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THE NEW YORKER

AUGUST 21, 2023

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Kadir Nelson (*Cover*) received the 2020 Caldecott Medal. His paintings are in the permanent collections of numerous institutions, including the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art.

Mary Jo Bang (*Poem, p. 32*) most recently published translations of "Colonies of Paradise," by Matthias Göritz, and of Dante's "Purgatorio." Her new poetry collection, "A Film in Which I Play Everyone," is forthcoming in September.

Andrew Marantz (*The Talk of the Town, p. 11*), a staff writer, is the author of "Antisocial," which was published in 2019.

Helen Shaw (*The Theatre, p. 64*) became a theatre critic for the magazine last year.

Masha Gessen (*"Another Country," p. 36*), a staff writer, received the 2017 National Book Award for nonfiction for "The Future Is History." Their latest book is "Surviving Autocracy."

David Owen (*"There and Back Again," p. 20*) has been a staff writer since 1991. He is the author of "Volume Control."

Liana Finck (*Sketchbook, p. 44*), a *New Yorker* cartoonist, is the author of "Let There Be Light."

T. Coraghessan Boyle (*Fiction, p. 46*) recently published his twelfth collection of short stories, "I Walk Between the Raindrops." His latest novel, "Blue Skies," was published in May.

Kathryn Schulz (*Books, p. 54*), a staff writer, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. She published the memoir "Lost & Found" in 2022.

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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

A REPORTER AT LARGE
Steve Coll on Zalmai Rassoul, an Afghan Ambassador whom the Taliban declines to recognize.

THE WEEKEND ESSAY
Jonathan Franzen on the paradox of nature writing: to succeed, it can't only be about nature.

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LEFT: SILVANA TREVALE; RIGHT: BENOÎT LEVA

THE MAIL

GETTING THE PICTURE

Patrick Radden Keefe's Profile of the art dealer Larry Gagosian brought to mind an experience I had as an observer of the beginnings of the contemporary-art-market boom ("Money on the Wall," July 31st). In November, 1964, I went to the vernissage for Andy Warhol's "Flowers" show at Leo Castelli's Upper East Side gallery. This was the initial exhibition of what would become some of Warhol's most ubiquitous imagery, appearing on everything from shower curtains to the sides of buildings. The large silk screens displayed in the gallery were on sale for four hundred dollars apiece; the smaller versions were two hundred. (They now sell for millions.) At the time, I was a young movie-industry press agent, and the rent of my starter apartment, on Sixty-first and Lexington, was sixty-eight dollars a month. I could hardly afford to buy anything shown that night—but I was told that, if one asked (and got approved), one could purchase a twenty-four-by-twenty-four-inch print for ten dollars.

I decided to try to buy a print, which was a variation on the mailer that announced the show. Castelli, Warhol, and David Whitney—who would go on to become a prominent curator but was working for Castelli at the time, and whom I knew through a friend of a friend—were holding court at the front of the gallery. I went up and asked Whitney if I could purchase one of the prints. He nodded and pointed at me; Castelli said a few words to Warhol; Warhol looked me over. More nods all around, and then I heard Castelli tell Whitney to go get a print. When I retrieved the ten-dollar bill I had in my wallet, Castelli averted his eyes, apparently reluctant to handle actual cash. Whitney seemed unsure if his role at the gallery included cashier responsibilities. Finally, it was Warhol who spoke up. "Take the money, Leo," he said. "That's what it's all about."

Rudy Franchi
Los Angeles, Calif.

OPPENHEIMER'S WORLD

In his review of Christopher Nolan's new film, "Oppenheimer," Anthony Lane mentions a conversation that the title character has at a cocktail party, where he asks, "What happens to stars when they die?" (The Current Cinema, July 31st). The academic work that lies behind this moment is worth dwelling on: in the late nineteen-thirties, Robert Oppenheimer published three papers on that very question. The third, co-written with Hartland Snyder, appeared in 1939, and used Einstein's mathematics of general relativity to predict the existence of black holes. The theoretical physicist Jeremy Bernstein has called this publication "one of the great papers in twentieth-century physics"; Roger Penrose, who shared the 2020 Nobel Prize in Physics for showing how black-hole formation shores up the general theory, cited it in his 1989 book, "The Emperor's New Mind," as being the first discussion of black holes to adopt a general-relativistic treatment.

Jeremiah Allen
Alberta, Canada

Lane's review alludes to a moment in Nolan's film when Oppenheimer translates a now famous line from the Bhagavad Gita, in which the divine avatar Krishna, who speaks much of the text, announces, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." As a lover of the sublime and succinct language of Sanskrit, I feel compelled to note the broader context of these words. Oppenheimer's quote is only one line from a work of some seven hundred verses. In another portion, Krishna also says, "I am the origin of all those things that are about to be."

Patrick A. George
Pacific Grove, Calif.

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GOINGS ON

AUGUST 16 – 22, 2023

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

Even in the playwright Annie Baker's quietest pieces, ley lines of power lie buried in the soil; there's a hum to her plays, a sense of old energies animating earthly matters. In **"Infinite Life"** (at Atlantic Theatre's Linda Gross, starting Aug. 18), Baker introduces five ladies of various ages, resting on their chaise longues outside a medical clinic in Northern California, chatting about the absurdity of having a body that desires and suffers and dies. You might suspect Baker of sneaking in a tragedy, but the cast is a supergroup of our funniest stage divas, all mistresses of either the deadpan or the zany: (left to right) Kristine Nielsen, Christina Kirk, Marylouise Burke, Brenda Pressley, and Mia Katigbak. The mischievous Pete Simpson plays the snake in their garden.—*Helen Shaw*

PHOTOGRAPH BY CELESTE SLOMAN

ABOUT TOWN

ART | "Beauty is not a need but an ecstasy." So sayeth the seer and moral center of Kahlil Gibran's book "The Prophet" (1923), still a worldwide best-seller nearly a century after his death. Lesser known are Gibran's drawings and watercolors, now the focus of an alluring exhibition, **"A Greater Beauty: The Drawings of Kahlil Gibran."** Where there is mysticism, there is often melodrama—or at least high moodiness—and Gibran's figures positively luxuriate in feeling, even if their bodies appear quite chaste. Scenes are erotically and spiritually suggestive: embraces give off little heat, but lovers nevertheless soften and melt together. Portraits of intellects, such as the artist Albert Pinkham Ryder and the psychoanalyst Carl Jung, are more precisely rendered in light and shadow—the materials that constitute a mind.—*Jennifer Krasinski (The Drawing Center; through Sept. 10.)*

MOVIES | In **"The Adults,"** a family saga on an intimate scale, the director Dustin Guy Defa probes the lasting frustrations and stifled dreams of ex-performers. Michael Cera stars as Eric, a poker player who returns to his upstate-New York home town, becomes involved with its gambling scene, and drops in on his sisters—Rachel (Hannah Gross), who works at a local radio station, and Maggie (Sophia Lillis), a recent college dropout at loose ends. The siblings, who are still grieving for their long-deceased mother, communicate poorly with one another—except by way of antic comedy routines and D.I.Y. song-and-dance numbers with which, growing up, they'd sought fame. As a result, the low-key melodrama often plays like an unspectacular musical, which the three lead actors bring to life with earnest energy and tremulous grace.—*Richard Brody (Opens in theatres on Aug. 18.)*

HIP-HOP | In the two-thousands, the Virginia Beach duo **Clipse**—composed of the brothers Pusha T and Malice—purveyed a charismatic brand of narcotic rap, emboldened by singular production from the off-kilter beat-makers the Neptunes. The pair's first two major-label albums, the fringe classics "Lord Willin' " and "Hell Hath No Fury," established a well-balanced dynamic—Malice pensive and deliberate, Pusha bombastic and reactionary. In the twenty-tens, the brothers took up solo careers; Malice converted to Christianity (becoming No Malice), as Pusha T became a hatchet man for Kanye West. In celebration of hip-hop's fiftieth anniversary, Clipse reunites to headline Genius IQ/BBQ. Entry is free with an R.S.V.P.—*Sheldon Pearce (Knockdown Center; Aug. 19.)*

OFF OFF BROADWAY | Just ninety people a night can squeeze into this loft production of **"Uncle Vanya,"** which seems familiar almost before you see it: the artisanal approach and the exclusive audiences will make many theatregoers think of Andre Gregory's invitation-only "Vanya" workshop, which was eventually turned into the Louis Malle film "Vanya on 42nd Street," from 1994. The director Jack Serio is inventive, but several actors need more time—Gregory took three years—to thrive in such proximity. Still, Will Brill plays the self-destructive doctor Astrov with fine-grained, rabbitlike wariness, and Marin Ireland's Sonya is unmissable. Serio does his best work when voices are low, and he, Ireland, and Brill collaborate on a breath-stealing candlelit scene, which nearly undoes the plot itself to let its two star-crossed hearts fall in love.—*Helen Shaw (Reviewed in our issue of 7/31/23.) (For tickets, visit vanyanyc.com; through Sept. 3.)*

TELEVISION | Two young, visionary chefs' endeavor to transform a Chicago Italian-beef-sandwich shop into a Michelin-star destination, all while fostering a humane and creative environment, continues in the piquant second season of **"The Bear."** With the titular eatery undergoing a gut renovation, the new episodes look outward, sending characters to Copenhagen, to culinary school, and on a mouth-watering food tour of the Windy City. But the soul of this crowd-pleasing follow-up is the Bear's crew, who are each encouraged to find their calling in the restaurant ecosystem, even as the pressure to rush the launch of the revamp renders the kitchen sign "every second counts" not just an ethos but a nerve-fraying necessity.—*Inkoo Kang (Streaming on Hulu.)*

DANCE | Since 2015, the **Beach Sessions Dance Series** has included up-and-comers, avant-gardists, beach-rake trucks, and a sandy version of the Hustle. This time around, in a choice that's both obvious and inspired, the main event is a restaging of Merce Cunningham's serene 1991 work "Beach Birds." It's a nature study of elegantly avian positions—hops, fluttering limbs, and sudden flockings—perfect for the setting, even if a fluid, uneven surface poses some challenges. Afterward, Sarah Michelson offers a choreographic response.—*Brian Seibert (Rockaway Beach at 108th St.; Aug. 26.)*

TABLES FOR TWO

Libertine
684 Greenwich St.

The other night at Libertine, a new French bistro in the West Village, a server described the Gnocchi Parisienne: unlike their Italian counterparts, they were made without potato—"just flour." After a pale pillowy puff, coated in a rich Sungold-tomato sauce flecked with spring onions and fennel, seemed to melt on my tongue, I waved him back over. "Only flour?" I asked, incredulous. "Oh," he said, "well, also butter and egg." Bien sûr. French pasta is French pastry: *pâte à choux*, gently simmered, then browned in more butter.

The combination of butter and egg was also the secret to the Scallop & Seaweed, for which a plump, sweet diver scallop was sliced and spooned, with sautéed leeks, back into its shell, then bathed in a hollandaise made with kombu-infused butter and Espelette pepper and lightly broiled, the sugars caramelizing into a crème-brûlée-like crust. Butter, on its own, was smeared into a glass pinch bowl, served with half of an excellent, crusty baguette and a few wonderfully sweet, meaty anchovies, whose gentle brine made the butter taste even creamier. And is there a dish that gets closer to the essence of the egg than a classic *œufs mayo*? Medium-boiled eggs were sliced in half, draped in fresh, glossy mayonnaise, and finished with chive and more eggs—clusters of trout roe.

The egg came first, but the chicken would not be upstaged. For the Poulet Doré Vin Jaune, half of a golden chicken (fed a diet of heirloom corn that turns the skin and fat a vibrant yellow, and slaughtered on the morning of delivery) was served with the foot still attached to the leg, suspended dramatically off the edge of the plate. (Beware: the hooked talons threatened to sweep my glass of natural rosé off the table.) That said, I was more impressed by the Duck Deux Façons, or two ways, featuring a rosy-fleshed, crisp-skinned breast atop a creamy green-peppercorn sauce, and a cocotte of confited leg meat capped with a torched purée of potato, egg yolk, and Comté.

You may have surmised by now that this is not a restaurant that puts vegetables on a pedestal. Still, herbs make thrilling cameos. Fresh tarragon livened up the *salade maison*. The namesake parsley in the *jambon persillé,* a cooked-ham terrine served with mustard and cornichon, accounted for the gorgeous green marbling in its terrazzo-like pattern. And, for dessert, a sublime chocolate mousse with a texture resembling soufflé came with a dollop of crème fraîche infused with Chartreuse—made, by French monks, from more than a hundred plants. *(Dishes $9–$72.)*

—Hannah Goldfield

PICK THREE

The staff writer Carrie Battan shares her current obsessions.

1. A WAY TO RESHUFFLE YOUR BRAIN: Until recently, I naïvely believed that endurance cycling was a physically taxing but relatively safe and relaxed sport. Then I watched **"Tour de France: Unchained,"** Netflix's new docuseries about the biggest race of the year. It depicts the agony and brutality of the three-week event in an especially visceral way, and explores the kind of masochistic endurance that these riders tap into in order to succeed. Now, instead of coveting money or success, I mostly wish I had a greater ability to tolerate pain.

2. A NEW SPORTS DOCUMENTARY THAT FEELS LIKE A HORROR FILM: Ever since the wild success of "Free Solo," the Oscar-winning documentary about mountain climbing without ropes, there's been a glut of highly enjoyable extreme-sports documentaries. But free-soloing is a walk in the park compared with free diving, an utterly senseless pursuit that involves following a cable down into the blackest depths of the ocean, without oxygen. **"The Deepest Breath,"** also on Netflix, tells the story of one diver, an Italian woman named Alessia Zecchini, and her ill-fated pursuit to plumb the depths of the sea. Not for the faint of heart.

3. A DIFFERENT KIND OF EUROPEAN VACATION: While the world of scripted film and television is at a standstill, I hope that HBO renews **"100 Foot Wave,"** a docuseries about big-wave surfing. The show chronicles the big-wave-surfing legend Garrett McNamara as he builds a scene in the unlikely town of Nazaré, Portugal. Spoiler: it's not the massive waves that make this unexpectedly profound series feel so epic.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC HELGAS FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRISTOPH NIEMANN (TOP); AJ DUNGO (BOTTOM)

THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
WITNESS

The day after Donald Trump was arraigned in Washington, D.C., on four counts related to an alleged conspiracy to prevent the electoral votes in the 2020 Presidential election from being counted, his former Vice-President, Mike Pence, was campaigning for the Republican Presidential nomination in Londonderry, New Hampshire. There he was interrupted by hecklers, some of them carrying Trump signs. "Why didn't you uphold the Constitution?" a man shouted. "I upheld the Constitution. Read it," Pence replied, as he shook hands with some young people. The heckler wasn't satisfied. "You sold the people out," he said. "You sold all these kids out, too." A woman yelled, "Traitor!"

Pence had heard it all before. At 2:24 P.M. on January 6, 2021, Trump tweeted, "Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution." What he should have done, according to Trump, was to reject, while ceremonially presiding over a joint session of Congress, the electoral votes from states that Joe Biden had won. A minute after Trump tweeted, the Secret Service decided to move Pence to a more secure location in the Capitol; on the way, he came within forty feet of rioters. Some in the crowd that day were chanting, "Hang Mike Pence!," "Traitor Pence!," and "Bring him out!"

The chanting has never really stopped, for reasons that go beyond the resentments of Trumpists. Trump is seeking the Presidency again; this time, Pence is running against him. Trump has finally been brought into court to answer for his actions in the lead-up to January 6th; Pence may take the stand to testify about what Trump asked him to do. If Trump was once convinced that Pence could save him from the ignominy of leaving the White House in defeat, he now seems to realize that Pence could help send him to jail. Soon after the indictment was made public, Trump posted on Truth Social that "Liddle' Mike Pence" is "delusional" and has gone over to "the Dark Side."

In a hearing on Friday, John Lauro, Trump's lawyer in the January 6th case, cited Pence's status as a rival candidate when arguing that Trump deserved leeway in what he could say about evidence in the case. The judge, Tanya Chutkan, disagreed, saying that Trump was still a criminal defendant bound by restrictions on intimidating and tampering with witnesses. That fight will continue.

The latest indictment is the second from the special counsel Jack Smith. It follows charges he brought in Florida related to Trump's stashing of sensitive national-security documents at Mar-a-Lago; the former President is also facing a criminal indictment in New York, on charges related to hush money and to falsified business records. (Trump has pleaded not guilty in all cases.) And, this week, Fani Willis, the Fulton County, Georgia, district attorney, is expected to bring another set of charges, centered on an alleged attempt by Trump to overturn that state's 2020 election results. But it is the January 6th case that has turned the focus onto Pence.

A section of Smith's indictment, on Trump's "Attempts to Enlist the Vice President" to change the election results, offers a seven-page catalogue of meetings, calls, and memos in which Trump "directly pressured" Pence. One revelation is that Pence kept contemporaneous notes of certain key meetings. Trump's plan depended on inducing would-be Trump electors in various states to sign false certifications that they were the real electors, which Pence would then brandish at the joint session and declare either that Trump was the winner or that there was so much uncertainty that the count had to stop. (Willis appears to be focussing on the fake-electors scheme, as well.) In essence, Pence was being asked to endorse a stack of forgeries and then use them as pretext for a coup.

Yet, last Sunday, when Lauro made the rounds of the morning talk shows,

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

he referred to Pence as "our best witness," and claimed that his testimony would acquit Trump. He stuck to that position even as his interviewers expressed skepticism. On "Meet the Press," after the host, Chuck Todd, played a clip from that morning of Pence saying, "The President specifically asked me, and his gaggle of crackpot lawyers asked me, to literally reject votes"—not exactly a line one would like to hear from one's star witness—Lauro said that Pence was, in fact, "substantiating" Trump's story. If so, that story doesn't sound good for Trump.

Still, Lauro is right that Pence will be a complicated figure for both the prosecution and the defense. For one thing, he is a reluctant witness. He refused to appear before the House's January 6th committee, and when Smith issued him a subpoena he fought it in court, and succeeded in somewhat limiting its scope. On "Face the Nation," when asked whether Trump had ever admitted to him that he had lost, Pence said that he didn't "know what was in his mind." He continues to suggest that there was something not quite right about the 2020 election. Lauro emphasized that Pence had also encouraged members of Congress to contest various states' electoral votes on January 6th. Thankfully, Pence stopped there.

Even after that day, though, Pence seemed to yearn for a reconciliation with Trump (and Trumpists). Only recently has he become open in his criticism. The question is whether the ways in which Pence abased himself in Trump's efforts to hold on to power will make his testimony seem weaker or more credible. After all, he can't be dismissed as someone who is speaking against Trump because he is a Democratic partisan. But neither side can be sure what kind of witness Pence will be.

If the Republican Party, or Pence, were different, he might be positioned to engineer a real split between those drawn to Trumpist proto-authoritarian populism and those who adhere to other conservative ideological strains. So far, he hasn't managed it. At present, he is polling at just above five per cent, in a crowded Republican primary field, while Trump's share is above fifty per cent. But that five per cent, along with Pence's tally of small donors, is enough to qualify him to participate in the first Republican debate, on August 23rd.

There would be few more acute examples of the collision of the legal and the political calendars than Trump's confronting his former Vice-President—and future witness against him—on the debate stage. Other candidates might want to try out a cross-examination, too. Then again, Trump has suggested that he might skip the debates; he doesn't have to go to any of them. But he and Pence will still have a date in court.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPT.

A LITTLE SHARKY

Come August, a predatory ruthlessness is required to survive in the Hamptons—stop moving for even a second when cutting across Route 27, or when jockeying for a Jitney seat, and you may find yourself pushing up hydrangeas. But all the meanness and the money in the world won't help you if you encounter an actual shark. A drone might.

"There's more sharks here than ever before," Drew Smith, the deeply suntanned, mustached chief lifeguard and beach manager of East Hampton Village, noted the other day, on the second-story deck of a shingled structure that overlooks Main Beach on Ocean Avenue. He was barefoot in an Adirondack chair, gazing at the water through dark glasses.

Lee Bertrand, the assistant beach manager, arrived, lugging a black rolling case that contained the fifteen-thousand-dollar Enterprise Matrice 30 Series drone that the village lifeguards use for shark-spotting, among other things. (On July Fourth weekend, it helped them locate a man whose family thought he'd been swept out to sea; he was down the beach, chatting with friends.) Last month, the governor allotted a million dollars to equip New York State lifeguards with drones—about thirty per cent of what New York City has budgeted for rat reduction in Harlem alone.

Smith explained that his lifeguards always keep an eye out for a flurry of marine activity. If they realize, "Hey, we got some fish here," they use the binoculars. If they "start to see the water boil, or start to splash," they send up the drone. Smith and Bertrand each got a Part 107 F.A.A. license—essentially, a pilot's license without the plane-flying—to operate it.

Smith said that if they spot sharks "and there's fish out there, there's food—that's regular behavior. If there's no fish around, and they're swimming in close to the shoreline, that's something a bit more alarming." The drone can provide a shark's exact coördinates, allowing lifeguards to Jet-Ski out and herd baitfish away from the shore.

If Smith decides to close the beach, "then we'll have people come up and be, like, 'Why are you closing?' 'How can you confirm it's sharks?'" he said. "We say, 'These are the images that were captured this morning.' And then they're, like, 'Oh, thank you.'" Smith went on, "I'd rather err on the side of caution—we take caution over chaos.

"I remember summers when we'd see one whale, maybe one pod of dolphins," he continued. "Now you're seeing it daily." As if on cue, dolphins porpoised in the water directly ahead. "After the COVID shutdown, there was less traffic in the water, there was less fishing, fewer restaurants needing food. And now, with the water being warmer, it's just bring-

ing different patterns of movement." There were five reported possible shark bites on Long Island in one week this summer; last Monday, a woman was bitten in the Rockaways, the first confirmed shark bite in New York City since the fifties.

In July, village lifeguards used five-gallon buckets to collect Portuguese man-of-wars that had washed up on the sand. Bertrand reminisced about filling similar buckets with cigarette butts in his early lifeguarding days. He and Smith listed sharks they'd seen in recent years: spinners, blacktips, threshers. Juvenile great whites hang out around Montauk. On Instagram, locals were posting images of hammerheads and sand tiger sharks.

"Every time you see a swirl, it doesn't necessarily mean there's a shark under it," Bertrand cautioned.

"That's where the drone comes in," Smith said.

When sharks attack, "it's typically a case of mistaken identity," Bertrand said. "It's never comparable to a bear, where it's, like, a bite and a 'See you later.'" The duo scanned the ocean, which seemed fin-free. "We had a shark jump and spin in front of us two days ago—like, a five-, six-foot shark," Smith said, apologetically. Bertrand assembled the drone for a test flight, exposing a shark tattoo on his forearm.

Smith's advice for avoiding an encounter: "Don't swim by bait, don't swim at dawn, don't swim at dusk, don't splash around."

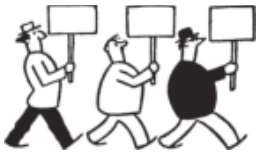
"Sometimes you just get that feel," Bertrand said. "Me and Drew will look at each other and be, like, 'It's a little sharky.'" The spidery, four-armed drone loudly whirred to life. Soon, it was a speck on the horizon.

"It has safeguards," Bertrand said, piloting the drone toward the deck. "If a seagull flies too close, I get an alarm."

"You've got a whale to the west of you," Smith said. Bertrand then used the controller, which looked like a souped-up Nintendo Switch, to zoom in on a paddleboarder to the east. "Something that we use really often in lifeguarding is looking at people's faces, to see if they're in distress," Smith said. The woman paddling looked serene. He concluded, "You can clearly tell that that person's just doing a workout."

—Emma Allen

DEPT. OF REMEMBERING
SAY HIS NAME



On a recent evening, hundreds of people converged at the northeast corner of Coney Island Avenue and Avenue P, in Midwood, Brooklyn, to remember O'Shae Sibley, a dancer who had been stabbed to death at that spot a few days earlier. They shouted, "Say his name!," and then said his name over and over, in different ways, sometimes chanting its four syllables, sometimes almost singing. "O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o'Shae! O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o'Shae!" The sound echoed off the glass front of the apartment building across the street and got louder as more people showed up. The name filled the intersection, ringing with unity and power, but you could hear the keening of absolute bereavement underneath.

Sibley and a few friends—dancers, like him, who specialized in the drag-queen-influenced, pose-striking dance style known as voguing—had been on their way back from a day at the beach when they stopped for gas at the Mobil station on this corner. They began voguing by their car. A group of young men standing nearby yelled insults. According to some reports, the young men objected to the dancing and to the skimpiness of what the dancers wore. The dancers yelled back, a confrontation ensued, and employees of the Bolla Market, the convenience store behind the gas pumps, came out and defused the situation. The dancers were getting back in their car when the trouble blew up again, and a seventeen-year-old boy among the young men allegedly pulled out a knife and stabbed Sibley in the side. Sibley bled on the sidewalk and died at a local hospital.

"O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o'Shae! O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o'Shae!" Sometimes rapid drumming underlaid the chant-singing. "O'-Shae Sib-ley, O'-Shae Sib-ley!" "Being gay is not a crime!" "Black, queer, and trans lives matter!" "We will take care of each other!" "O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o'Shae! O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o'Shae!" On Coney Island Avenue and on Avenue P, police were rerouting vehicles. Drivers leaned on their horns. One asked, "What's going on?," rolling down his window. "Memorial," an affectless cop said, waving him to turn left. "Oh, a memorial," the driver said, as his window went back up.

People were wearing almost anything a person could wear, except MAGA hats. Many of the cops wore the French-blue shirts of the Community Affairs squad. They would not let anyone prop a bicycle against an N.Y.P.D. van parked at the corner but did not try to stop a dancer from leaning back and voguing on the hood of an unoccupied police cruiser near the center of the crowd. Strobe-like, the cruiser's red, blue, and white flashing lights highlighted the poses. A man wearing a multipocketed vest that said "STREET MEDIC" and "HE/HIM"

O'Shae Sibley

circulated, handing out cough drops. Monitors of various sorts kept an eye out. There were volunteers in the chartreuse-green baseball caps of the National Lawyers Guild Legal Observer team, and young women in vests that said "ACLU OF NEW YORK PROTEST MONITOR," and older folks in jackets with "SPECIAL POLICE BRUTALITY UNIT" on the back, who were recording the event, and representatives of Release the Grip, an anti-gun-violence group from the Bronx. Sweatshirts and T-shirts said "UNFUCK THE WORLD" and "VOGUE AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE" and "BLACK QUEER LIVES MATTER" and "JEWS FOR

BLACK LIVES MATTER" and "STRIKE A POSE FOR O'SHAE" and "WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA EAST" and "GOD DON'T PLAY ABOUT" and "DANCE. HERE. NOW." A man wearing a white dress shirt, black pants, and a yarmulke bent down to get a better angle for a photograph. Two young women pasted a flyer that said "Hate Violence Happened Here" over an orthodontist ad on a bus shelter.

Five or six mourners sat in a circle on the sidewalk, knees up, their long legs pointing toward a middle. Only limber people could sit like that so gracefully. Their faces were downcast or covered by their hands. Their bodies formed spokes from a center that was the irregularly shaped stain on the pavement where Sibley had bled. Noise rose all around, but this circle was quiet. After a few minutes, the mourners got up and dispersed.

Night fell, the streetlights came on, and it started to rain. The police moved barricades and allowed some vehicles through on Avenue P. "O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o'Shae! O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o'Shae!" The voices continued to rise, defiant and triumphant and mournful. The crowd dwindled from hundreds to dozens, the police reduced their own numbers, and the acres' worth of flowers that people had brought formed a small foothill at the base of the lit-up blue-and-white Mobil-gas-station sign. Blocks away, a core group stayed on, standing under the elevated Kings Highway subway-station platform, out of the rain, chant-singing, "O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o'Shae! O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o'Shae!"

—Ian Frazier

DEPT. OF HOOPLA
COUNTERPROGRAMMING

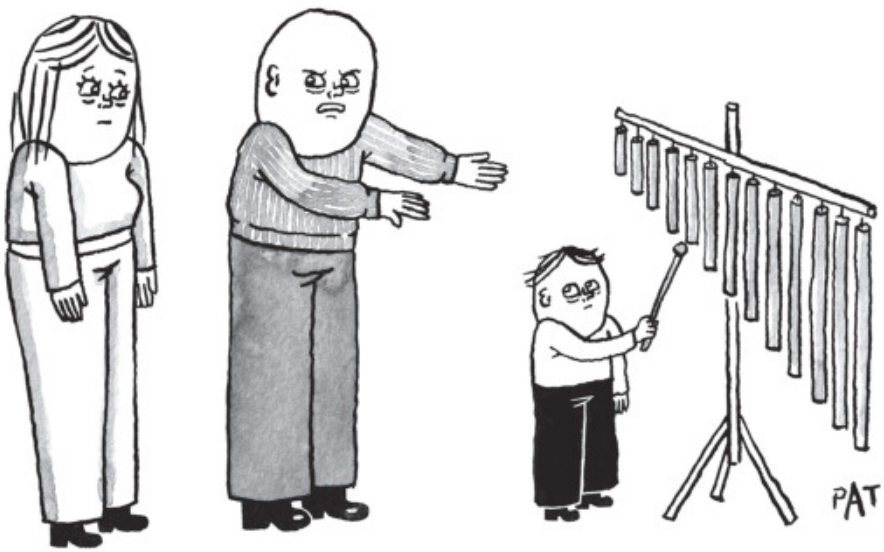
Like everyone else in New York City, Christopher Rufo was sweating through his dark suit on a recent afternoon, as he grabbed an iced Americano after a long day of promoting his book "America's Cultural Revolution." The writer and activist—and "New York *Times* best-selling author!" he made sure to add—has risen to moderate fame with his campaign against diversity, equity, and inclusion, having taken pains to brand those efforts as sinister. "On critical race theory, as a matter of public debate, we won," he said. He had come to New York in triumph, and to be celebrated at a book party at the Mondrian Hotel on Park Avenue.

Rufo, who was described by the *Times* columnist Jamelle Bouie as "a right-wing provocateur who helped instigate . . . panics" about race and L.G.B.T.Q. issues in public schools, wasn't always so confident. As an activist in the Seattle area, where he lives, he learned key lessons about politics by, he said, "getting my ass hammered." He worried that his progressive opponents would attack his family at home. He says that, in 2020, some neighbors formed the Q.R.F., or Quick Response Force, promising to have armed men at his house in six minutes, and that local women formed a prayer circle for him, which he found touching but scary. Rufo favors martial metaphors, and his formal declaration of war against the radical left would take place at the book party. "Theme could be 'counterrevolution at the Mondrian' :)" he wrote in a text with the details.

Never has a revolution involved so much business attire. Men with nametags milled around a rooftop bar, drinking mid-shelf liquor and snagging sliders from passing trays. Eric Nelson, Rufo's editor at HarperCollins, eyed the crowd. These were "people who are demographically Obama voters, who would never vote for Obama," he said.

Reihan Salam, the president of the Manhattan Institute, where Rufo is a senior fellow, worked the room in a tan suit. Salam made his career as a conservative commentator who is palatable to liberals. In recent years, he's moved into patron mode, seeking to make stars rather than be one. "I'm just a middle-aged Brooklyn dad," he said. (Technically, perhaps not; he doesn't bake bread.) Salam has turned the M.I. into a low-key outpost of the culture wars. "We're on this little pirate ship together," he said. M.I.'s targets for plunder were in the high-rise buildings that line Park Avenue: the élites who run America's institutions. "Our story of American life—it is imperfect, it is complicated. But it's not this hellaciously bleak perspective," he said. He sees a deep pessimism among the intellectual classes. "Only if you give Ibram Kendi this eight-figure philanthropic gift will you be forgiven of your sins," he said, referring to the anti-racism activist.

Rufo settled into a chair next to Salam for the talking portion of the evening. They discussed the German New Left intellectual Herbert Marcuse and Derrick Bell, the law professor who helped develop critical race theory, both of whom figure prominently in Rufo's book. The discourse was punctuated with macho humor. "I still am that amiable, fun, relaxed person," Rufo told the crowd. But then "you go into the changing room, you put on the other outfit. And I will



"The boy is not even as good as the wind!"

punch you straight in the face over and over and over—rhetorically speaking."

As they talked, one woman twisted her hair up to get it off her neck, and another fanned herself. A thirty-five-year-old finance guy, whose open white shirt revealed a silver chain and chest hair, said that he hadn't heard of Rufo before but was sympathetic to his ideas. He'd come for the socializing. "I recently broke up with a girl," he said, "because she thinks anyone who doesn't actively hate Ron DeSantis is a bad person." He went on, "It's an intolerance. If it's Ron DeSantis today or Trump yesterday, who's it going to be tomorrow?"

After the chat, Rufo posed for a picture with a producer for Newsmax, the right-wing TV outlet. As the waitstaff packed up the booze, Rufo reminisced with Armen Tooloee, his chief of staff. "We got surrounded by a mob of angry non-binaries in Florida," Rufo said. Tooloee "walks in with the biggest smile on his face, like *yea-a-ah*. There's cops everywhere. And Armen is in a state of bliss. He's like a Buddha!" Tooloee, who has a groomed beard, said that he'd had a lot of practice dealing with progressive protesters as an undergraduate, when he ran a College Republicans' "affirmative-action bake sale." (Black students got cheaper cookies than white students, for example.)

"I work in a small town. I tinker with things," Rufo said. "It's very hard to understand that there's any influence at all." Aboard this pirate ship in a luxury hotel, he could finally taste it.

—Emma Green

DEPT. OF COLLABORATION
CAMP SONGS

New Yorkers are supposed to be tough, but it's easy to hurt their feelings. All you have to do is imply that New York is not the center of the universe. "From Tin Pan Alley to CBGB to the birth of hip-hop, there's this story of New York as the birthplace of all the music that matters," Danny Ross, a pop producer and songwriter who grew up on Long Island, said the other day. There's nothing wrong with this story except that, for at least a decade, it hasn't been true. The place to be, if you're a working pop musician, is Los Angeles. Or arguably Atlanta, or Nashville. New York probably wouldn't crack the top five. "I was thinking about moving to L.A., like everyone else I knew," Ross, who lives in Queens, went on. "Then the pandemic hit, and I went, 'Eh, I'll just have to build a community here.'"

He got funding from streaming services and organized an annual event called Anti Social Camp (tagline: "We Are NYC's Music Ecosystem"). A songwriting camp is a kind of studio speed dating: a musician meets some producers and songwriters, and they spend a few hours trying to generate something out of nothing.

In a control room at Invite Only Studios, in Chelsea, Ross introduced the session's four speed daters. "What direction are you moving in these days?" Heather Sommer (songwriter) asked. "Any influences?"

"I secretly have preferences, but I don't like to sway the room too much," Grace VanderWaal (artist) said. "Maybe some soulful, bendy chords. Nothing too happy."

Sommer—platform sneakers, highlights—typed lyrics on her phone. The producers, Lucas Sim (black T-shirt, backpack) and Andrew Maury (long hair, backward ball cap), broke the ice by mocking the immaculate touch-screen recording consoles in front of them. "This looks like what an A.I. would guess a studio would look like," Maury said.

"Super expensive, basically useless," Sim said, taking an Apollo audio interface out of his backpack. "We're just going to bypass all this and record the way I do at home."

"Are there any instruments in here?" VanderWaal asked, scanning the room: a synthesizer, a six-string bass, a mandolin, and a lot of throw pillows. "I can't write a song on a fucking mandolin." She plugged in the synthesizer. "Give me, like, a fucked-up Mellotron sound?" she said to Sim. She played a warbly two-chord progression, Sim looped it, and she started improvising lines: "Take a break, take a breath, make it real."

"Maybe we rhyme that with 'how you feel,'" Sommer said.

"That's fire," Sim said. "Anyone getting a voice memo of this?"

"It's giving, like, druggy-interlude vibes," VanderWaal said. "Or, let's be real, maybe it's a sex song." They kept humming, blurting out phrases: "Seeing wind," "Breathe me in," "Feeling your vision."

"Fall off the deep end?" Sim said.

"That's it!" VanderWaal said, stamping her feet. "I love this, when the song is going faster than us, and we're just trying to keep up." It was her fourth studio session in two days. "The one yesterday afternoon was—let's just say the vibe almost concaved a few times."

VanderWaal grew up in Suffern, New York. When she was twelve, she left for California—she was a contestant on "America's Got Talent" (she won), and stayed on to record a couple of albums—but she recently moved back. "I'm never leaving the city again," she said. She wore wide-legged pants, a beanie, and a cropped T-shirt that read "NEW YORK CITY." Anti Social was hosting a party in Williamsburg later, and Sommer asked VanderWaal if she was going. "Bitch, I'd love to," she said. "But you'll have to come grab me at the door—I can't just be showing the bouncer my I.D." She's nineteen.

"Really?" Sommer said.

"I'm an industry baby," VanderWaal said. This was her first songwriting camp, but she'd grown up hearing about them. "The producers and songwriters I worked with would always be talking about this or that camp, and I'd think, Why are all my grownup friends going to camp?"

They started writing a chorus, and VanderWaal had an epiphany: "Maybe we cut out all the instruments, cut the lyrics, and just do one word: 'you.'" They recorded that, and VanderWaal added harmonies. Maury laid down some ethereal guitar, and Sim added a distorted whistle sound. "So sick!" VanderWaal said.

Sim promised to send everyone a copy of the recording, and they headed toward their respective subways. "Not incredible, not terrible," Maury said. "Most of the time, these things don't get released, they just sit on someone's hard drive. But you never know." On Instagram, VanderWaal posted photos of the skyline and a snippet of their session, with the caption "Inspired."

—Andrew Marantz

LIFE AND LETTERS

PRESENCE OF MIND

How the critic Jacqueline Rose learned to read the world.

BY PARUL SEHGAL

Rose warns against claims of innocence that turn victimhood into an identity.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBBIE LAWRENCE

We were too late. For weeks, the Davidia—the ghost trees—had been shedding their loose white blooms, like translucent handkerchiefs. Jacqueline Rose pocketed them on her walks around her London neighborhood of West Hampstead—the kind of long, looping tour she had begun taking daily during the pandemic. She brought me on one such walk, late this spring, but the specimens we found were sad: squashed, yellowing smudges. "About two weeks late," she assessed, studying them. Never mind. There was a handsome lime tree to admire. There was a florist to avoid ("racist") and a florist to visit. We lingered over shaggy mums and reluctant new lilies, bound tight in their buds. Groups of shouting boys ran by in ghastly magenta school blazers. "Who designed the jackets?" I wondered.

"Who designed the boys?" she replied.

Rose, who co-directs the Institute for the Humanities at Birkbeck, University of London, is a feminist writer and critic with a psychoanalytic orientation; she is singularly influential, both within and without the academy. Since the nineteen-eighties, she has explored a range of topics—modernism, motherhood, the Middle East. But mourning has long been a keynote in her work, nowhere more emphatically than in her new book, "The Plague: Living Death in Our Times." A collection of essays incubated during the COVID lockdown and structured around readings of Albert Camus, Sigmund Freud, and Simone Weil, it is perhaps her most scarred and harrowed volume and yet one strangely energized, full of possibility.

It is also, in Rose's elliptical way, full of her sister, Gillian Rose, a philosopher who died of ovarian cancer in 1995, when she was forty-eight and Jacqueline was forty-six. Growing up in London, they were the doctor's girls, the clever girls, from a middle-class Jewish family in a working-class neighborhood. Their stepfather—their parents divorced when Jacqueline was three, and their mother remarried soon afterward—kept a surgical practice on the ground floor of their house. Domestic life was quiet, organized around the doctor's work, the children's education, and a thicket of family secrets. Out of the silence, the sisters would produce shelves of books between them—consumed with naming the unnameable, with writing into the dark.

"We spurred each other on," Rose told me. She paused. "I hope I said 'spurred.' If I said 'spurned,' that's also quite interesting. I think both are true."

Rose's work has been full of haunting. "Haunting, or being haunted, might indeed be another word for writing," she noted in her essay collection "On Not Being Able to Sleep" (2003). She first came to broad attention with "The Haunting of Sylvia Plath" (1991), a feminist reading of the poet that refused to reduce her to a bundle of symptoms or to mine the poems for biography. Rose insisted on the violent, emancipating breadth of Plath's imagination, and turned the distorting fantasies projected on her poetry back on the reader. She went on to take this approach to studying women as varied as Marilyn Monroe and Rosa Luxemburg ("Women in Dark Times" was the title of her 2014 essay collection), tracing overlooked acts of creative defiance.

"I fell in love with these women—the links between their internal abjection and political insight," she told me. Never shying from trouble, she tussled with Plath's estate, and, many people said, put Israel itself on the analyst's couch, in her 2005 book "The Question of Zion." In Rose's view, nobody is innocent, and the work of mourning is never completed.

On our walk, she wore a buttery leather jacket and exuded a careful, coaxing charm. At times, she played the analyst, guiding the analysand toward insights but taking care not to preëmpt them. Lacan said that analysis did not take place in the present tense but in the future perfect—a way of looking back at what one will have become—and it is here that Rose seemed to dwell during our time together. "You'll want to tease this out," she would note, of a particular detail. Or, "There's a whole other story there, which I think is crucial for you." Holding up her finger, with its bright-blue polish: "Now, this is something you can use."

I became accustomed to her swift assessments, to her eerie bodily attunement: "You're jet-lagged. You will need to sleep. Go home but don't sleep just yet, stay awake." Before parting on one occasion, she scanned me quickly: "If you'll want the ladies, it's to your right. Never a bad idea." She wore Bakelite bangles and the same necklace every time we met, a string of alternating opaque and transparent beads. It was, I learned, her pattern.

Psychoanalysis, for Rose, begins with "a mind in flight," fleeing its own pain and obscuring its meanings by projection, displacement, inversion. As we walked, the ground beneath her feet seemed thick with the detritus of memory. "All the long gone darlings," Plath called her dead. "They/Get back, though, soon,/Soon." Rose mentioned Gillian almost as soon as we met, and Gillian was swiftly joined by two other figures: her cousin and lifelong "spiritual companion," Braham Murray, who died five years ago, and her friend Edward Said, who died fifteen years before that. (Rose does an excellent impression of him: "You've got to write every day, Jacqueline.") These were, she said, choosing her words carefully, "the losses that define one."

West Hampstead is bustling, affluent; we were far from the neighborhood of Rose's childhood. Born in 1949, she grew up in the West London town of Hayes, bordered by factories filled with the migrants of the nineteen-fifties. She recalled mothers warning their children, "'When those Pakis come at you in their bands along the street, just cross over to the other side. Dirty Pakis.' I would go home, and my stepfather would say, 'I've been in working-class houses, and I've been in Asian houses, and, believe you me, the least dirty in the town are the Asians.' He was really anti-racist, as was my mother." Still, the children didn't mix with their neighbors. "I'd walk into the grocery store and ask for 'small, firm tomatoes,' as if somehow being the doctor's daughter entitled me to the best tomato." The creeping understanding of her privilege, she said, was accompanied by a creeping awareness of unmentionable suffering in the family's past.

Every Sunday saw the dreaded trip to the maternal grandparents, the Prevezers, immigrants from Poland, and each a remnant of slaughtered families. Fifty of her grandmother's relatives had been killed in the Holocaust, Gillian once wrote. This was never discussed; all that was communicated was a hatred of Germans and a desperate cleaving to tradition. "They were cauldrons of feeling, but none of it could be expressed," Braham Murray, who became a celebrated theatre director, wrote in his memoir, "The Worst It Can Be Is a Disaster." The fact that "no Prevezer could ever appear vulnerable or moved" was, he said, the family "curse."

The grandparents had made their way in London by waiting outside stocking factories, collecting the rejects, matching up pairs, then selling them off a cart in the East End. In time, they set up their own hosiery shop. Rose's mother had secured a place at medical school, but her parents refused to let her attend. She was married off to a doctor fourteen years her senior who had recently returned from a prisoner-of-war camp, where he had been tortured. In Rose's delicate assessment, he "was not ready to be married."

Two daughters were born soon afterward: Gillian in the fall of 1947, and Jacqueline twenty months later. Gillian was the serious one, Rose said: "She was reading Plato while I was sitting on a swing, listening to pop music, thinking about looking pretty, and boys." Rose told me that the great wish of her childhood was to best her "serious, pained" sister; it was "a productive rivalry."

Their parents' divorce was bitter and protracted, with frequent custody challenges. Gillian, in her memoir, "Love's Work," recalled that she would vomit with dread before the fortnightly visit with their grim-faced father. Both parents remarried, had other children. At sixteen, Gillian formally changed her surname to that of her "kind, equanimous, humorous" stepfather, becoming a Rose in a defiant act of self-assertion that she compared to a bat mitzvah. (Jacqueline, of course, would do the same.) Then Rose's mother left her second husband—another painful divorce. Rose was in a gap year after secondary school; Gillian, in her first term at St. Hilda's College, Oxford. "My mother had given up too much," Rose told me. "She needed to live some more."

Gillian was less forgiving, and her fury at her parents still scorches in the memoir; her upbringing, she wrote, "ruined my capacity to tolerate highly charged yet contrary emotions about the same person." Rose, for her part, tries to maintain a gentle, rotating sense of sympathy for all the players in a drama. She says that her mother "had a case for rage" against her own parents, who had denied her an education. "But there was no empathy. And no historical understanding. And, above all, no real telling of the story."

Rose herself is not a voluble teller of such stories. Janet Malcolm, in her book about Sylvia Plath, "The Silent Woman," describes meeting Rose and offers up a grudging piece of praise: "Her manner was engaging—neither too friendly nor too distant—and on a scale of how people should conduct themselves with journalists I would give her a score of 99." Rose, Malcolm thought, had "carefully worked out for herself exactly how much she had to give." The Rose I met was equally circumspect, cordoning off large portions of her family history and of her personal life. But, even as she declined to provide certain details, she offhandedly pointed me to those people who would provide them—to family members, or their memoirs. This constitutionally guarded and private person has chosen to surround herself with provocatively candid intimates.

The question of closeness—closeness desired, permitted, negotiated, regretted—recurred in my conversations with Rose. Freud, I remembered, kept a figurine of a porcupine on his desk. He was fond of Schopenhauer's parable about a group of porcupines on a

cold winter's day. Huddling, they were pricked by one another's quills, and sprang apart; chilled, they again tried to nestle together. When I asked Rose what it had felt like to be in Gillian's physical presence, she told me, "We had the most profound respect and need for each other. But, in terms of comfort and ease in being together, it was never simple or straightforward."

Rose hadn't wanted to go to the same university as her sister, but she didn't receive the offer from Cambridge that she'd hoped for. After graduating, she moved to France, escaping the family turmoil; Gillian had gone to the U.S. and to Germany, where she studied Continental philosophy. "We had to push away," Rose said. "We had to push against each other."

A slight hill, a slight turn, and we arrived at an Anglican church, cradled by a ring of tall trees. Four benches faced one another, each occupied by an elderly man and his can of beer, calling across the courtyard to the others.

"This is the church where my mother was baptized," Rose said. Gillian, too, converted to Anglicanism, on her deathbed. Rose wanted me to understand that these were different conversions. She speculated that her mother, who converted in her sixties, felt only oppressed by the religion of her childhood; she couldn't see its traditions of justice and righteousness. But Rose thinks that Gillian's conversion came, paradoxically, from her attachment to her Jewishness, that she saw in the Church of England a way of augmenting Judaism's ethical traditions. On her headstone is both a cross and a Star of David.

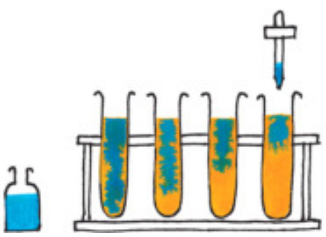
Down the hill, she explained, is the cemetery where Gillian is buried, and where her mother's ashes repose. "It's the street on which I live," she said, pinning map to metaphor.

Leaving family behind was a matter of survival when Rose was in her early twenties. She studied literature at the Sorbonne, discovered Freud, and took a job at an Yves Saint Laurent store—the English shopgirl adored by the clientele. Living in France, living in French, taught her about translation: "Which is to say, translation isn't about equivalence—it's about a re-rendering of the world. French was not just a liberation from the agonism of what was going on at home. It was also a way of thinking that was more flexible and nebulous and imaginative." She paused. "Let's cross over, and I'll tell you what our options are."

"*I'll tell you what our options are.*" "*We can either come back the short way or we can go the slightly longer way.*" "*Now you have to make a choice, because there's a walk down through the lime trees or . . .*" This is what it's like to walk with Jacqueline Rose. It is also what it's like to think with Jacqueline Rose—in an intellectual style that has been honed by her engagement with Freud. There are so many routes one can take, each with its own losses and gains.

What she calls "the wonder of Plath," for instance, involves the poet's taking multiple paths: "In the space of a line of poetry, she can rail against patriarchal figures—you know, fathers, husbands, doctors—and lament or even celebrate her passionate attachment for them at the same time."

When Rose writes about violence, in turn, she highlights the way it forecloses such multiplicity, and the sense of self that sustains it. "Harassment is always a sexual demand, but it also carries a more sinister and pathetic injunction: 'You will think about me,'" she wrote in her 2021 collection, "On Violence and Violence Against Women." A lasting injury done by threats of violence is the hijacking of thought. When our interiority is suborned, she argues, we lose our ability to come to



grips with the contradictions that lie within us and surround us.

"She plunges you straight into the world," her friend the historian Sally Alexander told me, "the most uncomfortable, obscure, and difficult moments. But she also reminds you that a thinking human being is capable of action in that world. How can we think through these difficulties?" It's here that Jacqueline and Gillian's "thought *touches*," Alexander added. "That comes from their parents, or their unspoken history—that sense that there was something to be uncovered and revealed and thought through."

In the front room of Rose's apartment hangs a Thérèse Oulton painting of startling contrasts, bright white edged with a dense brown. It is a painting of a terminal moraine, the term for the debris at the farthest edge of a glacier (also called its snout), which becomes edged by the earth scraped up and carried along under the ice sheet. It evokes a mind able to rake up and push into its own dirt. ("I would like to live in a world where you didn't have to be ashamed of shame," Rose once said.)

Another large Oulton hangs on a living-room wall, this one of pooling, pearlescent liquid—milk or spit or sperm, it's hard to say. "It's so multiple," Rose said. The brushstrokes are a single layer deep; no brushstroke covers another, no stroke is obscured, covered up, corrected.

Rose has lived in the apartment since her early twenties, decorating it in cream and beige—soft marine colors. The feeling was of being inside a shell. A low table was heaped with books by young women writers—Joanna Biggs, Andrea Long Chu, Yasmin El-Rifae. (Rose is "a model of how you engage as a feminist with younger feminists," the philosopher Amia Srinivasan told me. "She is so intellectually open, something you don't see in many feminists of her generation.") On a bookshelf, a fat volume on apartheid was squeezed beside a guide to cultivating orchids.

She pointed out a photograph: "Braham. Look at that beautiful Jewish face. Look, how beautiful." Then a picture of the trio—her, Braham, and Gillian—as children: "The three of us, deeply linked. Him with the authority, here. That's his bar mitzvah."

Rose writes in a dim, carefully organized study with bookshelves dedicated to South Africa, Israel and Palestine, psychoanalysis. Above her desk is a photograph of her daughter; nearby is a framed portrait of Edward Said, looking as if he's about to disagree with you. On a bookshelf in the corner is her Freud, the standard edition, twenty-four slipcovered volumes.

When Rose bought the flat, she became intent on painting this room a par-

ticular, shimmery shade of turquoise. "My friends thought I had gone mad—'This is not your palette,'" she recalled. When she finished and hauled in her books, she realized that she had painted the room the very blue of Freud's standard edition.

"It's enough to make you believe in the unconscious—that you could actually paint the room the color of the person's books you're going to spend the rest of your life thinking about, one way or another," she said.

In her younger years, she briefly considered studying to become an analyst, but decided she was deflecting from the analysis that she needed. "Psychoanalysis brings to light everything we don't want to think about," she explained. "If you can acknowledge the complexity of your own heart, then you're not going to look for scapegoats."

In her early twenties, back in England after her Paris sojourn, Rose embarked on a dissertation on children's literature at University College London, and fell in with feminist groups. She liked to tell people that the "Y.S.L." on her scarves stood for "Young Socialist League." "One of the great legacies of the feminism of the nineteen-seventies was friendship," she told me. Laura Mulvey, Sally Alexander, and other feminists were participating in reading and discussion groups; the friendships were fast and ardent. At a dinner party, Rose met Juliet Mitchell, a literary scholar and a psychoanalyst, and by the end of the evening they had agreed to translate Lacan together, eventually producing a volume that stayed in print for decades.

Rose's Ph.D. thesis, and the work that followed, about Peter Pan and childhood, was finding admirers, too. "It was groundbreaking," the novelist Ali Smith, then a lecturer at the University of Strathclyde, said. "Nobody was writing about literature like this." Childhood purity and innocence, Rose suggested, was an adult fabulation. Children's literature was structured by adult desires, actual childhood having been colonized by our fantasies of it. In later years, Rose seldom returned to children's literature, as such, but the interrogation of innocence became a lifelong project.

Her teaching life, meanwhile, became critical to her thinking. In 1976, she joined the School of Cultural and Community Studies at the University of Sussex (finding herself again with Gillian), which allowed her to stay near London. She was drawn, she said, to the social impact of education, and was determined to seek out and teach a multiracial student body. Talking about this, she gave me a significant look: "There's a story there about belonging and not belonging."

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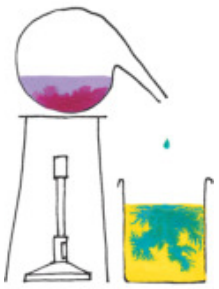
Starting in the late nineteen-eighties, a decisive shift occurred for both her and Gillian. The sisters, as well as Braham Murray, then an artistic director of the Royal Exchange Theatre, in Manchester, found that their work was drawing them toward the Holocaust. Gillian, a scholar of German idealism, had immersed herself in the Holocaust theology of Emil Fackenheim; Braham, at his Manchester theatre, set a production of "Macbeth" in a Nazi death camp. Rose was defending Sylvia Plath's controversial use of Holocaust metaphors. "I realize now that the three of us had been brought to this topic as a way of engaging a mostly unspoken part of our family history—on this, the lines that were running, strangely and unconsciously, between the three of us were clear," Rose told me. "But there was something more."

Murray, she said, was "blurring the ethical contours of history by forcing the prisoners to perform—through Macbeth's burgeoning and finally uncontrollable violence—the reality of the evil to which they as Jews were subject." And then, Rose says, there was Gillian's "not unrelated plea that Auschwitz should not become sacred, its victims ideal innocents, its perpetrators unthinkable monsters. Nor should it be seen as absolute, unrepresentable—a horror which can only therefore be countered by an equivalently absolute act of redemption by the Israeli nation-state."

Rose describes herself not as an anti-Zionist but as a critic of Zionism, a reader of Zionism, focussing on the nationalist movement's insistence on its own innocence. She warns against letting victimhood—best understood as an event, something that befalls a person—become an identity. In the context of Zionism, as in the context of

feminism, she has said, we "need to be endlessly vigilant in not allowing victimhood to become who we are."

Such statements have brought swift, sometimes violent censure. The novelist Howard Jacobson based a character on Rose in his 2010 Man Booker-winning novel, "The Finkler Question": Tamara Krausz, an academic and an "ashamed Jew" who "never appeared in public looking anything other than an executive of a fashion consultancy, at once businesslike and softly feminine." Finkler, the protagonist, fantasizes about slitting her throat. Recently, Rose's insistence that feminists have everything to learn from trans women alienated some former comrades. "I lost friends," she said.



Rose's suspicion of all notions of innocence ran through even her later reflections on South Africa's struggles to make itself whole after apartheid. She adopted a Freudian perspective on the impossible ideals of truth and reconciliation, on the paired sainthood of Nelson Mandela and vilification of Winnie Mandela. "Why do we expect, in situations of political injustice, that virtue will accumulate on the side of the oppressed?" she wrote in the *London Review of Books,* her regular outlet. "At the very least, Winnie Mandela does us the favour of demonstrating how misguided that belief is. Why, then, do we rush to divest the downtrodden of the ethical ambiguity that must be everyone's birthright?"

In 1992, at the age of forty-two, Rose took a position as a professor of English at Queen Mary University of London. (She moved to Birkbeck, in Bloomsbury, eight years ago.) Her partner then was the psychoanalyst and writer Adam Phillips, and in 1995, not long after Gillian fell ill, she adopted a girl from China.

"I had always wanted to be a mother," Rose said. "I was never one of those women who put their career first and wake up and find it is too late. It was simply that it never happened. Men thought, 'Oh, she's this intellectual.' I was a nice Jewish girl who wanted a family."

In Rose's living room, there is a photograph of her in a swimming pool, joyfully holding her daughter, Mia, aloft, almost like a prize. "It was just magic, being an older mother," Rose told me. "You know, I had fulfilled so much of my life in ways I'd never dreamed of. And so I thought, I can really do this. If I had my time over, I would have taken a five-year career gap just to concentrate on that. And I would have adopted a second child. But that turned out not to be possible."

Mia, a schoolteacher, lives with her partner nearby. When I asked her if she and Rose were close, she laughed and said that she does her mother's hair. She is possessed of a cheerful, slightly scary frankness. I raised the question of what it was like to be brought up by a psychoanalyst and a psychoanalytic critic—was there heavy dream analysis at breakfast?—and Mia replied heartily, "It put me off. I felt really stupid. As I got older, I became proud, but it was daunting. How do they know all this? What are they talking about? I became literally the opposite—into sports, photography."

Phillips and Rose split up when Mia was six. Mia is so blunt about the subject of her parents' relationship—so matter-of-fact, and so devoid of rancor—as to suggest that the Prevezer curse has been decisively routed. "Men feel competitive if their partners are clever and successful," she said. "My mum was very successful. And my dad wanted something different. He found someone in a different job, fourteen years younger."

Rose, on the other hand, is never more circumspect than on the subject of her personal life. "You can say," she finally allowed, "that 'there has been—and is—love of men in her life.'" On Phillips, she offers, diplomatically, that theirs was "a very fertile exchange." They read each other's work. "Whether there were other unconscious undercurrents, which were a bit more complex . . ." She shrugged, smiled.

"Prepare yourself," Rose told me. We were standing outside the Anna Freud room in London's Freud Museum. It had been the family house after the Freuds fled Vienna, the house where Freud died. There was something Rose wanted me to see, something she said would overwhelm me. She put her hand on my back lightly and followed me into the room. It was bright and bare: Anna Freud's desk with her typewriter, a few photographs, and display cases.

Rose looked stricken. "It's gone," she said. "Gone."

It was the loom. For years, she explained, Anna Freud kept a loom in the house; she would sit and weave between seeing patients. She sat there, too, after her companion, Dorothy Burlingham, died, weaving her grief. Many of the Freud women had worked with cloth; among the carefully curated objects in the Freud Museum is a messy box labelled "*Petites Choses*," stuffed with ribbons and swatches and lacework. They belonged to the sisters Freud left behind in Vienna, all of whom died in the Holocaust.

For Freud himself, textiles were a potent source of psychoanalytic metaphor—the strands to gather, the thread to follow out of the labyrinth. In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud described how his grandson would throw out of his crib a bobbin—a piece of a loom, with a string attached to it—and then pull it back. Each time he would say, "*Fort!*" ("Gone"), and then "*Da!*" ("There"). Freud surmised that he was coming to terms with his mother's absence, a form of unconscious mourning.

Rose had last visited the museum in September, 2020, to give the annual Freud Memorial Lecture, over Zoom. She had stood alone in Freud's study, between two couches: the ornate, rug-draped divan on which his patients lay and a very plain one, on which he died. Her lecture, which appears in "The Plague," explores how Freud's notion of the death drive was influenced by the pandemic of his own time, the so-called Spanish flu. The flu pandemic, by some estimates, wiped out more people than the two world wars combined but was itself swiftly wiped from historical memory. Freud himself seldom mentions it. And yet it took the life of his favorite daughter, Sophie, then pregnant with her third child.

Rose had been writing about Freud in her Freud-colored study throughout her career, but only during COVID did

she fully appreciate how his thought emerged from pandemic and war. Losing Sophie, she believed, helped him articulate a sense that the organism possesses an awareness that it is moving toward death. The death drive was among his most controversial theories, and for good reason, she insisted: "The idea of an unconscious demonic principle driving the psyche to distraction could be said to sabotage once and for all the vision of man in control of his mind."

The museum was nearly empty when we visited. The exterior walls were webbed with white roses cultivated from cuttings of Freud's own flowers. Two women sat knitting in the garden. His office that day was warm, enclosing. A brass kettle rested on a brazier. The porcupine figurine sat on his desk, grimacing. The patient's couch looked like a great inviting lap.

"It completely overwhelms me to see how much he had in his head, that he had room for all of this," Rose whispered, peering over glass cases that held Freud's archeological keepsakes—a terracotta Sphinx, a bronze Athena. "Well, everything began here, right? I mean, Oedipus begins here, and Moses, who was an Egyptian. Between classical culture and Egyptology. He sort of belonged in these two places."

Then she noticed that something else was missing: Where was the deathbed? She spotted the museum's director, in conversation with a guest, and introduced herself.

The director turned. He was wearing, improbably, a shirt in the same minty blue of Freud's standard edition. Now he gasped, theatrically. "You are Jacqueline Rose. The famous Jacqueline Rose."

The director's guest, a retired academic, sensed an opening and moved in. She was studying psychoanalysis and colonial India, the same topic as one of Rose's Ph.D. students—remarkable coincidence! They were to be in the same edition of a French publication—marvellous! They must all get in touch.

Rose turned back to the director. "Don't be shocked," she said. She reached into her purse and pulled out a photograph.

"Oh, my goodness," he said. "When was this?"

The photograph showed Edward Said sitting in Freud's green armchair, as if listening to a patient on the nearby couch. The photograph was taken, Rose said, before Said gave his "Freud and the Non-European" lecture at the museum, in 2001—a reading of "Moses and Monotheism" in which Freud's notion of Moses as an Egyptian complicates the usual promised-land narratives of identity and emancipation.

"Whoever was guiding us said, 'Hop over, go sit on the chair,'" Rose explained.

"I'm very glad that he did."

"I wasn't sure how you would react. I must be honest."

"We were more laid-back in those days," the director said. "We are stricter now." He looked at the photograph again.

Rose asked about the couch on which Freud died. What happened to it?

"It's upstairs," the director assured Rose. "It's just not something we like to display too much. We feel that it's maybe not part of the story, you know, of the creation of Freud's study, bringing everything over from Vienna. I mean, that couch was acquired in London for him to die on."

In "The Plague," Rose quotes Walter Benjamin's observation, in his 1936 essay "The Storyteller," that "there used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died." Like him, she looks askance at the effort to deny the spectacle of dying. "In a pandemic, death cannot be exiled to the outskirts of existence," Rose writes. But, even here, death was back in the attic; the couch was gone, and no one could tell us what happened to the loom.

At the launch for the British edition of "The Plague," hosted by the London Review Bookshop, the crowd was large, young, adoring. Not one but two young women with severe bobs were holding copies of "The Bostonians." An audience member reported arriving fresh from analysis, and looked it. Another lamented, about a lover or a crush, "I need him as an unattainable object of my desire. Maybe I should re-idealize him."

When Rose started to speak, they sat raptly. The storyteller used to derive his authority from death, she explained, glossing Benjamin. But now death had become a shameful thing, to be banished from sight. That pathology, the need to hide death, she said, "is always summed up for me by the joke Freud shares in 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death': Husband and wife are sitting together talking about their future. And the husband says, 'When one of us dies, I'll move to Paris.'"

When one of us dies: Braham and Gillian wrote with fierce urgency at the very ends of their lives. Braham received a finished copy of a book he had written on Shakespeare the day he died. Gillian wrote her memoir in the last two years of her life, squeezing in, as well, two philosophical treatises and at least one new love affair. (Rose had told me, with relish, "She lived fully.")

How, "The Plague" asks, do we think in a disaster? Pulsing beneath this is another, more disturbing question: How do we think without one? "So what if I die," Gillian wrote. "Let me discover what it is that I want and fear from love." The membrane between life and death feels very thin in her memoir, the time short, and thought distilled to essence. It was this urgency with which Rose spoke to the audience. Were they reading *Jewish Currents*? Had they seen that article in the new magazine *Parapraxis* about the importance of psychoanalysis in times of fascist creep?

"Of course, psychoanalysis is meant to be marginal," she said. "It's socially corrosive. If it becomes widely accepted, it can become a problem."

Rose took questions; she signed books. She performed, in her paradoxical fashion, the act of thinking in public—this tidy, tailored, precise person championing the virtues of the ambiguous, the ungovernable, the unruly.

Later, when a group of us decamped to a nearby pub, Rose seemed self-critical, and tired—tired of being looked at, I thought. She ordered a tomato juice, then, in a valiant stab at celebration, a prosecco. She made introductions, and, when she was satisfied that the conversation would go on without her, she pushed her full wine glass to the side and made a polite escape.

"This is why I love Simone Weil so much," she said, trailing a final strand, a final thought. "She had this thesis of how you make yourself most present in your absence." ♦

VOICE-OVERS FROM "SEX AND THE SPACE STATION"

BY TEDDY WAYNE

As I watched Sergei climb into his formfitting spacesuit, I couldn't help but wonder: Did I want a white Russian cosmonaut—or just a White Russian and a Cosmo?

Meanwhile, back at base camp on Olympus Mons, Samantha was experiencing her *own* volcanic eruption.

What *really* took my breath away: Was it Big's spontaneous proposal as we orbited the moon, or the air leak that was rapidly depleting our oxygen supply?

The problem was that Charlotte and Harry were like Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong. Buzz did all the grunt work—but Neil always came first.

Did I actually want to go on a two-month solo voyage into outer space? Or, after three years of intensive training with Aidan at NASA, did I just *need* some space?

What could go wrong with this coupling? Miranda, the universe's first interstellar lawyer, and Jackie, a nonbinary space pirate who smuggled rocket fuel (and the occasional pair of Manolos)?

Big's rejection was crushing—and it didn't help that his breakup signal from Cape Canaveral arrived just as I was dealing with a 4-g liftoff.

And just like that, I went from the V.I.P. section of the hottest planet in the solar system, Venus, surrounded by the brightest stars and starlets, to having my matter undergo spaghettification inside a black hole.

Afterward, as we cuddled in Zelgon's lair, with it enfolding me tightly in all thirteen of its muscular, ooze-covered tentacles, the irony hit me like an asteroid: it was only with an alien from a galaxy I'd never even *heard* of before last week that I finally felt . . . at home.

Steve had mostly adjusted to the atmosphere on Neptune—and to life as a bachelor. But that night, on his first date after his split from Miranda, he suffered a catastrophic failure to launch.

I needed to process everything that had happened, so I met the ladies at our favorite brunch spot, in the kitchen core module, for thermostabilized tangy quiche—*and* a pitcher or three of Tang mimosas.

After the explosion in the command bay and losing contact with ground control, I finally had some time to think. We're all just hurtling toward the infinite void in our own escape capsules. But sometimes, if you're lucky, you find the person you want to spend the rest of your days with, tapping out Morse code from *their* escape capsule, until you're both induced into centuries-long cryogenic sleep. And, sister, could *I* use a good nap. ♦

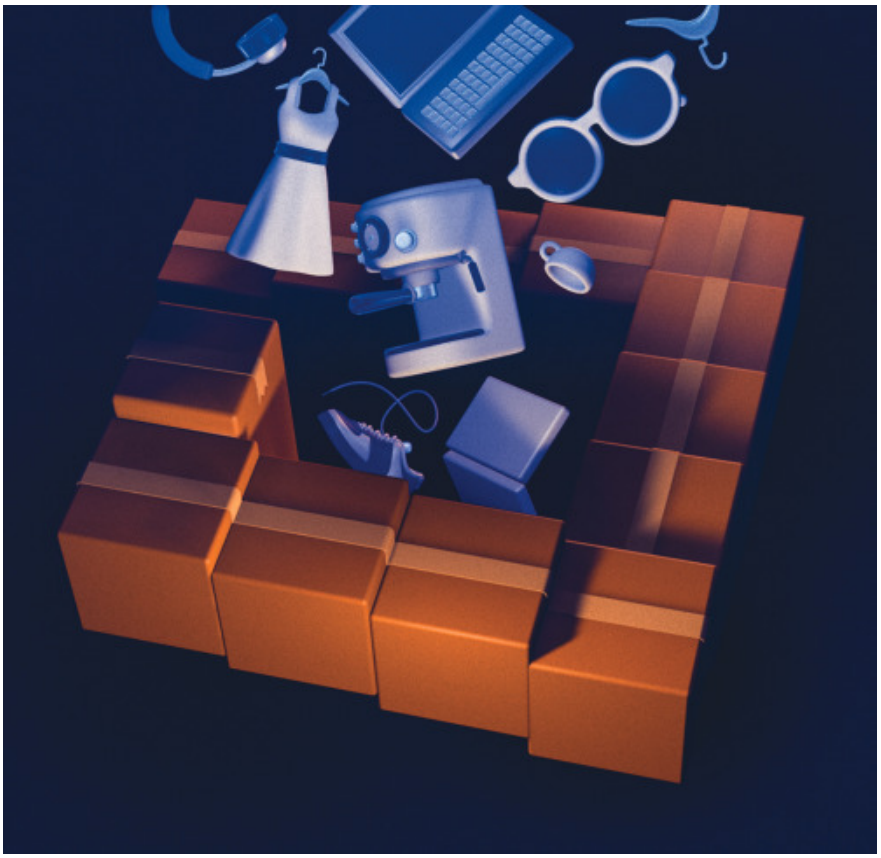
LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

THE WORLD OF BUSINESS

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

How product returns became an industry.

BY DAVID OWEN



It almost goes without saying that Americans are the world's top refund seekers.

The twentysomething daughter of a friend of mine recently ordered half a dozen new dresses. She wasn't planning to keep the lot; she'd been invited to the wedding of a college classmate and knew in advance that she was going to send back all but the one she liked best. "Swimsuits and dresses for weddings—you never buy just one," Joanie Demer, a co-founder of the Krazy Coupon Lady, a shopping-strategy Web site, told me. For some online apparel retailers, returns now average forty per cent of sales.

Steady growth in Internet shopping has been accompanied by steady growth in returns of all kinds. A forest's worth of artificial Christmas trees goes back every January. Bags of green plastic Easter grass go back every spring. Returns of large-screen TVs surge immediately following the Super Bowl. People who buy portable generators during weather emergencies use them until the emergencies have ended, and then those go back, too. A friend of mine returned so many digital books to Audible that the company now makes her call or e-mail if she wants to return another. People who've been invited to fancy parties sometimes buy expensive outfits or accessories, then return them the next day, caviar stains and all—a practice known as "wardrobing." Brick-and-mortar shoppers also return purchases. "Petco takes back dead fish," Demer said. "Home Depot and Lowe's let you return dead plants, for a year. You just have to be shameless enough to stand in line with the thing you killed." It almost goes without saying that Americans are the world's leading refund seekers; consumers in Japan seldom return anything.

Earlier this year, I attended a three-day conference, in Las Vegas, conducted by the Reverse Logistics Association, a trade group whose members deal in various ways with product returns, unsold inventories, and other capitalist jetsam. The field is large and growing. Dale Rogers, a business professor at Arizona State, gave a joint presentation with his son Zachary, a business professor at Colorado State, during which they said that winter-holiday returns in the United States are now worth more than three hundred billion dollars a year. Zachary said, "So one and a half per cent of U.S. G.D.P.—which would be bigger than the G.D.P. of many countries around the world—is just the stuff that people got for Christmas and said, 'Nah, do they have blue?'" The annual retail value of returned goods in the U.S. is said to be approaching a trillion dollars.

Most online shoppers assume that items they return go back into regular inventory, to be sold again at full price. That rarely happens. On the last day of the R.L.A. conference, I joined a "champagne roundtable" led by Nikos Papaioannou, who manages returns of Amazon's house-brand electronic devices, including Kindles, Echos, and Blink home-security systems. He said that every item that's returned to Amazon is subjected to what's referred to in the reverse-logistics world as triage, beginning with an analysis of its condition. I asked what proportion of triaged products are resold as new.

"It's minimal," he said. "I'm not going to give you a specific number, because it's so dependent on the product category. But our approach with this question is that, if the seal has been broken, if the wrap is not intact, then it's not going back to the shelf." Even though Papaioannou understands this fact as well as anyone, he said, he often shops the way the rest of us do. When he buys shoes, for example, he typically orders two pairs, a half size apart. In brick-and-mortar stores, a pair of tried-on shoes will be re-boxed and reshelved. "From an Amazon viewpoint, the moment the box opens, you've lost the opportunity," he said.

For a long time, a shocking percent-

ILLUSTRATION BY SHIRA INBAR

age of online returns were simply junked. The industry term is D.I.F., for "destroy in field." (The Web site of Patriot Shredding, based in Maryland, says, "Product destruction allows you to protect your organization's reputation and focus on the future.") This still happens with cheap clothes, defective gadgets, and luxury items whose brand owners don't want a presence at Ocean State Job Lot, but, in most product categories, it's less common than it used to be. Almost all the attendees at the R.L.A. conference, of whom there were more than eight hundred, are involved, in one way or another, in seeking profitable, efficient, and (to the extent possible) environmentally conscionable ways of managing the detritus of unfettered consumerism. "Returns are inherently entrepreneurial," Fara Alexander, the director of brand marketing at goTRG, a returns-management company based in Miami, told me. She and many thousands of people like her are active participants in the rapidly evolving but still only semi-visible economic universe known as the reverse supply chain.

People who weren't born yesterday, but almost, often assume that easy refunds and exchanges began with the online shoe store Zappos, which was founded in 1999. Tony Hsieh, the company's legendary late C.E.O., offered free returns for up to a year after purchase and encouraged people to order items in multiple styles and sizes. That policy, which was backed by intensely personal customer service, was so popular that the company's revenues grew more than sixfold in four years. Amazon started a similar shoes-and-accessories site, called Endless, but it eventually gave up trying to compete, having bought Zappos for $1.2 billion.

America's true refund pioneer was born a century before Hsieh, on a farm in northwestern Missouri. He moved to Kemmerer, Wyoming, in 1902, in order to become a one-third owner of a general store that was part of a small chain, called Golden Rule. Within a few years, he had bought out his partners and opened more stores, and in 1913 he consolidated his holdings under his own name: J. C. Penney. (The initials stand for James Cash.) Among his innovations was allowing customers to return anything, no questions asked. That approach made a permanent impression on Sam Walton, who went to work at a Penney's store, in Des Moines, in 1940, immediately after graduating from the University of Missouri. Twenty-two years later, Walton founded his own chain, Walmart, and adopted a similarly generous return policy, which is still in effect. "Sam Walton was very, very customer-centric," Chuck Johnston, who served as Walmart's senior director of returns between 2005 and 2012 and is now the chief strategy officer at goTRG, told me. "People would bring in stuff that was clearly from Sears, and we would take it back, because we wanted a happy customer." (Homer Simpson: "The customer's always right; that's why everyone likes us.")

A century ago, the average return rate at Penney's was probably something like two per cent; before Internet shopping truly took hold, retail returns had risen to more like eight or ten per cent. Returns to online retailers now average close to twenty per cent, and returns of apparel are often double that. Among the many reasons: products often look nothing like their online images—such as a crocheted bikini top that was barely big enough for the purchaser's cat—and colors and fabrics appear different on different screens.

The pandemic accelerated growth in online shopping, and therefore in returns, by several years. Quarantined lawyers bought fewer neckties but more sweatpants and bedroom slippers. People who were suddenly forced to work from home ordered desks, chairs, and computers. In 2021, UPS delivered a huge unassembled storage unit to my house. It was actually meant for a neighbor, but I opened the box because I, too, had ordered a huge unassembled storage unit. (Like many people, my neighbor and I had decided that COVID had given us an opportunity to organize our swelling hoard of household crap, including household crap we'd bought because of COVID. I texted my neighbor, and he drove over and picked up his box—no return necessary.) Prepandemic, a common shopping strategy was to study possible purchases in a regular store, then save a few dollars by ordering from Amazon. When in-person shopping became difficult, the best way to compare products was to order multiples and send back the rejects.

Returns are expensive for sellers, since shipping alone often costs more than the items can be resold for. Many retailers have responded by shrinking their refund windows or by imposing fees for postage or so-called restocking. Some sellers offer store credit only. Amazon now adds a "frequently returned item" label to listings of problematic offerings and encourages potential purchasers to double-check descriptions and customer reviews of those items before ordering. The online business model of the eyeglasses seller Warby Parker is based on easy returns: customers can order as many as five frames, at no risk, to try on at home. The company still offers that option but has reduced return costs by employing an increasingly sophisticated online tool that allows customers to try on glasses virtually. (It also has physical stores, which have mirrors.) Back in the mail-order era, L. L. Bean suggested that shoe customers include a tracing of their foot in the envelope with their order form—an effective way to reduce returns, but more troublesome than ordering multiple pairs.

Despite the cost, retailers worry that discouraging returns discourages buying in the first place, driving revenues down. Easy returns are like free shipping: they can be a dealmaker or a dealbreaker when a consumer is deciding where to shop, even though in both cases the cost is ultimately borne by the consumer. Most online mattress sellers offer free returns, in some cases for up to a year; used mattresses can't be resold, so the loss, usually some eight or nine per cent of sales, is folded into prices. Johnston said, "You've got to tread carefully, if you try to ratchet back ease of returns, so that you don't drive your customer to your competitor."

As a consequence, even as sellers are subtly and not so subtly discouraging returns, they're also exploring ways to make them easier. Some Target stores now have drive-up refund windows. Many online returns no longer have to be repackaged: just get a QR code on the seller's site and take the unboxed item to a location that consolidates shipments. Amazon offers Prime customers a seven-day "try before you buy" option on selected apparel and accessories. (You pay only for what you keep.) You might think that retailers would be pleased

when customers fail to send back items they don't want, but that isn't true if those customers remain unhappy. One of the most popular presenters at R.L.A. was Spencer Kieboom, a former major-league baseball player, whose company, Pollen Returns, uses underemployed rideshare and delivery drivers to pick up unwanted items, for free, at buyers' homes, thereby sparing them the nuisance of schlepping things to UPS on their own.

Some retailers simply refund certain purchases, no need to send anything back. ("When you ship a hundred-pound bag of dog food, you're probably losing money on it already," Johnston told me.) My wife ordered a funny poster for a high-school reunion, then decided it wasn't funny enough. When she tried to return it, Amazon told her to keep it, and refunded her $32.72. Perhaps surprisingly, companies that sell sofa beds, dining tables, and other bulky, heavy items often do the same, because return freight is so expensive.

"There are people who think that open returns are an idea whose time has come and gone, but it's a hallmark of successful American retail," Dale Rogers told me. "If you make it easy to shop, and you reduce the risk to the consumer, what you get is a lifetime consumer." It's probably not a coincidence that the world's two biggest retailers—Walmart, with revenues of five hundred and seventy-three billion dollars in 2022, and Amazon, with four hundred and sixty-nine billion—also offer some of the easiest returns.

Three years ago, the producers of a Canadian television show called "Marketplace" ordered boots, diapers, a toy train, a coffee maker, a printer, and several other items from Amazon Canada. They concealed a G.P.S. tracking device inside each one, then returned everything and monitored what happened next. Some of the items travelled hundreds of miles in trucks, with intermediate stops at warehouses and liquidation centers, ultimate disposition unknown. A brand-new women's backpack ended up in a waste-processing center, en route to a landfill. The show included a surreptitiously recorded conversation with an employee of a "product-destruction" facility, who described receiving truckload after truckload of Amazon returns and shredding everything—ostensibly for recycling, although the recoverable content of a chewed-up random selection of consumer goods is not high.

If you leave money lying around, someone will pick it up. One morning at the R.L.A. conference, I spent half an hour with two executives of Liquidity Services, a company that, according to its Web site, offers "circular commerce solutions" to businesses of all kinds, in part by selling "any item in any condition, anywhere in the world." John Daunt, the chief commercial officer, said, "It sounds like selling used stuff, but there's a lot more to it than you would think." Liquidity Services operates eight regional warehouse-size facilities in North America. The one closest to New York is in Pittston, Pennsylvania, at the outer edge of a business park that also includes distribution or return facilities owned by Amazon, Home Depot, Lennox, Neiman Marcus, PepsiCo, and a number of smaller companies. The rise of online shopping has been very good for people who build immense, low, flat-roofed metal structures. The Pittston complex includes two enormous buildings that belong to Lowe's; between them, they have more than fifty acres under roof, plus loading docks and parking spaces for hundreds of semitrailers. Similar complexes now exist all over the United States, in locations that have easy access to highways and airports. More are always under construction.

For a liquidator, turning a profit depends on having the ability to quickly determine whether an item can be sold again at a reasonable price, and, if so, whether it requires human attention first. Liquidity Services and companies like it use automated and semiautomated routines to sort returned items,

repair what can easily be repaired, wipe information from electronic devices, and funnel salable goods to likely customers. "A lot of what we do involves receiving a truckload and then finding another buyer for that truckload, who then will distribute it to mom-and-pop stores and other resellers downstream," Daunt said. "Or, if they're not quite big enough to handle that, we may sell it as pallets. We also have direct-to-consumer channels, and people will come to some of our facilities and pick up single items that they've bid for online."

You can register as a buyer on Liquidity Services' Web site right now, as I did recently, and place bids in any of hundreds of auctions. I didn't do that, but I did spend a pleasant morning studying items that other people were bidding on, among them a two-pallet lot containing six hundred and fifty-four pounds of sports-related Amazon returns. The lot included seven pellet guns, six clear-plastic umbrellas, an assortment of punching bags and punching balls, a double-bladed lightsabre toy, a shatter-resistant over-the-door mini basketball hoop, eight yoga mats, a minnow trap, an indoor exercise trampoline, a pair of hiking poles, a kickboxing shield, a car refrigerator, two hoverboards (one with Bluetooth and one without), a jump-rope rack, a quiver's worth of crossbow bolts, a fourteen-gallon red plastic gas can with a siphon pump, a set of four badminton racquets, and a mountain-bike handlebar. There were a hundred and fourteen items in all, and Liquidity Services had estimated their combined original retail value as six thousand five hundred and seventy-six dollars. The lot ended up attracting fifty bids. The winner paid nine hundred and twenty-five dollars, shipping not included. None of the fifty bidders were willing to offer more than fifteen cents on the dollar, and even at that price they were taking a chance, since there was no guarantee that any particular item would still function. Returned items are often damaged, dented, scratched, or inoperable, and even ones that don't look too bad can be missing parts or accessories.

I also followed the auction for a truckload of women's designer shoes: a little more than four tons of returns, all in their boxes, many in brand-new condition, with an original retail value that the company estimated as a hundred and eighty-one thousand seven hundred dollars. That auction expired with no bids, even though two hundred and fifty potential buyers, plus me, had looked at it. That outcome helps to explain why one R.L.A. attendee described apparel returns to me as "a nightmare." Clothing is tough: fashions go out of fashion quickly, and the items are likely to be one-offs.

When I got home from Las Vegas, I discovered that I live not far from one of the few companies that deal successfully with high volumes of apparel returns, out-of-stock clothing, and excess inventories. It's called N.E.J., and it's been in business for more than thirty years. It's based in Beacon Falls, Connecticut, an old industrial town that, a century ago, was famous for manufacturing rubber shoes. "Apparel is almost like vegetables," Ed Mascolo, the owner, told me, as he showed me around. "Things can lose value quickly."

The key to his business, Mascolo said, is "volume with velocity, supported by predictability." N.E.J. doesn't buy unwanted goods and resell them itself; it mainly contracts with large retailers to categorize and repackage truckloads of their returns and overstocks, then ships them to outlets and other secondary channels. On the day that I visited, some two hundred workers in the main building were opening pallet-size shipping containers, called Gaylords, and sorting their contents into wheeled bins. I watched other workers sorting, folding, bagging, hanging, boxing. Some were "delabelling" new arrivals—using an indelible marker to draw a black line across a tag or to add a conspicuous dot—in order to mark those items as goods that, among other things, can't be returned.

Six years ago, Mascolo decided that he had learned enough about the apparel industry to enter it himself. N.E.J. bought and revived a bankrupt American clothing company called Bills Khakis. It sells pants, shorts, shirts, and other items, all made in the United States. "We custom-hem our pants to the half inch," he said. "It's a very old-school pant. Seventeen-inch pocket. Extra belt loops, longer rise. Our customer is fifty to seventy-five, and he tends to be a little more conservative in how he dresses." When we met, Mascolo was wearing a pair of Bills five-pocket twill khakis (two hundred and twenty-five dollars) and a brown Bills leather belt (ninety-eight dollars). I asked him about his return policy.

"We take everything back," he said.

Last year, in an official statement, Amazon told CNBC that none of its returns are sent to landfills. All that really means is that Amazon itself doesn't send anything to a landfill, but many returns obviously get there anyway, and some avoid it only by being diverted to what the company described to CNBC as "energy recovery," a euphemism for burning in a furnace.

Liquidators must quickly sort and resell goods, usually in bulk. Some companies do more. One of those is America's Remanufacturing Company, based in Georgia, which contracts with brand owners to receive their returns and, when possible, to repair or refurbish them, so that they can be sold by others. (A.R.C. is also one of Amazon's so-called external repair venders.) "We never want to just buy returns," Paul Adamson, the company's chief revenue officer, told me. "There's a lack of value."

An important moment in Adamson's career occurred in 1991, when he was a sophomore at the University of New Hampshire and working part time in a RadioShack store. He got a call from someone at a company that provided rapid-turn-around computer-maintenance contracts to major corporations. The caller desperately needed a particular part. Adamson found the part, and then found so many others for the same maintenance company that it hired him. (He sat at a desk with a phone and a computer keyboard, but no computer. When he took a call, he would make typing sounds on the keyboard, then say, "Oh, I think I've got one left. Let me just call the warehouse and verify.") He followed that job with several similar ones, "all on the reverse side." He met A.R.C.'s previous owner through an electronics-recycling company in which he was a partner, and they hit it off.

When Adamson pitches A.R.C.'s services to potential clients, he told me, he argues that even with items that can be sold again the real value is in

information. "We can tell you how many units are being returned and how many of those are defective, and we can help you understand both of those numbers," he said. Recently, A.R.C.'s technicians determined that one reason customers were returning a particular high-end coffee maker was that it contained a cheap float valve, which was prone to malfunctioning when used with hard water. After identifying the flaw, they helped design a fix by working with the factory in China that was doing the manufacturing. A.R.C. handles so many returns that it can often spot defects before brand owners are aware of them—as it did, recently, after receiving just three returns of an appliance that turned out to have issues with condensation and heat. Some clients now send A.R.C. models for testing before they go to market. It also has clients for whom it does design work only.

This spring, I met with Adamson at A.R.C.'s facility in Union Point, Georgia, a small town a little more than an hour east of Atlanta. The company's building there is broad, low, and gray, and it's on a short potholed road with an aspirational name: Industrial Boulevard. There's a lumber warehouse on the left, a Dollar General on the right, and a cabinetmaking company across the street.

We walked through the receiving area, a large, open space that was filled with recent arrivals—tilting piles of household appliances, stacks of yellow bins containing miscellaneous Amazon returns—and stopped in front of a pallet on which half a dozen Husqvarna two-thousand-pounds-per square-inch electric pressure washers, made under a license by Briggs & Stratton, had been stacked and bound with plastic stretch wrap. (A pressure washer is many homeowners' second-favorite power tool, after their chainsaw. It shoots a stream of water at high velocity, and can be used to clean a roof, blast mold off a wooden deck, or scare away a bear, as a friend of mine did after being surprised by one while scrubbing down the inside of his swimming pool.) As Adamson and I watched, workers sorted units by model and year of manufacture. They checked electrical components and replaced damaged parts with parts they'd salvaged from returns they couldn't repair. Much of the refurbishing was done on a manufacturing line that A.R.C. bought from a Briggs & Stratton plant, in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, and modified, in part by adding a car-wash-like cleaning system to one end.

For every item it processes, A.R.C. knows the potential resale price, what percentage of that price the brand owner is willing to spend on refurbishment, and the cost of each potential intervention. Some problems are too expensive to address; pressure washers with broken pumps are stripped of usable elements and thrown into a steel hopper, to be sent later to a local recycling company, which shreds them and recovers as much salable metal and plastic as it can. At the end of the line, a worker replaced each Husqvarna label with one from Murray, a brand that Briggs & Stratton owns (and therefore a name it doesn't have to license). Each unit also received a new serial number and a new box, which clearly identified it as a refurb. "These will all end up at the discount chain Ollie's, where they'll sell for maybe half of what a new one costs," Adamson said. "Ollie's picked up twelve truckloads here in the past week and a half, and they have another twenty or so to go—another ten thousand units over the next six weeks." The pandemic was good for the refurb market, because in many product categories supply-chain problems made new items scarce.

A large number of the Amazon returns that A.R.C. receives, Adamson said, are "remorse returns": you order something late at night after drinking too much wine, or maybe you and your spouse accidentally order the same thing. I saw bins of window curtains in another part of the building; all were from Amazon, many in packages that hadn't been opened. Pressure washers, by contrast, are often returned because the people who bought them, usually men, don't read instructions. "You're always supposed to hook a pressure washer up to water before you turn it on, but a lot of people don't do that, and they burn up the motor," Adamson said. I asked whether Briggs & Stratton couldn't prevent that problem by adding a cutoff switch to the water tank. He said that such a fix was unlikely to be cost-effective, and that a more practical solution would be to add an extra warning tag or sticker.

Elsewhere, I saw technicians at long counters working on robotic vacuum cleaners. The units were plugged into outlets under the counter—they have to be charged before they can be evaluated—and hundreds, if not thousands, more were stacked nearby, on tall warehouse shelves. "The No. 1 issue with robot vacs is that people don't know how to use them," Adamson said. This is partly because the buyers tend to be older, but also because successfully making the necessary Wi-Fi connection can be frustrating even to people who do read instructions—an issue with other products as well. "A really good partner of ours does over fifty per cent of all the refurbishing of HP consumer printers in the U.S.," Adamson said. "On all the newer printers, the only connection option is Wi-Fi, so when they refurb them they include a printer cable. Problem solved."

Adamson told me that he used to be "an ardent hater" of companies that merely buy and sell returns. "I thought they just demonstrated the inefficiency of the reverse supply chain," he said. "But my mind has changed over the years." The fact that A.R.C. can't profitably refurbish a particular item doesn't mean that it won't have value to someone else, even if it's just a few cents' worth of ground-up plastic. "There's a guy in a small town in Alabama who buys trailer loads of returned air-conditioners from us," he said. "When I Googled his property address, I saw that it's a double-wide on four acres. He buys A.C.s that we can't refurbish economically, then tinkers with them and sells them locally. It's stuff I'm never going to touch, but he makes a living at it."

The next day, I visited a different A.R.C. facility, this one in Augusta, an hour east of Union Point, and was shown around by David Hogan, the company's C.E.O. At a workbench, two technicians were repairing upright vacuum cleaners, which were deluxe enough that A.R.C. could cost-effectively give

them lots of individual attention. "We receive units that were very clearly just run until they stopped working," Hogan said. "I mean, you've got to empty it, right? But some people don't realize that." Many American consumer goods are manufactured in Asia, for companies whose U.S. presence is limited to little more than marketing and sales departments. For companies like that, A.R.C. performs quality-control functions that used to be handled in-house. "You can't beat the information you get from a product once a customer has touched it," Hogan said.

The two technicians that Hogan and I watched are members of a rapidly vanishing species: people who know how to repair stuff. It used to be that when something went wrong with our dishwasher, washing machine, or oven, my wife or I would call a guy who owned a local appliance-repair company. Once, he got our dishwasher working again by taking apart the grinder and removing what he guessed were broken pieces of ceramic. (They were actually coyote teeth. Long story.) The last time I called him, seven or eight years ago, he said that he'd had to get a job as a greeter at Home Depot, because nowadays when appliances malfunction most people simply buy new ones.

That change is partly the result of consumer ignorance and laziness, but manufacturers are at fault, too. Almost all modern appliances contain electronics, which not only have a limited life span but are also usually impossible to repair and expensive to replace. Our former repairman once told my wife and me that we should always buy the "dumbest" appliances we could find. That was excellent advice, but it's close to useless now, since even blenders and coffee makers contain microchips. He also told us that the deadliest enemy of electronic components is heat, and that, as a consequence, we should never self-clean an oven, never install two ovens side by side, and definitely never simultaneously self-clean two ovens that had been installed side by side—three valuable lessons that we learned the hard way.

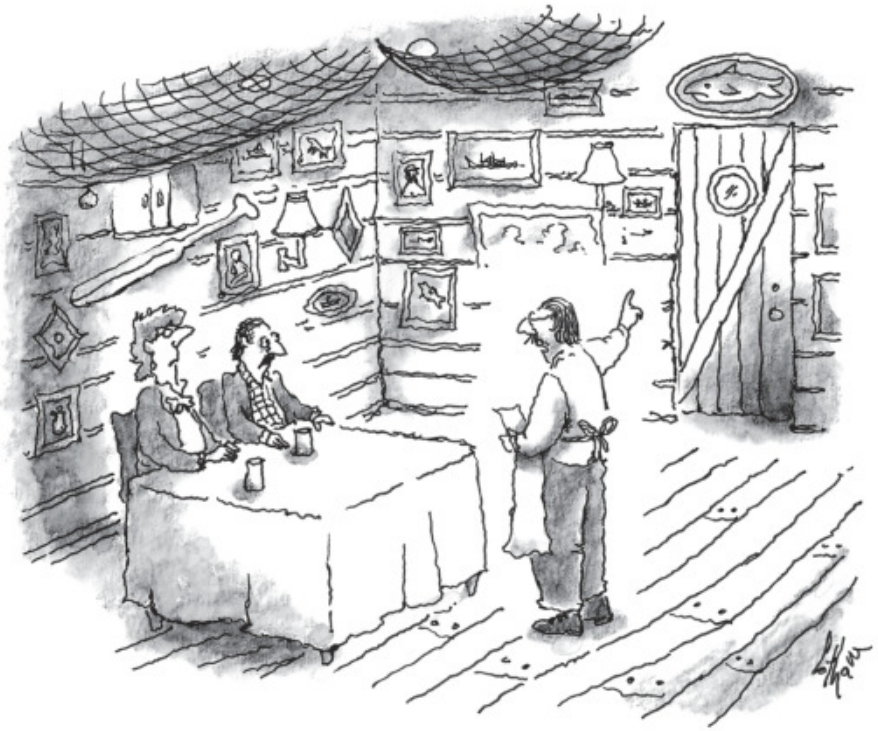
Another challenge is that few products today are manufactured with repair in mind. "You see it when you get inside the product, as we do," Hogan said. "A lot of it is materials selection, or the way the assembly was executed." Two significant impediments to repair: components that are glued together rather than screwed, and pieces that were snapped together with plastic fasteners that break off when the pieces are pulled apart. A service that A.R.C. offers to some of its clients is what it calls same-unit repairs: something goes wrong, under warranty, with an expensive item like a shop vac, and the manufacturer sends you a UPS label addressed to A.R.C., whose technicians repair it and ship it back within a day or two. The company is currently building that side of the business, but it's viable only with high-quality items, which don't fall apart when you open them up.

"At this company, we talk about how frustrated we are with some return practices—which is funny, because they're what keep us in business," Hogan said. He recently took part in a panel discussion at the Ray C. Anderson Center for Sustainable Business, at Georgia Tech, his alma mater. The topics included some of the same design issues we'd just been discussing—component quality, difficulty of repair, product life expectancy. He had asked the people in the room to imagine a world in which products were so well made and so easy to repair that a company like A.R.C. wouldn't need to exist.

"I said, 'Let me just theoretically offer you a deal,'" he told me. " 'I'll sell you a computer for the same price as the one you have now—a nice, expensive computer. But it will be twice as durable, and it will weigh half as much, and its battery will last twice as long, and it will have twice the processing power and twice the memory.'" The only condition, he said, would be that returns would not be allowed, for any reason.

"This was Georgia Tech's sustainability center, so these were super-smart engineering hippies," he said. "There were probably forty or fifty people, all M.B.A.s." Hogan assumed that they would all jump at the deal. But no hands went up—not one.

"I was blown away," he said. "It's just astounding how embedded returns are in our behavior. When I finished my talk, I said, 'Thank you all. I definitely picked the right industry.'" ♦



"The catch of the day looks a lot like that fish above the door, but a bit fresher."

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Monster Jam still likes wrecking a truck or two, but the main attraction these days is what the company calls "technical, big-air

THE SPORTING SCENE

AMERICAN DIRT

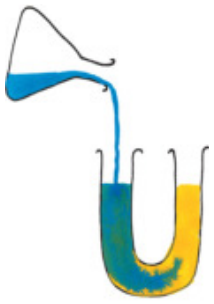
Monster trucks, the stars of the modern thrill show, sell more tickets than Taylor Swift.

BY ZACH HELFAND

events"—launching vehicles that are the size of an African bush elephant as high into the air as possible.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIELLE LEVITT

A monster trucker is the kind of person who has a favorite type of dirt. I've heard drivers describe a track as fluffy, sticky, loose, tacky, grippy, greasy, slick, crumbly, powdery, bone-dry, baked out, dead, loamy, earthen, sandy, slidey, soupy, snotty, and marshmallowy. Everyone understands the distinctions. They obsess over them like vintners obsess over terroir. The first time I met an employee of Monster Jam, which sells millions of tickets to its monster-truck shows every year, the first thing she told me was that the company owns more dirt, she thinks, than anyone else in the world.



Monster Jam runs events in about a hundred and thirty stadiums and arenas annually, on six continents. This requires building a hundred and thirty elaborate, temporary tracks, with massive jumps and ramps constructed out of dirt, like sandcastles for a giant. Rallies, these days, are less demolition-derby crash-fests than aerial acrobatic shows involving twelve-thousand-pound vehicles. It's expensive to source and truck in enough dirt to fill a stadium, so the company stashes a big pile near each venue, to be used year after year. For the Meadowlands' MetLife Stadium, in New Jersey, which Monster Jam visited a couple of months ago, the dirt lives in a nearby Superfund site: a decontaminated corner of an old cologne factory. When I showed up on the Thursday morning before the event, a procession of dump trucks was shuttling between the site and the stadium.

"It's so hard to find good dirt," Daniel Allen, who's known informally as Monster Jam's senior director of dirt, told me. "And by no stretch is the dirt in this area great." Allen, who is thin and wiry, got the Meadowlands dirt a decade ago from a housing developer nearby. "A Russian guy, Vlady something," Allen said. "You could barely even understand this guy, but he had good dirt." That first time, Allen's crew had taken possession of about half of Vlady's dirt when bad storms hit, and every construction pit in the area shut down. The show was in a couple of days. Allen had to improvise. "Our dirt in Philadelphia is stored behind Lincoln Financial Stadium, under I-95. I knew it was perfectly good and dry. So we took a night of hauling, and we brought over three thousand yards of clay at night, truck after truck, hundreds of truckloads."

Every dirt is different. The U.S.D.A. has identified and named about twenty thousand types of American soil. Allen knows that Atlanta's clay is red, and Glendale, Arizona's stains concrete. Chicago has dark topsoil. New England's dirt has rocks; Allen puts it through giant sieves so the spinning truck tires don't launch stone missiles into the crowd. He likes a mix of seventy per cent clay, which is moldable enough to build jumps and durable enough that the tires don't burn through to the floor below, and thirty per cent sand, which is strong, absorbent, and good for power slides. Sometimes finding that mix is impossible. "When they first told me we were going to take Monster Jam to Miami, I told them, 'Well, you show me water in a desert, and I'll show you clay on a beach.' Because that's essentially what Miami is. It's just pure sand." The company spent three hundred thousand dollars trucking in loads of clay from a vein near Fort Myers.

It's surprising how easily good dirt can turn bad. Dirt that weathers too much can become the texture of baby powder. The pH balance matters, so Allen grows plants on his pile. He likes mixing in straw. "It keeps our dirt alive," he said. A single teaspoon of soil can house a billion bacteria, along with protozoa, nematodes, and fungi. It's the bacteria that makes dirt smell like dirt—the scent comes from spores released to ward off predatory nematodes. The old Nassau Coliseum dirt always smelled like manure—"literally like a cow pasture," Allen said—perhaps because it hosted the rodeo, which borrowed Monster Jam's stockpile. Elsewhere, there are dirt bandits. "They run around behind us trying to steal our dirt," Allen said. In January, a motocross promoter lifted Allen's entire pile in Kansas City right before a show.

On the field of MetLife Stadium, a fleet of heavy equipment was preparing the track. Big excavators, the machines with an armlike shovel, were unloading dirt. Loaders, which have plowlike scoopers, were sculpting the dirt into ramps. I went down to take a look. At ground level, a cloud of dust hovered over the track and made my eyes water. I grabbed a clod and sniffed, hoping for Chanel No. 5. It was closer to damp basement: eau de nematode. For each venue, the dirt crew hauls in as much as six hundred truckloads in about two days. It's enough dirt to fill every car on the G train eleven times over. They take it out within twelve hours, and then go to the next city to do it again. The best loader operators can cup a ramp to within fractions of an inch of the proper radius of curvature. I watched them work for a while with Jayme Dalsing, Monster Jam's senior director of global operations. He had gauge earrings, and an infinity-symbol tattoo on his left ring finger. He'd once worked on a dirt crew but never got great at it. As they smoothed and carved, he shook his head, marvelling. "It's surgery with an immensely huge piece of equipment," he said. Allen had told me that some of his guys could spark a lighter with the tooth of an excavator, "or take a beer-bottle top off."

Two operators were on break: Bobby Hayes, who had a thick North Carolina accent, and a guy who went by Boston Rob, who sounded like you'd expect. (They joked that they sometimes needed a translator.) I asked about the beer-bottle trick. "We both could do it!" Boston Rob said. "We do screw with people. We'll go up and scratch their backs with the excavator."

Hayes said he sometimes follows the Cat-equipment rodeo, the Olympics of heavy machinery. "I have done a quarter flip on an excavator," he told me.

"I've picked up eggs," Boston Rob said.

Hayes went on, "The longer you're in them, the more time you have to think of stupid shit to do with them."

The thing that makes a monster truck is the tires. They must be at least sixty-six inches tall, which happens to be the height of the average American. The appeal has a certain timelessness: people have always liked really big stuff, particularly of the unnecessary variety. Stonehenge, pyramids, colossi, Costco. For perhaps obvious reasons, this is usually a male impulse. With trucks, it's also an American one, which has a lot to do with excess time and income, and our collective imperialist leanings. Then there's the

land itself. We've had to carry lots of people and lots of mail over vast and varied terrain. Marty Garza, a monster-truck historian, discovered that by 1894 some guys in Rochester had built a carriage with nickel-trimmed details and enormous wheels which they called their "monster truck." Two years later, Gottlieb Daimler invented the pickup.

Like the wheel, monster trucks were conceived by multiple men, but the godfather of monster trucks is Bob Chandler. Chandler, something of an engineering savant ("I actually compare him to Einstein," his daughter, Ann Trent, told me), owned a four-wheel-drive shop outside St. Louis. He liked to go off-roading in local creeks and mud pits. Over time, as he went looking for more things for his Ford F-250 to conquer—abandoned coal mines, slag heaps—the truck got bigger. Eventually, he added giant tires from a fertilizer spreader. (To accommodate them, he once used an axle from a military rocket launcher.) "My wife would say, 'Why do you have those bigger tires?'" Chandler told me. "I said, 'Because I can.'" He called the truck Bigfoot. He parked it in front of his shop, as advertising. "One day, he called me and said, 'Hey, I want to crush cars,'" his former business partner, Jim Kramer, told me. "My exact reaction was 'What the hell do you wanna do that for?'"

Kramer nevertheless filmed Bigfoot driving over a few junkers. The tape got around. People went crazy. In 1983, Chandler took Bigfoot 2 to a tractor-pulling show at the Pontiac Silverdome, in Michigan. In front of sixty-eight thousand people, he drove it onto the roof of an old car. The crowd's reaction was almost religious. People wanted to touch it. Thousands rushed the floor. "My son was in the truck with me, and I said, 'Roll up your windows,'" Chandler said. He was worried they might be crushed themselves.

Before long, monster trucks were everywhere. Upstarts used tires from Alaskan military transport vehicles, desert oil prospectors, and swamp trucks. Chandler put a set of ten-footers on Bigfoot. The truck, fully kitted, weighed about the same as a regional commercial jet. Variety abounded. There were monster trains, monster tanks, monster Vanagons, monster school buses, and a monster ambulance called the Whambulance. A truck called Mad Dog drove across the Lake of the Ozarks; sixty-six-inch tires are so buoyant that the trucks float. The trucks had names like 5 Ton Turd, Mt. Crushmore, Crush Socialism, Alcohaulin, Bad Pig, BlownIncome, Fat Landy, Jumpin' for Jesus, DT-Maxxx, and Bobby Wasabi's Wasab-A-Saurus. In Mexico, drug cartels have recently outfitted monster trucks with battering rams and machine-gun turrets to use in shootouts.

Monster-truck ads were often the ones in which a man screamed "Sunday!" over and over again. That's because shows were often in the kinds of places where businesses were closed on Sundays. Jan Gabriel, who popularized the "Sunday, Sunday, Sunday!" tagline, did it originally for a drag race, but he later made millions of dollars selling monster-truck VHS tapes, and died on January 10, 2010—a Sunday. The industry attracted a particular crowd. One monster-truck pioneer kept as pets two black bears, which he named Sugar and Spice.

At first, crushing was enough. Soon, promoters added drag races, small jumps, and gimmicks like tug-of-war. Monster Jam used to ram trucks through R.V.s filled with flour; they'd explode like a powdery firework. Before my trip to the Meadowlands, I'd assumed that the whole point of a monster truck was to smash stuff, but my understanding was outdated. Monster Jam still likes wrecking a truck or two, but Dalsing, the global-operations director, told me that the latest thing is what he calls "technical, big-air events." This involves launching vehicles that are about the same size and weight as an African bush elephant as high into the air as possible. Seeing this in person leaves an impression. Bari Musawwir, a superfan ("I used to make engine noises at the grocery store") who became a driver, told me he witnessed the first monster-truck backflip landed in competition, in Jacksonville, in 2010. "I remember grown men hugging in the stands," he said.

The day after the dirt was loaded in at MetLife, I met Matt Delsanter, the technician for a truck sponsored by a chain of hair salons, called the Great Clips Mohawk Warrior, whose roof has custom-cut broom bristles shaped like

"What about me would possibly make you think I regularly shave my legs?"

spikes of hair. Delsanter wears his hair in a nearly identical Mohawk, which he spikes on event days. When I arrived at the pit area, in the parking lot, he was buffing out the truck and conferring with a mulleted mechanic named Craig, who greeted me with "Mahalo."

Monster Jam has multiple tours, and each of them competes weekly. The mechanics travel from city to city with the trucks, which are transported on big rigs. (One time, a mechanic rode in the back of the trailer, buckled up in the monster-truck seat.) The trucks always sustain some kind of damage, often catastrophic, and the technicians have to get them ready to go by the weekend. Delsanter tapped Mohawk Warrior. "I've probably sat in that seat more than I have on my own couch," he said.

He continued, "I'm about to put the big tires on, if you'd like to see that." The tires weigh six hundred and forty-five pounds each. He rolled one over and grabbed an enormous wrench gun. "Big tools for big trucks!" he said. Then he showed me around the trailer, which serves as a mobile auto shop. A modern monster truck has as much in common with a pickup as a pickup has with a golf cart. At its simplest, a monster truck is a steel-tubed roll cage sitting atop a drag racer. The engine supplies as much as two thousand horsepower. Trucks have gone more than a hundred miles an hour. Instead of diesel, the engine burns methanol, at a rate of three gallons a minute. The motor lasts only thirty hours before a piston explodes straight out of the engine block. The trucks sound as loud as you'd imagine, although, a few years ago, Chandler created an electric Bigfoot that didn't make any sound at all.

Today, a lot of monster trucks don't look like trucks. They have fibreglass shells that are molded into pirate ships, dragons, or zombies. "The trucks are built almost identically," Delsanter said. The technicians' magic is in adapting to the dirt. If the track is tacky, Delsanter balloons the tires. If it's marbly, he likes them flat, for traction. On a sandy track, some mechanics tighten the sway bar. The right touch can make the difference in a race. Delsanter is very competitive.

"Matt, he's ate up if we don't win," Bryce Kenny, Mohawk Warrior's driver, told me. Kenny drives full time, but some drivers work day jobs. (Some across the industry make as little as five hundred dollars a show. A few stars can make six figures.) Brandon Vinson, who won the racing at last year's World Finals—the sport's Super Bowl—owns an earthmoving business. Another driver, Kayla Blood, works as a real-estate agent. Kenny grew up on a drag strip. He raced a dragster that was his grandfather's. In 2011, after the Great Recession hit, he had to give it up. He found a job as a corporate headhunter to try to buy it back. "I thought, I'll just go create wealth so that I can run it myself," he said. When Monster Jam called, he decided to take a thirty-per-cent pay cut.

Kenny and Delsanter are unusually loyal. Delsanter says he'd refuse a promotion in order to stay on Kenny's team. He worries constantly about truck safety. High jumps can carry more force than a highway crash. "It can get very violent," Kenny told me. "Me, I got this big old giraffe neck. My dad's a chiropractor, though, so that's like the best thing ever." Delsanter calibrates the shocks, which are filled with nitrogen gas, to the right stiffness. "It'll knock your fillings out if you're driving over a speed bump, but thirty, forty feet in the air you'll feel like you're on a La-Z-Boy," Delsanter said. The machines tend to break down in unexpected ways. "These trucks are sentient," Delsanter said. Sometimes he talks to his. When Mohawk Warrior won its first event, this spring, "I gave her a little pat," he said. "I was, like, 'You did it, girl, you finally did it.'"

I, too, worried for Kenny. Standing next to the truck, it was difficult to imagine it up above the parking-lot lights, airborne. The show was the next evening. In the afternoon, I hung around the pre-game "pit party," where fans check out the trucks and get autographs. A tent run by Morgan & Morgan, "America's Largest Injury Law Firm," offered a raffle for a hundred dollars.

A typical Monster Jam event has three parts: racing, two-wheel skills (wheelies and other stunts), and freestyle, the grand finale. In the stadium, the dirt crew was manicuring. The track looked great—a spiral of ramps surrounding a huge tabletop of packed dirt. The biggest jumps were ten feet tall. The first two tiers of seats were full—nearly fifty thousand people. "We sell four million-plus tickets a year," Dalsing said. "That's more than Taylor Swift." Monster Jam had appointed, as grand marshal of the event, Jason Biggs, the actor from "American Pie." He's a longtime fan. He took a microphone and announced, "This! Is! Monster Jam!," and the racing began.

I'd heard some rumors that Monster Jam shows were rigged, but Dalsing was adamant. "We're not W.W.E.," he said. The company is trying to present monster-truck driving as a legitimate sport. Dalsing recently forbade drivers to call events "shows." "I'll fine them a dollar," he suggested. (He would donate the proceeds to St. Jude's Children's Hospital.) It soon became clear to me that scripting events would be difficult. Trucks break down. Weird things happen on the dirt. Kenny, for example, won his first-round race, over Kayla Blood, by six one-thousandths of a second. He reached the finals, and then almost forfeited because of a balky battery. Delsanter had to run into the hot pits with jumper cables. Mohawk Warrior edged out Grave Digger, Monster Jam's most famous truck, in a photo finish.

It was the freestyle that everyone had come for. Freestyle consists of a truck trashing as much of the dirt crew's work as possible, in the span of two minutes. Trucks rampaged around the track, seemingly without a plan. Some wrecked. There was a special sponsored backflip ramp that obligated the event's announcers to proclaim, "He looks to the Morgan & Morgan backflip ramp!," over and over again. Kenny pulled one of the bigger backflips of the evening, then accelerated toward a giant kicking ramp. He popped into the air, terrifyingly high. It looked as though he was even with the stadium's second tier. Most of the crowd roared; my reaction was a slack-jawed laugh. It was the experience of seeing something amazing and slightly ridiculous, something you'd have never thought of yourself, like a dog juggling knives. I understood the hugging impulse. Kenny landed so hard that he bounced another eight feet on the rebound. Freestyle scoring is determined by fan voting. Kenny's score was good, but he was defeated by a truck called Bakugan Dragonoid. He finished third in the over-all standings. The crowd booed itself.

I headed down to the dirt. "I definitely was not happy," Delsanter said of the scoring. Still, it was a good night. "Want a souvenir?" he asked. He grabbed

When the trucks fly, it's like seeing something amazing and slightly ridiculous, like a dog juggling knives.

a knife and cut off a five-foot-wide flag from the back of the truck. Kenny signed it for me. His inscription said, "Live like a WARRIOR!!," right above giant lettering that read, "GREAT CLIPS."

Humans move about ten times as much dirt and rock around the planet's surface as all geologic processes combined—earthquakes, landslides, rivers, wind. That's impressive, when you consider that those processes carved the Grand Canyon. As you might expect, we do this heedlessly. Civilizations tend to start in river valleys where fertile soils can support an abundance that seems divinely wrought; the name Adam comes from the Hebrew word for earth or soil. For dust thou art. As the population booms, farms creep up the hillsides. Erosion follows. Crop yields falter, famine spreads. Civilizational collapse tends to coincide with plummeting soil productivity.

It was this pattern that helped inspire Elkanah Watson, a dirt aficionado whom I like to think of as the other godfather of monster trucks. Plump, restless, and intensely patriotic, Watson came of age in Plymouth, Massachusetts, during the Revolutionary War. He was obsessed with agriculture. During the war, he rode from Providence to Charleston, with twenty-six thousand Continental dollars sewn into his jacket. On the way, he asked so many questions about local farming that he was detained as a suspected British spy. He was apprenticed to a merchant, who sent him to Europe. He charmed Benjamin Franklin in Paris. He befriended John Adams in Holland. In London, he stood in the House of Lords and watched King George III proclaim the colonies free. "Every artery beat high, and swelled with my proud American blood," Watson wrote in his diary.

Of all that Watson saw in Europe, he was moved most by the agricultural societies. Yeoman farmers and landowners had discovered that their ancestors had been miserable stewards of the land. They organized to reverse the trend, led by men like Jethro Tull, Charles (Turnip) Townshend, and John Evelyn, a soil evangelist who advocated identifying a soil by, among other things, tasting it. (He also advocated enriching it with manure.) Watson noted how the agricultural societies were sharing their findings at local get-togethers. This, Watson decided, was what America needed, and when he returned to the States he created the country's first-ever agricultural fair, in 1811, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. He hoped to reverse soil depletion, but he knew that people wouldn't show up just for farming tutorials. A Barnumesque promoter, he brought in "innocent recreations," such as a carnival ride called the Fandango, which offered healthful "dizzy pleasures to the youths and maidens." A few years later, organizers introduced plowing matches, in which farmers raced to till an even field.

Before long, fairs had such attractions as cudgelling bouts, bearbaiting, and something called gouging. Later on came carnies, who brought tightrope walkers, learned pigs, and head-on railroad collisions. (Watson's own neighbors once pranked him by offering up a so-called potato hen, which could pick potatoes four times faster than a man.) The plowing matches evolved into tractor pulls, in which a team of oxen dragged a sled filled with heavy objects—often the fairgoers themselves. Eventually, oxen were replaced by motorized tractors, and then

by purpose-built pulling machines. One team put an aircraft motor in a tractor called the Honker, which blew a gasket and lit an entire oat field on fire. For a long time, monster trucks were the sideshows at tractor pulls and local fairs, and often they still are. If you overlay a map of soil productivity with a map of monster-truck hot spots, they align neatly.

It turned out that people who went to fairs liked to see stunts in which there was a credible chance that someone might get killed. These were called thrill shows. Invented at the Lucas County Fairgrounds, near Toledo, in 1923, thrill shows were daredevil acts, like Evel Knievel's. At one point, America had two hundred and fifty of them. Stunt drivers would jump chasms, hop in exploding coffins, or crash planes. There were no airbags; they'd stuff their cars with mattresses. A lot of monster-truck promoters got their start as thrill-show promoters.

In the eighties, some of them joined Truck-O-Rama, a company that did tractor pulling and mud racing. ESPN did bogside broadcasts of the mud races, during which you could hear reports such as "The hole is pretty soupy right now." Later, Truck-O-Rama became Monster Jam. In the nineties, it had a falling out with Chandler's Bigfoot company. "They wanted to own us," Chandler told me. Bigfoot stayed independent. It now runs on Monster Jam's rival tour, Hot Wheels Monster Trucks Live, which is geared more toward kids. Chandler views Monster Jam as wasteful. He said, "They'll destroy a monster truck on purpose just to excite the crowd."

These days, the fair circuit and the daredevil stunts are the domain of independent promoters, who put up their own money. Ed Beckley, who has been an independent promoter for five decades, can clear almost a quarter-million dollars in a good weekend. Throughout his career, Beckley has performed in thrill shows, and he still does at his monster-truck rallies. His most famous act involved jumping a motorcycle over two helicopters with the rotors running. He called it the World's Largest Human Veg-O-Matic. He once jumped seven cars with his ex-wife on the back. "She wasn't my ex-wife at the time," he told me. Sometimes it seems as if his job is just brainstorming entertaining ways to kill himself. The closest he came was a bad crash in Hobbs, New Mexico, in 2014. "I died three times in the helicopter," he told me. "I saw Jesus." From his hospital bed, he posed for a photo for a local newspaper, flashing a thumbs-up. Asked by the reporter how he was feeling, he said, "Rockin' and rollin', struttin' and strollin', man."

Safety standards at monster-truck shows are much higher now, but Beckley's theory is that people want to witness forces so vast and strange that they awe, or even terrify. The shows can be a forum for contemplating oblivion. There is the low end of this kind of American sublime, and there is the high. In the sixties and seventies, the earthworks movement used dirt and stone to produce art that could be beautiful and unsettling. Walter De Maria filled a floor in a building in SoHo with topsoil. Michael Heizer's "City," in the Nevada desert, is a mile-and-a-half-long sculpture that he carved using the native land. Visitors have described how its immensity and its enormous earthen pyramids can elicit visions of death. "Dirt is at the center of everything," Heizer told

A FILM IN WHICH I PLAY EVERYONE

In scene two, silence is a sleeve, I'm an arm in it.
In an outdated *Hollywood* magazine, I found a photo

of someone wearing my hair. How can that be?
Now I can't stop thinking about the synaptic sparks

over which no one has any control. Or, they have some
control but not enough to count on in a crisis.

I'm making sense all the time of all the senseless endings.
A day is as long as the time it takes

for the mind to consider life and death countless times.
Which must make a day plus a night a highway

we're only vaguely aware of since we're busy
sitting in a chair or lying on a bed

with a floral-print bedspread or walking to the store
past someone with a dog on a leash and a phone

in their hand, into which they seem to be saying
"That is not what I meant blah, blah, blah"

to an absent ear. Home, you unpack the items
you bought, crease the bags flat, stack them out of sight.

All without saying a word. This is a nonspeaking part.
You're an extra. That day you were filmed

on the steps walking into the school dance,
the costume you wore was pure you.

The set for the scene where everyone disappears
was painted Parisian sky-blue. The air burned

like a curtain on fire. The fire kept going out,
then being relit, a trick candle on a cake made of clouds.

—Mary Jo Bang

me, when I visited him in Manhattan, at his downtown loft. He talked about his earthmoving equipment, which he'd piloted personally. He pulled up a photo of a road grader. "It tears the fuck out of the ground," he said. Another photo: "That's a hammer for smashing things." A loader: "That thing alone is a civilization builder." He said that he still remembers happening upon a monster-truck show at Madison Square Garden years ago.

Monster Jam's biggest show of the year, World Finals XXII, was held in July, in Nashville. I'd heard it described as a carnival of carnage. "World Finals is basically job security for mechanics," one employee told me. I got into town just in time for a monster-truck parade down Broadway. On a city street, the trucks looked much bigger than on the dirt. As they rumbled by, grown men yelled at the top of their lungs, and a bachelorette party in front of Nudie's Honky Tonk took videos.

Since 2008, Monster Jam has been owned by Feld Entertainment, which produces travelling shows: Disney on Ice, Marvel Universe Live!, the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. The company claims that its headquarters, in Tampa, is Florida's third-largest building, after NASA and an Amazon warehouse. Before the circus got rid of animal acts, employees could encounter an elephant or a lion.

The Nashville event was at Nissan Stadium. Inside, I caught up with Tom Meents, the best driver on the circuit. He has won more World Finals titles than anyone else. He is six feet three, broad and sturdy, like a mini version of his truck, Maximum Destruction, known as Max-D. He drinks Mountain Dew constantly, including at breakfast, and rides around the parking lot before events on a bicycle. On multiple occasions, he told me that he was put on this earth to drive monster trucks. He has flipped, double-flipped, corkscrewed, long-jumped, moonwalked, sky-wheelied, and gone so high that it looked as if he might not survive. He's had back surgery once and been knocked unconscious twice. Meents has a keen sense of what fans want: "They want to see you go over the edge, and then bring it back when it's almost certainly not going to come back."

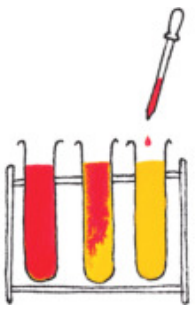
These days, Meents also runs Monster Jam's training facility, in a dug-up cornfield behind his house. He calls it Monster Jam University. For the previous several weeks, he had been working through a stunt with his stepson, the driver Colton Eichelberger. For World Finals, Eichelberger would try to jump over nine monster trucks. Meents said that they hadn't landed the jump in a practice session yet. "I'm way more nervous than I am when I'm driving," he told me. "When I'm driving, I have a calmness. I know what I need to do. I know what the risks are, I know what can happen. With him or anybody, I don't know if they've really thought about all the risk."

The weather in Nashville was not kind to the dirt crew. Heavy thunderstorms alternated with searing heat. Allen, the director of dirt, dispatched his crew to a hardware store to buy what he called "cordless mudsuckers." "We have a whole lagoon trapped by the high jump," he said. Puddles the color of Yoo-hoo dotted the field. A sloppy track is a nightmare for drivers. "On mud, the truck is like an elephant on ice skates," Krysten Anderson, who drives one of the Grave Digger trucks, told me. Allen used significant amounts of quicklime, a chemical powder, to boil the moisture from the dirt. After the quicklime was applied, I walked the track. It had dried into a hard mass, crisscrossed with tire prints. It was like walking on a giant peanut shell.

Complicating matters for the dirt crew was what Monster Jam called an "elevated start"—a towering ramp, cascading down from the first deck of the grandstand, constructed out of enough sand, clay, and asphalt tailings to nearly fill two Olympic swimming pools. At the beginning of each season, Monster Jam officials meet in a conference room and brainstorm new track layouts. For visual aids, they sometimes use toy trucks. They also consult with a couple of brothers from England who test the ideas using a computer game. "Ethan and Ash," Dalsing said. "We started working with them when they were teen-agers. They came to some of our international events saying, 'We love Monster Jam so much, here's something we designed.'"

Another lightning storm delayed the start of the show. Finally, it got under way, but because of the mud the two-wheel competition, which requires precise handling, was a washout. Even Meents had difficulty. In the racing, Kenny made it to the quarterfinals but had a breakdown on the first turn. He looked devastated. Meents's long-planned jump went better. Eichelberger, in a truck named ThunderROARus, zoomed down the elevated dirt ramp and flew so far over the row of nine trucks that the vehicle rammed into a barrier at the edge of the field. Eichelberger was fine—he got out and saluted the crowd. Meents looked elated. I couldn't help but feel a little underwhelmed. I'd seen a version of this a few times now—a big truck flying high and far. How quickly we desire more. This was Monster Jam's trap: a never-before-seen trick can happen only once. Awe is a hard thing to maintain.

Maybe it was the premeditation. During the freestyle, a driver named Todd Leduc, who drove Megalodon, a truck that looks like a shark, took off for a ramp without warning and pulled the biggest backflip most people had ever seen. He went maybe fifty feet in the air. He seemed out of control. This wasn't entirely true—when airborne, drivers can speed up their rotation by spinning the tires, or slow it down by pressing the brakes. "If we had wings, we'd fly out of the building," Kenny told me. When Leduc reached his apex, I thought he would over-rotate and crash into the ground roof first. But he tapped the brakes, and slammed down flat on the tires. A guy in the stands turned shrill: "WHAT?!? HOLY MOTHERFUCKING SHIT!" This was what we'd come to see: we'd spent an entire day in the heat and the rain, a little bored, in the hope that a twelve-thousand-pound fibreglass shark might briefly ascend toward space. Who in the crowd could imagine what it felt like to be in Leduc's seat?



I arrived at Monster Jam University, where I had a seat in driver tryouts, on a hot, dry day. Monster Jam runs tryouts every year in Paxton, Illinois, Meents's home town, with a dozen or so candidates. Typically, three or four get contracts. My wave included a few women who raced

professionally. One had graduated high school the previous weekend. Another, Lauren Partin, had grown up on a dirt track in southern Ohio. "My mom runs the concessions stands, my dad does the track stuff, my brother's the announcer, I race and do the paperwork," she said. "We have the ninth-biggest fireworks show in Ohio." She reported that Meents's dirt was "a little more nutrient" than the clay at home.

Meents, whom everyone at M.J.U. calls the Professor, volunteered to show me around town. I swung by his farmhouse in a rented Nissan Rogue and ceded the wheel. He adjusted the seat. "Gotta have lumbar when you're driving monster trucks for thirty years," he said. "Ahh. Ooh, yeah, there's the lumbar."

Paxton is a corn-and-soybean town, with roads so straight you could drive with your eyes closed; as Ed Beckley unforgettably described the region, it's as flat "as your third-grade girlfriend." Meents has lived there since he was three years old. The Meentses didn't have much money, but Meents's father, Bill, a fix-it guy at a Ford dealership, was a mechanical whiz. When Meents was thirteen, they bought a 1975 Ford F-100 that had been repossessed, and fixed it up with spare parts. Three days after Meents got his license, he totalled it.

Meents crashed a lot. When it rained, he and his friends would find the muddiest road and drive until they got swamped. "Then you would drag Main," he told me. "You'd drive your truck down there, and, if you had the most mud on it, it made you really cool." His truck had an eight-track: AC/DC, Bob Seger, Ozzy Osbourne. One time, Meents stopped in front of the police station. He revved the engine and spun the tires, but, before he could race away, the driveshaft dumped onto the pavement. "The police never even came out of the police station," a passenger during the incident recalled. "They just stuck their finger out the door and waved him on in."

Meents took me to the main drag. On weekend nights in the eighties, kids would drive their trucks to Paxton from all over. "It was a highlight of your life," he said. "This whole entire thing would be bumper to bumper." Meents remained enamored of old trucks. I'd been told that he still had one, which he'd modified with fifty-four-inch wheels; one of the drivers said that, when he visits M.J.U., they drive to the bank in it to get lollipops.

We drove to a storage garage across town, and there it was, a 1972 Chevy Blazer. "I did all the modifications to it, just got a little crazy," he said. "It's hard to get in, it's kinda hard to see, it's hard to maneuver. It's illegally wide and obviously illegally tall. But fortunately I know all the policemen in this town." ("He definitely dropped me off at school in that," his daughter, Hannah, told me.) I asked him what the appeal is—he can drive the real machines anytime he wants. "Joy," he said.

There was no easy way up into the cab. Meents grabbed hold of the wheel well, wedged himself against one of the tires, and swung in. He waved down at me. "Hey!" he said. He was smiling like a kid atop a playground slide.

Driving the trucks, he said, was almost an act of tenderness, or surrender. "It's kind of like dancing with a big girl," he said. "You can't really lead her, but you can kind of whisper in her ear."

My own monster truck was waiting for me in Meents's garage. "There's your chariot," a driver named Camden Murphy told me. Murphy, who drives the truck Bakugan Dragonoid, was apprenticing with Meents as an instructor at M.J.U. "I'm helping the Professor as a kind of teaching assistant," he said. He had blue eyes, a panama hat, and a gentle patience that seemed incongruous with some of the terrifying wrecks I'd seen him in. He was the one who'd outjumped Kenny at the Meadowlands.

Drivers auditioned in groups. My buddy for the day was Matt Dummer, a twenty-five-year-old mechanic with a scruffy beard. He grew up in the woods in Oregon. He is a lifelong Monster Jam superfan. "I tried to sleep last night and didn't do very well," he told me. "It's too cool to be here. I don't feel deserving of it." I felt a little abashed; I'd slept fine the night before. I was strangely unafraid. Maybe by now I'd seen too many drivers walk away from crashes. Dummer and I chatted with Murphy about his big jumps. "There's a moment of peace," Murphy said. "It takes longer than you think. You'll experience jumping today. You're gonna get maybe like three feet off the ground. But you'll know what I'm saying."

Before I could drive, Murphy needed to do a preliminary seat-fitting with me, so I climbed into the cab. Up there, I felt imperious, like an orchestra conductor. The interior was low-tech. There was a steering wheel, a handful of switches, and one seat, meaning I'd be solo. Logan Schultz, my chief technician, was working away at something with a drill. "Anything mechanically wrong that you're noticing, just call it out to me," he said.

"I will!" I said. Short of an explosion, I wasn't sure how.

"Hey, you two! Quit drowning!"

Murphy strapped me into full-body harnesses. "They should feel uncomfortable," he said. He began cranking with a ratchet. I could no longer take a deep breath. When it was time for driving, my head and neck would also be immobilized, with a safety restraint called a HANS device. I'd heard that the setup induced claustrophobia. Murphy continued ratcheting. "Are they uncomfortable?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"They're not really tight yet," he said.

Meents strolled over with a Big Gulp of Mountain Dew. "It's getting real now, isn't it?" he said.

After the fitting, I got out and inspected the track. It was literally in Meents's back yard, cut into the cornfields. Crop dusters occasionally interrupt practice. Meents had supplemented the farm soil with dirt from the excavation of an irrigation pond, next to the track. He'd trucked in about fifty loads of additional dirt. "Paxton dirt is unique, man," Murphy said. It's silty and hard-packed and swings between extremes. "When it's dry, it's wicked slick. When it's wetter, it's really, really tacky." The wet dirt has so much grip that trucks attempting to turn sometimes cartwheel.

Murphy brought over the fire-resistant driving suit and helmet that I would wear. He reminisced about his own tryout, seven years ago. "I remember being so nervous," he said. He'd driven in Nascar races and said that the two machines could not be more different. "With Nascar, you can control down to the inch where you want the car to be," he said. "Here you're hanging on. You're going for a ride." I told him that my motorsports experience consisted of driving an A.T.V. once. (I flipped it.) "Some people in the program have no motorsports background whatsoever!" he said. "We have some other drivers that were performers with Disney Live and the other Feld properties. Honestly, you never know."

I suited up and we walked back to the garage. Murphy called out, "What time does the ambulance get here?" I thought he was joking, but he wasn't. Meents gathered everyone for a safety meeting. He'd communicate with us over a crackly headset, as if we were fighter pilots. "If we have a rollover, the best thing for you to do is stay in it," he said. "You're gonna feel the blood rushing to your head if that happens, but you'll be fine." He stopped and stared me up and down for what felt like a long time. He continued, "I don't expect any issues like that, but you never know. We've had it happen in auditions. Have fun!"

Here are some of the things that Meents said to me over the headset during my run:

"There's a thousand things that could go wrong with this right here, and really only one that could go right."

"Over here, over here! Not over there, over here!"

[A brief scream.]

"Zach, whoa! Talk to me."

Before we'd fired up the trucks, I'd harbored certain daydreams. There was a part of me that fantasized about flipping over. Statistically speaking, driving a monster truck is safer than crossing a busy intersection, and I was unbothered by the prospect of a little head rush. Then we began. The sheer power of the truck provided a certain clarity. Specifically, that I was very scared.

Meents had us begin with simple laps around the track. Monster trucks are so wide that regular turning is impossible. To compensate, they use something called rear steering. As I navigated the oval, my left hand controlled the steering wheel, and my right hand manipulated a simple joystick. The steering wheel moved the front two tires. The joystick moved the rear ones. We started off very slowly. Suddenly, Meents yelled, "HIT THE FLOORBOARD!" I stomped on the pedal. Previously, I'd never understood what horsepower actually meant. Now I got it. The truck bucked. My vision blurred. It was an incredible feeling. It was also unsettling. I was driving, I was responsible for the vehicle, but I wasn't really in control, like a parent whose kid is having a temper tantrum at the supermarket.

Next up: tight ovals around two old monster-truck tires, followed by some figure eights. Dummer aced it. I turned so wide that I almost crashed into the side of a giant ramp. Then I nearly collided with a concrete barrier. The safety officials shut off my engine. (As a safeguard, all monster trucks come with a Chandler invention known as a remote ignition interrupter.) Apparently, I'd also run over both of the old tires. They're roughly the height of a moderately large child.

Meents delivered a pep talk—"You're doing everything right, but none of them are at the right time"—and I began again. This time, I engaged the rear steering earlier. I pumped the gas around the turn. My back end drifted. The truck whipped around. Somehow, I ended up facing the wrong way, and was now continuing the figure eight in the wrong direction.

Meents called a break. Dummer and I got down from our trucks. "It's rougher than I thought," Dummer said. "I can feel my eyeballs vibrating."

Then it was time to go airborne. We strapped back in. The ramp wasn't that mean-looking, four or five feet high. A baby jump. When the starting light turned green, I lifted my foot off the brake, mashed the throttle, and punched into second gear. And then suddenly I was in the air. This was the whole point, of course, but, when it happened, it still astonished me. I understood what Murphy meant by the jump taking longer than expected. I looked around, or as much as the HANS device would allow. I was in a farmer's field that had been tilled up—probably, if history is any guide, recklessly so. I'd burned through who knows how many gallons of methanol. Someone had dug a pond, trucked in fifty loads of dirt, and gathered dozens of gearheads, mechanics, safety officials, heavy-equipment operators, and E.M.T.s in the hope of launching people like me just a little bit skyward. It was quite possibly the most pointless thing I've ever done. I think it was the most fun I've ever had.

Later, I asked Meents for an honest assessment. "I could see going forward with you," he said. I asked him how many training sessions I'd need to be ready for a show. He thought for a moment. "Twelve," he said.

Afterward, I joined some of the technicians at a diner. We swapped videos of wrecks while we ate. Then I hopped into my Nissan. Kayla Blood, the driver who moonlights as a real-estate agent, had warned me, "Be careful when you get out and get in your personal car." After a training session, she'd said, it's easy to plow it through a fence. I drove very carefully back to my hotel. This time I didn't have much success falling asleep, so I lay there on the sheet, picking the silt out of my ears. ♦

ANNALS OF WAR

ANOTHER COUNTRY

The Ukrainians forced to flee to Russia.

BY MASHA GESSEN

Busloads of people from the other side of the internationally recognized Ukrainian border started arriving in Russian cities a few days before the full-scale invasion began. As Russia occupied more of Ukraine, more buses came. The Russians called the process "evacuation" and the people "refugees." Most of the world was aware of Ukrainians fleeing the war for Western Europe, but millions travelled east. Some were forced to go. Others went because they have family in Russia, or see it as a familiar environment. But even these choices were often made because the Russian occupation effectively leaves Ukrainians with no alternative. Many stories of Ukrainians who have gone to Russia involve coercion, confusion, or doublethink. What happened to some of them may be a war crime, though most don't seem to see it that way. And these Ukrainians have also encountered, almost without exception, unlikely, sometimes uncomfortable acts of solidarity from ordinary Russians.

On March 9, 2022, Viktoria Shishkina, nine months pregnant, was under observation in Mariupol's Maternity Ward No. 3 when a bomb hit the building. Shrapnel lodged in her legs, arms, and stomach. Rescue workers rushed Viktoria by ambulance to a different maternity ward, where three people operated on her in a basement using their phone flashlights. The baby died. Viktoria spent the next five weeks in the basement, alongside dozens of pregnant women and, as time went on, a growing number of newborns.

There was no cell reception, and Viktoria had no way to know if her husband, Volodymyr, was safe. Russian troops were levelling Mariupol neighborhood by neighborhood. As they advanced, they started bringing food and water to the basement. On April 15th, the troops told everyone inside to evacuate: their hiding place would soon become scorched earth. Buses were taking people to Russia. If anyone wanted to stay in Mariupol, they could do so at their own risk. If they wanted to go west, they'd have to cross the front line.

Viktoria didn't want to leave Mariupol—she thought that Volodymyr might still be alive and in the city. A hospital worker who had been sheltering in the basement had a car and an apartment on the ninth floor of a building in a Russian-occupied part of town. The building was still standing, but there was no electricity, running water, or gas. Residents cooked over a fire outside. Viktoria's leg was still healing from the surgery to remove the shrapnel, which made going up and down the many flights of stairs especially difficult. But there was no shelling in the neighborhood, and there was, occasionally, cell reception on a nearby hilltop.

Viktoria, who is thirty-eight, with dark hair that she often wears in a chignon, had nothing but the clothes that she had been wearing in the ward. The belongings she had taken to the hospital—including her cell phone and her identity documents—were lost in the bombing. She borrowed a phone to try the few numbers she remembered, and reached her best friend, who told her that, the day after the maternity ward was bombed, Volodymyr had been on his way to see her when a mortar shell hit nearby. Now he was in a hospital in Donetsk, a Russian-controlled city in eastern Ukraine. His left leg had been amputated above the knee.

It took Viktoria a couple of weeks to get the necessary documents to be "evacuated" to Donetsk. By the time she reached Volodymyr, she had learned that her father and sister were in Russia, in the town of Tikhvin, outside St. Petersburg. She also learned that there were people who could help get her and Volodymyr to Russia, too.

These people—all volunteers—communicated with Viktoria online. "Once Volodymyr and I were together, and we realized that we had survived, we just wanted to live," Viktoria told me. "We would do anything to live." By the end of May, Volodymyr's doctor agreed to discharge him. A car arranged by the volunteers took them to the Russian border, and another to the city of Rostov-on-Don, where they boarded a train to St. Petersburg. Volodymyr, limping along on crutches, had to be lifted into the train car. Along the way, he developed a fever. The volunteers arranged for an ambulance to pick them up at the station. He spent two weeks in intensive care.

Viktoria visited her sister, who was staying with other Ukrainians at a disused resort in Tikhvin. The state supplied the space; volunteers provided almost everything else, including clothes, blankets, and medical supplies. It was then that I was introduced to Viktoria by Galina Artemenko, a journalist who had been helping Ukrainians in the region. Artemenko had interviewed Viktoria and Volodymyr, recording their experiences of the war.

The bombing of the Mariupol maternity ward was one of the most egregious early instances of Russian attacks on Ukrainian civilians. In Russia, telling the story of the bombing is dangerous. Earlier this year, a Moscow court heard the case of Dmitry Ivanov, a twenty-three-year-old math student facing up to ten years in prison for a series of Telegram posts on the war, including one about the maternity ward. Artemenko testified in Ivanov's defense, telling the story of Viktoria and Volodymyr. I asked her what gave her the courage to speak up and to help Ukrainians. "What are the authorities going to do?" she replied. "We don't have a law against buying a saucepan, or underwear, or meeting a person at a train station." Still, in July, the state-owned Sberbank froze Artemenko's

Human Rights Watch has called Russia's effort to transfer Ukrainians to Russia a potential war crime.

ILLUSTRATION BY HOKYOUNG KIM

and other volunteers' online accounts, which they had been using to raise funds to help the displaced.

The people in Russia helping Ukrainians escape the war operate in a political gray zone. The Russian government uses the "refugees" for propaganda purposes, parading ostensible victims of Ukrainian aggression—and grateful recipients of Russian aid—on television. Russian volunteers can be both symbolically and practically useful: for the most part, they, not the Russian state, take care of the Ukrainians.

While Volodymyr was in the hospital in St. Petersburg, Viktoria realized that she couldn't stay in Russia. Every time an airplane flew overhead, she remembered that it was a Russian plane; the one that had dropped the bomb that killed her baby had been, too. The Russian government does not prevent Ukrainians from leaving Russia—in fact, some volunteers suspect that their efforts assisting those hoping to flee are tolerated because they help get rid of potentially troublesome new citizens. But, with Russia increasingly isolated from the European Union, leaving is complicated. Rules apparently vary from one border crossing to another and among the few commercial bus companies that maintain service between Russia and the E.U. Volunteers drove Viktoria and Volodymyr to the border with Estonia, which welcomes Ukrainian refugees but has sealed its border against most Russian citizens. Viktoria and Volodymyr crossed on foot. In June, 2022, they boarded a bus to Germany, where a bed in a rehabilitation center was waiting for Volodymyr. On July 1st, he had surgery to be fitted with a prosthesis.

There is no hierarchy, no chain of command, and no single formal organization that unifies the perhaps thousands of people who help Ukrainians in Russia. I interviewed about twenty volunteers, most of them by video chat. I promised not to disclose key details of their work, including how people find them and stay in contact with them. Among the people I talked to are artists, journalists, bankers, I.T. professionals, academics, schoolteachers, and one Orthodox clergyman. Some live in Russia. Some emigrated many years ago. Some have left in the past year. One was volunteering while living in a refugee camp in Europe. Some of the volunteers meet with the people they are helping, but mostly they stay connected online. Working from Paris, Los Angeles, and Moscow, volunteers are on call twenty-four hours a day, to virtually walk a refugee from one train station in Warsaw to another, navigating terrain that they have never physically experienced but have learned by heart.

Volunteers in Latvia maintain an apartment near the Russian border, where many refugees spend a night before getting a ride to a bus station in Riga. Iryna Glazova, who was thirteen when I met her last year, escaped Odesa with her parents on the first day of the war. She was now a volunteer at an information booth at the bus station. I spent a day with her there in December, watching her help a steady stream of people, most of whom had travelled from eastern Ukraine by way of Russia. Her first clients, a little after 8:40 A.M., were an elderly couple from the Kherson region. They had just come from the border and needed to continue on to Germany, where their daughter lived. Glazova dialled the office of the International Organization for Migration, which sometimes paid for bus tickets for refugees. (Now the volunteers generally cover the costs.) "I have a couple here," she said, speaking Russian. "The man has limited mobility, and I need to get them on the next bus to Berlin. Can you get to their tickets first?"

She put the receiver down and addressed the couple: "Food for the road? Coffee? Chocolate bars? Instant noodles? Please take something." For the next several hours, Glazova repeated this process again and again, writing down passport details and insisting that people take food for their journey. Once her shift was over, she went to school, where she was attending eighth grade.

The volunteers are not united by their political views. Several told me that this work is their form of protest. But some have working relationships with the Russian military; these people are often called Z-volunteers, and, among other things, they help feed and clothe soldiers. Z-volunteers have worked to get severely ill civilians from occupied territories to Russian cities, where they can receive medical care. Staunchly antiwar volunteers who have participated in such extractions told me that they've faced criticism from friends for engaging with pro-war Russians.

Many Ukrainians don't want to leave Russia once they arrive—some because they are afraid, disoriented, or depressed, others because they want to live among Russian speakers, have family in Russia, or just find the idea of being there appealing.

Svetlana Gannushkina, a matriarch of Moscow's human-rights community, has been helping displaced people since the late nineteen-eighties, when the first interethnic conflicts broke out in what was then the Soviet Union. Gannushkina has been branded a "foreign agent" by the Russian government. She spent her eightieth birthday, last year, in jail for protesting the invasion. On the eve of the war, her N.G.O., the Civic Assistance Committee, was evicted from its offices in Moscow. Prosecutors have accused it of "discrediting" the armed forces. Yet government officials continue to refer displaced Ukrainians to the organization. Many people come to the Committee proclaiming their love for Russia and their support for the "special military operation." When I asked Gannushkina how she, as someone who has been persecuted by the regime, felt helping its supporters, she explained that she thought people from eastern Ukraine were more susceptible to government propaganda than Russians were. "They've been watching our television, seeing what a wonderful President we have and how much he cares about the people," she said.

Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, has streamlined the process by which Ukrainians can obtain Russian citizenship and has promised each "refugee" a monthly stipend of ten thousand rubles (about a hundred dollars). In March, Tatyana Moskalkova, Putin's human-rights ombudswoman, boasted that more than five million Ukrainians had come to Russia "seeking safety from Ukrainian shelling and bombing."

The actual number of people is impossible to determine: even if Moskalkova happened to state the actual number of border crossings, no one knows how

many Ukrainians have stayed in Russia. Last October, the government said that Ukrainians were living in at least eight hundred "temporary residence centers." I obtained an updated list of more than thirteen hundred such centers, situated all over Russia, including in the Arctic and the Far East. But there is no information on how many people are staying in each, and how many more are living with relatives, with volunteers, or in rented apartments.

Nikolai and Nina (as I'll call them) met on a dating app in the winter of 2022, when he was twenty-three and she was twenty-one. They knew almost immediately that the relationship could be serious. Nikolai was working for a large I.T. company in Mariupol. Nina was studying acting in Kharkiv. Days after they first connected, they spent a week and a half together in Kyiv. Near the end of the trip, Nikolai proposed. Nina said yes. Nine days later, Russia launched its full-scale invasion.

Nina took a train east, toward Mariupol, and met Nikolai at her parents' house, near Illich Iron and Steel Works, one of Mariupol's two giant industrial plants. Nikolai, Nina, and Nina's parents and sister stayed in the house together. They began sleeping on the floor in the kitchen, which they decided was safer than the bedrooms. All around them, the city was burning. The ash in the air looked like rain. A house next door was destroyed by a direct hit. Nikolai surmised that Russian troops were firing on them from three directions and Ukrainians from another. Their water supplies were dwindling. For twenty-three days, they didn't bathe or brush their teeth.

Russian troops took control of the neighborhood in mid-April. By then, Nikolai, who is six feet four inches tall, weighed only a hundred and fifty pounds. He had lost much of his hair. Across the river, the battle for Azovstal, the other metals plant, continued, but Nikolai and Nina started venturing out. The city around them looked like a moonscape. In some areas, they could hardly get their bearings because everything—the houses, the stores, the signposts—was gone. They saw teams exhuming bodies from yards and parks, and bodies that had simply been left on the streets for feral dogs to feed on. One day, they found a candle that someone must have dropped, and they regarded it as a treasure. Another time, they made it to the office building where Nikolai had worked. There they collected batteries, which he rigged up so that Nina's parents' house could have electricity for the first time in more than two months.

"Just because we're not expecting anything doesn't mean I can't feel disappointed."

• • •

The Russians started distributing basic foodstuffs and hygiene supplies at what had been a big-box store called Metro, which now doubled as an office of the United Russia Party. When it opened, at ten in the morning, the soldiers played the Russian national anthem. Nikolai and Nina went there to get a SIM card that connected to a working network. They talked with a friend who told them that she was in St. Petersburg. On June 5th, they boarded a bus provided by the occupying authorities to Taganrog, a city just across the border in Russia.

That night, they slept on cots in a gym, shocked to be in an intact building with working electricity. Staff told Nikolai and Nina that refugees, as they were now called, were assigned to cities. Posters on the walls advertised remote places. Nina's friend in St. Petersburg told them about volunteers who could arrange transportation to wherever they wanted to go. Soon, they had tickets to St. Petersburg. Most of the people who aided them in Russia were opposed to the war, but a woman who helped set them up with an apartment turned out to believe that Russian troops were "liberating Ukraine."

Nina's parents belong to a minority of Ukrainian citizens who loom large in the Russian imagination: staunch supporters of Putin. Nina grew up watching Russian television. During Putin's annual New Year's address, her mother would say to the screen, "Vovochka, when will you come and get us?" Nina was nine when she realized that she didn't live in Russia. As Russian troops entered Mariupol, her mother, who had spent weeks cowering in her home while bombs fell, went outside to welcome them. "We have been waiting for you for thirty years," she said.

Nikolai never challenged Nina's parents—he didn't want to be impolite. Once he and Nina got to Russia, though, he told her that he thought both countries are corrupt, run by clans

"I'm sorry, could you scroll back up? I was reading that."

• •

of men driven by economic self-interest. But Russia, he said, is more corrupt, and ruled by a single clan, while Ukraine is run by several competing ones. It's a cynical position—not as cynical as the claim that both sides of the war are equally culpable, as I heard some displaced Ukrainians say, but cynical enough to enable Nikolai and Nina to choose a place to live without regard for national loyalties.

Nikolai and Nina received temporary refugee status in Russia. Authorities often pressure Ukrainians to apply for Russian citizenship, but Nikolai worried that doing so would subject him to conscription. Russian officials frequently tell Ukrainians that they can't get medical care without citizenship. After Nikolai and Nina's spring in besieged Mariupol, their teeth were rotting. Nina had chronic tonsillitis. Nikolai developed acid-reflux disease so severe that it required surgery. As they neared the first anniversary of living in Russia, they started considering seeking psychological help. "What if we turn out to have P.T.S.D.?" Nikolai said.

Ksusha Reitsen, a forty-two-year-old psychologist, left Moscow during the first week of the war and is now living in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. She counsels displaced Ukrainians in Russia. Many of the people she sees ask why they can't stop crying. They didn't cry when they feared for their lives, or when they saw people maimed and killed. They had acted decisively amid carnage and terror, but now, relatively safe from harm, they tell Reitsen that they don't know what to do next, and that they weep constantly. None of this is unusual, Reitsen tells them. But she rarely uses the term "post-traumatic stress disorder," because there is nothing "post" about it: their trauma is ongoing.

Over time, Reitsen also began providing support for the volunteers. Some of them fear that displaced people will blame them, as Russians, for what has happened to them. More often, they face the opposite problem—an inability to process inordinate gratitude. Then, there is the difficulty of speaking to Ukrainians who want to stay in Russia. One woman had fled her town in eastern Ukraine after it had been occupied. At first, she headed to the western part of the country. Once there, she faced disrespect and outright insults for being a Russian speaker. After a few months, she moved to Moscow, where she intends to remain.

A volunteer in St. Petersburg told me that she thinks of her work as paying reparations, and that the political stances of the refugees she helps are none of her business. "There is a part of their brain that stores factual information: their house was bombed out of existence," she said. "And here we are, going to a charity shop to pick up some clothes because they have none, and we are walking back to a place that some kind people have opened to them so that they have a roof over their heads, and suddenly they say, 'Look at how great Putin is. He is going to build us a new city. He is a strong leader. I'll have a new apartment.'" But the volunteer was also aware that some people may be saying what they think will keep them safe, rather than what they really think, if they are in any condition to think at all.

Another volunteer in St. Petersburg told me she was struck that Russia was the preferred destination of so many people escaping the war zone. She called what she'd observed in them "Mariupol syndrome," a combination of trauma, despair, and an understandable desire to rationalize their decisions. "Even people with staunchly pro-Ukrainian views say that neither side had mercy for civilians," the volunteer said. Several people from Mariupol told me, by way of justification, that Russian soldiers had been misled into thinking that civilians had left the city, so they didn't realize that they were killing noncombatants. Nikolai said that the Russian forces were using maps published in 1968, which didn't reflect subsequent residential construction. People often told me these kinds of things alongside stories that seemed to contradict them—most of them, for example, recalled Russian or pro-Russian troops coming to the cellars where they sheltered during the shelling.

Olga, who is forty, worked as a nurse at a dialysis clinic in Mariupol. Four days after the war began, she and her husband, their sons, who were seven and ten, and Olga's mother, who was seventy, started living in the clinic. About fifty patients and a half-dozen other medical personnel moved in, too. Water from a nearby pool allowed them to continue providing dialysis for a month; after that, a nurse guided some of the patients out of the clinic. Those who were sickest died. The morgue was overflowing, so Olga and her colleagues put the bodies in an empty ward. On March 28th, the day after the dialysis stopped, Olga's husband went to deliver some water to family friends, who were expecting a baby. He didn't come back. Olga's elder son started

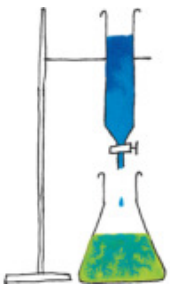
having trouble sleeping; he kept crying. When a building in the hospital complex was struck by a bomb, the people who remained in the clinic moved into the basement.

Less than two weeks later, Olga told me, pro-Russian forces "evacuated us, for which we are very grateful." Somewhere around Donetsk, Olga got cell reception. Her godmother had found a photograph of Olga's husband on a local Telegram channel: he had been shot in the back. Olga turned around and headed toward Mariupol with her sons, while her mother continued on to St. Petersburg, where Olga's sister lives. Olga wasn't allowed back into the city, but she managed to arrange for her husband's body to be brought to a suburb. She showed the body to her children, so that they would know their father hadn't abandoned them. They buried him and left for St. Petersburg.

Olga has since received Russian citizenship. Volunteers helped her get an apartment and a job at a private clinic. She has fallen out of touch with some of her closest friends, who are in Western Europe. "They are all under the spell of this war," she told me. "That's all they talk about." Olga doesn't speak with her children about the war. She told them that a "bad man" had killed their father. As we talked, she kept repeating, "I've lived this war." I understood: if Olga went to Western Europe, or back to Mariupol, she'd still feel like she was in the middle of the war. All she wanted was to be done with it. The only place on the planet where there was no Russian-Ukrainian war was Russia.

What the Russian government touts as humanitarian work human-rights defenders call a war crime. Many Ukrainians I spoke to described situations in which it seemed that the only way to escape death was to board buses provided by Russian authorities, bound for Russia or Russian-occupied areas. In a report from September, 2022, Human Rights Watch described such incidents as "illegal forcible transfers." Under international law, a forcible transfer or a deportation—the former defines movement of people within national borders and the latter across them—is a war crime. (The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia convicted at least three people of the crime of forcible transfer of Bosnian Muslims.) The report underscored that this war crime "includes a transfer in circumstances where a person consents to move only because they fear consequences such as violence, duress, or detention if they remain, and the occupying power is taking advantage of a coercive environment to transfer them." Displacing or moving civilians cannot be justified on humanitarian grounds, the report went on, "if the humanitarian crisis triggering the displacement is itself the result of unlawful activity by the occupying power."

Some Ukrainians who spoke to Human Rights Watch said that they voluntarily made the decision to leave for Russia. They wanted to evade Ukrainian travel restrictions, which require most men under the age of sixty to stay in the country; to be with relatives; or to find work and safety in a Russian-speaking country. Many of the volunteers' current cases involve people who have come from areas that were flooded after the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam, in June, and ill and elderly people who need to travel to Russia for medical care that they cannot obtain in Russian-occupied Ukraine. Some of them are going to Russia to die. In a narrow sense, their decision to leave is voluntary, but only if one doesn't take into account the reasons for the conditions they are escaping.



Oleksandra Matviichuk, the head of the Ukrainian Center for Civil Liberties, which shared the Nobel Peace Prize last year, believes that Russia's fundamental crime predates the displacement of civilians. From the earliest days of the war, Matviichuk said, Russia systematically violated international law by failing to provide humanitarian corridors for evacuation. To her and other Ukrainian human-rights defenders, Russia's refusal to allow safe passage is part of a larger crime of genocide. The indiscriminate shelling and bombardment, the "evacuation" of people to Russian territory, and even the pressure on Ukrainians to accept Russian citizenship stem from an intention to erase Ukraine as a nation.

In March, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia's ombudswoman for children's rights, charging them in connection with the deportation and forcible transfer of Ukrainian children. Ukrainian authorities have said that hundreds of thousands of children may have been illegally transferred to Russia. I first heard about such mass transfers late last year, from two separate Russian activists working in exile. Both told me that Russian authorities had moved entire children's residential institutions from occupied Ukrainian territories to Russia.

No one knows how many children have been affected. Before the war, according to Human Rights Watch, about thirty-two thousand children were institutionalized in parts of Ukraine that have been occupied by Russia. Some of those children were evacuated to western Ukraine. When I asked Daria Herasymchuk, the Ukrainian President's commissioner for children's rights, for the number of institutionalized children who were deported, she responded in general terms that Ukraine has been working to reduce the number of children in institutions—a hint, perhaps, that Ukrainian authorities would prefer not to disclose an embarrassing statistic. A February, 2023, study conducted under the auspices of the Yale School of Public Health concluded that at least forty-three facilities in Russia held about six thousand children transferred from Ukraine, though some of those children have gone back to Ukraine. In June, iStories, a Russian investigative outlet that operates in exile, reported that more than a thousand Ukrainian children had been placed with temporary guardians in Russia. It's unclear how many of those guardians are related to the children.

Unlike with prisoners of war, there are no direct, formal government-to-government deals to negotiate the return of the missing children. (Responding to a query from this magazine, the

Ukrainian government called the situation unprecedented and said that there is no mechanism to facilitate such negotiations.) Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights, told me that leaving this effort largely to civil society is risky. "Time is running out, and the danger is that these children will disappear," she said. One complication is that the children fall into several distinct categories, of which one of the largest—children who were institutionalized in Ukraine—has relatively few advocates. Another category includes children who lived in places such as Kherson and some suburbs of Kharkiv, which were under occupation last summer, when Russian authorities offered families the opportunity to send children to recreational camps in Russia, occupied Crimea, or Belarus. When the Ukrainian military subsequently liberated these towns and villages, parents were separated from their children by the front line. Herasymchuk said that this was "the most common scenario for the abduction of Ukrainian children." Groups of activists on both sides have worked to help mothers travel east to Russia, usually by first travelling west to Poland. (In most cases, fathers cannot legally leave Ukraine.) In a six-month period, hundreds of such trips took place, each organized separately and each hindered not only by the legal and logistical hurdles but by the particular social and economic vulnerabilities that made families prone to handing their children over to strangers in the first place. Rachel Denber, the deputy director of the Europe and Central Asia division of Human Rights Watch, said that the "nearly insurmountable" obstacles parents have faced trying to retrieve their children are additional evidence that what Russia has called "recreation" is likely forced transfer or deportation.

Grigory Mikhnov-Vaytenko, an Orthodox clergyman in St. Petersburg who coördinated a number of these rescue operations—he was forced out of the Moscow Patriarchate in 2014, for expressing his opposition to the first invasion of Ukraine—told me he believed that nearly all the children in this category had been returned to Ukraine, some after they had been separated from their families for nine months. Herasymchuk, the children's-rights commissioner, said that this was not true. It's possible that neither of them has complete information. Denber noted that, even if all the children in this category have been returned, their initial transfer to Russian-occupied territories or Russia, in at least some instances, still likely constituted a war crime.

The International Criminal Court's decision to focus on cases of deported Ukrainian children makes sense. The Russian state's apparently concerted effort to "Russify" Ukrainian children by placing them in a Russian-speaking environment, giving them Russian citizenship, and putting them up for adoption by Russian families bolsters the case for framing Russia's war as genocidal. And no one would argue that children can voluntarily decide to move to Russia. Many cases appear clear-cut. Three siblings from Mariupol, for example, were taken to Moscow while their father, who had been raising them alone, was held for screening.

The number of missing children cited by the Ukrainian authorities likely includes cases that do not constitute war crimes. A teen-ager who went to spend winter vacation with his grandfather in Russian-occupied Donetsk fell ill with pneumonia and was hospitalized. By the time he was discharged, the war had begun, and he couldn't leave Donetsk to reunite with his mother. A woman, originally from Russia, separated from her Ukrainian husband and moved back to Russia with their two children. She died of cancer just as Russia launched its invasion. The father faced a custody fight with the kids' grandmother, who supported Russia's war and saw her former son-in-law as the enemy.

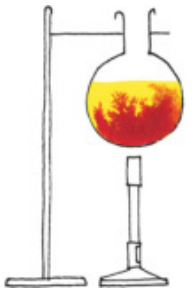
Other cases are harder to categorize. A woman I'll call Rosa was undergoing surgery when Ukrainian forces retook her town from the Russians. When she returned home, several days later, her husband, Roman (not his real name), and their three sons—nine-year-old twins and a seven-year-old—were gone, forcibly "evacuated" to Russia. Rosa travelled west, to Poland, where she was hospitalized with complications from her surgery. In the meantime, Russian lawyers filed queries on her behalf, but all relevant agencies said that they had no records of

Roman or the children. Finally, local volunteers from the Russian city of Voronezh read a description of Rosa's family and recognized Roman, whom they'd met after he crossed the border weeks earlier. But the children were not with him; they were in a camp in Belgorod, another Russian region. Rosa's lawyer, who works in exile, showed me a text message that Rosa had sent in November, 2022, more than two months after her ordeal began. "Hello," she wrote from Russia. "I can tell you that I have found my family and I think I will stay here with them." Her youngest son has epilepsy, she explained, and he was receiving treatment: "I hope I'm not breaking any laws about moving to another country given the war situation with Ukraine." The lawyer assured Rosa that *she* wasn't breaking any laws.

"I realized that having principles is a privilege," one of the Russian volunteers told me, as she described coming to terms with the decision, made by many of the Ukrainians she has helped, to remain in Russia. Not staying, or not going to Russia in the first place, can require nearly superhuman determination. Anton, then a twenty-year-old economics major, spent the first few months of the invasion in Izyum, a city outside Kharkiv. He tried to sign up for Territorial Defense but was turned away for lack of experience. The Russians occupied Izyum, but not before destroying much of it. Anton's twelve-year-old sister lost her ability to eat; every time she tried, she gagged. Anton's parents decided that they had to get out. The only direction available was east. On March 13th, they headed for St. Petersburg, where Anton's aunt lives, but Anton stayed behind.

Izyum continued to experience both occupation and bombardment. Anton heard of Russian forces throwing people out of their houses and witnessed them robbing stores, and he saw a car full of dead bodies. Trucks with loudspeakers blared a message that Kharkiv and Kyiv were already under Russian control and that resistance was futile. In March, a bomb hit his house, destroying the bathroom. Anton was in the cellar, and survived.

He hitched a ride, then another, heading toward Kharkiv. Russian soldiers at checkpoints kept telling him to turn around. "Go to Russia," he recalled one of them saying. "You'll be better off there. Here, everyone is a Nazi." At one checkpoint, soldiers put a bag over his head and shoved him into a vehicle. "We're taking you to be killed," someone said. Anton was roughed up. A soldier put out a cigarette on his skin. He was left alone and instructed not to make a sound. Confined to a small space, with his hands tied, Anton soiled himself. His only thought was "Please don't let them kill me." After a couple of days, he was driven a few miles away and dumped on the side of the road. Eventually, he made his way home.



In May, Anton went to pick up what the Russians called "humanitarian aid." He was approaching a queue when a rocket hit. He saw body parts flying through the air.

He felt that he couldn't stay in Izyum, so he took his car—he had hidden it deep in the family's yard, away from the Russian occupiers—and drove toward St. Petersburg. When he stopped at a gas station, a cashier who saw his Ukrainian license plates offered him free coffee and a cookie and said that the Russian Army was defending Ukrainians against the Americans. Anton felt sick.

The day after Anton arrived at his aunt's house, F.S.B. agents came to the door and took him for "processing." He didn't want to ask for temporary refuge or Russian citizenship, though he was pressured to apply. Throughout the next few weeks, the F.S.B. dragged him in for interrogations more than a dozen times.

Anton got a job as a janitor at a bank, which, for an economics major, felt particularly humiliating. One day, a female staff member made a derogatory comment about the quality of his work. Anton tossed a wet rag across the room and screamed insults at the other bank employees. He drove to the Russian-Estonian border, but his only identity document was a birth certificate: he had lost his passport in the preceding months. Russian border guards made him wait for nine hours in a tiny room, and then told him that he couldn't cross.

"How can you not let me out?" he asked. "I'm a citizen of a different country."

"What country?" an officer asked, then answered his own question: "An enemy country."

Anton returned to St. Petersburg and found the people who could help him. Someone got him a bus ticket to a city near another Russian border. A woman picked him up in a car, which was already carrying two passengers, a couple from Mariupol. Anton started talking about what he had experienced in Izyum. The driver responded that Ukrainian Nazis were to blame. Now Anton felt like a hostage, and thought, This time I'll definitely be killed. Instead, she drove him to a place where he could safely cross the border. His journey included a train, a car, a dinghy, and a bus.

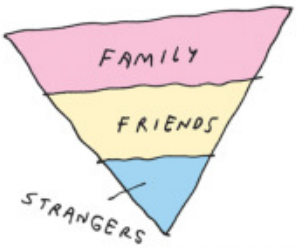
Anton made his way to France, where a friend had immigrated before the war. By the time we spoke, he had been living in Toulon for several months and had resumed his studies, remotely. But he still had no documents. At the Ukrainian consulate, he was told that he should return to Ukraine: he was, after all, an able-bodied young man, and his country needed more of those. "He hasn't seen war," Anton said of his interlocutor. While we were in touch, he travelled to Berlin, where he could apply for a Ukrainian passport. The journey by plane takes hours, but Anton, without any documents, was forced to use a bus and a train, which took days. After submitting his application, he went back to Toulon, where he completed his final exams and graduated from his university in Kharkiv.

Like others who have escaped the occupation, Anton just wants to be someplace where there is no war. Most of all, he wants that place to be Ukraine. "I just want victory to come as soon as possible so that I can return to Ukraine and work in my chosen field, to rebuild the economy," he said. His parents, who are still in St. Petersburg, want the same thing. He is worried, though, that if Russia loses the war they may never be allowed to leave. ♦


IN MY TEENS AND TWENTIES, I HAD A RECURRING DREAM THAT THE FAMOUS (AND HANDSOME) POET MARK STRAND STROLLED AWAY FROM ME ALONG A CRAGGY BEACH.
WAIT!
I'D MERGED ARTISTIC SANCTION AND MALE ATTENTION IN MY HEAD. I IMAGINED BOTH AS MYSTICAL STATES OF PERFECTION FOREVER OUT OF MY REACH.
PERMISSION TO SEE AND BE SEEN
I DESCRIBE THE PERSON I WAS IN THOSE DAYS AS DEPRESSED AND DANGEROUSLY NAÏVE.
AT THE SAME TIME, THOUGH, I WAS AWARE OF BEAUTY IN WAYS I HADN'T BEEN BEFORE AND HAVEN'T BEEN SINCE.
THE LOVELINESS I LONGED FOR WAS EVERYWHERE I LOOKED, BESIDES IN ME.
THE LANDSCAPE OF UNFULFILLED LONGING IS STRANGELY BEAUTIFUL. YOU CAN WALK THAT CRAGGY BEACH UNTIL YOU DIE. (BUT I DIDN'T.)
ONE DAY, I WOKE UP AND I WASN'T SAD ANYMORE. I WAS ANGRY.
I SUDDENLY UNDERSTOOD THAT MY TWO WHITE WHALES— GENIUS AND ROMANCE— WERE BOTH FORMS OF THE SAME THING: PROPAGANDA.
I'D ALWAYS WRITTEN. BUT IT WASN'T UNTIL I BECAME ANGRY THAT I SAW MYSELF AS A POET.
I'D ALWAYS HAD A VOICE. NOW I HAD SOMETHING TO SAY WITH IT.
I'M MAD.
MY MEDIUM, OF COURSE, WAS TWITTER. IN A SERIES OF BRIEF LINES, I DISMANTLED THE ELABORATE WALL OF UNSPOKEN RULES I FELT HAD KEPT ME SILENT (THE RULES OF ART, THE RULES OF FEMALENESS, THE RULES OF POLITENESS)—

AND LAID THEM, PIECE BY PIECE, BEFORE MY ONLINE AUDIENCE, WHICH HAD APPEARED FROM NOWHERE AND JOINED ME IN MY ANGER.

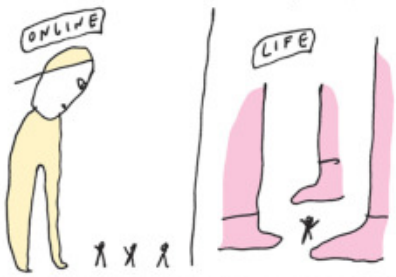
TO BE LISTENED TO ON THE INTERNET IS AN EXPERIENCE. YOU CRAWL OUT OF YOUR LONELY, ISOLATED SELF AND ARE IMMERSED IN OTHER PEOPLE. YOUR BORDERS DISSOLVE. YOUR SOCIAL HIERARCHY FLIPS UPSIDE DOWN.



PEOPLE TELL YOU THINGS, ASK YOU THINGS, GIVE YOU THINGS, AND DEMAND THINGS OF YOU. GOOD PEOPLE AND BAD. CLOSE FRIENDS AND LONG-LOST ACQUAINTANCES AND EX-BOYFRIENDS' THIRD COUSINS' CO-WORKERS.

COMPLETE STRANGERS, TOO.

AS IMMERSED AS YOU ARE, THOUGH, YOU KNOW NONE OF IT IS REAL. INTERNET FAME DOES NOT NECESSARILY CORRELATE TO BOOK SALES, FOR EXAMPLE. AND YOUR INTERNET FRIENDS DON'T KNOW YOU AT ALL, EVEN IF THEY THINK THEY DO.



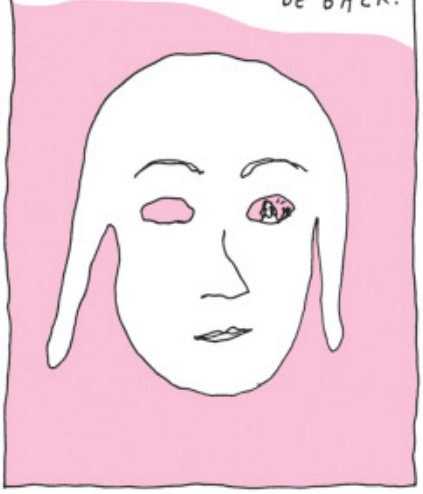
THEN THINGS CHANGED AGAIN. I WOKE UP ONE MORNING TO FIND MY AUDIENCE HAD DISPERSED.

MY ANGER, ALSO, SEEMED TO HAVE RUN ITS COURSE.

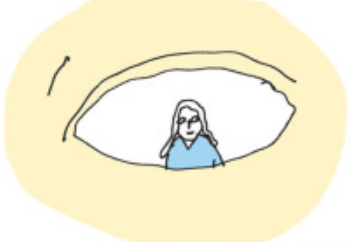
I STILL WRITE, BUT, WITHOUT THE AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT, MY POETRY IS NOT POETRY.

I DON'T MISS BEING LISTENED TO ON THE INTERNET. AFTER YEARS OF LIVING IN THAT BUSTLING ALTERNATE UNIVERSE—

I'VE CRAWLED BACK INTO MYSELF. AND I'M HAPPY TO BE BACK.



I DO WONDER IF I SHOULD HAVE CLUTCHED HARDER AT WHAT I HAD, WHATEVER IT WAS. BUT IT'S HARD TO SAY IF THERE WAS EVER REALLY ANYTHING THERE.



(AND MAYBE IT'S ALWAYS BEEN RIGHT HERE.)

T. CORAGHESSAN BOYLE

THE END IS ONLY A BEGINNING

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE VILLION

His wife wanted to go with him, but her mother was still dying, really taking her time with it, as if it were something to savor. And maybe it was. You looked at these hopeless cases—the blinding pain, the loss of volition and dignity and even personhood—and wondered why they didn't just kill themselves, but then you wouldn't know until you got there, would you? For his part, he was determined to go by his own hand, and when he was depressed, which had to be at least eighty per cent of the time, he dwelled on the details of how he was going to do it (car, garage, exhaust), mentally composing his obituary as if it were a story he was writing. A physician friend of his had told him that if you were terminally ill you could legally end your suffering by depressing a plunger on the IV tube that would flood your veins with benzodiazepines and morphine, but the rub was that you had to have the ability to use your hand, your thumb, your brain.

In any case, he was going to Paris and Caroline wasn't.

Air France, first-class cabin, the boredom ameliorated by champagne and Cognac and the in-flight cuisine, which only the French, Germans, and Dutch still seemed to care about, though he wasn't particularly hungry, not after three glasses of Taittinger, so he sat back and engaged with a new novel by one of his rivals, which so maddened him with its grace and fluidity that he finally had to put it aside and just stare out the window until the clouds below crept inside his skull and everything went pleasantly fuzzy, though he didn't sleep. He never slept on airplanes, no matter that he had his own gleaming little pod and the seat reclined into a simulacrum of a bed. He just couldn't get past the idea of his own fragility, suspended in the ether at thirty-five thousand feet like an unscrambled egg in a hurtling aluminum shell.

Across the aisle from him, in her own pod, was a woman of thirty or so with a honed physique and a face that wasn't conventionally pretty but was darkly erotic like that of a French actress from the sixties whose name he could never remember. Before takeoff, she'd talked on her phone in very bad Spanish to her maid or housekeeper or au pair about her daughter's needs and expectations, then washed down two tiny white pills with her champagne and fallen unconscious. She didn't move at all, not even to change position, until they were descending into Orly and the flight attendant was obliged to bend down and rouse her, at which point she hustled to the lavatory with her makeup bag. When they landed, she swept off the plane like a diva emerging from the wings to a roar of applause. As for Riley, he felt as if he'd been shot through the breastbone with a very short, very thick arrow—from a crossbow, wasn't that what they were called? He shuffled down the aisle like one of the walking dead, his roller bag clipping his heels all the way.

The good news was that Mireille was waiting for him in the arrivals hall. She was his editor, the granddaughter of the man who had founded the publishing house, and since all editorial decisions were made in New York long before the manuscript reached her desk their relationship was relatively uncomplicated. She vetted the translation, and if it passed muster with her he was fine with that, because he wasn't about to blunder through it himself, even with Google to fluently obfuscate things for him. There was the embrace, the three obligatory air kisses, and never mind the virus that was just beginning to infest the news reports (a virus that no one really knew anything about, so why worry?). And then she was asking him if he'd slept on the plane and, lying because it seemed appropriate, essential, even, he told her that he had.

"Good," she said, smiling widely, with her lips and eyes both, "because I thought it might be relaxing for you if we enjoyed some lunch?"

"*Déjeuner*," he said, just to say it, dredging up his limited vocabulary and creative pronunciation in order to remind himself that he was, at least for the time being, out from behind the tombstone of his desk and in another country altogether. Free for a couple of days—that is, free from the grind of work and of Caroline, too, though of course he loved her, etcetera, and never tired of her company. Or almost never. But to be on your own was always an adventure—and this adventure was unfolding in Paris, City of Light, where the possibilities were as multitudinous as the raindrops that were beginning to slicken the pavement outside.

"I have invited also your American friend May Carey?" Another smile, wider yet. She was glad to see him, genuinely glad, and he wondered, with a pang of jealousy, how glad she was to see her other American authors—or the French ones? The Italians?

Mireille was sad-eyed and pretty, and today she was wearing a sort of ensemble he'd never seen on her before—a red vinyl motorcycle jacket thrown over a retro T-shirt and black jeans, definitely not business attire. But this wasn't business, was it? Or not entirely.

"We have become great friends since you were here last, did she tell you?" She laughed. "You knew we would hit it off, didn't you? We have so much in common, commonality, yes?"

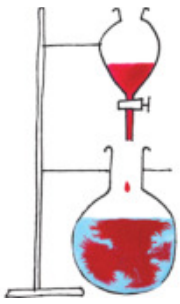
The main thing they had in common, aside from the language (May was fluent in French, though even he could discern how gratingly she mispronounced it), was alcohol. They were dedicated drinkers, daytime drinkers. Like him. Lunch would be a meal to drift away on.

Mireille said, "I thought of this *restaurant Chinois*, very elegant, and they have their own vineyard. They make a pink wine—bubbly, you say—and it is prized throughout Paris."

Lunch wasn't the problem. Nor was his exhaustion. The conversation was like adrenaline—books, music, gossip, and more gossip—and all the while the dutiful waiter kept bringing little dishes of *Porc Laqué au Miel* and *Crevettes Pannées à l'Ail et Piment*, and, at some point, *Soupe Wonton*, which nobody seemed to want. After the second bottle of bubbly, they had a third and, after that, realizing that they really couldn't drink any more—not in the middle of the day, certainly not—they ordered a half bottle and, when that was gone, a second half bottle. He was floating on air, buoyed by the attention of the two women, who occasionally lapsed into a brief duet in French but mainly stuck to English for his benefit. No, the problem arose afterward, after they'd maneuvered through their long vinous three-kiss goodbyes and his taxi had deposited him back at the hotel. It was 5 P.M., too early to collapse on the bed, the sole thing he wanted to do at this juncture. But he couldn't do that, could he? Not if he wanted to acclimate

himself to French time so as to be at least semi-coherent for the book signing and the round of interviews scheduled for the following day.

So what to do? He couldn't go to dinner, the thought of which sent up faint flutings of distress from his digestive tract, and he couldn't feature having to negotiate a bar, where his French, or lack of it, would cripple the high he was riding. On the coffee table in his room was a fruit-and-cheese plate, compliments of the manager, and in the refrigerator a cluster of wine bottles. He chose a half bottle of Sancerre—a *demi*—tucked it into his messenger bag along with a heel of bread, a wedge of cheese, and a sprig of grapes, and went out the door, thinking to head down to the river and station himself on a bench there to kick back and revel in the moment.



He was halfway to the Seine before he realized that he'd forgotten his umbrella. A light misting rain had been sifting down most of the day and here it was still, prickling at his scalp and infusing the arms and shoulders of his sports coat. It wasn't anything, really, not like the deluges that crashed down back home in the countryside, where he and Caroline had just sprung for a new roof on their nineteenth-century farmhouse, so he decided against going back for the umbrella. By the time he got to the river, the rain had intensified, but he was resourceful, wasn't he? And drunk, drunk, too, don't count him out on that score. Up ahead was the pedestrian bridge to the Louvre, which he'd taken advantage of on earlier visits when he was feeling touristic, and he saw that there was shelter beneath it, and even a little alcove in which some thoughtful clochard had left a nice, clean pallet of cardboard for the use of anyone in need, and in that moment it occurred to him that he was very much in need. So there he was, the distinguished American novelist and prospective interviewee, crouched over a slab of cardboard, opening the Sancerre, and so what if he'd neglected to bring a wineglass along? He was out of the rain, he was in Paris, and the aperture of the bottle fitted so perfectly to his pursed lips that it was as if he were playing an instrument, the sounds of the street and the river swelling joyously around him in accompaniment.

After a while he began to realize that the shelter beneath the walkway had become a way station for diners, couples, mostly, on their way to a restaurant on a barge that was docked no more than a hundred yards away, and how had he missed that? People stared at him, shook out their umbrellas, and went on up the ramp—gangplank?—to the restaurant, and that was as it should be. He didn't need company. He was enjoying himself, all by himself, a man of inner resources. There was the deep working odor of the river and the wet streets, the romance of the lights springing to life up and down both banks, the women who were perfect effigies of themselves, and all of them, even the ones linking arms with their dates, gazing over their shoulders at him. It was great, it was glorious, but . . . he was almost out of wine. Yes, O.K., time to call it a night. Or evening. Or whatever.

Just as he was tucking the empty bottle into his bag, where it made a mash of the forgotten grapes and *fromage*, he became aware of a woman standing on the pavement just below his alcove, which was elevated three or four feet above the pavement so that, even sitting, he towered over her. She was striking, blond, decked out in a pale-blue knee-length raincoat, a flowered scarf, and the heels that were standard issue for all Parisiennes between the ages of fourteen and ninety. "Monsieur Riley?" she said, making a question of it.

He didn't say yes, he didn't say no.

"Are you"—she glanced over her shoulder—"waiting for someone?"

"No," he said, feeling confused. What *was* he doing? "I was just, well, taking a walk, and then the rain . . ."

"I am a great admirer of your books," she said, staring up at him with a round beseeching face. "Especially '*Maggie de la Ferme*'—so sensitive and, how do you say, *knowing*. When I read this book I said to myself, 'Here is a man who knows the mind of a woman, truly.'"

He began to feel less confused. His exhaustion hovered momentarily, like a bird that's flown too far from the roost . . . and then it was gone. "Could I buy you a drink?" he offered.

When he awoke late the following morning, there were messages from May and Caroline, the latter of whom said, "Call me." It occurred to him that he could do that—call his wife—without guilt or resorting to subterfuge, because he hadn't slept with his editor or with May (though May's body language had seemed to intimate that she was up for it, despite her friendship with Caroline, which went back to before Caroline had even met, let alone married, him), or with the woman—Sandrine—who was not a prostitute or a lunatic but an apparently sane and decent book lover who'd recognized him from the picture in the paper promoting his book signing. She'd put her arm through his, unfurled her umbrella to shelter them both, and led him up the ramp to the barge, where she negotiated a table by one of the windows overlooking the dark roil of the river.

What did she do in life? He didn't know. She told him, but he wasn't listening. He'd reached a point at which he was beyond listening, except when she was staring directly into his eyes and praising his books. She had a salad and *pain et beurre* and a glass of wine; a small inner voice told him that he'd had more than enough wine, so he ordered a Cognac. She insisted on paying, even restraining his hand with a surprisingly firm grip when he tried to present his card to the waiter. That was a moment. Her hand was on his, communicating a level of intimacy that on another occasion might have sparked him to action despite his wedding vows, which he'd always taken more as aspirations than as absolutes, but he was beyond exhausted and she had uneven teeth and a runny nose and kept punctuating her stream of chatter with a delicate cough that she muffled with her fist. She walked him back to the hotel, chattering away. He promised to personalize her book at the book signing. They parted. He dropped into bed as if from a great height.

Then it was noon and he was in the dining room, eying a soft-boiled egg in a ceramic cup and a mug of heavily creamed and sugared coffee and staring into his phone, a device he resented, hated, even, because of the demands it

made and made again, hour after hour, day after day. He didn't particularly want to call Caroline, thinking it could only be bad news—if her mother had finally died, there was no way he was flying back for the funeral because he'd just got here, hadn't he?—but that wasn't it at all.

"Hello?" Caroline chimed, her voice coming at him magically, on the first ring, though it was, what? Six in the morning there?

"I made it," he said.

"Are you jet-lagged?"

"*Mais oui*."

"Listen," she said, "I just wanted to tell you that they're saying on the news to be careful. This virus is really beginning to cause problems in Italy and France, too, and you know how you always get sick when you travel."

He wasn't a hypochondriac and he wasn't yet one of the elderly (fifty-eight on his last birthday), and he didn't have any of the comorbidities that made you especially susceptible to this, but her warning froze him for a moment. On his flight, a couple had been wearing surgical masks, which he'd thought bizarre—ludicrous, really—and in his haze of clouds and champagne he hadn't wanted to parse the implications. Now, staring into the bright, glowing yolk of his egg, he decided to tune it all out, since there was nothing he could do about it, in any case. "How's your mother doing?" he asked.

Getting into the spirit of things, Caroline said, "*Comme ci, comme ça*."

"I'll be fine," he said. "Just send me a hazmat suit, O.K.? I'll wear it on the flight home."

They were fairly well insulated on the farm, which had come with 6.3 acres of woods backing up on former hay meadows that now sprouted various architectural wonders designated as single-family homes, though they could have accommodated whole tribes. The air was crisp and clean. A late-March snow smoothed out all the angles. Caroline came down with a cold, but he felt fine.

The fifth day back, he took her to Eladio's, a twenty-minute drive from the house on roads that were ice-ribbed and haunted by ghost images of snowstorms past but well worth it for the cuisine (Milanese, no fusion, no gimmicks). Western New York wasn't Paris. Which was why he liked it—the deep trance of the frozen nights, the icy panoply of the stars. Who needed haute cuisine? Or, for that matter, the Louvre? To visit, sure, but then you come home to the real world and take your wife out to the only restaurant deserving of the name for fifty miles around.

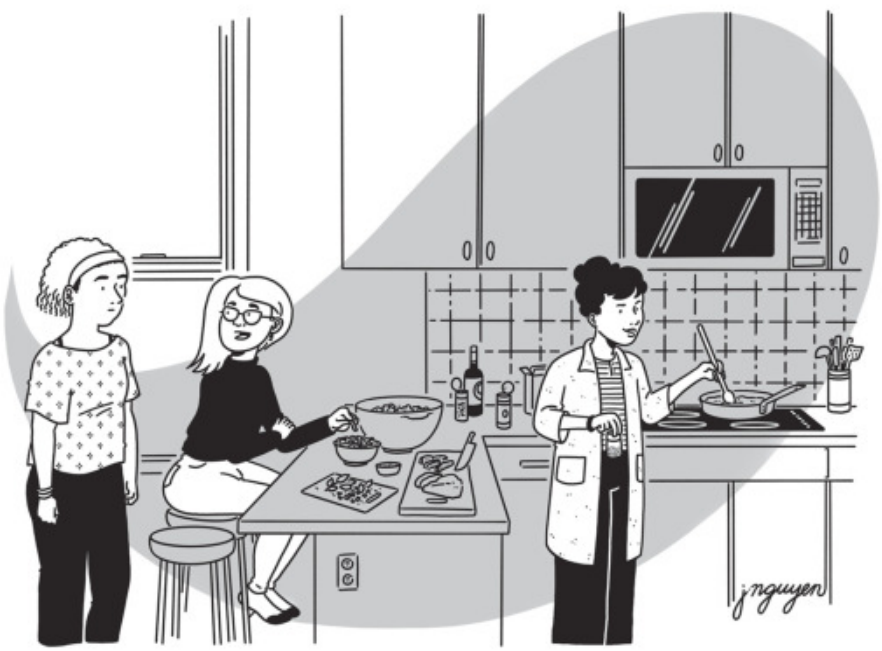
He had two drinks before they ordered. Some people they knew stopped by the table for a peripatetic chat about nothing in particular, a kind of catechism of the usual, then Eladio himself made an appearance, dispensing small talk in his soothing basso profundo. Caroline had a Martini, but she barely took a sip of it, and when the food came—she ordered the osso buco—she didn't do much more than push it around the plate with the tines of her fork. She took two bites, maybe three, but he wasn't really paying attention because he was talking, running off on a monologue about May and Mireille and even the woman with the umbrella, Sandrine, a fan, a true fan, and how about that?

Caroline didn't respond. Her Martini was getting warm, her osso buco cold. At that moment, the music paused—Vivaldi, far too insistent—and he could hear the faint rasp of her breathing, a human soundtrack with too much static in it. "Are you O.K.?" he asked, not alarmed, not yet, but getting there.

This was Caroline, his wife, his beauty, his love, the woman who'd stridden into his life like a warrior-savior on the heels of his second divorce, she who was consummately fit and polished and never at a loss for words. But not tonight. Tonight she looked washed-out, even in the forgiving glow of the candles, and she'd hardly said a word. She shook her head, balled up her napkin, and pressed it to her mouth, the first cough predicating the second and the third and then a whole taut string of them.

"Just get me home," she said finally.

The infection, if that was what it was, was viral, so antibiotics had no effect, which meant that there was no treatment beyond the cold medications, syrups, and lozenges that anybody could get over the counter. It began with sniffles and developed into a cough, and what you read in the paper or saw on the nightly news tended to minimize its impact on healthy adults. Caroline, who was supremely healthy and fourteen years younger than he was—a child, an infant—went straight to bed that night and didn't get up until after ten the following morning, and then only to use the toilet. He was downstairs at the time, at his desk, scrolling through his accumulated e-mails as a way of postponing the



"She loves when we cook together. I suggest a dish, and then she sits me down here and takes complete control to make sure it comes out perfect."

moment at which he would have to plunge back into the book he hadn't glanced at or even thought of since he boarded the plane for France, when he heard the toilet flush overhead and then the ascending notes of a ragged fit of coughing. By the time he mounted the stairs she was back in bed, her face flattened and reduced. She put a hand to her mouth and produced a long, dredging cough.

"You sound terrible," he said.

"It's just a cold. But I feel wiped out, like I climbed a mountain. Like I can't catch my breath."

He wanted to make a joke about altitude sickness or Sherpas or something—yaks—but it was no good. "You want me to call the doctor?"

"I just need sleep, that's all."

"How about something to eat? I could bring you some toast, a cup of tea? Or a muffin—you want a muffin?"

She shook her head.

"Tea? Juice?"

Her voice was so weak he could barely hear her. "Juice," she rasped, then coughed into her fist.

"O.K.," he said. "O.K. I'll be right back." And he turned and thumped down the stairs, converted in that moment into her nurse, a role for which he'd never auditioned and was hopelessly ill-prepared, because it was Caroline who took care of the domestic details—the grocery shopping, the meals, the cleanup, the feeding of the cats, and the emptying of their shit-fouled litter into the compost pit out beyond the denuded apple tree, where the wind knifed down out of the north.

She was asleep by the time he got back upstairs with the juice—and a muffin, because she had to eat something, didn't she? He saw that she'd thrown back the covers as if the weight of them were too much to bear. Her hair was ragged. And her feet, her beautiful, perfect feet, whose arches he'd kissed a thousand times, were blotched and discolored. He was about to leave the tray on the night table and back out of the room when her eyes flickered open. Caroline coughed. Her face flushed. "I can't breathe," she whispered.

It always irritated him when people said "I don't like hospitals," as if they were expressing an original thought, as if anybody anywhere liked hospitals. You didn't go to the hospital by choice or for pleasure—you went because your choices had been reduced to zero. Caroline coughed all the way there, coughed as the doors drew back to admit them, and kept on coughing through the ritual at the desk and the long, grim wait in the emergency room while gurneys angled past and everybody stared at the floor. At some point—they'd been there an hour, at least—a nurse called Caroline's name and took her into a back room, and at a point beyond that, after he'd sat packed in, elbow to elbow, with the snifflers and the groaners for who knew how long while trying to read an article about bass fishing in the sole magazine left in the place (not that he gave two shits for bass or fishing, either), a doctor appeared and called his name.

The doctor was tall and young, dressed in surgical scrubs, a mask, and nitrile gloves. There was a bump where the bridge of his nose poked at the fabric of the mask. His eyes, isolated in the space between mask and cap, gave up nothing. "Your wife tested positive for the coronavirus," he said, "and we've isolated her in the I.C.U. for her own safety and everybody else's, too."

Riley felt a shiver of fear. "She's going to be all right, isn't she? I mean, it's just like a cold, isn't it?"

"Truthfully? Your wife's the first case we've seen here, not that we didn't know it was coming sooner or later. She tells me you've been abroad recently—France, wasn't it?"

"Paris. Last week."

And then the eyes, interplanetary eyes, eyes attached to nothing, fastened on his. "You'll have to self-isolate. And

MY GRANDMOTHER'S DICTIONARY

It must have arrived in the hands
of a salesman whose name
shall remain unrecorded. Let's
call him the handsome stranger.
She saw him through the little
window next to the door
and knew although she did not
believe she believed in such
things she had loved him
in a former life. She gave him
a glass of her legendary tea
and let him go. My grandfather
was upstairs in the immaculate
attic where after they died
I found this typewriter
sleeping among old blueprints.
During the war he diagrammed
routes so trucks of soldiers
could arrive precisely in time
to wait for their orders. Or
he worked in parts. I don't
remember. I can only picture
that afternoon he told me
exactly who he had been,
I hear the resigned
tone but not what he said,
I was as is my nature staring
out the kitchen window
thinking some great hypothesis
that could easily be disproved,
that day now lost in the book
no one can ever turn
around and read. This was

in a little town that was a harbor,
its restaurant a windmill
replica turning in no wind.
We never asked her why she
always stood in the darkest
part of any room. Once
she looked up from her
eternal soup long enough to say
to me you really must remove
that terrible beard. What
is the name of that sort
of love? I want to look it up,
I think it comes from the latin
for not knowing the greek
for the particular quiet
of that afternoon I finally
gave in and picked up
the forbidden ceramic lion
from the shelf, it slipped
from my hands which already
as they do today trembled
and hit the very thick carpet
with a silent thud, exploding
into so many tiny pieces.
Out of the kitchen she came
with a broom and we both
pretended it was never there.
What is that sort of love?
The dictionary knows. I opened
it and found dust. I remember
it had a solitary gold stripe
across blue gray fabric like a dress
you wear only once, by the sea.

—Matthew Zapruder

we're going to need a list of everybody you've been in contact with since you got back. If you begin to show symptoms, consult with your own physician—but if at any point you feel that your breathing's compromised or you're running a fever, you'll need to have somebody bring you back here. I can't stress this enough—don't hesitate."

"What about a test? Can't you test me?" He felt as if he'd been shoved over a cliff, legs churning in the air, hands grasping for something, anything, to cling to.

"We're only testing patients with active symptoms."

There was the hiss of the intercom. A siren shrieked from beyond the windows, then died abruptly. "Can I see her?" Riley asked.

The doctor shook his head. "I told you, she's on the isolation ward."

Words were Riley's intimates. He knew definitions, nuances, implications. Caroline was isolated. He himself had to get home and *self-isolate*. Still, he said, "What's that supposed to mean?"

When his own mother was dying, ten years ago—or more, maybe more—he'd been apprised of it in a late-night phone call from her second husband, whom he really didn't know that well. His name was Patrick—*not* Pat—and he was an eerie replica of Riley's father: skinny, Irish, a drinker. They lived in San Diego. Riley saw them maybe once or twice a year. As far as he knew, they were in reasonably good health for their age, so the news that his mother was "gravely ill," as Patrick put it, came as a shock. At first, he tried to deny it—his mother couldn't die, no way in the world—and then, to his shame, he began calculating how he could avoid the whole thing, deal with it from a distance, on the telephone, and, yes, send the ashes here to me and I'll spread them in the woods, because she always liked nature, didn't she?

He was between wives at the time, so he had no one to nag him to do the right thing, the only thing, but within minutes of hanging up the phone he'd come around, because this wasn't about him, it was about her, his mother, and whatever the end of her life might mean. By the time he got there, standby on the first flight out of Buffalo, she was in a coma. Liver failure. Her system was shutting down. And, no, there would be no transplant, or even any possibility of it, because donor livers were in short supply and went only to people who could fully utilize them, people far younger than she was.

Patrick and the doctor (fiftyish, deeply tanned, a yachtsman, and fiendishly, as it turned out, an aspiring screenwriter who wanted to talk about nothing else) preceded him into a low-ceilinged room with twenty or more patients crowded into it. My mother, he was thinking, my mother, and here were all these people—strangers—dying their antiseptic deaths alongside her, as if it didn't matter whose mother she was. As they made their way across the room, dodging gurneys, the doctor was saying, "So R. T. Blankmanship—he's my protagonist?—winds up bottoming out on a reef off of Tonga, and it wasn't even on the charts. . . ."

Riley didn't recognize his mother. She was bloated and yellow, like a piece of fruit, like a vegetable. He was afraid to touch her, but he forced himself, just a tap there at the shoulder, and he leaned in close and whispered to her, saying the sort of things none of his characters would ever say on the page. Clichés. Only clichés could blunt what he was feeling.

And now Caroline was the one in the hospital. With a breathing tube down her throat because she couldn't breathe for herself. And who'd put her there? Who'd come back from France, the hotbed of infection, and kissed her, breathed on her, shared sips from a wineglass, and slept in the same bed? But, if he was the guilty

party here, why wasn't he coughing? Why wasn't he in the hospital instead of her? Would he trade places with her the way the selfless heroes did in the movies? Yes, he told himself, yes, of course, but he knew it wasn't true. She was stronger than he was, younger, and she'd never smoked and didn't drink even half as much as he did.

He called the hospital in the morning. Nobody knew anything. It took him fifteen minutes just to get through to a human being, and that human being transferred him to another human being, who, after audibly tapping at her keyboard and consulting with another live voice, informed him that Caroline was in isolation.

"*I know that*," he said, fighting to control himself. "I'm the one who brought her in. I want to know how she's doing, for Christ's sake—is she better? The same?" A term came to him, a term you heard on the news, and he employed it now. "Is she stable, at least?"

The human being on the other end of the line—he pictured a nurse, or was she just a receptionist?—said, "If there's any change, you'll be the first to know."

His own doctor, Marv Zwaga, with whom he was on a first-name basis and who had, through the years, treated him for a whole spectrum of ailments, from a dislocated shoulder to wasp stings, broken toes, and a particularly nasty knife-sharpening mishap, told him over the phone that he had no tests available. Nobody did. "Just assume you have it."

"And do what, drink plenty of fluids?"

There was a pause as Marv assessed the level of animosity here. Then he said, "It's never a bad idea. But, really, you just need to isolate until we find out what's going on with this thing."

"So I wait?"

"You wait. Some people are asymptomatic, but if you start to show symptoms—fever, chills, a cough—call me right away."

"And then?"

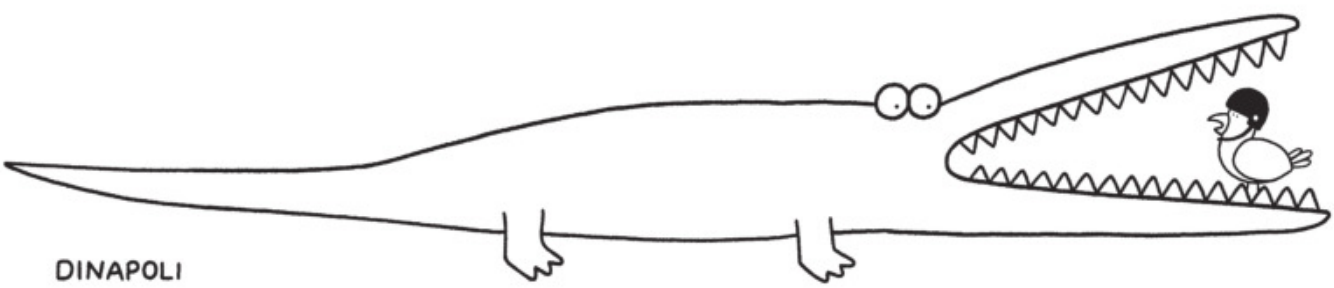
"Then we get you to the hospital. A.S.A.P."

Waiting wasn't Riley's strong suit. He called the hospital every couple of hours—that day and the next and the day after that—but all he got for his trouble was "She's resting," and when he asked if he could at least speak to her—or FaceTime, what about FaceTime?—he was told that she'd been sedated. What he didn't yet understand was that you had to be sedated to tolerate having a polyvinyl-chloride tube jammed down your throat 24/7 while a machine did your breathing for you. Or that the virus produced lesions of the lung tissue, which scarred over and made it still harder to breathe on your own, progressively harder, minute by minute, day by day. Or, worse, that the intensive-care unit wasn't necessarily a place you graduated from. Oh, it sounded good on the face of it—care, intensively given—but there were limits to what care could do, no matter how intensive it was. Nobody bothered to mention that.

Layered atop all this was his fear for himself. Every sniffle and sneeze, every hiccup, was fraught. Did he have a sore throat? Was he feverish? Weak? Dizzy? He tried to work, but it was impossible. There was TV, but he hated TV. He took long drives. He started drinking earlier in the day, until by six, when he should have been slipping a frozen entrée into the microwave, he was passed out on the couch. By the fourth day, he'd had enough of isolation. He got into the car and drove to the hospital under a cloudless sky, the sun laying a brutal hand on the snowbanks, ice gone to slush, the blacktop glistening because all of a sudden it was spring, and where were the pussy willows? Should he stop someplace and pick some up for Caroline? Or lilies? What about lilies?

He walked right in, and nobody said a word to him. People were wearing masks—the staff were, anyway—and he almost turned around and walked back out. But he didn't, because he was angry and scared and he needed to see his wife, see Caroline, who was locked up in here like a convict in prison. He knew enough to avoid the desk, instead going straight to the elevator and pressing the button for the third floor, where the I.C.U. was. Two other people rode up in the elevator with him, both in scrubs, both masked. When the doors opened, he hung back a moment, then followed them out into the hallway, with its windows like panels of light and the faint, lingering odor of human decay that no amount of disinfectant could ever erase. The door to the I.C.U. would be locked, of course, he knew that, but here were these two people ambling along ahead of him, these nurses or doctors or whatever they were, and they punched in a code and the door swung open to admit them. It was nothing to lean forward and catch the handle on the rebound.

At first nobody noticed him, which was a kind of miracle in itself, and as he moved deeper into the unit he saw the way it was configured—a central desk, bristling with nurses, and the patients' rooms, each with sliding glass doors for easy visibility, laid out on all four sides. Two of the rooms were unoccupied, but in each of the others he could see the dark forms of patients stretched out on their backs and immobilized as if they were corpses already. But which one was Caroline? Where



"It's nothing personal. I just have a hard time being vulnerable."

was she? What did she even look like?

"Sir!" a voice cried out behind him. "Sir, you can't be in here!"

In the next instant a pair of nurses converged on him, the shorter of the two taking hold of his wrist, the way Sandrine had done in the restaurant in Paris, intimately, forcefully, and with a show of strength that he found alarming—and unnecessary, because he was just here to see his wife, that was all, to know something, to be informed, and wasn't that his right?

Apparently not.

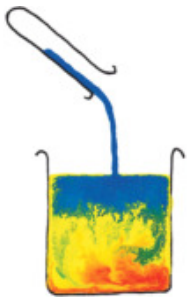
Because when he jerked his arm away a buzzer sounded, and before he could lay eyes on Caroline or even locate her he was being escorted from the room by a pair of sweating puffed-up underlings who didn't bother to wait for the elevator but frog-marched him down a damp echoing stairwell, through the lobby, and out into the glare of the springtime sun and the bright seep of the snowmelt.

May flew in for the memorial, which they'd had to postpone until summer because the whole world was in the grip of the virus now. She appeared at the door against a backdrop of greenery and the searing yellow slash of the taxi, and this time there were no air kisses to negotiate, just a hug that took all the air right out of him. She moved into the guest room, taking charge to help him get through this, to cook and shop and clean and look after the details while he mourned on the sofa with a handle of Scotch. Caroline had been cremated, her ashes consigned to the urn he'd brought back with him from the mortuary. As for him, he never developed so much as a sniffle, though he lived in dread.

His mourning took the form of focussing on himself to the exclusion of all else. He drank, tried to work up a smile when May made some comment or other that was calculated to cheer him, ate nothing, did nothing, just lay there reviewing his life with Caroline in a series of neural film clips drained of color and coherence. His agent called. Mireille called. Everybody he'd ever known called, all of them as stiff and formal as diplomats negotiating a treaty. The newspapers ran obituaries, "wife of noted novelist," and all the rest of it. They'd asked him at the hospital if he wanted to view the body—a grief counsellor, her hair pinned to the top of her head like the leaves of a cabbage and her eyes big bleeding vats of nothing—and he'd said no, he did not want to view his wife's body, he wanted to view *her*, his wife, alive and well and present, emerging from behind those locked doors and sliding into the car seat beside him.

Intensive care, oh, yes, indeed.

Caroline's mother, long given up for dead, appeared at the memorial in a wheelchair, an attendant at her side. She'd never meant much to him and now she meant even less, but he gave her a dose of chitchat and let her take hold of his hand for a minute while May, his self-appointed keeper, watched vigilantly from behind the bar the caterers had set up. At one point, Caroline's brother, Tom—a Christian of some sort, a platitude-spouter and self-righteous brick of certitude—came up to him, tears in his eyes. Tom took hold of his hand—everybody seemed to want his hand all of a sudden—and averred, tearily, "It's not an end, only a beginning." And Riley, the novelist, whose imagination had put him in any number of scenes like this, which always managed to fall flat on the page, said, "You talking molecules or God?"



"Jesus," Tom said, his throat clenching on the first syllable. " 'I am the resurrection and the life.' "

Riley really didn't want to do this, but deep down he was scared and guilty, guilty, guilty—*Paris, Sandrine, the hotel, the airplane, the whole seething world of filth and infection he'd embraced and stupidly brought home with him*—and he couldn't help himself. "I don't know where you're going to find Jesus, but Caroline's molecules are right over there in that urn wreathed in flowers—and maybe there's a few extra knocking around in the exhaust pipe at the crematorium."

Tom's face was like a plastic bag fluttering on a fencepost, and Riley wasn't giving an inch, not on the surface, but deep down he was crying out Caroline's name with every squeeze of his heart. Death, where is thy sting? Here, right here.

"You've got to have faith," Tom said.

But Riley didn't have faith. All he had was his memory. And here came the past running at him in an unstoppable rush as Caroline's brother spouted cant and people threw back their drinks and gobbled canapés and May studied him like a specimen ripe for preservation. He was seeing the day that he and Caroline first met, at a pool party in Brentwood thrown by a producer who'd just bought the rights to his second novel. Caroline worked for the agency that had closed the deal, and that was a good thing, a fine thing. He felt unconquerable, aglow like a comet trailing its own glory. There he was, semi-looped on champagne and hovering over the big blue mirror of the pool, while Caroline—stretched out on a chaise longue in a two-piece swimsuit, her legs crossed at the ankles and painted gold by the sun—made the whole party go away because she was talking in a soft analytical voice about the nuances of his book, its genius, the brilliant evocative language that *was* its cinematography. For once in his life, he just listened, and in that moment nothing could touch him, nothing,

"You know what?" he said. "I could listen to you all day."

"Sweet," she said. "Me, too. Or no, I mean—I'm not dominating the conversation, am I?" She was wearing sunglasses and she slipped them down the bridge of her nose to show him her eyes, which were cornflower blue with constellations of golden specks rimming each iris. It was a leading question, flirtatious, but she didn't wait for an answer. She said, "Jesus, it's roasting out here! You want to jump in the pool?"

"I'll race you."

"Underwater," she said. "To the other side and back. Deal?"

"Deal," he said, and then they were in, down deep, locked in a well of silence. He kept his eyes open, even against the pressure of the water and the sting of the chlorine, watching the slick tube of her body and the flutter of her feet and the way the bubbles kicked up and rocketed away.

She beat him, easily, because he ran out of breath and she didn't. ♦

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BOOKS

YOU NAME IT

Carl Linnaeus and the effort to label all of life.

BY KATHRYN SCHULZ

For the *Tyrannosaurus rex,* as for Elvis and Jesus, being extremely dead has proved no obstacle to ongoing fame. Last seen some sixty-six million years ago, before an asteroid wiped out three-quarters of the life-forms on earth, it is nonetheless flourishing these days, thanks in large part to Michael Crichton, Steven Spielberg, and elementary-school children all over the world. In my experience, such children not only can rattle off the dinosaur's vital statistics—fifteen feet tall, forty feet long, twelve thousand pounds—but will piously correct any misinformation advanced by their paleontologically passé elders. And here is the most surprising thing that all those ten-year-olds plus pretty much everyone else on the planet know about *T. rex:* the creature's proper scientific name.

That name is itself properly called a binomen, the smallest unit in the vast system known as binomial nomenclature. You'll remember the gist from basic biology: to eliminate any possible overlap or confusion, every species on the planet, whether extant or extinct, is assigned a full name, consisting of its genus (used here as a surname of sorts, indicating to what other creatures it is related) followed by its species, with both halves Latinized, and the genus sometimes reduced to just an initial, like Josef K. Thus: *Tyrannosaurus rex,* or *T. rex*, of the genus *Tyrannosaurus* and the species *rex,* known in full translation as King of the Tyrant Lizards.

Binomial names are extremely important to scientists but rarely used by the rest of us. Apart from *T. rex*, I am aware of only a few that crop up in everyday conversation. We know our own full name, of course—*Homo sapiens*, the last surviving species in a genus that once included *Homo habilis*, *Homo floresiensis*, *Homo neanderthalensis*, and several others—as well as that of the boa constrictor, a snake of the genus *Boa*, and *E. coli,* a bacterium of the genus *Escherichia*. You could argue based on those two examples plus *T. rex* that we speak respectfully of species that are potentially dangerous to us—not a bad policy, but also not a good argument, since a fourth example that comes to mind is *Aloe vera*. Also, almost no one outside scientific circles calls the great white shark *Carcharodon carcharias*.

Inside scientific circles, however, binomial nomenclature still rules the day, lending concision and clarity to fields ranging from molecular biology to evolutionary ecology. It was developed, as you might also remember from your school days, by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus in the middle of the eighteenth century, an era that was in thrall to the mighty project of trying to systematize all of nature. Appropriately for his line of work, Linnaeus's name remains widely known, and he is hailed in his country of origin as his own kind of *rex*—the King of Flowers. But the details of his life and the nature of his scientific contributions are both less contemplated and more complicated, with his staunchest defenders characterizing him as an Enlightenment-era genius who paved the way for Charles Darwin, and his fiercest critics casting him as one of history's most influential racists. A new biography, "The Man Who Organized Nature" (Princeton), written by Gunnar Broberg and translated from the Swedish by Anna Paterson, attempts to provide the fullest possible account of his life yet fails to grapple with the fundamental question it raises: if categorization is crucial to making sense of the world, how should we classify Carl Linnaeus?

The future father of modern taxonomy was born in Råshult, a village in southern Sweden, in 1707. His own father had originally been called Nils Ingemarsson, because he was the son of a man named Ingemar and most Swedes used a patronymic, but when Nils went off to university to study theology he was required to choose a new surname. For inspiration, he turned to a venerable linden tree on the land where he grew up—a *lin*, as it was known in the local dialect. Reborn as Nils Linnaeus, he was ordained in the Lutheran Church, got married, and had a son, Carl. Thus did the man who would name species get his name from a species.

It is a pretty bit of backstory, part and parcel of a thematically tidy childhood. Nils, himself an amateur botanist and an avid gardener, decorated his infant son's crib with buds and blossoms. As the boy grew older and prone to the outbursts of toddlerhood, he could be calmed by being handed a flower, and from an early age he began helping in the garden. After his father reprimanded him for forgetting the name of a plant, he vowed never to do so again, and, soon enough, he could

ABOVE: ANTONIO GIOVANNI PINNA

The sexual system Linnaeus favored for classifying plants brought a whiff of scandal, which only helped spread his name.

ILLUSTRATION BY KARLOTTA FREIER

identify virtually everything that grew in his native region. Nonetheless, he was a middling student, and his parents were distraught when his teachers informed them that he was not fit to follow his father into the ministry. Linnaeus decided to study medicine instead, chiefly because it served as a side door into the study of botany. As Broberg writes in his biography, "Medicine demands two kinds of knowledge, of the body and of what cures ailments," and the latter amounted to a mandate to continue learning about plants.

That proved difficult at Uppsala University, where Linnaeus got most of his higher education, and where he found the quality of the teaching abysmal; in all his time there, he never managed to hear a single lecture on botany. He did, however, meet someone who would change his life: Peter Artedi, a fellow-student and a budding ichthyologist, who, like Linnaeus, had disappointed his parents by failing to enter the ministry. The two became instant and devoted friends, and soon hatched, in the words of the twentieth-century botanist William Stearn, "the grand plan of revealing the works of the creator in a systemic, concise, and orderly fashion." Like Spain and Portugal in the Treaty of Tordesillas, they divided up the world between them: Artedi, by many accounts the greater intellect, would take the fish, reptiles, and amphibians, while Linnaeus would take the birds, insects, and the majority of the plants, and the two men would collaborate on mammals and minerals. If either of them died before the project was completed, they pledged, the other would finish his work. That was in 1729. Six years later, Artedi, then thirty years old and temporarily living in Amsterdam, was out walking late one night when he fell into an unfenced canal and drowned.

Linnaeus kept his promise, although by then he was already well on his way to describing the entire world on his own. At Uppsala, he had availed himself of the lax school schedule to study more and more species. During a field trip to an island in Lake Mälaren, while most of the other students were picnicking and lazing about he walked, as he later wrote, the way a man might plow, "along and crosswise, back and forth, one of my paths ran hardly further from the earlier one than by two feet." He documented eighty-eight species that day; another biological survey of the island conducted more than two hundred years later identified only seventeen that he had missed.

As word of Linnaeus's gifts spread, he began acquiring friends in high places, including one who offered him a position delivering lectures at the university's botanic gardens. That appointment earned Linnaeus some ire—it was normally reserved for academic elder statesmen, and he was still technically an undergraduate—but it further established his reputation as a rising star, and the talks he gave at the gardens routinely drew hundreds of people. That was in part because Linnaeus was advancing the theory that plants, like animals, reproduce sexually, their stamens releasing pollen to fertilize the ovules contained in pistils. That insight was crucial to the development of Linnaeus's systematics; he began dividing flowering plants into classes based on their stamens, subdividing those classes into orders based on their pistils, then further subdividing them into genus and species. (The intermediary category "family" wasn't widely used in Linnaeus's time, and "phylum" would not be created until the eighteen-sixties.)

Useful as these ideas were, they scandalized some of Linnaeus's contemporaries, not least because the plant kingdom, like the animal kingdom, proved to be sexually unruly. Linnaeus spoke tenderly of flower petals serving as a "bridal bed," but close examination of the reproductive methods of plants revealed relations that looked less like heterosexual monogamy than like homosexuality, polygamy, miscegenation, and incest. "Who would have thought that bluebells, lilies, and onions could be up to such immorality?" one critic mocked.

Still, the whiff of scandal helped spread Linnaeus's name. Bolstered by his newfound stature, he applied for funds from Sweden's Royal Society of Science in order to journey to Lapland, today the northernmost portion of Finland—most of it lies north of the Arctic Circle—but then part of Sweden. The money came through in the spring of 1732, whereupon he set off, at the age of twenty-five, for the first major expedition of his lifetime.

"Thanks so much for letting me crash here. I really appreciate how unassertive you are."

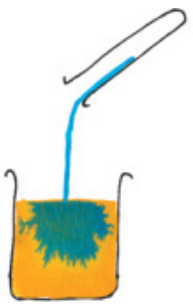
It was also the last one. Linnaeus was not cut out for the kind of swashbuckling adventures undertaken by so many explorer-scientists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Lapland, he admired the native Sami

people for their health, fortitude, and fashion sense, returning home with a Sami outfit that he wore anytime he could gin up a plausible reason to do so, including while sitting for perhaps his most famous portrait. But he complained bitterly of the hardships of travel—"Had it been punishment for a capital offence," he wrote of the journey, "it would still have been a cruel one"—and vowed never to undertake such a voyage again.

True to his word, Linnaeus left his native land only once more, and not for the wilds of South Africa or Surinam or the New World, where people kept encouraging him to go, but only across the North Sea to the Netherlands, at the time one of the leading scientific centers of Europe. At a Christmas party shortly before he left, he met an eighteen-year-old named Sara Elisabeth Moraea, and just after the new year he came courting at her door, dressed in his complete Laplander outfit (never mind that some of it was women's wear). Three weeks later, he proposed to her; she accepted, and her parents blessed the union on the condition that the wedding not take place for three years. Linnaeus vowed eternal fidelity to her, then promptly left the country.

The geography of the rest of Linnaeus's life is quickly told. He spent most of that premarital interlude in the Netherlands, living on the property and payroll of George Clifford, a wealthy director of the Dutch East India Company and Linnaeus's most generous patron. Linnaeus helped tend Clifford's fabulous gardens, wrote a book about their contents ("Hortus Cliffortianus"), and astonished his fellow-botanists by coaxing a banana tree into producing fruit well north of the fiftieth parallel. (He sent the results of a subsequent and equally successful experiment to the Swedish royal family, the only people to eat bananas there for almost two hundred years.) Then, in 1738, he returned to Sweden, began working as a doctor—a sluggish career that took off only when he started treating young libertines for gonorrhea—and finally married Sara Elisabeth. Together they had a son, also named Carl, followed by six more children, two of whom died before the age of four. When Linnaeus was appointed professor of botany and medicine at his alma mater, a job he had coveted since his student days, the family settled back in Uppsala, where, between a house in town and an estate on the outskirts, they lived the rest of their years.

Gunnar Broberg's biography dutifully accompanies Linnaeus every step of the way, trekking through his life for four-hundred-plus pages. These are not, unfortunately, a pleasure to read. A representative sentence: "That the printing plans did not become reality, however, is not a sign of failure but rather that he tested the wind and his own ability and examined what he wanted to say." Who knows whether prose like that is the fault of the writer or the translator, but the latter definitely can't be blamed for the most ironic weakness of "The Man Who Organized Nature," which is that it suffers from a problem of organization. Like most biographers, Broberg structures his book chronologically—a time-honored strategy, but a limited one, since it dictates only the order of the material, not what to leave out and what to put in. Those decisions must be made separately, according to some principle of salience, but no such discernment seems to have shaped Broberg's book, which is full of things we don't need to know, including the height and hair color of fleeting friends from Linnaeus's undergraduate years.



The main problem with "The Man Who Loved Nature," though, is not all the things in it we don't need to know but all the things we need to know that aren't in it. We care about Linnaeus today for his outsized role in the grand project of trying to systematize nature—a project that, for good and ill, changed the way we think about the world. Broberg, a Swedish professor of the history of science who died last year, should have been well positioned to explore that project and its impact, but his book never substantively strays from biography to intellectual history. Nor does Wilfrid Blunt's 1971 "The Compleat Naturalist: A Life of Linnaeus," the definitive English-language account of the great taxonomist. The first book is a laborious account of Linnaeus's life, the second a lucid one, but neither succeeds at the fundamental task of biography: to show us why that life mattered.

The impulse to impose order on nature is an ancient one. Aristotle tried to do it; so did his contemporary Theophrastus, often considered the father of botany; so did the first-century polymath Pliny the Elder, whose "Naturalis Historia" was enormously influential, albeit mostly wrong; so did the countless medieval monastics who carefully arranged all of creation in a "Great Chain of Being," positioning each entity in accordance with its imagined proximity to God—beginning with seraphim and cherubim, continuing on to humans, and descending all the way down through oysters, mushrooms, moss, and rocks.

That system, as much a moral order as a biological one, began to erode only under the combined influence of the Scientific Revolution, the Age of Exploration, and the Enlightenment. The first brought with it technological innovations that radically enhanced the observational powers of naturalists—including the microscope, although Linnaeus himself never used one. The second vastly expanded the number of known species, as travellers in foreign lands described or brought home previously unfamiliar plants and animals. The third, with its emphasis on reason, made it possible to conceive of organizing nature according to its observable properties, rather than in purely theological terms.

Owing to all this, by the seventeen-thirties, when Linnaeus began his taxonomic work in earnest, the study of nature had reached a curious fulcrum. For perhaps the first time in history, the practical, political, and intellectual conditions existed for entirely reimagining the relationships among living beings; for perhaps the last time in history, it was possible to believe that a single person might do so. This was Linnaeus's ambition. An exact contemporary of Denis Diderot, he wanted to become,

in the words of William Stearn, "the great biological encyclopaedist."

He succeeded, but the innovation for which he is best remembered today, binomial nomenclature, was merely a side effect of that goal. Before he came along, species' names often ran long; plain old peppermint, for example, was *Mentha floribus capitatus foliis lanceolatis serratis subpetiolatis*. (Roughly: "Mint, crowned with flowers, with sawtooth, lance-shaped leaves and very short petioles.") Names like that were full of information but unwieldy and impossible to remember, let alone to write down while, say, doing field work in the pouring rain. Linnaeus's great insight was that this method was trying to accomplish two separate and competing aims: precise description and clear identification. He promptly separated those objectives, rendering distinct the two fields now known as classification and nomenclature. The former required carefully characterizing each plant or animal, but the latter required only that each species be given a bespoke, nonoverlapping name. Thus liberated from description in matters of nomenclature, you could name a flower for a friend, a weed for an enemy.

Whatever a species' name was, Linnaeus determined that for brevity it should always be a single word, and, for universal comprehensibility, it should be rendered in Latin—at the time, the lingua franca of the scholarly world. (Among his other contributions, Linnaeus essentially created botanical Latin, which is as distinct from classical Latin as modern Hebrew is from the liturgical variety.) Having established those basic rules, he then set about, like Adam in the garden, naming all of creation.

Although Linnaeus was a wildly prolific writer, producing everything from scholarly tomes to vanity projects, coffee-table books, and self-help guides, his most important contributions to the world of science are contained in just two works: "Species Plantarum," a two-volume, twelve-hundred-page compendium of plant species, published in 1753, and "Systema Naturae," which was originally published in 1736 as fourteen folio pages but grew across twelve editions and thirty years into three volumes and twenty-three hundred pages. It is these two books which established the basis for, respectively, modern botanical nomenclature and modern zoological nomenclature. In them, Linnaeus listed every organism then known to exist, and personally coined names for more than twelve thousand species of plants and animals. But what was prodigious in his day is paltry in ours; today, his system of nomenclature has been used to distinguish more than one and a half million species—that is, if such a thing as a species even exists.

What Linnaeus sought to do was organize nature according to its fundamental, intrinsic divisions—to carve it at the joints, in Plato's famous formulation. But what he actually did, for the most part, was impose artificial categories on the natural world for the convenience of scientists. His use of stamens and pistils to classify flowering plants, for instance, was incredibly useful: it meant that a fellow-botanist facing an unknown plant could simply assess those parts to determine its order, class, and genus. But this system was also entirely arbitrary, in that it disregarded every other part of the plant, including those which might be more salient to understanding its place in the natural order of things.

This is not a retroactive assessment; Linnaeus himself knew full well the limitations of his classification method. To achieve a system completely in accordance with nature was, he wrote, "the first and last wish of botanists." But the more closely you looked at her bounty the more difficult that prospect became—so, in the meantime, "artificial systems are absolutely necessary."

In philosophy, this tension between intrinsic and imposed categories takes the form of a debate between nominalism and realism. Realists, whose ranks include everyone from strict creationists to Stephen Jay Gould, believe that nature is full of real and discrete categories, from "amphibian" to "zinc," and that the job of the scientist is to discern them accurately. Nominalists believe that nature lacks clearly defined categories, and that we simply impose those distinctions upon it—creating, as it were, the illusion of joints where none really exist. This is not just the position of French theorists and post-truth relativists. "I look at the term 'species' as one arbitrarily given, for the sake of convenience, to a set of individuals closely resembling each other": that is Charles Darwin, in the second chapter of "On the Origin of Species."

That book, of course, trumpeted to the world a very large problem with the entire notion of a species. Like nearly all previous and contemporaneous scholars, Linnaeus believed (with the occasional pang of doubt) that at creation God established each species in the exact form we know it today. But that idea was incompatible with evolutionary theory, according to which species are constantly changing—emerging, diverging, going extinct.

"On the Origin of Species" was published in 1859. In the century and a half since then, advances in biology have radically changed the way scientists characterize species, with the result that once-established categories have fallen apart. The giraffe, for instance, known since Linnaeus's time as the single species *Giraffa camelopardalis*, is today recognized by geneticists as four distinct species, while the linden tree for which Linnaeus was named now belongs to a different biological family from the one to which he assigned it. Even the broadest distinctions among living beings have changed enormously over time. Following Aristotle, Linnaeus placed all life-forms in three kingdoms: animal, vegetable, and mineral. Today, most scientists recognize either five or six kingdoms (Animalia, Plantae, Fungi, Protista, and Monera, with the last group sometimes divided into Archaebacteria and Eubacteria). Meanwhile, scientists have superimposed over those kingdoms the higher rank of domain, which, depending on whom you ask, consists of two divisions, Archaea and Bacteria, or those two plus a third, Eukarya.

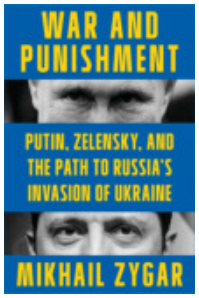
Nor is it just specific species or even specific kingdoms that have changed. The very concept of a species is in radical flux, too, with more than twenty

competing definitions in circulation. The one most familiar to laypeople regards a species as a population of individuals that reproduce only with one another. (One obvious problem with that definition: plenty of life-forms reproduce asexually.) Choosing a definition is not just a matter of what goes in the dictionary under "species"; which one you use will determine how you divide up nature, such that a group of creatures that would be regarded as a species by one standard might not merit the label by another. All this confusion comes, as Darwin wrote, "from trying to define the undefinable." Yet committed realists continue to promulgate more and more definitions, in the belief that one of them will map perfectly onto some intrinsic and stable feature of nature. Darwin called that idea "laughable," a word that captures the impossibility but not the gravity of arbitrarily imposing categories on living beings.

Of all the species Linnaeus set out to define, the most troubling by far—in his time and ours—was *Homo sapiens*. In earlier taxonomies, we humans had enjoyed a category unto ourselves, morally superior to and ontologically distinct from all other animals. This bothered Linnaeus, who recognized the extensive similarities between us and apes. Accordingly, in later editions of "Systema Naturae," he placed humans among the primates, in his newly created category of *Mammalia*. (That category replaced *Quadrupedia*, after Linnaeus, who in his free time lobbied against the upper-class practice of using wet nurses, determined that suckling the young was a more salient distinction than possessing four legs.) That classification ran contrary to the long-standing Christian insistence that humans ranked above rather than among other animals, but although Linnaeus was himself a devout Lutheran, he never backed down from his conviction about our place in the order of things. Those of his compatriots who read his "Fauna Svecica" might have been surprised to find that he included Swedes in his account of the fauna of Sweden.

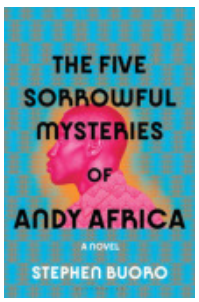
For most people, though by no

BRIEFLY NOTED



War and Punishment, *by Mikhail Zygar (Scribner)*. A young, distinguished, and wholly independent Russian journalist who was forced to flee his country for the West has written a superb account of all that led to Vladimir Putin's brutal and misbegotten invasion of Ukraine. Zygar became well known as a reporter in Russia with his best-seller, "All the Kremlin's Men." Here, through his on-the-ground reporting from Ukraine and Russia, conducted during the past two decades, and an incisive grasp of history, he describes how Putin has willfully distorted the past to serve his purposes. Read in conjunction with works by scholars such as Serhii Plokhy and Timothy Snyder, Zygar's book provides an ardent, informed understanding of the present.

August Wilson, *by Patti Hartigan (Simon & Schuster)*. As a child, the author of seminal plays including "Fences" and "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" was a bookworm: he learned to read by his fourth birthday, and stood out in kindergarten as "a miniature scholar." This biography deftly traces his ascent to becoming one of America's preëminent dramatists, recounting his discovery of the blues ("the wellspring of my art"); his founding of the Black Horizons Theatre, in his home town of Pittsburgh, in 1968; and his careful curation of his persona. Hartigan ably argues that his dramas, many of which pay close attention to ancestral lineages and ideas about inheritance, continue to reveal "fissures in the national culture."



The Five Sorrowful Mysteries of Andy Africa, *by Stephen Buoro (Bloomsbury)*. Andrew Aziza, the Nigerian teen-ager who is the protagonist of this début novel, describes himself as a "genius poet altar boy who loves blondes." A Christian who lives in a largely Muslim town, Andy feels ashamed of his preference for the West, which he considers to be a foil to his continent and to his Mama, who reads her Bible slowly and believes in ghosts. This shame is expressed in imaginary conversations with his stillborn brother, his schoolteacher, and the first white girl he meets, with whom he readily falls in love. Animated by a lively voice and a spiritual vision, Buoro's novel also unfolds a touching critique of the false promise of Western transcendence.

My Stupid Intentions, *by Bernardo Zannoni, translated from the Italian by Alex Andriesse (New York Review Books)*. This début novel is narrated by a beech marten named Archy, who is born into a life of hardship: his father dead, his mother barely able—and sometimes failing—to keep the newborn kits alive. Despite its fairy-tale-like feel, the novel is nothing cute. When Archy is lamed in an accident, he is sold to a dealmaking fox, who treats him like a slave before teaching him to read and write. Archy learns about the lives of men, knowledge that prompts a host of religious questions and leads to a restless search for meaning. Life in Archy's world is a constant fight for survival, and, while Zannoni's story implies that thinking and instinct may mean different things for animals than they do for us, he provokes the reader to consider just how different their realm truly is.

means all, our fellowship with primates is no longer as troubling as it was in Linnaeus's time. What disturbs us today is not how he categorized us among other animals but how he categorized us among ourselves. In the first edition of "Systema Naturae," he listed four variations of the human species, based on geographic distribution: *Americanus rubescens*, *Europaeus albus*, *Asiaticus fuscus*, and *Africanus niger*. Those modifiers correspond to colors—red, white, yellow, and black—even though he wrote in "Philosophia Botanica" that "color is wonderfully variable and hence of no value for definitions." But what applied to flowers apparently did not apply to humans.

Still, those differences in coloration were basically innocuous, a reflection of the broadly correct theory that skin color corresponded to climate. It was not until the tenth edition of "Systema Naturae" that Linnaeus linked his divisions within *Homo sapiens* to character traits: *Homo americanus* was "unyielding, cheerful, free"; *Homo europaeus* was "light, wise, inventive"; *Homo asiaticus* was "stern, haughty, greedy"; and *Homo africanus* was "sly, sluggish, neglectful."

What are we to make of these invidious and uninformed distinctions? Broberg dismisses them with a wave of the context wand. "Labels such as 'racism' and 'racist' are frequently misleading when applied to circumstances and people in the past," he writes—a curious defense, given that the misleading application of labels is precisely what is at issue here. It's true that the word "racist" did not exist in the eighteenth century, but the era was hardly free of racial prejudices; those are exactly what Linnaeus absorbed and then presented as scientific absolutes. He could not have been oblivious of the consequences of doing so, not least because "the circumstances of the past" include, in this case, Sweden's profitable involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, the proponents of which, like proponents of racial hierarchies in every time and place, looked to nature to try to legitimatize their bigotry and cruelty.

And yet it is true that Linnaeus's legacy on matters of race is a complicated one. He was not antisemitic, despite the prevailing sentiments of his time and place; indeed, he sought out Jewish communities in Holland and wrote about their customs with fair-minded attentiveness. In Lapland, he regarded the Sami with admiration, felt that they were in many respects superior to Scandinavians, and recorded with dismay the brutality to which Christian Swedes resorted while trying to convert them. Perhaps most striking, he seemed to view nurture as more determinative than nature when it came to distinctions among people. In that same edition of "Systema Naturae" where he linked geography to character, he also added another subvariety of human being, *Homo monstrosus*—which, surprisingly, referred not to people with congenital abnormalities but, rather, to those who were "deformed" by their environment. By way of example, he cited, among others, wasp-waisted, corset-wearing European women.

That strange category gestures toward the most paradoxical fact about a man who unquestionably helped lay the groundwork for future generations of "scientific" racists. Again and again, Linnaeus insisted that we humans—literally over and above our distinctions—are all one species, fundamentally deserving of being treated as the same. We cringe today, reading him on what he saw as the huge gap between the "Hottentot" and the "highly enlightened prime minister in Europe"—but his point was that the gap was less extreme than his contemporaries imagined, that the two of them, like all of us, are equally sapient, equally human.

It is consistent with the rest of Linnaeus's life that his legacy on race is so contradictory; seldom has a more paradoxical person existed. He was a lovely writer ("The corn-frogs croak toward evening," he once observed, "making a sound like big bells rung three or four miles away"), but his most influential books are deadly dull. He was admired for his supremely orderly mind yet prone to outbursts of temper that startled and dismayed his students. He depended on the generosity of countless mentors to achieve his success yet was profoundly ungenerous in return, refusing to share specimens from his collection and appropriating without credit the work of other botanists and illustrators. He was committed to exactitude yet inclined to hyperbole and dishonesty; in his report to the Royal Society on the Lapland journey, he exaggerated the distance he covered, and described the mountains in the region as higher than Everest. He was a central figure of the Enlightenment but cared not at all for philosophy or politics—or, for that matter, for art, literature, music, or theatre. He regarded himself as just a humble servant of God, doing his best to reveal the order in divine creation, but was a shameless megalomaniac whose boasts could form their own taxonomic kingdom. (He claimed to have "discovered in the field of natural history more than anyone could have believed possible"; his books were, variously, "the greatest achievement in the realm of science," "the fairest jewel in medicine," "a masterpiece that no one can read too often.") He was a committed homebody, and yet his work and legacy depended on the global travels of scores of "apostles," as he called them, who performed the dual function of sending specimens back home and evangelizing for his system abroad.

Those apostles performed their duties admirably. Linnaeus lived to see his system adopted almost universally, his praises sung just as far, and his own nomenclature updated, upon his ennoblement by the King of Sweden, to Carl von Linné. That is, perhaps, the most fundamental paradox of Linnaeus's life: that so much fame could be achieved through such fundamentally humdrum work. It is true that he was an exceptional botanist with remarkable powers of observation and incredible stamina; it is also true that he was mostly a kind of biological Marie Kondo, endlessly sorting and systematizing, and that his scholarship was ultimately more bureaucratic than profound. Those limitations have grown only more obvious with time, because, for all intents and purposes, the world as Linnaeus described it no longer exists. Only the system he devised to do the describing endures. ♦

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MUSICAL EVENTS

ALFRESCO

At Santa Fe Opera, a new orchestration of Monteverdi's "Orfeo."

BY ALEX ROSS

In Yuval Sharon's production, the opera resonates with mountains in the distance.

Desert-bright weather in the southwestern United States has long inspired architecture that opens itself to the land and the sky. Pueblo cliff dwellers carved shelters into walls of rock; Spanish settlers wrapped houses around courtyards that became, in the words of the pioneering California architect Irving Gill, "outdoor living rooms." In a similar spirit, Los Angeles modernists like R. M. Schindler and Richard Neutra designed semitransparent homes with light frames and sliding doors. In the performing arts, dry summers fostered the building of Greek-style amphitheatres, the Hollywood Bowl being the most famous example. Schindler wrote in 1926, "The distinction between the indoors and the out-of-doors will disappear."

One of the most spectacular instances of indoor-outdoor architecture in the Southwest can be found on a hill north of Santa Fe, New Mexico, at the edge of a rugged landscape of mountains, mesas, and arroyos. Santa Fe Opera, which presents a five-work season each summer, occupies a remarkable performance space that is open on the sides and the back, with swooping roofs that have the weightlessness of wings. In an acoustical mystery that invites comparison with the beautiful anomalies of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, voices project handsomely in the auditorium without getting lost in the wind. Bewitching serendipities are routine. At a recent performance of Wagner's "The Flying Dutchman," a stiff breeze kicked up as the Helmsman sang, "Dear south wind, blow once more!"

Santa Fe Opera was the creation of the impresario and conductor John Crosby, who launched the company in 1957, having fallen in love with the area as a teen-ager. (He spent a year at the Los Alamos Ranch School, just before it was shut down and transformed into the Los Alamos National Laboratory.) Crosby's first season featured Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress," with the composer in attendance. This established the mold for a forward-looking repertory that mixed standard Romantic titles with new work, Baroque fare, and bel-canto revivals, not to mention vast quantities of Richard Strauss. Crosby also instituted the Apprentice Program for Singers, which bolstered such performers as Sherrill Milnes, Samuel Ramey, Roberta Alexander, and Joyce DiDonato.

The immediate success of Santa Fe Opera—Stravinsky adored it and came back five more times—set the pace for what is now a bustling summer-opera scene in the United States. Glimmerglass, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, and Opera Saratoga followed its lead. The resulting extension of the season has been a huge boon to working singers, not to mention music lovers with ordinary incomes. (A subscription to all five productions at Santa Fe can cost as little as two hundred dollars—less than the average price of one Taylor Swift ticket.) The time-slowing beauty of the setting is an extravagant bonus. Few would dissent from the verdict of the late opera maven Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who said that there is no lovelier place to hear opera in the summer.

The chief novelty at Santa Fe this season is a new version of Monteverdi's "Orfeo," which, at the age of four hundred and sixteen, is the oldest opera still regularly performed. Although Harry Bicket, Santa Fe's music director, is a specialist in early opera, he decided against using a period ensemble of harpsichords, theorbos, sackbuts, and the like; this would have required a total reconfiguration of the company's resident orchestra. Instead, Bicket turned to the

ILLUSTRATION BY JOANNA BLÉMONT

composer Nico Muhly, who has refashioned Monteverdi's masterpiece in a captivating modern guise.

Various adaptations of "Orfeo" have circulated during the past century and more: Vincent d'Indy, Carl Orff, Ottorino Respighi, and Bruno Maderna, among others, tried their hand. Muhly, more respectful than most, preserves the crisp, clean lines of Monteverdi's score while filling in all manner of instrumental filigree: delicate arpeggios in the harp, buzzing tremolos in the strings, decorative flourishes in the winds. At times, he makes more boisterous interventions: when Orfeo enters Hell to retrieve his beloved Euridice, trumpets let loose with ad-libitum double-tonguing fanfares. But nowhere does Muhly indulge himself at Monteverdi's expense: rather, he acts as a fluent interpreter, bringing his own antic grace to bear.

Yuval Sharon directs the show, employing set designs by the artist-architects Alex Schweder and Matthew Johnson. The most striking effect comes courtesy of Santa Fe: at the outset, the allegorical figure of La Musica is sitting in a hospital bed atop a domelike hill, watching the sun go down over distant mountains. Given that Orfeo is himself a personification of music, Sharon's staging evokes the fate of the art form in an age of mass reproduction: after Euridice dies, her voice persists by way of a gold-plated Victrola, which Orfeo carries with him from Hell. For the most part, though, Sharon and his collaborators concentrate on straightforward, earthy images: a green hill for the world above, a misty grotto for the underground. Verdant colors and robust movement match the Monteverdi-Muhly score.

The tenor Rolando Villazón is singing Orfeo, but a stage accident put him temporarily out of commission for opening night. The baritone Luke Sutliff, a former Santa Fe apprentice, stepped in, finding keen expressivity at the top of his range. Among the supporting players, the mezzo-soprano Paula Murrihy stood out for her coolly piercing portrayal of La Messaggera, who brings news of Euridice's fate. The chill of her announcement is accentuated by Muhly's orchestration, in which bass clarinet, contrabassoon, harp, and cello perform a deathly turn from E major to G minor. Operagoers who saw "Tristan und Isolde" at Santa Fe last summer might feel a twinge of déjà vu: Tristan expires on the same quietly shuddering progression.

I saw two other operas during my time in Santa Fe: "Pelléas et Mélisande," directed by Netia Jones, and "The Flying Dutchman," directed by David Alden. Both stagings tend toward grungy industrial imagery—churning wall fans are a shared element—and both make a somewhat head-scratching impression. Jones places the archaic castle dwellers of "Pelléas" in a bunker rife with signs of disease and delirium: oxygen cannisters are wheeled out, projections of medical data flicker on walls, mysterious doubles appear. Alden, for his part, transposes the maritime denizens of "Dutchman" to a regimented container-shipping milieu. As arresting as the images sometimes are, they get in the way of the operas' fundamental qualities: Debussy's eerie radiance, Wagner's elemental swell.

The productions are more newsworthy for showing the progress of young singers on the rise. Samantha Hankey applied a startlingly lush, lustrous mezzo-soprano to the role of Mélisande, rescuing the character from the prison of Symbolist enigma. She had an able partner in her Pelléas, the ardent baritone Huw Montague Rendall; Zachary Nelson, as Golaud, erred on the side of gruffness. The bass-baritone Nicholas Brownlee exhibited astonishing raw power as the Dutchman, booming out so impressively that he might have been audible at the Tesuque Casino, up the road. His delivery, however, needs more nuance and variety. Elza van den Heever, who sang Senta, demonstrated how much can be communicated with differentiated phrasings and pointed diction.

The young German conductor Thomas Guggeis led the "Dutchman" in jumpy, erratic fashion. Bicket, showing his experience and range, contributed a poised, stealthily wrenching "Pelléas." Instruments in the pit came across as vividly as characters onstage: the hovering lamp of Bart Feller's flute, the pensive stride of Kelly Cornell's horn. A few birds joined in before bed. At one point, I sensed a floodlight glowing somewhere above and behind me; it was the moon. ♦

THE THEATRE

SHARK BAIT

The "Jaws" ecosystem and Broadway's "The Shark Is Broken."

BY HELEN SHAW

A new behind-the-scenes comedy clings to the skeleton of Spielberg's 1975 hit.

Forty-eight Junes ago, summer changed. A twenty-seven-year-old, as yet unknown Steven Spielberg released a shark movie, and thanks in part to some stunning casting choices—Roy Scheider as a decent police chief, Richard Dreyfuss in peppery scientist mode, the flinty British actor Robert Shaw as the Ahab-like fisherman Quint—the result ate the box office. "Jaws" shifted Hollywood, which shifted the culture as a whole. At sea, when a whale dies, it can fall to the ocean floor and decay into a nutrient-rich structural reef, the basis of a food web that can last for decades. When "Jaws" landed in 1975, it generated its own ecosystem, too. The modern movie industry, with its summer tentpoles, youth-oriented programming, and marketing blitzes, was born in its guts.

"The Shark Is Broken," a play by Ian Shaw and Joseph Nixon, now at the John Golden Theatre, also takes shelter in the "Jaws" skeleton: it's a behind-the-scenes comedy that imagines frequently irritable chats among the movie's three main actors as they wait around for weeks, delayed by the movie's malfunctioning rubber-skinned star. Scheider (Colin Donnell), Dreyfuss (Alex Brightman), and Shaw (Ian Shaw, both writing about and playing his own father) idle away the time on the set's lobster boat, which bobs in the ocean off Martha's Vineyard. They talk about everything under the New England sun, like Dreyfuss's yearning for fame and Shaw's constant boozing, and we see how desperate the eager pup (Dreyfuss) is to impress the salty dog (Shaw). There's also a certain amount of meta-theatrical ironizing, subtle as a harpoon. "Do you really think anyone will be talking about this in fifty years?" Robert Shaw scoffs at the two younger men. *Thunk.*

People have been fascinated by the making of "Jaws" since it opened. A memoir by the co-screenwriter Carl Gottlieb, "The Jaws Log," from 1975, has sold millions of copies; revelations about disasters on set and cast tensions have made the movie's triumph seem even sweeter. The play's raison d'être, though, seems to be Ian Shaw's desire to honor his father—or perhaps to reckon with his father's stature, measuring himself against a pattern cut by a man who died when he was eight. To do that, Shaw and Nixon's script lets the son take several cracks at the development of his father's most famous scene, a monologue about the sinking of the U.S.S. Indianapolis. ("Eleven hundred men went in the water, three hundred and sixteen men come out, the sharks took the rest.") Accentuating the sense that we're watching a Shaw *fils* showcase, the writers also sneak in a surprising amount of Shakespeare, including a handsomely delivered Sonnet 29, which Shaw *père* uses to calm Dreyfuss during a panic attack, and a wordless scene in which he seems to contend with a storm, à la King Lear.

The other actors didn't write their parts, so they're served fewer plums: Brightman, always the funniest thing onstage, nails his imitation of Dreyfuss, down to the rabbity giggle, but he's there mainly as a neurotic target for barbs, and Donnell isn't allowed any Shakespeare or much comic business. The writers focus on only three of Scheider's data points: his tan, his calm, and his zero-body-fat boxer's physique. Because it's a dad play about a dad movie written for dad reasons—I say this as a real fan of dads—Scheider does mention his father at one point, but he mostly serves as a two-dimensional sounding board and hype man for the parts of Robert Shaw's career that Johnny-come-lately fans might not

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM ENTHOVEN

know, like his stage work or his writing.

Duncan Henderson's Broadway set is grand: a photorealistic re-creation of the boat, sliced in half, set against an immense video-screen sky. (The glittering projections are by Nina Dunn.) Yet "Shark" is really a very small three-hander, scuttling like a hermit crab inside the "Jaws" whale fall. I don't mean that there's something inherently unseemly here—scavengers, like sharks, are unfairly maligned—but Spielberg's gorgeous and undiminished film is the show's indispensable scaffolding, and you need it playing in the back of your mind for the story to make sense.

"Shark" started its slow swim toward Broadway at the 2019 Edinburgh Fringe, and it's notable that the play's prolific director, Guy Masterson, specializes in Fringe productions with showy casting: he kicked off his career there in 1994 by reciting "Under Milk Wood," by Dylan Thomas, emphasizing the poem's connection to Masterson's own famous uncle, Richard Burton. There's a particular Fringe style he's employing here—thrift dusted with celebrity, spiced with winking commentary meant to make a late-night Edinburgh audience slosh their pints. Scaled for a Broadway house, though, these I-know-you-know jokes, like a mild gag about Spielberg's career ("Whatever next? Dinosaurs?"), can sound hacky. Worse, that unchallenging, jokey tone undercuts the intriguing psychodrama at the play's core.

There are times when "Shark" seems like a dramatized version of the movie's IMDb trivia page; we find out, for instance, who came up with the legendary "You're gonna need a bigger boat" line: it was Spielberg, shouting a suggestion to Scheider as cameras rolled. Yet it seems to expect us to know one fact without being told—that Robert Shaw died a few years after shooting "Jaws," at only fifty-one. (Ian Shaw is fifty-three.) If you're conscious of Robert Shaw's imminent death, it lends a certain eerieness to everything Ian Shaw is doing onstage. He's a softer actor than his father, and that pliability means he can contort himself into the other man's shape. In Shakespeare's "The Tempest," a taunting spirit tells a son that his drowned father has been transformed underwater into something "rich and strange." Ian Shaw inflicts that sea change on himself, staring out from his father's familiar face, speaking in his father's familiar voice, becoming not his father but an uncanny, full-fathom-five changeling copy.

It's the season for this sort of thing. British movie-reënactment fever has hit Broadway, thanks to this import from the West End and another, the "Back to the Future" musical, playing a few blocks away, at the Winter Garden. There, too, the actors are exactly aping performances that are now decades old; Casey Likes doesn't just play Marty McFly, boy guitarist and time traveller—he plays Michael J. Fox playing Marty McFly, imitating each gesture Fox made with his chin in 1985. I did not, I admit, enjoy "Shark" or "Future" on their own comic terms, but I did find that thinking about the pair of them sent me into long reveries about what theatre is for. In my bleaker thoughts, I wondered whether drama has been reduced to a kind of auxiliary feature for cinematic intellectual property, aiming to produce only minor feelings like recognition and comfort. The cheerier ideas were about theatre as graveside ritual, in which we impersonate or digest our ancestors to defeat death. So not *that* much cheerier.

There's a bit in "Shark" when the three men note that Spielberg didn't want celebrities in the lead roles—for "reasons of realism," Scheider says. In the play's case, Ian Shaw's casting does certainly break open its realistic surface. What does that leave? I think it turns the show into a caliper that gauges the widening distances between this fallen world of glossy imitations and the movie's grittier, brinier one; between one Shaw and another; between Spielberg's ambitious fusion of art and entertainment and what we find ourselves watching now.

For example, Donnell's Scheider has a wordless scene in which he strips to his micro-swimsuit to sunbathe. To prepare, Donnell has whittled himself into a hard-muscled sculpture. He's done impressive work, but he doesn't actually resemble Scheider, who was thin as a tomcat, yes, but also relaxed and liquid in his skin. The strip sequence is dramaturgically unnecessary, but at least it's metaphorically telling about the immense effort it takes to copy another generation. Copying has its costs; certain kinds of reverence are corrosive. Perhaps the "Jaws" whale fall has all rotted away, and there's finally too little of its original nourishment to go around. Did I mention that the latest shark movie, "Meg 2: The Trench," is now in theatres? Scrape and scrape at those bones, but eventually there's nothing there but ocean floor. ♦

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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 Lynn Hsu, must be received by Sunday, August 20th. The finalists in the August 7th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the September 4th 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

"That's where I met my wife."
Nicole Chrolavicius, Burlington, Ont.

"All it takes is one good Yelp review."
Dave Maxwell, Matosinhos, Portugal

"They fly all this way just to say they ate in the Hamptons."
Victor Chongchua, Honolulu, Hawaii

THE WINNING CAPTION

"It just depends on what you're looking for—unconditional adoration or soul-crushing disregard."
Rebecca Wiseman Lee, Martinez, Calif.

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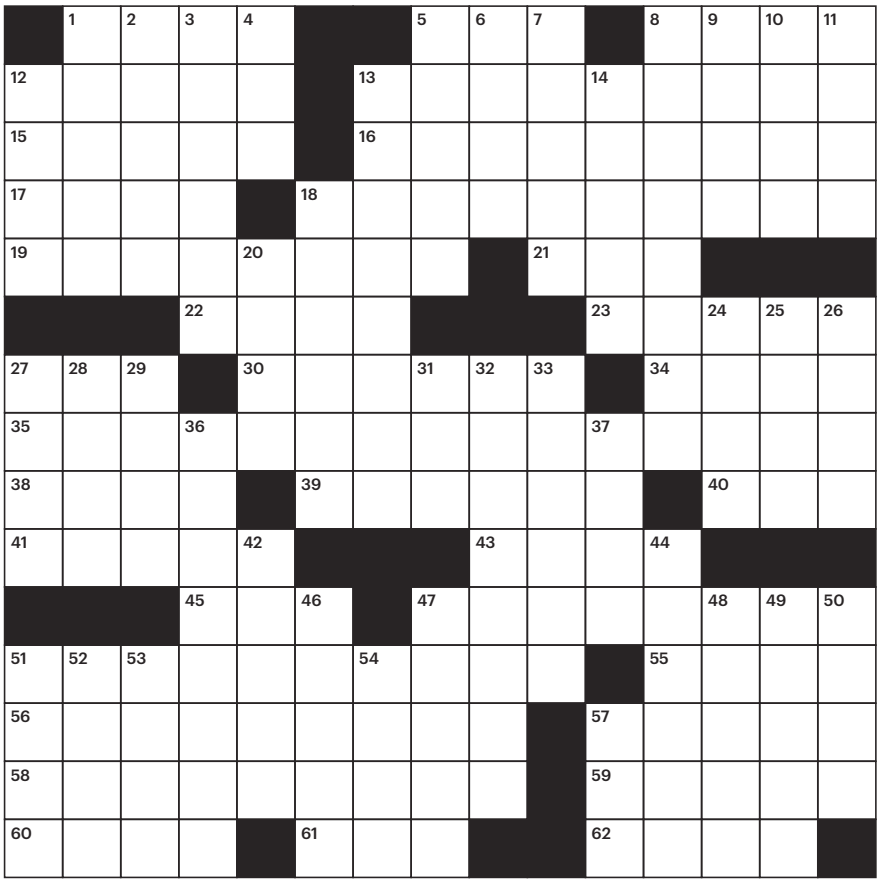
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

BY CAITLIN REID



ACROSS

1 Where the heart is, so it's said
5 TV network headquartered in Atlanta
8 Some macronutrients
12 Keep a library book for another few weeks, say
13 "You don't believe me?"
15 Upper crust
16 Big shot on the golf course?
17 Plant with medicinal leaves
18 "We Belong" singer who was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2022
19 Any of the massive stone heads on Rapa Nui, e.g.
21 Big beer container
22 Auditioner's desire
23 Drastically reduce, as prices
27 Volcanic debris
30 Divvies up
34 Lake that borders four states and Canada
35 Spotless
38 ___ Kelly (singer in the movie "Sing")
39 Snappy comeback
40 Layer of turf
41 Seattle's W.N.B.A. team
43 ___ in the blank
45 Competition where one might stand for a spell?
47 Results of sunbathing in a swimsuit
51 Fast-riding rodeo event
55 Noisemaker on a campus or at church
56 "Took you long enough!"
57 Kitchen tool that's handy when sifting flour
58 Flourished
59 Chimed in with
60 Meyers of late-night TV
61 Homer's neighbor on Evergreen Terrace
62 Softly throw

DOWN

1 First word of many phone conversations
2 White ingredient in pico de gallo
3 Streaker in the night sky
4 She-sheep
5 Canine or molar
6 2-Down, for one
7 Smooth and glossy
8 Accomplishes with a bit of underhandedness
9 Oodles
10 "S.N.L." alum Fey
11 Forecaster of the future
12 Package of paper
13 "Am I forgetting anything?"
14 Eats by candlelight, say
18 ___ of the community
20 Borrowed sum
24 Word that can follow liberal or martial
25 Storage tower on a farm
26 Pay attention to
27 Deeds
28 Opening that may be slightly wider than a quarter
29 Person who saves the day
31 Granola-bar bit
32 Double-dealing
33 Place of worship
36 Alter a photo, in a way
37 "___ all work out"
42 Events with heats
44 Screw driver?
46 Sir ___ Hercules John
47 Subdued, as a messy head of hair
48 Requirements
49 Fabled toymakers
50 Snow-day conveyance
51 Singer Streisand, to some fans
52 Competent
53 Plant's anchor
54 "The ___ of the Ancient Mariner" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge poem)
57 Took a load off

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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

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