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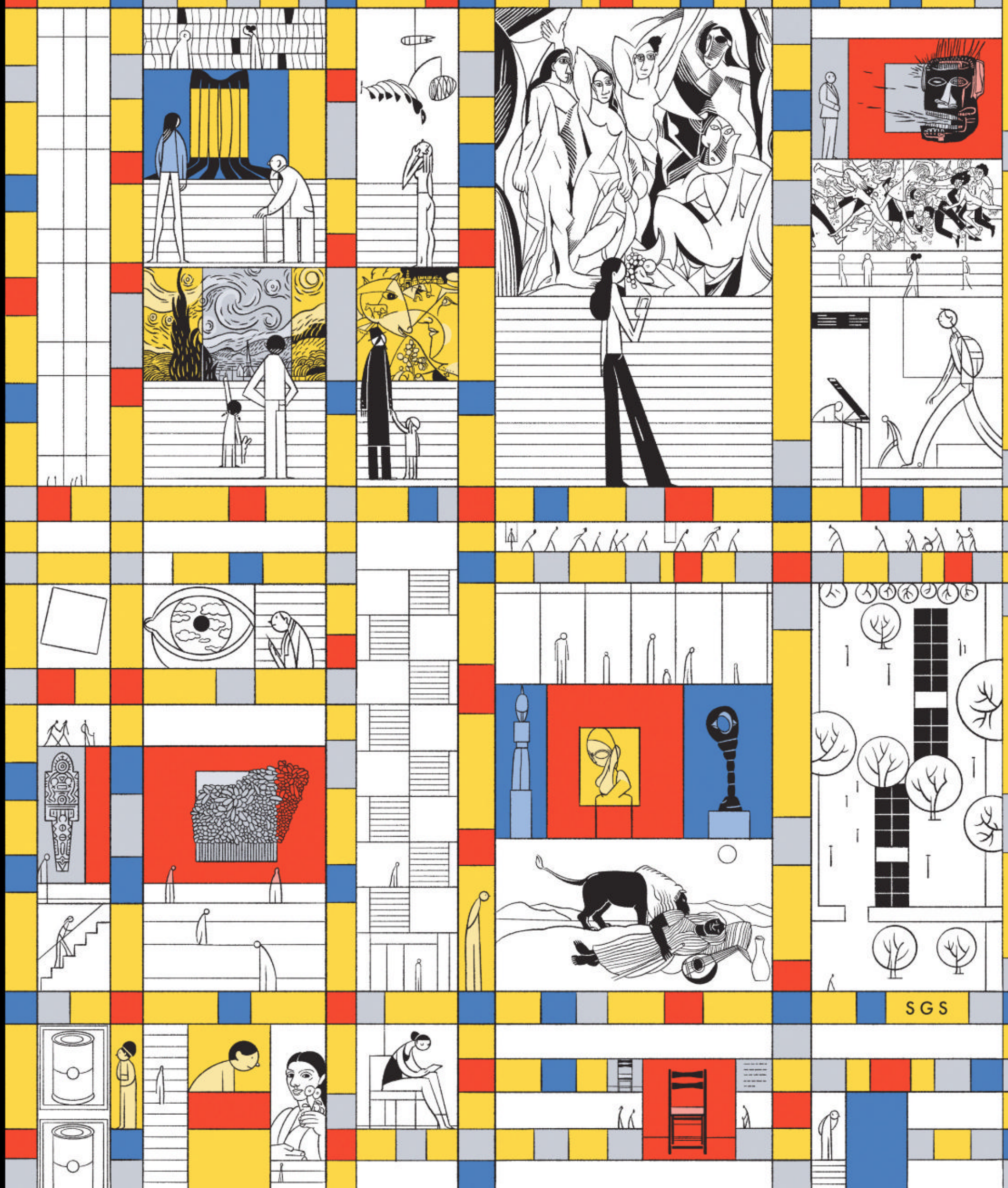

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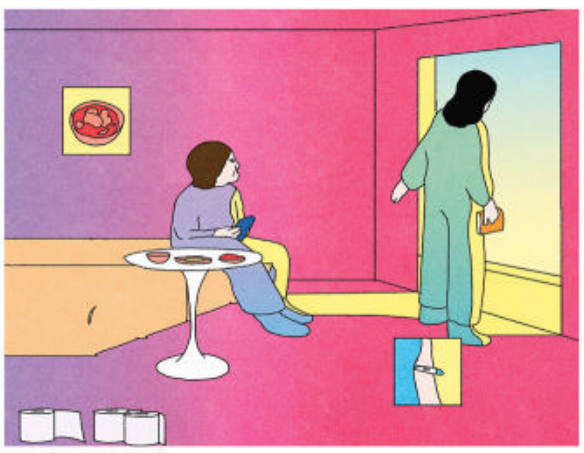
Sergio García Sánchez (*Cover*), a cartoonist and an illustrator, is the author, with Nadja Spiegelman, of the children's book "Blancaflor, The Hero with Secret Powers."

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

PAGE-TURNER
Zadie Smith on Toni Morrison's only short story, "Recitatif," an experiment in perceptions of racial identity.



PERSONAL HISTORY
E. Tammy Kim writes about quarantining in South Korea and questioning America's response to the pandemic.

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LEFT: DIANA EJAITA; RIGHT: MARÍA MEDEM

THE MAIL

WORDPLAY

Anna Shechtman's essay about her intertwined experiences of crossword-puzzle construction and anorexia presents a candid look at eating disorders ("Black-and-White Thinking," December 27th). As someone who has struggled with anorexia, I, too, believe that my disorder was primarily a curse of dualistic thinking, coupled with perfectionism, rigidity, and a desire to craft a certain identity. Yet I hadn't considered the connection between my disorder and my love of crosswords. I enjoy solving puzzles during meals, perhaps as a way of taking the focus away from what I'm eating. In the presence of a grid—and a seemingly impossible clue—any invasive thoughts quiet down. Maybe crosswords are both an extension of my eating disorder and part of my becoming free of it. I'm grateful to Shechtman for offering a sense of camaraderie, on two fronts.

Matigan King
New York City

DISNEY'S WORLD

Peter Schjeldahl, in his review of an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum about the relationship between Walt Disney and the French decorative arts, describes the work of Disney's animation studio as "kitsch" and "anodyne" (The Art World, December 27th). During at least the first half of the twentieth century, people interested in the arts often understood Disney differently. In 1934, James Thurber suggested that the only person who could make a proper version of the Odyssey was "no less a genius than Walt Disney." In 1938 and 1941, the Cleveland Museum of Art received gifts of drawings from "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," and, in 1944, the Museum of Modern Art placed Disney on its board of trustees. The point is not that Disney's films were universally praised as great art; that has never been the case. Instead, Schjeldahl might have more fully acknowledged that his perspective on Disney, as widely shared as it is now, has a fairly recent history, and that the narrative of Disney's artistic importance, as an individual and as a corporation, is very complicated.

Eric Smoodin
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HOW TO THINK ABOUT IRAN

While reading Robin Wright's excellent piece about the threat posed by Iran's transregional nuclear and missile capabilities, I recalled how the special envoy to Iran, Robert Malley, contributed to the understanding of the United States' historical role in the Middle East and North Africa in his acclaimed book "The Call from Algeria" ("Overmatch," January 3rd & 10th). I then wondered: What would it look like to approach the tensions between the U.S. and Iran not from the familiar flash point of hostage-taking in the nineteen-seventies and eighties but, rather, from the U.S. government's involvement in overthrowing Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister, in the nineteen-fifties? An honest admission of U.S. accountability for the current state of affairs in Iran might help readers to better contextualize the recording that Wright describes, in which General Qassem Suleimani, who was later killed by U.S. forces, says, "You start this war, but we create the end of it." The situation is indeed dire, but the Iranian-American relationship is unlikely to change unless the U.S. officially recognizes how its history of illegally meddling in other countries' affairs has caused international and geopolitical problems.

Catherine Boyle
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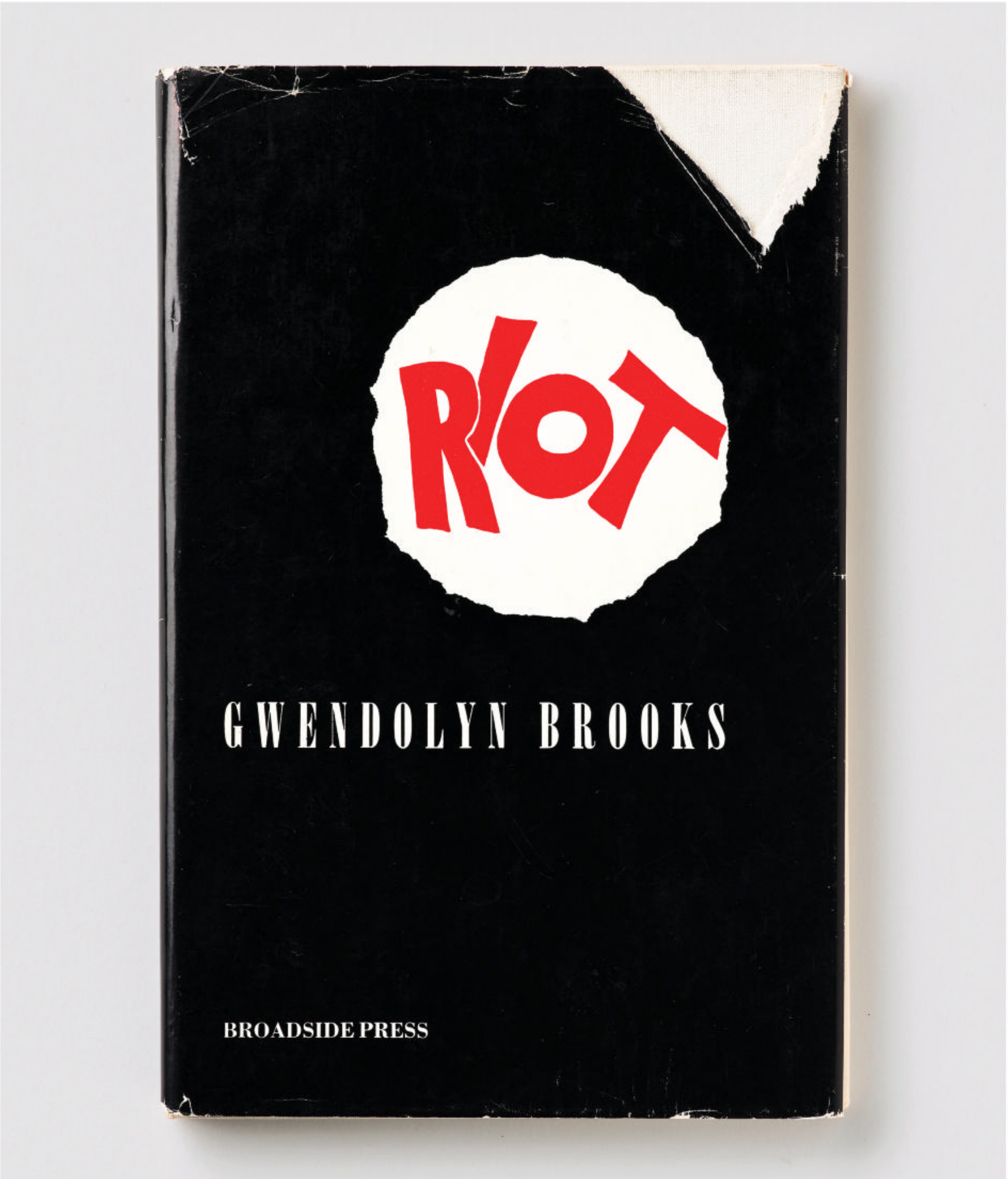
GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



In 1950, the American poet Gwendolyn Brooks became the first Black recipient of a Pulitzer Prize, in any category, for her second collection, "Annie Allen." Twenty years later, she donated the proceeds from "Riot"—poems about the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.—to its publisher, the Black-owned Broadside Press. Both books are among a variety of first editions, broadsides, and manuscripts on view in **"Gwendolyn Brooks: A Poet's Work in the Community,"** opening at the Morgan Library on Jan. 28.

As ever, it's advisable to confirm engagements in advance and to check the requirements for in-person attendance.

MUSIC

Earl Sweatshirt: "Sick!"

HIP-HOP In recent years, the rapper Thebe Kgositsile, who performs as Earl Sweatshirt, has tried to reassess the music of his youth in an attempt to reincarnate himself. An artist since his teens—as a prominent member of the collective Odd Future—Kgositsile and his songs of self-examination have grown more and more cryptic. His latest album, "Sick!," reflects his position as a twentysomething veteran who has already endured several career transitions, but it is also a calculated pivot into being more listenable—his previous record, "Feet of Clay," was nearly impenetrable. These verses are punchy and anecdotal, among his most brisk and clearheaded. Before the pandemic, he'd planned to release an album based on "The People Could Fly," a 1985 book of Black folktales. Then COVID and the lockdown hit. "Sick!," with its coiling production from the Alchemist and Black Noi$e, is a reflection of the atmosphere. Kgositsile knows a thing or two about isolating—in 2015, he released an album called "I Don't Like Shit, I Don't Go Outside"—but this music is more fidgety than closed off, eager to come up for air. Kgositsile, now a dad, learns poise, patience, and transparency, pushing through the cabin-fever-induced disquietude.—*Sheldon Pearce (Streaming on select platforms.)*

Jake Xerxes Fussell: "Good and Green Again"

FOLK Untold artists perform nominal folk music. Jake Xerxes Fussell is the rare contemporary to approach folk in its pure form, shunning self-penned compositions about bummer relationships to concentrate on material handed down from bygone, hardened times. The North Carolina singer is the son of a folklorist—as a teen, he got to play guitar with the blueswoman Precious Bryant—and he approaches his source material with an intuitive ease. On his fourth album, "Good and Green Again," Fussell and the producer James Elkington avoid a period pose, casting songs in lush arrangements that belong to the modern indie landscape. (Bonnie "Prince" Billy even shows up in the background.) The most dramatic shift is emotional. With their funny banjos and old-timey voices, folk artists of yore could read as chipper even when singing of shipwreck or famine. A creature of his own time, Fussell sounds unfailingly downcast.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Streaming on select platforms.)*

Jlin: "Embryo"

ELECTRONIC The Gary, Indiana, electronic producer Jlin makes sharp, antic dance tracks that travel fleetly even as they are encrusted in detail. Her new four-song EP, "Embryo," moves away from complex rhythms of footwork, the Chicago-rooted style in which Jlin made her name, and into straighter techno beats, but even those are far from straightforward. Tricky turnarounds and jumping cross-patterns remain the norm. Even when she slows the tempo, as on the EP's finale, "Rabbit Hole," the pulse remains dauntingly alert. It seems to breathe autonomously, particularly striking for music made with machines—as heady as bebop.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Streaming on select platforms.)*

"Soldier Songs"

CLASSICAL Opera Philadelphia's film of David T. Little's 2006 monodrama, "Soldier Songs," is up for Best Opera Recording at this year's Grammys—further proof, if any were needed, that the company's streaming channel is one of the most successful pandemic pivots among American opera presenters. Incorporating the composer's conversations with six war veterans, the opera sketches out, in brutal if oversimplified fashion, the way in which video games and action figures condition young men for service. The baritone Johnathan McCullough directs, and he also stars, as a veteran who, addled by P.T.S.D., has squirrelled himself away in a trailer in an open field. Little's score, a mélange of chamber and rock music, is most riveting as sound design, interweaving interview audio with ominous musical touches. Without the immediacy of live performance, the classically sung passages sound aloof, but McCullough's expressive Everyman makes the film of a piece.—*Oussama Zahr (Available as a rental or as part of a subscription.)*

"2 Blues for Cecil"

JAZZ A tribute to the iconoclastic free-jazz pianist Cecil Taylor wouldn't usually forgo the piano, much less feature two discernible blues recordings and a reading of a standard ("My Funny Valentine"), but these three alumni of Taylor's collaborative ensembles—the bassist William Parker, the drummer Andrew Cyrille, and the flügelhornist Enrico Rava—recognize that defying expectations may be the most honest way of honoring Taylor's vision of improvisation. If the performances are somewhat contained, at times swinging in a distinctly less Cecilian manner, so be it; these compelling pieces confirm that Taylor's message of personal expression speaks to those who still hear it.—*Steve Futterman (Streaming on select platforms.)*

ART

"Inspiring Walt Disney"

What explains the lasting wonderment of French rococo, the theatrically frivolous, flauntingly costly mode in art and décor that flourished in mid-eighteenth-century aristocratic circles before being squelched utterly by the Revolution of 1789? And why did that bedazzling visual repertoire recur in twentieth-century America as a species of imitation art—kitsch, in a word, although managed with undoubtable genius—in the animated films of Walt Disney? This fun show at the Met answers those questions by conjoining the pleasures of authentically frou-frou historical objects, mostly from the museum's collection, with their style's application in production drawings and video clips from Disney movies. The films include an early short, from 1934, called "The China Shop," in which porcelain figurines have come to life and are prettily dancing minuets; two classics of the nineteen-fifties, "Cinderella" and "Sleeping Beauty"; and, forming the pièce de résistance, an extravaganza in which atavistic pottery and candlesticks and clocks athletically celebrate a romance for their owner in "Beauty and the Beast," from 1991. Disney steered his studio to exploit rococo's gratuitous swank, emulating the feckless hedonism of the court of Louis XV while chastely suppressing its frequent eroticism. The language of antic curlicues, increasingly abstracted from film to film, blended smoothly into the insouciance of Disney's fairyland fantasies: escapist worlds, complete in themselves. Though thoroughly secular, like his nostalgic

ELECTRONIC MUSIC

In 2019, the English singer and producer FKA Twigs released her second album, "Magdalene," a breathtaking, voice-driven electronic-pop aria inspired by heartbreak. After the first COVID lockdown in the U.K., she feared she might be done making music, but she found restoration, and collaboration, in connecting with others—confidants and colleagues. Her new mixtape, **"Caprisongs,"** finds freedom from solitude in using field recordings as sound design. Produced by Twigs with El Guincho, the project is jubilant and exploratory, scanning Afro-pop, hymnals, club music, alt-R. & B., road rap, and even sound bites. Notable U.K. underground artists chime in on a sweeping mix, but the project feels most intimate when her songs are in conversation with her close friends.—*Sheldon Pearce*

OPPOSITE: PHOTOGRAPH BY GRAHAM S. HABER / MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM; RIGHT: ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORA CHEYENNE

AT THE GALLERIES

In 2017, Louis and Jack Shannon opened a gallery, Entrance, in a narrow basement at 48 Ludlow Street. The brothers, who are native New Yorkers, were born into the art world—they are the great-grandsons of Marcel Duchamp and the great-great-grandsons of Henri Matisse—but they weren't conventional gallerists. Instead, they were members of the disbanded Luck You Collective (and Jack is an artist himself). The two had taken over the group's former HQ to show their friends' work, run an on-site artists' residency, and host events, including a cybersecurity workshop with the Freedom of the Press Foundation and an intro to feminist bird-watching under the auspices of the anti-capitalist nonprofit 8-Ball Community. Entrance has since expanded beyond its underground lair to the street-level storefront above, where the exceedingly talented figurative painter **Hannah Lee** is now making her spellbinding solo début, in a show titled "First Language," on view through Jan. 30. The interiors portrayed in seven small works, rendered on panel in oil and wax, often dwarf the figures inside them (as seen in "Spa," pictured above), lending the scenes a haunted, cinematic uncertainty. Lee's true subject is intimacy—its tenderness, its discomforts—and the mysteries of the bodies and the rooms that contain it.—*Andrea K. Scott*

COURTESY THE ARTIST / ENTRANCE

evocations of circa-1900 America, the pastiche has something churchy about it.—*Peter Schjeldahl (Metropolitan Museum of Art; through March 6.)*

Jiha Moon

This Atlanta-based painter and ceramicist, who was born in South Korea in 1973 and has lived in the U.S. for two decades, has developed a strikingly varied vocabulary of forms—elegant, cute, grotesque, and all of the above. "Stranger Yellow," the title of her appealing, clamorous new show, refers to the color that dominates the works on view, as well as to racist, xenophobic, and sexualized Asian stereotypes and the related dynamics of estrangement and assimilation. Her brightly patterned paintings on *hanji* (Korean mulberry paper) and her delightfully perverse glazed sculptures mingle images of bananas, fortune cookies, and breasts with botanical motifs and fantastic creatures drawn from Korean folklore, augmented by flowing passages of abstract brushstrokes. The artist's seamless transition between mediums and her command of symbolic excess make for an absorbing and visually energetic exhibition.—*Johanna Fateman (Derek Eller; through Jan. 5.)*

Michelle Rawlings

Frugal applications of pale pigment on very small linen canvases lend the works in this Santa Fe painter's show a furtive air. Portraits of lithe (and, notably, all white) models in gauzy floral prints and dotted-swiss gowns—at weddings, on runways, in lush gardens—suggest aspirational, or even escapist, fantasies. (In fact, the images are based on fashion shoots and other contemporary media sources.) These paintings are complemented, rather enigmatically, by pixelated pastel abstractions. Rawlings has titled her show after "La Fille aux Cheveux de Lin" ("The Girl with the Flaxen Hair"), by Claude Debussy; perhaps her geometric compositions are A.I. visualizations of that piano score. More interesting is a selection of totally inscrutable collages installed between the paintings—tiny, almost accidental-looking constellations of what appear to be paint daubs and scraps of ribbon affixed directly to the wall. In these distilled, whisper-like, site-specific gestures one detects the show's weirdly exacting, hesitant pulse.—*J.F. (Chapter NY; through Feb. 5.)*

DANCE

New York City Ballet

An eventful winter season is planned, COVID permitting. Of particular interest is a new ballet by Justin Peck, the choreographer of the eye-catching dance sequences that drive Steven Spielberg's excellent new version of "West Side Story." The ballet is performed in sneakers and set to Caroline Shaw's "Partita for 8 Voices," a mostly a-capella piece. (The vocal group Roomful of Teeth, for whom the music was composed, sings live at the ballet's first three shows, on Jan. 27 and Jan. 29.) Another new work, no less intriguing, is the first for the company by Jamar Roberts, a creator of powerful dances for Alvin Ailey, where he is the choreographer-in-residence. Roberts tends to favor jazz, and his new piece, "Emanon—in Two Movements" (premièring Feb. 3), is set to music by the jazz saxophonist and composer Wayne Shorter. The company is also bringing back two rarities from the repertory: Jerome Robbins's pioneering ballet "Moves," from 1959, which is performed in silence, and Balanchine's streamlined, one-act "Swan Lake."—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch Theatre; Jan. 27-Feb. 27.)*

American Dance Guild

The New Dance Group is an underappreciated force in American dance history. Founded in 1932, as an artist collective dedicated to the struggles of the working class, it lasted into the nineteen-seventies, in the form of a racially integrated school and presenting organization promoting a passionate and progressive modernism. In 1993, the American Dance Guild mounted a retrospective concert of eighteen reconstructed works by the group's choreographers, and now, in the program "New Dance Group: Voices for Change," it's putting footage of that show online (on its Web site and Vimeo) in weekly installments. Some pieces, such as Donald McKayle's "Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder" and Pearl Primus's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," are still well known. Others, such as Eve Gentry's "Tenant of the Street" and Jane Dudley's "Time Is Money," are time-capsule discoveries.—*Brian Seibert (americandanceguild.org/2022-festival; Jan. 31-Feb. 27.)*

TELEVISION

Landscapers

This HBO miniseries is based on the true story of Susan and Chris Edwards, an English couple who, in 2013, were arrested for murdering Susan's parents—and burying the bodies in their back yard—fifteen years earlier. The show's co-creators, Will Sharpe, who directed, and Ed Sinclair, who wrote the script, fully integrate the breaking of the fourth wall into their haunting study of marriage, victimhood, and

role-play. Since the killings, Susan (Olivia Colman) and Chris (David Thewlis) have been living in France, where fugitive life is uneventful. Susan, a cinephile, blows through ludicrous amounts of money on rare movie posters and film memorabilia, while Chris tries and fails to find a job to support her life style. Their outlaw existence is endearingly simple, a trifle boring—they are not so much on the run as on a long walk. After they turn themselves in, Susan and Chris unspool their stories to the police as if telling genre tales. "Landscapers" does not hand down any real-world judgments—it wants to excavate the tension between fabulists and pragmatists, in order to suggest that pragmatists are just as blinkered, too insensitive to the experiences that cause others to abandon the rational world.—*Doreen St. Félix (Reviewed in our issue of 12/27/21.)*

South Side

In this comedy series (now in its second season, on HBO Max), set in the Chicago neighborhood of Englewood, Simon (Sultan Salahuddin) and Kareme (Kareme Young) are best friends who grudgingly clock in at Rent-T-Own, a shady furniture-and-appliance rental service. "South Side"—created by Salahuddin, his brother, Bashir, and Bashir's writing partner, Diallo Riddle—derives a great deal of its Black black humor from the encounters between its protagonists and the delinquent renters: the physical aspect of product repossession allows for so much slapstick. The universe of the series is dense and technically adroit: we have the cops, Officers Goodnight and Turner (Bashir Salahuddin and Chandra Russell, Bashir's wife); the mewling politicians, Allen Gayle and Adam Bethune (Diallo Riddle and Langston Kerman); Shaw (LaRoyce Hawkins), a terrifying hottie gangster, and his bullies; the pissy desk worker, Stacy (Zuri Salahuddin, Bashir and Sultan's sister); and a bunch of child wiseacres. "South Side" is of a piece with animated sitcoms: there's the controlled sprawl of loony characters, the granular picture of a city and its people, the surfeit of meticulously wrought gags and cultural references, the interplay of goofy and existential humor, the razzing of dirty political princes. This wackiness is fun, but it is also oddly literary, a kind of translation of the hyperbolic in Black American humor.—*D.S.F. (12/13/21)*

Station Eleven

Don't let the premise of this new drama from HBO Max—about several people who survive a deadly flu that wipes out most of the Earth's population—deter you from leaping in; the story is less about death and destruction than it is about life, vibrant and wild and humming with promise. The show, which was created by Patrick Somerville and adapted from Emily St. John Mandel's hit novel of the same name, centers on an actress named Kirsten (an excellent Mackenzie Davis), who was a child when the plague hit. (Matilda Lawler, who plays the younger Kirsten, is also a gifted performer.) Twenty years later, she leads a Shakespearean theatre troupe called the Traveling Symphony around the Great Lakes region. As outside dangers threaten the group, Kirsten springs into action to protect her tribe. "Station Eleven" is a weird and wonderful parable about hope in the face of crisis and the ways that people show up for one another. This is not a dystopian bummer—it's a celebration.—*Rachel Syme*

THE THEATRE

The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe

This one-woman show first arrived on Broadway in 1985, tailor-made for Lily Tomlin by Jane Wagner. Now it has been revived at the Shed, performed by Cecily Strong and directed by Leigh Silverman. The new production clarifies how tuned in—and limited—to Tomlin's rhythms, and to the problems of the eighties, the original was. The show begins with Strong as Trudy, who is "crazy," but happily so. She can, as she says, "pick up signals that seem to transmit snatches of people's lives," watching—and enacting—scenes from them. The characters she visits form a social frieze; among them are a latchkey kid and a once earnest activist whose life runs parallel to the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment. There are now contemporary references to, say, Elon Musk, but the play still feels firmly dated. Strong is funny and works from the heart. She could rivet in a show written about her own generation—one that is at once more sincere and more at sea than Tomlin and Wagner's.—*Vinson Cunningham (The Shed; through Feb. 5.)*

Whisper House

Young Christopher (Wyatt Cirbus)—his father killed in action in the Second World War and his mother sent to a mental ward—is shipped off to live with his socially awkward aunt (Samantha Mathis), who operates the second-tallest lighthouse in Maine with the aid of a Japanese immigrant (James Yaegashi). Composed by Duncan Sheik, with a book by Kyle Jarrow and lyrics by both, this musical has a clever conceit: it's narrated by two ghosts (Alex Boniello and Molly Hager) who wish ill on the protagonists. But the effectiveness of that device is diminished by the director Steve Cosson's decision to have the spectres leer throughout the show like a pair of B-movie Draculas. Sheik's melodies are as stirring as ever, and the six-piece orchestra

ON TELEVISION

ILLUSTRATION BY FAHMIDA AZIM

There are so many shows—and streaming services on which to watch them—that it is easy to overlook a true gem. But they are out there, glittering among the schlock, waiting to be discovered. Now is as good a time as any to hit play on the Peacock series **"We Are Lady Parts,"** a comedy from the creator Nida Manzoor about an all-female Muslim rock band in the U.K., which quietly débuted six hilarious episodes last summer and will soon start filming a second season. The show—which stars Anjana Vasan, Sarah Kameela Impey, Faith Omole, Juliette Motamed, and Lucie Shorthouse, as a ragtag riot-grrrl-esque group of musicians (and their cheeky manager)—is a modern-day screwball comedy laced with dashes of magical realism. The women regularly melt into rich fantasy worlds, as when Vasan's shy guitarist, Amina, imagines herself into a schmaltzy black-and-white movie when face to face with her crush. The show's strength is in its highly specific and eccentric characters; it taps into so many aspects of the British Muslim experience (which, in clunky depictions in popular culture, is so often portrayed as a monolith) that it moves past sheer representation and into a fully developed, rich, silly world where the jokes land as crisply as the G chords.—*Rachel Syme*

sounds grand, but the text is disappointingly obvious, with nary an unexpected incident or rhyme.—*Rollo Romig (59E59; through Feb. 6.)*

MOVIES

Golden Exits

The intersection of life and work bares hidden conflicts and sparks new ones in the writer and director Alex Ross Perry's taut, intimate melodrama, from 2017, of families and friends in the confines of Cobble Hill. Nick (Adam Horovitz), an archivist, is organizing the papers of his late father-in-law, an acclaimed editor. Nick is married to Alyssa (Chloë Sevigny), a therapist, whose sister Gwen (Mary-Louise Parker), the executor of the estate, makes Nick a pawn in sibling rivalry. Meanwhile, Nick's young assistant, Naomi (Emily Browning), makes Alyssa jealous and Gwen suspicious. The group is linked with another family—Sam (Lily Rabe), who's Gwen's assistant, and Sam's sister Jess (Analeigh Tipton), who's married to Buddy (Jason Schwartzman) and runs a recording studio with him. Deftly juggling characters and plotlines, and eliciting fierce emotions in coolly controlled performances, Perry evokes simmering frustrations and stifled furies, galling resentments and bitter self-recognitions. Sean Price Williams's cinematography is urgent and confrontational; Robert Greene's editing keeps the mood swings sharp and swift. The characters' flayed vulnerability plays like Bergman in Brooklyn.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Amazon, Vudu, and other services.)*

Harlem Nights

This boldly original, boisterously idiosyncratic, yet introspective drama—a gangland tale, set briefly in 1918 and then mostly in the nineteen-thirties—is the only movie that Eddie Murphy has directed to date. He also wrote the elaborate story, about a night club run by a gambling-ring operator named Sugar Ray (Richard Pryor), whose adopted son, a trigger-happy orphan (Desi Arnez Hines II), grows up to become his right-hand man, an impetuous troublemaker called Quick (Murphy). The film is a whirlingly divergent romp, blending agonizing violence with outrageous humor; above all, it has the feel of oral history, of lives and times rescued from oblivion. It spotlights a host of extravagant, exciting performers (including Della Reese and Redd Foxx), and the plot involves some outlandish twists, but the comedy is dead earnest. With a labyrinth of brutal threats and subtle double crosses, fatal misunderstandings and nimble evasions, Murphy brings to life a teeming, fabled past that undercuts nostalgia with authentic visions of danger. Released in 1989.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, HBO Max, and other services.)*

Suzanne, Suzanne

This medium-length documentary by Camille Billops and James V. Hatch, from 1982, is a multigenerational story, centered on the death of a man called Brownie. He was the father of Suzanne, the husband of Billie, and the son-in-law of Alma—and he was a domestic abuser. Suzanne, a recovering heroin addict, details the emotional and physical trauma of her childhood, which led to her drug use; Billie speaks of the liberation she felt after her husband's death. But, along with the participants' frank and unsparing discussions, the filmmakers develop a distinctive, stylistically original, and practically effective framework of both image and staging in order to unleash pent-up words and emotions. One extraordinary sequence features a composition of Suzanne and Billie together, both facing the camera, as Billie describes the horror of the beatings that her husband administered to Suzanne in a ritual that the family called "death row," and of the beatings that she herself endured. It's a scene of tragic confession and commiseration, of a newfound mutual understanding born of agonies reimagined on camera, by way of simple but profound directorial imagination.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel and screening Jan. 26 at MOMA.)*

The Wendell Baker Story

What is the collective noun for the Wilson brothers? A relaxation of Wilsons? They're all here, clubbing together to create so blatant a throwback to the nineteen-seventies that any viewer not wearing a floral shirt may be refused entry. Directed by Luke and Andrew Wilson, the movie stars Luke as Wendell Baker, a groundless optimist from Texas, who has an unsteady girlfriend (Eva Mendes), a dog, and not much else. After a spell in jail, he goes to work at a retirement home, where the head nurse (Owen Wilson) is making life hell for some of the crusty customers and is thus asking for revenge. The residents include Skip Summers (Harry Dean Stanton), Boyd Fullbright (Seymour Cassel), and Nasher (Kris Kristofferson), who have faces like dried-up riverbeds; they turn the movie into an admiring study of oldster hipness. The film is lazy, loose, inoffensive, shot through with occasional sadness, and all but ruined by an ending of spectacular wrongness. Will Ferrell punctures the mood with a cameo of surprising comic ferocity. Released in 2007.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 5/21/07.) (Streaming on Peacock, Tubi, and other services.)*

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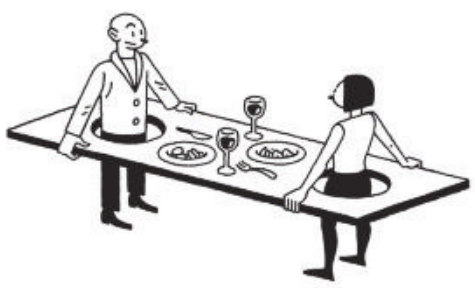
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town

WHAT TO STREAM

COURTESY KINO LORBER

The celebrated touch that made the Berlin-born director Ernst Lubitsch the blithe poet of shivery desire takes on a macabre tone in the silent melodrama **"Three Women,"** one of his first Hollywood films, from 1924. (It's streaming, in a sharp new restoration, on Kino Now.) This tale of the toxic connection of lust and money involves a middle-aged high-society roué named Edmund Lamont (Lew Cody), who's broke, and a rich woman of fading youth, Mabel Wilton (Pauline Frederick), who's lonely. Her efforts to snare Edmund, who's fleecing her, involve concealing her eighteen-year-old daughter, Jeanne (May McAvoy), from him. But, when Jeanne shows up uninvited, Edmund—his lechery matching his venality—seduces her, and turns his attention to a new conquest. The story's dramatic subtleties are curdled and grubby; Lubitsch fills the film with derisive panoramas of the Roaring Twenties social whirl and seething closeups of material things—glittering jewelry, desperate cosmetics, shimmering finery, telltale letters. As the ruthless deceptions veer toward blackmail and violence, Lubitsch's images burst with hectic flamboyance, and Frederick's performance rises to a fury that anticipates Joan Crawford's heyday.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

Rosella
137 Avenue A

At most sushi restaurants, when you're enjoying an omakase meal for which you're soon going to pay a large sum of money, you don't expect to hear phrases like "striped bass from a hydroponic farm in Bushwick," "sake brewed in Industry City," or "soy sauce made by a guy named Bob in Mystic, Connecticut." And yet that's exactly what you may hear at Jeff Miller's East Village spot, Rosella—the only sustainable sushi restaurant in New York City.

Miller, who grew up in California, is a pioneer: from 2017 to 2019, he was the chef at the *first* sustainable sushi restaurant in New York City, Mayanoki, now closed. At Rosella, he continues his practice of purposefully avoiding overfished species, a factor that constantly shifts in relation to fishery management, following the recommendations of the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch and the NOAA FishWatch programs. He also strives to source his ingredients as locally as possible, a philosophy that extends to the interior of his restaurant. The cozy space—with a six-seat omakase counter in the back and several bar seats in the front—features handsome wood countertops carved from a London plane tree that fell in Red Hook, Brooklyn, during Hurricane Sandy, in 2012.

Whether you invest in the fifteen-course omakase or just stop in for a *chirashi* bowl—a medley, atop rice, of exquisite cuts of sashimi, balancing stronger and lighter flavors, leaner and fattier fish, almost all of it procured in the U.S.—the welcome from Rosella's tight team of chefs and servers is warm. On a recent night, a succulent strip of Florida Spanish mackerel, swiped with *yuzu kosho*, was followed by a silky piece of applewood-smoked steelhead trout, from Hudson, New York. Artistic license abounds. The menu's Rolls That Defy Categorization section listed just one, an avocado roll mounded with Maine lobster, extracted whole from the claw and lightly dressed with citrus mayo, reminiscent of . . . a lobster roll. A slurpable, spicy Singapore-style *laksa*—poised to give ramen some healthy competition—combined chicken broth, homemade shrimp paste, coconut milk, and lime for a tangy, velvety soup swimming with thin rice noodles, roasted maitake mushrooms, and seared Gulf shrimp.

As in the trout, smoke found its way to a sea-urchin roll, and to the Crudo Verde, featuring walnut-wood-smoked Baja California amberjack wrapped around pickled tomatillos and nestled with mandarin supremes. Miller told me, "I love the flavor of smoke, so I have to limit myself with two or three things a night."

In his quest for sustainability, Miller has discovered a constellation of nearby artisans making traditional Japanese ingredients. He said that he mixes his sushi rice with "rice vinegar made in Pennsylvania by a little husband-and-wife operation called Keepwell Vinegar. They also make the misos that we use." That Mystic soy sauce is from Moromi, a company started by Bob Florence, who left the corporate world to learn fermenting techniques at the esteemed Chiba Shoyu, in Japan. And Rosella highlights Brooklyn-made sake: Kato Sake Works, in Bushwick, was started by a Japanese expat who produces a lovely, bright, smooth *junmai*. "Most of these things didn't even exist five years ago," Miller said.

Rosella aptly bills itself as an American sushi restaurant, but its name has roots in Australia—specifically, outside of Canberra, where Miller lived as a study-abroad student in high school, in the home of an eccentric man named Ron, who taught him how to cook intricate dishes. The area was rife with wild rosella parrots; Miller associates them with his burgeoning food awakening.

For dessert, you can have that American favorite, carrot cake, here on the verge of savory, fortified with sunchoke miso and garnished with candied orange peel and marigold flowers. The cake is scooped into a bowl, its sides smeared with a generous whoosh of scrumptious white frosting. The star ingredient? The cult favorite Ben's cream cheese, from Rockland County, just up the road. *(Omakase $150; sushi $7–$12; other dishes $6–$35.)*

—Shauna Lyon

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
PUTIN'S WAR GAME

Vladimir Putin presents himself to his citizens and to the world as the standard-bearer of a modern counter-enlightenment. He has declared liberal democracy "obsolete," a political arrangement that has "outlived its purpose." One of his historical role models is said to be Alexander III, a reactionary tsar in the Romanov dynasty who instituted draconian restrictions on the press, sought to "Russify" his multi-ethnic empire, and mobilized against internal and external threats. Four years ago, Putin expressed his deep admiration for the tsar while visiting the Crimean Peninsula, a substantial and distinctly unthreatening parcel of Ukraine that Russia invaded in 2014 and has occupied ever since.

Once more, Putin is poised to invade Ukraine. His weapons include military hardware, malware, and propaganda. The last time he invaded, he did so with utmost stealth, employing the "little green men" of the special forces as temporary cover in the court of public opinion while seizing Simferopol, Yalta, and Sevastopol. Now he wants the West, distracted and in disarray, to know that Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Luhansk, in the industrial east, and even Kyiv, the capital, are potentially in his sights.

For weeks, Putin's deputies and propaganda outlets have delivered contradictory pronouncements, at once denying any intention to invade and amplifying his urge to roll back what he sees as the galling encroachments of the West since the end of the Cold War. "NATO Is a Cancer: Shall We Cure It?" was the headline last week in one pro-Kremlin newspaper, *Argumenti i Fakty*. In *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, Konstantin Sivkov, a military analyst, said, "Russia must take unconventional steps. Harsh ones. If we don't, our 'partners' might think they can wipe their feet on Russia." He wondered about the possible need to create warheads that could "strike Yellowstone Park" or set off a "deadly tsunami with waves hundreds of metres high that would sweep away everything in their path."

Few leaders have leveraged inscrutability the way Putin has. His propagandists, kleptocratic allies, and secret services never know precisely what he will do next. But his general imperative is obvious: the preservation of power. As a trained K.G.B. officer, Putin senses threats in countless corners, and he is schooled in the history of challenges to Kremlin authority. He knows, for instance, that at around noon on August 25, 1968, four days after the Soviet Army moved into Czechoslovakia to crush the reformist movement known as the Prague Spring, eight Moscow intellectuals went to Red Square and briefly hoisted signs with such slogans as "For Your Freedom and Ours!" The poet Natalya Gorbanevskaya reached into a baby carriage and pulled out a Czech flag. This "anti-Soviet outburst," as a secret report to the Communist Party Central Committee described it, lasted only as long as it took for K.G.B. guards to set upon the demonstrators, beat them, and arrest them.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

But that fleeting protest had profound consequences. Vadim Delaunay, one of the Red Square demonstrators, said in court that his "five minutes of freedom" had been worth the thrashing and the prison sentence that was sure to come. He could not have known just how right he was. There were many factors that led Mikhail Gorbachev to propose the reforms known as glasnost and perestroika: the expense of empire, a shrivelling domestic economy, intellectual and scientific isolation, and the public's indifference to Communist ideology. The dissident movement that took the Red Square demonstrators as an inspiration, though never large in numbers, was a powerful generator of free thought and possibility. By the late nineteen-eighties, even Gorbachev, as the General Secretary of the Communist Party, paid uneasy tribute to the movement's most eminent leader, Andrei Sakharov.

Over and over, Putin has learned a singular lesson: crowds rarely come to the public square demanding more autocracy. At the May Day parade in 1990,

citizen groups marched in front of the Communist Party leadership assembled atop Lenin's tomb and aired their grievances with slogans and signs: "Down with the Politburo! Resign!" "Down with the Empire and Red Fascism!" A year and a half later, the Soviet Union dissolved—an event that Putin has declared the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the twentieth century. Since then, he has regarded opposition demonstrations—such as those in Moscow, on Bolotnaya Square, in 2011, or in various states within the former Soviet "sphere of influence," including Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan—as an intimation of mortality. And so, increasingly, he has become the philosopher and enforcer of authoritarian rule.

Enforcement comes with episodes of brutal intolerance. In August, 2020, Putin's security services used the nerve agent Novichok to poison Alexey Navalny, the regime's most prominent and impudent opponent. When Navalny survived, the authorities arrested him and, after a trial worthy of Kafka, locked him away in a prison camp near the city of Vladimir. Elections have been rendered a farce, courts a sham, parliament a plaything of the President. Various politicians, activists, and journalists deemed inconvenient to the regime have been murdered, assaulted, imprisoned, or forced into exile—not en masse, as in the days of Stalin, but often enough so that the limits of public life are made chillingly plain. The authorities have harassed human-rights organizations and liberal media outlets, such as Meduza and TV Rain, branding them "foreign agents." Memorial, an organization devoted to the restoration of historical truth, has been ordered to close.

Putin is particularly expert at exploiting the vulnerabilities, hypocrisies, and mistakes of his opponents. He plays a weak hand to maximal tactical advantage, and, at the moment, his high cards are Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas and the destabilization of democracy abroad, particularly in the United States. Donald Trump's Presidency, the January 6th insurrection, and the retreat from Afghanistan were especially gratifying to him. So is the fact that the supposed beacon of what used to be called "the free world" has millions of citizens who say they believe that their current President was elevated through a rigged ballot and ought to be turned out by force. It is a great deal easier to engage in a propaganda war with an opponent that is divided, dispirited, and worried about civil strife.

Ukraine is a sovereign nation of more than forty million people. It has been independent of Moscow rule for three decades. The country suffers from its own domestic crises—corruption, political division—but younger Ukrainians have been born into a far less autocratic political culture than have their Russian counterparts. It is not a sure thing that Putin will invade Ukraine. What is certain is that any attempt to occupy that nation will provoke resistance and lead to bloody disaster.

—David Remnick

SAN FRANCISCO POSTCARD

STREET SWEEPING

In San Francisco, three weeks after Mayor London Breed declared a state of emergency to fight the "nasty streets" downtown, Artie Gilbert walked up Market Street into the Tenderloin. It was dawn, and the open-air drug markets were dispersing. Gilbert, a former member of the Crips who spent twenty-six years in prison, said, "This is like walking into paradise." A man in a bus shelter was hunched over, smoking fentanyl with a plastic straw. "About a year and a half ago, you couldn't even walk through here: tents and drug dealers down every block, 24/7," Gilbert said. He gestured up the street. "Now the dealers pile up in a different area—they migrate further *that* way."

Gilbert walks this route regularly as an employee of a civic group called Urban Alchemy, whose mission is "transforming the energy in traumatized urban spaces." Its street ambassadors, most of them formerly incarcerated people, are paid a starting rate of about twenty-one dollars an hour to keep certain blocks clear during the day.

He was joined by a supervisor named Tiffany McClendon, who had on a leopard-print head wrap. "I was a full-time hustler in the Tenderloin for years," she said. "I know all these people. I was selling pills, crack, heroin, crystal meth with them. I'm one day away from where they are. This week, a guy tried to hit me with a fire extinguisher." She went on, "I did so much harm to this community. Now I'm like the mama here." Last year, fentanyl killed more people in San Francisco than COVID did.

"I was a getaway driver in S.F. in my teens," McClendon said. "When they don't want to move, people on the street call us hired criminals. But most people here are cool with it. Often it just pushes them to the next block—you can't get high in the overnight shelters, so a lot of people are back here all night." She passed a group selling drugs on the stairs to a BART station. "Police barely fuck with us, because we do all their work," she said.

Gilbert arrived at an encampment on Turk Street—one of several "Safe Sleep Villages" that Urban Alchemy runs—where he met Ian Clark-Johnson, another worker. They entered the village, where twelve people were living in tents by a parking garage. "We do wellness checks to make sure—well, are you alive, basically," Clark-Johnson said. Back on the street, he talked to stragglers who hadn't yet moved from the pavement after a 7 A.M. sweep.

"Just put it away," Clark-Johnson said to a man bent over a piece of foil. The man put the foil in his backpack until Clark-Johnson walked away, then took it out again.

"San Francisco is segregated. This is a containment zone," Clark-Johnson said. He stopped at a building whose entrance, at night, is crowded with people shooting fentanyl. "Now, during the day, residents can leave their building, exit and enter," he explained. A man named Cornbread came up and asked for money. "I only got two dollars," Clark-Johnson told him. "You want some food?" They went into a coffee shop, and Cornbread got a hot chocolate, because there was no cappuccino.

Next, Gilbert stopped by the main village, a fenced enclosure of seventy-nine tents, across from City Hall. The rows of tents surround bronze statues of the California grizzly and the Roman

goddess of war, Minerva. Elisa Dunivent, who has lived in the village for more than a year, said, "I call it my home. Outside these gates it's a lot worse. I live here with my boyfriend and his pet rooster. I spend all day here cooking and cleaning. I went to culinary school." She came to San Francisco after getting sick from mold in her house in Modesto.

Outside the village, people camp on the sidewalk. "Good morning!" Gilbert said. He passed a man under a red blanket. "We wouldn't bother this guest till a little later, after the sun comes up," he said. "We might come back and say, 'Need a coffee, need a bagel?' We don't really like calling the police on the guests."

Some San Franciscans want to recall the progressive district attorney, Chesa Boudin, for, they argue, selectively enforcing only laws he deems righteous. "I understand why people are frustrated," Gilbert said. "Right over here, a lady jumped out of her wheelchair and started beating a little kid." He continued, "The police come down this street, maybe they blow the horn, but they don't want to stop and do the paperwork to arrest them."

He headed back to headquarters. "After my shift, I'll go kick back, smoke a blunt, decompress, look at a lake, hear my heart beating, hear my thoughts thinking," he said.

—*Antonia Hitchens*

MOBILIZING
STOP THE SHOE SELFIE

The current civic mood is one of disgruntlement—flight attendants being harassed, shoving matches in testing lines, anti-vax protests. ("It's a violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Section 2, if you don't let us sit down in the Olive Garden in Times Square!" one sit-in participant was heard screaming recently.) It's easy to blame the peevishness on the pandemic. But maybe everyone's just irritated by all the helicopters? In the year before COVID, 311 received three thousand helicopter-noise complaints; last year, it received twenty-six thousand. Blades fly sorties to J.F.K. and East Hampton. Tourist convoys patrol Central Park. One chopper picked up passengers in a vacant lot in Crown Heights, then buzzed the Verrazzano; an N.Y.P.D. helicopter pursued it into New Jersey. "Is it legal to do what's been done?" the pilot asked, in the *Daily News*. "That we will figure out eventually."

Caroline Wood lives in Chelsea, within rotor-wash range of Hudson River commuters and Empire State Building sightseers. By the summer of 2020, she recounted, "I thought we were under attack." At first, Wood, a screenwriter, aired her grievances on Twitter. Some replies were hostile. She shrugged them off. "The next thing that happened is we started getting these phone hangups," Wood said. "Our caller I.D. would identify them as 'New York Helicopter.' I'm usually not a paranoid person. But that was definitely odd."

"I kept telling her she was going to get kneecapped," her partner, the playwright Bruce Norris, said.

Wood said, "Not to be dramatic, but, when they're circling directly above our building every day, that is a particular sensory experience. I think almost anyone would associate that with warfare."

It was time for a counter-offensive. At 1600 hours on a recent Sunday, Wood and Norris joined a ragtag corps of air observers to scan the skies along the Hudson. A command post, consisting of bicycles and an anti-helicopter sandwich board, was established in hostile territory, just outside the Thirtieth Street heliport. The troops, about fifteen in all, were affiliated with Stop the Chop NY/NJ, a group seeking a federal de-helicopterized zone (with exceptions for police, media, and medevacs). The mission: scout the enemy, gripe, commiserate.

"We're all volunteers," Melissa Elstein, Stop the Chop's chair, said. "You have people like me spending, I would say, all of my free time on this. People are suffering. Their homes have become uninhabitable. So they're sitting inside with the radar to track the misery."

"We're not normally crazy," Adrian Benepe, a board member, added. "This has turned us crazy." Benepe's radicalization had occurred during his day job: he's the president of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, which sits directly beneath the J.F.K. and Hamptons flight paths. He blamed the inundation on foreign invaders—in 2016, New York restricted the number of flights from city heliports.

"So the industry said, 'Thank you very much, we'll go to New Jersey,'" Benepe said. "Governors Island is like our early-detection outpost now."

On the waterfront, preparations were under way. Official hats were distributed, binoculars produced. Radar was consulted. Someone held a decibel reader. Bogeys appeared from across the river, where FlyNyon, a major tourist outfit, operates. The first helicopter thundered toward the landing pad. Everyone braced against the wind. "Ninety-nine decibels!" someone bellowed.

When the next helicopter swooped in, the group released a volley of boos and thumbs-down. One man yelled, "Have you heard about how sonar hurts the whales? Well, we're mammals, too!"

As they scanned the sky, intel was exchanged. "I can tell an N.Y.P.D. from a FlyNyon," Wood said. "The N.Y.P.D. is sort of flatulent," Norris said. A man named Ken Coughlin added, "I can tell a Sikorsky from a Bell." Someone else warned, "If you hear an R44, duck for cover."

Disaster scenarios were reviewed. "I'm thinking about a fully loaded Sikorsky flying down Flatbush Avenue into a school," Benepe said. A woman fretted, "Somebody could drop poison into the reservoir. I've seen them hovering low."

The assembled appreciated a certain esprit de corps. "I feel like no one believes us," Wood said. "But it's just this idea that thousands of New Yorkers can be disrupted so that five tourists can take a shoe selfie over the Empire State Building."

Another flight zoomed by. A man in

a red jacket named David Koch ("like the dead billionaire") threw up his hands: "You think, There is no god!" Morale was slipping. A big moon was rising. A rainbow appeared over Central Park: a shoe-selfie dream.

Just then, a Sikorsky strafed in low, directly overhead. "One hundred and five decibels!" came the call. The wind tossed bicycles to the ground. River water soaked the group. A woman screamed in terror. Benepe, his hat sent flying, turned into the squall, holding aloft a middle finger. Afterward, the corps decided to retreat. "I think that was their big 'fuck you,'" Benepe said.

—Zach Helfand

THE DEEP
MIRACLE OF THE FISHES

One morning in May, Ben Estes, a retired Hollywood grip ("Terminator," "True Lies") and a lifelong surf caster, was walking on the beach in Orange County when he came upon something weird. "It looked like a deflated black balloon that had thorns on it," he said. "Its mouth had some teeth you could almost see through. They were like pins. They were crazy teeth. And that thing that was hanging off its head, *it* looked pretty crazy. Not like anything I'd ever seen before."

He gave the balloon a poke. He adjusted the crazy-looking head tassel. And then the thing moved. "Its mouth just opened really wide, a slow *eeer*," Estes said, making the sound of a door opening on creaky hinges. Later, he learned that the mouth is designed to swallow prey whole.

When Estes showed his family some pictures he had taken, his daughter, who was four when "Finding Nemo" came out, recognized the creature right away. "She said, 'I know what that is. It's the monster-looking fish that chased Nemo around,'" Estes recalled.

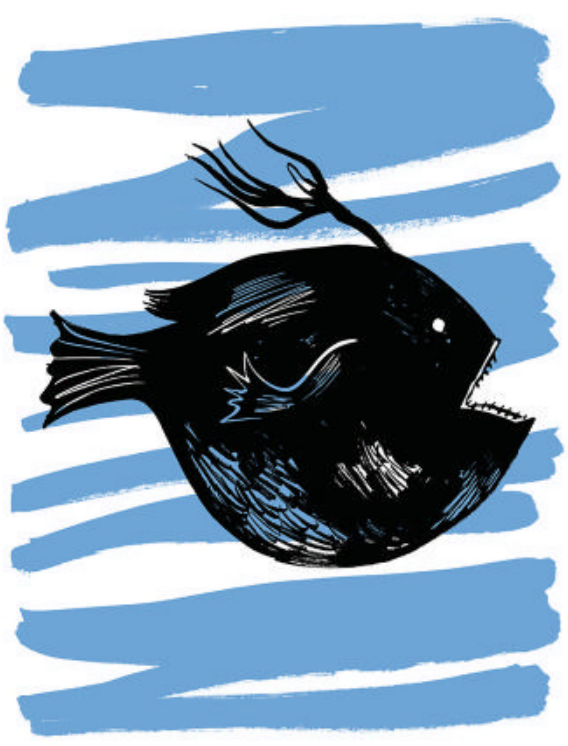
The creature was a female Pacific footballfish, an exceedingly rare deep-sea anglerfish that lives thousands of feet underwater, in the midnight zone, and sports a bioluminescent lure that it uses to attract prey. (The males are tiny, lightless, possibly toothless, and even harder to find.) Its close cousins are the seadevils (spiny, prickly, warty); more distantly, it's related to the frogfish, the batfish, and the sea toad.

The ichthyology world was stoked about Estes's find. The last time a Pacific footballfish had been collected in California was in 2001. "It was pretty exciting to see such a rare anglerfish," Ben Frable, of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, said. "Fast-forward to November, and I get an e-mail from a local news station." Another Pacific footballfish had washed up, this time in San Diego.

"My heart was racing," Frable said. "I didn't get any information, just 'There's this weird fish—can you identify it?'" But, by the time he went to check it out, it had been scavenged or had washed back out to sea. In December, a colleague at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration passed Frable another tip out of San Diego. "There was a 'weird deep-sea fish, like what was in the news,'" Frable said. Bingo. That fish went to Scripps and became one of about thirty specimens worldwide.

Estes's find went to the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, where she has been named, via a public Twitter poll, Spiny Babycakes. Last week, Bill Ludt, the ichthyology collection's curator, and Todd Clardy, its manager, welcomed a visitor to the room where the museum's three million fish specimens are stored.

"So this is where she lives now," Clardy said. "She's in a metal tank. She's a little too large to put in a jar." Sharing the tank were two warty seadevils, one of which, collected from the stomach of a sperm whale in the nineteen-seventies, had a parasitic male attached. In many types of anglerfish, the male fuses to the female, sharing her circulatory system and trading sperm for food. Among its relatives, the footballfish is an outlier, Ludt said: "It's strange in that it *doesn't* have parasitic males."



A Pacific footballfish

Clardy put on a rubber glove and eased the footballfish out: fifteen inches of tarry blob, with a startling underbite. "She's basically a swimming head," he said. "Several rows of nice sharp teeth." In the throat, more teeth. "The whole point of this is, whenever they encounter something they can possibly eat, gotta be able to capture it—don't let it get away—and eat it. You don't know when the next opportunity will come."

Little is known about the species' biology. Clardy and Ludt have already discovered a previously unknown feature of the fish: in addition to bioluminescence, it appears capable of fluorescence. Even less is known about its behavior, as one has never been observed at depth. The triple stranding is also a head-scratcher. "Why are these deep-sea fish washing up on the beach?" Scripps's Frable wondered. Was it oil spills, ocean-dumped DDT, sonic booms? "People on the Internet are coming up with Marvel-movie-style theories about why."

Ludt, at the museum, thinks it's possible that the fish are gathering somewhere to breed, then dying. "But we don't know," he said. The fish Estes found had an empty stomach; the December fish was full of sand.

The scientists agreed that the footballfish bonanza was probably just luck. That's how Dwight Hwang felt, too. He's an Orange County-based *gyotaku* artist, who makes fish prints. "It's a bucket-list fish that I thought would be wonderful but impossible ever to get," he said. "When it hit international news, I had people contacting me all the way from Australia, saying, 'You need to print this thing!'" Before Spiny Babycakes was preserved, the museum allowed him to do so. Then, in December, Hwang scored again. He hooked a footballfish playing Animal Crossing, where it appears only in winter months, at night, then disappears.

—Dana Goodyear

REBOOT DEPT.

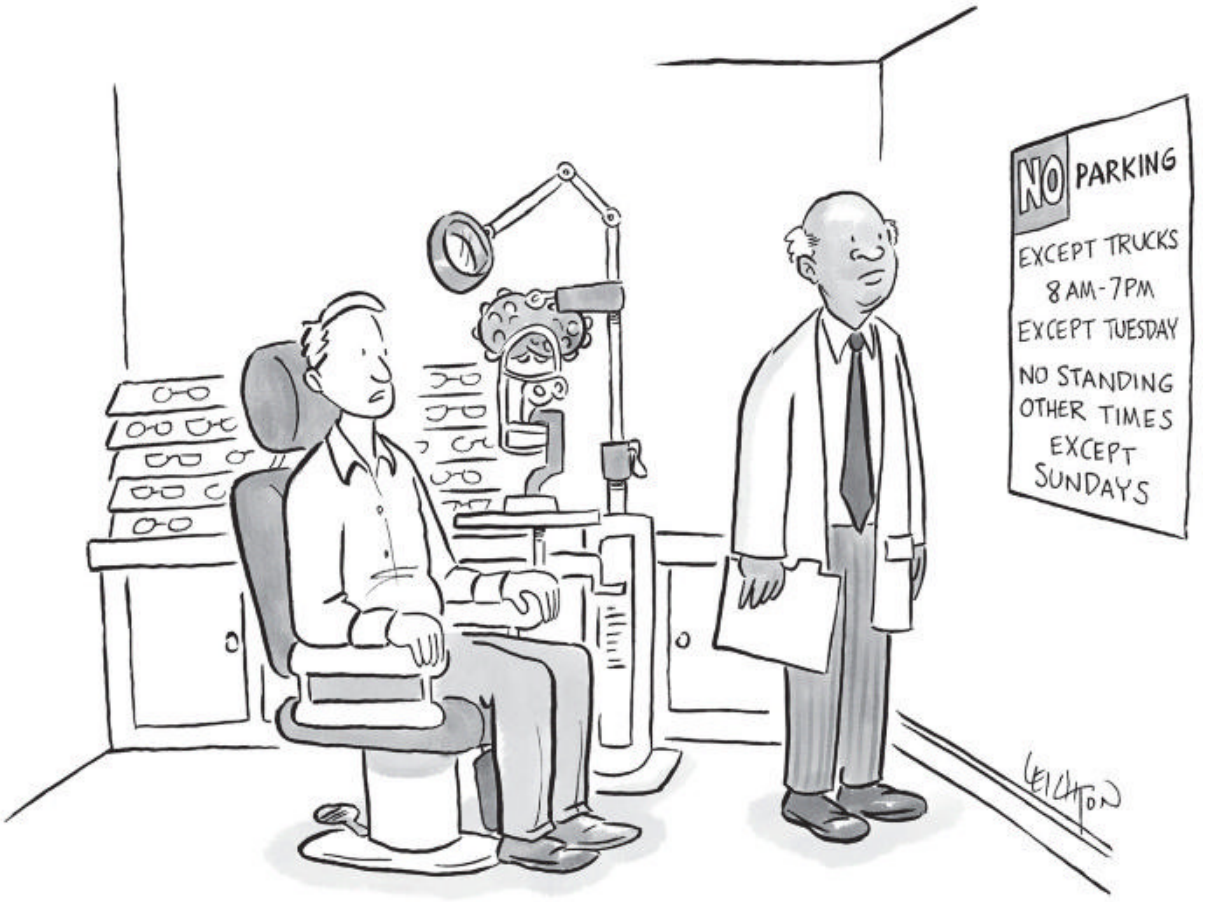
STOIC OR BUST

The comedian Scott Thompson likes to listen to the "Breakfast Club" podcast while driving in Toronto. One day, during the darkest part of the lockdown, the self-help author Ryan Holiday was a guest. The episode was about Stoicism, and Thompson's attention was piqued when he heard Holiday quote Epictetus. He remembers it as: "We all have to die, but do we have to die bawling?"

"That was it for me," Thompson said, on a recent Zoom call. "It hit me like a shot to the heart." He ordered the Enchiridion, Epictetus' Stoic advice manual. When it arrived, he made a cup of tea, sat down with his two cats, Rusty and Dusty, and began to read.

"Epictetus says you're a fool for trying to control outcomes, that all you can control is your reaction," Thompson said, seated before a cutout of Louise Lasser ("my muse"). "I'm at the point in my life where I don't want to be jerked around by my emotions. This two-thousand-year-old philosopher, he's exactly how I want to be."

Thompson, who became well known in the nineteen-eighties as a member of the comedy troupe the Kids in the Hall, then as a star of "The Larry Sanders Show," was looking for enlightenment; COVID had shut down the writers' room he and the other Kids had set up to write material for a reboot of their old television show, to be streamed on Amazon. Stoicism, founded by Zeno of Citium in the third century B.C.E., expounded upon by Seneca, and adopted by Marcus Aurelius, has been having a comeback. Holiday's best-seller "The Obstacle Is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Trials Into Triumph" repackages Stoicism as a series of life hacks. It came out a year after the launch of Stoicon, a conference for practitioners and academics. According to Penguin Random House, e-book sales of Seneca's "Letters from a Stoic" were up three hundred and fifty-six per cent in 2020, and the ranks of Stoicism fans include Arnold Schwarzenegger, LL Cool J, Elizabeth Holmes, Cory Booker, Brie Larson, and T-Pain.



"Nope. I can't make any sense out of that at all."

Modern Stoicism might seem more suited to Joe Rogan listeners than to an iconic gay comedian. "I can't like something that straight men like?" Thompson said, with a raised eyebrow. "I'm a classic old-fashioned liberal. This is something that's ancient and universal."

Last winter, Thompson shot a short film with his friend Paul Bellini, a "Kids" writer who used to appear on the show in a towel, about the four basic tenets of Stoicism. "Prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance," Thompson said. "I ordered all the stuff online: a green screen, fake snow, gallons of blood."

He continued, "I tend to write late at night, and I talk out everything. I do all the characters." His building's management company sent him a letter saying there had been complaints that he was throwing parties during lockdown.

The "Kids" reboot managed to film last July and will be released this summer. The series will feature an appearance by Buddy Cole, Thompson's barstool-philosopher character, who did a lot to change the way gay men are represented in comedy. Thompson considers Buddy a Stoic, he said: "Nothing touches him."

For a time in 2020, Thompson stepped away from social media, to escape "the din." "Epictetus would say you don't own anything, not your home, not your clothes, not even the people you love," he said. "It's all temporary. The only road to true happiness is owning what you say."

He went on, "Two thousand years ago, they didn't have comedians, but they had people who looked at things in different ways. That's what comedians do. Epictetus probably would have been a standup—he would have been a George Carlin."

If the "Kids" reboot doesn't fly, Thompson has a backup plan: "I've got a nice white robe and a beautiful pair of sandals. I'll find a bunch of young acolytes and we'll set up a Stoic school." His fellow-Kids, he said, would think, "Oh, he's off on another one of his *things!*"

Having spent almost two years immersed in Greek philosophy, he said, "I've got to be really strong, so when I'm thrown back into the real world I don't freak out." He touched his throat, pooched his lips, and transformed into Buddy Cole. Leaning forward, he smirked conspiratorially and said, "We'll see how *that* holds."

—Ivy Knight

A REPORTER AT LARGE

GINNI THOMAS'S CRUSADES

The activism of Clarence Thomas's wife risks tarnishing the Supreme Court.

BY JANE MAYER

In December, Chief Justice John Roberts released his year-end report on the federal judiciary. According to a recent Gallup poll, the Supreme Court has its lowest public-approval rating in history—in part because it is viewed as being overly politicized. President Joe Biden recently established a bipartisan commission to consider reforms to the Court, and members of Congress have introduced legislation that would require Justices to adhere to the same types of ethics standards as other judges. Roberts's report, however, defiantly warned everyone to back off. "The Judiciary's power to manage its internal affairs insulates courts from inappropriate political influence," he wrote. His statement followed a series of defensive speeches from members of the Court's conservative wing, which now holds a super-majority of 6–3. Last fall, Justice Clarence Thomas, in an address at Notre Dame, accused the media of spreading the false notion that the Justices are merely politicians in robes. Such criticism, he said, "makes it sound as though you are just always going right to your personal preference," adding, "They think you become like a politician!"

The claim that the Justices' opinions are politically neutral is becoming increasingly hard to accept, especially from Thomas, whose wife, Virginia (Ginni) Thomas, is a vocal right-wing activist. She has declared that America is in existential danger because of the "deep state" and the "fascist left," which includes "transsexual fascists." Thomas, a lawyer who runs a small political-lobbying firm, Liberty Consulting, has become a prominent member of various hard-line groups. Her political activism has caused controversy for years. For the most part, it has been dismissed as the harmless action of an independent spouse. But now the Court appears likely to secure victories for her allies in a number of highly polarizing cases—on abortion, affirmative action, and gun rights.

Many Americans first became aware of Ginni Thomas's activism on January 6, 2021. That morning, before the Stop the Steal rally in Washington, D.C., turned into an assault on the Capitol resulting in the deaths of at least five people, she cheered on the supporters of President Donald Trump who had gathered to overturn Biden's election. In a Facebook post that went viral, she linked to a news item about the protest, writing, "LOVE MAGA people!!!!" Shortly afterward, she posted about Ronald Reagan's famous "A Time for Choosing" speech. Her next status update said, "GOD BLESS EACH OF YOU STANDING UP or PRAYING." Two days after the insurrection, she added a disclaimer to her feed, noting that she'd written the posts "before violence in US Capitol." (The posts are no longer public.)

Later that January, the Washington *Post* revealed that she had also been agitating about Trump's loss on a private Listserv, Thomas Clerk World, which includes former law clerks of Justice Thomas's. The online discussion had been contentious. John Eastman, a former Thomas clerk and a key instigator of the lie that Trump actually won in 2020, was on the same side as Ginni Thomas, and he drew rebukes. According to the *Post*, Thomas eventually apologized to the group for causing internal rancor. Artemus Ward, a political scientist at Northern Illinois University and a co-author of "Sorcerers' Apprentices," a history of Supreme Court clerks, believes that the incident confirmed her outsized role. "Virginia Thomas has direct access to Thomas's clerks," Ward said. Clarence Thomas is now the Court's senior member, having served for thirty years, and Ward estimates that there are

Ginni Thomas sees herself as an enemy of the "deep state" and the "fascist left."

ILLUSTRATION BY CHLOE CUSHMAN

"something like a hundred and twenty people on that Listserv." In Ward's view, they comprise "an élite right-wing commando movement." Justice Thomas, he says, doesn't post on the Listserv, but his wife "is advocating for things directly." Ward added, "It's unprecedented. I have never seen a Justice's wife as involved."

Clarence and Ginni Thomas declined to be interviewed for this article. In recent years, Justice Thomas, long one of the Court's most reticent members, has been speaking up more in oral arguments. His wife, meanwhile, has become less publicly visible, but she has remained busy, aligning herself with many activists who have brought issues in front of the Court. She has been one of the directors of C.N.P. Action, a dark-money wing of the conservative pressure group the Council for National Policy. C.N.P. Action, behind closed doors, connects wealthy donors with some of the most radical right-wing figures in America. Ginni Thomas has also been on the advisory board of Turning Point USA, a pro-Trump student group, whose founder, Charlie Kirk, boasted of sending busloads of protesters to Washington on January 6th.

Stephen Gillers, a law professor at N.Y.U. and a prominent judicial ethicist, told me, "I think Ginni Thomas is behaving horribly, and she's hurt the Supreme Court and the administration of justice. It's reprehensible. If you could take a secret poll of the other eight Justices, I have no doubt that they are appalled by Virginia Thomas's behavior. But what can they do?" Gillers thinks that the Supreme Court should be bound by a code of conduct, just as all lower-court judges in the federal system are. That code requires a judge to recuse himself from hearing any case in which personal entanglements could lead a fair-minded member of the public to question his impartiality. Gillers stressed that "it's an appearance test," adding, "It doesn't *require* an actual conflict. The reason we use an appearance test is because we say the appearance of justice is as important as the fact of justice itself."

The Constitution offers only one remedy for misconduct on the Supreme Court: impeachment. This was attempted once, in 1804, but it resulted in an acquittal, underscoring the independence of the judicial branch. Since then, only one Justice, Abe Fortas, has been forced to step down; he resigned in 1969, after members of Congress threatened to impeach him over alleged financial conflicts of interest. Another Justice, William O. Douglas, an environmental activist, pushed the limits of propriety by serving on the board of the Sierra Club. In 1962, he resigned from the board, acknowledging that there was a chance the group would engage in litigation that could reach the Court. The historian Douglas Brinkley, who is writing a book about the environmental movement, told me, "I think Bobby and Jack Kennedy told Douglas to cool his jets."

In recent years, Democrats have been trying to impose stronger ethics standards on the Justices—a response, in part, to what Justice Sonia Sotomayor has described as the "stench" of partisanship on the Court. In 2016, Republicans in Congress, in an unprecedented act, refused to let President Barack Obama fill a vacancy on the Court. Trump subsequently pushed through the appointment of three hard-line conservative Justices. Last summer, Democrats in Congress introduced a bill that would require the Judicial Conference of the United States to create a binding code of conduct for members of the Supreme Court. They also proposed legislation that would require more disclosures about the financial backers behind amicus briefs—arguments submitted by "friends of the court" who are supporting one side in a case.

So far, these proposals haven't gone anywhere, but Gillers notes that there are extant laws circumscribing the ethical behavior of all federal judges, including the Justices. Arguably, Clarence Thomas has edged unusually close to testing them. All judges, even those on the Court, are required to recuse themselves from any case in which their spouse is "a party to the proceeding" or is "an officer, director, or trustee" of an organization that is a party to a case. Ginni Thomas has not been a named party in any case on the Court's docket; nor is she litigating in any such case. But she has held leadership positions at conservative pressure groups that have either been involved in cases before the Court or have had members engaged in such cases. In 2019, she announced a political project called Crowdsourcers, and said that one of her four partners would be the founder of Project Veritas, James O'Keefe. Project Veritas tries to embarrass progressives by making secret videos of them, and last year petitioned the Court to enjoin Massachusetts from enforcing a state law that bans the surreptitious taping of public officials. Another partner in Crowdsourcers, Ginni Thomas said in her announcement, was Cleta Mitchell, the chairman of the Public Interest Legal Foundation, a conservative election-law nonprofit. It, too, has had business before the Court, filing amicus briefs in cases centering on the democratic process. Thomas also currently serves on the advisory board of the National Association of Scholars, a group promoting conservative values in academia, which has filed an amicus brief before the Court in a potentially groundbreaking affirmative-action lawsuit against Harvard. And, though nobody knew it at the time, Ginni Thomas was an undisclosed paid consultant at the conservative pressure group the Center for Security Policy, when its founder, Frank Gaffney, submitted an amicus brief to the Court supporting Trump's Muslim travel ban.

Bruce Green, a professor at Fordham specializing in legal ethics, notes, "In the twenty-first century, there's a feeling that spouses are not joined at the hip." He concedes, though, that "the appearance" created by Ginni Thomas's political pursuits "is awful—they look like a mom-and-pop political-hack group, where she does the political stuff and he does the judging." It's hard to imagine, he told me, that the couple doesn't discuss Court cases: "She's got the ear of a Justice, and surely they talk about their work." But, from the technical standpoint of judicial ethics, "she's slightly removed from all these cases—she's not actually the legal director." Green feels that the conflict of interest is "close, but not close enough" to require that Thomas recuse himself.

David Luban, a professor of law and philosophy at Georgetown, who specializes in legal ethics, is more concerned. He told me, "If Ginni Thomas is intimately involved—financially or

ideologically tied to the litigant—that strikes me as slicing the baloney a little thin."

When Clarence Thomas met Ginni Lamp, in 1986, he was an ambitious Black conservative in charge of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission—and she was even more conservative and better connected than he was. Her father ran a firm that developed housing in and around Omaha, and her parents were Party activists who had formed the backbone of Barry Goldwater's campaign in Nebraska. The writer Kurt Andersen, who grew up across the street from the family, recalls, "Her parents were the roots of the modern, crazy Republican Party. My parents were Goldwater Republicans, but even *they* thought the Lamp family was nuts." Ginni graduated from Creighton University, in Omaha, and then attended law school there. Her parents helped get her a job with a local Republican candidate for Congress, and when he won she followed him to Washington. But, after reportedly flunking the bar exam, she fell in with a cultish self-help group, Lifespring, whose members were encouraged to strip naked and mock one another's body fat. She eventually broke away, and began working for the Chamber of Commerce, opposing "comparable worth" pay for women. She and Thomas began dating, and in 1987 they married. As a woman clashing with the women's movement, she had found much in common with Thomas, who opposed causes supported by many Black Americans. At Thomas's extraordinarily contentious Supreme Court confirmation hearings, in 1991, Anita Hill credibly accused him of having sexually harassed her when she was working at the E.E.O.C. Ginni Thomas later likened the experience to being stuck inside a scalding furnace. Even before then, a friend told the Washington *Post*, the couple was so bonded that "the one person [Clarence] really listens to is Virginia."

Ginni Thomas had wanted to run for Congress, but once her husband was on the Supreme Court she reportedly felt professionally stuck. She moved through various jobs, including one at the Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank. In 2010, she launched her lobbying firm, Liberty Consulting. Her Web site quotes a client saying that she is able to "give access to any door in Washington."

Four years ago, Ginni Thomas inaugurated the Impact Awards—an annual ceremony to honor "courageous cultural warriors" battling the "radical ideologues on the left" who use "manipulation, mobs and deceit for their ends." She presented the awards at luncheons paid for by United in Purpose, a nonprofit that mobilizes conservative evangelical voters. Many of the recipients have served on boards or committees with Ginni Thomas, and quite a few have had business in front of the Supreme Court, either filing amicus briefs or submitting petitions asking that the Justices hear cases. At the 2019 event, Ginni Thomas praised one of that year's recipients, Abby Johnson, a former Planned Parenthood employee who became an anti-abortion activist, for her "riveting indictment of Planned Parenthood's propagation of lies." That year, Thomas also gave a prize to Mark Meadows, then a hard-line Republican in Congress, describing him as the leader "in the House right now that we were waiting for." Meadows, in accepting the award, said, "Ginni was talking about how we 'team up,' and we actually *have* teamed up. And I'm going to give you something you won't hear anywhere else—we worked through the first five days of the impeachment hearings."

Thomas's decision to bestow prizes on Johnson and Meadows underscores the complicated overlaps between her work and her husband's. In 2020, Johnson, a year after receiving an Impact Award, filed with the Court an amicus brief supporting restrictions on abortion in Louisiana. Last year, Johnson participated in the January 6th protests, and the insurrection has since become the object of much litigation, some of which will likely end up before the Court. Last month, she went on Fox News and said that "a couple of the liberal Justices"—she singled out Justice Sotomayor by name—had been "idiotic" during oral arguments in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, the Mississippi abortion case now under consideration by the Supreme Court. (Johnson didn't respond to requests for comment.)

Soon after Ginni Thomas gave Mark Meadows an Impact Award, he became Trump's chief of staff. This past December, he refused to comply with a subpoena from the House select committee that is investigating the Capitol attack. Cleta Mitchell, who advised Trump on how to contest Biden's electoral victory, received an Impact Award in 2018. She has moved to block a committee subpoena of her phone records. The House of Representatives recently voted to send the Justice Department a referral recommending that it charge Meadows with criminal contempt of Congress. The same thing may well happen to Mitchell. It seems increasingly likely that some of Ginni Thomas's Impact Award recipients will end up as parties before the Supreme Court.

The Justice Department has so far charged more than seven hundred people in connection with the insurrection, and Attorney General Merrick Garland has said that the federal government will prosecute people "at any level" who may have instigated the riots—perhaps even Trump. On January 19th, the Supreme Court rejected the former President's request that it intervene to stop the congressional committee from accessing his records. Justice Thomas was the lone Justice to dissent. (Meadows had filed an amicus brief in support of Trump.) Ginni Thomas, meanwhile, has denounced the very legitimacy of the congressional committee. On December 15th, she and sixty-two other prominent conservatives signed an open letter to Kevin McCarthy, the House Minority Leader, demanding that the House Republican Conference excommunicate Representatives Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger for their "egregious" willingness to serve on the committee. The statement was issued by an advocacy group called the Conservative Action Project, of which Ginni Thomas has described herself as an "active" member. The group's statement excoriated the congressional investigation as a "partisan political persecution" of "private citizens who have done nothing wrong," and accused the committee of serving "improperly issued subpoenas."

A current member of the Conservative Action Project told me that Ginni Thomas is part of the group not because of her qualifications but "because she's married to Clarence." The member asked to have his name withheld

because, he said, Ginni is "volatile" and becomes "edgy" when challenged. He added, "The best word to describe her is 'tribal.' You're either part of her group or you're the enemy."

Ginni Thomas has her own links to the January 6th insurrection. Her Web site, which touts her consulting acumen, features a glowing testimonial from Kimberly Fletcher, the president of a group called Moms for America: "Ginni's ability to make connections and communicate with folks on the ground as well as on Capitol Hill is most impressive." Fletcher spoke at two protests in Washington on January 5, 2021, promoting the falsehood that the 2020 election was fraudulent. At the first, which she planned, Fletcher praised the previous speaker, Representative Mary Miller, a freshman Republican from Illinois, saying, "Amen!" Other people who heard Miller's speech called for her resignation: she'd declared, "Hitler was right on one thing—he said, 'Whoever has the youth has the future.'" At the second protest, not far from the Trump International Hotel, Fletcher declared that, when her children and grandchildren one day asked her, "Where were you when the Republic was on the verge of collapse?," she would answer, "I was right here, fighting to my last breath to save it!"

Vivian Brown, who returned a call to Moms for America, said that she would not discuss Fletcher's testimonial for Ginni Thomas or clarify whether Fletcher had been Thomas's business client. But the record suggests that the two have been political associates for more than a decade. A program from Liberty XPO and Symposium, a 2010 convention that has been described as the "largest conservative training event in history," indicates that Fletcher and Thomas co-hosted a Remember the Ladies Banquet. A list of other speakers at the symposium includes Stewart Rhodes, the founder of the Oath Keepers, an extremist militia group. Rhodes was arrested earlier this month and charged, along with ten associates, with seditious conspiracy for allegedly plotting to halt the congressional certification of Biden's electoral win by storming the Capitol. (Rhodes has pleaded not guilty.)

Another organizer of the January 6th uprising who has been subpoenaed by the congressional committee, Ali Alexander, also has long-standing ties to Ginni Thomas. Like Fletcher, Alexander spoke at a rally in Washington the night before the riot, leading a chant of "Victory or death!" A decade ago, Alexander was a participant in Groundswell, a secretive, invitation-only network that, among other things, coördinated with hard-right congressional aides, journalists, and pressure groups to launch attacks against Obama and against less conservative Republicans. As recently as 2019, Ginni Thomas described herself as the chairman of Groundswell, which, according to documents first published by *Mother Jones*, sees itself as waging "a 30 front war seeking to fundamentally transform the nation." As Karoli Kuns, of the media watchdog Crooks and Liars, has noted, several Groundswell members—including Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka, the fringe foreign-policy analyst—went on to form the far-right flank of the Trump Administration. (Both Bannon and Gorka were eventually pushed out.) According to Ginni Thomas's biography in the Council for National Policy's membership book, she remains active in Groundswell. A former participant told me that Thomas chairs weekly meetings.

Norman Eisen, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who, between 2009 and 2011, served as the special counsel and special assistant to the President for ethics and government reform, told me that "it is hard to understand how Justice Thomas can be impartial when hearing cases related to the upheaval on January 6th, in light of his wife's documented affiliation with January 6th instigators and Stop the Steal organizers." He argues that "Justice Thomas should recuse himself, given his wife's interests in the outcome of these cases."

Gillers, of N.Y.U., and other legal scholars say that there is little chance of such a recusal. Justice Thomas has recused himself at least once before, from a 1996 case involving a military academy that his son was attending. But, as Eisen observed, though Ginni Thomas's activism has attracted criticism for years, Clarence Thomas has never acknowledged it as a conflict of interest.

Recusals on the Supreme Court are extremely rare, in part because substitutes are not permitted, as they are for judges on lower courts. Yet several other Justices have stepped aside from

"Until I've had my coffee, I'm only capable of talking about coffee."

cases to avoid even the appearance of misconduct. Justice Stephen Breyer recuses himself from any case that has been heard by his brother, Charles Breyer, a federal judge in the Northern District of California. "It's about the appearance of impropriety," Charles Breyer told me. "Laypeople would think you would favor your brother over the merits of the case. It's [done] to make people believe that the Supreme Court is not influenced by relationships." Justice Breyer also recused himself from a case involving the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, because his wife had previously worked there.

Charles Breyer told me that, although Justices sometimes "might have a right not to recuse, that doesn't change the question, which is: How does that affect the appearance of impropriety?" When I asked him whether the Justices confront one another about potential conflicts of interest, he said, "My guess is that they don't discuss it. They leave it entirely up to the independent judgment. They wouldn't dare suggest recusal—it's part of the way they get along with one another."

In 2021, Justice Brett Kavanaugh recused himself, without explanation, from a case apparently related to a family member. According to Gabe Roth, the executive director of Fix the Court, a nonprofit advocating for reforms to the federal judiciary, an amicus brief had been filed by a cosmetics trade association that Kavanaugh's father used to run.

The spouses of other Justices have taken steps to avoid creating conflicts of interest in the first place. When Ruth Bader Ginsburg joined the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, her husband, Martin Ginsburg—then one of the country's most successful tax lawyers—left his law firm and turned to teaching. After John Roberts was nominated to be a Justice, his wife, Jane Sullivan Roberts, retired from practicing law and resigned from a leadership role in Feminists for Life, an anti-abortion group.

In 2004, Justice Antonin Scalia famously defended his decision to continue presiding over a case that involved former Vice-President Dick Cheney after it was revealed that the two men had gone duck hunting together while the case was in the Court's docket. Scalia argued, in essence, that Washington is a small town where important people tend to socialize. But in 2003 Scalia recused himself in a case addressing whether the mention of God in the Pledge of Allegiance violated the Constitution's separation of church and state—because, several months before oral arguments began, he'd given a speech belittling the litigant's arguments.

Ginni Thomas has complained that she and her husband have received more criticism than have two well-known liberal jurists with politically active spouses: Marjorie O. Rendell continued to serve on the appeals court in Pennsylvania while her husband at the time, Ed Rendell, served as the state's governor; Stephen Reinhardt, an appeals-court judge in California, declined to recuse himself from cases in which the American Civil Liberties Union was involved, even though his wife, Ramona Ripston, led a branch of the group in Southern California.

Ethics standards may be changing, however. Cornelia T. L. Pillard, a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit, currently handles a spousal conflict of interest more rigorously. She is married to David Cole, the national legal director for the A.C.L.U., and recuses herself from any case in which the A.C.L.U. has been involved, whether at a national or local level—and regardless of whether her husband worked on the case.

Roth, of Fix the Court, told me that there is an evident need "for a clearer and more exacting recusal standard at the Supreme Court—especially now, as it's constantly being thrust into partisan battles, and as the public's faith in its impartiality is waning."

"Once upon a time, there was a middle-aged man who left his job in corporate accounting to focus on his writing . . ."

Traditionally, judges have not been particularly fastidious about potential conflicts of interest connected to amicus briefs. But that standard may be changing, too. As the number of partisan political issues facing the judicial branch has grown, so has the number of these briefs. Many of them are being filed by opaquely funded dark-money groups, whose true financial sponsors are concealed, thus enabling invisible thumbs to press on the scales of justice. Paul Collins, a political scientist at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, who has studied the use of amicus briefs, told me, "There's been an almost linear increase in the number of them since the World War Two era. Now it's the rare case that *doesn't* have one." The reason, he

said, is that, "more and more, the courts are seen as a venue for social change." He explained that political groups, many with secret donors, are "using the courts the way they used to use Congress—basically, amicus briefs are a means of lobbying."

The problem has become so widespread that in 2018 the rules for appellate-court judges were amended to make it possible for judges to strike any amicus brief that might force them to recuse themselves. There has been no such reckoning at the Supreme Court—not even when close political associates of Ginni Thomas's have filed amicus briefs. One such associate is Frank Gaffney, a defense hawk best known for having made feverish claims suggesting that Obama is a Muslim and that Saddam Hussein's regime was involved in the Oklahoma City bombings. Leaked documents show that Gaffney was a colleague of Ginni Thomas's at Groundswell as far back as 2013. Gaffney was a proponent of Trump's reactionary immigration policies, including, most vociferously, of the Administration's Muslim travel ban. As these restrictions were hit by lawsuits, Gaffney's nonprofit, the Center for Security Policy, signed the first of two big contracts with Liberty Consulting. According to documents that Gaffney's group filed with the I.R.S., in 2017 and 2018 it paid Ginni Thomas a total of more than two hundred thousand dollars.

It's not entirely clear where Gaffney's nonprofit got the funds to hire Liberty Consulting. (Gaffney didn't respond to interview requests.) But, according to David Armiak—the research director at the Center for Media and Democracy, which tracks nonprofit political spending—one of the biggest donors to Gaffney's group in 2017 was a pro-Trump political organization, Making America Great, whose chairman, the heiress Rebekah Mercer, was among Trump's biggest backers. While two hundred thousand dollars was being passed from Trump backers to Gaffney to Ginni Thomas, the Supreme Court agreed to hear legal challenges to Trump's travel restrictions. In August, 2017, Gaffney and six other advocates submitted an amicus brief to the Court in support of the restrictions, arguing that "the challenge of Islam must be confronted."

That December, as the case was still playing out, Ginni Thomas bestowed one of her Impact Awards on Gaffney, introducing him "as an encourager to me and a great friend" but giving no hint that his group was paying her firm. The Impact ceremony was held at the Trump International Hotel, and, according to another guest, Jerry Johnson, Justice Thomas was in attendance. Johnson later recalled that the Justice sat in front of him and was a "happy warrior," pleased to be watching his wife "running the meeting." Throughout the 2017 and 2018 sessions, as various challenges to the travel restrictions were considered by the Court, Justice Thomas consistently took a hard pro-Trump line. Finally, in June, 2018, Thomas and four other Justices narrowly upheld the final version of the restrictions.

It's impossible to know whether Thomas was influenced by his wife's lucrative contract with Gaffney, by Gaffney's amicus brief, or by her celebration of Gaffney at the awards ceremony. Given the Justice's voting history, it's reasonable to surmise that he would have supported the travel restrictions no matter what. Nevertheless, the lawyers on the losing side of the case surely would have wanted to know about Ginni Thomas's financial contract with Gaffney. Judges, in their annual financial disclosures, are required to report the source of their spouses' incomes. But Justice Thomas, in his disclosures in 2017 and 2018, failed to mention the payments from Gaffney's group. Instead, he put down a curiously low book value for his wife's lobbying firm, claiming in both years that her company was worth only between fifteen and fifty thousand dollars.

Roth, of Fix the Court, told me that, at the very least, Justice Thomas should be asked to amend his financial statements from those years—as he did in 2011, after it became public that he hadn't disclosed the six hundred and eighty-six thousand dollars that his wife had earned at the Heritage Foundation between 2003 and 2007. Beyond that, Roth said, "the Justices should, as a rule, disqualify themselves from cases in which a family member or the family member's employer has filed an amicus brief." In Congress, the Democratic senator Sheldon Whitehouse, of Rhode Island, is pushing for reform. Amicus briefs, he told me, are "a form of lobbying that has two terrible aspects—the interests behind them are hidden, and they are astonishingly effective in terms of the win rate." He added, "They open up real avenues for secret mischief."

In January, 2019, Ginni Thomas secured for Gaffney the access that her Web site promises. As Maggie Haberman, of the *Times*, and Jonathan Swan, of Axios, have reported, not long after Clarence and Ginni Thomas had a private dinner at the White House with Donald and Melania Trump, the President's staff gave in to a months-long campaign by Ginni to bring her, Gaffney, and several other associates to the White House to press the President on policy and personnel issues. The White House was not informed that Gaffney's group had been paying Liberty Consulting for the previous two years. (Gaffney's group did not report signing a contract with Liberty Consulting for 2019.)

The White House meeting was held in the Roosevelt Room, and by all accounts it was uncomfortable. Thomas opened by saying that she didn't trust everyone in the room, then pressed Trump to purge his Administration of disloyal members of the "deep state," handing him an enemies list that she and Groundswell had compiled. Some of the participants prayed, warning that gay marriage, which the Supreme Court legalized in 2015, was undermining morals in America.

One participant told me he'd heard that Trump had wanted to humor Ginni Thomas because he was hoping to talk her husband into retiring, thus opening up another Court seat. Trump, given his manifold legal problems, also saw Justice Thomas as a potentially important ally—and genuinely liked him. But the participant told me that the President considered Ginni Thomas

"Do you have any true-crime podcasts?"

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"a wacko," adding, "She *never* would have been there if not for Clarence. She had access because her last name was Thomas."

Ginni Thomas rarely speaks to mainstream reporters, but she often gives speeches in private forums. The Web site of the watchdog Documented has posted a video of her speaking with striking candor. In October, 2018, she led a panel discussion during a confidential session of the Council for National Policy. At the time, the Senate was caught up in the fight over the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh, who had been accused of sexual assault. "I'm feeling the pain—Clarence is feeling the pain—of going through false charges against a good man," she said. "I thought it couldn't get worse than Clarence's, but it did." America, she said, "is in a vicious battle for its founding principles," adding, "The deep state is serious, and it's resisting President Trump." She declared twice that her adversaries were trying "to kill people," and drew applause by saying, "May we *all* have guns and concealed carry to handle what's coming!"

This warlike mentality is shared by Groundswell, the political group that Thomas has chaired. In a 2020 session of the Council for National Policy, Rachel Bovard, the senior director of policy at the Conservative Partnership Institute, described meeting weekly with Groundswell members to "vet" officials for disloyalty, saying, "Ginni has been *very* instrumental in working with the White House. . . . She really is the tip of the spear in these efforts." Bovard lamented Groundswell's failure to weed out the whistle-blower Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman before he gave testimony at Trump's first impeachment trial. "We see what happens when we don't vet these people," Bovard said. "That's how we got Lieutenant Colonel Vindman, O.K.?" Vindman, then the director for European affairs on Trump's National Security Council, testified that the President had tried to pressure Ukraine's leaders into producing dirt on Joe Biden's family. In retaliation, a smear campaign was mounted against Vindman. He suddenly found himself fending off false claims that he had created a hostile work environment at the N.S.C., and fighting insinuations that, because he was born in Ukraine and had been invited to serve in its government, he had "dual loyalty." (Vindman had self-reported Ukraine's offer, which he had rejected.) The Defense Department conducted an internal investigation of the accusations and exonerated him. But, Vindman told me, the attacks "harmed my career." He went on, "It's un-American, frankly, that a sitting Justice of the Supreme Court, who is supposed to be apolitical, would have a wife who is part of a political vendetta to retaliate against officials who were dutifully serving the public interest. It's chilling, and probably has already had an effect on silencing other whistle-blowers."

Another target of Groundswell members was Trump's former national-security adviser H. R. McMaster, who was deemed insufficiently supportive of the President. According to the *Times*, in 2018 Barbara Ledeen, a Republican Senate aide who had reportedly developed Groundswell's enemies list with Ginni Thomas, participated in a plot to oust McMaster by secretly taping him badmouthing Trump. Ledeen, who is a close friend of Ginni Thomas's, told the *Times* that she'd merely acted as a messenger in the scheme. The plan was to send an undercover female operative to snare McMaster at a fancy restaurant. But McMaster quit before the sting was executed. The *Times* also reported that another undercover operation—which targeted government employees, including F.B.I. agents, suspected of trying to thwart Trump's agenda—involved operatives from Project Veritas, the undercover-video group led by James O'Keefe. Ginni Thomas has given O'Keefe an Impact Award, too.

It's unclear whether the Crowdsourcers project that Thomas said she was launching with O'Keefe's help ever got off the ground. There's little public trace of Crowdsourcers, other than a tax filing from 2019, showing that it was developed under the oversight of the Capital Research Center, a right-wing non-

profit that does opposition research. Project Veritas's chief legal officer sent *The New Yorker* a statement saying that O'Keefe's "schedule does not permit such extracurricular activities" as Crowdsourcers. But, in a PowerPoint presentation on the effort, in 2019, Thomas said that "James O'Keefe wanted to head up" a part of the group aimed at "protecting our heroes." The purpose of Crowdsourcers, she said, was nothing less than saving America. "Our house is on fire!" she went on. "And we are stomping ants in the driveway. We're not really focussed on the arsonists who are right around us!"

Last year, Project Veritas asked the Supreme Court to hear its challenge to the Massachusetts ban on surreptitiously taping public officials. The Court turned down Project Veritas's petition, as it does with most such requests. Nevertheless, David Dinielli, a visiting clinical lecturer at Yale Law School, told me that Ginni Thomas's proclaimed political partnership with O'Keefe, and her awarding of a prize to him, appeared to be unethical. "That's what the code of conduct is supposed to control," he said.

Ginni Thomas has held so many leadership or advisory positions at conservative pressure groups that it's hard to keep track of them. And many, if not all, of these groups have been involved in cases that have come before her husband. Her Web site lists the National Association of Scholars—the group that has filed an amicus brief in the lawsuit against Harvard—among her "endorsed charities." The group's brief claims that the affirmative-action policies used by the Harvard admissions department are discriminatory. Though the plaintiffs have already lost in two lower courts, they are counting on the Supreme Court's new conservative super-majority to side with them, even though doing so would reverse decades of precedent. Peter Wood, the president of the N.A.S., is another Impact Award recipient. So, too, is Robert George, a legal scholar at Princeton who, according to the N.A.S.'s Web site, serves with Ginni Thomas on its advisory board. (He says that he has "not been active" on the board.) He received a "Lifetime" Impact Award from Ginni Thomas in 2019, and recently filed an amicus brief before the Supreme Court, in support of Mississippi's ban on nearly all abortions after fifteen weeks of pregnancy.

In April, 2020, when Ginni Thomas was serving as one of eight members on the C.N.P. Action board, it was chaired by Kelly Shackelford, the president and C.E.O. of First Liberty, a faith-based litigation group that is currently involved in several major cases before the Court. Last week, to the surprise of many observers, the Court agreed to hear a case in which First Liberty is defending a football coach at a public high school in Washington State who was fired for kneeling and praying on the fifty-yard line immediately after games. Richard Katskee, the legal director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, who is defending the school board, told me that the case was "huge," and could overturn fifty years of settled law. Shackelford's group is also the co-initiator of another case before the Court: a challenge to a Maine law prohibiting the state from using public funds to pay parochial-school tuition for students living in areas far from public schools. In addition to these cases, First Liberty has filed lawsuits that challenge COVID-19 restrictions on religious grounds—an issue that has come before the Court—and Ginni Thomas and Shackelford have served together on the steering committee of the Save Our Country Coalition, which has called COVID-19 health mandates "unconstitutional power grabs." In a phone interview, Shackelford told me that he couldn't see why Ginni Thomas's work with him posed a conflict of interest for Justice Thomas. "It's no big deal, if you look at the law on this," he said. It would be different, he argued, if there were a financial interest involved, or if she were arguing First Liberty's cases before the Court herself—but, he said, "almost everyone in America is connected through six degrees of separation."

Another of Ginni Thomas's fellow-directors on the C.N.P. Action board in 2020 was J. Kenneth Blackwell, a former Ohio secretary of state who is tied to one of the most consequential gun cases currently under consideration by the Supreme Court. In 2020, he was on the National Rifle Association's board of directors, and at the time the gun group's official affiliate in New York was challenging the state's restrictions on carrying firearms in public spaces. Earlier this term, the Court heard a related challenge, and a decision is expected later this year. (Blackwell didn't respond to an interview request.) Meanwhile, the Web site friendsofnra.org currently boasts that a winner of its youth competition had the opportunity to meet with "the wife of current Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas."

For lawyers involved in cases before the Supreme Court, it can be deeply disturbing to know that Ginni Thomas is an additional opponent. In 2019, David Dinielli, the visiting lecturer at Yale Law School, was a deputy legal director of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which had submitted an amicus brief in a gay-rights case before the Court. He told me he was acutely aware that Ginni Thomas and other members of the Council for National Policy loathed the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks right-wing hate groups. In 2017, C.N.P. Action directed its members to "commit to issuing one new post on Facebook and Twitter each week about the Southern Poverty Law Center to discredit them." In Thomas's leaked 2018 speech to the Council for National Policy, she denounced the S.P.L.C. for calling the Family Research Council—which is militantly opposed to L.G.B.T.Q. rights—a hate group.

For Dinielli, the idea that a Justice's spouse belonged to a group that had urged its members to repeatedly attack his organization was "counter to everything you'd expect if you want to get a fair shake" before the Court. He explained, "These activities aren't just political. They're aimed at raising up or denigrating actors specifically in front of the Supreme Court. She's one step away from holding up a sign in front of her husband saying 'This person is a pedophile.' "

Dinielli went on, "The Justices sit literally above where the lawyers are. For these people to do the job they were tasked with, they have to maintain that level. But this degrades it, mocks it, and threatens it." He warned, "Since the Court doesn't have an army, it relies on how it behaves to command respect. Once the veneer cracks, it's very hard to get it back." ♦

PERSONAL HISTORY

IMAGINING ZIGGY

A passage to parenthood.

BY AKHIL SHARMA

Not long after we began dating, my now wife, Christine, and I started making up stories about the child we might have.

We named the child—or, in the stories we told about him, he named himself—Suzuki Noguchi. Among the things we liked about him was that he was cheerfully indifferent to us. He did not wish to be either Irish (like Christine) or Indian (like me). Suzuki was eight, and he chose this name because he was into Japanese high fashion. When we told him that he couldn't just go around claiming to be Japanese, Suzuki said that he was a child of God and who were we to say that God was not Japanese.

In addition to being a dandy, Suzuki was a criminal. He dealt in yellowcake uranium and trafficked in endangered animals. Sometimes we asked him how his day at school had gone and he would warn, "Do you really want to be an accessory after the fact?" We imagined him banging on our bedroom door when we were having sex and shouting, "Stop! You can't get any child better than me."

My wife was forty-eight and I was forty-seven, and we started inventing these stories as a form of play. It also soothed some hurt part of us.

Christine grew up very poor in Dublin. As a child, she experienced periodic bouts of homelessness. When her family was able to get public housing, it was in a neighborhood where heroin was endemic. The family eventually settled in an area where children were regularly attacked by a local pit bull and people would come running with flaming torches, because fire was one of the few things that would make the dog unclench its jaws. I grew up with a severely brain-damaged brother, whom my parents took care of at home. My brother could not walk or talk or roll over in his sleep. Some nights, we didn't have health aides and my parents stayed up to turn him from side to side so he wouldn't get bedsores. My wife and I are careful people. We feel lucky to have the lives we have, and we don't want to mess them up. Our imaginary child was not careful at all.

Normally, it is the parents who imagine a future for the child and, through the imagining, hold open a space for the child to step into. In our case, it was the reverse.

I used to teach at Rutgers. I got an offer to teach at Duke for meaningfully more money. Duke wasn't promising tenure, though. I didn't want to surrender that security. Christine asked, "What would Suzuki do?"

"He would make me feel bad about how little I earn."

" 'Daddy, your salary is a rounding error,' " my wife said.

" 'Is that a paycheck or a dinner bill?' "

" 'A tip on a dinner bill.' "

" 'Are you going to be scared until you die?' "

The most wonderful thing about leaving New York City and moving to green North Carolina was the fact that we didn't have to worry about money. Once I left New York, I realized that financial anxiety had been like a piece of furniture I maneuvered around a hundred times a day. In Chapel Hill, we rented a three-bedroom, three-bath mid-century-modern home, on two acres with an artificial stream and a koi pond, for twenty-two hundred dollars a month.

My wife and I began talking about I.V.F. At this point, she was fifty and I was forty-nine. It was usually at night that we discussed it, lying in bed with the white-noise machine roaring. Christine had wanted to have children when she was younger but had surrendered

My wife and I began making up stories about the child we might have.

ILLUSTRATION BY DADU SHIN

this hope in her late thirties. I had never wanted a child. I think this was because I'd felt I had nothing to offer. My sense that I was worthless had come, in part, from my mother, who I believe is mentally ill (a diagnosis she disagrees with). I remember her telling me that people wouldn't even spit on me if it weren't for her. (She now denies this, along with most of my other recollections of our conversations.) Another part had come from the guilt of being healthy while my brother was not. As a child, when I walked out of the house in the morning and went down the street to where the school bus stopped, I was always conscious that my poor damaged brother was still at home, that all day my mother would be cleaning him, exercising him. I was also burdened with the knowledge that I did not want to switch places with my brother, and this was what made me feel that I was a bad person, that I had to hide my selfishness, that it would be best if I was not observed.

We are hurt in relationships, and we are healed in them, too. After I bought a thirteen-hundred-dollar watch and then had a panic attack at having spent so much money, my wife did not judge me, either for the panic attack or for spending at the edge of what we could afford. I once had an erotic dream about an affair and told my wife; she pointed out that I was writing a short story about an affair. One of the reasons I began thinking about the actuality of having a child was that I was overflowing with love for my wife and wanted a place to put that love.

Christine and I started investigating I.V.F. after a colleague at Duke offhandedly mentioned a friend who was in her sixties and had just given birth. Our minds snagged on this anecdote. We phoned the woman, a professor, and she was cheerful and practical, giving us a list of doctors to consult and telling us which clinics would not work with women over fifty. One of the doctors we ended up speaking with told us that some clinics would not work with couples whose combined age was over a hundred.

We e-mailed fertility clinics and then had Zoom appointments with the places that gave one free consulting session. Christine would put on makeup before these conversations.

Along with the overflow of love I was experiencing, another reason I wanted to have a child was that I wanted to make my parents happy.

I see my parents as tormented people. My father grew up in a troubled home, and if he hears good news he shakes the news suspiciously until the happiness dies. When I told him I had got tenure, he suggested that I was foolish to be happy since I still wouldn't earn much money. Once, my mother wanted to get hearing aids, and he told her, "Why? If, by mistake, some good news does come for you, I will write it down."

I've always perceived my mother to be very anxious, and her anxiety seems to manifest itself as a need for control. By constantly letting me know that I am a disappointment, she makes me desperate to please her. My brother died in 2012, and, soon after, my parents and I went to India to scatter his ashes in the Ganges. Each morning while we were there, I visited an elderly aunt whose husband had Parkinson's and had also lost his mind. I would sit with her for an hour. I did this because I remembered what it was like when I was living with my parents, how a night of taking care of a sick person leaves you feeling isolated. "Who are you showing off for?" my mother asked me one morning as I was leaving to see the aunt.

After decades of trying to get my parents to change, I now want them to feel seen. I call them every day. I tell them what I am doing and then ignore their hysterical responses. In the weeks after I first told my mother that I was dating Christine, I would call and she would accuse me of being a sexual deviant, because she opposes premarital sex. She would then hang up on me.

All this is, of course, exhausting. And, of course, every time I try to make my parents happy and fail, it makes me feel foolish for continuing to try.

I did not tell my parents that Christine and I were investigating the possibility of I.V.F. until Christine had undergone various tests and we knew that pregnancy was possible.

A few months after the process of inquiry began, I told my mother what we were planning. I was walking back from the mailbox when I phoned her. It was a sunny afternoon, and workers were putting down pine needles on a neighbor's yard to prevent erosion. I was nervous, and I had called while outside so that whatever emotions I experienced wouldn't contaminate my home.

"Christine and I are talking to doctors about using I.V.F."

My mother didn't respond.

The workers raked the pine needles. I wondered if my mother had heard me. I repeated myself.

"What's there to say?" she said.

I felt hurt, as if I had given her a present and she had put it aside without unwrapping it.

When I entered the house, I told my wife how my mother had responded. "She's scared," Christine said.

Several times during the next few weeks, I raised the topic of the possible baby with my mother. Each time, she failed to ask any follow-up questions. I finally asked her if she was afraid of the evil eye thwarting our hopes. Though she insists that she isn't superstitious, she quickly said yes, and fell silent, as if to avoid drawing the attention of bad fortune.

My wife and I entered the world of donor eggs. This is a strangely exploitative place, full of Web sites with names such as goldeneggdonation.com. The cost of acquiring donor eggs can easily be in the tens of thousands of dollars—a friend of mine who is Black and is married to a Black woman said that an acquaintance had offered them fertilized eggs for free and they were considering these, despite the fact that the woman offering the eggs was Thai and he and his wife very much wanted to raise Black children.

My first response to learning the price of donor eggs was to try to persuade my wife to ask her younger friends to donate their own. There was one woman who was getting her doctorate at Oxford and who, to me, seemed worth approaching. Christine was aghast at the suggestion. My second response was to argue that we should use leftover unfertilized eggs from other people's I.V.F. attempts. These eggs are kept frozen, and we were told that their success rate could be lower than that of freshly harvested ones. My wife said she was unwilling to get pumped full of hormones only to use an egg that was less than

optimal. This, I had to admit, was not unreasonable.

The fertility clinic we decided on was in Stamford, Connecticut. We picked it because the professor we spoke to had used it and because it had no age limits.

The clinic gave us access to its database of donors. While lying in bed, my wife and I began flicking through photos and videos, reading health and background questionnaires. The questions the women answered included whether they were willing to have their eggs used by same-sex couples and whether they were Jewish.

A few of the young women were very pretty. One Brazilian woman was achingly so. I was attracted to these women and felt confused by my desire. Because theoretically my sperm were going to fertilize their eggs, it was almost as if I were going to impregnate them. This felt dishonest to my marriage. Also, we would presumably have a child who somewhat resembled the donor, and so the attraction I felt toward the young women seemed creepy and vaguely incestuous.

The donors all seemed decent in a very calm way. Almost all explained that they had known someone who had struggled with infertility and that they wanted to give couples the opportunity to have a family. A social worker we consulted told us that donors tend to be in the caring professions. My wife had volunteered in orphanages in Romania, and I had known the aides who had come into my parents' home to help with my brother. The egg donors seemed similar to women we both admired. The young woman my wife and I ultimately selected had been the valedictorian of her high school and had volunteered in a NICU as a baby cuddler. I gave the fertility clinic a deposit.

As soon as I paid the deposit, I began having dreams in which I had cancer and was going to die. In these dreams, a baby existed, and, even in my sleep, my first worry on learning that I was going to die was for Christine and the baby. When I woke up, I retained the sense that I was not as important as they were, that my life was simply a sum of money that was there to be spent on my family. I don't think of myself as particularly self-sacrificing. It was strange to be responding in a way that seemed so out of character.

Christine had similar dreams of dying. She would wake me in the middle of the night and tell me that she was worried about how I would take care of the child if she passed. I responded that I was going to drop off the child at the nearest fire station.

When I told my mother my joke, she said, "Give me the baby. I will raise it." She said this immediately, and it was the first time I had heard her speak so forcefully about the child.

During winter break, my wife and I drove to New Jersey to stay with my parents. The goal was to use their house as a base for our appointments at the fertility clinic. Thus started the injections. Every two days, I knelt beside my wife and injected her in the hip. The low table covered with syringes in our bedroom reminded me of the syringes in my brother's room, the rubbing alcohol, the antiseptic gauze. I was choosing to spend tens of thousands of dollars so we could try to have a baby, but the feelings I had were the old familiar ones of not having a choice, of being in a situation that had been forced on me. At this time, the hormones were making Christine emotional. She would begin crying if the bed was unmade. The sense of emotions being out of scale also reminded me of my childhood, how my mother would call me selfish and worthless for wanting to watch TV instead of reading to my brother.

Once a week, we drove to Connecticut to see the fertility doctor. At the

clinic, whose walls were covered with photos of children, I sat in the waiting room as my wife was taken to be examined. During these appointments, and in our bedroom when I knelt beside her and injected her, I felt embarrassed at how much she was doing and how little I could do.

Contemplating the reality of a child made me feel that the passage of time was also real, that death was not theoretical. My mother prays several times a day. Her afternoon prayers are performed in the living room, where she sits on a sofa and rocks slightly as she chants, while reading from various pamphlets. I heard her praying one afternoon, and I went and sat on a nearby sofa. My mother is seventy-nine and has had health problems. Her voice is thin, and her shiny black hair only makes her look more fragile. As I watched her, I understood that she would probably die in five or six years. My normal response to emotion is to veer away from it. I wanted to interrupt my mother and ask what we would have for dinner. Instead, I sat and watched and listened. I became sadder and sadder. She finished chanting and brought the pamphlets to her forehead, as a sign of respect to God.

We received seventeen eggs from our donor in the cycle that we had paid for. To provide sperm, I went into a bathroom with a vial and my cell phone. All seventeen eggs were fertilized. Of the four embryos that survived to the blastocyst stage, only two were genetically normal. One was male and the other female.

Neither my wife nor I wanted the responsibility of picking. To select one would be to not select the other, and who were we to deprive this potential being of the right to move around in the world and experience life's joys?

All our fantasies had been of having a male child. Now that we actually had to decide, I didn't want a boy. I tried to imagine the reality of a son, and I felt toward him the impatience that I feel toward myself. My wife had helped raise two nieces and a nephew. She felt that she might be a better mother to a girl than to a boy.

Two weeks after the female embryo was implanted, my wife was sitting in our bedroom at my parents' house when her phone rang. It was the doctor's office saying that the hormone tests showed she was pregnant. I had been out getting gas when the call came. When I entered our bedroom, she got up and hugged me. "We're pregnant," she said.

I couldn't quite believe it. What did this mean? Despite all that we had done

to reach this moment, the news seemed impossible.

"Are you happy?" Christine asked.

"It feels strange."

We went to find my parents. My mother was in the living room watching "The Great British Baking Show."

Christine and I sat down on a sofa at a right angle to her.

"Mummy, the news came."

My mother looked at us silently. She knew that we had been waiting to hear about the hormone tests.

"Christine is pregnant."

My mother remained silent.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

"It feels like a shove," she said. By this, I later learned, she meant a shock.

My father came in. He looked at us and sensed that there might be news. He immediately turned around to leave the room. My father likes to keep the world at a distance and thus tries to get family news filtered through my mother.

"Sit," I scolded and pointed to the place on the sofa next to my mother. He sat down. My mother sidled up next to him.

"Christine is pregnant."

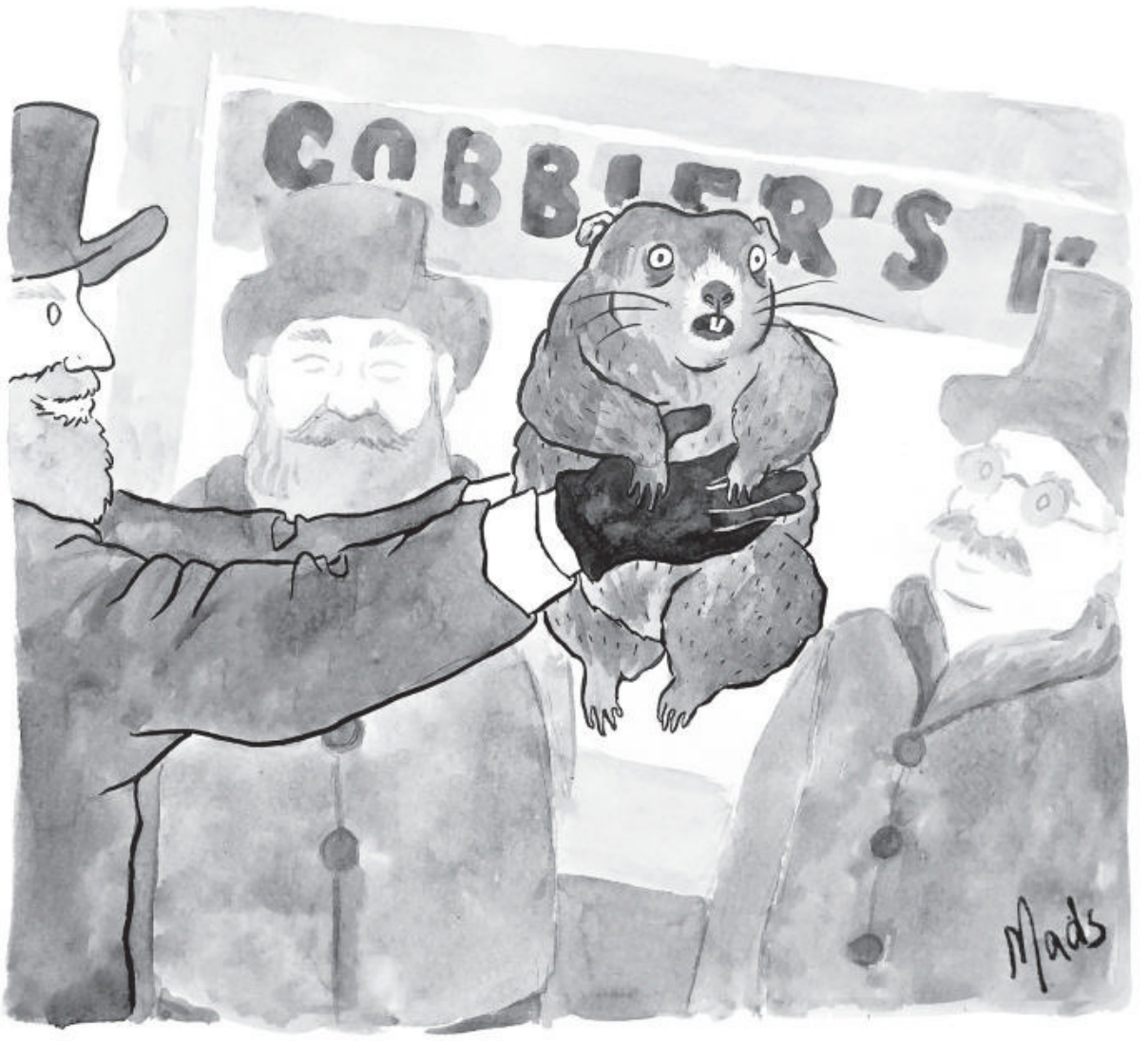
My father looked at his swollen, arthritic hands.

"What do you think?"

"What can I?" he answered.

A few minutes later, Christine and I left the room. My parents' bodies were pressed together. I had seen them do this only when they were very happy.

And, after this, my parents became very loving toward Christine. Every day, the four of us played ludo, and my father began wanting to let Christine win.



"I saw no shadow . . . only my demons . . ."

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Christine and I returned to North Carolina. There, we started to develop stories about the daughter we were going to have. It was strange to imagine stories for her. Each time we did, we felt we were being disloyal to Suzuki Noguchi. We also felt a sense of loss at letting him go. I had not realized until then that I had begun to love this child we had invented.

Because I am culturally Hindu and reincarnation is part of this culture, it seemed reasonable to me to imagine that our daughter already existed but was in Heaven, waiting to come down. In our stories, our child was in her thirties. She told us about the people she hung out with in Heaven: "Abraham Lincoln is always hitting on me. I tell him, 'You are the Great Emancipator, but you're a married man.'" Whenever we talked about what our daughter, whom we named Ziggy, for "zygote," would enjoy about our house—the birds, the squirrels—Ziggy one-upped us: "I have dinosaurs in my back yard." Like Suzuki Noguchi, Ziggy had a strong mocking personality. She complained about all the Christian martyrs in Heaven: "Never have a martyr over for dinner. Their stigmata start bleeding and your napkins are ruined." She also had Suzuki's covetousness. "Do you really need to spend so much money on yourself? Buy some Amazon shares for me." But, whereas Suzuki Noguchi had been a criminal, Ziggy abided by the law. The fact that women live a life of greater physical risk than men shaped how our imaginations treated her. As did the awareness that our daughter was going to be a woman of color.

The prospect of having a daughter made me realize how little I knew about the experience of women. I began reading biographies of female scientists and politicians. Books on violence against women. Books about how to help young women develop a healthy relationship to their own sexuality. Every time I read news about a strong woman, I began imagining Ziggy like her. I looked up Janet Yellen's educational history and thought how wonderful it would be if Ziggy ran a major central bank. I called an economist I know who teaches at Princeton and asked him what it would take for Ziggy to run the Federal Reserve. "Are you joking?" he asked. To me, my question seemed quite reasonable: somebody has to run the Fed; why shouldn't it be my daughter?

I was aware that I might die before Ziggy reached adulthood, and I began thinking about how to help her be confident and unafraid on her own. It occurred to me that I should take her for walks in the rain so she could understand that things can be uncomfortable and still be O.K. I wanted her to get used to uncertainty, and I thought of trying to get lost in an unfamiliar neighborhood so she could see that things

work out and we could find our way home. I wanted her to be engaged with the world, so I aimed to help her see that there is wonder in everything. "The light around us was on the surface of the sun just over eight minutes ago," I planned to tell her.

I wanted to set up the nursery. The baby was due in October, and my mother, who was too anxious to be optimistic, said to wait till August to buy anything.

Christine has suffered many tragedies, and she has a sense that almost anything good in her life can be taken away. She said, "Let's wait till September."

In the middle of May, at around five in the morning, Christine woke me. "Akhil! Akhil!" she said, shaking me. She was wearing a T-shirt and underpants. "I'm bleeding."

"O.K.," I said, and got up. I knew that we had to go to a hospital. I had no idea which one to go to. I went to the bathroom to brush my teeth. When Christine had woken me, her voice had sounded exactly like my mother's whenever my brother had had a medical emergency in the middle of the night and my parents had had to follow an ambulance to the hospital. Looking in the mirror, I began to feel faint.

I went back into the bedroom. Christine was still standing by the bed. "I feel like I'm going to pass out," I said. "I have to lie down." I slumped on the bed with my feet on the floor. I lay like that for a minute.

We drove to the hospital. It was fourteen minutes away. The sun was just rising. I thought, How do I cancel my paternity leave at the university? I thought, Perhaps we shouldn't have told anyone about the pregnancy. I thought, If the baby dies, how will we bear to be near each other? I thought, Should we try to implant the other embryo? When should we try it?

The staff at the hospital were wonderful. Christine was in a hospital bed, and I was standing beside her, my arm angled awkwardly over the bed's railing so that I could hold her hand. A doctor came in, saw our anxiety about touching any equipment, and lowered the railing.

There was a sonogram and a cervical exam. The fetus was healthy and the cervix closed. The doctor could not tell why Christine had had bleeding. He said that, when bleeding like this happens, a little less than half the time there is a miscarriage. He warned us that when his medical notes were posted online they might be frightening to read, and said that Christine shouldn't be alarmed.

When we returned home, the outdoor lights that I had turned on as we left were still burning.

During the next few days, we were so scared that Christine tried to avoid going to the bathroom. And, when she did, I waited nervously for her to come out.

A week passed, and then two. It now felt hard to make up stories about our future with the child. Doing so felt like bringing on bad luck. When my wife and I lay in bed and talked to Ziggy, all we said was "Hold tight. We love you."

July came. I turned fifty. "Ziggy, you will have an old man for a father," I said.

In the sonogram images, our daughter became more and more person-like. There is one series of images in which she is looking out, white and ghostly, through the frame, and these resemble paparazzi photos taken through a limousine window.

In August, we ordered nursery furniture. Because of Christine's age, her doctor wanted to induce her in her thirty-ninth week, and in September he set a date for this.

When Christine was a child, she was very badly scalded. Over the years, she has had multiple skin grafts. For her, going into the hospital came with a set of specific awful memories. The idea of having to go again frightened her so much that she began to have a hard time sleeping.

I, too, was afraid of going to the hospital. I, too, had spent many months in hospitals. We tried to calm each other down. "Maybe if we get to have Ziggy, we won't mind hospitals as much," Christine said.

We arrived at the hospital around midnight. Perhaps because of COVID and the absence of visitors, the hallways were quiet. Christine was admitted to her room. The nurses assigned to her asked if she would like to donate her placenta. There is a layer inside the placenta which is used to help burn victims with skin grafts. "Isn't this the most wonderful thing?" Christine said, smiling and looking ecstatic. At that moment, she felt that her childhood suffering was being overcome.

Soon after we arrived, a balloon was inserted in Christine to open her cervix. And, a few hours later, she was administered medicines intravenously to further open the cervix. She lay on the hospital bed and tried to sleep, and, when she could not, we watched movies on a laptop. Periodically, the nurses came in to see how the cervix was responding. Almost twenty-four hours after we had checked into the hospital, Christine's doctor said that she should have a C-section, that it was not smart to wait. Christine was rolled away to an operating room. I put on my shoes to follow. My hands shook so much that I had a hard time tying my shoelaces. A nurse took me to the operating room and had me stand outside and put on scrubs. As I tugged them on, I wondered how I might be able to comfort Christine.

I was led into the bright, cold operating room. The nurse walking by my side told me to keep my head turned to the right. The operating table was on the left, and she did not want me to see what was occurring. She guided me to a chair beside Christine's head. A blue curtain hid everything below her neck. "Do you remember when we got to touch the owl?" I said, referring to a vacation we had taken. "We'll do that with Ziggy." She gave me a strained smile. "Do you remember when we had the Japanese shaved ice? What was it called?"

"*Kakigori*."

And then suddenly there was the sound of a baby crying.

"She's here! She's here!" I yelled.

The nurse told me to get up. She led me to an infant warmer, where a dark-haired purple baby was lying and squalling and kicking her legs. "Do you want to cut the cord?" someone asked, handing me scissors. The baby was crying and crying. Her mouth was twisted, and she appeared so unhappy that she already seemed a full person, with all her own wants and preferences. I leaned down to look at her. When I bent, my soul fell out. I was in love with this purple crying child, who, even if I had had a million years, I would not have been able to imagine. ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS

THE "ANNE OF GREEN GABLES" V.R. EXPERIENCE

BY WEIKE WANG

There are four possible skin tones for your orphan avatar, but all come with red hair. The red hair parts down the middle and exists, throughout the thirty minutes, in two long braids. Your experience takes place in a room, with sensors placed on your hands and feet, and a headset that dictates what you see and hear. Should you wander out of bounds, a metal railing will restrain you. Should you flip over this railing, a staff member will flip you back.

Enjoy the carriage ride down the Avonlea main road, which dips and winds as good rural roads should. Wave hello to the brook, the valley, the hollow, the pond landing, and another brook, over which the carriage goes because this brook has a bridge. It's always autumn in Avonlea. And there's always a breeze, mimicked by a fan that blows directly at your face. Meet Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert, hardworking siblings whose skin tones (wrinkled white) can't be changed, and who requested from the orphanage a boy, not a girl. Marilla says "Fiddlesticks!" a lot. Matthew doesn't speak but can grimace, shrug, grunt, nod, or frown. They decide to keep you after all, but remind you a few times, seriously, and later teasingly, that you should've been a boy.

State your name, your real name, and the computer will intentionally omit one vowel from it, preferably an "e." If your real name is Chen, for the ten minutes when you are in the classroom simulation you will see your name on the blackboard as Chn, and you can tell your teacher that you are actually Chen with an "e." Without provocation, a roguishly handsome classmate yanks one of your fiery-red plaits and calls you a root vegetable at the top of his lungs. The room fills with the scent of stale carrot cake, and a staff member pulls your real hair with as much force as is necessary to cause you actual pain. You will then be presented with a virtual-weapons inventory, which includes a slate, a foam noodle, a retractable prop dagger, an inflatable hammer, and a dead fish. You can hit Gilbert Blythe with any of the above, as many times as you wish, and he will not be severely injured.

Diana Barry, your bosom friend, awaits you outside the classroom, and for six minutes she and you go on various life-affirming adventures. Will it be the haunted wood? The cordial cabinet? Jumping on old people asleep in their beds? Sinking a rowboat while reënacting a Tennyson poem? Discussing the latest fashions, like puffed sleeves or green hair dye, and, disastrously, trying to procure them? After bosom-friend shenanigans, your schooling must continue so that you don't grow up totally daft. You're at a desk, studying for hours, but in real time no more than forty-five seconds. The calendar pages in front of you keep falling off. Your pencil breaks, and is magically resharpened. What a montage, you think, and thirty seconds later you're at Queen's Academy, with Gilbert Blythe but not Diana Barry, whose mother doesn't approve of higher education for girls. At Queen's, you obtain your teaching license in one year instead of two and win the coveted Avery scholarship, making you the first island girl to attend a four-year college. Friends surround and exalt you, even Gilbert, whom you've forgiven but who is now obsessed with you. Triumphant music folds in: *hip hip hooray!* The V.R. experience can be stopped here, by selecting "Yes, I wish to end my experience" from the pop-up menu. You can then remove your headset and leave the room feeling galvanized, like you can do anything, like a woman in 1881 might've felt had she been allowed to attend college alongside braid-pulling men. Or you can stay for the final two minutes.

The bank that holds all the Cuthberts' savings fails. Upon receiving this news, Matthew has a heart attack and dies. Green Gables is now in danger of being sold. You decline the Avery scholarship and teach at a local school and help Marilla. Eventually, you do attend college, and become a teacher who aspires to write. Gilbert goes to college, too, becomes a doctor, makes a proposal of marriage, which you reject, makes another proposal of marriage, which you accept, because who else are you going to marry in this beloved tale? The wedding is held at Green Gables. Gilbert takes over his uncle's clinic and you stop teaching and writing and have seven beautiful kids, in the space of ten years. The V.R. experience ends here, and, though you do leave the room less galvanized, you are relieved that the immense pressure to amount to something has resolved itself and, in the natural course of adulting, priorities must change. A person can't trailblaze forever; she has to slow down sometimes and take stock of societal norms. Also, motherhood *is* wonderful, as is running your own home. But why does your home have to be so idyllic, overlooking a harbor, a brook, and a valley somehow simultaneously? And where are three of your kids? The husband, of course, doesn't know, because he's not here. So, should the urge seize you, and with a quick tap of that red button near your temple, you can return to the past, the classroom, and, free of charge, for up to a minute, smack young Gil again with a dead fish. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

BEST-CASE SCENARIO

He wrote the great climate-change novel. What does Kim Stanley Robinson know?

BY JOSHUA ROTHMAN

Last summer, the science-fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson went on a backpacking trip with some friends. They headed into the High Sierra, hiking toward Deadman Canyon—a fifty-mile walk through challenging terrain. Now sixty-nine, Robinson has been hiking and camping in the Sierras for half a century. At home, in Davis, California, he tracks his explorations on a wall-mounted map, its topography thick with ink. He is a devotee of the "ultralight" approach to backpacking and prefers to travel without water, instead gathering it along the way, from lakes and streams. Arriving at the canyon, with its broad, verdant floor cradled in smooth slopes of granite, he planned to fill his bottles with meltwater from the seven glaciers buried in its headwall.

But as the group hiked they found no water. Streams that had once carved elegant oxbows in the canyon floor were now dusty lacerations. Perhaps because of the altitude, one of Robinson's friends was feeling ill, and the others worried about how he would fare if they had to make a dry camp that night. Eventually, they found a rivulet of water. After his companions replenished their supply, Robinson hiked ahead, tracing the water uphill. He discovered that six of the seven glaciers had melted away completely. This was a new development, not recorded on any map. Only one corner of one glacier remained—a canted block of ice the size of two Olympic swimming pools. "It was the smallest living glacier that you could possibly imagine," Robinson told me. He broke off a tiny chunk and carried it back to camp for the hikers to use in their Scotch. "It was like a goodbye," he said. "Like going to a hospice visit." Recalling the moment, he shivered.

Many of Robinson's twenty-one science-fiction novels are ecological in theme, and this coming summer he will publish "The High Sierra: A Love Story," a memoir that is also a rich geological and cultural history of the range. After returning from Deadman, he updated the manuscript to include the vanished glaciers. He told me about them a couple of weeks later, while we were driving through California, toward our own backpacking trip in the Sierras. Tan and trim, with silver hair and wire-rim eyeglasses, Robinson rode in the back seat of the car, looking out at wildfire smoke. The night before, he'd outfitted me with some of his own minimalist backpacking gear; while he'd assembled it, I'd wandered around his house, inspecting his library. Walls of shelves contained British literature, American literature, and science fiction. Other areas were organized by subject (Antarctica, Mars, economics, prehistory, Thoreau). Shelves were dedicated to volumes about Galileo, which Robinson had read while writing "Galileo's Dream," a highly detailed historical novel, published in 2009. Mario Biagioli, a historian of science and a Galileo expert who'd helped Robinson with the research, was the third member of our backpacking party; an accomplished giant-slalom skier, endurance cyclist, and transatlantic sailor, he drove us expertly, hugging the curves.

Robinson is often called one of the best living science-fiction writers. He is unique in the degree to which his books envision moral, not merely technological, progress. Their protagonists are often diplomats, scholars, and scientists who fight to keep their future societies from repeating our mistakes. Robinson's plots turn on international treaties or postcapitalist financial systems. His now classic "Mars" trilogy, published in the nineteen-nineties, describes the terraforming of the Red Planet by scientists seeking to create a "permaculture," or truly sustainable way of life. A typical Robinson novel ends with an academic conference at which researchers propose ideas for improving civilization. He believes that scholarly and diplomatic meetings are among our species's highest achievements.

Climate change has long figured in Robinson's plots. "Antarctica," a novel from 1997, revolves around glaciologists at a fictional version of McMurdo Station, the principal U.S. outpost in Antarctica. (Robinson researched the book there, exploring ice cathedrals and helping to take the first G.P.S. reading of the South Pole.) In the two-thousands, climate started to become his central subject; his wonky brand of sci-fi turned out to be well suited to a reality in which the future depends on fast, unlikely, and coördinated global reform. "Science in the Capital," a trilogy of novels published between 2004 and 2007, follows administrators at the National Science Foundation as they fight climate change through grants; "New York 2140," from 2017, is set in a Venice-like Big Apple and explores efforts to reform the financial system on ecological grounds. With each book, Robinson has revised his deeply researched climate-change scenario, focussing not just on environmental havoc but on solutions that might stop it.

His most recent novel, "The Ministry for the Future," published in October, 2020, during the second wave of the pandemic, centers on the work of a fictional U.N. agency charged with solving climate change. The book combines science, politics, and economics to present a credible best-case scenario for the next few decades. It's simultaneously heartening and harrowing. By the end of the story, it's 2053, and carbon levels in the atmosphere have begun to decline. Yet hundreds of millions of people have died or been displaced. Coastlines have been drowned and landscapes have burned. Economies have been disrupted, refugees have flooded the temperate latitudes, and ecoterrorists from stricken countries

"The Ministry for the Future" displays Robinson's anti-anti-utopianism: its prognosis is both heartening and harrowing.

ILLUSTRATION BY DEENA SO'OTEH

have launched campaigns of climate revenge. The controversial practice of geoengineering—including the spraying of chemicals into the atmosphere to reflect sunlight—has bought us time to decarbonize our way of life, and "carbon quantitative easing," undertaken on a vast scale, has paid for the redesign of our infrastructure. But it's all haphazard. We just barely escape the worst climate catastrophes, through grudging adjustments that we are forced to make. The rushed, necessary work of responding to the climate crisis defines and, for some, elevates, the twenty-first century.

I'm a longtime reader of Robinson's, but "The Ministry for the Future" struck me with special force. For decades, I'd worried about climate change in the usual abstract way. Then I had a son, and read David Wallace-Wells's "The Uninhabitable Earth"—a terrifying survey of worst-case climate scenarios—and grew so alarmed that thinking about the problem became almost unbearable. I live on the North Shore of Long Island, close to the beach, in a village that already seems to be flooding. What did the future hold for my town, and my family? What would my son live through? We have put a lot of carbon into the atmosphere, and so a great deal of what is coming to us is now inevitable; as a species, we are moving into a prefab house. And yet its parts lie scattered, unassembled—we can't quite picture the home in which we'll live.

"The Ministry for the Future" gave me a sense of the space. It shows our prospects to be both imaginable and variable: we can still redraw the plans. Perhaps because the novel fills a vital narrative gap, it achieved an unusually wide readership. Barack Obama included it on his list of the best books of the year; the *Times* columnist Ezra Klein said that all policymakers should read it. Christiana Figueres, the U.N. diplomat who led the effort to create the Paris agreement, listened to the novel in her garden and wept. Robinson was invited to meet with government officials from around the world, including planners at the Pentagon. He became a featured speaker at COP26—the twenty-sixth Conference of the Parties to the Paris Agreement, held this past fall in Glasgow.

After reading the novel, I contacted Robinson to propose writing about him. He immediately suggested that we go backpacking in the Sierras—his "heart's home." I'm in good shape but not outdoorsy; I was a little intimidated by what he had in mind, an ultralight off-trail jaunt near twelve thousand feet. But I also liked the idea of entrusting myself to the experience and judgment of the only writer who had offered me some hope about our collective future. He outlined a simple plan: over Bishop Pass into Dusy Basin; over Knapsack Pass into Palisade Basin; then over Thunderbolt Pass—the highest and most difficult of the trip—and back to Dusy, then out. "Youth and fitness will see you through," he wrote, in an e-mail. I started training by carrying my toddler in a backpack for miles along the shore.

As the car headed east, the sky seemed to be getting darker. Everything was bathed in an orange Kodachrome light.

"We've definitely dropped into the smoke," Robinson said, looking out the window. The fields were blanketed in dun-colored fog.

"Not good," Biagioli said, removing his sunglasses and turning on the recirculation.

Robinson looked at his phone. "This is terrible," he said. "Now the air quality is three-ninety-four." Once, he'd been in Beijing when it had hit four hundred and ninety. "But Davis has reached that a couple of times in these big fires," he noted. "Hopefully it will be clear in the mountains." I looked ahead, as though I could see them, toward hills that were suggestions in the haze.

Robinson was born in 1952, and grew up in Orange County, among groves being paved over for suburbs. An athlete by inclination, he recalls his childhood in terms of the sports he played with friends—dodgeball, high jump, volleyball, bodysurfing—and the books he borrowed from his local libraries. His life is characterized by wholesome continuities. He and his gang of "hippie jocks" first ventured into the mountains in college, woefully unprepared, and he still hikes with many of them today. He has lived in Davis for forty years, and, on a walking tour, he showed me the bookstore where he'd worked in his late twenties and the pool where he'd met his wife, Lisa, an environmental chemist who outpaced him at their gruelling evening swim class. Boyish with an edge, he nurtures routines in part to optimize them—he has played Frisbee golf with friends at the same Davis park for so many years that he can now make par blindfolded.

One of Robinson's first Sierra excursions was over Bishop Pass. We retraced the route on our first day. At ten thousand feet, the air was clear. The seven-mile hike to the pass was easy. A groomed path ascended gently along a series of lakes; the terrain was desktop-background beautiful, with sky shining in the water and morning sun in the pines. Our packs were surreally light. We had no tents, no water, no stoves—I'd carried more with me to work. Our trekking poles tapped rhythmically as we climbed.

Biagioli and I were quiet, adjusting to the altitude. Robinson, who completed a Ph.D. in English, writing a dissertation on Philip K. Dick under the eminent Marxist scholar Fredric Jameson, cheerfully filled the silence by explaining science fiction from a theoretical point of view. He sometimes likens the genre to a pair of old-fashioned 3-D glasses, in which one lens is red, the other blue. Through one lens, sci-fi offers predictions about the future, which we judge on their plausibility; through the other, we see metaphors for our own time, which we judge on how well they capture the feeling of living now.

"The two perspectives combine to create a sense of time stretching out between now and then," Robinson called, over his shoulder. "It's a feeling of participating in history." He set a quick pace: we wanted to get over the pass by noon. As we climbed, the sun grew stronger, and I tucked a bandanna under my hat and collar, covering my neck.

"The Ministry for the Future" begins with a "wet-bulb" heat wave—a deadly coincidence of heat and hu-

midity in which, despite high temperatures, sweat ceases to evaporate. In such conditions, even a healthy person in the shade will cook and die. In recent years, such heat waves have occurred in Australia, India, Mexico, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other places; climate models suggest that, by the end of this century, they could become regular events in the tropical parts of the world. Robinson imagines a big wave, in the year 2025, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Frank, an American aid worker at a clinic, wakes up to find that the temperature is a hundred and three, with humidity of thirty-five per cent—close to the wet-bulb threshold. The sun "blazed like an atomic bomb, which of course it was," Robinson writes. As the day wears on, inhaling the hot air becomes difficult. The only safe places are air-conditioned, but eventually the power grid buckles under the strain.

Frank invites people from the neighborhood to take shelter inside his clinic, where his generator powers a window A.C. unit. The rooms are soon packed with families. But then armed men steal his generator and air-conditioner. Someone suggests taking refuge in a nearby lake, where crowds have gathered; stepping into the sun-blasted water, Frank can feel that it is hotter than body temperature. He notices that some of the people are "redder than the rest"; they soon die. He sees that "all the children were dead, all the old people were dead." He closes his eyes and sinks as deep as he can, struggling not to drink the fetid water. In the end, twenty million people perish in the heat wave: it is "the worst week in human history."

The world is appalled; the U.N. holds a moment of silence. Still, little changes. "Everyone knows everything," a character complains, but few seem to act on what they know. "They were only really doing things to try to ameliorate the situation they were falling into *after* it was too late," Mary Murphy, the chief of the Ministry for the Future, thinks, sometime in the early twenty-forties. "They kept closing the barn door after the horses were out, or after the barn had burned down." The question for Mary is whether the world has crossed the point of no return. If our collective belatedness entails "something physical, like the Arctic's permafrost melt, or the ocean's acidification past the point of life at the bottom of the food chain surviving it, or the Antarctic's ice sheet collapsing fast—then they were fucked and no denying it." On the other hand, "there were still people fighting tooth and claw."

A bureau full of experts, balked and opposed but not giving up—this is the metaphor that the novel offers for our own time. We are the Ministry for the Future. Our job, too, is to act on preëxisting knowledge: many of the solutions to the crisis are also prefab. Robinson researches his novels partly by attending scientific conferences. In 2010, at a meeting of glaciologists, a researcher sidled up to him with an idea for arresting Antarctic glaciers that are sliding into the sea by pumping meltwater out from beneath them at a few crucial locations, settling them back onto the bedrock. In Robinson's book, the idea is put into practice. It's speculative, but a paper outlining the procedure was published in *Nature*, in 2018; the proposal was further analyzed in a climate journal in 2020. "The Ministry for the Future" may be sci-fi, but its science isn't fictional.

Global finance is an unsexy but important part of the book. Corporations and governments, Robinson writes, have already located vast amounts of fossil fuel that has yet to be extracted; these untapped deposits are "listed as assets by the corporations that have located them," and are worth hundreds of trillions of dollars. If even a sixth of this carbon hoard is burned, we'll burn, too. Robinson provides a real-life list of the nineteen largest owners of the deposits ("Saudi Aramco, Chevron, Gazprom, ExxonMobil, National Iranian Oil Company, BP, Royal Dutch Shell, Pemex, Petroleos de Venezuela, PetroChina, Peabody Energy, ConocoPhillips, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, Iraq National Oil Company, Total SA, Sonatrach, BHP Billiton, and Petrobras") and narrates a series of meetings at which the world's central banks find a way to pay them off. The scheme revolves around a new kind of digital currency designed to reward companies and governments for reducing emissions. A version of this idea, known as the Global Carbon Reward, is advocated by a real nonprofit.

The map on the inside of your hotel-room door becomes suddenly riveting once the alarm goes off. This is one reason "The Ministry for the Future" can wring suspense out of financial negotiations. But the novel's concreteness is also compelling because it puts into

"Hi, yeah, I actually have more of a comment than an inquisition."

relief the strangeness of our outlook. Whenever we stare directly at the mess we're in, the solutions we think of seem implausible. (A carbon coin? Backed by the world's central banks?) And yet, because the stakes are so high, our skepticism threatens to become nihilism—an acceptance of the inevitability of civilizational disaster. Ultimately, this nihilism is a kind of sin against the future—a "betrayal," as Greta Thunberg puts it—and so reading "The Ministry for the Future" is a charged experience. It's normal, when taking in a science-fiction story, to wonder whether the future it depicts is plausible. It's unusual for the future we wonder about to be our own.

After a few hours, we neared the bottom of the pass. We filled our water bottles in a large, clear lake set in smooth granite, crossed a stream using stepping stones, and started up a winding path that rose to a series of switchbacks. As we climbed, the landscape changed. Below us, the lake nestled in grasses and pine trees. Above us was a gray, craggy world of rocks and dust—a piece of the moon jutting out of Eden. We passed a section of the slope where, years before, dozens of deer had slipped on ice and fallen to their death. Clavicles and spines were hidden among the stones.

Eventually, we arrived at the switchbacks—steep, narrow, tightly zigzagging cuts in the rock. Biagioli, who'd completed a hundred-kilometre bike race in the Dolomites a few years before, looked up eagerly at the first real challenge of the day.

"Mario, you should go ahead," Robinson said. "I bet you'll want to go fast."

"See you at the top!" Biagioli said, launching himself upward.

Robinson watched, appreciatively. "He's got that deep cardio conditioning," he said. Many of Robinson's novels are essentially love stories in which friends grow enamored of one another and of the landscapes they explore; I could see that the dynamic was taken from life. ("My friends are my heroes, and my heroes are my friends," he told me later.)

We followed a little more slowly. Robinson, dressed all in khaki, grinned from behind his sunglasses as he climbed. It was fun, fluid work, made easier by our ultralight packing and the leverage of our poles. Soon, the pass came into view—a broad, inclined, rocky field stretching between two peaks. We seemed to hike toward the cloudless sky. Biagioli waited for us, Dusy Basin opening up behind him.

Robinson believes that the novel has expanded with time. The first novels typically focussed on domestic life and its dramas; in the nineteenth century, they took cities and nations as their subjects. Science fiction could go further: being planetary in scale, it could show how a civilization lived within its biosphere—its most fundamental home.

Dusy Basin looked like a still-evolving world. Gray-brown mountains in the distance could have been captured by the Curiosity rover; below them, a granite landscape was spotted with grass and flowers. Huge angular boulders, deposited by glaciers, rested on hillsides, guarding the landscape.

"This is it," Robinson said. "Say goodbye to the trail."

In the late nineteen-seventies, when Robinson began publishing his stories, the sci-fi subgenre of "cyberpunk" was ascendant. Its hacker protagonists plugged in to an online virtual "matrix" and prowled smoggy cityscapes ruled by giant corporations. By contrast, Robinson's first novel, "The Wild Shore," from 1984, imagined a future California in which neutron bombs have made all electronics inoperative. Its early pages contain elaborate depictions of gardening and fishing. His sci-fi could seem like nature writing, with the Sierras recast as Mercury or Mars—a reflection of his early ambition to become a poet in the vein of Kenneth Rexroth or Gary Snyder. William Gibson, the author of "Neuromancer," told me that "the cyberpunk crew" didn't know what to make of Robinson—"this tan, fit, khaki-chinos dude who could've made a good living as a shirt model." They assumed that he was "too straight to get where they were coming from." But Robinson's politics were perhaps more radical, since he imagined the possibility of an improved world. His uncool, utopian interests—ecology, equality, democracy, postcapitalism—were prescient.

It isn't easy to be a utopian science-fiction writer. "Star Trek" is famously optimistic but isn't in any sense realistic; in general, when sci-fi engages in serious social analysis, it curdles. We may feel that dystopian stories are more plausible, yet Robinson thinks that there's something a little craven about them. Isn't it odd, he has written, to enjoy "late-capitalist, advanced-nation schadenfreude about unfortunate fictional citizens whose lives have been trashed by our own political inaction"? It's better, he believes, to be utopian, or at least "anti-anti-utopian." Robinson has a sweet and sunny disposition—he writes long, lambent e-mails signed "Your Stan"—that's pulled taut by a thread of anger. He is especially impatient with those who urge giving up when giving up is against their best interests. What he seeks to practice is, in a phrase popularized by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will."

As we made our descent, a bowl of mountains encircled us. Gentle hills of white granite rolled into the distance. Bridges of rock connected them; reflected light illuminated the hollows. Dwarf trees and tufts of flowers nestled in shelters from the wind. The landscape was fractal: basins within basins, spiralling patterns of white and rust rock. It was fun to wander, finding routes. Jameson, who reads Robinson's novels in draft—"The Ministry for the Future" is dedicated to him—told me that they stand out not just for their scientific and political rigor, but for their depictions of "athletic, physical joy," which lighten the mood. "In standard novels, there isn't any place for play, for physical exertion," he said; in Robinson's books, characters hike, climb, and swim through the worlds they hope to save. We walked easily over the rises in search of a lake at which to camp. We'd grown happily silent, lost in the flow of rock.

Robinson learned to write credible utopian fiction in part through a fractal sort of thinking, connecting the personal to the planetary. In graduate school, at the University of California, San Diego, he read Proust, the English Romantics, and Shakespeare while hiking in the Sierras as often as he could. (He calculates that he has camped in the mountains for two years in total.)

BROWN FURNITURE

Don't throw out that old chair!
Someone said yes there,
listened to Brahms while it rained,
fell asleep over "Das Kapital,"
told a small child about King Alfred and the cakes.

Don't be fooled by the dining table,
discreetly silent under its green cloth.
Momentous events occurred there,
all of which it remembers perfectly.
A terrible silence was broken over cake,
and three aunts sang a song about Romania.
Not your aunts? Not important. They were there.

Your living room's still making history.
All night the sofa
gossips with the Turkish carpet,
which boasts to the glass-fronted bookcase
about the fantastic voyages of its youth.

These things remember so that we can forget.
Who will love the old
if not the old?

—*Katha Pollitt*

For a time, he spent his nights in a sleeping bag on the cliffs near campus, overlooking the Pacific, then showering in the gym. ("I felt like I lived on a fifty-million-dollar estate," he told me.) When he and Lisa had the first of their two sons, in 1989, he became a stay-at-home dad, writing during nap times. The couple bought a house in a progressive Davis development centered on a sprawling village green and a community garden. Robinson cooked for potluck dinners and tended his garden plot; he adopted the habit, which persists, of doing all his writing outdoors, on his front patio, shaded by a tarp, year-round. He eavesdropped on Lisa's scientific phone calls, listening as she and her colleagues scrutinized and revised their findings about pesticides in the water. They were passionate, sometimes exasperated, but also collaborative, careful, truthful—a model society of their own.

He read the philosopher Bruno Latour, who studied how scientists worked together. Latour's "actor-network theory" held that it wasn't just individual researchers who mattered but the web in which they were embedded; the web could contain other scientists but also nonhuman entities, such as machines, treaties, institutions, historical events, even elements of the natural world. (In "The High Sierra," Robinson argues that the mountains themselves are "actors" in a network: they created "Sierra people," who formed the Sierra Club, which catalyzed the American environmental movement.) In the work of the literary theorist Gérard Genette, Robinson discovered the idea of "pseudo-iterative" writing, in which novelists describe what we do each day with a level of specificity that is not quite sensible. A narrator might say that, every morning, she eats a yogurt smoothie while doomscrolling newsfeeds on her phone. Such a statement may not be literally true—surely not every morning—but routines, loosely grasped, can reveal something about how the world is constructed; our small daily actions, in aggregate, suggest systemic facts.

In the Victorian era, social novels, by Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and others, awakened us to poverty and injustice. Modern "naturalists," like Émile Zola, took a scientific approach, following the causal chains of everyday life, which might link a kitchen stove to coal miners working underground. Robinson brings these traditions to bear on our future problems, combining them with an unusual narrative style designed to dramatize civilizational transformation. "The Ministry for the Future" contains chapters that describe the daily habits of geologists and encamped climate refugees; one chapter is narrated by a carbon atom, and another by the market—both actors in the networks that shape our world. Other chapters are oral histories of the sort one might find in the work of the Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich, showing how ordinary people could have their attitudes reshaped by climate disasters. The goal is to capture what the literary critic Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling"—an invisible scaffold, unique to its period, on which our emotions hang. In our current structure of feeling, a narrator suggests, the order of things is experienced as "unjust and unsustainable and yet massively entrenched, but also falling apart before your eyes." Like glaciers, structures of feeling shift with time—that's how we so readily distinguish between the nineteen-sixties and now.

Such shifts coalesce slowly, one realization after another. In the years since Robinson wrote his Mars novels, for instance, the prospects for human habitation on that planet have changed. Among other things, NASA missions have found perchlorates in the Martian soil—chemicals that are toxic to humans even in small quantities. Martian dust is so pervasive that avoiding contact with the poison may be impossible. In an essay titled "What Can't Happen Won't," from 2015, Robinson concluded that the settlement of Mars was unlikely anytime soon. "Aurora," a novel he published the same year, envisions an interstellar ship on a mission to settle a moon of a planet orbiting Tau Ceti, a nearby star. When the settlers reach their destination—a rocky world plagued by constant winds—many are killed by prions in

"Buy! Sell! Fetch!"

• •

its soil. "What's funny is anyone thinking it would work in the first place," one settler says.

> I mean it's obvious any new place is going to be either alive or dead. If it's alive it's going to be poisonous. If it's dead you're going to have to work it up from scratch. . . . Even if you put machines to work, it would take thousands of years. So what's the point? Why do it at all? Why not be content with what you've got?

Later, back on an environmentally damaged Earth, another settler listens to a space-exploration advocate argue that settling other planets is "an evolutionary urge"—the human equivalent of "a dandelion or a thistle releasing its seeds to the winds." Enraged, she punches him in the face. "Aurora" affronted some readers and sci-fi writers, as it was meant to; its goal was to shift the structure of feeling in science fiction, making it less escapist and more certain that Earth is our only home. "As soon as I read it, I thought, Of course, he's right," the science-fiction writer Ted Chiang told me. (The novel, he added, suggests that interstellar settlement is not just "impractical" but "immoral," since it involves "condemning generations of one's descendants to lifelong hardship when you cannot possibly get their consent.") It was all part of the larger shift that Robinson believes will take place in our broader structure of feeling, as more people experience for themselves the symptoms of a warming climate—from off-kilter seasons to wildfires, flooding, and storms.

"When I wrote 'Aurora,' I felt like I was taking a model of the Starship Enterprise and smashing it with a hammer," he said, laughing. We were cresting a rise, coming onto a flat saddle of land, fuzzed with alpine grass, that connected two lakes. Robinson lay down on the ground, stretching his arms to see if there was room for a sleeping pad, or three.

"Maybe this is a good spot," he said.

The sun was moving behind the mountains, casting long shadows in which it was suddenly cold. We unpacked what we had in the remaining light. Robinson unfolded a lime-green tarp and began staking it into the ground, in order to provide a windbreak for the "rock stove" over which we would boil water for our dinner. He had stumbled upon this retro innovation many years before, when he'd grown tired of lugging a typical camping stove into the mountains.

"What kind of rocks do we need?" I asked.

"You want a rock that's squared off, and about as big as that stone Mario's next to," Robinson said. Biagioli was standing near a shingle-like rock perhaps six inches square. "We want four of 'em."

We collected the rocks while Robinson finished the windbreak. He used one of his trekking poles to prop up the tarp, then took a small white cube of fuel from his pack and placed it on one of the rocks. He carefully balanced the others to create a small platform that could support a pot of water. Using a Zippo, he tried to light the fuel. But the wind kept evading his windbreak.

Biagioli came over to help, pulling the tarp tight and blocking the wind until the flame caught. Their efforts reminded me of Robinson's 2013 novel, "Shaman," set in Neolithic Europe, which opens with the problem of starting a fire using duff, roots, moss, and soft wood scraped from inside a tree trunk. (The research for the book involved a wintertime Sierra trip, which Robinson made alone.)

I was cold that night. The wind slipped under my tarp; my water bottle froze. In the morning, beside the jewel-like lake, I ate a protein bar and watched Robinson watch the sunrise. The sun's progress was visible in the shadow that the mountains to the east of us threw over the mountains to the west. In "The High Sierra," Robinson writes that the movement of such shadows reveals "the speed of the planet rolling under your feet." The movement is "slow, but not so slow that you can't see it. If you watch a boulder near the sun, but still in shadow, and keep watching it, then the sunlight will hit the top of the boulder, then move down the boulder—also the whole slope—slowly, slowly, but not imperceptibly, not quite." He calls the sight "beautiful but disturbing":

> This particular morning is passing at this very speed, it won't come back. The rocks will be here for millions of years, but not this moment, which creeps down and down at you, even if you hold your breath, even if you suspend your usual busy stream of consciousness and just look at it, be with it. Time passes.

I had read this description before the trip, but being there was different. I felt

the world turn beneath me for myself. The ticking of the clock, the smallness of the Earth—more realizations.

We dressed and set out for Knapsack Pass, our climb for the day. The bottom of the pass was a lush meadow, carpeted with grass and small flowers, under which streams flowed; the water sometimes emerged into the sun, and we reached down through breaks in the ground to fill our bottles. Above us, the pass seemed to be a thousand-foot jumble of car-size rocks, with no obvious path up.

"I took Lisa here on our first trip to the Sierras," Robinson said. He opened a small packet of Cheez-Its and looked meditative. "I totally botched the approach."

"What happened?" Biagioli asked.

"I went up there, on the left side," Robinson said, pointing. "And I traversed too high, under those boulders beneath Columbine Peak. She was so fit, so strong—she didn't even know anything was wrong. But there are sections up there where you start to feel a little desperate." Since then, he said, he had found the best possible route over Knapsack—a straight shot up the middle, not very difficult, but hard to see because of the way the rocks were arranged.

Just then we heard some sounds from behind us. Two hikers were making their way down into our meadow. As they got closer, they turned into chilled-out, bearded men in their thirties. They were the only other people we had seen since leaving the trail after Bishop Pass.

"You guys going over Knapsack?" one of them asked.

We nodded.

"We're thinking about the route," the other said. "Maybe that one, there." He pointed toward the route Robinson had taken with Lisa—including its troublesome traverse, across the slope of the mountain.

Robinson nodded. "Yeah, I've done that one," he said. "It'll get you over."

"Sweet," one of the hikers said, adjusting his pack.

"It can be tough, but you're young and fit," Robinson said. "We're still getting water, so we'll let you guys go first."

As they set off, Biagioli observed, "You didn't tell them about your route."

"Well, it's no fun to hike with other people," Robinson replied. "And everyone's got to learn for themselves. That's the whole point! It took me, I don't know, seven or eight crossings to stumble into the fact that the straight-line route right up the gut of it works, and none of the other routes work without outrageous effort."

"It's path-dependent, as the economists say," Biagioli joked, referring to the idea that the way things are isn't necessarily efficient; today's arrangements reflect the accidents of the past.

"Yes, very much so," Robinson said, chuckling. He looked up and groaned. "Ah—God, guys. I know that slope well. It's loose. It's steep. It's traversey. It's hard fuckin' work. And you can see that when they get around that shoulder, they're not to the pass. And right now, they can't see whether between them and the pass is this horrible ravine that they might have to cross, or not. And only by exploring it can they find out." It was a novelist's view of the situation—one that subordinated mere knowledge to experience.

There is knowing and knowing. Some knowledge sits inert within us; other knowledge shapes us. This past summer, Robinson and Lisa drove across the country. "In Wyoming, we hit a pall of wildfire smoke so thick that we couldn't see the mountains just a few miles away on each side of the road,"

he wrote, in an article for the *Financial Times*. "It went on like that for 1,000 miles"—a sign as clear as one of the ten plagues. Among the most disconcerting ideas in "The Ministry for the Future" is that the signs of climate change will have to become unmistakable—and painful—before we really acknowledge what we know. We will learn only with experience.

Is it possible to be reshaped by fiction, so that we can respond more readily to reality? Can we jolt ourselves awake with our imaginations? Diane Cook, whose post-climate-change novel "The New Wilderness" was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 2020, told me that she sees Robinson's fiction as "activism as much as art"; in a less fragmented society, she said, "The Ministry for the Future" could have played a role like that of Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle" or Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring." The book tries to do what a news report can't. It wants to offer us the experience of crossing the pass before we cross it—to give us a feeling for the routes we might take.

We had a little lunch—nuts, crackers—and then started up, slipping through a gap in the rocks toward a streambed. The climb was steep, at first on grass and then on granite blocks a few feet high. Robinson had told me that Sierra granite breaks naturally into staircase-like chunks rightly sized for a person; I hadn't believed it, but it turned out to be true. The path, invisible from a distance, revealed itself up close, one step at a time. Most of the climb was easy; occasionally, it was hand over hand. At some moments of confusion, small cairns of stones, left by other hikers, indicated the way forward.

After a long period of sustained work, I stopped and looked back. I was surprised to see how high we'd climbed. The lakes we'd explored the day before lay in a chain far below. When we reached the top, I saw that the light on the other side was different—it reflected the color of Palisade Basin, a world of iron-gray boulders and rust-colored ravines. A series of steep drops led downward, like the seats in an amphitheatre.

I sat on a rock and drank some water while Robinson and Biagioli talked about Galileo. Looking ahead across the basin at the ridgeline of the Palisades, I enjoyed the sense of being higher than a mountain range. In the distance was Potluck Pass, so-called because there was no obvious route—everyone had to invent one for himself.

"This pass is really striking," Biagioli said. "I really like it—the giant steps." I thought of one of Robinson's painstakingly imagined Martian vistas. His scientists move through

fields of rock sculpted into dolmens and cross deserts sifted into vast, patterned mandalas. Mars, they find, speaks "the visible language of nature's mineral existence"; it is "beautiful, or harsher than that: spare, austere, stripped down, silent, stoic, rocky, changeless. Sublime."

I saw movement to my left. It was the two hikers, looking pleased with themselves. There had been some hairy sections, they said. Now they had a question for Robinson, whom they recognized as being experienced in the mountains. Their camp was back in Dusy Basin. Did he think they could take a circular route, traversing to Potluck Pass, then climbing over and descending back to their campsite before nightfall?

Robinson mulled this over. He seemed reluctant to make promises. Then he outlined a complex itinerary that would get them back before dark, if they moved fast, if nothing went wrong.

"It's possible it could work," he said. "Worst case, you have to descend with headlamps."

They conferred with each other, and Robinson turned to Biagioli, resuming the conversation about Galileo. A little while later, I saw the hikers waving to us from a distance. They had started their traverse.

What I wanted was reassurance. As we picked our way through the Sierras, I asked Robinson lots of questions; one loomed behind them: Will it be all right? Of course, Robinson has no idea how the future will really go. He does believe that there *is* a future—an unknown place yet to be explored. He thinks that attitudes shift, that progress exists, that necessity drives invention; but also that progress is slow and easily reversed, that money talks, and that disorder is the norm. In 2002, he published "The Years of Rice and Salt," a novel imagining what might have happened if the Black Death had killed all the Europeans instead of a third of them. (Jameson has taught it to his students in a class on historiography.) In a fanciful conceit, the same characters take us from the fourteenth century to the present by means of reincarnation. During every epoch, they engage in the ceaseless work of improving civilization. Toward the end of the book, a feminist scholar attends an archeological conference in Iran. As she listens to the presentations, she's struck by an "impression of people's endless struggle and effort." A sense of "endless experimentation, of humans thrashing about trying to find a way to live together," deepens in her. In a subsequent incarnation, she works for the international Agency for Harmony with Nature—her world's version of the Ministry for the Future.

Climate work will be the main business of this century. Its basic outlines are already clear. Build wind farms, solar farms, and other sources of clean energy. Start an Operation Warp Speed for clean power: improve energy storage, and make small, cheap power systems for rural places. Tax carbon, reform agriculture, and eat less meat. Rethink construction, transportation, and manufacturing. Study the glaciers, the permafrost, the atmosphere, the oceans. Pilot some geoengineering schemes, in case we need them. Rewild large parts of the Earth. And so on, and so on, and so on. How will all this happen? In "The Ministry for the Future," societies start to make good choices, in part because citizens revolt against the monied interests that preserve the status quo. But people also thrash about. They grow frustrated, angry, and violent. Some survivors of the Indian heat wave become ecoterrorists and use swarms of drones to crash passenger planes; no one can figure out how to stop the drones, and everyone gets scared. People fly less. They teleconference, or take long-distance trains, or even sail. They work remotely on transatlantic crossings. It's not how we want change to happen. But, in the end, the jet age turns out to have been just that—an age.

We made our camp near a shallow, glassy lake in a hollow, where a single shelf of granite tilted into the water, like a hard beach. While we built our rock stove, Robinson and Biagioli talked about sailing. Biagioli had crossed the Atlantic twice, once with his wife and once with friends; Robinson was an amateur freshwater sailor of long standing.

Robinson said that when he was invited to COP26, the climate-change conference, he thought, "Well, I gotta do it like Greta Thunberg." (The summer before, Thunberg had sailed across the Atlantic instead of flying.) He'd been surprised to learn that there was no way of signing up in New York to sail, as a passenger, to the U.K. "My books have con-

vinced me that it's so obvious—I thought, it's surely gonna come. It's low carbon, and you're still doing world travel!"

"Except, what Greta did—she sailed in a super-fancy, sixty-foot carbon-fibre monster," Biagioli said. "It can do thirty-five knots. She needed to go fast, otherwise it would've taken a month."

"But why aren't there lots of those boats?" Robinson asked.

"I think they're incredibly uncomfortable," Biagioli said. "They bounce. I mean, people wear helmets inside the boat."

"But what if they were bigger?" Robinson persisted. "What if they were like clipper ships?"

"Well, then, that would be fantastic," Biagioli said. He shared some cubes of Parmesan from a small container. "And they would be stable, and you could have sailing ships that blow by diesel ships."

"Club Med—they've been putting sails on their cruise ships," Robinson noted. "And the whole technology of sails, per se, is rapidly shifting, because of computer modelling."

"The problem is the weight," Biagioli said. "People cross the Atlantic in five days, but that's predicated on a boat not weighing anything. So it's like here." He gestured to his ultralight pack.

"Hmm," Robinson said. He smiled, enjoying the conversation. "Well, but if you go back to—look, my Atlantic crossing is gonna take me two weeks, and I'm gonna be Internet-connected the whole time. And say you have a big boat, a passenger boat."

"Then that would be no problem," Biagioli said. "I even think you could do something really comfortable in not even two weeks. It could be ten days. The people who have a lock on the technology are the French."

Robinson laughed. "What are our billionaires doing?" he said. We talked a bit more about the idea, and about the prospects for dirigibles, which might replace short-hop jet flights, then went to sleep.

In the morning, we set out for Thunderbolt Pass. The climb began immediately. We ascended a series of steep slopes to the vast, mirrorlike Barrett Lakes, navigating around their rocky shores. The pass looked serious: it was about twelve thousand feet high, and made entirely of rock and sand. We started climbing, sometimes pulling ourselves up with our hands, sometimes slipping between narrow gaps. I looked back to find the lake where we'd camped the night before; it was like peering from an airplane and trying to spot my house.

Eventually, we reached a rock shelf about a hundred feet wide, where hulking boulders had been deposited by some vanished glacier. We passed a lone climber with a tent hanging from the sheer rock wall. The sun seemed to radiate more strongly. It was a long, challenging climb to the very top, where we rested in a small sandy spot, closed in by rock on two sides, like a little room.

"Now, this descent," Robinson said, while we drank water. "It's the most technical, meticulous part of our trip. There's nothing you won't be able to do. But you'll have to go slowly, and be careful."

I looked out over the other side of the pass, which led back to Dusy Basin. The landscape yawned downward over a couple of thousand feet. A field of boulders came first; beyond it was a rib of rock, which we could use to descend part of the way. The rib ended in a broad slope of fine-grained talus. We could navigate this by glissading—a kind of sliding, as though we were on snowshoes. That, in turn, would bring us to an ocean of smaller rocks. The first step was to traverse sideways across the mountain, over the boulders. I was nervous.

"Just go slow," Robinson said.

We started to cross the boulder field. The rocks were huge, with big gaps between them. Sometimes we clambered forward over empty space, touching four boulders at once. Then the rocks got smaller. I turned to face the mountain, my back to the sun. I moved laterally to my left, wondering how far it was to solid ground; I stepped carefully onto a funny-shaped rock that moved beneath me.

"Uh-oh," I said, louder than I meant to. "I don't like that."

All four of the rocks I was touching were moving.

"Don't look up!" Biagioli called.

I looked up. An apparent infinity of similar rocks was stacked above me on the hillside. By a trick of perspective, they seemed ready to fall.

I moved along. We reached the rock rib and crossed it to the long slope of talus. We glissaded down in zigzags through the lunar powder. At the bottom lay the ocean of rocks, small and sharp. They cast harsh shadows, creating pockets of darkness, and crossing them required intense attention. I had to remember to breathe, and to blink. Hours passed. I stopped to finish my water and looked ahead to see our destination, a lake glittering in the far distance. Almost all Robinson's novels involve an experience of this kind—a long, difficult, rocky journey through a mountain landscape, on Earth or elsewhere, accomplished through sustained concentration that lifts one out of time. The main thing is to start, then to keep going, finding your way one step at a time. It never occurs to you to stop. Even if the path isn't set, the job before you is clear: you have to get down the mountain before dark.

Robinson had been right. The descent had been difficult and doable—an ideal combination. Back in Dusy Basin, we watched the sun set from atop a high rocky outcropping. The lakes far below us glowed silver in the light.

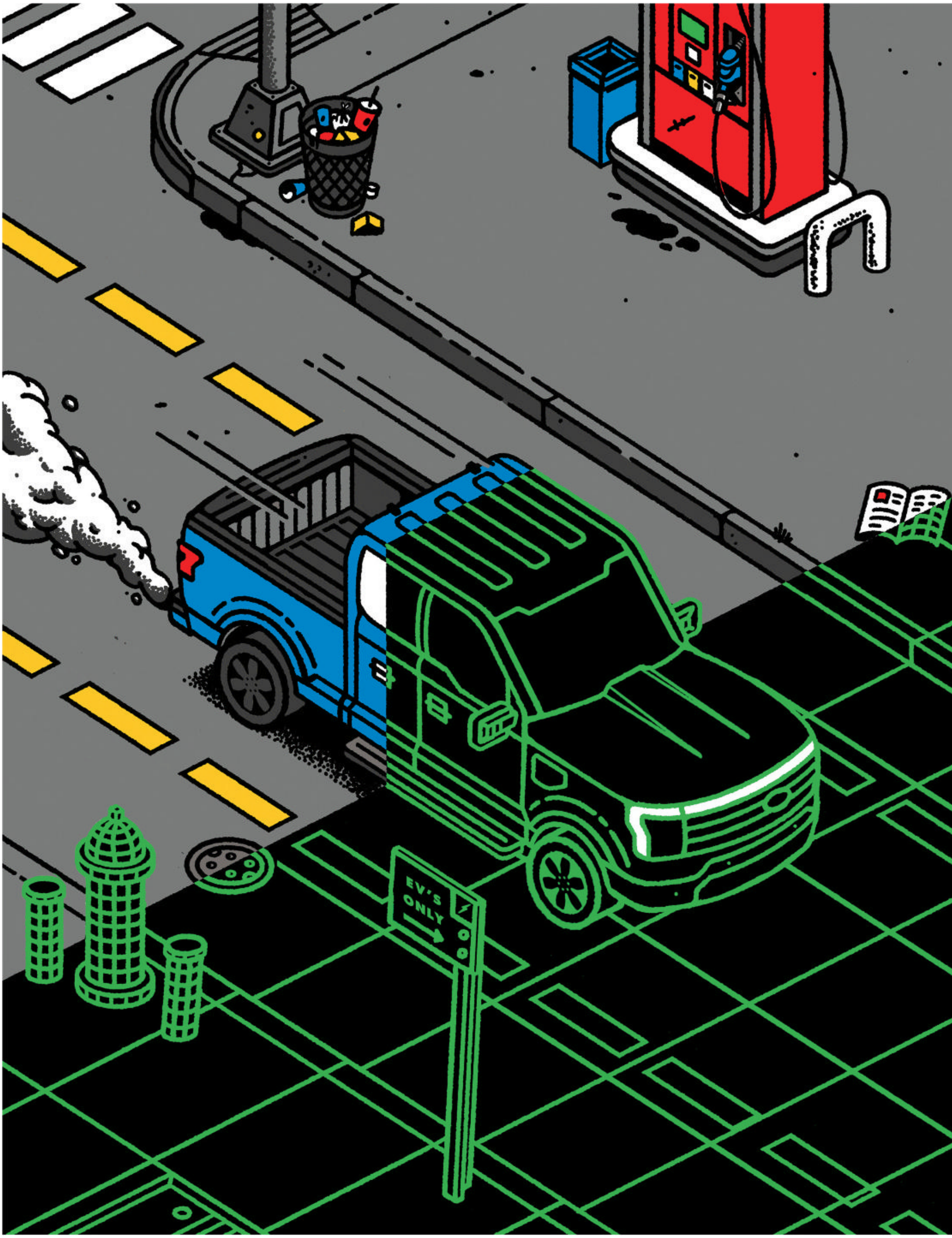
"What a planet!" Robinson said.

The next day, we hiked out. It was a long, easy walk, over Bishop Pass and through the picture-postcard forest. Robinson was sad to leave, and worried about the wildfires.

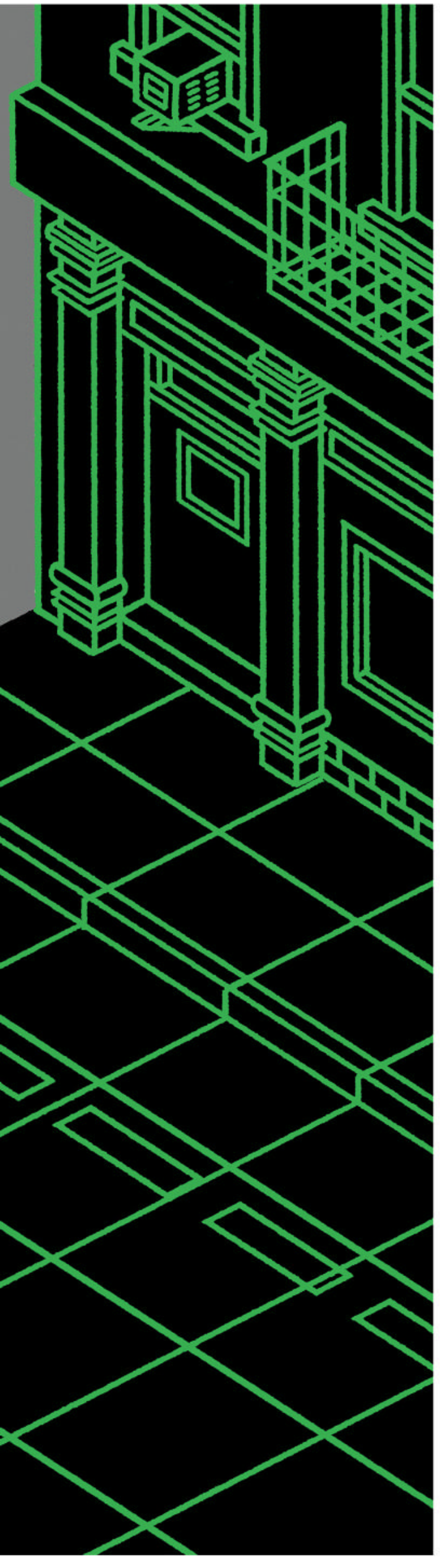
"What do you think?" I asked, finally, as we made our way down an ordinary rocky slope. "Will we be all right?"

"We'll have to make some big changes," he said. "I just hope that we won't have to make them so quickly that we break everything."

I wondered what he meant by "everything." Jobs? Currencies? Supply chains? Coastal cities? Beaches? Food? Ecologies? Societies? I looked around at the Sierras. Water stretched wide to my left, and pines framed a blue sky overhead. Songbirds were in the trees. It occurred to me that he meant everything. The whole world. All of it could break. Then, lost in thought, I slipped. ♦



Until now, most consumer E.V.s have been sedans, like Tesla's Model 3, but E.V. trucks, among them Ford's F-150 Lightning,



are coming on the market.

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL SHEPARD

ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY

GREEN GIANTS

Pickups—and their drivers—go electric.

BY JOHN SEABROOK

When I was twelve, in 1971, the walls of my bedroom in southern New Jersey were covered with full-page photographs of rail dragsters and "funny cars" with swollen engines which I carefully razor-bladed from hot-rod magazines. My older cousin Charlie Seabrook and his car, the Jersey Jimmy, were well known on the East Coast drag-racing circuit. On Saturdays in warmer weather, Charlie and his brother Larry would work on engines down the road from my family's farm, and I would hang around and watch, in love with the words they used—which showed up a few years later in Springsteen lyrics like "Chrome-wheeled, fuel-injected, and steppin' out over the line," in "Born to Run," and "Fuelie heads and a Hurst on the floor," from "Racing in the Street," a song about guys like Charlie, the "hot-rod angels / Rumbling through this Promised Land."

My cousins tried to teach me about how the power train delivers torque to the wheels. But I was more interested in car guys—the engineer cowboys who raced their "suicide machines" on weekends. Dreaming of one day having that kind of power and independence myself, I built plastic models of the cars that decorated my walls alongside their drivers, a gallery of petrol gods I knew chiefly by aliases: the Snake, the Mongoose, the Flyin' Hawaiian, and "Big Daddy" Don Garlits, King of the Dragsters.

That year, the National Hot Rod Association's Summernationals came to Englishtown, New Jersey. Charlie, who was eventually inducted into the N.H.R.A. Hall of Fame, was racing, and I got to go with some friends and stroll through the pits. Top-fuel dragsters run largely on nitromethane, a volatile fuel that contains oxygen. The pits were a mechanical Pamplona of nitromethane bulls, their belching tailpipes and fiery exhaust wrinkling the air, and their pit crews almost feral with the oddly fruity aroma of the fuel and the acrid stench of the smoking, treadless tires that the guys called slicks.

I thought of Charlie, who died in 2016, and the Jersey Jimmy recently, at the opening of a pop-up theme park that the Ford Motor Company created in downtown Austin, Texas, in mid-October, to display its 2022 lineup of S.U.V.s, trucks, and vans. As of 2020, Ford no longer sells sedans in the U.S., a development that might have horrified my cousin, a confirmed car guy.

But, instead of the nitrous roar of the Englishtown pits, the most compelling sound I heard in Austin was the silence of Ford's Mustang Mach-E as it zipped along a short track, to show off the rapid acceleration that electric vehicles, or E.V.s, are capable of. The Mach-E is a battery-powered version of the sports car that Ford introduced at the 1964 New York World's Fair; Ford unveiled it as an electric S.U.V. in 2019, in keeping with the company's move away from muscle and toward family vehicles with cargo space.

The star of the show was the F-150 Lightning—an electric version of the pickup that belongs to the best-selling vehicle line of any kind in the U.S. since the early nineteen-eighties. In a good year, Ford sells on average nine hundred thousand gas-powered F-series trucks, and earns about forty billion dollars annually from the line.

The Lightning, together with the Mach-E, and an electric Ford Transit, its cargo van, collectively represent the hundred-and-eighteen-year-old automaker's best and perhaps last chance to catch up with Elon Musk and Tesla, the dominant company in E.V. sales. (Tesla delivered close to a million electric vehicles worldwide in 2021; Ford dealers sold only about forty-three thousand E.V.s globally last year.) When Ford's electric

truck goes on sale this spring, the future of mobility will meet America's favorite ride—a momentous encounter not only for Ford but for all of us, whether we drive, bike, or walk. The future of the planet, and of human life on it, may depend on how rapidly the auto industry can reduce tailpipe emissions.

Until now, most consumer E.V.s have been sedans, like Tesla's Model 3. But sedans are a dying segment of the overall U.S. car market. During the nineteen-nineties, pickups and S.U.V.s were exempt from the luxury tax imposed on cars that cost more than thirty thousand dollars. These bigger vehicles were transformed from spartan conveyances into workingmen's Rolls, and returned much larger profits than sedans could earn.

I bought an F-150 in 2015, with seventy-two-months of low-interest financing, to use on the former dairy farm in Vermont that has become our family vacation place and pandemic retreat. (The New Jersey farm is long gone.) But in cold months I park it on the street in Brooklyn, where you can sometimes find me in it, seeking solitude in the spacious back seat. I love my truck, although I have yet to bestow an affectionate nickname on it, as do one in four truck owners, according to a Ford-commissioned study, and I don't have a truck tattoo, like fifteen per cent of my cohort. I was, however, more than a little excited to see my pickup's new electric twin.

The Lightning was under wraps inside the Lightning Theatre, a large, multimedia-equipped tent in the middle of Austin's Republic Square. Before the big reveal, attendees gathered outside in the hot sun to hear from a panel of executives about Ford's plans for electrifying its fleet. Looming overhead was Bronco Mountain—a steel-girded vertical road that the automaker had erected to demonstrate the off-road climbing capabilities of its newly revamped S.U.V.

Ford has pledged that by 2030 forty per cent of its global sales will be E.V.s; ambitious benchmarks have also been set by General Motors, Volkswagen, and Toyota. These promises have proved popular with investors, but will enough car buyers switch from gas to meet such lofty goals? According to the International Energy Agency, only two per cent of the vehicles sold in the U.S. in 2020 were E.V.s., far behind E.V. adoption rates in China and Europe. In Norway, seventy-five per cent of new car sales in 2020 were E.V.s.

Onstage, Linda Zhang, the forty-four-year-old chief engineer of the F-150 Lightning, was describing the electric truck's "mega-power frunk." In common with all E.V.s, the F-150 Lightning has no engine. Instead of a hunk of throbbing, greasy metal up front, there's a lockable storage space large enough to fit two sets of golf clubs, and equipped with a drain so that the frunk can be filled with ice and drinks for tailgating, or "frontgating," as Zhang put it. ("Frunking," the logical neologism, was perhaps too risqué for a family brand.)

In addition to performing traditional tasks like hauling and towing, Zhang claimed, a Lightning with a fully charged battery could serve as an electric generator, powering a home for several days in the event of an electrical outage. "I know you guys have struggled a little bit with storms and the power outages," she added, referring to Texas's extreme cold snap last winter.

Another Ford executive, Darren Palmer, the British-born general manager of Battery Electric Vehicles, explained that the company would rely on its strengths, among them its long manufacturing track record, its dominance in commercial and municipal fleets of pickups and vans, and its established brands. "Electrify our icons," as Palmer described the core strategy to me later. A longtime petrol-head himself—Palmer races his Shelby Cobra, a sixties-era muscle car with a Ford engine—he described getting his Mach-E as a kind of conversion experience. When the car man declared emotionally from the stage, "It kind of makes me angry when I go to a gas station now!," it felt like a Petroleum Anonymous recovery group.

Sitting next to Palmer, Muffi Ghadiali, a former Amazon executive who is helping to build Ford's charging network, assured the audience that "range anxiety"—worrying about the state of your battery, and where your next charge is coming from—was overblown. Ford lacks a nationwide network of branded charging stations like the one that Tesla has built in the past decade. Instead, the company has patched together nineteen thousand five hundred stations across the U.S., operated by independent providers such as Electrify America and ChargePoint. Ghadiali said that they were everywhere.

The audience was then invited inside the Lightning Theatre. The electric F-150 twirled on a dais while graphics flashed on a wraparound screen behind it, and a spokesperson touted the truck's attributes. In contrast to the Mustang Mach-E, Ford has kept the styling of the F-150 Lightning almost exactly the same as that of the 2022 gas F-150, inside and out. One obvious difference is a horizontal bar of light that forms part of the hood and links the headlights.

Palmer noted that owners who have accessories that fit their existing F-150s—like the cover I have for my truck's bed—won't need to buy new gear. "Customers told us, 'Do not mess with the bed!'" Palmer explained to me. Retaining the gas F-150's body also saves Ford hundreds of millions in retooling costs. The trade-off is that the new electric truck doesn't look very new.

Zhang invited me inside the Lightning to chat. She got behind the wheel, realized she didn't have the key fob, and went to find it. I waited there, searching the dashboard for something to mark this milestone in automotive history. I counted the cup holders in the console: four, the same number as in my truck.

"Are you a car person?" I asked when Zhang returned. She replied, "Well, I moved here from China when I was eight." Her first ever car ride was from Chicago's O'Hare Airport to West Lafayette, Indiana, where her father was pursuing a Ph.D. at Purdue University. "It was the middle of the night," she recalled. "Such an impactful journey."

Zhang's father, after getting his Ph.D., eventually went to work for Ford. He sometimes brought his daughter along. "I thought, Wow, this is interesting. And a lot of the things he was doing he would talk about at the dinner table," she told me. Zhang received three degrees from the University of Michigan, in electrical engineering, computer engineering, and an M.B.A. When she started at Ford, in 1996, she worked on Mustang

engines and manufacturing; later she pursued development and finance. More than three years ago, she became chief engineer for the gas F-150s, and began the Lightning project.

I asked about the biggest engineering challenges that Zhang and her team faced. Power trains in electric cars have many fewer moving parts than those in gas-driven cars. Mechanically, they aren't very complicated; the basic technology—a battery driving an electric motor—has been around since the eighteen-thirties, thirty years before internal-combustion engines came along. Electric motors are much smaller and more efficient than combustion engines. Motors convert more than eighty-five per cent of the energy they receive from the battery into motion, whereas engines use less than half of the energy produced by gasoline to power the vehicle.

The motors may be small, but the batteries aren't. Zhang said that one of the challenges was figuring out how to fit a battery large enough for a target range of two hundred and thirty miles (this bumps up to three hundred miles with an extended-range battery) without having to change the shape of the interior or "delete" the spare tire. "Once you put the motor and the battery in, where do you have room for the spare?" She and her team found the room in a redesign of the truck's undercarriage.

Which part of the truck was Zhang proudest of? That would be the frunk. We got out to peer inside. "Four hundred litres," she said. "That's a lot of beer."

Bill Ford, the company's sixty-four-year-old executive chairman, mused about the long, circular path back to electrification that the firm had taken when I spoke to him in November. Ford joined the family business in 1979, as a product-planning analyst; he's been the chair of the board since 1999.

"Henry Ford worked for Thomas Edison," he told me. In the early eighteen-nineties, Henry, who was Bill's great-grandfather, was serving as the chief engineer of Detroit's Edison Illuminating Company, a local electricity plant, while devoting his spare time to a "quadricycle" with an internal-combustion engine that ran on gasoline at a time when most motorized transport was powered by lead-acid batteries or steam.

In 1896, Ford attended a banquet for Edison's power-plant officers at the Oriental Hotel, in Coney Island, Brooklyn. After dinner, as Edison, then nearly fifty, and his managers were discussing electric vehicles, Alex Dow, Ford's boss at the Detroit plant, pointed out his chief engineer to Edison and said, "There's a young fellow who's made a gas car."

According to the account in "Taking Charge," by Michael Brian Schiffer, the thirty-three-year-old Ford, asked if he wanted to meet Edison, said yes. The two engineers sat together and discussed Ford's invention. Soon Edison began pounding on the table, and cried, "Young man, that's the thing; you have it. Keep at it! Electric cars must keep near to power stations. The storage battery is too heavy. . . . Your car is self-contained—carries its own power plant."

Edison had identified the problem with E.V.s then, and it's still the problem now. Gasoline has vastly more energy density than the best battery. About twenty gallons of gasoline, which weighs a hundred and twenty pounds or so, will convey my gas F-150 around four hundred miles: close to twice the target range of the Lightning's standard eighteen-hundred-pound battery. Part of the early appeal of the automobile, along with the everyday freedoms it offered, lay in "touring"—the ability to go long distances on a whim. Today, even though most people use their cars for shorter trips and fly longer distances, the mystique of touring remains.

By 1903, Edison had apparently changed his mind again about the power source for automobiles. "Electricity is the thing," he told *The Automobile* that year. "There are no whirring and grinding gears with their numerous levers to confuse. There is not that almost terrifying uncertain throb and whirr of the powerful combustion engine. There is no water circulating system to get out of order, no dangerous and evil-smelling gasoline, and no noise."

In January, 1914, in an interview with the New York *Times*, Henry Ford discussed a vehicle that he and Edison were building together. "Within a year, I hope, we shall begin the manufacture of an electric automobile," he said. Edison's

"It turns out 'Heaven South' is just a made-up realtor's term."

new nickel-iron batteries, supplied by the Edison Storage Battery Company, promised a range of up to a hundred miles. "At last," *Electrical World* declared, "the electric vehicle is to have . . . a low price and quantity production"—roughly the same message I heard in Austin.

Only a few Ford-Edison cars were ever made. During the First World War, petroleum mechanized the conflict, and securing access to the world's oil reserves became one of the motives for fighting it. And Edison's battery didn't work as advertised. Apparently, the Wizard of Menlo Park wasn't exempt from the adage one hears from industry insiders about "liars, damn liars, and battery suppliers."

Bill Ford noted that, with the discovery of oil in West Texas, "gasoline became so cheap that the whole fleet converted over." He added, "I often wonder what would have happened had that discovery not occurred."

Internal-combustion engines emit pollutants that can cause cancer, asthma, heart disease, and birth defects. In 2019, according to the E.P.A., transportation was responsible for twenty-nine per cent of U.S. greenhouse emissions, which trap heat in the atmosphere and deplete the ozone layer, prompting average global temperatures and sea levels to rise, and putting the planet on a path to catastrophe. And now the company and the family whose products have contributed to this predicament are offering us a way out, by electrifying its icons. What's not to believe?

The F-150 Lightning isn't the only electric pickup coming to the market, nor is it the first one. Rivian, a startup headquartered in Irvine, California, has already begun deliveries of its R1T "electric adventure vehicle" to customers, with its R1S S.U.V. soon to follow. The next two or three years will bring an electric version of General Motors' popular Chevy Silverado pickup, a battle-ready Hummer E.V., and the Cybertruck, Tesla's deeply dystopian-looking pickup, which reportedly has more than a million advance orders. Stellantis, formerly Fiat Chrysler, is also planning electric pickups and S.U.V.s. Electric sedans from Mercedes-Benz, Porsche, Lucid, and Audi are on the market or in the offing.

Electric trucks are intended, in part, to appeal to drivers like me, who feel guilty about their gas-guzzler, as well as to citizens whose concern for the common good has kept them from buying a pickup at all. (Two hundred thousand people have reserved Lightnings with Ford dealers; most of those potential customers are neither pickup drivers nor Ford owners.) But will buying a Lightning absolve me of my sins against nature? If one calculates all the nonrenewable-energy costs incurred in manufacturing an E.V. pickup, including the mining and processing of battery metals—lithium, cobalt, nickel, and manganese, among others—and the worldwide shipping of those components, along with the percentage of fossil-fuel-based energy that goes into the grid that charges E.V.s (in 2020, less than twenty per cent of the electricity generated in the U.S. came from renewables), and then compares that with the environmental cost of driving my gas F-150, might keeping my old truck be the better option for now, at least until renewable-energy sources make the grid cleaner?

According to Rahul Malik, a battery scientist who is currently working in the natural-resources department of the Canadian government, even an E.V. plugged into a highly renewable grid must be driven for more than twenty-five thousand miles before it has lower "life cycle" emissions (which include the energy used in mining and manufacturing) than a combustion vehicle. And, as William Green, a professor of chemical engineering at M.I.T., pointed out

to me, "if a person sells their used car and buys an E.V., that used car doesn't disappear, it just has a new owner, so it keeps on emitting." Ultimately, what matters is that first-time car buyers choose electric.

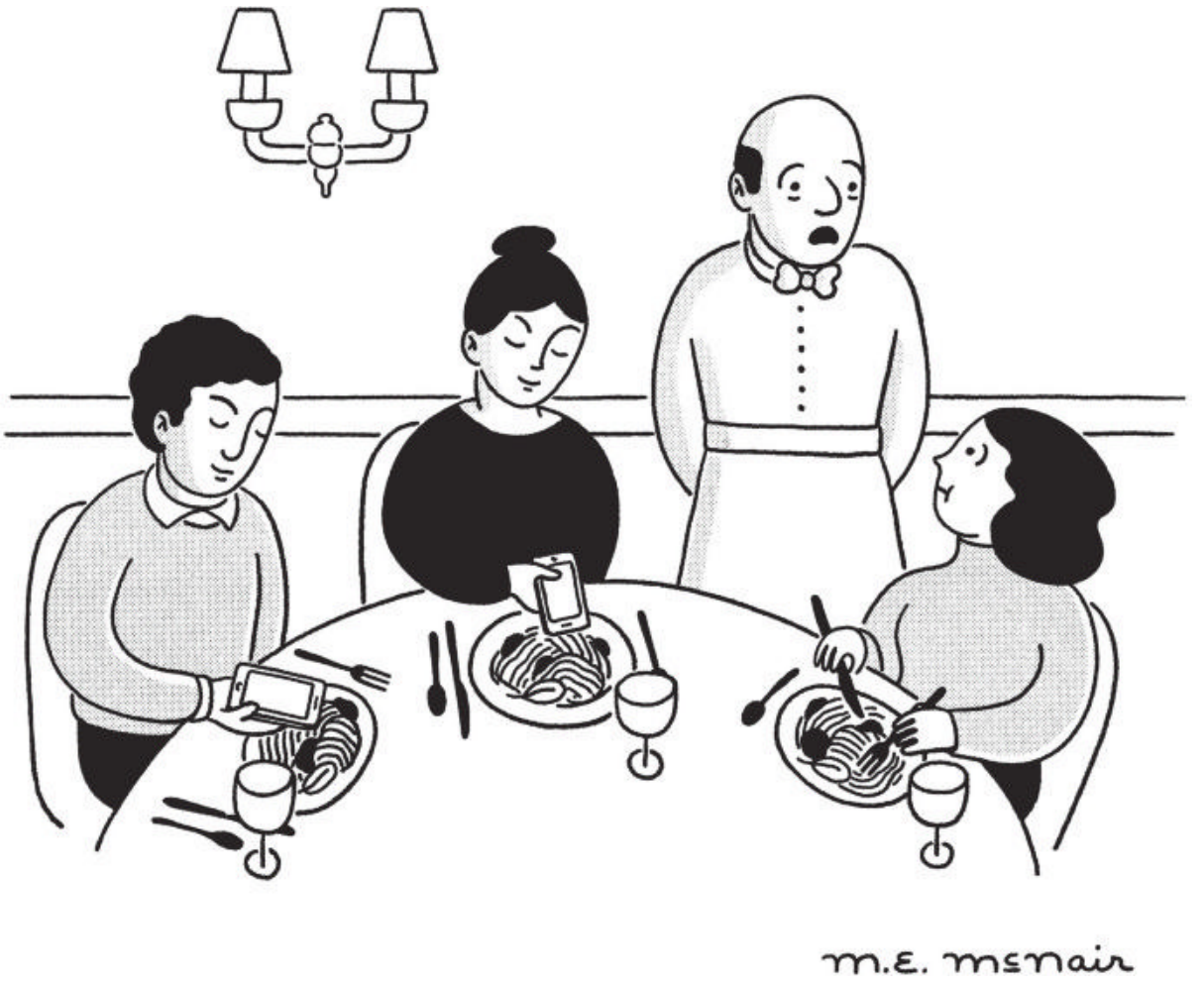
Then there's the other big issue with pickups, whether they're gas-powered or E.V.s: their size. Since 1990, according to Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the weight of the average pickup has increased by twelve hundred and fifty-six pounds—thirty-two per cent. A recent post on Vice observed that the largest pickups and S.U.V.s today are as big as Second World War-era tanks. Now pickups are going to get heavier still. The Lightning, because of its lithium-ion battery, weighs approximately sixty-five hundred pounds; in some cases the pickup can be more than two thousand pounds heavier than its gas counterpart. You'll be capable of assaulting a mountaintop redoubt, even if you're just driving to the store for milk.

Not only are large E.V.s not as green as smaller E.V.s.; what about all the people who aren't in big vehicles? Analysis from the National Highway Traffic Safety Association has shown that pedestrians who are hit by pickups or S.U.V.s are two to three times more likely to die than those who are hit by cars. In fact, the number of pedestrians killed by vehicles rose forty-six per cent between 2010 and 2019. According to the Governors Highway Safety Association, if you count deaths against vehicle miles travelled, 2020 saw the largest increase in pedestrian fatalities (twenty-one per cent) since nationwide tracking started, in 1975. Even though fewer vehicles were on the road early in the pandemic, more people died.

In "The Road to Transportation Justice: Reframing Auto Safety in the SUV Age," a forthcoming paper in the *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, John Saylor, a law student, argues that our entire concept of auto safety should be reconceived in the age of mega-vehicles, so that we focus not just on the people inside them but also on the people outside them, in other cars and on the streets. Automakers, for their part, say that adding cameras and sensors to vehicles will alert drivers to potential collisions, and, should autonomous-driving features be deployed, the vehicle might be able to take preventive action faster than any human. But autonomous vehicles, of course, pose a new set of possible hazards.

Still, 2022 looks like the year of the pickup. Ford is betting that, by making its vehicles greener through electrification, the company can increase profits, boost its stock price, and claim to be on the right side of the war against human-made climate change. Having come of age at a time when the well-being of U.S.

automakers mirrored the well-being of the country, I want to believe that Ford can innovate in a way that preserves the pleasure I get from my F-150—a satisfaction that comes not only from its personal utility but also from the opportunity to help haul stuff for friends and neighbors—while reducing its emissions and the hazard it could pose on the road. But I recognize that the price we pay for this Panglossian scenario may well be a plenitude of pickups.



"Is there something wrong with your food?"

In mid-November, I toured the Rouge Electric Vehicle Center, in Dearborn, Michigan, where the F-150 Lightning is being assembled in a new, five-hundred-thousand-square-foot "advanced manufacturing" plant. I was now one of the two hundred thousand people who had placed a deposit on a Lightning. Even though, in response to demand, Ford has increased the Rouge Center's production capacity to a hundred and fifty thousand Lightnings a year, I was probably in for a wait of a year or more.

Inside the plant, Corey Williams, the manager, welcomed me to "hallowed ground." The building is situated on a six-hundred-acre complex on the Rouge River which first began producing automobiles in 1927. There are eleven main buildings. The complex is thick with history—not just company and industrial and American history but also the history of the Ford family, and of the thousands of Ford families like Linda Zhang's. Whether Ford's epic industrial history is its singular advantage, as it seeks to compete with automakers like Tesla and Rivian with no legacy in gas-powered cars, or whether that history will drag the company into oblivion, will be partly resolved inside this facility during the next decade or so.

The original Rouge was a marvel of vertical integration, where a car could be made from raw materials, such as iron from Ford mines and timber from Ford forests in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, in just a few days. Jim Farley, Ford's fifty-nine-year-old C.E.O., told me after my visit that the symbolism of the location is important, because "we're going back" to something more like Henry Ford's ore-to-cars model, so that Ford won't be so dependent on foreign battery-makers and on imported microprocessors. Ford is investing billions of dollars to build electric-vehicle and battery-making plants in Tennessee and Kentucky. The venture is a partnership with SK Innovation, a Korean company that is a major global manufacturer of battery cells. Still, China controls important ingredients of E.V. batteries, including cobalt, which comes primarily from Chinese-owned mines in Congo, and it currently dominates the processing of battery materials mined around the world.

"We're not going to secure our future if we keep buying these things on the open market with everyone else, and buying them in Asia, where politics could affect our supply," Farley said. Ford has formed a new partnership with Redwood Materials, a battery-recycling company launched by JB Straubel—a co-founder, with Elon Musk, of Tesla—and hopes that it will allow the company to obtain crucial components from old batteries, and not be so reliant on China. Redwood says it can recover more than ninety-five per cent of the critical materials in used batteries.

I followed Williams along the moving assembly line, the production method that Ford introduced at the Piquette Avenue Plant, in Detroit, in the early twentieth century. In the gas-F-150 assembly plant, a few hundred yards away from the E.V. center, a conveyor system under the factory floor moves the vehicles along the line, creating a dungeon-like din. In the new plant, autonomous, battery-powered "skillets" containing a truck's chassis glide noiselessly along spotless polished-concrete floors. At each workstation, crews affix parts and the Lightnings begin to assume their familiar boxy shape. Having no fixed conveyance system makes it easier for the company to adjust capacity.

Another notable difference is the absence of paper checklists, which Williams said used to be knee-high at the other plant's workstations; now everything is on screens. But perhaps the most significant difference is a dearth of human workers. Because E.V.s contain fewer parts, they take less work to put together, which means fewer workers are needed. The United Auto Workers wants to preserve existing jobs. President Biden, responding to these concerns, offered up to $12,500 in tax credits on E.V.s bought from unionized shops, like Ford, as part of the stalled Build Back Better bill, making the starting price of a Lightning,

$27,500, an incredible deal. But the added incentive doesn't really address the inevitability of autoworkers' jobs becoming increasingly automated.

Only a fraction of Ford's total U.S. workforce of around eighty-six thousand will work at the Rouge E.V. Center. The old Rouge employed a hundred thousand workers, and the gas-F-150 plant, across the tarmac, where a new truck rolls off the line every fifty-three seconds, employs four thousand workers. (Ford has announced plans to add nine hundred and fifty new jobs to keep up with demand for the Lightning and its hybrid F-150 model.) Williams, who gave President Biden a tour when Ford débuted the electric truck, last May, explained that computer vision enhances the visual inspection of the vehicles that humans conduct, but with greater objectivity. Cobots—collaborative robots—check all the wiring and the fluid connections before the cab and the bed go on the chassis.

We came to the largest of the robots, a Fanuc M-2000iA, which can lift a vehicle frame at least thirteen feet into the air. The robot deftly picked up the truck's eighteen-hundred-pound Korean-made lithium-ion battery, which looked like a rooftop cargo-carrying case. The reinforced high-strength plastic shell contained hundreds of AA-battery-size cells filled with chemicals. The Fanuc placed the battery on the truck's chassis, and the skillet floated farther down the line.

CAPRA AEGAGRUS HIRCUS

No one knew the reason the town goat
followed the flower vender around town
until someone found piles of damp petals
along the routes the flower vender took.

All the kinfolk of the goat had long
become food. Their bones & muscles
had been used for tools & weapons.
Mannish water, a popular goat stew,

was made from the feet, intestines
& testicles of some goats. Cashmere
came from the undercoat of superfine
fibres on the underbelly of other goats.

Because the goat is one of the oldest
domesticated animals, it was one of the first
to be sacrificed in rituals, cooked in a hole
of fire, thrown off the side of a mountain.

Our goat followed the vender around town
dragging chains anytime there was a death
& dragging bells anytime a child was born.
The goat had no name. Or each of us called it

a different name, but when we draped its horns
in wreathes of fruit and flowers at harvesttime,
we called it *Cornucopious the Goat*. Dionysus
spent his childhood disguised as a goat

under Zeus' protection, but he went mad
when he was turned back into a human.

The electrification of Ford's fleet isn't the most challenging task that the company faces. As Jim Farley explained after my Rouge tour, "This industry is overly focussed on the propulsion change. But the real change is that we are moving to a software-defined experience for our customers." That experience will gradually replace what drivers do now, until Ford's fleet becomes fully autonomous, at some point years from now. "Can we sleep in our cars?" Farley asked, in a way that suggested the answer will be yes. "Can we use them as business places, so we leave for work an hour later?" Again, yes. "Then the drive totally changes."

Farley's maternal grandfather, Emmet Tracy, worked for Henry Ford in the foundry at the original Rouge—"An awful job," his grandson said. Farley, who grew up around the world (his father was in Citibank's international division), started his automotive career at Toyota, in 1990, where he worked as a marketing executive, helping to bring out the RAV4, Toyota's compact S.U.V., and leading its luxury line, Lexus. Farley's choice strained his relationship with his grandfather. By the time Farley joined Ford, in 2007, his grandfather was dead. He became the C.E.O. in 2020. Like Darren Palmer, Farley likes to race Cobras. He is a cousin of Chris Farley, the late comedian.

Farley pointed to the recent history of the mobile phone as "the most powerful proxy for what we are going through." In 2007, he went on, "three of the biggest mobile-phone-makers were BlackBerry, Nokia, and Motorola." A few years later, Apple- and Google-made mobile devices took over, and they were much more than telephones. "And the most important thing was that the software decided what kind of hardware got put on those machines," Farley added. When it came to the device business, hardware-centric companies had given way to software-first ones, and the customer experience was defined by the embedded operating system.

Ford is at that juncture now. The automaker must come up with a vehicular version of Apple's iOS for this software-first world in which Ford has very little experience. Historically, the company has outsourced electronics and software, and while the communication template is largely standardized, each supplier uses it differently. "We delegated our electrical systems and software to twenty suppliers," Farley told me, "and different parts of the car can't speak to each

Goats have pupils flat as slits in their irises.
A goat is more likely to ram a man

than a ram. Our goat pooped flowers
whether we fed it meat from the table
or the butcher's block or even if it ate a rodent
at the roadside after scaring the buzzards off.

Buzzards because when you put an ear
to the bird it sounded like bees in a hive.
The average goat is well known
for pinpoint balance in precarious places,

for climbing trees with hooves like ballerina
shoes & for escaping escape-proof enclosures.
When grazing undisturbed, goats maintain
social distance, but sheep huddle together.

Goats don't care for rain, rivers, or seas.
Goats converse with people about as well
as dogs & horses do. When your grandfather's
grandfather was alive, he used to say,

"I'll be here to eat the goat that eats the grass
on your grave." Many years later you were born
stubbornly side-eyeing the doctor at your delivery.
Maybe your mother had been given a magic

goat's milk by the midwife. I brought flowers
& the bells & babbling of a goat.
You spoke immediately as well as a goat.
I'm sorry I have always listened so poorly.

—*Terrance Hayes*

other—the software that controls seat movement can't talk to the software that controls the door latch, say."

Rather than E.V.s, Farley thinks of Ford's future products as digital vehicles. Instead of depreciating from the moment you drive your new purchase off the lot, "the product will get better every day," with regular software updates, allowing Ford to enjoy the kind of connected relationship with its customers that tech and gaming companies have. But how easy will that be?

Ford has long maintained a symbolic relationship with its customers, through ubiquitous advertisements (the company spent close to two billion dollars on advertising in 2020) that appeal to patriotism, family, helping others, and, for me, a piercing nostalgia for my boyhood on a farm. Ford buyers "shop for meanings, not just stuff," Laura Oswald, the author of "Marketing Semiotics," and a Ford consultant, told me. Yet the company has never maintained a direct relationship with its customers in the way Big Tech has. Also, it sells its vehicles through dealers. The intimate relationship between a connected device, an app, and its user can't be sustained through myth and symbolic consumption alone. If cybersecurity, for example, becomes a major issue in a world of networked digital vehicles, as many predict, would I trust Ford to protect my electric truck just because it's "Built Ford Tough"? All in all, Ford faces a monumental undertaking.

When Farley and I spoke, I was in a Ford conference room in Dearborn and Farley was on a big screen at the end of the room, at his desk in his Detroit apartment. (His wife and their three children live in London but will be joining him in Detroit later this year.) Farley admitted that moving to a software-defined driving experience was hard for people coming from the hardware world.

"I have to tell you, it's an overwhelming job," he said, then paused, tearing up. "It's all-consuming, so that's why I'm emotional. I miss my family—I wish I could be a better father and husband and go mountain biking and hiking, but that's all gone now in the service of this transition." He took another long moment. "But there are great American engineers," he went on at last. "And no one knows their names."

Farley was referring to, among others, Doug Field, a superstar engineer who began his career at Ford in the nineties, went on to Apple, where he designed hardware for the Mac, and to Tesla, where he led the software-development team for the Model 3. A few years ago, he returned to Apple, where he worked as V.P. of Special Projects ("I don't know what it was," Farley told me, "but it has something to do with a car") before rejoining Ford in September as chief advanced technology and embedded-systems officer, responsible for delivering "seamless, delightful and always-on experiences" to drivers, according to the Ford Media Center.

Farley said that he had been at a racetrack with Field the previous weekend. "Everyone was saying, 'Oh, there's Jim Farley. He runs Ford, he races Cobras.' I was with perhaps the most important American engineer of the past hundred years, and they didn't even know who he is." Field, who declined to be interviewed, seems intent on keeping it that way.

Ford lent me a Mustang Mach-E for several days, so that I could give electric touring a try. I invited my twenty-three-year-old son, Harry, along. Ford dropped off the sleek four-door in Brooklyn. Our destination, the Vermont farm, was two hundred and sixty miles away. In theory, this Mach-E, with an advertised range of around three hundred miles, could make it, but the car's navigation system told me that I was going to need to recharge partway. The majority of E.V. batteries, the single most expensive component of the vehicle, are rated to last no more than eight to ten years, on average. To preserve a battery's

"This will make the man in your life wonder where you went."

life, Ford recommends unplugging before eighty per cent, to avoid overheating the battery cells.

Having driven the route hundreds of times, I knew the filling stations and fast-food places by heart. Along I-95, I was used to seeing the Tesla Superchargers at the back of the service areas I frequent, but, owing to the terms of Tesla's onerous patent, its charging stations aren't compatible with Ford E.V.s and other electric vehicles. The Ford-friendly chargers have no Ford signage, and are discoverable only with the car's navigation system or the FordPass app; many aren't near the highway.

The first leg of the trip was spent in the familiar anxiety of afternoon rush-hour New York traffic, which seems worse than ever since the pandemic. It finally eased at Stamford, and I was able to test out the torque. Electric cars can't maintain horsepower as long as gas cars can, because it's hard to dissipate the heat that builds up in electric motors. But the motors can deliver microbursts of acceleration, without cycling through gears, in the way that an electric egg beater can go directly to the high-speed setting, skipping low and medium. My driver's brain was far more engaged by these torquey sprints than by a steady rate of high speed. I'm pretty sure Cousin Charlie would have dug it. But the torque wasn't truly satisfying until I turned on the "propulsion sound" in the "unbridled" mode (it's a Mustang, remember), so that I heard the speed. Harry shook his head. O.K., Vroomer.

The navigation system correctly calculated that if we drove to the Electrify America direct-current chargers in the Chicopee Marketplace mall, in western Massachusetts, we would have twenty-four per cent of battery life remaining. We arrived after nine, so the vast parking lot was mostly empty. The Mach-E's G.P.S. led us to the chargers—four plugs in green-glowing, gas-pump-like stations next to a Home Depot. Could this be right? No one else was using them.

We plugged in. The display on the charger said that it would take thirty-two minutes to reach seventy-four per cent, which would put us at the farm, still a hundred and nineteen miles north, with twenty-four per cent left. We walked toward the distant light of an Applebee's, and had a father-son chat while I monitored the battery's progress on my phone and ate ribs. This felt more like the opposite of range anxiety.

But as we drove north the temperature quickly fell into the forties, and, as it did, our projected range kept diminishing. The navigation system apparently hadn't figured this change in weather in its original calculation, which, at least to me, seemed neither seamless nor delightful. It began to rain. We were both showing signs of range anxiety by the time we arrived, at 11:30 P.M., nearing empty. We plugged into a regular outlet in the barn, in the dark.

The Mustang didn't charge much overnight on my 120-volt outlet. The car's navigation system—or the spotty rural cell coverage—failed to route me to the closest Electrify America chargers, across the state border in New Hampshire, and, for safety reasons, I couldn't use the FordPass app on my phone to navigate while the car was moving. Ford's charging infrastructure will inevitably improve as more E.V.s hit the road. Today wasn't my day. I finally found the charging stations in the West Lebanon Walmart parking lot, but they weren't working properly, and angry drivers were on the phone with customer service. It was still raining; puddles had formed in the depressions around the chargers, and my feet got wet while I was trying to get a hundred and fifty kilowatts flowing into my car, which isn't as unsafe as it sounds.

Back in Brooklyn, I asked Harry if he thought that his first car would be an E.V. "I think that being a city boy has shielded me from the utility of cars," he replied. He got an e-bike instead.

Erich Merkle, a Ford sales analyst, told me that during the past fifty years, as boomers have aged and prospered, "they have basically expanded and collapsed entire vehicle segments." In the seventies, he explained, "they were just coming out of school, without a lot of money, looking for an economical and affordable vehicle." That's how the Jap-

anese subcompact established itself in the U.S. market. In the eighties, with "boomers getting married and having kids, they flocked to the minivan," which Chrysler started producing in 1993. Ford came out with the 1991 Ford Explorer S.U.V., which "looked cool and the minivan didn't," Merkle went on, adding, "The driver could feel good about being an adventurous person even while doing nine-to-five jobs." S.U.V.s grew steadily bigger with boomer incomes and became Expeditions. Then, "Ford thought, People are buying these large S.U.V.s. What if we packaged the best of an S.U.V. into a pickup? So we moved people into these luxury crew-cab pickup trucks in the late nineties, and Ford hasn't looked back since."

Although I didn't get to drive an F-150 Lightning, I did take one of its electric rivals, Rivian's R1T pickup, from a Rivian service center in Bushwick to Far Rockaway and back. The truck starts at $67,500, but my ride, an Adventure Package model, which advertises three hundred and fourteen miles of range and comes with a natural-grained ash-wood dashboard, kicks off at $73,000—almost twice the Lightning's starting price. For an extra five grand, there's a two-burner induction cooktop and a sink, for those lonesome nights out on the range with the dogies.

Still, from my first glimpse of the truck's front end I was smitten. Instead of the usual grille full of snarling chrome-plated chompers, the R1T's retro-futuristic front end seemed to smile, and say, "You're not buying this vehicle for work, or at least not the kind of work people used to do in pickups, are you, cowboy?" That was true. According to a survey, more than one in ten country songs released in 2019 mentioned pickup trucks, but I still haven't heard any lyrics about truck-drivin' me. With apologies to Glen Campbell, that song would go: *Like a laptop cowboy/Sitting out here in my truck with my M1 MacBook Pro/Like a laptop cowboy/Tele-shrink sessions and watchin' my favorite new shows/And then buyin' more stuff on my phone.*

The R1T is fifteen inches shorter than my nineteen-foot-long F-150, which means that it can fit into most garages. It has a smaller bed, but it also has an ingenious "gear tunnel": a cuboid space that runs through the middle of the truck.

Rivian's founder, thirty-nine-year-old RJ Scaringe, from Rockledge, Florida, who wears horn-rimmed glasses and has a wholesome demeanor, is often likened to Clark Kent. But he struck me more as Mozart to Jim Farley's Salieri. Unburdened by incumbency, Scaringe can freely "mess with the bed," without alienating an existing customer base.

Scaringe grew up next to the Indian River from which the company derives its name. His father founded a mechanical-engineering firm, and a neighbor, who restored vintage Porsches, allowed young RJ to help out. He became so car-obsessed that he would stash spare parts around his bedroom. "But I had this realization that these things that I was deeply in love with were also the source of so many of the world's problems," he told me. "There are geopolitical challenges, air-quality issues in most of the major cities throughout the world, and we're essentially redesigning our atmosphere's composition at levels that are hard to imagine. It felt like it was emotionally inconsistent to love something so much that you knew was bad."

Scaringe received a master's degree in mechanical engineering from M.I.T. and a doctorate from M.I.T.'s Sloan Automotive Laboratory. On graduating, in 2009, he founded a company to build hybrid sports cars and coupes. A couple of years later, he renamed the company Rivian, and, recognizing that sedans were a shrinking category and that Tesla had already launched one, he started working on an electric pickup and an S.U.V. In 2017, Rivian's workforce, which is non-union, moved into a former Mitsubishi factory in Normal, Illinois. Amazon invested more than two billion dollars in the company, and ordered a hundred thousand vans. Ford invested $1.2 billion.

When Scaringe talks about vertical integration, he's referring not to raw materials but to the integration of software, electronics, and hardware. "From the start of building the company, software and electronics stacks are core to what we do," he said. "So we're building all the computers in the car, the software stacks that run those computers, and we integrate that. Which is very different from how the auto industry has evolved." Scaringe was the only person I met in the auto industry who talked about "software stacks" with the kind of poetic intensity that Charlie used to talk about engine parts.

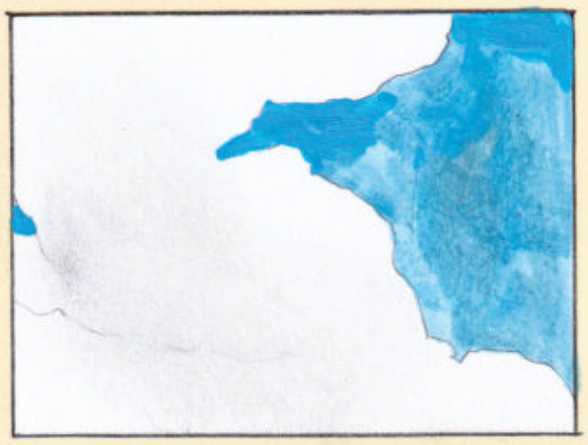
By the time I returned the R1T to Bushwick, this laptop cowboy had two sweethearts. I went on the Rivian Web site and, just for fun, configured an R1T for myself. Then I forked over a thousand refundable dollars to hold the reservation on a vehicle that may take even longer than my Lightning. At some point, I'll have to choose—the sensible, reliable, and more affordable Lightning (provided the Ford dealer doesn't add a huge markup, which seems possible, given demand), made in a union shop, or the R1T, an electric, digital vehicle designed from scratch that is truly new but doesn't benefit from Ford's manufacturing experience. Or I'll keep my gas F-150, which I recently made my last payment on, and spare the world another truck.

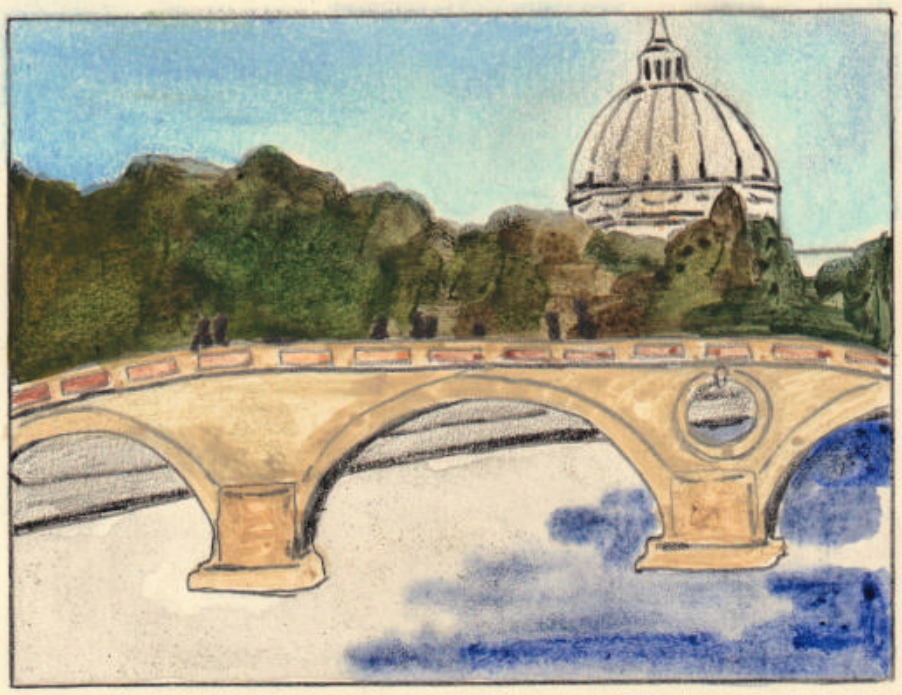
I spoke to Bill Ford on November 10th, the day that Rivian initiated an I.P.O. on the Nasdaq. By the end of the trading day, Rivian had reached a market cap of a hundred and one billion dollars (Scaringe was suddenly worth two billion), which made it for a time worth more than Ford, despite having no profits and little production history. (Ford's valuation has since risen.) Although Ford's investment in the startup paid off handsomely, Rivian's stock price also showed that investors thought a startup that had at that point made just north of two hundred vehicles might have a better chance of transitioning into the age of digital cars than did Ford, one of the world's great industrial enterprises.

Bill Ford seemed unbothered, however. "This is a blast," he said, of this pivotal moment in family and company history. "I love this. All my career, I've kind of been waiting for this." When he started calling for greener cars and manufacturing practices, more than twenty years ago, he has said, "the industry reacted like I was a Bolshevik." Now, he reflected, "it's here. I only wish I was thirty years younger."

Last May, Ford's daughter Alexandra Ford English, who started working for the company in 2017 as a manager in the autonomous-vehicle sector, became the first Ford woman to join the board. She was thirty-three—the age of her great-great-grandfather when he met Thomas Edison.

"She will live what I hoped to live," her father said. "And that will be very cool." ♦





LONG DISTANCE

Ayşegül Savaş

ILLUSTRATION BY AIDAN KOCH

Lea changed the sheets when she got up. She'd bought flowers the previous day, tulips that she'd put on the dresser. There were carnations on the kitchen table, in a squat glass vase. She thought they looked cheerful, and not too fussy.

The fridge was filled with more things than they would be able to eat: olives, jams, prosciutto, cheeses. She'd bought wine and beer, cookies, breads, the round taralli crackers that were common in Roman cafés.

She didn't think they'd be staying home very much—there were so many places she wanted to take Leo—but she had in mind a scene of the two of them eating in bed. Did people really do that? It seemed as though there would be too much mess, nowhere to put your plate. Still, she liked the idea: the sleepy indulgence, the sheets streaked with light—the hour, in her imagination, was late afternoon, which may have been the reason for the beer, though this particular timing would require some planning, with everything else she wanted to do with him.

Her phone buzzed. "Just landed. Will take a taxi over as soon as I'm out."

I can't wait to get there, she thought, alternatively. Or, *Finally*. But maybe this was Leo's way of elevating the anticipation further, not allowing any release with words.

They hadn't communicated very much in the past weeks, after Leo bought his ticket. Whereas before that they had written almost daily, talked on the phone for an hour, sometimes two. The relationship was still new; they spoke to each other in the hush of mystery.

This was different from their time in California, where Lea had been doing research for a semester. Leo worked as an engineer in a neighboring town; they hadn't met until the last month of Lea's stay. Then, there had been something embarrassing about their late-night returns to her apartment after dinners at the home of mutual friends: a secret, though not a thrill. On Lea's last weekend, they'd gone to a restaurant together, to dignify the situation with a formal parting.

But once Lea was in Rome the e-mails they exchanged to say goodbye had suddenly become tender. Their messages thickened with a new vocabulary. Lea wrote to him about the city: the banks of the river in the early morning, the market stalls closing in the afternoon, the kiosk where she drank her coffee. She went to small, out-of-the-way museums in part to tell Leo about them, to have him see her as someone curious and passionate.

She was in Rome as a postdoctoral fellow in linguistics. She took the metro to the university—an unremarkable place with Fascist architecture—and ate lunch in the campus café with other researchers. They'd formed a group, and met up on weekends for drinks or hikes. Lea had always felt comfortable among academic types—their measured enthusiasms and logical world view, their adaptability. But these were not the things she wrote about to Leo. She wanted to portray another version of herself: a young woman in Rome, enchanted by life.

Leo told her that he looked forward to her e-mails; he enjoyed picturing her in this city he'd never seen, where she seemed entirely at ease. Without their exchange, Lea might have been disappointed in Rome, having always imagined it as something more—more consistent, perhaps, or harmonious. Writing to Leo provided a vantage point, a way to sift and sort, to separate the beauty from the ungainliness.

She went downstairs when she heard the taxi pull up.

Leo stepped out of the car with a clutter of things. Coat, sweater, backpack. Headphones falling off his neck. He was different from how she remembered—smaller and paler. His expression was confused.

Lea shouted some phrases to the driver—thank you, good day, thank you again—maybe too loud, too eager to show off her Italian.

"Hello," Leo said. They kissed, somewhere between cheek and lips.

Upstairs, they put the suitcase in the bedroom, then sat in the kitchen. Leo wasn't very hungry. He picked at the cut-up fruits she'd put in a bowl.

"Would you like to take a nap?"

"No," Leo said. "Then I'd sleep all day. We'd better go out before the fatigue kicks in."

Of course I don't want to nap, he could have said. *We just reunited*.

She put on a jacket over the dress she was wearing, long and sleeveless. She'd bought it last week for this very day. Leo put on his sneakers.

They followed the tram tracks to the river. Lea worried that they walked mostly in silence. Near the Ponte Sublicio, Leo took her hand.

"Farther down's my favorite bridge," Lea said eagerly. "We'll walk it later."

"I trust the guide."

Once again, she was excited for their weekend ahead. Back in California, she'd felt a constant fluctuation of her attraction toward him. The first times they slept together, she'd found him almost repulsive. In their months of e-mailing, too, her image of him had swung back and forth. Sometimes it seemed that he heard her words exactly as she intended them, other times that he was deaf. At those moments, she would feel resentful: before she arrived in Rome, her friends had joked about all the Italian men she'd meet in the course of the year. She'd felt, once or twice, a pang of injustice, as if her desires had been curbed, her freedom restricted. The person she described to Leo in her e-mails—a woman enchanted by the world—should by rights be enchanting others. Not that she'd met anyone, though who was to say that she wouldn't, if she allowed herself to look.

She'd practiced the route to the restaurant once before, and plotted a path there through ivy-strung streets. She commended herself on her pick: the back garden was empty and sunny. The waiter tended to them with cheer, didn't show impatience at Lea's Italian. They got a plate of antipasti. Leo suggested beers. While they were waiting, Lea reached for his hands across the table, rubbed her palms up and down his arms.

Afterward, they climbed the hill of the Gianicolo, then surveyed the city from the Acqua Paola. Lea told him about the researchers at the university, exaggerating the character profiles for effect. She liked that he listened to her without interruption, kept track of names, didn't contest her point of view when she told him someone was annoying or boring, totally brilliant or a terrible scholar. Back in Trastevere, in the honey-tinted light, they sat down for Aperol spritzes. Their conversation was enlivened by tipsiness, their hands entangled restlessly over the table, touching insistently.

"Let's go home," Lea said. She waved

for the waiter. They walked back to the Ponte Sublicio. It was only later that she thought they should've taken a taxi instead.

"Something strange happened on the plane," Leo said as they were crossing the bridge. He had his arm around her waist. Lea leaned into him, exaggerating her tipsiness, making a slow, sensual dance of it.

"There was a woman next to me."

"Ooh," Lea said. "A beautiful woman?"

"She told me such a crazy story."

"I like crazy," she slurred.

"I felt like she hadn't talked to anyone in months. I felt so sorry for her."

"Are you trying to make me jealous?" Lea asked, coyly.

Leo stopped walking. He took away his arm. He looked sad, or disappointed, which Lea found patronizing.

"She was really troubled," he said. "She was an old woman."

"O.K.," Lea said. "You could've just said so. How was I supposed to know that?"

This was, more or less, the end of the conversation. Lea was too proud to ask him to tell her what the woman had said; Leo didn't offer to continue.

Back in the apartment, Leo asked whether he'd somehow upset her. If so, he was sorry.

They were sitting at the kitchen table. Lea was sullen, but preparing to let it go as soon as Leo made an advance. Instead, Leo apologized again, and said that they should perhaps go to sleep.

He was being decent, of course; he must have thought that it would be wrong to make a move given her mood. In another situation, Lea would have considered it crude, even aggressive. But at this moment his decency upset her even more.

"If that's what you prefer." She got up and went to the bedroom, aware that she was shutting down any opportunity to make up. She changed out of her clothes, put on a T-shirt and shorts.

When Leo came in, she was lying with her back to the door. He fumbled around in his suitcase, tiptoed to the bathroom, slipped into bed. There were a few minutes of what seemed like charged, mutual waiting. Then he was asleep.

Lea thought with frustration about her smooth, soft legs, her lace underwear, now wasted.

There had been, in fact, one opportunity since her arrival. The researchers from the linguistics department had met up on a Sunday to walk the Appian Way. Someone had invited a cousin—Riccardo—who arrived wearing a leather jacket and loafers.

"Are we attempting Everest?" he asked, surveying the foreigners with their water bottles and sports clothes. He and Lea fell in line and ended up walking most of the path together. Riccardo told her the history of the trail, not suspecting that she might actually know far more about it than he did. Anyway, she didn't mind. He related his vague facts with animation, complimented Lea on her observations and questions, made outrageous jokes about the others. It felt special to be his accomplice. There was a picnic afterward, and the two of them split up to join separate conversations. When they were leaving, Riccardo told Lea he could drop her off, since he lived near her. They went to a bar across from her apartment.

During their second drink, she told him that she was seeing someone. Not to prevent anything from happening, exactly. She wanted to be guiltless in the aftermath; not to have led him astray. Perhaps she even liked the notion of being fought over. Riccardo had put a hand to her cheek. After her revelation, he took it away. Once they'd paid for the drinks, he told her good night.

There was nothing romantic about Rome on a rainy day—not when you hadn't yet seen it enough in bright light. The city took time to get used to. You had to learn to love it without makeup, puffy-faced.

But here it was, a rainy morning. The apartment was cold and damp. Lea brought out the electric heater from where she'd hidden it in her closet. They sat at the table in socks and sweaters, drinking tea.

"We could go to the Palazzo Massimo," Lea said. "Or to the Borghese. In any case, we'll have to take a taxi."

"What would you prefer?"

"I wanted us to walk through the park to get to the Borghese," Lea brooded. "But that's obviously out."

"Let's do the other one, then."

Once they were dressed, he came up to hug her. "I'm really glad to be here," he said.

"Sorry I was in a mood," Lea said.

"I'm sorry, too."

"I feel like I wasted our evening."

"We had a great evening," Leo said. "With a minor glitch."

"I wasn't jealous or anything," Lea said. "I was just being silly."

In the taxi, he told her the rest of the story. Lea didn't interrupt to point out the sights, though she was a bit sad he was missing them.

The woman sitting next to Leo on the plane had been married at a very young age. Soon after the wedding, it became clear that there was something wrong with her husband. Nothing precise, at first, just a sense that he was off balance. He was a meat salesman—that was how she'd met him, on her own doorstep—and she'd found out, on a trip out of town,

"Weather like this plagued my retreat from Moscow."

that he was notorious in all the surrounding counties, where he was known as the Butcher. But it was too late: she was pregnant. After she gave birth, she and her child were held hostage by the Butcher, for more than a decade.

"Wait a second," Lea said. "What?"

This was all a very long time ago, Leo continued, and it wasn't entirely like the horror stories one read about in newspapers. The woman still had some freedom, and she'd ultimately managed to leave with her daughter and make a life elsewhere. It wasn't a separation, though; she'd had to escape. Leo added that he was summarizing what had been a very complicated story. Somehow the Butcher hadn't been able to find them again, or disturb their lives.

"You have to stop saying 'butcher,'" Lea said. "This story is so messed up."

"That's what she called him," Leo said. "She didn't want to say his name. But it gets worse. She was actually coming back from the funeral."

"Whose funeral?"

"The Butcher's."

"Will you stop saying that?" Lea said. "And why would she go to his funeral?"

"It was important for her daughter to be there. To have closure."

"Is this woman Italian?"

"No, but she moved to Rome many years ago. She considers it her home. She became a painter, which was her dream before she met the . . . her husband."

"Bullshit," Lea said. "This can't be true."

"It really is. She even won an award."

"She became a painter and settled in Rome? She went to her torturer's funeral after a decade trying to escape?"

"People can start over," Leo said.

"I don't know," Lea said. "It's too much."

"Well, you weren't there."

They'd arrived at the palazzo. Lea decided to drop it.

"That's an awful story," she told him once they got their tickets. "It must have been very upsetting to hear."

They headed to the gallery of frescos. One room was painted like a garden, lush with birds and leaves. Entering it offered another perspective, cutting them off from the present tense.

When they came out, it had stopped raining and the sun shone brightly. They stood on the steps, looking at the traffic. Suddenly the day felt new, and festive.

"I'm starving," Leo said. They ate salami panini standing at a kiosk, then walked all the way to the fountain of turtles, where they sat in the empty piazza. Leo said he'd be content to do nothing else for the rest of the day; he was feeling very happy. They returned home early, before dinner or drinks.

In imagining the act, she'd forgotten the facts: his rush to get to it—not roughness, really, more like bashfulness; his reluctance to look at her for too long. Back in California, she'd conceded to his haste, hadn't insisted that he slow down, or that he meet her gaze. Now she was more demanding. There was a twinge of antagonism in her touch, her hands directing him, yanking at him to stay still. She hardly knew where it came from—whether she was putting on an act or letting resentment seep through.

In any case, it was done. The sex needn't loom above them like an invisible boulder. In the morning, they stayed awhile in bed, their skin acquainted, their conversation giddy. Breakfast was jam-filled cornetti at the café downstairs. When they finished their second coffees, Lea suggested visiting the Vatican, or the Forum.

"I'm not letting you leave without some proper, large-scale tourism."

"Get some selfie sticks," Leo said. "Some fanny packs and hats."

Lea liked this new familiarity, different from their e-mails. In the end, they went to the Borghese museum, walked through the park and down the Spanish Steps. Leo had said that they might as well leave the big stuff for next time. This was another happy moment, when he brought up his next visit. They ate heaping cups of gelato facing a church. They both said that they were having a perfect day.

At the university, Leo and Lea's names had become a joke among the researchers. Somehow, the coincidence made the relationship sound more serious, as if two people with such similar names were surely reunited in love, like Plato's soul mates cut in half at creation.

The researchers were meeting up that weekend at a pub in Ostiense. Lea had told them she would try to come with Leo. "If you aren't too busy," the researchers joked predictably.

When Leo finished his gelato, she asked if he'd be up for going to the pub.

"As long as you're not embarrassed by me."

She liked him for saying that.

They walked along the river to an industrial alleyway now occupied by bars. Lea's colleagues had taken a long table at the back. There were baskets of fried foods, emptied glasses. People cheered when they walked in. "The double-L chromosome!" someone shouted. The enthusiasm was not so much about Lea and Leo as it was about the opportunity to bond as a group, in front of an outsider.

Tomas, a researcher in Latin, put his arms around both of them.

"How can we fill your fountains?" he asked.

Leo asked for a beer; Lea, a glass of wine. As Tomas was walking to the bar, Lea saw Riccardo sitting at the far end of the table. She hadn't considered that he might be here; she felt a momentary panic. But nothing had happened between them, she reminded herself. If Riccardo was flirtatious, she could tell Leo that he'd been just like this on their first meeting as well; it would serve as one of her character portraits.

Riccardo was listening to Rebecca, a scholar in digital archiving. He caught Lea's eyes and winked. *Here we are again*, he seemed to say. Or, *Well, well, look at you*. Lea felt a sudden pleasure, as if there were stage lights directed at her.

She took Leo around the table, introducing him one by one.

"Riccardo is an excellent guide to the Appian Way," she said, presenting him.

Riccardo slapped Leo on the back. "Good to meet you, man. Have some of these fries before I eat them all."

It turned out that the company Riccardo worked for used a software similar to something Leo was working on. Lea knew very little about this topic, and was surprised to see the two men hit it off. She and Rebecca had fallen into conversation out of necessity. After a while, Rebecca went to

the toilet, then joined the others. Riccardo and Leo were now talking about music. Lea realized with annoyance that she'd eaten the entire basket of fries. She got up and put her hand on Leo's shoulder.

"Oh, hello," Leo said.

"This man's the *man*," Riccardo said. He seemed to have forgotten about the evening with her.

"You haven't met anyone else," Lea said to Leo. "And it's already late."

He might have noticed the irritation in her tone. He probably thought she was acting moody for no reason.

"Let's talk to the others, then!" he said eagerly, as if to a child.

Everyone liked him. They proposed organizing a dinner for his next visit. Leo proposed having them over for fajitas, his specialty. Lea hadn't known about his specialty. She may not even have known that he cooked.

Then he was pulled into another private conversation—Tomas was giving a long-winded explanation of his quest to make a comprehensive map of Umberto Eco's symbols. Lea tugged at Leo's arm and said that they should get going.

"She's the boss," Leo said to Tomas, arms spread in surrender.

"Whatever," Lea said.

For his last day in Rome, they wrote out a list of things they wanted to do. They'd put aside anything requiring lines and tickets, but they decided to wake up early and walk to the Colosseum, to see the exterior before the crowds arrived. Lea suggested the San Pietro in Vincoli, with Michelangelo's statue of Moses with the horns. She showed Leo on the map how they would then be right by Monti, which had a different feel from the neighborhoods they had been to. Leo traced with his finger and suggested a final evening stop at the Piazza di Trevi.

"Isn't that the famous fountain?"

"It's pretty tacky," Lea said. "We wouldn't be able to find a decent place to eat."

"We can come home for dinner," Leo said. "I'll cook for you."

"Sounds delicious," Lea said. She got up and sat on his lap, straddling him. If only he were staying a bit longer, they would fall into perfect rhythm. Something had begun to loosen in the past few nights, though there was still the tug and pull—his hurry and her resentment, one perpetuating the other.

"Or maybe we can skip dinner," Lea said.

"Mm-hmm," Leo said. If he stayed longer, she thought, he might even break free of his reserve.

It was so easy for them to spend a day together. They were practical and spontaneous in all the same ways. They went through everything on their list, made discoveries in back streets. In Monti, Leo bought her a necklace of blue and green stones. Lea had been looking at it when he asked if he could get it for her. She'd been staring mindlessly, but she didn't say that she actually didn't like it that much. She put it on as they were leaving the shop. Leo told her it looked amazing.

They bought wine and mushrooms and rice for dinner, then took a taxi to the Trevi Fountain. They tried taking in the sight, with all the people gathered around.

"Let's have a final gelato," Leo suggested.

"This is probably the worst place in Rome for a gelato."

"It's better than anything I'll have once I'm home."

On a side street, they got in line at a gelateria with rows of neon-colored options.

"This is a tourist trap," Lea said. "The servers aren't even Italian."

"Don't be a snob," Leo said. "I'm looking forward to the bubble-gum flavor."

"Can you please miss your flight tomorrow?" Lea said. "We can have proper gelato."

Leo was holding her in an embrace, his face touching her neck.

"No way," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"No way," Leo repeated. "I can't believe it."

He let go of her. "It's the woman from the plane."

She was standing at the back of the line, in a red dress. She was smiling to herself, as if practicing the look of someone having a lovely time. Her arms were bare, splotched purple with cold.

Lea's instinct was to turn around before the woman spotted Leo. But Leo lifted both arms to wave. The woman cut the line and joined them.

"This is my friend from the plane," Leo said. "And this is Lea."

Her name was Janet.

"Do you live around here?" Leo asked.

"Oh, basically," the woman said, flapping her hand vaguely. "I mean, not so far."

She told them that she came there most afternoons to treat herself.

"It does you good, doesn't it?" she said, and laughed, which Lea found unsettling.

It was their turn to order. The server was in a rush, not keen on letting them try flavors. Lea repeated that the place

was a tourist trap. She got pistachio. Leo got stracciatella. Janet asked in English for a cup with strawberry and hazelnut and caramel. She asked for a wafer on top.

"I'll get these," Leo said, and reached for his wallet.

"You're a darling," Janet said. "Isn't he a darling?"

Lea smiled.

"What a treat," Janet said.

They walked together to the end of the street.

"Well, it was very nice to meet you," Lea said. She knew that she was being abrupt, but she didn't want to risk the woman walking along with them. They parted, waving. When they were sufficiently distant, Lea told Leo that she'd been right.

"About what?"

"About the fact that she's a pathological liar."

"Whoa," Leo said.

"She obviously doesn't live in Rome. She couldn't even order gelato."

"She did seem a bit clueless."

"I mean, who would go there for gelato every afternoon?"

"The snob speaks."

"Also, she really didn't look like a painter."

"The snob strikes back."

"I'm not a snob," Lea snapped. "I'm just assessing the situation."

"And what's your expert assessment?" He didn't sound so playful now.

"That you were duped."

"That's going a bit far," Leo said. "Maybe she exaggerated a few things."

"She made up a different identity! That's *alarming* behavior." She was almost shouting.

"You saw her," Leo said. "She's harmless."

"How is it that you're siding with a deranged stranger and being mean to me for pointing out the facts?"

"How is it that you're so upset?" Leo said.

"Because you're being willfully naïve."

"I can't take back the fact that I listened to her."

"And why do you think she chose you as her audience?"

"She said I had a kind face."

"Oh, aren't you lucky."

She felt angry, and stupid.

"What's going on?" Leo said. "This is getting out of control. Let's just have a nice evening."

"Why are you so *nice*?" Lea said. "You're so nice to everyone but me."

"You're being mean."

"You feel so sorry for the crazy lady on the plane. You let her talk to you for hours. You propose cooking for people you just met. You spend an entire evening listening to their pointless stories instead of spending time with me."

She considered that she may have taken one step too far.

"Are you talking about the pub?" Leo said. "I was making an effort with your friends."

"Exactly," Lea said. "You make an effort with everyone else."

They were in front of the Pantheon now, frightening and serene.

"This is quite a sight," Leo said.

It was just like him, she thought, to avoid her reproach.

"You know that guy Riccardo? He actually came on to me. And you spent all evening chatting with him."

"I didn't know that," Leo said.

"Even if you did, you wouldn't have cared."

"That's not fair."

"You would've cared more that he liked you."

Leo turned to face the building. Lea had an urge to yank at his shoulder, to make him look at her.

"What if I told you that something happened between us?"

"I guess that would be your free choice."

"Stop it!" Lea said. "Just stop it." She was shouting now. "Stop making me feel invisible."

Leo was silent. Maybe he mumbled something.

"You might as well know that we spent the night together." Even as she said it, she thought there would be an opportunity to take it back, explain that she was just trying to provoke him.

After a moment, Leo asked, "Why are you telling me this?"

She was astounded by the question, by the fact that he needed an explanation. They continued walking.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was upset. Nothing actually happened."

"O.K.," Leo said. He looked tired. Still, she was surprised that he didn't ask anything more. Certainly, she reasoned without conviction, it was the respectful thing to do.

They went home. They made risotto. They made love. Leo packed his suitcase.

His flight was early in the morning. A short one to London, then another to California. He would have to leave at sunrise. He'd told her that she should sleep; there was no need to get up.

"Don't be silly," Lea said. "Of course I'm getting up."

She lay in bed while he showered and dressed. When she came into the kitchen, he was writing something at the table. He folded the paper, put it under the vase. Already, the carnations were dry.

He insisted that he didn't want breakfast; he'd just get something at the airport. Besides, his taxi was almost there. They went downstairs.

"I've had an amazing time," Leo said, and hugged her.

Back in the apartment, Lea made tea and sat at the table. She composed a mental inventory of the visit, combing through the events several times in a row. Each time, the scales tipped more toward success than disappointment.

In the note folded under the vase, Leo repeated what a great time he'd had. He said that he was looking forward to the next visit, if he was invited. He'd underlined "if," though Lea couldn't quite tell what sort of effect he'd intended. It almost seemed sarcastic.

There was nothing for him to apologize for, and so he hadn't.

Lea had been wondering about something, on and off during the past days. She realized now that she hadn't had a chance to ask: How had Leo responded to the woman's story? What had he actually said to her on the plane? She doubted that he had posed any questions—he wouldn't have wanted to pry, or to say something wrong. Lea could picture him listening so silently that it wasn't clear if he was listening at all.

She felt, for a moment, on Janet's side, sympathetic that the woman had had to tilt her story further toward invention, to make sure that the quiet, kind-seeming man would continue to keep her company. ♦

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Ayşegül Savaş on desire and disappointment.

THE CRITICS

A CRITIC AT LARGE

GOOD TIMES, BAD TIMES

The making and unmaking of Led Zeppelin.

BY JAMES WOOD

How on earth did my mother know that Led Zeppelin was composed of satanists? Specifically, how did she know that Jimmy Page had "a great interest in the occult," and owned a bookshop "somewhere down in London" dedicated to these pursuits? Presumably, some furtive Christian network or back channel had provided the information. It was more than I or my elder brother knew, and gave her a sinister advantage over us. In my memory, she looms as a column of judgment in the doorway of the sitting room, as Angus and I watch the closing frames of the concert film "The Song Remains the Same" on television. It was 1979, I think. Angus, five years older than me and provider of all musical contraband, was eighteen. He may have lost his soul already; mine was still in the balance.

Our evangelical parents always managed to materialize while something awkward was on the TV, but our mother, who could find inappropriately suggestive moments in "Doctor Who," had surpassed herself this time. On the screen, the stage at Madison Square Garden had become a diabolical altar: half naked, Led Zeppelin's lead singer, Robert Plant, was screaming and writhing like a downed angel, and its drummer, John Bonham, was stolidly abusing what appeared to be a flaming gong. And surely Jimmy Page *was* a bit suspect? We had watched him during "Stairway to Heaven," grimacing in bliss, dazed in ecstasy, leaning back as he throttled his dark, double-necked guitar, like a man wrestling with some giant shrieking bird of the night. My brother was involved in his own spiritual struggle. A school friend of his had tickets to a Led Zeppelin summer show, at Knebworth; he was desperate to go. Stairway to Heaven? Chute to Hell, more like. Our parents had told him that if he went to Knebworth he would cease to be a Christian. Watching from the wings, learning how to deceive, I was mainly impressed by his honesty—why hadn't he just told them he was going to see Peter, Paul and Mary?

In those days, stuck in provincial northern England as we were, musical information seemed to reach us years late, like news from panting messengers of wars that had already fizzled out. New to Led Zeppelin's music, I had no idea that the group had become a ponderous joke, that Knebworth was to be its last gasp. Having an older brother was a mixed blessing in this regard. He both curated and retarded my education. The thirteen-year-old pupil was not expected to show any independence of taste. "Listen to this"—said as he flipped the LP onto the turntable—was a command more than an invitation. The stylus lay down in the groove, and wrote the law.

And, as my mother intuited, this law was a potent rival dominion, a law of negation, out to invert everything held sacred and respectable by parents, churches, principalities. Alice Cooper, who played alongside an equally uncelebrated Led Zeppelin at an early gig in Los Angeles, in January, 1969, voiced the essential rebellion with perfect ingenuousness in "I'm Eighteen": "I'm eighteen / And I don't know what I want / Eighteen / I just don't know what I want / Eighteen / I gotta get away / I gotta get out of this place / I'll go runnin' in outer space."

The Sex Pistols turned the screw more precisely six years later: "Don't know what I want / But I know how to get it." Not knowing what to want but knowing how to get it: rock music is this pure enablement, this conduit of the how over the what. I wasn't eighteen, but I didn't have to be, because I saw how it went for eighteen-year-olds: *Go to Knebworth and lose your soul*. Cardinal Newman had called Christianity "a great remedy for a great evil"; thus, in my mind, the size of the negation would have to match the size of that which had to be negated. Great forces of repression demanded great forces of rebellion.

But I didn't need punk's rebelliousness, since I had at hand the punk energies of two almost opposed but strangely overlapping English bands, the Who and Led Zeppelin, mods and rockers, respectively. The Who was English to the core, and the songs were hard, quick fights—struggles with class, inheritance, sex, the hypocrisies of power. Driven by Pete Townshend's scything chords and Keith Moon's boyishly linear drumming, the band offered Cockney swagger and music-hall one-liners: "I was born with a plastic spoon in my mouth"; "My mum got drunk on stout. / My dad couldn't stand on two feet / As he lectured about morality"; "Meet the new boss / Same as the old boss." The songs were tuneful and the

PHOTOGRAPH BY RON RAFFAELLI / © RON RAFFAELLI / CHERYL WATKINS; OPPOSITE: LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

If half the band's energy was proto-punk destruction, the other half was brilliantly refined restoration.

lyrics told stories. The members of the Who were excellent musicians but not great ones: Moon was all over the place, in good ways and bad, and Townshend tended to collapse when tasked with a solo. They were pleasingly familiar.

Led Zeppelin was uncanny. My brother dropped the needle onto the rustling vinyl, and something very weird began: "Hey, hey, mama, said the way you move / Gonna make you sweat, gonna make you groove." Where was Robert Plant's voice *from*? This bluesy banshee sounded like no other white man in rock and roll. Decades later, it's still one of those voices—like Lou Reed's, James Brown's, David Byrne's, Kate Bush's—which encode a whole strange world. If the voice was meaningful, though, the lyrics were mostly gibberish: the bandmates seemed quite content to get on with their fantastic musical particulars, as long as Plant, somewhere above them, was intermittently moaning "woman" or "babe." When you could decipher any sense, you'd find scraps borrowed from the more misogynistic blues formulas ("Wanted a woman, never bargained for you . . . / Soul of a woman was created below"); basic sex demands ("Squeeze me, babe, till the juice runs down my leg . . . / The way you squeeze my lemon / I'm gonna fall right outta bed"); and swirls of Tolkien, one of Plant's favorite authors (" 'Twas in the darkest depths of Mordor / I met a girl so fair"). The band seemed uninterested in politics, in the state of the nation, or in the traditional patricidal revolt of most rock and roll. In fact, its members didn't even seem to have much of an investment in being young. They were strangers to irony and levity; they would never have rhymed, say, "Lola" with "cola." Oddly classless and placeless, they were less angry rockers than nerdy but cool transatlantic archivists, cleverly raiding the blues and folk traditions to patch together some of their own best songs—"Rock and Roll" (the famous drum intro was inspired by a Little Richard song), "Babe I'm Gonna Leave You" (they got it from Joan Baez), "I Can't Quit You Baby" (from Willie Dixon), "Whole Lotta Love" (Dixon again), "The Lemon Song" (from Howlin' Wolf), "When the Levee Breaks" (from Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe McCoy).

It didn't really matter that the lyrics didn't matter. In the manner of an opera with a nonsensical libretto, the violence and the power were all musical. In "Led Zeppelin: The Biography," a gossipy, readable new account, the music journalist Bob Spitz reminds us that Jimmy Page hated the term "heavy metal"; he derided it as "riff-bashing." Led Zeppelin's talent and daring went way beyond the capabilities of the headbanging deadweights who hung off the group's example in the nineteen-seventies and eighties. Yes, Led Zeppelin was "heavy"—to hear "Communication Breakdown" or "Good Times Bad Times" or "Rock and Roll" or "Black Dog" or "Dazed and Confused" for the first time was to hear danger, perilous boundaries, the dirty roar on the other side of music. Page got extraordinary kinds of distortion and fuzz from his guitar, and Bonham hit his snare and his gigantic bass drum killingly. But I liked the fact that Led Zeppelin's members were, above all, heavy *musicians;* their talents as virtuoso performers made sense in the largely classical musical world that had shaped me.

Like most middle-class adolescents, I wanted to witness danger rather than actually experience it. My bets were comfortably hedged. As a teen-ager, I used to fall asleep at night to Led Zep—specifically, to the lovely blues ballad "Since I've Been Loving You."

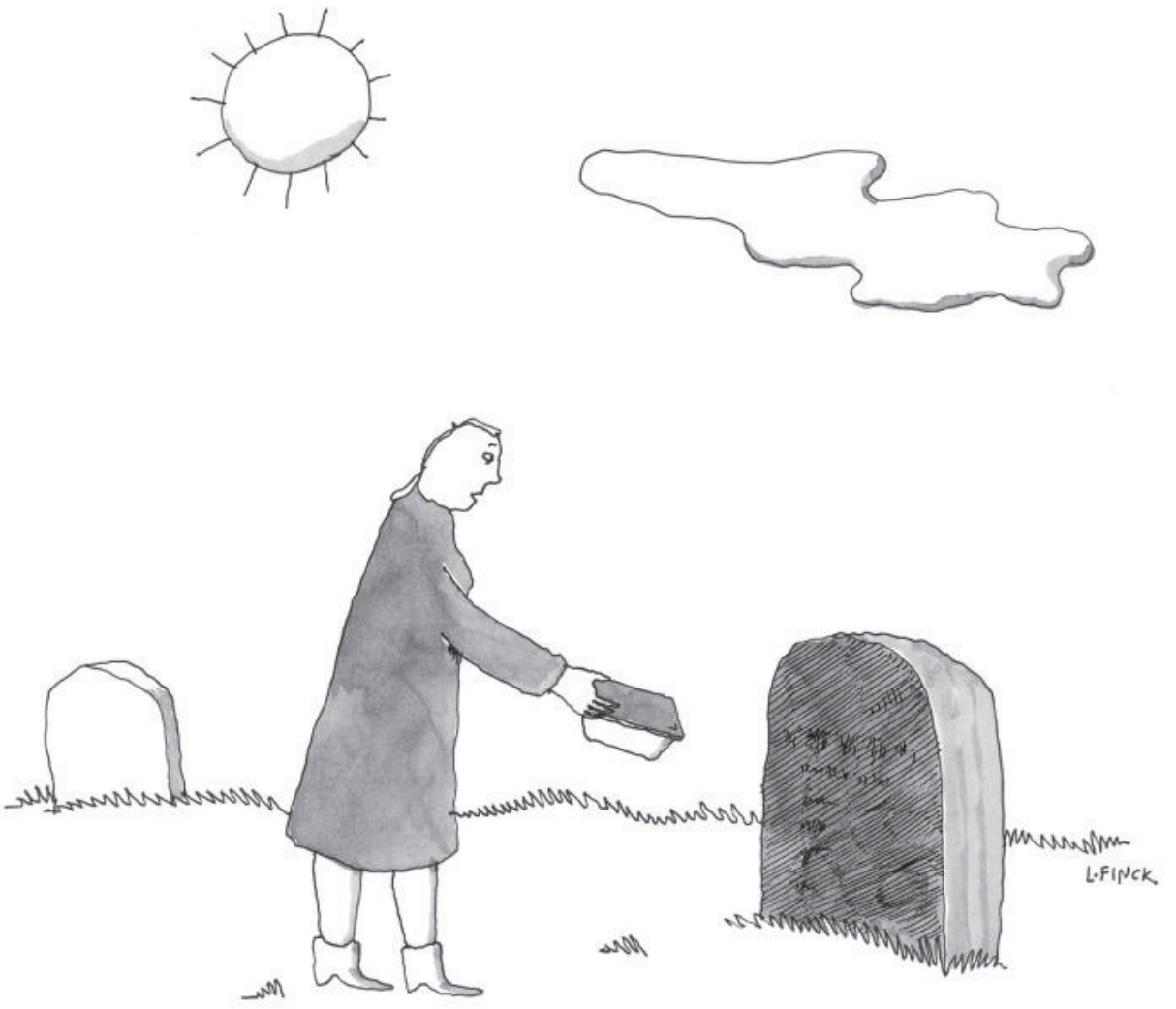
It soothed me; it still does. If half the group's energy was proto-punk destruction, the other half was musically refined restoration: it was the world's most brilliantly belated blues band. Its violence tore things apart which its musicianship put back together. In this respect, Led Zeppelin was the opposite of punk, whose anarchic negation was premised on not being able to play one's instrument well, or, in some cases, at all. But Page was already one of London's most successful session guitarists, and a member of the group the Yardbirds, when, in the summer of 1968, he began to pick the members of his new group, aiming for a declaration of musical supremacy. Led Zeppelin, that is, functioned first and foremost as a collection of great musicians.

Page, then twenty-four, chose a fellow session player, John Paul Jones, as the group's bassist (after toying with the idea of poaching the Who's John Entwistle). Jones, who grew up in Kent, was one of the few bassists in London who, in his own words, could "play a Motown feel convincingly in those days." Dexterous, imaginative, mobile, Jones is always sharking around at the bottom of the score, hunting for rhythmic tension and tonal complexity. His parts, in songs like "Ramble On" and "What Is and What Should Never Be," are pungent melodies in their own right.

John Bonham, like Robert Plant, was from farther north, near Birmingham. When Page came calling, Bonham and Plant were jobbing musicians, barely out of their teens, doing the circuits at provincial pubs and halls. On July 20, 1968, Page was in the audience when Plant performed at a teachers' training college in Walsall with a group of little distinction called Obs-Tweedle. Ambitious and calculating, Page surely understood what he had found in his singer and his drummer, though even he couldn't know that in a few short years Bonham would establish himself as one of the world's greatest drummers, perhaps the greatest in rock history. He had a comprehensive collection of percussive talents: speed and complexity rendered with a forbiddingly flawless technique; an instantly identifiable and original sound (best I can tell, the celebrated Bonham snare makes a dry bark in part because he seems to have hit the more resonant edge of the skin rather than the buzzier center); a wonderful feel for the groove of a song.

Bonham *was* Led Zeppelin, in this ability to land heavily and lightly at once. Listen again to "Rock and Roll"

and you can hear how he swings—he's swiping his sloshy hi-hats back and forth and bouncing the beat forward, less like the archetypal heavy-metal player than like the elegant mid-century big-band drummers he admired. In "Good Times Bad Times," the opening song on the group's first album, Bonham makes funky use of his cowbell, and introduces something that, it would seem, hadn't featured before in rock—a series of fast triplets on the bass drum, but with the first strike of the triplet merely implied, so that the beat falls more heavily on the second and third strikes. That's the technical explanation. Most listeners simply hear the staggered staccato of the bass drum worrying away at the beat in an interesting manner. That swift right foot is everywhere in the early albums. It's a joy to hear bassist and drummer working together in the fast instrumental choruses of "The Lemon Song," for instance. While Jones runs syncopatedly up and down the scales, Bonham supports the fidgety bass line with quick repeated double kicks. The song has a wicked velocity.



"I brought you your Tupperware back."

• •

Spitz's biography situates Led Zeppelin's formation in the context of the nineteen-sixties English scene. Those skinny white boys with big heads and dead eyes were obsessed with American music, and with the blues above all. It was difficult to get hold of blues albums in England. You might wait a month for something to arrive from the States. Mick Jagger hung around the basement annex at Dobell's Record Shop, on the Charing Cross Road, waiting for shipments. Jagger, Page, Keith Richards, and Brian Jones eagerly travelled from London to Manchester, in October, 1962, to see John Lee Hooker, Memphis Slim, and Willie Dixon play on the same stage: the adoration of the Magi. Four years later, Jimi Hendrix's London gig, in a Soho club, had an enormous impact; Eric Clapton, Pete Townshend, Jeff Beck, Eric Burdon, Donovan, Ray Davies, and Paul McCartney all attended. London was a busy little world. Everyone knew one another, and all these performers were, in various ways, chronically indebted to a music that originated somewhere else—the English journalist Nik Cohn called London the "Dagenham Delta."

In the summer of 1968, when Plant first visited Page to discuss joining his band, he brought his precious records with him, each one a kind of borrowed identity card—Howlin' Wolf's rocking-chair album, "Joan Baez in Concert," and, as Plant recalled, "my gatefold Robert Johnson album on Philips, which I bought while I was working at Woolworth's." In reply, Page played him Muddy Waters's "You Shook Me." Woolworth's and the Chicago-blues sound—that pretty much sums up English musical life at the time. Listen to Eric Burdon and the Animals performing their 1968 slow blues song "As the Years Go Passing By," and you'll hear Burdon, born not in Mississippi but in Newcastle Upon Tyne, in 1941, solemnly intoning, "Ah, the blues, the ball and chain that is round every English musician's leg."

Page—who wrote most of the group's music, as Plant wrote most of the lyrics—had no intention of being imprisoned by the blues. He wanted to treat them with a strange and never previously attempted alloy of hard rock and acoustic folk. Acoustic alternating with electric; quiet verses and hard choruses—many of the best-known Led Zeppelin songs, like "Babe I'm Gonna Leave You," "Ramble On," and "Stairway to Heaven," adhere to a sort of velvet-followed-by-fist form. Some of the gentler ones, such as the sweet-natured "Thank You," a favorite of mine, or the lovely Joni Mitchell tribute "Going to California," are all velvet. Spitz puts it well when he says that Led Zeppelin "claimed new musical territory by narrowing the distance between genres."

Already experienced in the studio, Page seems to have known precisely what sounds he wanted, and he worked fast. The band recorded its first album, untitled and known as "Led Zeppelin I," in September, 1968, in London. Page paid for the sessions, and the whole album was recorded in thirty-six hours. Speed is the dominant motif of Spitz's early pages. Astonishingly, the first four albums were released in a little under three years. The band's second album, which came out on both sides of the Atlantic in October,

1969, became the top-selling record in the U.S. by the end of the year, with three million copies sold by April. In Britain, it knocked "Abbey Road" off the No. 1 perch. In August, 1970, Led Zeppelin embarked on its sixth American tour in two years. In a Los Angeles studio, the band recorded "The Lemon Song" live, and in one take. And so on.

On those first four albums are most of the band's major songs, the ones that have dominated the past fifty years, including "Black Dog," "Stairway to Heaven," "Whole Lotta Love," and "Dazed and Confused." Listeners clamored for this music; by 1973, Spitz tells us, the band's revenue constituted thirty per cent of the turnover of its label, Atlantic Records. The professionals were harder to convince. Mick Jagger and George Harrison hated the début album. At *Rolling Stone*, a young critic named John Mendelsohn, who loved the Who, mauled Led Zeppelin in piece after piece. In "Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom" (1972), a tartly opinionated account of the quick rise and fall of pop music in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, Nik Cohn—also a fan of the Who—excoriated Led Zeppelin for reducing blues-playing "to its lowest, most hamfisted level ever." Pete Townshend seems never to have liked the band's music.

Nowadays, skeptics are likely to judge Page's project of "narrowing the distance between genres" as entitled cultural appropriation, or even plagiarism. Extending its traditional hostility, *Rolling Stone* has accused the band of having a "catalog full of blatant musical swipes." Words like "plunder" and "stolen" are thrown about online. Spitz prefers the gentler phrase "suspiciously close." Through the years, the band has been sued or petitioned by Willie Dixon ("Whole Lotta Love" took words from Dixon's "You Need Love"), Howlin' Wolf ("The Lemon Song" borrowed its opening riff and some lyrics from his "Killing Floor"), Anne Bredon (who wrote the original song that Joan Baez, and then Led Zeppelin, made famous as "Babe I'm Gonna Leave You"), and the band Spirit, whose "Taurus" contains a passage that indeed sounds "suspiciously close" to the opening chords of "Stairway to Heaven" (though Spirit lost a lawsuit it brought in 2016).

Page has certainly been parsimonious with credit-sharing, and, in at least one case, shabbily slow to do the right thing—he should have credited the American performer Jake Holmes, who created the musical basis for "Dazed and Confused," on "Led Zeppelin I." (Holmes sued and won a settlement in 2011.) But the blues evolved as an ecosystem of borrowing and recycling. The musical form cleaves to the twelve-bar template of I-IV-I-V-IV-I. Musically, you need some or all of this chord progression to cook up anything that feels bluesy, as a roux demands flour and fat, or a whodunnit a murder; originality in this regard would be something of a category error. In the Delta-blues or country-blues tradition that flourished before the Second World War, words tended to drift Homerically free of their makers. Performers might write a couple of their own verses and then finish with lines of a borrowed formula—so-called floating verses, or, the scholar Elijah Wald writes, "rhymed couplets that could be inserted more or less at random." In fact, the postwar Chicago blues musicians who excited a generation of English performers—Willie Dixon, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf—were themselves nostalgically repurposing, partly for a white crossover market, the Delta sound of lost prewar giants like Robert Johnson, who died in 1938. As early as 1949, the music industry cannily decided to baptize this modernized, electrified blues sound as "rhythm and blues." In this sense, you could say that English players like Clapton and Page were double nostalgics, copiers of copiers.

Robert Plant's tendency to lift words and formulas from old songs should be seen in this light. Plagiarism is private subterfuge made haplessly public. But to take Willie Dixon's "You've got yearnin' and I got burnin'" and put the words into "Whole Lotta Love" as "You need cooling / Baby, I'm not fooling"; to reverse the opening lines of Moby Grape's 1968 song "Never," from "Working from eleven / To seven every night / Ought to make life a drag," and put them into "Since I've Been Loving You" as "Workin' from seven to eleven every night / Really makes life a drag"; to punctuate "The Lemon Song," which is obviously indebted to Howlin' Wolf's "Killing Floor," with the repeated allusion "down on this killing floor," while guilelessly referring to Roosevelt Sykes's "She Squeezed My Lemon" (1937)—to make these moves, in a musical community that was utterly familiar with all the

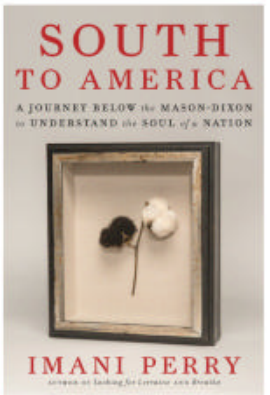
"I wouldn't be too concerned. They say the bear is more afraid of us than we are of it."

source material, testifies not to the anxiety of plagiarism but to the relaxedness of homage.

Plagiarists do what they do out of weakness, because they need stolen assistance. Does that sound like Led Zeppelin? The genius of "Whole Lotta Love" lies in its opening five-note riff, which has no obvious musical connection to Dixon's song. "The Lemon Song" makes of "Killing Floor" something entirely new. "Since I've Been Loving You" is a better and richer song than Moby Grape's "Never." "When the Levee Breaks" is astonishingly different from Memphis Minnie's. (It isn't a blues song, for starters.) And, yes, "Stairway to Heaven" has more spirit, along with a few other dynamics, than Spirit's "Taurus." Besides, Led Zeppelin did credit many of its sources. The first album names Willie Dixon as the composer of "You Shook Me" and "I Can't Quit You Baby." Generally, on the matter of homage and appropriation, I agree with Jean-Michel Guesdon and Philippe Margotin, who, in "Led Zeppelin: All the Songs," call the band's version of the latter song "one of the most beautiful and moving tributes ever paid by a British group to its African American elders."

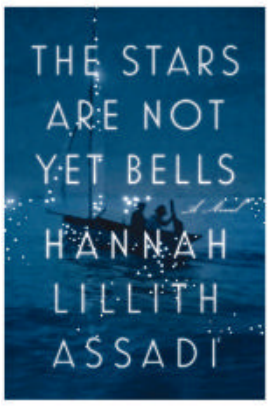
Still, such indebtedness can rub pride thin. It was always a bit embarrassing, if you grew up in Britain in the nineteen-seventies, that the local rock stars one so admired seemed compelled to sing with fake American accents. Why was this guy even singing about a levee? Sometimes I used to catch myself thinking, Do they *really* have to sound like that? It turned out that they didn't really have to; native help was coming. A movement of punk and New Wave bands was marshalling pallid performers who would spit and stutter in various regional accents: "They smelled of pubs, and Wormwood Scrubs / And too many right-wing meetings." Led Zep simply had to shuffle off and die. The Who paved the way for British punk, or for a great new mod band like the Jam, not just because Townshend smashed up his guitars but because his lyrics were armed with a social mission: the Sex Pistols covered the Who's "Substitute." But Led Zeppelin made punk dialectically inevitable. The cloudy

BRIEFLY NOTED

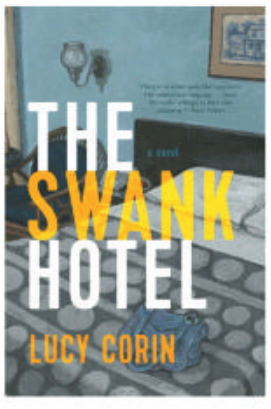


South to America, *by Imani Perry (Ecco)*. Structured as a journey, with chapters organized by location, this history of the American South examines its subject from both personal and sociopolitical perspectives. Perry, an Alabama-born Princeton professor, encounters a Confederate reënactor in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, and visits the Equal Justice Initiative's museum, in Montgomery, Alabama, which is situated near a parole office. She draws connections between the past and contemporary experience—for instance, she reads Thomas Jefferson's racist observations on Black people in the light of her own Ancestry.com results. Threading her protagonists' narratives through the book, Perry admits to "a bit of navel-gazing" but observes that, "if you gaze anywhere with a critical eye, you do have to look at your own belly, too."

The Uninnocent, *by Katharine Blake (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. When the author of this fragmentary memoir was at law school, a teen-age cousin had a psychotic break and killed a young boy. Blake, now a law professor, traces the aftermath of the killing and her attempts to comprehend it, examining Anna Freud's writing on defense mechanisms after a psychotherapist tells her that "a psychotic break is just intense fear." Having kept her distance from her cousin, Blake eventually corresponds with him and visits him in prison. She avoids neat conclusions or a sense of absolution, but her legal background and her insights yield a thought-provoking consideration of the limits of our criminal justice system.



The Stars Are Not Yet Bells, *by Hannah Lillith Assadi (Riverhead)*. Through the fog of dementia, Elle, the narrator of this novel, recounts her life on an island off the coast of Georgia during the Second World War. She, her husband, and a man named Gabriel (with whom she is in love, and who poses as her cousin) have come to mine an enigmatic mineral, Caeruleum, that glows blue in the coastal waters. They hope that its gemlike properties, or perhaps even its pharmaceutical ones, will make them rich. But events surrounding their excavations lead Elle to wonder if "beauty and death are coincident, codependent." As her thoughts move back and forth in time, dual mysteries rise to the surface: what happened to her grasp on reality and what happened to Gabriel?



The Swank Hotel, *by Lucy Corin (Graywolf)*. Unfolding amid the 2008 financial crisis, this hypnotic, antic novel revolves around two sisters: Emilie, who works at a drab job in a nondescript town where she has bought an "adorable starter home"; and Adeline, who suffers from mental illness and has gone missing. News arrives that Ad has committed suicide, then that she survived, and Em flies to be with her in Kansas City. Corin conveys a sense that insanity is everywhere: in the sisters' family history, in a colleague's affair, in news items and the plot of a television documentary. "The mad see the unseen," she writes. "What the collective suspects but can't express, a perpetual frictionless swing from object to subject."

unimportance of the band's lyrics, the devoted belatedness of its musical tribute, the reliance on American sources, American markets, American reverence, invited punk's slashing nativist retort.

It had to be the States. Peter Grant, Led Zeppelin's thuggish, gargantuan manager, knew that the money and the stadiums and the FM radio stations were all in America. But also America was the only temple vast enough for a properly oblivious performance of the rites that went with being a "rock god." Britain is a bitterly humorous little island. It's hard to imagine Robert Plant shinning up a tree in Kent and announcing—as he famously did at a pool in the Hollywood Hills—"I am the golden god!" Back home, he would have been laughed at, possibly by his mum. Tellingly, we learn that the band behaved much better in Britain than in America. At home, Page said, "your family" would come along to the shows. "But when we went out to the States, we didn't give a fuck and became total showoffs." It was 1973, and they had reached the high altar. Referring to Plant, Spitz breathlessly annotates the American moment: "What a life! He was the lead singer of the most successful rock 'n' roll band in the world. He had all the money he'd ever need, a loving family back home, unlimited girls on the road. Every need, every whim taken care of. Not a care in the world. The city of Los Angeles stretched out before him like a magic carpet."

In fact, the devil's bargain was already calling in its debts. The ledger of dissipation, first recounted at length in Stephen Davis's "Hammer of the Gods" (1985), was alternately horrifying and comic. At the Continental Hyatt House on Sunset Boulevard, which became the band's go-to den of instant iniquity, guests who complained about Bonham's playing music at four in the morning would find *themselves* relocated. What was it like to trash a room like a rock star? The desk manager at the Edgewater Hotel in Seattle, Spitz tells us, wanted to "go bonkers in a room himself." So Grant led him to an empty suite, peeled off six hundred and seventy dollars in cash, and said, "Have this room on Led Zeppelin." The funniest boys-gone-wild detail in the book may be that, in the first year and a half of the band's existence, Bonham bought twenty-eight cars.

But violence and addiction were stalking the tours. Grant was a former bouncer, with connections in the London underworld, who, as Spitz says, "brought a gangster mentality to the game." He and his vicious sidekick Richard Cole threatened the press and attacked audience members they didn't like the look of. Cole concealed small weights in his gloves, for heavier blows. Crowd control was nastily martial. Cole would hide under the front of the stage and, when fans got too close to the band, begin "smashing them on the kneecaps with a hammer." Money lay around like silt. By 1972, as the band was filling stadiums and selling millions of records, Grant had essentially bullied exceptionally favorable terms from promoters, who were commanded to pay in cash, partly to avoid punitive British taxes. The band journeyed throughout the United States accompanied by sacks stuffed with hundreds of thousands of dollars. Drugs followed the money. Grant was a coke addict by 1972; he helped himself to bags of the stuff. Jimmy Page soon caught up, and eventually added heroin. Although Page's addiction appears to have turned him sleepy and sloppy—benignly vampiric, he slept during the day and palely loitered at night—drugs and alcohol made Bonham, seemingly sweet-natured when sober, an energetic monster. At one point, he bit a woman's finger for no apparent reason, drawing blood. The reader of Spitz's book becomes inured to the horrors that "Bonzo" would inflict, including near-rapes of women, random assaults, repellent practical jokes: "On the overnight train to Osaka, he drank himself silly again, and while Jimmy and his Japanese girlfriend were in the dining car, Bonzo found her handbag and shit in it."

Then there were the underage groupies. Girls who made themselves available for sex got to hang out with the increasingly wasted golden gods. "We were young, and we were growing up," Page says in self-defense. But they were not as young as the groupies. Spitz calls the girls in L.A. "shockingly young"—thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. When Plant sang, in "Dazed and Confused," "I wanna make love to you, little girl," he wasn't being figurative. Some people thought that these girls could handle themselves. We can try to be tough-minded, in an Eve Babitz kind of way, and coolly appraise the twisted seventies scene. Still, it's unsettling when Page, at twenty-nine, takes up with a fourteen-year-old named

Lori Mattix. "He was the rock-god prince to me," she recalled, "a magical, mystical person. . . . It was no secret he liked young girls." Page phoned Mattix's mother to get the O.K., in what he seems to have imagined was an act of gallantry, whereupon Betty Iannaci, a receptionist at Atlantic Records, was tasked with collecting Mattix from a Westwood motel room. Iannaci recounts, "It was clear that her mother was grooming her for a night out with Jimmy Page. And I knew he was mixing it up with heroin."

It all went properly rancid during the tours of 1975 and 1977. Page was lost to drugs; Bonham was uncontrollable. The shows were hazardous, gigantic, brilliant, careless. Page seemed not to notice or care that his guitar was out of tune. In 1975, Bonham played the drums with a bag of coke between his legs; in 1977, he fell asleep over his kit. Crowds became riotous. The Detroit *Free Press* called the fans "the most violent, unruly crowds ever to inflict themselves upon a concert hall." In Oakland, in July, 1977, Bonham, Cole, and Grant seriously assaulted a colleague of the promoter Bill Graham, and were arrested. Led Zeppelin never played in America again.

Meanwhile, the recorded music was in decline. Listen to "Custard Pie," or "The Wanton Song," from the band's 1975 album, "Physical Graffiti." Compared with the nervous heavy swing, the brutish dance of the early music, these are monotonous, grounded stomps. "Kashmir," from the same record, has an interesting enough chord progression, but no one ever wished it longer. The starship had crashed to earth. The band's last proper album, "In Through the Out Door," was released in 1979, and, although it was an immense commercial success, offered little of musical value. "In the Evening," apparently intended to announce the return of the group's "hardness," achieves the distinction of sounding like anyone but Led Zeppelin. Bonham had been the crucial reagent; as had been the case with Keith Moon's spiralling alcoholism, the increasing unreliability of the drummer closely tracked the decline of the band. Spitz reminds us that 1979 was a richly transitional year. "In Through the Out Door" had to compete, musically, with the Clash's "London Calling," the Police's "Reggatta de Blanc," Talking Heads' "Fear of Music," Pink Floyd's "The Wall," and Joy Division's "Unknown Pleasures." Of Led Zeppelin's effort, the British publication *Sounds* declared, "The dinosaur is finally extinct." It is painful to read about how, as the August concerts that year at Knebworth approached, Page and Grant bandied the names of people they wanted as supporting acts—Dire Straits, Joni Mitchell, Van Morrison, Aerosmith, Roxy Music. Everyone turned them down. Dire Straits' manager told them that his band wasn't ready for such a major show, "but in truth he didn't want them sharing a stage with Led Zeppelin." A year later, John Bonham died in his sleep, after drinking forty shots of vodka, and Led Zeppelin promptly died with him.

Still, listen again to the opening of "Black Dog," or to Plant's forlorn wail at the start of "I Can't Quit You Baby," or Page's fingers in full flow in "No Quarter," or the violent precision of Bonham's beat in "When the Levee Breaks." It's like listening to atheism: the charge is still there, ready to be picked up, ready to release lives. The anti-religious religious power of rock was exactly what my mother feared. I don't think it was the obvious mimicry of religious worship—the sweaty congregants, the stairways to Heaven, and all the rest of it—that worried her. I think she feared rock's inversion of religious power: the insidious power to enter one's soul. There were many postwar households where a confession of interest in rock and roll was received rather as a young Victorian's crisis of faith had been in the nineteenth century. Spitz tells us that listening to pop music in the Plant home was "akin to a declaration of war," producing an "irreparable" rift between Plant and his parents. In my own adolescence, I can't clearly separate atheism's power from rock and roll's. My mother was right to be fearful. There was something a little "satanic" about Led Zeppelin. You can feel it, perhaps, in the music's deep uncanniness; in Plant's unsexed keening; in the band's weird addiction to downward or upward chromatic progressions—the sound of horror-film scores—in songs like "Dazed and Confused," "Kashmir," "Babe I'm Gonna Leave You," and even "Stairway to Heaven." It's in the terrifying, spectral, semi-tonal shriek of "Immigrant Song," the creepy scratching chords that open "Dancing Days," the dirgelike liturgies of "Friends" and "Black Dog."

That's the good satanism. What about the actual diabolical activity—the violence, the rape, the pillage, the sheer wastage of lives? Jimmy Page was a devoted follower of the satanic "magick" of Aleister Crowley, whose Sadean permissions can be reduced to one decree: "There is no law beyond do what thou wilt." If the predetermined task of rock gods and goddesses is to sacrifice themselves on the Dionysian altar of excess so that gentle teen-agers the world over don't have to do it themselves—which seems to be the basic rock-and-roll contract—then the lives of these deities are never exactly wasted, especially when they are foreshortened. Their atrocious human deeds are, to paraphrase a famous fictional atheist, the manure for our future harmony. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, they died young (or otherwise ruined their health), so that we could persist in the fantasy that there's nothing worse than growing old.

In this sense, it would seem as if the music can't easily be separated from its darkest energies. But it would be nice if the sacrifice were limited only to self-sacrifice and didn't involve less willing partners. And surely all kinds of demonic and powerful art, including many varieties of music, both classical and popular, have been created by people who didn't live demonically. What about Flaubert's mantra about living like a bourgeois in order to create wild art? In Led Zeppelin's case, the great music, the stuff that is still violently radical, was made early in the band's career, when its members were most sober. The closer the band got to actual violence, the tamer the music became. So perhaps the music *can* be separated from its darker energies.

I don't know what to think. I can say only that my brother didn't, in the end, go to Knebworth. Did he save his soul? Perhaps. I'm pretty sure Led Zeppelin saved mine. ♦

BOOKS

SILENT TREATMENT

The case for Buster Keaton.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

Critics like to create causes. If a pair of new Grover Cleveland biographies appears, we say that, with the prospect of a President returning to win a second term after having been defeated at the end of his first, who else would interest us more than the only President who has? In reality, the biographers started their work back when, and now is when the biographies just happen to be ready. And so it is with the appearance of two significant new books about the silent-film comedian Buster Keaton. We start to search for his contemporary relevance—the influence of silent-comedy short subjects on TikTok?—when the reason is that two good writers began writing on the subject a while ago, and now their books are here.

The truth is that Keaton's prominence has receded, probably irretrievably, from where it stood half a century ago—a time when, if you were passionate about movies, you wore either the white rose of Keaton or the red rose of Chaplin and quarrelled fiercely with anyone on the other side. In Bertolucci's wonderful movie about the Paris revolt of May, 1968, "The Dreamers," two student radicals, French and American, nearly come to blows over the relative merits of Charlie and Buster: "Keaton is a real filmmaker. Chaplin, all he cares about is his own performance, his own ego!" "That's bullshit!" "That's not bullshit!" Meanwhile, Janis Joplin growls on the stereo behind them.

In a weird way, the terms of the quarrel derived from the German Enlightenment philosopher Gotthold Lessing's search for the "essence" of each art form: poetry does time, sculpture does space, and so on. To the Keaton lovers, Chaplin was staginess, and therefore sentimentality, while Keaton was cinema—he moved like the moving pictures. Chaplin's set pieces could easily fit onto a music-hall stage: the dance of the dinner rolls in "The Gold Rush" and the boxing match in "City Lights" were both born there imaginatively, and could have been transposed there. But Keaton's set pieces could be made only with a camera. When he employs a vast and empty Yankee Stadium as a background for the private pantomime of a ballgame, in "The Cameraman," or when he plays every part in a vaudeville theatre (including the testy society wives, the orchestra members, and the stagehands), in "The Play House," these things could not even be *imagined* without the movies to imagine them in. The Keaton who created the shipboard bits in "The Navigator" or the dream scene in "Sherlock Jr." was a true filmmaker rather than a film-taker, a molder of moving sequences rather than someone who pointed the camera at a stage set. (One could make similar claims for the superior cinematic instincts of Harold Lloyd, who tended to get dragged into these arguments in much the same way that the Kinks get dragged into arguments about the Beatles and the Stones—though Lloyd, like Ray Davies, was such a specialized taste that he could only extend, not end, an argument over the virtues of the other two.)

Take the long sequence toward the end of "Steamboat Bill, Jr." (1928), in which Keaton, playing an effete, Boston-educated heir who rejoins his father, a short-tempered Southern steamboat captain, gets caught in a cyclone that pulverizes a small town. The episode is breathtaking in its audacity and poetry, an unexampled work of pure special-effects ballet. The houses explode, in a thousand shards of wood, as Keaton wanders among them. The moment when the façade of a house falls on Keaton, who is saved by a well-placed attic window, has been "memed" as the very image of a narrow escape. But it is

Being anti-sentimental, even coldhearted, was at the core of Keaton's comic art.

ILLUSTRATION BY AGOSTINO IACURCI

merely an incident in a longer sequence that begins when the roof and walls of a hospital building are whisked away like a magician's napkin; then a much bigger house falls on Keaton, who, accepting it neutrally, grabs a tree trunk and holds tight as it flies across town and into the river. Nothing like it had ever been seen in a theatre, or even imagined in a book, so specific are its syntax and realization to moving pictures.

How are we to share these glories in 2022? Fortunately, Cohen Films has produced mint-quality restorations of all the great movies, and Peter Bogdanovich's last work, the 2018 documentary "The Great Buster," is a terrific anthology of highlights. Even more fortunately, those two new books, each excellent in its way, are weirdly complementary in their completeness. James Curtis's "Buster Keaton: A Filmmaker's Life" (Knopf) is an immense year-by-year, sometimes week-by-week, account of Keaton as an artist and a man. Every detail of his life and work is here, starting with his birth, in 1895, as Curtis painstakingly clarifies which of two potential midwives attended to the matter. (Mrs. Theresa Ullrich rather than Mrs. Barbara Haen, for the record.) His perpetually touring and performing parents, Joe and Myra, had been on the road when it happened, in the one-horse town of Piqua, Kansas. Curtis takes us through the progress of the brutal comedy act that Joe Keaton raised his son to star in; things were so hard at the turn of the century that at one point Harry Houdini, with whom the three Keatons shared a show, had to pretend to be the kind of psychic he despised in order to draw the rubes into the theatre. We even hear about gags that Buster Keaton helped invent for Abbott and Costello in his later, seemingly fallow, years.

Dana Stevens, in "Camera Man" (Atria), takes an original and, in a way, more distanced approach to Keaton. In place of a standard social history of silent comedy, much less a standard biography, Stevens offers a series of pas de deux between Keaton and other personages of his time, who shared one or another of his preoccupations or projects. It's a new kind of history, making more of overlapping horizontal "frames" than of direct chronological history, and Stevens does it extraordinarily well.

Some of these pairings, to be sure, are more graceful than others. The comedienne Mabel Normand appears for the somewhat remote reason that Chaplin refused, early in his career, to be directed by her, a fact that's taken as an index of the misogyny that reigned in the world of silent comedy. (The truth is that Chaplin, a once-in-a-century talent, routinely bullied *anyone* who tried to tell him what to do.) On the other hand, a chapter on Robert Sherwood and Keaton is genuinely illuminating. Sherwood, now forgotten despite four Pulitzers and an Oscar, was one of those writers whose lives reveal more about their time than do the lives of those writers gifted enough to exist outside their time. The author of well-made, well-meaning plays advancing progressive causes—he ended up as one of F.D.R.'s chief speechwriters—he championed Keaton, notably in the pages of *Life*, with acute discernment, a reminder that the categories of popular culture and serious art were remarkably permeable in the twenties. Just as Hart Crane was writing poetry about Chaplin when Chaplin was still only very partly formed, Sherwood recognized Keaton's greatness almost before it seemed completely manifest. Writing about Chaplin, Lloyd, and Keaton in the early twenties, he maintained that their efforts "approximate art more closely than anything else that the movies have offered." Sherwood even wrote a feature for Keaton, which, like James Agee's attempt at writing a movie for Chaplin, proved unmakeable. Sherwood's script got Keaton marooned high up in a skyscraper but couldn't find a way of getting him down. When Keaton and Sherwood saw each other in later years, Sherwood promised to get him down, but never did.

Keaton seems to have been one of those comic geniuses who, when not working, never felt entirely alive. He fulfilled the Flaubertian idea of the artist as someone whose whole existence is poured into his art: the word "dull" crops up often as people remember him. Curtis is particularly good on the early years. Joseph Frank Keaton spent his youth in his parents' knockabout vaudeville act; by the time he was eight, it basically consisted of his father, Joe, picking him up and throwing him against the set wall. Joe would announce, "It just breaks a father's heart to be rough," and he'd hurl Buster—already called this because of his stoicism—across the stage. "Once, during a matinee performance," Curtis recounts, "he innocently slammed the boy into scenery that had a brick wall directly behind it." That "innocently" is doing a lot of work, but all this brutality certainly conveyed a basic tenet of comedy: treating raw physical acts, like a kick in the pants, in a cerebral way is funny. "I wait five seconds—count up to ten slow—grab the seat of my pants, holler bloody murder, and the audience is rolling in the aisles," Keaton later recalled. "It was The Slow Thinker. Audiences love The Slow Thinker."

A quick mind impersonating the Slow Thinker: that was key to his comic invention. The slowness was a sign of a cautious, calculating inner life. Detachment in the face of disorder remained his touchstone. Of course, stoicism is one of the easier virtues to aspire to when your father has actually put a handle on your pants in order to ease the act of throwing you across a vaudeville proscenium, and it's easy to see the brutality as the wound that drew the bow of art. But in this case the wound *was* the art; Keaton minded less the rough play than his increasingly drunken father's refusal to let him out of the act long enough to go to school. He seems to have had exactly one day of public education.

In New York, the Keatons found themselves at war with city reformers who were evidently more passionate about keeping children off the vaudeville stage than about keeping them out of the sweatshop; arrests and court appearances ensued. After that, the family largely avoided New York, often retreating to the backwoods resort town of Muskegon, Michigan, the nearest thing young Buster ever had to a home. It was only when Joe started drinking too hard and got sloppy onstage that, in 1917, the fastidious Buster left him and went out on his own. It was the abuse of the art form that seemed to offend him.

In those days, young comedians were being swept off the stage and into the movies more or less the same way that garage bands were swept out of high-school gyms and into recording studios in the nineteen-sixties. Keaton fell in with Joseph Schenck, then a novice movie producer, who paired him with Roscoe (Fatty) Arbuckle in the equivalent of the John Belushi–Dan Aykroyd teaming, a

"natural" comedian with a technical one. The partnership was an immediate success, starting with the two-reel short "The Butcher Boy" (1917), and was only briefly interrupted when Keaton was drafted and spent part of 1918 in France, having a good time serving in the Great War.

Keaton often credited Arbuckle with showing him how movies worked. But Schenck's role was just as important. Anita Loos recalled him as someone who brings "forth the aroma of a special sort of smoked sturgeon that came from Barney Greengrass's delicatessen"; and he and his brother, Nick, who later ran M-G-M, were cynosures among the generation of Russian Jews who dominated Hollywood for the next half century. Joseph Schenck was married to the film star Norma Talmadge; many dry-eyed observers thought that he was the trophy, and that Talmadge married him to keep the producer in her pocket.

Keaton's early entry into the movies, after his almost complete isolation from a normal childhood, meant that he was really at home only within the world of his own invention. One gets the impression that he mainly lived for the choreography of movie moments, or "gags," as they were unpretentiously called, though they were rather like Balanchine's work, with scene and movement and story pressed together in one swoop of action. Keaton was not a reader, unlike Chaplin, who fell on Roget's Thesaurus with the appetite of his own Tramp eating the shoe. Sex was of absent-minded importance for Keaton; his marriage to Norma Talmadge's sister Natalie, in 1921, was apparently ceremonial and, after two children were born, celibate, at her mother's insistence. Nor was he a family man; after they divorced, he hated losing custody of his kids, but it isn't clear if he saw them much when he had them.

Around 1921, when false charges of rape and murder devastated Arbuckle's career, Keaton was sympathetic, and then smoothly moved on, making solo movies. "He lives inside the camera," as Arbuckle observed. Being anti-sentimental to the point of seeming coldhearted was at the core of his art. "In our early successes, we had to get sympathy to make any story stand up," he said once, in a rare moment of reflection. "But the one thing that I made sure—that I didn't ask for it. If the audience wanted to feel sorry for me, that was up to them. I didn't ask for it in action." Life dished it out, and Keaton's character just had to take it.

Critics have drawn a connection between the Arbuckle scandal and Keaton's short comedy "Cops" (1922), made between Arbuckle's trials, in which Keaton, having been caught accidentally tossing an anarchist bomb, is chased across Los Angeles by hundreds of police officers. This is the kind of conjecture that shows little understanding of the way that artists work, rather like the belief that Picasso's barbed-wire portraits of Dora Maar, in the nineteen-forties, are protests against the Occupation, rather than a product of his own obsessive imagery. "Cops" is not about false accusation; it's about the massed comic power of regimented men in motion, uniform action in every sense. Pure artists like Keaton work from their own obsessions, with editorials attached awkwardly afterward.

His first feature, no surprise, was a movie about a movie, an ambitious parody of D. W. Griffith's legendary epic "Intolerance" (1916), in which Keaton's sister-in-law Constance Talmadge had appeared. His "Three Ages," seven years later, stowed together three parallel stories—one Stone Age, one Roman, and one modern—and mocked both Griffith's cosmic ambitions and his cross-century editing scheme. The caveman comedy is the same as all caveman comedies (Keaton has a calling card inscribed on a stone, etc.), but the Roman sequences are done with even more panache than Mel Brooks's "History of the World, Part I." Soon, Keaton was earning a thousand dollars a week, and becoming so rich that he, the boy who never had a home, built his wife a wildly extravagant faux Italian villa.

Dana Stevens takes up the really big question: What made Keaton's solo work seem so modern? Just as "Cops" can be fairly called Kafkaesque in its juxtaposition of the unfairly pursued hero and the implacable faceless forces of authority, there are moments throughout "Sherlock Jr." (1924) when Keaton achieves the Surrealist ambition to realize dreams as living action. Sequences like the one in which Keaton seems to step directly into the movie-house screen, and leaps from scene to scene within the projection in perfectly edited non sequiturs, make the Surrealist cinema of Buñuel and Maya Deren seem studied and gelatinous.

Stevens argues that Keaton's art was informed by the same social revolutions as the European avant-garde: "The pervasive sense of anxiety and dislocation, of the need to reinvent the world from the ground up, that groups like the Surrealists or the Bloomsbury authors sought to express in images and words, the human mop-turned-filmmaker expressed in the comic movement of his body." But Keaton also looks surreal because the Surrealists were feeding off the same sources as Keaton was, in circus and vaudeville and the music hall and stage magic. The Cubists, the Dadaists, and the Surrealists all had the sense that, as bourgeois pieties had grown increasingly meaningless, the only grammar from which one could construct a credible art was that of farce. So those clowns and comic artists who held down the tradition of burlesque and nonsense comedy were, willy-nilly, the modernist's dream brothers.

And then, in a modernist way, Keaton's movies very often are *about* the movies, which was a natural outgrowth of his single-minded absorption in his chosen medium. In "Sherlock Jr.," he plays a dreamy projectionist who falls into his own films, and in "The Cameraman" (1928) the joke is that Keaton's character accidentally makes newsreels filled with camera tricks, double exposures, speeded-up time, and backward movement. Even that great cyclone scene in "Steamboat Bill, Jr." is meant not to provide an illusion of reality but to show off the possibilities of artifice.

Keaton's subject, in a larger sense, is the growth of technology and the American effort to tame it. There is scarcely a classic Keaton film of the twenties that doesn't involve his facing, with affection or respect more often than terror, one or another modern machine: the movie camera, the submarine, the open roadster. Throughout "The Navigator" (1924), he looks uncannily like

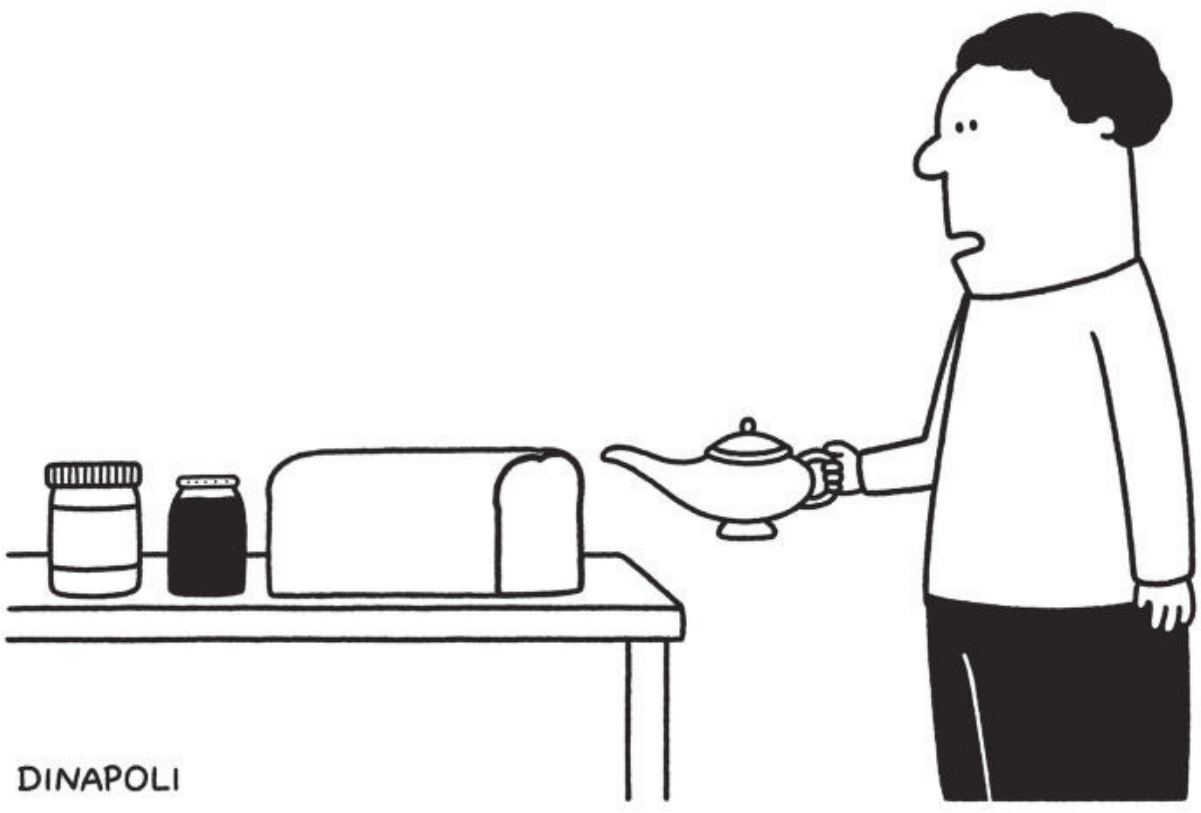
Wilbur Wright in the Lartigue portrait. Keaton seems, in the combined integrity and opportunism of his persona, to explain how those alarming machines emerge from an older American culture of tinkerers and bicycle repairmen.

Keaton's greatest work was made in the five years between "Three Ages" (1923) and "The Cameraman." "The General" (1926), the first of Keaton's features to enter the National Film Registry, was—surprisingly, to those who think of it as Keaton's acknowledged masterpiece—a critical flop. A carefully plotted Civil War tale, more adventure story than comic spoof, it shared the typical fate of such passion projects: at first a baffling failure, for which everyone blames the artist, and which does him or her immense professional damage, it then gets rediscovered when the passion is all that's evident and the financial perils of the project don't matter anymore. Nobody questioned Keaton's decision to make it, since the movies he had made in the same system had all been profitable. But businessmen, understandably, hate trusting artists and waiting for the product, and are always looking for an excuse to impose a discipline the artists lack. It takes only one bomb to bring the accountants down on the head of the comedian. Stevens, comparing the film to Michael Cimino's "Heaven's Gate," writes, "*The General* was less a cause than a symptom of the end of a certain way of making movies. The independent production model that for ten years had allowed Buster the freedom to make exactly the movies he wanted . . . was collapsing under its own weight." The thing that baffled its detractors (even Sherwood didn't like it) and, at first, repelled audiences was the thing that seems to us now daring and audacious: the seamless mixture of Keaton's comedy with its soberly realistic rendering of the period. No American movie gives such a memorable evocation of the Civil War landscape, all smoky Southern mornings and austere encampments—a real triumph of art, since it was shot in Oregon. Many of the images, like one of a short-barrelled cannon rolling alone on the railroad, put one in mind of Winslow Homer.

Two years later, in a studio sleight of hand so sneaky that Curtis spends a page and a half figuring out what the hell happened, Keaton became the subject of a baseball-style trade, in which Joe Schenck had Keaton transferred from United Artists to his brother Nick, at M-G-M. That gave M-G-M a clean-up-hitter comedian—United Artists already had Chaplin—while making sure that, post-"General," Keaton would be more closely supervised by M-G-M's boy genius, Irving Thalberg. Chaplin tried to warn Keaton off M-G-M. "Don't let them do it to you, Buster," he said. "It's not that they haven't smart showmen there. They have some of the country's best. But there are too many of them, and they'll all try to tell you how to make your comedies." Keaton's passivity made him reluctant to heed the warning, and off he went, Schenck to Schenck.

The mostly disastrous years that Keaton spent at M-G-M are the real subject of Stevens's chapter on F. Scott Fitzgerald. Thalberg will always have his defenders, but once one gets past the "quality" films he sponsored, it becomes clear what a con artist he was. He sold one observer after another—including Fitzgerald, who took him as the model for his idealized "last tycoon," Monroe Stahr—on the subtlety of his intellect, while everything he did revealed him to be the most ruthless kind of commercial-minded cynic. Thalberg robbed the Marx Brothers of their anarchy and Keaton of his elegance, turning him, as Stevens complains, into a mere stock rube figure. The Thalberg system tended to work well for an artist just once—as in both the Marxes' and Keaton's first films for M-G-M, "A Night at the Opera" and "The Cameraman." But Thalberg didn't grasp what had actually worked: the expensive style of the production, pitting the Marxes against the pomposity of opera, and placing Keaton against a full-scale location shoot in New York City. What Thalberg *thought* worked was schlock imposed on genius: big production numbers for the Marxes and unrequited-love rube comedy for Keaton. In many subsequent movies, at M-G-M and elsewhere, his character was named Elmer (and once even Elmer Gantry), to typify him as a backwoods yokel.

The M-G-M comedies did decently at the box office, but Keaton, an artist injured by the persistent insults to his artistic intelligence, started to drink hard, and soon the drinking drowned out that intelligence. The actress Louise Brooks recalls him driving drunk to the studio, where he silently destroyed a room full of glass bookshelves with a baseball bat. She sensed his message: "I am ruined, I am trapped." In 1933, he was fired by Louis B. Mayer, essentially for being too smashed, on and off the set, to work. Keaton's M-G-M experience, despite various efforts by Thalberg and others to keep his career alive as a gag writer, ruined his art. The next decades are truly painful to read about, as Keaton went in and out of hospitals and clinics, falling



"Come to think of it, these all probably could have been one wish."

off the wagon and then sobering up again. His brother-in-law, the cartoonist Walt Kelly, recalls that "nobody really wanted to put him under control because he was a lot of fun." What we perhaps miss, in accounts of the boozers of yore, is an adequate sense of how much fun they all thought they were having. Drunks of that period could not be shaken from the conviction that they were having a good time until they were hauled off to the hospital.

As Curtis establishes, when Keaton did dry out, by the nineteen-fifties, he had much better later years than the public image suggests. That image persists; a recent, impassioned French documentary titled "Buster Keaton: The Genius Destroyed by Hollywood" maintains that "in just a few years he went from being a worldwide star to a washed-up artist with no future." Curtis makes it clear that this assertion is wildly exaggerated. Keaton did as well as could have been hoped. But the notion that sound killed off the silent comedians is one of those ideas which, seeming too simple to be true, are simply true. Chaplin endured because he had money and independence, but even he made only two more comedies in the thirties; Harry Langdon was ruined and Harold Lloyd kept his money and withdrew.

Keaton did have to undergo a certain amount of whatever-happened-to humiliation; he is one of Gloria Swanson's bridge party of silent has-beens in "Sunset Boulevard." In tribute after tribute, he was condescendingly associated with custard-pie-throwing comedies of a kind he had almost never made. But he was properly valued in France, had successful seasons at the Medrano Circus, and worked ceaselessly as a gag man, even inventing an entire routine for Lucille Ball that became part of the pilot for "I Love Lucy."

His most famous late appearance was alongside Chaplin in "Limelight" (1952), Chaplin's last interesting movie, in which they play two down-on-their-luck vaudevillians. Claire Bloom, who played the ingénue, recalls that, in twenty-one days of shooting, Keaton spoke to her exactly once, when showing her a tourist-type photograph of a beautiful Beverly Hills house. He told her that it had once been his home, then fell silent. This seems sad, but Curtis also evokes him watching the camerawork and helping direct Chaplin: "It's okay, Charlie. You're right in the center of the shot. Yeah, you're fine, Charlie. It's perfect." Even when he was too frail to run or move much, as in the 1966 film "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," made a year before his death, and directed by his idolater Richard Lester, his face was a beacon not merely of endurance but of a kind of lost American integrity, the integrity of the engineer and the artisan and the old-style vaudeville performer.

Two kinds of American comedy made themselves felt in the first half of the twentieth century: the comedy of invasion and the comedy of resistance. The first was the immigrant comedy of energy, enterprise, mischief, and mayhem. The Marx Brothers are supreme here, but Chaplin, who, although an immigrant of the Cockney rather than the Cossacks-fleeing variety, could play the Jewish arrival brilliantly, and the immigrant-comedy vein runs right up to Phil Silvers's Sergeant Bilko, swindling the simpleton officers at the Army base. In response comes the comedy of old-American resistance to all that explosive energy, struggling to hold on to order and decency and gallantry. It's exemplified by W. C. Fields's efforts to sleep on his sleeping porch in "It's a Gift," while the neighborhood around him refuses to quiet down. The division extends even to the written humor of the period, with S. J. Perelman the cynical navigator and commercial participant in the endless ocean of American vulgarity, and James Thurber wistfully watching from Manhattan as the old values of the republic pass away in Columbus.

Keaton is the stoical hero of the comedy of resistance, the uncomplaining man of character who sees the world of order dissolving around him and endures it as best he can. (In "Steamboat Bill, Jr.," it's the nostalgic world of the river steamboat; in "The General," it is, for good or ill, the Old South.) Keaton's characters have character. They never do anything remotely conniving. And the one thing Keaton never does is mug. There are moments in all his best features, in fact, that anticipate the kind of Method acting that didn't come into fashion for another generation, as when he impassively slips to the ground beside the girl in the beginning of "The Cameraman," registering the act of falling in love by the tiniest of increments. The best thing in "Steamboat Bill, Jr." might be a bit of acting so subtle that one wonders whether people got it at the time. Under suspicion of sexual instability—"If you say what you're thinking I'll strangle you!" the title card has the captain saying bluntly to a friend, after watching his son caper with his ukulele—Bill, Jr., is compelled by his father to throw away his Frenchified beret, and try on a sequence of American hats. Keaton doesn't attempt, as Chaplin might have, to adopt a distinct persona in each hat but actually does what we do in front of a clothing-store mirror: he wears his trying-on face, testing a daring expression, sampling the aesthetic effect of each hat for the sake of his vanity while trying not to offend his father by seeming too much the hat aesthete. Somehow he is both preening and hiding. It's an amazing moment of pure performance, and every bit as "cinematic"—showing what extreme closeups can do—as the big special-effects sequences.

"Though there is a hurricane eternally raging about him, and though he is often fully caught up in it, Keaton's constant drift is toward the quiet at the hurricane's eye," the critic Walter Kerr observed of Keaton. What remains most in one's memory after an immersion in Keaton are the quiet, uncanny shots of him in seclusion, his sensitive face registering his own inwardness. In this way, maybe there *is* some relevance in a Keaton revival today. Critics may invent their causes, but sometimes a good critical book, or two, can create a cause that counts. Chaplin is a theatrical master and needs a theatre to make his mark. His movies play much, much better with an audience present. Keaton can be a solitary entertainment, seen with as much delight on a computer screen as in a movie palace—rather as our taste for the great humanist sacrament of the symphony depends in some part on having open concert halls, while chamber music has whispered right throughout the pandemic. Keaton is the chamber-music master of comedy, with the counterpoint clear and unmuddied by extraneous emotion. It may be that our new claustrophobia is mirrored in his old comedy. The hospital has blown away, and that house has fallen on us all. ♦

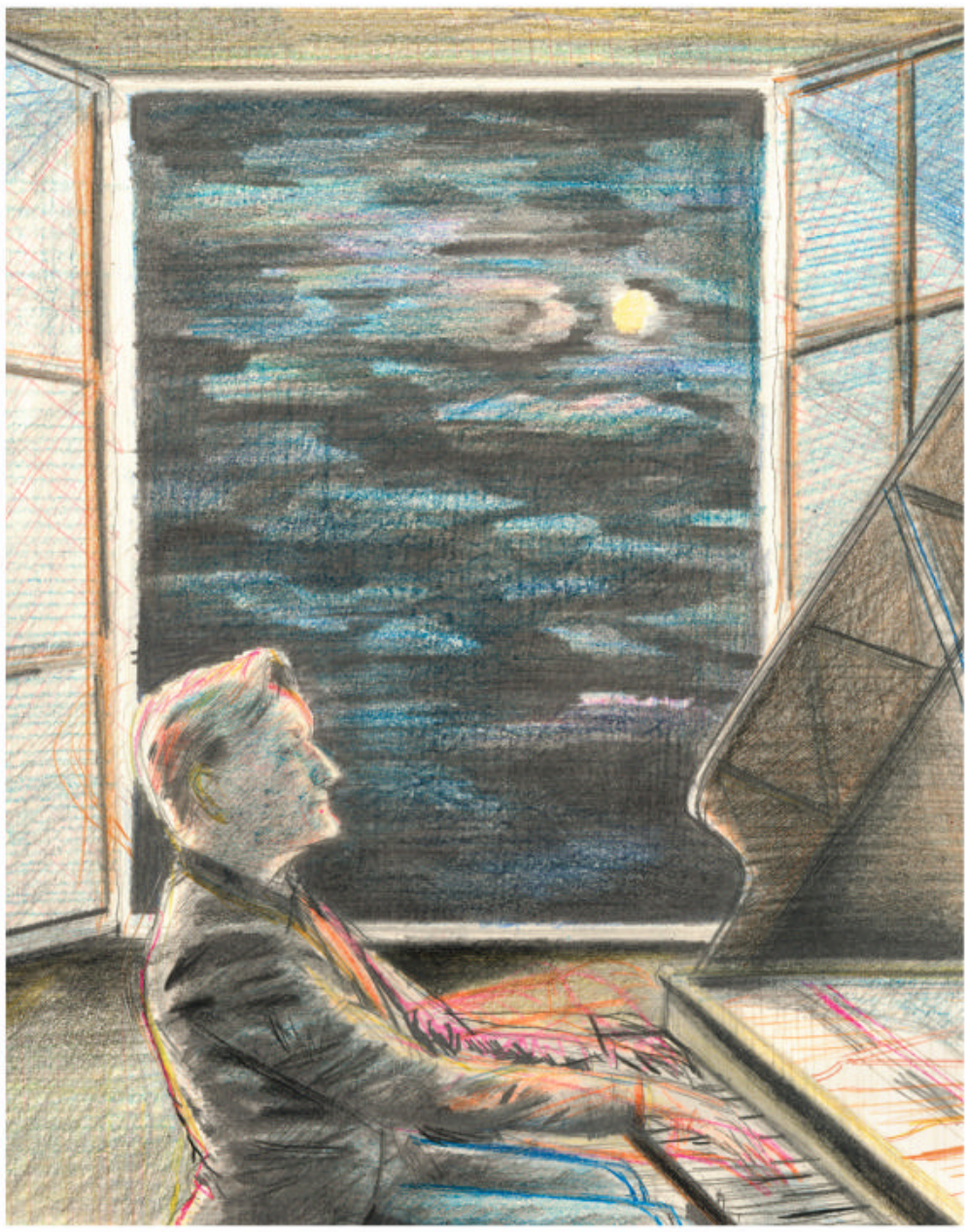
Today, I woke up and my first thoughts were about the inevitability of war. With reports of Russian saboteurs and hackers infiltrating Ukraine, anxiety is running high among my family and friends. Some of us have decided to join the Territorial Defense Forces—this helps calm me down, but not much. We pass soldiers on the street and in the metro. Around the city, the government is checking bomb shelters as a worker repaints a "Shelter" sign. In vain, I try to hide from the news.

MUSICAL EVENTS

MOONLIGHT

New recordings of Chopin's Nocturnes.

BY ALEX ROSS



Chopin's Nocturne No. 7, in C-sharp minor, begins with a low, ashen sound: a prowling arpeggio in the left hand, consisting only of C-sharps and G-sharps. It's a hollowed-out harmony, in limbo between major and minor. Three bars in, the right hand enters on E, seemingly establishing minor, but a move to E-sharp clouds the issue, pointing toward major. Although the ambiguity dissipates in the measures that follow, a nimbus of uncertainty persists. Something even eerier happens in the tenth bar. The melody abruptly halts on the leading tone of B-sharp while the left hand gets stuck in another barren pattern—this one incorporating the notes D, A, and C-sharp. It's almost like a glitch, a frozen screen. Then comes a moment of wistful clarity: an immaculate phrase descends an octave, with a courtly little turn on the fourth step of the scale. It is heard only once more before it disappears. I always yearn in vain for the tune's return: a sweetly murmuring coda doesn't quite make up for its absence. Ultimate beauty always passes too quickly.

Three recordings of Chopin's complete Nocturnes have arrived in the past year: one on the Deutsche Grammophon label, with the young Canadian pianist Jan Lisiecki; one on Harmonia Mundi, with the veteran French artist Alain Planès, who uses a vintage 1836 Pleyel instrument; and one on Hyperion, with the British polymath Stephen Hough. The notion of listening in a single setting to these leisurely, contemplative pieces—twenty or twenty-one in all, depending on how you count—might have struck Chopin as bizarre. Although he assembled sets of nocturnes, preludes, waltzes, mazurkas, and so on, his legendarily bewitching recitals intermingled selections from various categories, and also incorporated works by other composers. Chopin pianists tend to follow that practice today, in the interest of cultivating contrast; live traversals of the entire set of Nocturnes are rare. In the more intimate sphere of home listening, however, the idea of spending a couple of hours in this realm is by no means strange, and the experience gathers its own dream logic.

The C-sharp-minor Nocturne is a good test case for assessing these pianists' styles, which diverge in many respects. Lisiecki is the one who most consciously follows the high-Romantic school of Chopin playing—a studied sensitivity that, in the wrong hands, can evoke a fidgety period-movie performance by someone like Timothée Chalamet. In Lisiecki's hands, the Nocturne gets off to a deliberately sluggish start, as if rousing itself from slumber. The tempo, already languid, drags slightly as the opening melody arches upward. Lisiecki keeps the line very smooth, ignoring several of Chopin's accent marks. This withdrawn, ethereal atmosphere is broken rather violently by the tempestuous middle section: the left-hand double octaves that lead back to the main material verge on Rachmaninoff.

The velvety legato that Lisiecki lavishes on the C-sharp-minor Nocturne is impossible on Planès's period instrument, which has a crisper, tangier sound. In Planès's hands, the principal melody feels fragile and hesitant, in an expressively effective way. The relative lightness of timbre makes the transition to the middle section unusually organic. Because the double octaves lack booming resonance, they become more integrated—more nocturnal. If Chopin had had access to

The pianist Stephen Hough approaches the Nocturnes as a set of operatic arias.

ILLUSTRATION BY YANN KEBBI

the kind of modern Steinway that Lisiecki employs, he might not have felt the need for the doubling at all.

As for Hough, his tempo is markedly faster than that of the other two. He gets through the piece in under five minutes; Lisiecki needs almost six. As the initial line rises, Hough presses forward instead of holding back. He is anything but businesslike, though. What is immediately and magically apparent is the singing quality of the melody. When, in the sixth bar, it rises from C-sharp to G-sharp, Hough seems to take a quick breath before hitting the second note, as a singer would do. He also observes Chopin's accent on that G-sharp—giving the sense of an unknown word being enunciated with extra emphasis. He luxuriates a bit in the three quick notes that follow, as if they were an extension of the same secret thought.

In a program note for his recording, Hough remarks that the Nocturnes are a "corpus of some of the finest operatic arias ever written." The observation is hardly novel; Chopin's love of bel-canto opera has been noted innumerable times. Yet I'm not sure if any pianist on record has fleshed out the link as thoroughly and as persuasively as Hough has. Another telling instance comes at the beginning of the set, in the B-flat-minor Nocturne. That piece opens with a decorous six-note gesture, which leads into an initial thematic statement. In the third bar, the gesture returns, but in a heavily elaborated guise—a flourish of eleven notes in the same span of time, followed by a gossamer shimmer of twenty-two notes. Chopin here imitates the operatic custom of ornamenting an aria during the repeats. With a steady tempo established at the start, Hough gives the feeling of a singer pirouetting above her accompaniment and then falling back into synch with it. Planès and Lisiecki suffer by comparison; their upper lines come across as labored, and the underlying pulse is faint.

Some diehard Romantics might object that Hough is too fleet in his approach. At times, the sheer lushness of Lisiecki's manner reaps rewards; I was entranced by his exceptionally slow but never slack unfurling of the D-flat-major Nocturne. Still, Hough, whose reading is nearly two minutes shorter, wins me over with his liquid, limpid articulation. Again, he has thought at every turn about how a human voice would deliver the melody. In the process, he makes you forget that you're listening to the operation of a complicated machine: the materiality of the instrument disappears. That illusion is augmented by Hyperion's recording, which was produced by Rachel Smith and engineered by David Hinitt. The piano is a Yamaha CFX, and it sounds warm and clear but never dry. The sessions took place in the summer of 2020, in the Queen Elizabeth Hall at the Southbank Centre. I pictured Hough and his collaborators working through this intensely private music in a deserted venue, in a city brought to a standstill.

There is no lack of great accounts of the Nocturnes in the catalogue: the robust elegance of the younger Arthur Rubinstein, the grandeur of Claudio Arrau, the fine-spun melancholy of Ivan Moravec, the vibrant lyricism of Maria João Pires, the unaffected poetry of the late Brazilian Nelson Freire. I have no hesitation about placing Hough in that company. On many moonlit nights, his version will be the one I reach for first.

Until this past year, few people in the international classical-music world were paying heed to the Basque National Orchestra, which is based in San Sebastián, Spain, and is under the direction of the young Texas-born conductor Robert Trevino. Two startlingly excellent recordings on the Ondine label have raised the ensemble's profile. One is devoted to celebrated works by Maurice Ravel, who was born about twenty miles east of San Sebastián, just over the French border. The other explores little-known but worthwhile American repertory—scores by Charles Martin Loeffler, Carl Ruggles, Howard Hanson, and Henry Cowell.

Let the Basques' rip-roaring rendition of Ravel's "La Valse" stand in for the rest. It explodes with characterful touches: sinister noodling of bass clarinet, slashing cross-rhythms, kitschy swoops of portamento, concussive thuds on the bass drum. At the same time, Trevino maintains irresistible momentum, absorbing each detail into the general crescendo. "La Valse" was composed in the wake of the First World War, and conductors often make a point of enacting a brutal stampede toward catastrophe. Trevino doesn't skimp on the menace, but he and his musicians keep swinging to the end, dancing into darkness. ♦

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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 Christopher Weyant, must be received by Sunday, January 30th. The finalists in the January 17th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 14th & 21st 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

" "

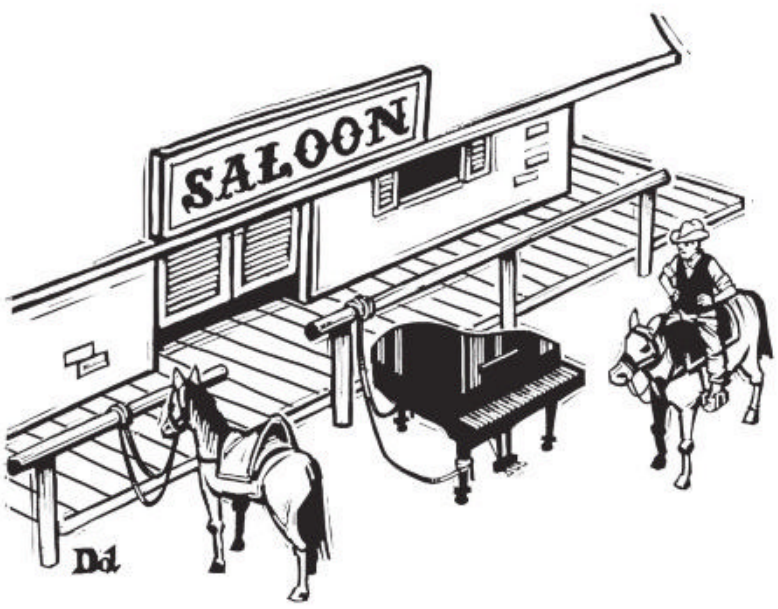
THE FINALISTS

"These should help me approach your father on his own level."
Sarah Totton, Guelph, Ont.

"I've been packed for ages."
Brian Warfield, Doylestown, Pa.

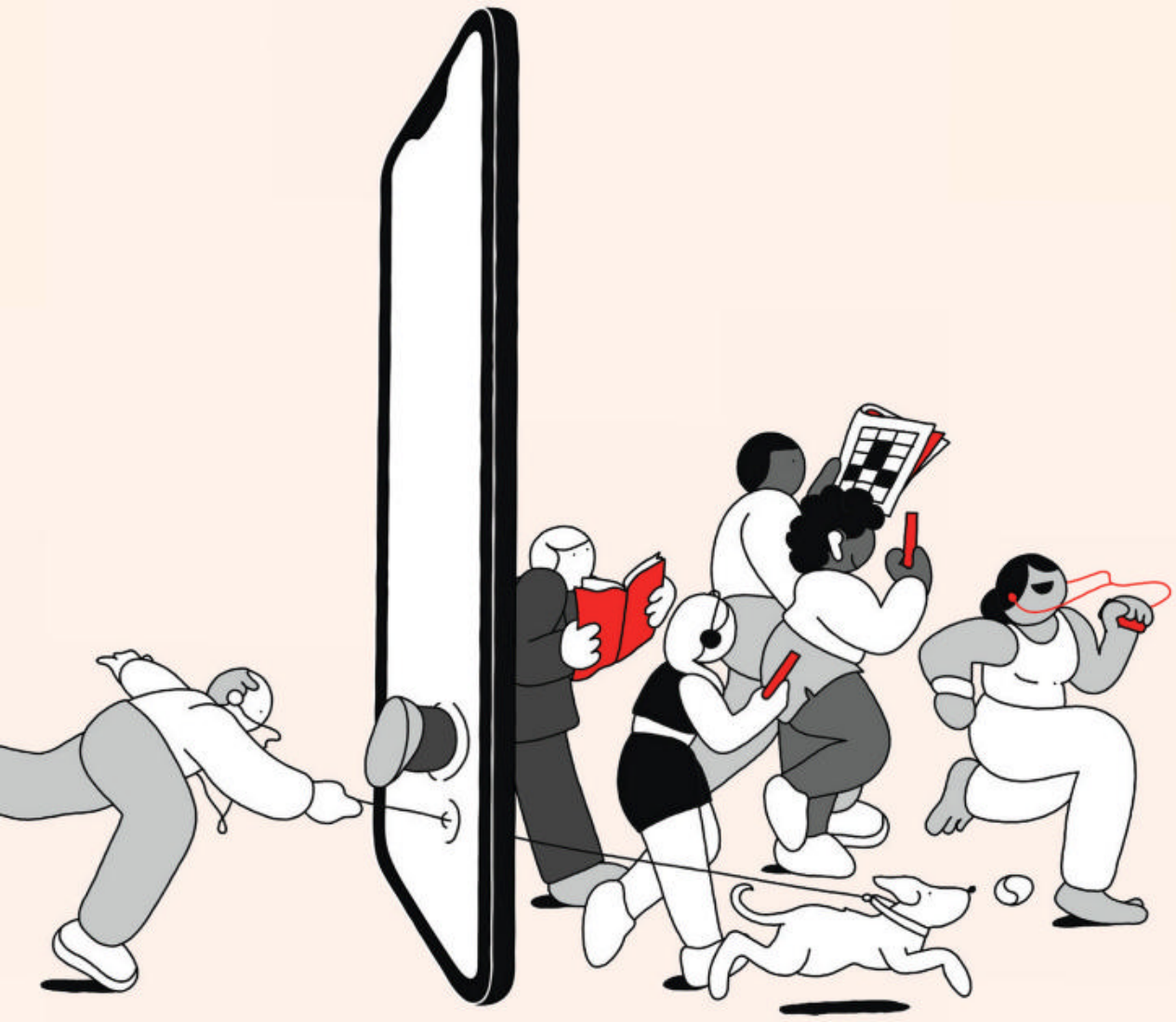
"If we forget anything, we can just invent it when we get there."
Andrew Welhouse, Salt Lake City, Utah

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Looks like somebody needs to be taught a lesson."
Mark Schaefer, Arvada, Colo.

THE NEW YORKER



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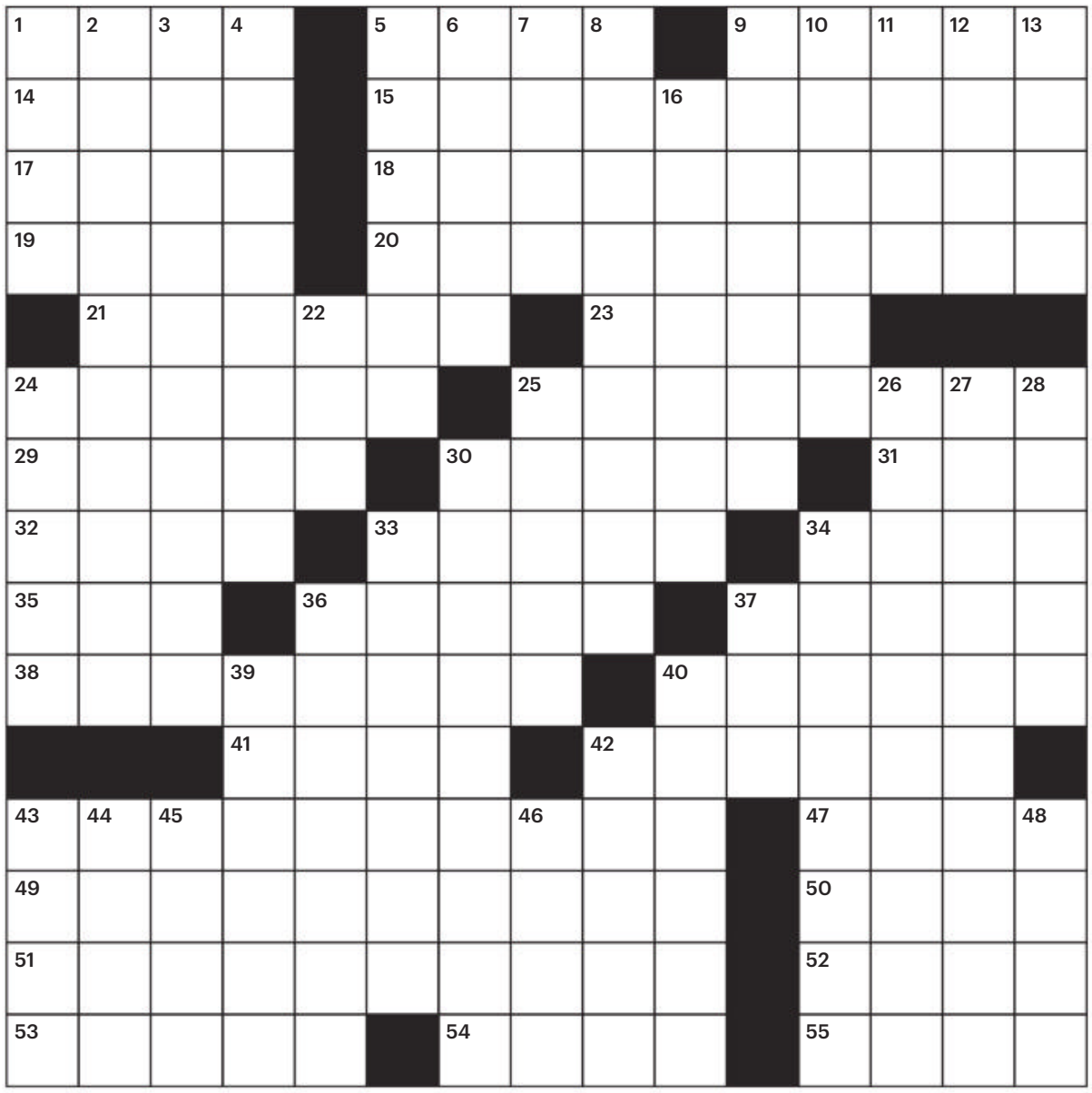
THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY PATRICK BERRY



ACROSS

1 Book before Romans
5 Largest city in the Baltics
9 The six in a cockpit's "six-pack"
14 Legend of R. & B.
15 How suspects who have fled may be tried
17 Birthplace of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity
18 Enjoy great and sudden success
19 Talk like Rochester on "The Jack Benny Program"
20 Dessert that's traditionally made with sweetened condensed milk
21 Metal found in the vast majority of meteorites
23 Greek goddess of the rainbow
24 Bludgeoned, across the pond
25 Guy doing double duty?
29 City whose stone quarries were used to supply material for ancient Egyptian monuments
30 Wealth-flaunting accessories
31 Athlete depicted fighting Superman on a 1978 comic-book cover
32 Editorial reversal
33 Becomes solid, perhaps
34 Defensive end Alzado who won a Super Bowl with the Raiders
35 Geologic time unit
36 Listing on a bill of lading
37 What the Standard Oil Company of New York later became
38 Bar-mitzvah keepsake
40 Core principles
41 Detroit's Belle ___ Park
42 Keep things up?
43 Politician who's good at meet and greets
47 Preserves containers
49 Place that'll rent you a set of wheels
50 Its state bird is the California gull, ironically
51 Beset by enemies
52 Name in Big Tech since October, 2021
53 Brown University athletes
54 Time for celebratory texts, briefly
55 Not-fast-enough food?

DOWN

1 Cracked
2 Crime organization whose name means "our thing"
3 Words spoken during a solemn oath
4 App with a My Eyes Only feature
5 Put on the line
6 Moles dig it up
7 Payton nicknamed the Glove
8 Superhero's special skills
9 Regarding
10 Consume
11 Sitting on
12 Actress Taylor of "American Crime"
13 Singer who recorded "Flower of the Universe" for the "A Wrinkle in Time" soundtrack
16 Snow-covered trails
22 "Toy Story 3" character voiced by Michael Keaton
24 Man described as "mighty" in an 1888 poem
25 Way to avoid getting tagged
26 Noncommittal response to a child's request
27 Choose words that start the same
28 Albert's opponent in a long-standing scientific debate
30 Possible injury from a body blow
33 Spoken name of a 1971 heist film whose title is a single non-alphabetic character
34 Olympic event for Bob Beamon
36 Ones that spout profusely
37 File-size unit, familiarly
39 "From a Distance" singer
40 Broadway misfire
42 Game with a lengthy buildup?
43 Comestibles
44 Isolated
45 Actor who played a senator on "The West Wing" and in "The Aviator"
46 Ran out of charge
48 Dan + ___ (country duo with the hits "Tequila" and "10,000 Hours")

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at
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