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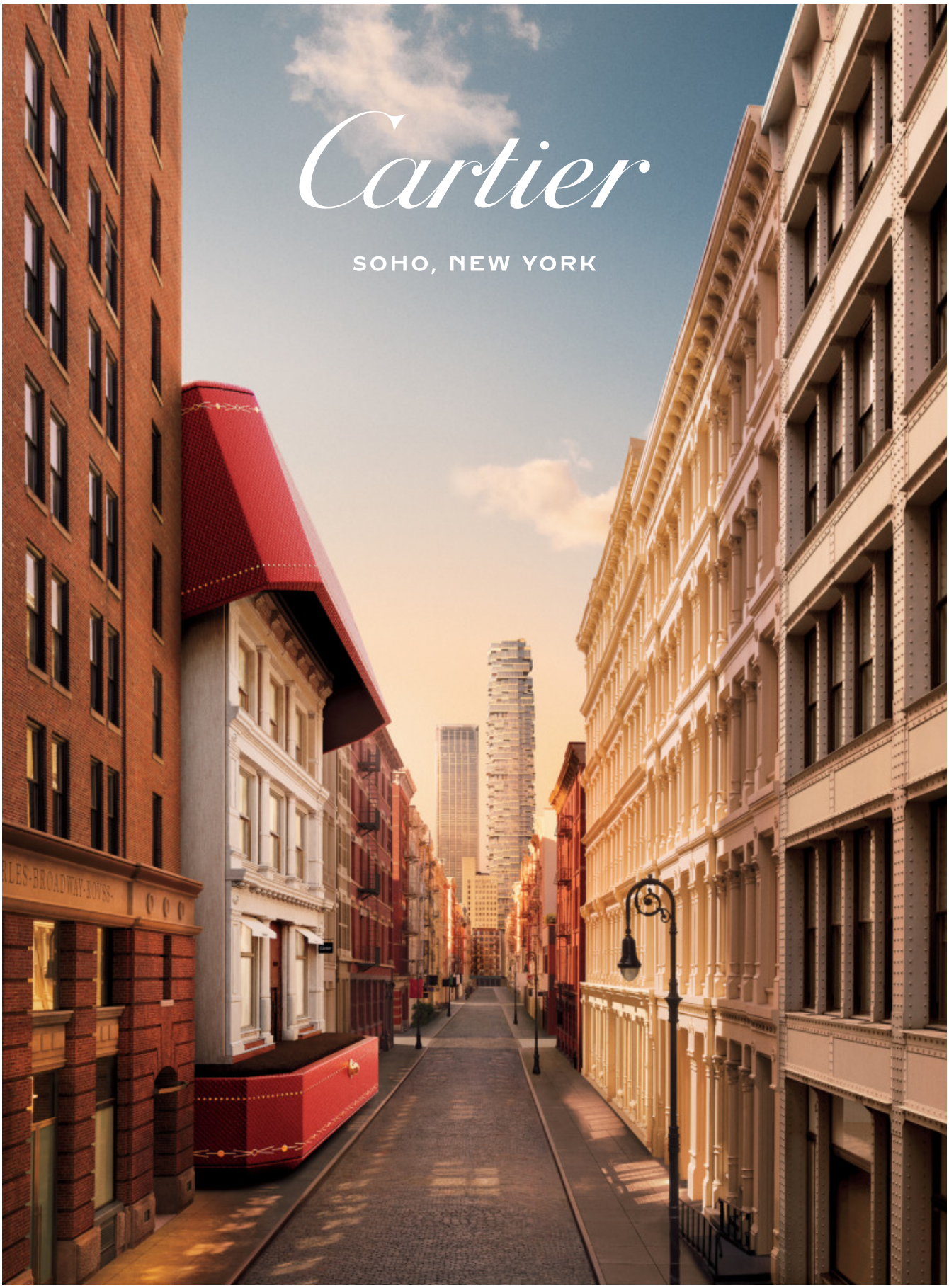

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MARCH 4, 2024

4 GOINGS ON
7 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
David Remnick on Russia and Navalny; diving the Hudson; an exoneree libretto; fashionable mammals; overheard at the Armory.

U.S. JOURNAL
Jay Caspian Kang 12 Identity Crisis
The professor whose Native ancestry proved false.

SHOUTS & MURMURS
Ian Frazier 19 E-Mails from the Dems

ANNALS OF CRIME
Ian Urbina 20 Invisible Workers
Inside North Korea's forced-labor program in China.

A REPORTER AT LARGE
Kathryn Schulz 26 Starburst
Are we ready for a solar-storm disaster?

LETTER FROM THE WEST BANK
Shane Bauer 36 The Dispossessed
Israeli settlers' escalating violence against Palestinians.

FICTION
Thomas Korsgaard 46 "The Spit of Him"

THE CRITICS
BOOKS
Anthony Lane 52 *Can Byron be saved from the Byronic?*
57 Briefly Noted
Maggie Doherty 59 *The long adolescence of Carson McCullers.*

ON TELEVISION
Inkoo Kang 64 *"Shōgun."*

THE THEATRE
Helen Shaw 66 *A revival of Dominique Morisseau's "Sunset Baby."*

THE CURRENT CINEMA
Justin Chang 68 *"About Dry Grasses."*

POEMS
Joy Harjo 32 "Eat"
Hala Alyan 48 "Light Ghazal"

COVER
Victoria Tentler-Krylov "All Clear"

DRAWINGS *Liam Francis Walsh, Sam Gross, Roland High, Will McPhail, Mads Horwath, Lonnie Millsap, Carolita Johnson, Emily Bernstein, Daniel Kanhai, Avi Steinberg, Lars Kenseth, Amy Hwang, John Kerschbaum, Roz Chast, Ed Himelblau, Kaamran Hafeez and Al Batt* SPOTS *Keith Negley*

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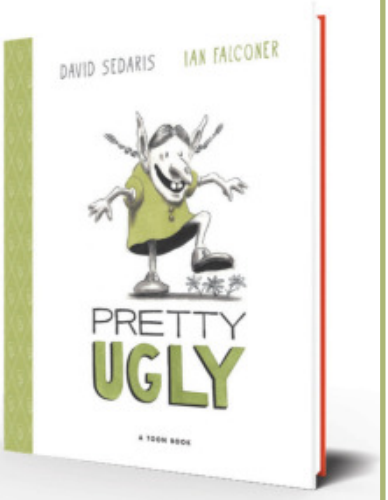

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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

PERSONS OF INTEREST
Peter Slevin profiles a doctor in Indiana who is risking her career, and her safety, to provide abortions.

ELEMENTS
Rivka Galchen writes about how Stanisław Lem foresaw the promise and the peril of artificial intelligence.

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LEFT: DIANA MARKOSIAN; RIGHT: MARK PERNICE

THE MAIL

INTO THE LIGHT

D. T. Max's account of Beatriz Flamini's experience of living alone in a cave for five hundred days was fascinating ("Cave Woman," January 29th). Near the end of the story, however, Max wonders if Flamini's accomplishment "might provide information on, say, whether survival on the dark side of the moon is possible." Pink Floyd notwithstanding, there is no "dark side" of the moon. Being gravitationally locked to the Earth, the moon always presents the same near-side face to us. This means that someone on the moon's far side would never see our planet in their sky. But, since the moon orbits the Earth approximately monthly, nearly the entire surface is gradually exposed to the sun. Observers on both near and far sides would experience a day and a night, each lasting about two weeks.

James E. Kloeppel
Urbana, Ill.

WITH THE BAND

I read John Seabrook's recent article about Lucian Grainge, the chairman of Universal Music Group, with interest that gradually turned to disappointment ("The Next Scene," February 5th). The piece credits Grainge with successfully steering the music industry to profitability in the streaming era and discusses how A.I. might affect the future of the business, yet it largely neglects the perspectives of practicing musicians. Seabrook thus risks missing an obvious parallel between streaming and A.I.: the latter could result, once again, in money disappearing from the hands of music-makers and appearing in the hands of tech companies.

This does not have to be an entirely foregone conclusion, however. Groups such as the American Federation of Musicians are helping musicians like me to navigate the effects of A.I.; our union has been in contract negotiations with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers that closely mirror what our colleagues in the actors' and writers' unions recently undertook.

Skye Soto Steele
Brooklyn, N.Y.

LITERARY PEDIGREE

Merve Emre, in her absorbing discussion of the early modern intellectual Margaret Cavendish, notes that Cavendish's husband, William Cavendish, the first Duke of Newcastle, had "a passion for training horses" (Books, February 5th). That observation is an understatement. A seminal figure in the history of horsemanship, William was the author of the canonical treatise "La Méthode Nouvelle, et Invention Extraordinaire de Dresser les Chevaux" (1658), translated posthumously, in 1743, as "A General System of Horsemanship." He followed it with "A New Method, and Extraordinary Invention, to Dress Horses" (1667), which he described as "neither a translation of the first [work], nor an absolutely necessary addition to it." The great eighteenth-century dressage master François Robichon de la Guérinière admired Cavendish, as did the nineteenth-century masters François Baucher, le Comte d'Aure, and Gustav Steinbrecht.

Margaret and William Cavendish influenced each other as writers and thinkers. The scholar Elaine Walker, in her study of William's treatises, "To Amaze the People with Pleasure and Delight," examines "the cross-references" and "cross-pollination of ideas" regarding horses in the Cavendishes' work, and notes that Margaret's biography of her husband was published in the same year as his second treatise on horsemanship.

Charles Caramello
Bethesda, Md.

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GOINGS ON

FEBRUARY 28 – MARCH 5, 2024

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

Around a decade ago, the PigPen Theatre Co., a seven-man theatrical collective and band, made a stir with its banjo-forward, Mumford & Sons-esque music, breaking through with lo-fi shows such as "The Old Man and the Old Moon," a sweet folktale from 2012 told with lamplight and shadow puppets. Now the company is back, composing songs for the much brighter lights of Broadway, joining the book writer Rick Elice to adapt Sara Gruen's Depression-era romance, **"Water for Elephants,"** from 2006, in which a veterinarian runs away and joins the circus. Shana Carroll, of the Montreal acrobatic troupe Les 7 Doigts de la Main, designs the show's circus choreography, which guarantees a certain lighter-than-air quality; Grant Gustin, of "The Flash," plays the sawdust-struck newcomer, and Isabelle McCalla (pictured) plays his aerialist love.—*Helen Shaw (Imperial Theatre; in previews.)*

MATTHEW MURPHY

ABOUT TOWN

FOLK | The New Orleans-based folk rocker Alynda Segarra has been a patron saint of troubadours for fifteen years, as the front person for **Hurray for the Riff Raff.** They left the Bronx at seventeen to escape a fractured home life, hopping trains and exploring the U.S. Their music embodies those travels, exploding Americana traditions and speaking for those marginalized by society. The 2014 song "The Body Electric" revealed the band's full potential—its sharp sendup of the murder ballad displayed Segurra's smoky voice and striking authorship, and the singer-songwriter has grown even bolder since. The group's new album, "The Past Is Still Alive," recorded in the wake of Segarra's father's death, continues a mission of record-keeping for outcasts, including those memories closest to home.—*Sheldon Pearce (Music Hall of Williamsburg; March 5.)*

CLASSICAL MUSIC | **A Far Cry,** a Boston-based chamber orchestra of vigor, sensitivity, and shared concentration, operates in egalitarian ways: its members play without a conductor, vote on their programs, and rotate artistic leadership. On March 2, the ensemble finds a beautiful metaphor for its organizational model in the concerto grosso, a Baroque form in which multiple soloists spin glittery lines in dialogue with a larger unit of players. The program includes modern examples by Ernest Bloch and Errollyn Wallen, which combine a fresh harmonic sense with Baroque elements such as the fugue and ground bass. The next day, A Far Cry invites attendees to delve into its artistic process as equal partners in an interactive listening session.—*Oussama Zahr (Kaufman Music Center; March 2-3.)*

ART | In her latest photographs, **Catherine Opie** takes us on another tour of a solemn sadomasochistic subculture, except that this time it's the Catholic Church. For the two most striking images in the exhibition "Walls, Windows and Blood," she assembles closeups of Christ's gushing wounds, all taken from medieval and Renaissance paintings and all marked by a bold androgynous eroticism. The kinkiness of Christian iconography may be more of a cliché than an insight at this point, but Opie's eye is so keen that she can walk around Vatican City photographing the most banal-seeming subjects—a red banner, a wall missing a few bricks, a window with a cross running up the middle—and give them a suggestive tingle.—*Jackson Arn (Lehmann Maupin; through March 12.)*

OFF BROADWAY | Ana (the charismatic Gabby Beans) is a clever, capable young woman, perched on the edge of becoming. Her encounters with three male figures make up the dreamlike texture of **"Jonah,"** a new play by Rachel Bonds, directed by Danya Taymor, for Roundabout Theatre Company. The show opens on Ana meeting Jonah (Hagan Oliveras) at a boarding school. Jonah is sweet and sensitive—the kind of boy that a certain kind of girl dreams of holding in a healing embrace. Ana encourages him, just as she does her off-putting stepbrother, Danny (Samuel H. Levine), with whom she has a more troublingly complicated relationship, and, later on, a fellow-writer at a residency, Steven (John Zdrojeski). On a claustrophobic one-room set, "Jonah" asks, through a symphonic structure, what are the costs of this sort of intimacy?—*Vinson Cunningham (Laura Pels; through March 10.)*

DANCE | For those unaware or in need of a reminder that the African diaspora extends to Colombia, the dancers of **Sankofa Danzafro** are ready to teach, not didactically but through poetic embodiment. In the new piece "Behind the South: Dances for Manuel," they take inspiration from the anthropologist Manuel Zapata Olivella and his epic novel "Changó, el gran putas." Like the book, the work touches on the arrival of African people to the Americas and the spiritual beliefs that they brought with them, but the company expresses those beliefs in drumming, song, and supple, subtle dance. The guiding spirit is less Changó, the god of fire, than Yemaya, the mother who heals.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Feb. 27-March 3.)*

MOVIES | The first feature by the Japanese filmmaker Shiori Itō, **"Black Box Diaries,"** will have its New York première at MOMA on March 6, as part of the annual "Doc Fortnight" series, which runs Feb. 22-March 7. Itō, a female journalist, accused a powerful elder male reporter of raping her, in 2015; two years later, when prosecutors refused to bring charges, Itō went public with her accusations, filed a civil suit against the reporter, and launched an investigation of her own, which she documents in the film. Itō shows in harrowing detail the surveillance and the threats that she endured, the intrepid maneuvers she undertook in pursuit of the truth, and the high personal price of her efforts, which have been credited with sparking Japan's own #MeToo movement and changes to the country's laws regarding rape.—*Richard Brody*

TABLES FOR TWO

Le B.
283 W. 12th St.

The West Village restaurant Le B., operated by the veteran New York chef Angie Mar, was, until a few months ago, Les Trois Chevaux, Mar's homage to the mid-century French haute cuisine of places like Lutèce and La Côte Basque. With a pricey prix-fixe menu and a jackets-required dress code, Les Trois Chevaux drew a well-heeled uptown crowd. As Le B., the physical space has hardly changed—there's still the gilded bar mirror, the velvet banquettes, the curtained alcoves. But the menu is now à la carte, and there's a burger at the bar that harks back to Mar's restaurant before last, the Beatrice Inn, an over-the-top, basement-level chophouse.

Still, a bid for a more downtown vibe does not mean that things skew to the proletarian. Nearly every dish incorporates a luxury ingredient, though they often show up as supporting players. At times, this can feel a bit like opulence theatre, rather than actual opulence—a black-truffle-flecked gelée, draped over a devilled egg *en chemise*, tasted like nothing much at all, least of all truffles—but when it works, my God, it works. A heavenly first course identified as Liver & Onions involved braised *lentilles du Puy*, toothsome and outrageously savory, topped with a sliver of nearly melting foie gras.

The subtlety of the grand old Continental techniques for which Le B. holds so much reverence can get lost amid the restaurant's taste for vivacity and drama, set to a soundtrack of hip-hop and bossa nova. A bronze-dark pastry encasing a Dungeness-crab Wellington was gloriously crisp and buttery, but it overwhelmed the delicate flavor of the crustacean inside. The desserts were quite lovely, including butter-drenched crêpes Suzette, theatrically flambéed tableside, and an obscenely silky chocolate sorbet that conjures licking frosting straight from the bowl. But eating a meal of such technical ambition without an haute-pâtisserie finale feels a bit like hearing a melody without the resolving chord.

For all of her evident Francophilia, Mar threads Le B.'s menu with references to her Chinese American heritage, and her cooking feels most assured, most alive, when she's playing in the slippery space between Chinese and chinoiserie. Her Salad "Chinoise" is a reinvention of that ubiquitous mid-tier-restaurant assemblage often called Chinese chicken salad. In some circles, the dish, being neither authentically nor coherently Chinese, has become shorthand for a certain stripe of culinary whitewashing. Mar makes hers with a stark green pile of baby lettuce leaves and a brilliant dressing of fresh satsuma juice and toasted sesame oil, plus a crackling, golden tuile made from chicken drippings. It's bold and zingy, French and Chinese at once, but mostly it's Mar's own vision, both a reclamation and a subversion that doesn't sacrifice even an ounce of glamour. *(Dishes $12–$210.)*

—Helen Rosner

PICK THREE

The staff writer Amanda Petrusich shares current obsessions.

1. Best Instagram account to browse while you dutifully eat kale: One could never in good conscience recommend smoking—the risks are real, gnarly, assured—but it's impossible to deny that, from an aesthetic perspective, the act itself is perversely alluring. This is the founding principle of **Cigfluencers,** which posts photos, new and old, of hot and famous people smoking while looking hot and famous.

2. Best podcast for pretending that you're still cool: The central pleasure of the smart, irreverent, and gleefully indecorous podcast **"How Long Gone,"** hosted by the old buds and "bicoastal élites" Chris Black and Jason Stewart, is that it makes its listeners feel as if they are privy to the travails and micro-beefs of the creative class, even if they're not spending their mornings sipping fourth-wave coffee or nibbling toast at Balthazar. The show has its own rhythm and slang, and Black and Stewart have an easy, confident rapport. Their interviews—with writers, musicians, artists, and fashion types—are often revelatory.

3. Best way to drop a hundred dollars and feel great about it: Record stores. Streaming is a convenient way to hear music, but it inevitably creates a gaping hole in your soul. One antidote is to ditch the algorithm for some good old-fashioned manual curation: if you Venmo **the End of All Music,** a record store in Oxford and Jackson, Mississippi, one of the shop's employees will send you a box of records, handpicked and nearly guaranteed to be great. Or just wander into your local shop and ask a clerk what's good. I've never once regretted it.

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
FEARLESS

In 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev initiated an era of political reform in the Soviet Union by liberating political prisoners and internal exiles, including the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Andrei Sakharov. During the next three years, Sakharov presided as the moral leader of the democratic opposition in Moscow and spoke his mind from the rostrum of the Congress of People's Deputies. On the eve of a major debate, he told his wife, "Tomorrow there will be a battle." He went to his study to take a nap and never woke up. Sakharov had died of natural causes, a free man in a fleeting era of hope.

In 2020, Vladimir Putin set out to crush popular dissent in Russia once and for all, ordering his secret police to hunt down his nemesis Alexei Navalny, the eventual winner of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. For nearly a decade, Navalny had driven Putin to distraction, denouncing his regime as a "party of crooks and thieves." He campaigned for high public office and employed open-source reporting techniques to uncover the gaudy corruption of the regime: the yachts, the planes, the villas, the billions stashed abroad.

Agents of the F.S.B. trailed Navalny to Siberia. They broke into his hotel room and, in a plot that might have been scripted by Gogol, spiked his underwear with Novichok, a deadly nerve agent. Navalny wore the poisoned garment aboard his flight home to Moscow and, sitting in seat 13-A, he soon found himself howling in agony, as his body began to shut down. The plane made an emergency landing in the city of Omsk. Somehow, Navalny survived. He was eventually flown to Germany and, with his wife, Yulia Navalnaya, at his side, he came out of a medically induced coma and steadily regained his strength. But he declined permanent refuge in the West. Do not be afraid, do not give up, was his constant refrain, and he refused to betray his own counsel and principles. In January, 2021, Navalny boarded a flight to Moscow, knowing full well that his moral prestige represented an intolerable threat to the regime. Putin had him arrested at the airport.

At his trial, Navalny showed that he was worthy of the Russian dissidents of the past, men and women who risked everything to tell the truth, whether it was at show trials where the verdict was never in question or in samizdat manuscripts that were passed hand to hand. But Navalny, who preferred to see himself as a politician, was also distinctly modern. Rather than attack his persecutor in court with high-flown metaphors and allusions, he referred to Putin plainly, comically, as "this thieving little man in his bunker," as "Vladimir, the Poisoner of Underpants."

Part of Navalny's appeal was that he evolved over time. He set aside the crude nationalism of his early rhetoric and learned to deploy both his courage and his humor. He came off not as a luftmensch, an ethereal intellectual, but as a grounded member of a hopeful generation: interested in freedom *and* prosperity. He even spoke of "happiness"—hardly a common term in the Soviet and post-Soviet political lexicon. His methods were entirely new. One of his earliest ventures into protest was as an activist shareholder; he used his small investments to uncover the ways some of the biggest Russian companies illegally enriched their Kremlin patrons.

Navalny knew how to talk to people on their level. He consumed many of the Russian classics and prison memoirs, but he also spoke of his affection for "Harry Potter" and "Rick and Morty." In a letter written to his friend Sergey Parkhomenko shortly before his death, Navalny referred not only to the portrait of despair in Chekhov's story "In the Ravine" but also to the no less gloomy late-Soviet landscape depicted in the popular film by Aleksei Balabanov, "Cargo 200."

Last week, forty miles north of the

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

Arctic Circle, at a prison camp known as Polar Wolf, Navalny was pronounced dead. Or, to call things by their proper name, he was murdered. The cause provided by the local prison authorities—"sudden-death syndrome"—was just an additional form of contempt and violence.

Speculative history can be hollow, and a country in need of martyrs and saints is not to be envied, and yet it is hard to overstate the loss of Navalny. Imagine the course of South African history had Nelson Mandela been killed on Robben Island. Or the fate of Czechoslovakia had Václav Havel been poisoned in his cell at Ruzyne Prison, near the Prague airport. Navalny was fearless, and a man of faith. When his friend Yevgenia Albats confided that she feared dying in exile, he told her, "There is no death." And yet, as Albats said the other day, the loss is devastating: for now, at least, "hope is lost."

In this moment, Putin's self-possession can only be outsized. He is a few weeks away from winning another phony election. He senses that the war in Ukraine, which just entered its third year, is going his way and that the Republican Party and its standard-bearer have little interest in resisting that dark trend. Putin has every reason to think he is secure. Cruelty is his ultimate protection. There are hundreds more political prisoners languishing in his jails, including Vladimir Kara-Murza (who has been poisoned *twice*) and the *Wall Street Journal's* Evan Gershkovich.

Certain reactions in the United States to Navalny's death have been clarifying. Tucker Carlson, freshly returned from a Moscow grocery store and Putin's knee, hustled to express Russia's allure to Glenn Beck. Donald Trump went on Truth Social not to send his condolences but to compare his self-inflicted troubles to Navalny's killing. President Biden, for his part, was admirably direct in his response: he squarely blamed Putin for Navalny's death, met with his widow and his daughter in San Francisco, and announced a package of further sanctions as punishment for the murder and for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In 2007, Putin went to the Munich Security Conference in order to unburden himself of his resentments against the West and to make it clear that he would carry out a politics based on that fury. Now, seventeen years later, at the same conference, Yulia Navalnaya exemplified the courage of the husband she had just lost and took the same stage. She stood tall. She refused despair. There will come a day, she insisted, that Putin will be called to account for what he has done to her family, for what he has done to Russia. "And that day," she said, "will come very soon."

—*David Remnick*

DEPT. OF ZERO VISIBILITY
WHERE'S MY CAR?

Early one morning not long ago, a municipal worker spreading road salt noticed damage to the dock at the end of Piermont Pier, a former railroad spur that juts a mile out into the Hudson River, south of the Governor Mario M. Cuomo Bridge. A bent cleat, splintered wood. On closer examination, there were tire tracks in the snow leading to the mess. Surveillance footage from a nearby scientific-research field station showed a car launching into the water in the middle of the night. It also showed the driver bailing before the plunge, without getting wet. And it showed the car floating north, with the incoming tide, like a duck boat. Then it went out of frame.

"The thing is, the air bags went off," Daniel Goswick, Sr., a chief with the Piermont Fire Department, said recently, explaining the peculiar buoyancy. "I think it was, like, a knot-and-a-half current. We basically figured out the trajectory of which way it was going and where it would sink." That was the easy part. After three hours of conducting a grid search on a fire-department boat, using side-scan sonar, they located the vehicle several football fields northeast of the pier and thirty feet down. Retrieving it, however, required diving, which is a Goswick family specialty. "I dove every part of this damn river," he said. "Me, my dad, my brother, my son, my cousins—basically, all of us were divers. And now my granddaughter and grandson are coming up."

Goswick is fifty-six and bald, with a mustache and a strong jaw. He was standing at the pier's end, surveying the broad river. "This is a shithole," he said, gesturing southward at a sewage outflow pipe near a marsh. "As you start to go down, you can see your hand, but after you get five or six feet you're done. And the thing with us is, when we're diving, we're on the bottom." Zero visibility. "You feel a squish," Goswick went on. That means you've reached the bottom. Then you have to dig in with your hands, to hold your position against the current. The squishy loam can be a foot deep. "You got to stay in shape," he said, slightly tensing his barrel chest.

The dive team was founded in 1956. Among their remarkable recoveries are a contact lens ("Guy threw it out the side of his boat in a tissue"), a wedding ring, and an undetonated Second World War bomb. (Piermont Pier was once known as "Last Stop U.S.A.," the disembarkation point for a million troops bound for Europe, including Goswick's uncle Harold.) A Saab, discovered during a training exercise in the late eighties, remains underwater, rusting, just southeast of the dock. "And the reason we knew it was a Saab?" Gos-

Daniel Goswick, Sr.

wick said. "Remember the tail-lights at the top?"

The divers wear dry suits, but the cold is inescapable. In 2005, Goswick sliced his suit going through the windshield of a car that went off the old Tappan Zee Bridge. "You're so jacked up, you don't feel it," he said. Not until you resurface, that is. "I spent the day in the hospital for that one. I had severe hypothermia." The bacteria are inescapable, too. He once cut his hand groping around in the dark, "and my fucking hand blew up to three times the size," he said. He was on antibiotics for a month.

"Hang on, I'll show you something," Goswick said, and he pushed up the right sleeve of his jacket, revealing a long scar. "That's Lennon." He meant Mark Lennon, the best man in a wedding party that crashed a Stingray powerboat into a parked barge, at night, in 2013. "Tore my bicep pulling him out of the river right over there. That was a sad day, man." There have been jumpers. A while back, he began noticing patterns. "When Clinton was in, it wasn't too bad," he said. "When Bush was in, people were jumping left and right, for Chrissakes. I guess it's based on the economy." More sad days. A happier day came a few years ago, when Goswick rescued a sixteen-year-old girl on her third suicide attempt. "All we saw was the top of her head," he said. "Collapsed lung, both legs broke, busted pelvis, ribs." A year later, she sent him a text of gratitude. "And I'm not an emotional guy," he said, "but thank God I was home alone that day."

Lately, Goswick has been spending more time training the next generation of divers than working in the squishy depths himself. For the recent car retrieval, he remained on board the boat, supervising, while his godson and another younger man descended, with hooks attached to a crane from a local shipyard. "The current was ripping, the wind was whipping," he said. "And, of course, the guys say, 'You picked this because you're such a prick, and you want us to train in the worst conditions.' They're probably right!" The crane deposited the car back on the dock. It was a new BMW—stolen, it turns out, and reportedly connected to several other crimes. "There's a lot of backstory to it," Goswick said. The driver remains at large—but not for long, Goswick predicted. "Detective Boutros is on the case. He's like a pit bull, that kid."

—Ben McGrath

• • •

EXONERATIONS DEPT.
UNCAGED BIRDS

Before a recent performance of "Blind Injustice" at the Alexander Kasser Theatre, at Montclair State University, in suburban New Jersey, a wispy horizontal cloud drifted across the stage. You almost might not have noticed it as you took your seat for the Sunday matinée. If you did, you would have had to stare at it for a while to see that it was moving almost imperceptibly from right to left. Why would there be a cloud in a ninety-minute opera about people wrongly convicted in the state of Ohio who were later freed through the efforts of Mark Godsey, a professor at the University of Cincinnati College of Law, and the organization he co-founded, the Ohio Innocence Project? Once the performance started, the cloud, which you soon forgot about, and others like it (all products, probably, of an offstage cloud-making machine), vividly captured beams of light from above the stage that came down in vertical shafts, suggesting interrogation lamps, the columns of a courthouse, or the bars of a prison cell.

Since 2003, the Ohio Innocence Project (O.I.P.) has freed forty-two people. Godsey has said that the organization could take on thousands more cases if it had the resources. In an office in the theatre building, Rickey Jackson, one of the forty-two exonerated, talked with a visitor who stopped by on his way to the show. Jackson served more than thirty-nine years of a murder sentence, with two and a half years on death row, because of the testimony of a thirteen-year-old boy whom the police had coerced. Both Jackson and the witness lived in the East Cleveland neighborhood known as Hough. "Later, the witness, Ed Vernon, had serious health problems," Jackson said. "He was on his deathbed, and his pastor went to him and said, 'You know what you got to get off your soul.' Everybody knew Ed had lied on me. Ed agreed with the pastor and recanted, and he was so convincing on the stand at the case review that the prosecutor dropped the charges even before the closing arguments. That was in 2014. And then Ed didn't die, after all—he's still living today."

Nancy Smith, another of the exonerated, was a Head Start bus driver in

Lorain who spent nearly fifteen years in prison after being convicted of molesting children she was driving to day care. After the verdict, the children's parents sued the federal government, which funds Head Start, and won large settlements. Some years later, it was alleged that the children who testified had been coached on what to say; one of the parents began coaching her granddaughter in a similar scam, and the girl's father called the O.I.P. Nancy Smith told the visitor how moved she was that the creators of the opera cared about her story. She recently retired from grooming dogs—including, as it happens, the dog of one of the detectives on her case.

Onstage, twelve actors, who portrayed Jackson, Smith, four other exonerees, a generic lead prosecutor, Mark Godsey, police officers, guards, and maybe a dozen other people, moved in and out of the beams of light, lifting their faces into the brightness as they sang and receding into the gloom as their characters despaired. A twenty-seven-person chorus on risers behind the action and a twelve-person orchestra in the pit backed them. The prosecutor—the main villain—wore a suit and kept his jacket buttoned, while the hero, Mark Godsey, kept his jacket unbuttoned. Rickey Jackson had said that when he forgave Ed Vernon he hugged him, and he could feel him growing lighter and lighter in his arms. That was what the whole company sang at the triumphant, swelling end: "Lighter and lighter in my arms! Lighter and lighter in my arms!"

After a standing ovation, Jackson, Smith, some of the performers, the director, the librettist, the composer, the conductor, and Godsey came back onstage and answered questions. Godsey asked Jackson how it had felt to watch an actor play him. "My wife said she would like to trade me in for that guy," Jackson said, gesturing to Eric Shane Heatley, the powerful baritone who portrayed Jackson's younger self. David Cote, the librettist, and Robin Guarino, the director and dramaturge, had interviewed the exonerees and had made the opera based on the transcripts; Cote said that about forty per cent of the libretto is taken from them verbatim. Scott Davenport Richards, who teaches music composition at Montclair State, wrote the score. He said, "The transcripts are often so beautiful and rhythmic. I took a lot of the rhythms in the music directly from them."

Mark Godsey published a book, "Blind Injustice," in 2017, and the opera is also partly based on that. The number of people wrongly jailed in our country appalls and angers him. He was a federal prosecutor himself in the Southern District of New York in his younger days, and aspects of that experience still pain him. He seemed happy and proud as he stood onstage—his coat not buttoned—but a bit wistful, too. "Now I spend most of my time fund-raising," he said at one point, in an aside.

—*Ian Frazier*

CATWALK DEPT.
FIERCE

The fashion world is notoriously cutthroat, but is it lions-and-tigers-and-bears-level ferocious? The question arose earlier this month, when National Geographic held its first-ever New York Fashion Week show, in SoHo. The occasion was the première, next week, of "Queens," a new docuseries about female wildlife: Ethiopian shewolves, Tanzanian lionesses, a deadly orca grandmother. The series, narrated by Angela Bassett, also has a female-led filmmaking team, and the theme of the runway event, " 'Fit for a Queen," was girl power across species.

"There are so many subtleties in female leadership," Sophie Darlington, a veteran wildlife cinematographer, said before the show. "It's not all fighting, although we've got a lot of that as well. There's some badassery." After working on "Queens," she was there to walk the runway, in a flamingo-pink linen pants suit. Sakinah Bashir, the evening's stylist, had pulled together nine nature-themed outfits. There were rules. "No fur, no leather," Bashir said backstage, as models primped nearby. "I was inspired by late-nineties runways. They had a lot of animal prints."

Ignoring male beasts and their bravado had freed the filmmakers to capture the wisdom of nature's matriarchs, such as the elephant who leads her herd along ancient savanna pathways. But there were divas, too, including an iridescent orchid bee in the Central American jungle. "She would absolutely be at New York Fashion Week," Darlington said. "Female leadership isn't always pretty. She basically gets her daughter to do all of her work." Bonobos were gentler. "You've got these beautiful elders—which I love, being an elder—and they make love to calm everybody down." She clarified, "I'm not advocating we all go and do that."

Darlington, who had briefly modelled in Dublin in her youth—"I used to walk on a plank laid over beer barrels for nuns, and you'd flash your knickers at them"—was mentored by Hugo van Lawick, Jane Goodall's first husband. ("He was not scared of strong women.") Having risen in a male-dominated industry, she and her collaborators brought on young female filmmakers for "Queens." Faith Musembi, from Kenya, joined as a field director and bonded with a pregnant elephant. One day, after turning on her car and startling the animal, she realized that she was blind. "I played her lots of Disney soundtracks," she said.

Erin Ranney, who filmed in Alaska, where she was born, came across a waterfall where female brown bears were sharing a fishing spot. "There was only one dorky male who came in at one point, and we're pretty sure he was related to the top female," she recalled. She wore a secondhand one-shoulder

white jumpsuit that showed off an arm tattoo of a bear hunting salmon. In the wild, she usually wears "greens and browns and a lot of sunscreen," she said. "Now we're *not* trying to blend in, which is very weird."

Out by the stage, fashionable mammals sipped sparkling rosé as "I'm Every Woman" blasted over speakers. A pair of fashion vloggers, Jayria Nicole and Iesha Gilchrist, sat in the second row. "I'm a Leo, so I would absolutely be a lion," Nicole said. "Lions are fierce!"

Gilchrist saw herself as a giraffe: "I want to be able to see what everyone *else* has going on."

"You give long neck," Nicole agreed. Monét X Change, a "RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars" champion, prowled the room in a gem-studded lioness bodysuit, fondling her tail. "The vibe is Scar from 'The Lion King,'" she said. But, she added, "I identify with the rhino—hard on the outside, very soft internally." A rapper in leopard-print spandex, Maiya the Don, eyed her and said, "I wish I had a tail. Motherfucker!"

The lights dimmed. Holograms of roaring lions and growling bears alternated with fauna-inspired looks, including a lioness-like crushed-velvet bodysuit and a bearish burnt-sienna dress with a bubble hem. At the end, Alicia Graf Mack, the dean of dance at Juilliard, came out with her seven-year-old daughter, both in gray stretch-nylon suits. They performed a pas de deux, reinterpreting a scene from "Queens," of a mother elephant protecting her calf from hyenas.

At the after-party, Musembi and Ranney surveyed the partygoers—including a few peacocking males—and saw traces of the jungle. "The posturing, the dancing. It's like animal society," Musembi said, comparing the swarm around the bar to "hyenas at a carcass." Ranney was reminded of a lion's den: "The females are really in charge—you just don't realize it."

Darlington, having changed from pink to black, said, "This is like a flock of the most beautiful flamingos. Everyone's out in their finest." She was relieved to be done with her runway moment: "I'm much happier watching cats walk than being on the catwalk."

—*Michael Schulman*

SKETCHPAD BY JENNY KROIK

"Do you want to buy this print to replace the paper you have taped up in the bathroom?"

"Who's the artist that puts old animal faces on people?" "I don't know, but I hope I never see it."

"My father would have loved for you to be me."

"You dropped my business card—that's a bad omen!"

U.S. JOURNAL

IDENTITY CRISIS

A professor claimed for years to be Native. She insists it was just a mistake.

BY JAY CASPIAN KANG

In 1928, a forty-one-year-old woman named Adeline Ovitt, née Rivers, drowned in the Schroon River, in upstate New York. The circumstances of her death are largely unknown, but she left behind a husband and five children, including a ten-year-old son named LeRoy, who later had six children of his own, including a daughter named Anita. Anita eventually settled down with Robert Hoover, a pipe fitter for General Electric, in the town of Knox, about forty minutes west of Albany. In 1978, Anita and Robert had their first child together, a daughter named Elizabeth. Two more daughters would follow.

Elizabeth Hoover, who is now forty-five years old, describes her childhood as "broke"—her father worked odd construction jobs and was periodically unemployed—but idyllic. "I spent most of my time running around outside," she told me recently. "My dad said I could head anywhere as long as I took a dog, a walking stick, and a knife." Much of her youth was spent harvesting vegetables, butchering meat, and chopping wood for the winter.

As Hoover and her sisters grew older, they began to find a sense of purpose and identity in a story that Anita told them about their family. Their great-grandmother, she said, had been a Mohawk Indian, and she had drowned herself in order to escape her drunk and abusive French Canadian husband. The girls were also told that they were Mi'kmaq on their father's side. Anita began taking the girls to powwows across western New York and New England, where Native Americans would play music, share crafts, and dance. These gatherings are held throughout the country. They are intertribal and offer opportunities for Native Americans who have become disconnected from their people to be welcomed back in.

Tammy Bucchino met Hoover at a powwow in the early nineties. Bucchino's mother, a German woman, took Tammy to the powwows for the same reasons that Anita Hoover took Elizabeth: she wanted her child to feel a connection to her heritage. Bucchino's father was full-blood Mi'kmaq, but she wouldn't get to know him until later in life. "We clicked because she said she's Mi'kmaq, like me," Bucchino said of Hoover. "And she said she had Mohawk background, and my stepbrother has a Mohawk background as well."

The Bucchinos and the Hoovers began to spend frequent weekends together. Elizabeth and Tammy taught each other the intricacies of the Fancy Shawl Dance, which involves elaborate regalia. (The dance emerged in the twentieth century, and it became a way to preserve Native American culture.) At powwows, the girls picked up ways of thinking and speaking that distinguished them from their white classmates in school. "Liz dances like her feet don't even touch the ground," Bucchino said. "She's put her heart and soul into her own culture. Not many people do that."

By the time Hoover was a teen-ager, she had taken on a Mi'kmaq name, Gomdineôeôeu Ôsaog, which she translates as Mountain Flower. She says she was given that name by a Mi'kmaq elder at a ceremony attended by her paternal grandmother. In 1996, *Parade* magazine collected statements from high-school students about racism and offensive mascots. "Being of Native American descent, I am annoyed at mascots like 'Indians' or 'Chiefs' or 'Braves'—and the mock war whoops and chanting that often accompany these names," Hoover is quoted as saying. The statement is signed "Elizabeth Gomdineôeôeu Ôsaog Hoover, 17, Knox, N.Y."

Hoover was an exemplary student, and she enrolled at Williams College, in western Massachusetts, in 1997. She studied anthropology and psychology. As a sophomore, she organized a powwow that got a writeup in the student paper.

In 2021, Elizabeth Hoover appeared on a notorious list of so-called Pretendians.

ILLUSTRATION BY DADU SHIN

The accompanying photo shows a nineteen-year-old Hoover, thin and tall, with dark-brown hair, close-set eyes, and two white feathers in her hair. She is described as "Elizabeth Hoover '01, known as Wind Chaser and descendant of the Mohawk and Micmac tribes." (Hoover says she has never gone by Wind Chaser.) Her senior thesis was titled "The Self-Identification of Mixed-Blood Indians in the United States and Canada."

After graduation, Hoover went to Brown to pursue a Ph.D. in anthropology. A teaching appointment at Brown was followed by a tenured professorship at the University of California, Berkeley. By her early forties, Hoover had become one of the most successful Native American academics in the country, renowned for her work in food sovereignty, the idea that self-determination entails controlling one's sources of nutrition. On Instagram, she posted envy-inducing pictures with her partner, a Crow photographer named Adam Sings In The Timber: Hoover, dressed in Fancy Shawl Dance regalia of bright blue and white, a goofy smile on her face; Sings In The Timber, handsome and dressed in black, a camera slung around his neck.

Then in October of 2022 Hoover published a statement on her Web site: "As a result of recent questions about my identity, I, along with others, conducted genealogical research to verify the tribal descent that my family raised me with, digging through online databases, archival records, and census data." These searches, she explained, had turned up no evidence of Native American lineage. "Essentially what I am currently left with is that I do not have any official documentation to verify the way my family has identified."

Several months later, after this statement had been met with great skepticism and online furor, Hoover, in consultation with the Restorative Justice Center at Berkeley, published another statement: "I am a white person who has incorrectly identified as Native my whole life, based on incomplete information."

To outsiders, the term "Pretendian" might sound ugly or be discomforting. There is no universal standard for determining who is a "real" Native American and who is not. Native identity is a legal and political classification, based on filial lineage and tribal citizenship. Tribal nations have their own rules for enrollment, and some are more open than others. The Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe, for example, requires twenty-five per cent Akwesasne Mohawk blood; the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma mandates that an ancestor be on its 1937 roll and have an eighth Pawnee blood. The Cherokee Nation, one of the two largest Native groups in the United States, will accept anyone who can prove some lineal descent in specific records.

These rules have been informed by brutal histories. Blood requirements can be traced to "blood quantum" laws, which, beginning in the Colonial era, were used to disenfranchise Native Americans and to enforce racial distinctions that controlled everything from land claims to marriages. But such criteria can now be a way of insuring that often scarce tribal resources are divided among actual descendants, and to discourage impostors from claiming identities that they don't possess.

Such fraud seems particularly rife in academia. In just the past few years, several scholars have been accused of being Pretendians, including Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, a former judge and law professor in Canada who has said that her father was Cree, and Qwo-Li Driskill, a professor of gender and queer studies at Oregon State University who claims to have Cherokee, Lenape, Lumbee, and Osage heritage. (Turpel-Lafond denied the accusation, in 2022; Driskill's attorney characterized the accusation against his client as intrusive and false.) Ward Churchill, one of the country's best-known Native-studies scholars, has been accused, throughout his career, of telling false stories about his Cherokee ancestry; when asked for proof of it, he claimed that such inquiries were the tools of colonialism. In January, 2023, Andrea Smith, a major figure in the field of ethnic studies, agreed to resign from the University of California, Riverside, effective this August, following questions about the veracity of her Cherokee heritage. (Both Churchill and Smith deny lying about their identities.)

There are likely many other cases. Kim TallBear, an enrolled member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate tribe and a professor of Native studies at the University of Alberta, guesses that a quarter of those who have checked the box for Native American in the academy are what she calls "self-Indigenizers," people who either invent a Native heritage wholesale or play up a tenuous connection. "Most of the cases haven't been made very public yet," TallBear said.

The word "complicated" always hovers in the stories of Pretendians. After centuries of colonization, displacement, and forceful assimilation, many Native Americans who grew up in their tribal communities can pass as white or as other races. People whose parents were adopted or sent to boarding schools as part of government programs to weaken tribal sovereignty may return to their communities, however removed they have since become. And a child may hear about some distant Native ancestor, then build an identity around what turns out to be a bit of family lore. There is a sympathetic—and, yes, complicated—version of Hoover's story in which a white woman named Anita is so moved by the tale of a grandmother's tragic death that she takes her daughters to powwows and encourages them to befriend Native kids.

Anita Hoover brought up her daughters to care about being Native; not even Hoover's critics dispute that. Hoover, in her formal statements and in the conversations I had with her over the course of nine months, has repeatedly insisted that, until people began questioning her identity, she had never carefully researched her genealogy. She knew that she was not eligible for tribal enrollment, she says, and so she didn't bother. This explanation seems to take for granted that there was little else to be gained by knowing more about the specific people she came from. You might wonder if, at some point, she began to have her own suspicions and avoided getting to the bottom of them. Or you might believe that Hoover must have traced her family tree, found it wanting, and decided to keep going with a story that had given her the life she had—in which case, you will have to conclude not only that she lied in her two formal statements but that she lied for years about who she was.

Jennifer Weston first met Hoover around the time that Hoover began her graduate work at Brown. Weston, who is Hunkpapa Lakota and was born and grew up on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, had gone to Brown as an

undergraduate, and she had recently returned to Providence to organize the small number of Native students on the campus. Hoover was with her boyfriend at the time, who is Wampanoag. They told Weston that they had connections to nearby tribes. "I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life," Hoover told me. Her boyfriend worked in a museum. "So I was, like, 'Well, I'll go get a degree in museum studies.'"

She matriculated at Brown in 2001, shortly before the arrival of a professor named Evelyn Hu-DeHart, a historian whose family immigrated to the U.S. from China when she was a girl. Hu-DeHart studied Latin American and Caribbean history and wrote extensively, at the beginning of her academic career, on the Yaqui, a Native tribe with roots in northwest Mexico. She was hired to build up the school's ethnic-studies program, and to run the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America.

Early in her time at Brown, Hu-DeHart remembers noticing a striking young woman who wore beaded earrings and hung around with the kids in a Native American student group. Hoover "figured out very early how to project her Native American identity," Hu-DeHart told me, noting that many Native people can pass for white. ("They don't necessarily have physical features or even a skin color that immediately marks them," she said.) She added, of Hoover, "At Brown, she organized an annual powwow. We brought in drums from the different tribes around. We had dancers, and Liz would always have a beautiful regalia, gowns, and beautiful beaded jewelry." The ethnic-studies department did not have a full-time Native American faculty member, a fact that weighed on Hu-DeHart. The university eventually began a job search for a Native-studies scholar. In the meantime, Hu-DeHart asked Hoover to serve as a graduate instructor for an introductory Native-studies course that Hu-DeHart planned to offer.

In Hoover's first few years at Brown, she and Jennifer Weston ran into each other often. Weston recalls Hoover saying that the Mohawk side of her family was from "north of Kahnawà:ke," a territory in southern Quebec, and that she wasn't sure about her Mi'kmaq side. In the summer of 2005, Hoover took a trip to Kahnawà:ke to attend a powwow; afterward, in an e-mail, she reported running into "people who knew people i'm related to so that was nice." She went on to explain that her family "left kahnawake a few generations ago" and had lived in New York ever since. (Hoover said that this connection fell through and that she never pursued it further.)

A month later, Weston got married. Hoover offered to make her a pair of moccasins to go with a traditional buckskin dress. Although Hoover would later maintain that she never found her relatives, Weston insists that, at the wedding, Hoover told people that she had found them—and that, contrary to what she had believed before, they were actually from Kahnawà:ke proper. Weston remembers feeling a great deal of happiness for her friend.

The Akwesasne Mohawk reservation straddles the border between New York and Canada and sits along the St. Lawrence River, which, for generations, carried effluents from nearby industrial sites, contaminating everything from local food to breast milk.

Hoover began spending a lot of time on the reservation not long after she started her doctorate. Through mutual Ivy League acquaintances, she'd met the son of a scholar and midwife named Katsi Cook, who, in the nineteen-eighties, had conducted a groundbreaking study of industrial pollutants in breast milk. Cook's son introduced Hoover to his mother, who quickly saw a use for this young, eager student from Brown. Cook wanted someone to look through the health records of participants from her study and to follow up with them, in order to gather information for how future studies could be improved.

Hoover began travelling back and forth between Providence and Akwesasne. On the reservation, she helped out with farming projects and in the community library. At Cook's urging, she decided to write her dissertation about industrial pollution as well as gardening. The perception of reservation-wide contamination had made people at Akwesasne afraid to grow crops, an activity that was vital for their self-reliance. Within a year, Hoover had conducted sixty-three interviews, which, along with the records Cook had given her, provided much of the basis for her dissertation.

In the community garden, Hoover met Jean Laffin, who runs a small farm. Laffin doesn't recall Hoover ever explaining her background, but she always assumed that Hoover was Native. "It was the way she spoke," Laffin said. "She just blended right in with people here." She eventually took to calling Hoover her "chosen daughter," and came to consider her part of the family.

Kahnawà:ke is about an hour and a half's drive from Akwesasne. Hoover had been there at least once, before Weston's wedding, and Katsi Cook's mother was from Kahnawà:ke. Given the close ties between the two Mohawk communities, Cook could easily have started Hoover on a path to finding her relatives, no matter how distant. So why didn't Hoover take the short drive in order to find them? And why didn't she ask Cook for help?

Audra Simpson, an anthropology professor at Columbia and a member of the Mohawk Nation at Kahnawà:ke, met Hoover at a Native-studies conference before Hoover had embarked on her Akwesasne project. Simpson was there with a Mohawk curator and scholar. "Liz Hoover approached us and introduced herself very enthusiastically," Simpson told me. "She was quite friendly. And she said she was from Kahnawà:ke."

Simpson began asking about Hoover's family, as she would any Native person with overlapping heritage. "I'm looking to make a connection," Simpson explained to me. "I'm looking to find out if we're related, because if you claim that you're from Kahnawà:ke then you're potentially related to me somehow. There's so few of us." Hoover gave her the name Brooks. Simpson thought she must have misheard. It wasn't a name she knew.

Over the years, Simpson occasionally heard about Hoover and spoke with other academics who had noticed the vague way that Hoover talked about her ancestry. Simpson was also slightly suspicious of Hoover on account of the volume of beadwork and Native American signifiers that she was known to wear. (Hoover insists that this is exaggerated, but others described her in a

similar fashion. "It looked like an Etsy shop exploded on her," Simpson said.) On a visit to Kahnawà:ke, Simpson asked around to learn if there was a family named Brooks. There was. "It's a tiny, tiny family," Simpson told me. "There were two people still alive." She asked cousins of the family if Elizabeth Hoover was related to them. "Nobody had ever heard of her," Simpson said. The next time she saw Hoover, at an American Anthropological Association event, she asked her a direct question: "Who are you?"

"I was not warm," Simpson recalled. "She looked at me like a deer in the headlights and then she sort of scuttled away." (Hoover disputes this account.) Simpson has known people whose families were from Kahnawà:ke and who had become disconnected from their pasts. "Some of us were forced to live off the reserve," she told me. "Even the ones forced out, we still know them and claim them." Such stories were not new to Simpson. "There are people who returned home, and maybe they don't feel one hundred per cent welcome, but they are brought back in," Simpson said. "I don't think Elizabeth Hoover ever made that journey."

Hoover completed her dissertation in 2010. When Jennifer Weston read it, she noted a mention of Kahnawà:ke in Hoover's description of her background. She assumed that Hoover had successfully traced her family, but, when she asked her friend about it, Hoover said she still didn't have much information. "I remember thinking that was weird," Weston told me. Hoover did say that she had learned who her family was. It wasn't the Brooks family. She was from the Rivers family, she said. She believed they had shortened the name from Two Rivers.

By 2012, Brown University's search for a Native-studies scholar had been going on for several years. Candidates were flown to Providence and asked to give "job talks," during which the scholar meets students and presents research. Some candidates who were brought in dropped out voluntarily. Others were passed over.

Annette Rodriguez was a graduate fellow at the center toward the end of this period. She told me about a Native scholar who gave a job talk wearing a three-piece suit with a distinctively patterned tie. Someone asked him about the pattern, expecting that the design had come from his tribal community. The scholar said it was from Barneys. "He wasn't going to fuel the fantasies of the white imagination of what an authentic Native person was," Rodriguez said. "Liz was very happy to do that."

Hoover had returned to Brown as a visiting scholar in 2011, after another attempt to fill the full-time position had failed. The American-studies department, which had absorbed the ethnic-studies program, then decided to alter the job description, calling for a scholar earlier in her career, and quickly hired Hoover. Hu-DeHart was on leave at the time, but Rodriguez saw her hand in it. Hu-DeHart was Hoover's patron, Rodriguez said. It's common—arguably, even required—for young faculty to have champions in their departments. But such a prestigious job doesn't often appear so suddenly for an academic who has not yet published a book or had a tenure-track job elsewhere.

Rodriguez saw a connection between Hoover's swift rise and how ardently she signalled her supposed Native identity. "I was never in a meeting where she wasn't beading," Rodriguez said. "She had different beads in little plastic containers or bags, and she would take them out and start beading during our faculty meetings or when someone was giving a presentation."

In Rodriguez's view, Hoover was performing a kind of fantasy of the Native scholar for the non-Native faculty around her—she was what they wanted to see. "She got grants, and she got fellowships, and she checked boxes, and she got positions," Rodriguez said. "And so she exploited the system. But I think the system also was very happy to have her as the visible Native."

In 2016, thousands of people gathered at the Standing Rock reservation to block the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Weston, who had returned home to take part in the resistance, got a message from her old friend. Hoover was planning on coming to Standing Rock, and a group of students were getting money together so that they could join her. They wanted to get the lay of the land before coming and hoped that Weston could fill them in.

The students created a GoFundMe page for the trip. They also drafted a funding proposal, with Hoover's knowledge, that suggested they would bring back items to donate to a museum. This seemed to violate key tenets of Native studies: you should not extract from a community and you should respect the sovereignty of its people. Weston was baffled that Hoover would fail to grasp something so fundamental. She explained these concerns to Hoover, who acquiesced, and they remained on friendly terms. Weston sent Hoover slides to use at Brown chronicling the Lakota's treaties with the U.S. government and Standing Rock's history of resistance. After Hoover's dissertation was published as a book, "The River Is in Us," in 2017, Weston helped organize a launch party at a bookstore in Providence.

A short while later, the department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management at Berkeley started a hiring search. The department was under some pressure to diversify the faculty after a Black professor was denied tenure. A handful of people in the department advocated for Hoover, including a

professor named Kathryn De Master, who had met Hoover earlier in her career and was impressed by her work. Hoover got the job, and she and Adam Sings In The Timber moved to Berkeley in October, 2020. He was hired as a photographer for the university. Hoover connected with students over Zoom and began figuring out her niche in the sometimes dramatic and frequently petty forum of department politics.

That December, Joe Biden appointed Deb Haaland, a member of the Pueblo of Laguna, to lead the Department of the Interior. A writer named Claudia Lawrence, who identified as Native, wrote an Op-Ed in the *Times* offering Haaland advice. After the column ran, the *Times* was informed of a claim that Lawrence had no Native ancestry, and determined that Lawrence could not prove otherwise. (Lawrence could not be reached for comment.) In the wake of the dustup, a journalist named Jacqueline Keeler created the Alleged Pretendians List.

Keeler had been on a campaign against Pretendians for several years. In 2015, she wrote a piece about the phenomenon for the Daily Beast, after Dartmouth, her alma mater, hired a woman named Susan Taffe Reed, the president of Eastern Delaware Nation, as the director of its Native American Program. The writers of an irreverent blog called FakeIndians had discovered that Eastern Delaware Nation was not a recognized tribe but a nonprofit, and that Taffe Reed did not appear to have Delaware tribal ancestry. (Taffe Reed did not respond to a request for comment.) Keeler began working with a team of scholars and genealogists to expose Pretendians, prompting bursts of attention in the press—most notably when she challenged the identity of Sacheen Littlefeather, the actress and activist who declined an Academy Award on behalf of Marlon Brando, in 1973, in an effort to protest Hollywood's portrayal of Native Americans.

Keeler shared the Alleged Pretendians List with a select group of scholars and community members, who could contribute the names of people they believed were faking their heritage and add notes detailing whatever evidence they had. The list was quickly screenshotted, downloaded, and shared. The ancestries of some people on the list were ultimately verified and marked accordingly. But many people I spoke to expressed discomfort with Keeler's methods, saying that she assumes guilt, requiring the accused to prove themselves innocent. What's more, critics say, the campaign encourages cultural chauvinism—tribal strength and sovereignty depend on a community being able to determine whom to invite in, not on the watchful policing of sometimes arbitrary genetic boundaries.

Still, even some of Keeler's sharpest critics say that she is, as one grad student put it to me, "problematic but necessary." Prior to Keeler, Pretendians had cosplayed for years without any real repercussions. Kim TallBear, the professor of Native studies at the University of Alberta, supports Keeler's work unequivocally. "Jackie being out front has opened a door that a lot of other people have walked through," she said. "I am disgusted when people throw her under the bus."

Jennifer Weston sought out the list to see if anyone she knew was on it. Many of the names were unsurprising, the subjects of years of rumor. Then she saw Hoover's name. She got in touch with her, expressing surprise and confusion. "When I asked her about it, she said that she was just going to keep doing her good work until they came for her," Weston told me. (Hoover disputes this account.) "And now I'm wondering if that's one of the only true things she's ever said to me."

"He thinks that just because he thinks, he is."

Early in 2022, accusations that Adam Sings In The Timber, Hoover's partner, was a sexual predator began circulating on social media. Soon, a Native organization, the Chi-Nations Youth Council, which had worked with him in the past, posted a statement denouncing him as "a groomer and a rapist."

One of Sings In The Timber's accusers was a student and an aspiring photographer named Tena Bear Don't Walk. Bear Don't Walk, who is Crow, was eighteen when she first got to know Sings In The Timber. They began exchanging Instagram messages in 2018, and the following year Sings In The Timber, who was in his early forties, told her about a talk he was giving in Seattle. Bear Don't Walk met him and Hoover there.

When Sings In The Timber made another visit to Washington State, months later, he met Bear Don't Walk for dinner. After dinner, he bought some alcohol, and they drank together in his hotel room. Then, while she was asleep, she says, he sexually assaulted her. Bear Don't Walk reported the alleged assault to the Tulalip Tribal Police Department three years later; after a brief investigation, the Tulalip prosecutor's office decided not to pursue the case. (Sings In The Timber did not respond to a request for comment. In an Instagram post, from 2022, he denied ever having nonconsensual sex with anyone.)

After the allegations began circulating, Hoover privately defended her partner. She told an acquaintance, David Smoke-McCluskey, that the accusations had been "completely made up," and that Sings In The Timber was working on a statement with a mediator and with "the woman who fabricated" the story. There would be a ceremony, she said, at which Bear Don't Walk would apologize for "publicly slandering" Sings In The Timber, and he would apologize "for hurting her feelings." A Crow woman named Nina Sanders had, indeed, been approached about handling the situation in a Crow way, and had explained that this would involve a ceremony, but she claims she never proposed a joint apology or characterized the allegations as

false. Hoover says the messages reflected her understanding of the situation at the time, but Smoke-McCluskey believes that Hoover lied to him in order to cast doubt on Bear Don't Walk's story.

Bear Don't Walk went public in April. Another young woman had posted a story about Sings In The Timber behaving inappropriately, and the allegations were written up in a couple of Native publications. Hoover posted a statement on Instagram, insisting that she was "completely unaware of Adam's harmful interactions with the two women who have come forward, until everything came out on this very public forum." This is an overstatement at best: the mediation involving Sanders was proposed shortly after the accusations were made, in February. Hoover later deleted her Instagram account.

As this was going on, Hoover went to her colleague Kathryn De Master's house and broke down. De Master felt overwhelmed, she told me. She considered Hoover a friend and an ally—the two had ridden out much of the early days of the pandemic texting jokes back and forth during department Zoom calls. And all the attention had made the whispers about Hoover's identity harder to ignore. When people wrote about Sings In The Timber's alleged behavior, they generally noted that his partner's Native identity had been contested. This wasn't news to De Master, but, like many of Hoover's colleagues, she had wanted to believe Hoover, and so she did.

Perhaps none of Hoover's colleagues were as upset about the rumors as Adrienne Keene, whom Hoover had mentored at Brown. Despite years of close friendship, Keene realized that Hoover had never told her the "full story" of her family. (Hoover denies keeping anything from her.) Keene reached out to Hoover and "asked her directly for family names and ties," she later wrote, and "was left confused and unsatisfied by the answers." She decided to investigate the matter herself, searching census records and reading through newspaper archives. Keene, who did not respond to several requests for an interview, has insisted that she began her investigation with the goal of helping her mentor by putting the questions to rest.

"I did this work from a place of love, which makes what I found even harder for me to understand," she wrote in a long e-mail to Hoover, in June, 2022. "I wanted your story to be true. I wanted to give you the tools you needed to prove everyone wrong." The e-mail goes through several generations of Hoover's family tree, finding no ties to any Indigenous community. Keene later posted the e-mail on her blog.

In October of that year, Hoover published the first of her two statements about her identity. In response, three Native students who had studied with Hoover—Ataya Cesspooch, Sierra Edd, and Breylan Martin—wrote an open letter demanding her resignation. "As scholars embedded in the kinship networks of our communities," they wrote, "we find Hoover's repeated attempts to differentiate herself from settlers with similar stories and her claims of having lived experience as an Indigenous person by dancing at powwows absolutely appalling." Hoover, they went on, had "failed to acknowledge the harm she has caused and enabled."

This question of harm—of whether and to what extent it has actually been done—is central to debates about racial fraud, particularly when the person accused has done good work in the community. With academics, harm is often, though not entirely, a matter of stolen opportunities. Martin told me about the difficulties she has had paying for her education, and about the necessity of fellowships and financial-aid opportunities aimed at Native students. Hoover had seized such opportunities her entire academic life, Martin said.

Edd suggested that Hoover's lofty career was symptomatic of a larger identity problem within the academy. "There's a prevalence of white people and white-passing people within ethnic cultural studies, whether you're talking about African American studies, Latino, Asian American, or Native American," she said. "There is a centering of whiteness that is felt within the fields, within the academic discourse, but also within the institutions who hire the people who make up these departments."

I heard versions of this point from several of Hoover's former students and colleagues. Hoover dressed the part, they said, but was also able to ingratiate herself with senior faculty—who may have subconsciously gravitated to someone who, behind the beads and the regalia, was just like them. "People who either have a story of a Cherokee ancestor or maybe actually have one in 1820, but who code as white, and come from a middle- or upper-middle-class background, there's a certain kind of white privilege that opens doors for you," Kim TallBear told me. "They're more comfortable for people."

Nearly four hundred people have signed the students' letter. Hoover's department asked the university's Restorative Justice Center to work with students who felt betrayed, and also with Hoover, to discuss the harm she'd caused. Hoover then released her second statement, titled "Letter of Apology and Accountability." In it, she writes, "I was first directly challenged in my Indigenous identity when I began my first assistant professor job." The word "harm," and its variants, makes thirteen appearances. Hoover never says that she lied, but she refers multiple times to "broken trust" and insists that she is deeply sorry. "I have put away my dance regalia, ribbons skirts, moccasins, and Native jewelry," she writes. "I've begun to give away some of these things to people who will wear them better."

Reading this second statement, Kathryn De Master thought back to a visit she and a colleague had made to Hoover's house months before, to ask Hoover about her past. If De Master and others in the department were going to support. Hoover, they needed to have a full accounting of the facts, and they needed to hear them from her. The three colleagues sat together on Hoover's porch. De Master asked Hoover if there had ever been questions about her Native heritage before she arrived at Berkeley, and Hoover emphatically said no. (Hoover denies saying no.)

I first contacted Elizabeth Hoover in May, 2023, the day after she published her second statement. We met shortly afterward, in a coffee shop in Berkeley. Living in a college town, one

meets more than one's share of academic narcissists, but Hoover didn't come across as that type. Her charm and intelligence were obvious. She spoke of the wreckage of her life with a dark, engaging humor.

I told Hoover that others remembered her speaking of a connection to a family named Brooks, and then to the Rivers and Two Rivers families. If she had never researched her family, as she claimed, where did these names come from?

"I've had one story, which is the story that my mother gave me," Hoover insisted. "My mom's grandma was Adelaide Rivers, and she was under the impression that it used to be Two Rivers and she shortened it." The Two Rivers family does in fact exist, though Hoover has no connection to it. She denies mentioning the name Brooks to anyone.

I asked why she didn't enlist the help of Katsi Cook—who, despite all the allegations, still loves Hoover—in order to find her people in Kahnawà:ke. She reiterated her point about not meeting the criteria for enrollment. "I know other people who have been rejected in this way," she said. "There's not an ethos of 'Yes, please come home and reclaim.' People, when I would reach out, were prickly towards me." She added, "I should have put myself out there. I should have just sucked it up."

At one point, Hoover suggested that she didn't investigate things further because the great-grandmother she'd heard about was not inspiring. "When people are, like, 'Oh, draw on the strength of your ancestors,' mine weren't," she said, alluding to Adeline Rivers. "She cracked and killed herself and abandoned her kids. So I lived in the present. And I went with the people that took me in and taught me and accepted me and didn't provide this kind of resistance."

How does one square these statements with Hoover's reference, in an e-mail about Kahnawà:ke, to "people who knew people i'm related to"? Or with what she allegedly told friends at Weston's wedding? Does it seem plausible that Hoover, a budding anthropologist, would have arrived in Kahnawà:ke, come so close to finding answers about who she was, and then just walked away?

Some of Hoover's friends and colleagues have come to distrust her over time. In 2019, Hoover co-edited a book of essays about food sovereignty with a scholar at the University of Kansas named Devon Mihesuah. In the book's original biographical materials, Hoover listed herself as Mohawk and Mi'kmaq. But after another of the book's contributors was accused of being a Pretendian, Hoover, without alerting Mihesuah, contacted the publisher and asked to have her tribal affiliations removed from this material. Mihesuah doesn't understand why Hoover would do this unless she doubted the veracity of the affiliations. (Hoover says that including her affiliations alongside Mihesuah's felt inappropriate given that, unlike Mihesuah, she wasn't an enrolled citizen.)

That same year, Hoover published an article in the Review of International American Studies titled " 'Fires were lit inside them:' The Pyropolitics of Water Protector Camps at Standing Rock." When Jennifer Weston read it, she saw that language had been lifted, without attribution, from the slides that she had given Hoover years before. She confronted Hoover, who said it had been an innocent mistake and asked the journal to issue an erratum. Later, Weston said, Hoover sent her a long handwritten explanation for what had happened. The letter came wrapped in "some kind of greenery," Weston told me. "I don't know if she put cedar or something in there with it. I guess she was intending to communicate some sort of healing energy or whatever."

When Weston eventually read both of Hoover's statements of identity, she could not recognize the person described there. "As someone who has known Elizabeth for twenty years, both of her statements are fraught with misinformation and misrepresentation," she told me. Weston refuses to believe that Hoover never researched her genealogy. "She did look," Weston said.

Although Hoover has support from some professors, the leadership of her department has turned against her. When the current school year started, two of her three graduate students refused to work with her. One of them, a Native student, had put aside community work to study at Berkeley with Hoover's encouragement. She has switched advisers. As Hoover's own career demonstrates, mentorship is crucial to academic success.

"I'm not going to be driven out, because I still have usefulness," Hoover told me. "I still did all that work. I did the research, I did all the learning, I did the teaching. And I'm not going to have all of that just cancelled and thrown away because people are upset about this."

For a long time, Hoover continued to show up to every department meeting, even to parties and retreats where her presence wasn't mandatory. Some of her former students and faculty friends began to dread running into her. Eventually, the chair of her department announced via e-mail that Hoover would stop attending these events; the department's administration also quietly tried to make sure that Hoover no longer worked in Native communities, as she had promised in her statement of accountability. (Hoover says she has upheld her promise without any administrative intervention.)

Almost immediately, however, rumors circulated that Hoover was breaking that promise, taking part in cultural burns—the lighting of controlled fires to manage Native land—and posting photos of herself at these events on Facebook. Hoover denies that the burns are part of her scholarly work and says that she had been invited by the tribal chairperson who hosted the burns. (The tribal chairperson did not respond to a request for comment.)

One day last fall, the Native grad student who had paused her community work was feeling overwhelmed by the turmoil in her new department and went to a cultural burn up north. She wanted to be around people who weren't embroiled in the drama surrounding Hoover, she told me. When she got to the burn, which was crowded, Hoover was there. The tribal chairperson acknowledged Hoover, announcing that she had given him a beaded medallion a year or two before. "And then she was at the campfires, laughing really loud, like how Native women usually laugh," the grad student said. "It's weird she laughs like that." ♦

E-MAILS FROM THE DEMS

BY IAN FRAZIER

From: Nancy Pelosi
Subject: Help!

Dear Ian—I am overwhelmed! I've tried and tried, but I can't delete this e-mail. You have been helpful in deleting e-mails from the Dems in the past—won't you please delete this one? All it takes is a few seconds of your time. In the upper right-hand corner of your keyboard, you will see a button that says "Delete." Can we count on you to hit that button before midnight tonight? We knew we could!

From: James Carville
Subject: Game Over

Hi, Ian, it's Jim here. Do you remember, two years ago, when I reached out to you and said that if we lost the governor's race in Virginia it would be "game over" for the Democrats? Well, we did, and it is. That's why I am asking you to delete this e-mail as soon as you possibly can. Please, won't you dig deep and hit that ol' Delete key? (Upper right-hand corner, if you've got a Mac.) I'd sure appreciate it.

From: Chuck Schumer
Subject: Wonderful News!

Dear Ian—I've just received some news that I'm sure will make you as happy as it made me. One of our most faithful supporters has offered to match every deletion for the next twenty-four hours on a two-for-one basis. That means you don't even have to delete a whole e-mail! Just select one-third of an e-mail from me and delete it, and this supporter will delete the other two-thirds. But you must act before 4:40 P.M. tomorrow—sorry, make that 4:41:33 P.M.!

From: Defend the Senate
Subject: Please Don't Delete (Not!)

We're reaching out to you, Ian, because you have been one of our most faithful deleters in the past. But now, frankly, we're worried. Our records show that you often read this far in our e-mails, and sometimes even farther. An e-mail like this should not even be opened, let alone allowed to go on for this long. We can make this work, but it's going to take all of us.

From: Elizabeth Warren
Subject: This Is Incredible!

Dear Ian—did you know that it's possible to go into your e-mail trash folder and *delete e-mails that you have already deleted*?! It's true! Each of those "double deletions" helps, so let's start with this one—delete, then re-delete, to make sure. It's as easy as that.

From: Tracking Poll
Subject: Update Your Poll Answers

Don't worry, all we're asking for today is your input on some important issues in the news, so there's no need to delete this e-mail. . . . On second thought, maybe you'd better.

From: Adam Schiff
Subject: You Need to See This

Ian, I'm going to be very candid with you. To help yourself and your fellow-Dems—not just to win but to survive emotionally and physically—you should be checking your e-mail every few seconds and getting rid of anything from my colleagues or myself the *instant* it pops up on your screen. Remember what happened with my book "Midnight in Washington"? You unwisely ordered it, thumbed through it, and lost an entire several minutes of your life that you will never be able to get back. Don't let that happen again.

From: Cheap Botox Last Chance
Subject: BACKFIRES!

The Dems' pleas for help in deleting their e-mails have **BACKFIRED!** Now you're deleting so much that your finger is too tired to delete **Cheap Botox Last Chance**, and you end up buying **Botox**, for **Cheap**—when the average age of U.S. senators is over sixty-five, and they probably need it even more than you do. Talk about a **BACKFIRE!** (See order form attached.)

From: Dems in Congress
Subject: FIRE! Really! A Real Fire, Not Just Figure-of-Speech Clickbait—FIRE!! I'm Not Kidding! FI-I-I-RE!!!

(Sorry, that was Jamaal Bowman. Disregard, delete.)

From: Nancy Pelosi
Subject: Blunt

Hi, Ian. We have been blunt with you in the past. Now we have to up our game and be even blunter, in the hope that our increased bluntness will get through. We understand that you're trying, but you are simply not deleting enough. I know this can be very hard for older folks like yourself. But I'll be as blunt as blunt can be—if we don't get at least four hundred thousand deletions by midnight, our very gerontocracy could be at risk! It's your decision.

From: James Carville
Subject: You Call That 'Blunt'? I'll Give You Blunt!

What's it gonna take, Ian? What's stopping you? Bad experiences in the past? You thought you pressed Delete, and you accidentally launched an I.C.B.M., or something? C'mon, Ian—just hit Delete, and keep on hittin' it. . . . Wait, I said hit Delete, not the Launch All Rockets button! Stop! HIT DELETE! DELETE!! Oh, *no-o-o-o-o-o-o* . . . (*End of world.*) ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

ANNALS OF CRIME

INVISIBLE WORKERS

How North Korea operates a forced-labor program in China.

BY IAN URBINA

A worker sent to a Chinese seafood plant said, "It was like a prison for me."

In February of last year, Donggang Jinhui Foodstuff, a seafood-processing company in Dandong, China, threw a party. It had been a successful year: a new plant had opened, and the company had doubled the amount of squid that it exported to the United States. The party, according to videos posted on Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, featured singers, instrumentalists, dancers, fireworks, and strobe lights. One aspect of the company's success seems to have been its use of North Korean workers, who are sent by their government to work in Chinese factories, in conditions of captivity, to earn money for the state. A seafood trader who does business with Jinhui recently estimated that it employed between fifty and seventy North Koreans. Videos posted by a company representative show machines labelled in Korean, and workers with North Korean accents explaining how to clean squid. At the party, the company played songs that are popular in Pyongyang, including "People Bring Glory to Our Party" (written by North Korea's 1989 poet laureate) and "We Will Go to Mt. Paektu" (a reference to the widely mythologized birthplace of Kim Jong Il). Performers wore North Korean colors, and the country's flag billowed behind them; in the audience, dozens of workers held miniature flags.

Drone footage played at the event showed off Jinhui's twenty-one-acre, fenced-in compound, which has processing and cold-storage facilities and what appears to be a seven-floor dormitory for workers. The company touted a wide array of Western certifications from organizations that claim to check workplaces for labor violations, including the use of North Korean workers. When videos of the party were posted online, a commenter—presumably befuddled, because using these workers violates U.N. sanctions—asked, "Aren't you prohibited from filming this?"

Like Jinhui, many companies in China rely on a vast program of forced labor from North Korea. (Jinhui did not respond to requests for comment.) The program is run by various entities in the North Korean government, including a secretive agency called Room 39, which oversees activities such as money laundering and cyberattacks, and which funds the country's nuclear- and ballistic-missile programs. (The agency is so named, according to some defectors, because it is based in the ninth room on the third floor of the Korean Workers' Party headquarters.) Such labor transfers are not new. In 2012, North Korea sent some forty thousand workers to China. A portion of their salaries was taken by the state, providing a vital source of foreign currency for Party officials: at the time, a Seoul-based think tank estimated that the country made as much as $2.3 billion a year through the program. Since then, North Koreans have been sent to Russia, Poland, Qatar, Uruguay, and Mali.

In 2017, after North Korea tested a series of nuclear and ballistic weapons, the United Nations imposed sanctions that prohibit foreign companies from using North Korean workers. The U.S. passed a law that established a "rebuttable presumption" categorizing work by North Koreans as forced labor unless proven otherwise, and levying fines on companies that import goods tied to these workers. China is supposed to enforce the sanctions in a similar manner. Nevertheless, according to State Department estimates, there are currently as many as a hundred thousand North Koreans working in the country. Many work at construction companies, textile factories, and software firms. Some also process seafood. In 2022, according to Chinese officials running pandemic quarantines, there were some eighty thousand North Koreans just in

ILLUSTRATION BY CLEON PETERSON

Dandong, a hub of the seafood industry.

Last year, I set out with a team of researchers to document this phenomenon. We reviewed leaked government documents, promotional materials, satellite imagery, online forums, and local news reports. We watched hundreds of cell-phone videos published on social-media sites. In some, the presence of North Koreans was explicit. Others were examined by experts to detect North Korean accents, language usage, and other cultural markers. Reporting in China is tightly restricted for Western reporters. But we hired Chinese investigators to visit factories and record footage of production lines. I also secretly sent interview questions, through another group of investigators and their contacts, to two dozen North Koreans—twenty workers and four managers—who had recently spent time in Chinese factories. Their anonymous responses were transcribed and sent back to me.

The workers, all of whom are women, described conditions of confinement and violence at the plants. Workers are held in compounds, sometimes behind barbed wire, under the watch of security agents. Many work gruelling shifts and get at most one day off a month. Several described being beaten by the managers sent by North Korea to watch them. "It was like prison for me," one woman said. "At first, I almost vomited at how bad it was, and, just when I got used to it, the supervisors would tell us to shut up, and curse if we talked." Many described enduring sexual assault at the hands of their managers. "They would say I'm fuckable and then suddenly grab my body and grope my breasts and put their dirty mouth on mine and be disgusting," a woman who did product transport at a plant in the city of Dalian said. Another, who worked at Jinhui, said, "The worst and saddest moment was when I was forced to have sexual relations when we were brought to a party with alcohol." The workers described being kept at the factories against their will, and being threatened with severe punishment if they tried to escape. A woman who was at a factory called Dalian Haiqing Food for more than four years said, "It's often emphasized that, if you are caught running away, you will be killed without a trace."

In all, I identified fifteen seafood-processing plants that together seem to have used more than a thousand North Korean workers since 2017. China officially denies that North Korean laborers are in the country. But their presence is an open secret. "They are easy to distinguish," a Dandong native wrote in a comment on Bilibili, a video-sharing site. "They all wear uniform clothes, have a leader, and follow orders." Often, footage of the workers ends up online. In a video from a plant called Dandong Yuanyi Refined Seafoods, a dozen women perform a synchronized dance in front of a mural commemorating Youth Day, a North Korean holiday. The video features a North Korean flag emoji and the caption "Beautiful little women from North Korea in Donggang's cold-storage facility." (The company did not respond to requests for comment.) Remco Breuker, a North Korea specialist at Leiden University, in the Netherlands, told me, "Hundreds of thousands of North Korean workers have for decades slaved away in China and elsewhere, enriching their leader and his party while facing unconscionable abuse."

In late 2023, an investigator hired by my team visited a Chinese plant called Donggang Xinxin Foodstuff. He found hundreds of North Korean women working under a red banner that read, in Korean, "Let's carry out the resolution of the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party." (The company did not respond to requests for comment.) Soon afterward, the investigator visited a nearby plant called Donggang Haimeng Foodstuff, and found a North Korean manager sitting at a wooden desk with two miniature flags, one Chinese and one North Korean. The walls around the desk were mostly bare except for two portraits of the past North Korean leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. The manager took our investigator to the workers' cafeteria to eat a North Korean cold-noodle dish called *naengmyeon*, and then gave him a tour of the processing floor. Several hundred North Korean women dressed in red uniforms, plastic aprons, and white rubber boots stood shoulder to shoulder at long metal tables under harsh lights, hunched over plastic baskets of seafood, slicing and sorting products by hand. "They work hard," the manager said. The factory has exported thousands of tons of fish to companies that supply major U.S. retailers, including Walmart and ShopRite. (A spokesperson for Donggang Haimeng said that it does not hire North Korean workers.)

At times, China aggressively conceals the existence of the program. Alexander Dukalskis, a political-science professor at University College Dublin, said that workers have a hard time making their conditions known. "They're in a country where they may not speak the language, are under surveillance, usually living collectively, and have no experience in contacting journalists," he said. In late November, after my team's investigators visited several plants, authorities distributed pamphlets on the country's anti-espionage laws. Local officials announced that people who try "to contact North Korean workers, or to approach the workplaces of North Korean workers, will be treated as engaging in espionage activities that endanger national security, and will be punished severely." They also warned that people who were found to be working in connection with foreign media outlets would face consequences under the Anti-Espionage Act.

Dandong, a city of more than two million people, sits on the Yalu River, just over the border from North Korea. The Sino-Korean Friendship Bridge links Dandong to the North Korean city of Sinuiju. A second bridge, bombed during the Korean War, still extends partway across the river, and serves as a platform from which Chinese residents can view the North Koreans living six hundred yards away. The Friendship Bridge is one of the Hermit Kingdom's few gateways to the world. Some trade with North Korea is allowed under U.N. sanctions, and nearly seventy per cent of the goods exchanged between that country and China travel across this bridge. At least one department store in Dandong keeps a list of products preferred by North Korean customers. Shops sell North Korean ginseng, beer, and "7.27" cigarettes, named for the date on which the armistice ending the Korean War was signed. The city is home to a museum about the conflict, officially called the Memorial Hall of the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea. On boat tours, Chinese tourists purchase bags of biscuits to toss to children on the North Korean side of the river.

Government officials carefully select workers to send to China, screening them for their political loyalties to reduce the

risk of defections. To qualify, a person must generally have a job at a North Korean company and a positive evaluation from a local Party official. "These checks start at the neighborhood," Breuker said. Candidates who have family in China, or a relative who has already defected, can be disqualified. For some positions, applicants under twenty-seven years of age who are unmarried must have living parents, who can be punished if they try to defect, according to a report from the South Korean government; applicants over twenty-seven must be married. North Korean authorities even select for height: the country's population is chronically malnourished, and the state prefers candidates who are taller than five feet one, to avoid the official embarrassment of being represented abroad by short people. Once selected, applicants go through pre-departure training, which can last a year and often includes government-run classes covering everything from Chinese customs and etiquette to "enemy operations" and the activities of other countries' intelligence agencies. (The North Korean government did not respond to requests for comment.)

The governments of both countries coördinate to place workers, most of whom are women, with seafood companies. The logistics are often handled by local Chinese recruitment agencies, and advertisements can be found online. A video posted on Douyin this past September announced the availability of twenty-five hundred North Koreans, and a commenter asked if they could be sent to seafood factories. A post on a forum advertised five thousand workers; a commenter asked if any spoke Mandarin, and the poster replied, "There is a team leader, management, and an interpreter." A company called Jinuo Human Resources posted, "I am a human-resources company coöperating with the embassy, and currently have a large number of regular North Korean workers." Several people expressed interest. (The company did not respond to requests for comment.)

Jobs in China are coveted in North Korea, because they often come with contracts promising salaries of around two hundred and seventy dollars a month. (Similar work in North Korea pays just three dollars a month.) But the jobs come with hidden costs. Workers usually sign two- or three-year contracts. When they arrive in China, managers confiscate their passports. Inside the factories, North Korean workers wear different uniforms than Chinese workers. "Without this, we couldn't tell if one disappeared," a manager said. Shifts run as long as sixteen hours. If workers attempt to escape, or complain to people outside the plants, their families at home can face reprisals. One seafood worker described how managers cursed at her and flicked cigarette butts. "I felt bad, and I wanted to fight them, but I had to endure," she said. "That was when I was sad."

Workers get few, if any, holidays or sick days. At seafood plants, the women sleep in bunk beds in locked dormitories, sometimes thirty to a room. One worker, who spent four years processing clams in Dandong, estimated that more than sixty per cent of her co-workers suffered from depression. "We regretted coming to China but couldn't go back empty-handed," she said. Workers are forbidden to tune in to local TV or radio. They are sometimes allowed to leave factory grounds—say, to go shopping—but generally in groups of no more than three, and accompanied by a minder. Mail is scrutinized by North Korean security agents who also "surveil the daily life and report back with official reports," one manager said. Sometimes the women are allowed to socialize. In a video titled "North Korean beauties working in China play volleyball," posted in 2022, women in blue-and-white uniforms exercise on the grounds of the Dandong Omeca Food seafood plant. (The company that owns the plant did not respond to requests for comment.) A commenter wrote, "The joy of poverty. That's just how it is."

Factories typically give the women's money to their managers, who take cuts for themselves and the government, and hold on to the rest until the workers' terms in China end. Kim Jieun, a North Korean defector who now works for Radio Free Asia, said that companies tell workers their money is safer this way, because it could be stolen in the dormitories. But, in the end, workers often see less than ten per cent of their promised salary. One contract that I reviewed stipulated that around forty dollars would be deducted each month by the state to pay for food. More is sometimes deducted for electricity, housing, heat, water, insurance, and "loyalty" payments to the state. Managers also hold on to wages to discourage defections. The women have been warned, Kim added, that if they try to defect "they will be immediately caught by Chinese CCTV cameras installed everywhere." This past October, Chinese authorities repatriated around six hundred North Korean defectors. "China does not recognize North Korean defectors as refugees," Edward Howell, who teaches politics at Oxford

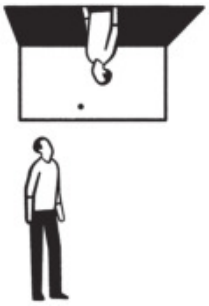
"Excuse me, can I ask how you guys come up with such believable dialogue?"

University, told me. "If they are caught by Chinese authorities, they will be forcibly returned to the D.P.R.K., where they face harsh punishment in labor camps."

Chinese companies have significant incentives to use North Korean workers. They're typically paid only a quarter of what local employees earn. And they are generally excluded from mandatory social-welfare programs (regarding retirement, medical treatment, work-related injury, and maternity), which further reduces costs. In 2017, Dandong's Commerce Bureau announced a plan to create a cluster of garment factories that would use North Korean labor. The bureau's Web site noted that all such workers undergo political screenings to make sure they are "rooted, red, and upright." "The discipline among the workers is extremely strong," it added. "There are no instances of absenteeism or insubordination toward leadership, and there are no occurrences of feigning illness or delaying work." China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not respond to questions for this piece, but last year the Chinese Ambassador to the U.N. wrote that China has abided by sanctions even though it has sustained "great losses" as a result. A spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently said that China and North Korea have "enjoyed long-standing friendly ties," adding, "The United States needs to draw lessons, correct course, step up to its responsibility, stop heightening the pressure and sanctions, stop military deterrence, and take effective steps to resume meaningful dialogue."

North Koreans face difficult circumstances across industries. In January of this year, more than two thousand workers rioted in Jilin Province, breaking sewing machines and kitchen utensils, when they learned that their wages would be withheld. Many North Koreans—perhaps thousands—work in Russian logging, in brutal winter weather without proper clothing. Hundreds have been found working in the Russian construction industry; some lived in shipping containers or in the basements of buildings under construction, because better accommodations were not provided. One recounted working shifts that lasted from 7:30 A.M. to 3 A.M. In preparation for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, held in Russia and Qatar, thousands of North Koreans were sent to build stadiums and luxury apartments. A subcontractor who worked alongside the North Koreans in Russia told the *Guardian* that they lived in cramped spaces, with as many as eight people packed into a trailer, in an atmosphere of fear and abuse like "prisoners of war."

Although it's illegal in the U.S. to import goods made with North Korean labor, the law can be difficult to enforce. Some eighty per cent of seafood consumed in America, for example, is imported, and much of it comes from China through opaque supply chains. To trace the importation of seafood from factories that appear to be using North Korean labor, my team reviewed trade data, shipping contracts, and the codes that are stamped on seafood packages to monitor food safety. We found that, since 2017, ten of these plants have together shipped more than a hundred and twenty thousand tons of seafood to more than seventy American importers, which supplied grocery stores including Walmart, Giant, ShopRite, and the online grocer Weee! The seafood from these importers also ended up at major restaurant chains, like McDonald's, and with Sysco, the largest food distributor in the world, which supplies almost half a million restaurants, as well as the cafeterias on American military bases, in public schools, and for the U.S. Congress. (Walmart, Weee!, and McDonald's did not respond to requests for comment. Giant's parent company, Ahold Delhaize, and ShopRite's parent company, Wakefern, said their suppliers claimed that they currently do not source from the Chinese plant in question, and added that audit reports showed no evidence of forced labor.)



Two of the plants that investigators from my team visited—Dandong Galicia Seafood and Dalian Haiqing Food—had an estimated fifty to seventy North Korean workers apiece. One worker who has been employed at Galicia said that the managers are "so stingy with money that they don't allow us to get proper medical treatment even when we are sick." Galicia and Haiqing have shipped roughly a hundred thousand tons of seafood to American importers since 2017, and Haiqing also shipped to an importer that supplies the cafeterias of the European Parliament. (Dalian Haiqing Food said that it "does not employ overseas North Korean workers." Dandong Galicia Seafood did not respond to requests for comment. One of the U.S. importers tied to Haiqing, Trident Seafoods, said that audits "found no evidence or even suspicion" of North Korean labor at the plant. Several companies, including Trident, High Liner, and Sysco, said that they would sever ties with the plant while they conducted their own investigations. A spokesperson for the European Parliament said that its food contractor did not supply seafood from the plant.) Breuker, from Leiden University, told me that American customers quietly benefit from this arrangement. "This labor-transfer system is for North Korea and China as economically successful as it is morally reprehensible," he said. "It's also a boon for the West because of the cheap goods we get as a result."

North Korea doesn't just export seafood workers; it also exports fish—another means by which the government secures foreign currency. Importing North Korean seafood is forbidden by U.N. sanctions, but it also tends to be inexpensive, which encourages companies to skirt the rules. Sometimes Chinese fishing companies pay the North Korean government for illegal licenses to fish in North Korea's waters. Sometimes they buy fish from other boats at sea: a letter from a North Korean, leaked in 2022, proposed selling ten thousand tons of squid to a Chinese company in return for more than eighteen million dollars and five hundred tons of diesel fuel. Sometimes the seafood is trucked over the border. This trade is poorly hidden. In October, a Chinese man who said his last name was Cui posted a video on Douyin advertising crabs from North Korea. When someone commented, "The goods can't be shipped," Cui responded with laughing emojis. In other videos, he explained that he operated a processing plant in North Korea, and gave information on the timing of shipments that he planned to send across the border. When I contacted Cui, he said that

he had stopped importing North Korean seafood in 2016 (though the videos were actually from last year), and added, "It's none of your business, and I don't care who you are." My team found that seafood from North Korea was imported by several American distributors, including HF Foods, which supplies more than fifteen thousand Asian restaurants in the U.S. (HF Foods did not respond to requests for comment.)

Chinese companies often claim that they are in compliance with labor laws because they have passed "social audits," which are conducted by firms that inspect worksites for abuses. But half the Chinese plants that we found using North Korean workers have certifications from the Marine Stewardship Council, which is based in the U.K. and sets standards for granting sustainability certifications, but only to companies that have also passed social audits or other labor assessments. (Jackie Marks, an M.S.C. spokesperson, told me that these social audits are conducted by a third party, and that "We make no claims about setting standards on labor.") Last year, one of my team's investigators visited a seafood-processing plant in northeastern China called Dandong Taifeng Foodstuff. The company has been designated a "national brand," a status reserved for the country's most successful companies, and supplies thousands of tons of seafood to grocery stores in the U.S. and elsewhere. At the plant, our investigator was given a tour by a North Korean manager. On the factory floor, which was lit by bright fluorescent bulbs, more than a hundred and fifty North Korean women, most of them under thirty-five years old, wore head-to-toe white protective clothing, plastic aprons, white rubber boots, and red gloves that went up to their elbows. They stood with their heads down, moving red, yellow, and blue plastic bins of seafood. Water puddled at their feet. "Quick, quick," one woman said to the other members of her small group. (Taifeng did not respond to requests for comment.) Just weeks after that visit, the plant was recertified by the Marine Stewardship Council.

Marcus Noland, who works at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, said, of social audits within the seafood industry, "The basic stance appears to be 'See no evil.'" Skepticism of such audits is growing. In 2021, the U.S. State Department said that social audits in China are generally inadequate for identifying forced labor, in part because auditors rely on government translators and rarely speak directly to workers. Auditors can be reluctant to anger the companies that have hired them, and workers face reprisals for reporting abuses. This past November, U.S. Customs and Border Protection advised American companies that a credible assessment would require an "unannounced independent, third-party audit" and "interviews completed in native language." Liana Foxvog, who works at a nonprofit called the Worker Rights Consortium, argues that assessments should involve other checks too, including off-site worker interviews. But she noted that most audits in China fall short even of C.B.P.'s standards.

Joshua Stanton, an attorney based in Washington, D.C., who helped draft the American law that banned goods produced with North Korean labor, argues that the government is not doing enough to enforce it. "The U.S. government will need to put more pressure on American companies, and those companies need to be more diligent about their suppliers and their supply chains, or face stricter sanctions," he said. Chris Smith, a Republican congressman from New Jersey and a specialist on China, noted that social audits "create a Potemkin village." He added, "The consequence is that millions of dollars, even federal dollars, are going to Chinese plants using North Korean workers, and that money then goes right into the hands of Kim Jong Un's regime, which uses the money to arm our adversaries and repress its own people."

Late last year, when I set out to contact North Koreans who had been sent to China, I ran into significant obstacles. Western journalists are barred from entering North Korea, and citizens of the country are strictly prohibited from talking freely to reporters. I hired a team of investigators in South Korea who employ contacts in North Korea to get information out of the country for local and Western news outlets—for example, about food shortages, power outages, or the rise of anti-government graffiti. The investigators compiled a list of two dozen North Koreans who had been dispatched to a half-dozen different Chinese factories, most of whom had since returned home. The investigators' contacts then met with these workers in secret, one-on-one, so that the workers wouldn't know one another's identity. The meetings usually occurred in open fields, or on the street, where it's harder for security agents to conduct surveillance.

The workers were told that their responses would be shared publicly by an American journalism outlet. They faced considerable risk speaking out; experts told me that, if they were caught, they could be executed, and their families put in prison camps. But they agreed to talk because they believe that it is important for the rest of the world to know what happens to workers who are sent to China. The North Korean contacts transcribed their answers by hand, and then took photos of the completed questionnaires and sent them, using encrypted phones, to the investigators, who sent them to me. North Koreans who are still in China were interviewed in a similar fashion. Because of these layers of protection, it is, of course, impossible to fully verify the content of the interviews. But the responses were reviewed by experts to make sure that they are consistent with what is broadly known about the work-transfer program, and in line with interviews given by North Korean defectors. (Recently, the investigators checked in on the interviewers and interviewees, and everyone was safe.)

In their answers, the workers described crushing loneliness. The work was arduous, the factories smelled, and violence was common. "They kicked us and treated us as subhuman," the worker who processed clams in Dandong said. Asked if they could recount any happy moments, most said that there had been none. A few said that they felt relieved when they returned home and got some of their pay. "I was happy when the money wasn't all taken out," the woman who did product transport in Dalian said. One woman said that her experience at a Chinese plant made her feel like she "wanted to die." Another said that she often felt tired and upset while she was working, but kept those thoughts to herself to avoid reprisals. "It was lonely," she said. "I hated the military-like communal life."

The most striking pattern was the

women's description of sexual abuse. Of twenty workers, seventeen said that they had been sexually assaulted by their North Korean managers. They described a range of tactics used to coerce them into having sex. Some managers pretended to wipe something from their uniforms, only to grope them. Some called them into their offices as if there were an emergency, then demanded sex. Others asked them to serve alcohol at a weekend party, then assaulted them there. "When they drank, they touched my body everywhere like playing with toys," a woman said. The woman who did product transport in Dalian said, "When they suddenly put their mouths to mine, I wanted to throw up." If the women didn't comply, the managers could become violent. The worker who was at Haiqing for more than four years said, of her manager, "When he doesn't get his way sexually, he gets angry and kicks me. . . . He calls me a 'fucking bitch.'" Three of the women said that their managers had forced workers into prostitution. "Whenever they can, they flirt with us to the point of nausea and force us to have sex for money, and it's even worse if you're pretty," another worker at Haiqing said. The worker from Jinhui noted, "Even when there was no work during the pandemic, the state demanded foreign-currency funds out of loyalty, so managers forced workers to sell their bodies." The worker who spent more than four years at Haiqing said, of the managers, "They forced virgin workers into prostitution, claiming that they had to meet state-set quotas."

The pandemic made life more difficult for many of the women. When China closed its borders, some found themselves trapped far from home. Often, their workplaces shut down, and they lost their incomes. North Korean workers sometimes pay bribes to government officials to secure posts in China, and, during the pandemic, many borrowed these funds from loan sharks. The loans, typically between two and three thousand dollars, came with high interest rates. Because of work stoppages in China, North Korean workers were unable to pay back their loans, and loan sharks sent thugs to their relatives' homes to intimidate them. Some of their families had to sell their houses to settle the debts. In 2023, according to Radio Free Asia, two North Korean women at textile plants killed themselves.

"This recipe turned out awful despite my substituting every major ingredient."

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The worker who told me that she wanted to die said that such deaths are often kept hidden. "If someone dies from suicide, then the manager is responsible, so they keep it under wraps to keep it from being leaked to other workers or Chinese people," she said.

This past year, pandemic restrictions were lifted, and the border between China and North Korea reopened. In August, some three hundred North Korean workers boarded ten buses in Dandong to go back home. Police officers lined up around the buses to prevent defections. In photos and a video of the event, some of the women can be seen hurriedly preparing to load large suitcases onto a neon-green bus, then riding away across the Friendship Bridge. In September, another three hundred boarded a passenger train to Sinuiju, and two hundred were repatriated by plane. Workers who return face intense questioning by officials. "They asked about every single thing that happened every day from morning to evening in China, about other workers, supervisors, and agents," the worker who processed clams in Dandong explained. As 2023 ended, the North Korean government began planning to dispatch its next wave of workers. In the past couple of years, according to reporting by Hyemin Son, a North Korean defector who works for Radio Free Asia, labor brokers have requested that Chinese companies pay a large advance; they were being asked to pay ahead of time, one broker told her, because "Chinese companies cannot operate without North Korean manpower."

Some North Korean workers have yet to go home. One woman said that she has spent the past several years gutting fish at a processing plant in Dalian. She described working late into the night and getting sores in her mouth from stress and exhaustion. In the questionnaire, I had asked about the worst part of her job, and she said, "When I am forced to have sex." She also described a sense of imprisonment that felt suffocating. "If you show even the slightest attitude, they will treat you like an insect," she said. "Living a life where we can't see the outside world as we please is so difficult that it's killing us." ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

STARBURST

The next big solar storm could devastate our power grid and communication systems. Are we prepared?

BY KATHRYN SCHULZ

Ken Tegnell's first home was on Alcatraz. At the time—this was in the nineteen-fifties—there was, in addition to the federal penitentiary, a preschool, a post office, and housing for prison employees and their family members. That included Tegnell, who lived with his mother and grandfather, a guard, while his father was stationed in Korea. The whole of Alcatraz Island is less than a tenth of a square mile, so, despite all the security measures and "DO NOT ENTER" signs, the inmates and civilians were never very far apart. Yet even given the proximity to the likes of Whitey Bulger, it was a peaceful place to live. The view was spectacular, almost none of the non-incarcerated residents locked their doors, and almost all of them knew one another and shared the camaraderie of an unusual identity. "We were an odd group of people," Tegnell jokes, "and that's why I'm strange the way I am."

When Tegnell's father returned from Korea, the family moved away, and then moved often. But eventually Tegnell returned to the Bay Area—this time to attend Berkeley, which, by the late nineteen-sixties, was another island of odd people. While taking an astronomy course there, he attended a lecture by a not yet famous scientist named Carl Sagan. Interested in things that happen in the sky and unmoved by the hippie culture around him, Tegnell joined the Air Force, in 1974. The military taught him to use telescopes and radio arrays, then sent him to the Learmonth Solar Observatory, at the northwestern tip of Australia, to gather data about the sun. He served two tours there, twelve hours from anything that could be called a city—a godforsaken place, as Tegnell recalls it, but gorgeous, with beautiful beaches, terrific fishing, and almost no rainfall year-round. Whether working or playing, he spent his days there looking at the sun.

That is still how Tegnell makes a living, although he hung up his wings in 1996. Today, his job is simultaneously so obscure that most people have never heard of it and so important that virtually every sector of the economy depends on it. His official title, one shared by no more than a few dozen Americans, is space-weather forecaster. Ever since leaving the Air Force, Tegnell has worked for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Space Weather Prediction Center, in Boulder, Colorado: ten hours a day, forty hours a week, three decades spent staring at real-time images of the sun. Eleven other forecasters work there as well. The remaining ones are employed by the only similar institution in the country: the Space Weather Operations Center, run by the Department of Defense on Offutt Air Force Base, in Sarpy County, Nebraska.

Regular, Earth-based weather is such a fundamental part of our lives that we are almost always aware of it and very often obsessed with it; it is the subject of everything from idle chitchat to impassioned political debate. By contrast, most people have no idea that there *is* weather in outer space, let alone what its fluctuations might mean for our planet. That's because, unlike everyday weather, you can't experience space weather directly. It doesn't make you hot or cold, doesn't flood your basement or take the roof off your home. In fact, until the nineteenth century, it had almost no appreciable effect whatsoever on human activity. Then came a series of scientific revolutions that made certain technologies, from electricity to telecommunications, central to our lives. Only later did we realize that those technologies are vulnerable to the effects of weather in outer space. The potential consequences are as sweeping as our technological dependence. In 2019, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, surveying the landscape of possible disasters, concluded that only two natural hazards have the capacity to simultaneously affect the entire nation. One is a pandemic. The other is a severe solar storm.

That is why Tegnell's job is so important. But "space-weather forecaster" is an optimistic misnomer; for the most part, he and his colleagues can't predict what will happen in outer space. All they can do is try to figure out what's happening there right now, preferably fast enough to limit the impact on our planet. Even that is difficult, because space weather is both an extremely challenging field—it is essentially applied astrophysics—and a relatively new one. As such, it is full of many lingering scientific questions and one looming practical question: What will happen here on Earth when the next huge space storm hits?

The first such storm to cause us trouble took place in 1859. In late August, the aurora borealis, which is normally visible only in polar latitudes, made a series of unusual appearances: in Havana, Panama, Rome, New York City. Then, in early September, the aurora returned with such brilliance that gold miners in the Rocky Mountains woke up at night and began making breakfast, and disoriented birds greeted the nonexistent morning.

This lovely if perplexing phenomenon had an unwelcome corollary: around the globe, telegraph systems went haywire. Many stopped working entirely, while others sent and received "fantastical and unreadable messages," as the Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin* put it. At some telegraph stations, operators found that they could disconnect their batteries and send messages via the ambient current, as if the Earth itself had become an instant-messaging system.

Owing to a lucky coincidence, all these anomalies were soon linked to their likely cause. At around noon on September 1st, the British astronomer Richard Carrington was outside sketching a group of sunspots when he saw a burst of light

FEMA has identified two natural hazards that could affect the whole nation at once: pandemics and space weather.

ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT BEATTY

"O.K., so if we share a ride and cut out all the singing, we just might be able to make it to the Emerald City in time for happy hour."

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on the surface of the sun: the first known observation of a solar flare. When accounts of the low-latitude auroras started rolling in, along with reports that magnetometers—devices that measure fluctuations in the Earth's magnetic field—had surged so high they maxed out their recording capabilities, scientists began to suspect that the strange things happening on Earth were related to the strange thing Carrington had seen on the sun.

Wonderment over the Carrington Event, as it is now known, faded almost as quickly as the auroras—but sixty years later it happened again. In May, 1921, dazzling lights filled the night sky in places as far from the poles as Texas and Samoa; this time, too, spectacle was followed by debacle. "Electric fluid" leaping from a telegraph switchboard set on fire a railroad station in Brewster, New York, while stray voltage on railway signal and switching systems halted trains in Manhattan and, farther north, started a fire at Albany's Union Station.

Over the years, at odd intervals, this pattern kept repeating: brilliant night skies followed by troubling consequences, which changed in concert with evolving technologies. Teletype machines ceased to operate; or transatlantic cables stopped working; or worldwide radio circuits fell silent; or hundreds of thousands of miles of transmission lines used to send and receive wire stories all went down at the same time. In May, 1967, all three radar sites of the Ballistic Missile Early Warning Systems then maintained by the U.S. Air Force appeared to have been jammed; worried that the Soviet Union was on the verge of attacking, military officials nearly scrambled nuclear-equipped aircraft. Five years later, during the Vietnam War, the United States started sowing the waters outside North Vietnamese seaports with mines that had magnetic sensors, to trigger explosions when steel-hulled vessels passed overhead. Three months after that program began, many of those mines—four thousand of them, according to one contemporaneous source—detonated almost simultaneously. An investigation determined that the plan had been compromised not by Hanoi but by a newly discovered solar phenomenon called a coronal mass ejection.

In time, aided by each new technological difficulty, astrophysicists began to piece together a better understanding of the weather in outer space. But science can take a long time to make inroads into public awareness, let alone public policy, so space weather remained a mostly marginal subject until 2008, when the National Academy of Sciences convened a group of experts to assess the nation's capacity to endure its terrestrial effects. Later that year, the N.A.S. published a report on the findings, "Severe Space Weather Events: Understanding Societal and Economic Impacts."

The title was dry; the contents were not. The report noted that the Earth hadn't experienced a Carrington-size storm during the space age, or, for that matter, during the age of widespread electrification, and that much of the country's critical infrastructure seemed unlikely to withstand one. Extensive damage to satellites would compromise everything from communications to national security, while extensive damage to the power grid would compromise *everything:* health care, transportation, agriculture, emergency response, water and sanitation, the financial industry, the continuity of government. The report estimated that recovery from a Carrington-class storm could take up to a decade and cost many trillions of dollars.

That report made headlines, and also made its way to President Barack Obama—who by then had appointed a new FEMA administrator, a man named Craig Fugate. At the time, very few people even within the emergency-response community knew much about space weather. But, by chance, Fugate had crossed paths with the Space Weather Prediction Center earlier in his career; interested in the center's work, he had made himself into something of a space-weather expert.

As a result, when the White House came knocking to ask if it should be concerned about the N.A.S. report, Fugate was in a position to offer an emphatic yes. The question, for him, wasn't whether a major solar storm posed a risk to the nation; it was how best to prepare for it beforehand and recover from it afterward. And so, as he began settling into his job, and getting to know the rest of the senior leaders at FEMA, he made a habit of presenting them with a hypothetical situation. "I asked them what they would do if there was a G5 storm," Fugate told me, referring to the highest classification on the NOAA Space Weather Scale, akin to an F5 tornado or a Category 5 hurricane. "And they go, 'What's a G5 storm?'" *Hoo boy*, Fugate remembers thinking. *We got a problem.*

In space weather, every day is a sunny day. There is no interstellar rain, no interplanetary snow, no sleet spinning off the rings of Saturn; all the phenomena we call space weather origi-

nate on the sun. And so, to start, you must shed the idea—implicit in our meteorology and omnipresent in our metaphors—that the sun is a mild and beneficent force, a bestower of good moods and great tans.

In reality, the sun is an enormous thermonuclear bomb that has been exploding continuously for four and a half billion years. Its inner workings are imperfectly understood even by heliophysicists, who sometimes sound less like scientists than like nineteen-fifties comic-book heroes, enthusiastically invoking things like flux tubes and convection zones and galactic-cosmic-ray dropouts. Fortunately, for our purposes, the only two solar phenomena you need to understand are solar flares and coronal mass ejections, both of which stem from the same thing: a buildup of energy in the magnetic field of the sun.

You are probably familiar with the Earth's magnetic field, which makes all life here possible by deflecting dangerous radiation from outer space. If you could see that field, it would look like a relatively tidy series of rings surrounding our planet, flowing out at the South Pole and reëntering at the North. The solar magnetic field does not look like that. That's largely because, although the sun is three hundred thousand times more massive than the Earth, no part of it is solid. Instead, it is made of plasma, that strange and mesmerizing fourth state of matter. (Heat up a liquid and it turns into a gas. Heat up a gas and it turns into a plasma, a glowing slurry of electrically charged particles.) As a result, the sun doesn't have to rotate rigidly, as our planet must. One rotation of the Earth takes twenty-four hours in both Ecuador and Antarctica, but one rotation of the sun takes approximately twenty-five days at its equator and thirty-three days at its poles.

This uneven rotation wreaks havoc on the sun's magnetic field. Imagine a race in which eight people are lined up on a track, holding on to the same long elastic ribbon. The starting gun fires and the people start running. The two in the middle are the fastest and the two on the ends are the slowest, so after a while the middle two are far ahead and the ribbon looks like this: > . If the race kept going and the runners' speeds remained constant, the two middle runners would eventually lap the others, and the ribbon would cross over itself. The longer the race lasted, the more tangled the ribbon would become.

That's what happens to solar-magnetic-field lines. They twist and crisscross until clusters of them pop up from the sun's surface, in huge loops that generate enormous amounts of energy. (Think of the energy stored in a rubber band when it is twisted and stretched. Now imagine that the rubber band is a hundred thousand miles long.) The ends of these loops are sunspots, the phenomenon that Carrington observed in 1859. He could see them readily enough for two reasons. The first is that they are darker than their surroundings, because they are a couple of thousand degrees cooler; the intensity of their magnetic fields hinders the flow of hot gas across the sun. The second is that they are large. An average sunspot is the size of the Earth, while the biggest ones can be ten times larger.

Forecasters like Ken Tegnell watch sunspots for the same reason that regular meteorologists watch low-pressure areas in the tropics: to see if a storm is forming. This happens when one of those twisted magnetic fields suddenly rips apart, then snaps back together again. That rearrangement returns the magnetic field to a more stable, lower-energy state, while releasing the excess energy into space in two different forms. The first is a solar

flare: a burst of radiation that can range across the electromagnetic spectrum, from gamma rays and X rays to radio waves and visible light. Solar flares contain a colossal amount of energy—enough, in a large one, to meet our planet's power needs for the next fifteen or twenty thousand years. The second is a coronal mass ejection: a billion-ton bubble of magnetized plasma that explodes off the surface of the sun. These two phenomena can occur separately, but when large ones occur together they mark the beginning of a major solar storm.

The forecasting room of the Space Weather Prediction Center is a dimly lit ground-floor office with no exterior windows. Nonetheless, in a sense, sunlight is everywhere. Banks of monitors run the length of one wall, filled with real-time images of the sun. Some show only the disk, others only the corona, others the entire star filtered through different wavelengths of light, turning it pale pink and brilliant yellow, electric blue and neon green. Two large images in the center show the sun as a writhing riot of orange and gold, the loops and filaments of its magnetic field lines rendered visible not by scientific instruments but by its own plasma, which is drawn to those field lines the way iron filings are drawn to bar magnets. Viewed this way, the sun does not make you want to grab a paperback and lie in a hammock. It looks like a volcanic eruption as seen from deep inside the caldera; it looks like a wildfire raging beneath forty billion hurricanes; it looks like, when it is over, there will be no survivors.

Surrounded by all of this, unfazed, Tegnell is logging in for his shift. In the hallway just outside, a mannequin stands upright in a NASA uniform. The uniform is the old-school, pale-blue kind, and the mannequin is pale and old school, too—crewcut, chisel-jawed, permanently twentysomething. Tegnell does not look like that. Bigger, bearded, older, he looks like the guy in the disaster movie who has the right combination of grit, experience, and indifference to authority to save the day. At present, he is eye level with a brace of computers, the screen of each one covered in flowing lines, as if the solar system were hooked up to half a dozen heart-rate monitors.

Some of the information filling those screens comes from terrestrial observatories, like the one where Tegnell used to work. The rest comes from space-based equipment on satellites, managed, variously, by NASA, NOAA, and the European Space Agency. Most of those satellites are in orbit twenty-two thousand miles above the Earth, a hundred times farther away than the International Space Station; a few are in orbit

a million miles away, or about one per cent of the distance to the sun. From these outposts, they transmit data to the forecasting room, where it is Tegnell's responsibility to interpret the contents, detect anything unusual, issue twice-daily forecasts, and, when necessary, activate a suite of watches and warnings.

Tegnell loves his job best when nothing is happening in the room—no groups of engineers trekking through, no stray journalists hanging around—but when many things are happening up in the sky. That makes some stretches of his professional life duller than others, because sunspots follow an eleven-year cycle, during which their activity goes from infrequent (solar minimum) to frequent (solar maximum). We are currently headed toward solar maximum, with activity on the sun expected to peak sometime between now and 2025. That cycle is not wholly determinative; a solar maximum can pass by uneventfully, while a powerful storm can happen during solar minimum.

Still, solar maximum does tend to make Tegnell's job more interesting. As we talk, an automated voice keeps informing him that a flare has been detected, with the same impassive insistence of Siri saying, "Proceed to the route." Tegnell ignores it, having already determined that the flare is too small to produce any effects on Earth, except possibly some auroras for people living near polar latitudes. (Auroras are the only pleasant by-product of charged particles entering our atmosphere, where they're channelled north and south along magnetic-field lines and interact with nitrogen and oxygen molecules, causing them to produce interesting colors.) But then something else leaps off the edge of the sun: a fountain of plasma that looks, to my untrained eye, enormous. "It *is* enormous," Tegnell affirms. "It's just incredible." It is not, however, headed toward the Earth.

"I know," Tegnell's colleague Bill Murtagh says as he watches me watching. "It's stunning. I've been doing this for twenty-five years and I've never yet found it boring." Like Tegnell, Murtagh arrived at the Space Weather Prediction Center via the U.S. Air Force, albeit more circuitously, as his Irish accent suggests. (He owes his American citizenship to the fact that he was born during a parental stint in the U.S., where his mother worked for Ogden Nash, taking care of his grandchildren.) Unlike Tegnell, he enjoys collaborating with other people. At SWPC—which is pronounced "swipsy," like "tipsy"—he coördinates space-weather-preparedness efforts with government officials, emergency managers, and the private sector, and he doesn't mind being loaned out to the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and working with the National Security Council. When a big storm starts materializing on one of the monitors in the forecasting room, it is Ken Tegnell's job to notice. It is Bill Murtagh's job to help minimize the storm's impact on everything it might derail, damage, or destroy.

That is a long list, because solar storms affect a broad, strange swath of the human endeavor. For instance, outside the SWPC forecasting room, in a glass case displaying old astronomical devices and a statue of a sun god, there is a life-size model of a homing pigeon. Pigeons navigate partly by tracking the Earth's magnetic field; when it behaves in uncharacteristic ways, a pigeon race can end in a "smash," the term of art for events in which many birds fail to return home. Since the most highly prized pigeons can be worth more than a million dollars, some pigeon racers have become dedicated subscribers to SWPC's space-weather alerts. Other constituents are interested for even more

arcane reasons. One of Murtagh's favorite phone calls came from a man who wanted to know if it was true that solar storms could interfere with G.P.S. signals. When Murtagh said yes, the man had a follow-up question: How did those storms affect electronic ankle bracelets? ("You know," Murtagh told the caller, "I'm not too familiar with that technology.") But the sectors that bear the brunt of bad space weather are anything but niche interest groups. They are the backbone of modern society: telecommunications, aviation, space-based technology, and the power grid.

Most solar storms do not hit the Earth, for the same reason that most baseballs don't hit one particular person in the stands. But, when a storm does get here, it gets here fast. Some of the radiation from the solar flare arrives in a little more than eight minutes: the amount of time it takes anything travelling at the speed of light to cross the ninety-three million miles between us and the sun. All that energy smacking into our atmosphere further ionizes the ionosphere, its upper reaches. The result, in a severe storm, is a partial blackout of low-frequency radio wavelengths and a complete blackout of high-frequency wavelengths across the entire side of the Earth that's facing the sun. Those blackouts, which can last up to several hours, disrupt ham radios, AM radio, ground-to-submarine communications (used by the Navy), backup ground-to-air communications (used by both military and civilian flights), and other backup communication, navigation, and timing systems used for military, government, and maritime purposes.

That is the first phase of a solar storm. Meanwhile, from the moment they formed, the flare and the coronal mass ejection began transferring energy to any protons and electrons in their path, accelerating them to relativistic or near-relativistic speeds. When those enhanced protons and electrons, known as solar energetic particles, reach our atmosphere, sometimes in just tens of minutes, they form the second phase, known as a solar-radiation storm.

As that name suggests, a solar-radiation storm can harm humans, although only if they happen to be up in the sky while such a storm is taking place. For people on airplanes flying routes over the poles (where energetic particles, following magnetic-field lines, tend to concentrate), that risk is minor; nonetheless, such flights get space-weather reports from SWPC before takeoff, and will typically reroute if a big storm is expected. For astronauts, however, severe radiation storms are more of a concern. Those on the International Space Station benefit from the attenuated but still extant protection of the Earth's

magnetic field, and during extreme radiation events they can take cover in the better-shielded parts of the station. But for those beyond our atmosphere such a storm could be lethal, either immediately or because radiation sickness would render them unable to perform life-critical functions. One obstacle to some of the space exploration currently being contemplated is that the moon and Mars lack a magnetic field to deflect the sun's radiation; as a result, absent adequate shelter, both are extremely dangerous in a solar storm. Only retroactively did it become apparent how lucky NASA was that no such storms happened during the Apollo missions.

At the moment, though, the number of people in outer space—fewer than a dozen—pales in comparison with the number of satellites in outer space: more than eight thousand. Like us, those satellites are imperilled by solar-radiation storms. For one thing, solar energetic particles can pass straight into the satellites, physically damaging hardware and hijacking software by randomly changing ones to zeros or zeros to ones. For another, as those particles bombard a satellite, different parts of it can build up different levels of charge, and the electricity can arc from one area to another, attempting to neutralize itself and, in the process, damaging or disabling the onboard electronics.

Finally, enhanced solar radiation increases the density of certain regions of the Earth's atmosphere, which increases the drag. This is particularly problematic in lower Earth orbit (up to about twelve hundred miles above the surface of our planet), where more than eighty per cent of all satellites are found. As drag increases, those satellites can shift out of place, leaving both their owners and the North American Aerospace Defense Command scrambling to find them in order to maintain functionality, prevent collisions, and avoid confusion about their identity: unidentified intruder or old friend in a new place? At best, satellites experiencing this drag must use more fuel to maintain orbit, thereby shortening their life spans; that's why, back in 1979, Skylab crashed to Earth sooner than expected. At worst, they lose orbit entirely, burning up on reëntry. In February of 2022, SpaceX, the space-exploration company co-founded by Elon Musk, launched forty-nine new satellites as part of its Starlink system, which aims to provide sky-based Internet access to paying customers anywhere on Earth. The company knew that a storm had started just before the launch date, but it was a mild one—a G2, the second-lowest category on NOAA's geomagnetic storm scale—and internal modelling suggested that the satellites would be fine. One day after launch, thirty-eight of them lost orbit and suffered catastrophic failure.

SpaceX still plans to launch tens of thousands of satellites in the coming years, and other entities are likewise expanding their fleets, deploying space-based technology for everything from wildlife tracking to intelligence gathering. But, of all the satellites in the sky right now, none are more crucial than those which constitute our Global Positioning System—or, to use the more universal term, G.N.S.S., the Global Navigation Satellite System.

G.P.S. satellites are not endangered by drag, because they are not in lower Earth orbit; up where they hang out, there is not enough atmosphere left to affect them. But, to reach receivers on the ground, signals from those satellites must cross some twelve thousand miles of space. During a solar storm, when our ionosphere is disturbed, those signals get distorted, much the way light bends when it passes through water, leading to location inaccuracies of tens or, in rare cases, hundreds of metres. Those inaccuracies generally self-correct when the storm subsides, and they don't really matter if you're using G.P.S. just to remind yourself which exit to take for the airport. But an increasing number of processes require constant access to ultra-precise location data, including military operations, aviation, crop management, bridge building, and oil and natural-gas exploration, especially off deep-sea platforms, where exact positions must be maintained during underwater drilling operations regardless of wave action and drift.

The more important service provided by the Global Positioning System, however, is not about space but about time: every G.P.S. satellite carries multiple atomic clocks, normally accurate to within a billionth of a second, which transmit hyperaccurate temporal information known as G.P.S. timing signals. Those signals are one of our most essential pieces of invisible infrastructure. Cell-phone companies use them to manage the flow of data over their networks. Media companies use them to broadcast programs, chopping up large data streams into smaller packets to transmit them, then recombining them upon arrival based on the time stamp. Power companies use them to help regulate the flow of electricity from source to destination,

protecting against surges and blackouts. Computer applications use them to coördinate any situation in which two or more users are working on the same project in different locations. The financial industry uses them to track mobile banking transactions and to time-stamp every trade—a crucial traffic-control system in a world where hundreds of thousands of financial messages are processed every second.

Like G.P.S. location accuracy, G.P.S. timing accuracy can suffer during a solar storm. The longer and more severe the storm, the more those errors compound, until the systems that depend on the signals no longer work correctly, or work at all. Backup programs are available; the Federal Aviation Administration, for instance, has alternative capabilities to keep planes flying safely when G.P.S. fails. Over all, though, incorporation of such alternatives remains limited, for a straightforward reason: G.P.S. is a service that our federal government provides free of charge. As the Department of Homeland Security dryly noted in a 2020 report, "Without regulatory requirements or positive benefit-cost equations, adoption of non-G.N.S.S. services is unlikely."

In the meantime, our primary source of navigation and timing information remains vulnerable to the vicissitudes of weather on the sun. So do the thousands of other satellites that increasingly fill our skies, courtesy of a young, booming, and largely unregulated industry. This worries the generally unflappable Bill Murtagh. "It's a Wild West out in space right now," he says. His assessment of satellite companies is blunt: "I do not think they are ready for a major space-weather event." If he is right, when that event happens, large portions of our life could be compromised: information, communication, entertainment, economic activity, national security. But all those are our vulnerabilities just in the sky. By most accounts, when the next extreme space storm hits, the real problems will be the ones on the ground.

If a solar flare is something like the muzzle flash of a cannon, a coronal mass ejection is the cannonball: slower, but more destructive. It takes anywhere from fifteen hours to several days to reach our planet, by which time it has expanded enormously in volume. Once it arrives, it smashes into our magnetosphere, flattening whichever side is facing the sun (that is, the daytime side) and sending the nighttime side streaming away from the Earth, like a wind sock in a gale. If you remember Faraday's law, you know that moving a magnetic field around produces an electric current. And so it is ultimately the Earth's own storm-tossed magnetosphere that induces excess electricity in our planet, thereby initiating the third and final phase of a space-weather event: the geomagnetic storm.

Although that storm can affect anything long and metal (pipelines, railroad tracks), it poses the gravest danger to power grids. In the United States, our grid is divided into three regions. The Eastern Interconnection runs from the East Coast to the Rocky Mountains; the Western Interconnection runs from the Rockies to the Pacific Ocean; Texas, in true Lone Star style, goes it alone. For the most part, power can't flow from one region to another—which is why, when seventy-five per cent of Texas suffered blackouts during a winter storm in 2021, no outside energy providers could help. But, within each region, electricity flows freely—and so can electrical problems, as when, in 2003, a shorted power line in Ohio caused a blackout across much of the Midwest, the mid-Atlantic, and the Northeast, leaving fifty-five million people in the dark.

All this infrastructure, which continues across the border into Canada to form the North American Power Grid, is also known as the bulk-power system, because it handles energy transmission, not energy distribution. Distribution involves sending electricity from a local substation to everything nearby that needs it—schools, stoplights, factories, the toaster in your kitchen. Transmission gets power *to* that substation, from one of the more than six thousand generation facilities on the North American grid (nuclear plants, hydroelectric dams, solar farms, etc.), via more than half a million miles of line.

The crucial nodes in this vast network are transformers. Power enters your home at a hundred and ten volts, but voltage that low can't be sent from a coal plant in West Virginia to your laptop charger in Alexandria; too much energy (in the form of heat) would be lost in transit. Instead, a transformer at

EAT

Grasshoppers devour the sunflowers
Petal by petal to raggedy yellow flags—
Squash blossoms of small suns blessed
By dewdrops flare beauty in the morning
Until an army of squash bugs land
And eat, then drag their bellies
From the carnage—
Field mice chew their way
Into the house. They eat anything
Sweet and leave their pebbled shit
In staggered lines to the closet door.
Hungry tree frogs cling to the screen.
Their curled tongues catch anything
With wings driven to the light—
We find a snake hidden on the porch,
There are rumors in the yard
Of fat mice frolicking here.
The night is swallowing
Daylight.

We sit down to eat.

—*Joy Harjo*

the power plant ramps up the electricity to hundreds of thousands of volts, so that it can be transferred efficiently over long distances; once it reaches a substation, another transformer ramps the voltage back down until it can safely enter your home. Whatever its voltage, all that power flows through the grid as alternating current, moving at a constant frequency of sixty hertz.

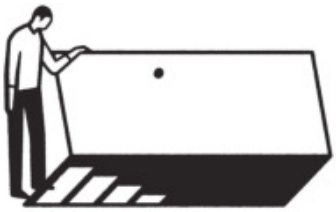
Hold that thought; here comes the coronal mass ejection. It smacks into our magnetic field, warping it—or, in severe storms, temporarily ripping part of it open—and setting in motion the chain of events that sends additional electric charge into the planet. Some of that charge, which is known as geomagnetically induced current, dissipates harmlessly, because it flows into a part of the Earth that excels at conducting electricity—salt water, say, or sedimentary rock. But, in places where the underlying rock is a poor conductor, the current must go elsewhere. Like all current, it follows the path of least resistance, and the least resistant path of all is the one designed to conduct electricity: the power grid.

By unfortunate chance, some of the least conductive bedrock in the United States is the very old metamorphic and igneous rock of the Appalachian Mountains and the New England Highlands—the geological substrates of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and much of the rest of the Eastern Seaboard, home to half the country's population. As detailed hazard maps recently created by the geophysicist Jeffrey Love and a team of his colleagues at the United States Geological Survey show, some other parts of the country, notably the Midwest, are likewise vulnerable to geomagnetically induced currents.

What makes these currents so disruptive is not their strength—they are actually quite weak—but their form. The power grid is built for alternating current, but geomagnetically induced currents are basically direct. The collision of these two currents can lead to the inability to transfer power efficiently, large temperature spikes inside transformers (which emit unholy groans and bangs under the strain), relays and other equipment tripping off-line, and, on a very bad day, voltage collapse. Mark Olson, a member of NOAA's Space Weather Advisory Group and a manager of reliability assessments at the North American Electric Reliability Corporation—the nonprofit agency tasked by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and Canada's provincial governments with keeping the continent's power grid sound and secure—summed this up for me succinctly: "blackout."

This can all happen almost instantly. On March 13, 1989, a coronal mass ejection struck the Earth; within ninety seconds, transformers on the Quebec power grid malfunctioned, dozens of safety mechanisms failed, and the entire grid shut down, leaving almost a quarter of the population of Canada in the dark. That geomagnetic storm—which also triggered outages in the U.K. and Sweden, destroyed a transformer at a nuclear power plant in New Jersey, and caused at least two hundred other issues on the North American grid alone—was strong, but not exceptionally so. Based on magnetometer readings, auroral latitudes, and other fingerprints left behind by solar storms, scientists now believe that at least three storms in the past hundred and fifty-odd years—the Carrington Event and others in 1872 and 1921—were roughly an order of magnitude more powerful.

All three of those storms took place before the power grid existed. The question that troubles space-weather experts—and divides them—is what will happen the next time a comparable one strikes. Some people think that the



Quebec event was a wake-up call—the perfect-sized storm, really, large enough to teach a lesson without being large enough to cause a catastrophe. But, per the N.A.S. report, any gains following the Quebec storm were offset by trends in America's bulk-power system, which came to rely on ever-larger amounts of power travelling through ever-longer transmission lines. A study commissioned by the federal government and summarized in the report found that a storm the size of the 1921 event would cause large regions of the grid to fail, with impacts that "would be of unprecedented scale and involve populations in excess of 130 million"—close to half of all Americans. The report estimated the cost of a storm like that as "$1 trillion to $2 trillion during the first year alone . . . with recovery times of four to ten years."

Fifteen years later, some experts believe *that* was the wake-up call: that the 2008 report, in its sober-minded scariness, inspired reforms that will make the next severe solar storm more nuisance than nightmare. Bill Murtagh worries about satellite companies, but he thinks that most power companies take space weather seriously and are doing their best to prepare for it. Mark Olson, of the North American Electric Reliability Corporation, concedes that solar storms present "a very challenging risk" to the energy sector, not least because we still know relatively little about them. But, he says, when a major one happens, "the North American grid won't be taken by surprise." And he points to a federal directive that, as of this January, requires every provider of bulk power to have a plan in place to deal with a "benchmark geomagnetic disturbance event."

That directive is important, but the benchmark itself is troubling. It was established by using thirty years of magnetic-field data to extrapolate the likely magnitude of a once-in-a-century storm. The resulting standard is clear, uniform, achievable, extremely useful during most solar storms, and wholly inadequate for severe ones. As Olson acknowledged, the federal benchmark is now widely believed to be weaker than the Carrington Event.

That wouldn't matter if the Carrington storm were an outlier, likely to happen only once every several hundred years. But, in reality, it might not even have been the worst storm of the nineteenth century; the one in 1872 was at least as strong. We also know, from data collected by satellite, that a more powerful storm narrowly missed the Earth in 2012. As that suggests, an extreme geomagnetic storm—the SWPC people call it a G5-Plus, at the upper threshold of the

highest NOAA category of severity—could be a more common event than previously thought. Some scientists now believe there is an approximately twelve-per-cent chance of one striking the Earth in the next decade.

That scares some experts. One of the eminences in the field of space-weather studies is Daniel Baker, who was the head of space-plasma physics at Los Alamos National Laboratory and a division chief at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center before going to the University of Colorado to lead its Laboratory for Atmospheric and Space Physics. "I do not want to be unduly alarmist," Baker told me. "But I *do* want to be duly alarmist." Like so much American infrastructure, he notes, our bulk-power system is underfunded and aging, while demand on it keeps rising—not only from population growth but from an incommensurate increase in our energy use. As a result, he says, the grid is operating "closer and closer to its maximum stress level." In that condition, it cannot easily absorb the additional stress of a solar storm.

Our aging grid could be updated, but the factors that make doing so expensive and time-consuming will also dramatically compound the effects of a severe solar storm. "Transformers are not just something you can go to Home Depot and buy," Baker points out; each one is idiosyncratic, a half-million-pound object designed specifically for one of the fifteen hundred-plus entities, from publicly traded companies to energy coöperatives, that together constitute the power grid. As a result, transformers can't be stockpiled. They are almost always built to spec, and they are almost all made abroad, which increases shipping times and leaves them vulnerable to political conflict and supply-chain issues. Even under optimal circumstances, the typical lead time to replace a transformer is at least a year. If enough of them fail in a solar storm, the recovery will not be measured in days (the length of time it took to get the power back after the Texas winter storms) or weeks (the length of time it took after Hurricane Katrina). It will be measured, almost unthinkably, in months and years.

That's one reason Craig Fugate, the former FEMA administrator, thinks the one-to-two-trillion-dollar figure in the N.A.S. report is "probably on the low side." But he also raises a problem that extends beyond the power grid: because solar storms affect an unusually wide geographic area and an unusually broad range of technologies, they are more likely than other disasters to cause cascading failures. A malfunction in one part of the grid forces electricity to flow elsewhere, overburdening a second part, which is then more likely to malfunction as well; the more such problems you string together, the greater the burden on the remaining parts, and the more likely a catastrophic failure. And what is true of the disaster is also true of the disaster response. Unlike terrestrial hazards, solar storms are not, in FEMA-speak, "geofenced." They can affect large areas of the world, which minimizes access to outside help in the aftermath. If an earthquake devastates Los Angeles, aid can pour in from neighboring regions. But, if a solar storm devastates New York, anywhere close enough to help will likely be devastated, too

Above all, Fugate fears that, because space weather affects so many technologies, a severe storm could expose dependencies among them that we did not fully appreciate, or did not recognize at all. Our vast and interrelated technological infrastructure could turn out to harbor a single point of failure—a component, no matter how central or trivial, whose malfunction shuts the whole thing down. Many experts regard G.P.S. signals with alarm for this reason; as a 2021 report by the National Security Telecommunications Advisory Committee noted, the signals are used so ubiquitously in so many critical sectors that "their vulnerabilities pose a near-existential threat." Alternatively, an individual system that seems robust in isolation might not respond as expected when other systems to which it is connected simultaneously experience powerful stressors—especially when those stressors involve, as Fugate put it, "more unknowns than knowns." That is true not only of technology but also of the people who operate it; we do not always perform at our best when things around us start malfunctioning. In this kind of "system of systems," even seemingly minor problems can concatenate in calamitous ways.

Baker worries about this as well. "We've built ourselves into a cyber-electric cocoon," he says, "and a lot of risk analyses show that when you start to lose nodes in that kind of a connected system it can propagate in very unpredictable ways. And there's nothing outside it." In a closed loop like that, a disaster is disastrous not only because of the problems it causes but because of the solutions it eliminates. Post-disaster relief and recovery operations rely on functional transportation systems, but airports, railroads, gas pumps, stoplights, and an increasing number of vehicles all need electricity. Emergency dispatchers rely on sophisticated communication and mapping technologies, but those technologies rely on working computers and satellite transmissions. Power companies need water supplies, but water companies need electricity. Knock over the wrong domino and down goes, as the N.A.S. report put it, "just about every critical infrastructure including government services." Baker, who led the team behind the report, suspects that we will see a devastating storm within a few decades, and that most of us alive today will suffer through those serial failures. "Maybe here in Colorado, we can go out and hunt elk or something," he says. "But I'd be very concerned about the major metropolitan areas."

All these problems have a meta problem. Radio blackouts, communication disruptions, power-grid problems: to an uncanny degree, solar storms mimic malicious actors trying to sabotage technology that is central to our economy and safety. Because of this, one of the most important functions of SWPC and the Defense Department's Space Weather Operations Center is attribution—determining whether a given anomaly was caused by bad weather in space rather than by a technical malfunction or deliberate interference. Such determinations must be accomplished quickly: if you have a radar system that's jammed or a missile-defense system that's malfunctioning, you can't wait around for long to figure out why. "When we see something, we've got five to ten minutes or less to get this stuff out," Tegnell says. Delay can be disastrous; in matters of national security, Murtagh notes, "a lot can happen in ten to fifteen minutes."

In part to facilitate these assessments, SWPC makes all its space-weather information publicly available. "We have no problem sharing information across the world," Murtagh told me. The U.S. has a vested interest in the global community not mistaking natural hazards for foreign adversaries; for that matter, given international supply chains and international commerce, the United States has a vested interest in the global community minimizing disruptions from solar storms. Whether it can do so is impossible to say; we don't even know how prepared the U.S. is, and the world is the ultimate system of systems, as we all learned at great cost from the pandemic. But it is difficult to be optimistic. For many nations, especially in the developing world, better space-weather preparedness is low on the list of priorities for infrastructure improvements.

And yet, precisely because solar storms can cause the same problems as enemy agents, better space-weather preparedness amounts to better preparedness over all. "I think of space weather as a stand-in for all those other disruptions," Kathryn Draeger, an agronomist at the University of Minnesota who researches how to mitigate the impact of solar storms on agriculture, told me. "A terrorist attack on our grid, an electromagnetic pulse, a natural disaster, a pandemic—if we can figure it out for space weather, we will be better protected from all these other major disruptions."

In theory, we've already figured out some of it. We could require backup navigation and timing systems; we could move away from ultra-long, ultra-high-voltage transmission lines. Certain new technologies could help, such as devices that block geomagnetically induced currents from entering the grid, as could a return to some old ones. The Army, concerned about overreliance on vulnerable technologies, has reinstated courses in orienteering, and the Navy has resumed teaching sailors how to use a sextant.

Still, persuading people to implement safety measures is difficult, because severe solar storms are what people in emergency management sometimes call low-frequency, high-consequence events. Such events are emotionally, ethically, and pragmatically vexing, and we respond to them in curious and inconsistent ways. In our private lives, we tend to focus on the high consequences: your nine-year-old will almost certainly not be kidnapped while playing alone at the local playground, but you don't let him do so, because the potential cost is too devastating. By contrast, corporations and nations tend to focus on the low odds, and therefore wave away the possible consequences. "I'm working with people and they'll say, 'Why do I need to spend a cent on this issue? I've been here for forty years and I've never seen a problem,'" Murtagh told me. "And I look at them and say, 'I don't know what to say to you.'" As far as the sun is concerned, "the Carrington Event happened one second ago. And it will happen again."

We don't know when, of course; there is so much we do not know. Before Tegnell became a space-weather forecaster, he was a regular-weather forecaster, and he remains acutely aware of the difference between them. It's not just that you have to go from thinking on the scale of cities and counties to thinking on the scale of millions of miles. It's that with solar events "you have no idea what goes on in ninety per cent of them." Space-weather forecasting, he believes, is where terrestrial meteorology was seventy-five years ago. Back then, we were farther from today's reality, of minute-by-minute weather information on your phone, and closer to the reality of sixteenth-century mariners or third-century shepherds, for whom hurricanes and blizzards happened more or less out of nowhere, and for whom our vulnerability to severe weather seemed immutable and inevitable, laid down as our lot in life since that first Biblical flood.

Someday, Tegnell says, our current understanding of space weather will seem similarly sparse. We will put more and better instruments in space; we will learn more about the physical dynamics of the sun and their effects here on Earth. Whether infrastructure improvements will keep pace with that knowledge is beyond his job description, and beyond his ken. He is hoping to retire this year, after half a century of service to the United States. He is not worried about being bored. He has spent a lifetime studying solar activity and doesn't figure that will change all that much. "I'm the kind of guy," he told me, "who likes looking at sunsets." ♦

LETTER FROM THE WEST BANK

THE DISPOSSESSED

Israeli settlers are escalating attacks on their Palestinian neighbors.

BY SHANE BAUER

The sounds of destruction carried through the valley. It was October 28th, and I was standing on a rocky slope in the West Bank with Bashar Ma'amar, a Palestinian who records the aggressions of Israeli settlers. Ma'amar pointed a camera at a group ransacking a house below us. A couple of days before, the settlers had set fire to it; the house's owner had gone to the police, but they had not intervened. As we watched, one settler kicked at the front door, and another tried to penetrate the charred walls with a board. Others tore a hole in the roof and slipped inside. On the hillside opposite us, three Israeli soldiers and a man with a rifle stood watching. Eventually, the settlers joined the soldiers to walk back to Eli, their settlement, where mothers pushed strollers down tree-lined blocks of red-roofed houses, people played tennis on courts with views of Palestinian farmland, and men and women carrying M16s and Uzis shopped in strip malls.

"Now is the time for them to implement their objectives," Ma'amar told me. "All the attention is on Gaza." Ma'amar is forty-one, tall and lanky. He drove his dilapidated car to Qaryut, his village of three thousand people, with winding alleys and olive groves that stretch in every direction. Qaryut, twenty miles north of Ramallah, is in the fertile central highlands of the West Bank, the twenty-two-hundred-square-mile territory that has been occupied by Israel since 1967. After Israel won the Six-Day War, fought against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, it took territory that included the West Bank, which most Israelis refer to as Judea and Samaria. Today, there are roughly half a million settlers in the West Bank, one for every six Palestinians. The Palestinian Authority, which nominally governs the territory, controls security—often with Israeli assistance—only in the urban centers. In the remaining eighty-two per cent of the territory, Israel is in charge. In Qaryut, Ma'amar operates a branch of the Red Crescent and administers message groups that monitor the actions of settlers and of the Israel Defense Forces. He is also a volunteer with B'tselem, an Israeli human-rights group.

One day when I visited Ma'amar, he piled up a dozen cameras on his desk—old mini-D.V. camcorders, point-and-shoot 35-mm.s—some broken by settlers. It was a collection built up during nearly twenty years of documenting settler violence and encroachment onto Palestinian land. "My cameras are my weapons," he said. "I'm probably the person in Qaryut who has filed the most complaints to the police, to the Supreme Court." There had been some moments of success. He'd helped a man get back half of the hundred and seventy acres that settlers had seized from him. Mostly, though, his cases went nowhere. "The Israeli legal system doesn't work for the benefit of Palestinians," he said.

His obsession with documentation was inherited from his grandfather Ahmed Odeh, who served for some thirty years as mayor of Qaryut. Ma'amar keeps century-old land deeds and tattered administrative maps, which show that the surrounding settlements were built on private land.

When Ma'amar was born, in 1982, his village was next to only one settlement, Shilo, established on land seized from his grandfather. Eli was founded when Ma'amar was five, taking more land from Qaryut. Eli and Shilo, which each has nearly five thousand residents, subsumed three of Qaryut's five springs. The village had to buy its water from Mekorot, Israel's national water company.

The first time that Ma'amar witnessed settler violence was in 1996. It was in the wake of the first election to Prime Minister of Benjamin Netanyahu, who was intent on blocking any progress toward a two-state solution. Shilo took even more land from Qaryut, to

The family of Bilal Saleh, who was killed

while harvesting olives. Since October 7th, the U.N. has recorded nearly six hundred attacks by settlers in the West Bank.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TANYA HABJOUQA

make a vineyard. The village staged a protest, which Ma'amar filmed. The Army and settlers rushed in, firing shots into the air, and settlers beat people and tried to take cameras from anyone documenting the scene. An Israeli court ruled that the land should be returned to Qaryut, but Ma'amar said that settlers continued to attack people who approached, so the land was effectively lost.

In the years that followed, settlers put up tents, then mobile homes, on hilltops. Settlements are mostly considered illegal under international law, but these outposts were illegal even under Israeli law. Still, the government did little to dissuade the hilltop settlers, who viewed themselves as pioneers. The outposts were quickly connected to larger settlements by water systems, power lines, and paved roads. In time, a corridor of settlement took shape, slicing across the West Bank until the map looked more and more like the one envisioned by many settlers and political leaders, in which Palestinians would live in small and disconnected territories within an expanded Israel. Qaryut sat right in the corridor's path; there were now eight official settlements and at least eleven smaller outposts in a five-mile radius of the village. "Without international and legal pressure on the Israelis, Qaryut will disappear," Ma'amar said.

In November, 2022, Netanyahu won reëlection for the sixth time. To form a governing coalition, he allied with leaders of far-right parties, including Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, who advocate for annexing the West Bank. Since then, the situation there has grown dramatically worse. In the first nine months of 2023, Ma'amar filed about seventy police reports of settler violence. In February, while he was driving an ambulance to pick up people injured in an attack, settlers smashed his windows and tried to burn the vehicle. In June, Palestinian gunmen killed four settlers near Eli; the next day, hundreds of settlers descended on Turmus Aya, a nearby village, shooting residents and burning cars and houses, some with people inside. By September, 2023, the United Nations was documenting around three settler-related incidents each day, the highest since it had started tracking the trend, in 2006, and eleven hundred Palestinians in the West Bank had been displaced.

Since October 7th, when Hamas-led fighters broke through the fence on Gaza's border with Israel and killed some twelve hundred people and took some two hundred and fifty hostages, attacks near Qaryut have become routine. Settlers have burned cars and houses, blockaded roads, damaged electricity networks, seized farmland, severed irrigation lines, attacked people in their fields and olive groves, and killed, all without repercussion. Ma'amar told me that a thousand acres had been cut off from Qaryut. The U.N. has recorded five hundred and seventy-three attacks by settlers in the West Bank since the war began, with Israeli forces accompanying them half the time. At least nine people have been killed by settlers, and three hundred and eighty-two have been killed by Israeli forces. Five Israelis have been killed in the West Bank, at least one of whom was a civilian.

On October 9th, settlers sent a picture on Facebook to people in Qusra, a few miles from Qaryut, of masked men holding axes, clubs, a gas can, and a chainsaw, with text that read, "To all the rats in the sewers of Qusra village, we are waiting for you and we will not feel sorry for you. The day of revenge is coming." Two days later, at the edge of the village, settlers lit utility poles on fire and tried to break into a house. For a half hour, a family huddled inside; then young men from the village arrived and threw rocks at the Israelis. Ma'amar drove over in his ambulance. At that point, the settlers started shooting. A man handed Ma'amar a six-year-old girl who had been shot. As the man walked away, he was shot and killed. When Ma'amar sped off, he said, settlers fired on his ambulance. Three Palestinians were killed, one of them the son of a man who had been killed by settlers in 2017. Then the Israeli Army stormed the village and killed a thirteen-year-old boy.

The next day, Hani Odeh, the mayor of Qusra, arranged for a procession to transport the bodies from the hospital to the village. Ma'amar took one of them in his ambulance. The I.D.F. dictated the route, then directed mourners to change course to avoid settlers. But dozens of settlers blocked the road and stoned the procession anyway. "I got out and talked to the Israeli commander, begging him to make the settlers leave," Odeh said. "He told me to turn around." The settlers killed a sixty-two-year-old man and his twenty-five-year-old son.

"They can't just continue to unleash the settlers on us like that," Odeh told me. "My generation has always tried to reason with our youth, but they can no longer take it, so what am I to do? People like me, who advocated for peace their whole lives—we are not respected anymore. They say what did Abu Mazen"—Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority—"ever do for us? And they're right. He keeps asking people to protest peacefully. Peacefully? There's nothing peaceful about the situation we're in."

On October 29th, settlers showed up at one of Qaryut's two remaining springs. They hung an Israeli flag and, with soldiers present, demolished one of the large concrete water basins that villagers had been using for irrigation for generations. Then the Army closed Qaryut's access road to the spring. The road separated Shilo and Eli, and Ma'amar guessed that the aim of the settlers and the Army was to connect the two settlements.

For the next couple of weeks, settlers came to the spring frequently, accompanied by soldiers. Some wore shirts with the logo of Artzenu ("Our Land"), a subsidiary of a government-funded organization which is dedicated to farming land in the West Bank before "non-Jewish entities" do. (A spokesperson for Artzenu said, "Not everyone who wears the shirt in their free time represents the organization's values.") One day, Ma'amar filmed two soldiers in sniper costumes on the hillside above the spring and young settlers burning tires on the access road. One soldier, lying prone with his rifle balanced on a tripod, aimed straight at Ma'amar.

That day, I went down to the spring with Ariel Elmaliach, the mayor of Eli. Around ten young men and boys were working to turn one of the concrete basins into a swimming pool. "Come in another week with shorts

PREVIOUS SPREAD: NOOR

and you can enjoy," Elmaliach told me.

He asked the group why they were doing this work.

"To take more room around the settlement," a boy of about fifteen said.

"For our homeland," Nadav Levy, a bearded man in his early twenties, said. He added that he didn't understand why people in Qaryut were upset about their project: "From my perspective, all of this is our land."

Ory Shimon, twenty, said he felt that Israel was being unfairly scrutinized: "America came with ships and killed all the Indians and made them slaves. It's terrible, but now America doesn't say, 'We're sorry, take the land back.'"

Elmaliach told me I was not allowed to take pictures, but then reconsidered. "Let's do a deal," he said. "If you write in your media that the Jews always take a place and they make it better, I give you permission to take a picture." He picked up a couple of discarded bottles. "See, this is Arabs," he said.

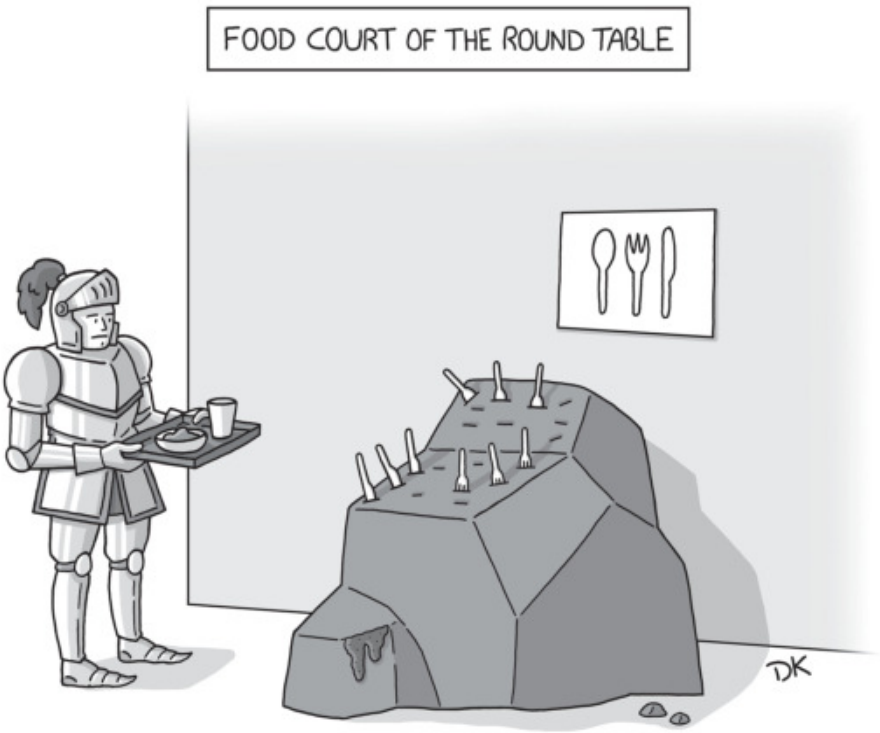
The spring, Elmaliach said, belonged to them, not to Qaryut. I showed him a map from the Civil Administration, Israel's governing body in the West Bank, showing that the spring was well outside settlement boundaries. Eventually, he said, "I will give you a real answer. If you are coming to a new land, and you are now the owner of that land, then you put in that land the rules that you want."

In February, 2023, Netanyahu appointed Smotrich, the finance minister and the head of the Religious Zionist Party, to a governmental position that granted him sweeping powers over West Bank settlements. In 2005, Smotrich had been arrested as part of a small group in possession of seven hundred litres of fuel. The former deputy head of Shin Bet, the Israeli internal security agency, accused him of plotting to blow up cars on a highway to protest Israel's withdrawal from settlements in Gaza. (Smotrich denied the allegation and wasn't charged with a crime.) Now Smotrich had the authority to legalize unauthorized outposts, to prevent enforcement against illegal Jewish construction, to thwart Palestinian development projects, and to allocate land to settlers.

Around the time of Smotrich's appointment, a Palestinian gunman shot and killed two settlers. Smotrich said that the Army should "strike the cities of terror and its instigators without mercy, with tanks and helicopters." Israel, he added, should act "in a way that conveys that the master of the house has gone crazy." While the Army stood by, hundreds of settlers rampaged through Hawara, a village south of Nablus, killing one person and injuring about a hundred, and burning some thirty homes and a hundred cars. It was the worst outbreak of settler violence in decades. (The I.D.F. did not respond to a request for comment.)

Smotrich, who lives in a settlement, has become one of the most prominent settler ideologists. In 2017, he published his "Decisive Plan" for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The first step, he wrote, was to make the "ambition for a Jewish State from the river to the sea . . . an accomplished fact" by "establishing new cities and settlements deep inside the territory and bringing hundreds of thousands of additional settlers to live there." Once "victory by settlement" was accomplished, Smotrich continued, Palestinians would have two options: stay in Israel, without the right to vote in national elections, or emigrate. "Zionism," he wrote, "was built based on population exchange e.g. the mass Aliyah of Jews from Arab countries and Europe to the Land of Israel, willingly or not, and the exit of masses of Arabs who lived here, willingly or not, to the surrounding Arab areas. This historic pattern seems to require culmination."

Plans for expulsion go back to 1937, when Britain proposed the partition of Palestine into two states and the transfer of about two hundred thousand Arabs out of territory slated for the Jewish state. Zionist pioneers attempted to expand their territory by building settlements outside the proposed boundary. David Ben-Gurion, the future Prime Minister of Israel, wrote, in a letter to his sixteen-year-old son about settling the Negev Desert, "We must expel the Arabs and take their place." In the end, Ben-Gurion agreed to a U.N. partition plan that did not call for the expulsion of Arabs from Gaza and the West Bank, but he immediately began taking tactical steps toward expanding the territory. He and other leaders devised a military strategy called Plan Dalet, which aimed to "gain control of the areas of the Hebrew state" and "the areas of Jewish settlement . . . located outside the borders" through "operations against enemy population centers," "control of frontline enemy positions," and the "destruction of villages." Should resistance be met, "the armed force must be destroyed and the population must be expelled outside the borders of the state." The Haganah (the



predecessor to the I.D.F.), destroyed Palestinian villages and carried out massacres. Three hundred thousand Arabs were expelled or fled before the British withdrew, in May, 1948. Then Israel declared independence, Egypt and Syria invaded the territory, and another four hundred thousand Arabs were driven out. By 1949, about eighty per cent of the Arab population had been removed from the territory claimed by Israel, now larger than what the U.N. partition plan—which was never implemented—had outlined, and hundreds of villages had been erased. Palestinians remember this as the Nakba, or "catastrophe."

Smotrich's desire to claim all of Palestine for Israel was held by many people in 1948, but his belief that such colonization is a divine commandment was marginal. Zionism was largely a secular movement, and most Orthodox Jews considered it a rebellion against God: if he had exiled the Israelites, then only he could determine when the punishment should end. Smotrich, like a third of West Bank settlers today, follows the teachings of a rabbi named Tzvi Yehuda Kook, who preached that Jews should play an active role in bringing about God's forgiveness by gaining possession of the entirety of the Biblical Land of Israel. By establishing a state, secular Jews—"good sinners," he called them—had unwittingly created a stepping stone to the "foundation of the throne of God in the world." When Israel occupied the West Bank, in 1967, Kook's devotees believed that it was a miracle.

Government officials disagreed about what to do with the West Bank. Maximalists, like Yigal Allon, a former special-forces commander, had been stopped short of taking the territory before borders were established, in 1949, and wanted to finish the job; other officials worried that incorporating nine hundred thousand Palestinians into Israel would upend the country's Jewish majority. Levi Eshkol, the Prime Minister at the time, said, "We got a lovely dowry. The trouble is that the dowry comes with the wife." Allon proposed a compromise: annex the least populated regions—a third of the territory—and give the rest back to Jordan. He proposed establishing settlements until the annexation was complete.

The difficulty was finding people to live in them: the younger generation of secular Israelis didn't have the nostalgia for pioneering that older Zionists did. But Kook's followers were more eager. As the government deliberated, Kookists announced that they were settling in Hebron. Allon, a one-time socialist, made common cause with the right-wing settlers, immediately guaranteeing them jobs and trying to procure weapons for them. Then he persuaded the Cabinet to grant permission for a settlement.

The Kookists learned an important lesson: if they took direct action and found sympathetic officials, the state would follow. They formed a movement, Gush Emunim, which tried to establish settlements on the densely populated mountain ridge south of Nablus, where Qaryut is situated. Yet the government, which, in accordance with Allon's plan, had begun building settlements in less populated areas, repeatedly evicted them.

In 1977, the Labor Party, which had held power since the founding of the state, was defeated by the Likud Party. Like Gush Emunim, Likud advocated for complete Israeli sovereignty "between the Sea and the Jordan." The government started building settlements throughout the West Bank, and put them under the management of Gush Emunim, which it funded. The state encouraged Israelis to move in, offering housing subsidies, lower income tax, and state grants for businesses. By the early nineties, there were some hundred thousand Israelis living in a hundred and twenty settlements in the West Bank.

On October 28, 2023, Bilal Saleh woke early to prepare for the olive harvest in the village of al-Sawiya. He knew it was risky. A couple of days earlier, farmers had returned from their olive groves in the nearby village of Deir Istiya to find flyers on their cars that read, "You wanted war, now wait for the great Nakba. . . . This is your last chance to escape to Jordan in an orderly fashion before we forcibly expel you from our holy lands, which were given to us by God." Since October 7th, messages in settler chat groups had portrayed olive pickers as undercover Hamas operatives and as Nazis. Elmaliach, the mayor of Eli, which is a mile and a half from al-Sawiya, sent around a sign-up sheet calling for the "full mobilization" of his residents "to stand up to the Arabs who try to harvest around our settlements."

Saleh, who was forty, kept his opinions to himself and avoided protests. But the land had been in his family for generations. He'd recently left his job at a hotel in Tel Aviv and had been selling herbs on the streets of Ramallah. Without the olive harvest, he'd be stretched thin. He and his friends and relatives chose a Saturday to pick olives, because it was the Jewish Sabbath, a day when the Orthodox settlers were likely to be in synagogue or resting.

Saleh loaded up his family's donkey and walked with his wife and kids through their village, across from the road where Israelis-only buses took settlers to their jobs, and down to their plot of trees. The settlement of Rehelim looked down on them from less than half a mile away. They put a tarp down under a tree and started picking.

At around 10:30 A.M., Saleh's friend Sami Kafineh was driving back to al-Sawiya from Nablus. Just before he reached the village, he noticed four men, dressed in white, walking from Rehelim toward the olive grove. He pulled over and shouted that settlers were approaching.

People who were in the grove told me that, as soon as Bilal Saleh realized that the settlers were coming, he hurried his wife and children to safety, leaving their belongings behind. As they walked to the road, Saleh, realizing he'd left his phone behind, turned back. He returned to the plot, picked up his phone, and was shot.

Kafineh was still on the road above. As soon as he heard the rifle crack, he started filming. The four settlers were in a clearing; one had an M16 and was walking along the edge of the terraced grove of olive trees. The settler fired again, and walked away. A video shows Saleh lying in the dirt, his chest and mouth bloody.

Then settlers rewrote the story. In a statement, Yossi Dagan, the head of the settlers' regional council whose area of authority includes Rehelim, said that a combat soldier on leave had been "attacked by tens of Hamasniks." The harvest around Israeli settlements had to be stopped, he said, because it was "being used as a platform for terrorism." Settlers later shared an image from Saleh's funeral, in which his brother, Hisham, is waving a Hamas flag. Shortly afterward,

Israeli police arrested Hisham. Polls show that support for Hamas in the West Bank, where dissatisfaction with the Palestinian Authority is widespread, has risen from twelve per cent to forty-four per cent in recent months. Seventy-two per cent of Palestinians polled also said that they thought the October 7th attack was "correct." (Ninety-four per cent of Israelis think that the I.D.F. is using either an appropriate or an insufficient amount of force in Gaza.)

"We don't have any hope," Bilal's cousin Hazem Saleh told me. He pointed toward some new houses in the village. Their owners didn't intend for them "to be demolished or bombed," he said. "They are not calling for fighting, or killing, or war. But when they are afraid to go out, when they don't have the minimum standard of living, when they are pressured, their reaction will be the same as the action."

Hisham Saleh spent three months in jail, without charges, for waving the Hamas flag. The settler who shot Bilal was arrested, and released a few days later. "We are happy that the court decided from the beginning that that was self-defense," his lawyer, Nati Rom, told me. The judge had cited the events of October 7th, writing, "The vigilance to which we are commanded by the blood of our brothers and sisters who fell for the sanctity of the land and the defense of the homeland is a real obligation."

Rom said that, to his knowledge, no other settlers had faced charges since October 7th. Settler violence was "fake news," he said.

"It certainly looks like we accidentally created a miniature black hole, but, just to be sure, let's throw in some more office supplies."

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Saleh's shooter was back in the Army, so I visited one of his neighbors, a forty-six-year-old woman named Reuma Harari. At the gate of Rehelim, soldiers took my passport, then security escorted me to Harari's house. Her back yard was a suburban idyll: a swing set on an AstroTurf lawn, an oak tree, a small dog; Tel Aviv was only forty minutes away, if the traffic was light. She offered me a seat under an olive tree. "Ironic," she said, chuckling.

Harari was eager to tell me about the origin of her settlement. "It's not a victim story," she said. "It's just the opposite." In 1991, settlers were on a bus to Tel Aviv to protest peace talks taking place in Madrid. Palestinians attacked the bus, killing the driver and a settler from Shilo named Rachel Drouk. After Drouk's funeral, twenty-five women set up a mourning tent on the spot of the killing. After three weeks, they issued their Feminist Manifesto. "We remain at this site demanding to found a settlement, for this is the only Zionist response to this criminal murder," it read. Under Army protection, the settlers seized land belonging to Saleh's village, and installed mobile homes on it.

Two years later, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization, agreed on the first stage of the Oslo Accords. Israel and the P.L.O. recognized each other, and the Palestinians gained limited autonomy in Gaza and some of the West Bank, under the administration of the newly created Palestinian Authority. But major issues—the future of Jerusalem, the ability of Palestinian refugees to return, the settlements, and the border—were left for a final agreement to be made in five years' time. That agreement never came to pass, and the hope for a two-state solution has steadily vanished.

Under international pressure, the government mostly stopped building new settlements, but in 1998, ahead of the final status talks for Oslo, Ariel Sharon, then the foreign minister, urged settlers to occupy territory themselves. On the radio, he said they should "run, grab more hills, expand the territory. Everything that's grabbed will be in our hands. Everything we don't grab will be in their hands." In the next nine years, roughly a hundred illegal outposts were created.

In 2001, during the second intifada, a popular Palestinian uprising against the occupation, Harari and her family decided to move from Jerusalem to Rehelim. She had asked herself, "What can I do for this country?" She knew that, wherever settlers go, "the Army will come," she said. "Zionism for me is dreaming and doing." Four years later, a government report revealed that the World Zionist Organization and a number of ministries had been secretly diverting millions of dollars to settler outposts with the active collusion of the military and the police. "It seems that the lawbreaking has become institutionalized," the report said. The government declared that such outposts would be evacuated, but in the twenty-tens

"There it is, Jenkins. The Wi-Fi password."

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Netanyahu retroactively legalized many of them, including Rehelim.

Harari said that Rehelim's stance toward its Palestinian neighbors had always been "If you live peace and quiet, we will live peace and quiet."

When I mentioned the various attacks perpetrated by inhabitants of her settlement through the years, Harari responded with examples of settlers killed in other parts of the West Bank, or by discussing October 7th. "My neighbors, if they have the ability, will come and butcher me in my bed," she said. She likened the Hamas attacks to Auschwitz, but she also said that they brought her a "shred of joy," because "now we earned back our unity. Now it's like '48 again."

Harari could understand why Palestinians might resent settlers. "Israel is an occupied territory from the river to the sea," she said. If she were Palestinian, she went on, she "would probably think we are not supposed to be here and we should go." She sometimes asked herself, "Is it worthwhile? Are the kids suffering? Is it normal?" Then she recovered. "We are not going anywhere," she said. " 'Homeland' is not a figure of speech."

Ten miles east of Rehelim, the olive groves and crowded settlements and Palestinian villages give way to the caramel-colored expanse of the Jordan Valley. The valley stretches six miles wide, from the Jordan River to the hills of the central highlands, and fifty miles long, from the Dead Sea to the Israeli city of Beit She'an. Israel has eyed the region for annexation since Allon's plan of 1967. Sparsely populated, it makes up about a quarter of the West Bank's landmass. Since 2012, Israel has been building what Dror Etkes, a longtime authority on settlements, called its "biggest and most expensive infrastructure project" in the West Bank, piping water from Jerusalem to settlers' date plantations throughout the valley. "They are building a project that costs a fortune," Etkes said. "From their point of view, they are going to be here forever." Any Jewish family that moves to the Jordan Valley is granted twenty acres of agricultural land.

The residents of the valley's more than twenty settlements are a mix of Orthodox Jews and the secular descendants of early Labor Party settlers. In the "eco settlement" of Rotem, businesses offer acupuncture, natural cosmetics, and "holistic therapy." People live in yurts, buildings made from hemp, and converted vehicles. One day, I sat under a thatched roof at a café where barefoot waitresses served vegan meals. Yet, as in other parts of the West Bank, violence is woven into the fabric of life. A family posed for a photograph looking over the valley, the man raising an M16 in the air. A small Palestinian sheepherding community sat on the valley floor. Rotem settlers had recently been showing up in the night, demanding that the Palestinians evacuate.

Many of the sixty-five thousand Palestinians in the Jordan Valley are the descendants of Bedouins who fled what is now Israel in 1948. Israel has long restricted their access to water and demolished their buildings. In the five months before October 7th, hundreds of Palestinians, the residents of three communities, left. Their exodus was prompted by a relatively new type of settler—the Orthodox Jewish shepherd.

In the northern part of the valley, I visited Moshe and Moriah Sharvit, whose sheep farm doubled as a bed-and-breakfast, with offerings including air-conditioned Bedouin-style tents and talks about "Zionism and the importance of settling on farms and the seizure of land."

Moriah, who is twenty-eight, wore a daisy-print dress and a dark-green head scarf, and had a blond infant strapped to her back. Mountains rose in the west, and on the eastern horizon, beyond Palestinian villages, the Jordan Highlands were outlined faintly. All this, she believed, was given to her by God.

Moriah was born in New Jersey and grew up in West Bank settlements. After she and Moshe married, at nineteen, they wanted a different life. The settlements, with their fences, cameras, and security, were like "ghettos," Moriah said. She invited me into their mobile home. A couple of M16s sat on a woodstove. Moshe, an olive-skinned man with a short black beard, ate in the kitchen. I recognized him. Israeli anti-occupation activists had

documented him dispersing Palestinians' sheep with his A.T.V., sending his dogs after them, and following with a drone.

Moshe had had a vineyard and an olive grove, Moriah told me, but that didn't allow for the control of much land, so he turned to sheepherding. "When you have sheep, you go here, you go there, wherever there is food to graze," she said. "You can protect more land."

Moriah and Moshe set up the outpost in 2020. "It's not like we bought the land from someone," she said. "It doesn't belong to us." Yet she described their mission as preventing land theft. She pointed through a window toward some Palestinian farmhouses a half mile away. "All those houses that you see over there are Arabs who came from A land to C land and stole the land," she said. "If we weren't here right now, they would be here."

The Oslo Accords sorted the West Bank into three areas, A, B, and C. Palestinian cities were designated Area A and put under the full control of the Palestinian Authority. The main villages—Area B—were left under Palestinian civilian administration, with Israel in charge of security. Together, Areas A and B make up forty per cent of the West Bank, but they are broken into a hundred and sixty-five islands. The sea they float in—Area C—remains under full Israeli control and includes not only settlements but also most of the West Bank's agricultural land. The accords said that Area C, now home to half a million settlers and some three hundred thousand Palestinians, was to be "gradually transferred to Palestinian jurisdiction," but Israel has increasingly treated it as its own.

Israel requires Palestinians to obtain permits for any new construction in Area C, but it has rejected ninety-eight per cent of applications. Unpermitted structures are regularly demolished by the military—yet settlers believe that the government doesn't do enough. Regavim, an organization co-founded by Bezalel Smotrich, takes aerial photographs of the West Bank twice a year in order to identify unpermitted structures, and it sues the government if it doesn't demolish them. Naomi Kahn, Regavim's international director, told me, "Area C should be annexed." A poll from 2020 showed that half of Israelis supported this idea.

The sheepherding strategy started to take hold around 2018, pioneered by a settler organization called Amana. At a 2021 conference titled "The Battle for State Lands," Amana's secretary-general, Ze'ev Hever, a convicted member of the Jewish Underground terrorist organization, explained that traditional settlements had been an inefficient way to seize land. "It took us more than fifty years to get a hundred square kilometres," he said. Sheep farms, on the other hand, control "more than double the area of built-up settlements."

Avi Naim, the former director general of the Ministry of Settlement Affairs, said that herding outposts were helping "prevent Palestinian invasions" of Area C: "You take people who believe in that goal as a pioneering mission, and let them spearhead the work to keep control of land reserves." By Dror Etkes's count, there are now about ninety herding outposts in the West Bank. He estimated that together they control some hundred and thirty-five square miles, about ten per cent of Area C.

All such outposts are considered illegal under Israeli law, but Moriah said that she and Moshe had received a great deal of assistance from the state. They had "a gazillion meetings," she said, with the Civil Administration, the Army, the Jordan Valley regional council, and other government bodies. Amana connected them to running water.

"Moriah!" Moshe shouted from the kitchen. He told her to be careful what she said.

Before the 2019 elections, Netanyahu announced a plan to annex twenty-two

per cent of the West Bank, most of it in Area C, including the majority of the Jordan Valley. The Sharvits established their outpost inside the area slated for annexation, which has not yet occurred.

"I believe that everything is ours—but there is the law," Moriah said. "We go by the law and what we're allowed and what we're not allowed." Buildings on their outpost had been under demolition orders for two years, but Moriah said that no one had pressured them to leave: "Israel understands—either we're here or the land's gonna be taken away."

On the living-room wall, a monitor displayed live footage from cameras that surveilled the surrounding area. Their farm acted as "eyes" for the Army, Moriah told me. "We could report on illegal buildings, on illegal hunting. . . . We work together." On the screen, the angle of one of the cameras changed; Moriah said that it, like cameras at other outposts in the valley, was controlled by a soldier at a command center.

After October 7th, an Army unit stayed at their outpost for a month. Moriah said the Army told them that each herding outpost needed at least three long rifles, so it gave her an M16. "They are giving them out like crazy," she said. The Army has distributed around seven thousand weapons to settlers since October 7th, on top of the ten thousand that the Ministry of National Security ordered be handed out to Jews across Israel and the West Bank. Like some fifty-five hundred other settlers, Moshe and his brother David were drafted into the Army's "regional defense" battalions, the ranks of which have increased fivefold since the war began.

Moriah said that their issue wasn't just with Hamas but with Palestinians in general. They weren't "regular people," she said. Violence was in "their DNA." The October 7th attacks happened because Israelis "were too nice," she said. "I think we need to do what we need to do to make this stop. I think we need to give an alternative to the Arabs who live here. . . . There's Jordan, there's Egypt, there's Syria."

Moriah drove me down a dirt road to the land below the outpost, where Palestinians grew wheat and potatoes. She pointed to some houses. "This over here—all on C land," she said. (According to Civil Administration maps, most of the houses were in Area B.) Shortly after October 7th, she said, a curious thing had happened: "We saw everyone just leaving." She continued driving down the dirt road. "They left," she said. "They all left."

Five days later, I visited David Elhayani, the governor of the Jordan Valley regional council. There are six such elected councils in the West Bank that provide services to settlers. Despite being

outside Israel, they fall under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior.

Elhayani thought that Netanyahu had not been decisive enough in annexing territory. "We don't have leadership anymore in this country," Elhayani told me. If annexation went for a vote, he said, he was confident that two-thirds of the Knesset would approve it.

In the meantime, he was grateful that settler shepherds like Moshe Sharvit were "taking care of the area." When I asked why the demolition orders on the Sharvits' property hadn't been carried out, he replied, "It's not my job."

Elhayani said that, if he could claim territory for Israel, he would do it, "even if it's not legal." He added, "The fight of 1948 is the same fight [today] in all of Judea and Samaria"—the fight over land. "You know what *homa u'migdal* is?" he asked.

It means "wall and tower." During British rule, the government restricted the establishment of Jewish settlements, but during the 1936-39 Arab revolt more than fifty of them were founded, in order to claim territory for a future state. The British let them stand, given an Ottoman law that said authorities could not demolish a structure once a roof had been constructed. The Zionists "came at night, made a wall, a tower, and said, 'We are here,'" Elhayani said. The herding outposts, he noted, "are the same."

I told Elhayani that I had gone with some Palestinians to their now empty houses, near the Sharvits' outpost. An elderly man told me that, a few days after October 7th, Moshe had beaten him, ransacked his home, and told him to leave. Others said he'd threatened to kill them. (Moriah Sharvit said, "Nobody on this farm has committed any offense.") Twelve families had evacuated.

"They are lying," Elhayani said.

"I can take you right now," I said.

"I don't believe you."

"I'll show you."

"I don't want you to show me."

The next day, the photographer Tanya Habjouqa and I went to Wadi al-Seeq, a recently depopulated community in the hills above the Jordan Valley. The sun slowly sank, lighting up the skeletons of shacks clustered in the shallow valley. Forty-odd families had lived here since the nineties, but the last of them had fled a month before. Inside a school, overturned desks lay on the floor; lessons remained on the whiteboards.

As we drove down a gravel road, a pickup truck blocked our path. A suntanned man with a long ginger-brown beard and sidelocks stepped out. It was Neria Ben-Pazi, a settler shepherd who presided over a handful of outposts and had organized the expulsion of the Palestinian families. I had tried multiple times to interview Ben-Pazi, but he never responded. When settler shepherds appear, their friends are often close behind, so I turned the car around and we left.

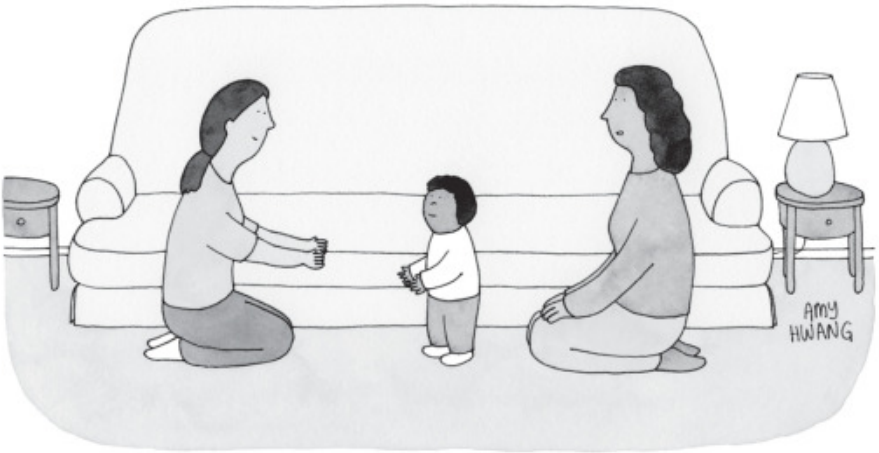
Ben-Pazi grew up in Kohav HaShahar, six miles north of Wadi al-Seeq. By 2015, he had founded a rugged outpost called Baladim nearby. Shin Bet considered it a center of terrorism; some of its residents were dedicated to bringing down the state of Israel and replacing it with the Kingdom of Judea. At least two of them have been convicted of arson-related hate crimes, including the firebombing of a Palestinian home, in 2015, which killed an eighteen-month-old baby and his parents. After that attack, Baladim was evacuated by the Army. Ben-Pazi was arrested for establishing the outpost in a military zone, but he was soon released. Then the encampment was reëstablished.

In 2019, after Netanyahu announced his plan to annex part of the West Bank, Ben-Pazi's relationship with the government changed. Within weeks, he established a new herding outpost outside Rimonim, a secular settlement that likely fell within the area targeted for annexation. A Civil Administration document shows that Ben-Pazi was allocated a hundred-and-thirty-five-acre plot. He was also given funds by the Ministry of Agriculture to pay for people to guard the outpost. Before long, Ben-Pazi and his men had taken over two square miles of Palestinian land. According to a settler publication, senior I.D.F. officers and political figures, including Yoav Gallant, the defense minister, regularly visited his farm.

One of the managers of Rimonim, a tattooed, motorcycle-riding secular man named Oz Shraibom, told me, "Those fanatic religious people are crazy. They come to fight." Since October 7th, "there are people who think this is the time to make everything happen." But, he added, "they are keeping the Arabs away. It's really convenient for me."

Ben-Pazi had established his Wadi al-Seeq outpost in February, 2023, just after Netanyahu gave Smotrich jurisdiction over the Civil Administration and the West Bank settlers. Almost immediately, young settlers started to graze their livestock on Palestinian fields. Before long, nearly all of Wadi al-Seeq's wells were in the hands of the settlers, so the Palestinians had to truck in water. Unable to access their farmland safely, they stopped planting. They could no longer graze their animals in most of the surrounding hills, so they had to buy feed. A few families left.

A man I'll call Suheil, whose home was just a few hundred yards from the outpost, told me that settlers had started to come by his house at night. One ap-



"What do you think is a good step goal for someone who's just started walking?"

peared in his doorway early one morning, and stared at him and his family as they slept. In August, settlers near the village tried to steal the sheep of two young men. Men from the village ran out to defend them, and a fight ensued. Dozens of police officers and soldiers arrived, confiscating three cars and arresting three Palestinians.

That day, a video circulated on social media showing Suheil pleading with Ben-Pazi. A settler WhatsApp channel reposted the video, calling it the "last gasp" of the Palestinian community and referring cryptically to "the Deir Yassin effect." (Deir Yassin was the site of the most notorious massacre of Palestinians in 1948; for many people, it represents the use of violence to instigate a broader exodus.) Arabs in Wadi al-Seeq, the WhatsApp channel said, were being "forced to leave their encampments because they cannot hold out against the Jews."

The families remaining in Wadi al-Seeq asked Israeli activists to stay in the village, hoping that their presence might deter the settlers. The Palestinian Authority's Wall and Settlements Resistance Commission organized Palestinian volunteers to stay as well. In charge was Mohammed Matar, better known as Abu Hassan, a forty-six-year-old activist turned official with a long history of civil disobedience against the occupation forces.

After October 7th, settlers started to drive through Wadi al-Seeq more often, now dressed in uniform and carrying assault rifles. They set up impromptu checkpoints at the entrance to the village, beat people, stole their phones, and visited families in their houses at night.

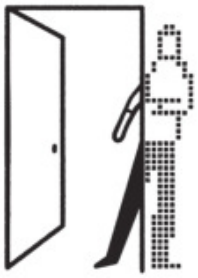
Most of the villagers decided that they couldn't stay. On October 12th, they started piling onto trucks mattresses, sheep troughs, and the tin roofs of their homes. That morning, six pickup trucks of settlers arrived. Abu Hassan, his colleague Mohammed Khaled, five Israeli activists, and a number of villagers stayed behind; they called the Army to ask for help. The settlers tied up Abu Hassan and Khaled and started beating them. At one point, the two men recalled, a Civil Administration officer arrived. After talking to the settlers, he started to leave.

"Where are you going?" Abu Hassan asked.

"These men are Army," the officer said, pointing to the men who had been beating them.

Three Israeli activists were hiding with a Palestinian family in a partially dismantled shack. They saw Ben-Pazi talking urgently on his phone; then an Army van arrived. Soldiers from the Desert Frontier unit emerged, largely youths recruited from shepherd outposts.

After the activists emerged, a soldier punched one of them in the face; they were zip-tied, and their phones and cameras were taken away. "Why aren't you in Gaza!" another soldier shouted. "You are under arrest for helping the enemy during war." The soldiers left them in another shack, guarded by settlers, and drove over to where Abu Hassan and Mohammed Khaled were being held.



While Abu Hassan was lying face down, one of the settlers pulled him up by the hair. "Do you remember me?" he asked. "I'm the shepherd from Biddya, near Salfit. A couple of months ago, you staged a protest there."

"That wasn't me," Abu Hassan said.

He later identified the man as Eden Levi, who was establishing a chain of herding outposts with the aim, he told a settler publication last summer, of "creating an important territorial continuity in the entire region of Western Samaria." Last February, Arabic media published a photograph of Levi, reporting that residents near his outposts said that he had shot and killed a twenty-seven-year-old Palestinian. (Levi could not be reached for comment.) According to *Haaretz*, the Israeli police had interviewed no witnesses.

Abu Hassan and Khaled said they were tortured for hours—beaten with poles, burned with cigarettes, sexually assaulted, urinated on, forced to eat sheep dung. Someone took a picture of them, stripped to their underwear, which was posted on Facebook. "Terrorists tried to infiltrate the Ben-Pazi farm near Kochav Hashachar," the post read. "Our forces seized the terrorists." They spent two days in the hospital.

Shortly after Wadi al-Seeq was depopulated, a new gravel road to Ben-Pazi's outpost was laid down. The Israeli police have not interviewed any of the Palestinians or Israeli activists who were there. Eden Levi has since led another raid near his outpost, in which settlers burned cars and shot Palestinians, killing one.

On December 5th, the U.S. State Department announced that it was imposing visa restrictions on "extremist settlers" who have committed acts of violence or have restricted civilians' access to basic necessities. The I.D.F. issued a restraining order barring Ben-Pazi from the West Bank, with the exception of the Ariel settlement, for three months. In an appeal, his lawyer, Nati Rom, wrote that Ben-Pazi's "extensive ties with the security forces are the best evidence that there is no place for the order to be issued."

In apparent defiance of the order, Ben-Pazi hosted senior rabbis and hundreds of worshippers at his Wadi al-Seeq outpost for Hanukkah. Amichai Eliyahu, the minister of heritage, who a month earlier had said that the government should consider dropping a nuclear bomb on Gaza, spent the night at the outpost. (He later claimed that the comment was "metaphorical.") Ben-Pazi, Eliyahu tweeted, was "the first line of defense against the enemy."

On February 1st, President Biden ordered financial sanctions against four Israeli settlers. Abu Hassan said that the political pressure was important, but that sanctions should "include the political and financial institutions that support [the settlers], as well as the police chiefs and Army officers that conspire with them."

In late December, Moshe Feiglin, the chairman of the far-right Zehut party, visited Ben-Pazi's farm. "So you are the violent monster that managed to drive away the multitude of Arabs?" he asked. Feiglin looked around, taking in the landscape. "You are sitting here on an area that is three times the municipal area of Tel Aviv."

"In the end, it's the connection to the earth," Ben-Pazi said. "If we want the land, we will get it." ♦

ILLUSTRATION BY HENNING WAGENBRETH

Kevin didn't have a rain jacket and for that reason he wasn't wearing one. A pair of "Bananas in Pyjamas" pajama bottoms bunched over the shafts of his rain boots. From his left shoulder, a flat laptop bag dangled. It had been consigned to his school's lost-property box and had remained there more than four months before he'd claimed it for himself. Now it flapped rhythmically against his hip. It contained next to nothing, but he felt that it lent him a professional air.

It was a Tuesday, early evening, and Kevin was the only person out. Darkness had descended upon him since he'd left home. Drizzle beaded his face.

He'd told his father that he was going out to get some fresh air. He wasn't actually sure that his father had even heard him. His father never heard anything when he was gathering his deposit bottles.

Anyway, there Kevin was, walking along the side of the road. Occasionally, he looked up to see if there were any cars coming. Only a single truck had gone past in the half hour that he'd been walking.

He was approaching the neighboring village. He'd never been this far. It was actually quite near his own village, but his father never took him there.

"What would we want to go there for?" his father had said when Kevin pointed at a signpost over by the church one day and asked if they could drive in that direction for a change. "It's a piddling little place with bugger all to see. All it's good for is driving through."

It couldn't be that little, Kevin thought now, as he passed a sign with the village's name. There were lampposts, too, with soft pools of light. White lines ran down the middle of the road. And soon there were houses, set rather far apart at first, then closer together.

Lettering was peeling off from the front of one. COFFEE. TOBACCO. BETTING. There were some lights on inside. He went up to a window where a small sheet of paper with some handwriting on it had been affixed. The letters got smaller and smaller as they neared the edge of the paper.

Open by appointment.

But there was no telephone number to ring. Kevin stood on his tiptoes and leaned forward. There was a slight bump as his forehead touched the pane. The shopwindow was crammed with china dolls wearing crocheted bonnets. Shoulder to shoulder they sat, staring out empty-eyed at the road. Two Madam Blå colanders, also, and a pair of hospital crutches. Farther inside, an old-fashioned spinning wheel and a desktop computer with its keyboard. There were price stickers on everything.

Someone sneezed. Then sneezed again. It sounded like a "no." Kevin dropped onto his heels and went round the side of the house. Some tall steps led to a door. He went up them and considered for a moment a Teddy bear crafted from moss which sat at the top. He raised his hand and gripped the knocker. It was made of brass and looked like a boot. But before he could bang it against the door the lights went out inside, one after another.

There were so many people you would never meet. Most, in fact. He returned the brass boot to its resting position and went back to the road.

In front of the next house stood a figure of a stork, with a pink ribbon around its neck. There were no lights on. Nonetheless, he went up to the door and knocked a couple of times. He stepped back and was trying to remember what he'd decided to say when a voice behind him said, "What can I help you with?"

Kevin spun around to see a square-shouldered man with a crewcut standing before him.

"It's because I'm out selling stickers. . . ."

The man bent forward, his eyes seeming to fix on Kevin's wet hair. He looked Kevin up and down, then zipped his coat. It was the local sports club's coat. Various sponsor logos were emblazoned on the front. Kevin recognized some of them.

"And what would your name be?" the man asked.

"Kevin."

"Kevin what?"

"Jørgensen."

"You've got some guts," the man said, and folded his arms.

Kevin looked him in the eye. He'd heard that eye contact was important, but then the man's eyes moved.

"You can wipe that grin off your face, too, if you know what's good for you."

A baby started crying inside, and a woman's voice called out. The man went in and quietly shut the door behind him. A little click of the lock, and then the light came on in the hall.

Kevin went down the drive until he reached the road again. The rain was heavier now. His boots chafed at his ankles. He paused to empty out some grit.

Kevin walked on through the village and, after a while, came to some houses that were being built. Cable drums occupied the pavement, which appeared to be new. Some of the paving stones wobbled under his feet. One house looked to be finished. It had big picture windows. There were stickers on several panes, featuring the name of a security firm and warnings about CCTV and Neighborhood Watch. The hedge had only just been planted. In the garden, perennials poked out of various sacks, waiting to be planted. Flagstones on a pallet, and a soil compactor. It was a two-story house. A few lights were on, and a flame flickered in a pumpkin lantern on the doorstep. Its lid was rotten and sinking. Three printed lines on the letter box:

Candle Showroom
&
The Rønbjerg Madsen Family

Kevin knew that their first names were Birgitte and Henrik. Every year, they donated some boxes of Advent-calendar candles to his school, Christmas gifts from their factory.

He stepped up to the door and wiped the rain from his face. Readied his teeth and pressed the bell. An intricate melody played, but no one answered.

He pressed again, leaving his finger on the bell this time. The music started from the beginning, but there was still no answer.

After a while, he stepped back, and he was about to walk away when a light came on behind the frosted glass.

A tingling sensation spread across Kevin's cheeks as a shadow loomed. And then a woman wearing an

apron was standing in front of him.

"Yes?" she said.

"Yes" was all Kevin could say.

"Adverts, is it?"

"Adverts?" he said.

"Just drop them in the letter box over there," she said. "We haven't got a slot."

She gestured to show him where and turned to go back in.

"Actually, it's not adverts."

A pleasant smell came from inside. He tried to sniff it in without making a sound. Cinnamon and something else. He could see behind her and into a mudroom with shiny tiles, and a long staircase going up.

"What do you want, then?"

Birgitte pushed a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Well, you see, it's . . . just a second," Kevin said. His hand found his laptop bag. The Velcro from the flap made a rasping sound as he reached inside to produce a smooth, plastic sleeve.

"There," he said. "They're a bit hard to separate in this cold weather."

"You should be wearing something warmer."

"No, I'm fine," Kevin said, in an older-sounding voice. "But I'm out selling something, you see."

"And what might that be?"

"These stickers here."

"Stickers?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

For every sheet you sold, you could keep five kroner. The rest went to a good cause. He'd been given two thick folders full, but not that many people lived around here.

"You can put them on your Christmas cards," he said.

"Christmas cards?"

"For example, yes."

He handed her a sheet. She looked at it, then handed it back.

"Christmas is a long way off," she said.

"Forty-eight days."

"As many as that."

"You can put them on ordinary letters, too."

"Oh, yes?"

"Oh, yes," Kevin said. "It's completely up to you."

And, because he stayed put, she eventually turned her head and shouted into the house.

"Henrik," she shouted.

For a second, neither of them spoke. Music was coming from upstairs. A man's voice was singing along.

"Henrik," she shouted again. "Henrik, turn that down. Have we got any change for some stamps or something for our Christmas cards? Turn it down so you can hear me, or else come downstairs. I'm asking if we've got any money for a sheet of stamps. There's a boy here."

"It's only twenty kroner a sheet," Kevin said. "And it's for a good cause."

"It's twenty kroner a sheet, Henrik."

"Yes, all right," a voice shouted back, and the music stopped. There was a thudding of feet on the stairs and a long sigh as someone came down. A man in a checked shirt appeared in the hall. He looked inquiringly at Kevin and then at his wife.

"Have we got twenty kroner?" she asked.

"What for?"

"The boy's making an effort to earn some pocket money."

Henrik extended a hand into the rain.

"What terrible weather," the man said. "A good thing we took the washing in."

"We?" Birgitte said.

"Summer's long gone," Kevin said. He felt a drip run down his neck.

"Birgitte," Henrik said. "Why don't you fetch those cookies?"

"They're supposed to be for later."

"Fetch them, go on."

She stepped past him and disappeared from view.

"The proceeds go to—" Kevin began, only to be cut off. It was Birgitte, back already. Her hands held out a baking tray. She gave it a little shake and the cookies loosened from the greaseproof paper.

"Take one," she said, looking at Kevin and then at her husband.

"Just the one, mind," Henrik said.

Kevin's fingers hovered over the cookies before selecting a medium-sized one.

"Thank you," he said, and popped it into his mouth.

He shuffled forward, slightly out of the rain. Under-floor heating streamed from the house and warmed his face.

"I know who you are," Henrik said.

Birgitte looked at her husband in surprise.

LIGHT GHAZAL

I'm terrible at parties, secrets, and money. I want my stars sexy: fast light
that's prophetic. No nonsense about physics, refraction, past light.

Even in Barcelona, I can't turn a bike. I let you change my mind: free will
and wet hair. One night, I let you pour white wine. I drink its aghast light.

Happy now? We're both like this—full of risk and nowhere to put it.
We sidle up to strangers with dry cigarettes and ask, *Light*?

I want small churches and noisy continents. I want you. I want you better.
I want you moved by what moves me: God, glass, light.

You like the line about men bored with beautiful women, as though
boredom's the prize, as though those peonies weren't a gaslight.

It's O.K. I play dumb. I count codes under my breath. I circle
you like a devoted planet. I see the whiskey bottle. I forecast light.

I'm a better gambler than wife: the house fills with music and your singing.
Dear enabler. Dear truce. I know you see the moon's steadfast light.

I know you remember Madrid, Istanbul, pinecones, that trip to
Iceland. How every midnight had a sun. How we clung to its last light.

—*Hala Alyan*

Kevin was going to say he knew who they were, too, only his cookie was in the way.

"There's no mistaking it," Henrik said, his eyes finding Birgitte as if wanting her to say something, too. "Can't you see?"

She scrutinized Kevin.

"It's Åge Jørgensen's lad," he said.

A little gasp escaped her. A snap of breath.

"It is, isn't it?" Henrik said, and then seemed to examine Kevin's clothing. A moment passed in which Kevin munched and pointed at his mouth, munched and pointed.

Kevin swallowed at last and smiled with pride.

"Yes," he said. "I am."

"I hadn't realized," Birgitte said. She kept looking first at Kevin, then at her husband.

"Do you know my dad?" Kevin said.

"Oh, we don't *know* him," Henrik said, his expression changing. "But we know who he is."

Kevin gave a puzzled look.

"From when he used to live here," Henrik explained.

"Here?" Kevin said.

"That's right," Henrik said.

"But he's never lived here."

They all went quiet.

"You'll be Jan," Henrik said after a second.

"Not Jan, Jon," Kevin said.

"Jon," Henrik said.

"Jon, yes," Kevin said. "He's my younger brother."

"Yes, you would have a younger brother," Henrik said, glancing again at Birgitte.

"Two, in a way, if my dad's new girlfriend's boy counts. But they live in Pattaya," Kevin said. "It's in Thailand."

"You don't say," Henrik said, and laughed as if what Kevin had said was funny.

"Have you been there?" Kevin asked. He smoothed the front of his top.

"No," Henrik said, rather quickly. "We certainly have not."

"Me neither," Kevin said. He could hear his father's voice in his head: Someday we'll go there together. Only it's a bit expensive if we're all going to go.

One of the candles on the chest of drawers in the hall went out. Birgitte opened a drawer, took out a long-necked lighter, and lit the candle again.

"They're very nice candles," Kevin said.

"We produce them ourselves," Henrik said.

"I know."

"It keeps half the village in work," Henrik said. "But what's your name, if it isn't Jon?"

"Kevin Jørgensen."

"Kevin," Henrik said.

"Yes."

"Birgitte," Henrik said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Offer Kevin another cookie, would you?"

Birgitte held out the baking tray. He chose another one and put it in his pocket.

"Thank you very much," he said.

"Take a couple."

Kevin studied the cookies again.

"In fact, you can take as many as you like," Henrik said, and so Kevin took one, two, three more cookies and put them in his pocket.

"Are you sure that's all? Go on, have some more," Henrik said.

"I don't mind if I do," Kevin said.

"I thought so," Henrik said.

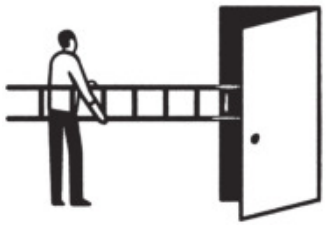
Kevin didn't know what else to say. Fortunately, Henrik did.

"You're the absolute spit of him," he said.

"The spit?"

"That's right. You look just like him. Your dad, that is," Henrik said. "It's amazing, when you think about it, that a person can look so much like somebody else."

Kevin's father was tall and hairy. His forehead was creased, and the creases never went away, not even when he relaxed. His father had five DVDs of porn hidden under the mattress and a bat next to his bed. His father walked with a slight



limp and coughed up mucus into the bathroom sink every night without washing it away. His father hated the government, which made people work for their disability benefits. His father was a Libra. His father had green eyes.

"I've got my mum's eyes," Kevin said, widening them so that both Henrik and Birgitte could see.

"It's your honker that gives you away," Henrik said, tapping the side of his own nose with a forefinger. "What's he doing with himself, anyway?"

"Now, you mean?"

"Yes, now."

"I can phone him, if you like. But I don't think he'd answer."

"I'm sure," Henrik said.

"It's because we've only got one charger at the moment."

"Ah."

"Our dog keeps chewing them up."

"I see. That's not very good."

"No, he chews everything up."

"Dogs need to be trained, or else—"

"Or else what?" Birgitte said.

"Well, or else you shouldn't have one."

"He just needs to learn, that's all," Kevin said. "He's only a puppy."

Birgitte was about to say something, but then her husband did.

"I saw that advert your dad put in the local paper. What was the slogan, now? It's slipped my mind."

" 'Cow-hoof trimmer? Åge's no beginner!' " Kevin said.

"That was it," Henrik replied with a smile. "Priceless."

Kevin smiled back.

"It's just something he does on the side," he explained. "To earn a bit of extra money. He's been looking for something more permanent, only jobs are hard to come by if you can't work full time."

"Are they really?"

"Yes, and employers can't even be bothered to take five minutes to reply to an application."

"Can't they?"

"No, they're too stuck up."

"Plenty of work to be had for those who want it," Henrik said.

Kevin pictured his father making candles for Henrik and Birgitte, twenty hours a week in a factory hall with tall chimneys. He imagined him having his lunch in a cafeteria and then coming home and talking about how his day had gone. Getting paid once a month and taking Kevin to the cinema.

"That'll be why he's driving again, I suppose," Henrik said. "I hear he drives a brown Lada now, with commercial plates. With loud music coming out of it. Is that right?"

"Yes, it's got a really good stereo," Kevin said.

"There you are, then," Henrik

said. "Spotted on the main road a couple of weeks back."

"Says who?" Birgitte said.

"Says Svenne, the carpenter."

"Well, do you know what I think?" she said, folding her arms across her chest. "I think Svenne should get a life. And I think you should lay off the lad. It's hardly his fault."

Henrik scrutinized her for a moment.

"He's not responsible for his dad," she said.

"I could come back another time, if you like," Kevin said. "Nothing we can do today that can't be put off until tomorrow."

"How old are you, anyway?" Henrik said.

"Ten," Kevin said.

"Ten," Henrik said, in a strange voice, as if he could tell by looking at Kevin that this wasn't entirely true.

"Or nearly ten," Kevin said. "Nine and three-quarters, actually. But I'll be ten next year. The eighth of February."

"You'll be having a party, then?"

"Yes," Kevin said. He could feel his cheeks growing warm. Under his bed, he kept a birthday box. In it were some drinking straws with little umbrellas attached, leftovers from last New Year's Eve. There were fifteen in all. He dealt them out in his head. Dad and Jon and himself. Granddad in Thisted, if he could get someone to drive him. Mum, if she and Dad were getting along. Henrik and Birgitte. Kevin smiled at them, and Birgitte smiled back.

"It won't be a big party," he said.

"Won't it?" Henrik said.

"Not this time. It's the half-term holiday, you see. People will be away. Besides, it's too much fuss for my dad. I'm sure it'll be a nice day, though."

"Too much fuss? His son's birthday?"

"It's not because he doesn't want to," Kevin said, shaking his foot inside his rain boot. It had gone to sleep from standing still so long.

"Have you ever heard the like?" Henrik said, looking now at Birgitte. "His own lad's birthday."

"He's got an old concussion," Kevin said.

"I'll bet."

"That'll do," Birgitte said.

"And dodgy knees," Kevin said. "It's not easy for him."

The wind gusted in the dark. Farther away, something made a commotion. It was the sound of an object dislodging, a roofing tile or a satellite dish, perhaps, falling to the concrete and breaking into bits. The lawn was saturated. There were big muddy pools in the grass. The rain sheeted down.

"Come out of that weather," Birgitte said. "You'll be drenched." She took Kevin's arm and drew him a step closer. "Now, about those stamps you were selling."

"They're not stamps exactly. They're—"

"Uh, what do you say we skip birding today?"

"To think," Henrik said, as if to himself. "More than ten years ago now."

"Henrik," Birgitte said. "I think you should go inside." She made as if to bundle him away from the door, but Henrik stayed put.

"Philip," he said calmly, pensively, and shook his head.

"Henrik," Birgitte said. "Inside."

"Philip?" Kevin said.

"Yes, Philip," Henrik snapped back, like the name belonged only to him.

"It's a nice name," Kevin said, sensing that he ought to say something but unsure what it should be.

"He was only on his way home from handball practice," Henrik said. "It wouldn't have taken five minutes on an ordinary night like this, especially when the weather wasn't as bad."

Kevin could hear himself breathe.

"It was an accident," Birgitte said.

Kevin dipped a hand into his pocket and was about to produce a cookie but thought better of it.

"An accident?" Henrik said. "Is that what you call it?"

"Yes," she said. It sounded almost as if she were crying. "A terrible accident that we needn't talk about now, Henrik."

"Getting behind the wheel of a car when you're pissed out of your mind?"

"Henrik," Birgitte said again. She took his hand and gave it a squeeze. "The boy obviously knows nothing about it."

"About what?" Kevin said.

"Let me see those stickers you've got," Birgitte said, smiling at him now. He'd nearly forgotten about them.

"It wasn't what *I* would call an accident," Henrik said.

Then Kevin said what his father usually said whenever there was a program about such things on the television: "How terrible."

"You think so, do you?" Henrik said.

Birgitte put the flat of her hand against his chest to shove him inside.

"I'm talking to the boy. I'm allowed to, you know," Henrik said.

"Not about this, you're not."

"Like I said," Kevin said, and gave his laptop bag a pat. "I'm out for a good cause."

Henrik was breathing heavily.

Then gradually everything went quiet.

"All right," Henrik said at last. "What sort of good cause?"

"I can't quite remember," Kevin said.

"You can't remember?"

"It was something to do with children. . . ."

"Save the Children?" Birgitte said.

"That's it," Kevin said.

He wasn't sure what more to say. Henrik looked out at the garden.

"These are the stickers, if you'd like to see them first," Kevin said, and handed Henrik a plastic sleeve.

Henrik looked through them.

"Actually," he said, "I'm not sure we're interested."

He handed them back to Kevin, though without returning the sheets to their sleeve. Rain washed over them. Colors started to run. Angels dissolved into clouds, chimney sweeps became black blotches that seeped into toothy mice, then trailed over stars and Christmas hearts and trees.

Henrik went inside for a moment and then came back.

"You're in luck," he said. In his hand was a small cylinder wrapped in brown paper.

He squeezed the cylinder between his fingers and out popped first one, then two, three, sixteen coins in all into Kevin's outstretched hand.

"We'll take the lot," he said.

Shiny and new, the coins lay in Kevin's palm, the Queen's head on top.

"All of them?" Kevin said.

"That's right," Henrik said. "All of them."

Kevin handed him the soggy sheets of paper.

"Thank you very much," he said, and dropped the coins into a pocket in his bag.

"On one condition," Henrik said. "You do me a little favor in return."

"Of course," Kevin said.

"Say hello to your dad from Henrik Rønbjerg Madsen."

"There's no need for that," Birgitte said.

"You stay out of it," her husband replied.

Birgitte huffed and went inside, her feet thumping heavily.

"Henrik Rønbjerg Madsen." Henrik pronounced the name slowly and deliberately, almost sounding it out. "Have you got that, do you think?"

• •

"Yes," Kevin said. "Henrik Rønbjerg Madsen."

"Right," Henrik said. "It's a deal."

"Right," Kevin said. "I'll tell him. Have a nice evening, and thank you for your business."

"My pleasure," Henrik said.

For a moment, Kevin remained standing at the door that had now closed on him, as if he were waiting for something more to happen. As he went down the drive, he turned and looked back, and in an upstairs window he saw Henrik flop down into an armchair. Seconds later, the music started again, the volume turned up a notch. Kevin arranged the strap of his laptop bag more comfortably on his shoulder, then carried on along the road.

Slowly, slowly, he walked.

He counted his steps to put his mind on something else.

One, two, three.

He passed the first of the houses he had seen when entering the village and was soon well on his way. A wind whipped at everything that was not rooted or lashed to the ground, rivulets of rain ran toward him on the road, and his pajama bottoms felt sodden and heavy. He sat down on a bench inside a podlike bus shelter. At his feet was an empty tobacco tin. He kicked it away. An out-of-date timetable was fixed to the inside of the shelter. Beside it, some words were scratched into the fibreglass:

~~S+T~~
torkild lund is a joke
BIG BASTARD GOT HIS HEAD KICKED IN HERE 13.8.2007 WELL DESERVED
Thanks for info
BEST FUCK RING 97528252
Fake
Not fake
Number not working
Not working
Number doesn't work :-(

His fingers were numb. He wondered how much rain it took to make a flood. The dike could burst. The roads could turn into rivers. The bus shelter could be swept away with him in it. The rain drummed against the roof.

Apart from that, there were no other sounds. He craned his head to look at the sky. His father had once told him about the moon in Pattaya. It was big there, and as orange as an orange. Here, it was small and pale. ♦

(Translated, from the Danish, by Martin Aitken.)

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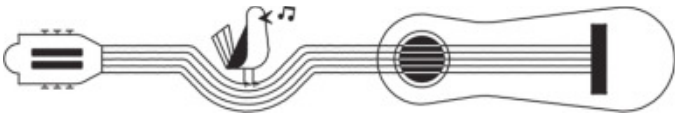
Thomas Korsgaard on what children know.

THE CRITICS



BOOKS

LORDING IT

Can Byron be freed from the Byronic?

BY ANTHONY LANE

It is almost two hundred years since the death of Lord Byron. He succumbed to a fever on April 19, 1824, in the town of Missolonghi, on the west coast of Greece, at the age of thirty-six. As was far from unusual at the time, medical professionals did much to hasten the end that they were supposed to prevent. In Byron's words, "There are many more die of the lancet than the lance." Leeches, enemas, and blistering—the deliberate raising of blisters on the skin—were part of the treatment. Byron was reluctant to be bled by his physicians, whom he slighted as "a damned set of butchers," but eventually surrendered to their efforts. One modern expert has estimated that, in his final days, they drained at least two and a half litres of his blood. It is surprising that the patient lasted as long as he did.

Byron had come to Greece the previous year, sailing from Italy, where he had been living since 1816. He was a British peer, and his poems have lodged him in the canon of English verse, yet the last eight years of his life were spent in exile. His liberal sympathies had always been fierily provocative, and his hope, on arrival in Greece, had been that he might lend his name, his title, his legendary lustre, and his considerable wealth to the cause of Greek independence in the fight against Ottoman rule. A naval officer, Captain Edward Blaquiere, had assured him that "your presence will operate as a Talisman—and the field is too glorious,—too closely associated with all you hold dear, to be any longer abandoned." Yet here was Byron, expiring not in glory but in delirium, with an unavailing gaggle of doctors and servants, amid a Babel of English, Italian, and Greek, and, outside, the shout of a thunderstorm. "Half smiling," one onlooker reported, the dying man said, "*Questa è una bella scena*." Or, "What a beautiful scene."

That clear note of the theatrical—of the self-dramatizing reflex, ringing out even at the last, on a dismal deathbed, far from home—is what we should listen out for, two centuries on, as we consider the case of Byron. Seldom is the drama unattended by the half smile. However heated the moment, and no matter whether the action is carnal, domestic, military, meteorological, or fashionably social, Byron, at his best, takes care to cast a cool, appraising glance at how the spectacle must appear to the passing ironist:

> They look upon each other, and their eyes
> Gleam in the moonlight; and her white arm clasps
> Round Juan's head, and his around her lies
> Half buried in the tresses which it grasps;
> She sits upon his knee, and drinks his sighs,
> He hers, until they end in broken gasps;
> And thus they form a group that's quite antique,
> Half naked, loving, natural, and Greek.

Such is the pretty picture presented by the hero and his paramour (one of many) in the second canto of "Don Juan," Byron's uncontested masterpiece. He began it in 1818; the fifteenth and sixteenth cantos were published shortly before his death, a fragment of a seventeenth long afterward. Notice how the quip at the stanza's end—a comical counterpart, you might say, to the vision of arrested beauty in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"—provides something other than cynical deflation. The fact that the lovers conform to a type, in their sighing and gasping, seems to buoy up, not to pop, the erotic mood. For all his lofty status, Byron tends to look askance rather than down. Ever generous, he bequeaths to us his craving for sensation. Just because there is nothing original under the sun doesn't mean that adventurous souls should not be over the moon. Tomorrow to fresh beds, and battles new.

But where to start? Should you wish to tackle Byron, now is the time, as the bicentenary of his death draws near; there's no denying, however, that his collected works loom like a fortress in your path. He claimed to detest the act of writing: "I feel it as a torture, which I must get rid of, but never as a pleasure. On the contrary, I think composition a great pain." Join the club. Somehow he mastered the torment and plowed ahead. A fine new Oxford edition of his poetry and accompanying material, edited by Jonathan Sachs and Andrew Stauffer, omits great swathes of Byron's output, but still runs to some eleven hundred pages. (And costs a hundred and forty-five dollars. Could one request a small discount, perhaps, given that there's a typo on the first page of the introduction?) As for his letters and journals, they have struck devotees as the most unflagging in the language, but these days they need to be hunted down secondhand, and, be warned, they fill thirteen volumes in all. To read straight through them would ruin your sleep, imperil your relationships, and entail trading your life for Byron's. Sounds like a fair swap to me.

Luckily, there is an alternative. Stauffer is paying double homage, not just co-producing the Oxford edition but also

ABOVE: ERRATA CARMONA

People who have never read a line of Byron's verse may still have heard that he was "mad—bad—and dangerous to know."

ILLUSTRATION BY CECILIA CARLSTEDT

giving us "Byron: A Life in Ten Letters" (Cambridge). This is a compact biography, elegantly structured around a few choice pickings from the poet's correspondence. Each letter affords Stauffer a chance for a ruminative riff on whichever facet of Byron's history and character happened to be glittering most brightly at the time. We are presented, for instance, with a jammed and breathless communication from Byron to his London publisher, John Murray, almost three thousand words long, sent from Ravenna, in 1819, and centered on "La Fornarina"—Margarita Cogni, a tempestuous baker's wife with whom Byron had been involved in Venice. Stauffer comments, "One gets the sense that he could have kept going indefinitely with more juicy details, except he runs out of room."

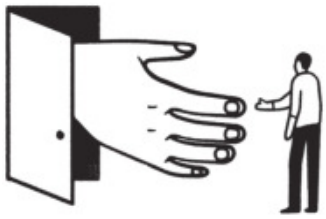
The person whom we know as Lord Byron made his entrance into the world, in 1788, with a plainer name: George Gordon Byron. The baby's mother was Catherine Gordon, a Scottish heiress, and his father was Captain John Byron, commonly referred to as Mad Jack (not to be confused with *his* father, an admiral known as Foulweather Jack), a spendthrift who did his best to burn through his wife's inheritance. The child had a misshapen foot and lower leg, which was to cause him lasting pain and lent him what one biographer, Fiona MacCarthy, calls a "sliding gait." Even here one finds a spasm of unlikely comedy: among his adult acquaintances, there was some disagreement as to which foot was actually deformed.

Young George was three years old when his father died. The boy was taken to Scotland by his mother, who was anything but temperate—"haughty as Lucifer," as he later recalled. From first to last, there is no sense of placidity, let alone swampy flatness, in Byron's existence; he was either forcing things to happen or having them befall him, and, in following every twist, you constantly need to remind yourself that this is a real being and not a fictional character. (He may have suffered the same confusion himself.) When he was six, the plot took another turn. The great-nephew of Foulweather Jack was killed by a cannonball in Corsica, the upshot being that Byron was now the heir presumptive to a title. He acceded to it in 1798, becoming the sixth Lord Byron, and his earliest biographer, Thomas Moore, tells us that, at school roll call, the word "Dominus" was prefixed to Byron's name. According to Moore, the ten-year-old child "stood silent amid the general stare of his schoolfellows, and, at last, burst into tears."

With his change of status came an ancient house, Newstead Abbey, near Nottingham, which still stands today. Grand and gloomy, with monastic ruins built into its structure, and three hundred acres of parkland, it is almost a parody of a Gothic dwelling; Washington Irving, having paid a visit, described it as one of "those quaint and romantic piles, half castle, half convent, which remain as monuments of the olden times of England." No less absurd is the notion of its having been the fiefdom of a lad. A poem titled "On Leaving N—st—d," written when Byron was fifteen, shows how the place ignited his flammable imaginings:

> Through the cracks in these battlements loud the winds whistle,
> For the hall of my fathers is gone to decay.

The precocity did not end there. Something murkier occurred as well. Byron had a Scottish nurse, May Gray; it was reported, by one of his guardians, "that she was perpetually beating him, and that his bones sometimes ached from it; that she brought all sorts of Company of the very lowest Description into his apartments." Byron later confessed to a friend that, when he was nine, "a free



Scotch girl," meaning Gray, "used to come to bed with him and play tricks with his person." Byron added, in his journal, "My passions were developed *very* early—so early—that few would believe me." The tone here is highly distinctive, entwining a perverse boastfulness with traumatic dread. As if that mixture weren't dense enough, the boy's abuser had a habit of quoting Scripture to him. The commingling of the sacred and profane in Byron's mature verse has no single root cause, but any inquiries should start with May Gray.

Byron went to Harrow School, and from there, "as unsocial as a wolf taken from the troop," to Trinity College, Cambridge. "I am now most pleasantly situated in *Super*excellent Rooms," he wrote, in 1805. "Yesterday my appearance in the Hall in my State Robes was *Superb*." Behind the snort of the italics, you hear a smart young beau trying too hard to carry off an aristocratic swagger. Hop ahead two years and you discover, as so often with Byron, that the edge of enthusiasm has been dulled. The first letter in Stauffer's selection has a jaded air: "This place is wretched enough, a villainous Chaos of Dice and Drunkenness, nothing but Hazard and Burgundy, Hunting, Mathematics and Newmarket, Riot and Racing."

For all the wretchedness, Cambridge provided Byron with what he later called "the happiest, perhaps, days of my life." It also furnished him with new acquaintances, including an undergraduate named John Cam Hobhouse, who would grow into a lifelong friend; a young chorister, John Edleston, for whom Byron conceived "a violent, though *pure* love and passion"; and, notoriously, a bear—Byron's way of cocking a shaggy snook at the authorities, who forbade the keeping of dogs. But he was genuinely fond of animals, and the bear was the prelude to a rolling bestiary. Years afterward, Percy Bysshe Shelley went to stay with Byron in Ravenna and met "five peacocks, two guinea hens, and an Egyptian crane" on the stairs.

At Cambridge, Byron attended no lectures, as far as we know. And yet, despite the demands of dissipation, he wrote. For him, poetry was no sequestered art; more aflame than aloft, it had to hold its own among competing ardors, any one of which could burn itself out. The trick was to catch and to kindle it when the opportunity arose, as he explained to Thomas Moore:

> I can never get people to understand that poetry is the expression of *excited passion*, and that there is no such thing as a life of passion any more than a continuous earthquake, or an eternal fever. Besides, who would ever *shave* themselves in such a state?

By the time Byron left university, he had produced no less than three volumes of verse, two of them privately printed.

The third, tellingly titled "Hours of Idleness," earned a review so infuriating to Byron that his response developed into yet another book, "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers," which launched a broadside against his contemporaries and hymned the praises of Alexander Pope, who had died sixty-five years earlier. In homage to Pope, Byron vented his spleen in heroic couplets:

> But now, so callous grown, so changed since youth,
> I've learn'd to think, and sternly speak the truth;

The joke is that Byron was all of twenty-one when this was published. Upon coming of age, he was able to take his place in the House of Lords. By then he was residing in London, "buried in an abyss of Sensuality," as he admitted, from which there was but one reliable escape. Thus it was that he set off, in June, 1809, together with Hobhouse, for Portugal. The new Oxford edition, ever dutiful, treats us to the poet's earnest envoi, its stanzas stiff with respectable yearning. ("And I will cross the whit'ning foam,/ And I will seek a foreign home" and "I go—but wheresoe'er I flee/There's not an eye will weep for me.") No fun at all. What the editors leave out, and what gives us a much saltier splash of the departing Byron, is a farewell letter that he sent to a pal named Francis Hodgson. Imagine receiving this in the mail:

> Now we've reached her, lo! the Captain
> *Gallant* Kidd commands the crew
> Passengers *now* their berths are clapt in
> Some to grumble, some to spew,
> Heyday! call you that a Cabin?
> Why tis hardly three feet square
> Not enough to stow Queen Mab in,
> Who the deuce can harbour there?
> Who Sir? plenty
> Nobles twenty
> Did at once my vessel fill
> Did they—Jesus!
> How you squeeze us
> Would to God, they did so still,
> Then I'd scape the heat & racket
> Of the good ship, Lisbon Packet.

If you want to track the to-and-fro of Byron's life, you need a map. This would show his first batch of peregrinations: Lisbon, Seville, Cádiz, Gibraltar, Malta, Albania, Missolonghi (fifteen years before he died there), Athens, Constantinople, Athens again, and back to England. Five years in and around London, so fraught with incident that they would have filled another man's life to overflowing. The final adieu to his native land, in 1816. Brussels, Waterloo, and a villa on Lake Geneva. Venice, Rome, Venice once more, this time for a deep dive. Ravenna, Bologna, Pisa, Genoa, and Greece. Embarkation to the underworld.

And the cast list! Abroad, there was a teen-ager who taught Byron Italian—"I am his 'Padrone' and his 'amico' and Lord knows what besides," Byron said—and a Greek with "ambrosial curls hanging down his amiable back." (A bright thread of bisexuality runs through Byron's career.) In England, there was Lady Caroline Lamb, with whom Byron conducted a barely concealed affair, and whose husband was later, as Lord Melbourne, to be Prime Minister. Byron also enjoyed an epistolary closeness to Caroline's mother-in-law, who was rather more discreet; in 1815, briefly and catastrophically, he married the latter's niece, Annabella Milbanke. One cause of the marital split was Annabella's well-grounded suspicion that Byron was having sexual relations with his own half sister, Augusta, whose third daughter may have been his. If so, he was following the example of his father, Mad Jack, who had consorted with *his* sister. Fiona MacCarthy remarks that incest "clusters within families." No kidding.

For anyone who likes to have intimate miseries from long ago unpacked and clarified as if they were current affairs, MacCarthy is your guide. In regard to Byron's sundering from Annabella, for example, Stauffer wisely suggests that "the total narrative is elusive, perhaps as it would be for any relationship placed under such intense scrutiny by so many interested parties." Thomas Moore alludes to "some dimly hinted confession of undefined horrors." MacCarthy, though, dispenses with the dimness:

> Had the scandal been only that of the breakdown of his marriage Byron might, if he had chosen to do so, have ridden out the storm. It was the additional element of incest, and more critically sodomy, that made his departure unavoidable.

Byron, for his part, took a poised approach to the rumors. "If *they were true* I was unfit for England, *if false* England is unfit for me," he wrote. We find ourselves bumping headlong into the Byron problem—not the question of what he

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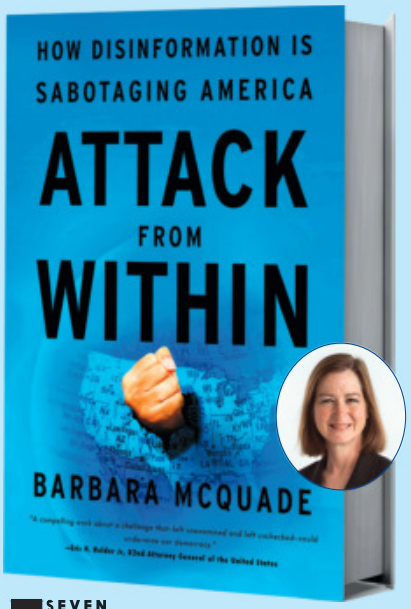

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did or might have done with whom, and when, but the remorseless way in which, during his lifetime and ever since, what you might call the higher gossip has trapped him in its claws. In the process, he is at once idolized and belittled. You could say that this procedure awaits all major poets; they are doomed to be more talked about than read, and, even when they *are* read, the poetry is parsed as a coded transcription of the life. Byron, however, remains the most extreme case. People who have never encountered a line of his verse may be able to cite Caroline Lamb's verdict on him ("mad—bad—and dangerous to know"), and, in common with Machiavelli, he has had the disturbing honor of spawning his own adjective. Google the word "Byronic" and up, with a toss of the forelock, comes this: "alluringly dark, mysterious, and moody." The Devil take him!

But Byron *was* Byronic. One observer, Lady Mildmay, is said to have felt the full force:

> Once, when he spoke to her in a doorway, her heart beat so violently that she could hardly answer him. She said it was not only her awe of his great talents, but the peculiarity of a sort of *under* look he used to give, that produced this effect upon her.

Then, there was Lady Falkland, the widow of a friend. "It is not a loveless heart I offer you, but a heart where every throb beats responsive to your own," she wrote to Byron, in 1812, after "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," his first hit, had commenced publication. "I awoke one morning and found myself famous," he recalled, and that fame seems to have quickened the birth of fan mail. In order to feel the throb, you didn't need to be a Lady, or even to have met the poet in the flesh. His presence on paper was sufficient, as shown by the outpourings of another reader: "Sir, I have just finished the perusal of your incomparable works—an impulse grateful as irresistible impels me to acknowledge your Pen has called forth the most exquisite feelings I have ever experienced."

In truth, much of Byron's earlier verse—including "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," with its protagonist roaming across Europe, powered by the perpetual motion of unsatisfied longing—leaves one struggling to fathom what all the fuss was about. "The Corsair," a roistering tale of piracy, sold ten thousand copies on the day of publication, in 1814. ("I have read the Corsair, mended my petticoat, & have nothing else to do," Jane Austen wrote in a letter.) Murray said that every man in the street had either read it or heard of it. How come? The autobiographical shading helped, for sure. The fact that Byron was known to have ventured far afield played into the voguish lust for the "exotic," and he, in turn, went along with it, posing for a "Portrait of a Nobleman in the Dress of an Albanian." To modern senses, "The Corsair" gives off a heavy whiff of Orientalism:

> In Coron's bay floats many a galley light,
> Through Coron's lattices the lamps are bright,
> For Seyd, the Pacha, makes a feast to-night:

Reading this now is like standing in front of a richly hued and glossily varnished old oil painting. So, in an era of mass tourism, when we can check out Coron (now Koroni, in southern Greece) on Instagram, and when celebrity—a concept that Byron, as much as anyone, brought into being—has gained in frenzy but lost its individuating glow, how can we summon the shock of Byronism? I would advise retracing his steps not in verse but in his letters and diaries, where wonders forever cease in order to make room for anticlimax. The dashing Lord is never more himself than when he charges into a forest of dashes, as in these Swiss jottings from 1816:

> Arrived at the Grindenwald—dined—mounted again & rode to the higher Glacier—twilight—but distinct—very fine Glacier—like a *frozen hurricane*—Starlight—beautiful—but a devil of a path—never mind—got safe in—a little lightning—but the whole of the day as fine in point of weather—as the day on which Paradise was made.—Passed *whole woods of withered pines—all withered*—trunks stripped & barkless—branches lifeless—done by a single winter—their appearance reminded me of me & my family.—

Alternatively, sit down and read "Don Juan." I have it in an old Penguin paperback that can be stuffed into a coat pocket, carried around, and devoured like a nineteenth-century novel. Which, in many ways, it is.

In September, 1818, Byron told Moore of a new undertaking: "It is called 'Don Juan,' and is meant to be a little quietly facetious upon every thing. But I doubt whether it is not—at least, as far as it has yet gone—too free for these very modest days. However, I shall try the experiment, anonymously, and if it don't take it will be discontinued." Safe to say that he continued, taking advantage of that freedom to cram into the poem pretty much anything that came to mind: shipwreck, cannibalism, lobster, cross-dressing, violent slurs upon the Duke of Wellington. In the ranks of the gallivanting, Don Juan makes Childe Harold seem sedentary, and Byron, as a narrator, keeps interrupting his story and whipping himself back into line: "Hail, Muse! *et cetera*," or, "But I'm digressing."

All told, the result is the most conversational epic ever penned, and certainly the only one with punch lines. Such is its Shakespearean capaciousness that Byron finds a use even for the dregs of his own experience. His biographers may be preoccupied by the ill will that brimmed between him and Annabella, but "Don Juan" distills the entire disaster into one sparkling phrase, ("that moral centaur, man and wife"), and proposes this:

> Marriage from love, like vinegar from wine—
> A sad, sour, sober beverage—by time
> Is sharpen'd from its high celestial flavour
> Down to a very homely household savour.

Notice how the second line requires us, especially if we're reading aloud, to slow down and relish the ruefulness. The ensuing pages are littered with similar aperçus, too pensive to be gags, too light of spirit for sententiousness: "Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife, / He would have written sonnets all his life?" Or, "Wives in their husbands' absences grow subtler / and daughters sometimes run off with the butler."

What's going on here? The poem, as its creator says, "Turns what was once romantic to burlesque," catching up with the garrulously jocund strain that had animated Byron's letters from the start. But how, precisely, did he manage to leap from this, in "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," in 1816—

> He who hath loved not, here would learn that lore,
> And make his heart a spirit; he who knows
> That tender mystery, will love the more,
> For this is Love's recess, where vain men's woes,

And the world's waste, have driven him
far from those,
For 'tis his nature to advance or die.
He stands not still, but or decays, or grows
Into a boundless blessing, which may vie
With the immortal lights, in its eternity!

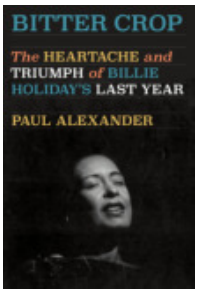
—to this, from "Don Juan," only three years later?

In thoughts like these true wisdom may
discern
Longings sublime, and aspirations high,
Which some are born with, but the most
part learn
To plague themselves withal, they know
not why:
'Twas strange that one so young should
thus concern
His brain about the action of the sky;
If you think 'twas philosophy that this did,
I can't help thinking puberty assisted.

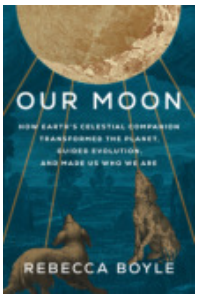
One answer is technical. The first passage is a Spenserian stanza, nine lines long, the last line being an Alexandrine—consisting of six feet, that is, and thus metrically a foot longer than the iambic pentameters that precede it. The effect is to stretch out the march of the verse, and to apply a calmative or an uplift. In contrast, "Don Juan" is, a few interludes excepted, in *ottava rima*: eight lines of equal length, rounded off with a resounding snap. As often as not, the snap is an undercut, slicing off solemnity at the knees. Byron dreams up rhymes with a cunning and a candor that are specifically designed to jolt: "martyrs hairy"/"Virgin Mary," "resurrection"/"dissection," "the loss of her"/"philosopher," or the splendidly mischievous "intellectual"/"hen-peck'd you all." Both Childe Harold and Don Juan are restless wanderers, but only the latter inspires Byron to unloose this meaty insult: "But here I say the Turks were much mistaken,/Who hating hogs, yet wished to save their bacon."

Here and there, "Don Juan" oversteps the mark. No one has ever been more cavalier than Byron about plunging face first into the melee of desire, on the page as on the rumpled couch, and he is equally honest when faced with the sheer nastiness of combat—"a brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art," as he says in "Don Juan." His accounts of slaughter, wrought by Russians against Turks, in the poem's eighth canto, verge on the Tolstoyan: "Sliding knee-deep in lately frozen mud,/Now thawed into a marsh of human blood." It is

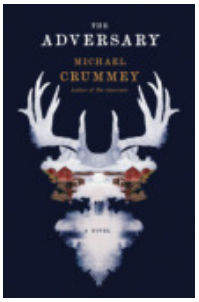
BRIEFLY NOTED



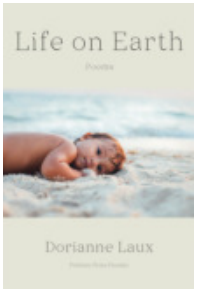
Bitter Crop, *by Paul Alexander (Knopf)*. This ambitious biography of the jazz singer Billie Holiday uses 1959, the tumultuous final year of her life, as a prism through which to view her career. Drawing its title from "Strange Fruit," a song about lynching that was Holiday's best-selling recording, the book focusses on her experiences of racism and exploitation, and on her anxiety about government surveillance. In tracing Holiday's longtime drug and alcohol use, which damaged her health and led to her spending nearly a year in prison for narcotics possession, Alexander also delves into the unwarranted sensationalism with which the press often covered these matters at the time. Holiday died at forty-four. Toward the end, she was frail—at one point weighing only ninety-nine pounds—but, as one concertgoer noted, "She still had her voice."



Our Moon, *by Rebecca Boyle (Penguin)*. This chronicle of our planet's "silvery sister" begins with the explosive interaction, four and a half billion years ago, that split the moon from the Earth, and eventually encompasses the climatic chaos that is likely to ensue when it ultimately escapes our gravitational pull. Boyle inventories the ways in which the moon's presence affects life on Earth—influencing menstrual cycles, dictating the timing of D Day—and how humans' conception of it has evolved, changing from a deity to the basis for an astronomical calendar to a natural-resource bank. Throughout, the author orbits a central idea: that understanding the science and the history of the moon may help to unlock mysteries elsewhere in the universe.



The Adversary, *by Michael Crummey (Doubleday)*. An all-consuming, mutually destructive sibling rivalry propels this vibrant historical novel, set in a provincial port in nineteenth-century Newfoundland—"the backwoods of a backwards colony." The antagonists are the inheritor of the largest business in the region and his older sister, who, through marriage, takes control of a competing enterprise. Amid their attempts to undermine and overtake each other, the community around them suffers "a spiralling accretion of chaos": murder, pandemics, a cataclysmic storm, an attack by privateers, and a riot. By turns bawdy, violent, comic, and gruesome, Crummey's novel presents a bleak portrait of colonial life and a potent rendering of the ways in which the "vicious, hateful helplessness" of a grudge can corrupt everything it touches.



Life on Earth, *by Dorianne Laux (Norton)*. "If we are fractured/we are fractured/like stars/bred to shine/in every direction," begins this small marvel of a poetry collection. Laux's deft, muscular verse illuminates the sharp facets of everyday existence, rendering humble things—Bisquick, a sewing machine, waitressing, watching a neighbor look at porn—into opportunities to project memory and imagination. Beautifully constructed exercises in tender yet fierce attention, these poems bear witness to deaths in the family, to climate destruction, and to the ravages of U.S. history, even as they insist on intimacy and wonder.

when he jumbles war and sex together that trouble stirs: "But six old damsels, each of seventy years,/Were all deflowered by different Grenadiers."

That is outrageous, now more than ever, and even the most ethically relaxed reader will feel like collaring the poet and exclaiming, "Hang on, Your Lordship, that's *not funny*." But the outrage is the point. Byron is surveying rout and pillage, and the terrible ease with which the laws of civil society, such as respect for the elderly, are flung aside. The clinching rhyme is like a pair of pincers, gripping to make us flinch. Byron is an equal-opportunity satirist, refusing to let go until we have agreed to examine our own prejudices for flaws: "Christians have burnt each other, quite persuaded/That all the Apostles would have done as they did." God knows that's true.

In a letter to Murray, Byron referred to "Don Juan" as "Donny Johnny." It's like Tolstoy saying that "Annie Karrie" is coming along nicely, or Shakespeare muttering about "Tony and Cleo" in the back of a pub. What allowed such insouciance to flourish, I would argue, was not just the Italian model of *ottava rima* but also Italy itself—Venice, above all, where Byron slipped his leash. "What men call gallantry, and gods adultery,/Is much more common where the climate's sultry," he wrote, and rarely has the bond between couplets and coupling been demonstrated with such alarming stamina. In a typical letter, Byron mentions a recent acquaintance, and adds: "fucked her twice a day for the last six—today is the seventh—but no Sabbath day—for we meet at Midnight at her Milliner's.—" As if to balance the books, he also spends time on the island of San Lazzaro, in a community of monks, learning Armenian. "My mind wanted something craggy to break upon," he explains.

But Venice was more than a set of challenges. To Byron, as to generations of uneasy admirers, it was the city of show. One word or deed could always mask another, and the waters offered both a sporting chance (he swam over the lagoon from the Lido and up the Grand Canal) and a rippling threat of dissolution. Everything, in the end, would melt away. Hence his newfound ability, in "Don Juan," to stand back from reputation, martial triumph, pledges of undying passion, and other mainstays of romantic renown, and to fool with them like toys:

> Well—well, the world must turn upon its axis,
> And all mankind turn with it, heads or tails,
> And live and die, make love and pay our taxes,
> And as the veering wind shifts, shift our sails;
> The king commands us, and the doctor quacks us,
> The priest instructs, and so our life exhales,
> A little breath, love, wine, ambition, fame,
> Fighting, devotion, dust,—perhaps a name.

The name of Byron, for a long while, tolled like a bell. On hearing the news of his passing, the teen-age Tennyson carved the words "Byron is dead" on a rock. "Let not my body be hacked, or sent to England," Byron had ordered, and he was promptly disobeyed. Many folk wanted a piece of him. His lungs and larynx were plucked out, placed in an urn, and kept in Missolonghi. The rest of him was ferried back to London, where his open coffin was displayed before being borne to a church near Newstead Abbey for interment. (Poets' Corner, in Westminster Abbey, was not an option: the dean had refused to accommodate such a blaspheming ne'er-do-well.) Byron's fellow-nobles, by and large, did not condescend to grieve him publicly. Thomas Moore noted, instead, "the riotous curiosity of the mob," with "few respectable persons among the crowd."

Byron would have rejoiced in such an irony: the blue blood revered by commoners. In a sense, it was not unexpected. His readership had already been broadened by the temptingly scandalous aura of "Don Juan." (I have seen shelves of cheap editions from the period, many of them pirated, and some no bigger than a pack of cigarettes.) As late as 1916, in "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," James Joyce's hero is pummelled by schoolmates for supporting Byron, who is, to the assailants, "only a poet for uneducated people." The fact is that Byron *had* spoken up for the downtrodden. His maiden speech in the House of Lords, in 1812, is still a clarion call: a rousing defense of the Luddites, who had smashed machinery that was taking over their jobs and were facing the death penalty. In Greece, likewise, Byron's faith in the self-determination of the country—"I dream'd that Greece might still be free"—has not been forgotten. To mark the bicentenary of his death, the Greek Ambassador to the United Kingdom will lay a wreath at Byron's statue in Trinity College.

Byron the philhellene is but one Byron among many. The limping boy, the wag with the bear, the cad with the under look, the Londoner, the libertine, the would-be liberator: take your pick. Although Byron defined himself as "a broken Dandy," and despite the portraits that depict him wearing a supercilious sulk, his loyal Cambridge friend Hobhouse clung to a more heartening vision. Of all Byron's peculiarities, Hobhouse wrote, "his laugh is that of which I have the most distinct recollections." Anyone who believes that radical politics have to be stern and humorless, for maximum impact, should consult Byron. He would cheer our progressive causes, but shame us into unpursing our lips.

What, if anything, binds all these Byrons together? Why does he not fall apart in our hands? Perhaps because his appetite for life, though contagious, is *not* insatiable; he, and his most compelling poems, are alert to the ways in which our hunger can be slaked. Very little matters as much as we like to pretend it does: "When one subtracts from life infancy (which is vegetation),—sleep, eating, and swilling—buttoning and unbuttoning—how much remains of downright existence? The summer of a dormouse." Melancholy and failure are part of the deal, and there is a profound comedy to be had from pressing on regardless. As he wrote, closing a letter to a friend:

> Good night—or, rather, morning. It is four, and the dawn gleams over the Grand Canal, and unshadows the Rialto.

I find it impossible not to be thrilled by that freshly minted verb, and by its promise of a day that is dying to be spent, or misspent, as fortune and fancy dictate. Byron was not a contented soul, yet a chapter of civilization is told by his discontents. Let him be unshadowed once again. ♦

BOOKS

ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

The long adolescence of Carson McCullers.

BY MAGGIE DOHERTY

McCullers was a brilliant but pampered writer, one who never quite grew up.

Throughout her life, the novelist Carson McCullers struck observers as preternaturally young. The biographer Leon Edel, who met her when she was thirty-seven, remarked on her "childish wonder." The French novelist Françoise Sagan wrote that she had the "laugh of a child forever lost." Like a child, she loved sweets, Christmas, and receiving presents on her birthday. Though she was tall—a "slender wand of a girl," in the words of her protégé turned rival, Truman Capote—she was often described as "little": "an odd little 22-year-old," a "little star."

If seemingly everyone agreed that McCullers was a child, they indulged her because she was a genius. The author of four novels, one novella, two plays, and sundry short stories and poems, McCullers ascended to literary fame when she was only twenty-three. Her début novel, "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter," wowed critics, who crowned her Faulkner's successor. In the decades that followed, McCullers devoted herself entirely to her work, relying on alcohol and an active fantasy life for inspiration. She relied, too, on a rotating cast of friends and family members, who cooked her meals, poured her drinks, listened to "her self-loving arias," and tucked her into bed at night. The playwright Tennessee Williams, McCullers's closest friend, thought she could be demanding, but he also thought that "when you remember the poetry of her work, you feel differently about her, appreciate her isolation and her longings, and you forgive her selfishness."

Since her untimely death, in 1967, at the age of fifty, biographers have tended to be similarly forgiving. In her 1975 biography, Virginia Spencer Carr presents McCullers as a sensitive and well-meaning dreamer, coddled from a young age and adored by the literati—how could she not be a bit self-important? Josyane Savigneau, whose biography of McCullers was translated from French into English in 2001, defends the novelist at nearly every turn, explaining that "a writer lives differently from people who don't write." And, in a more recent study of McCullers's life, Jenn Shapland attributes both the writer's protracted adolescence and her substance abuse to her queerness. (Though McCullers was married to a man for many years, her most significant romantic relationships were with women.) Given how lesbianism was pathologized, Shapland argues, it's not surprising that McCullers turned to drink.

The time is ripe, then, for a more clear-eyed appraisal. With "Carson McCullers: A Life" (Knopf), Mary V. Dearborn delivers. Dearborn, the author of six prior biographies, including three of mid-century American writers, approaches her subject with admiration—McCullers "created what may be American literature's most detailed, carefully observed picture of what it means to be an outsider," she writes—and also with a healthy skepticism. She's critical of McCullers's drinking and other "bad habits," and, armed with archival material unavailable to many of her predecessors, makes a strong case that these behaviors inhibited McCullers's writing and hurt those around her. "Those who loved her best treated her, in effect, like a child," Dearborn writes. "But Carson was a strong-willed woman, and this was how she wanted it."

A child in life, McCullers probed the emotional complexities of youth in her fiction. She is one of the great writers of American girlhood, someone who might be mentioned in the same breath as Louisa May Alcott and Judy Blume. But she was not a sentimentalist, or a young-adult author; rather, she used the techniques of literary modernism to depict the world as the child sees it, producing

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PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD AVEDON

sophisticated works of fiction for a sophisticated crowd. It may be true that she was a difficult person to be around, and that her life was less healthy and productive than it might have been. It may also be true that the same indulgent atmosphere that stunted her growth kept the link to late childhood alive.

McCullers was singled out early. The eldest of three children, Lula Carson Smith was clearly her mother's favorite. Vera Marguerite Smith, called Bébé by everyone who knew her, was an imaginative, charismatic woman who hosted salons in her living room. She dominated her quiet husband, a watchmaker and tinkerer, and lavished attention on her firstborn. "Mother fussed over me," McCullers recalled in an unfinished autobiography—curling her hair, tending to her appearance, and generally treating her like a young beauty-pageant contestant, or a doll.

Bébé was certain that her daughter was destined for fame, though she couldn't predict what kind. At first, it appeared that the girl's genius was musical. According to family lore, McCullers began playing the piano at five, when her father bought one for their home, in Columbus, Georgia. By six, she could pick out popular songs by ear; at ten, she was playing Liszt's Second Hungarian Rhapsody under the supervision of a teacher. Assuming she would be a great concert pianist, her parents allowed her to skip school in favor of practicing. McCullers, set apart from her peers, spent much of her childhood alone.

Encouraged by her mother and by a local musician named Mary Tucker—McCullers's first love object, Dearborn argues—McCullers planned to leave Columbus for New York, where she could study at Juilliard and, as she later put it, prepare "to make my mark in the world." But for various reasons—including a lack of family funds and a sickly adolescence—she shifted her attention to writing, a less physically demanding activity. Inspired by the plays of Eugene O'Neill and the fiction of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, she wrote an amateurish novel at fifteen, the same year she started going by her more androgynous middle name. Never one to research her books, McCullers instead dreamed up the details, imagining a New York where ticket collectors move through subway cars and city residents live in houses with front yards.

In the fall of 1934, McCullers saw the city for herself. Arriving by steamship, she worked menial jobs, having somehow lost the money her family had scraped together for her, and took writing classes at Columbia and New York University. The stories she produced there are impressive—and notably similar, in both theme and form, to her mature work. Most of them depict the trials of childhood and adolescence: a lonely eighteen-year-old adrift in New York ("Court in the West Eighties"), a thirteen-year-old girl who looks askance at her older sister's dating antics ("Like That"), a teen-age boy who resents his adoring younger cousin ("Sucker"). If these stories were scant in plot, forever McCullers's weakness, they ingeniously represented the tumult of growing up.

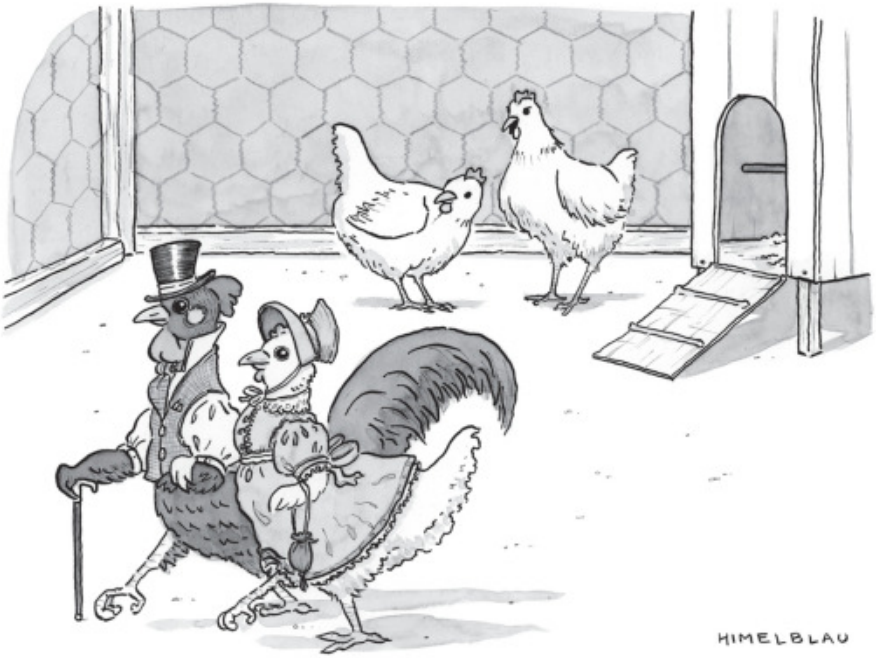
"Wunderkind," the strongest story from this period, depicts a fifteen-year-old piano prodigy named Frances. She arrives at her piano lesson "twitching," "quivering," gripped by the "fear that had begun to torment her for the past few months." What is Frances afraid of? That she will play the piano badly for her stern German teacher—and, worse, that a bad lesson will confirm that she is no longer the "wunderkind" she once was:

> What had begun to happen to her four months ago? The notes began springing out with a glib, dead intonation. Adolescence, she thought. Some kids played with promise—and worked and worked until, like her, the least little thing would start them crying, and worn out with trying to get the thing across—the longing they felt—something queer began to happen—But not she! . . . She had to be. She—

The more she contemplates the potential loss of her talent, the more fractured her thoughts become. Frances doesn't have the language to describe this new and troubling condition: a "little thing" wounds her, "something queer" thwarts her, there's a "thing" in the music that she can't get across. Stuck in the liminal space of adolescence, she is too young to understand the life experiences that motivated the great composers, but too old to impress her teacher with technical skill alone. At the lesson, she plays flawlessly but without great feeling; she cannot "imagine the music as it should be." When she flees the music room at the story's end, she is no longer an exceptional child but merely an ordinary teen.

If McCullers ever felt her confidence falter—if she ever worried that she, too, was ordinary—she had her mother's admiration to bolster her. And, soon enough, she had Reeves.

Dearborn describes Reeves McCullers as a "good-looking Alabama-born



"Their house is full of shit and feathers just like the rest of us."

charmer"; to Carson, he was simply "the best-looking man I had ever seen." The two met in 1935 on one of Carson's frequent trips home to Columbus, near an Army base where the twenty-one-year-old Reeves was stationed. They bonded over books, progressive politics, and literary ambitions: Reeves, too, fancied himself a writer, though he lacked Carson's single-minded dedication to her craft. They married in 1937, then moved to North Carolina, where Reeves worked as an investigator for a credit company and Carson drafted her first novel. Initially, the couple planned to alternate years writing and wage-earning, but it soon became apparent that Carson would never take a day job. Nor did she have much inclination to keep house: immersed in her work, she let dinner burn in the oven and relied on Reeves to wring out the wash. But Reeves had only admiration for his brilliant wife, who read to him from her work in progress each night. When she asked him whether it was any good, he replied, "No, it's not good, it's great."

He was right: "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter," which earned McCullers a contract with Houghton Mifflin, is an extraordinarily accomplished first novel, a symphonic work about our desires to be known and to be loved. Set in the Deep South, the story revolves around John Singer, a deaf-mute with Christlike patience and fast-moving hands. After he loses his beloved companion—Spiros Antonapoulos, an "obese and dreamy Greek" who is also a deaf-mute—to mental illness, Singer becomes a sort of father-confessor for a group of tortured and lonely characters, including a widowed café owner who's drawn to the downtrodden, a tubercular Black doctor who dreams of a better future for his race, and a pugnacious revolutionary powered by liquor and Marx. At first glance, these sad, middle-aged men seem utterly unlike their creator, yet there is something childlike about all of them, and their desire for a better, more just world.

But McCullers's clearest avatar is Mick Kelly, a lanky thirteen-year-old who loves Mozart and wants to be a composer, and whose parents own the boarding house where Singer resides. Wandering around her home town, composing a symphony in her head, she dreams about a time when she will be "very famous": "She would ride back home in a red-and-white Packard automobile with her initials on the doors. She would have M.K. written in red on her handkerchiefs and underclothes." Mick can't wait for adulthood, and she rushes around all summer, as if she could speed up time.

And yet, in one of the novel's most memorable scenes, Mick willingly turns back toward childhood. She's throwing a "prom party" for her high-school classmates, adolescents who are just starting to be curious about dating, and she's dressed in an evening gown, silk stockings, and an unnecessary bra. The party starts off fairly tame—boys and girls stand on either side of the room, while "the boys thought about the girls and the girls thought about the boys"—but, midway through, some rough-and-tumble neighborhood kids bust in, shattering the evening's decorum. Mick is first enraged by the development, then "excited":

> They were like a catching sickness, and their coming to the party made all the other people forget about High School and being almost grown. It was like just before you take a bath in the afternoon when you might wallow around in the back yard and get plenty dirty just for the good feel of it before getting into the tub.

If childhood is presented here as a "sickness," it's also a tonic, something that cuts through the fog of adult convention. McCullers understood the libidinal appeal of childhood, a time when appetite and impulse dominate, and she was at her best depicting the teen-ager's ambivalence about leaving it behind. When adulthood does come for Mick, it's not what she envisioned: she loses her virginity in an awkward encounter, takes a boring job in retail, and stops hearing music in her head. "It was like she was shut out from the inside room," McCullers writes, a metaphor that both recalls Frances's flight from the music room and neatly reverses it.

Monogrammed underwear aside, McCullers's own entry into adulthood was much closer to Mick's dream. When "Heart" was published, in June, 1940, the spotlight shone on its young author, a Southern ingénue with gender-bending good looks. (McCullers kept her hair short and favored menswear for most of her adult life.) The *Times* said the book had a "sweep and certainty that are overwhelming," and Richard Wright praised it as "a projected mood, a state of mind poetically objectified in words." Here was confirmation that McCullers was special, singular, fundamentally different from everyone else. She and Reeves moved to New York, to an apartment on West Eleventh Street, where, in Dearborn's words, McCullers was a "white-hot arrival on the literary scene," shot by fashion photographers and solicited by glossy magazines. When an editor at *Harper's Bazaar* published her next novel—a twisted tale of voyeurism and infidelity at an Army base in the South—under the title "Reflections in a Golden Eye," he referred to its author as "a *Wunderkind*."

More than two decades later, McCullers looked back at this moment in her career. "I became an established literary figure overnight, and I was much too young to understand what happened to me or the responsibility it entailed," she told an interviewer. "I was a bit of a holy terror."

The reign of terror began almost immediately. Just weeks after the publication of "Heart," she fell head over heels in love with the Swiss journalist Annemarie Schwarzenbach, a dashing, worldly morphine addict; she had a face, McCullers later wrote, "that would haunt me to the end of my life." Annemarie wasn't interested in cultivating a romance with McCullers, and, depending on how you look at it, either sought out a friendship or strung her along. Torn up over her first real lesbian love, McCullers confessed her feelings to Reeves, who, to his great discredit, slapped her across the face. Neither willing to commit fully to Reeves nor willing to leave him, she instead hoped that he would grant her the freedom to pursue other relationships. Reeves, hopelessly in love, acquiesced. It was a bargain the couple would strike repeatedly in the years to come, with disastrous results.

That same summer, McCullers began a whirlwind tour of conferences and

residencies, where she charmed some of the most famous names in literature and alienated many others. At Bread Loaf, the summer writers' conference at Middlebury College, she was an "enfant terrible," monopolizing the conversation and drinking all of Wallace Stegner's bourbon—when she wasn't drinking straight gin out of a water glass. Back in New York, she abandoned Reeves for an experiment in communal living in a Brooklyn Heights brownstone; other residents included W. H. Auden, Jane and Paul Bowles, and Gypsy Rose Lee. From there, it was on to Yaddo, where she became infatuated with Katherine Anne Porter, a writer nearly thirty years her senior and the "queen bee" of the artists' colony. One night, Porter exited her residence to find the lovelorn McCullers lying prone on the doorstep. The older writer simply stepped over the body and continued to dinner.

All this activity took its toll. Never a hardy person, McCullers suffered from increasing ill health during the early forties, contracting strep throat, an ear infection, double pneumonia, pleurisy, and a tooth infection that required daily trips to the dentist. She also suffered a small stroke in 1941 that affected her vision, though she seemed to recover within a couple of months. Bébé, who still saw herself as her daughter's guardian, appeared at the first sign of sickness. She nursed McCullers in New York, then summoned her home to Columbus, where McCullers did nothing but write, eat, and rest. Such attentive care both enabled McCullers to keep writing and insured that she wouldn't have to change her ways.

McCullers rarely wrote directly about illness, but she wrote often about what it's like to have a body that, for one reason or another, doesn't fit the norm. Her fiction is full of unusual characters, the kind that critics sometimes call "grotesques": deaf-mutes, drifters, convicts, women who chafe at feminine convention. But, in McCullers's fiction, these people aren't freakish or threatening so much as they are uncorrupted by adult life. In "The Ballad of the Sad Café," a novella she worked on while recovering from her stroke, she described one such character as possessing "an instinct which is usually found only in small children, an instinct to establish immediate and vital contact between himself and all things in the world."

"Ballad" is a strange little fable, and it occupies a strange place in McCullers's career. It's more philosophical than any of her novels, and its omniscient narrator frequently interrupts the central plot—a love triangle involving a cross-eyed giantess, a four-foot-tall hunchback, and a good-looking convict who is also the giantess's estranged husband—to pontificate about romantic love, small-town life, and "the atmosphere of a proper café." One oft-quoted passage concerns how lonely love is, describing the lover and the beloved as coming "from different countries":

> Often the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored-up love which has lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto. And somehow every lover knows this. He feels in his soul that his love is a solitary thing. . . . He must house his love within himself as best he can; he must create for himself a whole new inward world—a world intense and strange, complete in himself.

It's a strikingly capacious vision of love, if ultimately an adolescent one. What young person, falling in love for the first time, doesn't feel proud of her passion, or wary of sharing her feelings with the very person who inspired them? McCullers's trick, in "Ballad," was to transmute the typical teen's experience of love into a universal philosophy of the same. In all her fiction, she presented love not as a mutual experience but as a solitary fantasy, a feat of imagination that torments and consoles at once.

For her part, McCullers loved to play the lover. She spent most of her life pursuing women who were usually both unavailable and uninterested, a group that included the Broadway producer Cheryl Crawford, the actress Katharine Cornell, and the "First Lady of Alcoholics Anonymous," Marty Mann. Meanwhile, in her marriage, she cast herself permanently in the role of the beloved. Reeves existed to manage their domestic life and to meet her needs; if he wanted someone to meet his needs, then he could simply become someone else's beloved. But Reeves didn't embrace abjection the way his wife did. When McCullers criticized him or withdrew her affection, he drank, raged, and occasionally threatened suicide. The couple divorced in 1941, after McCullers caught Reeves forging a check in her name, and then, incredibly, remarried in 1945, after Reeves finished serving in the Second World War. "These two had an abominable, cannibalistic relationship," a friend of the couple observed. "But she was the vampire. . . . She had a colossal power of destruction."

McCullers couldn't always see the damage she caused. But the novel she worked on throughout her turbulent twenties suggests that, on some level, she knew she was a handful. "The Member of the Wedding," from 1946, seems at first to be a rehash of McCullers's prior work. It is yet another story about the painful transition from childhood to adolescence, featuring yet another young female protagonist with a nickname that sounds like a boy's. Frankie Addams is twelve years old during a "green and crazy summer," and in the middle of an existential crisis. Having suddenly shot up in height—she's now too tall to walk beneath the scuppernong arbor, where she used to put on plays—Frankie feels like an "unjoined person," belonging to nothing and no one. Early in the novel, she lights upon a solution to her loneliness: after a visit from her older brother and his bride-to-be, Frankie resolves to join the wedding party and depart with the married couple for a new home, far away from her small Southern town.

But the novel is a repetition with a difference. In her earlier fiction, McCullers presented imagination positively—as the handmaiden to creativity, or as a kind of life force. In "Member," we see for the first time its dangers. Frankie is obsessed with the wedding: she talks about it, daydreams about it, and pesters Berenice, the Black housekeeper, to tell her about it again and again. Berenice tries to puncture Frankie's fantasies, warning her against "falling in love with some unheard-of thing." "You cozen and change things too much in your own mind. And that is a serious fault," she tells Frankie. The rest of the novel proves Berenice right: Frankie has a disastrous flirtation with a soldier, then is disappointed by the wedding. She throws a tantrum, dismayed that her brother treats her like a child and equally dismayed that her childish behavior doesn't get her what she wants. As much as we may sympathize with Frankie, we also see clearly the error of her ways. It's

as if McCullers were stretching herself to show the adult perspective on the child who refuses to grow up.

McCullers took five years to write "Member," choosing each word carefully, as if she were composing a long poem. The novel is better for the effort, containing some of the most beautiful passages she ever wrote. (The dawn sky has "the wet pale blue of watercolor sky just painted and not yet dried.") There were emotional challenges, too. McCullers felt too close to the novel; at one point, she told Reeves that Frankie was "the expression of [her] failure"—not as a writer, one gleans, but as a person. For years afterward, McCullers said she was prouder of "Member" than of any other of her works.

Many critics saw the novel differently. For them, McCullers was no longer a twenty-three-year-old début novelist but an established writer—and she was still writing about twelve-year-old girls. Edmund Wilson panned the book, writing, not entirely without reason, that it was too long and that nothing really happens. Even some of McCullers's friends were repulsed. The journalist Janet Flanner was aghast: "To think that such disorder, physical and mental, resides within her perpetual juvenility is an alarming sight to see in print." Adolescence is a terrible time; why revisit it in adulthood? But McCullers, indulged and unfettered, wasn't writing what she remembered so much as what she knew.

"Has anyone turned in a pair of reading glasses?"

• •

Dearborn describes the publication of "Member" as a turning point in McCullers's career, but it's tempting to call it the end. McCullers became progressively less sure of herself and even more desperate for affection; Leon Edel remembered "a certain pathos in her pleading look, those large, liquid eyes that asked the world for love." She began writing for the stage, perhaps thinking that theatregoers were easier to please than literary critics. (Her adaptation of "The Member of the Wedding," starring Ethel Waters as Berenice, opened on Broadway in 1950.) She struck up a friendship with Truman Capote—another precocious Southern writer—but dropped him before long, worried that she couldn't trust him. (To be fair, Capote was a snake.)

In 1947, McCullers had a second stroke, a serious one, that partially paralyzed her left side. She had barely regained her mobility when she had a third, this one debilitating. Only thirty years old, she found it hard to walk and nearly impossible to type. Depressed, in pain, and entirely dependent on others, she wrote less and drank more. For years, she'd kept a thermos of sherry with her while she worked—she called it "tea," and sometimes there was tea in the mix—but now she drank several cocktails before dinner, then a bottle or more of wine. She turned mean. Reeves bore the brunt; she degraded him, confessing to various crushes and writing him letters that Dearborn describes as "intricately cruel." When Reeves died by suicide, in 1953, McCullers did not attend the funeral.

As Dearborn notes, with some incredulity, no one ever tried to moderate McCullers's drinking. (According to a relative, doctors recommended that she have no more than "one large drink—or two small ones" each night, but "they didn't define 'large' or 'small,'" and, with said relative's help, "the jigger got bigger and bigger.") Nor did friends and family insist that she seek consistent psychiatric care, not even after McCullers tried to take her own life, in 1948. The reason was the same as it always was: McCullers was a genius, and geniuses got to live by different rules.

Eventually, although later than one would like, McCullers decided to grow up. In 1958, she began seeing a therapist named Mary Mercer. In an early session, McCullers described her infatuation with Annemarie and the lessons she'd taken from it: love is suffering, and reciprocal love impossible. Mercer suggested that love could in fact be reciprocated, then showed her how: after they concluded therapy, the two began a relationship. At the age of forty-one, McCullers had her first real girlfriend. She returned to her writing, and became happier than she had been in decades. She wanted to travel abroad, to stay at fancy hotels, to cook elaborate meals from scratch—even though she only ate what Mercer called "pediatric" amounts of food. And she dreamed of writing a book called "In Spite Of," which would describe the lives of artists who had overcome disability and pain: Sarah Bernhardt, Cole Porter, and Arthur Rimbaud, among others. These were artists who had suffered greatly, sometimes by their own hands. Like her, they were imperfect; like her, they were extraordinary. ♦

ON TELEVISION

SWORD PLAY

"Shōgun," on FX.

BY INKOO KANG

"Shōgun" is the kind of Hollywood product that assumes a defensive crouch from the outset. The FX series—a ten-part adaptation of James Clavell's best-selling 1975 doorstopper, which centers on an English sailor who lands in seventeenth-century Japan and rises through its samurai ranks—was announced six years ago with reassurances from John Landgraf, the network's chairman, that this version would be au courant with modern sensibilities. "It's not an easy thing to get right," Landgraf admitted, adding that the show's creative team would consult experts in "feudal Japanese culture" and feature a cast of "almost entirely Japanese actors." (A previous miniseries, from 1980, hadn't bothered to subtitle the Japanese dialogue: producers felt that if the British protagonist, John Blackthorne, couldn't comprehend what was being said then neither should American audiences.) These production details were intended to distinguish "Shōgun" from the many Western films and TV shows that have been made under the assumption that, while Asian aesthetics are worthy as spectacle, Asian people do not merit understanding, identification, or individuation—or, in the most egregious cases, any presence at all.

The series opens with Blackthorne (Cosmo Jarvis), but, to the credit of its husband-and-wife creators, Justin Marks and Rachel Kondo, "Shōgun" doesn't confine itself to his point of view for long. A proud Protestant, Blackthorne has been searching for a route to "the Japans" to catch up with the Portuguese, who arrived there in the name of gold, God, and glory a half century earlier and have kept its location a secret from other European nations. After Blackthorne and his men wash up on the shore of a small fishing village, his ship—with its many cannons and muskets—is claimed by Lord Toranaga (Hiroyuki Sanada), who sees the "Christian weapons" as the advantage he'll need in an impending conflict with his rivals. Five regents, including Toranaga, have been entrusted to maintain peace while keeping the royal seat warm for their deceased sovereign's sole heir, who has yet to come of age. But, by the time the series begins, Toranaga's quiet consolidation of power has so threatened the other four that they've aligned themselves against him. The dreams of the dead can seldom compete with the ambitions of the living.

Early on, a fellow-sailor informs Blackthorne of a Japanese belief that "every man has three hearts: one in his mouth, for the world to know; one in his chest, just for his friends; and a secret heart buried deep where no one can find it." Toranaga embodies this spirit of hidden ambition. He employs Lady Mariko (Anna Sawai), a Catholic convert fluent in Portuguese, as a translator for the polyglot Blackthorne. Like Toranaga, she prizes discretion; she tells her new charge that her people are taught to compartmentalize their feelings, erecting "an impenetrable wall behind which we can retreat whenever we need." But characters defined by their opacity tend not to make for dynamic scenes—hence the dramatic (and comedic) value of Blackthorne, a brute who refuses to bathe more than twice a week, still believes in medicinal bloodletting, and addresses a local lord as a "milk-dribbling fuck smear." Unlike most of his Japanese counterparts, he voices his wants constantly: to reunite with his few surviving crew members, to pursue the married Mariko, and, in time, to advocate for the commoners whom he once dismissed as "a savage horde."

The show's world-building is elaborate and sometimes hard to keep up

The adaptation elevates Mariko and Toranaga to primary characters.

ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICK LEGER

with, but it may also feel familiar. Studios and streamers have been trying to create the next "Game of Thrones" for at least a decade, investing heavily in fantasy tales, medieval realms, and pricey I.P. HBO attempted to build on its initial success with a Targaryen spinoff, "House of the Dragon"; Amazon spent hundreds of millions of dollars on a "Lord of the Rings" prequel series it hoped would inspire similar devotion. In the case of "Shōgun," a "Game of Thrones"-style premise is accompanied by "Game of Thrones"-style carnage: in the first episode alone, there's a surprise beheading, death by boiling, ritual infanticide, and off-screen seppuku. (Many other hara-kiris will take place in plain view before the season is over.) Blackthorne, whose time at sea has made him no stranger to violence, finds the routine slaughter appalling. Toranaga, too, is reluctant to enforce honor codes that end not just single lives but entire family lines—and wary of the possibility of a new shogunate, deeming such a military dictatorship "a brutal relic from a bygone era." This restraint is undercut by one of his generals, the cocky Yabushige (Tadanobu Asano), who, despite his sadism as an executioner, comes across as the series' most believable character for his blithe self-interest and transparent scheming. The general's slippery desperation as he attempts to play both sides, heightened by Asano's petty-uncle energy, yields one of the season's most engaging story lines.

Like "Game of Thrones," "Shōgun" is a demanding watch, with dozens of characters sharing long, interlocking histories; a sprawling in-universe map; and frustratingly dim cinematography. By my count, about three-quarters of the dialogue is in Japanese, and it's something of a wonder that the show exists at all, with a cast unknown to most Americans and a setting so far removed from us by time, geography, and culture. That distance is attenuated through gobs of exposition, and with weighty, often inelegant monologues that reinforce (and fail to enliven) well-worn themes. But Marks and Kondo also know how to highlight the show's distinctive assets. The action, especially on the water, is impressive, and the sets and costumes are lavish. A slight lens warp lends the scenes at court a sense of grandeur. And, though much of the season is dour in tone, some of its best twists are the product of a dark wit.

Even so, "Shōgun" ultimately feels more like a curio than like a compelling series. "Game of Thrones" excelled at the macro—who'll prevail, and how?—and at the micro, which made the interpersonal ties among its characters relatable, or at least recognizable. "Shōgun" struggles on both fronts. Toranaga's rivals are scarcely differentiated, making it difficult to truly grasp what one regent's rule versus another's would mean. And, despite the series' emphasis on lineage—Mariko suffers unduly for her bloodline, which has been tarnished by her beloved father—the parent-child relationships that were so central to "Thrones" are nearly absent here. Mariko gets a few warm exchanges with her growing son, but she seems perfectly content to leave him behind, fantasizing about killing herself in order to be reunited with dead relatives. Matters of protocol and duty eclipse all else.

Blackthorne's gradual understanding of such samurai mores is meant to mirror our own, but his demotion from the novel's lone protagonist to one of several leads gives audiences little to seize on emotionally. His journey toward "enlightenment" and his unconvincing affair with Mariko are thinly sketched—and, because "Shōgun" is at pains to foreground the regents' war, he has more to offer the narrative as a source of discord and of new martial technology than as a romantic hero.

In theory, elevating Mariko and Toranaga to primary characters is the "correct" update, helping to avoid another "whitewashed" tale about Japan. But both are so bound by repression and secrecy that they're almost doomed to be dramatically inert. Though the marvellous Sanada exudes an enigmatic nobility, Toranaga's refusal to confide in his advisers thwarts any real insight into—or investment in—his ascent. Blackthorne gleans some wisdom from his time in Mariko and Toranaga's company, but he still frequently misreads the pair, presuming desires they haven't voiced and may not possess; when they decline to clarify their true feelings, the viewer suffers, too. The show's own heart is buried too deep for us to hear it beat. ♦

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THE THEATRE

FORGIVE ME NOT

A revival of Dominique Morisseau's "Sunset Baby."

BY HELEN SHAW

Moses Ingram stars as a daughter grappling with her father's past.

Theatre is a mirror, but for what? We quote "Hamlet," saying that performance should hold a "mirror up to nature"; in an interview, the playwright Dominique Morisseau cited Nina Simone, who said that an artist's duty is "to reflect the times." Nature, right; the times, of course—the theatre should reflect those things. But a play might also be positioned to show us the person who wrote it.

In "Sunset Baby," now at the Off Broadway Pershing Square Signature Center, Morisseau, best known for her play cycle, "The Detroit Project," invites us to look at the fraught final encounters between a woman and her activist father. When Nina (Moses Ingram) was five years old, her dad, the Black Power revolutionary Kenyatta (Russell Hornsby), went to prison for an attempted armored-truck heist—to "steal capitalist dollars in the name of Third World democracy," Nina sneers—and her once renegade mother dwindled into heartbreak and, eventually, addiction and early death. Now Nina is grown and making her own violent way, along with her boyfriend, Damon (J. Alphonse Nicholson). Together they think of themselves as Bonnie and Clyde, gun-toting tricksters who lure men into drug deals and rob them. Nina and Damon don't want radical liberation; they want ten thousand dollars. That stash will finally let them escape East New York for Paris or London or some other beautiful place that Nina has fallen in love with via the Travel Channel.

Nina—named for the play's tutelary spirit, Simone—spends a great deal of "Sunset Baby" staring into a mirror, dressing for her part in these crimes, pulling her thigh-high electric-blue boots on and off, and making herself up to the point of unrecognizability. Ingram, who swung a lightsabre in the TV show "Obi-Wan Kenobi," seems infinitely more tired here: her shoulders slump; her eyes, their lids painted peacock green, often drift nearly shut. Nina does have several stashes of treasure, however, that she hasn't told Damon about. Most important is a trove of letters that her mother left behind, written but never sent to her lover in prison; now that Kenyatta is out, he's desperate to have them. First, he begs his daughter, and she rejects him, with a surge of righteous fury. But, once Damon realizes that Kenyatta might be willing to pay for the letters, he pressures Nina into meeting with him again. Bitter and hardened as she is, her father's still burning idealism starts to melt and change her, even though he himself never seems to bend. Hornsby plays Kenyatta as a man always standing rigidly at attention, a soldier who hears the bugle calling.

In the director Steve H. Broadnax III's production, the crumbling, meagrely furnished tenement where Nina lives—designed by Wilson Chin for maximum bleakness—doesn't always seem quite real. Inside the apartment, Broadnax and his cast pay attention to small, world-building gestures, such as the way Damon takes off his shoes and changes into slides the minute he arrives. We never sense the world *outside*, though—no neighbors, no friends, nothing but the apartment buzzer, signalling another man who needs Nina to come to the door. She listens to Nina Simone's music constantly, and thus a sense of blues-broken reverie pervades every scene, even when people are shouting at, or stealing from, or abandoning one another. Kenyatta has recorded video messages for his estranged daughter, which are

ILLUSTRATION BY WANJIRA KINYUA

projected on the upstage wall, and his face, big as a billboard, looms above Nina's ugly room, his eyes as staring and huge as a god's. The image is wonderful, even though these passages are some of Morisseau's least confidently written. "This is not my apology. I could never. . . . Wouldn't know where to begin," Kenyatta says, his eyes moist with tears. "This is all I know, Nina. Speaking. Writing. Ideas. Activism. Justice. Meditation. Pondering."

"Sunset Baby" was first produced in New York by the LAByrinth Theatre, in 2013, after premièring in 2012 in London. Though it was well received, it was soon eclipsed by the Detroit trilogy—"Paradise Blue," set in 1949; the Motown-era "Detroit '67"; and the contemporary "Skeleton Crew"—which established Morisseau as a gifted orchestrator of plots about America's ongoing betrayal of Black workers. The revival of "Sunset" at the Signature is part of a multiyear residency, which has included a restaging of "Paradise Blue," in 2018, and a première of her most beautiful play to date, "Confederates," in 2022, which darted between two time frames: modern-day academia and a guerrilla action on a plantation during the Civil War. As a socially conscious writer, Morisseau seems drawn to realism, but I find her most convincing when she blurs her stories into quasi-fable, which she did in the time-bending "Confederates," and which she does, in glimpses and glances, here.

The attempts in "Sunset" to capture reality, when unmediated by fantasy, can falter. Ingram has a nice, icy thousand-yard stare, but Morisseau has written her part as a strange mixture of street-smart intellectual and deprived innocent who, as Nina says, has never even seen a "fuckin' sunset." (New York has its drawbacks, no doubt, but the sun does go down here.) Elsewhere, though, Morisseau is more careful with characterization. The play's finest accomplishment is Damon, whose own deep reading has allowed him to recast his exploitation of others as a kind of warped political radicalism. Nicholson, giving an astonishing performance, displays a gorgeous ease onstage, and is able to play Damon as both the supportive lover and the pleading bully, sometimes in the same moment, his arms around Nina's waist. Morisseau often pairs threat with some kind of appeal for love. "Tell me you need me, baby," Damon demands. Nina, in turn, will ask her father to express his regrets—at the point of a gun.

None of this mirrors Morisseau's life, or her parents'. But there's still personal revelation in the play. The playwright has posted a quote in the lobby outside the theatre, noting the way her own politically engaged father inspired her: "I've called my mother many times, like, 'Explain this to me. I'm trying to calm down; I'm not sure why I can't calm down. Have I always been this agitated?' She reminds me that I have always been like this. My father was a revolutionary-minded man." And when, toward the end of the play, Kenyatta hands Nina a photograph of herself as a child, it's actually a picture of Morisseau, taken by her dad when she was a toddler.

For a long time now, Morisseau, the bard of Detroit, has been one of our most morally driven, socially active writers. So "Sunset Baby," with its air of both fantasy and remorse, provides an illuminating look into Morisseau's magisterial status in American theatre. Who, really, is qualified to be Nina's comrade? Damon seems steeped in progressive theory, casually dropping terms from Steven Spitzer's "Toward a Marxian Theory of Deviance," but for some reason his praxis includes taking Nina's money. And Kenyatta, so dedicated to action and self-examination, has made no allowance for the profound damage done to his daughter by his absence. Morisseau hints at the pressures applied from one generation to the next, and we begin to understand the loneliness of liberation. It is necessary, of course, and Morisseau clearly appreciates the immeasurable gifts given to her by her father. But Nina hasn't had a childhood—and her creator may be showing us the high emotional cost of being raised in the revolution. ♦

Great Breakthroughs in American Technology

From the Times.

An earlier version of this article described incorrectly how Amanda Lepore decorated her accessories. She used a glue gun, not needle and thread.

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

UNLEARNED LESSONS

"About Dry Grasses."

BY JUSTIN CHANG

What a thankless time it is to be molding young minds, at least in the movies. The grouchy literature professor in "American Fiction," played by Jeffrey Wright, makes the mistake of teaching Flannery O'Connor, and is rewarded with a leave of absence. A nastier fate awaits Nicolas Cage's evolutionary-biology professor in "Dream Scenario," who becomes, for an inexplicably large swath of the population, a nebbishy figure of nightmares—a sad-sack Freddy Krueger. Both movies are to some extent poking fun at the thin skins and trigger warnings of contemporary campus culture, but Paul Giamatti's nineteen-seventies ancient-history teacher, in "The Holdovers," fares little better, stuck during the Christmas holidays at a boarding school as frigid and isolated as the Overlook Hotel.

The weather is just as chilly and the classrooms just as cheerless in "About Dry Grasses," the latest epic of wintry discontent by the Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan. We are in eastern Anatolia, where craggy mountain roads and stretches of steppe lie blanketed by heavy snow; not until the season changes, near the end of a formidable three hours and seventeen minutes, do the desiccated yellow blades of the title push their way into the frame. Until then, we must make do with the prickly company of Samet (Deniz Celiloğlu), an art teacher who's finishing up his fourth and—he hopes—final year at this remote outpost, a stint mandated by Turkey's public-education system. Our first glimpse of Samet, a tiny speck trudging across a blinding-white landscape, is a typical Ceylan overture: a lone figure dwarfed, spectacularly, by a terrain that reflects his inner desolation. Funny thing is, the closer we get to Samet, the smaller he seems; his outward affability soon melts away, exposing a heart of pettiest permafrost. That, too, is typical of Ceylan: he never mistakes a protagonist for a hero.

An accusation against a teacher exposes social ills in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's film.

How soon will you find yourself turning against Samet? Perhaps as early as the scene in which he and his colleague and housemate, Kenan (Musab Ekici), go out for tea with Nuray (Merve Dizdar), a fellow-teacher from a nearby town. Until now, Samet has shown negligible romantic interest in this young woman, but his competitive instincts are awakened by her unexpected chemistry with Kenan. The warmer their conversation, the more bitter and reproachful Samet's silence. Your reservations might deepen when you see, in montages throughout the film, the many portraits that Samet, an amateur photographer, has taken of various Anatolian locals posed in their natural surroundings—images of stirring but also faintly patronizing beauty. Samet, a self-styled urbanite who dreams of moving to Istanbul, can't hide his contempt for the country mice he's been saddled with. "None of you will become artists," he hisses at his pupils during one particularly nasty tantrum, condemning them to a lifetime of planting potatoes and sugar beets. In another ugly scene, when a student accuses him of favoritism, he yells, "Don't take advantage because I'm nice."

The student's charge happens to be spot-on. The teacher's pet in question is a girl named Sevim (Ece Bağcı), whom Samet treats with a discreetly conspiratorial affection, slipping her a gift outside class and briefly hugging her. Sevim responds to the attention with a coquettish giggle, a mischievous smile, and, disastrously, a love note that falls into the hands of another faculty member. In a sudden accretion of betrayals and reversals, stunning in their swiftness and wrenching in their plausibility, Samet's behavior makes him the object of serious accusations by Sevim and another student.

The allegations are upsetting but vague, and the degree of Samet's culpability is unclear. Little resolution is forthcoming, in any case. Not for the first time, Ceylan (who wrote the script with Ebru Ceylan, his wife and longtime creative partner, and Akın Aksu) introduces a plot rife with tension and suspicion only to pivot and de-escalate. He's less interested in crime and punishment, or even the proper allocation of blame, than he is in the accused's character, or lack thereof, and the way that it is revealed in the bureaucratic grind of the ensuing investigation. Even if, as Samet would claim, he is being unfairly targeted, the process still shows us something essential about him. It also lays bare the fault lines—entrenched

ILLUSTRATION BY EMILIANO PONZI

sexism, low-level authoritarianism, provincial small-mindedness—of a society that Samet, no matter how desperately he tries to preserve a sense of superiority, is part of.

Ceylan, now in his mid-sixties, came to international prominence with his third feature, "Distant," an exquisitely observed, modestly scaled two-hander that won the Grand Prix at the 2003 Cannes Film Festival. The movie, about two cousins sharing an apartment in Istanbul, was an odd-couple comedy in a wistful key, suffused with a bone-deep sense of alienation—social, economic, spiritual—that has haunted his films ever since. In the intervening decades, Ceylan's characters have grown chattier, his running times more distended, and his images more and more strikingly beautiful. Along the way, he has played with the trappings of genre—memorably in "Three Monkeys" (2008), a James M. Cain-style noir, and with utter mastery in "Once Upon a Time in Anatolia" (2011), a contemplative fusion of police procedural and Western—but he has never abandoned a harsh yet fundamentally humane view of the world.

He has also clung, with stubborn consistency, to his formative artistic influences, melding Antonioni's feel for existential anomie, Tarkovsky's eye for majestically bleak scenery, and Chekhov's ear for trivial argument and windy introspection. A pair of Chekhov stories provided the inspiration for "Winter Sleep," Ceylan's Palme d'Or-winning drama, from 2014, and, should you have seven hours to spare, a double bill of that and "About Dry Grasses" would prove both exhilarating and exhausting: two barely sufferable protagonists, two moral crises set in motion by rebellious children, and two titles whose cheerlessness almost suggests a parody of art-film anhedonia. If you find yourself plunking down your money on the ticket counter and saying, "One for 'About Dry Grasses,' please," you may even wonder whether Ceylan could be burlesquing his reputation for artistic severity, or daring us to roll over in our seats and enjoy a little winter sleep of our own.

Yet I urge you to go. "About Dry Grasses" may be unhurried, with languid steppe-by-steppe pacing and long, luxuriant, exquisitely sculpted conversations, but it is also nimble, alert, and alive in ways that seem to have taken Ceylan himself by surprise. How else to explain a dazzling formal rupture—a breaking of the fourth wall at the moment of Samet's greatest self-doubt—that has no precedent, as far as I can recall, in Ceylan's work? The movie brims with a bitingly melancholy Chekhovian spirit, so what are we to make of its single boldest departure from the Russian master's orders: a sequence in which one character, bragging about his toughness, briefly produces a handgun that is never fired, or even seen again?

Even if the weapons remain mostly sheathed, the threat of violence, especially emotional violence, lingers. You feel it in Samet's fury as he throws the once adored Sevim out of his classroom, and also in the callous determination with which he sets his sights on Nuray, quietly but decisively breaking Kenan's heart. Tellingly, it is Nuray who has experienced actual physical trauma, having lost part of a leg in a suicide bombing during a political protest in Ankara. The pain of that memory is visible in the laserlike intelligence and bracing warmth of Dizdar's performance (which won her the Best Actress prize at Cannes last year), and it imparts rare dramatic force to a dinner-table sequence in which Samet and Nuray spar over issues of the personal versus the political, the individual versus the collective. Samet, cynically defending his right to be an isolationist schlub, dismisses justice and community as naïve ideals. Nuray, having suffered and bled for those ideals, insists that everyone in society must do something, however small. "Can this wretched world be helped?" she asks. "That's the only question."

Ceylan clearly wants to agree with her—but can he? His long-standing fascination with a certain specimen of male blowhard has always smacked a bit of self-implication, something he made slyly explicit when he played the male lead, superbly, in "Climates" (2006), an incisive portrait of a toxic relationship. (Ebru Ceylan played the female lead.) And, given that Ceylan was a photographer before he turned to filmmaking, it's reasonable to ponder the extent of his identification with the odious (if not irredeemable) Samet. But it's ultimately Nuray, with whom he almost shares a first name, who captivates him. There's a productive tension, a bifurcation of sensibilities, at work in "About Dry Grasses" that feels excitingly unresolved. If the movie's perspective favors Samet, its sympathies are with Nuray, who practices what she preaches, pushing back against his complacency at every opportunity. She has a lot to teach him and us. ♦

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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 Avi Steinberg, must be received by Sunday, March 3rd. The finalists in the February 12th & 19th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 18th 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

" "

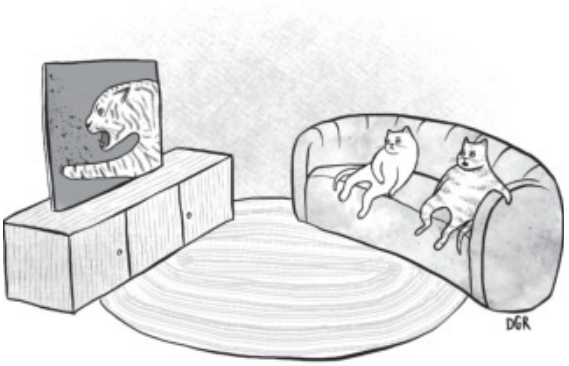
THE FINALISTS

"Part of me thinks this was a bad idea."
Dave Matta, Pittsburgh, Pa.

"Don't feel bad. In a few weeks, it'll be like this never happened."
Roy North, Norristown, Pa.

"Oh, my God! My butt is huge."
James Flaherty, Oakville, Ont.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"You knew I was domesticated when you married me, Margaret."
Jesse Kavadlo, Chesterfield, Mo.

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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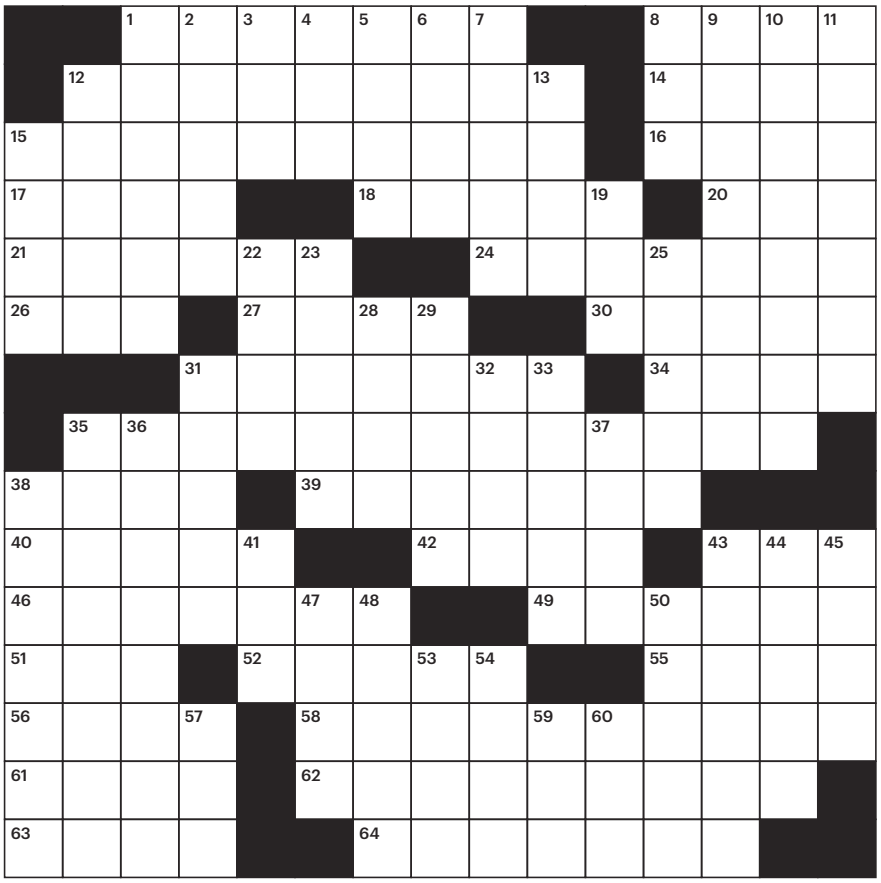
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A lightly challenging puzzle.

BY CAITLIN REID



ACROSS

1 What kids don't want to catch during recess
8 Comedian Trevor
12 High price to pay
14 Excited about
15 Stream flowing down a mountain, maybe
16 Accessory that goes to waist?
17 ___ Stanley Gardner (creator of Perry Mason)
18 Make a lot of noise in bed, perhaps
20 On the ___
21 Like citrus fruits
24 Nebbiolo or Sangiovese
26 Word often ignored when alphabetizing
27 "Rats!"
30 Shades
31 Partner in the sky
34 *Cuatro y dos*
35 Major-league starters?
38 Brusque
39 Workplace training session
40 Sprite in "The Tempest"
42 Spotted
43 "Tidy" amount
46 Things shared with confidants
49 Base of a puttanesca sauce
51 Pressure unit on a tire gauge: Abbr.
52 Pulls one over on
55 A double play results in two of them
56 Some methods of birth control, briefly
58 Texas's colorful state flower
61 Guthrie who sang "Alice's Restaurant"
62 "Instrument" that requires no musical talent
63 Food or water, for example
64 "Bye-bye!"

DOWN

1 Popular breed of herding dog
2 Went (for)
3 Laudatory lines
4 Heavy weight
5 Societal troubles
6 Get-up-and-go
7 Relish, as a frankfurter
8 Writing tip?
9 "I used to hate facial hair, but then it grew on me," e.g.
10 Fantasy island?
11 Train wreck, as it were
12 It's carried by the lovelorn
13 Like a steak that's "still mooing"
15 Steak, for instance
19 Summer hrs. in N.Y.C.
22 Exchanged promises
23 Family guys?
25 None the ___
28 SCOTUS count
29 Grabs (on to)
31 Supply the spread for
32 Ron Howard's role on "The Andy Griffith Show"
33 Principle
35 "Yeah, I bet"
36 Portrayer of Sir Robin the Not-Quite-So-Brave-as-Sir-Launcelot in "Monty Python and the Holy Grail"
37 Bygone small iPod
38 ___ Sea (world's largest inland body of water)
41 Spearheaded
43 Places to find some sweaters
44 Complete
45 Not quite all
47 Big brass
48 Bounced
50 Three-card ___
53 Currency adopted by Croatia in 2023
54 Lily with an edible bulb
57 Roll sold at a nursery
59 Chum
60 It may be crude

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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

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