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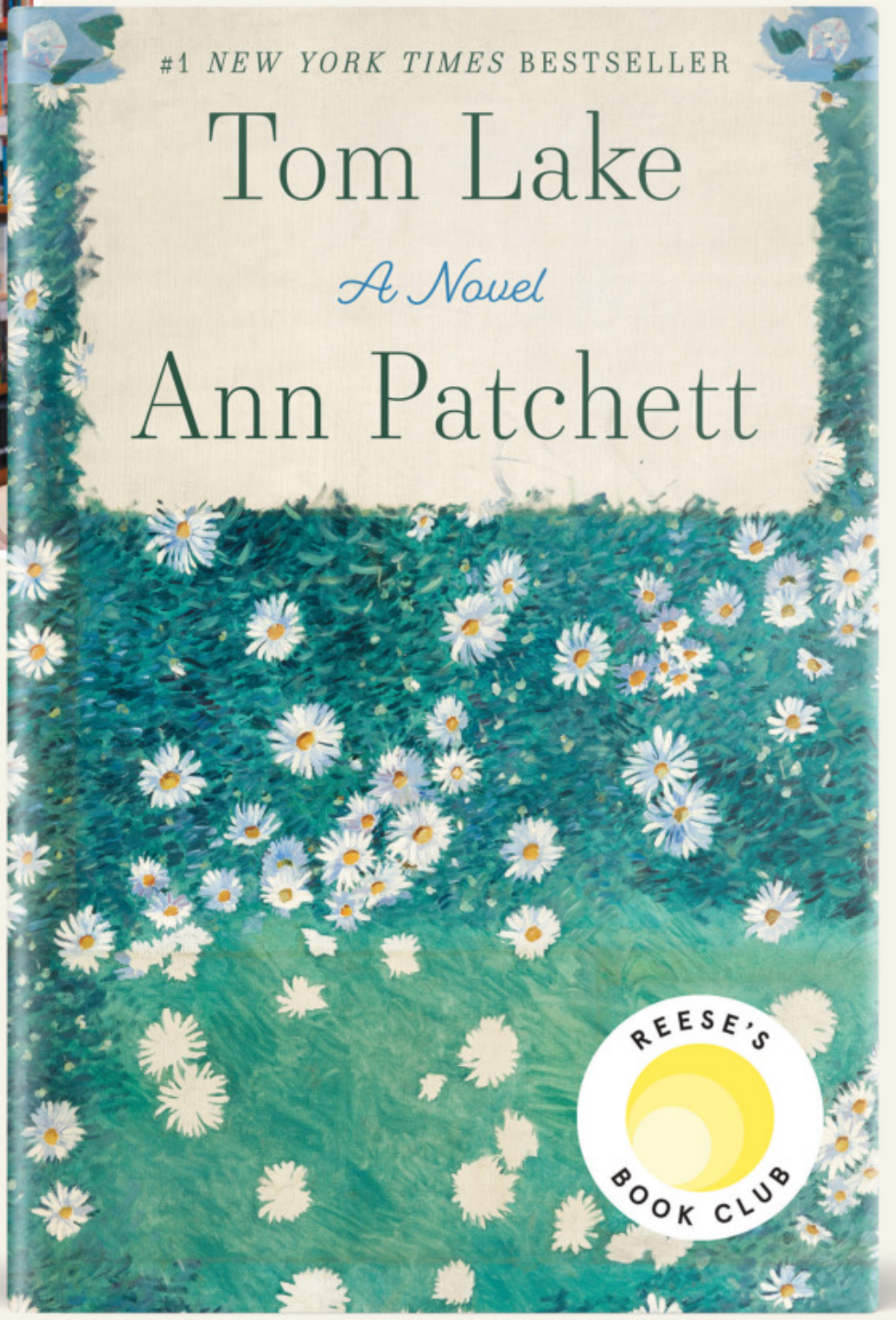

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THE NEW YORKER
FALL BOOKS

SEPTEMBER 18, 2023

DRAWINGS *Evan Lian, Charlie Hankin, Liza Donnelly and Carl Kissin, Jared Nangle, Nick Downes, P. C. Vey, Ngozi Ukazu, Ken Levine, Gingle Pingle, Paul Noth, Emily Bernstein, Ellis Rosen, Jason Adam Katzenstein and Natalia Winkelman, Lila Ash, Will McPhail, David Ostow and Lindsay Arber* SPOTS *Jochen Gerner*

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Ian Frazier (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 27*), a staff writer, is the author of "Cranial Fracking," a collection of humor pieces.

Roz Chast (*Sketchbook, p. 39*), a longtime *New Yorker* cartoonist, will publish her forthcoming book, "I Must Be Dreaming," in October.

R. Kikuo Johnson (*Cover*) is an artist and the author of, most recently, "No One Else." In March, he became the first graphic novelist to receive a Whiting Award.

Judith Thurman (*"Mother Tongue," p. 46*) began writing for the magazine in 1987 and became a staff writer in 2000. Her latest essay collection is "A Left-Handed Woman."

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Kamran Javadizadeh (*Books, p. 75*), an associate professor of English at Villanova University, is at work on his first book, "Institutionalized Lyric."

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John Lee Clark (*Poem, p. 35*) is a DeafBlind writer and a Protactile educator. His latest book is "How to Communicate: Poems."

Lore Segal (*Fiction, p. 54*), the author of "Half the Kingdom" and "Her First American," will publish "Ladies' Lunch and Other Stories" in the U.S. this fall.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

U.S. JOURNAL
After a young girl took her own life, a clash over race engulfed a Utah community, James Ross Gardner reports.

THE WEEKEND ESSAY
Viet Thanh Nguyen writes that his mother was not a casualty of war—but her peace of mind was.

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LEFT: JANNA IRELAND; RIGHT: JIA SUNG

THE MAIL

BRANCHING OFF

Kathryn Schulz, in her review of Gunnar Broberg's biography of Carl Linnaeus, discusses the fact that biologists have changed the classification of many species since Linnaeus's time (Books, August 21st). But the article omits the central paradigm shift: whereas Linnaeus believed that groups simply reflect similarity, biologists now see them as generally indicating species' ancestral relationships. Thus, scientists no longer count Monera among the kingdoms, because we now recognize that its former subgroups, Archaea and Bacteria—although both consist of single-celled organisms—are only very distantly related to each other; the split between them represents perhaps the deepest surviving fork in the tree of life.

Daniel Weissman
Associate Professor of Physics
Emory University
Atlanta, Ga.

Schulz quotes Charles Darwin as saying that he looked "at the term 'species' as one arbitrarily given, for the sake of convenience, to a set of individuals closely resembling each other." In this passage from "On the Origin of Species," Darwin is asserting that a natural group's taxonomic rank—its status as a species rather than as a genus, class, or variety—is arbitrary. He is not denying that a species is a unique kind of creature, as real as a chemical element. Indeed, only natural selection could explain this "natural arrangement in group under group." According to Darwin, the branches in the tree of life are real, but a particular branch's "rank" is not.

Marc Lange
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University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, N.C.

WASTE NOT

David Owen, in his article about the high percentage of products that are returned, especially those sold by online retailers, highlights the extent of a shocking phenomenon ("There and Back Again," August 21st). Retailers have seemingly accepted the "free return" policy as the norm. But the costs of added shipping and early disposal represent economic and environmental losses that should be addressed. There is a community seeking to change such practices, under the rubric "zero waste." A zero-waste policy would place the responsibility for a product and its packaging's eventual disposal on the producer. There would be a focus on reuse, and on product designs that are more durable, repairable, and recyclable. These measures would not prevent returns, but they would make them less desirable and less harmful.

Roger Diedrich
Cypress, Texas

TRAGEDY ON MAUI

Elizabeth Kolbert, in her Comment on the Maui wildfires, mentions the introduction of invasive grasses in recent decades as a contributing factor, and interviews a fire ecologist who says that "nothing's been done since then" (August 28th). Indeed, there was ample warning for these fires. Between 1999 and 2019, twenty-six wildfires occurred in West Maui. Hazard-mitigation plans noted the changing vegetation but ignored the ubiquity of flammable materials in Lahaina. The governments of Hawaii and Maui are a morass of large committees and agencies; some actions they could have taken, but didn't, include burying electrical lines, requiring more sprinklers, implementing evacuation plans, and maintaining reservoir capacity. By blaming climate change as something inevitable and unstoppable, governments avoid responsibility for preventable disasters.

Michael Lindenfeld
La Jolla, Calif.

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GOINGS ON

SEPTEMBER 13 – 19, 2023

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

The **Perelman Performing Arts Center, a.k.a. PAC NYC,** inaugurates its new facility with a five-night concert series that assembles thirty-odd distinguished artists from various musical disciplines. The opening show, on Sept. 19, dubbed **"NYC Tapestry: Home as Refuge,"** celebrates New York as a safe space and an incubator for music and culture from around the globe, featuring musicians who have made the city their creative home. Performances in the pay-what-you-wish series range from experimental music (Laurie Anderson) to *erhu* fiddle-playing (Wang Guowei), and include (pictured, left to right) the concert pianist Daniel Gortler, the soul fusionist Martha Redbone, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Raven Chacon (with a world-première commission), and Alberto Villalobos, of the world-music violin trio the Villalobos Brothers.—*Sheldon Pearce*

PHOTOGRAPH BY JUTHARAT PINYODOONYACHET

ABOUT TOWN

OFF OFF BROADWAY | "Don't mind me as I let myself be seen on this stage, on my own terms." These words come from one of the thirty two-minute plays that, on a recent night, constituted **"The Infinite Wrench."** That could be the motto of the whole show, whose performers have an hour to sing, dance, and sock-puppet their way through as many of the plays as possible, in a random order determined by the audience. Note that they don't act. "We are who we are," an ensemble member of the New York Neo-Futurists, the troupe behind this production, announces before the show. The company doesn't hesitate to test the audience's limits; drink the meat-flavored seltzer at your own risk.—*Dan Stahl (Kraine Theatre; Fridays and Saturdays.)*

JAZZ | On the record "Love in Exile," the vocalist **Arooj Aftab,** the composer and pianist **Vijay Iyer,** and the bassist **Shahzad Ismaily** tap into the same frequency. The songs on the album, which was released in March, move at a spellbindingly sedate pace, building gradually around Aftab's sinuous melodies, sung in Urdu. Many of the tracks stretch out as if trying to fill a void, with most running around twelve minutes long. The sounds are sustained and even echoing, seemingly inexhaustible. The music's ebbs and flows—generated by the hiss, hum, and chime of electronics, the gently throbbing bass, and haunting, atmospheric vocals that dissolve like vapor—conjure an inescapable dreamscape.—*Sheldon Pearce (Town Hall; Sept. 14.)*

DANCE | The dance form known as stepping developed in Black fraternities and sororities in the early twentieth century, mainly as group routines of stomping and clapping in intricate rhythms and formations which grew out of African American traditions of body percussion. But it was only in 1994 that the first professional company dedicated to the form, **Step Afrika!,** débuted. From the start, the troupe proudly juxtaposed the American style with South African ones, and its latest program keeps that conversation going, with samples of the gumboot dancing of South African miners and of the Indlamu dance of the Zulu people.—*Brian Seibert (N.Y.U. Skirball Center; Sept. 16-17.)*

CLASSICAL | When composers have milestone anniversaries, a company might trot out the influential pieces that made them memorable in the first place, but the Brooklyn-based new-music incubator National Sawdust honors the restless spirits of the boundary-breakers **John Zorn** and **György Ligeti** with fresh material. Two weeks after his seventieth birthday, Zorn unveils "Love Songs," the third in a set of chameleonic, genre-spanning projects with the lyricist Jesse Harris (Sept. 16-17). For Ligeti's centennial, the pianist Han Chen has commissioned a companion piece for each of the composer's eighteen études, eruptive works thinly disguised as keyboard exercises. Here, Chen plays the new pieces, paired with the originals, for the first time (Sept. 24).—*Oussama Zahr (National Sawdust.)*

TELEVISION | Eight years after it tipped its hat farewell, the crime drama "Justified" returned this summer for a stand-alone FX miniseries, **"Justified: City Primeval,"** which reaffirmed two of the original series' greatest strengths: rooting characters in their storied home towns, and offering a showcase for character actors, such as Walton Goggins and Margo Martindale, to embody compellingly unorthodox outlaws. Timothy Olyphant reprises his starring role as Raylan Givens, an itchy-fingered U.S. marshal from Harlan County, Kentucky, who's now trying to play things by the book. With the action moved to Detroit, the franchise newcomers Aunjanue Ellis, Vondie Curtis-Hall, and Boyd Holbrook give noteworthy performances as opportunists from across the legal spectrum, each seeking to take advantage of the murder of a judge.—*Inkoo Kang (Streaming on Hulu.)*

MOVIES | Hal Hartley, a leading independent filmmaker of the nineteen-nineties, is a master of artifice, crafting highly stylized and fable-like dramas. The Criterion Channel is offering a cornucopia of his work, including his satire **"Henry Fool,"** from 1997, in which his arch methods reach a height of expressive power. Set in Queens, the film is a cartoonish yet dour sendup of artistic ambition and celebrity, starring Thomas Jay Ryan in the title role of a literary outlaw—a sex fiend with a superiority complex who's working on an unpublishable magnum opus—and James Urbaniak as Simon Grim, a sanitation worker who, persuaded by Henry to write, becomes a world-famous poet and a target of right-wing politicians. Despite his wide-ranging mockery, Hartley delivers a spiritual vision of redemptive romance and creative devotion.—*Richard Brody*

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TABLES FOR TWO

Cecchi's
105 W. 13th St.

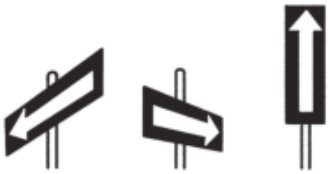
Cecchi's, a clubby restaurant that opened this summer in the West Village, occupies an address that's significantly haunted, even by New York City standards. The space's previous tenant, Café Loup, was a bona-fide writers' hangout, a home base for a brainy, artsy Manhattan scene that, in the course of its forty-odd years, encompassed Britchky, Sontag, Hitchens, and an army of literary-world regulars. When the restaurant closed, in 2019, it was eulogized as the end of a certain bohemian way of life in the city.

It's horribly unfair to weigh a restaurant against the ghost of its real-estate predecessor. But Cecchi's—which is operated by Michael Cecchi-Azzolina, a career maître d' who's now débuting as a solo restaurateur—seems to welcome the comparison. Café Loup was unfancy, a little bit ticky-tacky; its sophistication was a product of its clientele, not a matter of design. But Cecchi-Azzolina has transformed the space into a Hollywood vision of an important literary hangout. The old cane-backed Café Loup chairs remain; the hulking vintage cash register is still the centerpiece of the bar. But there's now molten-honey lighting, sinuous banquettes ideal for table-hopping, and whimsical murals of bons vivants in various states of lust and play.

Stepping into the vestibule is like being dropped into the middle of a party, but the landing isn't always smooth. Last year, Cecchi-Azzolina published a dishy memoir, "Your Table Is Ready," in which he mentions that if you don't feel like a restaurant wants you there you should walk out the door. When I was seated between a service station and the restrooms, was that my cue to pick up and go? Or was it when the gin rickey I'd ordered upon sitting took until the entrées to arrive? Maybe it was an off night. Returning a few weeks later, I was led to a pretty good table—most are—though not as good as the curved booths, which anchor the room, thrones for the *very* V.I.P.s.

On both visits, the food was quite good, if unsure of the story it's trying to tell. The menu is stacked with what the Martinis-and-TikTok crowd want: enormous cocktail shrimp; a minimalist, exquisitely juicy burger; tender steaks with tarragon-heavy béarnaise. As at Café Loup, the fries at Cecchi's are the best thing on the menu. Unlike at Café Loup, this is not a veiled insult: the fries are slim, golden, and crisp, glimmering with salt. An Italian-sausage variant on pigs in a blanket belongs on a kids' menu; apricot-glazed ribs are conceptually more aligned with an eighties issue of *Parade* than with the timeless glamour that Cecchi's is trying to evoke. "Food or service?" Cecchi-Azzolina muses in his memoir. "The one thing that keeps customers coming back over and over is the service." No one forgot to deliver my drinks the second time around. *(Dishes $7-74.)*

—Helen Rosner



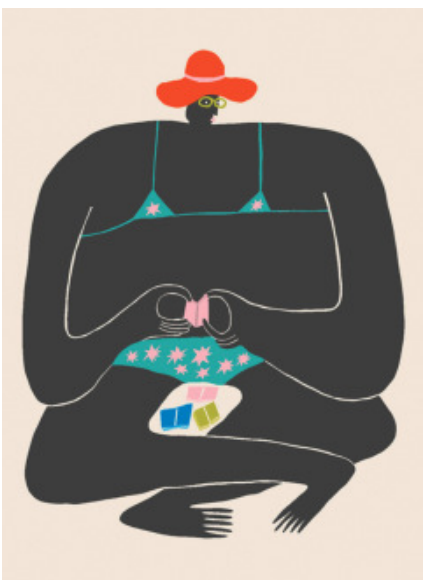
PICK THREE

The staff writer Katy Waldman on three of her favorite short books.

1. "THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY" (1927): I first came to Thornton Wilder through his play "Our Town." His fiction is even better—it's easier to appreciate the shrewd, avuncular delicacy of his style, and his tendency for understatement heightens a sense of wit and gentle authority. The novel opens with a rope bridge in eighteenth-century Peru breaking and sending five people to their deaths. A monk who sees the accident investigates the lives of the victims.

2. "THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE" (1961): A travelling companion in Scotland bought this book out of respect for the country, and for its genius Muriel Spark. It was so short that I hardly had to wait before he'd finished it; then I was transported by the six schoolgirls who make up the "Brodie set," and by their magnetic, unconventional teacher. Here's history, religion, jokes, the false promises of "goodness, truth, and beauty"—briefly, a miracle.

3. "TRAIN DREAMS" (2011): Robert Granier is a logger moving from gig to gig in the American West. He has lost his wife and his daughter; his rough world is infused with visions. Denis Johnson's book, with its alternately terrible and fragile wilderness, is famous as a twenty-first-century novel that deftly balances magnificence and brevity—a credit to the poetic cohesion of the author's design.



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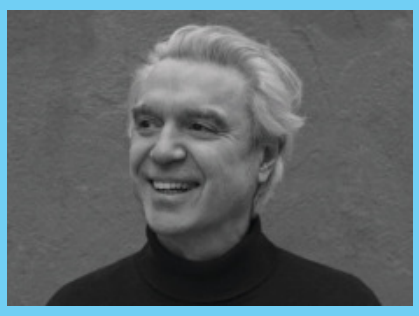

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
POLITICS AND POLITICIANS

On a hot day in May, 2022, Ron Klain, who was then President Joe Biden's chief of staff, found himself in the midst of a joyous crowd at the Tufts University commencement, and railed at the heavens. "*Why aren't we receiving any credit for making this possible?*" he thought, according to an account in "The Last Politician," a new book about the Biden Administration, by Franklin Foer. The pandemic was finally in abeyance: students were gathering with their families, and, as Klain saw it, the "whole nation could rush to see *Top Gun: Maverick* in theaters thanks to the White House." But Biden's approval rating was around forty per cent—about the same as Donald Trump's. Klain found it "darkly humorous" that the public got so worked up about problems like the baby-formula shortage but didn't applaud when the Administration would "drop everything" to deal with them. To him, it seemed terribly unfair.

And yet when voters went to the polls several months later, in midterm elections that were expected to be a brutal rebuke to the Administration, Democrats held on to the Senate and only narrowly lost the House. Foer's book ends with the midterms, so it is imbued with a sense of vindication. Biden, it argues, proves the doubters wrong.

Perhaps so, but the midterms are beginning to feel like a long time ago. Unemployment is low and inflation has eased, but it would be perilous to consider this a period of ascendance for Biden, or to be all that confident about the 2024 election. Foer writes, by way of praising the President's political instincts, that in the 2022 midterms he "desperately wanted to avoid a referendum on his performance," given his unpopularity, and that he encouraged Democrats to focus instead on the extremism of "ultra-MAGA" Republicans. Such a dodge is a lot harder in a Presidential election, even though his opponent will most likely be the ultra-ultra-MAGA Republican himself, Trump. Biden's favorability ratings are about the same now, after Trump's fourth criminal indictment, as they were a year ago.

Surveys released last week suggest further reasons for Democrats to worry. An analysis of *Times*/Siena College polls found a sharp drop in support for the President among Black and Hispanic voters, particularly younger ones. A CNN poll, meanwhile, showed Biden not only trailing Trump, among registered voters, but behind or tied with every other major Republican contender, except Vivek Ramaswamy. What's more, only thirty-six per cent of Biden supporters said that they were more "for Joe Biden" than "against Donald Trump." Trump supporters had a different answer: sixty-two per cent were "for" him, which may reflect a different degree of commitment.

The poll numbers are a reminder that the Biden boosters may be missing something. There are clear sources of discontent: the dearth of affordable housing; problems managing the influx of migrants; the surge in fentanyl use, which pushed the number of overdose deaths above a hundred thousand in 2021; fear of crime; economic stress; the mental-health crisis among young people. (For that matter, the baby-formula shortage persists, to some extent.) And when Democrats in the CNN poll were asked their biggest concern about Biden "as a candidate," half of them mentioned his age—he turns eighty-one this year—and another twenty per cent mentioned related issues, such as mental competence and health.

Those results are in line with a *Wall Street Journal* poll in which seventy-three per cent of registered voters said that Biden is too old to run again. Only forty-seven per cent said the same of Trump, even though he is just three years younger than Biden. More than sixty per cent had doubts about whether Biden was "mentally up for" the job; the number was forty-six per cent for Trump. Both men's ages add two somewhat paradoxical factors to the political equation: a sense that the country is stuck in a loop (with the same characters contending for the same offices)

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

and that our institutions are unstable (with the possibility that upheaval is only one medical incident away).

There is also the matter of Hunter Biden, the President's son. Polls indicate that the G.O.P.'s focus on him is beginning to gain traction with some voters. The problem is not imaginary: a special counsel, David Weiss, is assigned to the case, and he has said in court filings that he expects to bring at least one indictment against Hunter Biden in the next few weeks, connected to the purchase of a gun while he was addicted to crack cocaine, with more, on tax charges, likely to follow, and potentially more after that, perhaps related to foreign lobbying. A plea agreement fell apart after a judge found it questionable. Republicans have alleged political interference on Hunter's behalf, a claim that the Justice Department has publicly denied. Last month, Kevin McCarthy, the Speaker of the House, called an impeachment inquiry "a natural step forward." Hunter Biden is not the candidate, and his legal issues are still minuscule compared with Trump's, but they don't help.

Foer, in calling Biden the "last politician," relies on a narrow definition of politics which is distinctly Washingtonian, involving mediation, tolerance, rules, and acceptance of defeat. It is manifest in backroom negotiations of the sort that ultimately yielded the Inflation Reduction Act. Politics, in this sense, is Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo helping to bring Senator Joe Manchin back to the negotiating table by serving him and Klain a dinner of eggplant parm, roast pork, and cannoli. (Manchin likes Italian food.) But that anecdote is also a reminder of what has changed since the midterms: Manchin is now openly contemplating a third-party Presidential bid.

Still, the Inflation Reduction Act includes unprecedented support for green energy and a climate transition. Such investments, as they pay off, could give Biden more to run on. After all, he is not lacking in ways to differentiate himself from Trump. A key factor in the unexpected outcome of the midterms was the rage of women voters at the Supreme Court's Dobbs decision, in June, 2022, which overturned Roe v. Wade. That anger remains.

Biden is not the last politician, though he may be among the last of a certain kind. Trump is a politician, too—with his rallies and his appeals to crowds, the raw tools of the political trade—and a very dangerous one. Politics can be both its most compelling and its ugliest when people feel that they are shut out. Ultimately, in the United States, politics is about gaining power at the polls. Winning bureaucratic, legislative, or even legal battles is not the same as winning the country. And Biden has a real fight ahead of him.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

WORMHOLE DEPT.

DO-OVERS

At the Brandy Library, in Tribeca, a man in suspenders led Steven Soderbergh down a spiral staircase, into an amber-lit V.I.P. lounge. Soderbergh, who calls the bar his "satellite office" (his real office is down the street), ordered "the usual." The usual was singani, a Bolivian spirit made with Muscat of Alexandria grapes that are grown in the Andes, at an altitude of six thousand feet. Soderbergh first tasted it in 2007, while directing "Che," and learned that it had never been exported from Bolivia. In 2014, he founded his own brand, Singani 63, and spent eight years on a quest to bring it to market. The spirit finally received U.S. government recognition this past winter.

"Don't go into the booze business," Soderbergh warned, as the server poured him a glass. "I wonder why I did. Part of it was to be able to *get* it, because otherwise you'd have to have people buy it and send it to you."

Dread seems to come easily to Soderbergh, whose œuvre has probed the pleasures and the agonies of voyeurism ("sex, lies, and videotape"), stripping ("Magic Mike"), and Liberace ("Behind the Candelabra"). In 2020—a dread-filled year—he was reading the nonfiction book "Evil Geniuses: The Unmaking of America," about the decades-long effort of plutocrats and right-wing intellectuals (the Koch brothers, Charles Murray) to rig the economy. "Like everybody, I was in a steady state of feeling overwhelmed by everything," Soderbergh, who wore a blazer and his signature black-rimmed glasses, recalled. "It's always been my theory that this can all turn into 'Mad Max' a lot faster than people think." Naturally, he contacted the book's author, Kurt Andersen, and they turned it into a comedy.

The result is "Command Z," a sci-fi series that Soderbergh self-funded and released independently this summer, available on the Web site commandzseries.com, in eight bite-size episodes. Michael Cera plays a billionaire who has blown himself up on his way to Mars and appears in the dystopian year 2053 as an A.I. upload. (Shades of the would-be cage-match combatants Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk.) His digital double sends a trio of employees on a mission to save the world by travelling back to 2023 and influencing ultra-powerful jerks to make better decisions. Their method of time travel: entering a wormhole inside a laundry dryer while listening to "Theme from Mahogany."

The fictional billionaires include a fossil-fuel mogul and the founder of a private-equity firm—the type of guys who are "infatuated with their own brilliance and the affirmation of that brilliance by having a quarter-trillion dollars," Andersen, who sat beside Soderbergh with a glass of Merlot, said.

Michael Cera

Neither man has had close experience with such people. Andersen knows Warren Buffett—they're both from Omaha—but views him as the rare benevolent billionaire. Soderbergh has worked with an evil non-billionaire, Harvey Weinstein, and plenty of megastars—"Clooney told this story about getting elbowed in the mouth in Rome by somebody trying to get to Brad"—but Hollywood fame "doesn't typically result in the Federalist Society," he said.

Still, the thought experiment was tempting. Given the opportunity to go back in time, how would they influence our future billionaire overlords? Let's say: Zuckerberg, 2004, Harvard University. "Get him laid more," Andersen spitballed.

"It's axiomatic," Soderbergh said. "If he had the same approach to relationships that I do, that business couldn't have scaled in the way it scaled. I would have probably smothered it as soon as I saw the implications of what it could do."

How about Musk, in his South African adolescence? Andersen proposed enrolling teen Elon in an institute to teach him "that free speech is not just being an asshole and a troll and saying whatever you want and, like, lolz." The Koch brothers? "Just kill them," Andersen joked. Donald Trump? "His father was a monster," Andersen reasoned. "He would be better today if I went back in time to 1946 and raised him as my own."

How would they use the time machine on themselves? Andersen said that he would urge himself to visit his mother in Omaha more often before she died: "I don't think it would have any bad unintended consequences—unless my plane went down. That would be tragic."

Soderbergh said that he'd pondered the question on the walk to the bar. "It wouldn't work," he said, clutching his second glass of singani. "First of all, if it was my voice, I wouldn't trust it at all. Secondly, I've gotten very good advice from people whom I *do* trust that I have completely ignored." Would he advise himself to stay out of the Bolivian-booze trade? "No, and I think it comes back to issues of intention, why you do things," he said. "But, boy, it's extremely competitive in ways that I didn't understand, as somebody who used to just walk into a bar and order a drink. What was happening on that backbar was invisible to me. And now it's ruined."

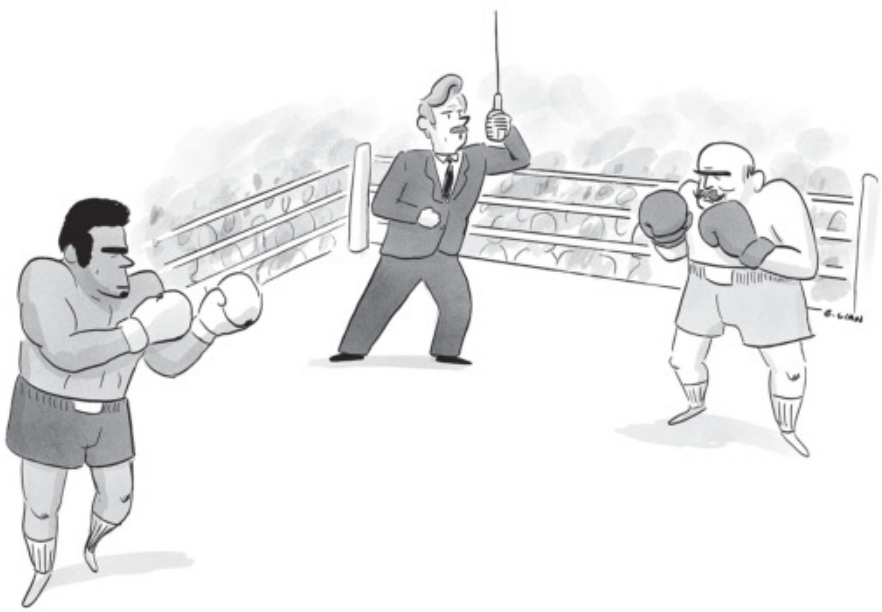
—Michael Schulman

MEMBERS ONLY DEPT.
SCHVITZ AND TONIC

The concept of the speakeasy has had considerable staying power, but why? We live in times of abundant booze, increasingly legal drugs, and technological surveillance. The semi-illicit-thrill industry could use an update. The other day, in the back of a second-floor yoga studio in NoMad, a couple of entrepreneurs were giving it a shot. They were throwing a party celebrating a new establishment called elahni, New York's first "wellness speakeasy," which combines a spa with a bar that serves nonalcoholic "adaptogenic tonics." Unlike a traditional speakeasy, the party wasn't hush-hush. (Heather Graham was on the invite list.) But there was a doorman, a guy in a peach-colored suit with his arms crossed, who manned the elevator entryway. His task: insure that all guests removed their shoes. "The wood is too gorgeous," Rima Rabbath, the pixielike co-owner of SOUK, the yoga studio, explained. Nick Rizk, one of elahni's proprietors, stood nearby with a hand on an unmarked metal door. "Ready?," he said, and slid it open.

Inside, Rizk, who is thirty years old and wore a black long-sleeved T-shirt, and his business partner, Keane Tan, a baby-faced thirty-one-year-old Australian, guided guests around the windowless four-hundred-square-foot space. They explained that visitors would make their way through the yoga studio and spend ten minutes in elahni's hundred-and-eighty-degree sauna, followed by a minute or so in one of its two thirty-nine-degree ice baths. They'd repeat the cycle three times. "It's a forced meditation: your body doesn't know where to go, except to focus on itself," Tan said, as Middle Eastern house music pulsed softly. Next, it would be off to the bar for the tonic shots, which are meant to support the body's hormones. Elahni (which is "inhale" spelled backward) organizes its drinks by "desired end state": "energized," "restful," "grounded," "ready to mingle." Rizk, a tech entrepreneur with a master's in neuroscience, and Tan, a former matcha importer, curated the menu themselves. "We've been trying stuff out, saying, 'How does it feel?'" Tan said. "Neither of us has a background in, like, tonics."

The pair met five years ago, at a boutique gym in SoHo. Last fall, they visited SOUK for some yoga. "Nick sensed



"In this corner, a man who describes everything as 'Orwellian.' And, in this corner, a guy who loves saying 'Kafkaesque'!"

a Lebanese vibe," Tan said. (Rizk's mother is from Lebanon.) Rabbath, the co-owner, confirmed that she'd been born in Lebanon, too. She told them about a spare twenty-by-twenty space that she was struggling to put to use. A partnership was born. Rizk's father, an architect, oversaw the intensive four-month construction that followed. "I gained a son," the elder Rizk said, gesturing toward Tan. The Rizks' corgi, Mishmush, panted at Tan's side. "I gained a dog," he said.

In the studio's main space, fit, sleekly dressed partygoers sipped boxed water and rosé beneath a disco ball. A d.j., who'd been granted a footwear exemption (he and his Brooks sneakers were confined to a yoga mat), spun tunes. Guests' backless dresses revealed cupping bruises. Rizk's mother, Amal—"the most incredible Lebanese chef in the universe," Rabbath announced—had prepared a lavish dinner buffet. Two partygoers, Leah Kreitz and her husband, Gabe Quiroga, were curious about elahni's price point. (A session costs fifty-five dollars.) Had they ever tried adaptogenic tonics? Kreitz wasn't sure. "We live in Brooklyn, so . . ." she said, and shrugged.

A few days later, Rizk and Tan invited a neophyte for an early-morning demo. Since opening, they had hosted bachelorette parties, birthday celebrations, and office team-building outings. "We've been having the real speakeasy experience," Tan said. "One girl tried to come up in the service elevator." Just then, a bespectacled sales rep named Carlos Oliva arrived, in khaki jeans, to discuss samples of a negative-ion drink. Rizk invited him to join the session.

Oliva had no swim trunks ("We should sell some," Tan said), and he said he was on his way to a job interview, but that he was game. He emerged from the locker room a few minutes later, in black boxer briefs. Tan distributed paper cups of electrolyte water and led the group to the sauna, for the first ten-minute stint. "We had a timer display, but then we noticed everyone was just looking at the clock," he said. Next came the one-minute ice bath. "There's a lot of bro culture around cold plunges," Rizk said. "We're trying to make it more mindful." Oliva went wide-eyed and stiff upon entry. "You should have a camera, like roller coasters," he suggested.

The rounds carried on. Feet tingled, fingers pulsed, capillaries dilated and danced. After the last plunge, Tan slipped behind the bar to pour four shots of a plum-colored tonic. He warned that it contained traces of kratom, an herb with some opioid properties. "We call it 'calm focus,'" Tan said. "The company calls it a 'heart opener.'" The shots were downed. A Dalí-style melting clock that hung from a bookshelf read quarter to nine. Carlos changed back into his work wear, wet hair neatly re-combed, and set off for the interview. He said he no longer cared if he got the job.

—Dan Greene

THE FAMILY BUSINESS
FOOT STOMPING

Some people hear the birth of rock and roll in the nasty backbeat on records that Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, Junior Wells, and Little Walter, among others, made in Chicago for Chess Records, the storied indie label, in the nineteen-fifties. Marshall Chess hears the foot of his father, Leonard.

Born Lejzor Szmuel Czyz in what is now Belarus, Leonard Chess and his brother Phil recorded some of the greatest Mississippi Delta musicians who rode the Illinois Central Railroad from New Orleans to Chicago. The Chess brothers marketed 78-r.p.m. singles of hits like Muddy Waters's "Hoochie Coochie Man" to Black record buyers. (These albums, originally known as "race records," were later billed as "R. & B.")

"My dad was called the Foot Stomper," Marshall, who is eighty-one, said the other day. "He wanted a big backbeat." To demonstrate the sound, Marshall stomped on the floorboards of his office, outside Phoenicia, in the Catskills, which he calls the "family museum": a log-cabin-style building decorated with old black-and-white photos of Marshall with his dad and uncle.

Marshall's latest project is "New Moves," an album of Chess Records classics reinterpreted by a supergroup that includes the Stones' backing vocalist Bernard Fowler, the guitarist Skip (Little Axe) MacDonald, and the hip-hop drummer Keith Leblanc, formerly the house session man for Sugar Hill Records.

Being a kid around 2120 South Michigan Avenue, the label's main office and studio, "was like being raised in a carnival," Marshall said. "There were all these characters. I used to drive Willie Dixon to the bank to cash checks for sessions. Willie was so big, the car would rock to his side when he got in." The Flamingos, a Chicago doo-wop group, performed at Marshall's bar mitzvah. Chuck Berry recorded "Maybellene" at 2120. (Leonard had suggested that Berry change the name from "Ida Mae," after spotting a box of Maybelline-brand mascara on a windowsill in the studio.) After Marshall spoke at Berry's funeral, in 2017, a friend of Berry's told him, "Mr. Chess, your daddy was the one who told Chuck to put the beat in there."

At twenty-one, Marshall quit college to work at Chess, as his father's heir apparent. After a month on the job, he asked what he was supposed to be doing. He said that his father replied, "You stupid motherfucker, your job is watching me." Marshall added, "My father was a rough character. He never played catch with me. Instead, he taught me how to shake hands."

One day in the early sixties, after Muddy Waters performed at the Newport Jazz Festival, Marshall was called into his dad's office. "We're getting all these sales from white kids," Leonard said, perplexed. "What's going on?"

Marshall, hip to the British Invasion, knew. In 1967, he started his own Chess

Marshall Chess

imprint, Cadet Concept, to create the sound of Chess's future: "psychedelic blues." The next year, Cadet released a Muddy Waters album with wah-wah and fuzz pedals. The old-school aficionados—"blues Nazis," Marshall calls them—hated it. Howlin' Wolf, another era-defining Chess artist, called his own psychedelic-blues album "dog shit." But a generation of hip-hop artists, including Public Enemy's Chuck D, were later inspired by the new sound.

In 1969, Leonard called Marshall from his Cadillac's car phone to say that he'd sold the record label. (He hung on to the publishing copyrights.) His son was devastated. "It's like you've trained your whole life to throw the javelin, and then a month before the event the Olympics are cancelled," Marshall said. He later spent eight years as president of Rolling Stones Records, and wound up with a heroin addiction. That led to his moving to the Catskills and embarking on a psychedelics-and-cannabis-aided journey of self-discovery.

He tried primal-scream therapy with the psychologist Arthur Janov, but got nowhere. "They told me I was the most defended person they had ever met," he said. "I couldn't remember crying." He experimented with ayahuasca. He installed a sensory-deprivation tank in the family museum's bathroom. He attempted to study with the Tibetan Buddhist master Namkhai Norbu, whose practice includes sealing his disciples inside a cave. It was unsuccessful. "He said I'd go insane," Marshall said. "He yelled at me."

Finally, in the late seventies, Marshall tried LSD therapy with an Austrian psychiatrist. "That broke the dam," he said. "I cried like a baby." He realized the source of his torment: "It was all that phone call," he said.

The tracks on "New Moves" reflect both the Chess legacy and Marshall's journey to make peace with it. The project is co-produced with his son, Jamar, who lives nearby. "I told him, 'I'm trying to treat you better than my dad treated me,'" he said.

What would Leonard say about the new record?

"He would say, 'I hope you're not ahead of time with this, because it's the same as being behind time.' Then he would say, 'Good luck, motherfucker.'"

—John Seabrook

SKETCHPAD BY HILARY FITZGERALD CAMPBELL

LIFE AND LETTERS

GLOW IN THE DARK

What Kate DiCamillo understands about childhood.

BY CASEY CEP

Three winters in a row, Kate DiCamillo went into the hospital, never sure if she would come home and always a little scared to do so. One of those winters, when she was four years old and the air outside was even colder than the metal frames of the oxygen tents she'd grown accustomed to having above her bed, her father came to see her. He was wearing a long black overcoat, which made him look like a magician. "I brought you a gift," he said, pulling something from his pocket as if from a top hat.

DiCamillo studied the red net bag in her father's hands, then watched as a set of wooden figurines tumbled out of it: a farmer, his wife, a cow, a pig, a chicken, a barn, a sun, and a moon. All the pieces were roughly the same size—the pig as big as the barn, the sun as small as the cow. Her father began arranging them on the hospital sheet, which was white and crisp as paper. He told her a story about them, then asked if she could tell him one in return. She did, and, for the first time in a long time, she was not afraid of him.

That was half a century ago, but, DiCamillo told me recently, she feels as if she's never really stopped moving those pieces around. She has written more than thirty books for young readers, and is one of just a handful of writers who have won the Newbery Medal twice. Novels such as "Because of Winn-Dixie," "Flora & Ulysses," "Raymie Nightingale," "The Beatryce Prophecy," and "The Tale of Despereaux" have endeared her to generations of children who see themselves in her work—sometimes because her human characters are shy or like to sing or have single parents as they do, but more often because their yearnings, loneliness, ambivalence, and worries are so fully, albeit fantastically, captured in the lives of her magical menagerie: a chivalrous little mouse, a poetry-writing squirrel, a "not-so-chicken chicken," and more than one rescue dog.

DiCamillo is startlingly versatile, which may help explain why, although she has now sold more than forty-four million books, she is not more of a household name. Some of her stories read like fables, stark and spare; others like the memoirs of mid-century children; still others like works of magical realism, ornate and strange. One of her picture books, "La La La: A Story of Hope," which was illustrated by Jaime Kim, consists of a single repeated word; some of her seemingly simplest stories—an early-reader series about a precocious pig, Mercy Watson, and her neighbors on Deckawoo Drive—collectively read like a grand project, à la "Winesburg, Ohio," with a wide cast of characters getting the inner lives they deserve.

This fall, DiCamillo will publish the last of the books in the "Deckawoo Drive" series, all of which have been illustrated by Chris Van Dusen, and the first in a series of fairy tales set in a land called Norendy. Next spring, she will publish something entirely new for her: a novel about a child loved since birth, who is adored by her mother and father, neither of whom frighten her or abandon her or die a horrible death. Like all DiCamillo's other books, this one, called "Ferris," took her less than two years to write. But in reality, she told me, the novel was decades in the making, because she had to imagine what for her was always truly unimaginable: a happy family.

It is broken families that have made DiCamillo's career. The narrator of her first novel, "Because of Winn-Dixie," which was published in 2000, can count on her fingers the number of things she knows about the mother who abandoned her; the protagonist of her second, "The

DiCamillo likes to tell audiences at book events, "Go home and read to your adult."

ILLUSTRATION BY NOAH SATERSTROM

Tiger Rising," published a year later, has to persuade his father even to speak his dead mother's name. DiCamillo's anthropomorphic characters fare no better: the brave mouse in "The Tale of Despereaux," illustrated by Timothy Basil Ering, is betrayed by his mother, father, and brother, none of whom have any real qualms about condemning him to death, after he commits the grave sin of speaking to a human. "The story is not a pretty one," the narrator explains midway through the tale. "There is violence in it. And cruelty. But stories that are not pretty have a certain value, too, I suppose. Everything, as you well know (having lived in this world long enough to have figured out a thing or two for yourself), cannot always be sweetness and light." My favorite of DiCamillo's novels, "The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane," with pictures by Bagram Ibatoulline, might also be the bleakest: Mr. Tulane, a bit of an antihero, is a haughty toy rabbit "made almost entirely of china," who is lost at sea by his well-to-do owner; subsequent trials soften his heart, but not before shattering him, figuratively and literally. The book's epigraph is taken from "The Testing-Tree," by Stanley Kunitz: "The heart breaks and breaks/and lives by breaking./It is necessary to go/through dark and deeper dark/and not to turn."

One gets the sense from the books that DiCamillo knows that "deeper dark" better than most of us, but she has, in the past, avoided letting on just how well. For almost her entire career, she has told the story of her life the same way: she and her mother, Betty, and her brother, Curt, moved from Pennsylvania to Florida when she was five years old, after doctors suggested that her many health issues, including the chronic pneumonia that kept landing her in the hospital, might be improved by a warmer climate; her father, Lou, an orthodontist, stayed behind to tie up loose ends at his practice, and never rejoined the family.

All of that is true, but it is not the whole truth. During a series of long walks around Minneapolis, where she lives, and longer talks in her home, DiCamillo carefully shared with me more of her family's history. "It's very hard to talk about, because you want to protect people," she said one summer night, sitting in the near-dark of her home office. Her tone, always curious and warm, turned contemplative and confiding. There were two chairs in the room with us, but one was occupied by a three-foot-tall rabbit and some puppets, so I was listening cross-legged at her feet; every so often, DiCamillo tried to coax me into switching places. "Even with your friends," she said, "you just want to protect them from any ugliness."

DiCamillo's brother thinks such reticence has been a survival strategy for the siblings, one they were taught to employ. Once, he said, when he was six and Kate was only three, they were at a Penn Fruit grocery store when a woman approached their mother, "saying something like 'Aren't you Dr. DiCamillo's wife? He's just so wonderful. You're so lucky to be married to him.' And she kept going on like that, and my mother just nodded. And when the woman walked away my mother said, 'They'll never believe you. You can never tell anybody what your father's really like, because they'll never believe you.'"

What their father was really like was terrifying. DiCamillo remembers a Christmas Eve when her parents were arguing, and she watched her father hold a knife to her mother's throat, threatening to kill her, while her mother told him to finally do it. Other images that she carries of her father, even ones connected to her life as a writer, like the figurines he brought her in the hospital, are likewise darkened by fear. When she thinks of him telling her and her brother a story, she conjures a bear, its enormous claws draped over their shoulders—a gesture that the outside world might see as protective but that is really a reminder of how swiftly and effortlessly he could "eviscerate them."

That terror found fictional expression earlier this summer, when DiCamillo published a story in *Harper's* called "The Castle of Rose Tellin." In it, a pair of siblings and their parents vacation on Sanibel Island; the brother plots to flee, and is badly beaten by his father, who later checks himself into a mental institution. In a text message to Curt, DiCamillo sent a link to the story and described it as a birthday gift for him. "It surprised me, because it certainly didn't feel like a gift, thinking about our father," Curt told me, "but also because years ago she was so against talking about any of this."

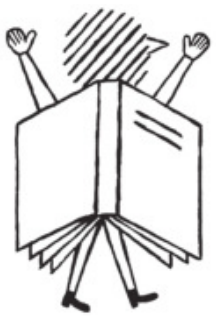
DiCamillo can now see how effectively her father turned his family members against one another, and how trying to please him made it hard to trust anyone else, including herself. When they were still living in Pennsylvania, she would help her father frighten Curt by hiding with him on a gloomy, narrow staircase in their house. She knew that her brother was terrified of that staircase, and knew that her father routinely mocked him for his alleged cowardice, and so she also knew that what she was doing was wrong. As she said in the speech she gave when she accepted her first Newbery Medal, in 2004, even a four-year-old's heart can be "full of treachery and deceit and love and longing."

From the time the family moved to Florida, DiCamillo understood, on some level, that her father wasn't coming. "We had this neighbor, Ida Belle Collins," she told me, "and I remember Ida Belle Collins asked me right away when we moved when my father was moving down, and I said, 'Soon, he's coming soon.' But I remember thinking, That's not true, that's a lie." She recalls feeling relieved that her father was gone. Her mother found a house close to old family friends who had retired to Clermont, where, in the years before Disney World, the orange trees seemed to wildly outnumber the people. That move to Florida, DiCamillo says, was the first time her mother saved her life; the second time was when Betty, an elementary-school teacher, taught her struggling daughter to read. Kate and Curt played in a tree house in the yard, walked through Jurassic-size jaws into the Gatorland theme park, picked their own kumquats, admired the mermaids at Weeki Wachee Springs, and trekked back and forth from the Cooper Memorial Library carrying armloads of books like kindling.

The third time Betty saved DiCamillo's life, she threw both kids and their poodle, Nanette, into the family station wagon and drove nearly two hours to St. Petersburg, to the office of the improbably named Dr. Wunderlich. He had trained as a pediatrician—and while in medical school, at Columbia, had dated Sylvia Plath—but, by the time the DiCamillos encountered him, had strayed from the mainstream. In an era when pharmacology was all the rage, he avoided prescribing drugs and was far

more likely to scrutinize what his patients were eating, how much they exercised, and whether they were exposed to any toxins—a holistic approach that earned him a reputation as a doctor of last resort.

Both DiCamillo and her brother are struck in retrospect by their mother's courage and commitment in taking Kate to Wunderlich. His practice was far away and, at the time, far out, but she got better. "I remember standing in front of him in my underwear with all these lumps on my arms and legs from where they had done allergy tests, and I was allergic to everything," DiCamillo told me. "And he said to Betty, 'I'll save her. We can save her.'"



On Wunderlich's orders, Betty radically changed DiCamillo's diet to avoid all sorts of foods, including sugar, wheat, dairy, and citrus. DiCamillo had allergy shots two or three times a week for years, and the doctor helped her manage both the weeping eczema on her hands and the terrible migraines that still sometimes afflict her. She was soon roller-skating and playing softball with ease. But that newfound vitality disguised an overdetermined sense of the precarity and vulnerability of childhood. Like so many of the characters in so many of the books DiCamillo loved to read, she already sensed that her own wounds, however painful, were also what set her apart.

Although DiCamillo always wanted to be a writer, for most of her twenties, she did everything a writer does except write. She is relentlessly funny in general, and especially so on the subject of her younger self. Per her, she wore black turtlenecks, had a typewriter, and moped; she wrote almost nothing, but wondered indignantly when she would be published. She had gone to Rollins College, in Winter Park, but dropped out after one semester; eventually, she graduated with a degree in English from the University of Florida. Around that schooling, she did desultory work in the Sunshine State: selling tickets at Circus World, potting fresh philodendron cuttings at a greenhouse, calling Bingo at a Thousand Trails campground resort, donning a polyester spacesuit and telling people to "look down and watch your step" at Disney World's Spaceship Earth.

It took a different geographic cure to turn her into an actual writer. When DiCamillo was twenty-nine, a friend of hers announced that she was moving closer to family in Minneapolis, and DiCamillo decided to go along. She didn't know much about Minnesota, but she knew it was nearer than Florida was to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, which she dreamed of attending. Soon after moving, in 1994, DiCamillo got a job at the Bookmen, a wholesale book distributor in the warehouse district. "The building was like something out of a Dickens novel," she said. "It had been a plumbing business, so there was this old brick with 'BETTER HEALTH THROUGH BETTER PLUMBING' painted on the side in huge letters."

DiCamillo never applied to Iowa, but she did create her own kind of workshop, getting up every day to write before her shift—first an hour early, then two hours early, at 4:30 A.M., setting herself the task of producing two pages a day. She chose the predawn hours because neither the rest of the world nor her inner critic was awake yet. Sitting at a desk that her brother helped fashion out of a wooden fence from their back yard in Clermont, she wrote by candlelight and lamplight. She submitted short stories to every magazine for which she could find an address, including this one, and she kept submitting them long after others would have called it quits.

Every morning, once she had met her daily writing goal, DiCamillo headed to work, clocking in at seven. The Bookmen had tall windows everywhere, like a cathedral, which left the warehouse freezing in the winter and stifling in the summer; no matter the time of year, the building smelled like dusty paper and dried apples. DiCamillo had been hired as a picker, which meant going around the shelves with a cart and a list, gathering all the titles a bookstore or a library wanted. She was assigned to the third floor, which held the children's books, and soon she wasn't just throwing the books in her cart; she was reading them. She read picture books and chapter books, new books and then older books as well: "The Watsons Go to Birmingham," about a family whose vacation is disrupted by the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, in 1963; "Bridge to Terabithia," about two friends whose creativity and collaboration are cut short by death; William Steig's "Abel's Island" and Lois Lowry's "The Giver"; stories about medieval times and modern adventures, historical accounts of slavery and segregation, realist tales of tomboys, parable-like depictions of tenderhearted teens. One day, she and everyone else on the third floor thought there must have been a clerical error when an entire shipment of a single title arrived, but then they started reading and understood why so many copies had been ordered: the title was "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone." The interest in children's novels exploded.

But the interest in DiCamillo's work did not. She received four hundred and seventy-three rejection letters; she lived off beans and rice; she pinned some of those rejection letters up in her room and threw darts at them. One of the winters was so cold that it wasn't only freezing, it hit "negative freezing": thirty-two degrees below zero. DiCamillo watched as the vinyl on the inside of her car doors cracked and fell off. She missed Florida, and she started writing about home to keep warm. One night, before she fell asleep, she heard a young girl with a Southern accent say, "I have a dog named Winn-Dixie."

DiCamillo has now lived in Minnesota for nearly half her life, but she still punctuates her speech with the "y'all"s and the long vowels of central Florida. We are back in her office, where she's explaining how she wrote "Because of Winn-Dixie," and when she says the main character's full name—India Opal Buloni—it's as if there's a fermata over every letter.

Like Scout Finch, Opal is a keen-eyed child narrator with a loving father. She rescues a stray dog and names it Winn-Dixie, after the Southern grocery-store chain. "Mostly," Opal says of the pup, "he looked like a big piece of old brown carpet that had been left out in the rain." Her father's job as a pastor has just brought them to a new town, Naomi, Florida, where she is friendless and griev-

ing for her absent mother. Everyone in the book feels like someone you might have met; the only departure from strict realism is an old-fashioned candy that used to be manufactured there called Littmus Lozenges. Like DiCamillo's work, it is a sweet that also tastes of sorrow, invented by a man mourning his own family.

After finishing that novel, she sent it to an editor at Candlewick Press, who passed it on to a colleague—who went on parental leave soon after, stranding the novel for months until an assistant found it, read it, and championed the author, who, by then, had almost lost hope in the publisher. More than thirteen million readers have now met Opal Buloni—many more if you count those who saw the film adaptation, which was released in 2005. (Four other DiCamillo books have been made into movies, too.) Since "Because of Winn-Dixie" first appeared, DiCamillo has averaged more than a book a year, many of them bestsellers. She has remained loyal to Candlewick, which could probably be renamed DiCamillo Press.

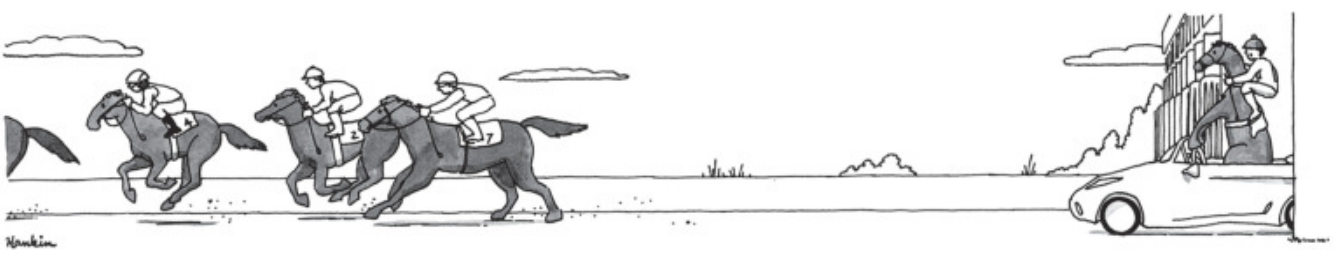
On the shelf in the office where DiCamillo recounted all of this sits the three-inch alarm clock she used to set every morning. She has been getting up so early for so long that she no longer actually needs it, but she still writes two pages almost every day by candlelight, tracking her progress on each story by the number of matches she's struck. Before settling down at her desk, she turns on a porch light to let one of her friends, a fellow early bird who lives across the street, know she's awake and working.

DiCamillo completists would notice a few subtle nods to many of her books in her bungalow, which, like a doll house, is a charming curio designed less for material comfort than for imaginative play: dozens of mice, à la Despereaux, can be found in ceramic, plush, and pewter form; rabbits, including the original Edward Tulane, hide in teacups and rest on shelves. There's a cozy place to read in every room but hardly any light for doing so after bedtime. Instead of china, her cabinets are lined with books; the bird feeder is overflowing, but there's no food in the kitchen. "I always say I love to eat, but I hate to cook," DiCamillo told me. Her meals, except for oatmeal in the morning and rice cakes for lunch, are almost all prepared by friends—including the one who first lured her to Minneapolis, all those years ago—or shared with them at nearby restaurants. Although her fiction is full of animals, in real life she has just half a dog, a goldendoodle named Ramona, as in Quimby, which she shares with another friend, who brings her by most days on the way to work and then picks her up for the night or the weekend or for longer stretches when DiCamillo is on a book tour.

DiCamillo says that, with her upbringing, she'll never feel entirely safe, but she has worked carefully to construct as much stability as she can, building routines in her work and finding security in her close friendships. Those are more important to her than the many things money could buy, and there's no evidence in DiCamillo's home, or almost anywhere in her life, of the wild success she has enjoyed. Despite her seven-figure book deals, DiCamillo is Midwesternly modest, thrifty by nature and habit but also environmentally conscious by choice. Not long after I first appeared at her front door, she offered me water, then asked if I minded her handling the ice for it. Reaching into the freezer, she explained that the dispenser on the door had been broken for some time but that the ice-maker still worked, so she refused to buy a new appliance and consign the current one to a landfill. The closest thing to luxury in her house is two pairs of slippers: one under her writing desk, the other under her claw-foot tub. During a tour of Eudora Welty's home, in Jackson, Mississippi, she was struck by the humanity of the novelist's slippers, which were still waiting faithfully under her bathrobe long after her death. DiCamillo talked about them so much that her best childhood friend, Tracey Bailey, got her one pair, and her best writing friend, the author Ann Patchett, got her another.

That interest in Welty is representative. DiCamillo made herself an expert in children's literature, but she was already highly literary, and, among countless other books, her house is filled with dog-eared copies of Herman Melville's poetry, Fowler's "Dictionary of Modern English Usage," all of W. G. Sebald and George Saunders, most of Anne Lamott, "The Paris Review Interviews," and the Best American everything.

DiCamillo likes to tell audiences, "Go home and read to your adult," by which she means we should all read to one another the way we read to children. Here is a small sample of what she read aloud during my visit: Frank O'Hara's "Animals"; the opening paragraph of "True Grit"; an excerpt of Stephen King's "On Writing" comparing literary criticism with farts; some sentences from Claire Keegan's short story "Foster," which she insisted I take back to my hotel to finish before our morning coffee; an entire Jack Gilbert poem after I failed to recognize a few of its lines ("We must have / the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless / furnace of this world. To make injustice the only / measure of our attention is to praise the Devil"); her favorite passages from Judith Thurman's biography of Isak Dinesen; a page of "The Elements of Style," from the version illustrated by Maira Kalman; random



"Gas—hit the gas!"

"By the time I realized Fred was an invasive species, it was too late."

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headlines from that week's *Times Book Review;* and all of the picture book "Farmhouse," by her past collaborator Sophie Blackall.

That last one DiCamillo read to my toddler before bedtime, holding up every page to my cell phone so that my daughter could see the intricate art over FaceTime. At DiCamillo's suggestion, we'd driven to St. Paul to get a copy from the independent children's bookshop Red Balloon, where, twenty-three years ago, she had held her first book launch. Booksellers, publicists, and friends all told me about her way with children off the page. DiCamillo chalks this up to her height—she is as short as her books—but children don't always like one another, so that is hardly a satisfactory explanation for their interest in her. She asks them deep questions, offers them frank answers, and knows instinctively which plosive sounds work best together and why hot buttered toast is funny.

Above all, DiCamillo has not lost her sense that the world is surprising and enchanted. She insisted to me that the key to writing well is paying attention to your surroundings, and, as if to underscore her point, her surroundings proved conspicuously worthy of attention. During one of our walks together, we found an abandoned fedora that looked as though it might be concealing an entire gangster beneath it; on the way to Louise Erdrich's bookstore, in the Kenwood section of Minneapolis, we saw a ginger cat strolling regally down the sidewalk, leading a dog as if the pair were practicing for the Westminster dog show. The water tower above DiCamillo's neighborhood is made of concrete but decorated with knights and eagles so gigantic they look as if they could carry it away at a moment's notice. While looping around nearby Lake Harriet, we talked about an anonymous elf who responds to the letters children leave by a door at the base of an ash tree near Queen Avenue. DiCamillo writes dozens of postcards every week, responding to every piece of fan mail that Candlewick Press forwards, but she swore, even when pressed, that she was not the elf in question.

But there is one letter to which DiCamillo never responded. Sitting barefoot on her front porch, drinking iced coffee from a heavy pewter mug, she continues a story about it that she's been trying to tell me for a few days. This time, she gets interrupted by a pair of woodpeckers at the bird feeder—siblings, she guesses, since they appear so often together. Her yard is an increasingly wild patch of native grasses and plants that she's been slowly turning into an urban meadow, and she's happy that so many creatures can now be seen in it every day. She jokingly calls herself a chipmunk, fearful and frenetic at work and in the world, but prefers to imagine herself as a bee drifting contentedly from flower to flower, starting one story, working on another, sending a revision of something to a friend, a finished version of something else to her editor.

"Kate's like the wildfires in Southern California: going everywhere, in every direction, at the exact same time," Patchett told me, with equal parts admiration and annoyance. Both writers have dedicated books to each other this year: Patchett's new novel, "Tom Lake," to Kate, "who held the lantern high"; DiCamillo's first Norendy fairy tale, "The Puppets of Spelhorst," to Ann, "who listened, clear-eyed, from beginning to end." "I really don't have anyone in my life who makes me feel like a slacker," Patchett said, "but she does—not because she thinks I'm a slacker, but her energy is always overwhelmingly 'Let's go, let's go, let's go!'"

When the woodpeckers fly away from the feeder, DiCamillo turns back to me. "I'm sorry for all this ping-ponging," she said. "I like a never-ending conversation." The story she has been trying intermittently to tell me is partly about her brother—about why the two of them were estranged for years, about how therapy apart and together helped them sort out their relationship—and also about why she never responded to the last letter her father ever wrote her.

However hard she works on her endless drafts, revisions, and publications, DiCamillo has worked even harder on herself, spending years in therapy trying to understand what kept her mother in a terrible marriage for so long, trying to forgive herself for not defending her brother against their father or the peers who also bullied him, trying to break a cycle of abuse that has made her and her brother both afraid to be partnered or to start families of their own. (DiCamillo says the word "marriage" always brings to mind that terrible Christmas Eve when her father threatened to kill her mother.) Betty died in 2009, and DiCamillo and Curt were by her side in her final days; together they spread her ashes at a beach she loved. When their father died, in 2019, neither was speaking to him.

"I think Kate has lived all her life in fear of being like our father," Curt, who is now an architectural historian in Boston, told me. "The worst thing you can say to her, that my mother and I would sometimes say, is 'You're just like Lou. You're just like your father.'" DiCamillo has his eyes, and, for a long time, she had his temperament, too—lashing out, brooding over supposed slights, putting self-preservation above all else. She was quick to anger, slow to trust, easily flustered, and difficult with even her closest friends.

There is almost no trace of that person today; earnest and effusive, DiCamillo now seems as generous toward others as she is critical of herself. "That streak of meanness or whatever it was, I think she's trained herself not to be like him," Curt said. Tracey Bailey, who has known DiCamillo since her Clermont days, told me something similar. "Some of the harshest words I've ever had spoken to me have come from her," she said, "but definitely some of the kindest words and most honest and generous and loving words have come from her, too."

Bailey's family owned the greenhouse where DiCamillo once worked, and the pair lived together during college; Bailey is married to a Presbyterian minister, who loosely inspired India Opal Buloni's preacher father, and her two children have generated their own ideas for "Aunt Kate," most notably when her eight-year-old son asked for a story about "an unlikely hero with exceptionally large ears," thereby occasioning "The Tale of Despereaux." Bailey worked for more than a decade as a school counsellor and is now in private practice. She knows that her friend credits therapy for her transformation, but she believes the writing has been just as therapeutic. "More and more of her shows up in what she writes," Bailey told me, "and I think it's the writing that saved her."

Take "The Puppets of Spelhorst," which will be published next month, with pictures by Julie Morstad. The puppets want more than anything to be part of a story. All five are distinct individuals—a boy, a girl, a king, a wolf, and an owl—and yet they are as interrelated as a family, as inseparable as a psyche. The wolf can't stop talking of his "very sharp teeth"; the owl speaks only in koans, portentous and searching. The puppets are purchased by a solitary, regret-filled sea captain, an avatar of sorts for DiCamillo's father, who takes them to his room, above a tailor's shop. He props the girl puppet on a table and apologizes to her, because she reminds him of someone he once loved. Afterward, DiCamillo writes, "he got into bed and cried himself to sleep as if he were a small child."

Bailey's first grandchild was born the year DiCamillo's father died, on what would have been his birthday. When the writer scrolled through pictures of the happy family—mother and father, grandmother and grandfather—she was struck by their intergenerational love, something she had not been born into but had cultivated in her friendships and in her work. Amid all the missing parents and grieving parents and emotionally unavailable parents in DiCamillo's fiction are glimpses of reconciliation and partial reunions and attempts at wholeness in spite of great losses. "Whenever people ask me if my books are autobiographical, I always try to explain they're emotionally true, that I'm drawing on things I've felt and experienced," DiCamillo said, acknowledging that those emotions often tilt toward sadness and loneliness and frustration and grief. "I can never make my peace with suffering, but holding on to things doesn't make my stories any better, it doesn't make the people around me any happier. I feel like we all have to push against the darkness however we can. For me, it's doing my work, writing stories that let children feel seen and to know they're not alone in whatever they're going through."

It is not only children who see themselves in DiCamillo's books. At the store that Patchett opened in Nashville, Parnassus Books, the novelist has personally sold copies of DiCamillo's novels to readers of every age. The two women had met briefly at book events over the years, but really became friends after Patchett sat down one day and read all of DiCamillo's books, an experience she described in an essay for the *Times*, in March, 2020. "I felt as if I had just stepped through a magic portal," Patchett wrote, "and all I had to do to pass through was believe that I wasn't too big to fit." Patchett urged people to turn to DiCamillo's writing as a way of finding comfort and connection in a dark and lonely time. "Especially during the pandemic, when people would say, 'I can't read,' or 'I can't find anything to stick with,' her novels were an answer," she told me. "I would tell people, 'You can have a full experience of a novel in two hours, reading the whole thing before bed, and be perfectly satisfied.' These are just perfect novels."

"Ferris," the one due next spring, full of depictions of unconditional love, is not only a book that DiCamillo thought she would never be able to write but also, in a sense, the letter she never sent her father. She had written to him once before he died, after all that therapy on her own and with her brother, after years of meditation, after making her peace with the torment she hadn't wanted but without which she worries she would not have become a writer. She had written to say she loved him, to thank him for the gift of storytelling, and to tell him she forgave him. He wrote back right away. "Forgive me for what?" he asked. "Who are we to speak of forgiveness?"

DiCamillo's father can still make her cry, but for different reasons now. "I never answered him," she said, "but I so wanted to say, *I* can speak of forgiveness. I wanted to tell him that *I* have been forgiven again and again by all these fabulous people in my life who have taught me to be a human being—that's how *I* can speak of forgiveness." It was something that she had been thinking about for a very long time. Late in "The Tale of Despereaux," the book's mouse hero comes face to face with his father, who let him be sent off to die. "Forgiveness, reader, is, I think, something very much like hope and love, a powerful, wonderful thing," the narrator tells us. Despereaux says, "I forgive you, Pa." "And he said those words," the narrator explains, "because he sensed that it was the only way to save his own heart, to stop it from breaking in two. Despereaux, reader, spoke those words to save himself."

In the days before DiCamillo's father died, a friend of his in Pennsylvania, who had been helping with his care, texted her, seemingly against her father's wishes, to say that the end was near. She was fifty-five years old, no longer angry, and more certain than ever that it is never foolish to hope and never impossible to change. "Tell him that I love him," she texted back. "Tell him that I am grateful for him and that I forgive him." ♦

PROFILES

THE BELIEVER

How the Times columnist Ross Douthat translates faith to the secular world.

BY ISAAC CHOTINER

This summer, Ross Douthat, liberal America's favorite conservative commentator, wrote a piece about liberal America's least favorite Democrat, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Douthat argued in his New York *Times* column that an unwillingness to debate Kennedy—who has claimed that childhood vaccines cause autism, that 5G networks are part of a mass-surveillance system, and that COVID was designed to spare Jewish and Chinese people—was an insufficient response to voters who are increasingly distrustful of the establishment. "If you don't think he should be publicly debated, you need some other theory of how the curious can be persuaded away from his ideas," Douthat wrote. "Right now the main alternative theory seems to be to enforce an intellectual quarantine, policed by media fact-checking and authoritative expert statements. And I'm sorry, but that's just a total flop."

Douthat is highly skilled at addressing liberal *Times* readers in a manner that makes clear he is not one of them, without allowing them to think that he actually holds views—about Donald Trump, say, or the importance of vaccines—that would render him beyond the pale. If asked to debate Kennedy, he continued, "I wouldn't speak on behalf of the vested authority of science, but on behalf of my more moderate doubts about official knowledge, a much more cautious version of the outsider thinking that he takes to unjustifiable extremes." In Douthat's view, the widespread distrust of science and embrace of conspiracy theories about vaccines, among other topics, "hasn't happened because of bad actors on the internet. It's happened because institutions and experts have so often proved themselves to be untrustworthy and incompetent as of late."

A few days after Douthat published the column, I met him for lunch at a dimly lit French restaurant in New Haven. We were joined by the leftist historian Samuel Moyn, who coteaches a class with Douthat at Yale called "The Crisis of Liberalism." "I have a bunch of what you might call conspiracy-adjacent views," Douthat said with a grin, after I asked him how he'd come to write the column. "I think that the medical establishment is wrong about Lyme disease, because I had Lyme disease. This is not conspiracy-adjacent, but I think that nice secular people like you and Sam are sort of blind to some obvious supernatural realities about the world. I think lots of people have good reasons to end up in that kind of territory. And the question I don't know the answer to is: Why is it so natural once you're in that territory to go all the way to where R.F.K. is?" He continued, "I spend a lot of my own intellectual energy trying not to let my sort of eccentric views blind me to the fact that the establishment still gets a lot of boring, obvious things right."

"In your case, some of the limits are characterological or temperamental, but aren't some also professional?" Moyn asked. "Because I think of you as the conservative whisperer to liberals at the New York *Times*, and you have to remain credible."

"I think that's right," Douthat responded. "If I wrote a flatly conspiratorial essay for the *Times*, it would get fact-checked and not published. There are also ways in which my vocation keeps me connected to the conservative coalition, because what am I doing if I'm not critiquing liberalism to some extent? It's hard to separate your own fundamental beliefs

To be devout "is to be a bit like a conspiracy theorist," Douthat has written.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM PAPE

from what you have structured your intellectual work around."

Douthat is tall and burly, with a short but unkempt goatee. His hair began thinning years ago, so that he looked about forty-five when in his twenties—perhaps ideal for a young conservative on the make in Cambridge, Massachusetts, or Washington, D.C.—but now that he is actually in his mid-forties he appears relatively youthful. One way that Douthat tries to disarm progressive or secular interlocutors is by playing up his role as a conservative. He will joke about being part of a right-wing conspiracy, or about trying to convert you to his faith, Roman Catholicism. At lunch with Moyn, he complained genially about what passes for intellectual diversity at Yale: "You always have people saying, 'Oh, So-and-So is very conservative.' And what that means is that they only vote for Democrats, but they, like, study military history."

Moyn smiled in such a way as to suggest that he'd heard this joke, or one like it, before. Moyn and Douthat have developed a rapport over their shared skepticism of prevailing wisdom, but for Moyn that skepticism exists within certain boundaries. Moyn recalled that, at the start of their course one semester, he'd said, " 'Look, this is actually a class that's about a dispute within liberalism. Ross is a liberal, I'm a liberal. We're just differently situated than current liberals or centrist liberals.' And he took a lot of exception to that."

Douthat looked a bit sheepish. "I think liberalism has strengths and weaknesses," he said. "I think it benefits from critiques from both the left and the right. It needs them to work. I don't see an alternative to liberalism available at the moment which is worth shattering society in order to obtain. But if you said, 'Philosophically, are you a liberal?' No, I'm not."

Several times during lunch, I prodded Douthat on whether the right's increasing distrust of liberal democracy is really the fault of liberal institutions. Perhaps a large portion of the right had turned into vaccine conspiracists who thought that Anthony Fauci belonged in prison not because of the failures of the élite, or because of natural human skepticism, but in part because of the media outlets that give airtime to Kennedy, or to Tucker Carlson?

When responding to such questions, Douthat often seems sincerely interested—out of some combination of self-preservation and genuine thoughtfulness—in phrasing his answers carefully. After a pause, he said, "Would I say that the New York *Times* should pluck someone from obscurity to write an op-ed saying that vaccines cause autism, because we find that five per cent of our readers think that, and they need to be represented? No, I would absolutely not say that. But the people who are making the argument already have a platform and an audience, so you need a way to engage it." Douthat continued, "I think a lot of people in the world of *The New Yorker* and the New York *Times* decided in the Trump era that they didn't even want to know where these ideas were coming from. It was just enough that they were bad. And I think you do have to figure out where those ideas were coming from." Douthat was getting more animated; he smiled broadly, and waved his right hand in the air to emphasize his points. "What liberalism—élite liberalism, whatever you call it—doesn't have is just a theory of persuasion." He paused again. "That's why, I mean, maybe I am a liberal if I'm interested in theories of persuasion."

Douthat, who joined the *Times* in 2009, occupies an all but vanished position: he is a Christian conservative who lives among liberals, writes for them, and—even when he is arguing against abortion, or against "woke progressivism"—has their respectful attention. This is in part because he is curious, not only distraught, about the decline of faith in American life. For Douthat, the most interesting question is whether that decline will lead to, as he put it in a recent piece, "a truly secular America," or "a society awash in new or remixed forms of spirituality," from the post-Christian right to the post-liberal left (which practices "a variation on the Protestant social gospel"). He writes frequently about his own Catholicism and about the fate of the Church—he strongly opposes Pope Francis's efforts at liberalization, especially regarding divorce and remarriage—but he is also fascinated by other forms of spirituality and by the supernatural, as well as, in the case of U.F.O.s, by the simply unexplainable. Douthat offers a counter-secular perspective—one that encompasses both the Catholic conservatism that currently rules the Supreme Court and the skepticism of science and tendency toward conspiratorial thinking that activates the political fringes.

In addition to his political commentary, Douthat generates a steady stream of columns on popular culture, especially film and television. (Since 2007, he has been the film critic at *National Review*.) For a social conservative, these are rarely fogeyish. Even his most pessimistic work—he wrote a book several years ago called "The Decadent Society," which argues that American culture is essentially stagnant—seldom extends to critiquing works of art for their ethical failings. "He's not a philistine, and he is interested in culture in ways that are not just oppositional," Michelle Goldberg, his *Times* Opinion-page colleague, told me. "And he is such a creature of left-wing milieus, even if he is critical of them. I suspect that he is more comfortable in them than he would be in conservative milieus."

James Bennet, the former editor of the *Times* Opinion page, told me that Douthat possesses "the ability to kind of think out loud in a nonthreatening way." In this respect, Douthat is nearly the opposite of the *Times*' best-known conservative columnist, David Brooks, whose musings on marriage, faith, and privilege routinely infuriate readers. "He has an amazing ability to make me feel envious," Brooks said of Douthat, when we spoke by phone. "A lot of people can make broad points. A lot of people can dig up facts. But Ross just has a mind that allows his columns to be incredibly closely argued." Other conservatives on the *Times* Opinion-page roster—the foreign-policy analyst Bret Stephens, the Christian legal scholar David French—frequently challenge Republican viewpoints, but Douthat is distinguished by how often he gives liberals a sustained hearing.

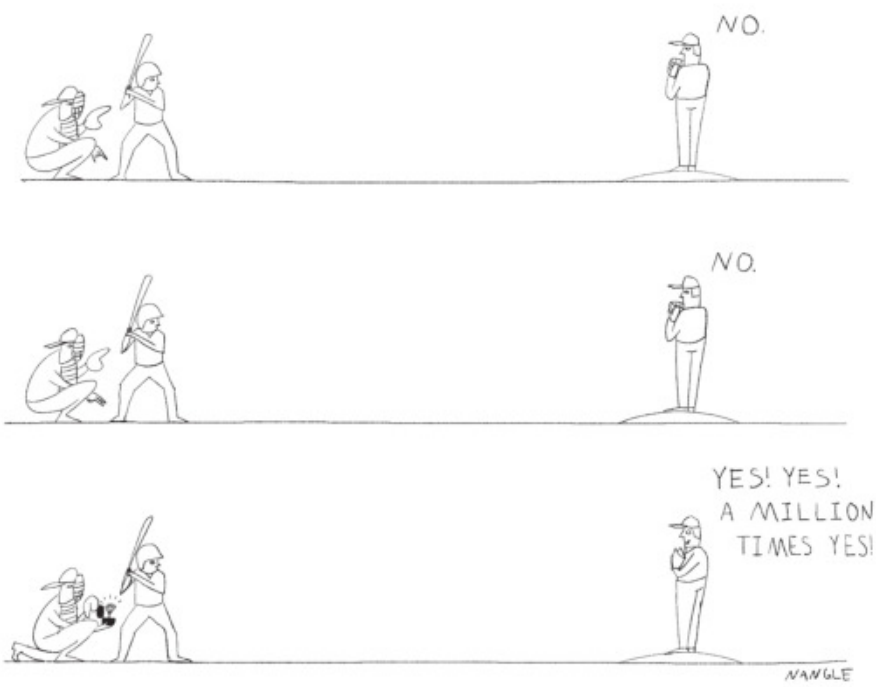
At its most basic level, Douthat's popularity among *Times* readers and

progressives can be explained by his long-standing critique of the Republican Party. Years before conservatives like Brooks, Stephens, and French were driven from the Party by Donald Trump, Douthat complained that it was in thrall to donors at the expense of a more family-friendly economic agenda. In 2008, he and Reihan Salam—then his fellow-columnist at *The Atlantic*, and now the president of the Manhattan Institute—published a book called "Grand New Party," which argued that both parties had failed working-class voters, and that Republicans could win them over by focussing on tax cuts that were not aimed primarily at the wealthy and on support for working families.

Douthat was regularly mocked for believing that such a turn was possible for the G.O.P., especially as the Party became more extreme on fiscal issues during the Tea Party years. The liberal columnist Jonathan Chait once wrote that Douthat's support of the Republican Party was "sort of like supporting la Cosa Nostra because you like the concept of a group dedicated to helping down-on-their-luck Italian-Americans. You can find bits and pieces of this behavior here and there, but it's fundamentally not what la Cosa Nostra does." Douthat, with his interest in conservative populism, could seem blind to its dangers: Sarah Palin, he wrote, in 2009, "represents the democratic ideal—that anyone can grow up to be a great success story without graduating from Columbia and Harvard."

When the G.O.P. finally turned to someone who appeared to have little interest in privatizing Social Security or Medicare, that someone was a thuggish demagogue. Douthat has devoted extensive time to criticizing Trump, but he also saw his rise as a vindication of the ideas laid out in "Grand New Party." "Trump was a yes-to-full-employment, no-to-welfare-state-rollback guy" Douthat told me. "He was the dark version of what Reihan and I were advocating." (Brooks said, "What they got right was an emphasis on trying to be at least in part the party of the working class. And what they failed to foresee is how nasty that working-class party would turn out to be.")

Douthat's obvious disgust at Trump's character comes through frequently in his column, but it exists alongside a desire to understand Trump's appeal. Several weeks before the 2020 election, when many political observers were warning that Trump might deny the results and try to hold on to power, Douthat wrote a column titled "There Will Be No Trump Coup." According to Douthat, Trump was "a feckless tribune for the discontented rather than an autocratic menace." A year later, Douthat wrote that he stood by his assessment of Trump but admitted that he had underestimated the mob: "I didn't quite grasp until after the election how fully Trump's voter-fraud paranoia had intertwined with deeper conservative anxieties about liberal power."



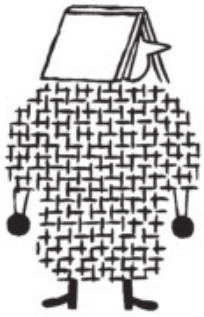
This was a generous reading of, for example, the people who'd built a gallows outside Congress. Douthat is comfortable being a "conservative whisperer" to liberals, as Moyn put it. Telling harsh truths to his fellow-conservatives is sometimes more difficult for him, in part because of his tendency to attribute right-wing paranoia to liberal missteps. Moyn told me, "His role is in part the apologist and rationalizer of the actually existing right, even as he idealizes a version of it that he would rather have."

Michael Brendan Dougherty, a *National Review* columnist and a friend of Douthat's, said that he and Douthat both see Trump as "this bad character." But he also relayed a phone conversation that they had on Election Night, 2020: "Ross feels the genuine conservative Schadenfreude at liberal overreach and failure. During the early returns, the needle at the New York *Times* was bouncing all over the place. There was a genuine, Oh, my God, is it happening again? He was just laughing at our fate—possibly to be stuck with Trump again—but also at the potential failure of conventional wisdom."

To Douthat, a second Trump term is not the worst-case scenario. He told me, "People organize themselves around dystopian fears to a deep extent, right? If your primary dystopia is a kind of fascist authoritarianism, you're going to end up in a different alignment versus if your fundamental dystopia is something closer to Huxley's 'Brave New World.'" The latter—a secular state that manages sex, death, and reproduction—is Douthat's dystopia, and in several of our conversations he brought up newly permissive euthanasia laws in Canada and other countries. He recently wrote, "In the Canadian experience you can see what America might look like with real right-wing power broken and a tamed conservatism offering minimal resistance to social liberalism."

But Douthat reserves his greatest

intensity for the matter of abortion. He acknowledges that, as he wrote in one column, "the pro-life movement's many critics regard it as not merely conservative but as an embodiment of reaction at its worst—punitive and cruel and patriarchal, piling burdens on poor women and doing nothing to relieve them, putting unborn life ahead of the lives and health of women while pretending to hold them equal." Yet, for Douthat, these concerns can be swept away, because, as he put it in another column, "a distinct human organism comes into existence at conception, and every stage of your biological life, from infancy and childhood to middle age and beyond, is part of a single continuous process that began when you were just a zygote."



Goldberg, who has sparred with Douthat over abortion on podcasts, but says that she holds him in the highest regard as a columnist, told me, "He knows what the audience is, and so he tempers his views on sexual issues, where I think his views are probably more apocalyptic than comes through in his writing." She added, "He will try to make fairly dispassionate arguments about abortion rather than arguing that abortion is morally monstrous—even though I think that is the belief motivating him. He's developed a sly distance that has allowed him to make his genuinely reactionary sentiments seem slightly ironic when they are actually sincere."

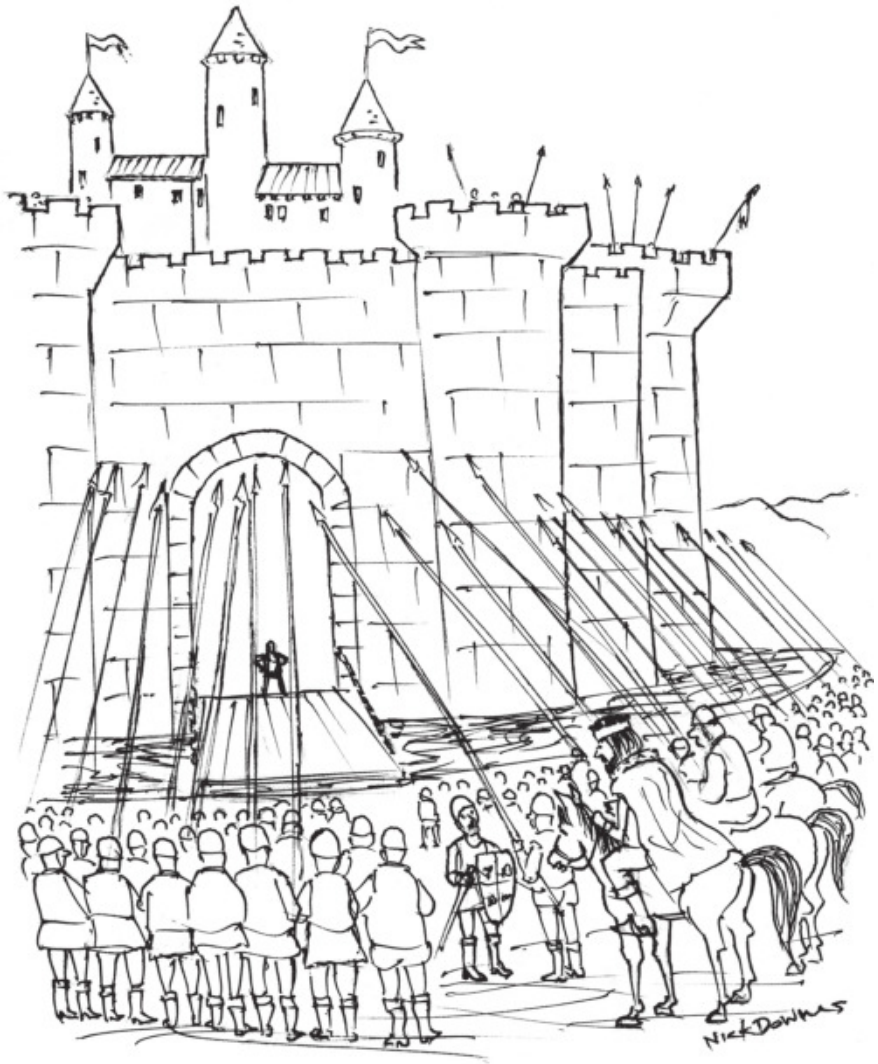
Michael Barbaro, the *Times* podcaster, has been a close friend of Douthat's since childhood—he told me that he was Douthat's "sidekick"—and was the best man at his wedding. In 2015, Douthat wrote a piece critical of the Supreme Court's decision to legalize gay marriage, expressing concern that it reflected a "more relaxed view of marriage's importance." The two men were now colleagues, but they had drifted slightly apart over the years. And Barbaro was married to a man.

Barbaro said, "We hadn't been in touch that much, but Ross reached out to me to say, 'I'm about to publish a column in which I come out against same-sex marriage, and I want you to know that it didn't come to me easily, and that it's something I know may be sensitive to you. And, as somebody I care about, I want you to understand it, and I don't want you to read about it in my column without us talking about it.'" Barbaro told me that he appreciated the note, which surprised me. I said that some people might have been more, rather than less, angry that the friend taking such a position saw that the issue went beyond abstraction. "I was wounded by the position he took on a personal level. How could I not be?" Barbaro said. "But it was meaningfully tempered by the reality that I knew where he was coming from, and that he had gone to the trouble to reach out to me."

Barbaro and his husband later divorced; when we spoke, he was on vacation with his wife and two children. "I've been on a long journey that I know Ross generally approves of," he said. "But, although I didn't do it for him, it's very funny, as I have had children I can just sense his glee. It's no secret that he wants people to have children and to enter into monogamous heterosexual relationships." Barbaro let out a laugh. "And that wasn't my plan, but I have sensed his joy at that outcome."

"I occasionally get accused of being part of the Wasp aristocracy of New England," Douthat told me. "But that is unfortunately not the case." His father, a lawyer and later a poet, came from California; his mother's family, in Maine, is a mix of lobstermen, carpenters, and more bookish people—"garage-sale rummagers and self-conscious outsiders," Douthat once wrote. He described going to an elementary school, in Connecticut, that "had a donkey and a lot of guitar playing." Barbaro recalled that, as teen-agers, he and Douthat would say that they attended the "working-class private school" in the area. (The better-known Choate Rosemary Hall was nearby.)

Douthat said that he had a superficially "conventional liberal, Northeastern, upper-middle-class childhood," but that his mother, Patricia Snow,



"He says they're willing to sublet."

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suffered in ways that set the family apart. As Douthat wrote in a recent memoir about his Lyme disease, "The Deep Places," "My mother had struggled with chronic illness when I was young, with chemical sensitivities and debilitating inflammation that had sent our family down a lot of strange paths—to health-food stores in the days before Whole Foods, to Pentecostalist healing services where people spoke in tongues, to chiropractors and naturopaths and other purveyors of holistic medicine." Snow wrote about this journey for the religious journal *First Things*. She described being unable to sit in certain cars, "because of the new plastics and formaldehyde," or to bear being in an enclosed space with another mother, because of "the chemical fabric softener in her laundry soap." Snow became a follower of a charismatic healer named Grace, and brought the young Ross with her to services where people wept and fell to the floor in the aisles. She eventually turned away from Grace's ministry, but only because her own faith had deepened. "All I knew was that to try to feed this hunger with the food of miracles didn't work and could lead to sin," she wrote.

To a child, Snow's growing fervor could have been bewildering or tumultuous. But Douthat, by his own account, approached it then the way he might now, with respect and curiosity. "Whatever the reality of charismatic healing is—speaking in tongues and all these things—that reality was a hundred per cent present in a lot of the places where we went and hung out. There was nothing faked or fraudulent about it," he told me. But, he added, "I would say I didn't have dramatic experiences with the Holy Spirit. I was more a sort of observer of my mother and my father, of my mother's religious pilgrimage."

When Douthat was in high school, Snow converted to Catholicism—which, he said, came as a relief. "I was extremely happy to end up in a church where you memorized the prayers and you could sit in the back," he told me. "The famous unfriendliness of Roman Catholicism was perfectly congenial to my sixteen-year-old self. The lack of spontaneity, the fact that there's a ritual for everything, was quite welcome to me after this long charismatic sojourn." Douthat converted as well, along with his father and his younger sister, Jeanne. He told me, "I had a conventional, 'Read C. S. Lewis, read G. K. Chesterton, read some Catholic apologetics, find it persuasive,' kind of experience, which was quite different from my mother's more mystical encounter."

Barbaro said, "The mother is where it's at, in both good ways and bad ways." When I asked what he meant by this, he explained that, when they were growing up, Snow "was always there, and had this big personality, and was deeply intellectual and deeply religious. I remember things in the house were a certain way, in terms of things like food. There was a particularness to the way that life had to be lived. People's lives had to be a little bit oriented around her." Snow does not have e-mail or use a cell phone, so Jeanne relayed my questions to her and then sent me pictures of her responses. I asked Snow how her faith differed from her son's. She replied, "I think that Ross himself has commented on this in the past, describing my faith as more 'pious' than his (daily Mass, the occasional pilgrimage, and so on), and his as more cerebral, detached, and even perfunctory."

Douthat, elaborating on the contrast with his mother, told me, "I think that ironic detachment, from a religious perspective, is my weakness. You don't read about a lot of saints who have ironic detachment." He added, "There's distancing that I do from ideas that I

do in fact hold. That's part of how I've made my way as a writer in the world." When I spoke to Douthat's wife, the journalist Abigail Tucker, about his faith, she said, "He's always kind of reaching and looking, without being religious in a rote kind of way. I think he wishes he was. I think he totally wishes that he had that always stable perspective. It must be exhausting."

In 2015, Douthat and Tucker bought an eighteenth-century farmhouse in Connecticut, with pastures and apple trees. In "The Deep Places," he writes, "I had a vision of myself going out into the world, flying around to various Babylons for important meetings and interviews, and then coming home on a summer evening, down a winding road, up a drive lined with oak trees, to find my two—no, make it three; no, make it *four*—kids waiting for me, playing on swings in the July dusk in front of a big white Colonial, my wife behind them, the whole scene an Arcadia." But on one of their first visits to the property Douthat contracted Lyme, and what was undertaken in the spirit of an invigorating renewal became an enervating nightmare. (Douthat writes that he and Tucker joked that it was "just like 'The Shining'—except we're both writers.")

Douthat describes his symptoms—pain, mostly—in agonizing detail. "It was a sense of *invasion,*" he writes. "Of something under my skin and inside my veins and muscles that wasn't supposed to be there." But "The Deep Places" is largely about his efforts to recover, which, in many respects, drew him closer to his mother's world. Douthat reports that he has chronic Lyme, an illness that many physicians do not believe exists. He saw "the Maverick," a doctor who's willing to prescribe antibiotics for years beyond the standard Lyme treatment. He then went further still, experimenting with supplements, more antibiotics (obtained, at times, from veterinary pharmacies), magnet therapy, and a Rife machine, which is said to treat illnesses by matching their electrical frequencies.

Having Lyme transformed his thinking. "I am more open-minded about the universe than I was seven years ago," he wrote in his column. "And much more skeptical about anything that claims the mantle of consensus." It also, he said, deepened his faith: "So why does God let bad things happen to people and so on. When you're not suffering, this seems like more of a hard intellectual problem. When you're actually suffering, the intellectual puzzle goes away." Several times in "The Deep Places," he describes praying or calling out to God and receiving an answer, in the form of a sand dollar that appears on the beach, or the brief cessation of pain. Snow wrote to me, of her son, "I would say that his faith is more grounded than it was before in his mortal body ('we hold this treasure in earthen vessels'), and at the same time, more mystical. Suffering, if it doesn't rout your faith altogether, can do that to you."

Since the worst years of his illness—which were followed by a tough bout of COVID—Douthat has been, in some ways, a different columnist. He's written several times about U.F.O.s, and he's made many references to Jeffrey Epstein, saying that he's open to the theory that Epstein was a foreign intelligence asset. In one column, Douthat offered his own approach to assessing fringe ideas. "To be a devout Christian or a believing Jew or Muslim is to be a bit like a conspiracy theorist, in the sense that you believe there is an invisible reality that secular knowledge can't recognize," he explained. "But the great religions are also full of warnings against false prophets and fraudulent revelations. My own faith, Roman Catholicism, is both drenched in the supernatural and extremely scrupulous about the miracles and seers that it validates. And it allows its flock to be simply agnostic about a range of possibly supernatural claims."

In recent years, a number of Catholic conservatives have been laying out alternative visions for how modern societies should function, with some offering praise for Viktor Orban's Christian regime in Hungary, which has seized control of the press and of universities, and passed a number of anti-L.G.B.T. laws, including a ban on recognizing gender transitions. In a 2021 column about Hungary, Douthat expressed empathy for conservatives who admire Orban's attempts to combat liberal culture. "It would be a good thing if American conservatives had more of a sense of how to weaken the influence of Silicon Valley or the Ivy League," he wrote. But, he concluded, "the way this impulse has swiftly led conservatives to tolerate corruption, whether in their long-distance Hungarian romance or their marriage to Donald Trump, suggests a fundamental danger for cultural outsiders."

Other Catholic intellectuals—most notably the Harvard Law professor Adrian Vermeule—have voiced support for the concept of integralism, which would make Catholic teachings the basis of the state. Vermeule has written that, in his vision—which he calls "common-good constitutionalism"—"the central aim of the constitutional order is to promote good rule, not to 'protect liberty' as an end in itself." He goes on, "Subjects will come to thank the ruler whose legal structures, possibly experienced at first as coercive, encourage subjects to form more authentic desires for the individual and common goods." Vermeule has criticized Douthat for, as he sees it, naïvely hoping that liberalism and conservative Catholicism can coexist. (Moyn told me, "Ross doesn't want to go back to the Middle Ages.")

I asked Douthat if any part of Vermeule's integralist vision appealed to him. "I think Vermeule is a brilliant critic of liberalism," he said. "I don't think the integralist vision has quite come up with a theory of why that kind of politics was defeated in the first place. As soon as the sexual revolution hit Ireland, institutional Catholicism, which had been deeply connected to state power, just completely collapsed. As soon as people were given the option to walk away, they were just, like, 'O.K., yeah, this was sort of corrupt. We're walking away.'"

Douthat did not sound nostalgic for the Irish past. But, perhaps because he's reluctant to argue with people to his right, he tends to focus on why their ideas are unworkable, rather than on whether they are misguided. Earlier, he had told me that "religion and the institutional state being too much in bed with each other can also, ironically, cause faith to weaken, because people

see it as corrupt or too involved in the gritty, everyday realities of the world." Douthat sometimes extends this pragmatism to his critiques of the left. He said, elaborating on his earlier comment, "I think it's important for *New Yorker* readers to see that this is a statement about belief systems in general, that it doesn't just apply to Catholic Christianity. If you think of the views associated with anti-racism and wokeness and so on, there are limits to how far an élite form of progressivism can advance those ideas to the country as a whole without provoking a Ron DeSantis-type backlash. Persuasion and consensus are very important forces for religion, for politics, for ideology."

Douthat brought up Bennet, the former *Times* Opinion-page editor, who resigned in June of 2020, at the height of the George Floyd protests. Bennet had run an op-ed by Senator Tom Cotton that called for sending in troops to quell riots, and many *Times* reporters revolted, tweeting, "Running this puts Black @nytimes staffers in danger." The *Times* went on to issue a statement saying that Cotton's op-ed "did not meet our standards." Douthat, who worked for Bennet at both the *Times* and *The Atlantic*, told me, "Having passed through something like that has some effect on your view of liberal institutions writ large, inevitably." For Douthat, it amplified the fear that liberalism was being overtaken by a post-liberal agenda, which would dispense with free debate in order to fulfill progressive goals.

Three years later, Douthat is less concerned. "The people who talk about passing 'peak woke' or whatever have a certain amount of evidence on their side," he told me. At the *Times*, Bennet's successor, Kathleen Kingsbury, has maintained a commitment to showcasing a range of political viewpoints, hiring French and the former *Times Book Review* editor Pamela Paul, who has emerged over the past year as a culture warrior. Perhaps because the paper does not have a columnist who will admit to voting for Donald Trump, its Opinion-page contributors have leaned into the topics—racial and sexual politics, mostly—that Douthat once worried would become taboo.

In a column about Bennet's resignation, Douthat described the *Times* Opinion page as "genuinely diverse and fractious" and concluded that he hoped that vision of the marketplace of ideas would last. Douthat often speaks of the liberal institutions where he has spent his life with a certain wistfulness; paradoxically, his ultimate complaint about liberalism may be that it's too ephemeral. "Successful religious systems, successful cultures, they're always holding a bunch of things in tension, and dynamism and creativity come out of that kind of tension. But the tension is volatile," he told me. "So you're always looking for a moment of fruitful balance that is inherently evanescent and never lasts that long."

Douthat and Tucker left their farmhouse in 2017 and moved to New Haven with their four children, who are all under thirteen. Their home, a brown-shingled Colonial on a wide, leafy street near the Yale campus, has the hectic energy that you would expect, given the average age of the residents. One afternoon, before the family dispersed to music lessons and baseball games, I chatted with Douthat and Tucker while the kids milled about. With his children, Douthat seems harried, but theatrically so, as if he enjoys playing the role of frazzled father. Even his mild attempts at discipline were undertaken with a tone of voice that suggested he was only acting the role of stern parent.

Tucker, who is the author of books on the history of house cats and the science of motherhood, first met Douthat in high school, when he and Barbaro were on an opposing debate team. (She told me that their presentation had "a lot of flair.") They met again in college and began dating; they have now been together for more than two decades. I was curious how Catholicism fit into their family's life. "I'm not currently Catholic," Tucker said, with a self-conscious smile. Douthat shot me a glance, as if to preëmpt any reaction I might have. "The kids are, and I go to church," she added.

"Abby has been incredibly gracious," Douthat said.

Tucker comes from a long line of Irish Catholics on her mother's side, but she attended United Church of Christ services growing up. She seemed not to mind attending Catholic Mass now, even if it clearly wasn't quite for her. "It's nice not to have—" She stopped herself. "I always call them the wrong things." I wasn't sure what she meant. "It's nice not to have priests"—she had found the word—"come and go with a cult of personality." As she was speaking, Douthat looked slightly embarrassed by my surprise, but I didn't sense any tension between them, and Tucker seemed to find the whole thing funny.

Tucker, in our conversations, kept returning to Douthat as a man of seeming contrasts, with a through line of almost radical openness to new ideas and experiences. "If you tell him any idea, he's going to be the last person to dismiss it, even if it's a really weird idea on its face," she told me. She expressed admiration, mixed with curiosity, about how his willingness to experiment sat side by side with his conservatism. As an example, she mentioned having sent their kids to a progressive school in New Haven, which Douthat's sister had also attended. "The idea of fostering a creative thinker who's constantly turning problems over in their mind—that's the view a lot of progressive schools have," she told me. "That's kind of the goal." I said I was a little surprised that this was their family's outlook, because Douthat had written so many columns that were critical of progressive educational institutions.

She responded that, in fact, the school's philosophy was very much congruent with how Douthat approaches life. "We're reaching for ideas, and we're making our 'beautiful mistakes,' as they call them, and we're not constantly being bogged down by conventional thinking," she said. "And I think that Ross defines that for me." We began talking about the church they attended, which she characterized as being "on the conservative end of the spectrum" with "many families of large numbers of kids" and "people who get dressed up." This sounded almost like a caricature of a conservative Catholic church, but Tucker saw it, like the school, as a place for her family. She told me, "Ross belongs in both those places." ♦

OLD MEN AND *SEA*

BY IAN FRAZIER

Plot Summary and Study Guide

This NarraTiVo is based on a pre-digital format (once known as a "book"). If you have been assigned "Old Men and Sea" as part of your advanced-level Taking Possession of Your Narrative class, you will first need to know enough about the plot, characters, and pertinent memes so you can explain this narrative in relation to your own.

The characters in the story are: Santiago, an old man; Eduardo, his friend; Ramón and Miguel, friends of Eduardo; José, Pedro, Esteban, Xavier, Buddy, and Antonio, friends of Ramón and Miguel; and thousands of other men of sixty-seven and above who are friends, or friends of friends, or friends of friends of friends, of theirs. The only character who is not an old man is a boy of about fifteen. He has a name, but is usually just called "the boy." Completing the list of characters are a marlin (a large type of fish, now extinct), some sharks (now mostly extinct or in private collections), and several extinct birds.

The plot begins with all the old men waking up very early, as usual. Santiago, in his shack by the harbor, sees that he has a message from Eduardo, who is forwarding messages from Ramón and Miguel, who say that a huge fish is swimming in the Gulf Stream, powerful and unknowable, far out in the deep ocean. The boy helps Santiago load his boat and the old man rows a long way from shore. Ramón sends him a message about which bait to use, but Esteban counters with a message arguing against this choice and calling it "an obscenity." Ignoring both of them, Santiago uses a bait suggested by a marlin-fishing algorithm. Soon Santiago hooks the huge fish.

All the old men receive alerts of this news. Santiago is videoing his struggle with the fish, which, as all the old men watching in their own various fishing huts and shacks agree, must be a creature of great nobility. Santiago begins to talk to himself, and Antonio and several other friends offer suggestions about the right words to use while fighting such a fish. Santiago thanks them and changes his words accordingly.

The old men share Santiago's video with other old men, who also share it. Thousands now add comments and send messages cheering him on. He tries to respond personally to as many of these as he can. By now, he has been fighting the fish for a long time. He does not know how long, but some of the old men have been timing the heroic struggle and are able to tell him to the hundredth of a second.

Many of the old men offer helpful tips, such as how the old man can reposition the line on his back so it won't cut into his flesh so deeply as the fish pulls. Meanwhile, the old man hopes he will not pass out from the pain, thirst, and hunger. Some of the old men send texts to a supply boat to bring him lunch and coffee. The boat that arrives does not have exactly the kind of coffee he likes. "But I have no time to worry about that now," the old man says. Then he texts, "I do not believe that I have ever encountered such a fish," but more than three hundred old men send him photos of fish that they estimate were as big or bigger.

You will not have to give more than a brief summary of the ending for the exam. Eventually, Santiago catches the fish and ties it to the side of his boat, and sharks eat it. Trying to fight off the sharks, he loses his phone, but luckily he has brought another one, and it is fully charged. He then returns to the harbor, where about four thousand of the old men who have been following him have been pre-alerted and are waiting. The boy, who came to help him take his fishing gear back to his shack, has trouble finding him in the crowd, and so goes home.

Study Questions

How does this story compare with your own personal narrative? What is the point of knowing it, if it does not relate directly to the narrative you wish to take ownership of? Was the old man smart to bring along a spare phone, and who will reimburse him for the phone that he lost? Do the sharks, the seagulls, and the huge fish represent the Holy Trinity? If so, will that affect anybody's final grade? How can a story from long ago help you with a degree in Marketing Resource Design? If you are majoring in Megafauna Rescue and Rehabilitation, what violations of game laws and bioethical standards do you see in this story? Is it possible to transfer out of this course so late in the term and still get credit for it? Discuss. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

A REPORTER AT LARGE

OFF THE *STREET*

A journey from homelessness to a room of one's own in New York City.

BY JENNIFER EGAN

Jessica moved into 90 Sands Street, a vast new supportive-housing facility in Brooklyn, on February 15th: a bleak, cloudy morning. The move came not a moment too soon; there had been much upheaval in her life in the previous few weeks, including an assault by her ex-boyfriend and two of his friends that had left her with facial bruises, and an overdose caused by the presence of the animal tranquillizer xylazine in her heroin—an honest error, it seemed, on the part of her trusted dealer—for which the forty-two-year-old was rushed to Mount Sinai from the transitional-housing facility where she'd been living for nine months. "I was dead," she told me with characteristic flair, in her strong Southern accent. "When I left in the ambulance, I was dead. They gave me CPR, they took me to the best hospital in Manhattan, and they shocked me in the hospital six times."

Her hospital discharge paper flapped in the breeze on top of one of the many plastic tubs that Jessica, her friend Bill, and her case manager, Carley Medley, hauled from Jessica's transitional-housing room to the van that Medley was driving. (Jessica's name and those of her friends and family have been changed.) Given that Jessica had spent most of the previous seven years living outdoors (with two interludes in jail for probation violations on old drug-related charges), she had amassed a remarkable number of possessions: Barbies and LOL Surprise! Balls, craft kits, scented candles, and an array of cosmetics. Jessica is savvy and resourceful, which is partly how she managed to survive, alone, on New York's streets. In addition to panhandling, which usually brought in a hundred dollars a day, she ran an online business with a friend, selling merchandise they'd bought at a discount from "boosters," who often had stolen it from large stores. Hence the random assortment of brand-new items in her bins.

Medley and Jessica met in 2019, when Medley, who is now twenty-nine, moved to New York with the goal of working in homeless outreach, an interest that was sparked by research on unhoused mothers that she did as a student at Ohio State. She got a job with the nonprofit Breaking Ground, working on a team that seeks out homeless people in and around Macy's flagship Thirty-fourth Street store. Breaking Ground's goal is to coax these clients, as they are known, into transitional and ultimately permanent housing *without* requiring that they first accept treatment for the drug, alcohol, and mental-health issues that are widespread among New Yorkers who live outdoors. This strategy, known as "housing first," was pioneered in New York, in the early nineteen-nineties, by Sam Tsemberis, a psychologist whose organization, Pathways to Housing, began renting apartments for homeless people with mental-health diagnoses and delivering medical and psychiatric services to them at their new residences—debunking the prevailing belief that people could not remain stably housed without having first undergone treatment. Study after study showed Tsemberis's approach to be far more successful than requiring treatment in advance. Housing first became a federal policy in the United States with passage of the HEARTH Act, in 2009, though advocates say that its implementation is spotty.

Outreach of the kind that Medley was doing at Macy's is the first step, but even identifying an unhoused person in a bustling department store can be a challenge. "Being in Macy's is kind of like hiding in plain sight," Medley told me. "It's like, Oh, I think I've seen that woman sitting here every day this week, and she was here last week. Maybe we can go introduce ourselves, let her know what we're here for." This stage of the process, which is known as engagement, is uncertain and often protracted; mistrust leaves many unhoused people reluctant to interact,

Jessica tours her new apartment at 90 Sands,

February 15, 2023: "I slept on Thirty-fourth Street between Madison and Fifth for, like, a year and a half, the same spot," she said.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSÉ A. ALVARADO JR.

and, when you've managed to survive outdoors in New York City, you might be excused for thinking that you don't need anyone's help.

Jessica is slight, with rounded shoulders, thanks perhaps to years of pushing the small shopping trolley she often has with her. She's white, with hazel eyes and thick dark hair that reaches to her waist, although she keeps it tied back. While living on the street, she used the oversized sink in Macy's wheelchair-accessible restroom to clean herself. "I'd strip down naked, sit in the sink, and take a bath," she told me. "Wash my hair and everything. I would be in there for, like, three hours. . . . They knew it was me in the bathroom, 'cause I would go, like, twice a week."

Medley first encountered Jessica panhandling outside Macy's with a sign that identified her as pregnant and fleeing an abusive marriage. Alarmed, Medley alerted her fellow outreach workers. "And they were, like, 'Carley, that's so cute. It's your first day, you don't know anything yet.' Her belly looked so real. And they're, like, 'Yeah, she's been pregnant for like a year. It's a big baby.'"

Jessica cheerfully acknowledges the fabrication: "I wouldn't make any money without that sign!" She is garrulous and unabashed about her drug use and her troubled history, which *has* included both pregnancy (a daughter and a son, whom she ceded to their father when they were pre-teens, are now healthy young adults) and abusive relationships (her last boyfriend, the one who assaulted her in January, also knocked out many of her teeth and slashed her with a knife, leaving a broad scar). She says that she was introduced to heroin in her mid-thirties by her third husband, who relapsed shortly after their wedding into an addiction that Jessica had been unaware of. "He held me down and shot me up," she told me. "I had never used drugs in my life, not even smoked weed." Her husband then persuaded her to leave the Southern state where they were living and come with him to New York. "I said, 'You promise you're not going to leave me by myself?' And he did." Within a year, she found herself alone in a new city, loosely connected to a group of about fifty drug users, she said, all of them living on the street in midtown Manhattan.

Situated in Dumbo, near the Brooklyn waterfront, 90 Sands is thirty stories high and has Richard Scarry-esque views of New York Harbor. Jessica's newly renovated studio apartment looked pristine, and its triple-paned windows replaced the din of the Manhattan Bridge subway traffic with suctioning silence. Like all the supportive-housing apartments in the building, it was furnished with a full-sized bed, a small table, and two chairs. There were built-in shelves and drawers in an enormous closet, and a "welcome box," containing bedding, kitchen and cleaning supplies, and toiletries. The building has a gym, a computer room, a laundry room, a bike room, and an outdoor plaza, as well as a team of service providers that includes psychiatrists, a doctor, a nurse practitioner, and an employment specialist.

"There are a hundred types of people who are homeless, but there are basically two patterns: people who are homeless for short periods of time and people who are homeless for very long periods of time," I was told by Dennis Culhane, a social-science researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, who has spent decades studying modern homelessness and has worked on the problem under the Bush and Obama Administrations. Short-term homelessness is best addressed with what is known as "rapid rehousing": granting emergency cash and rent money for up to two years. Permanent supportive housing like 90 Sands is the most effective solution for those in the chronically homeless category: generally people with disabilities—usually mental illness or substance-use disorders, often both—who need long-term rent subsidies and support services to keep them stably housed. A recent study showed that about ninety per cent of homeless people who enter supportive housing remain housed after two years.

Supportive housing has evolved since it was introduced in New York, in the early nineteen-eighties, and exists in various forms, from "scattered site" arrangements, in which tenants occupy ordinary apartments (singly or with a roommate), to entire buildings like 90 Sands. What the different arrangements have in common is that case management comes to the tenants with the goal of helping them remain housed. According to an estimate provided by the Supportive Housing Network of New York, there are now thirty-seven thousand units of supportive housing in New York City, about ninety per cent of which are for single adults, and about thirty-eight hundred more are under construction. Still, the

"I just have to finish reading them first."

quantity is woefully inadequate to the current need. (A Department of Social Services spokesperson said that the city is working to "aggressively expand" its supportive-housing capacity.)

90 Sands was originally a residential hotel for Jehovah's Witnesses, and it has some unusual features, including a panoramic observation deck on the top floor and a gargantuan underground kitchen that will be rented out to a commercial tenant. Snagging such valuable real estate for a supportive-housing development required some creative financing from Breaking Ground, which then brought in the Center for Urban Community Services (CUCS) to provide on-site social services and medical care. The two organizations have been collaborating on such projects in New York since 1991. By late spring, 90 Sands, which started accepting residents in September of 2022, had filled all of its three hundred and five supportive units, sixty per cent of the building's apartments. (The supportive residents' rent is paid by New York City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development, in combination with either a public-assistance housing allowance or a third of the resident's income or disability payments.) The remaining hundred and eighty-five apartments are designated "affordable" units to be rented by low- and middle-income New Yorkers through a separate bureaucracy that has proceeded more slowly (as of this writing, about forty-five per cent of the affordable units had been leased), for sums ranging from $537 to $2,132. Mixing supportive and affordable units is a standard industry practice, and the two types of tenants are co-mingled throughout the building. Sixty-one thousand applicants entered the city's lottery for 90 Sands's affordable units, a testament to New York's ongoing crisis of affordable housing.

Eligible individuals are usually referred into specific units by New York City's Department of Social Services. However, 90 Sands served as a test case for direct referrals, in which Breaking Ground and CUCS, both major players in the city's street-outreach work and transitional-housing programs, were able to refer qualified clients (Jessica being one) into two-thirds of 90 Sands's supportive units. This made for an expedited process that proved timely when busloads of asylum seekers began filling the city's shelters last fall; housing-approved tenants were able to move out quickly to make room.

To qualify for supportive housing at 90 Sands, a homeless person must have received a diagnosis of either a substance-use disorder or a serious mental illness, such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Jessica's heroin addiction made her eligible, but she insisted, in January, as I sat beside her on a freezing Upper West Side pavement outside Bed Bath & Beyond while she panhandled, that she had no need for that kind of support. "I'll stay for, like, a year, and hopefully they can find me an apartment without supportive housing. I don't want to take something from somebody that really needs it," she said. By the time she moved in, a few weeks later, she had reduced her daily heroin intake from two grams—or twenty-plus bags ("My tolerance is out of this world")—to a quarter of a gram, which she divided into morning and evening injections. When Jessica was in jail in 2018, she went on methadone, which allowed her to stay heroin-free for several months, but she now regarded methadone as another form of addiction and believed that it was harder on her body than heroin. Years of homelessness and drug use had taken their toll on her physically: she needed oral surgery to remove all her teeth; the veins in her arms were "shot," meaning damaged from years of injecting; and, in January, a deep new wound appeared where she had injected heroin into her calf—a by-product of that animal tranquillizer that nearly killed her.

"That is a lot of paper . . . my God," Jessica said at the start of her lease signing, which took place in 90 Sands's brightly lit conference room at a table decorated with silk flowers. As her emergency contact, Jessica listed Mary, her aunt, whom she lived with as a young child in the Midwest and often referred to as her mother. Her biological parents, whom she called her sperm and egg donors, both had drug addictions and were absent from her early life. Her mother reappeared when Jessica was six and drove her from her aunt's home to the South. "I didn't even know her," Jessica said. She remembers looking out the back window of the car and screaming for her aunt and her grandmother as she was driven away. Her mother had a new husband who abused Jessica, and she left home at fifteen. She finished high school and a year of community college while sharing a small, rented trailer with a female friend. She had her children at nineteen and twenty-two with her first husband and recounts having thrived professionally in young adulthood as a deli bakery manager for a supermarket chain, with more than a dozen bakeries under her supervision. "I had a new car every other year, a house. My kids were spoiled rotten. We went on vacation twice a year," she told me. But a violent rupture with her second husband brought an end to this stability, and the children went to live with their father. She spoke of wanting to go back to school for culinary arts. "I can decorate wedding cakes, all kinds of cakes. I can do anything in a grocery store," she said. She and her aunt remained in frequent contact and shared a passion for reading—thrillers especially. When I visited Jessica while she was panhandling on the Upper West Side, she'd come straight from the public library and had in her trolley a backpack crammed with fiction by Michael Connelly, Nora Roberts, Nicholas Sparks, and others. While panhandling, she usually reads a book a day.

After the lease signing, Jessica unpacked her library books and a few other items, including a tiny green cactus in a ceramic vase, which she placed on her new windowsill. Medley handed over Jessica's birth certificate and New York State I.D.: two hard-won "vital docs," whose retrieval had been essential to qualifying her for supportive housing. Jessica had lost virtually everything while living outside—most people do, which is why it's nearly impossible to apply for housing while chronically homeless, and why street outreach and case management are crucial to the process.

It was time for Medley to head back to Manhattan, and Jessica walked out to catch a ride with her. 90 Sands occupies a gap between the Manhattan Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the B.Q.E.; at

Kenneth Roberson, who moved into 90 Sands in 2022, after years in city shelters.

times, the roar of overhead trains can halt conversation. "I know nothing about Brooklyn—at all," she reflected, eying her new surroundings. Her heroin dealer, her panhandling spots, her friends—all of that was still in Manhattan. She climbed into the van with Medley and rode back.

The ongoing influx of asylum seekers caused the number of people being sheltered in New York City to balloon from around sixty-seven thousand last December to a hundred and eleven thousand in August, according to city data. (Counting the homeless is an imperfect science, and the data from D.H.S. and from the Department of Housing and Urban Development don't always align.) But homelessness had already been rising for nearly a decade in New York and a number of other American cities—Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., to name a few—where median rents had begun to exceed an average person's (or family's) ability to pay. New York State has the second-highest number of homeless people in the nation (largely living in New York City) after California, but whereas almost seventy per cent of California's homeless live on the street (a sizable portion in vehicles), fewer than six per cent of New York's do, making homelessness far less visible here. Many factors account for this disparity, chief among them the fact that New York City is the only municipality in America to guarantee a legal right to shelter for individuals and families—the result of court-approved agreements between advocates and the city that date back to the nineteen-eighties. (Massachusetts has a right to shelter for families.) Research disproves the notion that homeless people migrate to the West Coast for the weather; rather, a comparative paucity of shelter beds likely explains the more overt presence of homelessness there.

The six per cent or so of New Yorkers who choose to remain outdoors despite the city's right to shelter are almost all single adults who tend to be chronically homeless and predominantly male. Often, they sleep on the street because they're unwilling to enter the city's huge, centralized shelter system, which separates men and women into large congregate settings, sometimes dozens to a space. (Family shelter is handled through a different centralized system.) Drugs and alcohol are forbidden in city shelters; there are metal detectors and bag searches and a ten-o'clock curfew if one is not to lose one's bed. Many shelters require that residents vacate the dorms during the day.

Thousands of New Yorkers do successfully avail themselves of the city's shelters. One example is Kenneth Roberson, who moved into 90 Sands last September and was a lively source of knowledge and street smarts for me throughout my research. Roberson, who is sixty-four and Black, with bright-blue eyes, is an avuncular presence; he often covers his shaved head with a do-rag, maintains a tightly manicured mustache and goatee, and has a love of flashy sneakers. As a youth living in the Bronx, he ran with the Wild Cowboys, a notorious drug gang. He doesn't discuss his crimes, except to say that they went along with what he calls "the life style" of drugs and easy money, which always ends—he likes to quiz me on this—in either jail or death. ("Jenny on the block!" he'll crow, when I get it right.) Roberson logged more than twenty years behind bars through a combination of state and county bids, the last of which he completed fifteen years ago, at nearly fifty. During his criminal era, he spent two years on the run from police over parole violations, sleeping in abandoned buildings in Harlem to keep the law from breaking down the doors of the two women he adored—his long-term partner, a corrections officer who passed away in 2017, and his mother, whom he cared for in her NYCHA apartment until she died the following year, leaving him homeless because his name wasn't on her lease. ("God bless you, baby," Roberson sings out at the mention of either woman.)

Recalling those desperate years of sleeping in derelict spaces can still move

Roberson to tears (particularly when he's drinking vodka), and he had no intention of doing it again after his mother's death. He reported to the city's shelter system, where his history may have protected him from what many describe as a predatory atmosphere. "They know who's who," Roberson told me. " 'Oh, yeah, that's the drug dealer. Don't fuck with him. Oh, this guy, yo, he's been upstate before, he did a lot of time. . . .'" Roberson advocated for himself with the shelters' often overloaded case managers. "You gotta stay on top of those people," he explained. His vigilance paid off in the form of a city housing voucher.

For those who lack Roberson's institutional experience, particularly people with fragile mental health, drug addiction, or both, congregate city shelters can be frightening and dangerous. A thirty-four-year-old woman who lives at 90 Sands experienced a psychotic break while doing graduate work in literature at Columbia University. Her erratic behavior got her expelled from the program and cost her her apartment. She spent three years in city shelters, where she says that she was a target of violence from other women. "It's like prison," she told me. "But there's no bars to protect you from people in shelters." She is working on a memoir about those experiences.

Jessica never entered the shelter system; she'd heard stories of how violent it was, and her husband, who was fleeing arrest warrants when they came to New York, didn't want to be tracked through official records. The two spent their first winter sleeping in a dog park near Wall Street. "And then we came to midtown and I slept on Thirty-fourth Street between Madison and Fifth for, like, a year and a half, the same spot," she told me. "I was comfortable. I've had mattresses, I've had couch cushions I've slept on, I've had the foam things you can buy that go on your bed: I would put one down on the cardboard and get underneath my thousand blankets." She carried a knife, but said she'd never had to use it.

The enclaves that people make for themselves outdoors in New York—temporary, vulnerable, subject to vandalism, confiscation, and theft—are proof of how primal the nesting instinct is for nearly all of us. Many formerly unhoused people speak almost tenderly of "my spot" or "my place": under scaffolding; on church steps; on roofs or in stairwells; in abandoned cars. While accompanying an outreach team in Brooklyn, I saw a frail Black woman using bleach and a broom to scour not just the sidewalk around her makeshift home—constructed of bright-colored beach umbrellas, under elevated subway tracks—but the street itself. John Wood, a white man in his fifties who moved to 90 Sands in March, told me that he'd come to the city from upstate eight years ago with his wife, "my soulmate," with whom he shared a heroin addiction. The pair refused to be separated into shelters, and Wood instead constructed a series of insulated cave-homes, gouging them into hillsides in Riverside and Morningside Parks. At night, the couple lit their caves with dozens of candles whose eerie flickering beauty Wood captured in videos on his cell phone. That phone was long gone, as were the homes, each eventually discovered and destroyed; as was Wood's soulmate, who died of blood poisoning resulting from her drug use. But the memory was clearly a vivid one.

Many people describe acts of kindness from strangers who came to know them over time in their chosen spots. A young woman I spoke with, who immigrated from South Asia with her family when she was eleven, became homeless in her twenties after refusing an arranged marriage. Her parents banished her from their apartment, and she lived in and around parks in Queens for several years, hardly speaking to anyone, often weeping, but cared for by locals who left her plates of hot food, blankets, towels, and money when they passed by on their way to work.

Outreach workers are also a presence in the lives of most people who live outdoors in New York. A handful of nonprofits—Breaking Ground, CUCS, Goddard Riverside, BronxWorks, Project Hospitality, and the Bowery Residents' Committee (B.R.C.)—contract with the city to coördinate the systematic canvassing of all five boroughs, including the subways, in round-the-clock shifts, seven days a week. Outreach teams must also respond within two hours to 311 calls reporting a problem that involves a homeless individual. (Homeless people may report themselves as a way of requesting help.) These teams of at least two hand out supplies—bottled water and sunscreen in summer, socks and hand warmers in winter—and perform wellness checks, particularly during Code Blue and Code Red periods when temperatures are extreme. A psychiatrist and a physician or nurse practitioner accompany each outreach team once a week to treat patients at their street locations. At the end of each shift, outreach teams enter notes into a central database: listing which clients they saw where, and what interactions took place. Breaking Ground's corporate partnerships, like the one with Macy's, operate in addition to this structure.

The goal of all street outreach is to invite homeless individuals first "onto caseload"—meaning that they agree to share their story in detail and to work with a case manager—and then into transitional housing. For those who are averse to city shelters, transitional housing can take the form of "safe havens" or "stabilization beds"—together referred to as "low-barrier units"—newer models that are smaller and more flexible and forgiving than most city shelters. These facilities are often co-ed, though sleeping spaces are divided by gender, and they usually offer more private units, with dividers that extend partway to the ceiling. Like shelters, they serve meals, but there are no curfews, and residents are required to check in only once every seventy-two hours in order to insure that their beds are held for them—an easier standard to meet for those whose lives are disregulated by active addiction or mental-health crises. With a higher concentration of case managers and housing specialists on-site, low-barrier units have become desirable alternatives to city shelters, albeit on a lesser scale. (There are about thirty-five hundred such beds in the city.)

Even with elaborate coördination and information-sharing, though, the process of transitioning someone from the street into housing is patchy and precarious at best. Clients move around and rarely have phones; case managers—a position that generally requires no higher education, license, or specialized training—are poorly paid and often overburdened, though the good ones are heroic and save lives.

Last December, I joined a morning shift in Manhattan with Ramata Touré, a thirty-year-old assistant director at Breaking Ground's Connect to Care

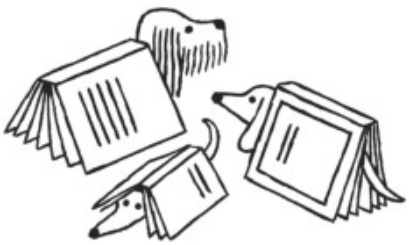
program, which is funded by a consortium of more than sixty companies through the Partnership for NYC. Touré oversees four supervisors and twenty outreach case managers, but, she says, she still likes to do outreach herself "once in a blue moon, just to keep up with my skills." In a subway entrance on West Forty-sixth Street, she engaged a stocky, strident forty-five-year-old Black man, who was leaning on a pair of crutches and opening a Slim Jim with his teeth. He identified himself as Paul Cameron, and immediately began to complain about not having been placed in transitional housing. Touré offered to arrange transportation for him that afternoon to Olivieri's, a drop-in center on West Thirtieth Street (drop-in centers have reclining chairs where clients can stay overnight), while she looked for a safe-haven bed for him. Cameron was brashly skeptical. "Everything you say has been said to me," he challenged Touré. "You sound enthusiastic, but I heard that before."

Touré had long braided hair, and wore a bright-green Partnership for NYC jacket. "I can't speak for others," she rejoined amiably. "I can only say what I can do from our engagement today and on." She gave Cameron a woollen hat, gloves, and granola bars, and took his photograph so that afternoon outreach workers driving the promised van would recognize him. But I later learned that, when the van arrived at the appointed time, Cameron wasn't there. It was a cold day, and he may have gone into the subway, where outreach is handled exclusively by the B.R.C. "That's sometimes where the disconnect can happen, with the up and down," Touré told me. "When it's cold, clients will go down."

A native New Yorker, Touré was studying forensic psychology at John Jay College when she volunteered to join D.H.S.'s PIT count in East Harlem—a "point-in-time" tally of every American municipality's total homeless population is required every two years. She liked the work and applied to Breaking Ground as a case manager soon afterward. (She completed her master's degree in social work last fall.) In the Times Square pedestrian plaza, Touré approached the Recharge Station, an outdoor booth operated by Fountain House, a mental-health organization. A small group of people—some tourists, it appeared—were partaking of coffee and snacks while charging their phones. "Identifying who may or may not be homeless can be the tricky part here," Touré said, scanning the crowd. "People expect clients to look a particular way, and here you will not find that; clients are dressed appropriately, keep up with their hygiene, and blend in. You have to look for a tell: sometimes they'll have dirty fingernails, certain little markings, and the footwear kind of gives off a little bit."

A hesitant, bearded older Black man approached Touré; he had been on Breaking Ground's caseload but had fallen off—something that often happens when people are hospitalized, jailed, or leave the city for a time. Touré arranged for him to go back on and noted his preference for a safe-haven bed. Later, she spotted an elderly white woman hunched over a suitcase under a scaffold, wearing a red Christmas sweater and a red face mask. The woman's tiny hands were exposed to the bitter chill. Touré approached respectfully. "My name is Ramata. I'm from Breaking Ground. Are you O.K.?" she asked. "Do you want a hand warmer or anything?" The woman started, then recoiled, shrieking incoherently. Touré backed off with an apology. "Some clients resist the engagements," she explained.

About a month later, in January, I joined James Martin, a CUCS supervisor for street outreach, for a 5:30 A.M. shift in upper Manhattan. Martin is fair and



open-faced, and moves at times with the awkwardness of a very tall person. It was a Code Blue day, and we looked for three individuals who required wellness checks but weren't visible that morning; likely, they'd gone underground to avoid a deluge of rain the previous night. Martin was also searching for a fourth person, a Black woman named Iishea Stone, a wheelchair-bound amputee who had discharged herself from Harlem Hospital—she'd been admitted with COVID—but hadn't returned to the Kelly, a CUCS safe haven on West 127th Street, where she'd been living for several months. Martin drove past a corner bodega in West Harlem that was Iishea's usual street spot, but she wasn't there.

In upper Harlem and Morningside Heights, Martin canvassed several areas where homeless individuals often encamp, including one under the Henry Hudson Parkway, accessible by a short hike through underbrush. Martin, who fell into outreach work years ago and also completed his master's degree in social work last fall, spent two years in the Peace Corps in Ecuador; he led the way, calling "*Buenos días!*" I followed him into a breathtaking debris field of single-use plastics and kaleidoscopic trash. Though devoid of human beings, the place intimated a breadth of recent activity: soiled mattresses, lighters, brooms and brushes, cigarette butts, a sequinned blue dress, rain-sodden socks, plastic cutlery, lipsticks, curlers, a spool of thread, a hurricane lamp, a crushed baby stroller, and a ubiquitous sprinkling of orange syringe caps. It was a reminder that life doesn't stop for people who live outdoors, invisible though they often may be to the rest of us. Iishea Stone, the woman Martin had been looking for, articulated this point for me a couple of weeks later, after outreach workers had located her by the bodega and she'd cheerfully accepted a ride back to the Kelly.

"I had a life before this," Iishea said once she'd rolled her wheelchair into a small office off the Kelly's bustling hallway. "When I was homeless, I used to roll around the streets at night. I like being outside; I'm like a butterfly. There's a peace of solitude. I was able to talk to God. If God spoke back, I was able to hear him—either a thought or an emotion, I was able to connect it to God. I roll the streets, like '*Wheeeeeee!*' I own the streets—there are no cars."

The wheelchair was a relatively new addition to Iishea's life; in 2020, she was run over by a subway train that severed her left foot and half of her left hand. (She had a prosthetic leg, but it hurt to wear it.) At fifty-one, she was a riveting presence, radiant, athletic, and a mesmerizing narrator of a dizzying life story: sexually abused from age five by her stepfather and three older brothers; dismissed by her mother even after the

A PROTACTILE VERSION OF "TINTERN ABBEY"

When I smelled the smoke, I knew
Where I was. Okay. There is water
Flowing along our flank here, and here
Near our knee is an old church.
But let us scroll up our leg
A few times. Here, inhale the smoke.
Our cold-tipped nose sniffing the back
Of our fourth hand, we hand-heel
Our lap's thick turf. Houses with pastures
That—give me an edifice—rub up
Against the very fingernails! The grass continues
Back to the brash water, and here
I need a cave. Thank you. Perhaps
Someone is holed up in there, tending
To flames that tickle your palm warm.
But never mind. Let us rove ahead
To where I found—give me tree.
Heavy with foliage. Can you feel that?
Now a claw for the knobby roots
Where I laid my head and crumbled
Clumps of dirt that I brushed off.
I had been here before, and then—

Let me think. A fist? No, no.
Give me an upturned claw, and feel
It swaying because of the rolling sun
Bumping into finger planets. . . . You were right!
We do need a fist after all.
Sliding the fire out of our palm,
We fold those thimbles into one world.
It makes perfect sense for the sun
To claim our shoulder! Our muscular star,
Our many-jointed sphere, our electric arm:
All shaking and snapping through five cycles
Of sweat and blizzard, each wobbly turn
A summons. We have indeed come back
To breathe in sweet Earth's smoky hand.

—John Lee Clark

abuse was corroborated by another family member; introduced to crack cocaine at thirteen by family friends who had driven her to an after-school swimming practice. Iishea left home—Far Rockaway—that year and survived on the streets thereafter, mostly around Times Square, where she sold drugs and sought out the company of people who would protect her. She served multiple prison sentences for drug dealing. "The last time was four and a half to nine, and I did every bit of nine years, because I did four state bids already. So I became a 'persistent predicate,' which means you keep doing the same goddam thing and you're gonna get it. But I'm not mad at that." In prison, she added, "I became a welder, I became a metal fabricator, a cook, I got my G.E.D., and then I got with the older women and I listened. I knew they didn't want nothing from me. I could sit down and actually be O.K. with listening, you know? And I learned. So when I came home I was a woman. And every bit of a phenomenal woman. And everything I had was enhanced. Everybody will say you become pessimistic from being in prison. Nope. N-O. I found refuge."

When Iishea completed that sentence, she was in her late thirties. She returned to New York and reconnected with an old acquaintance who became her husband. What followed was a golden interlude: the owner of the Brooklyn halfway house where Iishea stayed after prison agreed to rent her a house in Prospect Lefferts Gardens, and she and her husband lived there with their nine cats. Both stopped using and went on methadone. Iishea's husband had maintenance jobs at two churches, and Iishea worked at a deli and went to T.C.I. College. Every other Thursday, they took the train to Harlem for a comedy show. Then their housing fell apart: they were supposed to move into a rental apartment in a Brooklyn brownstone, but the building was sold to new owners who rescinded the agreement—a development that seems to have crushed them.

"We got a monkey wrench thrown in our plans . . . it felt like all our hard work just went down the drain," Iishea told me. They went to a family shelter and were placed in a boarding house on Park Avenue, in Harlem, that was vermin-infested. Both went back to drugs and began drinking heavily. "We used to sit there and watch the mice playing tag on our table. . . . Everything just . . . it went downhill. Everything you built—you watch it disappear just like that."

Her husband found maintenance work in Harlem, but Iishea had returned to dealing by the time she fell onto the subway tracks, in the winter of 2020. "The state shut me down," she said. "The government shut me down This happened maybe thirty-five days before the panic of the COVID. *Bang!* I couldn't get into these places. They didn't want to answer their phones." In August of that year, her husband died from cirrhosis of the liver. "He was the only ray of sunshine in my entire life. Him. Him," she told me, weeping. "And when he died the only refuge I got is God, and sometimes I don't feel like I got him."

Iishea's account of what happened next was a textbook case of how street outreach is supposed to work. For months at a time, she slept in front of a bodega at the corner of Frederick Douglass Boulevard and West 116th Street. "I'm never shy of working. I used to sweep up, or

help them with the boxes and the fruit. They have a flower shop in front—they used to teach me about the flowers and stuff." She suffered from asthma and congestive heart disease and had been told that she might need a pacemaker. (At one point, she told me, a heart-monitoring vest she'd been prescribed was stolen from her at a city shelter.) Then she was approached by a representative of the CUCS-led Manhattan Outreach Consortium. "They was, like, 'Someone really, really, really cares about you. They called us and asked us could we help you. Iishea, what is it that you want?' And I told them, 'I don't know what I want right now.' So they kept coming, and they kept seeing me in that same spot or the immediate vicinity. And then one day I was, like, 'O.K. I'm ready.'"

The Kelly, which has sixty beds and caters to chronically homeless clients with serious mental-health diagnoses (eighty per cent of whom also use drugs), is a friendly place, and Iishea raved about her three roommates and the Kelly's director, Aimee Poulin. Her case manager was another story: according to Iishea, she had been absent for several weeks and left her in limbo. Iishea had yet to be approved for disability benefits or even for public assistance. "I don't understand why they won't give me no type of income at all," she fumed, looking down at the stump of her left shin. "Inquiring minds want to know: *What the fuck*?"

Iishea still used crack cocaine, she told me ("Please don't ask me to deal with this shit sober!"), but her use had diminished since she'd moved into the Kelly. "When I was on the street, every day, every minute of my life, was idle time. I didn't want to feel anything, so I used. I haven't stopped, but I sure cut the hell down. At this point, it's when I *want* to do it, not when I need to anymore." She had a new suitor who was not a drug user—a Dominican man who'd begun courting her when she was sleeping outside the bodega. "Whenever I feel like I want to indulge, I can, and he feels no way about it. He don't judge me," she said. The keys to his apartment—on the ground floor, luckily, a city bus ride away—hung around her neck. She visited him overnight sometimes, but since her January disappearance she'd always returned to the Kelly within the required seventy-two hours, in the hope of eventually getting her own apartment. "Don't get the fuck-its!" she told me, acknowledging her tendency to give up impulsively out of frustration and impatience. "These people allot you a lot of room. I don't want no rope to hang myself. I just want that room so I can get my place, that's it. Ooh, that's it."

The cactus on Jessica's windowsill was soon joined by sprouting bamboo stalks in a glass vase, and an aroma dispenser that suffused the air with a puff of floral sweetness every few minutes, masking the smell of the Newport 100s she smokes. Her books were carefully arranged, along with her collection of tiny Ty Beanies. I was startled to find that a miniature set of wheeled plastic shelves I'd handed down to her contained orange-capped syringes from a needle exchange, plastic baggies full of miniature cotton balls, and the small squat cylinders that her heroin came in (at one point, her dealer would refund her two dollars and fifty cents for each one she returned to him).

Before I arrived to visit, Jessica had been touching up her walls with a Magic Eraser to remove fingerprints left by Bill, the friend who'd helped her move, and whom she'd allowed to stay in her apartment for several days. That morning she'd demanded that he leave. Bill's fiancée had died recently from an overdose (he does not use drugs), and he'd fallen hard for Jessica on the rebound, even accompanying her while she was panhandling. "Ever since Bill started following me around, I stopped making money," she vented. "He's trying to hug and kiss me. And I'm, like, 'Dude, my sign says "Pregnant with an Abusive Husband"—they think that's you and I'm still with you! Get away from me!'"

She'd made a new friend at 90 Sands, Troy, who she'd correctly sensed was a fellow heroin user. Although he was on methadone, he'd shot up with her several times and made tacos for her in her apartment. Bill was jealous of the new friendship, and Jessica had heard him grumbling under his breath when Troy came over the previous night. As she was telling me this, Bill called her cell phone. "O.K., I have company," Jessica told him testily. "I'm allowed to have company, Bill, and I'm allowed to have friends. And it's not Troy. . . . Don't get an attitude with me and say it like you just said it." She listened for a while, then protested, "You've gotta stop this jealousy shit. I told you I would be the most loyal best friend you ever had in your life, but I'm not interested in you that way." Bill's shouted reply prompted her to explode: "It ain't got nothing to do with getting high! Because you don't get *high*? You think I want you to be a fucking heroin addict? Are you, like, crazy?" More bellowing from Bill. "I have company, so I have to go," she said, cutting him off. "I love you, too. Bye." After hanging up, she continued to rail as though Bill were in the room: "Are you an idiot? Do you think I want you to be a heroin addict? I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy. Do you think I *want* to live like this?"

What the housing-first policy has meant at 90 Sands, practically speaking, is that three hundred and five people whose mental-health issues or drug use—or both—were severe enough to keep them on the street for an average of eight years all moved into one building within the span of eight months. Supportive tenants' former case managers are supposed to remain actively involved for the first three months after their clients move into 90 Sands, in order to soften the handoff to an unfamiliar case-management team, but a number of tenants told me that this "after-care" hadn't happened for them—one of many ways in which the case-manager position, with its low pay and high turnover, can constitute an unreliable link in the structure of homeless outreach and supportive housing, even as its low barriers to entry also encourage serendipitous vocations like Touré's and Martin's. Nearly all the people I spoke with described a trail of failed or abandoned case-manager relationships preceding the successful one—like Jessica's with Medley—that finally helped get them off the street and into housing.

The vibe among tenants, in those early months at 90 Sands, was an uneasy mixture of wariness and need. Roberson's good will, for instance, stopped short at the prospect of neighborly visits. "Don't knock on my door about nothing" was how he summarized his position. "Once you start giving, people take advantage of that. I'm not trying to break bread. You stay your distance, I stay

mine." He considers that, of his fellow-tenants, "sixty per cent is whack, and forty per cent is good." When I asked him to clarify which group he was part of, he said, with a chuckle, "I came from the sixty per cent, but I'm down with the forty per cent."

Within a few weeks of meeting Troy, her new neighbor-friend, Jessica called security to have him removed from her apartment after he hit her in the face. Later, they patched things up; then she swore off him again, saying he was using her for drugs. Then he agreed to take care of her new cat . . . and so on. Relations with neighbors are complicated, as any city dweller knows, but the nature of supportive housing can compound those complications. One tenant who moved into 90 Sands last fall confided to me that the people in the next apartment had installed cameras inside his unit and were firing commentary at him through the walls. Understandably, he wanted to escape this invasion by changing apartments. But, to his frustration, Matthew Minogue, 90 Sands's building director, wouldn't grant his request.

Russell Reavesbey, a fifty-six-year-old Black Muslim who wears shiny, bright-colored jilbabs, has a tendency to close his eyes while speaking, as if to tame his thoughts. When agitated, he paces. In both states, he often revisits a litany of losses: his mother, in 1998; his father, in 2000; a brother, who died of AIDS; another brother who was killed in a car accident; a sister who was murdered. "There's not one moment I don't miss my mother and my father," he told me. "Ain't nobody around, nobody I can talk to."

Reavesbey had been homeless virtually his entire adult life until he moved into 90 Sands, having cycled for decades among shelters, safe havens, jails, and psychiatric hospitals. He became a father at forty-three; that daughter is now thirteen, living with her mother, and their second daughter is a year old. He wants to get his G.E.D. and become a veterinary assistant—he adores animals—but says that his Social Security card was stolen by terrorists during 9/11. There is one loss that always sends Reavesbey into pacing mode: when he was living on the street in Brooklyn and was picked up by police, he asked his then girlfriend to watch his bag, which contained a precious family photo album he'd somehow managed to hold on to through the chaotic years. When Reavesbey was released the next day, bag and treasure had been lost. "It was all I had, because Mother and Father were dead and gone," he fumed, stalking his apartment in stocking feet as he recalled the discovery. "Those pictures to me was, like, sentimental, you understand? And that hurted me! I want to kill her, man."

He was also furious at whichever of his neighbors had found the apartment key he thought he'd lost somewhere in the building and failed to return it. "Somebody has my key, and if I find out who has that key I bet you this: they won't be staying in here," he muttered. "Won't be staying in here, because Imma—oh, Miss Jenny, I didn't mean to say it like that." He fell into pained silence until I assured him that all was well between us. "I just didn't want you to see the other side of me, that's all," he said. "I figured you'd be disappointed or something."

Reavesbey was one of 90 Sands's first tenants. He moved in on September 15th, the same day as Donald Malloy, who is known as Speedy. Speedy, who is Black, wears square glasses, fashionably torn jeans, and has a large tattoo of a microphone on one forearm. He's restless and fit and loves to work delivering food and packages. He's open about having bipolar disorder and P.T.S.D., which were diagnosed during his teen-age years. He grew up in his grandmother's home in Queens Village, but when she passed away and the bank foreclosed on her house he and his mother, with whom he has a volatile relationship, moved into a new apartment. After a physical fight with her when he was twenty-three, Speedy began sleeping in stairwells and on public-housing roofs, with spells in jail, psychiatric hospitals, and ten different shelters before outreach workers found him sleeping on the subway and

"Have you ever thought that maybe I don't do anything all day because you won't let me do anything all day?"

referred him to a safe haven. He'd had relationships with women simply to have a place to sleep, he told me. "I lost my home, my family's broken down. It make me cry a lot," he said.

When I visited Speedy last February, a pan of stewed oxtails he'd recently cooked was sitting on the stove. "I grew up in a household where everybody fight," he told me. "Everything was broken. My family broke the house, they broke the window, they broke the thermostat. When I was young, I used to punch walls and everything. My brother used to do the same. I don't destroy nothing up in here. I make sure I clean everything. I do not like pests!" His windowsill was strewn with medication bottles; loose tobacco and weed covered the kitchen table. He rolled the mixture into cigarettes and smoked them in succession.

Within a few weeks of moving into 90 Sands, Speedy began clashing with the security guards who are stationed at the building's entrance around the clock. A government-issued I.D. is required for nonresidents to enter, and Speedy was incensed when a guard refused to allow his female guest into the building. "I'm, like, 'You're security but you ain't gonna tell me how to live, 'cause I pay my rent here.' I flashed my Taser. They called the ambulance and police; you can't have weapons up in here. I'm, like, 'I just want to go to the hospital. I don't know what y'all talking about. . . .' But if I hit them I'm gonna get kicked out. I'm gonna lose my privileges of living here." Speedy was taken by ambulance to the hospital, where he was asked a series of mental-health questions and released later that night.

"I threw it in the river," he said of the Taser. "I don't want to go back to sleeping on trains or sleeping on rooftops or sleeping with three hundred people in shelters. No. I can't do it no more. I just can't." He mentioned often that he had turned thirty and wanted to complete his education. "There's a lady that was eighty-six that went back to school, and she got her diploma," he told me. "It's never too late. Never."

In March, I received a text at 4:01 A.M. from a man named Victor Lopez, whom I'd interviewed at his safe haven and again at 90 Sands, where he'd moved earlier that month after decades of homelessness: "I need to talk to you something happened yesterday that was dangerous to my life in the building it needs to be addressed or it may be one day someone's life may be taken like mine almost was yesterday please call me today later."

That afternoon, I accompanied Lopez to basement level C1 at 90 Sands, where Breaking Ground and CUCS have their offices. Lopez, a slight, courtly sixty-one-year-old who wears a porkpie hat and walks with a cane, relayed his story to Minogue. He'd been visiting a friend on another floor the previous afternoon and was waiting for the elevator in order to return to his own apartment. "All of a sudden I hear, 'Open the fucking door.' Elevator opens, she comes out with a big kitchen knife, chasing after me. As I was going backwards, I said, 'But I didn't do anything to you.' She stopped, and my friend opened her door when I ring her bell. I stood inside her apartment for hours."

Minogue, a cheery man with a red beard who worked for years in the forensic ward at Bellevue Hospital, has the air of someone who would be difficult to shock. "I'm aware of this tenant. I know who we're talking about," he assured Lopez, and urged him to file an incident report with building security. He also mentioned that Lopez had the option of pressing formal charges. (The son of a police officer, Minogue works to maintain good relations with the local precinct, which he said was aware of 90 Sands as a "hot spot.") "Our building is very well covered in cameras," Minogue said to Lopez. "We can't provide footage to police unless they provide us with a subpoena. That could happen if you press charges. I'm not encouraging you to. . . . You have a right to feel safe in the place where you live." He did encourage Lopez to share his experience at the monthly tenant meeting that took place the following day.

I caught up with Minogue before that meeting and asked him about the policy on threatening behavior at 90 Sands. "There are things that people do here, and behaviors that they engage in, that would very likely not be tolerated in other buildings," he told me. "We try not to leap too readily to evictions for behavior stuff. But some are just blowing that tolerance—or one in particular is blowing it—way out of the water." The difficulty for Minogue and his staff lies in balancing the conflicting needs of many fragile and unstable tenants. "There's an erosion of feeling that you're in a place you can call home if you feel like you're under assault," he told me. "And when there's a lot of *stuff* happening, fights or threats and things like that, that erosion happens more quickly." Lopez didn't attend that tenant meeting, but I heard other complaints about his assailant.

After the meeting, as I was entering the F-train station, I paused to give a dollar to a gaunt, forlorn figure wearing a face mask, huddled on the pavement wrapped in a soiled gray blanket. As I leaned down, the man lowered his mask and grinned at me. "Hi, Jenny!" It was Lopez. I was stupefied; I had sat at his kitchen table the previous day but had failed to recognize him without his porkpie hat—hadn't really looked at him, perhaps.

People who used to cohabit in safe havens may cease to feel an affinity once they're sharing an apartment building—evidence of the wide array of backgrounds and histories that converge under the generic rubric "homeless," a category I've come to feel is no more descriptive than that of "voter" or "employee." A man I'll call Danny, a member of the International Union of Operating Engineers, is licensed to drive bulldozers, backhoes, and small cranes. When I first met him at the Kelly safe haven, Danny, a trim and voluble forty-six, told me, "If I never became homeless, I wouldn't even talk to these types of people. But because I've ridden the trains, them same people have given to *me* food, given to *me* a dollar, given to *me* things when I didn't have anything, so I'm not going to shun them. These are my people."

Danny grew up outside Philadelphia, the son of a white mother and a Black father. A self-described "Neanderthal type of guy" who admires Donald Trump, he was living in a house in Westchester with his wife, a nurse, and their three children when, in 2018, he began to suspect that his oldest son might be gay and confronted him disapprovingly. Enraged, Danny's son retaliated a few weeks later by stabbing him in the abdomen. The internal injuries caused hernias that have made it impossible for Danny to return to work, and the violent rift with

ART-ENVY DREAM

(P.S. Yes, I'm familiar with Clifford the Big Red Dog.)

his son broke up the family. Danny began living in his C-Class Mercedes, eventually downgrading to a Toyota. Four years passed as he moved in and out of shelters and slept on subways, unable to get the abdominal surgery he needed without a place in which to recover. He fell apart mentally and physically before finally connecting with outreach workers at the Salvation Army and moving into the Kelly.

Yet Danny has family and a social fabric that many at 90 Sands lack. His new apartment is full of gifts from his mother. He and his wife have divorced, but he sees his children regularly and says that he's working to repair relations with the son who injured him. His case manager is helping him plan for his surgery, after which he intends to resume full-time work. Shortly after moving into 90 Sands, he paid a social call to a fellow Kelly resident's new apartment and found himself among people smoking crack and K2, a form of synthetic marijuana. He quickly distanced himself from that crowd and has focussed instead on discovering Dumbo's upscale social offerings. A few weeks after moving in, he texted me, "I had to tell you Jennifer that this place gives so much more than inspiration and desire. A lust for life. 90 sands gave me that ☺."

Marvell Calloway, a forty-five-year-old commercial driver from Florida, furnished his 90 Sands studio immediately upon moving in: a rug, an enormous TV, two counter stools, and a multi-panelled poster of a golden-eyed panther, all coördinated in black and gray with red accents. With its astonishing view of the Brooklyn Bridge, the apartment looks like a real-estate ad. Calloway, who is Black, has a gold grill on his upper front teeth and a manner that combines elaborate Southern politeness ("Yes, Ma'am") with occasional deadpan irreverence. "That just me, you know," he said of his décor. "I had a vision in how I like to organize things. I go about my business of that day and come home to peace and quiet, everything done, decent and in order." He is wary of his fellow-tenants, some of whom he knew from two years of living at a safe haven, where, he said, "common sense is not common, especially when it comes to hygiene. You gotta give 'em a extra push: 'Get in the shower, the water free! Ain't got no alligators, no sharks, and such.' I guess they just stuck in that salvage life."

Calloway has always worked, yet homelessness has nipped at his heels for much of his adult life, in large part because of alcoholism. (While at the safe haven, he joined A.A. and has been sober for more than a year, attending A.A. meetings daily by Zoom on his phone.) He was drawn to New York in 2019 by the higher minimum wage, and for months slept in shelters and parks while working at a bakery in Grand Central Terminal to pay for the transfer of documents he needed in order to drive commercial vehicles here. Like Roberson, Calloway resists easy friendships at 90 Sands. "*Let me see your place, man!* No, I don't do that. I tell him, 'It look just like yours. You know when you walk in your door with your key? Imagine that, just with me in it.'" Like Danny, Calloway has a professional network and good income prospects—things that are beyond the reach of many at 90 Sands. "All my friends are employed," he told me. "So when I talk about work, it won't be unfamiliar. It's different than a person that ain't never had a job. I'm, like, 'You ain't got no type of hustle in you? How in the world?' I got cans in my closet. When it fill up, I'm taking them to the recycling shop. It's not much money, but it's money: five cents a can."

Moving is disruptive for everyone. But the first weeks in a new home can be particularly volatile for people with serious mental-health or addiction issues—especially if they haven't experienced stable housing in years or decades. Sarah Lipsky, the program director at 90 Sands, supervises the "supportive" part of the housing. (She was recently promoted and will soon oversee a portfolio of CUCS buildings, including 90 Sands.) A playful presence, with close-cropped blond hair and a palpable affection for her tenants, Lipsky told me, "One of the most reparative things, to me, in what we do is having the opportunity to build that relationship with people. There's so much healing that can happen just by being there and being a person who leads with that love and care and concern and respect that so many people haven't had. It doesn't solve everything, but it does a lot for people who have been collectively disenfranchised."

But the breakneck pace of move-ins and a shortage of staff in the early months at 90 Sands sometimes made it challenging to form the necessary case manager-tenant bonds. Jessica's case manager was brand-new when they met at her lease signing, and she left the job three weeks later. Jessica, who is still in frequent contact with Medley, had little interest in engaging with a successor. Nor was she required to; while it is a condition of CUCS's government funding that the organization provide a quarterly service plan for every supportive tenant, which includes goals and challenges, in addition to an annual psychosocial assessment, the tenant is not obliged even to speak to a case manager, much less partake of CUCS's on-site services. This can lead to an awkward dance of case-manager pursuit and tenant avoidance that requires skill and ingenuity on the case manager's part to break through. "We try to focus on creative engagement, not just sitting there trying to call somebody all the time," Lipsky told me. "Are you visiting them at their apartment? Are we exhausting our options for how to engage with this person? And then we just keep going. We can be very annoying. Persistence doesn't always beat resistance, but when you offer consistency I do think eventually people feel that, and it pays off."

When the case manager-tenant bond gels successfully, the results can be immediately striking. Johannah Rippe, a white thirty-three-year-old from upstate New York, arrived at 90 Sands after a decade of homelessness that began in the company of her parents, both of whom used heroin and moved with Johannah and her six siblings to New York City when she was twenty-two. (Her father, Curtis Rippe, was stabbed to death last year, a story that made the news.) Rippe began tasting her parents' heroin at age nine. Later, when she was pregnant with the first of the two children she's had with her long-term partner, Ivan, a doctor insisted that she go off her bipolar medication. She tried using heroin to dull the mental and physical pain, and quickly became addicted. Both of her children were removed from her care in infancy by the

Administration for Children's Services.

While Rippe and I waited for her lease signing at 90 Sands in February, she showed me a cell-phone picture of herself at twenty-three, bare-armed and fresh-faced, cradling her first newborn. I was stunned by how different she looked ten years later. That day, she was dressed exactly as she had been when I met her at the safe haven where she and Ivan had spent the past two years (because Ivan is Mexican and undocumented, he can't join Rippe at 90 Sands, or apply for supportive housing, until they're legally married): both times, she was cocooned inside hoodies with grime-encrusted cuffs, bowed under a thick parka that fell to her knees, a blue Narcan pouch dangling from her neck on a lanyard. It was hard to conjure up the physical person underneath all those layers, and her posture was so radically hunched that she could barely make eye contact. (She has severe back pain, she told me.) Yet three weeks after Rippe's move, I caught a glimpse of her running through the 90 Sands lobby in black tights, a clingy dress, and platform shoes—a lithe young woman again. When I visited her apartment, she was pressed for time; her new case manager, with whom she was in close and frequent contact, had arranged for her to have a physical exam in the medical suite downstairs. When I commented on her change of attire, she said, "I'm in my house now. I'm not outside 24/7. Of course I don't need three, four, five coats. I'm in eighty-degree weather—I got my own thermometer!"

There was another change in Rippe that struck me as we stood together at her front door: her posture had straightened a little. "You can tell, right?" she said, with evident pleasure. "Everybody told me, 'You look different now, Johannah.' 'Cause I'm not outside all day like this." She resumed the more exaggerated stoop, which I recognized suddenly as the stance of someone perpetually seated at ground level and looking up at passersby, as Rippe had done for years. The next time I saw her, she and her case manager had arranged for her to enter a methadone program the following day. She is still enrolled there.

Likewise, Iishea saw immediate results after the Kelly paired her with a new case manager, Mariah Jones. Within six weeks of my first visit, she'd begun receiving public assistance and had had an interview for Supplemental Security Income. Under Jones's management, her housing packet was moving forward. She was also relying on Jones's help to get her prosthetic leg refitted; the suction part had been lost during a hospital stay, along with her dentures—she'd had no upper teeth for months. When I next saw Iishea, her hair was elaborately curled; her boyfriend had been treating her to a hair-stylist appointment every two weeks. "I'm sure now," she said of the relationship. "He's sixty-seven years old, and it's not like he's involved in shenanigans and bullshit. He's more seasoned. He don't speak a lot of English. English is predominant here, so I help where I can. And then I clean and I cook and I cook and I clean. . . . He's just so sloppy. Just like a man, I swear. Ooh, girl, it's the truth."

90 Sands, which started taking supportive-housing residents in September, 2022.

Iishea was eager to be photographed for this article. She'd lost her phone and was awaiting a replacement, so I made a date through Jones. We chose April 7th, a Friday when good weather was predicted. I arrived at the Kelly with the photographer and dozens of Krispy Kreme doughnuts and hazelnut coffee, Iishea's favorites. But she wasn't there and didn't show. Everyone at the Kelly was surprised; she'd had her hair done especially for the photo shoot, they told me.

Jones assumed that Iishea was at her boyfriend's, but Iishea was not seen or heard from in the weeks that followed. Outreach workers visited the corner by

her usual bodega repeatedly, without luck. Jones completed the housing packet, making Iishea eligible for a supportive-housing placement through the city's centralized system (likely not at 90 Sands, which was nearly full and far from Iishea's beloved Harlem). CUCS undertook what is known as a diligent search: contacting hospitals, jails, and the morgue. The Kelly reluctantly released Iishea's bed. I went uptown in May and found the small group of buildings where, I was convinced, based on Iishea's description, her boyfriend lived. I wrote her several identical letters and taped one to every front door, urging her to call me. I visited her bodega, but the man at the counter said that he didn't know whom I was talking about. The woman at the flower stand recalled someone posting a picture of a missing woman outside the store, but it had come down after a while.

My shock at Iishea's disappearance was a testament to how little time I'd spent among people whose lives have been riven, for decades, by violent instability. At 90 Sands, ten people died in the first four months of 2023, eight of them from suspected overdoses. (One of the non-overdoses was a man I'd interviewed in December, David Hoeltzel, a mechanical engineer who taught at Columbia in the nineteen-eighties and nineties and told me that he'd first begun to unravel when he failed to get tenure.) Nearly everyone I knew at 90 Sands had seen a body bag leaving the building. On my way to Russell Reavesbey's apartment, I passed the door to a unit where a suspected overdose had occurred; it was secured with a neon-green N.Y.P.D. "Seal for Door of D.O.A. Premises." Messages had been scrawled onto the seal: "Luv u Sis," and "Jus know your time spent on this earth was great," and "A100 u will always be remembered."

Taped just inside Reavesbey's door was a small xeroxed photograph of a Black man wearing a bandanna: another tenant who had recently overdosed. Given Reavesbey's tendency to brood over deaths that occurred decades ago, these reminders of mortality were keenly distressing. His mood that day was fiery and changeable; at one point he paused in his pacing and slammed the kitchen counter repeatedly for emphasis: "People died in this building. If the next two people that I know is gonna die of this fentanyl, then I need to be transferred, 'cause I can't stay in this type of situation. I can't!"

A small tiger cat with yellow-green eyes lay curled on a folded blanket on the floor, observing Reavesbey's outburst. He'd adopted her a few weeks earlier from a woman on another floor and was calling her Roxy. Early on, he'd complained to me that Roxy was "unmotivated," but things had improved between them. "She done got so used to me," Reavesbey said, his mood softening suddenly when he focussed on his pet. "The more I feed her, the more she got attached to me. She'll come towards me, and I rub her belly." He picked up Roxy and cradled her gently. "She's a one-in-a-million cat," he said, smiling for the first time that day. "She's the queen of this apartment."

Signs went up all over the building warning of the risks of fentanyl and xylazine and urging people not to use *any* drugs while alone. (Fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid, can be found in most street drugs, including cocaine products.) Medically prescribed Narcan kits were dispensed door to door and installed in every hallway. "Obviously, people die of overdoses in many contexts," Eve Goodman, who has worked with CUCS for seventeen years and teaches a training session on death and dying for CUCS employees, told me. "I think that sometimes people move into apartments and feel lonely. And one of the things that help with loneliness is to get high. But when someone moves into a housing program they're more likely to be using by themselves. When you overdose, that's that; you can't give Narcan to yourself."

At about this time, I ran into Jessica returning to 90 Sands from the post office, where she'd been mailing out online orders. I accompanied her to her apartment, assuming that she was just dropping off her trolley before heading back out for an ophthalmology appointment. As we chatted, she began to prepare a shot of heroin, finally flicking the syringe a couple of times and rising to her feet. "I've gotta go in the bathroom for a minute, sweetie," she said.

A silence fell on the room in her ab-

sence. Her cat whined outside the bathroom door and then shoved it open with his head. I heard Jessica tell him faintly, "Stop."

More silence, broken only by voices from the hallway and occasional chugs from her aroma dispenser. The cat mewed. I felt rising anxiety. After five minutes I called, "Are you O.K.?"

She laughed softly. "Yeah."

I spent the next five minutes reminding myself of where the Narcan kit was and trying to recall how to administer it.

"Still doing O.K.?" I finally asked. To her inaudible answer, I pressed, "What was that?"

"The more I try to rush, the longer it takes."

Twelve minutes after Jessica left the room, the toilet flushed and she reappeared, relaxed but unchanged. "All right," she said. "I've gotta go. Already gonna be late for my appointment."

Mercifully, the overdoses at 90 Sands slowed; of the six fatalities in the building since the end of April, four were from natural causes and the causes of the other two are, as of this writing, undetermined. (One of the latter deaths was that of John Wood, the builder of cave homes.) Spring arrived, the weather warmed, and the mood in the building felt lighter. More people could be found sitting outside on the curved wooden benches that intersperse landscaped flowerbeds in 90 Sands's public plaza.

When I visited Reavesbey in May, another tenant had given him a carpeted blue-and-gray house for Roxy, and the cat watched him serenely from her cushy new bower. Reavesbey told me that he wants to train her to dance. He wants her to become a mother. "I have a philosophy about Roxy: Roxy is coming into her own," he said. So, it would seem, is Reavesbey. "I'm doing good for myself," he told me. "I pay my rent, food-shop for myself, food-shop for this cat, clean up, sleep, mop, wash the clothes." His daughters have come with their mother to visit. For a man in his fifties setting up a home for the first time, these are immense accomplishments. In August, both Reavesbey and Speedy signed new two-year leases.

With all of 90 Sands's supportive units filled, the gruelling transition is over, leaving Lipsky and her staff with more time to focus on creating community events in the building, all of which are open to every tenant. There have been buffet lunches and board-game sessions and book deliveries from a nearby branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. There are hopes for group haircuts and foot soaks and self-defense classes. Meanwhile, the affordable units are slowly filling up, reducing the over-all proportion of tenants with acute needs. I spoke with the tenants of two affordable units, a young woman and a middle-aged man, both of whom have found living at 90 Sands challenging in the same ways that supportive tenants have. Both plan to stay—in part because of the vigilance of the management and the cleaning staff, and in part because, without an affordable apartment, they would have to leave New York altogether. "In the grand scheme of things," the woman told me, "you have your own apartment that you can keep clean, that's near transit. . . . Those moments of stress can feel like they trump all the good, but they don't."

When I interviewed Minogue and Lipsky together, in July, they were energized and optimistic. Minogue likened the ongoing evolution of a building like 90 Sands to a stockpot: "You never use up all the stock, you're constantly re-adding stuff to it, it has a fire underneath it all the time, and you can never leave it alone a hundred per cent. Things are better, they're just not done." Lipsky agreed, adding, "We're still in that settle phase, and probably will be for at least the next two, three years."

Even in a newly renovated building with panoramic views of New York Harbor, affordable tenants will likely need to embrace the vision and mission of supportive housing embodied in 90 Sands: some three hundred individuals who, for years, slept on stoops, steps, roofs, in stairwells, under scaffolding and under bridges, in abandoned buildings, outside Starbucks, inside Macy's, freezing through subzero New York winters and sweating on the sidewalk through broiling summers are presently housed. (No unit has been surrendered, although legal proceedings that could lead to eviction are under way for Lopez's assailant.) Many still live in poverty, often without having finished high school, and are hobbled by disabilities and criminal records that make panhandling a more lucrative job than any other they might conceivably obtain (and getting a full-time job would terminate their benefits and thus their guarantee of housing). Some have problems that can't easily be solved, particularly after decades of turmoil have erased any memory of a stable baseline, if they ever had one. But it would seem inarguable that they have a better chance of meeting these challenges now, while housed, than they did while they were living on the streets.

"We can end every person's homelessness. We know how to do it," Dennis Culhane, the sociologist, told me. For select populations—homeless AIDS patients and homeless veterans—this has already to some extent been done. Culhane helped design the Obama Administration's veteran homelessness initiative, which, starting in 2009, used a combination of rapid rehousing and supportive housing to achieve, by 2016, an over-all reduction of homelessness among veterans by nearly fifty per cent. "We showed that you could move at scale and dramatically impact the number of people who were homeless in a particular population," Culhane told me. The budget agreement, which was bipartisan, required an increase in the federal budget for veteran homelessness from some four hundred million to more than a billion dollars in 2016. Those systems, established more than a decade ago, continue to work, according to HUD: the number of homeless veterans dropped by another eleven per cent between 2020 and 2022.

The forces underlying modern homelessness are many and complex, but they boil down to a withdrawal of the federal government's commitment to providing either affordable housing or a functional safety net for its vulnerable citizens. S.S.I. benefits for disabled Americans are burdensome to apply for and frequently denied, and they often exclude addiction, or addiction-related disabilities like cirrhosis,

as qualifying conditions. Even when granted, S.S.I. pays a maximum of about a thousand dollars per month, depending on the region—which, even in its entirety, is only half the median market rent for a studio apartment in New York City. Medicaid under managed care is failing catastrophically to meet Americans' mental-health needs—including those of people suffering from opioid-use disorder who would benefit from medication-assisted treatment, fewer than twenty per cent of whom have received it. Despite measurable progress since the early two-thousands, the number of Americans who fall into homelessness each year exceeds the number who exit from it. Subsidized housing is the answer, nearly everyone seems to agree, though what form it should take is debated. Culhane believes that the pace of building and renovation is too slow to address the problem, and favors rental assistance that individuals could use for apartment shares, or even to stay with family or friends. But states are reluctant to spend this money.

Still, lawmakers and citizens who recoil from the expense of ending modern homelessness would do well to ponder the cost of maintaining it: eight and a half billion dollars a year on emergency shelter alone, according to Culhane's research (based on 2015 data), or about twenty-seven thousand dollars per bed per year—eleven billion and thirty-six thousand in today's dollars. That eleven-billion-dollar expense doesn't include, as Culhane reminded me, "the excess use of health care, emergency rooms, E.M.T.s, longer hospitalizations. It's not counting the impacts on parks, sanitation, police, libraries, education. . . . There is hardly a public-sector system out there that is not impacted by homelessness." In a landmark study from 2002, Culhane calculated the cost of chronic street homelessness for a *single* mentally ill person to be forty thousand dollars a year—about seventy thousand dollars in today's money. That's a lot of money to spend on a horrific status quo.

"Nobody wants to be confronted with a spectacle of human suffering every time you walk out your door with your kids," David Giffen, the executive director of New York's Coalition for the Homeless, told me. "I hate to put it in terms of enlightened self-interest, but if you don't want somebody sleeping in your subway then let's put a system in place that provides four walls, a roof, and a bed for that person." In a country with skyrocketing housing costs and insufficient mental-health care, virtually anyone could end up in that position of need. "It's not a question of *these people*," Giffen said. "These people are us."

In late July, Iishea's case manager e-mailed to say that there seemed to have been some activity on her E.B.T. card, or food-stamps account. I returned to West Harlem on a sweltering afternoon to look for Iishea again, and this time I managed to find a hair salon on West 116th Street that I thought might be the one where she'd been getting her hair done. Sure enough, a woman who was braiding a customer's hair inside the salon knew whom I meant. "Ah, Iishea. Wheelchair," she said in strongly accented English. Then she added, sadly, "She pass away. Long time ago. Overdose." The news had come from Iishea's boyfriend, she said, the one who had been paying for her appointments.

Still not satisfied, I proceeded to the buildings where I'd left letters for Iishea two months earlier. I rang all the ground-floor apartment buzzers and managed to find one tenant who identified himself as a former crack

user and said that he knew of Iishea's overdose death "through the grapevine." He told me which apartment her boyfriend lived in, and I left a letter in Spanish asking him to call me, so that I could find out exactly what had happened. I never heard from him. The Kelly was finally able to confirm with the morgue that Iishea had died on April 6th, the day before our scheduled photo session.

In a broader sense, I know what happened to Iishea Stone: a luminous and extraordinary woman was failed repeatedly—by her family's pathologies, by poverty, and by a social safety net that couldn't seem to catch her. Had Iishea grown up with the advantages I had, she might have accomplished anything. Instead, she suffered acutely and slipped away so invisibly that, thus far, the Kelly does not know what was done with her body. How many Americans are we losing this way? How can we—the wealthiest nation in human history—tolerate those losses? The fact that we can, and do, despite knowing that it's wrong, is what is meant by the moral cost of homelessness.

For Jessica, April brought the unthinkable: her aunt Mary, the woman she called her mother and listed as next of kin on her 90 Sands lease, died unexpectedly on the operating table during a lung biopsy. When I visited Jessica a couple of days later, she hadn't stopped shaking. She had spoken to Mary the night before the biopsy, trying to calm her fears about the procedure. "I woke up at four o'clock, wide awake, and I had a horrible feeling," she said. "I waited, because I knew she wouldn't be up at four. I messaged her at seven-thirty, and I was, like, I love you so much. I knew she wasn't coming home, I knew it." She sobbed openly as she spoke.

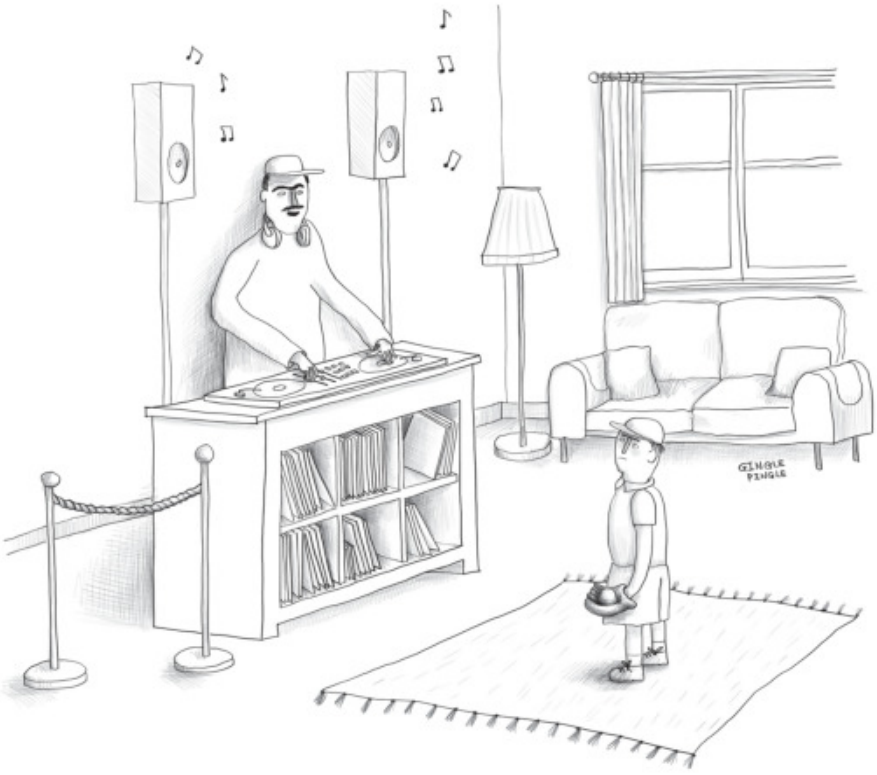
Jessica's aunt never knew that she had relapsed into heroin after going on methadone a few years ago. "She's the only person I've ever lied to about it in my life," Jessica told me. "I couldn't break her heart like that." But Mary had known about Jessica's homelessness and was hugely relieved when she moved into 90 Sands. "My cousin said, 'She told me she's so proud of you.' I was, like, I don't know what for."

Jessica's cousin had advanced her money for a plane ticket to get to the funeral, which was the following afternoon. She planned to leave before dawn to take the subway to LaGuardia, but was grappling with a logistical problem: she didn't want to carry heroin on the plane and needed some way to keep from going into withdrawal while she was away. The obvious answer was to carry a sealed dose of methadone, but Troy, her sometime

friend at 90 Sands, was demanding sixty dollars for one of his take-home doses. "I'm, like, 'Are you fucking for real right now? I've given you money all the fucking time, I've given you dope, I've given you cigarettes, and you're trying to charge me for methadone. Really?' When I get back here, shit's gonna change," she resolved. "I'm not talking to none of them no more. I'll change my number if I have to." She left without the methadone, and returned, dope-sick, within twenty-four hours.

Changing her life was not as immediate or neat as Jessica had promised herself it would be. After a fight with her dealer's girlfriend escalated into a fight with the dealer himself, she stopped buying heroin. Her withdrawal was manageable at first; she had tapered down enough that the sickness was bearable. But then illness seized her again; she vomited for days, and developed areas of infection in her legs that opened up into deep wounds. When those began to heal, she was too exhausted to leave her apartment. In mid-June she stopped answering texts, which was so uncharacteristic of her that I grew alarmed and went to 90 Sands, where I asked security to call upstairs on the internal phone to her apartment. She was there; her cellphone service had been turned off because she was too drained to panhandle and hadn't paid the bill.

I found her lying on her bed beside the small set of plastic shelves, from which all the drug paraphernalia had been removed. She was noticeably thinner. I asked whether she thought her recovery from heroin would stick this time, when it hadn't before. She reminded me that, when she'd left jail on methadone, she'd returned to New York with no place to go: "It was wintertime, I didn't have blankets, I didn't have anything." Medley wasn't her case manager yet, and no organization she contacted could find her a bed. Inevitably, she had rejoined the safety of the homeless drug users she knew and, after holding out briefly, returned to heroin. Now, in her own apartment, the situation was different: "I'm not around nobody." She had talked to her dealer on the phone a couple of times. "He asked me, 'You coming again, Jessica?'" She demurred, "Uh-uh, I'm sorry, I love you, but I can't do it. Can't be around that right now."



"Sorry, kid, Daddy doesn't have any records called 'Catch with Me'—why not request some Ethiopian jazz?"

• •

Unfortunately, she *was* still around heroin, and the rash of solitary overdose deaths had encouraged communal use. By the time I saw Jessica two months later, in August, she was using again (albeit on a smaller scale) and had new wounds caused by xylazine-adulterated doses that she said she'd purchased from a dealer living in the building. Still, in the halting realm of opioid recovery a spell of sobriety is an accomplishment—even if, as she'd insisted back in June, it was due less to grit than to sheer exhaustion, even depression, in the wake of her loss. "I just did not have the will power to get out of bed and go outside to try and make money—that's what it boils down to," she said. It struck me that what Jessica was describing was grief. Here, inside her clean, quiet, aromatic apartment, she had the luxury of indulging it. "My cousins are, like, 'You need to get up and go do something.' No, I don't. You don't understand. I was homeless on the streets. They can't grasp how hard it is. I was always outside. I walked ten miles a day, probably. Like, I don't need to get up."

Jessica is hoping to enroll in a culinary-arts program next semester, and is trying to get bone grafts so that her teeth can be replaced. She has started working with her 90 Sands case manager, and is receiving medical care for her wounds from the on-site doctor. She still intends to get off heroin.

"The wins can be really small at times," Lipsky reminded me at our last meeting, when I expressed distress over Jessica's perilous health, without naming her. "You meet people and you see where they are at that current stage, and where they could be. It does take time. And it takes investment, and it takes consistency. It takes trust and belief in that person to get to that point when five, ten years down the line you look back and think, Wow! Look where that person came from." ♦

MOTHER TONGUE

Emily Wilson makes Homer modern.

BY JUDITH THURMAN

Some three millennia ago, a blind bard whose name in ancient Greek means "hostage" is said to have composed two masterpieces of oral poetry that still speak to us. The Iliad's subject is death, and the Odyssey's is survival. Both plumb the male psyche and women's enthrallment to its bravado. "Tell the old story for our modern times," Homer entreats his muse, in the Odyssey's first stanza. The translator Emily Wilson took him at his word. Her radically plainspoken Odyssey, the first in English by a woman, was published six years ago. Her Iliad will be published in two weeks.

On a recent summer evening, Wilson surveyed the view from a precipice above Polis Bay, in the quiet village of Stavros, on the northwest coast of Ithaca. A shrine in the town square shows the floor plan of a ruin, not far away, that may be the palace of Odysseus. She pointed to a crescent beach five hundred feet below, slung like a hammock between two mountains. The cave at its far end was a site of Mycenaean goddess worship, and relics recovered from it include a set of bronze tripods which fit Homer's description of gifts that Odysseus received from the Phaeacians. "We'll swim there," she said.

Wilson is fifty-one, with expressive features that radiate alertness, and a lithe, sinewy physique—more Hermes than Hera. She set a brisk pace on our hike down the mountain. As I watched from the deserted beach, she plunged into the water and headed for the cave with rhythmic strokes. The bay was glassy until a breeze ruffled its surface with purple shadows, suddenly making sense of Homer's "wine-dark sea." It was Wilson's first visit to Ithaca. "I felt the presence in that sea of protective deities," she told me later, though she hastened to add that, elsewhere in Greece, unprotected migrants were drowning in it.

On our way to Stavros, we'd passed cultivated valleys and hillsides terraced with vineyards and olive trees. But the landscape, like Homer's prosody, is mostly rugged and austere. (Ithaca is "only fit for goats," the poet tells us.) It wasn't hard for Wilson to imagine the tar-blackened ships that Odysseus' father beached in its secluded coves, and the treasure he plundered stowed in its mountain grottoes. "Old Laertes was basically a pirate," she said fondly.

One of the grottoes is known as Eumaeus' Cave, in honor of the faithful swineherd who tended Odysseus' pigs and is said (improbably, given the terrain) to have fattened them on acorns there. Following Athena's directions, we found it near the spring of Arethusa, whose black waters are alleged to be a mother's tears for her dead son.

After a vertiginous climb through thorny underbrush, Wilson and I reached a keyhole of rock in the cliff and slid down the moss-slimed rocks at its entrance into a humid cavern that looks like a rotunda some Titan sheared in half. She had sprinted ahead of me, and when I caught up with her she was sitting on a boulder, dwarfed by her surroundings. The air hummed with birdsong, and with the bells of the mountain goats that forage in the highlands. "That sound takes you straight back to Homer," she said.

In bringing Homer back from antiquity, Wilson also had to bridge the chasm of time that has elapsed in English literature since the first full translation of the Odyssey: George Chapman's, in 1616. But, she cautioned, "you can't and shouldn't try to make all that history—layer upon layer—visible in the text. My goal was to evoke an experience like the original, using the language of the people who will read it."

The epics were originally performed by itinerant singers who roamed ancient Greece, entertaining guests at social gatherings. Travel inflected their speech with a mixture of dialects that they patched into their recitals. In classical Athens, the singers were known as *rhapsodes*, from the verb meaning "to sew songs together." Their diction was stately, but audiences of every class and age listened raptly to Homer's graphic imagery and impassioned dialogue, scored to a propulsive beat. Wilson's ambitious project of the past decade has been to re-democratize both the poetry and its audience. Her "folk poetics," as she calls them, are a reproach to predecessors who have "turned a great poem into a hard one," or into a poem of their own. She rejects historical reënactments that "archaicize" Homer's diction—"he didn't sound archaic to the Greeks"—and modern renovations that expand his footage. The opening of Robert Fagles's widely admired Odyssey, she points out, uses two English words for every Greek one. Her own translation hews strictly to the original line count, and it retains the power of a storyteller's voice to fix itself in your memory. "I write for the body," she told me.

As a brotherhood of nomads, the bards must have imbued their songs with a yearning for *nostos:* the homecoming that crowns a hero's journey. Homer keeps us in suspense about Odysseus' *nostos*. He left Ithaca unwillingly to fight the Trojans and spent his youth at war. His return is disrupted by misfortunes, but "dreadful, beautiful, divine" Calypso rescues him from the sea. After seven years of captivity, her charms have palled. When Zeus finally orders her to set him free, she looks for him on her island's shore:

> His eyes were always
> tearful; he wept his sweet life away, in longing
> to go back home, since she no longer pleased him.

A jealous goddess is dangerous, as

"As a translator, I was determined to make the whole human experience of the poems accessible," Wilson said.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HANNAH WHITAKER

anyone would know who had languished for ten years at Troy:

> So Odysseus, with tact,
> said, "Do not be enraged at me, great goddess.
> You are quite right. I know my modest wife
> Penelope could never match your beauty. . . .
> But even so, I want to go back home."

Odysseus knows how to massage an ego; that was his role in the fractious Greek camp. He's also the con man who thinks up the Trojan horse. Homer introduces him with the adjective *polytropos*—literally, "of many turns." Previous translators have called him "shifty," "cunning," and a hundred other things. After grappling with the alternatives, Wilson chose "complicated," hoping also to convey the sense of "problematic." Her first sentence—"Tell me about a complicated man"—instantly makes him our familiar: that charismatic prince who's too impossible to live with and too desirable to live without.

Part of Odysseus' appeal, not least to modern writers, is that he redefines heroism as imagination. "You love fiction," Athena teases him. The decade of his odyssey passes like a dream, as episodes of hardship and violence alternate with voluptuous idylls. And the mind games he plays to outwit his captors—lusty nymphs, ravenous cannibals, vengeful gods—have, Wilson notes, "a 'meta' element that's about language and storytelling."

The Iliad feels suffocating by comparison. Its central protagonist, the demigod Achilles, is problematic without being complicated. His "cataclysmic wrath" fuels a story that begins in medias res—not with Paris' abduction of Helen, or the massing of an invasion force, but at the end of a nine-year stalemate, with the demoralized Greeks camped on the Trojan coast and the Trojans trapped in their impregnable city. The action is compressed into about six weeks, whose grinding carnage would numb your senses if Homer's poetry didn't keep stirring them. Yet the Iliad's greatness is inseparable from its claustrophobia. Against a background of blight and bleakness, the characters dazzle us with their vivid idiosyncrasy. Perhaps even more than Odysseus, they're our familiars: beleaguered humans in tragically stressed relationships, at the mercy of fate.

Apollo sparks the conflict that will engulf them. One of his priests is a Trojan ally with a cherished daughter, "beautiful Chryseis." Achilles captures her in a raid, and Agamemnon, the Greek commander, claims her as his war trophy. The priest offers to ransom her with a priceless treasure, which Agamemnon spurns rudely, and Apollo punishes this sacrilege with a plague. Only after the Greek armies have been decimated does their general relent and send Chryseis home. But then he consoles himself by mortally offending his greatest warrior: he confiscates Achilles' trophy from an earlier looting spree, "fresh-faced Briseis." And with that puerile quarrel between stubborn warlords over the right to own and to rape a girl, Western literature begins.

While Wilson was contemplating the Greeks sickening in their camp, and the Trojans caged behind their city walls, the plague of COVID forced her family of five into lockdown. She didn't want to push the analogy ("I never thought, 'Oh, no—Achilles has to order online groceries'"), but she was conscious of both how volatile confinement can be and how primal the need for company becomes. "You can either rage at the people you're stuck with or grow more devoted," she said.

Wilson teaches classics and comparative literature at the University of Pennsylvania and lives near the campus in a rambling old house that she shares with her partner of nine years, David Foreman, an administrator at Swarthmore, and her two school-age daughters, Psyche and Freya. (Her eldest daughter, Imogen, is now in college.) When we met last May, she greeted me at her door in running clothes. I was surprised first by her youthfulness, then by the luxuriance of her tattoos. "I didn't used to read as a tattoo person," she told me, as we settled on the deck outside her bedroom, which is painted Aegean blue. "When you get tattooed in places that show, it changes your identity."

Wilson's tattoos became visible as she worked on the Iliad. They inscribe her closest relationships: with her children; Foreman; her late mother; her younger sister Bee Wilson, the noted British food writer; plus a pantheon of Greek deities and creatures sacred to them. The birds and flowers are emblems of a tender heart, while the armory of spiky weapons—a spear and a bow on her calves, the thunderclouds of Zeus on her shoulder—are badges of a fighting spirit.

That afternoon, Wilson took me for a walk through a neighborhood of abandoned factories, then along the banks of the Schuylkill River, crossing wild meadows to a glade, a route she'd chosen for its "Iliadic contrast of beauty and desolation." Her Iliad won't be the first by a woman, but she considers "the first-woman thing" a sexist distraction: "It slights the many brilliant female scholars who've worked on the poems. And no one mentions the gender of the men." What she didn't say, though her followers do (the flaws and merits of her Odyssey have been vehemently debated on social media), is that it slights her translations' real singularity.

"The ancient Greeks teach one to be modern," the poet and classicist A. E. Stallings observed to me. "They taught that to me and to Emily. It was time to strip away all the mannered layers—the tarnish of centuries—and she does that. Her translations have the freshness of the sky after a storm. Their briskness and simplicity are faithful to the oral tradition, and she brings the poems to a new generation, which struggles to read harder texts and wants clarity." Wilson feels an acute, almost maternal sense of duty to those lay readers: "They need to trust that I'm telling them the truth, both about the language and the psychology. There are no lazy ways to do it."

On rare occasions in her Iliad, a word would jar me: "flirty," "flabbergasted," "inappropriate." Or a slangy outburst made me laugh at a dramatic moment: "Stop! You are acting crazy, Menelaus!" But that line is worth pausing to consider precisely because none of Wilson's predecessors would have written it. Among the notable translations of the past century—by Fagles, Robert Fitzgerald, Richmond Lattimore, Peter Green, Caroline Alexander, Stanley Lombardo, Robert Graves (who pivots from prose to poetry to highlight dra-

matic moments; there's a lot of mansplaining in Homerdom)—each has its strengths. Their authors are united in presuming that readers will be "improved," as pious critics used to say, by their encounter with Homer. But Wilson reminds us that a great storyteller conceived the poems as entertainment. Her language is so vitally urgent that even the Iliad's endless battle scenes feel, to use an un-Homeric simile, like listening to the Super Bowl on car radio. Stallings said, "Does Emily's clarity betray that element of the epic register that Matthew Arnold calls 'nobility'? Some critics think a certain grandeur is missing. But every translation is a compromise, even a great one."

Wilson's mother, Katherine Duncan-Jones, was an eminent scholar of Elizabethan literature who died in October of complications from Alzheimer's. Her father is A. N. Wilson, the prolific English writer whose subjects as a biographer include Jesus, Darwin, Tolstoy, Milton, Hitler, and Queen Victoria. When I spoke with him in June, at the British Library, he was researching a life of Goethe. His latest book, "Confessions: A Life of Failed Promises," is the memoir of a writer's triumphs and travails. Among the latter, his first marriage set the high-water mark.

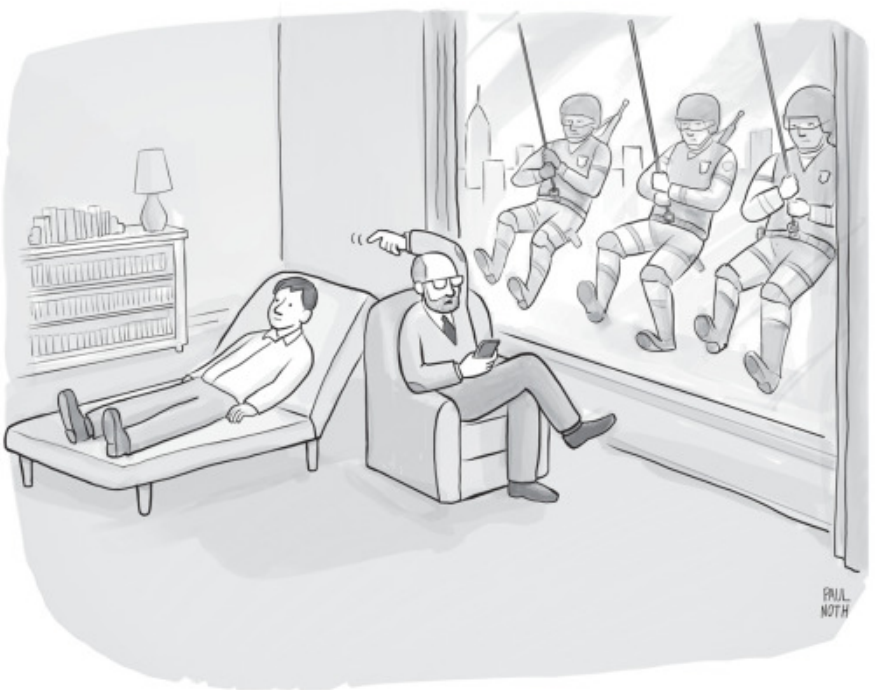
The Wilsons met at Oxford. Katherine was a teaching fellow, and Andrew was an undergraduate of twenty, a decade her junior. They married hastily in 1971, when she got pregnant with Emily. "Mom did all the housework and cooking and was always apologetic about it," Wilson said. Andrew Wilson told me that he found talking to his daughter difficult: "Sometimes she was completely mute, and sometimes she would burst into tears." Even as a little girl, Emily was conscious of her father's rage at his vassalage to a family, for which she felt he blamed her: "I was the one who had ruined his young life by being born." For reasons that are a bit inscrutable under the circumstances, the couple had Bee when her sister was two.

The Wilsons lived in poisonous silence, beneath a veneer of civility. ("We had a fatal gift for politeness," as Andrew put it.) Emily often locked herself in her room, from which she heard Bee sobbing through the wall. "My parents weren't listeners," she said, "so it was hard for me to imagine that I could be heard." Encouraged by her mother, she took refuge in books, and excelled in school, though she refused to say a word in class. Her other sanctuary was a world of fantasy: "For a year or two, I pretended to be a gorilla. I would thrust my lower jaw out, even though it was painful to walk around that way." Her other alter ego was an orangutan, which referred to itself in the third person. "It felt liberating to speak in another voice," Wilson told me. "It drove my parents completely crazy, which is also why I did it."

When Emily was eight, a perceptive teacher saw through her camouflage and cast her as Athena in a school production of the Odyssey. (The headmaster played the Cyclops, and the children relished poking his eye out.) "It was a turning point in my life," Wilson writes in the notes to her translation. The experience kindled a love of theatre shared by her mother; it also, she suggests, gave her a model of "human and nonhuman" shape-shifting. "Translators have to be chameleons," she said, "leaping from a green leaf to a brown one."

Both sisters told me that they were, at times, hostages to their mother's depression, though they never doubted her devotion to them. Their father could be charming, but he played favorites capriciously. "One day you were the scapegoat, the next you were his chosen one," Bee told me, over lunch in Cambridge. "It was a toxic game which served to teach us that love is conditional." It also served to cast them as foils. In Bee's telling, she was the "normal" one who loved comics and television, didn't cause much trouble, and cleared her plate. Emily was the brooding "genius." At around fourteen, she stopped eating, then coming to the table altogether, though neither parent commented on her blatant anorexia, even when she was living on apples. "As E got smaller, I got larger," Bee wrote in a poignant essay on sisters and their eating disorders.

Unhappy families tend to spin conflicting narratives, and there would probably be no literature without them. "I found this when I was working on my memoir," Andrew Wilson said. (His daughters are mentioned in it only in passing.) "It was my version of events, not theirs, about which I won't comment, except to say that what they may tell you about me is true, or partially, because they felt it." No one, however, took issue with Emily's account of the bitter scene that took place on January 1, 1988, when she was sixteen. The Wilsons had gathered for a New Year's lunch, and they went around the table announcing their resolutions. "My resolution," their



"Well, these feelings are all perfectly normal."

father told them, "is to get a divorce."

Andrew Wilson decamped to London, where he eventually remarried and had a third daughter. Duncan-Jones went on to write "Ungentle Shakespeare," a biography that reads the Bard's work deeply but portrays the man as a cad. "Mom knew that great literature is written by imperfect humans," Wilson said. Her father read "Ungentle Shakespeare" as a swipe at "Ungentle A.N."

When Bee went to boarding school, then to Cambridge, Emily stayed in Oxford to support their mother, "who was devastated for a long time." She read classics at Balliol and earned a master's in English literature at Corpus Christi, but by then England "felt like the wrong place for my well-being." In 1996, she took a blind leap. Knowing nothing about America or about Yale—"I hoped it was by the sea"—she arrived in New Haven to pursue a doctorate. Her marriage to a former fellow graduate student ended shortly after Imogen's birth. A second union also foundered and was followed by the familiar trials of single motherhood.

Wilson's thesis became a book: "Mocked with Death," a treatise on the tragedy of "overliving"—a penal sentence, by age or loss, to the terminal privation of whatever made a life worthwhile. Her mother's dementia hadn't set in yet, but she was attracted to writers who have dramatized this "horror": Sophocles, Euripides, Seneca, Shakespeare, and Milton. "Most of us," she wrote, "struggle in vain to outlive our own past selves." That struggle may not be in vain, if the self that survives it is the authentic one. But, Wilson wondered to me, how do you recognize her? "I'm not sure I have a stable identity—or perhaps it only emerges through an engagement with language."

At lunch, Bee had wanted to show me what one of Emily's past selves looked like, so she'd brought a family album. In a grainy photograph from the nineteen-seventies, the Wilsons pose in an English garden. The parents—a dapper young fogy with ramrod posture and a soulful, slightly rumpled bluestocking—stand behind two tidy little girls in matching sailor suits. The taller one is refusing to smile. "It's funny, isn't it?" Bee said. "Emily escaped to a world where people were free to express anger."

She was thinking of ancient Greece, but her sister also escaped to an angry new country. Wilson became an American citizen last year, in order "to vote where I live," and to engage with the political arguments raging around her. Had she not emigrated, she doubts that she would have seen the need for new Homer translations. "Being from two worlds is part of the story," she said. In that respect, she's also a dual national of two education systems. Her own élite schooling had come to seem cloistered, shielded by "walls of class" that also insulate some of her students. The ones who went to private schools "don't doubt that they belong" in a classics program, even if "they have some unlearning to do," she said. The public-school kids "need more nurturing to feel welcome. As a translator, I was determined to make the whole human experience of the poems accessible to them."

MAYBE IN ANOTHER LIFE

I think of the kids I may or may not have. I think about
their hair, the possible dark-brown curls. Baby fingers
tapping on my face. I haven't made up my mind yet,
but my body is making decisions before I am ready

to make them. I can't seem to say what it is I want
out loud. I can almost see all my different lives, almost
taste them, like trying to catch the tail end of a cinematic
dream before it evaporates. I want to capture it, a glimpse,

sneak a peek at each distant future before the View-Master
reel clicks. I want to follow the perfume of each life
I could live and linger in it: the vanillas. Milk leaking
from my breasts. Cereal. The piquant odor of parenthood.

The one where I am a mother negotiating happiness.
The one where I am not a mother and still negotiating
happiness, beauty, and rest. Almost 39, and I've never
loved myself more, yet nostalgia wavers all around me

like a montage of mirages muddling memories, complicating
hope, making me miss things I've already mourned.
The bargaining—ain't it a bitch? The bargaining aspect
of grief, to constantly release that which I've already

My first visits with Wilson took place during graduation weekend at Penn, which happened to coincide with Taylor Swift concerts in Philadelphia, so the city was a zoo. Worried that I'd get stuck in traffic, she gave me strict instructions to take the trolley. I shared a car with Swifties in lamé, graduates in mortarboards, and their elders of three generations. Wilson's chair had been endowed by the College for Women class of 1963 (Penn became coed a decade later), and the alumni who had gathered for their sixty-year reunion would celebrate her at a banquet. Many were the same age as her mother. "Today's her birthday," she said quietly. "She would have been eighty-two."

When I asked Wilson about the evening's dress code, she apologized for having "no idea." But she typically wears something talismanic when she performs. For her readings of the Odyssey, it was often a sequinned owl T-shirt that channelled Athena. (Homer, she notes, has an eye "for things that sparkle.") Athena is a shape-shifting goddess. She has the power to make herself invisible, and at luminous moments in Wilson's translations, especially private ones between foes or lovers, so does Wilson. Those exchanges are often

let go of, but how the water in my mind brings it all back
like the flood current each day, and each morning, in the ebb
I see the seafloor for what it is, another landscape of loss
and renewal, another augur deciphering the tea leaves

in the tide pool revealing the children I might never name,
have, or hold. There is a finite number of eggs and books
inside me. I am trying to release them. I am trying to mourn
the possible futures bursting before me in a fantastic finale

of fireworks, bursting in my mouth like red caviar as I try
to find the right words to say goodbye to little faces I can
only imagine. I'm not sure what I want. Each decision seems
to dissolve at the edge of the beach softened by the watercolor

cream of winter floating above the same shore where Eliot wrote
"The Waste Land" after a mental breakdown a hundred and one
years before me, writing "On Margate Sands. / I can connect /
Nothing with nothing." I keep looking at the gentle waves

for answers without trying to make another metaphor.
What if the image of what I'm feeling is too heavy to be
carried over into language? Maybe in another life you get
to live out all the lives you've imagined. Maybe in this life

I become who I am by not knowing—

—Tiana Clark

monosyllabic and charged with unspoken feeling. Her aim, she said, was "to give the characters breathing room for their ambiguities."

That evening, her sandals paid homage to Achilles' mother, "silver-footed Thetis"—a daughter of the sea god Nereus, who was forced to marry King Peleus of Phthia, after he had raped her with the gods' connivance. Thetis is a tutelary spirit for Wilson: "I've come to see the Iliad as a poem about the pain of a goddess mother who adores her mortal child and can't protect him. The theme of a mother's tragic love structures the whole poem. But that anguish teaches you a hard truth: you can't prevent your children from ever being hurt."

The banquet was held at the Penn library, and we got there early, so that Wilson could review her notes in a quiet corner. As the guests drifted in for cocktails, a few came over to introduce themselves. One regretted that she'd never studied Greek. Another suggested that the Iliad was ripe material for "a rap musical like 'Hamilton,'" and Wilson nodded politely. As a jazz group played oldies, her co-speaker, Stuart Weitzman, checked out her footwear. "I can see you're a lady who's into comfort," he said. Weitzman, a Penn megadonor, is a '63 graduate of Wharton who made a fortune in the shoe business. "I should really have planned a talk around various characters tying on their sandals," Wilson told me later. "They abound. But I wanted to read a violent slaughter passage."

Diffidence is Wilson's default mode, the legacy of a childhood spent biting her tongue, but her ferocity emerges onstage. "I think there's a tension," she told me, "or at least for many people a surprise, in the gap between my mostly shy persona and the intensity of emotion I try to express in performance." Her sonorous voice gives ancient Greek the rumble of a cataract, though she also brings an impious verve to passages of dialogue. In a video I watched online, Penelope might have been Lady Chatterley and gruff Odysseus her sexy gamekeeper.

Some of Wilson's YouTube readings have an edge of zaniness; she pulls faces and changes character with comic props—a cardboard crown, cat ears, a dishevelled wig. But that night, dressed sombrely in black lace, she recited one of the Iliad's most heartrending passages. The gods have been intriguing furiously. Thetis begs Zeus to avenge her son's honor, although the plan he hatches will also fulfill the prophecy that torments her: Achilles can choose to either die young as a hero or live to an obscure old age.

As the story unfolds, Agamemnon is tricked into thinking that he can win the war without his greatest fighter. The Trojans' champion—Hector, King Priam's son—makes the most of this advantage, without knowing it's a ploy. But a wary seer warns him to seek Athena's favor, so he leaves the gory plain to organize a sacrifice. Back in the city (briefly, he hopes), he finds his wife, Andromache, watching the war from the battlements with a nurse cradling their infant. In the passage that Wilson read, she grasps his hand and implores him:

> What are you doing, Hector? You strange man!
> Your will to fight will kill you! Do you feel
> no pity for your little baby son,
> or my unhappiness, my life of loss?

Achilles, she reminds him, raided her father's kingdom, killing him and her seven brothers and enslaving their mother. Hector is torn. If he stays behind on the walls, he can defend the citadel. But the supreme imperative of the noble warriors on both sides—Achilles, Odysseus, Ajax, Aeneas, Sarpedon, Patroclus, and even foppish Paris—is, as Hector exhorts his fighters, to "be men." A man is someone who courts death for glory, hoping that his deeds will be immortalized by a poet. (This worked out for all of the above.)

Hector tells Andromache, "No one matters more to me than you." Yet he offers her no comfort:

> One day some bronze-armed Greek will capture you,
> and you will weep, deprived of all your freedom. . . .
> But as for me, I hope I will be dead,
> and lying underneath a pile of earth,
> so that I do not have to hear your screams
> or watch when they are dragging you away.

Hector routs the besiegers and sets fire to their ships. The desperate Greeks

throw every man they have into the field. While Achilles sulks in his tent, his beloved comrade, Patroclus, who shares his bed, bravely joins the battle in Achilles' armor. This imposture cows the enemy, but Hector slays Patroclus anyway, sealing everyone's fate. Maddened by grief and rage, "the best of all the Greeks" butchers the Trojans and seizes twelve of their young boys to sacrifice on Patroclus' funeral pyre. He spears Hector through his neck, then drags the corpse around the city walls until old King Priam abases himself to beg for its return. The poem ends with the laments of three royal women—Helen, Hecuba, and Andromache—whose losses, Wilson writes, "can never be recuperated," except in the retelling.

Wilson has spent the past decade contemplating her kinship with these warriors. "My childhood self was an Achilles," she said, "holed up in protest, then emerging later to reveal his power. But I also had a dutiful Hector self, doomed by compliance." I told her that I thought Hector's speech to Andromache, with its vision of her degradation, was tinged with sadism, but she disagreed: "Brusqueness is often a mark of fear. You push people away when you worry that you need them too much." And it rankles her that men whom she considers self-appointed guardians of the Western canon have questioned a woman's fitness to do Homer justice. "Any woman who has lived with male rage at close range has a better chance of understanding the vulnerability that fuels it than your average bro. She learns firsthand how the ways in which men are damaged determine their need to wreak damage on others."

This insight, and the lucidity Wilson brings to it, may be the greatest revelation of her Iliad. The poem's machismo has often bored or estranged me, and, in more grandiloquent translations, its heroes' mindless bloodlust obscured the pathos of boys and men who are shamed literally to death by weaknesses that they've been bred to suppress. Her plainsong conveys the tragedy of their bravado, and, listening to her voice, I felt it for the first time.

I met Wilson in Athens before we left for Ithaca. The city, in late June, was more crowded than Philly had been, and considerably hotter. One morning, we hiked up to the Acropolis, but the wait for tickets was two hours in the sun, so we hiked back down. Over coffee in a little square, I told her about a vintage shop near my hotel. She was delighted by the prospect of taking her girls there. Finding a treasure in a thrift store, she said, gives her a sense of accomplishment akin to "what feels so satisfying in translation. Working within strict constraints like syntax and meter is like digging out the gem from a donation bin."

Wilson translated Homer into Shakespeare's meter—an iambic five-foot line, natural to an Anglophone's ear. She tuned her text like an instrument by reciting it aloud. But she avoided reading her predecessors, who suffered, in her opinion, from reading one another. None of them, she said, felt "particularly sacred, beyond Pope and Chapman, and that's because they are both in very different ways great poets." In writing for the body, she searched not only for the most visceral equivalent of every Greek word but for the least slanted one. Toward the end of the Odyssey, the hero's son, Telemachus, proves that he has become a man by hanging twelve of his mother's serving women, who have slept with the suitors besieging her. Most translators, Wilson writes, describe them as "sluts" or "whores," terms that don't figure in the Greek. Instead, she calls them what Homer does: "slaves," or, in an echo of plantation culture which felt apt to her, "house girls."

Wilson's translations are the first in English to jettison slurs or euphemisms that mask the abjection of women in a society where a goal of war, according to the Iliad, was to rob men of their women, and where female captives of every rank were trafficked for sex and domestic labor. (Boys were, too.) Yet she isn't aiming to generate outrage at the sexual politics of a Bronze Age patriarchy: "It's too easy." To the degree that she's outraged, it's by the sexual politics of her vocation. "The 'faithful' translation," she writes, is a "gendered metaphor." It presupposes a wife-like helpmeet whose work is subordinate to that of "a male-authored original." To some of her critics, especially the trolls on Twitter, Wilson's "wokeness" perverts Homer's world view. In her own view, the biases of previous translators have distorted Homer's "experiential truth."

Homer's goddesses are thrilling models of female power. Aphrodite takes her pleasure where she finds it (everywhere). Semi-divine Helen, Zeus' daughter, has a witchy seventh sense, a ventriloquist's voice, and a pharmacy of magic potions. In Wilson's view, "Nothing beats Hera, dressing up with super-chic earrings and

skin creams to mess with Zeus' plans." (Her craftiness evokes a conjugal eye roll: "She always thwarts whatever I decree.") But the poems' mortal women are subject to the dictates of their husbands and fathers, and even, like Penelope, of their barely postadolescent sons. None of them challenge that convention, yet Wilson is alert to the ambivalence in their stoicism. Where Andromache's is explicit, Penelope's is opaque. (Her name means "veil over the face.") "Is Penelope really glad to see her husband after twenty years?" Wilson asked me. Yes, but her translation of their reunion gives us a moment to wonder:

> She crossed the threshold
> and sat across from him beside the wall,
> in firelight. He sat beside the pillar,
> and kept his eyes down, waiting to find out
> whether the woman who had once shared
> his bed
> would speak to him. She sat in silence,
> stunned.

After coffee, I went prospecting for gems at the National Archaeological Museum. Its most famous artifact is a funeral mask of hammered gold leaf that Heinrich Schliemann, the German archeologist, found in what he believed to be Agamemnon's tomb at Mycenae. The mask, from the sixteenth century B.C.E., predates the war, if there was one, by about three hundred years, but it's the haunting likeness of an old king with an archaic smile, and, whatever terrible crimes he succumbed to or committed, he seems to be at peace.

The ancient gold in the vitrines reminded me of a passage from Wilson's introduction to the Odyssey. Helen and her husband, Menelaus, she notes wryly, "seem to have suffered no obvious ill effects from her escapade—beyond the fact that so many people . . . died as a result." Their marriage, she concludes, might have been cemented by a mutual appreciation for "wonderful consumer goods." They surely would have coveted the goods that were on display: exquisitely wrought diadems, tripods, wine cups, sword hilts, and jewelry, the likes of which Homer inventories with the concupiscence of a Sotheby's catalogue.

If you learn one thing from the Iliad, it's that the greed for stuff, the drive for sex, the fear of death, the bonds of love, the pull of home, the glamour of fame, plus all the insecurities—especially about virility—that generate violence in the world are still the same. I will confess that, in the next gallery, I tarried for longer than was strictly seemly at the statue of Paris—a monumental nude youth with surely the most beautiful face ever sculpted. Of course Helen eloped with him. Abduction, my foot.

When Odysseus at last reaches Ithaca, he doesn't recognize the island. Athena has shrouded it in mist to buy him some time for plotting his revenge before he confronts the suitors. Once she unveils the landscape, Odysseus, elated, knows just where he is: in a bay like Polis, shaded by a wooded mountain. A "cave sacred to nymphs" lies at one end of the beach, and that is where they hide his treasure—the Phaeacians' "heroic gifts of bronze."

On Ithaca, Wilson and I often crossed paths with mountain goats, whose bleating kids rooted at their udders, but we never met a goatherd. "They're all off composing poetry," she said. We never met a soul, in fact. It was as if the gods had decided to reward her with a private tour of their haunts.

To reach the palace of Odysseus, we set out from Stavros a little before dusk, when the heat had abated. About a mile from the village, on a steep mountain road, we found a sign that vaguely pointed toward the "School of Homer." Turning onto a rocky path, we climbed for another twenty minutes until an ancient flight of steps delivered us to a plateau that is one of the island's strategic high points. In the distance, we could see Afáles Bay and, beyond it, the Ionian Sea shimmering in a violet haze.

Schliemann poked around this acropolis in the mid-nineteenth century, and many archeologists have followed him. The existence of the palace has been disputed for millennia, and alternative locations have been proposed in Cephalonia, Paxos, Sicily, the Baltic, southwestern Spain, and elsewhere on Ithaca, but the School of Homer is a contender. Its ruins were once a complex of buildings pieced together from massive blocks of limestone, and sited so that ships or strangers were visible as they approached. Whoever lived here would have given those strangers a cordial welcome, according to *xenia*—the sacred code of Greek hospitality, whose breach by Paris (it was bad form to run off with your hostess) led to the Trojan War.

If these are indeed the ruins of the palace, they don't fit the Odyssey's descriptions of a royal seat with a vast banquet hall, a storeroom secured by "dazzling double doors," and an upper story where Penelope worked at her loom and hid herself from the rowdy suitors. A mosaic floor in one of the roofless chambers looked Roman. (Rome occupied Greece for hundreds of years.) In the seventeenth century, some of the stone was used to erect a church, dedicated to St. Athanasios. The School of Homer got its name in English some two hundred years ago, from a local priest who showed the site to a British classicist. He saw shards of pottery, perhaps Mycenaean, scattered in the rubble; Odysseus was unlikely to have been the first Achaean prince to live there.

The birds singing in this ruined choir might have told us its history, but there was no one to interpret their song. Wilson wandered off alone and spent a while looking out to sea. Later, she told me that she'd been thinking about her mother: "She was the home that I came back to."

Nostos may also imply the yearning for a home that doesn't exist, or no longer, or only as an ideal: a place where the people you love the most finally recognize and embrace you. "I often feel like an Odysseus," Wilson said. "He was always reinventing himself and, like a translator, pretending to be someone else and telling that character's story. But maybe a true self can emerge from the lies."

When we got back to the road, a sudden apparition arrested us. The setting sun backlit a spider's web. She hung like a dense onyx bead precisely at our eye level between a gnarly olive tree and a pine whose scent mingled in the warm air with jasmine and goat dung. Wilson whispered, "Athena is with us." ♦

On the Agenda

Lore Segal

ILLUSTRATION BY RICCARDO VECCHIO

JANUARY: THE FORGETTING OLYMPICS

Farah said, "Ladies' Lunch at my place, my agenda: Forgetting as an Olympic sport. You know how TV uses competition to turn us on to baking, interior decorating, fashion, and what all? I propose the Great Ladies' Forgetting Olympics."

Bessie said, "You mean whoever forgets the most names gets the gold?"

"Forgets more words, words, words," said Bridget.

"And dates and appointments," Farah said.

Bessie said, "Addresses. I remember Lotte calling me several times for the address of the party that turned out to be—I forget, what do we call a Jewish wake?—for Sylvia's deceased aunt. Poor Lotte spent the evening trying to remember from where she knew Sylvia or if maybe she had never met her."

"Forgetting people," Ilka said. "I had an e-mail from a Samson who writes as if I should know his brother, his mother? The only Samsons I know are Kafka's bug and the one in the Bible."

"I picked up a story I published in 2007," Bridget said. "It's not that I don't recognize what I wrote, but I couldn't think how it ended."

"So anyway," said Farah impatiently. "This is this morning. I'm enjoying my coffee, going to turn on the news, and I think, Wait a minute—today is the fifth? Imagine yourself in an elevator in free fall, your stomach has been left behind, or drops into your boots—or is it your heart that drops into your pants—I forget the idiom, but wasn't it on the fourth I was having dinner with Ervin?

"Ervin's folks are my mother's distant cousins who went to Canada. Ervin is the in-between generation, younger than my son but older than my grandson Hami, I think. Anyway. So. I marched myself into my office, turned on the computer—I have this big desktop because of my bad eyes—got briefly hysterical when I couldn't remember how to find the calendar, found it, and it was! It was yesterday that Ervin was in town. I see him sitting at a table waiting for me, except that I can't remember where we were supposed to meet. . . ."

"Wait!" Ilka said, "Wait, wait, wait! Samson! Lotte's son was Sam and his brother Gregor came from Chicago, was it? And they put Lotte into . . . what's the name of the assisted-living place?"

Farah said, "I had to decently wait till nine o'clock before calling, and I reached him at the airport, already in line to board. It was a slow line. I said, 'Ervin! It's this sorry old head of mine. I forget things!' He said what we all routinely say—he says, 'So do I. I forget things, too!,' meaning, If *I* forget, forgetting is nothing to do with *your* embarrassing old age. 'I forget everything all the time!' he says. If he thinks he's going to out-forget me, he has another think coming. I say, '*I* forget names, words, and dates, and yesterday I forgot that it was the fourth.' So he says, 'And I can't remember the number of Cousin Hami's phone,' and we're off to the races. I say, '*I* can't remember my own phone number, and I forgot my keys inside my apartment and had to call the locksmith.' He says, 'I left my bag in the hotel room. They will have to send it on.'

"And now he's one up on me because I'm not going to tell him, I have forgotten *you* and what you look like. If we passed in the street I wouldn't know you.

"Ervin said, 'The line is beginning to move. Goodbye, Aunt Farah.' I said, 'Next time you're in New York, you'll come and have dinner at my place and I'll take you up to our roof and show you the Hudson River right underfoot.' 'You showed me already,' he said. 'You've never been in my place,' I said. 'Sure I have,' he said. 'Last year, when I was in town, and after dinner we took drinks up to your roof. Goodbye.'

" 'Goodbye, Ervin,' I said. I try and try and fail to see Ervin sitting—on which chair? Facing in which direction? Looking over the wall on the roof? A mean trick if the loss of vision has taken away my visual memory."

Ruth said, "Like trying to force the raggedy tail end of a dream to reconstitute the dream before we forget what it was about."

Farah said, "Before we forget what there is to remember."

MARCH: NEXT TO GODLINESS

At Monday's Ladies' Lunch, Bridget told her friends the bad thing she had done on her way over. "My neighbor from 6-J got on the elevator and asked me how I was doing, and, instead of saying 'Fine,' I said, 'I've had the worst morning! I'm bringing my friends a bottle of wine and went to open the cupboard for a bag and out fell an avalanche of who knows how many years' worth of paper bags that I must have kept, for whatever future use or need I may have imagined, stuffed in anyhow just anywhere.' "

The shifting and resettling on chairs might have alerted Bridget that she was wearying her friends' interest and attention. Not knowing where she was headed, she continued, "Why, when I already had my coat on, did I start to organize the large and the midsize into separate piles, the small throwaways without handles on the left, and those handsomely engineered to be refolded on the right?"

Lucinella said, "There was a time when I needed, when I had to have my pencils in a row, sharpened to perfect points, all of one length, which, of course, they couldn't remain unless I kept getting rid of the wrong size."

"My friend Dario," Ruth said, "used to come in and sit and talk and fidget and look uncomfortable until he suddenly got up and straightened the picture on the opposite wall."

Hope said, "The nice woman who comes in once a week to clean doesn't put things back where they belong."

"Tell her you want the right things in the right place," Bessie said.

"Oh, I tell her. I tell her and tell her and tell her. I think she may really not remember where things are supposed to go."

"Does it matter?" Ilka asked her.

"It so obviously doesn't, so why is it driving me insane?"

Bessie said, "My Eve and Jenny are terminally untidy, which reminds me of my mother standing in my doorway saying it looked as if a band of robbers had gone through the things in my room."

The group considered Bessie to be the arbiter of Ladies' Lunch agendas. This week she had e-mailed them an idea suggested by a recent New York *Times* article that, she explained, "compared our children's relations with us with our attitudes toward the adults of our day."

"And *my* suggestion," put in Ruth, "was that we should think about what

our lot understands by 'wokeness.'"

Lucinella said, "I don't know that I know what exactly it is."

"That's what I want us to talk about."

"Yes," Bridget said, "yes, but *why* do Hope's things need to be in the right place?"

"So she can find them?" suggested Farah.

"I grant you that, O.K.," Bridget said. "But that is not why we arrange things in rows. Who benefits from my smoothing the wrinkles of my bedcover? Why do I correct what is off-center?"

"Because you want things to look neat and tidy."

"I do. I know I do. But *why* do I? What's it for? Why do we neaten nature into gardens? What is the virtue of a tidy grass border? And why did I take the trouble to hang the picture parallel to the floor in the first place?"

"Well, jeez, you wouldn't purposely hang it askew."

"No. I certainly would not," said Bridget. "That's what I *mean*. Why not?"

Bessie said, "Do you remember Lotte saying that things not put properly away were like 'visual noise'? Don't we have a need—don't we yearn for order?"

There followed a moment in which Bridget did not say "*Why* do we?," Bessie was remembering where Lotte used to sit, with her back to the window, and Farah understood that she was seeing her friends across the table as if through a plastic baggie.

Ruth picked up the *Times* and put it down again: they were not going to talk about wokeness.

Hope said, "Isn't 'neatliness' supposed to be next to 'godliness'?"

Bessie said, "That order is better than disorder is self-explanatory."

"Explain it," said Bridget.

JUNE: FUNK

"Woke up in some sort of state," Bridget e-mailed Ruth on the day of Ladies' Lunch. "I don't like to do this, but I'm not going to make it to your place."

"Do you want us to come to you?" Ruth e-mailed back.

"What I want is for this week to be the week after next," Bridget returned.

"Farah and I are coming over," Ruth wrote.

"I don't think I have any food," wrote Bridget.

•

"Hi! We've brought sushi," Ruth said, and Farah said, "Bessie and Ilka are on their way up. Hope might come a bit later. What's going on? Talk to us."

They seated themselves around Bridget's table. She said, "It's the stupid nerves *before* giving a talk. I'm on this panel on Wednesday and I have to give the opening statement. This is stuff I do all the time."

"But public speaking is famously nerve-wracking," said Ruth, the retired lawyer. "I used to worry weeks ahead, and then only one week, and later one day, then just for the five minutes before going on, until I learned to just *be* nervous."

"And I'm frazzled by all the things I haven't got done around the house," Bridget said.

"Like what, for instance?"

"Like . . . I can't remember—and I don't know how to find—the name of the guy who washes my windows, so I can't call to find out when he is supposed to come. Hope, hello!" she greeted the latecomer. "Sit down. Have sushi."

"Sorry I'm late," Hope said. "What's happening?"

"Bridget can't remember the name of her window washer," reported Bessie.

"Oh, wow!" commented Hope.

"Bridget is on a panel and has to give a talk," added Ruth.

"I know. I'm coming to hear you. It's this Wednesday, isn't it? Not the end of the world?" Hope finished on a questioning note.

"You know that," Bridget said. "And I know that, but you tell me why my blood pressure is way up, heart thumping, my sleep lousy with nightmares."

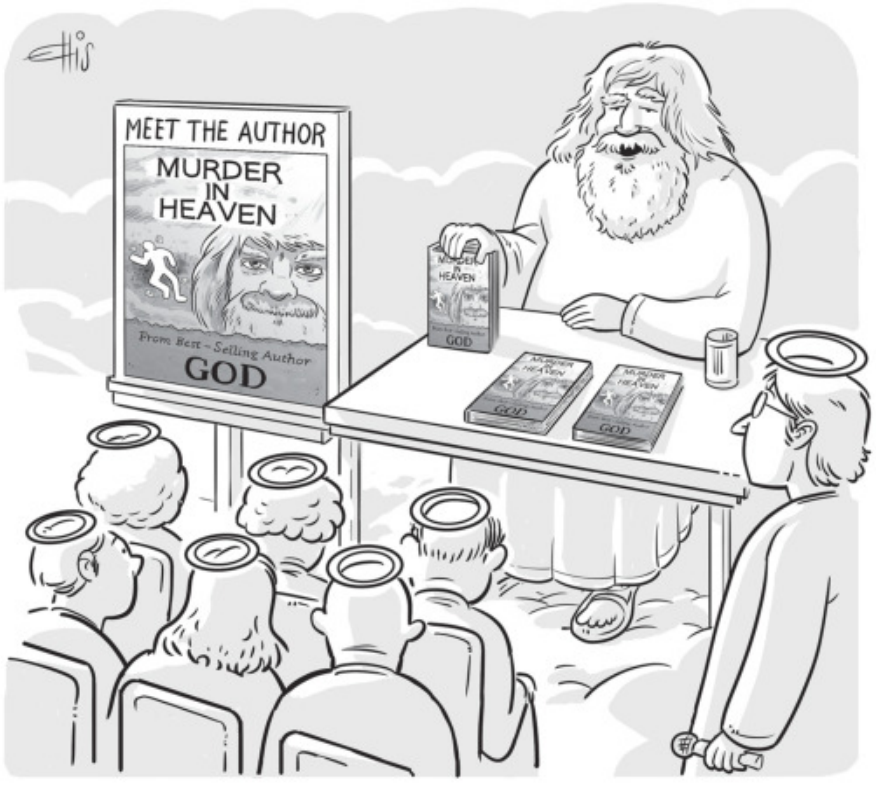
"That's unlike you," Farah said. "We rely on you to make us see our discomforts, even our disasters, as interesting experiences."

"Well, there is nothing interesting, I promise you, in not being at home when the window washer comes to wash your windows, or in being home when he comes to wash the windows and you haven't cleared a lifetime collection of colored glassware from the windowsills."

"Why not move everything and then he can come when he comes?"

"And live, for who knows how long, in a world with glass objects on every surface?"

Ilka said, "I must have quoted to



"The Bible I did for my publisher. 'Murder in Heaven' I did for me."

you my old friend Carter, who numbered the things that do not matter, which drove him to drink? 'It do not matter' became our watchword. It's surprising how many things that applies to."

Bridget said, "Anxiety is surprisingly uncomfortable. I remember and long for my normal, well-enough-regulated self. It's like not being able to imagine summer afternoons when your coat won't zip on a windy street corner in February."

"Wait! Hang on," Hope said. "Now imagine Hell as an eternal February on a windy corner with the zipper irreparably broken."

"What sin is it punishment for?" Ruth asked.

"No sin. Pure punishment. The greatest imaginable discomfort without the possibility of change or end is my idea of Hell. What's yours?"

"I've got a good one," Farah said. "Being on a telephone hold that cannot be disconnected and will never be answered."

They took turns imagining eternities of what each thought unbearable until Bessie said, "Watching my Colin in pain."

Here's where Hope opened the bottle of wine she had brought, and Bridget said, "My anxiety is a moderate Hell, like a low-grade, generalized fear about personal stuff I don't know how to fix and the stuff in the news that nobody knows how to fix, so I'm going to do what I know how to do, which is to write a story and call it 'Funk.'"

NOVEMBER: NO MORE TRAINS

"But no more trips, no more trains," Hope said.

"Except to go and see Lotte at her 'facility,'" Ruth said.

It was early one September. The friends had taken the train to Old Rockingham to have Ladies' Lunch at Bessie's. Colin, who was having one of his bad days, had gone into his room. They lunched on the wooden deck overlooking the curling blue bay with its traffic of pleasure boats. "Like so many little white triangles. It's lovely," they said, and Hope added, "But no more trips."

"The Connecticut train out here wasn't bad," Ruth said, and Hope said, "Oh, I like the *train*. I always feel that little thrill as soon as I sit in the taxi to the train or to a plane. It's the anxiety of the days—of the week—before a trip that's hard to survive."

"Oh, that. Yes," they had all agreed, and Farah said, "My balance is shot, and, with my eyes getting worse by

the day, it's the *thought* of the two blocks to Broadway that produces a small agoraphobia."

Bridget said, "I feel—do we agree—that we don't need more adventures, don't need new experiences? That we can batten on past travels?"

Bessie said, "The time Lotte and I and our two guys lit out for Europe after our final exams—the four of us lugging our bags, the only people out in the streets of midnight Venice."

"China," Bridget said. "In the eighties. We noticed the designs on the houses along the Burma Road—each village had its signature. A very old woman bent down to her grandchild and pointed at me: 'Look! An American.'"

Ilka said, "When you've made it up the mountain, you get to look over the top, and there is a new bit of the world that you could not have supposed."

They continued to meet for Ladies' Lunch and continued to say "If someone would drive us we could go to see Lotte in Green What's Its Name." Lotte had begun to call them hallucinating missing keys to a car that she seemed to believe she had bought to take herself home to her apartment.

"We didn't—we couldn't go to see her," they said after Lotte died. This, too, is now—how long ago?

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At lunch in November, Ruth said, "I accepted an invitation to dinner—another one of these longtime get-togethers—and at the last moment it seemed too complicated and I begged off."

"And you regret not going?"

"Not the dinner, and not the not getting together so much as not having gone, which makes it easier to not go the next time."

Bessie said, "Colin can no longer do without me, and it's getting harder for me to take the train into the city. I'm going to let Eve have the Ninety-fourth Street pied-à-terre. The light is good for her painting."

"No more lunches at the Café Provence," said Hope, who'd learned that her old friend Jack had died. "That was in June," she said. "Curious to have been living for months in a world without Jack living in it."

"So can we batten on the love it is better to have had and lost than never to have had at all?" said Bridget.

"Yes," Farah said. "Yes." And her friends waited for the story. Farah said, "I've been toying with a notion that losing my sight is the punishment for my great, grand forbidden affair."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, no you haven't! You don't really believe in punishment," Ruth said.

"I really don't," said Farah, "but punishment feels like the right idea."

"You mean that you wouldn't do it if you had it to do again?"

"Yes, I would!" said Farah.

"Will you tell us the story?"

"No," Farah said. "Did I mention that Medicare is sending me a walker?"

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Then there was COVID and their children worried about them. Ruth undertook to Zoom Ladies' Lunch. They became accustomed to watching themselves talking to one another out of squares that showed their beds, their bookshelves, the doors to their bathrooms. It turned out to be easier to stay at home—not to have to leave the house. Then, one day, Ruth e-mailed everybody to ask if anyone would mind if they took a hiatus. Nobody minded, and it has become easier to not have Ladies' Lunch. For now? ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Lore Segal on friendship, talking, and aging.

BOOKS

THE X-MAN

How Elon Musk became a superhero and then a supervillain.

BY JILL LEPORE

In 2021, Elon Musk became the world's richest man (no woman came close), and *Time* named him Person of the Year: "This is the man who aspires to save our planet and get us a new one to inhabit: clown, genius, edgelord, visionary, industrialist, showman, cad; a madcap hybrid of Thomas Edison, P. T. Barnum, Andrew Carnegie and *Watchmen*'s Doctor Manhattan, the brooding, blue-skinned man-god who invents electric cars and moves to Mars." Right about when *Time* was preparing that giddy announcement, three women whose ovaries and uteruses were involved in passing down the madcap man-god's genes were in the maternity ward of a hospital in Austin. Musk believes a declining birth rate is a threat to civilization and, with his trademark tirelessness, is doing his visionary edgelord best to ward off that threat. Shivon Zilis, a thirty-five-year-old venture capitalist and executive at Musk's company Neuralink, was pregnant with twins, conceived with Musk by in-vitro fertilization, and was experiencing complications. "He really wants smart people to have kids, so he encouraged me to," Zilis said. In a nearby room, a woman serving as a surrogate for Musk and his thirty-three-year-old ex-wife, Claire Boucher, a musician better known as Grimes, was suffering from pregnancy complications, too, and Grimes was staying with her.

"I really wanted him to have a daughter so bad," Grimes said. At the time, Musk had had seven sons, including, with Grimes, a child named X. Grimes did not know that Zilis, a friend of hers, was down the hall, or that Zilis was pregnant by Musk. Zilis's twins were born seven weeks premature; the surrogate delivered safely a few weeks later. In mid-December, Grimes's new baby came home and met her brother X. An hour later, Musk took X to New York and dandled him on his knee while being photographed for *Time*.

"He dreams of Mars as he bestrides Earth, square-jawed and indomitable," the magazine's Person of the Year announcement read. Musk and Grimes called the baby, Musk's tenth, Y, or sometimes "Why?," or just "?"—a reference to Musk's favorite book, Douglas Adams's "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," because, Grimes explained, it's a book about how knowing the question is more important than knowing the answer.

Elon Musk is currently at or near the helm of six companies: Tesla, SpaceX (which includes Starlink), the Boring Company, Neuralink, X (formerly known as Twitter), and X.AI, an artificial-intelligence company that he founded, earlier this year, because he believes that human intelligence isn't reproducing fast enough, while artificial intelligence is getting more artificially intelligent exponentially. Call it Musk's Law: the answer to killer robots is more Musk babies. Plus, more Musk companies. "I can't just sit around and do nothing," Musk says, fretting about A.I., in Walter Isaacson's new biography, "Elon Musk" (Simon & Schuster), a book that can scarcely contain its subject, in that it raises infinitely more questions than it answers.

"Are you sincerely trying to save the world?" Stephen Colbert once asked Musk on "The Late Show." "Well, I'm trying to do good things, yeah, saving the world is not, I mean . . . ," Musk said, mumbling. "But you're trying to do good things, and you're a billionaire," Colbert interrupted. "Yeah," Musk said, nodding. Colbert said, "That seems a little like superhero or supervillain. You have to choose one." Musk paused, his face blank. That was eight years, several companies, and as many children ago. Things have got a lot weirder since. More Lex Luthor, less Tony Stark.

Musk controls the very tiniest things, and the very biggest. He oversees companies, valued at more than a trillion dollars, whose engineers have built or are building, among other things, reusable rocket ships, a humanoid robot, hyperloops for rapid transit, and a man-machine interface to be implanted in human brains. He is an entrepreneur, a media mogul, a political provocateur, and, not least, a defense contractor: SpaceX has received not only billions of dollars in government contracts for space missions but also more than a hundred million dollars in military contracts for missile-tracking satellites, and Starlink's network of four thousand satellites—which provides Pentagon-funded services to Ukraine—now offers a military service called Starshield. Day by day, Musk's companies control more of the Internet, the power grid, the transportation system, objects in orbit, the nation's security infrastructure, and its energy supply.

And yet. At a jury trial earlier this year, Musk's lawyer repeatedly referred to his client, a middle-aged man, as a "kid." The *Wall Street Journal* has described him as suffering from "tantrums." The *Independent* has alleged that selling Twitter to Musk was "like handing a toddler a loaded gun."

"I'm not evil," Musk said on "Saturday Night Live" a couple of years ago,

MARK MAHANEY; OPPOSITE: ANTONIO GIOVANNI PINNA

"Unless the woke-mind virus… is stopped," Musk told Isaacson, "civilization will never become multiplanetary."

playing the dastardly Nintendo villain Wario, on trial for murdering Mario. "I'm just misunderstood." How does a biographer begin to write about such a man? Some years back, after Isaacson had published a biography of Benjamin Franklin and was known to be writing one of Albert Einstein, the Apple co-founder Steve Jobs called him up and asked him to write his biography; Isaacson says he wondered, half jokingly, whether Jobs "saw himself as the natural successor in that sequence." I don't think Musk sees himself as a natural successor to anyone. As I read it, Isaacson found much to like and admire in Jobs but is decidedly uncomfortable with Musk. (He calls him, at one point, "an asshole.") Still, Isaacson's descriptions of Jobs and Musk are often interchangeable. "His passions, perfectionism, demons, desires, artistry, devilry, and obsession for control were integrally connected to his approach to business and the products that resulted." (That's Jobs.) "It was in his nature to want total control." (Musk.) "He didn't have the emotional receptors that produce everyday kindness and warmth and a desire to be liked." (Musk.) "He was not a model boss or human being." (Jobs.) "This is a book about the roller-coaster life and searingly intense personality of a creative entrepreneur whose passion for perfection and ferocious drive revolutionized six industries." I ask you: Which?

"Sometimes great innovators are risk-seeking man-children who resist potty training," Isaacson concludes in the last lines of his life of Musk. "They can be reckless, cringeworthy, sometimes even toxic. They can also be crazy. Crazy enough to think they can change the world." It's a disconcerting thing to read on page 615 of a biography of a fifty-two-year-old man about whom a case could be made that he wields more power than any other person on the planet who isn't in charge of a nuclear arsenal. Not potty-trained? Boys will be . . . toddlers?

Elon Musk was born in Pretoria, South Africa, in 1971. His grandfather J. N. Haldeman was a staunch anti-Communist from Canada who in the nineteen-thirties and forties had been a leader of the anti-democratic and quasi-fascist Technocracy movement. (Technocrats believed that scientists and engineers should rule.) "In 1950, he decided to move to South Africa," Isaacson writes, "which was still ruled by a white apartheid regime." In fact, apartheid had been declared only in 1948, and the regime was soon recruiting white settlers from North America, promising restless men such as Haldeman that they could live like princes. Isaacson calls Haldeman's politics "quirky." In 1960, Haldeman self-published a tract, "The International Conspiracy to Establish a World Dictatorship & the Menace to South Africa," that blamed the two World Wars on the machinations of Jewish financiers.

Musk's mother, Maye Haldeman, was a finalist for Miss South Africa during her tumultuous courtship with his father, Errol Musk, an engineer and an aviator. In 2019, she published a memoir titled "A Woman Makes a Plan: Advice for a Lifetime of Adventure, Beauty, and Success." For all that she writes about growing up in South Africa in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, she never once mentions apartheid.

Isaacson, in his account of Elon Musk's childhood, barely mentions apartheid himself. He writes at length and with compassion about the indignities heaped upon young Elon by schoolmates. Elon, an awkward, lonely boy, was bored in school and had a tendency to call other kids "stupid"; he was also very often beaten up, and his father frequently berated him, but when he was ten, a few years after his parents divorced, he chose to live with him. (Musk is now estranged from his father, a conspiracist who has called Joe Biden a "pedophile President," and who has two children by his own stepdaughter; he has said that "the only thing we are here for is to reproduce." Recently, he warned Elon, in an e-mail, that "with no Whites here, the Blacks will go back to the trees.")

Musk's childhood sounds bad, but Isaacson's telling leaves out rather a lot about the world in which Musk grew up. In the South Africa of "Elon Musk," there are Musks and Haldemans—Elon and his younger brother and sister and his many cousins—and there are animals, including the elephants and monkeys who prove to be a nuisance at a construction project of Errol's. There are no other people, and there are certainly no Black people, the nannies, cooks, gardeners, cleaners, and construction workers who built, for white South Africans, a fantasy world. And so, for instance, we don't learn that in 1976, when Elon was four, some twenty thousand Black schoolchildren in Soweto staged a protest and heavily armed police killed as many as seven hundred. Instead, we're told, "As a kid growing up in South Africa, Elon Musk knew pain and learned how to survive it."

Musk, the boy, loved video games and computers and Dungeons & Dragons and "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," and he still does. "I took from the book that we need to extend the scope of consciousness so that we are better able to ask the questions about the answer, which is the universe," Musk tells

"I'm trying to get better at barking for what I want."

Isaacson. Isaacson doesn't raise an eyebrow, and you can wonder whether he has read "Hitchhiker's Guide," or listened to the BBC 4 radio play on which it is based, first broadcast in 1978. It sounds like this:

> Far back in the mists of ancient time, in the great and glorious days of the former galactic empire, life was wild, rich, and, on the whole, tax free. . . . Many men of course became extremely rich, but this was perfectly natural because no one was really poor, at least, no one worth speaking of.

"The Hitchhiker's Guide" is not a book about how "we need to extend the scope of consciousness so that we are better able to ask the questions about the answer, which is the universe." It is, among other things, a razor-sharp satiric indictment of imperialism:

> And for these extremely rich merchants life eventually became rather dull, and it seemed that none of the worlds they settled on was entirely satisfactory. Either the climate wasn't quite right in the later part of the afternoon or the day was half an hour too long or the sea was just the wrong shade of pink. And thus were created the conditions for a staggering new form of industry: custom-made, luxury planet-building.

Douglas Adams wrote "The Hitchhiker's Guide" on a typewriter that had on its side a sticker that read "End Apartheid." He wasn't crafting an instruction manual for mega-rich luxury planet builders.

Biographers don't generally have a will to power. Robert Caro is not Robert Moses and would seem to have very little in common with Lyndon the "B" is for "bastard" Johnson. Walter Isaacson is a gracious, generous, public-spirited man and a principled biographer. This year, he was presented with the National Humanities Medal. But, as a former editor of *Time* and a former C.E.O. of CNN and of the Aspen Institute, Isaacson also has an executive's affinity for the C-suite, which would seem to make it a challenge to keep a certain distance from the world view of his subject. Isaacson shadowed Musk for two years and interviewed dozens of people, but they tend to have titles like C.E.O., C.F.O., president, V.P., and founder. The book upholds a core conviction of many executives: sometimes to get shit done you have to be a dick. *He dreams of Mars as he bestrides Earth, square-jawed and indomitable.* For the rest of us, Musk's pettiness, arrogance, and swaggering viciousness are harder to take, and their necessity less clear.

Isaacson is interested in how innovation happens. In addition to biographies of Franklin, Einstein, Jobs, and Leonardo da Vinci, he has also written about figures in the digital revolution and in gene editing. Isaacson puts innovation first: *This man might be a monster, but look at what he built!* Whereas Mary Shelley, for instance, put innovation second: *The man who built this is a monster!* The political theorist Judith Shklar once wrote an essay called "Putting Cruelty First." Montaigne put cruelty first, identifying it as the worst thing people do; Machiavelli did not. As for "the usual excuse for our most unspeakable public acts," the excuse "that they are necessary," Shklar knew this to be nonsense. "Much of what passed under these names was merely princely wilfulness," as Shklar put it. This is always the problem with princes.

Elon Musk started college at the University of Pretoria but left South Africa in 1989, at seventeen. He went first to Canada and, after two years at Queen's University in Ontario, transferred to the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied physics and economics, and wrote a senior paper titled "The Importance of Being Solar." He had done internships in Silicon Valley and, after graduating, enrolled in a Ph.D. program in materials science at Stanford, but he deferred admission and never went. It was 1995, the year the Internet opened to commercial traffic. All around him, frogs were turning into princes. He wanted to start a startup. Musk and his brother Kimball, with money from their parents, launched Zip2, an early online Yellow Pages that sold its services to newspaper publishers. In 1999, during the dot-com boom, they sold it to Compaq for more than three hundred million dollars. Musk, with his share of the money, launched one of the earliest online banking companies. He called it X.com. "I think X.com could absolutely be a multibillion-dollar bonanza," he told CNN, but, meanwhile, "I'd like to be on the cover of *Rolling Stone*." That would have to wait for a few years, but in 1999 Salon announced, "Elon Musk Is Poised to Become Silicon Valley's Next Big Thing," in a profile that advanced what was already a hackneyed set of journalistic conventions about the man-boy man-gods of Northern California: "The showiness, the chutzpah, the streak of self-promotion and the urge to create a dramatic public persona are major elements of what makes up the Silicon Valley entrepreneur. . . . Musk's ego has gotten him in trouble before, and it may get him in trouble again, yet it is also part and parcel of what it means to be a hotshot entrepreneur." Five months later, Musk married his college girlfriend, Justine Wilson. During their first dance at their wedding, he whispered in her ear, "I am the alpha in this relationship."

"BIG EGO OF HOTSHOT ENTREPRENEUR GETS HIM INTO TROUBLE" is more or less the running headline of Musk's life. In 2000, Peter Thiel's company Confinity merged with X.com, and Musk regretted that the new company was called PayPal, instead of X. (He later bought the domain x.com, and for years he kept it as a kind of shrine, a blank white page with nothing but a tiny letter "x" on the screen.) In 2002, eBay paid $1.5 billion for the company, and Musk drew on his share of the sale to start SpaceX. Two years later, he invested around $6.5 million in Tesla; he became both its largest shareholder and its chairman. Around then, in his Marvel Iron Man phase, Musk left Northern California for Los Angeles, to swan with starlets. Courted by Ted Cruz during COVID, he moved to Texas, because he dislikes regulation, and because he objected to California's lockdowns and mask mandates.

Musk's accomplishments as the head of a series of pioneering engineering firms are unrivalled. Isaacson takes on each of Musk's ventures, venture by venture, chapter by chapter, emphasizing the ferocity and the velocity and the effectiveness of Musk's management style—"A maniacal sense of urgency is our operating principles" is a workplace rule. "How the fuck can it take so long?" Musk asked an engineer working on SpaceX's Merlin engines. "This is stupid. Cut it in half." He pushed SpaceX through years of failures, crash after crash, with the confidence that success would come. "Until today, all electric cars sucked," Musk said, launching Tesla's Roadster, leaving every other electric car and most gas cars in the dust. No automotive company had broken into that industry in something

like a century. Like SpaceX, Tesla went through very hard times. Musk steered it to triumph, a miracle amid fossil fuel's stranglehold. "Fuck oil," he said.

"Comradery is dangerous" is another of Musk's workplace maxims. He was ousted as PayPal's C.E.O. and ousted as Tesla's chairman. He's opposed to unions, pushed workers back to the Tesla plants at the height of the COVID pandemic—some four hundred and fifty reportedly got infected—and has thwarted workers' rights at every turn.

Musk has run through companies and he has run through wives. In some families, domestic relations are just another kind of labor relations. He pushed his first wife, Justine, to dye her hair blonder. After they lost their firstborn son, Nevada, in infancy, Justine gave birth to twins (one of whom they named Xavier, in part for Professor Xavier, from "X-Men") and then to triplets. When the couple fought, he told her, "If you were my employee, I would fire you." He divorced her and soon proposed to Talulah Riley, a twenty-two-year-old British actress who had only just moved out of her parents' house. She said her job was to stop Musk from going "king-crazy": "People become king, and then they go crazy." They married, divorced, married, and divorced. But "you're my Mr. Rochester," she told him. "And if Thornfield Hall burns down and you are blind, I'll come and take care of you." He dated Amber Heard, after her separation from Johnny Depp. Then he met Grimes. "I'm just a fool for love," Musk tells Isaacson. "I am often a fool, but especially for love."

He is also a fool for Twitter. His Twitter account first got him into real trouble in 2018, when he baselessly called a British diver, who helped rescue Thai children trapped in a flooded cave, a "pedo" and was sued for defamation. That same year, he tweeted, "Am considering taking Tesla private at $420," making a pot joke. "Funding secured." ("I kill me," he says about his sense of humor.) The S.E.C. charged him with fraud, and Tesla stock fell more than thirteen per cent. Tesla shareholders sued him, alleging that his tweets had caused their stock to lose value. On Joe Rogan's podcast, he went king-crazy, lighting up a joint. He looked at his phone. "You getting text messages from chicks?" Rogan asked. "I'm getting text messages from friends saying, 'What the hell are you doing smoking weed?'"

"Musk's goofy mode is the flip side of his demon mode," Isaacson writes. Musk likes this kind of cover. "I reinvented electric cars, and I'm sending people to Mars in a rocket ship," he said in his "S.N.L." monologue, in 2021. "Did you think I was also going to be a chill, normal dude?" In that monologue, he also said that he has Asperger's. A writer in *Newsweek* applauded this announcement as a "milestone in the history of neurodiversity." But, in Slate, Sara Luterman, who is autistic, was less impressed; she denounced Musk's "coming out" as "self-serving and hollow, a poor attempt at laundering his image as a heartless billionaire more concerned with cryptocurrency and rocket ships than the lives of others." She put cruelty first.

Musk's interest in acquiring Twitter dates to 2022. That year, he and Grimes had another child. His name is Techno Mechanicus Musk, but his parents call him Tau, for the irrational number. But Musk also lost a child. His twins with Justine turned eighteen in 2022 and one of them, who had apparently become a Marxist, told Musk, "I hate you and everything you stand for." It was, to some degree, in an anguished attempt to heal this developing rift that, in 2020, Musk tweeted, "I am selling almost all physical possessions. Will own no house." That didn't work. In 2022, his disaffected child petitioned a California court for a name change, to Vivian Jenna Wilson, citing, as the reason for the petition, "Gender Identity and the fact that I no longer live with or wish to be related to my biological father in any way, shape or form." She refuses to see him. Musk told Isaacson he puts some of the blame for this on her progressive Los Angeles high school. Lamenting the "woke-mind virus," he decided to buy Twitter. *I just can't sit around and do nothing.*

Musk's estrangement from his daughter is sad, but of far greater consequence is his seeming estrangement from humanity itself. When Musk decided to buy Twitter, he wrote a letter to its board. "I believe free speech is a societal imperative for a functioning democracy," he explained, but "I now realize the company will neither thrive nor serve this societal imperative in its current form." This is flimflam. Twitter never has and never will be a vehicle for democratic expression. It is a privately held corporation that monetizes human expression and algorithmically maximizes its distribution for profit, and what turns out to be most profitable is sowing social, cultural, and political division. Its participants are a very tiny, skewed slice of humanity that has American journalism in a choke hold. Twitter does not operate on the principle of representation, which is the cornerstone of democratic governance. It has no concept of the "civil" in "civil society." Nor has Elon Musk, at any point in his career, displayed any commitment to either democratic governance or the freedom of expression.

Musk gave Isaacson a different explanation for buying the company: "Unless the woke-mind virus, which is fundamentally antiscience, antimerit, and antihuman in general, is stopped, civilization will never become multiplanetary." It's as if Musk had come to believe the sorts of mission statements that the man-boy gods of Silicon Valley had long been peddling. "At first, I thought it didn't fit into my primary large missions," he told Isaacson, about Twitter. "But I've come to believe it can be part of the mission of preserving civilization, buying our society more time to become multiplanetary."

Elon Musk plans to make the world safe for democracy, save civilization from itself, and bring the light of human consciousness to the stars in a ship he will call the Heart of Gold, for a spaceship fuelled by an Improbability Drive in "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy." In case you've never read it, what actually happens in "The Hitchhiker's Guide" is that the Heart of Gold is stolen by Zaphod Beeblebrox, who is the President of the Galaxy, has two heads and three arms, is the inventor of the Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster, has been named, by "the triple-breasted whore of Eroticon 6," the "Biggest Bang Since the Big One," and, according to his private brain-care specialist, Gag Halfrunt, "has personality problems beyond the dreams of analysts." Person of the Year material, for sure. All the same, as a Vogon Fleet prepares to shoot down the Heart of Gold with Beeblebrox on board, Halfrunt muses that "it will be a pity to lose him," but, "well, Zaphod's just this guy, you know?" ♦

BOOKS

THE CATALYST

Betty Friedan and the movement that outgrew her.

BY MOIRA DONEGAN

It was a cold day in Manhattan in 1969, and Patricia Burnett was wearing her fur. She had looked up Betty Friedan's home address, and had made the trip to New York from Detroit, where the former beauty queen was a housewife and an occasional volunteer in local Republican politics. Inspired by Friedan's 1963 best-seller, "The Feminine Mystique," and by Friedan's new feminist activist group, the National Organization for Women, or NOW, Burnett had formed a local chapter, and hosted a gathering at the Scarab Club to recruit her friends, the genteel women of Detroit's white élite. She had expected it to be a harder sell. Burnett emphasized to the assembled group of mostly rich men's wives that NOW was moderate and respectable, and would "take pains not to appear threatening in order to protect members from their husbands' and friends' disapproval," Katherine Turk writes in "The Women of NOW: How Feminists Built an Organization That Transformed America" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), her new history of the group. But Burnett had been surprised at the women's openness to feminist politics; they were especially moved by NOW's call for abortion rights. Nearly all of them had joined NOW on the spot, and pitched in a total of a hundred and twenty dollars for their membership fees. Burnett was in New York to hand over the money—and to meet Friedan, her hero.

Friedan strove to keep feminism approachable, moderate, and respectable.

The woman who answered the door looked Burnett up and down. She called upstairs, "Betty, you won't believe this. Here's this woman down here in a chinchilla hat and muff, who says she's a lifelong Republican." Hearing this, Friedan ran down, and "yanked" Burnett inside.

Unbeknownst to Burnett, a lifelong Republican in a chinchilla hat was exactly the sort of NOW member that Friedan was looking for. In Rachel Shteir's new biography, "Betty Friedan: Magnificent Disrupter" (Yale), it becomes clear why. Friedan's vision was always to make NOW, and feminism more broadly, as nonthreatening as possible to the American mainstream. But the American mainstream, in Friedan's imagination, was a very narrow, specific group. "Friedan saw herself as the protector of the marginalized," Shteir writes, "by which she meant mothers, wives, and Midwesterners." By 1969, Friedan was already afraid that this mass of women would be turned off by feminism's reputation for bra-burning radicalism. "I kept moving to figure out new ways of bringing back the women the others were alienating," she later recalled. Someone like Burnett could be her perfect poster child: a demure, respectable, and extremely feminine feminist.

Burnett had arrived at an especially convenient moment. Friedan's apartment was crowded with journalists, cameras, and lights. Friedan was about to hold a TV news conference with other women in the movement, including Beulah Sanders, a Black leader of the National Welfare Rights Organization, and a white teen-age member of the radical feminist group Redstockings, "in a ragged t-shirt and jeans, defiantly nursing her baby," as Burnett later recalled. "You're going to fill this group out perfectly," Friedan told her, and shoved her in front of the cameras. Friedan later said that she made sure Burnett said "she was a Republican and had been 'Miss Michigan' in front of the press," Turk writes. A journalist asked the three women if they really thought they had anything in common. Each of them answered yes.

Turk's book is nominally a group biography, following three somewhat unexpected NOW leaders: Burnett; Aileen Hernandez, the Brooklyn-born daughter of Jamaican immigrants, who

ILLUSTRATION BY ELENI KALORKOTI

worked in labor and civil-rights activism before becoming NOW's second president; and Mary Jean Collins, a union leader from a working-class Catholic background, who led NOW's formidable Chicago chapter, and discovered her lesbian identity in the process. But Turk's true subject is NOW's early years. Her account reveals a uniquely ambitious political organization, one that achieved remarkable successes while struggling with divergent feminist visions, competing egos, and insufficient funds. Throughout the book, Friedan is a major presence, alternately inspiring her comrades with her vivid political vision and frustrating them with her demanding and indomitable personality. For her part, Shteir is rigorously fair to Friedan. And yet it is clear that she was difficult to like.

To those with even a passing familiarity with the women's movement of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, this will likely not come as a surprise. Sixty years after the publication of "The Feminine Mystique" and seventeen years after Friedan's death, it is still impossible to mention her name without eliciting strong responses—most of them negative. And yet Shteir and Turk show that Friedan, for all her considerable flaws, was one of those characters whom history responds to, someone who shapes public opinion through the force of her personality. She had the kind of insatiable insecurity that makes talented people both very driven and very draining.

By the time Burnett knocked on Friedan's door, in 1969, NOW, which had begun three years earlier with barely two dozen women, had emerged as a serious, accomplished, multi-issue organization, with outsized influence considering its relatively small membership. Anyone could join NOW; to start a new chapter, all you needed was ten interested people willing to shell out the membership fee, then under ten dollars per year. Local chapters developed their own tactics and priorities; NOW was nationally recognized but customizable for women on the ground. Under Friedan's leadership, the group organized the spontaneously forming local chapters, like Burnett's, under a national umbrella, and established a wide-ranging agenda. Among the objectives were securing the enforcement of anti-discrimination law; gaining subsidized child care, abortion rights, and public-accommodations protections; and passing the Equal Rights Amendment. NOW was able to bring about changes large and small—to hiring policies, to credit-granting rules, to laws—that improved the lives of American women. Through these first years, Friedan was NOW's public face.

The group was born out of frustration. "The Feminine Mystique" had ignited a national awakening of dissatisfied housewives, but discontent had been simmering for decades. Radical feminism would emerge in the late sixties, as a reaction to the social movements of the New Left, but a more technocratic, moderate feminism was already beginning to surface among women lawyers, labor-union activists, and political insiders in the early part of the decade. The intellectual center of this group was Pauli Murray, a Black legal theorist who was the architect of some of the most consequential litigation of the civil-rights era. After years of fighting for civil rights for African Americans, Murray had begun to see the inferior social and legal status of women as a related emergency.

A ban on sex discrimination in employment had been incorporated into the 1964 Civil Rights Act. But the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the government agency that had been established to enforce workplace equality, pointedly refused to acknowledge the sex-discrimination clause. Men in Washington were calling it the Bunny Law, joking that, if a ban on sex discrimination in employment were actually enforced, men would have to act as Bunnies at the Playboy Club. But, if Washington insiders felt that women's workplace-equality claims were laughably illegitimate on their face, that wasn't the mood in the American workforce. Nearly a third of the complaints received by the agency in its first year pertained to sex discrimination. For the most part, the commissioners were simply ignoring them.

In 1966, Friedan, by then a national celebrity, went to Washington to attend a national conference for women in politics. She was not impressed. On a visit to the White House, she listened as President Johnson welcomed the conference-goers by addressing "the distinguished and very attractive delegates." It was as if the President "fig-

"I just forgot everything I learned in there."

uratively patted our heads," Friedan later remembered.

For some time, Friedan had resisted the pleas she'd been receiving from Murray and others to lead a proposed new organization, which some activists had begun to call the "N.A.A.C.P. for women." Friedan, with an unusual degree of self-awareness, had been initially skeptical that she had the temperament to lead it. But at the time there was no other feminist with either her national profile or her political credibility. If Betty didn't do it, it wasn't going to happen. Her experience at the conference convinced Friedan that the federal government would not act on women's rights on its own. It needed external pressure.

The night after the White House visit, Friedan invited several conference attendees to an informal meeting in her suite at the Washington Hilton, where the conference was being held. Those women brought along others; in all, about twenty women were crammed into the room. Retellings of the meeting use varying euphemisms to convey the fact that many in attendance were drunk. A number of the women had just returned from a boozy reception at the State Department. "Everybody was feeling rather good by this time" was how Catherine Conroy, a union leader, put it, because their State Department hosts had been "very generous with the liquor." At Friedan's meeting, the women kept drinking, filling paper cups with alcohol from the suite's minibar.

Murray spoke first, clutching a yellow legal pad. They had gathered the women here for a purpose, she said. She proposed "an independent national civil rights organization for women" with "enough political power to compel government agencies to take seriously the problems of discrimination because of sex."

The proposal did not go over as well as Murray and Friedan had hoped. Some women thought they could still effect change from within existing structures. Others were miffed at what they perceived as Murray and Friedan's presumptuousness. A woman named Nancy Knaak spoke up: "Do you think we really need another women's organization?" At this, the room exploded into shouting. Friedan's voice rose above the din. "Who in the hell invited you?" she yelled at Knaak. "Get out! Get out!" she continued. "This is my room and my liquor." Knaak refused to leave; Friedan locked herself in the bathroom. Thus, amid a drunken fight, the National Organization for Women came into the world. "*Women*," Friedan would later write of the scene. "What can you expect?"

Friedan presided over NOW from 1966 to 1970, and immediately shaped the organization in her own image. At a 1967 conference formalizing NOW's agenda, Friedan made sure that endorsements of both the E.R.A. and abortion rights sailed through. The abortion provision alienated Catholic and anti-abortion women, who walked out when the pro-choice resolution was passed. Support for the E.R.A. alienated women from the labor unions, many of which opposed the amendment—they walked out, too. The objections did not seem to bother Friedan, who, at least on some matters, was willing to sacrifice popularity for principle.

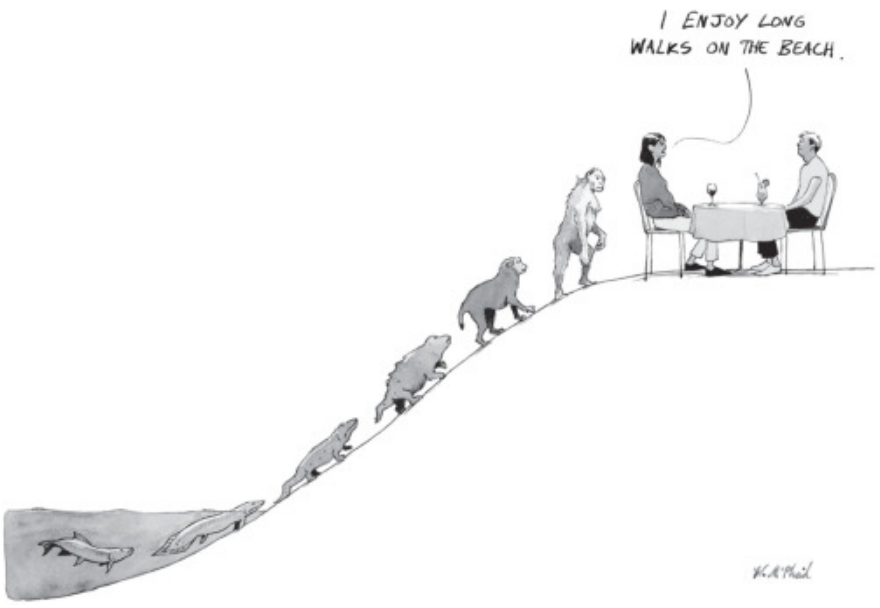
During her tenure, she steered NOW through a series of successful efforts to change labor law. It got the E.E.O.C. to hold public hearings on sex-segregated help-wanted ads; it got President Johnson to sign an executive order banning sex discrimination by federal contractors; and it won legal victories striking down discriminatory labor laws, which had long excluded women from higher-pay and higher-status work under the pretext of "protection." In 1968, NOW threatened Colgate-Palmolive, the household-products company, with a boycott when it and its union refused to rescind a company policy that closed off higher-pay, higher-status jobs to women. The New York chapter showed up outside the company's Manhattan headquarters and held a "flush in," symbolically flushing the company's products down a real toilet, complete with legs on either side.

These ambitious demands and theatrical demonstrations would today mark a militant group, one willing to break taboos and offend sensibilities. But Friedan strove to keep the group approachable, moderate, and respectable. When two radical leaders of NOW's New York chapter wanted to provide public support to Valerie Solanas after she was arrested for shooting Andy Warhol, Friedan roundly objected, and engineered their exit from the group.

Friedan's personality is often faulted for the failures of feminism's second wave, but what might have been more detrimental in the short term was her policy priorities. "Friedan wanted NOW to put women on an equal footing with men," Turk writes, "and she especially focused on relatively elite women who were shut out of male-dominated spaces."

Among other things, this focus on the élite kept NOW disproportionately white: about ninety per cent of NOW's members in this era were white, according to Turk, and these women "generally viewed racial justice struggles as laudable but distinct." Nonwhite founders, like Murray, tended to drift from the organization after its first years. Efforts to recruit more members of color were complicated by a federal policy that said that employees could complain about discrimination on the basis of race or sex, but not both—a state of affairs that made it harder for groups like NOW, with their focus on lawsuits and lobbying, to be of much help to women of color. Black women who did work with NOW were often highly credentialled policy professionals, like Turk's subject Aileen Hernandez, a onetime E.E.O.C. commissioner. Several of these women spoke candidly about NOW's narrow focus. "All women have problems to work on together," said Nancy Randolph, a dean of the University of Alabama's social-work school, and the NOW Tuscaloosa chapter's only Black member. Still, she said, "Every time I'm at a NOW meeting, I think of all the blacks who are at home taking care of the members' children."

Meanwhile, sexual politics were becoming a problem. When, in the late sixties, the emergent radical-feminist movement began to advance a critique of heterosexuality, Friedan found the focus on sexuality both crude and a bit naïve. "Young women only need a little more experience to understand that the gut issues of this revolution involve employment and education . . . not sexual fantasy," she wrote in a memo. More important, in Friedan's mind, the growing prominence of lesbians calling for recognition threatened to scare away the middle-class moderates whose support she so craved. In 1969, when NOW organized its first Congress to Unite Women, Friedan made sure that a lesbian



group was kept off the list of sponsors. But the radicals made their presence known anyway. At the conference, a woman cut off another woman's long hair onstage, as a symbol of liberation from femininity. Friedan was peeved. She described the haircutting as "a hysterical episode."

It was at a December, 1969, meeting of NOW's executive committee that Friedan made what is probably the most famous remark of her career, condemning lesbians as the "lavender menace." Explanations for Friedan's hostility to lesbians vary. According to Shteir, "Friedan herself sometimes blamed her own Midwestern prudishness." Another biographer speculated that her youth on the Communist left had caused her to feel vulnerable to mainstream rejection after the traumatic spectacle of the McCarthy hearings—the term "lavender menace," after all, is eerily similar to the McCarthyite claim of a "Red menace" in Washington. Shteir characterizes Friedan's preferred explanation as "palatable": "She feared that including lesbianism in NOW would alienate mainstream American women, tank the movement, and fail to generate the vast social changes she hoped for."

But, if Friedan's homophobia was strategic, it was a strategy that seemed misguided even at the time. NOW rank-and-file members, contrary to Friedan's assumptions, were increasingly supportive of gay rights, and tolerant of the lesbians in their midst. Even the Republican housewife Burnett, who had originally thought that embracing lesbian rights would doom the movement, came to lose faith in what Turk calls "defensive respectability politics." "There was only a core group of women that would have been respectable to the men," Burnett explained, "and even us, they didn't like very much." At a NOW conference in May, 1970, lesbians seized the stage to protest Friedan's remarks, wearing T-shirts that read "Lavender Menace" and holding signs proclaiming "WOMEN'S LIBERATION IS A LESBIAN PLOT." "The audience roared with laughter," Turk writes. "The whole room appeared to be on their side. . . . One by one, the protesters came forward" and "denounced Friedan."

Most accounts of NOW's early years feature Friedan's irascibility, her outbursts, her constant need for reassurance, and her tremendous capacity for cruelty. Shteir's book features all these, and also gives them biographical context—illustrative bits from Friedan's life that add reasons, if not excuses, for the worst of her behavior.

A Jewish native of Peoria, Illinois, Friedan had come east for college at Smith, where she faced the genteel antisemitism of Wasp classmates. In college, she found her first political identity, as a Communist. She wrote for the student newspaper, and took a far-left line. At Smith, she discovered a passion for psychology, and after graduating, in 1942, she pursued postgraduate work at Berkeley, earning a prestigious fellowship that she quickly gave up so as not to emasculate the man she was dating at the time. He dumped her anyway. A series of romantic misfires followed. Like many women of her era, and ours, Friedan's early dating life was characterized by inappropriate relationships with her professors, unsuccessful attempts to conform to feminine ideals she could not convincingly imitate, and sexual assault. Betty was intellectually serious, politically committed, and not very pretty. She craved romantic devotion from men that was not forthcoming. Her problem, one that would frustrate her for the rest of her life, was that she could not find a man who respected her as an equal and also wanted to sleep with her.

Love was not the only arena in which the young Friedan saw herself as an outsider. At one point, according to her F.B.I. file, she tried to join the East Bay branch of the Communist Party, but was rejected for being too intellectual. She stormed out of the Party office, saying that its paper was badly written anyway.

Soon, she dropped out of Berkeley. Her psychology studies did not last long in part because she felt disgust at the misogyny that characterized the field's theoretical foundations. Shteir recounts an incident in which a graduate student, over dinner with Friedan, introduced her to the concept of penis envy. Humiliated and enraged, she left the table, and locked herself in the bathroom. In psychology, in Communism, and in romance, she was a young woman looking for community—for belonging, fellow-feeling, respect. She did not find it.

Things did not improve much when, in 1947, she married Carl Friedan, a former magician who was trying to make it as a theatre producer. Carl was less intellectually accomplished than Friedan's previous boyfriends, and only intermittently employed. One could get the impression that Betty, who by then had a career as a journalist for the labor press, had settled. Her mother, Miriam, whom Betty never much liked, spoke of the marriage as a kind of alliance of desperation: "They thought if they got married, they could help each other."

The couple had three children, moved

to a large house in the suburbs that they could not really afford, and began to have ferocious fights. Betty drank heavily; Carl cheated on her; they yelled and threw things. Their destructive patterns accelerated after the publication of "The Feminine Mystique," when Betty became a sudden celebrity. In her biography, Shteir is careful to emphasize Friedan's role in the violence of her marriage. She recounts an incident, on Fire Island, in which Betty chased Carl down the beach, brandishing a butcher knife. But the pattern that emerges from her account is one typical of domestic violence. Once, while publicizing "The Feminine Mystique," Friedan showed up to a meeting with her press agent wearing sunglasses, to cover the bruises on her face. Friedan's fame as a feminist seemed to make her situation inescapable: the emphasis she placed on feminism's importance to the institution of marriage made her feel that she needed to project happiness in her own. Fearing the publicity, she delayed divorcing for a long time.

The violence went on for years, persisting into NOW's heyday. On February 12, 1969, Friedan found herself with a black eye at a particularly inopportune moment. It was NOW's "Public Accommodations Week," a series of protests in which NOW members stormed into male-only businesses, forcibly integrating them. The flagship demonstration was set to take place that morning, with a sit-in at the Plaza Hotel's exclusive Oak Room. Friedan was in a panic: women were coming out in the middle of a snowstorm, clad in Plaza-appropriate furs, and a number of journalists had been tipped off to cover the event. She wanted to skip it—how could she show up with a black eye in front of all those cameras?—but instead she called on Jean Faust, a NOW member who had once worked for the cosmetics company Elizabeth Arden. Faust covered Friedan's bruise with makeup, and Friedan arrived at the Plaza in her mink. Faust had done an excellent job: the black eye did not appear in any pictures.

Friedan saw herself, with some justification, as the founder of the second-wave feminist movement. It was a self-conception that led her into grandiosity; she sometimes compared herself to Joan of Arc. To Friedan, any attack on feminism was an attack on her; and any disagreement within feminism, or any diversion from what she saw as the movement's true purpose, was a betrayal. A recurring theme during NOW's early years was the other leaders' need to manage and control Betty, cajoling and pacifying her like a rare animal they had caught.

In the beginning, many of them considered Friedan to be as indispensable as she was impossible. Pauli Murray called her "a catalytic agent." Muriel Fox said, "She was our engine." The women felt they needed Friedan: needed her credibility and her celebrity, needed her knack for recruiting women, her bombastic demonstrations of principle, and her talent for soliciting attention. But, as the second wave gathered support and steam, they needed her less.

Friedan left the presidency of NOW in 1970, ceding it to Murray's protégée, Hernandez. Many were relieved to see her go. But she could not resist a parting gesture. At the March meeting where she handed Hernandez the presidency, Friedan announced a new initiative: a general strike of women, scheduled for just five months hence, on August 26th. NOW leaders were more than a little upset at Friedan's proclamation. "Hernandez was seated next to Friedan, prepared to settle in for the long-winded author's swan song," Turk writes. "Instead, she heard Friedan pledge that NOW would hold a national day of action that Hernandez would have to carry out." Mary Jean Collins, the Chicago chapter head, was in the audience for Friedan's sudden announcement. "We were all a little horrified," she recounted. "I thought, 'how are we supposed to do this?'"

But do it they did. The Women's Strike for Equality was promoted by NOW's local chapters, the source of the organization's greatest strength. The media publicized the action "not on the women's page, but the news page." Collins's chapter in Chicago plastered flyers around town, reading "Worry Your Pretty Head—Strike August 26," and "Don't Iron While the Strike Is Hot." Tens of thousands of women showed up for rallies in forty American cities and a number of U.S. embassies abroad.

Friedan, Turk writes, had conceived the strike as a way to reorient feminism around her own priorities, "away from 'bra-burning actions,' 'radical rhetoric,' and sexuality, and towards feminism's 'real goals': workplace rights, child-care centers, and free abortion available to all."

But, when strike day arrived, the action attracted not just Friedan's imagined constituency but women from across a wide range of experiences and ideological orientations. Demonstrations extended far beyond the organization's membership and beyond its priorities. Union women came out in support of job access and an end to the "racist, capitalist system that oppresses all blacks, all women and all workers." Secretaries at the Pentagon walked off the job and started throwing bras, girdles, and a rolling pin into a trash can. The New York demonstration included lesbian groups, student groups, a group called Older Women's Liberation, and members of the Third World Women's Alliance, carrying a banner that read "HANDS OFF ANGELA DAVIS!," in reference to the California activist who at the time was the subject of a federal manhunt. At the concluding rally, in Bryant Park, Friedan took the stage. "We learn . . . what none of us dared to hope," she said, "the power of our solidarity." In her memoir, she called the moment the "high point" of her career.

The result of Friedan's impulsive proposal was something much larger than she had imagined, something more dynamic and surprising. NOW membership exploded in the weeks after the strike; major networks sent reporters in multiple cities to cover the action, and newspapers printed their stories about it on the front page, above the fold. But when *Time* ran a feature story on the women's movement, five days later, the face on the cover wasn't Friedan's. It was that of the young radical Kate Millet. The movement had moved on; now it had new faces. ♦

Mohamed Mbougar Sarr fictionalizes literary history to escape its clutches.

NICK HELDERMAN

BOOKS

ABSENCE AFRICAINE

A Prix Goncourt–winning novel about a quest to unearth a literary legend.

BY JULIAN LUCAS

In 1968, the Malian novelist Yambo Ouologuem won France's prestigious Prix Renaudot for a bloody satire about a fictional African country called "Bound to Violence." Opening in mock epic style with the brutality of a medieval empire, and ending amid baroque assassinations in the mid-twentieth century, it vents its spleen in every direction: at slave traffickers, native and foreign; corrupt clerics and mercenary anthropologists; and, especially, oppressive rulers who used idyllic visions of the African past to hoodwink their countrymen. (Among its targets seems to have been Senegal's poet-President, Léopold Sédar Senghor, a leader of the Négritude movement and a future "immortal" of the Académie Française.) The book's biggest dupe is an African student in Paris, cultivated as the "black pearl of French culture" and then installed as the puppet leader of his nation.

Ouologuem's novel was a triumph and a scandal. Western critics hailed the arrival of a Black intellectual unafraid to tell the truth about his continent, whose "startling energy of language," John Updike wrote in this magazine, bespoke "modes of human existence prior to civilization." Many African writers accused him of cynicism or even self-hatred, though later generations would praise him for asserting literature's independence from nativism. In the midst of these debates, it emerged that "Bound to Violence" included unattributed passages from Graham Greene and André Schwarz-Bart, among others. Ouologuem blamed his publisher for deleting quotation marks, a claim that the publisher found absurd. He left France, disavowed his books, and became a marabout in his native Mali, where he died in 2017.

It was, in one scholar's words, "an incalculable loss to world literature." Yet an author's abdication can exert a powerful fascination. "Silence is the artist's ultimate other-worldly gesture," Susan Sontag once argued, reflecting on writers whose renunciation of their work had burnished it with an aura of "unchallengeable seriousness." Ouologuem's enigmatic withdrawal has proved similarly magnetic. Was he a great iconoclast and pasticheur? Or a cautionary tale, a mimic man whom Western letters seduced, then rejected and disgraced? Did he give up writing in defeat or in defiance, or simply because he found answers somewhere else?

In 2021, a young Senegalese author named Mohamed Mbougar Sarr won the Prix Goncourt—France's *most* prestigious book prize—for "The Most Secret Memory of Men," a rollicking literary mystery dedicated to Ouologuem and loosely inspired by his disappearance. It revolves around the search for a Senegalese author of the nineteen-thirties, T. C. Elimane, whose long-forgotten novel—every copy was said to have been destroyed—resurfaces in contemporary Paris. Elimane's work becomes an obsession for a contemporary cohort of African writers, giving them "the chance to tear each other limb from limb in pious and bloody literary jousts." The narrator speaks of it like scripture: "His book was both cathedral and arena; we entered it as if entering a god's tomb and ended up kneeling in our own blood, offered as libation to the masterpiece."

"The Most Secret Memory of Men" is an aerobatic feat of narrative invention, whirling between noir, fairy tale, satire, and archival fiction in its self-re-

flexive meditation on the nature of literary legend. Its Goncourt was seen as a coup in the world of French letters, which had never before conferred its highest recognition on a writer from sub-Saharan Africa. (Sarr's characters poke delicious fun at such dubious ethnogeographical distinctions.) This month, it's finally becoming available to Anglophone readers in Lara Vergnaud's propulsive translation for Other Press, which also plans to rerelease "Bound to Violence."

There's an element of poetic justice in an homage to Ouologuem winning such approbation from the very establishment that discarded him. Sarr witheringly scrutinizes the cultural Françafrique—a word for France's geopolitical influence over its former colonies—that relegates African fiction to the status of veiled memoir, ethnographic study, or folkloric entertainment. Defying these categories, he delivers a demiurgic story of literary self-creation, transforming the sad fate of an author who stopped writing into a galvanizing tale about all that remains to be written.

Sarr's narrator, Diégane Latyr Faye, is a young Senegalese writer in Paris. He's charmingly neurotic, passionately literary, and, having strayed from the "noble path of academia" to become a novelist, completely adrift. His girlfriend has left him for a career in foreign reporting and his parents in Dakar wonder why he never calls. He has published one novel, pretentiously titled "Anatomy of the Void," but it sold only a few dozen copies, and he's already squandered a month on the first sentence of his next. Seemingly all that tethers him to earth are his friends in the Paris literary scene's "African Ghetto," who share little more than a continent of origin and a great deal of frustration.

A deft caricaturist, Sarr sketches this clique with the mischievous affection of a recent alum. There's a Franco-Guinean influencer whose buzzy début, "Love Is a Cocoa Bean," is the toast of Instagram, and a Congolese poet whose reviews are as ruthless as his hexameters are recondite. They gather to kvetch about their literary elders (many of them mired in the "slave hold" of self-exoticism), African readers ("avid to be represented when they are in fact unrepresentable"), white ones (who envision them "weaving tales in the moonlight"), and, above all, the French literary establishment, object of their public derision and private dreams.

The anxiety of influence is crushing for Diégane, who grew up in a country "still haunted by Senghor's cumbrous ghost." In one of the novel's funniest chapters, he *almost* participates in a threesome with other members of the group, but overthinks the situation's literary resonances. "First we surrendered to the galvanic tremors of the barely nubile night, green as a young mango," he recounts, parodying the sensual imagery of Négritude. Their hostess proposes moving to the bedroom, but Diégane, too timid, ends up stewing on the couch under a giant crucifix, trying to ignore the cacophony of lovemaking as he hallucinates a conversation with Jesus. Vergnaud's fine ear gives vivid life to the Englished Diégane, whose extravagant sentences belie his literary-libidinal stagefright.

What initiates the central narrative is another failed tryst, this time with an older woman: Marème Siga D., doyenne of Senegal's expatriate writers, whose scandalous frankness has given her the reputation of an "evil Pythia." As their foreplay fizzles, Siga D. chides Diégane for confusing life and literature—and sends him home with a copy of T. C. Elimane's "The Labyrinth of Inhumanity." He spends the next two months on its author's trail, searching for answers to his own quandaries in Elimane's. "People think, as if it's a foregone conclusion, that it's the past that returns to inhabit and haunt the present," he reflects. "But it could be that the reverse is just as true if not more so, and that it's us relentlessly haunting those who came before. We are the true ghosts of our history, our ghosts' ghosts."

Sarr lends his narrator many aspects of his own biography. Born in 1990, the eldest of a doctor's seven sons, he began writing poetry at military school in Saint-Louis, once the capital of French West Africa, and graduated with so many honors that he was declared Senegal's top student. He later enrolled at Paris's École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, where he began a dissertation on three West African writers and their work in the late sixties: Ahmadou Kourouma, Malick Fall, and Yambo Ouologuem. Ouologuem's swift rise and subsequent ostracism particularly fascinated him. "I always ask myself whether he would have had the same fate if he hadn't been Malian," Sarr said recently, arguing that what really bothered Western readers about Ouologuem was that he "not only copied but, more explosively, parodied texts from the colonial tradition."

Eventually, Sarr decided to stop studying fiction and start publishing it, releasing his début novel with the storied house Présence Africaine. "Brotherhood" (2015) takes place in a fictional African city seized by an Islamist militia, whose residents establish an underground journal to chronicle the occupation. The book's theme was topical—Mali, at the time, had become embroiled in an insurgency—but its execution recalled the social novels of the nineteenth century, bringing comedy, melodrama, psychological acuity, and encyclopedic ambition to its portrayal of the corrupt jihadists and their skeptical subjects. The pattern continued with "Silence du Chœur" (2017), a raucously polyphonic novel about a group of African migrants and their confrontation with European nativists in a small Sicilian town.

The two books won a number of prizes, and early success seemingly emboldened Sarr to take a major risk. His third book, "De Purs Hommes" (2018), is a riveting psychodrama that dissects Senegal's taboo against homosexuality. The narrator, a professor in Dakar, finds his life upended after a woman he's seeing shows him a viral video of a mob disinterring and desecrating a suspected homosexual's corpse. Feigning indifference, he gradually becomes obsessed with the plight of the *góor-jigéen* (a Wolof slur that means "man-woman"), struck by the irony that homosexuality, though decried as Western decadence, is latent

in some traditional practices. Once the narrator's students stage a boycott in response to his lecture on Verlaine, the stigma also begins to envelop him.

At first, the novel was mostly ignored in Senegal. But controversy erupted after Sarr was "*goncourisé*." Local writers and religious leaders accused him of selling out his culture. The more conspiracy-minded speculated that he had received the Goncourt as a reward for his pro-L.G.B.T.Q. stance, or was even himself a disguised homosexual. The fracas didn't stop Senegal's President from awarding the young author the National Order of the Lion. But it did shed light on why Sarr might have found such a model in Ouologuem's courageous effrontery.

Fictionalizing literary history can allow writers to exorcise its overbearing presence, to escape its clichés and culs-de-sac. Jorge Luis Borges reviewed imaginary books to overcome the enormous weight of the forebears who obsessed him. Ishmael Reed, in his novel "Mumbo Jumbo," tried to free African American writers from their pigeonholes by parodying the archetypal figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Similarly, Sarr borrows from Ouologuem's life to fashion a new origin myth for his tradition.

The fact that Elimane is Senegalese, not Malian, and publishes in the nineteen-thirties, not the sixties, situates him near the very beginning of African literature in French. We aren't privy to more than a few sentences of his "Labyrinth of Inhumanity," but it certainly isn't Négritude. The story begins with a tyrant who massacres his kingdom's elders, suggesting bold iconoclasm rather than stylized nostalgia. Press clippings describe a "Negro Rimbaud" who inspires polemics by bigoted imperialists, patronizing socialists, and a host of others, all seemingly less interested in the book itself than in whether or not it is "African down to its marrow."

His biography is related through an engrossing sequence of nested narratives. When Diégane visits Siga D. in Amsterdam, she regales him with tales of the great author's private life, introducing a tertiary cast of narrators that includes journalists, one of his former lovers, and her own family back in Senegal—which, in a twist, is also Elimane's. We learn that he was involved in a ménage à trois with his publishers, a Jewish couple; fought with the French Resistance; and possibly spent years travelling Europe in search of his father, a soldier with a colonial education who disappeared on the battlefield after volunteering to fight for France in the First World War. Except, it emerges, Elimane might actually be the son of the soldier's twin and romantic rival, a blind fisherman who practices sorcery. The paternity question allegorizes a crisis of literary origins: Is Elimane heir to the brother who left or the brother who stayed, European brainwashing or Senegalese tradition?

The plot's endless recursions are a reductio ad absurdum of the quest for authorial authenticity, particularly acute in the context of African literature. One reason that plagiarism allegations sank Ouologuem's career so quickly is that readers expected him to embody the essence of a race, a culture, and a continent. To borrow an image from "Bound to Violence," he'd sold the ethnologists of the literary world a fake mask. Yet artifice and absence are basic to the modern myth of the writer, which Sarr both mocks and defiantly claims. "Of a writer and their work, we can at least know this," Diégane proclaims in the novel's opening sentence. "Together, they make their way through the most perfect labyrinth imaginable, the path long and circular, and their destination the same as their starting point: solitude."

He echoes Maurice Blanchot ("literature is going toward itself, toward its essence, which is disappearance") and Roberto Bolaño, whom Sarr credits with liberating him "to place literature at the heart of the novel." The book borrows its conceit and title from Bolaño's "The Savage Detectives," another madcap investigation of literary history; in a winking tribute to Latin American metafiction, Sarr even sends Elimane to Buenos Aires, where he romances a Haitian poetess and mingles with great modernists. Sarr seems keen to remind readers that African writers are part of the *world's* literary history, beyond the binary of Africa and Europe.

At times, Elimane's to-ing and fro-ing threatens to grow tiresome, especially since his aesthetic and political views never quite come into focus. He needs to remain elusive in order to drive the narrative, but it would have been more interesting to implicate him, somehow, in the many historical dramas that he glides through. His stubborn aloofness is the flip side of Diégane's ambivalence toward his literary vocation: "Conflicts were raging, the planet was suffocating . . . there was a whole ocean of shit outside, and we, African writers whose continent was swimming in it, were discussing *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity* instead of doing a single damn thing to rescue it."

"The Most Secret Memory of Men" arrives amid a rupture between France and its former colonies in Africa. A spate of coups across West and Central Africa—in Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and, most recently, Gabon—have been applauded by crowds expressing their opposition to France's military and economic influence over the region. Mali has dropped French as its official language in a new constitution, and in Senegal, where the government recently cracked down on supporters of a young opposition leader, French corporations have become targets. Where does this leave African writers based in the former metropole?

Sarr weaves these anxieties into Diégane's return to Senegal, where he comes to search for Elimane. A youth uprising is sweeping the streets of Dakar, and everyone wants to know his opinion. "The whites talk about you in France," an activist challenges him on Facebook. "But what do YOU have to say for your country?" Nothing, Diégane is ashamed to realize. Sarr himself recently co-wrote an opinion piece criticizing Senegal's President for this summer's unrest. But in the novel he dutifully cobbles together a vague political crisis far less compelling than the ones in his previous work. It reads

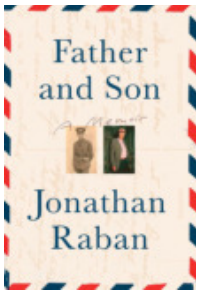
like a halfhearted apology for writing a novel about literature rather than current events.

There's also a politics to who may partake of the artist's solitude. When Diégane leaves Dakar for Elimane's village in the Sine-Saloum Delta—country of the Serer people, to whom Diégane, like Sarr, also belongs—the prose grows lush and immediate, as though the narrator has freed himself from worries about his peers, precursors, and political responsibilities. His doubts about his demystifying mission intensify: "An inner voice hopes that Elimane came back here, that he wrote and left something behind; another prays that the opposite is true . . . that he met his end in anonymity the way a star burns out one day amid a thousand others."

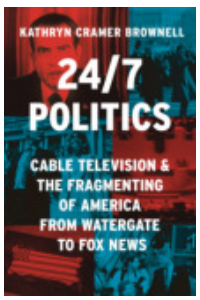
Yambo Ouologuem *was* found by the world he'd abandoned. A scholar tracked him down in the late nineteen-nineties, surprising him as he was giving an impromptu lecture on Islamic doctrine in the Malian town of Sévaré. Irritated, he refused to be photographed and was reluctant to discuss literary matters; when his dogged discoverer asked his opinion on the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, he declined to comment, though one of his friends protested that he'd been speaking about it the previous day. Eventually, he gave an interview, clarifying various aspects of his biography. But the exchanges have an air of sad anticlimax, like the blurry photo of Thomas Pynchon out with his son or Claudio Gatti's "unmasking" of Elena Ferrante.

Sarr could have written a biographical work about Ouologuem, speculating on the psychology behind his borrowings, the pornography he wrote under a pseudonym, or his abandonment of secular writing for religious study. He could have finished his dissertation on "Bound to Violence" and its era instead of writing a novel set in his own. But literature needs its legends. African literature, perpetually at risk of reduction to testimony, might need them more than most. Sometimes the greatest tribute that authors can pay to their predecessors is simply to continue where they left off. ♦

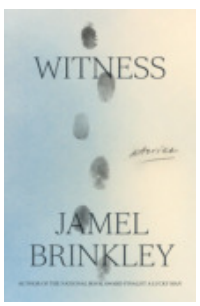
BRIEFLY NOTED



Father and Son, *by Jonathan Raban (Knopf)*. Like Edmund Gosse's memoir of the same name, Raban's posthumously published final work follows an English father and son whose lives take diverging paths. Raban juxtaposes an account of his rehabilitation after a stroke that occurred in 2011, when he was sixty-eight, with his father's experiences as an artillery officer in the Second World War. The stories never connect, reflecting the divide between the liberal, literary son, who immigrated to Seattle in 1990, and the conservative father, who became a vicar in the Church of England. The war chapters, which excerpt correspondence between Raban's parents, are compelling, but it is Raban's reckoning with his own frailty that carries the emotional weight of the book. "What have I lost?" he asks. "And am I fooling myself?"



24/7 Politics, *by Kathryn Cramer Brownell (Princeton)*. This near-encyclopedic exploration of the rise of cable news begins with the lead-up to the 1984 Presidential election, when cable executives and lobbyists set out to dismantle the power of network broadcasters and redirect it to themselves. Brownell, a historian, details how the opponents of network broadcasting successfully cast the industry as "elitist" and peddled cable as a democratizing force that would "empower people, politicians, and perspectives." Her persuasive account argues that cable's advocates were, in fact, motivated primarily by profit, and that cable television's Sisyphean pursuit of ratings and revenue ultimately served to cultivate a toxic media—and political—environment.



Witness, *by Jamel Brinkley (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. Many of the stories in this powerful collection, by a National Book Award finalist, orbit figures who dwell on the past, unable to accept their "forward movement through the entanglements of time." There is a woman who is obsessed with the wife of her brother's killer; a son haunted by his mother as he makes plans to install his father in a nursing home; a man whose budding romance ends after he relates a horrific memory. The wounds that afflict Brinkley's characters stem from social inequality—police brutality, exploitation in the gig economy, and doctors' racist dismissals of Black patients—and from such universal vulnerabilities as family discord, heritable illnesses, and our own resistance to change.

The Details, *by Ia Genberg, translated from the Swedish by Kira Josefsson (HarperVia)*. This elliptical novel, narrated by an unnamed woman who is confined to her bed by a high fever, consists of four character studies. During her illness, the woman picks up a book—an edition of Paul Auster's "New York Trilogy"—inscribed to her by a former lover. Flipping through it brings back vivid recollections of that woman, whose frosty personality "was part of her—and not as deficiency but as tool, a useful little patch of ice." These reminiscences lead to others: first of a wayward roommate; then of a "hurricane" ex-boyfriend; and finally of the narrator's traumatized mother. She relates her textured insights into human nature through small moments. "As far as the dead are concerned," she muses, "all that matters are the details, the degree of density."

BOOKS

HOT AND BOTHERED

James Ellroy finally takes on Marilyn Monroe.

BY PARUL SEHGAL

In the spring of 1995, dozens of snakes appeared on the beaches of Southern California. Panic. A Biblical curse, some held, to punish the wicked. "California has been given so many signs: floods, drought, fires, earthquakes lifting mountains two feet high in Northridge," the California congresswoman Andrea Seastrand declared. "Yet people turn from His ways." The Los Angeles *Times* made soothing noises, counselling against the curse theory. But the obvious person to consult would have been a native son of Los Angeles who saw geography as destiny, who specialized in snakes of all stripes, and whose characters find, in natural disasters, their only competitors in the making of mayhem.

James Ellroy, the neo-noir eminence of L.A. crime fiction, is back, with his favorite snake, Fred Otash, in tow. The real Otash, who died in 1992, was a disgraced former cop turned private eye and freelance menace who worked with the notorious Hollywood tabloid *Confidential;* he claimed to have hot-wired every bathhouse in L.A., to have spied on Rock Hudson and Tab Hunter, and to have eavesdropped on Marilyn Monroe as she died. Ellroy knew the man a little and loathed him a lot. "You don't go out and wreck lives en masse the way he did with *Confidential* and retain your humanity," he once told an interviewer. But Freddy Otash had his uses—that was the point of him—and he sure can shoulder a novel. He has been a sturdy muse: reportedly the inspiration for Jake Gittes in "Chinatown," and, as a sweeter, more humanized heavy, a supporting character in Ellroy's "Underworld U.S.A." trilogy ("American Tabloid," "The Cold Six Thousand," and "Blood's a Rover"). He has since been given top billing, and he narrates Ellroy's latest novel, "The Enchanters" (Knopf).

It's the summer of 1962. The assignment: Deliver the dirt on Marilyn Monroe. The clients: Jimmy Hoffa, the Kennedys, the L.A.P.D. The complications: Where to begin? A starlet is kidnapped by men wearing Fidel Castro masks; an industrious Peeping Tom paws through the lingerie drawers of local divorcées. Marilyn herself is unrecognizable; she has been leaving her house in baffling disguises, bloating and distorting her face with collagen injections. There is also the small matter of Freddy's affair with a very married Pat Kennedy, whose husband, Peter Lawford, procures women for his brother-in-law the President. Oh, and that catalogue he so thoughtfully arranged, of nude photographs of prospects, full "woof-woof" on display—anyone seen it lying around?

To pick up a James Ellroy novel in the year 2023 is to know the score. We—"the peepers, prowlers, pederasts, panty-sniffers, punks and pimps," as he refers to his readership—do not arrive expecting much in the way of lavish scene-setting, characters who confound us with complexity, or commas. We are here for the short, stabby sentences and percussive rhythms. Stories are sheared down to bare-bones plot, almost stage directions, almost, at times, demented square-dance calls: "Pete rotates. Wayne rotates. Pete moves stateside. Laurent's there. Ditto Flash. They funnel stateside. Stanton stays in-country. Ditto Mesplède. Tiger Kamp runs low-supervised. The war escalates. More troops pass through. The kadre hits Saigon half-assed." We expect redheads and racists, shock and schlock, pearl-gray suits and straw fedoras, weak men and strong women—noir stock types, surely, but not only.

The world of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, the pulps Ellroy loved as a child, and his own private California are distilled into a gab, a grammar for brutality, shame, misogyny, and unresolved mourning. Violence is taken

In "The Enchanters," the master of neo-noir crime fiction has met his match.

ILLUSTRATION BY EMILIANO PONZI

lightly, and desire with utmost seriousness. Ellroy, like Patricia Highsmith, has never really got over the fact of sex. There's a joke he enjoys telling: "I want to find the guy who invented sex and ask him what he's working on now."

Beyond the syntax, beyond the quick, greasy fun, there's a world view shaped by personal tragedy. When Ellroy was ten, his mother was strangled to death; her body was dumped, her killer never found. Receiving the news, he felt as if a veil had been lifted. "I wanted to canonize the secret LA I first glimpsed the day the redhead died," he wrote in his memoir, "My Dark Places," from 1996. His novels inspect that secret L.A.—the hidden life of his mother, the unknowable life of her killer, the networks of corruption, which he depicts with a matter-of-factness, and with none of the condemnation or hushed awe of DeLillo, otherwise an important influence. "America was never innocent," Ellroy tells us in "American Tabloid" (1995). "We popped our cherry on the boat over and looked back with no regrets." Ellroy once said that he wanted to destroy the cheap empathy of the crime novel, and, later, that he wanted to move past the genre entirely, to "move uptown" to the historical novel, to an examination of politics as crime: "My big thematic journey is twentieth-century American history, and what I think twentieth-century American history is, is the story of bad white men, soldiers of fortune, shakedown artists, extortionists, leg-breakers. The lowest-level implementers of public policy. Men who are often toadies of right-wing regimes. Men who are racists. Men who are homophobes. These are my guys. These are the guys that I embrace."

What does it mean to embrace such men? For Ellroy, this is literary vision—to see the world for what it is, to love it as it is without flinching, and to see yourself in the same way. In effect, it means that he can never fully abandon his psychosexual plots; they burn at the core of everything he writes. You even find it in the section headings of "The Enchanters": "Sex Creep," "Bait Girls," "Wife Swap." Public history does not feel as alluring to him as furtive genealogies of violence, dramatized in obstinate orphic repetition from one book to the next: a woman (a redhead, a divorcée, someone love-hungry and secretive) is resurrected and rescued, only to be lost again. This repetitiveness, this obstinacy, is a distinctive feature of Ellroy's writing. His fiction, at its most potent, is driven less by plot than by ritual. He has been canonized and censured; he writes now, in his mid-seventies, on a plane beyond the exigencies of either, enjoying a rare kind of freedom. What does he choose to do with it? And how will he—a writer, impelled by personal history, whose work glows inwardly, with private signifiers—contend with postwar Hollywood's brightest neon sign?

She is the bait girl nonpareil; no one can touch her. About seven hundred Marilyn Monroe biographies have been published in English alone. There have been biographies by her friends, her foes, her siblings, her household staff, two of her husbands, and two of her stalkers. Norman Mailer didn't hesitate to publish a glossy art-book appreciation of the actress. Why? Money, honey. "I've really gotten to the point where I'm like an old prizefighter," Mailer told *Time* during the book's launch, in 1973. "And if my manager comes up to me and says, 'I've got you a tough fight with a good purse,' I go into the ring." Nothing makes an old fighter madder than having to do a charity benefit. Few books could have made the old fighter come off worse. "She looks fed on sexual candy," he croons. "Never again in her career will she look so sexually perfect as in 1953 making *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, no, never—if we are to examine a verb through its adverb—will she appear so fucky again." A blessing, perhaps. But she remains flypaper for all sorts of agendas and desires. Many years later, Gloria Steinem imagined a feminist future that gave us Marilyn as a "student, lawyer, teacher, artist, mother, grandmother, defender of animals, rancher, homemaker, sportswoman, rescuer of children." Why shouldn't James Ellroy have a turn?

Yet it's curious that he would choose to. The sirens of the fifties (more than a few of whom have walk-on roles in "The Enchanters") exert a powerful hold on his imagination—Rita Hayworth, in the luxuriance of her red hair, Kim Novak, in her close-fitting dove-gray suit in "Vertigo." Ellroy still sends flowers to Lois Nettleton's grave, in the Bronx, and gives her choice roles in his novels. He has

always seemed indifferent to Monroe, however, and evidently remains so. He speeds through her scenes. Even Freaky Freddy Otash, rifling through her belongings, sniffs her sheets with only perfunctory enthusiasm.

This is not necessarily a flaw; it's rare to encounter a portrayal of Monroe unconcerned with diagnosing, rescuing, or rehabilitating her. And there's no question that Monroe could have provided all the details and darkly funny lines needed to carry an Ellroy novel. (Her regular makeup artist fixed her up after the autopsy; he still had a money clip that she had given him, inscribed "Whitey Dear: While I'm still warm. Marilyn.") But Ellroy seems determined to curtail her presence. He can only write about her, it appears, because she is so often in disguise. What risk does she pose?

Ellroy and Monroe were born five miles apart, in Los Angeles; they both took on names of their own devising. They endured the early and decisive absences of their mothers, and struggled with addiction. They cultivated over-the-top public personas that courted ridicule, beneath which they remained, in many ways, canny operators. And they seemed to work the same neighborhood. "When you're famous, you kind of run into human nature in a raw kind of way," Monroe once said. "You're always running into people's unconscious." No matter Ellroy's grand claims of excavating American history; he remains the trawler of the male id, the uncontainable unconscious.

Perhaps there's a frequency between them that feels too close—and makes him intent on keeping his distance. Perhaps her own winky performances, her awareness of the role she played in fantasy life, make her unavailable to star in his. Through Freddy, we follow Marilyn across the city in scenes that could have been taken from Hitchcock's "Vertigo": "There's Marilyn. She's done up movie-star incognito. Dark slacks, tight jumper. Wraparound shades and Hermès scarf." Marilyn remains fragmented and removed, strips of celluloid; it's only Freddy whose body heat we feel.

Freddy was last seen in "Widespread Panic" (2021), dangling in Purgatory, confessing to his crimes and hoping for a more permanent placement. The Freddy we meet in "The Enchanters" is tragic, cowed, and inexplicably more taciturn, even as he goes to work with brutal efficiency on some quarry of the hour. "The drop ran eighty feet," Freddy observes in the novel's opening sequence. "I held his right arm. Max Herman held his left arm. Red Stromwall jammed his head down and force-fed him the view." The sequence is as tight, mean, and poised as anything in Ellroy. A flicker of hope: the novels of late have been uneven—perhaps this one has a chance?

It does not. "The Enchanters," which takes place during L.A.'s August heat, is at once panting and sluggish. Ellroy creates a world and refuses to enter it. While the reader is keen for him to *go in,* he merely *goes on* (and on). He is known for crafting detailed outlines that stretch to hundreds of pages, and that is what it feels we are left with—the ribs and spine of a book, delivered with strange weariness despite the cheerful, enabling amorality of Freaky Freddy. It's Freddy as Whistler's Mother, permanently parked in a chair. He waits, watching a quarry's home: "Spots popped in front of my eyes. My arteries pinged. My feet went numb. I lost weight as I tried to sit still." "Snoresville," he sums it up. It's possible to compile a taxonomy of yawns in "The Enchanters": stage yawns, stifled yawns, stifled stage yawns, yawns to stay awake, yawns to fall asleep, yawns of our own.

Between the yawns, the naps, the waiting, we get disquisitions on how uninteresting the characters find one another. Freddy on Marilyn: "She worked people. She used people. She possessed three modes of address. She was bossy, she was demure, she was effusive. I didn't like her. I didn't get her. Her acting chops and alleged va-va-voom hit me flat." The real action arrives in "skull sessions," when characters deliver unseasoned hunks of exposition to each other over coffee. It's Ellroy's preferred information delivery system: "You hit it on the head, doll. Marilyn always had a coterie of sycophants, brown-nosers, and quacks calling the shots for her, and telling her she was a genius. She was hooked on this quack shrink, who palled with this dyke drama coach of hers, and they shot her up with collagen, to pudge her up in the face. She moved into a house near Marilyn, to coach her. I swear it's all true!"

It's perplexing to see Ellroy let his story go so slack, to see the tension flatlining, resistant even to the defibrillations of jokey, jittery tabloid-speak. Monroe, who could have been the book's making, is instead its undoing—which is, consoling thought, an odd sort of triumph on her part. But, for all the novel's exasperations, its author's talent for mayhem still has its charms. Under the L.A. heat dome, he sends snakes among the sunbathers and challenges us to tell them apart.

The last film that Ellroy saw before his mother died was, in fact, "Vertigo." The movie is structured like a spiral and populated with them—from the opening sequence, designed by Saul Bass, with its animated spinning spirals, to the spirals found in hair styles and in the structure of the famous staircase. The themes and shapes of the story would become Ellroy's—losing a woman, remaking other women in her image, the lurching and discomfiting transposition of past and present, obsession.

There's a shot Hitchcock popularized in "Vertigo" that involves the spiral: the dolly zoom, known as the "Vertigo" effect. You'll notice it when the private investigator, played by James Stewart, is climbing the spiral staircase, despite his fear of heights, pursuing a woman he is trying to save. He looks down, foolishly, and the floor seems to surge farther away. Hitchcock's trick is that the camera has physically moved back from its subject while zooming in—conveying a lurching disorientation.

Something of the sort takes place with "The Enchanters." In the course of a long, prolific, and galvanic career, Ellroy has revisited the same scenes, the same characters, killing them off, reviving them. Now, in this novel, he zooms in again, but what we experience most powerfully is blur, distance—and the passage of time. The story seems to yawn away, as if it is happening in the past, happening in his past. Yet he feels no less powerfully yoked, no less in inexorable pursuit. What does a writer do with freedom? Caught in this novel's spirals, pulled deep, again, into the same grooves, one wonders: Is there such a thing? ♦

BOOKS

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

The world-bridging poetry of Ben Lerner.

BY KAMRAN JAVADIZADEH

Sometimes what you see belongs to another world. Stars. City streets on a movie screen. The remembered face of someone gone. You know it is another world because you cannot touch what you see, or because it cannot see you.

Sometimes, though, the border between this world and the other one seems to blur. An eight-year-old boy and his brother are taken by their mother's friend to the Seattle Aquarium for a sleepover beneath its underwater dome. Sharks swim overhead. Food, the visitors are told, is strictly prohibited, but when the lights dim the mother's friend produces a bag of orange candies:

> They seemed to glow in the dark. My brother was thrilled, but I was horrified, maybe because I was so rarely away from my parents at night that I couldn't tolerate any sign of unpredictability in my guardian. Or maybe I thought the ban on eating was crucial for our safety, that if the sharks or rockfish somehow sensed the candies, they'd come after them, slamming their cold smooth bodies again and again into the glass until it cracked and four hundred thousand gallons of water came crashing down upon us.

The dome provides a view without the possibility of contact, a neat division of the familiar from the alien. In the child's mind, though, breaking the aquarium's rules renders that division dangerously contingent: "It must have shocked Shirley when I started to cry, to panic, repeating no, no, no, as she held the small bag toward me." The boy refuses the forbidden fruit and, at least in his adult memory, turns his attention to fortifying his would-be Eden's walls: "I remember a sleepless night, trying to keep the dome intact with the pressure of my gaze, though I probably slept for hours."

Between the "I" who remembers the sleepless night and the "I" who probably slept for hours is another blurry border, on both sides of which we find Ben Lerner. He tells the story in his fourth collection of poems, "The Lights" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). "All my favorite books," Lerner writes, "were about built spaces / shading into wilds, worlds, Narnia through the wardrobe / . . . Max's bedroom becoming jungle, Harold drawing the moon / into existence." Those books, which he read as a child and which now he reads to his young daughters, suggest a model for the kind of book he wants to be writing.

Lerner, a poet who has found a second life as a novelist, has been attempting versions of that book for nearly twenty years. The title of his first collection, "The Lichtenberg Figures" (2004), refers to the branching patterns that can briefly appear on surfaces after lightning strikes; the implication was that the book's sonnets were evanescent records of contact, each poem its own glass dome. In "Angle of Yaw" (2006), Lerner began to experiment with prose poems, not unlike the child he describes in one of them: "If you make her a present of a toy, she will discard it and play with the box. And yet she will only play with a box that once contained a toy." Just so, the "built spaces" of prose allowed Lerner to play with the poetry they seemed once to contain, to draw potential pleasures into existence. But actual life felt distant, ironized; Lerner was always retreating from experience, or, in his own words, sleeping through it. In "Mean Free Path" (2010), he wrote of finally being ready for "the recurring / dream of waking." Poetry was a hidden door, not so far from a wardrobe, that could lead into the world from which he'd withdrawn.

In "The Lights," Lerner has returned to that dream: "A dream in prose of poetry, a long dream of waking." Like much of Lerner's work, the book is full of uneasy divisions. But no matter the axes along which they're drawn—prose and poetry, parents and children, life and literature—the point is that on one

In "The Lights," Lerner attempts to reënchant both art and experience itself.

ILLUSTRATION BY HOI CHAN

side of the border the world often looks disenchanted, that now and then we are granted glimpses of the other side, and that our own world can hold, however provisionally, the other's reflected glow.

In one of the longer poems in this book, that glow looks literal:

> Some say the glowing spheres near Route 67
> are paranormal, others dismiss them as
> atmospheric tricks: static, swamp gas, reflections
> of headlights and small fires, but why dismiss
> what misapprehension can establish, our own
> illumination returned to us as alien, as sign?
> They've built a concrete viewing platform
> lit by low red lights which must appear
> mysterious when seen from what it overlooks.
> Tonight I see no spheres, but project myself
> and then gaze back, an important trick because
> the goal is to be on both sides of the poem,
> shuttling between the you and I.

If the lines sound familiar, that may be because you have read them before. Toward the end of "10:04" (2014), Lerner's second novel, the protagonist (also named Ben) is at a writing residency in Marfa, Texas. In some kind of hallucinated scene, he joins the ghost of the poet Robert Creeley on an excursion to view the famous "Marfa Lights," doesn't see them, and then writes a poem that includes those lines.

But that poem, merely excerpted in the novel, returns, like a long-discarded toy, in "The Lights." The narrator of "10:04" had gone to Marfa to work on a novel about a fabricated correspondence between poets, but after writing these lines tells us, "I decided to replace the book I'd proposed with the book you're reading now, a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them." Lyric poetry, in other words, might seem otherworldly, but for Lerner it's better understood as "our own/illumination returned to us as alien." Once upon a time, we read a novel and felt as though we were in a poem; now we read the poem and feel as though we're in a novel.

Is there any difference, for Lerner, between the two? "The Lights" opens with a poem called "Index of Themes":

> Poems about night
> and related poems. Paintings
> about night,
> sleep, death, and
> the stars.

The trick feels borrowed from autofiction, the genre in which Lerner's novels are often categorized: "The Lights" thematizes its own making, generates itself by describing the thing it will have become. "Do you remember me/from the world?" the poem goes on to ask, before concluding:

> It was important to part
> yesterday
> in a serial work about lights
> so that distance could enter the voice
> and address you
> tonight.
> Poems about you, prose
> poems.

Intimacy, in this view, requires not only some initial state of contact but also a subsequent separation. For a poem to address someone—for it to be experienced—that person must be truly other.

Why this need for tricks? Perhaps, Lerner might say, because poetry is embarrassing. In 2016, he wrote a book-length essay, "The Hatred of Poetry," on the subject, and elsewhere he has cited the scholar Gillian White, who argues that much recent poetry is written in anticipation of "lyric shame"—a feeling of mortification at the form's narcissism. "I'm always speaking of song instead of singing," Lerner writes in one poem. In another, hearing birdsong, he implicitly aligns himself not with the male warbler, who makes "a slow, soft trill," but instead with the ovenbird, whose call, he reminds us, is conventionally rendered as "*teacher, teacher, teacher*." I'd be

willing to bet that Lerner learned that fact the same way I did, as a gloss on Robert Frost's poem "The Oven Bird." That bird, Frost wrote, "knows in singing not to sing," and thus is a figure for the poet in a fallen world: "The question that he frames in all but words/Is what to make of a diminished thing." One way to read Lerner's work is as a series of responses, knowing but sincere, to that question.

His answers can be uncannily beautiful. In a prose poem called "The Rose," he runs into a former student (Lerner is a professor at Brooklyn College) who tells him, "All I remember from your course . . . is that the rose is obsolete." She is quoting another modern poet, William Carlos Williams, for whom, a century ago, the conventional emblem of love poetry had itself become a diminished thing, an image in need of renewal. For Lerner, what follows this encounter, as though in response to it, is the story of another Rose, this one Lerner's maternal grandmother. She, too, seems to be drifting into obsolescence: stuck in an assisted-living home, she has begun to complain "that the staff were sneaking into her room and subtly altering her paintings." Her family worries that she's lost touch with reality. But, during a visit, Lerner's father carefully inspects the paintings and says:

> Well, Rose, you are the one who really knows these paintings. You've had them for sixty years. So if you say they are being manipulated, I'm sure you're right. But you have to admit, the staff is doing an excellent job. How carefully they're reinserting the paper into the frame. No smudges on the glass.

Rose's initial complaint—that her paintings were, over time, being changed—was of course wrong in its attribution but at some level right. Everything is getting older, changing. But by acceding to the frame of her belief the poet's father makes it into a true story about the care she's receiving: "Rose thought for a moment. You're right, she said, they are doing an excellent job. And she never complained about the staff again." These are gentle, accommodating fictions; they don't just enter the world, they make another world feel possible.

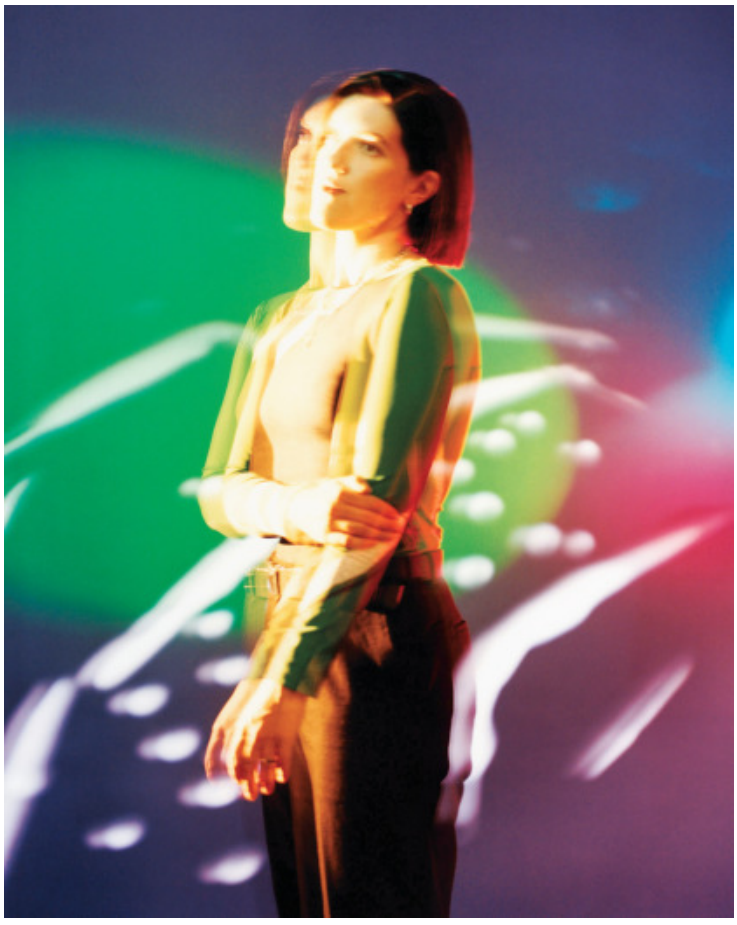
The flickering between worlds—call it reënchantment—that Lerner seeks is, after all, not merely a game. We might want very badly to be in the presence of people who are gone. We might want to share a world with our parents or children. We might, for any number of reasons, want that world to be unlike this one. In one part of the astonishing title poem from "The Lights," Lerner walks through Paris with a friend who is mourning his mother. Throughout the poem flutter phrases that seem to have been occasioned by sightings of U.F.O.s. Here the central metaphor of the book, the potential for contact between worlds, approaches the literal—and prompts a new worry in his friend:

> if they do make contact and the dead missed
> it
> my mom missed it, he said, a break
> in all human understanding she wasn't here
> for and I
> was like: One, they might have ways
> of ministering to the dead and two
> and two, there are deep resources in the
> culture for trying to
> understand.

If this consolation works, it does so by suspending our understanding of what counts as knowledge. What if the fiction, in other words, was not the fantasy of contact, the terror felt by the boy who thought the dome might fall, but instead the naïve belief that worlds could be held apart? That is the extravagant claim, made without apology or embarrassment, in the final section of the poem: "that they are here/among us, that they love us/that we invited them/in without our knowledge/into our knowledge." This is a speculative mode—and an exceedingly lovely one—that reads "the lights" not as evidence of what's out there but of what's already here, beside us:

> that they have arts
> that they are known to our pets
> that if you put a pet down
>
> they are beside it without judgment
> that they smell vaguely of burning paper
> that to meet them would be to remember
> meeting them
> as children, that they are
> children, that the work of children is
> in us, that they are part of our sexual life
> that they are reading this

This poet, who has dreamed himself awake, need not choose between the safety of the familiar and the thrill of the alien. To live in the world, his poem tells us, is already to know more than we can say. ♦



POP MUSIC

EUROTRIP

Romy's exuberant solo début.

BY CARRIE BATTAN

In the opening moments of Romy Madley Croft's début solo album, "Mid Air," the British singer makes a request: "Can you turn it up a bit more?" It's an entreaty often heard from musicians, usually either onstage, as a rallying cry, or in the studio, as an urgent demand. Coming from Madley Croft, though, it's a surprise. As a vocalist and guitarist for the British trio the xx, Madley Croft's signature has been a kind of hushed timidity, her voice often barely rising above a whisper. It's a key to the spare and downcast style of the xx—made up of Madley Croft, the bassist and vocalist Oliver Sim, and the producer and keyboardist Jamie Smith, known as Jamie xx—who have released three albums since they formed the group, as teen-agers living on the outskirts of London. The lyrics for the xx's self-titled first album, from 2009, were largely written by text messages sent from their respective childhood bedrooms, partly because all three were so shy.

Stylistically austere but emotionally rich, the record had a sensibility that spoke to introverts and impressed star-making blogs. Despite the quietude of the music, which at times bordered on morose, the xx became unexpectedly influential, transcending their status as indie darlings. They topped charts in the U.K., were sampled by Rihanna, and won the prestigious Mercury Prize. And yet they never made the sorts of bold leaps common among breakout artists looking to secure lasting commercial success: signing with a major label, touring constantly, collaborating with pop stars, engaging in endless self-promotion. During the past fifteen years, their evolution, like their music, has been measured, and this restraint is a large part of their appeal. The musicians remove, rather than add, elements to their songs, leaving big, breathy pockets of apprehensive space between bass lines and drum kicks. They make their public personas seductively scarce.

Many artists grow more staid as they mature, but the members of the xx have become steadily louder and more joyous, particularly in their solo work. In 2015, Smith, the band's producer, released "In Colour," an homage to the U.K.'s nineties rave scenes, which cemented his status as a reliably invigorating electronic musician. On "Mid Air," Madley Croft, who is thirty-four and performs under the name Romy, also has the world of the club in mind, and the result is one of the most confident dance records of recent years. The album, which will be released this month, is a thoughtful and loving celebration of Y2K dance music—a style that matches the rapturous mood of its songs, which explore the feverish early stages of falling in love. Croft inhabits new emotional terrain on songs like "Weightless," which starts with a kind of muted stoicism and is transformed by a strobing electronic beat. "Is this how it feels when something begins?" she asks. "Every part is weightless."

Modern electronic dance music is inherently nostalgic, endlessly mutating the core time signatures, tempos, and arrangements first mastered by disco, techno, and house d.j.s in the seventies and eighties. Today's dance musicians are hyperaware of the past, and many of them work more in a cerebral register than in the physical reality of the dance floor, producing music that is highly stylized but not necessarily adrenalized. (And smartphones have bred a distractibility and

On "Mid Air," the xx singer refines elements of Y2K dance music.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GARETH McCONNELL

a self-consciousness that make it especially challenging for listeners to lose themselves in live music.)

On "Mid Air," Madley Croft has chosen to draw on a familiar but often overlooked pocket of dance history—Eurodance, the oontz-oontzy stepchild of house and techno which was a mainstream global force in the nineties and early two-thousands. It's a genre that is laughed at more often than celebrated: when songs like Corona's "Rhythm of the Night" or La Bouche's "Be My Lover" are played today, it's usually to mock the broad-strokes inelegance of their era. One of the biggest viral hits of this summer has been a TikTok sensation called "Planet of the Bass," a parody of Eurodance by a young man named Kyle Gordon—a comedian.

But nothing about Madley Croft's enjoyment of Eurodance is ironic or cartoonish. She has refined some of the genre's more garish elements, transforming big-room E.D.M. drops into elegant crescendos. "Mid Air" was made with the help of Stuart Price, a veteran British record producer who has worked with acts ranging from Madonna to New Order, and with Madley Croft's friend Fred Gibson, a British d.j. and producer. An acolyte of Brian Eno's with an ear for mainstream pop, Gibson, who performs as Fred again.., makes sample-heavy but polished house music with enough emotional thrust to resonate with people not in the mood to dance. (When Frank Ocean pulled out of Coachella, earlier this year, Gibson was called on to replace him, to the delight of many attendees.) Gibson helped Madley Croft achieve "Mid Air"'s delicate balance of fervor and tenderness. On the track "Strong," Madley Croft pleads, "Let me be someone you can lean on." She has said that the song is about grief, but without that context in mind it's an upbeat soundtrack for the dance floor. In the chorus, she delivers advice that shades into pep-talk-like assurance, singing, "You don't have to be so strong," her digitally filtered voice layered across a gentle throb of synths.

As part of the xx, Madley Croft has sung many duets with Sim in which the two sound as if they're dancing coyly around each other, or reading aloud an allusive tract on love. Their dialogue can be opaque and formal, an effect enhanced by their stony delivery. "You've applied the pressure to have me crystalised / And you've got the faith that I could bring paradise," Sim sings on "Crystalised," a sedate post-rock-influenced song from "xx." "I'll forgive and forget before I'm paralyzed / Do I have to keep up the pace to keep you satisfied?" Madley Croft responds flatly.

One consequence of singing in such abstract terms, and to only each other, is that Madley Croft and Sim have avoided feeding speculation about their respective love lives. Both artists have been openly gay since they were teen-agers, but have begun exploring sexual identity in their work only recently, in their solo pursuits. Last year, Sim released a solo album, "Hideous Bastard," on which he refers to the H.I.V. diagnosis he received at seventeen. On "Mid Air," Madley Croft sings directly and confidently about having met "the girl of my dreams"; in the album's closer, "She's on My Mind," she admits to thinking about the object of her affection "every hour of every day." There's an almost adolescent purity to most of these songs, in part because they explore uncomplicated—if also universal—sentiments. But listening to "Mid Air" highlights how rare it is to hear a woman sing unambiguously about desiring another woman. When Madley Croft does so with such resoluteness, it feels like a revelation—especially in the context of a record so drenched in exuberance. One of the album's tracks takes its title, and its refrain, from "La Vita," a song by the transgender electronic musician Beverly Glenn-Copeland: "Enjoy Your Life."

The xx's records, particularly the first two, dwelled in a place rarely explored in youth-centric contemporary pop and rock music: the hesitation between desire and action. It's a topic requiring the sort of strict emotional control that has generated much of the beauty and the tension of the group's work. At times, though, that sound has edged toward the inert and the bloodless. As a solo artist, Madley Croft has stepped boldly in another direction. The xx, in their early days, were hailed as wunderkinder—the rare young people who had a fully formed vision. But what is perhaps more unusual than precocious artists are those who discover that with age can also come freedom, pleasure, exhilaration, and candor—things worth being loud for. ♦

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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 Elisabeth McNair, must be received by Sunday, September 17th. The finalists in the September 4th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the October 2nd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

“ ”

.....

THE FINALISTS

“I know. It's always tougher speaking before lunch.”
Susan F. Breitman, West Hartford, Conn.

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

“It'll be over before you know it.”
Paul Nesja, Mount Horeb, Wis.

THE WINNING CAPTION

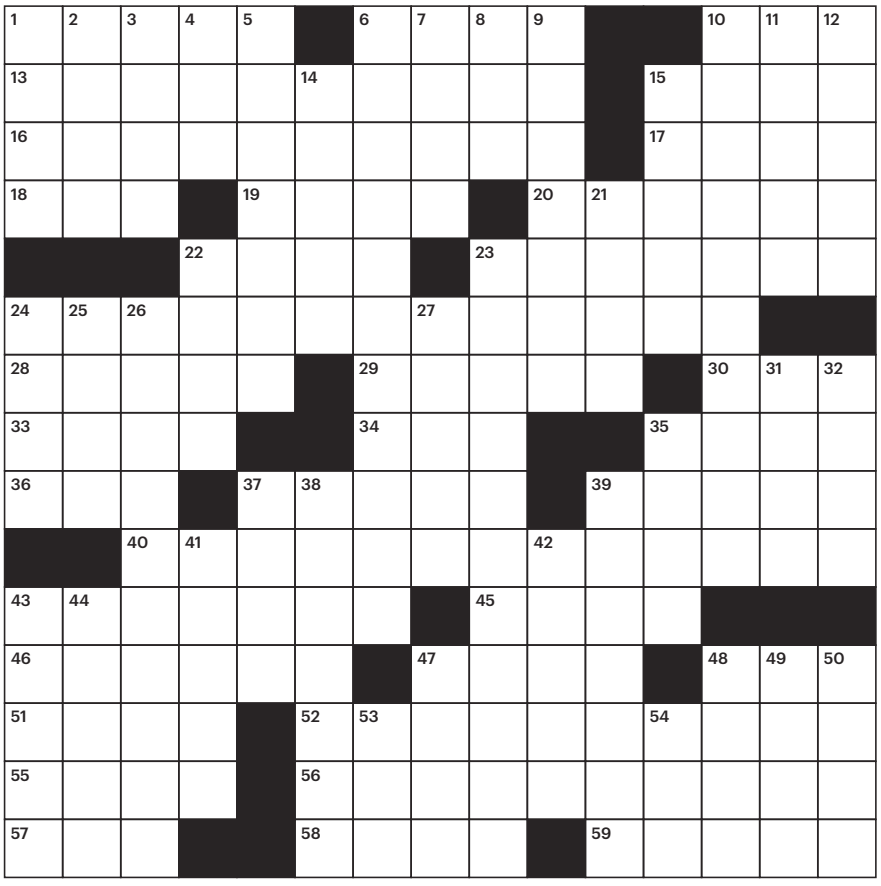
“He's still orange.”
Eric Simkin, Torrance, Calif.

PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

BY ROBYN WEINTRAUB



ACROSS

1 Bat one's eyelashes, say
6 Garments discussed in "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret"
10 Film studio with a lion logo, familiarly
13 Unmanned craft sent to explore the moon
15 Tortoise's opponent, in a fabled race
16 Not yet apprehended
17 Request from a dental hygienist
18 A narcissist has a big one
19 Southeast Asian nation once known as the Land of a Million Elephants
20 Threw forcefully
22 Like the fit of some jeans
23 Identities that can be fluid
24 Explanations of how superheroes got their powers, e.g.
28 Value after a decimal point, on a price tag
29 Clorox mold-and-mildew-remover brand
30 Talk non-stop
33 Sound from an angry cat
34 "___ be my pleasure"
35 First James Bond film
36 Air Force ___
37 Enjoyed by a narrow audience
39 Boxing-ring matches
40 Pastry-topped entrée
43 Small section in a women's clothing store?
45 Reasonable
46 Strolled lazily
47 Go around in circles
48 Longest-serving U.S. President, for short
51 Third ___ (metaphor for a charged political issue)
52 Dairy-animal breed from a mountainous area of Europe
55 Arts-and-crafts purchases
56 Price determined by supply and demand
57 Brewpub beverage
58 Eyelid affliction often treated with a warm compress
59 Tennis Hall of Famer Monica

DOWN

1 Frozen sheet in the Arctic Ocean
2 Instrumental part of every breath you take?
3 "___ the Woods" (Stephen Sondheim musical)
4 Cheerleader's cry
5 Vine-covered garden structure
6 Witches' rides
7 Aussie hoppers
8 Six-pack contents?
9 "Now listen to me, you dang whippersnappers!"
10 Sweet liquid derived from tree sap
11 Actress Garson who won an Oscar for "Mrs. Miniver"
12 Repairs
14 Unadorned bagel variety
15 Big crowd
21 Operating system developed at Bell Labs
22 Military officers above cpls.
23 Ceremonial final piece of the transcontinental railroad
24 Eight, in España
25 Bridle strap
26 Calamine-lotion target
27 Give ten per cent of one's income to the church
31 Prefix with social or freeze
32 Prepare to have a picture taken
35 Lavish affection (on)
37 Nick at ___ (evening TV block)
38 Frozen rooftop formations that can cause leaks by trapping water
39 Head coverings in "Little House on the Prairie"
41 "The ___ are alive with the sound of music . . ."
42 "Common Sense" author Thomas
43 Winter jacket
44 The first one was sent in 1971
47 Full of vim and vigor
48 New addition to a stable family?
49 Poisoned palm fruit in "Raiders of the Lost Ark"
50 G.P.S. suggestions: Abbr.
53 Back muscle, for short
54 Test taken by some prospective Ph.D. students: Abbr.

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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

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CHANEL