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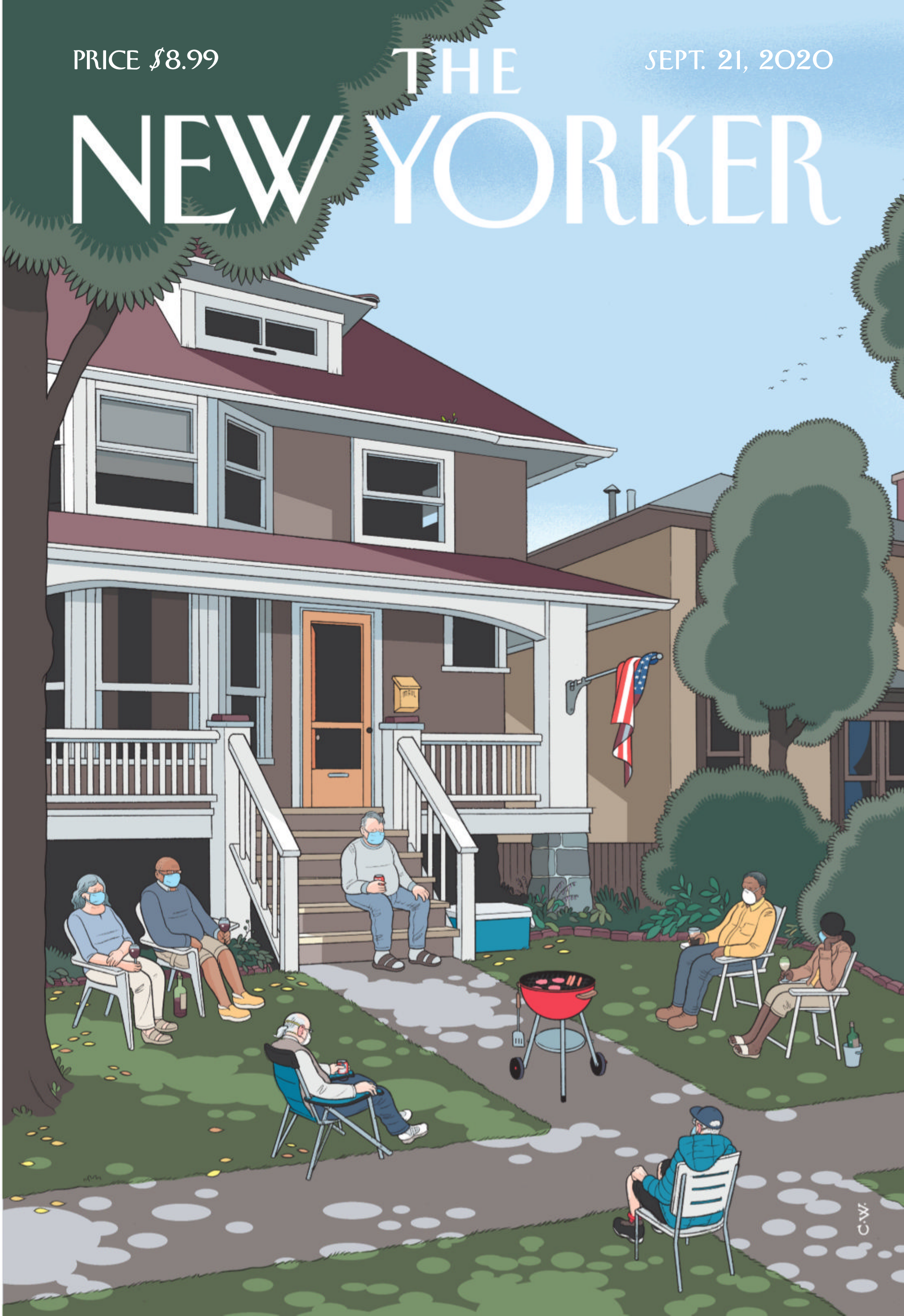
THE NEW YORKER

SEPT. 21, 2020

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THE NEW YORKER

SEPTEMBER 21, 2020

DRAWINGS *Millie von Platen, Mick Stevens, Johnny DiNapoli, Akeem Roberts, Lila Ash, Hartley Lin, Roz Chast, Charlie Hankin, Jason Adam Katzenstein, Lars Kenseth, Frank Cotham, Brendan Loper, Sofia Warren* SPOTS *Richard McGuire*

CONTRIBUTORS

Laura Secor (*"The Man Who Wouldn't Spy," p. 32*), an editor at *Foreign Affairs*, is the author of "Children of Paradise."

Thomas Mallon (*"The Normalcy Election," p. 26*) is a novelist, an essayist, and a critic. His ten books of fiction include "Finale" and, most recently, "Landfall."

Alexandra Schwartz (*"Making a Scene," p. 18*), a theatre critic for the magazine, has been a staff writer since 2016.

Julian Lucas (*Books, p. 65*) is a writer and a critic based in Brooklyn.

Nicole Krauss (*Fiction, p. 52*) is the author of four novels, including "The History of Love" and "Forest Dark." Her first story collection, "To Be a Man," will be published in November.

Barry Blitt (*Sketchbook, p. 41*) is a cartoonist and an illustrator. He won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning, for work that appeared in this magazine. His latest book, "Blitt," is a collection of his illustrations.

John Lahr (*"The Shape-Shifter," p. 44*) has written for the magazine since 1991. His book "Tennessee Williams" won the 2014 National Book Critics Circle Award for biography.

Maya Phillips (*Poem, p. 56*), the author of the poetry collection "Erou," will publish her second book, "NERD," in 2022.

Chris Ware (*Cover*) began contributing comic strips and covers to *The New Yorker* in 1999. His latest book is "Rusty Brown."

Emily Flake (*Sketchpad, p. 15*), a *New Yorker* cartoonist, is the author of "Mama Tried" and, most recently, "That Was Awkward."

Alex Ross (*A Critic at Large, p. 69*) has been the magazine's music critic since 1996. His third book, "Wagnerism," is out this month.

Bob Hicok (*Poem, p. 38*) is the author of nine poetry collections, including "Hold," which came out last year. He teaches at Virginia Tech.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

PERSONAL HISTORY

"Grief is a cruel kind of education," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes, on the sudden loss of her father.

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

Casey Parks on what centers for kids of essential workers can teach us about returning to the classroom.

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LEFT: LOSSAPARDO; RIGHT: ELIAS WILLIAMS FOR THE NEW YORKER

THE MAIL

BEASTS OF NUNIVAK ISLAND

I read with interest Jon Lee Anderson's account of his visit to Nunivak, in the Bering Sea, in search of musk-ox wool ("Wanderlust," August 17th). Anderson cites as inspiration the late Peter Matthiessen's participation in a 1964 expedition to Nunivak. That journey was led by John J. Teal, Jr., an American anthropologist and visionary, who, in a 1958 Profile in *The New Yorker*, was described as enjoying "the unique and quite profitless distinction of being the only musk-ox herdsman in the world." Earlier that decade, Teal had embarked on a mission to capture and domesticate the beast. With support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, he started Alaska's first domestic-musk-ox farm, in Fairbanks. He envisaged an Arctic domestic industry built around the animal's underwool, known as qiviut, which is often used in hand-knitted products. He hoped that this environmentally sustainable undertaking might provide income to native Arctic residents in a way that would align with their traditional culture and economy. In the course of three expeditions to Nunivak, in 1964 and 1965, Teal captured thirty-three musk-ox calves, which were taken to be raised on the farm in Fairbanks. I became involved with the project in 1968, and am now at work on a book-length history about it. Teal died in 1982, but his musk-ox-domestication project and the hand-knitting industry he began continue to this day.

Paul F. Wilkinson
Saint-Paul-d'Abbotsford, Quebec

A MODERN "BEOWULF"

Ruth Franklin's review of Maria Dahvana Headley's new translation of "Beowulf" asks why the monster Grendel terrorizes the Danes after hearing their feasting and singing (Books, August 31st). "The original text," she writes, "doesn't give a reason" for Grendel's fury. But, as Franklin mentions elsewhere in the article, the poem says that Grendel is a descendant of Cain, who was exiled by God. Like his ancestor, then, Grendel is removed from happiness; to know that the scop in Heorot, the magnificent hall, is singing of God's creation further angers him. Thus he subjects the Danes to long nights of terror, and thus Beowulf begins the first of his heroic quests.

Patricia Wemstrom
Mount Carroll, Ill.

Franklin applauds Headley's thesis about the Old English word "brimwyl," which appears in the "Beowulf" manuscript to describe Grendel's mother. It is usually taken to be a scribal error for "brimwylf," "sea-wolf," but Headley believes that it could read "brimwif," "sea-woman." This argument, which feminizes Grendel's mother, ignores the fact that she is given the epithet "brimwylf" elsewhere in the poem; considering that Old English poetry often repeats such formulaic phrases, it is reasonable to conclude that "brimwylf" was intended throughout. Furthermore, the definite article "sēo," which just precedes the misspelled word, is feminine, which means that it can modify "brimwylf" but not "brimwif"; the word "wif," despite meaning "woman," is grammatically neuter, and the neuter form of the definite article looks nothing like "sēo." But the emendation to "sea-wolf" takes away nothing from Grendel's mother's femininity—she is a female sea wolf, after all, as evidenced in the use of "wylf," the feminine form of "wulf." Human and inhuman descriptors for both mother and son are integral to the poet's conception of these characters, who exist unhappily on the outer edge of human society.

Randi Claire Eldevik
Professor Emerita, Old English
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, Okla.

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In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming.

SEPTEMBER 16 – 22, 2020

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

People's love for New York assumes many forms, from a Frank Sinatra ballad to a Frank O'Hara poem. The newly reopened **MOMA** is greeting visitors to its lobby with a big mural of the iconic I♥NY logo (seen in closeup, above). It was conceived for a 1977 tourism campaign by the legendary graphic designer Milton Glaser, who died in June, at the age of ninety-one. To insure a safely reduced capacity, the museum is making timed tickets available at moma.org; admission is free through Sept. 27.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW BECK

MUSIC

Rez Abbasi: "Django-shift"

JAZZ The music of the legendary Romani guitarist Django Reinhardt is Gallically romantic, effervescent, and almost aggressively expressive; the music of the guitarist Rez Abbasi, as heard on his tribute album to Reinhardt, "Django-shift," can be oddly shaped, inward-leaning, and fervently free of nostalgia. Abbasi, who mined his Pakistani roots for past jazz-fusion explorations, adapts the Belgian virtuoso's influence to a trio format that makes anachronistic use of electronic keyboards and drums. If the magnetic allure of the earlier guitarist—who even with a damaged fretting hand could probably outplay any contemporary shredder—is rarely evoked, an appealingly off-kilter charm is still generated. It's more early-two-thousands Brooklyn than nineteen-thirties Paris.—*Steve Futterman*

Dua Lipa x the Blessed Madonna: "Club Future Nostalgia"

POP The London-based American house-music producer the Blessed Madonna's new d.j.-mixed version of Dua Lipa's second album, "Future Nostalgia," is evidence that club culture's obsession with classic disco has dovetailed neatly with mainstream pop's recent fascination with the genre. Many of the guest remixers here offer touch-ups rather than face-lifts, as in the Zach Witness and Gen Hoshino version of "Good in Bed" or Horse Meat Disco's tighter, even more synth-heavy revision of "Love Again." And, rather than wallowing in these grooves, the d.j.s' occasional drop-ins of familiar hits by Neneh Cherry and Jamiroquai keep the pacing briskly pop.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

Ellen Reid SOUNDWALK

CLASSICAL The composer Ellen Reid writes atmospheric music with a sense of intimacy and immediacy, and now listeners can trek through her soundscapes with the free smartphone app Ellen Reid SOUNDWALK. The New York Philharmonic—in collaboration with three other ensembles, including the jazz band Poole and the Gang—has recorded pieces that Reid wrote for Central Park's various areas and attractions; as a user strolls through them, the soundtrack shifts dynamically based on the geolocation. The glistening work "When the World as You've Known It Doesn't Exist" comes up as an Easter egg hidden in one of the park's most beloved locations. Also playing: As part of the N.Y. Phil Bandwagon initiative, a small caravan of the Philharmonic's musicians travels around the five boroughs to play pop-up concerts on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays through mid-October.—*Oussama Zahr*

Josiah Johnson: "Every Feeling on a Loop"

ROCK The path that led to Josiah Johnson's first album as a solo artist, "Every Feeling on a Loop," seems torn from an overheated novel about a frayed musician. While plotting a record for his indie-folk combo, the Head and the Heart, the singer checked into rehab; upon discharge, he found himself unwelcome in the band he had co-founded. Undaunted, he broke off a romantic engagement, embraced his previously covert queer identity, and wrote a new batch of songs intended to be private. The novelized version of Johnson might be a rancorous hellion trailed by broken hearts and busted guitars, but the one reflected on this album seeks only placidity. At times, Johnson turns to mid-tempo laments to process days of fire and turbulence. But his slow-burn songs can also stretch into a Zen stillness, on an album that yearns for healing.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

Jyoti: "Mama, You Can Bet!"

JAZZ Throughout her career, the forward-thinking Los Angeles musician Georgia Anne Muldrow has expanded the parameters of modern jazz to include rap, neo-soul, and experimental elements. Under the moniker Jyoti—a name given to her by Alice Coltrane, a family friend—she makes some of her most referential music. Seven years after the last Jyoti odyssey, "Denderah," Muldrow returns to the project with "Mama, You Can Bet!," a new album that she has called a vocal document of her inner feelings. These songs have wondrous arrangements, riffing on ideas from jazz titans, and taken together they begin to form a self-portrait of Muldrow. But the most powerful moment of expression is the title track, a fitful piano ode to her mother, and to single Black motherhood.—*Sheldon Pearce*

Locrian Chamber Players

CLASSICAL Founded in 1995, the Locrian Chamber Players are among the hidden gems of the New York City concert scene, contributing depth and variety with their policy of playing only compositions less than a decade old. Now, in a time of forced isolation, the Locrians pursue their mission via Zoom Webinar, presenting three concerts of works for solo performers, free of charge, on successive Saturday evenings. The first program includes pieces by Thomas Adès and John Luther Adams; subsequent concerts feature music by Alvin Singleton, Eve Beglarian, and Jessie Montgomery.—*Steve Smith (Sept. 19 at 7:30.)*

DANCE

La Bienal de Flamenco de Sevilla

The twenty-first iteration of this prestigious festival is taking place, as always, in Seville. But this year, for the first time, some events are being live-streamed for free. On Sept. 16 (with a repeat broadcast on Sept. 18) comes "Paraíso Perdido" ("Lost Paradise"). In the Baroque church of San Luis de los Franceses, the brilliant viola da gamba player Fahmi Alqhai and the unvarnished flamenco dancer Patricia Guerrero look back to the Seville of the seventeenth century, and especially to the era's popular Afro-Caribbean music and dance forms, such as the *chacona* and the illicit *zarabanda*, which were refined in Baroque concert music to become the chaconnes and sarabandes of Bach.—*Brian Seibert (youtube.com/user/labienal)*

Catherine Galasso

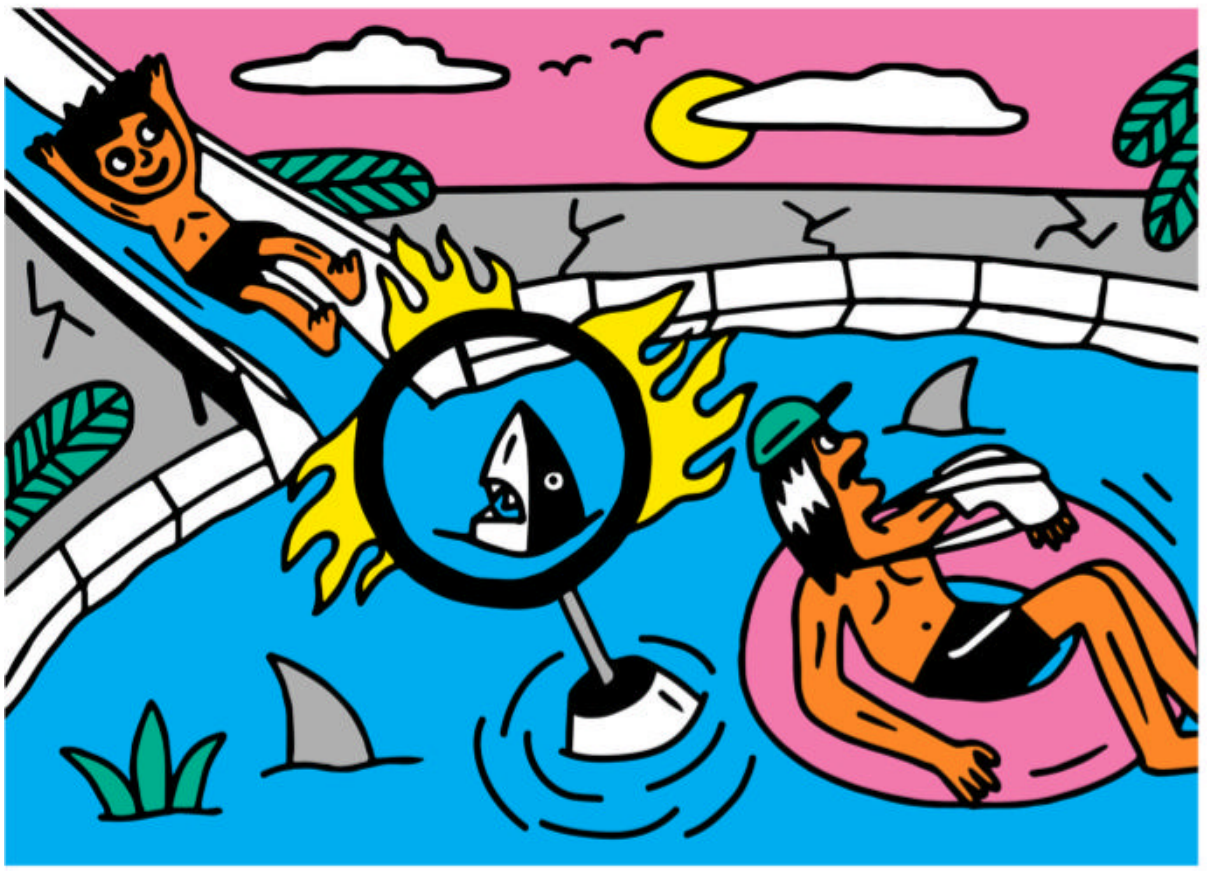
Galasso has been developing a choreographic series inspired by the Decameron since 2017, years before Boccaccio's collection of stories told during a plague became topical again. But much about the series' wistful and whimsical fourth chapter, "Field Notes: Outdoor Dances for This 21st Century," is inevitably and intentionally colored by COVID-19, starting with the setting for performances, which run Sept. 18-19:

HIP-HOP

Big Sean's 2012 mixtape, "Detroit," was a turning point in his career. Moving away from the goofy hashtag rap of his early music and toward a more robust sound and vision, he rapped about the stress of being a home-town representative, and his verses shed their slapstick quality in favor of greater narrative form. On **"Detroit 2,"** an album that he has described as a return to his roots, "with a stronger foundation," he expands the earlier mixtape's homegrown concept to mark another milestone. Produced primarily by his longtime collaborators Hit-Boy and Key Wane, this is the sharpest, most assured music of Big Sean's career. After years of workshopping, his clunker punch lines have steadily developed into thoughtful considerations of how to shield himself from depression, rejection, and duplicity.—*Sheldon Pearce*

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL KENNEDY

ON TELEVISION



The new HBO Max original documentary **"Class Action Park,"** directed by Chris Charles Scott and Seth Porges, follows the sordid history of Action Park, in Vernon, New Jersey. The brainchild of an eccentric former penny-stock trader named Gene Mulvihill, the water park, which opened in 1978, boasted dicey thrills with barely any oversight. Mulvihill designed many of the rides himself, or augmented them to be more treacherous; some former members of the staff, which was almost entirely made up of teenagers, describe, in shocking detail, how very little they did to keep people from getting hurt. John Hodgman narrates, detailing the menacing attractions, such as the Tarzan Swing (a rope swing over a deep, ice-cold swimming hole that led to near-constant injuries) and the Roaring Rapids, an inner-tube ride featuring a steep curve that dislocated limbs and broke noses. The final act takes a darker turn, exploring several deaths at the park. (It closed in 1996.) Scott and Porges don't seem to know quite how to square this sorrow with the silly popcorn nostalgia that comes before it; it's a tragic coda to a story about how corruption can lead to devastating outcomes.—*Rachel Syme*

outdoors, in the apple orchards on the sprawling grounds of PS21, in Chatham, New York.—*B.S.*

Emily Johnson

Socrates Sculpture Park lies on the shore of Long Island, across from the Upper East Side. It's a little treasure, with expansive views and an ever-changing sculpture display—a lovely backdrop for an outdoor performance. On Sept. 16 at 6 (the rain date is the following day), the Alaska-born indigenous dancer and choreographer Emily Johnson performs a solo there. Her stage is a multicolored ziggurat—a tiered structure reminiscent of Mesopotamian architecture—by the sculptor Jeffrey Gibson. The ziggurat is titled "Because Once You Enter My House It Becomes Our House," and was designed specifically for this purpose. The performance is closed to the public but will be streamed live on the park's Facebook page.—*Marina Harss (facebook.com/socratessculpturepark)*

Live @ Home / Studio 5

The passing down of dance memory is a unique aspect of the profession of dance. A ballerina who has danced a role hundreds of times, or who worked with a choreographer directly, gets into a studio with someone who is new to that role, sharing details of execution and secrets of interpretation. In this series, that process happens via Zoom, but it's no less exciting. Tiler Peck, one of New York City Ballet's most musical dancers, will perform excerpts from Jerome Robbins's "Dances at a Gathering" and discuss them with Stephanie Saland, who worked extensively with Robbins in the seventies and eighties. The dance discussed here is the "green" solo, which depicts an independent spirit who seems to remember earlier, grander days. The conversation, led by the former *Times* dance critic Alastair Macaulay, promises to be lively. It will be streamed on City Center's YouTube page through Sept. 22, starting on Sept. 16 at 5.—*M.H. (nycitycenter.org/studio5)*

TELEVISION

I May Destroy You

In this mesmerizing twelve-episode series for HBO and BBC One, written and co-directed by the aggressively free-minded Michaela Coel, Arabella (Coel), a young East London writer avoiding a deadline, parties late into the night, and then experiences a temporal blackness: she bolts awake, a gash on her forehead. The next day, a reel of horrible action colonizes her brain—a man, sweating and panting, thrusting in a bathroom stall. It will be a while before she can acknowledge that the image is a memory. Arabella has improvised a family in her mates Kwame (Paapa Essiedu), a gay aerobics instructor with a Grindr addiction, and Terry (Weruche Opia), an aspiring actress. Essiedu and Opia are understated and frequently superb, and Coel channels her enormous energy into a standout performance. She exerts a kinetic control over the story's many threads and characters—especially the calm Kwame, who is also a victim of sexual assault. Violation is the omnipresent, cultural weather. The show is "triggering," as all good art can be, because it sounds and feels and moves the way we do.—*Doreen St. Félix*

PODCASTS

The Promise

This podcast, reported and hosted by Meribah Knight for Nashville Public Radio, explores, with a keen ear for character and detail, life amid economic inequality in swiftly gentrifying East Nashville. The stellar first season focussed on the redevelopment of a public-housing complex; the new season studies de-facto segregation in schools and the people trying to challenge it, with historical context that includes clips from a John F. Kennedy speech and interviews about a forty-three-year segregation case that ended in a Pyrrhic victory. The show's greatest asset is Knight's vivid on-the-ground scene-setting, especially in schools—the sounds of bustling energy, teachers' devotion, and kids making strides. In the COVID era, it's practically a tearjerker, as is the joyful shouting of one bright, irrepressible kid running through the housing complex, telling everybody to come see his report card.—*Sarah Larson*

This Sounds Serious

Enjoyable fiction-based podcast narratives, to some discerning ears, are all too rare, as are good satirical podcasts—neither genre tends to err on the side of subtlety. So "This Sounds Serious," from Castbox and the Vancouver production company Kelly & Kelly, is an especially welcome delight. The smart, measured narration, by the actor Carly Pope—as Gwen Radford, a podcaster obsessed with 911 calls—hints at mocking podcast conventions but improves upon that of many "real" podcasts; the jokes arise from sharply observed details about human behavior and pop culture. It's all so thoughtfully executed that, when the first season premièred, in 2018, some listeners mistook it for true crime, even though it was about a weatherman murdered in his waterbed. The new season, the series' third, explores a mystery surrounding a Hollywood con man, beginning

ILLUSTRATION BY GABRIEL HOLLINGTON

with his origins as a "con boy" and satirizing everything from YouTube how-to videos to the Whiffenpoofs and "Who shot J.R.?"—*S.L.*

ART

Jordan Casteel

The first solo museum show by this American painter, who captures both likeness and mise en scène with tender incandescence in her figurative works, was open at the New Museum for only three weeks before New York City shut down, in March. There's no substitute for seeing these larger-than-life portraits in person, now that the museum has opened again, but you can also take a video tour, in which Casteel's generous narration elaborates her themes of human connection and community. In the artist's early nudes of Black men, from 2013, her subjects anchor lamplit domestic interiors with relaxed, direct gazes. The men's balance of self-assurance and vulnerability feels like a nuanced corrective to stereotype, as does the flipped gender dynamic of artist (historically male) and muse. Other paintings, such as "Harlem at Night," from 2017, show Casteel to be a consummate colorist, rendering the artificial light from shop-windows to magical effect as it floods sidewalks and illuminates faces. In the portrait "Harold," also from 2017, a man sits in a teal plastic chair in front of the blazing yellow-orange geometry of a laundromat.—*Johanna Fateman (newmuseum.org)*

Joe Fig

In his small paintings of people at museums and galleries, Fig offers the vicarious pleasure of others' absorption, as well the direct rewards of his own sharp, lustrous compositions. The Sarasota-based artist charts his travels during the past four years—to New York, mostly—in these lovely over-the-shoulder views, which capture observers paused before canvases by Rembrandt, Kerry James Marshall, Alice Neel, and Kota Ezawa, among others. There's something melancholic about Fig's mid-distance perspective; we stand with him at a remove from both the viewers and the art. The show's title, "Contemplation," refers to the meditative appreciation of art but also to the expressive postures and the diverse backs of people's heads that tend to partially block the works they regard. A half-dozen rapt visitors, standing before a trio of Max Beckmann self-portraits at the Met, are a tender reminder that people-watching can be every bit as fascinating as looking at paintings.—*J.F. (cristintierney.com)*

Shuzo Azuchi Gulliver

The Museum of Modern Art reopens with this Japanese artist's spectacular "Cinematic Illumination," from 1968-69—a precise, immersive installation that suggests the raucous and bygone (at least for now) experience of night life. Recently acquired and restored by the museum, the piece rings the fourth-floor studio with elaborately sequenced stills—shots of simple movements and images lifted from mass-media sources—that flash and ripple with color, accompanied by a loud proto-punk, psych-rock soundtrack. This pulsing merry-go-round of a visual effect was achieved by surprisingly simple means: a mirrored disco ball and eighteen slide projectors. (The clacking of the advancing slide carrousels overhead underscores the low-tech ingenuity of the feat.) Originally conceived for the Tokyo discothèque Killer Joe's as part of an arts festival organized by Gulliver's Fluxus contemporaries, the installation reflects a fervid moment in postwar Japanese art when counterculture and Conceptualism dovetailed. Intended as a kind of performance event—a projection to interact with the moving figures in a club—"Cinematic Illumination," with its ambience and energy, impresses in daylight hours, too, even amid a safely sparse crowd.—*J.F. (moma.org)*

Jacob Lawrence

Who made America great when America began making itself? That question is at the heart of this exhibition of exquisite and harrowing paintings, now on view at the Met. Organized by the Peabody Essex Museum, the show reunites the twenty-six extant panels of Lawrence's thirty-part cycle "Struggle: From the History of the American People," created between 1954 and 1956, which limn episodes from the country's foundational years, from the Revolutionary War to the construction of the Erie Canal. Transcendentally rendered in tempera on board—in an earthy palette of brown, blue, mustard, and green, almost always violently disrupted by red—each work compresses the dynamic sweep of a history painting into a modest twelve by sixteen inches. Unsung American heroes are Lawrence's ultimate subject. In the tenth panel, "We Crossed the River at McKonkey's Ferry . . .," he relays the story of George Washington crossing the Delaware River, replacing the figure of one triumphant general with a collective of anonymous, wave-battered soldiers.—*Andrea K. Scott (metmuseum.org)*

MOVIES

Mother

Albert Brooks is a sort of experimental filmmaker—he puts his tightly controlled characters into peculiar situations crafted to perturb them and observes the uproarious and liberating results. The very subject of this 1996 comedy is

AT THE GALLERIES

COURTESY SUSAN INGLETT GALLERY

The life of the American artist **Robert Kobayashi** reads something like a Zen koan. A gardener who knew nothing about gardens, he opened a beloved gallery that was usually closed. Despite critical kudos (including a 1958 piece in this magazine) for his early abstractions, he shifted to an offbeat figurative style, a folkloric Pointillism-in-the-round. Born in Hawaii, Kobayashi, who died in 2015, at the age of ninety, came to New York in 1950, after a stint in the Army, to study art and was soon hired by MOMA to tend to a Japanese house and garden, installed outdoors. After that exhibit closed, he stayed on, working at the museum for more than two decades. In 1977, a year before Kobayashi retired, he and his wife, Kate Keller Kobayashi, bought a building in Little Italy, with a former butcher shop on the ground floor. He eventually used the storefront to display his chimerical sculptures and paintings (including "Tablescape #2," from 1999, pictured above, fashioned from ceiling tin, paint, and nails on wood) for passersby, who often encountered them through the window thanks to the gallery's unpredictable hours. On Sept. 17, the Susan Inglett gallery opens "Moe's Meat Market," an exhibition devoted to Kobayashi's spirited work.—*Andrea K. Scott*

called "the experiment"—that's how John Henderson (Brooks), a novelist suffering from writer's block and a lonely recent divorcé, describes his bold decision to return to his childhood home and move back in with his mother, Beatrice (Debbie Reynolds). John hopes to renew his artistry and repair his love life by reëxamining their troubled relationship and reliving his own past. He even restores his old bedroom to its former high-school-era glory, forcing a lifetime of frustrations and submerged conflicts to the surface. Some involve petty domesticities; some involve his rivalry with his brother, Jeff (Rob Morrow), a successful sports agent, for their mother's affection; and some, of course, involve sex. In the process, Beatrice—the film's prime mover and guiding light—also relives frustrations; Reynolds's exquisitely calibrated, mercurially comedic performance reveals the stifled passions that inform a lifetime of rigidly refined habits.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on the Criterion Channel and Amazon.)*

People Will Talk

Joseph Mankiewicz's noble, mysterious 1951 comedy of medicine and mores stars Cary Grant as Dr. Noah Praetorius, a medical-school professor, student-orchestra conductor, and founder of a clinic that yokes modern science to folk wisdom. Praetorius treats a troubled young woman, Deborah Higgins (Jeanne Crain), whose unwanted pregnancy lands her in his clinic (their frank allusions to abortion are audacious surprises) and, soon, in his romantic schemes. Meanwhile, Praetorius's unorthodox methods arouse opposition, especially from the weaselly Dr. Rodney Elwell (Hume Cronyn), who brings trumped-up charges against him that also threaten his faithful sidekick, Shunderson (Finlay Currie), one of the strangest and most haunting supporting characters in all of Hollywood. A counterpart to the Commendatore from Mozart's "Don Giovanni," Shunderson is a stone-faced victim of eros-fuelled injustices. On the basis of this character alone, the movie—whimsical, profound, and stirringly idealistic—would be immortal.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon and the TCM app.)*

Residue

For his first feature, Merawi Gerima, a native of Washington, D.C., and a U.S.C. graduate, tells a story of strong personal resonance, about an aspiring young Black filmmaker named Jay (Obinna Nwachukwu) who, after living for many years in California, returns to his family home, in D.C., only to find his neighborhood gentrified. Despite offers from brokers and investors—and racist hostility from new white neighbors—Jay's mother (Melody A. Tally) and stepfather (Ramon Thompson) are staying put. Jay plans to make a film that, he says, will "give a voice to the voiceless"—the neighborhood's survivors, young men who've faced drug wars and incarceration. He seeks out his longtime—and long-unseen—friends, who now consider him an outsider and are suspicious of his insistent inquiries. Gerima films Jay's intimate confrontations with an impressionistic flair that focusses attention on characters' listening, thinking, and remembering; flashbacks and dream sequences infuse Jay's tightening conflicts with the pressure of history—both social and intimate.—*R.B. (Streaming on Netflix.)*

Sexy Beast

This drama, from 2001, is a tale of expatriate Cockneys, dry-roasted by the Spanish sun and determined to get England off their backs. Gal (Ray Winstone), once a crook, and his wife, Deedee (Amanda Redman), once a porn star, have retired to the Costa del Sol. There, they are tracked down by an old acquaintance, Don (Ben Kingsley), who invites Gal back home for one last crime. In his début feature, the British director Jonathan Glazer turns the first half of the picture into a cool study of hotheads, saturated with creative cursing; the second half, which finds Gal returning to London, stumbles and slides into the grim traditions of gangsterland. But the movie needs to be seen for its clean compositions, for its sure touch of fantasy, and, above all, for the forbidding presence of Kingsley—the prince of darkness, lightly disguised as a human being.—*Anthony Lane (Streaming on HBO Max and other services.)*

Tabu

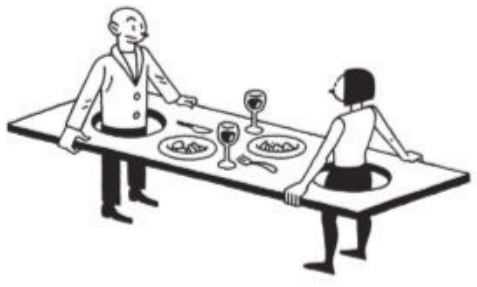
The Portuguese director Miguel Gomes's two-part drama, from 2012, is a deeply imagined psycho-excavation of modern Europe. In Lisbon, Pilar (Teresa Madruga), a lonely, middle-aged social activist, gently pursued by a gentleman artist, finds her elderly neighbor, Aurora (Laura Soveral), a capricious faded diva, in decline despite the care of her housekeeper, Santa (Isabel Cardoso). Aurora, on her deathbed, divulges a man's name and address. When Pilar finds him, he delivers a tale of his long-ago encounter with Aurora—a romantic whopper, set in one of Portugal's African colonies, that he narrates while it unfolds on-screen like a silent movie. In Gomes's vision, the serenely cultured solitude of the modern city rests on a dormant volcano of passionate memories packed with adventurous misdeeds, both political and erotic. Filming in suave, charcoal-matte black-and-white, Gomes depicts the mini-melodramas of daily life with a tenderly unironic eye; his historical reconstruction of corrupted grandeur is as much a personal liberation as it is a form of civic therapy. In Portuguese and English.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town

WHAT TO STREAM

COURTESY JANUS FILMS

One of the most important recent film restorations, of Jan Oxenberg's wildly imaginative personal documentary **"Thank You and Good Night,"** from 1991, is resurfacing at Film Forum's virtual cinema, on Sept. 16, and on the Criterion Channel, on Sept. 23. More than a decade in the making, Oxenberg's film was sparked by the news of her grandmother Mae Joffe's terminal illness. Delving deep into family stories and childhood memories, Oxenberg filmed her grandmother, her mother, herself, and other family members throughout Joffe's waning days. Unresolved conflicts and unhealed traumas are revealed in interviews and her own confessional voice-over—and brought to life in comedic dramatizations and elaborately decorative Rube Goldberg-esque reconstructions. The movie savors the intimate and the anecdotal (involving Joffe's friends, recipes, and tchotchkes) even as it leaps into grand metaphysical theatre. Pondering the mysteries of death with her grandmother and other relatives, Oxenberg crafts a poignant, tragicomic crowd scene—filmed at a surprising New York location and set to music by Curtis Mayfield—that's among the most exalted modern cinematic metaphors.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

Pupusas Ridgewood
71-20 Fresh Pond Road, Queens

Mirna's Pupuseria
1350 Flatbush Ave., Brooklyn

The cashew is a remarkably versatile ingredient. It's as delicious treated simply—raw or roasted, with or without salt—as it is soaked and processed and used to mimic cheese, butter, and cream, sometimes with astonishing success. My favorite thing about it is how it grows: each nut, encased in a hard, kidney-shaped shell, hangs from the end of a bulbous, shiny-skinned fruit, which turns red or yellow when ripe and could be easily mistaken for an apple or a bell pepper.

In countries across Asia and Latin America, this fruit is used to make a spectacular juice, with a sweet, tart flavor that's as recognizable yet as confoundingly complex as Coca-Cola. In El Salvador, where the fruit is known as *marañón*, the juice is ubiquitous. In the U.S., you have to hunt for it, so I'm delighted to report a new source: a restaurant called Pupusas Ridgewood, where you can order a plastic cup of it to go. At a moment when travel is fraught, if not out of the question, it feels especially miraculous to partake of a distinctive touchstone of another place, to shift perspective with a sip.

The griddled masa cake known as the pupusa is also a touchstone of El Salvador, where it's considered the national dish, and where, in 2005, a yearly holiday was instituted in its honor. Adjacent to the taco and the arepa, the pupusa is harder to find in the U.S. than either of those, although it was here that Pupusas Ridgewood's owner, Guillermina Ramírez, who was born and raised in Mexico, became infatuated with the dish. After she moved to New York, pupusas were the first food she ordered from a restaurant. Her menu offers little else, beyond a few other fresh juices, including a cucumber lemonade, and treats such as candied squash topped with pumpkin seeds and a three-tiered parfait of jello.

Undeterred by the pandemic, Ramírez opened her tiny *pupusería*—which would have fulfilled mostly to-go orders anyhow—in July. The other day, she presided over the cash register while, behind her, a chef named Yolanda Rosales, who is from El Salvador, tossed palmfuls of salt into a huge metal bowl of masa, hand-mixing the dough until it was thick and sticky, then molding it into saucer-size disks. Each pupusa encases some combination of mozzarella cheese, refried beans, stewed pork (called *chicharrón* in El Salvador) or chicken, and vegetables, including *loroco*, an earthy-tasting flowering vine that grows in El Salvador. They're seared on a flattop and come with the traditional accompaniments of a thin, mild tomato salsa and a tangle of *curtido*, a tart Salvadoran slaw of supple shredded cabbage, carrot, jalapeño, and dried oregano.

Pupusas, you may discover, can be habit-forming. At Mirna's, which opened in Flatbush in August of last year, you can try a slightly different iteration, smaller and served two per order, also with salsa and *curtido*. Here, the menu is more expansive. A Salvadoran breakfast platter comes with scrambled eggs, fried plantain, refried beans, crumbly *duro blando* cheese, and thick crema. Mashed plantain is used in place of dough to form empanadas, stuffed with beans or crema, their browned exteriors caramelized to the point where they're almost sweet enough for dessert—as are the wonderfully rich fresh-corn tamales.

At Mirna's, whose married proprietors, Mirna Elisabeth Marroquin and Lorenzo Garcia, hail from El Salvador and Mexico, respectively, you will find both *jugo de marañón* and *atol de piña*, a warm, drinkable porridge made from masa and pineapple simmered in water. You'll also find a quesadilla, a word that for most Americans conjures the Mexican dish comprising a tortilla folded around cheese and other fillings. In El Salvador, a quesadilla is a sweet and savory rice-flour poundcake with cheese mixed into the batter. It's perfect with morning coffee, and a tantalizing reminder of the possibilities of places near and far. *(Pupusas Ridgewood, pupusas $3. Mirna's Pupuseria, pupusas start at $2.25.)*

—Hannah Goldfield

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVEN MOLINA CONTRERAS FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

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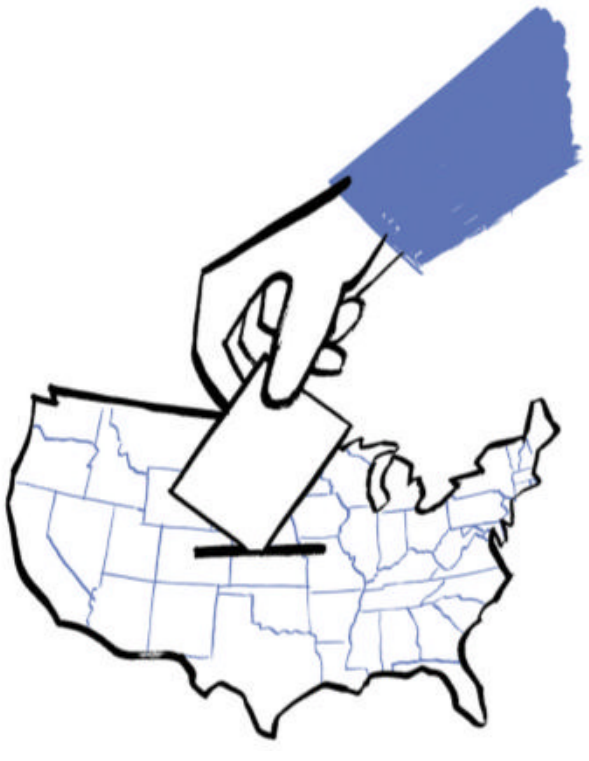
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
MAKING EVERY VOTE MATTER

In 1961, Estes Kefauver, the crusading Democratic senator from Tennessee, denounced the Electoral College as "a loaded pistol pointed at our system of government." Its continued existence, he said, as he opened hearings on election reform, created "a game of Russian roulette" because, at some point, the antidemocratic distortions of the College could threaten the country's integrity. Judging from Twitter's obsessions, at least, that hour may be approaching. The polls indicate that Donald Trump is likely to win fewer votes nationally than Joe Biden this fall, just as he won fewer than Hillary Clinton, in 2016. Yet Trump may still win reëlection, since the Electoral College favors voters in small and rural states over those in large and urban ones. Last week, a new book by Bob Woodward revealed how Trump lied, in the early weeks of the pandemic, about the severity of the coronavirus, even though that put American lives at risk; the thought that a reëlected Trump might feel triumphantly affirmed in such mendacity is terrifying. But criticizing the Electoral College simply because it has given us our Trump problem would be misguided. His Presidency, and the chance that it will recur despite his persistent unpopularity, reflects a deeper malignancy in our Constitution, one that looks increasingly unsustainable.

James Madison, who helped conceive the Electoral College at the Constitutional Convention, of 1787, later admitted that delegates had written the rules while impaired by "the hurrying influence produced by fatigue and impatience." The system is so buggy that, between 1800 and 2016, according to Alexander Keyssar, a rigorous historian of the institution, members of Congress introduced more than eight hundred constitutional amendments to fix its technical problems or to abolish it altogether. In much of the postwar era, strong majorities of Americans have favored dumping the College and adopting a direct national election for President. After Kefauver's hearings, during the civil-rights era, this idea gained momentum until, in 1969, the House of Representatives passed a constitutional amendment to establish a national popular vote for the White House. President Richard Nixon called it "a thoroughly acceptable reform," but a filibuster backed by segregationist Southerners in the Senate killed it.

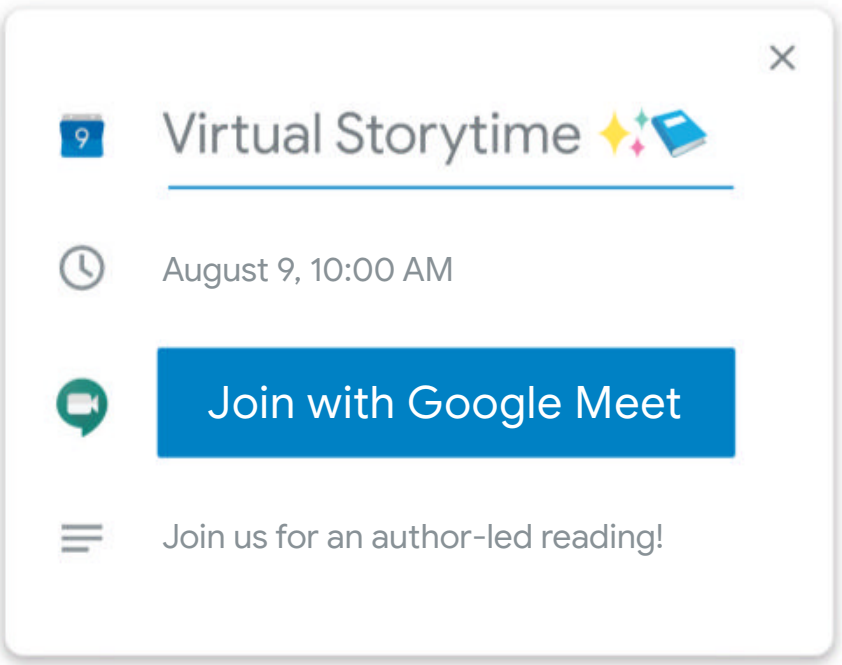


That defeat reflects the centrality of race and racism in any convincing explanation of the Electoral College's staying power. In the antebellum period, the College assured that slave power shaped Presidential elections, because of the notorious three-fifths compromise, which increased the electoral clout of slave states. Today, it effectively dilutes the votes of African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans, because they live disproportionately in populous states, which have less power in the College per capita. This year, heavily white Wyoming will cast three electoral votes, or about one per every hundred and ninety thousand residents; diverse California will cast fifty-five votes, or one per seven hundred and fifteen thousand people.

Electoral College abolitionists, knowing that the last successful constitutional amendment addressing the College was adopted in 1804, have in recent years embraced a clever workaround, called the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact. Fifteen states and the District of Columbia have passed bills containing identical language pledging to cast their electoral votes for the Presidential candidate who wins the most votes nationally. The jurisdictions in the compact currently have a hundred and ninety-six electoral votes among them, seventy-four short of the two hundred and seventy needed to bring the compact into effect, thereby guaranteeing that the candidate who wins the largest number of votes in the relevant constituency—the United States, not just the handful of "battleground" or "swing" states—wins the College and

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

Helping local businesses adapt to a new way of working



Google

Dea and Marc Lavoie of Second Star to the Right Bookstore in Denver have always been passionate about reading. They love hosting weekly in-store events, but after Colorado's stay-at-home order, they had to think of new ways of doing business.

They quickly turned to Google Meet, hosting free virtual storytimes for kids, giving Dea and Marc a new avenue for sharing their love of books—and a new way to be a community bookstore.

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gets the job. If the National Popular Vote plan ever succeeds, it would elide some problems, such as the current system's reliance on winner-take-all plurality voting, but it would fix the most egregious deficit: the undermining of one person, one vote.

The various arguments advanced for and against the Electoral College seem to outnumber the stars. A book issued by the group promoting the National Popular Vote plan runs a thousand pages, refuting no fewer than a hundred and thirty-one "myths" about the way we elect our Presidents. But the basic case for a national popular vote is simple and appealing. To be fair, the case made by supporters of the Electoral College also relies on a clear foundation: the role of federalism in the American experiment. Some who favor the status quo fear that a nationalized Presidential vote would also nationalize American politics and undermine states. In fact, the constitutional powers of state governments and the role of the Senate, whose membership advantages small states over large ones, would, among many other continuing features of federalism, insure that the United States remains a "consensus democracy," in the phrase of the political scientist Arend Lijphart—that is, one in which, by design, we must grapple with divided power.

A few days after the 2016 election, Trump told Lesley Stahl, of "60 Minutes," that he had "respect" for the Electoral College, but would "rather see it where you went with simple votes. You know, you get one hundred million votes, and somebody else gets ninety million votes, and you win." Like so many of his statements, this one proved unreliable. And, as his supporters realized that he had become President because of the Electoral College, their preference for the institution hardened. In 2012, fifty-four per cent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents favored replacing the College with a national popular vote, according to the Pew Research Center, even though George W. Bush, too, had lost the popular vote, in 2000. Today, only a third of them take that position. The National Popular Vote project relies mostly on the backing of Democrats and blue states; after Trump, it will not be easy to revitalize cross-party support. Yet a Presidential election decided by the popular vote might very well improve our rancid politics. A Republican Party with an incentive to compete for votes in California and New York, for example, might be less tempted by white nationalism.

Whenever the Trump years pass, our democracy, assuming that it endures, will face a major repair job. There will be new laws, one hopes, to prevent future Presidents from owning hotels down the street from the White House, and from withholding their tax returns, and from using the Justice Department as a personal law firm. To tear at the roots of Trumpism, however, will require much more. The Electoral College is a legacy of "distrust of the people," as Kefauver put it, and an artifact of racial injustice. If we haven't learned by now that it must go, what will it take?

—Steve Coll

PARIS POSTCARD

ROLL OF THE DICE

Amid a turn toward the convergence of leisure and escapism—I'm looking at you, recreational sourdough bakers—a number of French citizens are heading in the opposite direction. Take the success of Kapital!, a board game about class warfare. Kapital! is the creation of Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot, celebrity sociologists in a country where "celebrity sociologist" is not an oxymoron. At Christmas, the game was a runaway hit. The magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* recommended it as "a delicious poisoned gift for your right-wing friend," and ten thousand copies sold out in weeks. Since then, another twenty thousand customers have paid thirty-five euros apiece in order to "understand, apprehend, and even experience the sociological mechanisms of domination," as the game's promotional copy promises. "It makes you want to take up a pitchfork!" Maud R. wrote, leaving five stars on a retailer's Web site.

"Les Pinçon-Charlot," as the couple is known in the press, met in the library at the University of Lille in 1965 and have been married for fifty-three years. He is the son of laborers from the Ardennes; she was raised in the *moyenne bourgeoisie* of the Lozère, where her father was a prosecutor. "We both had a kind of rage in our stomachs," Pinçon-Charlot recalled. "We were convinced that our respective unhappinesses were as natural as the sun or the snow." In their life's work of studying class relations, they have met the patrimonial classes where they live: villas, châteaux, vineyards, banks, private clubs, private schools, racecourses, dinner parties. They spent three years biking around France doing research for a book on stag hunting, and have conducted field work in their bathing suits on the beaches of the Riviera. "It helped that we could go out together, as a couple," Pinçon-Charlot said. "Everything operates through that worldly sociability."

Pinçon-Charlot is tiny, with heavily lined, no-bullshit eyes peeking out from under dense bangs. (The hair style, an interview subject once gingerly informed her, marked her as an interloper on the society scene.) She was sitting in the dining room of the couple's row house, in Bourg-la-Reine, a suburb of Paris, offering a visitor hand sanitizer and sparkling water while her husband trimmed hedges in the garden. A red (like Communism) Kapital! box sat on the table. Pinçon-Charlot ("a Communist of the soul," if not currently a Party member) opened it and took out a game board, a die, and a stack of K, the game's paper currency.

"Let's roll the die!" she instructed. The visitor rolled a two. Pinçon-Charlot rolled a six, establishing her as the "dominant" player to the visitor's "dominated." "In life, it's like that," she said, sighing. "Frankly, it's all chance."

Pinçon-Charlot began distributing the cash. She dealt herself 50K in each category: financial capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital, according to the groups first established by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Her opponent received a fifth of that.

"In real life, I wouldn't have five times

as much," Pinçon-Charlot said. "It'd be more."

Kapital! follows a simple, snakes-and-ladders-style trajectory. You roll and then move your game piece the corresponding number of spaces along a winding road. The path—eighty-two squares, for the average life expectancy in France—begins at birth and ends in a tax haven. If a dominant player lands on "General Strike," she has to skip a turn and forfeit 30K in financial capital; a "Revolution" means that the wealth in the game gets redistributed. Every round, each player draws a card from a designated pile and reads it aloud.

"You buy a newspaper: who better than oneself to promulgate dominant opinion, *n'est-ce pas*?" Pinçon-Charlot read. The card instructed her to surrender 10K of her financial capital and to collect 10K each of symbolic and social capital.

Kapital! has been described as the "anti-Monopoly," which goes to show that Pinçon-Charlot is likely correct when she attributes the game's success to "being perfectly in tune with the political moment, in France and everywhere else—the whole world is under the same globalized capitalism." The game that became Monopoly, it turns out, was first conceived, in 1903, as a left-wing protest against the privatization of property, but the allure of racking up hotels and railroads was so strong that the critique was lost on players.

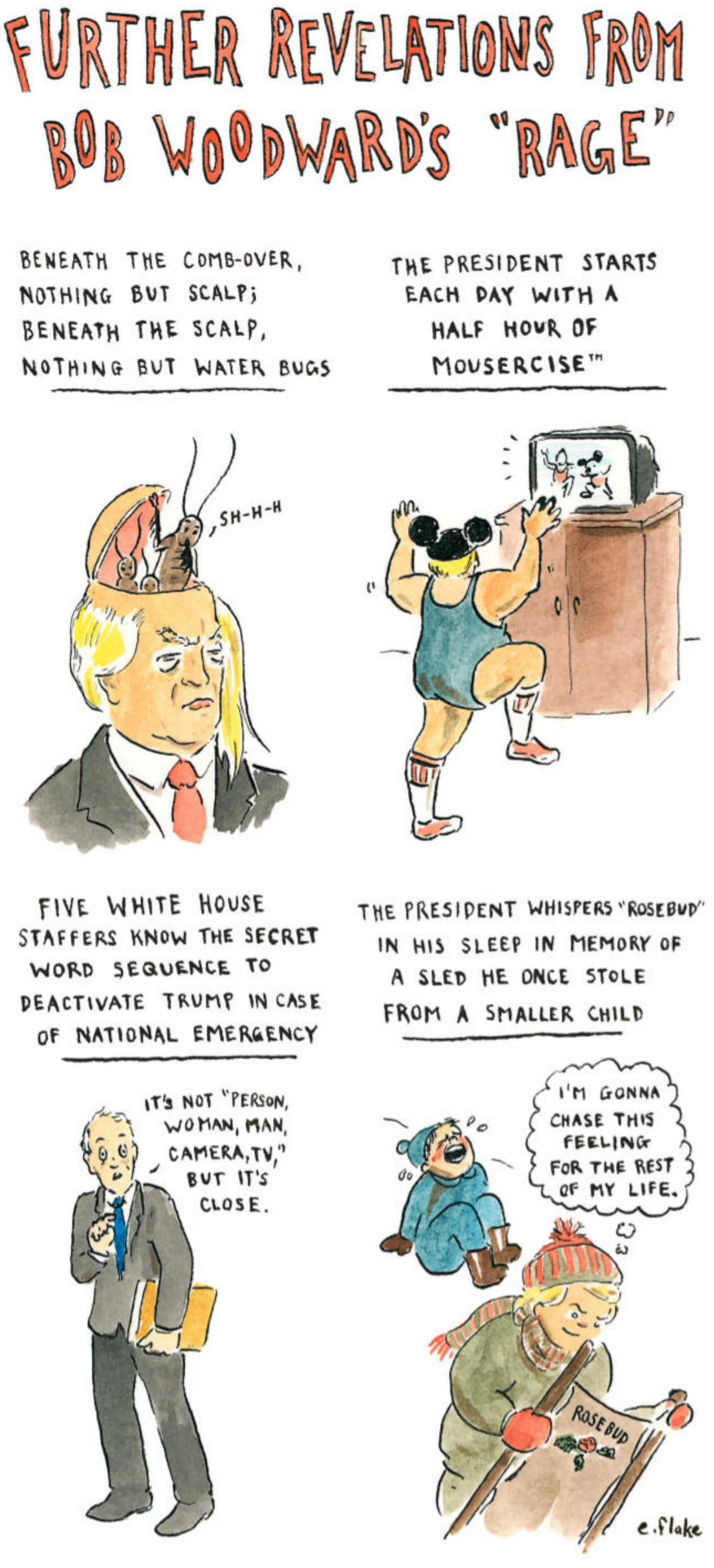
Kapital! risks no such ambiguity. "In France, ten billionaires possess almost all the media," a pedagogical factoid, printed in red italics at the bottom of the card, warned. "The news that one receives and the manner in which it's presented reflect their vision of the world and their interests, not ours."

It was the visitor's turn. "It's your birthday: you receive season tickets to your city's theatre, and that brings you 10K of cultural capital," the card read.

A butterfly flew in through an open window. Pinçon-Charlot rolled again, profiting socially from a promising encounter at a *rallye*, a kind of débutante party for pedigreed teens. The visitor, meanwhile, was having car trouble and had to cancel her summer vacation, costing her a cultural arm and a symbolic leg.

—Lauren Collins

SKETCHPAD BY EMILY FLAKE



THE PICTURES
WHO'S THAT GUY?

Rhode Island and Delaware are the tiniest states, but they've had big claims to fame lately. Delaware, of course, has Joe Biden, who's been campaigning from his home, in Wilmington. And Rhode Island managed to upstage all the other states during the virtual roll call at the Democratic National Convention, thanks to a mysterious man in black holding up a plate of calamari. The Calamari Ninja, as some people called him—he's John Bordieri, the executive chef of Iggy's Boardwalk Lobster and Clam Bar, in Warwick—may now be the most famous person living in Rhode Island. His competition, not counting natives who've moved away (Viola Davis, the Farrelly brothers) or celebrities with vacation homes there (Taylor Swift, Jay Leno), includes the character actor Richard Jenkins, who has lived in the state for the past fifty years.

"I am *not* the most famous person in Rhode Island, by far," Jenkins said the other day, as he and his wife, Sharon, took a drive around Providence. He named the former Providence mayor Buddy Cianci and the former U.S. senator Claiborne Pell (both deceased) and the pro golfers Billy Andrade and Brad Faxon (eh). From behind the wheel, Sharon brought up the actor turned alt-right troll James Woods, who has several houses in Rhode Island. "*Is* it me?" Jenkins asked himself. "That's a depressing thought."

Richard Jenkins

Jenkins, who is seventy-three, with the unassuming air of an assistant bank manager, is famous in a very Rhode Island way: he's appeared in more than eighty films, but, even with two Oscar nominations, for "The Visitor" and "The Shape of Water," and an Emmy win, for "Olive Kitteridge," he tends to slip under people's radars. "They say, 'What have I seen you in?' You go, 'I have no idea what you've seen,'" Jenkins said. "I had a woman tap me on the shoulder on an airplane and say, 'Have you ever been on "The Bob Newhart Show"? Because you look just like him.' I turned around and said, 'Are you asking me if I am Bob Newhart, or are you saying you have to look like him to be on his show?'"

The couple moved to Providence in 1970, when Jenkins got an apprenticeship at the Trinity Repertory Company. Back then, he said, Providence was a "burned-out mill town." He grew up in DeKalb, Illinois, the son of a dentist. Before starting his acting career, he made pizzas, detasselled corn, and drove a laundry truck for a company run by John C. Reilly's dad. (The two actors didn't realize the connection until they played a father and son, in "Step Brothers.") "We figured we'd be here a year, maybe two," Jenkins recalled. Instead, he became a Trinity company member. For a time, he commuted to New York for auditions. "That was back when the Amtrak was about a four-and-a-half-hour train ride, if you were lucky," he said, bringing to mind Biden's Amtrak years in the Senate. "I would go for an audition, and I'd have two lines, like, 'Freeze! It's the police!' And I'd leave."

From Sharon's Volvo, he pointed out low-key landmarks: the Providence Art Club, the first Baptist church in America. He didn't begin his movie career until well into his thirties, with roles including Woody Allen's doctor in "Hannah and Her Sisters" and a newspaper editor in "The Witches of Eastwick."

This month, he appears in Andrew Cohn's "The Last Shift," as an aging fast-food worker, and in Miranda July's "Kajillionaire," as the patriarch of a family of small-time scammers. ("They're just awful at it," he said. "They can't make two nickels.") He wore a bushy beard, which he'd grown for an upcoming Guillermo del Toro film, "Nightmare Alley." Production shut down in mid-March, but he had two days of shooting left, so he'd been stuck with the beard during the whole pandemic. "I can't wait to shave it off," he said, a sentiment for which Sharon expressed approval.

In quarantine, Jenkins has been playing (socially distanced) golf and puttering at home. "It's like the movie 'Marty': 'What do you feel like doing tonight?' 'I don't know, what do *you* feel like doing tonight?'" he said. "Yesterday was our fifty-first anniversary, and we drove down to Narragansett. There's a place called Aunt Carrie's, but if you're from Rhode Island it's Ahnt Carrie's. It's this great seafood restaurant—"

"When you say 'seafood,' it sounds fancy," Sharon said. "It's chowder and clam cakes."

"You can sit indoors, because all the windows are open and the sea breeze is blowing," Jenkins continued. The beard has made him all the more anonymous, even in Rhode Island; sometimes, to Sharon's dismay, he can't even get them a table at a restaurant. "When Tom McCarthy cast me in 'The Visitor,' he said, 'I want somebody who could walk down the streets of New York and not have people stop.' As soon as he said that, a guy walked by and went, 'Hey! Love your work!'" He laughed. "It's pretty civilized. I'm just a guy who's an actor who lives in Providence."

—Michael Schulman

STAY AWAY
BERMUDA WANTS YOU!

State tourism boards have ceased their siren calls in recent months, instead offering tough love in response to the pandemic. Colorado's "Waiting to CO" anti-tourism campaign asked that would-be visitors, in lieu of actually coming to the state, post pictures of "Colorado activities" that could be safely enjoyed at home. Kayaking in the pool, perhaps? Climbing the chimney with

ropes? The campaign was intended to slow the spread of the coronavirus in a state that's had more than sixty thousand cases of COVID-19, while simultaneously whetting travellers' appetites for post-pandemic trips.

Campaigns to keep people out are not exactly new. In the seventies, an Oregon governor proclaimed, "For heaven's sake, don't move here." Long before Seattle became a mecca for Kurt Cobain fans, a prescient local journalist popularized the slogan "Keep the Bastards Out!" In 2018, Nebraska introduced the catchphrase "Honestly, It's Not for Everyone," which actually succeeded in bringing more people to the Cornhusker State—"which had been among the least likely states for anybody to visit for a long time," John Ricks, Nebraska's tourism director, said recently.

Ricks, who is based in Lincoln, helped come up with "Honestly, It's Not for Everyone," which was inspired by a concept from the field of medicine. "Inoculation is what we call it," Ricks said. "That's where you feed off the negative perception." He went on, "We've been fortunate during this COVID crisis. People say, 'Go to open places, smaller cities, rural communities, places you've never been.' Well, that's our product!" Of course, if there were an uptick in cases, Nebraska could change course and tout the old perceptions of the state. As Ricks put it, "Nothing to do, flat and boring, dusty plains."

Jimmy Im, the Brooklyn-based founder of the Web site TravelBinger, claims to have visited more hotels around the world ("six hundred and counting") than anyone else, and has been to some forty states in his capacity as a travel professional. "And I've been invited to many of the rest," he said, mentioning Nebraska. But for now he's staying put at home, in Williamsburg. Im offered tourism boards some unsolicited slogans, to help them keep vacationers away. Florida: "Governor Ron is a Douchebag." Iowa: "Not Enough Attractions." California: "It's a Natural Disaster." Idaho: "Neo-Nazis and Whatnot."

Telling tourists not to go somewhere—facetiously, or as a matter of life and death—is an about-face for most travel-industry professionals. "It's hard," Campbell Levy, a vice-president at Turner, a public-relations company with travel-related clients in two dozen states, said the other day, from his home, in Evergreen, Colorado. "The world is different than it was. The tourism business is suffering. But it just doesn't make a lot of sense to get on a plane right now, unless you really have to."

"Oh, that's just all the online yoga she's been doing lately."

• •

Lately, Levy has been pushing an alternative to Stateside travel: obtaining a twelve-month worker certificate from Bermuda. His company represents the British territory, which is situated approximately six hundred and fifty miles off the North Carolina coast and has a population of more than sixty thousand. Unlike most places, Bermuda *wants* visitors—its economy is dependent on them. "There's practically no COVID there," Levy said. (Only a hundred and seventy-seven COVID cases have been confirmed on the island; eight are currently active.) "It's a prime opportunity," he added. "And they've got really robust testing."

More than three hundred people from a dozen countries—including Brazil, China, South Africa, and Bangladesh—have applied for Bermuda's certificate program, which launched in August. Certification for a twelve-month stay costs two hundred and sixty-three dollars (lodging not included). Sadie Millard, a New Yorker in her forties who works as a partner at a Wall Street brokerage firm, got a head start. She was visiting her boyfriend, who works as a civil engineer in Bermuda, when COVID hit New York, in March. "I came for the weekend, then things got crazy," she said. Airlines began suspending outbound flights from the island, her firm closed its offices, and employees began working remotely. She decided to stay. Her partners at the firm are fine with it. Even if there were in-person meetings to attend (there are not), New York is just a two-hour flight away.

Trading her six-hundred-square-foot apartment for a house near a golf course was not a tough call. "Nothing was open in New York," she said. "No theatre, no concerts, no anything." Storm season has arrived, but Millard, who expects to receive her worker certificate next week, is taking her chances: "I'd rather go through a hurricane than get COVID in New York City."

Back in Colorado, Levy couldn't stop himself from pitching a potential future traveller on Nebraska, one of his stalled accounts. What would this tourist do there? "It's really worth floating down a river in a livestock tank with a few buddies," Levy said, a pastime that locals call "tanking." He added, "But only once it's safe again."

—Charles Bethea

LIFE AND LETTERS

MAKING A SCENE

In the age of Trump, a writer explores America's divisions—and his own.

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ

Ayad Akhtar's autofictional novel cunningly entwines outrage and ambivalence.

PHOTOGRAPH BY COLE BARASH

A year after Donald Trump assumed office, Ayad Akhtar was at the American Academy in Rome, contemplating populism, the degradation of democracy, and ruinous civil strife. He had been mulling over the idea of a play about the brothers Gracchus, plebeian politicians in the century before Caesar whose defiance of the senatorial élite and championship of the poor led to an unhappy end. Akhtar wasn't alone in consulting Roman history to gain perspective on the present. From his window, he could look out at the residence of the U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, Callista Gingrich, whose husband, Newt, was studying Augustus, rumor had it, for pointers on how to counsel a President who fancied himself an emperor.

Akhtar, who is forty-nine, is an obsessive autodidact, with a mind like a grappling hook for any subject that attracts his interest. There are many. As a kid growing up in the Milwaukee suburbs, he studied the Quran with a rigor that flummoxed his secular Pakistani parents. As a theatre major at Brown, he taught himself French, attaining enough fluency in a year to direct his own translations of Genet and Bernard-Marie Koltès. When he was in his twenties, working in New York as an assistant to the director Andre Gregory, he spent his free time analyzing the prosody of Spenser's "The Faerie Queene" and poring over Freud, which led to a years-long study of Jung, then Lacan, then Winnicott. Although he lost his faith in his teens, religion of all kinds continues to fascinate him. "He's the only American I know who has read Meister Eckhart," the German writer Daniel Kehlmann, a good friend of Akhtar's, told me, referring to the medieval Christian theologian and mystic.

Success arrived late, but Akhtar has made up for lost time. His first novel, "American Dervish," about the coming of age of an innocent Pakistani-American boy, was published in January, 2012, when he was forty-one, the same month that his first play, "Disgraced," about the unravelling of a jaded Pakistani-American lawyer, premièred, in Chicago. After a buzzy run at Lincoln Center, where tickets were scalped for fifteen hundred dollars apiece, "Disgraced" won the Pulitzer Prize for drama, then moved to a sold-out run in London, and to the Lyceum Theatre, on Broadway.

In short order, Akhtar had three more plays première, including "The Invisible Hand," a thriller about an American hostage in Pakistan who, to pay his ransom, teaches his fundamentalist captors how to manipulate financial markets, and "Junk," another Broadway hit, which transformed the dry subject of high-yield bonds in the nineteen-eighties into unexpectedly riveting drama. "Ayad's particular brilliance is that he makes systems kinetic," Josh Stern, a producer who is working with Akhtar to develop a television show, told me. "He's able to take this huge, complicated infrastructure and distill it down to visceral character drama in a way that is unique." As arcane as his intellectual tastes can be, Akhtar is determined to appeal to a broad public. "Proust meets Jerry Springer" is how he described his work to me when I met him, earlier this summer.

In Rome, Akhtar devoted himself to the classics that lined the Academy's library: Livy, Tacitus, Machiavelli. One afternoon, he opened Giacomo Leopardi's "Canti," from 1835, and read the book's first poem, "To Italy":

> O my country, I can see the walls
> and arches and columns and the statues
> and lonely towers of our ancestors,
> but I don't see the glory . . .

An idea hit. Why not write to his own country—to the whole spliced-together nation, as it seemed on the verge of splitting apart? Forget the Gracchus brothers. Throw off the veil of metaphor and speak directly.

The result is Akhtar's second novel, "Homeland Elegies," published this month. The book opens with a letter addressed "To America"—an "overture," Akhtar calls it. In a crescendo of grievance reminiscent of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," the narrator, who shares Akhtar's name, denounces the nation's recent sins and failures, citing the decline of peers and family members who have been felled by debt, low pay, suicide, and overdose, "medicated for despair, anxiety, lack of affect, insomnia, sexual dysfunction; and the premature cancers brought on by the chemical shortcuts for everything from the food moving through our irritable bowels to the lotions applied to our sun-poisoned skins." He rails against the country's cult of greed, its prostitution of private life for public attention, its allegiance to devices that "filled us with the toxic flotsam of a culture no longer worthy of the name," and swears, on the sacred memory of Walt Whitman, to give his own account of the riven nation.

I visited Akhtar in late June at the modest Greek Revival house in Kinderhook, New York, that he bought last year with his fiancée, Annika Boras, an actor and director. Ongoing renovations had left the façade, with its portico of Doric columns, looking as if it had survived a small cyclone, though the interior was intact and comfortable, furnished with Boras's baby-grand piano and the largest wall-mounted television I had ever seen. The couple had decamped to the country in early March from their rental apartment on the Upper West Side. Since childhood, Akhtar has had vivid dreams that he interprets as premonitions. One came to him just before September 11th, and another this February, in which he tried to escape an evil fog that was smothering the world. When the first cases of the coronavirus were reported in the city, he and Boras left immediately.

Akhtar starts every morning by reading one of Shakespeare's sonnets. When he's writing, he likes to jot scenes and themes on index cards, which he tapes above his desk to arrange and reorder. Lately, he had been working around the clock to complete the pilot for his television series, but, concerned that early disclosure of its subject could prove disastrous, he had removed all evidence, leaving a single card on which he had written, in Latin, "*Vocatus atque non vocatus deus aderit*." "It means, 'Bidden or not bidden, God is here,'" he said. "It was a quote that Jung had up in his tower in Bollingen. It felt appropriate to what I'd like to think—that the mystery is present whether or not I'm aware of it."

Akhtar, who is bald and youthful, wore elegantly ripped jeans and round, blue-rimmed glasses; when he took them off, in moments of distraction or excitement, his eyes looked unguarded and dreamy. He is gentler in person than he is on the page, friendly and fluid, ardent in his search for the precise idea, the right phrase. He exudes a confidence that might border on showmanship were he not so intent on poking at his vulnerabilities. Sitting far apart, we ate ham sandwiches. "High-octane pretension," he said, when I asked him about his decision to speak, in "Homeland Elegies," to America writ large.

But that was customary self-deprecation, protective and perfunctory. Akhtar is serious about his work to a point that can delight collaborators, or drive them mad. He and Boras met when she was cast in an early reading of "Junk"; they decided not to work together again. "I get really nervous when I have a show going up," he said.

Akhtar has developed a theory of audience reaction influenced by the psychologist Daniel Kahneman's book "Thinking, Fast and Slow," and its suggestion that the brain processes parcels of information two and a half minutes at a time. He adjusts a play's rhythms accordingly, spending each preview in a different part of the theatre to listen for every missed gasp and laugh. Relentless in his perfectionism, he sees every new production of a work as a chance to finally get it right, and was still tinkering with "Disgraced" when it went to London, three weeks after the Pulitzer announcement. "I remember the *Times* saying it's unusual for a writer to revise a play after winning a Pulitzer," he said. "To which my private response was: *I* didn't give it a Pulitzer!"

With "Homeland Elegies," Akhtar was just as intent on capturing his reader's attention. The novel wears its erudition boldly. Discourses on Islamic finance, medical-malpractice suits, and Robert Bork's antitrust theory punctuate the narrative. Writers of the show-don't-tell school might worry about didacticism undermining artistry, but Akhtar has a different philosophy. "Telling is amazing—some of my best experiences have been being told stuff," he told me.

Akhtar modelled his book's main sections on different Tolstoy novellas: "The Kreutzer Sonata," for a sequence on sex and rage; and "Hadji Murad," for the bravura middle section about a Muslim hedge-funder who deploys an ingenious financing scheme to avenge himself on American Islamophobia. A final passage dealing with the decline of Akhtar's father is inspired by "The Death of Ivan Ilych." The prose, too, is stippled with the kind of Latinate vocabulary rarely seen outside a set of G.R.E. flash cards.

At the same time, Akhtar, aware of his competition in the attention economy, wanted the visceral effect of reading the novel to feel like scrolling through social media, fluid and addictive. "It's essay," he said. "It's memoir. It's fiction. It just had to be seamless, in the way that a platform like Instagram is seamless. And one of the pivotal dimensions of that content is the staging and curation of the self."

"Homeland Elegies" seems, at first blush, to be autofiction, a form in which the "fiction" is generally considered secondary to the "auto." But is the disgruntled, discontented Ayad Akhtar of "Homeland Elegies" the same Ayad Akhtar who was genially sitting across from me, thriving in his work, content with his personal life? (Boras, a graceful blond woman in clogs, whom Akhtar had affectionately described as an introvert, briefly slipped into the room during my visit, kissed Akhtar on the head, and left.) During this and other conversations, Akhtar gamely deflected my attempts to pry out what, exactly, was true in the novel and what wasn't. "Why does it matter?" he would ask—although just when I had assumed that something in the book hadn't taken place in life, he would mention offhandedly that it had. "Homeland Elegies" performs a kind of

trompe-l'oeil striptease, enticing readers with the promise of personal disclosure without ever revealing whether or not they have glimpsed actual flesh. The effect can be salacious, even inflammatory. The novel, which turns on Akhtar's sense of alienation as a Muslim man in the United States after September 11th, leans into provocation: we see the narrator fucking a white woman in an ecstasy fuelled by racial fetishism and hostility, and watch as he trades on his cultural capital to become, as he caustically puts it, "a neoliberal courtier, a subaltern aspirant to the ruling class." Indhu Rubasingham, the artistic director of London's Kiln Theatre, who became close to Akhtar after directing a production of "The Invisible Hand," told me, "For a Muslim-American man, writing a novel where people aren't going to know what is true and what is not is really audacious and brave."

Akhtar considers that risk to be its own reward. "I have some anarchist instinct, some righteous impulse toward disorder," he told me. People had been asking him why he didn't just write a memoir. "And my response to that is because there was a particular quality that I wanted to get to, something about the audience and the decay of their relationship with reality, and the collapse of truth into entertainment." He wanted to devise "a strategy that was going to make its peace with this, not as a critique but as a seduction."

If there is something Trumpian in the idea of reeling in a reality-addled public through a craftily manipulated persona, the echo is intentional. The President looms over "Homeland Elegies." He's there, in spirit, in the novel's bilious, bleak prelude, and is named in the first sentence of the book's first chapter. But so is Akhtar's immigrant father, a prominent Wisconsin cardiologist who, he writes—perhaps truthfully, perhaps not—treated Trump in the nineteen-eighties and voted for him in 2016. Akhtar's personal and political struggles with his father are at the emotional core of "Homeland Elegies." One of the novel's theses is that Trump is the logical outcome of the country's trajectory in the past half century, the period during which Akhtar's parents put down their roots. These facts, Akhtar came to believe, were intertwined; to get at what had landed a demagogue in the White House, he had to take aim at himself.

Akhtar's American story begins in Pakistan. His parents met as medical students in Lahore, and married just before Akhtar's father, Masood, immigrated to the United States, in 1968, to pursue a medical residency. His wife, Khurshid, a radiologist, soon joined him. Akhtar was born on Staten Island in 1970. When he was four, the family moved to Wisconsin's Waukesha County—a Republican stronghold, ninety-three per cent white, that was last carried by a Democrat in a Presidential election in 1964—so that Masood could open a cardiology clinic in neighboring Milwaukee.

The marriage was fraught. Masood, a pioneer in the treatment of arrhythmia with electrophysiology, was beloved by his patients and respected in his field. Gregarious and irrepressible, he was prone to astonishing gestures of generosity; once, he sold his Audi to the valet at a favorite restaurant for a dollar. To his family, though, he could be selfish and unreliable; he gambled, drank heavily, and made little attempt to hide his womanizing. Akhtar, as the elder child, became his mother's confidant and crutch—"a variation of the classic Oedipal dilemma." (He has a brother, seven years younger.) This troubled dynamic is on full display in "American Dervish," a novel that he

does not mind acknowledging as straightforwardly autobiographical. Masood was unfazed by the portrayal. "Some people say you make me look bad," he told Akhtar. "Other people say I'm a hero."

Cultural factors contributed to his parents' friction, too. Akhtar's father embraced life in the United States, whose freedoms and possibilities matched his outsized appetites. "He made and lost two fortunes," Akhtar told me: millions in investments that went boom, then bust. But Khurshid remained critical of her adoptive home. In a crucial moment in "Disgraced," the play's protagonist admits that he felt a measure of pride on September 11th. In "Homeland Elegies," Akhtar attributes the same sentiment to his mother. "Our blood is cheap," she says, years before the attacks take place. "They deserve what they got, and what they're going to get." He took his parents' opposing perspectives as the novel's poles. "One is infantile, rampant, moneyed individualism, an outrageous vision of American exceptionalism," he said. "And, on the other hand, postcolonial rage—an outrageous vision of an American critique."

Akhtar's parents were the first in their families to emigrate, and they spent long vacations visiting relatives in Pakistan, where Akhtar, the firstborn son of a firstborn son, was lovingly fussed over. While the men went off to hunt, he stayed inside drinking tea with the women, absorbing their Punjabi chat and gossip. "I was really into the domestic interior, family dramas," he said. One aunt loved Shakespeare; another enthralled him with stories of the Prophet Muhammad. Embedding in this protected female space helped him make better sense of his mother. "Her pain was, in large part, the pain of being a woman in a culture that made it very hard to be a woman," he said. "I saw all of her sisters go through this dilemma. Very smart, charismatic, resourceful women who were subordinated, and separated."

Influenced, in part, by his religious relatives, he developed an interest in Islam that soon turned to devotion, an experience that he mined in "American Dervish," whose protagonist yearns to become a *hafiz*, someone who knows the entire Quran by heart. Akhtar had to beg his openly dismissive father to take him to pray at Milwaukee's mosque. "I have an abiding interest in things that the somewhat narrow middle of contemporary Western life—economized life, if you will—tends to ignore," he said. "The sort of declivitous lows and ecstatic highs. I was very interested in religion because it seemed to be the only thing that spoke to that register of experience."

The religious fervor soon burned off. "Early on, I recognized—I won't put it generously—the abject stupidity of thinking that I must know something that

other people don't, and that I must be right because I was born into something," Akhtar said. (These days, he and Boras practice meditation.) His quest for the sublime found a new outlet when he saw "The Empire Strikes Back"—the Dagobah swamp blew his mind—and, later, in high school, when a teacher introduced him to European modernist literature. He decided that he wanted to be a writer, and the conviction deepened when he studied with the Americanist Mary Cappello at the University of Rochester, where he matriculated before transferring to Brown for his sophomore year. (Cappello, who appears in the novel as a beloved professor named Mary Moroni, told me that she still sends Akhtar detailed critiques of his work.)

Akhtar found early success in a creative-writing class in Rochester, with a short story about a burial gone awry in Pakistan. Impressed, the professor offered to connect him with literary editors at various illustrious magazines. Akhtar was elated, then frozen by doubt. What if the story was a fluke? He fell into a crushing depression. It was years before he showed his fiction to anyone else.

"Actually, I kind of wish it were quicker."

• •

In July, Akhtar spent the better part of a week at the sound director Robert Kessler's studio in Katonah, recording the audiobook of "Homeland Elegies." On the afternoon that I visited, he was preparing to read a chapter called "On Pottersville," which begins with a charged conversation the narrator has with a Black libertarian friend who is explaining why he votes Republican. Kessler, who has shoulder-length white hair and an aspect of relaxed competence, adjusted his blue medical mask and settled himself at the soundboard as Akhtar shut himself into a booth in an adjacent room.

"Let me know when you're rolling, dude," Akhtar said. Kessler gave him the O.K., and Akhtar launched into an epigraph from "It's a Wonderful Life," which opens the section: "Just remember this, Mr. Potter: that this rabble you're talking about—they do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and pay and live and die in a couple of decent rooms and a bath?"

Breaking for breath, he said, "I know it sounded nothing like Jimmy Stewart."

"That's a good thing," Kessler said.

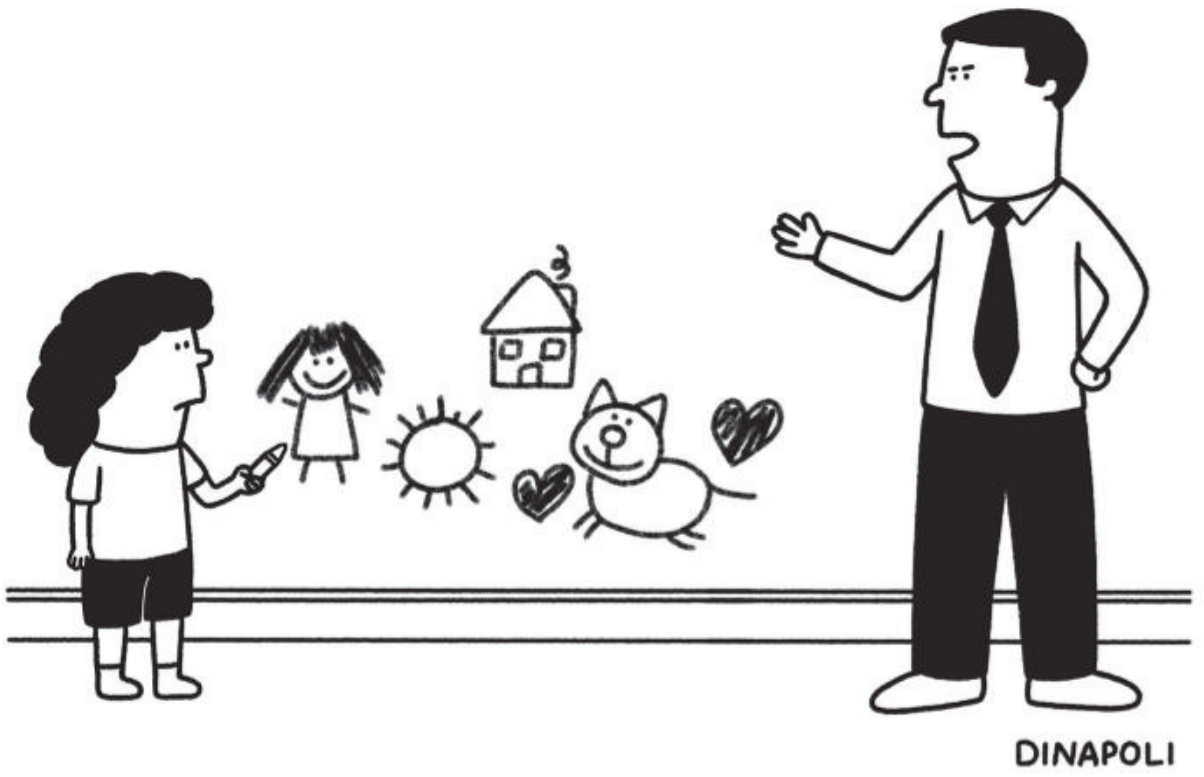
Akhtar feels that his books find their truest form in his performance of them. He takes special pleasure in rendering his parents' accents: his mother's lightly wheedling tone; his father's comical bombast. As he read, he shaped the air with his hands, marking rhythm. "*Fuck* me," he muttered as he stumbled on a word. "Robert was telling me that people swallow a lot of air when they're doing this, so that's why I'm burping a lot."

"I keep telling him he doesn't have to be so polite about it, to just let it out," Kessler said.

Akhtar discovered acting at Rochester, and transferred to Brown to pursue it. The program was like a conservatory: he was in acting class two hours a day, four days a week, and otherwise translating, directing, producing, and performing. At the end of Akhtar's senior year, Andre Gregory gave a talk on campus. "I basically accosted him," Akhtar recalled. "I said, 'I'm a big fan of your work, especially the spiritual dimension of what you're doing. I know you're good friends with Jerzy Grotowski,'" the avant-garde Polish director. Akhtar had become infatuated with Grotowski's spiritual predecessor, George Gurdjieff, the early-twentieth-century Armenian mystic who encouraged his followers to awaken a higher consciousness through music and dance. "Gurdjieff is dead," he told Gregory. "So I want to work with Grotowski."

Two weeks later, Akhtar skipped graduation and flew to Grotowski's institute in Tuscany. "His whole thing was about trying to find ways to gain access to a kind of animal state, what he would call an 'organicity,'" Akhtar said. Grotowski led his acolytes through sixteen-hour days that began in the middle of the afternoon and went past dawn, exhausting them to the point of breakthrough, or breakdown. "He and maybe one other person in my life have set a certain bar of what's possible, intellectually, creatively," Akhtar told me. Still, there was something cultish about a cloistered environment devoted to a theatrical genius who had stopped making theatre. When the actors performed, they faced an empty chair.

Some people spent a decade or more at the institute. Akhtar lasted a year. He and his girlfriend, a Frenchwoman whom he had met while studying abroad, and later married, moved to New York, where they lived in a studio apartment on Second Avenue. He began working as Gregory's assistant, helping to rehearse Gregory's production of "Uncle Vanya" with Julianne Moore and Wallace Shawn in the spectacularly dilapidated old Amsterdam Theatre. Louis Malle turned the production into the movie "Vanya



"Janey! What did I say about drawing on the walls? Perspective! Balance! Basic compositional principles!"

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on Forty-second Street." (You can catch a glimpse of Akhtar, still with hair.) He taught acting workshops and tried to start his own company, but his approach was at odds with commercially minded New York. "I did a translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's 'No Exit' that I rehearsed with three actors for eight months," he said. "We never did any performances, we just continued to rehearse." Akhtar prided himself on his artistic purity: "If you'd told me back then that I would become a Broadway playwright, I would have said, 'Put a bullet in me now.'"

"He was very much opposed to films," the director Oren Moverman, Akhtar's best friend from those years, told me. "We had a lot of fun conversations about why film is no good, where I was there to defend the love I have for the craft."

A dream led Akhtar to reconsider his resistance to what he had previously rejected as a debased medium. He started watching movies at a clip of six a day; within three months, he had seen three hundred and fifty, working his way through Hollywood from the thirties on up before pivoting to Italian neorealism, the French New Wave, and Ingmar Bergman. (Though his marriage managed to survive this hermetic boot camp, the couple split up a few years later.) In the fall of 1997, Akhtar enrolled at the Columbia film school. In his first semester, he directed twelve shorts, one film a week, a breakneck pace. "I just needed to learn the language," he said.

After graduating, he and two classmates wrote "The War Within," a thriller about a radicalized Pakistani whose plot to attack New York puts him in conflict with a friend who has embraced life in the United States. The movie's exploration of alienation and allegiance previews similar themes in "Homeland Elegies." Akhtar starred as the terrorist.

In a pivotal scene in "Homeland Elegies," Akhtar's car breaks down in Pennsylvania. The state trooper who comes to his assistance is helpful and friendly, until he asks about Akhtar's name. After 9/11, Akhtar tells us, he had started wearing a cross around his neck, to ward off suspicion; he tries to dodge the question, but once the trooper realizes that Akhtar is Muslim his attitude changes, and Akhtar's subsequent humiliation jostles something loose. "I was going to stop pretending that I felt American," he vows, deciding to change the focus of his writing accordingly. "Paradoxically, these were the works that would lead to me finally finding my way as a writer in my American homeland and to the success that would earn me enough money to settle my debts and start making the monthly ends meet."

In his twenties, Akhtar spent years laboring on a thousand-page novel about a poet who worked the graveyard shift entering data at Goldman Sachs. "I was reading too much Fernando Pessoa," he said. The realization that his oblique, high-modernist project had failed coincided with the discovery that he had a knack for writing things that people actually liked. After film school, he supported himself writing scripts such as "Trash Man," featuring a mobster placed in witness protection in Kansas who recruits high-school football players to help him run a racket. The popular register felt right. As a teen-ager, he'd loved soap operas. "There was something about campy melodrama that felt real to me," he told me. "The melodrama of a Punjabi household is much closer to that than it is to post-Jacobian naturalism."

He decided to write a novel that would be quickly paced but thought-provoking, set in a world he knew intimately. Still, seven agents passed before he found one who would represent him; eventually, Judy Clain, at Little, Brown, bought the book for a seven-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar advance. "There are so many people who are white who I've known who've worked so hard, who have not gotten any breaks," Akhtar said. "So to impute the difficulties I've had solely to race, I think, would probably be less than accurate, although that's of course been part of it."

If skeptical publishers had been concerned that "American Dervish" wouldn't appeal to white readers, they were proved wrong. Critics responded warmly. When I went to Audible to listen to Akhtar's performance of the book, I found hundreds of five-star reviews from listeners who, as one wrote, found the milieu it described to be "both completely foreign and painfully familiar."

But making his community accessible to others was not Akhtar's only goal. When he was growing up, he had been subjected to the double vision common among first-generation kids. "It was an awareness that there were two ways of seeing the world and they were both probably wrong," he said. "But they were both right. American society was pretty homogeneous where I grew up. And wonderful. I mean, the kids were great. The parents were welcom-

ing. We played baseball and had crushes on girls. There were some cultural issues navigating that, but I never felt myself to be coming from the outside. And then there was this very, very different world view within the Pakistani community in Milwaukee, which was that this society was illegitimate."

To tell the truth about where he was from, Akhtar felt that he had to press on those fault lines. The Milwaukee Pakistanis whom Akhtar depicts in "American Dervish" are hardly model minorities. The plot deals with the lasting effects of the domestic and legal repression of women in the Muslim world, and builds to an ugly eruption of anti-Semitism.

"American Dervish" rapped on a door that Akhtar had long wanted to open; "Disgraced" tore its hinges off. The play's protagonist, Amir, is a Pakistani-born American who has jumped through every hoop. He is married to a beautiful, accomplished white woman, lives in a luxurious apartment on the Upper East Side, and is on the partner track at his corporate-law firm. In the course of the play's single, ninety-minute act, everything is stripped from him. Akhtar was thinking of "Othello" when he wrote "Disgraced," but the play also owes a debt to the American literature of racial passing, in which characters who have managed to escape their origins fear that some unwelcome revelation will cast them out of the white world they have given everything to enter. In "Disgraced," though, it is Amir who exposes himself:

Isaac: Did you feel pride on September Eleventh?

Amir (With hesitation): If I'm honest, yes.

Emily: You don't really mean that, Amir.

Amir: I was horrified by it, okay? Absolutely horrified.

Jory: Pride about what? About the towers coming down? About people getting killed?

Amir: That we were finally winning.

Jory: *We*?

Amir: Yeah . . . I guess I forgot . . . which *we* I was.

Daniel Kehlmann told me, "What you want, as a playwright, is to have a climactic moment that resonates so much that people might forget everything else that happened in the play but they will remember that moment. Ayad achieved that in 'Disgraced.'"

"Disgraced" is rife with such taboo drama. Amir criticizes the Prophet and ridicules the idea that the Quran was dictated by God—grave blasphemies in Islam. "If you were to do the play in Cairo or in Islamabad, they would burn the theatre down," Akhtar said. Its reception among American Muslims has hardly been without controversy. Akhtar summarized the general attitude: "We were so excited that you won this big thing and everybody's talking about your play and now we've come with our parents and our family and you're attacking us." At the climax of the play, Amir, distraught and enraged, beats his wife, an act that provocatively mimics Western stereotypes about Muslim men. With "the brown dude reinforcing and enacting the worst version of his culture," one Pakistani-American critic wrote, "the brown people in the audience are—once again, for their sanity and safety—on the defense, forced to be educators."

Akhtar finds that he himself is frequently on the defensive. When "Disgraced" was on Broadway, he attended a fund-raiser at the home of a wealthy patron of the arts. The only other non-white person in the room was a young Muslim caterer. "I read your play," she told him, as she was clearing his table. "So you're the kind of person who makes us look bad."

"Then that's juxtaposed against folks who will come up to me and say, 'I understand what you're doing, but why are you doing it in front of *them*?'" Akhtar said. "It echoes all the same stuff that Philip Roth went through." Akhtar considers his path to have been blazed by Jewish-American writers like Roth and Saul Bellow, who, in the face of parochial censure, made audacious art that refused to flatter their communities. As unhappy as certain Jews were with "Portnoy's Complaint," though, none of them had the power to issue a fatwa. ("The Satanic Verses" has been a touchstone for Akhtar since he read it in his teens.) Still, Akhtar thought it was important to have someone from within the Muslim community argue for approaching Islamic scripture as literature, as a source not of eternal truth but of myth and metaphor.

This move is at the heart of Akhtar's play "The Who & the What" (2014), whose protagonist, Zarina, scandalizes

"I figured it was time to get a pet of my own."

her community by writing a novel that treats Muhammad as an ordinary person with sexual impulses and moral flaws. The play uses comedy as a salve in the way that "Disgraced" uses drama as a torch; audiences around the world loved it. (A production has run at Vienna's Burgtheater for the past two years.) A friend of Akhtar's went to a performance at Lincoln Center. "He called me and he said, 'I can't believe what you're doing.' I said, 'Well, what do you mean?' He said, 'Why are you humiliating us like that?' I said, 'What are you talking about?' He said, 'They were laughing at us.' I said, 'No, no, they were laughing *with* us!' He's, like, 'No, I was in that audience. How dare you say those things about the Prophet?' This is a secular Muslim, a neurosurgeon in Chicago."

Akhtar is wary of what he sees as a limiting trend, in American theatre and literature, of writers making work that strives to promote, rather than to interrogate, their racial or ethnic identities. "The audience is increasingly responding to the politics of representation," he said. "But I don't think an artist should be in advertising, which is sometimes what I worry we are becoming—advocates for certain points of view, as opposed to thoughtful instigators. It can go all the way back to Horace. What's the purpose of art, to delight or instruct?" Such committed iconoclasm can sometimes put Akhtar in strange positions. When the long-running Viennese production of "The Who & the What" opened, in 2018, it featured an all-white cast. He was initially disturbed, but the performance won him over; German audiences recognized their own families in the Pakistani characters onstage.

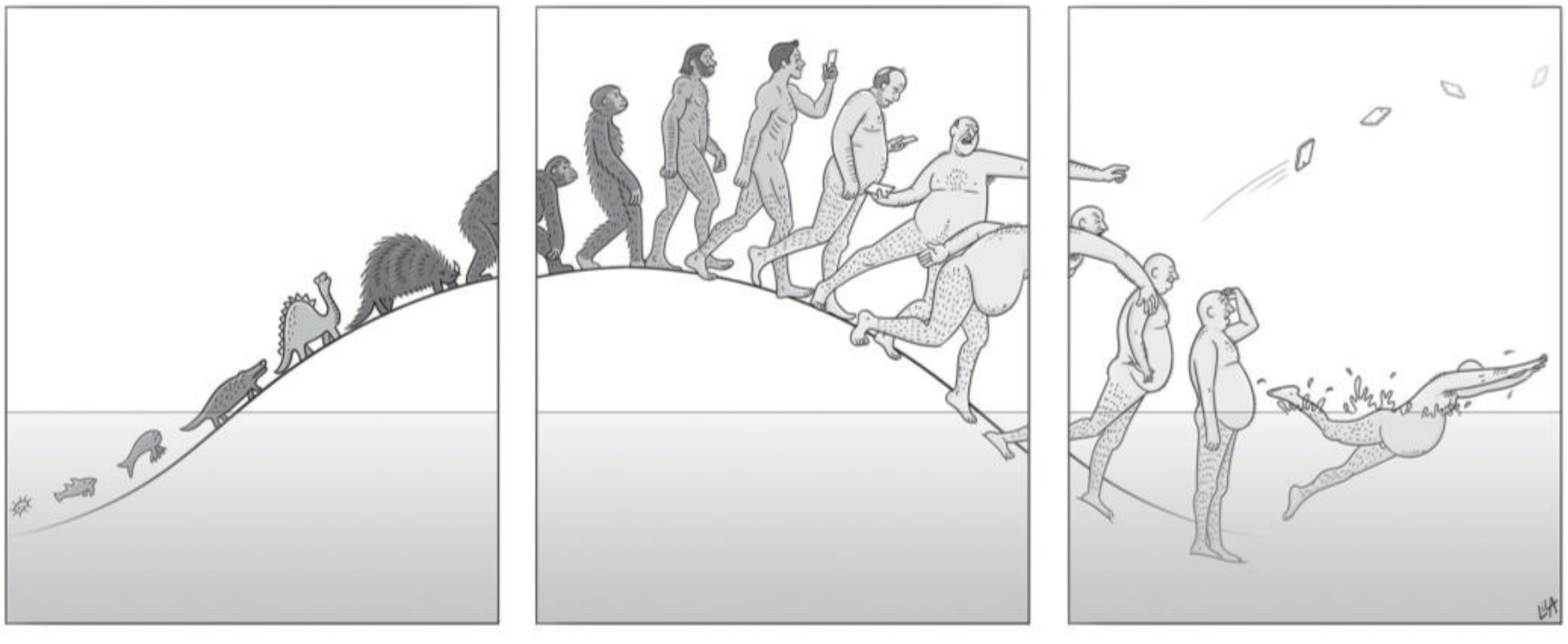
At the same time, there are plenty of sympathetic white audiences who miss the point. "Disgraced" depicts the myopia of the white ally in the character of Emily, Amir's wife, a painter who works with Islamic imagery and takes it upon herself to defend Islam to her husband. Akhtar finds that many audience members are "Emilys," too intent on proving that they get the message to listen to what he's trying to say. "The question I hear more often than any other is: 'Why is it called "Disgraced"?'" he told me. "And this, many times when I have ascended the stage mere minutes after the curtain has dropped, is itself just a few minutes removed from a monologue downstage center, in which a character, addressing the audience, almost, uses the word *twice* in a monologue that is clearly a capstone speech to the experience that they've just had."

We were sitting in the covered back yard of a restaurant in Hudson, New York. It was raining hard. Akhtar was adamant, almost agitated. The speech he was referring to is given by Amir's nephew, who begins the play as an assimilated American youth and ends it as a devout Muslim with an unsettling attraction to extremism. Akhtar went on, "But somehow they can't hear that, because all they see is a young Muslim who's angry. In a skullcap. That's not my problem. I am trying to give rich, political language to a subject who is often denied that, on stages and elsewhere. But the concussive conclusion on the part of an often well-meaning audience that is concerned about Muslim representations onstage is that simply seeing that reference, and seeing those shorthand symbols, cancels him as a legitimate representation of a Muslim point of view, when he is *absolutely* that."

Akhtar's face cleared. He smiled. This was a performance he had given many times, usually to the person in the audience who had made the mistake of asking the question.

One person who loved "Disgraced" without qualification was Akhtar's father. "Now I can die happy," Masood told him, at the New York première. At the after-party, Masood posed as a journalist, excitedly interviewing guests about their reactions and reporting back to his son. (Akhtar's celebratory evening was derailed when his father got drunk and wandered off into the city alone; he had to be retrieved the next morning from Central Park.) Akhtar's mother, too, found a way to let her son know that he had her support. When he gave her a copy of "American Dervish," it was with trepidation: would she feel that he had condoned his father's behavior toward her? After she read it, she told him, "I was happy to see you understood everybody was doing their best."

When you win the Pulitzer for drama, a lot of people will want to be your friend. They will take you to parties and then leave with the person they brought you there to impress.



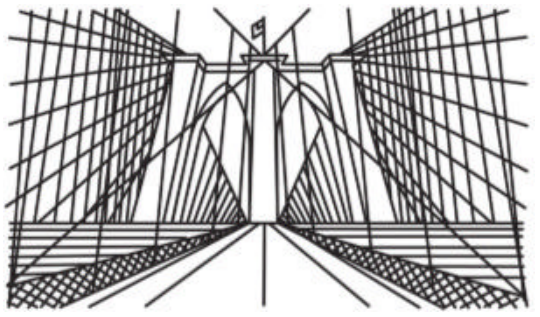
You will be asked to meetings with studio executives and hired to write television shows that never get made. You will be invited to give speeches and to sit on theatre boards; you may attend functions at the home of a billionaire like James Murdoch to ask millionaires to donate to organizations like PEN America, which you might eventually be called upon to head—as Akhtar was, earlier this month. But that all comes later, after the phone call that sends you shooting fifteen feet into the air. Winning the Pulitzer, Akhtar said, was "a pleasure as subtle and complete as any I've ever known." He took the prize as encouragement to make the most ambitious work about the biggest subject he could imagine: money.

Back when Akhtar was in his twenties and broke, his parents made a deal with him. They would send him ten thousand dollars a year if he read the *Wall Street Journal* every day to learn how to invest it. The nineties bull market was beginning, and the whole city seemed money-crazed. Akhtar got hooked on his assignment. He started reading *Barron's* and *The Economist*, too. He studied books about economic theory and pored over price-to-earnings ratios, looking for an edge.

Akhtar had grown up with his father's idea of American culture: Coca-Cola, Lana Turner, the Kennedys, opportunity, abundance. But the more he learned about finance the more he came to believe that money was the root of the whole system. You can have what you can pay for: that was the social contract. And, more often than not, what you could pay for was debt. "Interest is a sin in Islam," he told me. "So the fact that Western finance is entirely predicated on the concept of interest? Growing up Muslim gave me a different perspective on that, and a kind of fascination with it."

"The Invisible Hand," which Akhtar wrote before his Pulitzer, premièred in 2012. The play draws a connection between international capitalism and international Islamic terrorism, two systems that wreak havoc on much of the world for the gain of the few. The audience is invited to identify with Nick, an American investor who has fallen prey to Pakistani terrorists—but it is his captor Bashir, a young, working-class British jihadi, who ends up winning its affections. Kehlmann told me that "The Invisible Hand," which is fast-paced and gripping, "is the funniest Marxist play I've ever read."

The Pulitzer gave Akhtar the power to explore such ideas on a larger scale. "I liked having the pressure, having the stakes," he said. He started to imagine a muscular, glossy production about finance that could hold up a mirror to a high-powered Broadway audience as Shakespeare had done by staging plays about royalty for Queen Elizabeth and King James at the Globe. "Junk," which opened at Lincoln Center Theatre in October of 2017, deals with the nineteen-eighties corporate raiders who grew rich by hastening the decline of American industry and the working class, but it is not entirely unsympathetic to them. The play's protagonist, Robert Merkin, who is based on the leveraged-buyout pioneer Michael Milken, is a Jew who outsmarts a snobbish Connecticut competitor to force his way in. "Junk" is loosely modelled on Shakespeare's history plays, both in the scope of its theme—the shift in American economic and political power, as Akhtar puts it, between "those who make things and those who raise the money for those who make things"—and in its structure. There are thirty characters, including dealmaking kings, boardroom-adviser classes, and common folk, represented by the workers at the steel company that Merkin is ruthlessly dismantling.



Akhtar did pretty well as a self-taught investor, but he got out long ago. "There's something deeply, deeply immoral about the way that the national infrastructure has become tethered to the underlying market-cap values of private organizations," he told me. "It speaks to the despoiling of the nation." He found himself broke again in his thirties; the sale of "American Dervish" bailed him out. There is vindication in having made his way through his writing. He bet on himself, and won.

Last year, when Akhtar had nearly finished writing "Homeland Elegies," his brother called. Their father had fallen and hit his head. Akhtar flew to the Milwaukee I.C.U. Masood had suffered a subdural hematoma, partly related to his alcoholism. He died on the first day of Ramadan—as Akhtar's mother had, from cancer, two years earlier.

"I loved my father so much," Akhtar told me. "He was such an extraordinary, generous, brilliant man. There's something about being in the world that I learned from him, about being able to stand in your own being. But, you know, he was such a tortured guy, too." He hoped that "Homeland Elegies" dramatized their conflictual but close relationship—one filled with passionate disagreements and thorny mutual attempts at understanding—in a way that would have done Masood proud. "I had to always say to myself, 'Would Dad understand?' And I always, for whatever reason, came to the conclusion that, yes, he would. He would get that there are things bigger than himself, and things bigger than me."

"Homeland Elegies" was written before Masood died, but somehow its version of his departure amplifies the real one, and feels no less true. The body of the novel is brought to a close there—but Akhtar isn't quite done. In a coda, he replays the thunderous, vehement theme of his overture, this time in a defiantly major key.

"I always knew that at the end of the book there would have to be some affirmation of American identity, notwithstanding all of the critique," Akhtar told me. It's a threshold moment, looking at once back and forward. With the publication of "Homeland Elegies," Akhtar feels that he may be finished treating subjects that have obsessed him from his earliest days. "It's a lifetime's kindling that finally found an igniting story," he said. Time to set fire to something new. ♦

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

THE NORMALCY ELECTION

What can we learn from the fears and longings of the 1920 campaign?

BY THOMAS MALLON

Republican Warren G. Harding spoke to voters from his front porch in Ohio. A.P.

Here in stately, spacious Kalorama, a Washington, D.C., neighborhood less familiar and storied than nearby Georgetown, politics makes strange neighbors. Over on Tracy Place, Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump occupy a large, charmless house whose chief selling point, one suspects, was its fuck-you proximity to the post-Presidential residence of Barack and Michelle Obama, several houses away, on Belmont Road.

A short walk from either takes you to 2340 S Street, into which Mr. and Mrs. Woodrow Wilson moved after leaving the White House, in March, 1921. Wilson's successor, Ohio's Senator Warren G. Harding, and his wife, Florence, were packing up their house a few blocks away, at 2314 Wyoming. Harding was a serious poker player, and today his old house is occupied by the Ambassador of gambling-friendly Monaco. The Wilson House, a small museum that is Kalorama's chief tourist attraction, has been closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. With awareness of Wilson's racism cancelling his once-good name, someone has placed a Black Lives Matter sign, looking hasty and apologetic, against a small pane of glass near the front door.

The last four of Wilson's eight years in the White House were an epic drama. Reëlected in 1916 on an implied promise of nonintervention ("He kept us out of war"), he soon became the Commander-in-Chief of an American military victory and, on the streets of Europe, the rhapsodically received oracle of a permanent peace that would be sustained by a League of Nations. Crushed by his own country's resistance to this vision, he suffered a stroke in 1919 after barnstorming the U.S. in support of the League. The following year, he was too infirm to fulfill his hopes of bucking the two-term tradition and running for a third.

When considered against the electoral circumstances that exchanged Wilson, a Democrat, for Harding, a Republican, some of the tumults of 2020 appear to be a centennial reiteration, or inversion, of the calamities and longings of the 1920 campaign. Then the country—recently riven by disease, inflamed with racial violence and anxious about immigration, torn between isolation and globalism—yearned for what the winning candidate somewhat malapropically promised would be a return to "normalcy." Early in 2020, the term remained useful to supporters of Joe Biden, with its suggestion of Presidential behavior once more within the pale. The word's nostalgic tenor soon enough made it anathema to left-wing Democrats, and the cyclonic circumstances of the past six months may have made it feel obsolete to Biden himself, but it is still what he is talking about when he calls for removing Donald Trump: "Will we rid ourselves of this toxin? Or will we make it a permanent part of our national character?" In terms of the Presidential decency on which so much depends, there is nowhere to go but backward.

Harding received the Republican nomination on June 12th, in a hellishly hot Chicago. His tenth-ballot victory came after the famous deadlock-dissolving conversations in a "smoke-filled room" at the Blackstone Hotel. His image seemed to materialize as a kind of anti-Wilson: a non-cerebral, non-visionary backslapper, less interested in remaking the world than in making sure that Main Street looked spruce. His instinctive centrism led the Republican overlords to believe that Harding might finally reunite the "regulars"

who had stuck with Taft in 1912 and the progressives who'd bolted away on Theodore Roosevelt's bull moose. When it came to the Party's current fissures, Harding appeared likely to please the dwindling faction that remained open to participation in Wilson's League, as well as the Senate's Reservationists and Irreconcilables, who opposed it with varying degrees of implacability.

As the campaign took shape, Harding, whose success in politics had been only intermittent before he was elected to the Senate, in 1914, was aided by his pacific, Rotarian temperament; by an ambitious and mystical spouse; and by his sensual handsomeness—Alice Roosevelt Longworth, daughter of Teddy, believed that he resembled "a decaying Roman emperor." During the Convention, Harding had found time to dally, twice, with his mistress, Nan Britton, who'd given birth to their child a year earlier. In most respects besides the extramarital, he was the opposite of the man the Republicans have now, a century later, nominated for a second time. Far from bellowing that he alone could fix things, Harding accepted his nomination by saying, "No man is big enough to run this great republic." He promised to be directed by his party, not by any sense of personal gifts or destiny. If Trump is the most cultish figure ever to achieve his party's nomination for President, Harding may have been the least.

His Democratic opponent was another Ohioan, the state's reformist governor, James M. Cox. At the statehouse in Columbus, he had been both progressive and pragmatic, appointing skilled technicians where Harding would have chosen pals. Cox, too, was a fallback choice at his party's Convention, in San Francisco. It took him forty-four ballots to beat the ballyhooed front-runners, including A. Mitchell Palmer, the Attorney General, who had made himself the scourge of left-wing radicals after anarchists bombed his home on Washington's R Street, in June of 1919. Cox appeared to be, like Harding, a man who could thread several important needles. Pro-League of Nations but not ardently so, he was also considered, when it came to the enforcement of just-imposed Prohibition, neither wet nor dry but, like the Democrats' deliberately flexible platform plank, "moist." His bland memoir, "Journey Through My Years" (1946), brings to mind such non-show-stopping oratory as this, from 1920: "We stand at the forks of the road and must choose which to follow." If Harding's private life was secretly louche, Cox's divorce from his first wife was eight years in the past and a matter of public record. Now fifty, he was remarried, to a much younger woman, and the couple's new baby, Anne, was about to become a popular photographic subject for the Washington *Star's* Sunday rotogravure.

The candidates shared a background as newspapermen. Cox had been the publisher of the Dayton *Daily News*, whose presses rolled only eighty miles from those of Harding's Marion *Star*. The nominees' former profession was a point of pride with the nation's press, which presented them as tribunes, not enemies, of the people. The Washington *Star*, buoyantly middlebrow and moderately conservative, seemed to endorse Harding on October 16th, though it's difficult to tell. The paper remained almost Panglossian in its faith that, whoever won, the rapidly urbanizing country had a cheerful future. The marvels of modernity were regularly showcased in the paper: the start of coast-to-coast airmail; Governor Cox's use of an amplifier when addressing a crowd; Senator Harding's preservation, on a phonograph record, of one of his speeches. A mid-July advertisement by Woodward & Lothrop, a now vanished Washington department store, enticed the homemaker to buy "asbestos table mats."

And yet the prevailing mood of the country was troubled. The recent past weighed heavily on voters, who wanted to forget or suppress it. The influenza epidemic had finally subsided in the spring of 1920, leaving six hundred and seventy-five thousand Americans dead—more than ten times the number of U.S. soldiers killed on European battlefields. There might have been a strong public desire to celebrate the world war as a mission accomplished, but, nearly two years after the Armistice, bodies were still being repatriated from France for burial at Arlington, and the White House was only just getting around to selling a flock of sheep that had grazed the South Lawn, providing wool for the war effort. Five thousand draft resisters had been convicted, but Attorney General Palmer was bent on pursuing the rest.

The country feared that this immediate past was already turning into prologue. Nothing abroad had been settled. After the Versailles Treaty was rejected by the U.S. Senate, the European Allies had to arrange its implementation by themselves, negotiating disarmament and reparations with the Weimar Republic at a conference in Spa, Belgium, which the *Star's* correspondent compared to "a pack of wolves snarling over a carcass." Americans had increasing reason to fear that the war would never really be "over over there," and that their doughboys would soon be heading back.

The American voter of 2020 is aware of a Europe that wants to isolate itself from the United States, to raise a shield against Trump and his feckless gestures at disease control. The electorate of 1920 felt a compulsion to isolate itself from an array of needy, troubled European suitors. Many Americans cast doubtful looks across the Atlantic, and nativists were suspicious of the still assimilating Europeans they nonetheless pandered to as new voting constituencies. The threats to America were coming, after all, from the same places those people had recently left, and to which they might still feel attached.

In late July, the Comintern, in Moscow, told British and European workers to get ready for "heavy civil war" and "revolutionary struggle." As Poland held off Trotsky's Red Army, a delegation of Polish-Americans pleaded with Wilson's secretary, Joseph Tumulty, for U.S. aid to Warsaw. Neither candidate advocated such action, which seemed symptomatic of what Harding identified as the problem of "hyphenated citizenship," the dual loyalties that made immigrants to the U.S. encourage American "meddling" in their countries of origin. Such fears about those already here could amount to a kind of domestic xenophobia, and Cox saw Harding as the beneficiary of the split allegiances he publicly deplored. In his

memoirs, Cox pointed out how blocs of ethnic voters were either aggrieved with Wilson for going to war (the Germans) or angry with him for abandoning their interests, such as Irish independence, in the Versailles negotiations. It was this "racial lineup," Cox wrote, which guaranteed a G.O.P. victory.

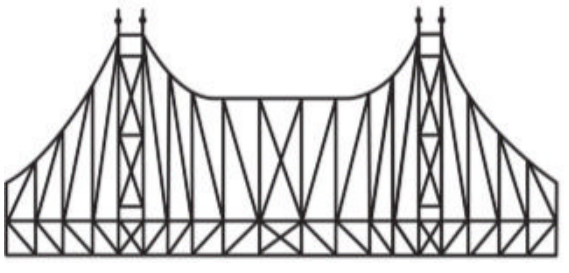
American participation in a League of Nations would only cement those grievances, but Wilson remained determined to see the U.S. join. The effects of his stroke rendered him so inactive and so little visible that, for stretches of the 1920 campaign, Cox and Harding appeared to be running for a job that no longer existed. The President's wife, Edith, along with his physician and his secretary, kept affairs of state operating at a minimal level, while Wilson navigated what his biographer A. Scott Berg calls "a twilight zone—a state of physical exhaustion, emotional turbulence and mental unrest."

The League became, to Cox's clear disadvantage, the central issue of the 1920 campaign after he was permitted to visit the White House on Sunday, July 18th. The sight of the disabled Wilson moved him to tears, changing the dynamic between the two men and ultimately the tenor of the whole campaign. Cox had been sufficiently lukewarm toward the League that Wilson was initially anything but enthusiastic about his candidacy. Now, however, the nominee impulsively pledged to Wilson his "million percent support" for the League. Cox's ardor became emotive and personal, prompting him to tell one campaign audience that Wilson had been reduced to "the saddest picture in all history" by the ad-hominem hatred of his tormentors in the Republican-controlled Senate.

Harding tried to finesse the League issue. His willingness to consider a different "international association" or a souped-up version of the World Court left him open to charges of waffling. Moreover, the Democrats' new commitment to the League gave Republican senators Henry Cabot Lodge, Hiram Johnson, and William Borah a reason to hold their candidate's feet to the rejectionist fire. As Cox pronounced opposition to the League a betrayal of "the boys who died in France," Lodge attacked the new organization as "a breeder of war." By October 7th, Harding appeared ready to offer a straight answer. "I favor staying out," he told the citizens of Des Moines.

The League issue came to the fore partly because it could be decided yes or no. Domestic anxieties never attained the same clarity but were ever present. In fact, the initials H.C.L., which turn up in headlines and stories, were shorthand not for Henry Cabot Lodge but for the high cost of living. Rising postwar prices for beef, coal, and sugar preoccupied householders and bureaucrats. The economic situation was not nearly as dire as the one strangling 2020, but then, as now, the federal response looked ham-fisted. The War Department sold off stockpiled canned meat, and the Justice Department's H.C.L. task force recommended, as an affordable "common sense garment," a dress made from sugar sacks. Until prices began coming down in September, Harding blamed the incumbent Democrats, in one speech intoning, with an ecstatic, Whitmanesque repetition, the phrase "more production," as the essential cure for consumer woe. A protective tariff, he believed, was also in order.

Throughout the year, labor was restive. The Wobblies, members of the Industrial Workers of the World, were said to be planning a "reign of terror" in the Pacific Northwest. The White House jawboned striking coal miners



back to work, and threatened D.C. sewer workers, who were contemplating a walkout, with replacement by U.S. troops. The biggest, blackest headline of the campaign appeared in mid-September, after an attack on New York's financial district: "20 KILLED IN WALL STREET EXPLOSION." (The final death toll was thirty-eight.) Inside J. P. Morgan's bank, as Beverly Gage reconstructed the scene in her book, "The Day Wall Street Exploded" (2009), one man experienced "a shudder followed by a blizzard of white" as "papers burst from their files." On the streets outside, "men on fire dropped to the ground: 'Save me! Save me! Put me out!' Customers fled barbershops, with cream on their faces, aprons streaming behind. . . ." No one was ever convicted of the attack, but evidence pointed to Italian anarchists, heightening the appeals to nativism and isolationism.

The socialist Eugene V. Debs, already imprisoned for sedition in encouraging draft resistance during the war, continued a third-party Presidential campaign from the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. He told the press that he was glad to have an alibi for his whereabouts during the bombing.

Racial violence remained a phenomenon of such dailiness in 1920 that its occurrence, even when reported, was perceived as being more inevitable than eventful, something that required an occasional word from the candidates without anybody believing it would seriously affect the election. During the campaign, there were lynchings in Duluth, Minnesota; Paris, Texas; Graham, North Carolina; Corinth, Mississippi; Macclenny, Florida; and elsewhere. The *Star* had occasionally, over the previous year, published strong editorials against lynching, but the paper's complacency more often prevailed. When it had reason to feature or consider the Civil War, only as distant from 1920 as the Kennedy Presidency is from our own day, it took satisfaction from lore and legend, and from North-South reconciliation—which (rather than emancipation) would be the dominant theme of the Lincoln Memorial, still under construction. The *Star's* Sunday magazine made a serious revival of the Ku Klux Klan in Virginia and Georgia seem part of a colorful pageant being staged by reënactors: "The Old Klan, Its Mysterious Rites, the Blazing Cross and the Fantastic Costumes."

Harding declared, in his speech accepting the nomination, "I believe the federal government should stamp out lynching," but his party's platform was more evasive: "We urge Congress to consider the most effective means to end lynching in this country." The cra-

venness of the Convention document compelled the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs to withhold its endorsement from the G.O.P. ticket. The Democratic Party, the nation's principal political guarantor of Jim Crow segregation for two more generations, offered even less. The word "lynching" doesn't appear in the platform constructed in San Francisco, and when Cox, late in the campaign, wrote that his opponent was trying to "arouse racial hatred," he meant that Harding was making too many pledges to Black citizens, which he had no "intention of carrying out." During the last days of the campaign, a pamphlet claiming that Harding had Black ancestry received substantial press coverage, but too late to incite the full horror it intended.

Memory of the recent mass death from influenza underwent its own sort of quarantine, a mental feat akin to the general denial surrounding race. The pandemic had never received sustained attention from the federal government. Wilson didn't address it in public, not even during its third wave, in 1919, when he remained preoccupied with peacemaking abroad. His detachment may have been enabled by something newly messianic in him, whereas Trump's petulant self-pity over COVID-19 was inevitable from the start. But the Presidential vacuum feels shocking in either century. Harding, in 1919, had been one of two senators to propose a modest appropriation for research into the flu; in 1920, there was no serious campaign discussion of any public-health policies that might blunt future pandemics. Whooping cough, tuberculosis, and even anthrax (a possible danger from new shaving brushes) all found their way into the news, but the flu departed from political discussion as stealthily as it had once settled into people's lungs.

The speed with which the disease's ravaging was airbrushed from history remains a matter of mystery and speculation. In "America's Forgotten Pandemic" (1989), Alfred W. Crosby suggests that the flu became in people's minds "simply a subdivision of the war," the other alien calamity that they were intent on forgetting. Few contagious diseases in that era were ever cured, and a practiced fatalism probably contributed to the willful adoption of what today we would call closure. Whereas the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to determine what happens on November 3rd, the flu played no discernible part in Harding's election.

It may, however, have contributed subconsciously to the longing for normalcy. The fulfillment of that longing depended on erasure more than on scrutiny, nostalgia instead of vision. As Irving Stone, in his chapter on Cox in "They Also Ran" (1943), summed it up:

> The people were tired: tired from the war, tired from the suffering and bloodshed, tired from hysteria, tired from being geared to the breaking point, tired from the vast expenditures of money and morale and man power, tired from eight years of idealism, tired from personal government. . . . For just a little while they wanted to be let alone, to sleep in the sun, to recoup their energies and their enthusiasm.

Cox promised a campaign of "ginger and jazz," but Harding won by conducting a sort of non-campaign from his "front porch." He occasionally travelled into competitive states, but Marion, Ohio, had a small-town camera-readiness that proved more effective than stumping. Harding made news greeting barefoot children or taking a vacation from what already appeared to be one: "Harding Lets Up in Campaign Work—Declares Holiday and Motors Forty Miles for Game of Golf." Cox insisted that no one was going to keep *him* "muzzled" on any veranda, and he taunted Harding as if his opponent were Joe Biden "hiding in his basement." But when Cox toured Western states, where voters were more sympathetic to the League, he risked becoming ensnared by local political squabbles that Harding was able to avoid.

There was one sea change that year: the triumph of women's suffrage, on August 18th, when Tennessee ratified the Nineteenth Amendment. After decades of bitter conflict in which its proponents were mocked, imprisoned, and despised, both candidates were eager to be seen giving it a final push toward

"Sorry, kid. The guy who comes up with names is on vacation, so we're just gonna call you Peter Who Eats Sandwiches."

passage. Republicans pointed out that twenty-nine of the ratifying states were controlled by the G.O.P.; Cox argued that women's traditional civilizing influence should make them natural supporters of the League. Will Hays, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, who later codified motion-picture purity, hoped that settlement of the suffrage issue would add to "national security" and clarify the "political atmosphere." Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby, hoping to avoid any display "of the friction or collusions which may have developed in the long struggle for ratification," chose to sign the new amendment, without any ceremony, at his home. The sudden absence of the contentious issue became one more ingredient of normalcy; the women's crusade contributed to it by going away, like the war and the flu.

The long-term direction of the country turned out to depend not on who was at the top of each party's ticket but on the Vice-Presidential nominees. The Republican Convention delegates, allowed a free hand in the matter, had picked the Massachusetts governor, Calvin Coolidge, newly famous for his tough handling of a Boston police walkout, in which he had declared, "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, anytime." Coolidge ended up serving twice as long as Harding in the White House, sanitizing the place with his dignified, even endearing probity. Throughout the 1920 campaign, he remained circumspect, allowing the image of thrifty Silent Cal to accrue: voters learned that he had not bought a new pair of shoes for the past two years. His biographer Amity Shlaes points out in "Coolidge" (2013) that his oratorical version of "normalcy" was "old times."

Governor Cox selected the beguiling thirty-eight-year-old Franklin D. Roosevelt, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, for his running mate. But, if Roosevelt was his first choice, Cox wasn't F.D.R.'s. One preliminary phase of the 1920 campaign feels like an alternate-history novel: Roosevelt was intrigued by the notion of being on a ticket that was headed by—wait for it—Herbert Hoover, the engineer turned nonpartisan public servant, hailed for saving Europe's war refugees from starvation. (Hoover, alas, decided to become a Republican.)

Two weeks after being nominated with Cox, F.D.R. assured him that he was getting lots of favorable mail from progressive Republicans. Roosevelt did not point out that a portion of his supporters believed him to be Teddy's son. He was soon on the stump from North Dakota to West Virginia, exhibiting a rhetorical talent that Cox could only envy. F.D.R. couldn't get Coolidge to debate the League face to face, but he told Bostonians that the Republican platform was "a hymn of hate," and insisted to Hoosiers that Harding's pledge of party government amounted to "a syndicated presidency," not leadership. Geoffrey C. Ward's biography of the young Roosevelt, "A First-Class Temperament" (1989), depicts a devious, exhaustingly ambitious future President who, in 1920, explained to voters that normalcy would actually be "a mere period of coma in our national life."

Warren Gamaliel Harding was elected President of the United States on his fifty-fifth birthday, November 2, 1920. Turnout was low, but voters provided Harding with a landslide and the Republican Party with nearly unassailable majorities in both houses of Congress. Debs polled almost a million votes for the Socialist Party, despite his imprisonment and the flood tide toward normalcy. The election results were quick, uncontested, and received with civility.

The *Star* felt certain that Harding would appoint "big men" to his Cabinet, and he did—Charles Evans Hughes as Secretary of State, Hoover as Secretary of Commerce—along with some speckishly small and corrupt ones: Albert Fall, the eventual brewmaster of the Teapot Dome scandal, went to Interior, and Harry Daugherty, Harding's campaign manager, became Attorney General. The cash-stuffed envelopes of "the Ohio Gang" soon began to upholster Washington. In the summer of 1923, increasingly mired in the scandals of subordinates, Harding embarked on a cross-country trip, a political reset that he dubbed the "Voyage of Understanding." Before he could complete it, he died on August 2nd, probably of a heart attack, in a San Francisco hotel room, just twenty-nine months into his term. Cox later recalled him as "a warm-hearted man with most gracious impulses" who had been undone by a "preference for cronies of a lower type."

Woodrow Wilson managed to outlive Harding and rode in his funeral procession, but, six months later, in February, 1924, those who still associated Wilson with freedom and self-determination were keeping a deathbed vigil, kneeling in prayer outside his house on S Street. Cox had by then returned to the newspaper business; a decade later, with F.D.R. in the White House, he declined his old running mate's request to serve as Ambassador to Germany or as head of the Federal Reserve. Cox's daughter (the baby in the rotogravure), Anne Cox Chambers, died in January, at the age of a hundred. In the past five years, ideological descendants of Debs, whose sentence Harding commuted in 1921 with a Christmastime handshake at the White House, have brought democratic socialism back into the mainstream of American political debate.

The *Star* expired early in the Presidency of Ronald Reagan, who, with admiration that had lingered since youth, hung Coolidge's portrait in the White House Cabinet Room. The *Star's* creamy white Beaux-Arts building still stands directly across from the city's Old Post Office, once the office of the Postmaster General and now occupied under a sixty-year lease by guests of the Trump International Hotel. The country's current Postmaster, Louis DeJoy, lives in Kalorama, at the corner of Connecticut and Wyoming Avenues. In August, demonstrators outside his apartment building, spurred by congressional accusations that DeJoy was trying to sabotage the mail-in voting that the President detests, shouted demands for his resignation.

Warren Harding's house and front porch in Marion, Ohio, have undergone restoration in advance of the opening, next door, of a museum and library. Because of the greatest health emergency to envelop the United States since the Spanish-flu pandemic, the dedication of these new facilities, once scheduled for September 18th, has been postponed indefinitely. ♦

ONE-STAR YELP REVIEWS OF HEAVEN

BY JAY MARTEL

"Too much steel."
—A one-star Yelp review of the Eiffel Tower.

I dunno. I heard a lot about this place, and everyone seems to love it, but the clouds are too soft—you could break an ankle if you had bones—and, granted, the peach cobbler (which everyone raves about) is perfect, but how much peach cobbler can you eat, really?

Smaller than I imagined. Also bigger than I imagined.

Let me preface this by saying, I love God. I mean, God's perfect. And IMHO that's what makes Heaven so disappointing. Because you think, like, *God*. You know? What could be better than that? Nothing. Of course. So, yeah, big letdown.

Could use a lot more sensitivity with the intake procedures. Everyone's, like, "We're all so happy, we're bathed in God's grace for eternity, tra-la-la." I just *died*, man. Have a little compassion.

I would be giving this place five stars except for one angel who was really rude to me. My harp needed to be restrung, but he said, "Whatever sound you make here, it's perfect." I told him that it was *my* harp and I should know when it needs new strings, and then he said (this really killed me, no pun intended), "Nothing need ever be new again. It's all new forever." With a big smile on his face. Can you believe the nerve? So condescending and disrespectful.

I really wanted condor wings.

I feel kinda bad about the one star, but I guess it was just way overhyped to me, and when I got here I took one look at the clouds and the angels and everyone in white gowns and thought, "Really?" It's such a cliché.

At first, it was a total rush hanging out with my idols, shvitzing with Churchill, playing foosball with Shakespeare, etc. But then they started getting on my nerves. Einstein has this nervous tic where he says "*Ja*?" at the end of every sentence, and Jesus often sits quietly for hours, not saying anything, even when I know he knows the answers during Trivia Night. Much more impressive in books and on TV, that's for sure.

I'm only giving one star because no stars is not an option. Right from the start, it seemed really unorganized. I worked my entire life in event planning, and, trust me, they could all do with some additional training. When I arrived, they just showed me in, no registration or anything, and it was like I was left on my own to figure out eternity. I went up to one angel and said, "So what do we do here?," and she said, "Whatever you want," which is really no answer at all when you think about it.

Not a fan of the pearly-white color scheme.

I thought the whole point of this place was to be together with your dead loved ones, but when I got here my dead loved ones were busy hanging out with Shakespeare and Churchill and Tallulah Bankhead. They should really organize it better so that families stay together and don't have to compete with every famous dead person who ever lived. *And* God.

I really wish I could give this a five-star rating, but my experience here is complicated. The place itself is controversial (we'd heard all kinds of weird stuff about who got in and who went to Hell instead), though honestly it doesn't feel like an "honor" or whatever to be here. It feels completely natural—which I think is part of the problem. Shouldn't it feel weirder? Since it's an exclusionary afterlife that I'm guessing some pretty decent souls have been left out of? During life, I fought against exclusive policies and clubs and secret societies, and it seems like this is the mother of them all.

Scary for kids.

What a farce! I'm a churchgoing Christian who prayed every day of her adult life, then I get here and find the place overrun with seemingly anyone who didn't kill a million people. Sorry, Stalin, Hitler, and Pol Pot—you're not welcome here. But apparently for *everyone else* it's "Come on in!" Yesterday, I saw Al Goldstein. Ugh.

Really, really boring. Trust me: no one wants to feel good *all* the time. Prefer the mix of experiences at the other place, to be honest. If you haven't checked it out, you definitely should. Down there, you call the shots instead of just being one of God's happy tools. Tempted? Then you're already on your way. And please . . . write a review. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE MAN WHO WOULDN'T SPY

The F.B.I. tried to recruit an Iranian scientist as an informant. When he refused, the payback was brutal.

BY LAURA SECOR

In the spring of 2017, an Iranian materials scientist named Sirous Asgari received a call from the United States consulate in Dubai. Two years earlier, he and his wife, Fatemeh, had applied for visas to visit America, where their children lived. The consulate informed him that their requests had finally been approved. The timing was strange: President Donald Trump had just issued an executive order banning Iranians from entering the U.S. on the very kind of visa that Asgari and his wife were granted. Maybe applications filed before the visa ban had been grandfathered through, or some career State Department official wanted to give families like his a last chance to reunite.

Asgari, who was then fifty-six years old, considered the U.S. a second home. In the nineties, he had attended graduate school at Drexel University, in Philadelphia, and he came to like America's commonsense efficiency. His daughter Sara was born in the U.S., making her an American citizen. His two older children, Mohammad and Zahra, had attended American universities and stayed on. Asgari was now a professor at Sharif University of Technology, in Tehran, and former graduate students of his worked in top American laboratories; his scientific research, on metallurgy, sometimes took him to Cleveland, where he had close colleagues at Case Western Reserve University.

Asgari and Fatemeh boarded a flight to New York on June 21, 2017. They planned to see Mohammad, who lived in the city, and then proceed to California, where they would visit Zahra and meet the man she had married. But when the Asgaris stepped off the jet bridge at J.F.K. two officials accosted them.

The officials whisked the Asgaris into a room, where a phalanx of F.B.I. agents awaited them. Asgari was under arrest, the agents told him, accused of serious charges in a sealed indictment whose contents they couldn't reveal at the airport. He could go with them to a hotel and look over the indictment, or he could go to a local detention center, and then be transferred to Cleveland, for an arraignment. In the turmoil of the moment, he barely registered that nobody had stamped his visa or returned his passport.

Asgari was fluent in English, but the word "indictment" was new to him. He'd never had a problem with the law. He was a high-spirited man accustomed to middle-class comforts, a professor's lectern, and an easy repartee with people in authority. Surely, he figured, he was the subject of some misunderstanding, and so he would go to the hotel and quickly clear it up.

At the hotel, the agents handed Asgari a twelve-page indictment. It charged him with theft of trade secrets, visa fraud, and eleven counts of wire fraud. To Asgari, the indictment read like a spy thriller. It centered on a four-month visit that he had made to Case Western four years earlier, which the document presented as part of a scheme to defraud an American valve manufacturer of its intellectual property in order to benefit the Iranian government. The punishment, the agents made clear, could be many years in prison. Their evidence had been gathered from five years of wiretaps, which had swept up his e-mails before, during, and after the visit in question.

The charges were nonsense, Asgari said. The processes he'd studied at Case Western were well known to materials scientists—they were hardly trade secrets. If the government really meant to prosecute him, it would inevitably lose in court.

"We haven't lost a case," one agent told Asgari.

"This will be your first," he replied.

Asgari didn't realize it, but a vise was closing around him. He had never seen his visits to America through the prism of its tensions with Iran. "Science is wild and has no homeland," an Iranian philosopher had once said, and Asgari believed this to be so. His scientific community spanned the globe, its instruments and findings universally accessible. That national boundaries and political intrigue should interfere with intellectual exchange seemed to him unnatural. He had confidence in the capacity of cool rationality to set matters right.

If he could just make the F.B.I. agents understand the science, Asgari told himself, they would see their mistake. He described the relationships and the laboratory equipment that had attracted him to Case Western, and explained how the properties of a material emanated from the arrangement of its atoms, and could be altered by engineers who understood that structure. But even as he talked he began to have a sinking feeling that an indictment was not something he could dissipate with words.

That night, Fatemeh went home with Mohammad, and two guards stayed in Asgari's hotel room as he slept. In the morning, the agents drove Asgari to Cleveland, his wife and son following behind.

He was arraigned at the federal courthouse and delivered to the Lake County Adult Detention Facility, a maximum-security jail in Painesville, Ohio. For the first of the seventy-two days he would spend in that facility, Asgari occupied an isolated cell. Lying on his bed, he could hear other inmates screaming.

The F.B.I. had reason to be interested in a man like Asgari. Sharif University was Iran's premier technical institution, and the instruments and insights of materials science could be used to build missiles and centrifuges as easily as to improve the iPhone or to better

In court, an F.B.I. agent said that he met Sirous Asgari, a materials scientist, to see if he might be "helpful" to the Bureau.

ILLUSTRATION BY CLAIRE MERCHLINSKY

understand the properties of a gem. Asgari's concerns fell squarely on the civilian side of the line. "I never intentionally worked for destructive purposes," he told me, during a series of conversations that began in 2018. "If you have a pen, you can write a love letter, or you can write instructions for making a bomb. That's not a problem with the pen."

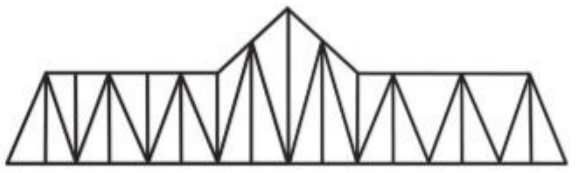
Asgari's career was a love letter to the atom. He was dazzled the first time he discerned one with the aid of a transmission electron microscope, or TEM: within the seemingly inert surfaces of objects was a kaleidoscope of churning activity. Atoms cannot be seen with an ordinary optical microscope. A TEM—which is about twice the size of an industrial refrigerator—is expensive, and so sensitive that it must be shielded from light, heat, cold, dust, the imperceptible shifting of buildings in wind, and the noise of distant galaxies.

Asgari was in charge of a TEM that Sharif acquired in 1994. He ran an élite research team of Ph.D. students and adored teaching. Compact and clean-cut, with a heart-shaped face and wire-rimmed glasses, he spoke at volume, often insistently, with a charisma that occasionally verged on overbearing.

Professors at Sharif supplemented their salaries and financed their departments with industrial and government contracts. Asgari had one with Iran's energy ministry, assessing and extending the longevity of gas-turbine parts; he was also conducting a feasibility study for a state-owned mining company, which was looking into producing high-performance, heat-resistant metals known as superalloys. The two contracts brought the university some four hundred thousand dollars, which helped support the work of Asgari and his students.

International sanctions had long been a fact of life in Iran. In the twenty-tens, in the run-up to nuclear negotiations between Iran and six world powers, the restrictions tightened: nothing that could be classified as "dual use," or applicable to both military and civilian realms, could be imported to Iran. Materials science straddled that line almost by definition.

Asgari could not order parts or maintenance for Sharif's TEM, which was made in the U.S. and had cost about a million dollars, and so he and his students learned to patch the instrument with improvised fixes and secondhand components. In 2011, for want of a filament, the machine spent months offline. That year, Asgari visited Pirouz Pirouz, a friend and colleague at Case Western. The materials-science lab there had a state-of-the-art TEM, and a collection of instruments not often found in one facility. Asgari was eligible for a sabbatical the next year, and he hoped to return to Case.



He was eager for both the laboratory access and the opportunity to make some dollars: Iran's currency was in free fall, and he had two children paying tuition at U.S. universities. But his search for a position came up empty, and so he went to America on a visitor's visa, in November, 2012, with a plan to spend time with his children while continuing to look for work. A few days after he landed in New York, he learned that a job had unexpectedly opened up at the materials-science lab at Case.

Arthur Heuer, the scientist then in charge of the lab, offered Asgari the position. The university would need to initiate paperwork to convert his visa to an H1B, which allowed employment in the U.S. In the meantime, he could work at Case as a volunteer. Asgari told me that he did so, with an informal promise of back pay once his status was straightened out. (Heuer said that he does not recall making such an arrangement.)

The work consisted mainly of preparing samples for the TEM. But a few weeks into the job Heuer asked Asgari to analyze the atomic structure of stainless-steel samples from the university's industrial partner, the Swagelok Company—a valve-and-tube-fittings manufacturer based in Ohio. In the mid-two-thousands, the company had generously funded the department's lab, and it was now called the Swagelok Center for Surface Analysis of Materials. Case scholars worked independently on research projects and also with Swagelok scientists on technologies that could benefit the firm.

In 2000, Swagelok secured its first patent for low-temperature carburization, a process for introducing carbon atoms into stainless steel, to produce a surface that was both extraordinarily hard and resistant to corrosion. The samples that Asgari was preparing and analyzing had been subjected to this process, and although the company was seeking to improve its product, for Asgari the technique was primarily of intellectual interest. He wanted to know not how it worked but why. The carbon atoms diffused into the crystalline lattice of solid metal like a drop of ink permeating a glassful of water. The laws of thermodynamics would not have predicted that the resulting metal would be stable, but it was.

Asgari had been at Case Western for three months when he learned that the university was rescinding its formal job offer. In March, 2013, Heuer told him that his visa application had no chance of being approved. According to Asgari, he noted, "The U.S. government is concerned about your activities in the United States." Asgari continued working while Case looked for a replacement, and Heuer paid him an honorarium from discretionary funds.

One day in April, Asgari noticed a business card stuck in the jamb of his apartment door. The card belonged to Special Agent Matthew Olson, of the F.B.I.; on the back, Olson had scrawled a note asking Asgari to call him. Where Asgari came from, a summons from an intelligence agency was trouble. He called Pirouz and another friend for advice, but their lines were busy, and Asgari, his mind spinning, became afraid that the Bureau had seized control of his phone and meant to arrest him. Finally, he called Olson, and the agent proposed meeting just a few minutes later, at a café across the street. As Asgari walked there, he imagined that people were watching him.

Olson was boyish and pleasant, and seemed mostly to want to make small talk. Like Asgari, he had three kids. Wasn't it amazing how different each child was? Olson looked too young to have three kids, Asgari remarked. Olson

said that he was thirty-five, adding, "When I was eighteen, the girls thought I was twelve." He asked Asgari why he had come to Cleveland, and Asgari explained the sabbatical, the job offer, the lack of parts for his TEM in Iran. He speculated to Olson that the F.B.I. had been behind the scuttling of his visa application. Four months' work, and some twenty thousand dollars that he would never be paid: the U.S. government was responsible.

Olson seemed to take Asgari's complaint to heart. He offered him five thousand dollars—if he would sign a paper, which he could get from another man in the café. Asgari realized that he'd walked into a trap. Olson was not there to arrest him. He was trying to recruit him as an informant.

Asgari looked at the man with the paper to sign and felt sick. He wouldn't sign anything, he said, or take a penny from the F.B.I. Honorable people didn't entertain such offers. Asgari soon finished up at Case and flew home to Iran, feeling that he had dispatched with the whole affair.

The man with the paper was Special Agent Timothy Boggs, a counterintelligence officer at the Cleveland field office of the F.B.I. His focus was Iran, a U.S. adversary whose nationals are of special interest to the Bureau, whether as suspected agents or as potential assets.

Iranians visiting or residing in the U.S. routinely hear from the Bureau. Half a dozen Iranian nationals and Iranian-Americans have described such approaches to me, and they have typically done so with trepidation, because the Iranian government sees any returning national who has had dealings with a U.S. intelligence agency as a potential spy. Some Iranians told me of polite conversations with federal agents, cards exchanged, refusals accepted. Others described repeated demands, veiled threats, and legal trouble lasting years. The Bureau recruits counterintelligence assets in much the same way it turns witnesses in domestic racketeering cases: agents look for vulnerabilities to use as leverage in pressuring people to become informants. They find discrepancies in immigration paperwork or identify petty sanctions violations, sometimes threatening an indictment to bolster their demands.

Late in 2012, Boggs got a tip from an informant at Case that an Iranian on a tourist visa was working at a lab there. Boggs must have sensed an opportunity: a professor from Sharif University undoubtedly would be acquainted with scientists working on military or nuclear engineering in Iran—and Asgari's tourist visa was a vulnerability, as it didn't authorize him to work for an American employer. Tellingly, Olson later testified in a court proceeding that when he met Asgari he did so to see if the scientist could be "potentially helpful for other areas."

Boggs had been sizing up Asgari since December, and by questioning Arthur Heuer, the Case scientist, he learned that Asgari's lab work was neither classified nor strictly proprietary. Still, Boggs examined the metadata for some of Asgari's e-mails. He noted that Asgari had been in contact with Case staff well before his arrival, and that during his time in Cleveland he had kept in touch with multiple people at Sharif.

In February, Boggs asked an Ohio magistrate to grant him a search warrant for a wiretap, claiming probable cause to believe that Asgari was violating U.S. sanctions. In an affidavit, Boggs mentioned Asgari's e-mails to Iran, and pointed out that Sharif University was partly funded by its home government. (Of course, all public schools are.) Part of the rationale for the search warrant was more insinuated than argued explicitly: the Swagelok Center, Boggs stressed, had received funding from the U.S. Navy for its work on low-temperature carburization, and researchers at Sharif University sometimes worked with the Iranian Navy. Boggs cited a paper written by a student at a branch of Sharif on the Persian Gulf island of Kish. The student, who hadn't worked with Asgari, or even in the same department, had written about autonomous underwater vehicles—a topic completely outside Asgari's area of expertise.

The magistrate granted the wiretap, which gave Boggs access to e-mails in Asgari's Gmail account from as far back as 2011. In 2015, when the wiretap expired, the Bureau secured a new one. The application for the second warrant suggested that F.B.I. agents had found

Asgari shares an Iranian philosopher's view: "Science is wild and has no homeland."

in Asgari's e-mails probable cause to believe that he might have violated sanctions, stolen trade secrets, and committed visa fraud. The agents never found evidence of a sanctions violation, but they did come across a proposal that a student of Asgari's had asked him to review: a request for a research institute attached to Iran's petrochemical industry to fund a project on low-temperature carburization.

For Asgari, the student's proposal had been a source of irritation, and a waste of time. But the F.B.I. fastened on the exchange as evidence of a conspiracy to expropriate Swagelok's process for the benefit of Iran's petrochemical industry. Asgari's earlier e-mails to Pirouz, looking for work, could be characterized as prior intent, and the tourist visa as a ploy. Such was the beginning of the sealed indictment that greeted Asgari upon his return to New York in 2017.

Someone in the F.B.I. may have truly believed that Asgari was funnelling industrial secrets to Iran. But the way the agency conducted its investigation suggested a fishing expedition—and an attempt to push Asgari into becoming an informant.

During Asgari's first days in the Lake County jail, in 2017, he emerged from his isolation cell only for meals. The prison population made him nervous—and the other inmates apparently felt the same way about him. The first one he befriended confided that a rumor had gone around the pod that Asgari was not to be messed with—he was an Iranian scientist who knew how to blow things up.

Asgari soon got to know many other inmates, in part by playing chess and cards, and he began to educate himself about racial division and drug addiction in the United States. He prided himself on being able to talk to anybody, and he was soon serving as a mediator between prisoners having disputes, and as a counsellor on matters of the heart. New prisoners often arrived after dinner had been served, and Asgari took up a collection for commissary items to feed them. He fought a rearguard battle against profanity, quitting a game of spades when his opponent exclaimed, "This motherfucker plays good!" Asgari had recently lost his mother, he explained, and would not be called that name. The inmate later apologized, asking, "Can I call you 'fucking professor' instead?"

Asgari taught physics to a small group of inmates. He explained how infrared detectors worked, and how optical scattering produced rainbows, advancing all the way to quantum mechanics. He found the greatest aptitude among the bank robbers and the racketeers. He had three such students: one Russian and two African-Americans.

He paid another inmate's bail. "I knew the minute you walked through that door that you were different—special," the inmate later wrote to Asgari, in a rounded, childlike hand. "You intrigued the hell out of me. I knew that when you talked or had something to say, I should just shut the hell up and listen."

The first week of Asgari's imprisonment, Fatemeh and Mohammad stayed in Cleveland, visiting the jail and looking for a lawyer. An attorney with a picture of Che Guevara in his office asked for half a million dollars up front, and when Mohammad said that he couldn't afford it the lawyer suggested hitting up the Iranian government. The family went with public defenders.

The first lawyer on the case, a warm and voluble assistant federal public defender named Edward Bryan, tried to get Asgari released from Lake County on bond. The U.S. Attorney's office for the Northern District of Ohio suggested a proffer. Asgari would be temporarily released to a hotel lobby, where a team of F.B.I. agents and prosecutors would join him for a conversation, in the presence of his attorney.

"I said, 'No way,'" Asgari recalled. "Talk to me in handcuffs and shackles—don't play nice. You want to talk? Come here."

They came. Daniel Riedl, a prosecutor from the U.S. Attorney's office, was accompanied by agents from the F.B.I.'s Cleveland field office, as well as "some people from Washington," according to Asgari.

In Bryan's twenty-two years as a public defender, he had never witnessed a proffer like this. Normally, a defendant admitted to at least one of the charges against him and provided information about the crime, including details about

FATEMEH SHAFIEE

others who may have helped commit it, in exchange for more lenient terms. Asgari had accepted none of the charges against him, and the information sought in the proffer was unrelated to his case: the agents wanted him to share general intelligence about Iran. "This was a counterintelligence case masquerading as a trade-secrets case," Bryan told me.

The F.B.I. agents touched on the indictment, but asked mainly about projects that could be connected to Iran's military and nuclear capabilities—research in which Asgari had played no part—and about colleagues at Sharif whose names the Bureau had culled from his e-mails. Asgari refused to answer these questions. Instead, he responded with a Persian parable. A man made friends with a bear because he believed that he needed a strong protector. One night, while the man slept, a fly landed on his face. The bear was indeed very protective—he crushed the fly with a boulder, killing the man. The moral? "Don't make friends with stupid people, even if they're very strong," Asgari said.

After another proffer meeting ended in a stalemate, the government offered Asgari release on bond, on the condition that he submit to further questioning. Asgari took the offer, thinking that he had made his limits clear and would go on answering only questions strictly pertinent to the charges against him.

Upon his release, he reported to the Cleveland federal building, to be fitted with an ankle bracelet. But there he was arrested again—this time by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The indictment, Asgari was astonished to learn, wasn't his only legal problem: his visa hadn't been stamped at J.F.K., most likely because it wasn't a real visa. "Unwitting silent parole" allows the F.B.I. to issue foreign nationals a document that looks to them like a visa but in fact grants them permission to enter the country only for the Bureau's purposes. Once those purposes are served, the F.B.I. is required to hand the foreign national over to ICE for removal.

The government petitioned ICE to defer Asgari's deportation until after he stood trial. While papers changed hands, Asgari remained in ICE's custody, at a facility in Geauga County. He shared an open dormitory with inmates from around the world, most of them seeking asylum or awaiting deportation. They fought less than the inmates at Lake County, and showed less interest in physics.

After eight days, an ICE officer told Asgari that he would be released if he signed a form that committed him to coöperating with an expedited deportation to Iran after the resolution of his case. His only other option was remaining in jail. Asgari signed the form, and was released on bond, with an ankle bracelet and a curfew.

Asgari moved into a run-down high-rise in Cleveland, where he studied cosmology, taught himself to cook, and fed a rooftop colony of sparrows. Fatemeh lived there with him until October, when she returned to Iran. He worked frenetically through the winter to build his legal case and almost managed to conceal from himself that he felt lonely and found his ankle bracelet and "Offender I.D." humiliating.

The prosecutors and the F.B.I. came to him for more proffer meetings. Each time, he refused to enter a guilty plea or to become an informant. The F.B.I. grew increasingly frustrated and angry with him—and he began to understand that rebuffing the Bureau's overtures would cost him. The government was prepared to prosecute him, even with a threadbare indictment. Edward Bryan, Asgari's defender, discussed the case with his boss, a slender ex-marine named Stephen Newman, and Newman stepped in as lead attorney.

Asgari felt that the indictment was a house of cards if you knew the science, but the amassed technical details did make for a sinister-looking tangle of acronyms and numbers. To win, Asgari's attorneys needed to understand the context and the meaning of the data in his e-mails, and they also needed to grasp the basis of Asgari's interest in this information. He offered them an illustration that later made its way into the courtroom. For thousands of years, humans have known that, when you boil an egg, it solidifies. But they have known for less than a hundred years why it does that, and why it does not revert to a liquid state when returned to room temperature. The first—the how—is the primary concern of engineers. The second—the why—is the province of science. Asgari stressed that, at Case, his interest was in the science.

The case was on the docket of the federal judge James Gwin. Appointed to Ohio's Northern District by President Bill Clinton, in 1997, Gwin had a record of mixing it up with the conservative appellate judges on the Sixth Circuit. Gwin enjoined voter harassment and intimidation at Ohio polling stations during the 2016 election; the Sixth Circuit reversed him. In 2018, Gwin threatened ICE with contempt if it deported a defendant who was awaiting sentencing; the Sixth Circuit reversed him again.

Before the proceedings began, Asgari and his attorneys obtained copies of the 2013 and 2015 search warrants, and they felt at once stunned and vindicated. As they saw it, the F.B.I. had secured the wiretap warrants based on little more than Asgari's nationality. Boggs's 2013 affidavit tantalizingly referred to a Bureau operation called Operation Clean Pitch—the pursuit of Asgari was somehow a component of it—but further detail was redacted. Asgari entered a motion to suppress all evidence from the wiretaps, on the ground that the warrants had lacked probable cause. His attorneys told him not to expect much: U.S. federal courts were not known for granting constitutional rulings in favor of foreign nationals.

Judge Gwin held a hearing on the motion on February 20, 2018, zeroing in on the 2013 affidavit's insinuations about the Iranian Navy and the graduate-student paper from Kish. In his decision, Gwin called the citation of the paper "wildly misleading," given the absence of any connection between Asgari and its author. "At its essence, the 2013 affidavit only says that Asgari worked as a metallurgy professor at an Iranian supported prominent engineering school," Gwin wrote. "That is not enough to show probable cause of an Iran sanctions violation." Concluding that Boggs had deliberately created a false impression of probable cause, Gwin granted the motion to suppress the wiretap evidence.

Asgari was riding high: the wiretaps were the whole case. But the U.S. Attorney's office appealed Gwin's ruling, and the Sixth Circuit reversed it, saying that, because "investigators operating in good faith reasonably could have thought the warrant was valid," the evidence could not be suppressed. Moreover, the Sixth Circuit judges felt that Boggs had not

intentionally misled the magistrate, and found the affidavit at least minimally persuasive: at the Swagelok Center, Asgari was working in a lab partly funded by U.S. military grants, at a time when Iran was under broad sanctions.

During the eighteen months that followed Gwin's wiretap ruling, there were more hearings, motions, appeals, and reversals. Because Asgari only rarely needed to appear in court in Cleveland, he obtained permission to stay with Mohammad in New York, where he read books on the crystallography of precious stones, and then with Zahra in California, where he went on hikes and audited lectures at Stanford.

Until the conclusion of his trial, he couldn't leave America: he had an ankle bracelet, supervision, and bond. If he was convicted, he'd go to jail; if he was acquitted, he'd be deported. He didn't know what would await him in Iran. The regime would surely look askance at his contacts with the U.S. justice system, no matter how antagonistic they had been, and might not believe that he hadn't let the F.B.I. recruit him. In the past, the Iranian government had negotiated prisoner swaps with the U.S., but Asgari told his wife to inform the Iranian foreign ministry that he did not want to be included in any such negotiations. He felt that he had a chance of a fair hearing before Judge Gwin, and didn't want his case to be politicized.

The trial began on November 12, 2019. Asgari, wearing a charcoal suit without a tie, in the Iranian fashion, sat through the proceedings alert and birdlike. The case before the jurors was dizzyingly technical, but the big picture was strangely vacuous. He had allegedly stolen trade secrets, but from a company that had suffered no apparent injury, and to nobody's profit. The supposed trade secrets had all been published in patents and scientific journals.

To support the trade-secrets charge, Daniel Riedl and the other prosecutors presented e-mails that Asgari had sent or received, some of which contained Swagelok data. But the data in the e-mails were either erroneous, banal, or in the public domain. The prosecution's centerpiece was an e-mail that Asgari received from Sunniva Collins, a materials scientist at Swagelok who held several patents in low-temperature carburization. Prosecutors characterized the message, which detailed times and temperatures for a carburization process used on one of the samples Asgari was asked to analyze, as the "recipe" e-mail.

By the time Asgari showed up at Case in 2013, low-temperature carburization had been around for decades. Dozens of papers had been published on the subject. To steal a trade secret, a person has to knowingly expropriate intellectual property for the profit of someone other than the owner. And, for information to qualify as a trade secret, it has to be both economically valuable and confidential. The "recipe" e-mail met none of these criteria. The particular sample that Collins described had been treated in a trial run for a patent that Swagelok had already published. Asgari did not forward the times and temperatures to his Gmail account or to anybody else. In any case, the values were consistent with the published patent. Collins testified that the recipe was not a trade secret.

The prosecution further offered an e-mail that Asgari had forwarded from his Case account to his Gmail account. It contained data that he'd obtained from Swagelok about the chemical composition of the steel before it was treated with carbon. Asgari's lawyers said that he had forwarded these data to himself out of puzzlement: the values for phosphorus and chromium did not match industry standards for the grades of steel Swagelok had ordered. Asgari had concluded that either the samples were defective or—more likely—Swagelok's instruments were out of calibration.

Finally, the prosecution presented the proposal that Asgari's student had made to a research institute connected to Iran's petrochemical industry, suggesting a project on low-temperature carburization. The student had hyped his professor's experience, boasting that, in America, Asgari had acquired knowledge of the process that nobody in Iran possessed. On the witness stand, the student made clear that he had sent Asgari the pro-

REMEDY

In deciding what I am, I've ruled out cat, vulture, shoe,
a sadist who tortures people to death in a Syrian hospital,
a president who separates families at the border,
a handful of purple irises at the beginning of the path
to heaven. Is there memory in the shade of a tree
of a lynching fifty years ago, when I was nine? And do I love
that tree? Love the sinner, not the sin. Forgive the electricity,
not the singeing of genitals. The more I know about human nature
the more I plan to be tall grass in a field. Until then
I'll tell my wife I love her in Toronto and Blacksburg and bed,
in pajamas and bluejeans and song, in theory and fact and dream.
I will not gouge a man's eye out, I promise, yet the eye is out,
the man is dead, and the geese I'm listening to have no idea
that we're as wild as the coyotes that would tear them apart.
If given a choice I'd not choose to be human. If given a choice
how to be human, I'd say like a glass of water. While I have
no answers to the questions I don't know to ask, I can love my wife
in Detroit, in general, in detail, in vain, in spite, in depth,
in the shallow light of the moon, in contrast to hating myself,
in sympathy and in stealth, in time as a ghost and right now
as a poet wondering if surgeons, during a transplant,
tell the shivering and recycled heart it is loved. I assume so,
but I've never asked a heart on its second time around,
Were you christened, were you blessed, are you worth
all this trouble?

—Bob Hicok

posal only after submitting it to the institute. Asgari ultimately judged the project impracticable.

Such was the heart of the prosecution: a recipe Asgari never asked for and never used, a faulty data set, and a student's amateurish grant proposal that went nowhere. The visa and wire-fraud counts were similarly flimsy. The defense filed a motion to dismiss all charges.

Gwin accepted the defense's motion. But he wasn't ready to dismiss the case just yet: he had found the arguments interesting, and hoped to write an opinion for the record. Until he had done so, he asked Asgari to remain in the country, on bond. Asgari's lawyers assured the judge that, once the case was formally dismissed, he would self-deport, returning to Iran on a commercial flight.

He didn't get the chance. The prosecution, evidently sensing that the case was not going its way, had quietly informed ICE that it no longer wished to defer Asgari's deportation: the agency could come collect its prisoner. No sooner had Judge Gwin departed the courtroom than a marshal seated in the gallery approached the defense table to haul Asgari into ICE custody.

The turn of events was stunning. Asgari had just been acquitted in a fair trial before a federal judge, but would end the day in prison. By all appearances, the government was acting out of vindictiveness. (Riedl, the prosecutor, declined to be interviewed.)

"He's going to self-deport!" Newman protested to the marshal.

"You're coming with me," the marshal told Asgari, and marched him from the courtroom.

Only the two legal teams remained, in a cavernous silence—the prosecutors with their backs to the defense, shuffling papers into briefcases while Bryan fumed and paced. Finally, he erupted. "This is bullshit," he said. "It was *always* bullshit!"

The day Asgari was cleared of all charges, he began a seven-month descent down a spiral of squalor, into a vast carceral system beyond the reach of the U.S. judiciary. Within the realm of ICE, there would be no public documents, no legal hearings. His federal defenders could not help him.

He was taken to the Northeast Ohio Correctional Center, a private prison, in Youngstown, that housed both convicted criminals and ICE detainees. There were fears of a chicken-pox outbreak when he arrived, and high-security prisoners kicked their doors late into the night. The food sickened him, and he assumed a strict diet of ramen noodles with dried vegetable flakes, obtained from the commissary.

His pod held forty-odd ICE inmates, many of them from Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh. He was impressed by their stories of migration—some had made months-long treks through jungles—and touched by the idealism of young men who had expected to find asylum in America. "They are really followers of Columbus," Asgari told me. One was teaching him the Tamil language, others about Buddhism. "I told them if they want to learn anything in physics, I can help," he said. Several times a week, he called me; we talked until his phone line mechanically disconnected. One day, I told him that I had gone to an electron-microscopy lab in New York, to view the instruments of his trade. That night, for the first time in two years, he dreamed that he was working with a TEM. "I was doing all sorts of operations, chemical analysis, high resolution, and enjoying it like crazy," he told me. "I woke up feeling so relaxed."

He tried to befriend some of the high-security prisoners. One, from Myanmar, was so dejected that for entire days he sat on his cot with a blanket over his head. Asgari knocked on his window, waving a chess board, and soon he and

the prisoner had a game going, Asgari outside the cell door, the Burmese man standing on a chair so that he could see the board and point to moves. The prisoner attempted suicide, and a guard asked Asgari to talk to him. He found the man stark naked, pounding on his door. "His face—he was gone," Asgari told me.

Almost every week, he took on a new cause, and he amiably needled the corrections officers. When a guard confiscated the cartons of milk that detainees kept on their windowsills, it was explained to Asgari that drug dealers in a criminal pod had made holes in the windows to distribute their goods and hidden the holes behind the cartons. Asgari protested that the ICE detainees had done nothing wrong and just wanted milk for their coffee. He argued that next the detainees would lose their hands—or, God forbid, other body parts—if inmates in another pod misused theirs. He won the milk cartons back.

After three months, Asgari was transferred, in the middle of the night, to Seneca County Jail, south of Toledo. Seneca was worse than Youngstown: some sixty beds in an open room, spaced about three feet apart; a single shower; three filthy toilets without stalls; unremitting noise and light. There were criminal convicts in the pod alongside ICE detainees. All of that Asgari could have handled. But his first conversation with the officer in charge of the ICE population brought him up short. The agency had apparently identified him as a leader who stirred up trouble. "I've been filled in about you," she told him. "Don't try to be a kingpin here."

Asgari retreated to his cot in abject silence. His wheedling and agitating, his problem-solving and peacemaking, had sustained him in Youngstown. "After two or three years of legal fight on a nonsense case, I'm still paying," he told me.

Nonetheless, he adjusted. Just a couple of weeks later, he joked, "If I have to be imprisoned by ICE, send me here." Mixing with the local prison population energized him. He felt sympathy for the desperation that had led the American inmates to drugs and crime. "They're boys from the middle of nowhere," Asgari told me. "There's something about them I really like." He was teaching again, this time about renewable energy: electric cars, lithium-ion batteries, solar cells. He even came to think of the officer who had warned him not to be a kingpin as his "close friend." He told me, with affection, "She has a strict face and a golden heart."

Given that Asgari had pledged to self-deport, his extended detention was almost impossible to fathom. His lawyers chalked it up to spite. Newman, the head of the defense team, said,

"Our country had to have its pound of flesh." Asgari ruminated ceaselessly on the injustice of it all. He hadn't sneaked into the United States; he had obtained a visa and paid for it. Why was he being punished?

If there was ever a force equal to Asgari's will, it was the bureaucratic inertia of ICE. The immigration attorneys he consulted were largely stymied by the agency's impenetrable structure. One said, "I'm just throwing shit at a wall, and every once in a while the wall throws something back." Another fruitlessly chased Asgari's paperwork from one office to another: ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations, the F.B.I., Customs and Border Protection, the ICE regional headquarters in Detroit, the local headquarters in Cleveland. At one point, Asgari urged me to call ICE officials in Detroit and Cleveland who had signed documents addressed to him. None of them ever answered their phones.

ICE occasionally sent representatives to meet with detainees and discuss their cases. They were just following procedures, they told Asgari, and had no authority to evaluate the logic or the justice of the measures they enforced. Asgari answered the representatives by telling them an Iranian joke. A man sees two groups of workers, one digging a trench along the road and the other following behind to fill it up and cover it. The bystander, confounded, asks the workers what they are doing. They say that the government hired three contractors: one to dig, one to install a pipeline, and the third to cover it. The second contractor never showed up, a worker says, adding, "So we are doing our job." Such, Asgari concluded, was ICE.

In January, he received a notice informing him that prisoners with a deportation order could request a custody review after ninety days, in the hope of winning release under supervision. His ninety days were up on February 13th. He was invited to submit documentation showing that he was neither a flight risk nor a danger to society. Asgari did so eagerly, pointing out that during the two years he'd awaited trial he'd obeyed every court order and kept every curfew, and that in court he'd been exonerated. On February 19th, he received a letter announcing that his request had been denied. The letter was dated February 3rd, ten days before the deadline—and before he had even submitted his supporting documents. Nobody had looked at his file, he realized. The reason that he was given for the refusal was even more baffling: ICE said that it was waiting for Iran to issue him a travel document, even though the passport he'd surrendered to ICE, in 2017, was valid through 2022.

The deciding officer assigned to his case was Scott Wichrowski. Asgari met with him twice at Seneca. How, Asgari asked, was waiting for a travel document a reason to incarcerate a person? What threat did he pose? Wichrowski, Asgari told me, just looked at his shoes. "If I were him, I would resign—I wouldn't just watch people suffering for nothing," Asgari grumbled. (Wichrowski declined interview requests.)

At the legal library in Seneca County Jail, Asgari happened on a quote from Robert Jackson, a Supreme Court Justice in the nineteen-forties and fifties: "Procedural fairness and regularity are of the indispensable essence of liberty. . . . Indeed, if put to the choice, one might well prefer to live under Soviet substantive law applied in good faith by our common-law procedures than under our substantive law enforced by Soviet procedural practices." Asgari concluded that he was a victim of American law enforced by Soviet-style procedures.

The coronavirus cut a brutal swath through Iran in February before wracking the United States. Flights to Iran were suspended. At first, Asgari was merely irritated; then he began to panic. He was at high risk of a severe COVID-19 infection. For six years, he'd suffered from repeated bouts of pneumonia, and he had a chronic liver condition and high blood pressure. Late that month, he developed a lung infection, but he took antibiotics and it cleared up, so he figured that it wasn't COVID-19. Then, as the pandemic worsened, ICE began transferring him to one fetid prison after another.

His first transfer, on March 10th, took some twelve hours. He and other detainees, in shackles and chains, could hardly move their hands to eat, and some prisoners soiled themselves for lack of toilet access. They flew from base to base and finally landed in Alexandria, Louisiana, where ICE had a deportation hub. When it was time to disembark, Asgari had a pounding headache and could hardly stand; when he reached the stairs descending from the plane, he fainted.

Asgari was told that detainees could be kept at the Alexandria Staging Facility for a maximum of one week. The place was correspondingly stark, without books or the camaraderie of a stable cohort. Asgari's blood pressure spiked. After seven days, he was scheduled for deportation. He spent another sixteen hours in shackles—this time going north, to New Hampshire, then south, to New Jersey, and then west, to Texas. At every stop, the plane sat for hours on the tarmac as more prisoners boarded. In the end, Asgari's flight to Iran was cancelled, because of the pandemic. The ICE plane finally landed again at Alexandria at 10:45 P.M., with more than a hundred people on board—many of them, including Asgari, the same detainees who had left the facility that morning.

Asgari noticed that the corrections officers at Alexandria had taken to wearing masks, and he suspected that they knew something he didn't. He had a mask in a suitcase that Mohammad had packed for his deportation, but he was forbidden to retrieve it. The transport hub was, as he put it, a viral bomb ready to detonate. Its population churned as other countries stopped accepting deportees. As most Americans began sheltering in place and tried to stay six feet apart on the street, the detainees in the Alexandria Staging Facility all but pickled in their shared breath.

On March 23rd, Asgari was put on another plane that flew hither and thither, collecting and disgorging inmates at every stop, and again he ended up back at the transport hub. Because he had left Alexandria for a day, ICE had technically avoided housing him at the facility for more than a week. Mohammad, in New York, reached out to activists and lawyers with mounting panic that his father would not live to return to Iran. Fatemeh could not visit him: she had applied for a visa to go to America, but her request had been denied.

If only Asgari had been convicted of theft of trade secrets, he would be in the criminal-justice system in Ohio, where Stephen Newman was working tirelessly to win his clients compassionate release from virus-ridden prisons. "We can't get

in front of a judge for Professor Asgari," Newman lamented to me. "We can't do anything for him. For two years, we were able to help him—and now we can't."

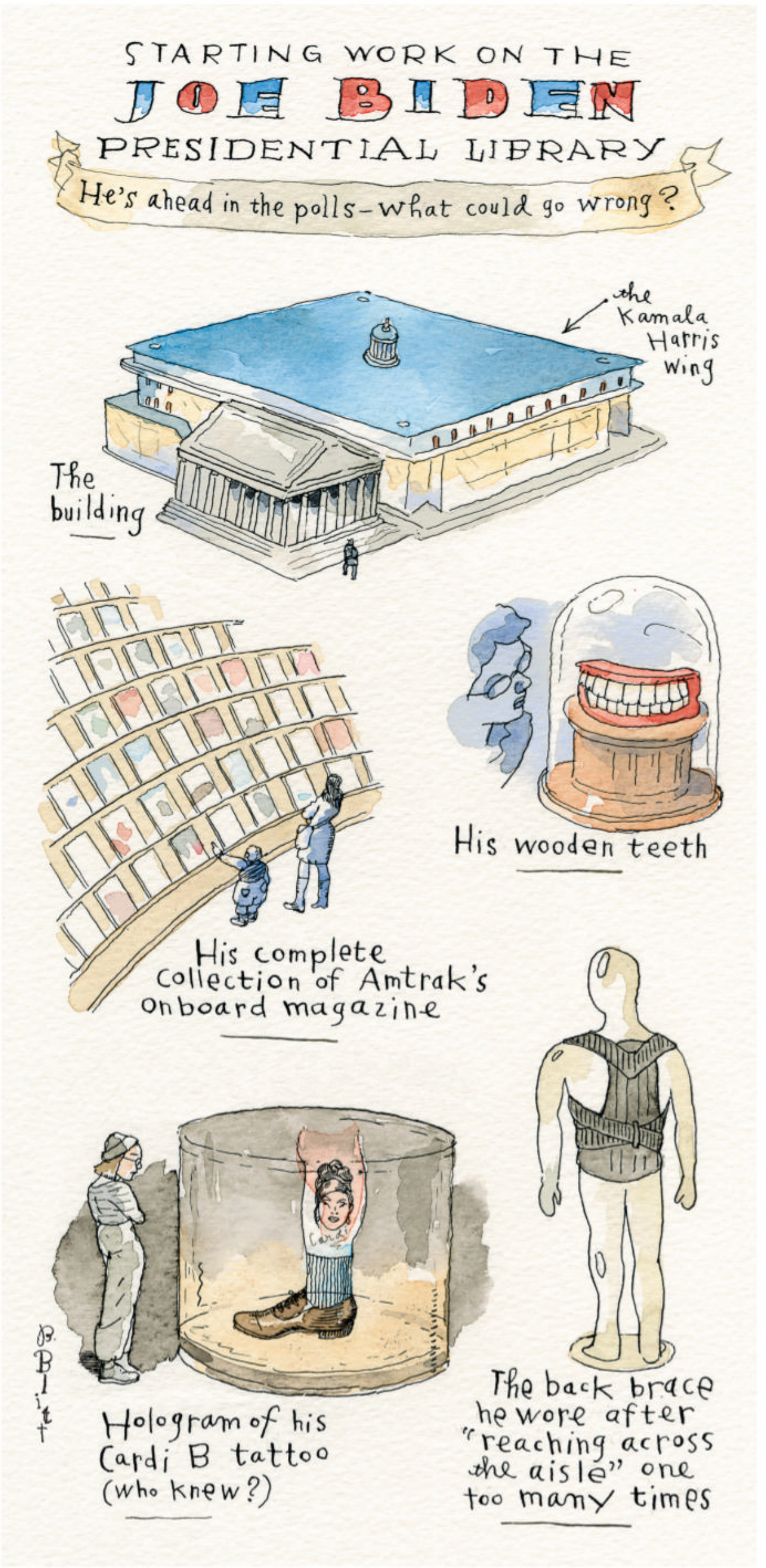
At the end of March, Asgari was transferred to the Winn Correctional Center, a sprawling, privately operated complex near the Louisiana-Texas border. His first glimpse of the place was a gut punch. The pod was a concrete box, the air so humid that it soaked his bedsheets, the forty or so beds rusted. The few windows were covered in semi-opaque Plexiglas. It was the most depressing place he'd ever been. "Whenever I think I've seen the worst treatment by ICE, they surprise me again," he told me.

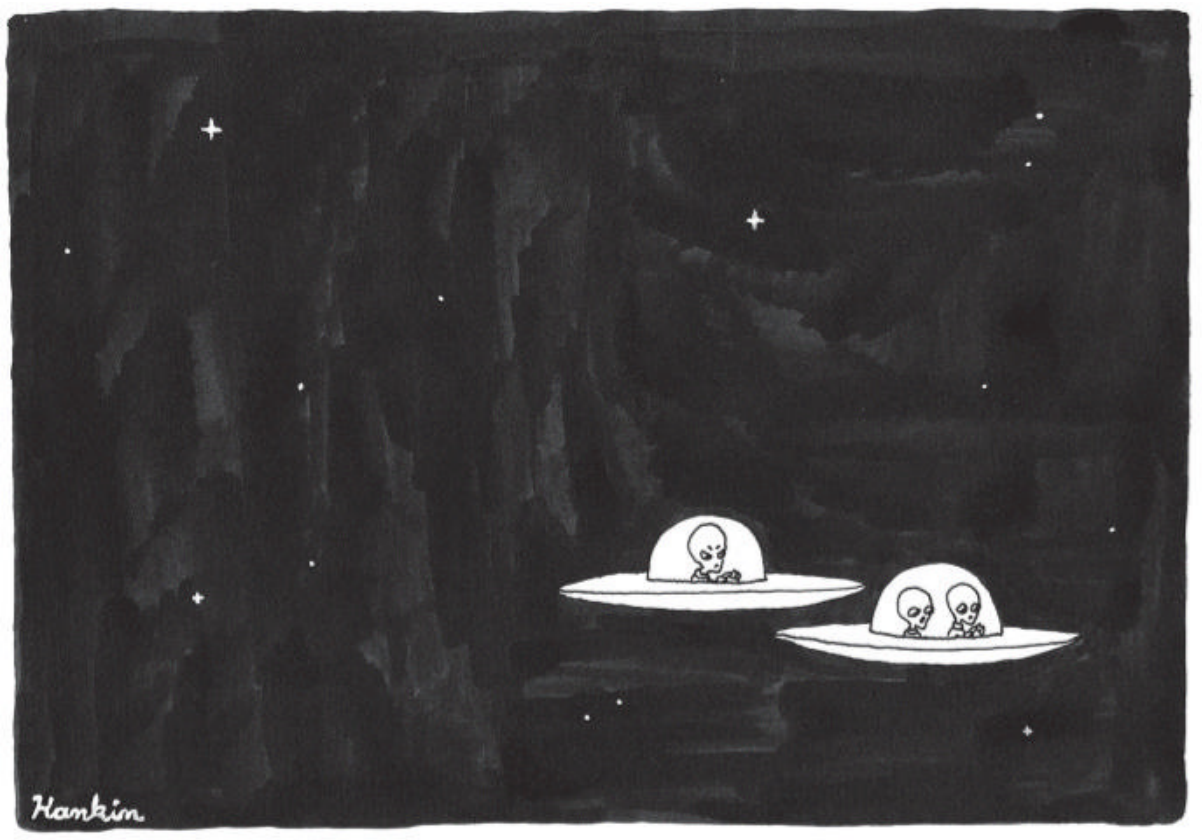
For all that, he was relieved to have left Alexandria. An inmate in his pod there had tested positive for COVID-19, and so the entire pod had been sent to Winn, where its members would be isolated for fourteen days, their temperatures taken regularly. "A couple of us cried," he said, of the group's arrival. "They said, 'Where the hell is this place?' I told them, 'Here, you are safer.'" Privately, Asgari told me that the facility was inhumane: "Nobody is talking to anybody. It is absolutely humiliating and disgusting to keep people here." But within his quarantine pod a kind of fellowship emerged, even though the others mainly spoke Spanish, which Asgari did not.

As far as Asgari could tell, ICE did not seem to take the quarantine very seriously. Within a few days, several Colombians in the pod had been deported, despite the pod's known exposure to the coronavirus. Some detainees from El Salvador were also repatriated before the end of the quarantine. Asgari joined a habeas-corpus suit of Louisiana ICE detainees at high risk of developing complications from COVID-19.

On April 10th, he told me that three men elsewhere in the facility had tested positive. His blood pressure hit a hundred and fifty over a hundred. By this time, his pod had been isolated for more than fourteen days without anyone having fallen ill. But while we were speaking he saw a new detainee being brought into the pod—an exposure risk for those inside. "I'm going to fight this!" he said. Asgari hung up, then called back a few minutes later to tell me that if I didn't

SKETCHBOOK BY BARRY BLITT





"Let this guy go around."

• • •

hear from him within an hour he had likely been taken to an isolation cell, and I should then call his family. Ten minutes later, he was back on the line, against a background roar of inmates cheering.

Asgari had led the pod in mobbing the entryway. He told the guards that he was fighting for his life and would not give in. His cellmates backed him, and the newcomer was led away. "Now people are happy," Asgari told me. "Not one showed weakness." When a new shift of guards arrived, Asgari said, they thanked him: they, too, felt safer because of what he'd done. A prison staffer who had witnessed the scene later told Asgari that he had been thrilled when Asgari had vowed to fight for his life, and had asked the other detainees if they would fight for theirs, too. Everyone had yelled, "Yes!" The staffer told Asgari, "I felt like I was in a movie."

Asgari's high spirits lasted only about three days. His right leg began to swell, purpled with bruises along a bone that he'd never injured. It became agonizing to walk the hundred feet from his bed to the pod door, where medicines were disbursed, or to the toilet. He was denied a wheelchair; a nurse offered him ice instead. At last, he saw a doctor, who suspected a blood clot and had him rushed to a hospital for an ultrasound. The doctor there also suspected clots, though they were too small to show on the ultrasound, and he told ICE that Asgari should not fly. Asgari did not seem entirely sorry that plans for his deportation were again delayed. If he stayed in the U.S. a little while longer, he told me, he might be granted habeas. "I want to show these guys they were wrong," he said.

Asgari was relentless in pursuit of a cause—and there was always a cause. The hospital gave him crutches, but using them hurt his back, and within two days he'd sent them to a nurse, with a note demanding a wheelchair. Protocol forbade it, he was told. In protest, he enlisted his cellmates to drag him to his destinations on a bedsheet. (At one point, he told me, laughing, "they dragged me on the floor so fast, my ass was set on fire.") How else, he asked a nurse, was he to transport himself? One day, a guard quietly placed a wheelchair inside the pod. Asgari attributed such victories to what he called the "power of one." He told me, "An innocent, independent, wise individual will prevail in any situation."

At Winn, Asgari had time to reflect on his experience. He had always lived, in a way, at a crossroads. He'd arrived as a student in the University of Tehran's department of metallurgical engineering in 1977, just as Iran's revolutionary student movement gathered force, and his faculty was its epicenter. When the movement toppled the Shah and established the Islamic Republic, Asgari helped form an organization called the Jihad of Construction, an Iranian counterpart to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He coördinated crews to build roads, pipe water, and harvest wheat. The Iran-Iraq War began in 1980, and the engineering students turned to military logistics. To move tanks onto the Al-Faw Peninsula, they helped design a pontoon bridge that had to be installed underwater in the middle of the night and then buoyed to the surface with air tanks. Asgari took part in five offensives; he saw bodies ripped apart, and once a mortar shell landed just behind him, causing the surrounding mud to boil.

Asgari had been a revolutionary not because he was a religious ideologue but because he was an egalitarian. He believed that social justice took precedence over any theory of the state. What surprised him most, when he first came to America, in the nineties, was that such a calm, orderly society had risen from the cruel machinery of capitalism.

He believed that his time in detention had given him a more complete picture of American society than most citizens possessed. "I have friends in low places," he often told me, with a chuckle. He'd spent two years in the federal court system and five months in the clutches of ICE, all because the F.B.I. had tried and failed to recruit him, and because his visa—if it really was a visa—had never been stamped. Now, in an ICE detention center on the Texas-Louisiana border, he was having a Tocqueville moment.

Asgari still viewed America with affection. He marvelled that, in every prison, he could pick up a phone and talk to journalists, and that journalists could publish what they wanted without fear of being censored. But what he appreciated most was the independence of the American judiciary.

"I appeared as an Iranian in front of an American judge," he reflected. "This American judge ruled against an F.B.I. agent in my favor. I was privileged to witness the way he handled the trial, from jury selection to the end, the way

he advocated impartiality and fairness. I believe these are global values that should be respected by all governments, including my own." He added, "My attorneys, who put their heart into this thing—they were employees of the same government that was on the other side of this case."

What a comedown it had been to pass out of the judiciary and into the hands of ICE. There, he had been witness to values that appeared to stand in bald contrast to those of the courts. He was staggered by the number of detainees who, he felt, had no business being imprisoned, and by brutal treatment that seemed at odds with the liberality of American law. Asgari was convinced that a hidden profit motive lay behind the circulation of ICE prisoners on desultory flights from one outpost to another. Otherwise, he simply could not understand it.

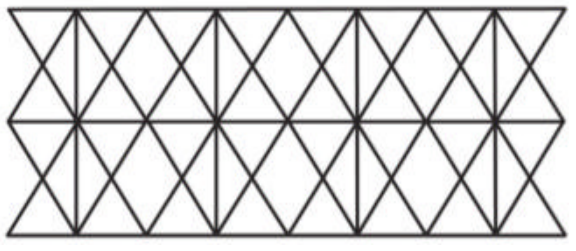
Who were he and the other ICE detainees in the eyes of American law? The zone they occupied was murky to the point of darkness. To win release on supervision, people who had been imprisoned precisely because they were to be deported had first to prove that they weren't flight risks. Their detention was considered administrative, not punitive, but they were housed in the same facilities as people convicted of crimes.

Prison was a crucible of human relations, and for the most part Asgari's faith in them had emerged stronger from the experience. In a pod, you couldn't hide behind an avatar, a bank account, or an accomplishment—not even behind the self-importance of a busy schedule. Governments might seek to dominate or obliterate one another, but human beings, forced into intimacy and the roughest equality, tended to be coöperative, Asgari had found. He had always been a scholar of microstructures, and now he understood that the atoms of a society—from which all its properties emanated—were people in their elemental state. The bonds among them were the structure's deepest source of strength.

At Winn, time spun circles. New detainees would show up at the gate, and a lookout would whistle for pod members to mob the door and prevent entry. Asgari saw the doctor for new bruises on his leg, and, on his behalf, the doctor refused another flight—whether it was bound for Cleveland or Tehran, Asgari never knew. He asked for a plastic chair to bring into the shower so that he wouldn't have to stand, and again he was battling protocol—a protocol whose logic no one remembered, or maybe ever knew. If only ICE would release him to his daughter, Asgari said: "Let me have four days, and I'll be at home watching TV and eating Persian food."

In late April, Asgari's pod lost its bid for isolation: the prisoners were forced into a new space with dozens of others. Asgari tested positive for COVID-19 on April 25th. He awoke at night drenched in sweat. When we spoke, he sounded weak and coughed incessantly. He was placed in a "negative pressure" cell that kept infected air away from other detainees. He had no shower and limited access to a phone, and only a large black spider for company. At least his oxygen levels held steady. While Asgari was in the negative-pressure cell, a magistrate recommended that his habeas petition be denied, on the ground that Asgari was already infected, and therefore no longer at risk.

When his fever broke, he was placed in a pod of confirmed COVID-19 patients. The outbreak ultimately affected nearly two hundred prisoners. Asgari was—for once—lucky. But upon his recovery he bridled more than ever at the



filth and the irrationality of his circumstances. Every other avenue having failed, his wife started talking in earnest with the Iranian foreign ministry.

Iran and the U.S. had exchanged a pair of prisoners in December, and had since been discussing another. Michael White, a U.S. Navy veteran sentenced to years in prison in Iran for allegedly insulting Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, was to be swapped for Matteo Taerri, a plastic surgeon in Florida charged with sanctions violations for smuggling a dual-use biological filter into Iran. The countries were to exchange the two men through Swiss intermediaries. In the spring, the Iranians decided to make Asgari's deportation a precondition for the deal: they would honor their part of it only after ICE sent Asgari back to Iran.

At the beginning of May, intimations of a swap leaked in the U.S. press, and some articles mentioned Asgari's name. Ken Cuccinelli, the acting Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security, claimed to the Associated Press that the U.S. had been trying to deport Asgari since December, and that the Iranians had delayed confirming the validity of his passport until late February, when the pandemic struck, making international travel impossible.

In late May, a Louisiana court decided to approve Asgari's habeas petition after all, and gave ICE two weeks to release him on supervision. But before that could happen, in early June, after seven months in ICE custody, he was finally deported. He called me from his country house, in Taleghan, in the mountains north of Tehran, on June 4th. He was jet-lagged, still feeling the shock of sudden freedom, and overwhelmed by the taste of food. High-ranking Iranian officials had received him. Local news media clamored for interviews, clearly eager to present him as an emblematic victim of American injustice. For now, he declined; he did not want to present his case in a political light. His story, he insisted, was really about the relationships that had sustained him. Still, memories of his incarceration, particularly at Winn and in Alexandria, intruded on his thoughts. He was sad to learn that a guard he'd known at Winn had died of COVID-19. "He was a gentle guy," he told me. "I never saw any aggressive behavior from him."

Asgari had meant to return to Iran the way he had left it—as a cosmopolitan scientist, beholden to nothing more absolute than reason or more fundamental than the atom. "I do not like to be swapped," Asgari had told me when the idea first arose, back at Winn. "I wanted to win this case in an American court, before an American judge and jury. Because I knew I hadn't done anything wrong." ♦

THE SHAPE-SHIFTER

The protean career of Ethan Hawke.

BY JOHN LAHR

On a chilly November morning last year, the sunlight a ribbon of gold on the rolling Virginia hills, Ethan Hawke, who would turn forty-nine the next day, ambled into a replica of Harpers Ferry in 1859. An armory and four short streets had been constructed on the grounds of State Farm, a prison property outside Richmond. Hawke, already in full makeup and sporting a long, shaggy beard, was playing the flinty abolitionist John Brown, in "The Good Lord Bird," a seven-part Showtime series adapted from James McBride's 2013 National Book Award-winning novel. (The show, which premières October 4th, is the first project that Hawke has produced, co-created, with Mark Richard, and starred in.) For his next scene, he was preparing to reënact Brown's famous raid on the United States arsenal. Brown was hanged for this botched act of terrorism—an attempt to arm slaves and start a revolt—but it proved to be a tipping point, eighteen months later, for the start of the Civil War.

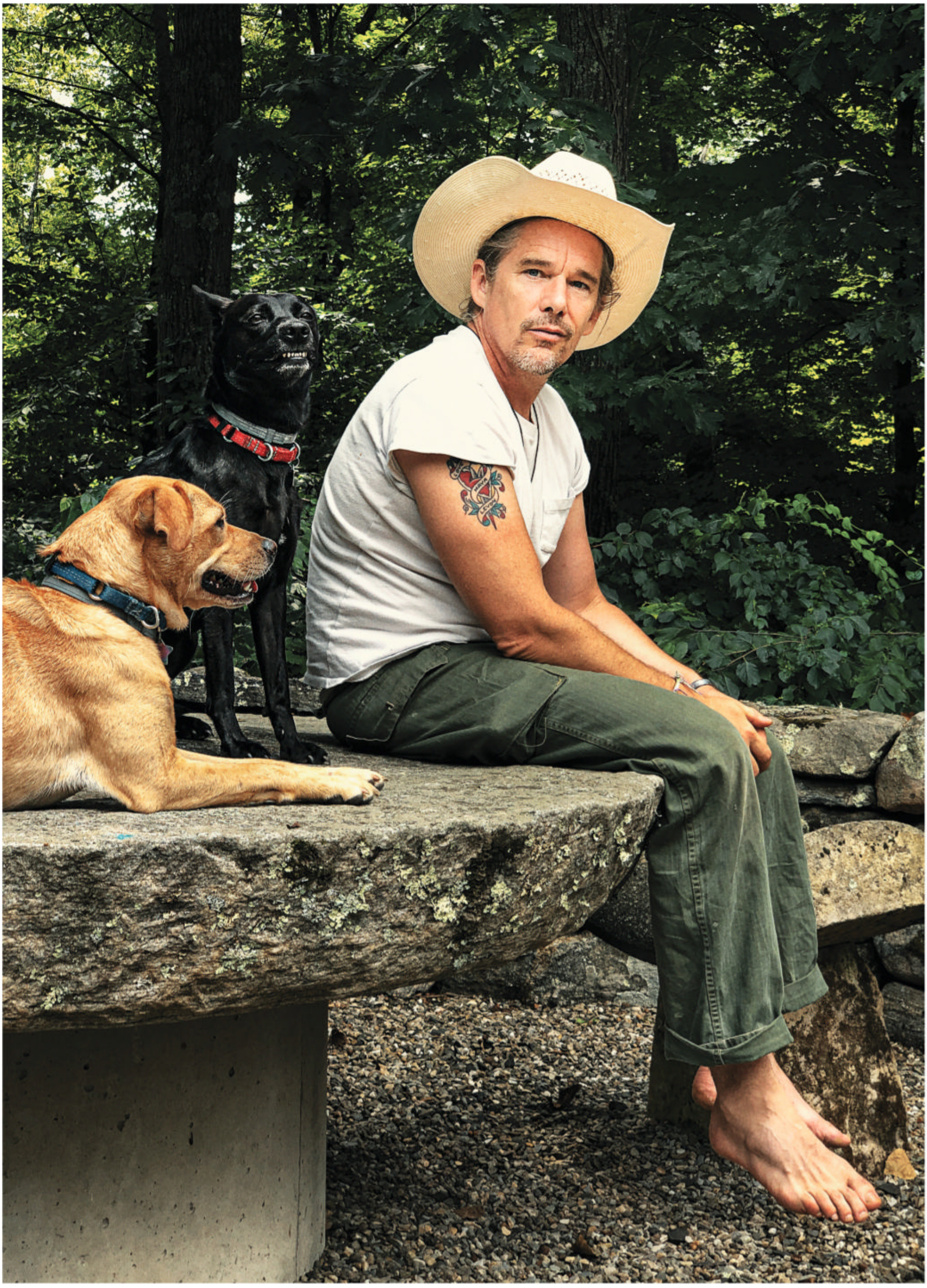
Hawke was at the end of a six-month shoot on the show, but his connection with Brown's story had begun a few years earlier, in 2015, as he drove to the set of Antoine Fuqua's remake of "The Magnificent Seven," near Baton Rouge. In that film, Hawke played a Confederate soldier who didn't want to fight anymore. In the scene he was shooting that day, a U.S. marshal (played by Denzel Washington) would say, "The war is over," and Hawke's character would reply, "It's never over. It just keeps going on and on." As Hawke ran through the scene in his mind, his car radio broadcast news of a legislative battle in South Carolina over the right to fly the Confederate flag in front of the statehouse. It struck him that the Civil War was, indeed, not over, an insight that coincided with one of the directors of photography asking him if he'd read the novel "The Good Lord Bird." Studying Hawke, with his piercing blue eyes, angular chin, and slicked-back brindle hair, the D.P. added, "Read the book—you'd make a great John Brown."

Hawke read the novel on set and couldn't stop laughing. The picaresque saga, which is told more in the style of Redd Foxx than of Toni Morrison, addresses the barbarism of slavery through the faux-naïf eyes of Little Onion, a formerly enslaved boy disguised as a girl, who becomes witness to Brown's rebellion. McBride's impish tone is as incendiary as his subject, precisely because the humor highlights the surreal horror of slavery and the courage needed to survive it. Here is a Black American novelist writing about the nation's greatest wound in an irreverent way that is "very dangerous in the current atmosphere," Hawke said. On the other hand, he went on, "if you're trying to teach people, or yell at them, you rarely change their mind. Humor can really effect change—it's the greatest illuminator."

Hawke, in his book "Rules for a Knight" (2015)—written for the instruction of his children—styles himself as a medieval knight searching for the holy grail of higher being. "A knight does not stop at each victory," he advises. "He pushes on to risk a more significant failure." John Brown similarly saw himself as a warrior for moral justice, and his righteous ideals make him a profoundly fascinating character for Hawke. "There is a mistaken idea that he was trying to save Black folks," Hawke told me. "He was trying to save *us*. Seen through the eyes of a serious Christian, Black people didn't need saving. The affluent white communities were the ones living in sin. Harpers Ferry was the great American trumpet sound." He went on, "If people said, 'Don't you feel bad you got your own sons killed?,' he'd say, 'Someday, this country will be ashamed of slavery, and I'll never be ashamed of my boys.' I just loved that. I found it very inspiring. I don't know how to wrestle with the violence of it, because I'm not a violent person. But I admire his ethics and his ferocity." He added, "John Brown's a lightning rod. He forces the question of violence versus nonviolence, like Malcolm X. That's why we avoid talking about him. He fans the flames of white guilt."

On the set in Virginia, Hawke ran through his lines, sitting on a barrel by the gates of the re-created Harpers Ferry engine house, where Brown's ragtag army of eighteen held off about two hundred and forty militiamen and U.S. marines for thirty-six hours. Because McBride's novel is narrated entirely by Onion, Hawke had to invent his own voice for Brown. Channelling the stentorian delivery of his Texan grandfather, a nabob of local politics who spoke in paragraphs, Hawke found both a sound and a subtext for Brown, who, he decided, was always in dialogue with his Maker. That morning, Hawke was working up a prayer that he planned to improvise on camera, as a way of circumventing studio interference—a technique he learned from watching Denzel Washington, when they co-starred in the 2001 film "Training Day." "If they see the words in the script, they get scared and note you to death," Hawke told me. "If you just improvise it, they think they are brilliant for hiring you." As he rehearsed, he could see his breath. "Might we, Lord, as your humble servants, grab the beams of this engine house and pull slavery down on top of us? If so, Lord, grant me the strength of Samson," he intoned.

By the time he had the speech formed, a hundred or so extras had filed onto the set with guns and horses. It was time to go to work. He thought about the fact that he was the first person to put John Brown's full story on film. As he told me later, "I couldn't believe that this moment of American history had been relatively



Hawke, at his home in Connecticut, in July. "If you want to live in the arts," he said, "you've got to dig in."

PHOTOGRAPH BY NIKOLA TAMINDZIC

untouched in cinema and that my heroes hadn't already played this part. Jason Robards? Chris Plummer? Orson Welles? How did Paul Newman not get this part? I felt like the luckiest actor in America."

Hawke's mother's family in Abilene, Texas—he was born in Austin—were Yellow Dog Democrats. His maternal grandfather, Howard Green, coowned and managed the Abilene Blue Sox, a farm club for the Brooklyn Dodgers, and was one of the men who wanted to have Jackie Robinson on the team. Hawke's mother, Leslie, whom he calls "a wannabe Eleanor Roosevelt," juggled her work with social action, teaching at an inner-city school, joining the Peace Corps at forty-eight, and founding the Alex Fund, a charity that helps provide education for poor children in Romania. As a teen-ager, Hawke himself volunteered, under the auspices of the Episcopal Church, in Haiti, during the early days of the AIDS epidemic, and in Appalachia. When he was in high school, in Princeton, New Jersey, his mother took in two Ethiopian students; one of them, who went on to study computer science, was picked up by police for walking in Hawke's suburban neighborhood. "That was a huge wake-up call for me," Hawke said. "He got stopped by the cops constantly. I never did. I could have had a bag of marijuana in my pocket. All he ever had in his pocket was a calculator."

While shooting "Training Day," Hawke spent four months riding around Watts, listening to Washington talk about race in America and about Malcolm X (whom Washington had played in Spike Lee's 1992 bio-pic); for Hawke, it was "a powerful education." When he and his wife, Ryan Shawhughes, met with McBride, in January, 2016, to discuss turning "The Good Lord Bird" into a limited series, McBride could tell that Hawke knew the territory. "There's dynamics of this whole race question that we could burn a lot of ink talking about," McBride told me. "Ultimately, that would have been a waste of time. Ethan really understood what John Brown represented." Hawke told McBride, "I'm not Brad Pitt. I can't afford to option this novel for the money that it deserves." But they made a handshake deal that allowed Hawke a year to come up with an adaptation. If McBride liked the script, they'd look for someone to buy it. "Basically, he gave me permission to write it for free," Hawke said.

One afternoon in May, 2017, Hawke rode his bicycle from his town house in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, to New Brown Memorial Baptist Church, near the Red Hook housing projects, where McBride oversees the children's music program. He was going to pick up McBride's notes on a rough draft of his script. Hawke wandered into the vestibule of the church. "Are you the guy who's come to fix the air-conditioning?" the church treasurer asked. At that moment, McBride appeared and identified Hawke. "Last time a white guy was here was to fix the A.C.," the treasurer said.

"Ethan looked like a white guy who just happens to be looking for a Coors beer," McBride said. But he also saw a lot of John Brown in him. In the decades since Hawke made his name as a shy, baby-faced teen-ager in "Dead Poets Society" (1989), his face has become craggy, and he has achieved a full-blown, happy maturity as a rough-edged, raucous actor. "Brown had a gleam in his eye," McBride said. "Part of him was just completely untamed. When he sat down with people, he was almost harnessing this madness within him. You get a little of that with Ethan. His antennae are always out, grabbing, catching every little bit of information. He's an outsider. It's not like he's attempting to do it. It's just that he's at a different radio station. He's operating on his own frequency."

Throughout his career, Hawke has consistently challenged himself to grow. He has appeared in more than eighty movies, predominantly independent films interspersed with Hollywood money-makers. He has directed four films, written three novels, and cofounded a theatre company. In the process, Hawke has been nominated for four Academy Awards (including two for Best Adapted Screenplay) and a Tony, for his performance, in Tom Stoppard's trilogy "The Coast of Utopia," as Mikhail Bakunin, the revolutionary Russian anarchist, whose bowwow personality resurfaces in the fulminations of Hawke's John Brown. The range of Hawke's roles—a romantic charmer (in the "Before" trilogy), a drug-addled Chet Baker (in "Born to Be Blue"), a guilt-ridden suicidal priest (in "First Reformed"), to name just a few—is also a reflection of his expansive empathy. "Acting, at its best, is like music," he said. "You have to get inside your character's song."

Hawke's shape-shifting has its origins in his powerful desire to engage his first audience: his parents. Leslie was eighteen when he was born; his father, Jim, was twenty. They'd met in high school in Texas and moved east after college. Hawke was four when they divorced, a breakup that sent Jim back to Texas, while Leslie and Ethan made their way to Vermont and, later, to Princeton. Alternating between parents, Hawke also alternated between personalities. For his mother, who put "a super-high value on intellectual pursuits," he said, he "played up the artistic, literary, conscientious political thinker." During his reunions with his much missed father, who became an insurance actuary and was a humble, conservative, deeply religious man, Hawke "affected a Southern accent," minded his manners, talked football, and was "a lot more religious." "I loved him so much," Hawke said. "I wanted him to like me. I was aware that I was performing for him. I hated myself for it." After a visit when he was sixteen, Hawke, arriving back at Newark Airport, stripped off his shirt and exited the plane bare-chested. "I can't find myself," he told his mother. "I can't find me." Recalling the incident, he added, "As I grew older, I realized that both personalities were just aspects of myself. I became very aware of the ability to shape your personality and do it honestly."

"Ethan was so extraordinarily accommodating," Leslie said. "He never asked for anything except your undivided attention." Hawke's protean energy was a kind of antidote to the anxiety of abandonment. Dissimulation was a family practice. "My mother and I were always pretending," he wrote in an autobiographical novel, "The Hottest State." "I was pretending to be a Texan, and she was pretending she wasn't." Hawke dubbed Leslie "the Lost Princess of Abilene." "She didn't seem to fit in anywhere," he said. He, by contrast, became expert at fitting in: "Football team, church youth group, Black kids, white kids, graphic-novel-reading geeks, theatre nerds, punk-rock girls, Dead-

heads—I was a good bullshit artist. I also didn't judge anybody."

The skills that acting requires—empathy, imagination, charm, surrender—were habits that Hawke developed from being with Leslie, for whom he was both son and companion. In a very real sense, he was dreamed up by his mother. As she shuttled him up and down the East Coast, bouncing between jobs—from department-store buyer to waitress to, finally, college-textbook editor—she threw herself into the task of making sure that his life was exceptional. "Patti Smith stole my life," Leslie joked to Hawke when he was a boy; she projected her own creative aspirations onto him. "I expected him to be better than most people, to accomplish more," she said. She chose his name, she told him, "because it would look good on a book jacket." Leslie supplied her son with music to listen to and books to read (including James Baldwin's essays, Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," and Thomas Merton's "New Seeds of Contemplation"). When Hawke was four, she took him to see Ingmar Bergman's subtitled "Scenes from a Marriage." (He couldn't yet read.) The film "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" was his fifth-birthday treat. Leslie read Pauline Kael's reviews in *The New Yorker* to him after such outings.

When Hawke was twelve, Leslie enrolled him in an after-school acting program at Princeton's Paul Robeson Center for the Arts. He was immediately cast in a production of George Bernard Shaw's "Saint Joan," at the nearby McCarter Theatre, as Dunois's page. The serious adult conversations, the costumes, and the standing ovations captivated him. By the time the show had closed and he'd pocketed his thirty-six-dollar salary, Hawke was "all in on being an actor." He started going to casting calls, and within half a year, having beaten out, he was told, more than three thousand other actors, he was starring, with River Phoenix, in Joe Dante's "Explorers," a sci-fi film about two boys who build a spacecraft. "I thought God had found me," he said. He first learned that he was likely to get the part by overhearing his mother and his stepfather, Patrick Powers, arguing about the logistics. "She couldn't leave her job," Hawke said. "She couldn't let me go to L.A. What were we going to do as a family?"

"You must get this all the time, but I have a great idea for how to strike him out."

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Despite her ambivalence, Leslie accompanied Hawke to L.A. for his final screen test. As their flight took off, she told him, "Remember, Ethan, this is just a lark! Nothing more, nothing less."

Hawke's initiation into filmmaking was exhilarating. Phoenix was charismatic, poetic, and serious about his work. The two stole their first pack of cigarettes together, found cocaine in a crew van, chased girls, and crashed Phoenix's father's motorcycle—slowing down the production until Hawke's broken leg had healed. "We were sure we were going to be movie stars," he said. "In my mind, I was Jack Nicholson." After the New York première, at the Ziegfeld Theatre, Hawke and Phoenix huddled unrecognized in the men's room, listening to the comments. "They were talking about what a piece of shit the movie was," Hawke said. "It didn't play more than a couple weeks." His confidence shattered, he blamed himself for the movie's failure. (He recalled hearing that a studio executive had said, "America has cast its vote, and Ethan Hawke is not a star.") To add to his humiliation, Phoenix was becoming famous; his next movie was "Stand by Me." "The envy was intense," said Hawke, who stopped going to auditions.

But a few years later, as a senior at the Hun School, in Princeton, playing Tom Wingfield in Tennessee Williams's "The Glass Menagerie," he rediscovered the thrill of acting. Hawke, who is a second cousin of Williams, rode the elegiac rhythms of the play's gorgeous lament. "I was aware of the full weight of Tennessee's play behind me," he said. "I had the sensation of completely disappearing—as if I was consumed by the wind and became wind. I could feel the whole room breathing in unison. . . . It was like a drug and that was the first time I'd used."

Hawke headed to Carnegie Mellon's School of Drama. "I wanted to get into college for my mom," he said. "When I got there, I realized I couldn't live for her. I was super anxious to start living my life." In his second week, he hitchhiked to New York to see the Grateful Dead. In his fifth week, a teacher pulled him out of class. "Are you high?" she asked. Hawke admitted that he was. "Then why are you here?" she said. It was the last theatre class he ever took. He'd heard that there were auditions in New York for a Peter Weir film called "Dead Poets Society." He decided that if he didn't get a part he'd become a merchant marine. The sun was not yet up when he got to the Pittsburgh bus station. "The only thing I remember is my mom on the phone crying," he said. "Then—I don't

know if I've ever done this since—I got on my knees and prayed that I was making the right decision."

Hawke was cast in "Dead Poets Society" as Todd Anderson, the reserved teen who, in the heart-wrenching final scene, stands on his prep-school desk to salute his inspirational English teacher (played by Robin Williams). Very soon, he was besieged with offers, among them "White Fang," "Waterland," and "Reality Bites," which eventually made him a poster boy for Generation X. At eighteen, Hawke, nervous about Hollywood's bum's rush, moved to New York, where, a few years later, in 1991, he cofounded the Malaparte Theatre Company, an Off Broadway group that he helped support with his film work. In those days, Hawke's Greenwich Village pad was piled high with scripts. "They were movie offers. I hadn't seen anything like it. No one I knew had seen anything like it," the playwright Jonathan Marc Sherman, Hawke's close friend and a cofounder of Malaparte, said. Hawke may have hated Hollywood's urge to "put a dollar sign next to everything," but fame was a live wire, and he found it hard to let go. "I don't want to be a movie star and I don't want not to be a movie star," he wrote in his journal around that time.

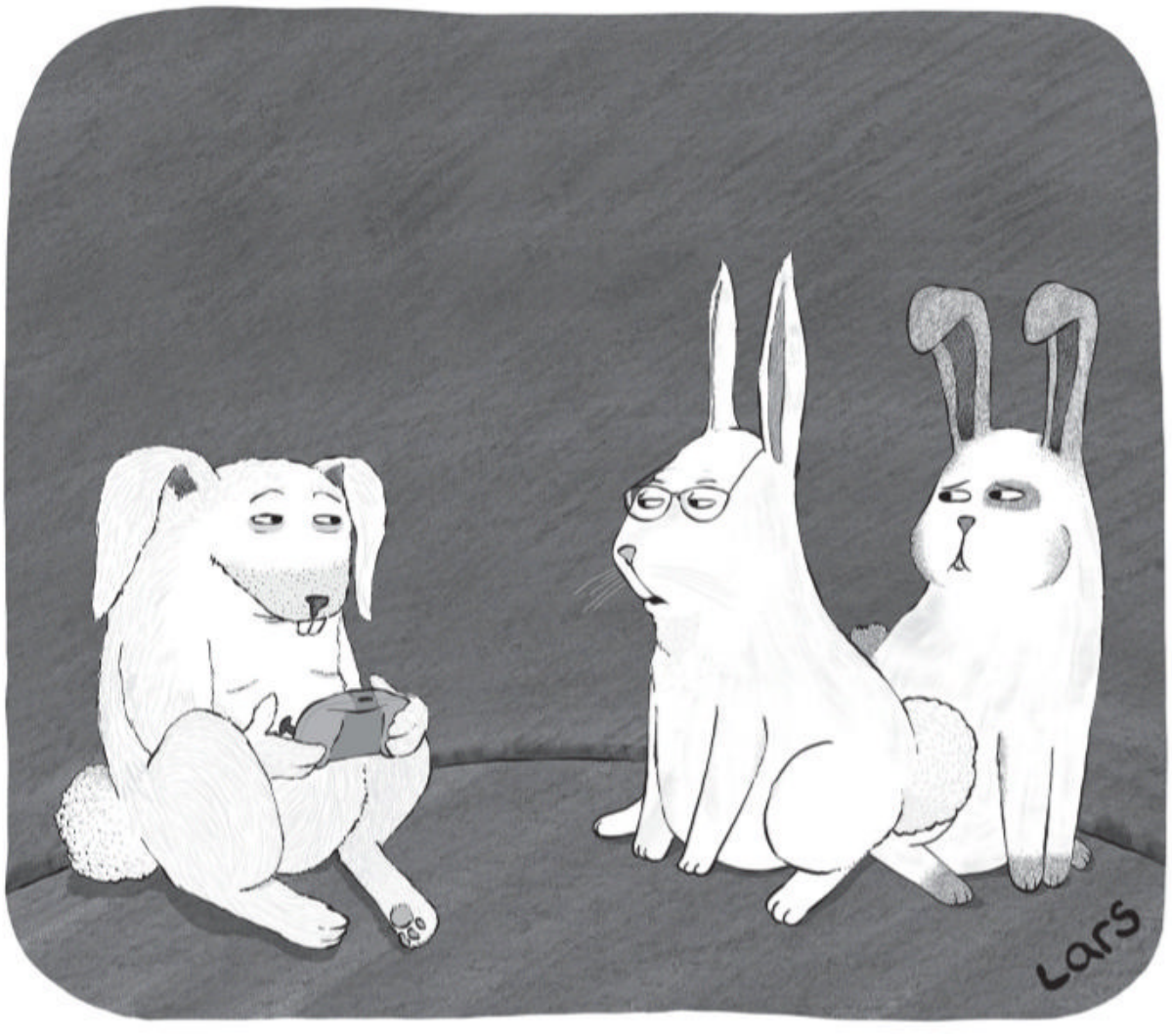
Between acting projects, he wrote his first novel, "The Hottest State." "Well, you're not Chekhov," Hawke recalled his mother saying after reading a draft, though she still encouraged him to publish it. "Get yourself reviewed, get criticized, live through it. And, when you get bad reviews, only the meek fail after that." He said, "I got roasted for it. I remember my favorite review, in some underground paper, said, 'Ethan Hawke achieves the impossible.' I thought, Oh, I want to read this review. And it said, 'He sucks his own cock.'" (Hawke's subsequent novel, "Ash Wednesday," from 2002, was reviewed favorably by the *Times;* a new novel, "A Bright Ray of Darkness," will be published next year.)

In a way, Hawke, who was an indifferent student, got his education in public. "He's always going, 'O.K., what does this person have to teach me?'" Sherman said. On the wall behind his office desk, Hawke keeps framed photographs of the knights of his artistic realm, including James Baldwin, Dennis Hopper, Woody Guthrie, John Cassavetes, Paul Robeson, Neal Cassady, and Sam Shepard, at the grave of Jack Kerouac. "I saw Ethan as a guy who'd stepped out of a Kerouac novel," the director Richard Linklater said of their first meeting, in 1993, after a production of one of Sherman's plays. "He's the extroverted Cassady, the mad-to-live crazy guy. He's also the guy writing it down and taking it in."

Over the next two decades, Hawke's acting evolved the most in his collaborations with Linklater; Hawke has starred in six of his films. (He will also appear, as Ralph Waldo Emerson, in Linklater's planned movie about the American transcendentalist movement.) When he met Hawke, Linklater was looking for "creative partners," he said, "people I could sit in a room with" to rewrite the screenplay he was working on. The film had no plot and relied exclusively on the immediacy of the actors' dialogue and their chemistry. The challenge for the actors was "to be brutally honest with themselves, with each other, and with the process," Linklater told me. "Ethan was willing to walk that artistic tightrope."

When he got Hawke and the French actress Julie Delpy into a rehearsal room for the first time, Linklater watched their interaction—"she had this I'm-the-worldly-European vibe; he's the American puppy dog"—and thought, "Boom! I have my movie." The script became "Before Sunrise," the first part of Linklater's intimate, boundary-pushing "Before" trilogy (which was made between 1995 and 2013). Together, the films chart the swings and reversals of a relationship, from chance meeting to bittersweet reunion to fraught marriage. Although they appear improvised, the movies were actually scrupulously written. Hawke and Delpy revised Linklater's dialogue in the first screenplay (written with Kim Krizan) and co-wrote the second and third films, "Before Sunset" and "Before Midnight."

Linklater's storytelling method in "Before Sunrise" put new demands on Hawke's acting. At the beginning of the first shoot, Linklater interrupted a scene. "You seemed like you were really moved by what you said," he told Hawke. "Why?" Hawke said he'd been doing his "classic Elia Kazan thinking about acting" and using a private secret to fuel the scene. Linklater responded, "It's good acting, but, in this movie, if I see you acting then I'm going to notice there's no plot. And if I notice there's no plot I'm going to get bored. We have to do something



"Son, your mother and I agree—it's time for you to leave the hat."

different. It's a Zen exercise in letting real life be present. What I want is not your artificial secret. I want *your* secret." To Hawke, this was a crucial lesson: "You are enough. Trust your beating heart."

At first, Hawke was uncomfortable with the process and with how much of his personal life was seeping into the movie. But, gradually, he said, he learned "how to be present in front of the camera." He emerged from the experience a more supple actor, with greater access to himself. "I never looked back after 'Before Sunrise,'" he said. "I could stop imitating other actors. I guess it's about breaking the mask we wear for the world and letting as much truth seep out of the cracks as possible." Hawke's darker truth is palpable in the trilogy's final installment, "Before Midnight." Hawke had gone through a difficult divorce from his first wife, the actress Uma Thurman, and elements of the crisis found their way into the film. In the penultimate scene, the couple argue in a hotel room. She calls out his infidelity, and he calls her the "mayor of Crazy Town." The characters struggle onscreen with questions that Hawke has said he was also facing in life: "How do you keep your innocence alive? How do you keep your sense of romance alive, your sense of joy?"

Linklater's "Boyhood" (2014), which follows the coming of age of a son of divorced parents, was filmed over a period of twelve years, so that the passage of time became the plot. In the script, Linklater excavated his own past, as well as Hawke's. (Hawke plays the boy's father.) The two had a lot in common: both were Texan and raised in single-parent families; both had fathers who worked for insurance companies; both loved sports. "I was a child of divorce and I'm a parent of divorce. And it's been a giant roaring dragon of my psyche," Hawke told the *Guardian*. "You have to mine your own life. It's just the only way you're gonna stumble on anything real." In "Boyhood," he stumbled onto his father's emotional truth. "Previously, I was looking at divorce through the eyes of a child, the victim—'How come you weren't there for me?'" he told me. "Then you see it from the dad's point of view: 'It's hard to go pick you up at your mom's house with the new boyfriend. Every time I see you and drop you off, it's like picking a wound.'" A lot of the film's father-son scenes were "ripped right out of my life," Hawke said, adding, "My dad's pain, my pain, our pain."

"I got levelled in my early thirties," Hawke told the *Guardian*, about his divorce from Thurman, in 2005. The pair had met while starring in the sci-fi biopunk fantasy "Gattaca" (1997), and married when Hawke was twenty-seven, at a time when his world "felt out of control." "I wanted to stop it spinning so fast," he said. Joining forces with another rising star, however, didn't slow the momentum; it sped it up. The couple, who eventually had two children, Maya and Levon, struggled to balance the duties of acting and family. "One person works, the other person doesn't," Hawke explained to ABC News. "Well, then somebody's always out of town. I'm living in a hotel room taking care of the kids while you're off on a film set six hours a day doing what you love. Do that for nine months and see what a good mood you're in." For a time, he stewed in his own sourness. His screen roles seemed to embody his self-loathing: a pill-head police sergeant, in "Assault on Precinct 13" (2005); a feckless son who robs his parents' jewelry store, in "Before the Devil Knows You're Dead" (2007).

Hawke retreated to the theatre, and immersed himself in plays by Shakespeare ("Henry IV," "Macbeth," "The Winter's Tale"), Chekhov ("The Cherry Orchard"), Tom Stoppard (the "Coast of Utopia" trilogy), and David Rabe ("Hurlyburly"). "I dove into the discipline of training myself as an actor," he said. "It's hard to suck in a movie. There are so many people to help you—the editor, the cinematographer, the music, the sound engineers. But when you're onstage they can hear the quiver in your voice, feel your concentration slip. The stage lacerates you. It exposes you."

In 2001, while performing in Sam Shepard's "The Late Henry Moss," Hawke was gripped for the first time by stagefright, which he likened to "accepting a date with the Devil." The feeling stayed with him and got worse after his divorce. Each time he stepped out of the wings, "it felt like walking into a moving propeller." Part of what helped Hawke overcome the paralysis was making a documentary, "Seymour: An Introduction" (2015), about the concert pianist and fellow-sufferer Seymour Bernstein, who taught him how to take pride in the stage-fright rather than pretend it wasn't happening. Now, although the fear still looms "in the darkness of my mind," Hawke said, he considers it "a friend," albeit one "with a wicked, abusive temper." "If you focus on the task at hand—the play, the words, the tone, the mood, the music of language—it ceases to be about *you*. You're doing it for others," he said, adding, "There is a tremendous confidence that comes from surviving it."

In creative endeavors, Hawke believes, "the struggle is everything, the struggle makes everything." Once, in 2013, after a performance of "Macbeth" at Lincoln Center, he was in the shower, and his daughter Maya, who was then fifteen, sat knitting in a corner of his dressing room, when the play's director, Jack O'Brien, barged in. "How do you think it went tonight?" O'Brien asked Hawke over the edge of the shower stall. "Pretty good," Hawke said. O'Brien responded, "It's not good, Ethan. If you do the speech in Act III like you did the one in Act II, why the fuck am I sitting here? I already saw that speech. Where was the work we did?" He moved on to the issue of Hawke's mumbling delivery. "Is it 'If it were done when 'tis done,' or is it '*If* it were done when 'tis done'? Because if the word is '*if*' then I know we're talking about choice. Human choice. It's a big fucking idea." O'Brien started out the door. "You're not there yet," he said as he left. Hawke and his startled daughter looked at each other. "You're so lucky," Maya said.

In 2008, Hawke married Ryan Shawhughes, a month before their first daughter, Clementine, was born. Shawhughes, who had worked briefly as a nanny for him and Thurman while she was a student at Columbia University, "turned his life around," according to O'Brien. As well as managing Hawke's finances, she has collaborated with him artistically, co-producing "First Reformed," "Seymour," a film version of his novel "The Hottest State," and "Blaze," a 2018 biopic about the country singer Blaze Foley, which was Hawke's first major outing as a director. In 2011, Hawke called his mother to tell her that Shawhughes was pregnant with their second child, Indiana. As he remembers it, Leslie said, "Ethan, you're gonna go broke. You have

so many children. You're crazy." She hung up and then called right back. "I take that back," she said. "The best thing that could happen to you and your children is you go broke. You need to keep your hunger alive. Have more children. Just don't stop making good art."

I met up with Hawke in early March for lunch at Rucola, a crepuscular Italian eatery in Boerum Hill. "A career is different than a job in that your inner life is connected to your work," he said. He admitted that his own freewheeling career had been a chart of his restlessness and his recklessness. "If you want to live in the arts," he said, "you've got to dig in. I would look at Warren Beatty and how carefully he constructed his career and just laugh. Beatty would make, like, one movie every six years and sit around and go to parties and develop material. That kind of preciousness of trying to get everything perfect before you act is not my style."

Whether writing, directing, acting, or producing, Hawke spends most of his waking hours thinking about storytelling. His productivity is unique among his acting peers. After lunch, we walked around the corner to his office, where he was preparing to direct a film adaptation (written with Shelby Gaines) of Tennessee Williams's lyrical political fantasia "Camino Real." Set in a barbarous Spanish-speaking backwater, the play is a paean to nonconformity, told, as Williams put it, "in the spirit of the American comic strip." Trapped within the town's ancient walls, various literary figures—Casanova, Lord Byron, Don Quixote, Madame Gautier—and Kilroy, a former boxing champ and eternal Punchinello, contend with illusion and desperation. In 1999, Hawke played Kilroy in a memorable production, directed by Nicholas Martin, at the Williamstown Theatre Festival, and the experience stayed with him. "It's like sticking your finger in an electric socket and having it shoot through the audience," he said. "The way Williams deals with iconography and sexuality and self-hatred and self-love—it's just the most incredible bit of performance I've ever had. I've been chasing that feeling and wanting to give it to an audience."

A big blue Xtracycle bike with seats for Hawke's younger daughters was stashed beside the front door, and his two dogs were sprawled like black and gold throw rugs in front of the gray sofa, where we sat and browsed through a bound collection of a hundred and thirty-eight collages that Hawke and his art director, Beth Blofson, had worked up for "Camino Real." A "sizzle book" is the usual term for such guides, which translate the director's vision for the production staff. But Hawke thought of it "more as a spirit guide," he said. "I call it Tennessee Williams's 'Book of the Dead.'" He paged through the collages, in which tawdry burlesque houses, caged showgirls with feathers, and nudes suspended in translucent bubbles were juxtaposed with images of slapstick savagery. "It's got to be decadent," he said.

In 2014, he organized a reading of the play with Vanessa Redgrave, John Leguizamo, and others, at the Box, a downtown New York night club with a raunchy, offbeat vibe. When he talked about wanting to direct a film version of the play and recalled Elia Kazan's dissatisfaction with his own direction of the Broadway première, Redgrave challenged him. "Kazan was brilliant. He didn't figure it out. What are you going to do?" Hawke remembered her saying. To anchor the work's surreal playfulness, he restructured the script in a way that allows for a collision of extremes, a fluid, subversive undertow that the cumbersome Broadway sets prevented. "You can't make it one thing," he told me. "Is it a dream? Yes. Is it Purgatory? Yes. No, it's not Purgatory. It's a fantasy. It's life and it's not life. The problem with film is it's literal. But it can be done."

Almost on cue, at the mention of Purgatory, Michael Daves, a mandolin player, and Dan Iead, a guitarist, appeared at Hawke's front door for his next adventure, a run-through of songs for "Satan Is Real," a bio-pic about the country-and-Western icons the Louvin Brothers—another Hawke project long in the making and now financed. Hawke had cast himself as the hell-raising, mandolin-smashing Ira Louvin, and his friend the actor Alessandro Nivola as the God-fearing, guitar-playing Charlie Louvin, in a story that chronicles the abrasions of the brothers' final tour.

Hawke sat cross-legged on a table and, tipping his green-and-white Black Crowes baseball cap back on his head, began to warm up the lower register of his voice. The musicians filled in as he sang the Louvins' dystopian anthem "Great Atomic Power":

> Are you ready for that great atomic power?
> Will you rise and meet your Savior in the end?

"When you're singing the verse, you're singing in your character," Iead told Hawke afterward. "There are two different vocal sounds, two different people singing."

For a while, they discussed the Louvin Brothers' different styles of performance. "I think it'd be good for you to practice singing the part, making the facial expressions and the body language just neutral," Daves said. "Focus on what's going on in the throat." Hawke took out his cell phone and watched himself as he sang. Eventually, he looked at his watch. "I want to do this forever, you guys, but I made a three-fifteen appointment."

After the musicians left, Hawke told me that the appointment was a call with the children of Joanne Woodward and Paul Newman, who had asked him to direct a documentary about their parents. On the phone, he swung into director mode, suggesting as a model the dual narrative of Doris Kearns Goodwin's biography of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt—"another couple, that very rare group of people, who used their success to great ends," he said. As he pitched his concept, he paced the room, emoting into the handset. After some discussion about story and budget, he got down to the details. "I don't want to invest a year of my life in this and not have it be some kind of expression of what I want to do artistically," he said. "My gut is we all want the same thing. You're not scared of darkness. I believe if you ignore the darkness the light doesn't matter, and if you ignore the light the darkness doesn't matter." At the end of the call, with both parties agreeing to send in the lawyers, Hawke spoke about the benefits of straightforwardness. "Good things happen to people who talk about scenarios," he said.

The following day, at The Players club, a landmark nineteenth-century town house on Gramercy Park, Hawke convened a group of eleven actors and Jack O'Brien, the director, to do a reading for another project he was developing, "Texas Red," an adaptation of "The Cherry Orchard" (with a screenplay by

Jonathan Marc Sherman). Hawke arrived early and strolled around the ornate rooms in a short-brimmed cowboy hat—he planned to play a Western version of the bumbling wastrel Gayev—inspecting the portraits of David Garrick, Helen Hayes, and other fabled theatricals that cluttered the walls. The eighty-one-year-old O'Brien was the first of Hawke's recruits to appear, trudging up the carpeted circular staircase.

Hawke and O'Brien huddled together to strategize. "I think our job today is to hear what it wants to be and what it sounds like out of these voices," Hawke said.

"Once people are totally in their skins, they'll say those things differently," O'Brien said. "More colloquial, much more resolute in terms of the extraordinary canvas Chekhov's given us."

Laura Linney and Bobby Cannavale—who would read the updated Ranevskaya and Lopakhin roles—appeared in the doorway.

"These losers," Hawke said, with a roll of his eyes.

"Who do I hug first?" Linney asked.

"We're all touching, right? 'Cause we're artists," Cannavale said. ("Social distancing" was still a couple of weeks away from entering the lingua franca of lockdown.)

When all the actors had assembled around a table, Hawke gave a brief preamble, recalling the 1992 Broadway production of Chekhov's "The Seagull," in which he and Linney had starred. "The worst reviews a human being could get," he said. "The review in *New York* was an argument about who was worse—me, Laura, Tyne Daly, or Jon Voight. We were all pretty goddam bad." O'Brien asked who was responsible for the failure. "Well, it wasn't Chekhov," Hawke said, and rode the laugh into an explanation of the genesis of the current screenplay, which involved a 2009 production of "The Cherry Orchard," directed by Sam Mendes, in which he'd played Trofimov. "The audience wasn't getting it," Hawke said. "I felt like, God, if they really understood how much he's talking about race, poverty, class." The night after Barack Obama was reëlected, in 2012, Hawke and Sherman discussed the idea of transposing the play to Texas, as a way of making the politics come alive for a contemporary American audience.

When the reading was over, O'Brien stood watching Hawke as he thanked the actors for their work. "Who else of his generation is doing this?" O'Brien said. "He's not wasting his time."

"Did you remember to bring my gardening gloves?"

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One day in April, Hawke piled his family into the car and set off from their house in Connecticut to visit John Brown's birthplace, in Torrington, a few miles away. "There was something hard about the pandemic happening right after I completed this role," he said. "I couldn't move on. The more I learned about John Brown, the more I enjoyed talking to him in my head." The uprisings across the country in the wake of George Floyd's death made it easy for Hawke to keep talking to Brown. "I can hear him cheering those protesters on," he said. "He would not have been as gentle as they have been."

When he was starting to work on "The Good Lord Bird," Hawke visited Brown's grave site, near Lake Placid, New York, to "pick up the scent" and "invite him in." The visit to Brown's birthplace brought the process full circle. "It was a farewell salute," he said, adding, "You want every project to have deep meaning to you, but they don't. This one was magical to me. It's somehow connected to the spine of my life."

The site of Brown's family house—which burned down a hundred years ago—was in the woods, up a somnolent arterial road named for Brown. The day was overcast, the ground wet. A creek ran through the property, which was bounded by a tracery of collapsed stone walls. A rough-hewn granite slab, engraved with Brown's name, stood on the spot where the house had been. "You feel your spirit get very quiet in these places," Hawke said. In that emollient stillness, he said his thank-you.

By mid-June, the enforced isolation of lockdown had taken a toll on Hawke. He was, he admitted, struggling. "The hard part of getting out of character is you have to ask the difficult question 'Who am I?'" he said, staring at me over Skype. "If I say, 'Who is John Brown?,' I point to all these facts. If I say, 'Who is Chet Baker?,' I can start to study that person. These characters flow through you. It's very easy to let them in, but if you invite them out you're left with these darker questions." As a performer, Hawke is a purveyor of presence; what he was experiencing was the confounding sense of not being seen. "If I'm not trying to please my mother, and I'm not trying to please my father, and I'm not trying to please an audience, I'm pleasing myself," he said. "It brings me to a very adult question: Who is this person I've been calling Ethan?" He added later, by e-mail, "I spent a couple weeks with a cruel case of the blues (the state of the nation not helping) and decided to come out of it with the only answer I could grab: I am my choices." ♦

Switzerland Nicole Krauss

PHOTOGRAPH BY FARAH AL QASIMI

It's been thirty years since I saw Soraya. In that time I tried to find her only once. I think I was afraid of seeing her, afraid of trying to understand her now that I was older and maybe could, which I suppose is the same as saying that I was afraid of myself: of what I might discover beneath my understanding. The years passed and I thought of her less and less. I went to university, then graduate school, got married sooner than I'd imagined and had two daughters, only a year apart. If Soraya came to mind at all, flickering past in a mercurial chain of associations, she would recede again just as quickly.

I met Soraya when I was thirteen, the year that my family spent abroad in Switzerland. "Expect the worst" might have been the family motto, had my father not explicitly instructed us that it was "Trust no one, suspect everyone." We lived on the edge of a cliff, though our house was impressive. We were European Jews, even in America, which is to say that catastrophic things had happened, and might happen again. Our parents fought violently, their marriage forever on the verge of collapse. Financial ruin also loomed; we were warned that the house would soon have to be sold. No money had come in since our father left the family business, after years of daily screaming battles with our grandfather. When our father went back to school, I was two, my brother four, and my sister yet to be born. Premed courses were followed by medical school at Columbia, then a residency in orthopedic surgery at the Hospital for Special Surgery, though what kind of special we didn't know. During those eleven years of training, my father logged countless nights on call in the emergency room, greeting a grisly parade of victims: car crashes, motorcycle accidents, and, once, the crash of an Avianca airplane headed for Bogotá, which nose-dived into a hill in Cove Neck. At bottom, he may have clung to the superstitious belief that these nightly confrontations with horror could save his family from it. But, one stormy September afternoon, my grandmother was hit by a speeding van at the corner of First Avenue and Fiftieth Street, causing hemorrhaging in her brain. When my father got to Bellevue Hospital, his mother was lying on a stretcher in the emergency room. She squeezed his hand and slipped into a coma. Six weeks later, she died. Less than a year after her death, my father finished his residency and moved our family to Switzerland, where he began a fellowship in trauma.

That Switzerland—neutral, alpine, orderly—has the best institute for trauma in the world seems paradoxical. The whole country had, back then, the atmosphere of a sanatorium or an asylum. Instead of padded walls it had the snow, which muffled and softened everything, until after so many centuries the Swiss just went about instinctively muffling themselves. Or that was the point: a country singularly obsessed with controlled reserve and conformity, with engineering watches, with the promptness of trains, would, it follows, have an advantage in the emergency of a body smashed to pieces. That Switzerland is also a country of many languages was what granted my brother and me an unexpected reprieve from the familial gloom. The institute was in Basel, where the language is Schweizerdeutsch, but my mother was of the opinion that we should continue our French. Schweizerdeutsch was only a hairbreadth removed from Deutsch, and we were not allowed to touch anything even remotely Deutsch, the language of our maternal grandmother, whose entire family had been murdered by the Nazis. We were therefore enrolled in the École Internationale in Geneva. My brother lived in the dormitory on campus, but, as I'd just barely turned thirteen, I wasn't old enough. To save me from the traumas associated with Deutsch, a solution was found for me on the western outskirts of Geneva, and in September, 1987, I became a boarder in the home of a substitute English teacher named Mrs. Elderfield. She had hair dyed the color of straw and the rosy cheeks of someone raised in a damp climate, but she seemed old all the same.

My small bedroom had a window that looked onto an apple tree. On the day that I arrived, red apples were fallen all around it, rotting in the autumn sun. Inside the room was a little desk, a reading chair, and a bed at whose foot was folded a gray woollen army blanket old enough to have been used in a world war. The brown carpet was worn down to the weave at the threshold.

Two other boarders, both eighteen, shared the back bedroom at the end of the hall. All three of our narrow beds had once belonged to Mrs. Elderfield's sons, who had grown up and moved away long before we girls arrived. There were no photographs of her boys, so we never knew what they looked like, but we rarely forgot that they had once slept in our beds. Between Mrs. Elderfield's absent sons and us there was a carnal link. There was never any mention of Mrs. Elderfield's husband, if she'd ever had one. She was not the sort of person who invited personal questions. When it was time to sleep, she switched off our lights without a word.

On my first evening in the house, I sat on the floor of the older girls' room, among their piles of clothes. Back home, girls sprayed themselves with a cheap men's cologne called Drakkar Noir. But the strong perfume that permeated these girls' clothes was unfamiliar to me. Mixed with the chemistry of their skin, it mellowed, but from time to time it built up so strongly in their bedsheets and tossed-off shirts that Mrs. Elderfield forced open the windows, and the cold air once again stripped everything bare.

I listened as the older girls discussed their lives in coded words I didn't understand. They laughed at my naïveté, but they were only ever kind to me. Marie had come from Bangkok via Boston, and Soraya from Tehran via the Sixteenth Arrondissement of Paris; her father had been the royal engineer to the Shah before the revolution sent their family into exile, too late to pack Soraya's toys but in time to transfer most of their liquid assets. Wildness—sex, stimulants, a refusal to comply—was what had landed them both in Switzerland for an extra year of school, a thirteenth year that neither of them had ever heard of.

We used to set out for school in the dark. To get to the bus stop, we had to cross a field, which by November was covered in snow that the sheared brown stalks sworded through. We were always late. I was always the only one who'd eaten. Someone's hair was always wet, the ends frozen. We huddled in the enclosure, inhaling secondhand smoke from Soraya's cigarette. The bus took us past the Armenian church to the orange tram. Then it was

a long ride to the school, on the other side of the city. Because of our different schedules we rode back alone. Only on the first day, at Mrs. Elderfield's insistence, did Marie and I meet up to travel together, but we took the tram in the wrong direction and ended up in France. After that I learned the way, and usually I broke up the journey by dropping in at the tobacco shop next to the tram stop, where before catching the bus I bought myself some candy from the open containers that, according to my mother, were crawling with strangers' germs.

I'd never been so happy or so free. It wasn't only the difficult and anxious atmosphere of my family that I'd got away from but also my miserable school back home, with its petty, hormonal girls, Olympic in their cruelty. I was too young for a driver's license, so there was never any means of escape except through books or walks in the woods behind our house. Now I spent the hours after school wandering the city of Geneva. I often ended up by the lake, where I watched the tourist cruises come and go, or invented stories about the people I saw, especially the ones who came to make out on the benches. Sometimes I tried on clothes at H&M, or wandered around the Old City, where I was drawn back to the imposing monument to the Reformation, to the inscrutable faces of towering stone Protestants of whose names I can recall only John Calvin's. I hadn't yet heard of Borges, and yet at no other time in my life was I closer to the Argentine writer, who had died in Geneva the year before, and who, in a letter explaining his wish to be buried in his adopted city, wrote that there he had always felt "mysteriously happy." Years later, a friend gave me Borges's "Atlas," and I was startled to see a huge photo of those sombre giants I used to visit, anti-Semites all, who believed in predestination and the absolute sovereignty of God. In it John Calvin leans slightly forward to gaze down at the blind Borges, seated on a stone ledge holding his cane, chin tilted upward. Between John Calvin and Borges, the photo seemed to say, there was a great attunement. There was no attunement between John Calvin and me, but I, too, had sat on that ledge looking up at him.

Sometimes in my wanderings a man would stare at me without letting up, or come on to me in French. These brief encounters embarrassed me and left me with a feeling of shame. Often the men were African, with sparkling white smiles, but one time, as I stood looking into the window of a chocolate shop, a European man in a beautiful suit came up behind me. He leaned in, his face touching my hair, and in

faintly accented English whispered, "I could break you in two with one hand." Then he continued on his way, very calmly, as if he were a boat sailing on still water. I ran all the way to the tram stop, where I stood gasping for breath until the tram arrived and squeaked mercifully to a stop.

We were expected at the dinner table at six-thirty sharp. The wall behind Mrs. Elderfield's seat was hung with small oil paintings of alpine scenes, and even now an image of a chalet, or cows with bells, or some Heidi gathering berries in her checked apron brings back the aroma of fish and boiled potatoes. Very little was said during those dinners. Or maybe it only seemed so in comparison with how much was said in the back bedroom.

Marie's father had met her mother in Bangkok while he was a G.I., and had brought her to America, where he set her up with a Cadillac Seville and a ranch house in Silver Spring, Maryland. When they divorced, her mother returned to Thailand, her father moved to Boston, and for the next ten years Marie was tossed and tugged between them. For the past few years she had lived exclusively with her mother in Bangkok, where she had a boyfriend with whom she was madly, jealously in love and would stay out with him all night, dancing in clubs, drunk or high. When Marie's mother, at her wit's end and busy with her own boyfriend, told Marie's father about the situation, he yanked her out of Thailand and deposited her in Switzerland, known for its "finishing" schools that polished the wild and the dark out of girls and contained them into well-mannered women. Ecolint was not such a school, but Marie, it turned out, was already too old for a proper finishing school. She was, in the estimation of those schools, already finished. And not in the good way. So, instead, Marie was sent to do an extra year of high school at Ecolint. Along with Mrs. Elderfield's house rules, there were strict instructions from Marie's father about her curfew, and after Marie got into Mrs. Elderfield's cooking wine those stringent regulations were tightened even further. Because of this, on the weekends that I did not take the train to Basel to see my parents, Marie and I were often home together while Soraya was out.

Unlike Marie, Soraya didn't radiate trouble. At least not the sort of trouble that comes of recklessness, of a desire to cross whatever boundaries or limits others have set for you, without consideration of the consequences. If anything, Soraya radiated a sense of authority, exquisite because it derived from an inner source. Her outward appearance was neat and composed. She was small, no taller than I was, and wore her dark straight hair cut in what she called a Chanel bob. Her eyes were winged with eyeliner, and she had a downy mustache that she made no effort to conceal, because she must have known that it added to her allure. She always spoke in a low voice, as if she trafficked in secrets, a habit she may have formed during her childhood in revolutionary Iran, or in her adolescence, when her appetite for boys, and then men, quickly outgrew what was considered acceptable by her family. On Sundays, when there wasn't much to do, the three of us would spend the day closed up in the back bedroom listening to cassettes and, in that low-slung voice further deepened by smoking, descriptions of the men Soraya had been with and the things she'd done with them. If these accounts didn't shock me, it was partly because I didn't yet have a solid enough sense of sex, let alone the erotic, to really know what to expect from it. But it was also be-

cause of the coolness with which Soraya told her stories. She had about her a kind of unassailability. And yet I suppose she felt the need to test whatever it was at her core that had come to her, like all natural gifts, without effort, and what might happen if it failed her. The sex she described seemed to have little to do with pleasure. On the contrary, it was as if she were submitting herself to a trial. Only when Tehran was woven into her discursive stories and she recounted her memories of that city was her sense of pleasure truly palpable.

November, after the arrival of the snow: it must have been November already when the businessman showed up in our conversations. Dutch, more than twice Soraya's age, he lived in a house with no curtains on an Amsterdam canal, but every couple of weeks he came to Geneva on business. A banker, as I recall. The lack of curtains I remember because he told Soraya that he only fucked his wife with the lights on when he was sure that people across the Herengracht could see her. He stayed at the Hôtel Royal, and it was in the restaurant of that hotel, where her uncle had taken her for tea, that Soraya first met him. He was sitting a few tables away, and, while her uncle droned on in Farsi about all the money his children spent, Soraya watched the banker delicately debone his fish. Wielding his utensils with precision, a look of absolute calm on his face, the man extracted the skeleton whole. He performed the operation perfectly, slowly, with no sign of hunger. Not once, as he proceeded to devour the fish, did he stop to remove a small bone from his mouth, the way everyone does. He ate his fish without choking, without even making a passing grimace of displeasure at being speared in the throat by a tiny, errant bone. It takes a certain kind of man to turn what is essentially an act of violence into elegance. While Soraya's uncle was in the men's room, the man called for his check, paid in cash, and rose to leave, buttoning his sports jacket. But, instead of going straight out the doors that led to the lobby, he detoured past Soraya's table, on which he dropped a five-hundred-franc note. His room number was written in blue ink next to Albrecht von Haller's face, as if it were Albrecht von Haller who was affording her this bit of precious information. Later, while she was kneeling on his hotel bed, freezing in the cold gusting in through the open terrace doors, the banker told her that he always got a room overlooking the lake because the powerful stream of its fountain, which shot up hundreds of feet into the air, aroused him. As she repeated this to us, lying flat on the floor with her feet up on the twin bed of Mrs. Elderfield's son, she laughed and couldn't stop. And yet, despite the laughter, an arrangement had been made. From then on, if the banker wished to let Soraya know of his impending arrival he would call Mrs. Elderfield's house and pretend to be her uncle. The five-hundred-franc note Soraya put away in the drawer of her night table.

At the time, Soraya was seeing other men. There was a boy her age, the son of a diplomat, who came to pick her up in his father's sports car, the transmission of which he destroyed on a drive they took to Montreux. And there was an Algerian in his early twenties who worked as a waiter at a restaurant near the school. She slept with the diplomat's son, whereas the Algerian, who was genuinely in love with her, she only allowed to kiss her. Because he had grown up poor like Camus, she projected onto him a fantasy. But, when he had nothing to say about the sun he was raised under, she began to lose feeling for him. It sounds cold, but later I experienced this myself: the sudden dissociation that comes with the fear of realizing how intimate you have been with someone who is not at all what you imagined but something other, entirely unknown. So when the banker demanded that Soraya drop both the diplomat's son and the Algerian, it was not difficult for her to comply. It excused her of responsibility for the Algerian's pain.

That morning before we left for school, the telephone rang. When she cut things off with each of these lovers, the banker instructed, she was to wear

"Wow, it's only eleven—that still leaves time for me to ruin tomorrow by staying up doing nothing on the Internet."

a skirt with nothing underneath. She told us this as we crossed the frozen field on our way to the bus stop, and we laughed. But then Soraya stopped and cupped her lighter from the wind. In the brightness of the flame I caught her eyes, and for the first time I felt afraid for her. Or afraid of her, maybe. Afraid of what she lacked, or of what she possessed, that drove her beyond the place where others would draw the line.

Soraya had to call the banker from the pay phone at school at certain times of the day, even if it meant excusing herself in the middle of class. When she arrived at the Hôtel Royal for one of their meetings, an envelope would be waiting for her at the front desk, containing elaborate instructions for what she was to do when she entered the room. I don't know what happened if she failed to follow the banker's rules, or follow them to his exacting standards. It didn't occur to me that she might allow herself to be punished. Barely out of childhood, I think what I understood then, however simply, was that she was engaged in a game. A game that at any moment she could have refused to go on playing. That she, of all people, knew how easily rules could be broken, but that she elected, in this instance, to follow them—what could I have understood then about that? I don't know. Just as thirty years later I don't know if what I saw in her eyes when the flame illuminated them was perversity or recklessness or fear, or its opposite: the unyielding nature of her will.

During the Christmas break, Marie flew to Boston, I went to stay with my family in Basel, and Soraya went home to Paris. When we returned two weeks later, something had changed in Soraya. She seemed withdrawn, closed up in herself, and she spent her time in bed listening to her Walkman, reading books in French, or smoking out the window. Whenever the phone rang, she jumped up to answer it, and when it was for her she shut the door and sometimes didn't come out for hours. Marie came to my room more and more often, because, she said, being around Soraya gave her the creeps. As we lay together in my narrow bed, Marie would tell me stories about Bangkok, and, however full of drama they were, she could still laugh at herself and make me laugh. Looking back, I think that she taught me something that, however many times I have forgotten and remembered it since then, has never really left me: something about the absurdity, and also the truth, of the dramas we need to feel fully alive.

From January, then, until April, what I mostly remember are the things that were happening to me. Kate, the American girl I became close with, who lived in a large house in the neighborhood of Champel, and showed me her father's collection of *Playboy*. The young daughter of Mrs. Elderfield's neighbor whom I sometimes babysat, and who one night sat up in bed screaming when she saw a praying mantis on the wall, lit by the headlights of a car. My long walks after school. The weekends in Basel, where I would entertain my little sister with games to distract her from my parents' arguments. And Shareef, a boy in my class with an easy smile, with whom I walked to the lake one afternoon and made out on a bench. It was the first time I'd kissed a boy, and when he pushed his tongue into my mouth the feeling it ignited was both tender and violent. I dug my nails into his back, and he kissed me harder; we writhed together on the bench like the couples I'd sometimes watched from afar. On the tram ride home, I could smell him on my skin, and a feeling of horror took hold of me at the thought of having to see him again in school the next day. When I did, I looked past him as if he didn't exist, but with my gaze softly focussed, so that I could still see the blur of his hurt in the corner of my eye.

Of that time I remember, too, how once I came home from school and found Soraya in the bathroom, doing her makeup in front of the mirror. Her eyes were shining, and she seemed happy and light again, as she hadn't been for weeks. She called me in and wanted to brush and braid my hair. Her cassette player was balanced on the edge of the bathtub, and, while her fingers worked through my hair, she sang along. And

RAUSCHENBERG

Our first concern might be did the artist consider the impossibility
    of defining
nothing without speaking of absence without speaking

The white paint of the artist carefully selected and applied so as to seem
an uncreased space unwrinkled unnippled a whatever indefinite
    nondescript discreet

But even without a mouth without figure or form or face the canvas if it
    were to speak
as we the viewers imagine would it not speak of powdered sugar
    and cocaine,
chalk, marshmallows, and salt
and even that a betrayal of substance
Would it not privately murmur something about the white simmer of stars
Would it not speak of something not nothing would it not

Perhaps here then is the problem
of the art not the art but the reflection the world cut in a pane of glass
or rather being as it is latex paint on canvas

Here the artist invites questions from the audience

The girl in back who asks if this is the moment before being
The man with glasses who asks if this is a room called grief

The boy who asks waveringly if this is his fear if this is his sleeping
in a dreamless night

The artist calls them clocks and here another problem to consider
for the art to know time like any other, ordinary thing and we may ask
of the knowing can we wear it on our wrists can it pulse with the seconds

One more question from the crowd

    Can the artist perhaps tell us something of the future

And here the artist politely demurs

    Thank you and good night everyone may exit to the left

And when the gift shop is closed we're saddened to leave empty-handed
but consider it a comfort the pressure
we feel when we press our palms together

That night we dream of a bounty of images every color at once

The artist dreams of something like god but completely the opposite

—Maya Phillips

then, when she turned to reach for a hairpin behind her, I saw the purple bruise on her throat.

And yet I never really doubted her strength. Never doubted that she was in control and doing what she wanted. Playing a game according to rules she had agreed to, if not invented. Only looking back do I realize how much I wanted to see her that way: strong-willed and free, invulnerable and under her own command. From my walks alone in Geneva, I already understood that the power to attract men, when it comes, arrives with a terrifying vulnerability. But I wanted to believe that the balance of power could be tipped in one's favor by strength or fearlessness or something I couldn't name. Soraya told us that soon after things began with the banker his wife had called on the hotel phone, and he'd instructed Soraya to go into the bathroom, but she'd refused and instead lay listening on the bed. The naked banker turned his back but had no choice other than to go on talking to his wife, whose call he hadn't expected. He spoke to her in Dutch, Soraya said, but in the same tone that the men in her own family spoke to their mothers: gravely, with a touch of fear. And, as she listened, she knew something had been exposed that he had not wished to expose, and which shifted the balance between them. I preferred that story to trying to understand the bruise on Soraya's neck.

It was the first week of May when she didn't return home. Mrs. Elderfield woke us at dawn, demanding that we tell her whatever we knew about Soraya's whereabouts. Marie shrugged and looked at her chipped nail polish, and I tried to follow her cue until Mrs. Elderfield said that she was going to call both Soraya's parents and the police, and that if something had happened to her, if she was in danger and we were withholding any information, we wouldn't be forgiven or be able to forgive ourselves. Marie looked scared, and, seeing her face, I began to cry. A few hours later, the police arrived. Alone with the detective and his partner in the kitchen, I told them everything I knew, which, I realized as I spoke—losing the thread, confusing myself—was not so much. Once they had interrogated Marie, they went to the back bedroom and combed through Soraya's things. Afterward, it looked as if the bedroom had been ransacked: everything, even her underwear, strewn across the floor and her bed with an air of violation.

That night, the second one that Soraya was missing, there was a huge storm. Marie and I lay awake in my bed, neither one of us speaking of the things we feared. In the morning, the crunch of gravel under the wheels of a car woke us, and we jumped out of bed to look out the window. But, when the door of the taxi opened, it was a man who emerged, his lips drawn tight below his heavy black mustache. In the familiar features of Soraya's father, some truth about her origins was revealed, exposing the illusion of her autonomy.

Mrs. Elderfield made us repeat to Mr. Sassani the things we'd already told the police. He was a tall and intimidating man, his face knotted in anger, and I think she wasn't brave enough to do it herself. In the end, Marie—emboldened by her new authority and the sensational quality of the news she had to deliver—did most of the talking. Mr. Sassani listened in silence, and it was impossible to say whether what he felt was fear or fury. Both, it must have been. He turned toward the door. He wanted to go to the Hôtel Royal immediately. Mrs. Elderfield tried to calm him. She repeated what was already known: that the banker had checked out two days before, the room had been searched, nothing had turned up. The police were doing everything they could. The banker had rented a car that they were working to track down. The only thing to do was stay here and wait until there was some news.

In the hours that followed, Mr. Sassani paced grimly in front of the windows of the living room. As the royal engineer to the Shah, he must have insured against all kinds of collapse. But then the Shah himself had fallen, and the vast and intricate structure of Mr. Sassani's life had crumbled, making a mockery of the physics of safety. He'd sent his daughter to Switzerland because of its promise to restore order and safety, but even Switzerland hadn't kept Soraya safe, and this betrayal

appeared to be too much for him. At any moment, it seemed he might shout or cry out.

In the end, Soraya came home on her own. On her own—just as she had gotten into it on her own, of her own choosing. Crossing the newly green field that evening, arriving at the door dishevelled but whole. Her eyes were bloodshot and the makeup around them was smeared, but she was calm. She didn't even express surprise at the sight of her father, only winced when he shouted her name, the last syllable muffled by a gasp or sob. He lunged for her, and for a moment it seemed that he was going to yell or raise his hand to her, but she didn't flinch, and instead he pulled her to him and embraced her, his eyes filled with tears. He spoke to her urgently, angrily, in Farsi, but she said little back. She was tired, she said in English, she needed to sleep. In a voice unnaturally high, Mrs. Elderfield asked if she wanted anything to eat. Soraya shook her head, as if there were nothing anymore that any of us could offer that she needed, and turned toward the long corridor that led to the back bedroom. As she passed me, she stopped, reached out her hand, and touched my hair. And then, very slowly, she continued on her way.

The next day her father took her back to Paris. I don't remember if we said goodbye. I think we thought, Marie and I, that she would come back, that she would return to finish the school year and tell us everything. But she never did. She left it to us to decide for ourselves what had happened to her, and in my mind I saw her in that moment when she'd touched my hair with a sad smile, and believed that what I'd seen was a kind of grace: the grace that comes of having pushed oneself to the brink, of having confronted some darkness or fear and won.

At the end of June, my father finished his fellowship and, expert in trauma, moved us back to New York. The mean girls took an interest in me when I returned to school in September, and wanted to befriend me. At a party, one of them turned a circle around me while I stood calmly, very still. She marvelled at how I'd changed, and at my clothes bought abroad. I had gone out into the world and come back, and though I wasn't saying anything, they sensed that I knew things. For a while, Marie sent me cassettes on which she'd recorded herself talking to me, telling me all that was happening in her life. But eventually they stopped arriving, and we lost touch, too. And that was the end of Switzerland for me.

In my mind, that was also the end of Soraya. As I said, I never saw her again, and tried to look for her only once, the summer I was nineteen and living in Paris. Even then, I barely tried—calling two Sassani families who were listed in the phone book and then giving up. And yet if it hadn't been for her I don't know that I would have got on the motorcycle of the young man who washed dishes at the restaurant across the street from my apartment on the Rue de Chevreuse, and ridden back with him to his apartment on the outskirts of the city, or gone to a bar with the older man who lived on the floor below me, who went on about the job I knew he would never get for me at the night club he managed, and then, when we got back to our building, lunged at me on the landing in front of his door, tackling me in an embrace. I watched a movie on the dishwasher's sofa, and afterward he told me it was dangerous to go home with men I didn't know, and drove me back to my apartment in silence. And somehow I broke free of the night-club manager and raced up another floor to the safety of my own apartment, though for the rest of the summer I was terrified of running into him, and listened for his comings and goings before I worked up the courage to open my door and bolt down the stairs. I told myself that I did these things because I was in Paris to practice my French and had resolved to speak to anyone who would speak to me. But all summer I was aware that Soraya might be near, somewhere in that city, that I was close to her and close to something in myself that drew me and frightened me a little, as she had. She had gone further than anyone I knew in a game that was never only a game, one that was about power and fear, about the refusal to comply with the vulnerabilities one is born into.

But I myself wasn't able to go very far with it. I didn't have the courage, and after that summer I was never again so bold or so reckless. I had one boyfriend after another, all of them gentle and a little afraid of me, and then I got married and had two daughters of my own. The older has my husband's sandy hair; if she were walking in a field in autumn, you could lose her easily. But the younger one stands out wherever she is. She grows and develops in contrast with everything around her. It's wrong, dangerous even, to imagine that a person has any choice in her looks. And yet I'd swear that my daughter had something to do with the black hair and green eyes that always attract attention, even when she's standing in a chorus of other children. She's only twelve, and still small, but already men look at her when she walks in the street or rides the subway. And she doesn't hunch, or put up her hood, or hide away behind her headphones the way her friends do. She stands erect and still, like a queen, which only makes her more an object of their fascination. She has a proudness about her that refuses to grow small, but if it were only that I might not have begun to fear for her. It's her curiosity about her own power, its reach and its limits, that scares me. Though maybe the truth is that, when I am not afraid for her, I envy her. One day I saw it: how she looked back at the man in the business suit who stood across the subway car from her, burning a hole through her with his eyes. Her stare was a challenge. If she'd been riding with a friend, she might have turned her face slowly toward her, without taking her eyes off the man, and said something to invoke laughter. It was then that Soraya came back to me, and since then I have been what I can only call haunted by her. By her, and by how a person can happen to you and only half a lifetime later does this happening ripen, burst, and deliver itself. Soraya with her downy mustache and her winged eyeliner and her laugh, that deep laugh that came from her stomach, when she told us about the Dutch banker's arousal. He could have broken her in two with one hand, but either she was already broken or she wasn't going to break. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Nicole Krauss on the drama of desire.

POP MUSIC

THE MUSICAL MONK

Rediscovering Beverly Glenn-Copeland's inward-looking sounds.

BY HUA HSU

In the early nineteen-eighties, Beverly Glenn-Copeland was living in a quiet part of Ontario famous for its scenic hills and lakes. He heard about the advent of the personal computer and, owing to a fascination with "Star Trek" and science-fiction futurism, became instantly intrigued. He bought one, even though he had no idea how to use it. Initially, he just walked around with his computer cradled in his arms, hoping that its secrets would reveal themselves.

For the next few years, Glenn-Copeland's free time was spent shovelling snow, feeding his family, and teaching himself how to use his computer to make music. He later recalled that his creative community consisted of trees, bears, and rabbits—"the natural world, that was my companion." He slept only a few hours a night, kept awake by the conviction that his computer could help him produce sounds that had never been heard before.

Glenn-Copeland, who is a transgender man, was born Beverly in Philadelphia in 1944. (He goes by Glenn, but he retained his birth name after his transition.) His family was middle class and Quaker, and many of the struggles faced by African-Americans seemed abstract to him as a child. His father would sit at the piano for hours a day playing Bach, Chopin, and Mozart, and Glenn-Copeland began learning the German lieder style of singing. He briefly studied with the opera singer Eleanor Steber. Occasionally, his

PHOTOGRAPH BY ELIZAVETA PORODINA

mother would sing him Negro spirituals.

Glenn-Copeland enrolled at McGill University, in Montreal, in 1961, becoming one of its first Black students. At the time, he identified as female. After he was ostracized for being in an openly lesbian relationship, he dropped out and became a folk musician. In the late sixties and early seventies, he recorded a couple of bluesy folk albums that call to mind Joni Mitchell or Odetta, full of the kind of searching, heartbroken songs that one learns to write by listening to other people's searching, heartbroken songs. Often, they sound as if Glenn-Copeland were trying to fit his operatic range into a narrow band of sentimentality. "So you run to the mirror in search of a reason / But the ice upon your eyelids only reminds you of the season / I don't despair / Tomorrow may bring roses," he sings. At first, his vocals are restrained and quivering. But then he lets loose, soaring above the strummed guitars and forlorn pianos.

By the time Glenn-Copeland began teaching himself how to use a computer, he was working in children's television, writing songs for "Sesame Street" and performing on a Canadian program called "Mr. Dressup." He had become immersed in Buddhism and its traditions. The music he was making was spacious and unpredictable, nothing like his work from the seventies. Some songs resembled techno anthems slowed to a crawl; others seemed like furtive experiments in rendering the sound of a trickling stream with a synthesizer. Instead of paeans to a lover, there were odes to higher powers and changing seasons, lyrics about spiritual rebirth and the great outdoors. "Ever New" slowly builds, a series of synth lines layering on one another, until Glenn-Copeland finally begins singing: "Welcome the child / Whose hand I hold / Welcome to you both young and old / We are ever new." He made two hundred cassette copies of an album called "Keyboard Fantasies." And then, befitting his life philosophy, Glenn-Copeland moved on to the next thing. More snow.

There's a history of electronic music that replaces the sweaty communion of the dance floor with self-discovery and alternative forms of consciousness. Glenn-Copeland has described himself as a "musical monk," largely ignorant of what's going on outside his house. "Keyboard Fantasies" was rediscovered in 2015 by a Japanese record collector, who bought Glenn-Copeland's remaining stock and sold it to people around the world. The following year, the album was reissued by the Toronto record label Invisible City Editions.

Part of the appeal of Glenn-Copeland's recordings from the eighties is the way in which they speak to our desire for a future that never came. "Keyboard Fantasies" is like an outsider artist's enchanted take on electronic music. As "Sunset Village" opens, Glenn-Copeland sounds as though he's still feeling his way around the keyboard, showing a slight hesitancy as he taps a pattern of low notes. But a simple, gorgeous synth melody weaves into the mixture, and he begins singing with a kind of serene calm: "Let it go / Let it go now / It's O.K." Where his folk recordings felt anguished and stormy, here the vocals are sonorous and slow, merging with mellow waves and pulses. Computers are capable of producing sounds that might never end, and it often seems as if Glenn-Copeland wanted to see how long he could sustain his vocals and stay inside the moment.

"Transmissions," released this month by Transgressive Records, is a compilation spanning Glenn-Copeland's career. Curiously, it's not sequenced chronologically, so it offers a sense of restless, ever-shifting moods rather than a single line of artistic progression. Plaintive folk tunes from the early seventies and eighties and experiments in ambient pastoralism sit alongside tracks from "Primal Prayer," an album released in 2004 under the pseudonym Phynix, which was full of sampled breakbeats and dramatic, operatic refrains. "My mother says to me / Enjoy your life," Glenn-Copeland sings on "La Vita," which sounds like a homemade version of early-nineties world-beat dance music.

In the mid-nineties, Glenn-Copeland was introduced to the term "transgender," which eventually gave him a language for understanding himself. Glenn-Copeland began publicly identifying as trans in 2002. He had long since stopped writing songs about relationships or heartbreak. Instead, the autobiographical nature of his music comes through in its exploration of textures, moods, and memory. "Transmissions" features a new song called "River Dreams," built around a downcast bass line echoed by piano. Here, Glenn-Copeland seems to chant, almost as though uttering an incantation, in an unfamiliar language. There's also a live recording from 2018 of the spiritual "Deep River," calling to mind the music of his youth. He turns it into a joyous sing-along, encouraging the audience to scat with him, and then thanking them for helping him out.

In August, Glenn-Copeland released "Live at Le Guess Who?," made during a Dutch music festival, which includes the recording of "Deep River." On "Colour of Anyhow," his voice is weathered and grainy as he unspools that older folk tune into a delicate jazz ballad. Throughout the concert, Glenn-Copeland is joyful and giddy, joking about how he's so chatty when onstage that the band might have time to play only a few songs.

Glenn-Copeland's exposure in the past few years, and his experiences as a seventysomething on tour for the first time, were documented by the filmmaker Posy Dixon in the 2019 film "Keyboard Fantasies: The Beverly Glenn-Copeland Story." One member of Indigo Rising, his young touring band, marvels at his desire to spend so much time with them, grinding away on the road. It looked as if 2020 would be the first year of Glenn-Copeland's life that he made money as a musician. But the pandemic resulted in a string of cancelled tour dates, which he and his wife had been counting on for income. Their daughter and her partner launched a crowdfunding effort that helped them avoid homelessness.

Throughout Dixon's film, Glenn-Copeland exudes an infectious mirth, like a person out of step with these grim times. He spent decades working in obscurity without realizing that that's what it was. Obscurity suggests an awareness of the outside world and its desires. Only now does Glenn-Copeland understand that he was making music for a generation of listeners who had yet to be born. In the documentary, he is excited to eat takeout on the sidewalk and to listen to his band tell stories about night clubs and new music. He is thrilled to be interviewed on someone's Internet radio show. Everything is delightful and unprecedented. He wasn't waiting for all this to happen—the recognition, the new records, the tours. But he was waiting for us. ♦

BOOKS

WAVES OF CHANGE

Goya and the art of survival.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

In "The Family of Carlos IV" (1800–01), Goya is behind the canvas we behold.

A good time for thinking about Francisco Goya is while the world stumbles. Crisis becomes him. "Goya: A Portrait of the Artist" (Princeton), a biography by the American art historian Janis A. Tomlinson, affords me a newly informed chance to reflect on an artist of enigmatic mind and permanent significance. In the tumultuous Spain of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Goya worked for three kings—the reformist Carlos III, the dithering Carlos IV, and the reactionary Ferdinand VII—and then for social circles of the French usurper Joseph Bonaparte; for an overoptimistic three-year constitutional government; and, finally, woe to the land, for Ferdinand VII again. Goya kept landing on his feet as cohorts of his friends and patrons toppled from official favor, or worse. His increasingly naturalistic portraits—vivid in characterization and unconventionally flattering, with all but breathable tones and tints in dusky chiaroscuro ignited at times by clarion hues—sustained him at court despite the intrigues of rivals and schemers. It could be argued that the deafness that befell him in 1793 (possibly from lead poisoning), when he was forty-seven, and continued until his death, at eighty-two, in 1828, provided him some diplomatic padding, as he managed his interests with politic correspondence and the support of well-situated admirers. He was firmly prestigious by the time he took to making works of lacerating wit and escalating, ultimately horrific intensity. A stormy petrel skimming waves of change that swamped others, he introduced to history a model of the star artist as an anomalous spirit equipped with social acumen and licensed by genius. His nearest avatar is Andy Warhol.

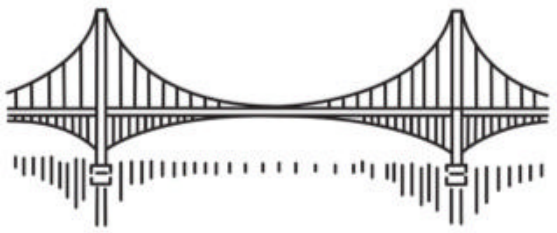
Tomlinson's dryly written accounts of the Spanish court are no Iberian "Wolf Hall," but they feature arresting characters, such as the raffish antihero Manuel de Godoy. A twenty-four-year-old military officer when he was elevated by Carlos IV, in 1791, Godoy came to manage Spain's crazily shifting alliances in a war with Revolutionary France and, when that went badly, one in league with France against Portugal, with Godoy promised a personal stake in the spoils. Big mistake. In 1808, Napoleon occupied Spain, made his brother the King, and discarded Godoy, who barely escaped the wrath of his betrayed fellow-citizens. (They made do with destroying nearly every available trace of him, such as portraits by Goya.) Rumored to be the lover of Carlos IV's queen, María Luisa, Godoy may have commissioned, or at least incited, Goya to paint his only erotic nude, "The Naked Maja" (1797–1800). (*Majas* and their male equivalent, *majos*, were flamboyantly cheeky lower-class dandies.) The Inquisition impounded "The Naked Maja" and its clothed counterpart in 1813 and posed stern questions to Goya, which he seems to have successfully ignored. There can be a lucky charm, during treacherous times, in being really, really good at something. Imperilled after the Bourbon restoration of 1814 by a purge of collaborators with the French regime, Goya redeemed a painting that he had made of Joseph I by substituting, or having someone else do so, the face of Ferdinand VII. He was cleared. The country's cultural establishment couldn't spare Goya's gifts, and arrivistes clamored to be portrayed by him.

Tomlinson addresses, with refreshing clarity, a chronic question of just how independent, not to say subversive, Goya was of the powers that employed him. She debunks a common oversimplification of Goya as a committed post-Enlightenment liberal. He was more complicated than that, and ineluctably strange. Uncanniness had to be part of his magnetism. There's often something haunted or haunting in his portraits and in some of his religious and allegorical commissions, though not in the antic cartoons of Spanish life that were destined for tapestries, an irksome duty of his early career. It's as if he always had something up his sleeve. That impression affected me strongly on a visit to the Museo del Prado, in Madrid, last year. Looking at his works can rouse the sensation of an alarm going off

nearby, but you can neither understand the reason for its activation nor find it to turn it off.

Goya didn't emerge as a master through a neat evolution of period styles. He can seem at once decadent and innovative, with some lingering tropes of the late Baroque and the rococo and the brassiness of the then fashionable neoclassicism along with utterly original freshets of Romanticism. Spanish art had become provincial. The country's leading art educator was the mediocre German painter Anton Raphael Mengs, who promulgated a sort of housebroken neoclassicism. In 1778, when Goya was thirty-two, he turned to Spain's own lapsed glories, with a set of etched copies of seventeenth-century masterpieces by Velázquez, skeletonizing the art of the painterly demiurge in incised line with washes of aquatint. The hair-shirt exercise puzzled some of his fellow-artists. The renderings are spot on, but their reductions of color to line and shading are like a broadcast of the "Hallelujah" Chorus over a kid's walkie-talkie. I think that Goya sought gains for painting through grasping what had been lost to it. No longer equal to illusions of reality, paintings were fated to become objects, real in themselves, of a certain kind. Rather than forge a signature style, Goya practiced a temperamental abnegation of anything usual. This kept—and keeps—him impossible to pin down: a deserter from the marching ranks of the Old Masters, forever on the loose.

An homage to Velázquez's touchstone "Las Meninas" (1656) figures in perhaps the most beautiful group portrait ever painted. "The Family of Carlos IV" (1800-01) stands out in Goya's portraiture as a one-off masterpiece on purpose, affirming for good the justice of his recent elevation to the first court painter. In the background, the artist gazes out from behind, it would appear, the very canvas that we behold, suggesting that he's working from a mirrored view of the scene—an unlikely conceit that seems meant mainly, and wittily, to recall Velázquez's similar self-portrayal in "Las Meninas." (The jape amounts to a proto-modernist instance of art about art.) Thirteen lavishly clad persons, from the fifty-two-year-old monarch to a babe in arms, share a room awash in the softly shadowed, caressing light of a golden afternoon. They assume informal attitudes of everyday aplomb, except for a woman who looks away as if distracted in the pictured instant. She represents a princess of Naples who was the bride-to-be of Carlos IV's son Ferdinand VII; her looks weren't yet known in Spain. She faces a muddy painting, on the room's back wall, that made reference to Sodom and Gomorrah. Some modern commentary



detects, in her Lot's-wife posture, a critical stab at the corruption of the monarchic state—as if no one at the time could have noticed it. And doesn't Carlos IV look clownish? Your call. The more germane point is that he looks like—because he is—the King.

The tacit sensibilities of a given era tend to elude subsequent generations. I suspect that Goya's sophisticated contemporaries found his occasional mischief chic. Tomlinson writes that to assign personal perspectives to Goya's work for the court "is to impose values that are not of his time"—a familiar defense of historical figures who are judged harshly by present-day standards, but apt, as well, for an ill-fitting halo. When we presume agreement with Goya's supposed politics, we drift afield of his extraordinary complexity. What it was like to be him crouches behind an ineffaceable question mark.

The lower-middle-class son of a gilder, Goya studied painting in his beloved home town of Zaragoza, northeast of Madrid. When he was twenty-three, he went to Italy and spent two knockabout years of which little is known. (But he won second prize in a competition in Parma for a painting of Hannibal crossing the Alps.) In 1773, he married María Josefa Bayeu, a sister of his elder Zaragozan Francisco Bayeu, who was then a court painter to Carlos III. Among several miscarriages, Goya and Josefa had seven children, only one of whom survived childhood. Does that concatenation of tragedies help explain the radical pessimism of Goya's later works—most shocking, the eighty-two engravings assembled as "The Disasters of War" (1810-20), which he made in reaction to the Peninsular War of Bourbon Spain, Portugal, and guerrilla bands, backed by Great Britain, against the French occupation? Other psychic scars may be adduced: Goya's witnessing of public executions by garrote and, in the case of a woman whose face he remembered and drew decades later, a burning at the stake. And sights of inmates from Zaragoza's mental asylum stayed with him. But any traumas hung fire as he launched himself on a professional career with seething ambition, adapting Bayeu's rococo manner, but with a faster, more spontaneous hand.

In 1772, for his first major commission, Goya frescoed a dome in the immense, new Zaragoza basilica of El Pilar. His drawings for the design displeased the local cognoscenti, leading to a suggestion that Bayeu should touch them up in the correct fashion. Having made grudging modifications, Goya completed the project on his own, but he was summarily dismissed from further work at El Pilar. The affront initiated five years of bad blood between the brothers-in-law. (Tomlinson reports that today a visitor to El Pilar can behold the Goya ceiling in full illumination, while a nearby one by Bayeu hovers in gloom.) The humiliation, staining Goya's reputation in his home town, nettled him for most of his life, even after Zaragoza was obliged to embrace him as an illustrious native son. Nothing like it happened again.

What most dramatically did happen, starting in 1793 with the small paintings on tin that he made (and found a market for) of what Tomlinson summarizes as "natural disasters, cannibals, madhouses, and murder," was the emergence of a blistering negativity. The works coincided with spells of freely admitted anxiety and depression—"at times raving in a mood that I myself cannot stand," Goya wrote to a friend—but there's nothing deranged about the paintings. Strongly styled, they process rather than express his disturbances: correlatives set outside himself. They were followed, in 1797, by the start of a series of eighty satirical engravings of Spanish life, "Los Caprichos," which proved widely pop-

ular. (Carlos IV acquired a set in return for granting Goya's son a pension.) He spared no class—O.K., except the titled—in his burlesques of donkey-headed professionals, superstitious peasantry, female and male poseurs, hypocritical clerics, and fools who, perhaps because so lost in delusion, verge on transmogrifying out of human form. In a rare public statement, advertising the series, Goya coolly declared as his targets "the innumerable foibles and follies to be found in any civilized society, and from the common prejudices and deceitful practices which custom, ignorance, or self-interest have made usual." Note the fatalism in that "any civilized society." If buyers of the works fancied themselves superior to the characters depicted, Goya surely didn't mind; but you know he had his doubts.

No public welcome could be counted on for the "Disasters of War," which weren't published until thirty-five years after Goya's death. He shared them privately, giving a set of proofs to a friend who inscribed it, laconically, "Fatal consequences of Spain's bloody war with Bonaparte, and other emphatic caprices." Understatement! Murder and dismemberment, rape, desecration of corpses, and ghastly tortures multiply. It is natural to assume outrage in the author of visions so terrible. But what freezes my blood is an equanimity that sublimates rage and sorrow at what people can—and will—do to other people when civilization's thin crust fissures.

Visiting war zones around Madrid, Goya witnessed scenes of the carnage; and he was present for the catastrophe, in 1811, of a famine that filled the city with desperate, diseased, and dying refugees from the despoiled countryside. History is replete with war and starvation, but nothing else in art before or since—including, to my mind, photography and film—compares with the "Disasters" for penetrating hurt. The pictures are something more, less, and other than what we think of as protest art. Working up his nightmare scenarios stroke by stroke, as if from the inside out, he vivifies both the suffering of cruelty and the delirium of inflicting it, without any allowance for a rote response. Nor did he affix blame. One of his sardonically bland captions, "Rightly or wrongly," withholds the verdict on a scene of soldiers about to kill two blade-wielding men who, for all we know, may be patriotic guerrillas or mere criminals. Other captions—"There is no one to help them"; "What more is there to do?"—visit contempt on the impotence of the uninvolved. The same petrifying dreadfulness marks those intermittent engravings which impute monstrousness—embodied by eruptive owls or witches—to the dreaming states of the putatively rational. Goya doesn't indict the evils of individuals and groups; he amasses evidence of universal depravity. He added to the series compulsively, using battered, pitted, or otherwise flawed copper plates to etch when good ones fell subject to wartime scarcity. The sublimity of his skill occasions no relief, but, rather, the opposite. The last turn of the screw is your aesthetic delectation.

Goya had been on hand for the French invasion, which, in 1814, informed two astounding paintings of an uprising fomented by the dethroned Ferdinand VII, "The Third of May 1808" and "The Second of May 1808." I cite the second date first because the image, a massacre of Spanish citizens by a French firing squad, is so routinely regarded as an antiwar icon on a par with "Guernica." Its central figure, arms raised in hopeless supplication, feels at once a bit Christlike and a lot like a guy who is appalled to find himself in the wrong place at exactly the wrong time. Now consider "The Second of May," a street scene of citizens frenziedly assaulting French forces. Their targets prominently include Mamluk cavalry from Napoleon's Imperial Guard. Possibly Muslim, do those figures touch a nerve of Spain's expulsion of its Moors two centuries earlier? (Fanatic religious intolerance had been one factor in the nation's decline from a cosmopolitan empire to a chew toy for armies.) We can't know what Goya had in mind for the picture, other than commonplace lunacy. But it wasn't propaganda.

Goya seems to have been a good enough man who led a decorous enough life, though hot-tempered in such practical matters as being paid for his work—reasonably, considering his early memories of poverty and his obligation to support members of an extended family after the death of his intestate father, in 1781. There's a lingering suspicion of homosexuality regarding his primary and, perhaps, only close friend, a never-married Zaragoza businessman named Martín Zapater. When apart, they corresponded constantly and longed for each other's company. But Zapater fell silent when Goya became hysterical during a case of smallpox in his remaining heir, Javier, and pelted his friend—"oh my soulmate"—with letters of hyperbolic devotion. (Javier survived,

"What did you expect from a budget airline?"

and Goya simmered down.) So there was a limit, though a porous one. The pair revelled in bawdry and exchanged drawings of male and female genitalia. Tomlinson discounts a sexual liaison on the ground that the men were too discreet to risk the possible scandal. But she confirms that the darkest turn in Goya's emotional life coincided not with his deafness or any other recorded misfortune but with Zapater's untimely death in 1803. The open-heartedness (exceedingly rare for Goya) in portraits that he made of his friend, which radiate mutual affection and trust, plunges me half into love with the sitter myself. For the record, I doubt a sexual relation, for want of more than speculative evidence. In Goya's one later painting that bespeaks male intimacy, "Self-Portrait with Dr. Arrieta" (1820), we see the artist, drastically enfeebled, being attended to by a doctor who is almost comically virile, competent, and concerned. It's a picture to make you smile through tears.

We come at last to the Black Paintings (untitled by Goya), of which Tomlinson gives a bracingly investigative account: fourteen pictures that Goya painted in oils on the plaster walls of the house in Spain where he lived from 1819 to 1824, before a sojourn in France and his final four years among Spanish exiles in Bordeaux. (His expatriation was elective. He could—and twice did—revisit Spain.) The works vary in size and format, from panel to panorama. Though effectively installed in an oblong room at the Prado, they arouse a retroactive ache to have seen them in situ before they were transferred to canvas, in the nineteenth century, and, judging from early photographs, in some cases coarsened by clumsy restoration.

There's no getting used to the jolts of a darkling procession of the immiserated and the insane: a crazed giant (traditionally assumed to be Saturn, but who knows?) devouring a human body; two men buried to their knees in a barren landscape and fighting to the death with cudgels; witches and a goat-headed demon in sinister excelsis; a little dog about to perish in what looks to be a tide of shit. Tomlinson surmises that an oddly ladylike giantess is Goya's maid and companion, Leocadia Weiss, whom he met after the death of his wife, in 1812. That image was situated next to the front door of the house, welcoming visitors to a peculiar scheme of interior decoration.

How do we square the courtier artist with the tour guide to Hell? It may be easier than it seems. For starters, what if the Black Paintings are in the nature of a joke? Tomlinson cites the possible influence of contemporaneous horror-mongering entertainments by showmen. And do the grotesqueries fundamentally contradict Goya's prior imaginative process? (I had thought, before my most recent visit to them, that I must be inured to those paintings. But no. Still and again, I cowered.) Mere squeamishness may impede thought on the question. Relative snowflakes that we are today, we can start by adjusting to the thicker skins of the culture that shaped Goya. Think of the cult of the bullfight, which he adored and immortalized in sensationally informative, visceral engravings and technically innovative lithographs that beggar Picasso's superficial homages a century and a half later. Goya was an avid hunter, once apologizing for having missed one shot of nineteen that had brought down two hares, a rabbit, five partridges, and ten quail. Tomlinson hazards that, for a social climber, hunting with aristocrats was that era's version of golfing with C.E.O.s. She admirably keeps the mysteries of Goya's character distinct from its self-serving machinations. He was unremarkably bourgeois, though salaried by royalty. (Payments kept arriving until the end of his life.) The boring parts of his story are salutary, framing the discontinuous dramas.

Goya's relationship with Weiss seems to have been tempestuous, but he was enchanted by her daughter, Rosario, whom he deemed, from the age of eleven, an artistic prodigy and promoted to everyone he knew. He had no other follower in art—unless you count, indirectly, most artists since. With a knack for miniaturist portraits, Rosario set an example for Goya that he took up and, of course, surpassed, with virtuosic miniatures of his own. Competitiveness consumed him. (Rosario went on to a meagre career as a copyist of paintings and was not above the odd forgery.) Ruling him, too, was humor, if that's the right word for sabotaging anyone's presumption to know his mind. I've compared the effect of the Black Paintings to unfriendly laughter coming out of a well. Don't kid yourself that he cares about connecting with you. But the works test, in the depths of the incommunicable, the degree of anyone's courage to envisage the bad in life, the worse, and the almost inconceivably abysmal. Whether he was driven by perversity or by obsession, there's an unholy glee about what Goya watched himself doing in and to his domestic haven. That's what keeps us returning to the works, as sorry as we may feel, yet again, to have come. One thing's for sure: the series marks no mental disintegration. Goya worked at top form, though reduced output, after moving to Bordeaux.

I believe that the Black Paintings distill, to a hundred proof, Goya's singularity. You can perceive tinctures of it in his best portraits, which register personhoods—specific existences—with curious dispassion. They attract obliquely. That's their eeriness. Be the sitter the Duke of Wellington (posing at stately ease while looking a bit tired, after his triumphal entry into Madrid, in 1812) or a gussied-up little boy (Goya was great with children, savoring their innocence of their preassigned social status), you sense him, when done, gathering his brushes and going home. Something has happened—the live capture of a personality, if not a soul—but it was engendered by a job, not by a divination. The quality of a remote regard, transposed from reality to fantasy, extends to even the most bizarre or tragic of his satirical subjects. No other artist possesses such a capacity to feel and to not feel, at a go. The Black Paintings simply—simple for him!—polarize torridity and iciness at simultaneous extremes that we would otherwise not suspect possible. Goya's cynosure is detachment regardless of the degree of pressure, professional or psychological, he may have been under. He leaves his subjects alone, as he was alone, and he leaves us alone with them. Rarely consummate in the ways that we associate with great art—Goya cranked out lots of so-so pictures—he is an outlier's outlier in the canon. His legacy isn't a commanding body of work but a homing beacon for worried people in worlds that are subject to unpredictable changes, perhaps suddenly and soon. Goya knew the problem and let slip the solution, which is to keep in mind that there is no solution, only an immemorial question: Now what? ♦

DEATH SENTENCES

Hervé Guibert in the kingdom of the sick.

BY JULIAN LUCAS

A frail young man shadowboxes to Technotronic & MC Eric's "Tough." Clothes hang loose on his uncoöperative body, which sways with each tentative punch. There's nobody else in the room, but a mannequin and a stuffed monkey look on. Cut to a spinning shot from the man's perspective—a blur of paperbacks and floral carpeting—and then a bathroom's wreckage of medicine. He dissolves a tablet in a cup and looks at himself in the mirror. One senses that he hasn't left home in a long time.

I watched Hervé Guibert's "La Pudeur ou l'Impudeur"—an auto-obituary filmed by the thirty-five-year-old, AIDS-stricken writer months before his death, in December, 1991—during the COVID-19 lockdown in April. It felt like a time capsule from another, lonelier epidemic: Guibert watches a video of a recent medical procedure, struggles to dress and shower, and discusses suicide with his elderly aunts. On vacation in Elba, he sips from a glass that appears to contain a fatal dose of digitoxin.

A year earlier, Guibert had shocked France by disclosing his diagnosis in a penetrating and uncannily lucid autobiographical novel, "To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life." A controversial landmark of AIDS literature, the book included a fictionalized portrait of Michel Foucault, Guibert's close friend and mentor, and revealed that his death, in 1984, had been the result of AIDS. Notorious for betraying secrets, Guibert justified the trespass as a prerogative of their shared destiny. Soon, he would die the same way.

If Foucault never said a word about his illness, Guibert would spend his last year in the glare of an unusual celebrity, dying of an illness that he treated as an instrument of self-revelation. As he wrote in "To the Friend," AIDS would be neither his secret nor his cause but his muse and teacher:

> I was discovering something sleek and dazzling in its hideousness, for though it was certainly an inexorable illness, it wasn't immediately catastrophic, it was an illness in stages, a very long flight of steps that led assuredly to death, but whose every step represented a unique apprenticeship. It was a disease that gave death time to live and its victims time to die, time to discover time, and in the end to discover life.

In the year between the publication of "To the Friend" and his death, Guibert completed five books: two short novels, a hospital diary, and "The Compassion Protocol," a moving account of his brief yet transformative "resurrection" under the influence of an experimental treatment. Altogether, they are a singular contribution to the literature

HANS GEORG BERGER

Guibert treated his battle with AIDS as an instrument of self-revelation, publishing five books in the year before he died.

of illness, the testament of a writer bracingly committed to everything that, in Virginia Woolf's words, "the cautious respectability of health conceals." Forget Susan Sontag's dictum that diseases shouldn't have meanings. Guibert inhabited AIDS as though it were a darkroom or an astronomical observatory, a means for deciphering the patterns in life's dying light.

Until recently, Hervé Guibert was not widely read in English. "To the Friend" was translated in 1991 but received mixed reviews in America: too sexually and medically explicit for mainstream audiences, yet too politically detached for a gay community then engaged in a life-or-death struggle for recognition. One reviewer for the *Lambda Book Report* wrote, "ACT UP, Hervé. ACT UP. Or get new friends."

A younger generation has proved more receptive to his raw, genre-bending body of work. In a spate of new translations, Guibert has emerged as a forerunner of today's most prominent gay writers of autofiction, such as Édouard Louis, Garth Greenwell, and Ocean Vuong. Guibert has even inspired (fictional) pilgrims, as he once predicted; in Andrew Durbin's novella "Skyland" (Nightboat), two young men search for a lost portrait of the writer on the island of Patmos.

Born in 1955, Hervé Guibert grew up in Paris and La Rochelle. His mother was a former teacher, and his father was a veterinary inspector who worked at a slaughterhouse. They were conservative, middle class, and disconcertingly obsessed with their son's hygiene, for which he later repaid them with a shockingly granular tell-all novel, "Mes Parents" (1986). Meanwhile, the young Guibert thrilled to Edgar Allan Poe stories and masturbated to stills from Fellini's "Satyricon." "At fifteen, before I wrote anything," he once wrote, "I understood wealth, celebrity, and death."

He moved back to Paris at the age of seventeen, hoping to become an actor or a scriptwriter. Rejected from film school, he quickly rebounded into the world of magazines. By twenty, he was contributing dating advice to *20 Ans,* a glossy marketed to young women; in his spare time, he wrote stories about voyeurism, dissection, cruising, and incestuous childhood memories. "I have a lyrical ass," he boasted in his first collection, which appeared, in 1977, as "La Mort Propagande."

A striking blond with unruly curls and the haughtily vacant expression of an anime villain, Guibert turned many heads. Friends compared him to an angel, a bad boy from a Pasolini film, and even "a little brother to Lucifer." Edmund White, who met Guibert in Michel Foucault's circle, described him as "hyacinthine, ringleted, foggyvoiced." Roland Barthes once tried to sleep with the younger writer, later analyzing his rejection in a long, wounded letter. ("By leaving so hurriedly," Barthes told Guibert, you "constructed me as a seducer.") Guibert published it.

He was as enraptured by images as others were by him. Joining *Le Monde* as a photography critic in 1978, he simultaneously established himself as a photographer, publishing a *photo-roman* with strikingly intimate portraits of his great-aunts. Soon afterward, he wrote "Ghost Image" (1981), reissued in Robert Bononno's translation in 2014, a beautiful and insightful collection of essays on the portraiture of family albums, photo-booth film strips, pornographic Polaroids, and other ephemeral genres. Guibert arrives at a vision of photography as tactile, fetishistic, and inseparable from the frustrations of desire.

A vanishingly thin boundary separated his art from his private life. Often befriending the celebrities he wrote about—such as the actresses Gina Lollobrigida and Isabelle Adjani—he portrayed loved ones as though they were celebrities, idolizing and exposing them by turns. "With each book, I place exorbitant demands on my friends, abusive demands for love," he told an interviewer in 1990. "But I've been very lucky. My friends have never censored or put me down."

In "Crazy for Vincent" (1989), a highly entertaining erotic novella, translated by Christine Pichini in 2017, Guibert dramatized his relationship with an impulsive teen-age lover. Vincent's wild life style and unpredictable appetites—for coke, heroin, girls, and, intermittently, Hervé—leave his suitor desperate enough to call the boy's family home: " 'What's it about?' asks Vincent's mother; urge to respond, 'It's about his cock, Madame, I need to suck it as soon as possible.' "

The Guibert revival's capstone has been Semiotext(e)'s reissue, this year, of "To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life," published in tandem with a career-spanning collection of short stories, entitled "Written in Invisible Ink." They reveal a writer of courage, beguiling flair, and sometimes maddening nastiness, who made the body his subject long before his own turned against him.

The several dozen stories of "Written in Invisible Ink," artfully translated by Jeffrey Zuckerman, read like schoolyard confessions carved into a desk. Surveying Guibert's work from 1975 to 1989, the book reveals a young writer confident in his themes yet restlessly experimental in expression. Realist vignettes alternate with fairy tales, ghost stories, and descriptions of imaginary erotic machines. In one story, a knife-thrower tricks the narrator into agreeing to perform as his partner (in drag); in another, a man steals a wax head of Jeanne d'Arc. The over-all impression is that of a writer in search of shapes for his unruly energy, as though picking through limbs in an anatomist's workshop.

Many of Guibert's stories originated as clippings from his diary, and the best ones have a sketch-like immediacy. They often begin with someone failing to call or to show up and end just as arbitrarily, unbeholden to the rules of gradual exposition or epiphany. The narrator of "A Kiss for Samuel" (1982) arrives in Florence to photograph dioramas at a famous wax museum, only to learn that it's closed for the next six days. He ends up wandering the city's train station with a nineteen-year-old Sicilian boy, searching for a place to kiss.

Other, more sinister stories revolve around codependent relationships. In "For P. Dedication in Invisible Ink," a ghostwriter's collaboration with a distinguished intellectual develops into a wordless struggle for dominance. The narrator wants friendship and acknowledgment, but his employer snubs him, routinely forcing him to wait outside his apartment like a dog. A similar but reversed dynamic plays out in "The Desire to Imitate," a darkly comic tale about

the narrator's vexed friendship with an aging movie star. During his visit to her campy, creepy château—where eels swim in the translucent guest-suite bathtub—the actress shows him an envelope of nudes that she's kept in a safe for decades. He reacts with indifference; she pinches him, hard.

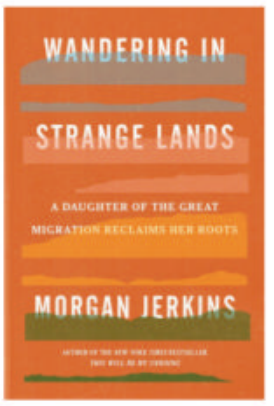
A cocktail of eighties glitz and gothic claustrophobia, the story reads like a sendup of Henry James's "The Aspern Papers," except that the narrator isn't conniving to extract the lady's secrets but attempting, half-heartedly, to escape. The anxious, melancholy mood is punctuated with flashes of deadpan caricature: "The Mercedes braking in the château's courtyard set the chickens fluttering in fright." The playful wit leaves an aftertaste of cruelty, especially after one learns that Guibert modelled the actress after his friend Gina Lollobrigida.

Guibert's often tasteless mean streak makes "Written in Invisible Ink" a decidedly mixed achievement. Old women, freaks, fat girls, and "an Asiatic dwarf" crop up in his fiction like extras in a circus; though he admired Diane Arbus, he is much crasser in his fascination with the supposedly monstrous. There's also his overwrought exhibitionism, especially in the early work. Lines of "Propaganda Death" read like smutty Symbolist poetry, inadvertently comic in their desire to provoke. "Secret laboratory with frozen, white walls that I tainted," one narrator rhapsodizes on the toilet.

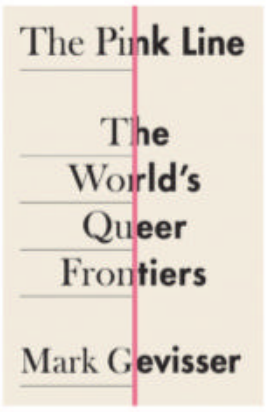
What's obscene isn't so much the obscenity as its arbitrariness. Jean Genet wrote as a missionary-messenger of a criminal underground; Georges Bataille insightfully linked sexual taboos and religious tradition. But Guibert wrote as a young man out to trigger the middle-class world he came from, espousing extreme self-exposure for its own sake. Wading through the scenes of rape, murder, pedophilia, necrophilia, and coprophilia in "Written in Invisible Ink," I was reminded less of these writers, whose lineage Guibert claimed, than I was of Madonna's "Like a Virgin"—glamorous blasphemy from a canny provocateur.

It's difficult to say what kind of writer Guibert would have become had he

BRIEFLY NOTED

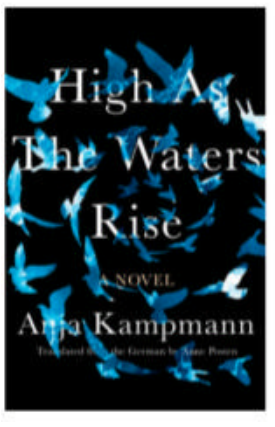


Wandering in Strange Lands, *by Morgan Jerkins (Harper)*. The author's ancestors were part of the Great Migration, the exodus of six million African-Americans from the rural South to Northern and Western cities. Growing up in New Jersey, she felt frustratingly detached from her Southern roots. In a book that is at once a family history, an ethnography, and a detective story, she follows clues about her lineage across the county. The people she meets—Gullah Geechee, Louisiana Creoles, Black "freedmen" fighting for recognition in the Cherokee Nation—resist categorization and help her to embrace the intricacies of her own identity. For Jerkins, this "journey in reverse" has a dual purpose: "to excavate the connective tissue that complicates but unites us as a people, and to piece together the story of how I came to be."



The Pink Line, *by Mark Gevisser (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. In 2010, after Tiwonge Chimbalanga was jailed for becoming engaged to a man, she fled Malawi for South Africa. Chimbalanga, who is transgender, was accepted in her village, but her case was treated as a gay marriage by progressive activists and reactionary prosecutors alike. This book argues that, in seeking safety in another country, she crossed a "pink line": a physical, legal, rhetorical, or moral frontier between oppression and tolerance. Through a series of personal narratives—lesbians seeking parental rights in Mexico, a third-gender community in Kerala—Gevisser explores how globalization, the Internet, and international development have brought clashing ideals of gender and sexuality into new configurations.

The Discomfort of Evening, *by Marieke Lucas Rijneveld, translated from the Dutch by Michele Hutchison (Graywolf)*. The narrator of this novel, the winner of the 2020 International Booker Prize, is the daughter of religious farmers in Holland. Surrounded by death—a drowned brother, the culling of diseased cows that she loves, suicidal threats from her mother—she makes a series of "sacrifices" to try to keep her family, and her own body, from changing. Her parents have banned Google and TV, believing them evil, but their authority collapses, leaving a silence that she fills with her own fantastic speculations: if she takes her coat off, she will sicken. In matter-of-fact prose, the banalities and horrors blend as she longs for a rescuer.



High as the Waters Rise, *by Anja Kampmann, translated from the German by Anne Posten (Catapult)*. This first novel by an established poet examines the marginalized lives of European laborers. An oil-rig worker, traumatized after a friend disappears at sea, embarks on a journey of self-discovery—to old haunts in Malta, Italy, and Germany, and to his friend's home town, in Hungary. Along the way, he encounters old and new friends and lovers, who often share his sense of being left behind in the wake of supposed progress. Although Kampmann addresses current events, such as environmental degradation and the precariousness of modern Europe, her focus is on how ideas of masculinity affect one man's ability to grieve.

lived longer. Confronting AIDS demanded that he draw on his higher talents—a minute fascination with the body; a sensitivity to how secrecy and projection shape friendships—and made many former vices useful. Among the allures of "Written in Invisible Ink" is seeing Guibert's defiance of death emerge from his macabre affectations, and his bold witness arise from a penchant for indiscretion.

"To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life" is the rare book that truly deserves the epithet "unflinching." Its author may be afraid to die, but on the page his voice doesn't crack, his hand doesn't tremble. He suffers throughout—passed between quacks and celebrity homeopaths because of mysterious symptoms; reliving sexual encounters as nightmarish premonitions—but along with this comes an exhilarating lucidity. Guibert feels transparent, as though walking around with "denuded blood," but the world, too, has been stripped naked, revealing charlatans and saints, startling moments of ugliness and grace.

The novel begins on the day after Christmas, 1988. Guibert has left Paris for Rome to avoid friends as he waits for the results of a blood test that will determine his eligibility for a new medicine. The reader knows how the story ends, but Guibert doesn't, and the layering of narratives creates a maze of dread and disorientation.

The first third of the novel revolves around the death of Muzil, an alias for Michel Foucault, who died four years before Guibert received his diagnosis. Kindly and stoic, Muzil laughs on his deathbed and discreetly makes provisions for friends. But he also espouses an obsessive concern for privacy, which Guibert betrays:

> I was writing reports of everything like a spy, like an adversary, all those degrading little things . . . he would have liked to erase around the periphery of his life, to leave only the well-polished bare bones enclosing the black diamond—gleaming and impenetrable, closely guarding its secrets—that seemed destined to form his biography, a real conundrum chock-full of errors from end to end.

If Muzil dies a sphinx, disguising all weakness and leaving behind only the black diamond of his intellect, Guibert chooses another form of self-effacement, transforming his condition into a social and existential mirror. Like Thomas Eakins's "The Gross Clinic," the novel is both surgical theatre and social tableau.

In Linda Coverdale's masterly translation, originally published in 1991, "To the Friend" powerfully evokes the AIDS epidemic's uncertain early days. Guibert writes with hindsight but preserves a sense of each moment's confusion and foreboding. He gets lost on the way to a half-shuttered hospital on the outskirts of Paris; stopping at a gas station for directions, he notices the attendant's suspicion, likely at seeing so many nervous young men headed in that direction. Nurses dismiss the disease's seriousness—"nothing but a kind of cancer"—and "slip on their latex gloves as though they were velvet gloves for a gala evening at the opera."

Muzil speaks of AIDS creating "new tenderness, new solidarities" among gay men, but Guibert finds himself reluctant to even make eye contact with a junkie he recognizes from a clinic in Rome. He describes AIDS as a "disease of witch doctors and evil spells" from Africa and hides his medicine from men he suspects of wanting to steal it for "their African pals." The best that can be said of such moments is that, with racism as with AIDS, Guibert does his readers the favor of being shamelessly transparent about his sickness.

The novel's final portrait is of a rich pharmaceutical-laboratory manager named Bill. An unforgettably predatory figure, he's known Guibert since the writer was a teen-ager in Paris, having once attempted to seduce him. He reappears in the novel as a name-dropping, Jaguar-driving purveyor of false hope, insinuating himself as the puppet master of Guibert's small group of seropositive friends. Bill promises to enroll Guibert in the trials for a new medicine but then deflects, deceives, and delays him, even mentioning that he's already given another twinkish young writer the (ultimately ineffective) inoculation. Survival becomes a petty social intrigue, a reality show with life-or-death stakes.

Bill is the "friend" to whom the novel is addressed. Guibert frames him as an enemy not only of his survival but of his book's very possibility—the mirage of a cure undermines the nerve required for his literary confrontation with death.

Intimacy with death is often mistaken for morbid complicity with it. "The myth of Hervé Guibert," Jeffrey Zuckerman writes, "is that of the cruelly beautiful man who betrayed his friends, the writer of sex and death who would die of a sexually transmitted disease." The reality was of a writer who knew not only that silence equals death but also that nothing could be more fatal to art than disguising death under false hope, decorum, and sentiment.

Curiously, Guibert insistently associates Bill with the United States. He is the only character in "To the Friend" with an English name, and spends much of his time jetting off to New York and Miami. Most damningly, he cries during Hollywood films, susceptible to the same vapid optimism that he dangles before his friend in lieu of treatment.

Inextricable from the malfeasance that has made the United States uniquely vulnerable to COVID-19 is a widespread failure to imagine one's own mortality—and a tendency to project it onto others, whose deaths are deemed unfortunate inevitabilities. At the core of this callousness is the misconception that acknowledging death is antithetical to "really living." But it isn't the dying who are truly deathly. Guibert, who faced down AIDS with such irreverence, achieved an almost indestructible vitality in the duel.

Death never made him heavy. Among the lighter moments in "To the Friend" is a dinner party for a closeted elderly priest, who is retiring as his AIDS worsens. Guibert arranges for one of the guests, a beautiful young man, to attend naked. Everyone pretends that nothing is out of the ordinary, and what at first seems like a prank becomes a moment of transcendence, as the old priest experiences what is "doubtless the first real vision he'd ever had in his entire ecclesiastical career."

Perhaps it's this mischievous affirmation of life's mess and sensuality, even in the face of death, that will define Guibert's contribution to the literature of illness. Rejecting its taboos, he scaled AIDS' very long flight of steps and fearlessly recorded what he saw on the climb. ♦

A CRITIC AT LARGE

MASTER PIECES

Scholars confront white supremacy in the world of classical music.

BY ALEX ROSS

Martin Luther King, Jr., in his book "Stride Toward Freedom," wrote, "On a cool Saturday afternoon in January 1954, I set out to drive from Atlanta, Georgia, to Montgomery, Alabama. . . . The Metropolitan Opera was on the radio with a performance of one of my favorite operas—Donizetti's 'Lucia di Lammermoor.' So with the beauty of the countryside, the inspiration of Donizetti's inimitable music, and the splendor of the skies, the usual monotony that accompanies a relatively long drive—especially when one is alone—was dispelled in pleasant diversions."

What does it mean, if anything, that King was listening to bel-canto opera as he made his historic journey to preach his first sermon at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church? One response would be to find something curious, or even contradictory, in the image of King enjoying Donizetti behind the wheel of his car. He was poised to become a titan in the civil-rights movement; classical music is a world in which Black people have seldom been allowed to play a leading role. Much the same question could be asked about W. E. B. Du Bois, who admired the music of Richard Wagner to such an extent that he attended the Bayreuth Festival, in 1936. Even though Wagner was notoriously racist, Du Bois said, "The musical dramas of Wagner tell of human life as he lived it, and no human being, white or black, can afford not to know them, if he would know life."

Several scholars have conjectured that King was sending a cultural signal when he inserted Donizetti into "Stride Toward Freedom." Jonathan Rieder says that the story demonstrates "King's desire to cast himself as a man of sensibility and distinction." Godfrey Hodgson writes that such references were intended to "reassure northern intellectuals that he was on the same wavelength as they were." Du Bois's cosmopolitan tastes have elicited similar commentary. It is questionable, though, to assume that these two formidable personalities were simply trying to assimilate themselves to a perceived white aesthetic. Rather, they were taking possession of the European inheritance and pulling it into their own sphere. More elementally, they loved the music, and had no need to justify their taste.

It is equally questionable to assume that King's and Du Bois's fondness for classical music lends it some kind of universal, anti-racist virtue. In that sense, my attraction to these anecdotes of fandom is suspect. I am a white American who grew up with the classics, and I am troubled by the presumption that they are stamped with whiteness—and are even aligned with white supremacy, as some scholars have lately argued. I cannot counter that suggestion simply by gesturing toward important Black figures who cherished this same tradition, or by reeling off the names of Black singers and composers. The exceptions remain exceptions. This world is blindingly white, both in its history and its present.

Since nationwide protests over police violence erupted, in May and June, American culture has been engaged in an examination, however nominal, of its relationship with racism. Such an examination is sorely needed in classical music, because of its extreme dependence on a problematic past. The undertaking is complex; the field must acknowledge a history of systemic racism while also honoring the individual experiences of Black composers,

Major orchestras are finally playing such Black composers as Florence Price.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANUJ SHRESTHA

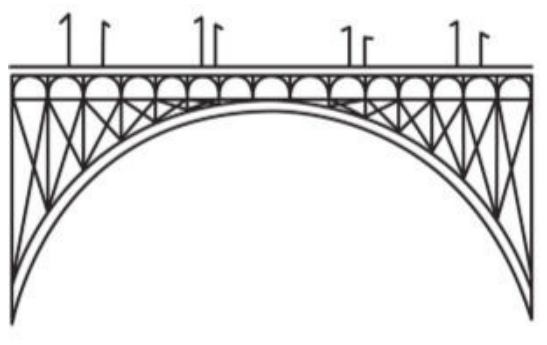
musicians, and listeners. Black people have long been marginalized, but they have never been outsiders.

This spring, the journal *Music Theory Online* published "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," an article by Philip Ewell, who teaches at Hunter College. It begins with the sentence "Music theory is white," and goes on to argue that the whiteness of the discipline is manifest not only in the lack of diversity in its membership but also in a deep-seated ideology of white supremacy, one that insidiously affects how music is analyzed and taught. The main target of Ewell's critique is the early-twentieth-century Austrian theorist Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935), who parsed musical structures in terms of foreground, middle-ground, and background levels, teasing out the tonal formulas that underpin large-scale movements. Schenker held racist views, particularly with regard to Black people, and according to Ewell those views seeped into the seemingly abstract principles of his theoretical work.

Schenker was Jewish, but his adherence to doctrines of Germanic superiority blinkered him to such an extent that, in 1933, he praised Hitler, adding, "If only a man were born to music, who would finally exterminate the musical Marxists." Schenker's advocates have long been aware of his disturbing views but have insisted that his bigoted rhetoric has nothing to do with his theoretical writing. Ewell argued that Schenker's system is, in fact, founded on national and racial hierarchies. Reverence for the kind of supreme talent who can assemble monumental musical structures shades into biological definitions of genius, and the biology of genius spills over into the biology of race. Ewell concluded, "There can be no question that for Schenker, the concept of 'genius' was associated with whiteness to some degree."

Shortly after Ewell's article was published, a skirmish broke out in the music-theory community, incited not by the article itself but by a twenty-minute condensed version of the material that Ewell had presented at a conference seven months earlier. The *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*, which is based at the University of North Texas, chose to devote ninety pages to responses to that brief talk. Some were supportive, others dismissive; one accused Ewell, who is African-American, of exhibiting "Black anti-Semitism," even though Ewell had not mentioned Schenker's Jewishness. On social media, Ewell's colleagues came to his defense and questioned the journal's methodology. The historian Kira Thurman wrote, "Did the Journal of Schenkerian Studies really publish a response to Professor Ewell's scholarship that was 'anonymous'? Yes." *National Review* and Fox News somehow stumbled on the episode and cast it as so-called cancel culture run amok; it was claimed that Ewell was trying to ban Beethoven, although nothing of the sort had been suggested.

At first glance, the Schenker debate looks to be of limited relevance to the wider classical-music world, not to mention the general population. Although his theories have been taught in American universities for generations, they are by no means universally accepted. German-speaking musicologists, for example, have never taken him as seriously. Even in the U.S., conservatory students can often undergo a thorough training without encountering his work. Yet the case of Schenker illustrates an implicit prejudice that is endemic in the teaching, playing, and interpretation of classical music. His method is far from unique in elevating the European tradition while concealing its cultural bias behind eternal, abstract principles. What Ewell calls "the white



racial frame"—he takes the term from the sociologist Joe Feagin—has the special power of being invisible. Thurman, in her paper "Performing Lieder, Hearing Race," makes a similar point: "Classical music, like whiteness itself, is frequently racially unmarked and presented as universal—until people of color start performing it."

The hysterical complaints that Ewell was proposing to "cancel" the classical canon stemmed mainly from a blog post in which he called Beethoven an "above-average composer" who has been "propped up by the white-male frame, both consciously and subconsciously, with descriptors such as genius, master, and masterwork." This is a provocation, though it is hardly the first to have been lobbed at the great man: Debussy wrote that Beethoven's sonatas were badly written for the piano, and Ned Rorem memorably dinged the Ninth Symphony as "the first piece of junk in the grand style." Ewell provokes with a higher purpose: he is goading a classical culture that awards the vast majority of performances to a tight circle of superstars, shutting out female and nonwhite composers who, until the mid-twentieth century, had little chance of making a career. In some ways, that Valhalla mentality is as entrenched as ever.

The whiteness of classical music is, above all, an American problem. The racial and ethnic makeup of the canon is hardly surprising, given European demographics before the twentieth century. But, when that tradition was transplanted to the multicultural United States, it blended into the racial hierarchy that had governed the country from its founding. The white majority tended to adopt European music as a badge of its supremacy. The classical-music institutions that emerged in the mid- and late nineteenth century—the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, the Metropolitan Opera, and the like—became temples to European gods, as Lawrence Levine argued in his 1988 book, "Highbrow/Lowbrow." Little effort was made to cultivate American composers; it seemed more important to manufacture a fantasy of Beethovenian grandeur.

Immigrant populations supplied much of the workforce for those ensembles: Germans gravitated toward the orchestras, Italians toward the opera. Such activity exemplifies the process of assimilation and ascent that Nell Irvin Painter describes in her 2010 book, "The History of White People": the expansion of the category of "whiteness" to encompass new groups. A large wave of German immigrants arrived in the period of the 1848 revolutions in Europe,

which sent thousands of leftists and liberals into exile. The Germania Musical Society, which was founded in 1848 and toured America widely, offered itself as a model of democracy in action—"one for all and all for one." Members of the group exercised a decisive influence on the development of the New York Philharmonic and other ensembles.

The wealthy white Americans who underwrote the country's élite orchestras tended to see their institutions as vehicles of uplift that allowed the lower classes to better themselves through exposure to the sublime airs of the masters. The contradictions of such paternalism are evident in the case of Henry Lee Higginson, who founded the Boston Symphony, in 1881. In his youth, Higginson opposed slavery, and after the Civil War he briefly ran a plantation in Georgia, aiming to provide employment and education to formerly enslaved African-Americans. When the project proved more difficult than he anticipated, he tended to blame his Black workers. In his later years, he adopted strident anti-immigrant rhetoric. By the time of his death, in 1919, he had become a leading member of the Immigration Restriction League.

Although a few well-dressed African-Americans would not have been unwelcome in the Boston Symphony audience, a Black musician had no hope of joining the orchestra. As Aaron Flagg recently recounted in *Symphony* magazine, the professionalization of the musician class in the late nineteenth century led directly to the segregation of musicians' unions—a system that lingered into the nineteen-seventies. Black musicians had to establish their own unions and form their own ensembles. Not until the forties and fifties did Black players begin joining upper-echelon orchestras: Jack Bradley in Denver, Henry Lewis in Los Angeles, Donald White in Cleveland, and, in 1957, the double-bassist Ortiz Walton in Boston.

Black composers had entered the edges of the limelight somewhat earlier. In 1893, the young singer and composer Harry T. Burleigh befriended Antonín Dvořák, who had come to New York to serve as the director of the progressive-minded National Conservatory. Stirred by Burleigh's singing of spirituals, Dvořák declared that Black melodies should be the foundation of future American music. A couple of generations later, the work of a few African-American composers—William Grant Still, William Dawson, and Florence Price—began to appear on orchestral programs. Black opera singers gradually made headway in the same period, culminating in Marian Anderson's breakthrough appearance at the Metropolitan Opera, in 1955. The Met has yet to present an opera by a Black composer, though a production of Terence Blanchard's "Fire Shut Up in My Bones" is planned for a future season.

In the long view, the marginalization of Black composers and musicians was not only a moral wrong but also a self-inflicted wound. Classical institutions succeeded in denying themselves a huge reservoir of native-born talent. Dvořák's acknowledgment that African-Americans were in possession of a singular body of musical material—one that broke open European conventions of melody, harmony, and rhythm—went largely unheeded. Instead, much of that talent found a place in jazz and other popular genres. Will Marion Cook, Fletcher Henderson, Billy Strayhorn, and Nina Simone, among many others, had initially devoted themselves to classical-music studies. That jazz came to be called "America's classical music" was an indirect commentary on the whiteness of the concert world, although it had the unfortunate effect of consigning Black classical composers to a double nonexistence.

Of course, racism was endemic in the pop sphere as well, as a host of scholarly studies have made clear. In an essay titled "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re) Making of Musicological Discourse," Matthew Morrison marshals a formidable array of research and theory to argue that the American pop-music industry is inextricably rooted in the racist routines of nineteenth-century blackface culture. Some historians and critics have tried to find redeeming features in a practice that pervasively ridiculed African-American voices and bodies; Eric Lott, in his classic 1993 book, "Love and Theft," argues that working-class blackface performers demonstrated a "profound white investment in black culture" even as they carried out appalling

acts of exploitation. For Morrison, these "counterfeit and imagined performances of blackness" are better understood as affirmations of white identity, with racial mockery integral to the act. (Mockery of "élite" European art was part of the formula as well.) Black performers eventually took up careers on the minstrelsy circuit, but only at the cost of playing along with white fantasies.

That dismal history may help to explain why such Black leaders as Du Bois and King found sustenance in European music. White as the canon was, it appeared to stand outside of America's racial horror. Du Bois's veneration of German culture—cultivated during his student years in Berlin, in the eighteen-nineties—partly blinded him to the depravity of German racism, which led not only to the Holocaust but also to the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples in what is now Namibia. Slavery was a European undertaking before it was an American one, and it left its marks on the repertory. A few years ago, the scholar David Hunter made the disturbing discovery that George Frideric Handel was an investor in the Royal African Company, which transported more than two hundred thousand enslaved Africans to the Caribbean and the Americas.

The racism embedded in classical and popular music alike is the necessary background to understanding the hard-won achievement of Florence Price, who is the subject of a new biography, "The Heart of a Woman," by the late musicologist Rae Linda Brown. Price was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1887, to middle-class parents, and won admittance to the New England Conservatory, which had a history of accepting Black students. She initially made a living by teaching and by composing parlor songs and other short popular pieces. But in her forties, having escaped an abusive marriage, she broadened her ambitions and turned to symphonic composition. She won some high-profile performances but found herself isolated. Her bonds with Black communities weakened; the white world treated her as an interesting oddity. The resistance that she faced as a female composer made her progress all the more arduous.

Nevertheless, she stuck to her path, and her Third Symphony, which premièred in 1940, is increasingly recognized as a landmark in American music. Variously majestic, sinuous, brooding, and playful, it gestures toward African-American spirituals and dance styles yet seems to enclose them in quotation marks, as if to acknowledge their ambiguous status in a white marketplace. Brown analyzes Price's work in terms of "double consciousness"—Du Bois's concept of the "warring ideals" inherent in Black and American identities—and then enlarges that tension to include Black traditions and European forms. Brown writes, "A transformation of these forms takes place when the dominant elements in a composition transcend European influence." The tradition will not survive without such moments of disruption and transcendence.

Classical-music institutions have just begun to work through the racist past. Scores of opera houses, orchestras, chamber-music societies, and early-music ensembles have declared solidarity with Black Lives Matter, in sometimes awkward prose. Because of COVID-19, most performance schedules that had been announced for the 2020-21 season have been jettisoned, and the drastically reduced programs that have emerged in their place contain a noticeable uptick in Black names. When the virus hit, we were in the midst of the so-called Beethoven Year—a gratuitously excessive celebration of the two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday of a composer who hardly needs any extra publicity. It remains to be seen whether this modest shift toward Black composers will endure beyond the chaotic year 2020.

In the same vein, mainstream organizations are giving more attention to a Black classical repertory: the elegantly virtuosic eighteenth-century scores of Joseph Bologne; the folkloric symphonies of Price, Still, and Dawson; the African-inflected operas of Harry Lawrence Freeman and Shirley Graham Du Bois. Yet such activity goes only so far in challenging an obsessive worship of the past. These works remain largely within the boundaries of the Western European tradition: if Schenker could have overcome his biases, he would have had an easy time analyzing Price's music according to his method. Furthermore, this programming leaves intact the assumption that musical greatness resides in a bygone golden age. White Europeans remain in the majority, with Beethoven retaining pride of place in the lightly renovated, diversified pantheon.

Classical music can overcome the shadows of its past only if it commits itself more strongly to the present. Black composers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have staged a much more radical confrontation with the white European inheritance. A pivotal figure is Julius Eastman, who died in near-total obscurity, in 1990, but has found cult fame in recent years. Eastman's improvisatory structures, his subversive political themes, and his openness about his homosexuality give him a revolutionary aspect, yet he also had a nostalgic flair for the grand Romantic manner; his 1979 piece "Gay Guerrilla," for two pianos, makes overpowering use of the Lutheran hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

With a vibrant roster of younger talents moving to the fore—Tyshawn Sorey, Jessie Montgomery, Nathalie Joachim, Courtney Bryan, Tomeka Reid, and Matana Roberts, among others—the perennial solitude of the Black composer seems less marked than before. Still, Black faces remain rare in the rank and file of orchestras, in administrative offices, and, most conspicuously, in audiences. Price once described how strange it was to see an all-white crowd vigorously applauding her Black-influenced music. That experience remains all too common.

A deeper reckoning would require wholesale changes in how orchestras canvass talent, conservatories recruit students, institutions hire executives, and marketers approach audiences. A Black singer like Morris Robinson should not have to live in a world where—as he recently reported at an online panel discussion—he has never worked with a Black conductor, stage director, or chief executive at an Amer-

ican opera house. At the same time, institutions must recognize that the Black-white divide is not the only line of tension in the social fabric. Asian musicians have often complained that blanket descriptions of classical music as an all-white field efface their existence. They are well represented in the ranks of orchestras, but they have little voice in the upper echelons, and routinely encounter the racism of disdain.

At bottom, the entire music-education system rests upon the Schenkerian assumption that the Western tonality, with its major-minor harmony and its equal-tempered scale, is the master language. Vast tracts of the world's music, from West African talking drums to Indonesian gamelan, fall outside that system, and African-American traditions have played in its interstices. This is a reality that the music department at Harvard, once stiflingly conservative, has recognized. The jazz-based artist Vijay Iyer now leads a cross-disciplinary graduate program that cultivates the rich terrain between composition and improvisation. The Harvard musicologist Anne Shreffler has said of the new undergraduate music curriculum, "We relied on students showing up on our doorstep having had piano lessons since the age of six." Given the systemic inequality into which many people of color are born, this "class-based implicit requirement," as Shreffler calls it, becomes a covert form of racial exclusion.

The sacralized canon will evolve as the musical world evolves around it. Because of the peculiarly invasive nature of sound, old scores always seem to be happening to us anew. A painting gazes at us unchanging from its frame; a book speaks to us in its fixed language. But when modern people play a Beethoven quartet it, too, becomes modern, even if certain of its listeners wish to go backward in time. The act of performance has enormous transformative potential—an aspect that musicologists, so accustomed to analyzing notation on a page, have yet to address in full. Naomi André, in her 2018 book, "Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement," evokes the dimensions of meaning that opened up when Leontyne Price sang the title role of "Aida" in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Of the passage "*O patria . . . quanto mi costi!*"—"Oh, my country . . . how much you have cost me!"—André writes, "The drama onstage and the reality offstage crash together. . . . This voice comes out of a body that lived through the end of Jim Crow and segregation." The music of a white European had become part of Black experience—become, to a degree, Black itself.

Jean-Jacques Nattiez, the musicologist and semiotician, has described two dominant ways in which we construct musical meaning: the "poietic," which reads a score in light of its creator's intentions, methods, and cultural context; and the "esthesic," which takes into account the perceptions of an audience. We live in a determinedly poietic age: we give great stress to what artists do and say, particularly when they stray from contemporary moral norms. That project of demystification is often useful, given the rampant idealization and idolatry of prior eras. But listeners need not be captive to the surface meaning of the scores, or to the biographies of their creators, or to the histories that accompany them. We can yoke the music to our own ends, as W. E. B. Du Bois did when he improbably reinvented Wagner as a model for a mythic Black art.

The poietic and the esthesic should have equal weight when we pick up the pieces of the past. On the one hand, we can be aware that Handel invested in the business of slavery; on the other, we can see a measure of justice when Morris Robinson sings his music in concert. We can be conscious of the racism of Mozart's portrayal of Monostatos in "The Magic Flute," or of the misogyny of "Così Fan Tutte," yet contemporary stagings can put Mozart's stereotypes in a radical new light. There is no need to reach a final verdict—to judge each artist innocent or guilty. Living with history means living with history's complexities, contradictions, and failings.

The ultimate mistake is to look to music—or to any art form—as a zone of moral improvement, a refuge of sweetness and light. Attempts to cleanse the canon of disreputable figures end up replicating the great-man theory in a negative register, with arch-villains taking the place of geniuses. Because all art is the product of our grandiose, predatory species, it reveals the worst in our natures as well as the best. Like every beautiful thing we have created, music can become a weapon of division and destruction. The philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, in a characteristically pitiless mood, wrote, "Every work of art is an uncommitted crime." ♦

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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 Lars Kenseth, must be received by Sunday, September 20th. The finalists in the September 7th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the October 5th 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

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Jonathan Havel, Queens, N.Y.

"Less woofer?"
Stephen Goranson, Durham, N.C.

"That's perfect. Get out the treats."
Susan F. Breitman, West Hartford, Conn.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"I'm starting to regret that haircut."
Erin Gormley, Buffalo, N.Y.

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