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DRAWINGS *Benjamin Schwartz, José Arroyo, Ellis Rosen, Sarah Kempa, Kendra Allenby, Jeremy Nguyen, Roz Chast, Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby, Teresa Burns Parkhurst, Colin Tom, Emily Flake, Michael J. Johnson, Anjali Chandrashekar, Lars Kenseth, Seth Fleishman, Edward Steed* SPOTS *Natalia Ramos*

CONTRIBUTORS

Margaret Talbot ("*Behind a Locked Door,*" *p. 26*) has been a staff writer since 2004. Her latest book, with David Talbot, is "By the Light of Burning Dreams: The Triumphs and Tragedies of the Second American Revolution."

Manvir Singh ("*Red Shift,*" *p. 14*), an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of California, Davis, is at work on a book about shamanism.

Dorothea Lasky (*Poem, p. 49*) is the author of several books, including the poetry collection "The Shining."

Graham Swift (*Fiction, p. 54*) won the 1996 Booker Prize for "Last Orders." His most recent novel is "Here We Are."

Jennifer Wilson (*Books, p. 58*) is a contributing essayist for the *Times Book Review*.

Hilton Als (*On Stage, p. 74*), a staff writer, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He published "My Pinup" in November, 2022.

Sheelah Kolhatkar ("*The Parent Trap,*" *p. 44*) is a staff writer. She is the author of "Black Edge: Inside Information, Dirty Money, and the Quest to Bring Down the Most Wanted Man on Wall Street."

Amanda Petrusich (*The Talk of the Town, p. 10; "Digital Memory," p. 20*), a staff writer, is the author of "Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World's Rarest 78rpm Records."

Zach Helfand (*The Talk of the Town, p. 12*) is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff.

Megan Amram (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 19*) writes for television and film.

Forrest Gander (*Poem, p. 32*) is a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and translator. His novel poem "Mojave Ghost" will be published in 2024.

Ian Buruma (*Books, p. 66*), a professor at Bard College, is the author of, most recently, "The Collaborators."

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

THE WEEKEND ESSAY
Rachel Monroe wanted to understand Texas gun culture. So she learned how to shoot.

THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW
Molly Fischer talks with the activist Astra Taylor about her idea that insecurity is central to our modern plight.

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LEFT: MARK PETERSON / REDUX; RIGHT: HEATHER STEN / GUARDIAN / EYEVINE / REDUX

THE MAIL

EXISTING SOLUTIONS

Dana Goodyear's article about the scientist He Jiankui captured the terrifying potential of gene editing ("Dangerous Designs," September 11th). However, many of the problems that certain scientists are trying to remedy with the gene-editing tool CRISPR already have controversy-free solutions. Conditions such as Batten disease, caused when a baby inherits one pathogenic gene from each parent, can be prevented by preconception screenings of would-be parents. (If both parents are carriers, there are additional options to avoid having an affected child.) Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, which is inherited from one parent, can be averted using pre-implant genetic diagnosis, a common I.V.F. technique. Gene editing will eventually have a place in clinical medicine, but its use will likely be minimal, compared with these currently accessible, effective, and less buzzworthy techniques.

Gabriel Dabscheck
Melbourne, Australia

LEARNING FROM WHALES

Elizabeth Kolbert brilliantly highlights the formidable efforts that researchers are making to decode sperm whales' unique communication system ("Talk to Me," September 11th). But we should consider why we continue to target these creatures as stand-ins for some E.T.-like intelligence. Though sperm whales undeniably possess exceptional vocal capabilities, so do many other species in the animal kingdom; belugas and prairie dogs, for instance, also engage in complex communications that could potentially be processed with A.I. Is there some deeper symbolic meaning in trying to converse with sperm whales in particular? Although the pursuit of communication with this species is a remarkable scientific endeavor, it would behoove us to examine our own motivations when it comes to engaging with nonhuman intelligences.

Heather Woodson-Gammon
Sparks, Nev.

Kolbert states, "In theory at least, what goes for English (and Chinese and French) also goes for sperm whale." On the contrary, linguists and neuroscientists alike still hotly debate how language works in the human brain. Given that more than seven thousand languages are spoken across the globe, "linguistic universals"—or patterns that occur across all human languages—are notoriously hard to pin down, and the idea that they exist at all remains highly controversial. What goes for widely spoken languages such as Chinese, French, and English doesn't necessarily apply to other human languages, and it is even less likely to be relevant to interpreting whale communication.

Animal intelligence rightly deserves more attention and scientific inquiry. But treating a complex phenomenon such as whale clicks as nothing more than a "weird translation problem" to be solved by machine learning loses sight of what makes it interesting in the first place: it is a way to learn more about nonhuman intelligent life.

Jennifer Storozum
Cambridge, Mass.

Although I appreciate the work that David Gruber and Michael Bronstein are doing to learn more about our cetaceous kin, I disagree with the idea, seemingly implied by both men, that hearing from whales themselves is crucial to generating support for conservation issues. We don't need more evidence that animals, plants, and fungi deserve protection, regardless of whether they can speak to humans. We should not demand proof of intelligence on human terms before deciding whether or not a species is worth saving.

Natalie Levin
Clinton, N.Y.

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GOINGS ON

SEPTEMBER 27 – OCTOBER 3, 2023

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

This year's edition of the **New York Film Festival** offers a wide variety of international features, including Catherine Breillat's "Last Summer" and two new works by the prolific South Korean director Hong Sangsoo, as well as major films by such acclaimed Hollywood figures as Sofia Coppola ("Priscilla") and Michael Mann ("Ferrari"), and even a hybrid—the Greek director Yorgos Lanthimos's "Poor Things," starring Emma Stone. There are also a few American independent films; one of them, "All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt" (pictured), the first feature by Raven Jackson, is among the most impressive recent directorial débuts. It's a historical drama with the power of legend, centered on the tragic small-town romance of a young couple in nineteen-seventies Mississippi.—*Richard Brody (Lincoln Center; Sept. 29-Oct. 15.)*

COURTESY A24

ABOUT TOWN

THEATRE | **"Prometheus Firebringer"** is a battle royale over how to create (apparent) meaning: in one corner, the theatre-maker Annie Dorsen lectures on the tragic dimensions of the ChatGPT-pocalypse; in the other, empty masks drone an A.I.-generated script for a lost Aeschylus play. Dorsen's human-fashioned speech consists of quotes by others (she provides attributions on a screen), whereas the A.I. language model composes doggerel via predictive text. Which do we prefer? Dorsen weights her gloves: the computer voices speak in a mind-numbing singsong; she is warm and thrilling. But her victory still counts. With phrases borrowed from the philosopher Bernard Stiegler, old Twitter posts, and even a guide for theatre students ("There is such a thing as a 'bad choice' "), she predicts the rise of the soulless art product—and handily demonstrates its defeat.—*Helen Shaw (Polonsky Shakespeare Center; through Oct. 1.)*

DANCE | In the twenty years of City Center's **Fall for Dance Festival,** the ticket price has inched up alongside inflation. But twenty-dollar seats still qualify the event as a populist endeavor. The idea, from the start, was to lower the bar to entry and organize sampler programs, with a scattering of stars and premières, on the variety-show principle of "You may not love this, but how about that?" This year's five programs are typical both in the mix of genres (contemporary, hula, hip-hop) and in the jumbling of the reliable, the worrisome, and the wild-card. Among the dependable are the moonlighting ballet star Sara Mearns, the Odissi expert Bijayini Satpathy, and the tap dancers Caleb Teicher and Michelle Dorrance.—*Brian Seibert (New York City Center; Sept. 27-Oct. 8.)*

ART | The nineteen-nineties are over in "Fold Me," a hypnotically glum exhibition of the photographer **Wolfgang Tillmans's** recent portraits, cityscapes, and still-lifes. The seedy glamour of his early work, which brought him fame in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, is gone. Seediness alone dominates. Locations from Shenzhen to South Dakota are suffused with the same grayish haze, and even a video projection of Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky (Tillmans has a thing for astronomy), looks a tad faded. But every so often a proud face or a glowing building reminds you that this isn't such a bad time to be alive—and that, someday, people may miss the seediness of the twenty-twenties.—*Jackson Arn (Zwirner gallery; through Oct. 14.)*

CLASSICAL MUSIC | When the violinist **Joshua Bell** came up with the idea for the new orchestral suite **"The Elements,"** which he performs with the **New York Philharmonic,** he found inspiration in a piece so obvious that it often escapes attention: Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons." Bell has commissioned five composers to depict earth (Kevin Puts), water (Edgar Meyer), fire (Jake Heggie), air (Jennifer Higdon), and, in a bit of twenty-first-century revisionism, space (Jessie Montgomery). Surfacing themes of destruction and rebirth, the composers delve into our uneasy relationship with the natural world.—*Oussama Zahr (David Geffen Hall; Sept. 29-Oct. 1.)*

FOLK POP | In April, the folk-pop singer-songwriter **Joy Oladokun** expanded her scope with "Proof of Life," a fortifying album about staying the course which straddles country, indie rock, and rap. Since 2016, she has been making subdued music about personal reckoning. Her previous record, "In Defense of My Own Happiness," gathered heartrending dispatches from her Arizona upbringing as a queer Black child of immigrants who flees the church to nurture her creative identity. "Proof of Life" has a similar intimacy, but its music is more robust and Oladokun's voice is more resonant. The album seeks solidarity with others who have been marginalized in subtle songs about class struggle and revolution. With her story out in the open, Oladokun seems ready to speak up for all the rest.—*Sheldon Pearce (Irving Plaza; Oct. 2.)*

MOVIES | In Jonathan Demme's fiction features, the late director spotlighted the complex interactions of his ensemble casts, and he deploys the same artistry in the 1984 documentary **"Stop Making Sense,"** his celebratory concert film chronicling a series of Talking Heads shows, now rereleased in a new restoration. The film opens with the band's front man, David Byrne, playing solo, but the concert only comes alive when he's joined by the bassist Tina Weymouth. As the other two original members come onstage, followed by a quintet of recent recruits (including the P-Funk co-founder Bernie Worrell), Talking Heads becomes a jam band centered on Byrne's inspired and antic mannerisms, and Demme finds ever more incisive camera angles to display the musicians' exuberant connections.—*Richard Brody (In limited release.)*

TABLES FOR TWO

Instant Noodle Factory
24-11 41st Ave., Queens

For most Americans, instant noodles might be the antithesis of restaurant food: the cheapest of cheap eats, the culinary domain of the broke and the dorm-dwelling. This opinion is decidedly not universal, particularly in Asian countries, where instant noodles are a foundation upon which to build a glorious meal. Tat Lee and Cierra Beck, a couple whose relationship began over a shared love of instant noodles, drew on this more expansive vision when conceiving Instant Noodle Factory, in Long Island City. They were inspired by Lee's childhood in Hong Kong, where extravagantly gussied-up instant noodles are a popular street-vender breakfast, and by Korea's D.I.Y. instant-noodle shops, where customers choose a package, select toppings from a vast buffet, cook the whole thing on-site, and then sit to devour it. What Lee and Beck have created is a hybrid of an automat, an art gallery, and a surprisingly cute dystopian future.

Upon entering Instant Noodle Factory, you are greeted by an illustrated mural of soup—combos of noodles (store-bought) and toppings (fresh), such as birria ramen, made with Kang Shi Fu braised-beef noodle soup, topped with brisket, jalapeños, and corn, or a vegan *soondubu* (Korean tofu stew) of veggie-flavored Nongshim Soon, dressed with silken tofu, shiitakes, hot peppers, and scallions. To the right is "The Wall of Ramen": a massive visual menu of the hundred and fifteen varieties available, each package affixed to the wall and labelled with its country of origin, like a museum display.

There are employees at Instant Noodle Factory, but, like the Wizard of Oz, they try to remain behind the curtain, emerging only to deliver orders: a paper bowl of dry noodles, along with any toppings that might benefit from being heated and ingredients to be added later. Place the noodles beneath the nozzle of a jaunty Korean machine that dispenses near-boiling water, wait a few minutes, and your concoction is ready.

The air in the restaurant has that familiar packaged-noodle smell—the seaside dosed with MSG—so it's something of a revelation that adding great ingredients is a reliable path to greatness. The roast beef that tops a bowl of *ramdon* (spicy-seafood Neoguri and black-bean Chapagetti mixed together, à la the film "Parasite") is unctuously tender. Elegant, paper-thin slices of *chashu*, Japanese-style braised pork belly, join a perfectly jammy soft-boiled egg and ultra-premium Nissin Raoh noodles in a tonkotsu broth—an experience uncannily close to high-end restaurant ramen. The kimchi is tart and funky; the air-fried Spam is crisp and salty; the Sichuan chili oil is fiery and numbing, a profound experience of *mala*. Skip dessert and buy some packages to take home, so you can go wild with toppings in your own kitchen, elevating instant noodles from quotidian to sublime. *(Noodle soups start at $3.25.)*

—Helen Rosner

PHOTOGRAPH BY HEAMI LEE FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRISTOPH NIEMANN (TOP); CHUAN MING ONG (BOTTOM)

PICK THREE

The staff writer Alex Ross shares his current obsessions.

1. Recently, in London, I called on the ninety-eight-year-old cellist, author, and Holocaust survivor **Anita Lasker-Wallfisch,** one of the most remarkable people alive. Born to a well-to-do German Jewish family, Lasker-Wallfisch was sent, at eighteen, to Auschwitz, where she played in the women's orchestra under the direction of Alma Rosé, Mahler's niece—an experience she's recounted in a video for the U.S.C. Shoah Foundation and in her memoir, "Inherit the Truth." Her intellect and wit are undiminished; her moral authority is overpowering.

2. Like many cinephiles, I've been celebrating the rescue of the TCM channel from corporate ruin. Where else could you find **"Two Sisters from Boston,"** a 1946 Henry Koster comedy that pairs Jimmy Durante with the incomparable Danish tenor Lauritz Melchior? It's set in the pioneer days of the recording industry; in one scene, Melchior, playing a buffoonish version of himself, records the Prize Song from Wagner's "Meistersinger," with string players swarming toward the horn to be audible over the tenor's imperious tones. This, indeed, is how it was done.

3. Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers, a monument of sacred music, has received many distinguished recordings, but a new rendition by **Raphaël Pichon** and the **Pygmalion** ensemble, from Harmonia Mundi, may outdo them all in gloriousness, sensuousness, and depth of feeling. The opening fanfares unfold like a mountain sunrise; the syncopations of "Lauda Jerusalem" are a divine dance; "Sancta Maria," interpolated from another Monteverdi work, gently pounds the heart. This is likely to be my album of the year.

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THE NEW YORKER

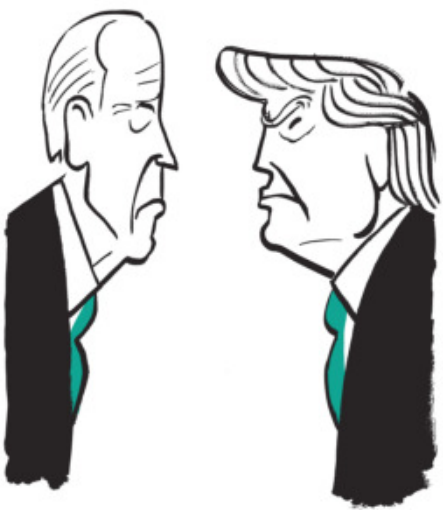
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
THIS OLD MAN

In a declining society, the images of an aging leadership can come to embody a general sense of withering and decay. A civic nightmare becomes the caricaturist's dream. In Moscow, the late nineteen-seventies and early eighties was the era known as *zastoi*, the time of stagnation. Leonid Brezhnev, the Communist Party's longtime General Secretary until his death, in 1982, suffered from arteriosclerosis and an alarming dependence on sleeping pills; ordinary Soviets, in the privacy of their kitchens, mocked his inability to speak a clear sentence. Brezhnev's successor, Yuri Andropov, was stricken by kidney failure shortly after taking office and lasted fifteen months. The Kremlin H.R. department promoted Konstantin Chernenko, an unsteady chain-smoker in his eighth decade. His emphysema was so acute that he could not climb the steps to the Lenin Mausoleum. Soon, he was often working from the hospital. In February, 1985, a large room there was remodelled so that television viewers could watch him casting his ballot at his "local polling station." Two weeks later, Chernenko was dead.

Is the United States in the midst of its own *zastoi*? Are we a teetering democracy of gerontocrats? The polls show that much of the American electorate fears just that. Cautionary tales abound: Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, age eighty-one, standing frozen before the cameras, unable to speak, evidently suffering the aftereffects of a fall; Senator Dianne Feinstein, age ninety, evidently confused in hearings and interviews. Nancy Pelosi, rather than returning home to San Francisco with a justified sense of triumph, is running. Again. Even those who admired Ruth Bader Ginsburg deeply must admit that her decision to gamble on her fragile health and the Hillary Clinton campaign could not have been costlier.

Joe Biden—in part because of the immense divisions in American politics, in part because of his failure to match the proficiency of his Administration with an inspiring fluency at the microphone—is struggling. If Biden, who will be eighty-one in November, were ten or fifteen years younger, he might well have a clear glide path to reëlection. But he is not, and he does not. In polls from the A.P.-NORC Center, the *Wall Street Journal*, and CNN, more than seventy per cent of respondents suggested that Biden is too old to be effective in a second term. According to a CBS News/YouGov poll released last week, only thirty-four per cent of registered voters believe that Biden would complete a second term; the number for Donald Trump, who is just three years younger, is fifty-five per cent.



The logic for Biden's reëlection bid is plain. He emerged from a highly competitive Democratic field in 2020 and went on to beat Trump, who now faces an array of indictments. As President, Biden can claim significant successes: jobs created; inflation diminished; a pandemic under control; the passage of major environmental and infrastructure legislation; the mobilization of NATO to defend Ukraine. He should be capable of defeating Trump again and of making further gains on many more issues, from income inequality to the climate crisis. Besides, the actuarial charts tell us that Americans in Biden's demographic who reach eighty in reasonable health will likely reach ninety, too.

Nonetheless, many Democrats dream of another option. Recently, David Ignatius, a columnist for the Washington *Post* who is wired into the D.C. establishment, joined the ranks of concerned voices calling on Biden to step aside. Others have called for younger candidates to join the race. Yet the modern history of primary challenges to an incumbent is not encouraging. Ronald Reagan's run against Gerald Ford, in 1976, weakened Ford in the general election against Jimmy Carter. Edward Kennedy's challenge to Carter, four

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

years later—no matter how bumbling—could only have further diminished Carter's already slim chances for reëlection. In the past seven decades, in fact, strong primary challenges to an incumbent have always preceded a loss of the White House. The specific quandary posed by Biden's Vice-President, Kamala Harris, is that her polling numbers are worse than Biden's, and she performed poorly in the Democratic Presidential primaries in 2020.

Then, there's the "compared with what?" factor. Trump's general malevolence sometimes obscures his incoherence. Trump recently made an appearance in which—even as he was calling Biden "cognitively impaired"—he suggested that we were headed toward "World War Two." He also seemed to suggest that he had beaten Barack Obama in 2016, and was leading him now in the polls. Yet somehow Trump's bile reads to his supporters as vitality.

Last week, Trump used the occasion of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, to send out this winning message on social media: "Just a quick reminder for liberal Jews who voted to destroy America & Israel because you believed false narratives! Let's hope you learned from your mistake & make better choices moving forward!" Trump supporters see no evidence here of cognitive or moral deficits; it's just Trump being Trump. The reaction was different when, at a press conference in Hanoi, Biden, in his now sandpapery voice, slipped in an obscure movie reference and fumbled with his notes.

A double standard? No doubt. But the prospect of a Presidential election as a contest of the ancients is not a heartening one, and the anxieties it provokes cannot be dismissed as ageism. What are younger people, especially, to make of a political culture in which incumbents cling so tenaciously to their seats? The median age for senators is now around sixty-five. Mitt Romney, announcing his retirement, at the age of seventy-six, wasn't wrong to declare that it is time for a new generation of leaders to take the helm.

And yet voting is often a matter of choosing among highly constrained choices. The portrait of Biden that emerges from Franklin Foer's new book, "The Last Politician," isn't always flattering, but it makes plain that Biden is the one calling the shots in this Administration. Unlike the Eastern Bloc gerontocracies of the *zastoi* era, there's nothing ossified about its approach to politics. In the 2020 primaries, Democratic voters picked Biden by a sizable margin; he has not, amazingly enough, grown any younger since. The real menace isn't posed by an elderly pol intent on protecting and renewing a democratic republic; it's posed by a chaos agent who fomented insurrection and promises to return America to a state of misery.

—David Remnick

THE MUSICAL LIFE

ARTIFACTS

Joan Baez was in a corner banquette at the Russian Tea Room the other day, plucking finger sandwiches from a tiered serving dish. "Joan Baez: I Am a Noise," a deep and meditative documentary about the eighty-two-year-old singer's life and work, will première in New York next month. The film features a bounty of archival material, including cassette recordings in which a young Baez narrates her experiences in the civil-rights movement and the folk revival. The tapes were found in a storage unit that Baez had turned over to the filmmakers Miri Navasky, Maeve O'Boyle, and Karen O'Connor seven years ago. "The big act of total trust was just giving them the key," Baez said. "I really thought it was lampshades and old plates. I didn't know that my father and mother kept everything. All the tapes I'd ever sent them, all the letters I'd ever written, all the drawings."

The film is a meditation on both the fallibility and the power of memory. As a child, Baez suffered panic attacks and extreme anxiety, which she later came to attribute, in part, to abuse by her father, a physicist. Her recollection of the trauma is hazy and fragmented, more feeling than narrative. She began discussing it with a therapist at the suggestion of her sister, Mimi Fariña, who, Baez said, had an "intuitive sense" that something ghastly had happened in the family. Baez made peace with not knowing the particulars. "I have no proof," she said, pouring tea. "I have no interest in trying to prove it. It's not provable. If twenty per cent of what I remember happening took place, that's enough."

The abuse revelation would be enough to anchor a less poetic film, but "I Am a Noise" also includes a frank discussion of Baez's romantic and creative relationships, including with Bob Dylan, whom she met in the early sixties, when she was already a star and he was an awkward upstart with a funny voice. The courtship fizzled by 1965, at which point Dylan's career had begun to accelerate. "He needed a mother, he needed someone to give him a bath, he needed someone to sing his songs," she says in the film.

Baez has made peace with that experience, too. A large portrait of Dylan, painted by Baez in 2018, can be seen hanging on the wall of her living room in Woodside, California, over a piano. "Whatever I've just painted, I put up there," she said. "The day they were filming, Dylan was watching. I call him Ol' Happy Face." In 1968, Baez married the activist David Harris; she gave birth to a son, Gabriel, in 1969, while

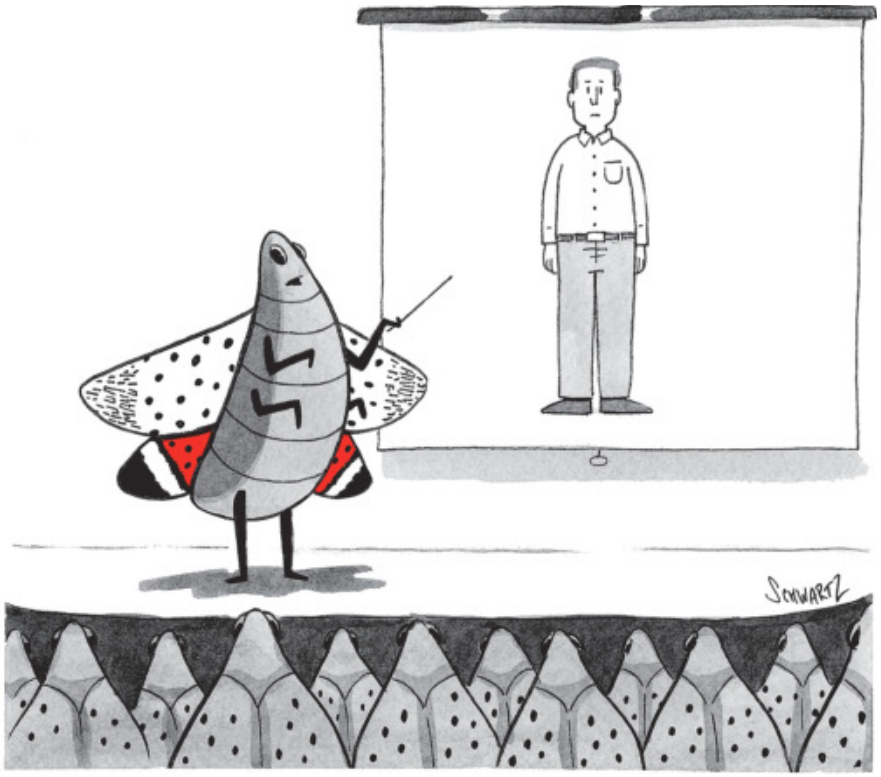
Joan Baez

Harris was serving twenty months in federal prison for refusing to report for military duty. They divorced in 1973. Baez never fell in love again after that. "I remember my therapist trying to get me to take the next step, which was being open to finding a partner," she recalled. "I said, 'I've worked too hard to get to where I have peace of mind. Why fuck it up?'"

She has found rewatching the documentary to be strangely edifying. "It's true, the film," she said. "There's nothing fake about it. It gets more difficult, in a way, because, each time, I see more of the depth of Gabe's sorrow when he was little." She paused, thinking about the years of trying to balance being a mother and being on the road. "It was pretty fucking complicated. When he was younger, it was tense. That was really my inability to just be with him, to be content and enjoy him. Those are the moments that I miss."

She is proud of the film, but she doesn't have any plans to continue poking at her past. Asked what might happen to the rest of the storage unit's personal contents, she said, "I'm probably going to have a bonfire. My assistant, Nancy, was sitting next to me saying, 'Well, the Smithsonian might want this,' and I said, 'Nancy, I don't give a fuck, just throw it over the cliff.' I've heard all I want to know."

—Amanda Petrusich



"They're an invasive species that will destroy the environment if left unchecked."

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DEPT. OF PROGNOSTICATION
STORM SCOOP

On a recent Thursday, a hurricane was tracking toward the general vicinity of Boston. How dire was it? Headlines varied from "Hurricane Lee to Peak in the Boston Area Around 6 A.M. Saturday" (the *Globe*) to "Worst of Hurricane Lee to Miss Boston" (the *Herald*). What's with all the confusion?

"This entire system"—the information gathered from ocean buoys, ground-based radar, weather stations, aircraft, satellites, and weather balloons—"has been predominantly done by government agencies," Rei Goffer, a founder of the Boston-based weather-intelligence company Tomorrow.io, said, a few hours before the duelling newspaper reports. Everyone, it seems, swears by a weather app (one year's AccuWeather craze is the next's Dark Sky mania), but they all rely on the same limited info. "The Weather Company? Your iPhone? These are solely repackaging governmental data," Goffer said. "They don't really contribute anything to the effort."

Earlier this year, in the spirit of contribution, Tomorrow sent two test weather-radar satellites into orbit on SpaceX Falcon 9s. The company is now planning to send a combination of radar and microwave sounders—twenty-eight in all—into space, to monitor most of the Earth every hour, instead of once every three days, which is the current rate for the radar aboard NASA's billion-dollar Global Precipitation Measurement Core Observatory. Goffer pointed out that much of the globe isn't covered at all by ground-based weather radar. "Those types of forecasts are almost as good as a toss of the coins!" he said. Tomorrow claims that its forecasts are thirty-eight per cent better than everyone else's, thanks to an artificial intelligence that the company has nicknamed Gale.

Tomorrow already offers boutique weather services to clients including JetBlue, Delta, Uber, the N.F.L., Porsche, Ford, Tesla, Live Nation, Denny's, and the city of Hoboken. The company consults on questions like whether to promote ice cream or hot chocolate on a drive-through menu, when to expect employees to call in sick because the weather is too bad (or too good), and whether a singer can go onstage without getting struck by lightning. The U.S. Open uses Tomorrow to decide whether to keep its stadium roofs open. The company charges business customers as much as seven figures. (It also offers a free consumer app that tells you when it's a good time to take your dog for a walk.)

Goffer, who is thirty-eight and has a scruffy beard, was on Zoom from Tel Aviv, where he lives. He was checking the news while fielding texts from

friends in Boston seeking the storm scoop. "I tell them, 'Use our app,'" he said. He declined to make his own predictions. "As far as safety and lifesaving weather alerts, the source is the government," he said. The National Weather Service had just issued a warning of "significant threat to life or property" and a directive to "take action within the next hour." Tomorrow's app said that it was seventy-four degrees and sunny.

The following day, the governor, Maura Healey, declared a state of emergency and activated the National Guard. At the company's office in Bourne, outside Boston, no one seemed concerned. "Hurricane Lee? No, not for us," James Carswell, who helped design the technology for Tomorrow's radar satellites, said.

Carswell, who is fifty-five, wore a light-blue polo shirt and braided bracelets. In his office, a whiteboard filled with enigmatic scribbles bore a sign that read "Caution Do Not Erase." He's the type of weather guy who flies in hurricane-chasing aircraft. "I probably have over one thousand hours in the actual storms," Carswell said, adding, "These larger hurricanes, you need information over the entire globe, and technology hasn't been there. The cost of going to space was just too expensive."

Another issue that Tomorrow is trying to fix? The weather is often unintelligible. "A forecast will say, 'Twenty-per-cent chance of rain, high winds across the state of New York,'" Dan Slagen, Tomorrow's chief marketing officer, said. "Weather intelligence will say, 'Stop the trains at mile marker twenty-seven, Thursday, at one o'clock.'" He said that a rep from one company told him, "I'd rather have one wrong forecast than multiple forecasts."

Slagen and Carswell strolled down the hall and into a laboratory. "This was our original prototype of our Pathfinder radar system that's up in space right now," Carswell said, pointing to what looked like an R2-D2 autopsy. He said that the satellites for the next launch were the size of dorm-room fridges.

Outside, the weather was gloomy but not apocalyptic. (The storm did, ultimately, stay out in the Atlantic, before making landfall in Nova Scotia.) Was it hubris to think that we mortals could predict the future? "Weather is very chaotic," Carswell said. "We always say, 'Wait an hour in New England and it's going to be different.'"

—Laura Lane

THE BOARDS

SPOOKY

The actor Patrick Page was recently polishing up his one-man play, "All the Devils Are Here," about Shakespeare's villains. He wanted some props. Someone suggested a costume shop a few blocks from the theatre, off Union Square. He walked into the store: spikes, leather, whips. Kinky stuff. "This is my kind of place!" he said, laughing.

Page often plays villains and antiheroes—Lear, Richard III, Claudius, Brutus, Green Goblin, Grinch, Scar, Scrooge—roles that go to men of a certain vocal register; Page is a bass. Onstage, at least, people rarely want their bogeymen to sound like Ron DeSantis. It's a specialized market. "There's the same five guys up for every role," Page said. "We all like each other!" The roles also require a certain allure. "Ted Bundy had trouble getting girls—until he was a serial killer," Page said, near some thigh-high boots. "Same with Richard Ramirez, the Night Stalker. He had groupies after groupies." One person who saw Page as Hades in "Hadestown" described the audience as "scared AND horny."

Patrick Page

Page, who is lean and muscly, was wearing all black. He wandered toward a wall display of skulls. "I always have a skull in my dressing room," he said. "I kept hinting to people that I wanted one, and nobody picked up on it. I think it's a little too, you know, provocative to give as a gift. So I bought one for myself."

What makes a villain? Page said there are the complicated cases—Shylock, Lindsey Graham—and then there are the crazies. Before playing Iago, he studied psychopaths. "The most generous numbers in terms of psychopathy are one in twenty-five," he said. "It's terrifying, isn't it? I do a thing in my show where I go through the psychopath checklist, which Dr. Robert Hare created, in 1972. Iago ticks every box. It's very, very hard to tick every box." What about some modern-day villains? George Santos? "Ticks some of the boxes," Page said. Putin? "Ticks all of the boxes."

Page eyed some masks with horns, but there was nothing he could use. He decided to try a more family-friendly shop nearby. A Grinch mannequin hung from the ceiling. "I was obsessed with the Grinch when I was little!" he said. "The Grinch is a misanthrope who's been excluded up there on Mt. Crumpit by the Whos down below. And I felt him, man. I *was* that kid."

Page grew up in Oregon. He had depression at a young age. He was into magic. "I did Houdini's metamorphosis, I did levitation, I did what's called the zigzag girl, which is cutting a girl in three parts. I did the Indian sword basket," he said. "Now I mainly do mind reading and mentalism." He loved vampires. "I had my dad build me a coffin," he said. "My intention was to sleep in it, just for fun. Of course, it's not comfortable. It was plywood. So then I went to him and I said, 'Could you put in purple velvet?' Because Barnabas Collins in 'Dark Shadows' had purple velvet. He declined." The Pages put the coffin to use on road trips, as extra luggage

storage, lashed atop their Ford Pinto.

A tiny dog scurried by. Page sat on the floor. "Hi, baby!" he squealed. "We have a beautiful little Maltese named Georgie," he said. Keegan-Michael Key, who worked with Page on the TV show "Schmigadoon!" (Page played Octavius Kratt, a sinister businessman), liked to impersonate his Darth Vader-ish voice on set, exhorting the tiny dog, "*Let's go poopie, Georgie!*"

Page tried on a half-transparent mask. "It's when the human face comes through that it's creepiest," he said. He picked up a pair of dragon-claw gloves. "I could use some of this shit in my show," he said. He took a picture in the mirror and made his way back toward the theatre. By the park, he stopped at a hot-dog stand. He ordered two Cokes ("I'm thirsty," he said), plus a dog with mustard and sauerkraut. "I had the most terrifying experience last night," he said, between bites. His e-mail was hacked. "So I check my bank account. It's been cleared out. All the money I saved for the last thirty years. So I'm *freaking* out." He continued, "It was a spiritual moment for me. Because I'm sixty-one years old. And it's all gone. And I'm, like, O.K., it really sucks, but it's just money. We're gonna have to sell the apartment, but we'll be O.K."

He sent a panicked text to his wife, Paige (she uses her own last name, Davis), and, after a half hour, she had sorted it out. His money was safe; the hack had sent him to a dummy Web site. "It's a fake page that they made to give people heart attacks," he said. Why? He shrugged. "Evil."

—Zach Helfand

FLOWER POWER
BETWEEN THE CRACKS

Among New York's official state emblems are yogurt, the apple muffin, the snapping turtle, milk from cows (but not from oats or almonds), and the rose, which, in 1891, was the favorite of a group of schoolchildren to be the state's official flower. The rose is also, thanks to Ronald Reagan, the official flower of the nation, but not the official flower of New York City, which was decreed the daffodil, in a short speech by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, on a spring day in 2007. "Just because they liked something, now it's our 'city flower,'" Marielle Anzelone, a former Parks Department employee and a self-described "disgruntled botanist," said the other day. Daffodils (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*) were chosen because of their connection to an initiative memorializing September 11th victims. "To caterpillars, daffodils are like plastic pink flamingos! They're completely meaningless," Anzelone said. "I like daffodils, too—to be clear, I'm a really big fan—but at an ecological level they're problematic."

On a recent Thursday, Anzelone visited Inwood Hill Park, in Manhattan, to discuss daffodil alternatives—flowering fruit trees, tick-infested tall grasses, weeds sprouting from the sidewalk. (Emerson described a weed as "a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered.") Native plants provide a habitat for the caterpillars, butterflies, and other bugs that make the city's nature natural. At around four o'clock, Anzelone approached a man who appeared to be living in a van parked in the shade of a *Quercus palustris* and told him, "I'm organizing a campaign for New Yorkers to vote for an official wildflower!" She had winnowed the candidates down to five flowers in the five boroughs, in advance of Election Day, in November, when she will tally up the online votes and present them to the City Council, which she hopes will anoint an official city wildflower. The man nodded and said, "You should make some flyers or something."

A campaign event was already under way nearby. Representatives from a few boroughs had convened for a nature walk, to allow citizens to stump for the wildflowers they'd nominated. The candidates: wild columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*, of Brooklyn), pinxter azalea (*Rhododendron periclymenoides*, of Staten Island), spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*, of the Bronx), butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*, of Manhattan), and the giant sunflower (*Helianthus giganteus*, of Queens). Anzelone, who wore blue shorts and a white blouse, said, "A wildflower is just an angiosperm." In other words, "If it grows in the wild and flowers, then it's a wildflower!"

"Trees can be wildflowers," Jamie Boyer, a spicebush partisan and an employee of the New York Botanical Garden, said. "My shrub is a wildflower."

The walk commenced. Bark was admired, foliage smelled, licked, and chewed. ("Is your mouth a little numb?" Evie Hantzopoulos, of the Queens Botanical Garden, asked, after Boyer encouraged the group to eat some *Sassafras albidum*.) Manhattan's representative was conjured via FaceTime. Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) was unsuccessfully avoided, and trash (*quisquiliae*) was spotted amid the trees. As the walk concluded, someone shouted, "Civilization!"

Later, near some teens getting stoned on a bench, stump speeches were made. Staten Island's spokeswoman was absent, so Anzelone offered an unrehearsed pitch: "I grew up in New Jersey, where a lot of people have azaleas planted, so there's that!"

Manhattan: "Butterfly milkweed is the perfect New Yorker! It's tough and it plays well with others. It's brash and bright orange and provides a lot of health to pollinators!"

Brooklyn: "Eastern columbine has five separate petals, which, I feel, speaks to the unison of the five boroughs."

The Bronx: "Spicebush plays an incredibly important role in a forest, like the one New York City would have looked like back in the sixteenhundreds, which would have been dominated by tons of spicebush, in the understory."

Queens: "There's the physical properties of the plant"—the giant sunflower—"and there's also the symbolism behind it. Physically, it grows to super-enormous heights. It's a great pollinator for bees. Birds love it, creatures love it, and people love it. Who doesn't love a sunflower? They're happy. Positivity! They follow the sun. They *love* the sun. But they also symbolize things in different cultures: longevity, adoration, good luck, good fortune, hope, optimism." A pause. "And they can grow between the cracks."

—Adam Iscoe

ANNALS OF GASTRONOMY

RED SHIFT

Is an all-meat diet what nature intended?

BY MANVIR SINGH

"Meatfluencers" claim that the solutions to our problems can be found in our past.

In August, 2021, a new, shirtless figure appeared on Instagram and TikTok. With a great shaggy beard and muscles the approximate size and color of ripe pumpkins, he was part cowboy, part Conan the Barbarian. "I'm Brian Johnson," he said in his third Instagram video. "My family and tribe call me Liver King." He is the owner of Ancestral Supplements—which sells desiccated organ meat in capsule form—and a walking marketing campaign.

Within eight months, the Liver King had amassed a million and a half followers on Instagram and nearly three million on TikTok. He was mellow at first, but he embraced the new persona, growing crasser and more meme-worthy, and less clothed. (On a podcast in March, 2022, he said that the Liver King "broke out of his cage, and he fucking ate Brian Johnson.") Most of his videos centered on eating meat, lifting heavy stuff, and doing punishing, unorthodox workouts. His body, he said, was all natural, the product not of steroids but of exercise and eating animals.

The Liver King's premise, a familiar one by now, is that we are mismatched with the modern world and that many of our problems can be solved by reconnecting with long-lost ways. He insists on nine ancestral tenets. These include reasonable suggestions like "sleep," "move," and "bond," but, as he once explained, "if I tell you all nine, you don't remember anything." Instead, he boiled his recommendations down to one: "I say, 'Eat liver, because liver is king.'" The best-selling, stand-alone product on ancestralsupplements.com is Grassfed Beef Liver.

The craze for eating the way our ancestors did is nothing new; it has been more than two decades since the exercise physiologist Loren Cordain published "The Paleo Diet: Lose Weight and Get Healthy by Eating the Food You Were Designed to Eat" (2001), helping launch a billion-dollar industry. But the Liver King, along with a crew of other "meatfluencers," has pushed paleo to an extreme of carnivory. They maintain that humans evolved to kill animals similar in size and constitution to domesticated cattle, to devour their organs (often raw), and to eat vegetables only in the most desperate of circumstances.

"Forget the leaves and fibrous tubers, we're going hunting!" Paul Saladino (IG followers: 1.6M) writes in "The Carnivore Code," the closest thing the new movement has to a manifesto. He asserts that "this approach appears to be *exactly* what our ancestors did." (Saladino co-owns a supplement company, Heart & Soil, with the Liver King.) According to "The Carnivore Code," plants are poison—they don't want to be eaten, and have, as a result, evolved defensive chemicals designed to disrupt your digestion. Likewise, in "The Carnivore Diet," Shawn Baker (IG followers: 319K) says that the most efficient way proto-humans got protein and calories was "to take down a big, fatty, energy-filled megafaunal animal." They may have nibbled on the occasional fruit or nut, he admits, but the time and energy needed to get the same payoff would have been "greater by at least an order of magnitude." The Liver King himself came up with the pithiest tagline: "Why eat vegetables when you can eat testicles?"

The notion of the meat-loving ancestor has a history. In the nineteen-fifties, the anatomist Raymond Dart, famous for discovering the first authentic fossil of an early African hominin, advanced what became known as the "killer ape" theory. Hunting, Dart

PHOTOGRAPH BY KELSEY McCLELLAN

thought, made us human. Our furry forebears climbed down from the trees to gorge on "the more attractive fleshy food that lay in the vast savannahs of the southern plains," he wrote in the book "Adventures with the Missing Link" (1959). Elsewhere, he described the earliest hominins as "confirmed killers: carnivorous creatures that seized their quarries by violence, battered them to death, tore apart their broken bodies, dismembered them limb from limb, slaking their ravenous thirst with the hot blood of victims and greedily devouring livid writhing flesh."

The killer-ape theory seeped into the mainstream. In 1955, Dart, then based at the University of the Witwatersrand, met the playwright Robert Ardrey, who was in South Africa for a reporting trip. Like a convert seeing the holy truth, Ardrey came away transformed. He was convinced that "the predatory transition" not only made us human but also explained what he described as "man's bloody history, his eternal aggression, his irrational, self-destroying inexorable pursuit of death for death's sake." Ardrey was inspired to write the "Nature of Man" series, a set of books about human nature and evolution, published between 1961 and 1976. *Time* later named "African Genesis," the first in the series, the most notable nonfiction book of the sixties. It was cited as an influence on Stanley Kubrick's film "2001: A Space Odyssey" (1968), whose opening sequence showed primate violence as a turning point in the development of our species.

As Ardrey and Kubrick popularized the killer ape, anthropologists started to review the evidence. In 1966, at a meeting remembered in anthropological lore as the beginning of hunter-gatherer studies, seventy-five experts assembled in Chicago to synthesize our knowledge about foraging peoples. More than ninety-nine per cent of human history was spent without agriculture, the organizers figured, so it was worth documenting that way of life before it disappeared altogether. The symposium—and an associated volume that appeared two years later, both titled "Man the Hunter"—exemplified an obsession with hunting, meat-eating, and maleness. "Man" was meant to cover all humans; "hunter" was shorthand for anyone who subsisted on wild food. The book devoted an entire section to the role of hunting in human evolution. "Hunting is the master behavior pattern of the human species," a chapter began. "It is the organizing activity which integrated the morphological, physiological, genetic, and intellectual aspects of the individual human organisms and of the population who compose our single species."

The meeting also revealed problems with the meat-centric story. Dart had asserted that "all prehistoric men and the most primitive of living human beings are hunters, i.e., flesh eaters." But contributors to "Man the Hunter" showed how one-sided this perspective was. The anthropologist Richard Lee reported that the !Kung, one of the so-called Bushman people of Southern Africa, got two-thirds of their calories from plants. Nor were they an exception. When he compared fifty-eight foraging societies from around the world, Lee found that half got the majority of their calories from plant foods; another eighteen relied mostly on fishing. Only eleven—less than a fifth—relied on hunting as their primary means of subsistence, and all but one were limited to either the highest or the lowest latitudes, far beyond our African homeland.

Since the publication of "Man the Hunter," scientists have incorporated genomic as well as new archeological and paleontological methods into the study of diets from deep history. "The details differ and it's easy to get lost in the weeds, but the overarching message from each is clear: we evolved as opportunistic omnivores," Herman Pontzer, an evolutionary anthropologist at Duke University, writes in his recent book, "Burn." It includes a takedown of paleo-style tropes, including carnivory. "Humans eat whatever's available, which is almost always a mix of plants and animals (and honey)."

Pontzer shows just how far the consensus has shifted. Dart had insisted that *Australopithecus*, an early group of human ancestors, gulped down blood and guts, and yet scratch patterns on their molars suggest that they were lovers of tubers. Our more recent forebears ate plants, too, including ones vilified by paleo advocates. Consider Neanderthal diets, which Rebecca Wragg Sykes covers in vivid detail in "Kindred: Neanderthal Life, Love, Death and Art." Neanderthals certainly ate big beasts; sites are filled with the bones of butchered bison and red deer—there are even indications that they took down mammoths. Yet Neanderthals living in warm, wet environs had tooth-wear patterns similar to those of agricultural peoples who eat lots of fibrous plants. Further evidence has come from investigating Neanderthals' dental calculus—that is, from probing their plaque. Shortly before he died, an individual known as Shanidar 3 consumed dates, a lentil-like plant, and an unidentified tuber or root. The remains of two adults found in Belgium had traces of grasses and water-lily-root starches, suggesting that they had foraged for plant food. A sample from El Sidrón, in Spain, had no large-mammal DNA, but it turned up matches for pine, mushroom, and moss. Scattered morsels of prehistoric diets reveal an enduring taste for veggies.

No controlled studies have been published that validate the extravagant health claims made for the carnivore diet, but the meatfluencers are undeterred. In "The Carnivore Diet," Shawn Baker lists eczema, depression, and fibromyalgia as "ailments that seem to respond positively to the carnivore diet." The psychologist Jordan Peterson claims that a regimen of beef, salt, and water sharpened his thinking, cleared up his psoriasis, and eliminated his gum disease; his daughter, Mikhaila Peterson, insists that the same diet, supplemented with lamb, bison, and the occasional vodka or bourbon, cured her arthritis. In "The Complete Carnivore Diet for Beginners: Your Practical Guide to an All-Meat Lifestyle," by Judy Cho (IG followers: 99.8K), carnivory is presented as a powerful remedy, with potential for alleviating depression, inflammation, eating disorders, and autoimmune issues.

Living off flesh alone is not easy, though, and Cho lays out suggestions for how to survive. Too much lean protein can cause problems, so make sure at least seventy per cent of your calories come from fat. Too little mastication can lead to constipation, so try to chew each piece of meat twenty to thirty

times. Carnivores tend to have messed-up thirst cues, so drink more often than might feel natural. If you don't like meat, stop snacking until you're so hungry that it becomes appealing. To ease the transition, Cho offers various weeklong meal plans, along with helpful tables of permissible items and their nutritional statistics.

Some meatfluencers stress that human beings are animals and maintain that, if allowed to eat according to our animal instincts, we will favor a meaty menu. But the biologists David Raubenheimer and Stephen J. Simpson have been investigating animal alimentation for more than thirty years, and their new book, "Eat Like the Animals," suggests that the meatfluencers have it all wrong. The authors started collaborating at Oxford, studying the eating preferences of locusts (grasshoppers, basically). First, they found that locusts preferred a certain ratio of carbohydrates to protein. When forced to live on foods higher in carbs and lower in protein, the insects ate a lot, becoming obese, and took longer to molt to adulthood. Conversely, when put on the insect version of the Atkins diet, they ate far fewer calories and were less likely to make it to adulthood. Second, they found that locusts with a decent food selection always ended up with near-identical ratios of protein and carbohydrates. "It's as if, regardless of whether we were offered meat and pasta, or egg and bread, or beans and rice, or fish and potatoes, we always consumed the exact same balance of protein and carbs." The critters somehow track which nutrients are in which foods.

These findings aren't limited to insects. Raubenheimer and Simpson have since determined that the pattern is widespread across the animal kingdom, from beetles to baboons. And they have found that protein-loaded diets don't just age animals; they kill them faster. "Our sexy, lean mice who ate high-protein, low-carb diets were the shortest lived of all," they wrote of research published in 2014. "They made great-looking middle-aged corpses."

Raubenheimer and Simpson find possible lessons here about human metabolism. As ultra-processed foods become stripped of protein, we behave like their protein-deprived locusts, becoming bloated on carbs. The elimination of fibre exacerbates the problem, they write, removing a brake that would otherwise slow eating, fill our stomachs, and curb hunger. At the same time, their work implies a Faustian allure to keto, carnivory, and other protein-heavy regimens. Cutting out carbs may make us skinnier and accelerate tissue development, shifting our bodies into a "growth and reproduction pathway." But this comes at the expense of longevity. Repair and maintenance systems are sidelined. Misfolded proteins and other cellular junk accumulate. Pushed into overdrive, the body falters.

According to Raubenheimer and Simpson, two canonically healthy populations—the Okinawans, in Japan, who become centenarians at five times the rate of the rest of the developed world, and the Tsimané, of the Bolivian Amazon, who have the lowest incidence of cardiovascular disease ever recorded—consume diets that are, respectively, just nine and fourteen per cent protein. Most of their calories come from fibrous starches, such as plantain, cassava, or sweet potato. Raubenheimer and Simpson don't propose that readers become Japanese islanders or remote Amazonians, and although they present suggested protein intakes, they warn against following them too strictly. Instead, they advise cutting out ultra-processed foods; finding good sources of fats, proteins, and fibre-loaded carbs; and listening to

your appetite (unless you crave savory snack foods, which, they point out, trick the body into thinking that it's getting protein when it's not). "Our appetites are better gauges than our calculators," they conclude.

Is it possible that the meatfluencers are only a muscly manifestation of a larger awareness—that our food system is failing us? In "Eating to Extinction," Dan Saladino, who's no relation to the carnivore Paul, urges readers to "consider what the past can teach us about how to inhabit the world now and in the future." Taras Grescoe's "The Lost Supper" argues, similarly, that when it comes to the plants and animals we've subsisted on for generations "the way forward lies in reviving them, cultivating them, herding them, and consuming them."

For Grescoe and Saladino, the crisis of modernity is not, as many meatfluencers insist, an excess of seed oils, carbohydrates, and plant-defense chemicals but a collapse of diversity. Grescoe takes the reader to a twenty-three-thousand-year-old site in eastern Africa, where foragers once feasted on twenty species of mammal, sixteen families of bird, and nearly a hundred and fifty kinds of nuts, seeds, fruits, and legumes. He transports us to Çatalhöyük, a bustling Neolithic settlement in Anatolia, where the fare included sheep, goats, wild cattle, wild boars, waterfowl, and an impressive array of plant foods, such as plums, figs, acorns, almonds, hackberries, pistachios, and wild mustard.

It may look as if modern diets are wonderfully varied, both Grescoe and Saladino argue, but by historical standards they're not. As a species, humans once ate thousands of plant foods, but only a hundred and fifty are cultivated at scale for food today, three of which—rice, wheat, and maize—constitute fifty per cent of all calories. Even within that trio, diversity is crumbling. In the twentieth century, American-grown hybrid corn came to account for fifty per cent of globally traded maize. Thousands of local varieties have been displaced. The result was a boom in calories but also a more fragile food system, as was made clear when a fungal blight ruined a billion bushels of American maize in 1970.

For opponents of meat eating, this loss of diversity is a call to arms. In "No Meat Required: The Cultural History and Culinary Future of Plant-Based Eating," Alicia Kennedy says that campaigns against ingesting flesh are about "claiming biodiversity and rebuilding the food system in a way that supports culture, tradition, and gastronomy." Their argument comes down to an ecological observation: it takes about a hundred times more land to produce a calorie of lamb or beef than it does to

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produce a plant-based alternative. Given that half the world's ice- and desert-free land is used for agriculture, shifting to a fully plant-based diet would unlock vast resources. By one estimate, agricultural land use around the world would decrease by about three billion hectares—roughly four times the area of the continental United States.

How do members of the carnivore crew respond? Some, like Judy Cho and Paul Saladino, argue that the consensus is wrong and that, as Cho says, "cows may be the way to save the planet." They blame environmental devastation on such factors as grain monocultures and crop-driven deforestation—never mind that some eighty per cent of farmland is used for livestock feed. Others take up a vaporously ideological form of opposition.

Consider the shtick of Raw Egg Nationalist (X followers: 182.8K), a right-wing conspiracy theorist who dispenses "red-pill fitness" to his fans. "The enemy today is what I like to call 'soy globalism,'" he explained on Tucker Carlson's 2022 Fox special "The End of Men." "The globalists want you to be fat, sick, depressed, and isolated—the better to control you and to milk you for as much economic value as they can, before they kill you." His solution aligned nationalism and masculinity: strong men build strong nations, which defend against soy globalism. "And that's where raw eggs come in. Eggs are a superfood, packed with protein, fats, vitamins, minerals, anabolic cholesterol—the absolute opposite of the disgusting rubbish the globalists want us to eat." He didn't end at eggs. If it has cholesterol, it qualifies: "That means butter, that means red meat, organ meat, eating liver, drinking raw milk, eating raw-milk products." He warned, "Eating a low-fat vegetarian diet is about the worst thing you can do. It just tanks testosterone."

On December 1, 2022, after incriminating e-mails were shared online, the Liver King released a video on YouTube titled "Liver King confession . . . I lied." Bare-chested and seated on what looked like a throne, he told the camera, "Yes, I've done steroids. And, yes, I'm on steroids." He defended himself by returning to the issues that inspired him to preach the ancestral tenets. "Our people are hurting at record rates, with depression, autoimmune, anxiety, infertility, low ambition in life. Our young men are hurting the most, feeling lost, weak, and submissive."

Pore over materials on carnivory and the overwhelming impression is that men are endangered. They were once strong. They lived with nature and had stone-hard chests. They killed or were killed. But not anymore. Now they are either scrawny or obese. They have plummeting sperm counts and middling testosterone levels. "Alexander the Great conquered the world at age 25," posted Carnivore Aurelius (IG followers: 717K), an anonymous meme-maker who dances between satire and sincerity. "The average 25 year old today has a panic attack if they leave their vape at home. WTF happened to men?"

Men, we read more and more, are falling behind. Just seventy-four men finish college for every hundred women. The model of a provider who supports a family through mostly physical labor is a diminishing prospect. Because meat is linked to manhood, carnivory promises a way to pump up a shrivelled birthright.

The Liver King understood this from the start. His very first video was ostensibly about a Paleolithic life style, but it looked like an ad for masculinity. It starred a semi-nude Viking hurling a spear, throwing a heavy ball, and benching a barbell with thick chains hanging down. It featured lightning, a bonfire, raw meat sliced with a chef's knife, and a marinated lamb chop thrown on a grill. There were symbols of status and wealth throughout, from the landscaping to the lavish home gym.

Carnivory conjures up an Edenic past that contrasts with our current discontents: a mythical time when men were manly and bodies were fit and food was real and natural. Cleanse yourself of modern corruption, it urges, and the world and your body will be renewed. You will be strong. Your family will be healthy. The land will recover. In "The Carnivore Code," Paul Saladino describes the zone you inhabit when consuming a meat-only diet as "Zion," "Shangri-La," and "the Promised Land," a "verdant" coastline where you can hunt "healthy ruminants" drinking from "clean, flowing streams."

It's familiar terrain. The most successful diets of the past half century benefitted from similar marketing. Alluring additives are poisoning our bodies, their advocates insisted. Freedom and vigor come from purging them, from reënacting the lifeways of make-believe ancestors. When, in the nineteen-seventies, Nathan Pritikin championed a high-carbohydrate, low-fat regimen, he and his co-authors claimed that it was "an accident of civilization" that Americans had such easy access to fat and cholesterol. "Primitive people" were "more likely to be near-vegetarians," he asserted. When Robert Atkins promoted the opposite approach—carbohydrate restriction as the key to good health—he stressed that "the food you eat when you do Atkins is surprisingly close to what our primitive ancestors ate." And in "Diet for a Small Planet" (1971), perhaps the most important tract in favor of meatless eating ever published, Frances Moore Lappé told her readers that she advocated "the return to the traditional diet on which our bodies evolved."

Fad diets are perfectly manufactured to spread. They appeal to dissatisfaction. They provide crude explanations for why things are going wrong. And they tap into an intuitive logic at the center of spiritual traditions—that the greater the sacrifice, the greater the redemption. Yet fad diets also doom themselves. The same features that fuel their popularity—their quick-fix nature, their severe and often harmful restrictions—are what make them unsustainable for many.

You even see this happening within the culture of carnivory. When the podcaster Joe Rogan went on a carnivore diet, in 2022, he ate fruit with his meat. The Liver King espouses a "nutrient-dense, nose-to-tail diet" while openly consuming potatoes and maple syrup. Yet the most dramatic turnabout occurred with Paul Saladino himself. Since publishing "The Carnivore Code," he has acknowledged the benefits of carbohydrates. He now incorporates fruit, honey, and kefir into his daily fare, and this spring he changed his social-media handles from versions of @CarnivoreMD to @PaulSaladinoMD. In true Paleolithic fashion, even meatfluencers struggle to resist the pull of plants. ♦

NEPO BABY

BY MEGAN AMRAM

Hey, guys! There's been a lot of discussion going on lately and I just wanted to clear the air. I totally understand that people think I got my job because of my dad, but I definitely would have still been the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ even if my dad wasn't God. *Everyone* says I would have been the Son of God even if I weren't the son of God.

Just because my dad is famous, it doesn't mean I don't have merits of my own. I am a very good listener, and nice, and I have a bag that has seven million fish in it. I'm pretty embarrassed by D-d—I don't even really like telling people my last name. When people find out that my last name is Of Nazareth, it just shuts down any conversation. How do they know it's the same Of Nazareth? What if my dad was, like, Bill Of Nazareth, just, like, a guy with a truck and a snake? Not everyone in my family is famous. What about my mom? She's a prude and a nobody! Her last name, Mary, isn't well known at all! Her last name is Mary and her first name is Virgin.

You have no idea—it actually really sucks to have a famous parent. No one believes that I healed those lepers on my own. But now we'll never know if I could have cured leprosy without the leg up my dad gave me, which is that I am magic and have the gorgeous hair of a horse you hope breeds with all the other horses. Sure, I got all this myrrh as a kid, but that myrrh lasts you only so long. And then you have to *work* for your *own* myrrh. And I worked for every inch of myrrh I ever got. Every cubic centimetre of myrrh. Every cup of it. What is myrrh?

I toiled really hard to get where I am. I went to four years of carpenter school. And, no, I don't have student loans, because, yes, my dad invented wood, but it was still hard. I have hammered my thumbs so many times. One time, I even drove a nail all the way through my hand. It hurt so bad, and I was, like, I hope that never happens again, but then it did! I totally acknowledge my privilege, but let's not act like other people don't have privilege, too. I can turn water into wine, but my buddy Eric can turn water into piss. Why aren't people obsessed with *Eric's* dad?

I started from the bottom—I was born and immediately put in a manger. You'd imagine that soft hay would be in there, but no. Do you know what was in there? Four scorpions. Worse than a normal bed. I don't even technically have my own birthday! I share it with Santa, which is antisemitic.

I'm a really good sport about things. Every time I walk into a Catholic church, there's a good chance I'll see myself on the Cross, being crucified. Obsessed with me much? And everyone is obsessed with drinking my blood and eating my body. It makes me feel faint. We have to talk about something else before I fall off this horse. And, before you comment about my having a fancy horse, just know that a lot of people's dads make them horses for their sixteenth birthday.

I don't want anyone to feel too sorry for me, but the nepo-baby thing makes me really insecure. People are just so ready to tear you down and say, "You don't even deserve to have a really popular book about you." I struggled with impostor syndrome for so long, but then I was able to cure it, because I can cure any disease, because I am magic, because of my dad.

All I can hope for is that, by keeping my head down and just doing the work, my legacy will finally be separate from D-d's. At the end of my career as the Lamb of God, no one is going to think about my dad. They'll just be, like, That's some guy who is a really hard worker and always has, like, a hundred loaves of bread with him for some reason.

Ultimately, it boils down to talent. And I will rest easy knowing that the haters are just jealous. But I will love them anyway. Because I am the most humble person of all time. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

DIGITAL MEMORY

The emotionally haunted electronic music of Oneohtrix Point Never.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

Daniel Lopatin, who collaborates with the Weeknd and the Safdie brothers.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAT MARTIN

The video for "A Barely Lit Path," the first single from "Again," Daniel Lopatin's tenth album as Oneohtrix Point Never, takes place on a dark road in a shadowy forest. Two CPR dummies wearing turquoise jumpsuits are strapped into a self-driving car. On the floor, there's an artificial-intelligence manual, a book about understanding computers, and a copy of "Erewhon," the 1872 satirical novel that imagines a future in which machines achieve consciousness. The dummies play chess; they nap. Their rubbery fingers reach across the seat for each other. It's sweet. At some point, the road gets rough and the dummies start flopping around. A Stop button is affixed to the gearshift, but it's just out of reach. One of the dummies starts to cry. The car is off course now, hurtling toward oblivion. The feeling is of utter helplessness in the face of assured disaster. Then—I don't know. Maybe one of them gets to the button? The screen turns scarlet and sinuous, and begins to throb. You can hear something like a heartbeat. The sequence recalls both a prenatal ultrasound and the Rapture.

The song opens with Lopatin singing. His voice is fractured and heavy with effects:

> If I empty my mind
> Do I scoop out my skull
> What gifts would I find
> Nothing's inside
> Just a slug that provides
> A barely lit path
> From your house to mine.

Lopatin has built a career writing elegiac, otherworldly electronic compositions using computers, synthesizers, and digital scree; when he includes lyrics, they rarely feel confessional. But the plaintiveness of those last two lines is somehow devastating—the tenuousness of our connections, how earnestly we try to maintain them. The video was directed by the French artist Freeka Tet. "It's the story of two lifeless characters," Tet said. "One layer of meaning has to do with being sentient—life, death, forced entertainment, choices. Another is this kind of uncanny, romantic story. There's the honeymoon phase, followed by the bumpy phase, and then the moment where you need to make a choice: Am I hitting the brake, or am I hitting the gas?" That feeling—liminality, ambiguity, unexpected tenderness—is consistent in Lopatin's music. "The tragedy of our whole thing is that we're very much contained in the unknown," Lopatin told me one afternoon. "It's part of us." The goal isn't to thrash against disconnection—or to panic, the old human instinct toward mastery and subjugation—but to somehow integrate it.

For more than a decade, Lopatin has been a highly regarded composer within electronic-music circles, and worshipped in certain corners of the Internet. But recently he has become the person mainstream pop stars call when their records are getting boring, rote, or predictable. Lopatin has collaborated with FKA Twigs, Caroline Polachek, Arca, Rosalía, Charli XCX, Anohni, and Nine Inch Nails, among others. In 2022, he produced "Sometimes, Forever," Soccer Mommy's third album. "He definitely has a knack for making things weirdly beautiful," Sophie Allison, the singer-songwriter who performs as Soccer Mommy, told me. But the two chief creative partnerships in his life are with the film directors Josh and Benny Safdie, best known for the tense thrillers "Good Time" and "Uncut Gems" (Lopatin wrote the scores for both), and with Abel Tesfaye, who records as the Weeknd. Lopatin worked on three tracks for the Weeknd's "After Hours" (2020) and co-

executive-produced "Dawn FM" (2022), two of the best-selling pop albums of the decade. "It's emotionally charged—even the stuff that sounds colder, more electronic, kind of icy. That's the paradox," the electronic musician James Blake said of Lopatin's work. "Dan's a sensitive person who's also really interested in exploring the absolute upper limits of what's possible creatively."

One morning in mid-August, Lopatin and I met at his studio, a bright two-room suite, nicknamed the Sky Dungeon, on the fifth floor of a former industrial building in Williamsburg. A long wall was lined with synthesizers of various vintages; elsewhere, there were books, stacks of VHS tapes, and framed posters of Enya and of the 1972 sci-fi film "Solaris." Lopatin, forty-one, is tall and easygoing. Though he recently composed and performed music for a Chanel runway show, he dresses in a low-key manner—"I basically just want to dress like I've been dressing since I was fourteen years old," he said—and has taken to wearing what he calls "Italian senior-citizen shoes." He was brought up in Winthrop, Massachusetts, an oceanside suburb across Boston Harbor from Logan Airport. His parents are Russian Jewish immigrants; before they left the Soviet Union, his mother taught music lessons and his father played a Roland Juno-60 keyboard in a rock band called the Flying Dutchmen. "When they came over, in '82, they had to give everything up. Their roots were just annihilated," Lopatin said. "They became very focussed on survival. My dad, because he had computer-science chops, found a way through into high tech. My mom, who didn't, taught herself to code in the early eighties. She picked a piece of paper off a bulletin board that said 'Learn C++' or something. She said, 'This is a lot like musical notation: it's a symbol that's in place for an idea.' Code didn't intimidate her." She ended up in software development.

Both of Lopatin's parents worked full time, and his sister was nine years older, so he was often alone, which perhaps accounts for the thread of alienation that runs through his work. (He is also the only American-born member of his family.) When he was six or seven, his dad brought home a personal computer. "I had never seen anything like it. It looked like the monolith from '2001,'" Lopatin recalled. "It was a Unix-based computer. It was beautifully designed—it looked like a crazy black cube. It was connected to a 28.8-Kbps modem, and it got me on the Internet." He went on, "We had computers all the time and music all the time. That explains everything you need to know about me."

As a preteen, Lopatin absorbed a lot of nineties alt-rock. "I was definitely grunge," Lopatin said of his middle-school years, adding, "I had a beanie that I wrote 'LOSER' on. By high school, I was kind of over it. I was listening to a lot of geeky jazz-fusion records, prog records." He drifted toward the local hardcore scene. "If somebody had a nominal interest in living their life in a nonconformist way, I was interested," he said. Lopatin attended Hampshire, the famously progressive liberal-arts college in Amherst, and began making music using a sampler, his dad's Roland, and a PC. In 2007, after a brief period living in Boston, he headed to Greenpoint, renting a bleak, moldering basement apartment and enrolling in the library-science program at the Pratt Institute. "The plan was to become a librarian and do music at the same time. I thought that would be a perfect life," he said. "I'd read Derrida's 'Archive Fever'—talk about pretentious!—and I was, like, 'This is sick.' The human instinct to preserve and to document the past while it's falling to rubble is one of the most romantic things I can possibly think of."

In 2008, Lopatin met Carlos Giffoni, a Venezuelan musician who had recently started an experimental label in New York called No Fun Productions. "I thought, There's nothing like this happening right now," Giffoni said of Lopatin's early cassettes. "He's using polysynths and arpeggiation, composing experimental music, but using tones and noise, things that back then were not usually combined." No Fun reissued "Betrayed in the Octagon," Lopatin's first official release, on vinyl. "We did three hundred copies, and they sold out within a couple of weeks," Giffoni said. "Then he did an original LP for me called 'Russian Mind.' That sold out in two days. And then we decided, Let's collect all this stuff and add some tracks." "Rifts," his first double album, became the label's best-selling release. The ingenuity and general inscrutability of Lopatin's work resonated within the scene. He put out two more albums on smaller labels ("Returnal," in 2010, and "Replica," in 2011) before signing with Warp, in 2013, and releasing "R Plus Seven." By then, he had racked up three coveted Best New Music proclamations from Pitchfork.

At the time, "I was trying to use sounds that I kind of deemed chintzy, borderline offensive," Lopatin told me. He often sampled TV commercials from the eighties and nineties, excavated from YouTube. "All this detritus, I wanted to make something cool with it," he said. "Being a latchkey kid, my memories were of commercials I saw between programs. It's not a point of pride—when people say, 'Your music is nostalgic,' I'm, like, 'Are you fucking out of your mind? You think I like this shit? It's garbage.' But it's the stuff of my life, whether I like it or not." He paused. "It's the way my brain is. I'm sensitive to ephemera. Maybe I was surrounded by people. But I can only remember the commercials."

When Lopatin was still living in Boston, and working at a textbook-publishing company, he started making what he called "eccojams"—essentially, chopped-and-screwed remixes of treacly ballads, paired with videos that featured strange repeating imagery. The publishing gig was stultifying. "I was nothing," he said when I asked what the job entailed. "I was a piece of furniture. I could just feel the life draining out of me." Lopatin began uploading the videos to YouTube, and in 2010 he put out a hundred copies of "Chuck Person's Eccojams Vol. 1" on cassette. "B4," the most beloved of the eccojams, features a mesmeric sample of "The Lady in Red," an awful song recorded by Chris de Burgh in 1986. On its own, de Burgh's voice has a weird, cadaverous quality; when Lopatin loops an isolated bit from the chorus ("There's nobody here!") nineteen times in a little more than two minutes, it becomes a kind of surreal Mayday call, lonesome and eternal. The video features a reiterative graphic—a pulsing stretch of rainbow-colored highway—from Laser Grand Prix, an eighties arcade game. Watching it made

me think of ancient Gregorian chants, and the droning, pentatonic laments of northern Greece, and certain Indian ragas, and, eventually, any sort of music that makes your vision blur, or gets the mind soft enough to see God.

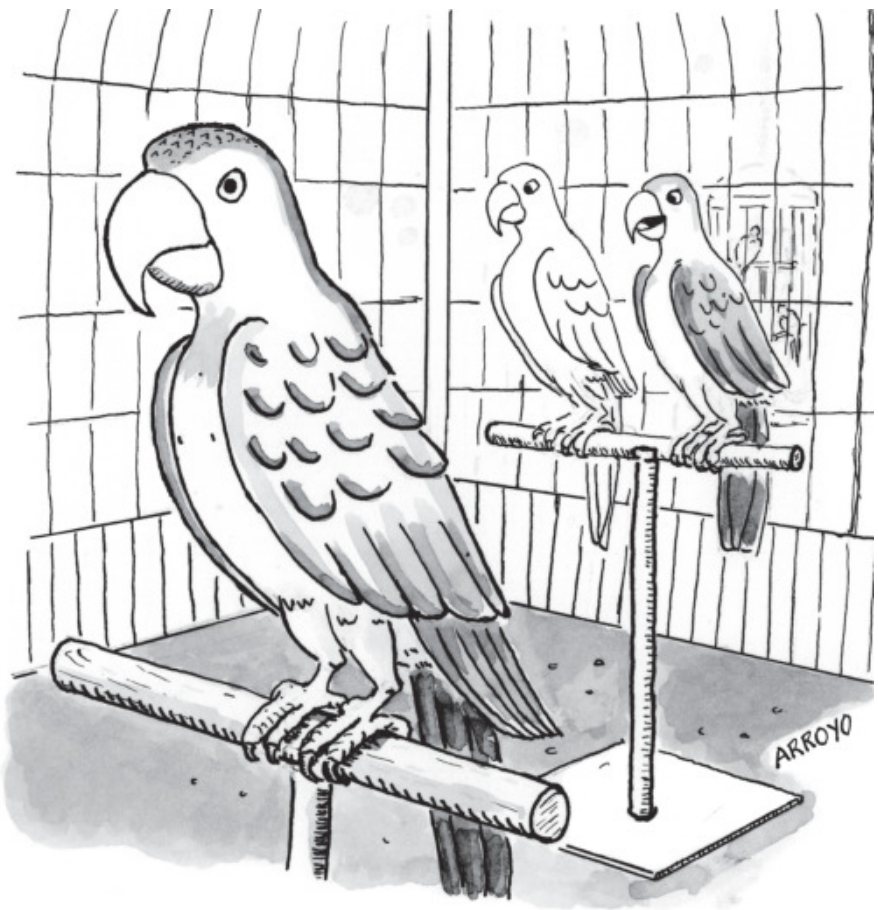
Both the song and the video were assembled entirely from found material. Yet the release of "Eccojams" was also a Big Bang: it was the dawn of vaporwave, a genre of electronic music obsessed with aestheticizing relics of the recent past. Attempting to define vaporwave is sort of humiliating: like most Web-based phenomena, it deploys an idiosyncratic grammar that remains mostly inscrutable to anyone who has recently gone outside. The visuals tend to involve 3-D graphics, screen savers, dolphins, dead malls, VHS tapes, corporate training videos, bad graphic design, and Greco-Roman statues. The primary instruments are synthesizers and YouTube. There's a kind of aching pathos to some of it. If you've ever wandered around a flea market and felt a peculiar pang after coming across, say, an inkjet printer from 2008, an old cable box, or an unopened Sony MiniDisc player, you know what I mean: the accelerated obsolescence of commercial technology can feel like a kind of memento mori. Nothing is relevant forever.

Lopatin is credited as one of vaporwave's earliest practitioners; he is probably its inventor. The genre had an oddball moment in the sun in 2012, when Rihanna performed her hit "Diamonds" on "Saturday Night Live" before a projection of vaporwave-ish graphics: a weird neon peace sign, a ceramic bust, a checkerboard, a spinning globe, fractals, palm trees. The fact that "Diamonds"—a pop ballad—is not a vaporwave song, in any sense, doesn't matter. Boundaries, systems, context: these are also relics of the past.

One Friday afternoon, Lopatin and I met at the Storm King Art Center, a five-hundred-acre sculpture garden in the Hudson Highlands, about an hour from Manhattan. The center's collection includes large-scale pieces by artists like Isamu Noguchi, Alexander Calder, Andy Goldsworthy, Richard Serra, and Louise Bourgeois, plunked onto grassy knolls. That day, the paths were filled with couples, presumably from Brooklyn, presumably giggling through a third or fourth date. Lopatin and I sat under a tree near "Lockport," a seventeen-foot-tall, Crayola-blue post-and-lintel aluminum structure built by Lyman Kipp, an American sculptor, in 1977. Kipp was inspired by the skeletal shadows of half-finished buildings at construction sites, and the piece's final form felt transitional, fluctuating, changing with the light and the slant of our approach. "A really exciting part of technology is that you can metaphorically experience one thing from many different angles," Lopatin said. "And that's sculpture, too. Being able to look at things a million different ways."

Lopatin feels more indebted to film and sculpture than to music—he once asked me, quizzically and sincerely, "Do you sit in your house and listen to records?"—though he also harbors what he describes as "active vitriol" toward the art world, which can feel cloistered and inaccessible. "Art itself shouldn't have a specialized language," he said. "Sculpture, especially, seems really, really metaphorically aligned with music." He continued, "There's this artist named Gordon Hall. I went to college with them, and we were very close. I went to a lecture of theirs many years ago, at the SculptureCenter, in Long Island City. Gordon's, like, 'Here's a chair,' and showed a picture of a chair. And then it was, like, 'Here's an abstract sculpture.' The chair, it infers the human body. So what body is inferred when you look at an abstract sculpture? There's an identity aspect to that part of the work for Gordon, but there's a really universal lesson in there as well, which is: What can new forms of art teach us about new worlds we want to build, new bodies, whatever? I saw that chair and I saw that sculpture and I said, 'Yep. I'm in the sculpture business. I'm not in the chair business.'"

For the cover of "Again," Lopatin commissioned an original piece by the Norwegian sculptor Matias Faldbakken after seeing his "Locker Sculpture #2," in which a row of collapsing



"He's not afraid to say exactly what other people are saying."

metal lockers are squeezed together by ratchet straps. It's as though the lockers were being hugged to death. "Again" features an array of outdated computer speakers in the same state. "I was spending so much time at thrift stores, and I kept seeing these computer speakers in the little electronics section. It's a useless section. But somebody had lovingly put these speakers out and wrapped them in tape," Lopatin said. "It reminded me of Matias's sculpture, so I took a chance and introduced myself, and asked him if he thought that it was possible to melt plastic the way he had hammered the metal. He was, like, 'There's only one way to find out.'"

Lopatin's work might be tethered, in literal ways, to the past, but the effect is not familiar. It's eerie and inconstant—more dream than memory. Around the time of "R Plus Seven," Lopatin stopped relying so heavily on found sound. "I didn't want to rearrange other people's textures and let that show me what the music was gonna be," he said. The records that followed ("Garden of Delete," in 2015; "Age Of," in 2018; "Magic Oneohtrix Point Never," in 2020) each have a particular sonic quality and conceptual framework. "Garden of Delete" is about a "molting teen-ager" who is visited by an alien bearing a USB stick; "Age Of" is about the chaos and peril of the Trump era; "Magic" is a sweeter, gentler album, as close as Lopatin has come to sentimentality. In 1962, the film critic Manny Farber coined the label "termite art" to describe work that "goes always forward eating its own boundaries," an idea that feels especially applicable to Lopatin, who has a tendency, maybe a compulsion, to invent and then dismantle new forms. "I'm not gonna regurgitate old ideas just because they're working. I distrust my own taste," he said, laughing. "Making one record over and over is just a little too self-assured."

Lopatin first met the Safdies in the mid-twenty-tens. "This is the upshot in New York—you're all kind of in the soup together," Lopatin said. "You're aware of other people doing interesting things. They invited me over to their offices in midtown. There's this one brother—crazy, looking insane, I can barely see his cheeks, they're just covered with hair. He's handsome. I like him! And then the other guy, he's well put-together, serious, I think he was wearing a fleece. Gigantic 'Akira' poster on the wall. I just felt immediate kinship. That doesn't really happen that often."

Josh Safdie recalled, "I briefly worked at a video store in Little Italy, and a CD-R sat on the player with the name of a friend who I used to cruise electronic music with. This was probably around 2008. Track twelve took the shop into a new place. I texted my buddy, 'Who's track twelve?' and he wrote back 'Oneohtrix.' It was one of those words that you read but don't say aloud. More like an image." In 2015, when the brothers were looking to score "Good Time," they reached out to Lopatin. "He showed up wearing a Boston Celtics hat, which was alarming, but I instantly felt like I was in an infinite hang session," Josh Safdie said. "He's a very deep guy, and yet everything is possibly a joke."

Safdie and Lopatin wrote together at Lopatin's studio, in Brooklyn, often working into the early morning. "We'd pirate plug-ins and cruise through every sound. After a feeling or a mood is set for a cue, often objects in the frame might inspire a note or a melody—we'd find ourselves synching a metallic sound to a highway overpass briefly wiping across our screen, or chimes that corresponded to a glimmer of light," Safdie said. "I learned alongside Dan that writing a score and producing it is like a whole other film hiding inside the film. I think we're both looking to take off, and by that I mean that we're in search of some destination outside time and place. We're both entirely interested in the moment and in getting lost in it. We also both suffer from anxiety, and music—in particular, electronic music—can tap right into that."

Lopatin met Tesfaye through the Safdies, who cast the Weeknd in "Uncut Gems." "Ever since we met, we were just inseparable," Tesfaye told me. "He has a lot of heart. And you hear it in his music. Even in his most avant-garde stuff, you hear the soul in it." He added, "I think together we've created some of the most genre-bending music of my career." The Weeknd's "Dawn FM," which was co-executive-produced, in 2022, by Lopatin, Tesfaye, and the Swedish hitmaker Max Martin, feels like a

spiritual rejoinder to "Magic Oneohtrix Point Never"—both records are obsessed with crackly, outmoded FM radio as a comforting but almost supernatural force. "Dawn FM" is full of strange and slippery moments (pitch-shifted vocals, arched melodies, warped synthesizers, existential duress) that are captivating to encounter on the pop chart.

When the Weeknd was tapped to perform at the Super Bowl halftime show in February, 2021, Tesfaye asked Lopatin to be his musical director. "He said, 'We'll figure it out.' That's my language," Lopatin said. The performance still feels singular among halftime shows. It was a dark and paranoid moment for the American psyche: COVID was raging, and the Capitol had been breached the month before. Because of the pandemic, more than half of Raymond James Stadium, in Tampa, was occupied by cardboard cutouts. Tesfaye bounced around a hall of mirrors filled with avatars of himself, their faces bandaged, singing about love as an utterly obliterating force. Then, suddenly, he was bopping around a platform, grinning, while fireworks went off, singing a song about romantic bliss. It was a thrilling mix of perverse and sunny.

When I asked Lopatin if he was on the field that night, he said, "There's this big pirate ship behind one of the end zones, and I was in the pirate ship." He continued, "My therapist calls me 'Motherfucker.' We have a whole thing. He was, like, 'Motherfucker'—he's from Texas—'Motherfucker, I'm old, I'm a bag of bones. You'd better bring me something back from that pirate ship, because I love Tom Brady!'" He laughed. "I got all this thread from the rope holding up the fake sail, and I put it in this little Plexiglas thing for him. If you're gonna steal, steal a tiny thread. Steal the smallest thing you can find."

Lopatin finished "Again" in March, in a rented house in Accord, New York. The record closes out a three-album run in which Lopatin has remembered, misremembered, and invented his own coming of age. "Again" was influenced by post-rock, a stark genre that coalesced in the early nineties and draws heavily from punk and experimental music. The album features contributions from Jim O'Rourke and Lee Ranaldo, erstwhile titans of the post-rock scene, and is "set," in a sense, in the early two-thousands, a period in which Lopatin was "not having corporate rock inflicted on me but was finally at an age where I was making my own choices," he said.

Lopatin was drawn to post-rock's particular mix of scrappiness and sophistication, how it pulled from the avant-garde but distorted those influences, in ways that could make the music feel feral. Something about it—post-rock can be cold and boring, yet also unpredictable—reminded him of artificial intelligence. "We're living during this paradigm shift where everyone's thinking about the soulfulness, or relative un-soulfulness, of A.I.," he said. OpenAI's Jukebox—which the company describes as "a neural net that generates music"—is credited on two tracks on "Again"; Lopatin also used Riffusion (which converts a text prompt into an image and then translates that image into sound) on one song and Adobe Enhanced Speech (an A.I. tool that cleans up low-quality audio) on two others.

Lopatin's work with A.I. owes at least a theoretical debt to the French composer Edgard Varèse, who was bored by the limitations of acoustic instruments, and who, in 1936, described "the electronic" as "our new liberating medium." Varèse thought that only electronic instruments could effectively "satisfy the dictates of that inner ear of the imagination," and dismissed fears that these

new modes might challenge composition. "Anything new in music has always been called noise," he wrote. Lopatin finds most of the hand-wringing about A.I. to be silly. "It's over, we're all gonna die, the machines are coming to get us," he said, laughing. "That's really boring. What's more interesting for me is seeing how A.I. fails." He went on, "When it fails, which it does a lot right now, it creates these insinuated arrangements that don't sound anything like any music I've ever heard. It's so broken that I can only compare it to, like, the most extreme music I've ever heard in my life."

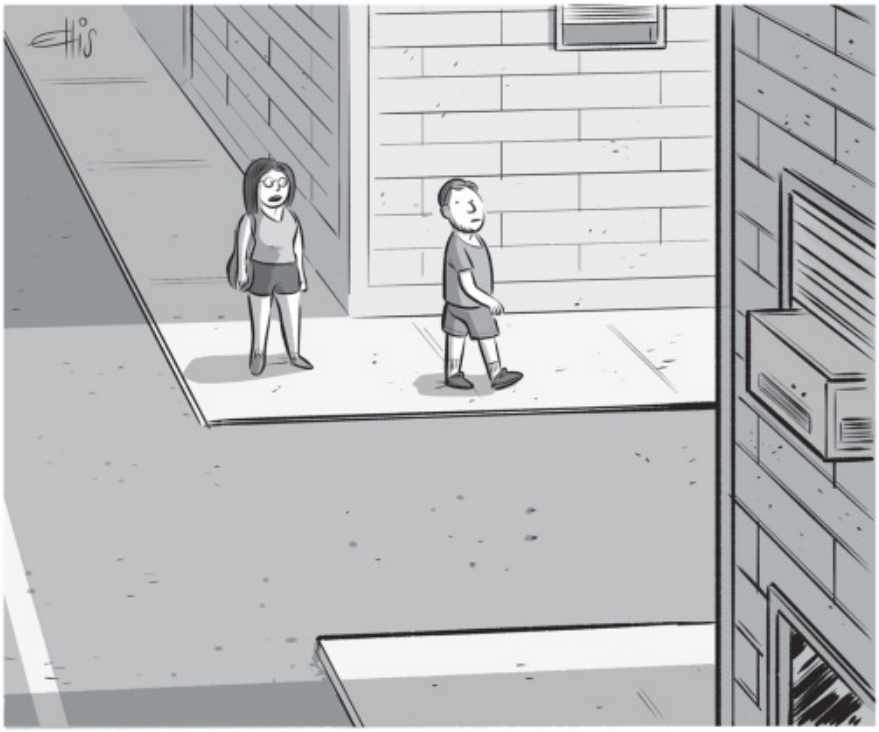
A.I.'s wonkiness—all of these networks are still in their nascency—forced Lopatin to reëxamine his most instinctive and well-worn habits. "It reminds me a lot of Paul Schrader's transcendental-cinema thing," Lopatin said. "He always talks about how there are films that are formulaic and ones that aren't. The ones that aren't do weird things with time. They dwell a little bit too long on the wrong object, like a door after someone has passed through it. You're usually following the person, but now we're staying on the door. That's what A.I. is actually doing really well. What it's not doing very well is following the person." He continued, "When I first started using A.I., I would basically just give it metadata. I'd say, 'I want you to make a Smashing Pumpkins song.' It tries, and it can't. That's a lot like me."

One recent afternoon, Lopatin and I met at the public library in Katonah, New York, a leafy suburb in Westchester County. What were we doing there? I'm not sure either of us could say. Lopatin kept forgetting the name of the town. It had come up that it would be funny, maybe germane, to meet at a library. "Ideal hang sesh," he'd texted. "Mark Twain ass." Lopatin is good on his phone: clever, charming, fast. One morning, he texted me a song by the singer and producer Marcus Brown, who records as Nourished by Time. The track, "Shed That Fear," features a chipper but celestial synth line that made me feel like my body was a helium balloon recently let loose by a child. Lopatin described it as "Arthur Russell meets Daft Punk but deep R. & B." and the "only new music I absolutely swear is next level."

We walked around town for a while, past rows of neatly maintained houses and driveways with children's bikes splayed on the pavement. The dissociation and the ambient loneliness of the Internet seemed far away. Over lunch, I needled Lopatin a little about his personal life. "What if we just say . . . I'm not a eunuch?" he suggested. Lopatin is generally interested in obfuscation, and in what he refers to, more formally, as "confusing the ear." He likes synthesizers, he said, because they monkey with a person's "sense of stability." Even

the name he records under—Oneohtrix Point Never—is a mondegreen, a mishearing of a radio-station call (Magic 106.7) from his youth. When it was suggested that perhaps there is an element of tricksterism to his work, he laughed. "That's Oneohtrix—'one oh tricks,'" he said. "Ones and zeros, tricking out computers, the manipulation of sound. I like to absorb factual things and make them fictitious. That's also a trickster's move: to introduce doubt into the thing." He kept enthusiastically recommending a BBC program called "Fake or Fortune?," in which experts attempt to determine the provenance and legitimacy of various art works.

I got it. A little bit of mystery is central to the project. It's not so much that Lopatin wants to be enigmatic as it is that he doesn't believe in the sanctity of fixed narratives. A photograph, an interview, a memory, an Instagram post—it's all a little bit unstable, a little bit untrue. He is more drawn to an ethos of transubstantiation, in which things can become other things.



"I'm leaving you, Tom. There's no shade on that street."

• •

The American primitive guitarist John Fahey described the Mississippi blues singer Charley Patton, who recorded between 1929 and 1934, as "a pioneer in the externalization, through music, of strange, weird, even ghastly emotional states." Patton's lyrics—which toggled between nonsensical and bawdy, delivered in a carnal bark—weren't entirely his. Like many bluesmen, Patton used what historians call "floating" verses—remembered (or, more likely, half-remembered) bits of other songs, which he picked up on the street, in bed, around a campfire, or in a juke joint, in an era before music was recorded and therefore frozen. Back then, performers were always collectors: of sounds, melodies, grudges, psychic states. The country blues was a wildly inventive idiom, but it was also rooted, like many vernacular traditions, in assemblage.

Musically, Oneohtrix Point Never could not be more distant from the country blues, but something about Lopatin's style reminds me of Patton and his itinerant cohort. Lopatin's music is built to make his listeners think about different things. "Again" eventually had me reconsidering my childhood, satellites, slow dancing, driving over a bridge in a new car, iPods, the lewd "No Smoking" ad that used to run before movies in the eighties, the spoken intro to Prince's "Let's Go Crazy" ("In this life, you're on your own"), Philip K. Dick, and, perhaps most of all, a line from Jack Spicer's 1962 poem "Three Marxist Essays." ("They know that which runs this country is an IBM machine connected to an IBM machine/They never think of using their knives against its aluminum casing.") Lopatin's best songs build a space—uncanny, warped, almost purgatorial—in which various eras and ideas, both dead and alive, can speak to one another.

Lopatin told me that he almost always thinks idiomatically. "Oh, this sounds like this. This kind of makes me think of this," he said. "I'm building a world of inter-referentiality. And then I can start collapsing some of those idioms on each other. I think that's my Gen X, postmodern side. I just like making crazy collages."

It seems possible that in the past few decades quantum leaps in technology have led to the creation of new—what? Feelings? Engaging with one's smartphone requires accepting an endless stream of simulacra; we scroll, gently submitting to an amorphous, floaty sense of connectivity and engagement. The artifacts of our youths, once relegated to the wormhole of memory, are here, now, on our phones. We are constantly being confronted by the gulf between what's real and what's less real. Oneohtrix Point Never speaks directly to that new sensation—the ease and exhilaration of it, but also the hazy, sourceless ennui that settles in when someone invests too much time in an ersatz and disembodied facsimile of life. When I asked the critic Simon Reynolds, who wrote about Oneohtrix Point Never's earliest releases in his 2011 book, "Retromania," what sorts of feelings he thought Lopatin's records evoked, he said, "I'm not even sure I can pinpoint what the emotions are. Often it's like strange new affects of the future." It's hard to think of another contemporary musician who addresses the experience of hyper-modernity—of living and dying on the Internet—with the same precision or compassion. Lopatin has found a way to make the fragmented experience of our present era not just beautiful but true. ♦

At the villa, Evy had to sleep with a blanket pulled tight under her armpits, her arms ramrod straight by her sides, to insure

A REPORTER AT LARGE

BEHIND A LOCKED DOOR

As a girl in Austria, Evy Mages was sent to a mysterious villa where a doctor performed cruel experiments. Decades later, she learned why.

BY MARGARET TALBOT

that her hands couldn't wander. Socializing was virtually forbidden. Nobody ever told her the reason for these rules.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAETITIA VANÇON

I—THE PALE-YELLOW HOUSE

One night in March, 2021, Evy Mages, a photojournalist in Washington, D.C., opened her laptop and, with trembling fingers, typed into Google the address of a villa in Innsbruck, Austria. For decades, Evy, who was fifty-five, had been haunted by memories of the house, where she had been confined for several months, starting when she was eight. She could still picture its pale-yellow exterior and the curved staircase and dark-wood panelling inside, but she'd kept what happened there a secret—even from a therapist whom she'd credited with saving her life. Evy's memories of the place had become dreamlike, simultaneously vivid and vaporous.

She remembered being wrested from bed in the middle of the night at the home of her foster family, in the Alpine valley of Kleinwalsertal. She was hustled into a stranger's car and driven through the mountains to Innsbruck. Nobody told her what kind of place the villa was, or how long she'd stay. Perhaps two dozen children were living there. Adults in white lab coats regularly administered shots and pills, and when it was time to eat the children were required to use weirdly abbreviated language: *"bitte, Löffel"* ("please, spoon"); *"bitte, Gabel"* ("please, fork"). In the morning, Evy attended school in the villa. At night, she had to sleep with a blanket pulled tight under her armpits, her arms ramrod straight by her sides, to insure that her hands couldn't wander. She was terrified of wetting the bed, because whenever she did the white coats would awaken her, even from deep sleep, and march her to the bathroom for an ice-cold shower; she would then have to stand in a corner for the rest of the night. She'd be shivering and it would be dark, except for the murky green light from a fish tank, which she was forbidden to look at.

Children at the villa were issued thick, bloomer-like underpants. Shrill alarm bells rang day and night. Orders blared from loudspeakers that hung over doorways; to Evy, the voices seemed to belong to all-seeing powers. Sometimes she was summoned to recount her dreams to an adult. This unnerved her: she could tell that there was considerable peril in the exercise, though she didn't understand why. She felt clever when she told her interrogator that she couldn't recall any dreams, but the result was punishment: she had to sit alone in a room until she came up with something. Once, she was shown a set of farm animals and told to assign to each one the identity of a person in her foster family. Evy agonized—surely it was the wrong choice to make her foster mother the pig.

One day, she and some other children were told to line up in front of a closet to receive a treat. When the person in charge dropped dates into Evy's skirt, which she had dutifully held out, she saw that ants were crawling on the fruit. Evy shook her skirt frantically, jumping up and down. White-coated adults carried her to the bathroom, where they held her down on the tile floor and administered a shot.

The pervasive sense of shame and surveillance had created a blurring effect. Evy could recall almost nothing about the children who had slept alongside her, in one big room, perhaps because talking to one another was largely banned. A yellow dot had marked her bed and the location of her toothbrush, and the color had perturbed her ever since. As an adult, she reminded herself that yellow was a happy shade, and tried to overcome her aversion by bringing home sunflowers.

When Evy was twenty, she moved to the United States. She settled first in New York City, where she eventually got a job at the *Daily News;* in 1998, she married a reporter she'd met there, Paul Schwartzman. They relocated to D.C. and had three children, Sammy, Stella, and Lily. She and Schwartzman later divorced, but over the years Evy amassed a tight circle of friends in D.C. and built a close relationship with each of her kids. In middle age, she felt more grounded than she had ever been. It was time to turn the key she'd been carrying around for decades—she'd never forgotten that the villa was on Sonnenstrasse—and enter those rooms again.

Nothing about Evy's childhood had been easy, so in some ways it puzzled her that the months on Sonnenstrasse loomed so large in her mind. She was born in 1965 in an Austrian town called Feldkirch, to a twenty-two-year-old single mother who was staying in a Catholic home for women. She relinquished Evy to foster care. A family took in Evy when she was three, with an eye to adoption, but the mother, Anni, seemed to quickly turn on her. Anni ran a bed-and-breakfast in the family's home, a stucco chalet with carved wooden balconies, tucked into a steep mountainside. Her husband, Erich, was a postman, making deliveries on skis in the winter and often retreating to a hut that he'd built, farther up the mountain. Managing the B. and B. put a strain on Anni, who once described herself to a doctor as "nervous." She soon became convinced that any bit of wear and tear—a scratch on a wall, a chip on a plate, a spot of missing paint on a crucifix—was an act of malice by Evy. As Evy remembers it, Anni would point out the damage, and if Evy didn't take responsibility for it Anni would hit her until she did. As punishment, Anni would send Evy to the cellar or lock the door to the bathroom so that she couldn't use it. Anni told Evy that her mother had been a whore.

If Evy didn't like the treatment she was getting, Anni warned, she could always go to a "worse place." Although Evy was afraid of Anni, she yearned for her love, and dreaded being sent away. Anni and her husband had a biological daughter, who was a year older than Evy. This girl was well behaved and shy; Evy was tomboyish, exuberant, and a little clumsy—the kind of kid who always had a banged-up shin or a skinned knee. At school, a priest sometimes scolded her, mournfully, for giving her delicate foster mother such a hard time. When Evy was sent to the villa, it confirmed her worst fear: nobody wanted her.

After a number of months in Innsbruck, Evy was abruptly sent back to Kleinwalsertal. But Anni soon became impatient with her again, and shipped her off to an orphanage in Kempten, Germany, run by nuns. There, Evy forged bonds with her fellow-orphans, who walked to school together in donated clothes and weren't allowed to participate in after-school activities. (The nuns told Evy that people like her were "gutter trash.") As a teen-ager, she began looking after the younger orphans—teaching them to tie their shoes, combing lice from their hair—and this came to feel like a sweet responsibility. Grow-

ing up, Evy told me, she'd trusted that God would eventually punish the cruel adults in her life. Then, one day, she saw a priest chase away a poor, mentally ill woman who was trying to give him some flowers—and she began to lose her faith.

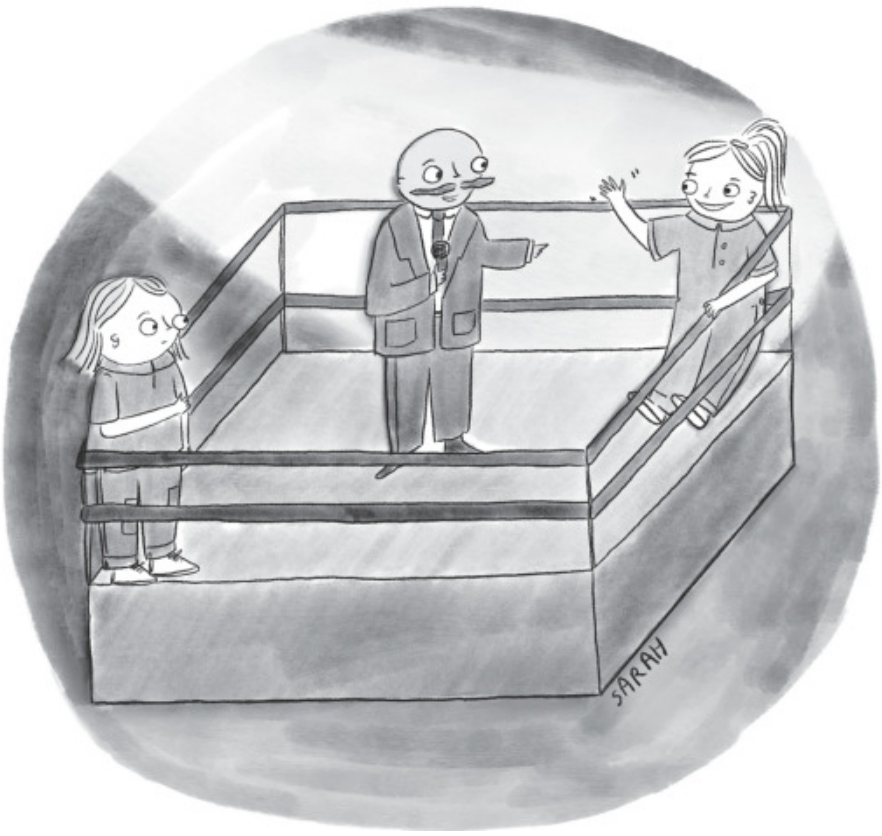
As an adult, Evy couldn't bring herself to tell her kids about Sonnenstrasse, but she did talk about the orphanage. When her affectionate and empathetic youngest child, Lily, became a teen-ager, she was fascinated to hear about her mother's life at that age. The nuns, Evy recalled, sometimes yanked her hair or slapped her. Once, she'd been hit after using a pen as eyeliner—makeup was forbidden.

Evy aged out of the orphanage at sixteen. She attempted a second return to Kleinwalsertal, where she began studying hotel management at a nearby school, but Anni still couldn't abide her. Evy was on her own. For a while, she worked at another local guesthouse, whose owner let her stay in a room upstairs, then moved to Vienna, where she felt lonely and unmoored. One day during that period, she drove to Innsbruck with an older friend, Jimi, a free spirit who'd run a bar in Kleinwalsertal and had watched out for her there. During the road trip, they sang along to a cassette of "The Threepenny Opera." When they arrived at Sonnenstrasse, they knocked on the villa's arched front door. A panel slid open, and a face appeared. Evy tried to ask about her stay there. The panel closed, with a clang.

When Evy scrolled through her search results for the Sonnenstrasse villa, which were in German, she noticed an unusual word: *Kinderbeobachtungsstation,* or "child-observation station." She'd always assumed that the villa had been some sort of psychiatric facility. It had seemed like "a transfer hub," as she recently put it—a place where children were monitored, classified, and then sent to other institutions. From the search results, Evy learned the name of the woman who'd headed the place: Dr. Maria Nowak-Vogl, a psychologist at the University of Innsbruck. Typing Nowak-Vogl's name into Google, she learned that the villa had indeed been a psychiatric facility, of a very peculiar kind. In 2013, an expert commission under the aegis of the Medical University of Innsbruck had issued a damning report about the facility, saying that Nowak-Vogl had perpetrated systematic abuse under the guise of dealing with "difficult" children. The report came three years after a muckraking Austrian historian named Horst Schreiber published a book that reported on Nowak-Vogl, "In Namen der Ordnung" ("In the Name of Order"). Schreiber had interviewed dozens of Nowak-Vogl's victims and had publicly demanded that the Austrian government offer them apologies and financial compensation. The government, Evy learned, was now doing so.

A news article about the commission's findings described the villa as a combination of "home, prison, and testing clinic." The commission had reviewed medical records and reported something shocking: children had been injected with epiphysan, an extract derived from the pineal glands of cattle which veterinarians used to suppress estrus in mares and cows. Nowak-Vogl, a conservative Catholic, had wanted to see if epiphysan would suppress sexual feelings in children, as well as discourage masturbation, thus rendering her charges more "manageable." Masturbation—among both adolescents and young children, who use it to self-soothe—was a preoccupation of Nowak-Vogl's. So was bed-wetting. Her staff was instructed to keep charts documenting urination and bowel movements, and to check children's underwear "with the eyes or the nose." Schreiber described her as being "on a crusade against masturbation and sexual excitedness."

The villa's staff, Evy learned, hadn't focussed on treating individual children. As Michaela Ralser, a University of Innsbruck professor who worked on the commission's report, wrote, Nowak-Vogl's goal was "protecting society from psychologically conspicuous children and adolescents." Ralser described the villa as "a closed system . . . characterized by the authoritarian leadership style of its unrestricted leader." As Evy later discovered, there was a pronounced Nazi lineage to the practices of child psychiatry in Austria that shaped Nowak-Vogl's approach. The story of the Innsbruck child-observation station, and



"And, in this corner, your 'friend' who is always doing just a little bit better than you."

other places like it, was entwined with the history of postwar Austria and its deeply flawed de-Nazification.

Nowak-Vogl had started housing children on Sonnenstrasse in 1954, under the sponsorship of the Tyrolean government, and had overseen the operation until 1987. At least thirty-six hundred children, most of them between the ages of seven and fifteen, had been confined for up to several months at a time. Nowak-Vogl, who had close ties to Austria's child-welfare system, determined each child's next placement. Some kids went to orphanages; others, to reformatories, where they often had to work in laundries or otherwise provide free labor. Nowak-Vogl also sent children to work with farming families. Occasionally, a kid got to go home.

Evy felt a rush of validation. All of us have childhood memories that sporadically pop into our minds, like slides in a randomly organized carrousel, and it can be hard to make sense of these fragments. But most of us can check our recollections against those of parents, siblings, cousins, childhood friends. Evy hadn't been able to speak with anyone about the villa. Now, as she scrolled through articles and reports about it, she confirmed, and clarified, many bewildering aspects of her experience. Staff members, she learned, had been alerted to bed-wetting by alarm-bell sensors lodged in children's mattresses—and sometimes in their bulky underwear. Evy had correctly recalled the consequence: a freezing shower. The commission report noted that the silence pervading the villa had been easy to maintain in part because the children had frequently been given psychotropic drugs and tranquillizers, often in response to "disciplinary difficulties." Medical records showed that they had also been dosed with potent sedatives, including Rohypnol. Only a small percentage of the children were given epiphysan. Evy wondered if she'd been one of them.

The commission report also mentioned "bans on speaking" and a "criminalization of feelings" when residents tried to socialize. Schreiber, who contributed to the report, wrote, "Friendships and expressions of affection for other children and young people were frowned upon and prevented, often interpreted as sexualized behavior."

The report included a document that listed Nowak-Vogl's house rules from 1979 and 1980. Twelve pages long and printed in a tiny font, it is perverse in its despotic specificity. Personal belongings, including books and dolls, were taken away upon arrival. Children had to clean their plates scrupulously: "Only bones, cartilage, and bay leaves may be placed to the side." Unfinished food was to be presented at the next meal, and the next, until it was eaten. "Romping, whistling, screaming, and singing" were forbidden. "There is absolute silence when the soup is served," the document noted. "Even marginal remarks or seemingly justified questions are not allowed to pass." Staff members were instructed "to make mealtimes as short as possible and not to sit down with the children out of inertia." The monitoring of toilet habits was described in exhaustive detail, and there was even a rule about how toothpaste should be "sparingly pushed between the bristles" of a child's brush.

The more that Evy read, the angrier she became. Nearly four thousand children? Until 1987? Eight or so similar facilities had operated in Austria after the Second World War. How many thousands of children had spent time in repressive psychiatric institutions like hers? At all the facilities, confused children were brusquely evaluated for "misbehavior." But only the Sonnenstrasse villa was so consumed with stamping out sexuality.

In September, 2021, Evy approached me to see if I'd look further into her story. We had been friendly acquaintances for years. Our kids had attended the same elementary school, in Northwest

D.C., and I'd occasionally run into her in the neighborhood, or at a demonstration that we were both covering. Evy was high-spirited, flaxen-haired, and casually glamorous, with a wide, dazzling smile. Her accent, full of trilled "r"s and "v"-like "w"s, reminded me of the Velvet Underground's Nico. In a D.C. milieu crowded with former student-council presidents, she stood out. Sometimes I'd see her in the middle of the day leaning into deep conversation with a friend at the local Starbucks; it was as if she'd transformed the place into a Viennese coffeehouse, the way dropping a colorful scarf over a motel-room lamp can make the drab space look dramatic.

Though we hadn't had many one-on-one conversations, I'd been struck by Evy's emotional directness and impetuous generosity. "The outside matches the inside with Evy" is how her friend Keltie Hawkins, a therapist, put it. I'd noticed, too, that Evy genuinely liked and fiercely defended kids. More than almost any parent I knew, she was comfortable around defiant teen-agers. When my daughter was in middle school, with purple-streaked hair and an emotional intensity that discomfited some adults, Evy made a point of telling me how great she was. I learned later that Evy would take in her kids' friends, and friends of her kids' friends, when they had conflicts with their own families. Hawkins called Evy's house "the wayward station." She recalled seeing Evy cross a playground to tell a man who'd hit his daughter, "How dare you—that's your child, not your property." And Evy had once confronted some cops who'd caught friends of her teen-age children shoplifting at a local store. "I've known these kids since they were this tall," she told the officers. "They're good kids." The teens got off with a warning. Evy liked to describe herself as "deeply anti-authoritarian," and the more she told me about her past the more sense that made.

A few days after Evy learned about Nowak-Vogl, she e-mailed one of the commission's lead researchers, Elisabeth Dietrich-Daum, a professor at the University of Innsbruck. "Never did I imagine there would be a reckoning," Evy wrote, adding that she was "overwhelmed with gratitude to you and your team for . . . bringing these atrocities to light." In another e-mail, she wrote, "I am immensely grateful that I somehow had the strength to create a life after growing up in Austria as a freak, a reject, and a test object." Dietrich-Daum replied to Evy, noting that she could apply for financial compensation from the State of Tyrol's office for *Opferschutz*, or victim protection. She could also obtain her medical records.

By the time Evy told me about the *Kinderbeobachtungsstation*, she'd reached out to other scholars and had submitted testimony to the commission. She was moved when she received a letter of apology from Gabriele Fischer, a Tyrolean official in charge of youth welfare. Fischer said that Evy was entitled to an immediate payout of fifteen hundred euros; upon turning sixty, she could receive a pension of three hundred euros a month. "What happened to you should never have happened," Fischer wrote. "I can only promise to learn from your story."

Evy requested a copy of her medical file from the villa. Her stay had lasted from December 27, 1973, to April 17, 1974. (Her foster parents must have thought they'd been kind to wait until after Christmas to ship her off.) The file was chilling, Evy told me, and she'd only begun delving into it. It included a small photograph of her at eight, smiling brightly under ragged blond bangs. One reason she'd been reluctant to revisit her mistreatment at the villa, she explained, was that "having been in a mental institution just comes with a stigma, no matter how unjust it is." But learning that so many other kids had been abused there had "totally blown the lid off," and she now wanted to "know everything." Who was Maria Nowak-Vogl, and how had she exercised unchecked tyranny for so long? What ideas and training had shaped her views of children's minds and bodies? How had Evy ended up under her power? Had Evy been given epiphysan—and, if so, were there long-term effects? How many victims knew about the restitution program?

We agreed to travel to Austria together. There were people—officials, researchers—whom Evy wanted to meet in person. She was also considering going to the villa. The trip wouldn't be easy: Evy hadn't been back to Austria for more than twenty-five years and had not planned to return. The country felt claustrophobic to her—a cold basement crammed with detritus from her past. Although Evy remained fluent in German, she'd pointedly avoided speaking it for decades. In America, she told me, she'd built a new life, which "did not translate into the life or language of my mother tongue." She'd undergone therapy in English; she'd raised her children in English, picking up phrases of comfort and nurture that her American friends used. Evy was a natural as a mother, but, given the deprivations of her childhood, she had to learn the lingo. (When she heard a friend in D.C. say, "Aw, kiss the boo-boo" after her toddler scraped his knee, Evy added that to her repertoire.) Eschewing her native tongue wasn't a therapeutic method that anyone had recommended, but she'd found it a balm. I understand some German, but we agreed that, whenever possible in Austria, we'd conduct our inquiries in English. In April, 2022, we met up in Innsbruck, for the first of two trips that we'd make together.

"We don't go for the weakest—we go for the one that's checking its e-mail."

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Innsbruck is a pretty university town whose backdrop of snow-cloaked peaks can make a visitor feel dizzy. Many buildings are painted in sugary Habsburg pastels; the Inn River, a tributary of the Danube, rushes through the city center, where students crowd cafés and beer gardens. For Evy—whose every minute in Innsbruck was a Foucauldian nightmare—none of this felt familiar. Neither did the people we were meeting there. They seemed like representatives of a new Austria, unafraid to reckon with the darkest periods in their country's past.

Ina Friedmann, whom we saw on our first morning, had become one of Evy's heroes. A historian of medicine at the University of Innsbruck, Friedmann had worked on "Psychiatrisierte Kindheiten" ("Psychiatrized Childhoods"), a 2020 book of essays about Nowak-Vogl's child-observation station. Evy was delighted to discover that Friedmann, who is thirty-eight, looked like an avatar of alternative Austria: her hair was indigo, she wore a metal-studded jacket, and she carried a tote bag emblazoned with the English phrase "ONLY ANARCHISTS ARE PRETTY." Friedmann's academic writing was careful and restrained, but in person she was warm and expressive. She and Evy hugged for a long time, like old friends.

We sat down for coffee in the courtyard of a café—it was chilly, but Friedmann could smoke cigarettes there—and discussed what Evy had learned about epiphysan. Her chart hadn't mentioned the drug, but, given all the shots she remembered, she suspected that she'd received it. Her chart noted that she'd been caught in class with "her finger up her nose or her pen in her mouth, and her hand down her pants while she masturbated." (I told Evy that I had to applaud her ability to multitask self-comfort in such an environment.) Moreover, Evy was a bed-wetter and a child born out of wedlock—categories that Nowak-Vogl associated with deviance. Friedmann said it was certainly possible that Evy had received epiphysan. Nowak-Vogl had been administering the extract since at least the early fifties; in a 1957 paper on "hypersexuality," she'd written about giving epiphysan to an unspecified number of children. Epiphysan had been tested on humans

once before: in the nineteen-thirties, male prisoners in Vienna were given the drug, which appeared to temporarily curb the impulse to masturbate. But Nowak-Vogl was the first to administer it to children. She said that it suppressed "physical and mental restlessness." In 2015, Friedmann had reviewed some fourteen hundred medical records, identifying nearly thirty cases in which Nowak-Vogl had documented giving minors epiphysan—more girls than boys, and most of them between the ages of seven and eleven. But records of the medication were erratic, and there was evidence suggesting that Nowak-Vogl had ordered its use in less controlled settings, including private homes.

Nowak-Vogl claimed that epiphysan was to be given only to children who were overcome by "instinctuality," not to those who masturbated because of "neglect" or "neuroticism." It wasn't clear how children were sorted into these idiosyncratic categories. Patients—who were told little, if anything, about epiphysan—often regarded the shots as a punishment. At least one child understood that the extract was meant to suppress sexual urges, and refused it: In a report to a local youth-welfare office from the early sixties, Nowak-Vogl described, with frustration, a girl who had "countered the onanism treatment with a determined and conscious resistance." The girl had insisted that she wouldn't stop touching herself, because it "made her happy and otherwise she had it bad." Nowak-Vogl lamented, "The known effect of epiphysan is by no means so strong that it could compensate for such an attitude."

Nowak-Vogl, Friedmann told us, was willing to prescribe epiphysan even though almost nothing was known about its side effects. From what I'd read, Nowak-Vogl saw the drug as especially valuable for addressing social problems caused by *female* sexuality, including abortion and children born out of wedlock. Ideologically, her preoccupations placed her in the mainstream of postwar cultural attitudes in Austria, especially among traditional Catholics. Bodily shame has plagued many a childhood, but if the literature of Austria is any indication, that country was particularly thick with it in the twentieth century. The writer Thomas Bernhard, in his 1985 memoir, "Gathering Evidence," describes being humiliated when his mother hung his urine-stained sheets out a window overlooking the street, *"to deter other children, and show them all what you are!"* The work of the Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek plumbs the psychosexual depths of Austrian child rearing; in her 1983 novel, "The Piano Teacher," the fiercely repressed protagonist, who is in her thirties, still sleeps in bed with her mother.

But, even in this context, the measures that Nowak-Vogl took were extreme. To justify the use of epiphysan, she relied on a panopticon-like system of surveillance that made it virtually certain every child would be caught touching herself. The squeak of a bedspring triggered reprimands over the loudspeakers, with the "culprit" made to stand in the hall for the rest of the night. (Nowak-Vogl was vexed that self-stimulation was hard to police in private homes, writing, "With little possibility of supervision, and possibly with the special skill of the pupil, there is a risk of overlooking this condition.") Nowak-Vogl's quest for an antidote to onanism was too haphazard to qualify as research, and she seems to have determined almost nothing concrete about epiphysan's effects or complications. It would have been reasonable to wonder if the extract might damage a human's pineal gland or interfere with puberty. Nowak-Vogl appears to have adopted an anecdotal, after-the-fact approach to information-gathering. Friedmann told us that, as late as 1980, Nowak-Vogl was asking former patients and their doctors if they'd noticed any health effects from the epiphysan that she'd administered years earlier.

Whatever risks the shots entailed were worth it, Nowak-Vogl wrote in her paper on hypersexuality. Without epiphysan, the only options for a girl who couldn't stop masturbating were "accommodation on one of those very lonely, sometimes childless mountain farms, where all residents could be informed and reassured about the girl's condition," or placement in a sanatorium, which entailed "renunciation of further schooling." As a chapter in "Psychiatrized Childhoods" notes, Nowak-Vogl acknowledged having performed an experiment on humans, but she clearly thought that she was improving society by eliminating undesirable behavior in children. Kids who didn't explore their own bodies, or wet the bed, or talk or laugh or cry or run around too much, would grow up to become socially compliant workers. In a country whose econ-

MOJAVE GHOST

But here, you said, at the time of our intrusion,
you said this zone here is not one of the earth's sentences
but an overdub of stutters here where we're walking
on this slumbering crack, a complex, you said,
of tensions right here, and you bent and touched
your finger to the warm, ant-fenestrated dirt
while I surveyed the hairpin turn in the arroyo beside us
and then you stood and brought it, your finger,
to my lips, you said here, and you watched me
as the taste, part you part earth, brought a change to my face.

—Forrest Gander

omy had been shattered by the Second World War, her approach, however brutal, had its utility for the authorities.

To this day, there has been no systematic research into the long-term effects of epiphysan, but the expert commission reported that the extract has a short half-life, and is therefore unlikely to cause health issues in later adulthood. "Transmission of viruses" from bovine material can't be ruled out, though nothing of the kind has been reported. In any case, Nowak-Vogl's actions were certainly unethical, for she proceeded without the informed consent of either the children or their parents. Evy told me she was relieved that she hadn't known of the epiphysan experiment until recently; it might have led her to avoid getting pregnant, for fear of complications or birth defects.

I asked Friedmann how influential Nowak-Vogl had been beyond the hermetic world of the child-observation station. It turned out that she had published and lectured widely, and had written popular advice manuals about child rearing. The Catholic Church awarded her a papal medal for her service in ecclesiastic marriage courts, which can grant annulments. "She really was respected," Friedmann told us. "She was a full professor at the university." Because Nowak-Vogl was also a consultant to the youth-welfare office, she could enter state-run orphanages and "recruit patients from there." For nearly forty years, Nowak-Vogl's beds were consistently full.

II—CURATIVE PEDAGOGY

Nowak-Vogl was born, as Maria Vogl, in 1922 in Kitzbühel, a medieval town near Innsbruck which is popular with skiers. Her father, Alfred, was a juvenile-court judge. When the Nazis occupied northern Italy, from 1943 to 1945, Alfred presided over a *Sondergericht*, or special court, in Bolzano. Nowak-Vogl never wrote about her childhood, but, given her father's role in the regime, she was likely steeped in Nazi conceptions of aberrance. Gerald Steinacher, a historian of Austria at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, told me that the *Sondergerichte* existed to intimidate the populace and stamp out resistance, whether it be "a negative comment about the local Nazi leader or listening to Radio London." Such courts, Steinacher said, "made a mockery of justice," briskly issuing harsh sentences, including death.

During the war, Nowak-Vogl attended a Nazi-run teacher-training school. She studied medicine at the University of Innsbruck, and went on to receive a doctorate in educational philosophy there, in 1952. Six years later, she obtained a *Habilitation*—the highest academic qualification in many European countries—in the field of *Heilpädagogik*, or curative pedagogy. Throughout the German-speaking world in the early twentieth century, *Heilpädagogik* was an influential approach to treating "difficult" children. The goal of the field, which relied on close collaboration among medical experts, the courts, the state, the police, and the youth-welfare system, was less to help individual children feel understood than to turn them into productive, rule-abiding, sexually regulated members of society. *Heilpädagogik* had stressed biology from the beginning—inherited traits and inborn constitutions were seen as important reasons that children became resistant—but the Austrian school of curative pedagogy, which developed in the thirties, placed a particular emphasis on the hereditary component.

The celebrated physician Hans Asperger, known for his pioneering research on autism, became curative pedagogy's leading exponent in Austria. Evy and I visited Herwig Czech, a medical historian in Vienna who, in 2018, revealed Asperger's complicity in the Nazi regime's eugenics policies. *Heilpädagogik* experts in Austria, Czech told us, had been eager to demonstrate the field's compatibility with National Socialism, and also with the "strong authoritarian current" of Austrian Catholicism. Asperger had referred the most troublesome and mentally handicapped children to a Viennese institution, Am Spiegelgrund, where patients deemed "incurable" were killed.

Nowak-Vogl's villa, Czech said, embodied the tenets of the Austrian school of curative pedagogy, with its relentless inculcation of "good" habits in children burdened by supposedly hereditary predispositions to alcoholism or crime, and with its unflinching willingness to remove kids from environments deemed undesirable. (Writing last year in *Profil*, an Austrian news magazine, the journalist Christa Zöchling decried "the disastrous history of curative pedagogy in Austria," with its "dehumanization of children as 'hereditary failures' because they wet the bed or were left-handed, stuttered, or had learning difficulties or nervous conditions.")

Nowak-Vogl shared with *Heilpädagogik* an unforgiving mentality toward sexuality—including toward children who had been sexually abused. According to Czech, the leading figures of curative pedagogy in Austria "turned against the victims somehow, by assuming that there was a kind of biological *predisposition* to being abused." The idea was that a defective "personality trait led girls—mostly girls—to be practically seducing their abusers." In 1952, Asperger wrote that young female victims of sexual violence often possessed "an endogenous willingness to experience" such assaults; some were " 'passive lure types' who, above all, lack the natural protective mechanism of shame." For such girls, he recommended a "long-term change of milieu, preferably placement in a good institution."

In 1967, Maria Vogl married a psychiatrist in Innsbruck, Johannes Heinz Nowak, and hyphenated her name. They had no children. The couple apparently shared an interest in the rather grim wooden religious sculptures of a local folk artist. In the only video I've seen of Nowak-Vogl, from "Problemkinder," a 1980 Austrian TV documentary about the abuse of children in institutions, she wears a starched white medical uniform and has her hair in a low bun. Leaning back in her chair and speaking in an emphatic tone, she defends her insistence on silence at the table: "There are quite a few children who, at home, aren't allowed to talk with their parents at the table. There it is said, 'Eat your meal first, *then* talk.' So I think we are within the customary framework of the country."

In Vienna, Evy and I met with Ernst Berger, a prominent Austrian child psychiatrist in his late seventies. He told us that, between 1975 and 1985, he'd often see Nowak-Vogl at psychiatry conferences. He described her as a "conservative woman, with her coiffure held back like this"—he mimed a bun. "She was very serious. And in dinner situations it was not very nice to talk with her." Once, he said, after he'd finished a conference presentation of a paper criticizing the

youth-welfare system, Nowak-Vogl had approached him in anger. "I didn't know your work was so bad," she said. Berger, laughing nervously at the memory, told us, "I was so frightened!" He had been aware that Nowak-Vogl ran a child-observation station in Innsbruck, but he'd never visited it. He didn't know anyone who had.

Several months later, Evy and I tracked down someone who knew Nowak-Vogl's child-observation station from the inside. In the winter of 1968, when Sylvia Wallinger was a nineteen-year-old psychology student at the University of Innsbruck, she began working at Nowak-Vogl's institution. She had learned that it was headed by a distinguished academic who lectured on a subject that interested her: measuring concentration and memory in children. Wallinger stayed for about a year. She was looking for a thesis topic and had been told that she could conduct research under Nowak-Vogl's auspices. Moreover, the child-observation station was around the corner from the house where Wallinger lived with her family.

When Evy and I contacted Wallinger, who is now a psychoanalyst, she was in the Canary Islands, where she lives part time, but she agreed to speak to us on Zoom. She wore pink lipstick and dangly earrings; shoulder-length silver hair framed her face. Though Wallinger is a practicing Buddhist, she didn't seem particularly detached. She was clearly troubled by her memories of the child-observation station and expressed worry about upsetting Evy. Her empathy made Evy cry—the only time I ever saw her do so in an interview.

"The ice-cold showers—it was absolutely terrible," Wallinger said. "When I did it myself, I used warm water. I was reported, and Nowak-Vogl threatened me, 'Do what you're told or just get lost.'"

The stories of two girls in particular had stayed with Wallinger: "The smallest had two thumbs cut—the tops were cut off. She was maybe five. Her father was a gynecologist who'd caught her masturbating, and he'd amputated one thumb and then the other." The second girl, about eight, had accused her father of sexual abuse. "Because no father would *think* of doing something like this, it was *she* who was a compulsive liar," Wallinger said, bitterly. "And, because she was a compulsive liar accusing her father, she was brought to Nowak-Vogl's institution."

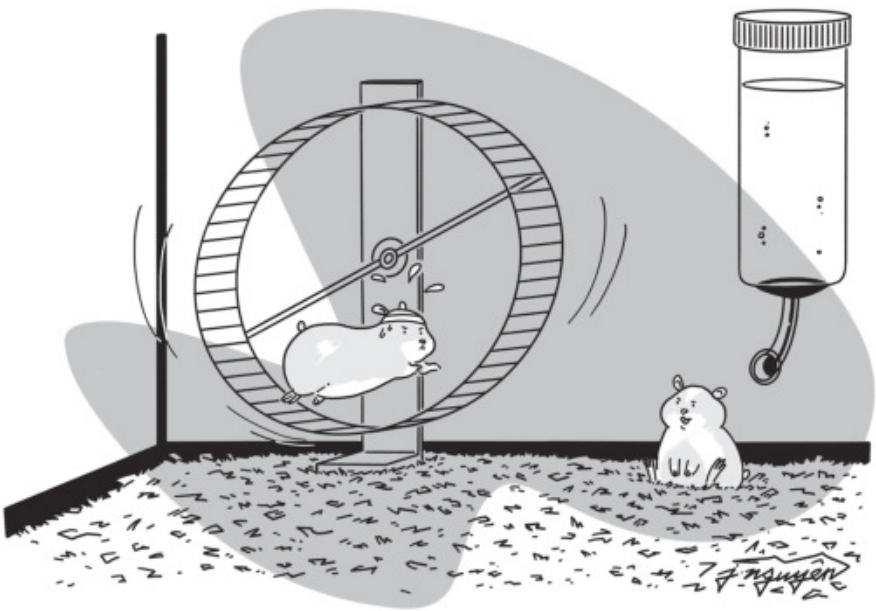
Sometimes, when Wallinger worked at night, she'd hear girls crying in the communal bedroom, and she'd slip in and discreetly comfort them. But she typically took the morning shift, arriving at work in her white uniform just before the wake-up routine. "If a bed was dirty or wet," Wallinger recalled, other children had to "stand around and make fun" of the miscreant. In the early twentieth century, a punitive approach to bed-wetting was common, including in America. Most experts gave little credence to the many developmental, physical, and emotional issues that cause a substantial minority of children to wet their beds past the toddler stage. Instead, children were sometimes thought to do it intentionally, out of laziness or defiance. Inventions such as the bed-wetting alarm could exacerbate the problem, waking up an entire household and shaming the unfortunate child. By the time that Nowak-Vogl was practicing her humiliating techniques, however, stigmatizing treatments were being discredited. She was a holdout.

When Wallinger worked at the child-observation station, Nowak-Vogl's sister, Elisabeth, oversaw the kids' schooling. Another figure in charge was a man called Höllebauer—Wallinger couldn't remember his first name. She described him as "a brute" who enjoyed beating girls: "He was a physical sadist, and Nowak-Vogl a psychological one." (During those years, a man named Robert Höllebauer, who had earned a Ph.D. in psychology in 1949, with a thesis building on Nazi racial theory, served as Nowak-Vogl's deputy.)

Nowak-Vogl sometimes hit the children, too. "I saw it at least once," Wallinger recalled. "A girl. She hit her around the face, and she fell." But what troubled Wallinger most was Nowak-Vogl's coldness: "She hated the children. She hated *children*. That's why she did it. In a certain way, she wanted to destroy childhood in the children. She wanted to make them robots."

When Evy told Wallinger about being forced to recount her dreams, Wallinger scoffed and said, of Nowak-Vogl, "Of course, that was not because she had any idea about psychoanalysis!" What had motivated her was "the inquisition—the *intruding*."

Wallinger told friends about the horrible treatment of children at Sonnenstrasse. And then she confronted Nowak-Vogl, even though she knew that it would mean the end of her thesis and, possibly, of her academic career: "When I told her, 'You cannot beat the children,' she asked me, 'Have you ever been at the B.D.M.?' That was the Bund



"Once he sees that rockin' bod, Butterscotch is totally going to regret breaking up with you."

Deutscher Mädel—the Nazi organization for girls. They wore the brown jackets and the swastika."

Wallinger protested: "Come on—I was born in 1948!"

"Oh, yes," Nowak-Vogl said. "But if you *had* been in the B.D.M. you would understand what I am doing."

A day or two later, Wallinger quit.

Throughout history, sadistic personalities have found cover—and even power and prestige—by directing their viciousness toward the furthering of a society's goals. A psychiatric theory that sanctions ruthlessly authoritarian child rearing with the aim of producing biddable workers can license, and even glorify, the person who implements it. Nowak-Vogl exercised cruel dominion over children, but she always did so within the framework of academic expertise.

It was convenient for Nowak-Vogl that her commitment to repressiveness, sexual and otherwise, dovetailed with many of Austria's anxieties after the Second World War. Authorities feared that war casualties had created a "surplus" of single women—a problem that seemed likely to worsen, given that divorce rates were climbing. Equally alarming was the thought that more women were having sex outside marriage. Politicians and journalists publicly fretted about venereal disease, particularly among women who had betrayed the fatherland by sleeping with Allied soldiers.

Austrians also worried that the deprivations of the war and its aftermath had fostered misbehavior in children. In an essay in "Psychiatrized Childhoods," the political scientist Alexandra Weiss writes, "Absent fathers, difficulties of everyday survival, poverty, unemployment and bombed-out houses stood in the way of a carefree childhood and youth. . . . Parents were busy organizing everyday survival, children had to contribute to it and sometimes participated in semi-legal activities, such as the black-market trade."

In the fifties and sixties, as Austria focussed on rebounding economically, the government of Tyrol placed more children in state institutions than during any period before or since—sometimes simply because a kid had a working-class single mother. In an e-mail to Evy and me, Horst Schreiber, the historian, described Nowak-Vogl as the kind of "inwardly frozen" figure who seemed to answer "a great social need" in postwar Austria: she was a credentialled expert implacably devoted to identifying the "rotten apples" of the lower classes and turning them into "proper bourgeois subjects, mothers and housewives, well-behaved family breadwinners who live the Catholic sexual morality, go to work, are not deviant, respect the authorities, love the homeland, and respect property."

Even when Nowak-Vogl wrote about the importance of sleep for children, she managed to sound fascistic. In a 1964 essay published in English, she warned that children who tried to delay bedtime with mischief, or even thought of doing so, were guilty of "socially undesirable" behavior. By the seventies, Nowak-Vogl was also presenting her hypervigilant approach as an antidote to student-protest movements. In a contribution to a 1972 essay collection in which medical thinkers pondered the irksome question of why so many young people wanted to "revolt against society," Nowak-Vogl suggested that a major answer was *Vehrwahrlosung*—neglect. In the framework of *Heilpädagogik*, the word implied more than social deprivation: it implied that a person had a moral or personality defect that made her vulnerable—for example, to sexual recklessness and sexual abuse. As Michaela Ralser, the University of Innsbruck professor, put it to me, this pseudo-diagnosis "transformed the child in difficulty into a 'difficult child.'" A "neglected" youth, Nowak-Vogl wrote, was inclined "to oppose any trace of the old order, because it fails to completely indulge his overwhelming physical urges." She warned that it was insufficient to discipline only youths who actively rebelled; more passive types could also become dangerous, unless "educational or therapeutic measures" were employed to thwart their opposition toward society.

Nowak-Vogl never expressed interest in one of the biggest sources of anger among young Austrians: cultural amnesia about the country's Nazi past. In Germany, a reckoning with Nazism was hard to shirk, but many Austrians evaded responsibility by portraying their country as an *Opfernation*—victim nation—rather than as an enthusiastic participant in Nazi annexation. In fact, the Nazi movement had taken firm root in Austria: when Hitler's troops marched across the border, in March, 1938, crowds welcomed them with flowers.

Immediately after the war, some Nazi war criminals did face justice in Austria—so-called people's courts initiated tens of thousands of prosecutions and executed thirty perpetrators. Austrians who'd joined the Nazi Party—about ten per cent of the population—temporarily lost voting rights and, in some cases, jobs or property. But by the mid-fifties the people's courts had been dissolved, and the Austrian government had abandoned de-Nazification programs. There was no substantive restitution for Austrian victims of Nazi atrocities, and the U.S., which was more concerned about Communism than about resurgent Fascism, stopped pressuring the country to ferret out war criminals.

The *Opfernation* mythology endured until 1986, when Kurt Waldheim, a former Secretary-General of the United Nations, ran for President of Austria. Journalists and historians uncovered evidence that, as a lieutenant in the Wehrmacht, he'd been attached to units that had sent thousands of Greek Jews to death camps and had executed Yugoslav partisans and civilians. Waldheim was elected despite these revelations, but the excuses that he'd offered—that he'd only been doing his duty, that he hadn't understood the scale of the atrocities—repulsed many young Austrians in particular. In the mid-nineties, the government finally began compensating victims of Nazi war crimes.

By then, though, former Nazis had held positions of power for decades. Among them were doctors and psychiatrists who had run Am Spiegelgrund, the Viennese institution where Hans Asperger had consigned children and adolescents with disabilities. At Am Spiegelgrund, more than seven hundred children who suffered from psychiatric, behavioral, or physical conditions that the Nazis considered "incurable" were killed. The American historian Edith Sheffer, in her 2018 book, "Asperger's Children: The Origins of Autism in Nazi Vienna,"

wrote, "In Nazi psychiatry, a child needed to demonstrate conformity, 'educability' and 'ability to work.'" She noted that "family and class factors played a role" in a child's survival: "Chances of death were greater if the child was born out of wedlock, had an absent father, or a mother suspected of being unable to cope, with other children at home."

Under the Reich's T-4 program, the killing of institutionalized adults with disabilities had happened in gas chambers—the first instance of their use. But the "euthanasia" of children was accomplished slowly, by the very doctors and nurses caring for them. Children, Sheffer wrote, were "starved or given overdoses of barbiturates until they grew ill and died, usually of pneumonia."

In 1946, a people's court sentenced to death Ernst Illing, the head of Am Spiegelgrund, after he confessed to direct involvement in the killings of some two hundred children. His deputy, Marianne Türk, spent six years in prison. But these were exceptions. Hans Bertha, a key medical adviser to the T-4 program, was never called to account, and he became the dean of the medical faculty at the University of Graz. Hans Krenek, the "pedagogical director" of Am Spiegelgrund, later directed Vienna's youth-welfare department.

If anything, Nazi psychiatrists, including those who sanctioned the murder of children, found themselves in a privileged position after the war. Many Jewish practitioners, including Sigmund Freud, had fled Austria in the thirties, and few of them returned; this exodus had opened up professional opportunities for Nazi scientists, many of whom, in addition to their ethical failings, were mediocrities in their fields. "Psychiatry, neurology, and pediatrics all had a high proportion of Jewish academics and practicing doctors," Herwig Czech told me. "They left a huge gap."

One survivor of Am Spiegelgrund remembered a physician named Heinrich Gross doing morning rounds in his Nazi uniform, handing out "sweets to some of the children, mainly the bed-wetters or the slow ones," before they were taken away. In 1950, Gross was convicted of manslaughter by a people's court, but the Austrian Supreme Court overturned the verdict for procedural reasons, and the case was never reheard. Gross became the director of his own neurological institute, where he conducted research on the preserved brains of children killed at Am Spiegelgrund.

He also became a highly paid court-appointed psychiatric expert. In 1976, Gross was hired to assess Friedrich Zawrel, an Austrian accused of stealing from a supermarket. Zawrel had been held in Am Spiegelgrund as a ten-year-old, mainly because he came from an impoverished family. Recognizing Gross, Zawrel said to him, "I know people who have committed crimes hundreds of thousands of times worse than mine. They are respected citizens." When Gross appeared confused, Zawrel said, "Herr Doktor, you have a very bad memory. . . . Didn't you hear the little children crying on the balcony? You never heard it—those who were murdered?" Gross took his revenge: he successfully recommended that Zawrel be confined to an institution for incorrigible offenders. From behind bars, Zawrel managed to unmask Gross to the Austrian media. In 1981, Zawrel was released, and prosecutors eventually brought murder charges against Gross. But he was deemed unfit to stand trial, and in 2005 he died a free man, at the age of ninety.

If Austrian psychiatrists who oversaw the murder of children were allowed to climb the professional ladder unimpeded, was it any wonder that Nowak-Vogl was, too? One of the child-observation facilities in Austria was run by Franz Wurst, a pediatrician who'd boasted of being the youngest doctor in the Reich. Wurst sexually abused children in his care; in the past two decades, hundreds of victims have come forward. But when he was finally arrested, in 2000, it wasn't for this abuse—it was for his role in the murder of his seventy-eight-year-old wife. She had been suffocated, at his behest, by his nineteen-year-old godson, whom he'd molested over a period of years. (Wurst was sentenced to seventeen years in prison but was released after four years, for health reasons.)

Nowak-Vogl didn't go wholly unchecked in the decades before Horst Schreiber and the University of Innsbruck researchers launched their investigations. Students protested her lectures because she brought in child patients and presented them to classes as case studies. In 1980, a director named Kurt Langbein made "Problemkinder," the TV documentary, which exposed some of the disturbing practices at the Innsbruck villa, including the administration of epiphysan. The film was broadcast over the protests of conservative Tyrolean politicians.

Langbein, who is sixty-nine, grew up around concentration-camp survivors; his father, Hermann Langbein, an actor turned resistance fighter, was a political prisoner at Auschwitz and later wrote several books documenting his experiences there. Evy and I visited Kurt Langbein at his office, in Vienna, and he told us that, in making the film, he'd wanted to expose Austrian institutions "where the old Nazis were still working," adding, "It was baggage from my father that I tried to carry properly." His documentary had triggered some reforms at the Innsbruck institution. Nowak-Vogl had a new supervisor, Kornelius Kryspin-Exner, who ordered an end to the use of epiphysan (which, Kryspin-Exner acknowledged, "does not have any medical indication") and to the restrictions on speaking ("the psychological value is zero"). But Nowak-Vogl remained an esteemed academic. Though she officially retired in 1987, she continued lecturing at the University of Innsbruck—on such subjects as "behavioral biology as a guide to educational crises"—until just before her death, in 1998, at the age of seventy-six.

Nowak-Vogl's child-observation station remained in operation for seven years after "Problemkinder" aired, and it wasn't subjected to further investigation until the two-thousands. Nevertheless, a new generation of mental-health professionals, some of whom had come of age with the student and feminist movements of the sixties and seventies, helped reshape the field of child psychiatry in German-language countries. *Heilpädagogik* was eclipsed by more child-centered, humane, and psychotherapeutic approaches. Closed institutions like Nowak-Vogl's fell out of favor. The people who'd been trapped in them, however, still bore their scars.

III—OTHER VICTIMS

On our first trip to Austria, Evy hadn't wanted to meet other former patients of the Innsbruck child-observation station. She was determined to keep her memories of the villa distinct—and

she didn't want to speak German. But the more that her own recollections were validated the less fragile she felt. Learning the facts, she told me, gave her something powerfully "concrete": "It's not just Evy overreacting. It's not just me making up stories, imagining things, lying—all the things I was told I did as a kid."

When we returned to Austria, three months later, Evy was ready to meet, and offer help to, other victims of the psychiatric regime that had harmed her. We made plans to gather with some women who had been institutionalized under Nowak-Vogl. Austrian privacy laws—and a lingering atmosphere of shame—made it hard to find people who'd been confined at Sonnenstrasse. Many residents had spent the rest of their youths in orphanages or other institutions, and weren't eager to revisit their pasts.

Horst Schreiber first heard about the child-observation stations from students he taught in an adult-education program, in the mid-two-thousands. The victims he met were initially reluctant to discuss their experiences, but, after he built a rapport with them, some agreed to be interviewed for his book. He offered to introduce three of them to us. Schreiber, who is sixty-two, has specialized in writing about uncomfortable aspects of Austrian society—the Nazi era, poverty, the children's homes—and he has the merrily pugnacious air of a veteran gadfly. He rode a bicycle everywhere and talked so volubly that, at the Innsbruck café where we first met, one meal melted into another. His laugh was a torrent of high-pitched giggling that reminded me of Tom Hulce in "Amadeus."

Schreiber nodded vigorously when Evy told him of the shame that she'd felt at "having been in a mental hospital like that." She added, "You don't even realize how strong it is, until finally a day comes when the tables are turned, and it's 'No, shame on *you.*'"

"This was the *purpose* of this institution—to shame," Schreiber said. "And speaking in public—that helped a lot of people to not be ashamed any longer." He took his scholarly obligations as a historian seriously, but he was just as serious about his moral obligations to the people whose stories he'd documented. He'd helped victims of Austrian institutions obtain their medical charts, organized commemorative events where victims could speak, and pushed for the creation of the expert commission that recommended reparations for former Innsbruck-station patients. One of them, Christine, was so appreciative of Schreiber's work that she'd got a tattoo depicting the cover of his book.

Christine was among the three former patients who'd agreed to meet us and Schreiber for lunch, at a restaurant at the foot of a mountain west of Innsbruck. She and the other two, Heidi and Hanni, had become friends, and in front of the restaurant the women greeted one another warmly. Then they did the same with Evy.

We sat down at a long table outside a traditional whitewashed building with dark-wood shutters and beams. Below us was a green meadow bright with sunshine. Rivulets of melted snow ran down the craggy mountains, glittering like silver chains. We stayed there all afternoon, alternating between beers and coffees, spätzle and salads. Christine was funny and outgoing and fidgety. She wore a rainbow-striped sleeveless top and bright-blue eyeliner. She showed off her book-cover tattoo—it was on her right leg—and warned me against a Tyrolean specialty on the menu, unappetizingly described as gray cheese, which she then ordered.

Like Evy, the three women had, in addition to the child-observation station, spent time in other harsh institutions and in foster care. With truncated educations and traumatic upbringings, they'd had challenging lives. But each woman said that the villa had particularly haunted her. All three remembered the suffocating imperative of silence, the minute monitoring of their movements, the enforced lifelessness so inimical to a community of children. Heidi told us that she'd come from a lively, loving home; her mother, who was Romani, was not "a typical Austrian hausfrau in an apron"—she'd strung up fairy lights in their back yard, played the mandolin,

Victims gather in the Alps. From left to right: Hanni, Evy, Christine, and Heidi.

and loved to dance. One day when Heidi was eight, she came home from school and found that her mother had forgotten to leave a key under the doormat. Night fell, and she and her older brother went to a police station for help. Child-welfare officials immediately picked them up and separated them; she didn't see her brother again for twenty-seven years. In a recording that Heidi had made with Schreiber, she said that the worst thing about Nowak-Vogl's institution was the "complete ignoring of the inner life—the soul—of the child."

Hanni, who wore a flowered dress and pearls, had short gray hair and a soft, sympathetic face. At seventy-one, she was the oldest of the three, and she said that she'd been confined at the child-observation station multiple times—starting at the age of two. When she had difficulty learning her colors, Nowak-Vogl beat her. She remembered voices booming out of the loudspeakers the instant a child spoke: "*Quiet! Quiet!*"

Christine said that she'd never seen a loudspeaker before arriving at the villa, at the age of six, and had believed that the voices were ghosts.

Evy leaned toward each woman in turn, placing a consoling hand on hers. She had switched to German—none of them spoke English, and it was worth it to her to communicate directly. They all had children, and shared the kids' names and ages. Wind rippled the shimmering leaves on birch and aspen trees. Fat bees buzzed around the sudsy glasses on the tables. One stung Schreiber on the mouth as he sipped beer, and Christine dug around in her tote bag for a salve. Somebody asked about nightmares and flashbacks. Heidi, who wore a moss-green dress and smoked cigarette after cigarette, volunteered that Christine had suffered the most flashbacks, because "she doesn't have the peace she needs to mentally work through everything." Christine then explained that the stigma she'd internalized as a child made her feel responsible for troubles her own children were now experiencing.

They talked about their medical charts, which were a confusing business. Nowak-Vogl had devised her own diagnostic code, using letters, and nobody had completely cracked it. Notes on the charts were a mixture of harsh judgments (kids were deemed "lazy" or "sneaky" or "slobs") and psychological jargon, some of it imported from psychoanalysis (children had "neurotic" or "Oedipal" tendencies). Evy's chart identified her as suffering from a jealousy of her foster sister which could be either "psychopathic or neurotic." She was also deemed a "gossip" who sucked her thumb, wet her pants, and lifted her skirt to fix her underwear. It was noted that she had once spilled water on another girl's bread, and had "probably bent a tulip" in a garden but "didn't admit to it."

When we'd come across the line about the tulip, Evy said, "There was no winning in that environment." The tiniest act was turned into a negative "judgment on your character." Any errant behavior that Nowak-Vogl observed was attributed to inborn deficiencies. The institution was seen as an objective diagnostic machine, and nobody in charge seems ever to have reckoned with the distorting behavioral impact of ripping children from their homes and dropping them, without explanation, into a frightening new reality. Instead, the researchers condemned Evy for her "clinginess."

A consistent theme in Evy's chart was her torment over being abandoned. A typical entry observed, "She wants to be noticed and is always afraid that she'll be forgotten at home." The chart noted that Anni, Evy's foster mother, hadn't sent letters or packages regularly.

Most victims who reviewed their charts couldn't help but be rattled by them. One woman had told Schreiber that reading hers had been "shocking" because it made her seem, at four years old, like a "sex monster." Georg Kaser, another former resident at the child-observation station, who met with Evy and me on a Zoom call, had ended up at Sonnenstrasse when he was ten. He came from a happy home, but he had developed anxieties—panicking, for example, when he sensed that his heart might be beating strangely. At the villa, he was miserably homesick, but this was construed as yet another indicator of constitutional weakness; his chart noted, with evident distaste, that he cried at night and was "always seeking attention with his loud voice," or else staring "straight ahead," looking "depressed." Outwardly, Georg could make a good impression, but in secret he was "always up to something," and had "a craving for validation."

Georg is now an actor who runs his own theatre company. He has three adult

children, and he proudly showed us photographs of them. He wore hip yellow glasses, and seemed charming and at ease on the Zoom call, though he said that he had suffered from anxiety throughout his life. He had been curious to get his chart, but reading it had taken him aback. All the things that he remembered as most salient about the place— being locked in the cellar, being forced to eat bits of fat he'd left on a plate, watching a boy who had difficulty dressing himself be paraded around and humiliated by the staff—went unnoted.

Evy's file didn't mention therapies. The authors of "Psychiatrized Childhoods" argue that the "most striking" quality of the charts is that "treatments were rarely named" and "their success or failure hardly reported." The charts create "the impression of a certain arbitrariness." Talk therapy certainly wasn't offered. Hanni and Christine said their records indicated that they'd been given epiphysan. Georg's chart mentioned that he had been given barbiturates, but noted nothing about their effects.

Heidi said her chart noted that she'd talked back to Nowak-Vogl, demanding to know why she was there, how long she'd be there, and where her brother was. Reading her file, she felt that she had been disparaged for being a child *nicht auf den Mund gefallen*—a blabbermouth. Though Nowak-Vogl grudgingly noted Heidi's intelligence, she recommended that she be sent to a Catholic home, where she ended up working in the laundry instead of attending school. (Despite this, Heidi managed to have a rewarding career, as a legal secretary.)

Ina Friedmann, the historian of medicine, told me in an e-mail that the sedatives appear to have served mainly to "guarantee the functioning" of the child-observation station from day to day, by preventing " 'wild' behavior." Again, neither Nowak-Vogl nor her colleagues seem to have noticed that their scientific observation of children was being tainted by the constant drugging of their charges.

When it was time to head back down the mountain, Evy thanked each woman. Remembering Sonnenstrasse had been such a lonely experience for so long, she said. Evy told them that she wanted the Tyrolean government to make a bigger effort to find people who were entitled to an apology and to reparations. There had been a flurry of attention in Austria a decade ago, when the commission report came out, but evidently many victims had missed the news. Why wasn't there a comprehensive Web site that laid out all the necessary information, including ways for victims to connect with one another and with therapists? If the government wouldn't create one, Evy decided, she would do it herself. To date, four hundred and fourteen former patients at Nowak-Vogl's institution—less than twelve per cent of the total—have come forward to report being abused.

IV–FAMILY SECRETS

Learning the truth about the villa soon led Evy to other discoveries, about her family and Austrian history. She hadn't expected so much to fall into place, and I sometimes saw her shake as if an electric current were running through her—from the force of revelations and memories, and from anger at officials who tried to withhold information or questioned the value of revisiting the past.

As Evy now recognized, she had once taken refuge in this attitude herself. She'd left the country the year after graduating from hotel-management school, in 1984, and had never considered returning home. For seven months, she worked as a wine steward on a cruise ship in the Caribbean. But she tired of all the drunk tourists, and when the ship was docked in San Juan she and a co-worker decided to quit their jobs and fly to Miami. When they got to the airport, the last flight for Miami had already taken off, but there was one leaving for New York. Evy got on it.

She instantly felt comfortable in the city: for the first time in her life, she wasn't relentlessly "judged for being different." She was just shy of twenty-one and didn't know Manhattan from Brooklyn or Queens. But she cobbled together a new life, loving the anonymity offered by a city as big as New York, where your past didn't have to trail you like the clattering cans on a newlywed couple's car. She initially stayed at the Y.M.C.A. on Forty-seventh Street and worked random jobs: scraping plaster for an apartment renovation, waiting tables in the Village. She once waited on Uli Edel, the German film director, who was then making "Last Exit to Brooklyn," and they dated for a while. She befriended a bald, bearded man because she thought that he was the writer Shel Silverstein; he wasn't, but over diner breakfasts he told her stories about the gay S & M scene.

One day, Jimi, the bar owner from Kleinwalsertal, and her husband, Andi, had the inspiration to send Evy a camera as a gift. Evy had never had one before, but she loved it right away, and roamed the streets taking pictures. She signed up for classes at Parsons and at the International Center of Photography, and became a devotee of Dorothea Lange. Her first published picture, of striking workers at LaGuardia Airport, ran in a leftist New York weekly called the *Guardian*. "I thought it was *very* much like Dorothea Lange!" she said, laughing.

She started freelancing for Agence France-Presse, then got a job with Reuters. In 1993, the *Daily News* hired her. It was a boys' club, but a friendly one. She'd receive a gruff directive—"Go to the East River, there's a floater"—and bicycle across town to get the shot. She won recognition for her work, and in 2000 she was named photographer of the year by the New York Press Photographers Association. One evening, on assignment for the paper, she was flying over the Brooklyn Bridge in a helicopter at sunset. The East River was glowing orange, and as she leaned out to get some shots she began sobbing: "I thought, I'm in New York—I've made it. But I couldn't tell anybody how far I'd come."

Though she was determined to escape her past, it kept resurfacing. "I was just haunted," she told me. "I couldn't sleep with the lights off." Sometimes she became so panicked on the subway that she had to run off the train wherever it stopped next. The photographer Greta Pratt, who was her boss at the Reuters bureau in New York and became a close friend, told me that Evy was vivacious and driven but also "secretive, because she was so hurt inside." Pratt recalls that Evy would "just sort of turn and walk away" from anything that conjured upsetting associations. When Evy was in her twenties, she developed a profound eating disorder—she sometimes passed out from hunger. But her

experience of psychiatry in Austria had been so horrific that seeing a therapist felt impossible.

During this time, however, she began dating her future husband, Paul Schwartzman, a New York native who came from a family of therapists. He encouraged her to seek help, and she began seeing a specialist in eating disorders, who warned her that she might die in her forties if she didn't stop starving herself. With the therapist's coaching, she stopped. When I asked Evy why she hadn't been able to confide in the therapist about the villa, she said that the pain "was way too deep," and that her mentality at the time was "You're just trying to patch yourself up so you can walk down the street."

Evy had long accepted that she had no family—she'd never tried to track down her biological parents. But one day in 1995 she received a phone call from a sister she hadn't known she had. Her name was Barbara Wespi—her friends called her Barbarella—and she was a year younger than Evy. They had different fathers, and Barbarella had met their mother only a few months earlier. Their mother was named Evy, too. The sisters agreed to meet in Switzerland, where Barbarella lived. At the airport in Zurich, Evy was so nervous that she didn't want to get off the plane, but once she caught a glimpse of Barbarella—whose smile was as wide and radiant as her own—they stood pressing their hands on either side of a glass dividing wall, weeping.

Their relationship with the woman they soon dubbed Evy, Sr., started off promisingly, too. Evy, Sr., said she was overjoyed to finally have her daughters in her life. She explained that Evy's father was a young man with whom she'd had a short relationship in 1964, when she was twenty-one and working at a restaurant in Salzburg. Evy, Sr., had gone to the city hoping to be an extra in the summer opera's production of "Elektra"; the young man was studying art at the School of Seeing, an avant-garde institution founded by the Austrian painter Oskar Kokoschka. Evy's father had been sweet and intelligent, with curly chestnut hair and beautiful eyes. He had also been determined, tough, and energetic—qualities that Evy, too, seemed to possess. Barbarella's father had been a one-night stand whom Evy, Sr., had met while working at a train-station restaurant in Switzerland. She said, apologetically, that she couldn't remember either man's name.

Evy, Sr., told her daughters that she had been born in Innsbruck in 1943. Her father had been a Jewish wholesaler of shoes. In 1949, he died. In those immiserated postwar years, her mother, overwhelmed by the need to make a living, sent little Evy, Sr., and her brother, Jürg, to live in a convent school outside Paris. She died not long afterward. Evy, Sr., lived briefly with her grandmother, then in group homes. In her late teens, she became itinerant. When she was still a minor, the police in Marseille arrested her for prostitution—a false charge, she insisted—and sent her back to Innsbruck, where she was institutionalized for a time. Her life had continued to be peripatetic, but now she was settled down, in a village in the Italian Alps, with a retired Italian construction worker.

Evy was openhearted and curious about her mother, and felt connected by their shared experience of orphanhood. But their connection soon faltered. Evy, Sr., visited Evy and Paul in New York, but to Evy she seemed detached and unenthusiastic. After returning to Italy, she sent letters, but they often consisted of bland comments about the weather, and she evaded further questions about their family history. "It drove Barbarella and me crazy, because we wanted some real answers," Evy told me. "And it didn't feel like she had true curiosity about *us*. I'm sure it came from a lot of pain. She was a very hurt person, and that's how she dealt with her trauma."

Evy let their correspondence lapse, and by the early two-thousands she'd stopped communicating with Barbarella, too. In 2018, Evy received a call telling her that her mother had died.

By the time Evy and I began investigating her personal history, her adventurous older daughter, Stella, had just started college, in Paris, studying art, and she had expressed an interest in meeting Barbarella, whom Evy hadn't been in contact with for years. Evy began tentatively e-mailing and texting Barbarella, saying that she was sorry to have been such a disappointing sister. "You're the sister I want," Barbarella told her. Evy asked to communicate in English, and Barbarella agreed. "That opened up the opportunity completely," Evy told me. "Just to be accepted like that. And I think, in a strange way, if I'm totally honest, it helped when I found out the truth about Innsbruck. It was, like, 'Maybe if I share this with my sister, she'll understand why I've acted so fucking weird.' And she did."

Evy, Stella, and Barbarella met up in Paris in November, 2021. Barbarella, who is gay and has no kids, turned out to be an ideal long-lost aunt: she was affectionate and funny with Stella, and, like Evy, she was unfazed by teen-agers' roiling emotions. Barbarella had worked as an art restorer and as a club d.j., and now owned an interior-design business in Zurich,

"First that nice Romeo boy, now Hamlet and his family. Sometimes I think we shouldn't even sell poison."

where she had a close-knit crew of friends.

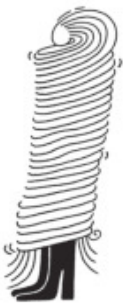
As a baby, Barbarella had been adopted by a Swiss couple in Horn, a small town on Lake Constance. The couple, who had previously adopted another daughter, soon divorced. The older girl had schizophrenia and was at times violent, and Barbarella had found it impossible to sustain a relationship with her. When Barbarella had first got to know Evy, all those years ago, she'd said to herself, "Oh, it wasn't my *mother* I was looking for after all. It was you." She told me, "Finding and losing Evy was difficult to understand. I tried to lock my heart and walk away, but it wasn't possible. My heart told a different story."

Barbarella joined Evy and me on our two trips to Austria. The first time I met her, in Innsbruck, she ambled over wearing red plaid stovepipe pants, black Converse high-tops, and an oversized sweater bearing the phrase "JE NE SAIS QUOI." On the second trip, Sammy and Stella, who were on summer break from college, and Lily, who was in high school, came, too. After gathering in Innsbruck one afternoon in July, we headed to a building that houses the Tyrolean state archive.

The archive had a fat file on Rudolf Mages, the maternal grandfather of Evy and Barbarella. Their mother's portrait of him was false. Rudolf hadn't been Jewish—he had been a Nazi, and such an eager Party member that he'd signed up in 1931. He'd gone to prison at least twice for Nazi political activities during the period between 1934 and the Anschluss, when Party membership was illegal in Austria. He'd fled to Munich when there was a crackdown on Nazis, and had been extended refugee status in Germany. Rudolf had held one of the highest honors the Party accorded—membership in the Blutorden, or Blood Order—for his devotion to the cause. In 1938, he and his wife, Herta, had "Aryanized"—taken over—an Innsbruck shoe store belonging to a Jewish proprietor, Richard Graubart. Later that year, during the November pogroms that broke out across the Reich, S.S. men found Graubart at home with his wife and four-year-old daughter, and stabbed him to death. These were bewildering discoveries. Had Evy, Sr., been lied to? Or had shame led her to conflate her father's identity with that of a Jewish man he had victimized?

With horror, Evy realized that the course of her childhood was partly attributable to the fact that her troubled mother had been raised by active Nazis. It was not a hereditary burden, of the kind that Nowak-Vogl had believed in. It was a historical burden.

She kept going through the archive's sepia-toned pages, as Sammy looked over her shoulder. In 1943, the file revealed, Rudolf had served a short time in prison for war profiteering—selling shoes without the proper ration certificates, and hoarding goods. Evy sighed in exasperation and said, "This is 1943, right? And you don't go to jail for *murdering* people, or for stealing somebody's whole life and property. But you do go to jail for selling shoes without a voucher."



Evy and Barbarella held out hope that Herta, Rudolf's wife, had been at most a reluctant participant in all this. Their uncle Jürg was still alive, in Germany, and Barbarella was in contact with him. He believed that Herta had divorced Rudolf after the war because she no longer wanted to be married to a Nazi. It wasn't clear to Jürg, though, why Herta had sent him and his sister to the convent school outside Paris. Perhaps she had been shielding them from their father's ignominy?

A few months later, we got closer to an answer. Evy, who had asked another Innsbruck archive if it had anything on Herta's family, received a reply from a historian and archivist named Niko Hofinger. Evy's timing had been fortuitous: in the basement of the city's police headquarters, somebody had just discovered a bunch of files from the Nazi period. The cache included a file on Herta. Evy might not like what she learned, Hofinger warned.

Evy asked to see a copy, and a PDF arrived in her in-box. It painted a picture of a woman out of Fassbinder's postwar trilogy: tough, cunning, and alluring. Like Maria Braun or Veronika Voss, Herta seemed to have traded on her looks, curried favor with Nazi leaders, and aggressively worked the black market. In 1936, according to an account that she'd given to the Innsbruck police, she'd lost her job as a salesclerk at a Viennese jewelry shop because of work she'd been doing for the then illegal Nazi Party: printing Party newspapers, making explosives. She married Rudolf, who was fourteen years her senior, in 1937, when she was twenty. A bookkeeper for the shoe store that the couple Aryanized described Herta as a "charming" woman whose "morals were not exactly impeccable," adding, "It was well known that she had several lovers. She had nothing left for her children. They were a burden." Herta, the bookkeeper said, had a "close connection" with Franz Hofer, the region's highest-ranking Nazi, and could call him at any time on a secret number. Rudolf used his wife's connections to Nazi officialdom to finesse business matters.

After the war, Rudolf was held in an Allied prison. Herta divorced him, and placed their kids in the French convent school. She moved into an apartment in Kitzbühel, where neighbors resented her lively parties and lavish life style. She travelled often to Milan and to Paris, where she sometimes visited her children. Police records indicated that state and border police had monitored Herta for suspected smuggling of furs (including a "monkey-skin cape"), paintings, antiques, and, possibly, cocaine.

In 1949, Rudolf killed himself, slashing his wrists in a guesthouse in Innsbruck. Herta died three years later, at thirty-five, apparently of a heart attack.

Evy shared the file with Horst Schreiber, who said that Herta came across as, if nothing else, a "clever" woman who had "seized favorable opportunities by the scruff of the neck." Still, Evy could find nothing to suggest that Herta had cared much for her kids.

Negligent parents come in all ideological stripes. And Evy, Sr., might have struggled psychologically wherever and whenever she was born. But her childhood had clearly been warped by her parents' Nazi activities—and by her mother's decision to send her to a foreign country. Evy found herself feeling more compassion for her mother than she had when she'd known her.

Moreover, they had both been abused

by doctors. After Evy, Sr., was arrested in Marseille, she had undergone electroshock therapy at a hospital outside Innsbruck. Electroshock was widely practiced in Europe and the United States in the postwar years, though it was usually indicated for intractable depression or schizophrenia, not for young women who might have been engaged in sex work. Evy, Sr.,'s memories of the experience had been unusually detailed. She'd described waiting her turn and seeing other patients convulse as electricity was administered. She remembered a Dr. Rodewald and a Dr. Simma, noting that Simma had a wide mouth that reminded her "of a toad's." (Official records indicate that psychiatrists named Hermann Rodewald and Kaspar Simma worked at Valduna, a hospital near Innsbruck, after the war.)

Evy and I tracked down a journalist named Hans Weiss, who, as a psychology student conducting research at Valduna in the seventies, had known both doctors and had witnessed electroshock procedures. He confirmed that patients awaiting treatment could see and hear what was in store for them. Patients were supposed to be given anesthesia, Weiss said, but some weren't—apparently as punishment.

Shortly after we returned from our first visit to Austria, Evy learned that her foster mother, Anni, was still alive. She was in a nursing home in Kleinwalsertal, and in her nineties, but, according to Evy's contacts in the town, she was able to receive visitors. Evy had decided to confront her on our second trip. She initially hesitated about including her kids in this particular encounter. But they were growing up, and they were curious. "It was always something I wanted to shield them from," Evy told me. "But then it's like you create secrets. And I don't want secrets." She concluded that treating the trip as "an investigation into something that happened in their family tree" might give them power over the story, and insight into the intimate ways that history works itself into us all.

To get to Kleinwalsertal, we took a train from Vienna to Munich, then a smaller train to Memmingen, a third train to Oberstdorf, and, finally, a bus over a mountain pass. It was high summer, and hikers with walking sticks passed through the town on their way into the Alps. We got cheese sandwiches at a café, then headed to the nursing home for an unannounced visit.

Anni sat teetering on the edge of a bed, a small, thin woman with lank white hair and a creaky, plaintive voice. But she seemed to recognize Evy, who knelt in front of her and said, "Anni, do you remember my childhood?"

"I have to think far back," Anni said. The conversation proceeded in fits and starts, with Anni looking into Evy's eyes and gripping her arm. "You rejected me," Evy said. "You didn't love me. You treated me terribly. You locked me in a cellar. I'm glad I get to tell you this."

"You can tell me everything—all the things I did wrong."

"It hurt me a lot, for many years."

"I am sorry," Anni said. "The sorrow is real."

For Evy, the encounter was draining and disorienting. The monster of her childhood had become a vulnerable, feeble woman who, for the first time in Evy's life, seemed to want her company. Evy briefly veered away from dark topics, informing Anni that she was now a photojournalist in the United States. They chatted about Anni's daughter, who now lived near Munich.

Suddenly, Anni wept, dabbing her eyes with her shirt. Evy turned to us and said, "Does somebody have a napkin for her?" She couldn't help but react with solicitude. Lily was kneeling next to her mother, with an arm around her. Sammy stood on Evy's other side, with his arms crossed across his chest, glowering. Stella sat at a distance, tears streaming down her face.

Evy asked Anni why she'd sent her to the villa. Anni replied that a doctor in the village had known of Nowak-Vogl's institution, and had recommended it. Evy said that Nowak-Vogl had been "very brutal," and asked Anni if she'd known her reputation. "No," Anni said. She told Evy, "We have both the same sorrow. You have it, and I have it. And we can't run away from it. That doesn't work." Evy and Anni hugged, crying.

Anni's daughter doesn't recall her mother being unkind to Evy. But that evening our group met up with Anni's nephew Heini, who had lived up the hill from Anni's B. and B., and he remembered vividly Anni's hostility toward Evy. He said that he wished his family had done more to stop it.

It wasn't clear how much of the nursing-home conversation Anni had taken in, but Evy felt some satisfaction in finally having the upper hand. By turning up with her "beautiful family," she told me, she had shown Anni that, despite her foster mother's mistreatment, she had thrived.

Stella put it more bluntly: "The best revenge Evy got was how great a mother she is."

Earlier this year, Niko Hofinger, the archivist in Innsbruck, informed Evy that a city archive likely contained a file documenting her time as a ward of the state. Evy successfully pushed for permission to see it. A letter from Robert Höllebauer, the brutal psychologist who worked alongside Nowak-Vogl, said Evy's stay at the villa had established that she was "neurotic," and that if she continued to create disturbances in her foster family she should be dispatched to one of the small children's homes known as SOS-Kinderdörfer. On these terms, she was returned to Anni, who, Evy recalls, made a point of telling other children in the village that she had just come back from a mental institution. Anni told a child-welfare official that, though Evy had been more restrained since her return from Nowak-Vogl's, she was still committing "malicious acts." Evy tried desperately to please Anni, but a letter from the official noted, "Her high spirit must constantly be dampened." If Anni had wanted a quiet playmate for her daughter and an efficient helper—both girls were expected to clean guest rooms and do other chores—Evy was not that.

The file also contained notes from caseworker, which said that Evy wanted Anni's affection, and tried to do what was expected, but was rambunctious. As we read through the assessment, Evy told me that she had skied recklessly as a kid. Once, she was entrusted with bringing a tall votive candle home from church; she dropped the candle, breaking it. She resented being the butt of jokes, and hated certain local traditions, such as when the terrifying Krampus came to the door in December, threw "bad" children in his sack, and carried them out into the snowy night. Evy got upset when she was forced to sit on the "donkey bench" at school with the only other child deemed an out-

sider—a Turkish boy. The school's principal recommended that she be sent away again, as soon as possible, because she outshone Anni's daughter academically. This, apparently, is why Evy ended up in the orphanage in Germany: she had been too smart for her own good, and her high spirits had proved incurable.

In the file, Evy discovered a record of her birth, and on it was written something that she'd never expected to learn: a father's name. One morning, she texted me a photograph of a handsome, brooding man who bore a resemblance to the actor Joaquin Phoenix. "I think this is my father," she said. He was Othmar Zechyr. On the document, Evy, Sr., had provided his birth date, May 28, 1938, and his birthplace, Linz. Looking him up, we saw that, just as Evy, Sr., had told her daughter, he had studied at Oskar Kokoschka's art school, in Salzburg. Zechyr had become a well-known artist in Austria, with work in major galleries and museums. He had made moody, cross-hatched pen-and-ink drawings—of knolls and haystacks, of fantastical machinery. Zechyr, who died in 1996, had three children. Evy is now in correspondence with one of them, an art historian in Vienna. She has broached the idea of confirming their mutual paternity with DNA tests, and of meeting in Austria.

At the end of the file was an official's assessment of Evy as a teen-ager: "The minor is courageous enough to assert herself in life."

"Want to go watch the people who get to leave at a normal hour?"

• •

Evy had Austria, and the German language, back in her life now. She had befriended advocates, historians, and former victims who were dedicated to an honest reckoning with the past. She had a renewed relationship with Barbarella. She had a probable candidate for her biological father, someone whose art she very much liked. She felt greater sympathy for her biological mother. There was only one more thing she wanted to face.

From the outside, the villa on Sonnenstrasse was basically as she remembered it: a rather grand and solid-looking structure from 1914, painted pale yellow. It was now divided into private apartments, with a locked front entrance, and to get inside we haphazardly pressed the buzzers. An older man named Peter, who lived on the top floor, let us in.

Nowak-Vogl's institution had moved to a new location in 1979, and afterward the villa sat empty for years. Trash piled up inside. Then, one day in 2003, the villa underwent a strange rebirth. A group of young punks started squatting there. They cleaned it up, showed movies and put on concerts, and took in anarchists, homeless people, and runaways, including kids fleeing abusive families from all over Europe. They nicknamed it Villa Kunterbunt, after the German name for Pippi Longstocking's house, where she lived on her own with her monkey, her horse, and her books.

One day, a young punk named Ingo spotted a man in his forties lingering in the garden, staring at the windows. The man explained that he'd been confined there as a child. Ingo invited him in and let him see his room. The man began trembling and crying. Ingo's room had once been the office of the institution's director, the man told him, and he had been so scared of her. Until that day, the squatters didn't know the villa's history, but they weren't entirely surprised. Although many of them had lived in more decrepit places, this one had the air of a haunted house.

Ingo now works for an organization in Innsbruck that helps homeless people. When Evy and I found him, we were back in the U.S., but he agreed to meet us on Zoom. He showed us photographs from his time in the villa. "It's amazing to see different images from what you hold," Evy told him. "It kind of pushes back against the bad shape of what happened there." Villa Kunterbunt hadn't been perfect—there were police raids and hand-to-mouth struggles, and in 2005 the young people were evicted. But they had cared for one another and had made a community whose spirit of love and freedom was antithetical to the rigidity and surveillance of Nowak-Vogl's institution. The transformation of the villa seemed to Evy like a benediction.

When Evy and I entered the building on Sonnenstrasse, she felt afraid but also ready. In the foyer, shafts of sunlight illuminated white walls and an imposing curved staircase, which looked very familiar. "I felt like a dragon slayer, going inside that building," Evy said the next day. "I never could have imagined doing that." On the villa's first floor, she looked up in silence. She touched the walls. Then we turned around and walked back out to the street, where her children were waiting. ♦

LETTER FROM PALO ALTO

THE PARENT TRAP

Inside Sam Bankman-Fried's family bubble.

BY SHEELAH KOLHATKAR

The Magistrates Court of the Bahamas, in Nassau, is situated in an imposing pink-and-white building edged with palm trees. On December 13, 2022, Sam Bankman-Fried, the former C.E.O. of the now bankrupt cryptocurrency exchange FTX, arrived there to ask for release on bail after being indicted on eight criminal charges. Bankman-Fried typically wears T-shirts and shorts, no matter the occasion; on this day, he wore, like armor, an ill-fitting navy-blue suit. He'd spent the previous night in jail, where he hadn't been given the medication he normally took for his depression. But of greater concern was the indictment, unsealed that morning in the United States, which accused him of fraud, conspiracy to commit money laundering, and other crimes that could lead to more than a hundred years in prison.

The evening before, he and a colleague had been working on their laptops in the oceanfront penthouse of a resort where he lived when his parents, who were visiting, called him into a bedroom. Minutes later, according to the colleague, a group of Bahamian law-enforcement officers, accompanied by members of the resort's staff, strode into the apartment. One officer had a warrant for Bankman-Fried's arrest.

When the officers entered the bedroom, Bankman-Fried asked for a drink of water and seemed to gird himself for what was ahead. "I can give you my passport," he told a broad-shouldered officer, who in turn suggested that he might want to bring a jacket with him. Passing his phone, wallet, and college class ring to the colleague, whom he'd asked to try to keep his parents calm, Bankman-Fried raised his wrists to be cuffed.

Now, as the court hearing got under way, his parents, Joseph Bankman and Barbara Fried, sat in the third row, feeling shattered. Bankman told me later, "I think most parents would much rather die, frankly, than see their child accused of such horrible things."

Bankman and Fried have long been popular faculty members at Stanford Law School, and known for their involvement in liberal causes. When Sam, their firstborn, was a child, they recognized him as being intellectually exceptional and emotionally atypical—an often isolated boy who entertained himself with baseball statistics and math puzzles. In his twenties, Sam achieved international fame as the head of FTX, a crypto company that he co-founded in 2019, and that promised to bring a measure of legitimacy to a nascent industry sometimes associated with money laundering and corruption. He shared a stage with Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, made the covers of *Fortune* and *Forbes*, and persuaded a range of prominent venture-capital investors to give his company hundreds of millions of dollars. Ten months before his arrest, FTX was valued at thirty-two billion dollars. A partner at Sequoia Capital, one of FTX's biggest financial backers, posited in an online profile of Bankman-Fried, since deleted, that he might become the world's "first trillionaire."

The academic community in which Bankman-Fried was raised is a place where immense wealth is often discussed with suspicion, even when privately courted. But Bankman-Fried stood out from other young billionaires for his commitment to the effective-altruism movement, some of whose adherents believe in trying to earn as much as possible in order to maximize what they can give away. By the time of his arrest, he had become a major contributor to public-health and other causes, and one of the biggest personal donors in American electoral politics.

His parents come from modest backgrounds and have lived in the same house—a one-story bungalow on the Stanford campus—since the nineties; they describe themselves as "utilitarian-minded." As academics, Bankman and Fried share an interest in using tax law as an instrument of social fairness. When Sam and his younger brother, Gabriel, were growing up, there was an ongoing household conversation about what it means to conduct an ethical life, and the brothers later worked together on philanthropic ventures that Sam funded. (Gabriel declined to be interviewed for this article.) As Larry Kramer, a former dean of Stanford Law School, told me, Bankman and Fried "loved that their children had these commitments that were so idealistic and powerful."

The rewards of being Sam's parents were financial as well as reputational. In 2022, he gave them a gift of ten million dollars; a lawsuit filed by FTX's bankruptcy estate against Bankman and Fried this September claims that the money was "plunder[ed]" and came from an account that contained customer funds. Their attorneys said that the lawsuit's claims are "completely false."

Bankman and Fried visited Sam in the Bahamas frequently, sometimes staying at a sixteen-and-a-half-million-dollar, thirty-thousand-square-foot beach house in a gated community. In December, 2021, Bankman took leave from Stanford to work full time at FTX, providing legal, philanthropic, and tax advice for a salary of two hundred thousand dollars a year, plus expenses. Those expenses included twelve-hundred-dollar-a-night "hotel stays," the lawsuit alleges.

"I'm in on crypto because I want to make the biggest global impact for good," Bankman-Fried said in an ad that ran in *The New Yorker*. Like other crypto evangelists, he professed a belief in the power of digital currencies and blockchain technology to eliminate corporate middlemen from the financial system and provide life-changing economic opportunities to the poor. He also relied

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH FROM GETTY

"Sam will never speak an untruth," Barbara Fried said. "It's just not in him."

ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH NEGLEY

on slick advertising to do the talking. In one commercial, a plumber realizes that he, too, can make bank in crypto with FTX, and the football legend Tom Brady says, conspiratorially, "You in?"

In March, 2022, a month after an extravagant Super Bowl ad starring Larry David (with Bankman-Fried's father hamming it up in the background in a powdered wig) told viewers not to miss out on FTX's crypto, the Federal Reserve began raising interest rates, in part to combat inflation. As money became more expensive to borrow, the value of many cryptocurrencies plummeted. Regulators and reporters began revealing that companies in the industry had been lending money to one another in a closed loop to prop up the value of their assets. The allegation that Bankman-Fried created his own closed loop in order to deceive investors and the public is at the crux of the government's case against him.

In addition to owning FTX, Bankman-Fried owned the majority of a crypto hedge fund called Alameda Research, which was run by Caroline Ellison, a trader whom he sometimes dated. On November 2nd, CoinDesk, an industry news site, reported that Alameda held almost fifteen billion dollars in cryptocurrency assets, a large chunk of which was in FTT—a digital token that FTX had issued. The disclosure raised questions about the true value of Alameda's holdings and about the conflict of interest between the two supposedly independent companies. Changpeng Zhao (generally known as C.Z.), the C.E.O. of Binance, a crypto competitor, wrote a series of skeptical tweets indicating that he was dumping his FTT. Alarmed, FTX customers withdrew six billion dollars in just three days. By November 8th, FTX was so broke it stopped honoring withdrawal requests.

Some of Bankman-Fried's employees quit, and he huddled with those who remained, trying to calm investors and raise money to save the company. Meanwhile, a former FTX employee told me, "the parents were freaking out and asking, 'What about your legal safety?' "

On November 11th, under what Bankman-Fried describes as pressure from FTX's lawyers, he agreed to relinquish control of the company to a new C.E.O.—a decision that he regretted immediately and tried in vain to reverse. The new C.E.O., quickly installed, was John Jay Ray III, a bankruptcy lawyer who had overseen the dissolution of Enron; he filed for Chapter 11 and began the process of formally winding FTX down.

Shortly after Bankman-Fried's arrest, the Commodity Futures Trading Commission said in a lawsuit that he'd caused the loss of more than eight billion dollars in customer assets. Among those reported to be affected were Tom Brady; his ex-wife, the supermodel Gisele Bündchen; the basketball star Steph Curry; the billionaire oil investor Robert Belfer; the tennis star Naomi Osaka; the former Trump spokesman Anthony Scaramucci; a teachers' pension fund; and many ordinary investors, including construction workers, small-business owners, and college students.

In Magistrates Court, Bankman-Fried stared straight ahead as his attorney argued for his release while his extradition was negotiated, noting that he had stayed put and tried to "fix things" for customers when he could have fled the country. A local prosecutor countered that Bankman-Fried was a flight risk, with the means to charter a private plane. When the prosecutor referred to Bankman-Fried as a "fugitive," his mother laughed darkly. Bail was denied, and eight days later he was extradited to the United States.

Bankman-Fried's trial is scheduled to begin in New York in early October, and until recently he was preparing for it while under house arrest in California, at his childhood home, which is surrounded by redwood trees and cacti. His parents were back to taking care of him and working to bolster his spirits, as they'd done when he was a child, but now they were also scrambling to find legal escape routes from circumstances they say they had failed to anticipate: that their son, now widely considered a crypto villain, would be facing life in prison, and that they would be accused of being complicit.

"I think there's probably a picture of it somewhere online."

For years, Bankman and Fried have hosted lively Sunday-night dinner parties at their home, during which discussions range from the global crisis of democracy to movies and campus gos-

sip. In December, after a New York judge set their son's bail at a quarter of a billion dollars, their home was pledged as security for his release. Two friends also served as guarantors: Andreas Paepcke, a computer scientist at Stanford, pledged six figures, as did Larry Kramer and his wife, Sarah, who has since died. In part because Bankman and Fried had been so supportive when Sarah was going through cancer treatments, Kramer told me, "I said yes before Joe even finished asking."

When I visited the family earlier this year, a security guard they'd hired to comply with the bail terms was sitting outside the house in an S.U.V., asking visitors to leave their telephones and other electronic devices in their cars. Inside, Bankman-Fried, wearing an ankle bracelet, had commandeered his mother's study. "It's mostly case prep," he told me, gesturing toward two computer monitors. "I mean, there's not a lot else that I can be doing."

At thirty-one, he in many ways still looks like a boy: pale and soft with dark eyes and wild, curly hair, which on that day was flat in the back where he had slept on it. The desk at which he sat was cluttered with packs of cinnamon gum, fidget spinners, a mini-fan, deodorant, and a bottle of Adderall. (He was diagnosed as having A.D.H.D., in addition to depression, years ago.) As we spoke, he jiggled his knee and shuffled and reshuffled a deck of cards.

The government alleges that Bankman-Fried engaged in fraud and embezzlement of customer deposits beginning in 2019, and spent those funds on travel, real estate, speculative investments, personal enrichment, and political campaigns. The government further alleges that he "caused" the creation of loopholes in FTX's computer code which allowed Alameda, his hedge fund, to borrow money that effectively belonged to customers, and that he conspired to bribe at least one Chinese official with forty million dollars to unfreeze FTX assets held in that country. This summer, the U.S. government severed the bribery and four other charges from the case and added a new one: that he'd used stolen customer funds to make more than a hundred million dollars in campaign contributions ahead of the 2022 midterms. "I'm trying not to freak out too much," Sam said.

At the keyboard, he opened and shared with me several memos he'd written since his arrest—documents replete with links, screenshots, assertions, and intricate explanations that, he claims, will demonstrate his innocence. The gist of his argument is that he made mistakes but did not knowingly commit crimes. At worst, he says, he was unaware of things that, as C.E.O., he should have known about—particularly the facts that Alameda had accumulated billions of dollars in losses and that FTX customers' money was being used to plug the hole.

"Alameda's position on FTX was substantially bigger than we had realized. That's one of the bigger fuckups," he told me. "Which meant that in fact, if Alameda were to go down, FTX would be on the hook for a lot more of that than I had realized." He said that this prospect did not become clear to him until shortly before the company collapsed. His defense team now has the task of convincing a jury that their client, a quantitative savant, missed something of such importance.

Three of Bankman-Fried's closest associates have already pleaded guilty and agreed to coöperate in the case against him: Caroline Ellison, the former Alameda C.E.O.; Gary Wang, a co-founder of FTX; and Nishad Singh, FTX's former director of engineering. In Ellison's guilty plea, she said that FTX had granted Alameda unlimited borrowing privileges, and that when loans from outside lenders were recalled in June, 2022, FTX funds were used to repay them. She further stated that she conspired with Bankman-Fried to hide the borrowing from Alameda's lenders by creating a false set of financial statements.

Ellison sounded slightly less certain last November, on the day after FTX stopped honoring customer withdrawals, in a recording likely to be used as evidence at trial. When a colleague asked her during a staff meeting who had authorized Alameda's borrowing, she said, "Um . . . Sam, I guess." Bankman-Fried was adamant, in my conversations with him, that prosecutors would not be able to produce any documents showing him authorizing the unlimited borrowing, because, he says, there are none.

As I sat with him in the study, his mother, who seemed tense, sometimes passed by on her way to the kitchen. Fried retired from full-time teaching last year, hoping to have more time for writing and political activism. After Donald Trump won the Presidency, in 2016, she co-founded Mind the Gap, a political-action committee built around Moneyball-style data analytics aimed at flipping congressional seats from red to blue. When her son was arrested, Fried resigned from the PAC and concentrated on exonerating him. "All four of us care about only one thing, which is Sam's innocence," she later told me.

I asked whether she had ever felt compelled to ask her son if he'd done any of the things he'd been charged with. She replied no—she didn't need to ask. Her son was incapable of dishonesty or stealing, she said. "Sam will never speak an untruth," she went on. "It's just not in him."

Fried is a leading scholar of legal ethics. Her best-known book, "The Progressive Assault on Laissez Faire," is a study of capitalism and the coercive aspects of free markets. "She's a brilliant critic," Debra Satz, the dean of Stanford's School of Humanities and Sciences, said, "and the book really picks apart these debates about freedom and equality." This year, her intellectual rigor has been applied to her son's media strategy, which she considered integral to his defense—so integral that she and her husband hired a high-powered P.R. consultant, Risa Heller, to assist them. The couple embarked on a campaign to spread their perspective: that the press, unfairly assuming that their son is guilty, has failed to examine weaknesses in the government's case and the role of FTX's lawyers in the company's downfall. The campaign was not aided by the September lawsuit against them—a legal action that their attorneys say is a cynical effort by John Ray to influence the outcome of their son's trial. Calling the suit a waste of creditors' money, Fried said that its real agenda was "to enflame the jury pool on the

eve of Sam's trial by portraying all of us as a pack of thieves."

Robert Gordon, a Stanford Law School colleague, described Fried as one of the most "ethically fastidious" people he knows. "She seems so sure," he said of her faith in her son, "and the way that she thinks through ethical problems is just so careful. This, of course, is the big mystery at the heart of all this."

During a hike in the foothills of the mountains near the family's home, Fried described herself to me as "emotionally reserved, like Sam," shortly before she teared up. "I don't care what is said about me, Joe doesn't care what is said about him," she said. "Saving Sam is the major project of our lives." She had lost ten pounds since his legal troubles began, and a recent eye operation had temporarily affected her vision, but she seemed intent on projecting her resolve. Wearing a baseball cap and a bright-red backpack, Fried charged up a hillside, shoes crunching on the dirt. In two hours in the blazing sun, she didn't take a sip of water.

Before the collapse of FTX, Bankman-Fried led a heady life. "I'd go to a conference, and I'd end up, like, cancelling a meeting with a head of state, because there was a conflicting request from a different head of state that seemed more important," he told me. "And, you know, there were celebrities all around—and I really don't give a shit about celebrities. But it is nonetheless a little bit surreal the first few times that it happens."

Bankruptcy documents say that he and his companies spent approximately two hundred and fifty million dollars to buy thirty-five properties in the Bahamas, and reportedly chartered jets to deliver Amazon orders from Miami to island-based employees. In our conversations, Bankman-Fried said that such seemingly profligate expenses were part of an effort to attract talented workers, as many tech-company leaders before him had done. "I did try to make FTX a nice place for people to work," he said.

Shuffling his cards, he insisted that the only real estate he purchased for himself cost "about two million"—negligible by tech-C.E.O. standards. "I didn't think it would have been correct for me to live an extremely lavish life style, nor would I have enjoyed it," he added. In the Bahamas, by his and others' accounts, he did a lot of his own shopping and sometimes cooked for some of his employees. (Beyond Burgers and Beyond Sausages were a staple, he said.) He also paid himself a two-hundred-thousand-dollar salary and never took bonuses, he told me. In court filings, the FTX bankruptcy estate said that it had traced $2.2 billion in payments and loans to Bankman-Fried, primarily from Alameda.

As we spoke, Fried popped her head in the doorway. "Dinner at seven?" she said. "How does pasta with vegetables sound?" Bankman-Fried, who barely spoke to his parents while in my presence, nodded. Before we assembled at the table, Bankman emerged with a bottle of California Cabernet.

Bankman-Fried gulped water and swiftly cleaned his plate before returning to his research. But Bankman, wiry and sunny in demeanor, seemed to be trying to convey a sense of normalcy. He is best known for work that jump-started two significant public-interest campaigns. One exposed illegal tax shelters and documented the aggressive marketing of those shelters to corporations by legal and accounting firms. He went on to help write legislation to identify users of the shelters, as a result of which around a billion dollars in unpaid taxes were recouped by the government. The second campaign has been to make tax-return filing easy and free. (California has adopted some of the reforms he fought for.) "You know, tax sounds so dull, and I get it," he said, "but it's really about who gets to own what, when the music stops. So, it's really important for social-justice purposes."

His son, though ostensibly supportive of crypto regulation in the U.S., once wrote to a reporter, in an exchange he believed to be off the record, "Fuck regulators . . . they don't protect customers at all." Bankman, by contrast, has fought in his career for more government scrutiny of financial transactions. As his son's business grew, Bankman said, he became interested in how crypto could make money transfers cheaper for consumers, especially in the Global South.

On an FTX podcast in August, 2022, three months before the implosion, he reportedly said, "From the start, whenever I was useful, I'd lend a hand." He was often useful, it turned out. According to the bankruptcy estate's lawsuit, he described Alameda as "a family business" years before his son hired him full time, and employed his connections and expertise to help Alameda and FTX grow. He joined his son at meetings on Capitol Hill aimed at securing changes to the policies that currently make it illegal to operate most crypto exchanges in the U.S. But Bankman's role in FTX's charitable giving was what he preferred to talk about with me.

"The company seemed to have such unlimited resources that you could really think big and do great things," he said. He directed money to a universal-basic-income project in Chicago, and a program that brought mental-health services into troubled homes in South Florida. According to the bankruptcy suit, another favored charity was Stanford. The complaint alleges that he gave his university five and a half million dollars of "FTX Group donations," for his and Fried's private professional gain. The day after the suit against them was filed, Stanford announced that it would return the money.

During my dinner with the family, Sandor, a docile German shepherd, lay underfoot. Before FTX collapsed, the family rarely locked their front door at night, Bankman said, but they were now getting threats, some of them antisemitic. At first, they were advised to hire full-time guards. But, once they calculated the yearly outlay, they decided to supplement their part-time security with Sandor. He is trained to attack if given the correct set of orders, in German. "The trainer came over and put on a bite suit," Bankman told me. "He said the words and the dog leaped through the air and tore the arm off."

Bankman is, in addition to his other work, a part-time therapist. Especially interested in anxiety, he has written on the intersection of law and psychology and co-hosted, with Stanford students, a podcast on wellness and the legal profession. He has deployed his psychological expertise at home, to try to keep everyone calm, but the morning after our dinner, as he and I walked around campus, his own anxiety was evident. When

BLOOD

A prerequisite is all of it everywhere
Daffodils and a smell like hamsters
And it pulsing and pulsing
From out of the elevator

They'll play the music later
But right now it's quiet
It just keeps pouring and pouring
There's no real sound it makes

Except from like a faucet
That strange sound of too much of it
The way that kisses escape you
When you see something you love

Or the way these poems found me
All of it, everywhere
I am pouring something out of me
With every step that I take

No one is surprised by any of this
Least of which all of this
It's all just falling everywhere
And then, somehow, it's done

—Dorothea Lasky

I asked what his son's defense would cost, Bankman said, "Substantially everything we have." But, he added, sounding melancholic, "that's what money is for."

Not long after Sam was born, it became clear to his parents that he was not like other children. He cared little for toys, apart from puzzles, and seemed largely indifferent to amusement parks and birthday parties. One evening before bed, Fried recalled, Sam and Gabriel, who were still in elementary school, started asking her and Bankman questions about divorce. They knew a kid whose parents were getting one, and wanted to know how it worked, and who got what. "We ended up, like, talking about community-property states, and the alternatives to community-property states, and the different ways of dividing up human capital," Fried said. The discussion went on for more than an hour, and after she and Bankman left the bedroom she turned to him and said, "We are such idiots. They're interested in what we're interested in, they're just a lot younger and more ignorant." Fried told me, unable to conceal her pride, "And that changed child rearing for us." They would give their boys fewer amusement parks and more adult conversation.

Still, a few years later, she arrived home from work one day to find Sam, who rarely cried, in tears. "I am so bored I feel like I'm going to die," he told her. At that point, Fried said, "we went into high gear." They enrolled him in a Saturday program called Math Circle, where professors taught logic and problem-solving to precocious students. There were further elevated math classes before school. And in ninth grade Bankman-Fried was admitted to a selective summer program called Canada/USA Mathcamp, where, for the first time, he made close friends. Gary Wang, who would become an FTX co-founder, was one of them. "Sam just got inducted into this other world of math and science nerds with passion, and they were his people," Fried said.

Sam and Gabe were also encouraged to engage in discussions about human rights and foreign policy at their parents' Sunday-night dinners. Larry Kramer recalled once having a disagreement with the boys and saying something patronizing, like "When you get a little older, you'll understand." Later, Kramer said, Bankman took him aside: "They wanted their kids to be treated at the same level as the adults."

After some hand-wringing about their commitment to public schooling, Fried and Bankman decided that Sam and Gabe would go to high school at Crystal Springs Uplands, a private school that attracted many privileged tech kids, including Steve Jobs's son. Sam was kind but mostly kept to himself, a former student recalled: "Everyone recognized he was brilliant and super sharp and that school wasn't challenging for him."

After graduating, Bankman-Fried enrolled at M.I.T., imagining that he might become a physicist. His plans began to evolve in his sophomore year, when he learned about the effective-altruism movement. Many effective altruists have taken inspiration from the philosopher Peter Singer, who argues that, when more than a billion people in the developing world are impoverished and suffering, spending on luxuries is morally flawed. The E.A. movement has considered how much money it would take to save a single imperilled life (approximately four thousand dollars, by one estimate), and some of its adherents have pursued high-paying careers in order to give most of their earnings to organizations that serve vulnerable groups. The movement appeals to people with quantitative orientations.

In 2014, degree in hand, Bankman-Fried took a job at Jane Street Capital, a trading firm that used mathematical models to find and exploit price discrepancies in different securities markets. The firm hired many programmers and math majors and had a geeky, collegial culture; late-night chess tournaments were common. Jane Street attracted other young effective altruists, among them Caroline Ellison, the daughter of M.I.T. professors, who had graduated from Stanford.

Bankman-Fried told me that the job favored people who could keep track of the many variables influencing the market, and who had the ability to synthesize them and make fast trading decisions, all while managing the computer code

"It's like a relic from the Before Plantar Fasciitis Era."

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designed to execute the trades. He described it as "sort of, like, right at the borderline of humans and computers."

Bankman-Fried told me that he gave away about half of what he made at Jane Street, though he declined to reveal the amount. Much of the money, he said, went to animal-welfare organizations and to the Centre for Effective Altruism, for grants and movement-building. After about three years, he left Jane Street and briefly worked for the Centre while thinking of starting a company of his own.

The cryptocurrency boom was under way, and hundreds of digital coins were trading on exchanges around the world. Bankman-Fried became interested in the industry after noticing that the prices were often quoted differently depending on which exchange one was using. A clever trader who was proficient in algorithmic programming was well positioned to exploit the differences—say, buying a bitcoin in the U.S., selling it in Japan, and profiting on the spread. In 2017, according to court filings, he and a colleague, Tara Mac Aulay, started trading crypto with their own money on various exchanges. Eventually, others joined in—Ellison; Sam's math-camp friend Wang, who'd worked at Google; and Singh, a friend of Gabe's who was working at Facebook. Wang and Singh had also become effective altruists, pledging to donate most of their earnings. The friends made the fund official, naming it Alameda Research.

Under Bankman-Fried, its first C.E.O., Alameda made aggressive bets, often with borrowed money. Because traditional banks wouldn't lend to crypto companies, the fund had to turn to institutions that catered to crypto, frequently at high interest rates. Alameda's track record, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, was inconsistent. A few months after launching, it lost about two-thirds of its assets on a big bet on XRP, a digital currency issued by a blockchain-based payments network. Mac Aulay quit, along with some other employees. Last year, she wrote on Twitter that the departures were in part caused by "concerns over risk management and business ethics."

Bankman-Fried rebuilt the fund and moved it to Hong Kong. In 2019, though, in the face of regulatory uncertainty and tight pandemic restrictions, he turned to his dad, who advised his son to set up shop in a place like the Bahamas, which was trying to generate domestic investment by making itself a crypto hub. FTX launched there later that year as an exchange and a trading platform. Alameda provided legitimacy by trading heavily on the new platform—an arrangement that also created conditions for Alameda to receive favorable treatment (possibly by being able to see what trades others on the exchange were making). The C.F.T.C. alleges that FTX gave the fund an "unfair advantage" by exempting it from rules that applied to other users. Bankman-Fried contends that Alameda wasn't granted preferential access in any way that really mattered: "It didn't give them the sort of leniency that would fuck over other accounts. We were fairly careful about that."

In the penthouse, which was valued at more than thirty million dollars and overlooked a yacht-choked marina, Bankman-Fried was living like a fantastically privileged college student, sharing the vast space with Ellison, Wang, Singh, and other employees. He kept odd hours, sometimes napping in a beanbag chair at the office. In 2019, he tweeted about "stimulants when you wake up, sleeping pills if you need them." Two years later, Ellison tweeted, "Nothing like regular amphetamine use to make you appreciate how dumb a lot of normal, non-medicated human experience is." (Bankman-Fried has said that he took only prescribed medication, and that his use was on label; Ellison did not comment for this story.)

Most of FTX's revenue came through fees that investors paid to trade on its platform. CNBC reported that the exchange's revenue was a billion dollars in 2021. That fall, Bankman-Fried appointed Ellison and Sam Trabucco, a fellow M.I.T. graduate, to become co-C.E.O.s of Alameda, so that he could focus on FTX. Bankman-Fried has said that he didn't play a role in investing decisions for Alameda after that point, but, according to the C.F.T.C. lawsuit against him, he maintained daily contact with Ellison and Trabucco and stayed intimately involved with the fund.

Bankman-Fried was also becoming

a kind of international statesman of crypto. Zeke Faux, a Bloomberg reporter and the author of a book about the industry, "Number Go Up," told me, "His trick with the media was just being very accessible. If a crypto newsletter needed a quote about Shiba Inu coin prices, he was there. And on the way up this was really effective, and he was able to create this image as the only honest guy in crypto."

Bankman-Fried told me, of that time, "I was on the path to accomplishing what I wanted to accomplish." Further affirmation seemed to come when the best-selling author Michael Lewis started hanging around the office and accompanying him to meetings. Bankman-Fried gave Lewis unrestricted access for a book that is set to be published next month.

While audited financial statements for 2021 show a profitable company, FTX, apparently through a loophole in the tax code that applies to cryptocurrencies, was able to report $3.7 billion in carryover losses on its tax returns, greatly reducing its tax bill. Later, accounting experts would see some red flags in the financial statements, including the fact that two different, relatively unknown auditors had prepared them. As one expert speculated on CoinDesk, "With the benefit of hindsight, we can see it perhaps suggested that Bankman-Fried didn't want any firm to see the whole picture."

The following year, a murky FTX transaction implicated Bankman-Fried's parents directly. During the company's property-buying frenzy, the couple signed a deed to the sixteen-and-half-million-dollar beach house in the Bahamas where they stayed, although they hadn't paid anything toward it. The bankruptcy suit insinuates that the arrangement was made at their son's instigation. Bankman-Fried and his parents strongly deny this.

In an explanation that reflects more carelessness about signing legal documents than Stanford law professors typically possess, Bankman told *The New Yorker* that he and his wife signed the deed in error; that the house was intended to be company property; and that, after belatedly grasping the U.S. tax implications of attesting to owning it, they fulfilled their legal obligations by alerting company lawyers to their concerns. A spokesperson for the couple said, "Outside counsel confirmed to Joe and Barbara that FTX would have all beneficial ownership of the house and agreed to document that in writing."

Bankman-Fried's ambitions for his philanthropy grew along with FTX. After the COVID-19 pandemic began, he joined multiple billionaires, including Peter Thiel and Patrick Collison, in funnelling money into efforts to find treatments. Edward Mills, a professor at McMaster University, whose lab conducted one of the largest COVID therapeutics trials in the world, was an FTX beneficiary. He told me that Bankman-Fried wanted to provide funding to hundreds of biotech companies to develop vaccines and treatments, which he hoped could be rapidly tested through an international network of clinical-trial sites. "Sam had a vision of a world free of disease." Mills said.

At the same time, Bankman-Fried was also becoming one of the largest political donors in Washington, personally contributing some forty million dollars ahead of the 2022 midterms, according to OpenSecrets, a nonprofit that tracks money in politics. He was one of the top C.E.O. donors to Joe Biden's 2020 Presidential campaign, giving more than five million dollars (an "anti-Trump" donation, he told me). He also made dark-money contributions to Republicans, which he wouldn't quantify. One of his goals was to counter extremist candidates in Republican primaries, he said, and by keeping his payments under the radar he could avoid the backlash that would ensue if candidates were found to have taken money from a known Democratic donor.

By the end of 2022, however, he had no more money to give, and, of all the causes he espoused, the effective-altruism movement in particular was reeling from his downfall. Not long before Bankman-Fried's arrest, one of the movement's co-founders, William MacAskill, wrote on Twitter, "If he lied and misused customer funds he betrayed me, just as he betrayed his customers, his employees, his investors, & the communities he was a part of." Peter Singer told me that although he thinks the movement will persist, Bankman-Fried's arrest has made the public more cynical about individuals trying to earn money to give it away. And, in an online effective-altruism forum, community members mourned the fact that FTX customers' lives had been ruined while also berating themselves for doing weak due diligence before, as one member put it, "entrusting a decent chunk of the financing and reputation of the entire EA movement to an offshore crypto business."

For FTX, the end began in the spring of 2022, when, in the face of rising interest rates, crypto darlings began to falter, sending waves of financial stress through the industry. Bitcoin dropped by twenty-seven per cent in eight days; terraUSD and Luna, two coins that provided liquidity to other crypto firms, lost almost all their value; Celsius Network, a crypto exchange, collapsed; and Three Arrows Capital, a ten-billion-dollar crypto hedge fund, was forced to liquidate after heavy losses. That June, a psychiatrist who had treated Bankman-Fried in California moved to the Bahamas to become a life coach for his rattled staff.

Nonetheless, through the summer, Bankman-Fried seemed to signal that he was unaffected by the turmoil in his industry, announcing plans to rescue some of the crypto companies that hadn't fared as well as FTX had. In late October, he visited Saudi Arabia to try to interest new investors. On November 2nd, the CoinDesk article about Alameda's balance sheet came out.

The following Sunday, when C.Z., the Binance C.E.O., tweeted his doubts and accelerated the rush of customer-withdrawal requests, Bankman-Fried's parents were in the Bahamas having an approximation of their Stanford Sunday-night dinners with FTX employees. Mid-meal, a company lawyer took a call, became agitated, and left.

"It was incredibly stressful and overwhelming," Bankman-Fried told me of the following days. He says he figured he could raise several billion dollars from investors to tide the company over and fulfill withdrawal requests. He could then sell off assets to raise more cash while keeping the exchange functioning. "There were way too many things I needed to be doing," he said. "It was kind of scary."

The day after C.Z. indicated that he was dumping his FTT, FTX acknowledged that it was experiencing a liquidity crisis, and Bankman-Fried started looking publicly for a bailout. Around that

time, Bahamian police paid a visit to the office. The visit was likely in regard to a security breach, but some employees started to panic that they might be in trouble, and others grew angry. "I think that, somehow, we all had this superhuman sense of him," a former employee told me. Now their leader was tainted, and so were their résumés. Soon, the employee went on, several of them began taking turns staying with Singh, a committed member of the E.A. community, out of concern that he might be suicidal. (Singh's attorney did not respond to requests for comment.) Three months later, Singh pleaded guilty to wire fraud, conspiracy to commit fraud, conspiracy to commit money laundering, and conspiracy to violate campaign-finance laws. The recent suit against Bankman-Fried's parents cited an e-mail from Fried to her son suggesting that he use Singh's name instead of his own when making a one-million-dollar contribution to Mind the Gap, in order to avoid creating "the impression that funding MTG is a family affair." Fried told *The New Yorker* that this was "a perfectly legal and commonplace practice," and said that her son had donated roughly a tenth of that figure to her PAC.

As FTX's downward spiral continued, Bankman began speaking with defense lawyers and tried to get his son to join the conversations. But, whether determined or delusional, Bankman-Fried was solely focussed on persuading people to entrust him with hundreds of millions more dollars, to save the company. At times, according to Bloomberg, his father was beside him, making calls on his behalf, to little avail. Many people were quitting, packing their suitcases, and leaving the island, said the colleague who, a few weeks later, would be taking Bankman-Fried's class ring and wallet before officers placed him in handcuffs: "At some point, Sam was practically the only one left."

It's well known that the government can exert enormous pressure on coöperating witnesses, and Bankman-Fried's parents recognize the devastating role their son's former colleagues and roommates are likely to play in his trial. In addition to Ellison's testimony, Wang, who pleaded guilty to four fraud charges, is expected to say he helped create the computer-code back door that allowed Alameda to borrow so much from FTX. Singh is also expected to take the stand.

It is standard practice for banks to take depositors' money and use it for other activities. Bankman-Fried's defense could try to argue that FTX customers knew their money might be used by the company for other purposes. Another defense argument is likely to be that FTX's external legal counsel, the firm Sullivan & Cromwell, and Ryne Miller, the general counsel of FTX.US, the company's American subsidiary, may have been motivated by conflicts of interest. Miller was a former partner at Sullivan & Cromwell, a prominent firm whose marquee client is Goldman Sachs. In 2021, Miller helped hire Sullivan & Cromwell to serve as one of FTX's outside legal advisers.

Bankman-Fried says that, in the days leading up to his decision to sign the change-of-control agreement that allowed the company to file for bankruptcy, Miller and Sullivan & Cromwell attorneys sent him numerous messages pressuring him to do so—a campaign that Bankman-Fried describes as "harassment, intimidation, coercion and misrepresentation." His records show that, on the night of November 8th, Miller sent a text to him and to FTX leadership that said, "I need to wire SullCrom $4M to make sure we are all represented through this. And we preserve any value that is left. Tomorrow. From FTX.com cash. Who

can do it? I'm in charge now." Miller declined to comment. Sullivan & Cromwell declined to comment on the record, but, in a declaration filed with the bankruptcy court, Andrew Dietderich, a Sullivan & Cromwell partner, said of Bankman-Fried's account of being pressured to file for Chapter 11, "This is false."

Around four-thirty the next morning, an exhausted Bankman-Fried clicked the DocuSign link Miller had sent him and electronically signed the document. About ten minutes later, he says, an emergency-funding offer of about four hundred million dollars came through from Tron, a blockchain platform. Tron's founder, Justin Sun, told Bloomberg TV that the offer was "subject to due diligence." Bankman-Fried said that he tried to rescind his signature but couldn't.

"That is like a singular fixed moment around which everything else rotates," the former colleague said. "That was incredibly palpable. I saw a man who was haunted by the fact that he could not wrap his mind around what had happened. It's like losing your keys and you've checked the room and you've checked the sofa and you can't figure out where they went."

Around the same time, Miller and Sullivan & Cromwell went to federal prosecutors, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the C.F.T.C. to report alleged accounting problems at FTX.US. And, after the law firm helped choose John Ray to lead the company through bankruptcy, he hired it as the lead legal adviser. The firm went on to bill more than a hundred million dollars for the first several months of work for the bankruptcy, with hundreds of millions more likely to come. (A Sullivan & Cromwell spokesperson directed *The New Yorker* to an effusive June report by a fee examiner from Godfrey & Kahn that acknowledged the "remarkable" fees but went on to praise the firm's "creativity, professionalism, and personal sacrifice" in "transforming a smoldering heap of wreckage into a functioning Chapter 11.") But last January a trustee policing bankruptcies for conflicts of interest on behalf of the Justice Department filed an objection to the firm's appointment.

Although a judge denied the trustee's motion, Jonathan Lipson, a bankruptcy expert at Temple University, later filed a brief in support of the trustee, noting that, in January, Ray had referred to FTX as a "dumpster fire." If that was true, he wrote, it was worth questioning why Sullivan & Cromwell hadn't seen it burning sooner.

Even if the defense can prove that Sullivan & Cromwell behaved unethically, few legal experts I spoke with think that the court will be persuaded by Bankman-Fried's contention that, if he'd had more time, FTX's problems could have been corrected. One expert in white-

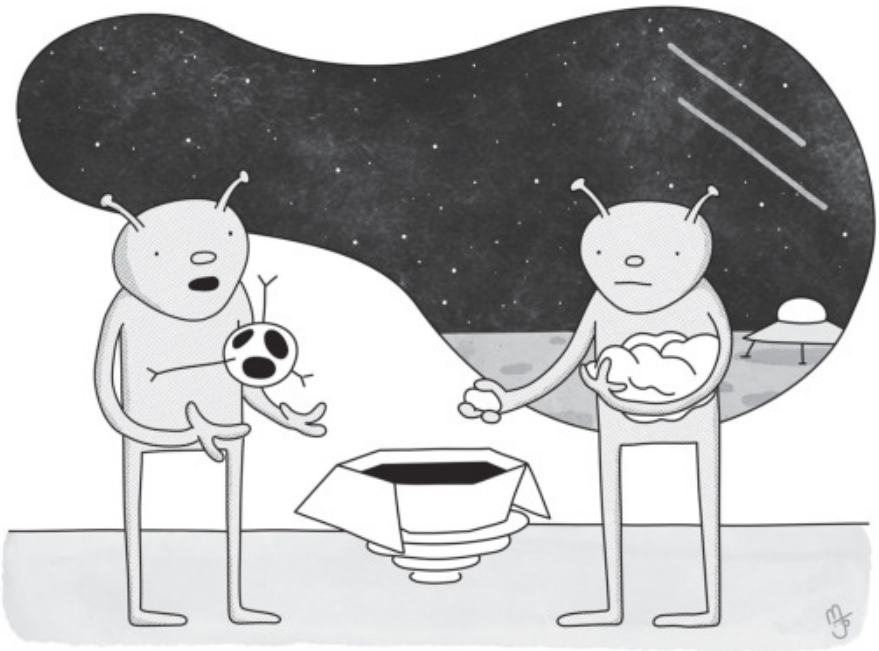
collar law likened it to taking a hundred dollars from the collection plate at church and hoping to gamble with it at the race track, win, and put a hundred and fifty dollars back onto the plate. "It's one thing to take your own money and bet on something you think is going to be a winner," he said. "But there's no excuse for taking someone else's money."

Intensifying the legal peril is Ray's claim, from his first legal filing as head of FTX, that he has never "seen such a complete failure of corporate controls and such a complete absence of trustworthy financial information as occurred here." Testifying before Congress last December, he compared FTX executives' conduct unfavorably to Enron's. "Crimes that were committed there were highly orchestrated financial machinations by highly sophisticated people to keep transactions off balance sheets," he said. "This is just taking money from customers and using it for your own purpose."

Bankman-Fried's defense has argued that the government is effectively deputizing the company to aid the prosecution. The defense has further complained that Ray and his colleagues control FTX's servers and files, and that they have denied Bankman-Fried access to documents that might exonerate him, including records of changes to the computer-code base that show exactly who enabled Alameda to engage in unrestricted borrowing from FTX. Ray declined to comment, and the prosecution denies that Bankman-Fried's access has been impeded.

On December 12th, a month after the Chapter 11 filing, Bankman-Fried was in the penthouse drafting testimony about FTX's collapse, which he had promised to give the next day to the U.S. House Financial Services Committee. Not long before Bahamian officials showed up to arrest him, he had shared a Google doc of the testimony with his mom and his colleague, and one of them struck out his opening line: "I would like to start by formally stating, under oath: I fucked up."

Financial-fraud cases of this magnitude often end with guilty pleas, so court trials like Bankman-Fried's are relatively rare. After years of sustaining harsh criticism for the lack of prosecutions related to the 2008 financial crisis, and for doing little as crypto grew into a speculative bubble, the Justice Department and securities regulators seem to be using the FTX case as an opportunity to project a newfound toughness on financial crime.



"Should I pack this or will there be one on Earth we can use?"

• •

Bankman-Fried is already facing consequences for trying to improve his public image in advance of the trial. This summer, the *Times* published portions of a diary kept by Ellison, in which she worried about being in over her head. Bankman-Fried's legal team admitted in a court filing that he had provided materials to the *Times*. The lead prosecutor, Danielle Sassoon, said that the leak was an attempt by Bankman-Fried to intimidate a witness, and not his first. She filed a motion asking that he and his parents be barred from making public statements about his case, and that he be transferred from house arrest to jail.

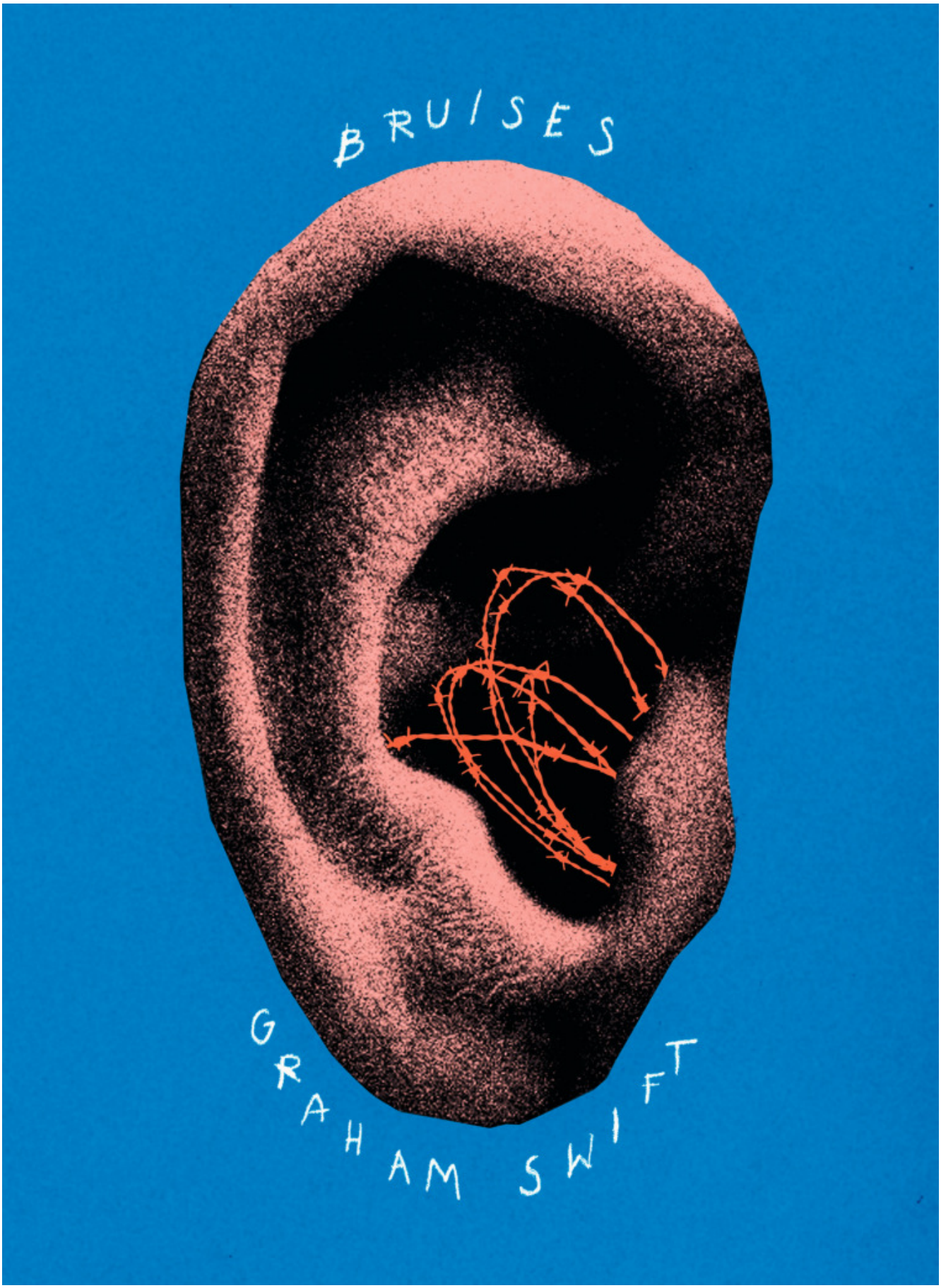
Bankman-Fried's defense lawyer Mark Cohen, of Cohen & Gresser, argued that Bankman-Fried had First and Sixth Amendment rights to respond to media inquiries about his case, and that his imprisonment would hamper his ability to prepare for his trial. But Judge Lewis A. Kaplan, who is presiding over the case, agreed in July to the gag order, and in August he remanded Bankman-Fried to the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, to await the start of his trial. My conversations with Bankman-Fried thus came to a halt.

Last December, around the time of the arrest, his parents wrote him a letter. "You are innocent," they said, and reassured him, "By a year from now, there is a nontrivial chance that the world's fury may shift to some other villain." Ten months in, his parents' very cautious optimism seems wishful. A fourth top executive in Bankman-Fried's inner circle, Ryan Salame, took a plea deal in September.

In an e-mail to *The New Yorker*, Fried characterized the actions of both the prosecution and the bankruptcy estate as "McCarthyite" and a "relentless pursuit of total destruction," which is enabled by "a credulous public that will believe anything they say." She went on, "It takes a lifetime to build up a reputation as honorable people. It takes five minutes to destroy it, which they now have done."

As their son's October trial date nears, Fried and Bankman have started talking about how, should he lose, they might handle his appeal. They take turns flying from California to visit him at the Brooklyn jail every Tuesday. But at Stanford they determinedly continue their famous Sunday-night dinners—staying "in the game," their colleague Robert Gordon said, "even as their lives are collapsing around them." ♦

BRUISES



GRAHAM SWIFT

ILLUSTRATION BY JACK SMYTH

"The quiet ones are the worst." I've never understood that expression. What's wrong with quiet? Surely it's the noisy ones who are the worst. Surely it's noise, generally, that there's too much of.

I don't like noise. I had enough noise in the Hussars. But they say the quiet ones are the worst. If everything's quiet, it means a bomb will go off. You can't win.

It seemed to be the issue when Shirley kicked me out. My quietness, I mean. I don't mean Shirley literally kicked me out. There was no kicking. Shirley didn't kick me. I didn't kick her. It wasn't a case of the "domestic violence" you hear about. It was my quietness that started it. Shirley could see that I'd gone into myself. That's what I used to do in those days—I'd go into myself.

Shirley said, "You never talk, you never say things." I think what she meant was that I wasn't much fun anymore. I'd agree with that. If I ever had been, I wasn't anymore. I'd stopped being fun. I'd gone into myself, like a worm into a hole. I think she meant she'd found out at last—and I'm surprised it took her so long—that she'd hooked up with a sort of invalid.

I said to her once, and it was all I ever said on the subject, "I was in the Hussars in Iraq, Shirl."

"What's a Hussar?"

"I've no idea, Shirl, but I was one."

When Shirl started to go for me, I said, "Don't raise your voice."

"I'm not raising my voice."

"You are."

She wasn't shouting, she'd just raised her voice, but I was afraid she might start shouting, and then things would get noisy. I'd never raised my voice at Shirley. I hadn't been with her for that long, but it was longer than I'd been with anyone else. I'd never shouted at her or done anything worse. I'd never raised a finger, let alone my voice. But now, it seemed, I'd gone too quiet.

She said, "Two, three nights a week, you're not even here. Even when you're here, you're not here."

I didn't deny it. I thought, All this is fair enough and I had it coming. That's a good expression: I had it coming. You had it coming. He, she, or they had it coming. We all have it coming.

Shirley was a good woman. There was a time with Shirl when I'd let myself think, Now I'm home. This is home. A crap neighborhood, but it was home. She worked mornings at a nursery school. Then she'd work afternoons at a coffee place, one of those kiosks close to the Tube station. Sometimes I'd be passing by and I'd go to the kiosk and order a coffee and pretend I didn't know her, and see how long she'd pretend, too, that she didn't know me. That we were complete strangers. Which of us would blink first? Laugh first?

Yes, for a while we had fun. We'd laugh. Laughter's a kind of noise. Kids in a nursery school must make a lot of noise. I wondered if Shirley ever told them to shut up, just to shut up.

I worked as an orderly in a mental hospital, the Langston. It was work I could get, work I could do. It sometimes got noisy at the Langston, but the strange thing was, I didn't mind it. I never found the Langston scary or creepy. It takes one to recognize another, maybe. In and out of a mental hospital every day, sometimes night shifts, too. But it didn't bother me. I didn't find it strange.

Shirley said, "Why do you work in that place?"

"It's a job, Shirl. It pays the rent. It doesn't bother me. Does it bother you?"

Shirley didn't answer that, but she looked at me. She looked at me the way she did when she was serving me a coffee and pretending not to know me. But she wasn't getting ready to laugh.

Shirley used to wear a red dress, a tight red dress. I mean, not all the time. It wasn't an all-the-time dress. It was like Shirley flying her special flag. She certainly didn't wear it to the nursery school. Then there'd have been some noise. I said, "I like you in that dress, Shirl. It's your color." She could tell I meant a bit more than that. "I like you in that dress and I like you when you're not in it."

Yes, we used to have some fun, but then I went into myself. I thought I wouldn't. I'd been starting to think I never would again. But I did.

Some people say that red is a "loud" color. But how can that be? How can any color make a noise? "Red rag to a bull." "Seeing red." I've never understood those expressions, either. Why red is the color of anger. I just told Shirley that I liked her in her red dress. So she wore it quite a lot.

But then one day, when I'd gone into myself, I said, "Don't you ever get tired of that red dress, Shirl?" It wasn't right, it wasn't fair to say that. And she kept wearing it anyway, she kept wearing it even more after that. It troubled me. But I kept quiet, I didn't say anything. A color is just a color.

And now she was saying to me, "Even when you're here, you're not here."

Well, that might have needed some thinking about. But I didn't deny it. I understood it. I didn't ask her what she meant. I might have said that she was spot on.

I said, "Are you chucking me out, Shirl?" I said it quietly. I wasn't arguing. I wasn't lifting a finger. "I want to be clear about it. Are you chucking me out? I'm not chucking *you* out. But we share the rent on this place. Are you chucking me out?"

I could see that she was getting pent up, like she might, instead of saying things, start throwing things around. She wouldn't hit me, I wouldn't hit her, but she might start throwing things, even throwing them at me. I could see that things were starting to get tricky.

I said, "Yes or no, Shirl?"

She made a sound, through her teeth, a sort of savage sound. She'd said that I never talked, but now it seemed that she was the one who couldn't get the words out.

"Yes or no?"

"Yes."

Then she raised her voice.

At the Langston, it's sometimes part of my job to "restrain" a patient. Nobody told me it might be part of my job. I was never trained. On the other hand, I *was* trained. I think they looked at me and thought, He'll be all right for the job.

She really raised her voice. "Yes! Yes, I am! And, while you're at it, you can go to hell!"

That was telling me.

I said, "O.K., Shirl. Fair enough. It's been nice knowing you."

I didn't raise my voice. But I know when I'm being told. I know when I'm not wanted. There comes a point when you know things.

So I got my zip-up jacket and I

walked out the door. I didn't slam it. I just walked out. It was dark and damp and chilly.

What was I going to do next? Did I have a plan? Search me. On the other hand, it was obvious. I walked to where I'd been going those two or three nights a week that Shirl had talked about. She'd chucked me out, but, on the other hand, nothing had changed. I walked to the Blue Anchor. We lived in an area of pretty rough pubs, but the Blue Anchor was the roughest of the lot. That's why I went there. I'd never have gone there with Shirl. It was the sort of pub where you only ever saw men hanging out. And most of them pretty rough. And I was one of them.

A tricky patient at the hospital, a noisy one? No problem. I hardly ever had to use force. That's because they could see that I could. Otherwise, at the Langston they liked to keep things polite. You weren't even supposed to say "mental" hospital—it was "psychiatric" hospital. In the old days, they used to call such places "asylums." They used to call the ones inside "lunatics." Now it was "patients," not even "inmates."

But I wasn't bothered. If they were inmates, poor bastards, I was an outmate. I was a mate, anyway. I wasn't trained in psychiatry, but I'd say, "Take it easy, mate. Keep a lid on it."

Shirley knew about me working at the Langston, but she'd never been in it. Why would she have been? And she knew about me going to the Anchor. Clearly. But she'd never been in the Anchor, either.

The place I'd go to that Shirley never knew about, and still doesn't, was the Catholic church, St. Mark's, on Winterton Road. Big red brick place, nearly always empty. I used to pop in there sometimes on my way back from my shift. The coffee kiosk, usually, but sometimes, by a different route, the Catholic church. I'm not a Catholic. My dad was in Northern Ireland. King's Hussars. I'm not a churchgoer, but, if you go into a church and sit quietly, they can't kick you out.

That's what I'd do sometimes—just sit there quietly. I'd see those things like cupboards along the side—the confessionals—and I'd sometimes think, I wish I could do that, just for the hell of it. No, I don't mean that. Just for the peace and quiet of it, the talking in whispers, with someone you don't know and can't even see.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. . . ."

"And what was your sin?"

"The sin of murder, Father. But I was in the Army and in another country, and it was a few years ago now."

If you went into one of those cupboards and you weren't a Catholic, or even anything, could they stop you? How would they know?

But that night when Shirley chucked me out I didn't go to the Catholic church. I went to the Blue Anchor. The barman knew me. I mean, he didn't know me, but he'd seen me quite a few times already, and he knew my game. I didn't want any chatty talk. I just wanted to sit quietly with my drink, and always at the bar, if there was a space. On a stool at the bar, even though I didn't want any chatty talk with the barman. What was wrong with that? It was a pub.

Barman? Landlord, too, I'd guess. Both. It was his place and he ran it. Not much of a place but the best he could get. And he was in charge, no doubt about it. He had to be. Big hefty bastard, too. You wouldn't want to mess. Or most wouldn't.

One night I'd come back from the pub with my face "all mashed up." At least, that's what Shirley said. It was just a few scrapes. "Your face is all mashed up."

"It's nothing, Shirl. Just a bit of bother."

She said, "What the hell's going on? This has got to stop."

True. She never said a truer thing. If you want to cure yourself of something, if you want to pull yourself out of it, you stop it. Simple.

How much dope dealing was going on at the Anchor? Search me. Quite a lot. But it wasn't my business. It wasn't my problem. It wasn't my poison.

That night, I went down to the Anchor again and sat at the bar. There was a space and I took up as much of it as possible. Elbows out, shoulders spread, and I'm not a small man. Always at the bar. Sit at the bar and mean it. So others at the bar, getting their drinks, have to reach round you or over you, or perhaps jog into you just as you're lifting your pint to your mouth.

So then I could say, "Excuse me!"

"Excuse you what?"

"I'm sitting here."

"You're sitting there, are you?"

And then, if I had anything to do with it, it might all kick off. But the barman would see that I hadn't started it, that it had nothing to do with me. I was just someone who'd been knocked into while sitting quietly with a drink. Oh, yeah?

And, that night, the barman must have seen that I really meant business. So I had it coming. He'd seen me before. He'd seen my kind before. And he had the look, himself, of someone who'd done time. I mean, not just behind a bar. Behind *bars*, maybe. In the Army. In a boxing ring. For all I knew, in the Langston loony bin.

You have to know about it, you have to know about being in a fight, before you go looking for one. My dad was in the Army, too. He loved it. He was a bully. He was over there in Belfast. He made me follow in the family tradition.

The barman saw me trying it on again. This time I really meant business. He could see it in my face.

"Excuse me!" Spilled beer all over his bar, but nothing to do with me.

This time it was really going to blow up. Except, before it began, it was all over. Before I knew it, that barman had come round from behind the bar, opening and shutting his flap. Before I knew it, he was standing behind me, and everyone else was standing back. Before I knew it, his hands were on my arms, and not just on them but clamping them hard against my sides so I couldn't move them, and he was lifting me up—just lifting me up, easy peasy—off my stool, so my legs were dangling and my feet weren't even touching the ground.

And they never did. My God, he had some strength. Then he was carrying me, like I was a piece of broken furniture, arms clamped, feet not touching anything, to the door. He kicked open the door while still holding me, and then we were out on the pavement. There was traffic and lights. Passersby. Well, they had something to pass by. Only then did he put me down, only then was I standing on my own two feet again, but he still had my arms tight against me, and he was twisting me round, like some kind of pole. All, apparently, so that he could face me in the right direction.

He said, "Now you walk. O.K.? You walk. You walk in that direction." He let go of my arms so that, in case I hadn't got the message, he could point the way, but my arms still stuck to my sides. "You walk. And you keep on walking till you get to hell."

That was telling me.

Why he thought hell was in that particular direction, I'll never know. There were two possible directions along the pavement, but he'd twirled me around and he'd chosen that one.

I might have said to him, "You don't have to do this. I've already been told to go to hell this evening." Or I might have said, "You don't have to tell me to go to hell. I've already been there." But I didn't say either of those things. I'm a quiet man. I don't like noise. And I walked. I walked with my arms still pinned to my sides. I walked like a clockwork man who'd just been wound up.

And it happened to be in the direction I'd come from. Back to where I lived, or thought I'd lived. To where I'd shut the door, without slamming it, on Shirl, then walked to the pub.

And it happened to be not in the direction of hell.

Sometime after all this was over, it occurred to me that the other direction would have been my way to work, to the Langston. It would have been a long walk—I took the Tube to work, several stops—but, if the barman had pointed me in that direction, I think I would have kept on walking, just as he'd told me, till I got to the Langston. And when I got there I might have said, "It's all right—I work here. But now I'm thinking of staying. I've got nowhere else to go. Will you let me in?"

If you want to cure yourself of something, you stop it. Fair enough. I might have said to that barman as he parked me on the pavement, "This isn't the first time I've been chucked out this evening."

But I walked. I walked in the direction he pointed out to me. And I didn't stop till I got to the door that I hadn't slammed behind me. And I knocked. It was quite hard to knock, because my arms still wanted to stay by my sides.

Shirley opened the door. Had she been expecting this? I'll never know. I looked at her. I said, "I hope you didn't mean it, Shirl. I hope you didn't mean it, because I've come back."

She looked at me. She looked at me for quite a long while, until I even thought, Does she recognize me? But then she said, No, she hadn't meant it. And I said I hadn't meant it, either, whatever it was I'd meant or not meant. And she let me in.

Home is where they let you in. I might have been in a police cell, with my face really mashed up. Serve me right. I might have been in the Langston and not getting paid for it. Wasn't I lucky? Wasn't I lucky that the barman had pointed me in the wrong direction for hell? How did he do it? How did he make such a basic mistake?

Shirley let me in. Then things happened fast. They'd already happened fast. I know that things can happen fast. Before you know it, they've already happened. I know all about that.

And before we knew it Shirl and I weren't standing up anymore, looking at each other like strangers. Our feet weren't touching the ground and we were in another, more friendly situation, where we generally remained all night.

And I'd swear now, looking back, that it was that night, by hook or by crook or by complete accident, that our first one—Martin (it was Shirley's dad's name)—got conceived. It was something else that happened that night.

One day I might tell Martin—he's three years old now, and he has a little sister, Jessie—how it happened, how *he* happened. But maybe that wouldn't be such a great idea. I might just say to him, "Promise me one thing, Mart: never join the Army." And I'll never know if Shirley had the same hunch as me, or even some kind of direct knowledge. That it was that night. I've never asked, she's never said. But she had a job in a nursery school. I should have got the message. I should have seen it coming.

It was only in the morning that she said, looking at me in the daylight, "What the hell's happened? What the hell's going on? You've got big bruises on both your arms."

I never went back to the Blue Anchor. Surprise, surprise. That barman must have thought that, sure enough, he'd sent me to the right place. And, so far—and it's been a long time now and I have two kids—I've never gone back into myself like I used to. I've never gone back to that place.

My God, he must have had some strength, some arms. I wish I'd known his name. One day Shirl told me that she'd never known her dad. She'd just known—from her mum—that his name was Martin.

I might have said to Shirl, but I didn't, "I knew my dad, and I knew his name. More's the pity."

But I said to her as she looked at the bruises, "Yes, I noticed them, too. I don't think it was something *you* did, was it, Shirl? I'll tell you all about it later. But I've got to get to work. I'll tell you all about it later." ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Graham Swift on the human wilderness.

BOOKS

IN OTHER WORDS

J. M. Coetzee's interlingual romance.

BY JENNIFER WILSON

An interviewer for the London *Sunday Times* once praised the acclaimed Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau for breathing some much-needed life into his instrument. The piano, the interviewer said, was "the most machinelike of instruments—all those rods, levers, little felt pads, wires, no intimate subtle human connection with it by breath, tonguing, or the string player's direct engagement with speaking vibrations." Arrau's playing transmitted the sensation of touch, each note like a finger pressing down on the spine, relieving the tension of the day. Admirers of the musician often described his talent in bodily terms, reaching for physical metaphors to explain his interpretive gifts. The Argentinean-born conductor Daniel Barenboim said of Arrau, "The music really goes into his bones and his blood."

In "The Pole," the new novel by the South African writer J. M. Coetzee, Arrau has another fan in the character of Beatriz, a fortysomething socialite. But what does she know? The wife of a wealthy Spanish banker, Beatriz volunteers with the Concert Circle, a cultural foundation that hosts monthly recitals in Barcelona's Gothic Quarter. She has been let in because of her ample free time and her impressive Rolodex, not her ear. As the book opens, the "rather staid" board has flown a Polish pianist in his seventies from Berlin to perform works by Frédéric Chopin, another Polish musician adrift outside his homeland. The man's name, Witold Walczykiewicz, "has so many w's and z's in it," the narrator explains, that "no one on the board even tries to pronounce it. They refer to him simply as 'the Pole.'"

Witold's recent concert in London was well reviewed. A critic praised him for his pared-down interpretation of Chopin. Beatriz prefers the Chopin of Arrau, but she supposes that her opinion reveals a defect in taste. Arrau, after all, is not Polish. "So perhaps there was something he was deaf to," she muses. "Some feature of the mystery of Chopin that foreigners will never understand." She is part of an audience that crowds into Sala Mompou (named for Federico Mompou, a Catalan composer influenced by Chopin) to hear "Chopin played by a real Pole." They are sure that Witold, more than anyone—certainly more than a Chilean born on the opposite side of the world—will have the music in his bones and blood.

Like someone who arrives in a country she has seen only in movies and on postcards, Beatriz is disappointed by the real thing. Whereas Arrau transported her "into the drawing room of a great old country house in the remote Polish plains, with a long summer's day wheeling to an end," Witold has left her unmoved in every sense. She has travelled nowhere. Coetzee slyly re-creates that effect in "The Pole," giving readers little in the way of escapist details about Barcelona. There are no gaudy mentions of Gaudi or knowing references to vermouth hour; the Circle takes Witold out for an Italian meal, not for tapas. Beatriz and the pianist converse briefly in stilted English, neither's first choice of language. The incoherence is adjacent to silence, as Coetzee pushes his signature sparseness to the limits of intelligibility. When Beatriz accompanies Witold on the drive back from dinner, though they sit side by side, they say nothing. Yet, as she will soon realize, Witold is a musician; his job is to fill empty space with sound.

A week after his visit, he sends her a recording of his playing, along with a flirtatious note "to the angel who watched over me in Barcelona." Then, months later, he sends word that he is back in Spain, in the nearby city of Girona, and invites her to visit. "I will meet the train at any hour," he writes.

Beatriz is puzzled. Was her English worse than she thought? What else could explain such a misfire of signals? But she had said so little! Surely a loss for words shielded one from misunderstandings. She tells herself that she has no time for "circumlocutions, word games, veiled meanings." But Beatriz is a lady of leisure, with plenty of spare time. And it's hard to step away from a puzzle once you've started it. "Why are you here, Witold?" Beatriz writes. "I am here for you," he replies. What does "here" mean?, she wonders. Is she meant to meet him? Or perhaps "he is here for her as one is in a church for God?"

"Here" is a complicated concept for Coetzee, born in Cape Town, educated in Texas, and for the past twenty years a resident of Australia. Readers seeking an unalloyed South African voice prepared to deliver them into a township have often found themselves as disappointed as Beatriz was by Witold's performance. Coetzee's early novel "Waiting for the Barbarians" (1980) was set in an unspecified realm, referred to as simply "the Empire," which only obliquely represented the realities of apartheid South Africa. He followed it with "Life & Times

ABOVE: ANTONIO GIOVANNI PINNA

Love turns Beatriz into a translator for whom no dictionary exists other than her own racing thoughts.

ILLUSTRATION BY TOMEK OPALIŃSKI

of Michael K" (1983), set in a fictitious South Africa, amid a civil war. The action of "Foe" (1986), a reimagining of "Robinson Crusoe," was scattered across Brazil, Portugal, England, and the remote island first envisioned by Daniel Defoe.

Though Coetzee's enchanting, austere English (not unlike Witold's "hard, percussive" Chopin) immediately distinguished him as an undeniable talent, some post-colonial scholars regarded his use of allegory as toothless abstraction. It did not help when, in 1994, as the country was electing its first Black President in Nelson Mandela, Coetzee—perhaps South Africa's most celebrated author—published "The Master of Petersburg," a novel set in nineteenth-century Russia.

Coetzee, for his part, balked at the notion that he had an obligation to play the role of national author. In an interview from 1983, he blamed a "wholly ideological superstructure constituted by publishing, reviewing and criticism that is forcing on me the fate of being a 'South African novelist.'" To him, wanting a South African author to write about South African politics is a bit like wanting a Polish pianist to perform Chopin. It was a convenient position for a white South African writer to take, yes, but Coetzee correctly identified a pressure felt by many artists—both nonwhite and those whose whiteness can read as exotic on the global stage, such as Afrikaner or Eastern European—to represent a specific "here" for the world out there.

With "The Pole," Coetzee muddies the waters of national purity with his trademark clarity. The book, written in English, originally appeared in a Spanish-language translation, with the title "El Polaco," as if to leave those of us tasked with identifying "the original" tongue-tied. Coetzee had done the same with "The Death of Jesus" (2019), releasing the Spanish translation first. It was part of his campaign to "resist the hegemony of the English language," as he told audiences at the 2018 Hay Festival in Cartagena.

From its title, one might expect "The Pole" to tangle with the particulars of Witold's national identity. Instead, the book approaches the politics of Polishness in true Coetzee fashion: with elegant elision, at such an angle as to be almost imperceptible. The novel opens in 2015, the year that Law and Justice, a right-wing party that ran on a platform of Polish nationalism, came to power, but you would never know this fact from the pages of "The Pole." A Circle board member, joining Beatriz and Witold for dinner after the recital, asks the visitor, "How are affairs in your country nowadays? I remember the good Pope, he was from there, was he not? John Paul.'" Witold is evasive. "The Pole seems reluctant to be drawn," the narrator, whose perspective is often hard to distinguish from Beatriz's, notes. It's for the best; one cannot imagine members of the Circle, who have hosted Witold so that they could see a real Pole play Chopin, being receptive to any misgivings about nationalism. And Witold, who leads the peripatetic life of a travelling artist, must serve as a local trinket, a curio, for the global flow of commerce.

Beatriz never liked the Pope, and she doesn't like this Pole, either. The dinner conversation is rote and awkward, as if the other members of the Circle have memorized scripts and dialogues out of an imaginary language textbook titled "Small Talk for Cultural Élites." Beatriz and Witold resist fluency. She is moody and taciturn. He rejects the word "pianist," preferring to call himself "a man who plays piano," as in "the man who punches tickets in the bus." At this, Beatriz warms up to Witold, someone who, among other things, does not speak the idiom of the bourgeoise.

While some might read "The Pole" as a love story that unfolds across a language barrier, it is at its heart a novel about language that can be told only through a love plot. Desire seeks out definitions, and is fuelled by that labor. Witold's first note to Beatriz is a simple enough message, as are all the ones he sends her in the following months: "You bring me peace"; "I am here for you." And yet Beatriz cannot imagine Witold falling in love with her, an "ordinary person, not an exception at all.'" She keeps thinking it must be a misunderstanding, something lost in the fault lines opened up between the pair's native languages. Love turns her into a translator for whom no dictionary exists other than her own racing thoughts. The effect can be comic. "She allows a day to pass," the narrator tells us, "while she ruminates on *for you*."

"The Pole" is Coetzee's reworking of "Vita Nuova," Dante Alighieri's thirteenth-century account of falling for Beatrice, his lifelong love, who serves, in the Divine Comedy, as his guide through Paradise. "Vita Nuova" is a classic text of courtly love. Dante describes how, in keeping with that tradition, he masks the fact that Beatrice is the object of his love by addressing his poems to other women. "Screen ladies," he calls them. Coetzee, ever indirect, also relishes the screen as device, and in "The Pole" translation becomes the source of a similar evasiveness. At one point, Witold bequeaths Beatriz a collection of poems in a box labelled with her name and the phone number of Sala Mompou. Are the poems about her or just for her? There is no way to tell: they are written in Polish. "If he knew you couldn't read Polish," someone asks her, "why didn't he translate them for you?" The question goes unanswered, but by the novel's end the reader understands that uncertainty is like oxygen for the fire between Beatriz and Witold. To wonder what someone meant to say is, after all, a convenient reason to think about him all the time.

Anglophone readers of Coetzee, arriving late to the concert of Beatriz and Witold, know well that frustration and fealty are perfectly compatible. Coetzee told the Barcelona-based newspaper *Crónica Global* that the Spanish translation of "The Pole" "better reflects my intentions" than the original English does. As we read the book, we are, like Beatriz, left to wonder not only what the words on the page mean but if the writer might have intended to say something else entirely.

What was absent in the original that could be found only in translation? The novel presents words and what we desire to say as two points on a map, as far apart as the poles. To confront the distance between them is daunting, but love pushes us along. ♦

Block That Metaphor!

From the Washington Post.

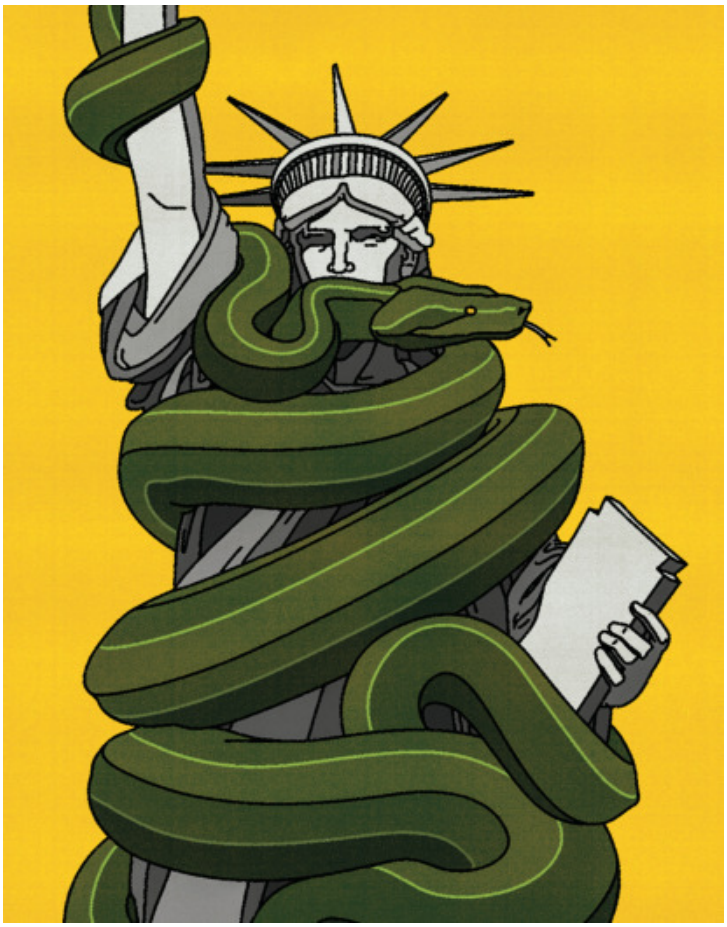
It's a gift horse for the bottom of the ticket; should we look it in the mouth or simply throw our arms around Uncle Joe for giving us a pony? The answer is obvious. I appreciate this theoretical horse/veep, and I can't wait to get it to a comfy stall in the West Wing and lovingly feed it oats and hope Biden consults it on important executive decisions. But I am going to spend a second examining its teeth. At the very least, we're going to do a quick floss.

BOOKS

YOU RULE

If democracy is ailing, how best to heal it?

BY ADAM GOPNIK



Liberal democracy was meant to accommodate political foes as well as friends.

ILLUSTRATION BY ÁLVARO BERNIS

Cicero, the Roman orator and politician of the first century B.C.E., spoke up over and over again—while stamping his feet for effect in between sentences, if his own testimony is to be believed—for the republic: that is, for a form of democratic government, perhaps limited, but unambiguously opposed to tyranny or boss-man rule. Supplying the rhetorical fuel, at least, for Julius Caesar's assassination, he took up with some of Caesar's successors, imagining them to be less autocratically inclined than the man they had assassinated. Before long, he found himself on the run from his new friends and was caught and killed by soldiers of the new regime. His head and hands were cut off and displayed in the forum where he had spoken, as a warning to others to be more discreet. His head was where his mouth was, of course, and his hands were an instrument of oratory, too; he was of a generation that believed in violent gesticulation while arguing, a form of communication now limited to football coaches protesting calls from the sidelines.

And that was more or less that: reticence about the res publica ruled for a millennium and a half, with Cicero reduced to a master of the long and Latinate sentence. Then, just a couple of hundred years ago, a new set of republics was born, in Western Europe and America. Now, by general agreement, they are in crisis, too, having lasted only about half as long as the Roman original.

Is the new crisis the result of cracks in the foundation of democracy, assaults on its principles, or the sudden appearance of a devil who scared away its better angels? Many recent books argue the various cases, and in each instance what you think will cure democracy depends on what you thought about it before it got sick. If liberal democracy (and how tightly those two words should be yoked together is among the subjects of contention) was a façade for the free market, then it is the neoliberal author of its own demise. If it was an essentially healthy, if imperfect, pluralist society, then it is beleaguered by enemies motivated by the sordid passions of mankind: nationalism, religious bigotry, xenophobia, and, above all, racial resentment. The basic solution that the writers of these books propose is to get more people to think about the problem the way they do. The trouble is that the whole point of liberal democratic regimes is to find solutions that involve people not thinking the way we do about a problem and somehow still existing, however grudgingly, as fellow-citizens. Against the urgent modernity of the crisis, the cures seem medieval—the political equivalent of cupping and blood-letting—in their vagueness and their very conditional promise.

Consider Heather Cox Richardson's new book, "Democracy Awakening: Notes on the State of America" (Viking). A Harvard-trained professor of history at Boston College, she is best known as a prolific and terrific Substacker, whose point-by-point empirical interventions provided welcome sanity in recent years. Richardson's pointillist empiricism does very good work in this book, too; she reminds the reader, for instance, that democratic deficits are deeply embedded in the American system, bringing up the easily overlooked detail that the senators voting for Donald Trump's conviction in both of his impeachment trials represented eighteen million more Americans than those who voted to excuse him.

But, for the most part, she offers in

almost storybook prose—one-sentence paragraphs abound—a storybook version of American history. It is not manifestly false, or simpleminded, just simplified, with good guys and bad guys lined up neatly in rows and familiar facts delivered with a sense of revelation: "In August 2022, the Democrats passed the Inflation Reduction Act, which made historic investments in addressing climate change, expanded health coverage, reduced the deficit, and raised taxes on corporations and the very wealthy." She has a subsidiary point to make—that President Biden was reacting to our problems as F.D.R. had reacted to his, by making social-welfare legislation central to his agenda. Yet, in her patient, accumulative narration of yesterday's news, one often feels as if one were reading yesterday's newspapers, and this in an age when there are no more yesterday's newspapers to read.

Richardson does have an overarching thesis, however, one that's equally simple and familiar: the crisis of democracy in America is a deep-seated current of racial resentment that has now become a torrent, with Trump a mere bobblehead doll bouncing along in its wake. Racial resentment today is rooted in the failure of Reconstruction back when—and in the baleful belief it engendered in the minds of poor working-class whites that the federal government exists to subsidize Black people at their expense. Faulkner's famous line about the past not even being past is echoed here not in an elegiac sense but as the herald of a permanent electoral emergency: the Confederate vision was left to fester as a wound. Exploited to the full by Nixon, the revanchist legacy was further entrenched in the Reagan years, and all talk of small government and self-reliance and the rest is merely a rider to this racism.

Growing inequality further fuels the dynamic, Richardson says, as wrath gets misdirected away from the oligarchs to the outsiders, particularly since the catastrophic Citizens United decision made "dark money" limitlessly available. Until the democratic deficits and the corruption by money are reformed, we will have Trumpism in one form or another. As the white majority becomes a minority, its sense of embattlement and its contempt for democracy will only increase. January 6th was merely a skirmish to which the federal government responded, in a very un-Lincolnian way, with foolish forbearance, hoping that a round of good government would break the fever.

Though the point of Richardson's book is plain—liberal democracy is under assault—its purpose is more obscure. To whom is it directed? If you accept this history, you'll accept her diagnosis, and if you don't, her book won't make you. Opposing arguments aren't seriously entertained, even to be dismissed. No conservative thinker, ancient or modern, is given much dignity or even credit for good intentions; nor is any right-leaning politician. Conservative political theory is taken to be a merely reactive body of thought. Yet the seeming contradictions of ideology—the undertow in the wave—is where any democratic hope lies.

Lincoln, as Richardson notes, called himself a conservative, and though this was largely a rhetorical trick—aimed at opponents of his anti-slavery cause, who had dubbed it radical—it was not entirely a rhetorical trick. Repeatedly placing himself alongside the Founding Fathers extended the appeal of his position to those who might not otherwise have tolerated it. It's the curlicues and the contradictions within an ideology that provide the opportunity for altering it. (L.B.J. and Martin Luther King, Jr.,'s shared insight, in the mid-sixties, was that you could win over at least a minority of racially suspicious white working-class voters if you offered social programs plainly in their interest.) It's true that, in a crisis, far too many conservatives are prepared to go along with authoritarians who hate democracy in all its forms, but a significant number, however strong their love for inherited order, rediscover a belief in constitutional and republican principles. When, as sometimes happens, that Ciceronian conviction supersedes all others, they often help lead the resistance to tyranny: de Gaulle is a grand instance of this truth, Liz Cheney a recent one. The devil may or may not be in the details, but hope lies in the cracks and crevices of our ideologies. It's where the light gets in.

A deeper problem arises from Richardson's conflation of liberalism in the partisan-political sense, meaning the pursuit of a particular set of desirable social programs, and liberalism in the larger sense, as a way of resolving social violence. Throughout, Richardson suggests that good government is the proof of a thriving democracy, and so we get her loving inventory of New Deal and Great Society programs ("Congress also endorsed LBJ's aspirations for beauty and purpose with the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965 . . . to make sure the era's emphasis on science didn't endanger the humanities"), while the Reagan revolution is seen as the result of media manipulation by the oligarchs. The strength of our democracy, in Richardson's view, evidently depends on the continuing electoral victories of the people we favor.

But, though the reader may heartily agree with the virtues of her preferred political programs, the superintending architecture of liberal democracy depends on oscillation in power and point of view, rather as a department store depends on revolving doors. Old customers go out even as new ones come in. If you take your particular policy prescriptions to be a precondition of democratic government, liberal-democratic government becomes impossible to sustain, because the central achievement of such a polity is to accommodate the coexistence of different views. Some may recall the Louisiana governor Earl Long's dry comment about the Republican magazine mogul Henry Luce, as reported by A. J. Liebling: "Mr. Luce is like a fellow that owns a shoe store and buys all the shoes to fit hisself."

A democratic shoe store must be able to fit more than a few feet. The great economist Friedrich Hayek looks absurd today for insisting that the British Labour Party in 1945 was pointing toward "the road to serfdom" and away from democracy. Civil liberties were unaffected by nationalized railroads. But it is no less absurd to make all neolib-

erals the enemies of democracy. If Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, elected more than once by wide margins, are not democratic leaders, then no one is. Praising the people who agree with you is the easy part of democratic government. The hard part is building a superintending architecture that wins the consent even of those you hate.

Brook Manville and Josiah Ober, in their new book, "The Civic Bargain" (Princeton), recognize this truth, and, indeed, build a whole theory of democracy around it. They begin with a simple but persuasive point: that democracy depends not on the creation of constitutions and statutes but on intuitive understandings among groups that precede this formal apparatus. The primal act of healthy democracies is the social bargain, and its product is an idea of citizenship that in itself depends on the coexistence of different kinds of groups. Citizenship is an escape from clan identity.

The authors trace this idea through the history of democracies, from the Athens of Pericles to the Rome of Cicero, leaping forward, as that history demands, to the slow evolution of British democracy in the seventeenth century and then to the American Revolution and its long aftermath. Manville and Ober land, in this pursuit, on several simple turns and several new conceptions. They divorce "democracy" from liberal institutions, for instance, on the ground that the institutions are a residue of the civic bargain, not the arbiters of it. And where earlier mega-histories of this kind emphasized the dangers to democracy of imperial growth, Manville and Ober imply, surprisingly, that size is essential to democratic health. The Athenians' inability to "scale up" their idea of citizenship in order to create an army large enough to confront the Macedonian forces is held responsible for the downfall of that democracy. Roman citizenship was far broader and, for a long time, helpful to the ideal of the Roman Republic; that republic eventually broke up through the sheer paralysis of trying to administer a monster-sized empire with pre-modern means. For the most part, in this history of democracy, growth is good.

In each case, the particular laws and rules of the explicit social contract overlay the often unstated practices of a larger social bargain. Ciceronian Rome worked for a surprisingly long time because of an ever-broadening social bargain that brought previously excluded social classes to citizenship, so that plebeians, the commercial classes, and aristocrats could peacefully coexist. However uneasy the members of the aristocratic senatorial class were at seeing their power diluted, they had sense enough to realize that adding more kinds strengthened the social fabric on which their continued prosperity depended. Very much like the Whig aristocrats of nineteenth-century Britain, so beautifully chronicled by Trollope, they gave up supremacy for longevity.

The United States, in this account, was a picture of a successful democracy until relatively recently. It was tested by the Civil War and the Second World War but survived both. Indeed, one crucial way in which democracies "scale up" is through warfare: no ideal of common citizenship is as pointed as comradeship in combat. But in recent decades, as the familiar story insists, citizenship and the ideal of negotiation and compromise have broken down through polarization intensified by social media. We have to return to the table and make a new bargain based on renewed compromise. Throughout the book, Manville and Ober's model is of civic dialogue rooted in an Aristotelian ideal of "civic friendship." In their view, "the most productive bargains expand opportunity for the future" and make for "achievable aspirations beyond what can be seen or imagined in the initial deal."

Two amendments to this agreeable vision would seem to be called for. First, a fruitful civic bargain necessarily exists at a more abstract level than Manville and Ober's picture quite allows. There is a sense in the book that the civic bargain can happen, or should happen, through the actual coming together of two sides, who may agree on little but act as citizens and friends to solve their problems and find common ground. This is the men-and-women-of-good-will, serious-people-of-both-sides approach, shared by "third way" thinkers of all kinds.

Yet the genius of liberal democracy is to accept that such face-to-face confrontations are unlikely to achieve much. It is one reason Manville and Ober are so persuasive when they insist that "scaling up" strengthens democracy. Abstraction is the enemy of personal empathy, but it's essential for equitable elections. Villages are communal, but they aren't

"The flight was terrible—I was surrounded by quiet adults."

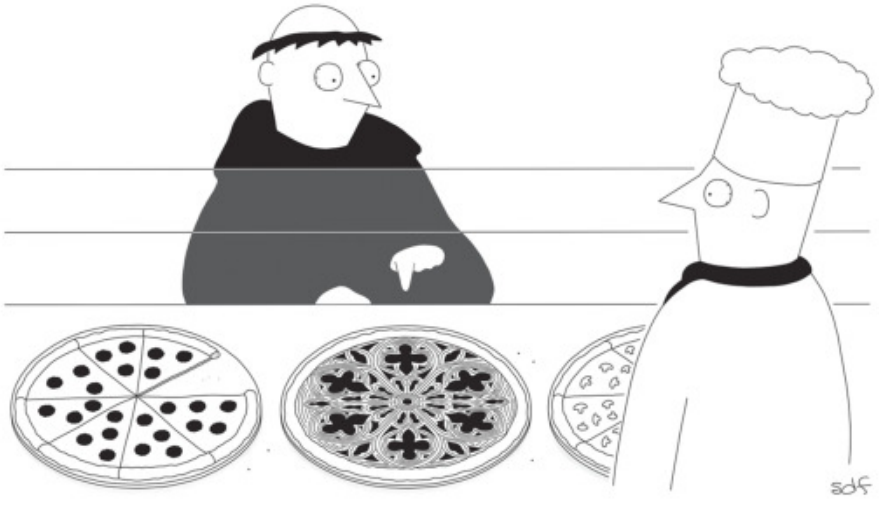
truly democratic. A level of abstraction is necessary to imagine other citizens as equal agents with rights, not clan histories. We know too much about the people we know. Hipsters and Hasidim in Brooklyn do not much benefit from direct contact; direct democracy tends to drift away in difference.

The essential compromises arrive, instead, through the proceduralism of representative democracy. In New York City, council members (whose names most of their constituents may not even know) meet and bargain over who's to pay for education and how to keep the rats away and the streets clean. The civic bargain between hipsters and Hasidim in Brooklyn takes place precisely because they don't have to sit together and misunderstand each other. Professional politicians are a necessary social class; as the late sociologist Howard Becker explained, all social systems need unofficial experts who can mediate between competing groups. Their virtue is that, whatever they say to their constituents, the habit of compromise is imprinted on their profession, just as the habit boxers have of hugging after attempting to inflict brain concussions on each other is imprinted on theirs.

A further objection to the happy-together view of democracy is that communal conversation is possible only on a ground already circled by a shared idea of the unacceptable. A conception of criminality is integral to the conception of citizenship. An unspoken precondition of coming to the table is keeping out the cannibals. Lincoln believed that slavery might be bargained over—with an eye to its eventual elimination, but conceivably in stages. Yet he also believed that secession in the pursuit of continuing slavery was a crime, not a negotiating position, and that secessionists should be treated as criminals within the country, not as adversaries outside it. His grand bargain for the nation was not to bargain with those he considered traitors.

And though it's certainly true that the American South has changed dramatically in the past sixty years, King and the segregationists found common ground not through a process of civil compromise but through a much more severe process of exclusion, centered in courts more than in clubs. The common ground was the ground that was left over after the other ground had been taken away. The South changed in part because, despite prejudiced juries and a weak F.B.I., the worst crimes of the Ku Klux Klan were often caught and frequently punished. The price of sedition became, for the first time since the Civil War, a high one. King and Jim Clark, the vicious leader of the Selma police, became common citizens because the Army was sent to Little Rock and the National Guard was employed in Alabama. Criminalizing certain actions is not an impediment to social compromise but part of its process. (Clark, by the way, having been defeated on segregation, set out to become a marijuana smuggler; there *are* second acts in American lives.)

Demonizing "the other side" is a bad idea, but in a healthy democracy the real demons don't get a side. Armed gangs and warlords, who have decided much of human history, don't get a voice. Mussolini ceased to be a politician when he marched on Rome. We have to be prepared to have debates, and to lose, on questions that may at the moment seem to us matters of life and death—on abortion or mass incarceration or gun sanity, say. We are compelled to bargain with people who believe, however crazily, that guns promote social peace. But when they pull out guns the bargaining ends. A man who brings a machine gun to a Monopoly game is not playing a "disruptive" form of Monopoly. He is not playing Monopoly. Laws, in this sense, are the rules on the box that allow real social bargaining to happen. This is what makes Trump, whatever etiology Richardson may rightly claim for him within respectable Republicanism, a very distinctive danger to democracy. To say that Trump presents a mere political challenge is silly: we voted him out, and he refused to go. At that moment, his part in the "civic conversation" ended, and the rules on the box took over. In this game, there is no Free Parking. The offending player gets to go directly to jail.



Yet the game of democracy cannot be assessed by who wins the round. Democracy, even of the most direct kind, has always implied some idea of pluralism. In the Athens of the fifth century B.C.E., Pericles insisted on an ideal of tolerance: "There is no exclusiveness in our public life, and in our private business we are not suspicious of one another, nor angry with our neighbor if he does what he likes; we do not even put on sour looks at him which, though harmless, are not pleasant." Cicero, too, is fairly described as a pluralist, if in the more limited sense of accepting an open-ended dialectic as the engine of public life.

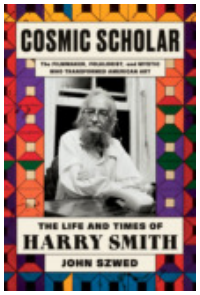
Liberal democracy isn't to be saved by attaching it to a particular political or economic program, because this is exactly what it doesn't demand. John Stuart Mill, the apostle of the liberal order, understood better than anyone that all of social life involves half measures and partial truths, and that committing irrevocably to a single economic program means putting an end to the possibility

of using empirical experience to test it. What worked once may not work again. There is much to be said on many sides of a question. The point of democratic government—as Pericles insisted, Cicero understood, and Mill demonstrated—is to make a wary practice of coexistence into a principle of pluralism.

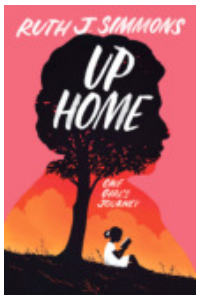
Nor must we go to such heights to see this truth. As Franklin Foer points out in the prologue to his fine new biography of Joe Biden, the President is, like Harry Truman before him, a professional politician, meaning someone who understands instinctively what political theorists have to explicate at length—that, as Manville and Ober would agree, politics at its best is "a set of practices" by which "a society mediates its differences, allowing for peaceful coexistence." Elsewhere, Foer calls Biden, affectionately, "the old hack that could." A hack, indeed. When democratic practices are in power, they look boringly normal; it's startling to realize how fragile they really are, and how hard they are to recover when they're gone. Cicero blithely believed that the institutions of the Roman Republic were so strong and long-standing that friends and colleagues like Octavian and Mark Antony couldn't really be capable of ending them. They were. The successful defense of democracy at times demands a price so high that we tend to have amnesia about it afterward.

Richardson ends with several stirring paragraphs citing rhetoric from the prewar Lincoln about the necessity of fighting for a free and equal nation. Lincoln, debating Stephen Douglas in 1854, declared that, in opposing a law of Douglas's that allowed slavery in the Western territories, "we rose each fighting, grasping whatever he could first reach—a scythe—a pitchfork—a chopping axe, or a butcher's cleaver." But she does not, perhaps, sufficiently emphasize that these words, though originally metaphoric, were tragically prescient of real violence to come. Presented as words to live by, they become, restored to context, a description of the way men came to die. One imagines Cicero's friends among the Romans, similarly, being asked to pledge their heads and hands to the good republican cause. Defending democracy can be a grimmer prospect than it sounds. ♦

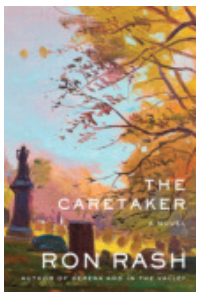
BRIEFLY NOTED



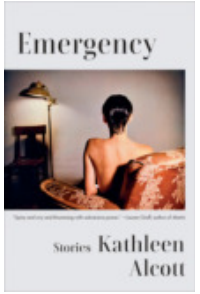
Cosmic Scholar, *by John Szwed (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. The Beat polymath Harry Smith—an eccentric, couch-surfing, bearded bohemian who repaired the holes in his jacket with duct tape and lived on pea soup, mashed bananas, and cigarettes—bears some resemblance to the protagonist of Joseph Mitchell's masterpiece "Joe Gould's Secret." But, whereas Gould's life's work turned out not to exist, this biography argues persuasively that Smith's contributions to art, anthropology, avant-garde film, and, most of all, popular music were profound. Szwed, also the author of an excellent biography of Billie Holiday, shows how the legacy that Smith left behind—including the six-LP "Anthology of American Folk Music," from 1952—influenced the sensibilities of Bob Dylan, Jerry Garcia, and countless others.



Up Home, *by Ruth J. Simmons (Random House)*. In 2001, Simmons, a Romanticist by training, became the president of Brown University—and thus the first Black president of an Ivy League institution. Her memoir, which borrows its title from a phrase she and her family use to refer to revisiting their home town of Grapeland, Texas, begins with her youth as one of twelve children born to sharecropper parents. The Simmonses' straitened circumstances led to her love of the classroom: "a place of brilliant light unlike any our homes afforded." She dwells on her encouraging teachers, and on the experiences that fuelled her fight against discrimination in higher education.



The Caretaker, *by Ron Rash (Doubleday)*. This immersive novel, set in Appalachia, explores the reverberations of a young man's decision to elope with a teen-age hotel maid. The only son of a well-to-do family, Jacob is disinherited over the marriage, and soon afterward is conscripted to fight in Korea. He asks a friend, the caretaker of the town graveyard, to look after his wife. The two are shunned—the wife because of the town's loyalty to her in-laws, the caretaker for the disfigurement he suffered as a result of childhood polio—and form a strong friendship. When news arrives that Jacob has been badly wounded, his parents plot to separate the married couple, but it is the lack of love in the caretaker's life that shapes the novel most deeply.



Emergency, *by Kathleen Alcott (Norton)*. "Nobody knows where I am," one of the narrators in this collection of stories chants. She is in crisis after discovering evidence of her late mother's secret past, but the line could plausibly be spoken by any of Alcott's protagonists, who all find themselves off the map in some sense—pushing against expectations, wrestling with desire, and reckoning with ideas of who they are or should be. One character, learning of her lover's disturbing history, grapples with the question of whether people can change; another attempts to navigate the ethical compromises of her well-paying job. In supple, self-assured prose, Alcott highlights the ambivalence that can come with intimacy and violence, asking whether love is merely another form of circumscription, and whether brutality can sometimes be an antidote to numbness.

BOOKS

YOU MUST REMEMBER THIS

How China's underground historians have fought the politics of amnesia.

BY IAN BURUMA

Remembering the fate of dissidents such as Lin Zhao is itself an act of dissidence.

Spark was not much of a magazine. Handwritten and mimeographed secretly with a primitive machine at a sulfuric-acid plant in a remote region of central China, the publication began in 1960 and never went beyond two issues. The first was hardly more than a poem and a few articles, critical of Mao Zedong's ongoing Great Leap Forward campaign. The young men and women involved in the venture were arrested in the fall of 1960, and some of the contributors were executed as "counter-revolutionaries" after spending years in prison under horrifying conditions. *Spark* was read by very few people.

And yet, as Ian Johnson makes clear in his superb, stylishly written book "Sparks: China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future" (Oxford), the publication has had an afterlife of great importance. Its title was based on a common Chinese expression: "A single spark can start a prairie fire." With firm but never dogmatic moral conviction, Johnson pays tribute to the writers, the scholars, the poets, and the filmmakers who found the courage to challenge Communist Party propaganda. These dissenters—he calls them "underground historians"—looked beyond the official lies about the past and the present, and decided to document the truth about forbidden topics, including Mao's campaigns to massacre putative class enemies and, indeed, anyone who pricked his paranoia. They often paid for their candor with long prison terms, torture, or death. If their conclusions—presented in homemade videos, mimeographed sheets, and underground journals—didn't reach a wide audience when they appeared, they were at least on record, for later generations.

For some underground historians, the crucial work has been to preserve the legacy of previous chroniclers and witnesses. One name that recurs throughout "Sparks" is Hu Jie, an Army veteran and a visual artist, whose documentary films focus on forgotten victims of various murderous policies. A poet named Lin Zhao, who contributed to *Spark*, was the subject of a film Hu released in 2004, titled "Searching for Lin Zhao's Soul." By interviewing people who had known her, Hu kept her legacy alive. Arrested in the fall of 1960, Lin was tortured in prison for having written poetry that expressed her yearning for freedom. Alone in a cell (rubber-walled, to stop her from killing herself), when she wasn't shackled to a chair and beaten by guards, she wrote poems on scraps of paper by piercing her finger with the sharpened end of a toothbrush and using her blood as ink. Eventually, her head was wrapped in a hood of artificial leather, with just a slit for her eyes and nose, so that she could barely breathe, let alone speak. Lin was executed by gunshot, in 1968. Her family had to pay for the bullet.

Hu told Johnson why he took risks to remember people like her: "They weren't afraid to die. They died in secret, and we of succeeding generations don't know what heroes they were. I think it's a matter of morality. They died for us. If we don't know this, it is a tragedy." Two years later, Hu completed "Though I Am Gone," a harrowing film about an incident, from the summer of 1966, in which a proud Communist vice-principal of an élite girls' school in Beijing was tortured to death by her pupils. In 2013, Hu finished a documentary about *Spark* that brought the long-forgotten journal to the attention of a wider audience than it had ever seen. Many of Hu's movies, including that one, are available on YouTube.

There are other underground historians who remain active, notably Wang Bing, whose films have won many prizes

HU JIE, "LIN ZHAO BEHIND BARS" (2007) / COURTESY THE ARTIST

at international festivals. One of his films, titled "The Ditch" (2010), depicts the lives and the horrible deaths of political prisoners in a forced-labor camp, in 1960, when extreme hunger compelled men to eat the starved corpses of their fellows. Since the dead bodies had little flesh, the men would cut out and consume the lungs and other innards.

Johnson also turns to lesser-known figures, such as Ai Xiaoming, a former professor of Chinese literature, with a focus on women's studies, whose admiration for Milan Kundera and experiences during the Tiananmen protests, in 1989, fed her growing skepticism about the official Party line. In 2006, she made "The Epic of the Central Plains," a documentary about poor villagers who sold their blood for food and got infected with H.I.V. Other films of hers show how shoddy school construction, permitted by corrupt Party officials, led to the deaths of many thousands of children in the Sichuan earthquake of 2008. (Addressing this taboo subject also landed the artist Ai Weiwei in trouble.) None of this work can be released in China.

There are plenty of contemporary problems that one can't safely discuss in China, especially when they involve important officials. But Johnson's underground historians are mostly concerned with unearthing and keeping alive forbidden memories of the past. Official Party history, imposed on China's population, is also a matter of official forgetting. Many people born in China after 1989 have never heard of the Tiananmen massacre. Many of the young people who lived through the Cultural Revolution, in the nineteen-sixties and early seventies, would have had limited knowledge of the Great Leap Forward, in the late fifties and early sixties, when Mao's crackpot schemes for industrial and agricultural transformation caused tens of millions of deaths from starvation. And many of those who starved may not have been fully aware of the land-reform campaigns of the early fifties, when vast numbers of people were murdered as class enemies, because they owned some land (as Mao's father did, but that is a fact Party ideologues prefer to keep quiet).

The dissident Fang Lizhi, holed up at the United States Embassy in Beijing, in 1990, to avoid arrest after the Tiananmen crackdown, composed an essay titled "The Chinese Amnesia." "About once each decade, the true face of history is thoroughly erased from the memory of Chinese society," he wrote, in lines that Johnson quotes. "This is the objective of the Chinese Communist policy of 'Forgetting History.' In an effort to coerce all of society into a continuing forgetfulness, the policy requires that any detail of history that is not in the interests of the Chinese Communists cannot be expressed in any speech, book, document, or other medium."

That is why the story of *Spark* was so important to Hu Jie and to others, including Liu Xiaobo, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010 and died of cancer in captivity for having advocated democratic reforms. The main figure behind *Spark* was Zhang Chunyuan, a decorated Army veteran of the Korean War. In 1956, he took up Mao's challenge to offer constructive criticism of the Party in the Hundred Flowers campaign. Like many young idealists, Zhang thought that he could improve his country by exposing its shortcomings, in his case the poor quality of teaching and the lack of books at his university. The regime quickly clamped down on its critics. Zhang was sent to a poverty-stricken and remote area to work at a tractor station.

It was the height of the Great Leap Forward, and Zhang, like other students sent to work the land, witnessed people dying of hunger. One student, named Sun Ziyun, thought he should let Communist officials know about these desperate conditions and wrote a letter to the editors of *Red Flag*, one of the main Party organs. He was arrested a few months later, beaten severely, and made to wear heavy buckets of feces and urine around his neck until he passed out. Of course, Party officials knew perfectly well what was happening. But if they wanted to keep their jobs, or stay out of prison themselves, they had to present inflated statistics to make Mao's fantasies appear to be a huge success. To further boost the statistics, they robbed peasants of what little food they had left. And so Zhang and others decided that they needed to start a magazine: the catastrophe had to be recorded.

Efforts, decades later, to commemorate *Spark* and similar testimonies were meant not just to celebrate the heroism of these chroniclers but to make sure that a record of the past was not lost. Johnson writes about a historian named Gao Hua, whose experiences of extreme violence during the Cultural Revolution prompted him to look into the earlier years of the Communist Party's history, before the so-called liberation of 1949, when Mao terrorized senior cadres into submitting to a kind of idolatry: only Mao was the legitimate revolutionary leader, only his ideas counted, only his ideological version of the past mattered.

The works of Johnson's underground historians—books, films, and various publications—don't amount to much compared with the vast propaganda apparatus of the country's Communist Party. And yet Johnson argues that their value is incalculable. To understand why he might be right, it helps to understand the role of history in Chinese politics.

"Patriotic education," as the campaign to propagate official history is now called, is a central pillar of Communist rule in China. Ever since Mao laid down the "correct line" in the caves of Yan'an, where the Communist leaders bided their time during the war with the Japanese in the forties, the goal has been to make people believe that everything before the Communist Revolution was decadent, corrupt, and wicked, that the revolution was inevitable, and that only Communist rule would restore the power and the glory of China. The Party line has shifted somewhat through the years. Deng Xiaoping, who was China's paramount leader from the late nineteen-seventies to the nineties, was mostly concerned with rebuilding a shattered economy, and he allowed that Mao had made some errors. Today, President Xi Jinping is much less tolerant when it comes to criticism of the Great Helmsman.

Johnson tells us that in the Yan'an area alone, where Mao's doctrines took shape, the government has identified four hundred and forty-five memorial sites and built thirty museums. There are thirty-six thousand revolutionary sites

throughout the country, and sixteen hundred of them are memorial halls and museums, all of which serve to indoctrinate an endless stream of schoolchildren and "red tourists." Popular entertainment on film and TV provides fictional accounts of Communist heroes resisting Japanese imperialists or defeating decadent class enemies left over from the irredeemable past. And a large number of memorials, from the southern province of Guangdong, where the Opium Wars began, to the far northeast, annexed by the Japanese in the thirties, are there to make people aware of earlier humiliations that only the Communist Party can put right.

Patriotic education is not unique to the People's Republic of China. Americans don't need to be reminded that the teaching of history can become a hotly contested political topic in democracies, too. But using the past to legitimatize political rule has an exceptionally long history in China. "For Chinese people, history is our religion," Hu Ping, a pro-democracy Chinese intellectual now living in exile in New York, once wrote. "We don't believe in a just God, but we believe in a just history."

Every new dynasty in imperial China had its own scribes to extoll the new rulers and disparage the old ones. Political legitimacy was a mixture of cosmology—the emperor as the Son of Heaven, who was mandated by Heaven to rule the earth—and moral doctrines based on Confucian philosophy. Obedience to authority is a Confucian virtue, but so is a ruler's duty to be worthy of such obedience.

In theory, at least, Confucian scholars were responsible for keeping a ruler on the straight and narrow, often using history as a guide. If rulers behaved badly, they would lose the mandate of Heaven. In a way, Johnson's underground historians are the latest in a long line of intrepid Confucian critics. Johnson cites the example of China's preëminent historian, Sima Qian, who was born around 145 B.C. Sima's career as a court historian in the Han dynasty was upended when he offended the emperor, and his testicles were cut off. His "Records of the Grand Historian" was completed later, as a private enterprise. Not only was Sima's secular history of China an attempt to provide a factual account, which was already an innovation, but he often interviewed ordinary people. Like Johnson's chroniclers—and, indeed, like the officials they opposed—Sima took a moral view of history writing. His task wasn't just to condemn wrongful behavior; it was to remember the deeds of the virtuous, so that later generations could celebrate them as examples.

If political conformity was imposed in the imperial past by instilling Confucian orthodoxy and official history, vast areas of China always remained beyond the control of the central government. There also existed something we would call civil society: religious institutions—Buddhist, Taoist, and, later, Christian, too—as well as clan associations and other independent social networks. Family loyalties and local patronage were often more important than obedience to the central state. Many rebellions against China's official rulers came from millenarian groups and religious cults that sprang up among the oppressed. Government based on moral orthodoxy can perhaps only be challenged by alternative orthodoxies, hence the ferocity of the Communist government's crackdown on such movements as Falun Gong. It may look like a relatively harmless cult of elderly Buddhist-inspired meditators. But to Party ideologues Falun Gong represents a direct and dangerous challenge to their ideological monopoly, and thus to the legitimacy of Communist rule.

What the Communist Party was able to do more successfully and ruthlessly

than any Chinese government before was to eliminate other forms of institutional loyalty. It prohibits organizations independent of the state. Ideally, all the cultural, spiritual, and political energies of the Chinese people are focussed on the Communist Party alone.

This has become especially important to Xi Jinping. In the eighties, Deng Xiaoping could afford to relax ideological indoctrination a little, because he believed that a strong economy would lend legitimacy to Communist Party rule. Xi, who was himself a victim of Mao's Cultural Revolution, as the son of a disgraced Party official, has drawn a lesson from the collapse of the Soviet Union. He is convinced that the Soviet Communists lost power because Mikhail Gorbachev allowed people to lose ideological faith. Xi's word for different historical interpretations is "historical nihilism." He will not allow this to happen in China. Dangerous notions—such as the value of liberal democracy, civil society, a free press, or an independent judiciary—have to be wiped out of public discourse, even at universities where they were once tolerated.

Xi's reactionary cultural and intellectual policies are a very Chinese response to a political crisis—rule legitimatized by official dogma. His resolution on history, a document adopted by the Chinese Communist Party in 2021, made it clear that Party orthodoxy should define Chinese civilization, within and outside the borders of the People's Republic, including Hong Kong and Taiwan. In the document's words, "As long as we continue to consolidate solidarity between different ethnic groups, people across the nation, and all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation, foster a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation, and ensure that Chinese people all over the world focus their energy and ingenuity toward the same goal, we will bring together a mighty force for making national rejuvenation a reality."

For Xi, and for many Chinese nationalists, to be critical of the government is to be anti-Chinese. One of the great merits of Johnson's book is his insistence that the Chinese are not monolithic. There are people who continue to defy official propaganda. Few people do so publicly, but Johnson argues that they have an influence far beyond their numbers.

One reason for this, Johnson thinks, is the nature of modern technology. Books can be burned. It is much harder to delete everything on the Internet. A kind of civil society can exist in cyberspace. Long after a person has died, Johnson writes, "that individual's

memories can now be preserved and transmitted to new generations." Social media and other forms of digital communication have "allowed large groups of people to understand that they are not alone in observing a disconnect between the official version of reality and their lived experiences."

Such technological optimism should be treated with a little wariness. Similar assumptions have been made before. W. H. Auden once wrote about the tape recorder, "In the old days only God heard every idle word, today it is not only broadcast to thousands of the living but also preserved to gratify the idle curiosity of the unborn." But, as we know from Hitler's use of the radio, or Donald Trump's of Twitter, the power of politicians to exploit new technology to broadcast lies and bury dissent can be greater than the power of the dissenters to spread their ideas.

Still, the underground historians are playing the long game. One might compare them to resisters under the Nazis. Often ineffective in its own time, their moral example can be the basis of national reconstruction and renewal once the occupation or dictatorship comes to an end. In Johnson's words, the dissidents "*know* they will win, not individually and not immediately, but someday. In essence, the Chinese Communist Party's enemies are not these individuals but the lasting values of Chinese civilization: righteousness, loyalty, freedom of thought."

This might be a trifle romantic; these are no more the "values of Chinese civilization" than they are uniquely French, British, or American. Perhaps they are universal, which may explain why Xi denounces the very idea of universal values and insists, instead, that the values now governing China are essentially Chinese. But it is not always easy to determine what is essentially Chinese. Johnson is an expert on religious life in China—his writings on the subject include the excellent book "The Souls of China" (2017)—and it's striking how many Chinese rebels and dissenters have been Christians. Sun Yat-sen, the father of China's Republican revolution, in 1911, was a Christian. The leader of the Taiping Rebellion, which started in 1850, thought he was the brother of Jesus Christ. Some of the student leaders in

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Tiananmen Square were (or became) Christians. And so are some of the underground historians.

Jimmy Lai, a newspaper publisher who now sits in prison, in Hong Kong, for his support of the democracy movements in Hong Kong and China, told me, for an article in *Harper's* in 2020, that "our values will prevail because our civilization is based on the rule of law. It is strong because this is based on Christianity. We follow rules because we fear a higher power." Martin Lee, another venerable democratic activist in Hong Kong, and a Roman Catholic like Lai, also told me, "We believe in the truth. The Communists don't recognize the truth."

A common dismissal of such declarations is to say that dissenters have been Westernized, alienated from Chinese values. This is certainly what Xi would say. The real story is more complicated; there are many different ways to be a Christian, and not all Chinese dissidents who become Christians do so for the same reasons. Still, one way to oppose rule by moral and spiritual orthodoxy is to be guided by an alternative metaphysical dogma. Christianity fits the bill rather well, because it promises equality before God, and that God is neither an emperor nor Xi Jinping.

Christian and more traditional Chinese values also overlap to some extent. Hu Jie isn't Christian, so far as I know, but his claim that the heroic dissidents, whose lives he recorded, "died for us" has the ring of Christian martyrology. The idea of having to die for a cause actually became a matter of contention after the crackdown on the Tiananmen protesters. A week before the massacre, Chai Ling, a student leader, spoke to an interviewer of her hope that blood would flow, for "only when the Square is awash with blood will the people of China open their eyes." Her words outraged many at the time. Chai is now a U.S. citizen, a successful software entrepreneur, and a Christian.

Lin Zhao, the poet who published in *Spark* and wrote in prison with her own blood, attended a Methodist school, where she was baptized. In her prison cell, she would pray and sing hymns. Somehow, against all odds, her bloody inscriptions survived. A woman named Tan Chanxue, who had spent fourteen years in prison for her participation in *Spark*, edited Lin's writings in the early two-thousands, along with other friends. Ding Zilin, a fellow-alumna of the Methodist school, who lost her son in the Tiananmen massacre, declared that finding out about Lin's story was "a kind of redemption for my soul." Xu Zhiyong, a prominent lawyer and campaigner for civil rights, was given a fourteen-year prison sentence, in April, for "subversion." He called Lin "a martyred saint, a prophet and a poet with an ecstatic soul, the Prometheus of a free China."

Lin no doubt believed in the Christian God. But her many admirers, Christians and non-Christians, also think of her as a martyr for another faith. As Hu Ping said, history is the true religion of the Chinese. Lin would probably have agreed. ♦

MUSICAL EVENTS

VALHALLA-ON-THAMES

A new "Rheingold" exemplifies a troubled but feisty London scene.

BY ALEX ROSS

The Royal Opera's production isn't flashy, but the direction is decisive and cohesive.

Doom is relative. Lately, my colleagues in the British press have been lamenting the decline of London's musical scene; John Allison, the editor of *Opera* magazine, writes that in the wake of Brexit the city "feels like much less of a great cultural capital." Yet a recent three-day visit to London left me envious of the riches on offer. I first went to Royal Albert Hall to attend the Last Night of the Proms, the culmination of the BBC's summer concert jamboree; the towering Norwegian soprano Lise Davidsen thundered forth "Rule, Britannia" while five thousand spectators struggled to match her in volume. The following morning, at Wigmore Hall, I saw the Doric Quartet play Schubert's G-Major Quartet before a capacity crowd. Finally, I took in a new production of Wagner's "Rheingold" at the Royal Opera. If I'd been able to replicate myself, I could also have heard the tenor Lawrence Brownlee, the soprano Asmik Grigorian, and the pianists Mitsuko Uchida, Jonathan Biss, and Paul Lewis. And London's half-dozen orchestras had not even started their regular seasons.

To be sure, ominous doings are afoot. Last November, Arts Council England slashed funding for the English National Opera, London's second opera house, and directed the company to begin planning a relocation to another city. Earlier this year, the BBC threatened to shut down the BBC Singers, a beloved chamber choir. Many British cultural leaders, like their American counterparts, dread being associated with allegedly snobbish art forms. Instead, they pursue a populist agenda that hypes profit, celebrity, and corporate branding. The Arts Council, as it reduced opera and orchestra budgets, gave a grant to the National Football Museum. In the same spirit, Lincoln Center recently let its plaza be overrun by the Nike World Basketball Festival.

What impresses an American observer is the ferocity with which the British have resisted the posturing of self-protective bigwigs. At the Last Night of the Proms, the BBC Singers received a sustained roar of applause—symbolic of an upwelling of protest that had forced the BBC to reconsider its termination of the group. When, last year, the head of Arts Council called incoherently for a focus on "opera in car parks, opera in pubs, opera on your tablet," newspapers and social media were flooded with creative sniggering. ("NISSAN DORMA" was a headline in the *Guardian*.) If only the pruning away of classical music at Lincoln Center, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and other New York institutions were sparking a comparable outcry. You hear much backstage grumbling but little public opposition. British music lovers know that once the smallest sliver of terrain is surrendered it will never be given back.

A primal passion for music was evident at the Last Night—a crushingly British ritual that I had never witnessed in person. The evening ends with a bellowing of patriotic tunes, with attendant flag-waving, blasts of confetti, balloon-popping, and choreographed silliness. The spasms of colonialist bombast were disconcerting—"Rule, Britannia! rule the waves: / Britons never will be slaves"—but a flurry of European Union flags offset the rah-rah vibe, as did the easygoing banter of the American conductor Marin Alsop, who seems better appreciated in Britain than in her native land. What struck me most was the musical literacy of the assembled crowd. A mass rendition of "Jerusalem," Charles Hubert Parry's anthemic setting of the William Blake poem, was both in tune and dynamically shaded, with a drop to piano on "I will not cease from mental fight"

ILLUSTRATION BY LISA MOUCHET

and a crescendo toward "England's green and pleasant land." The Empire is gone, yet its sonic splendor lingers.

New Yorkers have reason to take an interest in the Royal Opera's "Rheingold," since it is possibly destined for these shores. The Met had planned to co-produce a "Ring" cycle with the English National Opera, but that project has fallen by the wayside. The Royal Opera is now launching its own "Ring," and Peter Gelb, the Met's general manager, came to London to scope it out. If Gelb is seeking a spectacle on the scale of previous Met "Ring"s, he may have been disappointed: no forty-five-ton machines or shimmering Valhalla castles were on display. If, however, Gelb wants decisive, cohesive direction, then this show—directed by Barrie Kosky, with sets by Rufus Didwiszus, lighting by Alessandro Carletti, and costumes by Victoria Behr—may fit the bill.

Kosky, who recently completed a tenure at the Komische Oper, in Berlin, is a provocateur with show-biz chops. His staging of "Die Meistersinger" at the Bayreuth Festival, in 2017, succeeded in making that gargantuan opera funny, with a first act set in Wagner's living room at Wahnfried. Playfulness also marks his "Rheingold," which is as close as the "Ring" comes to comedy. In this production, the gods look like British royals out for a round of polo and a picnic. The giants, Fasolt and Fafner, resemble upscale gangsters who have wandered in from an episode of "Luther." The modern-dress antics unfold against a stark, bleak background, with a blackened tree lying across the stage. Present in every scene is the earth goddess Erda—an aged, naked, sorrowing witness. She is played, with mute dignity, by the actress Rose Knox-Peebles.

None of this is shockingly new: "Ring" directors have been gesturing toward ecological crisis for decades. What matters is the vital precision that Kosky brings to his scenario. Each character is sharply sketched and smartly blocked; a friend remarked that, as in a lucid tennis volley, you always see the ball. At the same time, the production has no shortage of uncanny, psychically unsettling images. The gold takes the form of a glowing liquid that pours from gashes in the tree, like the bodily fluid of a suffering Earth. In the underworld of Nibelheim, Erda is strapped to the tree as a hydraulic apparatus pumps out the gold.

Kosky's direction of the singers suited the men more than the women. Christopher Maltman assumed the role of Wotan with actorly panache, conveying the god's oblivious arrogance in narrow-eyed glances and peremptory gestures. Maltman's diction, though, lacked punch, and his voice thinned out on the lower end. Christopher Purves turned in an unusually affecting portrait of the cursed and cursing dwarf Alberich. Brenton Ryan's Mime, too, was more expressive and sympathetic than is the norm for that hapless part. Sean Panikkar, as Loge, darted about with balletic grace, exhibiting pinpoint intonation and crisp diction. Insung Sim and Soloman Howard created nuanced, telling characterizations of the giants.

Less telling was Marina Prudenskaya's portrayal of Fricka—or, more precisely, the portrayal that Kosky had devised for her. Wotan's wife comes across as a dim-witted socialite, flipping through a magazine while making scolding remarks and pulling grotesque faces. Such a caricature is to some extent inherent in the role, yet Wagner also grants Fricka moments of nobility and wisdom. Let's hope that the conception deepens when Kosky arrives at "Die Walküre." I also winced at some of what Kiandra Howarth, a finely voiced Freia, was forced to endure: when the giants are measuring out their payment from the gods, she is submerged in a bathtub of golden goo. Kosky's work is a bit too prone to juvenile japes: a prosthetic penis for Alberich elicited nervous giggles but no dramatic insights.

A more significant misjudgment was the lowering of the curtain during the orchestral transitions between scenes. As Wotan and Loge descend into Nibelheim, we find ourselves gazing at the embroidered legend "E II R," which prompts irrelevant thoughts of the late Queen. To be sure, the pause in the action highlighted the brilliant work of the Royal Opera orchestra, under the fluid, idiomatic baton of Antonio Pappano. But Wagner constructed the opera precisely to avoid any break in continuity. Better to have left the curtain up and revealed the stagehands at work. Such a choice would have served, incidentally, as a reminder that the so-called élitist arts are a community of livelihoods, demanding hard work and honed skill. ♦

THE THEATRE

PLANT LIFE

Rebecca Gilman's "Swing State" and Theresa Rebeck's "Dig."

BY HELEN SHAW

Bubba Weiler and Mary Beth Fisher play neighbors in Gilman's latest work.

Technically, there are only four characters in Rebecca Gilman's "Swing State," a melancholy new drama, now at the Minetta Lane. There's a retired guidance counsellor, Peg (Mary Beth Fisher); her troubled young neighbor, Ryan (Bubba Weiler); the local sheriff, Kris (Kirsten Fitzgerald); and Kris's niece and deferential new deputy, Dani (Anne E. Thompson). They all cause problems for one another, even as they try their clumsy best to offer help. But the fifth character—and the one we should really be worrying about—is Wisconsin. Is anyone doing anything for Wisconsin? In 2021, the swing state of the title is teetering, both socially and ecologically, and Gilman deposits us in that trembling landscape, even though her play takes place entirely indoors.

Peg's sprawling house sits on more than forty acres of so-called remnant prairie, a rare sliver of the tallgrass Plains, an endangered ecosystem that dates back roughly ten thousand years. "There used to be millions and millions of acres of it, all down the middle of the country, but there's only about four per cent left now," she tells Dani. Sheriff Kris hankers after the untilled property—she's dying to see it "put to good use" as productive cropland—but Peg is committed to protecting her wild remnant from the corn and soybean monocultures that threaten it on all sides. A biome doesn't necessarily obey boundary markers, however, and nitrates from huge farms are leaching into Peg's groundwater, as pesticides drip over her fence line.

Prairies, though they appear simple, are miraculous beneath the soil—thanks to complex root masses that descend as deep as fifteen feet, they can survive grazing, fires, and drought. Peg, as played by the graceful Fisher, possesses that quality, too: her selfhood goes beyond what we see. She has been knocked sideways by the sudden death of her biologist husband, a year earlier, and, in her friendship with Ryan, who has recently finished a prison term for felony battery, it's unclear who needs the other more. ("All we do is apologize to each other. We got a weird relationship," Ryan says to Dani, as he sticks a note on Peg's fridge.) Gilman sketches in a web of neighborly stewardship. But that social web, already weakened by the pandemic and vitriolic political division, begins to tear once Peg notices that she's missing some tools. When the police investigate, everything violently unravels.

The director, Robert Falls, has brought his 2022 Goodman Theatre production to New York from Chicago; here, the show is produced by Audible, and will be released as an audio drama after its run. The ensemble's long process has polished some aspects of the production to a deep shine. Todd Rosenthal's farmhouse set is imaginatively detailed—we can see, on a high shelf, a jar of gumballs that Peg must have kept on hand in case her students dropped by—as is Eric Southern's lighting design, a series of gray skies outside and plucky little lamps inside, which reflects the characters' sense of embattled isolation.

Among an experienced troupe, Weiler, as Ryan, is still settling into his part; he seems so bent on conveying "troubled youth" that he attacks the soup Peg makes for him as if he's never held a spoon. Fortunately, Fitzgerald and Thompson both do precise, naturalistic work with Gilman's delicately shaded dialogue, and manage to make the community just offstage seem populous and real. In the end, though, "Swing State" rests on Fisher's shoulders: she starred in the original production of Gilman's most famous play, "Spinning Into Butter," from 1999, and this part was written for her. The pro-

ILLUSTRATION BY MADISON KETCHAM

duction trusts her to hold our attention even as she's wandering in and out of rooms, alone. The play can be immensely moving when Peg lists her prairie's vanishing species—whip-poor-wills, nighthawks, chorus frogs—and we see her yearning to join them in oblivion.

Gilman has written an intermissionless play whose events swell to a climax, but it's difficult, sometimes, to impose conventional action onto the abyss of her heroine's death urge and the spectre of the sixth mass extinction. For all her extraordinary subtleties of characterization, Gilman can be a bit conspicuous, as a plotter, when she tries to hurry things along. "Swing State" is the third play I've seen this year to use a panic attack or a stress-induced seizure as a dramaturgical accelerant. (The others were Christina Masciotti's "No Good Things Dwell in the Flesh" and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's "The Comeuppance.") It's certainly handy for a playwright to have a character whose response to a tense situation is to hyperventilate and get loud, but Ryan's breakdowns show us Gilman's craft too clearly. *Here* is a turning point, they say. Crescendo *here*.

Still, "Swing State" is a model of structural restraint compared with Theresa Rebeck's tonally haywire "Dig," which is busy shovelling itself into a hole uptown at the 59E59 Theatres. Rebeck also wants to use plants—their resilience, their need for space and care—as a metaphor, but this show is a mind-boggling misfire. Rebeck has written dozens of tartly observed social dramas; she has noted that she is "the most Broadway-produced female playwright of our time." (Her fifth production there, "I Need That," arrives later this fall.) In a prolific career that has included writing for a number of television shows, such as "N.Y.P.D. Blue" and "Law & Order: Criminal Intent," she created the catnip-for-musical-lovers dramedy "Smash." Whether you're delighted by her other work or not, it's sturdy. It follows certain laws of cause and effect.

But the characters in "Dig" run so counter to recognizable human behavior that they'll say and do anything. The play's title refers to the name of a plant shop, which some people onstage inexplicably seem to find confusing. "You don't actually know what kind of store that might be," a customer says, even though she has, clearly, managed to figure it out. The shop's owner, Roger (Jeffrey Bean), claims at one point that he hadn't been selling flowering plants because he found them "too eager to please." What? And, when Megan (Andrea Syglowski), the local pariah and the daughter of his only friend, tries to seduce Roger, she does so by haranguing him with a non sequitur. "You act like a virgin," she says. No, he doesn't. And who says that?

We know two core things about Megan: she insists on telling the truth about her self-destructiveness to everyone she encounters ("This is totally my mandate," she says, blaming her oversharing on A.A.), and she is tortured by guilt for having let her child die in an overheated car. When her evil ex-husband, Adam (David Mason), slinks in like a mustachio-twirling nineteenth-century villain—Rebeck, who also directs the play, makes sure the performances are visible from outer space—we discover that she has been lying about her culpability. But Megan's actions and even the first half of her scene with Adam don't make sense without that guilt. It's as if the actors, the characters, and the playwright herself are all finding out about the twist at the same time.

I'm as capable as the next person of enjoying a play going cattywampus, but "Dig," with its barmy melodrama and sickening, torn-from-the-headlines violence, eventually becomes repulsive. It's one thing to be lazy about researching what goes on in a plant store (it's not *all* repotting and pruning), and quite another to be slapdash while staging the sexual assault of a blacked-out woman. Roger, whom Rebeck has chosen as her Do-Right hero amid a wilderness of wicked men, interrupts his onetime employee Everett (poor, poor Greg Keller) mid-attack, and accuses him of taking advantage of Megan's broken heart. Her heart? Instead of calling the cops or a doctor, let alone telling Megan what has happened to her when she asks the next morning, Roger shouts at her, then apologizes, then looks meaningfully at a fake African violet. "It can be saved," he says. Oh, Roger, no. Maybe your phony plant is gonna make it—but that potted metaphor you're holding has been dead for around two hours. ♦

THE NEW YORKER

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ON STAGE

MOM GENES

Michelle Buteau's caring comedy.

BY HILTON ALS

"I want to make millions of dollars making people feel safe and seen," Buteau says.

Kindness is comedy's boring first cousin, the very thing that most standup comedians and their rampant ids want to get away from, in order to be their worst and thus their funniest selves. Kindness suggests that there's a moral universe out there, in which we're all connected to one another, whereas standup is a willed isolation: a solo performer on a stage taking on the world. Standup artists like to stick pins in the voodoo dolls of convention and sentiment: "My kids are so ugly," "I hate my dog," "My marriage sucks," and so on. And yet sentiment—even a little sentimentality—provides the framework for the actress and comedian Michelle Buteau's new, eighty-minute show, "Full Heart, Tight Jeans." (The show is touring through December, with a stop at New York's Beacon Theatre on October 4th.)

When I saw "Full Heart, Tight Jeans" at City Winery in Chicago in early September, Buteau, who is forty-six and the mother of four-year-old twins, made a point, two-thirds of the way into her act, of criticizing Dave Chappelle for his notorious comments about trans people, including Caitlyn Jenner. (In his 2021 Netflix special, "The Closer," Chappelle said, "Caitlyn Jenner was voted Woman of the Year. Her first year as a woman. Ain't that something? Beat every bitch in Detroit; she's better than all of you. Never even had a period.") Buteau's usually bright face fell a bit as she called Chappelle out. "You can make jokes and not disparage people," she said, and paused before going on. "So he's making millions off that. I want to make millions of dollars making people feel safe and seen and happy."

It's a risky proposition, the making-people-happy part. Buteau's joyfulness—her freckle-faced charm and her robust desire to be out there, feeling and giving love—is not really in vogue. More common is the dystopian comedy, filled with crankiness and hopelessness, of such artists as the talented John Early and Jerrod Carmichael, two slightly younger, queer performers who affect disaffection as they call out family and friends or put them down. (At the start of this year's HBO special "John Early: Now More Than Ever," Early introduces his "stupid fucking parents.") In their routines, there's little love for their bodies, or for anyone who might want to get close to them: we're all jerks. Buteau, on the other hand, treats herself—and us—like a snack.

On the night I saw her, she was wearing a black faille skirt, faux alligator ankle boots, and a white T-shirt with the words "Wild Feminist" printed on the front, knotted at the waist. Taking the mike on the small stage, she began by saying how pleased she was to be with us. Then she had the stage manager turn up the house lights so that she could "see who I'm fucking with. Make some noise if you're over forty." A big cheer. Buteau smiled. "That's the extra-income shit right there. Like, I use *all* the good expensive candles." The audience was fairly mixed demographically, but Buteau was especially happy about all the Black women in the room. "I love the brown titties around me," she said. "I feel safe." Thus emboldened, she took a sip from her drink before focussing on a white guy sitting near the stage: "Your name is *Tad*? That's the whitest shit I ever heard." The house lights went down, and Buteau told us, with a not at all smug laugh, "I'm trying to be funny—that's how I get through the pain."

But what pain? As Buteau sometimes rambled, seeing what would stick, I thought of her peer Tiffany Haddish—they're about the same age—and how Haddish's standup is a display of a sensibility, how she wears her loneliness like

ILLUSTRATION BY SARA ANDREASSON

foundation under her rouge. Watching Haddish perform, you have the sense that you're seeing a little girl who's been broken by love time and again but knows there's some good stuff on the other side of that heartbreak. By contrast, Buteau kicks life's broken pieces to the curb, and encourages folks—especially women—not to settle. At one point during her set, she asked female audience members if they were in relationships, and then if they were in unsatisfactory relationships. When a woman told her that she was seeing a guy who was dating without "intention," Buteau went silent, then—just the kind of sister-woman you want to talk to in moments like that—she told the woman to get out of there. Fuck that. "Open your heart and legs to love," she counselled. "You never know what's going to happen." When Buteau met her husband, she said, it was supposed to be a one-night stand. But then "he put that shit in me and it was like an avatar—oh, yes, I see you."

Buteau, who was born in New Jersey to Caribbean parents, is a luscious wisecracker. She makes proud reference, frequently, to her big body and big hair, and her voice, a little tri-state nasal, is slyly incredulous, captivating in its familiarity. (She's her generation's Judy Holliday and would make a terrific Billie Dawn in "Born Yesterday," Holliday's signature role.) Buteau has a great capacity for physical comedy, too. In her superb 2020 Netflix special, "Welcome to Buteaupia," she talks to the audience about finding love. "You guys have a type, right?" she says. "But you don't even realize that you are somebody else's type. . . . I realized way too late in life that I am an achievable Beyoncé for government workers." Here she pauses, and does a few Beyoncé moves, shaking her mane from side to side. "And if they're, like, old Black government workers named Lawrence, Dennis, Curtis, Otis—anything ending in 'is'—they love me. I can't go to a Veterans Day parade—my booty ain't safe. She is not safe. They looking at me like they want me to motorboat the P.T.S.D. off their face, and I'll do it, 'cause I am a patriot. . . . Thoughts and prayers. Thank you for your service."

But in "Full Heart, Tight Jeans" sexiness, or the job of sex, is replaced, by talk about Buteau's kids, her "two emotional rotisserie chickens." What makes her stories about mothering the best part of the show is that she balances the love with the reality of what goes into caring—and how that caring can sometimes *not* be its own reward. "Baby girl gives the energy of a fifty-two-year-old Black woman who works at the D.M.V.," Buteau said of her daughter, Hazel. Once, when the family was travelling, someone in the airport "looked at her passport and said, 'Is she looking through my soul?' Probably." Pause. "And then Hazel said, 'Mama, why do your elbows look old?' She's right. They look haunted." Buteau's son, Otis, on the other hand, has "the energy of a tired man holding his wife's purse at Macy's," she said. "His first sentence was 'Everybody calm down.'" Buteau is glad that her kids are cute, she added, because there are some parents who have two jobs: "to take care of their kids *and* pretend they're not ugly." But, even as she jokes about ugly kids and overworked parents, you know how much she feels for all of them, parents and children held captive by their love for one another, as she is by hers—even when Otis says, the way he did one day in SoHo, while waiting to cross the street, "It's O.K., Mama. The white man says we can cross now." Buteau, looking around at the largely white crowd on the sidewalk, said, "We just saw '12 Years a Slave.' We're big Brad Pitt fans. *Big*."

Buteau's more caustic bits did a lot to balance out her sweetness, but nothing could diminish her essential kindness, which I hope audiences won't confuse with Hannah Gadsby-like piety. What interests Buteau is how you build a community not out of sameness but out of difference (even if the different ones are your kids). In Chicago, she demanded that we "stand up for people who don't have a voice." In "Survival of the Thickest," a new, scripted half-hour sitcom on Netflix (loosely inspired by her 2020 essay collection of the same title), she does just that. The TV show gives Buteau a fictional character—Mavis Beaumont, a body-positive stylist with a cracked roommate, good friends, and a queer community she calls her own—whom she can endow with her interiority and her born-to-do-this comedic skills, free from the constraints of standup, which can limit artists, even as they push against those limitations. As Mavis, Buteau can indulge in the transformative energy that narrative and metaphor give her, and she gifts us, in turn, ideas that are too complex for standup, feelings that can be conveyed only in a closeup, in a gesture, or through interactions with others. Onscreen, Buteau doesn't have to ask who we are or why we're there; we tune in for her extraordinary presence, and all the make-believe, joy, and tenderness that come with it. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Dan Misdea, must be received by Sunday, October 1st. The finalists in the September 18th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the October 16th 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

“One more round and I'll call it a day.”
Myron Carlson, Grantsburg, Wis.

“Look, pal—I know when something is seventy per cent water.”
Marilyn McGrath, Phoenix, Ariz.

“How does it feel to be the world's favorite bartender?”
John Van Slyke, Walla Walla, Wash.

THE WINNING CAPTION

“Just tell them why you've chosen to run.”
Matt Hindman, Tulsa, Okla.

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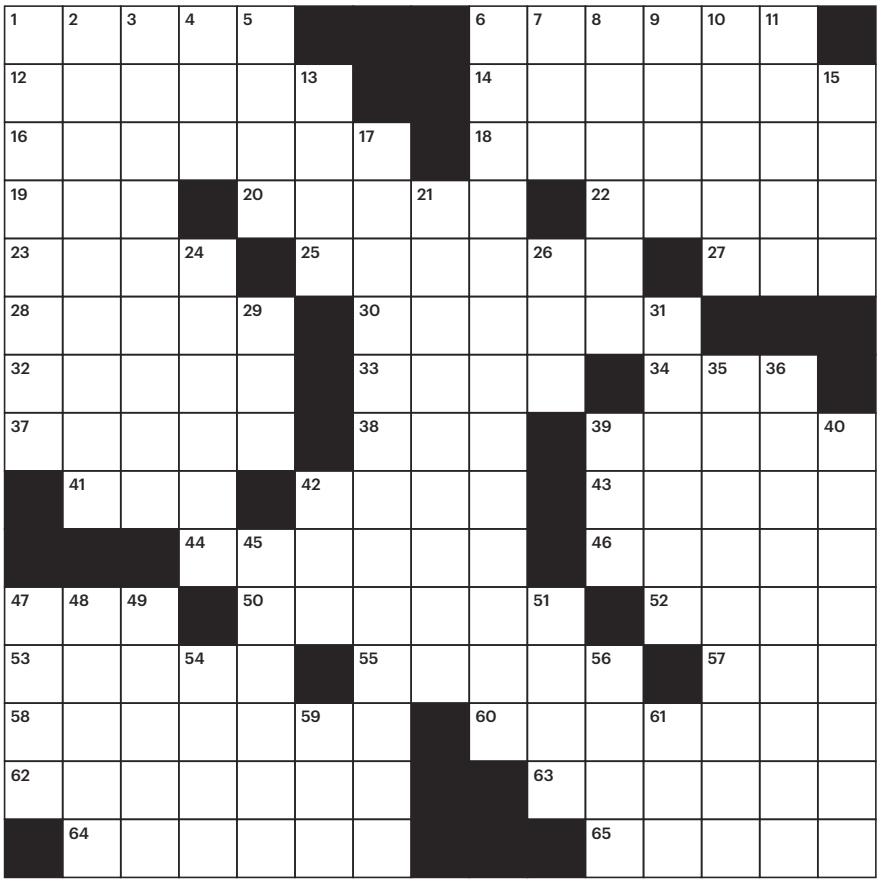
THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY BROOKE HUSIC



ACROSS

1 Direction toward the Kaaba
6 It has milky and smoky varieties
12 Spread open
14 Four of diamonds?
16 Native of northern Alaska
18 Medium-quality probe?
19 Number retired by the Seattle Storm in honor of Sue Bird
20 Not free
22 Forty beats per minute, maybe
23 ___ Maya (Mexican rail project in the Yucatán Peninsula)
25 "By ___!"
27 Footwear-superstore inits.
28 These, in Spanish
30 City named in the Steve Miller Band's "Take the Money and Run"
32 In again
33 ___ Sjöberg (songwriting pseudonym for Taylor Swift)
34 Sharpness measures, briefly
37 Heaps
38 "One Piece" manga artist Eiichiro
39 Further down?
41 Health-care benefit for medical expenses: Abbr.
42 Sound of dismissal
43 Dosa relative
44 "Over here!"
46 Third-degree
47 Letters after some professionals' names
50 Score that might lead to penalty kicks
52 Bill
53 Brigade
55 "Star Trek: Discovery" character ___ Tal
57 Lead engineer at a startup, perhaps: Abbr.
58 Jessie who won a Tony for playing Carole King in "Beautiful"
60 Piece of political satire, perhaps
62 Most straightforward, say
63 2013 Wimbledon finalist Lisicki
64 Trashes
65 Grounded

DOWN

1 People taking fire-prevention measures?
2 Part of a person not seen by others
3 Some are described as chestnut
4 Hack (off)
5 Et ___
6 Like some nonsexual, non-romantic relationships
7 Stalling sounds
8 Galas, e.g.
9 Confirmation, say
10 Statistical observation
11 Scratches the surface?
13 Lit's counterpart, in A.P. English courses
15 Stash
17 Quick-tempered literary monarch
21 Baby step?
24 Stavanger's country
26 Induction alternative
29 2022 SZA album that débuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* 200
31 Part of a lomilomi massage
35 Vermonter's neighbor
36 Antique bronze?
39 "Moving you to ___" (bit of workplace politeness)
40 Worked out
42 "___ de Replay" (triple-platinum début single from Rihanna)
45 Heaps
47 "The Collected Schizophrenias" author ___ Weijun Wang
48 Zilch
49 Accompaniment for chips
51 Personal-style phases
54 Legendary boxing family
56 ___ Spring
59 Relative of -babble
61 Not yet public, briefly

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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