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ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY

David W. Brown on a wildly ambitious new program that aims to get us back to the moon for good.

THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW

Jennifer Wilson talks with Helen Oyeyemi about how she chose Prague as the setting of her new novel.

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LEFT: RAMI ALSAYED / GETTY; RIGHT: ENES DIRIĞ; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH FROM GETTY

THE MAIL

GOD AND NATURE

Adam Kirsch, in his review of Ian Buruma's new book about Spinoza, relates that "in Spinoza's universe there is no place outside nature where we can stand in order to exert force on it, since we ourselves are part of nature" (Books, February 12th & 19th). Here Spinoza prefigures an important active discussion in modern science. Classical physics presumes a sharp division between observer and observed: an experimenter watches but must never interfere with an experiment, lest the results be flawed. But current research in quantum physics finds that no such separation is possible. Observer, observed, and everything else are part of one universe that is described by a single "wave function"—much as Spinoza intuited, three hundred and fifty years ago.
John Sechrist
Pittsburgh, Pa.

Like Buruma, Kirsch does a terrific job of illuminating Spinoza's life and ideas. But he cites Leo Strauss's notion that Spinoza used an " 'esoteric' style of writing," cautiously hiding his dangerous thoughts behind a relatively benign façade. As a scholar of Spinoza, I have always found Strauss's reading unpersuasive. What Spinoza explicitly says in his treatises is—to the Dutch ecclesiastic and political authorities, at least—so subversive that, with Strauss's statement in mind, one can only think, My God (or Nature), what is the hidden doctrine here?! As Kirsch notes, Spinoza "spoke the most outrageous truths he knew." In this, the philosopher was simply taking advantage of what he claims at the end of his "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus" to be a right that any citizen should have: "to think what he likes, and say what he thinks."
Steven Nadler
Professor of Philosophy
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, Wis.

During the Vietnam War, I was a conscientious objector. At that time, in order to be granted I-0 (or "nonparticipant") status, you had to profess belief in "a Supreme Being." This I was unable to do. I told my draft board, "No, but I believe in supreme being. Do you see the difference?" One of the panel members said, "Yes. Like Spinoza." My appeal was successful.
Mark Zorn
Eugene, Ore.

STATE OF PLAY

Louisa Thomas's thoughtful and absorbing profile of the Denver Nuggets player Nikola Jokić did not mention that, since 2019, most local Nuggets fans have been stymied in their attempts to follow his career closely ("No Joke," February 12th & 19th). In Colorado, Nuggets games are carried exclusively on the sports-TV network Altitude, which is owned by the Kroenke family, who also own the Nuggets. For nearly five years, Altitude has been unavailable on the locally popular cable-TV provider Comcast/Xfinity, owing to a lengthy contract dispute between Comcast and Altitude. That dispute was eventually settled, but there is still no agreement allowing Comcast/Xfinity to carry Altitude programming. As a result, for fans who cannot afford to attend home games, one of the only opportunities to watch a complete Nuggets game is when the occasional one is broadcast on a national network. (Although it is possible to watch Altitude programming on streaming and satellite carriers, the additional cost of doing so can be significant.) To me, the fact that Denver fans have to look to a literary magazine produced in New York for a detailed understanding of how fascinating a player and person Nikola Jokić is reflects poorly not only on the Nuggets' ownership but on the N.B.A. as a whole.
Erika Enger
Golden, Colo.

•

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GOINGS ON

SPRING PREVIEW

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

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Olivia Rodrigo, Sleater-Kinney, Davido

This spring—which features perhaps the most loaded concert lineup of the COVID era—jazz experimentalists both fresh and familiar put their work on display: **Herbie Hancock,** a pop-bop legend of many innovations, brings his piano flair to Lincoln Center (March 26), and Jasper Marsalis, under the name **Slauson Malone 1,** explores intersections of pop music and performance art at the Park Avenue Armory (March 27-28). Other options range from the traditional (the saxophonist **Melissa Aldana** at Dizzy's Club; April 10) to the progressive (the modern soul man **BJ the Chicago Kid** at Blue Note; April 30-May 5).

In other venues, pathfinders who have defied and defined genres reveal their various breakthroughs. Brooklyn Steel welcomes the Scottish fringe-rap group **Young Fathers** (April 4) and the pop-rock reformist **Amen Dunes** (May 15). **Woods** and **Avey Tare,** indie needle-movers since the mid-two-thousands, co-headline Knockdown Center, joined by the New Age guru **Laraaji** (April 13). **Helado Negro,** on the heels of his wondrous new album "Phasor," brings Latin folk-pop to Webster Hall (April 24). The Brooklyn native L'Rain, now with three albums' worth of avant-garde soul, celebrates a homecoming at Bowery Ballroom (May 9).

The historic Brooklyn Paramount Theatre reopens with a medley of shows. The U.K. dance revivalist **PinkPantheress** teams up with the emergent plugg envoy **Bktherula** (April 14-15), sharing music of the Web with IRL audiences. On April 21, the explosive rapper **Busta Rhymes** runs through a catalogue spanning nearly four decades. On April 26, the experimental electronic artist and score composer Daniel Lopatin surveys the many revolutions of his music as **Oneohtrix Point Never,** and a day later Katie Crutchfield débuts songs from "Tigers Blood," her latest album as **Waxahatchee.**

At Madison Square Garden, two distinct and distinguished pack leaders with strong brands make cases for their primacy: **Olivia Rodrigo** (April 5-6 and April 8-9), who solidified her standing with the pop punk of her 2023 album, "Guts," and **Davido** (April 17), arguably the most popular progenitor of modern Afrobeats. At Radio City Music Hall, the Icelandic TikTok sensation turned Grammy winner **Laufey** restores traditional pop for a new generation (May 3-4).

The goth-rock singer-songwriter **Chelsea Wolfe** continues recent forays into industrial music at Bowery Ballroom (March 13). **Erika De Casier,** after writing for the K-pop visionaries NewJeans, furthers her own retrofuturist R. & B. vision at Warsaw (March 30). At Elsewhere, the fusionist **Hudson Mohawke** tests the danceability of his oddball creations (April 6), and a few weeks later the Newark d.j. **UNiiQU3,** one of Jersey club's finest practitioners, displays the power of the form amid its online renaissance (April 18).

At Brooklyn Steel, the riot-grrrl pioneers of **Sleater-Kinney** work through difficult, grief-stricken songs from their latest album, "Little Rope" (March 13-14). Baby's All Right hosts **Rosie Tucker,** who, this past fall, illustrated their music's pith and thrash with "Tiny Songs Volume 1" (May 8). The following days feature two sublime folk artists operating in singular modes: **Julia Jacklin,** attempting her version of a Las Vegas residency (National Sawdust; select dates May 9-29), and **Kara Jackson** (Public Records; May 15-16), whose début album, "Why Does the Earth Give Us People to Love?," from last April, is delightfully lush and breezy—and most fitting for the season's aura.

—*Sheldon Pearce*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MILLIE VON PLATEN

THE THEATRE

Art, Politics, and Rock and Roll Onstage

The spring glut of 2024 Broadway openings is upon us—eleven musicals and seven plays—all cramming in before the Tony Awards' eligibility cutoff of April 25. For audiences, it means a bonanza of major stars in major works: Steve Carell, Alison Pill, Anika Noni Rose, William Jackson Harper, and Alfred Molina as a romantic pentangle in Heidi Schreck's new translation of **"Uncle Vanya"** (Vivian Beaumont; starting previews on April 2); Rachel McAdams in the title role of **"Mary Jane"** (Samuel J. Friedman; April 2), Amy Herzog's shattering masterpiece about maternal sacrifice; and Jessica Lange and Jim Parsons as mother and son in Paula Vogel's **"Mother Play"** (Hayes; April 2). For those hungry for an unadulterated celeb experience *without* a playwright, Laurence Fishburne will be at PAC NYC, downtown, with an autobiographical solo show, **"Like They Do in the Movies"** (March 10-31).

Almost as handy as a star is an intellectual property. This spring, several new musicals capitalize on our fondness for period movies that are themselves reworkings of books: Rick Elice and the PigPen Theatre Company adapt the love-in-the-circus novel **"Water for Elephants"** (Imperial; in previews); the composer-lyricist Ingrid Michaelson and the book writer Bekah Brunstetter wax romantic with **"The Notebook"** (Gerald Schoenfeld; in previews); and the playwright Adam Rapp collaborates with Justin Levine and the band Jamestown Revival on the youth-in-revolt staple **"The Outsiders"** (Jacobs; March 16).

Notably, many of the musical partners here come from the worlds of retro folk, indie pop, and Americana. And there's more: Alicia Keys's **"Hell's Kitchen"** (Shubert; March 28) draws deeply from her neo-soul catalogue; Pete Townshend and Des McAnuff's **"The Who's Tommy"** (Nederlander; March 8), from 1993, gets another crack at the rock-opera game; and Charlie Smalls's 1975 musical, **"The Wiz"** (Marquis; March 29), eases down a road—yellow-brick Broadway—it hasn't seen since 1984. Even one of the plays going up, David Adjmi's vivid recording-studio-set **"Stereophonic"** (Golden; April 3), transferring from Playwrights Horizons, is stuffed with seventies Fleetwood Mac pastiche, courtesy of Arcade Fire's Will Butler. We're awash in the rock-inflected past.

There are also some less comfortingly nostalgic projects on Broadway. Eddie Redmayne plays the silvery-voiced emcee in **"Cabaret"** (August Wilson; April 1), Kander and Ebb's admonitory 1966 musical, revived yet again, just as we can hear fascism's not-so-distant jackboots; Peter Morgan's drama **"Patriots"** (Ethel Barrymore; April 1) stars Michael Stuhlbarg as the oligarch Boris Berezovsky, who defied Vladimir Putin. Shaina Taub's women's-suffrage musical, **"Suffs"** (Music Box; March 26), transfers from the Public with Hillary Clinton among the producers—a rallying cry in an election year. And **"Lempicka"** (Longacre; March 19), the book writer Carson Kreitzer and the composer Matt Gould's musical about the titular Art Deco painter, considers the detachment of the "pure" artist in times of revolution.

Farther afield, Off Broadway, the preoccupation is with safety: Suzan-Lori Parks's **"Sally & Tom"** (Public; March 28) imagines an actor couple negotiating their own racial and sexual politics while playing Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson, in the supposedly protected space of theatre; the composer Dave Malloy is back with **"Three Houses"** (Signature; April 30), a tripartite musical about an intergenerational haunting in three places of theoretical refuge; Abe Koogler's **"Staff Meal"** (Playwrights Horizons; April 12) creates a mysterious restaurant that offers respite from a world in flames; and in the late spring, at Classic Stage Company, LaChanze directs a rare revival of Alice Childress's **"Wine in the Wilderness,"** from 1969, in which a Black woman forces her portraitist to truly see her as riots rage outside. How do we find places of safety? And how do we keep them, or return to them, once they're found? As the uptown shows roll down the windows and turn up the radio, downtown, it seems, the artists are thinking about locking the door.

—*Helen Shaw*

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DANCE

Eccentric Flamenco, Mark Morris on Burt Bacharach

From March onward, many of New York's companies holding their in-town seasons are joined by visitors from elsewhere. This year, **Olga Pericet** (March 15), an intriguing and occasionally eccentric flamenco artist based in Madrid, comes to City Center as part of the **Flamenco Festival** (March 8-17), with her one-woman show "La Leona." The title ("the lioness") borrows the moniker of a sonorous flamenco guitar developed in the mid-nineteenth-century—and could also apply to Pericet herself. She is a diminutive dancer-choreographer with an imposing stage presence, unafraid to break conventions—at points in the show, she wears a mask and dances topless—while exhibiting an impressive mastery of form.

Mark Morris Dance Group's yearly run at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (March 20-23) is one of the remnants of BAM's once rich dance offerings. In "The Look of Love," Morris, more often associated with Baroque music, responds to the familiar melodies of Burt Bacharach. (Even Kermit the Frog has sung "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head.") The songs, adapted by Ethan Iverson for jazz ensemble and the vocalist Marcy Harriell, speak of life's foibles with an earnestness that Morris both channels and subverts, with a suite performed by his wonderfully down-to-earth dancers. Loneliness and pain keep peeking through the friendly veneer—but hope remains.

Seven years after Trisha Brown's death, the **Trisha Brown Dance Company** soldiers on, and lately it has begun commissioning new work. "In the Fall" is the second such creation; Noé Soulier, its choreographer, is based in France, where the influence of Brown's momentum-driven, lucid dances has loomed large. At the Joyce (March 26-31), Soulier's piece is performed alongside "Glacial Decoy" (1979), a beautiful, spare work by Brown in which luminous dancers clad in white pleated dresses move, with loose-limbed elegance, in front of black-and-white images of everyday places. (The set and costume designs are by Robert Rauschenberg.)

The following month, the Joyce shines a light on the work of the jazz innovator **Max Roach,** born a hundred years ago, with a program of dances, in "Max Roach 100" (April 2-7). Inspired by the drummer's flexible, almost pointillist use of rhythm, three choreographers, working in different modes, take on Roach's catalogue. Ronald K. Brown has made a fluid West African-influenced piece for an ensemble of Cuban and American dancers, set to Roach's 1961 Afro-Cuban album, "Percussion Bitter Sweet." Rennie Harris applies his sophisticated brand of hip-hop to Roach's "The Dream/It's Time," which contains a dialogue between percussion and Martin Luther King's voice. And, in a twenty-minute solo, Ayodele Casel, a tap choreographer with a rhythmic and sonic range to rival Roach's, riffs on a series of duets that Roach recorded with the pianist Cecil Taylor, in 1979.

The **Martha Graham Dance Company** celebrates its centenary a little early—Graham's first choreographic evening wasn't until 1926—with revivals of classic dances by Graham and Agnes de Mille, plus a new commission (City Center; April 17-20). The most classic of all is Graham's "Appalachian Spring," from 1944, whose choreography, music (by Aaron Copland), and set (by Isamu Noguchi) have come to represent a certain idea of the spaciousness of the West. Another of Copland's evocations of America, "Rodeo," has been adapted for bluegrass ensemble, to accompany a restaging of de Mille's ballet of the same name. (Graham and de Mille were not only contemporaries but close friends.) The young choreographer Jamar Roberts, lately of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, creates his first dance for the company, set to a folk-and-gospel score by Rhiannon Giddens, a vocal artist with a knack for reinvention.

—*Marina Harss*

ART

Hiroshige's Edo, Jenny Holzer's Scrolls

The theme of this year's **Whitney Biennial** (opening March 20), entitled "Even Better Than the Real Thing," splits the difference between the topical and the timeless. The co-curators Chrissie Iles and Meg Onli say they have emphasized art that explores shifting definitions of reality—also known as *all* art, you might argue, though the reality of the twenty-twenties has fluctuated like the price of cryptocurrency and seems particularly in need of artists who can make sense of it. There are sixty-nine of them (plus two collectives) in the new installment.

The early-twentieth-century German artist **Käthe Kollwitz** devoted her life to expressing "the sufferings of men," and her Expressionist prints and drawings are as sombre as that pledge makes them sound. But they're also joyfully inventive in their depictions of weavers, soldiers, and struggling mothers, and together they constitute something close to a history of their maker's country in its darkest decades. For Kollwitz's first major exhibition at a New York museum (March 31), MOMA has assembled roughly a hundred and twenty works, the better to make a full-throated case for her importance to art, politics, and political art.

With **"Hiroshige's 100 Famous Views of Edo (feat. Takashi Murakami)"** (April 5), the Brooklyn Museum is showing one of the most glittery treasures in its permanent collection for the first time in nearly a quarter century. Hiroshige's series of woodblock prints—produced in the years leading up to his death, in 1858, and thereafter completed by his apprentice, Hiroshige II—is inaccurately named: there are a hundred and eighteen views in all. Considering that "Views" has a claim to being the single greatest creation of the single greatest Japanese artist, however, showing more than advertised doesn't seem like a bad thing. An accompanying set of Takashi Murakami paintings riffs on the prints' calm with madcap Surrealism.

The Native American artist **Rose B. Simpson** is having a good year. Her work appears in the Whitney Biennial, and for the twentieth anniversary of the Madison Square Park Conservancy's public-art program she has contributed a set of figurative sculptures in steel and bronze; while these occupy Madison Square Park, two others will be on view in Inwood Hill Park. The second location wasn't lightly chosen. It's believed to be the site where Dutch settlers "bought" the island of Manhattan from the Lenape tribe, for next to nothing—a sour truth that gives this two-part outdoor exhibition, **"Seed"** (April 11), a tone that is both outraged and triumphant.

Frederick Kiesler was a mutant creature of the early twentieth century: an experimental designer who was also an artist who was also an inventor, writer, architect, professor, and all-round charismatically wacky visionary. The Jewish Museum's exhibition **"Frederick Kiesler: Vision Machines"** (April 25) examines his tenure as the director of the Laboratory for Design Correlation, at Columbia University, during which he pursued projects such as the Mobile Home Library, a rotating-shelf device that has been constructed specially for this occasion, close to a century after he dreamed it up.

Thirty-five years ago, the inner wall of the Guggenheim Museum was dressed in curling ribbons of L.E.D. lights. The dresser, Jenny Holzer, has spent her career composing koan-like phrases and turning them into signs that lurk in museums and public places, waiting to pounce. In **"Jenny Holzer: Light Line"** (Guggenheim; May 17), a reimagining of the earlier show, she brings back her old words and adds new ones, some generated by artificial intelligence. A natural response to all this may well be confusion, but, as the artist herself tells us, "CONFUSING YOURSELF IS A WAY TO STAY HONEST."

—*Jackson Arn*

CLASSICAL MUSIC

American Identity, Climate Change, Bach in Modern Times

This spring, artists are engaging in seemingly spontaneous conversations with one another across performances—about identity, climate, and how to contextualize canonical composers for contemporary audiences.

American works about cruelly thwarted dreams hit the stage. The choir MasterVoices gives a concert of Ricky Ian Gordon's **"The Grapes of Wrath,"** an opera that shines with goodness, at Carnegie Hall (April 17). Huang Ruo and David Henry Hwang's opera **"An American Soldier,"** about the tragic death of the Chinese American private Danny Chen, shortly after he joined the Army, in 2011, has its New York première, at PAC NYC (select dates May 12-19).

The **Miró Quartet's** brief survey of twentieth- and twenty-first-century American art music, at the Church of the Intercession, in Harlem (May 4), adopts a tenderly elegiac tone, with famed string pieces by George Walker and Samuel Barber. Other ensembles fill in that history with missing voices. At Town Hall, **Kronos Quartet** and **Ghost Train Orchestra** delve into the extensive catalogue of **Moondog** (April 16), a blind composer of simple, catchy songs, who was known as the "viking of Sixth Avenue" for the horned helmet and cloak that he wore on the streets of New York in the fifties and sixties. For the centenary of the Black composer **Julia Perry's** birth, the **Experiential Orchestra** mounts a four-day festival, which closes at Alice Tully Hall with Perry's aching Prelude for Strings and her piquant Violin Concerto (March 16).

John Adams's **"El Niño,"** a Nativity oratorio that humanizes Mary's experience of motherhood, has its **Metropolitan Opera** première (select dates April 23-May 17). Dan Schlosberg and Amanda Quaid's **"The Extinctionist,"** in **Heartbeat Opera's** first world première, also contends with a birth: a woman wrestles with the moral dilemma of bringing a child into a world that appears to be falling apart as a result of global warming (Baruch Performing Arts Center; select dates April 2-14).

The director Peter Sellars, whose work is both visionary and humane, likewise concerns himself with climate collapse in **"Shall We Gather at the River,"** an original show that weaves together spirituals and Bach cantatas, at the Park Avenue Armory (May 21); the cast includes the smooth-voiced countertenor Reginald Mobley. Bach crisscrosses with the modern era in two programs: one by the pianist **Simone Dinnerstein,** who pairs his lilting sinfonias with music by Keith Jarrett and Philip Lasser, at Miller Theatre (April 25), and the other by the cellist **Alisa Weilerstein,** who couches Zoltán Kodály's twisting Sonata for Solo Cello among Bach cello suites, at the 92nd Street Y, New York (April 3).

The **Danish String Quartet** presents the fourth installment of its "Doppelgänger" series, which pairs a Schubert work with a new commission, this time by the ever-interesting Thomas Adès (April 18), at Carnegie Hall. **Paul Lewis,** a Schubert interpreter of verve and fluidity, offers his own four-part cycle of the composer's work—specifically, the piano sonatas—for Peoples' Symphony Concerts, where tickets cost less than ten dollars with a subscription (various venues; April 27 and May 19).

Also at Carnegie, the **American Symphony Orchestra** tackles Schoenberg's "Gurre-Lieder," a last, magnificent gasp of post-Romanticism in the composer's œuvre, for the hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of his birth (March 22). **Mitsuko Uchida,** a pianist of engrossingly precise insight, centers her "Perspectives" series on her lodestars Mozart (March 28) and Schubert (April 9). The baritone **Matthias Goerne** wraps a voice of dark velvet around Schumann's "Dichterliebe" (April 25), and the sensitive pianist **Jan Lisiecki** plays Chopin's Twenty-Four Preludes for his recital début on Carnegie's main stage (March 13).

Meanwhile, at David Geffen Hall, the mellifluous violinist **Hilary Hahn** rounds out her New York Philharmonic residency (April 25-27), by stealing away into an Iberian fantasy with a concert of Sarasate, Ginastera, and Ravel.

—*Oussama Zahr*

MOVIES

Shirley Chisholm, Zendaya's Tennis Smackdown

Even as the Oscar season rolls by, the bio-pics keep coming, and this spring offers a pair of notable ones. **"Shirley"** (opening March 22) stars Regina King as Shirley Chisholm, who, in 1968, became the first Black woman elected to Congress, and, four years later, was the first Black woman to run in a major party's Presidential primary. The movie is written and directed by John Ridley; Lance Reddick and Terrence Howard co-star. Marisa Abela plays Amy Winehouse in **"Back to Black"** (May 17), the story of the singer's adolescence and too-brief adulthood, written by Matt Greenhalgh and directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson.

Much of life's most important action takes the form of talk, but Hollywood sees things differently and, as usual, will be filling the screen with rough-and-tumble adventure in a range of genres. **"Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire"** (March 22), the franchise's latest sequel, directed by Gil Kenan, combines members of the first-generation poltergeist patrol (including Dan Aykroyd, Annie Potts, and Bill Murray) with newcomers (Carrie Coon, Celeste O'Connor, Paul Rudd) who attempt to prevent a new ice age. Alex Garland's dystopian fantasy **"Civil War"** (April 12) stars Kirsten Dunst as a journalist covering the violence of a second American civil war involving the secession of Texas and California; Nick Offerman plays the President. **"The Fall Guy"** (May 3), directed by David Leitch, a former stunt coördinator and a co-director of the first "John Wick" movie, is a comic thriller about a stuntman (Ryan Gosling) who hunts for an actor (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) gone missing from a film that his friend (Emily Blunt) is directing. In the sports romance **"Challengers"** (April 26), Zendaya plays a tennis coach who is training her husband (Mike Faist) prior to his big match against her ex (Josh O'Connor).

American independent filmmaking returns to prominence with a varied slate of movies. One of the hits of this year's Sundance Film Festival, **"Sasquatch Sunset"** (April 12), directed by the brothers David and Nathan Zellner, stars Riley Keough and Jesse Eisenberg as the titular creatures, who make their way across American landscapes. In Bob Byington's **"Lousy Carter"** (March 29), David Krumholtz plays a terminally ill literature professor whose professional activities and love life are in chaos. Joanna Arnow wrote and directed **"The Feeling That the Time for Doing Something Has Passed"** (April 26), a dramedy about a thirtysomething New Yorker (Arnow) who searches for romantic connection and a sexually submissive relationship; it was one of the outstanding entries in last year's New York Film Festival. Pamela Adlon makes her feature-film directorial début with **"Babes"** (May 17), starring Ilana Glazer (who co-wrote the script) as a single woman who becomes pregnant and decides to raise the child on her own.

Idiosyncratic offerings are en route from the international cinema, such as **"The Beast"** (April 5), the French director Bertrand Bonello's science-fiction spin on a Henry James story of failed romance, "The Beast in the Jungle"; the movie is set in three eras, ranging from the early twentieth century to 2044. The contemporary dystopian tale **"Do Not Expect Too Much from the End of the World"** (March 22), from the Romanian filmmaker Radu Jude, centers on two women named Angela: a production assistant on an industrial-safety video, who is also a social-media provocateur, and a taxi driver who is also the protagonist of a real Romanian movie from 1981. In **"La Chimera"** (March 29), directed by the Italian filmmaker Alice Rohrwacher, an archeologist haunted by memories of a woman he loved becomes involved with smugglers, whose excavations may open a door to his past. And Ryûsuke Hamaguchi's new feature, **"Evil Does Not Exist"** (May 3), is set in a rustic Japanese village whose fragile ecosystem is threatened by the development of a resort.

—Richard Brody

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
BEFORE THE COURT

There is uncertainty in every Presidential race, but an extraordinary number of questions about Donald Trump's candidacy are ending up at the Supreme Court. For example, any reckoning of the odds that he will come out of the month of March as the presumptive Republican nominee has to factor in both his dominance in the primaries and the outcome of Trump v. Anderson, the case about whether he is disqualified from holding office again, under the Fourteenth Amendment, because of his involvement in the events of January 6th. In April, there will be oral arguments in at least two more Supreme Court cases: Joseph Fischer v. United States, on the sixteenth, and Trump v. United States, during the week of the twenty-second, which the Court agreed to take last Wednesday. Each has the potential to do a great deal of damage to one or more of the four criminal cases that Trump is facing. "Legal Scholars are extremely thankful for the Supreme Court's Decision" to hear the latest case, Trump posted on Truth Social. He surely is.

Trump v. United States is the better known of the two April cases; indeed, it is notorious, because of how extreme Trump's claims are. He is arguing that former Presidents are immune from criminal prosecution for any allegedly "official acts" that took place during their terms, unless they are impeached by the House and convicted by the Senate first. Trump was impeached but acquitted, a fact that he spun into a far-fetched complaint about double jeopardy, which the Court, to its credit, did not take up. (The Court also indicated that it would not address the question of whether his acts really *were* official.)

Trump has said that Presidents should have "absolute immunity" even if they do things that "cross the line." The Supreme Court has not previously been very clear about where "the line" lies—which could be one reason that it took the case. Presidents are generally protected from criminal charges while in the White House, and ex-Presidents are immune from suits for civil damages for official acts. The Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit drew an admirably firm line in turning Trump down flat. It may be one of many tragedies for the country that the boundaries will now be worked out in the midst of an election campaign, by a Court with a conservative super-majority.

Trump's attempts to claim immunity in lower courts have already delayed by more than two months his trial in the District of Columbia on charges, brought by the special counsel Jack Smith, related to January 6th. The earliest trial date now, even if the Court rules quickly, might be in late July or August. Given everything else on the calendar, though, it will be hard for the trial to take place before the election. And if Trump wins he can make the case go away.

But the immunity case may also be better known simply because Trump is Trump and Joseph Fischer is a guy who drove to Washington to take part in the Stop the Steal rally on January 6th, and then allegedly entered the Capitol in a surge of people during which a police officer was knocked down. It's still a bombshell of a case, in terms of Trump's prospects. At the time, Fischer worked—ironically enough—as a policeman in North Cornwall Township, Pennsylvania. ("May need a [new] job," he later wrote in a Facebook message, according to prosecutors; that was correct.) He'd allegedly boasted in texts about being ready for a civil war; video suggested that he was in the Capitol for about four minutes, arriving after Congress had gone into recess. Fischer was charged with seven crimes, including assaulting an officer, engaging in disorderly conduct in a restricted area, and obstructing an official proceeding. (He pleaded not guilty.)

The obstruction charge is the only one at issue in the Supreme Court case. The Department of Justice has used it against more than three hundred and forty January 6th defendants, and Jack Smith is using it for two of the four felony charges he has brought against

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

Trump (who has denied all wrongdoing). More than a dozen district-court judges allowed the charge; the one overseeing Fischer's trial did not. A three-judge panel for the Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit overturned that ruling, 2-1, but the majority was itself divided about how to use the law.

It may be a surprise that the matter is so complex. The tallying of electoral votes looks like an official proceeding, and to say that the mob disrupted that work when it shouted for Mike Pence to be hanged is to put it mildly. But there are oddities. The charge relies on Section 1512(c) of the U.S. criminal code, which is part of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act. Congress passed it in 2002, partly in response to frustration at the shredding of documents by the accounting firm Arthur Andersen, during an investigation of enormous fraud by its client Enron. Subsection 1512(c)(1) refers to corruptly destroying or mutilating documents or records meant to be used in an official proceeding; subsection (c)(2) refers to "otherwise" obstructing a proceeding. The government argues that the second subsection is a "catch-all" for a wide range of actions; Fischer contends that it is limited in scope by the first subsection. Indeed, before January 6th, the statute does not seem to have been used in a context that didn't involve interfering with some kind of evidence in an investigation. To put it another way: How much like an Arthur Andersen accountant does Joseph Fischer have to be?

One element of 1512(c) that's attractive to prosecutors is its potential penalty: up to twenty years in prison. As Fischer's lawyers noted in a brief, it "provides the government with substantial leverage." (Other judges have delayed sentencing January 6th defendants pending Fischer.) The concern that prosecutors may be overusing the statute is reasonable. So is the worry that the D.O.J. is setting a precedent for its too-broad application; imagine what a second Trump D.O.J. might regard as obstruction.

Even if the Supreme Court opts for a narrow reading of the statute, Trump's alleged direct role in procuring "fake elector" certificates might still provide a basis for prosecuting him—if not Fischer—under 1512(c). Having to make that argument would be one more obstacle, though. Of course, Trump is busy, too. There are unresolved issues in almost all of his many other legal battles, from Florida to New York, which could make it to the Court.

Not every one of those matters can be neatly framed as an up-or-down vote for Trump. The fear is that some Justices might see their task that way. Trump will lose some, and he'll win some. But he'll have to keep coming back to the Court.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

ON CAMPUS

CONFLICT THEATRE

The director and translator Bryan Doerries stood by the stage in Columbia University's Miller Theatre the other night, watching an audience of students, faculty, and alumni file in. Since 2006, Doerries, who founded Theater of War Productions, has put on performances in locations riven by trauma and strife: military bases, prisons, gang-dominated neighborhoods, opioid-gripped towns. An Ivy League campus in 2024 was as volatile a venue as his troupe had encountered. Since October 7th, Columbia has been wrenched by protests, rage, and grief, with students, faculty, and alumni drawing rhetorical battle lines in support of either Israel or Palestine—yet Doerries expressed no trepidation. "In our form, the whole point is that the audience is the main character," he said. "What Theater of War does for institutions is create conditions for dialogue that they couldn't create for themselves."

Three hundred and forty people had R.S.V.P.'d. College I.D.s were checked at the door. Doerries had chosen to present two passages from ancient Greek literature: Book VI of the Iliad, when the doomed Trojan warrior Hector bids farewell to both his wife, Andromache, and his young son, Astyanax; and the climax of Euripides' "The Trojan Women," in which the freshly widowed Andromache is informed that a victorious Greek war council, led by Odysseus, has decided to execute her son, raze her city, and cart her off into slavery. The texts were Doerries's translations. "If the dating is correct," he said, "then the audience that originally watched 'The Trojan Women' would have been a militarized democracy that had just committed the kinds of atrocities, on the island of Melos, as the characters in the play." After the performance, Doerries would lead a discussion. "We read something," he said. "And then we break it open."

From his spot beside the stage, Doerries waved at Clémence Boulouque, a professor of Jewish and Israel studies, who had helped plan the performance. She took a seat in the auditorium. Boulouque is a member of the university's task force on antisemitism; the group's records are being sought by the Republican-led House Committee on Education and the Workforce. The night's turnout encouraged her. The production had been placed on a boycott list by the Columbia University Apartheid Divest coalition, a student group spurred, in part, by the university's decision to suspend two other groups, Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace, both of which had been protesting the Israeli military's mass killing of civilians in Gaza. "This is the reality here now," Boulouque said. A few moments before the performance began, Minouche Shafik, the president of the university, sat down near Boulouque.

Doerries, who has a bushy beard and was wearing a black ball cap, introduced the players—five professional actors and seven students. The actors included the Tony winner Lois Smith, the Obie winner Elizabeth Marvel, and Glenn Davis, an artistic director of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company. The seven students, several of whom identified as Jewish or Arab, played the chorus. An eighth chorus member had got nervous and dropped out. The actors sat at a long table draped in black cloth. For an hour, they read their lines with blunt emotion.

"I would prefer to be dead, the earth piled high above my remains, than to hear your blood-curdling screams as they drag you away," Davis (Hector) told Marvel (Andromache).

"Oh, dearest women," Smith (Hector's mother, Hecuba) said. "The gods, the gods—all this time they only wished to see

us suffer. So great was their hatred for Troy."

When the readings were done, the professionals exited the stage, leaving the student chorus. Doerries appeared with a microphone and floated around the audience, collecting responses. "It's as if nothing will be left of Troy," a member of the chorus, who identified himself as Palestinian and Egyptian, said, kicking off the conversation. "That is something that worries me every day." A woman in the front row spoke about the Greeks' taking "hostages," and the horror of mourning loved ones without being able to bury their bodies. Another student in the audience talked about "Hamlet."

Thirty minutes into the discussion, Shafik, the university president, left. The members of the chorus took note. "There's a large part of the community who has been wanting to engage in dialogue," a young woman, who identified herself as Israeli, said. "And it's not been happening, no matter how many administrators we go to."

Afterward, Smith ambled out to the lobby and looked for Doerries. He was her ride home. Ninety-three years old, Smith made her film début in 1955, in "East of Eden." She was full of praise for the students. "There's been this sense of 'Oh, it's so fraught,'" she said. "Thank God it's not all explosive. There was very much a sense of their thoughtfulness and seriousness." Doerries found Smith, and the two walked out.

—Eric Lach

THE PICTURES
COUPLE CAPER

Few things are more comedically satisfying than an odd-couple pairing. Oscar and Felix, Lucy and Ethel, Tom Wambsgans and Cousin Greg: if the tensions are plentiful, so are the laffs. In "Drive-Away Dolls," the new caper from the married couple Ethan Coen and Tricia Cooke, we have Jamie (Margaret Qualley) and Marian (Geraldine Viswanathan), two lesbian friends, in 1999, who can't avoid rubbing each other the wrong way. Jamie is a Texan live wire, all twang and sexual bravado, and Marian is a guarded Henry James reader in a pussy-bow blouse. When Jamie's girlfriend, Sukie (Beanie Feldstein), tosses her out of the house for cheating, Jamie joins Marian on a trip from Philadelphia to Tallahassee, and the two find themselves in the midst of a complicated scheme involving a severed head, assorted dildos, a crooked conservative senator, and a mysterious briefcase.

"Ethan thinks I'm like Jamie," Cooke said on a Zoom call the other day, from a wooden-raftered Airbnb in Albuquerque, where the couple are shooting another movie. "I'm a glass-half-full person. Ethan can kind of spiral into—"

"I'm like Marian," Coen interjected. He had a close-cropped salt-and-pepper beard and wore black-rimmed glasses. "I'm the worrier." He sighed. "Sometimes I get infuriated with Trish for *not* worrying!"

"I admit I can be a little cavalier," Cooke conceded. She had on black-rimmed glasses like her husband's, and her brown hair fell straight down her back.

"Me, on the other hand, all I've got are my fears!" Coen said.

When casting "Drive-Away Dolls," the couple quickly found their Marian in Viswanathan. It was harder to find a Jamie—"someone who is charismatic and reckless but then can turn sweet very easily," Cooke said. Qualley was a last-minute addition. "Before you find the person, it's an enormous locus of anxiety for me," Coen said. He considered "No Country for Old Men," the Oscar-winning movie, from 2007, that he made with his brother, Joel, and said, "The most anxious part of my life was until we cast Josh Brolin, and that was just three weeks before we had to start shooting. I was, like, 'We're fucked.'"

For the past four decades, Ethan has worked with Joel on a slew of movies that examine man's darkly violent impulses through an absurdist lens. After "The Ballad of Buster Scruggs" was released, in 2018, Ethan decided to take a break. "He kind of semi-retired," Cooke said.

A couple of years later, however, during the pandemic, he dipped his toe in again, by co-directing, with Cooke, a documentary, "Jerry Lee Lewis: Trouble in Mind," which came out in 2022. "We had a lot of fun working on it together," Cooke said. As an editor, she has cut many of the Coens' movies, including "The Big Lebowski" and "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" The enforced hiatus of COVID also prodded them to dig up a script they'd written in the early two-thousands. They decided to rewrite it. It was originally titled "Drive-Away Dykes."

"Me and Ethan met on a movie in 1989, in New Orleans, and we were very

"Do you see yourself becoming a movie in five years?"

close friends, best friends, for years," Cooke said. "I'd come out in college, and I identified as a lesbian."

"I come from Minneapolis, where there are no lesbians!" Coen said. "So, this was all new and exciting to me."

Cooke laughed. "At some point, I was, like, This is silly. He's the person I want to spend all my time with. So, we made that work. And still do."

They've been married since 1993, have two grown children, and live together, but their relationship is open. "I felt like I was losing my lesbian identity, and we were, like, O.K., let's change our marriage to make it work," Cooke said.

"It wasn't vexed or problematic," Coen said. "We kind of fell into it, and it seemed natural."

"Drive-Away Dolls" is the first of a projected lesbian trilogy. The second installment, a detective genre piece titled "Honey Don't!," is the project that brought them to New Mexico. Although it's more noir than comedy, they want it to retain the feel of a B movie. "The world is a rough place," Cooke said. "And I do a lot of political-activism work, so, for me, to tell stories that are a little bit silly or trashy or stupid, it's just a sigh of relief."

The silliness is still a lot of work. "Ethan is always working," Cooke went on. She turned to her husband. "There's never a spare minute in your day."

"That's actually not true," he protested, not too convincingly. (This past summer, he wrote a new screenplay with his brother.) "I sit around looking into space most of the time."

"It's the life of the mind!" Cooke said.

"O.K., we'll call it that!" Coen said.

—*Naomi Fry*

Ethan Coen and Tricia Cooke

FORMER LANDMARKS DEPT. MAY BE CLOSED

5Pointz—also known as the Phun Phactory, the Aerosol Art Center, and the Institute of Higher Burnin'—was once a water-meter plant on Jackson Avenue, in Long Island City. For about two decades after that, beginning in the nineties, it was filled with ramshackle artists' studios, and its exterior was eventually covered with a curated selection of murals by the kinds of painters who make pictures while looking over one shoulder for the police. The owner of 5Pointz painted over the murals in 2013 and demolished the complex several months later. Today, the site is occupied by a connected pair of high-rise residential towers, called 5Pointz LIC, which the developer describes as "THE BUILDING OF YOUR DREAMZ." Almost twenty years ago, the artist Ellen Harvey made a small unauthorized contribution to the old exterior; more recently, she included the vanished façade in an ongoing project of hers, "The Disappointed Tourist," which consists of paintings of beloved places that no longer exist, all suggested by other people.

Harvey was born in southeastern England in 1967 and moved to the United States in time for high school. "Immigrants like myself are the most nostalgic," she said recently. "The thing that's nice about this project is that people stand in front of it and tell stories, forever." Nominations for subjects come from all over the world, usually through the Web site disappointedtourist.org. Each painting is twenty-four by eighteen inches, and is executed in wistfully monochromatic acrylic with oil glazes, lightly tinted, on wood panels. The work has been shown in Austria, Ireland, Poland, the U.K., and Wisconsin. Its current version, which includes renderings of three hundred or so vanished places—the Satellite Motel, in Cape Canaveral; the Shrine of Sidi Mahmoud, in Timbuktu; successive iterations of the Birmingham Central Library, in England—is on view at the Rowan University Art Gallery & Museum, in Glassboro, New Jersey.

"I haven't actually submitted anything myself, but other people have suggested places I would have picked," Harvey said. 5Pointz is one of those. On a monochromatic day last month, she returned there for the first time in a long time. "Oh, my God," she said, as she got out of the car. Harvey has brown shoulder-length hair with bangs, and she was wearing a wool overcoat with biggish buttons. Two immense towers, which looked as though they'd been erected from squat blocks of cookie dough, loomed above her. "This is so anodyne," she said. "I can't believe they took the name." A sign in the window of the rental office listed twenty-three amenities, among them a poker lounge, a spin room, golf simulators, an indoor pool, outdoor barbecues, shuffleboard, and boxing. A perk not mentioned—but evident on the sidewalk—is a lenient attitude toward residents who don't clean up after their dogs.

Harvey headed next for Florent, a now defunct all-night diner, on Gansevoort Street, a block from the Hudson River. "Florent had the most amazing mix of people—drag queens, artists, celebrities," she said. On the drive over, Harvey's car navigation warned that Florent "may be closed," thereby raising the slender hope that it wasn't. But it definitely was. Heavy black plastic sheeting hung like a stage curtain inside the big front window. "I met my husband at a dinner here, in the late nineties," Harvey said. In her painting, their initials are enclosed in a graffiti heart under the same window.

A little over a mile east of Florent, on Third Avenue between Tenth and Eleventh Streets, is the old site of New York Central Art Supply, another lost landmark that Harvey would have picked if others hadn't. It closed in 2016, after a hundred and eleven years. "I used to go twice a week," she said. "The paper people were upstairs, and the canvas-stretcher people were downstairs. When you paid, everything was written down by hand." Today, the old storefront is hidden behind scaffold-

Ellen Harvey

ing and green plywood. A small window, maybe a foot square, has been cut into the plywood at eye level, near where the front door used to be. "They were in their death throes for a year," she continued. "They were, like, 'No, no, no, we're not closing,' and I was, like, 'Yes, yes, yes, you are.'" Nothing was visible on the other side of the plywood except a steel security gate. "I'm going to start crying," Harvey said. "When you live in the city, you no sooner fall in love with something than it disappears."

Her next big project—which will open in September, in collaboration with the Los Angeles Central Library—will be a forward-looking corrective, she said. The library's patrons will suggest elements of a "much needed positive future," and she will create "a huge composite fictional patent drawing" for a contraption to produce them all—a device she calls "Utopia Machine."

—David Owen

ON THE RUNWAY
TO BARE ARMS?

Lately, runways and red carpets have featured lots of spins and twists on covering one's arms. Beyoncé wore dramatic sleeve styles—puffs, tufts, capes—on her Renaissance World Tour. At the Golden Globes, in January, the "Abbott Elementary" star Janelle James accessorized with chartreuse opera gloves that included yards-long, free-hanging fabric, which billowed beside her like a parachute. Fendi's Spring/Summer 2024 show had double-sleeve sweaters. (The extra set is specifically meant for tying around the body, à la a vacationing Wasp.) Arms are the trending appendage.

"I think that picked up during COVID, because suddenly we're all seeing each other on Zoom calls from the waist up, and one of the interesting ways to express yourself is with an interesting sleeve," Colleen Hill, a curator at the Museum at F.I.T., said recently. Hill got into sleeves two years ago, when she was in the Fashion Institute of Technology's library and happened upon a copy of Louise Todd Cope's "Sleeves: A Treasury of Ideas, Techniques and Patterns," from 1988. (Cope: "I see arms as hugs, warmth, and support.") Hill decided to stage an entire exhibition, on view through August, dedicated to sleeves, from the late seventeen-hundreds to the present day, called "Statement Sleeves." She picked eighty pieces for display—puff sleeves, raglan sleeves, leg-of-mutton sleeves, bishop sleeves, lantern sleeves.

On a recent evening, Hill, who is forty-one, browsed the exhibition during off-hours. She wore a puff-sleeve Ulla Johnson dress that rustled with each step. "Of course I love a statement sleeve myself," she said. The dimly lit exhibition room was filled with mannequins dressed in archived garments by designers such as Yves Saint Laurent, Christian Dior, and Helmut Lang. "Maybe ten or twelve years ago, I would take women in particular through the exhibitions, and they would look at the contemporary clothing and say, 'Why doesn't anything have sleeves?'" Hill said. "Even dresses for fall and winter were sleeveless." Was this, as some have theorized, the hidden influence of Michelle Obama, a noted arm-barer? "I think it was more about what was available to women from designers," Hill said. "Michelle Obama has always been very fashionable, and she was in that fashion moment." She went on, "Now I think the pendulum has swung the other way."

Hill, who is earning a Ph.D. in fashion studies from the University of London, likes to place contemporary outfits in a historical context. What did she make of Selena Gomez dressed in an off-the-shoulder gown with falling puff sleeves at last year's Golden Globes? "To me, it's reminiscent of eighteen-thirties styles," Hill said. Back then, the fashion was to wear sleeves that sat low on the wearer's arms. What about Beyoncé and others sporting opera gloves anywhere but the opera? "It has actual connotations with the opera, of course, but also this idea of Old Hollywood elegance," Hill said. "The way that we're seeing it worn and styled now is simultaneously very contemporary. That's what makes it so exciting."

To start her granular survey, Hill decided to introduce visitors to the "fundamental forms" of sleeves—kimono, dolman, angel. More recent versions include the shoulder pads of the nineteen-eighties (favored by Princess Diana, Margaret Thatcher, Diane Keaton) by heavyweight designers like Mugler and Armani. "They do create the illusion of a narrower waist," Hill said. "But it's also about power." Some innovations were more practical. Why did Helmut Lang opt for sleeves slashed at the elbow, eventually his signature? They offered more range of motion, and they didn't bunch up.

While conducting research for the exhibition, Hill searched for antique clothing with examples of statement sleeves. "I found one that is more than five thousand years old, from ancient Egypt," she said. Its sleeves have dramatic knife pleats. One section of the exhibition, "Puffs and Folds," includes a callback to a fifteenth-century trend of purposely exposing one's undergarments through the sleeves. The quick explanation: sleeves were detached at the time. "I think it was a way to just highlight that style rather than pretend the sleeve wasn't detached," Hill said.

Hill wasn't always a sleeve obsessive, but she has found the granular focus satisfying. She has already begun working on her next project. "It's a fashion exhibition that's all about cabinets of curiosity, a precursor of the modern museum," she said. "That'll be next year."

—André Wheeler

ANNALS OF ENTERTAINMENT

ROLE PLAY

RuPaul, who brought drag mainstream, fears the end times.

BY RONAN FARROW

Recently, the drag star RuPaul Andre Charles has taken to falling asleep while watching the documentary series "Secrets of Great British Castles." He's seen every episode, knows every turn in the bloody histories of landmarks like Dover Castle and the Tower of London. "The headline is: Humans have been horrible since the beginning of time," RuPaul told me. "And the human ego can justify these terrible things that people do. You know, these kings, Henry VIII, and Edward II, and all these people who have just decimated hundreds of thousands of people because their feelings were hurt."

RuPaul is braced for conflict. "I'm fearing the absolute worst," he said. "We are moments away from fucking civil war. All the signs are there." He continued, "Humans on this planet are in the cycle of destruction. I am plotting a safety net." He was referring to a fortified compound being constructed on the sixty-thousand-acre ranch of his husband, Georges LeBar, in Wyoming. "I wouldn't call it a bunker," he said. But it is designed to withstand calamity. "It's a lot of concrete and a lot of things. I keep thinking about these castles that I'm going to bed to."

I met RuPaul at the end of January in Britain, at a rented cottage in Windsor and at Pinewood Studios, nearby, where movie franchises including James Bond and Harry Potter have been filmed. He was shooting "RuPaul's Drag Race UK," one of nineteen regional variations of his competition reality show, while promoting a memoir, which will be published this week, called "The House of Hidden Meanings." (The title comes from a friend's comment during an acid trip. "After the drugs wore off," he writes, "I realized it was nonsense.") RuPaul now hosts seven versions of "Drag Race," a pastiche of competition reality-television tropes that follows participants, in and out of drag, through eclectic challenges including costume-making, lip-synching, and standup comedy (testing "charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent"—the resulting acronym is representative of the show's bawdy sense of humor). He has taken an underground, subversive form and made it so mainstream that Nancy Pelosi has appeared as a guest on the show. The sixteenth season of the U.S. version, currently airing, has some of its highest ratings yet, and RuPaul recently won his fourteenth Emmy, making him the most decorated competition host and the most decorated person of color in the award's history.

"Drag Race" often focusses on competitors who are profoundly marginalized. Almost all the drag queens on the show are queer, and many are people of color, who come from backgrounds where they faced homophobia, racism, or transphobia. For them, drag can be a lifeline, affording a sense of community and an opportunity to transmute stigmatized traits into something exuberant. "It's armor, 'cause you're putting on a persona. So the comments are hitting something you created, not you," Jinkx Monsoon, who has won two seasons of the show, told me. "And then it's my sword, because all of the things that made me a target make me powerful as a drag queen."

Yet, as "Drag Race" has become mainstream, a burgeoning culture war has demonized its subject matter. In the past year, lawmakers in at least fifteen states have attempted to ban drag shows, part of a wider queer panic. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, more than four hundred bills that the organization identifies as anti-L.G.B.T.Q.+ are currently under consideration around the country, featuring provisions like curriculum censorship, facilities bans,

"I'm always looking to play," RuPaul says. "I want to be in that state all the time."

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIELLE LEVITT

and mandates that school staff out young people to their families. Drag performances, particularly for child audiences, have recently been cancelled in at least seven countries where "Drag Race" airs. RuPaul, sixty-three, is the world's most famous drag queen, at the helm of one of the world's most far-reaching platforms for queer expression. In conservative communities around the country and the world, he often serves as a way in to queer culture. And, for those set against that culture, he represents the dangerous spread of liberal ideas. "He's seen the way people connect to the show. That's the way for him to spread the rebuttal to what's happening in the world," Randy Barbato, an executive producer of "Drag Race," said. "His way to ward off the enemy."

One of RuPaul's favorite responses, to anyone who asks how he's doing, is "I don't see how that's any of your business." This is a bit, but it's also something of a life philosophy. "Ru, he is a study in the private and the public self," Barbato said. "He's a public figure. And he's extraordinarily private." I have twice appeared as a judge on the American "Drag Race" programs, but our interviews in England were our first substantive exchanges. In advance, I received anxious calls from mutual friends telling me how much RuPaul hates giving interviews, and when I met him, at Pinewood Studios, almost the first thing out of his mouth was "I fucking hate giving interviews." (The actual first thing he said, after he noticed that I was on crutches, owing to a sprained ankle, was classic "Drag Race" standup: "Fisting accident?" Quoting a contestant on the show, I told him, "There are no accidents in fisting.")

We sat in a small dressing room dominated by RuPaul's hair-and-makeup collection, which covered four plastic picnic tables, and by the man himself, who is six-four but is often thought to be taller, probably on account of all the killer heels. (The celebrated drag queen Lady Bunny once described him as "a six-foot-seven monster-model-woman thing.") RuPaul, on a break between shooting segments in which he would appear out of drag, was without the heels, and instead wore fuzzy gray slippers, a black Abbey Road hoodie, and black workout pants. "I did not think this memoir shit through," he told me, shaking his head. "It's presumptuous that the interviewer can interpret my experience." There's some irony in this: like many reality shows, "Drag Race" is subject to complaints from competitors who feel unfairly reduced to archetypes. ("It's nothing like what happened on set," Phi Phi O'Hara, who was portrayed as hostile toward other contestants, told *New York*.) RuPaul once recorded a song about the complaints, "Blame It on the Edit," singing, "You the one who said it, bitch / How you gon' regret it." To me, he said, "We've had kids come on the show, and we put a camera on them, which can be like a mirror, and they see the reflection of themselves and go, 'Oh, no, that is not who I am. They must have done something to make me look like that.' Like Blanche DuBois, they will not see it, then they will fight to the end to say, 'I was tampered with.' No, we don't do that."

RuPaul's drag and out-of-drag personas on the show are, essentially, characters. In drag, he's the candy-colored, Diana-Ross-meets-Bugs-Bunny-meets-Dolly-Parton character he's built an empire around. (The drag looks featured in each episode take four to six hours to create. His makeup artist, a former contestant named Raven, said, "We do a little brush. We take a break. Coffee talk. O.K., let's get back to it.") In the show's out-of-drag segments, where he introduces challenges or checks in on contestants, offering mentorship and advice, he plays a cheerful, avuncular, professorial type, complete with eyeglasses that he doesn't really need. Both performances offer touches of ribald humor that pay homage to drag's more transgressive roots, while sanding off the sharpest of those edges and putting a wholesome face on the form. "I went Disney when I went mainstream," RuPaul told me. Drag's evolution from edgy night-club revues to family programming has, predictably, spurred criticism. "What was once counterculture has simply become the Culture," E. Alex Jung wrote, in *New York*, in 2019. "This has its benefits: Mainstream consumer culture has gotten a little less straight. But in the process, something—maybe the feeling that this was by us and for us . . . was lost." RuPaul argued that the full spectrum of drag continues to flourish. The form, he told me, "doesn't need defending."

His onscreen personas pull off the trick of revealing—in the show's monomaniacally branded universe, one would say "ru-vealing"—little about RuPaul himself. Even people who work with him closely can find him distant. His appearances on camera are executed like military strikes; he spends relatively little time with panelists and contestants. "I keep the boundaries," he said. He mentioned a former colleague who worked with him for decades. "We kept a working relationship, we travelled the world together," he said. "But sometimes I would hear her talking to a friend, and she'd be talking about her latest boyfriend. She never did that with me, because I'm her boss. And the truth is, I don't want to hear about it. I don't care about that shit."

One of RuPaul's foundational beliefs is that, as he said, "everybody's playing a role." At times, he plays a nurturing one. A staple of "Drag Race" is an interview that finalists have with RuPaul—it is often a "lunch" conducted over a bowl of Tic Tacs—in which they tell him their hopes and fears, and he dispenses therapeutic wisdom. It's easy to dismiss these exchanges as superficial, but they can be a genuine source of strength for competitors. Jinkx Monsoon recalled that, during their lunch segment, "he was, like, 'You don't need to make yourself smaller for other people. . . . And he said that, and it was amazing, because it did make me feel like, Oh, I don't have to feel guilty for being talented."

At other times, RuPaul can appear cold, a quality born of painful experience. "So much of our culture today, with young people, is centered around their feelings," he told me. "Feelings are indicators, they're not facts." He went on, "Parents teaching their kids about safe spaces, and 'I feel uncomfortable' . . . It's, like, You know what? The world is not a safe space. You have to find the comfort. It's mostly uncomfortable." He told me that he has never wanted children. "I don't like kids," he said flatly.

RuPaul was born in San Diego in 1960, the third of four children and the only boy, and brought up in a yellow three-bedroom tract house, one of four models in a housing development called Michelle Manor. According to family lore, before he was born a fortune-teller

told his mother, Ernestine, that the baby would be famous. Ernestine introduced him to his aunts by saying, "His name is RuPaul and he's going to be a star."

"I was always anointed," he told me. "I know it sounds obnoxious. But I knew from childhood I was the golden child." His father, Irving, who worked as an electrician at an aerospace company, was a charming philanderer with a gambling problem. Ernestine, who was of Creole descent, was flinty and aloof, with an immaculate sense of style. Her eviscerating barbs earned her the nickname Mean Miss Charles among the neighborhood kids. "She was a mess," one of Ru's older sisters, Renetta, has said, referring to their mother's temper. "Said what she felt, meant what she said, and you dealt with it." The parents' fights could be cataclysmic. At one point, Ernestine poured gasoline over Irving's convertible, an Oldsmobile Delta 88, and threatened him with a matchbook. RuPaul told me, "They were embroiled in their own two battling nations, and I'm in the middle. So I learned how to be a diplomat and read the situation and go, 'Oh, can't say that. How can I say it? I'll say it like this.' It's a dissociative thing that we do to protect ourselves, to not make it personal."

Irving and Ernestine divorced when RuPaul was seven, and afterward he didn't see much of his father, whose absence he often describes as a primal trauma. Living with his mother, he witnessed her slide into depression and her sorrow at having allowed herself to be vulnerable enough to be heartbroken—a "softness," RuPaul writes in "The House of Hidden Meanings," that she viewed as an "Achilles' heel." The complicated and forthright portrayal of her in the book is one of its strongest aspects. "It's my mother," he told me, about his own guardedness. "She said I'm way too sensitive. And she was absolutely right. So my job for a lot of time has been to hide the fact that I'm too sensitive."

Attempting to appeal to his mother, through her often Valium-laced distance, RuPaul would impersonate his favorite divas, wrapping a towel around his head to channel Tina Turner and LaWanda Page, who played Aunt Esther on "Sanford and Son." (Page later featured on the closest thing RuPaul's had to a mainstream radio hit, "Supermodel (You Better Work)," from 1992, providing the song's spoken-word narration about a Black girl escaping from poverty into a life of glamour.) Performance soon became a kind of protection. "I never fit in," he said. "I wasn't one of the most desired things on the hit list." Television offered an escape, and early affirmation of his belief that everyone, everywhere, was playing a character. He liked "Mission: Impossible," with its complex nesting of disguises, each a layer of defense.

In 1976, when RuPaul was fifteen, he moved to Atlanta with Renetta, who was in her early twenties. They were part of a wave of Black newcomers seeking economic opportunity. He enrolled at the Northside School of Performing Arts, where he appeared in drag for the first time onstage, in the Tennessee Williams play "Camino Real." After dropping out, he came into contact with the drag scene at a disco called Numbers, where he watched a queen named Crystal LaBeija lip-synch to Donna Summer's "Bad Girls." By the eighties, Atlanta was "drag heaven," Lady Bunny told *The New Yorker*, in 1993. "Midtown Atlanta was a very gay scene. They had transvestite hookers all over the streets day and night. When we started out, the Southern queens were deadly serious, without a shred of humor." But RuPaul embraced a genre of drag now known as "genderfuck," a catchall term for aesthetics that are designed to poke fun at gender norms. In "The House of Hidden Meanings," he describes the look as "mohawk-and-extensions, tribal apocalyptic Thunderdome."

Drag brought RuPaul his earliest sense of community, uniting him with kindred misfits. But, with his striking height and confidence, and his new look, he also stood apart. "I thought he had, like, fallen out of the sky," Larry Tee, the d.j. and club promoter, who was one of his close friends and collaborators during that period, later said. "I thought he was an alien." In those years, RuPaul was in a constant state of creative self-promotion. He started a series of musical groups, first performing as RuPaul and the U-Hauls, then as Wee Wee Pole. (He made some of his earliest costumes on Renetta's sewing machine—"tasteful ones," he writes, "like leopard-print catsuits with fringe down the side.") He began performing as a go-go dancer, then created his own avant-garde drag revues, which he brought to New York clubs like the Pyramid and Illusions. He advertised these appearances with posters bearing catchphrases like "RUPAUL IS EVERYTHING" and "RUPAUL IS RED HOT," which he taped to telephone poles. "I have never met anyone in my life that is as driven as RuPaul," the performer known as Flloyd, another friend from that era, later told a documentarian. "The first day I met him, we drank a whole bottle of Jack Daniel's and I was laying on

"We're shifting from literate discourse to talking about all the things that are wrong with our house."

the couch going, 'Uhhh,' and Ru was, like, 'Let's go to Kinko's! Let's make posters of me!'"

The early performances could be political, and often framed drag as liberation from oppressive norms. He opened one show, at the Pyramid Club, as a slave on a plantation. "I hate being a slave," he said, in a breathy, Marilyn Monroe stage whisper. Then he rose to his feet, swimming in mismatched oversized layers of leopard print, crimped hair wild, intoning in a baritone, "I'm a slave. And you're a slave. And we're just gonna break out."

He put himself in front of cameras whenever he could; once, he wrote to an Atlanta public-access variety program called "The American Music Show" and insisted that, since he would soon be a star, he should be booked as a guest. The hosts of the program had never had anyone write to them before. RuPaul soon became a regular. With friends, including Lady Bunny, he made micro-budget short films on Super 8, among them the sexed-up slasher "Trilogy of Terror," based on the anthology starring Karen Black. Another series of shorts, "Starbooty," followed, with RuPaul playing a model turned spy in the mold of blaxploitation divas like Cleopatra Jones, reinterpreted in his "Mad Max" aesthetic. "Really, it was just an excuse to change clothes," Jon Witherspoon, the director of "Starbooty," later recalled.

In the mid-eighties, when RuPaul was making frequent trips between Atlanta and New York, he met Barbato and Fenton Bailey, who were in a pop act called the Fabulous Pop Tarts but had aspirations to be filmmakers. They have different memories of the first encounter. Bailey told me that he was in a car in Atlanta, and, turning a corner, was confronted by an indelible image: "in the headlights of the car, there was this extraordinary creature pasting these posters." Barbato recalled meeting him in the lobby of the Marriott Marquis, in Times Square. "He had football shoulder pads on, thigh-high waders, you know, rubber wading boots, and he was dressed like such a freak," Barbato said. "And it was like seeing a huge star. I was dazzled."

RuPaul spent Memorial Day of 1986 with Barbato and Bailey in a studio in Manhattan, recording an album built around the "Starbooty" character. "Ru always, always had specific ideas of 'I want this to sound like that,' like, he knew music so well," Barbato said. ("The House of Hidden Meanings" is, among other things, a love letter to RuPaul's musical inspirations—the songs referenced throughout make up a playlist of about six hours, with cuts of classic rock, disco, and nineties R. & B.) A few years after "Starbooty," Barbato directed the music video for "Supermodel," which featured RuPaul vamping around New York, chanting "Sashay, shanté," before having a slapstick nervous breakdown, replete with snarling and wig-snatching. The song reached No. 1 on *Billboard's* dance singles chart, and the video was nominated for an MTV Video Music Award for best dance video. (It lost to En Vogue's "Free Your Mind.")

RuPaul's earliest collaborations with Barbato and Bailey are among their most winning. For Channel 4, in the U.K., the trio worked on a gonzo cable-news series titled "Manhattan Cable." RuPaul served as a field correspondent. In one segment, he walked around downtown Manhattan, like Dan Rather in a faux-cheetah coat and platform heels, collecting the stories of sex workers. "The meat market is filled with transvestite hookers by night," RuPaul tells the camera. And then, with a figurative wink: "Maybe I'll make my rent money." His exchanges with the sex workers are frank and sensitive. He likes them, and they seem to like him. As a punch line, he gets into a client's car and drives off.

The team has continued to build projects around RuPaul ever since. After experiments in different genres—"The RuPaul Show," a talk show he hosted in full drag, ran on VH1 for a hundred episodes from 1996 to 1998—in the early aughts they devised, with another producer, Tom Campbell, the idea that would become "Drag Race." RuPaul was initially reluctant. "There was the meeting where Ru was, like, I'll do anything but a reality competition show," Bailey told me. But eventually he was won over. "Drag was perceived as some crazy novelty," Barbato said. "Ru understood having the familiarity of a competition format would help us give something familiar to the networks." Every platform they pitched passed on the show, except for the L.G.B.T.Q.+ channel Logo TV, where "Drag Race" ran for eight seasons, becoming the network's most watched program, before moving to VH1 and then to MTV.

As RuPaul became more popular, he changed his look to a less challenging aesthetic that he refers to as "high-femme Glamazon." He writes about the first time he performed in a more feminine costume, at a wedding-themed drag show, where he wore a white strapless dress with a Dior-style cinched waist. He felt "some energy shift . . . I was finally getting sexual attention." The early forays into aggressive femininity represented his "Black-hooker phase," he told me. "I don't know if that's politically correct . . . but that was my look. It was like a 'Soul Train' dancer." By the time of "Supermodel," however, he was moving away from such overt sexuality. The décolletage was becoming more modest, the gowns more polished. "I desexualized all the way," he told me. The change was not universally welcomed. It "caused a bit of a tiff from the other drag queens who he'd come up with in New York. They kind of labelled it as 'RuPaul goes to the mall.' They were all angry," Jimmy Harry, who co-wrote "Supermodel," once said. "But I think that was necessary for him to kind of become a commercial entity."

RuPaul's rise has made him a target for criticism within the queer community. In an interview with the *Guardian*, in 2018, he wondered whether physically transitioned transgender women should compete on the show. "Probably not," he said. "It takes on a different thing; it changes the whole concept of what we're doing." The show has long featured transgender competitors, but early seasons were dominated by those who identified as gay, male, and cisgender. Gia Gunn, a contestant, told *New York*, "There were trans women who were putting their transitions on hold and purposely not taking hormones leading up to the show." Another contestant, Monica Beverly Hillz, told the queer Web site Them that, after a struggle to

fund her transition through sex work, "Drag Race helped me escape that world, but their world was never really made for me either." More recent seasons have had transgender winners, including Kylie Sonique Love, Willow Pill, and Sasha Colby. "I didn't have a single issue," Jinkx Monsoon, who identified as transfemme during her most recent win on the show, told me. "Every season, it becomes more and more mindful of what's going on in the actual drag world. . . . People want to call Ru transphobic. And I just think that's really hard for me to believe, given Ru's history." In "The House of Hidden Meanings," RuPaul describes a life in drag entwined with trans performers, a community he speaks of with apparent affection. But he has built a career on sidestepping gender norms in a way that involves ignoring identity labels, which can be in tension with contemporary discourse. He doesn't much like to talk about the issue. "Gender is a concept that we come up with, in our minds and our egos," he told me. "My genitals are male. But I can be whatever I can. I feel I'm everything. You are everything. You are male, female. Sometimes I feel more male than others."

Criticism also followed an interview with NPR, in 2020, in which he suggested that fracking, an environmentally destructive practice used to extract fossil fuels, was taking place on his husband's Wyoming ranch. RuPaul remains defiantly annoyed about the matter. "Do you buy gas?" he said to me. "Before you point the finger, smell it first, bitch." He sounds weary when discussing these controversies. "There's no combination of words I can put together that would soothe the mob," he said.

Sam Lansky, a writer who helped RuPaul with "The House of Hidden Meanings," told me, "He has been, in some ways, sort of misread in terms of his beliefs, or his politics," contributing to "a world-weariness that he has, and this kind of pessimism that everything is gonna go bad."

In the memoir, RuPaul treats most celebrities he's encountered with diplomacy, if not reverence. An exception is Madonna, whom he describes giving him a "snarl of contempt" at a club in the eighties. "In aging, there is a natural flow," he told me. "And, when you're against the flow, it doesn't look right, it doesn't feel right. The energy around the Madonna thing—it feels weird, right?" He referred to "chasing arena tours and grills in your teeth." He added, "I'm not interested in appealing to eleven-to-twenty-five-year-olds, I'm just not. I can, on a bigger level, as a mother. As Mama Ru. It's a different relationship—I'm not trying to be them."

At Pinewood, RuPaul emerged from a bathroom, decked out for a non-drag segment of the show in a Trina Turk suit with a swirling, psychedelic maroon print. Thairin Smothers, one of his producers, handed him a paper cup of hot water with lemon, then followed him into a TV studio. Under fuchsia lights, a set for "Snatch Game," a sendup of "Match Game," awaited. In the segment, a staple of "Drag Race," a panel of contestants, each impersonating a celebrity, attempts to complete a phrase, trying to match answers provided by celebrity guests. The episode's guests were Rachel Stevens and John Lee, of the pop group S Club. Opposite them sat drag renditions of Elvis Presley, Liza Minnelli, Marie Antoinette, a dragon, and other characters. RuPaul, cue cards in hand, set them up for witty comebacks to questions.

This was a light makeup day: for non-drag segments, RuPaul applies his own eyebrows, using four different products. Raven, the makeup artist, was nevertheless watching the monitors in case touch-ups were needed. She told me that she had worked with RuPaul on seven seasons of television in 2023 alone. "I literally fill a suitcase, go home, fill another suitcase, go again," she said. Smothers corrected her. "Lingo," a game show on CBS that RuPaul began hosting last year, had made a season, too. "It all kind of blends together after seventeen years," Smothers said, watching the monitors. Many of the "Drag Race" staff have worked on the show for a decade or more. For all RuPaul's boundary-setting, the atmosphere can be unusually familial for TV. Under the lights at Pinewood, the queen playing Liza Minnelli tried out an old standard, snapping, "I don't see how that's any of your business," and RuPaul howled with laughter.

A few days later, RuPaul woke up and performed his morning ritual. First, he stretched. "I'm older," he said. "I have to make sure everything is doing the thing." Then he prayed, saying aloud the words "Dear God, thank you," followed by things for which he is grateful. That week, the list included the roof over his head, his access to running water, and Georges, his husband, whom he met while dancing at Limelight, in New York, in the nineties. After that, he meditated, a practice that can last anywhere from forty-five seconds to fifteen minutes. He lets the ideas drift through: "Oh, there's my father. Oh, there's Judy Garland." His demons are there, too, but he claims to have befriended them. He put on another black hoodie and another pair of black workout pants and walked ten minutes to the nearest Marks & Spencer to pick up an apple turnover.

Soon afterward, we sat in the living room of his rental cottage, a modest, two-story structure with neutral walls and a tiny kitchenette to which he had added, as far as I could tell, nothing but a row of identical boxes of berry-flavored Special K. "I brought this in," he said, pointing to an LCD monitor that sat, with his laptop, on an otherwise empty white desk. "And I moved this chair. That's about it." Yet he was crazy about the place—he liked the flow of the floor plan, and took pictures of it, to try to replicate it in Wyoming.

RuPaul is, in profound ways, a loner. For much of his adult life, he had felt alienated from the easy intimacy of casual gay sex. "In my twenties and stuff, when I was meeting someone at a bar or something, I always would want to find some type of connection, but it was not there," he said. "And I did not enjoy being with somebody I don't have a connection to."

His Black identity didn't furnish much sense of community, either. "I come from a Black family," he said. "But I always felt different. Not better or anything. I just felt like Ru." In the memoir, he recounts a moment, two years after his move to Atlanta, when his father grilled him about rumors that he was having gay sex. "In the Black church, 'gay' represents something against the family, and the family is an extension of how Black people survived from slavery," he told me. "So my existence becomes a threat to the family, because I'm *other than*." I expected that he would suggest that he now relishes his role as a trailblazing celebrity in the Black community. "I've won fourteen Emmys. And you would think I'd have

been on the cover of *Ebony*, if that still exists," he said. "I don't represent what the Black community wants to lift up. I never have." His computer's desktop showed a black-and-white closeup of Diana Ross. From an early age, he admired her ability to craft an image that was unthreatening to white audiences. "I went, That's what I want to do. I want to be on a world stage and not be questioned, or make people feel threatened," he said. "Most Black people in our culture have to not scare white folks."

RuPaul told me that his social life is circumscribed, in some ways, by design. "I meet new people, but like, socially, do I go out to dinner with people, or meet someone and say, 'Hey, let's go on a hike'? Very rarely." He and his husband have an open relationship. "It's just realistic," he said. "There's no such thing as monogamy with men." But, he said, because of his fame, there's no longer "a circle of people that I can sort of rely on" for intimacy.

When Georges and he first met, Georges asked if he could floss RuPaul's teeth. RuPaul, horrified, said no. But Georges eventually got past his guardedness. While I was with RuPaul, Georges FaceTimed him from a hospital room, where he was recovering from a minor medical procedure. "Oh, my God, look at you," RuPaul said. "Did you get the morphine I told you to get?" And then: "I love you." At one point, while we were talking, RuPaul mentioned his name, smiled, and then started to cry.

"I would love to have more fun," he told me. "I would love to go to a fucking roller disco. Why aren't there fucking roller discos? What's the deal? People have lost track of what's really fun." RuPaul has his own skates, and he's nimble. Occasionally, he will drive to a remote parking lot and skate by himself. But he finds the kind of night life he once loved to be inaccessible. "You know, at a night club or at a disco dance place, people are on their phones," he said. "How am I going to be spiritual and in the moment, sweating, and take my shirt off, where there are people filming?"

Lansky, the writer, described to me what he thought of as RuPaul's foundational beliefs: "Don't take anything too seriously. Don't treat anything as sacred. Stay in play, nurture your inner child." For all its profitability, "Drag Race" still ropes contestants into campy, small-budget music-video shoots that mirror his own experiments on "The American Music Show," in Atlanta: creations with little artistry and lots of cheap wigs and improv. Before he dropped out of high school, a drama teacher scolded him for caring about his precarious academic career, telling him, "RuPaul, don't take life too fucking seriously." The admonition has since become a mantra. "I'm always looking to play," he said. "I want to be in that state all the time."

"Wait—have you guys been hanging out without me?"

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RuPaul has been sober since the late nineties. In "The House of Hidden Meanings," he describes years of alcohol abuse that he now views as an effort to "anesthetize" himself, and also his eventual decision to seek treatment, spurred by his effort to help Georges, who was addicted to crystal meth. But he remains a proponent of psychedelics, and told me that early acid trips provided essential perspective on the importance of being in a state of play. "That's why hallucinogens are so wonderful. Because your self-consciousness is stripped away when you're tripping your balls," he said. The spiritual guru he finds most influential, he said, is "my fucking idol, Bugs Bunny. Who is a fucking Zen master." His teachings: "Don't take other people too serious. And stay ahead of their stupidity. If you have to, build a fucking compound somewhere, but stay ahead of their own self-destructive, ridiculous mentality."

RuPaul has been trying to outrun that kind of thinking for a long time. He recalled an appearance he made, in full drag, on "The Arsenio Hall Show," in 1993—a radical act, at the time. "In the moment, on 'Arsenio Hall,' I'm up against the status quo and the machine," he recalled. "There is pain in that."

He got up and served me the apple turnover. With his face shadowed by the hoodie and bare of makeup, he looked ascetic and almost otherworldly. He told me he'd been reflecting on his comment about not liking kids. "I would be a great parent," he said. Though he would fear sending a child into a world he finds inhospitable and dangerous, he added, "I would love that kid so much." The cottage is near a school. "The bell just rang," he said. "You know, last year, when I took this place, I thought, Oh, God, the kids, they're gonna drive me crazy." Now, he told me, "I fucking love hearing their voices out there. It's kind of this white noise of joy." ♦

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

HIGH ANXIETY

The playwright Lucy Prebble is expert at getting inside worried people's heads.

BY REBECCA MEAD

Partway through "The Effect," by the British playwright Lucy Prebble, a clinical psychologist named Lorna James tells a joke: At a conference, a medic is attracted to a woman who pays him no attention. The medic, aware that the release of dopamine is associated with the onset of love, and that dopamine levels rise during novel, exciting experiences, arranges for himself and the woman to go bungee jumping. "They fall headlong into this incredible, adrenaline filled rush—their dopamine levels go wild," James says. "He looks into her eyes and says, 'Wasn't that amazing?!' And breathlessly she answers, 'Yes! And isn't the instructor handsome!'"

James tells the joke to Connie, a subject in a clinical trial for a new antidepressant. Connie is a psychology student, and she knows that the antidepressant affects dopamine levels, but she can't tell if it's working—or if she's taking a placebo. Locked inside a medical facility for weeks, she has few people to talk to except for the doctor and Tristan, another young volunteer. Connie and Tristan—placed in proximity within a charged, unfamiliar setting, and with a powerful drug possibly coursing through their veins—begin a romance. Prebble told me that she wrote the play, which was first produced, at London's National Theatre, in 2012, because "she wanted to understand, a bit like the play seeks to, what was real and what wasn't"—about love, and about the brain itself. A revival, which the National Theatre mounted to acclaim last year, arrives in New York later this month, at the Shed.

Prebble started her career in the theatre, but she's now equally well known as a television writer. She worked on all four seasons of "Succession," Jesse Armstrong's satirical drama about media moguldom; with her close friend Billie Piper, she created the wickedly disorienting British series "I Hate Suzie," which Prebble wrote and Piper stars in. In "Suzie," Piper is a former teen pop star who undergoes a mental-health crisis after a scandal. Piper was herself a teen star, but the show also draws on Prebble's experience of navigating high-pressure workplaces as a young woman. Prebble was just twenty-two when her first full-length play, "The Sugar Syndrome," was produced in London, winning several awards. She was still in her twenties when her second play, "ENRON," about the implosion of the Texas-based energy company, was a hit in the West End. Prebble, who is now forty-three, told me, "All I know inside is that I much prefer being older to being younger, and that's nice, because I wasn't expecting it. Everything culturally has told me, 'You'll hate this. You'll be an invisible crone.' And, actually, I much prefer walking into a room and not having the assumption be that I am somebody's assistant, and then having to apologetically make clear that I am not."

In late December, I visited Prebble at her home—a compact, attractive row house in South London that she bought a few years ago—where she lives with her partner, the screenwriter Ed Solomon. Prebble was less than a month away from giving birth to her first child, and the living room was dominated by a drying rack from which dangled dozens of onesies and burp cloths—gifts and hand-me-downs from friends which she would soon make use of. She wore a loose floral dress and galoshes, and looked a little frazzled, having just been in the back yard fruitlessly emptying out the contents of a vacuum-cleaner bag in search of her wedding ring, which she had removed to sleep, and which

In "The Effect," a couple can't decide if their love is dependent on antidepressants.

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN PHILLIPS / GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY IRIS LEGENDRE

had seemingly gone missing from her bedside table. (Later, she found the ring beneath a cookie that she'd placed on the table, in case she needed to stave off early-morning nausea.)

Though Prebble wasn't formal, and was quick to laugh, she conversed with the kind of considered precision that a contemporary playwright might avoid on the page, for fear of making a character appear unrealistically fluent. She began dissecting the social dimension of her maternal condition. "It's really interesting when you get onto public transport—the acknowledgment from people," she said. "You're a part of something socially, where normally—AirPods in, eye contact withheld—you are not. Obviously, it's nice to sit down, but also this feels *right*, that we're all part of a community." She went on, "In one's twenties, you got a bit more of 'Oh, a man's being nice to me, do I have to work out what that's about?' Being heavily pregnant and a man's nice to you, you don't have to worry about what's being expressed."

Such attention to psychological nuance is unsurprising from a writer whose first play, like "The Effect," explored a woman's interrogation of therapeutic norms. "The Sugar Syndrome" centers on Dani, an angry but perceptive teen who has spent time in an eating-disorders clinic before returning, unhappily, to high school. ("Sorry, but you should see it, the common room, these bitchy little girls on beanbags drinking their tea with both hands," Dani says, an image that will trigger any woman still in recovery from being an adolescent.) Dani romanticizes her disorder as rebellious taboo-breaking, and this leads her to make a troubling alliance online with someone else who represses urges: a pedophile.

"The Effect" similarly explores provocative ideas with rapid-fire dialogue and fierce humor. When Connie is shocked that Tristan has sneaked a phone into the trial—they've been warned that transmission signals interfere with the clinic's equipment—he pityingly tosses her a burner phone from his bag. "Anytime anyone says turn off your phones you should worry that's a situation where you might die, not worry about the fucking equipment," he comments. (Connie flirtingly says of the burner phone, "So early 2000s!") But "The Effect" is emotionally charged to a degree that Prebble's earlier dramas were not. "What I learned from writing the play—which is the only point of writing anything, I think, to be different at the end than at the start—was that it was a stupid question, what is real and what is not," Prebble told me. "It's an irrelevant question. It's *not* the question." Tellingly, "The Effect" tilts away from Connie, who's intent on understanding how biology shapes her brain, and toward Tristan, who just wants to fund adventurous travel, and who prioritizes sensation over cerebration.

"The Effect" questions the tendency to resort to pharmacological intervention for feelings that are fundamental to human experience: desire, loss, misery, uncertainty. The play, a dozen years old, now feels timelier than ever. Since 2012, the use of antidepressants has risen, with a sharp increase for young people after the onset of the pandemic, in part because of stress and isolation. "What the play is about, really, is that it's difficult to apply a consistent diagnostic model to something like human emotion, and human distress particularly, which is a natural part of being alive," Prebble told me. "That doesn't mean it doesn't sometimes overlap with something that should be medicated." She took antidepressants for a period, and says that they "made an unbearable experience more bearable." But, she added, "there are some examples where you are trying to make yourself bear something when you would be better off changing your circumstances rather than your neurotransmitters."

Prebble's pregnancy was welcome but unexpected. "I'd only ever had miscarriages," she told me. "My experience of it wasn't 'Oh, I'm going to have a baby!' It was more 'I'm probably going to have a miscarriage.'" Noting that she'd bought her house while single, she said, "I'd orchestrated my life almost deliberately not to have a child—I had made choices so that this wouldn't feel like grief." Solomon, the writer of "Men in Black" and a co-writer of the "Bill & Ted" movies, among other credits, is two decades Prebble's senior, and has adult children. Until recently, he lived in New York. The pair were married in September, in Central Park; soon afterward, Solomon moved to England.

Prebble and Solomon met in January, 2021, on Twitter, after she retweeted a thread in which he recalled an unnerving period, in 1985, when a police mixup led him to be briefly misidentified as the Night Stalker, a serial killer. Solomon sent Prebble a direct message to say that he was watching "I Hate Suzie"; they began texting, then progressed to Zoom. Their first in-person meeting occurred some weeks later, when Prebble and other "Succession" staffers were finally able to start filming Season 3 in lockdown-era New York. "At that time, when someone flew to New York, you literally had to stay at an initial address for several days without ever leaving," Prebble recalled. Solomon, who lived across town from the apartment that had been rented for her, "turned up with a bottle of wine and a bœuf bourguignonne, which he was going to leave with me. He didn't try to come in, but I said, 'No, no, of *course* you should come in, you've come all this way.' And we ate the bœuf bourguignonne together, and it was a bit weird, but very nice. And then there's a knock at the door." An officer from the city had arrived to insure that Prebble was following quarantine protocol. Like a character in a Broadway farce, Solomon hid behind the bed. Prebble told me, "The officer looked around, and there were literally two bowls and two glasses of wine, and she said, 'O.K., great. Can you sign here and say that you're not going to have anyone around?' And I was, like, 'Well, *she's* no Columbo.' She just couldn't be bothered."

Prebble recounted the story with flair—an off-the-page skill that doesn't always come naturally to writers. Tony Roche, a colleague from "Succession," told me, "A lot of people become writers because they don't want to say things to people, because they are socially awkward. But Lucy is a phenomenal extemporizer. You could point to anything in the room and say, 'Explain why that sausage is a metaphor for Britain today,' and she would be able to talk fluidly and coherently and amusingly, and make a very convincing argument. At the end of it, you would go, 'That's

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exactly what it is—that's not really a sausage, it's a metaphor for Britain today!'" Will Tracy, another "Succession" writer, recalled going out to dinner with Prebble at an early point in her pregnancy, before she was ready to share the news. "She had a very convincing story for why she wasn't drinking, involving how she was rethinking the relationship to alcohol in her life," Tracy said. "It was so good, and well said. I remember thinking, Maybe Lucy's right—*I* should do that."

After Prebble narrated her peculiar first meeting with Solomon, she noted, "The story I told you was such a highly adrenalized event—biologically, that's interesting. You often find that in traditional love stories—there's a situation that is bonding because of its danger." The encounter with the officer, we agreed, was a real-life version of the bungee-jumping tale in "The Effect," bringing Prebble and Solomon into charged complicity. (In the joke version, of course, Prebble would have fallen for the officer.)

Prebble is steeped in theatre history, which allows her to notice themes of archetypal drama in even the most comic scenarios. Jesse Armstrong, the creator of "Succession," told me, "It wasn't like we were constantly talking about Aeschylus and Chekhov, but we'd often say, 'What's the children's-TV version of this plot? What's the simplest, most graspable version of it?' And equally sometimes we'd say, 'What is the Chekhovian version of it?' 'What is the more tragic, Shakespearean version of this story, and what is it that would make it so?'" Armstrong went on, "Especially in the U.K., we can be a little bit embarrassed of being thought to be pretentious. Lucy is never pretentious, but she is willing to bring some quite big ideas to the table." In the writers' room, he said, Prebble had "a great, slightly bloodthirsty relish" for placing the show's characters in painful situations. "She talks about 'writing in red,' and I think that means vividly, related to blood. She's pretty unflinching about tearing at those vulnerable parts of characters—not in a sadistic way, but she's just interested in human beings."

Will Tracy, who edited the Onion before writing for "Succession," told me, "She was as funny as anybody in the room, but she would step in a bit when the comedy writers led us down a path that had more of a sitcom flavor, and steer us back to 'Let's remember, this is a *tragedy*.'" For the series' final episode, Prebble told me, "the tragic ending, as it was envisioned, was: Is it possible to show everything shattered? If the center of it is the family, is it possible to really tear them apart?" Prebble had pitched the idea that at the end of the show Shiv might be pregnant. (As it turned out, Sarah Snook, who played Shiv, was pregnant during filming.) Prebble told me, "There's hope in this, in having a baby. But, actually, what's awful, in tragic terms, is that you are just passing down something terrible, because Shiv's relationship with Tom is so unsavable." She went on, "From a political point of view, I was quite interested in Shiv, because in pregnancy there is a reliance you have to have on other people. That would be very challenging to her. In thinking, What's the tragic end for each of these three characters?, Shiv's great fear would be losing autonomy and power. And there's *nothing* like having a baby to do that."

When Prebble joined "Succession," in 2017, she feared it confirmed that her career had passed its peak, since she'd had difficulties getting her own television projects made. But "Succession" became a career highlight, and also a way of supporting less lucrative projects: Prebble credits HBO with underwriting her 2019 play, "A Very Expensive Poison," a trenchant exploration of the murder, in London, of the Russian dissident Alexander Litvinenko. Jesse Armstrong and Prebble knew each other slightly: they'd met at a comedy workshop where Armstrong spoke, and they'd been among a group that retired to a bar afterward. It was the day of the Brexit referendum, another highly adrenalized occasion to make a connection, albeit a professional one. "I like to think my job on the show was the only good thing to come out of Brexit," Prebble wrote in an introduction to the published script of Season 3.

Among Prebble's qualifications for "Succession" was the research she'd done about the finance industry while writing "ENRON," which opened in 2009, just a year after the financial crisis. It was a deliriously anti-realist drama about the sinister complexities of insider trading, complete with musical numbers and puppetry. Described by the *Guardian* as "an exhilarating mix of political satire, modern morality and multimedia spectacle," the play portrayed the doomed firm of Lehman Brothers as a pair of conjoined twins who couldn't decide what direction to walk in. London audiences welcomed

a scathing romp about the perfidies of global capitalism. In 2010, the play came to Broadway, but it was clear to Prebble before the opening that New York audiences took the play's sharp edges more personally: "During the first preview, a lady collapsed in the aisle during the intermission, and the other patrons were *stepping over her* to get to their seats. I'd never experienced an atmosphere quite like it. I had this tremendous feeling of 'Whoa, the audience is quite angry.' There was a part of me that thought maybe they were angry because the curtain went up late, and were afraid because this woman collapsed." But in subsequent previews the audience was just as hostile to the play, even without a meddlesome medical emergency.

In hindsight, Prebble said, it was obvious that "what the audience wanted was 'The Lehman Trilogy,' a brilliant show, technically impressive—theatrically simple, though—that ends with a sense of how extraordinary it is to have built New York. This was *not* that show." The fate of "ENRON" was sealed when Ben Brantley, of the *Times*, declared, "This British-born exploration of smoke-and-mirror financial practices isn't much more than smoke and mirrors itself." Prebble recalled the opening-night party: "When the *Times* review arrives, at maybe midnight, the caterers start taking all the food back, because everyone's leaving, and they want to save as many hors d'œuvres as possible."

"ENRON" closed less than two weeks later, at a loss of millions of dollars. Prebble was devastated, particularly on behalf of the cast and crew, who were suddenly unemployed. "Now I look back at it—I wouldn't say that it's a cold show, but it basically says that the way we are all living is unsustainable bullshit, *especially* in New York," Prebble said. "In retrospect, that's quite a foolish thing to charge people hundreds of dollars to hear." She went on, "But how extraordinary that I was able to make a play about losing people millions, and then actually do it? Anything I hadn't understood about what I had written, I understood *then*."

Prebble retreated to the U.K., where she was comforted by other British playwrights who'd met resistance on Broadway. "I got a beautiful card from Tom Stoppard," she said. "I got a beautiful card from David Hare. I've never received as much kindness from people I didn't even know knew I existed." (In an e-mail, Stoppard told me, "If one goes to the theatre a lot, as I used to, pretty often one sees a play to like or love, but it's quite rare to feel challenged as a fellow playwright. 'ENRON' and 'The Effect' did that for me—the sense of a play being dealt from a slightly different deck.") Prebble observed, "We do a lot of things badly here—we do struggle with people's success. But we do not struggle with people's failure."

In the U.K., "ENRON" became one of the few contemporary texts on the largely traditional English-literature high-school syllabus. (A sample essay question invited students to compare it with Christopher Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus": "How far would you agree that in both 'Doctor Faustus' and 'ENRON' 'we witness the sacrifice of intellect to the foolish pursuit of profit and delight'?") In fact, Prebble told me, "Macbeth," with its gradual accumulation of immoral acts, was a more important referent for "ENRON" than Marlowe's play. Prebble said of her Shakespearean borrowings, "If you take something that has lasted an incredibly long time, and that everyone says is good, and then use that as a sparse backbone, you might be protecting yourself to some extent—or helping the narrative be stronger." The notion

that "ENRON" has entered the scholarly canon "makes me sort of want to cry," she told me. "There's a feeling of slightly bewildered pride and, I suppose, satisfaction that some sort of authority has been reached."

Prebble was born in 1980 and grew up in Surrey, southwest of London. Although her parents had conventionally middle-class occupations—her mother was a school bursar, her father a businessman—her dad had the kind of unusual background that makes a writer salivate. "He was brought up below stairs in a castle in Aberdeenshire, in Scotland," Prebble explained. "His father was a butler, and his mother was a maid. His father died when he was very young, and his mother only a bit after that. He was given some help from the laird of the castle, and then he was on his own." Her father's story, she observed, had a fairy-tale quality: "Lots of talk of him romancing a shepherd's daughter as a lad, and other things that sound like they are from another century." A few years ago, she and her family went to Scotland to buy a headstone for her grandfather's grave—there'd been no money for one when he died—and stayed overnight in the castle, which is now owned by the National Trust for Scotland. "We had dinner there as a family," she said. She sent me a photograph of her father sitting stone-faced at a formal dining table, in a room whose damask walls were hung with oil paintings of someone else's ancestors. In the image, he bears a striking resemblance to another Scotsman made good: the "Succession" titan Logan Roy. "We get a *lot* of that," Prebble said, though she hastened to add that, although she knows something about powerful patriarchs who are proud of their Scottish origins, Logan Roy is thoroughly Jesse Armstrong's creation.

As a child, Prebble was an avid reader, often of books meant for adults. "I remember reading, or trying to read, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being,'" she said. She was about nine. "There's a lot of sex in that," she went on. "I remember thinking, Wow, you wouldn't be allowed to *see* any of that. But in a book nobody cares." She also played a lot of video games, particularly enjoying those which involved immersive adventures, like King's Quest. She still plays video games: a recent favorite is Alan Wake, a horror title about a blocked crime writer who gets attacked by possessed figures that shout at him that he's a terrible writer. Playing these games, she said, "creates a sensation of relaxation unlike almost anything else—it's most similar to the really intense state of reading, when it's transporting." The appeal, she suggested, is that

a player is given both a goal and a firm sense of how to achieve it: "That's like a tidier version of real life, where not only do you have to work out *what* you want, but the means with which you might achieve it are often unclear." In a video game, "even if that world is horrific or combat-filled, it's actually preordered and safe."

Prebble is alert to the evolution of narrative in the digital age, and likes to think about how writers and directors might adapt to new technologies. She said, "Over the holidays, I was with my family and my nephews and nieces, and, like everybody, they now watch everything with the subtitles on—which I would never have predicted." She realized that her relatives preferred to have more information available onscreen, to insure that they weren't missing anything if their attention was divided. Prebble went on, "Like a wanker, I'm spending hours and hours on my stuff, carefully calibrating an actor's performance in the edit, and they're just watching it with subtitles anyway!" She observed this not in a spirit of curmudgeonly nostalgia but with an open, interested curiosity. "I'm thinking that now there might be a market for television or drama that's the opposite of the grabby, 'Something's happening all the time, don't look away!' kind of thing—that Netflixy thing," she said. She cited the example of "The Beatles: Get Back," the Peter Jackson documentary about the 1969 recording of "Let It Be." Watching that was more like listening to a chatty podcast: "You could wander away and come back, because there were lots of scenes of these incredible geniuses creating in a room together, but they were also being, like, 'Shall we have some tea?'" It suggested to Prebble that she might want to experiment with "doing shows that feel like having a bath—where you just want to be in that environment for a long time."

In 2002, after receiving an English-literature degree at the University of Sheffield, Prebble became an assistant at the National Theatre, arranging hotel and dinner reservations for writers and directors, and wrote "The Sugar Syndrome" in her spare time. With the success of that play, she got an agent, quit the assistant job, and began writing treatments for TV shows, none of which got made. Eventually, she sold a production company on a project: "The Secret Diary of a Call Girl," adapted from the blog by the pseudonymous Belle de Jour, which featured such spiky observations as "I don't take cards. Where would I put the swipe machine?" Prebble said of the author, "She had quite a dark sense of humor toward what she was doing. I could see myself, or someone else, having that attitude toward doing something so difficult and complicated. The insights that she had felt really recognizable to me—about what the dangers of sex are, what the dangers of sex for money would be. It felt robust and rich in a way that normally that sort of thing doesn't."

"This place is nice, but what would we really do if we lived here? Lie around and be happy all the time?"

Belle was played by Billie Piper, who'd become famous in the U.K. at the age of fifteen with "Because We Want To," a pop-rap confection in which she sounded like the Spice Girls' little sister. "Billie had come out of that pop world—that weirdly infantilizing and sexualizing thing," Prebble said. "But artistically she's really avant-garde." (In 2017, Piper won an Olivier Award for Best Actress for her performance in a radical production of García Lorca's "Yerma" that reimagined the protagonist as a life-style blogger.) Prebble swiftly discovered, however, that the British network airing the show was less daring. "I had this idea for the second season about mental illness—a really high proportion of sex workers suffer from O.C.D., which I found fascinating," she said. "It almost certainly has a relationship to working with strangers a lot, and safety and structure and insecurity around that, and hygiene. That felt to me really unexplored—the kind of consequence that is more common, but less talked about, than sexual violence." Network executives balked: "That was deemed not fun enough. They wanted a lot of bounce and underwear." Prebble quit the show after Season 1; Piper stayed on for three more. "I felt hurt. But we were both young," Piper told me, in an e-mail. And the lack of control "made it a ship worth jumping for her."

At Piper's instigation, however, that truncated collaboration grew into what Prebble considers one of the most important relationships in her life. "Billie kept saying we should do something together, and I was quite wary, because I didn't want our friendship

to be damaged," Prebble said. "With work of my own, I can be quite formidable, or maybe defensive and aggressive. I care so much about it that it's an area in my life where I think I will push someone away. And Billie, very wisely, just kept trying."

One day in August, 2014, hackers posted intimate photographs of dozens of Hollywood celebrities on the Internet. Prebble told me that she was fascinated by how silent the stars were about this violation, "which was obviously because their people went into overdrive shutting it down online, but also because any mention of it would just increase visibility." Prebble continued, "I always found that devastating and creepy, that they'd been told never to refer to it. You've been a victim of a crime, and then have your voice immediately taken away because it would immediately make you more the victim of a crime." The coincidence of sexual and technological themes interested Prebble, as did the central trauma: "What if you have been living a seemingly quite contained, well-boundaried life, a structured life, and then it all gets completely overturned?"

From that premise emerged "I Hate Suzie," in which Prebble's capacity to marry darkness and humor is given full expression, as are Piper's avant-garde leanings. "I start from a position of quite traditional storytelling, and Billie is much more comfortable with things not making sense," Prebble said. "It makes us quite a good combination, because sometimes she can push me to places that elevate the work, but I also cling on very tightly to a rope that binds everything together." In the first season, which aired in 2020, Piper's character, Suzie Pickles, has her public persona, and her family, shattered when hacked photographs expose her infidelity. It consists of eight tonally distinct episodes, each of which is named for a stage of grief. The third episode, "Fear," in which Suzie is terrified of being stalked after the location of her home is revealed online, has a horror-movie sound design and jump scares. The dialogue of "Suzie," like that of "Succession," has a baroque originality. Suzie's agent, talking about masturbation, comments, "You know what I call that when you cry after? A French wank."

Creating the show while also working on "Succession" was debilitating for Prebble—who actually did give up drinking to get it all done. "If you work all your weekends, and all your evenings, you sort of have two weeks in a week," she said. "And if you don't drink—well, there's a whole other day after 6 P.M. You're not just sitting in front of Netflix with a glass of wine." Even so, Prebble became so paralyzed with anxiety that she consulted a hypnotherapist. She said, "He helped me reconceive writing in my mind to what it was when I was younger, rather than what it had become—which was this sort of overwhelming burden of having to *deliver*."

The second season of "Suzie" features some of the most unsettling TV scripts ever aired. The nude photographs have so damaged Suzie's career that she desperately attempts to save it by participating in "Dance Crazee," a cheesy televised contest. Suzie, who is also navigating a custody battle and occasionally using recreational drugs, melts down, and Piper viscerally conveys the sensation of feeling one's life come undone. The first episode juxtaposes Piper's dancing in a clown costume, and receiving abysmal scores from the audience, with her facing an unwelcome pregnancy. She hurriedly undergoes a medical abortion, then bloodies and removes one sanitary towel after another, to the sound of repeated toilet flushes. "There is something very female about the mundanity of blood," Prebble said. "It's so lurid in everything else: *splash, splash*, murder, 'Reservoir Dogs,' whatever. And for us it's, like, 'Ugh, wrap this up again, hide it in the loo, can't flush it because it will block the pipes.' It's just a very different experience."

At the end of the dance contest, an overwhelmed Suzie rips off a wig to show a shaved head—she has destroyed her hair through bleaching it, in an effort to subvert drug tests that her bullying ex-husband has been insisting on—and rants on live television about the custody battle she's losing. Among the inspirations for "Suzie," Prebble told me, were "All That Jazz," Bob Fosse's veiled autobiographical movie about a director who falls apart as he tries to make a film and a musical at

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the same time, and John Cassavetes's "Opening Night," in which an actress undergoes a crisis during previews of a new play. Prebble was also inspired by tabloid accounts of such stars as Amy Winehouse and Britney Spears. "I'm always fascinated by the way that stories of women's breakdowns are looked at and consumed—the tragedy of them but also the salaciousness," she said. "What if you followed every step of what was happening, rather than intervening at the very high, lurid points, like the shaving of the head and the staggering down the street, where everyone looks mad? If you follow, beat by beat, what has happened to that person, it makes perfect sense that Britney Spears shaves her head. If you were to follow someone as a protagonist, rather than as trashy entertainment, you would be inside, and you would understand."

Prebble isn't sure if there will be a third season of "Suzie." British television shows typically receive a fraction of the funding that a production on HBO or Apple TV does. "To have hardly any of the resources of the streamers but to have the same pressure to achieve artistically—it's a really difficult situation," she said. Reëntering the world of Suzie would also be emotionally challenging, she acknowledged. "It's somewhat exposing, and it's intense to make something, with a very good friend, that is quite aggressive and weird and tricky and dark in places. I can't work out if the healthiest thing is to leave it alone." Rather than writing a new television show, Prebble told me, what appeals to her now is writing and directing a movie. "TV has become the place where everyone goes to make money, which film used to be," she said. "So now it feels like there are two kinds of films—the big franchises, and then, you know, the weirder, more esoteric personal movies." She leans toward the latter, she says, and is gravitating toward the horror genre, in which she might, as with "Suzie," strike a tone of humor combined with terror.

In writing "The Effect," Prebble created the character of Connie for Piper. But Connie's propensity for caution and overthinking was drawn from Prebble. Piper said, "It was the biggest challenge in the performance for me. I had to force myself to actively think with more speed and anxiety. At that time in my life, where I had only responded or acted in alignment with my emotional world, it felt like such a leap, almost impossible for me to imagine forensically pulling anything apart in the way Connie/Lucy did." Prebble told me, "It's quite a beautiful thing when someone who knows you very well can express on your behalf."

In the revival, Connie is being played by Taylor Russell, a young actress who starred in a Netflix reboot of "Lost in Space." Tristan is played by Paapa Essiedu, who appeared in Michaela Coel's "I May Destroy You." Prebble always makes textual adjustments to a play before a major new production, and when reformulating "The Effect" she more explicitly foregrounded the notion that mental-health disorders can be exacerbated, or even caused, by the political and social conditions in which characters live. The new production also emphasizes the way that mental-health therapies, however much of a salve they provide for individuals, can obviate the need for broader societal reform while enriching pharmaceutical companies. Toward the end of the play, Dr. James berates a colleague, saying, "There's no such thing as side effects, Toby. They're just effects you can't sell." Prebble also considered the grim economic realities faced by young people today: "I've tried to bring in much more of the experience of not being able to have a standard of living that feels tolerable, and having the fear that that won't be the case for quite a long time, if ever again." She went on, "I'm not saying, therefore, divorce it from a conversation about medication, but don't make it *only* a medical conversation. Because I think that's as dishonest as ignoring mental-health problems—and *so* beneficial to authority and power."

At the same time that the new production deepens these debates, it potently captures the heightened emotions of an unexpected new love. The audience flanks a stage brightly lit with white L.E.D.s, arousing the senses like a pharmaceutical stimulant. The idea, Prebble said, was to establish a clubby setting—an environment "where you don't abandon your physicality at the door." Witnessing young people fall in love onstage is a theatrical experience as old as time, or at least as old as Shakespeare. It's freshly captivating, though, to watch Russell and Essiedu as they plunge into desire and attraction, connection and vulnerability, while all the time being monitored and measured, not least by themselves. What is real, and what is not? Can we tell, and does it matter? "Some of the things you experience when you feel uncertain, or threatened, or afraid, are very similar to what we think about as 'falling in love,' like increased heart rate, or heightened awareness," Prebble told me. "When you are younger, that can feel meaningful—'It makes my heart race and my stomach flip.' Well, so does being in an accident."

The last time I saw Prebble, in early February, she was three weeks postpartum. Her son lay on a soft mat nearby, sleeping. She looked beatific, but mentally she was already subverting the acceptable narrative of blissed-out motherhood. "I wasn't expecting the level of physicality that feels so disrupting and unnerving," she told me. She had delivered by Cesarean section, and since going home she had been waking up with her feet or hands unexpectedly swollen, the bed drenched from night sweats—the side effects of surgical intervention and rapid hormonal change. "There's this sort of blitheness around it," she said. "Like, it could be very bad, but it's also very normal. And *nobody's* mentioned it to you."

During her pregnancy, Prebble had asked Piper, who has three children, if coping with an infant was as hard as making two TV shows at once. Piper had told her yes, but the difference is that the baby loves you back. Before giving birth, Prebble had cleared the decks of work projects. But the mind doesn't stop. "Having just gone through *this*"—she gestured toward the baby, herself, the room—"there's a lot of horror in life, as a woman." She laughed, and looked down at the mat, where her son was now squirming. "Historically, the horror genre is dominated by men making them, and a lot of women I know don't want to watch horrors, because I think their lives feel very horrific already," she said. "I am quite interested in a version of *that*." ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

SCENES FROM MY OPEN-ISH MARRIAGE

BY JOHN KENNEY

There's a scene in Molly Roden Winter's debut, "More: A Memoir of Open Marriage," that should come with a warning. Winter is at her home in Brooklyn. She has just had sex with her boyfriend while her two children sleep upstairs. Her husband, Stewart, consented to her tryst, but feeling guilty, she dashes naked into the kitchen to text him: Don't worry, she writes, "he has nothing on you as a lover." But instead of texting her husband, she accidentally sends the message to her boyfriend, who leaves in a huff, and later breaks up with her.
—*The Times.*

My wife walks in from work. She says, "I just had sex with a stranger." At least, I think she said that, as I wasn't really listening. Am I bothered? No, I am not. We have an arrangement. I mean, I think we do. Maybe we don't. I'm not sure. We also have an arrangement about the grocery shopping and the recycling (I do both), and not just about sex. Actually, maybe sex isn't part of the arrangement. The point is, we're not uptight Puritans about this stuff. I want her to be fulfilled and I try to do things that support her needs. Also, it turns out she didn't say the thing about the stranger and the sex. She said, "I just went to Trader Joe's, because you didn't." I guess my mind wandered when I heard "Joe." I also didn't mean to say out loud, while looking through the grocery bags, "Looks like someone forgot the Sea Salt Brownie Bites." We probably won't have sex tonight. Or for, like, a while.

IN HINDSIGHT, I should not have walked into the kitchen nude. And I shouldn't have done it on Thanksgiving, when many of the relatives arrived far earlier than planned. "Why is Phil naked?" I heard my father-in-law say. But people don't understand that, when you are in the kind of relationship that my wife and I have, sex is as natural a part of your day as laundry. And, many days, laundry is as natural a part of your day as, well, laundry. Had I just had sex? Absolutely not. But I had just showered and for some reason there were no goddam towels in the upstairs bathroom.

AT MY NEPHEW'S birthday party, I turn to my wife and casually say, "Your sister has great boobs." Now, the funny thing is that I'd meant to say, "Your sister throws a great party." But then I looked at her boobs. For a lot of couples, that kind of statement might cause a problem. But my wife and I have an understanding about our sexuality. We're not constrained by societal norms. I'm free to make a comment like that and my wife is absolutely fine with it. To the point where she'll probably agree with me and say something like "You're right. She does have great boobs." Except what she said was "You're such an asshole." And then she walked away. Sometimes openness can also close.

THE TOWN WE live in is much like any other. Not too far from the city. Lots of trees and parks and youth sports programs. It's a wonderful place for raising children, but also for conducting illicit sexual affairs. Think Thornton Wilder's "Our Town." It's "Our Town," but it's your wife. Your wife, your neighbor, the ConEd guy. Everyone is having sex and no one is judging it, because we're not Puritans. Even though there are some Puritans in the congregation. Take coffee hour at our local church recently. My wife and I were chatting with Gary and Karen, who are new to the area and lovely people, and yet it was so obvious that they have an open marriage. Karen was talking about how their twins are playing ice hockey for the first time and loving the new rink in town. And Gary was smiling and nodding along and saying that their youngest loved the cartoon show "PAW Patrol." And I said what I was pretty sure was on everyone's mind: "Wouldn't this conversation be a lot better if we were all naked." Apparently, it wouldn't have been, according to Karen and Gary and my wife. Also, we're looking for a new church.

"IF I WEREN'T IMPOTENT, I would gladly join your foursome," I said, laughing.

"Golf," they said. "Like . . . golf."

Sometimes this happens when you're living an open life. ♦

PROFILES

THE LAST CAMPAIGN

Trailing Trump in polls and facing doubts about his age, President Biden voices defiant confidence.

BY EVAN OSNOS

"I'll show you where Trump sat and watched the revolution," Joe Biden said, stepping out from behind his desk in the Oval Office. It was noon on a Wednesday, in the doldrums of January. The Middle East was aflame, and Biden's approval rating was among the lowest of any President in history, but, for the moment, he was preoccupied with Donald Trump. As he led the way through a door toward his private chambers, he startled two Secret Service agents in the corridor. They had expected him to remain at his desk for a while; agents, referring to him by his handle, had passed word: "Celtic is in the Oval." Walking by, he said, in a whispery deadpan, "Hey, guys—it's a *raid*," and then moved on.

Biden, always a little taller than you expect, wore a navy suit and a bright-blue tie. He passed a study off the Oval, where he keeps a rack of extra shirts, an array of notes sent in by the public, and a portrait of John F. Kennedy in a contemplative pose. (It's one of his favorites, even though Bobby Kennedy thought that it evoked his brother during the Bay of Pigs debacle.) He continued to the Oval Office dining room, a small, elegant space where, in Biden's eight years as Vice-President, he often visited Barack Obama for lunch. One wall is graced by "The Peacemakers," a famous painting of Lincoln and his military commanders, on the cusp of winning the Civil War. Another is dominated by a large television set, installed by Donald Trump.

It was in front of that TV that Trump spent the afternoon of January 6, 2021, after exhorting his supporters to march on the Capitol and stop Congress from certifying Biden's election. With the television remote and a Diet Coke close at hand, he watched the events live on Fox News, rewinding at times for a second look. It is a period in Presidential history that the House select committee on January 6th later called "187 Minutes of Dereliction."

"This is where he sat," Biden said, and I braced for a bit of speechifying on democracy or character or the defiling of the Presidency. (As early as 1970, a colleague of Biden's on a Delaware county council observed that he could make a "fifteen-minute speech on the underside of a blade of grass.") But, in the dining room, he let the moment pass. At the age of eighty-one, in his fourth year as President, he displays less of the reflex to fill every silence. Gesturing around the room, he said, "I don't do interviews here, because it's not so commodious." He gave a rueful laugh and headed back to his office.

Not long ago, most Americans found it inconceivable that they might once again face the choice between Trump and Biden. In the years since Trump lost the 2020 election and refused to concede, he has been found liable for sexual assault and financial fraud, and indicted for attempting to overturn the election and refusing to return classified documents; as his legal challenges mounted, he embarked on a campaign focussed on "retribution" against his enemies. Yet Republicans have become steadily less likely to hold Trump responsible for the violence on January 6th—and less likely to believe that Biden actually won the White House.

Back in the Oval Office, where winter sun shone through glass doors, I asked Biden if it was possible for him to reach voters who had those beliefs. He treated the question as a provocation: "Well, first of all, remember, in 2020, you guys told me how I wasn't going to win? And then you told me in 2022 how it was going to be this red wave?" He flashed a tense smile. "And I told you there wasn't going to be any red wave. And in 2023 you told me we're going to get our ass kicked again? And we won every contested race out there." He let that sink in for an instant and said, "In 2024, I think you're going to see the same thing."

For decades, there was a lightness about Joe Biden—a springy, mischievous energy that was hard not to like, even if it allowed some people to classify him as a lightweight. For better and worse, he is a more solemn figure now. His voice is thin and clotted, and his gestures have slowed, but, in our conversation, his mind seemed unchanged. He never bungled a name or a date. At one point, he pulled out a white notecard inscribed with some of Trump's most alarming comments: his threat to terminate the Constitution, his casual talk of being a dictator on "Day One," his description of immigrants as "poisoning the blood of our country." Biden tossed the list on his desk and gave a look of disbelief. "What the *hell!*" he said. "If you and I had sat down ten years ago and I said a President is going to say those things, you would have looked at me like, 'Biden, you've lost your senses.'"

I last interviewed Biden in 2020, when he billed himself as a "transition candidate" and praised "an incredible group of talented, newer, younger people." But, in office, he has presided over the passage of ambitious legislation, the end of the COVID pandemic, and an economic revival beyond anyone's expectation—and declared his intention to run for a second term. I asked Biden if there was ever a time when he doubted that he would run again. "No," he said. "But, look, if I didn't think that the policies I put in place were best for the country, I don't think I'd be doing it again. I'm running again because I think two things: No. 1, I'm really proud of my record, and I want to keep it going. I'm optimistic about the future." He continued, "And, secondly, I look out there, and I say, 'O.K., we're just—most of what I've done is just kicking in now.'"

If you spend time with Biden these days, the biggest surprise is that he betrays no doubts. The world is riven by the question of whether he is up to a second term, but he projects a defiant belief in himself and his ability to

"I'm really proud of my record, and I want to keep it going," Biden says. "Most of what I've done is just kicking in now."

PHOTOGRAPH BY THEA TRAFF

persuade Americans to join him. For as long as Biden has been in politics, he has thrived on a mercurial mix of confidence and insecurity. Now, having reached the apex of power, he gives off a conviction that borders on serenity—a bit too much serenity for Democrats who wonder if he can still beat the man with whom his legacy will be forever entwined. Given the doubts, I asked, wasn't it a risk to say, "I'm the one to do it"? He shook his head and said, "No. I'm the only one who has ever beat him. And I'll beat him again." For Biden, the offense of the contested election was clearly personal. Trump had not just tried to steal the Presidency—he had tried to steal it *from him*. "I'd ask a rhetorical question," Biden said. "If you thought you were best positioned to beat someone who, if they won, would change the nature of America, what would you do?"

By the usual measures, Biden should be cruising to reëlection. Violent crime has dropped to nearly a fifty-year low, unemployment is below four per cent, and in January the S. & P. 500 and the Dow hit record highs. More Americans than ever have health insurance, and the country is producing more energy than at any previous moment in its history. His opponent, who is facing ninety-one criminal counts, has suggested that if he is elected he will fire as many as fifty thousand civil servants and replace them with loyalists, deputize the National Guard as a mass-deportation force, and root out what he calls "the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country."

But the usual measures do not apply these days. Rarely in American history have two major parties had such wildly different intentions—and such similar levels of support. In 2020, seven states hinged on a difference of less than three percentage points. "The electorate is frozen," Dmitri Mehlhorn, an adviser to Democratic donors, told me. "There will be important movements on the margin—but they are only important because this thing is fucking tied."

For a long time, Biden had a modest but steady advantage in the polls, ahead by three or four or five points. By this February, though, Trump had taken the lead, forty-seven to forty-two per cent, according to an NBC poll. (In 2020, by contrast, Biden never trailed Trump in any major poll.) Some Democrats were already complaining publicly that Biden's campaign was complacent and behind schedule in hiring staff for battleground states. On Bill Maher's podcast, the political consultant James Carville said, "Somebody better wake the fuck up." Maher wondered if Biden was in danger of staying so long in his job that he would be blamed for handing it to the opposition—becoming the "Ruth Bader Ginsburg of the Presidency." At a dinner attended by major donors in Chicago, Senator Chris Coons, a co-chair of the Biden campaign, struck a reassuring note. "I'm given to worry on occasion," he told the audience. "I've been known to wring my hands." But in the 2022 midterms, he reminded them, "the American people showed up," giving the Democrats unexpectedly strong results. "Folks, trust our voters," he said. "They will show up again."

As the election year arrived, Biden's aides argued that the polls were too early to be useful; they reasoned that sitting Presidents are often a target for free-form resentment—and that, in any case, only a quarter of Americans were engaged enough to even realize that it would be a choice between Trump and Biden. His advisers present his confidence as a virtue. One told me, "He is not diverted by politics or by bad polling or by some crazy-ass shit that Donald Trump has done." Bruce Reed, one of his closest aides, said, "We live in abnormal political times, but the American people are still normal people. Given a choice between normal and crazy, they're going to choose normal."

When I visited Biden in January, two days had passed since the Republican caucuses in Iowa. Trump had won all but one of the state's ninety-nine counties; the voting was so lopsided that news organizations called the race with many votes still to be cast. For all the speculation that Ron DeSantis might secure evangelical voters, Trump took even more of them than he had eight years before. In the Oval Office, I brought up the Iowa results and asked Biden to explain why Trump was still popular with a substantial portion of Americans. He disputed my framing. "Substantial portion of the Republican *MAGA party*," he said. "That's who it is."

His objection was not just rhetorical. "Look, a hundred thousand people voted," he said. "He got fifty per cent of a hundred thousand votes." To be precise, it was closer to a hundred and ten thousand votes, but the point remained: Trump had generated the lowest turnout in a contested G.O.P. race in a quarter century, a drop of forty per cent from the Republican primary of 2016. It didn't help that temperatures were below zero that night, but the fact was that nearly half the Republicans who voted chose someone other than Trump. Some forty per cent of Nikki Haley supporters in Iowa told pollsters that if she fell short they would vote for Biden. "Now, they're going to argue the weather was the reason," Biden told me. "But what about this enthusiasm—this hard-baked enthusiasm?"

Trump is too familiar and too disliked to attract many new supporters. And when voters are asked in polls how they will react if he is actually convicted of a felony, Biden pulls ahead again. But the schedule of Trump's trials is in flux, and, even if he is convicted, it is difficult to predict how that unprecedented spectacle will reverberate.

By the end of January, the race was nearing the point at which history shows a correlation between approval ratings and electoral results: incumbents who trail their opponent nine months from Election Day rarely go on to win. When pollsters asked who would do better in specific areas, the gaps were stark. On immigration and border security, Trump led Biden fifty-seven to twenty-two; on the economy, fifty-five to thirty-three. On the "required mental and physical stamina for the presidency," Trump was lapping Biden, forty-six to twenty-three per cent. Even seasoned analysts who tend to discount small fluctuations in polls took note. "Let's say it's a fifty-per-cent chance that Trump could be President again," a prominent Biden donor told me. "That's like a fifty-per-cent chance that the doctor is going to tell you that you have pancreatic cancer."

David Axelrod, who was Obama's

chief campaign strategist, told me that age was the crucial issue for Biden. "I don't question his competence as President," he said. "You give me Biden's record and take fifteen years off of him, and this wouldn't be a competitive race. This is the barrier he has to overcome, and it's a hard one, because the march of time is immutable."

The kind of people who believe that they should be President of the United States do not generally go graciously into retirement. Alexander Hamilton, who knew his share of ex-politicians, described them as "discontented ghosts." When Richard Nixon was between stints in office, he fretted, "I'm going to be mentally dead in two years and physically dead in four." Calvin Coolidge, the only twentieth-century President who voluntarily passed up a reasonable chance at reëlection, said that he hoped to avoid "grasping for office." (Coolidge noted that Presidents "live in an artificial atmosphere of adulation and exaltation which sooner or later impairs their judgment.") In Biden's case, he has been in politics so long that one of his aides told me a decade ago that he seemed "afraid if he stops working he might just fall over."

Early in Biden's Presidency, his age was a fixation mostly on the right. Conservative media circulated video anytime he fell—while dismounting from his bike, or tripping over a sandbag onstage. Kevin McCarthy, the Speaker of the House, joked about bringing "soft food" to a meeting with Biden, even though McCarthy was, according to Politico, "privately telling allies that he found the president sharp and substantive." Biden's doctors reported no significant trouble. (His latest medical report, released last week, lists sleep apnea; atrial fibrillation; a "stiff" gait, owing to arthritis and the aftermath of a fractured foot; and gastroesophageal reflux, which causes him to cough and clear his throat. Like most of his predecessors, Biden didn't undergo a cognitive test, but the report notes that an "extremely detailed neurologic exam was again reassuring.")

For a time, Democrats who worried that Biden's age would prevent his reëlection hesitated to speak out. "A lot of people thought, O.K., we'll get our ass kicked in the midterms, and then we'll have this big conversation about whether Joe should run again," a former Democratic official told me. "Then the midterms are this big surprise." For Biden, questions about his age were inextricable from feelings of being underestimated by the establishment. In 2015, during his second term as Vice-President, when he was reeling from the death of his son Beau, Obama enveloped him in personal support but was, in Biden's words, "not encouraging" of his running for President—a fact that some intimates recall with bitterness. (One told me that Biden was treated in a spirit of "See you later. Emeritus. God bless. Nice guy.") An effort to discourage him from running for reëlection in 2024 could well have had the opposite effect. Besides, Trump—just four years younger than Biden—was already so prone to signs of age that the DeSantis campaign set up a social-media account called the Trump Accident Tracker. He had confused Jeb Bush with George W. Bush, talked about Obama when he meant Biden or Hillary Clinton, and called the Hungarian Prime Minister "the leader of Turkey."

The former Hollywood executive Jeffrey Katzenberg, a co-chair of Biden's campaign, urged him to embrace his age with swagger, like his fellow-octogenarians Mick Jagger and Harrison Ford. Biden tried out some jokes. Just as Ronald Reagan, in a 1984 debate, had vowed not to "exploit the youth and inexperience of my opponent," Biden told an audience he had "never been more optimistic about our country's future in the eight hundred years I've served." In the meme wars on social media, the campaign promoted illustrations of Biden as a political mastermind, firing lasers from his eyes.

Still, Axelrod and others eventually started voicing their worries. "I felt like Biden had the ability to say, 'I've run my race, and I've faithfully fulfilled my duties to the nation,'" he told me. "He's really done a hell of a job, but he is not a particularly competent performer in front of cameras now. That's mostly how people interact with the President. Bill Clinton said, 'Strong and wrong generally beats weak and right.'" (When Axelrod expressed criticisms, Biden reportedly dismissed him as a "prick," after which one of Axelrod's friends printed campaign buttons that read "Pricks for Biden.")

The concerns about Biden's age exploded on February 8th, with the release of a report by the special counsel Robert Hur on the handling of classified documents, which Biden's lawyers had reported after discovering them in his offices and garage. Hur, who had worked for the Justice Department under Trump, concluded that he lacked evidence to bring charges, but also described Biden, indelibly, as "a sympathetic, well-meaning,

"Is anyone sitting here?"

elderly man with a poor memory." Hur wrote that Biden "did not remember, even within several years, when his son Beau died."

The Administration could have chosen to emphasize the fact that Biden, unlike Trump, had been exonerated, but Biden wanted to dispute Hur's comments. At a hastily called press conference, he said, "I'm well meaning and I'm an elderly man and I know what the hell I'm doing." He seethed at the assertion that he did not remember the date of his son's death, saying, "I don't need anyone to remind me when he passed away." In his final answer of the night, after being asked about hostage negotiations, he slipped up, referring to the Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, as the President of Mexico. Stories about Biden's age and memory dominated the news for days. After the *Times* carried several articles on the topic on a single Sunday, Margaret Sullivan, the newspaper's former public editor, criticized the response as disproportionate—calling it the "2024 version of the media's obsession with Hillary's emails"—and faulted the press for not focussing as much on Trump's recent threat to let Russia "do whatever the hell they want" against NATO allies that do not spend enough on their militaries.

Hur's comments and Biden's press conference spread panic among Democrats. "If we don't get an emergency transplant, we're going to die," one donor told me. Ezra Klein, of the *Times*, argued that Biden was governing well but was no longer capable of sustaining the "performance" that a campaign requires: "Whether it is true that Biden has it all under control, it is not true that he seems like he does." Klein proposed that Democrats hold an open convention this summer and let a "murderers' row of political talent" compete for the nomination. Proponents often mention Gretchen Whitmer, Raphael Warnock, and Gavin Newsom, among others. But, at the moment, none of these people poll better against Trump than Biden does, or have enough money on hand to mount a serious campaign. And holding an open convention risks fracturing the Party, as a relatively small group of insiders scramble to pick a candidate. The last time Democrats held an open convention, in 1968, a Party divided by war fought openly; the losers stayed home on Election Day, and Richard Nixon won by one per cent.

Unless Biden decides to step aside, it is overwhelmingly likely that he will be the nominee in November. "There is no group of wise men or women who compose the Party anymore, who have the assumed gravitas," Michael Kazin, the author of "What It Took to Win," a history of the Democratic Party, told me. "The President now runs the Party."

Like many Democrats, Axelrod has turned his critiques to the opposition. "Now I think the question is: how do you make the best argument for Biden in a race against Donald Trump?" he told me. "Both these guys are old. The difference between them is one of them is actually working on the project of building a better future—not for himself, but for the country and for our kids and grandkids. And then you have on the other side a guy who's not looking to the future but is consumed by his own past."

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, of Rhode Island, voiced a position that I encountered among many high-ranking Democrats. "He's not the only option that we *had*," he told me. "But, once he'd made the decision to go, he became the only option that we *have*." In the months that remain, Whitehouse said, the best way to beat Trump is a strategy that he called "Biden plus offense." When people are "frightened or angry, you need to convince them that you, too, are equally concerned and you're willing to throw punches and pick fights," he said. "If you've got your sleeves rolled up and you're waist-deep fighting alligators in the swamp, then nobody's really thinking about your age."

"Aside from the wholesale abandonment, and the immediate mad dash from predators, I'd say my childhood was pretty good."

Last March, Trump held the first rally of his 2024 Presidential campaign in Waco, Texas—a choice with unsubtle significance. Thirty years before, federal agents in Waco confronted a cult called the Branch Davidians, whose members were stockpiling weapons and explosives in their compound. After a siege, the building caught fire, and more than seventy people died. The incident became a rallying cry for right-wing activists and militiamen, who see themselves as locked in conflict with a tyrannical regime. Trump's event embraced the full aesthetic of anti-government resistance. He stood onstage with his hand over his heart, while loudspeak-

ers blared "Justice for All"—a recording in which inmates serving time for their role on January 6th sing "The Star-Spangled Banner," as Trump recites the Pledge of Allegiance. ("Justice for All" later reached the top of a *Billboard* chart.) While the song played, a huge screen showed scenes of the riot at the Capitol. Trump told the crowd, "For seven years, you and I have been taking on the corrupt, rotten, and sinister forces trying to destroy America." He declared, "2024 is the final battle."

The violence of January 6th has become a touchstone for Biden, too, but with a different valence. He staged his first rally of 2024 on the eve of the riot's third anniversary, near a site chosen to dramatize the stakes: Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where George Washington hunkered down in 1777 and turned a group of militias into a cohesive force for democracy.

The encampment sprawled across a grassy plateau, where Washington arrived at the head of a contingent of weary and ill-equipped soldiers. Biden arrived in Marine One, accompanied by dusty green military helicopters loaded with advisers, security staff, and the press pool. The Presidential arrival is a hoary ritual of the media, but these days it carries the added risk that any stumble will become fodder for critics. Biden descended the steps from the helicopter and turned back to extend a hand to Jill Biden, his wife. They gazed at the weathered remnants of the revolutionary camp, then ducked into a waiting limousine. After a couple of stops—laying a wreath at a memorial, visiting a stone house that Washington used as his headquarters—the motorcade headed to a community college in the nearby suburb of Blue Bell, where Biden would give a speech.

Biden stepped onstage to the audience's chant of "Four more years!" But little of what followed bore much resemblance to a typical campaign speech. There was no ingratiation, no name-check for the local pols. He barely bothered with the requisite list of first-term achievements. "The topic of my speech today is deadly serious," he began, "and I think it needs to be made at the outset of this campaign." He talked of the sacrifices memorialized at Valley Forge. "America made a vow—never again would we bow down to a king," he said. "Whether democracy is still America's sacred cause is the most urgent question of our time." He turned to the memory of January 6th and ticked through the horrors of that day—the wooden gallows, the chants of "Where's Nancy?" Over and over, he named Trump—more than forty times in all. "Trump lost sixty court cases—*sixty*," Biden said. "The legal path just took him back to the truth: that I won the election, and he was a *loser*." The crowd erupted in chuckling applause.

Four years ago, Biden tried to position himself as a unifier in an age of conflict and name-calling. But there is less of a market for that this time, and in any case he finds it hard to hide his contempt. He conjured the image of Trump joking about the attack on Nancy Pelosi's husband, Paul, who was struck with a hammer, fracturing his skull: "He laughed about it. What a sick—" Biden held up his hands, as if to stop himself from going further, and clenched his fists as the crowd applauded. (In private, Biden is less decorous; among other things, he has been heard to call Trump a "sick fuck.") He cited Trump's threat to give the death penalty to Mark Milley, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and his reported mockery of dead soldiers as "suckers" and "losers." (Trump has denied this.) "How dare he?" Biden asked. "Who in God's name does he think he is?" He was rolling now, calm and clear. Preserving America's democracy, he told the crowd, is "the central cause of my Presidency."

For nearly half a century in Washington, Biden worked on many things—foreign policy, crime, domestic violence. It's only now, in the era of Trump, that he has arrived at a defining mission. In the final moments of the speech, he posed a question that will almost certainly feature in his rhetoric in the months ahead, a question that could be posed to Biden as much as to the audience. "We all know who Donald Trump is," he said. "The question we have to answer is: who are we?"

Among the staff members backstage at the rally, none had spent more time formulating that day's message than Mike Donilon, an unassuming man in a roomy gray suit. Donilon is, as Sheldon Whitehouse puts it, the "high priest of Bidenism." At sixty-five, he has short white hair, long white eyebrows, and a quiet voice, often used to deliver gnomic pronouncements. He does not tweet or go on television, and even after decades in politics he slips into restaurants in D.C. without attracting notice. He started out as a pollster before making ads and running strategy for campaigns, and has worked with Biden off and on since 1981, longer than nearly any other member of his inner circle. In the 2020 election, it was Donilon who spurred Biden on, helping to shape the campaign around the concept of a "battle for the soul of a nation." He followed Biden into the White House as a senior adviser.

Donilon's mild demeanor can be misleading. Like Biden, he has firm beliefs—about politics, the public, the press—and a contrarian side. In 2020, he and his campaign team had to decide whether to emphasize the economy or the more abstract idea that Trump imperilled the essence of America. "We bet on the latter," Donilon said, even though "our own pollsters told us that talking about 'the soul of the nation' was nutty." That experience fortified his belief that this year's campaign should center on what he calls "the freedom agenda." By November, he predicted, "the focus will become overwhelming on democracy. I think the biggest images in people's minds are going to be of January 6th."

He sees a parallel to the race between George W. Bush and John Kerry, in 2004. At the time, Donilon was working on television ads for Kerry. "The Democratic Party didn't want to believe it was a 9/11 election," he said. Instead, the Party tried to focus on an array of issues—the war in Iraq, the economy, hostility to Bush. But, shortly before the election, a new video of Osama bin Laden was released that dredged up memories of 9/11. Bush won, and Donilon vowed not to repeat the error: "I decided, after the election, I would never be part of a Presidential campaign that didn't figure out—with clarity—what it wanted to say and stick to it."

It's easy to miss how unusual a "freedom agenda" is for a Democratic Presidential campaign. Since the nineteen-sixties, Republicans have held fast to the language of freedom—from the backlash against civil rights to the Tea Party to the Freedom Caucus. But Democrats have been trying to convince the

public that the Republican Party under Trump has transformed into the "MAGA movement," an authoritarian crusade bent on dominion. Donilon said, "At its heart, it doesn't believe in the Constitution, doesn't believe in law, embraces violence." He sees an opportunity for Democrats to be "in a place where they usually aren't." They can lay claim to the freedom to "choose your own health-care decisions, the freedom to vote, the freedom for your kids to be free of gun violence in school, the freedom for seniors to live in dignity."

The idea of wrapping the 2024 campaign around this kind of high concept is divisive in Democratic circles. "I'm pretty certain in Scranton they're not sitting around their dinner table talking about democracy every night," David Axelrod told me. "The Republican message is: The world's out of control and Biden's not in command. That's the entire message—Trump, the strongman, is the solution. I think you have to be thinking about how you counter that, and how you deal with fears about Biden's condition." Axelrod argues that in 2020, even as the Democrats summoned concerns about the soul of a nation, they never lost sight of more concrete issues: "Biden as a guy who really understood and fought for the middle class, Biden as a person of faith, and Biden as someone who had a deep connection to the military. It was basically 'Biden is one of us.'"

Donilon is undeterred. He shares Biden's pride in defying predictions that Democrats would take heavy losses in the 2022 midterms, because of inflation and poor views of the economy; instead, they expanded their Senate majority and picked up two governors' seats, the best performance in decades by a party in the White House. The freedom campaign, Donilon said, is a story in three acts: "The first act was 2020. Trump represented a threat, and Biden won. 2022 was a second round. You had these election deniers, and all these folks around the country, and they were beaten back." He added, "Round three is 2024. The thing is, you got to win all the rounds."

As the crowd dispersed in Pennsylvania, I scanned the social-media reaction to Biden's speech. His supporters had thrilled to the flashes of anger: "Biden almost slips up and calls Trump a sick fuck"; "pissed off Biden is my favorite Biden." His opponents were posting, too, of course, but they didn't bother with the content of his remarks. The Republican National Committee put up a clip of Biden walking stiffly beside the First Lady. Soon, it had been reposted hundreds of times, while the posts in Biden's favor had not spread as widely.

That was no accident, according to Sarah Longwell, a former Republican strategist and a founder of the Bulwark news site. "Democrats do not build their own echo chambers the way Republicans do," she said. "It's a strange communications differential. It's not rocket science: you create a narrative, you are relentless about promoting it, you have a million people all working from the same sheet of paper." She continued, "I know that this is a thing with Democrats—it's like herding cats—but if Biden is not the strongest communicator, why aren't there hundreds of surrogates for him? Having spent a long time on the Republican side, I am constantly flabbergasted by the inability of Democrats to prosecute a case against Republicans relentlessly, with a knife in their teeth."

In Chester County, on the outskirts of Philadelphia, I stopped for dinner with three local Democratic volunteers. "The three of us live in the swing district of the swing county of the swing state," Caroline Bradley, a marketing director for a fitness company, told me. "Registration for our district is pretty much fifty-fifty, Democrats and Republicans." Her friend Vanessa Babinecz chimed in, "Purple, purple, purple!" Babinecz, who is thirty-eight years old and of mixed race, works as an administrator at a private school, and had watched the Valley Forge speech at home, with her toddler on her lap. "I was riveted," she said—and that surprised her. "He can still connect with people."

Babinecz confessed a lack of enthusiasm for Biden. "I wish there was someone younger, but I don't know anyone who's younger who's qualified, who could do it," she said. "I thought Kamala would've been great, but for whatever reason she just can't make a compelling speech." Babinecz is confident, though, that women will be motivated to vote by Republican efforts to eliminate access to abortion. She said, "Every single woman I've ever talked to about it either has had an abortion or knows someone who's had an abortion." She offered the Pres-

INVITATION

Should we take a trip?
Find a room in the woods
With a fireplace, the scent

Of dry wood on fire, of pine
Beyond the room where we
Could be falling asleep, entangled?

There might be a wind
That breathes in the tree scent
To the bed where under blankets

We could be assembling something,
Or dissembling something else,
Placing some disassembled pieces

Back together with memory's glue.
The weather is only the weather,
And like us resembles the moods

That blow through us. That carry us.
We could be here in a flickering light
Or somewhere we once were

Where the wood was damp
And the smoke off that wood
Carried a heavy fragrance, unlike

The pale and light eventual smoke off wood
Drying now, imagined and unignited.
Did we ever discuss distance?

Was there a thought about
What was yet to come while
Looking back, a road snaking

Both ahead and subtracting back
To what hasn't arrived? We could be
There in the smoke of burning trees,

We could be planning to travel,
To a room filled with the smoke
Scent of what is almost here.

—*Daniel Halpern*

ident some advice: "He needs to have a few viral TikToks and a few viral Instagrams. We need to see pictures of him in his slippers interacting with his grandkids. A more approachable side, not just him on a stage."

Social media could be vital. With older Americans already entrenched in partisan identity, strategists are focussed on mobilizing young urbanites. Dmitri Mehlhorn, the donor adviser, said that the numbers are potentially significant: "How many Millennials and Gen Z-ers are in dense cities in one of the seven swing states? About five million."

Bradley, who described herself as a "HinJew" ("My father's Hindu, my mother's Jewish"), keeps a close eye on persuadable voters, monitoring the number of people who contact the local Democratic Party to switch their registration. Through her outreach, she's heard that "people are sick of Biden now. I don't know if fear of Trump is enough this year." When major candidates are unpopular, third-party options prosper. Though polls show modest support for Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Cornel West, and Jill Stein, protest votes can tip the results of a tight race—and they become more likely when people think that their vote won't determine the outcome.

As we talked, the volunteers returned often to the challenge of getting Biden's message to break through to an overloaded, disengaged public. Bradley looked back fondly at the simplicity of an earlier slogan: "You want to know why Barack Obama was awesome? Hope, change. Hope, change." She went on, "Biden hasn't figured out how to be clickbait. I work full time. I have two kids. How much time do people really have? Biden does all of these things and nobody knows what he's done." Biden has passed up major opportunities to advertise his record, including televised interviews before the Super Bowl. His advisers have embraced less conventional venues—he has appeared on podcasts with comedians and with a life-style guru.

There is no guarantee that the more people see Biden, the more they'll like him. But as Longwell, the former Republican strategist, who has spent hundreds of hours with focus groups, told me, "Trump was in people's faces so insanely all the time for so long that actually voters got quite used to the rhythms of a President who was just front and center constantly. Let's get Biden on shop floors, in swing states, putting his arms around people. People think he is invisible."

When you go to work for Biden, you'll likely hear his version of Tip O'Neill's classic political adage. In his view, all politics is not local; it's *personal*. Even more than most politicians, Biden refracts the world through the lens of the individual—through an accounting of people's idiosyncrasies and biographies, their talents, flaws, and blind spots. Before meeting foreign leaders for the first time, he will grill his briefer for insights into their areas of pride and vulnerability. When he talks about economics, he refers to data less often than to "dignity," and he routinely conjures up the image of a laid-off father or mother, on the humiliating trip home to face their kids. Senator Whitehouse told me, "The world is personal to him in a way that it is not to everyone."

Biden takes the same approach to his own life, which he tends to frame in terms of obstacles overcome and respect earned—or, when necessary, seized. In his first memoir, "Promises to Keep" (2008), he devoted the opening chapter to his stutter, which a nun mocked by calling him "bu-bu-bu-bu-Biden," and to his efforts to defeat it by practicing Irish poetry in front of the mirror. He also recalled his mother's high-minded pugilism: "She once shipped my brother Jim off with instructions to bloody the nose of a kid who was picking on smaller kids, and she gave him a dollar when he'd done it."

Biden's self-mythology took shape around the figure of the underdog. "I was young for my grade and always little for my age, but I made up for it by demonstrating I had guts," he wrote of his early years, in Scranton. He described exploring the region's culm dumps, heaps of coal slag with fires smoldering below the crust: "On a dare, I'd climb to the top of a burning culm dump, swing out over a construction site, race under a moving dump truck. If I could visualize myself doing it, I knew I could do it."

That effortful confidence carried over into politics. After scraping through the University of Delaware, he graduated from law school at Syracuse University, despite rarely attending class. In 1972, as a council member in New Castle County, with governing experience

"I, for one, refuse to just sit at the door pining for his return."

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mostly related to stoplights and sewers, he decided to run for the United States Senate. His opponent, Senator Caleb Boggs, had won seven straight elections, but Biden saw a path for himself—playing up his youth, showing off his handsome family, flattering Boggs with patronizing grace. In June, while polling at three per cent, Biden rented the biggest ballroom in Delaware for what he was already calling his "victory celebration." When he won—by just three thousand votes—it was one of the biggest upsets in Senate history.

In 1987, as Richard Ben Cramer started writing "What It Takes," his study of the psychology of Presidential aspirants, he gravitated to Biden, then a third-term senator competing in the Democratic primary. Biden had survived a personal agony almost beyond reckoning: in 1972, a car accident had killed his wife, Neilia, and daughter, Naomi, and left his young sons, Beau and Hunter, hospitalized. But Biden had found a calling in the Senate, where he came to believe ever more deeply in his capacity to envision a way through obstacles. "Joe called that process 'gaming it out,'" Cramer wrote, "and it went on continuously in his head."

Biden, the persuasive son of a car salesman, was always gaming out ideas that others thought half crazy—like the time he bought a dilapidated mansion, full of squirrels and asbestos, for two hundred thousand dollars that he didn't have, or the time he fell in love with a crop of enormous hemlock bushes at a nursery in Pennsylvania and borrowed a truck to haul them home. "Joe drove the thing," Cramer wrote, "overloaded, rocking and pitching, with trees hanging off the tail, down the back roads, an hour and a half, back to Wilmington." Sometimes Biden's ambition nearly derailed his career; in 1987, his first run for President ended abruptly after he was found to have embellished his biography and used other politicians' lines in his speeches. Biden returned to the Senate, and in 2008, after another unsuccessful campaign for the Presidency, Obama asked him to join his ticket. The idea was that he would bring some foreign-policy experience, a connection to working-class white voters, and not much else. Biden was sixty-five years old; the job would be, as Obama's strategist David Plouffe later put it, "a capstone to his storied career."

In the Vice-Presidency, Biden took bristly pride in defying the political wisdom of younger advisers. In 2012, he publicly embraced gay marriage while Obama was still weighing the political implications. The same year, though, he sided against progressives in a debate over requiring health-care plans to provide free contraception. When Biden argued that it risked alienating religious voters, a White House aide is said to have dismissed his concern as an artifact of the "electoral map of 1992," when "the Catholic, white, Reagan Democrat vote was decisive."

Some of those same voters would prove decisive again, when they sided with Trump in the 2016 election. But Biden was not in that race, of course. As he entered the last year of his Vice-Presidency, his son Beau was stricken with brain cancer—the second great agony of Biden's life. He coped by returning to his "purpose" as a public servant—asking his chief of staff to overload the schedule with work, and telling him, about his family's car accident, "The only way I survived, the only way I got through it, was by staying busy and keeping my mind, when it can be, focused on my job."

When Biden left office, he was still in mourning, and for the first time in decades he was unsure what to do next. He started public-policy organizations, signed a reported eight-million-dollar contract for three books, advocated for veterans' issues and cancer research. Meanwhile, his son Hunter was coming apart; he had leveraged the family name into a much criticized business venture, joining the board of Burisma, an energy company in Ukraine, while his father was still overseeing relations with the country. While Hunter descended into addiction, he made a multimillion-dollar deal with a Chinese energy company that also benefitted his uncle James. (Hunter is awaiting a possible trial in California on federal tax charges.) Those ventures have become a focus of Republican-led investigations, but they have produced no evidence that Joe Biden was financially involved.

In 2017, Biden published his second book, "Promise Me, Dad," framed around a moment near the end of Beau's life when he implored his father to stay engaged in public life after he was gone. In April, 2019, Biden entered the Presidential primary, but found himself beset by concerns that he was too old, too out of touch. After he lost in Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada, advisers told him that he was so low on cash he might be finished within weeks.

In a turnaround that Biden and his aides still often cite, he won the South Carolina primary, thanks in part to a long-standing bond with Representative James Clyburn, who delivered an endorsement that carried singular weight with Black voters: "We know Joe. But, most importantly, Joe knows us." Democrats, fearing a divisive primary, rapidly coalesced around Biden, and he went on to beat Trump by more than seven million votes. It was a smaller margin than polls had predicted—but it also represented the highest turnout in a Presidential election in decades.

Winning the Presidency after Trump was a mixed blessing. During the usual redecoration of the Oval Office, Biden was surprised by a proposal to put Franklin Roosevelt's portrait over the fireplace. "I said, 'I admire Roosevelt, but why Roosevelt?'" he told me. Citing the threat to democracy, the Presidential historian Jon Meacham told him, "Not since Roosevelt has anyone ever inherited a circumstance of more difficulty."

The economy was in ruins. On Inauguration Day, unemployment was 6.3 per cent, and food banks were sustaining millions of people who had been laid off. Thousands of Americans were still dying of COVID every day. Arriving at the White House, Jeff Zients, who was assigned to take over the pandemic response, could not bear to dwell on images of hospitals. "I remember watching CNN out of the corner of my eye, and finally turning it off," he said.

On both COVID and the economy, Biden had a core belief: better to respond too heavily than too lightly. "I want to overwhelm the problem," he told aides. The risk of a stimulus is inflation, but Biden recalled a bitter lesson from the financial collapse during the Obama Administration, when a stimulus proved insufficient and Republicans, who took control of the House in the next year's midterms, refused to agree to more. Biden told aides working on the stimulus proposal, "We're not going to be able to do this again." In March, 2021, after intense debate among members of the Administration and Congress, Biden signed a $1.9-trillion package. In July, as inflation was registering worldwide, Biden's approval rating fell substantially for the first time.

That drop in popularity was compounded in August, when Biden fulfilled a years-long desire to pull American troops from Afghanistan—despite warnings that he should disregard the timetable set by Trump. The withdrawal was ugly. The Taliban took over almost instantly, and the Administration was desperately unprepared; it airlifted out some hundred and twenty thousand people, but tens of thousands more who had worked for the U.S. government were still clamoring for evacuation. In "The Last Politician," a book about Biden's first two years in the Presidency, Franklin Foer wrote that criticism of his policy "caused him to stubbornly defend his own logic." According to Foer, Biden saw the scathing coverage and told an aide, "Either the press is losing its mind, or I am." As people scrambled to flee, a bombing at the gates of the Kabul airport killed thirteen American troops and nearly two hundred Afghans.

Biden's popularity might have recovered as the economy steadied. The stimulus was likely contributing modestly to rising prices, but it had also kept many out of poverty. Then, in February, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Biden was lauded for his response; European leaders had wrongly predicted that Vladimir Putin was bluffing, but the Administration had released accurate intelligence in advance, which fortified Biden's bid to rally NATO allies. Nevertheless, the costs of energy and shipping spiked,

and, by that June, prices in America had soared more than nine per cent in one year—the steepest rise in four decades.

The feeling of a world out of control—inflation, Afghanistan, Ukraine—contributed to a sense that Biden was floundering. Larry Summers, the former Treasury Secretary, said that a recession was "almost inevitable." Biden repeatedly disputed the idea, even as a consensus formed: in December, a *Financial Times* survey of economists found that eighty-five per cent predicted a recession within a year. Bloomberg Economics calculated the odds at a hundred per cent.

Those predictions proved resoundingly wrong. By 2024, the country had gained more than three million jobs, unemployment was at historic lows, consumer confidence was steadily rising, and the United States was in stronger shape than all other advanced economies. (Germany, by contrast, declared a recession in early 2023.) The economist Tyler Cowen concluded, in a postmortem on the forecasts, "The problem is that the real world is not as consistent as model builders might like."

Biden takes evident pride in having been right. He asked me, "How many times did you and your colleagues write, 'The recession is coming next month'?" In pursuing a larger stimulus, Biden was challenging what he often calls "the orthodoxy of trickle-down economics." That view, he said, held that "the only way we're going to get inflation down is to get unemployment up to ten per cent. Come on. That's how it worked in the past, because we'd want to make sure the wealthy don't get hurt. But who pays for that?" The goal was rebuilding the economy from "the middle out and the bottom up," he said. "When that happens, everybody does well, including—*including*—the wealthy."

In January, when the S. & P. 500 and the Dow hit their highest points in history, Biden posted a video from 2020 of Trump predicting that a Biden win would lead to "a stock market collapse the likes of which you've never had." More recently, Trump had said that he was hoping for a crash. "He'd like to see a recession or a depression," Biden said, aghast. "He doesn't want to be the next Herbert Hoover? He's *already* Herbert Hoover. He's the only President that ever lost jobs in a four-year period—other than Hoover."

Roger Altman, a Deputy Secretary of the Treasury in the Clinton Administration, told me, "The data is so good you have to rub your eyes." But feelings about the economy have become, in part, a proxy for partisan identity. In December, more than three-quarters of respondents in a poll for Axios acknowledged reports of the recovery but said they were "not feeling it where I live." Those most likely to report financial distress were

Republicans and rural Americans. Biden, Altman said, needs to hammer home the idea: " 'We're getting key prices back down for you.' Talk about it every half hour, because this grocery-price anger is a real problem."

Three days after the Valley Forge speech, Biden was back on the road—this time to Charleston, South Carolina, where he could counter talk that he was losing ground with an important demographic. Four years earlier, Black voters had resuscitated his campaign. Now, according to an NBC News survey, their approval of Biden had dropped nearly twenty points in a year.

The Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church occupies a creaky nineteenth-century sanctuary—and a singular position in the history of the Black freedom struggle. Founded near what was once one of the country's busiest slave ports, it became known as Mother Emanuel, because it spawned so many churches across the Lowcountry of South Carolina. In 2015, it gained international notice, in horrific fashion, when a white supremacist, welcomed at a Bible study, pulled out a gun and murdered the pastor and eight parishioners.

The horror at Mother Emanuel would come to be understood as an opening shot in an age of far-right violence, and of radicalization in the Republican Party. Joseph Darby, a reverend and an influential political voice in Charleston, told me, "It was a dog whistle in the Nixon days. It's a bullhorn now. You've got Nikki Haley running around with amnesia about slavery. You've got DeSantis trying to ban books and saying that slaves might've learned to make a buck while they were being beaten, raped, and maimed."

On the dais at Mother Emanuel, backed by a towering stained-glass mosaic, Biden faced an audience of about seven hundred parishioners and guests. He was introduced by Clyburn, the dean of South Carolina's congressional delegation, who ticked through the Administration's programs and repeated his crucial imprimatur: "As I told you four years ago, we know Joe. But, more importantly, Joe knows us."

Biden rose from his seat, embraced Clyburn, and stepped forward. Before he spoke much of politics, he spoke of loss. After the massacre, Biden and Hunter had visited the church. The trip was meant "to show our solidarity," Biden recalled, but Beau had died only three weeks earlier, and "my family also needed to be healed." Now, he said, seeing family members of some of those killed "reminds me that, through our pain, each of us—each of us—must find purpose."

Biden didn't restrain himself from politics for long. In the minutes that followed, he drew his opponent into a blistering analogy to the aftermath of the Civil War, when, he said, "defeated Confederates couldn't accept the verdict of the war." They took refuge in "a self-serving lie that the Civil War was not about slavery but about states' rights." That lie, in turn, gave rise to Jim Crow. "Once again, there are some in this country trying to turn a loss into a lie," Biden said. "This time, the lie is about the 2020 election, the election in which you made your voices heard and your power known." He never mentioned Trump's name, but the point was clear. "In our time, there's still the old ghost in new garments," he told the crowd. "And we all need to rise to meet the moment."

Seated in the second row was Deon Tedder, the son of a custodian and a secretary, who was elected last year to the state senate. He knows that some young voters are unimpressed with Biden. "They're saying, 'Well, what has he done? We don't see anything,' " Tedder told me. Trump put his name on people's stimulus checks—and they still talk about them. But the effects of Biden's policy agenda will take years to manifest. Tedder went on, "Democrats, even here, we are horrible with messaging. Talk about student-loan forgiveness. Talk about the push to decriminalize nonviolent offenses. You have to break it down so that people can connect."

After leaving the church, Biden stopped at Hannibal's, a venerable soul-food spot that draws Democrats on the stump. A President's entourage is the size of a small army, but as Biden moved from booth to booth he seemed relaxed for the first time all day. A half century of glad-handing shone through. Approaching the owner, who was standing with his daughters, he asked, with mock concern, "Do you know these women?" The man beamed and said, "They're the next generation. I'm the old patriarch—like you."

Biden's victory in the South Carolina primary, on February 3rd, was never in question, but the returns would be studied for indications of his campaign's momentum. The results were encouraging for Democrats. Turnout in Orangeburg County, home to two historically Black universities, was the second-highest in the state—and it was higher still in the county's predominantly African American precincts.

Reverend Darby told me that he has always thought Biden's standing among Black voters was better than press accounts suggested. "Donald Trump is not exactly the picture of health, but if Joe Biden wears sneakers there's a great national concern. There's something wrong with that balance," he said. He believes that as the year moves on voters will recognize practical improvements from some Biden-era policies. He said, "My late wife was diabetic. The first time I found out how much insulin costs, I asked, 'How much is it with insurance?' And the pharmacist said, 'That is with insurance.'" (Under the Inflation Reduction Act, a month of insulin, which used to cost Darby about two hundred dollars, is now capped for Medicare recipients at thirty-five dollars.) He continued, "I have two sons. Neither of them are exceptionally enthused. But both of them say, 'I will be at the polls. Can't have Trump.'"

The Trump White House confronted Americans with a parade of emergencies, pratfalls, and defenestrations. The Biden Administration, by contrast, has a culture of almost ostentatious calm. Biden's public statements are "actively sedative," as one commentator put it, and Cabinet members seem to go out of their way to avoid generating excitement. In a list of their personal New Year's resolutions published by Politico, Gina Raimondo, the Secretary of Commerce, declared, "I'm hoping to drink less diet soda."

Turnover has been rare in the top ranks of the Administration. Biden has long retained a core group of advisers, and, unlike in the previous Administration, top aides don't regularly disparage each other to reporters. Anita Dunn, a senior adviser who specializes in communications, considers that a by-product of age. "You don't have a lot of the jockeying around being close to him, or 'Who is he listening to?'" she said.

"We're closer to the end of our careers than the middles or the beginnings."

But the culture of calm also relies on a capacity for setting aside concerns. A series of senior aides told me that they doubt Biden is trailing Trump as much as some polls have suggested. "Polling is broken," one of them said. "You can't figure out how to get someone on the phone." Pollsters partly concede the point; few people these days are willing to be candid with a stranger about politics, and fewer still have landlines. "I think the only person who calls me on my landline is Joe Biden," the aide added. Campaigns that are trailing in the polls often impugn them, of course, but Biden aides cite reasons for their skepticism. When I raised the issue with Jennifer O'Malley Dillon, a top adviser who recently moved from the White House to the campaign, she made a distinction between "favorability" (a line of inquiry in opinion polls) and "vote choice" (the outcome of recent elections, notably the recent ones in which Democrats did well). "Historically, favorability and vote choice have been correlated," she said. "I actually think that that's no longer the case."

Outside the White House, though, concerned Democrats note that Biden was not on the ballot in 2022 or 2023, so voters did not have a chance to signal their feelings about him. They worry that aides are relying too much on Biden's self-image as the underdog who disproves the doubters. In any Administration, there is a tendency to amplify the good news and obscure the bad. "Every White House does it to some degree," the former Democratic official told me. He said he believes that Biden's polls show "flashing red warning signs," but that the President "can just choose to hear the positive reinforcement."

Unsurprisingly, Biden's aides reject the idea that the White House is insular or dismissive of reality. Zients, who succeeded Ron Klain as chief of staff last year, pointed to Biden's reputation for soliciting opinions from critics. "Just the other day, he picked up the phone and called Larry Summers," Zients said. As outreach goes, it was relatively safe; Summers, despite his critical comments, is a longtime adviser to Presidents. Biden's other occasional calls range from the columnist Thomas Friedman to the Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell. "That's how you pressure-test decisions," Zients said.

At bottom, Biden has oriented his Presidency around an unfashionable faith in compromise, experience, and relationships. As Dunn put it, "The biggest bet of all is that good governing actually can get you reëlected in 2024, when all of the forces seem to be arrayed against it." But there is little agreement—even among Biden's supporters—on what good governing looks like. Perhaps the greatest test of Biden's belief in the old ways of Washington came from abroad, and outraged some of the voters he needs most.

At 12:06 A.M. on October 7th, the Situation Room at the White House sent an urgent message to national-security officials: "Heavy rocket barrage launched from Gaza." By 12:48, new details had confirmed that something far more devastating was afoot: "Hamas militants have infiltrated Israel from Gaza via land, air, and sea." Michael Herzog, Israel's Ambassador to Washington, had sent the message, "This is war."

Like many Presidents before, Biden had come to office hoping to avoid engulfing dramas in the Middle East. "No new projects," as one aide put it. But, after Hamas slaughtered some twelve hundred Israelis, Biden expanded arms shipments to Israel, dispatched ships, and spoke furiously about the rampage of killings, rapes, and kidnappings—what he called "an act of sheer evil."

In Biden's view, the attack was part of a challenge that defines his Presidency: the assault on free societies. "Hamas and Putin represent different threats, but they share this in common—they both want to completely annihilate

a neighboring democracy," he said, in an Oval Office address last October. Although Biden has a half century of sometimes tense dealings with Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's right-wing Prime Minister, he feels a deep kinship with the country, which he first visited in 1973, just before it fought off a surprise attack from its neighbors. "In his gut, he sees Israel as besieged by enemies," Senator Coons told me. "The tension is that my kids' college-ish generation doesn't see Israel as surrounded by enemies, at risk of not surviving."

As Israel's retaliation generated horrific images of Palestinians suffering in Gaza, Biden's tone slowly shifted. He publicly warned Israel against "indiscriminate" attacks and privately intervened to avoid counterstrikes based on bad information; by mid-January, the number of Gazans killed each day had fallen by nearly half, according to a tally by the *Times*. But Biden continued to resist calls for an immediate ceasefire or a reduction in military aid. When I visited the White House, protesters near an entrance used by visitors and staff were dousing the pavement with blood-red liquid and lying across the walkway. The potential political impact was obvious: In 2020, Biden won resoundingly among Arab and Muslim voters—an especially consequential bloc in Michigan, where he won by just a hundred and fifty-four thousand votes. Now some of the same voters in Michigan were promoting a campaign called Abandon Biden, and a national poll showed that his support among Arab and Muslim Americans had dropped by forty per cent.

I asked Biden if he intended to apply more pressure on Israel's leaders, and, for the first time that day, he did not jab back at the question. "I understand the anger and the rage" sparked by October 7th, he said. "But you can't let the rage consume you to the point where you lose the moral high ground." Biden didn't hide his frustration with Netanyahu's government. He told me that, when he preached caution to members of Israel's war cabinet, they replied that America had carpet-bombed Germany in the Second World War. Biden said that he responded, "That's why we ended up with the United Nations and all these rules about not doing that again."

Biden holds out hope for the most elusive of grand bargains: getting Israelis to accept the creation of a Palestinian state, in exchange for normalized relations with Saudi Arabia—which many Israelis see as a vital step toward long-term security. He described it as a way for Israel to fight off its attackers without causing undue suffering: "We could put in place a circumstance that ends up where they continue to move—as we did with bin Laden—against the leaders of Hamas, but not assume that every Palestinian is a supporter of Hamas." He added, "I've been pushing very hard for the Israeli government to come down hard on these out-of-control settlers." (In February, Biden imposed financial penalties and visa bans on four Israeli settlers in the West Bank who were accused of attacking Palestinians and Israeli peace activists.)

I brought up the disdain that Biden's handling of the war has engendered among Arab Americans and young Democrats. "I don't want to see any Palestinians killed—I think that it's contrary to what we believe as Americans," he said. But he urged his critics to wait. "I think they have to give this just a little bit of time, understanding what would happen if they came into their state or their neighborhood and saw what happened with Hamas," he said. "The pressure on the leadership to move with every ounce of capacity against Hamas is real. But it doesn't mean it should be

continued. It doesn't mean it's right. And so, I think you're going to see—I'm praying you're going to see—a significant downturn in the use of force."

That posture was echt Biden: asking for patience to continue private negotiations, criticizing Netanyahu's government without renouncing him. It would satisfy almost nobody in the short term. (The day after we spoke, Netanyahu dismissed Biden's idea of a Palestinian state as an "attempt to impose a reality that would harm Israel's security.") As with many issues, Biden is both weighed down and blessed by his experience. He is not counting on an epiphany from Netanyahu. Without saying so explicitly, he is betting that an offer of Saudi normalization would be so popular with Israeli leaders that Netanyahu would have no choice but to engage it. Since the war began, Israel has rejected many American requests—to allow humanitarian assistance, to let out the severely wounded and foreign-passport holders, to pause the fighting while hostages are released—before ultimately agreeing. The Administration treats each no from Israel as an "initial answer," a national-security official told me, adding, "Other people would like us to take an approach that is much more publicly confrontational. But would it actually lead to better outcomes in the war?"

Not long after I visited Biden, I called Mohammad Qazzaz, a Palestinian American who lives in Dearborn, Michigan, and owns a coffee business. We met in 2020, when he was a strong Biden supporter. Now he was furious. "There are people who bleed Democratic here, but they will never vote for Biden again," he said. "Some of them are actually saying they will vote for Trump because they just want to screw up the whole system. Screw this country if it thinks we're dogs."

Qazzaz can't bring himself to vote for Trump, but he plans to write in "Free Palestine" on the ballot this November. It's not yet clear how much this kind of sentiment will hurt Biden. During the Michigan primary, a hundred thousand people—about thirteen per cent of the total—wrote in "uncommitted," as a protest vote. When I asked one of Biden's political advisers how much disillusionment over the war will matter, he said, "The single biggest thing is whether it's a three- or four-month thing—or does it go on longer?"

On a crisp afternoon in late January, Biden and the First Lady boarded Marine One from the South Lawn of the White House, for a short hop to Manassas, Virginia, where George Mason University has a campus. There, they would meet up with Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff, to mark the fifty-first anniversary of Roe v.

Wade—which the Supreme Court overturned in 2022, starting a national furor. Onstage for Biden's speech, a backdrop of white letters spelled out "Restore Roe."

For decades, the politics of abortion were notoriously awkward for Biden. As a devoted Catholic and a liberal Democrat, he was torn between two creeds. Even after he became a vocal supporter of same-sex marriage and transgender protections, he remained, as he put it, "not big" on abortion. "It's always been a hard issue for him," an aide told me. "But it became a very easy issue for him because of the Supreme Court." O'Malley Dillon recalled that when the decision came, in a case called Dobbs v. Jackson, Biden's immediate response was "How is it that we are rolling back fifty years of rights?"

I asked Biden what he would do in a second term to protect abortion access at the federal level. "Pass Roe v. Wade as the law of the land," he said. Democrats would need to win control of the House of Representatives and gain seats in the Senate, but Biden expressed confidence. "A few more elections like we've seen taking place in the states" would suffice, he said. "You're seeing the country changing." Then, reiterating his position on Roe, he said, "I've never been supportive of, you know, 'It's my body, I can do what I want with it.' But I have been supportive of the notion that this is probably the most rational allocation of responsibility that all the major religions have signed on and debated over the last thousand years."

It's a framing that irritates advocates. (In February, after he told attendees at a New York fund-raiser, "I don't want abortion on demand, but I thought Roe v. Wade was right," Slate ran a story titled "Biden's Latest Abortion Fumble Is Particularly Distressing.") But, so far, they have chosen to avoid a fight with a Democratic President whose opponent crows that he was able to "terminate" Roe. After the midterms in 2022, researchers found that abortion restrictions had disproportionately motivated first-time and younger voters, and women under fifty.

Since Dobbs, twenty-one states have tightened restrictions on abortion. The prospect of a further rollback looms. In a concurring opinion on Dobbs, Justice Clarence Thomas argued that the legal rationale for overturning Roe could be applied to "correct the error" in cases on same-sex marriage, the decriminalization of homosexuality, and access to contraception. I asked Biden if he thought that the Justices would undo those protections. "I don't think there's a majority to go there," he said, but added, "I think that a couple on the Court would go considerably further"—specifically "the guy who likes to spend a lot of time on yachts."

"Thomas?" I asked.

Biden grinned.

At the event in Manassas, it became clear that two of the most important issues for young people are colliding. As Biden began cranking up his speech, a man in the auditorium yelled, "Genocide Joe, how many kids have you killed in Gaza?" The audience drowned him out with chants of "Four more years," and Biden returned to his lines, but moments later another call came from across the room: "Israel kills two mothers every hour!"

While the protesters were removed, Biden looked out calmly, knitting his fingers on the lectern. He seemed determined to project the mien of a parish priest, saying of the protesters, "They feel deeply." But he barely made it through the next sentence of his speech before there was another shout. "This is going to go on for a while," he told the crowd. Eventually, he gave up bothering to pause with each interruption—his supporters shouted, "Keep going!"—and by the end there had been at least a dozen removals. Biden wound up the speech to thundering applause. Still, it was hard to see how the impassioned young people who had been ejected, or who had stayed away that day, would change their minds between now and November.

A few hours after I met Biden in the Oval Office, he was due to sit down with members of Congress to discuss an ungainly jumble of issues, including military aid for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan, as well as the humanitarian crisis at America's border with Mexico. They had been conjoined in a single bill after

"It says, 'Unless you're selling Thin Mints, begone!'"

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Republicans vowed to block funding for Ukraine unless Biden did something about immigration.

At the West Wing, more than a dozen Republicans and Democrats filed into the Cabinet Room, where the fireplace was roaring. The Republicans were led by the unlikely Speaker of the House, Mike Johnson, a previously obscure lawmaker from Louisiana: a staunchly religious lawyer, with a rigid shell of salt-and-pepper hair and round schoolboy glasses, who had been installed only after a chaotic internal revolt pushed out his predecessor.

Biden's aides worried that the meeting would devolve into grandstanding. In December, House Republicans had approved an impeachment inquiry into Biden, in the hope of finding evidence of corruption by him and his family. And immigration was a growing political nightmare for Democrats. For nearly three years, the Administration, beset by internal tensions, had tacked between looser and stricter policies. By the end of 2023, the number of migrants coming to the border had risen tenfold in five years, driven by calamities in Central America, the Middle East, and beyond. Some in the White House spoke glumly of the border with the mantra "All options are bad."

The Ukraine problem was no less of an emergency, and no simpler to solve. Military analysts estimated that, without more American arms and ammunition, Ukraine would start to succumb to Russia's attacks by the summer. The Republican Party once defined itself by its opposition to Russian aggression, but the current House of Representatives is often sympathetic to Putin—and nearly always unsympathetic to Biden's requests for funding. Still, Biden liked his chances. "Bring them here," he told aides. "I want to meet with them."

Biden's seemingly inexhaustible appetite for negotiating with Congress can make him seem like a political misfit, a conciliator in an age of absolutes. But, in one of the more perceptive observations I've heard about Biden, his longtime aide Bruce Reed told me that he "proceeds as if things are on the level and tries to force them to be so." He still believes in the old legislative-favor trade. In 2021, even though Mitch McConnell directed his members not to vote for the stimulus package, Biden made a point of approving a measure that the Alaska Republican Lisa Murkowski requested, providing relief for the cruise-ship industry. Biden told aides, "She can't vote with me now, but that doesn't mean she won't later, and she'll remember this."

At times, Biden's deference to lawmakers has infuriated progressive members of his own party. In 2021, some pushed him to publicly criticize Joe Manchin, the conservative Democrat who had scuttled the centerpiece of the Administration's agenda, a bill known as Build Back Better. But Biden refused to "kick the shit" out of Manchin, an aide said. Instead, Steve Ricchetti, Biden's counsellor, who oversees legislative affairs, privately stayed in touch. They were an easy mix: two genial Italian American pols from industrial flyover states—Manchin from West Virginia, Ricchetti from Ohio. Manchin is a Democrat in a deep-red state, and Biden, betting that he might coöperate after the initial pressure passed, encouraged a strategy to "keep the door open." Manchin ended up siding with the Administration on a series of pivotal votes. Ricchetti told me, "Had we listened to that advice"—to name and shame Manchin—"we don't get the Inflation Reduction Act, we probably don't get the CHIPS Act, and we don't get the veterans'-health bill, or Ketanji Brown Jackson on the Supreme Court."

Last fall, once Republicans made it clear that they would not agree to aid for Ukraine without an immigration deal, a group of senators started meeting to negotiate across the aisle. By January, they were nearing a compromise that no one in Congress would have predicted a decade ago. To the chagrin of immigration advocates, Democrats were prepared to drop the requirement for a pathway to legalization for undocumented immigrants already in the country, and to accept Republican demands for expanded detention capacity and higher standards for asylum. During the meeting at the White House, Biden told the assembled group, "I will do a big deal on the border." Speaker Johnson said on television that night that the meeting was productive.

None of that sat well with Trump, who had built his campaign on the pol-

itics of a permanent border crisis; if conditions improved, he would have nothing to blame on Biden. On January 25th, even before the text of the bill was available, Trump posted on social media, "A Border Deal now would be another Gift to the Radical Left Democrats." Republicans rapidly fell in line, without bothering to conceal the rationale. Representative Troy Nehls, a Texas Republican, asked a reporter, "Why would I help Joe Biden?" On February 4th, just hours after the bill was released, Johnson pronounced it "dead on arrival."

Trump had thwarted a bipartisan effort to address two of Washington's most urgent problems. Yet this act of cynicism was also, perhaps, a political gift to Biden. For the next nine months, he could blame Republicans for being feckless and destructive. In an apparent preview of how he will talk about the topic during the campaign, Biden told me, "I'm watching television this morning while I'm shaving." A Republican was trashing him onscreen, he recalled, saying, "Well, Biden won't support more funding for the border!" Biden laughed. "I mean, what the hell?" he said. "I've been pushing *so damn hard* for reform of the border."

Biden's opportunity is akin to the one that Harry Truman had in his 1948 campaign for reëlection. Trailing in the polls, Truman railed against what he called a "Do Nothing Congress," which had failed to stop spiking prices and ameliorate a housing crisis. Much as Biden talks about the threat to freedoms worldwide, Truman spoke of a gathering Cold War, a grand mission that served to unify a fractious Democratic Party. He ultimately prevailed.

"It was a matter of pulling together a coalition that was in even worse fragmentation," Sean Wilentz, a Princeton historian, told me. "Truman did it by going to the American people, running against Congress, standing up on both the Cold War and civil rights. It's possible that '48 will prove a precursor to what we have now—if the Democrats take heed." Sarah Longwell said, drawing on her experience in focus groups, "Nothing papers over the fractures in the Democratic coalition like Donald Trump. He is a walking turnout mechanism. I've just spent so much time listening to how much voters viscerally dislike him." She added, "You're not building a pro-Joe Biden coalition—you're building an anti-Donald Trump coalition."

Near the end of my conversation with Biden, he said, "There's only one reason, I think, to be involved in elective office, and that's to be able to do what you think is the right thing." The sentiment is noble but incomplete. In this election, the right thing is to win. If Biden succeeds, his critics will say that their alarms nudged him to victory. If he loses, they will say that he was captive to hubris. History will be harsh.

Biden believes that he is doing the most essential work of his life. To some, this is a dangerous rationalization. He is at peace with that. In the election, he is betting that Americans will reward him for his achievements: ejecting Trump from the White House, getting the nation out of the pandemic, rescuing the economy, reviving NATO—not to mention passing significant legislation on climate change, gun control, drug prices, manufacturing, and infrastructure. But achievement is not the same as inspiration, and Americans are not in a mood of gratitude toward our leaders.

Having entered the Senate at the age of thirty, one of the youngest members in its history, Biden formed an idea of himself as a wunderkind, and he has never quite shed it. He often says, "I feel so much younger than my age." In the early years of his Presidency, when people asked him about his age, his stock response was "Watch me." He doesn't say that as much anymore. Grudgingly, painfully, he may be coming to terms with the reality that people don't see him the way he hopes they will.

In 1960, when John F. Kennedy ran for President, discrimination against Catholics was widespread, and he faced the persistent slur that he would be controlled by the Vatican. In a speech that fall, Kennedy told an audience of Protestant ministers, "The real issues in this campaign have been obscured—perhaps deliberately." Without posturing, he asked Americans to join him in rejecting "disdain and division" by promoting "instead the American ideal of brotherhood." The speech was a success, and the fixation on Kennedy's faith receded.

Biden has not addressed the matter of age as forthrightly, even though it is a topic that might resonate with Americans, especially those who have suffered the condescension and dismissal that rankle him. Yes, he might stumble at the microphone, but he might also convince skeptics of the power in his patience, institutional memory, and experience. His campaign, at least, has evidently decided that the issue can't be avoided entirely. Last week, Biden made an appearance on "Late Night with Seth Meyers," and the first question was about his age. Biden replied, as he often does, with a joke: "You got to take a look at the other guy. He's about as old as I am, but he can't remember his wife's name."

Biden likes to say, "Don't compare me to the Almighty. Compare me to the alternative." But, unlike his opponent, he is in office, and liable to be judged for the condition of the country. It is a measure of the interlocking crises in the world today that the course of the next eight months depends on circumstances that are unfathomable in advance. Could Houthi militants, firing rockets over the Red Sea, disrupt enough shipping to revive inflation? Could Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., ride a wave of nostalgia onto the ballot in Arizona or Michigan? Could a last-minute deepfake deter a decisive few thousand voters in a swing state? The real world of politics, like economics, is not as consistent as model builders might like.

One of the few points of certainty is a chilling one. Half the respondents to a CBS poll in January said they believed that the losing side of the coming election will resort to violence. Biden has an uneasy relationship to such knowledge. He is convinced that Americans will reject the Trumpist view of politics. "How can we, as a democracy, elect anyone President who says violence is appropriate?" he asked me. And he thinks that the press has failed to take full stock of Trump's menace. "It's like you've all become numbed by it."

But he must also prepare for the prospect that this race will get very ugly. When I asked whether he thinks that Trump will concede if he loses in 2024, Biden said no. "Losers who are losers are never graceful," he said. "I just think that he'll do anything to try to win. If—and *when*—I win, I think he'll contest it. No matter what the result is." ♦

LETTER FROM MEXICO

THE FORTY-THREE

After a group of Mexican students disappeared, their parents fought for justice.

BY ALMA GUILLERMOPRIETO

Last year, I drove south from Mexico City, along the highway toward Apango, a modest hillside town in the state of Guerrero. The highway ends at Acapulco, but there were no palm trees and no glamour where I was going. I turned onto a silent two-lane road, and drove past villages where indigenous languages such as Nahuatl are still spoken. It was the dry season, and the scrub-forest hills had turned every shade of dust and brown, punctuated only by the soft white flowers of the *casahuate* trees. In Apango, I asked for Estanislao Mendoza Chocolate, or Don Tanis, as he is respectfully known. I had travelled here to ask him about his son, who vanished one night in 2014, along with forty-two other students from a rural teachers' college, never to be seen again.

When I arrived, Don Tanis was waiting anxiously in his doorway, a round-faced, neatly dressed man in his sixties with a lively manner and eyes so haunted it was hard not to look away. He showed me around his house, a collection of bare cinder-block rooms with a light bulb in the center of each one, which he built in the course of two decades as a seasonal migrant in California. There was a storage room for the year's supply of corn—to sell, or to grind for the family's tortillas—and, untouched all this time, the room where his son had lived: a sagging cot, a chair, some fading photographs and posters on the wall. "I wanted a ranch, with *animalitos*, and he was helping me set it up, but it's all abandoned now," Don Tanis said, studiously avoiding his son's name, as he did throughout our conversation.

His son, Miguel Ángel Mendoza Zacarías, earned his living cutting hair and working construction jobs. He was tall, with a shock of hair that he was proud of, to judge from the self-portrait he drew on the outside wall of the house to advertise his services as a barber. He'd been thirty-three, a full-grown man, when he applied to the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College, in nearby Tixtla—older than most of his cohort. When I asked why he'd wanted to go, Don Tanis said, brightly, "It's never too late to learn!," adding, "He loved children, and he always wanted to teach." I suspect he might also have wanted an opportunity to get away from working as cheap day labor. For people from Indigenous and campesino communities—in Mexico these are neighboring categories—Ayotzinapa provided free tuition and board, and the possibility of a job teaching somewhere in a rural district.

Yet students at rural colleges quickly learn that their diplomas will do little to close the chasm between their lives and those of the rich and powerful. They often become radicalized, usually in the old-fashioned Marxist-Leninist sense. This was particularly true at Ayotzinapa, thanks to a long guerrilla tradition: multiple campesino movements had flourished in Guerrero in the sixties and seventies, and two of their leaders, Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez Rojas, had close ties to the school. Although their respective movements were exterminated by military and police forces in a "dirty war," their portraits are still painted on some murals at the school, alongside Lenin, Che, and Marx. The Ayotzis were a rowdy and aggressive bunch; *revoltosos*, people called them—troublemakers, punks—tolerated but hardly loved in the region. They often carried sticks, covered their faces with bandannas, and took over toll booths to demand payment "for the revolution." Whenever they needed to travel as a group—to a protest march somewhere, or to a meeting at another rural teachers' school—they would commandeer buses, leaving the passengers stranded on the asphalt.

On Friday, September 26, 2014, about a hundred students left their campus in two previously requisitioned buses, and went in search of several more, in preparation for an upcoming demonstration in Mexico City that takes place every year. It marks the anniversary of a massacre on October 2, 1968, when Army and paramilitary troops gunned down hundreds of demonstrators at an anti-government rally. The march in Mexico City has become an almost sacred ritual for thousands of young people across the country, and, for the young Ayotzis, their search for transportation must have felt heroic: *¡Dos de octubre no se olvida!* In the capital of Guerrero, Chilpancingo, fifteen minutes away from the school, bus takeovers were a frequent, even negotiated event, but that morning the students were chased away by the police. After another failed attempt in the afternoon, they ended up on the outskirts of Iguala, a town some fifty miles from their turf. The students split into two groups. One group finally managed to take over a bus bound for the downtown Iguala terminal, and the driver persuaded them to let him deliver the passengers to their destination before he returned with the students to campus. But at the terminal he let the passengers out and swiftly locked the students inside. Soon afterward, the rest of the Ayotzis arrived to rescue their mates. Shouting and banging on the doors of buses, they commandeered three others in a matter of minutes, for a total of five, and prepared to head back to their school in triumph.

That was when the killing started.

It was a busy night in town; the mayor's wife had just hosted a lively ceremony in the central square, cafeterias were still open, and people were strolling home. And yet, less than half an hour after the buses left the station, members of the Iguala police, in uniform and in plain sight, opened fire on the students. A statewide surveillance system registered the fear as frenzied messages zipped

"I don't have a body to mourn," a father said of his son, one of the missing students. "I have nothing to hold that is him."

ILLUSTRATION BY KATHERINE LAM

through: "Stay at home, there's a shooting." "They're saying two people are dead." "We've turned off the lights and put the lock on." Rumors flew back and forth: "They're burning taxis downtown." By the next morning, six people were dead, including three students, and another was left in a coma. But the worst of the terror was still to come: in the days and weeks that followed, dozens of families would come to understand that forty-three of their children were missing. No one knew whether they were alive or dead.

Their absence could easily have been forgotten: there is a low-range official estimate that more than eighty thousand people have disappeared in Mexico since 2006, with virtually no official attempt to find them. But, thanks to their parents and relatives, the missing students—who became known as *los cuarenta y tres*, or the Forty-three—became a cause. Unforgiving, stubborn, and extremely vulnerable, the families marched once a month through central Mexico City, putting themselves in front of television cameras, shouting, gathering at the entrance to government buildings, and refusing to budge, demanding the return of their sons. Within weeks, the number forty-three was painted on walls, buses, windows, doors—everywhere in Mexico, and, for a time, throughout Europe and the Americas. As far away as Australia, people marched. "We are missing forty-three," they chanted, and, "Alive they were taken, we want them returned alive." "I used to come across protest marches by students or workers and say, 'Lazy bums, get back to work,'" Don Tanis told me. "Now I say, 'I understand.'"

There's a reason the number of disappearances started climbing in 2006. That was the year then President Felipe Calderón ramped up the so-called War on Drugs, bringing in the military to crack down on an assortment of powerful groups. As a result, some of the most notorious drug-clan leaders have been captured or killed, allowing Mexican Presidents, and their allies in the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, to boast of many victories. In reality, the effort has been about as effective as trying to get rid of ants by breaking up one nest: each drug leader's death or capture leads to the rise of several small would-be lords. In the ensuing power struggle, paranoid traffickers turn on close associates and inflict ever more grotesque forms of violence on their enemies, and on civilians. Nearly three thousand clandestine graves have been discovered in the past five years alone. According to the investigative reporting group Quinto Elemento Lab, for example, just one grave site in the small municipality of Úrsulo Galván (population thirty thousand) held more than a hundred bodies. From 2018 to 2023, more than two hundred secret graves were found in the municipality of Tecomán, which has a little more than a hundred and fifteen thousand inhabitants. And these are only the graves that have been found.

Military patrols assigned to destroy crop fields can easily get corrupted by drug money. Soldiers uproot the poppy plants from a field or two and file a report: mission accomplished. The situation is stable, as long as no one oversteps the boundaries of a delicate agreement. The drug groups are also deeply entangled with officialdom at even the most local level. A bar owner I know in Mexico City was having trouble with a drug group that was demanding the right to sell drugs in his bar and threatening his life. Eventually, he was invited to have lunch with a local official, and discovered that the other guest was the boss of the drug group. Governors of the states of Quintana Roo and Tamaulipas have been convicted of drug-related crimes in Mexico and abroad. Judges and the security forces are also all too frequently in the pay of drug groups. It is up to the relatives of the disappeared, then, to look for their loved ones, searching the ground for any sign that it has recently been disturbed. Each new discovery floats in the news cycle for a day, or a week, and vanishes. *Ya nos acostumbramos*, people will say. We have become accustomed. Or you might translate the phrase as "It has become part of our customs."

The families of the Forty-three didn't want their children's stories to unfold this way. On the evening of September 26th, Don Clemente Rodríguez Moreno, the father of an Ayotzi named Christian Rodríguez Telumbre, raced to the school when he heard that his son might be in trouble. "I wanted to grab a machete and go fight whoever was harming my son, but I was told that it wasn't the prudent thing to do," he said. He waited until morning to go to Iguala. "I thought, If my boy's done something wrong, they'll be holding him at the jail. But no one gave us any news there, or anywhere." By dawn, Vidulfo Rosales, a lawyer and human-rights defender at the nonprofit Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Montaña Tlachinollan, in highland Guerrero, had also heard that there was trouble in Iguala. He got a ride in an old VW Beetle, but at Chilpancingo his volunteer driver refused to go any farther. "News of what had happened in Iguala had spread fast," Rosales explained. "There were roadblocks everywhere, people were riled up." When he finally reached Iguala, he worked frantically with colleagues, locating survivors, checking the morgue, the main hospital, and detention centers, and following the progress of official inquiries. It was only after days of anguish, as survivors got in touch with the school, that the extent of the tragedy became clear. Dozens of students remained missing.

Given the scandalous nature of the crimes, President Enrique Peña Nieto, a slick but empty politician, was forced to promise an investigation. Six weeks after the crime, his attorney general, Jesús Murillo Karam, discussed its status at a press conference. The students, Murillo declared, had been abducted by crooked municipal police from Iguala and neighboring towns. Following orders from the mayor, the police had handed their captives over to a local drug group, the Guerreros Unidos, or United Warriors. (The mayor did not respond to a request for comment. He was later convicted of an unrelated kidnapping and other charges and sentenced to ninety-two years in prison.) Several members of the group had already been arrested and confessed. Here, Murillo displayed photographs of a few men—shabby, dejected, filthy, and, as seasoned reporters immediately guessed, tortured. The men had taken

the students to a trash dump near the town of Cocula, Murillo said, and killed those who weren't already dead. Subsequently, the murderers built an open-pit fire with tires, gasoline, and wood to burn the youths' bodies down to ashes so small that they would forever remain unidentifiable. No members of the armed forces or the federal police had been involved. It was an unfortunate episode.

That version of events—which Murillo took to calling the "historic truth"—has stuck in the minds of many. But the evidence so far indicates that the Ayotzinapa students did not die at the trash dump, and that multiple authorities, including the military, were involved. In 2021, investigators gained access to a video taken one month after the crime by a drone operated by the Mexican Navy. The video shows two Navy vehicles parked on the edge of the dump, next to three large white sacks. A group of men scurry about the terrain, eventually lighting a fire. Once the smoke clears, the sacks are no longer visible. Soon afterward, vehicles from the Navy, the Army, and the attorney general's office arrive at the site. We know what happened next: Mercedes Doretti, a member of the renowned Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, which was investigating the disappearances on behalf of the victims' families, was summoned to the dump while she was en route to search for bodies a few miles away. Not long afterward, Murillo gave the press conference that presented the trash-dump version of events. Doretti's team was presented with hundreds of bone fragments that supposedly came from the area, but almost all were too warped by heat to be used for DNA identification. Examining the drone video years later, it's hard not to wonder whether the fragments had been brought to the dump in the mysterious sacks, as part of a coverup. (The Mexican Defense Ministry and the Navy did not respond to requests for comment, nor did Murillo, though he has publicly defended his investigation, and his lawyers maintain his innocence.)

Even before the images became public, Murillo's account had failed to convince the missing students' parents. Using common sense, they reasoned that, since it rained on the night of the attack, a fire could not have consumed their children's bodies. "From the beginning, I knew it wasn't true," Don Tanis told me. Always soft-spoken, he lowered his voice even more, sensing that what he was about to say would shock me. "When you roast a pig, there is always a pool of grease at the end," he said. "But at the trash dump there was nothing." The families knew that the government was lying to them, but they could do little to press for further investigation by themselves. Fortunately, Don Tanis said, they had the early support of Centro Tlachinollan.

"By the fourth or fifth day, we realized that we couldn't do this work by ourselves," Rosales told me. Rosales is from the highland Guerrero town of Totomixtlahuaca, where he was one of only a few students who made it to high school. He went further, graduating from law school, joining Tlachinollan, and working on cases involving the torture, murders, and disappearances of Indigenous and human-rights activists. "We had certain procedures in place for those situations," he said. "But slowly we saw that this was more than we were prepared for. There were the dead, dozens of disappeared, the aggressors, and the families." Rosales drew in other organizations from Mexico City—chiefly, the Jesuit-founded Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center, known as the Centro Prodh. In turn, those groups called on the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team. Meanwhile, the parents of the Forty-three were beginning to see themselves as a unit. "It was love for our children that brought us together," Don Tanis told me. "We'd never even met before."

In November, 2014, the parents had their first great triumph: the Mexican government agreed to bring in an international investigative team, given the cumbersome name of Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts—or GIEI, by its Spanish acronym. The following March, the GIEI arrived in Mexico. One afternoon last spring, I met with two of its members, Carlos Martín Beristain and Ángela María Buitrago, at a café in Mexico City. Beristain, a physician, has worked with trauma victims for human-rights commissions throughout Latin America. Buitrago, a Colombian prosecutor, put a number of generals responsible for monstrous human-rights violations in prison. The pair remembered the moment they first visited the Ayotzinapa campus. "Even before we entered the school grounds, there were people waiting to escort us in," Buitrago said. "Parents, students, the school's marching band. They placed one garland of flowers after another around our necks." She added, "Every one of the parents who welcomed us repeated the

"Can we please not have the same old argument about the thermostat?"

same thing: the one thing they asked of us, they said, was to always tell them the truth—not to lie and not to sell out. I'm a lawyer, I believe in institutions. But when I heard that phrase, 'Don't lie, don't sell out,' repeated so many times, I thought this had to be the ultimate expression of a citizenry that no longer believed in anything at all."

Soon, the GIEI members were learning the Mexican lesson. At the café, Beristain and Buitrago chuckled as they recalled officials from the prosecutor's office giving a presentation and saying things like "You will never see a more complete investigation than the one we have carried out." The GIEI members' efforts were impeded at every turn. For months, they were blocked from obtaining copies of hundreds of documents. Salvador Cienfuegos, the Secretary of National Defense, refused to let them question anyone from one of Iguala's military battalions. "I will not permit soldiers to be treated like criminals," he told the press. It was almost fun to watch GIEI press conferences, because Buitrago called out the government's lies in a way that is all but unheard of in Mexico's institutional discourse. "We were given statements signed by personnel from the general prosecutor's office that were false," she declared at one point. "There were investigative proceedings in which all the information was tampered with."

The GIEI was forced to spend much of its twelve-month mandate proving that the government's account of events was untrue. "They told us with a straight face that the Guerreros Unidos had incinerated forty-three corpses with five gallons of fuel," Buitrago said. Beristain added, "They took us to the site and showed us a tree from which two branches of very green wood had recently been cut," claiming that the branches had also fed the fire. By the end of its first year, the GIEI had issued two reports totalling a thousand pages, both largely devoted to demonstrating why the "historic truth" version of events was impossible. The group's contract was not renewed, and a farewell ceremony was held in an auditorium in Mexico City. "One man stood up and shouted, 'Don't leave!,'" Beristain said. "And then another stood up, and then they were all chanting, '*No-se-va-yan!*' Don't leave us! We nearly died then, all of us."

In 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador became the first independent candidate to be elected President in more than seventy years, and he promised to clean up the mess of his predecessor. He created the Presidential Commission for Truth and Access to Justice in the Ayotzinapa Case, headed by Alejandro Encinas, an old ally of his and a former mayor of Mexico City. A young, obsessive lawyer named Omar Gómez Trejo, who had been working on the case at the U.N. and with the GIEI, was chosen to head a new special investigative unit. At the parents' insistence, López Obrador agreed to bring back the GIEI. It was a moment of optimism. "You had the attorney general's office, the President, the GIEI, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the United Nations, and, principally, the families' legal representatives, all working to obtain the truth, to insure that justice was done, to know what happened to the boys," Gómez Trejo told me. Beristain said, "I was confident that this time we were going to be able to do it."

Last year, I was surprised to find myself in the possession of a confidential and valuable document: the more-than-six-hundred-page court filing presented before a judge in August of 2022 by Gómez Trejo's team. It was the result of the two years that he, along with the GIEI, had spent digging through files and interviewing hundreds of suspects, survivors, government officials, bystanders, and relatives of the disappeared. Thanks to the intricacies of the Mexican legal system, the document is all but incomprehensible at first read. But, beneath the legalese, it's packed with information, particularly regarding the drug-trafficking organization involved in the disappearances: the Guerreros Unidos.

The G.U. was born because a major drug boss, Arturo Beltrán Leyva, was shot and killed by Mexican marines, in 2009. As generally happens, Beltrán Leyva's underlings split into several small clans. One of these called itself los Rojos ("the Reds"), and established itself in Guerrero state, near the Ayotzinapa campus. The Rojos ran a nice little business, moving drugs like heroin into the United States. Another set of people, two of them brothers who, according to a story in the Chicago *Sun-Times*, had in the past delivered pizzas for a Chicago restaurant called Mama Luna's, formed a breakaway group called the Guerreros Unidos. By 2012, the pizza boys and their colleagues had set up shop in places including Iguala, a town equipped with a bus terminal big enough that unusual activity might go unnoticed, but not so large that it would call attention to itself. This was key to the group's success, because its specialty was fitting secret compartments in passenger buses, such as those travelling from Iguala to Chicago. The compartments would be stuffed with drugs and the buses loaded with passengers. In Chicago, the bus would be met by an associate, named Pablo Vega, who had grown up in a nearby suburb and worked in local factories. He and others would unload and distribute the merchandise, replace the product with cash, and send the bus back to Iguala. (Vega did not respond to a request for comment, but he has pleaded guilty to drug-conspiracy charges.)

In 2022, Gómez Trejo gained access to some twenty-three thousand BlackBerry text messages collected by the D.E.A. from Vega's phone and those of his associates. The texts, which were first reported in the Mexican press, and later in English by the *Times*, make stupefyingly boring reading on first pass; they consist mostly of terse instructions about where to park the "aunt"—the bus—and how many "vases" to deliver. But a picture eventually emerges of an inept bunch. On one shipment, the loaded bus crashes, "because it was raining." Someone leaves a loaded pickup illegally parked, and they can't get it back, because the driver is nabbed by immigration. A key collaborator vanishes, and days go by while the group makes a lame attempt to find him. ("What's his name?" "I just know him as el Cuate.") Vega's wife harangues him constantly, and, when she does, he messages a girlfriend and asks for a '*foto sexi*.' A shipment succeeds and tens of thousands of dollars get distributed, but less than three months later the water is cut off at Vega's home, because he can't pay the bill. His sister-in-law, the widow of the presumably height-challenged G.U. founder known as el Minicooper, mopes

about, complaining that she's always the last to be taken into account. Someone announces that he's selling tennis shoes to make ends meet. Worst of all, the group's members, who are supposed to be united by mystical links of shared lineage, constantly suspect one another of treason. (A lawyer who has represented members of the group did not respond to a request for comment.)

Perhaps because the competition wasn't that bright, either, the Guerreros Unidos eventually managed to consolidate its fledgling operation, and even imbue it with a sort of mystique. As "Juan," a G.U. member who eventually turned state's witness, explained to investigators in a sworn deposition, "The purpose of every person who belongs to the organization" is "to send drugs to Chicago, and to keep watch and do what is necessary. . . . That is why there should be support by public officials like police officers at every level." (Juan could not be reached for comment.) The G.U. often cleaned its cash through real-estate deals and other traditional money-laundering methods. The clan saw to it that another associate, Francisco Salgado Valladares—a pig-eyed man in charge of a ferocious group of Iguala police known as los Bélicos—was appointed vice-chief of the force. (Salgado Valladares is currently a fugitive from the law, and could not be reached for comment.)

The group brought in others: a butcher here, a car-wash operator there, in addition to dozens of gofers, petty drug peddlers, and lookouts who kept an eye on the whereabouts of every resident, visitor, and passerby in the G.U.'s areas of control. Their bosses wanted reports, particularly on military movements—long sequences of the twenty-three thousand messages are devoted to minute-by-minute descriptions of the exact whereabouts of the Army's daily patrol units—and, above all, of any sign of the presence of rival groups, referred to as "contras." (Unfamiliar cars entering the group's territory were stopped and searched for signs of the enemy.) Pursued by fear of their rivals, the G.U. killed senselessly, adding by the month to Guerrero's very high body count. The clan soon had police and military officers in its pay. The BlackBerry messages include boasts that a member called el Güero Mugres—Filthy Blondie, roughly—has the military "in the bag," and that the group has established friendly relations with a certain Captain Crespo. Someone crows that he has acquired other military contacts ("*putos*," he calls them) and complains about how much money they are demanding. When Gómez Trejo read these texts at the D.E.A.'s Chicago office during the several days he spent on the task, he was euphoric. They were, he told me, "objective and resounding proof tying an authority of the state to organized crime—not a declaration by a witness but objective, verifiable proof."

OUR VISIT TO THE CONTEMPORARY-ART MUSEUM DID NOT GO ENTIRELY AS PLANNED

It remains unclear why the Guerreros Unidos would carry out an attack on a hundred unarmed students. Perhaps, as the GIEI came to believe, one of the three buses that the students took from the station was loaded with product. Another theory—there are many—holds that the G.U. was convinced the Ayotzis had been infiltrated by the Rojos, and there is some evidence to support that this was their motivation. The G.U. had been fighting with the Rojos the week before, and perhaps it expected an attack. The day after the Iguala attack, one G.U. member texted another, "The contras came all mixed up with the Ayotzinapas, and shit came dooown!" A massacre on defenseless youths carried out by paranoid, incompetent, and bloodthirsty goons: that makes sense.

Shortly after nine o'clock on the night of September 26, 2014, Ayotzinapa students on five buses—the two they had arrived in and the three they had commandeered in Iguala—were heading home when they noticed police following them. The buses split up as their terrified drivers tried to turn onto narrow downtown streets that led back to the highway, but police cars managed to stop most of them. When patrols tried blocking their way, students threw rocks at them and the officers drove off, firing warning shots. A student whom I'll call Luis told me, "I got scared, but then I thought, Well, they're leaving, they've left. But when I turned around, I saw that there were more police, and they were shooting directly at us."

Eventually, three of the buses arrived at an intersection with the ring road that surrounds Iguala. Luis and several other students, including a boy named Aldo Gutiérrez Solano, tried to move a police car that was blocking the road, but the steering wheel was locked. Gutiérrez suddenly fell to the ground. Luis remembers looking dumbly at the red-hot spent

"People of Earth—can everyone see my screen?"

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casings all around him, and thinking at first that they were fireworks. Then he saw blood pooling under Gutiérrez's head. "He's dying!" students yelled, asking the police to help, still not grasping the situation. (Gutiérrez fell into a coma and remains in a vegetative state.) A student somewhere screamed, bleeding from a bullet wound to the hand. Another, called Pulmón—Lung—was in the throes of a severe panic attack, unable to breathe. Luis hid between two of the buses as the police fired on a third. "We saw how they started bringing the compañeros down from the bus, hands behind their necks," he said. "I counted twelve or fifteen of them." A half-dozen police pickups had moved into place behind that bus, lights flashing. Officers forced the students to lie face down on the sidewalk, Luis said, then loaded them in the backs of their pickups. He would never see his classmates again.

The students travelling in the other two buses were stopped by the Iguala Palace of Justice, beyond the ring road. Police attacked one of the buses, shooting tear gas through the windows to force students out. An anonymous witness cited in the court filing saw policemen tear switches off nearby trees and hit students with them as they staggered off the bus. These students were handcuffed and loaded onto pickups, some of them belonging to police officers from nearby Huitzuco. Members of the federal police stood by as the scene unfolded. An intelligence agent from one of the nearby battalions pulled up on a motorbike, took a few photos on his cell phone, and went back to inform his superiors. The military also had other ways of staying abreast of the situation. Troops were constantly monitoring the statewide surveillance system, which included footage from security cameras throughout Iguala. The Army had at least one soldier acting as an informant, who had infiltrated the student body and was with the group that disappeared. It may also have been monitoring the cell phones of several members of the G.U., using the surveillance software Pegasus. But no one in the military intervened. This is the part that guts Gómez Trejo. "If they knew, why didn't they save those boys?" he asks himself to this day.

Two busloads of students were about to vanish forever, and yet the violence was far from over. On a road out of Iguala, members of the Guerreros Unidos and the police, some from Huitzuco, mistakenly attacked a bus carrying a junior-league soccer team, from Chilpancingo, which was heading home to celebrate a victory. Before the attackers realized that there were no Ayotzis on the bus, they shot and killed the driver, a fifteen-year-old player, and a woman in a passing taxi. Around the same time, a group of Ayotzis raced to Iguala from the campus and from Chilpancingo to see what was happening to their schoolmates. They were holding an impromptu street-corner press conference when several vehicles arrived, and armed men dressed in black jumped out and opened fire on them. The shots were registered on a reporter's audio. Two students lay on the ground, dead. Another victim, a first-year Ayotzi named Julio César Mondragón, was found the next morning, lying dead outside a soccer field, according to officials. Like other students trapped in Iguala, he had texted his family an ongoing account of the night. His last message to his partner was a farewell: "Take care of yourself and of my daughter, tell her that I love her, bye." He had been severely beaten, and had multiple broken bones. Much of his face was missing.

Patrol cars roamed the streets in the predawn silence of Saturday the twenty-seventh. From a rooftop where he had found safety, Luis heard them whistle, calling out to the remaining Ayotzis. (*We know you're hiding!*) One panicky group scrambled to get medical care for a schoolmate who had been shot through the jaw. Eventually, they found themselves inside a small clinic, and begged the staff for help, but didn't get any. The young men cowered in the waiting room and on the upper floors, terrified that their attackers might find them. Instead, sometime after midnight, military vehicles arrived, and a cluster of soldiers muscled their way in, fanned out, and pointed machine guns at the students. They were led by an imposing man in uniform, José Martínez Crespo, who is currently in military prison, accused of collaboration with the G.U. Some students thought the soldiers were there to help. "I felt joyful when I saw them," one student—part of a group of more

than twenty who agreed to testify anonymously—told investigators.

But Crespo ordered photographs taken of the scene—twenty-five despondent, exhausted young men staring at the floor. According to one student's testimony, he made some of them strip to the waist and ordered a soldier to write down everyone's name. "Make sure you give the real ones," Crespo said. "Otherwise, they'll never find you later." Others recalled him saying, "You sons of bitches, you think you are so tough. Now you are faced with a real motherfucker. Let's see how tough you really are." (Crespo's lawyer said that he is innocent of any wrongdoing. Members of the military, including Crespo, denied in their depositions that they held the students at gunpoint or recorded their names.) It remains unclear what Crespo's intentions were. But at last he left with the other soldiers, saying that he was off "to see about some corpses nearby," most likely the two students killed during the press conference. The students in the clinic managed to flee, and survived the night.

By midnight, forty-three Ayotzis were in the hands of local police forces. There is one last glimpse of them before we lose sight of them forever. A driver from one of the commandeered buses told investigators that he saw a number of the students at a local police facility, lying prone on the floor. Another witness, who happened to walk into the facility the following morning, testified that he saw a photograph of the students on a screen, and heard a magistrate on duty (a position like that of a hoosegow sheriff) joking about how the Ayotzis had been roughed up, and boasting that he himself had beaten them during their interrogation. (The magistrate, who was granted asylum in the U.S. in 2020, has denied that the students were brought there that night, and declined to comment for this piece.)

Investigators pulled this account together slowly in the course of years, cross-checking hundreds of interviews with survivors, eyewitnesses, and participants in the events. But the answer to a key question sought by the students' parents—what happened to their children after they were last seen that night long ago?—remains elusive: of those seven or eight missing hours, only fragments can be pieced together and the story behind them guessed at. Various documents, including text messages and testimony in the court filing, indicate that the police forces of Iguala, Huitzuco, and another neighboring town, Cocula, distributed the students among various members of the Guerreros Unidos. (The Iguala and Huitzuco police departments did not respond to requests for comment. The Cocula department could not be reached.) A document released by the Mexican Defense Ministry, which investigators were unable to corroborate, shows a text exchange between two people whom the ministry identified as an Iguala police official and a leader of the Guerreros Unidos. "There are twenty-one people inside the bus that's leaving," the policeman says, and the leader replies, "Yes, hand me all the detainees." By this time, some of the students may already have been dead from injuries sustained during their beatings. The survivors could talk and create problems. What should be done with them?

Some investigators believe that the decision to kill the students was made before dawn, when members of the Cocula police visited the house of one of the G.U.'s leaders for several hours—the only encounter that night between officers and the group which has been corroborated. Others believe that the plan was already under way by then. According to Juan, the G.U. member who turned state's witness, the order they received from above was "*pártanles su madre*," which can be translated either as "beat the shit" out of the students or, given the context, "do away" with them. What Juan claims—and this is a ghastly thing to have to write—is that some of the students were killed, sometime in the early hours of September 27th, and cut into pieces. (Why not just shot, one wonders. Why not that small mercy?) When investigators inspected the safe house where they were taken, they found incisions on the floor that seemed to have been made by axes or machetes, and that were consistent with Juan's testimony. One man, a lowly gofer, testified that he and others were instructed to get cleaning supplies and pick up the mutilated corpses, which were stuffed into plastic garbage bags.

According to these statements, the students' remains were taken to local funeral homes to be cremated. Juan told investigators that it took several days to insure that the remains were cremated thoroughly enough that no one would be able to identify them. Other remains, he has said, were never cremated, and were disposed of in the surrounding area. Some students may have been kept alive longer, or done away with differently. But Juan, a participant in some fashion in the events of that evening, is not the most reliable witness, and investigators have been unable to fully confirm his account. What is true is that the G.U. seems to have been at pains to make the students truly disappear. "We didn't think that this business would be so *mediático*," Juan said, irritated by the publicity.

Eight years later, on August 18, 2022, the families of the Ayotzis gathered for a meeting with the President. López Obrador had met with them multiple times before. He was always courteous and friendly, sitting with them to hear their suggestions and concerns about the investigation. But María Luisa Aguilar Rodríguez, from Centro Prodh, told me that when they walked into the room she knew something was wrong. The President spoke at a podium flanked by a good part of his cabinet, including his attorney general and the defense minister—figures the parents distrusted. Encinas, the families' onetime ally, read what he described as the government's "conclusions." The investigators—Gómez Trejo, the GIEI, the Argentines—and the parents and their representatives have said that they were not advised of the contents of the report. Encinas denounced police and military participation in the events. For the first time, he defined what happened in Iguala as a "crime of the state"—an important acknowledgment by a Mexican administration. But he also presented unverified information that seemed to hark back to the "historic truth," such as a

series of WhatsApp messages sent by local officials and members of the Guerreros Unidos, which emphasized the role of the mayor and included graphic descriptions of what had allegedly happened to the students. (Encinas said that he had informed investigators of the report the day before, and denied pushing the "historic truth.") López Obrador did not take any questions. "The families were utterly undone," Aguilar said. "The mothers were distraught. Men who do not allow themselves to cry in public were weeping."

Up to that moment, it had seemed that justice was within reach. As the meeting with the President was starting, Gómez Trejo's team was requesting warrants for the arrest of eighty-three participants in the events. Among them were G.U. members; soldiers; police officers; the magistrate at the Iguala police facility; a judge in Chilpancingo who was accused of facilitating the destruction of state surveillance footage from the night of the event; the state attorney general at the time, Iñaki Blanco; José Martínez Crespo; and the commanders of the two Iguala battalions. (A lawyer representing the commanders of the military battalions said that they are innocent.) Gómez Trejo left immediately for Israel, in an effort to obtain the extradition of the former attorney general Murillo's chief of criminal investigations. He returned to a different world. His investigators had been sent away for "retraining." A team of auditors took possession of every file in his office. He was told that he would not be allowed to open any new lines of investigation. And, at the request of the attorney general's office, the same judge who had authorized the arrest warrants days earlier now rescinded twenty-one of them, including the ones for the state attorney general and the judge in Chilpancingo. A few days later, Gómez Trejo resigned, and his security detail was removed. Later, I learned that, as Gómez Trejo weighed his resignation, a high-ranking official took him aside, draped an arm confidentially over his shoulder, and said that Gómez Trejo had really managed to piss off the President. López Obrador had negotiated the arrest of five military members with the high command of the armed forces, the official told Gómez Trejo, but he had issued orders for twenty. (The attorney general's office declined to comment. López Obrador did not respond to a request for comment.)

It was a startling indication of the power of the Mexican military. Under López Obrador, the Army has been given control of the construction and administration of airports, roads, railroad lines, customs offices, and tourist agencies, to name only a few of its powers. In 2020, General Salvador Cienfuegos, who had tried to stop the GIEI investigators from interviewing members of the military, was arrested in the Los Angeles airport on charges that, as Secretary of National Defense, he had helped the H-2 drug clan with its operations trafficking cocaine and methamphetamine. (Cienfuegos did not respond to a request for comment, but his lawyer has issued a statement saying that he is innocent.) The arrest created a diplomatic standoff. President López Obrador reportedly threatened to suspend the D.E.A.'s operations in Mexico, although he later denied having done so, and U.S. prosecutors were forced to return Cienfuegos to Mexico, where he walked off the plane a free man. "We view this not as an act of impunity, but of respect towards Mexico and our armed forces," Marcelo Ebrard, Mexico's then Foreign Secretary, said. Two months later, Mexican justice officials declared that there was no evidence that the General had any relationship with the H-2 group. In October, President López Obrador gave him a medal.

Gómez Trejo moved to the U.S. with his wife and child, fearing for his family's safety. When I had lunch with him in New York recently, he looked rested—not as haggard as when he first moved here. He's working as an international consultant on human-rights issues. Two members of the GIEI, feeling that they would be legitimizing fraud if they stayed, also stepped down and left the country. The remaining two, Buitrago and Beristain, held a press conference this past July, demanding answers, then resigned a few days later. The President appointed a new special investigator, who quietly reinstated several of the twenty-one arrest orders that had been revoked. There is now a sense that, for all practical purposes, the investigation into the disappearance of the Forty-three has come to an end.

One recent afternoon, I spoke with Santiago Aguirre Espinosa, a member of the parents' legal team, who, along with his colleague Aguilar, spent years in Guerrero at the Centro Tlachinollan. They are both perpetually cheerful and extremely slender, possibly because they seem always to be racing from one appointment to another. I asked what Aguirre made of the last nine years of effort. "From the point of view of the families, their main objective was to find their sons, and that was not achieved," he replied. "They are angry and sad, and some of them have doubts as to whether their fight was worth it." For his part, Beristain, who has now returned to his home in Spain, lamented that the extent of the military's involvement in the saga remains unclear. There are hundreds of pages of military records that are still missing, he said—pages the GIEI believes can shed light on what exactly happened

"It's just going to get messed up again next winter."

to the students, and why two administrations have felt the need to cover it up.

These days, the President has taken to denouncing Centro Prodh and Centro Tlachinollan's Vidulfo Rosales at his daily press conferences. Encinas's phone, and those of several human-rights defenders, have been infiltrated by Pegasus. As his six-year term in office draws to a close, the President's relations with his perceived adversaries grow more fraught. Recently, the *Times* reported on a now closed investigation into the drug trade's possible dealings with close associates of the President, and he lashed out at the paper's Mexico City bureau chief, reading her name and phone number out loud during his morning press conference two weeks ago. This may be illegal, but "I would do it again," he said the next day: the President's "moral authority is above the law." In an exceedingly rare interview—two hours with a Russian journalist from a minor Spanish cable channel—he recognized that Ayotzinapa remains a pending assignment. "There is still time," he affirmed. "The most important thing is to find them."

Six years after the massacre, Clemente Rodríguez and his wife, Luz María Telumbre, received a visit at their home in Tixtla from Gómez Trejo, Encinas, and two members of Centro Prodh. The group was there to tell them about a two-inch fragment of bone that Gómez Trejo's team had found in a dry gully. The Argentine team had certified that the DNA recovered from the fragment belonged to Christian Rodríguez Telumbre, one of only three positive identifications that have been made in all this time. "We tried to bring some dignity and a sense of ceremony to the event," Gómez Trejo told me, of the visit. But it was hopeless trying to replace a twenty-year-old who skipped gaily around his parents' house, practicing steps from the folklore dances he was crazy about, with a broken bit of bone. When I met Doña Luz María in Mexico City last spring, at the start of one of the parents' marches, I asked her about this moment. She is a beautiful woman with an easy, affectionate manner, but there was no hiding the paper-slicing edge in her voice when she answered. "I said thank you," she told me, "and I asked what part of the body this *huesito*"—little bone—"was from." She was informed that it was part of Christian's right foot. "But I've seen people who lost a foot and are still alive," she said, not raising her voice. "I am not satisfied. I want my son."

It was Day of the Dead in Mexico City when I ran into Don Clemente, later that year. I asked if he was going to place a picture of his son on the family altar in Tixtla that night. There was a long silence before he finally said, "I can't." He was in town to give a talk at a local school, and as usual he had brought some of his friends' and family's handicrafts to put out for sale. He used to sell five-gallon jugs of drinking water for a living, but the constant travelling to agitate for his son's return has ruined the family's livelihood, and they now made money weaving straw, or embroidering textiles, and selling these crafts during events and marches. Don Clemente has a sidelong sense of humor, but I watched his face crumple as he tried to find words to explain his son's absence on the altar. "I don't have a body to mourn," he said. "I don't know the place where he is. I have nothing to hold that is him." The hope that their children would be returned to them alive was at the center of the parents' movement. It was the motivation that kept them going through years of doubt, and fear, and struggle, away from their families and their fields. *Alive they were taken away. We want them returned alive*. What parent wants to kill his own child in his heart? Don Tanis gently corrected me when I referred to his son in the past tense.

Recently, I drove back to Guerrero along the same long highway that had taken me to Don Tanis's home, but this time I stopped in Tixtla, to talk to Rafael López Catarino, or Don Rafa, whose son, Julio César López Patolzin, was the Army informant who was disappeared along with the other students. Unavoidably, his father became something of a pariah among the other families once his son's role in the school was made public, and it seemed to me an unusually cruel fate to lose a son and be unable to seek the comfort that the other parents obviously find in one another's company.

Don Rafa, curmudgeonly and limping, took me around the land his son can no longer help him farm. He showed me a picture of Julio César at his high-school graduation, a boy stiffly uncomfortable in his formal shirt and vest, holding a diploma. He handed me a sheet of paper with the heading "Life Project" at the top of a list his son had written, in careful block letters in bright-blue ink. "I would like to travel around the country learning different things and meeting new people," it began. Farther down, he wrote that he would like to study at Ayotzinapa so that he could become a physical-education teacher. He also wanted to join the military, and to study to become an Army doctor. And he wanted to earn money, "so that I can help my parents the way they have helped me." In the end, Julio César did join the Army. He spent some of his time patrolling the mountainous region of Guerrero. Eventually, his father said, Julio César was injured and could no longer go out on patrol. He told his father that he wanted to leave the Army and study, but it must have been hard to give up the salary of a foot soldier. One can imagine his commander zeroing in at that point to offer him a deal: *Go to Ayotzinapa if you want, and keep your salary. But help us.* He must have protested at the unfairness of his fate before he was taken away.

Don Rafa is a gruff man, but he insisted on riding back on the road to Chilpancingo with me so that I wouldn't get lost. There was a new crop of Ayotzis at the toll booth, exacting fares for "the revolution." The G.U. was diminished, as were the Rojos, and rival groups had eclipsed them. In Chilpancingo, a new mayor had been filmed having breakfast at a restaurant with a drug boss. (The mayor did not respond to a request for comment. She has denied that any deal was made at the meeting.) Don Rafa generally struck me as a harsh realist, but he told me that Julio César's godmother, recently deceased, had come to his daughter in a dream. "She had looked for Julio César everywhere on the other side," Don Rafa told me, "and found no sign of him. She said we should keep looking for him in this world." Still, he seemed to be in deep mourning. "I used to tuck him in at night when he was a baby and watch him sleep," he said. "What a thing, huh?" he added, as he got out of the car. "We care for and nurture our children so that the government can rip them away from us." ♦

HOSTEL

Fiona McFarlane

ILLUSTRATION BY OWEN GENT

I've never told my husband this story, but I suppose I will eventually, on some sticky night in, say, February, as we lie naked in bed with the ceiling fan set at its highest speed. We'll be waiting for a storm to bluster in from the south, and I'll see the relevant part of him lying flushed and heavy against his thigh, and I'll think about how I'd consider taking it in my mouth if the room were cooler by as little as two degrees. That will remind me of Roy and his wife, and I'll feel like talking about them. And I'll start by telling my husband that I used to know this couple who, on learning they were going to have a baby, began taking long walks together in the evening.

I might not use their real names. It would be hard, though, not to reveal Roy's, which seemed almost to have shaped his personality. His given name—much to his embarrassment—was Royal, and, in defiance of his parents' grandiosity, he'd cultivated an unroyal persona. He was a humble guy, self-effacing. He lived his life—at least his public, social life—as if he were answering a survey about it. If someone asked, "How was your trip to Fiji, Roy?," his answer might be "I'd describe myself as having enjoyed it." The trouble was that he took his humility to such lengths that he actually came across, in the end, as kingly—detached, benevolent, devoid of individuality. His opinions and tastes and desires were as carefully bland as a king's must be. A polite king, I mean, who coexists with a constitution, and whose irrelevance now and then sparks a complicated optimism about the possibility of a republic. Or, of course, a queen.

There's no need to use Roy's wife's real name; in fact, she's no longer his wife. I'll call her Mandy. A name like this reveals nothing about her except, perhaps, that she was pretty and athletic. The evening walks were a response to Mandy's fear that pregnancy might change her body. It's not that Mandy was vain; she just liked to be good at everything she did. So she liked to be good at having a body.

At the time, Roy and Mandy lived in Newtown, which, I'll explain to my husband, is a crowded inner-city Sydney neighborhood that, back in the nineties, was grimy but beginning to gentrify. They were part of that gentrification: they'd bought a tall, shuttered terrace house in north Newtown and fitted it with many skylights, so that sunlight filtered down like luminous smoke through the stairwells and woke them each morning from a gleaming square above their bed. You could sit on their guest toilet and see the undersides of airplanes. The kitchen, too, was new, and they'd painted the front door an intrepid red, as if to advertise their plucky personalities. They were both lawyers with good salaries, and the timing of the pregnancy was part of a long-term plan that took into account the rising property values in their neighborhood. Each night, they strolled hand in hand through the streets of Newtown, Mandy's belly beginning to show, while Sydney Uni students rolled joints in the tiled front gardens of their rented houses and the employees of Thai restaurants ferried bags of fragrant rubbish out into narrow alleyways.

Sometimes Roy and Mandy walked down one particular street that had a backpacker hostel on it. The hostel was shabby and loud, but Roy and Mandy claimed to like it; they said it reminded them of their own student travels through Europe, of being nineteen and crawling into each other's beds in crowded dorms. There was the time at a hostel on Mykonos when, apparently, Roy sat on a top bunk, his legs dangling while Mandy stood between them sucking him off, and some raucous Croatian girls burst into the dorm. I heard Roy and Mandy tell this story multiple times, separately and together. Roy told it as if someone had informed him that, if he didn't tell a slightly risqué story at least once every year or two, he'd be considered terminally unadventurous. Mandy told it with genuine pleasure, as if she were astonished at herself for having lived a life in which an incident like this had taken place. The details changed over the years; eventually, the girls became Czech, and they ran from the room shouting, "God save the Queen!"

Roy and Mandy had had other backpacking adventures, but hasn't every middle-class Australian? Weren't we all at one time nineteen years old and sweet, oblivious amateurs? There was a night on the roof of a hostel in Marrakech that I've told my husband about; another in Penang, in a hotel full of Belgian doctors, that I haven't; a full-moon party on Kuta Beach that explains the small scar beneath my left ear. Everywhere I travelled in the eighties, I found Australians in short shorts carrying treasured copies of "Southeast Asia on a Shoestring." We all stank and thought we were poor, and none of the sex we had was interesting enough to talk about even two years later. But Roy and Mandy continued to recount their escapades. They spoke with such fondness for their younger selves—as if they had somehow been especially sweet and especially amateurish—that I was always vaguely annoyed by their stories of those times.

The backpacker hostel in their gentrifying neighborhood was made up of three connected terrace houses, leprous with pink paint and festooned with Tibetan prayer flags. It was being slowly devoured by some enormous bushes of night-blooming jasmine, which clotted the street with their creamy smell. No matter the time of day, there were always lights in the windows; there was always music playing and laundry hanging from the balconies. The street wasn't well lit, and the hostel reared up so suddenly from the footpath and was so tall and bright that walking past it in the dark felt a little like being in a tugboat bumping along the edge of an ocean liner. The hostel was next to a park, which in turn was next to a church, and on warm nights backpackers usually occupied both the park and the churchyard in more or less furtive stages of drunkenness, sex, or both. In my experience, it was impossible to walk past that hostel without thinking of all the fumblings and unzippings of your own young life, the stubborn grass stains, the greedy crevices, the rueful grimaces when someone's wrist seized up at an awkward angle.

These are my own impressions, of course. I don't know how Mandy and Roy really felt about the hostel, only that they walked past it one night and heard someone crying in the park. According to Roy, he knew at once that the person crying was a girl, but Mandy was less sure: there was a depth to the weeping which seemed masculine. It could even have been the growl of a possum. Anyway, something about the sound unsettled her enough that when Roy stopped walking she squeezed his hand and shook her head, as if to

say that they shouldn't get involved.

But Roy—noble, kingly Roy—squeezed back, gave a reassuring smile, and called out, "Hello? Hello? Is anybody there?"

The weeper took some time to emerge, but when she did she was a tall blond girl in cutoff denim shorts and a baggy tie-dyed T-shirt. Apparently, she'd been crouching against a wall of the hostel, not far from the footpath but concealed by a bushy bottlebrush, and the first things that Mandy noticed about her were that her braided hair was dotted with thin red fibres—the stamens of bottlebrush flowers—and that she was barefoot. When Roy told the story, he never mentioned what he'd first noticed about the girl. Mandy was always quick to say how pretty she was. I heard her compare the girl to assorted actresses, all of whom had been blond in at least one major role but otherwise looked nothing alike.

The girl came sobbing up from the bottlebrush, wiping her nose with the back of her wrist. For several minutes, she was able only to apologize, and to weep. According to Roy, Mandy rushed to the girl, took both her hands, and asked her what was wrong, while the girl just stood with her streaming face and her gulping mouth, saying, "Sorry."

Roy asked her if she was hurt, and I can imagine this—Roy stepping up to her and asking, gravely, "Would you describe yourself as having been hurt?" There would be some urgency in his voice, but also some restraint, and the effect would be that of a member of the Royal Family pausing in a receiving line to speak to a retired Olympian.

The girl shook her head to say that, no, she wasn't hurt. Roy asked if there was anyone they could find for her. A friend? A boyfriend? Someone inside? Because it was obvious that she had come from the hostel: her fair hair was twisted in Balinese braids, her neck was noticeably dirty, and she seemed to cry with a European accent. The girl only shook her head again and cried louder.

"Can we take you to your room? Can we get you anything?" Mandy asked, Roy asked, and the whole time the little life they'd created together was floating inside Mandy, preparing itself to be part of the world.

But the girl didn't want to go to her room or to be brought anything. Mandy felt that there was nothing to do but take the girl in her arms, so she did. This seemed to be the right thing: the girl collapsed against Mandy's neck in relief and sorrow. Since they could get nothing more intelligible from her, Mandy and Roy decided to take her home with them.

It was one of those decisions a couple make without discussion, but in full knowledge that they're in agreement. Roy nodded, stepped away from Mandy and the girl, and gestured down the street; Mandy, with her arm around the girl's shaking shoulders, led her away from the park and the hostel. The girl came without hesitation. Five minutes later, they were safely behind the red front door. Roy filled the kettle for tea and Mandy guided the girl to one of the chrome barstools at the kitchen island. When she was shopping for the stools, Mandy had imagined her children sitting at them, crayons gripped in chunky fists while she made dinner. Roy, in Mandy's vision, would arrive home from work, enter the kitchen rolling up his shirtsleeves, kiss everybody hello, and open a bottle of Merlot. It would all be very ordinary, very lovely, and as she described the scene I could see it, too, and the safety it represented, a safety I had always associated with Roy.

In fact, I had always found those stools perilous—I had spun back and forth on them many times, confessional and unhappy, my hands pushing off from the Corian countertop, while Roy leaned toward me over the island with a look of concern on his reassuring face. Mandy told me about the kids and crayons later, after the divorce, when they'd just sold the house and she was offering me the barstools. I had no use for barstools, but it seemed important to accept them.

So Mandy guided the girl to one of those stools, and this was the point at which they learned that the girl was Swiss and eighteen; but her name was unusual enough, or her accent heavy enough, that all they could be sure of was the letter it started with, "S." She was no longer crying, although her body was still racked occasionally by dry, soundless sobs; in order to subdue these, she buried her chin against her chest in such a way that Roy and Mandy could see every bit of the wincing scalp exposed by her braids.

EXORCISM IN ARCHAIC FORM

Fetal, fealty, feet of clay,
feeler, *ferae naturae*,
ferret (*Mustela putorius furo*),
feaze, feces, fear. Fear.

OE *faer*, sudden danger.
L *periculum*, peril. "An unpleasant
strong emotion caused by awareness
of danger." Dread, fright, panic,

terror. Painful agitation.
Intense reluctance to face a person
or situation. Aversion. Shock.
Adjure, to command under oath, or penalty

of curse. To expel an evil spirit
by adjuration. The word is beside
a pen-and-ink of an Exmoor sheep, almost
round with wool and mutton, like a white-mother

breast on four legs, with hooves
and horns. Mom, I adjure thee. Depart this child.

—*Sharon Olds*

She explained that she was backpacking around Asia and Australia with her boyfriend, Daniel; his name brought a quaver to her voice, but she didn't give in to it. She and Daniel had another six months of travel planned, and were due to leave Sydney in two days, hitchhiking to southern New South Wales, where they'd lined up a season of work picking fruit. After that, their plan was to head north, to the Great Barrier Reef, for a final, tropical hurrah, then return to Basel in time to start university. S wanted to study psychology. Daniel was supposed to become a doctor. S looked skeptical at the idea of Daniel as a doctor, and the wry face she pulled made Roy and Mandy laugh. S joined in this laughter and relaxed visibly. She curled her bare feet around the legs of the stool, shook her tight, greasy braids behind her shoulders, and tugged at the neckline of her T-shirt as if to cool herself down. She wore a halter bikini top beneath the shirt—Roy and Mandy now noticed the withered bikini strings pressed into the back of her pinkish neck.

The whole sad story came out as she drank her tea: There had been a barbecue at the hostel that evening. Daniel had been drinking all afternoon, he was flirting with an Irish girl, had been flirting all week, and when the Irish girl sat in Daniel's lap and S objected Daniel made a joke at her expense—at S's expense—and everyone at the barbecue laughed. S told the story as if she saw, now, how trivial it must sound, but there was still great dignity to the way she seemed to look back on it, with sorrow and wisdom, as if it had happened to a much younger person. Mandy and Roy, listening, must have thought of their passionate, brave young selves in those filthy backpacker hostels across Europe. They must have felt tender and protective toward S, and much older.

Now Mandy suggested that a glass of wine might be in order—something stronger than tea—although, naturally, she wouldn't have any herself. (I can see the way she would have stroked her rounding stomach as she said this.) When Roy told the story, he always made it clear that the wine had been Mandy's idea, that he would never have suggested it, and, of course, that he would never have drunk wine alone with the girl, who was after all only eighteen and in a vulnerable state. Mandy would nod in agreement as he said this. I once saw them tell the story while Mandy was breastfeeding, and she nodded so vehemently that the baby's little mouth detached from her purple nipple.

So Roy opened a bottle of Shiraz, and he and the girl drank—only a glass or two each—as they all sat talking in the kitchen. Mandy and Roy told stories of their travels and their university days; S talked about her parents, who had divorced a few years earlier and were now both seeing much older partners. It was as if, S said, the divorce had aged them, and she shook her head in wonder and disbelief, because she was at just the right age to start pitying her parents. They talked about the baby and somehow got around to looking at childhood photos of Roy and Mandy, and S said that if the baby was a girl they should name it after her. She was joking, of course, but the familiarity of this made it doubly impossible for them to ask for her name again.

Finally, Mandy yawned and said she thought it was time to get some sleep, and she suggested that Roy walk S back to the hostel—or, of course, S was very welcome to stay the night, although they had already converted the guest room into a nursery and S would need to sleep on the couch, which folded out into a bed and was apparently fairly comfortable. I slept on that couch a few times myself—always heartbroken or drunk, usually both, absolutely sure that my life

would never improve, that loneliness was everlasting, that no man with forearms like Roy's would ever turn to me with love—and I can confirm that it was, indeed, fairly comfortable.

S, of course, chose to stay the night. Why do I say "of course"? I'm not sure—only that it's so easy to imagine the intimacy of the three of them as they giggled at baby albums in that bright, bare kitchen, and how much nicer a stay in this pristine house must have seemed than a sheepish return to the hostel. Also, S said, she liked the idea of Daniel wondering where she was. She wanted him to suffer.

Roy made up the fold-out bed, as he'd done for me so many times, and told S to help herself to anything in the kitchen. Then he withdrew. Mandy found the girl some pajamas. She issued warnings about the delicate temperament of the downstairs shower, then she and S hugged in such a genuine way that Mandy, apparently, had felt as if they were sisters.

At this point in the story, someone in Mandy and Roy's audience would usually ask if it had occurred to them that the girl might rob them, and Mandy and Roy would always say no, absolutely not. And Mandy would say that she had only done what she hoped some stranger might one day do, if necessary, for her own daughter. When she said this, she would lean down to kiss the baby's head, or she and Roy would look at each other as if to say, "Don't worry, we'll never actually let her out of our sight—there will never be any need for the kindness of strangers."

Both Roy and Mandy insisted that they'd felt perfectly safe with S in their house, and that they had slept long and deep through the night. But surely Mandy must have spent some time, during that night, gazing at the dim square of the bedroom skylight and thinking about the girl sleeping on the fold-out, who had been so unabashed about changing that Mandy had seen her young, buoyant breasts. And Roy must have thought about how he'd gone around making sure that the windows and doors were locked, and all the time there was a stranger in the house with them, a girl who might have been anyone, whose name they didn't even know.

I've also imagined them having thrilled, hushed sex, knowing that the girl was sleeping downstairs—of course I've imagined that, though I probably won't mention it to my husband. And I've imagined the girl coming into their room in the early light, climbing into bed with her long blond limbs. Maybe Mandy spent the night awake, rigid, waiting to see if Roy would get up as if to use the bathroom, say her name in a loud whisper, and then, on receiving no response, creep trembling down the stairs toward the fold-out bed. I don't know

what it was really like, but I do know that, every unhappy night I slept in that fairly comfortable bed, I wondered if Roy would come down those stairs. I listened for his step and thought at some length about what he would say or do, and how I'd respond. When he didn't come, not once, I cursed the effortless happiness of married people.

In the morning, the girl was gone. She'd stripped the bed, turned it back into a couch, drunk a mug of instant coffee, and left a note that said, "Thank you very much," with "very" underlined three times. She signed it "S." She hadn't stolen or damaged anything, had even closed the gate on her way out. I imagine the house feeling strangely empty that day, both Roy and Mandy looking in at the spotless nursery even more than usual, reminding themselves that they were awaiting a joyous arrival, not mourning a departure.

Mandy and Roy walked by the hostel again that night. They considered going in and asking after S, but because they didn't know her name they decided against it.

Their baby was born three months later. She was the first of many babies of my acquaintance to be named Isabella.

When Isabella was a few weeks old, Mandy read a newspaper article about two Swiss backpackers who had been picking fruit in southern New South Wales. At the end of the harvest, these backpackers had left for Sydney—they were planning to hitchhike—and hadn't been heard from since. Their names were Daniel and Sabina. Mandy studied the photo of the couple in the newspaper. Sabina didn't look like S, but she also didn't not look like S. Mandy showed the picture to Roy, who agreed that she might have been S. Every time I heard them tell this story, they always looked a little apologetic at this point, as if they knew that it would have been improved by a positive identification of S—but of course it had to be her, she was the right age, she was reported as being from Basel, her boyfriend's name was Daniel, and, like S, the pair had spent time in Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia before their arrival in Australia. Sabina's hair wasn't in braids in the newspaper photo, and that may have been why she looked different.

At first, Roy and Mandy ended their story here, with this slightly ambiguous thrill. The story was enriched a few months later, however, when a pair of mushroom foragers found Daniel's and Sabina's bodies in Barrow State Forest. They had been shot; Daniel had also been stabbed. Until then, I had never taken seriously the concept of evil. It was too abstract, I thought, and too convenient. Of course there was no power that moved in darkness through the world, recruiting some people and striking others. But I remember watching the news that day: the screen showed police tape across a bush track, officers walking with black Labradors, helicopters hovering above treetops. Nothing overtly frightening, but all of it was terrible—the tautness of the tape, the businesslike trot of the dogs, the way the crowns of the trees thrashed with the force of the helicopter blades. I felt the presence of something then, quite suddenly, in my stomach and at the roots of my hair. I watched the helicopters rise from the treetops, as if hauling a vast net full of some heavy, invisible substance that seemed to want to drag them back down—but they broke away.

Isabella was six months old when the bodies were found, able to sit up on her own in a tottering way. At barbecues and lunches and catch-ups and cafés, Roy and Mandy were asked to tell the story of S, the murdered girl who stayed the night. They always complied. As we leaned toward them to listen, I would look at Mandy, and at Roy, and at everyone else present, to see which of us might be willing to suggest that, by being kind to S that night, Roy and Mandy had made her so trusting of Australian strangers that she might, for example, have been less careful if a man approached her on a highway, offering her a ride in his truck. Maybe no one else ever thought this. Maybe only I pictured S on a lonely road with her tight braids and her boyfriend, backpack at her feet, one thumb raised, hoping for hospitality and thinking, when the truck pulled up, that she had found it.

My husband, when I tell him about S, will recognize this part of the story, because Sabina and Daniel were only the first of the bodies found at Barrow State, and what came next—the capture of the man who had chosen his victims at random, the media circus, the trashy books and TV movies—was spread out like a wicked feast for anyone to pick at. But S was something private, a connection. She was Roy and Mandy's. She was mine.

Years passed, despite the existence of evil. None of our friends would admit to being surprised when Roy and Mandy broke up, but I was. I had been so sure of the red door, the skylights, the way they looked at each other as they told the story of S. I had been sure that marriage to a man like Roy—so reliable, so benevolent—would be like stepping onto a throne from which there could be no abdication. But, apparently, they had found themselves in different places, wanting different things. Isabella was just starting high school at the time. Property values in their neighborhood were soaring, and the house sold for a record price. Mandy inherited me in the divorce, but we lost touch when I moved out of state and married.

Yesterday, I was back in Sydney and ran into Roy on a street in Paddington. He looked good—older, leaner, like a man who would no longer talk about his backpacking days. There was no ring on his finger. He suggested a drink, and I liked the idea and was going to say yes. I wanted to ask him about the divorce, hoping he might say, "I wouldn't describe myself as having enjoyed it." I wanted to hear the story of S one more time, as told by Roy. It felt as though this might be my last chance to get close to the largeness of life, its terror and mystery, while remaining perfectly safe.

And I wanted to ask if he'd ever thought about me as I lay in the fold-out bed.

I already knew that he'd thought about me, and I also knew that, if I did go for a drink with him, we would find ourselves in a bed together sooner or later. But as he stood with me in the street, his hand on my elbow, suggesting this drink, I was reminded of a member of the Royal Family showing concern for patients on a hospital visit. It hurt just to look at him. I still might have gone, but then I remembered that I was married now, and that married people are happy. ♦

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Fiona McFarlane on murder's ripple effects.

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THE CRITICS

THE ART WORLD

HARLEM IS EVERYWHERE

Denise Murrell takes on the Harlem Renaissance at the Met.

BY HILTON ALS

I first learned about Denise Murrell—the curator and scholar behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art's big and shiny new spectacle, "The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism" (through July 28th)—in 2018, when I saw her landmark exhibition, "Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today," at Columbia University's Wallach Art Gallery, in Harlem. The show, which occupied a relatively small space but never felt cramped, apprised us of what had been left out of the available history (even the British art historian T. J. Clark's essential 1984 study, "The Painting of Modern Life"): the importance and the resonance of the Black female presence in the early days of modernism. As someone who'd been enamored of nineteenth-century French literature in college, I'd longed to know more about the poet Charles Baudelaire's mixed-race lover, Jeanne Duval, the inspiration for his "Vénus noire," in "Les Fleurs du Mal" (1857). From "Posing Modernity," I learned not only that Duval had been an actress when she met Baudelaire, in the early eighteen-forties, but that, during her volatile relationship with the poet, she visited artists and writers with him and frequented a coffeehouse on the Rue de Richelieu. I knew, from Clark and other scholars, that Baudelaire's depiction of the changes in industrial-era Paris had influenced his friend Édouard Manet, but it was Murrell who showed me that one reason works such as Manet's 1862 painting "Baudelaire's Mistress (Portrait of Jeanne Duval)"—in which we see difference that is not sentimental or exoticized, that looks back at us with no need to be liked or adored—were powerful was that they also at times illuminated how difference looked at itself.

"Posing Modernity," with its informative, never didactic wall texts and its wonderful abundance of paintings, photographs, and ephemera, began more or less with Laure, the model who posed as the Black maid for Manet's astonishing 1863 work "Olympia" (though that painting wasn't in the show), and continued through the twentieth century, to that performing juggernaut Josephine Baker and on to contemporary artists such as Mickalene Thomas, who reinterpreted the Laure figure in her 2012 series, "Une Très Belle Négresse." Murrell's framing of these extraordinary figures gave the impression that the models were all involved in self-inquiry, whereas the artists sometimes struggled to see beyond the color and shape of the women they were depicting. Murrell forced us to think about the interiority of the Black models. What trouble was in their minds as they were being looked at? And how did they trouble your mind as you looked at them?

Murrell herself knows something about identity and change. After graduating from Harvard Business School, in 1980, she got a job in finance, but it was art that captivated her, and she soon began graduate studies in art history. She received her Ph.D. from Columbia in 2014, a few years before "Posing Modernity" opened, and while she was working toward her dissertation she began to ask questions about Manet's Laure. Other "unknown" Black women followed, including the mixed-race German-born aerialist Miss La La, muse to Degas. In "Posing Modernity," Murrell was at her best—her freest as a thinker and a curator—when focussing on the nineteenth century; her imagination soared through all the erasures and elisions of the time and made something exciting and novel.

Unfortunately, the possibilities for imaginative freedom are more limited in her current show, in part because of where it is mounted, and in part because of what has already been said about the Harlem Renaissance. Murrell's biggest exhibition to date—it's many times the size of "Posing Modernity"—the show occupies eleven rooms plus a "coda" gallery dedicated to later years, and is divided into sections that focus on different aspects of the New Negro movement, as the Harlem Renaissance was originally dubbed, by the philosopher Alaine Locke: "The Thinkers," "Everyday Life in Black Cities," "Portraiture and the New Black Subject," and so on. Each gallery is awash in colors that seem inspired by the artist Aaron Douglas's palette, particularly in his allegorical paintings about Black American life: mauve, light green, grays. Murrell has left enough air around the paintings, photographs, sculptures, and other objects for us to really dig into the work without tripping over it. Viewers who are unfamiliar with the work of Winold Reiss, for instance, are in for a treat—he's featured prominently in "The Thinkers," the first room off the entryway. Born in Germany, Reiss was a painter, a sculptor, and a graphic designer. Always attracted to difference, the artist, who immigrated to the States in 1913, spent time at the Blackfeet Reservation, in Montana, in 1920, and made some remarkable drawings of the tribe. After that, he illustrated the historic anthology

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Winold Reiss, "The Actress" (1925). Reiss's forceful graphic sense highlights his psychological acuity.

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"The New Negro" (1925), edited by Locke. Reiss's forceful graphic sense highlights his psychological acuity. He's drawn to his subjects not by their race but by their grounded, lyrical presence. (It was wise of Murrell not to lump him with the other European artists, who are confined to another section of the show.) Like the photographer Richard Avedon, Reiss often poses his sitters in white space, the better to see their faces and minds at work. Looking at his pastel illustration of Locke, I thought about how far outside of Blackness one needs to stand in order to see how it renders itself.

Part of the greatness of "Posing Modernity" had to do with the fact that the artists it featured didn't assume that they understood Blackness; nor did they romanticize it. Duval, for example, is as tough and modern a figure in Manet's painting as the white woman at the center of his 1882 work "A Bar at the Folies-Bergères," and just as alienated. But that alienation—the flip side of modernism—is missing from Murrell's take on the Harlem Renaissance. We cannot guess from this show how soul-crushing the nineteen-twenties were for the majority of Black folks, in Harlem and elsewhere, who were scrambling to survive racism, low-paying jobs, segregation, and more in the wake of the First World War. (Jervis Anderson's work "This Was Harlem," which appeared first in these pages in 1981, remains an essential source when it comes to the politics of those times.) Murrell nods in that direction only by including a few books in vitrines—Langston Hughes's 1949 work "One-Way Ticket," for instance, which deals beautifully, and often painfully, with Black urban life. Collectively, the paintings and the drawings that Murrell has chosen are, no matter their pathos, a paean to the joys of Black life, to community, to togetherness. This she stresses in the room devoted to "Everyday Life in the New Black Cities," with works like Archibald J. Motley, Jr.,'s "Picnic" (1934) and William Henry Johnson's "Street Life, Harlem" (1939-40), paintings that show just how lively Black people can be. I suppose Murrell felt that she had to come at it this way—to cast sunshine on a dark historical shadow.

In 1969, the Met put on an exhibition titled "Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America 1900-1968," and it was a critical and political disaster. There were no paintings or drawings in the show (even though the legendary painters Romare Bearden, Faith Ringgold, and Jacob Lawrence lived in Harlem at the time, and the Met had works of theirs in its collection). Instead, the guest curator, Allon Schoener, treated Harlem as a social narrative, told through newspaper clippings, time lines, and numerous photographs by James Van Der Zee. "Harlem on My Mind" has haunted the Met ever since, and to some extent Murrell has been asked to make up for that. There are many paintings, drawings, and sculptures here, but less documentary material than one needs in order to appreciate the complicated history of the place and time. With this omission, Murrell has forgone some layers of complexity. Indeed, her own complexity as a writer and a thinker has been flattened, made more "accessible," presumably for the Met's wide audience. Her wall labels overexplain and reduce—using the word "flamboyant," for example, to describe a Black figure's look or way of being. "Posing Modernity" showed us a curator who embraced modernism's fractures, all those stories that were incomplete, sometimes unpleasant, but powerful, because they created us. The current show, by contrast, makes the history of Harlem palatable.

Romare Bearden's "The Block" (1971) appears—tellingly—as a coda to the show, and this monumental piece shows what Murrell could have done if liberated from the museum machinery: she could have mounted a show that drew on the truth of Bearden's collage effects, with its cut-up papers and lines broken and reassembled and turned into something else. "The Block" brings to mind Ralph Ellison's complicated but necessary 1948 essay, "Harlem Is Nowhere." In Harlem, Ellison writes, "the grandchildren of those who possessed no written literature examine their lives through the eyes of Freud and Marx, Kierkegaard and Kafka, Malraux and Sartre. It explains the nature of a world so fluid and shifting that often within the mind the real and the unreal merge, and the marvelous beckons from behind the same sordid reality that denies its existence." To make Harlem "nice" and vibrant throughout is to iron out—to whiten—the contradictions of the place, to deny both all that it has given and all that it has taken away. ♦

BOOKS

THE BOY WHO CRIED ART

Was Keith Haring a brilliant painter or a brilliant brand?

BY JACKSON ARN

© PATRICK McMULLAN

Haring created world-conquering images but yearned to be taken more seriously.

Mayor John Lindsay declared war on New York's graffiti in 1972. It was a curious move, even in an era known for unwinnable conflicts. Many residents hated graffiti, of course, but it didn't lack for fans in high places. The previous year, the *Times* had published an admiring profile of Taki, a teen-ager who scribbled his tag, TAKI 183, on walls and subway cars across the five boroughs. In 1974, Norman Mailer wrote a long essay for *Esquire* in which he compared Taki et al. to van Gogh. But the Mayor had spoken, and for the rest of the seventies the M.T.A. spent millions of dollars keeping the trains gray, which mainly seemed to encourage people to gussy them up again. By 1982, the year of Keith Haring's career-making solo show at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery, there was nothing groundbreaking about the idea that graffiti could be real art.

What was still novel was the idea that graffiti could sell for real money. At the end of the summer, the stock market began its famed five-year sprint, yanking the art market behind it. A newly loaded clientele went south of Fourteenth Street, where the principal crops included cocaine, rancid apartments, and most of the worthwhile culture within the city limits. In a single year, more than twenty galleries sprouted in the East Village alone. There were already spaces where graffiti artists could display their work—Fashion Moda, in the South Bronx, was the best known—but not for these prices. Between 1980 and 1982, Haring filled subway stations with hundreds of chalk drawings of babies, U.F.O.s, dogs, and televisions; for his solo show, he covered Shafrazi's walls in the same sorts of images. Within a few days of the opening, he had sold around a quarter of a million dollars' worth of work. If you bought something, you were buying graffiti, but a special kind that you could hang in your home, regardless of whether you cared to see it on your block.

A handball court in Harlem; a candy store on Avenue D; the Fiorucci boutique by the Piazza del Duomo, in Milan; the Dupleix Métro station, in Paris; the Berlin Wall; Grace Jones—for much of the eighties, it seemed that Haring's mission was to coat every square inch of the planet in his pictures, and that he might someday succeed. There were arrests and court summonses along the way, but they got rarer as he got more famous. (In 1984, another New York mayor, Ed Koch, thanked him for his public service.) A "CBS Evening News" segment on Haring, which aired shortly after the Shafrazi opening and was seen by some fourteen million people, presents his subway art as the creations of a precocious kid. He looks the part—twiggy frame, wire-rimmed glasses—and sounds it, too, explaining his pictures with the shy earnestness of someone a few years away from discovering self-doubt. "They come out fast, but, I mean, it's a fast world," he says. His voice is so flat that he could be doing a bit.

The only bit, the segment reveals, is that there is none. Haring *does* work fast, sometimes finishing dozens of drawings in a day, always of things everybody knows. He attracts onlookers but barely acknowledges them—as long as he's working, he barely hesitates at all. Muscle memory is his muse. In the years leading up to his death, from complications due to AIDS, at the age of thirty-one, the crowds kept getting bigger, but his process stayed the same: steady hand, monastic concentration. To go on YouTube and watch Haring

perform is weirdly gripping, so much so that the residue of performance he left behind, otherwise known as images, can't help but let you down.

Nabokov has a short, vivid scene about a bouquet of flowers. The bouquet sits in a shop that makes copies of old curios. A boy strolls in and touches the petals, expecting them to be lifeless, only to find that they're the real deal, camouflaged by a roomful of fakery. Brad Gooch's new biography, "Radiant: The Life and Line of Keith Haring" (Harper), often gives you the sense that Haring was, in essence, that bouquet: an utterly genuine person in a profession full of artifice. Even as a child, in small-town Pennsylvania, he had a gift for embracing mass culture with total, solemn fervor, whether it was supposed to be solemn or not. In the fourth grade, he fell hard for the Monkees and filled a notebook with cutout pictures of Davy Jones; in junior high, inspired by Billy Graham and maybe "Godspell," Haring found Jesus and rated all hundred and fifty of the Psalms on a scale from "good" to "ugh!"

Those obsessions faded. Others stayed. Haring's father, an amateur artist, taught him to draw and showed him Dr. Seuss and Walt Disney, both decisive influences on his graffiti. Lines, far more than shape or color, bring this kind of art to life: when an object is supposed to be bright, short black ones stick out of it like feathers on a peacock; when somebody is supposed to be in motion, little trios of waves around the knees and elbows remind you. It's a visual language we all learn before we can talk, not that artists require anything fancier. Disney, Haring would later say, was one of the twentieth century's three key artists, along with Warhol and Picasso. A 1982 Haring painting of Mickey Mouse clutching his fire-truck-red cock might look like the desecration of a beloved character, but, given the artist's feelings, it seems more of a shrine to animation's utopian, anything-goes potential, with any subversive spark drowned in affection. When Haring described Christopher Street, one of the first places he discovered upon moving to New York City, as a "gay Disneyland," he was giving it the kindest compliment he knew.

Haring was twenty years old and freshly enrolled at the School of Visual Arts when he met the teen-age Jean-Michel Basquiat, another artist about to make the leap from graffiti to gallery art. The year was 1979. The same semester, Haring and some friends discovered a jukebox in the basement of the Holy Cross Polish National Church, at 57 St. Marks Place. This turned out to belong to Club 57, a new social space run by Stanley Strychacki, with the intention of netting the church some money. (Apparently, polka nights were not the cash magnets the priests had prayed for.) If the essence of the East Village could be found in a single room, here it was; under Strychacki, there were poetry open mikes, dance parties, d.j. sets, and B-movie screenings seasoned with salty commentary. Haring paid two dollars and became member No. 35.

Gooch, a seventies downtowner himself and the author of a sensitive biography of Frank O'Hara, is superb on the textures of these New York years, when a young artist seemingly couldn't cross the street without getting ideas. Haring is strolling through the Flatiron district one day, for instance, when he finds unwanted rolls of photographic background paper; he ends up dragging them all the way to his studio and covering them in ink. Between projects, he has endless sweaty adventures at a gay bar called International Stud, and, when he and a classmate move into an apartment on First Avenue, he covers the walls in little penis drawings. "[I] spent 90 percent of my time being totally obsessed with sex," he recalled, "and that became the subject of my work." His ideal seemed to be art with a minimum of conscious calculation, in the spirit of Dadaist automatic writing or the wriggly abstractions of Pierre Alechinsky. Spontaneity, not insight or virtuosity, was his thing, and Club 57, not S.V.A., was his real alma mater. The group embraced its own transience in performances that existed only in the seconds needed to sing or say or spin them. "We did it for each other," the club's manager, Ann Magnuson, said, "and then we were on to the next thing the next day." It may as well have been the young Haring's motto.

Art for art's sake, but sometimes for politics' sake, too. At MOMA's Club 57 exhibition, in 2017, the one sour, inescapable presence was Ronald Reagan, the "Bedtime for Bonzo" star who somehow ended up with the launch codes. In a collage from 1981, he wears an S.S. hat and prances around on showgirl legs. ("When martial law is declared," the image demands, "what will you wear?") "We were fully convinced [he] was going to start a nuclear war with Russia," Magnuson wrote in the show's catalogue, "so we were creating at a frenetic pace." By the middle of the decade, the rockets remained unlaunched, but the AIDS epidemic had killed thousands of Americans, many of them gay New Yorkers. Reagan didn't make a major speech on the subject until 1987, six years after the earliest reported cases and several after Haring began showing symptoms. "Radiant" never outright claims that he cranked out art in part because he suspected that he was going to die soon, but it doesn't have to. Everybody he knew half suspected that they were going to die soon.

Success was a fast-acting drug. In Chapter 8, Haring is still making art in a basement studio with ratty floors and actual rats. By Chapter 9, he's promoting his work in Tokyo and celebrating with Madonna. He brings old friends to parties at the Paradise Garage and dinner at the Four Seasons, and he makes new friends easily. The aura of Andy Warhol, another party buddy, shines on him, sanctifying all worldly ambition. In 1986, Haring opened an art-merchandise store in SoHo, coated it in floor-to-ceiling graffiti, and called it the Pop Shop. People who could never afford Haring originals could at least buy a T-shirt, which had the happy side effect of turning them into walking billboards that might catch the eye of someone who could. The venture, Gooch writes, was Haring's response to the gospel of Business Art: "the step," per Warhol, "that comes after Art." To Haring, this meant work that any patron could understand and enjoy. "Art for everybody," he liked to say.

He had found his groove by then, covering big rectangles of brick or metal or canvas with Day-Glo, enamel, or acrylic paint. He rarely touched oils,

possibly because they looked too organic—he was after something hard and artificial, as well as something that dried quickly. The paintings had a small vocabulary of simple shapes (dollar bills, hearts, globes, crawling babies), applied to the picture plane with no great attention to exact placement or color, like a baker applying sprinkles to a birthday cake. Somehow, bright, rough cartoons had become "his," so that anybody who dared paint the same was ripping off the Haring brand. There is a sharp, slightly nauseating sort of glee in watching him get away with this, reminiscent of the scene from "Mad Men" in which Don Draper decides that a tobacco company's new slogan will be "It's toasted." Everyone's tobacco is toasted, but no one else has bothered to plant a flag.

Something in Haring's art had changed. In footage of his early graffiti stunts, the images themselves don't really seem to be the point, any more than the color and curvature of rubber balls are the point of juggling. His chalk drawings are almost always very crude, so as not to interfere with the whoosh-ing immediacy of the performance or the nervous allure of the performer. In "Painting Myself Into a Corner," a video Haring created while still at S.V.A., he crawls across a big canvas on the floor, leaving a dark trail of paint behind him. He doesn't look up much, as though encouraging us to look down with him, a call that's hard to heed—the painting is a dense, Alechinsky-esque cartoon, but its artist is a decidedly more interesting cartoon who refuses to stop moving. As the final minutes arrive, the painting's life has only just begun, but the art is over. "Painting Myself Into a Corner" may, in fact, be the best art Haring ever created, a charismatic shrug that earns your enthrallment by never once seeming to demand it. The title turned out to be prophetic, though.

The most frustrating thing about Haring, and maybe the most intriguing, is that he was a seventies, performance-type artist who fell into an eighties, gallery-type career; decided that he was a regular painter after all; and then expected everyone to find profundity in his bright, melty stick men, just as he had once found profundity in the Monkees. It is true, though trivially, that he made it big because he got lucky: lucky with his location, luckier with his timing, and luckiest with his skin color. (If this sounds harsh, watch that CBS segment again and behold Dan Rather trying and failing to hide his fascination that there exists a graffiti artist who is also a white kid from Pennsylvania.) Still, some lucky painters have the decency to make excellent paintings. The defining feature of Haring's images may be their obviousness: beside Club 57's spikier efforts, his anti-Reagan collage "Reagan: Ready to Kill," in which the words are gathered from newspaper fragments and paired with a photograph of a Klansman (it could mean anything!), leaves barely a mark. In "Tree of Life" (1985), the tree is green because green is the color of life; in "A Pile of Crowns for Jean-Michel Basquiat" (1988), completed shortly after his friend's overdose, the crowns are black because black is the color of death. The money-guzzling capitalist pig in a 1984 painting is a pig.

Art for everybody isn't for everybody, I suppose, but when Haring tries something less obvious, his shortcomings become more so. An untitled canvas from 1985, teeming with cocks and flames and grinning beasts, is wonderfully self-assured in its intimations of shameless desire—we seem to be looking at a version of Hell, but, if so, then who needs Heaven? Much of the piece's square footage is pure mush, though, and a comparison with the work of the cartoonist Robert Crumb, an honest-to-God genius who sometimes worked in a similar register but whom nobody ever mistook for a Business Artist, does Haring no favors: this painting cries out for odor, texture, fleshiness, the kind that Crumb brought to every line. Anything to make it stick in your craw after your eyes move on.

It is hard to name another famous artist in whom the lovable was joined by so much that still grates. A performer of undeniable charm; a gentle fellow, good with kids and loyal to friends; a martyr who bravely spoke out about his disease. On the other hand: a dilettante of immense self-esteem who rode the train, saw the tags of Black and Latino teen-agers, appears to have

"Unfortunately, the balloons are from an earlier thing."

thought, Yeah, I could do that, was promptly and richly rewarded, and still felt that his reward wasn't big enough. Haring may have sensed that his images were faint echoes of the live performances where his real appeal lay, but he was desperate for these images to be taken more seriously all the same. Complaining of the lack of "real critical inquiry into my work"—reviews were rarely better than mixed, and rivals like Eric Fischl got all the attention from MOMA—he penned an article in 1984 on his creative influences, to no obvious effect. Say what you will about Warhol, but he never whined like that. On the contrary, he agreed when people said his art was thin and smirked at the tastemakers who ransacked it for meaning—which, naturally, made them ransack it more.

Gooch makes a valiant effort to present his hero as an artist-intellectual whose creations only seem shallow. He quotes Haring's friend's claim that the late-seventies images were "very William Burroughs-esque, in terms of crossing out or rearranging words or cutting up headlines," as though every comic-book villain who snips and glues a ransom note is an heir of the Beat Generation. Gooch thinks that the title of "Painting Myself Into a Corner" is "witty." Upon the single semiotics class Haring took at S.V.A., he builds a wobbly theory that the artist's subway drawings were "cleverly semiotic," since they occupied space usually devoted to ads and therefore offered some comment on commercialism, though Gooch is less than his usual articulate self concerning what this comment might have been.

His other way of dignifying his subject with depth is to conflate art with the causes it supports. Haring made anti-apartheid paintings and, near the end of the eighties, the "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" ACT UP posters that are arguably his most famous creations. In 1989, he paid to print twenty thousand copies. These were noble acts, and Gooch is right to celebrate them. The ACT UP posters may well be Haring's most aesthetically successful images—not because they do anything more than usual, but because they're obliged to do less. His art doesn't need to stick in anyone's craw, so long as it's paired with something that does—it gets people in the room, and an activist takes things from there. Various people (Haring, for one) compared the paintings to Paleolithic art carved into the walls of caves; his "line never felt more carved," Gooch insists, "than when he was drawing with passion to right wrongs or to urge timely political action." Opinions will vary as to whether this sentence belongs in an otherwise sober biography; what's less debatable is that the sentence is *wrong*. Haring's style feels—is—the same whether enlisted in the cause of ACT UP or his own bank account, of fighting racism or promoting the Pop Shop. What his images advertised was always changing, but they only ever spoke in advertising's metallic chirp.

Haring died in 1990. As narrated by Gooch, his last days were filled with warmth: fellow-artists and old S.V.A. classmates visited, Madonna rang from California, Tony Shafrazi ordered everybody food from Haring's favorite Vietnamese restaurant. His parents were holding him when his kidneys finally gave out. Shortly before, he had received a letter from Walt Disney Studios about the possibility of a collaboration, an inquiry which he assumed to be a trick his friends had concocted to cheer him up. It was not.

Naturally, some acquaintances scorned the bohemian turned millionaire. "We were all thrilled for him," Magnuson claimed, but it's unclear how many people "we" describes—not the graffiti artists, certainly, who defaced one of his murals with the words "Big Cute Shit." Accusing Haring of selling out, as they were doing and others still do, slightly misses the point, however. Even in its infancy, there was something in New York graffiti that smacked of Business Art. You can see it in Basquiat, who put a copyright symbol on his creations well before they hung in galleries. Or watch "Stations of the Elevated," Manfred Kirchheimer's ecstatic M.T.A. documentary. Pay attention to the way he cuts between spray-painted trains and signs for Burger King and Coppertone. When people watched the film in 1981, they may have sensed aesthetic deadlock: commercial art and street art face to face, without much of anything to say to each other. But you might also interpret these scenes as street art competing with commercial art, trying to match its bigness and brightness—and, the moment you do, Haring seems less the artist who betrayed graffiti and more the artist who made its guilty dreams come true.

More than three decades on, his reputation seems out of focus somehow. Nobody really thinks of him as a performance artist, but few think of him as a great painter, either—his pictures are just *there*, and everywhere. They are presumed to have broken down barriers between high and low art, though Warhol painted his soup cans a full twenty years before the Shafrazi show, and Duchamp signed "R. Mutt" on a urinal almost half a century before that. His admirers continue to complain that he isn't taken seriously enough; in a way, they are correct, though this book may change things. His art is overexposed but not overanalyzed, perhaps because Haring himself was unclear on how we should treat it: he made art for everybody, unless he made deep, semiotic Ph.D. fodder, conversant with Lascaux and Dada and "Naked Lunch."

Not that clarity need be the goal. In Haring's case, its absence has worked wonders, to the point where it's worth asking if the bouquet may have had a few fake flowers in it after all. Among artists, Warhol gets all the credit for writing the self-promotion playbook, but I count more Keiths than Andys on the scene in 2024. You don't keep people interested with enigmatic muteness; you do it by noisily positioning your stuff as both populist and cerebral and then letting the chatter commence. The dust never settles—consensus seems perpetually just around the corner, but, since it would be better if it didn't arrive, it doesn't. It hasn't for Jeff Koons, or for Damien Hirst, and perhaps it never will for Keith Haring, the subject of indignant love from his partisans, weary amusement from his skeptics, collaborations with Disney, a major exhibition at the Broad Museum in Los Angeles last year, and, not least, this highly entertaining biography, all of which makes me wonder if he wasn't an even shrewder Business Artist than we realize. ♦

BOOKS

HAD TO HAPPEN

Marilynne Robinson on Genesis.

BY JAMES WOOD

There was a hymn we used to sing when I was a child, one of those lusty, murderous chants characteristic of the Anglican Church in its high-Victorian pomp. Written in 1894, it vibrates with imperial certainty—of salvation, election, sure destiny.

> God is working his purpose out
> As year succeeds to year.
> God is working his purpose out
> And the time is drawing near.
> Nearer and nearer draws the time,
> The time that will surely be:
> When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
> As the waters cover the sea.

These words were mystifying to me before they were repellent. How could the waters cover the sea, given that the sea is made of water? (I didn't know that the hymn quotes the Book of Isaiah.) Once I'd decided that the phrase simply meant a great deal of water, that it promised an annihilating but glorious flood, there was time enough to recoil from the theology. When the hymn was sung in our church in Durham, I tended to float away from the congregation. I saw the worshippers singing a jaunty tune in unison, as if at a football game, about a dearly desired apocalypse that sounded highly undesirable to me, because it apparently had no space for human beings. Where would we be when water covered the sea? Underneath it? More orthodoxly, somewhere above it. (Though about that "we": surely a great number, the unlucky damned, would indeed be underneath.) Unless we'd be bobbing on it, alongside Noah on his ark. Had the hymn writer not considered that the image used for this triumphant finale also conjures the great flood in the Book of Genesis, God's vengeful destruction of the world after he came to regret having made it? And then there was the unsettling implacability of this plan: "nearer and nearer" . . . and thus soon. Not *too* soon, I hoped.

Victorian hymns are cheap targets: their bloodthirsty optimism has so profoundly had its day. But, putting aside my childhood struggles with the hymn's unseaworthy simile, the teleology that it renders is perfectly orthodox in Christian theology. It is called Providence, and it involves the idea that God orders time: that, however mysteriously, we are moving toward the fulfillment of his design. Providence arises from creation. If God created the world and put us at its center—Genesis tells us that we were made in God's image—then he must intend to do something with us and for us. In the Christian version, Christ is the eventual hero of God's plan, leading humanity both forward and backward, toward its eternal place with God. What was lost in the Garden of Eden will be restored in the Kingdom of God. Christianity, you could say, is what makes Providence good, insuring that life is not tragic fortune or careless fate, and also not the terrible whimsy of the Greek gods. In this sense, Providence is God's meaning. And the very end of our story is the chapter that will finally reveal the fullness of that meaning.

Nonbelievers may suspect that the Christian notion of Providence is itself whimsical, in its conceit of a Creator who, one day, just fancied us into life. And, besides, what is intrinsically meaningful about eternal life anyway? But there's little in my summary that would have been alien to St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, or John Calvin. Or to Marilynne Robinson, to judge from her new book, "Reading Genesis" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Robinson has often described herself as a Calvinist. By her lights, as she explained in her

The novelist considers God's "mysterious benign intention" for human beings.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARIE LARRIVÉ

essay "Awakening," Abraham Lincoln was also a Calvinist, since he believed that "life is shaped by divine intention, which will express itself in ways that can be baffling or alarming but that always bring an insight, pose a question, or make a demand, to the benefit of those who are alert to the will of God."

Calvin (1509-64) was a French Protestant Reformer, who became a kind of theocratic boss of Geneva. Robinson has written powerfully in defense of Calvin and of the lively Puritanism that his movement birthed, not least in America. She tends to pass over, as she does in that description of Lincoln's theology, Calvin's signature terror—that the divine intention of which Robinson speaks was, for Calvin, an ordained system of doom and election. Calvin believed that God had chosen for each of us, before our births, our ultimate fates. A fortunate few (starting, of course, with Calvin's own lucky congregation) will go upstairs, to reside with the Lord; a much larger number, the plebeian damned, will go downstairs, condemned to eternal Hell. And there is nothing any of us can do about it. Calvin often cites Augustine, in whose works this thought is clearly lurking (Augustine wrote that the reason God did not save the damned was simply that he did not want to, and that was God's own business). But Calvin makes the doctrine central.

This is Providence on fire. Thankfully, Robinson's Calvinism is gentler: she has no evident interest in Hell, but she shows a warm interest in Heaven. In her fiction, Robinson has returned again and again to what she has called, in her novel "Housekeeping," "the law of completion." Sometimes earnestly, sometimes with plain and touching comedy, her characters picture and populate that strange utopian afterlife, that scene of fulfillment and restoration, where we hope to see our parents and grandparents, and perhaps even the weird old lady who lived down the street, and where God will bind our wounds, and, as Robinson puts it, "we will learn what we have been and what we are." In this eternity of recognition, "a veil will be lifted and there will be an ending and a beginning, creation purged, healed, and renewed." All pain will cease—fortunately enough, because in our lives, of course, there has been much pain. Toward the end of Robinson's novel "Gilead," the narrator, nearing his life's end, quotes the famous verse in the Book of Revelation about God wiping away our tears in Heaven, and he movingly adds this gloss: "It takes nothing from the loveliness of the verse to say that is exactly what will be required."

On the face of it, Robinson should be an ideal reader of Genesis, of its richly compacted human stories and their sharp details: Noah, drunk and naked in his tent, his state witnessed by his son Ham, although not by his two other sons, who walk into his tent backward to avoid the filial shame; or Jacob, tricking his elder brother, Esau, out of his birthright and winning his father's blessing ("Do you have only one blessing, my father?" Esau cries on discovering what's happened. "Bless me, too, my father!"); or the long story of Joseph and his envious brothers—how they sell him for money, Joseph's disappearance into Egypt, his prosperity there, and the family's eventual reconciliation after many years of separation ("I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well," Joseph's father, Jacob, says). And, finally, Jacob's death, described with the reticent palpability so characteristic of the Hebrew Bible: "When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed, and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his kin." *Drew his feet into the bed.* One wants a novelist of Robinson's talent to cast her eye over these crooked tales, these stories bent into their shapes by human want and willfulness.

At the same time, a novelist who appears to trust in divine intervention the way you or I might trust in a train timetable, who reads these verses as human episodes written by humans who were themselves authored by God, makes for an intriguingly pious commentator. There are enough academic studies of Genesis written from outside ancient understanding. There are shelves of scholarly books explaining that Genesis is written by different hands, that indeed God's proper name changes in the course of the book, that the story of Noah's flood borrows from Mesopotamian myth, that in this wild conglomeration we can see polytheism being shaped into something at once quite magnificent, awful, and peculiar: a single God, who chooses his people and is in turn chosen by them.

This new mono-God is fiercely interventionist, and he seems to possess a plan that his dim-sighted human creations can barely make out. He banishes Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden

"How is our take on your culture?"

because, in disobeying his orders not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they become godlike. Of the two brothers Cain and Abel, God mysteriously likes Abel but has no affection for Cain. Human wickedness is so disappointing to this God that he destroys the earth, saves Noah and his family, and then promises never to do anything like that again. This God knows the future: he tells Abraham that his people are going to suffer four hundred years of enslavement in Egypt. He chooses the wily trickster Jacob, anointing Jacob as Israel itself, passing over poor stiffed Esau. Notoriously, he orders Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as a test of faith, lifts the command at the last second, and then doubles his blessings: Because you were willing to sacrifice your heir, the angel of the Lord tells Abraham, I will give you many heirs. Not to mention the business with foreskins, demanded by God like genital loot, the spoils of victory, so many scalps.

Reading Genesis from inside rather than outside these theological presumptions seems an interesting experiment: it would involve properly crediting both the humanity and the divinity of these strange tales. At her best, Robinson is masterly at this hybrid task. In the early pages of the book, she lays out the lines and the limits of her system. Genesis was written by human beings; this concession seems, to some believers, to circumscribe the text's sacredness, but, as she nicely puts it, the Bible itself appears to have no anxiety on this score, since it names the authorship of many of its books, "a notable instance of our having a lower opinion of ourselves than the Bible justifies." We should not have a low opinion of ourselves, she argues, for if Genesis tells us anything it is that we are exalted beings, created in God's image. It further tells us that God is goodness itself, and that he created a universe he considered good. The human adventures and episodes that follow God's creation of the world dramatize how "a flawed and alienated creature at the center of it all" managed to make such a mess of things. Robinson isn't especially interested in the historical actuality of events like the expulsion from Eden, the flood, or the Tower of Babel. They are closer to a set of allegories about the nature of reality. In this sense, "the Bible is a theodicy, a meditation on the problem of evil," because it is constantly trying to reconcile the darker sides of humanity with God's goodness, and the original goodness of being.

Again, there is nothing theologically eccentric about any of this. Like many Christians, Robinson sees Genesis, and, by extension, the Bible, as a tale of protected errancy. We sinfully swerved away from God's "first intention," and the writers of Genesis are extremely interested in all our subsequent avarice, aggression, rebelliousness, and sexual deviancy. In order to be free and autonomous beings, we had to be allowed by God to be capable of such errancy. But we are ultimately protected by "the faith that He has a greater, embracing intention that cannot fail." Robinson sees evidence that the Bible writers were fixated on God's goodness in the way that this story of the flood differs from superficially similar Babylonian legends, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh and Enuma Elish. In her view, the Babylonian myths have no interest in the goodness of creation and feature gods with no interest in human beings as moral actors. The Enuma Elish myth concludes that humans exist only to make offerings to the gods. By contrast, the God of Genesis "is unique in His having not a use but instead a mysterious benign intention" for human beings.

As she sorts through the Genesis stories, Robinson notes how often God chooses the younger son over the natural heir—Abel over Cain, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over his brothers—or the prodigal over the righteous. As Robinson observes, Jacob is a very unlikely beneficiary of God's blessing. His behavior is ignoble, and he doesn't always know what high purpose he is being put to, but the story is written with an understanding that in the long run his faith, and the faith of his people, will be vindicated. This is "providence working itself out." As Robinson notes, the story had to go this way because Jacob has a foreordained task in becoming one of the patriarchs of Israel. If Jacob had been less envious of his elder brother, or if Esau had been less entitled, Jacob's story would never have entered what Robinson calls "sacred history." But, as it is, the story reminds us that "the covenant is not contingent upon human virtue, even human intention. It is sustained by the will of God, which is so strong and steadfast that it can allow space within Providence for people to be who they are, for humanity to be what it is."

Robinson often makes an eloquent case for the specialness of this new kind of God and the unusual interest, solicitude, and high-handed love he displays to his creations. But perils attend her kind of piety. You soon become aware of Robinson skewing everything in favor of this strange God. There is an austere final judgment or a hard kernel lurking inside each of her apparently gentle evaluations.

Noah's flood: well, yes, God destroys the world, but in the end he "solicitously preserves a human family," and the covenant he makes with Noah when the waters subside affirms God's forbearance and loyalty. The destruction of Sodom: yes, Abraham appears to bargain with God, asking whether the Lord would spare the city if it contained just ten righteous men. But in the end there was clearly something evil going on inside its walls, and the ultimate fate of Sodom "indicates that there were not ten righteous men, nor even one." O.K., then! Cain and Abel: well, God curses Cain for killing his brother, and sends him wandering in exile, but in the end Robinson thinks God shows "great leniency" toward Cain in granting him such estimable descendants. The four hundred years in Egypt: rough, of course, but "even the enslavement is providential." Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac: well, the sacrifice was never going to happen, for three reasons. First, the parable exists to tell us that God is not interested in human sacrifice. (Though isn't the whole command-and-remand thing a torturous way of demonstrating this admirable preference?) Second, Isaac has to survive, in order to go on to lead his people and fulfill his role in "providential history." And, third, from Abraham's great devotion we get to learn about the importance of humble faith: "So the seeming cruelty to Abraham is compassion toward those great nations who learned from him or modelled their piety on his." What Abraham as a figure "means," Robinson says, is that "the Lord has an intention for the world that is to be realized through history."

One problem with Providence is that it is always in danger of turning story

into parable. Of course, once any human story has been written down, it is complete and ordained, but tales and novels wisely proceed as if the opposite is the case. If the story could never have been otherwise, it is not quite a story. Robinson concedes that there is no meaningful "if" involved in these tales. "I could conceive of another Abraham," sly Kafka wrote, but Robinson is not really permitted to do so. What can be said about story must also be said about history. If history is providential, it becomes historical parable. We know the end in advance. The four hundred years in Egypt have no intrinsic meaning, because "even the enslavement is providential." The same could be said, according to this logic, of the Holocaust. Providence functions as the ultimate answer to all troublesome questions about evil and pain: trust the plan, and its final revelation. At one point, while discussing Jacob, Robinson pauses to reflect that it's not so strange that humans and their foibles are at the center of these sacred stories. After all, "love and grief," she says, are, "in this infinite Creation, things of the kind we share with God." Then this: "That they exist at all can only be proof of a tender solicitude." That love and grief exist at all, she means, is owing to God. Which further means: that we exist at all is owing to God. He is the author, and the stories of our very lives are a magnificent and utterly unearned gift.

Officially, Robinson understands Genesis to have been written by human beings. In effect, since free story is hemmed by unfree Providence, and all stories are God's, she reads the Bible as Scripture (a word she always capitalizes)—as revelation. So, in turn, you learn to read her book in a spirit of wary doubleness. There is an official text and a shadow text. In the official text, there's nothing out of order about a commentator writing such things as: "the Lord has an intention for the world that is to be realized through history." Or: "It is not always obvious that God does love humankind as such or that He should, but this is, of course, a human view of the matter." Such glosses are merely the patient commentator doing her best to see things from the world view of the Bible itself.

But at some point the shadow text extends its ghostly hand, and you realize that Robinson is not merely paraphrasing the text's sacred premises; she is sermonizing about an actual God and his actual Providence. She is not only speaking of God but for God. That last quoted sentence is an odd one. It isn't obvious, Robinson says, that the God of Genesis does love us—but then, she qualifies, this is a rather limited, "human view" of the matter. The oddity here is not theological but literary. One is, after all, reading a book by a modern novelist about a collection of human stories. And what else could the Bible be except a series of writings that reflect "a human view of the matter"? In the Bible, there is literally no other "view of the matter" except the human one.

It is, in truth, very hard to remember, if one has been brought up in a religious tradition of any kind, that the God of the Hebrew Bible is not God himself but a collection of human approximations and reckonings and inspired fictions. I have spent much of my life hating the God who replies to Job, the God who bullies and blusters out of the whirlwind, when calm rationality should remind me that this God speaks words written by a human or group of humans. From a literary point of view, it makes no more sense to hate this God than to hate King Lear. In both cases, human beings, writing with an ardor and an inspiration that indeed seem sacred, went to the edge of the knowable. And, in both cases, these writers use words and characters to bring back the great treasures of their literary pilgrimages. It is an extraordinary thing that a human being saw fit to describe the creation of the world from the point of view of God himself. I share Robinson's reverence for the endeavor. But the tale is itself a creation.

Remembering this literary createdness—pinching ourselves from time to time with good, strong secular fingers—what do we find in Genesis? Perhaps we don't find the good God of Robinson's piety but a God ably described by Jack Miles as "maximally powerful and minimally kind." Robinson sees only forbearance and tender solicitude in the God who makes covenants with Noah and Abraham and Jacob, but the deity who promises to make a great nation for his chosen patriarchs adds, "I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you." The God of the Israelites is working out the terms of his particular protection racket, and the Israelites respond accordingly. "Because" and "if" are the watchwords here. Because you were willing to sacrifice your heir, God tells Abraham, I will grant you many heirs. If God protects me and gives me food and clothes, Jacob says, "then the Lord shall be my God." This mutual choosing produces the warrior god of the Book of Exodus, the divine general who leads his people out of Egypt and who will tell them how to wage war (exterminating the Canaanites, for instance). There are, of course, the Ten Commandments and the moral law. But there is also God's law of divine caprice and favoritism: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."

Far from obviously being good, the God of the Hebrew Bible comes up short, morally. Once we rid ourselves of the illusion that we are witnessing God himself in action, his shortcomings are of the greatest interest, since these inadequacies must enact the moral critique of the people who created him on the page. In place of Robinson's placid reading of the destruction of Sodom—they must have deserved it—we see Abraham reminding God that the moral thing to do would be to spare the city, perhaps not only on account of the righteous but, by implication, as a mercy to the sinners, too. Before Plato activated his famous dilemma in the Euthyphro—is an action right because it is commanded by the gods, or do the gods command it because it is right?—Abraham teases God in like fashion, reminding him that an objective morality exists, and reminding us that this God may not be its possessor: "Far be it from you to do such a thing. . . . Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

The Book of Job stages a similar struggle. As Slavoj Žižek has often argued, it is not Job who is on trial but Job who puts God on trial, and it is hard to see how God wins his case. Some Christians maintain that without God there is no objective grounding to our morality. Without him, anything is permitted. Robinson has herself implied as much. But Abraham and Job do appear

to have an intuitive sense of moral action, one distinct from God's. Anyway, if the Bible is properly thought of as a human text, then all of its moral discussion is human, and one can quite easily ground oneself in a morality that is both perfectly Biblical and perfectly Godless—since God, in the Bible at least, is a literary creation. The Hebrew verb "to love" first appears in Genesis as an attribute not of God but of humans. Take your son, your only son, Isaac, God tells Abraham, "whom you love," and . . . murder him. Whom would you rather be fathered by, Job or Yahweh?

Return to Robinson's beautiful phrase "the law of completion." Her version of Calvinism is a humane anti-humanism. We are at the center of existence, but we are also so helplessly indebted to God's charity that we are but creatures of his much greater centrality. We are autonomous moral agents, but everything we do is providentially planned. We are exalted beings, but utterly debased at the same time.

John Calvin, so admired by Robinson yet to most reasonable observers a rather nasty piece of work, liked to call humans "worms." If God wanted to destroy the whole of mankind, Calvin says, he would be justified by our sinfulness. What do we bring from our mother's womb, he asks in a sermon, except sin? One of his collaborators, the Swiss Reformer Heinrich Bullinger, describes us all as "children of death"—a self-inflicted death from which Christ, of course, came to rescue us.

Robinson's Calvinism holds out an earnest optimism about what awaits us in the afterlife, alongside a deep pessimism about our terrible brokenness here on earth. The pessimism and the optimism are inseparable. From such tremendous errancy, tremendous protection will be required. After all, Calvin adds, when God looks at us he can see only what is hateful about us. The true miracle, it seems to me, is not to be found in the pages of Robinson's new book or in the pages of Genesis. It is hiding in plain sight elsewhere. It is that Marilynne Robinson, loaded up with the severe paradoxes of her religious tradition, is a novelist at all. But she is, and a great novelist, too. This is one miracle that, having seen it with my own eyes, I'll happily believe in. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

Smoke and Ashes, *by Amitav Ghosh (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. A hybrid of horticultural and economic history, this book proposes that the opium poppy should be taken as "a historical force in its own right." Ghosh touches on opium's origins as a recreational drug—it was favored in the courts of the Mongol, Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires, each of which enhanced its potency in different ways—but he dwells on its use by Western colonizers. In the mid-eighteenth century, the British began a campaign to get the Chinese population hooked on opium produced in India, in the hope of correcting a trade imbalance. Ghosh details the illegal business that arose as a result—opium imports were banned in China—ultimately arguing that the British "racket" was "utterly indefensible by the standards of its own time as well as ours."

Remembering Peasants, *by Patrick Joyce (Scribner)*. In this elegiac history, Joyce presents a painstaking account of a way of life to which, until recently, the vast majority of humanity was bound. Delving into the rhythms and rituals of peasant existence, Joyce shows how different our land-working ancestors were from us in their understanding of time, nature, and the body. "We have bodies, which we carry about in our minds, whereas they *were* their bodies," he writes. The relative absence of peasants from the historical record, and the blinding speed with which they seem to have disappeared, prompt a moving final essay on the urgency of preserving our collective past. "Almost all of us are in one way or another the children of peasants," Joyce writes. "If we are cut off from the past, we are also cut off from ourselves."

In Ascension, *by Martin MacInnes (Black Cat)*. In this capacious, broody work of speculative fiction, which was long-listed for the Booker Prize, a Dutch microbiologist who had a turbulent childhood joins expeditions to the center of the earth and to the far reaches of space: first to a hydrothermal vent deep in the Atlantic Ocean, then to the rim of the Oort cloud, a sphere of icy objects surrounding our solar system. As her narration toggles between chronicles of her voyages and reflections on her personal life, each of these "two zones" is revealed to be a wonder of inscrutability. "So many times I had identified errors," she thinks, "stemming from the original mistake of . . . predicting rather than perceiving the world and seeing something that wasn't really there."

Martyr!, *by Kaveh Akbar (Knopf)*. This amusing and macabre début novel follows a Tehran-born poet who decides to write a book about martyrs as a prelude to becoming one himself. The poet, who is grieving the death of his parents, struggles to find direction in life until he learns that a dying Iranian artist is spending her final days as a human exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum. He makes a pilgrimage to see her, and discovers that she knows much about his life. Throughout, the novel is preoccupied by the constant synthesizing required of immigrants, for whom an adoptive country can hold the fascination of a work of art.

DANCING

WAR AND PIECES

Two outstanding premières at City Ballet.

BY JENNIFER HOMANS

Alexei Ratmansky's new ballet, "Solitude," which recently premièred at New York City Ballet, begins with a devastating image: a father holding his dead son's hand. The dance is dedicated to "the children of Ukraine, victims of war," and Ratmansky has said that this image comes from a photograph of a father in Kharkiv sitting on the ground at a bus stop with his child, killed in a Russian air strike. This is Ratmansky's second dance alluding to the war, but there is nothing outwardly political about it. The dancing is abstract and classically based, with no narrative and few outward signs of violence and death. Ratmansky's canvas is not war but the human mind, and what he has managed to stage, with fourteen dancers and one child, is the disorienting experience of grief.

The opening tableau, sculptural in composition, brings to mind the war-scarred art of Käthe Kollwitz. The man kneels silently in a corner of an empty stage, eyes blankly staring into semi-darkness. The lifeless boy whose hand he holds lies on his back in a bright-blue T-shirt, his face turned away from us, toward the father. We see everything; they see nothing. No one moves. The figures are presented without anything that might suggest their whereabouts or their lives. We could be them, and the sight is etched into our minds before the music begins and the lights rise.

The dance is in two parts, each set to music by Mahler: the Funeral March from the First Symphony, followed by the Adagietto from the Fifth—death followed by grieving. As the Funeral March begins, with a minor-key version of "Frère Jacques," the lighting, by Mark Stanley, slowly forms a kind of eerie sunset, faintly illuminating an abstract design, by Moritz Junge, resembling rubble at the back of the stage. A blackness rises from the rubble and covers the backdrop to the height of a man: the dancers will perform against this eclipse, which in the course of the ballet creeps upward, further extinguishing the light. The dancers enter wearing costumes that blend with the shadows. I found myself squinting and failing to make it all out, and then realized that this was the point: we were seeing this hazy and barely decipherable world through the eyes of the father, not our own. The dancers appear disorientingly remote, and their angular, arrested movements jarringly interrupt the waves of music and feeling that seem to belong to the father alone.

There are plenty of steps for these dancers to do, and they push, pull, slide, swing their arms—the stuff of choreography—as they make their way toward the child and eventually fall into a jagged line at his side, bodies simultaneously dead and pointing at him in a way that seems accusatory, violent, empathic, resigned. The community has suffered, too, but the father barely notices. A woman sits beside him and hugs him—or, rather, gives him a hugging gesture as he looks at her blankly and remains frozen, without affect. The world whirls on; the man and the boy don't move. As Mahler layers his dirge with vernacular and klezmerlike themes, two women walk the boy away and he disappears and reappears, through the turns and jumps of the other dancers, like a lost ghost wandering through a moody nightscape. When the minor-key "Frère Jacques" returns, the boy resumes his funeral march, and, as the movement closes, the father finds himself kneeling again

Alexei Ratmansky's "Solitude," inspired by the war in Ukraine, centers on a father and his dead son.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NATALIE KEYSSAR

in his downstage corner, staring into space. This time, he is alone.

Mahler's Adagietto begins. Here we find ourselves in new musical territory. The Fifth Symphony marks Mahler's move away from the "folk utopias" (as one scholar has put it) of his early symphonies and into a more metaphysical realm. He composed it in the wake of a health crisis and while falling in love with his future wife, Alma, and the Adagietto seems to flow out in waves of yearning and serenity. Mahler, deeply drawn to interior worlds, worked on the Fifth while also working on the "Kindertotenlieder," songs to dead children, set to Friedrich Rückert's poems of mourning. The parallels with Ratmansky's artistic evolution are striking: the choreographer began with his own kind of "folk utopias" using Russian and Ukrainian music and themes—such as "The Bright Stream" and "Songs of Bukovina"—and reconstructions of nineteenth-century classics. His choice of Mahler for "Solitude" marks a break, and it's telling that he did not choose "Kindertotenlieder" but something wordless and abstract.

The father (Joseph Gordon) rises from his knees and executes a lyrical and weighted dance on an empty stage. The idiom is classical, stripped of ornament and deepened with open-chested lunges and expansive ports de bras. Every movement has volume and tone, and nothing is thrown away. Gordon's restraint reminded me of Agnes Martin and the ways that line can make grief possible by containing feeling so deeply inside form. This restraint is perhaps ballet's greatest formal paradox: an art that shows the body at the peak of life also testifies to what is lost when the body is gone. Such coexistence of life and death, beauty and destruction, may be why people are drawn to ballet at moments of trauma and loss. Gordon's turns, jumps, reaches, and falls, responding to Mahler's heightened sonorities, exist somewhere between feeling and numbness, as he carries us with generously rounded movements into pain, fear, even madness.

But this is not a solo, and soon the other dancers return, moving around Gordon like dim memories or shades. Things happen, but in the logic of this bending mind space we are not sure how or in what sequence, and my own memory and notes scribbled in the dark blur and overlap. The boy reappears; the father dances with him; the boy takes the father's hand; until, finally, boy and father huddle on "their" side of the stage, peering across some liminal divide at a clump of dancers on the other side, a life and a world they will never rejoin. Suddenly, the dancers throw themselves protectively around the boy as a flash of light momentarily floods the stage and the ballet winds back to the moment of death; the boy falls to the floor and the father drops to his knees, takes the boy's hand, and steadies his gaze. We are back at the beginning. Now the blackness has reached its apex, occluding all but a sliver of light. On the horizon the rubble glows red, as the curtain falls.

This season at City Ballet also featured Tiler Peck's first dance for the company. Peck (no relation to the dancer-choreographer Justin Peck) is best known as a principal dancer there, where she has performed for nearly two decades. She is probably the sunniest dancer I have ever seen. Her style is light and her astonishing virtuosity appears natural; difficult steps and musical phrasing seem to make her happy, and her performances brim with an irrepressible spontaneity and joy. I have always thought of her as a kind of forever child, all innocence and smiles.

No more. Her ballet, "Concerto for Two Pianos," shows Peck to be a choreographer of considerable skill and range. Set to the double-piano concerto by Francis Poulenc, the dance she has devised is a perfect match: a mercurial and moody rush through styles and ideas for nineteen dancers which leaves us somehow lighter—and full of the great good energy of Poulenc and the dancers. In an era inclined to narrative and political art, Tiler Peck is not afraid to give us the pure pleasure of music and dance.

The ballet begins with the curtain down as the orchestra strikes Poulenc's first dramatic chords. As the curtain rises, we see several couples already dancing—and they won't stop or take a breath until it falls. There is no plot, no set, only dramatic lighting by Brandon Stirling Baker and simple costumes by Zac Posen in a palette of blues and grays, with the exception of a glamorous red dress for Mira Nadon. Peck effortlessly moves colors and dancers through an array of mercurial patterns.

The dancing felt familiar, like a memory I couldn't quite locate, until I realized that it was flowing out of everything Peck has danced in the course of her long career. The enormous repertory of the N.Y.C.B. is in her body, and her knowledge of Balanchine, in particular, but also of Petipa, Robbins, Ratmansky, is profound. She is not quoting them, and her touch is so deft that we barely notice the wisps from past ballets floating through the dance, but they are there, beginning with the midstream opening: Balanchine's "Allegro Brillante" (1956) starts this way, too.

If Peck's skill appears effortless, we should note its thoughtful construction. She responds to Poulenc's loving homage to Mozart, at the start of the second movement, with a nod to Petipa's "La Bayadère" (1877), transposing the Old Master's procession of classical arabesques for all-female shades into a line of melancholy men winding their way in a wilting prance.

Yet this is not the classicism of Petipa, or even of Balanchine; it is today's classicism, an accumulation of what today's dancers have each and collectively made of their art. And what Peck has made of it is, if anything, simplified and clarified. When Roman Mejia performs a circle of leaps, for example, there are no embellishments, only the clean and moving fact of his body flying through space. Not tricks; just dancing. Following Poulenc, Peck stays away from sustained themes or development. At one point, she begins a dance between Mejia and Nadon, and we expect a romance, but she immediately brings in Chun Wai Chan, who falls into unison with Mejia in an intriguing emotional doubling. Soon she drops that idea, too, and moves briskly on. As the music races to its close, Peck has Mejia center stage, turning and jumping, and the dancers flying in all directions. In the last seconds, she scatters them into a surprisingly intimate off-center and asymmetrical portrait—which itself disappears before we fully take it in. The curtain falls so quickly that we are not sure we have seen what we saw, and I for one rushed out into the street happy to have been there. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

SPICE ODYSSEY

"Dune: Part Two."

BY JUSTIN CHANG

Having been delayed, amid the recent Hollywood strikes, from its original release date, in the fall of 2023, "Dune: Part Two" is understandably eager to get going. It's off before we've even glimpsed the Warner Bros. logo, whose famous water tower is a helpful reminder to hydrate: we've got a long, dust-choked ride ahead. While the screen is black, a heavily distorted voice hisses something that we recognize as words only by the grace of subtitles: "*Power over Spice is power over all.*" The rare newbie to the Dune-iverse may be confused: is this a story of cumin bondage? But the meaning will be clear enough to readers of Frank Herbert's 1965 science-fiction colossus or to those who have watched the 2021 adaptation, "Dune: Part One."

That picture—directed, like this one, by Denis Villeneuve—dropped us into an aggressively beige and brutalist version of Herbert's cosmos and set in motion a saga of feudal conquest and environmental ruin. At the heart of the plot is the substance known as spice, capable of prolonging life, inducing prophetic visions, and enabling interstellar travel. (It's good for any kind of trip.) Spice has long triggered fights and conspiracies among those seeking to control supply, because it exists only on Arrakis, a desert planet plagued by giant sandworms.

"Dune: Part Two" opens where the previous movie ended, at the conclusion of an especially cutthroat game of thrones. It's still the year 10191, and the bald-headed baddies of House Harkonnen, having vanquished the nobler, hairier lords of House Atreides, are now running Arrakis and its spice-mining operations. But hope springs anew in the desert, where the hero of the tale—Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet), son of the tragically slain Duke Leto Atreides—has gone full T. E. Lawrence, taking refuge with blue-eyed, Bedouin-like desert dwellers known as the Fremen.

Zendaya and Timothée Chalamet star in Denis Villeneuve's film.

Paul—fifteen in Herbert's book—possesses extraordinary mental acuity, precocious fighting skills, luxurious windswept locks, and, as things proceed, more epithets than anyone under the age of twenty should be saddled with: Mahdi, Muad'Dib, Usul, Lisan al-Gaib, Kwisatz Haderach. You've heard of messiah complexes, but Paul's case is uniquely burdensome. A faction of Fremen, led by the wry and avuncular Stilgar (a wonderful Javier Bardem), believes that Paul will lead their people to triumph over their Harkonnen oppressors. Paul's noble mother, Lady Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson, all fire and steel), belongs to a shadowy religious sisterhood, the Bene Gesserit, with its own twisted designs on her son. (To add a nativity story to this heady theological brew, Lady Jessica is pregnant, and Villeneuve, perhaps with a nod to Stanley Kubrick, grants us a womb with a view.)

Is the prophecy true? Does it even matter, so long as Paul can weaponize his worshipful following in the pursuit of personal vengeance? Chani (Zendaya), the fierce and beautiful warrior who haunted his dreams in the first film, easily captures his heart in this one, and she tosses cold water—O.K., a drop of spittle—on his delusions of divine grandeur. Yet Zendaya, an actor of tremulous, often wordless nuance, also shows us the mounting alarm behind Chani's skepticism. "Fear is the mind-killer," Herbert's text warns, and faith may be deadlier still.

Paul harbors anxieties of his own. Even as the character gains in physical confidence and emotional stature, the swift and spindly Chalamet never fully sheds his boyish vulnerability. He and Zendaya get some brief moments of dune-top canoodling; were Villeneuve more of a sensualist, or Paul a bit more adventurous, we could be watching "Call Muad'Dib by Your Name." Ultimately, though, he's out to make war, not love. More than once, we behold his fiery visions of an apocalypse—a "holy war"—that may come to pass if he ascends. Herbert, steeping his Fremen mythology in details from Arab culture and Muslim precepts, used the word "jihad."

The apparent decision to avoid the J-word must have been made long before the most recent conflagration in the Middle East, but the movie, pitting Fremen fundamentalists against a genocidal oppressor, can scarcely hope to escape the horror of recent headlines. Yet if the movie is, among other things, a timely parable of Arab liberation, it's at best a slippery and reluctant one, in which the politics of revolution feel curiously under-juiced. In retaining the material's Arabic filigree, albeit with a glaring pau-

ILLUSTRATION BY EVA REDAMONTI

city of Arab actors in key Fremen roles, Villeneuve and his co-writer, Jon Spaihts, follow the text with a cautious, noncommittal blandness. Which is not to say that the picture has no mind of its own or that it sidesteps politics entirely. Villeneuve may be more cinematic logician than ideologue, but, in implicating Paul as a possible charlatan, the director shrewdly feeds our own uneasiness. He can't fully refute the long-standing charge that "Dune" is just another white-savior fantasy, but with a measure of self-awareness he can keep it in check.

In any event, he has bigger worms to fry. Paul, as part of his Fremen assimilation, must master the extreme sport of worm riding, which is a bit like windsurfing, a bit like rock climbing, and a hell of a thing to witness. Tellingly, it's only in this glorious burst of spectacle, backed by the mighty surge of Hans Zimmer's score, that "Dune: Part Two" rises above proficiency and flirts with transcendence. With Hollywood's bulkiest coffers and most advanced technologies at his disposal, Villeneuve becomes a prophet in the wilderness, an evangelist for that old-time religion known as the movies. For a moment, at least, the worm turns.

From the start, Villeneuve has told the story of "Dune" with exceptional lucidity, and I don't mean that entirely as a compliment. Hollywood places a naturally high premium on narrative coherence, whereas Herbert's text—with its abstruse tangle of names and concepts, its intricate layering of conscious and subconscious perspectives—demands otherworldly leaps of imagination. Villeneuve's tendency, evident in the immaculate sci-fi riddles of "Arrival" (2016) and "Blade Runner 2049" (2017), is to streamline, to iron out every last kink of confusion or ambiguity. In "Part One," the actors wrapped their tongues around the Herbert lexicon with po-faced conviction. (Some of them make welcome returns, including Josh Brolin, as the Atreides weapons master Gurney Halleck, and the ever-formidable Charlotte Rampling, as a Bene Gesserit reverend mother.) The actors' skill felt of a piece with the austerity and occasional anemia of the visuals; striking as it was, the aesthetic seemed to have been imposed from without by some Marie Kondo of dystopian minimalism.

"Part Two" marks an improvement, mainly because so much of it transpires not in sterile fortresses and hangars but in the vastness of the open desert, where we can better appreciate the life-or-death stakes, the hard shimmer of sunlight on sand, and the pleasing sophistication of the survival gear. When the Fremen insert siphoning tubes into their enemies' corpses, insuring that not a single precious drop of liquid goes to waste, the world-building takes on a queasily intimate physicality. But the filmmaking loses some of that persuasiveness at scale: "Dune" is already drawing wishful comparisons to Peter Jackson's "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, but, for all the impressive pitch and frenzy of Villeneuve's battle sequences, they don't have Jackson's pop-Wagnerian grandeur, his exultant B-movie flair.

Villeneuve occasionally explores the universe beyond Arrakis, which only makes you long to return to Arrakis. An oasis of greenery surrounds the duplicitous Emperor (Christopher Walken) and his daughter, Princess Irulan (Florence Pugh), but the change of scenery is all but undone by the characters' colorless solemnity. More pallid still is the dread planet Giedi Prime, where the cinematographer Greig Fraser makes a stark palette shift to black-and-white, as if to emphasize the vampiric quality of the Harkonnens' fascism. Here, the rancidly evil Baron Vladimir Harkonnen (Stellan Skarsgård) soaks in a tub of oily chowder, while his loathsome nephew, Feyd-Rautha, prepares to succeed him as Psycho-Villain-in-Chief. Feyd-Rautha is played, amusingly, by Austin Butler, who is shorn of eyebrow, Skarsgårdian of voice, and altogether unrecognizable as the star of "Elvis" (2022). What an arc: from wowing the crowds in Vegas to shivving gladiators in a monochrome replica of Caesars Palace.

You needn't have read a page of Herbert to guess that Feyd-Rautha will factor in this movie's climactic showdown. But, even as "Dune: Part Two" builds toward a half-satisfying bout of imperial comeuppance, I found myself pitting Butler against another challenger: not Chalamet but Sting, who, strutting and sweating in galactic undies in David Lynch's "Dune" (1984), captured rather more of Feyd-Rautha's louche sexual menace. Those of us who retain a stubborn fondness for Lynch's much maligned adaptation will sense what's missing from Villeneuve's: an imaginative density, a hint of psychoerotic danger, the grotesque, teeming aliveness of a fully inhabited world. Not that it will trouble anyone's sleep, least of all the heads that rule over House Hollywood. The only world that matters here is the one that this "Dune," a box-office messiah, has already conquered. Power over spice is power over all. ♦

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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, March 10th. The finalists in the February 26th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 25th 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

"It's not the sound of gentle waves kissing the shore, Walter. It's the dishwasher."
Kate Lohman, Providence, R.I.

"I know the difference between 'working remotely' and 'fired a month ago.'"
Gabriel Unger, Palo Alto, Calif.

"It's still March on this side of the room."
P. M. F. Johnson, Minneapolis, Minn.

THE WINNING CAPTION

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

THE NEW YORKER

The Runaway Princesses

FROM In the Dark

Why do the women in Dubai's royal family keep trying to flee? A four-part podcast tells the story of a powerful sheikh and the women who risked everything to escape him.

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PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

BY PATRICK BERRY

ACROSS

1 Feudal peons
6 Carpenters' cutting tools
10 Online journal
14 Light on one's feet
15 Word after paint or potato
16 Seized vehicle, for short
17 Mugful served with marshmallows
18 Liquid carried by vampire slayers
20 Question before a phone number on a bumper sticker
22 Cabbie's query
24 Permit
25 Astronomer Edmond with a namesake comet
26 Weasel relative with silky fur
27 Greek epic that ends with Hector's funeral
28 Deeply desires
32 Piece that may be written in iambic pentameter
33 Feelings of hunger or remorse
34 Landed
36 Provisions and equipment
38 Move the tiniest bit
39 Oscar-winning pop star ___ Gaga
40 Put one's trust in
41 Doo-wop cover band that got its own TV show in 1977
45 Trades without money
46 Restaurant with an unassuming façade
48 Broadly speaking
49 "Asteroid City" actress Swinton
52 Robert Frost's "The ___ Not Taken"
53 Metal bar in a skate park
54 Adversary
55 Card higher than a deuce
56 Lively for one's age
57 Start a volley

DOWN

1 Cul-de-___
2 Megalomaniac's problem
3 Villainous cardinal in "The Three Musketeers"
4 One often seen standing in the corner of a room?
5 Green sushi wrapper
6 Joe ___ (average guy)
7 Sailor's greeting
8 Clanspeople who call themselves the Free Folk in "Game of Thrones"
9 Cloak-and-dagger groups
10 Undaunted
11 Allowed to enter
12 Gets the crowd warmed up
13 Deep, narrow canyon
19 Parts of candles
21 Pigpen
22 Beat into a froth
23 Glowing symbols of goodness
26 Penny-pincher's concern
28 Tried to ensnare something
29 Sign of a fracture in the Earth's crust
30 1957 Disney film featuring the line "You crazy, wonderful dog!"
31 Unyielding strictness
33 Books with calendar pages
35 Bills featuring Alexander Hamilton
37 Flat, treeless expanse
38 Criticizes at length
40 Unpasteurized, say
41 Button-down, e.g.
42 "Duty, ___, Country" (West Point motto)
43 Growth in a stagnant pond
44 Emotionally high-maintenance
45 ___ flop (ungraceful dive)
47 Head locks?
50 Org. that administers vision tests
51 "Yes, Captain!"

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at
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