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THE NEW YORKER

OCTOBER 30, 2023

DRAWINGS *P. C. Vey, Lynn Hsu, Ollie Wootton, David Sipress, J. C. Duffy, Juan Astasio, Liana Finck, Maggie Larson, Anjali Chandrashekar, Jon Adams, Asher Perlman, Oren Bernstein, Ivan Ehlers, Diane de Ferran* SPOTS *Antonio Giovanni Pinna*

JESSICA GOLDMAN SREBNICK'S UNIQUE ARTISTIC VISION

THE CO-CHAIR OF GOLDMAN PROPERTIES KNOWS HOW TO MARRY ART AND ARCHITECTURE. WYNWOOD WALLS IS JUST THE START.

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3.


1. JESSICA GOLDMAN SREBNICK PHOTOGRAPHED BY ZULE CHOUDHARY

2. AN AERIAL OF WYNWOOD WALLS A MURAL BY SHEPARD FAIREY, PHOTOGRAPHED BY NIKA KRAMER

3. CORE WYNWOOD GOLDMAN PROPERTIES' AWARD-WINNING DEVELOPMENT

Jessica Goldman Srebnick loves art and architecture. Since joining the family business, Goldman Properties, in 1997, she has made a career of fusing the two. Her late father Tony Goldman named her as Co-Chair of Goldman Properties in 2012, and she has simultaneously carried on her father's legacy and grown the company into a modern force that has changed the look and feel of the built environment—starting with her ongoing curation and development of Goldman Properties' iconic Wynwood Walls, a spectacular outdoor street art museum.

The urban art project first launched in 2009 and was an immediate success and instant magnet in its namesake up-and-coming Miami neighborhood. Goldman Srebnick is now the lead curator for Wynwood Walls, working with a who's who of both emerging and established artists to create and paint unique experiences on walls under the Miami sun.

"I'm as obsessed with art as I am with architecture," she says, laughing. "We have this amazing opportunity to put our stamp on the world. Whether it's a large-scale mural, a new building, or an older building's renovation, we have an opportunity to change an environment for the better."

In 2015, she launched Goldman Global Arts (GGA) to bring that vision to the masses by working to build communities driven by art and architecture. "I just wanted to put beauty into the world," she says. "To do projects that are impactful. Projects that make you think. The kind of projects that change the paradigm. Projects that are meaningful."

GGA has been a vehicle for that mission, curating projects for a broad range of clients that spans real estate developers, sports venues and more. "I'm trying to push the trend of marrying art and architecture," Goldman Srebnick says.

Goldman Sachs Private Wealth Management has been an indispensable asset and fountain of knowledge for Goldman Srebnick, helping her maximize her impact, secure her legacy, and continue to be a force for good around the globe. "Goldman Sachs has proved to be an invaluable partner," she says. "They have an unbelievable amount of expertise and deep benches of specialists in areas I need."

CONTRIBUTORS

Evan Osnos (*"China's Age of Malaise," p. 34*) writes about politics and foreign affairs for the magazine. His latest book is "Wildland."

Yiyun Li (*"If Not Now, Later," p. 14*) received a 2022 PEN/Malamud Award. Her latest collection of short stories, "Wednesday's Child," was published in September.

Mark Ulriksen (*Cover*) is an artist and an illustrator. His art will appear in "Pawsibilities Unleashed: A Pet Portrait Exhibition," which opens at the Disney Family Museum next month.

Emma Cline (*Fiction, p. 46*) is the author of, most recently, "The Guest."

Steve Coll (*Comment, p. 9*), a staff writer, is a two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize. His next book, "The Achilles Trap," is due out in February.

Carmen Maria Machado (*Poem, p. 41*) is the author of a collection of stories, "Her Body and Other Parties," and a memoir, "In the Dream House."

Jonathan Blitzer (*"The Wrestler," p. 24*) became a staff writer in 2017. His first book, "Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here," is due out in January.

Elizabeth Kolbert (*"Needful Things," p. 20*), a staff writer, won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction for "The Sixth Extinction." Her latest book is "Under a White Sky."

Henry Alford (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 19*), a humorist and a journalist, has contributed to the magazine for more than twenty years.

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

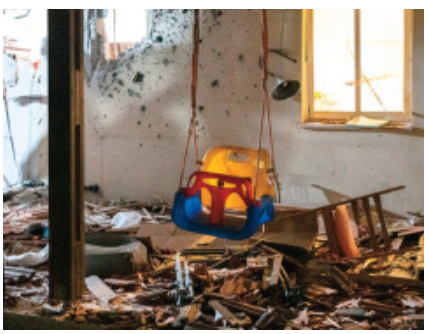
Taras Shevchenko (*Poem, p. 28*) was a writer, an artist, and a political figure whose works include "Kobzar" and "Haidamaki." He is widely considered a founding figure in Ukrainian literature.

Rebecca Mead (*Books, p. 59*), a staff writer since 1997, most recently published "Home/Land."

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

THE WEEKEND ESSAY

Mosab Abu Toha writes from northern Gaza about daily life under Israeli bombardment.



DISPATCH

Ruth Margalit writes about the massacre at Be'eri, an Israeli kibbutz, by Hamas militants.

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LEFT: JAN ROBERT DÜNNWELLER; RIGHT: PETER VAN AGTMAEL / MAGNUM

THE MAIL

FIT TO SERVE

For many readers such as myself, Barry Blitt's recent cover depicting an enfeebled Donald Trump, Mitch McConnell, Nancy Pelosi, and Joe Biden using walkers was an example of both ableism and ageism (October 2nd). The fact that none of these politicians really do use walkers indicates that the devices are there to stigmatize, and that the cartoon is grounded in the assumption that those who use assistive technology to walk are no longer competent. It makes an unexamined connection between physical condition and mental capability. On the contrary, walkers enable many people to pursue their work and interests. Not to mention that a very famous President used a wheelchair to accomplish the things that he did.
Jerrold Hirsch
Kirksville, Mo.

As someone who regularly incorporates articles from *The New Yorker* into my teaching of English at the high-school and college levels, I was disappointed to see Blitt's recent cover. The irony of the illustration lies in the fact that, even as it attempts to denigrate older politicians by depicting them using walkers, it actually shows four determined individuals still very much "in the race." The attempt at bipartisanship and gender equity was not lost on me, but the use of age as the lowest common denominator of those who support reproductive rights and fair immigration laws and those who seek to annihilate such measures struck me as inappropriately reductive.
Catherine Civello
Sacramento, Calif.

MIRROR IMAGE

Although I appreciated Manvir Singh's awareness of how the impression "that men are endangered" has affected the popularity of all-meat diets, his article might have benefitted from an acknowledgment of the parallels in fad diets that overwhelmingly affect women ("Red Shift," October 2nd). As Singh notes, what we eat (and how we think about food) continues to reflect traditional gender roles. Carnivory may conjure "a mythical time when men were manly and bodies were fit," but the incredible influence of such diets as keto, Paleo, and low-fat on unhealthy eating habits among women of all ages seems to reflect our continued romanticization of a past when a woman was valued entirely for her physical appearance.

If we can understand "meatfluencers" as the manifestation of outdated but ruthlessly persistent conceptions of manliness, we can look to the many thousands of female "gym girl" influencers and "What I eat in a day" TikTokers as their counterpart.
Katharine Nichols
Charlottesville, Va.

REVOLUTIONARY INCITEMENT

In his review of Ian Johnson's book about underground historians in China, Ian Buruma refers to the title of one journal, *Spark*, and says that its name derives from a common Chinese expression, "A single spark can start a prairie fire" (Books, October 2nd). It would surprise me if the editors of *Spark* were unaware that there was an antecedent journal with the same name—*Iskra*, in Russian—established by Vladimir Lenin and fellow socialists in exile, in 1900. The name of Lenin's journal came from a line by the Decembrist revolutionary Alexander Odoevsky: "One spark will start a flame."
Joseph Scott
Oakland, Calif.

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GOINGS ON

OCTOBER 25 – 31, 2023

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

Ralph Lee, an avant-garde puppeteer and the founder of New York City's **Village Halloween Parade,** died in May, at age eighty-seven. He left behind quite a legacy: what started in 1974 as small "transient entertainment" has, fifty years later, ballooned into the world's largest Halloween parade and a beloved institution. Lee launched the event, in partnership with Theatre for the New City, as a bohemian happening featuring D.I.Y. puppets and eccentric floats; now it's a massive spooky-season tentpole that floods the West Village with costumed revellers, live music, and hectic hoopla. If you feel moved to join the throng, the festivities begin on Oct. 31 at 7 P.M., at the corner of Canal Street and Sixth Avenue.—*Rachel Syme*

PHOTOGRAPH BY LANDON NORDEMAN

ABOUT TOWN

THE THEATRE | There's a thin line between making a sharp satire and making your audience watch the kind of show that you're trying to poke fun at. **"Gutenberg! The Musical!,"** by Scott Brown and Anthony King—directed by Alex Timbers—falls into the latter category, leaving Josh Gad and Andrew Rannells to spend their talents on middling laughs. Gad and Rannells play friends who have written a poorly researched musical about Johannes Gutenberg and the invention of the printing press, and they've rented out a theatre for one night in the hope of attracting a producer. These guys are sweet, but neither has a discernible personality, or even quirks of character, until the show's almost over. We watch their bad show, waiting for the one surrounding it to get good. It doesn't.—*Vinson Cunningham (James Earl Jones Theatre; through Jan. 28.)*

DANCE | Wire walking and rock climbing count as extreme sports. But although these daredevil activities appear throughout "Corps Extrême," a dance-theatre work by the French Algerian choreographer **Rachid Ouramdane,** the focus of the performance isn't on risk and adrenaline but on meditative calm and grace. There is a climbing wall, a high wire, and a cast of acrobats who erect human towers and toss one another through the air, but, instead of cymbal crashes and gasps, there is spare music and soft landings. Not only is a man on a wire suspended high above the ground—the whole production seems to float.—*Brian Seibert (BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House; Oct. 27-29.)*

R. & B. | With **Jorja Smith's** new album, "falling or flying," the British singer has grown into a master of a vulnerable yet collected self-expression. Her début, "Lost & Found," from 2018, announced her as a mesmeric performer with delicate, layered R. & B. songs animated by a soothing but authoritative voice, earning her a Best New Artist nomination at the Grammys. "Well no one can understand confusion like I do / These blue days are my truth," she sings on "Tomorrow," hinting at a clearheadedness amid emotional turmoil. On "falling or flying," Smith's songs are even more vibrant and attentive, and on such confessionals as "GO GO GO" and "Too many times" she channels both poignance and resilience in every single breath.—*Sheldon Pearce (Apollo Theatre; Oct. 26.)*

THE THEATRE | The artist nicHi douglas's immersive, inward-turning choreopoem **"(pray)"** evokes a new kind of church service. In the show, a bevy of intergenerational Black women and femmes—all dressed in their baby-blue Sunday finest—conduct a song-and-dance-filled liturgy, as a praise leader, played by the overwhelming singer S T A R R Busby, who composes with the jazz intellect JJJJJerome Ellis, guides them in reconstructed gospel. "This little shine o' might / I'm gonna let it light," the marvellous cast sing, both ecstatic and deliberately opaque, or they offer responsive readings in Christianity, Black matriarchy, and slavery. The holiest actions are hidden away in a copse of huge onstage trees—the rite thus retains, in moments both transformative and frustrating, a deep sense of privacy.—*Helen Shaw (Ars Nova @ Greenwich House; through Oct. 28.)*

ART | **"Manet/Degas,"** the Met's sprawling yet intimate two-hander, is an audacious show. For much of Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas's friendship, Manet was the bigger deal, touted first for his success and then for his succès de scandale, "Olympia" (1863-65)—a triple portrait of a Black maid, a bug-eyed cat, and a naked white prostitute making no effort to pretend she enjoys her work—this show's inevitable centerpiece. Vividness was Degas's superpower: in his portraits of the banker Hilaire Degas and of Yves Morisot, it's unclear if he's being mean or merely telling the truth, or if there's a difference. In a sense, most of Manet's and Degas's best work is about repose; both artists understood that leisure can be anxious, disappointing, exhausting, boring—sometimes for the bourgeois, sometimes for the working-class folks paid to keep them happy, sometimes for all concerned.—*Jackson Arn (Reviewed in our issue of 10/23/23.) (Metropolitan Museum of Art; through Jan. 7.)*

MOVIES | Family life and political history are connected through the power of imagination in Kaouther Ben Hania's hybrid documentary-drama **"Four Daughters."** The film is centered on a tough and devoted Tunisian woman, Olfa Hamrouni, who left her abusive husband around fifteen years ago and single-handedly raised the couple's four girls (who were born between 1998 and 2005). After the Tunisian revolution, in 2011, Islamist ideology rose to prominence; Olfa's two eldest daughters, who were teen-agers in the mid-twenty-tens, became devoutly religious, joined ISIS, and were arrested. Ben Hania tells the family's story through interviews with Olfa and her two younger daughters, and through reënactments in which actresses play the absent daughters and also Olfa, when scenes are too painful for her to relive. The real-life subjects, taking the lead in the restagings, deliver a revelatory, poignant blend of drama, memory, and self-scrutiny.—*Richard Brody (In limited release on Oct. 27.)*

TABLES FOR TWO

The Bazaar by José Andrés
35 W. 28th St.

The Spanish-born chef José Andrés—perhaps best known these days for the remarkable humanitarian work that he's been doing with his organization World Central Kitchen—came of age as a cook in the heyday of molecular gastronomy, when the fine-dining world was enraptured by the pearls-and-foam bravado of chefs such as Ferran Adrià. The conceit at Andrés's high-end quasi-chain the Bazaar, whose sixth location opened this summer in the Ritz-Carlton NoMad, is to graft that turn-of-the-millennium culinary modernism onto some second thing—a steak house, say, or historical Americana. For the New York outpost, Andrés turns his attention to Japan, and the seventeenth-century journey of an imperial samurai to the court of Spain.

The theme is unsubtle (a towering portrait of a geisha wearing a comb and a mantilla looms over the bar), and it's all a little ridiculous in a way that could be fun—if the restaurant didn't seem to be working so hard to deflate any shred of amusement. This is unfortunate, because playfulness is the most generous lens through which to consider the experience. Take the *o-toro* tuna wrapped in poufs of cotton candy (total nonsense, with flavors that fight one another), or the dramatically vertical Japanese coffee siphon employed tableside to infuse a mushroom broth for a bowl of ramen—dishes that foreground spectacle over satiety, presented with monklike sombreness by stone-faced servers. The less pageantry, it seems, the better the food: an understated plate of pressed sushi—rectangles of shiso-flecked rice topped with *shima aji* (striped jack) and a crunchy-spicy salsa of pine nuts and rosemary—provides a rare moment of genuine dazzle.

But too many dishes lack cohesion, derived from a grab bag of ingredients and techniques rather than a true marriage between culinary cultures. *Socarrat* (the crispy, saffron-suffused rice at the bottom of a paella), cleverly repurposed as a crêpe of sorts, bore tender slices of raw *shima aji* (again? again), but it called out for something more vivid, both more Spanish and more Japanese—the metallic sweetness of *botan ebi* (Japanese sweet shrimp), perhaps, or the basso profundo of smoked pimentón. I was grateful for the relief of the cocktail menu. The drinks are unreservedly exquisite—tight, focussed, and beautifully balanced. Though, like the food, which seems priced for people who never look at prices, they are soberingly expensive, twenty to thirty dollars apiece; a few, made with a *jamón iberico*-infused mezcal, climb to fifty dollars. For the cost of one ham-kissed glass, you can get a lordly portion of the actual meat, sliced tableside, precisely arranged in a vermillion nautilus, streaked with snowy fat. It's funky and ferocious, the righteous king of aged hams. Such severe simplicity is, itself, a type of spectacle. Not another thing on the menu is its equal. *(Dishes $14–$65.)*

—Helen Rosner

PICK THREE

The staff writer Alexandra Schwartz shares her current obsessions.

1. New York has been enjoying a protracted season of Sondheim for nearly two years now, but nothing has moved or delighted me as much as Maria Friedman's **"Merrily We Roll Along,"** at the Hudson Theatre. This notoriously unproducible show—the characters begin in cynical, depressed middle age, then get younger and starrier-eyed as the show progresses—doesn't just work in Friedman's staging; it renews your belief in the unique art of the Broadway musical. Special props go to Jonathan Groff for turning the villainous Frank into a sellout with soul.

2. I love a good thriller, unreliable writers, and complicated women, so I love **"Anatomy of a Fall,"** the French director Justine Triet's new film. The astonishing German actress Sandra Hüller plays Sandra Voyter, a novelist who is accused of murder when her husband's body is found near their chalet, in the French Alps. What ensues is a courtroom drama whose exploration of literary ambition and the compromises of coupledom will stay with you long after your pulse settles.

3. I recently gulped down Jean Beagin's novel **"Big Swiss,"** the funniest fiction I've read all year. Greta, a depressed drifter in her forties, lives in a tumbledown house in Hudson, New York (a place that Beagin parodies to perfection), where she works as a transcriptionist for a sex therapist called Om. Soon she finds herself in thrall to the title character, a patient of Om's who happens to be a married woman about fifteen years Greta's junior. This deliciously eccentric sex comedy bristles with wit and weirdness, but beneath all the antics is a tender heart.

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
ALL FRONTS

In Barack Obama's White House, there were two schools of thought about managing the United States' bedrock alliance with Israel. Defense Secretary Robert Gates privately called the relationship "all give and no get," and was among those who thought that Obama should approach Jerusalem with skeptical caution, according to Dennis Ross, a Middle East hand who advised Obama and later wrote an eyewitness history of U.S.-Israeli relations. On the other side, as Ross summarized it, then Vice-President Joe Biden argued for "drawing the Israelis close to us," in part to gain greater influence, even amid bitter disputes with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over the expansion of Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank.

Last week, arriving for a one-day visit to Tel Aviv, President Biden descended from Air Force One and bear-hugged Netanyahu before a phalanx of cameras. "You are not alone," he said later, in a speech to Israelis about the Hamas-led terror attacks of October 7th, when militants broke out of Gaza and murdered more than fourteen hundred Israelis and seized hostages. Since then, Biden has denounced the "bloodthirstiness" of Hamas and spoken evocatively of Israeli victims: "infants in their mother's arms, grandparents in wheelchairs, Holocaust survivors abducted." As the Israeli Air Force unleashed an unbridled counterattack in Gaza, the President also pledged aid to besieged Palestinian civilians; according to Gaza's health ministry, more than twenty-five hundred women and children died in the enclave during the war's first two weeks.

Biden's attempt to get food and medicine into Gaza will test whether his access and credibility with Israeli decision-makers can help protect Palestinian civilians even as the Israel Defense Forces prepare an expected ground invasion. In Tel Aviv, Biden struck a deal with Israel and Egypt to send an initial aid shipment; at Israel's behest, hundreds of thousands of Gazans have migrated to the south of their fenced-in territory, in search of safety amid bombings and dwindling resources. Providing care to such a displaced population would be hard even if Israel and Egypt, the co-authors of a long-running blockade of Gaza, coöperated fully. As it is, Israel has agreed to let aid flow to Gaza only if it can be kept away from Hamas—no simple matter.

The risk of a wider regional war remains acute. Hezbollah, the heavily armed Shiite militant group in Lebanon, has traded fire with Israeli forces, and Israel has evacuated civilians from several border towns. The Pentagon has dispatched two aircraft-carrier strike groups to the Mediterranean, partly to deter Hezbollah from opening a second front. Iran—a patron, funder, and arms supplier of both Hezbollah and Hamas—presents another variable. Biden Administration officials have told reporters they have no evidence that Iran helped to plan the October 7th assault; according to the *Times*, the Administration has sent messages urging Tehran to stay out of the conflict.

Meanwhile, on the Gaza front, the kidnapping spree carried out by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad has embedded a wrenching and delicate international hostage crisis in an urban war that may soon involve block-by-block combat. Militants took more than two hundred people—Israelis, Americans, and others. Israel has long made bold efforts to free its hostages and prisoners, and Biden has said that he has "no higher priority" than seeking the release of the American captives. On Friday, Hamas released two of them, a mother and a daughter taken from Kibbutz Nahal Oz, but carrying out negotiations or rescue attempts during a chaotic and high-tempo war remains a tall order.

Within Israel, the kidnappings have deepened the national trauma. Biden, during his visit, noted that the events of October 7th were like "fifteen 9/11s" relative to the size of Israel's population, and that, as was true of many Americans in 2001, many Israelis would understandably feel an "all-consuming rage." The President also suggested reflection on the lessons of America's post-9/11 overreach: "While we sought justice and got

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

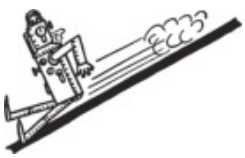
justice, we also made mistakes." (He did not elaborate, but the invasion of Iraq and the failed twenty-year war in Afghanistan hardly needed to be named.) Israeli government spokesmen have said that their war aim is to end Hamas's governance of Gaza and to destroy the movement's military capabilities. Yet even if Israel bears the casualties and accepts the Palestinian civilian suffering that would be inflicted in order to achieve those goals, what will happen the day after? A renewed Israeli occupation would inflame Palestinians and the Arab world, while the imposition of a new Palestinian administration would be a highly uncertain project.

Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. Presidents have tried to steer toward a durable peace accord between Israelis and Palestinians—a negotiated "two-state solution" that would birth an independent Palestine, including Gaza. These days, many Palestinians and Israelis regard that project as futile, if not dangerously delusional. The Administrations of Donald Trump and Joe Biden have concentrated on fostering new diplomatic and economic ties between Israel and Arab states, including the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Bahrain. Another proposal—normalizing relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia—was being discussed openly just before the October 7th attack. (Spoiling an Israeli-Saudi accord may have been part of Hamas's motivation.) The Gaza war will set the project back, but may not bury it. Saudi and other Sunni Arab leaders promote Palestinian rights and statehood, but they also fear Iran and despise the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist political movement of which Hamas is an offshoot. In private, they are unlikely to wring their hands over the fate of either Hamas or Hezbollah.

Last Thursday, after returning home, Biden delivered a prime-time address from the Oval Office. He spoke again of aid for Gaza's civilians, and of the need for Israel to adhere to the laws of war, but he offered no details. He conjured a future Middle East with better-connected economies, "more predictable markets, more employment, less rage, less grievances, less war." In the shadow of October 7th, it sounded like a self-soothing daydream, and the main point of his speech was a pitch for some seventy-five billion dollars of "urgent" new aid for Israel and Ukraine. Among other things, the President said, the aid would "sharpen Israel's qualitative military edge." Biden's instinctive embrace of Israel in its unprecedented hour of crisis has been one of the most confident performances of his Presidency. But his foreign-policy legacy will be shaped by what comes next, in a war in which his advice about restraint and calm deliberation may well be ignored by all the leaders involved.

—Steve Coll

TECH SKEPTICS
SMITHEREENS



"I'm absolutely a Luddite," the author and columnist Brian Merchant said the other day at an outdoor café in Brooklyn. He has long, brown hair and a goatee, and was wearing a plaid shirt over a T-shirt that read "The Luddites Were Right." On the chair next to him sat an HP printer.

Merchant feels that the original Luddites, early-nineteenth-century clothmakers who raided British factories and destroyed the new machines that were replacing them, have been getting a bad rap lately. Modern people tend to see them as fools who didn't appreciate the benefits of technology. In Merchant's view, the Luddites saw the future all too clearly: new machinery meant that the work they had previously done in their own homes would now be done in factories, as mass production, destroying the workers' way of life.

"It wasn't so much resisting any kind of change—it was resisting getting steamrolled, getting crushed and thrown into poverty," Merchant said. "They were more anti-poverty than they were anti-technology." He thinks their rebellion, which came after more peaceful attempts to save their jobs failed, was "morally justified."

He sees parallels in the present, including people throwing rocks at Google's employee buses, actors striking over streaming pay, writers protesting the use of artificial intelligence, and activists placing construction cones on driverless cars to scramble their computers. "That's a Luddite tactic right there," Merchant said.

He was about to host what he called a Luddite Tribunal at Starr Bar, around the corner, to celebrate his new book, "Blood in the Machine," about the history of the movement. Merchant and other tech critics—the artist Molly Crabapple; the podcast host Edward Ongweso, Jr. ("This Machine Kills"); the labor reporter Alex Press; and Paris Marx, the host of "Tech Won't Save Us"—planned to hold up pieces of technology, debate whether they caused more harm than good, and then smash the condemned objects to bits. Merchant had brought an eight-pound sledgehammer purchased from a local hardware store. (He shuns Amazon.)

At the bar, he explained that the panel would "try" the printer and a Ring camera he'd brought, and accept submissions from the audience. "You have to have something that's, like, satisfying to smash," he said. "I think we're gonna have to have a blast radius." He supplied the front row with safety goggles.

One of the bar's events managers, Quinton Counts, wasn't fazed by the potential for glass projectiles and flying motherboard shards. "We get it all," he said. "It's Bushwick."

Two guys were sitting in the front row with cans of beer. One of them, Christian Cmehil-Warn, an M.I.T. grad student with long hair and a red T-shirt, said that he worried about A.I. being

Brian Merchant

used to oppress workers and make unjust decisions about loans and housing. His friend, a former professional gamer who has a graduate degree in quantitative finance (and who didn't want to be identified), said he'd become skeptical of technology after realizing that the industry he works in—mobile gaming—had created the equivalent of online slot machines, primed to drive addiction. "It's, like, sixty to ninety per cent of the revenues come from one per cent of the people," he said. "They're essentially degenerate gamblers being exploited by sophisticated algorithms."

As the room filled up with other tech skeptics, Cmehil-Warn said that, at M.I.T., scientists were developing robots and apps without considering how they would be used. "It's like Frankenstein's monster," he said. "The guy just makes it and lets it go." The former gamer was interested in the psychology of cults and scams and said that he was opposed to cryptocurrency, which he called a "multilevel-marketing scheme for tech bros." Which technological development were they most worried about? "A.I. girlfriends," the former gamer said without hesitating.

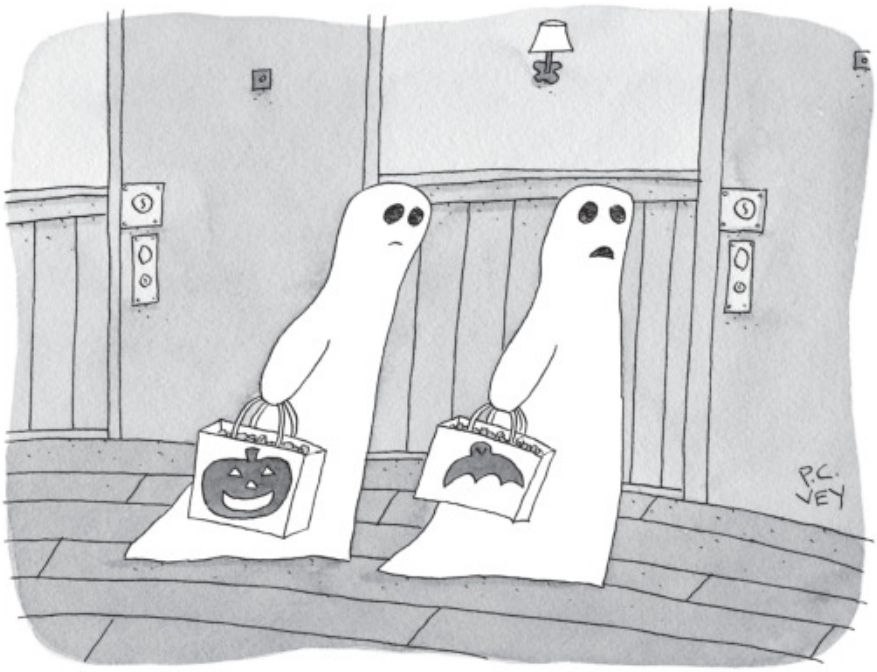
David Gray Widder, fresh from Carnegie Mellon with a Ph.D. in computer science, sat down. He said that, as a student, he'd protested the use of facial-recognition software by the Pittsburgh police. He wore a Garmin, rather than an Apple, watch. He had helped cause a kerfuffle at Carnegie Mellon (named after "two anti-labor philanthropy capitalists," he said) in 2020, when he took a screwdriver and removed a "smart sensor," which included a microphone, that had been preinstalled in his campus office. He put the sensor in a plexiglass box on a shelf and notified the department leadership of his concerns. (After a backlash, he reinstalled it.) Caleb Malchik, another computer scientist, took a seat next to him. He'd been radicalized against tech in part by Edward Snowden and said that copyright posed a threat to free speech.

"Look!" the former gamer said, holding up his phone screen. "I just got a recruiting e-mail from Meta. How's that for irony?"

Onstage, Merchant leaned forward on the handle of his hammer. "You know, it's important to point out that the Luddites were not just in a blind rage, smashing everything," he said. "They were very tactical and very focussed on what was actually causing exploitation." After significant effort, the panelists managed to break the Ring camera ("expanding the surveillance state"), and then tore up a hideous clown poster created using generative A.I. ("made basically from plagiarized work"). Then Merchant brought out the printer (a symbol of the indignities of office life which only works with Hewlett-Packard's own overpriced ink) and placed it on a chair.

" 'Office Space' that shit!" someone yelled.

—Sheelah Kolhatkar



"I don't mind wandering the hallways for all eternity, but all this candy is making me sick."

• •

AMERICAN SONGBOOK COLLABORATION

Dressed in jeans, a baseball shirt, and a puffer, with a saxophone case strapped to his back, Joshua Redman could have passed for a Juilliard student as he walked into the lobby of the 92nd Street Y. It wasn't just the clothes: Redman is as lean as any twenty-year-old subsisting on instant ramen. He's fifty-four, though, and entering his fourth decade as one of his generation's preëminent jazz musicians. He was at the Y to prepare for a concert celebrating his new album, "where are we"—one of two dozen as a leader or co-leader, but his first with a vocalist.

The piano in the Y's Kaufmann Concert Hall needed to be tuned before sound check, so Redman was ushered to a green-room, where he sat surrounded by photos of eminences who have appeared at the Y—John Coltrane, Malala Yousafzai, James Baldwin, Philip Roth, Jay-Z, Sonia Sotomayor. "Some jazz musicians say it's the best room in New York," he said of the theatre, mentioning the late baritone-sax player Gerry Mulligan. (Some others, not knowing the Kaufmann's history or acoustics, have asked, with a raised eyebrow, "Your next gig is at *the Y*?," as if he were playing a gym in Dubuque.)

Redman said that he had wanted to record with a vocalist for a long time. The canon doesn't offer many examples of saxophonists and singers sharing equal billing. He pointed to a few stellar pairings: Lester Young and Billie Holiday,

Coltrane and Johnny Hartman, Cannonball Adderley and Nancy Wilson. "I'm sure I'm forgetting some," he said. "But, yeah, there are fewer iconic albums from the past, fewer ghosts over you. I've done a lot of just saxophone-quartet albums, and obviously the John Coltrane Quartet, 'A Love Supreme,' hovers over everything. You're never going to attain *that*." Needing to live up only to the Coltrane-Hartman pairing "was kind of freeing."

The vocalist in question, Gabrielle Cavassa, joined Redman in the greenroom. If he was Juilliard, she, wearing an off-the-shoulder black T-shirt and low-rise cargo pants, was more N.Y.U. (Both glammed up before the show.) Cavassa, who is twenty-nine, is a California native who now lives in New Orleans, where Redman's manager heard her perform one night. Redman checked her out and liked what he heard, and when the two first spoke over Zoom about a possible collaboration—Cavassa had a single LP to her name—they hit it off.

The challenge became selecting what to record. "Once we started talking about the different sorts of songs we might do, it just seemed too overwhelming to me, the vast sea of material," Redman said. He claims to suffer from decision anxiety, so he and Cavassa settled on a theme to help corral their choices: songs about American places. In other words, a concept album. In jazz, that usually means "So-and-So Plays the You-Know-Who Songbook," but Redman and Cavassa came up with something more resonant: a record whose moods move between celebratory, mournful, puzzled, whimsical, angry—a series of emotional dissonances that mimic what it can feel like to live in the United States. "Darkness and light," as Redman put it.

Still, even with the concept settled, the pair found choices difficult. "I think we both maybe have a tendency to be accommodating," Redman said.

"Yeah, there weren't any fights," Cavassa agreed. "But there were definitely songs I didn't want to do at first. 'Hotel California,' for example."

"Well, we didn't do it on the album."

"We didn't, but now we're doing it in the live show," she said. (When they played the song that evening, they turned the overly familiar classic-rock staple into a barn burner.)

They settled on thirteen tracks, ranging from such standards as "Manhattan" and "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" to less obvious picks like "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" and "Streets of Philadelphia," Bruce Springsteen's Oscar-winning ballad from the 1993 film "Philadelphia." Redman had suggested it as a joke, riffing on place-name songs, but Cavassa listened to it one night in her car—"the best one of my favorite places to listen"—and started crying. "I was, like, I guess I should do it, because I didn't cry at 'New England,'" she said.

She was referencing an obscure track of unknown authorship which she'd heard on a Betty Carter CD. With a pretty melody and corny lyrics, "New England" was new to Redman. "Gabrielle could be an archeologist," he said.

Cavassa said that, although she often connects to songs through lyrics, "these lyrics are about syrup and clams"—not much to dig into emotionally. Even so, she responded to Carter's performance, and to the way the singer made something out of not quite nothing, so "New England" made the cut. (Redman's arrangement, retitled "That's New England," interpolates passages from Charles Ives, bracing like a November wind.)

To clarify, Cavassa added, "I really do love syrup and clams."

"Just not together," Redman said.

—Bruce Handy

NEEDLE AND THREAD
STORYTELLER

Michael A. Cummings, a seventy-seven-year-old quilt artist based in Harlem, is the only person he knows of who has slept beneath one of his works. "I have put my quilts on my bed when I was cold," Cummings said the other day. "When I first got to New York, I was putting layers on top of me on the bed, and I couldn't move, hardly, because it was so heavy. But I was warm." Eventually, his mother and his sister told him about electric blankets. Over the years, he has made some quilts for friends with babies, but none made it into a crib. "One woman I know, she just put it on the side of the baby bed, and the baby looked at it," he said.

Cummings's work typically hangs in galleries, museums, foundations, and embassies—the realm of art. The Whitney has exhibited quilts since 1971; more recently, A$AP Rocky wore a quilted blanket to the Met Gala, and the fashion designer Emily Bode has outfitted Harry Styles and Bad Bunny in quilted garments. Quilting, though, can conjure images of hot-glue guns, pipe cleaners, and old ladies at JOANN stores—the world of crafting. Cummings doesn't like the classification. "I don't think it should exist," he said. "There shouldn't be a division. It's all art."

Cummings was standing in the back room of Hunter Dunbar Projects, a gallery in Chelsea that's putting on his first retrospective, called "Storyteller." He wore a red quarter-zip sweater and a houndstooth newsboy cap and led a tour of some of the pieces.

Cummings grew up in Los Angeles and moved to New York in 1970. He found work in the city's Department of Cultural Affairs. One day, he was tasked with making a banner, and, after a tailor wanted a hundred dollars for the job, he decided to teach himself to sew it instead. "I said, Wow, this is better than painting," he recalled. He soon went to Macy's and bought his own sewing machine. His work often explores Black history—sometimes in frightening detail—which he eases viewers into with bright colors and embellishments. He stopped in front of a quilt titled "Waiting for Slave Ship Henrietta Marie," which features four enslaved women in West Africa. "These women here are not having a good time," he said.

Standing in front of "Yemaya," a mermaid quilt saturated with sequins and electric blues and pinks, he peered up at the titular Yoruba water goddess. "Your mind might go to a romantic fantasy and 'Oh, isn't that nice,'" he said, gesturing toward the words "LOVE" and "DESIRE," which are featured between red hearts. "But 'Love' and 'Desire' were in the names of slave ships," he said. When you begin to notice the finer details—bloody palms, corpses, and the Grim Reaper—there's a shift. "It becomes 'Oh, it's not nice.'"

Yemaya is sometimes believed to have watched over Africans as they were forced across the Atlantic, and she is still worshipped today. Benjamin Reed Hunter, the co-owner of the gallery, who was ac-

companying Cummings, said, "I'm not kidding, there was a woman who was just here, in front of 'Yemaya,' and she—" He raised his hands above his head, tilted his chin toward the ceiling, sucked in air, and swayed back and forth. Cummings said that at a recent exhibition in Birmingham, England, two other quilts brought women to tears.

Cummings headed for a fabric store nearby, in the garment district, where he gets many of his materials. He doesn't typically start out searching for anything specific. "You'll never know what fabric might holler, 'Take me home, take me home,'" he said. The shop resembled a library, but for textiles instead of texts. Rolls of fabric were packed together so tightly that only slivers of each were visible, like the spines of books. Cummings was drawn to a gold cloth with intricate beadwork near the entrance. "I *might* get a half yard," he thought aloud, before disappearing down an aisle lined with rolls of fabric as tall as he was.

He wandered toward a collection of African textiles. "The thing I learned about African fabrics is that they have a commercial line that they push," he said. "If you look at what the actual people are wearing, you don't see that in the mix of the fabric here." Cummings once approached a vender at an African market on 116th Street about his clothes. "He said, 'Well, what do you want to buy?' I said, 'I want to buy the shirt that you have on.'"

Cummings said that when he's working he loses track of everything. "You get into a trance. I have a personal trainer with me all the time, and that personal trainer is a sixty-minute clock," he said, referring to a kitchen timer. "It doesn't take batteries or anything. And, when that bell goes off"—he snapped his fingers—"it brings me back to reality." Upon surveying his work, his reaction is sometimes Urkelian. "I step back and ask, 'Wow, did I do that?'"

He took a few laps around the store and scrunched a few fabrics between his fingers—he folds, rather than rolls, his quilts, so he requires material that isn't prone to wrinkling. But he found his way back to the gold cloth. "Can I see what a half a yard looks like?" he asked the shopkeeper. Looking down at it unfurled, he sighed. "I'll take a yard," he said. "See what you made me do?"

—Nina Mesfin

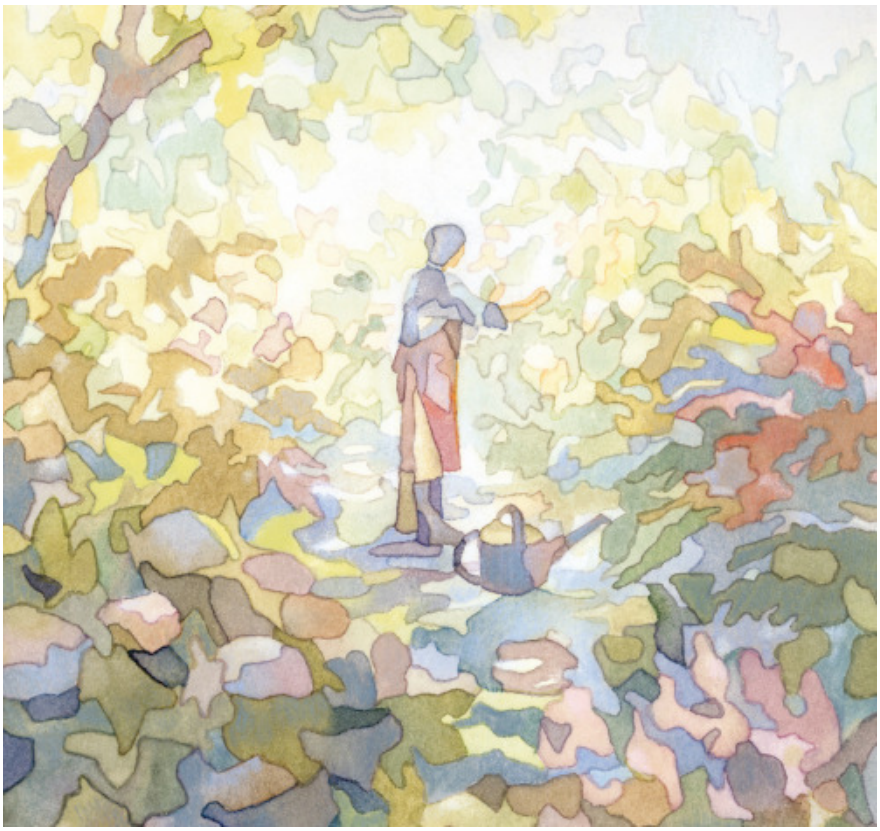
SKETCHPAD BY ZOE SI

PERSONAL HISTORY

IF NOT NOW, LATER

What gardening offered after a son's death.

BY YIYUN LI



"It's rather vexing, isn't it, not to know what flowers will come up next year?" I said to my friend Brigid, in a voice that sounded more like a character's in a novel than my own. It was November, 2017, and my family had just moved into our house in Princeton. The trees were shedding their leaves, in a theatrical manner that was new to us—we had relocated from California to the East Coast four months earlier.

"There are some roses," Brigid said. "Those look like lilies."

"And those are hostas."

There were six or seven rose bushes, with residual flowers, fuchsia-colored, shivering on top of the near-leafless branches. Lilies and hostas, their leaves already paled and half rotted by the cold autumn rain, remained recognizable. The rest of the garden was a wilted mystery, buried under fallen leaves.

I was not a character, but I was speaking like one for a reason: I was pondering a set of characters. I went on and told Brigid about a moment in "The Saga of the Century Trilogy," by Rebecca West, about a British family living in London in the first half of the twentieth century. The eldest daughter in the family, Cordelia, newly wed, has moved into a pretty house in Kensington; when she has her two younger sisters over for a visit, she frets, with the leisure of a young woman married into respectability and stability, about not knowing whether the hawthorn tree in her garden will bear white, pink, or red flowers in the spring.

A few chapters later, the hawthorn tree blooms. By then, the little brother of the family, Richard Quin, still a teenager, has been killed in the Great War, ten days after arriving in France. "Killed, not missing?" Cordelia cries out in agony when she's told the news. The hawthorn tree outside reveals the answer to the riddle from the winter before: the flowers are red.

It is a quick stroke in a trilogy. The first time I read it, I did not fully register the weight of the detail. But, moving into a house in the fall, studying a garden that would remain unknowable for the moment, I went back and reread the few paragraphs about the tree.

Richard Quin, in West's trilogy, is killed in the same manner that one imagines Andrew Ramsay is killed in "To the Lighthouse": "[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.]"

For all we know, Richard Quin might have died next to Andrew Ramsay, in a pair of Virginia Woolf brackets.

Some days, that pair of brackets of Woolf's continue to baffle me. Other days, they feel just right. The predicament when writing about a sudden, untimely death: the more you remember, the more elusive that death becomes. A sudden, untimely death is a black hole, absorbing all that you can give, not really clamoring for more. Though is a black hole ever to be fully filled so that it can cease to be one? Has anyone been able to define, capture, or even get close to a black hole?

[In September, 2017, our older son, Vincent, died by suicide, at sixteen.]

[On that day, we put down the deposit for the house. Deposit, death, in that order, four hours apart.]

In a novel, I would never have put the two happenings on the same day. In writing fiction, one avoids coincidences like that, which offer unearned drama, shoddy poignancy, convenient metaphor, predictable spectacle. Life, however, does not follow a novelist's discipline. Fiction, one suspects, is often tamer than life.

Some fiction is tamer than some life, I should amend. And I confess that this is only a variation of a statement made by another character in "The Saga of the Century Trilogy," who, upon discovering her husband's extramarital affair, reads "Madame Bo-

ILLUSTRATION BY MUSUBU HAGI

vary" and exclaims, "But art is so much more real than life. Some art is much more real than some life, I mean."

A couple of months after Vincent died, a colleague asked me where I was "in the process of grieving," assuming, I supposed, that there would be, and should be, a conclusion of mourning at some point. That phrase struck me as inaccurate; she might as well have asked me where I was "in the process of living."

There is, alas, not a normal course of life, against which deviations can be measured and, hopefully, corrected. Only changed courses, altered lives. One can look longingly at the alternatives: Vincent graduating from high school (as our younger son did this summer) or graduating from college (as Vincent's old school friends will next year), but alternatives belong to the realm of fiction. To paraphrase Elizabeth Bowen, the great Anglo-Irish writer, good fiction is good because it offers "the palpable presence of the alternatives." In life, that presence can be palpably felt, but too much preoccupation with the alternatives may lead to a dilemma of either/or; even, neither here nor there. "Dilemma," from its Greek etymology, means two lemmas: double assumptions, double propositions. But death is definitive; death does not lead to a dilemma.

I think about the alternative lives of my characters all the time. But, as I did not live in fiction, I decided, soon after Vincent's death, to stop pondering the alternatives. *What if* belongs to fiction; *what now*, to this real life.

What now, in the last months of 2017: I could not read fiction. It was not a problem of mental focus. I spent hours every day reading Shakespeare's plays and Wallace Stevens's poems—all of a sudden, those words were the only ones that made sense to me. But if I stopped reading fiction would I ever be able to write fiction again? I was in the middle of a long novel. Forging ahead or scrapping the project felt equally impossible. Anguished, I looked up "anguish" in the O.E.D., to make sure that I was using the right word to describe my situation, and, indeed, it was an apt word choice. Etymologically, "anguish" comes to us from the Latin *angustia*—narrowness, lack of space, narrow space, narrow passage, strait, limitations, restrictions, confinement, imprisonment, restrictedness, shortage, scantiness, critical situation, narrow-mindedness, pettiness.

A black hole takes all and gives back naught. The anguish from a sudden, untimely death has a narrowing effect: alternatives are lost; space in the mind, too.

On her next visit, Brigid brought me two books. The first was "Onward and Upward in the Garden," a collection of fourteen essays by the former *New Yorker* fiction editor Katharine S. White. The essays were originally published, in a span of twelve years, in the magazine, ostensibly as reviews of nursery catalogues. The other book was "Two Gardeners: A Friendship in Letters," a collection of correspondence between White and Elizabeth Lawrence. Lawrence was a gardener and a gardening writer in North Carolina, and the friendship began when Lawrence wrote a fan letter to White after reading her first essay, "A Romp in the Catalogues," in the March 1, 1958, issue of *The New Yorker*. For a year, they were "Mrs. White" and "Miss Lawrence" to each other, and then they became "Katharine" and "Elizabeth." They would write to each other for the next nineteen years, until White's death, in 1977.

Through the winter, I read the two books, very slowly. There was no reason to hurry, as that first winter was a long one; cold, snowy—cold and snowy for recent transplants from California, in any case. Day after day, I looked at the bare limbs of the trees, brownish gray, and the stale snow covering the garden, grayish white. I thought one afternoon, What if spring never returns? Right away I recognized the illogic and the melodrama of that thought. I had at my hand the words of two gardeners of yesteryear, books that had taken years to be written. Were these words not enough evidence that spring always comes, if not now, later?

[That winter, I often returned to Marianne Moore's words: "If nothing charms or sustains us (and we are getting food and fresh air) it is for us to say, 'If not now, later,' and not mope." Incidentally, it was Moore who may have first suggested that White should collect her reviews of garden catalogues into a book.]

Not to mope, I thought, was a proper goal: it would take all my energy and all my vigilance, and it was attainable. White's essays and the letters between White and Lawrence were just right for that aspiration. The two women (and likely some of the gardens and many of the plants that they had written about) were no more, and yet their words remained and sustained, offering facts and opinions, gardening tales and personal woes, seasons and years, illnesses and deaths—all there, ready to distract me.

For instance, there were the names of plants to learn. In both books, I encountered many names, some familiar, others unfamiliar, and every one of them—even the most common, like "peony" or "lotus" or "fuchsia"—required investigation. Unlike Lawrence, I'm not a purist when it comes to botany, and I don't always look up the Latin names for the plants. But I do like to know the etymology of their English names. And what one can learn just by going to the dictionary! "Peony" goes all the way back to ancient Greek: Paieon, or Paeon, was the physician of the gods. (What afflicts the gods? Possibly what afflicts us mortals.) "Lotus" comes from the Greek *lōtos*, a mythical plant bringing forgetfulness to those who eat its fruits. (I have eaten my share of lotus seeds, a delicacy in Chinese cuisine, without achieving oblivion.) "Fuchsia," a word I often misspelled as "fuschia"—what mythical story accompanies thee? It turns out that fuchsia was named for the sixteenth-century German physician and botanist Leonhard Fuchs, whose name gave birth not only to that of the flower and that of the color but also to the nickname, Fuchsienstadt, for his home town of Wemding, where there is a pyramid made of as many as seven hundred fuchsia plants. And yet Fuchs never saw the flower fuchsia in his lifetime: it was discovered in the Caribbean and named by the French botanist and monk Charles Plumier, who was born a hundred and forty-five years after Fuchs. What led Plumier to name the flower for Fuchs? One can ask the question, but any speculation would be closer to fiction, just as peony was once the physician of the gods and lotus would bring forgetfulness.

Nearer our time—nearer than Fuchs and Plumier—were the horticulturists, seedsmen, growers, some older than White, others her contemporaries, behind those nursery catalogues which

were once scrutinized by her. "They are as individualistic . . . as any Faulkner or Hemingway, and they can be just as frustrating or rewarding," White wrote. And what a great joy to get to know the Faulkners and Hemingways of the nursery world through her words. Signing off for the catalogue of White Flower Farm was one Amos Pettingill. "I have no idea whether Amos Pettingill is a real person—the name sounds like an ill-advised fabrication," White observed. Real or not, the name alone, I thought, was enough to send one's imagination on a detour to Dickens-land. In the catalogue of White Flower Farm, Mr. Pettingill claimed that its French Pussy Willow was "not the unreliable wild Pussy Willow," which led White to protest, "What is unreliable, pray, about the native wild pussies? I have found them trustworthy in every respect." David Burpee, the president of the W. Atlee Burpee & Company, campaigned to have the marigold recognized as the national flower of the United States. White, describing "David Burpee's one-man lobby," noted, "I was also pleased as well as entertained, a couple of years back, when Mr. Burpee in person went to Washington, bearing marigold boutonnières for the legislators, and, at a Congressional hearing on naming a national flower, faced down the Senatorial proponents of grass, the corn tassel, the rose, and the carnation." (Mr. Burpee did not succeed; the rose prevailed to become the national flower.)

To catch a glimpse, in White's essays, of these men and women who once lived in their gardens, cultivating, hybridizing, dreaming of colors and shapes and scents that would catch their fancy, and then turning their obsessions into words, hoping that their catalogues would catch the fancy of many gardeners' hearts: there is nothing narrowing in the world of roses, dahlias, marigolds, tulips, daylilies, and chrysanthemums. They were not black holes but rabbit holes.

And, of course, there were White and Lawrence, knowledgeable, opinionated, delighting in miscellanies. In her first letter, Lawrence recommended that White write about Cecil Houdyshel's catalogues (which always opened with "Dear Floral Friends"): "I think he is in his nineties now, so you had better hurry." In reply, White confessed, "I am always nervous when I write about old people." Both women saw a garden writer in Lewis Carroll. In her first *New Yorker* review of nursery catalogues, referring to the card gardeners painting roses in "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," White wrote, "Lewis Carroll was prophetic; today the garden men are quite as busy changing the colors of flowers as they are changing their size and shape." A year later, Lawrence wrote in a letter, "If I have to hear flowers talk, I would rather read *Through the Looking-Glass*, which *is* my favorite garden book."

[Their conversation led me to reread "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking-Glass," the first fiction I read after Vincent's death. The books, of course, have less to do with the missed or lost alternatives; instead, they make perfect nonsense out of the alternatives.]

After we moved into the house, I ordered twenty-five hyacinth bulbs (Delft Blue) and buried them haphazardly in the corners where I was certain that they would not interfere with any existing plants. Twenty-five, in retrospect, was a touchingly small number—a gesture rather than a plan, a prelude to a dream rather than a dream realized. But a gardener, like a writer, must start somewhere. (Last fall, I planted eight hundred bulbs; the fall before, seven hundred.)

Because of those twenty-five bulbs, garden catalogues began to arrive. One could be realistic: it had taken little time for one's address to be shared among the nurseries. One could also be romantic: imagine that tentative order of bulbs as a small bugle, announcing a budding gardener. The catalogues, though radically improved graphically from the ones reviewed by White, still bore the same names: White Flower Farm, Wayside Gardens, Park Seed Company, W. Atlee Burpee & Company, and several more. I perused the catalogues as I imagined White and Lawrence had done; although new to this literature, I had yet to cultivate my tastes and form my opinions.

It occurred to me one day that no one had made a catalogue of gardeners: professional gardeners, who might be like important cultivars, bearing poetic or eccentric names; amateurs, akin to common carnations and cornflowers; and those, like me, who were gardeners only in their fantasies. Such a catalogue, abundant with human stories, would be amusing to read, no? I then realized that I was, true to my profession, fictioneering again.

When I was growing up, in Beijing, my family lived on the ground floor of an apartment block, so we were lucky to have a tiny lot, about two metres by 1.5 metres. My father, who had come from poor peasant stock, gardened judiciously: a grapevine that produced very sweet grapes (often pillaged by the wasps), our favorite green beans (which bore the name "pig ears"), loofahs (good for soup when the gourds were young and tender; when they were old and fibrous, they made the best kitchen scrubs), a honeysuckle plant (dried honeysuckle flowers can be used as medicinal tea). One year, when I was four or five, he planted some potatoes and described to me the unforgettable flavor of new potatoes. The only other time I have heard such a rapturous description of new potatoes was from an Irish poet in Cork.

My father did not garden for beauty. Some years, he would plant a cluster of impatiens, which he called "fingernail flowers" because, in the old days, the pink and red petals had been used when painting girls' fingernails. The only constant floral decorations in our garden were the morning glories, self-seeding and wildly vivacious. Once, two women laughed at our garden to my face, dismissing my father as a lazy gardener who grew flowers that were no more than weeds. I was too young and too intimidated to defend him: he was a nuclear physicist, but he also did all the grocery shopping and most of the housework, cooked three meals a day for the family, and gardened in his spare time.

People who cultivated peonies and roses and orchids were not necessarily kind, which was not a surprise. I had learned from Chinese history that cold-blooded dictators—Chairman Mao, for instance—had also written heartrending poetry, and that capricious dynastic

tyrants had often been supreme calligraphers and painters. On the other hand, people who were cruel to garden plants could easily extend that cruelty to human beings. One day, my mother uprooted the honeysuckle for no other reason than that she could—so she would—inflict pain. My father mourned, and I seethed, though we both did so quietly.

When the spring of 2018 arrived, I, the daughter of my pragmatic father, started by growing vegetables in containers—I was still waiting for the flowers in the garden to emerge and show themselves to me. In the next two years, I grew Chinese celtuce, baby bok choy, green beans, eggplants, tomatoes, sweet peppers, okra, and a variety of herbs, and ended up having plenty of opportunities to observe at close hand birds and squirrels, snails and slugs, aphids and spider mites, and all the other archenemies of a garden. Various campaigns were carried out: I ordered live ladybugs, hundreds at a time, and released them in the evenings after it rained, hoping that they would not fly away; I hung up birdhouses, waiting for wrens to move in and feed their chicks with my garden's offering of bugs; fake snakes were strategically placed to ward off rodents, and they did little but frighten me every time I stepped on their rubbery bodies.

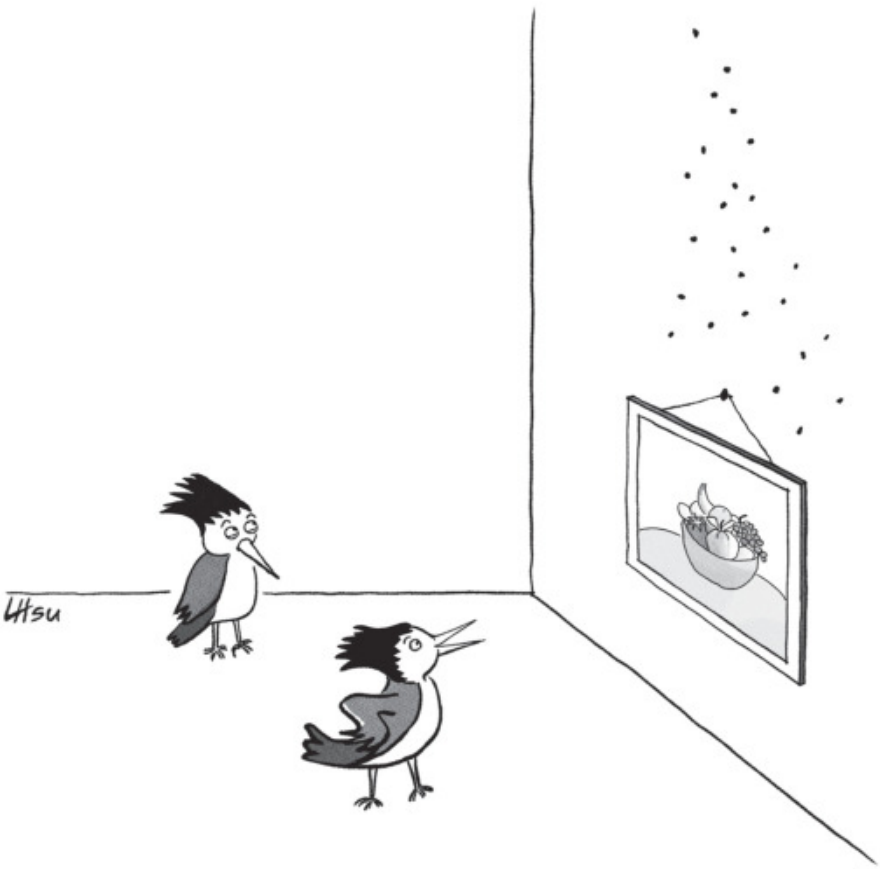
And then there is the problem without any solution: the bigger animals. Deer graze undiscriminatingly (but luckily, in my case, only in the front yard, for the back yard is fenced). The fence, of course, does nothing to deter rabbits. (On a visit I paid to the Irish writer William Trevor, at his house in Devon, he pointed out rolls of metal mesh, to be buried at a certain depth—inches? feet? I forgot how much—into the ground as a rabbit fence. I have yet to be so enterprising.) The rabbits show up in late May or early June, fist-size fluffs, and a month later they can stand on their hind feet and stretch more than a foot tall. They chomp down everything and turn me into a maddened Mrs. McGregor. (I will never believe any catalogue if it dares label a plant rabbit-resistant.) Next comes our resident groundhog. Perhaps there is more than one, but they all look the same to me: giant and comical. The groundhogs are the most effective destroyers of a garden. I named ours for an infamous politician, although a friend, quite sensibly, pointed out that calling the groundhog by the politician's name was an insult to the animal: the groundhog is doing only what he's supposed to do, tramping and feasting in what he considers his garden.

One early summer morning, I looked out the window and saw two deer and a rabbit in my front garden, eating up some hydrangea bushes I had planted a few weeks earlier. It occurred to me that, had I been able to go back to my childhood self and tell her that one day I would live in a place where rabbits and deer eat side by side peacefully, the child would be incredulous: certainly no real people could live in a fairy tale like that?

"I am sure that if you had been told when you were a child about all the things that you were going to have to do, you would have thought you had better die at once, you would not have believed you could ever have the strength to do them." In West's trilogy, Richard Quin says this to his mother before he leaves to be killed in France. Had I been able to go back to my childhood self and tell her that one day I would live as a mother who has lost a son, the child would be equally incredulous: surely such things happen only in fiction, to characters who are much more interesting and tragic?

My garden this spring looks a little different from the garden that came back to life in the spring of 2018. For two years in a row, it was razed by an endless army of rabbits, and, by late summer, it looked like a sad head suffering irregular hair loss, with large bald patches and some surviving stalks of flowers. But this, I had learned from White and Lawrence, is only part of a garden's fate. In a letter from the spring of 1960, Lawrence reported to White about her magnolia, "We had a real frost last night (almost unheard of for mid-April) and *Magnolia Lennei* is covered with brown rags. I am going to chop it down, for this happens too often." In her reply, White wrote, "I called home and learned that mice had eaten and destroyed nine of my old-fashioned rose bushes, so I am extra sympathetic about the magnolia."

Anything can happen in a garden, nothing lasts, and yet something can



"Is this height better?"

always be made out of the soil, even with the most destructive weather, even when rabbits and groundhogs and Japanese beetles join forces, greedy and ruthless. All things in the garden, just as in life, are provisional and impermanent. One gardens with the same unblinded hope and the same willingness to concede as one lives, always ready to say, If not now, later; if not this year, next year.

But these sentiments would have sounded preachy had I said them to Vincent when he was alive. (The truth is, I would not have been able to, since I had not yet learned them myself.) A few weeks before his death, when we were touring the house with real-estate agents, he said to me, "This garden needs improvement. I can't wait to garden with you."

One can linger in that memory, but there is no reason to attach too much meaning to it. A garden is not a shrine. Living is not metaphorizing. I don't always think about Vincent's plan to work alongside me when I potter in the garden. A garden is trustworthy only at this moment, in this now: the past is irrevocable, the future unpredictable.

[Though I did plant a special patch of tulips for Vincent last fall: Tulipa Vincent van Gogh, dark and mysterious, and Tulipa Ballerina, golden and elegant.]

Five years later, I still consider myself a beginning gardener. I'm avid, but always ready to surrender to disappointments, to setbacks, to failures and deaths. Unlike White and Lawrence, I garden without a design. (From E. B. White's introduction to the essay collection, one gathers that Katharine's garden provided the right colors, shapes, and scents throughout the year.) Much of the planting and growing delights me because of the connections I can make.

The blooming of the Vanessa Bell, one of my favorite roses from the David Austin catalogue, reminds me of one of the last public readings that William Trevor gave, in 2008; I had flown from California to England to attend the event, which took place in Charleston, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant's house in East Sussex. Emily Brontë, another of my favorite David Austin roses, blooms with what I call "a wuthering tenderness," and when the Emily Brontës are blooming I always think of my first reading of "Wuthering Heights," as a teen-ager in Beijing. Mystified and electrified, I held on to the book as though it offered a refuge for my mind, but I now suspect that I was only pretending to understand the passion and the drama in the story. A few Roald Dahls from David Austin were planted because Dahl was among my children's favorite authors when they were young. The Lady of Shalott and Tess of the d'Urbervilles for poetry and fiction. The Lady Gardener as a self-mocking gesture.

Over the past few years, I've added a dozen hydrangea bushes to the garden, because one of my characters, Lilia—who, like me, lost a child at the age of forty-four—has grown hydrangeas all her life with a passion. [It was the novel I was working on when Vincent died. I had already written about the death of Lilia's child when I encountered the same loss.]

Daylilies are not really my favorite, but I grow them because in my father's village in southern China the soil is the meagrest type, and the only crops my father's family could grow were yams and daylilies; the flowers were harvested for culinary use—a delicacy for other people.

Some flowers in my garden have been inherited from the previous owners: astilbes, baptisias, azaleas, and buddleias. When the astilbes bloom, their white flowers make a shimmering mass in the sun, countering the meaning of their name, in Greek, as something that does not shimmer. The baptisias have indigo flowers, and the name comes from the Greek: to dip, to immerse, to dye (which shares the root with "baptism"). Azaleas' name, too, comes from the Greek, meaning "dry," but there is nothing dry about these flowers. Buddleias, however, were simply named for an English botanist, Adam Buddle.

Primroses bloom early, before the roses. Anemones (ancient Greek's daughters of the wind) wave their strikingly colorful and delicate flowers in the spring breeze. Geraniums (from the Greek: cranes) expand long-leggedly. Campanulas (from the Latin: little bells) produce bell-shaped flowers without making a cacophony. These and other varieties I have added to the garden. Some have stayed and prospered. Others have proved to be a trustworthy food supply for rabbits. Delphiniums, I have learned, can never stay in the garden for more than a few days. Dianthus and phlox are a game of statistics, which is possibly just like fate; if they survive the raids of the rabbits, they have neither themselves nor me to credit.

When Vincent was in the eighth grade, I drove him and a friend, a girl, back from a birthday party, and, like all mothers, I eavesdropped on their conversation. They were discussing the girl's decision not to participate in a poetry contest. She had read the previous winners, she said, and they were composed of words such as "injustice," "inequality," "empowerment," "action." "What I don't understand," the girl said, "is why can't we write about flowers anymore."

"Of course we can," Vincent said. "But . . ."

He did not finish the sentence. I wondered if he was asking: Is there still a place for Emily Dickinson these days?

Every spring, when the first flush of David Austin roses bloom, there is always a moment when I turn, in my mind, to Vincent. "Here's something you haven't seen: these roses." The line is offered as a fact, not as an argument, for a rose is never an argument. There is no such thing as an angry rose or a moping rose or an empowered rose; only a realistic rose, a matter-of-fact rose, a transient rose.

A garden is a place full of random, diverting, and irrelevant happenings, and a garden, as good as a rabbit hole, serves also as an antidote to a black hole. These days, I often get up early. Every flower seems to require an individual greeting from me. In the Buddhist tradition, one encounters sayings like "A flower is a world, a grass leaf is a paradise." But I, not quite a believer in any kind of religion or metaphor, would rather think that each flower in my garden holds some concrete space, a physical one as well as a temporal one. A flower, like a thought, a sentence, a book, is but a placeholder. ♦

"MY NAME IS BARBRA," EXCERPTED

BY HENRY ALFORD

With her long-awaited memoir, Barbra Streisand offers a funny and frank look at her career, six decades in. At a whopping 992 pages, it appears that the Hollywood and Broadway legend . . . isn't skimping on the details of her rarefied life.

—*Time.*

PAGE 1–Barbra chalks up her cardiovascular wellness to screaming daily at C-SPAN.

PAGE 5–Barbra recounts girls' weekend with Donna Karan full of laughter, nail care.

PAGE 14–Barbra says that Track II diplomacy is the "Hello, gorgeous" of statecraft.

PAGE 20–Barbra recounts anecdote featuring Shimon Peres, throw pillows.

PAGE 112–Barbra says Thomas Jefferson's Monticello is "an autobiographical masterpiece but the drawer pulls are all wrong."

PAGE 261–Barbra says that too much guitar noodling on a song can sound like jazzturbation.

PAGE 290–Barbra says that being the only artist to have No. 1 albums in each of the past six decades always makes people ask her if she wants to lie down after lunch.

PAGE 292–Barbra interlards her praise for Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a woman?" speech with a digression on period-appropriate sconcing.

PAGE 293–Barbra says calling up Apple's Tim Cook to have Siri's pronunciation of "Streisand" corrected was her "Norma Rae" moment.

PAGE 384–Barbra says of her collection of Cartier and Cheuret antique clocks, "They are *all* my children."

PAGE 477–Barbra says she included on her archival album the forty-nine seconds of applause for her at the 1969 Oscars for "context."

PAGE 578–Barbra writes that starring in "Nuts" resulted in speaking requests from Planters and Blue Diamond.

PAGE 649–Barbra writes that she cloned her dog Sammie because her other dogs pooped on her antique-doll collection.

PAGE 702–Barbra says that many Republicans attend her concerts "because they're who can afford the tickets."

PAGE 803–Barbra writes that a carefully selected array of Jordan almonds on a Lalique platter is as close as man gets to God. "Have I ever suffered for my commitment to perfectionism? Of course. But shouldn't we be willing to suffer for the things we love? It's like the time at a fund-raiser in the nineteen-eighties—oh, my God, I'm losing my breath control even *thinking* about this—I got seated next to the real-estate magnate Donald Trump. *Talk* about suffering. The eleventh plague. Even then, I knew. I knew. But I kept my mouth shut until dessert. Because we all have to practice empathy. Life is not always easy. You want a walk along the ocean at sunset? Order the mussels. If you're not a listener, then you can't get informed, and Jefferson said that 'a well-informed electorate is a prerequisite to democracy.' Or look at the Hebrew word *dayenu*, which means 'enough.' No one mandates what is and isn't *dayenu;* there's no Dayenu Committee (though if you're looking for people to serve: hello). You've got to determine this stuff on your own—when to speak out, when to rejoice in song. You know, some of my friends tease me for color-coördinating the wrappers on the candy in my living rooms; other people thought I was crazy when I built a 'shopping mall' of antique stores and my used costumes, based on the one at the Winterthur estate, in the basement of my barn in Malibu. But at the end of the day? These are precisely the things that these same people love about me. Bill and Hillary adored it when I gave them a tour of the barn and I made Hillary try on my sequinny black see-through Scaasi pants suit from the '69 Oscars: NSFW Hillary. Hillary *beyond* e-mails. I mean, if you don't assert your will and your consummate design sense, who are you really? Sure, people have called me 'mouthy' or 'pushy' or a million things that they'd never say about a man, but you know what? The world needs to know what the rest of the world is thinking. People who need people, etc. And in my experience people *want* to be told if their jeans make their ass look fat. Sure, they'll smart at first, but later that night, as they're falling asleep? They're smiling. Why? Because they're thinking, Barbra cares about my silhouette. So, sometimes you need to speak out. Sometimes you need to look at the person next to you at the dinner party of life and—on realizing that he is a liar and a bully and a misogynist and a tax cheat who supports capital punishment—whisper in his ear, 'Donald, honey. Less is more.'"

PAGE 945–Barbra recounts vacation with Madeleine Albright rife with handbag repair, disappointment.

PAGE 963–Barbra concludes lengthy section on global disarmament with "Yentl"'s tagline, "Nothing's impossible."

PAGE 970–Barbra designs own headstone, which reads "Dayenu already."

PAGE 992–Barbra says the two greatest threats to civilization are encroachments on the truth and the stickers on fruit. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

THE CONTROL OF NATURE

NEEDFUL THINGS

The raw materials for the world we've built come at a cost.

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

Extraction rates aren't slowing down; in fact, they're speeding up.

The town of Spruce Pine, North Carolina, doesn't have a lot to say for itself. Its Web site, which features a photo of a flowering tree next to a rusty bridge, notes that the town is "conveniently located between Asheville and Boone." According to the latest census data, it has 2,332 residents and a population density of 498.1 per square mile. A recent story in the local newspaper concerned the closing of the Hardee's on Highway 19E; this followed an incident, back in May, when a fourteen-year-old boy who'd eaten a biscuit at the restaurant began to hallucinate and had to be taken to the hospital. Without Spruce Pine, though, the global economy might well unravel.

Spruce Pine's planetary importance follows from an accident of geology. Some three hundred and eighty million years ago, during the late Devonian period, the continent of Africa was drifting toward what would eventually become eastern North America. The force of its movement pressed the floor of a Paleozoic sea deep into the earth's mantle, where, in effect, it melted. Over the course of tens of millions of years, the molten rock cooled to form deposits of exceptionally pure mica and quartz, which were then pushed back up toward the surface. In the twentieth century, Spruce Pine's mica was mined to make windows for coal-burning stoves and insulation for vacuum tubes. In the computer age, it's the town's quartz that's critical.

Silicon chips are essentially made of quartz, although this is a bit like saying that the "Mona Lisa" is essentially made of linseed oil. Manufacturing microchips is phenomenally complex and supremely exacting. The process generally begins with quartz's cousin, quartzite, which consists in large measure of silicon dioxide. Under very high heat, and in the presence of carbon, the quartzite gives up most of its oxygen. Then acid and a great deal more heat are applied, until the silicon reaches a purity level of 99.9999999 per cent, or, as it's known in the business, "nine nines." At this point, the silicon is ready to be fashioned into a "boule," or ingot, that weighs upward of two hundred pounds and consists of a single perfectly aligned crystal. It is here that Spruce Pine's quartz comes into play.

To form a boule, pure silicon has to be heated in a special crucible to twenty-seven hundred degrees Fahrenheit. The crucible must be tough enough to withstand this temperature, and, at the same time, it must have the right chemical composition, so it won't introduce contaminants. The only substance that meets both these criteria is high-purity quartz, and one of the only spots where the right sort of quartz can be found is Spruce Pine.

Spruce Pine's quartz is so valuable that, as the Vancouver-based journalist Vince Beiser observes in his book "The World in a Grain," almost everything about it, outside of its purity, is a closely guarded secret. The company that owns the town's largest mine—Sibelco, a Belgian conglomerate—doesn't publish production figures. When contractors arrive to make repairs at the mine, they are reportedly led to the equipment in blindfolds. According to documents filed in a case that the company once brought against a former employee, it tries to divvy up its contracting jobs, so that no individual can learn too much, and for the same reason it purchases its supplies from multiple venders.

All this stealth, Ed Conway suggests in his new book, "Material World: The Six Raw Materials That Shape Modern Civilization" (Knopf), is justified. "There are few such cases where we are so utterly reliant on a single place," he writes.

ILLUSTRATION BY LAURA EDELBACHER

He quotes an unnamed industry veteran who notes that someone flying a crop duster over Spruce Pine and releasing "a very particular powder" could "end the world's production of semiconductors" within six months. No production of semiconductors would mean no production of computers, cell phones, automobiles, microwaves, game consoles, fitness trackers, digital watches, digital cameras, televisions—the list goes on and on.

"Even in devices that don't have 'smart' in their name, mechanical linkages have long since given way to a network of semiconductors," Conway, a London-based journalist, observes. "Nearly every economic activity, nearly every dollar of global GDP, relies in one way or another on the microscopic switches of semiconductors." Prudently, he does not reveal what that very particular powder is.

Of the ten largest corporations in the world, six are tech companies. In 2021, fifty per cent of Americans said they spend more than half the day in front of a screen, and a recent survey found that kids in the United States devote almost seven hours a day to staring at pixels. Statistics like these can produce the sense that matter doesn't matter all that much anymore. Conway thinks that this is an illusion, and a dangerous one. Contemporary society continues to rely on raw materials, like Spruce Pine's quartz, taken from the earth. Indeed, extraction rates, far from slowing, keep accelerating. These days, Conway reckons, humanity mines, drains, and blasts more stuff out of the ground each year than it did in total during the roughly three hundred millennia between the birth of the species and the start of the Korean War. This comes with immense consequences, both ecological and social, even if we don't attend to them.

Consider sand, the first of Conway's not so dark materials. According to a 2022 report from the United Nations Environment Programme, global demand for "sand resources" has tripled in the past two decades, to something like a hundred trillion pounds a year; this amounts to almost thirty-five pounds a day for every person on the planet. A lot of sand (though no one seems to know exactly how much) goes into land building. Among the world's biggest sand importers is Singapore, which has grown by more than fifty square miles since the nineteen-sixties. Among the major exporters is Vietnam, where sand dredging along the Mekong Delta has caused so much erosion that whole villages' worth of homes have been swept downstream.

"Where once there were riverbanks, today there are sheer drops into the water," Conway writes. Such is the hunger for sand that, in many parts of the globe, an illicit trade has sprung up. In India, so-called sand mafias are rumored to pay off cops and politicians. According to the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People, a Delhi-based advocacy group, at least a dozen civilians and two government officials were killed by sand mafias between December, 2020, and March, 2022. (This was down from twenty-three civilians, five journalists and activists, and eleven government officials killed during the two years prior.)

A lot of sand also goes into building buildings, not to mention dams, bridges, overpasses, and roadways. Sand and gravel are the major ingredients in concrete, some seven hundred billion tons of which now slather the earth. Often, concrete is reinforced with rebar, which is made with iron, the third of Conway's six materials. (The material I've skipped here is salt, which, Conway says, is essential to just about every chemical process that's ever been invented.)

Worldwide, nearly three billion tons of iron ore are extracted each year. Australia is currently the leading source, and its biggest mines are in the Pilbara, a region in the country's dry, dusty northwest. Iron from the Pilbara is mined by blasting the landscape apart and then carting away the pieces, using, as Conway puts it, "church-sized diggers." Just the other day, several people died in the Pilbara when a truck carrying ammonium nitrate, an explosive used in the blasts, collided with another vehicle.

Conway devotes a hefty chunk of his discussion of iron to the story of the rock shelters in Juukan Gorge. These were sacred to two of the Pilbara's Aboriginal peoples, the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and the Pinikura, and contained artifacts that were some forty thousand years old. After assuring the communities that "all reasonable endeavors" would be made to minimize the impact of its operations in the area, the mining company Rio Tinto blew the rock shelters up. (The company has since apologized for what happened.)

"Perhaps what makes the destruction of the Juukan caves most disturbing is that we are all, one way or another, complicit," Conway writes. Most of Australia's iron ore is shipped off to China, where it's converted into steel and used to construct the factories and machinery that churn out the phones, consoles, chargers, T-shirts, running shoes, housewares, and assorted tchotchkes the rest of the world buys.

Like many books in its genre—about how *x* number of *y* items explain *z*—"Material World" has trouble sticking to its chosen integer. One of Conway's six raw materials is oil, but into this category he also squishes natural gas. Both are obviously fossil fuels, but, as Conway himself notes, they have distinctive properties that make them essential in different ways. Oil powers the transportation sector—cars, trucks, airplanes, and supertankers—and its by-products go into plastics, which show up in just about every consumer product you can name, from air mattresses to zippers. Natural gas, meanwhile, is primarily used to generate heat and electricity. It's also a key ingredient for synthesizing nitrogen fertilizer, without which, it is estimated, half the world's eight billion people would starve.

"Much of what we eat today is, one way or another, a fossil fuel product," Conway observes. Despite a lot of talk about cutting back on fossil fuels, the world, he points out, is consuming just as much oil and gas as ever before (and very nearly as much coal). But, if Conway is concerned about our continuing reliance on fossil fuels, he's also concerned about what it will take to replace them. Two of the alternatives are solar and wind. Conway calculates that building enough wind turbines to shutter a hundred-megawatt natural-gas plant would take fifty thousand tons of concrete and thirty thousand tons of iron. Meanwhile, a transportation sector that runs on electricity will require a whole lot more of his fourth material, copper. A recent report from S. & P. Global predicted that, worldwide, copper consumption will double over the next twelve years and that "there is a looming mismatch" between the available supply and the growing "copper demand

resulting from the energy transition."

Conway visits the Chuquicamata copper mine, in northern Chile—Chuqui, for short—which is believed to be the largest open-pit mine on the globe. When a blast goes off at the bottom of the pit, more than half a mile down, the noise, he says, is "shattering."

Industrial mining operations began at the site a century ago. In the intervening decades, most of the best-quality ore there, and indeed around the globe, has been churned through. "Even as people demanded more copper the earth became considerably less willing to give it up," Conway writes. In 1900, fifty tons of rock yielded a ton of copper; to obtain that ton today, some eight hundred tons of rock must be processed.

Next to the Chuquicamata mine sits a town of the same name, which was abandoned in the early two-thousands, as waste rock began tumbling into people's gardens and residents fell ill. (The citizens of the town took to calling it *Chuqui qui mata*, or "Chuqui which kills.") By now, the waste has piled up high enough to consume a quarter of the vacant houses and a seven-story hospital.

Lithium—the last of Conway's materials—is equally essential to electrification. A typical electric-car battery contains nearly twenty pounds of the metal, which, in the era of climate change, has been dubbed "white gold." Like many strategic resources—see, for example, high-purity quartz—lithium is unevenly distributed. More than three-quarters of the known resources lie in just four countries: Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, and Australia. Competition over lithium supplies is one of the many sources of tension between the U.S. and China. Conway fears a replay of the nineteenth century, "when European countries colonised their way through much of the world, seeking rubber here, copper there."

The best option he sees for the future lies in what he calls "unmanufacturing." Iron, copper, and lithium, in contrast to oil, can be recycled. Faced with climate change on the one hand and the material demands of new energy infrastructure on the other, perhaps humanity will finally figure out how to reuse the gazillions of tons of resources it's already dug up. Conway doesn't believe this will happen anytime soon—"We are still a long, long way from that promised land," he cautions—but it is at least theoretically possible.

"Quit hogging the covers!"

Chip Colwell, too, argues that it's time to rethink our ties to the material world. But Colwell is an archeologist, and, as such, he takes a longer view. In "So Much Stuff: How Humans Discovered Tools, Invented Meaning, and Made More of Everything" (Chicago), he seeks to explain how *Homo sapiens* went from knapping chert to ordering granite countertops. What happened, he asks, "that led our species from having nothing to needing everything?"

Colwell, a former curator at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, divides humanity's association with "stuff" into three periods. At the start of the first (and by far the longest), our hominin ancestors realized that some of the objects that were lying around—rocks, primarily—could be fashioned into implements. By two and a half million years ago, hominins—it's uncertain which species they belonged to—had mastered what's known as "secondary tool use"; they could take a stone and bash it against a different kind of stone to produce a blade with one sharp edge. This method of tool production continued, pretty much unchanged, for a million years or so, until some other group of hominins—probably *Homo erectus*—made a breakthrough: they fig-

ured out how to make stone tools with *two* sharp edges. Meanwhile, the story goes, humans began to evolve in concert with their technologies. Their hand axes allowed them to chop up other animals (and also, presumably, plants); this, in turn, allowed them to devote less effort to digestion and put more toward cogitation. The result was a feedback loop.

"Bigger and smarter brains led to the ability to create better tools, which in turn provided more energy for bigger and smarter brains," Colwell writes. Eventually, early humans became so dependent on their tools that they couldn't do without them.

The next period, in Colwell's telling, begins with the invention of what might, broadly speaking, be called art. This happened perhaps as early as half a million years ago, when a *Homo erectus* living in what's now Indonesia made some scratches on a mussel shell. By thirty thousand years ago, *Homo sapiens* living in what's now Italy were grinding ochre to paint figures on stone. The advent of art marks the point, Conway writes, at which things were no longer valued only for their utility—"when objects began to do more than just serve our biological needs."

During periods one and two, accumulating stuff was tough. In the days before agriculture, humans were constantly on the move and could possess only as much as they could carry. Once they began farming and settling down, around ten thousand years ago, whole new classes of objects were created—wheels, plows, sickles. The new objects, along with the food surpluses they helped produce, gave rise to new forms of human relations. Societies became stratified, and their most powerful members began to express their status by accumulating objects of value. Still, everything had to be made by hand, and the vast majority of people remained, by today's standards, dirt poor.

Then came the Industrial Revolution, which ushered in period three. People figured out how to reliably turn iron into steel and sand into concrete. They invented steam engines, followed by steam turbines. Each innovation begat more innovation, and the feedback loop was, in a manner of speaking, electrified. To manufacture demand, marketers capitalized on the equation of stuff with status. In the Global North, at least, scarcity gave way to superabundance. Colwell quotes an estimate—perhaps reliable, perhaps not—that the average U.S. household possesses three hundred thousand things. (Some of these things, admittedly, are paper clips.) Americans now have so many belongings, he notes, that they routinely pay to keep piles of them in storage.

While writing his book, Colwell decides to try to step off the consumerist treadmill. Together with his wife and nine-year-old daughter, he embarks on what he calls a "slow-buy year." Each member of the family agrees to purchase no more than five items over the course of twelve months, besides "necessities"—a category that includes food and school supplies. Before the halfway mark, Colwell and his family are already starting to chafe against their self-imposed limits. Then they purchase a new house. The idea of slow buying gets tossed out with the moving boxes.

"So Much Stuff" and "Material World" each make strong points; taken together, the books are even more compelling—and alarming. Consumption patterns in the Global North—and South, increasingly—simply cannot be sustained. Everyone who's read the news lately, or just ventured outside into this summer's smoke-filled, record-breaking heat, knows this. But that knowledge doesn't seem to change much. Conway explains this failure as a function of modernity. The industrialized world was built out of mountains of sand, iron, and copper, and it cannot operate without vast quantities of these or other materials. Colwell traces the problem back even further. Our special talent as a species is our ability to refashion raw materials—first rocks into tools, then, eventually, quartz into integrated circuits. We are, he suggests, *Homo stuffensis*, a creature "defined and made by our things." We should change our ways—we *must* change our ways—but this long history is against us. ♦

THE WRESTLER

How Jim Jordan prosecutes Trump's conspiracy theories in Congress.

BY JONATHAN BLITZER

On October 3rd, Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives were threatening to do something unprecedented in American history. A faction of the far right had introduced a motion to oust their leader, Speaker Kevin McCarthy. Before the final vote, McCarthy's allies offered some words in his defense. The third member to rise to the dais was Jim Jordan, a fifty-nine-year-old Republican from Ohio, who for years has been the Party's most influential insurgent. Colleagues used to call him "the other Speaker of the House," because of his frequent maneuvers against leadership. But this time his tone was subdued. He was there to praise McCarthy, not to bury him.

"Kevin McCarthy has been rock solid," Jordan began. He wore a dark suit jacket, which looked almost exotic on his shoulders. When he holds forth—as he routinely does in the House committee room and on conservative television—he's almost always in shirtsleeves, speaking in a rapid-fire diction that can make him sound like an auctioneer crossed with a street preacher. Listeners who share his grievances are inspired; those who don't often have little idea what he's talking about. In his seventeen-year career in Congress, Jordan has not once sponsored a bill that became law. Instead, he's searched for victims of liberal plots—the most famous being Donald Trump, whose election loss, in 2020, Jordan refused to certify.

Now Jordan recited the accomplishments of the previous nine months in the Republican House, ticking off a list of investigative probes into far-right causes célèbres which, he said, had revealed bias against conservatives at the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security, machinations by the deep state, malfeasance related to the 2020 Presidential election. These achievements, he went on, "happened under Speaker McCarthy." But none of it would have happened without Jordan, who is currently the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. In paying tribute to McCarthy, Jordan was also dusting off his own résumé. The next morning, after eight Republicans, joined by every House Democrat, voted to remove McCarthy, Jordan declared that he was running for Speaker himself.

Straightaway, he had some two hundred backers. That he was in the running at all marked a seismic shift, both in Congress and in the Republican Party. The Speaker isn't just the second in line for the Presidency; he sets the chamber's entire legislative agenda. By his own admission, Jordan "didn't come to Washington to make more laws." He had risen in stature as a political hit man, a launcher of partisan inquisitions. In a conference of cynics, he had distinguished himself as a true believer. No one was more aggressive in prosecuting the Party's paranoia or more creative in stoking its sense of victimhood. The villains in the schemes he rode to power could come from anywhere.

One of them was Kate Starbird, a computer scientist at the University of Washington. Starbird has what she calls a "sticky" name—it stays in people's heads. She also has an unlikely background: for nine years, she played professional basketball, including five seasons in the W.N.B.A. After retiring, at the age of thirty, she completed a Ph.D. program, with a focus on a burgeoning field called crisis informatics—the study of how people use (and misuse) social media during natural disasters, wars, terrorist attacks, and other outbreaks of violence. Often, her academic work involves analyzing online conspiracy theories: how and why they spread and who keeps them going. In her professional judgment, in the summer of 2022 she became the target of a very good one.

The origin was, in part, a single line taken out of context. It came from a report released in March, 2021, by the Election Integrity Partnership, a group of academics, students, and data analysts that tracked online misinformation during the 2020 election. Through an organization that received funding from the Department of Homeland Security, they were able to communicate with local and state election officials, sharing information and looking into tips. Kim Wyman, the former Republican secretary of state of Washington, told me that, in the past, "election officials saw posts that were wrong, but couldn't take them down." Now they could consult directly with a team of researchers, and send inaccurate information—misreported voting hours at a polling place, for instance—to the relevant social-media platforms, which would decide whether to remove it.

Starbird had joined the project, in the summer of 2020, with colleagues from the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public and the Stanford Internet Observatory, where the concept had originated. Several months after the election, the researchers published their final report. On page 183, they cited a critical part of their data set: 21,897,364 tweets, collected between August 15 and December 12, 2020, which dealt with false information or unsubstantiated rumors. Some three thousand tweets were flagged as potential violations of Twitter's terms of use.

"My wife thinks I'm losing touch with reality when I try to explain the whole story," Starbird told me recently. By the time of the report, Trump's lies about a stolen election were starting to cool in the mainstream of the Republican Party. His lawyers and their allies had lost repeatedly in court; the Department of Justice was making arrests for the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6th. Starbird observed the fallout in the far corners of the Internet, where increasingly wild theories would surface—January 6th was an Antifa plot or an F.B.I. setup—then wash out. One

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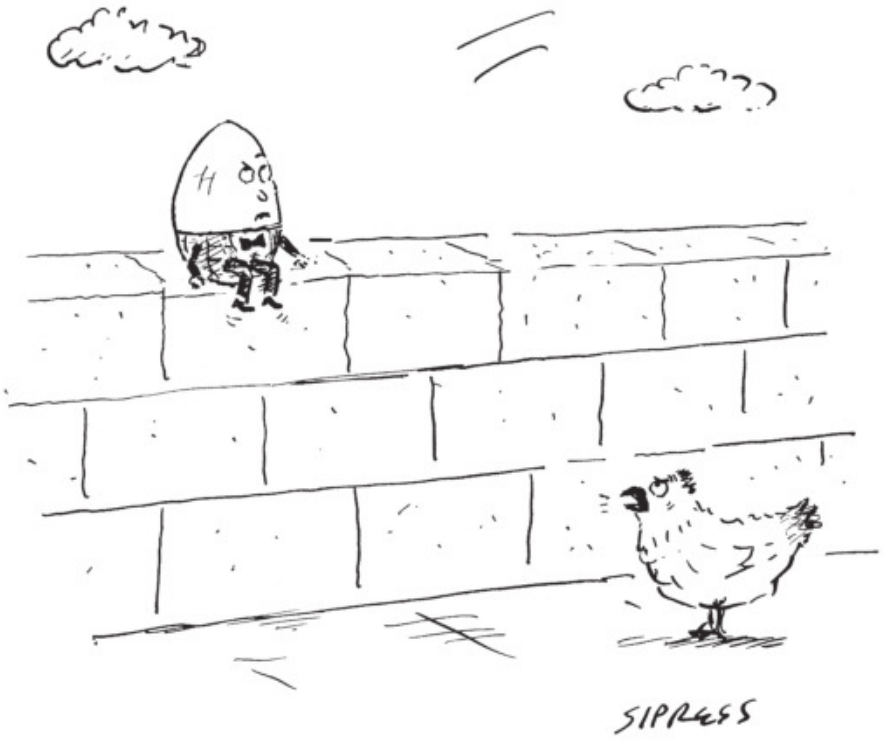
"Big Tech is out to get conservatives," Jordan has said. "That's not a suspicion. That's not a hunch. That's a fact."

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL SAHRE



"I've said it until I'm blue in the face—keep sitting on walls and something bad's going to happen. But what do I know? I'm just your mother."

• •

recurring idea, Starbird said, was "that there was censorship that hid the truth of what happened in 2020, that this was the real reason Trump lost."

At some point—it was impossible to say exactly when—online conspiracists began claiming that Starbird and other researchers at the Election Integrity Partnership had colluded with the Department of Homeland Security to censor twenty-two million tweets during the 2020 election. This was, Starbird told me, "a literal misreading" of the group's findings. But the conspiracy theory had all the key elements to spread widely, starting with the fact that it was politically useful. "People wanted to believe it," she said.

Allegations began to appear on fringe news outlets, such as the Gateway Pundit. On August 27, 2022, Mike Benz, an ex-Trump appointee who runs an organization called the Foundation for Freedom Online, wrote that his exposé of D.H.S. would provide "the basis for a full-scale bipartisan Congressional committee armed with subpoena power." The story soon reached Breitbart and Steve Bannon's podcast. On Twitter, Trump supporters told Starbird to lawyer up.

In September, the University of Washington started to get dozens of public-records requests seeking access to Starbird's and her colleagues' work e-mails. These came from more established sources: the Republican attorney general of Missouri, Eric Schmitt (who is now a U.S. senator); a journalist from the Intercept; the conservative foundation Judicial Watch. Since the university is public, the administration was legally obligated to supply the e-mails. "In reality, all these records would be a great defense if a real person were to go through them," Starbird told me. Under the circumstances, her e-mails became a fount of quotable material for the conspiracists.

By then, campus police had alerted her to a complaint someone submitted alleging that she was abusing people via satellite; later, she received a death threat. "No one in the rest of the world knew this was happening," Starbird said. "But anyone in the right-wing media ecosystem and the few of us who were targeted were hyperaware." In the run-up to the midterm elections last November, when Republicans were expected to retake control of the House and the Senate, Starbird began warning colleagues, "There are going to be investigations."

The current Republican House was sworn in at the start of this year with more of a complex than an agenda. The Democrats still controlled the Senate and the White House, so legislating wasn't an option. Even if it were, the Republican conference was too divided to reach any consensus on policy. On the Hill, the different ideological factions inside the Party were known as the Five Families; the most unruly of these was the House Freedom Caucus, a group of thirty-three hard-line anti-institutionalists. The closest the conference came to a proactive message was its vow to investigate Joe Biden and to fight the scourge of the federal bureaucracy. "You have agencies that we know have spied on the American people, have suppressed the speech of the American people, have targeted members of the populace," Byron Donalds, a Florida Republican, told me. "We're the ones really trying to save democracy."

During the race for House Speaker in January, twenty members of the Freedom Caucus withheld their votes from McCarthy. In exchange for their support, they made numerous demands; one of them was the creation of a freestanding committee to uncover how the federal government was supposedly cracking down on conservatives. McCarthy appeased them, in part, by agreeing to create a subcommittee run out of the Judiciary Committee and led by Jordan, who had helped found the Freedom Caucus, in 2015. More than anyone in the House at the time, several G.O.P. insiders told me, Jordan held the key to McCarthy's Speakership.

Ever since the revelation, in March, 2017, that the F.B.I. had opened a probe into the Trump campaign's alleged ties with Russia, Jordan had been demanding that Congress "investigate the investigators." In the summer of 2018, Jordan introduced articles of impeachment against Rod Rosenstein, the Deputy Attorney General, who had appointed a special counsel to investigate Russian interference in the election. The next year, when Trump faced his first impeachment, Jordan organized the President's

defense on the Hill. After Trump lost the 2020 election, few Republicans amplified his lies about fraud and vote theft more vociferously than Jordan. "I don't know how you can ever convince me that President Trump didn't actually win this thing," he said that December. "Sometimes you gotta beat the referee."

On January 2, 2021, Jordan led a conference call with Trump to discuss how they could delay certifying the election. One of the ideas was to encourage Trump supporters, via social media, to march on the Capitol on January 6th. Jordan spoke routinely with the President by phone during the next few days, including twice on January 6th, and he texted Trump's chief of staff with advice on how to get Vice-President Mike Pence not to count electoral votes. Hours after the insurrection, Jordan stationed himself next to the House floor to whip votes against certification. Before leaving office, Trump gave him the country's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Jordan, Trump has said, "is a warrior for me."

Around the time that Starbird joined the Election Integrity Partnership, Jordan was calling for a major investigation into partisan censorship. "I'll just cut right to the chase," he said at a hearing of the Judiciary Committee. "Big Tech is out to get conservatives. That's not a suspicion. That's not a hunch. That's a fact." He listed half a dozen instances: Google "censoring" Breitbart and the Daily Caller, YouTube blocking content that violated COVID recommendations made by the World Health Organization, Facebook taking down a post from Trump's reëlection campaign. "I haven't even mentioned Twitter," Jordan said. "Four members of Congress were shadow-banned two years ago." This was a reference to a brief period in which Jordan and his fellow-Republicans Matt Gaetz, Mark Meadows, and Devin Nunes couldn't get their names to autofill on Twitter's search bar, something the company called a glitch and promptly fixed. "Four hundred thirty-five members in the House, a hundred in the Senate," Jordan continued. "Only four. Only four!"

From his perch as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee, Jordan oversaw the production of a thousand-page report, released four days before the 2022 midterms, titled "FBI Whistleblowers: What Their Disclosures Indicate About the Politicization of the FBI and Justice Department." It was mostly a compilation of angry letters mailed by the committee to various agency officials, claiming that the federal government had "spied on President Trump's campaign and ridiculed conservative Americans."

Jordan currently has a hand in every major investigation under way in the House. He is a member of the Oversight Committee, and, as chairman of the Judiciary Committee, he controls a staff of more than sixty and a nineteen-million-dollar budget, nearly triple what it was under the Democrats. This summer, when an I.R.S. whistle-blower appeared before the House Ways and Means Committee to share confidential information about Hunter Biden's taxes, Jordan's chief counsel, a veteran lawyer named Steve Castor, was permitted to work with the committee. The arrangement was a highly unusual workaround; by law, members of Ways and Means cannot share citizens' tax information with anyone outside the committee. Now someone close to Jordan, who is not on the committee, had direct access to a sensitive probe.

What immediately distinguished the Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government—the new body created by McCarthy at the behest of the Freedom Caucus—was the broadness of its scope. The targets ran the gamut from "tech censorship" to F.B.I. responses to violence at school-board meetings. The primary victims, as the Republican subcommittee members saw it, included January 6th protesters, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., pro-lifers, and parents enraged by the liberalism of their children's schools. "Normally, when you have a subcommittee, it's studying something specific and substantive that everyone can agree happened, like the break-in at a party headquarters or an attack on the Capitol," Matthew Green, an expert on Congress at Catholic University, in Washington, D.C., told me. "Here there's a bunch of premises that are really only circulating among conservatives."

Jordan, who entered Congress after a dozen years in the Ohio state legislature, has an unusual background for a career politician. Growing up in St. Paris, Ohio—where he and his wife, who have been together since he was thirteen, still live—Jordan was a high-school wrestling champion. He went on to win two national championships at the University of Wisconsin, and was later inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame. For nearly a decade, he was the assistant wrestling coach at Ohio State University. During that time, the university's trainer sexually abused a hundred and seventy-seven male athletes; the predation was, according to a subsequent investigation, "an open secret." Many years later, after Jordan had risen to national prominence, several of the victims accused him of knowing about the abuse and covering it up, which Jordan has repeatedly denied.

Jordan arrived in Washington in January, 2007, dressed the same casual way he does now. "I remember thinking, Who the hell is this guy?" a senior staffer at the time told me. "He's a freshman. He just got elected, and he's not wearing a jacket?" Newcomers were typically out of their depth and needed staff to coach them through the arcana of House procedure. Somehow Jordan seemed already to know his way around, according to the staffer. "He was starting to build his brand as a rabble-rouser."

Jordan's pugnacity was his chief political selling point. He quickly "realized that oversight and attacking Democrats was the easiest way to enhance his standing with the conservative base," a former top aide in House leadership told me. "He took opportunities to live on Fox News and bash the Dems, whether his investigations had merit or not." A certain talent drew him to scandals of Manichean dimensions, in which Democrats were the aggressors and Republicans the champions of just causes. "He has a memory for faces and details," someone who worked closely with him told me. "When he studies up and deep dives on something, it sticks and doesn't unstick."

And yet, for years, the defining aspect of Jordan's brand involved positioning himself in opposition to Republican leadership. In 2011, a new crop of anti-establishment freshmen, mobilized by the Tea Party, threatened to force a federal default if the Republican Speaker of the House, John Boehner, didn't slash the budget. When a last-minute deal was reached with the White House, many of them relented. Jordan vowed

to fight on. Two years later, in an effort to defund Obamacare, he joined a group of conservative Republicans who shut down the government. An ally of Boehner's described them as "lemmings with suicide vests."

In 2015, Jordan and other members of the Freedom Caucus tried to oust Boehner as Speaker. After Boehner resigned in exasperation, deeming them "legislative terrorists," Jordan led the campaign to sabotage his heir apparent, Kevin McCarthy. A year later, when Paul Ryan was Speaker, Jordan was an architect of yet another plot. The plan was for him to travel to the Fox News studios in New York and declare, on air, that he would challenge Ryan for the job. Jordan didn't have the votes to beat him, but the thought was that a dramatic confrontation would make Ryan look weak, so that someone friendlier to Jordan's interests could take the job. Before he could carry out his plan, though, someone tipped off the press. According to "The Hill to Die On," by Jake Sherman and Anna Palmer, one night in the fall of 2016, while Jordan was scheming with Freedom Caucus allies in the Washington apartment of Mark Meadows, a group of reporters gathered outside. Jordan escaped through the parking garage and hid in the back seat of a staffer's jeep until they dispersed.

During the 2016 Presidential campaign, when other establishment Republicans were openly critical of Trump, Jordan was one of his staunchest defenders. In Trump, the Freedom Caucus had a Republican candidate whose madcap charisma could accommodate its insurrectionary style. Trump was obsessed with Jordan's past life as a wrestling champion. At one meeting, in June, 2017, Trump kept interrupting a discussion on tax policy to ask whether it was true that Jordan had been the best wrestler in the country. When Jordan demurred, Trump said, "Admit it. You're a winner. You were the best."

In November, 2018, the Republicans held a vote for Minority Leader, the Party's top job in the upcoming term. Jordan decided to run against McCarthy and lost badly. Several days later, while working out in the House gym, he received a call from McCarthy, who offered him the ranking-member position on the Oversight Committee. ("The Oversight Committee is where you take on the left," Jordan wrote in his political memoir. It is "the closest thing to a wrestling match that members of Congress can get.") The appointment was a major concession for McCarthy, but, from his perspective, turning an insurgent into a beholden ally was a matter of survival. "Jordan had a strategy and he stuck to it," Carlos Curbelo, a Florida Republican who worked with both men, told me. "It was McCarthy who went to him. Jordan never conceded much."

With the support of Trump's base and the far right, Jordan was already a political force, but now he had an actual path to institutional power in the House. "There's a pre-2018 Jim Jordan and a post-2018 Jim Jordan," the former House leadership aide told me. "He realized the importance of having a relationship with McCarthy. Having that relationship gave him a lot more power without much responsibility."

The key component of any durable conspiracy theory is a partial truth—something that intersects with reality just enough to lend credence to the broader invention. Republicans attacking the practice of content moderation have hit on a largely unsettled legal question. Under the First Amendment, Facebook and Twitter can make independent decisions according to their own policies, but the Biden Administration has repeatedly pressured them to take down content, especially on COVID and vaccines. The track record of social-media companies in complying with these requests is mixed. When they have done the government's bidding, however, Republicans have cried foul. "Obviously the government has a legitimate role to play in insuring that dangerous public-health misinformation doesn't spread on social media," Jameel Jaffer, the director of the Knight First Amendment Institute, at Columbia University, told me. "But First Amendment scholars are actually quite unsure how to draw this line."

Both the government and the tech platforms have made some high-profile mistakes. In October, 2020, Twitter restricted access to a New York *Post* story with details on Hunter Biden's laptop, out of concern that it was the product of a Russian "hack and leak" operation. The lab-leak theory about the origin of COVID was written off by public-health officials as misinformation in the early months of the pandemic; today, it seems far less outlandish. "The lesson from that is to find interventions that leave space for dissent," Jaffer said. "The lesson isn't that nobody should make any effort to curate or edit. That can't be the lesson we draw

AND THE SKY

remains unwashed, and the waves
sleep;
reeds bend in no wind
like drunks.
My god!
How long will I keep
boring the waves
from inside
this open prison?

God's mum
as the fields
of yellowing grass.

He'll never tell the truth.

But there's no one else to ask.

—Taras Shevchenko (1814-61)

(Translated, from the Ukrainian, by Askold Melnyczuk.)

from this, that Facebook or the government has to treat everything equally."

The Election Integrity Partnership was associated with a government body that, for a time, was uncontroversial. It was called the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, or CISA. Trump created the agency in 2018, by signing a law to protect critical infrastructure from cybersecurity threats. Later, his second Secretary of Homeland Security, Kirstjen Nielsen, directed CISA to address false information that could undermine the country's voting systems. "It had existential consequences not only for the mission of D.H.S. but for democratic institutions," Robert Schaul, who worked at the agency at the time, told me. "She saw it as a broader mission."

The idea for the Election Integrity Partnership initially came from Stanford students who had interned at CISA and felt that more could be done to support election officials. "The E.I.P. wasn't something that was pushed or proffered by D.H.S.," Schaul said. "The research community decided to organize and then reached out to CISA for a little bit of leverage. All their connections to the platforms were *their* connections to the platforms." By design, he went on, "we were never directing research or making specific requests. We had to protect our brand. Even being an intermediary could be a liability. No deep-state stuff. Just states and private industry."

Schaul worked at CISA under Trump and Biden, and felt that the agency operated better with Trump as President. The White House was so distracted by chaos and infighting, he said, that "the experts could actually do their jobs." Nevertheless, in November, 2020, Trump fired the agency's widely respected head, Chris Krebs, after he contradicted the President's claims that the election was stolen.

A year later, Jen Easterly, Biden's new director of the agency, asked Starbird to lead a CISA advisory subcommittee on disinformation. In practice, this meant nine months of unpaid work in which, for about two hours each week, Starbird and the other members would meet with CISA personnel to discuss complex questions about how the government could counter disinformation threats. Sitting with her on the subcommittee was Vijaya Gadde, Twitter's chief legal officer, who'd been involved in deciding to ban Trump from the platform after January 6th. Eventually, they wrote a series of general recommendations. "We didn't coördinate with platforms or recommend that CISA coördinate with platforms to moderate content," Starbird told me. Her approach to undertaking potentially controversial work like advising the U.S. government was to manage the things that critics might misconstrue. She wouldn't bend herself "into a pretzel" to avoid conflict, she said, but neither would she "throw them softballs."

Ironically, it was a separate D.H.S. initiative that caused a scandal. In late April, 2022, the Biden Administration announced the formation of the Disinformation Governance Board. Headed by an author named Nina Jankowicz, who had written about election interference and online warfare, it had no operational authority; its main task was to align the department's different projects addressing disinformation—"to make sure that people were talking to each other," Jankowicz told me. Within hours of the announcement, the pro-Trump influencer Jack Posobiec, who had nearly two million followers on Twitter, tweeted that the Biden Administration had created a "Ministry of Truth." By the end of the day, there were more than fifty thousand tweets mentioning the board or Jankowicz. Within a week, they would be cited in roughly seventy per cent of the one-hour segments on Fox News.

Jordan marshalled right-wing outrage from the House floor. The day after the board's announcement, during a hearing at the Judiciary Committee, he confronted Biden's Secretary of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas, who had promoted the effort. "You said that misleading narratives . . . undermine the trust in government," Jordan said. He went down a list of talking points about Anthony Fauci, COVID vaccines, and the intelligence community. "Will you be looking into that?" he asked.

For reasons obscure even to Jankowicz, the Biden Administration struggled to explain the board's actual job to Congress and to the broader public. That summer, D.H.S. shut it down. Jankowicz, who was pregnant at the time, faced a torrent of death threats and harassment. "It was shocking to see how quickly it went from Posobiec saying that this is the Ministry of Truth to Jordan making this his raison d'être," Jankowicz told me. "It was a single day."

That December, Jankowicz was at Heathrow Airport, catching a connecting flight, when she received a text message from a reporter at CNN asking her to comment on a letter from Jordan threatening to subpoena her. She hadn't yet received it. "Jordan posted the letter on his Twitter profile," she told me. "He put my home address on the letter. I had to have a friend at D.H.S. congressional affairs and my lawyer call committee staff."

Several months later, after Jordan subpoenaed Jankowicz, she decided to sue Fox News for defamation, saying that the network had lied about her work on the board. (Fox has moved to dismiss the case on First Amendment grounds.) "Jim Jordan subpoenaing me is the thing that made me want to sue Fox," she told me. "They're all feeding off one another."

Starbird learned about the Disinformation Board only after it was publicly announced, but what played out next was something she had studied extensively. It's known among experts as the "transitive property of disinformation." As Starbird put it, "If A has ever talked to B, and B has ever talked to C, and you can say something bad about C, then you can smear A and B. You can smear everybody just by smearing one group." Because the Disinformation Board was based at D.H.S., the department's other agencies were implicated, as were the researchers tied to them. Online conspiracists were now saying that the Election Integrity Partnership was the "precursor" to the Disinformation Board and that the group's own final report demonstrated precisely how it had colluded with D.H.S. to censor millions of tweets during the election.

Jordan may be the face of the weaponization subcommittee, but the idea for its creation began with a series of conversations among three hyperconservative members of the Republican Party: Russell Vought, Trump's former

head of the Office of Management and Budget, and the Freedom Caucus members Dan Bishop and Chip Roy.

Their goal was to reconstitute the Church Committee, a bipartisan select committee convened in the mid-nineteen-seventies and headed by the Democratic senator Frank Church. It investigated the abuses of the C.I.A., the F.B.I., and the National Security Agency, including their surveillance of U.S. citizens and their role in fomenting political assassinations and right-wing coups abroad. The committee's work, the journalist James Risen writes in "The Last Honest Man," his recent biography of Church, "marked the first time there had been any serious congressional inquiry into the national-security state. As a result, the Church Committee's hearings became something like a constitutional convention, airing basic questions about the proper balance between liberty and security."

Vought is now the president of the far-right group Center for Renewing America, which operates under the aegis of the Conservative Partnership Institute, a lavishly funded network that many in Washington consider the Trump Administration in exile. His animus against the F.B.I., like Jordan's, began in 2016, when the Bureau surveilled members of the Trump campaign—the "Russia-collusion hoax," he said. He likens the government to the mansion on the television show "Downton Abbey." The deep state is the first floor. "As a Cabinet secretary, you're the second floor," he told me. "Everything is happening in the kitchen. And they wall it off."

We met one afternoon in August at a town house on Independence Avenue, in Washington, that belongs to the Conservative Partnership Institute. On the walls were framed political cartoons featuring Jim DeMint, the former South Carolina senator and president of the Heritage Foundation, in different mythic poses. In one, he was a vulture regally perched on the top of a headstone bearing the words "RIP: Immigration Bill."

When Vought first broached his idea for a modern-day Church Committee, people asked him if the concept was religious. The name, he explained, "would mean something to the agencies themselves. It changed their culture. And we wanted to put that shot across their bow." Vought envisioned a well-resourced, high-profile committee that could do unfettered fact-finding. Who, for instance, was making decisions about security clearances? "We know there is a massive problem," he said. "I want actual offices, people, names." He called these the "nodes of weaponization." There needed to be serious investigations. In the process, he said, "my hope would be that we would be getting reports from national news outlets that there are so many subpoenas going out that everyone is having to lawyer up. It'd put a constraint on the system."

Vought went public with his mission on August 8, 2022, the day the F.B.I. executed a search warrant at Mar-a-Lago. That night, he appeared on Laura Ingraham's show, on Fox News. Kevin McCarthy, for his part, also started embracing the idea of a law-enforcement probe after the Mar-a-Lago search. "I've seen enough," he tweeted. The D.O.J. "has reached an intolerable state of weaponized politicization."

In late November, after the Republicans won the midterms, Jordan wrote to the F.B.I. director, Christopher Wray, instructing him to preserve documents for an impending investigation. The following month, he sent letters to Amazon, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, and Alphabet. A year earlier, when Jordan was subpoenaed by the January 6th Committee, he had ignored it. But now that he was entering the majority with a chairman's gavel he would have the power to compel people to testify. In early 2023, he created a small subcommittee on "Responsiveness and Accountability to Oversight," with the singular purpose of enforcing subpoenas. "They exist to haul in the top leadership of agencies for refusing to respond fast enough," a committee staffer told me.

On January 10, 2023, in a party-line vote, the House formed the weaponization subcommittee. Its members have since interviewed more than eighty people—from former intelligence officials and F.B.I. personnel to tech-company employees and academic researchers. It has obtained some six hundred and fifty thousand pages of documents through subpoenas. "The D.O.J. is prosecuting the Republican candidate for President," someone close to the subcommittee told me. "This is the Republican counter to the January 6th Committee. It's counter-programming to the Trump indictments." (A spokesperson for the subcommittee said that its "ongoing investigation centers on the federal government's involvement in speech censorship, and the investigation's purpose is to inform legislative solutions for how to protect free speech.")

Dan Bishop, who is a member of the subcommittee, met me one morning at his office in Washington. The first time McCarthy mentioned the subject of a modern-day Church Committee on television, Bishop told me, "I nearly fell out of my chair. I'd been saying this for months, and he'd listen, stone-faced." In a polite, almost apologetic voice, Bishop also said that he didn't trust me. I was a skeptic with a hostile agenda. But, he added, this was a cause that progressives typically embraced. He cited some unexpected sources: an article in the Intercept about how the F.B.I. entrapped a Black Lives Matter activist, along with a decades-old Senate Select Committee report on the Bureau's dubious methods for using informants against leftist activists accused of having ties to Com-

munism. "The F.B.I. spied on Frank Sinatra, John Lennon, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Muhammad Ali because they were national-security threats," Bishop has said. "We owe it to the American people to reveal the rot within our federal government."

Jordan had recently threatened to hold Mark Zuckerberg in contempt of Congress unless he turned over e-mails documenting company-wide conversations at Meta about content moderation. Bishop, who has announced a bid for attorney general of North Carolina, seemed solemnly pleased. "This is a very earnest effort," he told me. "It could be bipartisan. Americans have the First Amendment right to information, even foreign propaganda."

Of all the partisans spreading attacks against the researchers, the most significant was initially one of the most obscure. "I don't think it's possible to have spent more hours a day on this," Mike Benz, of the Foundation for Freedom Online, has said. "My wife calls it the man in the box because my whole life has just been listening to this whole network, day and night, and chronicling and archiving and explaining."

Benz, a lawyer by training, describes himself on his organization's Web site as "a former State Department diplomat responsible for formulating and negotiating US foreign policy on international communications and information technology matters." But a recent investigation by NBC News found that several years ago he maintained an online persona under which he posted explosively antisemitic and racist content. In one post, from 2017, he wrote, "If I, a Jew, a member of the Tribe, Hebrew Schooled, can read Mein Kampf and think 'holy shit, Hitler actually had some decent points.' Then NO ONE is safe from hating you once they find out who is behind the White genocide happening all over the world." His inspiration, whom he credited with "putting the puzzle together," was the alt-right influencer Milo Yiannopoulos. A year later, Benz stopped posting under his white-nationalist pseudonym and entered the federal government, taking a speechwriting job in the Department of Housing and Urban Development. He joined the State Department in November, 2020, but left a couple of months later, at the start of the Biden Administration.

Since then, as the executive director of the Foundation for Freedom Online, where he appears to be the sole employee, he has focussed much of his attention on Renée DiResta, the research director of Stanford's Internet Observatory and one of Starbird's co-authors on the Election Integrity Partnership's final report. DiResta has a number of associations that are easy to misrepresent. As an undergraduate, she interned at the C.I.A. Before joining Stanford, she served as the research director of a controversial cybersecurity firm called New Knowledge. In 2017, during Roy Moore's Alabama Senate race, New Knowledge experimented with a small-scale disinformation campaign of its own. According to the *Times*, the effort included creating a Facebook account meant to draw in conservative voters. (DiResta was not working for the company at the time.) The next year, she testified before the Senate on Russian interference in the 2016 election; a team she led then wrote up a report for the Senate Intelligence Committee. On the Web site of the Foundation for Freedom Online, Benz outlined what he called DiResta's "censorship industry career arc" and wrote that "the prominent role Renee DiResta plays in EIP—a government-partnered Internet censorship consortium—is particularly worrisome and disturbing."

In early December of 2022, a group of iconoclastic journalists—with the help of Elon Musk, who now owned Twitter—began publishing the Twitter Files, a series of viral posts that used the company's internal e-mails to argue that controversial speech by conservatives had been suppressed. One thread, by the journalist Matt Taibbi, detailed the story of the *Post's* blocked article on Hunter Biden's laptop. Another parsed Twitter's decision to suspend Trump even though some employees argued that the actual language of his tweets about January 6th didn't violate company policy.

The publication of the Twitter Files supercharged the allegations against the Election Integrity Partnership, because it highlighted instances of content moderation that appeared to have gone too far. Two weeks after the first installment, Trump posted a six-minute video on Truth Social, his social-media network, announcing his "free-speech platform" for a second term. Promising to "shatter the left-wing censorship regime," Trump vowed to fire federal bureaucrats at D.H.S., the D.O.J., and the F.B.I. who "directly or indirectly" interacted with tech companies to take down misleading information online about the 2020 election, COVID, or the efficacy of vaccines. He went on to say, "If any U.S. university is discovered to have engaged in censorship activities or election interference in the past, such as flagging social-media content for removal or blacklisting, those universities should lose federal research dollars and federal student-loan support for a period of five years or more."

On March 2nd of this year, in a Twitter Spaces conversation attended by some thirty-nine thousand users, Benz made contact with Taibbi. "I've been hoping to talk to you for a long time because I believe I have all of the missing pieces of the puzzle," he told Taibbi, according to a recording of the conversation. "You're someone who can actually communicate the story to a large platform. I can tell you literally everything." The E.I.P., Benz said, was "the deputized disinformation flagger for D.H.S." He went on, "Basically, they gave this private group—E.I.P.—D.H.S.-F.B.I. powers to talk directly to the key content-moderation liaisons." Taibbi responded, "I'm very anxious to talk to you."

A week later, at Jordan's invitation, Taibbi and another journalist involved in the Twitter Files, Michael Shellenberger, gave public testimony before the weaponization subcommittee. While they addressed the members, Benz, dressed in a dark suit, sat in the row behind them. Both Taibbi and Shellenberger cited the E.I.P. and the twenty-two million censored tweets, though that figure never appeared in the materials they'd published in the Twitter Files. Afterward, they acknowledged that Benz had helped them with their testimony. Evidently, it was his influence that led Shellenberger to call the E.I.P. "the seed

of the censorship-industrial complex."

They weren't alone in relying on Benz. By then, he claimed to have given eight congressional briefings, spoken regularly with congressmen and senators, and addressed members of the House Oversight, Homeland Security, and Judiciary Committees. On March 10th, Jordan sent letters to Starbird, DiResta, and Alex Stamos, the head of Stanford's Internet Observatory, demanding access to e-mails and other communications with both the government and the tech platforms dating back to January, 2015.

Within days, Taibbi posted another thread in the Twitter Files about the "Great Covid-19 Lie Machine: Stanford, the Virality Project, and the Censorship of 'True Stories.'" After the 2020 election, many of the researchers involved in the Election Integrity Partnership had regrouped and launched the Virality Project, making its mission the tracking of online misinformation surrounding COVID vaccines. This time, the mechanics of the operation were simpler. D.H.S. was not involved, nor were the tech platforms. Researchers posted their findings online each week and sent them to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Surgeon General. Taibbi's thread, which received more than forty million views, rearranged information that Stanford had already been making available. "Even though all of our work is public, they reframed it as a secret cabal," DiResta told me. "I study rumors and propaganda, but that doesn't mean we can do anything to stop them when we become the subject. It's a problem for the field. What can you do when it happens?"

Students began receiving requests from Jordan and Bishop to appear for voluntary, three-to-four-hour videotaped interviews. The public-records campaign against Starbird ramped up in the spring. DiResta said, "Matt Taibbi says something on a Twitter thread, and then members of Congress get to read my e-mails!"

At ten o'clock in the morning on June 6, 2023, Starbird sat at a long wooden table on the second floor of the Rayburn House Office Building, in Washington, D.C., accompanied by her lawyers, to testify before the weaponization subcommittee. There were no reporters present, and the doors were closed to the public. A stenographer transcribed the proceedings, and a video recorder was placed across from Starbird. She was under strict instructions not to disclose the contents of the conversation she was about to have. "Ms. Starbird," Jordan said, according to a transcript obtained by *The New Yorker*, "what percentage of your funding is directly from the government?" For five hours, she answered questions about her work, but that was the only one that Jordan himself asked.

When Starbird and I spoke in July, she was about to fly across the country again, this time at the request of the House Homeland Security Committee. Bishop chairs its oversight subcommittee, and he had some more questions. According to multiple Republican and Democratic staffers, Bishop and Jordan were sometimes at odds. Bishop felt that Jordan could be doing more to push the investigation. When I asked one of the staffers what that meant, I was told, "Jordan only pursues most of Mike Benz's theories. Bishop wants to run down *all* of them."

As of this past summer, Stanford University had spent close to a million dollars in legal fees. "It makes you really wonder whether it's worth it," Alex Stamos told the subcommittee in June. "My primary responsibility is to my wife and my three children, and it's very hard to justify for them—even if it's unfair—for them to be put at any kind

of physical risk because I want to do academic research into the election."

Jaffer, the First Amendment expert, told me, "Jordan seems to be suggesting that private researchers are in league with government officials, part of this grander conspiracy to suppress conservative speech, and that they should be held accountable for their role in that conspiracy." But suing them, Jaffer argued, was an affront to the First Amendment. Two decades ago, he pointed out, the *Times* sat on evidence of an N.S.A. secret wiretapping program for about a year at the government's request. By Jordan's theory, Jaffer asked, "could the reporters be sued for having conspired with the N.S.A. not to publish certain things?"

The tech companies were always reluctant to moderate speech. Political circumstances forced them into it: the foreign interference in the 2016 election, Trump's election lies four years later, the January 6th attack on the Capitol, a once-in-a-century pandemic. "The winds have changed," Starbird told me. "Any defenses we created in 2020 and 2022 are gone. The government has pressured the platforms not to do anything. That's a direct outgrowth of what's happened with the weaponization subcommittee."

Schaul, formerly of CISA, told me, "The attack on government responses to disinformation isn't necessarily meant to rein in government, because they don't believe in government approaches anyway. It's meant to be a harbinger of burdens to come for social-media platforms should they not clear space for bad actors." He described the end goal of Jordan, Benz, and others as the turning of social media into "NATO for MAGA: keep the liberals out, the voters down, keep us in power."

The language and logic of Jordan's inquiry have already spread to other parts of government. On July 4th, a federal judge appointed by Trump issued a sweeping injunction in a case called Missouri v. Biden, blocking the Administration from having any contact with social-media companies or certain universities conducting research into misinformation. The original plaintiffs in the case were the Republican attorneys general of Missouri and Louisiana, who accused the White House, D.H.S., and the F.B.I. of colluding with Meta and Twitter to police the speech of conservatives on their platforms. "The present case arguably involves the most massive attack against free speech in United States history," the judge said. The opinion was tendentious and riddled with factual errors, citing material from the Twitter Files and the weaponization subcommittee.

In August, after the federal ruling was appealed, eight members of the weaponization subcommittee submitted an amicus brief in the appellate case, citing exclusive documents and statements obtained through its interviews and sub-

poenas. Filing it on their behalf were lawyers from America First Legal, a group that is run by Trump's former political adviser Stephen Miller, and is part of the Conservative Partnership Institute. The litigants in Missouri v. Biden had claimed that their First Amendment rights had been restricted, but in doing so they had curtailed those of scientists, academics, and researchers. "Now we can't talk to local and state election officials," Starbird told me at the time. "I don't think they would talk to a set of academics now. The people that need help don't have anywhere to turn."

Last month, the conservative Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld some of the lower-court ruling, finding that the Biden Administration had "coerced or significantly encouraged social media platforms to moderate content" related to COVID-19 misinformation, thus violating the First Amendment. Yet the panel took issue with the previous judge's preliminary injunction, on the ground that it was "both vague and broader than necessary to remedy the Plaintiff's injuries."

The researchers, no longer tied by the injunction, were momentarily relieved. Still, they had cause for anxiety. A parallel lawsuit against them, also handled by America First Legal, was moving through civil court, in the same district as Missouri v. Biden. Starbird, DiResta, Stamos, and other figures and organizations involved in the Election Integrity Partnership were accused of being part of an effort that "tramples" on the First Amendment by engaging in "probably the largest mass-surveillance and mass-censorship program in American history—the so-called 'Election Integrity Partnership' and 'Virality Project.'" The two plaintiffs in the case were claiming personal injury. One was Jim Hoft, the founder of the Web site the Gateway Pundit. The other was a woman from Louisiana named Jill Hines, who runs a small advocacy organization that is critical of the C.D.C., vaccines, and Anthony Fauci, whom she calls "a Karen." Starbird told me, "This past year, I spent more time with my lawyers than with my students."

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A week after McCarthy was voted out as Speaker, I sat down with Ken Buck, one of the eight Republicans who had set the whole plot in motion. Buck is a fiscal hawk from Colorado and a member of the Freedom Caucus. It was late in the afternoon, about an hour before Jordan would make his case for Speaker at a closed-door meeting of Republicans. Buck, who'd just come from the airport, had no regrets about his decision to move against McCarthy, but he wasn't happy with the current front-runner to replace him.

Over the next several days, Jordan's run for Speaker intensified. He lost the first round of voting to an old establishment hand, but stayed in the running because no one could come close to the two hundred and seventeen votes necessary to clinch the job. Many who opposed Jordan, recognizing his overwhelming power with the base, were careful not to antagonize him—not that it mattered. The wife of a Nebraska moderate received menacing text messages and phone calls from anonymous critics of her husband. A congresswoman from Iowa fielded what her office called "credible" death threats. E-mails had also been circulating. Producers from Sean Hannity's show on Fox News were contacting Jordan's opponents with a script making it clear that they'd be forced to answer for their intransigence. It was unnerving to see how quickly Jordan's bullying, honed by tormenting Democrats, could be directed at members of his own Party. Still, with each subsequent vote, Jordan fell short. On the afternoon of October 20th, in a secret ballot, a majority of the Republican conference voted for him to end his candidacy.

Buck had been one of the holdouts. "The Jim Jordan of 2015 would not recognize the Jim Jordan of 2023," he told me. "If George W. Bush lied about the outcome of an election, Jim Jordan would have been all over him." But the issue Buck considered the most indicative of Jordan's lost principles was Big Tech. They were both passionate about taking on the platforms, but, whereas Buck saw companies like Meta and Google as monopolies that the government should break up, Jordan had seen an opportunity for a fight with a more immediate political payoff: demonizing Big Tech as a threat to all Republicans. If you don't pursue anti-trust policies, Buck noted, "you can scream all you want about how they colluded with the Biden Administration." He told me to read up on Lyndon Johnson. "Jim made a decision on what he wants to do, and he has followed a path," Buck said. "People who want power find a way to get there." ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

CHINA'S AGE OF MALAISE

Facing a grim economy, disillusioned youth, and fleeing entrepreneurs, Xi Jinping turns to the past.

BY EVAN OSNOS

Twenty-five years ago, China's writer of the moment was a man named Wang Xiaobo. Wang had endured the Cultural Revolution, but unlike most of his peers, who turned the experience into earnest tales of trauma, he was an ironist, in the vein of Kurt Vonnegut, with a piercing eye for the intrusion of politics into private life. In his novella "Golden Age," two young lovers confess to the bourgeois crime of extramarital sex—"We committed epic friendship in the mountain, breathing wet steamy breath." They are summoned to account for their failure of revolutionary propriety, but the local apparatchiks prove to be less interested in Marx than in the prurient details of their "epic friendship."

Wang's fiction and essays celebrated personal dignity over conformity, and embraced foreign ideas—from Twain, Calvino, Russell—as a complement to the Chinese perspective. In "The Pleasure of Thinking," the title essay in a collection newly released in English, he recalls his time on a commune where the only sanctioned reading was Mao's Little Red Book. To him, that stricture implied an unbearable lie: "if the ultimate truth has already been discovered, then the only thing left for humanity to do would be to judge everything based on this truth." Long after his death, of a heart attack, at the age of forty-four, Wang's views still circulate among fans like a secret handshake. His widow, the sociologist Li Yinhe, once told me, "I know a lesbian couple who met for the first time when they went to pay their respects at his grave site." She added, "There are plenty of people with minds like this."

How did Wang become a literary icon in a country famed for its constraint? It helped that he was adroit at crafting narratives just oblique enough to elude the censors. But the political context was also crucial. After the crackdown at Tiananmen Square, in 1989, the Communist Party had risked falling into oblivion, behind its comrades in Moscow. It survived by offering the Chinese people a grand but pragmatic bargain: personal space in return for political loyalty. The Party leader Deng Xiaoping broke with the orthodoxy of the Mao era; he called for "courageous experiments" to insure that China would not be like "a woman with bound feet." Soon, new N.G.O.s were lobbying for the rights of women and ethnic minorities, and foreign investors were funding startups, including Alibaba and Tencent, that grew into some of the wealthiest companies on earth. Young people were trying on new identities; I met a Chinese band that played only American rock, though their repertoire was so limited that they sang "Hotel California" twice a night. Above all, the Party sought to project confidence: Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin, visited the New York Stock Exchange, in 1997, rang the opening bell, and boomed, in English, "I wish you good trading!"

For two decades after Deng made his deal with the people, the Party largely held to it. The private sector generated fortunes; intellectuals aired dissent on campuses and social media; the middle class travelled and indulged. When I lived in Beijing from 2005 to 2013, the social calendar was punctuated by openings: concert halls, laboratories, architectural marvels. At a celebration for a new art museum, an international crowd peered up at a troupe of Spanish avant-garde performers dangling from a construction crane, writhing like flies in a web—just another evening in what a writer at the scene called "the unstoppable ascension of Chinese art."

When I return to China these days, the feeling of ineluctable ascent has waned. The streets of Beijing still show progress; armadas of electric cars glide by like props in a sci-fi film, and the smoke that used to impose a perpetual twilight is gone. But, in the alleys, most of the improvised cafés and galleries that used to enliven the city have been cleared away, in the name of order; overhead, the race to build new skyscrapers, which attracted designers from around the world, has stalled. This summer, I had a drink with an intellectual I've known for years. He recalled a time when he took inspiration from the dissidents of the Eastern Bloc: "Fifteen years ago, we were talking about Havel." These days, he told me with a wince, "people don't want to say anything." By the time we stood to leave, he had drained four Martinis.

The embodiment of this reversal is Xi Jinping, the General Secretary and President, who has come to be known among the Party rank and file by a succinct honorific: the Core. In the years before Xi rose to power, in 2012, some Party thinkers had pushed for political liberalization, but the leaders, who feared infighting and popular rebellion, chose stricter autocracy instead. Xi has proved stunningly harsh; though at first he urged young people to "dare to dream," and gestured toward market-oriented reforms, he has abandoned Deng's "courageous experiments" and ushered his country into a straitened new age. To spend time in China at the end of Xi's first decade is to witness a nation slipping from motion to stagnation and, for the first time in a generation, questioning whether a Communist superpower can escape the contradictions that doomed the Soviet Union.

At the age of seventy, Xi has removed term limits on his rule and eliminated even loyal opponents. He travels less than he used to, and reveals little of the emotion behind his thinking; there is no public ranting or tin-pot swagger. He moves so deliberately that he resembles a person underwater. Before the pandemic, China's official news often showed him amid crowds of supporters applauding

Few citizens believe that China will reach the heights they once expected. "The word I use is 'grieving,'" one entrepreneur said.

ILLUSTRATION BY XINMEI LIU

in stilted adoration. The clips circulate abroad with the mocking caption "West North Korea," but at home censors vigilantly guard Xi's honor; a leak from a Chinese social-media site last year revealed that it blocks no fewer than five hundred and sixty-four nicknames for him, including Caesar, the Last Emperor, and twenty-one variations of Winnie-the-Pooh.

Unlike Deng and Jiang, Xi has never lived abroad, and he has become openly disparaging about the future of the U.S. and its democratic allies, declaring that "the East is rising and the West is declining." He does not mask displeasure at the occasional run-in with a free press; on the sidelines of a G-20 summit last year, he complained to the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, "Everything we've discussed has been leaked to the papers, and that's not appropriate." In the exchange, captured by a Canadian television crew, Xi flashed a tense smile and demanded "mutual respect," adding, "Otherwise, there might be unpredictable consequences."

Year by year, Xi appears more at home in the world of the man he calls his "best and closest friend," Vladimir Putin. In March, after the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for the Russian President on war-crimes charges, Putin hosted Xi in Moscow, where they described relations as the best they have ever been. Clasping hands for a farewell in the doorway of the Kremlin, Xi told Putin, "Right now there are changes—the likes of which we haven't seen for a hundred years—and we are the ones driving these changes together." Putin responded, "I agree."

In China, as in much of the world, you can tell a lot about a place by its bookstores. For years, readers in Shanghai, the nation's most cosmopolitan city, had Jifeng—"Monsoon"—which opened in 1997, just as Wang Xiaobo was breaking through. It was the city's undisputed liberal outpost, where even the most esoteric speakers drew a crowd. But in 2017 the public library, which owned the building, cancelled the lease, citing "increased regulations" on state-owned property. The owner, Yu Miao, scouted new sites, but, every time, the landlord got a call and Yu was turned away. He ultimately realized that "Jifeng can't get a foothold." Even the farewell party, to sell off the last books, was plunged into darkness by sudden "equipment maintenance." Buyers kept shopping in darkness, using cell phones as flashlights. Today, nobody would dare try to open a store like that.

Measuring a nation's mood can be difficult—especially in China, which doesn't allow independent polling—but there are indicators. In America, when the nineteen-seventies brought inflation, gas lines, and turmoil in the Middle East, the public mood could be read on the roadways; the car industry still calls the sluggish, boxy aesthetic of those days the Malaise Era. Ask Chinese citizens about their mood nowadays and some of the words you hear most are *mimang* and *jusang*—"bewildered" and "frustrated."

As in America, China's changing temper partly reflects economic concerns. After Party leaders embarked on market reforms, in 1978, the Chinese economy more than doubled in size every decade. Infrastructure was built at such a pace that China used more cement in a three-year span than the U.S. had used in the entire twentieth century; Guizhou, one of the poorest provinces, has eleven airports, to serve an area the size of Missouri. But that boom is over now. China has all the airports—and railways and factories and skyscrapers—that it can justify. The economy grew three per cent last year, far short of the government's target. Exports have dropped, and debt has soared. Economists who once charted China's rise are now flatly pessimistic. Dan Rosen, of the Rhodium Group, a research firm in New York, told me, "It is not just a blip. This is a permanent new normal."

As a matter of scale, China is as formidable as ever: it is the largest trading partner for more than a hundred and twenty countries, it is home to at least eighty per cent of the supply chain for solar panels, and it is the world's largest maker of electric vehicles. But the downturn has shaken citizens who have never experienced anything but improvements in their standard of living. People who shunted their life savings into contracts for new apartments are contending with unfinished concrete blocks in overgrown lots, because the developers ran out of money. Civil treasuries are similarly depleted, by the shutdowns required by China's "zero-COVID" policy; there are reports of teachers and civil servants going unpaid.

China's present troubles are about far more than the economy. Four decades after Deng and his peers put their country on a path of "reform and opening up," his successors have reversed course, in politics and in culture. For ordinary Chinese citizens, that reversal is as jarring as it would have been for American homesteaders if the U.S. had retreated from the frontier. Joerg Wuttke, the president emeritus of the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China, who has lived there for more than thirty years, told me, "China always had comeback stories. But not now." He recalled addressing a roomful of students at Peking University: "I said, 'Who among you is optimistic?' It was one-third—which means two-thirds are pessimistic at the best university in China. There's this feeling of 'What are we here for?'"

Over the summer, in visits to China and to émigré communities abroad, I interviewed several dozen people about their work and private lives, their sense of the direction in business, art, and politics. I was surprised how often they spoke about Xi without uttering his name—a single finger flicked upward can suffice—because the subject is at once ubiquitous and unsafe. (To a degree I've rarely encountered, many asked to have their identities disguised.) Most of all, I was struck by how many people have come to doubt that China will achieve the heights they once expected. "The word I use to describe China now is 'grieving,'" an entrepreneur told me. "We're grieving for what was an exceptional time."

The Party has taken steps to obscure problems from foreign inspection: overseas access to corporate data and academic journals has been restricted, scholars are warned not to discuss deflation, and, in stock-market listings, lawyers have been told to cut routine suggestions that laws could change "without notice." (Instead, they are to use the phrase "from time to time.") Officially, China is encouraging foreign companies and scholars to return, but an expanded "anti-espionage" law puts a vast range of information off limits, including "documents, data, materials, or items related to national security and interests." Authorities have raided consultancies with

long histories in China, including Bain & Company and Mintz Group, a due-diligence firm that said five of its Chinese employees had been detained.

The space for pop culture, high culture, and spontaneous interaction has narrowed to a pinhole. Chinese social media, which once was a chaotic hive, has been tamed, as powerful voices are silenced and discussions closed. Pop concerts and other performances have been cancelled for reasons described only as "force majeure." Even standup comics are forced to submit videos of jokes for advance approval. This spring, a comedian was investigated for improvising a riff on a Chinese military slogan ("Fight well, win the battle") in a joke about his dogs going crazy over a squirrel. His representatives were fined two million dollars and barred from hosting events.

Into the cultural void, the Party has injected a torrent of publishing under Xi's name—eleven new books in the first five months of this year, far more than any predecessor ever purported to write—collecting his comments on every topic from economics and history to the lives of women. Geremie Barmé, a prominent historian and translator, calls it "Xi Jinping's Empire of Tedium." "Here is one of the great cultures of succinct telegraphic communication, and it has ended up with this tsunami of logorrhea," Barmé said. The system is fumbling in search of an answer to the big question: Can Xi's China still manage the pairing of autocracy and capitalism? "What do you do with an economy that can't deal with unemployment created by mismanagement?" Barmé asked. "What do you do with people who feel their lives are aimless?" He said, "They don't have a system that can cope with the forces they've unleashed."

Late one Saturday night in Beijing, I met friends at a hole-in-the-wall called Xiao Kuai'r—"A Small Piece"—to hear a lineup of local bands. During the day, the bar doubled as a recording studio, turning out retro-chic plastic cassettes. After dark, twentysomethings crowded in to see groups with names like Black Brick and Ionosphere.

Despite the enthusiastic audience, there was a fin-de-siècle vibe in the air: the couple who ran the bar were giving it up at the end of the month. They had hoped to promote "independent culture," they wrote in a farewell note, but had struggled to manage the "shifting line of what's permissible and what isn't." Xiao Kuai'r was joining a list of Beijing haunts—Temple, Cellar Door, 8-Bit—that have disappeared in recent memory.

Disappearances, of one kind or another, have become the backbeat of Chinese public life under Xi Jinping. The head of China's missile force, Li Yuchao, was secretly detained sometime during the summer. His political commissar vanished, too. Under the unwritten rules of these kinds of disappearances, an official report will eventually disclose what the two men did and what happened to them, but in the meantime there was little more than a rumor that they were being investigated for corruption or, perhaps, leaking state secrets.

The missing generals marked an unusually busy summer of purges. China's foreign minister, Qin Gang—last seen shaking hands with a Vietnamese official at a meeting in Beijing—vanished at around the same time. His disappearance attracted attention; among other tasks, he had been involved in delicate dealings with the United States over Taiwan and over access for businesspeople and students. A spokesperson initially said that Qin was gone for "health reasons," but the ministry cut that statement from the official transcript and took to saying that it had "no information" on him. In Washington, where he had previously served as Ambassador, I used to meet him occasionally; he was a smoothly pugnacious presence, who liked to boast of how many American states he'd visited. (Twenty-two, at the highest count.) The last time I saw him, he was about to visit St. Louis, where he would throw out the first pitch at a Cardinals game, and was nervously preparing by studying videos on YouTube.

In Mao's day, a purge within the Party required skilled technicians to excise a comrade from photos. In the digital age, it is easier; entries on Qin vanished from the foreign ministry's Web site overnight. But the references to the minister were restored when the change attracted attention abroad, and during my

"It's too well packaged to open."

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visits this summer everybody was still talking about him. Some theories were grim. "Word is he got the bullet," a man in Shanghai said, over coffee. Others were outlandish: one businessman picked up my audio recorder, held it behind his back, and leaned in to whisper, "I heard he slept with Xi Jinping's daughter." But most people offered versions of the same story: Qin, who is married, had an affair that produced a child born in America, exposing him to blackmail by foreign intelligence services. (The mother of the child was thought to be Fu Xiaotian, a television reporter, who has also dropped out of sight.)

Since 2012, when Xi launched an "anti-corruption" campaign that grew into a vast machine of arrest and detention, China has "investigated and punished 4.089 million people," according to an official report from 2021. Some of the disappeared eventually go on trial in courts that have a ninety-nine-per-cent conviction rate; others are held indefinitely under murky rules known as "double restrictions." The disappeared hail from every corner of life: Dong Yuyu, a newspaper columnist, was arrested last year while having lunch with a Japanese diplomat, and subsequently charged with espionage; Bao Fan, one of China's best-known bankers, vanished in February, though his company later reported that he was "coöperating in an investigation carried out by certain authorities." In September, Rahile Dawut, a prominent Uyghur ethnographer who had been missing for almost five years, was found, by a human-rights group, to be serving a life sentence on charges of endangering national security.

In addition to the disappearances, the deepening reach of politics is felt throughout daily life. Early this year, the Party launched a campaign to educate citizens on what Party literature habitually refers to as "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era." All manner of institutions—laboratories, asset-management firms, banks, think tanks—are expected to make time for regular lectures, followed by the writing of essays and the taking of tests. Some business executives report spending a third of the workday on "thought work," including reading an average of four books a month. A microchip engineer at a university lab told a friend, "Going to meetings every day literally eats away at the time for scientific discoveries."

The over-all effect is a revival of what the late Sinologist Simon Leys called the "lugubrious merry-go-round" of Communist ritual, and a culture of deliberate obfuscation that he likened to deciphering "inscriptions written in invisible ink on blank pages." The return of disappearances and thought work on this scale has made clear that, for all of China's modernizations, Xi is no longer pantomiming the rule of law; he has returned China to the rule of man. At his core, a longtime observer told me, Xi is "Mao with money."

At the bar in Beijing, I stepped outside for some air with a man named Steven, who had graduated from a top Chinese university. He wore a Hawaiian shirt and Nikes. After a few minutes, he told me that he was plotting to ditch his lucrative job—editing energy reports—in order to travel. "A lot of the interesting people are leaving," he said. "My friends have left." A little while later, at the bar's entrance, a guy carrying a guitar case barked into his phone, "I just quit my job! I'm done." He hung up, lit a cigarette, and told a friend, "I'll figure out something to do."

The sense that China's march through time has stalled is especially acute among the young, who are contending with stagnant wages and a culture of enervating limits. For a generation raised on the mythology of social mobility, the loss of optimism aches like a phantom limb.

In 2021, a thirty-one-year-old former factory worker named Luo Huazhong posted a photo of himself in bed, with the caption "Lying flat is my sophistic act," he said, professing solidarity with the philosopher Diogenes, who is said to have protested the excesses of Athenian aristocrats by living in a barrel. The post spread, and "lie flattists" formed online groups to commiserate. The censors closed the discussions, but the phrase has lingered, especially among urbanites, some of whom liken themselves to the Beat generation, which originally took the name to mean "weary" in the face of materialism and conformity.

In July, the National Bureau of Statistics revealed that youth unemployment had hit a record high of twenty-

one per cent, nearly twice the rate four years earlier. Then the bureau stopped releasing the numbers. Zhang Dandan, an economics professor at Peking University, published an article arguing that the true rate might be as high as forty-six per cent, because she estimated that up to sixteen million young people have temporarily stopped looking for jobs in order to lie flat.

Young people raised under the one-child policy want smaller families, because they fear the cost of supporting kids alongside retired parents. As a result, by mid-century, China's working-age population is expected to decline by nearly twenty-five per cent from its peak in 2011. The prospect of constrained growth has returned the bedroom to the focus of political attention—not to police extramarital sex anymore, but to urge procreation in the name of patriotism. Local officials have taken to calling newlyweds to inquire and encourage, and a county in Zhejiang Province has offered cash incentives to couples with brides under the age of twenty-five, to promote "age-appropriate marriage and childbirth."

In Xi's China—like Putin's Russia and Viktor Orbán's Hungary—a war on democratic influence has brought about a resurgence of gender inequality; in 2021, the Party committed itself to "traditional virtues of the Chinese nation" and the "social value of childbearing." Signs of regression are stark: for the first time in decades, the Politburo is composed entirely of men. Feminist activists are often prosecuted.

For many Chinese women, political pressure on their personal decisions has fed broad disaffection. China's birth rate has plunged by more than half since 2016—even after the government changed the rules to let people have up to three children. This kind of drop has rarely been recorded in a nation that is not at war or in the throes of upheaval. The last time China reported a population decline of any kind was 1961, when it was reeling from the famine that followed Mao's Great Leap Forward. Nicholas Eberstadt, a political economist who studies population trends at the American Enterprise Institute, has described the birth crisis as "internalized civil disobedience."

"For me, it's a hard no," a twenty-four-year-old named Sybil said over dinner, when I asked if she plans to marry. She had recently visited a cousin's house, and watched as his parents tyrannized his wife. "If you don't do what they expect as a wife or a mother, they'll kick you out," she said. "So why carve out the prime of your life?" For a long time, Sybil said, she had a recurring nightmare that she was pregnant. "I would wake in the middle of the night, and I couldn't get back to sleep," she said. "If I have kids, I wouldn't live up to my potential. I think a family can't have two people's dreams."

Sybil's distaste for marriage is inseparable from China's fierce competition for college and employment. She is in a master's program in linguistics, and has a flexible attitude. "If you give me a job, you can send me to Mars," she said. But the best position she could find for now was an internship at a P.R. firm—and she figures that, if she leaves to have a kid, she'll never catch up. "We're running like hamsters on a wheel," she said.

Historically, young people have been a volatile presence in Chinese politics. In 1989, students protesting corruption and autocracy led the occupation of Tiananmen Square. In the present moment, their distress takes other forms. For years, young graduates have streamed into China's big cities in pursuit of wealth and stimulation, but, in August, state media reported that almost half of new

graduates were returning to their home towns within six months, unable to afford the cost of living. Among those who stay, some are answering advertisements for "bedmates"—sharing a bed with a stranger—or living rent-free in nursing homes, in return for spending ten hours a month entertaining the residents.

A decade after Xi told young people to "dare to dream," he now admonishes them to curtail their expectations; in recent speeches, he has said that disgruntled youth should "abandon arrogance and pampering" and "eat bitterness"—basically, Mandarin for "suck it up." The exhortations land poorly. Young people mock the implication that they are little more than a *renkuang*—a "human mine"—for the nation's exploitation. As a subtle protest during college-commencement season, graduates took to posting pictures of themselves sprawled face down, or draped over railings, in a manner they named "zombie style."

Spend some time on the edges of China's business world these days and you'll pick up new rules of thumb. If you have to speak publicly, stick to the Party patois; when the first large cruise ship built in China was launched, last year, the company's C.E.O. pledged devotion to "a new concept of cruise culture and tourism with Chinese cultural identity as the core." If you are abroad, be wary of urgent requests to come home. "Several people I know have been called back to China for a deal. It was a setup by the government, just to nab them," a financier told me. In custody, there are clues to help gauge the gravity of the interrogation. "If they give you your phone at night, everything is going to be O.K.—they just want to talk to you," he said. "You can WeChat your wife or your mistress." But, if investigators keep your phone from you, the odds are you are a target, not a source.

It is difficult to overstate how much Xi has shaken China's private sector. Decades ago, as Deng began opening up the country, he said, "Let some people get rich first and gradually all the people should get rich together." For years, each successive wave of aspirants watched the entrepreneurs before them and then "dove into the sea" themselves. In 2014, Alibaba went public on the New York Stock Exchange and raised twenty-five billion dollars, the largest I.P.O. in history at the time. New enterprises proliferated; by 2018, China had attracted sixty-three billion dollars in venture-capital deals, up nearly fifteenfold in five years.

When Xi first became President, he revealed little of his view of the private sector. "Nobody was sure what we were getting," Desmond Shum, a real-estate developer based in Beijing at the time, recalled. But businessmen figured that the private sector was too important to

mess with. A Chinese saying held that entrepreneurs produced sixty per cent of the nation's G.D.P., seventy per cent of the innovation, eighty per cent of the urban employment, and ninety per cent of new jobs.

By 2015, Shum said, "you started seeing things going a different route." That December, Guo Guangchang, the industrialist known as China's Warren Buffett, was held for several days; later, his company sold a series of major assets. In 2017, Xiao Jianhua, a billionaire with ties to politicians, was taken from his apartment at the Four Seasons in Hong Kong, in a wheelchair, with a sheet over his head. (His disappearance went unexplained until last August, when authorities announced that he had been imprisoned for embezzlement and bribery.)

But it was only in 2020 that the risks became truly evident. Jack Ma—the founder of Alibaba, China's richest man, and a role model to younger entrepreneurs—criticized the Party's handling of financial reform, and then disappeared for months. Regulators postponed the I.P.O. for Ant Group, another of Ma's companies, and fined Alibaba a record $2.8 billion for antitrust violations. Similar disappearances and penalties swept through one industry after another: education, real estate, health care. The Party explained that it was targeting inequality, monopoly, and excessive financial risks, but some of the arrests seemed personal. Ren Zhiqiang, a real-estate tycoon, received an unusually harsh sentence of eighteen years on corruption charges, after someone leaked an essay in which he mocked Xi as a "clown stripped naked who still insisted on being emperor."

None of the targets showed any organized political intentions. The only visible pattern is that Xi and his loyalists appeared intent on snuffing out rival sources of authority. One after another, he got rid of anyone with power, the entrepreneur said: "If you have influence, you have power. If you have capital, you have power." Xi is said to have spoken bitterly of watching Boris Yeltsin contend with Russian tycoons in the nineteen-nineties. Joerg Wuttke told me, "When Putin entered the Kremlin in 2000, he assembled the oligarchs and said, basically, You can keep your money, but if you go into politics you're done." He went on, "In China, the big names should have learned from that meeting, because in this sense Putin and Xi Jinping are soul mates."

For years, economists have urged the government to stop relying on real-estate investment and bloated state-run companies, and to increase health and retirement benefits so that ordinary households consume more, spurring the private sector. But Xi, a Marxist-Leninist at his core, said last fall that state-owned enterprises would "get stronger, do better, and grow bigger." Foreign investors are alarmed. In the second quarter of 2023, according to JPMorgan, direct investment from overseas fell to its lowest level in twenty-six years. Local governments, short of cash, have adopted a subtle extortion method that lawyers call "taxation by investigation." A factory owner in Shanghai told me that Party officials used bank records to identify residents with liquid assets of at least thirty million yuan—about four million dollars—and then offered them a choice: hand over twenty per cent or "risk a full tax audit."

Recently, the Party has signalled that the purge of the private sector is over, but many have grown wary. A former telecom executive cited an ancient expression—"*shi, nong, gong, shang*"—which describes a hierarchy of social classes: scholar-officials, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants. "For two thousand years, the merchants were the lowest," he said. "What Xi is doing is just a reversion to the imperial Chinese mean." The big winners, in the current era, are officials with deep personal ties to Xi; he has stocked the Politburo with trusted aides, and has cultivated the military by boosting investment and replacing top leaders with loyalists. The People's Liberation Army, in the words of Deng Yuwen, a former Party editor who now lives in America, has become "Xi's personal army."

Among the unintended effects of Xi's campaign against the private sector has been an awakening of political consciousness. For years, many of China's entrepreneurs expressed ambivalence about the Party's abuses of authority. China is flawed, the thinking went, but it was moving in the right direction. That mind-set of compromise is rarer now. "This reversal has already been going on for many years," an investor who now lives abroad told me. "Of course, I miss China. But China has changed so much that it's no longer the same country."

Nobody I met thinks politics will loosen up as long as Xi is at the top, and he could rule for decades. (Xi's father lived to eighty-eight, and his mother is ninety-six. Xi, like many heads of state, can expect excellent medical care.)

The darker prospects of China's private sector have inspired job seekers to rush toward security: in 2023, 1.5 million people sat for China's national civil-service exam, up by half in two years. The popularity of securing a state job—known in Chinese as "landing ashore"—has fuelled an unlikely fashion trend, in which young men display their aspirations with sombre suits, windbreakers, and even Communist Party badges, a vogue known as "cadre style."

In less than five years, the Party has hobbled industries that once supplied tax revenue, jobs, inspiration, and global stature. For a generation, the Party found ways to put practicality ahead of ideology. "It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white," Deng said, "as long as it catches mice." In the Xi era, that principle has become, in effect: It doesn't matter if the cat catches mice, as long as it's red.

Year by year, Xi has rescinded the deal—space for loyalty—that Deng and his generation made with their people. He broke the compact first with the political class and then with the business community. Finally, during the pandemic, he seems to have alienated vast reaches of the Chinese public, in ways that are only beginning to be truly visible.

For a time, China's approach to COVID was highly popular. In 2020, after failing to contain and cover up the initial outbreak, in Wuhan, the Party adopted a "zero-COVID" strategy, of closed borders, mass testing, and strict quarantine procedures, which allowed much of China to resume normal life, even as schools and offices in the U.S. struggled to maintain basic operations. Tech companies and the government collaborated to assemble huge tranches of medical and location data to assign everyone a health code—green, yellow, or red. Lock-

MEAT EATER NO. 5

I realized today that I will die
with work unfinished, and someone
will have to find it. I am determined
to be alone, so who knows who
will have to sift through it all—fragments
of pages of nothing, dumb e-mails.
Will it be a lover? I hate the word
lover, but one of my lovers loves
the word *lover*, and so I can't escape
it even though it makes me feel
beloved. I have a type, and I always
find them. When they ask me to put my own
hand to my own throat, I don't just listen,
I ask *Are you left-handed or right*? because
the first or second or third or fourth
time you fuck someone is never the best;
ecstasy takes practice. I want to say this,
but I don't because it would put pressure
on this nothing. I will die, and someone
(not them) will have to make sense
of the unfinished books and juvenilia
and W-2s and archived Internet journals
and paper to-do lists (car inspection, playlist
for K——, digitize to-do list). I'll die
because one day I was alive
and the next day I was alive with a little
cul-de-sac at the end of an artery
in my brain. The doctor is *concerned*.
You're telling me, dude. He has knowledge,
wisdom, experience. But I have some,
too. He asks if I have questions, and I tell him
the trick to having your heart broken
is telling someone *You are going to break
my heart* because either you're happy
to be wrong, or you're right.

—Carmen Maria Machado

downs were finite; volunteers went to work for the ubiquitous testing-and-enforcement crews, in white Tyvek suits that earned them the affectionate nickname *dabai* ("big whites").

But, over time, the zero-COVID strategy combined with the politics of fear to produce extraordinary suffering. Local apparatchiks, fearing punishment for even tiny outbreaks, became rigid and unresponsive. In Shanghai, most of the twenty-five million residents were confined to their homes for two months, even as food and medicine ran low. A woman whose father was locked down so long that he nearly ran out of heart medication told me, "We don't have to imagine a bleak future with robots controlling us. We've lived that life already." After citizens took to their balconies to sing or to demand supplies, a video circulated of a drone hovering above a compound in Shanghai, broadcasting a dystopian directive: "Control your soul's desire for freedom. Do not open the window to sing."

Some patients with problems other than COVID were turned away from hospitals. Chen Shunping, a retired violinist with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, was vomiting from acute pancreatitis before he jumped from his apartment window. In a note left for his wife, he wrote, "I couldn't stand the pain." In perhaps the greatest provocation, parents who tested positive were separated from their babies and toddlers, who were taken to state wards. Last November, demonstrations erupted in Shanghai and other cities; protesters held up blank sheets of paper to symbolize all they could not say. Dozens were detained, and an unknown number remain in custody. Kamile Wayit, a Uyghur college student who shared video of the protests online, was sentenced to three years in prison for "promoting extremism." When the zero-COVID policy was finally abandoned, the following month, the change was so abrupt that at least a million people died in a matter of weeks, according to independent analyses; the state stopped publishing cremation statistics.

Since the pandemic, a new strain of cynicism has emerged. "I'm shocked at how angry people are," an entertainer in Shanghai told me. For the first time, he hears acquaintances openly share doubts about the competence of the leadership. "Confidence is like faith in religion," he said. "It's a belief in the evidence of things unseen."

I visited a respected writer, who works at the foot of a crooked alley, in a hideaway almost entirely overtaken by books. (He distrusts e-books, because they, too, can be disappeared.) Nudging a cat from a stool to make sitting room, he spoke with a scowl about the pandemic. He identified a dynamic among people he knew: the older and more powerful they were, the more they were destabilized by the lockdown. "These are the élites," he said. "They did a good job, they're influential people. But they were left to wail in anguish. I kept thinking, If someone speaks up, maybe we can unite to say we don't like the policy or the irrational conditions. But no one wanted to be the first to poke their head out." He went on, "The most troublesome thing in China is that the open-mindedness—the ability to learn—has come to a halt. For forty years, we learned things, and then people concluded that China was formidable and capable, that the East is rising and the West is declining, that China is already a big boss in the world. And so we stopped learning. But, in reality, we haven't even

established a society with a conscience."

People describe psychological marks that they are still uncovering. Months after the lockdowns, a friend was walking home from dinner and passed a testing booth. She felt a sudden, inescapable urge to kick it. "I was very angry—about everything," she said. The shattered glass opened a gash in her ankle. Blood spilled out, and, to make matters worse, she suddenly remembered the surveillance cameras. "I was so afraid," she told me. "Am I going to get in trouble?" Visiting the hospital felt risky, but the bleeding was too heavy to ignore. She made up a story about bumping into a glass wall, and by dawn she was bandaged up and limping home, her shoe caked in blood. She is left with a long scar snaking up her ankle, and the persistent remnants of the rage that triggered her outburst. "Subconsciously, it's never going to be gone," she said. She spends much of her time these days trying to find a way to emigrate.

In 2018, online discussions in China started to feature a Mandarin neologism: *runxue*—"the art of running." When Shanghai went into lockdown, the saying took off. Tencent, a tech platform, reported a surge of people searching the phrase "conditions for emigrating to Canada." Authorities were displeased; the immigration department announced plans to "strictly restrict the nonessential exit activities of Chinese citizens."

But people found ways out. More than three hundred thousand Chinese moved away last year, more than double the pace of migration a decade ago, according to the United Nations. Some are resorting to extraordinary measures. In August, a man rode a Jet Ski, loaded with extra fuel, nearly two hundred miles to South Korea. According to rights activists, he had served time in prison for wearing a T-shirt that called China's leader "Xitler." Others have followed arduous routes through a half-dozen countries, in the hope of reaching the U.S. Some take advantage of Ecuador's visa-free travel to enter South America, and then join the trek north through the jungle of the Darién Gap. This summer, authorities at America's southern border reported a record 17,894 encounters with Chinese migrants in the previous ten months—a thirteenfold increase from a year earlier.

For years, wealthy Chinese argued that they had more to gain by staying than by leaving, but many have changed their minds. In June, Henley & Partners, which advises wealthy individuals on how to get residence and citizenship by investment, reported that China lost a net total of 10,800 rich residents in 2022, surpassing Russia as the world's leading exporter of wealthy citizens. Last fall, in the name of "common prosperity," Xi called for "regulating the mechanism of wealth accumulation," raising expectations of new taxes on inheritance and property. "If you are part of the .01 per cent, you are trying to get out," the entrepreneur told me.

Jun, a technologist in his fifties, who has a shaved head and a casual bearing that disguises intense sentiments, bought a place near the Mediterranean. "There's an expression in Chinese: A smart rabbit has three caves," he told me. "My biggest fear is that someday, with a Chinese passport, you can't go out." Chinese citizens can buy a foreign passport for about a hundred thousand dollars from a Caribbean tax haven such as Antigua or Barbuda. Since Malta started selling permanent residence, in 2015, eighty-seven per cent of applicants have been Chinese. Earlier this year, Ireland abandoned its investment-migration program, amid concerns over China's domination of the process.

Jun is hardly a dissident; he has prospered through a series of Internet and

entertainment ventures, but he has come to believe that the Party's need for control is untenable. By choking off private life and business, it is hastening a confrontation—which Jun sees as painful but necessary. "The more pressure there is, the sooner it will open up," he said. "In five years, China will be diminished. In ten years, it will be in conflict. But in fifteen years it might be better." Versions of this view circulate widely enough that some Chinese have given Xi the nickname the Great Accelerator, in the belief that he is pushing China toward a reckoning. For now, Jun said, "nobody will say anything. They're just watching the pressure cooker."

Chinese leaders know the risk of a brain drain. In a speech in 2021, Xi said, "Competition for comprehensive national strength is, in the final analysis, competition for talent." But, when that priority collides with the need for control, control wins. In Beijing, a man told me that his social circle has been so severely depleted by migration that he's "trying to make new friends on the badminton court." He relayed a recent family drama that combined multiple strands of distress: "My nephew told his parents, 'If you don't let my wife and me move to Canada, we're going to refuse to have children.'"

David Lesperance, a former lawyer who helps wealthy clients leave China, said that inquiries tend to increase after a high-profile disappearance. One of his first clients was a member of a prominent Shanghainese family, he told me. "This guy said, 'Look, my family's lived through the emperor, the Taiping Rebellion, the Boxers, the Japanese, the Nationalists, the Communists.' He said, 'Our family motto was, no matter how good things are, we always keep a fast junk in the harbor with a second set of papers and some gold bars. Well, the modern equivalent of that is second passports, second residences, and second bank accounts.'"

Chinese citizens are generally allowed to convert no more than fifty thousand dollars a year into foreign currency. There are work-arounds, though. An underground network known as *feiqian* ("flying money") lets you put money into a local account and retrieve it abroad, minus a fee. For larger sums, people rely on bogus invoices—sending, say, a million dollars for machine parts that cost a hundred thousand. In August, police arrested the head of Shanghai's largest China-U.S. immigration company, the Wailian Overseas Consulting Group, and accused her of "collecting RMB in China and issuing foreign currencies abroad"—a signal that Chinese authorities are wary of an outflux of cash.

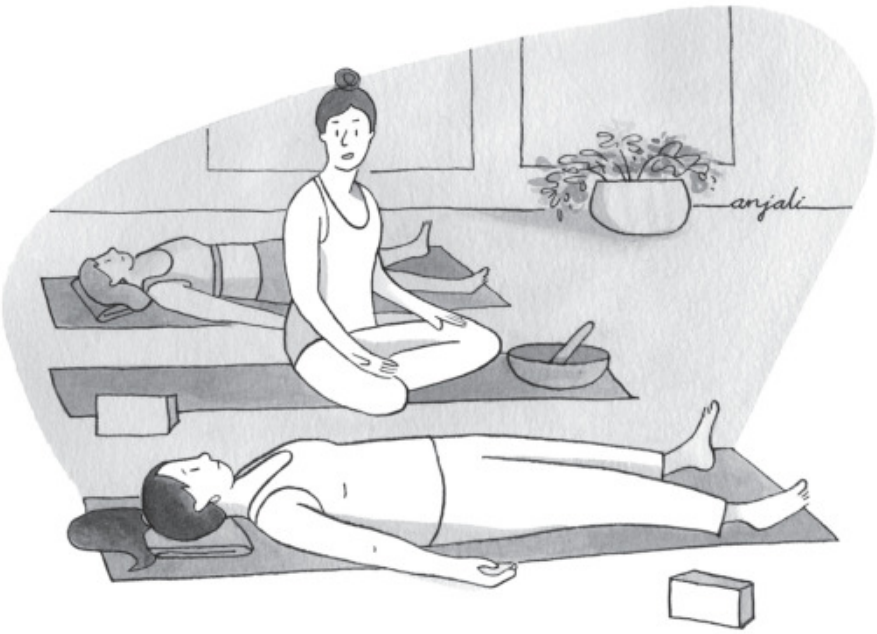
When I visited Singapore this summer, Calvin Cheng, a local businessman

with close ties to Chinese élites, told me, "Singapore is a refugee camp for these people." He said, "They eat the same food, speak the same language. They don't feel like second-class citizens here." Chinese émigrés have taken to calling it Singapore County, as if it were another district of China. In 2022, the state registered 7,312 corporate entities with Chinese owners, up forty-seven per cent from the previous year. The wealthiest migrants congregate on the tony island of Sentosa, where villas rent for thirty-five thousand dollars a month. There have been so many new arrivals in rich neighborhoods that one Chinese resident told me, "They would just be hopping from house to house and toasting each other."

The press in Singapore tracks the movements of prominent Chinese businesspeople, including Zhang Yiming, the founder of TikTok's parent company, ByteDance; and Liang Xinjun, a founder of Fosun, the conglomerate that was pressured to sell off key assets. "A significant number of the founders of Alibaba are here," Cheng told me. "But they all keep a low profile." A businessman close to the new arrivals said that many of his Chinese friends are reading "1587, a Year of No Significance," a classic account of imperial hubris, which describes how the Emperor Wanli's rule descended into autocracy as an epidemic swept the land and his bureaucracy lost faith. "There have been thirteen dynasties in China," he said. "A lot of what Xi is doing is like the late Ming emperors. People see that and they say, 'Time to go.'"

Holly, a Chinese documentary filmmaker in their late twenties, told me that they recently secured a U.K. visa. "The most important thing for me is freedom. The ability to choose, and to control things around me," Holly said. In the past, they had misgivings about leaving China: "I felt guilty or ashamed. But after the lockdown, and after my friends were leaving, I was, like, 'Well, sometimes we can just take care of ourselves.'"

One afternoon, I waited at a side gate of Peking University, where a metal barricade was watched over by a drowsy guard in a booth. During the pandemic, China closed its campuses to outsiders, and the reopening has been slow. The guard studied a list of visitors until he found me, pointed to a camera that captured my face, and then allowed me through. I was there to see Jia Qingguo, the former dean of the School of International Studies. In his office, he told me that the scarcity of foreign visitors was about more than COVID; the university was increasingly reluctant to allow in reporters from abroad. For a time, he had stopped answering interview requests almost entirely. "I didn't know what to do, so I didn't respond," he said glumly. "I don't know what they're thinking of me now."



"Slowly begin to reawaken the body with thoughts of unread e-mails, piles of dirty laundry, and the kids you have to pick up from school."

• •

Jia spoke with alarm of the trend in relations between the world's two most powerful countries—of the Chinese balloon that was shot down in American territory, of U.S. export controls on technology, of a darkening mood in Beijing. "If you put these together—the economics and the U.S. pressure—a lot of people think that China's current problem is caused by the U.S.," he said. Jia suspects that American politicians' jockeying for the toughest approach to China could heighten the chance of a violent confrontation. "By early next year, we'll have the U.S. Presidential race in full steam," he said. "People are very pessimistic."

The feeling is mutual. President Joe Biden has sent a series of Cabinet officials to repair ties—even as Republican critics complained that the visits looked needy, and the State Department warned ordinary Americans to reconsider visiting China, citing a growing risk of "wrongful detention." In Washington, the mutual antipathy fuels a daunting question: Is a stagnating China more likely to end up at war with America, or less?

The answer may depend on the trajectory of the economic decline. Economists generally agree that the boom years are over, but they disagree—even within the same institution—about how bad things will get. At the Peterson Institute for International Economics, the China specialist Nicholas Lardy expects slow but steady growth; he points out that imports are recovering and Internet companies are hiring again, and that the property slump has not undermined the financial system. "The banks can weather that hit," he said. But Adam Posen, the institute's president, predicts long-range problems. Historically, he notes, autocrats—such as Hugo Chávez, Orbán, and Putin—have tended to achieve high growth for a time, but, eventually, their capricious use of force and favoritism creates a

frustrated, cautious society. Citizens who can't vote out their leaders resort to hoarding cash or sending it abroad. Xi, compared with other autocrats, has a vastly larger, more functional economy, but the dynamics are similar; the zero-COVID policy, in Posen's view, was "a point of almost no return for Chinese economic behavior."

In the darker scenario, China faces "Japanification"—a shrinking workforce, lost decades of growth. It might avoid that with quick, decisive policy changes, but Cai Xia, who was a professor at the élite Central Party School until she broke ranks and moved abroad, in 2020, told me that mid-level administrators have grown paralyzed by fears of a misstep. "Officials are 'lying flat,'" she said. "If there is no instruction from the top, there will be no action from the bottom." It is equally unlikely that change will be inspired from abroad. A Chinese diplomat recently told me that the government was annoyed by Westerners preaching reform. "We will stick to our plan," he said. "The Chinese are stubborn," he added, smiling tightly. "Principles are more important than tangible benefits."

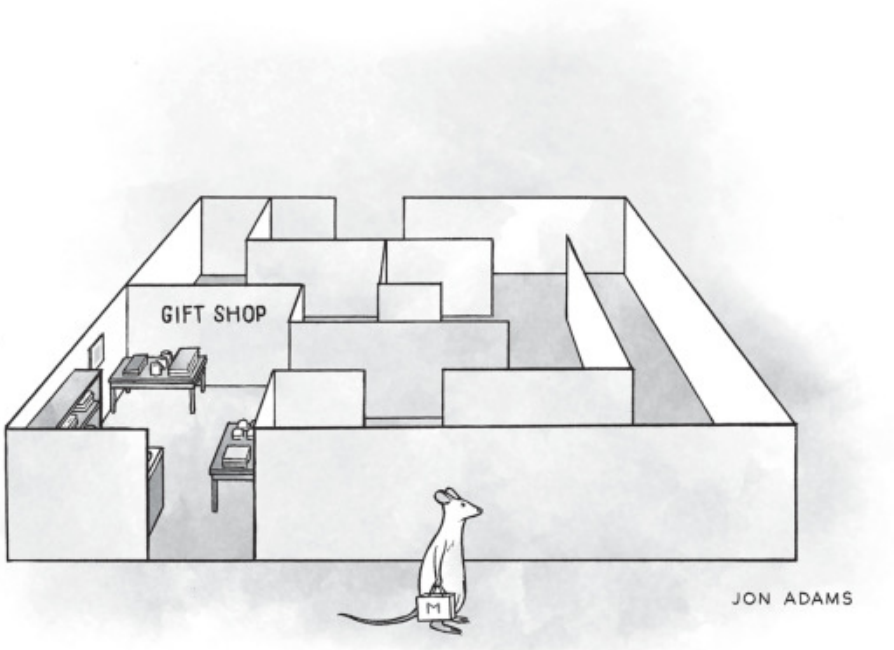
The economist Xu Chenggang told me that he regards the Party's current leaders as political "fundamentalists" who are blind to the risks of doctrinal rigidity. Xu won China's top economics prize in 2013, and four years later left his post at Tsinghua University, where a climate of ideological stricture has set in. He is now a researcher at Stanford.

During the boom years, China made rapid gains in technology using foreign investment and training, as well as rules that required "technology transfer." But the U.S. has narrowed those channels: new export controls cut off China's access to advanced chips, and Biden issued an executive order that bars investors from funding Chinese development of A.I. In response, Xi has repeatedly declared China's ambition to achieve "self-reliance and strength in science and technology." Xu is skeptical. "In the U.S., you have a jungle of free competition, dozens of laboratories competing—no one knows what is going to work," he said. "But the Communist regime will not allow for this. That's the key issue." The Chinese government sank billions of dollars into two failed efforts to build foundries for advanced chips; Chinese chatbots have struggled to compete with ChatGPT, because the Party imposed rules requiring them to uphold "socialist core values." (If you ask ERNIEBot, a Chinese version of ChatGPT, whether Xi Jinping is pragmatic, it replies, "Try a different question.")

In Washington, the ascendant view, in recent years, has been that Xi will respond to slower growth with greater aggression, including a possible invasion or blockade of Taiwan. In a 2022 book, "Danger Zone," the scholars Hal Brands and Michael Beckley popularized a theory called "peak China," which holds that the country is "losing confidence that time is on its side," and might risk a war to make "nationalism a crutch for a wounded regime." A related view, popular among Chinese abroad, is that Xi might attack Taiwan to elevate his status at home and to insulate himself against revenge for his brutality.

But the "diversionary war" theory faces skepticism from some experts on China's military. M. Taylor Fravel, the director of M.I.T.'s Security Studies Program, who conducted the first comprehensive study of China's territorial disputes, told me, "Not only did China not engage in diversion during periods of economic shock or unrest—it often became more conciliatory." When China was isolated after the massacre at Tiananmen Square, Deng told colleagues to be "calm, calm, and more calm," and he repaired troubled relationships with Indonesia, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam. Nobody knows yet if Xi will follow Deng's pattern, but Fravel is wary of a mood in Washington in which, as he put it, "whether China is rising or falling, some people will say they're going to become more aggressive." Attempting to exploit China's economic weakness could backfire, he said: "If China believes people are taking advantage of their insecurity—especially on things they care a lot about—then they may be more willing to use force to restore the credibility of their position."

In testimony before Congress this year, U.S. defense and intelligence officials said they saw no evidence that Xi had imminent plans to attack Taiwan. By most accounts, the more immediate risk is that rising tensions in the South China Sea or the Taiwan Straits could yield an accidental collision that leads to war. After Nancy Pelosi visited the island, in 2022, Chinese leaders launched the most threatening military exercises in decades. Wang Huiyao, a former adviser to China's cabinet and the head of the Center for China and Globalization, a think tank in Beijing, sees the makings of a downward spiral of mutual antagonism. Chinese leaders, he said, "feel they've been provoked. Of course, the U.S. is saying, 'Oh,



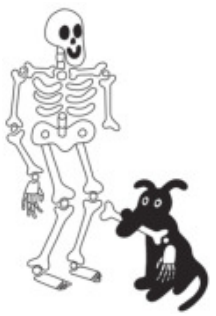
China is doing another big military showdown—they'll never give up using force!' So this reinforces each other, escalating things."

When I saw Nicholas Burns, the U.S. Ambassador to China, he predicted "a competitive, contested relationship for the next ten to twenty years," though he observed that recent high-level meetings had "brought greater stability." Burns anticipates that America will continue to bring home more of its supply chain—a process that politicians call "de-risking"—but warned against following that impulse so far that the two societies lose touch. According to the U.S. Embassy, the number of American students in China has plummeted from several thousand in 2019 to fewer than four hundred today. "You need ballast, and people are the ballast—students, businesspeople, N.G.O.s, journalists," he said. "There's no scenario where divorcing the two countries helps us."

Walk down any street in Beijing before a big day on the political calendar and you'll see a profusion of mantras, emblazoned on posters and brilliant red banners. The era of Xi Thought is rich with pithy aphorisms, which somewhat cryptically remind the public to heed the "Two Establishes," the "Three Imperatives," and the "Four Comprehensives."

Xi has always spoken more bluntly in private. In a speech behind closed doors, shortly after he came to power, he uttered what remains the clearest statement of his vision. "Why did the Soviet Communist Party collapse?" he asked, according to excerpts that circulated among Party members. One reason, he said, was that the Soviets' "ideals and beliefs had wavered." More important, though, "they didn't have the tools of dictatorship." With dogged efficiency, Xi has set out to strengthen belief in the Party and to build the tools of dictatorship. He has succeeded more in the latter than in the former. These days, the most prevalent belief in China is that anyone—from the truest believer to the canniest tycoon—can disappear. This fall, there was fresh evidence: yet another powerful general, the defense minister, Li Shangfu, never arrived at a meeting he was scheduled to attend.

A wily editor who has fought with censors for years told me that people are growing increasingly unwilling to mortgage their rights in exchange for a higher standard of living. Without mentioning Xi's name, the editor said, "To use an expression that's popular online, everyone has a moment when they are 'punched by the iron fist.' Some were shattered by the constitutional amendment in 2018," which removed term limits on Xi. "For others, it was the second reëlection. And for others it was the crackdown on the education industry or on tech. Every person has a different pressure point." As a result, society is not united in its frustrations: "The frustration is fragmented. It's not collapsing all at one point. There is one bit that is cracking here and another bit cracking there."



If public frustration continues to build, there is always the prospect that it will produce more than a short-lived protest with blank pages of paper. But history suggests little chance of a palace coup; since the founding of the People's Republic, in 1949, no head of the Party has been deposed by underlings. (Three have been toppled by Party elders.) For the moment, China's economic problems are unlikely to doom the Party. To make up for its diminishing ties with the West, China is devoting more attention to making deals in the Global South. It now exports more to the developing world than it does to the U.S., Europe, and Japan combined.

For all of China's ambitions to greatness, it faces a consuming struggle to restore the trust and vigor of its own people. The stagnation could pass, as it did for America in the nineteen-eighties, or it could deepen, as it did for the Soviet Union during the same years. (A decade later, one of those empires was gone.) Wuttke's father-in-law was the first Russian Federation Ambassador to China; at a Party reception in 2011, his father-in-law cautioned Chinese comrades against the dangers of hubris. "We were in office for seventy-four years. You are at just about sixty-one," he said, adding, "The last ten years are the worst." As of this year, the Chinese Communists have matched the length of the Soviets' tenure. I asked Wuttke how Americans might misread China from afar. "The twentieth century could have been the German century, but we screwed up—twice," he said. "And the twenty-first century could have been the Chinese century, but they're now running the risk this is not going to happen." Xi, in the minds of some of his most accomplished citizens, has squandered that potential. The entrepreneur said, "Someone has to tell the Americans that the idea that China is going to overtake them is over. This guy has ended that game."

A decade into Xi's campaign for total control, he has awakened China's beliefs, but not in the way he imagined. I spoke with a former banker who moved his family from Shanghai to Singapore, after concluding that his expertise on powerful people and their finances put him at risk. "Even though I love China, the nation is one thing and the government is another—it's a group of individuals with power over the country for a brief period in the grand sweep of history," he said. "I have no intention of overthrowing the government, nor do I have the ability. But there are truths that I believe Chinese citizens have the right to know. We've all been educated to say, 'Better to keep our mouths shut.' But this is wrong. When information doesn't flow, the whole country will go backward."

Xu, the economist who fled China, surprised me by describing this sort of political evolution as "enlightenment." He explained that his father, a prominent physicist and dissident, had spent decades under house arrest, but never lost faith in a comment from Albert Einstein: "The state is made for man, not man for the state. . . . I regard it as the chief duty of the state to protect the individual and give him the opportunity to develop into a creative personality." Xu told me, "Historically, Chinese people didn't know anything about constitutionalism or human rights. The proportion who do now is still small, but the *number* who are enlightened is not small. They know. That is going to be part of the future." ♦

UPSTATE

EMMA CLINE

ILLUSTRATION BY DENNIS ERIKSSON

Before the rental could be confirmed, Djuna wanted Kate's full name and the full name of her boyfriend. Djuna wanted to know the license-plate number of the car they'd be driving. Djuna wanted to remind them, before their arrival, that shoes were not to be worn in the house. Djuna wanted to be very clear, yet again, that no pets were allowed—they would not be bringing any pets, correct?

There was only a small profile photo of Djuna on the Web site, but even from that sliver, with some burly-bearded husband or boyfriend half in the frame, Kate could tell that she was attractive. They didn't live in this house, Djuna and whoever was in the picture with her—it was obvious from the online calendar, how often the place was rented—but the profile said that they lived nearby, would be available if there were any issues.

•

The house was two hours away. It was a hot day, like the inside of a dog's mouth. Kate forgot to pack shorts, so she changed into a pair of Paul's old swim trunks. Paul drove, his hand on Kate's leg.

The car was Paul's family car—his son's surf wax in the cup holder, dog hairs on the back seat. They didn't have to worry anymore about accidentally leaving any damning evidence of Kate behind. Paul had been divorced for almost a year now. He and his ex-wife still shared the car. The dog, with his many medications and nightly steroid shots, had been remanded to the ex's household. A mostly civil détente, these days. Paul didn't want to talk about her or the divorce, newly moral. He had cut his gray hair shorter, too, an almost monkish style. Another kind of penance, Kate thought.

Now Kate spat a piece of gum back into its wrapper, folded the wrapper into a napkin. Then she unscrewed the cap of an empty water bottle and stuffed the gum and napkin inside. Collecting garbage in garbage—efficient, a nesting doll of trash.

"I love driving in the city," Paul said, making the turn onto the highway, but he looked tense, shoulders up around his ears. He had told Kate once that he didn't mind being stuck in traffic, but that also seemed untrue—at least it had the time he'd yelled at a driver who wouldn't let him merge. The vitriol was startling, Paul smiling wildly. "Thank you!" he shouted inside the car, his grin eating his whole face. "Thank you so *fucking* much."

•

The sliding glass door was a wall of coolness at their backs when they sat on the porch to undo their laces, their bags beside them. They used the electronic keypad to open the door with the code Djuna had provided.

The house was small and boxy, the stairs running up along the stone fireplace.

"It's great," Kate said, wandering the rooms in her bare feet. There were plants and a suncatcher squeezing out rainbows of light and a pretty, wood-countered kitchen. A droopy linen hammock was strung across a corner of the living room to pseudo-bohemian effect.

"It's a nice place, huh?" Paul said. He looked pleased, though Kate had been the one who found the listing, set everything up. But Paul had paid—so there was that.

Kate opened the refrigerator. A former guest had left a single Rolling Rock, a half-used bottle of maple syrup drooling in the door. A jar of fizzy-looking mustard that should probably be thrown away. Not by her. She unloaded the beer, the groceries, though they hardly counted as groceries: they'd mostly brought snacks. The kitchen was nice enough, but they would go out to eat. Kate didn't really enjoy cooking and neither did Paul.

•

There were no photos anywhere, no personal effects—the clues came in the books on the shelves, "The Dance of Anger," "The Hyperactive Child." "Mating in Captivity"—the presence of this book, Kate theorized, meant there was an eighty-per-cent chance that someone in the couple had recently cheated, the book part of a strenuous joint effort to rebrand infidelity. Was the perpetrator Djuna, or the bearded husband?

The information packet requested that guests not enter the downstairs closet.

"The internet router is located in this private closet," the instructions read, "but please contact us *first* if there is an issue with the internet."

Of course Kate and Paul looked in the downstairs closet—opened the door to see straw hats, out-of-season clothing, boots, and hanging jackets, an unplugged laser printer on top of a cardboard box. There were leather notebooks in a stack—diaries, Kate discovered when she opened one, and she flipped through the pages for a bit before she realized she was looking for her own name and that was crazy.

•

Jolted by his recent, fifty-fifth birthday, Paul had finally kicked a decades-old cigarette habit. In its place, he ate at least two bars of dark chocolate a day. He broke them into perfect squares with the wrapper still on—to prevent mess. It seemed like another wish for a new self. Now he was dismantling a bar at the counter and reading work e-mails.

"Do people ever go in the hammock, you think?" Kate said. "Or is it just there to be cute?"

She hoisted herself into it. Instantly the fabric swallowed her up. Was it comfortable, lying there, or not comfortable? Not really comfortable.

Kate poked just her head out of the hammock.

"Take a picture."

Paul paused his work on the chocolate bar to hold up his phone.

"Let me see," she said.

Paul came over with chocolate breath and handed her the phone. She zoomed in on her own face. "Eh," she said, though she swiftly sent the photo to herself.

It took not insignificant effort to get out of the hammock.

•

All these towns where there was nothing to do but walk up and down the sidewalks and go in and out of small stores. The ritual seemed important, though, the getting out of the city. Even if you mainly did the same things you would do there, at least here you were relieved of the fatigue of choice. There was only one of everything—one Thai restaurant, one coffee place, one bakery.

They walked all the way to the river. The river didn't look so wide from here. It was a flat, dull green. They stepped out on the rocks, then stepped back.

The train tracks ran right alongside the water.

Paul took multiple photos of the river. Kate hated photos without people in them—no one ever looks at those kinds of pictures again, she said, but Paul disagreed. And maybe Paul did look at his photos—what did Kate know?—maybe

he was regularly scrolling back through his archive of flowers and sunsets and mountaintop views, the collection of things he'd seen, a full moon recorded on his phone as a blurry gape of light.

Paul wanted to go a little way down a private driveway. Just to check it out, he said. He surprised Kate sometimes, what rules he'd break and what rules he'd obey. There were bee boxes stacked in a field. He didn't know what they were—she did. It was satisfying to have the whiff of rural knowledge.

Paul had grown up going to the beach for the summer months. He was passionate about the ocean. This was represented by the blue rubber bracelet he wore on his wrist until Kate made fun of it and he stopped wearing it. It had been some type of charity Clean Up the Ocean thing.

Kate kept looking at the train tracks. It felt as though a train would come barrelling through at any second, and they were both bracing for it. No train came.

Already the day seemed extremely long. They'd walked the length of Main Street. Browsed through any store they could conceivably enter. It was barely lunchtime.

•

There was a swimming hole nearby that was meant to be quieter, more beautiful than the popular swimming hole. A friend had recommended it. There were detailed instructions on a message board about how to get to the special swimming hole, but the Web page wouldn't fully load. You were supposed to park on some other road and hike in—there were coördinates, but they didn't have enough service for Google Maps.

Paul was no help. Why did Kate always end up with people who didn't know what was happening, who were as unsure of themselves as she was?

They just went to the popular swimming hole, finally, after driving for a while in one direction, then turning around, stopping to ask a man in a tollbooth that turned out to be the entrance to a private club. He was listening to the radio and wearing a blue uniform shirt. "You can try that way," he said, pointing to an unmarked dirt road, but neither of them was that kind of person.

They parked with dozens of other cars.

"It's gonna be packed," Paul said, preëmptively annoyed, and they were both, Kate was sure, picturing the better swimming hole they hadn't been able to find and the better versions of themselves who were having a much better time there.

Kate carried their towels and snacks in a paper grocery bag. Paul was older, had raised a family—shouldn't he have thought to bring a tote bag for the weekend? And sunscreen, too. Shouldn't one of them be the kind of person who kept track of the procurement and deployment of such things, the tools that smoothed over life's little discomforts?

They were like Garbage Pail Kids, Kate thought: no sunscreen, no tote, humping along the sunny bank with their paper sack, the threat of its ripping imminent. They'd eaten the salami and bread in their kitchen before heading out—ravenous—and brought what was left, the fat supermarket strawberries and a bag of Lay's and a bottle of pink lemonade, now warm. High-fructose blah blah. Two peaches that weren't very good—Kate smelled the stems and they smelled like nothing.

Some days she ate ten nectarines in a row. They were consistently less disappointing than peaches.

•

The water was cold. They watched some teen-agers jumping off rocks.

"I read a book," Kate said, "where this guy's wife dies after jumping into a swimming hole. Like, she has some terrible spinal injury."

Paul made a neutral sound.

"I think it could happen to me," Kate said. "As punishment."

Paul didn't ask for what; he'd told her that lately he had imagined getting a brain tumor.

•

When she finally went to swim, she shuddered from the cold.

"Look at you," Paul said, already in up to his neck and treading water. "Such a baby."

And now she kept shivering, but she wasn't sure anymore if it was a real impulse or if she was performing in the ways he wanted her to.

Once, early on, Paul had said, Let's tell each other whenever we feel like we're acting false. And Kate had stiffened because suddenly it all seemed false. She stuck her hand back into a container of blueberries and sifted for a fresh one, a firm one, and agreed, but the air in the apartment felt changed and so she looked at her phone.

•

More teen-agers showed up. Their antics were nerve-racking: there was much climbing of rocks, many daredevil jumps. The rocks had furry caps of algae that looked slippery. Kate tried to stop anticipating calls for help.

The snacks were long gone, the paper grocery bag stuffed with their trash. Paul's nose was getting sunburned.

"Ready?" he said.

•

"This way," Paul said, and Kate ducked under a branch to follow him up from the bank. She carried her clothes and her shoes, the towels in her arms: she kept checking to make sure she hadn't dropped anything.

Back in the parking lot, she stood at the passenger door. The asphalt started to burn her bare feet. She shifted from foot to foot.

Paul had hidden the car keys in the front right tire well.

"They're gone," he said, stricken.

"Gone?" Her arms were full. She wanted to be inside the car, in the air-conditioning.

She pulled at the door handle.

Paul was on his knees, checking the ground.

Kate pulled the door handle again. She dropped her shoes on the asphalt and shoved her feet half in. A dread was making itself known—this wasn't fun.

"Oh, Jesus," Paul said, standing up. "This isn't my car."

Kate looked at the back seat. There was stuff in there but it was unclear if it was their stuff. Maybe it belonged to Paul's children? There was a blue towel and a travel neck pillow. Were these objects familiar or unfamiliar?

"Seriously?"

"Look."

And, yes, there was exactly the same

car across the parking lot. This car was the same make as Paul's car, the same color, but it was not Paul's car.

They had come up a different path to the parking lot and got turned around.

"Jesus," he said as they walked over. "I was freaking out."

"And here we go," he said, holding up the keys from the tire well.

"You sure this is our car?" she said.

"Are you joking?"

Kate got in without responding and kicked her feet out of her untied shoes. She didn't say that the car felt weird, like a totally alien car—though it was their car, because here was her little bottle of trash and there were the dog hairs stippling the back seat.

•

Paul had Norcos from his son's wisdom-teeth extraction and they split one back at the house, both of them wet-haired from the shower. They lay on the carpet in front of the fireplace, though it was too hot to actually make a fire. Kate had two beers; she felt her eyes go a bit dreamy.

"We should get in," Paul said. "The hammock."

Neither of them moved from the carpet.

They had sex there on the floor, mostly to underscore to each other that they were indeed on vacation.

"Uh-oh."

She had bled a bit on the rug, she saw afterward. Djuna seemed like the type who would notice and charge a fee. She looked up how to get bloodstains out of carpet—dish soap. There was only the hippie kind in the house, perhaps not toxic enough to clean anything. But Kate scrubbed hard—the stain relaxed, then mostly disappeared.

•

Nearly time for dinner. Finally. The hours up here seemed to pass at half speed.

An artist had bought a building in town and turned it into a nice restaurant, the kind of place where the waiters had to wear striped shirts and linen half-aprons and serve the usual roster of updated classics, the roast chicken and the parsnip mash. They'd made a 5 P.M. reservation, embarrassing, but they would have gone earlier if it were possible.

They were lying on the floor, talking.

Paul's eldest daughter was getting a nose job. She had just turned seventeen. This bothered Kate to a degree she couldn't explain.

"Can't she just wait?" she said. "She might change her mind."

"I don't want to hear about it again," Paul said.

"I just—if you let her do this, then what's next?"

Paul seemed tired and on the edge of angry.

"Never mind," Kate said. It wasn't in her purview anyway. Sometimes she was acutely aware of the absolute privacy conferred by Paul's marriage, or the ghost of his marriage. They could stay together forever, Paul and Kate, and there would still be some core that would remain untouchable to her.

She was going to change the subject, but then a noise drew their attention outside.

A car was pulling into the driveway.

Now the car was parking right next to their car.

It was Djuna, Kate recognized her right away. Oh, God. Was she going to come inside? The stain on the rug was gone, but neither of them was wearing pants.

Kate and Paul had both hunched down out of the woman's sight line.

"Close the curtains," Paul hissed.

"She'll know we just closed them because she's here," she said.

They were both whispering urgently.

"So?" he said. "She should have warned us she was showing up."

Kate watched the woman get out of the car, but she didn't come to the door. She was going to the small outdoor shed. She unlocked the padlock. She didn't glance up at the house.

"What's she doing?" Paul said.

"Hold on."

Before Kate pulled the curtains closed, she looked out again—the doors of the outdoor shed were wide open now, Djuna busy moving boxes out onto the grass. Doing what, exactly? Not their business.

They kept crouching on the carpet.

"How long is she gonna be out there?"

"Not like we were going anywhere," Kate said. Their dinner reservation was still a half hour away.

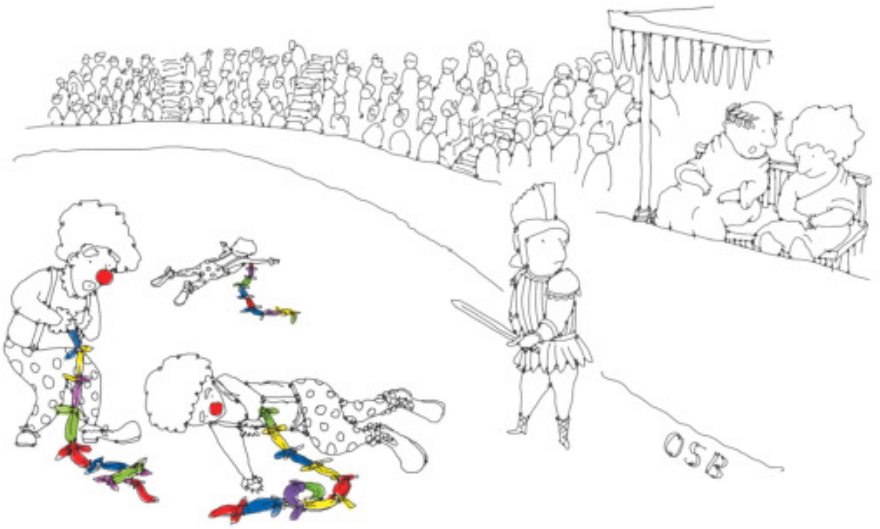
The feeling of being trapped settled in. Although it hadn't occurred to them to, say, sit out on the porch and admire the changing light, now that they couldn't do such a thing it seemed very unfair, Djuna's presence. Much better to feel thwarted.

•

It took them longer than it should have to get dressed. They'd be a little late for their reservation. The restaurant was only a ten-minute walk away—no shoulder on the road, most of the way there, but there wasn't that much traffic.

Kate put on her jacket. She ran

"Latte for a guy you're sure ordered after you."



"Disappointing. I thought humor would be a more effective weapon."

• •

her fingers through her damp hair.

Paul was lagging, as usual. Kate waited for him on the porch.

It was lavender outside, the nice evening light. The insects hazing in the grass and brambles. Kate bent to put on her shoes, and had nearly straightened up before she realized that Djuna was standing at the base of the porch steps.

"Oh."

Kate had forgotten about Djuna. She smiled to cover how startled she was. "I didn't see you, sorry."

No response.

Kate waited for the woman to introduce herself. The woman didn't. Paul would be out any moment, and that would be good, Kate thought, he'd break this strange tension.

"Sorry," the woman said, finally. "That's mine? Is that my coat?"

Kate looked down at herself. "My coat?"

"Is that mine?"

Kate smiled at her, dumbly. "Um, no, it's my coat."

"Did you go in the downstairs closet?"

Were there cameras or something? Her face got hot. "No."

" 'Cause I have that coat in the closet. That exact coat."

Kate looked down at herself again. "Yeah, sorry. This is my coat. It's, like, a pretty popular style of coat," she added, in what sounded like a desperate, fake voice.

It was Kate's coat, she'd had it since college, so why did she suddenly have the fear that she had stolen it from this woman?

"Do you want to go, like, check that your coat is still in the closet?"

"Sorry," Djuna said. "Sorry."

Her eyes were squinted still, unpleasantly, such a pretty woman looking very unpretty.

Paul finally emerged onto the porch.

"Oh, hi," he said, smiling at Djuna. "It's such a great house. Thanks again."

"Mm."

Djuna made a face that Kate was familiar with, downloading the information of Kate and Paul's age difference. Though the disapproval usually wasn't this visible, this obvious.

Paul darted a glance at Kate.

"Well, we're heading to dinner. Have a good night," Paul said.

•

"What was that," he murmured to Kate as they walked past Djuna's car.

"Wait a sec."

Kate didn't want to say anything until they were entirely out of Djuna's sight line. They turned right out of the driveway and headed toward town.

Kate looked back: Djuna was hidden behind the trees. She waited an extra beat anyway before she said anything.

•

The restaurant was staffed by good-looking students from the nearby college, their skin ruddy with the health they were intent on destroying, cigarette packs sticking out of their back pockets. Their waiter recited the specials off his notepad.

They both got cocktails—Kate pointed at the menu, rather than say the humiliating name of the cocktail out loud.

As she drank, she watched the people walking past the tall windows. Expecting that Djuna would be among them. She wasn't.

At the bar was a young guy, maybe a few years younger than Kate. He was some kind of volunteer paramedic, sitting, in his uniform, on the very edge of his stool, visibly pleased with himself. He was loud, addressing the bartender and the whole room at the same time.

"This car just flipped," the guy said, "totally on its roof. Like, full on."

The bartender watched him talk with a perfunctory expression of interest, all her actual energy expended in the busy motions of her hands.

"Could have been a lot worse," the guy said.

He had an expectant shine on his cheeks, anticipating some kind of response—admiration, Kate guessed. She accidentally caught his eye and looked away quickly.

"Young men are horrible," she said.

•

She was drunk after a bottle of wine at dinner, plus the embarrassing cocktails. Maybe this was actually a fun trip.

They were going to put a movie on back at the house.

"Who's watching this crap," Paul said, reclining on the bed, scrolling through the Recently Watched on his laptop.

Kate said it was just his son, probably.

She did not mention that she'd given Paul's Netflix password to her ex—Paul's algorithm now thoroughly torqued.

They couldn't agree on a movie. And it was still so early—they could walk to the pub. Sunday was open-mike night, they'd learned from a lively bulletin board in town. And they had to go to the bakery for breakfast tomorrow—their friend had insisted. Blue-corn pancakes. These sounded foul, but everyone, they had been assured, loved them.

Sure, they would do all these things. All these activities. Kate just wanted to close her eyes for a second. A quick nap before they went out again—twenty min-

utes, that was all she needed, a brief time-out to metabolize some of this alcohol.

•

When she opened her eyes, it was one in the morning.

Paul was awake, still fully dressed, reading in bed beside her. The lamp was on.

"Fuck," Kate said.

"I know," Paul said. "I just woke up, too. I was trying to let you sleep."

"I'm starving," she said. "Do you think anything is still open?"

"Definitely not."

Kate groaned. "Now I'm too hungry to fall asleep."

"Let's just try, O.K.?" Paul put away his book.

Kate unbuttoned her jeans and kicked them down her legs.

They stared up at the ceiling. After a while, Paul turned out the light.

"Let's just wake up really early tomorrow," Paul said in the darkness. His voice sounded strained. "O.K.? Then we can nap in the afternoon but we'll still be on schedule."

Try to sleep. Kate thought this over and over. Just close your eyes. Just fall asleep.

•

Already past eleven by the time they woke up. There would be no blue-corn pancakes, no sourdough toast or cardamom buns or cappuccinos. There would be no food at all—everything was closed on Mondays, it turned out.

They had watery coffee from the rental's blighted Moka pot. Kate had some of Paul's chocolate. It left a strange film on her tongue. Maybe cigarettes weren't even that bad, Kate thought, forcing herself to swallow the tasteless chocolate. They'd recently watched a documentary about a singer who'd smoked his whole life and died at eighty. Didn't seem terrible. Unless you were eighty, probably, and then it would seem terrible.

•

They drove around looking for something that was open. There was a farm stand in a low, new-looking building, with a burgundy corrugated-metal roof. So much of the new construction around here seemed to be painted that same burgundy or forest green.

Some of the fruit had stickers on it. It looked pallid. Kate suspected but did not say that none of it was grown there.

There were baked goods wrapped tightly in Saran Wrap and jars of honey with the farm logo and bags of multicolored dried pasta, also stickered with the farm logo.

They got a slab of brownie and an oatmeal cookie.

Paul insisted on buying a bag of apples.

"It's not even the season," Kate said, peevishly.

Paul took a few bites of an apple in the car.

There was no crunch.

"It's good," he said, brightly.

•

They decided to go to the wilderness preserve. Another recommendation from their friend. They drove for a long time, looking for the preserve. Kate worried, privately, that Paul was lost. She had started to worry more about this lately: that Paul was lost, that he was, in some fundamental way, disoriented.

The wilderness preserve, they discovered, was also closed on Mondays.

•

They had a just O.K. dinner at the Mexican restaurant the next town over. The chips were warm and bad,

their warmth basically cancelling out their badness. And it was fun whenever they made the wordless agreement, as a couple, that they would drink. Really drink. The mutual suspension of judgment was heady, like a jaunt through international waters, some temporarily ungovernable zone. If they'd had cigarettes, Kate was sure, Paul would have smoked them.

On the way out, Kate took a pocketful of cheap peppermint candies from the bowl by the register and crunched through them on the drive home, the windows open to the swimmy dark.

•

Had Djuna been here? While they were out?

No, that was crazy. But something seemed different in the house, shifted around.

"Like, wasn't your book on the couch?" Kate said.

"You're just being drunk," Paul said. With fondness.

Kate was drunk, it was true, and, because she was drunk, it didn't seem so bad. That Djuna had been in the house. Because she definitely had been.

They split another Norco.

"We have to leave by 10 A.M., O.K.?"

Djuna had been very clear: if you stayed past ten in the morning, she charged you for another night.

"10:01? 10:02? You think she's just lying in wait to catch you?" Kate said. "Or it's like those minibars in hotels that have sensors, so if you even lift up a Coke they bill you."

The windows were dark, reflecting the lights of the living room.

Djuna wasn't out there. Obviously. Still, Kate got up to close the curtains. She sat in the hammock and let herself dangle for a while.

It smelled like other people's bodies.

"Does anyone ever wash this," she said, tonelessly.

"Probably not."

Kate heaved herself out. They still had a few beers left in the fridge.

"Want one?"

Paul did. While Kate opened the beers, Paul got himself into the hammock, ass first. One foot still touched the ground.

He kicked to rock the hammock back and forth.

"Nice," he said.

Paul looked at the ceiling as the hammock rocked.

Was he having a good time, Kate wondered.

When they were in the car, Paul's son had FaceTimed to ask for the frickin' Wi-Fi password 'cause the frickin' Internet wasn't working again, and it was so frickin' annoying. Paul had soothed his son with shocking patience. "It's a zero, not an 'O.' And uppercase

'P,'" he'd said into the phone. "*Uppercase*."

Back in the city, the ex-wife would be moistening the dog's food with a little goat's milk. Readying the steroid shot. It hadn't even been a question, whether Paul would help take care of the dog. Despite the monkish haircut.

The hammock was rocking faster now. Paul peeping out as he swung.

"Are you ever, like, What happened to me?" Kate said. "Why am I in this stupid upstate house with a stupid Tulum hammock?"

"No."

Maybe Paul really didn't regret any of it.

He kept rocking. He stretched back, surrendering himself fully to the fabric.

It's not even that nice, Kate was about to say, of lying in a hammock. Before she could say it, one end of the hammock snapped.

Paul fell to the ground.

•

Oh, God.

The first instinct was to laugh. But it wasn't funny.

Paul groaned.

His eyes closed, then sputtered back open. Kate was kneeling beside him. "Shit," she said. "Shit. Baby?"

He looked drained of life.

Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck.

The impulse to touch him, her hands hovering.

She needed to call someone—she understood that.

She had to find the address of the house in the e-mail from Djuna. To say where they were.

•

Kate had no memory of letting them into the house, the paramedics, but now they were here, efficient and relentless and managing the situation. They'd suggested that she give them some space. Maybe the suggestion had been more of a demand. She stood dumbly by the fireplace.

She didn't want to ask yet. If Paul was O.K. And they would have said something, wouldn't they? If he really wasn't?

They were moving him carefully onto a hard plastic stretcher. Like in that sleepover game, Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board, multiple paramedics crowded around to lift Paul's prone body. It took an excruciatingly long time. He was blinking. He said something quietly.

A good sign, surely.

Kate should find Paul's phone. She didn't have his kids' phone numbers.

It was only in that lull, reminding herself to look around for Paul's phone, that she saw a young man hanging back, crouched by the fireplace. His outfit was a little different from the others'. And it took a second before she placed him—the young man from the restaurant bar. In his volunteer-paramedic uniform. A walkie-talkie was squalling on his belt holster.

He watched the proceedings intently. Ready to leap into action.

"Easy does it," the young man said, as the others strapped Paul to the board. None of them responded, or even acknowledged him.

Why was he here, the young man? Lurking, useless?

Kate tried to ignore him, tried to concentrate whatever scant faculties she currently possessed on the unfolding situation.

Her eye was drawn to the carpet. She stared at it.

The stain, she realized, was still there. Faint. But still visible.

•

The young man drove the car along the highway, Kate in the passenger seat. The car was just the man's hatchback, nothing special, following behind the ambulance that carried Paul; for some reason, they had not allowed her to ride in the ambulance with Paul.

But the movies, Kate had wanted to say. They let everyone do it in the movies.

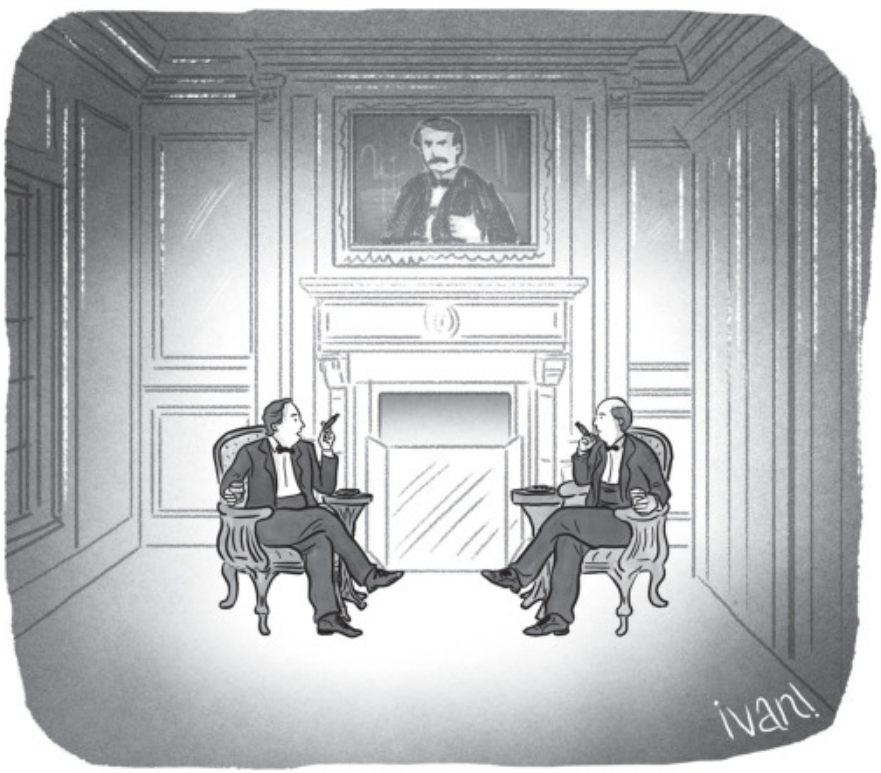
Maybe she hadn't insisted with enough vigor. Maybe there was a correct way to act in these situations and she was already performing her role in this crisis badly.

The ambulance had its lights going, up ahead, but not the siren. Because there weren't any other cars on the road, probably. But it did make her anxious, this lack of urgency.

At what point did she need to let Paul's kids know? God—or the ex-wife.

Kate checked her pocket again to make sure she had Paul's phone.

"He'll be fine," the young man said



"My father and I are very different people. While he was a greedy, soul-crushing capitalist hellbent on the destruction of the middle class, you'll notice that I don't have a mustache."

in a chatty tone. "I've seen people walk away from, like, really worse stuff. Like car crashes. Full-on rollovers."

"Mm."

They shouldn't have opened the closet door, Kate thought. As if that had caused everything. A dumb thought. But maybe this was how it felt, when life cleaved into the before and after—it was this dumb.

The young man kept talking. Something about the car accidents they had up here, a new measure from the county to put in a roundabout. She wasn't listening. The ambulance was no longer in front of them. How had he managed to lose it on this empty road? Drive, she wanted to mutter at him, like in the movies, but she stayed quiet.

Paul would be fine. They'd be together soon.

She tried to seem occupied with staring out the passenger-side window.

"You're looking out like there's something to see," the young man said, cheerily.

It was black out there, it was true. Nothing to see but varying shades of darkness. Maybe he'd meant it as a joke, and probably he'd be smiling, if she glanced over to check.

But something stopped her. She didn't want to look over at the young man. It seemed important that she not look at him. Why had she just got in the car with this stranger? Had the paramedics even told her to do it? She couldn't remember. Maybe he wasn't taking her to the hospital at all.

Her own phone rang in her lap, cutting through the quiet.

The screen showed an unfamiliar number.

She answered the call.

"Hello?" Kate said into the silence.

She should have insisted on staying with Paul, she realized. That had been another mistake.

"Hello?" Kate said again.

"Excuse me," the voice said. "Excuse me," the voice repeated. "Is this Kate?"

It was Djuna, and she had stopped by the house (why had she stopped by the house?) and found all the doors open and the lights on and she was mad, was the gist, and Djuna would be contacting the Web site in the morning, if not the police. She sounded nearly hysterical. It's about respect, Djuna was saying. You people, she said.

"Everything O.K.?" the young man asked Kate in a stage whisper, his face ghoulish in the wan light. Kate saw, then, that they were parked in front of a hospital, under the concrete arch of the Emergency entrance.

Kate put her hand on the car door. She nodded at the man, the phone still pressed to her ear, Djuna's unending stream of invectives slithering into her brain. She'd explain the situation to Djuna, was about to explain, but, when she did, it would already be too late: Kate had taken receipt of the message, understood the call for the curse it was.

•

Almost a month later, Paul was installed back in their apartment, subject to the daily ministrations of a therapy team, who moved each of his limbs in steady, maddeningly slow arcs.

There had been so many loads of laundry those first days they were back. Endless legal pads that Kate had filled with notes and names and instructions and underlined dosage reminders and the anxious, pointless rows of checkered boxes that she had doodled in moments of stress since she was a child.

She kept her phone on her at all times: there were innumerable calls, crucial points to follow up on, each thread equally important. Her phone had never seen so much use. The constant notifications, that buoyant little ping that signalled a new e-mail, a resonant chime like optimism itself, and it was a time when the situation was still fluid, subject to change, and so Kate should have jumped at the sound: someone might still deliver good news.

It could be the second-opinion doctor; it could be the out-of-network neurosurgeon. It could be a friend of a friend sending along details of some experimental intervention that would tilt them toward a happier ending.

Yet she had noticed a slight hesitance to check her phone, to face what might have arrived: Kate was afraid. It was illogical, a stupid fear circling mutely below the relentless din of the ongoing crisis—but it was there. She was afraid of Djuna.

Kate knew she was being crazy. Knowing this didn't help.

Kate had explained everything to Djuna, on that phone call. Or everything she knew at that time, the night at the hospital that already seemed many aeons ago. There was no world in which Djuna would pose any kind of problem.

If anything, Djuna was the one who should be afraid, the one losing sleep, just waiting for some lawyer's missive. Djuna should be terrified.

Maybe she *had* stolen Djuna's jacket, Kate thought, idly, dumping the dregs of Paul's meal-replacement shake down the drain. She caught herself. She hadn't. She told herself again more firmly: she definitely hadn't.

She would never admit it to anyone, this embarrassing Djuna fixation—there was no real way to say it.

What was she afraid of, exactly? What could Djuna even do? Leave them a bad review?

Yes. Maybe. And maybe it would say everything—that was the part that Kate couldn't really explain. Somehow Djuna would know the things they had done wrong, all the mistakes, recent and ancient, they had ever made. She would know the ugly little ways they'd used each other, the petty, private cudgels they'd made of their own emotions. Had they ever loved each other, she and Paul? Yes, Kate thought, dully. Once, Paul had said, as a joke, "I love you as much as I'm capable of loving anyone." And Kate had laughed and said something like "Me, too." But there was some part of her that knew it was true. Djuna would know it, too. Djuna would see right to their core, inventory their paltry souls, and make these findings known. They weren't good people. And Djuna knew it. They'd got what they deserved.

•

Kate kept the windows shut in the apartment and the air-conditioning on. The air was stale. Paul's eyes roved around the room, then landed on Kate's. His pupils dilated, his eyes wettened. Kate squeezed his hand.

"There, there," she said, or thought she said. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Emma Cline on performative vacationing.

BOOKS

TRAPPED

The life and death of Tupac Shakur.

BY HUA HSU

In just five years of stardom, Tupac Shakur released four albums, three of which were certified platinum, and acted in six films. He was the first rapper to release two No. 1 albums in the same year, and the first to release a No. 1 album while incarcerated. But his impact on American culture in the nineteen-nineties is explained less by sales than by the fierce devotion that he inspired. He was a folk hero, born into a family of Black radicals, before becoming the type of controversy-clouded celebrity on the lips of politicians and gossip columnists alike. He was a new kind of sex symbol, bringing together tenderness and bruising might, those delicate eyelashes and the "FUCK THE WORLD" tattoo on his upper back. He was the reason a generation took to pairing bandannas with Versace. He is also believed to have been the first artist to go straight from prison, where he was serving time on a sexual-abuse charge, to the recording booth and to the top of the charts.

"I give a holla to my sisters on welfare/Tupac cares, if don't nobody else care," he rapped on his track "Keep Ya Head Up," from 1993, one of his earliest hits, with the easy swagger of someone convinced of his own righteousness. On weepy singles like "Brenda's Got a Baby" (1991) and "Dear Mama" (1995), he was an earnest do-gooder, standing with women against misogyny. Yet he was just as believable making anthems animated by spite, including "Hit 'Em Up" and "Against All Odds"—both songs that Shakur recorded in the last year of his life, with a menacing edge to his voice as he calls out his enemies by name. That he contained such wild contradictions somehow seemed to attest to his authenticity, his greatest trait as an artist.

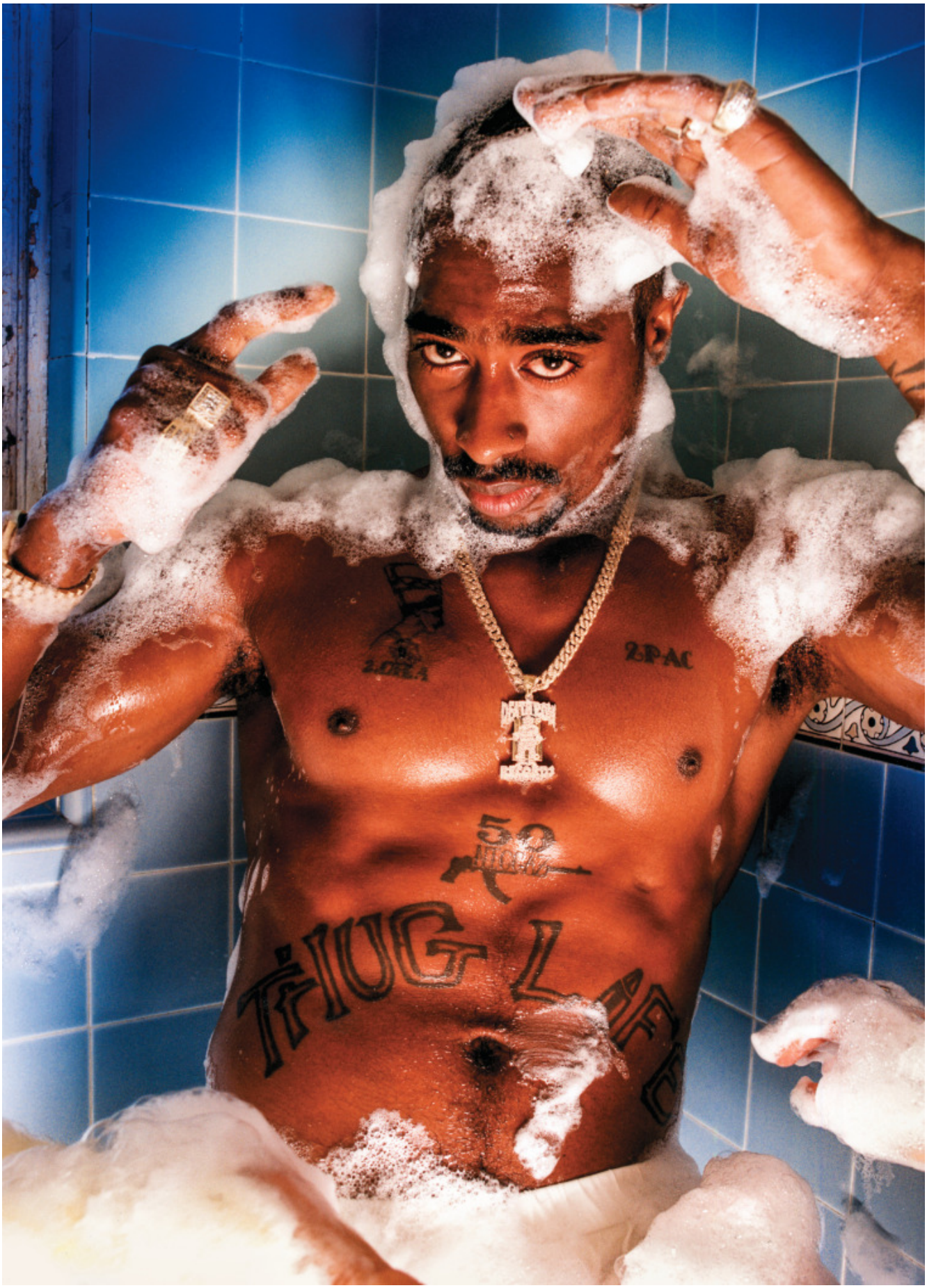
He died at the age of twenty-five, following a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas, in 1996. Until last month, nobody had been charged in the murder, despite multiple eyewitnesses—a generation's initiation into the world of conspiracy theories. An entire cottage industry arose to exalt him. Eight platinum albums were released posthumously. His mystique spawned movies, museum exhibitions, academic conferences, books; one volume reprinted flirtatious, occasionally erotic letters he'd mailed to a woman while incarcerated. There appears to be no end to the content that he left behind, and it has been easy to make him seem prophetic: here's a clip of him foretelling Black Lives Matter, and here's one warning of Donald Trump's greed. Every new era gets to ask what might have happened had Shakur survived.

This plenitude is the challenge faced by "Tupac Shakur: The Authorized Biography" (Crown), a book that the novelist and screenwriter Staci Robinson began working on nearly a quarter century ago. She first met Shakur, who attended the same Bay Area high school that she had, when he was seventeen. In the late nineties, at his mother's behest, Robinson began interviewing his friends and family, though the project was soon put on hold. She was asked to return to it a few years ago, and was given access to unpublished materials.

It's a reverential and exhaustive telling of Shakur's story, leaning heavily on the perspective of his immediate family, featuring pages reproduced from the notebooks he kept in his teens and twenties. The biography's publication follows "Dear Mama: The Saga of Afeni and Tupac Shakur," a documentary series that premièred, on FX, in April. Robinson was an executive producer on "Dear Mama," which drew on the same archive of estate-approved, previously unreleased materials as her book, and the works share a common purpose: to complicate Shakur without demystifying him.

She begins, as the artist himself would have preferred it, with his mother. Afeni Shakur was born Alice Faye Williams on January 10, 1947, in Lumberton, North Carolina; about twelve years later she moved to the South Bronx. Williams was academically gifted and attended the High School of Performing Arts, in Manhattan, though she felt out of place among her more affluent classmates and eventually dropped out. In the late sixties, she became interested in Black history and Afrocentric thinking, took the Yoruba name Afeni, and joined a local chapter of the Black Panthers. In 1968, she married Lumumba Shakur—and into a family of political radicals. His father, Salahdeen Shakur, was a revolutionary leader who'd worked closely with Malcolm X. The Shakurs were such a force that others in their circle adopted their surname as a mark of allegiance.

In April, 1969, prosecutors charged her and twenty other Black Panthers with participating in a plot to kill policemen and to bomb police stations and other public places throughout the city. The police relied on undercover informants, one of whom Afeni had long suspected. As Robinson writes, this "was



DAVID LACHAPELLE / CONTOUR / GETTY; OPPOSITE: LALALIMOLA

In 1996, not long after getting out of prison, Shakur modelled for David LaChapelle in the photo shoot "Becoming Clean."

the beginning of what would become a lifelong 'trust nobody' mentality."

The defendants became known as the Panther 21. Supporters raised enough money to get Afeni out on bail. "Because I was articulate, they felt that I would be able to help get them out if I got out first," she recalled. When the case went to trial, in 1970, Afeni, who was pregnant, defended herself and supported her comrades from the stand. She was clever, charismatic, and relentless in the courtroom, helping her fellow-Panthers gain acquittal in May, 1971. The journalist Murray Kempton, who covered the trial, wrote that Afeni spoke "as though she were bearing a prince."

Her "trust nobody" mentality was encoded into Tupac Shakur's very identity. He was born Lesane Parish Crooks in East Harlem in June, 1971, and Robinson explains that the name, borrowed from Afeni's cellmate, Carol Crooks, was meant to protect him from being seen as a "Panther baby." Meanwhile, Afeni's marriage collapsed when Lumumba learned that she had been seeing other men; Tupac's biological father, whose identity would remain a mystery for years, was a man named Billy Garland.

From the beginning, Afeni saw her son—whom she would rename Tupac Amaru, for the Peruvian revolutionary—as a "soldier in exile." Robinson depicts her as a devoted, and at times demanding, mother. She enrolled him at a progressive preschool in Greenwich Village—but withdrew him after she came to pick him up and saw him standing on a table and dancing like James Brown. "Education is what my son is here for, not to entertain you all," she told his teacher. Later that night, as she spanked her son, she reminded him, "You are an independent Black man, Tupac."

In 1975, Afeni married an adopted member of the Shakur clan, the revolutionary Mutulu Shakur, with whom she had a daughter, Sekyiwa. Despite gestures toward a conventional life, Afeni couldn't shake her experiences in the sixties, especially her sense of mistrust and vulnerability. She split from Mutulu in the early eighties and moved with Tupac and Sekyiwa to Baltimore, where she struggled with addiction and a larger sense of disillusionment. "It was a war and we lost," she later explained. "Your side lost means that your point lost. . . . That the point that won was that other point."

Shakur sometimes felt that his mother "cared about 'the' people more than 'her' people." He attended the Baltimore School for the Arts, with the hope of becoming an actor, and fell in with an artsy crowd that included Jada Pinkett. Robinson sees this as a period of self-discovery. He was into poetry and wore black nail polish, recruited classmates for the local chapter of the Young Communist League, and obsessively listened to Don McLean's "Vincent," a feathery tribute to the misunderstood genius of van Gogh, who had "suffered" for his sanity: "This world was never meant for one / As beautiful as you."

Just before his senior year of high school, Tupac and Afeni moved to California, where they would be closer to Sekyiwa, who had gone to live with family friends just north of San Francisco. "He taught us a lot about Malcolm X and Mandela," a local d.j. recalled, "and we taught him a lot about the streets." Shakur eventually befriended members of Digital Underground, an Oakland hip-hop group that took inspiration from the energy and the eclecticism of seventies funk. He worked primarily as a dancer before earning a guest verse on Digital Underground's 1991 hit "Same Song."

In the early nineties, making it through hip-hop's hypercompetitive gantlet didn't guarantee stability. Robinson writes that Shakur considered leaving music for a career in political organizing. His modest, local fame got him a record deal, but it didn't insulate him from the troubles facing most young Black males. In October, 1991, he was stopped by the police for jaywalking in downtown Oakland. After a brief argument, in which the officers made light of his name, the rapper was put in a choke hold, slammed against the pavement, and then charged with resisting arrest. (He sued the city of Oakland, settling out of court.)

That November, he released his début album, "2Pacalypse Now," drawing on the slow-rolling, synthesizer-driven funk of the West Coast. His political convictions gave shape to his anger; there was a brightness to his voice which made tales of police brutality, such as "Trapped" ("too many brothers daily headed for the big pen"), seem like an opportunity to organize, not a reason for resignation. "2Pacalypse Now" gained notoriety when Vice-President Dan Quayle demanded that the rapper's record label recall it, after a self-professed Tupac fan shot a state trooper in Texas. Among aficionados, meanwhile, Shakur became better known for "Brenda's Got a Baby," which he wrote after reading a newspaper story about a twelve-year-old Black girl who put her newborn down a trash chute. Shakur avoids judgment, instead pointing to larger forces at play: "It's sad, 'cause I bet Brenda doesn't even know / Just 'cause you're in the ghetto doesn't mean you / Can't grow."

At the heart of the Tupac Shakur mythology is how much of his artistic persona was the result of moments in which he imagined what it might be like to walk in another's shoes. It speaks to how empathetic—but also how impressionable—he could be. It's something his fans often debate: Were there simply some poses he could never shake? While working on what became his début album, he had been filming "Juice," Ernest Dickerson's movie about four young men juggling friendship and street ambition in Harlem. He played Roland Bishop, whose devil-may-care drive distinguishes him from his pals, and leads him to betray them. Shakur studied Method acting while in high school, and some believe Bishop was the beginning of a series of more sinister characters that Shakur absorbed into his persona.

There are a few clips on YouTube of speeches that Shakur delivered in the early nineties, and they are among the most riveting performances he ever gave. In one, he addresses the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement at a banquet in Atlanta. Shakur, introduced as a "second-generation revolutionary," regards the room of middle-aged activists, some of whom might have fought alongside his mother, with a punk irreverence. "It's on, just like it was on when you was young," he says, casting himself as the new face of the struggle. "How come now that I'm twenty years old, ready to start some shit up, everybody telling me to calm down?" He keeps apologizing for cursing before cursing some more, making light of their respectability politics. "We coming up in a totally different world. . . . This is not the sixties."

He talked about an initiative called 50 N.I.G.G.A.Z.—a backronym for "Never Ignorant, Getting Goals Accom-

plished"—in which he would recruit one young Black man in each state to build a community-organizing network. This eventually became T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E. ("The Hate U Gave Little Infants Fuck Everybody"). The approach was inspired by the Black Panthers and sought to mend the divisions engendered by gang life. By the time he released his triumphant 1993 album, "Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.," he seemed resolute in his pursuit of politics by other means.

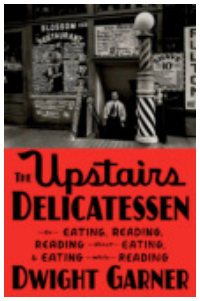
That fall, he went to New York to film "Above the Rim," the story of a talented basketball player trying to steer clear of a local drug dealer who has taken an interest in his success. Shakur was the villain, and to shape the role he spent time with Jacques (Haitian Jack) Agnant, a local gangster. Agnant was present on a night that became pivotal to Shakur's life. That November, Shakur, Agnant, and two others were accused of sexual assault by a woman the rapper had met a few days earlier at a club. Shakur claimed to have fallen asleep in an adjoining room, and to have played no role in the alleged abuse.

"When the charge first came up," he explained in an interview for *Vibe* magazine, "I hated black women. I felt like I put my life on the line. At the time I made 'Keep Ya Head Up,' nobody had no songs about black women. I put out 'Keep Ya Head Up' from the bottom of my heart. It was real, and they didn't defend it. I felt like it should have been women all over the country talking about, 'Tupac couldn't have did that.' "

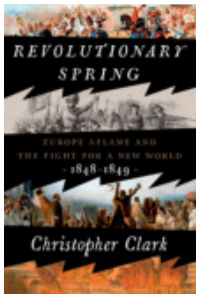
This is a challenging moment to weave into a largely flattering biography. Biographies tend to make a life into a series of inevitable outcomes. At times, Robinson's book invests more in exhaustive detail than in a sense of interiority. We get the family and friends lobbying on Shakur's behalf. "He was not just angry, but *insulted* by the charge," his aunt explains to Robinson. The author continues, "Afeni felt sympathy for the woman, but she never doubted that Tupac was innocent." (Robinson notes that his accuser "would tell a different story.")

A song like "Wonda Why They Call U Bitch" (addressed to a "sleazy," "easy" gold-digger) might be rationalized as so much toxic bravado. It's much harder to explain away acts of coercion. Fans and journalists struggled with this question at the time. In June, 1995, *Vibe*

BRIEFLY NOTED



The Upstairs Delicatessen, *by Dwight Garner (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. Garner, whose book reviews are a highlight of the *Times* culture pages, serves up a commonplace book composed of literary quotations, advice for living, recipes, and a heaping side order of memoir. The assortment makes it clear that, in his reading and at the table, Garner, like A. J. Liebling before him, is a man of immense appetites. He likes his dishes unpretentious—his yearning for chili dogs is at least as powerful as his love of oysters—and his tastes as a reader range from thrillers centered on hardboiled boozers to "Ulysses," in which grilled mutton kidneys thrill Leopold Bloom, with their "tang of faintly scented urine." Garner's mind—his "upstairs delicatessen"—is generous, excellent company.



Revolutionary Spring, *by Christopher Clark (Crown)*. This Cambridge historian's scrupulous survey takes up the interconnected uprisings that engulfed almost all of Europe in 1848. Arguing that they represent "the only truly European revolution that there has ever been," Clark follows these revolts' trajectories, from heady beginnings, when parliaments were convened and new constitutions proliferated, to counter-revolutionary backlashes. Resisting the "stigma of failure" that has tended to lurk over this period, he insists that it was consequential, calling it "the particle collision chamber at the centre of the European nineteenth century. People, groups and ideas flew into it, crashed together, fused or fragmented, and emerged in showers of new entities whose trails can be traced through the decades that followed."

Pet, *by Catherine Chidgey (Europa)*. In this suspenseful bildungsroman, Justine, a Catholic schoolgirl living in New Zealand in the nineteen-eighties, searches for a classroom thief, as the school's suspicions shift from her to her best friend to a glamorous new teacher. Justine's adolescence is colored by concerns both workaday and personal: a close female friendship, petty teen-age infighting, seizures that disrupt her recall, grief for her recently deceased mother. The novel occasionally jumps forward to 2014, when Justine, now an adult with a daughter of her own, tends to her dementia-stricken father. In these moments, Justine's girlhood collapses into her present, and she appraises "shimmers in my memory" and revisits the mysteries of her youth.

Fire in the Canyon, *by Daniel Gumbiner (Astra)*. Set in the foothills of California's gold country, this dread-laden novel follows a family who make their living cultivating grapes for winemaking as they attempt to resume their lives in the wake of a wildfire. After an evacuation, they return to the same land, but their environment—increasingly marred by drought, fire, and high temperatures—presents a cascade of fears: not just death and injury from fire but power outages, dangerous air quality, and smoke that might taint their grapes and thus take away their livelihood. The father's detailed awareness of the region's weather produces a sense of looming crisis; he notes how often once unusual events now occur—a set of circumstances that make it "hard not to wonder where the bottom was."

printed a letter from his accuser. She denied that Shakur was, as he insisted, in an adjoining room. "I admit I did not make the wisest decisions," she writes, "but I did not deserve to be gang raped."

The episode marked the beginning of Shakur's paranoid descent. In late November, 1994, almost exactly one year later, he was beaten up and robbed in the lobby of a recording studio in New York. During the scuffle, he was shot five times. The following day, he was found guilty of first-degree sexual abuse, a lesser charge among those he faced, but one that still carried a sentence of eighteen months to four and a half years in prison. "It was her who sodomized me," he declared of his accuser at the time of the trial. (Agnant pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges and got probation.) A person of extremes, he expected extremes of those around him. "He definitely believed there were two kinds of women," Jada Pinkett Smith told Michael Eric Dyson, whose 2001 book, "Holler if You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur," helped bring Shakur to the academy. "He had a way of putting you on a pedestal and, if there was one thing you did wrong, he would swear you were the devil."

Shakur was sentenced in February, 1995. He became convinced that Christopher Wallace (better known as the Notorious B.I.G.) and Sean Combs (then Puffy), who were at the studio the night he was shot, were part of a setup; he thought Agnant was in on it, too. (All three denied involvement.) In the meantime, his legal bills had left him with precarious finances. Suge Knight, the bullying head of Death Row Records, a label with ties to L.A.'s gang underworld, persuaded Shakur to sign with him; soon afterward, its parent label posted bail, so that Shakur could go free while he appealed his conviction. Knight preyed on Shakur's growing persecution complex. By this time, it was hard to recall that his famous "THUG LIFE" tattoo, which was inked across his abdomen in 1992, had once held a political meaning. The struggle was no longer against an unjust establishment; it was between "ridaz and punks," his fast-living crew and its "bitch" rivals.

He was feverishly productive, sometimes setting up two studios at once and bouncing between them, working on different songs at the same time. Months after his release, Shakur put out a double CD—the first by a solo rapper—called "All Eyez on Me." Joining Death Row gave his music a fearless and foreboding feel; it sounded both harder and more radio-ready than anything he'd previously done, his raps toggling from hell-raising party boasts to taunting singalongs. But there were also moments of penitence, like "Life Goes On" and "I Ain't Mad at Cha," which some fans later interpreted as prophecies of his demise.

In the ten months following his release, he recorded two additional albums and worked on two films. He had plans for restaurants, a fashion line, a video game, a publishing company, a cookbook, a cartoon series, and a radio show. In her introduction, Robinson explains that Shakur had couch-surfed at her apartment when he was younger and visiting Los Angeles to meet with record labels. He never forgot her kindness. He told her that he was forming a group of women writers to work on screenplays with him. Their first meeting was to be at his Los Angeles condo on September 10, 1996.

The writers' group would never meet. On September 7, 1996, Shakur attended a Mike Tyson fight in Las Vegas. Afterward, he caught four bullets from a drive-by near the Strip. His death, six days later, mired in mystery, seemed instantly significant. Chuck D, of Public Enemy, soon floated a theory that the rapper was still alive. When Shakur's first posthumous album was released, in November, fans combed it for clues that he had faked his own death.

Others tried to reconcile the vengeance rap he recorded for Death Row with the conscious ideals with which he'd started out. "It is our duty to claim, celebrate and most of all critique the life of Tupac Shakur," Kierna Mayo wrote a few months after his demise. In 1997, *Vibe* published a book collecting its coverage of the artist. "Wasn't Tupac great when he wasn't getting shot up? Or accused of rape?" the editor Danyel Smith asks in the introduction. "Wasn't he just the best when he wasn't falling for Suge Knight's lame-ass lines and dying broke? Couldn't Tupac just have been your everything?" In the *Village Voice*, the critic dream hampton wrote, "I believed he'd get his shit together and articulate nationalism for our generation."

For years, the most plausible explanation for Shakur's murder was that he fell victim to a feud between two Los Angeles gangs, the Mob Piru Bloods, with which Death Row was associated, and the South Side Compton Crips. In 2019, a Crips leader, Duane (Keffe D) Davis, published "Compton Street Legend," in which he detailed the mounting tensions that led to Shakur's killing. "Tupac was a guppy that got swallowed up by some ferocious sharks," Davis wrote. "He shouldn't have ever got involved in that bullshit of trying to be a thug." Davis explained that, although he didn't pull the trigger, he was in the car and supplied the murder weapon. In September of this year, he was finally arrested by the Las Vegas Police Department, and he now faces murder charges. (A former lawyer of his told the New York *Times* that Davis plans to plead not guilty.)

Rap music has a particular relationship with death—a reminder of the precariousness of Black life. In a recent essay on hip-hop's long trail of deceased, Danyel Smith lamented that "so much of Black journalism is obituary." The one-two punch of Shakur's death in September, 1996, and the Notorious B.I.G.'s the following March taught a generation how to mourn: loudly, defiantly. Perhaps Shakur's contradictions—the gangster poet who was never exactly a gangster, the actor who could never break character—would have found resolution had he lived longer. At the heart of things was always the question of how to distinguish the persona from the person.

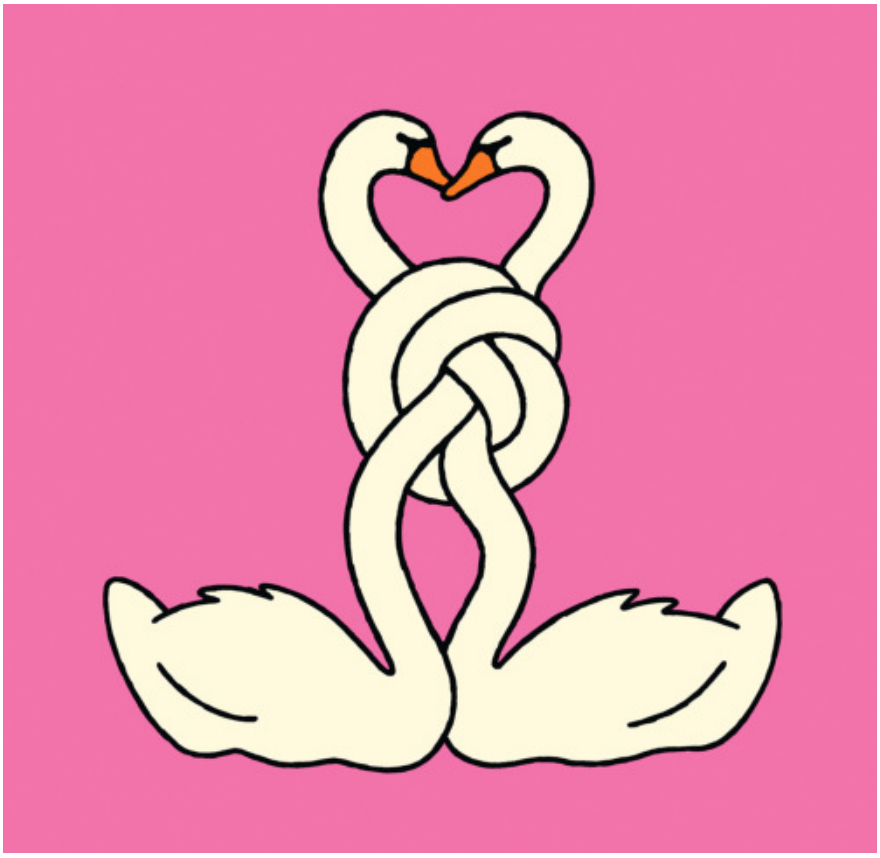
That Shakur left so much behind—a vault of unreleased songs, a startling trove of videotaped interviews, from his high-school years to the last hours of his life, the speeches and performances—is one reason that his career can appear to be a solvable mystery. He could have been a political leader or gone on to even greater success as an actor or a recording artist. What he wanted, however, seemed always to elude him. I remember seeing the February, 1994, issue of *Vibe*, which featured Shakur in a straitjacket, and the question "IS TUPAC CRAZY OR JUST MISUNDERSTOOD?" Maybe a little of both? He took on the world because he was young, convinced that he could turn the pain around him into something else. He trusted nobody; he wished to love everybody. He was, for a long cultural moment, incandescent. But he was never free. ♦

BOOKS

THE MARRIAGE PLOT

What it means to share a life.

BY REBECCA MEAD



Two new books make their cases for how we ought to regard matrimony.

"Marriage is so unlike everything else. There is something even awful in the nearness it brings." So says Dorothea Brooke, the heroine of George Eliot's "Middlemarch," a novel that explores the many different ways in which the institution of marriage can be a site of discovery and delusion, proximity and estrangement, comfort and misery. Dorothea's insight is informed by her own ill-advised marriage, to Edward Casaubon, a desiccated scholar and the blocked would-be author of a "Key to All Mythologies." Dorothea's words, which arrive close to the end of the novel, are addressed to Rosamond Vincy, the mayor's daughter. In Rosamond's marriage to Dr. Tertius Lydgate, a newcomer to Middlemarch, Eliot provides another illustration of curdled marital expectation, with each spouse disappointed and embittered by the other's intransigent sense of selfhood. Between these two poles, Eliot offers refracted perspectives on more or less successful marriages: the complacent bourgeois harmony of Mr. and Mrs. Vincy, Rosamond's parents; the sometimes contentious equality struck between Caleb Garth, an honorable land manager, and Susan, his frequently wiser wife; the secrets and lies that underpin the smug union of Mr. Bulstrode, a banker with a dark past, and the willfully unwitting Mrs. Bulstrode. In "Middlemarch"—as in the wider world the novel still speaks to—marriage is the default social arrangement; despite its omnipresence, it is too little questioned, often flawed, and only occasionally satisfactory.

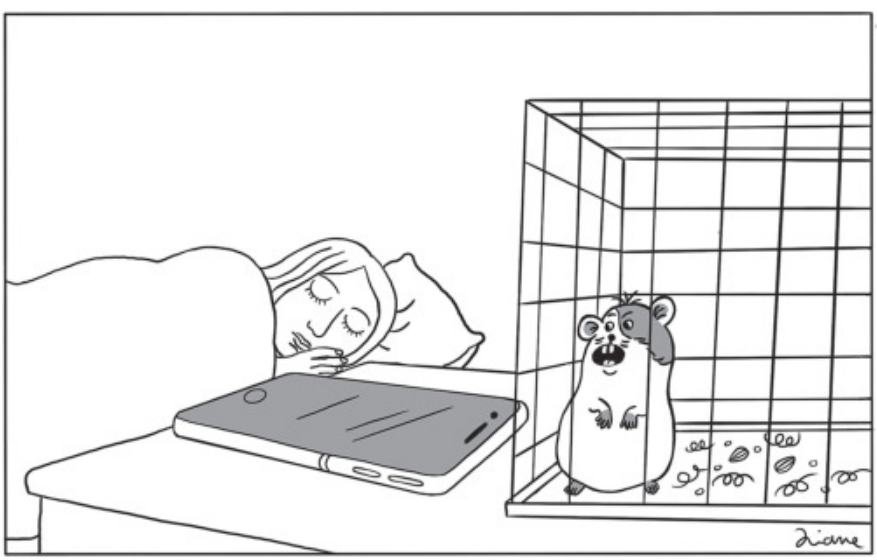
How is marriage unlike everything else? And why is it sometimes so very awful? These are questions raised by the British critic and filmmaker Devorah Baum in her nimble new work, "On Marriage" (Yale). There is, she writes, "something enigmatic about the marital bond lying in excess of Enlightenment reason or easy description." Marriage is a vast subject, being an institution that informs our most important social structures—including the tax code and the disposition of intergenerational wealth—while also circumscribing the idiosyncratic goings on within Baum's household, or mine, or, quite possibly, yours. Yet Baum finds that marriage is a surprisingly unexamined subject, at least by professional philosophers, who have left the field to novelists, filmmakers, and other artists and theorists. When marriage does make an appearance in the philosophical canon, Baum suggests, it is typically only a subsidiary topic. Philosophers lose their minds a bit when trying to address the subject of the marital condition, she says, citing the unmarried Kant's insistence that marriage is founded upon "the reciprocal use that one human being makes of the sexual organs and capacities of another." (She notes that "long-term married people, at least, would surely have been able to reassure the moral philosopher that marriage isn't chiefly about constant reciprocal sex.") Baum asks whether the relative lack of philosophic interest in marriage could, in fact, be the key to understanding what marriage means philosophically. Is marriage, she asks, "what you only do when you do not ponder it too much?"

Baum, who teaches English literature and critical theory at the University of Southampton, has made a specialty of pondering marriage. The author of an earlier work of criticism, "Feeling Jewish," in which she artfully explored themes frequently associated with Jewishness—such as self-hatred, alienation, and smothering mother love—Baum has collaborated with her husband, the filmmaker Josh Appignanesi, on two feature-length comedic documentaries that, in an autofictional mode, chronicle their domestic life in times of crisis. "The New Man," from 2016, takes up Appignanesi's infantile fears of being displaced when Baum becomes pregnant, though the film takes a darker turn when the pregnancy becomes

ILLUSTRATION BY MIGUEL PORLAN

endangered. "Husband," from 2022, is about Appignanesi trying to make a movie about Baum's New York publicity tour for "Feeling Jewish": book parties with academics, a Q. & A. with Zadie Smith at the McNally Jackson bookstore in SoHo, all with their two small children in tow. (As they walk through a bustling Washington Square Park, Appignanesi badgers Baum for not enjoying her success more while bemoaning his own sense of being eclipsed: "I want to ride on your coattails and at the same time ruin it for you—is that O.K.?") In both films, Baum is restrained and precisely intelligent, especially in contrast to her excessive, neurotic spouse. "Husband," with its jazzy soundtrack and its talky sidewalk excursions, might have easily been called "Manhattan," had that title not already been taken.

"On Marriage" shares the cerebral sensibility established in those movies; the book is characterized by an affinity for wordplay and by an awareness, informed by psychoanalytic theory, that wordplay is seldom wholly frivolous. Baum's opening pages are groaningly laden with marriage-centric puns. "Writing about marriage wasn't my idea—someone eligible proposed it to me and I said yes," she reports. Her point is that marriage lends itself irresistibly to metaphor, being an inescapable framework for conceiving of ourselves in relation to others. Working on her own, and on the page, rather than collaborating with her husband on film, Baum makes the exposure of her own marital arrangements secondary to her preferred activity of analyzing books, movies, and television shows. Her selections are mostly of the sort produced and consumed by members of the transatlantic cultural cognoscenti who appear in "The New Man" and "Husband"—including work by the novelist Taffy Brodesser-Akner, the theorist Slavoj Žižek, and the screenwriter Phoebe Waller-Bridge. (For Baum, the figure of the "hot priest" in Season 2 of "Fleabag" is a representation of "marriage's singular ability to conjugate those things within us that otherwise cannot abide in a world with no patience for contradictions, such as love and hate, morality and obscenity, the orthodox and the liberal, the secular and the religious.") Ingmar Bergman is a touchstone, as is Stanley Cavell, that rare philosopher who has taken marriage as a topic for serious consideration, especially in "Pursuits of Happiness," an account of Hollywood's screwball comedies as remarriage stories. Like Cavell—and like George Eliot, who also gets a look-in—Baum is convinced that marriage, over all, might provide a moral and social good. Of "Middlemarch," the greatest novel by the most philosophically inclined of novelists, Baum offers the ingenious interpretation that marriage itself is the key to all mythologies, and that "Middlemarch" was meant to be the all-encompassing work that Edward Casaubon was unable to write.



"Advertise fun hamster snacks. Advertise organic hamster snacks. Hamster snacks. Where can I find fun hamster snacks. Organic snacks. #hamstersnacks. I want to buy organic hamster snacks. Advertise hamster snacks."

Among the scenes from her own marriage that Baum describes is a moment in which she's sitting with her husband on the couch while watching the unnervingly intimate sex represented in the television adaptation of Sally Rooney's novel "Normal People." She begins by underlining how, for parents of small children, the co-watching of television represents a precious opportunity for adults-only time. "We look forward to looking forward together and there are few things we look forward to quite as much," she writes. She goes on, though, to consider just why the encounters between Marianne and Connell, the two young people at the story's center, should be so especially squirm-inducing, given the quantity of explicit content readily available to the contemporary viewer. Recalling the acute embarrassment she would feel as a child when, while watching TV with her parents, a bout of onscreen sex would occur, Baum draws upon the Freudian concept of scopophilia, or the pleasure of watching: those unsought glimpses were, she says, a kind of displacement of the primal scene, and a reminder that the people inside the family home have "their own bodies, their own histories, their own feelings, their own desires, their own dreams and fantasies and lives to live." She enlists an observation by the psychoanalyst Darian Leader that "one starts looking for things only once they are lost," and proposes that the depiction of intercourse between beautiful twentysomethings in "Normal People" may evoke in each of the co-watchers a nostalgic desire for a lost past that, crucially, may not be a shared one. In a final critical turn, Baum considers the way in which the show illustrates the evolution of Marianne and Connell's own intimacy: at first, they look into each other's eyes while making love, only later to lie in bed companionably with an open laptop. For the characters onscreen, no less than for viewers at home, watching together is one way that a relationship matures as its participants come of age—or, in Baum's phrase, as love enters history.

"On Marriage" is characterized by this kind of agile curiosity: to Baum, no couch

is ever just a piece of furniture, even when a couple collapses upon it exhausted at the end of a day devoted to family management. Every scene from her marriage is offered up in the expectation that it will be understood in the spirit of Bergman's 1973 miniseries, "Scenes from a Marriage"—a work that episodically chronicles the dissolution of a marriage between a professional couple who claim, at the outset, to be "indecently" fortunate in their bourgeois union. By the story's end, divorced and remarried to other people, they reunite for an extramarital affair, having, Baum says, "finally arrived at their marriage's indecent happiness in true form." Like the critic Laura Kipnis, whose 2003 polemic, "Against Love," advanced an arch Marxist analysis of marriage as alienated labor, Baum is good at unpicking clichés about marriage. She considers, for instance, the horse-and-carriage trope, a conjunction usually trotted out to suggest that love and marriage are a harmonious pairing. Baum points out that the metaphor actually demonstrates the opposite, with love as the libidinal force restrained by harness, bit, and yoke: "You don't need to be an animal expert to deduce that horse and carriage aren't likely to be in the most unimpeded of relationships."

Unlike Kipnis, however, Baum writes from within the institution she is examining. She is interested not only in the ways marriage might be repressive and regressive—a force to sustain the patriarchy and maintain the capitalist social order—but also in asking what is at stake in continuing to characterize marriage in this negative light. Baum is especially interested in marriages that adapt the institution's conventional trappings for subversive and playful ends; the quarrelling of couples in Shakespeare's plays or in Hollywood's screwball comedies, she maintains, reflects "the pleasure of a relationship that, though it might look like a battle for mastery, is really thrilling to the dynamics of equality." Baum writes of how Maggie Nelson, in her memoir "The Argonauts," conjures a rapturous vision of coupled happiness with her spouse, the video artist Harry Dodge, who is trans. Able to pass as a heteronormative family unit when they wish to, Nelson and Dodge partake in the consolations and the pleasures of marriage while also upending the institution. "The happily married," Baum says, "are the ones who've simultaneously killed and reinforced the institution by making it suit themselves."

How marriage underpins social inequality is the subject of "The Two-Parent Privilege" (Chicago), by Melissa Kearney, a professor of economics at the University of Maryland and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. Kearney's approach to the subject of marriage could hardly be less like Baum's. Kearney is not interested in marriage as a "meet and happy conversation," in John Milton's still persuasive formulation, or as an arena for the consensual, revolutionary blurring of identities—each of us our own Titania and Bottom. The possibilities of marriage that preoccupy Baum—the space it offers spouses for self-realization, for evolving intimacy, for the unconscious replaying or conscious resolution of childhood experience—don't get attention from Kearney. Marriage is, instead, considered solely as an arrangement for the raising of children. Kearney is almost touchingly apologetic for the dryness of her analysis; early on, she writes, "Other people and experts are trained and experienced at eliciting the deeply personal stories of others through extensive interviews and powerful vignettes. That is not my particular expertise." Her expertise—her "comparative advantage," as she puts it in the language of her trade—is in analyzing large sets of data to produce quantifiable findings about the effects of marriage upon society at large.

Kearney begins by setting forth what she acknowledges is a difficult argument to make, at least if one does not want to be accused of being a doctrinaire social conservative: that the decline in marriage rates and the corresponding rise in the number of children being raised in one-parent homes "has contributed to the economic insecurity of American families, has widened the gap in opportunities and outcomes for children from different backgrounds, and today poses economic and social challenges that we cannot afford to ignore—but may not be able to reverse." There has been a dramatic rise in births to unmarried mothers: almost half of all babies born in the U.S. in 2019, up from eighteen per cent in 1980. Of those unmarried mothers,

more than half have never been married, rather than having been married and subsequently divorced. Kearney highlights the racial disparities revealed by the data: seventy per cent of unpartnered Black mothers have never been married, compared with thirty-eight per cent of unpartnered white mothers. She also points out the perhaps surprising stability of marriage among members of the educated class: of the children whose mothers are graduates of four-year colleges, eighty-four per cent lived in homes with married parents.

Having two parents who are married to each other, Kearney argues, provides offspring with an advantage that is "becoming yet another privilege associated with more highly resourced groups in society." By joining their particular strengths, a married couple can give their progeny more than the sum of their parts. "As a concept, this principle mirrors the genius of the assembly line in production and manufacturing," she writes. She also acknowledges that her calculations about the relationship between "partner resources" (parental income, wealth, time, and emotional energy) and a child's "outputs" (the level of education she attains, and her own ultimate earning power) may present a cognitive challenge for readers "who aren't accustomed to thinking about raising children in the same terms that are used to describe a car factory."

Kearney insists that she is not blaming single mothers, or dismissing the effects of structural racism, or saying that everyone should marry, or calling for a reinstatement of the model nineteen-fifties household, with a waged father and a stay-at-home mom. She does not suggest, like some cultural critics before her, that the increase in out-of-wedlock birth rates is a signal of moral decline in America, or of a willfully individualistic flouting of tradition. Rather, she points to how the decline of manufacturing in the United States—and the rise of lower-paid, more precarious working conditions—has made it much harder for blue-collar males to sustain an adequate and reliable standard of living, rendering them less inclined to marry or to stay married, and less appealing as marriage material in the first place. In some of the most compelling passages in her book, Kearney explores research on the impact of financial strain on cognitive functioning; there's evidence that the children of parents who are poorer and more consumed by stress may be shortchanged not only materially but emotionally.

And a certain privilege is no doubt necessary to engage in the kind of exploration of marriage that is Baum's comparative advantage. If a parent is struggling to maintain the means to support a child, she is less likely to take pleasure in considering, as Baum does in a chapter titled "Creative Accounting," the contradictory manner in which a child at once confirms a couple's identity "by naturalizing their relation and proving its profitability according to the accumulative logic of capital" and "subtracts from the unity of the whole by adding its own difference." At the same time, Kearney's bloodless analysis can invite subversion of the sort that Baum might encourage. If, as Kearney argues, two parents are demonstrably better than one at maximizing outputs in the form of successful children, does it not follow that adding yet more parental figures into the mix—a stepparent here, a queer known donor there—might lead to still more impressive results?

Such a proposal is not among Kearney's recommendations for closing the daunting marriage gap. What she does argue for are policy changes that would scale up community-based programs that strengthen and increase economic support for low-income families. But she also places stock in promoting an unfashionable cultural narrative that acknowledges how "in most cases, two-parent, stable families are very beneficial for children." One way of advancing such a message, she suggests, might be via mass-cultural phenomena such as television shows; a study she conducted in 2015 found that a 4.3-per-cent reduction in teen pregnancies was attributable to the début, on MTV, of "16 and Pregnant," the precursor to the popular "Teen Mom" reality series. Kearney is agnostic about questions of gender or sexuality as they pertain to the formation of a marriage; what seems to make a difference is the solidity of the union, not the identities of those coupled within it. If in theory cohabitation might provide as secure a family structure, she shows that in practice it does not: in the United States, at least, such partnerships are less stable than those of married couples. Kearney offers one interpretation of this data: "Relationships are inherently difficult, and marriage provides an extra layer of institutional inertia that keeps them in place." For Kearney, as for Dorothea Brooke, marriage is unlike anything else; for raising children, no other arrangement works quite as well.

Selling the idea of marriage on the basis that it provides a helpful layer of institutional inertia—like a mattress protector for our leaky lives—is hardly the most romantic of pitches. And, given that romance is among the reasons two people—normal people—might choose to pitch themselves into wedded coupledom, as Baum so amply shows, Kearney's data will be more effective in persuading policymakers of the virtues of the institution than in moving individuals to exchange rings. On the other hand, Baum's book, though unlikely to have the reach of "Teen Mom," might convey the salutary pro-nuptial impetus that Kearney calls for—at least in certain circles, such as among maritally hesitant subscribers to the *London Review of Books*. Kearney proposes marriage as a solution, but Baum holds it up as a seduction. As Baum considers the widespread cultural narrative that insists upon the prevalence of marital misery, she suggests that this downbeat way of talking about marriage might, in truth, be a cover story for people who are happy in their unions. Such a cover story is necessary, Baum goes on to conjecture, because of the shame people experience in having "found an oasis of comfort in an unjust and unequal world, and via the very institution that has founded and cemented so much of that inequality and injustice." Marriage, despite sometimes being awful in the sense of being terrible, can also be awful in the alternative sense that George Eliot no doubt also had in mind: as a state that can offer, at its best, a sense of awe happily conjoined with joy. ♦

From the Mount Desert Islander.

An officer helped Acadia National Park officers look for a dirt bike that had fled the park around 3:30 p.m. on Sunday. It was not found.

Rather, it is still on the lam.

LIFE AFTER CALVIN

Bill Watterson's return.

BY RIVKA GALCHEN

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY C. H. PETE COPELAND / THE PLAIN DEALER / AP

"Nothing is permanent. Everything changes. That's the one thing we know for sure in this world," Calvin says to Hobbes in the first panel of a two-panel strip that ran in more than two thousand newspapers on Monday, July 17, 1995. The two friends are in a wagon, plummeting perilously forward into the unseen—a common pastime for them. Outside the world of the cartoon, it's less than half a year before Bill Watterson, thirty-seven at the time, will retire from producing his wildly beloved work. "Calvin and Hobbes," which débuted in 1985, centered on six-year-old Calvin and his best friend, Hobbes, a tiger who to everyone other than Calvin appears to be a stuffed animal. Six days a week, the strip appeared in short form, in black-and-white, and each Sunday it was longer and in color. The second panel of the July 17th strip is wide, with detailed trees in the foreground, the wagon airborne, and Calvin concluding his thought: "But I'm still going to gripe about it."

After retiring, Watterson assiduously avoided becoming a public figure. He turned his attention to painting, music, and family life. He kept the work he made to himself; he gave few, but not zero, interviews. (When asked in an e-mail interview that ran in 2013 in *Mental Floss* why he didn't share his paintings, he replied, "It's all catch and release—just tiny fish that aren't really worth the trouble to clean and cook.") Still, now and again his handiwork appeared. He wrote twice about Charles M. Schulz, the creator of "Peanuts," whom he never met. For the charity of the cartoonist Richard Thompson, who had been given a diagnosis of Parkinson's, Watterson illustrated three strips for "Pearls Before Swine," by Stephan Pastis, and also donated a painting for auction. In other words, he came out for the team.

In 2014, he gave an extensive and chatty interview to Jenny Robb, the curator of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum, on the occasion of his second show there. Robb asked if he was surprised that his strip was still so popular. "It seems the less I have to do with it, the higher the strip's reputation gets!" he said. In the interview, he comes across as levelheaded, not egotistical, not very pleased with electronic devices, the Internet, the diminished size of cartoons—and also quietly intense, like the dad figure in the strip, who enthusiastically sets out on a bike ride through heavy snow. As a college student at Kenyon, Watterson spent much of a school year painting his dorm-room ceiling like that of the Sistine Chapel, and then, at the end of the year, painted it back dorm-room drab.

My ten-year-old daughter makes a detailed argument (it involves bicycles, ropes, and scratch marks) that Hobbes is indisputably real; millions of us have the more decisively illusory experience of having grown up with Watterson. But we haven't! Will we be disturbed if, now that time has passed, he has changed? When word came out that Watterson was releasing a new book this year—"The Mysteries," a "fable for grown-ups," written by Watterson and illustrated in collaboration with the renowned caricaturist John Kascht—there was more than passing interest. There were also very few clues about the content, save that there's a kingdom in trouble, living in fear of mysteries. With a different artist, I might interpret this as an enticement, but it seems more likely that Watterson is merely averse to marketing—he did no publicity for his first "Calvin and Hobbes" collection, and fought for years to prevent Hobbes and Calvin from appearing in snow globes, on pajamas, on chip-bag clips, on trading cards. ("If I'd

"The Mysteries" shares with his famous comic strip a sense of enchantment.

ILLUSTRATION BY MIKEL JASO

wanted to sell plush garbage, I'd have gone to work as a carny," he once said.) Yet Calvin and Hobbes are still everywhere, and forever young. Somewhere on the outskirts of Cleveland, their creator is probably irked that his old characters are pouncing into all these reviews of this other endeavor. As Calvin put it, the universe should have a toll-free hotline for complaints.

"The Mysteries" is clothbound and black, about eight inches square, with gray endpapers. The title font looks medieval; the text font looks contemporary. Words appear on the left page of each spread: one or two sentences in black, surrounded by a field of white. The images appear on the right, taking up most of the page, framed by a thick black line. Some of the illustrations appear to be photographs of small clay sculptures alongside elements composed in graphite and maybe paint—but the materials aren't specified. Think Chris Van Allsburg's "Jumanji" gone darker, crossed with Fritz Lang's "Metropolis." The characters, unnamed, are drawn from that strange eternal medieval world of fantasy: knights, wizards, a king; peasants with faces like Leonardo grotesques, wearing kerchiefs or hoods. There are forty-three sentences in total, and one exclamation point. The magic of condensation that is characteristic of cartoons is also here, in a story with a quick, fairy-tale beginning: "Long ago, the forest was dark and deep."

It all sounds rather sombre, but also it doesn't take long to read it nine or ten times. (The illustrations, slower to process, do much of the storytelling work.) The story is: Unseen mysteries have kept the populace in a state of fear. In response, a king bids his knights to capture a mystery, so that perhaps its "secrets could be learned" and its "powers could be thwarted." When mysteries are caught, the public finds them disappointing, ordinary. One illustration is of a vender at a newspaper stand, looking askance. Below him are newspapers with headlines such as "So what?," "Yawn," and "Boring." But modern technologies begin to appear: cars, skyscrapers, televisions. Mastering the secrets of the mysteries brought about a lot of technological marvels, and made the people less fearful. Or you might say insufficiently fearful: the woods are cut down, the air becomes acrid, and eventually the land looks prehistoric, desiccated, hostile to life. In one read, "The Mysteries" is a nephew of Dr. Seuss's "The Lorax."

It's also kin to the ancient story of Prometheus, a myth we now associate with technological advancements. Prometheus took pity on the struggling humans, and stole fire from the gods to share it with them. And how has that magnificently useful fire gone for the humans? Pretty well by some measures, pretty catastrophically by others. If only humans heeded the warnings within mysteries as well as they followed the blueprints for making Teflon pans and missiles. I don't think I'll spoil the plot of "The Mysteries" if I say that the story finds a distinctive and unsettling path to its final three words, which are "happily ever after."

"It's a funny world, Hobbes," Calvin says, plummeting again down a hill in a wagon with his friend. "But it's not a hilarious world," he says, as they fall out of their wagon. "Unless you like sick humor," Hobbes says after he and Calvin have both crashed to the ground.

Watterson has said, of the illustrations in "Calvin and Hobbes," "One of the jokes I really like is that the fantasies are drawn more realistically than reality, since that says a lot about what's going on in Calvin's head." Only one reality in "Calvin and Hobbes" is drawn with a level of detail comparable to the

scenes of Calvin's imagination: the natural world. The woods, the streams, the snowy hills the friends career off—the natural world is a space as enchanted and real as Hobbes himself.

Enchantment! If disenchantment is the loss of myth and illusion in our lives, then what is the chant that calls those essentials back? An ongoing enchantment is at the heart of "Calvin and Hobbes." It's at the heart of "Don Quixote" and "Peter Pan," too. These are stories about difficult and not infrequently destructive characters who are lost in their own worlds. At the same time, these characters embody most of what is good: the gifts of play, of the inner life, of imagining something other than what is there. If "The Mysteries" is a fable, then its moral might be that, when we believe we've understood the mysteries, we are misunderstanding; when we think we've solved them and have moved on, that error can be our dissolution.

Calvin offers the means of enchantment for seeing reality properly. This is well illustrated in the June 3, 1995, daily. (The brief black-and-white weekday strips of "Calvin and Hobbes" often feel as whole as the epic Sunday ones.) Calvin is digging a deep hole and Hobbes asks why. Calvin answers that he's looking for buried treasure. Has he found any? Calvin replies, "A few dirty rocks, a weird root, and some disgusting grubs." In the final panel, Hobbes: "On your first try??" Calvin: "There's treasure everywhere!"

While rereading "Calvin and Hobbes" comics for this piece, I was surprised that almost all of them were not entirely forgotten. If I saw them on a crowded subway platform, I would recognize them, even after years of separation. Some of the silliest and most untethered of the strips have stayed with me the most: one in which Hobbes repeats the word "smock" again and again, just happy to say it; another in which Calvin writes down, "How many boards would the Mongol hoard, if the Mongol hordes got bored?"—then crumples up the paper.

Watterson has written, "Whenever the strip got ponderous, I put Calvin and Hobbes in their wagon and send them over a cliff. It had a nice way of undercutting the serious subjects." "The Mysteries" doesn't entirely lack that lightness—the contrast of modern and medieval in the illustrations is often funny—but humor is not its main tool. Reading "The Mysteries" after rereading "Calvin and Hobbes" reminded me of the Brothers Grimm story "The Goblins." Goblins steal a mother's child and replace it with a ravenous changeling. When the woman asks a neighbor for advice on how to get her child back, she is told to make the changeling laugh, because "when a changeling laughs, that's the

end of him." She makes him laugh (by boiling water in eggshells? A trick perhaps lost across the centuries), and the goblins take the changeling away and return her child. She counters tragedy with a deliberate silliness—and it succeeds, even as the dark persists. In that sense, the old strip and the new fable work best, maybe, together. I'm also reminded of the strip in which Hobbes says, "I suppose if we couldn't laugh at things that don't make sense, we couldn't react to a lot of life."

One of the cozy pleasures of "Calvin and Hobbes" is the prominence of the seasons. This was felt even more acutely when the comics appeared daily in the paper, as they did throughout my childhood, when my brother used to call the Sunday comics insert "the intellectual pages." (Now we both read the nearly comic-free online news instead of the material papers, into which, Watterson has said, "little jokes" were placed as a respite from "atrocities described in the rest of the newspaper.") In the fall, a leaf pile transforms into a Calvin-eating monster; in winter, Calvin sculpts a snowman swimming away from snow-shark fins; spring is rainy, and in summer the days are just packed. Time hurries along through the year, but the years never pass—a great comfort. In "The Mysteries," time's arrow can't be missed for a moment. Though the story starts in the misty forever-medieval, it quickly javelins forward. By its close, aeons have passed, and the perspective is no longer even earthbound. The book reads like someone saying goodbye. The outcome feels inevitable.

Calvin isn't the only comic-strip character who doesn't age. The characters in "Peanuts" never grow up, either. Schulz drew the strip for fifty years, and the final strip was published the day after he died. George Herriman drew "Krazy Kat" for more than thirty years, through to the year of his death, 1944. The characters in "Krazy Kat" also didn't age or really change much: Krazy Kat is a black cat forever in love with Ignatz, a white mouse who serially hits Krazy with bricks, an action that Krazy misinterprets as a sign of love. Watterson has expressed admiration for both Schulz and Herriman. Yet Watterson, after ten years, moved on to other interests.

"Schulz and Peanuts: A Biography," by David Michaelis, makes vivid that no amount of success ever separated Schulz from his sense of himself, carried over from childhood, as a lonely and overlooked "nothing." In 2007, Watterson reviewed the biography for the *Wall Street Journal*, and reminded readers that "Peanuts" had as much darkness—fear, sadness, bullying—as it had charm. "Schulz illustrates the conflict in his life, not in a self-justifying or vengeful manner but with a larger human understanding that implicates himself in the sad comedy," Watterson wrote. "I think that's a wonderfully sane way to process a hurtful world." Herriman, born in the nineteenth century in New Orleans to a mixed-race family, often presented himself, in his adult life, as Greek. It would be oversimplifying to say that Herriman's background fuelled "Krazy Kat," just as it would be oversimplifying to say that Schulz was forever a Charlie Brown—but it would be delusional to think that the persistent situations and sentiments of those comics weren't inflected by their makers' lives. As Krazy Kat put it, in that magic mixed-up Kat language, "An' who but me can moddil for me, but I!"

Watterson must have been working out something in his strip, too. By his own account, he had a pretty nice childhood, with supportive parents and a house that bordered a mysterious wood. It's possible that Watterson quit because he tired of the demanding work, or because he'd said all he had to say, or because he was worn out by the legal battles over his characters. But maybe he just changed. Growing up is always a loss—a loss of an enchanted way of seeing, at the very least—and for some people growing up is more of a loss than for others. Perhaps part of what drove Watterson, "Ahab-like" by his own telling, back to the drawing board with his boy and his tiger day after day was a subconscious commitment to staying a child. Maybe he chose to stop publishing because, in some way, for whatever reasons, he became O.K. with growing up.

In a Sunday strip on April 22, 1990, Calvin's dad tells Calvin and Hobbes a bedtime story, by request, that is about Calvin and Hobbes. All he does, pretty much, is describe, to his rapt audience, the first part of their actual day. Calvin complains that his dad ends the story too early, that he hasn't even gotten to lunchtime. His dad says the story has no end, because Calvin and Hobbes will go on writing it "tomorrow and every day after." The friends are pleased to learn they're in a story that doesn't end.

Here's another story, kindred to "The Mysteries," about a knight who journeys into a dark and unknown wood. The first scene of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," which is thought to have been written in the late fourteenth century, takes place in Camelot during New Year's festivities. A good time, with feasting and friends, is interrupted by the arrival of a stranger: a massive knight, whose skin and hair are all green, who is dressed all in green, who is riding an all-green horse. The knight carries a huge axe and makes a strange proposal, in such a way that the honor of the whole court feels at stake. He invites someone to swing at his neck with his axe; in return, he will have a chance, a year and a day later, to swing the same axe at the neck of the volunteer, who ends up being Sir Gawain. The resonance of the story with facing the perils of a dark and unknown wood, of nature itself, is pretty clear.

Gawain chops off the head of the Green Knight, who then picks up his head; says, See you in a year; and rides away. Pretty quickly, the feasting and the merry mood return. How, I remember thinking the first time I read the tale, could this possibly end? It's not satisfying if the Green Knight is killed, or if Gawain is. Maybe both of them die, I supposed.

But no. Gawain keeps his word, despite the perilous terms. En route to his meeting with the Green Knight, in the Green Chapel, he tries to behave well with the seductive wife of the lord who graciously hosts him. Then he bravely bares his neck for the terrifying Green Knight—but he learns it was an enchantment! To me, the ending follows from both good behavior and enchantment—good behavior being something Calvin despises, and enchantment being the realm in which he is king. ♦

MUSICAL EVENTS

REORIENTING "BUTTERFLY"

At Detroit Opera, a new production subverts Puccini's depiction of Japan.

BY ALEX ROSS

In this rendering, the opera becomes the muddled reverie of an American male.

When Japanese audiences encountered Puccini's "Madama Butterfly"—a sumptuous Italianate treatment of a geisha's doomed love for an American naval officer—they found it implausible, insulting, and riotously funny. In 1925, two decades after the opera's première, the *Japan Times* reported "screams of hearty laughter" as spectators took in the posturings of a touring foreign troupe. Puccini's habit of citing popular Japanese songs did not help matters. As Arthur Groos points out in "Madama Butterfly/Madamu Batafurai," a new book about the opera's Japanese sources and reception, the composer ignored advice about how to use his material appropriately. When Suzuki, Butterfly's maid, prays at an alleged Buddhist shrine, she sings to the tune of "Takai Yama," a song that extols cucumbers and eggplants. Furthermore, she garbles the names of Shinto gods, who don't belong in a Buddhist setting to begin with. It's similar, Groos writes, to "having a Catholic pray to Adam and Eve in front of a menorah."

Nevertheless, Japanese audiences and artists have continued to engage with "Butterfly," not least because it has influenced Western perceptions of Japan for generations. In the fifties, the Fujiwara Opera, based in Tokyo, collaborated with New York City Opera on a bilingual production: Japanese singers took the Japanese roles, and white singers portrayed the callous Lieutenant Pinkerton and the more sympathetic consul Sharpless. The 1953 musical "Chōchō-san Sandaiki" ("Three-Generation Butterfly") wove Puccini's characters and music into a tale of Japan under Allied occupation; the fact that the opera is set in Nagasaki added a shuddering layer of significance to that retelling. The scholar Mari Yoshihara, in a 2004 essay about the pioneering Japanese soprano Tamaki Miura, who won international fame as Butterfly, notes that the singer challenged restricted ideas of femininity at home.

Today, as the American opera business grapples anew with the political baggage of its repertory, a fresh wave of "Butterfly" productions is arriving, with people of East Asian descent dominating the creative teams. Amon Miyamoto, Aria Umezawa, and Phil Chan have lately directed the work, at San Francisco Opera, New Orleans Opera, and Boston Lyric Opera, respectively. Earlier this month, at Detroit Opera, I saw a staging by Matthew Ozawa in which the story is framed as the increasingly disturbed fantasy of a modern American guy addicted to anime imagery and to V.R. technology.

Some operagoers will inevitably protest that "Butterfly" should be left alone, as an innocent artifact of its time. Yet a work that delves into late-nineteenth-century sexual colonialism and makes ironic use of "The Star-Spangled Banner" cannot be stripped of its politics. As Groos and other scholars have noted, "Butterfly," especially in its original version, has an anti-imperialist streak; Pinkerton, who goes through the motions of marrying Butterfly and then discards her, is a devastating caricature of cultural arrogance. After the opera's unsuccessful première, at La Scala, in 1904, Puccini softened the Pinkerton character, but there remains enough of the initial idea for directors to run with. Butterfly, for her part, may be hemmed in by Ori-

ILLUSTRATION BY ARD SU

entalist stereotypes, yet she draws power from the opulence of the music that Puccini wrote for her. Grotesque in some ways, greathearted in others, "Butterfly" is the kind of piece that not only invites but requires reflection on the part of performers and spectators alike.

At the beginning of Ozawa's "Butterfly" in Detroit, we see a bored young man alone in his apartment, which is decorated with Japanese posters and tchotchkes. He gets a beer out of the fridge—Sapporo or Kirin, no doubt. You have the sense of an emotionally shut-down business bro who studied for a semester in Tokyo. He settles into a chair and picks up his V.R. gear, at which point his modern world dematerializes. Ceremonially clad characters step out of the fridge; imperial sets slide forward. When Pinkerton is not in a scene, the singer who plays him often hovers to the side, gesturing and twitching in an indolent trance.

The framing is ingenious because it compensates for the opera's misbegotten notions of Japan. When Shinto names are mangled, or when Chinese folk songs come out of nowhere, we can blame the protagonist's muddled reverie. Even Puccini's most questionable choice in his revision of the score—giving Pinkerton an aria of bathetic remorse—can be justified as a spasm of performative self-pity on the part of the player's avatar. I remain convinced that the original "Butterfly," in which the cowardly Pinkerton slinks away while "The Star-Spangled Banner" snarls dissonantly in his wake, is superior; New York City Opera's staging of it in 1993 transformed my perspective on the work. But I also recognize the practical need to give the lead tenor something a bit more gratifying to sing.

Puccini, a sovereign artist terrified of commercial failure, tinkered with "Butterfly" for several years, steadily backtracking on his provocative initial conception. Ozawa drops some of the later changes, essentially adhering to a version that was presented in Brescia, several months after the première. The most crucial difference comes in the Act II aria "Che tua madre," in which Butterfly, processing the news that Pinkerton has abandoned her, imagines her future and that of Dolore, her child. In the Brescia version, as in the original, she spins out a triumphant scenario in which Dolore is discovered by the Emperor and raised to a high station. Puccini later inserted a different, more lachrymose text, one that forecasts her suicide. The original Butterfly is a prouder, steelier character, a shade closer to the imperious Tosca.

So she was in Detroit, in a formidable embodiment by Karah Son. Like many sopranos of East Asian background, Son has sung Butterfly over and over—in her case, more than three hundred times. She has not lapsed into routine. Her rendition of "Un bel dì" was a full-blown psychodrama, more a feverish hallucination of Pinkerton's return than a hopeful vision of it. Eric Taylor, as Pinkerton, brought to bear full-voiced lyric ardor while also communicating the character's rising unease over his entangled desires. Nmon Ford, as Sharpless, and Kristen Choi, as Suzuki, deftly navigated the show's imaginary landscape. Kensho Watanabe, in the pit, led a confidently paced, vibrantly colored performance.

What I like most in this "Butterfly," which has also played at Cincinnati Opera and will travel next to Utah Opera and Pittsburgh Opera, is its conjuring of stage pictures that are at once beautiful to look at and troubling to think about. Ozawa's collaborators—the design collective known as dots, the costume designer Maiko Matsushima, and the lighting designer Yuki Nakase Link—festoon the scene with glowing lanterns, cherry blossoms, and the like, but the images have a tacky, C.G.I.-like glow. Sometimes figures freeze and lights flicker, signalling a breakdown in the smooth function of the fantasy. It wasn't clear to what extent the audience grasped the deconstructive agenda; I heard confused mutterings at intermission. The message of the closing tableau, though, should have been unmistakable. After Butterfly stabs herself, Pinkerton rushes onstage and clutches her, only to be left holding her bloody garment as she strides away. At the final, shocking triple-forte chord, she fixes the audience with an icy stare.

There are days, many days, when I miss the old City Opera. It rejuvenated audience favorites, like "Butterfly," which remained piles of bric-a-brac at the Met. It took chances on American singers instead of flying in jet-lagged European stars. And it featured new works that the bigger company discovered only decades later. The Met opened its current season with Jake Heggie's "Dead Man Walking"; City Opera presented the work in 2002, with the young Joyce DiDonato leading the cast. Coming in November is Anthony Davis's "X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X," which had its world première at City Opera in 1986. If the Met is looking for more inspiration in past City Opera seasons, it might consider Bernd Alois Zimmermann's "Die Soldaten" (1991), Erich Wolfgang Korngold's "Die Tote Stadt" (1975), and Alberto Ginastera's "Don Rodrigo" (1966). Or it could come up with new ideas.

"X," which Detroit Opera revived last year, is a major work whose impact has deepened with time. "Dead Man Walking," based on Sister Helen Prejean's account of her friendship with a death-row inmate, made a feebler impression on its return to New York. It's an uncommonly popular piece, having been staged by more than seventy companies around the world. But the score is derivative and discursive, reacting to the story instead of driving it. At the Met, the opera felt like a movie of the week blown up to CinemaScope dimensions. Frantically loud orchestral playing, under the overeager baton of Yannick Nézet-Séguin, only amplified the music's limitations. DiDonato, again playing Sister Helen, and Ryan McKinny, as the inmate, were vocally secure and theatrically incisive; the production, by Ivo van Hove, undercut them with video trickery and a relentlessly chilly mise en scène. The execution scene had a clinical vividness, yet the barbaric politics of the death penalty remained an abstraction. Curiously, "Butterfly" in Detroit seemed more of the moment: it suggested how the virtual realm can infect and degrade the real one, turning us into prisoners of other people's fantasies. ♦

THE ART WORLD

EYE FOR AN EYE

Henry Taylor and the fraught art of seeing.

BY JACKSON ARN

"i'm yours" (2015), one of Taylor's many unconventional works of portraiture.

There's something dodgy about portrait artists, and that's part of their allure. One way or another, they need faces. Often, they steal them and hope nobody complains. At times, they entice volunteers by appealing to their arrogance or cluelessness. Other portraitists pride themselves on treating their subjects well—befriending them, learning about them—but even a subject who feels seen may not understand exactly what she's getting into (how many people know how they look?), and, if she is satisfied with the result, she is lucky. It's the artist's way that counts, not hers.

Not everyone agrees—if anything, there seems to be a law that all great portraitists must be praised for their empathy. (Even Diane Arbus, who referred to the people she photographed as "freaks," is now described as a champion of body positivity.) There's something defensive about this, perhaps related to the intrinsic strangeness, so common that we forget, of looking at faces that can't look back. The more we flatter portrait makers for their virtue, the better we portrait viewers get to feel about our ogling.

Henry Taylor, the subject of "Henry Taylor: B Side," a new exhibition at the Whitney, is an empathetic portrait painter. So the exhibition insists, so Taylor has said, and so I'd agree, up to a point—the point, to be precise, where things start to get interesting. Taylor grew up in Oxnard, California, but has lived in Los Angeles for years, and sometimes seems to have painted everyone who's spent any time there at all, from panhandlers and music moguls to his siblings and the Obamas. The richness of Black American community and the indignities of Black American life, in particular the violence of law enforcement, are his recurring themes. There's also an undeniable strain of impishness and amoral weirdness in his work, though this show isn't always sure how to handle it. After a friend of his, the artist Noah Davis, died of cancer, he painted the man as an adolescent (or a man trapped in an adolescent's body), one eye blue and the other brown. His 2007 portrait of Eldridge Cleaver, modelled on James McNeill Whistler's famous portrait of his mother, is a terrific prank: the macho activist who attacked James Baldwin for his dandyish effeminacy gets feminized. I don't know if these are empathetic or ethical works; what I know is that they reward looking.

Taylor, sixty-five, is a more compelling artist than this exhibition suggests, and often a weaker one. The past few years have been kind to him—in June, he launched a collaboration with Louis Vuitton, and "B Side," which was previously at the Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A., has received breathless reviews—but he got off to a slow start. For a decade, he worked as a psychiatric technician in a mental hospital, and he was nearly forty when he graduated from CalArts. In his work, there's a palpable sense of making up for lost time; he rarely takes more than one sitting to finish a painting. This shoot-from-the-hip approach works best when he observes something small and strange in his subjects—the way, for example, the seated woman in "Resting" (2011) holds her right wrist in her left hand, creating a little fortress around herself. The posture of the man sitting next to her is as open as hers is closed, and neither of them acknowledges the teeming prison yard in the distance. It took me a second visit to the Whitney to notice the third figure in the foreground, reclining behind the other two. Who is this? Are the woman and man (Taylor's niece and nephew) leaning against a couch, or a body? In a painting preoccupied with prisons literal and otherwise, the incoherence isn't merely odd but disturbing. It rings in your ears.

Were "B Side" bursting with paintings like this, it might have been one of

the better shows of 2023. Much of the time, however, Taylor doesn't really paint paintings at all; he paints faces and occupies the rest of each canvas with bright, dead space. Most of "Portrait of Steve Cannon" (2013) is devoted to dribbles and scratches not quite filling the emptiness—they're the visual equivalents of "um"s and "like"s—and his faces aren't always much livelier. It's striking, given Taylor's reputation, how often he smothers his sitters' personalities with his own stylistic mannerisms (asymmetrical eyes, flat frontal views, chunky lines). A good portrait needn't be an empathetic one, but it should at least seem to discover something in its subject—the style should be rich and surprising enough to suggest a spark of life. Look at Taylor's portraits of the composer George Acogny or the artist Andrea Bowers, and then at his portraits of Kahlil Joseph or Jay-Z or Deana Lawson. In the first group, there's a tautness in the expressions and a specificity in the gazes: someone's in there. In the second, I sense no spark, just a prolific artist's eagerness to move on to the next thing.

This show is a good reminder of the difference between upsetting art and unsettling art. It is deeply upsetting to look at the strapping, utterly vulnerable inmate in "Warning shots not required" (2011), though the title is more powerful than the figure, and a nearby wall, covered in photographs of beaming Black men and women unaware that they will be killed, is more powerful than either. "THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!" (2017), a huge painting of Philando Castile dead in his car, his eyes still open, betrays some of Taylor's weaknesses: slack composition, size used as a shortcut to gravitas. It's also one of the most upsetting paintings I know, a memorial to a young man shot five times for the crime of obeying a police officer. It stings. I'm trying to imagine a similar work of art that wouldn't.

When I saw "THE TIMES," I thought of "Black Painting," Kerry James Marshall's tranquil, unsettling image of the Black Panther Fred Hampton in bed with a pregnant Akua Njeri. It's an image as dark and dim as Taylor's is bright, as slow-acting as Taylor's is immediate. (If you can make sense of it in less than a minute, your eyesight is better than mine.) Njeri seems to be trying to listen to something, which we know to be the sounds of cops about to murder her fiancé in his sleep. Yet because the violence resides entirely in our minds, we're denied the warm consolation of catharsis—and who says we deserve it? To the extent that we see and identify with the two figures at all, we're forced to assume a perspective horrifically close to that of Hampton's killers, blundering around a strange room in search of bodies. To look at them is to lurk; to empathize is to intrude—standing before "Black Painting," you wonder how anyone could have thought life was simpler.

At his finest, Taylor doesn't. The most illuminating works in this show are a series of sketches he made while working at the mental hospital. The days were long, and drawing was a way of passing the time when he wasn't administering medication or giving shots. Patients could be agitated, or violent; in some of the sketches, they're unconscious, or trapped in five-point restraints, their eyes covered. You can interpret these images as studies in compassion—the show certainly does—but imagine Taylor on the job, pencil and paper in hand, staring at people who can't stare back, and maybe you'll agree that the portraits evince something closer to fascination, the kind of unquenchable compulsion that inspires someone to make thousands of drawings and paintings, often many a day, for decades.

You can feel the same compulsion coursing through "i'm yours" (2015), Taylor's portrait of himself and his children. Almost half of the canvas is dedicated to Taylor's face. His son's is tinier, and his daughter's presence in the upper-left corner seems like an afterthought, which, according to Taylor, it was. The two small portraits are as slapdash as the self-portrait is lushly layered; you could stare at Taylor's face for an hour and still find new colors, and his own stare seems too deep and too hungry to be satisfied. This may strike you as a little impolite—aren't parents supposed to lavish more attention on their kids than on themselves?—but, then, art has no obligation to behave itself. There are no purely moral ways of looking, nor purely immoral ones. There is only looking, and the artists who do it because they'd rather die than not. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

DRILLING DOWN

"Killers of the Flower Moon."

BY ANTHONY LANE

For fans of James Dean, nothing beats the moment in "Giant" (1956) when an oil well erupts. Dean raises his arms and bathes in the rich rain. Clocking in at three hours and twenty-one minutes, "Giant" chimes with Martin Scorsese's latest movie, "Killers of the Flower Moon," which, not to be outdone, is five minutes longer still. In an extraordinary sequence, near the start, we see men of the Osage Nation, stripped to the waist, dancing in slow motion, and in unfeigned joy, as a shower of oil falls upon them. It may be the one happy vision in the entire film. From here on, oil will take second place to another precious commodity that gushes with the aid of human know-how. There will be blood.

Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro star in Martin Scorsese's film.

Written by Scorsese and Eric Roth, "Killers of the Flower Moon" is adapted from the nonfiction book of the same title by David Grann, a staff writer at this magazine. Grann explores the quest for oil under Osage country, in Oklahoma, in the springtime of the twentieth century, and the auctions at which leases for drilling were purchased from Osage landowners. (A single lease could cost more than a million dollars.) In 1920, one reporter, describing the newfound Osage wealth, proclaimed, "Something will have to be done about it." What was done is soon revealed in the film, as vintage stills of the Osage, posed in their finery or in resplendent automobiles, make way for other images, composed by Scorsese with equal calm: dead bodies of the Osage, viewed from above, laid out on their beds. A voice-over gives their names and their ages, adding, "No investigation." If they are being murdered, nobody seems to mind.

Grann ranges wider, in time and in territory, than Scorsese is able to do. The book arrives at the dire proposition that there was "a culture of killing," with Osage victims numbering in the hundreds, many of them missing from official estimates. As often as not, they were slain for their "headrights," shares in the mineral trust of the tribe. (Were an Osage woman to meet with an unfortunate accident, or succumb to a puzzling illness, her rights would pass to her nearest and dearest—a grieving white husband, say.) Grann homes in on a bunch of characters in and around the towns of Gray Horse and Fairfax, and Scorsese does the same. We meet an elderly Osage widow named Lizzie (Tantoo Cardinal) and her daughters, Mollie (Lily Gladstone), Minnie (Jillian Dion), Rita (Janae Collins), and Anna (Cara Jade Myers). Then, there is William Hale (Robert De Niro), a cattle owner, prosperous and genial; he cultivates warm relations with the Osage and speaks their language. No one could accuse him of modesty. "Call me King," he declares. Hale has a nephew, Ernest Burkhart (Leonardo DiCaprio), who is not long back from the First World War. He served with distinction as a cook.

You may be wondering who, of all these folk, will be the lodestone. For Grann, it's Tom White, who, in 1925, was sent by J. Edgar Hoover, of the Bureau of Investigation (the forerunner of the F.B.I.), to delve into the Osage deaths. White cuts a genuinely heroic figure, upright and just, and his sleuthing guides us surely through the skeins of evidence. He shows up in the movie, too, but not for a long while, and—although he's well played, with a courteous tenacity, by Jesse Plemons—in no way does he bind events together on-screen as he does on the page. Instead, bewilderingly, it is Ernest Burkhart whose fortunes we are invited to follow. Huh? This dumb dolt, with bran for brains? Why should *he* take center stage?

Early in the film, Burkhart has a talk with his uncle, who asks whether he is fond of women. "That's my weakness," Burkhart replies. "You like red?" Hale inquires, and we realize that he wants to marry Burkhart off to an Osage woman, like an aunt in Jane Austen trying to hitch an unpromising nephew to a local heiress. The slight difference is that very few aunts in Regency England, as a rule, arranged to have notable persons bumped off with poisoned hooch or shot in the back of the head. Hale doesn't merely hope for Osage lucre in the long run; he wants it now, by whatever means necessary. "If you're going to make trouble," he says, "make it big." Everything to come is foretold in this conversation. Burkhart does indeed court Mollie and make her his wife, to the satisfaction of his scheming uncle and to the detriment, I would argue, of sus-

ILLUSTRATION BY LEONARDO SANTAMARIA

pense. Somehow the very appearance of De Niro, in a Scorsese film, is enough to give away the plot.

The loyalty of directors to their actors is a noble trait, and often a highly productive one. Think of the troupe that rotated around Ingmar Bergman, shifting between major and minor stints; in 1957, Max von Sydow was a medieval knight, bestriding "The Seventh Seal," and then a gas-station attendant, in "Wild Strawberries." No less faithful, Scorsese (who used von Sydow in 2010, in "Shutter Island") has turned repeatedly to De Niro and DiCaprio, and some of the results have been stupendous.

DiCaprio, however, is a curious specimen. The more agonized the roles into which Scorsese has plunged him, in films like "Gangs of New York" (2002) and "The Departed" (2006), the less DiCaprio has been at liberty to flourish his prime asset—namely, his boyishness. He strikes me as a perennial kid, adrift in a land of grownups, and only truly at ease when he can lark around. That's why his best and his most believable performance was back in 2002, in "Catch Me if You Can," directed by Steven Spielberg, whose casting eye is unrivalled, and who spied the essential lightness in DiCaprio. Scorsese, on the other hand, has strained to drag him into the dark. If their happiest collaboration is in "The Wolf of Wall Street" (2013), it is because, for once, the actor's puckish vagaries are not reined in. Scorsese loosens the leash.

I would love to report that DiCaprio is rejuvenated by "Killers of the Flower Moon." Sadly not. He does get to banter with De Niro, during a car ride, but listen to the topic under discussion: the killing of an Osage man, Henry Roan (William Belleau), which was meant to resemble a suicide but went awry. We can't help laughing along with Hale and Burkhart, as if they were two goons in a Scorsese Mob movie; meanwhile, the thought of poor Roan gets lost in the mix. Such is the dilemma that weighs upon this film. Although its moral ambition is to honor the tribulations of an Indigenous people, it keeps getting pulled back into the orbit—emotional, social, and eventually legal—of white men. Mollie is diabetic, and Burkhart gradually suspects that the insulin injections he is giving her may be doctored; yet the focus remains more on his clenched and frowning perplexity than on her wasting away.

More than once, Mollie refers to herself as "incompetent." This is not a joke but a formal term, which the film, for some reason, never bothers to define; many Osage were considered ill-suited to handling their own funds, which had to be administered by a white guardian. Yet it *is* a joke, as dark as oil, because Lily Gladstone, as Mollie, is unmistakably the most compelling presence in the movie. Her gait is dignified and unrushed, her humor is vented in a high and lovely yelp, and her smile is deliciously knowing and slow—so knowing, in fact, that it's hard to imagine what Mollie sees in Burkhart, whom she calls a coyote. It's not as if she's blind to his basic motive. "Coyote wants money," she says. All of her sisters make their mark; Myers, especially, does a wonderful job as Anna, who is handsome, wanton, fiery, and fatally drawn to the bottle. But Mollie is at the core of the family, and Scorsese, to be fair, does her proud with a scene in which a crowd of onlookers, gathered near a corpse that has been found by a river, parts in silent respect to let Mollie through. The camera takes the part of the bereaved.

If you relish that kind of staging—people being shifted, smoothly or brutally, around the frame, the better to boost the narrative sway—then Scorsese, aged eighty, is still the guy you need. Check out the sequence, for example, in which a wanted man is arrested. He sits in a barber's chair, in the foreground; when lawmen enter from the street, behind him, we notice them well before he does. Even as they draw close, he stays put, making no effort to scuffle or scarper, and that simple quiescence proves that his hour of reckoning comes as no surprise. Hell, it might just be a relief.

"Killers of the Flower Moon" is rife with such passages of action and inaction, in tune with its symphonic stateliness. Themes of oppression, vengeance, and resistance are developed and recapitulated throughout, and there's also a strange coda, in which Scorsese himself turns up. He plays an announcer on an old-school radio drama, which retells the saga of the Osage murders, complete with cheesy sound effects. Needless to say, the heroes of the show are Hoover's boys from the Bureau. Is Scorsese claiming that, in contrast to this low-rent travesty, he has reclaimed the original terrors of the case; or is he, more humbly, confessing that his film is just one more version of a tragedy that can never be fully fathomed or explained? Next time, perhaps, an Osage voice will tell the tale anew. ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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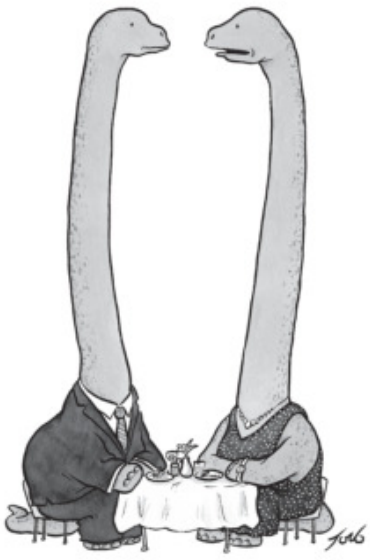
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

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 Tom Toro, must be received by Sunday, October 29th. The finalists in the October 16th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the November 13th 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



“ ”

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THE FINALISTS

"I'm teaching object impermanence."
Alex Bryce, Perth, Australia

"This way, we'll all be crying about the same thing."
Carol Lasky, Boston, Mass.

"Of course, we'll place it higher if it's a girl."
Jerrold E. Fink, Highland Park, Ill.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"My wife complains that I'm cold and self-serving."
Dan Rose, San Francisco, Calif.

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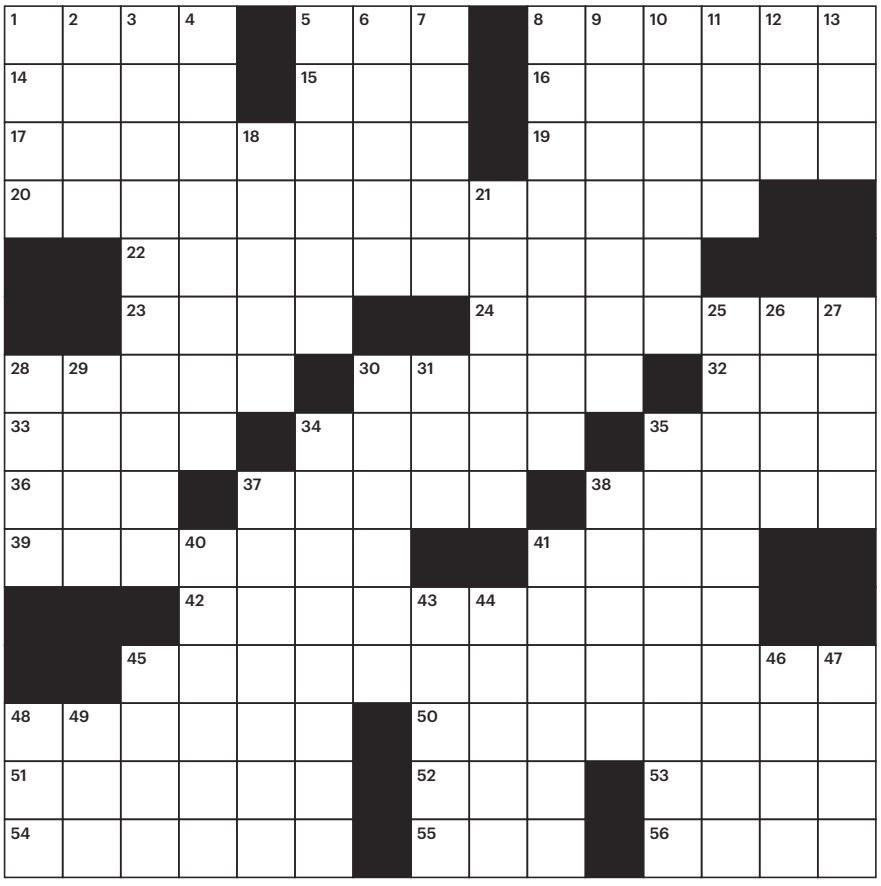
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

BY PAOLO PASCO



ACROSS

1 Sweethearts, in modern parlance
5 2022 film in which Cate Blanchett plays a world-renowned conductor
8 In flames
14 Like taking up two parking spots or cutting in line
15 Genre for Fall Out Boy
16 Intend to
17 Crowd stereotypically seen with pitchforks and torches
19 Kicked, as a football
20 Intangible asset for a Broadway actor
22 Business where people deal with lots of lots?
23 Golden ___ Bridge
24 "Hey now, you're an ___ / Get your game on, go play" (Smash Mouth lyrics)
28 Treats like a pariah
30 Mariah who holds the record for most cumulative weeks atop the *Billboard* Hot 100
32 Insurance option that generally doesn't cover out-of-network care: Abbr.
33 ___ & Chandon (champagne house)
34 Carefully studied, with "over"
35 Quick job at the barbershop
36 Delivery co. that's the subject of the book "Big Brown"
37 Tear it up on the guitar
38 Disreputable
39 Become a part of, as a scheme
41 Unfreeze
42 Accommodations for road trippers
45 "Might as well try!"
48 "The Color Purple" actress Goldberg
50 Silvery adhesive strip
51 Placated
52 ". . . or something like that"
53 Biblical garden in which Adam named the animals
54 Jousters' horses
55 Consumed
56 "Don't let them live in your head ___-free"

DOWN

1 Lingerie tops
2 Viv, to Will, on "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air"
3 American poet who wrote "Only a Dad" and "It Couldn't Be Done"
4 Military rank above corporal
5 Place of worship
6 Italian for "love"
7 Judges' garments
8 Contested the results of a trial
9 In a not so tactful manner
10 Jousters' weapons
11 Poker player's buy-in
12 Kravitz who played Catwoman in "The Batman" and "The Lego Batman Movie"
13 Terminus
18 "Sailing to Byzantium" poet W. B. ___
21 Looked intently
25 Slyly sniped, in slang
26 In the thick of
27 "___ and Michele's High School Reunion"
28 Smarmy
29 Optimist's sentiment
30 Smaller relative of a trumpet
31 Nirvana's "Come as You ___"
34 Cards presented at T.S.A. checkpoints
35 Trucker in a union
37 Looked through someone's phone, say
38 ___ king (charismatic five-foot-four-inch guy, maybe)
40 Cry upon entering one's apartment
41 "I don't have a comeback for that"
43 Youngest Bennet sister in "Pride and Prejudice"
44 Forcefully awaken
45 Foot-massage target
46 Word on one side of a shop-window sign
47 Camper's shelter
48 Toilets, to Europeans: Abbr.
49 Trilby or fedora, e.g.

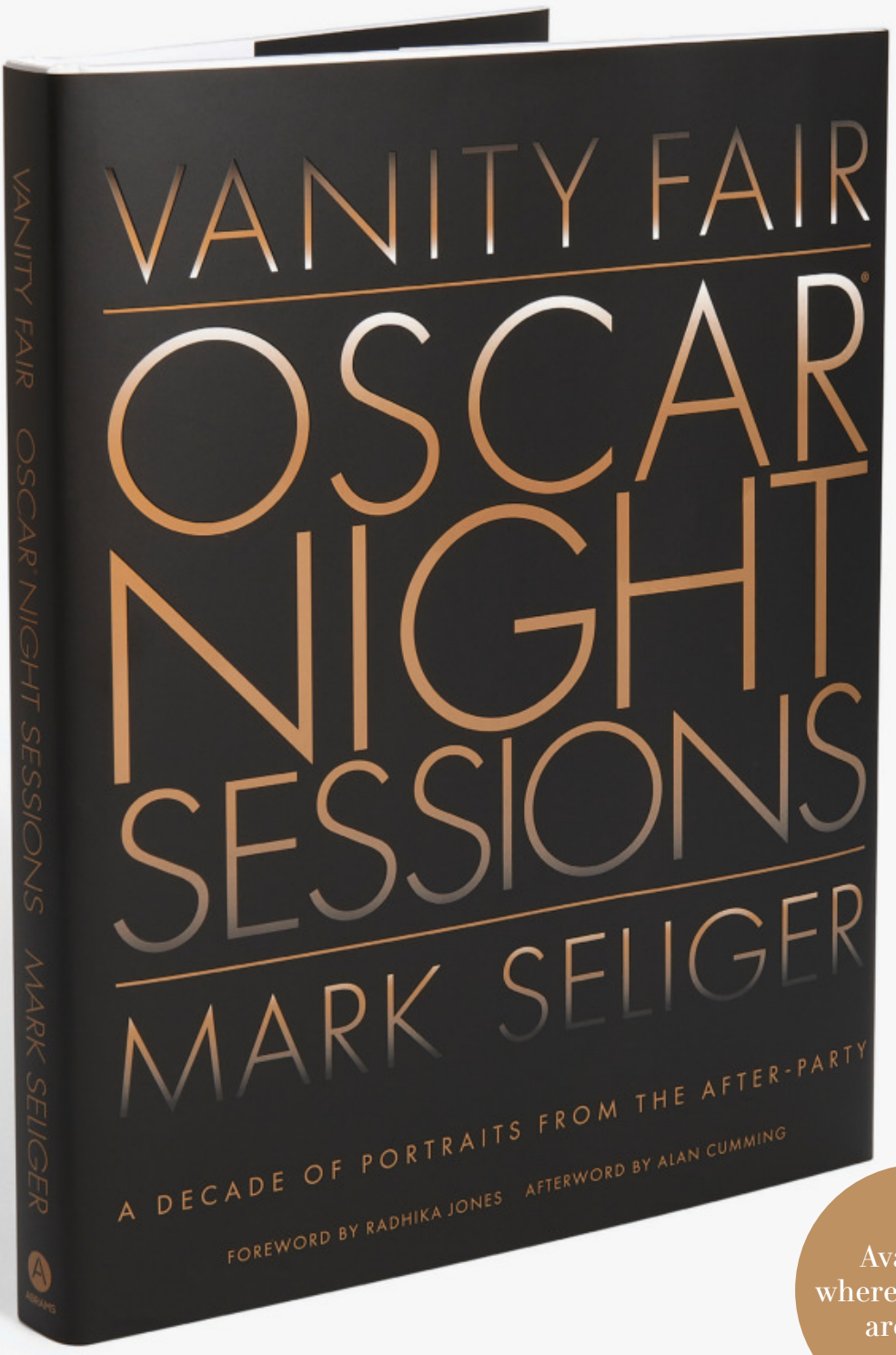
Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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

VANITY FAIR

This Year, *You're* Invited



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