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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

PERSONAL HISTORY
Emily Ziff Griffin on going to sleepaway camp during the final days of her father's battle with AIDS.

PAGE-TURNER
The New Yorker's writers and editors share their favorite places to shop for books in the Big Apple.

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LEFT: COURTESY ZIFF GRIFFIN; RIGHT: IKER AYESTARAN

THE MAIL

BEEFED UP

I love reading food articles, especially those by Helen Rosner, but I was troubled by her recent review of the smash-burger restaurant Hamburger America (Tables for Two, January 22nd). It strikes me as strange to run an unqualified celebration of meat-eating when *The New Yorker*, like so many other news outlets, dedicates many of its pages to climate change—and often notes, in those pages, the direct relationship between climate change and agriculture.

Americans' love of consuming meat not only directly causes warming by creating methane emissions (a greenhouse gas that traps much more heat than CO_2 does); it also does so indirectly through the destruction of forest for pasture. Increasingly, chefs are acknowledging this reality by changing their menus. When will publications do the same, by ceasing to promote attitudes that make little sense in light of these facts? *The New Yorker* has been responsible for some of the best climate reporting published anywhere in recent decades, and it should set an example. I admit, I adore food writing—including writing about dishes that feature meat—but, as much as I hate to say it, this sort of celebration lulls the public into indulgence and inaction.
Carlyn Christianson
San Luis Obispo, Calif.

Had Rosner written a broad survey of smash burgers, she would, I hope, have included a mention of Ann Arbor's Krazy Jim's Blimpy Burger, which was established in 1953 and is a deeply beloved community tradition. The burgers at Blimpy are made exactly like those served in the restaurant described in Rosner's piece, though Blimpy offers more options—I once witnessed a football player ordering a quint (a burger comprising five patties) with a fried egg on top. When the University of Michigan proposed building a new graduate-student dorm whose construction would require tearing Blimpy down, there was a crisis. Fortunately, a new location was soon found, and burgers continue to be served there in the time-honored fashion.
Vivienne Armentrout
Ann Arbor, Mich.

TURGENEV'S TRAVELS

James Wood, in his review of Hisham Matar's novel "My Friends," compares one of Matar's characters, a Libyan exile in London, to Ivan Turgenev (Books, January 22nd). Both, he writes, are men "paralyzed by literature, marooned by excessive feeling, drifting slightly out of time."

Matar mentions Turgenev by name, but, Wood notes, the reference may be easily missed, as Turgenev's œuvre lacks an "obvious connection to the literatures of emigration." This is true, but movement across borders was integral to Turgenev's life. Contemporary Anglo-American audiences tend to think of Nabokov and Ivan Bunin as the quintessential Russian writers in exile, but for nineteenth-century Russian readers the principal figures of this variety were Alexander Herzen and Turgenev. The latter, who studied in Berlin between 1838 and 1841, spent most of his mature life in Germany and in France, where he more or less permanently settled in 1854, disgusted with the regime of Tsar Nicholas I. His emigration affected the reception of his work in Russia, where his novels mapping social divisions were often criticized as having been penned by a person who knew current developments only from a distance. Turgenev was also one of the earliest Russian writers to be lionized by Westerners—not just by close friends like Flaubert but also by later figures (some of them expatriates themselves), such as Henry James and Joseph Conrad.
David Shengold
New York City

•

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GOINGS ON

FEBRUARY 21 – 27, 2024

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

People tend to use the word "love" when they talk about the Morgan Library, which celebrates its centennial this year. Its big spring show honors another beloved institution, the British author **Beatrix Potter.** Those who know her only for children's books may be surprised by the breadth of her career as an amateur mycologist, or by the beauty of botanical illustrations such as "Leaves and Flowers of the Orchid Cactus" (pictured), completed in 1886, the year she turned twenty. But her true legacy may well be in merchandising: in 1903, Peter Rabbit became the first licensed character in history, earning his creator more money than she could spend and anticipating a veritable warren's worth of I.P. cash-ins soon to come.—*Jackson Arn (Morgan Library & Museum; Feb. 23–June 9.)*

BEATRIX POTTER / COURTESY MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM

ABOUT TOWN

DANCE | In the Goldberg Variations, Bach spins a quiet, vaguely melancholy melody into thirty variations. Each one introduces a mood, a novel interplay of colors, a new shading. In a dance of the same name by the Belgian choreographer and dancer **Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker**—the author of works that seem to plumb the very vibrations of sound—Bach's endless inventiveness translates into a conversation between one dancer's body in space and the Siberian-born pianist Pavel Kolesnikov's fingers at the piano. Both start out barefoot and simply dressed (though De Keersmaeker adds some pizzazz at the end); together, they give shape to Bach's playful flow of ideas, molded by the spare choreographic language—a mix of pivots and bends and swishing of the limbs—and Kolesnikov's quietly lucid reading of the score.—*Marina Harss (N.Y.U. Skirball; Feb. 22-24.)*

EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC | The interdisciplinary artist Rena Anakwe explores the curative properties of sound design. The first music that she released under the name **A Space for Sound** collected sound-bath performances from sessions held on Instagram Live, full of the deeply meditative and mellow drones of a tank drum. Her second album, "Sometimes underwater (feels like home)," from 2021, used ambient instruments—the tank drum, along with singing bowls, a multitrack tape machine, an effects pedal, and a synth, plus vocals—to bring a rushing sensation to her euphonic compositions. Anakwe's live shows pursue a broader sensory balance by mixing music with found-footage visuals and the scents of essential oils. Included on her bill at the fourth edition of the Dweller festival is the experimental R. & B. artist **KeiyaA,** whose songs also pursue a spiritual cleansing.—*Sheldon Pearce (Public Records; Feb. 23.)*

OFF BROADWAY | In the breakneck camp farce **"Oh, Mary!,"** Cole Escola—the comedian, Internet filmmaker, playwright, and evil-sprite actor—plays the First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln, or, rather, her bitter, alcoholic, narcissist burlesque, complete with big black dress and dangling Civil War-era ringlets. Barging through White House doors and stomping across national sanctities, this catty-scary version of Mary rages at her killjoy husband, Abe (Conrad Ricamora), because he refuses to let her pursue her true love: cabaret. And . . . I can tell you no more. Escola's jokes, as explosive as musket blasts, depend on surprise, and I wouldn't dare get between Mary—one part Carol Burnett, two parts Charles Busch—and a punch line. Sam Pinkleton directs with a steady hand, but the audience hangs on for dear life.—*Helen Shaw (Lucille Lortel Theatre; through March 24.)*

ART | A pleasant form of meditation would be to glide through **Mary Weatherford's** latest exhibition, "Sea and Space," and try to count all the greens. In new abstract paintings—some Flashe on linen, some ink on paper, none unimpressive—you will find every shade and saturation of the color, from pond scum to Statue of Liberty, spread across the picture plane in gooey waves. The one thing you will not find is neon lighting, probably the most talked-about component of her earlier paintings, though not my favorite. This time around, an air of psychedelic mysticism presides over everything, inspired, Weatherford has suggested, by NASA photography and trips to the Hayden Planetarium. It's a trade-up.—*Jackson Arn (Gagosian; through March 2.)*

CLASSICAL MUSIC | In 2022, **Yunchan Lim** became the youngest-ever winner of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, and he comes to New York City for a second lap in his victory tour when he makes his Carnegie Hall début. Last season, a spot opened unexpectedly on the New York Philharmonic's calendar, and the ensemble snapped up the preternaturally gifted musician for an electric, smoothly confident rendition of Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto, which didn't shortchange the work's stormy passions. Now the nineteen-year-old Lim appears in his first solo recital in New York, playing Chopin's études, keyboard studies of elegance and dazzle which the composer started writing, precociously enough, when he was Lim's age.—*Oussama Zahr (Carnegie Hall; Feb. 21.)*

MOVIES | Before launching her directorial career, Greta Gerwig was a daringly inventive actress, and she gives one of her most furious performances in Mary Bronstein's ultra-low-budget, ultra-raw 2008 drama, **"Yeast,"** now streaming on the Criterion Channel. Gerwig plays an art-world beginner named Gen, who goes on a camping trip with a longtime frenemy, a teacher named Rachel (Bronstein), whose roommate, Alice (Amy Judd), abruptly cancels on them. Gen unleashes anarchy on the open road (the streaming service subtitles her first lines of dialogue as "Ahhh! Wahh!") and chaos in a food court, and she starts physical fights with both of the women and with two guys (Josh and Benny Safdie) whom she meets in the wild. Alice, too, is possessed by an antagonistic demon; Bronstein revels in and shudders at the reckless impulsivity that she finds at the core of creative passion.—*Richard Brody*

TABLES FOR TWO

Oti
40 Clinton St.

You'll know that you've arrived at Oti, a modest Romanian-ish restaurant on the Lower East Side, when you see the monster on the window (and on the menu, and the wall): a saffron-hued cartoon blob of a face capped with gray tasselled horns and a purple eggplant for a nose. He's dramatic, colorful, a little off, more than a little goofy. How lovely for a restaurant to have built in such a convenient metaphor!

Oti has existed, in one form or another, for about five years. Elyas Popa, its Romanian-born proprietor and chef, ran it as a catering business, then as a series of pop-ups and residencies. In September, Oti became a proper restaurant, serving Popa's artsy-cheffy riffs on the food of his childhood. Traditional Romanian cooking is a collision of Balkan, Ottoman, and Mediterranean influences—soft cheeses, spiced meats, mountains of fresh green herbs, a vivid tradition of pickling and curing—both lush and straightforward.

On my first visit to the tiny space, the manager and co-owner, Dania Kim, walked me through a brief menu of three entrée-size plates and five smaller ones. Each of the bigger dishes, she explained, goes perfectly with a particular little-dish sidekick: what Popa calls "broken burrata"—Romanian Telemea cheese, dressed in edible flowers—next to a pepper-and-eggplant *zacuscă* dip, for example, or pickled-mushroom toast with char-blackened pickled hot peppers.

Under Kim's direction, we paired the daily special—plump mussels cooked in a tomato-beer broth—with a bowl of *mămăligă* (Romanian polenta) shot through with Parmesan cheese. The combo didn't really make any sense, but it also sort of did: two different species of rich and salty, one chewy, one creamy, in a mutually constructive weirdness. A plate of three lamb-and-beef meatballs, topped with mustard softened by a swirl of miso, nicely complemented a dish of pickled grapes, pike-sharp with apple-cider vinegar and cinnamon, clever and bizarre.

Oti is idiosyncratic, but the quirks don't feel art-directed or forced. This is real-deal eccentricity, a phenomenon increasingly rare (and much eulogized) in New York, and in the grime-and-glitz Lower East Side in particular, where "authenticity" has become more of an aesthetic theme than an inherent state. Oti is a confident, at times graceful little restaurant, but you still get the feeling that it's a scrappy operation held together via Popa's sheer creative tenacity. And yet occasional inconsistency doesn't take away from the sense of the place as ambitious, and maybe on the cusp of becoming something really, really great. There's no dessert menu, but the restaurant does provide a concluding bite of gummy bears, precisely arranged, one bear in each color—an unexpected little rainbow, sweet and absurd. *(Dishes $9–$21.)*

—Helen Rosner

PICK THREE

The staff writer Jiayang Fan shares current obsessions.

1. How often have I fantasized about disappearing into another story in order to escape my own paralysis on the page? Maybe that is why I find the generosity and grace of the HBO series **"Sort Of"** so welcome and absorbing. Centered on Sabi, a job-juggling, gender-fluid millennial of Pakistani heritage, the show is a cousin of personal dramedies like "Girls" or "Fleabag," but it's less obsessed with sticking the perfect landing. The mania to solve the complexities of life, or to untangle braided identities, is likely misplaced, the wise Sabi would probably counsel me. Rethink your story.

2. Given my abundance of nervous energy, I would likely rope Sabi into listening to the addictive, nerdy, under-the-radar podcast **"The Psychosphere."** The Social Broadcasts show, hosted by the historian and science writer Melanie Challenger, is a cerebral palate cleanser that invites biologists, philosophers, and neuroscientists to discuss everything from the nature of consciousness and the origin of intelligent life to the personhood of octopuses and elephants.

3. The Whitney's **"Harold Cohen: AARON"** traces the evolution of an artificial-intelligence program for art-making (AARON), begun in 1968, by the British artist Harold Cohen. At its heart, the project is an attempt to get to the core of the creative process by coding the cognitive process into software. How sophisticated does a program's neural network have to be to produce an image that is indistinguishable from what a human can create? At the Whitney, I wished that I could occasionally substitute my procrastinating brain for AARON's relentlessly industrious one.

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
OLD TIMES

In a report sure to find its place in the annals of politically damaging exonerations, Robert Hur, the special counsel appointed to investigate Joe Biden's handling of classified documents, cleared the President of wrongdoing, and explicitly distinguished his behavior from Donald Trump's more egregious misconduct in a similar case. But Hur, a Republican, also noted that he didn't recommend charges in part because Biden would likely come across to a jury as a "well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory." Among his claims was that Biden couldn't recall when he'd been Vice-President, or when his son Beau had died, "even within several years."

Biden's supporters saw the language as a gratuitous partisan attack, a speculative salvo far outside the prosecutor's purview; his lawyers said it was "highly prejudicial." Clearly sensing the precarity of the moment, the White House called a press conference at which Biden forcefully disputed Hur's characterization. A few minutes later, though, in answering a question about hostage negotiations in Israel, he referred to Egypt's President as the leader of Mexico. One Democrat declared it the "worst day of his Presidency."

Biden's age, of course, has long been a topic of debate, and conservatives have spent much of his Presidency sharing clips of names misremembered and words misspoken. (Last month, at an event in Iowa, Trump even mocked Biden's stutter.) But the report, carrying the imprimatur of official inquiry, shifted the atmospheric conditions. If old age was in the air, the clouds burst open. Hur's words were so cutting because they resonate with what many voters already think. In a swing-state poll conducted by the *Times* last fall, seventy-one per cent of respondents said that Biden was too old to be President; more than six in ten thought that he lacked the mental acuity for the job. (In national polling, a majority of Democrats also say he's too old for a second term.) Other surveys suggest that being old is seen as a kind of crime: Americans are equally loath to support candidates over the age of eighty and candidates who've been charged with a felony. A third of respondents would set the maximum age for elected officials at seventy (and some would set it even lower). By that standard, about a fifth of the current Congress would be aged out.

Ageism certainly plays a role in such attitudes. But it would be a mistake to cast concerns about Biden's age as simply a distillation of biases against the elderly. Trump, if reëlected, would also finish his term as an octogenarian, but voters harbor considerably fewer misgivings about his age. (It's possible that the question of age is overshadowed by Trump's more general incoherence; earlier this month, he claimed that Democrats were trying to change the name of Pennsylvania, and encouraged Russia to attack U.S. allies.) In Biden's case, the public is responding to the particularities of his presentation and performance. Roll footage of his speeches from 2016 or 2020 and you don't need to take last week's videos out of context, or doctor them with A.I., to witness a man who has aged. He is thinner, his hair wispier. He moves more cautiously and speaks more softly.

Our minds naturally evolve over the course of our lives. In general, fluid intelligence—our ability to think creatively, reason abstractly, and learn new skills—declines with age, whereas crystallized intelligence, by which we integrate accumulated knowledge to solve problems and make decisions, tends to increase. The speed at which we process new information peaks in our twenties and thirties; our vocabularies expand into late middle age. Memory loss exists on a spectrum, and even speaking of "memory" as a monolith is misleading. (Deficits in working memory versus long-term memory, for instance, suggest different pathologies.) Geriatricians often try to differentiate normal age-related memory loss from what's known as mild cognitive impairment. Whereas the former leads to minor and occasional lapses—where's my phone? when's his birthday?—the latter

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

indicates a more significant limitation, and, in a third of cases, progresses to Alzheimer's disease within five years. These determinations are rendered through a battery of neuropsychiatric tests and a series of careful conversations with patients and their families—not on cable news or by special counsels.

Perhaps the most accurate thing that can be said about aging is that it is a vastly heterogeneous process. Some people enter their later years and suffer a swift decline; some people stay sharp until the day they die. And yet it's also true that for most conditions age is not *a* risk factor but *the* risk factor. An octogenarian in excellent health is more likely to have a heart attack than a sedentary thirtysomething chain-smoker is. Your risk of stroke doubles every decade after the age of fifty-five. The average eighty-four-year-old man has a ten-per-cent chance of dying next year. Averages are averages, though, and a person who assumes the Presidency is anything but average. Biden has access to world-class medical care; he works out regularly; he doesn't drink or smoke. His father died at eighty-six, and his mother lived into her nineties, in reasonably good health until the end. Some longevity researchers, having pored over publicly available medical information about Biden and Trump, have deemed both men "super-agers." Still, time inflicts insults in myriad ways, both small and—increasingly over the years—large.

Doctors sometimes draw a distinction between the patient in the chart and the patient in real life. The first is a product of the medical record—the sum of blood tests, X-rays, and urine samples. The second is invariably more important: how a person looks, feels, and acts; what he can do and how well he can do it. In the battle to assuage anxieties about Biden's age, his most powerful weapon is not a physician's note or a cognitive exam but his performance on the job and transparency on the campaign trail. Biden has helmed one of the most legislatively productive terms since Lyndon B. Johnson but, to date, has held fewer press conferences and given fewer interviews than any President since Ronald Reagan. He's avoided town halls, and for the second straight year he skipped the interview before the Super Bowl, when Presidents usually address one of the country's biggest audiences, opting instead for a curated TikTok video.

No doubt Biden faces an unkind asymmetry when he speaks live and unscripted: a smooth interview fades into the ether unnoticed, while each misstep ignites a social-media frenzy. But demonstrating his fitness for office may provide his surest path to reëlection and, at this stage, the country's best shot at forestalling the chaos and dysfunction of a second Trump term. A more vigorous, more visible Biden would speak for himself. If this approach feels too risky, that's saying something, too.

—Dhruv Khullar

THE BOARDS

GLIDING GWYNETH

Early last year, when the actress and wellness icon Gwyneth Paltrow appeared in a small Utah courtroom to defend her reputation as a conscientious skier, the playwrights Linus Karp and Joseph Martin took an active interest. They were transfixed by the case. A retired optometrist named Terry Sanderson was suing Paltrow for three hundred thousand dollars—down from an initial three million—claiming that she had recklessly skied into him on the slopes of Deer Valley, Utah, in 2016. Blaming the crash on Sanderson, Paltrow was countersuing for the symbolic sum of one dollar, plus legal fees. Blockbuster!

"Like the rest of the world, we just thought it was very silly and ridiculous," Karp said. "Like, how is this a real thing?" Coverage of the case was equally fascinating. "Every moment was instantly transcribed and memed," Martin said. Dramaturgically speaking, it was gold. The stakes were low, the audience rapt. "In a courtroom, everything is taken so seriously, and they will sit down in their suits discussing it, but it's just, like, 'Are you friends with Taylor Swift?'" Karp said, referring to a question posed by Sanderson's lawyer. "It's the combination of being so serious and so stupid at the same time that's really attractive for us."

"Gwyneth Goes Skiing," Karp and Martin's two-man comic play about the fracas, recently sold out at London's Pleasance Theatre, where it is billed as "a story of love, betrayal, and skiing—where you are the jury." (Audience members are invited to vote at the end.) The creators—late twenties, earnest—met while working the Harry Potter photo op at King's Cross station. ("He was throwing scarves, I was taking photos," Martin said.) They have been engaged for five years. Their previous play, "Diana: The Untold and Untrue Story," was a campy hit at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and decried by a former Cabinet minister as "repellent trash." When "Gwyneth" was announced, the flurry of interest surprised the playwrights. Various outlets mistakenly called it a musical, and then a West End musical. It is a play *with* music, they clarified, written by Leland, of "RuPaul's Drag Race." It was not in the West End. In May, it will open for a short run at the Egyptian Theatre, in Park City, Utah, where the crash took place.

Not long ago, just before the show's opening, Karp and Martin were running lines in a cluttered attic above the Pleasance. A pair of skis was propped against a wall; a blue Smythson notebook, identical to the one Paltrow carried at the trial, was nearby. "Soundscape skiing!" a

Gwyneth Paltrow

producer called. Karp, who is Swedish and willowy, and had bright-red nails, stepped forward and said, breathily, "I'm the Goop-founding, door-sliding, 'Shakespeare in Love'-ing, Academy Award-winning, consciously uncoupling mother of Apple, vagina-candle-making Hollywood superstar, who, in 2013, was named *People* magazine's most beautiful woman." Martin, in Adidas and a striped shirt, said, "I'm . . . a man."

As Paltrow, Karp wears a blond wig and a series of chic outfits: "The white turtleneck, the Jeffrey Dahmer glasses, the brown trousers." Martin found a boxy suit for Sanderson and shaved his facial hair into a goatee. Although "Gwyneth" is not strictly, or even mostly, factual—the first act, which takes place on the slopes, is, Martin said, "*very* fictionalized"—the duo watched hours of courtroom footage while writing and pulled quotes directly from the trial. Paltrow's much memed line "I lost half a day of skiing" is there, as is her parting phrase, whispered to Sanderson after winning: "I wish you well." "Such an iconic moment," Karp said.

Like the former Princess of Wales, Paltrow was an appealing subject because she has become a queer icon. "I love Gwyneth," Karp said. "Just the other day, I was on Instagram and she was doing a Live for a Los Angeles-based L.G.B.T.Q. charity, and they were talking about trans rights and stuff, and she was part of it. And that just made me so happy."

Karp was working on Paltrow's voice; he had booked a session with an accent coach for later that week. "I think it's a lot of just catching the essence of her," he said. "She always seems relaxed and at ease, and she speaks very slowly." He admired her unruffled manner throughout the trial. Martin mentioned a technique whereby actors ascribe characters a specific quality of movement: "There's stab and push and pull and glide, but I think she floats. Everything she does is a mixture of gliding and floating."

They tried another scene. Paltrow and Sanderson are being sworn in inside the courtroom. Karp put his hand delicately on an imaginary Goop employee handbook. "I swear to tell the Goop, the whole Goop, and nothing but the Goop, so help me Goop," he said.

—Anna Russell

DEPT. OF SONG
MISTY IN MANHATTAN

The members of Tiny Habits, a young vocal trio, met as students at the Berklee College of Music, in Boston. The Habits are Maya Rae, from Vancouver, British Columbia; Cinya Khan, from Montclair, New Jersey; and Judah Mayowa, from Birmingham, Alabama. It was January, 2021, and they had just moved into the same dorm, after attending remotely during the fall. Socially rusty, they weren't quite sure how actual collaborations might come about.

"Here's how it happened," Khan said the other day. "There was a bathroom attached to the room, and I couldn't fucking figure out the toilet-paper holder." She posted a query about it on Instagram. Rae replied with a how-to-load-the-toilet-paper-holder video she'd made, and this led to a D.M. exchange about singing together.

Rae had also invited Mayowa to her room to sing with her. "I was so nervous," he recalled. "I stood outside her room and thought, I'm gonna bail."

"I hear this knock on the door and open it and here's this *very* tall man named Judah," Rae said.

"We sat on the dorm-room floor and started doing YouTube karaoke," Mayowa said. They started with Adele and Rihanna.

"I remember when you first opened your mouth," Rae said, re-creating an expression of wonderment.

"I remember when you opened *your* mouth: 'This white girl can *sing*.'"

A bit later, Khan arrived. Together, the three sang "Happy & Sad," by Kacey Musgraves. This wasn't exactly the Crosby, Stills, and Nash eureka moment at Mama Cass's house in Laurel Canyon, but it was a combustible start.

Their public début was a video they recorded in the dorm stairwell (that natural reverb) of themselves singing Carly Rae Jepsen's "Call Me Maybe." Eventually, they were making several videos a week, quick covers with delectable harmonies, and gaining an avid following, first among kids their age and then, before long, among older euphony connoisseurs, including Elton John and David Crosby himself. Nine months later, the trio wrote a song together. After

"Don't zip me all the way up—I'm claustrophobic."

a year, they formed a band and came up with the name.

Now, three years and a day after their first go at "Happy & Sad," Rae, Khan, and Mayowa were in Khan's hotel room in SoHo. They'd just arrived from Australia, where they'd been opening for Gracie Abrams, and had come from a rehearsal for an appearance on a new variety show hosted by the mandolinist Chris Thile and his band, Punch Brothers, where they'd met and sung with Musgraves. A new album and a tour of their own loomed: they were on that rocket ship. Still, with a couple of hours to kill, they were determined, or maybe just habituated, to make and post one of their signature short videos. They try to put out two a week. The space was snug, and, sitting cross-legged on the bed together in their socks, they exuded conviviality and ease. Rae and Khan wore parachute-y pants. Mayowa, the shy one, had a head scarf holding back all but a few of his dreadlocks.

Mayowa had chosen "Misty," the Erroll Garner classic, with lyrics reluctantly furnished by Johnny Burke. First, they listened to Ella Fitzgerald's version, then got to work arranging it into three parts.

Mayowa often takes the lower register, and Rae the highest, though they seem to weave around one another. On "Misty," the melody fell to Rae. Sometimes they make a Google Doc, color-coding the parts, but this time they winged it.

> Look at me
> I'm as helpless as a kitten up a tree.
> And I feel like I'm clingin' to a cloud I can't understand;
> I get misty, just holding your hand

Khan recorded voice memos of her attempts to perfect the landings on "tree" and "understand." She touched her nose as she sang, as though she could hear through it.

"Your part is too complicated," Mayowa said.

"No, I like the part."

"From the top."

"Can't understand."

"Fuck!"

Khan was a font of alternate lyrics, delivered in a hearty tenor: "And I feel like I'm pooping on a cloud." "I love mustard." "I get musty."

When they clinched the harmony on "clingin' to a cloud," Rae screamed with delight. Khan said, "Part check!" Mayowa mangled the "cloud" line. "What the fuck?"

"This is going to be so yummy," Rae said.

"Someone's flat there, is it me?"

"I sang the wrong part."

"What note are you hitting?"

"You're a great singer."

"Debatable."

"Should we try and film it?"

They set up an iPhone on some pillows and scrunched together at the foot of the bed. Ten takes later, they still hadn't got it.

They went at it again, making their singing faces. They nailed it this time, and Rae shouted, "That's the one!" The process had taken an hour. They tinkered with the reverb, and then got ready to post.

"What's a misty emoji?" Rae asked. They settled on an umbrella, then titled the vid "misty . . . in manhattan." It was time to get ready for a big dinner out with their agent.

—*Nick Paumgarten*

LADIES, LUNCH
CASTLE CREEPER

Lunchtime at Benoit, a swish French bistro on West Fifty-fifth Street. To one's right: a pair of young women in black power suits, chitchatting over sunchoke soup. To one's left: two ladies of a more mature vintage, with identical crimson manicures, sitting side by side beneath a mirror. Across one's table: a red velvet banquette, into which sinks a diminutive man in a yolk-colored sweater and a polka-dotted scarf—the British actor Tom Hollander, who was returning to the scene of a literary crime.

Before it housed Benoit, the building was the last location of La Côte Basque, a temple of haute cuisine. The restaurant opened in the late fifties, in the space that is now the Polo Bar; it moved a block west in the nineties and closed in 2004, a relic of a more elegant age. In its mid-century heyday, it was a hub of high society, where such uptown doyennes as Babe Paley and Lee Radziwill gathered to gossip over soufflé. In 1975, Truman Capote scandalized his friends in this

Tom Hollander

set when *Esquire* published his thinly veiled tell-all "La Côte Basque, 1965," which eavesdropped on the restaurant's clientele. His "swans" closed ranks against him, and he spent his remaining years drinking himself into oblivion and failing to complete his planned roman à clef "Answered Prayers."

The new Ryan Murphy miniseries "Feud: Capote vs. the Swans" retraces the dustup, with Hollander as Capote. "I came here when we were shooting and sat at the bar one evening, just to see if I could feel something," he said. Did he? "Not really. But it sort of makes sense that I couldn't, because it's not actually the place. It's mythic now." He cast a Capote-like eye around the room. The two older ladies, in unseasonable Hamptons-y white (one wore a bucket hat), were splitting a tarte tatin. "They're sweet," Hollander said. "They're definitely ladies lunching. Whether they're ladies who lunch, I don't know."

What did Hollander think compelled Capote to expose his swans? "The simple answer is he's a writer, and writers tend to write about their lives, so what did they expect?" he said. "But I've also heard him say, 'They were disguised. I was satirizing a world.' To which you say, 'Well, they weren't well enough disguised.'" He took a forkful of fennel salad. "His vanity perhaps misled him, or he was in denial about how much he despised himself for being this castle creeper. Do you have that expression, 'castle creeper'? The eternal house guest who's somewhere between them and the

staff. He's not an equal. He's the gay guy at the end. He knows that there's homophobia in there, and he's rebelling."

Hollander, who was born in Bristol, knows the lure of infiltrating the aristocracy. "My parents are schoolteachers. I dated some people in that world when I was younger. I was a social tourist," he recalled. After attending Cambridge, he became a character actor: a pompous Italian beau on "Absolutely Fabulous," Mr. Collins in the 2005 "Pride & Prejudice" film, a bewigged villain in the "Pirates of the Caribbean" movies. More recently, he played the gay dandy plotting against Jennifer Coolidge on "The White Lotus." Hollander, who is straight and, at fifty-six, a first-time dad, dismissed the idea that he is typecast as malicious gay men who betray their female confidantes. "It's a coincidence! I was cast as Truman before 'The White Lotus' was out." To nail Capote's wheezy, Droopy-dog drawl, he studied the author's talk-show appearances. "It's a female voice in its register. He can go low—when he laughed, it's a full, broken-voiced laugh," Hollander said, over *poulet rôti*. "He avoids people's eye a lot. He looks up, he looks around. He's often trying to escape where he is."

He glanced back at the two ladies. "The one on the right is now aware that we're talking about her," he said. "I like the fact that they're both facing out. They're clearly people-watching themselves." Surveying the lunch crowd, he saw little of the old Côte Basque glamour. "The modern equivalent of that world is not here, is it?" he asked. "Women with that amount of determination and agency would be running their own businesses. They wouldn't be somebody's wife—they would be Kim Kardashian. I mean, when those women walked into La Côte Basque, it was Instagram, wasn't it? They were known."

A nauseated look crossed his face; it had been a long week. The two ladies left with a doggie bag, and a waiter changed their tablecloth. The last lines of Capote's "La Côte Basque, 1965" came to mind: "Stewards were resetting the tables, sprucing the flowers for the evening visitors. It was an atmosphere of luxurious exhaustion, like a ripened, shedding rose, while all that waited outside was the failing New York afternoon."

—*Michael Schulman*

SKETCHPAD BY BARRY BLITT

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

IN THE WEEDS

The struggle to sell legal marijuana in New York.

BY JIA TOLENTINO

A few years ago, Howell Miller was in prison in New York State, walking laps around the track with a fellow-inmate he'd befriended, who happened to be a former U.S. congressman. Prior to the prison stint, Miller, a cheerful guy in his early fifties, had run a construction company and a serious marijuana operation, simultaneously. "I was a silent baller," he told me. "Then one of my guys got caught with forty-four hundred pounds on a truck." As Miller neared the end of a twelve-year sentence, he began hearing stories of people getting rich running weed shops: "I was thinking, Why the hell am I still in jail?" His ex-congressman friend, Anthony Weiner, told him on the track that day that the first dispensary licenses were going to be awarded to people who had marijuana convictions. "I thought, I'm gonna get out and look into that," Miller said.

What Weiner had described was the Conditional Adult-Use Retail Dispensary program, or CAURD. It's the flagship program of the Office of Cannabis Management (O.C.M.), the agency created, in 2021, to oversee the legalization of marijuana in New York. The state's cannabis restrictions had been loosening for almost a decade, but that year the government passed a law that would have seemed unthinkable just a short while before. The governor at the time, Andrew Cuomo, had been pushed left on the issue during a primary challenge from Cynthia Nixon; after his reëlection, he found himself knee-deep in multiple scandals, and unusually pliable. The law not only made pot legal for adults; it also allocated forty per cent of weed-related tax revenue to communities where cops had made disproportionate marijuana arrests, and it set a goal of awarding half of all licenses to "social and economic equity" applicants: women, people of color, service-disabled veterans, distressed farmers, and residents of those overpoliced communities.

CAURD went a step further, mandating that the first licenses for the sale of recreational weed go to people who had, or whose family members had, a marijuana-related conviction. In the previous four decades, according to an analysis by the Legal Aid Society, police in New York had made more than a million marijuana arrests. Although weed is consumed in roughly equal proportions across the racial and economic spectrum, as recently as 2020 people of color were subjected to ninety-four per cent of marijuana arrests and summonses in New York City; arrests in the city were also much heavier in high-poverty areas. The idea for CAURD was plain: legal weed as reparations.

After the program was announced, I called Damian Fagon, a cannabis activist and educator who was once one of the state's few Black hemp farmers, to get his take. (We used to smoke weed together in college.) He told me that he'd just been appointed the O.C.M.'s chief equity officer. His new boss, the director of the O.C.M., was Chris Alexander, the thirty-three-year-old son of immigrants from Grenada, who'd helped shape the law while working for a progressive nonprofit. Fagon had been texting his weed dealer, Misha, for feedback on policy proposals. The activists had won.

Howell Miller got out of prison in early 2022 and followed up on the tip from Weiner. It led him to the Bronx Cannabis Hub, an incubator set up by the Bronx Defenders and run by a public defender in his thirties named Eli Northrup. That August, Northrup held his first meeting for potential CAURD applicants. Forty or so people, most of them Black or Latino, gathered in the reception area of the Bronx Defenders

Governor Kathy Hochul recently called the rollout of legal weed a "disaster."

ILLUSTRATION BY ROSE WONG

office. Northrup and his colleagues had previously defended several of the attendees in court, and he dapped them up as they walked in. A twentysomething man named Sirvon, wearing a Louis Vuitton shower cap, told me that he used to call Northrup from Rikers on weekends, just to catch up. "That's my bro," Sirvon said. "That's really *gang*."

The Hub brought together a scrappy and profoundly New York City collection of people. The prospective applicants included a bricklayer, a harm-reduction trainer, and the owner of a local grocery store. There were also cabdrivers and restaurant managers, an accountant, and an electrician. (Sirvon's day job was still weed dealer; he soon learned that, without tax records showing he'd run a profitable business, he wasn't eligible for CAURD.) Among the few women was Naiomy Guerrero, an art historian in her early thirties doing a Ph.D. at the City University of New York. (Her brother had the weed conviction.) Among the many men was Coss Marte, who got busted on a major trafficking charge at the age of twenty-three and then, after serving time, opened a "prison style" fitness boot camp called Conbody. He had the vibe of a young Vin Diesel and a telegenic smile; he'd already done a spot on "Ellen." He was going to call his dispensary Conbud.

Legal weed entrepreneurship is typically a sport for the well capitalized. It can cost millions of dollars to open a dispensary, and, because marijuana is still illegal at the federal level, dispensary owners can't write off many of their business expenses—they pay effective tax rates of up to eighty per cent. CAURD promised a package that would help licensees leapfrog these barriers, providing renovated dispensary spaces and access to a loan fund of two hundred million dollars. New York's cannabis law mostly prohibited vertical integration; it was designed to stave off corporate capture and give opportunities to people without venture-capital funding or Goldman Sachs on their résumés. In several states, companies that already dominated the medical-marijuana market got the first shot at the recreational market. New York required those companies to wait three years. "There are a lot of white dudes who are pissed, who think we're giving the industry away," Fagon told me.

If they were, it wasn't easy. At the Hub meeting, Northrup began taking questions, and hands kept going up. It was still illegal to transport marijuana across state lines—how would retailers get their inventories? Farmers upstate were growing fields of licit marijuana! What were the state's loan terms going to be? No one knew, exactly. How much was the application going to cost? Two thousand dollars. Also, it was nonrefundable. "Jesus Christ," one man said.

What about the weed-selling bodegas and trucks that had been sprouting up across the city throughout the summer? Weren't they cornering the market? "All of that is illegal," Northrup said. "You're not behind the ball." The city, he assumed, would shut those shops down, eventually. Kathy Hochul, who had replaced Cuomo as governor, insisted that legal dispensaries would be open by the end of 2022. O.C.M. employees likened their task to building a plane while trying to fly it. "New York isn't basing this on any existing model," Northrup said. "They're basing it on trying to do the right thing."

By the end of the meeting, a preëmptive weariness had cut through the mood of buzzing optimism. A woman in a pink skirt sighed. "I don't think the government made this confusing on accident," she said. "I think they did that shit on purpose."

Equity programs elsewhere had flopped. Illinois had a carve-out for social-equity applicants, but by 2022 only one per cent of legal weed businesses in that state had Black majority ownership. Ohio mandated that fifteen per cent of medical-marijuana licenses go to people of color; after a lawsuit, the mandate was ruled unconstitutional. But a fluky political moment had created the chance for something radical in New York. If the O.C.M. built a profitable marijuana industry on a foundation of social equity, it could change the trajectory of national legalization. If it failed, people might see it as a death knell for social justice having anything to do with legal weed.

Around nine hundred people applied for CAURD licenses. When the O.C.M. announced the first approvals, in November, 2022, only thirty-six applicants had got through. Miller was not among them. Neither was Marte, who told me that he'd done a timed practice run uploading his documents, and had been applicant No. 13.

Guerrero, the art historian, did get a license. A careful woman with a fluency in institutional critique, she appeared warier of CAURD's promises—and of the narrative of criminal grit and economic redemption that seemed to be expected of licensees—than some of the other applicants did. Even so, she said that she'd wept as she watched the announcement. "The term 'justice-involved' describes all of us in my family," she told me. "I was just swaying back and forth, thinking, We did it. We really did this thing."

There were some large asterisks, however. The state had been hit with the first of many lawsuits arguing that CAURD, in giving exclusive priority to people with convictions and their families, violated the law. The state-renovated dispensary locations weren't ready, and no one knew when they would be, or where they'd be situated. And the two hundred million dollars didn't exist yet, either.

That money was meant to be the fruit of a partnership: fifty million from the state, a hundred and fifty million from investment in a private fund. Management of the fund was entrusted to a team consisting of the former N.B.A. star Chris Webber, an entrepreneur named Lavetta Willis, and Siebert Williams Shank, a financial firm certified as both women-owned and minority-owned. A week after the first licenses were announced, the online publication NY Cannabis Insider reported that, by all indications, no private money had been raised. What's more, Webber and Willis had undisclosed ties to a huge national weed brand, Cookies, and their major alleged accomplishments in the field—raising a hundred million dollars for nonwhite entrepreneurs and launching a fifty-million-dollar cannabis facility in Detroit—had not come to fruition.

The author of that report was Brad Racino, a journalist based in Syracuse. Starting in 2021, he'd published one story after another highlighting oversights and complications in the legal-weed rollout. "You throw a rock and you hit an accountability investigation,"

he told me. (When I asked Willis and Webber for comment, they pointed out that no one has ever achieved what they're trying to do.)

CAURD applicants started getting antsy. Marte and a couple of friends set up a group text for gossiping, brainstorming, and sharing resources. It turned into a WhatsApp chat, then a Discord group, and it ballooned with members—including Racino, who said that he began to receive a "steady stream of phone calls, Twitter D.M.s, and LinkedIn messages from people asking basic questions." Some people were close enough to Alexander and Fagon to text them when issues came up; others couldn't get information out of anyone. The O.C.M. was staffed with people from the hands-on world of social-justice work. Now, as regulators, they were required to keep their distance—even if they didn't always do so.

Marte, talking on Zoom with his bright-eyed toddler in a Pack 'n Play behind him, obsessed over the scoring system used to approve applications. "Give me this license and I'll be popping off deliveries in three weeks," he told me. Guerrero was growing skeptical and overwhelmed. So many people were calling her with weird and seemingly predatory financial offers that she'd told her dad to disconnect the home phone. Most of the CAURD licensees were vulnerable to this sort of thing: the monetary value of a license was likely well into seven figures, but without financing or real estate they couldn't get their operations started. "Social equity is not about plucking an opportunity out of the sky and giving it to someone who hasn't had it," Guerrero told me. "It's about supporting that entity and setting them up for success. The real work is that in-between."

In her view, New York's lawmakers had created a situation where the licensees with the most resources would open stores first—"the total opposite," she noted, "of what they said they wanted to do." The most resourced licensees, for now, were nonprofits: eight licenses had gone to organizations that served the currently or formerly incarcerated. They generally had fund-raising lists and boards of directors. On December 29, 2022, Housing Works, which supports people with H.I.V./AIDS through the sale of clothing and books, débuted the first legal weed store in New York City, near Washington Square Park. The doors opened at 4:20 P.M., and the line was around the block. Chris Alexander was the first customer. He bought a pack of watermelon gummies and a sativa strain called Banana Runtz. "I've said it often and I'll say it again," he told the crowd. "Equity is not *a* thing. It's *the* thing. It is what we are doing."

When 2023 began, New York City had one legal weed store and about fourteen hundred illegal ones. Some of these shops had an Apple Store look—minimalist merchandising, counters of blond wood and glass—and seemed well capitalized. A big illicit chain called Empire Cannabis Clubs had opened its first New York outlet in early 2021, insisting that its business model, in which customers pay for membership to a "private club," was legal. (A co-owner of the chain has said that every man in her family served time for marijuana, and that the stores were a way to "take back the years lost.") A lot of the unlicensed shops looked like bodegas, sat in storefronts that previously were bodegas, and seemed to be run by bodega guys who had found a way to make better money. At a City Council meeting, representatives for the Yemeni American Merchants Association—nearly half of N.Y.C. bodegas are run by Yemenis—said that many

of its members wanted weed licenses but knew that, as "immigrant owners," they "tend to be the last in line when it comes to these new regulations, like the cannabis law."

Gale Brewer, a former Manhattan borough president who's now a City Council member on the Upper West Side, has been pushing New York to do something about these stores. I met her at her office, on Columbus Avenue, on a rainy afternoon. Brewer is in her early seventies, with blond hair graying at the roots and the unflappable bearing of a lifelong city dweller. She'd agreed to take me on a tour of illicit shops in her district—there were sixty-five at last count, she said, on about a hundred and sixty city blocks. She laid out our itinerary: "Should we start with, what's it called, Wazoo Zazoo?"

In nearly every state where marijuana has been decriminalized, legalization has been followed by an upswing in illegal activity. Many entrepreneurs keep a hand in each world: legal growers in California often divert half their product to the illegal market as a safeguard against industry volatility (and to pad their bottom line). Officials in that state recently accused a founder of a well-known legal brand of being the landlord for a string of illegal dispensaries in Los Angeles. Yelp-like Web sites that list local dispensaries frequently display legal and illegal businesses alike, without differentiating.

But the explosion of unlicensed weed stores in New York City is unparalleled. This is due to, among other things, the sheer number of storefronts and the hypercharged culture of entrepreneurship in the city, where pop-up vending is perpetually in bloom. It's also because the N.Y.P.D., no longer able to search cars or suspicious persons under the pretext of "marijuana odor," seems uninterested in policing for weed at all. One of Brewer's staffers suggested to me that the police were being obstinate—that they didn't want to be on the hook for a problem that the state had created. Enforcement, in any case, has fallen on the entirely unequipped O.C.M. Alexander compared the situation to a group project in grade school. "Let's say Jessica is tasked with drawing, but she can't draw," he told me. "I wasn't expecting to draw, but I'll take on the drawing for her. But don't come back and say the group project is a mistake because I'm drawing slow."

In the year and a half that elapsed between the legalization of marijuana and the arrival of legal stores, the illegal shops were allowed to flourish. Consumers were waiting for weed stores, and look—here they were! For months, I walked into random smoke shops whenever I passed them and asked employ-

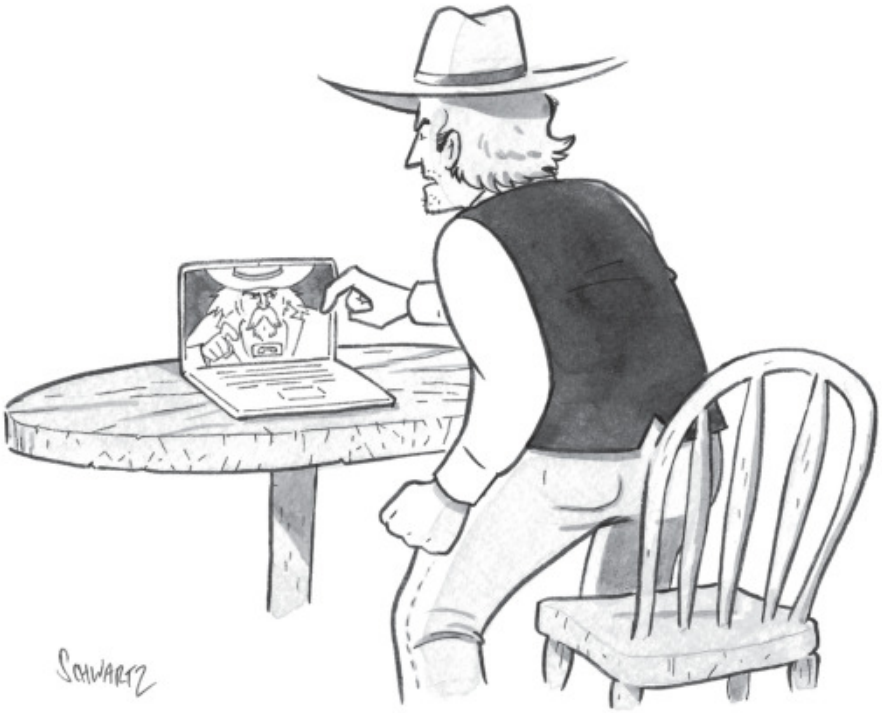
ees if this was one of the new legal dispensaries I'd been hearing so much about. "Sure," they usually told me. "Absolutely."

The name of the weed bodega a block from Brewer's office was Zaza Waza. It featured a velvet rope and a red carpet and the standard inventory for such places: pre-rolled joints, neon bud grinders, elaborate bongs, candy-flavored nicotine vapes (which are illegal to sell in New York), cans of nitrous oxide, weed-infused gummies and chocolate bars from out-of-state brands. Several products advertised a truly terrifying potency: one bag of peach gummy rings from the California brand Smashed supposedly contained two hundred and fifty milligrams of THC per gummy, enough to send a devoted stoner like myself to the emergency room, if not to the grave. (These purported amounts are not always accurate. Also, no one has ever actually died from too much weed.)

"When's it gonna be legal?," the guy behind the counter asked Brewer, unprompted, as we perused the merchandise. "I want to apply for a license." He told me that he hadn't been interested in marijuana until he started working at the store, a month before, but now he thought it was a great and fascinating product. He handed me a copy of *Cannabis Magazine* in case I wanted to learn more.

Plenty of penalties, both civil and criminal, can be deployed against these sellers, at least in theory. Churros are thoroughly legal—and a thirteen-year-old can consume them incautiously without having a very memorable panic attack—but cops still occasionally find the motivation to bust ladies who sell them in the subway. At the end of 2022, Brewer released a survey about weed shops in her district, asking the sheriff's office and the O.C.M. for better enforcement. The sheriff sent police to sweep a few shops and confiscate illegal products. Zaza Waza's shelves were emptied. Two days later, the store was open again, fully restocked. (The owners of Zaza Waza could not be reached for comment.)

Back on Columbus Avenue, Brewer and I passed weed bodegas every few blocks. She had a grim sense of humor about their invincibility. The Mayor, Eric Adams, had launched an inter-



"Ain't nobody gonna end a meeting faster than me."

• •

agency task force to inspect stores and seize illegal products; the state legislature granted the O.C.M. authority to issue up to twenty thousand dollars in fines a day. But the fines could be levied only through scattershot administrative hearings, and the O.C.M. had reportedly collected just two hundred and twenty thousand dollars in total before suspending proceedings entirely.

"I'm frustrated!" Brewer announced. The bottoms of her camel pants were soaked from walking through puddles. We passed a bar called Prohibition. "The city blames the state, the state blames the city," she continued. "The D.A. says, 'I don't get any coöperation from the police or the sheriff.' I keep saying, 'Why can't we just get everyone in a room?'" I asked Brewer which agencies would need to be present. "The D.A., the sheriff, the P.D., the O.C.M., Tax and Finance, Consumer Protection, Health," she said. "Oh, and the schools." Some of the shops made a point of opening early, she told me, to catch high-school kids on their way to first period. Selling cannabis to minors is a felony.

I thought about a conversation I'd had a few days earlier with a talkative cannabis attorney named Jeffrey Hoffman. "The best way to fight the illegal stores is to open a bunch of legal stores and have them delight their customers," he said. "The next one is no tax on the legal stores for three years, and then we tax when we have a seven-billion-dollar cannabis industry." But the quick path, he went on, would be to levy huge, escalating fines on the landlords who own the properties that house the illegal businesses. In his political dreams, the city might seize the property after a landlord's third violation, then open a legal cannabis store on the first floor and put affordable housing above it. "Thank you very much—I'm now the mayor," he said.

Brewer snorted when I recounted the conversation. "That's a great idea if you don't have to actually do it," she said.

New York didn't just have to license the people who were going to sell marijuana—it also had to license, among others, the people who were going to grow it. Here, too, regulators tried to create an industry that was equitable, and environmentally friendly. The state gave its first round of recreational

cultivator licenses to farmers who'd already been authorized to grow hemp—i.e., low-THC cannabis—which has been legal since 2017. New York is the only state in the country to have its first crop of legal marijuana grown entirely under the sun, Alexander told me. Farmers were allowed an acre of outdoor canopy, or about half that if they wanted to grow in a greenhouse. Alexander said that these restrictions were "driven by principle."

Not everyone agreed that this was a good thing. "The quality is so bad," a longtime pot grower in the Bronx who calls himself the Kolektor and has a cult following, told me. "You need equatorial conditions to grow—heat and humidity." Classic New York weed, he said, was "obnoxious, pungent, superloud. Never a sweet smell. You'll be walking down the block and smelling it, like, 'God *damn*.'" You can't grow weed like that outdoors here.

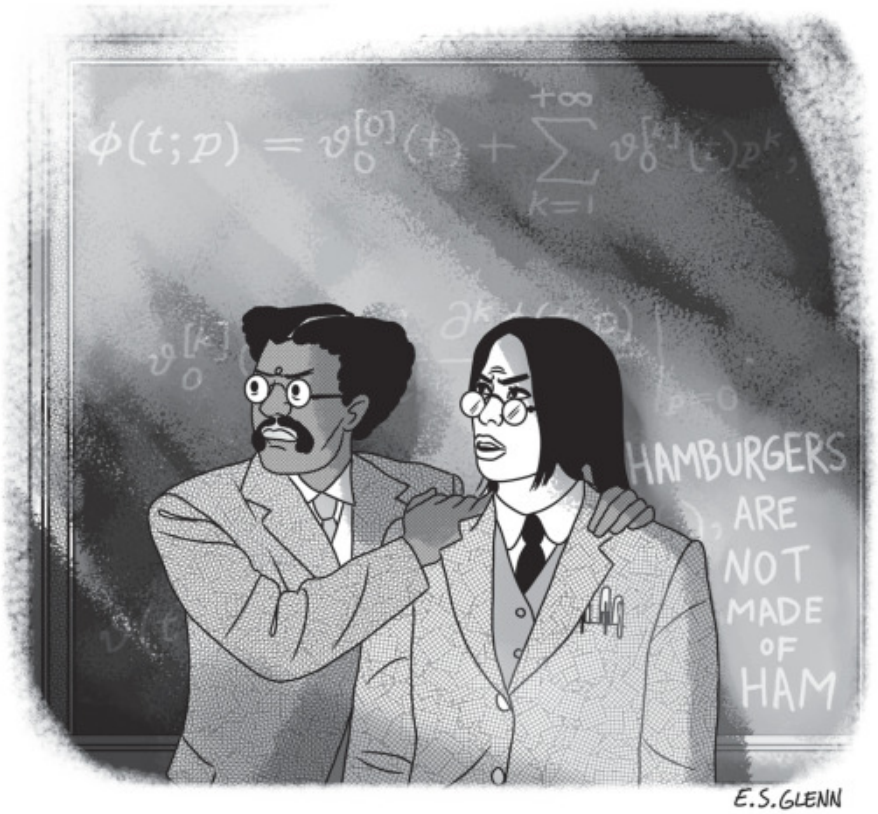
The Kolektor, a former U.S. infantryman who wears a ski mask when he showcases his weed at public events, started growing marijuana to alleviate his own symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. He prided himself on fresh product, never treated with pesticides, touched by only a few hands: "grown, not flown." He wanted to go legal, he told me, but the new law didn't lay out a pathway to get licenses for people who were still involved in the black market. Only those with convictions were eligible for CAURD; plenty of longtime dealers and growers had never been caught. The Kolektor sent me an elaborate amnesty proposal, drafted by a prominent cannabis lawyer. It involved a double-blind application system, a truth-and-reconciliation tribunal, locked hearings. Anything like that would take a lot of time. But the Kolektor wasn't too pressed—his business was flourishing. He posted closeup shots of his dense, crystalline flower on Instagram and sold huge amounts of weed through Discord every week.

Most of the hemp farmers were white, and lived upstate. Brittany Carbone, who grew up on Long Island, runs a farm with her husband, Erik. Her past involvement with marijuana includes a run-in with law enforcement: as an undergrad at Penn State, in 2010, she was arrested for smoking weed in her dorm room. Her parents paid a three-thousand-dollar fine, and she did a day of community service; a year later, her record was automatically expunged. Her passion for marijuana was undiminished. After college, she worked as a personal trainer for Equinox, and started making her own CBD blends, mixing hemp extract into ashwagandha root and lemon balm in her kitchen. When New York announced that farmers could get licensed to grow hemp for CBD, she thought of a property her family owned, which had a lot of unused acreage. There was even a barn—it's where she and Erik had had their wedding reception.

I visited the farm, called Tricolla, on a biting-cold day. Carbone wore fleece, Erik wore lined denim, and their dogs ran underfoot. Carbone drove me around in a utility vehicle, passing acres of four-foot-tall marijuana plants, a million nugs waving gently in the wind. The barns were strung with wire cages for drying the harvest. Plastic tubs were stuffed with bags of weed.

Carbone speaks with the wonkish vigor of a policy nerd and the can-do restlessness of an athlete at a press conference. She told me she understood that people were skeptical about the quality of outdoor-grow marijuana. She believed, she said, "that this opportunity should be going to legacy growers, to the people who've been cultivating marijuana in New York for years." Still, the opportunity was a mixed blessing. She and her husband had taught themselves how to grow hemp just as the federal government removed it from the controlled-substances list: supply skyrocketed, prices plummeted, and they ended up with their crop mostly composted and an unsustainable load of debt. Legal cannabis had arrived as a lifeline, but the Carbones had upended everything to grow their first weed crop, and then found themselves with almost nowhere to sell it.

In the early months of 2023, licensed dispensaries began to dot New York. Smacked Village, the first shop run by an individual CAURD licensee, Roland Conner, opened as a pop-up on Bleecker Street in January. Union Square Travel Agency, a luxe store



"Professor Jenkins, the world must never know of this discovery. Our findings die with us."

operated by the Doe Fund, a nonprofit, arrived soon afterward. The O.C.M. expanded CAURD beyond the planned hundred and fifty licenses, in the hope of getting more legal stores open. In April, Coss Marte finally got his license. Howell Miller got his in July. Then, in August, the entire program was halted by litigation.

A group of military veterans had sued the O.C.M., arguing that CAURD discriminated against people who'd been designated as social-equity applicants, including them. Soon, a coalition of medical-marijuana suppliers was allowed to join the suit as plaintiffs, giving rise to a popular theory that it had orchestrated the case. Brad Racino, the Cannabis Insider journalist, wasn't surprised. "We ran so many stories from so many attorneys saying that CAURD is a lawsuit magnet," he told me. Jeffrey Hoffman, the cannabis lawyer, said the same thing: "I absolutely love the folks at O.C.M., I commend them till the cows come home, but their regulations don't match the law."

The judge presiding over the suit issued an injunction, freezing the CAURD program. By that point, only about twenty licensees were doing business. Many people had signed leases and were paying rent, losing money they'd barely scraped together in the first place. Webber and Willis had finally secured a lender, Chicago Atlantic, for the two-hundred-million-dollar loan fund. The loans required no collateral, but the licensees couldn't renegotiate the terms, couldn't pay off the loans early without penalties, and couldn't set their own profit margins or staffing costs. The interest rate was thirteen per cent. The O.C.M., needing more stores on the streets, waived the waiting period for medical-marijuana companies, allowing each one entry into the market for a twenty-million-dollar fee.

Carbone told me that farming was "the most humbling experience you could go through," and said that it had taught her to let go of many expectations. To raise money and get help with operations, she'd partnered with a company in California, but it hadn't worked out. Things weren't going great in that state, either—high taxes and regulatory struggles were sandbagging the legal market. Small businesses were going bankrupt, corporations were moving to less restrictive territory, and the majority of weed purchases were still made illegally. "California is drowning," Carbone said. "And people are grabbing on to New York as a lifeboat. And now the lifeboat is sinking."

In the fall of 2023, the O.C.M. convinced a judge that a few licensees should be allowed to proceed. Marte, who'd put hundreds of thousands of dollars into building out his location and was beginning to fear that he had made a life-altering mistake, was one of them. He opened Conbud ten days later, on the corner of Orchard and Delancey, just three blocks from the park where he'd first been arrested for weed. He threw a huge party—Funkmaster Flex d.j.'d, budtenders wore shirts that said "Come Back with a Warrant," and a camera crew filmed everything for a documentary.

Marte, a natural salesman armed with social connections and a P.R. agent, was about as well equipped as someone in the CAURD program could be. Still, he immediately ran into obstacles. If you searched Google for "weed stores" in his neighborhood, only the illegal ones came up. The law required that cannabis products not be visible from the street, and limited the text a store could print on its signs. (Many weed bodegas, in contrast, had a flamboyant, illegal tackiness.) Marte hustled like old times on the sidewalk, telling people about his store in Spanish and in very basic Chinese.

In October, applications for licenses opened to the general public. Unsure of how the lawsuit would turn out, the O.C.M. urged CAURD licensees to apply again. I took the train back to the Bronx, where the Hub was helping people navigate the process. Northrup sorted through paperwork; the licensees, used to getting worked over by the government, sat by patiently. One of them had given up a restaurant to focus on his dispensary, and was fretting about yet another pivot. On the phone with a business partner, he said, "What if O.C.M. fucks us two times?"

The plaintiffs suing the O.C.M. reached a settlement in late November: the veterans were awarded dispensary licenses, and each medical supplier was given permission to open three dispensaries. CAURD could now proceed. I called Carbone and caught her in a "trim trance," manicuring her marijuana crop by hand. She and Erik had downsized, on account of the delayed rollout, and were now tending to a half-acre crop mostly on their own. Their prerolled joints and gummies were selling at Housing Works and Conbud. But the cost of doing business was punitively high, she said, and the market was fluctuating, with farmers lowering prices to impossible levels just to get their products on the shelves.

"This isn't an easy state to do business in," she said. As she saw it, the O.C.M. wasn't equipped to regulate the legal shops, let alone the unlicensed ones: "Out-of-state indoor flower is on the shelves in legal dispensaries, being sold as 'greenhouse.' Growers know this—we know what greenhouse grow looks like—but no one wants to snitch on the dispensaries." She said that some dispensaries weren't paying their bills, perhaps in some cases "because they're saddled with an insane monthly nut" from the state on their storefronts. "And what are we supposed to do about that?"

At the end of the year, I waded through holiday shoppers in Tribeca on my way to the law offices of Cleary Gottlieb, thirty stories up in a high-rise, where Northrup had invited CAURD holders to plan their next steps. People clapped one another on the back as they walked in. Most of them were struggling to find financing. One man, a cabdriver, was still miffed about having to apply for a license twice. For CAURD, he'd needed to show that he had run a successful business, but to get priority in the general round he'd needed to show that he was low-income. "Do you want social equity or do you want to humiliate me?" he said.

Naiomy Guerrero was biding her time, turning down a succession of predatory offers. The language of social equity had come to seem like a cloak for a more brutal capitalist reality. "Many of us want a world that operates on radical principles, but that's not what we are living," she said.

Northrup had decided that the best

way for him to help was to join the legislature: he was now running for State Assembly. Several licensees lived in his campaign district, in Morningside Heights and West Harlem, and they joked about getting out the vote. He suggested that the licensees organize a trip to Albany to advocate for themselves. "Even if it was just the people in this room, we have power," he said. The talk continued, and ideas flew alongside grievances and hopes. Could they form a CAURD franchise, and get investors interested in multiple stores? Could they crowdfund? Was it all too late? "If we wait on O.C.M., we're gonna get screwed," a man who runs a Jamaican restaurant upstate said. "This is how poor people, like all of us in the room, get marginalized." Weed bodegas kept opening with crappy product at low prices, and the corporations were right around the corner. "It's not fair," Northrup acknowledged, trying to quiet the room. "This is America, and it's playing out like America."

In January, I sat down at a bar near Fort Greene Park and looked around for Sirvon, the weed dealer I'd met at the Hub a year and a half before. We'd agreed to have lunch together, at 1 P.M., and he had generously insisted on coming all the way to Brooklyn from Eastchester, in the Bronx. But now snow was falling, for the first time in ages, and at three o'clock I found myself eating shrimp cocktail while engaging in a deeply familiar, almost old-fashioned activity: texting a weed guy to ask his E.T.A.

Sirvon arrived in a hoodie, which he kept pulled up over his head, and wearing a nameplate ring that said "NEW MONEY." He grew up in the Edenwald Houses, and got locked up for the first time when he was eleven, he said, on a robbery charge. ("My mom's got seven fucking kids, and she's taking care of all of us by herself? Nah, I can't be asking her for money to buy me my little pair of pants.") He started selling weed not long afterward. He made a business out of it when he was nineteen and expecting his first kid; his supplier got barrels shipped in from Jamaica. "You had Piff, you had Sour, you had Kush," he said. "None of this Afghanistan Blueberry Sunshine shit." He started doing deliveries; he expanded and staffed up. "You got people that's ambitious and hungry, you put them to work together. Then you got people who just like to have a gun and shit—'O.K., you can be the security guard,' you feel me?" He was moving half a pound daily, touching a grand in cash a night.

Ineligible for CAURD, he'd continued dealing, but the unlicensed stores had messed up his business—partly by emboldening sellers who were new to the trade. "If you're coming to Edenwald," he said, "and you see me and thirteen other niggas standing right there, you're going to be, like, 'Fuck that, I'm going to go to the smoke shop.' And the smoke shop's got a dusty bag of chips near the counter, so they be taking E.B.T.!" E.B.T. cards cannot be legally used for alcohol, tobacco, or even prepared foods, let alone marijuana, but the unlicensed stores are already operating outside a number of regulatory boundaries, and so might be willing to cross a few more. (A spokesperson at Brewer's office told me that he'd also heard rumors about shops accepting E.B.T. for weed.) Sirvon's profits were way down. He would work past midnight and barely clear two hundred dollars.

"It's not that we know the perfect way to design or implement a cannabis market," Chris Alexander, of the O.C.M., told me. "Who do we turn to to know the way to do this? It's just us." The agency now has around a hundred and fifty employees. "We are not close to where we need to be to handle all that we're trying to do," Alexander said. Despite the agency's missteps, there were victories to claim. Housing Works had done twenty-four million dollars in sales in 2023. A year ago, according to an O.C.M. report, there were only twenty Black-owned dispensaries in the country; by January, New York had added a dozen more. Marte said that sales at Conbud were increasing by five per cent every week. Naiomy Guerrero got a state-issued site for her family's dispensary, called Nube, and hopes to open it later this year. Howell Miller signed a lease for a dispensary in the Bronx—Two Buds, which he will run with his brother, and which has a grand opening planned for the spring. I e-mailed Anthony Weiner to ask if he remembered his conversation with Miller on the prison track. "Holy shit," he replied. "Totally remember that dude. So glad to hear he is doing well. Send him my best."

More than a hundred thousand marijuana convictions have been expunged, and sellers in the black market continue to cross over, if slowly. Misha, formerly the weed dealer of choice for the O.C.M.'s Damian Fagon, got a CAURD license and the keys to a store in Bushwick: Misha's Flower Shop. A handful of legacy growers, including the Kolektor, were in line for micro-licenses, allowing small, craft-beer-esque cultivation. "I told Damian, 'Bro, you give me a license or not, there's a lot of us who are going to be doing our thing. It behooves you to find a way to get us in,'" the Kolektor said.

Still, there were two hundred and fifty thousand pounds of legal weed deteriorating in storage, and patience was ebbing in Albany. At the end of January, Hochul called the legal rollout a "disaster" and said that "the legislation was crafted in a way that was not poised for success." Brad Racino has come to believe that staffing the O.C.M. with advocates doomed the program. "When you start using this law in your own ways, and you're not an elected official, that's when things start to go wrong," he said. He feared that a lot of CAURD licensees would end up worse off than when they began. "You have all these people who have already been targeted by the government, and you're taking that vulnerable population and experimenting with them."

Sirvon still wanted to go legal, but he couldn't put together a strong application. He didn't have the capital to secure a storefront, legal or otherwise, and corporations were no longer hunting around for people with marijuana convictions to invest in, even predatorily. "I'm Black," he told me. "Period. I'm from the hood. I was promised forty acres and a mule, and I ain't seen that shit yet. It's always a Catch-22 when it comes to Black people. It's always something in the fine print." I told him that I hoped he'd have a weed store of his own someday. "Yeah," he said. "At some point. That's what I'm definitely doing. Facts." ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

EXCERPTS FROM A POSTING FOR MY IDEAL JOB

BY DANIELLE KRAESE

You are an experienced writer who lives and breathes finding excuses to avoid writing.

You are passionate about having enough money for things like food, rent, clothes, and a Lifetime Movie Club subscription.

You know what an Oxford comma is, and you have a strong opinion about it that you'll share with just about anyone if you sense that it could waste twelve minutes of company time.

You have a hunger for just hanging out and vibing.

You also have a hunger for food, which means that you must take a break every forty minutes to get a little snack.

You possess a keen editorial eye, a conspiratorial smile, and a mercurial shoulder that will go into full spasm if someone even mentions the word "deadline."

You're obsessed with finding new ways of becoming wildly over-caffeinated to the point of being totally useless.

You're a team player who won't hesitate to provide an in-depth recap to anyone who missed last night's episode of "Love Island."

You thrive in a collaborative environment of constant validation and frequent reminders that no one is mad at you.

You are not afraid to put in as many hours as it takes until your company-issued laptop runs out of battery.

You're also an independent worker, so you won't bother the I.T. team about the fact that your laptop battery only lasts an hour, tops.

You know when to go the extra mile, which is never, unless you're going on a secret midday excursion to get more snacks.

You have excellent professional judgment in that you know when to put on a bra for a Zoom meeting and when to simply tilt your laptop screen back sixteen degrees and hope for the best.

You are comfortable juggling hundreds of Chrome tabs, most of which you will never return to (like a search-results page for "focus at work how do i do it help").

You have a proven track record of increasing LOLs in the team Slack through your curation of world-class memes.

You are a persuasive leader who will convince everyone on the team to max out their allotted sick days and test the limits of "unlimited" vacation.

You are willing to take junior employees under your wing and tell them things like "Don't even worry about that mistake! Someday we'll all be dead" and "Honestly, I never liked this job that much."

You understand that this is a hybrid role; you will be expected to work two days a week from your couch, one day from your bed, and one day from half on the couch and half on the floor, in a position so devoid of ergonomics that the sight of it would make even the steeliest orthopedist weep.

You will report directly to Snickerdoodle, our Chief Canine Officer (a very good girl).

Salary range: $80-90 million. ♦

BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPT.

SKIN IN THE GAME

Inside the frenzied business of designer ball pythons.

BY REBECCA GIGGS

The "leopard blackhead Mojave hypo black axanthic" is a prized ball python.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DELANEY ALLEN

On a fall day in Gainesville, Georgia, Justin Kobylka, the forty-two-year-old owner of Kinova Reptiles, was preparing to cut open two clutches of snake eggs. He was hoping to hit upon some valuable, beautiful reptiles. Kobylka is a breeder of designer ball pythons—one-of-a-kind, captive-bred snakes whose skin features colors and patterns not usually found in nature. "I think of myself as an explorer," he told me. Nicking an egg with a pair of surgical scissors, he exposed a live hatchling in its goo. "Even when they haven't yet touched air, you can sometimes see the tongue going," he said, making a flicking gesture with his thumb and fingertip.

We were standing in a six-thousand-square-foot climate-controlled outbuilding that housed some two thousand pythons, which were kept in individual plastic trays slotted into tall metal racks. The space, which cost nearly a million dollars to build and outfit, was immaculate and well lit, with corner-mounted industrial fans and glossy floors. A vague odor of musk and Clorox was all that hinted at the daily chores of snake husbandry.

Ball pythons originated in Africa, and in the wild they are typically dark brown with tan patches and a pale underbelly. Those bred for their appearance, as Kobylka's have been, often have a brighter palette, from soft washes of pastel to candy-colored bursts of near-fluorescence. Their patterns, too, have been transformed: a snake might be tricked out with pointillist dots, or a single dramatic stripe, or colors dissolving into one another, as in tie-dye. One captive-bred ball python's splotches and squiggles show up only under a black light. These changes reflect genetic mutations, which breeders call morphs. (The term is also used as shorthand for the snakes themselves.) World of Ball Pythons, a repository of information related to breeding, has catalogued more than seven thousand morphs in the past thirty years—though the actual number likely exceeds that by several thousand. "Evolution can go very fast," the animal-domestication expert and paleobiologist Marcelo Sánchez-Villagra, a professor at the University of Zurich, told me, adding that the variety of "ball pythons may be extreme even among reptiles." Arguably, no other snake, lizard, or turtle has been so sweepingly restyled by human effort.

The animals Kobylka breeds at Kinova are sold to collectors, independent pet stores, and élite breeders who want to replicate, or even improve on, their design. The launch of a new morph is sometimes called a "reveal" or a "drop," echoing the language of luxury-sneaker culture, and there are ball-python Internet forums that roil with opinion about which morphs are the hottest, and which ones aren't worth the hype. The most coveted morphs have commanded higher prices than giraffes, lions, and tigers have at auction. "I've had offers of over a hundred thousand dollars on a snake," Kobylka said. "But the way I operate, it's important to keep those snakes for my future work. You actually lose money long-term if you sell the most amazing thing at the time."

Kobylka, who is six feet two, was wearing a gray Lacoste polo, charcoal-colored jeans, and Adidas Sambas; he has dark hair, which he keeps short. In the first clutch, which had nine eggs, he was aiming, he said, for an "orange dream, yellow belly, enchi, leopard, desert ghost, carrying axanthic and clown genes." What sounded like an incantation was a catalogue of desirable mutations. ("Clown," for example, is named for teardrop shapes that show up under the eyes,

like the stylized tears of a clown.) As a breeder, Kobylka always has a "goal snake" in mind. "You've done a lot of mental work to imagine it, usually years in advance," he told me, describing a process of zeroing in on specific traits using the known heritability and interaction of genes. "Sometimes your odds are one in two hundred and fifty-six, or one in five hundred and twelve, to make the snake you're thinking about," he said. "The thing that makes it so addicting for me is the fact that there's a large amount of chance involved."

Kobylka has been breeding snakes for more than twenty years and is known as a trendsetter in the field, which is both close-knit and competitive. Courtney Capps, a co-founder of Leviathan Snakes, in South Carolina, observed that buyers are sometimes so proud of owning a Kinova python that, when it comes time to sell its offspring, they'll note in the listing, "Mom was produced by Justin." Kobylka gained an even wider audience in 2016, after he opened up an egg to find a white snake patterned with three orange smiley faces along its body. He had been trying to produce a "dreamsicle"—a white ball python with splotches of tangerine—but most of the circular markings on this snake had two eyes and a grin. Kobylka posted an image on his company's Facebook page, and, when someone suggested in a comment that the photograph had been edited, he made a fifteen-second video that showed him turning the baby python from side to side to display its distinctive motif. The video of the "emoji python" went viral, and the story of the unusual snake was covered by *Esquire*, *Business Insider*, and the New York *Post*, among other outlets.

On the day I visited Kinova, Kobylka wasn't filming the proceedings, but he sometimes shares egg-cutting videos on Patreon and YouTube. Ball pythons are able to hatch on their own, but such videos, in which a breeder gives a preview of a snakelet's coloration, have garnered a dedicated following. Offering anticipation, disclosure, and irregular reward, they are, in many ways, similar to toy-unboxing sequences. The footage also has elements of the #oddlysatisfying content known as A.S.M.R. (autonomous sensory meridian response)—videos of human hands gently manipulating something slimy or soft, for instance, or holding an object ready to burst. It isn't just egg cutting; the entire business of ball-python breeding is extremely online. Breeders deliver pro tips via live stream, develop colorways that will "pop" on Instagram, and often use language borrowed from digital-image editing, promising that a mutation will provide "amazing contrast" or "pixelated sides." Ball-python aficionados can't seem to get enough, finding in morphs a combination of clickbait, dream collectibles, data-driven hobby, and living art. Recently, a video of a ball python with the mottling of an overripe banana next to an actual banana was posted widely on X, while a TikTok video showing a ball python named Gizmo tracing a serpentine line on a tablet computer, as if on an Etch A Sketch, has been viewed approximately five million times. ("He tried to draw himself," one commenter noted.)

It was balmy in the outbuilding. Kobylka modulates the temperature to stagger the pythons' breeding cycles throughout the year (wild females become fertile in response to seasonal cues), but his snakes still seem to intuit the weather outside. A rainstorm can spark mating—Kobylka said that he will sometimes rush to match receptive females to males ahead of a downpour.

The first clutch, I learned, had a parent with a pastel gene, which, in addition to being commonplace, causes the animal's coloring to fade over time. (The standard life span of a captive ball python is fifteen to thirty years, though the St. Louis Zoo had one that keepers believe lived to be at least sixty-two.) Pastel unfortunately dominated the brood: most of the snakes would be priced in the low thousands. But, Kobylka said, "every miss is, as probably a gambler would tell you, almost as exciting as a win." A miss, he explained, will still find a home, and can provide useful information about how traits are masked, or about other polygenic effects.

Things went better with the next clutch. Glistening in the first shell was a tiny ball python with three recessive traits—"desert ghost, g-stripe, clown"—and another mutation called "spotnose." The baby snake was the color of straw, with smoky markings down its body, as though it had been repeatedly pinched by hot tongs. "That's everything it could be," Summer Melville, Kinova's business manager, said. The hatchling, a male, would retail for fifteen thousand dollars and be posted on MorphMarket, an e-commerce site for reptiles.

"My wife says I didn't get as excited about our kids being born as when the eggs hatch," Kobylka told me, "but I knew what to expect with our children." (The Kobylkas have five children: two adopted, three biological.) "Actually," he added, "our last son came out with red hair and blue eyes, so he was a double recessive."

As Kobylka went around pulling out trays to show me some of his most valuable full-grown pythons, I was reminded that in nature these creatures are ambush predators. Charles Darwin believed that a fear of snakes is, to some degree, hardwired in us. In "The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals" (1872), he recounts putting his face up against the glass enclosure of an adder in an attempt to conquer "the imagination of a danger which had never been experienced." The adder struck at the barrier. Darwin couldn't help but leap backward.

But ball pythons are not venomous, and were named for their tendency to curl up when threatened. The ones I saw tended to huddle in a corner, or contract slowly toward the farthest edge of their trays, which were lined with shredded coconut husk. They couldn't hide their extraordinary appearance, though. I saw a sixty-thousand-dollar python of such stark elegance—bone white and ink—that you could imagine it being unveiled at the Venice Biennale, and a bubblegum-pink python fit for Barbie. Kobylka admitted to getting quite attached to some of them. Star stickers had been placed on several racks to indicate his favorites, encouraging particular devotion from his staff. In the wild, ball pythons are nocturnal and live mostly underground, often in burrows taken over from rodent prey. They are not very social, though infants may stick together for a short time after hatching. Was Kobylka's affection, then, one-sided? "Ball pythons don't seem to mind being held, but they don't seem as curious as some other species," he said.

The team at Kinova would soon box up dozens of the company's finest specimens and drive them to Tinley Park, Illinois, for the North American Reptile

Breeders Conference (N.A.R.B.C.), one of the most anticipated reptile expos in the nation ("the Mecca of the ball-python market," as one breeder called it). Kobylka, who owns several Porsches, including a 2016 Cayman GT4 Clubsport that he races, compared the N.A.R.B.C. to a premium car show, offering a window onto the future of the industry. A draw for attendees this year would be the opportunity to meet Emily Roberts, the star of Snake Discovery, a YouTube channel with more than three million subscribers. Kobylka himself was teasing the existence of a baby "sunset combo" on YouTube. "We finally hit something really epic," he announces in the video.

Before leaving Kinova, I asked if I could hold a ball python. Kobylka selected a small lemon-yellow snake and placed its rolled-up body on my open palm. I had expected something cool to the touch, but the snake was warm, the temperature of its enclosure. When I shut my eyes, the impression of it on my hand seemed remarkably faint. "They tend to just sit still, and they're handleable," Kobylka said. "They're just so packaged."

The ball python is known to zoologists as *Python regius*, or "royal python." Cleopatra is rumored to have worn one as a bracelet, but the story is almost certainly apocryphal—ball pythons have never been native to Egypt. Today, ball pythons live in western Africa and parts of central and eastern Africa, from Senegal to the borderlands of South Sudan and Uganda. About three feet long, they can be found on the margins of rain forests and in the woods, but they have also adapted to managed environments: timber plantations, agricultural fields, trash heaps.

Snakes have evolved without major transformation for more than a hundred million years. Ball-python breeding and collecting is a relatively recent phenomenon. The high end of the American reptile market was long monopolized by large, heavy-bodied snakes, like boas and reticulated pythons. In the early twentieth century, dealers mainly sold their wares to film studios and zoos. By the mid-nineteen-sixties, improved habitat construction in zoos led to snowballing competition for hard-to-collect species—Angolan pythons plucked from war zones along the Namibia-Angola border, iridescent Boelen's pythons caught on the mountainsides of Papua New Guinea. The consumer market for pet reptiles was sluggish by comparison; through the nineteen-eighties, wildlife traders viewed parrots as more profitable. The investigative journalist Bryan Christy has described reptiles as having been "the Bic lighters of the pet industry: cheap, disposable point-of-sale pets."

In the early nineteen-nineties, though, household reptiles began to get a reputational makeover. Children raised on "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" and "Jurassic Park" reimagined scaly pets as characterful and intriguing. Retailers started to see an uptick in iguana sales. New Caledonian crested geckos, believed extinct until 1994 and jeopardized today by wildfires and invasive predators, became well established in captivity. Snakes were pitched to prospective buyers as perfect for cramped urban residences: undemanding, hypoallergenic, and needing to be fed only once a week. Ball pythons—which were abundant in their natural habitats and, being compact and docile, highly transportable—were soon arriving in the U.S. by the crateful, tucked into sacks and pillowcases.

Between 1989 and 1999, exports of ball pythons from West Africa to the United States tripled. In "The Ultimate Ball Python," an encyclopedic volume on morphs helmed by the breeder Kevin McCurley, one early broker described them as a "junk" species. In pet stores across the U.S., imported brown-and-tan ball pythons sold for around thirty dollars, discounted for being less alluring than other tropical reptiles. They were quintessential starter pets, and when he was in his mid-twenties McCurley, now an exuberant figure in the snake world, owned two: Eek and Meek. Speaking to me from what he called a "venomous room" in his breeding complex in New Hampshire, McCurley said that one day he had a vision of what ball pythons could be: "I looked at the vehicle of the ball python, and I said, 'This is the ideal snake. But it needs a totally different paint job.'"

In 1989, an Oklahoma-based breeder named Bob Clark received a tip about a single albino ball python found in Africa. "I got a letter from a friend in The Hague, Netherlands, about a dealer in Ghana, who had the animal," he told me. For a few years, Clark had been successfully cultivating albino Burmese pythons, costly novelties that can reach almost twenty feet, which he raised on rats, rabbits, and piglets. But in the ball python's small size he saw an opportunity. On the strength of a photograph sent to him in the mail, he bought the albino for seven thousand dollars, a price that he said "seemed a little crazy" at the time.

It took Clark several years of linebreeding—mating snakes to their forebears, littermates, or descendants—to produce a second albino ball python, and more followed. (Such ball pythons aren't pure white: you might get a snake with carrot-orange daubs or pale-yellow streaks.) He began selling the hatchlings at seventy-five hundred dollars apiece, and a wait list quickly formed. Collectors liked them, but his main type of client, he found, was the aspiring breeder. "Everybody wants nice, beautiful, expensive snakes that are rare," he said. "One way they justify that to themselves, and their spouse, is to say, 'This could be a moneymaker.'" Then, in 1994, Clark's facilities were burgled. The thief got away with his founding albino male as well as females that were heterozygous for the trait. Clark retained a large enough colony to continue, but he began hearing rumors of other albino ball pythons: his supply was no longer exclusive. (The thief was eventually caught and ordered to pay a civil judgment of $2.5 million.)

Soon another ball-python type, the piebald, or pied, which features mottled brown spots on an ivory body and is considered scarce in the wild, became popular: in 1997, a pied ball python could sell for thirty thousand dollars. McCurley, who had been breeding reptiles while working a day job as an electronic technician, couldn't afford an albino, let alone a pied. Instead, he started buying imports with minor irregularities, and mating them to determine whether a

specific quirk could be passed on (a process known to breeders as "proving out"). Most anomalies were discreet—a bit of speckling, a squiggle along a spine. Matthew Lerer, who used to sort reptile shipments in South Florida, noted in "The Ultimate Ball Python" that McCurley would study the snakes' markings for hours, "like he was a gemologist inspecting the Hope Diamond." Mike Wilbanks, a snake breeder from Oklahoma, told me, of the years that followed, "Some of the morphs turned into gold mines. Some turned out to be just a dry, empty hole." It is not possible to trademark a morph, but breeders came to view the particular designs they were working toward as commercially sensitive information. The first to produce a morph, and name it, gained celebrity.

Many breeders believe that ball pythons' history of living primarily belowground has preserved an array of mutations related to appearance. The thinking is that eye-catching snakes living aboveground are more visible to predators, making them more liable to be picked off before their genes get passed on. (Ball pythons have poor color vision, and their markings, unlike those of many lizard species, are not thought to play a role in courtship.) By the early two-thousands, middlemen in Ghana, Togo, and Benin had learned that American buyers were willing to spend top dollar for "odd balls"—snakes that diverged from the wild type in even minor ways. What had been an amateur pursuit was fast becoming an industry. Ball-python exports from West Africa peaked at around two hundred and fifty thousand a year in 2005, and began to decline, as domestic breeding replaced mass importation. American captive-bred ball pythons seemed to better express buyers' notion of the exotic. The wild type had begun to be seen, in McCurley's words, as "garden variety."

Perhaps not unrelatedly, snakes—and snakeskin—were having a moment in the broader culture as emblems of opulence and transgression. At the 2001 MTV Video Music Awards, Britney Spears sashayed across the stage with a seven-foot-long Burmese python slung around her shoulders. Gleaming in the windows of high-end fashion boutiques were python-skin footwear and clothes, often dyed traffic-light green, neon yellow, or electric blue, from Yves Saint Laurent, Jimmy Choo, and Chanel. ("Eve's Revenge, the Python's Sorrow," one headline in the *Times* ran.) Ball pythons were too small to be profitable for the skin trade, but the Zeitgeist's embrace of surreally hued scales conferred an aura of glamour on collecting and breeding them.

Kobylka had an itinerant childhood. His mother—who raised him and his younger brother on her own—sold handicrafts and moved the family to Nebraska, Oklahoma, Colorado, Tennessee, and Arizona. Wherever he was, Kobylka spent hours outside. "I always felt there's a world within a spot," he said. "Lizards and turtles and frogs, centipedes and salamanders—creatures most people would walk right past and never see." His mother encouraged Kobylka's pursuits but insisted that no animal be brought home. "That was the rule with my family: what's wild is wild."

When Kobylka was a teen-ager, he began attending a small religious boarding school in Oklahoma, where he became fascinated by scarlet king snakes, an elusive, tricolored species. After class, he would go searching for them, turning over logs and debris. He didn't find one, but he did catch a rattlesnake, which he kept in a homemade cage in his dorm room until he himself was caught. "I met my wife at the school, and it was her mom who called and tattled on me," Kobylka said with a laugh. The school did offer him an empty room to accommodate the rest of his collection, which by then included White's tree frogs, box turtles, and a red-tailed boa he had bought at a pet store.

At nineteen, Kobylka spent a gap year in Benin, where ball pythons pocket the landscape. While there, he visited a Vodun temple and saw ball pythons, which are regarded as sacred, roaming freely. "I have pictures of me from that time, holding ball pythons, having no concept of: this is going to be my whole life," he said. What captivated him then were chameleons—reptiles that change color for camouflage or to indicate excitation, rivalry, or submission. He gave local children pocket change for any that they could catch, and placed the animals on the boughs of a tree outside his lodgings. He would sometimes climb the

tree and be surrounded by the creatures, the shade tick-ticking with eyes.

Kobylka attended Southern Adventist University, in Tennessee, where he majored in communications and began keeping king snakes—which are banded and slender—caged in his dorm bathroom; he soon had fourteen of them. He was reintroduced to ball pythons through the Web site of a Maryland-based breeder named Ralph Davis, who kept pieds. "He had this rock-star personality," Kobylka told me. "Ralph's site was the only place you could see all these mutations and get a picture of what was possible. Everyone else was stuck in the Stone Age." On weekends, Kobylka would visit his uncle, a physician in Georgia. "I was just talking about snakes constantly," Kobylka said. "I drove him crazy."

One day, his uncle offered to invest in a pair of pastel ball pythons, then top-tier morphs, and to split the profits if they produced salable offspring. They earned enough on the deal that Kobylka was able to persuade his uncle to buy a pied, which he went to fetch from a dealer in Florida. "I still remember driving home with that animal," Kobylka told me. "I would stop by the side of the road to look at it every hour. And I just—" He exhaled, seemingly at a loss for words. "Amazement," he said after a beat. (These days, ball pythons are sent between dealers and collectors using overnight mail carriers such as FedEx.) His uncle attached one condition to the purchase: the snake was too valuable to be left in Kobylka's care, so it would live in a tank next to his uncle's bed.

The early two-thousands were a good time to get into the business. McCurley had received a six-figure bid for three golden snakelets with webbing patterns, called "spider" morphs. The breeder Mike Wilbanks sold a "black-eyed Lucy"—a leucistic ball python—to a Belgian collector for two hundred thousand dollars. People were taking on debt to finance their ball-python purchases. "I had second mortgages on my house so I could have a hundred thousand dollars ready to go if that next new thing came out," Wilbanks told me. "It was a big race."

Like a new gadget, a morph might be faddish and expensive at first, but as it was sold widely its value would slide to an entry-level price point. Those rare ball-python traits first discovered in the wild and now known as base morphs had followed this trajectory. "They all became accessible," Kobylka said.

He recalled thinking, "Wait a minute, there's infinite possibilities if we just stack genes together." He told me, "That's where I got my jump on the industry." In 2003, he launched his business, aiming for "combos," mutations layered together, in order to produce singular dazzlers that could appeal to connoisseur breeders in the U.S. and internationally rather than to big-box pet stores. It would be a slow-release undertaking. "I wanted to imagine a morph combo in the future, and create it ten years later—that was what I was all about," he said.

These days, Kinova's yield is around fifteen hundred pythons a year, and Kobylka is seen as unrivalled in his artistry with genetic mutations, a breeder at the frontiers of the form. "You will never ever be able to catch Justin Kobylka," Antoine Hood, of High Desert Pythons, in North Carolina, told me. "How can I parallel him? That's a better endeavor." Brittney Gobble, who breeds ball pythons in Tennessee, called Kobylka "a savant." "He's able to create a 3-D model, combining five or six mutations in his mind. And then eventually it gets made, and it looks like how he described it," Gobble said. "It's truly just insane."

On a brisk October day, I went to the North American Reptile Breeders Conference in Tinley Park, where venders from around the country had set up booths. With most transactions taking place online, expos are seen as an opportunity to launch what Kobylka called "really cutting-edge things." Many breeders showed their ball pythons in clear acrylic boxes on logo-printed paper; photographs of them would be automatically branded.

Kobylka had walked around the venue before it opened to the public, taking note of the competition, but now he couldn't get more than a few steps away from the Kinova booth without being accosted by neophyte breeders and reptile enthusiasts. In the melee, I saw a buyer lightly rap the top of one of Kinova's display cases and announce, "That's the snake—that's the showstopper." It was the "sunset combo" morph, which had the bittersweet-orange sheen of heirloom glassware. Kobylka held court, fielding queries and dispensing advice. "Justin would take this off my hands in a second, if I let him," a breeder who had brought a morph called "Cyborg" said. Emily Roberts's fans had dressed in pink, and together they formed a shuffling, spangled queue. A woman

"When you get to be my age, your friends start dropping like flies—and no one suspects you."

in a sleek blazer was deftly handling a lustrous slate-blue snake, changing her grip the way a rappeller belays a top rope, hand over hand, as the snake cascaded without progress in the direction of the floor. "They can have quite a spicy temperament," she declared. "They're not for beginners." At the booth for Best Dressed Balls—an Iowa-based venture run by a breeder named Troy Schroeder—a girl of nine patted the box in front of her, fixated on the creature inside. "Tell everyone he's unlovable, Troy," she pleaded, hoping to save up enough to bring it home.

An estimated six million households in the U.S. include at least one reptile. Millennials make up the largest group of reptile owners, but snakes, lizards, and turtles have become increasingly popular with Generation Z. "One of our concerns is that technology will take kids away from this world," a breeder observed. "Why would a kid today want to peer at a snake through glass, when they can put a V.R. headset on and play with dinosaurs?" As much as the ball python seems to have been pulled into the technological infrastructure of the twenty-first century—featured in live streams, traded via MorphMarket—snake ownership was frequently portrayed at the expo as an antidote to the anomie of feeling ourselves to be part of a big machine. A 2015 poll of readers by *Scientific American Mind* found that snake owners were more likely than other pet owners to describe their animals as "part of the family."

Some reptile owners clearly felt that more was more. Bob Clark was in the crowd, buzzing from the recent sale of five "retics" (reticulated pythons) to a customer in the Middle East, for half a million dollars. These snakes were so big that, once crated, a forklift had been needed to move them. Among breeders, the matter of snake size could be divisive. "One per cent of snake keepers are up to taking care of a snake that large, and not the other ninety-nine," Kobylka said. He expressed unease at the rise of social-media accounts that sensationalize living with gigantic snakes, misrepresenting snake keeping as an extreme sport rather than a serious responsibility.

But the majority of collectors were there for the ball pythons. Although *Python regius* is not endangered in Africa, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (I.U.C.N.) has designated it as near-threatened, and the N.A.R.B.C. prohibits animals that aren't captive-bred or "quality farm-raised" in the U.S. As I wandered through aisle upon aisle of ball pythons, I wondered if the line between the wild type and the captive-bred could be so easily demarcated. Rob Rausch, who is in charge of juvenile animals at Kinova, told me that he thought ball-python morphs took the pressure off wild-snake populations by satisfying people's longing for exotic-looking reptiles. "You can go to the wild, and you can get a normal ball python. Or you can come here, and"—he made an openhanded gesture, as of a shopkeeper displaying his wares—"What color do you like? What pattern do you like?"

At the N.A.R.B.C., combos that were darker in tone reigned. I saw rows of axanthics, which are monochrome, in ash white, pewter, and black. There was a "hurricane" combo, with lightning slashes of electric yellow along its chocolate-brown sides. Then there were the ball pythons that hadn't yet been conjured. Kobylka told me that he was hoping to make "a truly zebra-looking animal, with black and white stripes." He added, "We visualize that, but the difficulty is that'd be a quadruple recessive. That's many years out." I had already seen, at the expo, designer "leopard" morphs, with the coloration of a spotted big cat, and there were also two much talked-about "gorilla" combos, which were dark with tortoise-shell ripples: as on fashion runways, there was a constant conflation of wildness with luxury.

Ball pythons have come to be seen as unnatural, hothouse creatures. At the conference, I frequently heard them described as "pet rocks"—that is to say, inert and highly collectible. "A snake is a snake," Clark said. "You can't make a dog out of it." I appreciated the fact that many breeders seemed to resist anthropomorphizing their stock. But speaking of ball pythons as "pet rocks" seemed to ignore their fundamental creatureliness. "I've had people who have had five-thousand-dollar, ten-thousand-dollar snakes, who said they didn't want to pay seventy-five dollars for an exam or treatment for that animal," Mark Mitchell, a professor of zoological medicine in Louisiana, said. "People

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are much more apt to want to take care of an animal they view affectionately than those they consider commodities."

Yet evolving into eye candy for humans has meant that designer ball pythons, when viewed at the species level, enjoy some of the evolutionary advantages of domestic animals, including wide dispersal. "There isn't a single endangered species of domestic animal," Marcelo Sánchez-Villagra told me. "Many have worldwide distribution." With natural habitats disappearing all the time, finding a way to shelter within anthropic culture might be a good strategy. "What is a better ticket to survival than being beautiful and rare?" Clark said. "Those traits are going to be multiplied in future generations because that's what people like, not because that's what kept you from getting eaten."

The evolutionary trade-offs borne by individual snakes in captivity, however, have, in some instances, been dire. Breeders once championed their field as a salve against the cruelties of shipping wild-foraged snakes, which can be at risk for dehydration, parasites, and increased disease transmission, but morphs aren't always better off. Over time, breeders have discovered that several sought-after traits and specific gene-crossings also produce physical irregularities. Duckbill, in which a snake's rostrum is upturned and flattened, is a benign deformity, but it is said that some morphs, such as the "caramel albino," have a higher chance of producing young with spine kinks, a condition that can prevent them from moving sinuously, or can fatally obstruct digestion. "If we hatch a python with small eyes, we won't sell it as a breeder," Courtney Capps told me. "We sell those as pets only, because I don't want the genetics to be passed on. Potentially, at some point, small eyes turn into no eyes." Another condition that can be distressing is "wobblehead," a tic that likely betrays neurological issues. Online, breeders have counselled against pairing morphs that are known to result in impairments. ("We want mutations that are just skin-deep," Kobylka told me. "We don't want the animal to be at all changed in any way that would hurt its ability to survive.") But some unusual malformations, unrelated to breeding morphs, can be profitable windfalls: early in the new year, Clark sold a two-headed ball python for a hundred thousand dollars. "Both heads eat," he assured me, when I inquired after its health.

At Kinova, I had asked Kobylka which was the rarest snake in the room, expecting to be shown something supremely expensive. As it turned out, though, the rarest snake was an endling, the last of its kind, and wouldn't be sold. He retrieved it from a tray. The morph was called "desert," a snake the color of burnt butter with a toothlike pattern. It was a variety that "everybody loved when it first came out," he said, "but, if you try to breed them, the eggs will get stuck and they'll die."

Unsurprisingly, many snake experts are skeptical of the whole morph-making enterprise. "It's 'The Island of Doctor Moreau,'" the British herpetologist Neil D'Cruze told me. D'Cruze is the head of research at World Animal Protection International, and the senior co-author of "Snakes and Ladders," a scientific paper on the ball-python trade, published in 2020. "The speed-breeding, the genetic manipulation, it's being pushed out of the desire to create a new product. Not to help the snake cope better in captivity—to be a better pet for whoever owns it. Are these animals part of a genuine conservation program to help save the species? No."

Some are concerned about the limits of our ability to envision what snakes need, and to act in their best interests. Eben Kirksey, an Oxford professor of anthropology who has written about python-breeding communities in the U.S., believes that seeing "past the dollar value of a snake with particularly colorful skin" would mean offering more to the snakes than racking trays. Breeders "talk about burrowing," Kirksey said, "but the enclosures I've seen, they're not like actual burrows. These are life-support technologies that people are cobbling together out of plastic, out of machines." Were the snakes O.K. with all of this? "There are a lot of animals that, unfortunately for them, tolerate captivity well," D'Cruze told me. "But suffering isn't always overt. Suffering can be under the hood, invisible." I had read that it was possible to gauge a python's stress by measuring its blood cortisol, but as I walked around the expo I found myself troubled by the question of what thriving or discomfort looked like in a snake. Could a python raised in a tray, fed, kept warm and watered, and bred be said to live a full life?

In the meantime, the business of breeding rolls ever forward. When ball pythons were first becoming investment pieces, inevitably there were scams. One individual purported to have the world's first entirely red ball python, and sold the python's offspring—which were all black—to several U.S. concerns. As clutches laid by those snakes failed to contain any crimson hatchlings, vexed breeders agreed that they'd been conned. New technology promises to change all of that. A topic of fervent conversation at the expo was shed-testing, a kind of 23andMe for snakes, as Kobylka put it. "That's where our industry is headed," he said. The testing, which requires the tiniest scrap of molted snakeskin, offers designers a more rigorous way to verify traits. Brittney Gobble told me she had heard that artificial insemination might soon be available for ball pythons, which would expand the field exponentially. I imagined a world where creating new morphs would be a matter of transporting little vials of snake sperm, not the snakes themselves.

In one of our earliest conversations, Kobylka had said that he wanted "to make something that is genuinely beautiful to an average person. That's my criteria—if the person on the street, who doesn't like snakes, stops and says, like, 'Whoa, that's a snake?! I didn't know a snake could look like that.'" But it was also possible to go too far. A scaleless morph, for example, has bald, matte skin, similar to a sphynx cat or a furless guinea pig. Many will recognize it as "the pinnacle of 'unnatural,'" the veterinarian H. Kitt Hollister wrote in "The Ultimate Ball Python," because it is "delicate, and seemingly unable to survive without human intervention." The breeder responsible for the morph, Brian Barczyk, who died earlier this year, of pancreatic cancer, marketed it as "smooth and soft," a completely different texture to touch. Kobylka told me that when he finally got to hold one he was perturbed. The scaleless snake seemed to break the boundaries of what a snake is. "They feel like human skin," he said, shuddering at the memory. ♦

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PROFILES

THE CHAOS AGENT

Matt Gaetz threw the House into disarray. What does he want?

BY DEXTER FILKINS

Representative Matt Gaetz arrived at the White House in the last days of 2020, amid a gathering national crisis. President Donald Trump had lost his bid for reëlection the previous month, and his allies were exploring strategies to keep him in office. Though only thirty-eight years old, Gaetz, the scion of a political family in Florida's Panhandle, had become one of the Republican Party's most prominent and divisive figures. His dark hair styled in a kind of bouffant, his lips often curled in a wry smile, Gaetz bore a resemblance to Elvis Presley, or, in the description of a Florida friend, "either Beavis or Butt-head." He was quick-witted and sometimes very funny, and he loved to taunt his enemies, who were numerous, especially in his own party. "He's the most unpopular member of Congress, with the possible exception of Marjorie Taylor Greene, and he doesn't care," a fellow-congressman told me. With a combination of charisma and gleeful shamelessness, Gaetz had come to embody the new Republican creed of doing whatever it took, and laying waste to whatever it took, to insure that Donald Trump would survive and succeed.

By the time of Gaetz's visit, on December 21st, Trump's allies had already set in motion a deceptively simple mechanism to overturn his defeat: in seven states where he had narrowly lost, they attempted to replace the delegates to the Electoral College with loyalists to Trump. The plan, which came to be known as the "fake elector" scheme, was unsuccessful, and led to the indictment of several dozen people. Gaetz was more interested in exploiting technicalities. He joined a group of Republican hardliners in a meeting with Vice-President Mike Pence, to discuss using parliamentary rules to reject electors' votes—attempting to reverse an election that Gaetz described as "uniquely polluted."

But Gaetz had another reason to be at the White House that day. In December and January, he tried repeatedly to persuade the Trump Administration to grant him an unusual dispensation: a "blanket pardon," which would cover any number of potential crimes. "He wanted a pardon, as I recall, from the beginning of time up until that day, for anything," Eric Herschmann, an attorney in the Trump White House, told the January 6th Committee. Gaetz invoked Richard Nixon, whose successor had pardoned him for his involvement in the Watergate scandal. Herschmann found even this ambitious comparison insufficient. "Nixon's pardon was never nearly that broad," he said.

It's not clear why Gaetz pressed for such extensive immunity, but he was clearly preoccupied with more than trying to overturn the election. Prosecutors in the Justice Department's Public Integrity Section were investigating him over allegations that he had helped transport a seventeen-year-old girl across state lines and had had sex with her. It was a felony, and if Gaetz was convicted, he would likely be forced to resign and potentially sent to prison. Devin Murphy, who oversaw legislation in Gaetz's Washington office for more than four years, told me that Gaetz was so consumed by the investigation that he effectively stopped carrying out many of his official duties. "He had withdrawn," he said. "I was making all the decisions." Tom Joscelyn, a principal drafter of the January 6th Committee's final report, believes that the investigation could be the reason Gaetz asked for a pardon: "He may have been trying to head off the indictment."

By then, the sex scandal had helped make Gaetz one of the most notorious members of Congress. Evidence suggested that he had spent time with a number of young women who advertised on a Web site that seemed to be

Having gained notoriety from a sex scandal,

Gaetz has also emerged as the embodiment of the populist wing of the G.O.P., molded in the image of his mentor, Trump.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK PETERSON

"On second thought, place the apple in front of your face and put your clothes back on."

• •

a thinly veiled venue for prostitution. Gaetz, then a three-term congressman with a reputation for a freewheeling private life, appeared to have the impulse control of a teen-age boy. Cassidy Hutchinson, a young White House aide, wrote in her memoir that he made repeated passes at her. On a trip to Camp David in 2020, while she was meeting with the House Minority Leader, Kevin McCarthy, Gaetz came to the door and asked her to "escort" him to his cabin, because he couldn't find it himself. (Gaetz denies this.) Even after Hutchinson pointed out that all the cabins were on the same circular drive and clearly numbered, Gaetz persisted, until McCarthy shooed him away. "Get a life, Matt," he said, closing the door.

During the January 6th riots, though, Gaetz found a different way to make the news. He was at the Capitol when protesters stormed the building, and he joined colleagues in Congress as they were led to a safe room. "A lot of the members thought they were going to die," a longtime House staffer told me. "They were calling their families to say goodbye."

Once the rioters dispersed, the members filed into the chamber to cast ballots on the certification of the November election. Gaetz, along with a hundred and forty-six other Republicans, voted against it, but the majority of the House endorsed Biden's victory. Minutes after the members reconvened, Gaetz took to the podium and suggested that neither Trump nor his supporters were to blame for the day's events. He cited a story that had just appeared in the arch-conservative Washington *Times,* about a facial-recognition-software company that claimed the rioters had been infiltrated by false-flag agitators. "Some of the people who breached the Capitol today were not Trump supporters," Gaetz said. "They were masquerading as Trump supporters, and in fact were members of the violent terrorist group Antifa." (The story quickly disappeared from the *Times'* Web site after the software company protested that it was false.)

In fact, the crowd that stormed the Capitol was overwhelmingly pro-Trump, which Gaetz had every reason to know. He was friendly with members of the Proud Boys, the hard-right gang that sent numerous people to Washington that day. He was in contact with Roger Stone, who had helped coördinate the movement to resist Trump's loss, and with Jacob Engels, a conservative journalist whom one observer described as Stone's "surrogate son." The night before, Engels had attended a gathering of the demonstration's leaders at the Willard hotel, across from the White House. (He wasn't at the protest itself—he drank so much that night that he slept through it. "My alcoholism saved me," he told me.) Engels has known Gaetz for some fifteen years, since they met through the Florida Teenage Republicans, and speaks of him with a mix of admiration and resentment: "He's done very well. Family money can give you a lot of license to not give a fuck."

Gaetz's speech on the House floor was a remarkable performance: a protester had been fatally shot, Capitol Police officers were wounded, and members of Congress had possibly been saved from disaster by the barricaded doors they had hidden behind. Still, in just minutes, Gaetz had deftly constructed an entirely different story.

Last year, prosecutors from the Justice Department announced, without explanation, that they were ending their sex-crimes investigation into Gaetz. But he still faced an inquiry from the House Ethics Committee, which could, if it determined that he violated its rules, lead to a vote on his expulsion.

By then, Gaetz had emerged as the embodiment of the populist wing of the G.O.P.—railing against the government, the establishment, and even the rule of law, if that stood in the way of political objectives. Aggressively self-promoting and consummately skilled at social media, Gaetz seems molded in the image of his mentor, Trump. In a memoir, "Firebrand," he envisioned a dramatic trajectory for himself: "All political lives end in failure, in a sense, but some are spectacular. Better to be a spectacle than to end up having never said anything worth cancelling because nobody was listening in the first place."

In seven years in Congress, Gaetz has helped make the institution even more dysfunctional than it already was, threatening to shut down the federal government and force a default on its debt. Gaetz is a paradox: he is determined to attack the modern democratic state, but he harbors ambitions that only modern American politics can satisfy. He articulates an idea of the country that seems so negative—ridiculing his colleagues, trashing the welfare

PREVIOUS SPREAD: REDUX

state, scorning embattled democracies abroad—that it is sometimes difficult to see what he stands for. And yet the more Gaetz tears down, the more his supporters love him.

As his popularity grew, he seemed to be preparing an effort to succeed Ron DeSantis as Florida's governor. Some of his fellow elected officials wondered what he would do if he got the job. Gaetz has said privately that he dislikes being in Congress. A longtime friend of his family told me that he finds the hours too long and the work too frustrating. (Gaetz denies this.) "Being a member of Congress is hard," the friend said. "You're flying from your district to Washington and back all the time, you're studying policy, you're raising money. Matt is too lazy for that." Many are left to puzzle over what Gaetz's ultimate political objective is, beyond self-serving anarchy. "Matt is very smart, even brilliant, and he can be very nice," a former elected official who knows him well told me. "But when I see someone that intelligent aggravating the toxic divisions in this country, spreading mistrust in the institutions that are our foundations, it makes me wonder—where does it end?"

For months, as I reported this story, Gaetz refused to participate. Then, one day in January, my phone rang, and he was on the other end. "I would prefer not to have your attention," he told me. Still, after some conversation, he invited me to meet him after an event in Little Elm, Texas, where he was campaigning for another insurgent Republican.

Gaetz has distinguished himself with flamboyant gestures—he once protested a COVID-response bill by wearing a gas mask on the House floor—but when we sat down, in the lounge of a Ramada across the street from his campaign event, he was studiously self-aware, eager to talk about parliamentary rules and political philosophy. Gaetz describes his ideology as "a populist-flavored libertarianism—or a libertarian-flavored populism." At the event, he had enlivened his complaints about budget policy by proclaiming that it was the audience's "destiny" to rescue a "diminished country." Afterward, a long line of admirers gathered for pictures, treating him more like a celebrity than a public servant. "I think that if you want to be a populist, it's sort of important to be popular," he told me.

In 2020, Gaetz got engaged to Ginger Luckey, an executive at K.P.M.G., an auditing-and-consulting firm. (Luckey's brother, Palmer, is a tech developer who founded Oculus VR and sold it for more than two billion dollars.) The two eloped, but there was a wedding party, where guests photographed a sign with light-up gold letters that read "Gaetz Got Luckey." Recently, she has joined Gaetz on the campaign trail for Trump.

He also has an adopted son, Nestor, who was born in Cuba and is the younger brother of a previous girlfriend. After his mother died, Nestor, who was then twelve, came to the U.S. to live with Gaetz, who was in his early thirties. Gaetz did not disclose Nestor's existence for years, and, when the news came out, he said that he'd been trying to shield the boy from publicity. "We share no blood but he is my life," he wrote on Twitter. In an interview with *People*, he added, "I live for the values and principles that matter to my constituents and that I've been raised with."

Gaetz grew up in Niceville, Florida, in a family of unusual wealth and political influence. His grandfather Jerry Gaetz, a former mayor of Rugby, North Dakota (campaign slogan: "Unbought! Unbossed! Unbowed!"), was famous for giving a speech to the state Republican Party in 1964, urging the election of Barry Goldwater for President, after which he walked into the crowd and collapsed of a fatal heart attack.

Gaetz's father, Don, started out as a hospital administrator, then helped run a nonprofit that provided hospice care. In the nineteen-eighties, the industry was dominated by nonprofits, but Don Gaetz saw a way to use government power to create an advantage. He helped lobby the Florida legislature to impose a licensing code on hospice work, and then formed a for-profit company—giving him, for several years, a near-monopoly in the state. Concerns about inferior service were set aside. "The evidence is pretty clear that, with for-profit hospice care, you have less credentialled staff, fewer doctor visits, and lower-quality care," Sam Halabi, a professor at Georgetown, told me. "But it's an incredibly lucrative business." Around the same time, Don was among the leaders of an effort in Washington to make hospice care reimbursable by Medicare, a vast source of revenue. His company grew rapidly, and in 2004 he and his partners sold it to Chemed Corp., which also owns Roto-Rooter, for four hundred million dollars. The company was later sued for overcharging Medicare and settled for seventy-five million dollars. (Though some of the overbilling occurred while Don was on the board of directors, he wasn't named in the suit and denied wrongdoing.) A few years later, Don listed his net worth at twenty-four million dollars.

By then, he had moved on to a second career, in politics. In 2000, he decided to run for superintendent of the Okaloosa County School District. He won that race, and was subsequently elected to the Florida legislature, becoming the Senate president in 2012. He built a reputation as an unflashy but formidable legislator. "Don is one of the smartest people I know, and good at the game," a Tallahassee lobbyist told me. "He can be so kind and so ruthless." In 2017, when a $1.5-billion fund was set up to ameliorate the catastrophic damage from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Don was named to the board that decided how to direct the money.

As a student at Niceville High School, Matt Gaetz excelled in debate, becoming the state champion in 2000. ("He was always winning an argument about something," a classmate told me.) Offstage, he often projected an air of entitlement, boasting to peers that his family's vacation home, down the coast, was where "The Truman Show" was filmed. In his teens and twenties, Gaetz was cited by Florida police eight times for speeding and once for driving drunk. In the latter case, he was pulled over in his father's BMW and refused to take a sobriety test—the police found an empty mouthwash bottle in the glove compartment—and an Okaloosa County deputy arrested him. Gaetz engaged a lawyer and contested the case, and the charges were dropped for lack of evidence. When the Tampa Bay *Times* asked to see video of the arrest, officials responded that it had been destroyed. Soon afterward, the deputy who arrested

Gaetz was forced to resign, on the ground that he had used excessive force with a civilian, among other infractions.

At Florida State University, Gaetz majored in interdisciplinary sciences and took a class in state government with Brian Ballard, a prominent lobbyist in Tallahassee and Washington. "He was smart as a whip, and he did the work," Ballard told me; the two are now friends. Gaetz went on to law school at William & Mary, and soon was given a position with State Senator Ray Sansom. But Sansom quickly transferred him to a campaign committee, from which he was fired for allegedly not showing up. (Gaetz denies this.) Gaetz went into private practice, representing citizens in disputes with local governments.

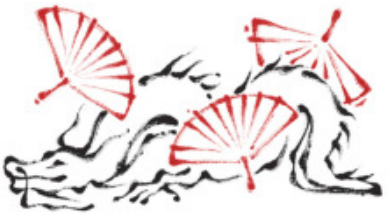
In 2010, though, he filed to run for the Florida House. The seat he was pursuing had belonged to Sansom, who had been indicted for corruption. (The charges were later dropped.) Gaetz raised nearly half a million dollars for his campaign, far more than any other candidate. He finished first in a field of five primary challengers and then easily beat his Democratic rival.

In the legislature, the Gaetzes acquired nicknames: Daddy Gaetz and Baby Gaetz. But Matt distinguished himself as being well prepared and unusually adroit. He took a leading role in drafting legislation to legalize adoption by gay partners, and supported measures to increase penalties for animal abuse and to strengthen child-sex-abuse laws. Republican colleagues recognized the easy facility that had made him a debate champion. They would often hand him a bill, give him a minute to read it, and then have him formulate an argument for or against. Ron Book, a longtime Tallahassee lobbyist, told me, "He's the kind of guy you want on your team."

Gaetz built a theory that government was good in some cases, bad in others—particularly in the case of Washington, D.C. "It's just so corrupt," he told me. "That's my principal thesis. It's just broken." He blames the emphasis on fundraising, and the lack of term limits, which constrain legislators in Florida but not in D.C. "When you only have a certain term of years before you have to leave, you're willing to take half a loaf," he said. "Also, I learned that in a term-limit system, you don't have to be there forever to get a substantial amount of power and influence."

Soon after taking office, Gaetz helped draft legislation that legalized medical marijuana; his father, then the Senate president, supported the bill. "Matt was a big-time proponent of marijuana, and a big-time user," a former Republican official told me. The legislation permitted a limited number of venders to sell marijuana; one license went to a company owned by the family of Halsey Beshears, a state congressman who was a friend of Gaetz's. "The legislation was written to more or less insure that one of the franchises was awarded to Beshears," a Florida lobbyist told me. Afterward, Beshears supplied Gaetz with thousands of dollars in campaign contributions.

Some of Gaetz's initiatives seemed calculated to attract publicity. He pushed a bill to hasten the execution of death-row inmates and another to allow carrying guns in public, even in churches and schools. In 2013, during a debate over accepting federal funding to help secure health care for the poor, Gaetz reportedly expressed reluctance to aid single, childless adults, because they were "too busy playing a Grand Theft Auto video game to get a job." Two years later, when Democrats filed an emergency lawsuit to stop the Florida House from ending the legislative session over a stalemate on health care, Gaetz posted on Twitter, "This lawsuit reads like it was



researched and drafted by Sen Joyner . . . and spell checked by Sen Bullard." Arthenia Joyner and Dwight Bullard are both Black. The House leader apologized on Gaetz's behalf; Gaetz soon did the same.

"He's a typical child of rich parents," Mac Stipanovich, a former chief of staff to the Republican governor Bob Martinez, said. "He's intelligent, entitled, irresponsible. He is accustomed to being the center of attention, and insists on being the center of attention." A fellow-lawmaker subsequently accused Gaetz of presiding over a game for House legislators in which each member would receive points, on a sliding scale, for having sex with "aides, interns, lobbyists, and married legislators." (Gaetz denied the accusation.) "Matt dated younger women and bragged about it," the Tallahassee lobbyist told me. "He showed inappropriate pictures around the legislature. He acted like a twelve-year-old boy."

In 2016, Representative Jeff Miller announced that he would retire from his seat in Florida's First Congressional District. Gaetz, despite his reservations about national politics, decided to take his place. The Florida Panhandle, like much of the South, was a reliably Democratic stronghold from the end of Reconstruction until the nineteen-sixties, when the Party embraced civil-rights legislation. In recent decades, the Panhandle has produced consistently conservative Republican congressmen. The most intense competition took place not in the general election but in the Republican primary.

One of Gaetz's main opponents in the primary was Cris Dosev, a combat veteran and a father of eight who advocated balanced budgets and a vigorous foreign policy. "Gaetz calls himself a conservative," he told me. "But a conservative respects tradition and those who came before him. All Gaetz wanted to do was tear things down."

As a candidate, Gaetz attached himself to Donald Trump, who was running for President. The previous year, both Gaetz and his father had endorsed Jeb Bush, the moderate former governor. But on the campaign trail the younger Gaetz began to invoke Trump's themes: illegal immigration, Islamist terrorism, and Second Amendment rights. He had the advantage of his family's name and local political network; a significant portion of his funding came from his own wealth and from his father's companies. Dosev said that these things, combined with the identification with Trump, made Gaetz all but unstoppable: "I'd knock on someone's door, and I would hear Fox News on the television—Fox was all about Trump, and Gaetz was riding that." Gaetz won an easy victory, carried into office by the wave of frustration that

brought Trump to the White House. But the relationship was not entirely one-sided: Gaetz had campaigned hard for Trump, helping to secure his big upset in Florida. "We relied quite a lot on Matt," Ballard, who was the finance chair for Trump's campaign in the state, said.

In 2018, coasting to reëlection, Gaetz made another shrewd political move, this one in the gubernatorial race. While most Republican leaders were lining up behind Adam Putnam—a reliable moderate who served as the state agriculture commissioner—Gaetz backed a relatively unknown congressman named Ron DeSantis. No one expected much of DeSantis, but Gaetz offered him a potent advantage. "Matt orchestrated his introduction to Trump," the former Republican official told me. "DeSantis never would have won without that." With Trump's endorsement, DeSantis shot past Putnam in the primary and won the election.

Gaetz helped run DeSantis's transition, working to appoint loyalists throughout the bureaucracy. "Matt had a huge influence on who was hired in the administration, and also on policy," the former Republican official told me. "He and Ron were very, very, very close." Gaetz's ascent looked certain. "Matt has the winning formula," a former Florida official who knows Gaetz told me. "He's a privileged son. He was handed a legislative seat and a congressional seat in a super-protected Republican district and really doesn't have to do anything to stay there."

THE BELOW ZERO, LAST WALK OF THE NIGHT STANDOFF

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The Florida novelist Carl Hiaasen, a former newspaper reporter who made a second career of fictionalizing his state's excesses, once said, "The Florida in my novels is not as seedy as the real Florida. It's hard to stay ahead of the curve." The investigation that may force Gaetz out of office would be right at home in a Hiaasen novel: an only-in-Florida tale of local corruption, illicit sex, influence trading, and fraud. It might never have emerged, if not for the concerned testimony of a high-school band director in Florida.

In October, 2019, Brian Beute, who taught at Trinity Preparatory School, was summoned by his bosses and told that someone had sent a series of nine letters accusing him of raping a male student. Beute, devastated by the allegation, feared that his career was over. "There wasn't a shred of truth to any of it," he told me.

Beute lived in nearby Chuluota, in Seminole County. In the previous year, he had helped form a citizen's group, Save Rural Seminole, to oppose a sprawling housing development that was proposed to be built on land set aside for farms and nature preserves. Some of the area's biggest developers and lobbyists were behind the project, called River Cross. As the dispute spread, River Cross also gained the support of Seminole County's elected tax collector, Joel Greenberg. Locals found it unusual for a tax collector—an ostensibly apolitical official—to take sides in a sensitive public controversy. But Greenberg had big ambitions and influential supporters. In 2016, when Trump had appeared at a campaign event in the small city of Sanford, Greenberg introduced him.

In 2018, after months of petitioning by Save Rural Seminole, the county commission voted unanimously to reject River Cross. The next year, Beute filed papers to challenge Greenberg in a coming election. Soon afterward, the mysterious letters arrived at Trinity Prep. Investigators were curious; the timing of the letters seemed fishy. What was more, someone had set up a fake Twitter account in Beute's name, with posts trashing Jews and a vow to make Seminole Country racially segregated. The investigators lifted fingerprints and DNA from the letters and found that they matched Greenberg's.

As it happened, Greenberg was already under investigation for financial crimes. When police arrested him, they discovered several identification cards with his picture on them. Amy Tyler, an employee in Greenberg's office, told investigators that, one weekend a few months before, someone had tripped the office alarm. When she went to investigate, she found what appeared to be expired state I.D. cards scattered across a desk. Suspecting a burglary, she checked security footage from the weekend. The tape, she said, showed Greenberg at a desk, sorting through I.D.s, with another man. She texted Greenberg to inquire, and he replied that it was Matt Gaetz. "I was showing congressman Gaetz what our operation looked like," he wrote. "Did I leave something on?"

Gaetz's congressional district, and his home, were some four hundred miles from Seminole County, but he visited Greenberg repeatedly. They'd met in 2017, through a mutual friend, and become close; the two often talked politics and sometimes mused about how Greenberg could get elected to Congress. At one point, they had dinner with Roger Stone, and the three men posed for a photo together.

Investigators eventually determined

that Greenberg had gone on a crime spree, beginning soon after he was elected; they charged him with a range of crimes that included identity theft, wire fraud, and embezzling hundreds of thousands of dollars to use in cryptocurrency transactions. By the time the inquiry was finished, nine people had been indicted for various political and financial crimes, including placing a ghost candidate on the ballot for the state legislature.

Greenberg, faced with decades in prison, agreed to coöperate with prosecutors, as they looked into Gaetz. With his help, they began to unravel the story. In Seminole County, Greenberg and Gaetz hung out with a lobbyist named Chris Dorworth—who was also an investor in River Cross. Dorworth had previously served in the state legislature and befriended Gaetz there. The three men spent time together in restaurants and at social events at Dorworth's home.

Before Gaetz came to town, according to people close to the case, Greenberg often went to a Web site called Seeking Arrangement, to procure women. "Greenberg would set up girls and drugs," a lawyer with knowledge of the case told me. (Gaetz disputes descriptions of his conduct and his relationship with Greenberg.) The Web site evidently stopped short of outright prostitution: in a typical transaction, a man would make contact with one of the women on the site and negotiate a price—though what the price was for appears to have been left unsaid. In a letter to Roger Stone, Greenberg said that he would sometimes aid women financially, and that the interactions typically led to sex: "Often it was a card payment, help with rent, a speeding ticket or even a plane ticket home to see their family during a break." (Stone denies receiving this letter.)

Documents record one of the exchanges involving Gaetz, when Greenberg, in 2018, connected online with a woman from West Palm Beach who went by the pseudonym Priscilla.

Greenberg: I have a friend flying in and we are trying to make plans for tonight. What are your plans for later?

Priscilla: That's good! As of now nothing planned . . .

Greenberg: And how much of an allowance will you be requiring :) If you have a friend that is down, perhaps all four us can meet up later. Do you party at all?

Priscilla: Oh that's perfect. I have a friend who introduced me to the website that I could bring. She's very pretty, great personality. I usually do $400 per meet, does you friend use the website as well? And yes I do like to go out sometimes

Greenberg: Very cool. Yes, he understands the deal :) What does your friend look like? $400 is not a problem. Are you both old enough to drink?

Priscilla: She's 21, I'm actually 20 (put 21 on the site for safety) but I do have an ID that I use.

They exchanged photos, and Priscilla proclaimed Greenberg "very handsome." When she asked for a picture of his friend, a photo of Matt Gaetz appeared onscreen.

Priscilla: Oooh my friend thinks he's really cute!

Greenberg: Well he's down here only for the day, we work hard and play hard. Have you ever tried molly

Greenberg told investigators that he sometimes got Molly—the party drug also known as Ecstasy—and that he and Gaetz had sex with the women. "There were multiple sex parties," the lawyer with knowledge of the case told me. Sometimes, the women were required to put their phones in a box.

The liaisons on Seeking, whatever

THOUGHT A RARITY ON PAPER

Here I am thanking you for this fine copy
of Jack Spicer's posthumous
"One Night Stand and Other Poems"
(Grey Fox Press, 1980),
introductions by Donald Allen and Robert Duncan.

It's such a rare little bird,
I was careful to purify my hands
before sliding it out of its clear Mylar sleeve.

I was careful, too, when I turned the pages,
but when Jesus began making out his will
and Alice in Wonderland went missing from the chessboard,
the book had to be restrained from taking flight
and flapping its many wings against a window pane.

So now, the front cover is bent back a little
like a clam with its shell slightly ajar
the way Spicer's mouth could look sometimes
when we would see him at Gino and Carlo
or in the park by the Church of Sts. Peter and Paul,
where he would often sit cross-legged under a shade tree.

There on hot summer afternoons
he would suffer the company of young poets
if they observed the courtesy of arriving
with cold quart bottles of Rainier Ale,
as green as the sports section of the paper.

It was a practice that my friend Tom
and I and his friend A. B. Cole followed religiously.
Spicer even called us "The Jesuits"
for he knew where we had gone to school.

To be imperfectly truthful,
I was intimidated by his reality—

a lonely homosexual adult
who dressed funnily in summery shirts
and baggy pants, belt buckle to the side,
his sad moon-face pocked as the moon itself,
and with a name like a medieval vender's.

He would talk about poetics,
of which we knew nothing,
and about the other Berkeley poets,
but we poetry juniors felt more at home
when he talked about Willie McCovey
and we would be on to another still cold quart.

Then a forceful wind came off the Bay
and blew Jack Spicer away, found a year later at 40
on the floor of an elevator going neither up nor down.

Later still, Tom would be blown over a golden bridge,
his soft inner arm full of holes,
and I sadly lost track of the sardonic Andy Cole.

And here I still remain,
more than twice Spicer's final age,
rolling through the pages of his little book,

listening to his bewildering birds,
and watching Beauty walk, not like a lake
but among the coffee cups and soup tureens,

causing me to open my hands
and allow this green aeronaut of paper
to lift off and fly around my yellow house
and beat its wings against glass
as the thrilling sky continues to change
slowly from blue to black
then, miraculously, back to blue once more.

—*Billy Collins*

their legality, appeared to have been consensual. But then investigators uncovered evidence that at least one of Greenberg's recruits was not an adult. According to Greenberg, he, Gaetz, and others had sex with a seventeen-year-old who had posted on the site, claiming to be older. "On more than one occasion this underage individual was involved in sexual activity with several of the other females at the house, myself and also the congressman from Florida's panhandle," Greenberg wrote. "I also made payments to several of the girls on behalf of the congressman."

Gaetz has repeatedly denied that he had sex with an underage girl. "I have maintained my innocence," he told Tucker Carlson on Fox News, in 2022. "This was an operation to destroy me." Still, the revelations prompted the House Ethics Committee to launch its investigation. In 2020, the F.B.I. seized Gaetz's phone. The evidence was highly suggestive. Venmo records showed that, in a single day, Gaetz had sent Greenberg nine hundred dollars' worth of payments, including one flagged with what was apparently a short version of the underage girl's name. The next morning, Greenberg paid out nine hundred dollars to the girl and two other women. Greenberg's attorney, Fritz Scheller, said in an interview on MSNBC, "There's a lot more witnesses than just the minor and Mr. Greenberg."

Greenberg recalled that he discovered the girl was a minor from an anonymous text message, and that he and Gaetz were stunned by the news. "She had a fake ID, her surrounding friends were all in college and there was absolutely no way any reasonable person could tell that she was under the age of 18," he wrote, adding, "None of us would have ever engaged in any of type of relationship with this individual had we known the truth." After that, Greenberg said, there was no further contact with the girl "until she had turned 18." (Her lawyer declined to comment.)

Under federal law, though, the prohibition on adults having sex with minors entails what is known as "strict liability." All that matters is the act; it doesn't matter if the perpetrator believed that the victim was an adult. Even as Gaetz proclaimed his innocence, he hired the attorneys Michael Mukasey (the former Attorney General) and Marc Fernich (who previously defended John A. Gotti).

While Gaetz braced for the possibility of an indictment, Greenberg had already pleaded guilty. In late 2020, when Trump was still in office, Greenberg reached out to his friend Roger Stone and asked if he could beseech the President for a pardon on his behalf. Trump had already commuted Stone's sentence for obstructing a federal investigation. Stone thought that he could, at a price. "Your thing is being looked at," he texted Greenberg, who was ecstatic. "Thank you so much Roger," he replied. "I pray that the Lord will help." "Today is the day," Stone later wrote. "I hope you are prepared to wire me $250,000 because I am feeling confident." (Stone denies offering a pardon, saying that the correspondence was "incomplete and corrupted.") Stone never came through, though; he told Greenberg that Pat Cipollone, the White House counsel, had shot down his request. In 2022, Greenberg was sentenced to eleven years in federal prison.

As it turned out, Gaetz did not require a pardon of his own. In February, 2023, lawyers at the Justice Department informed him that they were closing their investigation. They didn't give a reason, but observers speculated that they'd concluded their main witness—Greenberg, a convicted felon eager to

secure a lighter sentence—might not prove credible in a trial. The underage girl, now over eighteen, had become an adult-film star, with her own channel on Pornhub and a profile on OnlyFans.

Observers of Florida politics say that Gaetz's constituents don't particularly care about the inquiry. "Matt could be serving hard time for sex trafficking and he'd still get reëlected," Stipanovich, the former chief of staff, told me. But, he added, that sense of assurance had inspired hubris; Gaetz had got out of so many jams since his youth in the Panhandle that he was certain he could get off again. "If you're going to be a spoiled rich kid, it's better to be dumb," he said. "Matt's trouble is, he's a spoiled rich kid and he's smart—he's clever. And that's gotten him into all kinds of trouble."

One Saturday morning last fall, at Callie Opie's Orchard restaurant in Mineral, Virginia, I contributed fifty dollars to Representative Bob Good's campaign so that I could watch Gaetz speak at a fund-raiser on his behalf. Dressed in a black jacket and black pants, Gaetz looked more like a night-club singer than an elected official, and he held a roomful of voters rapt. He spoke of an America in decline, of runaway deficits that were sucking the life out of the country, of the dream of homeownership slipping away. Gaetz has the political gift of sounding completely sincere; he told the crowd that he and his small band of rebels were among the only members of Congress who were determined to cut spending and shrink the deficit. "We believe that this system needs change—that sometimes you've got to send a shock to the system," Gaetz said to the audience, arrayed before him in plastic chairs. "We can solve every other problem, but if our country continues to spend money like this, we will be the generation that presides over a managed American decline."

Gaetz is part of a chorus of Republican politicians, including J. D. Vance and Kari Lake, giving speeches on Trump's behalf. They all say more or less the same thing: the country's problems can be blamed on Washington and on the Democrats, with their out-of-control spending. (Never mind that Trump presided over an eight-trillion-dollar increase in the national debt, compared with about six trillion for Biden.)

Gaetz criticizes the influence of lobbyists, and in 2020 he announced that he would stop taking PAC money. ("I confessed my sins," he told me.) He depends on his road show for funding; eighty per cent of it comes from out of state, largely in small donations. Along with paying Gaetz's travel costs, his campaign spent millions of dollars last year buying lists of potential out-of-state donors.

In addition to his campaign events, Gaetz posts photos and videos on X (formerly Twitter) nearly every day, and appears in such right-wing outlets as Steve Bannon's "War Room," Sean Hannity's show on Fox News, and Newsmax. Given their frequency, these videos and guest spots sometimes seem more important than the votes he casts. As he wrote in his memoir, "Stagecraft is statecraft."

Gaetz's speech on January 6th was a memorable demonstration of his stagecraft, but it wasn't the first time he had accused Democrats of stealing an election. In November, 2018, two statewide races in Florida—for governor and for U.S. senator—were remarkably close, with margins of less than half of one per cent. The nominees—Ron DeSantis and Andrew Gillum in the governor's race, and Rick Scott and Bill Nelson for the Senate—didn't know who had won. Under Florida rules, both races were subject to mandatory recounts.

During the proceedings, Gaetz met Jacob Engels, the columnist and confidant of Roger Stone, outside an office in Fort Lauderdale where poll workers were counting ballots. Standing on the back of a truck and speaking into a bullhorn, Gaetz led demonstrators in denouncing the recount. "Stop the steal!" they chanted. He likened what was happening in Fort Lauderdale to the Presidential election of 2000, when George W. Bush and Al Gore tangled for weeks after the voting was over. "For all I know, they're still counting ballots for Al Gore back there!" Gaetz told the crowd.

There was no evidence of fraud, but it didn't matter. Demonstrators blocked the doors to the elections office, and security had to be put in place for officials. "It was pretty rough, trying to get inside," the then-lawyer for the Florida Democratic Party told me. Both Republicans ultimately won their races, and the demonstration in Fort Lauderdale was mostly forgotten. But, three years later, after the January 6th riot, federal prosecutors were intrigued by the similarities of the two Stop the Steal protests. Stone said that he attended neither, but some of his associates, including several leaders of the Proud Boys, went to both. Years before, Stone had led the so-called Brooks Brothers riot in Miami, when, during the tense recount for Bush and Gore, Republican protesters tried to rush the doors of the Miami-Dade supervisor of elections office. It was the first in a series of national and statewide elections in which Republicans protested results, accusing Democrats of fraud.

The demonstration in Fort Lauderdale was emblematic of the kind of congressman Gaetz would be: showy, glib, and relentlessly antagonistic to institutional norms. He had a serious side, though he seemed not especially eager to show it, and even his enemies conceded that he was smart. As a legislator, he worked to constrain government power. He pushed to end warrantless surveillance, to curtail the government's ability to seize individuals' property, and to loosen laws criminalizing marijuana distribution and possession.

For the most part, though, his record in getting laws enacted is undistinguished. "Nobody's going to accuse me of passing too much legislation," he joked to me. His more prominent role is that of gadfly. He chides his fellow-Republicans for insider trading and occasionally takes sides with progressives—particularly around environmental protections, which have bipartisan support in his home state. During the Trump years, Gaetz helped end oil drilling off Florida's coast, and spoke in favor of regulating polluters: "Conservative, Inc.—bought off as always—would have you believe it's in your best interest for chemical plants to pollute our rivers, agribusiness to clog our estuaries with their runoff, and coal plants to darken our skies."

To Gaetz and his allies, his unpopularity in Congress is a measure of his principled approach. In their telling, the typical Republican member wins election on a promise of reducing the federal deficit and shrinking the govern-

ment, but, once in Washington, succumbs to pressures to conform. "It's so sad up here," Representative Eli Crane, a friend of Gaetz's, told me. "Most of the members of Congress come here to be popular, and they ignore their base back home. They don't do what they were elected to do. Matt is very unpopular here, but it makes him popular back home. And he's popular because he actually listens to his base."

Gaetz speaks of his district as a haven for like-minded people. "My community is very conservative—it's very homogenous," he said. "It's actually where I'd like to spend all of my time." But he seldom seems to be there. In four months of reporting, I saw him speak in rural Virginia, New York City, and the Dallas suburbs, and I just missed him in Montana and North Carolina. As far as I could tell, he did only two events in the Panhandle: a ceremony for military cadets and a rally for his campaign in the town of Navarre, at which he likened his obstructionism in the House to John Quincy Adams's unpopular stand against slavery. The old saw "All politics is local" is no longer true. These days, all politics—from a train derailment in Ohio to an argument about gender at a school-board meeting in Florida—is national. Gaetz was elected to represent the people of Florida's First Congressional District, but he understands that his stage is much larger than Pensacola, Crestview, or Fort Walton Beach. "The number of nights that we spent in our own bed in Florida, in calendar year 2023, was in the teens," he told me. When he is criticized for not spending more time at home, he said, "The way I explain that is that I am an expeditionary force."

Nowhere did Gaetz's desires to shock the system and to attract attention converge more dramatically than in his long feud with Representative Kevin McCarthy, of California. In the 2022 election, the G.O.P. took control of the House of Representatives, and McCarthy was poised to become Speaker. The Republicans' majority was thin—only nine seats—but, under normal circumstances, that would have been enough for him to secure the job. Yet McCarthy was precisely the kind of Republican whom Gaetz said that he'd come to Washington to fight—the kind who favored incremental progress, kept close ties with lobbyists, and feared dramatic change. In January, 2023, as the 118th Congress took office, Gaetz led an effort to peel away twenty-one members from supporting McCarthy, depriving him of a majority.

In taking on McCarthy, Gaetz was violating hallowed traditions. For most of American history, the longest-serving members of Congress were typically the most influential. From their posts as committee chairs, they guided decisions around how bills were drafted and brought to a vote. Junior members waited their turn, and rarely criticized their party's leaders.

Gaetz portrayed McCarthy as little more than an apparatchik, hardly different from the corrupt Democrats, who rose to power by securing campaign money for his colleagues. He told the House that McCarthy was "the LeBron James of special-interest fund-raising." Jeering at a reference to McCarthy as "selfless," he said, "Selflessness is not selling shares of yourself to the lobby corps and then doing their bidding at the expense of the American people."

His resistance was met with outrage. "Matt Gaetz is a fraud," Nancy Mace, of South Carolina, said. "Every time he voted against Kevin McCarthy last week he sent out a fund-raising e-mail." He and his allies insisted that Jim Jordan, the hard-right representative from Ohio, was a better candidate. Gaetz subjected McCarthy to a sustained public humiliation; fourteen times McCarthy offered himself up for a vote, and fourteen times, with Gaetz marshalling the dissidents, he failed. On the fourteenth attempt, McCarthy grew so angry that, in view of television cameras, he strode up the aisle toward Gaetz, who was looking smugly implacable. Mike Rogers, of Alabama, a McCarthy ally, surged at Gaetz and had to be physically restrained.

Gaetz's professed goal was to force McCarthy to confront the huge deficits that have plagued federal budgets for the past two decades—particularly under the Trump and Biden Administrations, which used borrowed money to stabilize the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Last year, federal borrowing represented more than six per cent of the G.D.P., which, while not a record, was historically high for a country not in a major war.

By law, the President is required to propose a federal budget in February, giving Congress several months to debate its various parts, with deadlines along the way. In the past thirty years, though, as the parties have grown further apart, they have mostly failed to approve individual appropriations bills on time. Instead, congressional leaders have typically rolled over budgets largely unchanged from previous years, discarding much of the debate on spending priorities. Gaetz and his allies claimed that they merely wanted to return to a normal budgeting process. "I think that not passing single-spending-subject bills is chaos," he argued. "We have been out

of compliance with budget laws for most of my life."

In the end, McCarthy managed to secure support for his candidacy. But Gaetz forced him to agree to make deep spending cuts in the next federal budget, and to give any House member the right to call for a no-confidence vote. With the majority so thin, McCarthy effectively gave Gaetz the power to remove him. These conditions left almost no room to maneuver. On one side, McCarthy faced a Democratic White House and Senate. On the other were Gaetz's hard-liners, who were insisting on severe cuts. "When Kevin gave Matt the power to remove him, he gave him his life," the fellow-congressman of Gaetz's I spoke to told me. "The idea that you could give that power to Matt and that he wouldn't use it—boy, you don't understand Matt."

It didn't take long. In June, McCarthy struck a deal with the White House and the Senate which continued high spending and lifted the government's borrowing ceiling. To do it, he'd had to secure both Republican and Democratic votes—a show of old-fashioned bipartisanship. To Gaetz, he had committed an unpardonable sin. "It is going to be difficult for my Republican friends to keep calling President Biden feeble while he continues to take Speaker McCarthy's lunch money in every negotiation," he said. In September, McCarthy confronted Gaetz in a closed-door session and dared him to try removing him, snapping, "File the fucking motion." Less than three weeks later, Gaetz gathered his allies and called for a vote.

Many Republicans were furious at Gaetz. "I think he's a petulant child," Mike Lawler, of New York, said at the time. "He doesn't care about governing. He cares about getting attention." Meanwhile, House Democrats were only too happy to watch Republicans assail one another. "Do we side with a sociopath or an incompetent?," Mark Pocan, a Democrat from Wisconsin, mused.

Gaetz's calculus was audacious. He had only a handful of Republican allies—but he gambled that he wouldn't need more than that, because Democrats, angry that McCarthy had endorsed an impeachment inquiry against Biden, would agree to oust him. Gaetz was right: McCarthy became the first House Speaker in history to be removed before his term expired.

Some of Gaetz's peers believed that he had pulled off an astonishing feat. "He single-handedly toppled a Speaker of the House," David Jolly, a former Republican congressman from Florida, told me. "For someone to be able to do that within six years shows incredible gravitas." But, for the most part, his actions left intense bitterness. Not a few Republicans pointed out that he had relied on the opposing party to drive a wedge into his own. "Does someone want to tell Matt Gaetz that he worked with RADICAL DEMOCRATS like @AOC @IlhanMN and @RashidaTlaib to remove @SpeakerMcCarthy, a REPUBLICAN SPEAKER," Lawler wrote on X.

The episode left many Republican members feeling that their party was captive to people with motives they could hardly comprehend. "Matt actually thrives on the hatred," Representative Garret Graves, an ally of McCarthy's, told me. "I pray for him. I truly believe that he had a tough childhood, because there is no one that can have that mindset and be that maniacal and be mentally healthy."

McCarthy's ouster threw the House into chaos. Several members stepped forward to run for Speaker, only to back out when they determined that they couldn't win. Jim Jordan, Gaetz's favored candidate, made his own failed attempt. For three weeks, the legislature was effectively incapacitated, at a time when the United States was involved in two overseas wars. Finally, Republicans came together around Mike Johnson, a deeply conservative member with support among evangelical Christians.

Within days of taking over, Johnson realized that he faced the same circumstances McCarthy had: Congress needed to approve yet another temporary budget to avert a shutdown. So, like his predecessor, Johnson made a deal with Democrats.

Gaetz voted against this compromise, but neither he nor the other hard-liners tried to remove Johnson, even though the budget that he shepherded through represented essentially the same level of spending—$1.6 trillion—as the one approved under McCarthy. "After all of that, what did we get?" Graves said. "We lost time, we lost credibility, and we ended up with a deficit larger than before."

As much as Gaetz talked about balancing the budget, he never laid out a detailed plan to do it. (Like most congress members, he takes pride in securing federal funds for his district, especially for the many military bases in northwest Florida.) Roughly eighty-five per cent of the budget is military spend-

"If our marriage could survive a panini press, a garlic roaster, and a spiralizer, it will survive an air fryer."

ing and entitlements, which neither Gaetz nor his colleagues seem willing to cut. "I'm realistic about the political circumstances," he told me. "If you started with the prospect that you were going to cut Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid all at once, it would be politically doomed to fail."

Nor did Gaetz present a definite vision of how the House should be reformed. "Matt didn't have a plan beyond taking down McCarthy—he didn't know who was going to come after," the former Republican official told me. "He thought he'd shake up the system, cause some chaos, and in the meantime get on TV a lot." Yet Gaetz's maneuvering made him a star. During his monthslong feud with McCarthy, he raised $1.8 million for his campaign, positioning himself as a bulwark against Washington's élite. "If you want to Drain the Swamp, you cannot put the biggest ALLIGATOR in charge of the exercise!" he wrote in a fund-raising letter.

Some veterans on Capitol Hill believed that Gaetz's motives were even more cynical: he was carrying out a personal vendetta connected to the sex-trafficking allegations. According to people around McCarthy, Gaetz made it known that he expected McCarthy to kill the House Ethics Committee investigation. McCarthy refused, saying publicly that he had no legal authority to do so. Gaetz insisted that he had never asked him. "It was all about vengeance," a person close to McCarthy told me.

On February 6th, Mike Johnson oversaw what was widely viewed as a devastating defeat. In a single day, his divided party failed to pass two measures that prominent Republicans had urgently endorsed: the impeachment of Alejandro Mayorkas, Biden's Homeland Security Secretary, and a bill to provide Israel with additional military aid. A bill that made assistance for Ukraine contingent on increased spending for border security had died the day before. The conservative establishment was outraged. The *Wall Street Journal* editorial board, which has taken to calling Gaetz's crew "the chaos caucus," derided "the war of all against all that has followed its coup against Kevin McCarthy" and declared that the "revolution is eating its own."

When I raised the *Journal* editors' comments with Gaetz, he seemed amused: "When I threw out McCarthy, it was the first regime change they've ever opposed." For him, voting down the spending bill was a victory. "When Mitch McConnell builds it, it usually becomes a law. And for the first time in seven years, we blew it up and stopped it."

Between campaign events, Gaetz has been working to remake his party—supporting candidates he likes, attacking those he doesn't, and sometimes just making trouble. On the night that the votes failed, he went online to offer an evidently sarcastic endorsement of Kevin McCarthy as the new head of the Republican National Committee, praising him as "a very high-revenue fundraiser."

Not long before, Gaetz had appeared with Trump in the ballroom of Cipriani Wall Street, for the annual gala of the New York Young Republican Club. The attendees constituted a taxonomy of MAGA influence: the Old Guard stalwarts Rudy Giuliani and Steve Bannon; America First cheerleaders like Senator J. D. Vance; and newer faces such as the lawyer Alina Habba, who has represented Trump against a series of accusations of fiscal and sexual impropriety, and Rogan O'Handley, an online personality who helped popularize the boycott of Bud Light's trans-inclusive advertising. Dressed in tuxedos and body-con dresses, downing Bellinis, they projected an image of a party, or at least a faction, confident in its own ascent.

The crowd cheered when Trump ambled onto the stage, but as he began to speak he seemed tired, slurring his words. Against President Biden's frailty it's easy to forget that the anointed Republican nominee, obese at seventy-seven, is also perilously old for the job. Trump rallied enough to promise the crowd that he would bring the country back from "Hell," and to repeat his infamous comment about being a dictator on "Day One." Still, the real energy was provided by Gaetz—bouncing, beaming, almost conspicuously young—as he told the room that Trump was the greatest President America had ever had. He mocked leftists—who "seethe at the thought of greatness" and consider "Lizzo a sex symbol"—and said that most Republicans had been "derelict in their duty." His wife, Ginger, in a sequinned evening dress, sang the national anthem with unusual facility. (She used to volunteer as a piano and voice teacher.) If Trump wasn't exactly passing the torch to Gaetz, it seemed clear that the torch was his to take.

After that, wherever Trump went on the campaign trail, Gaetz followed with a galvanizing stump speech. He was less sycophantic than such MAGA endorsers as Kari Lake, Tim Scott, and Vivek Ramaswamy; he looked like a more charismatic version of Don, Jr., with a stronger chin. Almost everywhere, Gaetz was met by adoring crowds. Like Trump, he occasionally had to confront detractors. "What's the youngest schoolgirl you've been with?" a heckler called out in New Hampshire. Unfazed, he riffed on Vice-President Kamala Harris's incompetence and moved on to his own remarks.

In recent weeks, the House Ethics Committee has apparently ramped up its inquiry. Scheller, Greenberg's attorney, turned over a trove of documents and said that his client would coöperate. But there is no guarantee that even a damning verdict will have much effect on Gaetz. Both he and Trump have behaved in ways that not so long ago would have led them to be, at the very least, banished from political life. To the annoyance of what they call "the liberal media élite," both men have almost seemed to enjoy sidestepping ethical pitfalls. With each new allegation, their voters become more committed. These tactics have taken Trump further than anyone might have imagined when he left office, friendless and defeated, in 2021. Gaetz, by his side on the campaign trail, has the air of someone who is just getting started. "What you learn is, in politics, it's all the best-laid plans of mice and men," he told me. "And so I'm trying to do a good job. I like what I'm doing now. I think I'm where I'm supposed to be." ♦

THE POLITICAL SCENE

BORDER TROUBLES

Why are Republicans impeaching Alejandro Mayorkas?

BY JONATHAN BLITZER

In early December, 2020, Alejandro Mayorkas was called to Wilmington, Delaware, for a meeting with Joe Biden. The President-elect was choosing his Cabinet, and Mayorkas, whom Biden knew personally, had the sort of résumé that made him an obvious contender for a top role in the new Administration. Then a partner at WilmerHale, an élite white-shoe law firm in Washington, D.C., he had been a U.S. Attorney under Bill Clinton and Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security under Barack Obama. Now Biden wanted to discuss Mayorkas's interest in running D.H.S. During their conversation, which lasted ninety minutes, Biden kept returning to the same question: "Are you sure you want do this?"

D.H.S. has a sprawling portfolio, with two hundred and sixty thousand employees spread across two dozen agencies, including the Coast Guard, the Secret Service, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and a cybersecurity division. But the department is best known for presiding over what some have called the third rail of American politics: the country's immigration system, which was last reformed in 1990 and has been in a state of disrepair for decades. "I've seen it," Mayorkas told Biden. "I've been up close. I know what I'm getting into."

Mayorkas made history twice when he was confirmed as D.H.S. Secretary, the following February. Born in Cuba and raised in Los Angeles, he became the first immigrant ever to head the department. He is also D.H.S.'s first homegrown leader; typically, secretaries have burnished their standing elsewhere in government or in public life. Marielena Hincapié, a former director of the National Immigration Law Center, told me, "Immigration was going to be front and center whether Biden wanted it to be or not. How would Democrats be able to present a different vision, and to talk about it? They had someone in Mayorkas."

In the three years since, with record numbers of migrants arriving at the border, Mayorkas has had to testify before Congress twenty-seven times, far more than any other Cabinet member. "Get the popcorn," Mark Green, the chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, told a group of conservative donors last spring, before one of the hearings. "It's going to be fun." He went on to accuse Mayorkas of the "intentional destruction of our country through the open southern border." Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, the homeland-security adviser at the White House, told me that Mayorkas "did not anticipate, as none of us could have anticipated, how savage the attacks would be personally."

On a cold, clear morning last month, I sat down with Mayorkas in his office, at the department's headquarters, in southeast Washington, a sprawling campus of brick and glass buildings that was once the site of a mental hospital. Hours earlier, Republicans had announced plans to impeach him, claiming only that he had "refused to comply with Federal immigration laws." In private, Mayorkas—who is short, fit, and bald, with bushy eyebrows and a cadet's ramrod posture—is ironic, sharp-witted, and charismatic, a raconteur who leaps out of his seat to exaggerate a detail or deliver a punch line. In public, he tends to speak with dignified aloofness, saying less than he knows, while making you understand that he'd like to tell you more. "I'm in disbelief, just frankly," he told me. "As someone who has spent twenty years in government, twelve years of which were spent as a federal prosecutor, the accusation that I've intentionally chosen not to enforce the laws is beyond the pale."

Recently, while Mayorkas was having dinner with family at a restaurant in California, another diner—a white retiree in a blazer—flipped him off. When Mayorkas discreetly asked the man to stop, the man yelled, "You piece of shit!" It was the latest in a series of unnerving incidents. In late 2021, a group of left-wing protesters, accusing the Biden Administration of continuing Donald Trump's immigration policies, parked themselves in front of Mayorkas's house, in Washington. They hung a giant sign made of Mylar blankets, banged drums, and accosted Mayorkas's wife as she came and went. Still, during our conversations this past December and January, as political pressure mounted, Mayorkas routinely told me that he wouldn't "sink" to the level of his detractors. Fighting back would only "feed the beast," he said. Instead, he passed me an Op-Ed that he'd clipped from the *Times*, written by a clinical psychologist, called "Finding Brightness in Winter." It contained the line "The despair I feel about the world would ruin me if I did not know how to find light."

On February 6th, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives held a vote to impeach Mayorkas—the first time Congress had attempted to charge a Cabinet secretary since 1876. Every Democrat in the chamber, along with three Republicans, opposed the resolution, but they were still short a vote. At around 6:50 P.M., Al Green, a seventy-six-year-old Democrat from Texas, was wheeled into the chamber wearing a gown and socks. He'd come from the hospital, where he was recovering after surgery on a blocked intestine. "I believe him to be a good, decent man," he said of Mayorkas. "I don't want his reputation to be besmirched." The Republicans were stuck. With the vote now tied, at two hundred and fifteen, they needed all their members to be present to pass the resolution, but one was missing: Steve Scalise, the House Majority Leader, who has blood cancer, was back in his district, in Louisiana, recovering from a stem-cell transplant.

At the House dais, Speaker Mike Johnson held the gavel, looking stricken. Several Republicans swarmed a member of their party who'd voted against

"It's on me," the D.H.S. Secretary said of his immigration portfolio. "I don't need to ask someone else to take the heat off."

PHOTOGRAPH BY BALAZS GARDI

impeachment, trying to pressure him to switch sides. "Order! Order!" the Democrats yelled. A little before seven o'clock, Johnson conceded defeat. Standing off to the side was Mark Green, of the Homeland Security Committee, who, hours earlier, had described Mayorkas as a "reptile with no balls." The failed impeachment "frustrated" him, he said. "But we'll see it back again."

That morning, Mayorkas had awoken to an otherwise typical day. There'd been a "morning huddle" at headquarters, in Washington, followed by a session in a secure location, where he received the President's Daily Brief. Later that day, he was in a boardroom in Mountain View, California, meeting with a Silicon Valley executive about artificial intelligence. A staffer summoned him for a phone call. "O.K., thanks," the Secretary said flatly, upon hearing the news of the vote. His face betrayed no emotion. He handed the phone back and, closing the door to the boardroom, resumed the meeting.

For months, Mayorkas had been waking up at around three o'clock in the morning and, with a pen and pad, jotting down notes in a neat hand: policy ideas, thoughts for a memo, tasks to look into. The magnitude of his responsibility weighed on him constantly. Some D.H.S. employees call him the Patron Saint of Paid Leave, because he's scrupulous about awarding overtime pay and boosting workforce morale.

Lately, the main cause of his sleeplessness had been the border. The country was in what he called a "threshold moment." The U.S. Border Patrol was apprehending some ten thousand migrants a day, many of whom were being released into the country because the government had nowhere to detain them and not enough staff to process them. D.H.S. was short on money and personnel. Last year, the department was authorized to hire three hundred Border Patrol agents, but that was the first time the agency had been "plussed up" since 2011, Mayorkas told me.

One evening in late December, Mayorkas and I were sitting at an Italian restaurant near the White House. Some ports of entry in Arizona and California had just been closed because border agents were being reassigned to deal with influxes of migrants. The governor of Arizona, a Democrat, was calling for the deployment of the National Guard to address the "unmitigated humanitarian crisis." When the waiter arrived with a cocktail, Mayorkas asked her if she wouldn't mind pouring it on his head. "People are always asking about the border numbers," he told me. "They say, 'We have to get the numbers back to where they were ten years ago.' But migration is a function of the world's conditions."

Contending with a border crisis has become a political rite of passage for American Presidents. Obama dealt with one in 2014; Trump had his in 2019. But the current moment is unique. In the past, authorities were overwhelmed by migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Central Americans, however, no longer make up the majority of border crossers—their numbers, though still large, have been eclipsed by arrivals from South America, Asia, and Africa. Until very recently, the Darién Gap, a treacherous stretch of jungle that straddles Colombia and Panama, served as a natural buffer limiting migration from South America. Only eleven thousand people, on average, crossed it each year. In 2023, five hundred thousand made the journey. A decade ago, Mayorkas pointed out, "a third of the Venezuelan population wasn't seeking refuge in multiple countries."

The U.S. immigration system encompasses far more than securing the two thousand miles of border separating the country from Mexico, and, under other circumstances, the Administration's track record might have earned it plaudits. Legal immigration is now higher than it was before the Trump Presidency. The refugee system, which was hobbled by Trump, is on pace to resettle more people this year than at any time in the past three decades. Away from the border, immigration arrests that result in deportations are also down, in part because of a series of directives from Mayorkas that have emphasized discretion. "You don't hear about ICE picking up grandmothers," he told me. "Even during Obama, that was a huge issue. We have changed the landscape."

But Biden has seemed reluctant to tout these successes. As one White House refrain goes, a good day for the President is one when immigration isn't in the news. A former senior D.H.S. official said that the Administration "looks at the polling numbers and CNN, and that does not make their heart sing. They hated the border issue. They wanted to thrust it away." According to someone close to Mayorkas, Biden would "blanch" whenever he saw his D.H.S. Secretary. (A White House spokesperson said, "This is false. The President and the Secretary have a good relationship.")

Most of the new arrivals to the U.S. are seeking asylum, but few of them qualify. Eligibility depends on strict types of identity-based persecution, related to someone's religion, political beliefs, or race, among other factors. But, because Congress has failed to open other channels for legal immigration, travelling to the U.S.-Mexico border and claiming asylum has become a migrant's best shot at entering the country. Mayorkas, who for much of his career has defended asylum, is now in the uncomfortable position of conceding that the system no longer works. "Ten thousand people at the border in one day is not an asylum system," he told me.

As a result of the dysfunction, Mayorkas has had to implement orders from the White House, using immigration agencies that are effectively performing triage at the border. "He's a man out on an island," Jason Houser, a former chief of staff at Immigration and Customs Enforcement, told me. "He is left alone to handle all problems until it's a political problem, and then he's told what to do." Mayorkas seems to embrace the role of martyr. At one point, I asked him if the Administration might benefit from having an "immigration czar," someone who could oversee the issue for all government departments, not just D.H.S. "It's on me," he said. "It's not pleasant, but I can take it. I don't need to ask someone else to take the heat off."

In December, a bipartisan group of senators began meeting in a room on the second floor of the Capitol. It was the same room where four Democrats and four Republicans—the so-called Gang of Eight—had negotiated the terms of a comprehensive immigration-reform bill.

That deal, which passed the Senate in 2013 but eventually died in the Republican-led House, would have provided a path to citizenship for the roughly eleven million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. in exchange for harsher enforcement measures at the border. The current talks were built around a far narrower framework: House Republicans were withholding from the White House increased border funding and continued military aid to Ukraine in exchange for new restrictions on the asylum system. Mayorkas was on hand to answer questions about what was and wasn't feasible. Jonathan Davidson, his chief of staff, told me, "When the 'too complicated' drawer gets filled up, they take it out and bring it to the Secretary."

What did it mean for Mayorkas, as a "technical adviser" in bipartisan talks, to point everyone toward a mutual understanding? "You need to embrace the absence of a center," he told me. Last year, House Republicans passed a bill mandating that the government detain all families crossing the border unlawfully and reinstate Trump's immigration policies (including those blocked by the courts). Democrats were too divided on immigration to coalesce around a bill of their own, let alone to pass one. Mayorkas told me that members of Congress have come to him requesting "a seat at the table." He reminds them, "A seat at the table means compromise."

As House Republicans were preparing to impeach Mayorkas, Senate Republicans involved in the immigration talks, including James Lankford, of Oklahoma, their lead negotiator, were calling him for advice. When asked in early January about impeachment, Lankford told reporters, "You can swap secretaries, but the policies are going to be the same." Other Republicans worked with Mayorkas behind closed doors but attacked him before the cameras. I was with Mayorkas when he received a voice mail from one of them. Mayorkas wouldn't tell me who. "He was just calling to check up on me," he said. "To see how I was doing."

On the wall of Mayorkas's office is a photograph of his late parents at a garden party. His mother stands in the foreground, gazing at the camera. His father, wearing a tan suit, is laughing in the background. The two of them, both Jewish and both only children, met in Havana in the early nineteen-fifties. Mayorkas's father, Charles, who was known as Nicky, was the son of Turkish and Polish immigrants who left Europe after the First World War. Mayorkas's mother, Anita Gabor, was Romanian, and had lost two grandparents and seven uncles in the Holocaust. She arrived in Cuba after her family fled to France during the rise of the Nazis.

Mayorkas, the second of Nicky and Anita's four children, was born in 1959, the year Fidel Castro came to power. Nicky ran a steel-wool factory, and the family lived in a condominium in an upscale neighborhood. "He loved Cuba and the life there," Mayorkas said of his father. But, in 1960, his parents, fearful of the rise of a Communist dictator, joined an exodus of the middle and upper classes. They landed in Miami, then settled in Los Angeles, where Nicky worked as a comptroller for a textile manufacturer. Mayorkas remembers him leaving the house each morning at five, returning home for dinner with the family, taking a short nap, and then getting back to work. "He was just exhausted," Mayorkas said. One reason he keeps the photograph in his office is that it captured his father in a rare moment of levity. "He did *not* manage up," Mayorkas told me. "My mother would say, 'Do you have to disagree all the time?'"

As a boy, Mayorkas joked with his mother that he would one day write a sitcom about "how our family wasn't like the other families." They blended Cuban and Central European traditions—paella and potato soups, conversations in Spanish, English, and Romanian. Anita spoke five languages and read widely. "You'd walk into our living room and to the left was a collection of books about antisemitism," Mayorkas said. "The fragility of life as a Jewish person was something extraordinarily present in our home." His mother inculcated in him a reverence for American law enforcement. Driving him around L.A. in a Ford Country Squire station wagon, she'd pull over when she saw a police officer walking down the street and tell her son to shake his hand. "The idea of having someone in uniform be a source of security was something very meaningful to my mother," he told me.

Mayorkas has described his command of Spanish as "suboptimal." When he was a boy and his father would speak it to him, he'd reply in English. "The term back then was 'assimilation,'" he told me. Mayorkas went by Ali, which he still uses today. His youth, as he tells it, was a period of waywardness and curiosity—delivering pizzas, working as a messenger in a rickety old car without air-conditioning. "I just wasn't strongly foot-planted at the time in terms of where I was headed," he said. Years later, when Obama re-started diplomatic relations with Cuba, Mayorkas joined an American delegation in Havana. "It was like a pilgrimage for him," Mayorkas's wife, Tanya, told me. He visited his family's old apartment and his father's elementary school, and travelled to the cemetery where his paternal grandmother

"I'll be your waiter tonight, because you left your back door open, and I really need the tips."

was buried. Tanya said, "A piece of himself got put back into place."

After college, at U.C. Berkeley, and law school, at Loyola Marymount, Mayorkas got a job as a line prosecutor with the U.S. Attorney for the Central District of California, in Los Angeles. Around the courthouse, his friends called him the Mayor, because he knew everybody; he stopped to speak with the janitors, the court reporters, the clerks. For a prosecutor, he showed an unusual interest in the lives of the people on trial. Three decades later, he can still recite the home address of the first person he charged. "It's not easy to see a human being shackled," he once told me.

In 1995, Mayorkas was brought in to try the fraud case of Heidi Fleiss, nicknamed the Hollywood Madam, who ran a prostitution ring catering to wealthy and powerful L.A. clients. The defense held that prostitution was a victimless crime and that Fleiss was the target of gender discrimination. Mayorkas countered by emphasizing the ugly realities of sex work. "Fleiss cried, and they were not crocodile tears," Mayorkas told me. "I thought it reflected well of her." He won the case, and earned the respect of the opposing counsel, who praised him lavishly in the press. Fleiss told a local reporter, "I shouldn't say this, but I really like him. Even though he's the little fucker who was begging the judge to give me ten years."

Three years later, Mayorkas, at the age of thirty-nine, became the youngest U.S. Attorney in the country. There were more prominent candidates for the job, and it was unusual for someone of his rank to be promoted from inside the office. What gave him the edge, one person told me, was his interview with Senator Dianne Feinstein, who ultimately made the recommendation to President Bill Clinton. Mayorkas had honed a public image that was well suited for the moment—a centrist with a heart. "Part of my job is knowing when not to prosecute," he told *Los Angeles* magazine two years later. "But if you're guilty and you want to bang heads in court, I have no hesitation in making sure you get drilled."

His life in public service followed a partisan cycle: when Republicans took power, he left for private practice. He spent the Bush years at the L.A. firm O'Melveny & Myers, and then in 2009 was tapped by the Obama Administration to lead U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which administers the country's legal immigration system. At Mayorkas's Senate confirmation hearings, where Feinstein introduced him, he said, "The most important responsibility of U.S.C.I.S. is its authority to bestow citizenship. As a naturalized citizen, I have a deep understanding and appreciation of this mission."

In June of 2012, after more than two decades of congressional inaction on immigration reform, Obama announced a sweeping measure called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which granted a reprieve from deportation to undocumented immigrants who'd grown up in the U.S. Through the program, they could qualify for work, state-based financial aid, and mortgages. "If there were a hundred and fifty thousand people who applied, that would have been a ton," Noah Kroloff, the D.H.S. chief of staff at the time, told me. "It wound up being several times that."

U.S.C.I.S. was given two months to manage the rollout. "We're talking about the government here, and each and every application had to be considered individually," Kroloff said. Mayorkas told his staff, "I don't care if you agree or disagree with this policy. They're saying we can't do it in time. Wouldn't it be nice to prove them wrong?" By March of 2013, the agency had registered more than four hundred and fifty thousand applicants—a resounding success. "We were meeting with him every single week," Hincapié, the former director of the National Immigration Law Center, said. "It was the first time we had someone in a U.S.C.I.S.-level position that was doing the work side by side with us."

A year later, after Obama nominated Mayorkas as Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security, an official at the D.H.S. inspector general's office leaked information about an ethics investigation involving Mayorkas to Chuck Grassley, the top Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee. The allegations concerned a visa program that allowed foreigners to qualify for green cards if they invested large sums of money in American businesses, thereby helping to create jobs. U.S.C.I.S. staff members claimed that Mayorkas had interceded on behalf of applications that were slated to be rejected. Three of these applications involved companies associated with well-connected Democrats, including Hillary Clinton's brother Anthony Rodham and Terry McAuliffe, who was then running for governor of Virginia. The inspector general's final report found no evidence of illegal behavior but faulted Mayorkas for appearing to improperly exert his influence. "Two possibilities existed," according to a profile in the Washington *Post*. "He'd committed the sin of favoritism. Or . . . he'd committed another kind of power-player sin: he hadn't considered the optics."

The controversy reanimated a scandal from Mayorkas's time as U.S. Attorney. He had once taken a call from the White House about commuting the

"This is embarrassing. I don't even remember what I was crying about."

sentence of a convicted drug dealer whose father was a Democratic donor with ties to Hillary Clinton's other brother, Hugh Rodham. In his confirmation hearings for the job at U.S.C.I.S., Mayorkas had addressed the incident, denying any wrongdoing but saying that he'd made a "mistake."

The confirmation process for Deputy Secretary dragged on for months. Senator Tom Coburn, of Oklahoma, said that the allegations raised "strong questions and concerns about his fitness for this office," and that it would be "virtually unprecedented" for the Senate to move forward with Mayorkas's confirmation. Democrats scheduled a vote anyway, and confirmed him without Republican support. It was the start of a long-standing partisan grudge.

Obama had campaigned on restoring humanity to the immigration system. But, once he was in office, the number of deportations rose. Increased enforcement, he believed, was necessary to keep Republicans at the negotiating table for comprehensive immigration reform, which he attempted in his second term. He was right, up to a point. But the Gang of Eight's bill died anyway, in the summer of 2014, and by then a record number of unaccompanied children and families from Central America had begun arriving at the southern border, straining government resources and dominating the news.

The White House announced that it would start detaining families who crossed the border seeking asylum. This meant that children could spend months in custody with their parents, even though none of them had committed a crime. The D.H.S. Secretary at the time, Jeh Johnson, defended the move, saying, "We simply cannot have a situation where, if you cross the border and are apprehended, you can count on being escorted to the nearest bus station."

The asylum crisis, coupled with the collapse of the comprehensive reform bill, undercut more than a decade of Democratic organizing. "The focus for years and years was on the domestic population," Mayorkas told me. Because millions of immigrants lacked status, policy discussions revolved around legalization; heightened security at the border was a means to an end. Now the center of gravity was shifting. Republicans were refusing to offer legal status to anyone, and tens of thousands of new migrants were arriving with stories of abuse and suffering, only to languish while the government scrambled to find places to put them. Mayorkas, who had strongly opposed the family-detention policy, was deputized to break the news to a room full of indignant activists. He considered it one of the lowest points of his career.

Mayorkas spent the Trump years in a state of canny expectation, living in a town house in Georgetown and working at WilmerHale. In his spare time, he met influential immigration advocates for coffee and occasionally spoke to journalists off the record. "It was obvious to anyone who was paying attention that he was well positioned to be the Secretary," Cecilia Muñoz, the director of domestic policy in the Obama White House, told me. Ricki Seidman, an old friend of Mayorkas's who's now a senior counsellor at D.H.S., asked him if he'd consider becoming Attorney General. "Trump has torn the Department of Homeland Security apart," Mayorkas responded. "I want to rebuild it."

During the 2020 Presidential transition, Mayorkas prepared for his new position in part by speaking to people who had held the job before, including Michael Chertoff, the head of D.H.S. under George W. Bush. "There was not really a transition," Chertoff told me recently. "When we passed it on to the Obama Administration, we had multiple meetings over a course of months. It was the reverse when Trump left, because he didn't want to admit he lost." In the days after the Inauguration, Roberta S. Jacobson, whom the White House brought in to coördinate border policy, met with career D.H.S. officials over Zoom. "It was like talking to a room of people with P.T.S.D.," she told me. "They had just lived through four years in which no one asked them for their opinion. They were yelled at, belittled, talked at—end of meeting."

The incoming Administration also made some costly mistakes. Members of the Biden transition team had drafted meticulous planning documents outlining the technical steps necessary for managing the border at a turbulent moment. There were suggestions detailing, for instance, what to do if arrivals increased—how to handle operations as well as political messaging. But the plans never reached the new Administration's political appointees. The documents weren't shared widely, one person involved told me, because of fears that people outside the Administration could sue to obtain them.

In the final months of the Trump Administration, the number of unaccompanied children at the border was rising. By the time Biden took office, authorities were overwhelmed. Top officials at the Department of Health and Human Services, which was responsible for housing minors and placing them with sponsors, still weren't confirmed. Several Administration sources told me that Mayorkas had been forced to step in and help manage the situation. A policy expert who'd served in the transition asked Susan Rice, the head of the White House's Domestic Policy Council, if the Administration was consulting the planning documents. "What documents?" Rice replied.

In the President's earliest days in office, he attempted to deliver on a central campaign promise: dismantling Trump's asylum policies, especially the Migrant Protection Protocols, also known as Remain in Mexico, which had forced seventy thousand asylum seekers to wait in dangerous and squalid conditions just south of the U.S. border. But in an effort to show solidarity with the progressives who had helped him win, Biden went a step further, issuing a deportation moratorium that was quickly blocked by a federal judge. Republicans portrayed his entire approach as feckless and naïve. They were ready with a slogan: "Biden's Border Crisis."

The White House had instructed Mayorkas to avoid using the word "crisis" in his public appearances, but it was obvious to most observers that there was one. More than five hundred unaccompanied children were arriving each day; thousands of them were stuck in borderland holding facilities. At a White House press conference, in March, 2021, a reporter asked Mayorkas if there was

"The only problem with Heaven is there's nowhere to hang stuff."

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a "crisis at the border." "The answer is no," Mayorkas replied. "I think there is a challenge at the border that we are managing." The response struck even his defenders as awkward and evasive. When I asked him about the Administration's messaging, he told me, "I refuse to engage on battles of diction."

Biden, meanwhile, was furious that the issue was casting a shadow over the start of his term. "There was tension with every single person who sat with the President in the Oval Office on this issue," Jacobson, the border coördinator, said. Administration officials faulted the head of Health and Human Services, Xavier Becerra, who had recently been confirmed, for bungling the response. During a meeting in which Biden took Becerra to task, Axios reported, Rice passed Mayorkas a note: "Don't save him."

But, according to three Administration officials, during a White House meeting in late spring, Biden's chief of staff, Ron Klain, raised the possibility of firing Mayorkas, just to reset the Administration's message. ("I never suggested firing Secretary Mayorkas," Klain told me. "I consider Ali a friend and a dedicated public servant.") The irony was that Mayorkas, who had witnessed the surge in unaccompanied minors in 2014, as Deputy Secretary, was perhaps the least convenient fall guy. Among the Administration's highest-ranking members, he had the most experience with the matter. As one former White House official told me, "Who could possibly replace him?"

Last year, at an event in Washington, Mayorkas fell into conversation with a staffer. He was frustrated that the border issue was consuming all his time. "What's happened to me?" he said. "I came in with so many ideas."

One Trump border policy in particular had put Mayorkas in a bind. At the start of the pandemic, the Trump White House had strong-armed officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to authorize the use of Title 42, an obscure statute that allows the expulsion of migrants without asylum hearings during a public-health emergency. The Biden Administration—both fearing a border surge and concerned about detaining migrants in close quarters during a pandemic—had opted to retain its newfound powers. The decision ultimately made the crisis worse. Migrants who were expelled under the policy generally didn't face detention or future legal consequences, so they reëntered the country multiple times. "Title 42 turned the system on its head," a former senior White House official said. "It inflated the numbers."

The situation created conflicts within Mayorkas's agencies. "The factions inside D.H.S. were even more complicated than they were at the White House," the former senior official told me. The heads of the Border Patrol and ICE kept telling Mayorkas that they didn't have the processing capacity to handle large numbers of migrants at the border without Title 42, but the policy was straining resources within their own ranks. Many ICE officers resented Title 42, because they were responsible for carrying out the expulsions; they frequently had to fly migrants to places along the Mexican border where it would be easier to expel them. The agency couldn't deport everyone, and a large portion of the people who were allowed into the country were not even screened for asylum. Border Patrol agents, for their part, were glad not to have to book the migrants they encountered—ICE took them into custody before expelling them—but the rise in repeat crossings meant that the agents had to make more apprehensions.

In August of 2021, the American Civil Liberties Union resumed a lawsuit that it had first brought against the Trump Administration to end the policy. The move coincided with a separate set of negotiations between the Biden Administration and the A.C.L.U., over a lawsuit to reunite families who'd been separated by Trump. When I spoke to Mayorkas in May of 2021, he called the reunification effort "a source of pride" and said that he considered the families "victims." Mayorkas was also speaking to lawyers at the A.C.L.U., including the organization's executive director, Anthony Romero, to persuade them to delay the Title 42 case. Sometimes he'd talk to them twice a day about both lawsuits; one call would be coöperative, the other tense. Mayorkas was desperate to buy time, but, as long as Title 42 remained in effect, his agencies were slow to develop alternatives.

In early September, rumors began circulating among a community of Haitians in southern Mexico that it was possible to sneak across the border into Del Rio, a small city in southwest Texas. Many of the Haitians hadn't lived in their home country for nearly a decade, having relocated to Chile and other countries in South America after the devastating 2010 earthquake. The economic fallout of the pandemic had uprooted them once more. Now, as thousands of Haitians made their way to Del Rio, local authorities declared a

state of emergency. The port of entry was temporarily closed. Mayorkas flew to the border, where about fifteen thousand migrants had set up a makeshift camp under the Del Rio International Bridge. "There was a real fear that the flow of Haitians would keep coming," an official working in the White House at the time told me.

Two groups inside D.H.S. were battling over how to respond. The conditions in Haiti were especially dire: in July, the Haitian President, Jovenel Moïse, had been assassinated, intensifying a gang war that was already under way in the capital. One set of advisers saw mass deportation as the only option; the other balked at the human cost. A former Biden Administration official told me, "The conversation that mattered was the one that the Secretary was having with officials at the White House. Depending on how much heat he's getting from them, it'll tip him in the direction of one stakeholder or another."

By mid-September, D.H.S. was launching several deportation flights to Haiti each day, using the expulsion authority granted by Title 42. Some D.H.S. officials, upset by the policy, began scouring passenger manifests to remove women and children before the planes took off.

On September 16th, Mayorkas called an emergency meeting with half a dozen D.H.S. officials. He looked anxious and exasperated—clearly tormented, one of the attendees told me. Representatives from ICE were the most outspoken. Their agents had to operate the deportation flights, and some of the migrants were physically resisting being taken to Haiti. There had been incidents on the tarmac in Port-au-Prince in which migrants refused to get off the planes. Fights broke out with deportation officers. Mayorkas was unmoved. When a career ICE officer suggested reducing the number of flights, Mayorkas's face tightened. "I don't hear any disagreement," he said firmly. An official in attendance told me, "He was telling people to shut up."

Three days later, agents on horseback chased after a group of Haitians along the banks of the Rio Grande. The images—white border agents in cowboy hats lunging toward Black migrants, including children—went viral. Prominent Democrats, such as Chuck Schumer, the Senate Majority Leader, who'd said little about Title 42, now assailed the policy. It "defies common sense," he said. "It also defies common decency." Biden said that the agents' actions were "simply not who we are."

Mayorkas made a television appearance in which he expressed concern without directly blaming his agents. "I am going to let the investigation run its course," he said. But "one cannot weaponize a horse to aggressively attack a child." At a White House press conference, on September 24th, he shared what was meant to be more positive news. "Less than one week ago, there were approximately fifteen thousand migrants in Del Rio, Texas," he said. "As of this morning, there are no longer any migrants in the camp underneath the Del Rio International Bridge."

Early one morning in late January, 2022, Mayorkas stood before a group of some three dozen Border Patrol agents in Yuma, Arizona. He and the head of the Border Patrol, a phlegmatic agency veteran from Texas named Raul Ortiz, were there for a "muster," as the agency calls it—to field questions and to address concerns—but the agents were upset. They were getting COVID at high rates, and some were dying. In the early two-thousands, Yuma was among the busiest crossings along the border, but it had calmed in the decades since, as more smuggling networks moved migrants into South Texas. "All of a sudden," Ortiz later told me, "they start to see an uptick in traffic like everyone else."

Keeping the Border Patrol in line has become a particular challenge for Democratic Administrations. During the Obama years, a member of the Border Patrol union, which represents some eighteen thousand agents, leaked information about the routes of government buses carrying migrants, so that anti-immigration activists could block their paths with protests. In 2016, the union endorsed Trump. In the summer of 2021, Biden officials learned that the Border Patrol had been releasing thousands of migrants without the paperwork they'd need to report to ICE and, eventually, to show up in court. The head of the Border Patrol at the time was Rodney Scott, an outspoken critic of Biden. "They do whatever they want," a former White House official said.

In Yuma, Mayorkas sounded apologetic, but he also looked like an interloper, in khakis and a polo shirt with the D.H.S. insignia. "The numbers I know well, but I don't live them," he said. Before he finished speaking, an agent made a show of turning his back on him. "You can turn your back on me," Mayorkas said, "but I'll never turn my back on you." The agent responded, "You did the day you were appointed."

On the flight out of Yuma, Mayorkas asked Ortiz, "What do I need to do, Chief?" Ortiz told him to distance himself from the White House. "You go before Congress and testify that it's not a crisis, and then you come out here and you have three thousand people under a bridge in El Paso, or fifteen thousand people under the bridge in Del Rio," he said. "Don't try to B.S. and sugarcoat the agents out there."

That May, Mayorkas travelled to the offices of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, in Washington, for a meeting with about forty representatives from several of the most prominent advocacy organizations in the country. The mood was glum. Many of the lawyers had thought that the Democrats would be able to secure a pathway to citizenship for a portion of the country's undocumented population through a budget measure known as reconciliation, which had recently failed. It would be another year before Title 42 was finally lifted. Mayorkas asked the attendees a question: What did they think that the government should do if a migrant, with a lawyer, applied for asylum but eventually lost her case both before a judge and on appeal? He waited for someone to acknowledge that such a person, by law, would have to be removed. No one spoke.

The common criticism of Mayorkas, shared by both his allies and his antagonists, is that he wants to be liked. The paradox is that the head of D.H.S. can rarely please anybody. Janet Napolitano was a two-term governor of Arizona before she became Obama's first D.H.S. Secretary; her chief credential for the job was her obdurate centrism in a border state roiled by political fights over immigration. "I remember I was testifying on the Hill, before the Judiciary Committee," she told me. "The Republican members were beating up on me for being soft at the border, not doing enough, being weak. And there were advocates in the room yelling and chanting about how Obama was the 'deporter-in-chief.'"

As Mayorkas shuttled between

immigration agents and advocates, officials at D.H.S. were beginning to think more expansively about the situation at the border. After the war in Ukraine began, large numbers of Ukrainians had started gathering in northern Mexico. Mayorkas and his advisers came up with a plan to grant them entry using the Administration's powers of "parole," a Presidential authority, in place since the Eisenhower era, that allows the government to bring in vulnerable people in moments of international emergency. Their legal status would be temporary, but they'd get authorization to work. "Almost immediately, the gatherings at ports of entry dissipated, and people began accessing the program," Mayorkas told me. "We then applied it to the Venezuelans."

The idea was to manage the flow of people to the border, not simply to fight it. The government would open legal pathways for some migrants to gain entry to the U.S., but it would refuse asylum to anyone who attempted to enter the country by crossing the border between ports of entry. D.H.S. identified the fastest-growing populations of new arrivals—Venezuelans, Haitians, Cubans, and Nicaraguans—and built a parole process around them. It would allow as many as thirty thousand members of these nationalities to enter the U.S. legally each month. At the same time, the government had expanded access to a scheduling app, called CBP One, that migrants could use once they reached central Mexico; this would grant them an appointment at a port of entry, where they had a chance to get paroled into the U.S.

In the past year, some four hundred and fifty thousand people have used CBP One to make an appointment at the border. Another three hundred and sixty thousand have used the program reserved for the four nationalities. At the same time, between the middle of last May, when Title 42 was lifted, and the end of January, D.H.S. deported roughly half a million migrants, including some ninety thousand who crossed the border with family members.

Jason Houser, the former ICE official, had been critical of the White House's handling of the situation in Del Rio. "We had twenty-five flights to Haiti on Title 42," he told me. "No one got to seek asylum." But the parole process, he said, was the only sensible response to what is happening at the border. In the first months of the program, encounters at the border with migrants from Venezuela, Haiti, Cuba, and Nicaragua dropped ninety per cent. What was especially striking, Houser said, was that some of the same Haitians the Administration had expelled in 2021 were now applying for parole.

In December, as I sat in Mayorkas's office at the department's headquarters, his phone would occasionally ring, and, after he excused himself, I'd hear him greet a member of the small group negotiating the Senate border bill. Democrats were considering measures that would have once been inconceivable—raising the screening standards for asylum and creating "triggers" to stop asylum processing when border traffic increases—and getting modest concessions in return. Legalization of any sort was off the table. A senior D.H.S. official involved in the negotiations told me, "Democrats have shifted in a major way in the last six months because of Greg Abbott."

Since the spring of 2022, Abbott, the governor of Texas, has sent more than a hundred thousand migrants to six Democratic cities across the country. He's refused to coördinate his efforts with governors, mayors, or local officials, and the result has been chaos, as intended. This past fall, as Mayorkas was being driven home, he passed two buses unloading passengers near the Vice-President's residence. "It was the middle of the night," he said. "I find it unconscionable."

At first, mayors in New York, Chicago, and Washington publicly attacked

Abbott. But as the numbers of migrants grew, exceeding the capacity of shelter systems and overwhelming municipal and state budgets, local leaders turned their ire toward Biden. "The President and the White House have failed this city," Eric Adams, the mayor of New York, said last April.

One of the mayors who has worked with Mayorkas on the issue is Mike Johnston, of Denver, a forty-nine-year-old Democrat who won election last June, having run a campaign to address homelessness. Since Abbott began his busing scheme, Denver has received more migrants per capita than any other city, exacerbating some of the issues that Johnston had vowed to solve. "We're the cheapest ticket north of El Paso," he told me. "The great tragedy of this situation is that we have employers all over the city calling us every week saying, 'We have open jobs—can we please hire the migrants that have arrived?'"

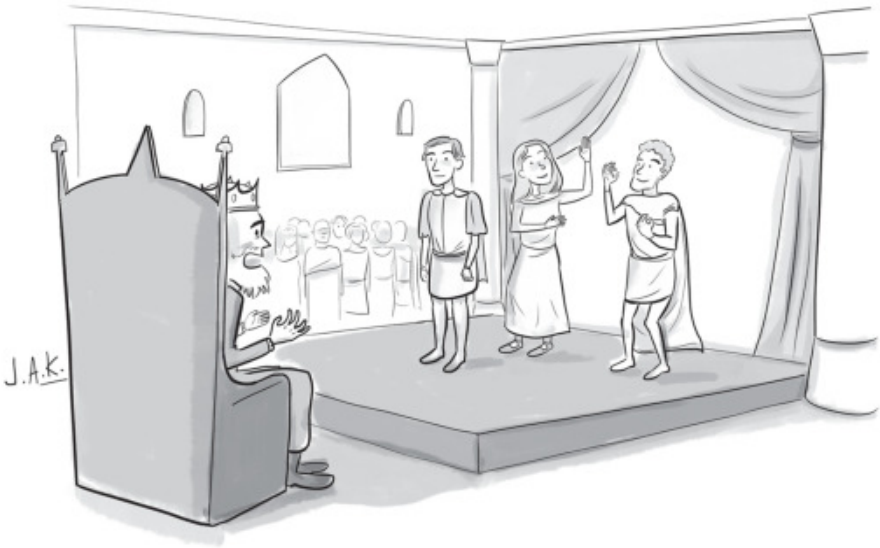
Johnston believes that there is no way to handle the influx of migrants without a federal response. "You need a system to manage across cities," he told me. In the past year, he noted, Chicago has seen more Ukrainian refugees arrive than Venezuelans. "You cannot find a single one of them on the streets of Chicago, because they're in jobs, in houses, in communities," he said. "They came with work authorization, they came with federal support."

In September, Mayorkas announced that the government would extend temporary protected status to Venezuelans who'd arrived in the U.S. before July 31, 2023. This meant that they could apply for work permits, which in turn would allow them to move out of city shelters. But more people were coming by the day. A few months later, after a meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, which is led by Johnston, I spoke to a senior White House official. "There are a number of cities that have said, 'We are willing to help,'" the official told me. But those cities say they have two conditions: "We need work-authorized people, because we have all the jobs in the world. And, secondly, we cannot put an ad up, because we do not want to be the next target of Greg Abbott." When I asked Mayorkas if D.H.S. could have done more to neutralize Abbott's campaign, he pointed out an operational problem: once migrants are released into the U.S., "we are limited in our authority to control their movement."

This was technically true, but it also glossed over some ideas that had been circulating within the department. In the spring of 2022, a group of officials at ICE and Customs and Border Protection proposed a plan for the federal government to send migrants to cities across the country. Rather than watch Abbott

make unilateral decisions with national consequences, the Administration would have intervened to meet local and state needs. Houser, of ICE, was one of the proposal's authors. "We could create two thousand movements a day away from the border," he told me. "The cities we were going to work with were Buffalo, Miami, L.A., Newark, Denver, and Detroit." The key, he said, was to fly and bus people to these cities and "process them in transit." They could be released to ICE custody once they arrived. He told me that the group "did multiple weekend meetings" with top officials at the White House, and that getting the idea past them was "like passing a kidney stone."

Eventually, Houser was invited to a meeting with a group of high-ranking officials, including Julie Chavez Rodriguez, who is now the director of Biden's reëlection campaign. At the time, she served as the head of the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, which is the White House's direct point of contact with state and local governments. "When it got into her orbit, we knew the idea was being seriously considered," Houser told me. But, then, "all of a sudden, it went quiet." The argument he later heard was that "we don't want to own the issue. We'll be accused of finishing the smugglers' job."



"O.K., Hamlet, I admit I killed your father! Just please stop making me watch your improv group!"

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Before the February 6th impeachment vote, the Republican-led Homeland Security Committee held a series of hearings to investigate possible ways to charge Mayorkas. These sessions, as many Democrats pointed out, were combative, full of invective, and almost entirely devoid of substance. Bennie Thompson, the ranking Democrat on the committee, summarized the Republicans' approach to me as "Don't confuse me with facts. My mind is made up."

But when I attended one hearing, on January 10th, I'd at least expected some high drama. Instead, the hearing was upstaged by a meeting of the House Oversight Committee, which was marking up a resolution to hold the President's son, Hunter Biden, in contempt of Congress. That morning, as I listened to the Republican attorney general of Oklahoma tell a sparse crowd to "remember the murder victims, remember the drug-overdose victims" of an "unsecure border," Hunter surprised everyone by walking into the Oversight hearing to stare down its members. Nancy Mace, a Republican from South Carolina, responded, "I'm looking at you, Hunter Biden," then added that he "should be arrested right here, right now, and go straight to jail."

An hour or so later, I bumped into Mace near an elevator. When I told her that I'd missed the confrontation, because I'd been at the Mayorkas impeachment hearing, she said, "If we can expel George Santos, we can get rid of Mayorkas."

This was supposedly the majority view in the House. A month later, when the impeachment vote failed, by the slimmest of margins, some G.O.P. members openly wondered if expelling Santos—who, like the Party's presumptive Presidential nominee, faces a hefty federal indictment—had been a mistake. "Miss me yet?" Santos tweeted, next to a screenshot of the vote count.

The politics of immigration have always been cynical, even obscene. But Washington was entering a new dimension. When the bipartisan immigration agreement was finally announced, on February 4th, Lankford's own colleagues attacked it. Days earlier, in a meeting with senators, Mitch McConnell, the Minority Leader, told them, "The politics on this have changed." On Truth Social, Trump had called the bill "a great gift to the Democrats, and a Death Wish for The Republican Party." As long as he was campaigning on a broken immigration system, congressional Republicans couldn't try to fix it. "We don't want to do anything to undermine him," McConnell said, according to Punchbowl News.

For days, Biden had been saying that, if only Republicans could get their act together and move the legislation to his desk, he would immediately declare an emergency and "shut down the border." The White House was finally issuing an unapologetic message on immigration. It just happened to use the language of the other side.

On February 13th, a special election was held in New York to fill Santos's seat, which Democrats were poised to flip. While the returns came in, and Republicans guarded their dwindling majority in the chamber, the Speaker convened another vote to impeach Mayorkas. As before, the charges failed to identify any concrete acts of wrongdoing. There was still no chance of conviction in the Senate. But this time Scalise was in attendance, and two Democrats—one with COVID, the other stuck in an airport in Florida—were not. The resolution passed. History was made, abjectly.

Biden called it a "blatant act of unconstitutional partisanship." Schumer dismissed it as a "sham." Mayorkas kept quiet. When I reached him two days later, he was flying to a security conference in Munich. "Our work continues," he told me. "The threats we face are real." ♦

ILLUSTRATION BY SOPHY HOLLINGTON

Through no fault of our own (naturally), we were late. Our wives, you see, had decided to tag along. And although in general we didn't bring our women to khatams, Hajji Hotak's wife had sent each of our wives a personal invitation on Facebook, which they lorded over us, until, inevitably, we found ourselves waiting in empty living rooms or pacing back and forth on dreary porches, every few minutes shouting up the stairs or into the house, or quietly muttering to ourselves that we were late, goddammit, forever late, forever late and waiting, our wristwatches ticking as if time had no meaning, as if we weren't hurtling toward the oblivion we had seen in the gaping mouths of boys with guns, but our clever wives—plucking and pruning and painting themselves—paid us no mind, or else shouted back that when everyone is late no one is late, which is true, in a way, because if we had arrived at six in the evening, as instructed by Hajji Hotak, our host would have been horrified to see us standing at his front door an hour and a half before anyone else. And so, oddly enough, out of courtesy, yes, courtesy, we drove up late to Hajji Hotak's house, in West Sacramento, double-parking in his cul-de-sac, behind his mailbox or beneath the basketball hoop, almost pulling up onto his immaculately manicured lawn—Hajji Hotak having worked for years as a professional landscaper—most of us filtering into the house between seven-twenty-five and seven-forty, our wives flocking into the living room, already chirping about nothing.

Gradually, we filled the guest room. Some of our white-bearded elders lay back on toshaks, their legs sprawled out, bodies cushioned by three or four pillows. A few read the Quran, though Hajji Hotak had completed the khatam by himself hours ago. Most of our black-bearded, balding gentlemen sat upright on couches, their guts sucked in, their mustaches twisted from unconscious twirling. A number of us scrolled through iPhones with our index fingers or exchanged small talk, occasionally slipping into English by accident. Others took in Hotak's home. The shoddy paint job and the new carpets. The cobwebs and the cracked windows. The old portrait of his late father, Hajji Atal, and the black-and-white photograph of his martyred brother, Watak Shaheed, who was killed by Communists during the war. Poor Hotak. His home was deteriorating before our eyes, and not one of his three useless sons was likely to save it.

Turkish teacups in hand, we sipped green or black chai, savoring the slight burn in our throats and the warmth in our bellies. We ate sugar-coated almonds or dried mulberries hand-delivered from Logar. We spoke to our friends and ignored our enemies. We lobbed one-liners at Adel Sahib, requested real-estate advice from Rahman Sahib, demanded duas from Qari Sahib, and tried not to peer at Achakzai Sahib, whose left eye was still bruised from a fistfight with his son Rahim. "You will never let him hit you again," Rahim had told his mother, who had told our wives, who had told us. We were a mangled bunch. Hajji Hotak suffered from nerve damage in his shoulders and spine. Hajji Aman had scars running up and down his skull, from when he was scalped by Spetsnaz. Doctor Yusuf was missing three toes on his left foot (nobody knew why), and Doctor Majboor had lost four fingers on his right hand in one of Najibullah's dungeons. Whenever our children asked him what had happened to his hand, Majboor would tell them that demons had eaten his fingers during the war, and, when our children asked why the demons had only eaten the fingers of his right hand, he would say that it was because he washed his ass with his left and they couldn't stand the smell of his shit. Whoever sat beside Sar Malam Sahib knew to gently place three fingers beneath his elbow as he drank his chai. His tremors were getting worse. The man currently balancing Sar Malam Sahib's elbow was a former student of his from Logar, Adel Sahib, who had never finished high school (or passed any of Sar Malam Sahib's history classes) but had managed to fight briefly for every mujahideen faction in Afghanistan.

"I knew he wasn't going to pull the trigger," Adel Sahib began, retelling the story—completely unprompted—of the day that he'd saved our local mosque from a pistol-wielding hoodlum. "He was a little girl with a bruised ego. He didn't want to kill anybody. Deep down, he *wanted* me to disarm him."

"So what did you do with the kid's gun?" Hajji Hotak shouted from the kitchen.

"It's been sitting in my glove box ever since," Adel Sahib shouted back, and laughed, and we all laughed with him, because he had earned the right.

Huddled beside Adel Sahib, the engineers, Qasim and Tariq, discussed a secret construction project that they were under strict orders not to mention outside the office. And yet almost all of us had already heard from our wives that the city was planning to build two new bridges across the Sacramento River, cutting commute times in the region in half. Housing prices—we speculated—would rise, and a few of us were already looking to buy farmland in the boonies of West Sacramento or Elk Grove, before its value shot up. Sitting shoulder to shoulder, muttering curses in Farsi and Pashto, our engineers had each drunk six cups of tea in less than ten minutes, hoarding an entire thermos for themselves. Theirs was an unlikely friendship. Qasim, a fervent supporter of the former engineering student turned Islamist rebel turned power-hungry warlord Ahmad Shah Massoud, had once despised Tariq for his devotion to the former engineering student turned Islamist rebel turned power-hungry warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. None of us knew when, exactly, they'd renounced their feud; we were just happy not to have to rehash the same tired arguments about which warlord killed the fewest Afghans or which Afghans weren't supposed to have been killed or which massacres didn't actually occur at all. We had more pressing topics to discuss: gardening techniques and brands of manure and how Hajji Hotak kept his persimmons alive through the winter (some sort of plastic-tarp contraption, it seemed) and gas prices and housing prices and masjid membership fees (apparently Sheikh Burhan had decided to jack up the fees without consulting his board) and SAT scores and our relatives who were arriving on S.I.V.s and the color of the leaves in October and Hajji Khushal's habit of calling us at all hours of the night to ask about the fate of Hajji Khushal and Commandant Sahib's eldest grandson's imminent divorce from the Indian girl we'd all advised him not to marry and the increasing cost of umrah packages and the hypocrisy of the Saudis and the strange case of Aisha from Kunar and the unending drought in California, and where the hell was Sheikh Burhan?

"Five minutes away," Hajji Aman

announced, hanging up his phone.

Ten minutes later, at exactly eight-fifteen, Sheikh Burhan barged into the house with a legion of disciples—mujahideen veterans and reformed Taliban and distant cousins and American-born students from his Islamic school. They squeezed themselves into the already cramped guest room as Hajji Hotak and two of his sons rushed about the house, collecting plastic lawn chairs and kitchen stools and swivelling desk chairs and the upstairs love seat and a purple beanbag. Sheikh Burhan glided swiftly through the carrousel of chairs in his enormous white thobe and aviator sunglasses, distributing hugs and cracking jokes and commenting on Hajji Kareem's weight and Engineer Qasim's dyed hair and Achakzai Sahib's black eye and Hajji Hotak's headstrong wife, which, we all knew, was a misstep by Burhan, though we didn't expect Hajji Hotak to respond with, "It's too bad, Burhan, that you couldn't bring your *first* wife to the khatam," an obvious allusion to the rumor that Sheikh Burhan had recently taken a second wife, in Karachi. We all hushed. Burhan towered over our host, but Hotak was built like a barn door. It would have been a good match in its day.

"That's because I've got a handle on my household," Sheikh Burhan replied.

"Which household?" Hajji Hotak said.

"I don't know what you mean."

"The one here," he said, pointing to the ground. "Or over there?"

Sheikh Burhan was burning. He had stepped on his own land mine, and we couldn't have been more delighted. But, on the brink of victory, Hajji Hotak was interrupted by his wife.

"Husband," Bibi Hotak shouted from the kitchen. "Husband, I need you."

Hajji Hotak didn't immediately respond.

"Husband," she shouted again. "Husband, get in here."

"Husband," Sheikh Burhan mimicked with a grin. "Get in there. Your commandant is calling, and, if you don't report soon, you may be shot for desertion."

We all laughed. We couldn't help it.

"Go on, old friend. I'm only joking," Sheikh Burhan said, still grinning, and our defeated host slumped away to the kitchen, where he hissed at his wife about her tone.

Our Sheikh, meanwhile, glided over to the toshaks, slipping in between Hajji Aman and Commandant Sahib. They sat beneath the black-and-white photograph of Hajji Hotak's brother Watak Shaheed and chatted about a plan to restore the women's section of Burhan's mosque, a storage room nestled between the men's prayer hall and the kitchen. Apparently, Sheikh Burhan needed twenty-five thousand to double its size, but, before we could hear more about this suspicious request, the doorbell rang. We looked around. It was eight-twenty-five. None of us were missing. Or so we thought.

Engineer Fahim appeared at the Hotak residence, in an old pin-striped suit he must have worn around Kabul in its heyday, two hours and twenty-five minutes late, but—alhamdulillah—sober.

By then, most of us had given up on Fahim. Decades earlier, when he had first arrived at our gatherings, he'd been such a delightful storyteller that no one had thought to question him about where he had come from or who had invited him until it was far too late to do so, and, despite our suspicions, over time we came to love Fahim so dearly that we took his rapid descent into alcoholism as a personal affront. In fact, he had been more or less banished since he'd shown up mad-drunk to the wedding of Hajji Aman's middle son, Ajmal or Akmal (no one remembered), and was caught pissing in the gas tank of the groom's bright-yellow Mustang. "I'm saving the earth," Fahim had slurred in the parking lot, his cock still in hand, before Ajmal or Akmal beat him bloody. These days, we saw Fahim only at the mosque on Jummah, when he showed up for prayers already tipsy.

"I'm sorry, Hotak," Fahim said from out on the porch. "I shouldn't have come. It's just . . . I was walking, and I saw the lights, and, as I got closer, I heard the laughter, and I . . . I thought of old times, you know? I'm sorry. . . . I couldn't help it. . . . I . . ."

"I'm sorry, too," Hotak said. "You should come inside."

"No. No, there's nothing to forgive. I didn't mean to suggest—Wallah, Hotak—I didn't . . . your family has been good to me."

"Then be good to us. Be our guest."

"Are you sure?" Fahim said, already slipping off his loafers.

"Not at all," our host said, and offered his hand.

In the guest room, Engineer Fahim stood before us, looking brand new. He had taken great care to restore his old suit and trim his gray mustache. He had cut his nails and was wearing a light, flowery perfume. And even those of us who despised Fahim, who refused to forgive his past sins, couldn't deny the triumph of his resurrection. Sheikh Burhan was the first to rise and embrace him. He led Fahim around the room like a shah on his wedding day, and each of us touched the forgotten engineer with genuine awe, half expecting him to dissolve in our arms. Eventually, Burhan squeezed Fahim between himself and Commandant Sahib, who turned to Fahim, at eighty-thirty-five in the evening, and said, "It's been a long time, Engineer Sahib. I sometimes forgot you were alive."

"Me, too," Fahim replied.

"How's that?"

"I don't get out so much anymore."

"I heard you're a regular at the mosque."

"The duas help me cry," Fahim admitted.

"I know what you mean," Commandant Sahib said. "I've been telling Burhan to shorten his speeches for years."

"I don't ever see you, I think," Fahim said. "Do you pray someplace else?"

Commandant Sahib told Fahim that he frequented the Haram Mosque in Elk Grove, which was a lie, of course, since Commandant Sahib hadn't taken part in a communal prayer—not Jummah, not Eid, not even janazas—since King Zahir Shah's death, in 2007. The old soldier had lost faith. A development we continued to ignore because many of us considered Commandant Sahib the unofficial founder of our little community. He had come to California in the seventies and was stationed at Travis Air Force Base during Daoud's coup. With the help of his military contacts, Commandant Sahib settled in Sacramento and figured out how to exploit the asylum system in D.C., helping many of us to enter the country. If anyone had outed the Commandant as a disbeliever (God forbid), we wouldn't have been able to invite him to gatherings anymore, which would have been a great shame for the Commandant, so late in his life, and with so many of our secrets still tucked away in his shrunken head.

"Who gives the khutbahs at Haram now?" Fahim asked.

"That Arab with the goatee," Commandant Sahib said.

LIGHT ME DOWN

Light me down to the long meadow
to where the new snow taps on the fallen snow
with the fingers of the lost tribe.

Who would want us to listen?
Someone does want it:

Mother of snow
smoking your cigarette ration, your dark
lipstick mouthprint hungry

for the frail paper,
long after the war was over.

—Jean Valentine (1934-2020)

"I don't think Imam Kareem speaks at Haram anymore," Fahim said.

"Sure he does," Commandant Sahib said. "He's always gone, that's all, on his tours."

"I think there was a feud between him and the board. It got very messy. He was kicked out."

"I don't pay attention to politics, Fahim," Commandant Sahib said.

"But their new imam has a beard that goes down to his belly. How could you not notice?"

"I couldn't *notice*," Commandant Sahib said, "because I'm a senile old fool, with fucked-up eyes, who forgets his glasses. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"No, I'm sorry, I just—"

"Let's leave it alone, Fahim," Sheikh Burhan said, and he gestured to the dastarkhan laid out in front of them. "Our host has finally decided to feed us."

We stuffed ourselves. We tore through meat with our fingers. We sucked marrow out of bones. We ate how we used to eat in the mountains, in the camps, when we were uncertain of our next meal. We consumed grease and fat, killing ourselves with delectable dishes, oils and sugars, and we needed chai to wash it all down. Swiftly, Hajji Hotak's sons collected our plates and swept up the dastarkhan and distributed thermoses. Once we were sated, Hajji Khushal—as if he could tell that we had no excuse to ignore him—began to call, and one by one each of us silenced our phones. Fahim turned to Burhan and asked what was happening.

"It's only Khushal," Sheikh Burhan said.

"Hajji Khushal?" Fahim said. "I haven't seen him in years."

"Neither have the rest of us. His eldest dumped him in a retirement home. Now he calls at all hours of the day and night, asking for the whereabouts of Hajji Khushal."

"He asks for himself?"

"He's losing his mind," Burhan said.

"It's not just that," Commandant Sahib said. "You have to understand. Our Hajji Khushal wasn't always Hajji Khushal. He stole the name from a cousin who had been granted asylum in the States. Took his spot on the plane, too. The original Khushal, the one left behind, managed to survive the Soviet War but died in an American bombing twenty years later. And *that's* the Khushal our Khushal asks about. The man whose identity he stole. The man who must haunt him now, in his dying days. Can you imagine? What a torment! I think it was Sartre who said that Hell is other people, but I think Hell can be yourself, too."

"You've read Sartre?" Fahim asked.

"Of course I've read Sartre. I attended Lycée Esteqlal. I've been reading Sartre since I was twelve. '*On n'arrête pas Voltaire*,' as de Gaulle once said."

"*J'existe, c'est tout*," Fahim replied.

"Were you at Lycée?"

"Class of '66."

"You must have been there with Massoud."

"I remember Massoud."

"That smug fuck ruined the war. Him and Hekmatyar."

"That's not fair," Engineers Qasim and Tariq said, almost at once.

"Even then," Fahim said, "I remember he was so charismatic. If he hadn't become a rebel, I think he would've been a terrific movie star. It's sad, but I thought it was so ironic—almost poetic—that, in the end, they killed him with a camera."

"You think suicide bombings are poetic?" Engineer Qasim said.

"More than poetic," Engineer Tariq said. "An act of God."

"Aren't all bombings an act of God?" Commandant Sahib said.

"After the thousands he slaughtered in the wars. Women and children. Massoud couldn't have met a more fitting end," Tariq said.

"I didn't mean to suggest that Massoud's death was—" Fahim began to say.

"And who are you to speak on the Amir at all," Qasim shouted. "You're a damned Communist."

"I'm not a Communist," Fahim said.

"You ran with Layeq and Babrak and them."

"That was decades ago. We wrote poetry."

"That's not all you wrote," Qasim said.

Indeed, for a short time, Engineer Fahim had volunteered for the Communist newspaper *Parcham*. He published exactly one article, a two-part critique of the hard-line, top-down approach to Communist revolution, advocating instead for a popular, peasant-led uprising. Fahim's piece kicked off a mini-firestorm in Kabul, pretty much infuriating everyone who read it—the Khalqists, the Parchams, and even the Islamists—because they all assumed that they were the ones being critiqued. A day or so after the article's publication, Fahim was brutally beaten, at Zarnegar Park, by a future President of Afghanistan, Mohammad Najibullah, who broke Fahim's right arm in two places and kicked him so hard in the testicles that his scrotum swelled up and turned purple.

"I read your article," Engineer Qasim said, though that wasn't true. The article had been summarized to him by Hotak, who had had the article summarized to him by his middle son, a Ph.D. student. "Hotak's boy is researching you."

"Is that true?" Fahim asked Hotak.

"No," he said. "Well, yes, partly. It's not just you, though. He's researching that time. The revolution. The wars. Your

article is only a small part of his book."

"Could I speak with him? Your son."

"Now?"

"Yes, if possible," Fahim said. "I don't know when, if ever, I'll be back, and I promise I won't be long. I remember school. I remember the papers. The endless assignments. I remember books so heavy you had to be careful crossing the Kabul River. But, really, I think I might be of use to your boy, if you don't mind."

Relenting, at nine-fifty-five, Hajji Hotak led Fahim up the stairs, leaving the rest of us behind with the argument that Fahim had started.

"Massoud had no idea his men were raping—"

and

"Hekmatyar only sided with Dostum because Massoud sided with—"

and

"If Hekmatyar had let Mojadidi rule as the council had—"

and

"If it weren't for the Taliban's initial alliance with Massoud, Hekmatyar would have—"

and

"No one was going to let Hekmatyar rule. He'd killed—"

and

"An old man, yes, but still—"

and

"And then Hazrat Baz dressed up like an Arab and made his way to Sayyaf's—"

and

"In those days, Hekmatyar had only to imagine a man dead for him to wind up with a bullet in his—"

and

"During a live interview, one of Dostum's soldiers—"

and

"Telepathic assassinations, I swear in the name of—"

and

" 'Ahlan wa sahlan,' Hazrat Baz said to Sayyaf's guards, who let him through—"

and

"But when the three Hezbis defected to Harakat, Hekmatyar had them rounded up and taken to his secret mountain—"

and

"But Hekmatyar didn't realize that the defectors were related to his host, whose men had already surrounded the veranda, and Hekmatyar was finally caught off—"

and

" 'Ahlan wa sahlan,' Hazrat Baz said to Sayyaf himself, who had sprinted all the way from his compound—three kilometres, at least—with his thobe lifted over his thighs the whole—"

and

"The entrance was at the mouth of a cave in the mountains so dark we—"

and

"Fled the country for a few months, took refuge in Turkey, and I think he's back now, promoted to—"

and

"They went from house to house, rounding up the men and the older boys and even the—"

and

"By the light of our torches, we could see endless row after row of cells, and the men in these cells peered up at us, moaning, sobbing, some of them calling out for their mothers, some of them reaching for our legs, pleading for us not to go, not to take the light—"

and

"It's funny because they had all gone to Kabul University at the same time, they had all been fighting in the same schoolyard—"

and

"There must have been hundreds, maybe thousands, of men buried in—"

and

"Not funny but—"

and

"By the river, we—"

And, almost all at once, a chorus of adhans rang out from our pockets, and we quieted down, waiting for each of our phones to go silent before asking Hajji Hotak for a place to pray. We lined up according to seniority and filed out through Hotak's kitchen, slipping past our women in the living room, some of whom were already praying in clusters, four or five at a time. We couldn't say why, exactly, but they seemed so strange to us then. Praying together. Teary-eyed but smiling. Their hands trembling.

In the back yard, Hotak's sons unfurled woollen blankets onto the cracked concrete that Hotak himself had paved two decades earlier. With the house on one side and Hotak's garden on the other, we stood in eight short rows behind the Sheikh, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip. Some of us prayed beneath the cherry trees or in the warm light coming off the living room or on the edges of the concrete, our faces, our fingers, almost touching the mud. Some of us prayed for our dead (shot in dark fields or shattered by mines, limbs torn apart, buried beneath rubble), and some of us prayed for our living (stolen by KhAD or divorce or C.P.S. or the Sacramento P.D.), but those of us in the back, near Hotak's rotting wood fence, were distracted by the Commandant and Fahim, who were now sitting together in the guest room, smoking cigarettes and telling stories. Fahim gestured to the old photograph of Watak Shaheed. Commandant Sahib poured two cups of tea. We tried not to watch them through the guest-room window. Not to pry. But we could hardly focus. Some of us recited suras aloud, into the air or toward the concrete. Some of us fell silent, only pretending to pray, prostrating and lifting and bowing and kneeling along with everyone else but not actually believing in the mute God

who (our mothers would say) speaks in dreams or through starlight, birdsong, mystical visions, honeybee flight patterns, atomic blossoms, righteous jihad, death, stones, mud, maggots, and fire, until, finally, at ten-twenty-three, Sheikh Burhan bid salaam to the angels and turned to give us his dua.

Usually, Burhan would jump right into a dua, improvising as he went along, starting in Mecca, maybe, but concluding in Elk Grove, in the mujahideen camps, or in the holy lands of Jerusalem, crossing mountains, intersections, free-associating, calling upon Hajar or Maryam, denouncing suicide and McDonald's, employing so many allusions and metaphors that attempting to follow his logic was a maddening enterprise. But, on the night of the khatam, Sheikh Burhan could only watch as Engineer Fahim opened the guest-room window, slipped into the back yard, and offered his own dua. Before any of us could stop him, Fahim began to recite Ayatul Kursi so beautifully, with such flawless tajwid, that even Burhan, who had spent years in the madrassa perfecting his Arabic, was silenced; he just lip-synched along with the old drunk, searching, perhaps, for an error, an imperfection. Fahim concluded his dua by asking Allah to have mercy on our living and on our dead, especially our martyrs, whom he listed by name, each and every name, until he got to Watak Shaheed. Then he glanced over at Hajji Hotak and asked if he had anything he wanted to add.

Hajji Hotak sat on a plastic lawn chair that had sunk into the mud of his garden, and, under the light of a nearby street lamp, he looked much older than before. "Two weeks ago," he began, "Watak appeared to me in a dream. We sat together in an apple orchard back home. Snow fell from a black sky, but our trees hadn't died yet. Holding my arm, Watak made fun of my white hair and my belly. He said that time had taken the best of me, and I laughed and replied that we couldn't all stay sixteen forever. He laughed, too. He wore white clothes. Snow fell in his hair and onto his thin mustache. Then, after a little while, he took my hand and clasped his fingers between my own, like we used to do when we were children and we couldn't sleep at night, and we just sat like that, quietly, watching the snow fall, and, when I woke from my dream, in the morning, I could still feel his hand in my hand, and even now, as we speak," he said, showing us his fingers in the falling light of the street lamp, "I can't believe it's not real."

Fahim died three months after the khatam. Late-stage cirrhosis. He had known for the better part of a year. Some of us wondered if he came to the khatam that night just to make sure a few old friends would attend his funeral. So we did. We buried Fahim in the Greater Sacramento Muslim Cemetery, splitting the cost of his tombstone and prayer services. The Commandant offered his own burial plot. "I don't plan to die soon," he said—though he was eighty-nine and riddled with intestinal tumors—and he prayed the janaza salah with us. Afterward, we gathered in the parking lot, contemplating the fields just beyond the graveyard, which belonged to a local real-estate developer, who was practically extorting us for the land. Our cemetery, you see, was filling up. Some of us already had parents, siblings, and even children buried in this dirt. They had travelled a long, long way to get here, and we wanted to stay close.

Fahim died with almost nothing. No savings or land or really any property. All that he had left behind was his pinstriped suit, a few boxes of old books, some damaged VHS tapes, and a five-hundred-page manuscript. A novel, apparently, which he had addressed to Hotak's boy, the Ph.D. student.

Hearing of the novel, we gathered, once again, at Hajji Hotak's, in the guest room of his crumbling home, and, surrounding our host like schoolboys, we listened as he recounted the plot of the book. Fahim's novel told the story of a young poet in Kabul who is swept up in the political machinations of a revolution. After being falsely accused of aligning himself with the minority faction of a leftist political party, our poet is imprisoned and tortured and turned into an informant for the ruling majority faction of that same party. Soon enough, the poet betrays almost all his old friends, sending them to die nightmarish deaths in government dungeons. But, a few months into the revolution, the majority faction is overthrown by the minority faction, and our poet is exiled to East Germany, where he falls in love with an older German pianist well known for her renditions of Schubert. They have two children together and live happily for years, until, one seemingly uneventful evening, our poet's wife and his two children go on a drive to the Elbe and never return. No corpses or wreckage—his entire family vanishes. Our poet begins drinking, gambling, travelling. After the dissolution of East Germany, he roams from country to country and eventually winds up in Sacramento, California, quickly ingratiating himself to a small community of Afghan refugees. He writes poetry and lives in abject poverty. Then, a few years into the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, federal agents approach our poet and offer him hundreds of thousands of dollars to act as an informant. He sells his soul, briefly, but when his prime target, a former mujahid named Hajji Hotak, is injured in a terrible car accident and left with debilitating nerve damage, our poet breaks his contract with the federal agents and falls back into financial ruin. According to Hotak's son, the last few chapters of the book were hastily written, marred by grammatical errors, confusing jumps in time, and long, sentimental monologues. The novel ended on the night of the khatam.

Driving home, we recounted Fahim's novel to our wives, who sat staring out at dark freeways, utterly silent, unmoved, and so we repaid them with silence, sometimes glancing over to see what they were seeing in the abandoned storefronts or on the dead roads, until we reached home and stumbled into our bedrooms, and after we had made love, or failed to make love, we pretended to sleep as our wives quietly slipped out of our beds and crept down the hall or the stairs, and, while we waited for them to return, we kept our eyes closed and ran our hands over the empty space where they had lain, and we listened for their steps, or the chiming of their bracelets, and at some point, while pretending to sleep, we must have accidentally begun dreaming, because, in our dreams, they never returned, and we never got up to find them. ♦

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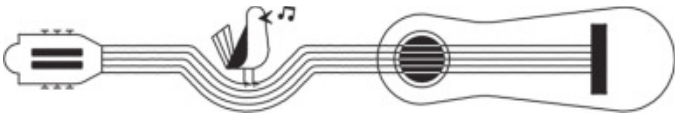
THE CRITICS



POP MUSIC

NORTHERN ATTITUDE

How Noah Kahan went from rural Vermont to the world.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

In recent years, as TikTok has become an increasingly powerful engine for the dissemination of culture, a new sort of pop star has emerged: one who has enormous pull on social media but gets comparatively little acknowledgment from the music press, which remains laser-focussed on a handful of millennial superstars, so much so that the more conspiracy-minded among us have started whispering, "PsyOp." Noah Kahan is one of those artists—everything to some, inscrutable to others, with striking numbers on Spotify and TikTok, and a steady presence on the *Billboard* chart since the release of "Stick Season," his third album, in 2022. Kahan, who was nominated for a Grammy for Best New Artist this year, is the rare figure who seems positioned to leverage viral success into something more like a traditional career. "I knew there was potential for a moment to happen for me. I didn't realize it would happen so quickly and in such a big way," Kahan told me recently. He added, laughing, "I didn't think it would be through viral success. I fucking hated social media. TikTok for me was just, like, What the fuck, dude? What am I gonna do here? I don't get it."

Kahan is from Strafford, Vermont, a town of around a thousand people. When we spoke, he was in the midst of playing a series of sold-out shows in Australia. Kahan often pulls his wavy brown hair into a low bun, and he has an affable, patient demeanor, as though in another life he would have been good at teaching toddlers how to ski, or home-brewing beer. His backing band and most of his gear had been waylaid by bad weather, so he was performing solo, on a rented guitar. The experience was nerve-racking. "I was rooted in place, stomach ache," he said. "The crowd carried me through that moment." Video from the first show, in Melbourne, started whipping around the Internet—twelve thousand rapt fans hollering along to every word. (Other viral stars have not been so fortunate. I remain haunted by a clip of the gifted singer-producer Steve Lacy, whose song "Bad Habit" was a TikTok sensation, trying and failing to get his audience to sing along with anything other than the hook.)

This month, Kahan released "Stick Season (Forever)," the third and final iteration of the album. (A deluxe version, titled "Stick Season (We'll All Be Here Forever)," was released in 2023.) I told Kahan that the subtitles made me think of being young and feeling eternal. "My intention was to introduce this idea that you can never truly leave your home town," he said. "Whether it's physically or mentally, we still live in those places. When I wrote 'Stick Season,' I was home all the time, living through the positive and the negative of being in Vermont. When I released the album, I was touring all the time. I was singing about being stuck at home, but I was at some cool hotel in New York City. . . . 'We'll All Be Here Forever' allows some grace for the person—I guess me, in this situation—who has left." The new version of the album features duets with Post Malone, Kacey Musgraves, Hozier, Gracie Abrams, Sam Fender, Brandi Carlile, Lizzy McAlpine, and Gregory Alan Isakov. "I've definitely seen some fan responses, like, This motherfucker's gonna keep releasing collabs? But I think the collaborations are really cool. I'm just doing what makes me happy."

Kahan is sometimes lumped in with a subgenre of Americana music referred to, retroactively and derisively, as "stomp-clap-hey." If you've heard the Lumineers' "Ho Hey," from 2012, you are familiar with both the sound (acoustic, shouty, urgent) and the general aesthetic (waxed mustaches, bowler hats, suspenders), jubilantly performed by bands with names (Mumford and Sons, Of Monsters and Men) that sound as though they might also be gastropubs. The genre enjoyed considerable commercial success; when Mumford and Sons' second album, "Babel," was released, it was the highest-selling U.S. début of the year. "Ho Hey" has been streamed more than a billion times on Spotify, just a little less than Rihanna's "Diamonds," an enormous hit from the same year. Still, the authenticity shtick eventually grew tiresome, and then sort of repellent. Kahan shares some musical DNA with those acts—furious vocal delivery, occasional banjo—but he is mostly uninterested in appearing as if he recently disembarked from a steamboat. He borrows more from contemporaries such as Taylor Swift (chatty, parasocial confessionalism) and Zach Bryan (wounded and seeking oblivion). Kahan's earliest influences had broad appeal. "When I was really developing as a songwriter, I was listening to Jason Mraz and John Mayer, these guy-with-guitar dudes," he said.

Kahan recently turned twenty-seven. On social media, he is charming and self-effacing about his extraordinary success. "The only thing me and the haters have in common is we're both wondering how I am headlining festivals lmao," he recently posted on X. Kahan

ABOVE: ERRATA CARMONA

"You can never truly leave your home town," Kahan says. "Whether it's physically or mentally, we still live in those places."

ILLUSTRATION BY BILL BRAGG

first started writing music as a kid. He recalled performing a Cat Stevens song at a nursing home with his dad when he was seven or eight—a gig he described as a kind of consolation prize. "That's where they send you when they don't want you to play in the talent show at school," he joked.

He was a listless student. "I was able to get decent grades, B's, but I hated school," he said. "I played soccer, but I was always so fuckin' slow and no one passed to me. So I was, like, I'll just play music. I'll be the music guy. Then I really fell in love with being the music guy." He began posting his songs online; when he was eighteen, Kahan deferred admission to Tulane University and signed a deal with Republic Records. He released a series of singles, which would later be included on "Busyhead" (2019), his début full-length album. On early tours, Kahan sometimes introduced himself as "the Jewish Ed Sheeran"—a good line, but also an apt description of his entire vibe. Kahan's first few releases are lightly catchy indie pop—the sort of thing that might play at a reasonable volume while a dental hygienist scrapes gunk off your molars. In 2018, he performed his single "Hurt Somebody" on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," and a version with Julia Michaels later went gold in the U.S. The song is about the experience of trying to talk yourself out of breaking up with someone—theoretically rich terrain—but the lyrics ("It hurts when you hurt somebody") lack the humor and the specificity that later became Kahan's calling cards. In 2021, Kahan released a second album, "I Was/I Am," which felt more personal. Its plucky single "Godlight" is a tense meditation on how someone can change: "Black heels in the summertime/Dirt road smoking on a Friday night/Honey, now you got a look that I don't recognize," Kahan sings.

But it wasn't until "Stick Season" that Kahan finally found a sound—folksy, drunken, depraved, a little neurotic—that felt singular. He wrote the title track at an Airbnb in Los Angeles while he was in town for a recording session. "I was ordering gross amounts of tacos and eating a bunch of edibles, trying to do the TikTok thing," he said. "If a song didn't get a response right away, I would be so upset and so disappointed. Just such a servant to the applause." The title track initially got little response. "I ate an edible after I finished editing the song, and then, by the time I posted it and I realized it wasn't getting any likes or whatever, I was too high to delete it, so I fell asleep," he said. He woke up the next morning to an avalanche of attention. The song opened something up for Kahan. "It's very clearly about Vermont. It's very clearly about transitions, and feeling stuck, or left behind. Suddenly, all these other songs I'd written came into view in a different way. That's when I felt like I had an album."

Kahan's songs tend to unfold in the strange liminal space between late adolescence and adulthood, but they also nod to the strange liminal space that was 2020 through 2022, when it felt as though the only responsible choice was to stay tethered to one's sofa, mired in a kind of arrested development ("Doc told me to travel, but there's COVID on the planes," Kahan sings on "Stick Season"). His best lyrics are clever, earnest, and suffused with vague yearning—a nudging sense that, as Bruce Springsteen once sang, not without a little despair, "There's something happening somewhere."

"Stick season" is a phrase used in Vermont to describe the rotten stretch after peak autumn foliage and before the first snow. "Fall is beautiful, and then the leaves fall off the trees and it stinks," Kahan said, in 2022. But his New England origins have led to opportunities. He's curated a collection for L. L. Bean that includes a plaid wool shirt and a reversible field coat for dogs; worked with a craft brewery based in Stratford, Connecticut, on a bespoke I.P.A. with a "piney and resinous" flavor profile; and collaborated with Ranger Station, a company that makes hand-poured candles in reusable cocktail glasses. Kahan's candle, which sells for forty-five dollars, is said to evoke "misty woods, crisp pine trees and bittersweet hometown nostalgia."

Sometimes it seems as if Kahan is leaning into the bit. Yet there's an entire canon of nineteenth-century poetry, from Thoreau and Longfellow to Whitman and Dickinson, dedicated to the grim, spartan lonesomeness of late fall and winter in the Northeast. "Forgive my northern attitude," Kahan sings on "Northern Attitude," a song about geographic and emotional desolation. "Oh, I was raised out in the cold." He reiterates the idea on "Homesick," an extremely funny song about the spiritual stagnation of small-town life: "I would leave if only I could find a reason/I'm mean because I grew up in New England." (That couplet always reminds me of certain Ben Affleck memes, in which the actor is pictured clutching Dunkin' Donuts coffee, his face twisted in the existential anguish that comes from trudging over one too many gray snowbanks peppered with cigarette butts. "The weather ain't been bad, if you're into masochistic bullshit," Kahan quips.) In 1921, Wallace Stevens—who was born in Pennsylvania and spent much of his life in Connecticut—published "The Snow Man," a perfect poem about attempting to receive the natural world on its own terms:

> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds
> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Stevens finds a kind of void opened up by the cold. Kahan does, too. On the chorus of the album's title track, a lament for a broken relationship, he sings:

> I love Vermont, but it's the season of the sticks
> And I saw your mom, she forgot that I existed
> And it's half my fault, but I just like to play the victim
> I'll drink alcohol 'til my friends come home for Christmas

Kahan sings about drinking a lot—more specifically, about the pursuit of a kind of palliative self-obliteration. (He is also a vocal advocate for mental-health care, and has started a foundation, the Busyhead Project, to help fund it.) On "Dial Drunk," he sings about trying to chug his way out of heartbreak and ending up hunched over in the back seat of a police cruiser:

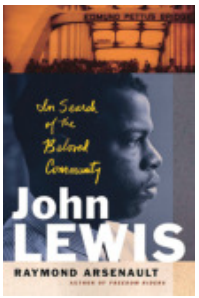
> I ain't proud of all the punches that I've thrown
> In the name of someone I no longer know
> For the shame of being young, drunk, and alone
> Traffic lights and a transmitter radio
> I don't like that when they threw me in the car
> I gave your name as my emergency phone call
> Honey, it rang and rang, even the cops thought you were wrong for hangin' up
> I dial drunk. I'll die a drunk. I'll die for you

I asked Kahan if the track was autobiographical—had he ever been shoved, face first, into the back seat of a cop car? "Yeah, no, I have not," he said, laughing. "I just love characters so much. There is a lot of myself in every song. I would never yell at the police or throw a punch at somebody, but I've been in situations where I'm desperate to fix something that can't be fixed. I like to not be limited by my own life experience, which in the past year and a half has not been very relatable and has been kind of weird." He did admit that drugs and booze, which appear often in his songs, have at times been useful for dampening his anxiety and boredom. "I've used drugs and alcohol to help just block some of that noise out," Kahan said. "It's something that I am working on in therapy all the time."

Kahan doesn't drink while on tour, and he has a hard time writing songs, which is the other thing that helps him navigate difficult moments. "Writing has always been a way for me to figure out what I'm feeling," he said. "Now I distract myself with social media, fall into a cycle, and feel worse afterwards. I don't know—give me advice!" He added, "It's hard to describe how lonely it is to have everybody think that you're succeeding, and to feel that you're barely managing. There are lots of beautiful moments, and I'm grateful for all of those. I'm so fuckin' lucky and privileged to be in this position. But I still feel like every other human being: stress, anxiety. Recently, I've felt more of that than I've wanted to."

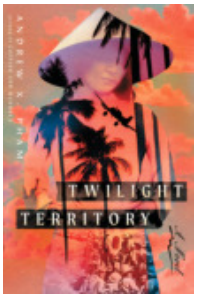
This past December, Kahan performed "Stick Season" and "Dial Drunk" on "Saturday Night Live." In an era in which pop stars are relying on visual spectacle, I found his performance exuberant, unfussy, and sincere. The stage was decorated with large sticks, a choice so literal I couldn't help chuckling. A few days before the performance, Kahan told a reporter from the *Times* that he was so exhausted that having to drive from Vermont to New York City for the taping filled him with dread. Yet onstage he seemed seized by gratitude. During the final chorus of "Dial Drunk," he announced, "I'll die for you, 'S.N.L.'! Or at least seriously injure myself!," before bouncing around the stage with his band. In that moment, he looked happy, warm, free. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED



John Lewis, *by Raymond Arsenault (Yale)*. This sweeping biography represents the first effort at a comprehensive account of the life of the civil-rights icon John Lewis. Lewis's "almost surreal trajectory" begins with his childhood in a "static rural society seemingly impervious to change." Arsenault frames what followed in terms of Lewis's attempt to cultivate the spirit of "Beloved Community"—a term, coined by the theologian Josiah Royce, for a community "based on love." As a boy, Lewis disapproved of the vengeful sermons at his home-town church; as a youthful protest leader, he adhered to nonviolence, even while being assaulted by bigots; in Congress, he rose above a culture of self-promotion and petty rivalries. Lewis, in Arsenault's account, was unfailingly modest: watching a documentary about his life, he was "embarrassed by its hagiographical portrayal."

Alphabetical Diaries, *by Sheila Heti (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. This unconventional text comprises diary-entry excerpts that are arranged according to the alphabetical order of their first letters. The sections derive their meaning not from chronology but from unexpected juxtapositions: "Dream of me yelling at my mother, *nothing I did was ever good enough for you!* Dresden. Drinking a lot." The text is clotted with provocative rhetorical questions: "Why do I look for symbols? Why do women go mad? Why does one bra clasp in the front and the other in the back?" Rich with intimacies and disclosures, these fragments show an artist searching for the right way to arrange her life.



Twilight Territory, *by Andrew X. Pham (Norton)*. Set during the Japanese occupation of Indochina and its bloody aftermath, this novel of war is nimbly embroidered with a marriage story. In 1942, a Japanese major who is posted to the fishing town of Phan Thiet falls for a Viet shopkeeper when he witnesses her excoriating a corrupt official. The shopkeeper, despite her wariness of being viewed as a sympathizer, accedes to a courtship with the major, recognizing their shared "language of loss and loneliness," and the two eventually marry. Soon, the major's involvement with the resistance imperils his family, but his wife remains resolute, having long understood fate to be a force as pitiless as war: "Destiny was imprinted deeply. She saw it the way a river sensed the distant sea."

To the Letter, *by Tomasz Różycki, translated from the Polish by Mira Rosenthal (Archipelago)*. In this philosophical collection that explores doubt—regarding language, God, and the prospect of repeating history—many poems address an unreachable "you" who could be a lover, a deity, or a ghost of someone long dead. Rosenthal's translation draws out these poems' shades of melancholy and whimsy, along with the slant and irregular rhymes that contribute to their uncanny humor. Różycki's verse teems with sensuous, imaginatively rendered details: "that half-drunk cup of tea, the mirror/filled up with want, the strand of hair curling toward/the drain like the Silk Road through the Karakum/known as Tartary, the wall that defends the void."

BOOKS

DISPOSSESSED

In Tommy Orange's "Wandering Stars," history and its horrors are heritable.

BY PARUL SEHGAL

What happened in the apple orchard that so frightened the children? Something had been half-glimpsed or heard, something in the night. Rumors sparked but didn't catch. The children kept their distance, and stayed close to the nearby school. Years passed. The school was shut down. The buildings stood. The orchard grew wild. And, one day, a tourist out walking in the area discovered a piece of bone—a child's rib.

In 2021, the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation began an investigation. Ground-penetrating radar detected what seemed to be evidence of some two hundred graves, presumably belonging to Native American children, in the land surrounding the Kamloops Indian Residential School, in British Columbia. A few weeks later, Cowessess First Nation reported signs of seven hundred and fifty-one graves around the Marieval Indian Residential School, in southern Saskatchewan. As the earth was probed, so were the wounds that were the legacy of residential schools, a cornerstone of colonial policy toward Native Americans across the continent for more than a century.

Hundreds of boarding schools operated in the United States and Canada with the aim of severing children's spiritual and cultural ties and accelerating their assimilation. "Kill the Indian to save the man" was the guiding principle of the American Army captain Richard Pratt, who established the nation's first such institution, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, at an old Army barracks in Pennsylvania. Children were forcibly removed from their communities, given new names, and made to convert to Christianity. (Many of the schools were run by the Catholic Church.) Native languages and spiritual practices were forbidden, and punishments could be brutal. St. Anne's school, which operated until 1976, in Fort Albany First Nation, in Ontario, became notorious for shocking students in a homemade electric chair. Other schools used whips and cattle prods. Still others subjected the children to experiments, deliberately withholding food and medical care. In 2022, the U.S. Department of the Interior released an investigative report on the federal Indian boarding schools, which found "rampant physical, sexual, and emotional abuse." Illness and malnourishment were widespread. Thousands of children, perhaps tens of thousands, disappeared. At the Carlisle Indian School, which operated for four decades, more than two hundred children died, some barely surviving their first month. The last North American residential school closed in 1998.

"Wandering Stars," the new novel by Tommy Orange, an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, spans more than a century of Indigenous history, and holds at its center the Carlisle school and its long aftershocks in the lives of a survivor and his descendants. The story follows Orange's acclaimed 2018 début, "There There," and is part of a rush of recent work examining residential schools, spurred by the discoveries in the orchard. These include the documentary "Sugarcane," which just received a directing award at Sundance; the latest season of the FX television show "Reservation Dogs"; and the podcast "Stolen: Surviving St. Michael's," which won a Pulitzer Prize last year. They join a deep and varied body of literature on the residential schools: memoirs, poetry, plays, young-adult fiction. If such accounts sought to preserve

Residential schools were a cornerstone of colonial policy toward Native Americans.

ILLUSTRATION BY SALLY DENG

the stories of survivors and shatter the silences within families and within society, these new projects prickle with a nervy energy about what it means to handle this material at all, to push one's fingers into the wounds. Are there silences worth protecting? What kinds of care are possible for the living and for the dead? Can the stories be told without turning them into entertainment—easily consumed, easily forgotten? What sort of action does a story make possible; what sort of healing?

Connie Walker, a Cree journalist and host of the "Stolen" podcast, knew that generations of her family had attended the schools, but it was only after the news broke about the graves at the Kamloops school that the reticence of family and friends thawed and they would sit for interviews. And, as we hear on the podcast, there was a caveat. Over coffee, a schoolmate of her father's warns her, "This stuff that I've shared with you, that's our knowledge. That's ours. What we've learned. And we use that in a respectful way. This is what I call '*Nehiyaw*.' This is what we have learned. We don't profiteer from it. We take care of it, where we have to pass it down. But use this in a good way. Don't play with this."

Second novels can be gawky creatures, sulky and strained as they try to slink out of the shadows of their predecessors. Will the second novel follow the formula, or repudiate it and chance something new? Critics seem to lie lazily in wait, ready to punish either choice. *More of the same, a pity. A misjudged departure, alas.*

"Wandering Stars," calmly and cannily, has it both ways. Orange brings back the characters from the first book, where narration duties rotated among a cast of voluble and charming junkies, Internet and food addicts, criminals and aspiring criminals, deadbeat dads, dying mothers. "There's been a lot of reservation literature written," Orange said when his first novel came out. "I wanted to have my characters struggle in the way that I struggled, and the way that I see other Native people struggle, with identity and with authenticity." His characters in "There There" are resolutely contemporary. They live in cities, mostly Oakland—"We know the sound of the freeway better than we do rivers, the howl of distant trains better than wolf howls"—and their connections to lineage and community are often frayed. Many feel insufficiently Indigenous. Thomas Frank, whose mother, like Orange's, is white, reflects, "You're from a people who took and took and took and took. And from a people taken. You were both and neither." To be Native American is less an identity to be claimed and proclaimed than to be tried on, furtively, after much Internet research.

In "There There," Orange keeps his characters distinct and recognizable, but many of them share a particular gesture. Catch them unawares and you will find them looking in a mirror or just at the darkened screen of a computer. They like to hold their own gaze, if no one else's. Many of them share the sentiments of another character, Tony Loneman: "Maybe I'm'a do something one day, and everybody's gonna know about me. Maybe that's when I'll come to life. Maybe that's when they'll finally be able to look at me, because they'll have to." It's the desire that fuels the novel, which works doggedly to maintain the reader's attention with its pinwheeling narration; short, swift chapters; a gun produced toward the start of the book that goes off at the end; and that sickening undertow of dread. The reader can no more escape the book than one of its characters. "I wanted to create a fast-moving vehicle to drive somebody to some brutal truth," Orange explained in an interview.

But it is a different tempo, a different ambition—almost a different writer—we encounter in "Wandering Stars." Where "There There" shoots forward with a linear trajectory, the new novel maunders and meanders. Repetition is its organizing principle—the repetition of pain, addiction, injury. A linear story, it seems to argue, would be a lie. The narrative spirals around and envelops the previous book. "There There" ends with an attempted robbery leading to a shooting at a powwow, and one of the central characters, Orvil Red Feather, a high-school student, is shot and badly wounded. "Wandering Stars" casts back into the past, into the lineage of his family. The book begins with the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre, the Army's mass slaughter and mutilation of the Cheyenne and Arapaho people in Colorado Territory. A teen-ager, Jude Star, narrowly survives and is imprisoned. His son, Charles, is sent to the Carlisle school. We do not see what he suffers; he shares only the ghost of a memory, of being grabbed by the back of his neck so hard that his legs give out and he falls to the bathroom floor. He discovers laudanum—it is like spooning sunshine into his mouth. When the action picks up in the present, in the wake of the shooting, we see his descendant Orvil recovering from his wound and falling into the same thrall, finding his way to opiates. Orange is as good as Denis Johnson in describing addiction's passage into joyless duty. But it's not merely addiction that connects these men, these generations—so many are drawn to ritual (newly invented or otherwise), storytelling, music-making. "The goal for me and my band-mates was always the same," Orvil says. "To try and make musical loops that wouldn't sound or feel like loops because of the way they were built, that's the way out of a loop. Every day is a loop. Life tries the same as we try with music. Every day is the sun rising, and the sun going down, and the sleep we must sleep. I even like sleep and dreaming now. Every day is life convincing us it's not a loop. Addiction is that way too."

Loops are self-enclosing. The reader can see what the characters cannot—what forced migration and residential schools have prevented them from seeing and sharing. The reader can see how the addictions and terrors, as well as the capacity for pleasure and endurance, echo across the Red Feather family. The characters, cordoned off, capable only of confusing and disappointing one another, sometimes sense that profound sources of knowledge and connection have been severed. "Everything that happens to a tribe happens to everyone in the tribe," Opal, the matriarch of the family, recalls her mother telling her. "But then she said now that we're so spread out, lost to each other, it's not the same, except that it's the same in

our families, everything that happens to you once you make a family, it happens to all of you, because of love, and so love was a kind of curse."

With this expansive canvas to fill, Orange can seem perpetually out of time and out of breath. A few key characters are quick smudges, scarcely more than their signifiers—addict, nonbinary, grandmother—when, in his previous book, each character felt like a world. They sound alike, prone to parroting self-help homilies. Orange resorts to cliffhangers to stitch sections together. ("He'd never stopped worrying about Lony. Everything seemed fine. Until it wasn't.") And he works his motifs into tatters—holes, spiders, flying, and, above all, stars (even the bullet shards in Orvil's body are star-shaped and prone to wandering). The book appears to suffer from the same condition as its characters; it cannot see itself, cannot see that it need not hammer home every theme every time, that it speeds where it should saunter, tarries where we need to move. And yet it expands and expands—why not throw in a subplot about a suburban pill mill?—with such exuberance that even at its most sprawling and diffuse, I wondered: Is this novel flailing or dancing?

Orange once spoke of his writing process as a practice of building portals for himself, small doors to help him find his way back into difficult sections in a draft. What if this billowy book is intended to open a series of small doors, but for the reader? It's a shelf of books collapsed into one: for the price of a novel, here is a recovery manual; an account of trauma therapy; a guide to writing, with lists of recommended reading; a chronicle of American history that carries us from the Sand Creek Massacre to the Native American occupation of Alcatraz. Each topic is a door for the reader, and Orange insures that there will be something behind each door, something to keep. Everything the characters cannot share with one another is bound together here: the flailing and the dancing, the sorrow and the survival strategies, the sweet and the sour—like the blackberries one of their ancestors, Little Bird Woman, craves during her pregnancy. She talks, in a drowsy way, to her unborn child: "I like them tart, with that little bit of red still at their tops, or if they're just a little hard and not so soft they come off when you pull at them and leave your fingers stained. The sweet and the sour together at once has been tasting better ever since you got big in me, so it must be you doing that."

"Wandering Stars" talks to the future, too; it is a book about Orvil and his younger brother, Lony, and a story made for them. "Yes it would be nice if the rest of the country understood that not all of us have our culture or language intact directly because of what happened to our people," their grandmother says. "How we were systematically wiped out from the outside in and then the inside out, and consistently dehumanized and misrepresented in the media and in educational institutions, but we needed to understand it for ourselves. The extent we made it through."

In July, 2021, shortly after the discoveries in the apple orchard, the T'exelcemc people of Williams Lake First Nation, in British Columbia, began conducting their own investigation into unmarked graves at St. Joseph's Mission, a former residential school. The directors of "Sugarcane," Julian Brave NoiseCat and Emily Kassie, followed the months-long process in their documentary.

It is a personal story for NoiseCat, a member of the Canim Lake Band Tsq'escen' of the Secwépemc Nation. His family had attended St. Joseph's Mission, and his father had been found abandoned there as an infant. Like many of Orange's characters, NoiseCat grew up in Oakland, and the story that emerges is one of loops of private pain intersecting, the repetitions revealed. "You don't fully recognize the thing that we share. Your story is someone who is abandoned but also someone who abandoned," NoiseCat tells his father. As in the world of "Wandering Stars," the sweet and the sour mingle. Father and son are on a quest to get to the bottom of almost unbearable truths, but their travels often have the warmth and goofiness of a buddy comedy.

What is most striking, however, is what "Sugarcane" does not do and will not show. It is a particular refusal shared, in some ways, by "Wandering Stars," "Reservation Dogs," and "Stolen." The most anguished conversations—between NoiseCat's father and his father's mother, say—are kept off camera. In the most recent season of "Reservation Dogs," which depicts the residential schools, the torture and death of young children is alluded to but never shown.

There is a widespread expectation that beneath silence pulses a story waiting to be told. Suffering must be spoken, we are urged. Confession expiates. It has to be coaxed out, in its anguished detail, and held in the light. But in these works, where we anticipate testimony, we receive ceremony instead. The survivors in "Sugarcane" share the outlines of their experience, and the film cuts to scenes of men praying. After difficult revelations, the survivors are brushed with feathers. It's the inversion of what such depictions teach us to expect. Instead of a story extracted, secrets revealed, a face in close-up, we see men going into the sweat lodge, where the camera cannot follow. We see the subjects being held, and covered, the traditional ritual for cohesion and healing restored.

The characters in "Wandering Stars" have a ravenous hunger for ritual—Lony Red Feather invents his own, out of a need and a despair he doesn't fully understand, cutting himself and burying his blood in the earth. He is trying, he explains, to forge a connection to his tribal nation, the Cheyenne, the "cut people," as they were once known. He is not shedding his pain but attempting to move with it, make something with it. In the opening montage of "Sugarcane," we meet the survivors, and each of them is doing the same. NoiseCat's father is carving wood; a former T'exelcemc chief, Rick Gilbert, plays his violin, lost, like Orvil, in loops of sound. "There was unspeakable pain and loss all about us wherever we went," Jude Star recalls early in Orange's novel. "But with the drum between us, and the singing, there was made something new. We pounded, and sang, and out came this brutal kind of beauty lifting everything up in song." ♦

BOOKS

FOUR YEARS LATER

What we can't learn from 2020.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

Which were the pivotal years of the past century? An argument could be made for 1929, when the worldwide financial crash ushered in the crisis that led to the rise of Nazism (and of the New Deal) and, eventually, to the Second World War; for 1945, when the United States emerged from that war uniquely victorious—having, like Hercules, strangled two serpents in its cradle, as Updike thought—and in possession of the most lethal weapon the world had ever known; for 1968, marked by a series of assassinations and domestic unrest that announced the beginning of the end of the American bulwark empire but also, through the awakening to liberation and the soft power of the European left, of the Russian one. Other years raise their hands eagerly and ask for admittance: 1979, with the rise of Margaret Thatcher and Ayatollah Khomeini and the war in Afghanistan; 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall; 2001, with its terrorism and counterterrorism. But 2020, the year when a virus came out of China and shut down the world, gets in by acclamation.

Writing the history of an event that happened generations ago is difficult enough. (The 1968 movements in Paris and elsewhere seemed leftist at the time but actually marked the break of young radicals with the Communist Party.) Writing about an episode that happened five minutes ago is hard in another way. Who knows what counts and what doesn't? Yet 2020 already seems historic—how remote so many of its rituals now feel, from the Lysol scrubbing of innocent groceries to the six-feet rule of social distancing. Andrew Cuomo and Joe Exotic, both superstars of the first pandemic months, have been banished from attention. We speculated about how New York City would emerge from the pandemic: traumatized or merry or newly chastened and egalitarian? Now the city is back, and little seems changed from the way things were when normal life stopped in mid-March of 2020.

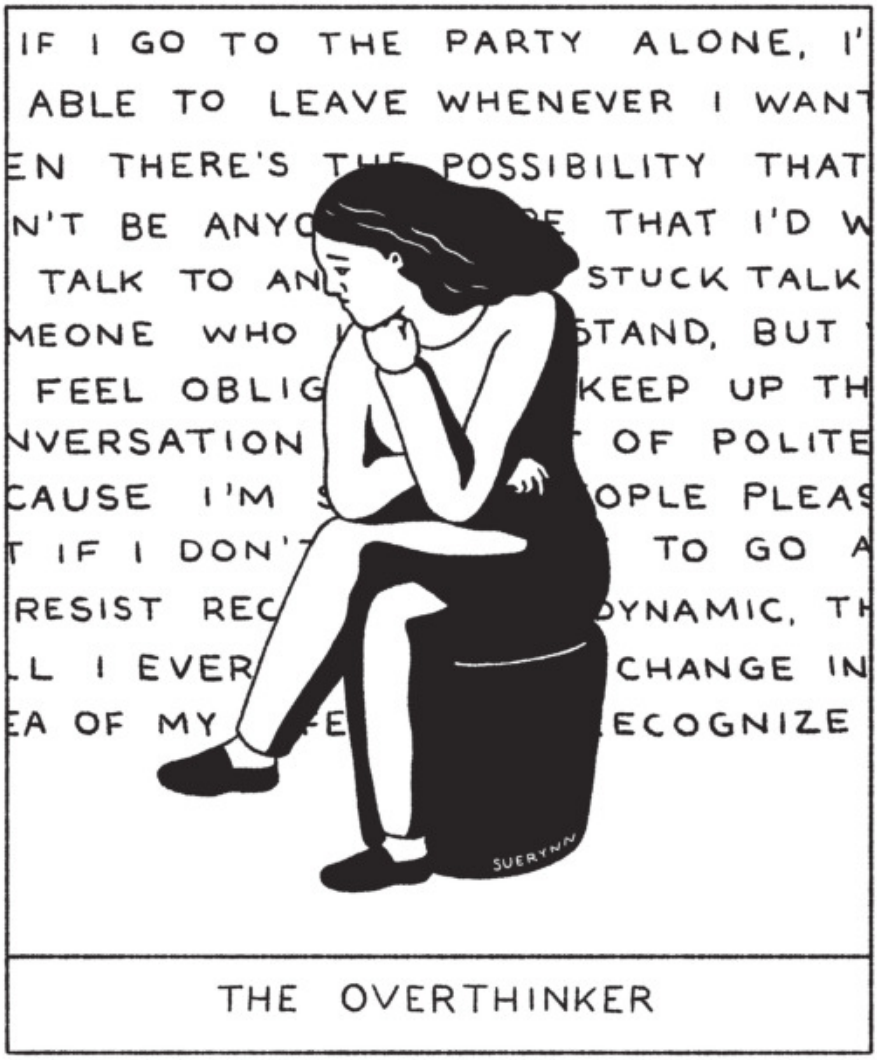
The restaurants—can it really be the case that for several months they were shuttered by edict?—are packed tight, the subways tighter, and almost no one wears a mask in either place, not even those of us who swore to keep wearing one in the future, though the virus continues to mutate and spread. The political trajectory of the country appears to be set on the same catastrophic path it was on before the pandemic. One can look up in the evening and see more darkened office buildings, where once sweet monitors shed their aquarium glow, but on the New York streets the last remnants of the pandemic are the ingeniously improvised sidewalk-dining sheds. Nobody knows how much longer they will last.

What did it all mean? There are lots of takes on what happened, many of them plausible even as they contradict one another. A non-crazy case gets made that the period was just as epoch-changing as it seemed: a million people died of the plague in America; schoolkids were deprived of instruction and left behind in ways that may be impossible to remedy. The paranoia that was already rampant in the social-media age intensified, advancing the corrosion of institutional trust. Another non-crazy case gets made that much of the damage was self-inflicted: the schools should never have been closed; the elaborate pantomime of masking may have saved some lives but may not have; and, amid high-handed edicts, the price we paid in the erosion of social trust was higher than it needed to be.

At the same time, a non-crazy case can be made that the restrictions and restraints did not go far enough and were abandoned too soon, so that now, with the pandemic still rampant—very few

Eric Klinenberg's "2020" is an engrossing mixture of the closeup and the systemic.

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN WISEMAN



THE OVERTHINKER

families have not been through at least two or three cases—we have simply decided to ignore the bug, even as it refuses to ignore us. The cases are less lethal, but significant numbers of people suffer from long COVID—with ongoing uncertainty about whether this is a thing, or several things, or a combination of things and non-things. Many immune-suppressed people argue that we are indulging, in the name of exhaustion, a collective callousness to the welfare of others, particularly the most vulnerable.

The last pandemic to strike the world with such force was the Spanish flu, which started in 1918, primarily afflicting not the old but the young. Tens of millions around the planet died in what the editor of the new Oxford University Press collection "Pandemic Re-Awakenings" says "may have been the most lethal catastrophe in human history." Many who died were makers of modern consciousness—Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele in Austria, Max Weber in Germany, Guillaume Apollinaire in France. (Joe Hall, a Montreal Canadiens defenseman and Hall of Famer who died during the 1919 Stanley Cup Finals, causing it to be cancelled for the only time in its history, was perhaps not a maker of modern consciousness, but he was a maker of modern hockey.) In the new anthology, a series of historians offer focussed views on what happened then, but the fundamental question they pose is about the oddity of our amnesia: Given the scale of what occurred, why is there so little collective memory of it?

The answer is, in part, that the Spanish-flu pandemic was so braided together with the end of the First World War, which accelerated its spread (most brutally on troopships headed home), that one calamity was buried under another, more photogenic one. The culture of memory of the Great War and its fallen soldiers, which for a time dominated so many public squares and public buildings, drowned out the cries of those who died, equally horribly, from the influenza. We have room for only one story at a time, the historians argue, and in a competition for memorial space—at times a literal one—a military conflict among nations takes political priority over a medical conflict between germs and humanity. An idea of heroism sticks, however grotesquely, to the story of war as it does not stick to the story of infection.

One sees this in Ernest Hemingway's First World War novel, "A Farewell to Arms," the tale of a wounded soldier, Frederic, and his love for a nurse, Catherine. Though mentioned in passing in the Oxford anthology, the actual story of Hemingway's intertwining of war and influenza is complicated and revealing. Having raced to Europe as an ambulance driver, he got word in the mail that his family back home, outside Chicago, had been hit hard by the flu. (It had taken hold at a nearby Navy training station, on Lake Michigan.) His favorite sister, who had fallen ill, wrote to him poignantly, "Dad just called me in his office and looked at my throat and said I had the flu. Oh, bird. My head is beginning to ache, so I think I better go to bed. So good night but tell all the Austrians and Germans you can that I would like to get a good chance at them and see what they would look like when I got through."

As it happened, the real-life model for Catherine, Agnes von Kurowsky, wasn't wrested away from Hemingway by a fatal pregnancy; she was simply reposted to a hospital for men suffering from the flu. (She also found another fellow.) Eliding this truth, Hemingway remade this story of the entanglement of epidemic and vocation into a simpler and more romantic story of war and love—an easier tale to grasp. (He wrote a candid short story inspired by von Kurowsky, in which the soldier, at one moment, refuses to kiss the nurse for fear that she might infect him, but it was never published in his lifetime.)

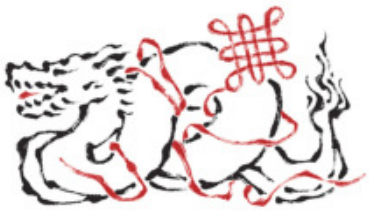
The same process that made all the monuments about the fighting made all the books and poems about the fight-

ing, too. Hemingway did write at length about the flu, dwelling on its ignominy: "The only natural death I've ever seen, outside of loss of blood, which isn't bad, was death from Spanish influenza. In this you drown in mucus, choking, and how you know the patient's dead is: at the end he shits the bed full." In "A Farewell to Arms," Frederic goes back to the war, and the nurse gives him a St. Anthony medal to keep. In real life, Hemingway gave the nurse a St. Anthony medal as she went off bravely to help the influenza patients. Through such details do writers revenge themselves on life. Once again, in literature as in public memorials, there is a figure-ground reversal between war and contagion.

It is perhaps a larger truth that epidemics, being an insult to human agency, are always removed to the background as quickly as we can find a figure to put in front of them. Something similar is happening with the history of the COVID pandemic, whose literature typically makes the medical story secondary to some other story, one with a plainer moral point. Like Hemingway with the nurse, we seek to make what happened less about pathogens and infection and more about passions and infatuation—in our case, often, political passions and party infatuations. Right-wingers were quick to decry the medical establishment for stepping away from its own public-health strictures when the George Floyd marches happened. (The protests took place out-of-doors, which provided at least a medical fig leaf for the rearrangement.) Still, such exchanges happened in all directions—as with the manic libertarian rhetoric that accompanied the resistance to vaccination. We search for some significant figure to place against the motivelessly malignant ground.

And how can we not look for larger social meanings? What if the pandemic, rather than knocking us all sideways and leaving us briefly unrecognizable to ourselves, showed us who we really are? In Eric Klinenberg's excellent "2020: One City, Seven People, and the Year Everything Changed" (Knopf), we are given both micro-incident—closely reported scenes from the lives of representative New Yorkers struggling through the plague year—and macro-comment: cross-cultural, overarching chapters assess broader social forces. We meet, among others, an elementary-school principal and a Staten Island bar owner who exemplify the local experience of the pandemic; we're also told of the history, complicated medical evaluation, and cultural consequences of such things as social distancing and masking.

The book is broad in scope, within certain limits; Manhattan north of Chinatown is left unwitnessed. (As the liberal-democratic coalition has become increasingly weighted with highly educated voters, it has become reluctant to make too much of their lives in its chroniclings, perhaps wary of the fact that it is the educated élite who control the chronicle.) Still, we meet many people who make convincing case studies because of the very contradictions of their experience. Sophia Zayas, a community organizer in the Bronx who worked "like a soldier on the front lines," was nonetheless resistant to getting vaccinated, a decision that caused her, and her family, considerable suffering when both she and her grandmother contracted COVID. Klinenberg sorts through her surprising mix of motives with a delicate feeling for the way that community folk wisdom—can the vaccines be trusted?—clashed with her trained public-service sensibility. Throughout, Klinenberg's mixture of closeup witness and broad-view sociology is engrossing, and reminds this reader of the late Howard S. Becker's insistence that the best sociology is always, in the first instance, wide-angle reporting. As we flow effortlessly from big picture to



small, we learn from both. To be sure, Klinenberg takes a platoon-in-a-forties-movie approach to casting: we feel that we are given one of every New York type, and that all can be redeemed. The Staten Island bar owner, who insisted on reopening his place early despite the rules against doing so and thereby became a kind of Trumpite champion to local libertarians, is treated sympathetically, as a confused working-class hero betrayed by unfeeling élites whose balky rules hindered his enterprise. Yet even if the interdiction on restaurants was, in retrospect, excessive, no one could have known that then. Part of being a good citizen is accepting restrictions on our own freedom for the sake of strangers. We do things like obey speed limits and put on seat belts, even if we are alone, because we recognize that these are rules that benefit everyone.

Klinenberg's own figure on the pandemic ground is that America's exceptionally poor handling of the crisis exposed the country's structural selfishness: our political culture and institutional habits tell people that they're on their own. Other countries, he writes, "experienced a spike in generalized anxiety when the pandemic started. Their lockdowns were extensive. Their social gatherings were restricted. Their borders were sealed. Their offices were closed. Yet no other society experienced a record increase in homicides. None saw a surge in fatal car accidents. And of course, none had skyrocketing gun sales, either."

And so, he tells us elsewhere, "we need a social autopsy . . . to identify the underlying conditions and acute shocks that shaped these patterns." The pandemic exposed the geological faults in American society, which now threaten to split the earth and plunge us inside.

Anyone who is sympathetic to Klinenberg's concerns—who recognizes how increased crime disfigures politics, or who hates the gun culture that disfigures American life—is bound, at first, to nod at these injunctions. And, indeed, in 2020, many of us were inclined to see societies with greater degrees of social trust—one had to look no farther than the northern border—as superior models in their handling of the pandemic. Even the conservative writer David Frum wrote admiringly about the efficiency and diligence with which the authorities of his homeland—he was born in Toronto—tracked contacts and monitored risks in Canada, in contrast with the anarchic American pattern.

And yet, over the course of 2020, Quebec, which took notably stringent measures, ended up with roughly the same cumulative mortality rate as Florida, Georgia, or Michigan. Although over-all

Canadian mortality was meaningfully lower than our own, the social history of unhappy lockdowns and lockdown resistance was similar—the path of the pandemic was not recorded in medical data alone. A truckers' convoy in Ottawa brought anti-vaccine hysteria to the usually milder Canadian political climate. Fox News may have contributed, from the south, but there was no ducking the same spiral of pandemic-fuelled delusion.

Indeed, to survey the planet through the pandemic years is to see how societies with fundamentally different ways of ordering their citizens' lives could end up with comparable consequences. Britain, with its creaking but deeply lodged National Health Service, had case rates and death rates similar to those of the U.S., with our laissez-faire entrepreneurial medical system; it also shared the same fury about lockdowns—and saw the same political crises born of the seeming hypocrisy of the overseeing health authorities. The outrage over lockdowns on the part of conservative Britain parallels the outrage over mask mandates in red-state America. Sweden, an improbable libertarian outpost given its social-democratic history, was the least restrictive country in Western Europe. But the rate of all-cause excess mortality does not suggest that Sweden fared worse than its neighbors. About the only indicator on the global dial that clearly shows a better outcome is crudely geographic: it helped to be an island, like New Zealand or Singapore. For most of the world, the virus went its way, mutating cleverly, with the weird mimic intelligence of microorganisms. And so virtue regularly went unrewarded; a *Lancet* study from last year found that COVID death rates in Florida, adjusted for age, compared favorably to those of California. The broader American sickness that Klinenberg rightly deplores—shooting deaths, traffic deaths, violence generally—was entrenched before the specific sickness of COVID arose, and was only marginally slowed or accelerated by it. If anything, the pandemic seemed to act as a brake on populist politics, helping to end both the Trump and the Boris Johnson governments. The pathogen, finally, is an agent without agency—a bug trying to make more bugs, heedless of motives or morals.

"Oh, yeah? If you love apple juice so much, why don't you marry it, divorce it twelve years later, and then run into it at parties and tell it it's looking well?"

A final non-crazy case can be made that human existence is inherently crazy—that is, chaotic and not easily explicable by a single rule. A pandemic that affects billions of people will have billions of specific effects, and they will be grouped into various bunches; even a marginal phenomenon will involve an enormous number of people. It's in the midst of such numbers that we turn to fiction and poetry, for their specification of experience. What makes Camus's "The Plague" so memorable—and what made it so popular during the pandemic, despite the fact that it was an allegory of the German Occupation of France—is that in his plague people are so particular. It is a seductive mistake to say that the pandemic X-rays their souls. What happens in "The Plague" mostly happens through happenstance: strong people die, weak people cope, the average become exceptional.

In the pursuit of that kind of pandemic particularization, we now have "Fourteen Days" (Harper), a round-robin novel written by many illustrious hands—including Dave Eggers, John Grisham, Erica Jong, Celeste Ng, Ishmael Reed, and Meg Wolitzer—all left cozily anonymous in the linked storytelling. (You must turn to the back to see who did what.) With a wink at Boccaccio's Florentine narrators, filling their time with stories as a plague rages, these modern storytellers do their thing on the roof of a somewhat improbably rundown building on the Lower East Side, where they meet by evening to share tales and memories.

Each storyteller is identified by a single signifier—Eurovision, the Lady with the Rings—and the stories that the speakers unwind (in a way properly reminiscent of the Decameron itself) leap wildly off topic, with the morals of their tales and the pandemic itself almost invisible. An apron sewn in a suburban home-economics class becomes the subject of one narrative. Another storyteller

recalls an art appraiser's trip to the country and a scarring revelation about the wealthy collectors he is visiting: they keep the lid of their dead son's coffin visible as a memento of their pain. ("At every meal it had been there, hidden, present. It was the only object in the house that was truly theirs.") A comedian with dated tastes and old-fashioned sex jokes suddenly appears, talks about his act, then vanishes. The others wonder whether he has jumped off the roof. But nobody is eager to go down to the street to see.

The evasion of the central subject, the turn to subtext over text, the backward blessing of being "off the news"—all this rings true to the time. Symbolic experience overlays all the other kinds. At one point in Klinenberg's book, we get a chapter, written with cautious delicacy, about the mask wars, making the point that, although the medical value of masking is still undecided, the practice quickly devolved into a battle of symbols: wearing a mask meant one, lefty kind of thing; not wearing a mask meant another, righty one.

One wonders, though, if the symbolic level of communication isn't exactly the place where humans meet one another to contest the truth. Saying that something is a symbol does not rob it of rational significance. The swastika is a symbol, and the peace sign is a symbol. What they symbolize is still worth an argument. People who wore masks and people who did not weren't simply members of different clans: the ones with masks were making a gesture toward social solidarity and signalling a reluctance to infect their neighbors; the ones without were affirming selfishness as a principle of conduct. Back then, one might not have known for certain what a mask would do while still being certain that it was better to signal community than self.

Did 2020 change everything? Perhaps those big, epoch-marking years are tourist traps of a kind. The year 2001 may, in historical retrospect, be remarkable first as the year when, at last, more American homes had Internet access than did not. A terrorist attack came and went, was grieved and then memorialized, but big terrorist attacks will happen every generation or so. On the other hand, a life spent online is a permanent feature of our modernity. Those few who proposed that the wisest thing to do after 9/11 was to mourn and move on were excoriated, but they may have been better guides than those who insisted that a new age of militance and counter-militance had arrived, and that a global war on terror had to be unleashed. There is nothing to do with a day except to live it, a great poet wrote, and there may be nothing to do with an epochal year except to remember it.

Of course, this is the sort of view that, taken to its logical end, can annihilate the meaning of *any* event. Did the First World War require updating our beliefs and values, given that ordinary life went on afterward? It's true that we should be hesitant to leap too soon into a new world view because of a dramatic outlier event; it's also true that updating our beliefs about the nature of the world is what science routinely demands of us.

Irony was dead, we were told after 9/11, but the largest irony of the past couple of decades is that the vaccine project called Operation Warp Speed, which may be the only decent thing Trump has ever done, or at least did not keep from happening, is also the one thing that has weighed against him with his own base. (The story of 2020 may be many-voiced, and full of choral counterpoint, yet its resolution, post-vaccines, whistles one plain, familiar tune. Science saves lives.)

We can't help, it seems, placing a human figure before the ground of inexplicable nature and its contagions—and most often that figure is pointing, accusingly, right back at us. *You did this*, we insist to ourselves, through some failure of belief or behavior or ethical tenet. Yet a disaster that happens so similarly to so many seems a hard case for too much moralizing, since at its heart is the one thing that always escapes moralizing, and that is our own mortality. As the rituals of the pandemic recede, we might recognize that some of them, like the beating of bells and pans for essential workers at 7 P.M., were good in themselves, not because they made anything else happen or protected us from harm. W. H. Auden, writing in yet another candidate for an epochal year, 1939, insisted that we must love one another or die—and then withdrew the remark, recognizing that we are all going to die no matter what we do. He decided that we ought to love one another anyway, or try to, year in and year out. ♦

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BOOKS

TORN PAGES

The fate—and the power—of books in wartime.

BY CLAUDIA ROTH PIERPONT

At Christmas, 1939, a few months into the new World War, London bookshops were very busy. The war was bringing in a public eager to learn about weapons, planes, and the nature of the country that was once again the enemy. Confidence was high and curiosity, as much as fear, prevailed. Among recent titles, "I Married a German" had gone through five editions, and the Lewis Carroll-inspired illustrated satire "Adolf in Blunderland"—featuring Hitler as a mustachioed child and a Jewish mouse who has been in a concentration camp—sold out in days. Publishers, proudly demonstrating how different the English were from the book-burning Germans, had issued a newly translated version of "Mein Kampf," unabridged, which was selling fast; royalties were diverted to the Red Cross, which sent books to British prisoners of war. It was only the next summer, after the wholly unexpected collapse of France, when bombs began to fall and politicians warned that a German invasion was imminent—when even Churchill questioned "if this long island story of ours is to end at last"—that people confessed they were finding it difficult to read.

But not impossible. "For Whom the Bell Tolls," "Gone with the Wind": American stories of earlier wars became big best-sellers as this war went on. When bombs forced thousands of Londoners to shelter in the city's underground train stations, small libraries were often installed to boost spirits. One of the most famous photographs of wartime London shows a group of calmly composed men, in hats, examining books on the miraculously intact shelves of a Kensington mansion's bombed-out library. The photograph was almost certainly posed, as Andrew Pettegree, a prolific British expert on the history of books, points out in "The Book at War" (Basic), but it was a true image of the way that books were used in catastrophic times: as solace and inspiration, as symbols of resistance against barbarism and of a centuries-old culture that remained an honored trust.

The Germans, once so learned and now so desperately frightened of books, understood this, too. The most fearful reminder of the planned invasion that did not happen—thanks largely to the unforeseen resilience of the Royal Air Force—is a volume, secretly prepared in 1940, titled "Informationsheft GrossBritannien" (later translated as "Invasion 1940"). Produced by the S.S., it was a closely researched compendium of basic information about Britain's geography, economy, politics, and so on, which would be useful to an occupation regime. This disquietingly assured handbook concluded with a "Special Wanted List" of two thousand eight hundred and twenty British subjects and foreign residents who were to be arrested as soon as the Nazis took power. Among the politicians, journalists, Jews, and others on the list were a number of outstanding writers, including E. M. Forster, Rebecca West, Noël Coward, and Virginia Woolf. None could have known that their names were there, although some assumed that they would be targeted. Woolf's friend and sometime lover Vita Sackville-West and Vita's husband, Harold Nicolson (a government official who was on the list), both carried poison pills for the day the Germans landed.

To study books is to take on a limitless task, since there is no end to the subjects that books contain. The academic field of book history strives to keep the material facts of the book as an object—paper (or parchment, or papyrus), typography, printing history—in steady focus. Inevitably, though, such

Books and conflict have an intertwined history running from Homer to Gaza.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL SAHRE

sturdy facts prove inseparable from the immaterial life that these strange objects preserve, and from the larger histories into which books are inescapably bound. Readers have long taken pleasure in books about books, from "The Name of the Rose" to "The Swerve" or "84, Charing Cross Road." And at a time when the continued existence of print culture is in question, books about the contributions that books have made to our lives have a special poignance, akin to an image Pettegree conjures of an American G.I. with a worn paperback jutting from his pocket.

The book in wartime is a vast subject, and Pettegree wisely restricts his scope. The earliest conflict he examines is the American Civil War, which he uses largely to address Harriet Beecher Stowe's landmark anti-slavery novel, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," published in 1852 and renowned for turning weeping readers into up-in-arms abolitionists. Frederick Douglass described its impact as "amazing, instantaneous, and universal," and President Lincoln, when introduced to its author, in 1862, reportedly called her "the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war." Pettegree, like many others, assumes this famous comment to be apocryphal. He also has doubts about the novel's actual influence on events, contending that the abolitionist sentiments Stowe aroused had little effect on the war and didn't lead Union soldiers to enlist.

Even Lincoln didn't believe that his soldiers would take up arms to defeat slavery, rather than to preserve the Union—that's one reason he hesitated over emancipation—and the surviving letters of Union soldiers bear this out. It should be noted, though, that many became abolitionists as the war went on, influenced by what they saw of slavery in the South and by the brave performance of Black soldiers. Sadly, however, there seems to be merit to Pettegree's claim that a major ramification of Stowe's novel was a Southern backlash. Copies of the book were burned in public, and a spate of "anti-Tom" novels appeared, depicting slavery as a benign system and rebutting Stowe's harsh portrait of Southern life.

A full half century after Stowe's book was published, a stage production of her story so outraged a North Carolina Baptist minister named Thomas Dixon, Jr., that he wrote what became the most influential anti-Tom novel of all, "The Clansman." Published in 1905, it told of bestial Black rapists and of white avengers from the noble Ku Klux Klan, offering ostensible justification for the resegregation then occurring under Jim Crow laws. By the time Dixon was writing, the Klan had been extinct for decades, but his novel—adapted as D. W. Griffith's film "The Birth of a Nation"—helped revive it. This monstrous cinematic masterpiece was released in 1915, and the Klan reëstablished itself as a newly vindictive force of terror the same year. Astonishingly, the burning cross set high on Stone Mountain, in Georgia, the night it was reborn—a symbol that cut deep into the nation's psyche for many years—derived not from the historic Klan but from Dixon's novel.

"The Book at War" extends to the present, but Pettegree writes most and best on the Second World War. (He mentions that his father was an officer in the Royal Air Force.) Here, he considers a wide range of printed materials: maps, pamphlets, scientific periodicals. For example, a scientist working for British intelligence was able to discern, just by reading the physics journal *Physikalische Zeitschrift*, that, as of 1941, the Nazis had not committed the resources needed to make an atom bomb. The journal listed physics lecture courses being offered in German universities, and it turned out that the best physicists remaining in Germany (after Jews had been fired) were scattered across the country teaching. Clearly, no concerted Nazi effort was under way. If developing a bomb was so hard for their own scientists, the Nazis appear to have reasoned, how could the degenerate Allies ever do it? As a result, the Manhattan Project, that enormous concerted Allied effort, benefitted from no fewer than eleven articles about declassified German research on atomic fission that were openly published in physics journals in 1942 and 1943.

"In this war, we know, books are weapons," President Roosevelt said in 1942. A decade before, when Nazi book burnings took place, more than a hundred thousand people across the United States had marched in protest. Now the U.S. Office of War Information issued a poster that framed a photograph of a book burning with the words "THE NAZIS BURNED THESE BOOKS . . . but free Americans CAN STILL READ THEM." In 1943, American publishers began to produce Armed Services Editions, for soldiers overseas—millions of books that provided edification, amusement, even bouts of peace. These editions were small in format and printed on lightweight paper, designed so that they could fit in a serviceman's pocket and withstand some half a dozen readings, as soldiers passed them on. (There is an entire book about this series, Molly Guptill Manning's "When Books Went to War.") Thirty titles were sent out to start, fifty thousand copies of each. Hundreds of works were eventually added, and the number of copies tripled: fiction, classics, biographies, humor, history, mystery, science, plays, poetry. Bundles of books were flown to the Anzio beachhead, in Italy, dropped by parachute on remote Pacific islands, and stockpiled in warehouses in the spring of 1944, so that they could be shipped to the staging grounds for D Day.

"Oliver Twist." "The Grapes of Wrath." Biographies of George Gershwin and Ben Franklin. Westerns by Zane Grey. Virginia Woolf ("The Years"). Ogden Nash. Plato's Republic ("a new version in basic English"). "The Fireside Book of Dog Stories." Sexy novels did especially well, and the most popular book of all seems to have been "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," whose author, Betty Smith, estimated that she received some fifteen hundred letters from soldiers a year. "I was thinking about that book even under pretty intense fire," one soldier wrote. Another, expressing perhaps better than anyone the appeal of books in wartime, wrote, "I can't explain the emotional reaction that took place in this dead heart of mine."

It's an ancient belief that the gods send us sorrows, including wars, so that we will have stories to tell: "I sing of arms and the man." We know who we are through the stories we share. Tell someone your favorite book—one about, say, an impoverished child growing up in a Brooklyn tenement, striving for education—and you tell them something about yourself. In the years that followed the September 11th attacks, a selection

of books was made available to the inmates in the military prison at Guantánamo, which has held nearly eight hundred Muslim men and boys since 2002. The books were kept in a trailer and read by prisoners in their cells.

In 2010, there was a sentencing hearing for a Toronto-born inmate, Omar Khadr, who was partly raised in Pakistan and was arrested in Afghanistan in 2002, at the age of fifteen. A psychiatrist testifying for the prosecution called Khadr a dangerous jihadist who had spent much of his eight years at Guantánamo memorizing the Quran. The defense attorney countered by demanding a full list of the books that Khadr had asked to read: Barack Obama's "Dreams from My Father," Nelson Mandela's "Long Walk to Freedom," Ishmael Beah's "A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier," novels by Stephenie Meyer, John Grisham, and Danielle Steel. Not the list one might expect for a jihadist. The books were not the reason that Khadr was transferred to a Canadian prison, in 2012, and released a few years later, ultimately obtaining a formal apology from the Canadian government and a large cash settlement. But they were an early sign, duly covered in the press, that he was not the person his jailers claimed. The hearing was a strangely literal example of the idea that books, even in the darkest prison, can set you free.

The foundational book in the Western tradition, the Iliad, is a book of war—of the anger of Achilles and of the bloody victory over Troy that took ten years. It not only marked the great turn from oral recitation to writing but was also, as papyrus fragments show, the most read Greek book in ancient times. The Spanish classicist Irene Vallejo writes in her eclectic and often enchanting book "Papyrus" (translated in 2022 by Charlotte Whittle) that people took passages of the Iliad with them into death, in their sarcophagi, as though it were a sacred text.

One of the many lessons the great poem offers is that even the bravest fighters, even those most favored by all-powerful gods, will not be saved. Man is "born to die, long destined for it." The story runs thick with the blood of heroes, with the pain and defilement of their wounded bodies, which is presumably why the Iliad, unlike the Odyssey, was not among the books sent to American servicemen. Still, the Iliad has inspired soldiers from antiquity onward. Alexander the Great is said to have always kept it near him, and to have seen himself as a new Achilles, as he conquered lands from Egypt to India.

The famed library at the city he founded, Alexandria, was established at an uncertain date a few decades after his death, at the absurdly young age of thirty-two, in 323 B.C. But Vallejo suggests that the idea for the library began with Alexander himself. His teacher, no less a figure than Aristotle, would have instilled in him a love of books. More telling, the library shared Alexander's vast global ambition, having been built to contain all known writings from all known lands, translated into Greek: the Hebrew Bible, Egyptian pharaonic histories, lengthy Zoroastrian texts. Unending conquest and unending knowledge; full command of the geographic world and of the intellectual world. Armed men were sent to foreign lands like soldiers, in search of papyrus scrolls. But the library also offered its own kind of remedy for the battles beyond its walls. However fiercely Egyptians and Jews and Greeks and others fought, their books rested together on the shelves in peace. As part of a temple complex dedicated to the Muses, the library was a sacred space.

Nothing of the building or of its vast collections remains. Some sources attest that the library was accidentally burned when Julius Caesar put down an insurrection led by Cleopatra's brother, making it a victim of the world's next round of geopolitical conquest. But Vallejo and others cast doubt on that dramatic scenario. Papyrus—made from an aquatic plant whose stems were cut, woven, and pressed until they made a fixed support for writing—is fragile, vulnerable to infestations, humidity, and time. Sheer neglect as much as war or fire could have destroyed the library during the centuries when Rome gained precedence and Alexandria crumbled.

The ancient texts that have survived, a sliver of what once existed, owe their preservation to a combination of happenstance and slow-building technological changes. Why do only seven plays each by Aeschylus and Sophocles survive out of some two hundred that, between them, they are known to have written? Vallejo provides an arresting answer: storage boxes for papyrus scrolls held five to seven scrolls, depending on their size. It's likely that the plays we now have represent two boxes that fortuitously tumbled from the transport headed to oblivion.

The oldest of these survivors, Aeschylus' "Persians," first performed in 472 B.C., takes place not in the mythic past of other surviving tragedies but just after the Battle of Salamis, during a war so real and so recent that Aeschylus himself had fought in it, protecting Athenian democracy from incursions by the Persian Empire. Surprisingly, the playwright sets the drama in the defeated enemy's capital city and depicts the Greeks' precious victory through the eyes of an enemy shown as deeply human: a chorus of wretched counsellors and a stricken queen; a messenger from the front revealing atrocious losses; an empire filled with weeping young widows. The oldest extant work of world theatre is a generous lesson in war and in imaginative sympathy, still waiting to be learned.

Vallejo's book covers a pair of technological improvements that saved many texts. Parchment—that is to say, animal skins, soaked in lime and scraped—began to replace papyrus around the second century B.C., and scrolls eventually gave way to the codex, a proto-book with rectangular pages fixed along one edge, so that they could be turned. Parchment was tougher and more durable than papyrus and, unlike papyrus, allowed writing on both sides of a sheet. Vallejo, who is also a novelist and whose book includes passages of memoir and reflection, is torn about the gifts and costs of parchment. She mentions that hides for parchment were often bought while animals were still alive; healthier animals produced smoother surfaces. Holding a parchment manuscript in her hands, she is simulta-

neously thrilled by the preservation of treasured words and repelled by the slaughter on which this miracle rests.

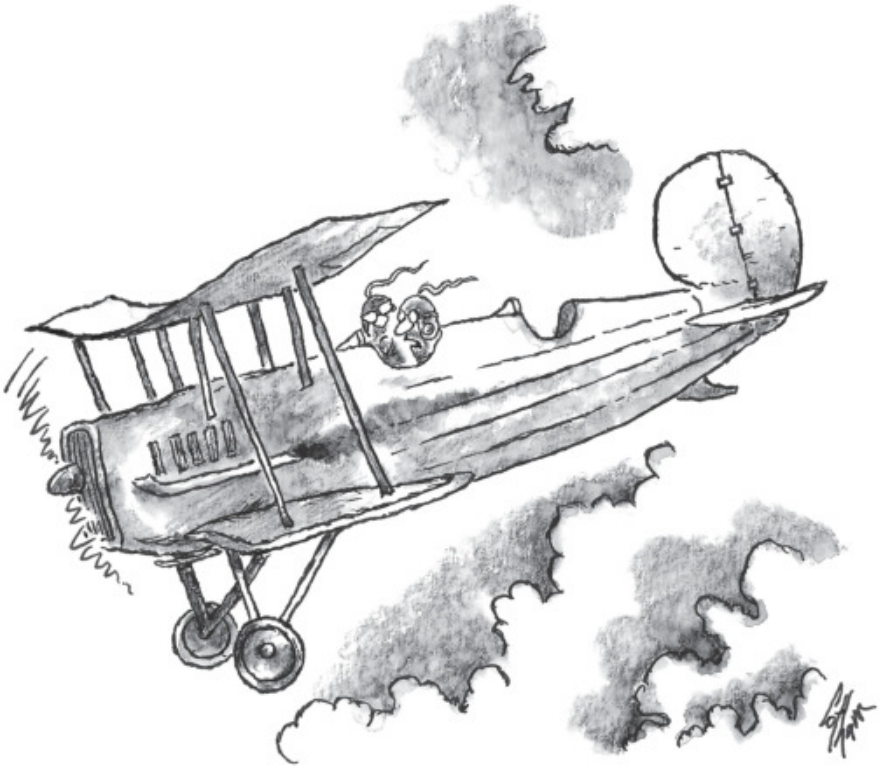
The codex, easily transportable and containing larger quantities of text, won favor with the rising Christian movement, suiting both its rituals and its experience of persecution. One could easily find one's place in a codex when reading aloud with others—try that with a scroll—and also easily hide it when imperial thugs appeared. When the Emperor Constantine, a Christian convert who legalized the religion in A.D. 313, ordered fifty Bibles to be copied, he specified that they were to be "written on prepared parchment" and made "in a convenient, portable form." Apart from eight-hundred-page Bibles, books were becoming light objects, able to accompany readers anywhere. Some codices were small enough to be held in one hand, and Cicero claimed to have seen a copy of the Iliad that fit in a nutshell. But by the time the codex was reaching broad acceptance, toward the fifth century, fewer and fewer people seemed to be reading.

The long centuries that followed, which the fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch called the Dark Ages, mark the conclusion of Vallejo's book, a sorry end to an age of cosmopolitan excitement. Germanic tribes had repeatedly sacked Rome, and most of its libraries were closed or destroyed. The unlikely preservers of the West's literary heritage were now monks, working as scribes, diligently copying not only Christian texts but older ones considered harmonious with Christianity. (Augustine wrote that Plato would have been a Christian had he lived in later times.) The monks carried out a colossal conversion from decaying papyrus to parchment, and monastic libraries offered safekeeping. Not that the new material was without problems: "The parchment is hairy," one disgruntled scribe penned on an offending manuscript. Furthermore, despite varied triumphs of the Middle Ages—Gothic cathedrals, three-field crop rotation—what these manuscripts had to say didn't take hold culturally until Petrarch himself started searching through the shelves, uncovering knowledge that would illuminate all of Europe and beyond.

The history of the Florentine Renaissance can also be told in wars—a continual melee of rival families and city-states—and in the books that were used both to support and to undermine civic freedoms. Ross King's "The Bookseller of Florence" (2021) traces this complex history by focussing on the life of one remarkable man, Vespasiano da Bisticci, known in the mid-fifteenth century as the "king of the world's booksellers." Born around 1422, when artists like Donatello, Fra Angelico, and Masaccio were at work nearby, Vespasiano was apprenticed to a bookseller at the age of eleven. By the fourteen-forties, the shop, near what is now the Bargello museum, was not only a place to order books—still handwritten and likely bound on the premises—but also a popular meeting place for discussions of politics, philosophy, and other subjects that the books contained. King provides a portrait of Florence's intellectual circles, and a sense of their importance to the city's artistic culture. The reader is perpetually aware of big, perhaps unanswerable questions: What makes a culture flourish? And why did this particular city flourish above all others at this time?

Florence was mad for learning, mad for books. That seems to be part of the answer. The literacy rate was extraordinarily high, estimated at seven out of every ten adult men, when other European cities had rates of twenty-five per cent or less. Even girls, against the advice of monks and prigs, were taught to read and write. The excitement, of course—the rebirth that gives us the word "Renaissance"—was for the recovered writings of the ancient Greek and Latin masters. Following Petrarch's example, Vespasiano and his comrades became book hunters, ferreting out works by Cicero or Lucretius from the monastic libraries where they'd been languishing for centuries. Florentine scholars learned Greek, and one, Marsilio Ficino, translated the entire corpus of Plato's work into Latin, a language far more commonly read. "All evil is born from ignorance," Vespasiano wrote. An extraordinary statement. Born not from the Devil, as many would have said at the time, or from human nature, as many would say today, but from a condition that could be repaired by the books sold in his shop.

Not that all his clients were sedate scholars. Among the most illustrious



"Once you've warmed up, you're going to have to go back to your own seat."

"I am genuinely full of empathy and compassion until I see how other people drive."

• •

were men who might be called mercenary warlords, whose taste for books assuaged (or disguised) the brutality of their profession. One of the finest private libraries of the age belonged to Vespasiano's client Federico da Montefeltro, known for his spectacular palace in Urbino, and for having led an attack on the town of Volterra so unaccountably vicious that Machiavelli cited it as proof that men are inclined to evil. Vespasiano excused his client by claiming that he'd attempted to stop his men from rampaging, even though Federico himself looted a trove of rare Hebrew manuscripts that had belonged to a Jewish victim of the onslaught. Vespasiano also noted that Federico's study of ancient Roman historians was one of the reasons he excelled in battle.

Still, there was optimism about the growth of knowledge through the spread of books. Paper, used in China for more than a millennium, slowly made its way westward with the spread of Islam and then advanced across Europe. (The process has left linguistic traces: the word "ream" derives from the Arabic *rizma*.) But the real revolution was the printing press. The Chinese, again, were there centuries earlier, but their achievements were unknown to Johannes Gutenberg, the German goldsmith who in the fourteen-fifties introduced a press with movable metal type, making books abundant and relatively affordable. For the wealthy, handwritten manuscripts, on parchment, retained prestige as luxury products for years. (Lorenzo de' Medici, another client of Vespasiano's, had scribes recopy printed books for his collection.) But, for many, printing was about more than convenience and cost. It was a means of dispelling darkness and, as one idealistic friar wrote, of bringing about "salvation on earth."

Throughout Florence's cultural ascendancy, it was an independent city-state and a constitutional republic, albeit often functionally impaired by the power grabs of wealthy families, among whom the Medici became dominant. Many of the ancient texts that the Florentines favored spoke directly to the political tensions of a situation in which popular liberties were ever balanced against Medici control. Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, for example—a fifteenth-century best-seller—assured citizens that, contrary to Christian teaching, spending large sums of money could be a virtue, if it was done with generosity and taste; a rich man could be "an artist in expenditure," an idea readily taken up by the Medici. Cicero, on the other hand, taught that a good man must be active in political life, a crucial lesson that accorded with Florentine democratic beliefs as well as with the need for political watchfulness. An ardent republican, Cicero was the most admired of ancient writers until, as the fifteenth century wore on, he was superseded by Ficino's Plato, who supplied very different counsel: the good life was now the contemplative life, spent far from political distractions, immersed in thought about the eternal verities of truth, harmony, and beauty.

The Medici were devoted to Plato. Cosimo, the founder of the family's public ambitions, had sponsored the translation of Plato's writings and had excerpts read aloud to him on his deathbed. Lorenzo, his grandson, who came to unofficial power in 1469, wrote a long philosophical poem about his conversion to Platonism. Their interests seem to have been at once sincere and insidiously self-serving. Plato, who saw democracy as too flawed to function, believed that a republic must be headed by a philosopher-king—a figure whom Plato's translator, for one, saw in Lorenzo. As it happened, in 1480, while the once politically vigilant Florentines were presumably engaged in high Platonic contemplation, the city's constitution was changed to firmly consolidate Lorenzo's power. By 1532, the document had entirely lost its original force. While the lights of Florentine culture dimmed, Lorenzo's heirs were installed as hereditary dukes of a city whose long republican experiment had finally failed.

As history proves, reading does not always lead to the consequences we fondly imagine. Sometimes the results can shock. "Stalin's Library" (2022), by Geoffrey Roberts, makes a grim if

absorbing companion to Timothy W. Ryback's "Hitler's Private Library" (2008), and both suggest that the Alexandrian impulses of conquest and cultural accumulation are related. In pure numbers—books, not victims—Stalin comes out ahead, having owned some twenty-five thousand, including periodicals and pamphlets. Hitler owned about sixteen thousand, including a hand-tooled leather set of Shakespeare, in German, and a German translation of Henry Ford's "The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem," a collection of articles from the automaker's own Michigan newspaper. Both dictators were not only voracious readers but, for a time, aspiring writers. Hitler identified himself as a "writer" on his tax forms from 1925, when he published the first volume of "Mein Kampf," until 1933, when he changed his profession to "Reich Chancellor." Stalin, in his youth, published romantic poems in a Georgian journal and never stopped caring about poetry. Roberts, rather chillingly, calls him "an emotionally intelligent and feeling intellectual." Indeed, the great Russian poet Osip Mandelstam used to tell his wife, Nadezhda, not to complain about their tribulations under Stalin: "Poetry is respected only in this country—people are killed for it."

Mandelstam was arrested in 1934, after reciting a mocking poem about Stalin to a small number of individuals whom he had supposed were friends. Exiled from Moscow to the provinces, he was arrested again in 1938 and died, of uncertain causes, in a transit camp. For years, when his poems were suppressed and it was too dangerous even to write them down, Nadezhda kept them alive through an extraordinary feat of memorization. It was only after Stalin's death, in the mid-fifties, that the poems began to appear in the homemade typescripts known as samizdat, secretly passed from hand to hand. ("We live in a pre-Gutenberg age," the poet Anna Akhmatova said.) Around the same time, a patched-together volume of Osip Mandelstam's work was published in New York, in Russian, by admirers who did not know whether he was alive or dead. As for Nadezhda Mandelstam, the modest wife and helpmeet, she became one of the major prose writers of the century with her memoirs "Hope Against Hope" and "Hope Abandoned." (*Nadezhda*, in Russian, means "hope.") For all the stinging clarity of her mind, evident throughout these books, there was something important that she did not understand.

Immediately after Osip's death, she tells us, she spent several weeks with a friend who had just been released from a camp, and the friend's mother, whose husband had been shot. Reading Shakespeare together, the three women paused over young Arthur in "King John," whose death is ordered by his scheming uncle but whose innocence softens the heart of his executioner, who can't bear to carry out the crime. What Nadezhda cannot understand, she tells her friend, is how the English, who must have read about young Arthur, had not stopped killing their fellow-men forever. The friend replies, with clear intent to comfort, that for a long time Shakespeare had not been read or staged, and that people kept slaughtering one another because they had not seen the play. The notion of literature's power is left intact. The explanation allows for the possibility, at least, that the play will have an effect someday. But Nadezhda is not comforted. "At nights I wept at the thought that executioners never read what might soften their hearts," she writes. "It still makes me weep."

Looking at the world, one might well believe that too few people have read the scenes that would soften their hearts. Pettegree's "The Book at War" includes some thoughts about the invasion of Ukraine, dwelling on one emblematic photograph. Taken in Kyiv, it shows no people, no violence, only an apartment window viewed from the street, filled top to bottom with books stacked like bricks—and used like bricks, to block incoming shrapnel and shattering glass. The image bespeaks a cultured people resisting barbarism as much as the old photo of the imperturbably English book browsers in a roofless building. In Ukraine, so many libraries have been destroyed that photographs of rubble studded with broken shelves have become almost indistinguishable. And, for months, Gaza has been furnishing similar photographs. The main public library was gutted in November, and the much loved Samir Mansour Bookshop—razed in 2021 and reopened thanks to an internationally supported GoFundMe—now has the distinction of having been destroyed twice.

Such destruction is part of a wider attack on distinctive cultural identities, Ukrainian and Palestinian, but a universal identity is also at stake. Before the war, Samir Mansour's shop featured not only Palestinian classics, such as the works of the political novelist Ghassan Kanafani (killed by Israeli agents, in 1972, for his involvement with a group linked to a massacre near Tel Aviv), but also an Arabic translation of "Anne of Green Gables" and English editions of books by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Carrie Fisher. Its most popular children's titles were the "Harry Potter" books. Here, no less than in ancient Alexandria, is a repository where the books of embattled people suggest a peace that exists nowhere outside, a road to common ground.

There is a special shock in seeing these places hit, because we can't stop believing that books can spread that peace—if only the right people would read the right books and understand them in the right way—even when they are being blasted off the shelves. Or maybe the most important books about war, the books that would change things once and for all, are the ones that didn't get written. The novels and essays of Anne Frank. The late poetry of Osip Mandelstam. The mature poetry of Wilfred Owen, who was killed in action at the age of twenty-five, a week before the end of the First World War. Ghassan Kanafani's furious yet real hopes for peace: what form would they have taken? And all the works by those who never even began. Maybe these are the books we need, filled with the answers we don't have. Maybe the real books of war are nothing but blank pages. ♦

THE THEATRE

UNREAL LIFE

"Russian Troll Farm" lands Off Broadway.

BY HELEN SHAW

Russian cyber saboteurs take aim at U.S. voters in Sarah Gancher's wry comedy.

Theatre has become a slow art. It takes time to write a play, and then additional time to get someone to produce it; no wonder, then, that current events are most likely to show up in cabaret and standup. (Political theatre's version of super-timeliness tends to be, like, the past five years.) And drama requires a certain slowness from us, too. You can casually wander out of a movie, pause a television show, check social media as you read a book, or—I don't know—knit. But the scant hundred minutes of Sarah Gancher's Off Broadway play "Russian Troll Farm," for instance, have to unfold in the molasses time of unadulterated, undistracted viewing. Luckily, that fight for our scattered attention, and even the topical delay, can become part of the show itself.

Gancher's "workplace comedy," now at the Vineyard Theatre, is set during the six-month run-up to the 2016 Presidential election, and dramatizes Russian cyber interference by the Internet Research Agency, in St. Petersburg. For years, the real-life Russian company used bogus social-media accounts to sow fake news and real division, apparently manufacturing millions of tweets' worth of institutional mistrust and norm-eroding nastiness. (In Gancher's play, we hear a supervisor exhorting her underlings to normalize the word "pussy" to diminish Americans' shock at Donald Trump's hot-mike vulgarities.) Despite the intervening insurrections and invasions, the world of "Russian Troll Farm" doesn't feel that distant. Perhaps you recognize the still constant drip of conspiracy theories in your own feeds, or maybe you saw this very play, which aired online during the pandemic shutdown, just before the election in 2020.

Gancher is best known as a collaborating playwright on group-written musicals: she shaped both "The Lucky Ones" and "Hundred Days" with the husband-and-wife band the Bengsons; she co-wrote "Mission Drift" with the collective the TEAM. There are no songs in this project, so Gancher provides the orchestrated din of social-media chatter. The earlier production of "Russian Troll Farm"—co-created by TheaterWorks Hartford, the Civilians, and TheatreSquared, a company in Fayetteville, Arkansas—was one of the notable successes of the streaming-theatre era. (It won an Obie.) The characters appeared in familiar Zoom boxes, their faces uncomfortably close; as you looked at your screen, you could see the reflection of your own face, a ghost among machines. The Russian trolls were trying to lead normal lives—fall in love, keep their day jobs—while being sucked into the relentless online maw, but so were we all, and that bad-mirror symmetry was key to the show's effectiveness. (Its co-directors, Jared Mezzocchi and Elizabeth Williamson, worked on this version as the video and projection designer and the dramaturge, respectively.)

Now that "Farm" has been translated to three dimensions, in a strangely glossy production by the director Darko Tresnjak, it takes a bit more to recognize our reflections onstage. (We can *almost* see them: Alexander Dodge has designed a set that looks as white and gleaming as an Apple Store.) The Russian trolls are still the same, but with mostly new actors playing them. There's the story-obsessed screenwriter Nikolai (Hadi Tabbal), the ex-journalist Masha (Renata Friedman), the robotic Egor (Haskell King, the only holdover, and excellent again), the rambunctious sociopath Steve (John Lavelle), and the group's ice-queen supervisor, Ljuba (Christine Lahti).

As pressure comes down from their higher-ups, the trolls crack neatly along

ILLUSTRATION BY CLAIRE MERCHLINSKY

the fissure Gancher has written for each one. Masha falls for Nikolai, who bewitches her with his weird love for their work. "Human beings need stories, they crave them. In terms of mankind's hierarchy of needs, stories are right between sleep and sex," Nikolai says, a glint of the zealot in his eyes. Eventually, Steve, drunk on Russophilia and grievance, convinces Egor to sabotage their co-workers out of a need for advancement as well as an aimless hatred for authority, and, perhaps, for women.

But it's a comedy! The show's most reliable comic strategy is unleashing Lavelle, who plays Steve as Jack Black in rock-star mode, wielding a power belly and a Brian Blessed beard. It's fun to see Steve freak out, especially when he can't get a rise out of Egor, who is seemingly impervious to emotion. "I'm gonna knock you down and curb-stomp your vampire wax face, you fucking bat-faced SHIT! You fucking SLOVAKIAN FUCK! SOULLESS, EMOTIONLESS, BLOODLESS, DICKLESS THUMB WITH A FACE DRAWN ON IT!" When the audience laughs at these shrieking Dadaist insults, it's hard not to feel as though we are being manipulated as easily as some Pepe the Frog galoot on 4chan.

When Steve isn't shouting Sun Tzu quotations about effective warfare, though, the production clearly feels a need to keep the audience amped. Tresnjak and Gancher rely on clichés I associate with goofball Internet thrillers—the characters say everything they type out loud, and they type *very fast*. In the end, the show turns to sentiment to keep our hummingbird brains engaged: Ljuba pivots without warning from iron lady to surrogate mother. Lahti, as Ljuba, delivers a long, tear-choked monologue about the social programming, first Soviet, then Russian, that turned her into an informer against women she might have been able to love. Even though her sudden sorrow rings false, the mawkish turn is understandable—it's a huge temptation to imagine emotional punishments for people who inflict emotional damage for a living. Aaron Sorkin and David Fincher did something similar with "The Social Network," letting their ersatz Zuckerberg have Zuck's real career success while giving him an invented private loneliness. Nikolai insists that humans "need stories," but why do we need the story that bad guys are secretly sad? Fate doesn't punish people who break society; that task is left to us.

Despite some awkwardness, Tresnjak's production of "Russian Troll Farm" still does an excellent job of showing us the reality-irreality fault line. At the end of the show, we learn how many of the troll characters' tweets were real—a surprising number. It's hardly revelatory that Russian trolls wrote, "Obama called me clinger. Hillary calls me deplorable. Terrorists call me infidel. Trump calls me American." But no part of our national conversation was uncorrupted: Russian trolls also ran the @Blackantifa social-media account, for example, which posted righteously about police violence. Gancher and Tresnjak use our attention against us here, sending our thoughts scrolling back through the production. In retrospect, the distracting narratives about Masha and Nikolai's romance and Ljuba's regret seem to be spoonfuls of sugar that Gancher added to her medicine. Many of us don't want to remember 2016, or see the way it's echoed in our current election discourse. But Gancher insists on our deeper reflection, and makes us sit with our memories.

"Russian Troll Farm" reminded me of a wild dreamscape comedy I saw in early February at the Wilma, in Philadelphia: "My Mama and the Full-Scale Invasion," by Sasha Denisova, translated from the Russian by Misha Kachman. (A filmed version will be available on demand on the theatre's Web site from February 19th to March 17th.) For most of the rollicking show, directed by Yury Urnov, we watch Denisova (played by Suli Holum) as she funnels her fear for her mother in Kyiv into a series of exaggerated fantasies. Terrified by the idea of her mother enduring Russian bombardment, Denisova instead imagines her tough-as-beets mama, Olga Ivanovna (Holly Twyford), commanding anti-Putin troops from her apartment balcony and tartly telling Joe Biden and Emmanuel Macron how to do their jobs. The Russian-malfeasance plot is similar to "Farm"'s, as is the late-breaking-footnote approach to the truth. Just before the end, a projection shows the recording of a video call. In a shocking, instantly affecting moment, we see Denisova's actual mother—gray-haired, a bit impatient, in her apartment. In English and Russian, she says, on her daughter's cue, "Hello, Philadelphia! I am Olga Ivanovna, I live in Kyiv, in Ukraine. Glory to the Armed Forces of Ukraine!" Theatre may be full of slow, deliberate fictions, but it can also make the real explode like a special effect. Olga, certainly, seems tired of blurring the line: "Have I mixed it up again?" ♦

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VOLUME C, NO. 2, February 26, 2024. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for four planned combined issues, as indicated on the issue's cover, and other combined or extra issues) by Condé Nast, a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Eric Gillin, chief business officer; Lauren Kamen Macri, vice-president of sales; Rob Novick, vice-president of finance; Fabio B. Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast Global: Roger Lynch, chief executive officer; Pamela Drucker Mann, global chief revenue officer and president, U.S. revenue and international; Anna Wintour, chief content officer; Nick Hotchkin, chief financial officer; Stan Duncan, chief people officer; Danielle Carrig, chief communications officer; Samantha Morgan, chief of staff; Sanjay Bhakta, chief product and technology officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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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 Liza Donnelly, must be received by Sunday, February 25th. The finalists in the February 5th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 11th 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

"But I'm not a real peanut. I just play one on TV."
Roger Westerman, Brooklyn, N.Y.

"The cane is made of ivory. Why do you ask?"
Eric Behrens, Austin, Texas

"We can't be seen together—I just got out of the can."
Michael Holmes, Moseley, Va.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"He's also the fastest gun in the West, so no one wants to tell him."
Leah Barrett Demers, Arlington, Mass.

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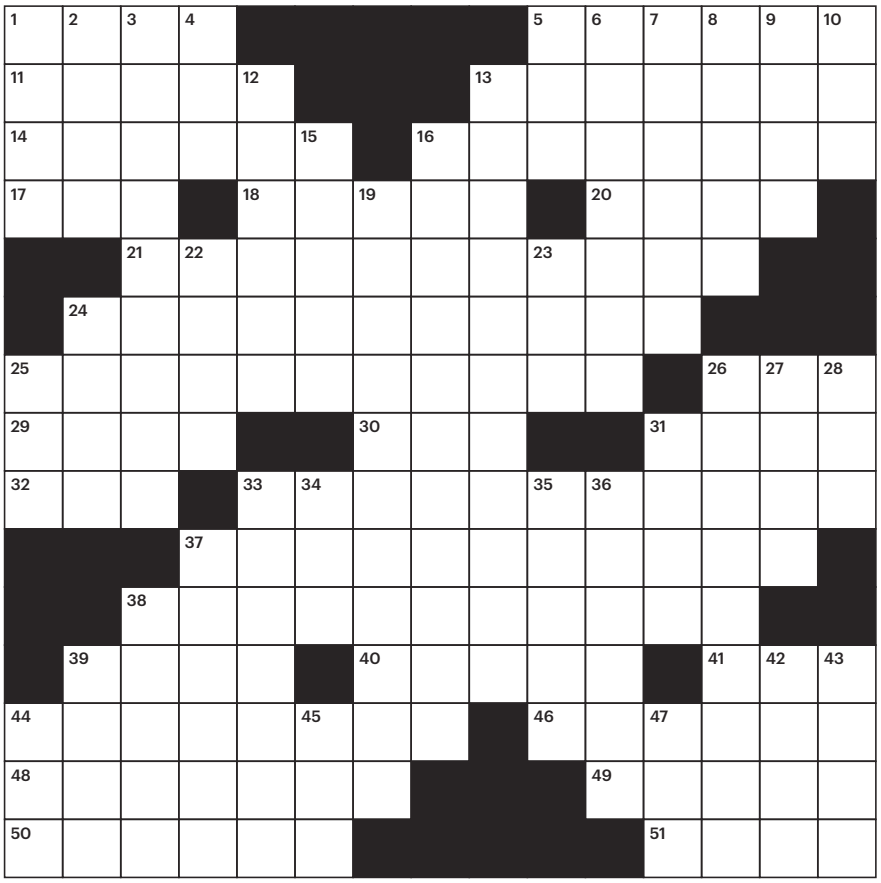
THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY ERIK AGARD



ACROSS

1 Complication

5 Substance in a kitchen or a bathroom

11 Person who lives in the area

13 Not at all encouraged

14 Car part that can inflate

16 Drops into conversation

17 "Cool story, ___"

18 Provided with new décor

20 "Take My Hand, Precious ___" (signature song for Mahalia Jackson)

21 Curses and such, in some Native cultures

24 W.W.E.'s Hell in a Cell contests, for example

25 Focus of the Web site Curly Nikki

26 Not quite there

29 Home to Dubai and Mumbai

30 Sank one's teeth into

31 Needs to reimburse

32 Fan-shaped muscle, for short

33 Protective of one's space

37 Conclude

38 Skip pages?

39 Member of a pack

40 Mononymous singer with the 2023 album "Gag Order"

41 Large tank

44 The ___ (chart-topping R. & B. group from Illinois)

46 Most populous Portuguese-speaking country after Brazil

48 Come through

49 Discourage

50 See 47-Down

51 Wall of ___ (very long online post)

DOWN

1 Big hunk

2 Gritty film genre

3 Like some highlight-reel catches

4 Yak

5 "Jeez!"

6 Odd number?

7 W.G.A. and SAG-AFTRA, for two

8 Part of a chain, perhaps

9 E-mail button

10 Some newspaper staffers, for short

12 Food-storage site

13 For You pages?

15 "Eternals" star Chan

16 Some eighties babies are in theirs

19 Dumping grounds?

22 ___ fresca

23 Tai ___

24 Item offered by an optician

25 Possible reason for setting a twenty-minute timer

26 Highly anticipated casting choice?

27 Top of a Guinness

28 Haute-couture initials

31 Source of crunch for a milkshake

33 List of favorite rappers, often

34 Certain ambulance worker, for short

35 Naturi Naughton's character on "Power"

36 Not swimming or airborne

37 Words before a coin toss

38 Spirals

39 "This is fun!"

42 Newell who won a Tony for their role in "Shucked"

43 Open-topped pastry

44 Clock setting for Mo. summers

45 "Thanks for coming to my ___ talk"

47 With 50-Across, prepare for sex with a new partner, in a way

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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