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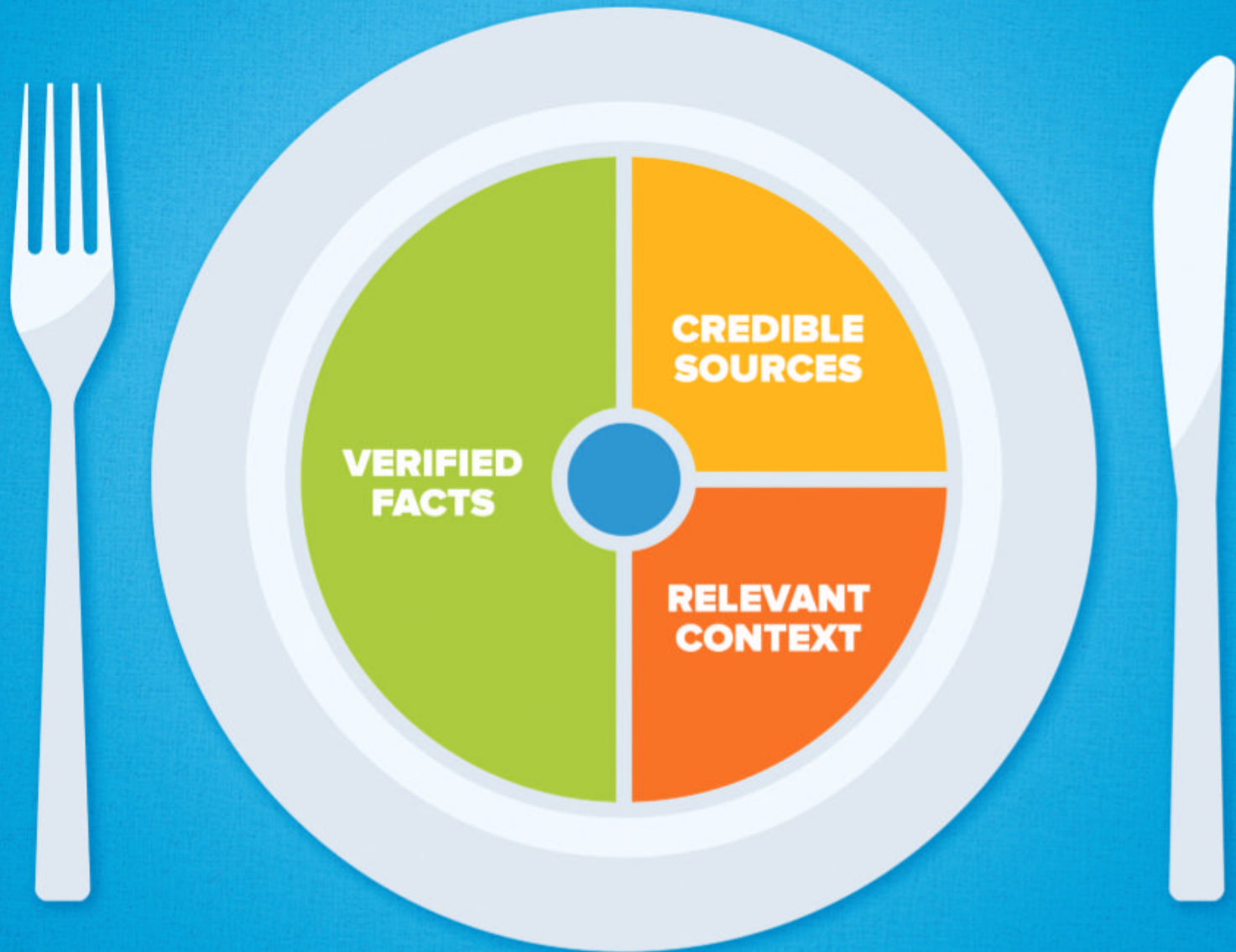
# THE NEW YORKER



D. B. White



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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Luke Mogelson** (“*The Storm*,” p. 32), a contributor to *The New Yorker* since 2013, has written the short-story collection “These Heroic, Happy Dead.”

**Karla Cornejo Villavicencio** (“*Bad Dream*,” p. 28) is the author of “The Undocumented Americans.”

**Barry Blitt** (*Cover*), a cartoonist and an illustrator, won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning, for work that appeared in this magazine.

**Allegra Goodman** (*Fiction*, p. 54) most recently published the novel “The Chalk Artist.”

**Akash Kapur** (*Books*, p. 68) is the author of “India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India.” His latest book, “Better to Have Gone: Love, Death, and the Quest for Utopia,” comes out in July.

**Rita Dove** (*Poem*, p. 38), a Pulitzer Prize winner and a former U.S. Poet Laureate, will publish a new collection, “Playlist for the Apocalypse,” this year. She teaches at the University of Virginia.

**Dorothy Wickenden** (“*Civil Wars*,” p. 16) has been the magazine’s executive editor since 1996. Her book “The Agitators: Three Friends Who Fought for Abolition and Women’s Rights” will be published in March.

**Balazs Gardi** (*Photographs*, pp. 32–52) is a photographer based in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City.

**Elizabeth Kolbert** (*Books*, p. 60), a staff writer since 1999, received the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction for “The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History.” Her new book, “Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future,” is due out in February.

**L. S. Klatt** (*Poem*, p. 57) has written four poetry collections, including, most recently, “The Wilderness After Which.”

**Brooke Jarvis** (*Books*, p. 65) is a contributing writer for the *Times Magazine*.

**Adam Iscoe** (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 14) joined the editorial staff of *Lapham’s Quarterly* in 2020.

## THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



### MEDICAL DISPATCH

Dhruv Khullar on how ordinary people around the world, from Brazil to Rwanda, have navigated the pandemic.



### PHOTO BOOTH

The Greek photographer Ioanna Sakellaraki captures the dying art of professional mourning.

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# THE MAIL

## THE PATHS NOT TAKEN

I applaud Joshua Rothman for a fascinating look into the attraction of imagining unlived lives (A Critic at Large, December 21st). His piece brought to mind the rare pairs of identical twins who are reared separately and later reunited, and thus given a glimpse of an alternative path. In my work as a psychology professor specializing in twin research, I was struck by the case of Jack and Oskar, born in 1933 in Trinidad. Their German Catholic mother and their Romanian Jewish father divorced when the twins were six months old. Jack remained with his father in Trinidad and was raised Jewish, whereas Oskar went with his mother to Germany. He was raised Catholic and joined the Hitler Youth. The twins, who met in their twenties, acknowledged that, had their places been reversed, each would have grown up embracing the other's beliefs.

*Nancy L. Segal  
California State University, Fullerton  
Fullerton, Calif.*

Rothman observes that the world of Achilles, the hero of the Iliad, was relatively uncomplicated. When offered two possibilities for his future, Achilles unhesitatingly chose a short life and enduring glory over obscurity—a decision that ancient Greeks would have understood and praised. But, in the Odyssey, Odysseus speaks with the shade of Achilles in the underworld, and Achilles declares that he would rather be the slave of a dirt-poor tenant farmer on earth than be king of all the dead. It would seem that the yearning for another self is not an altogether modern phenomenon.

*Frederick Sweet  
Toronto, Ont.*

I would be interested to read more from Rothman about how the intersection of language and culture affects one's understanding of possible other lives. In my Muslim Indian family, we often say *Inshallah*, or “God willing,” which removes human will from life's trajectory.

Urdu, my native language, does not have modals like “could,” “should,” and “would.” In fact, there is only one word used to signify the possibility of something—*shayad*. Imagining the hypothetical was difficult for me to grasp as an immigrant child in American schools.  
*Samina Hadi-Tabassum  
Chicago, Ill.*

I appreciated Rothman's recognition that our imagined lives are a vital part of our real lives. I spent much of 2020 in a new routine, often while picturing myself still in my old one. It has been comforting, and perhaps lazy, to consider this past year a detour from normal life. Rothman's piece reminds us that there are no such detours. Rather, there is the realization that current events do not reflect an aberration but simply the road we have taken.

*Elizabeth LaBauve  
Oklahoma City, Okla.*

## FOR KIDS AT HEART

I was delighted to see Mark O'Connell's article about Cartoon Saloon, the animation studio that made “Wolfwalkers,” one of my favorite movies of 2020 (“Story Time,” December 21st). Yet I was somewhat irked by the characterization of the company's animations as specifically for children. “Wolfwalkers” is a visual feast for all ages: at my local theatre, in the Netherlands, the evening English-language screenings, aimed at older viewers, were generally attended by more people (in compliance with COVID restrictions) than were the screenings of the dubbed version, intended for children. I wish that O'Connell had instead used the term “family entertainment,” which would better signal the film's wide appeal.

*Bibi Queisen  
Nijmegen, the Netherlands*

•  
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(relationships)  
(your job)  
(being isolated)  
(all the negative news)

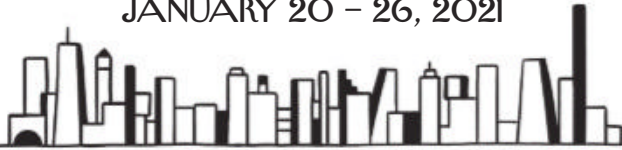
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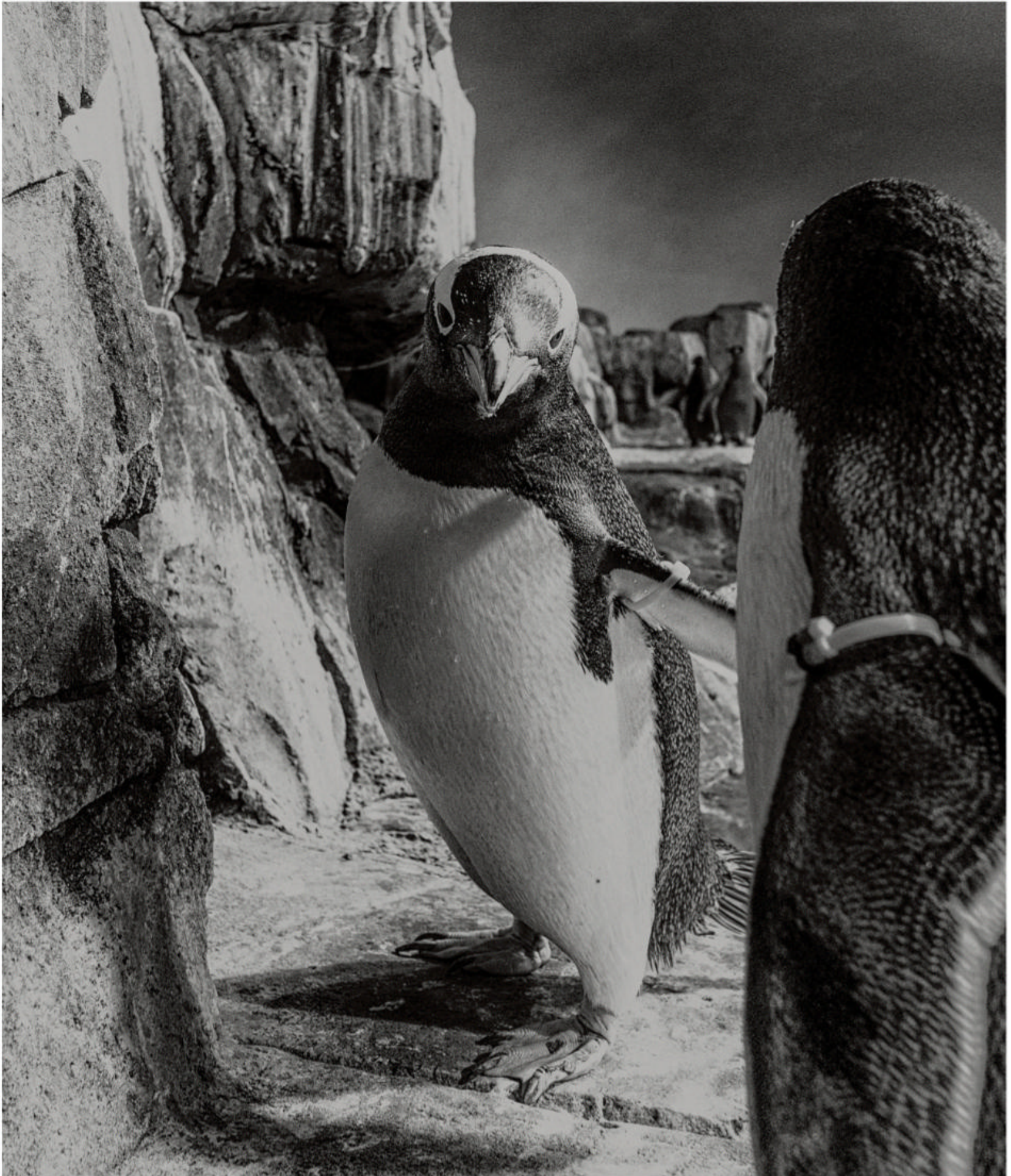


*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed.  
Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming.*

JANUARY 20 – 26, 2021



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



A group of penguins in the water is called a raft—on land, they become a waddle. Four species of the flightless birds—chinstrap, gentoo, king, and macaroni—inhabit the Polar Circle exhibit (pictured, with gentoos, above) at the **Central Park Zoo**, whose work supports the protection of animals in the wild. (Advance timed-entry tickets, available via [centralparkzoo.com](http://centralparkzoo.com), are required.) Lucky visitors might spot a recent arrival: Marinara, the first macaroni-penguin chick to hatch at the zoo.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DEVIN OKTAR YALKIN



## ART

### Garrett Bradley

This filmmaker's entrancing and unsettling installation "America," now on view at MOMA, was inspired by "Lime Kiln Club Field Day," a silent feature, from 1914, that's considered the earliest extant movie with an all-Black cast. On four screens, configured to form an X, joyful vintage footage of a fairground courtship is intercut with twelve new vignettes, beautifully shot by Bradley to look as if they, too, were excerpted from early-twentieth-century Black productions. The screens are transparent, which allows the fleeting scenes of romance and revelry to spill onto the surrounding walls, yielding a dreamy apparitional effect. But this elegant immersive experience is not purely one of pleasure or nostalgia; Bradley's images are carefully conceived to include reminders of the original film's Jim Crow backdrop. In one poetic chain of events, a Klansman's destroyed robe flies away to become a sheet on a clothesline, then a white flag in the possession of buffalo soldiers. Bert Williams, the star of "Lime Kiln Club Field Day," wears blackface—a concession to the racist conventions of the era that is jarring to see today. Bradley's artful combination of recovered and new footage is a profoundly imaginative and terribly timely expansion of national mythology and historical memory.—*Johanna Fateman (moma.org)*

### Gregory Edwards

Today's flâneur likely carries a smartphone, strolling while scrolling and taking pictures of whatever catches the eye. In the crisply rendered series "Pedestrian Paintings" (at the 47 Canal gallery), Edwards conveys this new digitally enhanced experience, nesting images in other images, all derived from his personal archive of street photography. These square canvases exude an observant dispassion—Edwards's paint handling is uniform and unexpressive—but there's a considered lyricism in their juxtapositions. One painting shows what looks to be a deflated ball, emblazoned with a smiley face, resting on asphalt in daylight; the toy's bright yellow echoes the glare of headlights in the image of traffic that frames it. Nearby, a mostly grisaille composition makes shadows its theme—a silhouette of stacked street signs is inset into a scene of sun-dappled concrete. In these paintings, Edwards handily pauses our mode of endless screen time and distraction, offering moments of visual serendipity for contemplation instead.—*J.F. (47canal.us)*

### "Engineer, Agitator, Constructor"

Your first impression of this vast and exciting show, at MOMA, of Soviet and European graphic design, made between 1918 and 1939, may combine déjà vu and surprise. You likely know the look, loosely termed Constructivist: off-kilter geometries, strident typography, grabby colors, and collaged photography, all in thrall to advanced technology and socialist exhortation. But you won't have seen about two-thirds of the three hundred pieces here (they're recent acquisitions). The scope is encyclopedic, surveying a time when individuals sacrificed their artistic independence to ideological programs of mass appeal. As the exhibition unfolds, artists-penitent, shrinking from the perils of originality,

dominate in Russia. Careerist designers teem in the West, with such fecund exceptions as László Moholy-Nagy and Kurt Schwitters. Some work will surely be enjoyed for its formal ingenuity and rhetorical punch. The architectonic and typographical razzmatazz of the Austrian-born American Herbert Bayer affords upbeat pleasures; a strikingly sensitive Dada collage by the German Hannah Höch feels almost over-qualified for its company. But art unaffected by personality is sterile. That needn't constitute a failure. It may be a clear-eyed choice made on principle. What needs saying conditions how it's said, which means accepting the chance that, should conditions change, the work may prove to be ephemeral.—*Peter Schjeldahl (moma.org)*

### Tourmaline

The most enthralling period piece onscreen right now isn't streaming on Netflix (sorry, "Bridgerton")—it's the six-minute marvel "Salacia," by the artist, filmmaker, and activist Tourmaline, making her solo gallery debut at Chapter NY, which has opened a pop-up location, at 126 Madison Street, for the occasion. Combining magic realism and historical fact, the 2019 film concerns

the true story of Mary Jones (superbly played by Rowin Amone), a Black trans woman and sex worker in New York City, who was sentenced, in 1836, to five years in Sing Sing prison. By setting the film's domestic scenes in Seneca Village, a community of Black landowners (razed in the mid-nineteenth century to make way for Central Park), Tourmaline dreams of a freedom for Jones that the world denied her. No spoilers here, but one climactic scene puts an Afrofuturist spin on "The Wizard of Oz," replacing Dorothy's mantra, "There's no place like home," with an incantation of self-invention. Five enticing self-portraits, which Tourmaline photographed in 2020, serve as both establishing shots and an epilogue.—*Andrea K. Scott (chapter-ny.com)*

## DANCE

### BalletX

This Philadelphia-based company has hit on a workable streaming model, setting up its excellent dancers with choreographers, filmmakers, and photogenic locations for short films

## AT THE GALLERIES



For more than fifty years, as Abstract Expressionism gave way to Pop, then to Minimalism, and on to Neo-Expressionism, until art's isms exhausted themselves, **Jane Freilicher** devoted herself to painting "eternally fixed afternoons," to borrow a phrase from Frank O'Hara's 1957 poem "Chez Jane." (In addition to being a phenomenal painter, Freilicher was a muse of the New York School.) In the attentive tradition of Pierre Bonnard—and with a similar passion for color—Freilicher, who died in 2014, at the age of ninety, found beauty at home, whether in her Greenwich Village apartment (where, circa 1990, she made the untitled three-foot-square canvas pictured above) or at her house on the East End of Long Island. The best of these luminous views unify inside and outside—and still-life and landscape. On Jan. 21, the Kasmin gallery, in Chelsea, opens the exhibition "Jane Freilicher: Parts of a World."—*Andrea K. Scott*





Jazmine Sullivan's 2015 album, "Reality Show," is a soulful master class in assumed perspective—by turns, she plays the lovestruck fool, the unappreciated homemaker, the disillusioned realist, the intimacy addict, and the vindictive harpy, performing classic caricatures of women while giving them depth and making them feel whole. After an almost six-year hiatus, she returns with **"Heaux Tales,"** a multitudinous concept album that only furthers this agenda. The project, set up at nearly every interval by spoken-word interludes performed by other women (including the R. & B. singer and Sullivan collaborator Ari Lennox), neatly unpacks its many character studies, exploring love, infidelity, prospecting, social responsibility, and sexuality in the process. The stories are anchored by Sullivan's powerful, rangy voice, which is more than capable of embodying every point of view established, and all of the emotionality within.—*Sheldon Pearce*

available on its digital subscription service, BalletX Beyond. The latest batch, all filmed by the former Cunningham dancer Daniel Madoff, launches on Jan. 20. In "THAW," Francesca Harper honors the poet and activist Alice Dunbar-Nelson. In Tsai Hsi Hung's "Two X Two," dancers embody a dragon and a tiger. And Manuel Vignouelle sets his cast in nature for "Heal."—*Brian Seibert (balletx.org)*

## Boston Ballet

As part of its online subscription series, "BB@yourhome," available on the company's Web site, Boston Ballet is offering a program of archival recordings, streaming Jan. 21-31. Among them are three seldom performed works by the mid-twentieth-century Soviet dance-maker Leonid Yakobson, known for his choreographic miniatures. "Vestris," the most famous, is a portrait (some might say a caricature) of the eighteenth-century French ballet star Auguste Vestris, an artist of great skill and even greater ego. "Vestris" was one of the first pieces that the young Mikhail Baryshnikov performed in the U.S. after defecting to the West. Also on the program are highlights from several of the company's recent tours, including a performance of Jiří Kylián's "Bella Figura," an abstract work set to music by Pergolesi and Vivaldi.—*Marina Harss (bostonballet.org)*

## La Mama Moves!

Last year's festival, postponed, now resurfaces in virtual form, running Jan. 19-20 and Jan. 26-27. Kevin Augustine, of Lone Wolf Tribe, presents "Body Concert," a philosophical solo puppet show in which foam-rubber skeletons and organs consort. In "The night that you stopped acting," Anabella Lenzu considers her own experience as an immigrant artist in New York. Kari Hoas adapts her post-apocalyptic dance party, "Heat," to empty office spaces in Oslo. And Tamar Rogoff and Mei Yamanaka, in "The Yamanakas at Home," tell the story of an elderly couple in Japan.—*B.S. (lamama.org)*

## MUSIC

### The KLF: "Solid State Logik 1"

**ELECTRONIC** In 1992, Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty, of the British dance-music dyad the KLF, took their recordings out of print. On New Year's Day, 2021, "Solid State Logik 1" was released as the first in a series that restores their catalogue. This collection is a singles primer, and it doesn't groove so much as it bounds—a mock-triumphalist air blows through everything, whether the duo is stealing riffs in "Doctorin' the Tardis,"

which stitches Gary Glitter to the "Doctor Who" theme, or roping in the Nashville country queen Tammy Wynette to sing about science fiction in "Justified and Ancient," the unlikely hit of the nineties.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

### Rhye: "Home"

**R. & B.** Rhye's debut album, from 2013, exuded a quiet elusiveness—a result of the androgynous voice of its singer, Mike Milosh, wisping through subtle R. & B. production, his silken delivery both enigmatic and penetrating. The project has morphed in the intervening years, gently expanding to include more robust, muscular soundscapes, and Rhye's latest release, "Home," is a maximalist progression, engulfed by choral interludes, dressed-down dance lines, and sudden dustings of ornate strings. Though ballads such as "Fire" and "Holy" leave room for Milosh's quivering intimacy, the approach here relies on movement and uninhibitedness, shaping a record intended as a celebration of the senses, and of the experience of being alive.—*Julysa Lopez*

### Sleaford Mods: "Spare Ribs"

**ROCK** To listen to the Sleaford Mods is to enter a monstrously English landscape of overt class strife, knotty accents, and imported profanity. The duo's new record, "Spare Ribs," is a window into a singular culture in contemporary Nottingham. Active for more than a dozen years but making a Stateside dent only recently, Jason Williamson (vocals) and Andrew Fearn (computer beats) conjure punk for a world long molded by hip-hop. The verbose Williamson makes a colorful vocal guide, following a lineage of juicily accented British ranters while invoking various working-class characters who tear through Martin Amis novels, dropping pub wisdom and offbeat humor. "Watch 'em get depressed under the lockdown stress," he vents in "Out There," agit-pop for the COVID era.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

### "Soldier Songs"

**CLASSICAL** Transforming an operatic work into a streaming experience that takes advantage of possibilities intrinsic to the screen can be challenging, but "Vinkensport," a comic opera composed by David T. Little, made the transition successfully last October. Now "Soldier Songs," Little's 2006 monodrama about the far-reaching impact of military service, receives its own video makeover in an Opera Philadelphia presentation directed by the baritone Johnathan McCullough, who also stars. The piece, based on and incorporating recorded testimony from veterans, handles its subject with nuance and sympathy—qualities echoed by McCullough's arresting adaptation, which vividly amplifies and extends the impact of Little's words and music.—*Steve Smith (Jan. 22 at 8; operaphila.org.)*

### Nathalie Stutzmann: "Contralto"

**OPERA** Opera audiences have grown accustomed to hearing countertenors in Baroque music, and in the first few minutes of Nathalie Stutzmann's new album of eighteenth-century arias, "Contralto," she almost sounds like one. There are similarities in range and resonance, but the power, color, and amplitude at Stutzmann's disposal are rarely available to male falsettists. As she conducts the ensemble Orfeo 55, she lavishes her smooth, dusky contralto on highly



decorated works by Handel, Porpora, Vivaldi, Bononcini, and Caldara. The instrumentalists' deckle-edged playing sounds at once scrappy and polished, matching the kinetic energy and moment-to-moment insight of Stutzmann's singing.—*Oussama Zahr*

## Victor Lewis Group

**JAZZ** Miles Davis once remarked that drummers make fine composers, and Victor Lewis continues to make good on that claim. An in-demand player whose propulsive and filigreed work has fit the bill for leaders as diverse as Woody Shaw, Carla Bley, and David Sanborn, Lewis also has a knack for turning out tuneful pieces that stick like glue. (Best of luck jettisoning his "Hey, It's Me You're Talkin' To" from your inner ear.) For this live stream from Smalls, Lewis leads a quintet featuring the saxophonist Abraham Burton and the pianist David Kikoski.—*Steve Futterman* (Jan. 21 at 5 and 7; [smallslive.com](http://smallslive.com).)

## THE THEATRE

### Origin 1st Irish Theatre Festival

This yearly festival, the thirteenth presented by New York's Origin Theatre, goes virtual, offering six new plays, six films, and a wide-ranging variety of panel discussions from companies in Ireland and America. Curated by the actors Michael Mellamphy and Sarah Street, the theatrical works include Eva O'Connor's one-woman play "Mustard," produced by Fishamble, in Dublin, about madness and condiments; Darren Murphy's "The Gifts You Gave to the Dark," from the Irish Rep, cataloguing a last, lonely phone call between a man in Belfast and his mother in Dublin during the lockdown; "The Scourge," from Ireland's Wexford Arts Centre, written and performed by Michelle Dooley Mahon, about the effects of Alzheimer's on a small-town family; and a collection of five plays, commissioned by Origin and first produced as radio dramas, called "Under the Albert Clock," a reference to the iconic Belfast landmark.—*Ken Marks* ([origintheatre.org](http://origintheatre.org))

## TELEVISION

### Bridgerton

Lady Whistledown (voiced by Julie Andrews), a pseudonymous gossip columnist, is the faceless narrator of this new Netflix show, a costume farce of Regency society based on Julia Quinn's wildly popular romance-novel series. It's courting season in early-nineteenth-century London, and the eligible girls are vying for approval from the snuff-sniffing Queen Charlotte (Golda Rosheuvel). Daphne Bridgerton (Phoebe Dynevor, as delicate as a songbird) is the most sought-after girl in the "ton," until, all of a sudden, she's not. Desperate to marry well, she recruits the grouchy bachelor Simon Basset, the Duke of Hastings (Regé-Jean Page), into a mutually beneficial dating scheme. Daphne and Simon, of course, end up falling for each other, and their union permits "Bridgerton" to mature past the cutesy and into the adult. A burlesque of selfish viscounts, conniving ladies of the house, and enterprising modistes, the show is less pleasurable when attempting seriousness. The creator Chris Van Dusen's version of nineteenth-century England

is race-blind, and Simon's refusal to propagate his seed has something to do with his father's race shame; the grafting of contemporary politics onto the period piece feels extraneous and vague.—*Doreen St. Félix* (Reviewed in our issue of 1/4 & 11/21.)

## The Flight Attendant

Cassie Bowden (Kaley Cuoco), the party-girl title character of the best new miniseries on HBO Max, swoons over the guy sitting in 3C, Alex Sokolov (Michiel Huisman); on landing in Bangkok, they engage in excess: too much food, too much alcohol, and too much sex. The morning after, Cassie wakes up to find Alex dead, his throat slit, and she is unable to recall the events of the night before. The series is an adaptation, from Steve Yockey, of Chris Bohjalian's novel of the same name, and its thrill is in its juxtaposition of a rowdy rhythm with a lyrical portrait of tragedy and grief. The intriguingly quiet character study of Cassie may be at the expense of the secondary characters, including her co-workers, the wonderfully fey

Shane (Griffin Matthews) and the middle-aged worrier Megan (the terrific Rosie Perez), who were not given much room to grow. Cassie also sees visions of Alex, who, from beyond the grave, becomes her spirit guide—the device is almost grotesque, but it's also lovely. Much of the fun lies in watching Cassie stumble into capability, as she becomes an amateur sleuth in an attempt to clear her name.—*D.S.F.* (1/4 & 11/21)

## MOVIES

### The Disorderly Orderly

It may be hard to believe, but Frank Tashlin's antic and raucous 1964 comedy, starring Jerry Lewis, is also a wildly original take on Alfred Hitchcock's cinematic universe. As Jerome Littlefield, an aspiring doctor whose debilitating sympathetic hypochondria reduces him to menial labor at a sanatorium, Lewis is a flustered klutz and a meek, painfully sincere Everymensch. From the use of the song "Que Será, Será" to the

## THEATRE FESTIVAL



European companies started capturing stage productions on video long before American ones did, and now those theatrical chickens are coming to our home to roost. This month, Stockholm's Dramaten and Hamburg's Thalia Theatre present "**Stories from Europe**," an online festival of ten subtitled productions (Jan. 20–31, at [dramaten.se/lessingtage](http://dramaten.se/lessingtage) and [thalia-theater.de](http://thalia-theater.de)) from some of Europe's most prestigious companies. This is a rare opportunity for a crash course in contemporary Continental stage aesthetics—check out, for example, Anne Lenk's eye-popping take on "Mary Stuart" for Deutsches Theatre, or a four-actor reimagining of Dostoyevsky's "The Idiot," from Moscow's Theatre of Nations. Just as exciting is the opportunity to see lesser-known (in the U.S.) works by masters, such as Pirandello's "Right You Are (If You Think So)," by Turin's Teatro Stabile, and the Berliner Ensemble's staging of Brecht's "The Caucasian Chalk Circle," directed by Michael Thalheimer. Among the few contemporary creators to sneak in are Daria Deflorian and Antonio Tagliarini, whose "The Sky Is Not a Backdrop" is presented by Théâtre de l'Odéon, in Paris.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli*



film's styles, colors, camera angles, and moods, Tashlin offers a riotous cabinet of Hitchcockian curios. The strangest is an icy Tippi Hedren look-alike who's brought to the clinic after attempting suicide—the lost love of Jerome's dreadful high-school years, whose presence gives rise to a scene of lurid romantic obsession recalling "Vertigo" and to an ineffably sad, though ultimately goofball, reunion. This wacky world is as gloomily psychoanalytical as "Psycho," but Lewis seems even more of a menace than Norman Bates—and the final, madcap chase, for all its death-defying precision, is frighteningly destructive.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Crackle.)*

## Not Fade Away

For his first feature film, after the long-haul glory of "The Sopranos," David Chase digs into a more distant, though no less fractious, stratum of New Jersey life. In remembrance of his own coming of age, he delves back to the nineteen-sixties and tells the story of Douglas (John Magaro), who joins with friends to form a band, plays reverential covers of Buddy Holly and other gods, and cultivates hopes of making

it big. Some viewers might find these youthful characters—including Eugene (Jack Huston) and Grace (Bella Heathcote), the girl who sways between them—somewhat slender and hazy, but that may be the point. They are souls still forming, unsure of the face and the sound that they ought to present to the world, and most of them are fated to stay small. Hence the importance of James Gandolfini, no stranger to Chase's method, in the role of Douglas's father. In a few unforgettable scenes, he nails the image of a guy who hardly dared to countenance escape, and thus never left. Released in 2012.—*Anthony Lane (Streaming on Amazon, Vudu, and other services.)*

## Ornette: Made in America

Shirley Clarke's 1985 documentary about the crucial jazz innovator Ornette Coleman unites an impressionistic portrait with an overview of his life, work, and ideas. It also poses painful questions about a mid-career artist whose restless curiosity is yoked to the glory and burden of a public persona. The film's collage-like composition is anchored by Coleman's 1984 visit to his home town of Fort Worth, where he

receives official tributes and performs with the city's symphony orchestra. Dramatizations of his youth, filmed performances from the sixties onward, and discussions with him and other musicians and associates (including William Burroughs and Brion Gysin) mesh with Clarke's diverse video manipulations and rapid-fire editing, which evoke the visions and fantasies from which Coleman's music arises. (His discussion of an earlier plan for sexual abstinence is as chilling as it is revealing.) Clarke relates Coleman's grandly transformative multimedia projects (including one involving satellite transmissions) to her own; his troubled effort to rehabilitate a Lower East Side building highlights the free-flowing connection between art and life.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*

## The Salt of Tears

Two classic themes, the eternal triangle and a provincial's big-city struggles, get distinctive twists in Philippe Garrel's brisk yet pain-filled new drama of youth's illusions. Arriving in Paris to compete for a spot in a prestigious crafts academy, the soft-spoken but willful Luc (Logann Antuofermo) meets a student named Djemila (Oulaya Amamra) and begins a relationship with her. But, when he returns to his home town, he rekindles a romance with a former high-school classmate, Geneviève (Louise Chevillotte), only to take up, when he's back in Paris, with Betsy (Souheila Yacoub), a nurse. Luc's professional ambitions as a cabinetmaker distort his impulsive love and lust, which in turn curdle his close bond with his wise, aged, devoted father (André Wilms), under whom he'd apprenticed. Filming with a sombre black-and-white palette and a spare, pointed camera style, Garrel lends the tale a heady mood of refined melancholy underpinned with aspects of contemporary politics; he crowns the hero's bemused adventures with an ecstatic dance scene that embodies the elusive dream of happiness.—*R.B. (Streaming at Film Forum.)*

## Song to Song

In this romantic drama, set in and around the Austin music scene, Terrence Malick places his transcendental lyricism on sharply mapped emotional terrain. It's a story of love skewed by ambition. Rooney Mara plays Faye, a young musician who falls into a relationship with a record-company mogul (Michael Fassbender) who can boost her career. Then she starts seeing another musician (Ryan Gosling), who also gets pulled into the impresario's orbit. The shifting triangle, à la "Jules and Jim," is twisted by business conflicts and other players, including a waitress (Natalie Portman), a socialite (Cate Blanchett), and an artist (Bérénice Marlohe). Meanwhile, Patti Smith, playing herself, is the voice of conscience and steadfast purpose, in art and life alike. Without sacrificing any of the breathless ecstasy of the film's urgent, fluid, seemingly borderless images (shot by Emmanuel Lubezki), Malick girds them with a framework of bruising entanglements and bitter realizations, family history and stifled dreams. His sense of wonder at the joy of music and the power of love is also a mournful vision of paradise lost.—*R.B. (Streaming on Crackle, Tubi, and other services.)*

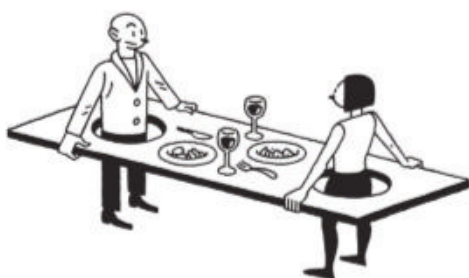
## WHAT TO STREAM



The Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski, one of the most daringly original filmmakers of the nineteen-sixties, was expelled from Poland, as a dissident, in 1969, and moved to Great Britain. The personal, artistic, and political costs of exile are at the core of his bitterly ironic 1984 drama, "**Success Is the Best Revenge**" (streaming on Amazon). It's the story of Alex Rodak (Michael York), a Polish theatre director who, with his wife, Alicia (Joanna Szczerbic, Skolimowski's wife), fled Poland after the imposition of martial law, in 1981. Two years later, in London, the couple is uneasily reunited with their teen-age sons (played by Skolimowski's children Michal and Józef). Meanwhile, Alex struggles to stage a wildly ambitious play about Iron Curtain tyranny (spectators will arrive by bus to observe terrifying scenes of protest and repression) and contends with a predatory financier (John Hurt) and a high-handed producer (Anouk Aimée) while facing bureaucratic harassment from local authorities and trying to hold his family together. With a florid style and a pugnacious tone, Skolimowski evokes the tangled paradoxes of freedom and the illusions of nostalgia alike.—*Richard Brody*

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## TABLES FOR TWO

### Dame

85 MacDougal St.

I had a hunch, the moment I saw the glorious fish and chips at Dame, a pop-up in the West Village, that they were going to be the best I'd ever had. In a few bites, my suspicion was confirmed: deep within a surreally puffy, crunchy, craggy golden shell of batter—adorned with coarse, twinkling crystals of sea salt—I found satiny, briny flakes of hake. Each of the thick-cut chips bore the unmistakably bronzed, bubbled surface and creamy interior of a gentle boil followed by multiple rounds in the deep fryer. Tucked beside them, in their charming paper boat, was a wedge of lemon; the faint perfume of malt vinegar hovered in the air.

By phone the other day, the chef Ed Szymanski, who started Dame, last March, with Patricia Howard, his partner in both life and business, was more than game to illuminate his technique. Though I didn't expect it to be simple, the process he described was so intricate it made me laugh out loud. I felt a wash of awe, then gratitude, for the lengths he'd taken to make something so spectacularly delicious.

To perfect his recipe, Szymanski drew on his years of experience cooking in his native England and in New York, at Brooklyn's Cherry Point, several April Bloomfield restaurants, and the Beatrice Inn (where he and Howard met). He studied books by Josh Niland, an Australian chef known for his innovations in fish butchery, and the British chef Heston Blumenthal, considered a father of molecular gastronomy. To achieve a crust that is sturdy enough to do justice to the most traditional iterations of the English dish but “light enough that it makes you think of tempura,” he told me, he combines all-purpose flour with rice flour, adding baking powder for a ballooning effect and honey for color.

In a key move, he cuts the beer in his batter with vodka, which has a lower evaporating point, “so when the batter hits the frying oil, it forms a crust much quicker, which stops the fish itself from frying.” The hake effectively steams but never gets soggy; before cooking, he cures it (per Niland) for half a day over a mix of salt, sugar, and lemon zest. As for the chips, after they're boiled and before their first dip in the fryer, they're dried thoroughly with an electric fan, then frozen. And, for his final moisture-reducing trick (*à la* Blumenthal), Szymanski sprays, rather than dribbles, both fish and chips in a fine mist of malt vinegar, using an atomizer.

In Szymanski and Howard's original vision for Dame, the emphasis was on the English tradition of wood-fired meats. This proved difficult for a pop-up format even pre-pandemic, and by sum-

mer they had pivoted. That they didn't seem to have much competition when it came to fish and chips led Szymanski to wonder if New Yorkers would be disinterested, but it turned out that the market was simply theirs to corner. In the course of five months, Dame Summer Club, as they first called it (the menu also featured tomato sandwiches, Eton mess, and cocktails including a Pimm's cup), made twenty thousand dollars in profits, all of which they donated to organizations associated with Black Lives Matter.

Last fall, they began to sell provisions as Dame Deli & Bottle Shop. Fish and chips are still available on Fridays and Saturdays; expanded offerings include wine and locally made spirits, fresh produce (chicories, citrus), and bread and pastries from nearby bakeries. A small fridge is stacked with half-pints of phenomenal prepared seafood dishes, from saffron potted shrimp to smoked-whitefish chowder and squid in tomato oil, an array of which, with a baguette and a tub of roasted-garlic aioli, makes for the dreamiest of suppers. It's an exciting preview of much more to come. In May, the pair will open a full-service seafood-themed establishment next door (with outdoor seating, at least), serving Szymanski's playful interpretations of classics such as kedgeree, grilled oysters with hollandaise, and sashimi—seasoned with “English soy sauce,” a reduction of bread stock (made from sourdough simmered in water), Worcestershire, and Marmite. (*Fish and chips* \$20, *prepared foods* \$5–\$10.)

—Hannah Goldfield



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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT FEAR ITSELF

Among the more striking aspects of the Republicans' response to last week's historic second impeachment of Donald Trump, for "incitement to insurrection," were their warnings that holding the President to account for his role in the assault on the Capitol, on January 6th, would only lead to more violence. On Wednesday night, just hours after the House vote, Senator Lindsey Graham, of South Carolina, told Sean Hannity, on Fox News, that the impeachment was itself an incitement. Graham, who had flown with Trump to Texas the day before, said that President-elect Joe Biden should tell Chuck Schumer, the incoming Senate Majority Leader, and Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House, to call off the proceedings ahead of a trial in the Senate: "If you want to end the violence, end impeachment."

In light of the events at the Capitol, which left five people dead, the possibility of violence can't be regarded lightly. But bending to that threat would mean acting as if the Capitol were still in the hands of the mob. The insurrectionists whom Trump directed to prevent the tallying of Electoral College votes have, in a sense, been redeployed in an effort to secure impunity for him. That menace lies behind Republican complaints about how "divisive" it would be to convict Trump. It is why members of the National Guard have been camped in the halls of Congress, using their backpacks as pillows; why more than a dozen major Metro stations in Washington are closed; and why Airbnb will not book

rooms in the city until after Biden has been inaugurated.

It is also why the Senate must proceed undeterred with Trump's trial, which will begin, as the Constitution requires, the day after Pelosi sends to the Senate the single article of impeachment approved by the House. (In a signing ceremony after the vote, Pelosi used the lectern that a member of the mob had taken from her office.) The case is solid: the article encompasses not only the incendiary rally before the attack, at which Trump told his supporters to head to the Capitol and fight, but his earlier calls to battle and his blatantly illegal demand that Georgia officials "find" votes for him—or else. Although no other President has been tried after leaving office, there is a precedent in the 1876 case of William Belknap, the Secretary of War, who was unable to head off impeachment by resigning.



A conviction, which could result in Trump's being barred from ever again holding federal office, would require sixty-seven votes. That means at least seventeen votes would have to come from Republicans; so far, just a handful seem ready to convict. (Among them is Mitt Romney, the only Republican who voted to convict in Trump's last trial, for the attempted extortion of the President of Ukraine.) The outgoing Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, has said that he is waiting to hear the legal arguments; he and other senators are also doubtless gauging their own vulnerability.

Meanwhile, Graham is hardly alone in trying to scare his colleagues into going easy on the President. In the House debate on Wednesday, Jason Smith, of Missouri, said that impeachment would "bring up the hate and fire more than ever before"; Bob Good, of Virginia, cautioned that it would "further offend" Trump voters; and Andy Biggs, of Arizona, told his colleagues in a frantic address, "Yours will be a Pyrrhic victory," because "you will have made him a martyr!" The effort to hold Trump accountable, Biggs said, would "douse the remaining burning embers of this movement with gasoline."

Biggs is part of a cohort of representatives who have falsely insisted, in particularly florid terms, that the election was stolen. Madison Cawthorn, of North Carolina, and Mo Brooks, of Alabama, addressed the rally where Trump spoke and the mob gathered—Brooks told those present to "stop at the Capitol" and begin "kicking ass." Then again, two-thirds of the House Republican caucus voted to reject electors; the Republican side of the debate was a pageant of



extremists and loyalists. Democrats have openly raised the possibility that Republican legislators or their staff members abetted the assault—a stunning allegation that warrants serious investigation. (There are also questions about the role of some law-enforcement officers, despite the heroism of others.) Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, of New York, said she believes that certain House Republicans “would create opportunities to allow me to be hurt, kidnapped, etc.”

Peter Meijer, of Wisconsin, one of only ten Republicans who voted for impeachment, said that he knew of members of Congress who were acquiring body armor. One rattling spectacle last week was the near-hysteria of some Republicans at the placement of magnetometers at the entrance to the House chamber, to prevent guns from being brought in. Many walked around them, or pushed their way past Capitol police after setting off the alarm. Lauren Boe-

bert, of Colorado, has said that she should be able to carry her Glock onto the floor of the House. Trumpism and America’s gun pathology have become intertwined.

Yet it was the Democrats who were told, in the words of Tom Cole, a Republican from Oklahoma, that they needed to “think about this more soberly.” Other Republicans said that the assault on the Capitol was actually the Democrats’ fault, because they had countenanced the Black Lives Matter movement, cancel culture, and people bothering Trump officials in restaurants. Republicans complained about a “double standard,” as if Trump were the real victim. (If they were looking for a double standard, they could have found it in the tolerance afforded to a mostly white mob, even as its members broke down the Capitol’s doors.)

In the end, it is the Republicans who seem frightened—“paralyzed by fear,” as Jason Crow, a Colorado Democrat,

put it. Some may be afraid that Trump will lash out and that his base will turn against them—as it already has turned against, among others, Vice-President Mike Pence and Representative Liz Cheney. Trump still has that power, in part, because elected Republicans have functioned as his willing hostages. Some are true believers; others opportunistically colluded with him, feeding panic about election fraud, race, immigration, class, and the media, as well as promoting QAnon conspiracy theories. All of them may be wary of a trial that will expose what their party has become.

But fear is its own trap. A trial—and other investigations that allow the country to plainly face what happened on January 6th—can help those in its grasp to break out of it. To borrow Lindsey Graham’s formulation, the way to end this violent chapter is, indeed, for impeachment to end—with a trial and a conviction.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

## TEST DRIVE DEPT. COCOON



Ours is an age of infantilization and cossetting: our TV shows come with trigger warnings; our waistbands are elasticized; our vitamins, gummied. In order to experience this cultural softening at its most marshmallowy, a correspondent recently test-drove three wearable sleeping bags. Two were essentially roomy hooded snowsuits, and one was a regular sleeping bag, but with armholes, and an opening at the bottom. “They’re for enduring the cold,” the correspondent found himself explaining, as he walked around the city in them. “I don’t have a leisure fetish.”

Before wearing a bag to dine in one of the restaurant sidewalk sheds that have taken over many of the city’s on-street parking spaces, the correspondent arranged a Zoom call with the fashion designer Norma Kamali. In 1973, Kamali released her iconic sleeping-bag coat, which, over the years, has been worn by Rihanna, Lady Gaga, and André Leon Talley. Looking at the giant onesies on

the screen, Kamali said, “Hysterical. Who makes them?” The night before, when temperatures were in the low thirties, she’d worn one of her sleeping-bag coats over a sleeping-bag vest (also hers) to an al-fresco restaurant in the Village. “I ate everything hot on the menu,” she said. “Soup, steamed mussels, bouillabaisse, hot tea.” At one point, warmed by the food and an overhead heater, she even removed her coat.

Asked for her own coat’s origin story, Kamali said that, one cold night, she’d been camping by the Delaware River (“I was a little bit hippie-dippie”), when nature called. “I wrapped myself in my sleeping bag, and as I was walking I thought, I’m gonna put sleeves on this when I get home.” The original iteration of Kamali’s coat, chic and slouchy-shouldered, teems with adventure: Kamali recalled that, in 1983, when her staff collected testimonials for the coat’s tenth anniversary, “many people said they slept in them, many people said they made love in them, many people said their cat had kittens in them. One guy said he stole eyeliner from Bloomingdale’s in his coat.”

Flush with a sense of possibility, the correspondent started wearing the two snowsuit-ish bags—a black Thinsulate-filled one from Hygger (\$149, with a temperature rating of thirty-seven de-



grees) and a sky-blue polyester-lined one from Selk’bag (\$99.99, temperature rating: forty-eight degrees)—around town. Everyone he crossed paths with had a take: “Oh, you’re Max from ‘Where the Wild Things Are.’” “You look like the kid from ‘A Christmas Story’ who can’t put his arms down.” “Could we get these on the homeless?” “That shit’s dope!”

If wearing the suits indoors for any length of time begot a clamminess reminiscent of boil-in-bag vegetables (or, for younger readers, sous vide), wearing them outdoors was largely delightful. The Selk’bag was ideal for a therapy session



conducted, over FaceTime, during a walk on a forty-five-degree afternoon.

The correspondent then took the Hygger to Croasdaile Village, his mother's retirement community, in Durham, North Carolina, where he helped her move out of her apartment. A silver-haired male resident stared at the garment nostalgically and said, "It must be nice to wear pants that make noise again." Two women at reception asked if the getup was related to a Slanket or a Snuggie. At a donations center, where the correspondent dropped off several carloads of household goods, he asked an employee if he'd seen any wearable sleeping bags being donated. The employee answered, "We mostly get the lie-down version."

Back in New York, the traditional sleeping bag with armholes and hood from Sportneer (\$37.99, claiming a temperature rating of twenty degrees) stared at the correspondent like an unloved pet. The correspondent had napped comfortably in it one afternoon, but, when he'd unzipped the bottom and put his hands through the arm slits, the bag felt bulbous and dysfunctional, a far cry from the unstructured Issey Miyake vibe he'd been envisioning. On the Zoom call, Kamali had made a suggestion. "I would recommend getting a big belt to tie around the waist," she said. "Cinch it up, hold it in, and you're good to go."

The correspondent decided to brave a wintry evening of outdoor dining. After studying a 2017 cover of *Elle* that featured Solange Knowles in one of Kamali's fire-engine-red sleeping-bag coats, he turned his bag inside out (to avoid emblazoning his chest with the jumbo "Sportneer" logo), and cinched it with a red scarf, creating a Michelin Man look in draped dove-gray polyester. Walking in the floor-length garment required lifting it up, petticoat style, beckoning wisps of arctic air to his lower regions. Nevertheless, the correspondent and his boyfriend climbed on Citi Bikes and hid themselves to an enclosure in front of the Lower East Side Chinese restaurant Fat Choy. When their server goggled at the outfit, the correspondent said, "I'm going for gay Jabba the Hut." She said, "You've hit the nail on the head." Moments later, she proffered food, saying, "For Jabba and his friend." Warmth.

—Henry Alford

## DEPT. OF INVENTION IN MY ROOM



The British musician Jacob Collier, who is twenty-six and has the exuberance of an even younger man, lives with his mother and two sisters in North London, in the house where he grew up. In August, he released "Djesse Vol. 3," which, like his three previous albums, he recorded, mixed, and produced in a music room on the first floor. "This is where I learned to walk," Collier said recently, on a Zoom call. It's also where he learned that he had been nominated for three 2021 Grammy Awards, including Album of the Year. On the Zoom, he wore white headphones, a purple roll-neck sweater, and patchwork trousers given to him by a fan. His hair style resembles Brian Grazer's—exclamation points beaming skyward. Behind him were guitars, a piano, and a keyboard accented with four previously won Grammys. ("I keep them on my Wurlitzer.")

Growing up, he said, "I was very much encouraged to play, far more than I was encouraged to practice." His mother is a classical violinist. Music, at home, was "pretty much a second language." They listened to everything from "Benjamin Britten to Stravinsky to Bach to Björk and Sting and Bobby McFerrin." Early on, he began experimenting. He got into chords—"chords were kind of my first crush"—and harmonies, including those of Stevie Wonder, and began arranging favorite songs "in a strange new way that I found fun or unexpected or crazy or warmhearted." In 2013, he tinkered with Wonder's "Don't You Worry 'Bout a Thing": "stretched it as far as it could go in terms of chords," recorded himself playing multiple parts on multiple instruments and "lots and lots of Jacob voices," filmed "all the different Jacobs," edited them into a grid, and posted the results on YouTube. Within a week, the video had two hundred thousand views, and he'd been e-mailed by Quincy Jones.

"It was very surreal," Collier said. "You know, 'Hi, my name is Quincy.'" They then Skyped and "geeked out about

chords," and Collier soon found himself in Montreux, Switzerland, meeting with Jones and Herbie Hancock. Collier signed to Quincy Jones Productions, and in 2016 he released "In My Room"—a solo album featuring a skillion Jacob voices, in originals and covers of Beach Boys songs and the "Flintstones" theme. Jones has been "almost like a godfather figure in terms of musicality," Collier said. "And Q tells crazy stories, like, 'You'll never believe it, but I was hanging out with Picasso and X,' or 'Stravinsky came over and blah,' or 'Ella Fitzgerald used to say something about,' you know." After a world tour, "with me in the center of a dozen instruments," featuring a real-time vocal synthesizer designed by a grad student at M.I.T., Collier "began to crave the feeling of just jamming." The "Djesse" albums, while kaleidoscopic and Collierian—"Djesse" is a playfully spelled version of his nickname, J.C.—are collaborative.

Collier now has his own Q-like array of friends. His idea of fun is texting a hundred and fifty of them, as he did in 2019, and saying, "Hey, can you send me a 'moon'? Just sing the word 'moon' on any note in B-flat major." They did, and he "made a great big wall of them"—a wall including Chris Martin, David Crosby, Merrill Garbus, Kimbra, Chris Thile, Steve Vai, Ty Dolla \$ign, and "my mum"—"doused them in reverb," and "put them in the Notre Dame." (It was the day of the Notre Dame fire, and he had a reverb preset of the church's interior.) The resulting version of "Moon River" might have startled Henry Mancini:



Jacob Collier



“Thousands of voices singing together,” and bracingly so; in the final verse, the song “goes into a key that doesn’t exist.” Collier can sound like a Richard Feynman of pop composition. “You can unlock other keys by using physics,” he said. “I cracked open a half key for the final verse of ‘Moon River,’ which is something I’ve been wanting to do for such a long time.”

“Djesse Vol. 3,” recorded remotely, is “really a quarantine album,” he said. One of the songs, “He Won’t Hold You,” with Rapsody, “is about coming to peace with being alone. So much of my process is a solitary one. I wanted to craft a journey that described that—a mixture between very chaotic sounds that wrapped themselves around you and a simple melody that can rock you to sleep.” The Grammys have been postponed; meanwhile, he’s working on “Djesse Vol. 4” and planning a ninety-one-city tour, which, like the half key, does and doesn’t exist. “People can go on my Web site and say, ‘I’d like to come to your show in Philadelphia or Florida or Tel Aviv or whatever,’” he said, and sign up, specifics T.B.D. “Someone said once, ‘Don’t wait for things to be possible before doing them.’”

—Sarah Larson

## DEPT. OF GUTS SEWAGE STUDIES



Chris Randall, a field technician with EST Associates, an environmental-field-services company, was standing over a manhole cover in Cambridge, Massachusetts, holding two crowbars, preparing to collect some feces. “‘Waste’ is probably the term we use most often,” he said, pulling on a pair of latex gloves. He wore an orange safety vest, a surgical mask, lab goggles, and plastic sleeves that went up to his elbows.

“It’s called ‘stool’ within the medical community, or ‘biological sample,’” Jennings Heussner, a business-development associate with Biobot Analytics, who accompanied Randall, said. Biobot is a company that specializes in wastewater epidemiology, or the study of sewage for the purpose of tracking the spread of disease. “We are great at euphe-

misms in this business,” Heussner added.

Biobot has a contract with Cambridge to analyze wastewater for COVID-19. The city and the school district used the data to help make decisions about whether schools should stay open; last month, the district switched to remote learning, after high wastewater virus levels and daily cases rose. Water samples are collected every Tuesday morning. Randall hooked the crowbars under the manhole cover and pried it off. A yellow harness hung inside, attached to what looked like a small submarine dangling below. Randall pulled it up, opened the lid, and removed a bottle. “It’s a combination of sink water and toilet water,” he said, holding the bottle up to the light. “It’s not too cloudy.” He carefully poured the contents into specimen tubes, which would be shipped to a lab and analyzed.

Biobot was founded in 2017 by Newsha Ghaeli and Mariana Matus, who met at M.I.T., where Matus was getting a Ph.D. in computational and systems biology and Ghaeli was a research fellow in urban studies and planning. “The overarching question was: Can we look at our sewer systems as being analogous to the human gut?” Ghaeli, the company’s president, said over the phone. “In the same way you can tell a lot about a person by sampling their gut, what can we learn from a community, a neighborhood, from sampling sewage?”

Before COVID, the company worked with a few cities to identify areas where opioid abuse was prevalent, so that officials might intervene before overdoses increased. When the pandemic arrived, Biobot started monitoring wastewater for signs of outbreaks before hospitals became overwhelmed. Testing wastewater turned out to be simpler than testing individuals; a picture of a whole community could be created while people stood in long lines to get nasal swabs. “If one good thing comes from this year, it’s going to be a renewed focus on public health,” Ghaeli said.

Ghaeli was born in Iran and grew up in Canada. When she and Matus began their wastewater-epidemiology research, while still at M.I.T., there were relatively few scientists studying human health via sewage. They quickly learned about the peculiar challenges posed by their research. They got permission to take samples from the manhole closest to their

lab, but the process—especially removing the manhole cover—proved cumbersome. “They’re really heavy,” Ghaeli said. Often, they’d persuade public-works employees to help. Then she and Matus would move in with a homemade apparatus—“a twenty-foot pole and a container for scooping the sewage out,” Ghaeli said. “Mariana and I were both, like, ‘There has to be a better way to collect the sample, because this is kind of gross.’”

They also realized that they needed to collect samples over time, rather than just once. They mapped Cambridge’s sewer system and designed a collection device with a filter that could sit inside manholes and take samples over a twenty-four-hour period. In the summer of 2019, they tasked an intern with devising a magnetic manhole-opener. (“That was a game-changer,” Ghaeli said.) It is exacting work. “Mariana got really sick from a splash in the lab, and then I got a horrible rash from a splash in the field,” Ghaeli said. “That reinforced the need to be very meticulous about protocol and P.P.E.”

Presenting their business model to potential backers requires finesse. Investors aren’t worried about hygiene, though; rather, they express concern that Biobot’s customers are government agencies, which tend to change their plans based on political exigencies. But Ghaeli is excited about all the new data to be gleaned from what people flush down their toilets. “It’s about our health and well-being in general,” she said. “It’s about understanding nutrition disparities in communities, understanding stress levels, pervasive infectious diseases like influenza or Zika virus.” She paused. “Really, the applications are endless.”

—Sheelah Kolhatkar

## GOING GOING DEPT. UNDER THE HOOD



The other morning, in Brooklyn’s Gravesend neighborhood, a heavy-set man in unlaced work boots peered through a chain-link fence at Ken Ben Industries, a tow-impound yard at Shore Parkway and Bay Forty-fourth Street. “I see a truck in here we should prob-



ably get," he barked into his phone.

"What kind?" a voice asked.

"I don't know, man! Yo, hit me up on FaceTime right now." He turned his camera toward the pickup—a red crew-cab Ford F-350 with a hundred-gallon gas tank. "That shit could pull a three-car trailer!" he said.

Another man walked up: "You better know what you're getting, 'cause you could get a piece of shit." He added, "Or you could get a gold mine."

By 8 A.M., the parking lot had filled with conversation—in Russian, Arabic, Spanish, Farsi, English—maybe seventy-five people in all. Three balding men from Staten Island reviewed a list of Vehicle Identification Numbers neatly written on a sheet of notebook paper; a tow-truck driver explained the difference between numerators and denominators to his daughter; a South Brooklyn scrap-yard boss kibbitzed with his competition, a younger man from the Bronx. A guy sitting on the curb, repairing his sneakers with rubber cement, eavesdropped. Others looked at their phones.

Aneudy Gutierrez, a squat man in a tired blue hoodie, and an older man who introduced himself as Drew Chimmy—both veterans of New York City Department of Finance vehicle auctions—stood drinking deli coffee and offering advice.

"Get a good car," Gutierrez said.

"An old car," Chimmy added.

"You gotta think about the key, none of them come with a key."

"Get a Honda."

"Yeah, get a Honda!"

"Avoid Pontiacs."

"Yes. Avoid Pontiacs, Saturns."

"Fuck Saturn!"

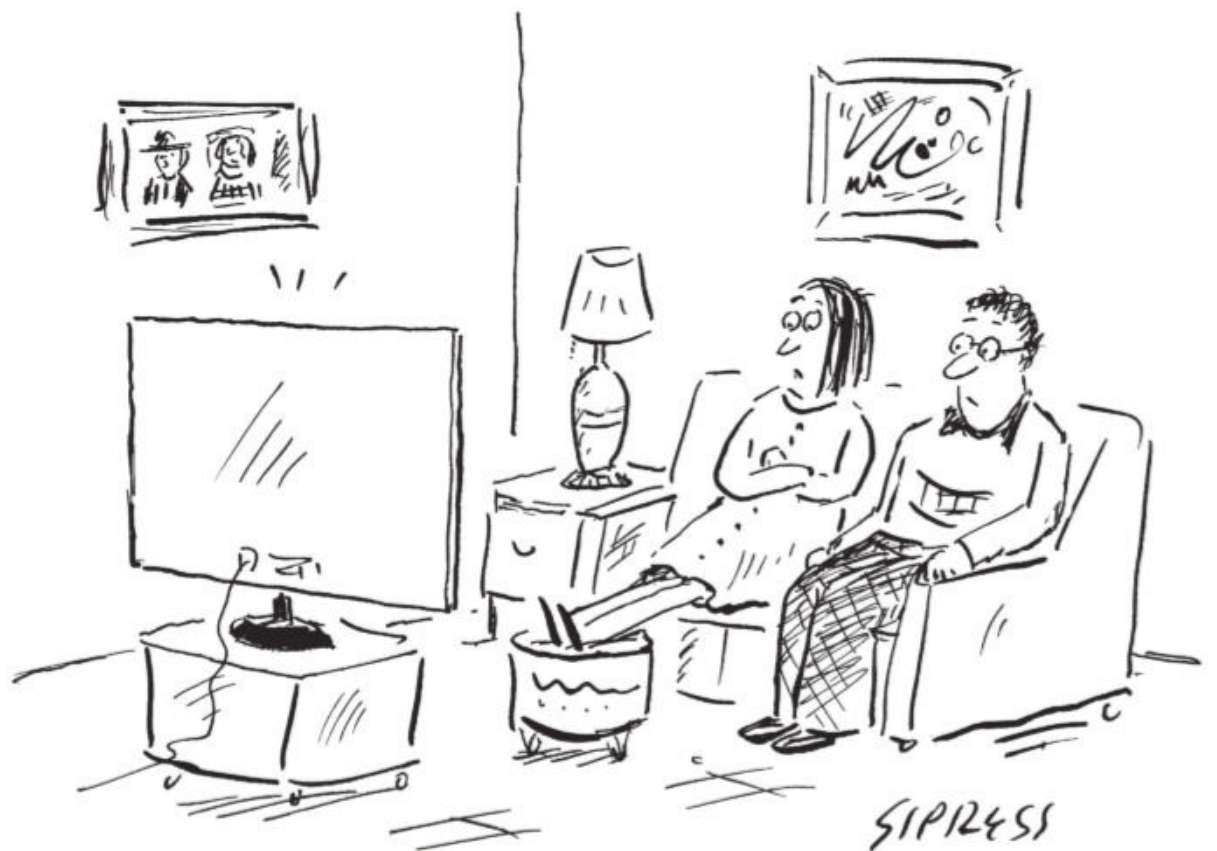
"Certain G.M.C. cars you can't fuck with."

"If you don't got no mechanic on lock, you're straight on drugs."

"If you find the right one, you can drive it clean to Texas."

Near the gate, George and Tina Ortiz, a couple wearing matching Adidas, reminisced about two decades' worth of vehicle auctions. One time, a guy couldn't start the car he'd bought because the fuel tank was full of blocks of cocaine. "I've seen people who fainted," George said. "I remember one guy—"

Tina cut in, "—He spent a lot of money on a car, and then there wasn't no engine in it!"



*"The following contains scenes of people not accepting what they cannot change. Viewer discretion is advised."*

The auction began an hour late, around 10 A.M., after the auctioneer, Dennis Alestra—license plate "BID2BUY"—arrived in a pickup with a custom-built auction cab mounted on the truck bed. Police officers handed out blue surgical masks, and the crowd rushed to inspect the twenty-six impounded trucks, buses, and cars for sale. Chimmy looked under the hood of a 2000 Toyota. "This person didn't care about the car," he said, shaking his head. The oil smelled burned. He walked to the next car on his list, a 2001 Honda Accord. "The inside is clean, so maybe they took care of it," he said, optimistically. But the trunk was full of garbage—fast-food wrappers, a deflated football, and four empty oil bottles, which meant that there was a leak. "I'm still gonna bid," he said. "We'll see."

The auctioneer's mike crackled to life: "All payments are made in cash. There's no going to the cash machine! There's no going to Aunt Tilly's house to go get the money! You got to have the money in your pocket!" Several buyers walked away, disappointed. The first car—a 2003 Chevrolet from Florida—sold for five hundred and fifty dollars. The second—a 2002 G.M.C. from Pennsylvania—went for seven hundred and fifty. Alestra had lit a cigar by the

time he started taking bids for the Honda Accord.

"One-fifty, one-fifty now." Three hands shot up. "One-seventy-five!" Chimmy hesitated, then put his hand in the air. "Two hundred, two-twenty-five bid now, two-fifty, two-seventy-five, now three hundred." The bids were coming quickly. "And now three-fifty now, now three-fifty now!" Alestra's mouth was moving too fast to smoke. A man in an orange beanie waved rubber work gloves above his head. "Three-seventy-five!" Chimmy raised his hand; he was still in the game. "Four-hundred-dollar bid now, four-twenty-five, four-fifty, five hundred, want it now at five hundred?"—a man wearing a T-shirt covering his face cried, "Bullshit!"—"five hundred! Five hundred." Chimmy laughed a loud laugh.

The car had an oil leak, but the price kept going up. "Eight-fifty, nine, nine, nine, would you give me nine, eight-fifty, would you give me nine hundred?" Eventually, three women, all in flip-flops despite the cold, walked up to the auction booth to pay. The car sold for one thousand and seventy-five dollars, plus a ninety-eight-dollar tow-out charge, and another seventy-five for a locksmith to cut a key. Chimmy was long gone.

—Adam Iscoe



ANNALS OF HISTORY

# CIVIL WARS

*In a country riven by racial politics, three women fight for a more perfect union.*

BY DOROTHY WICKENDEN



Senator William H. Seward's enemies in Congress called him a villain and a traitor, but they rarely missed his parties. Invitations to his soirées—which took place several times a week in the eighteen-fifties, during Washington's winter social season—were more coveted than those to the White House. Seward was an impresario of dinner diplomacy. He thought entertaining was indispensable to his political success, and, as of 1854, to the future of the new Republican Party. In those days of polarized politics, it was Republicans who espoused the rights of Black men, and reactionary Democrats who indignantly defended white

male supremacy. One of Seward's regular guests was the Democratic senator Jefferson Davis, of Mississippi, who described slavery in the United States as “a moral, a social, and a political blessing.” After Seward reminded colleagues that the enslaved were human beings, Davis branded him the country's most insidious “sapper and miner” of the Constitution. Black people, he said, “are not fit to govern themselves.” Seward, who prided himself on his persuasive powers, thought little of Davis's attacks. He serenely assumed that if politicians got along outside Congress they were more likely to overcome ideological differences.

*A politician's wife, Frances A. Seward faced injustice with “furor in my soul.”*

He loosened up senators and representatives, Supreme Court Justices, prominent journalists, and foreign diplomats with rich meals and good wine, followed by after-dinner brandy and cigars. His wife, Frances A. Seward, spent much of her time in Washington drawing up guest lists and menus and shopping for provisions. She dressed formally in the morning for visiting and receiving visitors, and more so each evening, especially when Henry, as she called her husband, entertained: braided chignon, breath-constricting corset reinforced with light steel, and wide hoop-skirt overlaid with a heavy gown. She glided through the rooms of Henry's residence, exchanging pleasantries as women flicked their fans at men and appraised one another's silks.

Frances hated these parties. She wrote in her scrapbook, “The moral & intellectual degradation of woman increases in proportion to the homage paid by men to external charms.” By her estimate, dressing and socializing consumed two-thirds of the time of well-off women—making them as vapid as they were presumed to be. In Henry's first months as a senator, Frances wrote to her sister, Lazette, that she hadn't done one important thing all week. The city's hierarchy was more in keeping with a royal court than a democratic republic. Senators' wives had the same status as the wives of Supreme Court Justices—second only to the President's family. Frances couldn't see the point of it all, except to make idle women feel almost as busy and important as their husbands. It was, as she morosely put it, “the life to which I am doomed.”

Henry was the former governor of New York and the putative head of the Republican Party. Frances was a sub-rosa abolitionist. She read William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper the *Liberator*, which damned Washington, with its flourishing slave trade, as one of the foulest places on earth. She was revolted by the sight of men, women, and children being herded in coffles to the slave pens between the Capitol and the White House, to be sold at auction. The women Frances met through Henry did not share her commitment to sweeping reforms for the rights of Blacks and women, and he thought it best for her to keep quiet about such



things. His foes already considered him a dangerous “Black Republican.” If he was seen as unable to control his wife, voters might reconsider their support for him. Frances, an important influence on Henry’s politics, was obligated to hold her tongue in public, but she did what she could. One Northern dinner guest noted that Mrs. Seward had “clearly developed her own place and her own views—which are not always those of her husband. She is said to be much more thorough in her religious and political radicalism than he.” Seward said playfully that night, “My wife doesn’t think much of me.” Mrs. Seward replied, “You do very well as far as you go.”

When Frances Miller met William Seward, she was sixteen, he was twenty-one, and both were filled with youthful idealism. Frances was the daughter of Elijah Miller, an influential county judge in Auburn, in upstate New York. Her mother had died when she was five, and Judge Miller sent her to boarding school and then to Emma Willard’s Female Seminary, in Troy, which gave “young ladies of means” an education as rigorous as at any male college, while preparing them to be the wives of upstanding citizens.

In 1821, during a break from school, Frances went to Florida, New York, to visit a classmate named Cornelia Seward. Cornelia’s older brother, William Henry, was there, and he and Frances were introduced. He was not much to look at. Five feet six, slight and hawk-nosed, he had unkempt rusty-red hair and sloping shoulders that didn’t quite fill his jackets. But Frances, a tall, cerebral beauty, barely noticed his appearance. A quick-witted conversationalist, Seward was steeped, as she was, in history, literature, and current affairs. They almost certainly talked about slavery. It was the year after Congress passed the Compromise of 1820, which allowed slavery in Western territories south of the Missouri line but prohibited it to the north. Henry had no doubt that the issue could be settled amicably if the South would agree to a plan of gradual emancipation.

After graduating from Union College, he studied for the bar and moved

to Auburn, attracted by its growing class of bankers, lawyers, and entrepreneurs—and by Frances. Judge Miller approved of young Seward, and asked him to join his law practice. Henry and Frances fell in love, but that was almost incidental; marriage was a contractual matter overseen by parents. Henry assured his father—a judge and a member of the State Legislature—that Frances would inherit a small fortune, and that she would be “a wife with a strong mind together with a proper respect for me.” Miller agreed to the match on one condition: they must live with him until his death. In return for overseeing the servants and keeping him company, Frances would inherit the house.

Frances imagined a quiet life: Henry would practice law, and together they would raise their children, tend the gardens, and spend evenings reading and talking by the fire. Soon after they married, he punctured this fantasy, telling her, “I fear, abhor, detest, despise and loathe litigation.” He pursued politics instead, which he considered the most important business in the country. She found the constant dealmaking of his chosen career rather squalid.

She did, though, feel passionate about the critical issues the nation faced. As Henry rose from state senator to governor to U.S. senator, she urged him to follow his conscience and not the path of expediency. Henry’s consuming ambition and Frances’s insistence on a retiring life led to an unconventional marriage. They spent more time apart than together: he lived in Albany and Washington, while she mostly stayed in her childhood home with her multigenerational family: father, grandmother, aunt, and children.

The Swards wrote to each other almost every day. He was busy and fulfilled, excitedly describing his work and the people he met. After seeking out the former Vice-President Aaron Burr, by then a somewhat disreputable lawyer in Albany, Henry wrote, “Do I actually grasp the hand which directed only too successfully the fatal ball which laid low Alexander Hamilton?” He cultivated the former President John Quincy Adams, whom he and Frances regarded as the nation’s finest statesman. Adams, serving in his later years as a U.S. representative, saw Henry as

a protégé, telling him, “I trust, Mr. Seward, you will allow me to say that I hope you will do a great deal for our country.” Henry described his wily, ever-present political consultant, Thurlow Weed, as a “magician whose wand controls and directs” the party. As far as Frances was concerned, Weed controlled her husband, too.

With Henry gone for months at a time, Frances grew lonely. She suffered from chronic headaches, insomnia, and depression, ailments that she sensed sprang from the strain of raising two young boys with little help from their father. Doctors were no use. Women afflicted with anything from a toothache to feelings of despair were given a diagnosis of “hysteria,” and casually prescribed laudanum, a highly addictive tincture of opium.

The Swards hoped that time together and a change of scene would help, and in 1835 they took a leisurely summer excursion through Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and Washington. Frances felt restored by family pleasures: picnics, long conversations with Henry, and reading under a shade tree as he fished for trout with their son Frederick. But, as they travelled into Virginia, the roads became rougher and the farmhouses and towns fewer and farther between. The blight of slavery was pervasive. Virginia enslaved four hundred and seventy thousand people—almost half its population. Stopping at a tavern one day, the Swards heard weeping and moaning, and saw ten naked boys tied together by their wrists, being driven forward by a white man bearing a whip. They watched with horror as he led them to a horse trough to drink, and then to a shed, where they lay down, sobbing themselves to sleep. The man had bought the children from several plantations, and was taking them to Richmond—a few of the tens of thousands of people Virginia supplied every year to the cotton and rice fields of the Deep South. Frances, unable to get the scene out of her mind, was struck by the emptiness of Thomas Jefferson’s promise of “equal and exact justice to all men.” She wrote in her journal, “Slavery—slavery the evil effects constantly coming before me and marring everything.”

The trip made a lasting impression



on both of them. In 1838, after seven years as a state senator, Henry successfully ran for governor. Following Weed's advice, he campaigned as a moderate, but he intended to govern as a progressive. For Henry's inaugural message to the legislature, Frances encouraged him to take positions that remained contentious two centuries later. He argued that Black men were imprisoned disproportionately because they were treated abominably and denied access to educational opportunities and jobs. Immigrants, he said, were vital to America's economic growth, and so barriers to citizenship must come down. Prison inmates must be treated humanely, religious discrimination ceased, and public schools opened to all children: "Education banishes the distinctions, old as time, of rich and poor, master and slave. It banishes ignorance and lays axe to the root of crime."

Frances, pregnant again and unable to contemplate greeting five thousand guests at Henry's public reception, didn't travel to Albany for the speech. Nor did she enjoy the time she spent in the Kane Mansion, with its cavernous ballroom, rented furniture, and unfamiliar staff, where Henry began entertaining on an extravagant scale. He thrived on glad-handing; Frances found it difficult to talk with people who did not interest her.

Auburn was a conservative town, but Frances had an ally: Martha Coffin Wright, a rebel who rarely encountered an institution she didn't want to challenge. Martha, married to a practicing lawyer, felt as trapped in her existence as a homemaker as Frances did as the wife of a famous politician. By the eighteen-forties, she and her husband, David, had six children, and, except for an Irish girl who helped in the kitchen, Martha did the domestic labor herself. She took care of her rambunctious brood, sewed the family's clothes by hand, changed soiled hay in the mattresses, and darned the carpets when they grew threadbare. Each fall, she made soap and candles, and canned fruit for the winter. Seeing no

end to her drudgery, Martha complained, "The only way is to grub & work & sweep & dust, & wash & dress children, & make gingerbread, and patch & darn."

Frances, now the mother of four, had a cook, a gardener, a coachman, and housemaids. Martha was envious, but she was a stalwart friend, and mordantly funny about women's plight. She was strongly influenced by her older sister Lucretia Mott, a Quaker minister who lived in Philadelphia—one of the earliest, and most insistent, American proponents of human rights. Unlike most white abolitionists, Lucretia believed that society should be fully integrated, by race and sex. When her Black friend Robert Purvis called her the most beligerent pacifist he'd ever



seen, she welcomed the characterization, saying, "I glory in it." She modelled herself on the early Friends, whom she described as "agitators, disturbers of the peace."

Martha fed Frances's hunger for reform with her stories about her indomitable sister. Frances, in turn, lent Martha books from her library. She had approvingly marked up a printed lecture by an unusually enlightened judge, who said that women were "entitled to the full enjoyment" of unalienable rights. As a girl, Frances had read John Locke and John Stuart Mill, as well as Mary Wollstonecraft's treatise "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman." The judge borrowed from Wollstonecraft's argument that women were men's chattel: "They may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent."

Wollstonecraft's words, written in 1792 in England, were just as true for American women in the nineteenth century. Upon marriage, a woman became her husband's property. She was required by law to turn over to him any money, land, or goods she had inherited. She could not make a will or sign a contract, attend college or enter a profession. She had to confine herself to her "proper sphere"—little more than a form of house arrest. Domestic

abuse was pervasive, but wives had no legal recourse, even when their husbands threatened to kill them. If a woman pursued divorce, she became a social pariah and lost her children and any money she had brought into the marriage.

In December, 1841, Martha and her husband invited Governor and Mrs. Seward to tea at their house, a large, plain saltbox several blocks from the Seward's. The conversation turned to the Married Women's Property Act, an extraordinarily controversial bill before the State Legislature. If passed, the bill would grant wives the right to their inherited property. It had a stunning ramification: women who owned property would pay taxes; if they paid taxes, they could legitimately claim the right to vote. As one alarmed legislator put it, the measure raised "the whole question of woman's proper place in society, in the family and everywhere."

Martha pointed out that the bill would be a boon to husbands who encountered business setbacks. To her embarrassment, David sharply contradicted her, saying that, in nine cases out of ten, when a man failed in business it was because of his wife's extravagance. That night, in a letter to Lucretia, Martha tried to make light of the remark: "Now, I think it a great shame for David to make so ungallant a speech as that." David shared her progressive beliefs on other issues, but, like most men, he thought the idea of women's rights was preposterous. Henry, thankfully, agreed with Frances. A decade earlier, writing to him in anguish to report that *Lazette* was being battered by her drunken husband, Frances had said, "Men have framed laws I believe to uphold themselves in their wickedness." As governor, Henry did his best to get the property act passed, but the legislature voted it down.

For Frances and Martha, the revolution began at home. They raised their children in keeping with Wollstonecraft's dictum "Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience." Martha sent her two youngest to an avant-garde boarding school in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, which was integrated by race and sex. Martha told David, "The bigoted and narrow-minded chose other



schools for their children—those who had not emancipated themselves from the prejudices of education & circumstances.” Frances homeschooled her daughter, Fanny, with a curriculum that included Herodotus, Shakespeare, and Voltaire, along with contemporary greats: Frederick Douglass, Charles Dickens, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Fanny grew up playing with children of both races. Emulating her mother, she supported abolition, women’s rights, and temperance. When a friend asked Frances about the difficulties of overseeing a young girl’s lessons while also preparing her for courtship, she replied that she was educating Fanny “not to be married.”

In the eighteen-thirties, many presumably open-minded abolitionists refused to allow women to join their political organizing, so women in Philadelphia, led by Lucretia Mott and her friends, formed a racially integrated anti-slavery society of their own. They travelled to other cities to hold meetings, and by 1837 there were a hundred and thirty-nine such societies, from Boston to Canton, Ohio. Their members inundated Congress with anti-slavery petitions, and demanded basic freedoms for themselves. One influential activist wrote, “All I ask of our brethren is, that they take their feet from off our necks.”

As Martha saw what Lucretia was accomplishing, she grew more restive. In 1848, forty-one years old and pregnant with her seventh child, she joined Lucretia, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and two other reformers to convene the first meeting in America devoted to women’s rights: the Seneca Falls Convention. It was attended by Frederick Douglass, the world’s best-known abolitionist and the publisher of a recently established newspaper, the *North Star*. Afterward, he expressed support for a resolution that the delegates had vigorously debated, writing, “There can be no reason in the world for denying women the exercise of the elective franchise.” Within days, an obscure rural village noted for making wheelbarrows was being vilified as the seedbed for women’s suffrage.

Martha’s burgeoning activism helped convince Frances that it wasn’t

enough simply to oppose slavery. After Congress passed the draconian Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the question was not whether she would violate it but how. The new law allowed slave catchers to travel to free states to hunt down “runaways,” and required citizens and police to deliver suspected fugitives to federal commissioners, who held perfunctory hearings before returning them to the South. People who protected them could be fined a thousand dollars and sentenced to six months in prison.

The Fugitive Slave Act radicalized the North. Frances wrote to her son Augustus, “The public opinion against Slavery is daily growing warmer—It is impossible to see where it will all end.” Henry opposed the law, and kept up a brisk correspondence with abolitionists, but he was hamstrung by Congress. When a pen pal in Boston urged him to be more strident, Henry pleaded for patience, considering “what gales I have had to encounter from that quarter.” For Frances, the conundrum of her life was trying to act on her convictions without damaging Henry’s career, or appearing to be “extravagant or unwomanly.” She wrote to Lazette, “The Abolitionists & women’s rights

women will act for us,” but “are we sure that we can join them & is it right for us to be silent?”

Frances was catalyzed most of all by a friend far removed from the reactionaries of Auburn and Washington: a freedom seeker from Maryland’s Eastern Shore who, at the age of twenty-seven, had walked out of slavery, leaving behind her parents and siblings and her free husband. Born Araminta Ross, she went by her mother’s first name, Harriet, and her husband’s surname, Tubman.

Harriet had begun planning her escape in the fall of 1849, when she learned that she was to be sold to a slaveholder in the Deep South. Her destination was Philadelphia, a city where people of both races sought to overthrow slavery, and where Blacks could find jobs for themselves and schools for their children. To her disappointment, her husband, John, refused to go with her. He had steady work and no desire to take his chances elsewhere. If he was caught fleeing with a fugitive slave, he was liable to be sold into slavery, shot in the back, or torn apart by bloodhounds. Harriet left alone, relying on her wits and on



*“Do you think my followers will mind if ‘Martin’s Theory of Everything’ ends after just three installments?”*



contacts in the Underground Railroad.

Slavers knew that abolitionists helped enslaved people vanish, but they couldn't fathom how. As one of them said, fugitives were concealed "in a labyrinth that has no clue." A loose network with no central office or command structure, the railroad was staffed by free and enslaved African-Americans, white businessmen and housewives, sailors and captains, ministers and farmers, Quakers, Unitarians, Methodists, and others who believed slavery was the worst of all sins. Freedom seekers sometimes dressed as members of the opposite sex or attempted to pass as white. They hid in cramped root cellars and rat-infested holds of boats, travelled on trains with forged papers, or by foot after dark, arriving at safe houses on moonless nights and leaving before the cows were milked.

Harriet made her way from Poplar Neck to Philadelphia, a distance of nearly a hundred miles. When she arrived, she was assisted by the city's vigilance committee, founded by Lucretia Mott's friend Robert Purvis to help "colored persons in distress." As she began to plot a series of rescue missions into Maryland, she introduced herself to every abolitionist in town, and soon became close with Lucretia. It isn't known how Harriet met Frances and Martha, but it is likely that Lucretia introduced her to Martha during one of her visits to Philadelphia. Martha, in turn, likely introduced Harriet to Frances in Auburn.

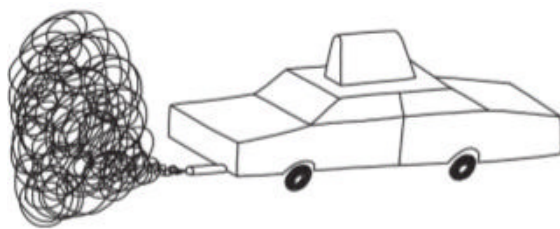
Very few people ever returned to the place they'd risked their lives fleeing, but, after Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, Harriet began her incursions into the Eastern Shore, escorting out family members and other freedom seekers a few at a time. She told her first biographer, Sarah Bradford, "I wouldn't trust Uncle Sam with my people no longer; I brought them all clear off to Canada." England had long since abolished slavery in its colonies, and in 1857 Harriet moved to the town of St. Catharines, where she had deposited numerous siblings, cousins, and friends.

Frances and Martha were transfixed by the story of Harriet's life. She couldn't remember her oldest sister, who was sold when she was three years old. Two

other sisters had been leased away by their enslaver, as her mother pleaded for mercy. Harriet had scars on her neck from whippings at the age of six or seven by a sadistic woman who'd refused to instruct her about her chores, then thrashed her repeatedly for failing to do them to her liking. She had periodic blackouts from a head injury she'd suffered when an overseer hurled an iron weight at an enslaved man at a drygoods store and hit Harriet instead.

The trouble in her head, as Harriet called it, gave rise to visions that she considered prophetic. Although she could not read, she had memorized long passages of the Bible. To Frances, an observant Episcopalian, she brought to mind Isaiah: "Forget the former things; do not dwell in the past. I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."

Whatever Frances's and Martha's frustrations with their husbands, it never would occur to them to strike out on their own. Harriet had made the solitary walk to Philadelphia expecting that, when she returned to Maryland, John Tubman would accompany her back North. Instead, he had taken another wife. Others subjected to such adversities would be embittered or broken. Harriet was wry, matter-of-fact, and undeviating. She finished one expedition only to plot the next. For Frances, this small, unstoppable woman, some eighteen years younger but apparently unafraid of the



slave power of the South and the lawmakers in Washington, embodied the exigency and the potential of abolition.

Frances began her revolt modestly. In Washington, she allied herself with Emily Howland, the daughter of an Underground Railroad conductor near Auburn, who had moved to the capital to teach at the Normal School for Colored Girls, founded by another abolitionist. Frances gave money to the

school, and she and Fanny often visited with gifts of books and mittens. She also helped Howland develop a private aid channel for freedom seekers. Howland assisted one woman who needed to raise nine hundred dollars to buy her children out of slavery; the "owner" had set a price and then doubled it. Howland commented acidly, "The market value of humanity must have risen in Virginia." Frances, who had helped the woman once, made a second donation.

The death of Judge Miller, in 1851, freed Frances to take direct action. She had always followed his rules in Auburn, just as she did Henry's in Washington. Now, with the Married Women's Property Act finally passed, Frances became the legal owner of her father's house, as well as considerable property he'd bought up around town. The original basement kitchen and dining room were empty after an extensive remodeling, and she turned the rooms into a haven for freedom seekers. Henry approved of the idea. In a speech in Cleveland in 1848, he had advised extending a "cordial welcome to the fugitive who lays his weary limbs at your door," and defending him "as you would your paternal gods." He also rather enjoyed the subterfuge. Who would suspect the proper Mrs. Seward of being a dangerous dissident?

On cold nights, Frances kept a fire going downstairs, and, when someone knocked at the back door, she had bedding and a hot meal prepared. In the spring and summer, she used the woodshed behind the house as a shelter that she called her dormitory. On one occasion when Henry was at home and Frances was off visiting a friend, he couldn't resist writing to her about a pair of unexpected guests: "The 'underground railroad' works wonderfully. Two passengers came here last night." The Seward's bulldog, Watch, mistaking them for intruders, bit one of the men. Henry remarked, "I am against extending suffrage to dogs. They are just like other classes of parvenues."

In December, 1858, Frances found herself dreading the New Year. It was not only the looming obligations of the Washington social season. The United States had been moving ineluc-



tably toward self-annihilation, as the westward expansion became a source of bitter debate. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act enabled voters in the Western territories to decide for themselves whether to permit slavery. A large migration of settlers, subsidized by abolitionists in the East, set out to insure that Kansas entered the Union as a free state. They found themselves facing off against pro-slavery militias, led by David Rice Atchison, a recently retired U.S. senator from Missouri. The militias, dubbed Border Ruffians by the Northern press, vowed to “lynch and hang, tar and feather, and drown every white-livered Abolitionist who dares to pollute our soil.”

Martha told an Auburn friend that she expected the pioneers to “maintain their ground manfully, and not be driven off by the idle threats of the Missourians.” But Atchison and his men meant what they said. Kansas’s first legislative elections, in 1855, empowered the new legislature to write a state constitution, which would determine the state’s position on slavery. The day before the polls opened, a thousand well-armed militia members crossed the border, intent on voter suppression and fraud. Carrying preprinted ballots, they fanned out to free-state towns, stuffing ballot boxes and accosting voters and election judges. When the Ruffians’ candidates won, the besieged free-staters refused to accept the results of a patently fixed election. Rejecting what they called the “bogus legislature,” they established a rival government and set out to write their own constitution.

“Bleeding Kansas” further inflamed the national frenzy over slavery. On May 19, 1856, Frances’s friend Senator Charles Sumner, an intemperate abolitionist from Massachusetts, gave a speech titled “The Crime Against Kansas.” In it, he eviscerated Democratic colleagues and President Franklin Pierce for their complicity in the “incredible atrocity of the Assassins and of the Thugs.” Two days later, the Border Ruffians sacked the free-state town of Lawrence. The day after that, the South Carolina congressman Preston Brooks approached Sumner in the well of the Senate, where he sat bent over his desk franking a stack of printed copies of his speech, to be mailed to



*“Let me tell you something I learned from life as I’ve experienced it through the media.”*

sympathizers. Before Sumner could stand, Brooks began striking him with his cane, with such force that it splintered. “I wore my cane out completely,” Brooks remarked, “but saved the head which is gold.” Sumner was carried home unconscious. Frances, aghast at the near-fatal attack on her friend and the savagery of the Missourians, wrote that the events had “deepened that furor in my soul.”

The Supreme Court’s decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, in 1857, made the spread of slavery seem inexorable. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, writing for the majority, declared that neither the Declaration of Independence nor the Constitution defined Black men and women as citizens—they were, in his words, “beings of an inferior order.” The decision repealed the Missouri Compromise, insuring the perpetuation of slavery across the United States. As Republicans and abolitionists warned of civil war, the new President—James Buchanan, a Democrat and an enthusiastic supporter of the Kansas-Nebraska

Act—predicted blithely that “all good citizens” would “cheerfully submit” to the decision’s effects.

Henry issued a slashing response to *Dred Scott*, followed by a speech in Rochester in which he defined slavery as “an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces.” He told the crowd, “A revolution has begun.” Privately, though, Frances worried that Henry’s good will sometimes got the better of him. After visiting an old colleague and his wife on their plantation in Culpeper, Virginia, he wrote to her about a husking “frolic” he witnessed—a “merry and noisy scene.” He added, sounding like a slaveholder himself, that his hosts treated their “hands” with “kindness, and they appear clean, tidy, and comfortable.”

She also suspected that Henry’s decade in the Senate had made him too quick to compromise. By late 1858, Henry was thinking about running for President, and he maintained good relations with Stephen A. Douglas, the Illinois senator who had introduced the



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Do not take XOFLUZA if you are allergic to baloxavir marboxil or any of the ingredients in XOFLUZA.

##### Serious side effects of XOFLUZA may include:

- **Allergic reaction.** Get emergency medical help right away if you develop any of the following signs or symptoms of an allergic reaction:
  - trouble breathing
  - swelling of your face, throat or mouth
  - skin rash, hives or blisters
  - dizziness or lightheadedness

**The most common side effects of XOFLUZA** in clinical studies were diarrhea, bronchitis, nausea, sinusitis, and headache. These are not all the possible side effects of XOFLUZA.

Please see adjacent page for Brief Summary of full Prescribing Information.



## Brief Summary

XOFLUZA® (zoh-FLEW-zuh) (baloxavir marboxil) tablets

This is only a brief summary of important information about XOFLUZA. Talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist to learn more.

## What is XOFLUZA?

XOFLUZA is a prescription medicine used to:

- Treat the flu (influenza) in people 12 years of age and older who have had flu symptoms for no more than 48 hours.
- Prevent the flu in people 12 years of age and older following contact with a person who has the flu.

It is not known if XOFLUZA is safe and effective in children less than 12 years of age. XOFLUZA does not treat or prevent illness that is caused by infections other than the influenza virus. XOFLUZA does not prevent bacterial infections that may happen with the flu.

**Do not take XOFLUZA if you** are allergic to baloxavir marboxil or any of the ingredients in XOFLUZA.

**Before taking XOFLUZA**, tell your healthcare provider about all of your medical conditions, including if you are:

- **Pregnant or plan to become pregnant.** It is not known if XOFLUZA can harm your unborn baby.
- **Breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed.** It is not known if XOFLUZA passes into your breast milk.

**Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take:** Keep a list that includes all prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements, and show it to your healthcare provider and pharmacist. Talk to your healthcare provider before you receive a live flu vaccine after taking XOFLUZA.

## How should I take XOFLUZA?

- Take XOFLUZA exactly as directed by your healthcare provider or pharmacist.
- Take XOFLUZA with or without food.
- Do not take XOFLUZA with dairy products, calcium fortified beverages, laxatives, antacids, or oral supplements containing iron, zinc, selenium, calcium or magnesium.
- If you take too much XOFLUZA, go to the nearest emergency room right away.

## What are the possible side effects of XOFLUZA?

**XOFLUZA may cause serious side effects, including:**

**Allergic reactions.** Get emergency medical help right away if you develop any of these signs and symptoms of an allergic reaction:

- Trouble breathing
- Swelling of your face, throat or mouth
- Skin rash, hives or blisters
- Dizziness or lightheadedness

**The most common side effects of XOFLUZA** for treatment of the flu in adults and adolescents include:

- Diarrhea, bronchitis, sinusitis, headache, and nausea

XOFLUZA is not effective in treating infections other than influenza. Other kinds of infections can appear like flu or occur along with flu and may need different kinds of treatment. Tell your healthcare provider if you feel worse or develop new symptoms during or after treatment with XOFLUZA or if your flu symptoms do not start to get better.

These are not all the possible side effects of XOFLUZA. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects.

## General information about the safe and effective use of XOFLUZA.

Medicines are sometimes prescribed for purposes other than those listed in a Patient Information leaflet. Do not use XOFLUZA for a condition for which it was not prescribed. Do not give XOFLUZA to other people, even if they have the same symptoms that you have. It may harm them. You can ask for information about XOFLUZA that is written for health professionals.

**You are encouraged to report side effects to Genentech by calling 1-888-835-2555 or to the FDA by visiting [www.fda.gov/medwatch](http://www.fda.gov/medwatch) or calling 1-800-FDA-1088.**

For more information, go to [www.xofluza.com](http://www.xofluza.com)

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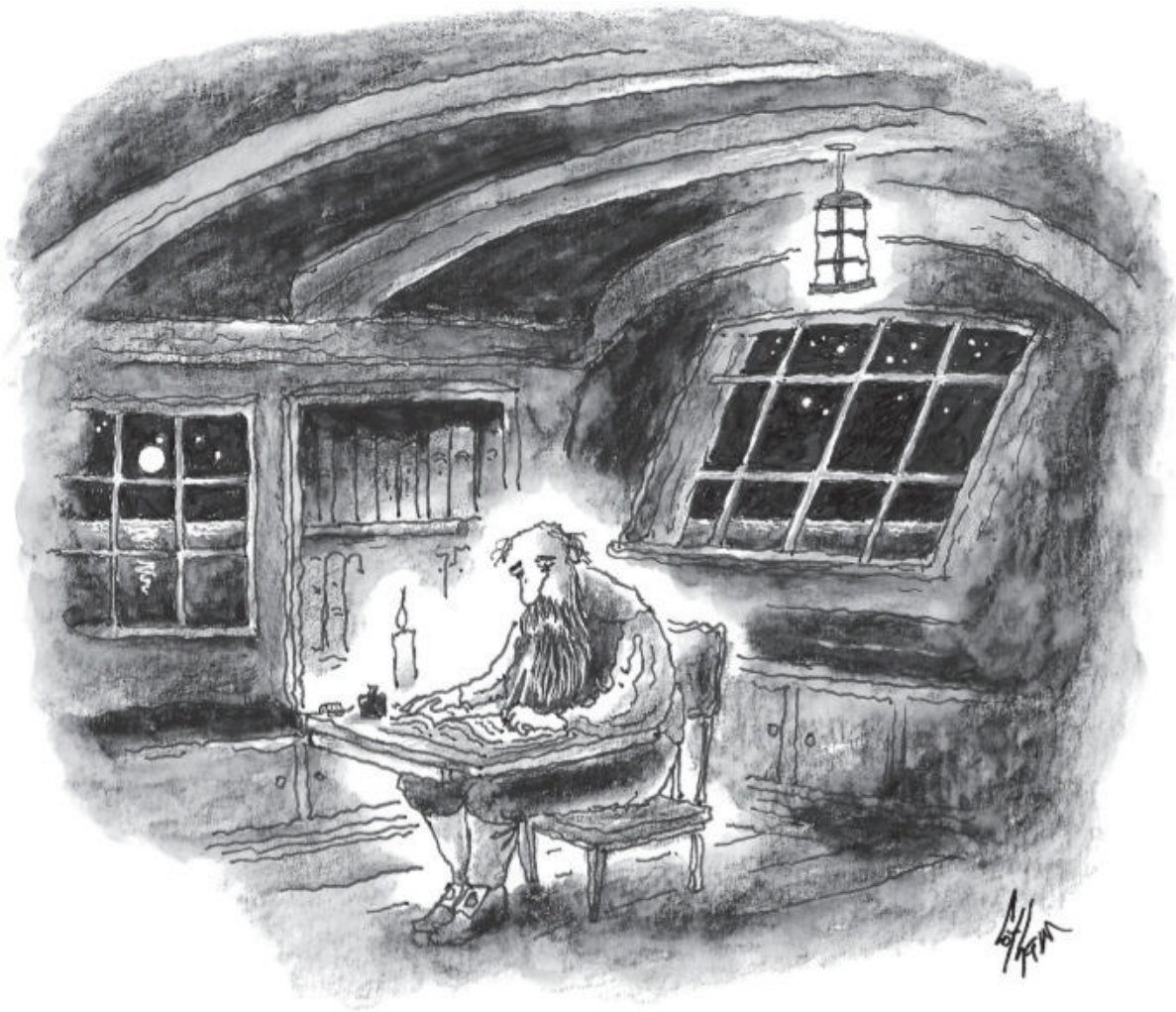
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*"I am wearying of the crew's constant repetition  
of the same old sea shanties."*

Kansas-Nebraska Act. Henry thought that Douglas might even switch parties, after pro-slavery Kansas officials pushed through their state constitution in a transparent effort, as Douglas himself called it, "to cheat & defraud the majority." Frances wished that she, like Henry, could "generously forget" all that Douglas had done to advance slavery, but, she wrote, "I cannot."

As New Year's approached, Frances doubted that Henry's opulent entertaining and his excessive courtesy toward slavery's apologists would do anything to hold the country together. She did impose a modicum of restraint on his open house. Fanny wrote in her diary that, as she watched the kitchen staff prepare, she was glad to find that her mother had ruled out a whiskey punch. A would-be vegetarian, Fanny added that she was upset to see the cook scald "eight unfortunate terrapins" to death. "If I could influence everyone by doing so, I would never taste animal food," she wrote. "At any rate I will not eat turtle, terrapins, lobsters, eels, and frogs."

By noon on January 1st, the dining-

room table was set: turkey, ham, tongue, and oysters, chicken salad garnished with hard-boiled eggs and celery, and, for dessert, delicacies from Henry's favorite bakery in New York. The centerpiece was a white-frosted plum cake decorated with the state coat of arms and a banner emblazoned with Henry's name. As Democrats laughed and filled their plates alongside Republicans, Frances could think only of Harriet Tubman's infiltrations of Maryland, and the desperate people Emily Howland was helping. After the final guests departed, Henry complacently remarked that they must have entertained four hundred people.

The party triggered an internal rebellion that had been gathering force in Frances ever since Henry had first run for office. She wrote to Lazette a few days after the reception, admitting that she had failed as a political wife, and concluding, "There are so many things that Henry and I cannot think alike about." Then she announced to him that she would no longer serve as his hostess. Henry, astonished, saw her

decision not as an assertion of independence but as an admission of physical weakness. He'd once chillingly told a colleague, "She is too noble a woman to think of parting from and too frail to hope to keep for long." He tried to cajole her, but she was adamant.

In mid-February, as the Seward household prepared for a formal dinner, Frances came down with a bad case of the flu. Henry wrote in exasperation to their son Frederick, who was working as a journalist in Albany, saying that he was "left in straits." He needed someone to act "as and for Mrs. Seward, who is too feeble to preside." Emphasizing that Frances's duties were almost as onerous as his, he said that Frederick's wife, Anna, was the only one who was qualified: "I want her to come, stay, and do it." Anna, an obedient daughter-in-law and placid society matron, took to the job with apparent ease. Frances showed no hint of regret.

In Auburn that spring, Frances began to think more daringly about her life. Emily Howland taught free Black girls at the Normal School and ran her branch line on the Underground Railroad. Martha Wright organized conventions for women's rights and for abolition, braving hecklers and mobs. Harriet Tubman had returned to the Eastern Shore some dozen times, even rescuing her elderly parents and taking them to Canada.

Frances shared Harriet's love of family, and knew that her parents were unwell and unhappy. Harriet's father had rheumatism; her mother blamed her for depositing them in a remote, frigid, foreign town, then rushing off with no guarantee that she would return. On her journeys, Harriet was hungry and exposed to the elements for weeks at a time. With the lives of her "passengers" utterly dependent on her decisions, she had to be constantly alert to the rustle of branches, the barking of bloodhounds, the muted exchanges among slave catchers on horseback. Auburn, midway across New York State, would be a far more convenient location for Harriet and her parents. One of the parcels of land that Frances had inherited was about a mile from her house on South Street. It included seven acres of farmland, a new frame house, a barn, and a



few outbuildings. She decided that Harriet should have it.

The idea could hardly have been more subversive. Women rarely sold property—let alone to fugitive slaves. Frances would be flouting the Fugitive Slave Act just as Henry was beginning his bid for President. Yet he strenuously opposed that law, and the land belonged to Frances. For years, the Swards had been integrating Auburn neighborhoods, building houses on the lots they owned and selling them inexpensively to immigrant and Black families. The state permitted Black men to vote if they owned at least two hundred and fifty dollars' worth of property, and the Swards' real-estate sales made that possible for a number of Auburn residents. As Frances saw it, the transaction with Harriet would simply be a more assertive act of conscience.

Harriet was in no financial position to buy a house, and Frances might have made the place a gift, if it had been up to her. But Harriet, who gratefully accepted contributions for her Underground Railroad work, refused outright charity. The Swards' youngest son, twenty-year-old Will, who was starting a banking career in Auburn, helped Frances draw up the paperwork for a twelve-hundred-dollar mortgage. They settled on a modest twenty-five-dollar down payment and quarterly remittances of ten dollars with interest. Conveniently for Henry, the sale was completed while he was on an eight-month tour of Europe, Palestine, and Egypt.

Harriet and her parents moved into her house in the spring of 1859. The political climate in the North had changed enough that she was raising money by speaking publicly, particularly in and around Boston, where the leading abolitionists were well-heeled and generous. On July 4, 1859, she appeared before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, in Framingham, her largest audience yet. She was introduced by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Boston Brahmin who was a radical minister, a militant abolitionist, and a women's-rights advocate. He told the audience that Harriet Tubman was looking to raise funds for a "little place" she had bought for her parents. She secured thirty-seven dol-

lars in donations, and returned to Auburn to "resume the practice of her profession."

Harriet Tubman didn't stay long in her new home. Civil war broke out in April, 1861, and the following spring she persuaded Northern officials to sanction a new profession: she would go to Union-occupied Port Royal, South Carolina, and become a kind of guerrilla operative. The Union Army had barely begun admitting Black men, much less Black women, but Harriet would not be deterred. She explained her sense of urgency by citing the Book of Exodus: "The good Lord has come down to deliver my people, and I must go and help Him."

Just before Harriet departed, Frances used the same passage in a letter to Henry: "I think we may safely assume that the cry of the oppressed has reached the ear of God and that he has 'come down to deliver them.'" For Frances, as for Harriet and Martha, the war was a "holy cause." There would be no peace, she wrote, without a "promise of liberty to all." Henry advised her to think strategically instead.

He had lost the Republican nomination of 1860, for the reason that everyone assumed he would win it: his thirty-year anti-slavery record. Abraham Lincoln, who'd been more circumspect on the issue, was seen as a safer choice. Henry had to settle for the position of Secretary of State, but he grandly thought of himself as the "premier" of the new Administration. Lincoln initially reinforced that impression. Staying in Springfield until his Inauguration, he left Henry to contend with a national emergency: the impending secession of all seven states of the Deep South. In his final speech before the Senate, Henry emphasized that Lincoln's goal was not emancipation but restoration of the Union: "In political affairs, we cannot always do what seems to us absolutely best." The Administration would even support a constitutional amendment barring Congress from abolishing slavery in any state. Frances was appalled, writing to accuse Henry of abandoning convictions he'd held his entire

life: "Compromises based on the idea that the preservation of the Union is more important than the liberty of nearly 4,000,000 human beings cannot be right."

Two years into the cataclysmic war, Lincoln found a way to justify emancipation, as a "military necessity." Frances greeted the proclamation with relief, but not euphoria. She was equally subdued when the Thirteenth Amendment eventually passed, on January 31, 1865, inscribing into the Constitution the eradication of slavery. Back in Auburn, she read the *Herald Tribune's* report about the giddy scene in Washington. The visitors' galleries were full, and senators and Supreme Court Justices squeezed onto the House floor. Finally, Speaker Schuyler Colfax stood and gavelled the room to order, announcing in a quavering voice that the ayes had a hundred and nineteen votes, the nays fifty-six. As Democrats looked on stonily, Republicans threw their hats in the air, cheering and roaring. Women in the gallery waved their handkerchiefs. Artillery at the Capitol fired a hundred-gun salute. The *Tribune's* headline declared, "FREEDOM TRIUMPHANT. COMMENCEMENT OF A NEW ERA. DEATH OF SLAVERY."

It was a historic victory, but it had been won as much by political horse-trading as by deep principle. Henry and Lincoln, in a months-long backroom campaign, had lobbied wavering representatives with bribes and offers of jobs. And, Frances thought, it was too soon

to celebrate. The amendment still had to be ratified by three-quarters of the states. Half a million men had died in the war, and it was not over. General William Tecumseh Sherman was moving through the Carolinas, and Ulysses S. Grant was eight months into his siege of Petersburg.

There were rumors that rebels would attempt to assassinate the President. After reading about the joyous outpouring in the House, Frances wrote Henry a bracingly solemn note: "I congratulate you on the passage of the Constitutional amendment which I know you had much at heart. The prospect of abolishing slavery throughout the United States is indeed cheering." The battle for equality had barely begun. ♦





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## SHOUTS & MURMURS



# WAITING FOR TO-GO

BY SAM LIPSYTE

**SCENE:** *A living room. Evening. V sits on the sofa. E sits in a chair. Both gaze into their phones.*

**V:** On my walk . . .  
**E:** Yeah . . .  
**V:** I heard today . . . on my walk.  
**E:** Yes. O.K., I'm listening.  
**V:** I heard an interesting podcast.  
**E:** What about?  
**V:** I don't know. It was the Neolithic or something. The way people . . . lived.  
**E:** Neo . . . Is that the Stone Age?  
**V:** But they had copper. Like a copper axe.  
**E:** That sounds nice.  
**V:** I don't know about that. It was hard going. The Neolithic.  
**E:** No, I just mean copper is nice. Like that fancy pan I ordered.  
**V:** You ordered that?  
**E:** Yeah.  
**V:** I thought we decided not to order that.  
**E:** We said if it was reduced.  
**V:** It's still money.  
**E:** You were the one who wanted it.  
**V:** I know.  
**E:** To control the heat, you said.  
**V:** I said, I know.  
**E:** It was reduced. I was going to surprise you.  
**V:** That's sweet. I'm just wondering now if we really need a copper pan.  
**E:** Should we get the axe instead?

**SCENE:** *The same living room. Later that evening, or another. E sits on the sofa. V sits in a chair. They gaze into their phones.*

**E:** Ha! My God. That's amazing!  
**V:** What is it?  
**E:** No.  
**V:** What?  
**E:** Nothing.  
**V:** Oh.

**SCENE:** *Same living room. A bit later. V and E sit on the sofa, in the glow of a large screen. They gaze into their phones.*

**E:** Should I turn it off?  
**V:** What?  
**E:** Are you still watching?  
**V:** Are you?  
**E:** Didn't we see this episode?  
**V:** Did we?  
**E:** Yeah. Where the daughter does that singsong thing in the mirror and the detective finds the old guy crying in the boathouse?  
**V:** We saw that?  
**E:** Look, she's in the boathouse now.  
**V:** Is that the same detective?  
**E:** There's only been one detective. With the braids.  
**V:** O.K. Wait, she's the detective?  
**E:** Who did you think she was?  
**V:** I don't know.  
*(Pause.)*  
**E:** I guess we can just watch it again.  
**V:** Fine with me.



**SCENE:** *Still the living room. Another day. E wears earbuds, sits on the sofa, stares into a laptop open on the coffee table.*

**E:** Right. *(Pause)* That was my point. The contracts can't go out until Wendy looks at them. Where is Wendy? *(Pause)* Are you sure? *(Pause)* That doesn't make sense. She already went for a run and to the store. *(Pause)* What do you mean? *(Pause)* I don't think it's weird that I know that. I'm her supervisor. Look, I have to go. I've got a big call in five minutes. *(Pause)* Yeah, both of them.

*(V walks in, gazes down at phone.)*

**V:** Hi. Have you seen my—

**E:** No. I really haven't.

**V:** O.K., no worries. Do you need anything?

**E:** Don't you have clients today?

**V:** Later.

**E:** Well, could you do me a favor?

**V:** Of course. Anything.

**E:** Do you think it's at all possible that you could find some corner or closet or some fucking crevice in this motherfucking bullshit how-about-I-just-kill-myself-now apartment that you could just sort of, I don't know, fold yourself into and disappear for the next six or seven hours?

*(Pause.)*

**V:** I guess anything's possible.

**E:** Good.

**V:** How about I just go out?

**E:** You're always going out. Running away.

**V:** I just walk to the river.

**E:** Is it safe to be out there so much? This is bigger than us, you know.

**V:** O.K.

**E:** But maybe you should go. We need wine. At least two wines. *(He looks down at the laptop.)* Shit! Hi, Paul! Hi, Layla! The contracts are on their way!

**SCENE:** *This room of living. Afternoon-ish. E is on the sofa. V is in the chair.*

**E:** When's dinner?

**V:** What time is it?

**E:** I don't know.

*(They gaze at their phones.)*

**V:** I ordered some food to go. I'll pick it up soon. But we have to wait. It's not ready yet.

**E:** I'll go in a minute.

**V:** Or I can go.

*(They do not go.)*

**SCENE:** *Yes, the living room. Evening. V and E sit on the sofa. Takeout containers are on the coffee table.*

**V:** If the guy's demented, how does he remember where in the boathouse his mother hid the Nazi photos?

**E:** The detective just explained it. How dementia works.

**V:** Wait, which one is—

**E:** Don't.

**V:** Sorry. *(Pause)* You know, I was thinking today. On my walk?

**E:** O.K.

**V:** I was listening to this podcast about ancient shepherds. It wasn't easy. Being one.

**E:** I bet not.

**V:** Made me realize. Hate to say it. I'm grateful. Bad as everything is, we are doing better than most. We have a roof over our heads, food, jobs. And I'm grateful to have you. I mean that. You're, like, a good person, you know?

**E:** I'm *like* a good person?

**V:** No, I mean you're a good person.

**E:** Oh.

**V:** And I'm grateful.

**E:** I'm grateful, too. Also, I got laid off today.

**V:** What?

**E:** We all did. Wendy. Paul. Layla.

**V:** When were you going to tell me?

**E:** After this episode.

**SCENE:** *The room, barely alive. V enters, holding a package.*

**V:** Didn't you hear the door? This came. Can I open it?

*(E stares at phone. V opens the package and lifts out a copper saucepan.)*

**V:** Shiny.

**E:** What's that?

**V:** Look! It's so shiny.

*(E gazes up at the copper saucepan, transfixed. V's phone makes a noise. E's phone makes a different, similar noise.)*

**E:** Oh, my God.

**V:** What is it?

**E:** Holy shit. I can't believe it.

**V:** It's happening.

**E:** They said it might. They kept saying that.

**V:** Well, now it's happening.

*(E and V look at each other, then back down at their phones.) ♦*



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# BAD DREAM

*On waking up in America.*

BY KARLA CORNEJO VILLAVICENCIO



If you are an undocumented person anywhere in America, some of the things you do to make a dignified life for yourself and your loved ones are illegal. Others require a special set of skills. The elders know some great tricks—crossing deserts in the dead of night, studying the Rio Grande for weeks to find the shallowest bend of river to cross, getting a job on their first day in the country, finding apartments that don't need a lease, learning English at public libraries, community colleges, or from "Frasier." I would not have been able to do a single thing that the elders have done. But the elders often have only one hope for survival,

which we tend not to mention. I'm talking about children. And no, it's not an "anchor baby" thing. Our parents have kids for the same reasons as most people, but their sacrifice for us is impossible to articulate, and its weight is felt deep down, in the body. That is the pact between immigrants and their children in America: they give us a better life, and we spend the rest of that life figuring out how much of our flesh will pay off the debt.

I am a first-generation immigrant, undocumented for most of my life, then on DACA, now a permanent resident. But my real identity, the one that follows me around like a migraine, is that

I am the *daughter* of immigrants. As such, I have some skills of my own.

You pick them up young. Something we always hear about, because Americans love this shit, is that immigrant children often translate for their parents. I began doing this as a little girl, because I lost my accent, dumb luck, and because I was adorable in the way that adults like, which is to say I had large, frightened eyes and a flamboyant vocabulary. As soon as doctors or teachers began talking, I felt my parents' nervous energy, and I'd either answer for them or interpret their response. It was like my little Model U.N. job. I was around seven. My career as a professional daughter of immigrants had begun.

In my teens, I began to specialize. I became a performance artist. I accompanied my parents to places where I knew they would be discriminated against, and where I could insure that their rights would be granted. If a bank teller wasn't accepting their I.D., I'd stroll in with an oversized Forever 21 blazer, red lipstick, a slicked-back bun, and fresh Stan Smiths. I brought a pleather folder and made sure my handshake broke bones. Sometimes I appealed to decency, sometimes to law, sometimes to God. Sometimes I leaned back in my chair, like a sexy gangster, and said, "So, you tell me how you want my mom to survive in this country without a bank account. You close at four, but I have all the time in the world." Then I'd wink. It was vaudeville, but it worked.

My parents came to America in their early twenties, naïve about what awaited them. Back in Ecuador, they had encountered images of a wealthy nation—the requisite flashes of Clint Eastwood and the New York City skyline—and heard stories about migrants who had done O.K. for themselves there. But my parents were not starry-eyed people. They were just kids, lost and reckless, running away from the dead ends around them.

My father is the only son of a calous mother and an absent father. My mother, the result of her mother's rape, grew up cared for by an aunt and uncle. When she married my father, it was for the reasons a lot of women marry: for

*For the undocumented, no amount of achievement can guarantee dignity.*



love, and to escape. The day I was born, she once told me, was the happiest day of her life.

Soon after that, my parents, owners of a small auto-body business, found themselves in debt. When I was eighteen months old, they left me with family and settled in Brooklyn, hoping to work for a year and move back once they'd saved up some money. I haven't asked them much about this time—I've never felt the urge—but I know that one year became three. I also know that they began to be lured by the prospect of better opportunities for their daughter. Teachers had remarked that I was talented. My mother, especially, felt that Ecuador was not the place for me. She knew how the country would limit the woman she imagined I would become—Hillary Clinton, perhaps, or Princess Di.

My parents sent loving letters to Ecuador. They said that they were facing a range of hardships so that I could have a better life. They said that we would reunite soon, though the date was unspecified. They said that I had to behave, not walk into traffic—I seem to have developed a habit of doing this—and work hard, so they could send me little gifts and chocolates. I was a toddler, but I understood. My parents left to give me things, and I had to do other things in order to repay them. It was simple math.

They sent for me when I was just shy of five years old. I arrived at J.F.K. airport. My father, who seemed like a total stranger, ran to me and picked me up and kissed me, and my mother looked on and wept. I recall thinking she was pretty, and being embarrassed by the attention. They had brought roses, Teddy bears, and Tweety Bird balloons.

Getting to know one another was easy enough. My father liked to read and lecture, and had a bad temper. My mother was soft-spoken around him but funny and mean—like a drag queen—with me. She liked *Vogue*. I was enrolled in a Catholic school and quickly learned English—through immersion, but also through “Reading Rainbow” and a Franklin talking dictionary that my father bought me. It gave me a colorful vocabulary and weirdly over-enun-

ciated diction. If I typed the right terms, it even gave me erotica.

Meanwhile, I had confirmed that my parents were not tony expats. At home, meals could be rice and a fried egg. We sometimes hid from our landlord by crouching next to my bed and drawing the blinds. My father had started out driving a cab, but after 9/11, when the governor revoked the driver's licenses of undocumented immigrants, he began working as a deliveryman, carrying meals to Wall Street executives, the plastic bags slicing into his fingers. Some of those executives forced him to ride on freight elevators. Others tipped him in spare change.

My mother worked in a factory. For seven days a week, sometimes in twelve-hour shifts, she sewed in a heat that caught in your throat like lint, while her bosses, also immigrants, hurled racist slurs at her. Some days I sat on the factory floor, making dolls with swatches of fabric, cosplaying childhood. I didn't put a lot of effort into making the dolls—I sort of just screwed around, with an eye on my mom at her sewing station, stiffening whenever her supervisor came by to see how fast she was working. What could I do to protect her? Well, murder, I guess.

Our problem appeared to be poverty, which even then, before I'd seen “Rent,” seemed glamorous, or at least normal. All the protagonists in the books I read were poor. Ramona Quimby on Klickitat Street, the kids in “Five Little Peppers and How They Grew.” Every fictional child was hungry, an orphan, or tubercular. But there was something else setting us apart. At school, I looked at my nonwhite classmates and wondered how their parents could be nurses, or own houses, or leave the country on vacation. It was none of my business—everyone in New York had secrets—but I cautiously gathered intel, toothpick in mouth. I finally cracked the case when I tried to apply to an essay contest and asked my parents for my Social Security number. My father was probably reading a newspaper, and I doubt he even looked up to say, “We don't have papers, so we don't have a Social.”

It was not traumatic. I turned on our computer, waited for the dial-up, and searched what it meant not to have a Social Security number. “Undocumented

immigrant” had not yet entered the discourse. Back then, the politically correct term, the term I saw online, was “illegal immigrant,” which grated—it was hurtful in a clinical way, like having your teeth drilled. Various angry comments sections offered another option: illegal *alien*. I knew it was form language, legalese meant to wound me, but it didn't. It was punk as hell. We were *hated*, and maybe not entirely of this world. I had just discovered Kurt Cobain.

Obviously, I learned that my parents and I could be deported at any time. Was that scary? Sure. But a deportation still seemed like spy-movie stuff. And, luckily, I had an ally. My brother was born when I was ten years old. He was our family's first citizen, and he was named after a captain of the New York Yankees. Before he was old enough to appreciate art, I took him to the Met. I introduced him to “S.N.L.” and “Letterman” and “Fun Home” and “Persepolis”—all the things I felt an upper-middle-class parent would do—so that he could thrive at school, get a great job, and make money. We would need to armor our parents with our success.

We moved to Queens, and I entered high school. One day, my dad heard about a new bill in Congress on Spanish radio. It was called the DREAM Act, and it proposed a path to legalization for undocumented kids who had gone to school here or served in the military. My dad guaranteed that it'd pass by the time I graduated. I never react to good news—stoicism is part of the brand—but I was optimistic. The bill was bipartisan. John McCain supported it, and I knew he had been a P.O.W., and that made me feel connected to a real American hero. Each time I saw an “R” next to a sponsor's name my heart fluttered with joy. People who were supposed to hate me had now decided to love me.

But the bill was rejected and reintroduced, again and again, for years. It never passed. And, in a distinctly American twist, its gauzy rhetoric was all that survived. Now there was a new term on the block: “Dreamers.” Politicians began to use it to refer to the “good” children of immigrants, the ones who did well in school and stayed off the mean streets—the innocents. There are about



a million undocumented children in America. The non-innocents, one presumes, are the ones in cages, covered in foil blankets, or lost, disappeared by the government.

I never called myself a Dreamer. The word was saccharine and dumb, and it yoked basic human rights to getting an A on a report card. Dreamers couldn't flunk out of high school, or have D.U.I.s, or work at McDonald's. *Those* kids lived with the pressure of needing a literal miracle in order to save their families, but the miracle didn't happen, because the odds were against them, because the odds were against all of us. And so America decided that they didn't deserve an I.D.

The Dream, it turned out, needed to demonize others in order to help the chosen few. Our parents, too, would be sacrificed. The price of our innocence was the guilt of our loved ones. Jeff Sessions, while he was Attorney General, suggested that we had been trafficked against our will. People actually pitied me because my parents brought me to America. Without even *consulting* me.

The irony, of course, is that the Dream was our inheritance. We were Dreamers because our parents had dreams.

It's painful to think about this. My mother, an aspiring interior designer, has gone twenty-eight years without a sick day. My dad, who loves problem-solving, has spent his life wanting a restaurant. He's a talented cook and a brilliant manager, and he often did the work of his actual managers for them. But, without papers, he could advance only so far in a job. He needed to be paid in cash; he could never receive benefits.

He often used a soccer metaphor to describe our journey in America. Our family was a team, but I scored the goals. Everything my family did was, in some sense, a pass to me. Then the American Dream could be mine, and then we could start passing to my brother. That's how my dad explained his limp every night, his feet blistered from speed-running deliveries. It's why we sometimes didn't have money for electricity or shampoo. Those were fouls. Sometimes my parents did

tricky things to survive that you'll never know about. Those were nutmegs. In 2015, when the U.S. women's team won the World Cup, my dad went to the parade and sent me a selfie. "Girl power!" the text read.

My father is a passionate, diatribe-loving feminist, though his feminism often seems to exclude my mother. When I was in elementary school, he would take me to the local branch of the Queens Public Library and check out the memoir of Rosalía Arteaga Serrano, the only female President in Ecuador's history. Serrano was ousted from office, seemingly because she was a woman. My father would read aloud from the book for hours, pausing to tell me that I'd need to toughen up. He would read from dictators' speeches—not for the politics, but for the power of persuasive oratory. We went to the library nearly every weekend for thirteen years.

My mother left her factory job to give me, the anointed one, full-time academic support. She pulled all-nighters to help me make extravagant posters. She grilled me with vocabulary flash cards, struggling to pronounce the words but laughing and slapping me with pillows if I got something wrong. I aced the language portions of my PSATs and SATs, partly because of luck, and partly because of my parents' locally controversial refusal to let me do household chores, ever, because they wanted me to be reading, always reading, instead.



If this all seems strategic, it should. The American Dream doesn't just happen to cheery Pollyannas. It happens to iconoclasts with a plan and a certain amount of cunning. The first time I encountered the idea of the Dream, it was in English class, discussing "The Great Gatsby." My classmates all thought that Gatsby seemed sort of sad, a pathetic figure. I adored him. He created his own persona, made a fortune in an informal economy, and lived a quiet, paranoid, reclusive life. Most of all, he longed. He stood at the edge of Long Island Sound, longing for Daisy, and I took the train uptown to Columbia University and looked out at the campus, hoping it could one day be mine. At the time, it was

functionally impossible for undocumented students to enroll at Columbia. The same held for many schools. Keep dreaming, my parents said.

I did. I was valedictorian of my class, miraculously got into Harvard, and was tapped to join a secret society that once included T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. I was the only Latina inducted, I think, and I was very chill when an English-Spanish dictionary appeared in our club bathroom after I started going to teas. When I graduated, in 2011, our country was deporting people at record rates. I knew that I needed to add even more of a golden flicker to my illegality, so that if I was deported, or if my parents were deported, we would not go in the middle of the night, in silence, anonymously, as Americans next door watched another episode of "The Bachelor." So I began writing, with the explicit aim of entering the canon. I wrote a book about undocumented immigrants, approaching them not as shadowy victims or gilded heroes but as people, flawed and complex. It was reviewed well, nominated for things. A President commended it.

But it's hard to feel anything. My parents remain poor and undocumented. I cannot protect them with prizes or grades. My father sobbed when I handed him my diploma, but it was not the piece of paper that would make it all better, no matter how heavy the stock.

By the time I was in grad school, my parents' thirty-year marriage was over. They had spent most of those years in America, with their heads down and their bodies broken; it was hard not to see the split as inevitable. My mom called me to say she'd had enough. My brother supported her decision. I talked to each parent, and helped them mutually agree on a date. On a Tuesday night, my father moved out, leaving his old parenting books behind, while my mom and brother were at church. I asked my father to text my brother that he loved him. I think he texted him exactly that. Then I collapsed onto the floor beneath an open drawer of knives, texted my partner to come help me, and convulsed in sobs.

After that, my mom became depressed. I did hours of research and found her a highly qualified, trauma-informed psy-

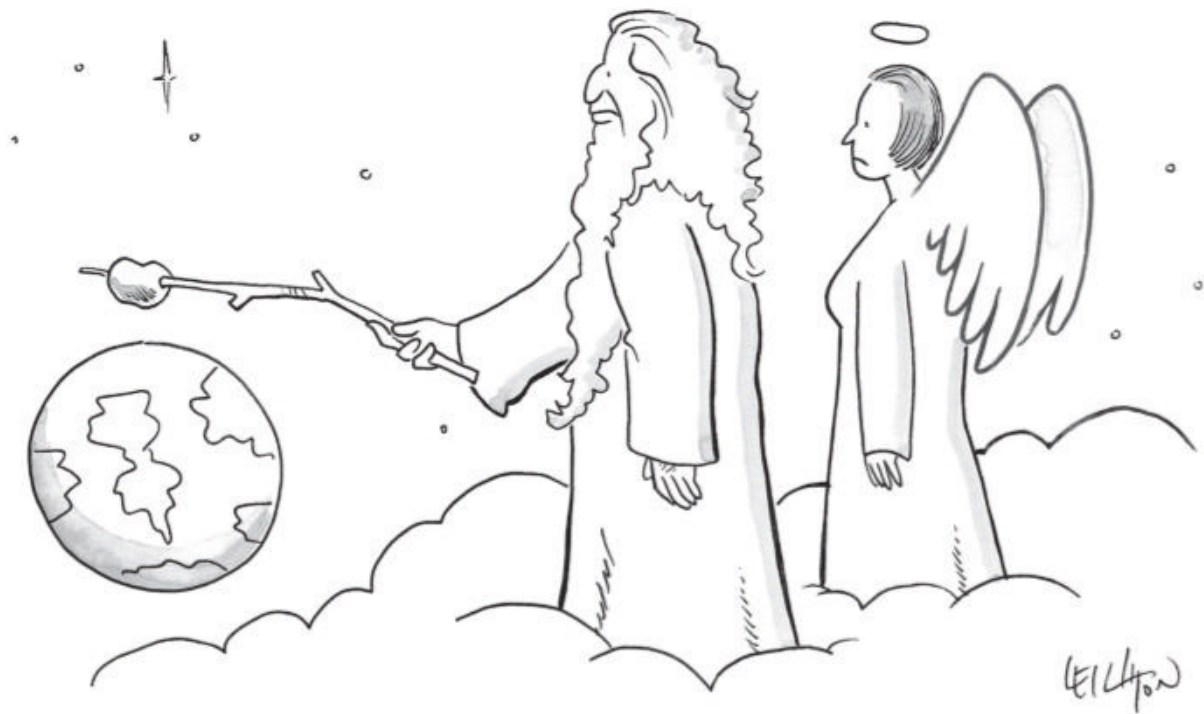


chiatrist, a Spanish speaker who charged on a sliding scale I could afford. My mom got on Lexapro, which helped. She also started a job that makes her very happy. In order to find her that job, I took a Klonopin and browsed Craigslist for hours each day, e-mailing dozens of people, being vague about legal status in a clever but truthful way. I impersonated her in phone interviews, hanging off my couch, the blood rushing to my head, struggling not to do an offensive accent.

You know how, when you get a migraine, you regret how stupid you were for taking those sweet, painless days for granted? Although my days are hard, I understand that I'm living in an era of painlessness, and that a time will come when I look back and wonder why I was such a stupid, whining fool. My mom's job involves hard manual labor, sometimes in the snow or the rain. I got her a real winter coat, her first, from Eddie Bauer. I got her a pair of Hunter boots. These were things she needed, things I had seen on women her age on the subway, their hands bearing bags from Whole Foods. My mom's hands are arthritic. She sends me pictures of them covered in bandages.

My brother and I now have a pact: neither of us can die, because then the other would be stuck with our parents. My brother is twenty-two, still in college, and living with my mom. He, too, has some skills. He is gentle, kind, and excellent at deescalating conflict. He mediated my parents' arguments for years. He has also never tried to change them, which I have, through a regimen of therapy, books, and cheesy Instagram quotes. So we've decided that, in the long term, since his goal is to get a job, get married, have kids, and stay in Queens, he'll invite Mom to move in with him, to help take care of the grandkids. He'll handle the emotional labor, since it doesn't traumatize him. And I'll handle the financial support, since it doesn't traumatize me.

I love my parents. I know I love them. But what I feel for them daily is a mixture of terror, panic, obligation, sorrow, anger, pity, and a shame so hot that I need to lie face down, in my underwear, on very cold sheets. Many Americans have vulnerable parents, and strive to succeed in order to save them. I hold those people in the highest regard. But the undoc-



umented face a unique burden, due to scorn and a lack of support from the government. Because our parents made a choice—the choice to migrate—few people pity them, or wonder whether restitution should be made for decades of exploitation. That choice, the original sin, is why our parents were thrown out of paradise. They were tempted by curiosity and hunger, by fleshly desires.

And so we return to the debt. However my parents suffer in their final years will be related to their migration—to their toil in this country, to their lack of health care and housing support, to psychic fatigue. They were able, because of that sacrifice, to give me their version of the Dream: an education, a New York accent, a life that can better itself. But that life does not fully belong to me. My version of the American Dream is seeing them age with dignity, being able to help them retire, and keeping them from being pushed onto train tracks in a random hate crime. For us, gratitude and guilt feel almost identical. Love is difficult to separate from self-erasure. All we can give one another is ourselves.

Scholars often write about the harm that's done when children become caretakers, but they're reluctant to do so when it comes to immigrants. For us, they say, this situation is *cultural*. Because we grow up in tight-knit families. Because we respect our elders. In fact, it's just the means of living that's available to us. It's a survival mechanism, a mutual-aid society at the family level. There is culture, and then there is ad-

aptation to precarity and surveillance. If we are lost in the promised land, perhaps it's because the ground has never quite seemed solid beneath our feet.

When I was a kid, my mother found a crystal heart in my father's taxi. The light that came through it was pretty, shimmering, like a gasoline spill on the road. She put it in her jewelry box, and sometimes we'd take out the box, spill the contents onto my pink twin bed, and admire what we both thought was a heart-shaped diamond. I grew up, I went to college. I often heard of kids who had inherited their grandmother's heirlooms, and I sincerely believed that there were jewels in my family, too. Then, a few years ago, my partner and I visited my mom, and she spilled out her box. She gave me a few items I cherish: a nameplate bracelet in white, yellow, and rose gold, and the thick gold hoop earrings that she wore when she first moved to Brooklyn. Everything else was costume jewelry. I couldn't find the heart.

I realized that, when my mother found the crystal, she was around the same age I am now. She had probably never held a diamond, and she probably wanted to believe that she had found one in America, a dream come true. She wanted me to believe it, and then, as we both grew up, alone, together, she stopped believing, stopped wanting to believe, and stopped me from wanting to believe. And she probably threw that shit out. I didn't ask. Some things are none of our business. ♦





*The attack on the U.S. Capitol was a predictable culmination of a months-long ferment. Throughout the pandemic, right-wing*



A REPORTER AT LARGE

# THE STORM

*In the weeks before the assault on the Capitol, the President and his supporters kept stoking paranoia and rage.*

BY LUKE MOGELSON



*protesters had been gathering at statehouses, demanding entry and shouting things like “Treason!” and “Let us in!”*



By the end of President Donald Trump's crusade against American democracy—after a relentless deployment of propaganda, demagoguery, intimidation, and fearmongering aimed at persuading as many Americans as possible to repudiate their country's foundational principles—a single word sufficed to nudge his most fanatical supporters into open insurrection. Thousands of them had assembled on the Mall, in Washington, D.C., on the morning of January 6th, to hear Trump address them from a stage outside the White House. From where I stood, at the foot of the Washington Monument, you had to strain to see his image on a jumbotron that had been set up on Constitution Avenue. His voice, however, projected clearly through powerful speakers as he rehashed the debunked allegations of massive fraud which he'd been propagating for months. Then he summarized the supposed crimes, simply, as "bullshit."

"Bullshit! Bullshit!" the crowd chanted. It was a peculiar mixture of emotion that had become familiar at pro-Trump rallies since he lost the election: half mutinous rage, half gleeful excitement at being licensed to act on it. The profanity signalled a final jettisoning of whatever residual deference to political norms had survived the past four years. In front of me, a middle-aged man wearing a Trump flag as a cape told a young man standing beside him, "There's gonna be a war." His tone was resigned, as if he were at last embracing a truth that he had long resisted. "I'm ready to fight," he said. The young man nodded. He had a thin mustache and hugged a life-size mannequin with duct tape over its eyes, "TRAITOR" scrawled on its chest, and a noose around its neck.

"We want to be *so nice*," Trump said. "We want to be so respectful of everybody, including bad people. We're going to have to fight much harder. And Mike Pence is going to have to come through for us."

About a mile and a half away, at the east end of the Mall, Vice-President Pence and both houses of Congress had convened to certify the Electoral College votes that had made Joe Biden and Kamala Harris the next President and Vice-President of the United States. In December, a hundred and forty Republican representatives—two-thirds of the caucus—had said that they would for-

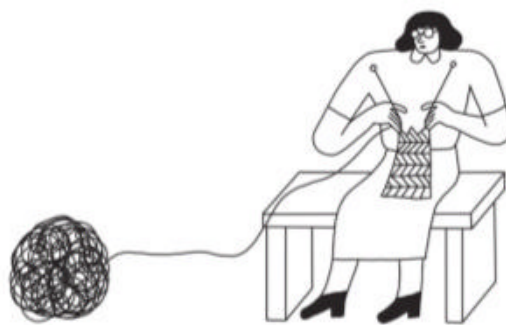
mally object to the certification of several swing states. Fourteen Republican senators, led by Josh Hawley, of Missouri, and Ted Cruz, of Texas, had joined the effort. The lawmakers lacked the authority to overturn the election, but Trump and his allies had concocted a fantastical alternative: Pence, as the presiding officer of the Senate, could single-handedly nullify votes from states that Biden had won. Pence, though, had advised Congress that the Constitution constrained him from taking such action.

"After this, we're going to walk down, and I'll be there with you," Trump told the crowd. The people around me exchanged looks of astonishment and delight. "We're going to walk down to the Capitol, and we're going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women. We're probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them—because you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength."

"No weakness!" a woman cried.

Before Trump had even finished his speech, approximately eight thousand people started moving up the Mall. "We're storming the Capitol!" some yelled.

There was an eerie sense of inexorability, the throngs of Trump supporters advancing up the long lawn as if pulled by a current. Everyone seemed to understand what was about to happen. The past nine weeks had been steadily building toward this moment. On November 7th, mere hours after Biden's win was



projected, I attended a protest at the Pennsylvania state capitol, in Harrisburg. Hundreds of Trump supporters, including heavily armed militia members, vowed to revolt. When I asked a man with an assault rifle—a "combat-skills instructor" for a militia called the Pennsylvania Three Percent—how likely he considered the prospect of civil conflict, he told me, "It's coming." Since then, Trump and his allies had done everything they could to spread and intensify this bitter ag-

grievement. On December 5th, Trump acknowledged, "I've probably worked harder in the last three weeks than I ever have in my life." (He was not talking about managing the pandemic, which since the election has claimed a hundred and fifty thousand American lives.) Militant pro-Trump outfits like the Proud Boys—a national organization dedicated to "reinstating a spirit of Western chauvinism" in America—had been openly gearing up for major violence. In early January, on Parler, an unfiltered social-media site favored by conservatives, Joe Biggs, a top Proud Boys leader, had written, "Every law makers who breaks their own stupid Fucking laws should be dragged out of office and hung."

On the Mall, a makeshift wooden gallows, with stairs and a rope, had been constructed near a statue of Ulysses S. Grant. Some of the marchers nearby carried Confederate flags. Up ahead, the dull thud of stun grenades could be heard, accompanied by bright flashes. "They need help!" a man shouted. "It's us versus the cops!" Someone let out a rebel yell. Scattered groups wavered, debating whether to join the confrontation. "We lost the Senate—we need to make a stand *now*," a bookish-looking woman in a down coat and glasses appealed to the person next to her. The previous day, a runoff in Georgia had flipped two Republican Senate seats to the Democrats, giving them majority control.

Hundreds of Trump supporters had forced their way past barricades to the Capitol steps. In anticipation of Biden's Inauguration, bleachers had been erected there, and the sides of the scaffolding were wrapped in ripstop tarpaulin. Officers in riot gear blocked an open flap in the fabric; the mob pressed against them, screaming insults.

"You are traitors to the country!" a man barked at the police through a megaphone plastered with stickers from "InfoWars," the incendiary Web program hosted by the right-wing conspiracist Alex Jones. Behind the man stood Biggs, the Proud Boys leader. He wore a radio clipped onto the breast pocket of his plaid flannel shirt. Not far away, I spotted a "straight pride" flag.

There wasn't nearly enough law enforcement to fend off the mob, which pelted the officers with cans and bottles. One man angrily invoked the pandemic



lockdown: “Why can’t *I* work? Where’s my ‘pursuit of happiness’?” Many people were equipped with flak jackets, helmets, gas masks, and tactical apparel. Guns were prohibited for the protest, but a man in a cowboy hat, posing for a photograph, lifted his jacket to reveal a revolver tucked into his waistband. Other Trump supporters had Tasers, baseball bats, and truncheons. I saw one man holding a coiled noose.

“Hang Mike Pence!” people yelled.

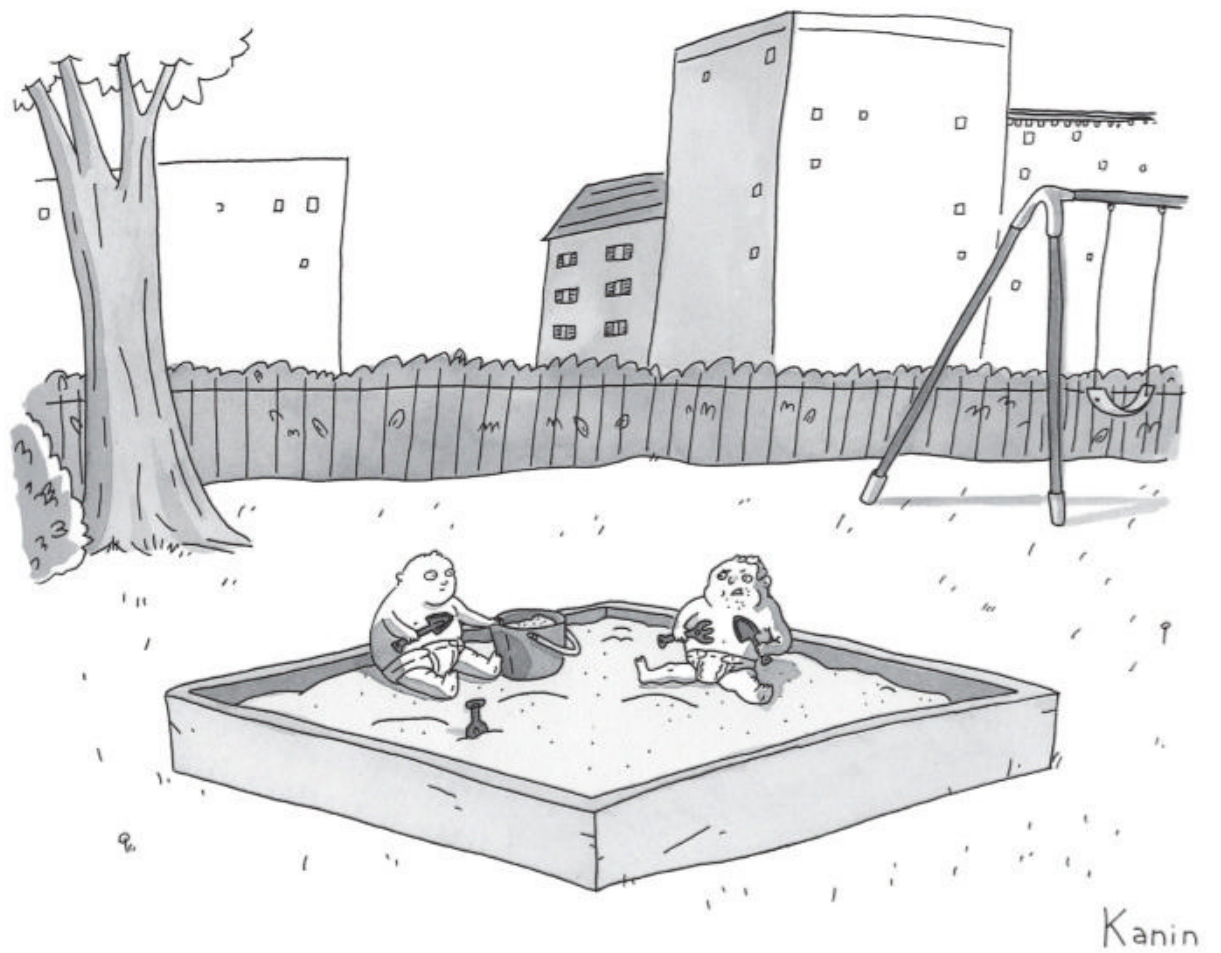
Soon the mob swarmed past the officers, into the understructure of the bleachers, and scrambled through its metal braces, up the building’s granite steps. Toward the top was a temporary security wall with three doors, one of which was instantly breached. Dozens of police stood behind the wall, using shields, nightsticks, and pepper spray to stop people from crossing the threshold. Other officers took up positions on planks above, firing a steady barrage of nonlethal munitions into the solid mass of bodies. As rounds tinked off metal, and caustic chemicals filled the space as if it were a fumigation tent, some of the insurrectionists panicked: “We need to retreat and assault another point!” But most remained resolute. “Hold the line!” they exhorted. “Storm!” Martial bagpipes blared through portable speakers.

“Shoot the politicians!” somebody yelled.

“Fight for Trump!”

A jet of pepper spray incapacitated me for about twenty minutes. When I regained my vision, the mob was streaming freely through all three doors. I followed an overweight man in a Roman-era costume—sandals, cape, armguards, dagger—away from the bleachers and onto an open terrace on the Capitol’s main level. People clambered through a shattered window. Video later showed that a Proud Boy had smashed it with a riot shield. A dozen police stood in a hallway softly lit by ornate chandeliers, mutely watching the rioters—many of them wearing Trump gear or carrying Trump flags—flood into the building. Their cries resonated through colonnaded rooms: “Where’s the traitors?” “Bring them out!” “Get these fucking cocksucking Commies out!”

The attack on the Capitol was a predictable apotheosis of a months-long ferment. Throughout the pandemic,



*“If they didn’t want us to eat it, why’d they give us this big fork and spoon?”*

right-wing protesters had been gathering at statehouses, demanding entry. In April, an armed mob had filled the Michigan state capitol, chanting “Treason!” and “Let us in!” In December, conservatives had broken the glass doors of the Oregon state capitol, overrunning officers and spraying them with chemical agents. The occupation of restricted government sanctums was an affirmation of dominance so emotionally satisfying that it was an end in itself—proof to elected officials, to Biden voters, and also to the occupiers themselves that they were still in charge. After one of the Trump supporters breached the U.S. Capitol, he insisted through a megaphone, “We will *not* be denied.” There was an unmistakable subtext as the mob, almost entirely white, shouted, “Whose house? *Our* house!” One man carried a Confederate flag through the building. A Black member of the Capitol Police later told BuzzFeed News that, during the assault, he was called a racial slur fifteen times.

I followed a group that broke off to advance on five policemen guarding a side corridor. “Stand down,” a man in a MAGA hat commanded. “You’re outnumbered. There’s a fucking million of us out

there, and we are listening to Trump—your boss.”

“We can take you out,” a man beside him warned.

The officers backpedaled the length of the corridor, until we arrived at a marble staircase. Then they moved aside. “We love you guys—take it easy!” a rioter yelled as he bounded up the steps, which led to the Capitol’s central rotunda.

Beneath the soaring dome, surrounded by statues of former Presidents and by large oil paintings depicting such historical scenes as the embarkation of the Pilgrims and the presentation of the Declaration of Independence, a number of young men chanted, “America first!” The phrase was popularized in 1940 by Nazi sympathizers lobbying to keep the U.S. out of the Second World War; in 2016, Trump resurrected it to describe his isolationist foreign and immigration policies. Some of the chanters, however, waved or wore royal-blue flags inscribed with “*AF*,” in white letters. This is the logo for the program “America First,” which is hosted by Nicholas Fuentes, a twenty-two-year-old Holocaust denier, who promotes a brand of white Christian nationalism that views politics as a means of preserving



demographic supremacy. Though America Firsters revile most mainstream Republicans for lacking sufficient commitment to this priority—especially neoconservatives, whom they accuse of being subservient to Satan and Jews—the group’s loyalty to Trump is, according to Fuentes, “unconditional.”

The America Firsters and other invaders fanned out in search of lawmakers, breaking into offices and revelling in their own astounding impunity. “Nancy, I’m *ho-ome!*” a man taunted, mimicking Jack Nicholson’s character in “The Shining.” Someone else yelled, “1776—it’s now or never.” Around this time, Trump tweeted, “Mike Pence didn’t have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country. . . . USA demands the truth!” Twenty minutes later, Ashli Babbitt, a thirty-five-year-old woman from California, was fatally shot while climbing through a barricaded door that led to the Speaker’s lobby in the House chamber, where representatives were sheltering. The congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a Democrat from New York, later said that she’d had a “close encounter” with rioters during which she thought she “was going to die.” Earlier that morning, another representative, Lauren Boebert—a newly elected Republican, from Colorado, who has praised QAnon and promised to wear her Glock in the Capitol—had tweeted, “Today is 1776.”

When Babbitt was shot, I was on the opposite side of the Capitol, where people were growing frustrated by the empty halls and offices.

“Where the fuck *are* they?”

“Where the fuck is Nancy?”

No one seemed quite sure how to proceed. “While we’re here, we might as well set up a government,” somebody suggested.

Then a man with a large “AF” flag—college-age, cheeks spotted with acne—pushed through a series of tall double doors, the last of which gave onto the Senate chamber.

“Praise God!”

There were signs of a hasty evacuation: bags and purses on the plush blue-and-red carpet, personal belongings on some of the desks. From the gallery, a man in a flak jacket called down, “Take everything! Take all that shit!”

“No!” an older man, who wore an ammo vest and held several plastic flex

cuffs, shouted. “We do not take anything.” The man has since been identified as Larry Rendall Brock, Jr., a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel.

The young America Firster went directly to the dais and installed himself in the leather chair recently occupied by the Vice-President. Another America Firster filmed him extemporizing a speech: “Donald Trump is the emperor of the United States . . .”

“Hey, get out of that chair,” a man about his age, with a thick Southern drawl, said. He wore cowhide work gloves and a camouflage hunting jacket that was several sizes too large for him. Gauze hung loosely around his neck, and blood, leaking from a nasty wound on his cheek, encrusted his beard. Later, when another rioter asked for his name, he responded, “Mr. Black.” The America Firster turned and looked at him uncertainly.

“We’re a democracy,” Mr. Black said.

“Bro, we just broke into the Capitol,” the America Firster scoffed. “What are you talking about?”

Brock, the Air Force veteran, said, “We can’t be disrespectful.” Using the military acronym for “information operations,” he explained, “You have to understand—it’s an I.O. war.”

The America Firster grudgingly left the chair. More than a dozen Trump supporters filed into the chamber. A hundred antique mahogany desks with engraved nameplates were arranged in four tiered semicircles. Several people swung open the hinged desktops and began rifling through documents inside, taking pictures with their phones of private notes and letters, partly completed crossword puzzles, manuals on Senate procedure. A man in a construction hard hat held up a hand-signed document, on official stationery, addressed from “Mitt” to “Mike”—presumably, Romney and Pence. It was the speech that Romney had given, in February, 2020, when he voted to impeach Trump for pressuring the President of Ukraine to produce dirt on Biden. “Corrupting an election to keep oneself in office is perhaps the most abusive and disruptive violation of one’s oath of office that I can imagine,” Romney had written.

Some senators had printed out their prepared remarks for the election certification that the insurrectionists had disrupted. The man in the hard hat found a piece of paper belonging to Ted Cruz

and said, “He was gonna sell us out all along—look! ‘Objection to counting the electoral votes of the state of Arizona.’” He paused. “Oh, wait, that’s actually O.K.”

“He’s with us,” an America Firster said.

Another young man, wearing sweatpants and a long-sleeved undershirt, seemed unconvinced. Frantically flipping through a three-ring binder on Cruz’s desk, he muttered, “There’s gotta be something in here we can fucking use against these scumbags.” Someone looking on commented, with serene confidence, “Cruz would *want* us to do this, so I think we’re good.”

Mr. Black wandered around in a state of childlike wonder. “This don’t look big enough,” he muttered. “This can’t be the right place.” On January 14th, Joshua Black was arrested, in Leeds, Alabama, after he posted a confession on YouTube in which he explained, “I just felt like the spirit of God wanted me to go in the Senate room.” On the day of the riot, as he took in the chamber, he ordered everyone, “Don’t trash the place. No disrespect.” After a while, rather than defy him, nearly everybody left the chamber. For a surreal interlude, only a few people remained. Black’s blood-smeared cheek was grotesquely swollen, and as I looked closer I glimpsed the smooth surface of a yellow plastic projectile embedded deeply within it.

“I’m gonna call my dad,” he said, and sat down on the floor, leaning his back against the dais.

A moment later, the door at the back of the chamber’s center aisle swung open, and a man strode through it wearing a fur headdress with horns, carrying a spear attached to an American flag. He was shirtless, his chest covered with Viking and pagan tattoos, his face painted red, white, and blue. It was Jacob Chansley, a vocal QAnon proponent from Arizona, popularly known by his pseudonym, the Q Shaman. Both on the Mall and inside the Capitol, I’d seen countless signs and banners promoting QAnon, whose acolytes believe that Trump is working to dismantle an occult society of cannibalistic pedophiles. At the base of the Washington Monument, I’d watched Chansley assure people, “We got ’em right where we want ’em! We got ’em by the balls, baby, and we’re not lettin’ go!”

“*Fuckin’ A*, man,” he said now, looking around with an impish grin. A young policeman had followed closely behind





*On the day Joe Biden's win was projected, hundreds of Trump supporters protested at the Pennsylvania state capitol.*



him. Pudgy and bespectacled, with a medical mask over red facial hair, he approached Black, and asked, with concern, "You good, sir? You need medical attention?"

"I'm good, thank you," Black responded. Then, returning to his phone call, he said, "I got shot in the face with some kind of plastic bullet."

"Any chance I could get you guys to leave the Senate wing?" the officer inquired. It was the tone of someone trying to lure a suicidal person into climbing down from a ledge.

"We will," Black assured him. "I been making sure they ain't disrespectin' the place."

"O.K., I just want to let you guys know—this is, like, *the* sacreddest place."

Chansley had climbed onto the dais. "I'm gonna take a seat in this chair, because Mike Pence is a fucking traitor," he announced. He handed his cell phone to another Trump supporter, telling him, "I'm not one to usually take pictures of myself, but in this case I think I'll make an exception." The policeman looked on with a pained expression as Chansley flexed his biceps.

A skinny man in dark clothes told the officer, "This is so weird—like, you should be stopping us."

The officer pointed at each person in the chamber: "One, two, three, four, five." Then he pointed at himself: "One." After Chansley had his photographs, the officer said, "Now that you've done that, can I get you guys to walk out of this room, please?"

"Yes, sir," Chansley said. He stood up and took a step, but then stopped. Leaning his spear against the Vice-President's desk, he found a pen and wrote something on a sheet of paper.

"I feel like you're pushing the line," the officer said.

Chansley ignored him. After he had set down the pen, I went behind the desk. Over a roll-call list of senators' names, the Q Shaman had scrawled, "ITS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME/JUSTICE IS COMING!"

The Capitol siege was so violent and chaotic that it has been hard to discern the specific political agendas of its various participants. Many of them, however, went to D.C. for two previous events, which were more clarifying. On November 14th, tens of thousands of Republi-

cans, convinced that the Democrats had subverted the will of the people in what amounted to a bloodless coup, marched to the Supreme Court, demanding that it overturn the election. For four years, Trump had batted away every inconvenient fact with the phrase "fake news," and his base believed him when he attributed his decisive defeat in both the Electoral College and the popular vote to "rigged" machines and "massive voter fraud." While the President's lawyers inundated battleground states with spurious litigation, one of them, during an interview on Fox Business, acknowledged the basis of their strategy: "We're waiting for the United States Supreme Court, of which the President has nominated three Justices, to step in and do something." After nearly every suit had collapsed—with judges appointed by Re-

publicans and Democrats alike harshly criticizing the accusations as "speculative," "incorrect," and "not credible," and Trump's own Justice Department vouching for the integrity of the election—the attorney general of Texas petitioned the Supreme Court to invalidate all the votes from Wisconsin, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Michigan (swing states that went for Biden). On December 11th, the night before the second D.C. demonstration, the Justices declined to hear the case, dispelling once and for all the fantasy that Trump, despite losing the election, might legally remain in office.

The next afternoon, throngs of Trump supporters crowded into Freedom Plaza, an unadorned public square equidistant from the Justice Department and the White House. On one side, a large audience pressed around a group of preppy-

## LAST WORDS

I don't want to die in a poem  
the words burning in eulogy  
the sun howling *why*  
the moon sighing *why not*

I don't want to die in bed  
which is a poem gone wrong  
a world turned in on itself  
a floating navel of dreams

I won't meet death in a field  
like a dot punctuating a page  
it's too vast yet too tiny  
everyone will say it's a bit cinematic

I don't want to pass away in your arms  
those gentle parentheses  
nor expire outside of their swoon  
self-propelled determined shouting

Let the end come  
as the best parts of living have come  
unsought and undeserved  
inconvenient

now that's a good death

*what nonsense* you say  
*that's not even worth*  
*writing down*

—Rita Dove



looking young men wearing plaid shirts, windbreakers, khakis, and sunglasses. Some held rosaries and crosses, others royal-blue “AF” flags. The organizers had not included Fuentes, the “America First” host, in their lineup, but when he arrived at Freedom Plaza the crowd parted for him, chanting, “Groyper!” The name, which America Firsters call one another, derives from a variation of the Pepe the Frog meme, which is fashionable among white supremacists.

Diminutive and clean-shaven, with boyish features and a toothy smile, Fuentes resembled, in his suit and red tie, a recent graduate dressed for a job interview. (He dropped out of Boston University after his freshman year, when other students became hostile toward him for participating in the deadly neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, and for writing on Facebook that “a tidal wave of white identity is coming.”) Fuentes climbed atop a granite retaining wall, and someone handed him a megaphone. As his speech approached a crescendo of indignation, more and more attendees gravitated to the groypers. “It is *us* and *our* ancestors that created everything good that you see in this country,” Fuentes said. “All these people that have taken over our country—we do not need them.”

The crowd roared, “Take it back!”—a phrase that would soon ring inside the Capitol.

“It’s time for us to start saying another word again,” Fuentes shouted. “A very important word that describes the situation we’re in. That word is ‘parasite.’ What is happening in this country is parasitism.” Arguing that Trump alone represented “*our* interests”—an end to all legal and illegal immigration, gay rights, abortion, free trade, and secularism—Fuentes distilled America Firstism into concise terms: “It is the American people, and our leader, Donald Trump, against *everybody else* in this country and this world.” The Republican governors, judges, and legislators who had refused to leverage their authority to secure Trump four more years in the White House—“traitors within our own ranks”—were on “a list” of people to be taken down. Fuentes also opposed the Constitution’s checks and balances, which had enabled Biden to prevail. “Make no mistake about it,” he declared. “The system is our enemy.”

During the nine weeks between November 3rd and January 6th, extremists like Fuentes did their utmost to take advantage of the opening that Trump created for them by refusing to concede. They were frank about their intentions: undoing not just the 2020 Presidential outcome but also any form of representative government that allows Democrats to obtain and exercise power. Correctly pointing out that a majority of Republicans believed that the election had been stolen, Fuentes argued, “This is the opportunity to galvanize the patriots of this country behind a real solution to these problems that we’re facing.” He also said, “If we can’t get a country that we deserve to live in through the legitimate process, then maybe we need to begin to explore some other options.” In case anybody was confused about what those options might be, Fuentes explained, “Our Founding Fathers would get in the streets, and they would take this country back by force if necessary. And that is what we must be prepared to do.”

In the days before January 6th, calls for a “real solution” became progressively louder. Trump, by both amplifying these voices and consolidating his control over the Republican Party, conferred extraordinary influence on the most deranged and hateful elements of the American right. On December 20th, he retweeted a QAnon supporter who used the handle @cjtruth: “It was a rigged election but they were busted. Sting of the Century! Justice is coming!” A few weeks later, a barbarian with a spear was sitting in the Vice-President’s chair.

As Fuentes wrapped up his diatribe, he noticed a drag queen standing on the periphery of the crowd. She wore a blond wig and an evening gown with a beauty-queen sash identifying her as Lady MAGA. At the November D.C. rally, I had been surprised to see Trump supporters lining up to have their pictures taken with her. Now Fuentes yelled, “That is disgusting! I don’t want to see that!,” and the groypers wheeled on her, bellowing in unison, “Shame!”

No one in the crowd objected.

While Fuentes was proposing a movement to “take this country back by force,” a large contingent of Proud Boys marched by. Members from Illinois, Pennsylvania, Oregon, California,

and elsewhere were easy to identify. Most were dressed in the organization’s black-and-yellow colors. Some had “RWDS”—Right-Wing Death Squad—hats and patches; others wore balaclavas, kilts, hockey masks, or batting helmets. One man was wearing a T-shirt with an image of South American dissidents being thrown out of a helicopter and the words “PINOCHEZ DID NOTHING WRONG!” Another T-shirt featured a Nazi eagle perched on a fasces, below the acronym “6MWE”—Six Million Wasn’t Enough—a reference to the number of Jews slaughtered in the Holocaust.

Many of the Proud Boys were drunk. At around nine-thirty that morning, I’d stopped by Harry’s Pub, a dive bar close to Freedom Plaza, and found the street outside filled with men drinking Budweiser and White Claw. “We are going to own this town!” one of them howled. At the November 14th rally, clashes between the Proud Boys and antifascists had left a number of people injured. Although most of the fights I witnessed then had been instigated by the Proud Boys, Trump had tweeted, “ANTIFA SCUM ran for the hills today when they tried attacking the people at the Trump Rally, because those people aggressively fought back.” It was clear that the men outside Harry’s on December 12th had travelled to D.C. to engage in violence, and that they believed the President endorsed their doing so. Trump had made an appearance at the previous rally, waving through the window of his limousine; now I overheard a Proud Boy tell his comrade, “I wanna see Trump drive by and give us one of these.” He flashed an “O.K.” hand sign, which has become a gesture of allegiance among white supremacists. There would be no motorcade this time, but while Fuentes addressed the groypers Trump circled Freedom Plaza in Marine One, the Presidential helicopter.

The Proud Boys who marched past Fuentes at the end of his December 12th speech were heading to the Washington Monument. When I got there, hundreds of them covered the grassy expanse near the obelisk. “Let’s take Black Lives Matter Plaza!” someone suggested. In June, the security fence around the White House had been expanded, subsuming green spaces previously open to the public, in response to protests over the killing of George Floyd, in Minneapolis. Muriel



Bowser, the mayor of D.C., had renamed two blocks adjacent to the fence Black Lives Matter Plaza, and commissioned the city to paint “BLACK LIVES MATTER” across the pavement in thirty-five-foot-high letters. Throughout the latter half of 2020, Trump had sought to dismiss the popular uprisings that Floyd’s death had precipitated by ascribing them to Antifa, which he vilified as a terrorist organization. The Proud Boys had seized on Trump’s conflation to recast their small-scale rivalry with antifascists in leftist strongholds like Berkeley and Portland as the front line of a national culture war. During the Presidential campaign, Trump’s histrionic exaggerations of the threat posed by Antifa fuelled conservative support for the Proud Boys, allowing them to vastly expand their operations and recruitment. The day after a Presidential debate in which Trump told the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by,” Lauren Witzke, a Republican Senate candidate in Delaware, publicly thanked the group for having provided her with “free security.” (She lost the race.)

As Proud Boys from across the nation walked downhill from the Washington Monument toward Black Lives Matter Plaza on December 12th, they chanted, “Whose plaza? *Our* plaza!” Many of them carried staffs, canes, and holstered Maglites. There was a heavy police presence downtown, and it was still broad daylight. “We got numbers, let’s do this!” a Proud Boy with a newsboy cap and a gray goatee shouted. “Fuck these gender-confused terrorists! They’ll put the girls out first—they think that’s gonna stop us?” His name was Richard Schwetz, though he went by Dick Sweats. (He could not be reached for comment.) While some Proud Boys hesitated, others followed Schwetz, including a taciturn man with a high-and-tight military haircut and a large Confederate flag attached to a wooden dowel. I saw him again at the Capitol on January 6th.

On Constitution Avenue, the Proud Boys encountered an unsuspecting Black man coming up the sidewalk. They began shoving and jeering at him. As the man ran away, several of them chased him, swinging punches at his back.

Officers had cordoned off Black Lives Matter Plaza, but the group soon reached Farragut Square, where half a dozen counter-protesters—two men and four



*On an open terrace on the U.S. Capitol’s main level, Trump supporters clambered*





*through a shattered window. “Where’s the traitors?” they shouted.*



women—stood outside the Army and Navy Club, dressed in black clothes marked with medic crosses made from red tape. They were smaller and younger than most of the Proud Boys, and visibly unnerved. As Schwetz and others closed in on them, the medics retreated until they were pressed against a waist-high hedge. “Fucking pussies!” Schwetz barked, hitting two of the women. Other Proud Boys took his cue, assailing the activists, who disappeared into the hedge under a barrage of boots and fists. Policemen stopped the beating by deploying pepper spray, but they did not arrest any Proud Boys, who staggered off in search of a new target.

They promptly found one: another Black man, passing through on his bicycle. He wore Lycra exercise gear and looked perplexed by what was happening on the streets. He said nothing to anybody, but “Black Lives Matter” was written in small letters on his helmet. The Proud Boys surrounded him. Pointing at some officers watching from a few feet away, a man in a bulletproof vest, carrying a cane, said, “They’re here now, but eventually they won’t be. And we’re gonna take this country back—believe that shit. Fuck Black Lives Matter.” Before walking off, he added, “What y’all need to do is take your sorry asses to the ghetto.”

This was the tenor of the next eight

hours, as hundreds of Proud Boys, groypers, militia members, and other Trump supporters openly marauded on the streets around the White House, becoming more inebriated and belligerent as the night wore on, hunting for people to harass and assault. “Fight for Trump!” they chanted. At one point, Proud Boys outside Harry’s Pub ganged up on another Black man, Philip Johnson, who took out a knife in self-defense, wounding four of them. Police intervened and rushed Johnson to the hospital, where he was arrested. The charges were later dropped. Outside Harry’s, I heard a Proud Boy joking about Johnson’s injuries: “He’s going to look different tomorrow.”

Shortly thereafter, I followed a number of groypers past a hair salon with a rainbow poster attached to its window. Tearing the poster to pieces, a young man screamed, “This is sodomy!”

“Fuck the fags!” others cried.

By eleven, I was following another group, which happened upon the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church. Built in the late nineteenth century, the steepled red brick building had hosted the funerals of Frederick Douglass and Rosa Parks. President Barack Obama had attended a service there on the morning of his second Inauguration. Outside the entrance, a large Black Lives Matter sign, illuminated

by floodlamps, hung below a crucifix. Climbing over a low fence, several Proud Boys and men in red MAGA hats ripped down the sign and pried off boards from its scaffolding to use as weapons, eliciting wild cheers.

“Whose streets?”

“Our streets!”

More people piled into the garden of the church, stomping on the sign and slashing it with knives. Amid the frenzy, one of the Trump supporters removed another placard from a different display. It had a verse from the Bible: “*I shall not sacrifice to the Lord my God that which costs me nothing.*”

“Hey, that’s Christian,” someone admonished.

The man nodded and gingerly set the placard down.

The cascade of destruction and ugliness triggered by Trump’s lies about the election consummates a narrative that predates his tenure in the White House. In 2011, Trump became an evangelist for birtherism, the false assertion that Obama had been born in Kenya and was therefore an illegitimate President. Whether or not Trump believed the racist slander, he had been apprised of its political utility by his friend Roger Stone, who made his political reputation as a dirty trickster for President Richard Nixon. Five years later, in the months before the 2016 election, Stone created a Web site called Stop the Steal, which he used to undermine Hillary Clinton’s expected victory by insisting that the election had been rigged—a position that Trump maintained even after he won, to explain his deficit in the popular vote.

The day after the 2020 election, a new Facebook page appeared: Stop the Steal. Among its earliest posts was a video from the T.C.F. Center, in downtown Detroit, where Michigan ballots were counted. The video showed Republican protesters who were said to have been denied access to the room where absentee votes were being processed. Overnight, Stop the Steal gained more than three hundred and twenty thousand followers—making it among the fastest-growing groups in Facebook history. The company quickly deleted it.

I spent much of Election Day at the T.C.F. Center. COVID-19 had killed three



*“I don’t like ironing, but it reminds me that once, long, long ago, there was a semblance of order in the world.”*



thousand residents of Wayne County, which includes Detroit, causing an unprecedented number of people to vote by mail. Nearly two hundred thousand absentee ballots were being tallied in a huge exhibit hall. Roughly eight hundred election workers were opening envelopes, removing ballots from sealed secrecy sleeves, and logging names into an electronic poll book. (Before Election Day, the clerk's office had compared and verified signatures.) The ballots were then brought to a row of high-speed tabulators, which could process some fifty sheets a minute.

Republican and Democratic challengers roamed the hall. The press was confined to a taped-off area, but, as far as I could see, the Republicans were given free rein of the space. They checked computer monitors that displayed a growing list of names. A man's voice came over a loudspeaker to remind the election workers to "provide for transparency and openness." Christopher Thomas, who served as Michigan's election director for thirty-six years and advised the clerk's office in 2020, told me that things had gone remarkably smoothly. The few challengers who'd raised objections had mostly misunderstood technical aspects of the process. "We work through it with them," Thomas said. "We're happy to have them here."

Early returns showed Trump ahead in Michigan, but many absentee ballots had yet to be processed. Because Trump had relentlessly denigrated absentee voting throughout the campaign, in-person votes had been expected to skew his way. It was similarly unsurprising when his lead diminished after results arrived from Wayne County and other heavily Democratic jurisdictions. Nonetheless, shortly after midnight, Trump launched his post-election misinformation campaign: "We are up BIG, but they are trying to STEAL the Election."

The next day, I found an angry mob outside the T.C.F. Center. Police officers guarded the doors. Most of the protesters had driven down from Macomb County, which is eighty per cent white and went for Trump in both 2016 and 2020. "We know what's going on here," one man told me. "They're stuffing the ballot box." He said that his local Republican Party had sent out an e-mail urging people to descend on the center.

Politico later reported that Laura Cox, the chairwoman of the Michigan G.O.P., had personally implored conservative activists to go there. I had seen Cox introduce Trump at a rally in Grand Rapids the night before the election; she had promised the crowd "four more years—or twelve, we'll talk about that later."

Dozens of protesters had entered the T.C.F. Center before it was sealed. Downstairs, they pressed against a glass wall of the exhibit hall, chanting at the election workers on the other side. The most strident member of the group was Ken Licari, a Macomb County resident with a thin beard and a receding hairline. The two parties had been allocated one challenger for each table in the hall, but Republicans had already exceeded that limit, and Licari was irate about being shut out. When an elderly A.C.L.U. observer was ushered past him, Licari demanded to know where she was from. The woman ignored him, and he shouted, "You're a coward, is where you're from!"

"Be civil," a woman standing near him said. A forty-eight-year-old caretaker named Lisa, she had stopped by the convention center on a whim, "just to see." Unlike almost everyone else there, Lisa was Black and from Detroit. She gently asked Licari, "If this place has cameras, and you've got media observing, you've got different people from both sides looking—why do you think someone would be intentionally trying to cheat with all those eyes?"

"You would have to have a hundred thirty-four cameras to track every ballot," Licari answered.

"These ballots are from Detroit," Lisa said. "Detroit is an eighty-per-cent African-American city. There's a huge percentage of Democrats. That's just a fact." She gestured at the predominantly Black poll workers across the glass. "This is my whole thing—I have a basic level of respect for these people."

Rather than respond to this tacit accusation of bias, Licari told Lisa that a batch of illegal ballots had been clandestinely delivered to the center at three in the morning. This was a reference to another cell-phone video, widely shared

on social media, that showed a man removing a case from the back of a van, loading it in a wagon, and pulling the wagon into the building. I had watched the video and had recognized the man as a member of a local TV news crew I'd noticed the previous day. I distinctly recall admiring the wagon, which he had used to transport his camera gear.

"There's a lot of suspicious activity that goes on down here in Detroit," another Republican from Macomb County told me. "There's a million ways you can commit voter fraud, and we're afraid it was committed on a massive scale." I had seen the man on Election Day, working as a challenger inside the exhibit hall. Now, as then, he wore old Army dog tags and

a hooded Michigan National Guard sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off. I asked him if he had observed any fraud with his own eyes. He had not. "It wasn't committed by *these* people," he said. "But the ballots that they were given and ran through the scanners—we don't know where they came from."

Like many of the Republicans in the T.C.F. Center, the man had been involved in anti-lockdown demonstrations against Michigan's governor, Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat. While reporting on those protests, I'd been struck by how the mostly white participants saw themselves as upholding the tradition of the civil-rights movement. Whitmer's public-health measures were condemned as oppressive infringements on sacrosanct liberties, and those who defied them compared themselves to Rosa Parks. The equivalency became even more bizarre after George Floyd was killed and anti-lockdown activists in Michigan adopted Trump's law-and-order rhetoric. Yet I never had the impression that those Republican activists were disingenuous. Similarly, the white people shouting at the Black election workers in Detroit seemed truly convinced of their own persecution.

That conviction had been instilled at least in part by politicians who benefited from it. In April, in response to Whitmer's aggressive public-health measures, Trump had tweeted, "Liberate Michigan!" Two weeks later, heavily armed militia







*Rioters forced their way past barricades to the Capitol steps, over which bleachers had been erected in anticipation of Biden's*





*Inauguration. There wasn't nearly enough law enforcement to fend off the mob.*





members entered the state capitol, terrifying lawmakers. Mike Shirkey, the Republican majority leader in the Michigan Senate, denounced the organizers of the action—a group called the American Patriot Council—as “a bunch of jackasses” who had brandished “the threat of physical harm to stir up fear and rancor.” But, as Trump and other Republicans stoked anti-lockdown resentment across the U.S., Shirkey reversed himself. In May, he appeared at an American Patriot Council event in Grand Rapids, where he told the assembled militia members, “We need you now more than ever.” A few months later, two brothers in the audience that day, William and Michael Null, were arrested for providing material support to a network of right-wing terrorists.

Outside the T.C.F. Center, I ran into Michelle Gregoire, a twenty-nine-year-old school-bus driver from Battle Creek. The sleeves of her sweatshirt were pushed up to reveal a “We the People” tattoo, and she wore a handgun on her belt. We had met at several anti-lockdown protests, including the one in Grand Rapids where Shirkey spoke. In April, Gregoire had entered the gallery overlooking the House chamber in the Michigan state capitol, in violation of COVID-19 protocols. She had to be dragged out by the chief sergeant at arms, and she is now charged with committing a felony assault against him. (She has pleaded not guilty.)

Gregoire is also an acquaintance of the Nulls. “They’re innocent,” she told me in Detroit. “There’s an attack on conservatives right now.” She echoed many Republicans I have met in the past nine months who have described to me the same animating emotion: fear. “A lot of conservatives are really scared,” she said. “Extreme government overreach” during the pandemic had proved that the Democrats aimed, above all, to subjugate citizens. In October, Facebook deleted Gregoire’s account, which contained posts about a militia that she belonged to at the time. She told me, “If the left gets their way, they will silence whoever they want.” She then expressed another prevalent apprehension on the right: that Democrats intend to disarm Americans, in order to render them defenseless against autocracy. “That terrifies me,” Gregoire said. “In other countries, they’ve said, ‘That will never happen here,’ and before you know it their guns are confiscated and they’re living under communism.”

The sense of embattlement that Trump and other Republican politicians encouraged throughout the pandemic primed many conservatives to assume Democratic foul play even before voting began. Last month, at a State Senate hearing on the count at the T.C.F. Center, a witness, offering no evidence of fraud, demanded to see evidence that none had occurred. “We believe,” he testified. “Prove

us wrong.” The witness was Randy Bishop, a conservative Christian-radio host and a former county G.O.P. chairman, as well as a felon with multiple convictions for fraud. I’d watched Bishop deliver a rousing speech in June at an American Patriot Council rally, which Gregoire and the Null brothers had attended. “Carrying a gun with you at all times and being a member of a militia is also your civic duty,” Bishop had argued. According to the F.B.I., the would-be terrorists whom the Nulls abetted used the rally to meet and further their plans, which included televised executions of Democratic lawmakers. When I was under the bleachers at the U.S. Capitol, while the mob pushed up the steps, I noticed Jason Howland, a founder of the American Patriot Council, a few feet behind me in the scrum, leaning all his weight into the mass of bodies.

Even if it were possible to prove that the election was not stolen, it seems doubtful whether conservatives who already feel under attack could be convinced. When Gregoire cited the man with the van smuggling a case of ballots into the T.C.F. Center, I told her that he was a journalist and that the case contained equipment. Gregoire shook her head. “No,” she said. “Those were ballots. It’s not a conspiracy when it’s documented and recorded.”

Conspiracy theories have always helped rationalize white grievance, and people who exploit white grievance for political or financial gain often purvey conspiracy theories. Roger Stone became Trump’s adviser for the 2016 Republican primaries, and frequently appeared on Alex Jones’s “InfoWars” show, which warned that the “deep state”—a nefarious shadow authority manipulating U.S. policy for the profit of elites—opposed Trump because he threatened its power. Jones has asserted that the Bush Administration was responsible for 9/11 and that the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre never happened. During the 2016 campaign, Stone arranged for Trump to be a guest on “InfoWars.” “I will not let you down,” Trump promised Jones.

This compact with the conspiracist right strengthened over the next four years, as the President characterized his impeachment and the special counsel Robert Mueller’s report on Russian elec-



tion meddling as “hoaxes” designed to “overthrow” him. (Stone was convicted of seven felonies related to the Mueller investigation, including making false statements and witness tampering. Trump pardoned him in December. Ten days later, Stone reactivated his Stop the Steal Web site, which began collecting donations for “security” in D.C. on January 6th.) This past year, the scale of the pandemic helped conspiracists broaden the scope of their theories. Many COVID-19 skeptics believe that lockdowns, mask mandates, vaccines, and contact tracing are laying the groundwork for the New World Order—a genocidal communist dystopia that, Jones says, will look “just like ‘The Hunger Games.’” The architects of this apocalypse are such “globalists” as the Clintons, Bill Gates, and George Soros; their instruments are multinational institutions like the European Union, NATO, and the U.N. Whereas Trump has enfeebled these organizations, Biden intends to reinvigorate them. The claim of a plot to steal the election makes sense to people who see Trump as a warrior against deep-state chicanery. Like all good conspiracy theories, it affirms and elaborates preexisting ones. Rejecting it can require renouncing an entire world view.

Trump’s allegations of vast election fraud have been a boon for professional conspiracists. Not long ago, Jones seemed to be at risk of sliding into obsolescence. Facebook, Twitter, Apple, Spotify, and YouTube had expelled him from their platforms in 2018, after he accused the bereaved parents of children murdered at Sandy Hook of being paid actors, prompting “InfoWars” fans to harass and threaten them. The bans curtailed Jones’s reach, but a deluge of COVID-19 propaganda drew millions of people to his proprietary Web sites. To some Americans, Jones’s dire warnings about the deep state and the New World Order looked prophetic, an impression that Trump’s claim of a stolen election only bolstered.

After Facebook removed the Stop the Steal group that had posted the video from the T.C.F. Center, its creator, Kylie Jane Kremer, a thirty-year-old activist, conceived the November 14th rally in Washington, D.C., which became known as the Million MAGA March. That day, Jones joined tens of thousands of Trump supporters gathered at Freedom Plaza.

Kremer, stepping behind a lectern with a microphone, promised “an incredible lineup” of speakers, after which, she said, everyone would proceed up Pennsylvania Avenue, to the Supreme Court. But, before Kremer could introduce her first guest, Jones had shouted through a bullhorn, “If the globalists think they’re gonna keep America under martial law, and they’re gonna put that Communist Chinese agent Biden in, they got another thing coming!”

Hundreds of people cheered. Jones, who is all chest and no neck, pumped a fist in the air. “The march starts now!” he soon declared. His usual security detail was supplemented by about a dozen Proud Boys, who formed a protective ring around him. The national chairman of the Proud Boys, Henry (Enrique) Tarrio, walked at his side. Tarrio, the chief of staff of Latinos for Trump, is the son of Cuban immigrants who fled Fidel Castro’s revolution. Although he served time in federal prison for rebranding and relabelling stolen medical devices, he often cites his family history to portray himself and the Proud Boys in a noble light. At an event in Miami in 2019, he stood behind Trump, wearing a T-shirt that said “ROGER STONE DID NOTHING WRONG!”

“Down with the deep state!” Jones yelled through his bullhorn. “The answer to their ‘1984’ tyranny is 1776!” As he and Tarrio continued along Pennsylvania Avenue, more and more people abandoned Kremer’s event to follow them. As we climbed toward the U.S. Capitol, I turned and peered down at a procession of Trump supporters stretching back for more than a mile. Flags waved like the sails of a bottlenecked armada. From this vantage, the Million MAGA March appeared to have been led by the Proud Boys and Jones. On the steps of the Supreme Court, he cried, “This is the beginning of the end of their New World Order!”

Invocations of the New World Order often raise the age-old spectre of Jewish cabals, and the Stop the Steal movement has been rife with anti-Semitism. At the protest that I attended on November 7th in Pennsylvania, a speaker elicited applause with the exhortation “Do not become a cog in the ZOG!” The acronym stands for “Zionist-occupied government.” Among the Trump supporters was an elderly woman who

gripped a walker with her left hand and a homemade “Stop the Steal” sign with her right. The first letters of “Stop” and “Steal” were stylized to resemble Nazi S.S. bolts. In videos of the shooting inside the Capitol on January 6th, amid the mob attempting to reach members of Congress, a man—subsequently identified as Robert Keith Packer—can be seen in a sweatshirt emblazoned with the words “Camp Auschwitz.” (Packer has been arrested.)

On my way back down Pennsylvania Avenue on November 14th, after Jones’s speech, I fell in with a group of groypers chanting “Christian nation!” and “Emperor Trump!” I followed the young men to Freedom Plaza, where one of them read aloud an impassioned screed about “globalist scum” and the need to “strike down this foreign invasion.” When he finished, I noticed that two groypers standing near me were laughing. The response felt incongruous, until I recognized it as the juvenile thrill of transgression. One of them, his voice high with excitement, marvelled, “He just gave a fascist speech!”

A few days later, Nicholas Fuentes appeared on an “InfoWars” panel with Alex Jones and other right-wing conspiracists. During the discussion, Fuentes warned of the “Great Replacement.” This is the contention that Europe and the United States are under siege from non-whites and non-Christians, and that these groups are incompatible with Western culture, identity, and prosperity. Many white supremacists maintain that the ultimate outcome of the Great Replacement will be “white genocide.” (In Charlottesville, neo-Nazis chanted, “Jews will not replace us!”; the perpetrators of the New Zealand mosque massacre and the El Paso Walmart massacre both cited the Great Replacement in their manifestos.) “What people have to begin to realize is that if we lose this battle, and if this transition is allowed to take place, that’s it,” Fuentes said. “That’s the end.”

“Submitting now will destroy you forever,” Jones agreed.

Because Fuentes and Jones characterize Democrats as an existential menace—Jones because they want to incrementally enslave humanity, Fuentes because they want to make whites a demographic minority—their fight transcends partisan



politics. The same is true for the many evangelicals who have exalted Trump as a Messianic figure divinely empowered to deliver the country from satanic influences. Right-wing Catholics, for their part, have mobilized around the “church militant” movement—fostered by Stephen Bannon, Trump’s former chief strategist—which puts Trump at the forefront of a worldwide clash between Western civilization and Islamic “barbarity.” Crusader flags and patches were widespread at the Capitol insurrection.

In the Senate chamber on January 6th, Jacob Chansley took off his horns and led a group prayer through a megaphone, from behind the Vice-President’s desk. The insurrectionists bowed their heads while Chansley thanked the “heavenly Father” for allowing them to enter the Capitol and “send a message” to the “tyrants, the communists, and the globalists.” Joshua Black, the Alabamian who had been shot in the face with a rubber bullet, said in his YouTube confession, “I praised the name of Jesus on the Senate floor. That was my goal. I think that was God’s goal.”

While the religiously charged demonization of globalists dovetails with QAnon, religious maximalism has also gone mainstream. Under Trump, Republicans throughout the country have consistently situated American politics in the context of an eternal, cosmic struggle between good and evil. In doing so, they have rendered constitutional principles of representation, pluralism, and the separation of powers less inviolable, given the magnitude of what is at stake.

Trump played to this sensibility on June 1st, a week after George Floyd was killed. Police officers used rubber bullets, batons, tear gas, and pepper-ball grenades to violently disperse peaceful protesters in Lafayette Square so that he could walk unmolested from the White House to a church and pose for a photograph while holding a Bible. Liberals were appalled. For many of the President’s supporters, however, the image was symbolically resonant. Lafayette Square was subsequently enclosed behind a tall metal fence, which racial-justice protesters decorated with posters, converting it into a makeshift memorial to victims of police violence. On the morning of the November 14th rally, thousands of Trump supporters passed

the fence on their way to Freedom Plaza. Some of them stopped to rip down posters, and by nine o’clock cardboard littered the sidewalk.

“White folks feel real emboldened these days,” Toni Sanders, a local activist, told me. Sanders had been at the square on June 1st, with her wife and her nine-year-old stepson. “He was tear-gassed,” she said. “He’s traumatized.” She had returned there the day of the march to prevent people from defacing the fence, and had already been in several confrontations. While we spoke, people carrying religious signs approached. They were affiliates of Patriot Prayer, a conservative Christian movement, based in Vancouver, Washington, whose rallies have often attracted white supremacists. Kyle Chapman, a prominent Patriot Prayer figure from California (and a felon), once headed the Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights, a “tactical defense arm” of the Proud Boys. A few days before the march, Chapman had posted a statement on social media proposing that the Proud Boys change their name to the Proud Goys, purge all “undesirables,” and “boldly address the issues of White Genocide” and “the right for White men and women to have their own countries where White interests are written into law.”

The founder of Patriot Prayer, Joey Gibson, has praised Chapman as “a true patriot” and “an icon.” (He also publicly disavows racism and anti-Semitism.) In December, Gibson led the group that broke into the Oregon state capitol. “Look at them,” Sanders said as Gibson passed us, yelling about Biden being a communist. “Full of hate, and proud of it.” She shook her head. “If God were here, He would smite these motherfuckers.”

Since January 6th, some Republican politicians have distanced themselves from Trump. A few, such as Romney, have denounced him. But the Republican Party’s cynical embrace of Trump’s attempted power grab all the way up to January 6th has strengthened its radical flank while sidelining moderates. Seventeen Republican-led states and a hundred and six Republican members of Congress—well over half—signed on to the Texas suit asking the Supreme Court to disenfranchise more than twenty million voters. Republican officials shared



*The conspiracist Alex Jones dominated a*





*pro-Trump rally on November 14th. "Down with the deep state!" Jones yelled. "The answer to their '1984' tyranny is 1776!"*



microphones with white nationalists and conspiracists at every Stop the Steal event I attended. At the Million MAGA March, Louie Gohmert, a congressman from Texas, spoke shortly after Alex Jones on the steps of the Supreme Court. “This is a multidimensional war that the U.S. intelligence people have used on other governments,” Gohmert said—words that might have come from Jones’s mouth. “You not only steal the vote but you use the media to convince people that they’re not really seeing what they’re seeing.”

“We see!” a woman in the crowd cried.

In late December, Gohmert and other Republican legislators filed a lawsuit asking the courts to affirm Vice-President Pence’s right to unilaterally determine the results of the election. When federal judges dismissed the case, Gohmert declared on TV that the ruling had left patriots with only one form of recourse: “You gotta go to the streets and be as violent as Antifa and B.L.M.”

Gohmert is a mainstay of the Tea Party insurgency that facilitated Trump’s political rise. Both that movement and Trumpism are preoccupied as much with heretical conservatives as they are with liberals. At an October rally, Trump derided RINOs—Republicans in name only—as “the lowest form of human life.” After the election, any Republican who accepted Biden’s victory was similarly maligned. When Chris Krebs, a Trump appointee in charge of national cybersecurity, deemed the election “the most secure in American history,” the President fired him. Joe diGenova, Trump’s attorney, then said that Krebs “should be drawn and quartered—taken out at dawn and shot.”

As Republican officials scrambled to prove their fealty to the President, some joined Gohmert in invoking the possibility of violent rebellion. In December, the Arizona Republican Party reposted a tweet from Ali Alexander, a chief organizer of the Stop the Steal movement, that stated, “I am willing to give my life for this fight.” The Twitter account of the Republican National Committee appended the following comment to the retweet: “He is. Are you?”

Alexander is a convicted felon, hav-

ing pleaded guilty to property theft in 2007 and credit-card abuse in 2008. In November, he appeared on the “InfoWars” panel with Jones and Fuentes, during which he alluded to the belief that the New World Order would forcibly implant people with digital-tracking microchips. “I’m just not going to go into that world,” Alexander said. He also expressed jubilant surprise at how successful he, Jones, and Fuentes had been in recruiting mainstream Republicans to their cause: “We are the crazy ones, rushing the gates. But we are winning!”

Jones, Fuentes, and Alexander were not seen rushing the gates when lives were lost at the Capitol on January 6th. Nor, for that matter, was Gohmert. Ashli Babbitt, the woman who was fatally shot, was an Air Force veteran who appears to have been indoctrinated in conspiracy theories about the election. She was killed by an officer protecting members of Congress—perhaps Gohmert among them. In her final tweet, on January 5th, Babbitt declared, “The storm is here”—a reference to a QAnon prophecy that Trump would expose and execute all his enemies. The same day that Babbitt wrote this, Alexander led crowds at Freedom Plaza in chants of “Victory or death!” During the sacking of the Capitol, he recorded a video from a rooftop, with the building in the distance behind him. “I do not denounce this,” he said.

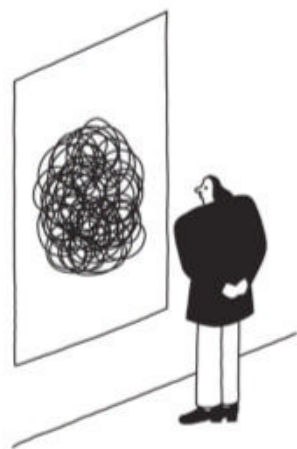
Trump was lying when, after dispatching his followers to the Capitol, he assured them, “I’ll be with you.” But, in a sense, he was there—as were Jones, Fuentes, and Alexander. Their messaging was ubiquitous: on signs, clothes, patches, and flags, and in the way that the insurrectionists articulated what they were doing. At one point, I watched a man with a long beard and a Pittsburgh Pirates hat facing off against several policemen on the main floor of the Capitol. “I will not let this country be taken over by globalist communist scum!” he yelled, hoarse and shaking. “They want us all to be slaves! Everybody’s seen the documentation—it’s out in the open!” He could not comprehend why the officers would want to interfere in such a virtuous uprising. “You *know* what’s right,” he told them. Then

he gestured vaguely at the rest of the rampaging mob. “Just like these people know what’s right.”

After Chansley, the Q Shaman, left his note on the dais, a new group entered the Senate chamber. Milling around was a man in a black-and-yellow plaid shirt, with a bandanna over his face. Ahead of January 6th, Tarrio, the Proud Boys chairman, had released a statement announcing that his men would “turn out in record numbers” for the event—but would be “incognito.” The man in the plaid shirt was the first Proud Boy I had seen openly wearing the organization’s signature colors. At several points, however, I heard grunts of “Uhuru!,” a Proud Boys battle cry, and a group attacking a police line outside the Capitol had sung “Proud of Your Boy”—from the Broadway version of “Aladdin”—for which the organization is sardonically named. One member of the group had flashed the “O.K.” sign and shouted, “Fuck George Floyd! Fuck Breonna Taylor! Fuck them all!” He seemed overcome with emotion, as if at last giving expression to a sentiment that he had long suppressed.

On January 4th, Tarrio had been arrested soon after his arrival at Dulles International Airport, for a destruction-of-property charge related to the December 12th event, where he’d set fire to a Black Lives Matter banner stolen from a historic Black church. (In an intersection outside Harry’s Pub, he had stood over the flames while Proud Boys chanted, “Fuck you, faggots!”) He was released shortly after his arrest but was barred from remaining in D.C. On the eve of the siege, followers of the official Proud Boys account on Parler were incensed. “Every cop involved should be executed immediately,” one user commented. “Time to resist and revolt!” another added. A third wrote, “Fuck these DC Police. Fuck those cock suckers up. Beat them down. You dont get to return to your families.”

Since George Floyd’s death, demands from leftists to curb police violence have inspired a Back the Blue movement among Republicans, and most right-wing outfits present themselves as ardently pro-law enforcement. This alliance is conditional, however, and tends to collapse whenever laws intrude on conservative values and priorities. In Michigan, I saw anti-lockdown protesters ridicule





officers enforcing COVID-19 restrictions as “Gestapo” and “filthy rats.” When police cordoned off Black Lives Matter Plaza, Proud Boys called them “communists,” “cunts,” and “pieces of shit.” At the Capitol on January 6th, the interactions between Trump supporters and law enforcement vacillated from homicidal beligerence to borderline camaraderie—a schizophrenic dynamic that compounded the dark unreality of the situation. When a phalanx of officers at last marched into the Senate chamber, no arrests were made, and everyone was permitted to leave without questioning. As we passed through the central doors, a sergeant with a shaved head said, “Appreciate you being peaceful.” His uniform was half untucked and missing buttons, and his necktie was ripped and crooked. Beside him, another officer, who had been sprayed with a fire extinguisher, looked as if a sack of flour had been emptied on him.

A policeman loitering in the lobby escorted us down a nearby set of stairs, where we overtook an elderly woman carrying a “TRUMP” tote bag. “We scared them off—that’s what we did, we scared the bastards,” she said, to no one in particular.

The man in front of me had a salt-and-pepper beard and a baseball cap with a “We the People” patch on the back. I had watched him collect papers from various desks in the Senate chamber and put them in a glossy blue folder. As police directed us to an exit, he walked out with the folder in his hand.

The afternoon was cold and blustery. Thousands of people still surrounded the building. On the north end of the Capitol, a renewed offensive was being mounted, on another entrance guarded by police. The rioters here were far more bitter and combative, for a simple reason: they were outside, and they wanted inside. They repeatedly charged the police and were repulsed with opaque clouds of tear gas and pepper spray.

“Fuck the blue!” people chanted.

“We have guns, too, motherfuckers!” one man yelled. “With a lot bigger rounds!” Another man, wearing a do-rag that said “FUCK YOUR FEELINGS,” told his friend, “If we have to tool up, it’s gonna be over. It’s gonna come to that. Next week, Trump’s gonna say, ‘Come to D.C.’ And we’re coming heavy.”

Later, I listened to a woman talking



*“Would you worry less about your relationship if I told you we’re about to get hit by a giant asteroid?”*

• •

on her cell phone. “We need to come back with guns,” she said. “One time with guns, and then we’ll never have to do this again.”

Although the only shot fired on January 6th was the one that killed Ashli Babbitt, two suspected explosive devices were found near the Capitol, and a seventy-year-old Alabama man was arrested for possessing multiple loaded weapons, ammunition, and eleven Molotov cocktails. As the sun fell, clashes with law enforcement at times descended into vicious hand-to-hand brawling. During the day, more than fifty officers were injured and fifteen hospitalized. I saw several Trump supporters beat policemen with blunt instruments. Videos show an officer being dragged down stairs by his helmet and clobbered with a pole attached to an American flag. In another, a mob crushes a young policeman in a door as he screams in agony. One officer, Brian Sicknick, a forty-two-year-old, died after being struck in the head with a fire extinguisher. Several days after the siege, Howard Liebengood, a fifty-one-year-old officer assigned to protect the Senate, committed suicide.

Right-wing extremists justify such in-

consistency by assigning the epithet “oath-breaker” to anyone in uniform who executes his duties in a manner they dislike. It is not difficult to imagine how, once Trump is no longer President, his most fanatical supporters could apply this caveat to all levels of government, including local law enforcement. At the rally on December 12th, Nicholas Fuentes underscored the irreconcilability of a radical-right ethos and pro-police, pro-military patriotism: “When they go door to door mandating vaccines, when they go door to door taking your firearms, when they go door to door taking your children, who do you think it will be that’s going to do that? It’s going to be the police and the military.”

During Trump’s speech on January 6th, he said, “The media is the biggest problem we have.” He went on, “It’s become the enemy of the people. . . . We gotta get them straightened out.” Several journalists were attacked during the siege. Men assaulted a *Times* photographer inside the Capitol, near the rotunda, as she screamed for help. After National Guard soldiers and federal agents finally arrived and expelled the Trump supporters, some





*Outside the Capitol, rioters surrounded news crews, chasing off the reporters and smashing their equipment with bats.*



members of the mob shifted their attention to television crews in a park on the east side of the building. Earlier, a man had accosted an Israeli journalist in the middle of a live broadcast, calling him a “lying Israeli” and telling him, “You are cattle today.” Now the Trump supporters surrounded teams from the Associated Press and other outlets, chasing off the reporters and smashing their equipment with bats and sticks.

There was a ritualistic atmosphere as the crowd stood in a circle around the piled-up cameras, lights, and tripods. “This is the old media,” a man said, through a megaphone. “This is what it looks like. Turn off Fox, turn off CNN.”

Another man, in a black leather jacket and wraparound sunglasses, suggested that journalists should be killed: “Start makin’ a list! Put all those names down, and we start huntin’ them down, one by one!”

“Traitors to the guillotine!”

“They won’t be able to walk down the streets!”

The radicalization of the Republican Party has altered the world of conservative media, which is, in turn, accelerating that radicalization. On November 7th, Fox News, which has often seemed to function as a civilian branch of the Trump Administration, called the race for Biden, along with every other major network. Furious, Trump encouraged his supporters to instead watch Newsmax, whose ratings skyrocketed as a result. Newsmax hosts have dismissed COVID-19 as a “scamdemic” and have speculated that Republican politicians were being infected with the virus as a form of “sabotage.” The Newsmax headliner Michelle Malkin has praised Fuentes as one of the “New Right leaders” and the groypers as “patriotic.”

At the December 12th rally, I ran into the Pennsylvania Three Percent member whom I’d met in Harrisburg on November 7th. Then he had been a Fox News devotee, but since Election Day he’d discovered Newsmax. “I’d had no idea what it even was,” he told me. “Now the only thing that anyone I know watches anymore is Newsmax. They ask the hard questions.”

It seems unlikely that what happened on January 6th will turn anyone who inhabits such an ecosystem against Trump. On the contrary, there are already indications that the mayhem at the Capitol

will further isolate and galvanize many right-wingers. The morning after the siege, an alternative narrative, pushed by Jones and other conspiracists, went viral on Parler: the assault on the Capitol had actually been instigated by Antifa agitators impersonating Trump supporters. Mo Brooks, an Alabama congressman who led the House effort to contest the certification of the Electoral College votes, tweeted, “Evidence growing that fascist ANTIFA orchestrated Capitol attack with clever mob control tactics.” (Brooks had warmed up the crowd for Trump on January 6th, with a speech whose bellicosity far surpassed the President’s. “Today is the day American patriots start takin’ down names and kickin’ ass!” he’d hollered.) Most of the “evidence” of Antifa involvement seems to be photographs of rioters clad in black. Never mind that, in early January, Tarrio, the Proud Boys chairman, wrote on Parler, “We might dress in all BLACK for the occasion.” Or that his colleague Joe Biggs, addressing antifascist activists, added, “We are going to smell like you, move like you, and look like you.”

Not long after the Brooks tweet, I got a call from a woman I’d met at previous Stop the Steal rallies. She had been unable to come to D.C., owing to a recent surgery. She asked if I could tell her what I’d seen, and if the stories about Antifa were accurate. She was upset—she did not believe that “Trump people” could have done what the media were alleging. Before I responded, she put me on speakerphone. I could hear other people in the room. We spoke for a while, and it was plain that they desperately wanted to know the truth. I did my best to convey it to them as I understood it.

Less than an hour after we got off the phone, the woman texted me a screenshot of a CNN broadcast with a news bulletin that read, “ANTIFA HAS TAKEN RESPONSIBLITLY FOR STORMING CAPITAL HILL.” The image, which had been circulating on social media, was crudely Photoshopped (and poorly spelled). “Thought you might want to see this,” she wrote.

**I**n the year 2088, a five-hundred-pound time capsule is scheduled to be exhumed from beneath the stone slabs of Freedom Plaza. Inside an aluminum cylinder, historians will find relics honoring the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.:

a Bible, clerical robes, a cassette tape with King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, part of which he wrote in a nearby hotel. What will those historians know about the lasting consequences of the 2020 Presidential election, which culminated with the incumbent candidate inciting his supporters to storm the Capitol and threaten to lynch his adversaries? Will this year’s campaign against the democratic process have evolved into a durable insurgency? Something worse?

On January 8th, Trump was permanently banned from Twitter. Five days later, he became the only U.S. President in history to be impeached twice. (During the Capitol siege, the man in the hard hat withdrew from one of the Senate desks a manual, from a year ago, titled “PROCEEDINGS OF THE UNITED STATES SENATE IN THE IMPEACHMENT TRIAL OF PRESIDENT DONALD JOHN TRUMP.”) Although the President has finally agreed to submit to a peaceful transition of power, he has admitted no responsibility for the deadly riot. “People thought that what I said was totally appropriate,” he told reporters on January 12th.

He will not disappear. Neither will the baleful forces that he has conjured and awakened. This is why iconoclasts like Fuentes and Jones have often seemed more exultant than angry since Election Day. For them, the disappointment of Trump’s defeat has been eclipsed by the prospect of upheaval that it has brought about. As Fuentes said on the “InfoWars” panel, “This is the best thing that can happen, because it’s destroying the legitimacy of the system.” Fuentes was at the Capitol riot, though he denies going inside. On his show the next day, he called the siege “the most awe-inspiring and inspirational and incredible thing I have seen in my entire life.”

At the heap of wrecked camera gear outside the Capitol, the man in the leather jacket and sunglasses declared to the crowd, “We are at war. . . . Mobilize in your own cities, your own counties. Storm your own capitol buildings. And take down every one of these corrupt motherfuckers.” Behind him, lights glowed in the rotunda. The sky darkened. At 8 P.M., Congress reconvened and resumed certifying the election. For six hours, Americans had held democracy hostage in the name of patriotism.

The storm might be here. ♦



A Challenge  
You Have  
Overcome



Allegra  
Goodman



They were a family of long marriages. You might sleep in separate bedrooms and wash dishes in a fury. You might find a moldy peach in the refrigerator and leave it on the counter for three days as evidence in some private trial—but you would never leave. Dan and Melanie had been married for thirty years. Steve and Andrea were coming up on twenty-five. Andrea felt a certain vindication about this anniversary because she had married in, and her own parents had split when she was young.

Steve's mother, Jeanne, used to ask Andrea, in a melancholy way, "How is your mother?" and then, after a long pause, "How is your father?" Clearly, divorce was hereditary, and Andrea a carrier. Real Rubinsteins had the marriage gene—except for Aunt Sylvia and Cousin Richard, who was Sylvia's son, so there you go.

And yet, despite Andrea's unfortunate heritage, she and Steve remained married. Were they happy? Yes, of course. They were at least as happy as everybody else. And why was happiness the criterion, anyway? They had endured health scares, teen-agers, money problems. They were struggling even now, because they had spent their professional lives in educational publishing. Steve hated what was left of his job, and Andrea had lost hers altogether. Nevertheless, Steve kept schlepping to the city, where he worked in a new open-plan office and was allowed no shelves, no files, just one drawer. Andrea now toiled in the finished basement as a private college counsellor. And together they kept paying their bills, their taxes, their older son's tuition, and their interest-only mortgage. Jeanne would have approved if she had lived. This was a woman who praised a shirt: it wears like iron. Who lay on her deathbed refusing to accept that she was dying. As a couple, Steve and Andrea had staying power—a virtue Jeanne had prized more than youth, beauty, joy. And why not? Youth ended, beauty faded, and where was joy when you needed it?

Joy was not the word that came to mind when Andrea remembered her late mother-in-law. Toward the end of her life, Jeanne lost patience with everyone, but particularly with her grand-

sons Zach and Nate. Their high-school teams meant nothing to her. Their classes, friends, activities did not register. In her delirious last days, Jeanne kept asking Andrea why her sons did not read. Why they did not talk. "They *do* talk," Andrea protested, and Jeanne said, "But why can't they carry on a conversation?" The last time Jeanne saw the boys, she spoke obsessively of music, and kept asking Nate, "What do you play?" She could not comprehend his answer—soccer.

No, Jeanne had not been sympathetic, and yet Andrea appreciated her, now that she was gone. Was it pity? Was it distance? Was it knowing that Jeanne could no longer hurt her? Or was it that Andrea's own work required such extraordinary tact? Counselling students and consoling parents, Andrea looked back in awe at Jeanne's breathtaking honesty.

"I don't think there's enough of *you* in this essay," Andrea told a girl named Lizzie, but she knew what Jeanne would have said. *Oh, I disagree. The less said, the better.*

"I think she'll have good options," Andrea reassured Lizzie's mother on the phone, but she could hear Jeanne. *With that transcript?*

At night, when Andrea heard Steve's heavy footsteps, she ascended the stairs. "Hello," she said, by which she meant how was your day?

"Hi," Steve answered, which meant don't ask.

"Did you find the other clicker?" The garage-door opener was broken.

Steve stared at her as though he had never heard of a clicker, or a garage. "Are we having dinner? Or is everyone just fending for themselves?"

Andrea said, "You know what? I'm not even going to answer that."

Steve opened the fridge and gazed inside. Finally, he took out the remains of Nate's birthday cake and cut himself an enormous slice. *You don't need that.*

It was strange, hearing your mother-in-law like a Greek chorus, in the kitchen. Weird, tragic, gothic, which didn't match their sixties split-level, but there she was.

There had been a time when Jeanne regularly brought Andrea to tears. Then Steve would say, The truth is, my mom

is a good person, but she has no filter. And Andrea would say, She hates me. And Steve would say, No! How could anybody hate you? These were their actual conversations. Now Andrea stood in the kitchen doorway, and Jeanne hovered at her shoulder. Bad habit, guilty pleasure, good without a filter.

Meanwhile, Steve ate the cake, with its thick slab of buttercream. "Where's Nate?"

Andrea glanced down at the tiled entryway. His cleats were lying by the door, but his sneakers were missing, which meant he was with Mackenzie, his girlfriend. And what were they doing? Not college applications. Yes, while Andrea built spreadsheets and schedules with some of Nate's classmates, he rejected such prosaic methods. He had joy to spare, and very little sense of time. His parents worried, disapproved, and envied him.

"Wasn't he supposed to be here after practice?" Steve said.

"I don't know. I've been working."

"Well, so have I." Steve carried his plate to the kitchen counter. (No one but Andrea ever opened the dishwasher.) "You should talk to him."

"I tried!"

Steve could have answered this. He could have said, Why are you shouting? But he was beyond bickering. He sank down on the couch in the living room and closed his eyes, because if exhaustion were a competition he would win. Andrea got to set her own hours, while he sifted ashes nine to six at Hillier-Nelson, where scarcely anyone remained and Steve awaited termination. He was the working dead, his projects cancelled, his assistant fired. He had nothing left—not even survivor's guilt. At one time, he had acquired books. "Composition Across the Curriculum." "Writing for Everyone." As a senior editor, he had shepherded each manuscript to publication. Now he thought only of his severance package. No, that wasn't true. He mourned his house—once proud, once famous—merging, swelling, and then collapsing like a dying star, retrenching to the backlist, selling dead authors, then giving up entirely on print editions.

Eyes closing, he dreamed lightly of new titles. "Research Across the Universe." "Writing Without Readers." He saw paper and black print and poetry,



his first love, the yellow wood he had forsaken.

The room chilled; the windy night rushed in. Steve started up. "Nate."

"What?" His son was already bounding up the stairs. He was always bounding, jumping, hair flopping in his face.

"What day is it?"

"Thursday," Nate said.

"No, tell me the date."

"October."

"It's October the eleventh," Steve informed his son.

"O.K." Nate smiled, gracious and a little condescending, as if to say, I'm not gonna argue.

"So, when are you going to work with Mom on applications?" Nate didn't answer, because, of course, he had no intention of working with his mom on anything. Other people paid good money for her services. Parents and students testified to Andrea's insight, her compassionate approach. No way did Nate want any part of that. He didn't know he needed an edge. He had good grades, great scores, and he was a pretty decent athlete, but he had won no prizes; nobody was scouting him. Obviously, he needed all the help that he could get. "Just use your common sense," Steve said. Unfortunately, Nate did not have any. He was applying to Brown on November 1st, and he had not started his essays—or so he said. Secretly, Steve hoped his son was going it alone, crafting a brilliant piece of writing. Nate cultivated a careless look, but he was more thoughtful than he appeared. This was what Steve had always told his own mother.

Jeanne never disputed the point. She just said, "He should play an instrument." As a violinist, Jeanne saw music as a sign of character as well as competence. Steve had labored at the piano all his childhood, practicing alone, then with his brother, who had it even worse, sawing his small, gloomy cello. Beethoven should have been their birthright, except that they had no talent or motivation. It was a great day when their father announced that they could stop, indeed that they should stop playing, for the good of everyone around them. Jeanne had never entirely forgiven him for that, just as her sons had

never entirely forgiven her for forcing lessons on them all those years. Steve refused to repeat the experiment, and his sons grew up happy to a fault. Zach was now at Rutgers, mostly playing rugby. Nate, who really was quite bright, was gliding through the end of high school, last-minuting every assignment.

"You have to start," Andrea told Nate the next morning. "You have to put some time in. You can't just close your eyes and say, 'I'm gonna get into Brown.'"

"You have an in-house college counselor," Steve added, but Nate was rushing, gathering his stuff for school. Notebook, laptop, graphing calculator.

When Andrea said, "You're just leaving your bowl on the table?," he clattered cereal bowl and spoon into the sink. "Don't break it!" she snapped as he ran down the stairs and out the door.

Then Steve told Andrea, "You don't have to yell."

She said, "That wasn't me. It was your mother."

Andrea had to make a conscious effort to block Jeanne's voice, because she could not speak that way. She was not so old, or so angry, or so bitter. Nevertheless, Jeanne tempted her.

A student named Jonah came to her that afternoon, and at one point he said, "I'm not going to get in anywhere."

Andrea whipped off her reading glasses. "We will build a list of schools that are right for you!" Of course there

was a school for everybody, even the worst student. There was absolutely a college out there. *A lid for every pot*, Jeanne whispered.

Too cynical. Too true. This is not who I am, Andrea told her mother-in-law. I never even liked you. *Yes, I know*, she heard Jeanne answer. Sometimes Andrea hummed to drown

Jeanne out, but it was difficult. She felt haunted, although she did not believe in ghosts. Jeanne said, *I don't, either*.

On November 1st, Andrea made a supreme effort. When she saw Steve digging into the leftover Halloween candy, she did not say a thing. When Nate skipped school to write his appli-

cation, she did not say, Oh, now you're trying to do it all on the last day? Her clients had already submitted. They had completed the process a week ago. Meanwhile, her son holed up in his room.

Andrea stood outside his door and begged to help—but he would not relent. Hours passed, and she could hear Nate typing. Half a day, and she worked down in her office. Leave him alone, she told herself. No more pleading or berating. All she did was slip her Essay Guidelines under Nate's door. This was a two-page handout that included TOPICS TO AVOID:

1. Death of pet
2. Divorce of parents
3. Sports injury
4. Drugs, alcohol, mental health, cancer
5. Challenge you have overcome, if it's one of the above

Actually, Andrea steered her students away from writing about challenges of any kind. Asian, Jewish, and just plain white, her kids had real troubles, but they were not homeless, stateless, or first-gen anything. They had not walked across Sudan to freedom, or escaped the killing fields, or lived as refugees. Some had parents or grandparents who had done these things. Nate's own grandfather had been a Holocaust survivor who had rebuilt his life, working his way through college and then law school—but, to state the obvious, Zeyde was not the one applying. (Andrea's sixth topic to avoid was "Impressive relatives.") Demographically, a kid like Nate just couldn't win. All he could do was write with wit, humility, and self-knowledge, and hope that someone would take a second look at him.

At dinnertime, Nate emerged to refuel in the kitchen. He toasted two bagels and smothered them with cream cheese, which melted through the holes.

"How are you doing?" Andrea asked, as he licked his fingers. "Do you want me to look?"

"No."

The garage door was rumbling open, now that they had found the other clicker. Steve thumped up the stairs and said, "Hey, Nate. How's it going?"

"O.K."





## TO BE YOUNG

To do all your picnicking in a suburban forest. To lie  
hammocked under the persimmon tree. To dream of ultralights

while wearing a lime-green jumpsuit, or inflate  
with blood before flying off the handle. But you reach

a point when there are no more infinitives. The beautiful  
the only imperative. You signal for sex then death. Is that it?

Nothing comes after but moonlight & a butterfly net?  
A man chainsaws the orchard of which you once partook.

The man has a mill in mind where the wood  
is valued, where gold runs out into the river

with the sewage. You taste the fizz of a Royal Crown Cola.  
And the rain, the rain, the rain. At you, spitting.

—L. S. Klatt

"Taking a break?"

"Yeah."

"We should at least proofread," Andrea interjected.

"Sh-h-h," Steve said.

What? Andrea demanded silently, because hadn't she kept quiet almost the whole day? And wasn't her kid sending in his application that very night with no help, no oversight? ("Every essay will benefit from a second pair of eyes.") She told Nate, "Just let me look for typos," but he was already running to his room with a one-pound bag of pretzels.

Steve reproached Andrea. "Can't you see you're triggering him?"

"I'm not triggering anyone!"

"You chased him right out of here."

"I did not."

"Now you'll never see that application."

"That's not my fault!"

"Because you are always ordering him around."

"I was making a suggestion."

"You are incapable of suggesting anything. Every statement is an injunction." Not for nothing had Steve edited "The Hillier Handbook for College Writing," ninth edition.

"Stop!" That wasn't Jeanne talking; that was Andrea, trapped there in the kitchen with her husband. She a college counsellor, he an editor, both ban-

ished by their son—and now what? They were supposed to take it calmly? Applaud his budding independence? Let go and watch him fail? Fuck that. Why was their kid the one who had to learn the hard way? And why was this somehow Andrea's fault? "I wanted to help him. I tried to help him."

"But you have no idea how to talk to him," Steve said.

"I talk to people all day."

"That makes you even worse."

"You try coaching five kids an afternoon."

"I wish," Steve said. "I wish I had your job."

"You do not," Andrea shot back, and this was true. He wouldn't last five minutes; he would lose his mind. At the same time, she had no idea what he was going through. Andrea had been laid off two years before, along with lots of other people. There had been esprit de corps, and good-bye coffees, common cause. She'd left when business was merely bad. She had not seen worse. She had never known the loneliness, the dread, the poison in the air. He was about to say all this when Nate flew down the stairs.

"Nate!" Steve called, but he was already standing at the door.

"Hey," Nate said softly, and Steve thought, Oh, great.

"Hi, Mackenzie," Andrea called down to Nate's first love, a junior with her whole life ahead of her, no applications for an entire year.

"Hi, Andrea," Mackenzie answered, as Nate rushed her to his room. Jeanne said, *That's what she calls you?*

"Now Nate has his second pair of eyes," Andrea told Steve.

"Wonderful." Steve stalked to the living-room couch, and Andrea sat in the matching armchair. He opened a book. She wondered if Mackenzie could differentiate between "there" and "their." "What time is it?" Steve asked.

"Just eight."

Steve opened "The Hillier Anthology of Short Fiction," because this is what he did now. He salvaged old books from the office. These were the stories he had studied back in college. High school. This was his youth. "Araby" and "A. & P." "Lady with a Lapdog." "The Horse Dealer's Daughter." He said, "I really thought they'd fire me today."

"Yeah, I know," Andrea said. November 1st was a good crisp date for termination. Slowly, she said, "It's been so long, I don't think they'll ever do it."

"Oh, they will." Steve's fate had been decided when his editorial director left, and her deputy left, too, and then Hillier restructured to bring in a new V.P. named Erin. This Erin, who was thirty-one years old, had an even younger assistant, named Cody, who had a Ph.D. in composition from Wayne State, and answered the phone "Lo?," sounding remarkably like Nate. Who was upstairs in his room with his girlfriend and his essay on his laptop on his bed. "What was that song we used to sing to the kids?" Steve asked Andrea. "About the branch on the tree and the twig on the branch?"

"And the nest on the twig," she remembered immediately. "And the egg in the nest, and the bird in the egg, and the feather on the bird, and the flea on the feather."

"That's what it's like," he said, because the older you got, the faster everything went. Childhood, school, college, marriage, kids—egg, bird, feather—each nesting inside the other. You tried to



# THE FIRST PARTY



hold on. You tried to get your kid to listen. You wanted to change the outcome somehow, but that wasn't happening.

Strange how much better Steve felt in the morning. Andrea was sipping coffee in the kitchen, and she looked better, too. One minute before midnight, Nate had sent his application in. Relief! Of course, he would have many more to write. Andrea's students had a Plan B and a Plan C, their applications cued up like airplanes on a runway. Nate had nothing. He would have to spend all of winter break writing new supplemental essays after he was rejected from Brown, but they couldn't think about that now.

You just couldn't get this crazy every time. You could not let the darkness and the aggravation win. And what if, by some chance, Nate had done it right? Steve's secret hope returned. What if his essays sparkled with originality? And what if Mackenzie had actually done some proofreading and he got into Brown without adults? What a triumph that would be—like navigating by the stars. Steve thought about this at work, where Erin was presenting in

her eager way to what she called the team, and what Steve knew as the remnants of the company.

"We're very excited about this project!" she announced. "We're taking our content off 'The Hillier Handbook,' and what we're doing is creating a series of interactive trainings." As she played video clips, Steve imagined telling people, I never read my kid's college applications. No! they would cry, disbelieving. How could you let him send them in without even proofreading? Steve would answer modestly, He didn't need my help. He decided to go it alone, and I respected his decision.

"That's what's cool about this platform," Erin was explaining, and Steve remembered that he had not respected his son's decision at all. He still doubted whether Nate had done the right thing.

Nate hated personal essays. He was a whiz at math, and a political savant, but he didn't read a lot off screen. He was the kind of student Erin hoped to reach, although Steve could not imagine Nate undergoing video trainings—not for writing.

One dark night in December, Steve

told Andrea, "This interactive thing is the end."

Andrea thought he was talking about the company. "Not necessarily."

"No, I mean the end of me. I'm writing my resignation letter."

Jeanne slipped out. "Oh, please." Steve should have been writing cover letters. He should have been meeting with his headhunter. Instead, he produced a yellow legal pad with a handwritten screed:

Dear Erin,

Much as I enjoy your presentations—very—I find myself incapable of stepping onto your cool platform together with the team. I am a book editor, and content provider, a.k.a. writer. I am not an animator, coder, or video editor. My texts do not need performers. They interact right here on the page.

Andrea said, "Oh, come on." Because here she was, building her home business hour after compassionate hour, and all he wanted was to burn his ships. "You're not sending that anywhere."

"Why not?" He was proud of his manifesto, his jeremiad.

"You should be working on your next steps."

"I am!"

"This is not one of them," Andrea said, because what was he thinking?

Actually, he was thinking about how he'd given up on poetry so he could earn a living. Ha, he thought, the joke's on me. He was thinking about technology and whether he could find another job without going to boot camp. Steve's brother, Dan, knew a musicologist who had changed careers that way. You came to camp a Baroque specialist, coded non-stop, and emerged a programmer with marketable skills. "But I'd be terrible at it," Steve told Dan on the phone.

"You never know until you try," Dan answered. "I'm saying, Think out of the box."

You're an insurance agent, Steve thought. Meanwhile, Dan's wife, Melanie, got on the phone. "Hey, happy anniversary!"

Steve exchanged looks with Andrea, who sat close enough to overhear. "Thanks," he said, as Melanie asked, "How are you guys celebrating?"

It felt like a trick question. Not what are you doing for your anniversary but how are you guys doing?



When he got off the phone, Andrea said, “Only Melanie would remember that.”

“So, you forgot, too,” Steve ventured hopefully.

“Oh, I didn’t forget.”

“Well, you didn’t mention it.”

“You know what?” Andrea said. “I’m tired of reminding everyone of everything.” She had been e-mailing students, and now she closed her laptop, because all she did was say, Don’t forget to send me your next draft, and Time to register for the next SAT. She was the scheduler and list-maker and timekeeper. *What else is new?* said Jeanne.

“You always take offense,” Steve said. “You are personally offended at everything I do.”

“No,” Andrea said. “It’s what you don’t do. It’s what you constantly ignore.”

“I’m not ignoring anything.”

“Nate heard from Brown.”

Instantly, Steve’s tone changed. “Was he rejected?”

“I’m sure.”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“That’s how I know.”

Steve glanced down at the entryway to check for shoes. He must have taken refuge at Mackenzie’s house. He didn’t like his own house at the best of times—and Steve couldn’t blame him. Unhappiness filled every room. Why should he come home? Why should he tell them anything? He would leave just like his brother; he would disappear into the ether, leaving them to bicker over dying houseplants.

Not yet. The garage door rumbled underneath, and there was Nate in his bike helmet. No Mackenzie, just their own kid, huge and strong, nose red, cheeks glowing.

Nobody spoke, not even Jeanne. In fact, Andrea could not hear Jeanne’s voice at all. She just walked up to Nate and wrapped her arms around his chest, which was the highest she could reach, and said, “I never went to Brown.”

“I didn’t, either,” Steve put in from the kitchen table. “And look at us. Look how well the two of us turned out.”

Nate pulled away, and Andrea studied his face. She saw stubbornness there, and frustration, a little sadness, but mostly surprise. It was the first time he’d been rejected from anything. “You’re gonna be great. Nate the

Great!” she told him, and Steve remembered Nate at four in his homemade superhero cape. “This is just the beginning,” Andrea said, as Nate headed to his room. “And this weekend why don’t we sit down and plan your next applications?”

“No, thanks.”

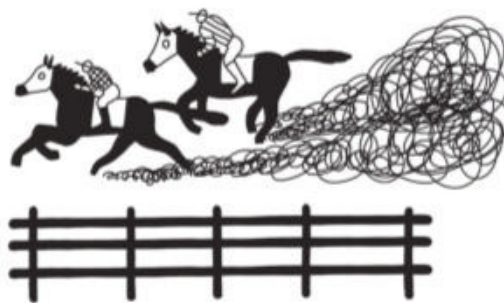
Steve whispered to Andrea, “Did you have to mention that?”

Surely Jeanne would have had a comeback, but at that moment Andrea had no idea what she would say. It was a strange feeling, like shaking water from your ear. “Oh, well,” she told Steve, “I had to ask.”

The next morning, Steve got the call. Cody ushered him into Erin’s office, and she told him how much his work was appreciated, and how much the company had changed and how unfortunately Hillier was restructuring, which meant new roles for everyone.

Steve said, “And no roles for some.” This interruption startled Erin. She seemed to forget her lines, so Steve encouraged her: “Do go on.”

He would have preferred to quit. Much preferred to type and send his letter, but he did not. He simply walked out in the middle of the day. Briefcase in hand, he joined the throngs in midtown, the guys in ski hats, and the other guys in suits, and the tourists with their kids shopping for Christmas in the department stores. So this was freedom. Perfect emptiness. This was what he had been waiting for. What did it say



about him that his first impulse was to buy something? He wanted to go out and spend all his nonexistent money—but of course he didn’t. He kept walking. He walked all the way down to the West Village, where you could purchase antique tricycles and letterpress stationery. Then he walked back to Penn Station.

What he really wanted was some

chocolate. Andrea liked good chocolate, especially with hazelnuts or almonds—but he didn’t buy any, because she worried he was eating too much candy. He found a florist instead, and stood in front of the glass refrigerator case, a morgue for roses. You could get a dozen in a long box like a coffin.

“Special occasion?” the tiny saleslady asked.

“Anniversary. One day late.” He wasn’t sure why he confessed to that.

“Long-stem red,” she told him with authority, but they looked vampiric, almost black. The orange roses were much better, flaming colors, perfect for a firing—except the flowers weren’t for him.

He looked at potted orchids, azaleas, cacti—maybe a little hostile for the occasion—and then he saw it, an overpriced ficus standing in a ceramic pot, an entire tree with a slender gray trunk and abundant fluttering leaves. “I’ll take that.”

Now the saleslady frowned, as though she were concerned for him. She tied a red ribbon around the trunk and handed him a blank card. “Careful, careful,” she warned, as he left the shop and struggled with the door.

The whole thing was a struggle. The heavy pot and the leaves tickling his face. He almost fell stepping onto the escalator at the station. He wrenched his back, but he fought on, wrestling the tree onto the train. There he sat with the pot on the floor in front of him. Who bought a ficus in the city and took it to New Jersey? Apparently, he did. He should have asked Andrea what she wanted, but she would have said, “Nothing.” His back was seizing, and he regretted not buying the flaming roses—but a tree had roots. It was alive. Meanwhile, the florist’s card was the size of a postage stamp—much too small to say what he was thinking. That he was starting over. That he was glad and disillusioned all at once. That he was lucky to come home to Andrea and Nate—and Zach, who had just arrived for winter break. That this tree reminded him of the song, although it didn’t come with a bird or a feather or an egg. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Allegra Goodman on the parents of teens.



# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## SWINGING ON A STAR

*Have signs of intelligent extraterrestrial life been found already?*

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

On October 19, 2017, a Canadian astronomer named Robert Weryk was reviewing images captured by a telescope known as Pan-STARRS1 when he noticed something strange. The telescope is situated atop Haleakalā, a ten-thousand-foot volcanic peak on the island of Maui, and it scans the sky each night, recording the results with the world's highest-definition camera. It's designed to hunt for "near-Earth objects," which are mostly asteroids whose paths bring them into our planet's astronomical neighborhood and which travel at an average velocity of some forty thousand miles an hour. The dot of light that caught Weryk's attention was moving more than four times that speed, at almost two hundred thousand miles per hour.

Weryk alerted colleagues, who began tracking the dot from other observatories. The more they looked, the more puzzling its behavior seemed. The object was small, with an area roughly that of a city block. As it tumbled through space, its brightness varied so much—by a factor of ten—that it had to have a very odd shape. Either it was long and skinny, like a cosmic cigar, or flat and round, like a celestial pizza. Instead of swinging around the sun on an elliptical path, it was zipping away more or less in a straight line. The bright dot, astronomers concluded, was something never before seen. It was an "interstellar object"—a visitor from far beyond the solar system that was just passing through. In the dry nomenclature of the International Astronomical Union, it became known as 1I/2017 U1. More evocatively, it was dubbed 'Oumuamua (pronounced "oh-mooah-mooah"), from

the Hawaiian, meaning, roughly, "scout."

Even interstellar objects have to obey the law of gravity, but 'Oumuamua raced along as if propelled by an extra force. Comets get an added kick thanks to the gases they throw off, which form their signature tails. 'Oumuamua, though, didn't have a tail. Nor did the telescopes trained on it find evidence of any of the by-products normally associated with outgassing, like water vapor or dust.

"This is definitely an unusual object," a video produced by NASA observed. "And, unfortunately, no more new observations of 'Oumuamua are possible because it's already too dim and far away."

As astronomers pored over the data, they excluded one theory after another. 'Oumuamua's weird motion couldn't be accounted for by a collision with another object, or by interactions with the solar wind, or by a phenomenon that's known, after a nineteenth-century Polish engineer, as the Yarkovsky effect. One group of researchers decided that the best explanation was that 1I/2017 U1 was a "miniature comet" whose tail had gone undetected because of its "unusual chemical composition." Another group argued that 'Oumuamua was composed mostly of frozen hydrogen. This hypothesis—a variation on the mini-comet idea—had the advantage of explaining the object's peculiar shape. By the time it reached our solar system, it had mostly melted away, like an ice cube on the sidewalk.

By far the most spectacular account of 1I/2017 U1 came from Avi Loeb, a Harvard astrophysicist. 'Oumuamua didn't behave as an interstellar object would be expected to, Loeb argued, be-

cause it wasn't one. It was the handiwork of an alien civilization.

In an equation-dense paper that appeared in *The Astrophysical Journal Letters* a year after Weryk's discovery, Loeb and a Harvard postdoc named Shmuel Bialy proposed that 'Oumuamua's "non-gravitational acceleration" was most economically explained by assuming that the object was manufactured. It might be the alien equivalent of an abandoned car, "floating in interstellar space" as "debris." Or it might be "a fully operational probe" that had been dispatched to our solar system to reconnoitre. The second possibility, Loeb and Bialy suggested, was the more likely, since if the object was just a piece of alien junk, drifting through the galaxy, the odds of our having come across it would be absurdly low. "In contemplating the possibility of an artificial origin, we should keep in mind what Sherlock Holmes said: 'when you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth,'" Loeb wrote in a blog post for *Scientific American*.

Not surprisingly, Loeb and Bialy's theory received a lot of attention. The story raced around the world almost at the speed of 'Oumuamua. TV crews crowded into Loeb's office, at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, and showed up at his house. Film companies vied to make a movie of his life. Also not surprisingly, much of the attention was unflattering.

"No, 'Oumuamua is not an alien spaceship, and the authors of the paper insult honest scientific inquiry to even

ABOVE: TAMARA SHOPSIN





*Encountering aliens would be surprising; the fact that we haven't yet heard from any is perhaps even more so.*



suggest it," Paul M. Sutter, an astrophysicist at Ohio State University, wrote.

"Can we talk about how annoying it is that Avi Loeb promotes speculative theories about alien origins of 'Oumuamua, forcing [the] rest of us to do the scientific gruntwork of walking back these rumors?" Benjamin Weiner, an astronomer at the University of Arizona, tweeted.

Far from being deterred, Loeb doubled down. Together with Thiem Hoang, a researcher at the Korea Astronomy and Space Science Institute, he blasted the frozen-hydrogen theory. In another equation-packed paper, the pair argued that it was fantastical to imagine solid hydrogen floating around outer space. And, if a frozen chunk did manage to take shape, there was no way for a block the size of 'Oumuamua to survive an interstellar journey. "Assuming that H<sub>2</sub> objects could somehow form," Hoang and Loeb wrote, "sublimation by collisional heating" would vaporize them before they had the chance to, in a manner of speaking, take off.

Loeb has now dispensed with the scientific notation and written "Extraterrestrial: The First Sign of Intelligent Life Beyond Earth" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). In it, he recounts the oft-told story of how Galileo was charged with heresy for asserting that Earth circled the sun. At his trial in Rome, in 1633, Galileo recanted and then, legend has it, muttered, sotto voce, "*Eppur si muove*" ("And yet it moves"). Loeb acknowledges that the quote is probably apocryphal; still, he maintains, it's relevant. The astronomical establishment may wish to silence him, but it can't explain why 'Oumuamua strayed from the expected path. "And yet it deviated," he observes.

In "Extraterrestrial," Loeb lays out his reasoning as follows. The only way to make sense of 'Oumuamua's strange acceleration, without resorting to some sort of undetectable outgassing, is to assume that the object was propelled by solar radiation—essentially, photons bouncing off its surface. And the only way the object could be propelled by solar radiation is if it were extremely thin—no thicker than a millimetre—with a very low density and a comparatively large surface area. Such an object would function as a sail—one

powered by light, rather than by wind. The natural world doesn't produce sails; people do. Thus, Loeb writes, " 'Oumuamua must have been designed, built, and launched by an extraterrestrial intelligence."

The first planet to be found circling a sunlike star was spotted in 1995 by a pair of Swiss astronomers, Michel Mayor and Didier Queloz. Its host star, 51 Pegasi, was in the constellation Pegasus, and so the planet was formally dubbed 51 Pegasi b. By a different naming convention, it became known as Dimidium.

Dimidium was the 'Oumuamua of its day—a fantastic discovery that made headlines around the world. (For their work, Mayor and Queloz were eventually awarded a Nobel Prize.) The planet turned out to be very large, with a mass about a hundred and fifty times that of Earth. It was whipping around its star once every four days, which meant that it had to be relatively close to it and was probably very hot, with a surface temperature of as much as eighteen hundred degrees. Astronomers hadn't thought such a large body could be found so close to its parent star and had to invent a whole new category to contain it; it became known as a "hot Jupiter."

Mayor and Queloz had detected Dimidium by measuring its gravitational tug on 51 Pegasi. In 2009, NASA launched the Kepler space telescope, which was designed to search for exoplanets using a different method. When a planet passes in front of its star, it reduces the star's brightness very slightly. (During the last transit of Venus, in 2012, viewers on Earth could watch a small black dot creep across the sun.) Kepler measured variations in the brightness of more than a hundred and fifty thousand stars in the vicinity of the constellations Cygnus and Lyra. By 2015, it had revealed the existence of a thousand exoplanets. By the time it stopped operating, in 2018, it had revealed sixteen hundred more.

NASA's ultimate goal for the telescope was to work out a figure known as  $\eta_{\oplus}$ . This is the average number of rocky, roughly Earth-size planets that can be found orbiting an average sunlike star at a distance that might, conceivably, render them habitable. After spending two years an-

alyzing the data from Kepler, researchers recently concluded that  $\eta_{\oplus}$  has a value somewhere between .37 and .6. Since there are at least four billion sunlike stars in the Milky Way, this means that somewhere between 1.5 billion and 2.4 billion planets in our galaxy could, in theory, harbor life. No one knows what fraction of potentially habitable planets are, in fact, inhabited, but, even if the proportion is trivial, we're still talking about millions—perhaps tens of millions—of planets in the galaxy that might be teeming with living things. At a public event a few years ago, Ellen Stofan, who at the time was NASA's chief scientist and is now the director of the National Air and Space Museum, said that she believed "definitive evidence" of "life beyond earth" would be found sometime in the next two decades.

"It's definitely not an 'if,' it's a 'when,'" Jeffrey Newmark, a NASA astrophysicist, said at the same gathering.

What will life on other planets look like, when—not if—it's found? Arik Kershenbaum, a researcher at the University of Cambridge, takes up this question in "The Zoologist's Guide to the Galaxy: What Animals on Earth Reveal About Aliens—and Ourselves" (Penguin Press). "It's a popular belief that alien life is too alien to imagine," he writes. "I don't agree."

Kershenbaum argues that the key to understanding cosmic zoology is natural selection. This, he maintains, is the "inevitable mechanism" by which life develops, and therefore it's "not just restricted to the planet Earth" or even to carbon-based organisms. However alien biochemistry functions, "natural selection will be behind it."

From this premise, Kershenbaum says, it follows that life on other planets will have evolved, if not along the same lines as life on this planet, then at least along lines that are generally recognizable. On Earth, for instance, where the atmosphere is mostly made of nitrogen and oxygen, feathers are a useful feature. On a planet where clouds are made of ammonia, feathers probably wouldn't emerge, "but we should not be surprised to find the same functions (i.e. flight) that we observe here." Similarly, Kershenbaum writes, alien organisms are apt to evolve some form of



land-based locomotion—“Life on alien planets is very likely to have legs”—as well as some form of reproduction analogous to sex and some way of exchanging information: “Aliens in the dark will click like bats and dolphins, and aliens in the clear skies will flash their colours at each other.”

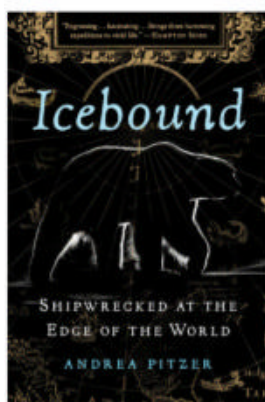
Assuming that there is, in fact, alien life out there, most of it seems likely to be microscopic. “We are not talking about little green men” is how Stofan put it when she said we were soon going to find it. “We are talking about little microbes.” But Kershenbaum, who studies animal communication, jumps straight to complex organisms, which propels him pretty quickly into Loebian territory.

On Earth, many animals possess what we would broadly refer to as “intelligence.” Kershenbaum argues that, given the advantages that this quality confers, natural selection all across the galaxy will favor its emergence, in which case there should be loads of life-forms out there that are as smart as we are, and some that are a whole lot smarter. This, in his view, opens up quite a can of interstellar worms. Are we going to accord aliens “human rights”? Will they accord us whatever rights, if any, they grant their little green (or silver or blue) brethren? Such questions, Kershenbaum acknowledges, are difficult to answer in advance, “without any evidence of what kind of legal system or system of ethics the aliens themselves might have.”

As disconcerting as encountering intelligent aliens would be, the fact that we haven’t yet heard from any is, arguably, even more so. Why this is the case is a question that’s become known as the Fermi paradox.

One day in 1950, while lunching at Los Alamos National Laboratory, the physicist Enrico Fermi turned to some colleagues and asked, “Where are they?” (At least, this is how one version of the story goes; according to another version, he asked, “But where is everybody?”) This was decades before Pan-STARRS1 and the Kepler mission. Still, Fermi reckoned that Earth was a fairly typical planet revolving around a fairly typical star. There ought, he reasoned, to be civilizations out there far older and more advanced than our own, some of which should have already mastered

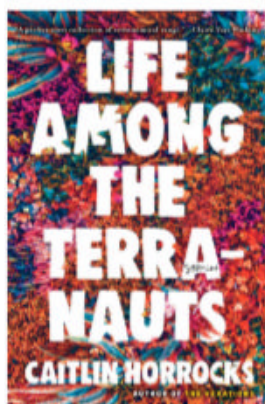
## BRIEFLY NOTED



**Icebound**, by *Andrea Pitzer* (Scribner). This meticulous account of the sixteenth-century Dutch navigator William Barents’s three ill-fated journeys to the polar seas is a portrait in miniature of the Age of Discovery—a time when sovereigns’ ambitions for wealth and glory far outpaced their knowledge of climate and geography. Barents died in 1597, after his ship became trapped in ice during an attempt to crest the top of the world and find a trade route to China. Journals from the expedition survived, endowing the Netherlands with a powerful national story of courage and endurance. The chapters describing the crew’s forced overwintering in a cramped makeshift hut—seventeen confined seafarers “forced to move entirely through the medium of time”—are a resonant meditation on human ingenuity, resilience, and hope.



**Sylvia Pankhurst**, by *Rachel Holmes* (Bloomsbury). In 1941, a street in Addis Ababa was named for the British activist Sylvia Pankhurst, a tribute to her campaign against Mussolini’s attempted takeover of Ethiopia. The recognition, as Holmes writes in this monumental biography, did not extend to Pankhurst’s homeland—though she was imprisoned and tortured more often than any other suffragette, she was denied the acclaim heaped on her mother, Emmeline, and her sister Christabel. But Sylvia, a socialist who insisted on linking women’s rights with class struggle, was the only Pankhurst to remain a thorn in the government’s side for so long, and on behalf of so many causes. Holmes’s effort finally gives Pankhurst her due, bringing to life a woman with a “terrifying capacity for martyrdom” and a profoundly forward-thinking conception of human rights.



**Life Among the Terranauts**, by *Caitlin Horrocks* (Little, Brown). The characters in this potent short-story collection face the environmental hardship that man has wrought. Residents of a decaying town hibernate through freezing winters. On the Oregon Trail, a woman loses her children, her husband, and her oxen to the wild—all in the name of Manifest Destiny. In the title story, set among a group of starving “terranauts” living in a sealed ecosystem that is slowly failing, a man thwarts a vote to leave, convinced that the self-contained world will right itself. The slow violence of economic hardship and ecological degradation underpins each tale. When a fight among the terranauts turns lethal, it is “the beginning of whatever comes next.”



**Pickard County Atlas**, by *Chris Harding Thornton* (MCD). This atmospheric debut thriller is set in the late nineteen-seventies in small-town Nebraska, a landscape littered with rundown double-wides and populated with “chain-smoking squatters drinking Cutty Sark from gallon jugs.” The taut plot concerns the fallout from the murder of a young boy eighteen years earlier, and family traumas that link a deputy sheriff to the victim’s surviving brothers—one a suspected arsonist, the other a speed addict. It culminates in an incendiary sequence that pits prolonged anguish against the need for new beginnings.



interstellar travel. Yet, strangely enough, no one had shown up.

Much human intelligence has since been devoted to grappling with Fermi's question. In the nineteen-sixties, an astronomer named Frank Drake came up with the eponymous Drake equation, which offers a way to estimate—or, if you prefer, guesstimate—how many alien cultures exist with which we might hope to communicate. Key terms in the equation include: how many potentially habitable planets are out there, what fraction of life-hosting planets will develop sophisticated technology, and how long technologically sophisticated civilizations endure. As the list of potentially habitable planets has grown, the “Where are they?” mystery has only deepened. At a workshop on the subject held in Paris in 2019, a French researcher named Jean-Pierre Rospars proposed that aliens haven't reached out to us because they're keeping Earth under a “galactic quarantine.” They realize, he said, that “it would be culturally disruptive for us to learn about them.”

Loeb proposes that Fermi may be the answer to his own paradox. Humanity has been capable of communicating with other planets, via radio wave, for only the past hundred years or so. Seventy-five years ago, Fermi and his colleagues on the Manhattan Project invented the atomic bomb, and a few years after that Edward Teller, one of Fermi's companions at the lunch table at Los Alamos, came up with the design for a hydrogen bomb. Thus, not long after humanity became capable of signalling to other planets, it also became capable of wiping itself out. Since the invention of nuclear weapons, we've continued to come up with new ways to do ourselves in; these include unchecked climate change and manufactured microbes.

“It is quite conceivable that if we are not careful, our civilization's next few centuries will be its last,” Loeb warns. Alien civilizations “with the technological prowess to explore the universe” are, he infers, similarly “vulnerable to annihilation by self-inflicted wounds.” Perhaps the reason no one has shown up is that there's no one left to make the trip. This would mean that ‘Oumuamua was the cosmic equivalent of a potsherd—the product of a culture now dead.

A message an earthling might take from this (admittedly highly speculative) train of thought is: be wary of new technologies. Loeb, for his part, draws the opposite conclusion. He thinks humanity ought to be working to produce precisely the kind of photon-powered vessel that he imagines ‘Oumuamua to be. To this end, he's an adviser on a project called the Breakthrough Starshot Initiative, whose stated aim is to “demonstrate proof of concept for ultra-fast light-driven nanocrafts.” In the longer term, the group hopes to “lay the foundations” for a launch to Alpha Centauri, the star system closest to Earth, which is about twenty-five trillion miles away. (The initiative has funding from Yuri Milner, a Russian-Israeli billionaire, and counts among its board members Mark Zuckerberg.)

Loeb also looks forward to the day when we'll be able to “produce synthetic life in our laboratories.” From there, he imagines “Gutenberg DNA printers” that could be “distributed to make copies of the human genome out of raw materials on the surface of other planets.” By seeding the galaxy with our genetic material, we could, he suggests, hedge our bets against annihilation. We could also run a great evolutionary experiment, one that might lead to outcomes far more wondrous than seen so far. “There is no reason to expect that terrestrial life, which emerged under random circumstances on Earth, was optimal,” Loeb writes.

When I was a kid, one of my favorite books was “Chariots of the Gods?,” by Erich von Däniken. The premise of the book, which was spun off into the TV documentary “In Search of Ancient Astronauts,” narrated by Rod Serling, was that Fermi's question had long ago been answered. “They” had already been here. Von Däniken, a Swiss hotel manager turned author who for some reason in the documentary was described as a German professor, argued that aliens had landed on Earth sometime in the misty past. Traces of their visits were recorded in legends and also in artifacts like the Nazca Lines, in southern Peru. Why had people created these oversized images if not to signal to beings in the air?

I figured that von Däniken would be interested in the first official interstellar object, and so I got in touch with him. Now eighty-five, he lives near Interlaken, not far from a theme park he designed, which was originally called Mystery Park and then later, after a series of financial mishaps, rebranded as Jungfrau Park. The park boasts seven pavilions, one shaped like a pyramid, another like an Aztec temple.

Von Däniken told me that he had, indeed, been following the controversy over ‘Oumuamua. He tended to side with Loeb, who, he thought, was very brave.

“He needs courage and obviously he had courage,” he said. “No scientist wants to be ridiculed, and whenever they deal with U.F.O.s or extraterrestrials, they are ridiculed by the media.” But, he predicted, “the situation will change.”

It's often said that “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” The phrase was popularized by the astronomer Carl Sagan, who probably did as much as any scientist has done to promote the search for extraterrestrial life. By what's sometimes referred to as the “Sagan standard,” Loeb's claim clearly falls short; the best evidence he marshals for his theory that ‘Oumuamua is an alien craft is that the alternative theories are unconvincing. Loeb, though, explicitly rejects the Sagan standard—“It is not obvious to me why extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence,” he observes—and flips its logic on its head: “Extraordinary conservatism keeps us extraordinarily ignorant.” So long as there's a chance that 1I/2017 U1 is an alien probe, we'd be fools not to pursue the idea. “If we acknowledge that ‘Oumuamua is plausibly of extraterrestrial-technology origin,” he writes, “whole new vistas of exploration for evidence and discovery open before us.”

In publishing his theory, Loeb has certainly risked (and suffered) ridicule. It seems a good deal more likely that “Extraterrestrial” will be ranked with von Däniken's work than with Galileo's. Still, as Serling notes toward the end of “In Search of Ancient Astronauts,” it's thrilling to imagine the possibilities: “Look up into the sky some clear, starlit night and allow yourself the freedom to wonder.” ♦



## BOOKS

## THE AIR IN HERE

*The many ways the world breathes together.*

BY BROOKE JARVIS



For a man who died ninety-seven years ago, Carl Flügge had a very big 2020. We paid homage to him every time we waited in a socially distanced grocery line, used a homemade chute to deliver Halloween candy, or yelled “Six feet!” to a child wandering too close to a stranger. In an age of CRISPR and face transplants, one of the heroes of the coronavirus pandemic was a German doctor who, in 1897, measured how far bacteria-laden spittle could travel from the mouths of volunteers. Six feet, he determined, and so, last year, that became the recommendation offered by caution signs around the world. (In Sweden: “Please keep a distance about the size of a small moose between your-

self and others.”) We’ve learned that our breath can sometimes carry the coronavirus much farther than six feet, but the number is still useful and seems permanently etched into our brains. We are all Flüggeites now.

Flügge was obsessed with hygiene, and for good reason. In his day, there was little to offer the sick in the way of effective medicines—beyond, say, opiates or quinine—and few vaccines were available. The best way to be of help, some physicians decided, was to try to find out how to keep patients from getting sick in the first place.

At the time that Flügge was measuring droplet travel, New York City was

overcome by a terrible respiratory disease. Tuberculosis, the city’s leading killer, was claiming ten thousand lives a year. A local doctor, Hermann Biggs, proposed actions that he believed could save lives: reporting all TB patients to the health department, and tracking everyone with whom those patients had been in close contact. (Other physicians protested, calling the moves “aggressive tyrannies” and “offensively dictatorial,” so Biggs wasn’t able to implement them fully.) He also pushed for people to cover their mouths while coughing, and for patients infected with TB to be isolated from healthy people. Twenty years later, even with no advances in medication, Biggs’s careful attention to the sharing of air had helped cut the number of TB cases in the city in half.

Eventually, effective antibiotics were introduced, and by the nineteen-fifties TB was considered, in the United States, anyway, to have been more or less conquered by modern medicine. But, in the decades that followed, with the old precautions abandoned, the disease began to spread anew in New York, and there was an additional problem: incomplete treatment could lead to strains that resisted the drugs. The number of cases per capita doubled between 1980 and 1990. The pulmonologist Michael J. Stephen writes about the debacle in his wide-ranging new book, “Breath Taking: The Power, Fragility, and Future of Our Extraordinary Lungs” (Atlantic Monthly Press): “In a time when we had our most powerful antibiotics, New York was doing worse than Dr. Biggs had done ninety years before, with education and no antibiotics at all.” The story is a reflection of the remarkable fact that, in the twentieth century, an era of astounding medical breakthroughs, simple—and relatively inexpensive—public-health interventions saved more lives than clinical medicine did.

As a doctor of the lungs, Stephen is plenty interested in cutting-edge cancer therapies and treatments for such harrowing illnesses as cystic fibrosis, but he clearly sees his philosophical forebears in the likes of Biggs and Flügge—and even their successor William Wells, who, in the nineteen-thirties, introduced sneezing powder and *Balantidium coli* into the lecture halls and air-conditioners of the Harvard School of Public Health, just to find out how far the bacteria could

*More than just simple pumps, the lungs are portals to our environment.*



travel and still reach human lungs. All of them understood a basic truth, which, Stephen maintains, becomes more profound the more you think about it: “The atmosphere is a communal space, and lungs are an extension of it.” Our very breath ties us to one another and to the world around us. It’s a lesson that we seem to struggle to remember.

In countless languages and religions, breath is a synonym for life, as well as for the spirit or soul. And for good reason. The Earth spent some two billion years without oxygen in its atmosphere, bereft of life beyond a few anaerobic microorganisms. Slowly, blue-green algae generated a buildup of oxygen, and so created the conditions that allowed for the grand explosion of biology on which nearly everything and everyone we know depends. “Life and respiration are complementary,” the English physician William Harvey wrote in the seventeenth century. “There is nothing living which does not breathe, nor anything breathing which does not live.”

He was overlooking anaerobes, of course, but the gist was right. Even plants respire, in a process separate from photosynthesis; animals such as jellyfish or earthworms, which lack respiratory systems, breathe through their skin. (A dried-up worm on the sidewalk is dead because it has suffocated.) Our very distant ancestors, having started with something more or less like a fish’s swim bladder, developed lungs—a highly efficient mechanism for exchanging internal gases for atmospheric ones—and took to the land. It’s a beginning we each reenact on the day we are born. Though other organs function in utero, independent life starts the moment that our fluid-filled lungs inflate, for the first time, with our own breath.

And yet, Stephen argues, we have consistently overlooked the importance of our lungs (and not just by giving hearts all the glory in love songs). The details of our ordinary breathing—pacing, depth, and so on—get little attention in modern medicine, but Stephen tells us that breathing exercises, of the sort long promoted in Buddhism and Hinduism, may improve

not just respiratory conditions but also depression and chronic pain. Some studies suggest that they can combat the damaging effects of stress; Stephen says that “mobilizing the power of the breath has also been shown to turn on anti-inflammatory genes and turn off pro-inflammatory ones, including genes that regulate energy metabolism, insulin secretion, and even the part of our DNA that controls longevity.” The breath of life, indeed.

Meanwhile, diseases of the lungs, which have often been stigmatized as “dirty,” have trouble attracting research money and attention. (“Ignored, underfunded, and forgotten: this is the medical history of lung diseases,” Stephen writes.) You’ve likely never heard of idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, though it affects more Americans than cervical cancer and has a much lower survival rate.



Lung cancer is by far the deadliest cancer in America, but other cancers receive significantly more funding. Even as deaths from traditional killers such as heart disease and cancer are largely in decline in the United States, mortality from respiratory diseases is rising. (And this was true before we lost hundreds of thousands of Americans to COVID-19, which kills most of its victims through acute respiratory failure.) Cases of asthma increase every year, and, globally, so do cases of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, which is associated with smoking but also afflicts people who have never smoked. Lung cancer, too, is becoming more common among nonsmokers; in the United States, someone is diagnosed roughly every two and a half minutes. Worldwide, respiratory problems are the second most common cause of death, and the No. 1 killer of children under five.

We tend to think of a lung as a simple pump: one gas is pulled in, another is pushed out. In fact, Stephen writes, “it is an organ alive with immunology and chemistry, one that does an extraordinary amount of work under extreme stress from the moment we enter this world.” With each of the roughly twenty thousand breaths we take in a day, air travels through convoluted passages that can stretch for fifteen hundred miles, to

one of the approximately five hundred million alveoli—tiny, clustered air sacs—that each of our lungs holds. Oxygen moves from the lungs to the bloodstream, as carbon dioxide flows back to the lungs. The brain stem controls the balance, which must be just right. Gas exchange has a remarkably immediate and intense effect on the body; one reason cigarettes are so addictive is the speed with which inhalation delivers drugs to the brain. When you hold your breath, what feels like hunger for oxygen is really your body’s reaction to too much carbon dioxide, which turns blood acidic. When you breathe into a paper bag to quell a panic attack, it works because hyperventilating has tipped the balance in the other direction, leaving you without enough CO<sub>2</sub>.

Lungs are a paradox. They are so fragile that an accumulation of the tiniest scars can rob them of their elasticity and function, so delicate that one of the pioneers of pulmonology solved a long-standing mystery about a deadly neonatal lung disease in part by reading a book about the physics of soap bubbles. Yet, unlike our other internal organs, nestled away inside us, they are open, like a wound, to the outside world. The respiratory system is regularly attacked by pathogens, to say nothing of allergens and pollutants. As a result, our lungs are home to vast numbers of protective cells that patrol them like sentries, and a lining of tiny hairs that constantly move a layer of cleansing mucus upward, ejecting all the invaders they can. Our lungs are both protection and portal, the nexus of our relationship with an environment that can heal us as well as harm us. In their deepest recesses, a wall as thin as a single cell is all that separates us from the world.

In December of 1952, a temperature inversion, a relatively common winter-time meteorological event, developed in the skies above London, trapping cold air under a layer of warmer air. Because the air could not escape, the already terrible pollution of the city grew so concentrated that, in some areas, people could no longer see their feet. Buses and cabs stopped running because of the poor visibility, and some people blindly wandered into the Thames and drowned. The air quality was such that even indoor events



had to be cancelled, and the press reported cows dying of asphyxiation.

For five days, amid what became known as the Great Smog, Londoners got to know, too intimately, everything that the city emitted into the communal atmosphere—including coal smoke, from factories and homes, which mixed with fog and generated sulfuric acid. Enormous numbers of people were hospitalized, and, in the weeks and months that followed, an estimated twelve thousand died. Undertakers ran out of caskets.

For centuries, there had been failed attempts to reduce coal burning in England—among them a ban in 1306 by Edward I, who turned to fines, torture, and death threats; and, in the sixteen-sixties, a report written for Charles II that warned about the effects of “filthy vapour” on “this frail Vessel of ours which contains it.” But the region’s famous air pollution was dismissed as simply the cost of modern life. Four years after the Great Smog, though, Britain finally passed a Clean Air Act and began its long, slow transition away from coal. (In 2020, Britain set a national record by going sixty-seven days, twenty-two hours, and fifty-five minutes without burning any coal for power—a first since the Industrial Revolution.)

In the U.S., several years before the Great Smog, a winter inversion trapped the residents of Donora, Pennsylvania, in a cloud of emissions from local zinc and steel factories, sickening nearly half the town. The resulting outcry led to the first federal efforts to address air pollution, although America’s Clean Air Act wasn’t passed until 1963. People learned the hard way about the lack of separation between themselves and what they breathed.

Or not. In today’s world, episodes like the Great Smog are less famous but more common. In recent years, residents of cities from São Paulo to Sydney have watched as smoke from record fires, fuelled by climate change and deforestation, has blotted the sun from the sky. In November, 2017, air quality in New Delhi—a city that, like Seattle and Salt Lake City, is prone to winter inversions—was so bad that sensors tracking air pollution, including the level of particulates under 2.5 micrometres, which are small enough to travel deep into the lungs and even into the bloodstream,

couldn’t keep up. (Levels above 200 are considered “very unhealthy”; most sensors maxed out at 999.) Poor visibility caused a huge pileup of cars on a highway, and Delhi’s chief minister tweeted that the region had become a gas chamber. But it wasn’t an isolated event. Last winter, government officials in Delhi cancelled flights, shut down schools, and declared a health emergency because of air pollution. Millions of children are now believed to have irreversible lung damage, and a local surgeon told the *Times* that he no longer sees pink lungs, even among young nonsmokers.

We’re still learning all that air pollution can do to our bodies. It can cause not just lung diseases and impaired lung development (in Los Angeles, researchers found that they could track the progress of anti-pollution measures by the increasing size of children’s lungs) but also, indirectly, heart attacks and osteoporosis. For first responders who breathed in clouds of dusty air following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, many of them without wearing protective masks, health problems often came in three waves. First, there were persistent coughs, and then, a few years later, asthma, sinus inflammation, acid-reflux disease, C.O.P.D., and pneumonia. Finally came cancer, heart disease, and stroke.

In the U.S. today, our bad air comes not just from industry but from industrial agriculture (with its emissions of ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, methane, and the like); according to some research, the two cause about the same number of air-pollution-related deaths each year. Forty-six per cent of Americans live in counties where the air is considered unhealthy, raising the risk of disease and early death, with the brunt borne by poor people and people of color, who are likeliest to live in the most polluted areas.

We know the dangers, and we also know that, according to the World Health Organization, more than ninety per cent of human beings live in places where we breathe substandard air. Yet this knowledge doesn’t much stir us. It feels symbolic that, according to the E.P.A., air pollution has decreased the distance and clarity of our vision—even in protected natural areas and even in our post-Clean Air Act country—by as much as eighty-three per cent, depending on where we

live. We fail to notice how much the air we breathe is literally shrinking our own horizons.

This past summer, the streets erupted in protest after a white police officer slowly and calmly asphyxiated a Black man named George Floyd by restraining him with a knee to the neck. Floyd repeated a phrase that other victims of police violence had said before him, and that took on an extra resonance amid a respiratory pandemic in which people of color, in part because they were already breathing the nation’s most dangerous air, have suffered disproportionately. In the *Annals of Surgery*, Sanford E. Roberts, a Black surgical resident in Pennsylvania, wrote that the parallels of the situation—of patients gasping for air while protesters chanted “I can’t breathe”—were “striking and suffocating.” The atmosphere may be a communal space, but its risks aren’t evenly shared.

2020 was full of grim jokes about what an awful year it was—sentient almost, weaponized against us. It began with fires in Australia that suffocated untold numbers of animals and sent coughing people fleeing into lakes, as well as an announcement that a pneumonia of unknown cause was circulating in Wuhan, China. As the year went on, the dangerous imbalance of gases that we’ve created in the planet’s atmosphere contributed to the most active Atlantic hurricane season in history, along with record rainfall in some places and punishing droughts in others. In Brazil, rain forests and wetlands burned. It was a relentless litany of news that began to seem united not just in awfulness but in theme. There is no escaping the air that we share.

On the West Coast of the United States, where I live, wildfires sent the smoky remains of trees and houses and lives swirling across thousands of miles. You could drive for hours and never see anything but smoke, which turned our usual bluebird summer skies disquieting shades of orange and gray, and rendered the air toxic. It was another grim joke: it wasn’t safe to breathe outside, because of the smoke, but it wasn’t safe to breathe inside, either, because of the pandemic. The air had never felt so communal, nor these vessels of ours which contain it so frail. ♦



## TOP OF THE WORLD

*How not to see the Himalaya.*

BY AKASH KAPUR



We drove higher and higher, the road corkscrewed tighter, and the air grew thinner. It was September of 2019 and I was travelling with my wife and two sons in the Indian province of Ladakh, deep in the Himalaya. We were on our way to the Nubra Valley, a high-altitude desert in the northeastern part of the province, close to the Chinese border. The road crossed the 17,428-foot-high Wari La Pass, at roughly the same elevation as Mt. Everest's base camp.

As we climbed, there was a pounding in my temples; I wondered if we'd

have to use the oxygen cylinder in the trunk. Mostly, I felt the isolation. There was no cell-phone coverage, and the vistas were forbidding in their emptiness. It felt like the end of the world; I worried about a breakdown.

Then we turned a corner and saw a man in a black coat lying under a car, changing a flat tire. He clambered out as we squeezed past, waving and yelling a cheerful "*Julley!*" (a Ladakhi amalgamation of "hello" and "goodbye"). I was startled by the man's nonchalance. In the back seat, a woman was snacking on a banana. Our driver told me

that the man was probably a farmer heading to market—just another harried commuter.

I was hardly the first visitor whose view of the Himalaya was shaped by romantic fantasies, or paranoid neuroses. Ancient Indian sages wrote tales of flesh-eating demons and singing spirits (the Mahabharata makes several mentions of the Himalaya, whose name is Sanskrit for "abode of snow"). The Greeks and Romans—purportedly including Alexander the Great—were enthralled by Herodotus' tales of giant gold-digging ants in the mountains; scholars today assume that the traveller and historian was referring to the Himalayan marmot, a nervous, furry mammal that wanders the lower altitudes. "Mountains have always been places for lowlanders to exercise their imaginations," writes Ed Douglas near the start of "*Himalaya: A Human History*" (Norton), his ambitious, learned account of the ranges. "The abode of snow has offered a vast white screen on which to project the fantasies of all comers: exiled kings, foreign imperialists, spiritual seekers, self-important explorers, archaeologists, missionaries, spies, mapmakers, artists, hippies—and climbers."

Douglas, an accomplished mountaineer and the author of eight previous books on the subject, is refreshingly aware of his own romanticizations. A child of the English suburbs, he writes that he was mesmerized by the mythic mountains, "a castle of impossible dreams"; on an early trip, he "found a door marked 'adventure' and stepped through it." The Himalaya that Douglas seeks to capture in this book are at once more prosaic and more fascinating than the idealized version. Although he doesn't overlook ecology or geology, his focus, as the subtitle indicates, is on the history of the people in the region. In twenty teeming—at times over-teeming—chapters, Douglas portrays a complex, populated landscape and an intricate patchwork of cultures. Some two hundred and forty million inhabitants speak more than four hundred languages and practice at least twelve religions. "Where did mythology end and reality begin?" Douglas asks. His book seeks to reclaim humans from geography, and to recapture the lived experience of the Himalaya.

*Romantic visions of the region have obscured the real people who live in it.*



The tendency toward mythologization is understandable. The greater Himalayan mountain system (which also includes the Pamir, Hindu Kush, and Karakoram ranges) stretches across some two and a half thousand miles and at least eight countries, from Afghanistan to Myanmar. It features the hundred highest mountains, such as Mt. Everest, K2, and Kanchenjunga. Salman Rushdie has described the Himalaya as “land’s attempt to metamorphose into sky.” This sense of awe—and otherworldliness—is deepened by the presence of fossilized shells and sea creatures many thousands of feet above sea level, remnants of a massive collision that occurred around fifty million years ago, when a fragment of the supercontinent Gondwanaland hit the Eurasian tectonic plate and the earth began crumpling upward. (The Himalaya are still growing by around two centimetres a year, according to some estimates.)

For centuries, this formidable terrain has sheltered the people and cultures of the Himalaya and also obscured them. Out of that obscurity rose a thousand gauzy tales about mysterious forbidden cities and enchanted Shangri-Las and Shambalas. Buddhism—Tibetan Buddhism, in particular—played a key role in these narratives, draping the Himalaya in an aura of benign spirituality and etherealness. Douglas painstakingly reconstructs a grittier history, of the region’s ancient wars, invasions, and dynastic bloodletting. The over-all impression is less of a region above ordinary human compulsions than of a hotbed of high-altitude Realpolitik.

Before the nineteenth century, there were a few intrepid explorations into the mountains—by Rajput kings and Mongols, by Marco Polo, and by a smattering of determined Jesuit missionaries. It wasn’t until the arrival of British colonialism, however, that the barrier was definitively breached. In 1802, the East India Company embarked upon what became known as the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, to produce detailed maps of the subcontinent. One of the greatest scientific achievements of the age—and perhaps of all time—the survey was conducted by an army of officials and human “computers” who dragged a half-ton theodolite (an instrument for measuring angles) and a mounted tele-

scope known as a zenith sector across the country’s jungles and plains. The project was supposed to last a few years, but it took seven decades, and hundreds of deaths, for accurate measurements of the region, including the mountains, to be completed.

Opinion had long been divided on whether the Himalaya were indeed the earth’s highest range. But as the British inched forward, measuring one peak after another—Nanda Devi (25,646 feet), Dhaulagiri I (26,795 feet), and Kanchenjunga (28,169 feet)—the full gargantuan splendor of the mountains slowly unfurled. Finally, the surveyors set their instruments on a distant, fog-obscured protuberance that, measured at more than twenty-nine thousand feet, was revealed to be the highest mountain on the planet. The Tibetans called it Chomolungma (often translated as “Mother Goddess of the World”); for the Nepalis, it was Sagarmatha (“Peak of Heaven”). The head of the surveying operation instead named it Mt. Everest, after his retired predecessor, George Everest, who was by this time back in England and never set eyes on the mountain that bears his name.

Cartography is a form of control. “The Great Arc,” John Keay’s account of the surveying operation, argues that the undertaking was both a scientific triumph and an exercise in imperial authority. As the mountains were mapped and labelled, they began to lose their aura of inaccessibility. The Great Survey heralded a golden age of Himalayan exploration and exploitation, in which young European men, monocles firmly in place and teakettles securely lashed to their porters’ sacks, set out in the explorer-conqueror mold of Christopher Columbus and Captain Cook. But even as these exploits eroded the Himalaya’s inscrutability they marked a new phase of mythologization. The mountains became stages for mystical self-discovery and Nietzschean improvement. Francis Younghusband, the British explorer, author, and spy, wrote that the Himalaya offered an opportunity for “evolving from ourselves beings of a higher order.” George Mallory, who disappeared on Mt. Everest during an ill-fated summit attempt in 1924, is reputed to have said, “If you cannot understand that there is something in man which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes

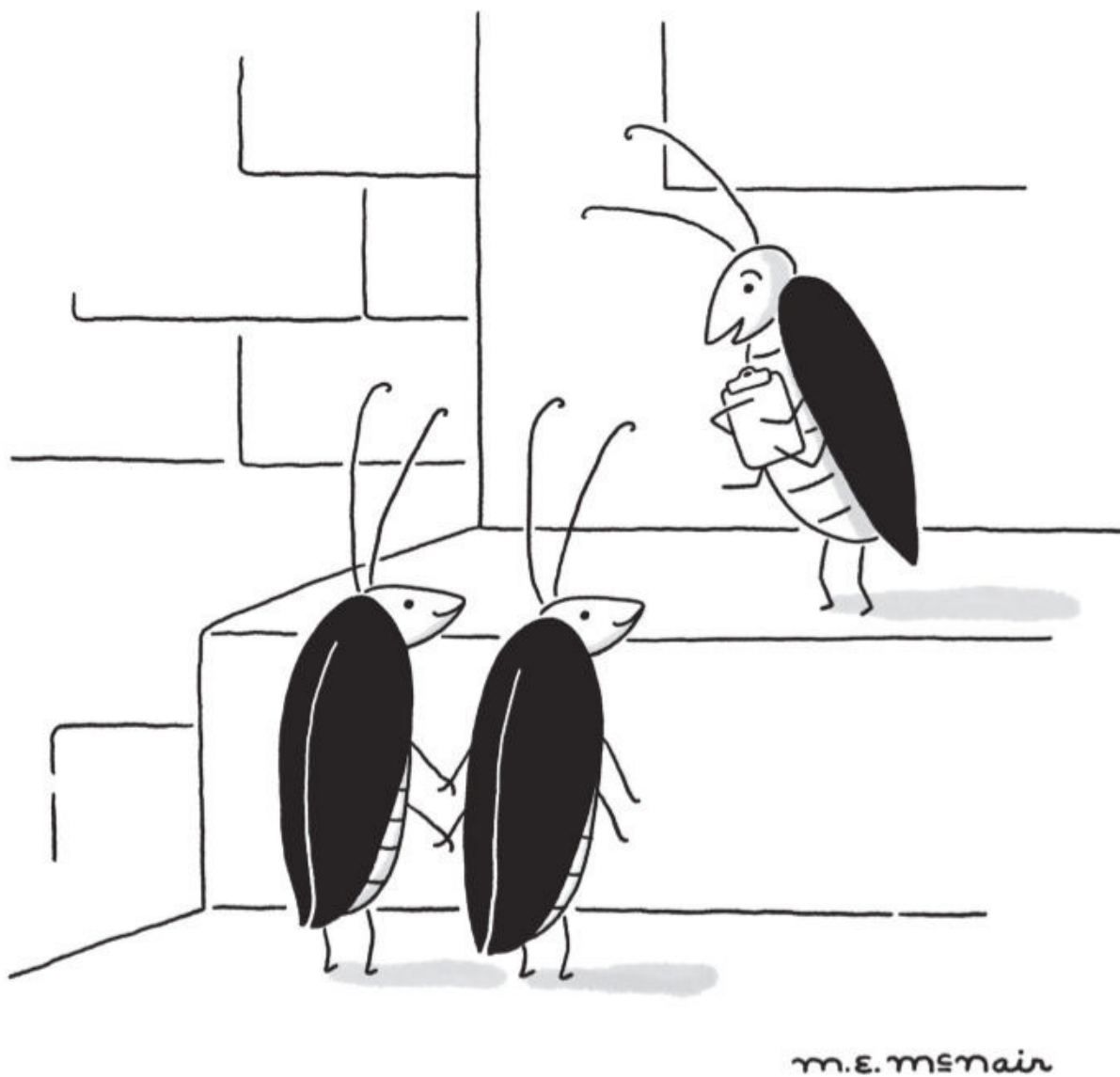
out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself upward and forever upward, then you won’t see why we go.”

A line runs from such ponderous (and self-aggrandizing) proclamations to more contemporary attitudes. The Beatles went to Rishikesh, India, to study with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, seeking—as they put it in one of their song titles—“The Inner Light.” (Their Himalayan fantasies were replaced by disillusionment with the Maharishi, memorialized in “Sexy Sadie.”) In 1960, in “Tintin in Tibet,” Hergé’s young hero established his bravery and selflessness in encounters with Buddhist monks and the Yeti; over the following decades, books such as Peter Matthiessen’s “Snow Leopard” and Andrew Harvey’s “A Journey in Ladakh” chronicled personal spiritual pilgrimages. In 1997, Jon Krakauer captured the popular imagination with “Into Thin Air,” an account of eight deaths during a crowded, tragic day on Everest. Although the book was a clear-eyed critique of Himalayan commercialization, its popularity ignited a boom in amateur mountaineering and adventure tourism.

Many millions of people now visit the Himalayan region in a typical year. Some four thousand climbers have attempted to summit Everest in each of the past two decades, a fifty-per-cent increase over the period when Krakauer wrote his book. Satellite phones and charter flights penetrate the formerly inviolable geography, and climbers on Mt. Everest have access to Wi-Fi at seventeen thousand six hundred feet. Himalayan myths endure, but old tropes about self-cultivation through adventure have been repackaged and commodified, marketed to eager consumers desperate for a taste of authenticity. The snow-capped peaks and dramatic glaciers have been reduced to props in a great big human reality show: backdrops for a thousand selfies and boastful social-media feeds—destinations, as the author Jamaica Kincaid puts it, for “people from rich countries in the process of experiencing the world as spectacle.”

Kincaid writes this as she boards a rickety airplane following a long hike in Nepal, near the end of her gardening-and-mountaineering memoir, “Among the Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya.” Originally released in 2005, the book has now been reissued by Picador,





*"I know you liked the place with the damp, dark bathroom, but what if I told you that this apartment is home to a woman who screams and jumps on a chair every time you enter the room?"*

•      •

partly in response to what her publishers identify as the erasure of people of color in nature writing. One of the most compelling aspects of this slim, elegant narrative is the way Kincaid captures—gently, unpolemically—a similar tendency toward erasure by visitors to the Himalaya: a habit of relegating local people to the background, of accentuating the sublimity of landscape over what Douglas calls "Himalayan voices."

Kincaid's journey is inspired by a horticulturalist friend, who invites her to go hunting for seeds of rare flowering plants in Nepal. Botany, as both Kincaid and Douglas explain, has a long history of entanglement with colonialism. Kincaid, who grew up in Antigua, is acutely conscious of this history, even as she hunts for exotic species to decorate her New England garden and struggles to remember the names of her native attendants. (She refers to them instead only by their functions—"Cook" and "Table.")

Her prose is limpid, her descriptions

of nature knowledgeable and often exquisite. But there is a kind of auto-subversion at play in this writing, its abstruseness—the litany of Latin plant names, the author's frequent evocations of "Eden" and "idylls"—serving as an implicit reminder of all the surrounding reality, the lives and names, that she overlooks. "I was making this trip with the garden in mind," Kincaid writes, "so everything I saw, I thought, How would this look in the garden?"

It is the fall of 2002; Kincaid is dimly aware that the King of Nepal has dissolved parliament and that it has something to do with the Maoist revolution convulsing the nation. As she drives past the royal palace, she reflects, "I should have been properly interested in that, but I was not at all." At the airport, she sees soldiers in blue camouflage fatigues, but her thoughts turn quickly away from politics, and again to nature (the blue, she reflects, must be to match the Himalayan sky). Still, evidence of human

perturbations mounts. There is a shortage of beer in small mountain towns (the revolutionaries proscribe alcohol), and Kincaid notices red stars and writing on the walls of schools and bridges. A succession of extortionist Maoists show up, demanding payments from Kincaid's party and subjecting them to political lectures and anti-American tirades. Kincaid begins telling people she's Canadian.

The tension builds in this way—gradually, subtly, so that a book about gardening improbably takes on the effect of a thriller. Toward the end of the hike, in the village of Donje, Kincaid's party comes across a police station that has been burned down by Maoists, and a school and a religious building that have been shuttered. Soon a group of men appears, the lapels of their shirts and jackets marked with red stars, bringing with them an air of violence. That night, as Kincaid lies in her sleeping bag listening to booms in the distance that she is told are Maoist bombs, the reality of these mountains is undeniable: in the twenty-first century, the true hazards (and adventures) of the Himalaya emanate not so much from their daunting topography or arduous terrain as from human beings, riven by clashing ideologies and allegiances.

Late at night on June 15, 2020, on a ridge above the swirling waters of the Galwan River in Ladakh, an argument over a border post escalated into a fierce confrontation between members of the 16th Bihar Regiment of the Indian Army and troops from the Chinese People's Liberation Army. The skirmish reportedly lasted around seven hours, and at its peak some three hundred men were involved. Because mutually agreed-upon rules barred the use of firearms in the area, the soldiers resorted to rocks and nail-spiked clubs. Twenty people died on the Indian side; the number of Chinese casualties remains unknown. Many of the troops died from hypothermia, or from falling into the icy river below.

The world, more accustomed to India's conflict with Pakistan, was astonished by news of this clash with the region's other military heavyweight. For Indians, the incident was an unexpected upsurge in hostilities that had largely receded after the brief but bloody Sino-



Indian War of 1962. I grew up on stories of that war. My grandfather's brother was killed in it—mowed down, according to family lore, by Chinese machine gunners high in the Himalayan glaciers—and my history teacher in high school was a retired Army general who spent time as a prisoner of war in China. These killings more than half a century later were a dismal indication of how the Himalaya remain crisscrossed by conflict. Most of the history Douglas recounts takes place in the distant past; readers are more likely to come away with images of horse-mounted, spear-wielding warriors than of tanks and nuclear weaponry. Yet the mountains occupy one of the most politically fraught corners of the world, marked by contested borders and roads, and great-power rivalries that are likely to shape international relations for the rest of the century.

For about three and a half decades, Indians and Pakistanis have been fighting—and dying—on the disputed Siachen Glacier. (At some twenty thousand feet, it is often referred to as “the world’s highest battlefield.”) Pakistani and Afghan troops likewise engage in skirmishes along the mountainous Durand Line, which separates their countries; India and Nepal tussle over twenty-one of their twenty-six adjoining districts; and last year, shortly after the Sino-Indian clashes in Ladakh, China laid claim to a swath of territory in Bhutan. Such disputes take place alongside a number of armed insurrections and mini civil wars: in Kashmir, in Tibet, in the province of Balochistan, and in the Terai region in Nepal. Many of these conflicts are the legacy of vaguely or illogically drawn colonial maps, but have been heightened in recent years by China’s Belt and Road Initiative. In 2019, Xi Jinping visited Nepal, long considered by New Delhi to be within its sphere of influence, and pledged to build a trans-Himalayan railway that would run from Tibet to the Indian border. Partly in response, the United States offered Nepal five hundred million dollars in loans. A Chinese-government spokesperson, in turn, decried America’s “arrogance, prejudice, selfishness, and narrow-mindedness.”

Such geopolitical tensions are intimately linked with another human scourge: the catastrophe of global warming. According to a recent report, more

than a third of Himalayan glaciers may melt by the end of the century, even assuming dramatic reductions in global carbon emissions. Without such reductions, the figure is closer to two-thirds. The region’s rivers, which help sustain nearly two billion people and run through at least sixteen countries, could dry up, and the dwindling glaciers are already prompting a rush for control of ecological resources. Sunil Amrith, a professor at Harvard University, has noted that some five hundred dams are currently being built or planned in the region. These projects threaten to displace populations, flood ancient homelands, further jeopardize already endangered species, and heighten rivalries between neighbors.

The unfolding ecological catastrophe on what is often called the planet’s third pole receives considerably less attention than similar disasters playing out on the other two poles. A more familiar image of environmental crisis in the Himalaya is of waste on one particular mountain. Krakauer, among others, vividly described discarded oxygen cylinders and piles of human feces tainting the slopes of Mt. Everest. As always, the tallest peak stands in for the entire range. But, as dispiriting as such reports are, they greatly understate the real problem.

In an upcoming book, “The Next Everest” (St. Martin’s), Jim Davidson, an American mountaineer and an author, in some ways follows in the literary trail blazed by Krakauer. He includes



now familiar descriptions of a cosmopolitan tribe of experienced and amateur climbers who gather outside tents and in shared kitchens, equipped with G.P.S. devices, satellite phones, and other accoutrements of their trade. When it comes to the environment, though, Davidson is more sanguine than Krakauer, describing recent efforts by governments and civil-society organizations to clear refuse from Everest.

At the same time, his narrative sug-

gests the sheer scale of the remaining challenges. He provides a gripping account of a series of avalanches on Everest on April 25, 2015, which followed a powerful earthquake in Nepal. Davidson was on the mountain that day as an avalanche swept through base camp and killed at least nineteen people, making it the deadliest recorded incident on those slopes. The earthquake also claimed almost nine thousand lives across the rest of the country.

Although Davidson doesn’t make the point, the disaster was likely exacerbated at least in part by climate change: scientists have been warning for years that warmer temperatures, which disproportionately affect higher altitudes, are loosening snowpacks and weakening glaciers, increasing the risk of avalanches. The impact of global climate change is evident even to casual visitors to the region. On my recent trip to Ladakh, I saw brown and black patches in the distant glaciers, the result, I learned, of a substance known as cryoconite—an accumulation of microbes and dust, soot, and other forms of pollution—which floats in from coal plants and forest fires. The patches are like bruises; they are the toll exacted by the growing human presence on these once sacred peaks.

In “Among the Flowers,” Kincaid and her hiking party, as they descend from the mountains, pass flowering begonia, poinsettia, and datura, and traverse roaring glacier-fuelled streams. They meet a man who, they later find out, will be stripped and robbed by the revolutionaries, and they end up in a village where they sit naked in a river drinking bottles of beer. Kincaid leaves her group and, seeking to relieve her bladder, heads into the empty hills—“somewhere I thought it would be impossible for me to be seen.”

As Kincaid crouches along the river, exposed, she spots a stretch of blue on the other side of the water. She assumes it is part of the landscape: perhaps where water meets sky. But then the water and sky wave at her, and they cheer, and Kincaid realizes that there are villagers on the opposite bank. Their presence has been concealed by the brilliant Himalayan blue. People are everywhere in these mountains; as travellers should have understood from the start, it is wise not to overlook them. ♦



## SOUND DESIGN

*The obsessive beat-making of Madlib.*

BY HUA HSU



Madlib has always seemed more concerned with making music than with the question of what to do with it. The forty-seven-year-old producer and multi-instrumentalist has estimated that he makes hundreds of beats a week, many of which he never shares with anyone. His beats are a form of homage. He listens carefully to an old record, trying to squeeze every musical possibility out of it, to follow every path not taken. Sometimes it's therapeutic. The week that Prince died, Madlib mourned by making tracks built on Prince samples. Following the death of his collaborator J Dilla, and then that of MF DOOM,

he stayed awake for days, making hundreds of hours of music. Since the nineties, Madlib has essentially been building a private, ever-expanding library of beats, which spans everything from hip-hop, jazz, and soul to German rock, industrial music, Brazilian funk, and Bollywood. He has released dozens of albums under just as many aliases. Sometimes the aliases splinter off to form side projects. For Madlib, making music is as elemental as eating or sleeping, though he claims to do very little of the latter.

Madlib, born Otis Jackson, Jr., was brought up in Oxnard, California. His father was a soul singer, and his mother

was a pianist. As a teen-ager, he and his brother, Michael, who raps and produces as Oh No, formed a hip-hop collective called the Crate Diggas Palace. Madlib's first major release came in 1999, when the Lootpack, a trio made up of Madlib and his high-school friends Wildchild and DJ Rome, put out "Soundpieces: Da Antidote!" In the next few years, he began to channel his work ethic into a universe of alter egos. One of his most famous albums, "The Unseen," from 2000, which is credited to an alter ego named Quasimoto, was the result of an experiment. He didn't like the sound of his own voice, so he pitch-shifted his vocals and rapped from the perspective of a slick-talking, squeaky-voiced alien prankster with a fondness for marijuana.

In the early two-thousands, Madlib began applying the logic of hip-hop, where anything can be taken apart and put back together, to jazz music. He started by playing the melodies of his favorite tunes on the keyboard. Then he taught himself other instruments, which he played alongside samples, becoming a one-man ensemble. He invented a roster of jazz musicians with names like Monk Hughes, Ahmad Miller, and Joe McDuphrey. He wasn't a virtuosic soloist; rather, his work skillfully pursued hazy textures and stoned vibes. His jazz noodling culminated in the excellent album "Pardon My French," which came out last year—one of three credited to him in 2020. It was released by a group called the Jahari Massamba Unit, a collaboration between Madlib and the Detroit drummer and producer Karriem Riggins (who is real).

The combination of Madlib's prolific output and his hesitancy to talk about it has turned him into a cult favorite. He often claimed to be clueless about when the backlog of albums he has recorded would actually see the light of the day, and it was a challenge to keep up with what he did get around to releasing. In recent decades, he has become one of the most respected producers of his generation, collaborating with Kanye West, Pusha T, Freddie Gibbs, and Erykah Badu, among others.

*Madlib makes hundreds of beats a week, many of which are never released.*







ON TELEVISION

## STILL HERE

*"Pretend It's a City," on Netflix.*

BY NAOMI FRY



Is there anything more delightful than watching Martin Scorsese enjoy someone? One of the best things about his new documentary series, “Pretend It’s a City,” is getting to see the filmmaker react to his subject, the author and humorist Fran Lebowitz, who is also his good friend. Ten years ago, Scorsese made “Public Speaking,” his first documentary about Lebowitz, which was an ode to a vanishing breed of New York celebrity, as well as a portrait of the city itself. Sitting in a booth at the Waverly Inn, Lebowitz expounded on her various hobbyhorses, including her rejection of technology, her love of talking, and her addiction to smoking. (“The clerk said, ‘Oh, you know, Marlboro Lights, they’re

on sale.’ And I thought, Really? Why? . . . They could be a million dollars, I don’t care.”) Now Scorsese and Lebowitz have made a kind of sequel, which comes, in the manner of the hour, as a streaming Netflix series rather than a feature-length film.

Its seven episodes, each of which is centered on a different theme (money, wellness, books), are refreshingly loose, the conversations between Scorsese and Lebowitz often meandering. The show’s only through line is Lebowitz herself, whose slapdash history of New York City is mostly just an occasion to riff. Scorsese’s role is largely limited to explosions of laughter, often heard off camera, and fretful interjections. (His reflexive “Oh,

Fran, no!,” as she tells a story about thinking that the falling chandelier at a performance of “The Phantom of the Opera” was real, is a study in empathetic responsiveness.) Though the director is often recognized for his bravura, his modesty—his ability to foreground his interlocutor—is perhaps one of his greatest skills as a filmmaker.

Scorsese loves characters, and his style is to let them reveal themselves through gesture and, especially, through speech. This has been apparent in the vivid voice-over monologues of Robert De Niro’s Travis Bickle, in “Taxi Driver”; Ray Liotta’s Henry Hill, in “Goodfellas”; and Leonardo DiCaprio’s Jordan Belfort, in “The Wolf of Wall Street.” Scorsese’s documentaries, too, often hinge on the portrayal of voluble figures. In my favorite, “American Boy,” from 1978, he interviews his friend Steven Prince, a wild-eyed former road manager and drug addict, marginally known for his minor role as a gun salesman in “Taxi Driver.” Scorsese sometimes interjects, on one occasion requesting that Prince take another stab at telling a story for the camera. (“When you told it to me on the plane, there was a little more sincerity to it,” he says.) Even so, he gives Prince room to weave tales about his colorful life; it’s film as a tour-de-force performance of personality.

Lebowitz needs plenty of room. This will come as no surprise to anyone who is even vaguely familiar with her work, which, in the past four decades, has largely consisted of being Fran Lebowitz: a strong-willed, grumpy, verbose, brilliant woman, who is eager to give her invariably cutting take on anything and everything. The daughter of Jewish parents, Lebowitz grew up in New Jersey and was expelled from her high school for being a bad influence on her peers. (One example: “We had a Halloween party and I came as Fidel Castro,” she has said.) Around 1970, she moved to New York City, where she wrote a column for Andy Warhol’s *Interview* magazine, and published two acclaimed essay collections—“Metropolitan Life,” in 1978, and “Social Studies,” in 1981—which were full of spot-on observations about contemporary living. I’ve always loved her description of a phone call with a Hollywood agent, who, she noted, sounded “audibly tan.”

*The one thing in New York that doesn’t really change is Fran Lebowitz.*



Apart from writing one children's book and the occasional magazine article, Lebowitz has suffered, in recent years, from what she calls a "writer's blockade." This has prompted her shift from an actively publishing author to a legendary public wit, who earns her living through speaking engagements. This is excellent work if you can get it, and, as far as I can tell, hardly anyone but Lebowitz has. Former Presidents have pivoted to making money on the lecture circuit, but they had to be President first.

"Making distinctions is my profession, and judging is my profession," Lebowitz tells Scorsese in the second episode, and, throughout the series, she does so extemporaneously, and with a spectacular self-assuredness in her own tastes. "The kind of snobberies I have," she says, "has to do with: 'Do you agree with me about this?'" She is a fan of the definitive maxim. (On health: "Your bad habits can kill you . . . but your good habits won't save you." On wealth: "There's only two kinds of people in the world—the kind of people who think there's such a thing as enough money, and the kind of people who have money.") She also loves the minor wisecrack; speaking about a child she knew whose parents allowed him to have ice cream for breakfast, she says, "That house to me was like the Marquis de Sade."

As I sat down to watch, I recalled that, when "Public Speaking" came out, I went to see it at Film Forum, a fifteen-minute stroll from the Waverly Inn. Now Film Forum had been shut for nearly a year, and I was viewing "Pretend It's a City" from my couch in Brooklyn, feeling far away in more ways than one. "Pretend It's a City" shows New York as it was when people still left their couches. Most of Lebowitz's conversations with Scorsese were recorded in late 2019, and are presented alongside clips of public events in which she speaks onstage with other notable interviewers—Spike Lee, Alec Baldwin, Olivia Wilde—and interstitial footage in which she walks the streets of a pre-pandemic Manhattan, in her uniform of cuffed jeans, cowboy boots, and a well-tailored jacket. Her shoulders are squared defensively, and the perma-sulk on her face suggests a preemptive annoyance with her fellow-man.

Occasionally, as he did in "Public

Speaking," Scorsese inserts archival snippets of musical performances—Marvin Gaye rehearsing "I Want You," the New York Dolls tearing through "Jet Boy," as a way of invoking a bygone city. But these touches, while lovely, aren't enough to make the show particularly compelling visually. That isn't the point; rather, the point is to hear Lebowitz talk. Her opinions about New York are legion, and a lot of them are what you might expect: tourists who stop in the middle of the street are exasperating; the city is a trial to live in ("Everything in New York is like the 'Ring' cycle!"); people are always on their phones and not looking where they're going; the subway is barely operative and smells bad; the city changes all the time, and, as soon as you finally get used to something, it's gone.

The one thing in New York that doesn't really change, it seems, is Lebowitz. The endurance of her infuriating, stubborn, and hilarious self feels like a balm in a wildly shifting world. There is something delicious, too, in hearing her complain—and be unabashedly petty—during a time in which to do so is a faux pas. She almost seems to be kicking New York when it's already down, and it is exactly what a love letter to the city should look like.

Lebowitz's New York—well-fed, culturally elite Manhattan—is a particular type of New York, to be sure, and one gets a sense that both she and Scorsese can enjoy recalling (and romanticizing) the city's grittier, impoverished past thanks to the safety of the perch they've long occupied. It is interesting to watch "Pretend It's a City" alongside the recent documentary series "How To with John Wilson," on HBO. Wilson, who, at thirty-four, is nearly forty years Lebowitz's junior, gives viewers an exploratory, lo-fi, collage-style depiction of the city, which includes bare scaffolding in Harlem and his cat's litter box in his Queens apartment. The footage, despite—or maybe because of—its mundanity, is affecting. Still, there is something to be said for larger-than-life landmarks. "The great thing about Grand Central Station, the reason it's so beautiful, is because one person built it," Lebowitz says in the fourth episode. "A building that size now would never be built by a single person. There would not be a single sensibility." Besides her own, of course. ♦

# GLAMOUR 30 YEARS OF WOMEN WHO HAVE RESHAPED THE WORLD



*Foreword by*  
*Yara Shahidi*

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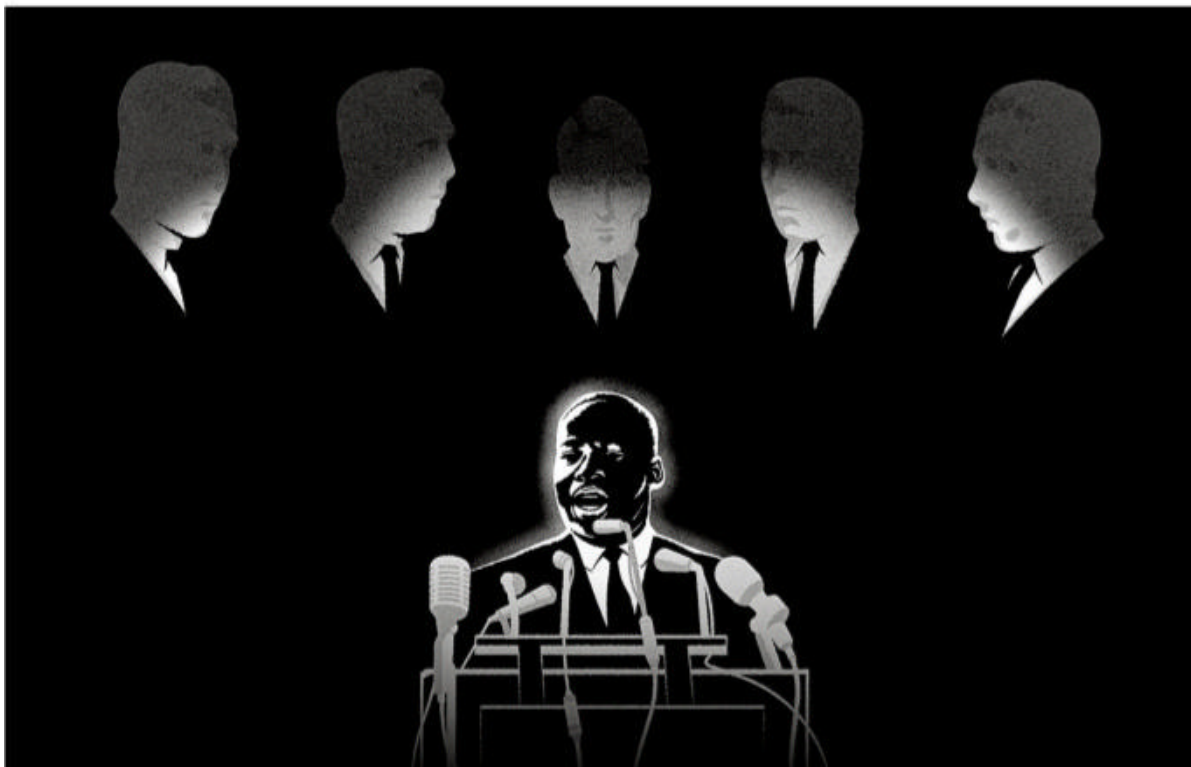
## SURVEILLANCE

*"MLK/FBI" and "Preparations to Be Together for an Unknown Period of Time."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

In the late nineteen-fifties, James Stewart was on a roll. "Vertigo" came out in 1958, as did the sly and funny "Bell, Book and Candle," followed by "Anatomy of a Murder," in 1959. A decorated veteran and a loyal Republican, Stewart seemed at once trusty and perplexed—still a straight arrow, but no longer sure, in the postwar world, of where, exactly,

you preach at a church, does that prove that you can't be a Communist? Scenes from "The FBI Story," and from other films and TV shows, are used as evidence in "MLK/FBI," a new documentary, directed by Sam Pollard, which investigates the investigators in the age of Hoover. Specifically, with the aid of declassified documents, Pollard explores



*Sam Pollard's documentary investigates J. Edgar Hoover's investigators.*

he was aimed. Yet to come was "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" (1962), in which he and John Wayne duke it out for the values of the Old West. Was it, perhaps, Stewart's wish to prove himself steadfast, in spite of change, that impelled him to star in "The FBI Story" (1959)? It runs two and a half hours, growls at irony and doubt, and features a cameo by J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the Bureau from 1924 to 1972. Stewart plays a longtime G-man, whose creed is nicely distilled in this report on a current suspect:

On Sunday morning he left the house. He couldn't be going to work. Since he was a Communist, we knew he wasn't going to church.

So, *that's* clear enough, though it raises a question: if you do go to church, or if

the Bureau's campaign to spy on the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.—to record his words and deeds, and, given the chance, to wield them against him. As an internal F.B.I. memo read, "We must mark him now as the most dangerous Negro in the future of this Nation."

That was written at the end of August, 1963, only days after King (a long-standing anti-Communist, as it happens) spoke at the conclusion of the March on Washington. "Free at last!" he exclaimed, whereupon the secret fetters were applied. Of particular interest to the Bureau was King's close associate Stanley Levison, who had formerly harbored Communist sympathies and, as a treasurer in the American Jewish Congress, had supported the defense of

the Rosenbergs. On the strength of such weak links, Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General, was asked to approve the covert wiretapping of King, whom he openly admired. Kennedy complied.

If you wince at such revelations, get ready. There is more wincing to come, and Pollard forbids you to relax. The movie doesn't stop for talking heads; commentary is supplied in voice-over, with the speakers' names—Clarence Jones, say, or Beverly Gage—placed at the foot of the screen. Should this be your field, you will know that Jones was one of King's lawyers (it was he who smuggled out the loose sheets of King's writing that would form the basis of "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in 1963), and that Gage, a professor of history at Yale, is an expert on Hoover. We lesser mortals must wait until the end of the film to be enlightened.

In short, "MLK/FBI" has a yen for narrative momentum, and you can see why. Pollard wants to capture not just the crusading urgency of King, who acted as if all too aware that his days were numbered, but the corresponding compulsions of Hoover, who publicly referred to King as "the world's most notorious liar." Once the wiretaps had uncovered King's marital infidelities, the scrutiny of him acquired an excitable life of its own, far exceeding the original brief and reaching its vengeful extreme in the tapes that were sent to King's wife, together with a letter addressed to King. Though anonymous, the letter was, in fact, composed by William Sullivan, the head of domestic intelligence at the F.B.I., and capped with a vague but menacing caution: "You know what you have to do."

The most contentious detail in the film is the accusation, made in a typed F.B.I. report, that King was present when a female parishioner was raped in a hotel room, by a Baptist minister, in 1964. A scribbled note was added to the report: "King looked on and laughed and offered advice." As one of the movie's contributors points out, this is profoundly flawed as testimony; how could anyone determine, from an audiotape, that King "looked on"? Might it be that the addendum—disclosed in 2019 by David Garrow, whose biography of King won a Pulitzer Prize, and who appears in "MLK/FBI"—is mere scurrility, and,



if so, why lend it any credence, or air it afresh on film? On the other hand, if the Bureau *was* making grave and deliberate mischief, is that not part of the historical record? (Sullivan described the allegation as “a golden opportunity to discredit King because of his communist connections and moral degeneracy.” So much for gold.) Further clarity will not be available until 2027, when the surreptitious tapes of King’s activities are unsealed, and this documentary, however dramatic its mood, is, in a sense, a prequel. Many people are confident that no damage will be done to King’s reputation as a result of the unsealing, although one retired F.B.I. agent, interviewed by Pollard, believes that the tapes should stay in the dark.

Viewers who find these quandaries depressing or distasteful should persevere with “MLK/FBI” nonetheless, for three reasons. First, it bears renewed witness to King’s eloquence, which is no less astounding in casual exchanges than on grand occasions; one interviewer is treated to a calm, impromptu diatribe against “the thingification of the Negro,” in slavery’s wake. Second, we are reminded, by Garrow and Gage, of an awkward truth—that Hoover’s F.B.I. was not some rogue outfit but a core component of the existing social structure, welded firmly to public opinion. Hence the movie’s clips from popular culture, which tends both to mirror and to magnify the prejudices and dreads of any given period. I was inspired by Pollard’s findings to watch “I Was a Communist for the F.B.I.” (1951), a feature film of more punch than subtlety, in which a largely African-American audience, in a Pittsburgh meeting hall, is

roused by what the narrator calls “a hell brew of hate from a recipe written in the Kremlin.”

Third, and last, we have Ernest C. Withers—a minor tributary of the movie, you might say, yet almost as fascinating as the main flow. One of the leading Black photographers of his time, Withers took a memorable picture of King and others as they rode one of the first desegregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956. In “MLK/FBI,” we are shown a wonderful image of Withers, posed against his station wagon, in striped pants, with his foldable camera and flash. We are also told that, for eighteen years, he was an F.B.I. informant at the heart of the civil-rights movement. And that, with all due respect to James Stewart, is the F.B.I. story I want to see.

**T**he title of Lili Horvát’s new movie, “Preparations to Be Together for an Unknown Period of Time,” sounds like an accurate description of family life pretty much anywhere in the world in 2020. Surprisingly, though, the film is not about a virus-driven lockdown. Nor is it a prison drama, or a scorching documentary that rips away the fig leaves and brings us the *real* story of Adam and Eve. The tale that Horvát has to tell is elliptical, inward, and unrushed, played out on the smallest of scales. Much of it, indeed, appears to take place inside one woman’s head.

Márta (Natasa Stork) is a Hungarian brain surgeon, approaching forty, who has spent almost half her life in the United States. Now she is returning home, purely because of another doctor, named János (Bodó Viktor). She has encountered him only once, in New

Jersey, at an annual meeting of the International Society for Neuro-Oncology—an obvious hotbed of desire—but that was enough to light the flame. They have arranged to hook up in Budapest, at the Pest end of the Liberty Bridge. (Another phrase that would make an excellent title.) When János doesn’t show up, Márta tracks him to the hospital where he works and confronts him in the street, whereupon he denies ever having seen her before. She faints.

What sets this film apart is its fusing of the impassioned and the grimly palpable. Márta may swoon, like a heroine of romantic fiction, and she throws away a comfortable existence for the spectre of a possible love. But what does she get? A damp and shabby apartment, where she sleeps on a mattress on the floor and dines off dark bread and cucumber, plus a job in a run-down hospital where the employees have to bring their own toilet paper. She consults a shrink, who asks her, “What comes to mind?” “That I’ve lost my mind,” Márta replies. Yet minds are her own business; we get a lengthy scene in an operating theatre, where she attends to the exposed brain of a conscious patient, who talks while she probes. The movie has a sifted texture, and some of the faces, and the naked bodies, are no more than granular blurs. Everything seems to slip our grasp, and it comes as a genuine disappointment when, toward the end, the puzzle of the plot is solved. Where’s the fun in that? If clarity is what Márta wants, she should have stayed in New Jersey. ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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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 Michael Maslin, must be received by Sunday, January 24th. The finalists in the January 4th & 11th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 8th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

### THE FINALISTS



*“Once tax season is over, you can go  
back to being the only child.”*  
Luisa Madrid, New York City

*“He said you ate his homework.”*  
Monica Bayer, Fairport, N.Y.

*“When you're best in show, you can have nice clothes, too.”*  
Don Patterson, Lexington, N.C.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“I thought you said the cloud was secure.”*  
Jack R. Thompson, Denver, Colo.



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