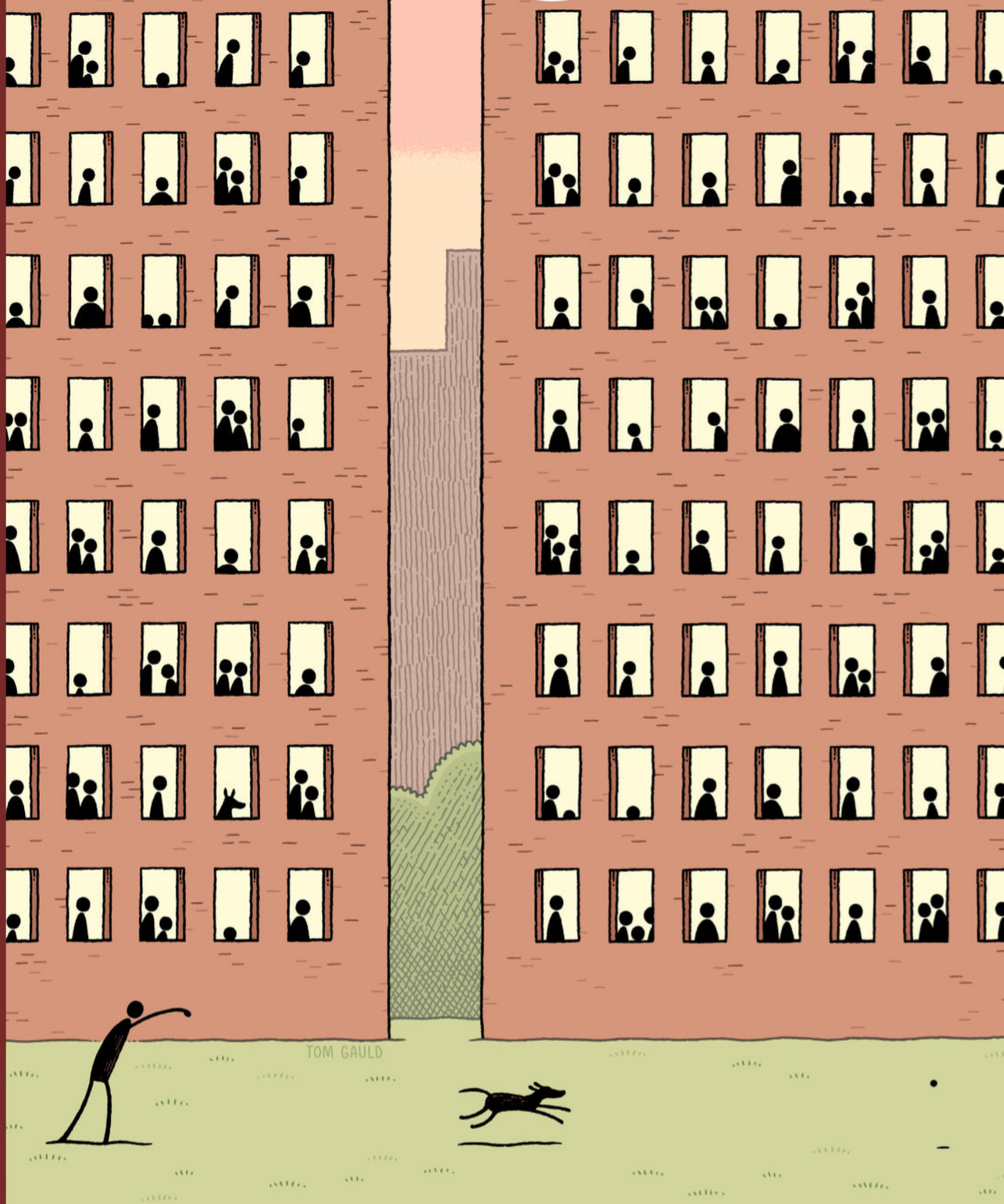


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TOM GAULD



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MARCH 15, 2021

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**Tom Gault** (*Cover*) will publish his first book for children, "The Little Wooden Robot and the Log Princess," in August.

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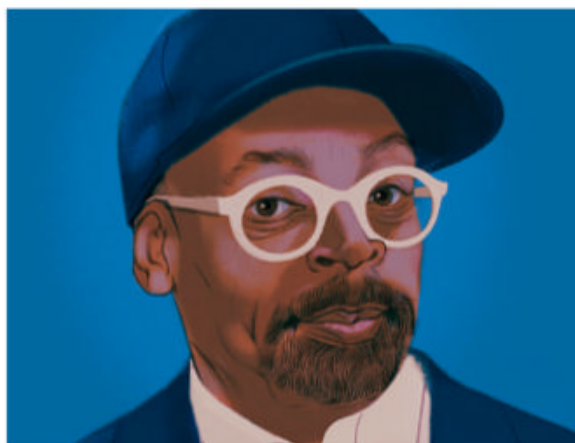
**T. Coraghessan Boyle** (*Fiction*, p. 60) has published seventeen novels and eleven short-story collections. His new novel, "Talk to Me," will come out in September.

**Doreen St. Félix** (*On Television*, p. 84), a staff writer since 2017, is *The New Yorker's* television critic.

**Christian Wiman** (*Poem*, p. 64) is the author of several books, including the memoir "He Held Radical Light" and the poetry collection "Survival Is a Style."

**Aimee Lucido** (*Puzzles & Games Dept.*) has written the children's books "Emmy in the Key of Code," which received a Northern California Book Award, and the forthcoming "Recipe for Disaster."

## THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



**THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW**  
Vinson Cunningham talks with Spike Lee about his film career, from "Do the Right Thing" to "Da 5 Bloods."



**DAILY COMMENT**  
Michael Luo on how Christianity's history in the U.S. explains evangelicals' vulnerability to misinformation.

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LEFT: XIA GORDON; RIGHT: NA KIM



# THE MAIL

## BUILDING BLACK CAPITALISM

I read with interest Kelefa Sanneh's piece about Soul City, its founder, Floyd McKissick, and Black capitalism, all of which are vital to understanding the story of the United States ("The Color of Money," February 8th). I could not help but think about another chapter in the history of Black capitalism—the growth of the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma. In spite of the ugly inequities of Jim Crow segregation, the neighborhood thrived, and, because of its affluence, became known as Black Wall Street. Then, starting on May 31, 1921, white mobs attacked Greenwood's Black residents—resulting in, by some estimates, hundreds of casualties—and burned down more than a thousand homes and businesses. Within a decade of this tragedy, the people of Greenwood rebuilt their neighborhood, only to have an interstate highway cut through it in the nineteen-sixties. (In fact, the Interstate Highway System, a symbol of American commerce and progress, has damaged Black neighborhoods all over the U.S.) The loss of communities is just one of the challenges that Black Americans have faced as they have built their own form of capitalism.

*Martijn Steger*  
*Granville, Ohio*

## WHO WAS CROMWELL?

In his lively tour of the Frick Collection, Peter Schjeldahl pauses at Hans Holbein's portrait of Thomas Cromwell and muses that "he looks like a thug to me, sullen in profile" (The Art World, February 15th & 22nd). This observation is preceded by an apology to Hilary Mantel, Cromwell's "novelistic defender." Putting aside whether it was Mantel's aim to defend such a complicated subject, those familiar with her Cromwell trilogy might recognize Schjeldahl's sentiment: Mantel gives Cromwell a similar qualm when Holbein shows him the portrait. Cromwell

thinks he looks like a murderer. His son, Gregory, replies, "Did you not know?"

*David Cote*  
*New York City*

## I LOVE NEW YORK

Rivka Galchen, in her beautiful piece about her midtown neighborhood, mentions a shelter at Port Authority, noting that it is no longer there ("Better Than a Balloon," February 15th & 22nd). In the nineteen-nineties, as a member of the physician staff of St. Vincent Hospital's Health Care for the Homeless program, I would attend to patients in that shelter. A social worker, a nurse, and I would address urgent issues, conduct physicals, and encourage our patients to visit the hospital clinic for more complex problems. The shelter's guests were appreciative and often returned for care. On my way to the site, I passed through the neighborhood that Galchen describes, often buying a slice of pizza or a frozen yogurt. At the end of my shift, walking back to my apartment, on Twenty-second Street, I would stop in the small shops along Ninth Avenue. I felt anonymous there, but also at home.

*Roberta Berrien*  
*Dennis, Mass.*

I enjoyed Galchen's description of her New York City neighborhood. Fifty years ago, I moved with my wife from a then edgier Morningside Heights to a then even sleepier Norman, Oklahoma—the reverse of Galchen's journey. In Norman, I was worried at night: we were isolated in our detached single-family ranch-style house, without the constant activity and the twenty-four-hour delis, newsstands, and Korean fruit markets that made upper Broadway feel alive and safe, even in the small hours of the morning.

*Andy Magid*  
*Norman, Okla.*

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

MARCH 10 – 16, 2021



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



The Kaufman Music Center's innovative **"Musical Storefronts"** series brings live concerts back to the city. Through the end of April, many of the Upper West Side's vacant retail spaces become stages (with support from Milstein Properties) for local musicians to safely showcase their work. The lineup includes stars from "Hamilton," the opera singer Chrystal E. Williams, the composer Caroline Shaw, the pianists Orli Shoham and Conrad Tao, the Attacca Quartet (pictured), and more than a hundred other artists.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TAYLOR KAY JOHNSON



## ART

### “Albers and Morandi”

In this show, subtitled “Never Finished,” the Zwirner gallery pairs two artists who can seem bizarrely mismatched: Josef Albers, the starchy German-American abstract painter and color theorist, who died in 1976, at the age of eighty-eight, and Giorgio Morandi, the seraphic Italian still-life painter, who died in 1964, at the age of seventy-three. Albers, who was wedded to a format of three or four nested, hard-edged squares, is academic in spirit—easy to admire but hard to like. Morandi, transfixed by the bottles and vases in his studio for fifty years, is deeply poetic. Yet viewing them together electrifies—this is one of the best-installed shows that I’ve ever seen—as their works’ extremes play off each other. Think of it as a pas de deux of a drill sergeant (Albers) and an enchanter (Morandi). Most of the pieces in the show (twenty-three by each artist) are small. This was Morandi’s habitual scale and Albers’s most successful one. The soft cosmos of Morandi is both relieved and refreshed by the architectonics of Albers, and vice versa. Neither artist looked over his shoulder at trends of the day. They were brothers in perseverance.—*Peter Schjeldahl (davidzwirner.com)*

### Joaquín Orellana

Since the nineteen-seventies, this Guatemalan musician has been producing experimental soundscapes, using his ingenious and elegant *útiles sonoros*—sound tools—instead of conventional instruments. In “The Spine of Music,” an exceptionally inviting interactive show, at the Americas Society, viewers are encouraged to don gloves, grab a mallet, and try the tools out. Each one has a sculptural presence that seems to match its aural personality, from a whimsically rocking construction of weighted chimes and bright plastic beads to more austere, gonglike pieces, in which metal shapes dangle from chains in dark armatures. Dramatically curved variations on the marimba require their players to perform swooping movements; smaller, handheld percussive instruments are less intimidating. Orellana’s interest in early electronic music (to which he was exposed as a student in Buenos Aires) inspired him to improvise alternatives to the synthesizer, as the technology was unavailable to him in Guatemala. Indeed, the musician’s low-tech inventions can be played to generate Kraftwerkian clicks, pops, and oscillating tones. But Orellana’s aim has never been imitation—rather, using instruments derived from the materials, the crafts, and the sonic traditions indigenous to his country, he articulates a radically expansive and humane approach to avant-garde composition.—*Johanna Fateman (as-coa.org)*

### Howardena Pindell

“Rope/Fire/Water,” the new video in Pindell’s show at the Shed, grew out of an indelible childhood memory: the smell of cooking meat wafting from a kitchen as she looked at a *Life*-magazine photograph of a Black man being lynched, burned to death, by a cheerful white mob. A metronome ticks steadily through the heart-racing horror of the video’s archival imagery, accompanied by Pindell’s dispassionate

voice-over, which details a shameful American time line, from the Middle Passage to the recent police killings of Black Americans. (The film’s structure echoes Pindell’s landmark video from 1980, “Free, White, and 21,” although that piece describes a more personal chronology of insults and abuses.) The hauntingly blunt expository mode of “Rope/Fire/Water” is only one of the septuagenarian artist’s techniques—she is perhaps best known as a painter. In the soaring gallery space that surrounds the darkened room showing the video, a selection of her abstractions lines the wall, charting a progression from the muted, grid-based canvases of the artist’s early career (their textured surfaces are constructed from hole-punch chads) to her more recent en-crusted, glittering biomorphic works. Several text-based paintings, from 2020—so dark that they appear charred—commemorate the victims of colonial genocide, slavery, and white-supremacist terrorism, providing a formally re-

strained, grief-stricken connection to the show’s unforgettable centerpiece.—*J.F. (theshed.org)*

## THE THEATRE

### Franz Kafka’s “Letter to My Father”

Of all the nightmarish cruelties visited on Kafka’s characters, none is realer than the emotional abuse exacted by a domineering patriarch. At thirty-six, Kafka set his filial grievances down in a forty-seven-page typewritten letter. The missive never reached its intended recipient (Kafka’s mother declined to relay it), but it was published forty years after the writer’s death. In M-34’s deliberately bleak and trippy adaptation for the theatre-in-quarantine era, the actor Michael Guagno reads the letter, from what looks like a subterranean storage room in

## AT THE GALLERIES



The real star of the comprehensive exhibition “**David Hammons: Body Prints, 1968-1979**” (at the Drawing Center through May 23) is the artist’s energetic, younger self. (Advance appointments, via [drawingcenter.org](http://drawingcenter.org), are required.) In 1963, when Hammons was twenty, he moved to L.A. from his native Illinois and began using his own anatomy, combined with pigment and paper, as a printmaking tool. Yves Klein’s “Anthropometries” (made with female models) and Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil’s collaborative “Blueprints” had already used similar methods to propose that all art emanates from the artist’s body. Now, Hammons asked, what if that body is Black? Galvanized by the civil-rights and the Black Arts movements, he returned, again and again, to the subject of America, and her relationship to Black men as builders and targets, outsiders and originators. Throughout the thirty-two prints and drawings on view (including “Bye-Centennial,” from 1976, pictured above), one can feel the provocateur’s excitement about his medium, but also his need to push its boundaries, which led to his great interest in performance—another discipline that celebrates the human form, and the ephemeral.—*Hilton Als*



the bowels of some dreary office building, or an alt-right radio personality's doomsday bunker. The performance, directed by James Rutherford and delivered with perspiring, ruminative intensity, is live-streamed on the gaming platform Twitch, using six cameras positioned at different angles. The interface is complex enough to require an instructional video, which informs viewers that the six live feeds will inevitably desynchronize in the course of the ninety-minute show. Intentional or not, the lag produces a cool effect that, coupled with the dissonant droning of a synthesizer, tips into the delectably creepy.—*David Kortava (m-34.org)*

## M.T.A. Radio Plays

Conductor announcements, the *ding* of closing doors, the buzz of overheard conversations: the sounds of the New York City subway are sonic madeleines to its passengers. It's a natural environment for the Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre's "M.T.A. Radio Plays," an anthology of short works that was conceived by Ren Dara Santiago and features contributions from seventeen playwrights. All the stories are set along the 2 line, which snakes its way from the Bronx to Brooklyn. The biggest surprise in the initial batch of six episodes is how similar to one another they sound. Signature messages ("The next Manhattan-bound train will arrive

in . . .") anchor the setting, but the muffled soundscapes share a certain lifelessness, which is compounded by uneven acting. The highlight is Dominic Colón's zingy "Prospect Avenue or The Miseducation of Juni Rodriguez," about a brief encounter in which two men converse about life, love, and McDonald's.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (rattlestick.org)*

## DANCE

### New York City Ballet

The company closes out its Balanchine series with a performance of "Stravinsky Violin Concerto," recorded at the City Ballet's Lincoln Center home in 2018. This striking 1972 work is a great example of Balanchine's high-modernist style, stripped of the frills and manners associated with classical ballet. The piece opens with a lighthearted introduction in which each of the four leads enters, flanked by a team of the opposite sex. The leads then pair up to perform two extraordinary, and contrasting, duets. In the first, the dancers face off almost aggressively, engaging in something resembling combat. In the second, set to some of Stravinsky's most sentimental music, tenderness and neediness intermingle. The finale is a playful,

even comedic romp. In this recording, Sara Mearns and Taylor Stanley are the combative couple, followed by Sterling Hyltin and Ask la Cour as the codependent pair. The stream is available on the company's Web site and YouTube channel, from March 11, at 8, through March 18.—*Marina Harss (nycballet.com)*

### BalletX

The Philadelphia-based company has hit on a workable model during the pandemic, setting up its excellent dancers with choreographers, filmmakers, and photogenic locations for short films streaming on its digital subscription service, BalletX Beyond. In the latest collection, available March 10, Gustavo Ramírez Sansano offers his take on "Hernando's Hideaway." In Maddie Hanson's "Virtuality," we see a dancer in her apartment but also—through a virtual-reality headset she wears—onstage. In "Her Blood a Wild River," Stephanie Martinez honors the strengths of Mexican and Indigenous women.—*Brian Seibert (balletx.org/beyond)*

### Dance Now

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the festival, turned digital and spread out over months, continues. The latest installment, available March 11, features "Alongside: how colors sit next to," a collaborative project in dance and sound led by Jasmine Hearn. Tsiambwom M. Akuchu presents "Purgatory," an investigation into systemic racism. Brendan Drake's "Spare Room" takes place on an empty street on a cold, windy day. Rubén Graciani's "Inner/Outer Hemispheres" follows two searching women.—*B.S. (dancenow.online)*

### Paris Opera Ballet

Forty thousand green balls rain onto the stage, and the dancers slip, slide, and roll, as if in a shallow pool. So ends the first act of "Play," a 2017 piece by the cheeky Swedish choreographer Alexander Ekman, which contrasts the joy of childlike activity with the drudgery of work. Set to a lively score by Mikael Karlsson, the dance is episodic—a duet on moving boxes in one scene, a herd of antlered ballerinas in another. A Paris Opera Ballet performance of the piece is viewable online, March 8-14, in the tristate area, via the French Institute Alliance Française.—*B.S. (fiaf.org)*

## THEATRICAL TRIBUTE



The Twitter account @LiZaOutlives uses breaking-news events to measure the unlikely longevity of the entertainer Liza Minnelli. (A recent benchmark: "Liza Minnelli has outlived the marriage of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West.") Why does Minnelli's staying power surprise us? She's lived a lot of life—as Judy Garland's daughter, as the Oscar-winning star of "Cabaret," as the sequinned diva who launched a thousand drag queens—and yet, like her mother, she always seems as breakable as she is brassy. So there's extra reason to celebrate her seventy-fifth birthday, on March 12. "Love Letter to Liza," a virtual bash airing on the big night (tickets are available at clubcummingnyc.com), features tributes and performances from both contemporaries and notable admirers, among them Lily Tomlin, Joel Grey, Ben Vereen, Catherine Zeta-Jones, John Cameron Mitchell, Sandra Bernhard, Nathan Lane, and Andrew Rannells. Terrific!—*Michael Schulman*

## MUSIC

### Chet Baker

**JAZZ** The 1988 cinematic fantasia "Let's Get Lost" magnified the trumpeter Chet Baker's legend, but it did so at the expense of his exceptional musicianship. As the movie gazed with fascinated horror at the ruined beauty of Baker the unrepentant junkie, his affecting singing and the inventive lyricism of his trumpet-playing became little more than a backdrop to a tale of romantic dissolution. For a taste of Baker's true artistry, turn to the recent vinyl reissues of four recordings for the Riverside label in 1958 and 1959: "(Chet Baker Sings) It Could Happen to You," "Chet Baker in New York," "Chet," and "Chet Baker Plays the Best of Lerner and Loewe." Recorded far from the West Coast environs where he established his cool-jazz reputation, these mid-career albums



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Since 2015, the twenty-five-year-old singer-songwriter Julien Baker has written stinging, confessional music about self-respect, shame, and rehabilitation. **“Little Oblivions,”** her third album, feels fuller than the others—she plays most of the instruments, giving it a complete-band sound—but it isn’t any less intimate. The tensions that built up in her acoustic debut, *“Sprained Ankle,”* from 2015, and erupted across her less isolated 2017 follow-up, *“Turn Out the Lights,”* culminate in her latest, a stunning record crammed with lawless arrangements and searing self-examination. Her songs about addiction, morality, and codependency have never been more poignant. In *“Highlight Reel,”* her biggest mistakes torture her on a loop, but she’s working toward acceptance. “Start asking for forgiveness in advance / For all the future things I will destroy,” she sings on the opener, *“Hardline.”* “That way I can ruin everything.”—*Sheldon Pearce*

find Baker focussed and inspired—the poetic charm of his horn work and vocalizing fully revealed.—*Steve Futterman*

### C. Tangana: “El Madrileño”

**EXPERIMENTAL** Throughout his career, C. Tangana has billed himself as a gritty representative of Spanish trap, a scene that has faced questions about appropriation and whitewashing. But his new album, *“El Madrileño,”* works because it doesn’t feel like a crass imitation of other genres. His collaborators are a motley bunch: Omar Apollo lends R. & B. vocals to the wispy *“Te Olvidaste,”* the Argentine rocker Andrés Calamaro splashes *“Hong Kong”* with irreverence, and the Gipsy Kings burst in for *“Ingobernable.”* C. Tangana gives them space to imbue the music with their own sounds while he plucks traditions from home—flamenco rhythms, classic guitars, percussive hand-claps—molding a project that’s satisfyingly bizarre and forward-thinking.—*Julysa Lopez*

### Sam Dew: “MOONLIT FOOLS”

**R. & B.** The Chicago-born singer-songwriter Sam Dew has spent much of his career crafting music for others to perform, with credits that

include songs for Rihanna, Taylor Swift, Mary J. Blige, and Jessie Ware. After signing to RCA Records and testing the waters with a 2015 EP produced by TV on the Radio’s Dave Sitek, Dew finally makes his big solo turn, on *“MOONLIT FOOLS.”* The payoff is his voice, now silken and defined. His falsetto melodies are distinctly R. & B., smooth and yearning, but he runs them through production heavily indebted to contemporary rap, a self-aware bit of integration in which he interpolates the hook from Heavy D & the Boyz’s *“Now That We Found Love”* and channels T-Pain’s meta ballad *“Rap Song.”* When Dew gets the blend just right, on songs such as the masochistic *“KILLERS”* and the slow-building *“TO YOUR FACE,”* he sounds like he’s on the genre’s cutting edge.—*Sheldon Pearce*

### Ian Sweet: “Show Me How You Disappear”

**ROCK** Across her three albums, the Los Angeles singer Jilian Medford has embraced the punkish stage name Ian Sweet. Aliases can be employed as built-in distancing mechanisms, but not here. The ten songs on Ian Sweet’s new album, *“Show Me How You Disappear,”* all delivered in the first person and many opening

with *“I,”* revel in the L.A. lexicon of therapeutic self-exploration—lingua California. Indeed, Medford plotted the album last January, during a period of inner calamity that involved a wave of panic attacks and intensive outpatient therapy, right before the rest of the world’s breakdown. Her songs distill the experience musically as her wispy voice pushes against backdrops that shift unpredictably, from grand guitars to washes of contemporary keyboards. The music threatens to engulf the singer, but she forever hangs in, more resilient than she may at first seem.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

### Will Liverman: “Dreams of a New Day”

**CLASSICAL** For his new album, *“Dreams of a New Day,”* the baritone Will Liverman wanted to step beyond spirituals to shine a light on other eminently programmable material by Black composers, such as Harry Burleigh’s dynamic, lovelorn *“Five Songs of Laurence Hope”* (1915) and Margaret Bonds’s persevering *“Three Dream Portraits”* (1959), which describes the African-American experience using Langston Hughes’s words. Shawn E. Okpebholo’s staggering *“Two Black Churches”* (2020) crowns the album, recounting racially motivated massacres in Birmingham, in 1963, and in Charleston, in 2015, with poetry and grace. Liverman and the pianist Paul Sánchez perform the diptych with clarity, sensitivity, and barely contained heartbreak.—*Oussama Zahr*

### Louisiana Philharmonic

**CLASSICAL** The composer Courtney Bryan is skilled at spinning melodic lines that sing irresistibly, a point made most recently in *“Blessed,”* a nuanced vocal work that Opera Philadelphia introduced online in late February. That knack for song permeates *“Syzygy,”* a concerto that Bryan wrote for the violinist Jennifer Koh, who played the world premiere last March, in Chicago. Now both the piece and the player come to the Louisiana Philharmonic, where Bryan, who was born in New Orleans, is serving a term as the orchestra’s first creative partner. The conductor Carlos Miguel Prieto also leads works by Aaron Copland and Carlos Simon.—*Steve Smith (March 12 at 8; lpomusic.com.)*

## MOVIES

### Coming 2 America

This cheerful yet inert sequel is patterned closely on the 1988 original but builds its plot on current sensibilities. Eddie Murphy returns as Prince Akeem, who ascends to the throne of Zamunda. Although he and Queen Lisa (Shari Headley) have three daughters, he must find a new crown prince as an eventual successor—because, by law, only males may rule. Learning that he has an illegitimate son in Queens named Lavelle (Jermaine Fowler), Akeem—to the dismay of his quick-witted eldest daughter, Meeka (KiKi Layne)—brings him to Zamunda and grooms him for power, even as circumstances put tradition to the test. Most of the comedy arises from the Queens barbershop where Murphy (in two more roles) and Arsenio Hall (playing Akeem’s wingman, Semmi, and other characters) hold court, and





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from the exuberance of Lavelle's mother (Leslie Jones) and uncle (Tracy Morgan). The sentimental return of many from the first film's cast (including James Earl Jones and John Amos), plus some welcome additions (Wesley Snipes, Nomzamo Mbatha), along with all-too-brief appearances by Salt-N-Pepa, En Vogue, and Gladys Knight, don't outweigh a sense of dutiful effort. Directed by Craig Brewer.—*Richard Brody* (*Streaming on Amazon.*)

## Moxie

In this bright-toned and earnest teen drama, directed by Amy Poehler, a shy eleventh grader named Vivian (Hadley Robinson), in a conservative, jock-centric high school in Rockport, Oregon, has a quick political awakening. When Lucy (Alycia Pascual-Peña), an outspoken new student, is harassed by the school's football star (Patrick Schwarzenegger) and his clique, and gets no help from the principal (Marcia Gay Harden), Vivian—inspired by the riot-grrrl adolescence of her suburban-sedate mother (Poehler)—anonymously starts a zine and or-

ganizes bold actions to challenge the school's male-supremacist ways. The film, based on a novel by Jennifer Mathieu, takes Vivian through coming-of-age lessons via a relationship with a nerdy and sympathetic boy (Nico Hiraga), conflict with her best friend (Lauren Tsai), and an understanding of the injustice and violence that silently seethe beneath the surfaces of daily life—yet the nonwhite characters merely aid the white protagonist's journey of growth. The movie rushes breezily through its plot points, ignoring real-world politics and the complications of protest in a repressive environment, as it didactically but heartily conveys the spirited solidarity of young people in principled revolt.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on Netflix.*)

## Party Girl

In this electrifying blend of documentary and fiction, from 2014, Angélique Litzenburger portrays herself, a raven-haired, middle-aged hostess at a German strip club. A regular patron named Michel (Joseph Bour), a retired French miner, proposes marriage, and she wrangles

with her misgivings. The tempestuous Angélique is a mighty force of nature and a study in trouble. She has a mean streak and a hard past, and, in an effort to overcome both and to make a new life with Michel, she circles the wagons, bringing together her four real-life children—including Samuel Theis, one of the film's co-directors, and her teen-age daughter, who has long been in foster care. Angélique is an instant, screen-grabbing star, and her family and friends are relaxed and captivating in their supporting roles as themselves. Theis and the other directors, Marie Amachoukeli and Claire Burger, build a grand and rumbling tale from Angélique's daily struggles at home and at work. Their revelations of erotic crises and eye for symbolic details suggest a Maupassant story for modern times. In French and German.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on Tubi.*)

## Persuasion

The young British director Roger Michell did, in this 1995 film, what always seemed impossible. He made a Jane Austen movie that is never pretty and only occasionally charming; instead, it is troubled, astringent, and touched with melancholy—not unlike the novel. Amanda Root plays Anne Elliot, who once turned down Frederick Wentworth (Ciarán Hinds, who has the profile of a Regency miniature) and has regretted it ever since. They come together again—in the country, by the sea, and on the streets of Bath—and you can guess the outcome. But Michell somehow tenses a simple narrative into suspense; the camera catches every glance between the former lovers and probes every scene for signs of hope. Anyone expecting verbal Ping-Pong and unspotted elegance will be disappointed: Anne's dress gets caught in the mud, and her sister Mary (a fine turn from Sophie Thompson) talks through a mouthful of pie. With Corin Redgrave as Anne's monstrous father, and Fiona Shaw as the worldly wife of an admiral.—*Anthony Lane* (*Reviewed in our issue of 9/25/95.*) (*Streaming on Amazon, iTunes, and other services.*)

## Utamaro and His Five Women

Kenji Mizoguchi's 1946 historical drama, about the life and work of the Edo-era painter, who was born in 1753, is also the director's daring and forthright credo of artistic ambitions. Utamaro, famed for his depictions of women, defies established styles and schools, is resented by traditional artists, and ultimately renounces his social position and his job as a court artist in order to mingle with the populace, work with a tattoo artist, and make modest woodblock prints without regard for genteel values—and to leap into the maelstrom of women's desires, wiles, dreams, and frustrations. The drama of Utamaro's persecution by a touchy official who sentences him to fifty days' house arrest—handcuffed—gives way to the stories of five women he knows, most memorably that of the tragic Okita. She likens her furiously romantic course through life to his art—an expression of her true being and of her freedom—and Mizoguchi captures it in one glorious, tragic closeup, in which his exquisite camerawork substitutes for the handcuffed Utamaro's brushstrokes. In Japanese.—*R.B.* (*Streaming on the Criterion Channel.*)

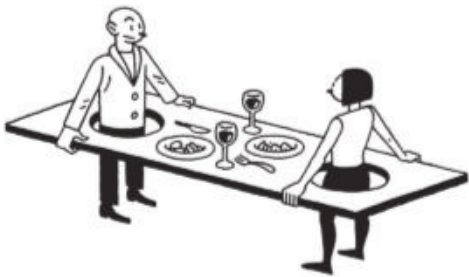
## WHAT TO STREAM



With **"Center Stage,"** a 1991 bio-pic of the Chinese silent-movie star Ruan Lingyu, the Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan reveals the political fault lines of the actress's intimate passions while radically revising the bio-pic form. (It's streaming on Metrograph's Web site.) Maggie Cheung plays Ruan, who rose to stardom in Shanghai, in the early nineteen-thirties, while supporting a dissolute ex-lover and having an affair with a rich and feckless businessman. After the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and bombing of Shanghai, Ruan appeared in confrontational political dramas—amid threats of censorship—and was targeted by scandalmongering journalists; she died, in 1935, by suicide, at the age of twenty-four. Kwan films Ruan's story with a glossy blend of romantic melancholy and social history; it's intercut with clips from Ruan's films, interviews with her now elderly real-life colleagues, discussions with his cast and crew about her life and times, and behind-the-scenes footage of his shoot. The self-aware drama moves at the hypnotic pace of an elusive dream—above all, in spectacularly staged musical scenes, set in a night club, merging sinuous and languid dances with high-stakes emotional battles.—*Richard Brody*

For more reviews, visit  
[newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town](http://newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town)





## TABLES FOR TWO

### Fan-Fan Doughnuts

448 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn

### El Newyorkino

61 Commerce St., Brooklyn

Soon after Fan-Fan Doughnuts, in Bed-Stuy, opened, in October, a young girl came in with her parents. Fany Gerson—who started Fan-Fan after parting ways with Dough, the doughnut brand that she co-founded, in 2010—asked if she'd like a demonstration. When she took the girl behind the counter, “the mom was sobbing,” Gerson recalled recently. “She’s, like, ‘It’s just been such a hard time.’ And then I started crying.”

Fan-Fan was supposed to debut much sooner, in a big, airy space in Clinton Hill where people could linger. When the pandemic struck, a capacious café no longer made sense, so Gerson and her partner decided to use Dough’s original, much smaller location, which had been adapted as a wholesale headquarters for another pastry project. That the space had been stripped down to its most industrial parts ended up feeling fateful to Gerson. “We’re very open in terms of what we do, how we do it,” she told me

recently. Plus, “it allows the kitchen to see what joy we bring to people.”

Joy—Fan-Fan’s globally inspired doughnuts practically quiver with it. I was especially delighted by La Donna, featuring an irresistibly fuchsia-hued, refreshingly tart, juicy black-currant-and-raspberry glaze, crowned with crisp shards of meringue and dried rose and cornflower buds. An oblong, éclair-inspired number wore a long squiggle of torched meringue and oozed with yuzu curd; another paired guava and a sweet, salty cream cheese.

But it’s the basics I crave: Gerson’s yeasted, brioche-style dough, which contains flour, butter, and eggs and is fried to the color of honey, is a marvel in itself, not much heavier than cotton candy, and is perhaps best coated in an inky slick of Valrhona chocolate or braided and lightly lacquered with the simplest white icing. Chocolate comes in hot-beverage form, too: a rich, velvety Belgian-style mix of melted Guittard (both milk and dark), not so thick that you need a spoon, but thick enough that it’s nice to use one, to more easily consume the doughnut croutons and house-made marshmallow bobbing at the top.

For Gerson, 2020 posed challenges even beyond opening a new business while raising a toddler during a pandemic; she was also forced to close the Manhattan outpost of La Newyorkina, her beloved *paleta*-and-ice-cream shop, founded the same year as Dough. In the off-season, business all but dried up. But she found a way to buoy the

still open Red Hook location until the summer, by launching El Newyorkino, with a weekly menu of Mexican meals for takeout and delivery in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens.

The easily reheatable dishes are the kind that soothe the homesickness that she and her husband, Daniel Ortiz de Montellano (an owner of Casa Pública, in Williamsburg), feel for their native Mexico City: empanadas stuffed with roasted pineapple, or mushrooms in green mole; *pastel azteca* (a layered casserole you could liken to lasagna, made with tortillas instead of noodles); and all the fixings for tacos, with fillings such as stewed *jamaica*, or hibiscus flowers.

A few weeks ago, Gerson introduced brunch, which will scratch a nostalgic itch for anyone who has been to Mexico City, where the art has been thoroughly mastered. Kits to make huevos rancheros or their bicolor cousins, huevos divorciados, include the eggs, plus tortillas, salsa, and black beans. Apple-cinnamon French toast, with a side of *cajeta*, or goat’s-milk caramel, is made from thick slices of apple challah. Gerson, who is Jewish, offered doughnuts in the shape of hamantaschen for Purim at Fan-Fan, and El Newyorkino is already taking preorders for a Mexican-inspired Passover feast, including a spicy lime-and-chili-laced matzo-ball soup, a beacon of spring and survival. (*Fan-Fan doughnuts* \$3–\$5. *El Newyorkino brunch items* \$8–\$42.)

—Hannah Goldfield



## ONE PATIENT'S STORY OF USING A CONVENIENT SHORT-COURSE ORAL TREATMENT FOR PATIENTS WITH RELAPSING FORMS OF MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS



"I'm enjoying my life, easing back into work and college," Sagal said, as the twenty-four-year-old urban-engineering student described her routine. For a long time, life was significantly more challenging for Sagal, who was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis, or RRMS, when she was in high school. Her primary-care physician attributed her fatigue and migraines to hormones or developmental issues, and teachers implied that she was lazy. "I blamed myself," Sagal said. "To compensate, I signed up for an early-morning gym class, ate healthily, and pushed myself to do well in school."

Despite her efforts, Sagal's symptoms began to escalate: tingling and numbness in her arms and legs, loss of sense of taste, and increased fatigue. One day during her senior year, Sagal was struck by intense dizziness and vomiting. "My dad took me to the emergency room, where the doctor did not take me seriously," she said. Her father, also a doctor, insisted that she be admitted for testing. A spinal tap revealed that Sagal had MS. "I cried—I thought my life was over," she recalled. "But I also felt a little relieved, thinking, 'I'm not crazy!'" Sagal's neurologist, Dr. Bhupendra O. Khatri, a founder and medical director for the Center for Neurological Disorders, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which treats 3,500 MS patients per year, prescribed a daily pill. She became well enough to attend college on a limited basis and to work part-time.

But then, after five years, Sagal's fatigue and headaches returned and she had to put her college studies and work on pause. A new MRI confirmed some progression of the disease. Dr. Khatri told her about MAVENCLAD® (cladribine) tablets, which had recently come on the market. "I had been following the development of MAVENCLAD for years," Dr. Khatri said. "I felt that Sagal was an excellent candidate for this short-course oral therapy."

He made sure that Sagal and her family were aware of potential side effects. He explained that there is a cancer risk associated with the medication, so she needed to follow screening guidelines prior to treatment. Dr. Khatri also noted that there's a risk of birth defects for pregnant women, and that men and women of childbearing age should use effective birth control during treatment and for at least six months after the last dose of each treatment course. The most common side effects for MAVENCLAD include upper respiratory infection, headache, and low white blood cell counts.

Dr. Khatri was reassured by the fact that "the pharmaceutical company, EMD Serono, Inc., had performed analysis by collecting safety data from two thousand patients over 15 years." During a ninety-six-week clinical trial for MAVENCLAD, inclusive of 433 patients on MAVENCLAD and 437 on placebo, patients who took the medication experienced a 58%

reduction in relapse rates per year, compared to those who took a placebo (MAVENCLAD 0.14 vs placebo 0.33). In people with MS, white blood cells called T and B cells, or lymphocytes, do not communicate properly and become overactive, leading them to attack the central nervous system and cause damage and inflammation. "MAVENCLAD is believed to work by reducing the number of T and B cells in the body, so there are fewer of them to attack the nerves," Dr. Khatri said. Once treatment is finished for the year, the immune system will begin to produce new T and B cells. It may take several months or more for the recovery of T and B cells, but some patients may not go back to pre-treatment levels.

MAVENCLAD is the only short-course oral therapy that requires a maximum of ten treatment days a year over two years. "For me, the best part is the dosing schedule," Sagal said. Patients take one to two tablets for up to five days per month for two consecutive months during the first year, and then repeat that course at the beginning of the second year. "Since I'm not taking MAVENCLAD for ten months out of the year, I don't have to take it everywhere with me," she added.

Your healthcare provider will continue to monitor your health during the two yearly treatment courses, as well as between treatment courses and for at least another two years, during which you do not need to take MAVENCLAD. Your healthcare provider may delay or completely stop treatment with MAVENCLAD if you have severe side effects. It is not known if it is safe and effective for people to restart MAVENCLAD after the full four-year period.

Sagal completed her second course of treatment in August of 2020. Today, she and Dr. Khatri are pleased with how she's doing. "Over all the years I've known Sagal, she seems more like herself now," Dr. Khatri said. Sagal has returned to college, though classes are virtual due to the coronavirus, and works part-time. "MS is not holding me back," she said. Reflecting on her experience, she said, "I would offer this advice to people who are newly diagnosed with MS: There are people who care. Stay hopeful!"



US-MAV-00525

MAVENCLAD is a prescription medicine used to treat relapsing forms of multiple sclerosis (MS), to include relapsing-remitting disease and active secondary progressive disease, in adults. Because of its safety profile, MAVENCLAD is generally used in people who have tried another MS medicine that they could not tolerate or that has not worked well enough. MAVENCLAD is not recommended for use in people with clinically isolated syndrome (CIS).

**MAVENCLAD may cause serious side effects.**

**Treatment with MAVENCLAD may increase your risk of developing cancer. You should follow healthcare provider instructions about screening for cancer. Because of the risk of fetal harm, do not take MAVENCLAD if you are pregnant or of childbearing potential and not using effective birth control.**



# I'M READY

**FOR AN MS TREATMENT THAT'S  
NOT AN INFUSION, NOT AN INJECTION, NOT A DAILY PILL.\***

**\*Not taken every day of the year.**

**MAVENCLAD is the first and only short-course oral therapy with no more than 10 treatment days a year over 2 years.<sup>†</sup>**

**Talk to your healthcare provider to find out if MAVENCLAD is right for you, and visit [mavenclad.com](http://mavenclad.com) for more information.**

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<sup>†</sup>Depending on your weight.

Please see Important Information, including **serious side effects**, on the following pages.



## IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT MAVENCLAD® (cladribine) tablets, for oral use

Read this information carefully before using MAVENCLAD and each time you get a refill, as there may be new information. This information does not take the place of talking with your healthcare provider (HCP).

### What is the most important information I should know about MAVENCLAD?

#### MAVENCLAD can cause serious side effects, including:

- **Risk of cancer (malignancies).** Treatment with MAVENCLAD may increase your risk of developing cancer. Talk to your healthcare provider about your risk of developing cancer if you receive MAVENCLAD. You should follow your healthcare provider instructions about screening for cancer.
- **MAVENCLAD may cause birth defects if used during pregnancy. Females must not be pregnant when they start treatment with MAVENCLAD or become pregnant during MAVENCLAD dosing and within 6 months after the last dose of each yearly treatment course. Stop your treatment with MAVENCLAD and call your healthcare provider right away if you become pregnant during treatment with MAVENCLAD.**
  - For females who are able to become pregnant:
    - Your healthcare provider should order a pregnancy test for you before you begin your first and second yearly treatment course of MAVENCLAD to make sure that you are not pregnant. Your healthcare provider will decide when to do the test.
    - Use effective birth control (contraception) on the days on which you take MAVENCLAD and for at least 6 months after the last dose of each yearly treatment course.
      - Talk to your healthcare provider if you use oral contraceptives (the “pill”).
      - You should use a second method of birth control on the days on which you take MAVENCLAD and for at least 4 weeks after your last dose of each yearly treatment course.
  - For males with female partners who are able to become pregnant:
    - Use effective birth control (contraception) during the days on which you take MAVENCLAD and for at least 6 months after the last dose of each yearly treatment course.

### What is MAVENCLAD?

MAVENCLAD is a prescription medicine used to treat relapsing forms of multiple sclerosis (MS), to include relapsing remitting disease and active secondary progressive disease, in adults. Because of its safety profile, MAVENCLAD is generally used in people who have tried another MS medicine that they could not tolerate or that has not worked well enough.

MAVENCLAD is not recommended for use in people with clinically isolated syndrome (CIS).

It is not known if MAVENCLAD is safe and effective in children under 18 years of age.

#### **Do not** take MAVENCLAD if you:

- have cancer (malignancy).
- are pregnant, plan to become pregnant, or are a woman of childbearing age or a man able to father a child and you are not using birth control. See **“What is the most important information I should know about MAVENCLAD?”**
- are human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) positive.
- have active infections, including tuberculosis (TB), hepatitis B or C.
- are allergic to cladribine.
- are breastfeeding. See **“Before you take MAVENCLAD, tell your healthcare provider about all of your medical conditions, including if you:”**

#### **Before you take MAVENCLAD, tell your healthcare provider about all of your medical conditions, including if you:**

- think you have an infection.
- have heart failure.
- have liver or kidney problems.
- have taken, take, or plan to take medicines that affect your immune system or your blood cells, or other treatments for MS. Certain medicines can increase your risk of getting an infection.
- have had a recent vaccination or are scheduled to receive any vaccinations. You should not receive live or live-attenuated vaccines within the 4 to 6 weeks preceding your treatment with MAVENCLAD. You should not receive these types of vaccines during your treatment with MAVENCLAD and until your healthcare provider tells you that your immune system is no longer weakened.
- have or have had cancer.
- are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. It is not known if MAVENCLAD passes into your breast milk. Do not breastfeed on the days on which you take MAVENCLAD, and for 10 days after the last dose. See **“Do not** take MAVENCLAD if you:”

#### **Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take,** including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements.

#### **How should I take MAVENCLAD?**

- Limit contact with your skin. Avoid touching your nose, eyes and other parts of the body. If you get MAVENCLAD on your skin or on any surface, wash it right away with water.
- Take MAVENCLAD at least 3 hours apart from other medicines taken by mouth during the 4- to 5-day MAVENCLAD treatment week.



- o If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember on the same day. If the whole day passes before you remember, take your missed dose the next day. **Do not take 2 doses at the same time.** Instead, you will extend the number of days in that treatment week.

Your healthcare provider will continue to monitor your health during the 2 yearly treatment courses, and for at least another 2 years during which you do not need to take MAVENCLAD. It is not known if MAVENCLAD is safe and effective in people who restart MAVENCLAD treatment more than 2 years after completing 2 yearly treatment courses.

### **What are the possible side effects of MAVENCLAD?**

#### **MAVENCLAD can cause serious side effects, including:**

- o See **"What is the most important information I should know about MAVENCLAD?"**
- o **low blood cell counts.** Low blood cell counts have happened and can increase your risk of infections during your treatment with MAVENCLAD. Your healthcare provider will do blood tests before you start treatment with MAVENCLAD, during your treatment with MAVENCLAD, and afterward, as needed.
- o **serious infections such as:**
  - **TB, hepatitis B or C, and shingles (herpes zoster).** Fatal cases of TB and hepatitis have happened with cladribine during clinical studies. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get any symptoms of the following infection related problems or if any of the symptoms get worse, including:
    - fever
    - aching painful muscles
    - headache
    - feeling of being generally unwell
    - loss of appetite
    - burning, tingling, numbness or itchiness of the skin in the affected area
    - skin blotches, blistered rash and severe pain
  - **progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy (PML).** PML is a rare brain infection that usually leads to death or severe disability. Although PML has not been seen in MS patients taking MAVENCLAD, it may happen in people with weakened immune systems. Symptoms of PML get worse over days to weeks. Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any new or worsening neurologic signs or symptoms of PML, that have lasted several days, including:
    - weakness on 1 side of your body
    - loss of coordination in your arms and legs

- decreased strength
- problems with balance
- changes in your vision
- changes in your thinking or memory
- confusion
- changes in your personality

- o **liver problems.** MAVENCLAD may cause liver problems. Your healthcare provider should do blood tests to check your liver before you start taking MAVENCLAD. Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any of the following symptoms of liver problems:

- nausea
- vomiting
- stomach pain
- tiredness
- loss of appetite
- your skin or the whites of your eyes turn yellow
- dark urine

- o **allergic reactions (hypersensitivities).** MAVENCLAD can cause serious allergic reactions. Stop your treatment with MAVENCLAD and go to the closest emergency room for medical help right away if you have any signs or symptoms of allergic reactions. Symptoms of an allergic reaction may include: skin rash, swelling or itching of the face, lips, tongue or throat, or trouble breathing.

- o **heart failure.** MAVENCLAD may cause heart failure, which means your heart may not pump as well as it should. Call your healthcare provider or go to the closest emergency room for medical help right away if you have any signs or symptoms such as shortness of breath, a fast or irregular heart beat, or unusual swelling in your body. Your healthcare provider may delay or completely stop treatment with MAVENCLAD if you have severe side effects.

#### **The most common side effects of MAVENCLAD include:**

- o upper respiratory infection
- o headache
- o low white blood cell counts

These are not all the possible side effects of MAVENCLAD. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects. You may report side effects to FDA at 1-800-FDA-1088.

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For more information, call toll-free 1-877-447-3243 or go to [www.mavenclad.com](http://www.mavenclad.com)





## LOOKING FORWARD. Ivorypress at Twenty-Five

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT

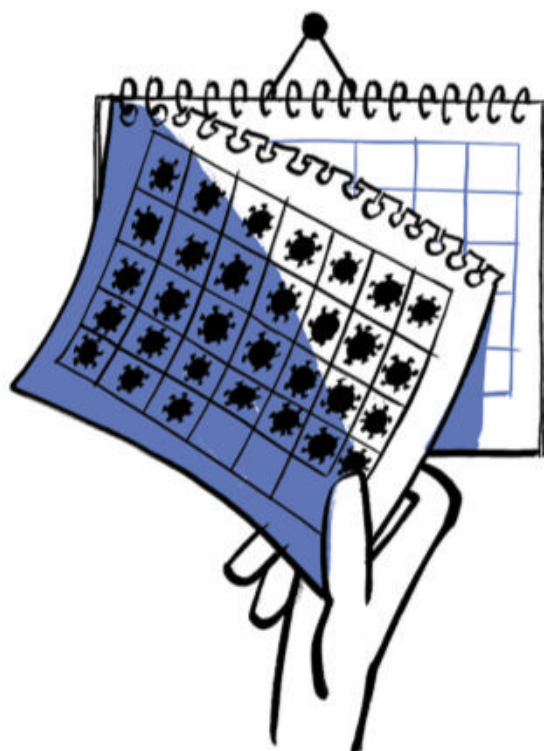
#### FIFTY-TWO WEEKS LATER

If you were lucky, you were merely bored. And, if you were sentient, you had to acknowledge, when tallying up COVID-19's impact on your own circumstances, that others had it worse. Fifty-two weeks ago, in the early days of March, you may have boarded a subway car or an airplane wearing gloves but no mask, or have scrubbed your hands until the knuckles bled, after blithely sharing the air with twenty thousand other humans at Madison Square Garden. We had a lot to learn. Many of us, though unable to differentiate among a year's worth of Groundhog Days, can still deliver a meticulous "what I knew and when I knew it" account of the week or so leading up to the lockdown, as society snapped to attention. A final restaurant meal or concert; a heedless party or Sunday lunch with the in-laws; a last-ever handful of bar nuts.

Some of those gatherings killed people. The spring surge was a pitiless blitz. The hospitals filled, and the citizens holed up. A year later: more than half a million Americans dead, plus widespread economic ruin, the incalculable proliferation of domestic misery, and the heavy toll on the category of worker now designated essential. In the midst of trauma, the more trivial manners and poetics of detention evolved. Zoom, bad beards, D.I.Y. dye jobs, strange shortages (yeast!), the scrubbing of the groceries, the staging of the bookshelves. In public, police drones—real-life RoboCops—admonished pedestrians to

maintain their distance. There was the tut-tutting at the maskless joggers, the shaming of those who'd fled the city—those who had the luxury of flight—and the nightly sacrament of applause for the front-liners who were caring for the sick.

Many New Yorkers hardly left their apartments, pinned down by fear or necessity or their own interpretation of good sense. (This was a luxury of another kind; you could order meals, work from home, and scold everyone outside.) Others found ways to improvise a semblance of a life beyond the apartment: pods, park walks, meetups on stoops. People interpreted the official rules to suit themselves. For some, the trick was to defer gracefully to whoever had the strictest regime. For others, it was to insist that the rules, any rules, were dumb. Sometimes people got into fights over this.



There was a Presidential election, and such disputes helped sway it.

Home confinement, less like imprisonment than like getting grounded, sharpened one's awareness of the near at hand. You could watch your toenails grow. You honed your refrigerator-leftovers game. Perhaps you had second thoughts about the person you'd chosen to live with. No matter how many times you absentmindedly straightened the pictures on the wall during long phone calls, they were always askew. A kind of visual starvation took hold. You had your immediate environment, the same old crap, and then maybe the neighborhood, most of it forlorn, with the sporadic "Truman Show" comings and goings of the people in it. The screen was the only window onto the wider world, your best chance at new faces and bright colors.

There were small graces: unforeseen time with kids both young and old (on balance, you hope, more blessing than curse, in spite of the slog of remote schooling) and some cultivating of better habits (if only to counterbalance the entrenchment of the bad ones). The telescoping of one's social universe, the drop-off in the usual gluttonous diet of fleeting contacts, imposed a culling of acquaintances and friends, which brought to mind Marie Kondo's advice for weeding out a closet: Get rid of it, unless it brings you joy. As for the actual closets, better to ignore the Kondo plan, in these extraordinary times, unless you want to own nothing but a pair of sweatpants.

It will take a while for most people



to rebuild the social and societal synapses. Talk about the lost art of conversation! Perhaps you've had the experience, wading back into in-person contact, of wondering whether you'd lost the capacity and the feel for prolonged and complex human interaction. Maybe you found yourself blabbing away or growing antsy or distracted or tired—more so than usual, anyway. You feel the magnetic pull of the phone in the pocket, the couch at home, and Episode 7 of “Bridgerton.” One likes to imagine that, when everything finally really opens up, the streets will erupt as they did on V-J Day and there will ensue rapturous social excitement, cultural and commercial ferment, and even a baby boom. It seems unlikely, though, that we will see a Generation Warp Speed. Predictions are that the birth rate in 2021 will be well below average, with straitened economic circumstances and the strains

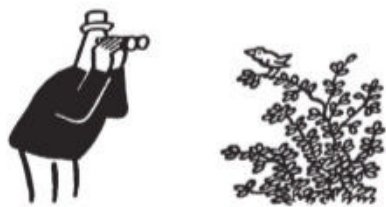
of dual-income family planning making it harder for people to afford children. Last year, some four hundred thousand more people than usual died; this year, three hundred thousand fewer shall be born.

There is plenty to be anxious about as New York emerges from its pandemic year. Depleted treasuries, mounting debts, faltering tax receipts. Rising crime, poverty, homelessness, and inequity. Bankrupt businesses and acres of vacant office and retail space. The reckless premature lifting of mandates elsewhere by some recalcitrant governors, the ones susceptible to what President Biden called “Neanderthal thinking,” while our own governor, to the dismay of New Yorkers who'd been seduced by his pandemic act, found himself mired in scandal over his own cave-man ways. But here in the city there are green shoots. The movie theatres

are reopening, and indoor dining has resumed. Strangers are huddling together around the Goyas at the Met. The Garden is again admitting fans (and the Knicks aren't bad). The vaccination rate is brisk, at last, and the forecast for the delivery of more doses is better still. Washington seems to have a functioning government again, and hopefully help is on the way, in the form of almost two trillion dollars in stimulus. The municipal and state budget holes may not be as deep as feared. The days are getting longer and warmer. The forsythia is blossoming, the crocuses are coming up. Some things we'll never get back—the loved ones who perished; the city that was; the time itself, and the peculiar experience of its passing—but who can't imagine that happier days may soon be here again?

—Nick Paumgarten

## CHECKING IN BIRD LOVE



*A year ago, we talked with a fifteen-year-old named Camilo, who lived with his mother and two siblings in a shelter with no Internet. The family shared one unreliable laptop and one cell phone. When they spent a night at the home of friends, to use their Wi-Fi, the shelter kicked them out. Last week, Camilo brought us up to date.*

We still don't have Wi-Fi, but I have a school iPad that has service. Last spring, we moved to a shelter on the Lower East Side. I didn't like it because I had to share a room, and I need my own space. But I liked the vibe. It was a good neighborhood, next to East River Park. I had a place to jog. I had a place to feed the birds.

In July, I hadn't seen anybody in so long, so I took the Staten Island Ferry with one of my old friends from the Bronx. In Battery Park, a squirrel kept following me. I could tell it was hungry. It was, like, reaching toward me. Then I remembered: I had peanuts in my bag! Next thing you know, a ton of pigeons

come, a ton of squirrels. I even fed the squirrel by hand. They were really friendly animals. I don't know if it was because of my aura—I had a crystal on my neck. That was the happiest I'd been in a while.

After that, I would go to East River Park almost every day. There was nothing else to do, because of quarantine. I didn't have any friends because I'd moved to a new neighborhood—nobody's going to get near you with this virus. But the birds would see me from afar, and they'd come flying. There would be ten birds on my lap, on my shoulder, on my head, too. I was like a male Snow White! I really wish I had a friend to record it—I'm pretty sure that would've gone viral.

One bird was white with two bracelets on its feet, an escaped racing pigeon. I'd been feeding him for months, but I didn't know that they're not supposed to be in the streets, that they could get killed by a hawk, that they don't have the instincts. The white pigeon was always alone. He wouldn't fly with the other birds. I brought him to the shelter. Another day, I went to Union Square. I saw a bird with a broken leg. He was trying to get the food that I was throwing, but he couldn't. He was just hopping around on one foot. I caught him, too. His name's Rocky. The white one is Zen.

Zen never really liked me. Rocky is different, because I rescued him. I bought

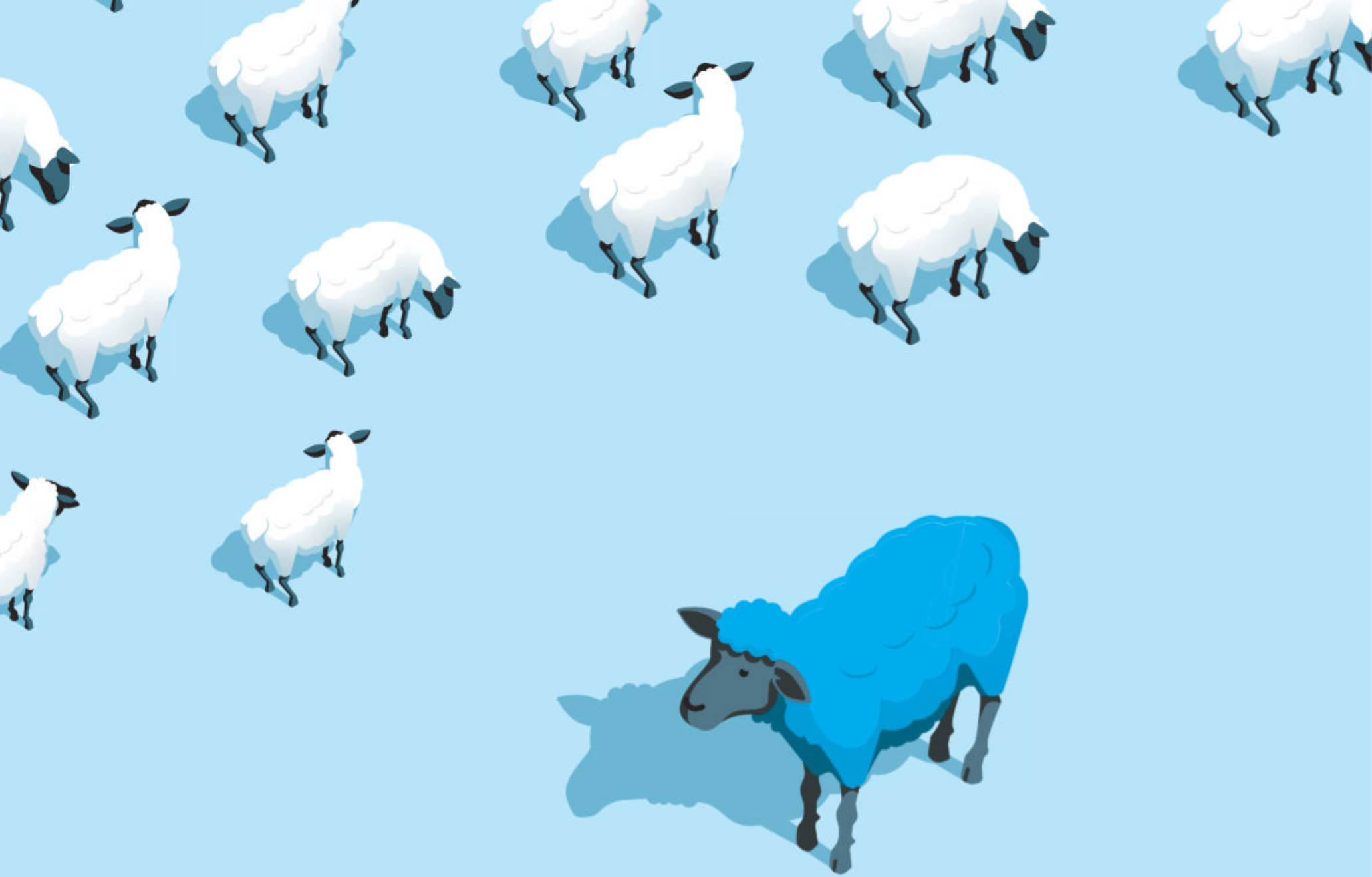
a first-aid kit, looked up a bunch of YouTube videos, and made a cast until the foot was healed. I got some vitamins, pills, and pain-relief cream. He loves me. When I call his name and snap my fingers, he'll fly to my hand. He'll make a happy noise when he sees me. When I pet him, he'll close his eyes and purr.

We've been in shelters since 2019. We've been on the NYCHA waiting list for, like, ten years. Until I bought a cage, the birds lived in a crib. I taped a blanket around the bars. I had a ritual to hide them from the maintenance men. It



Camilo R.





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wasn't difficult until my mom snitched. I had to talk with the social worker, who made me leave them at my grandma's house. It was hard to let them go.

Maybe this quarantine changed me for the better. I'm starting my first business right now, selling crystals. It's called Faith in Stones. I became a vegan, too. My mom doesn't really support it, so I buy my own stuff. Right now, I've got celery, blueberries, strawberries, bananas, kale, spinach, broccoli, and asparagus.

I got jumped last year, so they transferred me to a new school. They put me in twelfth grade—I skipped eleventh. I thought it was an accident, but the counsellors said I've got enough credits. I'm gonna be sixteen in college! As soon as I could, I went in person to school. I stopped after a few days. It was whack. I wanted to go meet new people, but there were only three others in the room. All we'd do is sit down and do Zoom. What's the point?

In December, they told us that they'd found an apartment for us. They gave us the address and everything. I missed school so we could pack. Then they told us it's not ready.

We finally moved two weeks ago. The place is small, there's no furniture—I'm used to sleeping on the floor anyway—and bringing back the pigeons was a lot of work. But I felt free. I had my own room. And I had my own key! Now if I ever get some friends I can bring them here. I talk to this spiritual girl, she's into crystals and all that. I still have the pigeons only because I want to show her. After that, I'm gonna find a new home for Zen, and I'm gonna set Rocky free.

—Camilo R.  
(as told to Zach Helfand)

## AS IT HAPPENS DEPT. ONLY COLLECT



The New-York Historical Society preserves artifacts of historic significance, many displayed in its museum, on Central Park West. Its collection includes a Constitution-ratification-parade banner, from 1788, carried by the Society of Pewterers; a draft wheel from



Sandra Lindsay

the Civil War; a women's-suffrage pennant; and, from the twenty-first century, "some wonderful pussy hats," Margi Hofer, the museum's director, said recently. Last year, on March 13th, as Americans began to restructure daily life in response to COVID-19, one curator, Rebecca Klassen, had an idea. After seeing an Instagram post of a bottle of hand sanitizer with the caption "Liquid gold," she sent Hofer a note. "That was the first acknowledgment that a historic event was upon us," Hofer said.

The History Responds initiative, which the Society's former president Kenneth T. Jackson created the week of September 11, 2001, documents history as it happens. Hofer said, "Ken Jackson called an all-staff meeting and said, 'This is the most historic moment that most of us will live through. And it is incumbent upon us as a history institution to collect.'" Employees gathered dozens of items: a venetian blind that Jackson found in a tree in the St. Paul's Chapel cemetery, a singed knife and spoon from a rooftop next to Ground Zero, a mangled desk clock with hands stopped at 9:04 A.M. They have since gathered objects related to Occupy Wall Street, the climate strike, and Black Lives Matter.

By early April, the initiative had ramped up its pandemic-collecting efforts and invited the public to help. "The first masks we collected were in the context of the early P.P.E. shortage—home-made masks for medical professionals," Hofer said. Then: "hand-sanitizer bottles, from distilleries that had pivoted

their business from whiskey"; hastily scrawled store-closure signs; a rock, cheerfully painted by a young boy and his mother in Queens and left on a neighbor's doorstep; a T-shirt reading "I Danced at Club Quarantine"; a portrait, by the street artist SacSix, of Dr. Fauci as Spock, giving a Vulcan salute, his palm reading "WASH 'EM." In the summer, two crises coincided after the murder of George Floyd, and the initiative intensified its Black Lives Matter collecting, including photographs, by Bob Gore, of masked protesters. In one, a woman holds up a B.L.M. sign from behind her apartment window.

The initiative's latest acquisitions are the I.D. badge, scrubs, and vaccination card of Sandra Lindsay, the first person in the U.S. to be vaccinated against COVID. On a recent Friday, via video, the curator Cristian Petru Panaite interviewed Lindsay, the director of critical-care nursing at Long Island Jewish Medical Center, Northwell Health. She looked much as she had on TV: white uniform, pearls, calm demeanor. Lindsay, who immigrated from Jamaica, has a slight accent, as does Panaite, who immigrated from Romania. Panaite, talking about N.-Y.H.S., said, "We're right next to the Natural History museum. Kids come in and ask, 'Where are the dinosaurs?' And we're, like, 'Hey, let's learn about George Washington!'"

A transcript of Lindsay's account will be kept with her donated items. "On March 13th, a Friday, I met with my team," she said. "Our first COVID patient had transferred to one of our I.C.U.s the week before, and by the thirteenth we were talking about expanding to make another I.C.U." They opened the new I.C.U. that weekend, and by Monday, March 16th, "the volume of patients was just overwhelming," she said. "We just kept expanding and expanding and expanding our I.C.U. capacity. At the peak, we were up to ten I.C.U. spaces. As people passed away, more people filled the beds." Lindsay worked twelve- to sixteen-hour days. "There were days where I didn't even remember the drive home," she said. "I started doing Transcendental Meditation. It helps with clarity, keeping me calm, making sure I'm making the right decisions."

"In New-York Historical, we have a gallery of Tiffany lamps," Panaite



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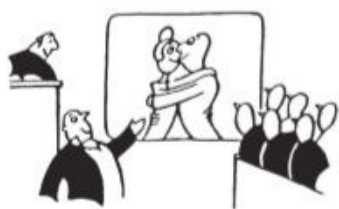


said. “Whenever you come in, that’s one of the best places to meditate.”

On December 13th, Lindsay, who had been open about her eagerness to be vaccinated, got a call from her chief nursing officer. The vaccine was coming the next day; did she still want it? “I said, ‘Absolutely—without hesitation, I am ready.’ I did not know that I was going to be making history.” At the hospital on the fourteenth, just before a live broadcast of the vaccination, she learned she would be first in the nation when Governor Cuomo announced it. Dr. Michelle Chester injected Lindsay with the Pfizer vaccine as shutters clicked; onlookers cheered. “I felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders,” Lindsay told Panaite. As the interview ended, she thanked him: “History is very, very important, and 2020 is not a year we would ever want to forget.”

—Sarah Larson

## INTERMISSION DEPT. BACK AT IT



Just about everyone agrees that good ventilation and a safety-minded catchphrase are essential to reopening a movie theatre. But the specifics remain up for debate: How many hand-sanitizer sta-

tions? Lysol Concentrate, Purell Surface Sanitizer, or PureBright Germicidal Ultra Bleach? AMC Theatres (catchphrase: “Safe & Clean”) partnered with Harvard’s School of Public Health (and Clorox) to decide. The Alamo Drafthouse theatres (“Safer than a supermarket”) released an animated video detailing their new protocols. (Preorder food online, exit by row.) Last Wednesday, Showcase Cinema’s College Point Multiplex (“Be showcase safe”), in Queens, welcomed fourteen furloughed employees—janitors and ushers, ticket scanners and ice-cream scoopers, all dressed in black polo shirts—for their first time back to the theatre in at least three hundred and fifty-one days.

At 9:45 A.M., Gloria Rivera, who wore black Crocs, was already cranky. “They haven’t told us anything yet,” she said. “We’re just standing here waiting.” On March 17, 2020, after a showing of “Sonic the Hedgehog,” the multiplex closed, and Rivera lost her job. She started working a bakery shift at Food Bazaar, from 5 A.M. to 3 P.M., in addition to a job she already had, with Con Edison. She said that she was too busy to keep up with the movies.

A few women chatted by a “Jurassic Park” arcade game, which was cordoned off by a “TEMPORARILY CLOSED” sign. Near the self-serve soda machines (“THIS AREA CLOSED”), Michael Quintana, a young bearded man in a lime-

green mask, and his work friend Louis Mojica, who has a ponytail, caught up. “It’s kind of emotional being back,” Quintana said. “It feels surreal.” He remembered how, when the new “Lion King” was showing, a little girl had given him a drawing of Simba. “It was honestly the cutest fucking thing ever,” he said.

“It’s nice. It’s kind of a sense of bliss,” Mojica said. “I remember thinking, It’s gonna be, like, a month, maybe two. And then the whole year goes by?”

“I’ve been through a couple of different jobs,” Quintana said.

Mojica nodded. “I tried working odd jobs. Nothing really stuck.”

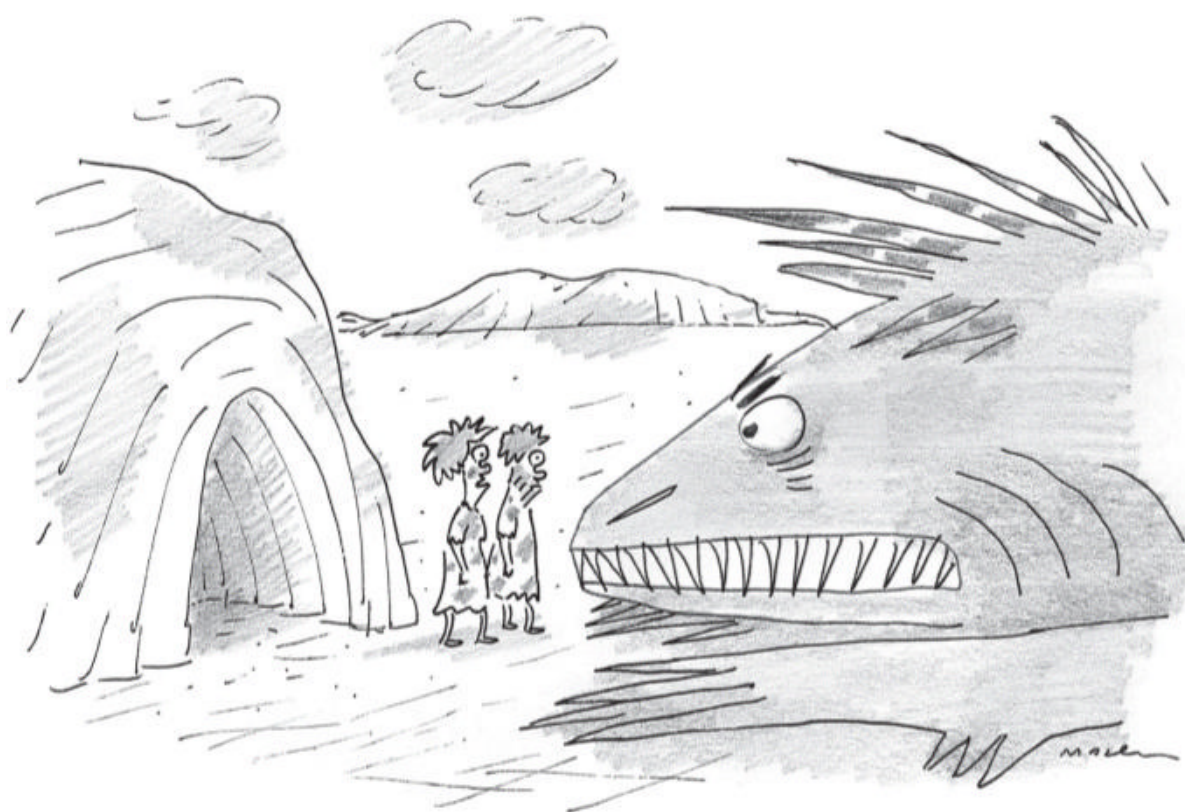
“I worked for Home Depot,” Quintana said. “That was a weird stint. And Chipotle. That sucked terribly. I know how to make the rice, though, if you ever need the recipe.” He continued, “I worked for a warehouse for about a month. Shit, technically, I haven’t quit yet. I’m still waiting to hear about what the pay is gonna be like here.” He sighed. “As much as I consider this place family, you gotta make your own way.”

At the concession stand, Aboubaker Hamida, who had finished up a bachelor’s degree in economics while on furlough, described his coronavirus side hustle. “I was selling stuff online. Like, selling junk from my house—just to keep myself busy,” he said. “I live with my parents, and they’re kind of hoarders.” Someone asked what he sold. “Lampshades, helmets, a lot of art, photographs, weights.” He paused. “I kind of regret selling those, because I could have used the exercise.”

By ten-thirty, Kenny Cao, the theatre’s managing director, had assembled the employees—plus a half-dozen theatre executives from the New York region—in the upstairs lobby for a day-long training session. Rivera said, “I just hope everything goes well, so we can stay open.” In two days, “Raya and the Last Dragon,” “Tom & Jerry,” and “Chaos Walking” would begin showing.

“Good morning, everyone!” Cao shouted. “I hope you guys still remember who I am.” A few people laughed. “It’s been almost a year! Thank you guys very much for coming back!” An employee with long green and blue fingernails yawned into her elbow.

“Don’t be nervous, everything is



*“Maybe we don’t need to go out. I can use vegetable oil instead of olive oil for the biscotti.”*



going to be just fine,” another manager said. “The doors will open, the popcorn smell will fill the air, and it’s like riding a bike. You never forget how to ride a bike. You get back on, and you do just swell.”

The innovations making things just swell: new MERV-13 air-conditioner filters, iWave-C bipolar ionization generators, temperature-screening kiosks, touchless employee time clocks, and new cleaning carts loaded with a two-part Viking Pure disinfectant solution. An area manager held up a plastic face shield and an extra-large safety-yellow T-shirt for employees on the cleaning crew. A manager from Yonkers demonstrated how to use the new eMist cordless electrostatic disinfectant gun, which sprays cleaning mist and resembles a Cheese Ray from “Jimmy Neutron.”

“I’m real excited about it,” he said. “I want you guys to also get excited about this. All right?”

After the meeting, Erick Mejia, an employee in a purple mask, grabbed a yellow T-shirt from a cleaning cart. “Look at this shirt!” he said. “It’s a bad color. Yellow!”

Quintana, a five-year veteran of the concession stand, wandered behind the candy counter. He found a thirty-five-pound bag of popcorn kernels in a storage closet. “At one point during the pandemic, I bought popcorn, just to try to relive the experience,” he said, as he poured buttery salt powder along with the kernels into a popcorn machine. “It wasn’t the same.” A minute later: *pop-pop-pop*. “Yeah, this is it,” he said. *Pop-pop-pop*. “This is movie-theatre popcorn!”

—Adam Iscoe

## REARVIEW MIRROR THE WINTER OF ’42



The past isn’t always a foreign country; sometimes it’s more like a fun-house mirror, reflecting the present in ways both recognizable and strange. Consider the United States in December, 1942, a year into a terrible war: dif-

ferent and yet not so different from the United States in March, 2021. They had blackouts, sugar and gas rationing, and war work. We’ve had lockdowns, yeast and toilet-paper shortages, and Zoom meetings. They had anxiety, grief, sacrifice, boredom, and a strong sense of unity and national purpose. We have . . . some of those things.

Readings from the wartime press, in December, 1942, as America took stock on the first anniversary of Pearl Harbor:

“As a Nation and a people we have been going through changes, some of them hard to take. . . . We have learned to be a little sad and a little lonesome, without being sickly about it. . . . There are things we love that we’re going to have [again] if the breaks are not too bad against us.” —*Carl Sandburg, in the Chicago Times*.

“Our war opened with a disaster which is still hard to excuse. . . . At home our immense industrial machine was being geared, by heroic effort, to its task; but political calculations and timidities, the President’s ineptness in the creation of effective administrative machinery, the demands of pressure groups incapable of seeing the greatness of the crisis beyond their own narrow interests, delayed the work. All this will cost us many lives and much sacrifice.” —*New York Herald Tribune*.

“Many workers are feeling ‘essential’ for the first time. . . . Others are fatalistic and apathetic.” —*Times Magazine*.

“Back of us is a year of heartbreak and a multitude of new experiences we always felt can’t happen here. . . . We used to grimace at pictures of long queues outside English markets, but we chuckle out the other side of our mouths now. The butter and egg and citrus scavengers hang now like a pall over the corner grocer waiting for a shipment.” —*Los Angeles Times*.

“Household ammonia is just one more of those things which were consistently sniffed at and scorned until the exigencies of war transformed them into luxuries.” —*The Times*.

“Gone is the Hollywood we used to know,/The strumpet strutting in the night club’s glow./Premieres and searchlights in the sky/Are memories of nights gone by . . ./No more you read the tales of midnight brawls . . ./And swing-shift gals perform in overalls.” —*Variety*.

“Professional baseball . . . now seems reasonably assured of going through next year with its second successive wartime campaign. It will be a streamlined meal that will be served to the nation’s fandom, with many of its festive trimmings clipped.” —*The Times*.

“I have a run in my stocking. Not a fresh, impromptu snag, but a wide, shameless bull run up the whole fatted calf. Am I embarrassed? Self-conscious? Not at all. Nonchalance is the word for me, since I can blame my genteel shabbiness on the ever reliable war. . . . So what if I take advantage of an unfortunate state of affairs, and wear air-conditioned hosiery? . . . War is a wonderful alibi.” —*Margaret Fishback, in Woman’s Day*.

“After Pearl Harbor, like most other family men, I started fighting the war on the home front. I bought War Bonds, became a blood donor, joined the air-raid wardens. . . . But then, as the months dragged by, something happened to me, something that might be called patriotic dry rot. Slowly I began to lose my drive as a home-front fighter. Slowly I began to indulge myself beyond all reason in expensive food and other luxuries and a desperate sort of merriment. . . . The war began to seem remote.” —*Herbert Clyde Lewis, in the Herald Tribune*.

“Hoarding has been good for a hundred laughs. Personally, I’m hoarding bobby pins. (Steel shortage, you know.) . . . There’s my friend who rushed out the day after Pearl Harbor to buy a rip saw. He’s used it once. It’s rusty. But he wanted to be sure to have a rip saw.” —*Sigrid Arne, A.P.*

“So much for a year of war. If the war continues another year—and it would be rash to expect less—one cannot doubt that our determination and our unity will be even more conclusively demonstrated.” —*The Times*.

One further reflection: in late 1942, the A.P. reported a total of 8,192 American deaths during the country’s first year at war. The true number was surely higher, and by the war’s end more than four hundred thousand American lives had been lost. During the first year of the pandemic, about half a million Americans are said to have died from COVID-19. That number is surely higher, too.

—Bruce Handy



## HOW PARTIES DIE

*Will the G.O.P. go the way of the Whigs?*

BY JELANI COBB



One of the oldest imperatives of American electoral politics is to define your opponents before they can define themselves. So it was not surprising when, in the summer of 1963, Nelson Rockefeller, a centrist Republican governor from New York, launched a preemptive attack against Barry Goldwater, a right-wing Arizona senator, as both men were preparing to run for the Presidential nomination of the Republican Party. But the nature of Rockefeller's attack was noteworthy. If the G.O.P. embraced Goldwater, an opponent of civil-rights legislation, Rockefeller suggested that it would be pursuing a "program based

on racism and sectionalism." Such a turn toward the elements that Rockefeller saw as "fantastically short-sighted" would be potentially destructive to a party that had held the White House for eight years, owing to the popularity of Dwight Eisenhower, but had been languishing in the minority in Congress for the better part of three decades. Some moderates in the Republican Party thought that Rockefeller was overstating the threat, but he was hardly alone in his concern. Richard Nixon, the former Vice-President, who had received substantial Black support in his 1960 Presidential bid, against John F. Kennedy, told a

reporter for *Ebony* that "if Goldwater wins his fight, our party would eventually become the first major all-white political party." The *Chicago Defender*, the premier Black newspaper of the era, concurred, stating bluntly that the G.O.P. was en route to becoming a "white man's party."

But, for all the anxiety among Republican leaders, Goldwater prevailed, securing the nomination at the Party's convention, in San Francisco. In his speech to the delegates, he made no pretense of his ideological intent. "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice," he said. "Moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." (He delivered that famous line shortly after the delegates had defeated a platform plank on civil rights.) Goldwater's crusade failed in November of 1964, when the incumbent, Lyndon Johnson, who had become President a year earlier, after Kennedy's assassination, won in a landslide: four hundred and eighty-six to fifty-two votes in the Electoral College. Nevertheless, Goldwater's ascent was a harbinger of the future shape of the Republican Party. He represented an emerging nexus between white conservatives in the West and in the South, where five states voted for him over Johnson.

The reason for the shift was clear. Many white Southern Democrats felt betrayed by Johnson's support of civil rights. The civil-rights movement had learned how to translate grassroots activism into political power. Among government leaders, L.B.J. was singularly important to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and he stood firmly behind the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In both cases, he pressed on white Southern Democrats in Congress who had long supported the racist culture and strictures of Jim Crow. Until the mid-twentieth century, it was the Republican Party, founded a century earlier by Northerners enraged by the expansion of slavery—the "party of Lincoln"—that looked more favorably upon the rights of Black Americans. In 1957, it was a Republican President, Eisenhower, who deployed troops to intervene on behalf of Black students in the school-integration crisis in Little Rock. Goldwater's rise proved the catalyst for

*The Party's future depends on whether it will adapt to modern circumstances.*



change. As the historian Ira Katznelson told me, Goldwater opposed the Civil Rights Act mainly for libertarian reasons: “Nonetheless, it was a signal, and opened up possibilities for a major realignment.”

Establishment leaders of the G.O.P. were concerned that Goldwater had opened up the Party, which had barely emerged from the shadow of McCarthyism, to fringe groups on the far right, such as the John Birch Society—people whom Nixon referred to as “kooks.” (Robert H. W. Welch, Jr., the founder of the society, claimed that the goal of the civil-rights movement was to create a “Soviet Negro Republic.”) Marsha Barrett, a historian at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, who chronicles the evolving relationship between civil rights and the Republican Party in her forthcoming book, “The Politics of Moderation: Nelson Rockefeller’s Failed Fight to Save the Party of Lincoln,” notes that, before Rockefeller issued his broadside, George W. Lee, a Black civil-rights activist, businessman, and lifelong Republican, wrote to Robert Taft, Jr., the Ohio Republican who ran for Congress in 1962. Failing a significant intervention, Lee said, “the Republican Party will be taken over lock, stock, and barrel by the Ku Kluxers, the John Birchers and other extreme rightwing reactionaries.”

Yet, once it became clear that Goldwater could win the nomination, shock at his extremism on a number of issues, including the potential use of nuclear weapons, began to morph into compliance. Taft’s behavior was typical of the trend. Although his family had long been a mainstay of the Republican Party—his grandfather had been President; his father, a senator—he endorsed Goldwater. Barrett told me that Goldwater’s rise was facilitated by the fact that “some moderate Republicans were simply trying to protect their own political prospects.”

In the contemporary Republican Party, the resonance is obvious. Mitch McConnell, the Party’s leader in the Senate, has long played this game, despising Donald Trump but knuckling under to the reality of his immense popularity among Republican voters. At Trump’s second impeach-

ment trial, McConnell voted to acquit but, after the vote, delivered an exco-riating speech about Trump’s incitement of the January 6th riot at the U.S. Capitol and the effort that day to reverse the results of the 2020 election. Days later, when asked whether he would support Trump if he was nominated by the G.O.P. in 2024, McConnell responded, “Absolutely.”

The most widely debated political question of the moment is: What is happening to the Republicans? One answer is that the Party’s predicament might fairly be called the revenge of “the kooks.” In just four years, the G.O.P., a powerful, hundred-and-sixty-seven-year-old institution, has become the party of Donald Trump. He began his 2016 campaign by issuing racist and misogynistic salvos, and during his Presidency he gave cover to white supremacists, reactionary militia groups, and QAnon followers. Trump’s seizure of the Party’s leadership seemed a stunning achievement at first, but with time it seems more reasonable to ponder how he could possibly have failed. There were many preëxisting conditions, and Trump took advantage of them. The combination of a base stoked by a sensationalist right-wing media and the emergence of kook-adjacent figures in the so-called Gingrich Revolution, of 1994, and the Tea Party, have redefined the Party’s temper and its ideological boundaries. It is worth remembering that the first candidate to defeat Trump in a Republican primary in 2016 was Ted Cruz, who, by 2020, had long set aside his reservations about Trump, and was implicated in spurring the mob that attacked the Capitol.

One of the most telling developments of the 2020 contest was rarely discussed: in August, the Republican National Convention convened without presenting a new Party platform. The Convention was centered almost solely on Trump; the events, all of which took place at the White House, validated an increasing suspicion that Trump himself was the Republican platform. Practically speaking, the refusal to articulate concrete positions spared the Party the embarrassment of watching the President contradict them.

In 2016, religious conservatives succeeded in getting an anti-pornography plank into the platform, only to be confronted by news of Trump’s extramarital affair with the adult-film performer Stormy Daniels. Now there would be no distinction between the Republican Party and the mendacity, bigotry, belligerence, misogyny, and narcissism of its singular representative.

Or consider the events of the past six months alone: during a Presidential debate, a sitting Commander-in-Chief gave a knowing shout-out to the Proud Boys, a far-right hate group; he also refused to commit to a peaceful transfer of power, and subsequently attempted to strong-arm the Georgia secretary of state into falsifying election returns; he and other Republican officials filed more than sixty lawsuits in an effort to overturn the results of the election; he incited the insurrectionists who overran the Capitol and demanded the lynching of, among others, the Republican Vice-President; and he was impeached, for the second time, then acquitted by Senate Republicans fearful of a base that remains in his thrall. The fact that behavior is commonplace does not mean it should be mistaken for behavior that is normal.

But the character of the current Republican Party can hardly be attributed to Trump alone. A hundred and thirty-nine House Republicans and eight senators voted against certifying some of the Electoral College votes, even after being forced to vacate their chambers just hours earlier, on January 6th. A week later, a hundred and ninety-seven House Republicans voted against Trump’s impeachment, despite his having used one branch of government to foment violence against another. Liz Cheney, of Wyoming, the most senior of the ten Republicans who voted to impeach, survived an effort to remove her from her post as chair of the House Republican Conference but was censured by her state’s party organization. In the House, more Republicans voted against Cheney than voted to remove Marjorie Taylor Greene, of Georgia, the extremist Trump stalwart and QAnon promoter, from her committee posts. She lost those assignments, but only because the Democrats



voted her out. Then, on February 13th, all but seven Republican senators voted to acquit Trump in his impeachment trial.

The Trump-era Republican Party does occupy a very different niche from the Party of 1964. When Trump was sworn into office, the G.O.P. held both houses of Congress. In 2018, the Democrats won back the House; the Senate is now a fifty-fifty split. But the Party still controls thirty state legislatures and twenty-seven governorships. In November, Trump, facing multiple, overlapping crises, all of them exacerbated by his ineptitude, won seventy-four million votes. Still, the Republican Party confronts a potentially existential crisis. Last year, Thomas Patterson, a political scientist at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, argued in his book "Is the Republican Party Destroying Itself?" that, over time, the Party has set a series of "traps" for itself that have eroded its "ability to govern and acquire new sources of support." The modern Republican Party was built upon the Southern beachhead that Goldwater established more than half a century ago. Johnson rightly

worried that his embrace of civil rights would lose the South for the Democrats for at least a generation. In 1968, Richard Nixon won the Presidency, employing the Southern Strategy—an appeal to whites' racial grievances. By 1980, the G.O.P. had become thoroughly dependent on the white South. In 2018, some seventy per cent of "safe" or "likely Republican" districts were in Southern states. Prior to last year's election, Southerners composed forty-eight per cent of House Republicans and seventy-one per cent of the Party's ranking committee members. The South remains the nation's most racially polarized region and also the most religious—two dynamics that factor largely both in the Party's political culture and in its current problems. "The South," Patterson writes, "is a key reason why the GOP's future is at risk."

In addition, the G.O.P.'s steady drift toward the right, from conservative to reactionary politics; its dependence on older, white voters; its reliance on right-wing media; its support for tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans; and its increasing disdain for democratic institutions and norms all portend increasing division and a diminishing pool of vot-

ers. Republicans, Patterson says, have been depending on a "rear-guard strategy" to "resist the ticking clock of a changing America." Time may be running out for the Party, as its base ages and dwindles. "Its loyal voters are declining in number and yet have locked the party in place," Patterson writes. "It cannot reinvent itself without risking their support and, in any event, it can't reinvent itself in a convincing enough way for a quick turnaround. Republicans have traded the party's future for yesterday's America."

The marginalization of moderate Republicans has accelerated in the past decade, since the advent of the Tea Party. Moderates in Congress recognized that, if they hewed to a centrist position, they would face serious primary challenges. In 2010, conservatives revolted against the Obama Administration's bailout of the banks during the housing crisis. In theory, that uprising could have spawned a cross-partisan populist alliance of the anti-corporate left and fiscal conservatives, but it was quickly subsumed by paranoid, racist currents. The same year, as debates over the Affordable Care Act came to dominate American politics, Tea Party gatherings began to resemble proto-Trump rallies, at which the first Black President was sometimes lampooned as a monkey. That blend of populist rage and overt racism was the active ingredient in what eventually became the Trump movement. In the 2014 Republican primary in Virginia, when David Brat, with the support of state Tea Party activists, defeated Eric Cantor, the House Majority Leader, the G.O.P. took note that even the most powerful conservatives faced a threat from far-right upstarts.

Some of the few remaining Republican centrists, such as Jeff Flake, of Arizona, Rob Portman, of Ohio, and Pat Toomey, of Pennsylvania, are leaving politics entirely. Last month, Reuters reported that dozens of Republicans who had served in government during the George W. Bush era were abandoning the Party. Jimmy Gurulé, who was Under-Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, said that the Republican Party he knew "no longer exists," that what exists in its place is simply "the cult of Trump." Trump's centrality has so far survived



*"If I'm going to die, I want it to be while doing something I love."*



his loss to Joe Biden and the spectacle of the Capitol riot. In states across the country, local Republican officials are working against leaders whom they deem disloyal to the former President. The Arizona Party even censured Cindy McCain, the widow of the state's six-term senator. The result is that the Party leadership sees no popular incentive to move toward the center, even as the warning signs of decline accumulate. Last year, for the first time, the number of registered Independents exceeded the number of registered Republicans. In the eight Presidential contests since 1988, Republicans have won the popular vote only once, in 2004.

The emergence of Trumpism as the Republican brand has also borne out the warning that the G.O.P. would become a white man's party. In a now famous autopsy of Mitt Romney's loss to Barack Obama, in 2012, analysts for the Republican National Committee argued that the Party had to expand its appeal to people of color if it hoped to be competitive in future national elections. "Nothing happened," Patterson told me, speaking of the G.O.P.'s response to the report. "Right-wing media said, 'You're going to ruin America if we take the advice of the Republican National Committee.'" Today, the Republican electorate is whiter and more male by far than its Democratic counterpart. By 2020, eighty-one per cent of Republican voters were white, and fifty per cent were male.

Last November, Trump made gains among some minorities, over 2016, particularly Latinos, although minority groups remain overwhelmingly supportive of the Democratic Party. The gender gap between voters for Biden and those for Trump was the most pronounced in recent history: fifty-seven per cent of women voted for Biden; forty-two per cent voted for Trump. The G.O.P. has also gained increasing shares of decreasing constituencies. White conservative Christians remain prominent in the Party, but they are a dwindling segment of the electorate: in 2007, thirty-nine states had white Christian majorities; today, fewer than half do. In 1996, non-Hispanic whites made up nearly eighty-five per cent of the electorate; by 2018, they were just sixty-seven per cent. In the six Presi-

dential elections since 2000, Democrats have lost the white vote every time, but prevailed in half of them even without it. The day before the 2020 election, Benjamin L. Ginsberg, a longtime Republican election lawyer, who represented the George W. Bush campaign in 2000 and 2004, published an op-ed in the *Washington Post*, warning that the Party could find itself a "permanent minority."

The fraught discussions over the G.O.P.'s future are really debates about whether the current Party is capable of adapting to modern circumstances again—or whether it will turn into a more malign version of itself, one even more dependent on white status anxieties. As Heather Cox Richardson, a historian at Boston College and the author of "To Make Men Free," a history of the Republican Party, told me, "When you see the collapse of parties it is usually because you have some problem of the existing party system coming up against a major new change."

The Republican Party itself was built on the ruins of the Whigs, a party that broke apart in the tempests leading up to the Civil War. Marsha Barrett mentioned a passage to me from Herbert Hoover's address to the 1936 Republican Convention, four years after he had lost the White House to Franklin Roosevelt, in which he issued a warning about what becomes of parties that fail to navigate the critical issues and circumstances of their time. "The Whig Party," Hoover said, "temporized, compromised upon the issue of slavery for the Black man. That party disappeared. It deserved to disappear." Hoover was speaking in the midst of the Great Depression, but his larger point was that parties are not necessarily permanent political fixtures. Considering that history, it's worth asking whether the party of Lincoln, now the party of Trump, is engaged in conflicts so intense that it will go the way of the Whigs.

The G.O.P.'s travails echo a historical pattern. Despite the United States' reputation as the most stable democracy in the world, most of the political parties born in this country, including major ones, have ceased to exist. The list of those that have collapsed includes, in addition to the Whigs, the

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*"There was a time—back before people found out that dragons were made up—when I would've gotten a hell of a lot more respect for being a dragon slayer."*

Federalists, the Democratic-Republicans, the American Party (also called the Know-Nothings), the Free-Soil Party, the Populist Party, the National Republicans, the Anti-Masonic Party, and three iterations of the Progressive Party. (The Socialist and the Communist Parties also briefly commanded public attention.) What we refer to as the two-party system has collapsed twice before. The Democratic and the Republican Parties have endured as long as they have because they have significantly altered their identities to remain viable; in a sense, each has come to represent what it once reviled.

America's political parties and the party system are, in fact, accidents of history. The Founders were suspicious of "factions," as parties were then called, fearing that powerful blocs would put their own regional or commercial interests above the common good, and endanger the fragile union of the new nation. But, as Richard Hofstadter wrote, in his 1969 book, "The Idea of a Party System," the Founders' "primary paradox" was that they "did not believe in parties as such, scorned those that they were conscious of as historical models, had a keen terror of party spirit and its evil consequences, and yet, almost as soon as their national government was in operation, found it necessary to establish parties."

George Washington reluctantly ran for the Presidency in 1788. He remains the only Independent elected to that office. His farewell address, of September 19, 1796, provides the framework for the peaceful transfer of power. (It is read aloud in the Senate every year; this year, that event occurred a week after Trump's impeachment trial had concluded there.) In the address, Washington, like a father chiding his bickering children, advised his countrymen, no matter what their political passions, to consider the fundamental bonds that connected them as Americans. Political parties were useful to check the worst instincts of a monarch, he wrote, but, in a democracy, a party

agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foment occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which find a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions.

Nevertheless, that fall the nation held its first partisan election. Divisions evident in Washington's Administration had solidified into formal categories: the Federalists, who supported a strong central government and favorable relations with Great Britain, coalesced around John Adams and Alexander Hamilton. The Democratic-Republi-

cans adopted Thomas Jefferson's arguments for a decentralized government and a national alliance with France. Adams beat Jefferson in the race to succeed Washington, but, as a result of a quirk in the Electoral College at the time, Jefferson became Vice-President. Not only had parties come into existence; even James Madison, who had charted their dangers in Federalist No. 10, had joined one—Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans. Each side rationalized its existence by pointing to the excesses of the opposition. After Jefferson won the White House in 1800, the Federalists opposed his signature act, the Louisiana Purchase, of 1803. When Madison succeeded him, they opposed the War of 1812. But both events stoked popular support across the country, which was expanding rapidly, and the elitist-oriented Federalists, nestled largely in the Northeast, soon ceased to be contenders in national politics.

The first two-party system was over, but the victor, despite having essentially unchecked one-party rule, didn't survive for long. In the 1824 election, Senator Andrew Jackson, Democratic-Republican of Tennessee, and a hero of the War of 1812, won the popular vote, but no candidate achieved a majority in the Electoral College. Two of the runners-up, John Quincy Adams, the son of the first Federalist President, and Henry Clay, the Speaker of the House, formed an alliance that handed the Presidency to Adams and made Clay the Secretary of State. In the uproar that ensued, the Party split, with each side laying claim to a portion of its name: the smaller faction, led by Adams, became the short-lived National Republicans; the larger, led by Jackson, became the Democratic Party.

Crucially, Jackson's populist allure, along with his pioneering campaigning practices, such as hosting barbecues and cultivating a national network of affiliates, meant that people did not simply vote Democratic; they began to identify as Democrats. Parties were becoming a fixture not just in America's politics but also in its social life. In 1828, Jackson defeated Adams in a landslide, and, four years later, was easily reelected. He was succeeded by his Vice-President and for-



mer governor of New York, Martin Van Buren, a wily political operator with consequential ideas about national affairs. Having witnessed single-party rule and the collapse of the Democratic-Republicans, he essentially turned Washington's warning on its head: a contest between parties, rather than jeopardizing democracy, could be the key to its survival, he maintained, precisely because there were so many potential economic and geographic dividing lines in the nation.

A viable second party was already in place. Henry Clay had been building a broad and loosely affiliated coalition of Jackson's opponents; they came to be known as the Whigs, and by 1836 they were in control of the main Senate committees. (Two Whigs were elected to the White House: William Henry Harrison, in 1840, and Zachary Taylor, in 1848.) As the historian Eric Foner wrote in "Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War," "Van Buren and many of his generation of politicians had been genuinely frightened by the threats of disunion" in earlier years. "They saw national two-party competition as the alternative to sectional conflict and eventual disunion."

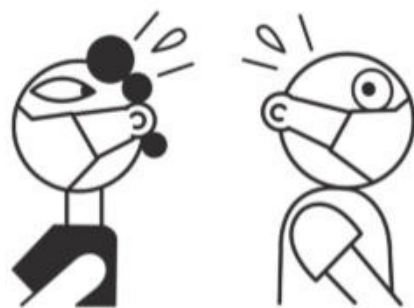
Yet, to a remarkable degree, the history of political partisanship and the trajectory of American parties has been bound up with the history of race in this country. Just as the two major parties of the mid-twentieth century recognized the polarizing effect that civil-rights legislation would have, the Democrats and the Whigs sought to prevent slavery from becoming the axis of national politics. Both parties were internally divided on the issue, and were largely successful in keeping it at the margins of national discourse. But, in 1854, Senator Stephen Douglas, Democrat of Illinois, in an effort to build a cross-regional alliance that he hoped would help him win the Presidency, introduced the catastrophically divisive Kansas-Nebraska Act, which allowed new states to decide for themselves whether they would permit or prohibit slavery. Douglas's act posed a defining dilemma to the parties, much as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 did a century later. The Democratic Party aligned firmly around its pro-slavery wing. The Whigs could neither finesse the issue

nor establish a unified opposition to it, and the Party dissolved. The second two-party system had ended, with stark implications for the nation, and civil war on the horizon.

Abraham Lincoln, who had returned to legal practice after serving in the House, as a Whig, was so incensed by the Kansas-Nebraska Act that he decided to reënter politics. The party he joined got its start at a meeting in a schoolhouse in Ripon, Wisconsin, attended by a small group of disaffected Whigs, alienated Democrats, and Free-Soilers, all of whom were furious about the act. The new Republican Party immediately possessed an asset that its predecessor lacked: clarity on the fundamental political and moral issue of the day, the expansion of slavery.

The Federalists collapsed because they failed to expand their demographic appeal; the Whigs because of internal incoherence over what they stood for in the nation's most crucial debate. Among the more striking dynamics of the Trump-era G.O.P. is the extent to which it is afflicted by both of these failings.

The arc of political movements in this country has never been predictable. The Democratic Party, confronted with a changing nation, chose to adapt, evolving, over time, from a bastion of pro-slavery sentiment in the nineteenth century, and of volatile racism for the first half of the twentieth,



to its current status as a multiracial coalition emphasizing civil, women's, and immigrants' rights. That transformation mirrors the narrative that the country likes to tell about the growth of American democracy. The Republican Party, which had a firmer grasp on that ideal at its outset, rose from a passionate opposition to the spread of slavery to become a redoubt of Confederate sympathizers and racial reactionaries, and home to the twice-impeached for-

mer President who cultivated them. Jennifer Horn, the former chair of the New Hampshire Republican Party, told me that the G.O.P., in its current incarnation, is "the most open embrace of an anti-democracy movement that we have seen in our country in a very long time."

Horn quit the Party in December and, until recently, worked with the Lincoln Project, a group of Republicans dedicated to preventing Trump's reelection. She added, "This Republican Party cannot win a national election. Everybody will say, 'But look, Trump brought more people out than they did before.' Yes, but the opposition brought out even more people." The Republican Party appears to have decided in the wake of Trump's defeat that, particularly at the state level, it will pursue tactics, such as gerrymandering and voter suppression, that will enable it to wield power even from a minority position. Since the Civil War, Van Buren's ideas about the stabilizing effects of partisan competition have held sway in American politics. But it is increasingly reasonable to revisit Washington's perspective that, under the right circumstances, a party could become antagonistic to the health of democracy.

In the past decade, gerrymandering has taken on renewed prominence, especially as software has become more sophisticated and analytical tools make it easier to predict how individual households will vote. The Brennan Center for Justice reported that the redistricting put into effect after the 2010 census provided the G.O.P. with at least sixteen additional seats in the House of Representatives. In 2013, the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* eviscerated a key provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and allowed changes to voting laws which, in the name of preventing voter fraud—something that has repeatedly been proved to be a nonexistent problem—made voting more difficult, particularly for minorities. Those laws were overwhelmingly passed in state legislatures controlled by Republicans. (The Brennan Center is tracking more than two hundred and fifty bills, pending in forty-three states, that would restrict voting.) Last Tuesday, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments on an Arizona law that effectively restricts



voting access for people of color, in a case that could undermine remaining protections of the Voting Rights Act; the conservative Justices appeared ready to uphold the restrictions.

Michael Steele, the first Black chair of the Republican National Committee, told me that these efforts are a losing strategy. We spoke in mid-January, when the images of the Capitol insurrection were still fresh. Early in our conversation, he pointed to the decades when the Democrats controlled Congress in the middle of the twentieth century as a product of the G.O.P.'s operating as a regional party, based in the Northeast, rather than as a national one. Making inroads in the Southern states was key to the Party's growing influence, but the modern Party, Steele told me, "is not really prepared for the ways that the country is changing"—including, again, in the South. "Virginia was a blood-red state," he said. "It was actually sort of the model of Republican strength and political power, by virtue of how the Republicans controlled the state. But what happened? By 2006, that was done. And you could see the trend line heading down 95 into North Carolina, Georgia, bringing it over into the rest of the South." Referring to the defeat of Trump, followed, in January, by that of the senators David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler, Steele said that the Republicans "lost Georgia not once but three times."

Steele's assessment is akin to conclusions that Rockefeller and other moderates drew in the past century. Between 1940 and 1970, about five million African-Americans left the South for industrial centers in Northern and Midwestern states, which were largely Democratic strongholds. The influx changed the political calculus. Black voters had begun abandoning the Republican Party during Franklin Roosevelt's first term; now their increasing numbers in those cities meant that their concerns would carry more weight with Democrats at the state and municipal levels. "Politically, the Democrats repositioned themselves," Steele said. That process happened in fits and starts, but the Democrats' over-all shift toward greater reliance on Black voters and more attention to their concerns opened a breach with the Party's powerful

Southern wing, which Goldwater filled.

Conversely, Republicans have moved further away from emerging groups in the electorate, resurrecting political tactics that are reminiscent of the segregation-era South. "If your base is ninety per cent white, and you're losing Asian-Americans by two to one, the Black vote by nine to one, and the Hispanics by two to one," Thomas Patterson told me, "voter suppression becomes the only viable strategic option." Just since the Senate and Presidential losses in Georgia, the Republican-controlled state legislature has introduced twenty-two proposed laws that would make voting more difficult in that state; the most restrictive would limit absentee voting and early voting on weekends. (Last Wednesday, the House of Representatives passed HR1, a huge reform package that would expand voting rights; no Republicans voted for it.)

Amid the storm of canards about the Presidential vote tally last year, an easily discernible pattern emerged: the Trump Administration contested the results in Milwaukee, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Atlanta—all of them cities with significant Black populations in states that he lost. The Party, Horn told me, has to admit that "we did a terrible thing. We tried to disenfranchise American voters. We targeted minority voters in Georgia and Michigan and Pennsylvania, trying to overturn democracy in America." Yet a reckoning seems nowhere in the G.O.P.'s near future. The Party offered Donald Trump as its platform, and there's no indication that this state of affairs has changed since he reluctantly moved out of the White House.

Two weeks ago, attendees at the Conservative Political Action Conference convened in Orlando, to rally the right wing of the Republican Party. When Trump took the stage, on the last day, he was received in a manner typically reserved for politicians who have won an election. Matt Schlapp, the conference organizer, referred to Trump as "the President of the United States." Trump cycled through the now familiar grievances about cancel culture and bad trade deals and, unsurprisingly, flogged the false tale that his fortunes are the result of election fraud—all

to rounds of raucous applause. According to a recent study conducted by the American Enterprise Institute, nearly eighty per cent of Republicans hold favorable views of Trump, and two-thirds of them believe that there was widespread voter fraud in November, despite clear evidence to the contrary. CPAC featured sessions that included "Protecting Elections: Part 2: Other Culprits: How Judges & Media Refused to Look at the Evidence," and "Fraudulent 2020 Elections in South Korea and the United States."

The idea that the nation would thrive with two parties was contingent upon both of them holding a shared version of reality. It's also the case that a demographic clearly in the thrall of radicalizing conspiracy theories, and convinced that it stands no chance of exercising its will through electoral politics, will potentially turn to violence as a regular form of expression. The A.E.I. study found that fifty-six per cent of Republicans believe that the use of force may be necessary to save "the traditional American way of life." The obvious concern should be that January 6th was not a culmination but, rather, a preface to more violence conducted under the same banners.

At CPAC, Trump shot down the idea that he would form a separate MAGA party, making it clear that the G.O.P. will be cast in his likeness for the foreseeable future. "We have the Republican Party," he told the crowd. There's also the question of Trumpism's having intergenerational potential. Observers are wondering what Ivanka Trump's future looks like, and whether Lara Trump, the former President's daughter-in-law, will run for the seat of Senator Richard Burr, Republican of North Carolina, when he leaves office, in 2022. (Burr voted to convict Trump in the second impeachment trial.) Jennifer Horn told me, "I maintained this hope that, if we could just beat Donald Trump, then others in the Party would see that as their opportunity to come forward and say, 'O.K., let's put that behind us.'" She did not anticipate the durability of Trump's version of Republicanism even after his defeat. "The Party," she told me, said, "You may have defeated Trump, but we're all in for Trumpism. Full steam ahead." ♦



## SHOUTS & MURMURS



# MACMUFFIN: A TRAGEDY

BY JAY MARTEL

McDonald's will test a meat-free burger in several markets . . . which it has dubbed "McPlant."  
—CNBC.

### SCENE 1. *The S'moors.*

**SHAKES:** Bubble, bubble, rat hair and stubble

Cellulose churn, diglycerides bubble.  
(*Enter Macmuffin.*)

**1 SHAKE:** All hail Macmuffin! We bring good tidings to thee  
Who is morning taste treat now, Mayor of Arches soon.

**MAC:** Thy speakest vanilla falsehood, though 'tis true:  
I am now morning taste treat; but Mayor of Arches?

I knowest not of what you speak.

**2 SHAKE:** By my froth, do not doubt:  
In menu marquee  
Macmuffin shall appear above all:  
Above McNuggets, 'bove McCheese.

**MAC:** Above McCheese? But this cannot be! The Mayor lives.  
Are you sure 'tis I who shall reign?

**3 SHAKE:** Fear not, Macmuffin. No burger born of beef  
Shall e'er have power upon thee.  
(*Exeunt.*)

**MAC:** This strange news hath poached double my yolk.

Could it be true the news from paper cups parted?

Just as milkshakes boast o' no dairy  
And factory farm is a phrase contrary

A muffin testing destiny must be wary.

### SCENE 2: *Macmuffin's Castle.*

(*Enter Lady Filet-O-Fish and Mac.*)

**MAC:** Lady Filet!

How fares my tender fish sandwich?

**LADY:** Golden brown, my lord, with the news of late:

The forecast of those triple thick hath reached my ears. And hast thou heard?  
With Mayor McCheese have we for lunch together been order'd.

**MAC:** 'Tis true then the prophecy!

But dar'st I yank

The sweating patty from its limp bun?

**LADY:** Hear me now: for with my plan  
Greasy arches we shall quickly span.

When McCheese comes, greet him  
with the smile of Ronald,

But with the heart of Hamburglar.

Mayor Macmuffin you shall be

And no burger born of beef

Shall have the power to stop thee.

This sauce offer, laced it is with drug.

Strike first and never worry

Your heart as cold as a McFlurry.

(*Exit. Enter McCheese, Lords, Fries.*)

**MAYOR:** Hail noble Macmuffin of Egg  
Fulfiller of that most important meal.

**MAC:** Hail Mayor McCheese!

Yet I see thy patty hath grown dry.

A special sauce will surely greasen  
thy extremities, making thee juicy anew.

**MAYOR:** Spread on, then, McMuffin!

My beefy Cheddar awaits.

**MAC (aside):** Special it is, in both intent  
and effect.

**MAYOR:** Yet I feel a sudden fatigue. Go  
forth, and I will join thee of late.

To my chamber I'll retire for twenty  
winks to take. (*Exeunt.*)

**MAC:** More than twenty winks into this  
night he'll fit—

A sleep of no waking: I'm lovin' it.

### SCENE 3: *The Mayor's Chamber.*

(*Macmuffin and Lady Filet chew.*)

**MAC:** Methought I heard a voice cry,  
"Seep no more! Macmuffin doth murder grease"—the innocent grease,  
The ring that dots every placemat to  
show a burger once was there.

**LADY:** The drippings from this meat hath  
stained my white bun

And no cleanser, nay Biz nor Fab, shall  
draw it out.

Out, damned sauce! Out, I say! (*Dies.*)

**MAC:** She hath perished, simmered in  
her own juices.

Tomato and tomato and tomato

Creeps in this petty place from bun to bun

To the last comestible of recorded time.

(*Enter Guard.*)

**GUARD:** My lord, a large order of  
burgers has been assembl'd

And are now led against us!

**MAC:** What burgers are these? Were  
they not born of beef? The shakes  
that know all mortal consequences  
have pronounced me thus:

"Fear not, Macmuffin. No burger born  
of beef

Shall e'er have power upon thee."

**GUARD:** Um . . .

(*Alarum within. Enter McPlant.*)

**MCPLANT:** Rise up, muffin, and fight!

**MAC:** May I have your order?

**MCPLANT:** Vengeance, false mayor!

**MAC:** We shall soon see what you are  
made of! (*They fight.*)

**MCPLANT:** Pea-protein isolate, pressed  
canola oil, bamboo cellulose . . .

**MAC:** Yet where lies the beef?

**MCPLANT:** Only that which comes from  
beyond.

**MAC:** 'Tis impossible!

**MCPLANT:** No. He serves another king.

**MAC (dying):** The future is yours with  
that sure poke:

My bacon is pierced straight through  
to my yolk.

**MCPLANT:** Then run yellow from this  
life, sickly sandwich.

**MAC:** I die uneaten an unethical egg;  
Let all who hear my fate a more  
sustainable snack beg. (*Dies.*)

**MCPLANT:** Distasteful story, done at last:  
Ne'er from life has food moved so fast. ♦



# TRAILER-PARK TRADES

*When corporations acquire mobile-home communities, what happens to the residents?*

BY SHEELAH KOLHATKAR



One day in October, 2016, Carrie Presley was visiting her boyfriend, Ken Mills, when she received a phone call from a neighbor informing her that someone had just been shot outside her home. Presley lived with her seventeen-year-old daughter, Cheyenne, in a two-story clapboard house on Jackson Street, in the northern part of Dubuque, Iowa. The neighborhood was notorious for its street crime, and Presley, who was, as she put it, in “the housing community”—she received Section 8 housing vouchers—had grown used to the shootings and break-ins that punctuated life there. After talking to Cheyenne, who was in tears, Presley rode with Mills back to her house, where police were sweeping the perim-

eter of the property. As Presley recalled, Mills looked at her and said, “We’re not doing this anymore.” It was decided that Presley and Cheyenne would move in with Mills and his son Austin.

Mills, a long-haul truck driver and the father of four grown children, lived in a three-bedroom single-wide in the Table Mound Mobile Home Park, a quiet community of more than four hundred mobile homes arranged in a tidy grid. The homes in the park are not as portable as its name implies; they’ve been placed on foundations, and their hitches have been removed. From afar, they look a little like shipping containers sitting next to small rectangular lawns. In Iowa, park owners can choose whether to ac-

cept Section 8 vouchers—which are distributed to 5.2 million Americans—and many, including the owner of Table Mound, do not, citing the administrative burden. By moving, Presley would lose her government subsidy, and she and Cheyenne would have less space, but, as Presley told me, “I was sacrificing material goods for a sense of safety.” She and Cheyenne held a garage sale, and watched as their neighbors walked away with the kitchen table, a dresser, armoires, and most of their clothes.

In the U.S., approximately twenty million people—many of them senior citizens, veterans, and people with disabilities—live in mobile homes, which are also known as manufactured housing. Esther Sullivan, a sociologist at the University of Colorado Denver, and the author of the book “Manufactured Insecurity: Mobile Home Parks and Americans’ Tenuous Right to Place,” told me that mobile-home parks now compose one of the largest sources of nonsubsidized low-income housing in the country. “How important are they to our national housing stock? Unbelievably important,” Sullivan said. “At a time when we’ve cut federal support for affordable housing, manufactured housing has risen to fill that gap.” According to a report by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, there isn’t a single American state in which a person working full time for minimum wage can afford a one-bedroom apartment at the fair-market rent. Demand for subsidized housing far exceeds supply, and in many parts of the country mobile-home parks offer the most affordable private-market options.

In the past decade, as income inequality has risen, sophisticated investors have turned to mobile-home parks as a growing market. They see the parks as reliable sources of passive income—assets that generate steady returns and require little effort to maintain. Several of the world’s largest investment-services firms, such as the Blackstone Group, Apollo Global Management, and Stockbridge Capital Group, or the funds that they manage, have spent billions of dollars to buy mobile-home communities from independent owners. (A Blackstone spokesperson said, “We take great pride in operating our communities at the highest standard,” adding that Blackstone offers “leading hardship programs to support

*Hikes in lot rent are forcing out people who’ve saved for years to buy their homes.*



residents through challenging times.”) Some of these firms are eligible for subsidized loans, through the government entities Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. In 2013, the Carlyle Group, a private-equity firm that’s now worth two hundred and forty-six billion dollars, began buying mobile-home parks, first in Florida and later in California, focussing on areas where technology companies had pushed up the cost of living. In 2016, Brookfield Asset Management, a Toronto-based real-estate investment conglomerate, acquired a hundred and thirty-five communities in thirteen states.

Residents of such parks can buy their mobile homes, but often they must rent the land that their homes sit on, and in many states they are excluded from the basic legal protections that cover tenants in rented houses or apartments, such as mandatory notice periods for rent increases and evictions. One sign that a large investment firm has taken over a neighborhood is a dramatic spike in lot rent. Once a home is stationed on a lot, it is not always possible to move it; if it is possible, doing so can cost as much as ten thousand dollars. Most buyers aren’t eligible for fifteen- or thirty-year fixed-rate mortgages, so many of them finance their homes with high-interest “chattel loans,” made against personal property. “The vulnerability of these residents is part of the business model,” Sullivan said. “This is a captive class of tenant.” A leader of an association for mobile-home owners in Washington State has compared life in a mobile-home park to “a feudal system.”

When I visited Table Mound, in February of 2020, Presley welcomed me into the cluttered kitchen of her home—her third in the park. The home, where she has lived since September, 2019, has two modest bedrooms, wall-to-wall beige carpeting, and a “God Bless America” sign on the kitchen wall. Presley is forty-nine, with a strong build, curly auburn hair, and black-framed glasses. She and Mills attended the same high school in Dubuque, but Presley, who said that she was a “troubled” teen-ager, didn’t graduate; in her twenties, she spent time in a women’s shelter, then moved into transitional housing, where she had her first child, Keenan. In 1994, she got married, and a few years later Cheyenne was

born. Soon afterward, Presley and her husband attempted to set up a transportation company, but the marriage fell apart. “I lost and regained everything,” she said. Her relief on moving into the park had been immediate. On weekdays, Mills was usually away, but she no longer feared the walk to her door when she returned early in the morning from a shift at the bar where she worked. On weekends, she and Mills would play video games, cook, and go fishing. In the summer, residents barbecued while kids rode their bikes around. “You could sit outside and see the stars,” she told me. “You knew who your neighbors were.”

Whereas traditional homeownership can form the basis for intergenerational wealth, mobile homes depreciate in value, like cars or motorboats. Still, many of Presley’s neighbors had saved for years or used inheritances to buy their homes. Karla Krapfl, Presley’s second cousin, has lived in Table Mound for three decades with her husband, Dennis, an Army veteran. In 1993, they bought their current home new, and had it fitted with large windows, so that Krapfl could watch from the kitchen as their three boys played outside. Their sons are now grown; two served in the armed forces and the third is a controller at a local company. When I stopped by, Krapfl showed me around the house, which was decorated with quilts, porcelain animals, and silk flowers. Princess Diana plates from the Franklin Mint hung in a triangle in the master bedroom. Krapfl had enjoyed raising a family in Table Mound, and compared living in the park in those years to being on a military base. “Everybody knew everybody’s kids,” she said. “It was all very friendly.”

Table Mound’s owner, Michael Friederick, was from Dubuque, and had made typical investments in the park, plowing the roads in the winter and repairing the curbs. He raised the rent by no more than two per cent a year. During the summer of 2017, less than a year after Presley moved to Table Mound, she and the other residents learned that Friederick had sold the park. It had gone for more than six million dollars, and was now being managed by RV Horizons. As it later emerged, according to court documents, RV Horizons is one of several foreign limited-liability companies controlled by another L.L.C., Impact MHC Management. RV Horizons an-

nounced that it would be charging residents for water and trash removal, which had previously been included in the rent. It installed new digital water meters on each property, billing residents five dollars a month for the meters. It also raised the rent on lots: Mills’s lot rent rose from two hundred and seventy dollars a month to three hundred and ten. According to Jim Baker, the executive director of the Private Equity Stakeholder Project, a think tank that monitors the effects of private-equity firms’ investments, extracting profits by increasing lot rents and decreasing expenditure on upkeep is common. “In many cases, residents have invested forty, fifty, sixty thousand dollars into the homes,” he said. “There is such a strong incentive to pay, because are you going to walk away from this home that you put your retirement into?”

A year later, RV Horizons raised the lot rent again. By then, Presley had moved out of Mills’s single-wide and was living with Cheyenne in her own home, a dilapidated trailer built in 1974 that she acquired for twelve hundred dollars. Her brother, Buddy, who worked at a company that sold and installed building supplies, delivered flooring, drywall, and insulation. Presley suffers from spinal stenosis, which sometimes leaves her hobbling in pain. The condition entitles her to federal disability benefits, provided that she works only part time—a situation that requires a delicate financial balancing act. At the time, she was employed as a substitute cafeteria worker for the Dubuque Community School District, in addition to bartending. She immediately started worrying about how she was going to make the new lot rent.

RV Horizons had sent all the residents a new lease, forty-seven pages long and full of addenda, which contained some provisions that struck Presley as unfair and potentially illegal, including an eight-hour limit on street parking for guests, a requirement for a hundred-thousand-dollar-minimum insurance policy to cover accidents related to pets, and the institution of quiet hours. Despite the fact that the land belonged to the park, residents were now responsible for repairs to the water pipes connected to their homes. Clotheslines were no longer permitted. There would also be a fifty-dollar late fee for any rents received after the monthly deadline. RV Horizons claimed





*"It's not necessary that we agree on a radio station."*

that the money from the rent increases would be spent on repairing the roads and installing satellite-television service.

As Presley discussed the complexities of the lease with Mills and their neighbors, she felt a surge of fury. "I was pissed," she said. "I thought people were being played with." The next day, she and Mills printed flyers inviting residents to a meeting the following Sunday afternoon in the yard outside the community storm shelter. A hundred and fifty people showed up. Presley and Mills handed out yellow stickers that read "No to ILLEGAL LEASE." Presley used the bed of Mills's white pickup truck as a stage, announcing that the two of them were collecting names for a petition, and gave an impromptu speech. When I asked Presley whether she had ever been involved in activism before, she said no. "I was a rowdy teen-ager," she told me. "My friends and family are very surprised that I took this on."

Trailer parks first sprang up in the nineteen-twenties, as campgrounds designed to attract wealthy tourists. As the country entered the Great Depression, some unemployed Americans, known as "hobo-tourists," took to compact travel trailers, migrating in search of work. Soon, local governments began to pass zoning restrictions that dictated the size of the lots on which mobile homes could be placed, forcing them into less dense areas of town, and limited how long trailers could be stationed. In the fifties, manu-

facturers started producing trailers that were more like small bungalows. Trailer parks began to serve largely as housing communities for lower-income and working-class families; many had amenities like clubhouses and swimming pools, and fanciful names like Shangri-La. By the time Table Mound was established, in 1963, there were at least three million Americans living in mobile homes; during the next two decades, the structures became more elaborate and harder to move.

Frank Rolfe, a co-founder of several corporations that invest in, manage, or are linked to mobile-home parks, grew up in Dallas and graduated from Stanford with an economics degree. In 1983, he founded a company that rented billboards to advertisers; before long, it owned more than three hundred billboards, mostly around the Dallas-Fort Worth area and in Los Angeles. He also offered a class called Billboard Boot Camp for aspiring investors. Rolfe sold the billboard company in 1996 for \$5.8 million, and used the proceeds to buy his first mobile-home park, Glenhaven, in Dallas, for four hundred thousand dollars. In a 2016 interview, he recalled that he had assumed that almost anyone who lived in a mobile home was a "drug addict, a hooker, and just the scum of the earth," and claimed to have felt so unsafe walking around Glenhaven that he applied for a concealed-weapon permit. But, he went on, he came to realize that just because tenants were poor didn't mean that they were "dangerous" or "stu-

pid." It was possible to provide clean, safe housing for working people who were "just like you and me," but who had very little money.

Rolfe met Dave Reynolds, an accountant whose parents owned a mobile-home park in Colorado, at a mobile-home-investing conference in 2006, where both of them were speaking. Soon afterward, they created Mobile Home University, a program for potential park owners which offered, among other things, three-day seminars in Southern California and Denver, for almost two thousand dollars a ticket. (The program is currently being offered virtually.) Later, they established a partnership that invests in mobile-home parks. In 2017, Rolfe was reported to have compared a typical mobile-home park to "a Waffle House where customers are chained to their booths." (He has said that the quote was taken out of context, and was meant to refer only to the "incredibly consistent revenue" of mobile-home parks.) Esther Sullivan, who attended one of Rolfe and Reynolds's Mobile Home University seminars in California while researching her book, summarized the advice that they offered participants: "Look for a park that's got high occupancy and that doesn't need a lot of investment. Take out any possible amenity you'd ever need to invest in, such as a playground or a pool that's going to need insurance. Make sure it's got a nice sign, and pawn off any maintenance costs onto your tenants."

Rolfe and Reynolds recommended that owners regularly raise rents, but not so much that it would drive out desirable tenants. They also told investors to avoid "tenant-friendly" states such as California and New York, where evictions can take months, and urged them to concentrate on areas where there is a shortage of reasonably priced rental apartments. The Mobile Home University Web site states, "Mobile home parks are the hottest sector of real estate right now, due to the endless decline in the U.S. economy." The site points out that thousands of baby boomers are retiring each day, and that they will receive around fourteen thousand dollars a year in Social Security income: "Mobile home parks are the only segment of real estate that grows stronger as the economy weakens."

Reynolds and his wife, Terri, own Impact Communities, which controls Table



Mound. Rolfe and Reynolds claim that their companies constitute the fifth-largest operator of mobile-home parks in the country, with properties in twenty-five states. (They declined to comment for this article.) When I called Michael Frederick, the former owner of Table Mound, he told me that he hadn't been planning to sell the park, but that Rolfe and Reynolds's company had approached him many times, increasing its offer each time. "They drive you nuts until you cave," he said. Not long after RV Horizons took over the park, Stephanie Small, who had lived in Table Mound for twenty-six years, became the property manager, collecting rent checks and issuing citations for rule violations. On the day the rent was due, the mailbox outside Small's office was taped shut at 5 P.M.

After the meeting at the storm shelter, Small and her husband followed Presley and Mills to Presley's yard, where, according to Mills, Small told them that their campaign was hopeless, saying, "This is a big corporation—there's nothing you can do." (Small declined to comment for this article.)

Around this time, Presley was contacted by Lindsay James, a Democratic state representative. James, who had been hearing from distraught constituents who lived in the park, put Presley in touch with two Legal Aid lawyers, Alex Kornya and Todd Schmidt, who agreed to analyze the new lease, and with Tom Townsend, a business manager from the local chapter of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, who offered the use of his organization's union hall for the residents' meetings.

Impact, which had taken over operations from RV Horizons, invited all the residents of Table Mound to a buffet dinner with the company's regional manager, Mike Willis, in the storm shelter. As residents ate fried chicken off paper plates, Willis assured them that the company was fixing the roads and upgrading the television service. "They basically got up there and bragged about what a great company they were and how philanthropic the owner is and all this wonderful stuff they're doing," Townsend recalled. One resident, a retiree who was undergoing treatment for cancer, told Willis that the rising costs had forced him to choose between buying medication and paying his rent. (An attorney

representing the company said that it operates a philanthropic arm, Impact Cares, which repairs some homes in the community for free.)

In August, 2019, Presley and Mills formed the Voices for Table Mound Neighborhood Association. Presley became the president, and she usually took the microphone in meetings. She spent much of her free time making phone calls, writing e-mails, and knocking on doors. Soon, the Dubuque *Telegraph Herald* and the local ABC news affiliate were covering the association's meetings. Karla Krapfl printed purple T-shirts that read "Table Mound Strong." In the weeks that followed, Presley, Mills, and other residents began to attend city-council meetings, wearing their purple T-shirts. In November, the council passed an ordinance allowing residents of mobile-home parks to use federal housing vouchers to help pay their rent—a lifeline to several residents of Table Mound who were close to being evicted. Impact refused to accept the vouchers.

One Saturday in April, 2019, Zach Wahls, a Democratic state senator who represents Iowa's Thirty-seventh District, read a news article about rent increases at mobile-home parks in his district. Wahls is twenty-nine years old and six feet five, with brush-cut brown hair, rosy cheeks, and dimples. When the legislature is not in session, he works as a vice-president for community investment and development at GreenState Credit Union, in Iowa City. In 2011, when Wahls was an engineering student at the University of Iowa, he made an impassioned speech before the Iowa House of Representatives, which was considering outlawing same-sex marriage; in the speech, he described growing up with his two moms, Terry and Jackie. A video of the speech went viral, prompting an Australian writer, Chloe Angyal, to publish a piece for the Web site Feministing titled "Marry Me, Zach Wahls." In 2013, Angyal and Wahls met in New York; they are now engaged.

Two parks near Wahls's district had just been acquired by Havenpark Communities, an investment company based in Utah. The company was increasing the rent at Golfview Mobile Home Park, in North Liberty, by fifty-eight per cent, and at Midwest Country Estates, in Wau-

kee, by sixty-nine per cent. (Havenpark said in a statement that it "publicly acknowledged they had made a mistake after hearing from residents and subsequently lowered lot rents by a third," and that the company has since made more than two million dollars in improvements to both communities.) Residents at Golfview had started organizing and had enlisted help from tenants'-rights groups and from Legal Aid. In interviews with the local press, Barbara Hames, the president of Hames Homes, a family business that had previously owned two other communities that were purchased by Havenpark, said that, before selling, she'd been getting two to three calls a week from investors looking to buy parks. She'd finally decided to sell because the parks needed a million dollars in upgrades to the wastewater-treatment systems.

As Wahls learned, Iowa's tenant laws pertaining to residents of mobile-home parks are extremely weak. Residents can be evicted for no reason, provided that park owners give them sixty days' notice. A staffer in the Iowa Senate who has worked at the statehouse for fourteen years told me that, when she started researching the housing code, she was shocked. "The entire chapter on manufactured-housing tenant law is absolutely obscene," she said. "People who own their manufactured homes have little to no rights once they put them on rental property."

There were only a few weeks left before the Iowa legislative session adjourned for the year. Wahls knew that there wasn't time to get any ambitious new legislation through the state's House and Senate, which are Republican-controlled, so he rushed to introduce an amendment to an existing bill, first proposed by a Republican colleague, that would extend some basic tenants' rights to residents of mobile-home parks. The legislation was unanimously passed by the Senate. Such strong bipartisan support was rare for legislation that would certainly be opposed by a powerful industry, but, Wahls told me, many Republican lawmakers had mobile-home parks in their districts, and having angry and desperate constituents was clearly a campaign liability. Wahls said, "Even free-market people can see this is predatory behavior."

The amendment was more controversial in the House of Representatives,



and the legislative session ended before the bill could be passed. But momentum was gathering behind Wahls's cause. That spring, John Oliver delved into the mobile-home industry on his TV show, "Last Week Tonight," and described Rolfe and Reynolds's Mobile Home University as "a crash course in how to be an asshole." In May, dramatic rent increases at several parks in Iowa started to receive national attention. Senator Elizabeth Warren, of Massachusetts, wrote letters to eight owners and managers of Iowa mobile-home parks, including Havenpark and RV Horizons, asking them to provide an accounting of their profits. Soon afterward, during one of Warren's Presidential-campaign trips, she visited the Golfview mobile-home community.

In December, Wahls and other supporters of the proposed reforms scheduled a public hearing at the state capitol. Presley and several dozen other residents of various Iowa communities filed into the former Supreme Court chamber, a majestic room with vaulted ceilings and a mahogany judge's bench. Five residents' associations, including Voices for Table Mound, had requested time to speak, and nearly every seat in the room was filled. Wahls sat at the head of a conference table, flanked by half a dozen other lawmakers, including Lindsay James. Wahls thanked everyone. "I know a lot of people have come a long way," he said. "We're going to try to hear as many voices as we can."

Candi Evans, the vice-president of the Golfview residents' association, was among the first to speak. An elegantly dressed woman, she put on a pair of reading glasses as she sat down at the table. Evans had bought a double-wide mobile home in Golfview with her husband in 1998. "This was where we were going to grow old together," she said. She had

planned her life so that she "would never be a financial burden to our children or society." After her husband died, in 2002, she took over the roofing company he had been running. She was financially stable until 2019, when Havenpark attempted to raise her rent by sixty-six percent. She and other residents fought the increase, and Havenpark lowered the new rate slightly. "When we told them that some of the residents couldn't afford that, they said we should turn to the government to subsidize our rent," she said.

Later, Presley spoke. Clasp ing her hands nervously between her knees and leaning toward the microphone, she said that she had finally been able to get out of subsidized housing when she moved into Table Mound, and was now faced with the prospect of going back on government assistance, because "this Frank Rolfe character says it's not his problem whether or not these people can afford their homes." Then Mills came forward. "I'm a father of four," he said. "I've been a truck driver for twenty-eight years." His voice started to crack. "They're counting on you guys just to lay down and let them roll all of us over."

Two hours into the meeting, Wahls asked if anyone else wanted to speak. A woman named Margaret Clark said that she and her husband had owned two mobile-home parks near Des Moines since the seventies. She begged the lawmakers not to penalize responsible park owners with overly harsh new laws. "As you're crafting legislation to restrict abuse, make sure you use a scalpel and not a butcher knife," she said. "We're supposed to be on the same team."

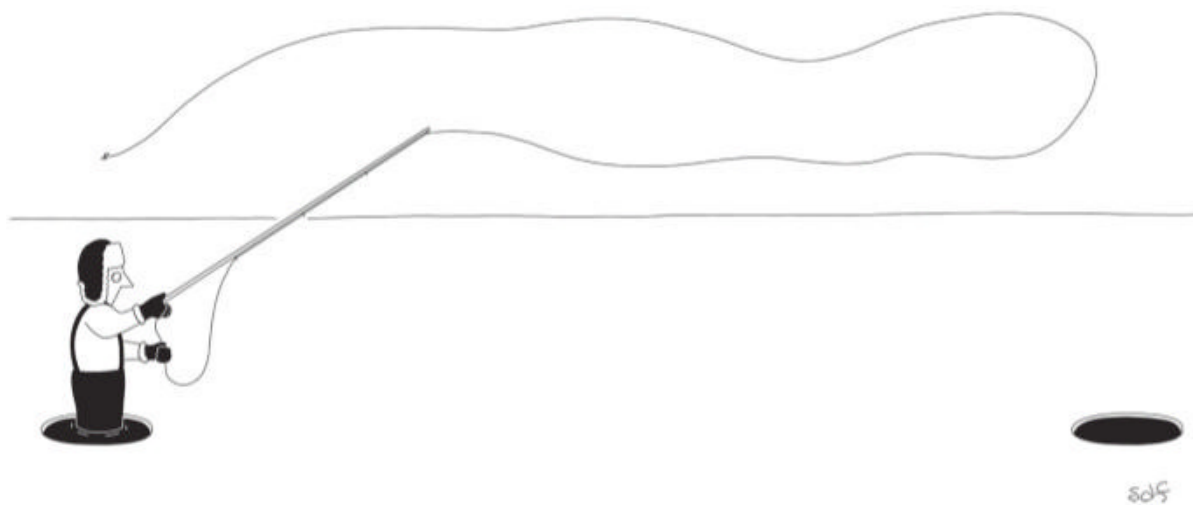
On February 15, 2020, thirty sponsors, evenly split between both parties, introduced a twenty-seven-page bill called Senate File 2238. A companion bill was introduced in the House. The legislation

mandated "good cause" for evictions and a hundred and eighty days' notice before rent increases went into effect. Rent increases would not be allowed to exceed the local inflation rate unless there was a legitimate reason. Wahls, aware that the term "rent control" tended to evoke strong responses, framed the issue instead as "rent justification."

For the past four decades, the Iowa Manufactured Housing Association, a trade group promoting the interests of mobile-home manufacturers, park owners, and park operators in the state, has successfully courted Iowa Republicans. In the summer of 2019, the I.M.H.A. brought in Timothy Coonan, a lobbyist with the Des Moines law firm Davis Brown, who also worked with the electrical-utility and insurance industries. His profile on Davis Brown's Web site notes that he has "annually defeated multiple mandates on behalf of clients." Brian Lohse, a Republican member of the state House of Representatives and a supporter of the legislation, told me that he and his colleagues had sent the proposed wording of the bills to the I.M.H.A. to get its feedback, but that, despite an initial friendly response from Coonan, who said that the I.M.H.A. would get back to them with suggestions, they had heard nothing. Wahls told me, "Through this whole process, we were desperate for the association to give us ideas of things we could do to help residents without screwing over landlords who are doing the right thing. They gave us nothing."

It later emerged that Coonan had been meeting with other senators and House members, criticizing the legislation's sponsors for including rent-control provisions. That summer, the I.M.H.A. PAC had also made thousands of dollars in contributions to Republicans in the Iowa statehouse, including thirty thousand dollars to the thirty-six-year-old speaker of the House, Pat Grassley, a grandson of the U.S. senator Chuck Grassley and one of the most powerful people in state politics. Gradually, Republican members of the House and the Senate who had previously supported the idea of tenant protections started to waver.

The House bill was approved unanimously by the three-member judiciary subcommittee, but there was speculation that Speaker Grassley would not allow it to advance to a full committee vote.





(Grassley did not respond to requests for comment.) On the evening of Tuesday, February 18th, Wahls was at a reception for the Iowa Biotechnical Association, hosted by Coonan, at the Marriott Hotel in Des Moines, when he received a text message from James, who was at a reception at a hotel nearby. Wahls grabbed his coat and rushed down the street to meet her. She had just learned that the bill had been pulled from the schedule, which, for procedural reasons, meant that it couldn't be taken up again for the rest of the session. Wahls was devastated.

Presley and several other Table Mound residents found out the next day that the bill had died. That afternoon, Presley, James, and a few others cornered Coonan in a hall of the capitol. Presley told him that he, Grassley, and the other lawmakers who had helped kill the bill didn't have to worry about whether they were going to lose their homes. "We don't have that luxury," she said. Then she went into the bathroom and wept.

On March 17, 2020, the governor of Iowa, Kim Reynolds, declared a public-health emergency in response to the coronavirus, outlining restrictions on gatherings in restaurants, bars, gyms, and places of worship. Three days later, she declared a moratorium on evictions, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control, until May. Presley had recently started a new job, at Tobacco Outlet Plus. In February, she had been given a diagnosis of kidney disease. Worried about exposure to the coronavirus, she sheltered at home for three weeks in March and April, then returned to work. Since then, she has covered several times for co-workers who have tested positive for the coronavirus, or who have missed work because a family member was sick.

Before and after her shifts, Presley sits on her couch with her laptop on a TV tray, doing research and making phone calls. In spite of the moratorium, twenty-four residents of Table Mound received eviction notices in April. Presley posted the news on Facebook, called reporters, and contacted the Legal Aid attorneys. Two days later, Impact retracted the notices, saying that they had been issued by mistake. (The company's lawyer stated that it had reversed \$4,650 in late fees for residents during the pandemic.) Mills told me that, over the sum-

mer, dozens of people had moved from Table Mound to Spring Valley, a park just south of Dubuque that is owned by Michael Friederick; his lot rents were significantly cheaper. After someone Mills knew offered to buy his trailer, Mills also moved, into a rented house in town. He seemed ambivalent about the decision. "Do you just walk away and keep your sanity?" he said. "Or do you go down fighting for God knows what?"

Residents of parks across the country controlled by Impact have contacted Presley for advice. One afternoon in July, she received a phone call from Carol Johnson, a sixty-year-old resident of Midwest Mobile Home Community, in Independence, Missouri, which Impact had bought in 2018. Johnson, a former bus driver for the local hospital system, who was taking care of her eleven-year-old granddaughter, told Presley that she had been thrilled to move to the park that year, after the landlords of several apartment buildings had rejected her because of a poor credit score. After Johnson had rented her home for five months, she said, the community manager told her that she qualified for a financing program that would allow her to purchase her home over fifteen years. "I talked to my husband and we decided to do it," she said. Nine months later, after making every payment on time, Johnson and her husband received an eviction notice. "I started reading my lease agreements, and I started seeing things that I didn't know were there," Johnson said. The financing, which had an annual interest rate of almost twelve per cent, would have resulted in her paying sixty thousand dollars on a twenty-eight-thousand-dollar home. After researching Impact's operations online, she learned that, according to the contract she had signed, her lease could be terminated with no cause. To keep her mobile home, she would have to continue making payments for an extra four years.

"Do you remember the old eighties game Mouse Trap?" Presley asked. "That's exactly what this is like." Johnson's lease stipulated, among other things, that Impact could sell the land beneath her home. Presley advised Johnson to

contact Legal Aid. She also suggested that the residents form their own neighborhood association. Johnson followed her advice, naming the group the Voices for Midwest Mobile Home Community Association. Later, she told me that she had tried to organize a residents' meeting, but that, after speaking with twenty residents who seemed enthusiastic

about attending, only one had shown up. "Everyone's just scared," Johnson said. (She has since been evicted, and she and her family have been living in hotels.)

Presley has also heard from mobile-home residents in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota. On September 8th, Legal Aid filed a lawsuit against Impact, charging it with violating the Fair Housing Act by discriminating against a disabled sixty-year-old Table Mound resident named Suellen Klossner. According to the suit, Impact tried to compel Klossner to sign a lease with illegal provisions, such as one that said that, if any rule in the lease was breached, Impact could evict residents after giving just three days' written notice. Impact had also increased Klossner's rent and utility charges by about eighty-seven per cent since buying the park. (Impact denies all the allegations in the suit.)

When I spoke to Presley recently, she was worried that she, too, would have to find a cheaper place to live. The stimulus payments she had received in April and December had quickly disappeared; she had been putting groceries and car repairs on credit cards. Still, she said, she would keep fighting, even if she had to move out. On December 23rd, a new player had entered the Dubuque mobile-home-park market: RHP Properties, a real-estate investment company based in Michigan, and one of the nation's largest privately held owners and operators of mobile-home parks, had bought the Alpine Park Manufactured Home Community, eight miles north of Table Mound. "We take great care of your community and its residents during the transfer to new ownership," RHP's Web site read, addressing independent park owners. "Best of all, you will finally have the time and money to do the things you want to do." ♦





Malibu Creek State Park is an eight-thousand-acre wilderness in the Santa Monica Mountains, stretching along the western side of Malibu Canyon, between the coastal city of Malibu and the San Fernando Valley. At the edge of one of the most densely populated urban areas in the United States, it's remarkably pristine, with oak savannas, volcanic rock formations, and a fourteen-mile creek that feeds the Pacific Ocean at Malibu Lagoon, near Surfrider Beach. Before opening as a state park, in 1976, the land contained a "movie ranch" owned by Twentieth Century-Fox. Relics of its history still litter the park. The "M\*A\*S\*H" camp, where the TV show was filmed for years, is a popular hiking destination, and Mr. Blandings's dream house is an administrative office.

Tristan Beaudette always wanted to take his daughters camping there. An avid outdoorsman, Beaudette was slowly inducting the girls, who were two and four, into his love of nature, teaching them about the constellations and testing his theory that all kids really need to have fun are sticks and rocks. The campground, a meadow tucked into a wooded area and surrounded by the jagged peaks of the Santa Monicas, is an idyllic spot, packed with families, especially in the summer months.

One Thursday in late June, 2018—it was the summer solstice, the longest day of the year—Beaudette decided to make the trip from Orange County, where he lived. His brother-in-law Scott McCurdy joined them, with his two boys, who were three and five. It was a dads-and-kids trip, to say goodbye.

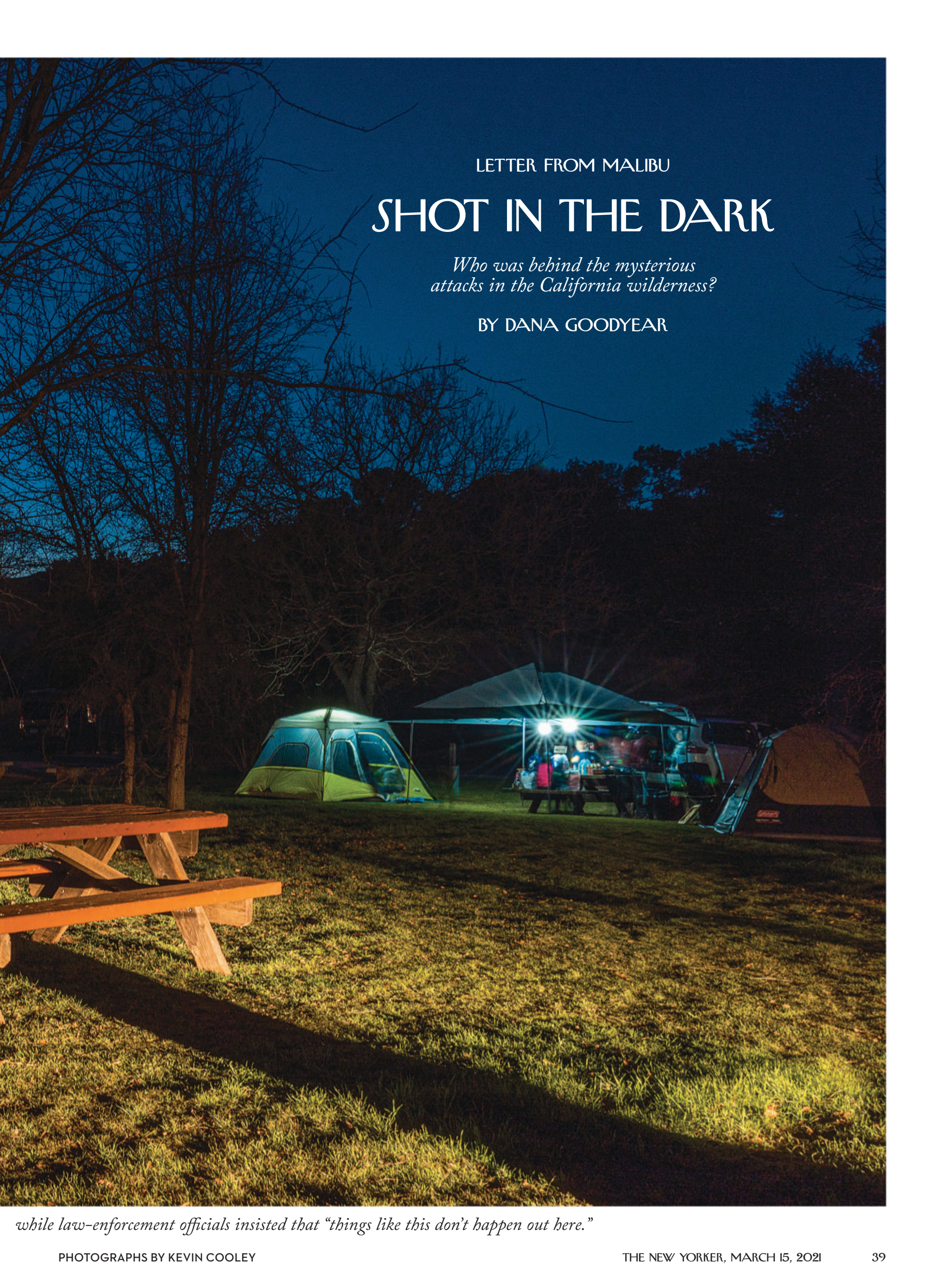
In a week, Beaudette and his wife, Erica Wu, were planning to move their family to the Bay Area. Beaudette, a polymer chemist, had already had his last day at Allergan, the pharmaceutical company where he worked. Wu, an ob-gyn, was completing her fellowship. She had a medical-board certification exam that Friday, and Beaudette's trip would get the kids out of the house so that she could study.

Wu is slim, with shoulder-length dark hair and a deliberate manner. She and Tristan started dating during



*A series of unsolved shootings around a state park left locals frightened and outraged,*





LETTER FROM MALIBU

# SHOT IN THE DARK

*Who was behind the mysterious  
attacks in the California wilderness?*

BY DANA GOODYEAR

*while law-enforcement officials insisted that “things like this don’t happen out here.”*



their senior year of high school, in Fresno, after being set up for his winter formal. She was reserved, the fourth of five girls born to immigrants from China. When I met Wu, in the spring of 2019, she told me that she was attracted to Beaudette's confidence and ease. "He was a happy guy, and he was very sort of just uncomplicated," she said. "He wore everything on his sleeve."

At thirty-five, Beaudette was accomplished—he had published widely, and held a patent related to vaccine delivery—but, Wu says, compared with her, he never looked as if he was working that hard. He devoted a lot of time to adventures: camping, hiking, mountain biking, backpacking. "Camping trips for him were not just the camping trip," Wu said. "He just loved the whole process, like getting all the stuff together and planning out the meals." Wu was less enthusiastic, but he met her where she was. "When we did go, he would bring a blow-up bed," she said. "He would try to minimize the roughing it as much as possible for me."

The morning of the trip, Wu watched him pack the car, a black Subaru Forester: a camp stove; a tent; a small bicycle, with training wheels, on the roof rack next to his large one. It was the first time he'd taken the girls camping without her, and she had secretly been hoping he would cancel. "Whenever he would go on long business trips, or the girls would leave, there was always part of me that was a little bit anxious," she said. But she was also grateful that he was the kind of father who would take their daughters camping when she needed to work. She put the girls' hair in pigtails. "The one thing Tristan couldn't do was anything with their hair," she says. "I remember braiding both of the girls' hair, and I'm, like, 'O.K., just leave it like this till you guys get back.'"

At Malibu Creek State Park, Beaudette and McCurdy checked in with park employees, who assigned them a campsite. They followed a one-way road around the meadow to the site, but Beaudette, a camping perfectionist, didn't like it. The ground was uneven, and it was too close to the bathrooms. McCurdy went back to

negotiate for another spot, and they settled in at the northern end of the meadow.

During the long dusk, the kids ran around, looking for bugs, while the dads made a fire and cooked dinner. Beaudette had brought Manhattans, premixed, which they sipped. By the fire that night, they discussed Beaudette's move. "He was so excited about this next chapter in his life," McCurdy told me. "I kind of guilted him a little bit. Like, 'Well, we had a good run, buddy. I'll miss you, you know.' I remember at the end of the night we decided, O.K., well, it's late, let's go to bed. We put out the campfire, and I gave him a big hug and told him I loved him."

Just before sunrise, McCurdy was awakened by a sound that he thought was fireworks. Then he heard one of the girls crying. She wouldn't settle, which was strange. Why wasn't Tristan helping her? He went over to Beaudette's tent and opened the flap. The girls were whimpering, and one of them was saying, "Wet, wet." He could hear the four-year-old shushing her sister, trying to comfort her. But he couldn't see anything. He reached for Beaudette and tried unsuccessfully to rouse him. This was normal; he was a heavy sleeper. Groping around in the dark, he found Beaudette's phone and used it as a flashlight. McCurdy rolled him



over, and, by the light of the phone, saw that he was covered in blood. The girls, kneeling beside him, were in a pool of it.

Beaudette had been shot through the head. The autopsy report, which was released nearly a year later, showed that a copper-jacketed lead bullet had entered just below his hairline and penetrated his brain. It was a homicide, but an utterly baffling one. The weapon's make and model were unknown. There were no eyewitnesses, no sus-

pects, and no motive. Rumors flew around Malibu. Had his vaccine work made him a target of "Big Pharma" or "the government"? Was the perpetrator a disgruntled former park worker? Someone associated with an illegal marijuana grow? None of it made sense; it felt both terrifyingly random and shockingly precise. Beaudette had been killed while he slept beside his children, and no one knew why.

Locals sometimes call Malibu "the pink bubble." The nickname suggests privilege and safety, a self-enclosed universe, where everything is tinted the color of the sky at magic hour. One recent headline-grabbing crime in Malibu: the brazen theft of two amethyst "purifying" crystals, worth a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, from outside a shop called Serenity Rocks.

Malibu's population is wealthy and overwhelmingly white, with a history of privacy enforcement that surpasses the familiar walling off of natural beauty for the enjoyment of a few. Exclusion is Malibu's founding principle. In 1892, Rhoda May Rindge, with her husband, a sickly, rich New Englander, bought Rancho Malibu, a former Spanish land grant that stretched from the mountains to the coast, then erected gates and locked them. After her husband's death, Rindge stopped the Southern Pacific Railroad from running tracks through Malibu, and nearly bankrupted herself trying to prevent the state from building the Pacific Coast Highway. In need of funds, she started renting cottages to celebrities and built the Malibu Movie Colony. In the decades to come, celebrities used Malibu as a retreat from paparazzi and as a strategic background for bathing-suit shots.

These days, Malibu is a tourist town, with more than thirteen million visitors a year and only thirteen thousand residents—people like Lady Gaga, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Barbra Streisand, who, along with the beaches and the hiking trails, are part of the appeal, though the day-trippers will likely never glimpse them. Khalil Rafati, a co-founder of SunLife Organics, Malibu's swankiest smoothie bar, told me, "The first thing tourists say—I mean, I've



had this question asked to me, no joke, a hundred times—is ‘Where is Malibu?’ I’m, like, ‘This is it.’ Like, ‘Yes, Lady Gaga lives here, but she doesn’t want you to know that, and you’re never going to see her house.’ The Malibu that we get to experience is not available for the public.” Malibu is a walled garden. Bad things are not supposed to happen there.

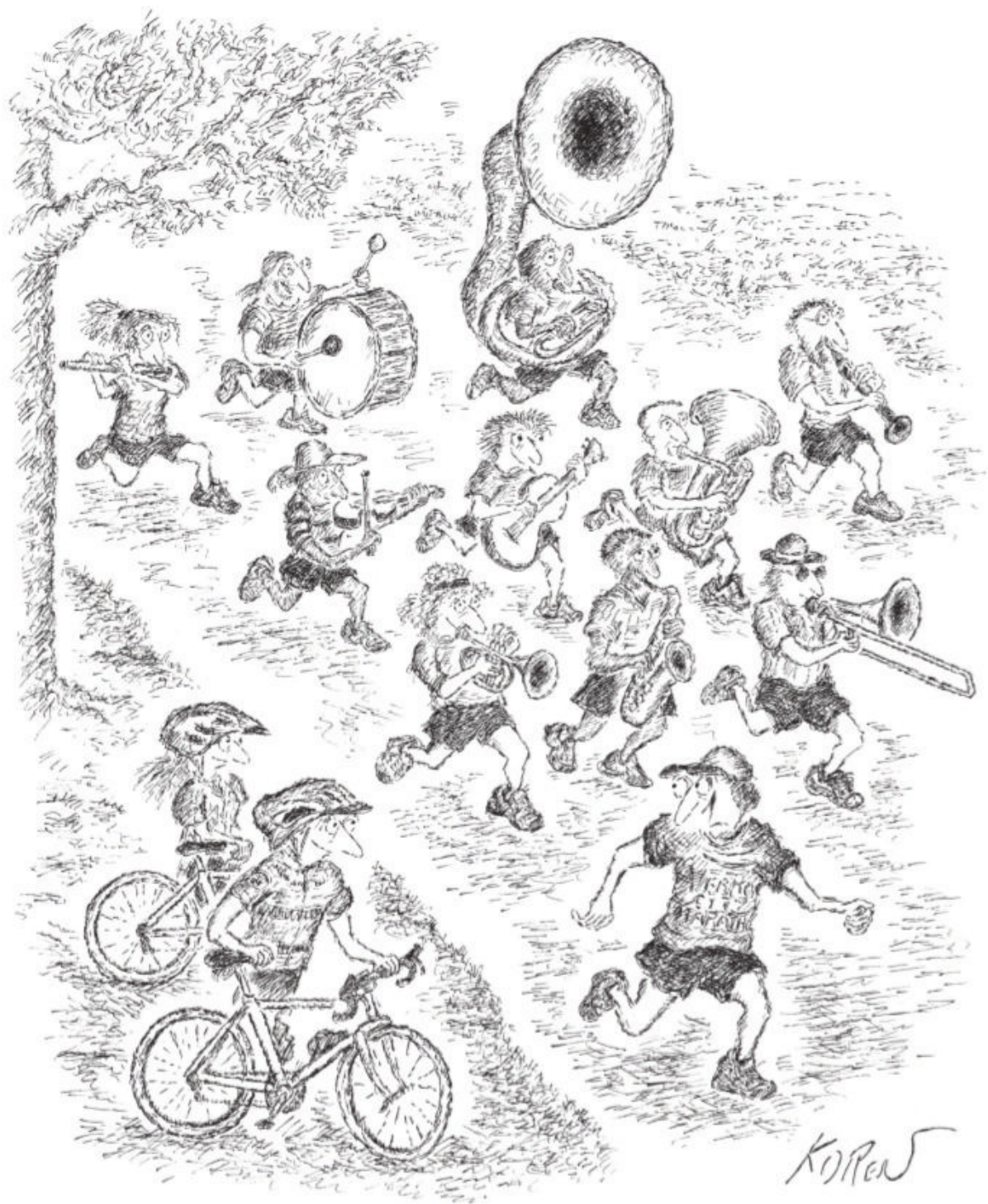
The morning after Beaudette went camping, Wu woke up at home and got ready to take her test. She was surprised when her oldest sister showed up at her door, and disbelieving when she heard why. Her sister put her in the car and drove to Malibu, while Wu called family members. “I remember arguing on the phone,” Wu told me. “Just, ‘How do you know that he’s dead? Why isn’t he at the hospital? Who said he was dead? How do they know?’”

When Wu arrived at the park, she tried to get to the campground. She told me, “One of the rangers or somebody there said something like, ‘This never happens, you know. This kind of stuff never happens here.’”

It was a callous thing to say to a person whose husband had just been murdered; it was also untrue. Over the previous twenty months, multiple victims had reported to authorities that they’d been shot at in Malibu Creek State Park or on the nearby canyon road. There had been six near-misses, two of them in the campground where Beaudette was killed. One person was injured, requiring surgery.

State Parks officers had taken reports, as had deputies from Malibu/Lost Hills Sheriff’s Station, the local branch of the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department. But neither the sheriff nor the California Department of Parks and Recreation issued a public-safety warning. Between the third and fourth shooting, State Parks posted an enticing picture online of someone free-climbing a rock wall at the park, with the hashtag #InventYourAdventure. The campground remained open to visitors.

Not long after Beaudette’s killing, when the campground was finally shut down, I went out to the park and walked around. There was just a small paper sign informing people of the closure. I looked at all the kiosks I came across:



*“I can’t work out without music.”*

nothing was posted about Beaudette, or any of the near-misses—no request for information, no suggestion to remain vigilant. On my way out, I stopped by the administrative office. When I introduced myself, Tony Hoffman, the public-safety superintendent, asked me to step outside. He was visibly uncomfortable. He said he wasn’t “free to talk.” Then he added, tantalizingly, that Beaudette’s death “began to lift the veil of ignorance.”

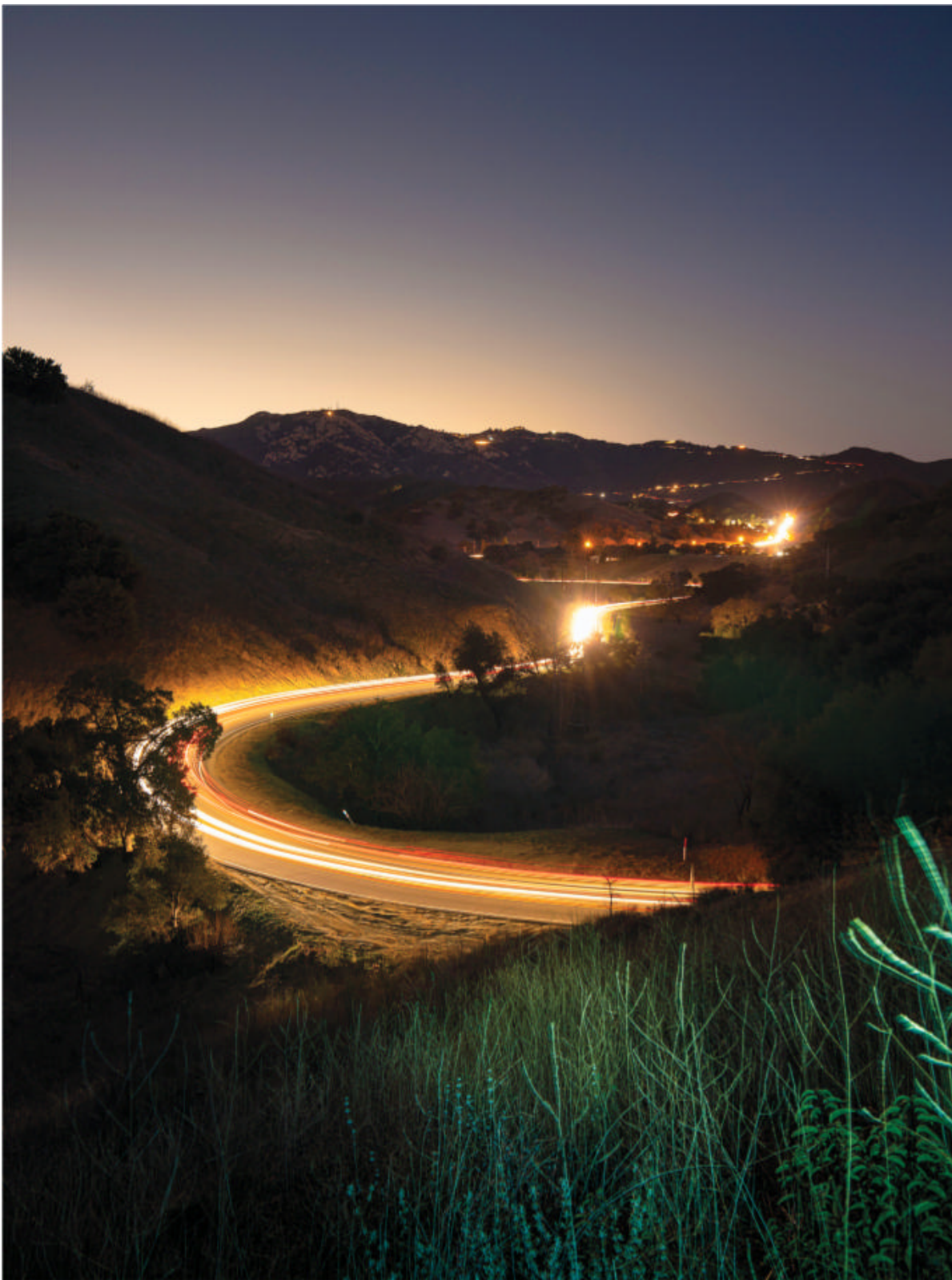
A few weeks later, I met Jimmy Rogers in a parking lot at Tapia Park, a day-use area of Malibu Creek State Park. He is thirty-one years old, with long, dark hair and a swimmer’s build. He looked at the sky, where

two specks were bobbing and weaving. “A raven bombing a red-tailed hawk,” he said.

We walked into a grove of decaying oaks. In the fall of 2016, Rogers told me, he was a graduate student in environmental biology, working at R.E.I. on the side. He decided to take a three-day solo trek on the Backbone Trail, a sixty-seven-mile route along the spine of the Santa Monica Mountains. He had been hiking parts of the trail for a decade, but he wanted to complete it in one go. Not many people attempt this, as the trail has few official campsites and plenty of mountain lions.

On his first day, Rogers hiked twenty-five miles, reaching Malibu





*In 2017, the cars driving through Malibu Canyon became targets.*

Creek State Park around 9 P.M. Staying in the campground seemed extravagant: it cost about fifty dollars, and required a reservation. Rogers was planning to eat a peanut-butter sandwich and an energy bar for dinner, sleep for several hours, and get up early to resume hiking. He decided to hang a hammock close to the trailhead, in the grove in Tapia Park.

Rogers bundled into a down jacket and a sleeping bag and cocooned himself in the hammock, but it was hard to sleep. He could hear the traffic rushing by on the canyon road. After midnight, he dozed off, listening to Cat Power on headphones. A few hours later, he was startled awake. He can't remember the sound, just that there was one, and a sudden drop, when his

hammock split and he fell to the ground. His right arm was stinging, and when he looked at it, he saw that the underside, near the triceps, had thirty or forty small holes in it.

His first thought was that he had been attacked by a rabid animal. He cycled through the list of candidates: coyote, fox, dog, skunk, rat. There was a thin layer of blood covering his wound. That indicated a vampire bat, pushed north from its usual habitat in Mexico by climate change. He held still, listening. He knew how to be silent in the wilderness; while working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on a study of California condors, he had spent thirteen-hour days observing nests. "I didn't hear anything, and I didn't see anything," he told me. "So I

thought, What are the chances somebody's just hiding in the dark?"

Rogers proceeded, without a flashlight, deeper into the grove. After several yards, he heard something. "I wanted to keep going, because if it's a mouse, it's going to make more sounds to get away," he said. "But I didn't, because I literally thought, I don't want to get shot in the face."

He retreated, shouting insults into the silent woods just in case, then left the park, walking along the dark canyon road until he finally had cell-phone service. He called his girlfriend, and she hurried him to the hospital, where he was treated for rabies. A few weeks later, he told me, he noticed that a sphere was rising to the surface of the wound. "I was playing around with my nephew at the time and it just popped out," he said. "It was metal. You drop it on glass and it goes *tink, tink, tink*."

Rogers's girlfriend squeezed out a few more metal balls before he decided to get an X-ray. The balls, it turned out, were bird shot, and he needed surgery to remove them. At that point, he knew for sure what kind of animal had attacked him. He was furious. He kept thinking about the way he had been sleeping, inside his sleeping bag, with his right arm thrown over his forehead. Whoever shot him seemed to have been aiming for his head.

Rogers drove over to Malibu Creek State Park and filed a report with a ranger. "He told me some interesting stuff," Rogers said. "He said that none of the State Parks employees go out there on patrol, because they're afraid. He said, 'There's a lot of weird stuff going on in this area.'" The ranger, Rogers says, urged him to call Lost Hills Station, and he talked to a couple of deputies, but nothing much came of it.

Beyond the "21 Miles of Scenic Beauty" that represent the coastal city of Malibu, there is a vast, wild, and thinly populated zone. Most of the park is in Malibu's unincorporated outskirts; its entrance is in Calabasas. There are steep canyons and long stretches where cell phones don't work. Bluntly descriptive place names suggest an unsettled frontier: Dark Canyon, Cold Creek. In these areas, Malibu can feel liminal, a no man's land at



the far-western edge of Los Angeles County. Wildfire scientists call places like this the W.U.I.—the wildland-urban interface.

The abundant unclaimed space is inviting to drifters and loners. “There are the Jeremiah Johnson-type guys,” a retired Lost Hills patrol deputy told me—the hermits who live in the hills. The people of Malibu are generally inhospitable to them. Though the area has only about a hundred and fifty homeless people, they occupy disproportionate psychic space. At one community meeting I attended, a resident bemoaned the R.V.s parked along the Pacific Coast Highway and the encampments in the canyons. “This homeless scourge, epidemic, whatever you want to call it, has impacted our ability to use our public lands the way they were meant to be used for all,” she said. “I don’t hike anymore, for God’s sake.”

At the northern end of Malibu Creek State Park, behind the Lost Hills Station, is a scruffy patch of wilderness, where the brush, crisscrossed with deer trails, can grow to overhead. There, on a steep slope facing the canyon road, is where Anthony Rauda lived, in a tarp-covered dugout under the canopy of a large oak tree.

Rauda, who is forty-four, with dark hair and green eyes, spent years in and around the Santa Monica Mountains. He preferred nature and solitude to people, and he didn’t get much news. But, he told me, “I heard a lot of gunshots around the time of the Beaudette killing.” He thought he’d been shot at but wasn’t sure if it was intentional. “I just heard the bullets fly by.”

Rauda’s life was lonely, by design. In the hills, he froze at night and hiked during the day. He was close to the park’s entrance—it was just across Mulholland Highway, where lots of people leave their cars to avoid paying the parking fee. If I’d ever seen “The Dukes of Hazzard,” I’d recognize the terrain, he told me. Early mornings, he took pictures of the fog coming off Mulholland. He saw foxes, bobcats, eagles. Baby lizards crawled on him as he sat in the sun. After I mentioned that I had once written about the mountain lions in the Santa Monicas, he showed me a drawing he’d made of

two mountain-lion cubs, snuggling. I recognized it as a painstaking copy of a famous photograph published by *National Geographic*.

Avoiding people was a habit, and also a way of escaping scrutiny. Rauda told me, “I worried every time I left the wilderness, as the sheriffs would usually try to stop me. Question me about being around such exclusive neighborhoods.” After the Beaudette killing, he heard their sirens wailing through the canyon. He sensed that he was being followed when he hiked.

Lost Hills is known as a “slow station,” an outpost in the boonies, covering a vast and varied terrain. It has a “beach team,” which patrols the sand on quads in the summer and tries to break up the flash mob of drunken teen-agers at Point Dume each Fourth of July. There is also the Malibu Search and Rescue team. M-SAR focusses on man-tracking and wilderness rescue—finding lost hikers, pulling people out of cars when they plunge off the side of the canyon, and, occasionally, helping on homicides and other criminal investigations. The team is largely made up of reserve deputies: entertainment lawyers and emergency-room doctors and yoga instructors, who receive training but are not full-time employees of the sheriff’s department. They get paid a dollar a year.

Sergeant Tui Wright spent most of his three-decade career with the sheriff’s department at Lost Hills Station, working as a narcotics detective and then running M-SAR. When I interviewed him, in 2019, he had just retired. He is sixty-one, sturdy and tall, an ex-marine with incongruously jumpy energy. He spent his early childhood in Fiji—*tui* is a Polynesian word for “king”—and grew up in Topanga, a couple of canyons away from Malibu Creek State Park. He’s a bow hunter and, except for what he kills, mostly vegan.

Wright told me that he first heard of the Malibu shooter in January of 2017, from Lieutenant James Royal, who oversaw the Lost Hills detectives. Tony Hoffman, the State Parks superintendent, had reached out. He was worried about a series of unexplained shootings in the park.

Several days after Jimmy Rogers was shot, in November of 2016, a man named Ron Carson was in a camper, parked close to where Beaudette was later killed. Between three and four in the morning, he got up to use the bathroom, turning on the light. Then he got back in bed and turned it off. He was lying in the dark when the camper was rocked by an explosion. “It felt like a bomb went off,” he testified later. He looked around; there was bird shot everywhere, and the wadding from a shotgun shell was lodged in the wall right next to where his head had been.

Two months later, Meliss Tatangelo and Frank Vargas were sleeping in her Honda, two sites over from where Carson had camped. Between four and five in the morning, they heard a bang. Later, after they’d left the campground and were pulling into a parking space at Starbucks, Tatangelo heard a rattling sound and discovered a hole in the trunk. She went back to the park, and State Parks officers found a shotgun slug in her car.

Wright says that, when he and Royal learned of the attacks, they notified their station captain. But the captain, who was close to retirement, brushed them off, saying that it was State Parks’ problem. Wright disagreed. He said, “It’s right down the street, and it might technically be in the State Parks jurisdiction, but who’s to say it couldn’t spill out into ours?”

Soon it did. That summer, two cars were shot while driving through Malibu Canyon. The canyon is a major thoroughfare, connecting the Pacific Coast Highway with the 101. The road is spectacular and harrowing, with steep drop-offs on one side and towering rock faces covered in oaks and chaparral on the other. Some twenty thousand cars drive on it every day, passing through Lost Hills’ jurisdiction.

Across the canyon road from the Malibu Creek State Park campground is a large Hindu temple. That’s where a white Porsche was hit with bird shot, then a white BMW. The BMW was being driven by a teen-ager, Nicole K.; another, Nathan G., was in the passenger’s seat. They were on their way to a surf competition at Surfrider Beach. When the car was hit, they pulled over. A back



window had been shattered, and the side panels were riddled with holes. Nicole called her dad, who told her to call the police.

Wright says that the timing of the incidents (“in the wee morning hours”) and the M.O. (a single shot, with shotgun ammunition) suggested a lone perpetrator, as did the location. “The state park is huge, but this was one particular campground,” he told me. “Then on the highway, adjacent to the campground, in the same spot. Those were consistent patterns that I think indicated a serial shooter. I think it’s only common sense.”

J. T. Manwell worked under Royal, until he retired recently after twenty-five years as a detective. He told me that the similarities between the crimes were pretty obvious by the fourth shooting. “A lot of us believed there was a pattern between three and four,” he said. “Definitely by five, we knew we had a shooter out there.”

There weren’t many leads, but Royal started developing a list of possible suspects. When a new captain took over, later in 2017, he was more sympathetic to their views. He and Royal went downtown, to sheriff’s-department headquarters, and met with the division chief and the commander, urging them to mount an aggressive response. But that meeting, too, was fruitless. “They didn’t want to scare the public,” Manwell told me. (The sheriff’s department, asked to confirm facts for this article, claimed that there were “unsupported” assertions, but declined to offer specifics, citing an ongoing investigation.)

Even after multiple shootings, the supervisors seemed to think that Royal and Wright were blowing the threat out of proportion—perhaps a side effect of working at a slow station. Wright was galled. “To be told by other investigators or the department there was no evidence, or there was not enough information to link these crimes—I just thought it was ridiculous,” he told me. He acknowledged that the presence of a sniper in the area would have been a “shit sandwich”—a mess that no one comes away from with clean hands. But, he said, “the park probably should have been closed. And had we warned the public—I

## HOW TO APOLOGIZE

Cook a large fish—choose one with many bones, a skeleton you will need skill to expose, maybe the flying silver carp that’s invaded the Great Lakes, tumbling the others into oblivion. If you don’t live near a lake, you’ll have to travel.  
Walking is best and shows you mean it, but you could take a train and let yourself be soothed by the rocking on the rails. It’s permitted to receive solace for whatever you did or didn’t do, pitiful, beautiful human. When my mother was in the hospital, my daughter and I had to clear out the home she wouldn’t return to. Then she recovered and asked, incredulous,  
*How could you have thrown out all my shoes?*  
So you’ll need a boat. You could rent or buy, but, for the sake of repairing the world, build your own. Thin strips of Western red cedar are perfect,

mean, maybe the highway would be shut down during the early-morning hours. It sounds pretty extreme, but would that have saved people from being assaulted? Probably.”

The people who did know about the shootings—law enforcement—took measures to protect themselves. “We all knew where this shooting ground was,” Wright says. “And I had heard rumors that some patrol cars would go by there at high speed, with their guns out the window pointing in that direction. I believe that people knew, and warned their family members not to drive by there.” Manwell told me that he instructed his daughter, who worked at Pepperdine University, at the southern end of Malibu Canyon, to take a different route.

After the teen-agers in the BMW, there was an eleven-month lull in shootings. Then, on June 18, 2018, Ian Kincaid was driving his car, a white Tesla, through Malibu Canyon on his way to work. It was around four in the morning, and there was no one on the road. He caught himself speeding. He remembers thinking, “I’m going to get there too early. There’s no hurry.” Right by the Hindu temple, a bullet hit his car.

I went to see Kincaid at his house, in the Malibu hills. He is in his early sixties, with young kids, and has worked as a gaffer on six Quentin Tarantino films. On the long driveway onto his property, facing panoramic views of the ocean, is a playhouse built out of repurposed sets from “The Hateful Eight.” He pulled the Tesla out of the garage and peeled back a piece of white electrical tape from over a gash in the hood. The gash is like a memento mori, hidden, so his kids won’t see.

That morning in the canyon, Kincaid was headed to the set of “Once Upon a Time in Hollywood.” He heard a strange sound. “I thought, Did I leave a coffee cup on my roof again?” he told me. He looked down, and his cup was right in its holder. “I thought, Well, maybe it was an acorn, because I was driving near some oak trees.” Then his car alarm started going off, so he pulled over, and saw that the front hood had popped open. He closed it and continued on to work.

A quick-draw world champion happened to be on set that day, and when he saw the gash in Kincaid’s hood, he said, “Son, that’s a bullet hole.” Kincaid called Lost Hills Station and was told that he could stop



but don't cut a tree. There'll be  
a demolished barn or downed trunk  
if you venture further.  
And someone will have a mill.  
And someone will loan you tools.  
The perfume of sawdust and the curls  
that fall from your plane  
will sweeten the hours. Each night  
we dream thirty-six billion dreams. In one night  
we could dream back everything lost.  
So grill the pale flesh.  
Unharness yourself from your weary stories.  
Then carry the oily, succulent fish to the one you hurt.  
There is much to fear as a creature  
caught in time, but this  
is safe. You need no defense. This  
is just another way to know  
you are alive.

—Ellen Bass

by on his way home. A deputy photographed the damage and handed him a slip of paper with a number on it. “She said, ‘This is your crime report, if you ever need it,’” he told me. “There was nobody expressing any kind of serious interest.”

Four days later, Tristan Beaudette was killed. Suddenly, Kincaid told me, “My phone just lit up. Within a half an hour, I probably got twenty calls—from sheriffs, from L.A.P.D., from Lost Hills, from rangers, from newspapers, from reporters—and I just thought, What is this?”

Sergeant Wright was one of the people calling. When he heard about Kincaid, he felt a “sickening concern,” he told me: “Here’s another one. It happened at the same time, in darkness, in the same area.” Several days later, a Lost Hills deputy found spent ammunition on the roadside—not bird shot, but a bullet. This was disturbing, a suggestion that the shooter had upgraded to a weapon that was far deadlier and far more precise. “When you shoot at a car with bird shot, it’s very difficult to penetrate the vehicle and get somebody inside,” Wright said. “But when you shoot a vehicle with a solid-projectile weapon, it’s going to penetrate through the win-

dow, through the body, through the door. It will go inside.”

Kincaid brought his car to the station again, and, as he tells it, deputies ushered him around to the back. Wright and the others ran dowels through the hole, to confirm the size of the bullet and determine its trajectory. “It really threw us for a loop,” Wright told me. “There was a change in weapons.”

Beaudette’s death horrified Malibu. But when, in the days after his killing, stories of earlier victims began to surface, a different emotion emerged: outrage. “Police don’t do anything here,” Cece Woods told me at the time. She’s a self-described Malibu “big mouth,” with a Web site called the Local, who prides herself on knowing what is going on in town. “I take public safety very, very seriously,” she said. “So *now* I’m finding out that there’s two years’ worth of shootings?”

On Facebook, Woods shared a screenshot containing details of the Tesla shooting. In a comment to that post, Melissa Tatangelo wrote that she, too, had come close to getting hit, but that the State Parks officers were nonchalant. “When the police came (which took over 2 hours to show up) they told me, ‘things like this don’t happen out here,’” she wrote. “I asked

what they were going to do about it and they told me they couldn’t do anything.”

As far as the public could tell, Malibu was being terrorized by an elusive killer, the Canyon Shooter, who already had a string of victims. But law enforcement seemed, almost willfully, to resist that interpretation. Press releases from the sheriff’s department hewed to a strict narrative, which seemed to justify the decision not to warn the public before the murder: “Homicide detectives are advising, at this time there is no evidence to suggest the past shootings are related to the June 22, 2018 homicide.”

Inside Lost Hills Station, the faction that had long believed there was a sniper at large was frustrated. On the morning of the murder, Manwell reported to the campground. “When we found out that Mr. Beaudette was killed, I can tell you I was angry as hell,” he said. “My belief was, we should have warned the public, giving them a choice of whether they wanted to drive through the canyon, stay at the campground, or anything else.” He went on, “I felt very much like we had failed this family.”

The pressure intensified to come up with a suspect. Manwell told me, “It was focussed on a lone-wolf type of guy.”

That summer, a rash of mysterious burglaries of commercial buildings began near the periphery of the park. Someone was stealing breakfast sandwiches and cinnamon rolls, leaving valuables untouched. A burglar was caught on camera: dressed in black, carrying a black backpack with what appeared to be a rifle sticking out of it. Sergeant Wright was on vacation at the time, but Lieutenant Royal sent him an image. Wright says that he recognized the weapon as a pistol-calibre carbine: a lightweight semi-automatic weapon that takes a 9-millimetre handgun round. Metal detectorists from his Search and Rescue team had found five 9-millimetre shell casings in the campground a week after Beaudette died. Wright thought that the carbine could be the weapon that both fired on the Tesla and killed Beaudette.

Major Crimes, a bureau that focusses



on serial crimes, took over the investigation in early October. There were large-scale manhunts, with helicopters, bloodhounds, and a special-weapons team. The stated purpose was to find an armed burglar—one who seemed primarily focussed on eating—but the public assumed that the real objective was to find Beaudette’s killer. “We’re not getting a clear picture of what’s happening,” a resident of the area told a local news station. “But I sense that what’s happening is worse than what we think.”

On October 9th, there was another break-in, at the Agoura Hills/Calabasas Community Center. Using a rock, someone had smashed a glass front door, and then a vending machine, taking snacks. The community center is next door to the Lost Hills Sheriff’s Station.

Wright went to investigate, along with Steve Sullivan, a member of the Search and Rescue team, whom he considered his “best man-tracker.” In a planter in the parking lot, they found a distinctive boot print, which they recognized from the site of one of the previous burglaries. “It wasn’t your typical waffle sole,” Wright told me. Next to it was some broken glass. The prints and the glass formed the beginning of a trail; with the help of a dog, Wright and Sullivan followed it into the hills behind the station. On the way, they were joined by investigators from Major Crimes and Lost Hills Station. “We tracked that person until it got dark, where it was no longer safe or feasible,” Wright said.

The next day, Major Crimes organized a sweep of the park. Assigned to the command post, Wright ruminated on the last boot print that he had seen in the hills. It was in the middle of nowhere. He knew, based on the time of the break-in at the community center, that it must have been placed just before dawn. Why would someone be *there* at that time? He figured that there had to be a camp. Scanning the area with mapping software, he saw tree canopy and what looked like a streambed. Cover, water—these were clues, to a former narcotics de-

tective, that a camp could be there. That afternoon, a team went out to the site—Major Crimes investigators, along with Royal, Sullivan, and two Lost Hills deputies.

They split up, with Royal and one deputy heading south and the rest heading west. The westward team trudged through overgrown brush toward a ridge that was already steeped in shadow. “It was a very eerie quiet,”

Steven Arens, a Lost Hills deputy, later testified. “You just hear the wind slowly howling through the canyon.” Suddenly, Arens said, he heard a strange clanging noise from the ridge. He got down on one knee and looked through the optic on his rifle. Zooming in, he saw a man in black, with a backpack. A gun was

sticking out of the top.

“Freeze,” Arens yelled. The man argued, but the deputies had their guns trained on him. They ordered him to toss his backpack, and handcuffed him as he lay face down in the brush, right by his camp. “It was what we call a hooch, which is a military term for a homemade tent made from a tarp,” Wright told me. The man was Anthony Rauda, and the gun in his backpack was a carbine.

Rauda describes his living situation as a principled retreat from civilization. In 2016, he says, he made a pledge to live without money—no handouts, nothing from the government, no more contact. He wanted a light footprint, no tent. “I have not used tents in Years 1) so I can travel anytime lightly 2) so I can learn to survive outdoors with as little as possible,” he wrote, in one of a series of letters we exchanged after his arrest. He wanted to prove something to himself, “and maybe write about it.”

According to his father, Oswald, Rauda had been a meticulous child, shy and gentle, who loved playing baseball. When he was young, the family lived in Highland Park, on the Eastside of Los Angeles, close to cousins and to the elementary school. After Oswald and Anthony’s mother divorced, he says, she and her new hus-

band moved Anthony and his two older siblings to Tampa, and he lost touch with them. Anthony dropped out of high school, got a G.E.D., and briefly joined the Army, training in infantry. By the time he showed up back in L.A., Oswald felt that he’d changed.

Anthony Rauda says that he had a hard time adjusting to a stable life. He made music and wrote poems; he tried to make it as a d.j., then, when that didn’t work out, as a movie extra. He spent time drifting up and down the coast, dipping into transient communities, before he decided to live apart, in a society of one.

To prepare, Rauda followed the advice of Ragnar Benson, who has written dozens of books, including manuals on how to survive a coming apocalypse and get ready for the “next economy.” Benson advocates opportunism: survivors may need to scrounge and steal, poach game, trap muskrats. His followers should cache weapons, ammunition, hydrogen peroxide, kitchen matches. Benson’s brand of self-reliance is adversarial: “David’s Tool Kit: A Citizen’s Guide to Taking Out Big Brother’s Heavy Weapons,” “Ragnar’s Guide to Home and Recreational Use of High Explosives.” Pity the Mormons, he writes, who’ve broadcast to everyone that they have good canned food.

In “Live Off the Land in the City and Country,” Benson tells the story of Bill Moreland, a “ne’er do well” who couldn’t get along with people. After years of train-hopping and trouble with police, he writes, “the Wildman” walked into the Idaho wilderness. For the next thirteen years, he lived in hollow logs, caves, and dugouts, and spoke to another person only twice. He stole what he needed from Forest Service lookout towers; when he was finally caught, with a .22 and ammunition, he was wearing a sweater taken the previous summer from one of the rangers who arrested him.

Rauda’s life followed a similar trajectory—frequent skirmishes with authorities—but in a region far more heavily trafficked than the mountains of northern Idaho. In his twenties, Rauda started breaking into





buildings, stealing stuff, lighting fires. In 2003, he broke into a high school and set a fire, and was convicted of second-degree commercial burglary, a felony.

Soon after, Rauda was arrested for public drunkenness and fighting in Agoura Hills, a suburb that backs up to Malibu Creek State Park. In a letter to the county ombudsman, calling for an investigation, Rauda claimed that a deputy attacked him. On a dark road, he wrote, "I was approached by a sheriff cruiser who asked me to stop, I did so on the second command. I told the officer I did no wrong." More cruisers appeared, he claimed, blocking off the road. "A deputy attacked me by placing both hands on my neck and choking me."

The charges against Rauda were dismissed, but the conflict with Lost Hills reverberated. In court documents, Rauda claims that he feared for his life, and, although he was on probation for the incident at the high school, he began avoiding his probation officer. His father, with whom he stayed briefly, told me that he was acting strangely. He laughed joylessly, and he had no friends. He received a lot of mail from the N.R.A.

In 2004, he was arrested in a warrant sweep at a motel; when officers noticed a fuse lying on top of his backpack, they got a warrant to search his father's house, his sister's house, and a P.O. box he rented. They found evidence that he had purchased more

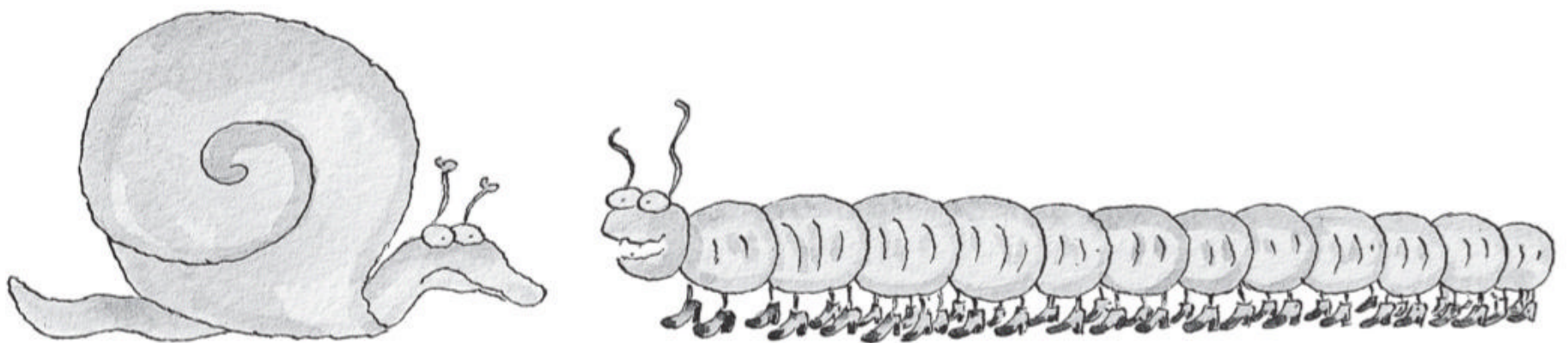
than four pounds of explosives. They also found two guns: a double-barrelled derringer and a .44 revolver, muzzle-loaders that take black-powder ammunition. In California, it's illegal for a convicted felon to buy a handgun of any kind. But, according to Greg Block, a weapons trainer and expert witness I spoke to, these guns, as antique replicas, are essentially considered decorative—"wall hangers"—and sellers don't often check a buyer's criminal history. Among the evidence that investigators collected were Benson's book "Guerrilla Gunsmithing" and George Hayduke's "Get Even," which is devoted to the art of revenge. In court documents, Rauda argued that he needed the guns, to protect himself from the Lost Hills deputies. During the proceedings, he took a swing at a deputy, which he explained later by saying that he was tired of being "harassed" by law enforcement.

Rauda went to state prison, and was released on parole less than two years later. His mental health deteriorated, and he drank: sometimes he'd pass out, and sheriff's deputies once found him unconscious in suburbia, dressed in black and wearing a backpack full of contraband. Judges mandated therapy and treatment, but he didn't always complete it. "I'm just going to go through counseling and try to get a residence and, you know, try to get my health better," he told the court after a D.U.I. arrest in 2012.

"I should have went to the classes, but they are a little rough for me. I can't stand being around people."

As Rauda's behavior grew increasingly troublesome, Oswald, who is sixty-six and lives in the San Gabriel Valley, struggled to stay in his son's life. He told me that he once made a plan to give him an A.T.M. card, but Anthony didn't show up at their meeting place. He seemed to want to disappear. A few times, Oswald tried unsuccessfully to find Anthony in his camp. When he arrived, the place always seemed neatly maintained, as if the brush had been cleared with a machete. But the choice of location was odd. Despite Rauda's antipathy toward law enforcement, and the thousands of acres of nearby wilderness to choose from, he had decided to make his camp in the desolate terrain right behind the Lost Hills Sheriff's Station.

In January, 2019, Rauda was charged with murder, for killing Beaudette, and with attempted murder, for his daughters, who were in the tent when he died. He was also charged with eight other counts of attempted murder, for the shootings in the park and on the canyon road, and with five second-degree commercial burglaries. He pleaded not guilty on all counts. "I have been wronged by the system and other people," Rauda wrote to me. "I am not a violent person & I would never want to be known as someone



Victoria Roberts

*"Look, I don't expect you to get the shoe thing."*



who hurt innocent people or children.”

In Malibu, those who felt that law enforcement had been hiding the existence of the Canyon Shooter are not entirely convinced that they arrested the right person. Karen and Arnold York, the publishers of the *Malibu Times*, a community newspaper, told me that they “take it with a grain of salt.” Karen said, “The fact that this guy was a homeless guy, it was so easy to say, ‘His fault.’ Who knows? It may be a perfectly preppy-looking guy, who’s got issues with guns, who did this, but we’re not going to look for him. We’re going to focus on somebody that threatens our vision of what Malibu should be.”

Even Sergeant Wright, who firmly believes the serial-shooter theory, admits that the Rauda story is a little neat. “I would think it would take some nerve to commit a burglary directly next door to the station,” he

told me. “I mean . . . why would somebody commit a murder and then hold on to the same weapon? And then do burglaries on videotape, making very little effort to hide, other than putting a mask on part of your face? There’s an assumption that most criminals would think, if their picture was captured on camera with a weapon, that there’s going to be a heightened law-enforcement effort to engage them, and that’s exactly what happened.”

More than two years later, Rauda’s criminal trial has yet to begin, but he and his family continue to proclaim his innocence. Oswald told me that he doesn’t understand how Rauda got the carbine and can’t imagine him using it. “He doesn’t even hunt,” he said. “He eats from the dumpsters at the McDonald’s near the 101.” Rauda’s brother-in-law told me that he believes Anthony has been framed. Rauda, too,

argues that the focus on him is misplaced. “The Beaudette family and friends can blame the sheriff’s department for his death,” he wrote. “That’s where the justice is at.”

For almost two decades, Rauda has felt picked on, singled out, wronged, specifically by law enforcement and the criminal-justice system. In the murder case, he has repeatedly asked to represent himself and been denied. He’s gone through several public defenders and is now being represented by a private attorney who works with indigent clients.

In pretrial hearings, he behaves erratically. “I don’t want to sit in jail another two years,” he shouted at the judge during a hearing in July. He was in a restraint chair, with his hands fixed to the armrests, surrounded by deputies. He was railing against the fact that he hadn’t been provided a ballistics expert, or been allowed to send an investigator to his campsite. Did the judge want him to be stupid? To close his eyes and his ears? “I have a brain, I have soul,” he said. “I’m gonna fucking have your job one day, lady. Fucking liars.” The judge looked at him with raised eyebrows as the deputies wheeled him out.

After asking me to help him get an attorney (which I didn’t) and asking me to put money on his books (which I did, so that he could buy writing materials and stamps for our correspondence), Rauda decided that he didn’t trust me, either. In his final letter to me, he expressed resentment. “The media’s portrayal of me has been slanderous,” he wrote. “I have not been to Malibu in years.”

Then he turned, as usual, to the cops, and their failures. He wrote, “There’s been other shootings and crimes in that area that cannot be linked to me, nobody investigates that. I have medicine records showing injuries done to me by sheriffs, this can be checked, no one has. . . . I met a lot of good people in my travels but lying cops are not among them.”

It will likely be many more months before the case goes to trial. At a recent hearing, the judge, citing Rauda’s uncoöperative behavior, entered a doubt as to his competency to stand trial. Criminal proceedings are currently sus-



*“This painting commemorates the moment a friend actually read a book I recommended.”*



pended, while he is assessed and stabilized. The prosecutor is confident that the trial will take place, but when it does she faces a challenging set of circumstances. The first five near-misses used shotgun ammunition, and no shotgun has been found. Just a month after Rauda's arrest, the Woolsey Fire devastated Malibu, scorching much of Malibu Creek State Park and destroying his campsite, along with any evidence that may have remained.

The struggle inside the sheriff's department could prove consequential, too. After Rauda's arrest, Wright and Royal were transferred out of Lost Hills Station and later disciplined for conducting what the prosecutor called "unauthorized investigations"—including the dowel test on the Tesla. Both filed lawsuits against the department; the county settled with Wright, but Royal's case is on hold until Rauda's trial is finished. The prosecutor has referred to these disputes as "potentially exculpatory," making it extremely unlikely that she'll call on Wright and Royal to testify at Rauda's trial, despite their intricate knowledge of the case.

If Rauda is the Canyon Shooter, one thing is clear: he has extracted heavy revenge on the sheriff's department and on the Lost Hills cops in particular. Public confidence in law enforcement in the area has been seriously eroded. Along with the reputational harm, there may be a financial toll. Erica Wu, Tristan Beaudette's widow, has filed a ninety-million-dollar lawsuit against the sheriff's department, State Parks, and others, citing their "failure to warn."

Wu's father died of cancer when she was eight, and her mother raised her and her sisters alone. After Beaudette's death, grief counsellors she met with tried to make this out to be a silver lining. Who better than she to raise two little girls who had lost their dad?

But Wu didn't want to be an expert on grief, on growing up without a father. Her own childhood loss didn't ease the burden; it made it heavier. She told me about Beaudette's last Father's Day, less than a week before he died. It was clear and sunny, and he brought



the family to the beach. "Tristan set up a little sunshade, and the girls were playing in the waves," Wu said. "They were letting the waves chase them, and I remember running after them and Tristan running after them, and I remember sort of looking at the three of them and just thinking how lucky I was to have them."

She went on, "Probably the biggest fear that I had was loving them so much that you get scared of what it would be like not having that." His death, she says, had a redounding effect. None of them will ever be the same. "Obviously, he died, but that sort of family that I had died, too," she told me. "Part of me, part of them."

After Beaudette's death, she couldn't spend another night in their house in Orange County. The moving vans came, as scheduled, for their move to the Bay Area. Her sisters did everything, and put most of the stuff from the old house into a storage unit. Wu barely remembers this period. She didn't move into the house that Beaudette had found for them. She rented another place, a town house near the medical center where she works. Every day feels like a lifetime, she told me. She still can't believe that her husband kissed her goodbye the morning of his camping trip and never came back.

When I talked to Wu last month, she was getting ready for another move. It was just to another unit in the same complex, but she sounded lighter and more optimistic than she had in our previous conversations. The girls were excited. They could each have their own room, if they wanted, though Wu didn't think they would. They still sleep in the same bed.

She had been making photo albums for them—pictures of their father, which until recently she found it excruciating to look at. She'd also cleaned out the storage unit, filled with her husband's things. She set aside a box of his favorite T-shirts, and the girls found them in her closet. Now they wear them to bed, like nightgowns. A friend offered to take the rest of the shirts and make them into quilts for the girls.

On Tristan's birthday, Wu told me, she takes off work and lets the girls miss school. They spend the day together, doing something that he would have loved. On his most recent birthday, they went hiking in the redwoods. Wu took a wrong turn and they ended up lost, on a six-mile hike. When they finally made their way back, they took some of his ashes to the Pacific Ocean and scattered them from the beach. ♦



## MANUFACTURING DIPLOMACY

*While political leaders trade threats, Chinese factories have strengthened ties to the U.S.*

BY PETER HESSLER

On Amazon.com, if you search for running shoes, drop the price point to around thirty dollars, and scroll past the initial pages, you'll eventually encounter brands that you've never heard of. Some seem to follow an alphabetic theme—Zocavia, Zocania, Zonkim—while others are pure etymological puzzles: Biacolum, Qansi, NYZNIA. Study the product images, and pieces of the puzzle start to connect. The Qansi Men's Sneakers Mesh Ultra Lightweight Breathable Athletic Running Walking Gym Shoes look exactly the same as the Biacolum Men's Running Shoes Non Slip Gym Tennis Shoes Slip Resistant Air Knitted Sneakers Walking Workout Sport Shoes, which in turn appear to be identical to the Zocavia Men's Running Shoes Ultra Lightweight Tennis Gym Shoes Slip On Mesh Fitness Slip Resistant Walking Workout Shoes. The language of these listings could be described as Amazonglish: awkward but basically intelligible, redundant but highly searchable. Often, a product description has just enough linguistic accuracy to sail past a computer's grammar check. Zocavia: "Ultra lightweight material leaves few weight on your feet." Zocania: "Your feet can breathe easy in the latest iteration of fabric upper."

One word that almost never appears in Amazonglish is "China." Marketplace Pulse, which analyzes e-commerce, has said that nearly half of Amazon's top sellers—those with more than a million dollars in annual sales in the U.S.—are in China. An Amazon spokesperson recently described this as inaccurate, although he declined to disclose the number of Chinese sellers, saying only that the majority of third-party vendors on the U.S. site are based in America. On product pages, Chinese sellers rarely advertise their location, and the Zocavias and Zocanias don't mention where they are manufactured. For more information, it helps to head over to the Web

site of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, whose registrations are full of useful details. ("The wording 'Biacolum' has no meaning in a foreign language.") On the trademark site, Zocavia and Zocania, which sound a little like tennis-playing twins from Serbia, are in fact registered to the same person in Guanting Village, Danling County, Sichuan Province. These brands, along with Zonkim, Biacolum, NYZNIA, and dozens of others, are under the purview of a company called Kimzon Network Technology. The Kimzon headquarters are on the sixteenth floor of an office building in the city of Chengdu, where, in the pandemic spring of 2020, the owner told me that he was reconsidering his approach to the American market.

It was April 26th, and Li Dewei wore a black Bluetooth headset, a black long-sleeved T-shirt, black trousers, and black sneakers that had not been made in any of his three factories. Li, who owned the company with a partner, was only in his mid-thirties, but he had the serious demeanor of an older man. Chengdu, like all Chinese cities, had already brought the pandemic under control, and Li told me that a week earlier he had stopped requiring masks in the workplace. But he had just started coping with the economic fallout of the virus. The previous month, Li had laid off fifty workers—a third of his Chengdu staff.

Li said that things would have been worse if not for the stimulus checks sent out by the Trump Administration under the CARES Act. Because Li sold directly to Amazon customers, he could track sales closely. "We check the statistics every day," he said. "After the American government started issuing the money, the next day we saw an increase in sales." By the time I visited, two weeks into the stimulus program, Kimzon's American sales had almost doubled, although they were still slightly lower than usual. "We don't know whether the current con-

sumption with the U.S. government aid is a short-term trend," Li said.

Not long before, Li had had a series of discussions with his partner and some other export entrepreneurs. They had determined that June, 2020, would be a critical month. "If by June the virus is totally under control in the U.S. and the E.U., then we can rebound to the normal level," Li told me. But the entrepreneurs had all concluded that it was unlikely that the U.S. and other Western countries would handle the pandemic well. Li was also concerned about the ongoing political conflict between China and the U.S.

In a typical year, seventy per cent of Kimzon's sales were in the United States, with another twenty per cent in Europe and ten per cent in Japan. Kimzon sold nothing in the Chinese market. For Li and his partner, the solution seemed obvious: reduce American exposure by selling Zocavia, Zocania, and the other brands to Chinese consumers. "Many things in China are not being badly affected by the pandemic, like logistics," Li explained. His staff had already redesigned some shoes and was preparing a domestic marketing campaign; the goal was to have as much as a third of their business in China within a year. Li expected that after three months he would know whether the plan might succeed.

In August of 2019, I had moved with my family to Chengdu, where I teach journalism and English at Sichuan University. It was the second time I had arrived in the region during a period of troubled U.S.-China relations. In 1995, the two countries had entered a tense phase after the U.S. State Department granted a visa to Lee Teng-hui, the President of Taiwan, who had been invited to give a speech at Cornell, his alma mater. The Chinese government responded furiously, conducting a series of missile tests in waters near Taiwan. In March,





*After the U.S. government issued stimulus checks, “the next day we saw an increase in sales,” a Chinese businessman said.*



1996, the U.S. sent ships to join two aircraft carriers in the region—the greatest show of American military strength in Asia since the Vietnam War.

That summer, I arrived in Chengdu as a Peace Corps volunteer. Along with another young American, Adam Meier, I was assigned to teach at a college in a remote part of Sichuan. Bill Clinton was running for reelection, and he was frequently attacked by the Chinese state-controlled media. Years later, one of my students wrote a letter in which she described her feelings at the time: “Not long after you became my teacher, I read a piece of news comment that said [if] Mr. Clinton took presidency, one of the reasons was that he would take stronger measure on China. Those days, I hated to see you and Mr. Meier.”

But any such opinions were kept quiet. In Sichuan, people generally took a pragmatic approach to politics, and the college accepted the risk of American teachers as part of Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and opening” policy. Most students came from poor rural families, but they had tested well enough to major in English. Along with language classes, they took mandatory political courses with throwback titles like Marxism-Leninism and Building Chinese Socialism. Yet even a glance outside the classroom showed how quickly Chinese socialism was being dismantled. During my second year, the government stopped providing graduates with guaranteed jobs, and the local housing market was privatized, a process that was happening across the country. Some of my most ambitious students left for provinces like Guangdong and Zhejiang, where the export economy was starting to boom.

Bill Clinton turned out to be better for China than anybody would have predicted. In his second term, Congress granted China permanent trading privileges, and Clinton began the process of negotiating for China’s admission to the World Trade Organization, which happened in 2001. Throughout successive Administrations, the U.S. mostly followed a strategy of engagement with China. Even President Obama’s “Pivot to Asia” policy, which was intended to

counter China’s growing influence in the region, seemed to have little real effect.

When I returned to Chengdu, the material benefits of the reform era could be seen everywhere: an extensive subway system, a brand-new Sichuan University campus, a high-rise business district where Kimzon and other companies were situated. In my classroom, I felt the change at the most visceral level. My students laughed when I showed class pictures from 1996—at five feet nine inches, I had towered over my students. Now, because of rising living standards, it seemed that I was shorter than most of the boys I taught. Last year, a study in *The Lancet* reported that, out of two hundred countries, China has seen the largest increase in boys’ height, and the third largest in girls’, since 1985. The average Chinese

nineteen-year-old male is now more than three and a half inches taller.

Almost all of my students came from urban middle-class families. The majority were enrolled in a program that sent them to the University of Pittsburgh for their final year or two, joining the nearly four hundred thousand Chinese who study in the U.S. every year. But, at Sichuan University, even students bound for America still took political courses with throwback names: Basic Principles of Marxism, Introduction to Mao Zedong Thought and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. Next to the building where I taught, a recently completed structure had a gleaming four-story glass façade and a row of enormous golden characters that read “Marxism Institute.” The building reminded me of my students: bigger, stronger, better dressed. The institute had been designed with a large parking garage in the basement, because nowadays a lot of Chinese Marxists buy cars.

The Communist Party’s control was even more powerful than I remembered, and relations with the United States were even worse. Before Donald Trump took office, a consensus had already been building in Washington that the Chinese had benefitted too much from the bilateral relationship. Trump Administration officials frequently advocated “decoupling”—separating from China in

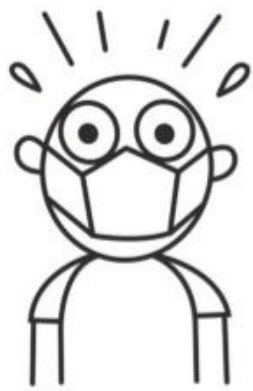
economic and technological realms. In the spring of 2018, Trump started imposing high tariffs on Chinese products, and China countered with measures of its own. Exchange programs also came under pressure, in part as a response to a brutal Chinese crackdown in Xinjiang and the suppression of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong. During my first year at Sichuan University, Trump abruptly ended the China Peace Corps program, along with all Fulbright exchanges with China and Hong Kong.

In Chengdu, most people seemed to respond as they always had. Li Dewei told me that he had no strong opinions about American politics, and that, after tariffs were imposed on his shoes, he simply raised his Amazon prices by fifteen per cent. “The tariff is paid by the customer,” he said.

In my department, all instructors helped out at a writing center, where students could make appointments for tutoring sessions. Before I arrived, there had been a plan to purchase scheduling software from an American company. But the deal fell through, and an administrator told us in meetings that he believed the reason to be fallout from the trade war. So the department found a U.K. company, Fresha, that provides software for salons, spas, and massage parlors. Whenever I received notice of a tutorial, the student was described as a “customer,” and promotional e-mails pitched me on added features like special settings for “Mani-Pedi or Couples Massage.” In April, the massage e-mails suddenly got a lot more urgent: “The COVID-19 crisis has triggered a tsunami of Salons and Spas switching to Fresha from their current expensive scheduling solutions.”

On May 14th, I met Li Dewei for dinner, and he told me that Kimzon was struggling with the shift to the domestic market. “Sales aren’t good yet,” he said. He thought that style might be an issue, so Kimzon was producing shoes with white soles instead of black, believing that these would appeal to Chinese consumers.

In March, when the pandemic first began to have an impact in America, Kimzon had reduced its production to five hundred pairs a day. But now it was up to two thousand, close to normal. Although Li had laid off people in de-





sign and marketing, he never downsized assembly-line workers. He told me that the top priority was to protect the supply chain.

Despite all of Li's business on Amazon, he had never visited the U.S. His background was modest: his parents had grown up in farming families, and their educations ended with primary school. Both of them found assembly-line work at a blanket factory, and eventually they started their own small blanket workshop. They spent much of their disposable income on educating Li and his two siblings. Li excelled in high school, and he was admitted to Sichuan University. After graduating, he went to work for a family friend who ran a shoe factory in Fujian Province, where Li learned the trade.

We always communicated in Mandarin, but Li read English well. He used a virtual private network to skirt the Chinese firewall and access sites like Google Trends, in order to research the American market. "It would help to go to America, but from the Internet we can learn a lot," he said. "America is a free place—so much information is open. That's different from China." Li had developed some long-distance ideas about American characteristics, and he expressed them diplomatically. "Of course, you have more experience, but my thinking is that Americans don't save much," he told me once, after describing the way that sales increased in response to the stimulus payments. "Whenever they have money, they'll spend it."

The Chinese government had botched its initial response to the coronavirus, which first began to spread in Wuhan, a city about seven hundred miles east of Chengdu. After covering up details about the virus, and detaining and punishing early whistle-blowers, the government eventually instituted effective policies aimed at eliminating the spread of infection. But relatively little direct economic support was given to citizens. During the first financial quarter of 2020, the Chinese economy shrank by nearly seven per cent, the first time the government had reported a contraction since the Mao Zedong era. Nevertheless, the government didn't issue across-the-board stimulus payments. "If the Chinese government did that, people would just put it in the bank," Li told me.

In fact, many Americans had done the same. Scott R. Baker, an economist at Northwestern University, told me recently that the CARES Act prompted spending patterns that were unlike what resulted from stimulus programs in 2001 and 2008. "The big difference was less spending on durables," Baker said. "People weren't buying new cars and refrigerators." He continued, "It seems that a majority of checks were saved."

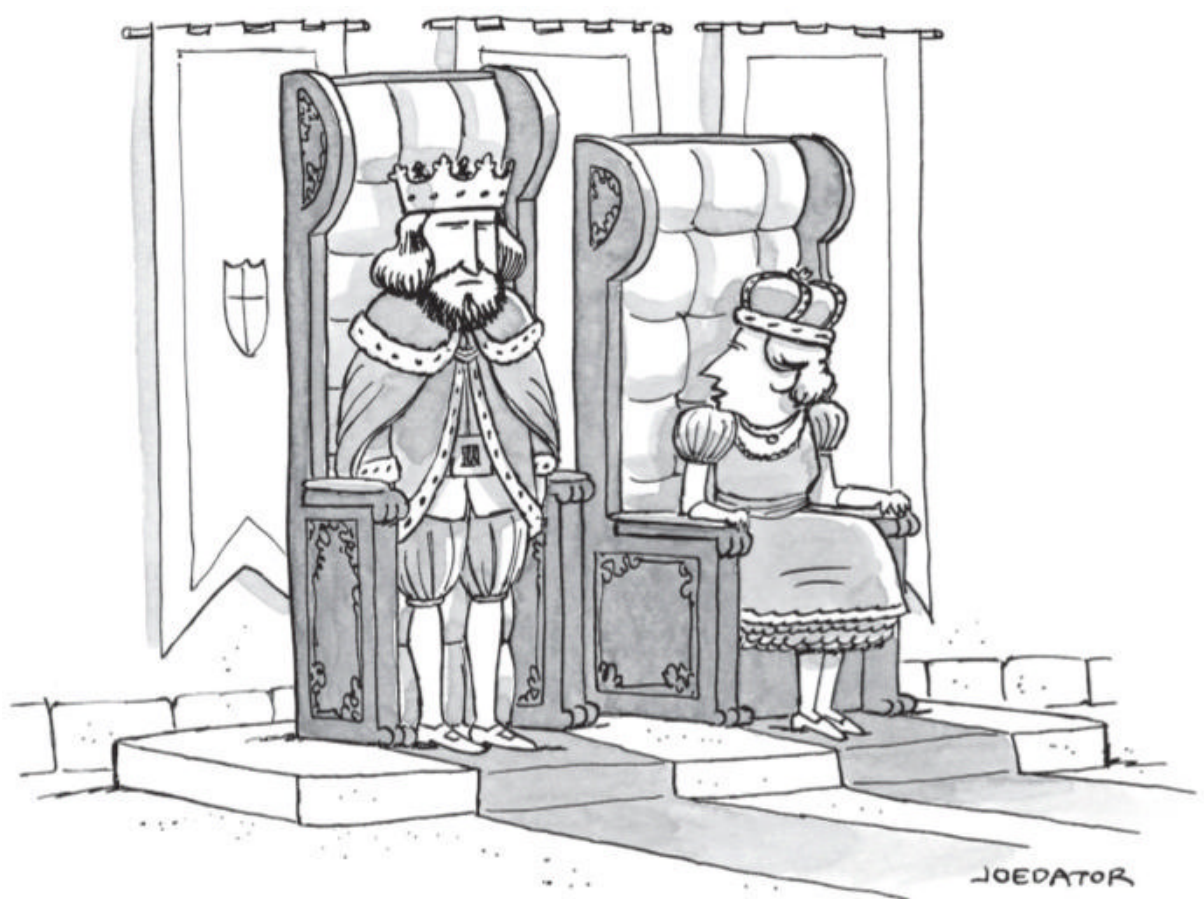
Along with four other economists, Baker had analyzed high-frequency bank-transaction data for more than thirty thousand consumers. They concluded that the 2020 stimulus was less effective than previous programs, in part because of the unique nature of the pandemic, which had caused consumers to be wary of visiting a car dealership or having appliances delivered by strangers. "If you can send out a thousand-dollar check and it prompts the purchase of a car, that has a big effect," Baker said. "Versus the purchase of thirty-dollar shoes from overseas—that's not doing a lot for the economy."

I had described Li Dewei's post-stimulus sales. "I'm not surprised that he sees that surge so clearly," Baker said. "We see that the majority of spending that does happen goes out in the first week or so after receiving the check." He noted that, while most Americans seemed to have saved their stimulus checks, people

with less money in their bank accounts were more likely to spend. These consumers tended to buy food, nondurables, and other inexpensive items—often, the kinds of products manufactured by Chinese entrepreneurs like Li Dewei.

In Chengdu, Li and his staff combed through Amazon reviews every day. He described them as a kind of *jiaoliu*—an exchange or conversation. Early in the pandemic, many American consumers complained about shipping delays, and, on May 6th, a buyer rated one of Li's products with a single star: "They were late. Then they were stolen off my porch. I would like a refund immediately." Li eventually contracted with a more expensive shipping service, and he made other adjustments. When a number of customers complained about a narrow toe box in the Zocania brand of shoes, Li had changes made at the factory.

Part of the Amazon *jiaoliu* was a glimpse of pandemic life for lower-income Americans. Reviews rarely mentioned exercise or sporting activities; it seemed more likely for customers to buy Li's shoes to wear at jobs that required them to stand. On May 16th, a customer gave one star, on account of the "non-slip" tread: "I'm a cook at dennys and I almost busted my face just from water on our kitchen floor! Super scary!" Others referred to jobs that had vanished. June 14th, five stars: "I got them for



"How do you like the standing throne?"





*"Yes, I do need help. Could you show me where the chocolate chips are and tell me everything's going to be O.K.?"*

work but just found out my work won't be opening back up but I still like them." As the summer wore on, other points of stress emerged. July 13th, five stars: "Bottom tread doesn't last very long. I was only chased by the police twice while wearing these and they're down to half the tread life!" August 1st, one star: "Bought two pairs, didn't return because of the whole pandemic thing (was honestly afraid to get them in mail \*nervous chuckle\*)." Periodically, Li and his staff tinkered with product photos or Amazonish descriptions. ("The soft insole fits well and protect your ankle, tongues and feet from hurt.") Li followed the American news closely, and he always seemed to know the current number of coronavirus cases. "Two million six hundred and fifty thousand," he told me on July 2nd, when I asked about the situation. "Every day it goes up another thirty to forty thousand. These are not optimistic numbers." But, even as the pandemic worsened across the Pacific, Li kept an eye out for other opportunities. In June, after Li's research on Google Trends gave him a new idea, he hired an American law-

yer to register yet another application with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Like the others, the new brand name was a puzzle: Pemily12.

In late January last year, the U.S. Embassy and five consulates in China, including the one in Chengdu, decided to evacuate non-essential American staff, along with all spouses and children. Many other embassies and foreign companies across China made similar decisions. My wife, Leslie, and I opted to stay, along with our twin daughters, who attend a local public school. Our decision had nothing to do with an estimation of which country was likely to handle the disease better. We simply didn't grasp the seriousness of the pandemic, and the Chengdu lockdown, which lasted for about a month and a half, struck us as overkill. In a city of more than sixteen million, there were only a hundred and forty-three symptomatic cases reported by the end of February. Afterward, there weren't any recorded instances of community spread for the rest of the spring. There didn't seem to be a real risk of catching the disease, so we saw no reason to leave.

At the end of March, the Chinese government banned the entry of almost all foreign-passport holders, even if they had valid work visas. Officials believed that as long as they could quarantine the relatively few Chinese nationals who returned, and maintain testing and contact-tracing across the country, daily life could proceed with few restrictions. By early May, our daughters' third-grade section of fifty-four kids was back in the classroom, and within a couple of weeks they stopped wearing masks. That month, when I took a domestic flight for the first time since the lockdown, there wasn't an empty seat on the plane.

Initially, I had assumed that in China we would undergo the pandemic first, and then the rest of the world would follow, step by step: outbreak, lockdown, recovery. But now it became clear how much our experiences had diverged, and Chengdu's month-and-a-half lockdown began to seem shorter in my memory. I hadn't missed a single barbershop haircut, and all of our favorite restaurants had reopened completely. The only reason we ever used videoconferencing was to communicate with family and friends in the U.S., mostly out of solidarity. In early May, some old college friends arranged a Zoom meeting, talking about their American lockdown experiences. Afterward, I closed my computer and biked across town to a night club to do some reporting. The club was packed; out of dozens of people on the dance floor, only one woman wore a mask.

By the second financial quarter, the Chinese economy was growing again. In July, exports rose 7.2 per cent compared with the same month a year earlier, and I made a long trip across Zhejiang Province, one of the centers of foreign trade. Most entrepreneurs I met there said the same thing: they were surprised by how quickly sales were bouncing back. They also indicated that they had never suffered much from the effects of the U.S. trade war. A couple of small-scale exporters told me that they underreported the value of goods, in order to avoid tariffs, but others said that this practice was too risky for large businesses. In general, they passed at least some of the cost on to American customers, and the Chinese government had a long-standing policy of tax rebates for exporters.

Entrepreneurs mentioned other ways



to avoid negative attention. In Yuhuan, a city near the coast, I met a woman who managed foreign trade for a company that manufactured precision parts for automobiles. She said that U.S. clients had her sign contracts that prevented her from listing their names on her company's Web site. "We can't say publicly that we do business with this American company," she said. "They don't want people to know they're getting this part from China."

She no longer travelled abroad for trade fairs or meetings, but the lack of direct contact wasn't much of a problem. Even in Yiwu, the site of China's largest wholesale market, people had adjusted quickly. Usually, the city is home to around ten thousand foreigners, along with many more who arrive on short buying trips, and neighborhoods cater to various nationalities and regions. But now these places felt abandoned; on one street, I walked past ten Indian restaurants that were closed.

Nearby, on a block of shipping agents that specialized in Russian and Central Asian trade, only one was open. The boss, Mao Yuankui, told me that the pandemic had shifted everybody's working hours. "They're closed in the morning, because it's too early in Russia," he said. "We're mostly on the phone and WeChat nowadays. Customers aren't coming to the stores."

Mao shipped cargo to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia. In a normal year, he relied on planes for urgent orders, but flight schedules had been slashed. In the years before the pandemic, China's Belt and Road Initiative had invested in the longest freight rail line in the world, which runs for more than eight thousand miles, from Yiwu to Madrid, passing through Central Asia. Mao said that now he was using trains to move a lot of cargo. During the pandemic, shipping rates rose, and traffic was unbalanced: for every three shipping containers that left China, only one returned, because export sectors in other countries had been decimated. Even before the pandemic, China had produced ninety-six per cent of the world's shipping containers, and now that industry was also in overdrive. Mao told me to come back late at night, to see how the neighborhood functioned. When I returned, the cargo shops were

lit up. Inside, agents were busy on phones and computers, all of them working on Central Asian time.

Children had taken over the hallways of Yiwu's wholesale market. The sprawling structure has nearly ten times the square footage of the Pentagon and is home to some hundred thousand merchants. In past years, I had visited when the market was busy with foreign traders; now it was so empty that many Chinese sellers had brought their children for the summer vacation. Packs of kids rode bikes and scooters down the empty corridors, and they had set up badminton nets and basketball hoops.

Most merchants there specialize in a single product sold in bulk. Nothing was more depressing than the hallways dedicated to luggage dealers—lines of glum-faced people sitting next to roller bags that weren't rolling anywhere. Folks who sold tourist trinkets were also out of luck. But business was booming for dealers who stocked L.E.D. curing lamps, for customers who did their nails at home, and it was also a good year to sell plastic pump heads for hand-sanitizer bottles. Bicycle dealers couldn't keep product in stock, and a woman with punching bags told me that her sales had doubled. A place called Henry Sport, which specialized in yoga mats, had back orders through September. On the second floor, merchants selling inflatable back-yard pools were also doing great.

The Yiwu market niches were so specific, and the pandemic's effects so unusual, that even products with ostensibly logical connections had different prospects. Near the inflatable-pool dealers, other stalls featured swim caps and goggles, but their sales had plummeted. One dealer explained that in fact goggles have almost nothing to do with back-yard pools. "That's something people do at home," she said, gesturing at the pools. Then she pointed at her own products: "They use goggles when they go out. And people aren't going out now."

A large section of the second floor was newly dedicated to P.P.E. dealers. Many of them had been manufacturing toys or jewelry before the pandemic; they said that with such small products it was relatively easy to retool assembly lines and retrain workers. A woman named Shi Gaolian had a factory that had manu-

factured bracelets until February, when she abruptly changed the product line; now she exported between two million and three million surgical masks every month. Like most people in the market, Shi wasn't wearing a mask herself. She didn't worry that P.P.E. might turn out to be a short-term business. "At the least, it will take two years for the world to manage this," she said. "After that, I'll find something else to manufacture."

On the same floor, merchants were preparing for the upcoming American election. Baseball-cap stalls had MAGA stock, and flag manufacturers were receiving orders for Trump and Biden banners. I talked with a middle-aged dealer named Li Jiang, who first went into business in 1995, producing the inexpensive red scarves worn by Young Pioneers, the Communist Party's primary-school organization. In 1997, Hong Kong returned to Chinese control, and the wave of patriotism led to new demand for national flags, so Li expanded his assembly line. Four years after that were the attacks of 9/11, and Li started manufacturing the Stars and Stripes. That was his entry into the international market, and, ever since, his business has been shaped largely by what happens abroad. On the day I visited, he had just sold a few thousand Trump flags—from the Young Pioneers to MAGA in the span of a quarter century. "If people want it, we make it," Li said. On his desk, a small gay-pride flag sat next to one featuring the face of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan.

After leaving Yiwu, I stopped at a large flag factory called Johnin, in the city of Shaoxing. A young manager named Jin Gang gave me a tour. On the assembly line, dozens of women sat at sewing machines, stitching flags that read "North Dakota for Trump," "Keep America Great," "Trump 2020," and "Trump 2024." Since the start of the pandemic, everything seemed to happen first in China, and now I wondered if Johnin knew something that I didn't.

"That's what they asked for," Jin said, when I inquired about the 2024 banners. "I guess they have this idea that he will be President again."

Jin was coy about his customers, though he said that the orders didn't come directly from Trump's companies or the Republican Party. During the 2016 campaign, Johnin sold between two million



and three million Trump flags, at roughly a dollar each. Now, with the election less than four months away, Trump products represented about seventy per cent of Johnin's business. There were some orders for Biden flags, but not many.

In general, the pandemic had been bad for Johnin, because flag-waving events like European soccer tournaments were cancelled. But there were scattered moments of high demand. In June, in the wake of George Floyd's death, Johnin received a spike in orders of blue-line police flags. Shortly after that, there was a sudden interest in the state flag of Mississippi. "Many customers were telling us, 'We need Mississippi flags,'" Jin said. "We made forty thousand. It happened really fast, and then it was finished." He continued, "I think the people who bought those flags were Black."

Jin had read that Mississippi has many Black residents. He was accustomed to manufacturing flags for both sides of foreign elections, sports matches, and other events, so it seemed logical: police supporters had their blue-line flags, while Blacks had Mississippi flags. In Mandarin, it took me a while to explain a counterintuitive fact about democracy: the state with the highest percentage of Black residents might also be the last one to get rid of a Confederate symbol.

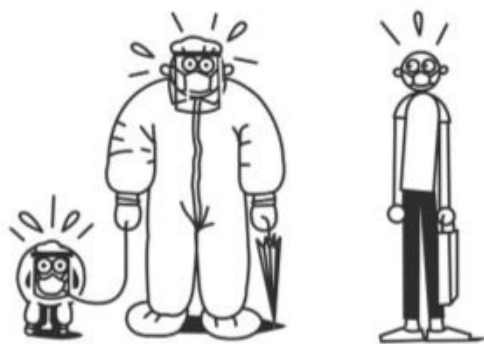
Jin disliked Trump, but he wasn't worried about November. "After the election, we'll make flags for somebody," he said. "Americans always want flags." He showed me how the factory double-stitched seams. "A lot of other companies don't do that," he said. Cut-rate manufacturers also tried to save on fabric for Trump flags, which have a standard size of ninety centimetres by a hundred and fifty centimetres. Jin said that, if you measure some of the cheap ones, you'll find that everything has been shaved down by about two per cent: eighty-eight centimetres by a hundred and forty-six. In the most literal way imaginable, Chinese manufacturers were working the margins on Trump.

At the beginning of July, Li Dewei told me that he and his partner had abandoned their plan to sell in the Chinese market. "The investment is too high," Li said. "And domestic competition is too fierce."

He had also concluded that U.S.-China tensions were unlikely to have any

impact on Kimzon's business. Trump Administration officials often blamed China for its early handling of the pandemic, but there didn't seem to be any consumer backlash. In the span of three months, Li's ideas about risk had completely reversed: now he believed that the poor handling of the pandemic in the U.S. was likely to benefit his sales. "A lot of businesses are closed," Li explained. "People are afraid of going to shops, because of infections, so they want to buy online." Even the Amazon reviews of his shoes told him which way the wind was blowing. May 14th, five stars: "I purchased them to wear during the day at work delivering packages for a big online order company that rhymes with am-a-John. So far so good on 10-hour shifts."

According to an Amazon spokesperson, the company has hired more than four hundred thousand frontline employees worldwide since the start of the pandemic. In Shanghai, I met a young Chinese woman who worked in advertising for the company, and her division had doubled its staff in the past year. She asked me not to use her name, because Amazon hadn't given her permission to talk. She had returned to China after living abroad, and she often had to explain the Chinese mind-set to Amazon co-workers in Seattle. She said that American entrepreneurs tend to be obsessed with branding. "You want to have a great brand-name story to convince your customers," she said. "In



China, it's the opposite. They sell things first. And then they think about brand."

Zack Franklin, an American consultant who has worked for years with Amazon sellers in Shenzhen, told me that Chinese online entrepreneurs had figured out a different way to scale up their businesses. In addition to expanding product lines or exploring new markets, they simply sold the same thing in the same place under different names.

"You want to take up as much space

on the shelf as possible," Franklin said. "Just get a different label." He continued, "You are making money through this illusion of choice." He explained that in order to get access to a brand registry it's necessary to apply for a trademark, so Chinese applicants were flooding the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Li Dewei had registered about seventy brands, and some of his applications had been handled by a law firm called Ni, Wang & Massand, in Dallas. Hao Ni, one of the firm's founders, told me that it represents Chinese clients in eighty to a hundred brand applications every month. Ni said that Chinese choose odd brand names because those applications tend to be approved faster by the trademark office, which might reject a name that's too close to an established brand. "We've so far never had a conflict with a Chinese company," Ni said.

Ni had handled the application for Li Dewei's most recent brand, Pemily12. On July 2nd, Li showed me the new Web site he was setting up. This time, he hoped to bypass Amazon and sell directly to consumers. But the product names still used Amazonish: Pet Dog Toy Dog Leakage Food Toy Ball. There was also an introduction to the brand:

Why is Pemily?

This is a combination of pet family

Why is it 12?

12 = 12 month = 1 year = forever

Why is Pemily12?

pemily12 means we will always be a family

Earlier in the pandemic, Li had noticed on Google Trends that a lot of Americans were searching for products connected to the word "pet." "Pet clothes," he said. "Pet toy. Pet health." A friend in Shenzhen manufactured pet accessories, and he was expanding the product line and partnering with Li on the Web site. They believed that clothes for pets were particularly promising. I asked Li if it had been stressful to make so many major decisions in recent months, but he shrugged it off—as far as he was concerned, he was simply reacting to the situation. "The market decides for us," he said. "It's not us deciding."

American shoe orders were still increasing, and now Kimzon was shipping three thousand pairs every day. "The U.S. government has been sending out more money recently," Li said.



I told Li that he was mistaken—there hadn't yet been a second stimulus program. But he swore that government money was reaching consumers: he could see it in sales, and other entrepreneurs had mentioned the same thing. The following day, I received an e-mail from the young woman who was living in our family's house in rural Colorado. She sent me a list of things that had appeared in our mailbox, including a CARES Act debit card labelled "Economic Impact." It was in the amount of thirty-four hundred dollars.

I learned that during the past couple of weeks the government had been sending debit cards to people who had been missed in April, often because their bank information wasn't on file. I had wondered why we hadn't received a stimulus check, but I was too distracted by life in China to look into it. Now I realized that Zocavia and Zocania could have kept me updated on the U.S. government's payment schedule.

Near the end of July, my daughters' only American friend still in Chengdu left. Most other Americans had been evacuated in January or February, and as time passed the isolation grew harder for the few families who stayed. In a normal summer, we would have visited Colorado, but now, if we left China, we couldn't reënter.

As a Peace Corps volunteer, I hadn't returned to the U.S. for two years, and now we seemed likely to repeat that experience. But, in the nineteen-nineties, Sichuan still felt remote, and even American commerce seemed a world away; I never saw a McDonald's during those two years. By 2020, there were more than seventy thousand American companies doing business in China. Meanwhile, the Chinese were producing much of the P.P.E. and many other goods that were bought by Americans during a time of crisis. Almost any event in the U.S.—a protest, a lockdown, a stimulus program—had an immediate economic ripple effect somewhere in the People's Republic. Decoupling had been envisaged as an economic process, but the market links were stronger than ever: in 2020, U.S.-China trade increased by nearly nine per cent. The separation was happening almost entirely at the human level.

On July 24th, the Chinese govern-



*"I was told to bring myself, and my 'overpriced chicken salad' with me."*

ment announced that it was closing the U.S. consulate in Chengdu and expelling all remaining American staff. The Chinese were retaliating for the recent actions of the Trump Administration, which had shut down the Chinese consulate in Houston, citing espionage. A State Department official told me that, while there was no question that the Chinese had been spying in Houston, the American response could have been less self-defeating. "We have ways of dealing with this stuff, to get the message across without being so absolute," he said. He believed that in a normal situation the Americans would have expelled some individual Chinese diplomats, rather than closing the entire consulate.

He said that, earlier in the year, White House officials had proposed an even more radical move. "There were people in the Trump Administration who suggested shutting down all of our consulates in China," he said, "with the idea that it would give us free rein to kick the Chinese out of their consulates." A similar strategy had been applied to the press. In March, the Trump Administration

sharply limited the number of Chinese who were allowed to work in America for state-run news organizations. The Chinese foreign ministry countered by expelling almost all Americans who worked for the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. By the end of the year, there were only about thirty American journalists left in China.

In Chengdu, after the announcement was made about the consulate, I biked over to the site a couple of times a day. The area was heavily policed, but by the second day large numbers of civilians started to appear, in order to take selfies in front of the building. I overheard one woman tell her companions to hurry up with their photos so that they could make it to Dujiangyan, a tourist site outside the city. They told me that they were on vacation from Wenzhou, and they had added the consulate to the day's itinerary.

Inside the compound, the Americans were executing what's known as a "destruction plan." Along with some hurried packing, they were also shredding documents and smashing computers and telecommunications equipment. The



Chinese had given them exactly seventy-two hours, the same amount of time that the Americans had allowed in Houston. The exchange had the ritualized air of a sporting event: each side had one home game and one away game, and everybody collected whatever he could for propaganda. In Houston, U.S. security agents tailed Chinese consular staff on visits to the Home Depot, where they purchased barrels in which to burn documents. American television news carried images of smoke plumes rising from the consulate's courtyard.

In Chengdu, the consulate's highest building was six stories. When it opened, in 1994, it was the tallest structure in the neighborhood, and rice fields bordered the consulate walls. By the time I first visited, in 1996, the city had already started to grow around the compound. Two decades later, buildings of twenty or more stories loom on three sides. It was an architectural version of my classroom experience: relatively speaking, the Americans were getting shorter.

The high-rises had always presented a security risk, and now the Chinese government arranged cameras on the upper floors, in order to live-stream any activity in the consulate's courtyard. "They were clearly set up to get a shot of us burning documents," the State Department official told me. "They wanted that picture."

Somebody in the consulate had the idea to commission a local print shop

to make a couple of banners, one of which said "*Ganxie Chengdu*"—"Thank you, Chengdu." They figured that this would send a more dignified message to viewers, but they knew that any staffers would be followed, like the barrel boys at the Home Depot. The order was made by a private citizen, but, shortly after the banners were supposed to be ready, more than a dozen security officers took her into custody. When she was finally released, after seven hours and an extensive interrogation, the banners were nowhere to be found.

In the end, the Americans finished their destruction before the clock ran out. Shortly after dawn on the third day, the last diplomats in the U.S. consulate unlocked the front door, turned around, and left through the back, driving off in unmarked vehicles. The Chinese seemed to miss that shot, which wasn't featured on state-run media. Nobody ever saw the banner, either.

On September 25th, Li Dewei told me that sales were still strong. This was true for many businesses in China: in the third financial quarter, the nation's economy grew by nearly five per cent. In recent months, Li had hired a few new employees, but he didn't plan to return to his pre-pandemic staff numbers. As far as he was concerned, this was a good opportunity to improve efficiency. At the age of thirty-four, Li was the oldest person in his office.

Every day, the Pemily12 Web site was receiving four hundred unique visitors, and daily sales were in the thousands of U.S. dollars. Li believed the business's potential for growth was excellent, given all the pandemic pets in America. As usual, he was diplomatic, but he told me that he was disappointed by the way the virus had been handled in the U.S. He compared it with India, where the numbers were also bad. "India doesn't have the ability to handle this," Li said. "But America has the ability. America didn't have to do it like this."

He believed that Trump would win the election, which was the opinion of most Chinese I knew. In early November, Jin Gang, the flag-maker in Shaoxing, told me that a flood of recent Trump orders had convinced him that the Republican would be victorious. At Sichuan University, I polled my students, and fifty-four per cent thought that Trump would win.

A number of students followed the election coverage on Fox News. In a detail that is unlikely to appear in any of the station's promotional materials, the Communist Party didn't bother to block Fox's Web site, unlike those of CNN, the *Times*, and other American sources. In class, my students and I discussed what they were seeing on Fox, and I introduced them to Lauren Boebert, who was campaigning in Colorado to represent me and my family in Congress. All November, a student in the front row of my journalism class wore a "Trump: Keep America Great" baseball cap. He referred to the President as Chuan Jianguo, an ironic Chinese nickname that pairs the Trump surname with a Communist-era patriotic moniker—essentially, Make-China-Great-Again Trump.

Most students said they were personally interested in the outcome of the election. "Yes, because it is related to China and my future life, to study in the USA," one engineer wrote, in an assignment. "Also, now the politicians are not as polite as in the past. I want to see how crazily the failed candidate's party will do."

Others had already abandoned plans for overseas study. In some cases, their parents made the decision, out of concern about diplomatic tensions, the pandemic, and Black Lives Matter protests, which the Chinese media often portrayed as violent. Even with Joe Biden's victory,



*"But you'll never meet anyone if you don't put yourself out there."*



it seemed unlikely that the U.S.-China relationship would change quickly. People I spoke with in the State Department were hopeful that at least some academic and cultural exchanges might be reestablished, but even this would take time.

Meanwhile, the inequality in information was obvious to anybody who had stayed in China. All educated Chinese had studied at least some English, and they could access American culture through Hollywood movies, television shows, and other sources. Many export entrepreneurs, like Li Dewei, used virtual private networks—the Chinese government deliberately allowed such holes in the firewall in part because they were important for business. When I visited Yiwu, my entire hotel was wired through a V.P.N., so that buyers could access Google, Facebook, and other open-society resources. But, for Americans, China was essentially closed. Once the U.S. started losing the small core of diplomats, journalists, and businesspeople who were based in China, the already limited knowledge of the country was bound to be diminished.

From the perspective of the Chinese government, there seemed little incentive to reopen. China was the only major economy that had grown in 2020, and domestic support for the pandemic policies had become stronger as the year went on. Officials were clearly emboldened; in the fall, the crackdowns in Xinjiang and Hong Kong ramped up. Any serious investigations into the early mistakes in Wuhan were censored, and seven journalists and commentators who had reported on the crisis were either in detention or missing. The government had approved for emergency use four vaccines developed by Chinese companies, but there hadn't yet been a push for mass vaccinations—probably, officials were waiting to see how the situation developed overseas. They could afford to be patient, because there was very little virus spreading in China. When I talked to friends and family in the U.S., people always mentioned the vaccines, but the topic rarely came up in Chinese conversation.

Increasingly, our version of 2020 felt like an alternate reality. I had spent an intense year teaching, travelling, and conducting face-to-face interviews, but there had never been a moment when I considered the possibility of contracting the

virus. In August, after reporting for a week and a half in Wuhan, I had flown to Hangzhou, where, the following day, I attended a lecture in an auditorium packed with unmasked people. Afterward, I was one of twenty or more who exchanged handshakes—the old-fashioned kind, where you touch your face afterward—with Jack Ma, who had long been known as the richest man in China. Almost nothing had changed in the ways people interacted, and I never heard a Chinese person mention “pandemic fatigue.” Of the thirty million university students who attended in-class sessions during the fall, I could find only two reported infections.

In many ways, the Chinese system and society were uniquely well suited to handle the pandemic, while the opposite was true of the U.S. For a number of Chinese, the contrast seemed to reflect a permanent change in the world order, but more thoughtful individuals worried about overconfidence. “The pandemic is a very exceptional situation,” Gary Liu, an economist and the founder of the National Affairs Financial Review Institute, a private think tank in Shanghai, told me. “You can't make a long-term conclusion based on an exceptional situation.” He feared that the pandemic could vindicate certain authoritarian structures.

**M**y last journalism class of the term was on New Year's Eve. I asked the students a question: For you, was 2020 a good year or a bad year?

Earlier in December, the university had restricted all students to campus, because Chengdu had experienced its first outbreak since February. As the weather grew colder, there were scattered infections across the country. In most instances, the spread started with Chinese citizens who had quarantined after returning from abroad. Chengdu's outbreak was believed to have begun after an elderly person handled contaminated garbage near a quarantine facility. The first case was reported on December 7th, and, in the following five days, the city tested more than two million residents. Despite having had only a hundred and forty-three non-imported symptomatic cases up to that point, Chengdu had a hundred and forty-one testing locations—a ratio of almost one testing facility for every symptomatic infection. In Decem-

ber, thirteen new symptomatic cases of community spread were reported, and there were targeted lockdowns, but most of Chengdu remained unaffected. In the middle of the outbreak, the city opened five new subway lines.

Almost seventy per cent of my students said that it had been a good year. The same was true for many others. Li Dewei told me that Zocavia, Zocania, and the other shoe brands had enjoyed their best holiday sales ever, and the year's total revenues had increased by about fifteen per cent compared with 2019. For Pemily12, Li believed that the future might involve pet beauty products. “It will be just like beauty products for people,” he said, when we met in early 2021. He showed me an online image of false eyelashes for dogs. “We haven't started this yet,” he said. “But we can see that other people are making this product. Maybe in two or three years it will be a big market.”

After the Capitol was stormed, on January 6th, Jin Gang, in Shaoxing, reported a spike in orders for Trump flags. He sent me pictures on WeChat of the new designs that were being manufactured by the Johnin assembly lines: “Trump 2024: The Revenge Tour,” “Trump 2024: Take America Back,” and “Trump 2024: Save America Again!”

Every Monday, my daughters wore red Young Pioneer scarves to school, as was required of all students. Sometimes they complained about not being able to visit Colorado, and they missed our cat, which was being cared for by our tenant. But increasingly that life felt far away. One afternoon, the twins found an abandoned kitten on the banks of the Fu River, and they took him in and named him Ulysses. That was the best way to cope—one reality here, one reality there. Certain family photographs hung in both our homes, and some pieces of IKEA furniture were also duplicated. In Colorado, our black Honda CR-V was parked in the barn; now we bought another black Honda CR-V for Chengdu. Our Chinese CR-V had been manufactured in Wuhan. Even there, it had been a good year for assembly lines; Honda reported that, in 2020, its automobile sales in China increased by five per cent over the previous year. We called it our COVID car. On campus, I parked in the basement of the Marxism Institute. ♦



# The Shape of a Teardrop



T. CORAGHESSAN BOYLE



## POLICE DOGS AND FIRE HOSES

I'm not going anywhere. They can come in with police dogs and fire hoses and I'll cling to the woodwork till I'm stripped to the bone. They'd like that, wouldn't they, their one and only child, who never asked to be born in the first place, reduced to an artifact in his own room in the only home he's ever known? A memento mori. A musculoskeletal structure without the musculo. Shouting matches? If they want shouting matches, well, I'm more than equal to the task. They're old and weak and ridiculous and they know it, with their stained teeth and droopy necks and faces like masks cut out of sheets of sandpaper, with two holes poked for their glittery, hypercritical eyes to blaze through. But what a fool I am—I thought the final straw was when they dropped me from the family plan and I woke up one day with no cell service and, really, knock-knock, how do they expect me to get a job if I don't have a phone? Is that so hard to figure out? Does that take higher reasoning? Putting fucking one and one together? The next final straw was when they brought in Lucas Hubinski, who was in high school with me back in the time before time, and had him put a lock on the refrigerator and the pantry, too, as if they were display cases at Tiffany's. You think that was extreme? How about the final final straw, the one that could have filled a whole barn with ungulate fodder bound up in bales eight feet high? You ready for this? They went out and got an eviction notice and taped it to the door of my room, as if that was going to mean anything to me, as if I cared what the Danbury Superior Court had to say about anything. Or what they had to say. Them, too.

## EVERY ADVANTAGE

He had every advantage. We loved him, we still love him, our only child, who came to us as the sweetest and truest blessing from God when I was forty-one and so empty inside I was staring into the void in my every waking moment and in my dreams, too, which used to be full of wonder but had turned so rancid I could feel my brain rotting right there on the pillow while Doug

snored the night away—because he'd given up, he really had, worn out from working overtime so we could afford the in-vitro treatments, which were just money down the drain, because nothing ever came of them except heartache. But I don't give up so easily. I'm hardheaded like my mother and her mother before her. When the calendar said I was ovulating, I went to Victoria's Secret for lingerie, got Doug drunk on champagne, posed for him, sat in his lap, and watched porn with him till we were both so hot we practically raped each other. Still, nothing happened. Months dripped by like slow poison. I told myself there were other ways to be fulfilled besides bearing children, though when you come down to it, God and Heaven aside, the whole point of life is to create more life. Then, in the way of these things—the mysterious way, I mean, the way the world turns whether you think you're in charge of it or not—I missed my period. One morning, I woke up feeling sick to my stomach. I knew right away. I was elated. And my baby was more beautiful than beauty itself.

## THE DOCUMENT IN QUESTION

The document in question is just a paragraph long, pithy, to the point, and was drawn up by some lower life-form with a J.D. degree they'd met at the bar at Emilio's, where they used to take me in happier days, before, in my father's words—no joke, my own father—I became an embarrassment to them. Ha! I'm an embarrassment to them? Have they looked in a mirror lately? Anyway, it was a day from hell, first week of February, a cold needling rain harassing me all the way back from the mall, which is a 2.3-mile walk, and, of course, to get there in the first place, I had to walk the 2.3 miles, and forget sticking your thumb out, because nobody around here's picked up a hitchhiker since the first "Star Wars" movie came out or maybe even before that. Who knows? That's a matter for the social historians. But why didn't I drive? Because my car, a Japanese piece of shit, needs a new front end, and it's been up on blocks in the driveway for the past eighteen months, because my parents refuse to loan me the money to get it repaired,

and, again, their thinking is beyond stupefying, because, even if I did manage to find a job without a cell phone, how would they expect me to actually arrive at my place of employment?

But I needed to get out, if only for my own mental and physical well-being, because you can only reread the creased and moldering paperbacks you've had on your shelf since you were fourteen, play video-game retreads, and stare into the fish tank for so many hours a day before you start feeling like Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, so I decided to make the trek. In the rain. I'm not much of a drinker, and, since my unemployment ran out, I don't have a whole lot of cash to throw around, but there's a bar at the mall where I like to sit over a pitcher and watch the bartender go briskly about her business, which mainly involves polishing the bar top and flirting with the male customers, a subset to which I belong. Her name is Ti-Gress, or at least that's what her nametag says, and, given what I have to put up with at home, it's beyond refreshing to sit there and watch her while the sound system delivers electronica and the patrons jaw at one another and the TV redirects its pixels till everybody's in a trance. Plus, I wanted to stop at Pet Emporium to pick up a pair of convict cichlids for the big tank (fifty gallons, freshwater, strictly Central and South American species, because that's my method, not like these so-called hobbyists who mix Asian, African, and South American species in a way that's an outrage to nature, if you think about it). Anyway, I watched Ti-Gress and exchanged a comment or two with her as she slid like a big silk kite up and down the bar, finished my beer, picked out the convicts, and had the stringy-haired sixteen-year-old pet-shop nerd put them in a bigger-than-normal plastic bag, with an extra shot of O<sub>2</sub> (which I tucked inside my jacket to keep it warm for the 2.3-mile walk home).

It got colder. The rain turned to sleet. Nobody would even consider stopping to offer me a ride, and, no, I didn't have the money to waste on an Uber, if that's what you're thinking. Then I walk in the house—nobody home, they're still at work, thank the tutelary gods for small miracles, and Jesus, Muhammad, and Siddhartha, too, if they're



listening—and there's this notice taped to my door. You are herewith informed. Et cetera.

## BIRTHDAY CARD

I didn't even have a chance to get out of the car before he was right there in my face, waving the notice I'd come all the way home on my lunch break to tape to his door so there would be no mistaking our intentions, no more second chances or third chances—or twentieth, actually, if you want to know the truth of it. He was ugly in that moment, which I hate to admit, stamping around in the slush of the driveway, throwing a tantrum like a two-year-old. And with the neighbors watching, too—Jocelyn Hammersmith across the street, whose stone face I could see peeking through her parted blinds, foremost among them. Oh, he was so put-upon, so abused, and I was inhuman, the most unfeeling mother in history, who'd never understood him, never supported him, never given him a break. Doug had called him an embarrassment, which was cruel and wrongheaded, but in that moment—with his face contorted and that unkempt snarl of a beard he never trims or even washes, so flecked with dandruff that he looks like a fur trapper in a snowstorm, and with all the weight he's put on feeling sorry for himself in the room I haven't been allowed to enter since he moved back home after breaking up with his girlfriend, seven years ago—I couldn't help seeing the truth of it.

Will he think to open the car door for me? No, he just wants to rave. "You're killing me! Is that what you want? You want me to be homeless? You want me to sleep outside in this shitty weather and get, what, multiple-drug-resistant TB from all the bums? Huh, would that make you happy?"

Does he notice that my arms are full or wonder why I'm bringing home a bouquet of pink roses and white carnations (which my eighth-period honors class went out of their way to surprise me with)? Does he even know it's my birthday? And what about a card? What about a birthday card, even a generic one—or a handmade one, like the ones he used to give me when he was in elementary school? Am I being petty to want some kind of recognition that I'm

alive and breathing, even if it's only one day a year? Who is this person? What have I made? What has he become?

The door of the car—a Jeep Grand Cherokee that Doug insisted I get for the four-wheel drive—is heavier than the door of a bank vault and even in the best of times I have to push hard to get it open, but now, juggling my purse and briefcase and trying to protect the flowers, it's a real trick. Somehow I manage, and then I've got a foot on the pavement, in the slush, and I'm so angry I'm afraid of what I might say, afraid I might lash out, reminding him of all the "loans" over the years and the fifteen hundred dollars we gave him for Christmas to get himself an apartment, which he says he spent on "expenses," so I just match my expression to his and say, "It's my birthday."

That stops him, if only for an instant, the hand that's been flailing the notice like a doomsday flag dropping to his side and his face softening before it snaps back to the look of umbrage he seems to wear all day every day, even when he's out in the yard by himself or power-walking down the street to wherever he goes when he leaves the house. "You want me to die?" he shouts, loud enough for Jocelyn Hammersmith to hear through her storm windows.

I should bite my tongue. I should remember the way he once was, the way life was before whatever happened to him—to us, him, Doug, and me—wiped it all away. "Yes," I say, making my way past him, so close that the flowers in their crinkly cellophane brush the black leather coat that he insists on wearing winter and summer, as if it were the skin he was born in. "If you're going to die, go ahead and do it—but do it someplace else, will you? Will you at least do that for us?"

I'm angry, I am, but he looks so pathetic in that moment that I want to take everything back. "I didn't mean that," I say. "Justin, listen to me, look at me—"

But he's already turned his back on me, stamping up the front steps and slamming the door practically in my face.

A card. A birthday card. Is that too much to ask?

## LORENA

What my parents don't seem to understand is that Lorena is a miserable excuse for a human being and a certified

bitch to boot. I tried with her. Tried to "man up," as she put it, and, when she got pregnant in our senior year at state college, I even moved in with her in her apartment that was the size of the sweatbox in "The Bridge on the River Kwai" (movie version; I never read the book), and I put up with that till she got so big I started calling her Godzilla, Jr., and things became toxic to the point where it made me physically ill just to look at her. Yes, I had sex with her, guilty as charged, but I was her pawn. All the experience was on her side—I barely knew what a condom was. And please—I never asked to have a child. I wasn't ready to be a father, O.K.? So sue me. Which, of course, was what she did, and, when I dropped out of school twelve credits short of a B.A. in cultural studies, went to sleep on the couch at Steve Arms's place, and got a job at Home Depot, they garnished my wages for child support. Welcome to the legal system of the U.S. of A.!

I made it short and sweet the day I ran into her on the street with the kid. "Lorena, you're killing me," I said, and it was the literal truth.

Lorena might have been pretty if she had more style, but she didn't. And there was the baby, propped up beside her on the bench waiting for the bus, and I just happened to have the bad luck of walking by at that moment. Five minutes before or after and she wouldn't have been there at all. "No, you're killing me," she said, and gave one of her curdled little laughs, like it was the wittiest thing that had ever emerged from anybody's mouth.

I didn't know what to do. I was frozen there. I still had a car then, and a job, and I could have done anything I wanted. The baby didn't look like me, but the DNA test her lawyer made me submit to came up bingo, and there he was, the baby, gazing up at me out of a pair of eyes that were as black as the empty spaces between the planets. "What's his name?" I asked, and she gave me a look as if I'd just slapped her and her mother and her mother's mother, all the way back to the hominids loping across Olduvai Gorge.

"What are you saying?" She was looking down a double barrel of hate aimed right between my eyes. My legs felt weak. I felt weak. I was so far gone I



almost sat down beside her. “You know his name as well as I do.”

“I didn’t give it to him.”

“No,” she said. “No, you didn’t.”

And that, right there, that encounter at a bus stop, of all places, was what started the rift between my parents and their only child, because if there was one thing they wanted, my mother most of all, it was to see this marvel, this grandchild (“grandbaby,” as she put it).

## ALEJANDRO

That was his name, my grandson, Alejandro Diaz Narvaez, and, if my son had done the right thing by the child’s mother, he could have been named Alexander Dugan and brought into the family legitimately and wouldn’t have to swim against the current all his life with a single parent who can’t begin to give him the advantages he deserves. But my son refused to let us see him or have any contact with the mother, with Lorena, whom we laid eyes on for the first time a month after Justin moved back into his room, when she appeared on the front porch with the baby in her arms. “Mrs. Dugan?” she said, making it both a question and a surmise, and I said, “Yes?”

Neither Doug nor I have a prejudicial bone in our bodies, so I can’t imagine how Justin could have thought we wouldn’t accept this child as readily as any other, even if we’d missed the birth of the baby, the shower, the christening, getting to meet the other set of grandparents, shopping for baby outfits and toys and cribs and strollers, all of it. I was gracious with Lorena, of course I was—that was how I was raised. And, as we sat over a cup of tea and a platter of shortbread rounds I found in the back of the cabinet and was afraid had gone stale (but hadn’t, thankfully), I studied that baby like a genealogical sleuth. And whose nose did he have? Whose eyes? Ears? Hair? Even the bow of his legs and the dimples that creased his cheeks when his mother made him laugh, which he did readily, a little chirp of a laugh. I could see right away what a good mother she was. He kicked out his legs and waved his arms, and when Lorena put him down on the carpet he showed off his ability to crawl at speed and even stand for whole seconds at a time without assistance, and the more



“Yeah—no, at night we’re just guessing.”

I watched him the more I knew in my heart just whose child this was and the thing I felt above all else was blessed.

## ON A LEGAL FOOTING

So things are on a legal footing, as the expression goes, my mother, on her birthday, of all days, having taped the eviction notice to my door where it would instantaneously register, like a verbal slap in the face, before I could even work the combinations on the three case-hardened padlocks I’d had to install to protect my privacy and get the fish into the tank because the water in the plastic bag wasn’t getting any warmer and the O<sub>2</sub> level was dropping by the minute. And guess what? My father, when he came home, though I refused to come out of my room and join in any birthday celebration—are you kidding me?—went right along with the agenda. Because he’s weak, a drudge, a drone who’s toiled away at I.B.M. his whole life, taking his lunch to work in the same scuffed aluminum lunchbox he claims

I gave him for Father’s Day when I was five years old, which probably isn’t even true and if it is it’s beyond pathetic.

Anyway, no sooner do I get the convicts into my ten-gallon holding tank to acclimate them and scrutinize them for disease—ich, in particular, *Ichthyophthirius multifiliis*, that is, which can infest an entire tank and turn your fish into tiny bloated white corpses floating in little slicks of their own scum—than I hear my mother’s car pull into the driveway, and it just sets me off, her coming home like that, like today’s no different from any other day, and so I tear the notice off the door and run right out there in the driveway to confront her with it. Which, of course, is just another kind of disaster, because we’ve reached the point where she doesn’t care if I live or die, just as long as I vacate the premises. And she admits it, says it right to my face in a tense little choked voice like it’s tearing her up inside, when the fact is that she coldly contracted with her lawyer friend to draw up the notice and then went down



to the courthouse and paid the fee to file it. It's like in that Russian story where the wolves are chasing the sled through the snowdrifts and the parents toss the baby out to distract them and save themselves—and the horses, don't forget the horses.

Later, after my father comes home, I hear him at my door, though I've got the music going and I'm so furious I can barely concentrate on what I'm seeing on the computer screen, as I scroll through site after site about tenants' rights, most of which are telling me I have none because I've never paid rent or helped with maintenance or entered into any kind of legal agreement, because they're my parents, for shit's sake, and my father's saying things like "Come on, Justin, it's your mother's birthday" and "You knew this was coming and don't say we didn't warn you," and then adding a threat or two about cutting off the power (which he knows drives a knife blade right into my spinal cord, because, in this weather, it would kill my fish in less than an hour) before he gives up. I hear them thumping around up there for the next half hour or so, and then they're slamming out the front door and into my father's car to go someplace (Emilio's, no doubt) for a celebratory dinner without me, the embarrassment who's so embarrassing he's not even going to have a roof over his head anymore. But that doesn't work for me, so what I'm doing is putting things on a legal footing of my own, searching for the cheapest lawyer I can find.

## TIT FOR TAT

The notice gave him ten days to vacate the premises, and every minute of those ten days was soul-wrenching for us, because after everything that's happened over the years—his disrespect and hostility, his slovenliness, his refusal to look for a job or offer to help out in the least bit, and the way he categorically rejects his own son and won't listen to reason or even consider our feelings as grandparents and bolts straight out of the house on the rare occasions when Lorena and Alejandro do make the effort to pay us a visit—please understand that we love him, no matter what he might tell you. But he makes it hard, so very, very hard.

The night of my birthday, after that

## REMEMBERING A CITY AND A SICKNESS

Zapped rats abounded  
on signs behind that house  
but never once did we see one.  
Zapped, that is.

We kept such watch as we could manage  
in those days,  
when such hurt kept us  
alert to (it seemed)

vaster things:  
Heaven, say, which remains  
as remote a thought as pain  
when pain is gone.

Where do they,  
did they,  
go,  
the zapped rats, I mean,

which must have scorched  
and must have screeched  
and must have thudded  
like hirsute breadfruit

down the darksome alleys  
which every morning,

scene in the driveway, we came home to a mess in the kitchen like you wouldn't believe. He'd managed to pry the door off the pantry and take a pair of bolt cutters to the lock on the refrigerator and make himself a big pot of the slumgullion stew he'll eat for days on end, just grabbing everything he could find and throwing the whole mess into the biggest pot we have, which, of course, disappeared into the basement, where he had his hot plate and microwave and whatever else I don't know. His door was locked, as usual. And, when I went down the hallway to pound on it and yell my lungs out in frustration, the carpet gave like a sponge under my feet. Why? Because it was wet, soaked right through to the maple flooring, and I saw then that he'd taken one of his ten-gallon aquariums, the first one I gave him, when he was still in elementary school, and just flung it into the hallway, plants and gravel and broken

glass and all (but no fish—his fish were too precious for that, no matter what kind of gesture he thought he was making). I pounded on the door. Doug pounded on the door. But all we got back for the effort was the dismal electronic music he listens to 24/7, which got progressively louder as we pounded.

Happy birthday, Mom.

Two days later, as I got out of my car in the school parking lot, a stranger walked up to me, handed me an envelope, and announced, "You've been served."

## WHAT I REALLY WANTED TO SUE THEM FOR

What I really wanted to sue them for was giving birth to me in the first place, which had happened without my knowledge or consent and resulted in my having to live a shit life on a shit planet and all because they wanted to have sex. (All



I'm here to tell you,  
were clean.

Of rats, I mean.

Funny, as in strange,  
that now, out of range  
of rats and reason  
to watch for them,

it is the signs that jolt  
me back: an ecstatic rat  
riding a red lightning bolt,  
as if inspired to die.

How much of now's  
a touch of never,  
a gasp of vastness  
like the end of was.

Funny, what I remember:  
dawn: two lit, abysmal eyes  
meeting mine  
amid the prodigal rot.

Funny, as in not.

—*Christian Wiman*

right, all right, so I fell into the same trap, but if they hadn't irresponsibly brought me into the world Lorena wouldn't have been able to take hold of my tool and stick it inside her as if that was where it belonged.) But the lawyer I talked to on the first-five-minutes-free hotline said that would never fly, despite the guy in India who's suing his parents for the exact same thing, so I settled on breach of contract and drew up the complaint myself, alleging that, by virtue of their giving me my own room in the house since I was an infant and freely letting me move back in when I had no place else to go, they had entered into an unwritten contract to provide me with shelter, and that, even if it was within their rights to evict me, they at least had to give me six months' notice, because you can't just throw somebody out in the street, unless you're in some country where they randomly kick down doors and put people in concentration camps.

They didn't take it well. My father, the drudge, got somebody with a tow truck to come and haul my car away, leaving me to contemplate the bleached-out car-shaped blotch on the blacktop driveway and the bill for a hundred and twenty-five dollars that arrived in the mail three days later, along with the address of a garage where I could pick the car up (after shelling out twenty-five per day in storage fees). Which meant, in essence, that I no longer had a car, because I wasn't about to pay anybody anything for having misappropriated my property, and why couldn't I sue the garage, along with my father? Or, better yet, just call the police and report it stolen? That would make them squirm.

As it turned out, I didn't get around to it because other problems arose. Specifically, Lorena and Alejandro. Time may have winged by, but Lorena was pretty much the same, shapeless and without a clue about style (unlike Ti-

Gress, who absolutely rocked every outfit she wore and was the only person I knew who actually got my jokes). It was different for the kid. He'd grown, as I'd already observed through the window on the occasions when Lorena came to visit my mother, hoping, no doubt, for some kind of handout, because I wasn't paying child support and never would, which was why I wasn't about to go out and get a job—Mom, if you're interested—just to see my wages garnished for this skinny, hungry-eyed blur of motion, who was something like seven years old and still didn't look anything like me, no matter what the spit-in-a-kit DNA test said. Oh, my mother would stand outside the door of the room from which she was evicting me and tell me that my son was here and how much he wanted to see me, and I'd just crank the music till the walls shook and watch for my chance to slip out of the house. And I'm sorry, but I am not going to be forced into any kind of relationship with anybody ever—I've got enough to deal with as it is when my own flesh and blood want to throw me out in the street like trash.

Yeah. Right. Call me naïve, because I had no idea the kind of cabal I was faced with here or what they were scheming together to do, my parents and Lorena and the kid, too, but let me clue you in: they wanted me out. And, once I was out, what was going to become of my six-hundred-square-foot room with its own private entrance and full bath, and the knotty-pine panelling I measured and cut and nailed up myself when I was a junior in high school and busting my hump over the college-prep classes I was taking just to please my parents, including the true ballbusters, pre-calc and French? French, Lorena, not Spanish.

## DAY IN COURT

He had his day in court, which was what he wanted, what we all wanted, lacking an alternative. We served him notice three times before we finally got to stand before a judge in a public courtroom, where our family differences were aired as if we were the lowlifes and toothless rednecks you see on the reality shows I never really had the stomach for, and the whole experience was as humiliating as anything I've ever been



through in my life. We retained a friend of Doug's boss at I.B.M. to represent us, and Justin, looking the way he could always look if he put any effort into it—dignified and handsome, dressed up in a sports coat, with his beard trimmed and his wavy hair pulled back in a ponytail—represented himself, because ultimately he was too cheap to hire a lawyer, which Doug had known all along would be the case.

But listen to me, I sound as if I'm my own son's adversary, as if I want to denigrate him, and I don't—far from it. I want to build him up, to love him and respect him, but here we are, in a courtroom, and all those present, from the judge to the court reporter to the onlookers with nothing better to do, are just having the time of their lives with our public ignominy, as if we were back in Dutch times and sitting in the stocks in the town square. We're suing to evict our own son from our family home, where he's lived all his life, because he's become a burden to us, an impossible person, lazy, venal, and abusive—yes, an embarrassment—and he's countersuing us on the ground that we've failed in our parental duty, reneging on the parent-child

bond we made in the hospital the day he emerged from my womb and Doug cut the umbilical cord and the doctor handed him to me to clasp to my breast. That hurts. Lord, how that hurts.

### SO THEY NAILED ME

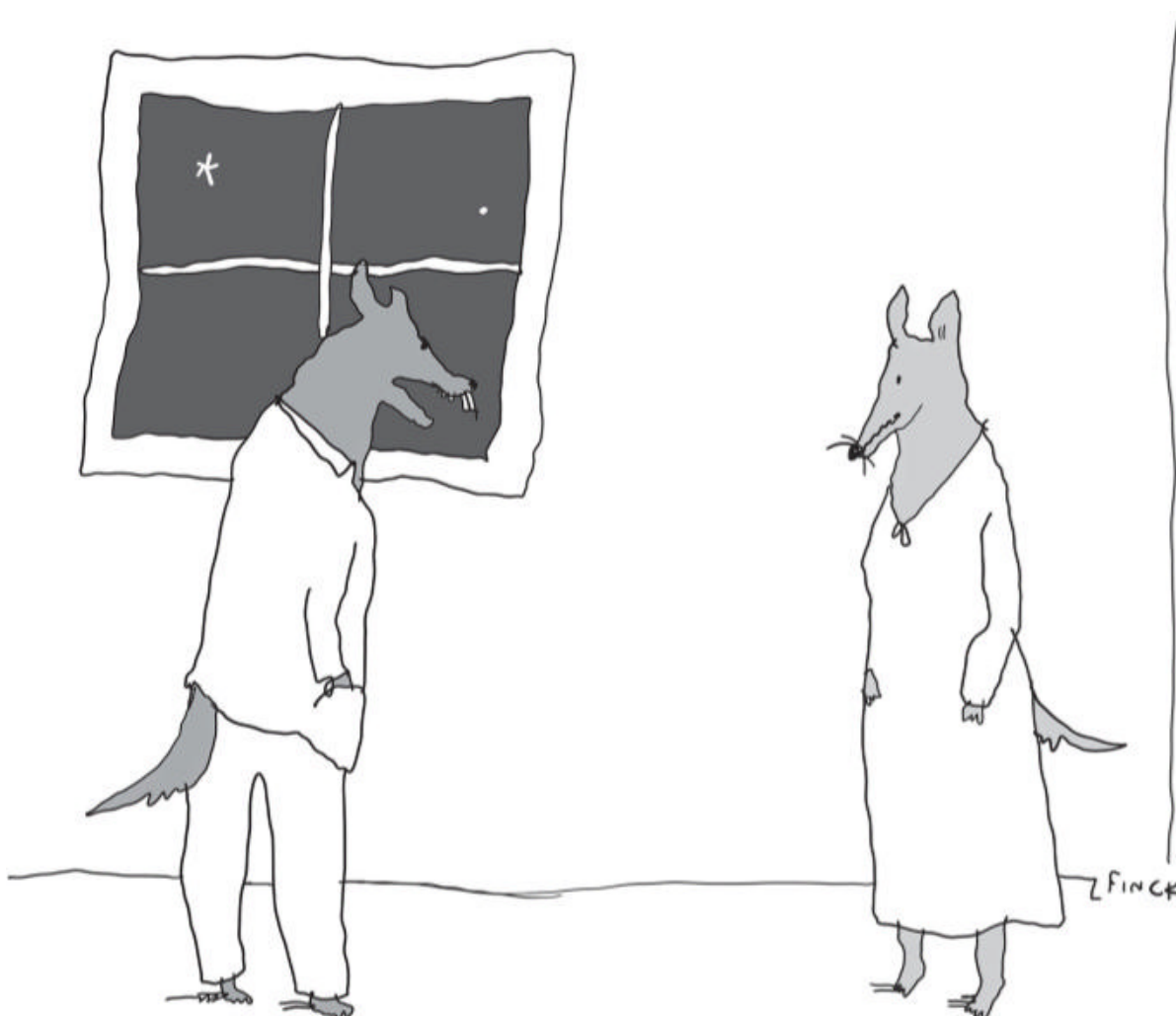
I pleaded with the judge (this balding, meringue-faced automaton who could have been a clone of my father) and made my case with all the authority and ironclad logic I had inside me, and, believe me, I'd done my homework online, and I cited a precedent in which the evictee—somebody's daughter, who was in the same figurative boat as I was—got the court to side with her and grant her a six-month extension, which was really all I wanted at this point, because the level of animosity and tit-for-tat-ism at home was just beyond belief, and I did not want to live there anymore or really ever see my parents again, but the judge came back at me as if he were the prosecuting attorney in some tabloid murder case on cable TV, just grilling me and grilling me. Did I have a job? Was I paying child support? Had I ever contributed anything toward rent

at my parents' house? (Which was bogus, because I happen to know they own the house outright and mortgage-free, so blood from a stone, right?) Was I aware that a parent's legal responsibility for his or her child ends when that child turns eighteen and—here he shuffled the papers on the bench and made a show of clamping a pair of reading glasses over his little upturned lump of a half-price nose—it says here that you're thirty-one years of age, is that right?

Well, I was. Simple fact. Do your homework, dude. But the relevant fact here was that, whether I was six or sixty, I was the one getting tossed out in the street, and I tried to make him see that, tried to make him understand what it was going to take for me, with no money, no prospects, and, let's face it, no hope, to get it together to move, and did he have even the slightest notion of how difficult it is to relocate six fish tanks, including the fifty-gallon? Did he know how big that was? How much it weighed? Did he know that water weighs 8.34 pounds per gallon and the tanks would burst unless they were drained first, and, if they were drained, where did he expect me to put the fish, which required, life or death, a pH factor of 7.1 and a steady temperature of seventy-eight to eighty degrees or they risked getting the ich and the ich could kill them? *Would* kill them?

But the judge was the judge, and I was a minute speck on his docket, a blot, a nuisance, nothing. He set down his glasses, looked first at my parents, then at me, and pronounced his verdict. The case I'd cited, so he claimed, had been superseded by a more recent case and the judgment thrown back on the parents' side, who had the absolute right to evict anybody from their own domicile, and, in respect to that and his own determination in the case before him, he was finding against me and giving me seventy-two hours to vacate or face forcible eviction at the hands of the county sheriff, who—and here he looked me right in the eye—really had better things to do. Understood?

And then there was the scene in the hallway, when I was so blind with fury I couldn't have told you my own name if you'd asked me three times in succession, and before my parents could get to me and gloat or jeer or threaten me



*"What are you in the mood for tonight—Red Riding Hood or Little Pigs?"*



or whatever they were going to do I was confronted with Lorena and the kid, who were standing there practically blocking the exit, Lorena in a burlap-colored dress that showed off her fat knees and the kid in a miniature Mets cap and jersey, as if that would mean anything to me, since I gave up on baseball forever when I was thirteen, the year that the Mets crashed and burned. She looked from me to the kid and said, “Alejandro, say hello to your father.”

## PYRRHIC VICTORY

The silence in the house that night was almost insupportable, as if the air had been sucked out of us and we were just waiting for permission to breathe again. For the first time in as long as I could remember, the floorboards were not reverberating with the pulse of our son’s music, which, as dreary and insistent as it was, had nonetheless become the heartbeat of the house, a filial rhythm I absorbed through the soles of my sandals and the arms of the chairs in the living room and could detect in the faint rattle of the dishes in the sideboard, and, even if I wasn’t always consciously aware of it, it was there, letting me know that my son was alive and well and present. But why wasn’t he playing his music? He was down there, wasn’t he? I’d sat at the window watching since we’d got back from court, feeling nervous and guilty, hating myself, and I hadn’t seen him go out since Steve Arms had dropped him off hours ago.

I asked Doug that question over dinner, which was a homemade paella with clams, mussels, and shrimp, fresh from the seafood market, which Justin used to love when he was still Justin. “I don’t know,” Doug said. “Maybe he unplugged the stereo—maybe he’s packing up.” He bent forward to dig a wedge of the socarrat out of the bottom of the pan. “All I can say is it’s a relief to be able to sit here and eat dinner like normal human beings without that constant goddam thumping. You know what I say? It’s time. It’s about fucking time.”

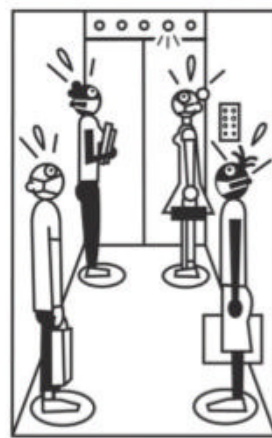
Of course, Justin is Justin, which meant that he ignored the court order and Doug had to summon somebody from the sheriff’s department to come by and enforce it, which was a trial all in itself, watching my son be put through

that on top of everything else. I wanted to go out and interfere, but Doug wouldn’t let me. Here was this young man, in his pressed blue uniform and gun belt, standing outside the basement door while Justin pleaded with him for just a little more time and Steve Arms backed his truck up to the door and the two of them started putting black trash bags full of books and games and clothes into the back of the truck. Eventually, the sheriff’s officer pointed at his watch, got in his cruiser, and drove off. Mercifully. But the process had started, and whether the officer had given him an hour or three hours or five I didn’t know—all I knew was that by the end of the day there’d be a new lock on the door and my son wouldn’t be allowed back inside ever again, whether he’d got his things out or not.

I watched them work, watched them drive off with the first load, then the second, and then finally come back for the fish tanks, the two of them maneuvering gingerly around the big one that still had half an inch of water in it while the fish batted around in the bulging clear plastic bags they’d laid carefully in the tanks after securing them in the bed of the truck, and I knew they didn’t have long before they had to get those fish to where they were going and back into the tanks with the heaters and the filters up and running—that much Justin had taught me over the years. But where were the fish going? That I wasn’t privy to. I wasn’t privy to anything, not anymore. I used to have a son and now I didn’t.

## THE SHAPE OF A TEARDROP

Steve, Ti-Gress, a couple of deadheads I knew from the bar all said the same thing: You’re better off! Don’t you feel better off? And I had to seriously wonder if they were joking or being sarcastic or just radiating their own hostility and insecurity. Better off? In a Section 8 shithole infested with addicts and ex-cons and welfare mothers and their shrieking welfare brats hanging off their necks like tumors, with my tanks crowding the room so I could barely turn around? The tanks I had to move twice, incidentally,



first to Steve Arms’s garage, literally under the gun of some fascist Storm Trooper, and then to this place, and, if I lost half the fish in the process, what’s that to anybody, least of all the judge or my parents? Or Lorena. Who—you guessed it—moved in with my parents, temporarily, strictly temporarily, because her place was being renovated, or so she claimed, and that was six months ago, and every time I walk by at night I wind up peeping in the window, even though I don’t want to, and I can see them in there, one big happy family, my mother smiling and laughing and the kid bouncing off the walls like a Ping-Pong ball and Lorena looking pleased with herself, as if she’d finally

settled the score with me, once and for all. My father I don’t talk to. But my mother, out of the bigness of her heart, put me back on the family plan, and I do get to hear her voice once in a while—all right, daily—and she has one theme only now: Alejandro. As in, when am I going to take him to the park or to a movie or show him my fish tanks, because he’s crazy about fish tanks and he loves you, he really does? I’m saying, “How can he love me when he barely knows me?” And she counters with “It’s in his blood, don’t you get it?”

You can only live with resentment for so long, I know that. I’m free of that place, free of my parents, and yet every time the phone buzzes in my pocket it’s my mother or sometimes Lorena or even, with their prodding, Alejandro. They had him do some art work at school, which my mother sent me via the U.S. Postal Service, pictures of fish in tanks, squirrels and dogs and cars, the usual sort of thing, except for one that said “Dad” on it in big red bleeding letters and showed a kid’s face, his face, obscured by a swarm of floating misshapen blobs that I finally figured out were teardrops, as if he was sending me a message, which he was, no doubt at the prompting of Lorena and my mother, but the thing was, the kid was no artist and you couldn’t really tell what they were supposed to be. ♦

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T. Coraghessan Boyle on the limits of love.



# THE CRITICS



POP MUSIC

## MERGING LANES

*The notion of genre is disappearing. What comes next?*

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

When the newest batch of Grammy nominations were announced, in late November, Justin Bieber expressed displeasure with the way his music had been identified by the Recording Academy. His fifth studio album, “Changes,” was up for Best Pop Vocal Album, a major category. “I am very meticulous and intentional about my music,” Bieber wrote on Instagram. “With that being said, I set out to make an R&B album. ‘Changes’ was and is an R&B album. It is not being acknowledged as an R&B album, which is very strange to me.” There are eighty-three categories at this year’s Grammy ceremony. Although some awards—Comedy Album, Spoken Word Album, Liner Notes—feel relatively unambiguous, most are inherently vague. Whether an album belongs in one category or another (Rock or Alternative? Folk or Americana or American Roots?) is debated, often hotly, by nomination committees assembled by the Academy. Those determinations are confidential and, of course, fallible.

This isn’t the first time an artist has bucked against the specifics of a nomination. Last year, Tyler, the Creator won Best Rap Album for “IGOR,” a complex, often radical concept record about a devastating love triangle. “I’m very grateful that what I made could just be acknowledged in a world like this,” he said backstage. “But, also, it sucks that whenever we, and I mean guys that look like me, do anything that’s genre-bending, they always put it in a rap or urban category.” He continued, “I don’t like that ‘urban’ word. To me, it’s just a politically correct way to say the N-word. Why

can’t we just be in pop?” (Though “urban” is not included in the guidelines for the Best Rap Album category, the Grammys have nonetheless struggled with the term, which some once considered to be an acceptable euphemism for non-white; this year, the Academy changed the category of Best Urban Contemporary Album to Best Progressive R. & B. Album, and, in a stab at transparency, made its rules and qualifications available publicly for the first time.)

It’s difficult to imagine a Grammy ceremony that doesn’t rely on genre as its organizing principle—I suppose that would entail the bestowing of just one award, Best Music—yet genre feels increasingly irrelevant to the way we think about, create, and consume art. Few contemporary stars pride themselves on a pure or traditional approach to form, and most pull purposefully from assorted histories and practices. Is it even possible, in 2021, to locate, let alone enforce, an impermeable membrane between R. & B. and hip-hop, hip-hop and pop? Genre was once a practical tool for organizing record shops and programming radio stations, but it seems unlikely to remain one in an era in which all music feels like a hybrid, and listeners are no longer encouraged (or incentivized) to choose a single area of interest.

I graduated from high school at the end of the nineteen-nineties, and I’ve often wondered whether I was part of the final cohort to think of unwavering genre fealty as an expression of integrity: you picked a style and vigorously defended its superiority. As a teen-ager, I lived in near-constant fear of being called a poser—an incoherent tender-

foot who simply drifted toward whatever was popular. Now the idea of identity as a fixed and narrow concept, and of taste as inherently cloistered, feels bizarre, punitive, and regressive. Taste is still a way of broadcasting a social identity and indulging in a kind of instinctive tribalism, but the boundaries are no longer quite so circumscribed.

Popular music has always been the result of various traditions intermingling. Yet, until relatively recently, the ways in which we write about and sell music haven’t left a lot of room for that idea. Years before I was scrawling “NIRVANA” on the sides of my Chuck Taylors with a black Sharpie, there were hints of the kind of cross-genre pollination that was coming. In 1980, Deborah Harry, of the New Wave band Blondie, rapped some of the verses on “Rapture,” an elastic, disco-influenced pop song. In 1984, the Beastie Boys illegally used an AC/DC sample and bragged about it (“Use real rock beats/Show off big toys”). Two years later, the rap group Run-D.M.C. and the rock band Aerosmith collaborated on a version of Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way,” which became the first rap song to chart on the *Billboard* Top Ten. The song’s opening guitar riff—meaty, beautifully dumb—had been popular with hip-hop d.j.s in New York for years (Grandmaster Flash had used it as early as 1978), but for most listeners the partnership was startling. Even Run found the song’s success odd, telling Geoff Edgers, the author of “Walk This Way: Run-DMC, Aerosmith, and the Song That Changed American Music Forever,” “We did not perform ‘Walk This Way’ in 1986 while it was exploding.” He added, “It

ABOVE: LIANA JEGERS





*It's hard to imagine the Grammys without their categories, yet they feel increasingly irrelevant to our consumption of music.*



was a separate thing in my mind.” The track inspired a slew of imitations, including one by the Fat Boys, a hip-hop trio from Brooklyn, who teamed up with the Beach Boys to record a version of the surf-rock classic “Wipeout,” which charted at No. 12 in 1987.

“What ‘Walk This Way’ did was break down musical genres so they didn’t really exist,” Edgers told me. In 1991, Perry Farrell, of the alt-rock band Jane’s Addiction, launched Lollapalooza, a multi-act summer tour. The first lineup included Rollins Band, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Living Colour, Butthole Surfers, and Ice-T and Body Count—bands that didn’t necessarily share a musical through line but did coexist on the periphery of the industry. Though the festival was branded as “alternative,” its theme was inclusivity. “Punk rock couldn’t last, only because their attitude was ‘Fuck everything,’” Farrell later told *Spin*. “Mine is ‘Include everything.’”

What we mean by “pop” or “jazz” or “country” changes regularly; genre is not a static, immovable idea but a reflection of an audience’s assumptions and wants at a certain point in time. The scholar Carolyn R. Miller

defines genre as being marked by some “typified rhetorical action”—a repeating feature that handily satisfies our expectations or desires. That rhetorical action might be musical (a proper twelve-bar blues, for example, is played on a guitar and built around a 1-4-5 chord progression), but it’s just as likely to be rooted in aesthetics (country singers wear cowboy hats and boots) or attitude (punk bands consist of miscreant anarchists). “Genre is always a blending of both formal structure and cultural context,” Ehren Pflugfelder, a professor of writing at Oregon State University, told me recently. “This may be the most frustrating thing about genre for those who want it to be stable over time. What makes something country music is often just as much about what the audience for that genre expects it to be as it is the chord progression, instruments, time signature, or lyrical content.”

As an audience’s assumptions about a genre change, so does the genre itself. Although some styles, such as bluegrass, cling to their signifiers, assigning huge amounts of value to the old way of doing things, others, such as pop, demand a kind of endless, pur-

poseful reinvention—regurgitating too-recent sounds and tropes would simply be humiliating. (Mercifully, it’s been a couple of years since I’ve heard on the radio an air horn, a staple of Jamaican dancehall culture that, beginning in the late two-thousands, was briefly but enthusiastically adopted by such hip-hop artists as Drake, Kanye West, Eminem, Lil Wayne, Missy Elliott, and even Beyoncé.)

Often, nonmusical components—our aesthetic expectations—are tangled up in discriminatory ideologies. In the earliest days of the recording industry, genre was frequently determined by race, and more than a century later the repercussions of that choice—who gets to make what kind of song—are still profoundly felt. When phonographs were introduced to the mass market, around 1900, they were housed in elaborate wooden cabinets and sold in furniture stores. The records they were designed to play—fashioned from a fragile shellac compound and spun at seventy-eight revolutions per minute—were considered an added-value perk, a way to make the cabinet itself more appealing to buyers. It took a while for people to stop thinking about music as a lived, temporary, and communal experience, and to re-imagine it as fixed, replicable, and private. Once the first record labels became more established, executives who had previously worried about the sale of cabinets had to decide how to market music as a physical product.

Few of the early strategies made sense. Before the vaudeville star Mamie Smith recorded “Crazy Blues,” a runaway hit in 1920, blues songs had been recorded only by white performers, even though Black musicians had developed and perfected the genre decades earlier. Okeh Records took a gamble on Smith. It had been erroneously presumed that Black people would not (or could not) buy records. “That Southern vernacular low-down sound? Those straight-out-the-juke-joint blue notes and bends? Early white labels saw no reason to record them unless they could be repackaged with white artists for the phonograph-owning bourgeoisie of the Progressive Era,” Daphne A. Brooks wrote in the *Times* last year, on the centennial of the release of “Crazy Blues.” Smith changed that trajectory by virtue of her popular-



*“You didn’t slip the surly bonds of convention.  
You bought a pair of striped socks.”*



ity with Black listeners. The title “Crazy Blues” refers to the irrationality of love, and the nauseous realization that you have perhaps committed yourself to a person who can’t or won’t love you back. Smith’s performance was undeniable. “Crazy Blues” sold some seventy-five thousand copies and earned close to a million dollars.

The plan shifted. From then on, blues records were sold to Black buyers. The idea that these marketing distinctions were somehow valid and inflexible began to take hold. Black artists should be sold to Black consumers (these were often called “race records”), and white artists to white consumers. Eventually, that spirit of separation seeped into the music: certain genres would be made by and for white people, and other genres would be made by and for Black people. “The racially segregationist distribution strategy of the recording industry implicitly instructed white ears to feel revolted by the blues and, moreover, to assume that this sense of revulsion was instinctive,” the scholar Angela Davis wrote in her book “Blues Legacies and Black Feminism,” from 1998. Race remained such an important factor in determining musical genre that new language often had to be used whenever a popular artist subverted racial expectations. Though the term “rock and roll” was not created for Elvis Presley, it was eagerly applied to his work, which was famously rooted in Black gospel, R. & B., and blues.

The legacy of these choices became evident in late 2018, when Lil Nas X, then an unknown eighteen-year-old who had been brought up in an Atlanta housing project, and who possessed an uncanny aptitude for synthesizing online culture, released “Old Town Road,” a song that adroitly blurred genre lines. “Old Town Road” is based on an instrumental track that features a sample of “34 Ghosts IV,” a spectral, loping song by the industrial band Nine Inch Nails, and contains some rapping, some singing, and many gleeful allusions to horses, boots, Wranglers, cowboy hats, and bull riding. In photographs, Lil Nas X, who is Black, often wore chaps, fringe, and a sizable Stetson. The track gained purchase first on TikTok, and then on the *Billboard* country chart, where it debuted at No. 19

before the magazine removed it, claiming that it had been miscategorized. *Billboard* explained that it determines genre by “looking at an artist’s chart history, listening to the song, looking at streaming services and examining how and where the label is promoting and marketing the song.”

It seems strange, perhaps, to prioritize a label’s prerogative (or lack thereof) over the artist’s own; when Lil Nas X released the song online, months before he signed with Columbia Records, he tagged it as country in the track’s digital metadata, which is typically what streaming services use to place new music on the appropriate playlist. He also publicly described the song as “country-trap”—a label that, he pointed out, also applies to Bebe Rexha and Florida Georgia Line’s “Meant to Be,” which debuted at the top of *Billboard*’s Hot Country chart, and was allowed to stay there. (Rexha and both members of Florida Georgia Line are white.)

Despite its problems, genre is still a useful enough shorthand that it can feel essential to marketing a new artist, especially on a large scale. Aaron Bay-Schuck, the C.E.O. and co-chairman of Warner Records, told me that ideas about genre are still critical to determining how an artist will be presented to the public by a major label. “We are always asking ourselves, ‘Who is the audience for this music?’” Bay-Schuck said. “‘What fans will be the first early adopters of this artist? What is our entry point?’ And those questions dictate our radio, press, and marketing strategies.” He admitted that it can sometimes be difficult to reconcile the aesthetic and the musical. “When determining what the genre is, strictly in musical terms, it’s all about the musical and lyrical signifiers, the performance, the sonics of the production. But from a marketing lens it’s all about the contextual signifiers. The danger can come when these things do not align.”

Nabil Ayers, the U.S. general manager of 4AD, an independent label based in the United Kingdom, said that 4AD has always been defined more by its psychology than by its sound, though fans of the label often conflate the two. “We

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put out music by drastically different artists, and always have,” Ayers said. “Even before I was at the label, people loved to talk about the old days of 4AD, when it had such a recognizable aesthetic. And I’m always, like, ‘But Pixies and Cocteau Twins sound nothing alike!’” 4AD does have to think about genre when the label is asked to provide metadata for a new release. “It’s pretty archaic,” Ayers said of the process. “Is it electronic? Is it rock? Is it alternative? You have to choose one of these big buckets to put things in. But we don’t think about it much beyond that tick of a box.” He doesn’t see genre as relevant to the way younger listeners experience music. “I don’t think they *actively* don’t think about it,” he said. “I think they *actually* don’t think about it.” He added, “It’s so easy to find anything you want without having to label it.”

Since streaming services have mostly supplanted record shops as the simplest way to find or acquire music, the issue of how to organize a musical library has been revisited. Spotify operates from a playlist model, frequently sorting music by vibe—an idea that’s perhaps even more ineffable than genre, but which also seems considerably more in tune with how and why people listen to music.

Spotify’s playlists are determined in one of three ways. Personalized playlists (the music that gets recommended to you by the app) are compiled by an algorithm that uses a listener’s previous activity, and the activity of others who have exhibited similar habits. Listener playlists are compiled by individuals who want to broadcast their taste. Editorial playlists are curated by Spotify employees. Some prominent editorial playlists, such as “Rap Caviar,” have a genre requisite, but many more are fundamentally experiential (“Songs to Sing in the Car,” “Mood Booster”), and rely explicitly on a presumed listener response. Judging by their success, it doesn’t seem that difficult to figure out how a song will make a person feel. “Obviously, we have access to a tremendous amount of data that tells us what our users listen to, and what they want to listen to,” Kevin Weatherly, Spotify’s head of North American programming, told me. “But it’s still music, it’s

still art. It’s our human curators who ultimately determine what playlists newer songs fall into.”

A popular editorial playlist such as “Chill Hits” (“Kick back to the best new and recent chill tunes,” the description reads) might contain gentle, down-tempo tracks by Taylor Swift, Justin Bieber, Maroon 5, Lewis Capaldi, Harry Styles, the Chainsmokers, and others. One snowy afternoon, I listened to “Chill Hits” for about an hour. It reminded me of standing for too long in the vitamin section of a drugstore. There were plenty of songs I hadn’t heard before (“Ordinary People,” a sentimental ballad by the Australian singer-songwriter Blake Rose; “Slow Motion,” a dreamy lament by Charlotte Lawrence, a model turned singer from Los Angeles), but the cumulative effect was a kind of narcotized stupor. Because the mood of these tracks was so consistent and unbroken (“I have been disappointed by love—*again!*”) and the production so gleaming, after a while every song sounded like the same song, and none of the songs sounded good.

Other playlists are richer and more inscrutable. “Pollen” is described as “genre-less.” When I listened, the first song—sometimes referred to as the playlist’s “cover,” because it provides the graphic at the top of the page—was “Guard Down,” by Claud, a twenty-one-year-old nonbinary singer from the Chicago suburbs, whose soft, searching music is most often described as indie pop. The second track was “Gang Signs,” by the thirty-eight-year-old rapper Freddie Gibbs. Gibbs is a dynamic and provocative artist; his music is not always very amiable. (One verse of “Gang Signs” contains three separate instances of the phrase “suck a dick.”) Tempo aside, it was hard to locate a musical or even an aesthetic commonality here, but it was not especially difficult to imagine the *kind* of listener who might appreciate both songs: young, cool, curious, perhaps roaming an obscure corner of the city with a pair of expensive headphones and a pocketful of half-nibbled weed gummies.

Weatherly is hesitant to suggest that he or anyone else at Spotify makes definitive decisions about how music should be organized or presented, pointing out that the service’s A.I. is merely

reactive. “We’re not arbiters of taste,” he said. “We’re not A. & R. We’re here to try to connect our audience with different types of music, regardless of genre.” He continued, “If you look at playlists like ‘Pollen’ or ‘Warm,’ they really aren’t about specific genres. It’s more about having all of these songs woven together to satisfy a particular user. It’s really the user who defines what makes sense in a particular playlist.”

He sees this new model as potentially generative. “When you have the entire world’s music library at your fingertips, the potential for exploration and discovery of different styles and different types of music is greater than ever,” he said. “Prior to Spotify, you were spoon-fed what music you listened to by traditional gatekeepers. All of that has been shattered.”

No one is pouring one out for consolidated radio or gasbag critics, but some nontraditional gatekeepers (obsessive, savant-like record-store clerks; zine publishers) played a sizable role in the development of my own musical ideas—still tethered, as they were, to genre. (I remain grateful for the ways in which those sources helped me locate like-minded friends to see all-ages shows and trade overwrought mixtapes with.) Genre is a reductive, old-fashioned, and inherently problematic idea, and we should all be eager to see it rendered moot, but I remain curious about the contours of a post-genre world—what that might open up for the future, and what might be sacrificed. Pflugfelder, the writing professor, pointed out that anyone who believes too strongly in genre as inflexible or absolute is, by nature, already somewhat behind the times. “The most identifiable and significant features of a genre are always identified after they’ve actually occurred,” he said. “They’re almost never named in the process of changing, but just after, so the expectations audiences have for certain genres of music are, by definition, referring to the past.” He added, “Anyone enthusiastic for the strict adherence to something called genre is engaging in something fundamentally conservative.” It’s interesting to consider genre as inherently backward-looking—particularly in a moment, such as this one, in which we are all hungrier than ever for the future. ♦



A CRITIC AT LARGE

# STRANGER COMMUNITIES

*Octavia E. Butler's visions of struggle and symbiosis.*

BY JULIAN LUCAS



*Butler's prodigies of survival are forced to confront adaptation's hidden costs.*

In Octavia E. Butler's novel "Parable of the Sower" (1993), a climate-change Book of Exodus set in a scorched mid-twenty-twenties California, a preacher's daughter named Lauren Oya Olamina tries to convince a friend that their world has veered off course. Disaster surrounds their fortified suburb of Los Angeles: water shortages, a measles epidemic, fires set by drug-addicted pyromaniacs, and bandits who prey on the unhoused multitudes that roam the lawless highways. Outsiders throw severed limbs over the walls of their neighborhood, "gifts of envy and hate." Lauren knows it's time to get out:

I'm talking about the day a big gang of those hungry, desperate, crazy people outside decide to come in. I'm talking about what

we've got to do before that happens so that we can survive and rebuild—or at least survive and escape to be something other than beggars. . . . We'll be hit and hit and hit, then the big hit will come. And if we're not ready for it, it will be like Jericho.

Her friend demurs: "My mother is hoping this new guy, President Donner, will start to get us back to normal." Others take refuge in criminal enterprises, Christian worship, or even indentured servitude, exchanging their freedom for security in a neo-feudal company town. Only Lauren, a teenager afflicted with "hyperempathy," has the courage (or inexperience) to imagine an alternative: a survivalist gospel of constant adaptation that she calls Earthseed. She leads a band of refugees

north, dreaming of an extraterrestrial future; in a sequel, "Parable of the Talents" (1998), her small sect confronts a fundamentalist President who wants to "make America great again."

It's often observed that the "Parables," already prescient when they were published, now read like prophecy. Isaac Asimov captured the spirit of Pax Americana in his mid-century "Foundation" series, a saga of galactic expansion through soft power and advanced economics; Butler may have a similar relationship to our own stunned era of slow-motion ecological catastrophe. Earthseed's precepts have inspired an opera, by the folk-singer Toshi Reagon, and, last September, "Parable of the Sower" debuted on the *Times* best-seller list nearly three decades after its first publication. (A few days later, the Bobcat Fire prompted evacuation warnings in Butler's home town of Pasadena.)

Now the Library of America has published the first volume of her collected works. Butler is the sixth science-fiction writer to be featured in the landmark series, and the first Black science-fiction writer. (One hopes that Samuel R. Delany, who once taught Butler, will be next.) Nisi Shawl, a writer and a close friend of Butler's, who edited the volume with the scholar and biographer Gerry Canavan, introduces the book by heralding the "canonization of discomfort."

The volume collects Butler's essays and short stories as well as her two stand-alone novels: "Kindred" (1979), the classic neo-slave narrative, and "Fledgling" (2005), a late-life vampire story. In some ways, it's an unusual assortment, gathering short works by a writer who preferred the capaciousness of trilogies and tetralogies. ("Short story writing," she notes in the preface to "Bloodchild and Other Stories," "has taught me much more about frustration and despair than I ever wanted to know.") But the collection's variety also reveals the clarity of purpose in a body of work that ranged broadly among species, genres, and millennia.

Butler's great subject was intimate power, of the kind that transforms relationships into fulcrums of collective destiny. She explored the ways that bodies could be made instruments of alien intentions, a motif that recurs throughout her fiction in ever more fantastic





*"The DNA test is back. You're guilty and part collie."*

guises: mind control, gene modification, body-snatching, motherhood. Her protagonists often begin as fugitives or captives, but emerge as prodigies of survival, improvising their way through unprecedented situations only to find that adaptation exacts hidden costs.

Butler began writing early. Growing up in Pasadena, where she was born in 1947, she was a shy only child, embarrassed by her conspicuous height. She first tried her hand at magic-horse stories, and switched to science fiction after a formative viewing of the schlocky British space adventure "Devil Girl from Mars." Even at twelve, Butler was convinced that she could do better; soon, she was submitting to local story contests and borrowing money from her mother, who cleaned houses for a living, to hire an agent. (He turned out to be a con artist.)

A practical aunt counselled her that "Negroes" couldn't be writers. Yet although Butler had "never read a printed word that I knew to have been written by a Black person," she was undeterred. "Positive obsession is about not being able to stop just because you're afraid and full of doubts," she wrote in a 1989 essay for *Essence*. "Positive obsession is dangerous. It's about not being able to stop at all."

She was a library-dweller, a writer of

affirmations, an aficionada of self-hypnosis, and a diligent apprentice at her craft. After she'd earned an associate's degree at Pasadena City College, she enrolled in workshops that competed for time with gigs like telephone solicitor and potato-chip inspector. (Sometimes she woke up at 2 A.M. to write before work.) Her career has been as inspiring as her books for the writers who consider themselves—to crib the title of adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha's 2015 anthology—"Octavia's Brood."

The first story Butler sold, "Childfinder," was written for a workshop led by Harlan Ellison, in 1971. A vignette about a racial schism in a clandestine organization of telepaths, it looked ahead to the series of novels that inaugurated her literary career, though five difficult years passed before her first book, "Patternmaster," was published. A down-and-out L.A. haunts the periphery of her fiction: factory workers with abusive lovers, fights on city buses, killings in a city whose inhabitants suddenly lose the ability to speak. The volatile bonds of desperate people living and working in close quarters seem to have provided a model for telepathy in her fiction, an ability that tortures its adepts with the mental noise of others' pain. Empathy, in her work, is often less a virtue than a vulnerability or a weapon.

"Patternmaster" takes place in a de-

populated future Earth ruled by despotic telepaths, who draw their strength from a "vast network of mental links" called the Pattern. It's an engaging story about a psychic succession struggle, with glimmers of the devious reproductive quandaries that would become Butler's watermark. She also hints at a mysterious immortal "Founder," whose machinations drive two later prequels. (The novel and its four prequels are collected in the single volume "Seed to Harvest.")

The Patternist novels established Butler as a science-fiction writer; a degree of crossover appeal came with "Kindred," in 1979. She won a Hugo and a Nebula for the story "Bloodchild," in the mid-nineteen-eighties, but spent years trying to move beyond the genre market. Outside of it, her work was noticed by such Black women writers as Toni Cade Bambara and Thulani Davis, and excerpted in *Essence*—one of whose writers seemed surprised to find nuanced ideas in a genre associated with "overgrown juveniles." But mainstream literary editors, including Toni Morrison, at Random House, didn't buy manuscripts that Butler wanted to set before a wider audience.

The nineties were a breakout decade. Frustrated by publishers' refusals to send her on book tours, she signed with an independent press, which promoted her work to Black and feminist booksellers. "Parable of the Sower" won critical acclaim, and in 1995 Butler became the first science-fiction writer to receive a MacArthur grant. The honor coincided with a growing interest in how Black writers, artists, and musicians drew on the dislocation of the past in critically reflecting on the future. The critic Mark Dery called it "Afrofuturism," and Butler has become its most widely recognized literary avatar.

Perhaps her greatest talent was the clear evocation of thinking in a crisis. The thrill of her fiction lies in its learn-or-die urgency, conveyed in a streamlined prose of situational awareness. The brinkmanship of the Reagan era inspired her standout Xenogenesis trilogy, collected in the volume "Lilith's Brood." (Ava DuVernay is producing a TV series based on the first installment, "Dawn.") It begins in a womblike cell on a living spaceship, where Lilith Iyapo, one of the only survivors of a nuclear war, waits for



her captor-saviors to show themselves. They are part of a galactic diaspora of tentacled bipedal “gene traders,” the Oankali, who propose a merger of the species. The scheme is not only the price they exact for repopulating Earth but a biological necessity. “We are committed to the trade as your body is to breathing,” one explains. “We were overdue for it when we found you. Now it will be done—to the rebirth of your people and mine.” Lilith is to be the first mother of this hybrid species, and an evangelist for Oankali-human interbreeding to fellow-survivors, many of whom consider her a traitor.

Nearly all of Butler’s protagonists face the accusation that their survival is a form of complicity, and none more acutely than the protagonist of “Kindred.” Dana, a twenty-six-year-old Black writer living in nineteen-seventies Altadena, California, is transported back in time to a small plantation in antebellum Maryland each time her white ancestor Rufus Weylin is in danger. Rufus grows up to inherit the plantation, while Dana, who repeatedly saves his life, attempts to awaken him to the injustice of slavery. “Not all children let themselves be molded into what their parents want them to be,” she reasons. Her white husband, Kevin, who accompanies her to the plantation, is skeptical, objecting that she’s “gambling against history.”

The novel’s enduring power lies in how it forces Dana not simply to experience slavery but also to accept it as a condition of her own existence: “Was that why I was here? . . . To insure my family’s survival, my own birth.” The double bind deepens when Dana learns that this survival depends on Rufus’s enslavement and rape of a free Black woman named Alice. Dana doesn’t just fail in her efforts to enlighten Rufus (empathy lessons being no match for lust and impunity); she also becomes an unwilling accomplice in his depredations. Rufus uses her as a go-between with Alice, figuring that Dana, who needs Alice as an ancestor, might discourage her from taking the potentially fatal step of resisting him or running away.

“Kindred” helped to create a genre, the neo-slave narrative, that still flourishes. Its dark fairy-tale conceit has marked not only a recent crop of liter-

ary descendants—books such as Colson Whitehead’s “The Underground Railroad” and Ta-Nehisi Coates’s “The Water Dancer”—but the art of Kara Walker, the domestic horror of films like “Get Out,” the speculative scholarship of Saidiya Hartman (who cites Dana’s odyssey in her influential essay “Venus in Two Acts”), and the broader culture of remembrance, to the extent that even those who have never read the novel are familiar with the motif of a plantation looming over the present like a ghostly double. Maybe too familiar: the “Kindred”-like film “Antebellum,” starring Janelle Monáe, was widely panned.

The genre’s evolution has thrown some of the novel’s weaknesses into relief. Its big-house entourage is crammed with stereotypes, from the world-weary auntie in the kitchen to the hysterical laudanum-sipping mistress. “Kindred” also sidelines contact among the enslaved in favor of the drama between Black and white. The narrative revolves around Dana’s relationships with Rufus and Kevin, falling back—despite Butler’s original treatment of hybridity elsewhere—on the perennial cliché of interracial contacts pregnant with the future of the country. (Danzy Senna lampooned this trope in her essay “Mulatto Millennium.”) Meanwhile, Alice, Dana’s ancestress, never becomes much more than a moral quandary: a stubborn victim who is unable to adapt.

Even so, the novel’s premise feels newly mordant in an era when Black women have been hailed as the saviors



of American democracy, whether they like it or not. “Kindred” takes place during the United States bicentennial, and Dana’s last trip back to the plantation takes place on July 4th. Her time-travelling mission begins to look less like an opportunity to change history than like a confirmation that it couldn’t have been otherwise. Or is it that Dana, in saving Rufus, has by extension saved America?

In one uncomfortable scene, Dana compliments Kevin by saying that he looks like “a heroic portrait” of Andrew Jackson. Whether it’s sarcasm, an earnest moment of interracial patriotism, or a cry from the sunken place, this certainly wasn’t the future that Alice might have hoped for. “We are our ancestors’ wildest dreams,” goes one popular affirmation; Butler raises the disquieting proposition that we are, at least some of the time, their parasites.

Dana is forced to confront the monstrosity of her origins. Shori, the Black vampire protagonist of Butler’s final novel, “Fledgling,” is herself a monstrosity, the half-human result of an experiment to create an “Ina,” as the novel’s vampires call themselves, who can endure the sun. Butler didn’t invent the melanin-armored daywalker (the Marvel superhero Blade was there first), but she did give it a new political charge: Shori and her family are attacked by agents of a conservative, old-line Ina family—night-supremacist blue-blood-suckers—who consider her a threat to their species’ integrity. With the help of other Ina, she confronts them in a vampire trial of the millennium.

Shori is the archetypal hybrid of destiny: confused, persecuted, yet ultimately more powerful than the monoracials. She begins the novel in a cave, severely wounded after an attack, completely unaware of who or what she might be. Soon, she hitches a ride with Wright, a young white man who smells delicious. Shori looks about eleven—though she’s really fifty-three—and Wright offers to drive her to the police station or the hospital. After she bites him, the destination shifts to Wright’s cabin. Blood-sucking, predictably, turns out to be highly erotic.

Wright becomes Shori’s “symbiont,” growing as dependent on her venom as she is on his blood. He’s the first of many in the diverse flock that Shori gathers while fleeing her attackers, and, as they make contact with other Ina, the outlines of a society emerge. Each adult Ina “feeds” on half a dozen or so human symbionts, who lose their freedom but gain in health and life span. They all live together, improvising a spectrum of familial and sexual relationships. Butler’s domestic Draculas reside not in towers or sarcophagi but in cozy subdivisions



with chosen families of human beings.

Beginning with the squicky idea of a vampire-girl with an adult male dependent, Butler's Ina families pose characteristically unsettling questions. Don't all intimate relationships—not only those deemed taboo—involve power imbalances? And what can “consent” mean when one being needs another to sustain one's life? After one bite, it's difficult to tell where choice ends and compulsion begins. Butler suggests that the Ina-symbiont relationship might be no worse than the forms of dependency that humans already take for granted. One of Shori's symbionts is an elderly widow who gladly exchanges a lonely life of unmet needs for a place within an Ina family.

These suggestive dynamics are undermined by the hokey hunt for Shori: repetitive shoot-outs; a courtroom finale stuffed with unnecessary new characters; a relative who shows up to deliver expository monologues on Ina society only to be killed a few chapters later, like a tutorial character in a video game. Butler herself wasn't satisfied with “Fledgling,” which she wrote as a diversion while struggling with her never-finished “Parable of the Trickster.”

But certain of its weaknesses are characteristic of a writer who sometimes let intellect and adrenaline outpace attention to the messier aspects of her creations' inner lives. Butler's narrator-protagonists often sound like variations on the same courageous, cerebral pragmatist. They rarely notice anything that doesn't pertain to their emergency, as though the world were a fluorescent-lit escape room. Minor characters who question their efforts—Alice in “Kindred,” the alien skeptics in “Lilith's Brood”—come across merely as obstinate foils. This straightforwardness gives Butler's narratives their urgency. Yet what's the worth of survival if all other values fall before it?

Butler's stature feels most certain when these doubts—the guilt of the survivor-creator—enter her writing. They are best exemplified by “Wild Seed,” Butler's fourth Patternist novel and the first chronologically, a captivating transatlantic creation myth that may be the most brilliant of her books. (The novel is being adapted for television by the writers Nnedi Okorafor and

Wanuri Kahiu.) It's a duet between immortals—Anyanwu, a shape-shifting healer, and Doro, the Founder alluded to in “Patternmaster”—whose stormy relationship doubles as a custody battle over humanity's future.

They meet in West Africa, at the close of the seventeenth century. Doro, a body-snatching spirit, has wandered from host to host for millennia. He dreams of fathering a new race, and corrals individuals with rare abilities—especially mental powers, like telepathy and telekinesis—in concealed “seed villages” on five continents. Anyanwu is the first fellow-immortal he's encountered, and he covets her companionship. More darkly, he wants to breed her with his other subjects, selecting for her abilities and longevity. Doro seduces her with an irresistible promise: “I can show you children you will never have to bury.”

Doro is the ultimate survivor, and millennia of cunning have made him cruel: “Everyone has always been temporary for him—wives, children, friends, even tribes and nations, gods and devils. Everything dies but him.” If any of his children refuse to mate in accordance with his wishes, he takes their bodies and does it himself.

Anyanwu travels with him to his village in upstate New York, on a ship crowded with “wild seed” taken from slavers. (Slavers are alternately Doro's rivals and his accomplices.) For the next half century, she bears children who then become hostages in her struggle to tame or defeat him. Anyanwu's only leverage is Doro's fear of killing her, his one peer in the universe.

Butler published “Wild Seed” a year after “Kindred,” which, in early drafts, was itself supposed to fit within the Patternist series. The novels feel separated at birth; both are stories of enslavement, codependence, control of the future, and women whose will to sustain life is perverted by men. “Wild Seed,” though, goes beyond its predecessor in juxtaposing the particular experience of American slavery with a fantasy that hints at the fundamental sources of human parasitism. Doro's mission forms a slant rhyme with history; a fantastic double of Colonial slave society, it makes the original less familiar, throwing its atrocities into relief. His settlement in New York flagrantly violates the taboos of

the surrounding society—incest, miscegenation—in pursuit of its own distinctive eugenics.

The terror of “Wild Seed” is not only that one's body can be made a vector for somebody else's future but that this dynamic is in some ways unavoidable. Late in the novel, Anyanwu escapes to Louisiana and builds her own community of mutants on a remote plantation. It's an island of freedom, and yet Anyanwu finds herself behaving as an authority: selecting, governing, marrying, and occasionally exiling her wards. “Sometimes, one must become a master to avoid becoming a slave,” she tells Doro earlier in the novel. Now he accuses her of becoming another him.

Like Milton's Satan, Doro, for all his malevolence, has his creator's sympathy. Butler gives him many of the virtues that define her heroines: patience, situational awareness, emotional intelligence, and, above all, a flexibility uninhibited by fear, prejudice, or sentimental attachment. We learn that he, too, was once an underdog: a prisoner of the Egyptians in ancient Nubia, who likely escaped captivity by taking his captors' bodies. In another Patternist novel, “Mind of My Mind,” the cycle repeats itself, as one of Doro's children learns to resist him with psychic abilities that are later used to establish the Patternists' supremacy over non-telepathic “mutes.” The abuse of power, Butler suggests, can be distinguished from the art of survival only if we acknowledge the intimacy between them.

In other words, the future is made of others' bodies, if only because we cannot sustain life or reproduce it on our own. Butler expresses this viscerally in her exquisite short story “Bloodchild.” In it, Gan, a young man on an unnamed planet, must decide whether to allow himself to be impregnated by his family's alien patron, a velvety centipede-like being with a stinging tail named T'Gatoi. (Butler was inspired by certain botflies that lay their eggs in human wounds.)

It's a terrifying conceit that, characteristically, Butler's coolly reasoned narrative makes seem logical and necessary. The clawed parasite T'Gatoi is, of all things, a politician—even a liberal—who wants to find a reasonable accommodation between the humans and her own species. As Gan says, “She parceled us out to the desperate and sold us to the



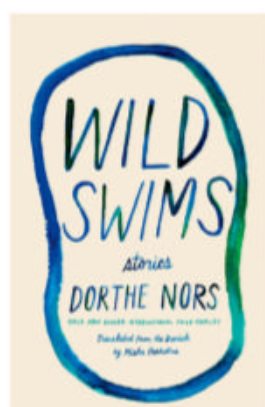
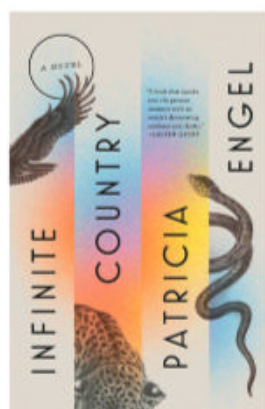
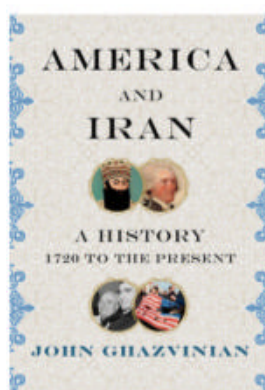
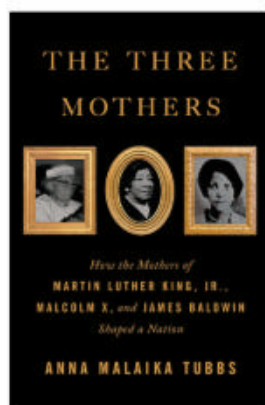
rich and powerful for their political support. . . . Only she stood between us and that desperation that could so easily swallow us.” It’s supposedly an honor to have T’Gatoi in the family; all that Gan has to do is let her insert her ovipositor and use his body as feed for her grubs.

Some readers saw “Bloodchild” as a story about slavery, a reading that took Butler aback. Gan’s choice is, if constrained, nonetheless free. Freedom is always a negotiation with others—even for the powerful—and to forget this, Butler suggests, is ultimately to denigrate the oppressed. It’s an ethic that recurs in “Amnesty,” a late-career story originally published online. Its appearance—three years before she died, in 2006, of a fall, at the age of fifty-eight—dispels any suspicion that Butler’s talent was atrophying in her final years.

The story is about a fraught détente between humans and the “Communities,” a species of extraterrestrials who have forcibly occupied the world’s deserts. These entities, each one a foliage-like swarm of organisms, are eager to communicate with their new neighbors, preferably by “enfolding” their bodies and feeling their movements. Butler’s protagonist, a woman named Noah, was abducted by the Communities as a child, but goes on to work for them consensually as a “translator,” developing an interspecies language of touch. She has learned to enjoy the sensation of a “stranger-Community . . . drawing her upward and in among its many selves.”

At the end of “Amnesty,” Noah faces a skeptical crowd of recruits, who interrogate her about her loyalty to the “weeds.” Everyone unpacks a particular kit of preconceptions: a woman sees the Communities as colonizers, a man thinks that translators must have been hypnotized and drugged. They can’t accept that Noah is neither a victim nor a turncoat but, much like her Biblical namesake, the only one preparing to live in a world made new.

If there’s a cardinal sin in Butler’s universe, it’s expecting your way of life to go on forever, or, in more intimate terms, expecting your descendants to be like you. But our histories—evolutionary, diasporic—teach otherwise. The future isn’t a mirror. There is a grace in learning, like Noah, to lose oneself in stranger-Communities. ♦



## BRIEFLY NOTED

**The Three Mothers**, by Anna Malaika Tubbs (*Flatiron*). This dynamic blend of biography and manifesto centers on Louise Little, Alberta King, and Berdis Baldwin—the mothers of, respectively, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and James Baldwin—women whose legacies, as Tubbs notes, have been overlooked. Using them as a window into the varieties of Black American experience, Tubbs finds that, though they came from vastly different backgrounds, there were important commonalities: each was passionate about Black progress, each instilled a sense of duty and possibility in her children, and each outlived her son. Tubbs’s book stands against the women’s erasure, a monument to their historical importance. As Malcolm X put it, “All our achievements are mom’s.”

**America and Iran**, by John Ghazvinian (*Knopf*). “There is not a single problem the United States is dealing with in the Middle East that cannot be traced, in one way or another, to its dysfunctional relationship with Iran,” Ghazvinian writes, in a history that stretches back to 1720. An American historian of Iranian origin, he frames the story as four seasons, beginning in spring, when Iran and the newly formed United States held each other in mutual respect and fascination, and concluding in the present winter of “wholly unnecessary” misunderstanding and distrust. Ghazvinian had access to archives in both countries and gives revealing accounts of how such events as the hostage crisis and the C.I.A.-engineered overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddeq, in 1953, were perceived on each side.

**Infinite Country**, by Patricia Engel (*Avid Reader*). The questions that accompany the choice to move far from home reverberate through this novel about a Colombian family. Mauro and Elena, parents of one child, leave for Texas to escape Bogotá’s violence. Years later, after they have overstayed their visas and have had two more children, Mauro is deported. Engel interweaves the story of the family’s fracture with scenes of the youngest child, Talia, who was sent back to Colombia as a baby, in a reform school. Talia hatches a plan to join her mother and her siblings but struggles with leaving her father behind. Elena, meanwhile, ruminating on her choice to stay in America rather than return with Mauro, realizes that, for those sundered from home, “years will bleed together like rain on newsprint.”

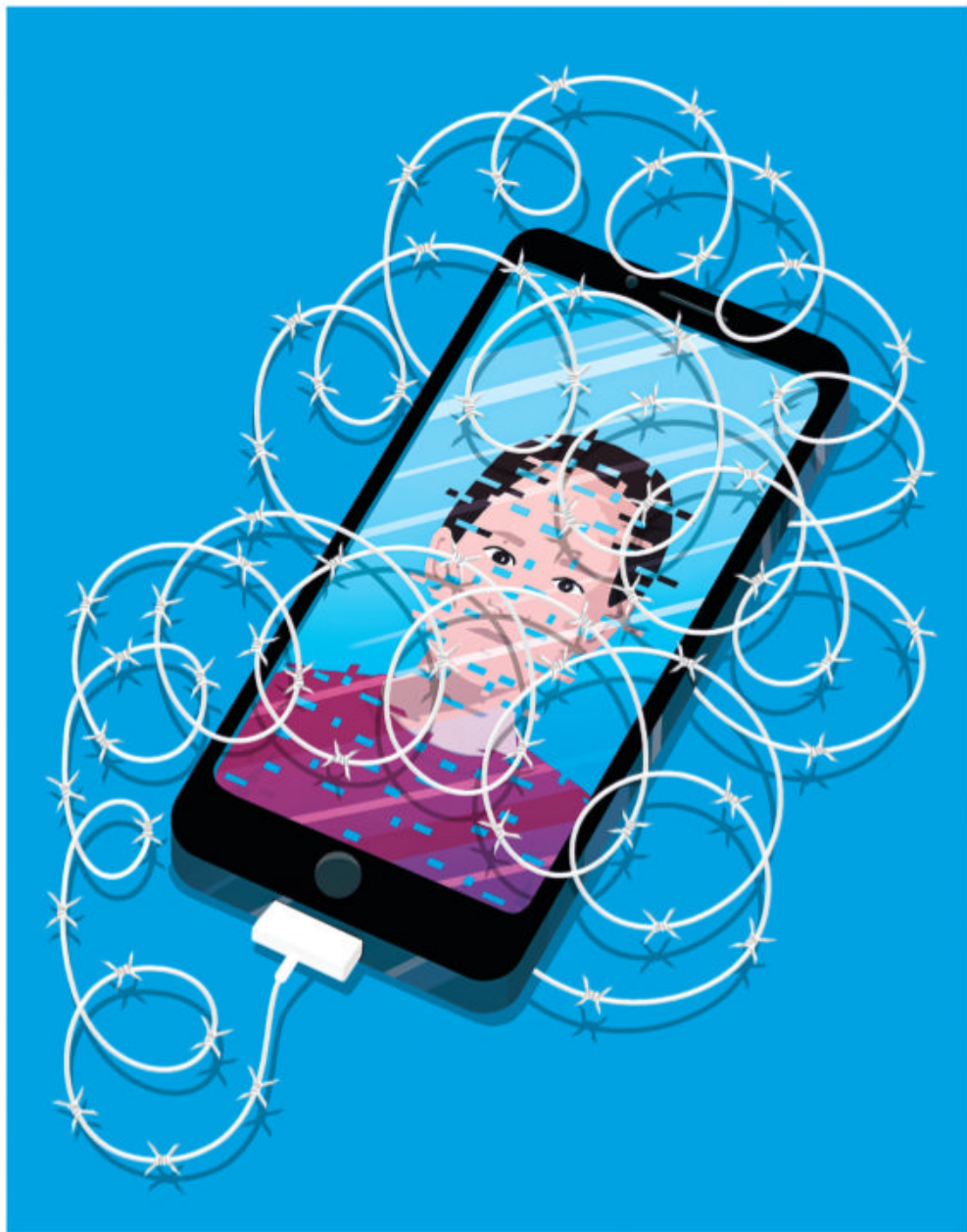
**Wild Swims**, by Dorte Nors, translated from the Danish by Misha Hoekstra (*Graywolf*). Written with Nors’s customary economy of style, these stories confirm her as a master of unlikely liaisons. A writer strikes up a friendship with the mother of an ex-lover; a woman at a party avoids the scrutiny of a crush’s acquaintance by hiding behind some beer kegs, and notices “a sweet smell of warm grass and public opinion.” In the title story, a woman’s observations of strangers in a swimming pool arouse recollections of a childhood excursion to a different swimming spot, outdoors and unchlorinated. The present is uncomfortable and off-kilter, and the memory—the wild swim—is an idyll.



# WHAT'S MINE IS MINE

*Are we making up our notions of property rights on the fly?*

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT



On July 26, 2015, William Merideth's daughter was sunbathing on the deck of their house, in Hillview, Kentucky, when a drone flew over the backyard. The girl rushed inside to tell Merideth, who rushed out. The drone had whizzed on, but it soon returned. It was, Merideth would later say, "hovering" above him when he decided to plug it with his shotgun.

The drone, which cost its owner some fifteen hundred dollars, crashed into a nearby field. Merideth argued that he was justified in firing at it because it was trespassing on his property. "I didn't shoot across the road," he told the local Fox affiliate, WDRB. "I didn't shoot

across my neighbors' fences. I shot directly into the air." The Hillview police took a different view. They arrested Merideth and charged him with criminal mischief. He ended up spending a night in jail. Upon his release, he had T-shirts made up showing a drone in a set of crosshairs. "We the People have had enough," the shirts said.

According to the maxim *Cuius est solum, eius est usque ad coelum et ad inferos*, whoever owns the ground owns up to Heaven and down to the center of the earth. William Blackstone cited this formula in his "Commentaries on the Laws of England," which was published in four volumes starting in 1765.

For the next century, most legal texts repeated some version of it. "The law says the land is his even to the sky, and therefore he has a right to it," a Vermont judge wrote in 1888, in a decision involving a roof that edged over a property line.

With the invention of the telegraph and the telephone, courts extended the principle to transmission wires. Later, the same was done for elevated train tracks. In 1897, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that the Metropolitan West Side Elevated Railroad Company had acted illegally in extending a track fourteen feet above a Chicago alleyway owned by a man named Warren Springer. Springer was awarded sixty-one thousand dollars, almost two million dollars in today's money.

When airplanes drifted into the picture, applying *Cuius est solum* started to get tricky. In a single trip, a plane might pass over hundreds, even thousands of properties. Was this trespassing? If so, what was the remedy? On the ground, a landowner had the right to eject a trespasser, provided the force exerted was "reasonable." But as Stuart Banner, a professor at the U.C.L.A. School of Law, observes in "Who Owns the Sky?" (2008), anyone who tried to scare off an aircraft by, say, firing a warning shot "would likely be committing a felony."

The issue was finally settled in 1946, with the help of some poultry. Thomas Causby was a chicken farmer who lived just east of the Greensboro–High Point Airfield, in North Carolina. During the Second World War, the United States Army leased the airfield, extended the runway, and erected a control tower. With that, it was "one plane right after another," Causby's wife, Tinie, lamented. The noise of the aircraft agitated the hens; frantic, they would throw themselves against the walls of their coop and, in Causby's words, "burst themselves open and die." Causby filed suit, claiming that the War Department had deprived him of his livelihood. The case reached the U.S. Supreme Court, which, in a manner of speaking, split the air column. A landowner, the Court ruled, did not own up to Heaven—only "the immediate reaches of the enveloping atmosphere."

So what about drones? Is a drone two hundred feet above someone's yard

*The big tech firms are wizards when it comes to the engineering of ownership.*



hovering in the “immediate reaches”? How about a hundred feet up? Or fifty? What about ten?

Everyone, from toddlerhood onward, knows—or thinks he knows—what’s his. But, according to Michael Heller, a professor at Columbia Law School, and James Salzman, a professor at the U.C.L.A. School of Law, ownership is never straightforward. It “is a social engineering choice, a conclusion we come to, not a fact we find,” they observe.

Heller and Salzman open their new book, “Mine! How the Hidden Rules of Ownership Control Our Lives” (Doubleday), with the brouhaha that became known as “reclinegate.” In January, 2020, on the day that the Trump Administration declared COVID-19 a “public health emergency,” a woman named Wendi Williams travelled from New Orleans to Charlotte on American Airlines. She was sitting in the next-to-last row, and some minutes into the flight she pressed the metal button on her armrest and leaned back. The man behind her responded by pounding on her seat. Williams filmed him with her phone and tweeted the video, which went viral. Everybody, it seemed, had an opinion on the matter.

“The proper thing to do is, if you’re going to recline into somebody, you ask if it’s O.K. first,” Ed Bastian, the head of Delta Air Lines, said.

“The only time it’s ever O.K. to punch someone’s seat is if the seat punches you first,” Ellen DeGeneres declared.

According to Heller and Salzman, neither party was exactly right or exactly wrong. When Williams bought her ticket, she’d been led to believe that she was buying access to her seat and to the triangle of space behind it. The man in the last row believed that the triangle properly belonged to him. The airline had left the “rules of ownership” vague so that it could, in effect, sell the same wedge of space twice. The result was an aerial imbroglio.

In “Mine!,” Heller and Salzman examine a wide array of ways that people lay claim to things, both actual (as in treasure) and more abstract (as in ideas). Since ownership is constructed, it’s always up for grabs. Consider perhaps the most basic argument for pos-

session: it’s mine because it’s me. Heller and Salzman recount the story of Levy Rosenbaum, a Brooklyn man who worked to match desperately ill patients with kidney donors. Had the donors given away their organs, Rosenbaum would probably have been considered a hero. As it was, the donors were paid. Under U.S. law, a person is forbidden to sell a kidney, even if it’s her own, and Rosenbaum was convicted of organ trafficking. At his sentencing hearing, in Trenton, several people said that he had saved their lives. Nevertheless, he ended up spending two and a half years in prison.

Heller and Salzman acknowledge that putting a price on organs has its perils. But, they argue, exploitation is a fact of life: “Poor people already work extra shifts and take dangerous jobs that risk their health.” Why “deny adults the ability to pay off a mortgage by selling a kidney instead of working in a convenience store?”

Meanwhile, the law on selling body parts is all over the map. People get paid for parting with their blood plasma and their sperm. In Montana, it’s O.K. to sell your bone-marrow cells, though in neighboring Wyoming it’s not. In Illinois, a woman can rent out her uterus to gestate someone else’s baby, but in Michigan this is prohibited. Egg donors can make tens of thousands of dollars, through payments that are labelled “compensation.” In Canada and much of Europe, payment for eggs is forbidden, which is why, according to “Mine!,” the United States has become a destination for “fertility tourists.” If it seems as if people are making up the rules of anatomical ownership as they go, Heller and Salzman argue, that’s because they are.

Then, there’s the claim that it’s mine because I got there first. “First,” Heller and Salzman point out, is itself a judgment call. There are profound examples of this—the wholesale appropriation of Indian lands so that white settlers could claim priority—and also many more trivial ones. Services with names like Skip the Line and Linestanding.com hire people (sometimes the homeless) to queue up (sometimes for days) for seats in congressional hearing rooms and in the U.S. Supreme Court. When the hired stand-in gets to the door, a

well-heeled lawyer or lobbyist takes his spot. Is it fair to say you are “first” if you’ve paid someone to be first in line for you? “We never used to ask these questions,” Heller and Salzman write. “But today we must.”

In recent decades, the Web has created a whole new class of possessions to wrangle over. Take, for example, the e-book. A person who buys a digital book may imagine she’s bought the electronic equivalent of a hardcover or a paperback. The e-book version of “Neuromancer” is, after all, pretty much word for word the same as the print version. Legally speaking, though, the two volumes are very different. Once you’ve bought a paperback, you can resell it, or give it to a friend, or cut it up and make a collage out of it and sell that. If you buy the e-book, you can’t resell it or lend it or rearrange it—at least not without violating the terms of service. Sometimes you can’t even read it yourself. In 2009, Amazon removed copies of “1984” and “Animal Farm” from purchasers’ Kindles. (The company said that the books had been downloaded from an intermediary that did not own the rights.) Similarly, Apple has pulled movies from customers’ accounts as a result of disputes with the movies’ copy-right holders.

As more and more objects are connected to the Web, the odds of such take-backs grow. Heller and Salzman cite the case of Revolv, a company that offered a “smart-home” hub that could be used to program a household’s lights, alarms, and motion detectors. In 2014, Google bought Revolv; two years later, it closed the company and disabled the hubs. Though Google didn’t actually go into people’s homes and take the devices, it might as well have. As one irate owner complained, the hubs had become about as useful as “a container of hummus.” The move was legal owing to the licensing agreement that Revolv owners had acquiesced to, doubtless without perusing.

“iTunes, Kindle and Revolv licenses all work more or less the same way,” Heller and Salzman write. “The limits of your ownership are described in excruciating legal detail on a website no one ever reads and few could understand (including us, your authors).” And



tech firms like Google and Amazon want it that way: “The companies we interact with online are masters of ownership engineering.”

By now, so much online territory has been seized by our e-overlords that the rest of us have been reduced to e-peonage. So, at least, runs the argument of “Owned: Property, Privacy, and the New Digital Serfdom” (2017), by Joshua A. T. Fairfield.

Fairfield, a professor at the Washington and Lee University School of Law, opens his book with the tale of We-Vibe, a line of sex toys sold by the company Standard Innovation. We-Vibe vibrators work with an app that allows customers (or their partners) to manage the devices via their cell phones. In 2016, a group of We-Vibe customers filed a class-action lawsuit, alleging that Standard Innovation had used the app to extract personal data. These data—of a remarkably intimate nature—revealed when the vibrators were operating, at what intensity, and even at what temperature. Fairfield refers to the company’s conduct as the online version of *droit du seigneur*. “The digital and smart devices that surround us are legion, but we do not truly own or control them,” he writes. (Standard Innovation eventually settled for \$3.75 million, without admitting wrongdoing.)

“Owned” is filled with tales of similarly devious technologies, including browsers that trick people into overpaying for plane tickets and computers that communicate surreptitiously with appliances. In a peculiarly creepy instance, a pro-life group used a technology called mobile geofencing to follow women into abortion clinics and send messages to their cell phones. Fairfield’s own phone was, he reports, hijacked by a game that his daughters downloaded. The game commandeered the phone’s Internet connection in order to distribute itself to other customers.

In the meantime, of course, all our devices—phones, laptops, tablets, even, in some cases, sex toys and water meters—leak information about our movements and our purchases. “The ‘owner’ is a source of data to be harvested,” Fairfield observes. He tries to shield his own data, with the paradoxical result that he’s become that much easier to follow:

“I am now *more* identifiable, since I’m now ‘that guy who always sets his do-not-track flag’ in addition to all the other browser characteristics I transmit to each website.”

Like Heller and Salzman, Fairfield is troubled by the agreements we all click through without reading. Often, these agreements state, in dense legalese, that consumers don’t own the contents of their devices. “It is as if the dealer sold you a car, but retained ownership of the motor,” Fairfield writes. As with e-books and digital movies, purchasers are only licensing the software that comes with their iPhones; they can’t modify it, or—in theory, at least—do anything else with it that Apple doesn’t approve of. Meanwhile, software-makers often have plans for people’s devices that diverge from those of their (ostensible) owners. Extending the vehicular metaphor, Fairfield writes, “It’s as if your car had a built-in back-seat driver, one that constantly pulled you off the road to go to McDonald’s.” Consumers can decline to consent to the licensing agreements they’re presented with, but most devices won’t function without the installed software. Besides, as Fairfield points out, many agreements don’t even really require agreement:

I’m sure you have seen websites that say, “By continuing to this website, you agree to tracking by cookies.” That is not an argument that usually works. Let’s try it: Dear reader, by reading this book, you have already agreed to give me all your money. Nope. Didn’t work. But it does online.

Why is it that Apple can retain control over the software in your phone but G.M. can’t maintain control over the engine in your car? Fairfield argues that it’s because the legal system has had trouble deciding what sort of rules to apply to digital goods. He cites two cases decided by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. In the first, *UMG Recordings, Inc. v. Augusto*, the judges ruled that used music CDs could be resold on eBay. In the second, *Vernor v. Autodesk, Inc.*, decided on the very same day, the very same panel of judges ruled that used software CDs could *not* be resold on eBay.

In another case, *MAI Systems Corp. v. Peak Computer, Inc.*, also decided by the Ninth Circuit, the court ruled that

a computer-repair company that copied custom software from a computer’s storage disk into its active memory was violating copyright. There’s no way to fix a computer *without* copying the software into the active memory, so the ruling could have put every independent computer-repair shop in the country out of business. To prevent this, Congress had to get involved. It passed a law overruling the ruling, in part. In a new book, “Runaway Technology” (Cambridge), Fairfield argues that the problem isn’t an inherent one. Case law could keep up with Moore’s law; legislators and the courts just need to learn to “think different.” He counsels, “To the extent that we think of law as rules, we must reconceive it as a way of guiding change in rules.”

Fairfield depicts Big Tech—and, to be fair, also Little Tech—as unrelievedly greedy and manipulative. Clearly, he intends his books as a goad. Digital serfs, unite! You have nothing to lose but your blockchains! In the not too distant future, he warns, Google could decide to shut off your self-driving car or your pacemaker. “If we do not take back our ownership rights,” he says, we will be reduced to using “our smart devices, our homes, our cars, and even our own software-enabled medical implants purely at the whim of others.”

Fairfield’s argument is persuasive; whether it is practical is another matter. As he observes, Google, Facebook, and other “masters of ownership engineering” are working hard—and paying armies of lobbyists—to preserve their digital kingdoms.

“Framed as it is in terms of Silicon Valley propaganda, technology policy in the United States is ineffective by design,” he writes. And while the legal system may be capable of coming up with new ways to deal with new technologies, historically it has lagged and stumbled. *Cuius est solum* remained the standard for nearly two hundred years, even as hot-air balloons and then dirigibles and finally airplanes rendered it untenable. Four decades after Kitty Hawk, the law still hadn’t caught up. As Heller and Salzman point out, this is why it’s so important to craft the “rules of ownership” wisely: “Once created, ownership is hard to roll back.” ♦



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## X-ED OUT

*KAWS at the Brooklyn Museum.*

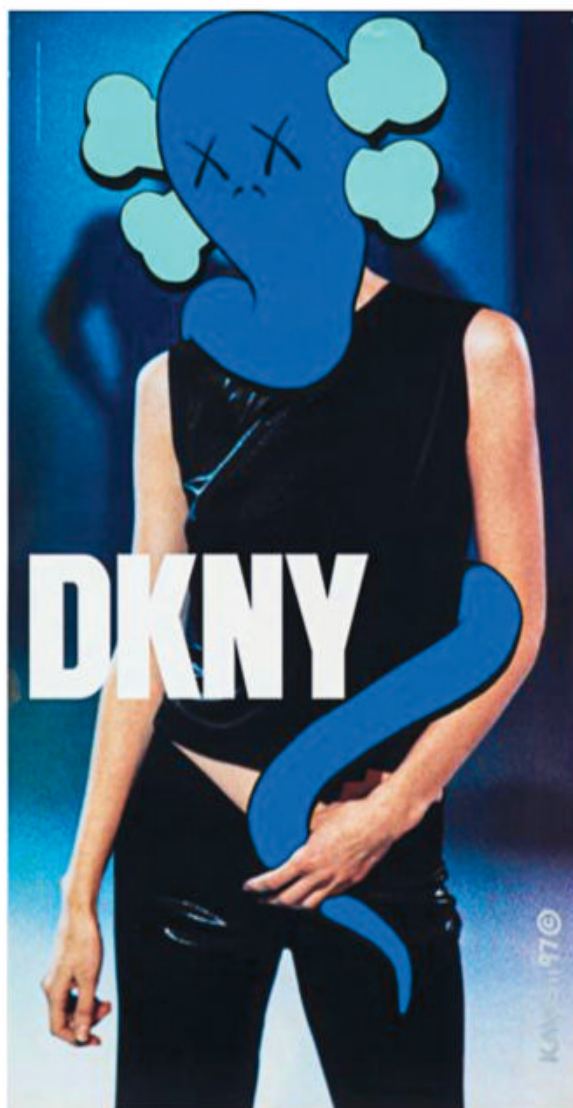
BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

In 1992, a Jersey City graffiti artist named Brian Donnelly adopted KAWS as his nom de spray can, only because, he has said, he liked how the four letters looked together. Nigh on thirty years later, as a phenomenally successful painter and sculptor with lines of toys and other merchandise, he remains pragmatic. “KAWS: WHAT PARTY,” at the Brooklyn Museum, is the latest in a globe-trotting series of institutional exhibitions of neon-bright acrylics, antic statuary, and gift-shop-ready tchotchkes that are either based on familiar cartoons and puppets—the Michelin Man, “Peanuts,” “The Smurfs,” “Sesame Street,” and, especially, “The Simpsons”—or run changes on such characters of his own devising as Companion, a lonesome sad sack sporting Mickey Mouse-style shorts and gloves.

The figures are jokey-saturnine. They have “X”s for eyes. Many of their heads suggest skulls, with the ends of bulbous crossbones protruding behind them and three quick vertical lines at chin level, a trick that hints at missing lower jaws or sags of decaying flesh. The sizes range from a few inches to more than thirty feet high. All are well made, in materials that include vinyl, fibreglass, wood, and bronze. Donnelly’s craft ethic was striking from the start, as seen here in photographs of train cars and billboards that he once sumptuously vandalized—returning in the morning to gauge the success of a nocturnal raid before the evidence was defaced or scrubbed away—and original phone-booth and bus-shelter posters that, having learned how to pick locks, he took home, altered, and put

back in place. (Many of his augmented posters were stolen and eventually made their way to the art market.) He realized complex, rhythmic, even elegant wonders with variations on his tag. Were there a Royal Academy of Bubble Letters, KAWS would be knighted.

Those ephemeral misdemeanors may well be my favorite things in the show, crackling with precocious virtuosity and renegade drive. Carefully overpainted, they look seamlessly professional, until you register their additions of sinuous shapes and skull heads. Donnelly’s work since he went legit lacks any equivalent emotional charge—it is flat in feeling. I marvel that so many people like it. (Why am I reviewing the show? Because it’s there, and it invites a diagnosis of certain conditions in the art world—notably, a cheeky, infectious dumbing-down of taste.) At a Sotheby’s auction in Hong Kong—KAWS has an immense following in East Asia—in 2019, an anonymous buyer liked Donnelly enough to pay more than fourteen million dollars for “The KAWS Album” (2005), a busy painting of “Simpsons” characters massed in imitation of the teeming album cover for the Beatles’ 1967



© KAWS

*Pieces by KAWS, using advertising posters, from 1999, 1997, and 1999. Every KAWS indexes every other KAWS.*



"Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," designed by Jann Haworth and Peter Blake. Plainly, some gradient of nostalgia factors in the KAWS craze, with its triggering of past enchantments. To avoid sappiness, Donnelly tends to complicate his allusions with willful grotesquerie. In one painting, decapitated members of the Simpson family are seen holding one another's heads—to strictly goofball, anodyne effect. (You can bring the kids.) The impact of another figure that is partly played to expose its viscera—a steal from the British sensationalist Damien Hirst, who hasn't achieved much with it himself—is anything but visceral. Blandness reigns.

I do enjoy Donnelly's occasional forays into apparently abstract painting, which frees up his considerable gifts for zippy color and hyperactive composition; he knows his way around the pictorial rectangle. The show's adept curator, Eugenie Tsai, remarked to me that there are trace elements of cartoon imagery in those works, if I would look for them. I replied happily and, I'm afraid, impolitely, "But I don't have to." As a graffiti artist, Donnelly, the scion of a middle-class family, was no up-from-the-streets wild child. In the nineties, he attended New York's School of Visual Arts, worked as an animator, and began visiting Japan, where he encountered that country's *otaku* subcultures of manga and anime—updates of a national tradition that prizes all creative pursuits more or less equally. Donnelly, inspired by the boundary-defying aesthetics, added collectibles to his repertoire in the late nineties and, a few years afterward, opened a boutique for them in Tokyo. While gauche by genteel art-world standards, they sold like hotcakes. His burgeoning fan base came to include movie stars and such musicians and producers as Jay-Z and Pharrell Williams.

Donnelly isn't a Pop artist, exactly, except by way of distant ancestry. Most of his career moves were initiated about six decades ago by Andy Warhol, who had the not inconsiderable advantage of being great. Warhol's conflation of fine art with demotic culture were, and remain, pitch-

perfect in all respects, including a candid avarice that kidded, even as it embraced, triumphant American commercialism. Do Donnelly's frisky morbidities emulate Warhol's preoccupation with death? Fatal car crashes, suicides, the electric chair, and Jackie Kennedy in mourning invested Warhol's gorgeous stylings with haunting gravitas. Donnelly's semi-defunct figures generate nothing similarly affecting. Nor is he in a league with Jeff Koons, despite the probability that but for Koons there would be no KAWS. Koons's weddings of banality and beauty, in his sculptures of determinedly kitsch subjects, are formally consummate and—once you recover from their insults to your intelligence—fantastically seductive. Koons anticipated a global hegemony of big money in contemporary art, symbolizing it in advance of its arrival. His works look as expensive as they are, and then some. But he delivered the goods.

Donnelly's statues and figurines swing at a similar mojo of high art crossed with nonchalant vulgarity. They miss. The shortfalls are so routine that futility may be a criterion of his art's anti-glamorous glamour. Like his paintings of the tops of "Simpsons" heads, the objects don't feel motivated as art. Their themes ring hollow. The supposed melancholy of the abundant Companions—often slumping in evident despair—seems as coolly calculated as the burlesques of death with the "X"-eyed figures in the cartoon paintings. Branding has long since siphoned away the passion of the trainyard prodigy. The only palpable carry-over from his bygone street work is a ravenous hunger to make himself known. Mission accomplished! As a recent profile in the *Times Magazine* noted, he has more than three million Instagram followers.

The established New York art world was having none of KAWS for several years. Professionals quailed at his formulaic production of luxury goods with a populist veneer. But nothing succeeds like success—KAWS found a rapt audience via entertainment-intensive public works, including the "Holiday" series of enormous Companions. One floated on its back in Hong Kong's Victoria Harbor, others

rode weather balloons into the stratosphere, or reclined near the base of Mt. Fuji. Call the mode Koons lite—harmless, really, if you leave out the sensitivities of viewers who pay searching attention. Every KAWS indexes every other KAWS. All partake in one predilection—not kitsch, which debases artistic conventions, but a promiscuity that sails beyond kitsch into a wild blue yonder of self-cannibalizing motifs that excite and, I believe, comfort a loyal constituency.

I fail to detect charm in most anybody's cartoons of cartoons. Anything you do at second hand with that lively art—unless you're Roy Lichtenstein, exercising Mondrian-grade formal rigor—merely churns and inevitably dissipates what it's about. How do you satirize satire, in the capital case of "The Simpsons"? And when is a Simpson not a Simpson? When it's a pastiche. But instant recognizability combined with rousing entrepreneurship, at prices for every above-average wallet, seems key to KAWSism—which is certainly democratic, in the sense of making no demands on anyone. It isn't a taste. It's an illustrated success story—naked ambition as its own reward, with just enough tacit irony to disarm some doubters. To Donnelly's credit, he has shaken up the art world, humbling gatekeepers who would love to keep him out but can't any longer.

Be it noted that there is nothing felonious about Donnelly's manipulations, which vivify a possibility—the erasure of hierarchical distinctions between art and, well, stuff—that someone was bound to grab hold of eventually. I find it depressing, but you would expect that from an elitist art critic, wouldn't you? A chance to snoot highbrows is a bonus for KAWSniks, whose glee might as well be taken in good grace by its targets. See the show, for its lessons in a present psychosociology. I predict that you'll be through it in a jiffy, and that little of it, if any, will stick in your mind a day or even an hour later. There's a certain purity in art that's so aggressively ineloquent. Like a diet of only celery, which is said to consume more calories in the chewing than it provides to digestion, KAWS activates hallucinatory syndromes of spiritual starvation. ♦



ON TELEVISION

## BOSS LADY

*"The Equalizer," on CBS, and "Ginny & Georgia," on Netflix.*

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX



**W**ho do you go to if you can't go to the cops?" Jewel Machado, a high-achieving Latinx teen-ager, wonders, unbelievably, in the pilot of the CBS action procedural "The Equalizer." Even considering the relative conservatism of prime-time drama, the line struck me as glaringly unhip. Wouldn't this character, coded as she is, *get it*? And yet the series is full of Jewel Machados: people who are marginalized but still stunningly naïve about the forces of marginalization. Their cluelessness allows "The Equalizer" to showcase the bad-bitch proficiency of its hero, Robyn McCall, played by the congenitally warm Queen Latifah. In each episode, an unequal system plunges a character, who is poor or Black or both, to the darkest of depths, and McCall, a

former C.I.A. agent, is invariably there to rescue them. Though she is styled a lot like Olivia Benson of "Law and Order: S.V.U.," in domme leather outfits, often astride a motorcycle, McCall is a soothing, maternal figure. The show is a gimme for an audience who'd die to have this therapeutic queen dismantle racial capitalism in one fell girl-boss swoop.

The series, a reboot of an eighties crime drama of the same name, premiered right after Super Bowl LV. I found this scheduling inspired: perhaps it moved the viewer to build a through line from the National Football League's foul embrace of the language of the social-justice movement to the more soulful appropriation of the movement's convictions in the series that followed. From the "Black Trans Lives

Matter" poster on the wall of a community-activist character to the scene of a youth choir singing the anthem "Glory," from Ava DuVernay's film "Selma," "The Equalizer" signals that it has the right politics, a nonnegotiable in post-Trump debut television.

In her past life, McCall did the dirtier bidding of the C.I.A. "You work with orphans in Third World countries, so I can't ever be unhappy," her daughter complains; what is strongly implied is that McCall did the opposite of help those children. Haunted by her misdeeds, she has left the agency and returned to New York City, where she enacts her penance: the extrajudicial exoneration of framed individuals in the tri-state area. With the help of two sidekicks—Mel (Liza Lapira), an ex-Air Force sharpshooter, and Harry (Adam Goldberg), an I.T. whiz—and her smirking mentor, William Bishop (the always debonair Chris Noth), McCall takes down gentrification profiteers and their hired guns, warmongers and tech magnates, entitled white male murderers and the judges who protect them.

"Now it's my world," she says, after she's beaten a gaggle of mobsters into a Looney Tunes heap. This line, breaking the fourth wall, signals that "The Equalizer" is at ease with its kitsch. Queen Latifah is an executive producer of the series, which was written by Andrew Marlowe and Terri Edda Miller, of "Castle," and her star power and feminist rap persona instantly, and perhaps problematically, lighten the intended darkness of the show's conceit. In the original series, McCall was Robert, and he was white, and he tended to lean against his hot car, in the shadows. Denzel Washington played an unsmiling "Equalizer" in Antoine Fuqua's movie adaptations; there, the redressing of justice was always a spectacle of brutality, a heavy shout-out, no doubt, to Ellison's "Invisible Man."

In the new version, there are interesting allusions to Harriet Tubman: McCall conducts her operations from underground, and she has mostly given up a social life in order to lead others to freedom. The show keeps telling us, especially in the scenes between McCall and her aunt Vi (the underused Lorraine Toussaint), that our hero is guarding an ugly psychological wound—the kind of thing that could eventually cause her to snap. Five epi-



sodes in, however, Queen Latifah, with her unfailingly glamorous posture, has yet to convey her history, which might give her character some much-needed depth. One is never worried that McCall will take her vengeance too far.

Critics and showrunners alike say that the police procedural, the most American genre, is in crisis. Last summer's police violence against Black Americans forced what have been called "reckonings," or, more to the point, recalibrations of who and what perspectives popular entertainment should cater to. "The Equalizer" may not be a police-glorification device, but don't mistake McCall for a renegade; she delivers a compensatory fantasy of law and order. In the second episode, a Black mother, whose son has been taken hostage by international criminals, shakily points a gun at McCall, exhausted by the situation. McCall does not flinch; she believes in the goodness of the people she's trying to help. And they are always, unilaterally, good. The Black men who are killed, often reformed criminals, are presented as angels—almost ritualistic sacrifices. It's preppy blaxploitation.

That's not to say that I don't dig watching McCall obliterate Trumps n' Musks. I like the show best when it abandons righteousness and goes for camp, as when McCall pretends to be a chauffeur in order to duplicate her passenger's cell phone. One episode is a feast of racial-justice cheese: McCall uncovers a housing scandal in part by deciphering a lyric from Kendrick Lamar's "m.A.A.d city." I'll keep watching, mostly because of the burgeoning romance between Robyn and a reluctant conspirator, the goody-two-shoes Black cop Dante (Tory Kittles),

which promises a knotty, Rhimesian story line. The two flirt at the gym—we see some lower torso—and Queen Latifah shifts to the rom-com gear that she can so easily inhabit.

The ampersand in the title of the Netflix show "Ginny & Georgia" means to imply conjunction but turns out to indicate a grotesquely cute chimera. The body of the series is a bantery young-adult soap, the head a woman-on-the-edge thriller, and the tail a race melodrama. The creator, Sarah Lampert, must have looked upon her handiwork with proud amusement. The show's action is driven by its titular duo: Brianne Howey as Georgia, a young sexpot mother of white-working-class provenance, and her fifteen-year-old biracial daughter, Ginny (Antonia Gentry), who, when the show opens, is drowning in angst. "Is this Hell? It feels like Hell," she chides her mom, when Georgia sticks her nose in Ginny's teen business. The same can be said of watching this show.

Let's get the references out of the way. Like "The Equalizer," the series lightly imitates and then parodies a network-TV ancestor, which, in this case, is "Gilmore Girls." (There's an admirable Stars Hollow dis in the pilot.) Following the mysterious death of Georgia's husband, who was also the stepfather of Ginny and her younger brother, Austin, Georgia drives the family to the fictional town of Westbury, Massachusetts, for a fresh start. With her Fashion Nova wardrobe and her overdone Southern idioms, Georgia seems to push the entire town out of its New England repression. A nurturer intent on securing for her children the security that she never had herself, she also

outwits prying school moms and outruns a secret that would ruin the family's fragile peace. Ginny, caught between wanting to assimilate and wanting to raze the neighborhood, can't rest, sensing that, somewhere, there's blood in the water. "No secrets, right?" mother coos to daughter. Maybe just a few.

A twitchy mystery is tacked on to the shallow character studies, a device through which "G. & G." can launder sermons on self-loathing and self-love, family ties and social alienation. We are teased with a race catharsis between mother and child that never comes to fruition. Spying on the exploits of her daughter, Georgia sets up a private Instagram account, named after her idol, Vivien Leigh. "My regards to Vivien Leigh," snorts Ginny, informing Mom that "Scarlett O'Hara's been cancelled." The clash of traditional-Americana references and hyper-modern lingo makes you want to groan, right? But circulating on Twitter, as I write, is a scene that made me wonder if "Ginny & Georgia" is not cannier than it seems. Ginny taunts her half-Taiwanese, half-white boyfriend for not knowing Mandarin, and he counters with this bitchy retort: "Sorry I'm not Chinese enough for you, but I've never seen you pound back jerk chicken." They are spiritedly engaging in the so-called Oppression Olympics. It's demeaning, to be served this ham. But is it that off? No amount of recoiling changes the fact that "Ginny & Georgia" is mirroring a mode of cavalier speech on social media that compresses the ineffability of identity into a checklist of outwardly visible bona fides: what one eats, where one was raised, how well one twerks. If "Ginny & Georgia" can sound canned, then so do we. ♦

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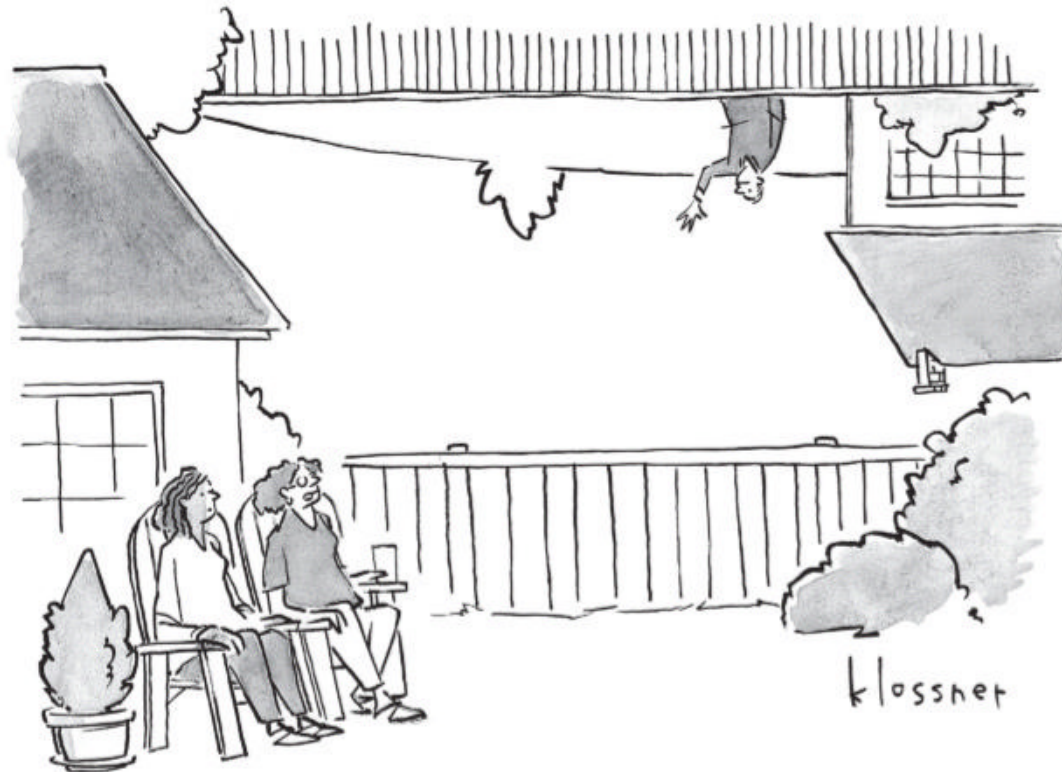




## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*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 John Klossner, must be received by Sunday, March 14th. The finalists in the March 1st contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 29th 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



*“I told you we should have salted the roads.”*  
Luke Stancil, Orem, Utah

*“If you turn the binoculars  
around, the problem pretty much goes away.”*  
Johnathan Derry, Pawtucket, R.I.

*“Quick, stroll for cover.”*  
Joe Kehoe, Goliad, Texas

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“Still not level.”*  
Nathaniel W. Pierce, Trappe, Md.





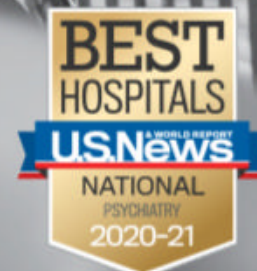
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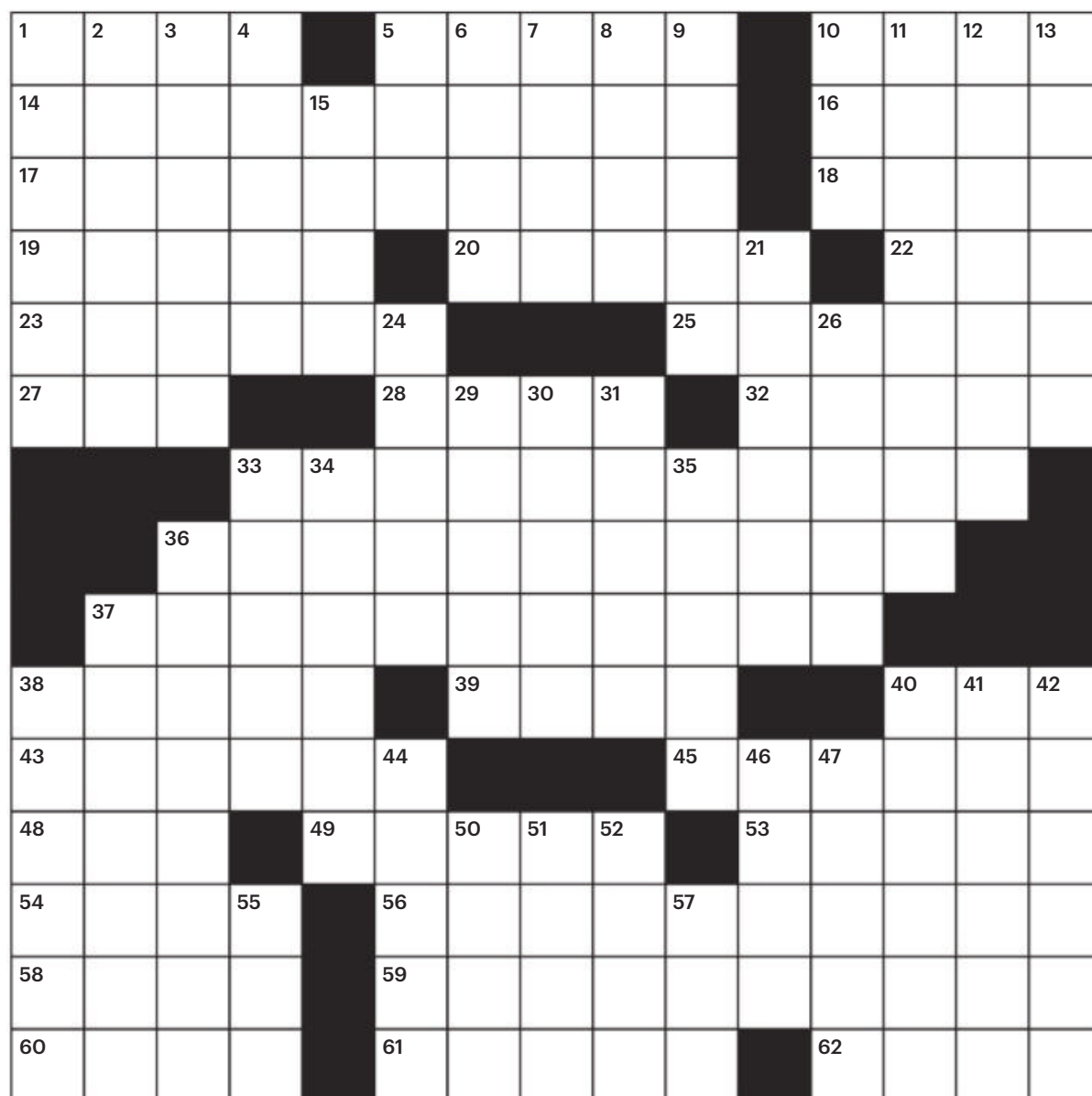
# THE CROSSWORD

*A moderately challenging puzzle.*

BY AIMEE LUCIDO

## ACROSS

- 1 Portion of a heart on many friendship bracelets
- 5 Instrument played by Brian Jones on "Paint It Black"
- 10 Livens (up)
- 14 Oscar-nominated star of "Juno" and "The Umbrella Academy"
- 16 Level
- 17 Friendly reply to "Got a minute?"
- 18 Number of Super Bowl rings for Dan Marino
- 19 One who doesn't stay put for long
- 20 Seat for spilling one's guts to the bartender
- 22 2011 animated movie set in Brazil
- 23 "Hold on!"
- 25 Soggy janitorial tool
- 27 Magazine figs.
- 28 Emulate a 19-Across
- 32 Frozen \_\_\_\_
- 33 Image-manipulation specialists?
- 36 Like much of a locavore's diet
- 37 Gatherings whose guests are kept under wraps?
- 38 Assist a rock climber, in a way
- 39 Low-level laborer
- 40 Winter hrs. in Minneapolis
- 43 "Feel me?"
- 45 Clarke of "Last Christmas"
- 48 Strong acid, symbolically
- 49 "See you tomorrow!"
- 53 Bumbling
- 54 "Hello, sailor!"
- 56 Dali painting, perhaps
- 58 "I, Claudius" role
- 59 Discuss
- 60 Sketched
- 61 Gave a big promotion?
- 62 Some homeschooled students get them, briefly



## DOWN

- 1 Tuchus
- 2 Alternative to whole
- 3 Andean wool producers
- 4 Some tennis shoes
- 5 Many a kid's room, hyperbolically
- 6 N.Y.S.E. debuts
- 7 Like a post-Botox face
- 8 Lead-in to chemical or industrial
- 9 Plant anew
- 10 Candy eaten out of Santa's head, perhaps
- 11 Taylor Swift album released in December, 2020
- 12 School-day units
- 13 Digs through someone's medicine cabinet, perhaps
- 15 Shoppe description
- 21 Didn't bother
- 24 Make one's hair groovy?
- 26 Knitting needles, e.g.
- 29 Readily available
- 30 Can't get enough of
- 31 "Industry," for Utah
- 33 Astronomical figure?
- 34 Contemplate
- 35 Michael of "Miss Congeniality"
- 36 Taylor Swift album released in July, 2020
- 37 Certain frontline worker

- 38 How artisanal goods are generally made
- 40 Cut in two
- 41 Nursed, as a beer
- 42 What tots once were
- 44 Side-to-side spec
- 46 Spooky weather
- 47 Undercover, for short
- 50 Slate, e.g.
- 51 Rightmost menu option, often
- 52 Word after hot or spit
- 55 "Hey, that hurts!"
- 57 Central

*Solution to the previous puzzle:*

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

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