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THE NEW YORKER
THE POWER ISSUE

NOVEMBER 1, 2021

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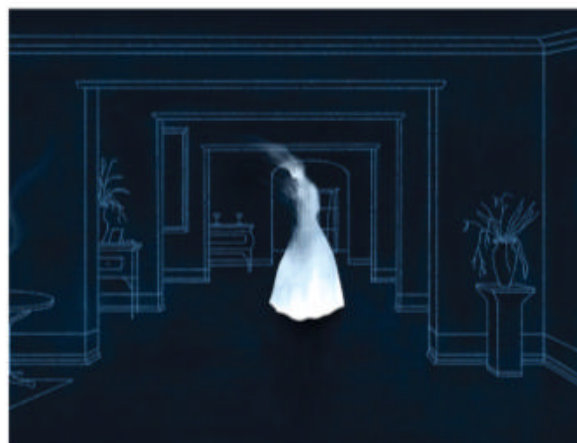
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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW

Dylan Byron talks with the reclusive author Fleur Jaeggy about writing, silence, and the soul.



PAGE-TURNER

Anna Russell on a reissued collection, long out of print, of Edith Wharton's masterly ghost stories.



DISPATCH

Jane Ferguson writes about the tragic fallout of America's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan.

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DEFENDING THE DEAD

Thank you for recognizing the efforts of the activists featured in Jill Lepore's piece about African American burial grounds ("The Underworld," October 4th). Their work in reclaiming cemeteries and other hallowed spaces is essential in moving the United States toward truth and justice. As the executive director of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, I can attest to the consequences of the past and present erasure of history in this country, driven by those who wish to conceal the shameful truth of racial terror and systemic racism. Our organization's aim is not only to tell the full histories of sites but to foster the engagement of descendant communities and others in demanding a reckoning. We know from our two decades of work in the U.S. and other countries that the greatest impact results from collective action. We do not define justice simply as building a memorial. Community-centered acknowledgment of injustice is a crucial initial step toward reparation, healing, and restoration, but transformational memorialization is composed of more than brick and mortar.

Elizabeth Silkes
New York City

I found Lepore's article gripping. After retiring from a career in education, I became a volunteer at several historic sites, including one where I portrayed an abolitionist and helped schoolchildren retrace the Underground Railroad's path through southern New Jersey. Inspired by this work, I did some research and came across a number of overgrown cemeteries outside small, historically Black communities. One of these, near the hamlet of Othello, was the Ambury Hill Cemetery, where African American Civil War veterans are buried.

As Lepore makes clear, there is a trove of history in these places, as well as evidence of a broken bond of trust between past and future generations.

Perhaps it is inevitable that human history will be overlaid by parking lots, housing developments, and strip malls, but I am heartened that some activists are protecting and honoring these important sites.

Jo Ann Wright
Mt. Ephraim, N.J.

BODY LANGUAGE

Gary Shteyngart's powerful essay about his botched circumcision made for troubling reading on many levels, not the least of which is the role that religious traditions play in the procedure ("My Gentile Region," October 11th). I have been a congregational rabbi, ordained by the Reform movement, since 1984, and have never insisted that parents circumcise their sons or that adult males undergo circumcision when they embrace Judaism. I respect the challenges that new parents face when deciding whether their newborn should have surgery that is not medically necessary but is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition and practice. Although problematic circumcisions are rare, Shteyngart's experience speaks to the potential for life-altering trauma. Rabbis will doubtless reach different conclusions about the need for ritual circumcision, but I will continue to be guided by my conviction that Judaism is revealed not in our bodies but in our deeds and commitments.

Elias Lieberman
Falmouth Jewish Congregation
East Falmouth, Mass.

Kudos to Shteyngart for bravely exposing the harm that can be caused by circumcision. His heartbreaking personal struggle, while extreme, is more common among circumcised men than the public has been led to believe. Since 2008, when I co-founded Intact America, an organization that seeks to change the way people in this country think about circumcision, I have heard from thousands of men who have suffered life-

long physical and psychological damage from the procedure. According to a 2019 report published in the *Journal of Pediatric Surgery*, in the U.S., where nearly all circumcisions take place in medical settings, eleven per cent of pediatric-surgery malpractice cases involve circumcision. Yet American doctors and hospitals keep putting babies at risk with a medically unnecessary procedure that is not routinely performed on male children in any other Western country. We must ask why we allow doctors and hospitals to profit from cutting the genitals of male children even as we fight to outlaw female genital cutting, here and abroad.

Georganne Chapin
West Hurley, N.Y.

I appreciated Shteyngart's article for its biting wit, rabbinic exegesis, and affecting retelling of his personal travails. As a longtime urologist, I wanted to point out that, when circumcisions are performed in the neonatal period, the penis still has the opportunity to grow into its final, mature look. But, when it is performed on older children or adults, the question of how much skin to remove has always troubled urologists. Many would rather err by taking less than by taking more, as the consequences of the latter are more dire.

The benefits of circumcision have been shown in medical studies. The foreskin can be a source of multiple medical problems in older men, thus justifying later-in-life circumcision. But the neonatal period remains the ideal time to do the procedure, as it is less likely to leave the patient with mental and physical scars.

Michael Mooreville
Lansdowne, Pa.

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"Splendid ... Gripping" —*The New York Times*

"A *Porgy* of its time that speaks to ours" —*Washington Post*

The cast and creative team of the Met's sensational season-opening production of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* come together once again for the return of the smash-hit staging of the Gershwin favorite. Sopranos Angel Blue and Latonia Moore—fresh off their triumphant performances in *Fire*—join esteemed baritone Eric Owens in the principal roles of *Porgy*, directed and choreographed by James Robinson and Camille A. Brown, who just redefined the possibilities of American opera with their work on *Fire*.

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OCTOBER 27 – NOVEMBER 2, 2021



GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Halloween scares abound in the **“Folk Horror”** series at Anthology Film Archives (Oct. 28–Nov. 11). This sub-genre, which links mystery and monstrosity to ancient ways that endure beneath the surfaces of modern life, is explored in Kier-La Janisse’s new documentary, *“Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched.”* It’s featured alongside fourteen dramatic classics, including *“The Wicker Man”* (above), from 1973, in which a policeman searches for a missing child on an island where paganism is practiced, complete with fertility rites and human sacrifices.

MUSIC

Jacques Greene: “ANTH01”

ELECTRONIC The Vancouver house-music producer Jacques Greene emerged at the dawn of this past decade, stippling R. & B. vocal lines over hazy, melancholic dance tracks suffused with an emotionality that's rare in modern club music. “ANTH01” is the first collection of Greene's early-twenty-tens work, and it holds up amazingly well—the strafing synth pulse of “Ready” and the stun-gun bass of “These Days” seem absolutely contemporary, not like throwbacks. His first single was also his best, and here it provides a perfect ending: “Another Girl” teases out a Ciara sample until it bursts, like a match striking a flare.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

The Magnetic Fields

INDIE POP As a species, songwriters tend to inhabit creative peaks and valleys, generally living out their days down in the latter. Yet, with workmanlike flare, the Magnetic Fields' Stephin Merritt has remained largely in the zone for thirty years. Although his legacy rests on the band's 1999 magnum opus, “69 Love Songs,” Merritt's recent work finds his ingenuity unflagging as he continues to commit whole hog to conceptual risks. Most monumental is “50 Song Memoir,” from 2017, a dazzling song cycle that plays like a behind-the-scenes companion to “69,” carving out a space somewhere between a rock album and a David Sedaris book. This week, the Fields' current tour of City Winery locations settles into the club's Manhattan mother ship (Oct. 28-31). The concerts belatedly toast “Quickies,” a 2020 album dedicated to morsel-size tunes. Measure them in seconds. “Let's make a death pact / Cause I can't live without you,” the pithiest goes. “Let's make a death pact / When you go, I'll go too.”—*Jay Ruttenberg*

Roscoe Mitchell

CLASSICAL Had the improvising multi-instrumentalist and composer Roscoe Mitchell done nothing more in the course of his half-century career than found the Art Ensemble of Chicago, his place in history would be assured—indeed, in 2020, he was anointed an N.E.A. Jazz Master. But Mitchell, a rigorous, disciplined iconoclast, bucked at boundaries from the start, incorporating into his practice elements of free improvisation, classical composition, ritual, and media art. He opens the thirty-second season of the similarly broad-minded “Interpretations” series with a solo performance involving video, an improvised duet, and recent chamber works for percussion and winds.—*Steve Smith (Roulette; Oct. 28 at 8.)*

Houston Person

JAZZ Faced with authenticity in the flesh, the natural response is to heave a sigh of contentment and give thanks that it still exists. Houston Person elicits that reaction on a regular basis, his soulful tenor saxophone returning us to a bygone era when a horn player's tone and ability to conjure up unvarnished emotion was of equal—if not greater—importance to his technical chops. Not that Person, a dedicated stylist who has spent the past several decades offering up unpretentious beauty, lacks any of the means necessary to say what he wants to say—he just knows exactly how

and when to use them. This white-walled gallery space may be far from the funky joints Person cut his teeth in years ago, but his earthy grit and romantic effulgence remain.—*Steve Futterman (Soapbox; Nov. 3 at 8.)*

Seth Parker Woods and Andrew Rosenblum

CLASSICAL Last year, the cellist Seth Parker Woods, an audacious interpreter of experimental and electronic music, wrote an article for *Strings* magazine to advocate for George Walker's Cello Sonata, from 1957. “This sonata is truly one of the lesser-known masterpieces of the repertoire, yet it is not taught,” he writes. “It is a treasure and needs to be repositioned in the American classical-music canon.” Following through on that exhortation, Woods and the pianist Andrew Rosenblum play Walker's piece—an invigorating workout with hints of the blues—alongside compositions by Mendelssohn and Schumann in this concert at the 92nd Street Y. Walker is one of three Black composers featured on the program, which also includes movements from Florence Price's Piano Sonata in E Minor and Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson's “Lamentations: Black/Folk Song Suite.”—*Oussama Zahr (Oct. 30 at 8.)*

Yves Tumor

EXPERIMENTAL The musician currently known as Yves Tumor has been reborn several times. Tumor's music shape-shifted through the twenty-tens, from hypnagogic electronica to uncanny club noise, and the artist (who uses they/them pronouns) emerged, with last year's “Heaven to a Tortured Mind,” as a thrillingly contemporary glam-rock star—a mercurial Ziggy Stardust for a post-genre generation. They've emboldened their shadowy psychedelia with funk, soul, industrial, and grunge;

their suspended singing sometimes evokes the pop-emo provocations of Lil Peep. Tumor's shows this year have been unmissable for their anarchic energy and cinematic awe, inciting crowd participation as the band brings to life anthems such as “Gospel for a New Century” and “Noid,” from 2018, a comment on police brutality. Last month, at Chicago's Pitchfork Musical Festival, Tumor's set was cut short after exceeding its allotted time. The unruly audience chanted, “FIVE MORE MINUTES!” They wanted to keep singing along to the tune of the future.—*Jenn Pelly (Webster Hall; Oct. 28 at 8.)*

DANCE

American Ballet Theatre

After a week of “Giselle,” the company switches gears to perform a series of mixed bills. From the archives comes Antony Tudor's one-act drama “Pillar of Fire,” from 1942, a portrait of the damage wrought by a repressive society on the psyche of a young woman, set to Arnold Schoenberg's rapturous string work “Transfigured Night.” The newest piece on view is “ZigZag,” by Jessica Lang; it will be performed for the first time at this year's gala, on Oct. 26. Set to recordings of standards by Tony Bennett, it's a jazzy, feel-good piece of Americana with lots of roles for up-and-coming dancers. “La Follia Variations,” set to music by the eighteenth-century composer Francesco Geminiani, is by Lauren Lovette, who just retired from New York City Ballet to focus on her choreography.—*Marina Harss (abt.org)*

BalletCollective

What began as a side gig for the New York City Ballet dancer Troy Schumacher has become an enduring and fertile artistic project that

HIP-HOP



For the better part of a decade, the enchanting rapper Young Thug has grown exponentially more unpredictable, even as hip-hop has tried to shift in his direction. True to form, his new album, “Punk” defies expectations: instead of a thrasher provocation, he presents a meditation set to soft piano and guitars, moving away from commotion to repose. The title is an inversion of the pejorative use of the word: “[Punk] means brave, not self centered, conscious. Very, very neglected, very misunderstood,” he told *The Fader*. This album trades the sugar-rush hyperactivity of his 2019 project, “So Much Fun,” for lucidity and calm. If Thug is a rapper who usually performs in scribbles, then “Punk” is a clear turn toward legibility and precision. There's something thrilling about a being of pure chaos discovering control.—*Sheldon Pearce*

is now entering its tenth season. With Ballet-Collective, Schumacher's interest lies in the collaboration between artists and experts of different disciplines. His newest piece, "Natural History," which premiered last year, was born out of a discussion about the mechanics of remembering with a memory researcher and a trip to the American Museum of Natural History. From these conversations emerged two poems by Carey McHugh, which then formed the basis of a score, by Ellis Ludwig-Leone. The piece, performed by dancers from New York City Ballet and the Martha Graham Dance Company, will be one of three dances presented Nov. 1-2 at the Bohemian National Hall (321 E. 73rd St.).—*M.H. (balletcollective.com)*

Madeline Hollander

The list of dance performances postponed or cancelled because of the pandemic is long. For Performa 2021, the choreographer Madeline

Hollander gathers twenty-five dancers—from New York City Ballet, the companies of Trisha Brown and Martha Graham, and the short-lived 2020 Broadway production of "West Side Story," among other sources—and has them "mark," or rehearse less than full-out, choreography from that list. "Review," Hollander's arrangement of this found material, débuts, Oct. 28-29, at the Hamilton Fish Pool, on the Lower East Side, with a live stream on the Performa Web site on Oct. 29.—*Brian Seibert (performa2021.org)*

Martha Graham Dance Company

Fresh from her new ballet for New York City Ballet, the modern-dance choreographer Andrea Miller has now created a work for the Martha Graham dancers, to be revealed during the company's season at the Joyce. Like Miller's City Ballet piece, which suggested the ebb and flow of nature, this new one deals with the rhythms and shapes of the natural world. Alongside such

classic Graham works as "Appalachian Spring" and "Diversion of Angels," the company also performs "Untitled (Souvenir)," a piece by Pam Tanowitz that makes reference to several well-known Graham dances, quoting and recombining steps and poses to create a kind of Martha Graham collage. Miller's new piece and "Appalachian Spring" are on Program A; "Untitled (Souvenir)" and "Diversion of Angels" are on Program B.—*M.H. (Oct. 26-31; joyce.org.)*

Christopher Williams

A choreographer and a puppeteer with a bold imagination, Williams can alchemize his anti-quarian interests into dance theatre of compelling strangeness and beauty. His latest project is a series of contemporary queer reinterpretations of works made for the Ballets Russes. At New York Live Arts, Oct. 28-30, he débuts "Narcissus," based on the myth and set to a score that Nikolai Tcherepnin composed in 1911. The title role, danced by Nijinsky in the original production, is here shared by Cemiyon Barber and the New York City Ballet shape-shifter Taylor Stanley.—*B.S. (newyorklivearts.org)*

ON TELEVISION



The new Hulu drama "**Dopesick**" constantly deploys the trusty time stamp, telling you in what year a scene is taking place, because it jumps around like a hyperactive tree frog. In other series, this might feel chaotic or like lazy screenwriting, but here it feels necessary: the sprawling tragedy of the opioid crisis has unfolded over so many years and with so many bad actors as it has decimated and destabilized American lives that it would be otherwise impossible to keep it all straight. The showrunner, Danny Strong, and his team make a valiant effort in the face of so much material, managing to wrangle the malignant epic (an adaptation of Beth Macy's best-selling exposé) into eight compact episodes. The show follows several key players: Richard Sackler (Michael Stuhlbarg), who led the development and rabid marketing of OxyContin at Purdue Pharma; a doctor (Michael Keaton) who descends from prescriber to pill addict; an ambitious but wary drug rep (Will Poulter); a young coal miner (Kaitlyn Dever) trapped in a vicious cycle of opioid hell; and two federal employees (Peter Sarsgaard and Rosario Dawson) trying to take down the Sackler machine. The show is uneven and at times almost too harrowing to watch, but in its best moments it conveys the pain and the havoc wrought by corporate recklessness and greed.—*Rachel Syme*

THE THEATRE

Chicken & Biscuits

Written by Douglas Lyons and directed by the twenty-seven-year-old Zhailon Levingston, this play is an old-fashioned crowd-pleaser, a comedy as conventional as convention comes. A funeral is being held for the pastor of a Black church in New Haven, but the proceedings are threatened by conflict between his two daughters, the prim Baneatta (Cleo King) and the raucous Beverly (Ebony Marshall-Oliver). Add a cast of competing family members, plus one very anxious Jewish boyfriend (Michael Urie), and high jinks ensue. Is some of the humor hokey, the characters a tad heavy on caricature? Sure. Is the show too long? By about twenty minutes. Does the priceless Norm Lewis, as Reginald Mabry, Baneatta's husband and the church's new pastor, bring down the house while revelling in the spirit, and was it a delight to be introduced to Aigner Mizzelle, making her Broadway debut (as is much of the cast), in the role of La'Trice, a Gen Z-er with SoundCloud dreams and no indoor voice? Yes, and absolutely yes. The show won't be remembered for breaking any artistic ground, but it does offer something that has been in dangerously short supply lately: a good time.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Reviewed in our issue of 10/25/21.) (Circle in the Square; through Jan. 2.)*

Lackawanna Blues

Ruben Santiago-Hudson's talent, showcased in this touching autobiographical collage, which he wrote, directs, and stars in, for Manhattan Theatre Club, confirms one of Henry James's more memorable phrases: "A human voice is what we want." Santiago-Hudson uses his voice—and body, and uncanny sense of timing—to offer snatches from the lessons of his youth, all spinning around the figure of Miss Rachel, or Nanny, the woman who raised him. Sometimes he flurries through characters, playing one Rust Belt old-timer after another, making entire personalities and implicit backstories out of little quirks of his face and adjustments of the stressed-out places




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Forty years after his last show in New York City, the Persian American painter and poet **Manoucher Yektaï** is the subject of a striking two-gallery reappraisal at Karma (on view through Nov. 13), featuring thirty-one works made between 1958 and 2002. Yektaï, who was born in Tehran in 1921, and died on the East End of Long Island in 2019, always had supreme confidence in his talent—he was welcomed into Ab Ex circles, early on—and took the decades-long lull in his career in stride. After retreating from the gallery scene, in the eighties, he used to say that he was on “the six-hundred-year plan,” referring to the centuries that it took a wide audience to embrace the Sufi bard Rumi. That bravado matches the extravagant impasto of Yektaï’s canvases, which bring an action-painting intensity to bear on tranquil subjects, notably still-lives of fruit and fragmentary landscapes (often combined, as in the untitled 1981 work above) that make no secret of his passion for Paul Cézanne. Yektaï may not have suffered from what the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty called “Cézanne’s doubt,” but his works do present the act of painting as a struggle so fierce that a brush might just break off in the process and become part of the picture itself, as seen in one energetic abstraction from 1961.—*Andrea K. Scott*

between his shoulders. “Lackawanna Blues” is as much a social chronicle as a personal remembrance, and Santiago-Hudson—sometimes in song, accompanied by Junior Mack on guitar—brings a whole lost milieu with him onto the stage. Whenever his love for his characters slips close to saccharine, it’s his technique, and the ancient intoxication of direct address, that keeps pulling you back in.—*Vinson Cunningham (Samuel J. Friedman; through Nov. 7.)*

Thoughts of a Colored Man

Love, Happiness, Wisdom, Lust, Passion, Depression, and Anger—that’s a list of potentially interesting emotional states, and it’s also the names of the characters in this muddled and sometimes offensive show, which never makes it far past the premise, or the archetypes, suggested by its title. Written by Keenan Scott II and directed by Steve H. Broadnax III, “Thoughts of a Colored Man” feels in its structure—monologues interrupted by scenes—like an attempt at a Black man’s

answer to Eve Ensler’s “Vagina Monologues” or, perhaps especially, Ntozake Shange’s “For Colored Girls.” But all the talk just adds up to a collection of tropes. There’s an arch-gentrifier gay man with a puppy that uses they/them pronouns; women are either “thick” Instagram eye candy or traumatized “Dear Mama”-style saints. Amazingly, the piece comes to a head while the guys wait in line for Jordan sneakers. This “colored man” kept thinking, Speak for yourself.—*V.C. (Golden Theatre.)*

ART

“Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams”

The Dior show at the Brooklyn Museum is dazzling—a seemingly endless, and somehow soothing, parade of exquisite garments, enhanced by a no-holds-barred exhibition design. By the

time visitors reach the museum’s Beaux-Arts Court, where projections of moving clouds and migrating birds complement garden-inspired gowns, the designs of the French progenitor of the postwar, wasp-waisted New Look—and those of the fashion house that carried on after him—do indeed seem to be the stuff of dreams. The exhibition tells the story of the visionary drive of a singular talent—Christian Dior himself—through phalanxes of mannequins wearing smart wool day dresses and magical evening wear, such as the sculptural, asymmetrical “Athena” dress, from 1951, in pale-gold satin. The garments’ presence is impressive, but the exhibition makes it clear that the brand’s ascent is inextricable from advancements in fashion photography: Dior’s silhouettes come alive in Richard Avedon’s stunning images. Dior died in 1957 (he was only fifty-two), and so the bulk of the styles on view are by his torch-bearing (and sometimes torch-dropping) successors, from the designer’s protégé Yves Saint Laurent to Dior’s current creative director, Maria Grazia Chiuri. Although viewers understandably seem drawn to John Galliano’s fabled provocations first, the survey as a whole captures the history of the iconic fashion house in an artful sweep.—*Johanna Fateman (brooklynmuseum.org)*

Gauri Gill

The worlds of dreams and reality merge in this Indian photographer’s enthralling vignettes: a lizard drives a van, a woman has a camera for a head, a horse has a job in an office. To make the images of “Acts of Appearance,” an ongoing series that Gill began in 2015 and now auspiciously inaugurates the James Cohan gallery’s second Tribeca location, the Delhi-based artist collaborated with mask-makers from the Kokna and Warli tribes in the rural state of Maharashtra, who usually sculpt and paint the heads of gods and goddesses for performances of Hindu epics and tribal myths as part of the city of Jawhar’s annual Bohada festival. Working with Gill, the craftspeople traded divine and demonic subjects for animals and consumer goods, as well as stylized human likenesses. In the photos, these bright, oversized papier-mâché heads are worn by village inhabitants, creating surreal ruptures in otherwise naturalistic scenes. The immovable faces are curiously expressive, revealing some hidden aspect of the wearers as they bridge everyday life and allegorical realms in Gill’s rich, remarkable pictures.—*J.F. (jamescohan.com)*

“Greater New York”

This show of hundreds of works by forty-seven more or less contemporary artists was slated to open in 2020 and necessarily postponed. The result amounts to something of a time capsule: a collection of judgments that predate a period so tumultuous it feels like an age. One current trend that is represented, albeit scrappily, is neo-Surrealism: the wild subjectivity of artists turning from outer worlds to inner. But the fundamental mood is external, slanted toward politically charged urgencies. A consensus is projected that scants aesthetics. Exactly one artist really enthralled me: the Japanese-born Yuji Agematsu, who fashions tiny sculptures from detritus that he comes across in New York’s streets. Three hundred and sixty-six of these, displayed in twelve plexiglass cases, achieve feats of formal and coloristic lyricism, conveying a homing instinct for beauty in the humblest of materials. Otherwise, however, the show takes a position

COLLECTION

Fifty Fathoms



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that identifies cultural legitimacy with obeisance to supposedly unexceptionable opinions. The political is more important than the artistic. Using art to advance causes isn't bad; it simply surrenders independent initiative, always a fragile affair, to overbearing powers of worldly argument. "Poetry makes nothing happen," W. H. Auden observed, but life without poetry is apt to be pretty bleak. How about basing value in joy and letting agreement and disagreement see to themselves?—*Peter Schjeldahl (moma.org/ps1)*

MOVIES

Bergman Island

Mia Hansen-Løve's new drama—about two directors, a younger woman named Chris (Vicky Krieps) and an older man named Tony (Tim Roth), who are a couple—offers a personal view of the European film industry. They have a residency at the Bergman Estate—a mini-institution and cinephilic pilgrimage site on the Swedish island of Fårö, where Ingmar Berg-

man lived and worked—to write their respective screenplays. Tony, a Bergman fan and the more established filmmaker, finds his work progressing rapidly; Chris, who is dubious of Bergman's grim tales and turbulent private life, finds herself stuck—and, when she tells Tony the story she's writing, it appears onscreen, as a film-within-a-film, starring Mia Wasikowska as a young woman who, while attending a destination wedding on a remote island, rekindles an affair with a former boyfriend (Anders Danielsen Lie). The strength of Hansen-Løve's movie is its nested framework, but she films the two tales with the same uninflected naturalism and constructs their characters with the same functional sparseness. What she reveals most clearly is her process—the literal translation of a script into a movie—and the film bureaucracy that fosters it.—*Richard Brody (In limited theatrical release.)*

The Last Duel

This historical drama, based on real-life events in fourteenth-century France, smothers its fascinating details with intentions—which the

director, Ridley Scott, fails to realize. Jean de Carrouges (Matt Damon), a poor and peevish warrior, marries Marguerite de Thibouville (Jodie Comer) for her money but loves her nonetheless. Jacques Le Gris (Adam Driver), a flashy courtier and a womanizer who falls in love with Marguerite, forces his way into the Carrouges castle and rapes her. When Marguerite tells Jean of the attack, he brings charges against Jacques. After Jacques's rigged acquittal by a corrupt count (Ben Affleck), Jean challenges Jacques to a joust to the death, a decision that also holds grave consequences for Marguerite. The script (written by Affleck, Damon, and Nicole Holofcener) tells the story in three chapters, one each for Jean, Jacques, and Marguerite. But the dialogue is dull, the characters thinly imagined—and, worst of all, the rape is repellingly shown twice, when it shouldn't be shown at all. Jean believes Marguerite when she tells him of the crime, but Scott apparently doesn't believe it without seeing it—and doesn't allow the viewer that freedom, either. The result is a wannabe #MeToo movie.—*R.B. (In theatrical release.)*

Shallow Grave

This claustrophobic chamber piece, set mostly in a Scottish apartment, poses an old Hitchcockian question—What's the best way to lose a dead body?—and comes up with some fresh and bloody answers. Kerry Fox, Ewan McGregor, and Christopher Eccleston are three roommates confronted by the corpse of their new lodger and the stash of drug money that he has left behind. They do the obvious thing: bury the body and keep the cash. Greed and paranoia soon kick in, and the plot marches toward its climax. Not that you care too much how it ends up or what happens to these people—the film is less a thriller than a frosty exercise in logic. But the director, Danny Boyle, does wonders with a small budget, and the suave, dense-hued look of his movie stays with you long after the horror has evaporated. Released in 1995.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 2/13/95.) (Streaming on Amazon, iTunes, and other services.)*

A Story from Chikamatsu

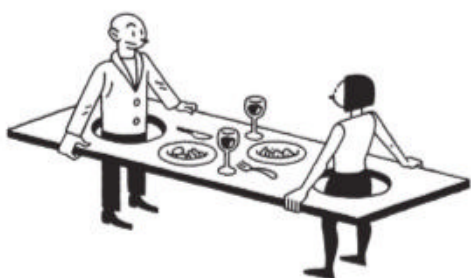
Kenji Mizoguchi's 1954 historical drama condenses a vast array of injustices—as well as an extraordinary romantic power—into its teeming action. It's centered on the scroll-making shop of a wealthy Kyoto merchant named Ishun (Eitaro Shindo). His much younger wife, O-San (Kyōko Kagawa), was married off to him for his money, but he refuses her family a loan. Ishun's compassionate employee, a man named Mohei (Kazuo Hasegawa), forges a letter of credit for O-San—thereby arousing suspicion that they're having an affair, which is a capital offense, punishable by crucifixion. Mizoguchi builds the drama on such underlying pathologies as Ishun's sexual harassment of a female worker, the martial cruelty of the samurai class, and a repressive moralism that treats women like property. The tale morphs into a hectic, passionate flight for freedom as O-San and Mohei try to save their own lives and, in the process, discover their love for each other; Mizoguchi films their devotion unto death with a fiercely defiant exaltation. In Japanese.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*

ON THE BIG SCREEN



The wide-ranging Metrograph series "Lives of Performers" includes the unusual and self-scouring drama **"Jo Jo Dancer, Your Life Is Calling,"** from 1986, the only dramatic feature directed by Richard Pryor. It's a quasi-autobiographical story, which he co-wrote (with Paul Mooney and Rocco Urbisci) and in which he stars, in a double role. The action is framed by a horrific incident from Pryor's own life: Jo Jo (Pryor), a comedian who's addicted to freebasing cocaine, endures disastrous self-inflicted burns. Hospitalized and near death, Jo Jo is visited by his uninjured alter ego (also Pryor), who guides him on a retrospective tour of his life. The story starts with Jo Jo's tough childhood (his mother was a prostitute, his father an abusive pimp) and details his hard rise to fame—involving mobsters and grifters, flatterers and hangers-on, racist aggression, and his own demons of sexual voracity, jealousy, and violent rage. Above all, Pryor emphasizes (with deft compositions involving mirrors and effects) Jo Jo's elusive selfhood—the fundamental problem of what performers who feel fully alive only while onstage or on camera do with the rest of their time.—*Richard Brody*

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TABLES FOR TWO

Le Pavillon

1 Vanderbilt Ave.

It might seem that the French chef Daniel Boulud, a master of the fine-dining universe in New York City and beyond, has so many exceptional restaurants—including Bar Boulud; Boulud Sud; his flagship, Daniel; and even his grab-and-go café, Épicerie Boulud, which peddles impeccable madeleines and sirloin panini—that he has nothing left to prove. And yet when, five years ago, developers approached him to open a restaurant in the new midtown skyscraper One Vanderbilt (which also features, a thousand feet in the air, a mirror-and-glass public observatory “experience” called Summit), the chef saw an opportunity to infiltrate the heart of Manhattan.

Boulud’s vision for Le Pavillon—named for a French restaurant that originated at the 1939 New York World’s Fair and went on to become a Manhattan stalwart from 1941 to 1971—was “to create an oasis of peace and harmony,” he told me, “in contrast with the location, which is very bustling.” Indeed, the showpiece of the space, a welcoming square bar—cutely named Bar Vandy,

presumably to signal a shift, for Boulud, to a more carefree, fun atmosphere—is privy to a spectacular view of Grand Central Station, its taxi stand, and the glittering Chrysler Building. A fanciful blown-glass chandelier, by the artist Andy Paiko, drips from the room’s cathedral ceiling; a grove of olive trees and verdant plants line the long, hushed dining room’s banquettes and walkways.

If you’re not seated near the view, you might pass through the lovely foliage to reach the Siberia of Le Pavillon, a back corner behind a massive column, close to the kitchen door. There, beige upholstery and semi-sheer curtains incapable of concealing the Chick-fil-A across Forty-second Street evoke, slightly, a Hilton Hotel in Toronto. But the warm, extremely attentive service—and the food—makes you forget all that.

On its Web site, Le Pavillon, which opened in May, only three months later than scheduled, proclaims itself “vegetable-forward and seafood-centric”—an undoubtedly au-courant, and responsibly proactive, position. Diners choose, from the prix-fixe menu, one each from a vast list of appetizers (twelve dishes, none with meat), entrées (also twelve, three with meat), and desserts (no meat, but cheese). On a recent night, a perplexing amuse-bouche included celery root, Concord grape, and a wisp of wasabi; earthy, pasty, and hard to identify, it was an unusually dour note in an otherwise fairly symphonic meal.

Begin, in earnest, with oysters Vanderbilt, a World’s Fair-worthy invention.

“You’ve heard of oysters Rockefeller?” Boulud said. “Vanderbilt built Grand Central Station, he built the Grand Central Oyster Bar, but he never had his own oysters.” Now he does: plump John’s River specimens, from Maine, are poached in a chowder fortified with potatoes, leeks, crème fraîche, and hazelnuts, all spooned into oyster shells and topped with a crust of seaweed, parsley, butter, and more hazelnuts. It must be said: Vanderbilt finally beats Rockefeller in the race to the richest.

One thing that you’re sure to get at a Boulud restaurant—and, perhaps, the reason you came—is a plethora of techniques meant to elevate the essence of an ingredient. Here this happens time and again: an emulsion accompanying a Vidalia-onion tart tastes like pure, liquid Époisses cheese. A dark, clear broth poured around a hefty slab of halibut, layered with Martha’s Vineyard shiitakes, imparts potent mushroom umami. Juicy duck with plum sauce sits near a delightful roasted turnip stuffed with duck forcemeat, a modern take on *canard aux navets*. A miniature potato gratin that accompanies the Angus strip loin is glazed in a beef-stock reduction and crisped into one tiny, ideal beef-and-potato meal.

For dessert, make sure that someone good at sharing gets the Noisette Chocolat, for the quintessential Boulud pièce de résistance: controlled whimsy, precise geometry, silken mousse, flawless chocolate coating, a crumbly, nutty praline *croustillant*, and a strong hit of salt. (Three-course menu \$125.)

—Shauna Lyon

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT CANCEL BAIT

Dave Chappelle, early in his new, predictably incendiary Netflix special, “The Closer,” says, in an understatement of the obvious, “I’m rich and famous.” He says it en route to the larger observation that, if the pandemic has been trying for him—he contracted COVID-19 in January but was asymptomatic—it has been far more so for people who fall into neither category. But from there he detours into an extended series of jokes about the L.G.B.T.Q. community—he refers to being trans as the gender equivalent of wearing blackface—which have mired the special in controversy.

For two weeks after its release, on October 5th, “The Closer” was among the ten most viewed programs on Netflix—but it was also met with outrage. Jaclyn Moore, the showrunner for the Netflix series “Dear White People,” who is white and trans, denounced “The Closer” and pledged not to work with Netflix in the future. (This led to a social-media backlash from people asking why “Dear White People,” a show about Black perspectives on white racism, had a white showrunner to begin with.) B. Pagels-Minor, a Black trans nonbinary Netflix employee who was helping organize a workplace walkout to protest “The Closer,” was fired for allegedly leaking internal documents about the special to the press. (Pagels-Minor denied leaking the material.) The walkout took place on October 20th.

Meanwhile, in response to allega-

tions that Chappelle’s comments in “The Closer” might lead to violence against trans people, Ted Sarandos, a Netflix co-C.E.O., in a memo sent to employees, defended the special and cited other more L.G.B.T.Q.-positive content on the platform, such as the comedian Hannah Gadsby’s two specials. Gadsby responded by denouncing Netflix, with poetic economy, as an “amoral algorithm cult.” Sarandos also noted the company’s “strong belief that content on screen doesn’t directly translate to real-world harm.” This was a curious position, and, on Wednesday, Sarandos felt compelled to concede that, in fact, “content on-screen can have an impact in the real world, positive and negative.” Comedy is powerful precisely because it riffs on and ridicules mores and habits. And within that arena no one is more successful,

relevant, or influential than Chappelle.

And no one is seemingly more aware of the power of his comedy. In 2005, Chappelle walked away from a reported fifty-million-dollar contract with Comedy Central for two additional seasons of “Chappelle’s Show,” his sketch-comedy series. Years later, he explained that he’d been conflicted about the effect of his brand of racial humor, which relied heavily on enacting stereotypes in order to ridicule them. He had begun to wonder whether his audience got the second, more subtle layer of his work, or whether it was entertained purely by the stereotypes. Some critics said that the pressure and the expectations that came with the contract and the success of the show’s previous seasons had been so intense that the comedian just decided that he wanted out. But Chappelle, as he told David Letterman, was attuned to nuances in his work that it would have been more convenient (and more lucrative) to ignore. There was always the risk, in riffing on the racial absurdities of American culture, of reinforcing rather than undermining them.

The absence of concern of this kind about “The Closer” is striking, and suggests that Chappelle’s line about being rich and famous is more significant to the controversy than has been noted. Onstage, he refers to himself as the man who walked away from fifty million dollars, but the credibility he derived from that act sixteen years ago is now being deployed defensively and cynically, as if to place above suspicion any possible motive for telling denigrating jokes about trans people. He is also the man who



walked into a reported sixty-million-dollar Netflix deal.

The “Closer” controversy is not happenstance; Chappelle notes that this will be his last special “for a while.” It may even be seen, along with some of his previous work, as cancel bait. In “The Bird Revelation,” which aired on Netflix in 2017, Chappelle defended Louis C.K., whose own television series had been cancelled owing to allegations—which he admitted to—of sexual misconduct, including masturbating in front of female colleagues. In “The Closer,” Chappelle jokes that he hoped to “negotiate the release of DaBaby,” the rapper who was criticized for making homophobic comments and insulting people with H.I.V./AIDS during a performance in July. (DaBaby apologized on Instagram, albeit in a way that only compounded his problems; he later deleted the post.) Chappelle has argued that taking away people’s livelihoods via cancellation is

tantamount to killing them—a statement that carries weight coming from someone who has spent three decades creating work that critiques racism. Yet the principle at stake here is not equality but impunity.

“The Closer” marks a new iteration of the ongoing debate about cancel culture, but not necessarily for the reasons that Chappelle intended. In 2005, it meant something for a Black man to reject an enormous pile of money in the name of integrity. The past two weeks reiterated a contrasting point: that Black men, too, can be invested in the prerogatives that wealth purchases. Earlier this year, Netflix removed old episodes of “Chappelle’s Show” from the platform at the comedian’s request, forgoing the revenue it would have reaped, after he called the contract that allowed Comedy Central to profit from the show more than a decade and a half after its release exploitative. Sarandos has dismissed requests from trans

employees that “The Closer” be removed.

The most reactionary and dangerous parts of our current politics and culture are driven by powerful people who claim to be the victims of groups that are far more vulnerable than they are. The irony is that these dynamics are increasingly present in matters of racism. Days after “The Closer” aired, Chappelle performed at a sold-out event at the Hollywood Bowl, before an audience that included Nas, Lizzo, Stevie Wonder, Brad Pitt, and Tiffany Haddish. He remains powerful and influential, despite the protests from a comparatively small community of activists and their supporters. The turbulence around “The Closer” will, in all likelihood, amount to just another speed bump in Chappelle’s path. In gliding through this situation, he has emphasized a fact about power that was never particularly noteworthy. Because the one thing that has not been cancelled is the check.

—Jelani Cobb

TIDYING UP DEPT. PAPER CHASE



Robert Caro was up at the New-York Historical Society last week, and it can be noted with gratitude that although he took the morning off from writing, he remained in a sympathetic writerly mood. “How many words are they giving you?” he asked. His eyes widened. “Eight *hundred*?” Caro, who turns eighty-six later this month, is usually at work seven days a week on the final volume of his biography of Lyndon Johnson. (“Right now,” he dropped, unprompted, into the conversation, as if reciting the weather, “he’s passing Medicare and escalating the Vietnam War. Simultaneously, actually!”) So this counted as a special occasion. Caro had sold his personal files to the museum—hundreds of thousands of pages, perhaps more. (An exhibit of them opened on Friday.) He was there to tour his own archives for the first time.

In the lobby, Caro met up with Paul Bogaards, his publicist at Knopf, and André Bernard, an old friend who’d arranged the archive’s sale. Caro planned

to bring his wife and research partner, Ina, later on. He wore a wool blazer over a sweater, walked with a little shuffle, and spoke in his New York accent, which itself conjures the archival. “My idea was that they should have a little voice box, and you could speak into it and come out sounding like Bob,” Bogaards said. “‘Ina’ would be ‘I-ner.’” A video screen cycled images, including one of a young, action-figuresque Caro, in shirtsleeves, looking like Robert Redford. Someone suggested that this was his secret for getting sources to cooperate. “Yeah, physical intimidation,” Caro said. “I just took out my blackjack and they started talking.”

Caro entered the exhibition hall. “This is terrific, *terrific*!” he said. “I haven’t looked at these in forty-seven years.” He stopped in front of a paper with hundreds of tiny tally marks, a result of the time he and Ina went to Jones Beach to see whether Robert Moses’s segregationist schemes had endured. “We each had a notebook, and we counted people,” he said. There were hardly any tallies for Black bathers. “I remember thinking, That son of a bitch.” Nearby was an address book from 1977, open to an entry for Lady Bird Johnson. He pointed at a hunk of metal. “That’s a sadiron,” he said, a relic from the Texas Hill Country. “We have other sadirons in the house, so I could give them that.”

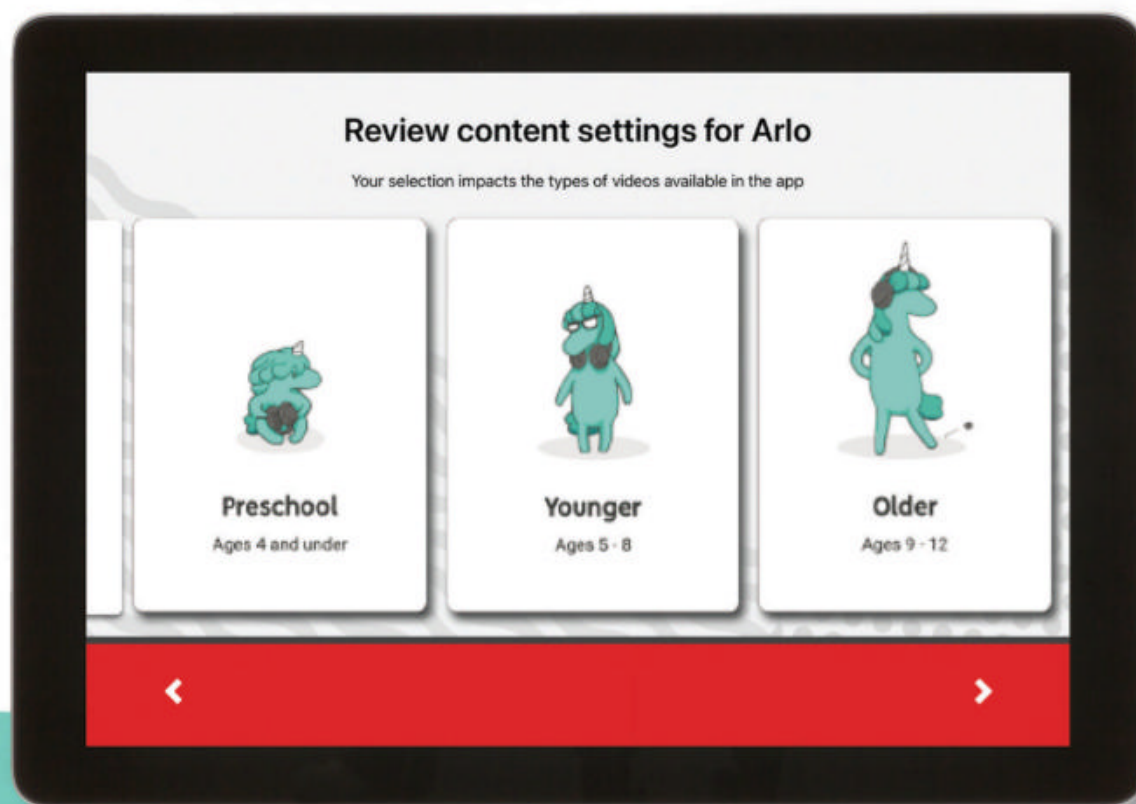
The exhibit was also a tribute to the analog—longhand first drafts, scribbled revisions with notes in red to his longtime typist (“Carol—don’t miss the ¶ here”), handwritten exhortations to himself (“commas matter”). “Bob, don’t you have a number of backup typewriters in case one goes down?” Bernard said.

“Well, I use a Smith Corona Electra 210,” Caro said. “I always get the same kind of letters. Half the letters say, ‘Oh, I have one in the garage. I’m such an admirer of yours. I’ll send it to you.’ The



Robert Caro

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other ones say, 'Oh, I have one in the garage. I'm such an admirer of yours. I'll sell it to you for four thousand dollars.' So I accept all the free ones. When I started this fifth volume, I had fourteen, but now I'm down to eleven."

Bernard pointed to a typewriter on display and said, "Ten now."

Caro discussed the relinquishing of custody. "Last summer, I would open the drawers of these filing cabinets in my basement one after the other and there was nothing in them," he said. "I had a feeling of real emptiness."

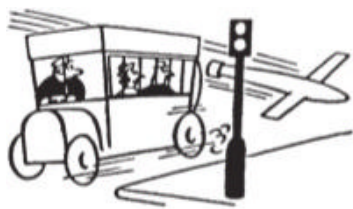
"It was very hard for him to let go," Bernard said.

Caro reconsidered: "No, I never wanted to see these again." He paused. "I'm of two emotions. There's the sinking feeling. What if I need something? But what is it, forty-seven years since 'The Power Broker' came out? You'd look at these things and you'd say, What if there was a fire or something? And you'd worry. So that worry is off my plate." He added, "Now we have a lot more shelf space."

It was almost time to get back to work—more writing, more documents. "Because I was a newspaperman, every time I put a piece of paper in the typewriter, I also put a piece of carbon paper in it," he said. "Every night, I fold up the carbon papers in quarters, stick them in my coat pocket, and the first thing I do when I walk in the house is I put them above the refrigerator. We have a storage space there that's six feet deep. There's an incredible mass of loose, folded-up papers—we're talking about thousands of pages that I've typed over the last forty years or so. Every so often, it looks like it's filled up, but there's enough space there so I can push the pile." He added, "They're still there."

—Zach Helfand

PASSING THE BUCK DEPT. THE TWO PER CENT



East Hampton, being East Hampton, is home to many people who have access to private jets and helicopters. It is also home to many people who do not. A few years ago, the have-not-

quite-as-muches decided that the traffic generated by East Hampton Airport was noisy, annoying, and anti-democratic. A protracted political battle began. Novice activists demanded that the airport be closed. Pickets were organized. ("The two per cent versus the one per cent," a local politician labelled the fight.) Recently, the town board has been seriously considering closing the airport permanently—a blow, symbolically at least, to inequality everywhere.

For many residents of Montauk, the increasingly glam fishing town on the eastern tip of Long Island, the possible closure was a source of distress: with East Hampton off limits, jet-setters from Manhattan would land at Montauk's little airport. Was the two per cent just foisting its noise and traffic problems onto the three per cent? A week ago, residents held an emergency "town hall" discussion at the fire station.

"We are the ugly stepchild of the Hamptons," Victoria Rudolph, a local property manager, said, from the back of the room. "Let me tell you, no one gives a rat's patootie about us." A woman in a flowered dress added, "It's classic East Hampton—they have a problem that's their own and they send it right over for us to deal with. But guess what? We don't want their sloppy seconds."

Jeffrey Bragman, a councilman from East Hampton, smoothed his tweed jacket and stood up to speak. Muted boos echoed through the room. Montauk is technically a part of the town of East Hampton, but a dozen miles distant. Political power and decision-making lie with East Hampton. Before Bragman opened his mouth, a member of the crowd yelled at him, "You take our money, but you don't care about us!"

Many Montaukers spoke against the airport's closure, but there wasn't a clear consensus about what, exactly, the objection was: Increased noise over Montauk? Ecological devastation? Imminent casualties due to Montauk's short runway? They did seem to agree that fighting the private-aviation industry was futile, and that Montauk would pay the price. "The billionaires aren't going anywhere," Tom Bogdan, the retired founder of a chain of home-furnishing stores and the head of Montauk United, which organized the meeting, said. "I hate to break it to everyone, but these guys are

gonna fly their planes to their houses whether we like it or not."

A woman wearing a Prada fanny pack and combat boots had a question: "What's wrong with the train?"

One answer: Nothing's wrong with the train—unless you're used to riding in helicopters. Rob Wiesenthal, the founder and C.E.O. of Blade, the "urban mobility" company that flies helicopters from Manhattan to East Hampton, who was wearing a powder-blue sweater and chunky-framed glasses, told the group, "Our focus at Blade has always been shared aircraft at a low cost. A flight out to East Hampton can cost as low as two hundred and ninety-five dollars." (The offer is available in the off-season only, and only with a nine-hundred-and-sixty-five-dollar commuter pass. Normally, a seat costs seven hundred and ninety-five dollars.) "Helicopters are not just for wealthy people anymore!" he said. The crowd jeered. He added, "Our clients—these people—are not going to stop flying out here, so it's really in everyone's interest to keep the airport open."

A man in a tracksuit and wearing an orange Rolex said, "I take a Blade two times a week from East Hampton to New York, and if the airport closes it will be very inconvenient for everyone." He went on, "I tried to land in a plane at the Montauk airport once, and we almost ran right into a deer. It's a very, very dangerous airport."

Bogdan said that some East Hamptonites have downplayed the traffic threat. "They say, 'Montauk Airport doesn't even have a ladies' room!'" he said. But he wasn't buying the argument.

Chuck Morici, a commercial fisherman who donated seven thousand pounds of fish to the local community last year, picked up a button showing a helicopter with a slash through it. "Helicopters, pah!" he said. "The least of our problems. Beach erosion is what we should care about." Morici fishes the Montauk coastline for scup, butterfish, and flounder. "If the helicopters are Black Hawk helicopters, and they're shooting at us, I'll start to worry. But these people need to look around. One hurricane and we're gone. Helicopters ain't the problem."

Rudolph, the property manager, mentioned another traffic nightmare. "Have you seen the trade parade?" she asked, referring to the bumper-to-bumper



DAVID WEBB

New York

construction trucks heading to work on Hamptons houses. “Hell,” she said, “if I had the money, I’d take a plane, too.”

—Parker Henry

DEPT. OF EDUCATION READY, HEADSET, GO



Most reporters learn the tools of the trade on the job: school-board meeting, campaign trail, war zone. Some attend hostile-environment trainings offered by journalism schools (lesson plan: car bomb, tourniquets, and screaming actors; mock kidnapping and buckets of fake blood). Recently, a magazine writer was doomscrolling in bed when he spotted an out-there tweet: crisis and conflict training for journalists, offered in three-hundred-and-sixty-degree room-scale 4K V.R. Sold.

In 2019, two foreign correspondents turned virtual-reality entrepreneurs, Kate Parkinson and Aela Callan, got a grant from the British government to develop a virtual journalism course. “I might still be doing journalism if I had better training,” Parkinson said, on a video call from Kent. Her hair was pink, cut in a bob,

and she wore a white V-neck. “I was working in Libya, in 2011, and my cameraman and I were covering the fall of Qaddafi.” A vacant look crossed her face. “I saw him effectively blown to pieces.” She went on, “I had some training, and, you know, supposedly knew what to do. But, in the moment, I didn’t have a clue. I completely froze.” She shook her head. “What if I had been able to do the training the day before I stepped on the plane?”

Hostile-environment training with the help of virtual reality, she said, will let reporters access the skills they need when they need them. “More training more often is the answer,” she said.

Callan, who wore a sleeveless white top and Apple earbuds, joined the call. In a virtual environment, she said cheerfully, “mistakes are free.” She likened the experience to “a virtual field trip!”

So that the journalist might try taking such a trip, Callan overnighted him a cardboard box. Inside was a portal to another world. The journalist opened his laptop and joined a few other participants in cyberspace for a morning of whiteboard sessions led by Callan and Chris Post, a first responder and photojournalist, who runs a Web site called JournalistSafety.com.

“Has anyone been teargassed?” Callan asked. “You want to be careful not

to jump in a hot shower. It’ll reactivate the chemicals.”

“I would caution against using milk for an eyewash solution,” Post added.

Simulation time. The journalist eagerly unboxed and tried on his new virtual-reality goggles, which had hundred-and-one-degree high-fidelity F.O.V. and built-in spatial stereo speakers (and retailed for six hundred and ninety-nine dollars). He tightened the head straps and pressed the power button. Callan’s voice bellowed from the Zoom call: “Get your headsets on! Are you all in the white room? The big white lobby? What do you see?”

The journalist saw computer-generated park benches, street lights, plane trees—wait, what’s that? A crowd of far-right protesters had appeared on the horizon. (The simulation was created using motion capture and C.G.I.) They were glowing red! His living room was transformed: a gray sofa started chugging beer; a round kitchen table shouted, “Fuck you, fake news! You lying piece of shit!” The journalist bumped into his bookshelf as the crowd swelled into a mob: “Lying fucking maggots!”

Outside the journalist’s apartment, two sanitation workers piled garbage bags into a diesel-powered truck. A man in a backward ball cap walked with his daughter, holding her hand. Meanwhile, in the simulation, the journalist watched as the mob shouted sexist comments and threw Molotov cocktails at a line of police decked out with riot shields. “Get back! Get back!” the cops shouted. A police van exploded in a cloud of smoke.

The virtual night air was filled with sirens and shouting, and the journalist tasted that metallic, get-me-out-of-here adrenaline flavor at the back of his mouth.

Ding, ding, ding. Dingggggggg. “Hello?”

The journalist’s neighbor had decided to drop in. “What are you doing!” the journalist could hear her ask, from his doorway. He knew she was staring at his goggle-clad head.

“Er, well . . .,” he stammered, removing the goggles and holding them up for her to try.

She strapped them on. “It looks like a crime scene,” she yelped. “I don’t like that.” She handed the goggles back and said, “I had a very close interaction with a rat yesterday!”

Back in the simulation, the journalist



“Welcome to the open house. If you happen to battle any other couples to the death, we just ask that you don’t do it on the new carpets.”



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found himself surrounded: tear gas, broken glass, a police dog glowing purple and blue. Nearby, where his neighbor had just been standing in real life, several protesters attacked a colleague dressed in jeans and a face mask. “Fuck you!” a protester said, knocking the colleague down. “Fake news!” another man shouted, kicking the colleague viciously.

The field trip faded into darkness, and a voice came through the goggles’ speakers: “Notice how you’re feeling. If you could rate your physiological state on a scale of one to ten, what would it be?” The journalist had goosebumps.

Afterward, over Zoom, Callan asked the group to debrief the session.

“I felt rather helpless,” one correspondent said, shyly.

“I felt a little tingly.”

“I was surprised at how much a virtual experience could elevate my pulse.”

Reality beckoned. The journalist closed his laptop and went outside. A big rat crossed his path.

—Adam Iscoe

BELOW STREET LEVEL RIND ROOM



“A lot of people think that they want to work in a cheese cave,” Caroline Hesse, the head of sales at Crown Finish Caves, a cheese-aging company in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, said, standing by a door marked “Employees Only.” “Then, when they realize that you’re in a tunnel that’s thirty feet underground for eight hours a day, a lot of them are, like, ‘Oh, maybe not.’” Hesse opened the door to let in a visitor.

Crown Finish’s cheese cave is situated below one of the old Nassau Brewery buildings, on Bergen Street. The company’s owners, Benton Brown and Susan Boyle, bought the building in 2001 and converted the four stories aboveground into art studios. Then they had an idea for what to do with the vaulted brick tunnels beneath the building, where the brewery once aged lager. Brown had been learning about affinage, or cheese aging. Affineurs buy “green” wheels of cheese from cheesemakers who don’t have the time or

the space to minister to the cheeses for the months or years needed before they’re ready to be sliced into wedges and sold to consumers. “Cheeses that don’t need to cave are like ricotta, mozzarella—things that don’t have a rind on them,” Hesse said. “Everything else—Brie, blue cheese—needs to be put in a cave.” The Nassau Brewery tunnels, which hadn’t been used since the brewery closed, in 1916, and where the ambient temperature has stayed a cool fifty-five degrees for more than a century, are an affineur’s dream.

Hesse put on a red hairnet, a blue lab coat, and a pair of white plastic clogs—mandatory cavewear—and made her way down a spiral staircase. Crown Finish gets asked about the clogs, which fans spot on the company’s Instagram. “A German man sent us an e-mail saying, ‘I think they would go great with a lot of my outfits,’” Hesse said.

Opening a sliding door, she revealed the cave: a space the size of a decent studio apartment, with white brick walls and three banks of wooden shelves holding twenty-four thousand pounds of cheese-in-progress. A hygrometer—which measures humidity—read just below ninety per cent. The smell was more barnyard than locker room. In the back, two affineurs, Liana Kindler and Ethan Partyka, moved around, affinaging. Hesse made for a shelf of Mixed Signal, a clothbound Cheddar-style cheese from Vermont. “This went into the cave last week,” she said, pointing to a waxy orange cylinder a foot tall and two feet across. “And this went in last month,” she said, pointing to a Mixed Signal cylinder covered in green-gray mold. In a few more months, the mold would develop into a proper rind. Until then, the cylinders would be flipped regularly, to keep the moisture in the cheese from sinking to the bottom, and brushed, to maintain an even distribution of mold.

Cheese aging is a craft of active patience. You can’t age cheese remotely. Crown Finish Caves kept operations going through the pandemic. At the start, the company sold whole wheels direct to consumers for the first time. “Everyone was hunkering down,” Hesse said, looking over a row of Carpenter’s Wheel, a goat’s-milk cheese from Maryland, which had been molded into smooth disks intended to look like river stones. “We made videos explaining how to store a whole wheel



of cheese.” At the back of the cave, globes of Mimolette, an orangey French cheese, hung from the ceiling. “We like to keep a couple wheels of Mimolette, because there’s this great mold that grows on them—these nice red spots,” Hesse said. “The air has all these molds and microbes and things that pass over all the cheeses.”

Hesse stopped to talk with Kindler, one of the affineurs. “Time kind of stands still in here,” Kindler said. “I don’t know if the sun is up right now. It could be snowing. We’re able to monitor time in a way that humans usually don’t.” Hesse nodded. “This is, like, a very normal clock,” she said, meaning the cave. “At the one-month mark, the Mixed Signals are going to start showing a lot of mold on them. At the three-week mark, the Bufarolos are going to start turning orange.”

Partyka, the other affineur, appeared. He had two flying birds tattooed on his neck. “The weirdest thing was being considered essential workers,” he said. “The world was thrown into chaos, and I’m still biking to work, coming underground, and here’s the cheese.” In the cave, social distancing was difficult. Flipping cheese, scrubbing cheese—these were normally two-person jobs.

There was the cave, and there was the world, but the line between the two had been blurred. “A lot of what we’re doing from a food-safety perspective is risk assessment,” Partyka said. “Cheese—everything—has a potential risk.”

“For every risk, there’s a protocol,” Hesse said. “Now we have these protocols for our own personal lives, too.”

—Eric Lach

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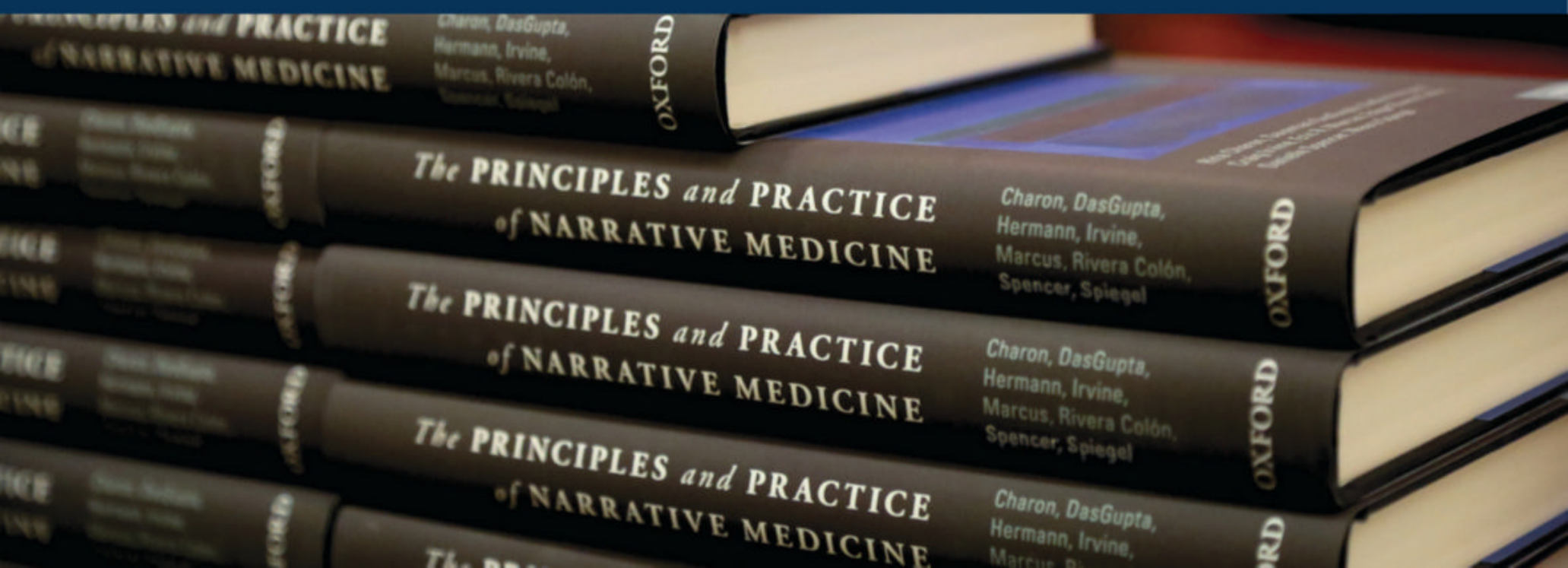
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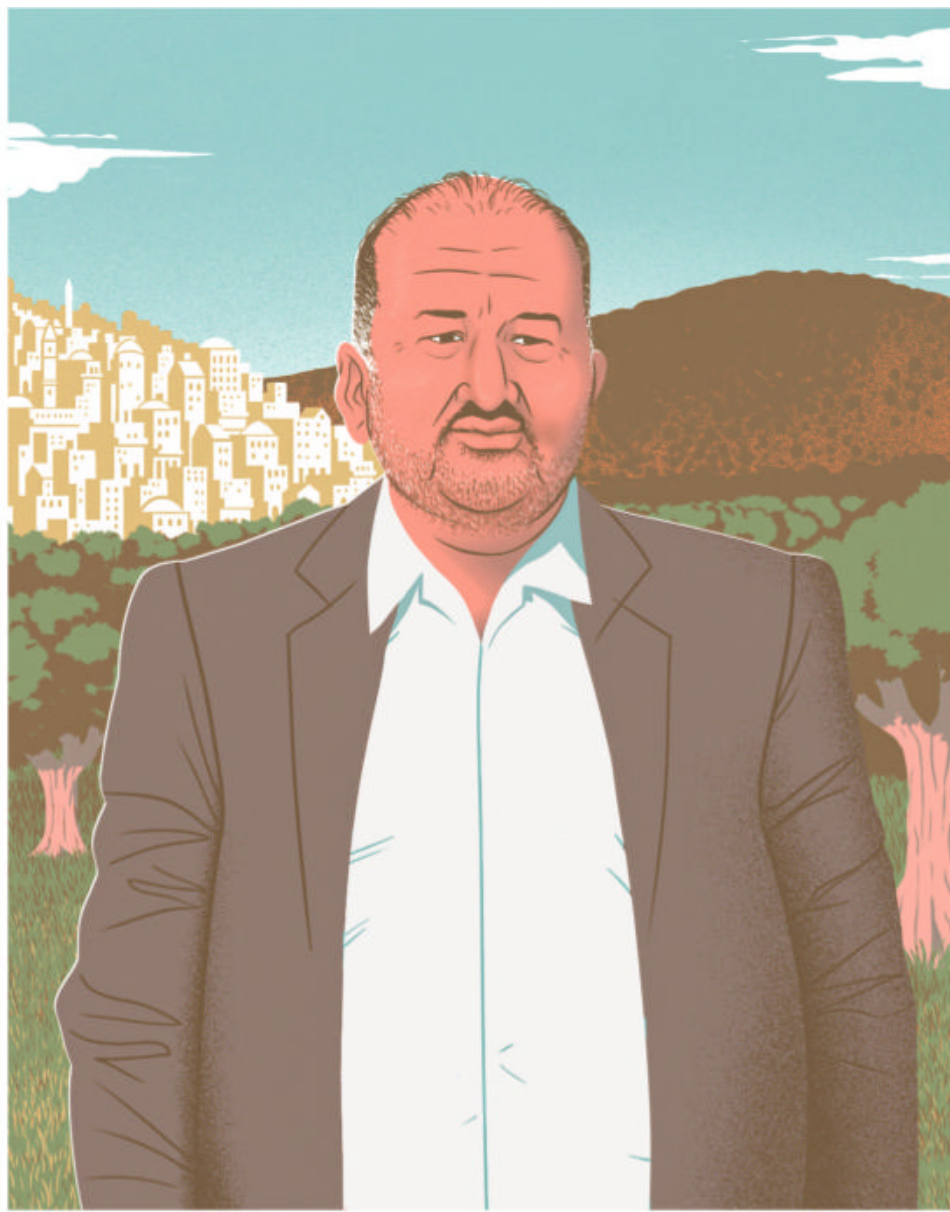
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LETTER FROM ISRAEL

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

Is Mansour Abbas changing the system or selling out?

BY RUTH MARGALIT

There's a saying in Arabic about learning from hard experience: "Burn your tongue on soup and you'll blow on yogurt." Mansour Abbas, an Arab-Israeli legislator, has had his share of tongue burns, and he has learned to be cautious. In public appearances, he makes sure to keep the Israeli flag in view; last year, he spoke stirringly on Holocaust Remembrance Day. But, as the head of an Islamist party with connections to the Muslim Brotherhood, he remains an object of suspicion for many Jewish Israelis. At least four of his colleagues in the Knesset, the country's parliament, have called him a "supporter of terror." When Ayelet Shaked, a member of his coalition, recently saw him in a narrow corridor there,

she walked right past, as he stood by, offering a soft "Shalom."

Things are nearly as bad on the opposing side. The Palestinian press regularly describes Abbas as a traitor. One veteran negotiator suggested that his ascent in the Knesset had created a "Vichy government." His offense, in their view, is an insufficient commitment to the long fight for Palestinian statehood. In the West Bank, 2.3 million people live under Israeli occupation; another two million are blockaded in Gaza. But Abbas focusses instead on improving conditions for the Palestinian citizens of Israel proper, a population of nearly two million that has sustained decades of discrimination and neglect. (The tradi-

tional term for this group, Arab Israelis, is increasingly controversial, but it's the one that Abbas prefers.) In March, when Abbas attended a protest against the Israeli police in the Arab town of Umm al-Fahm, two of his fellow-protesters punched him in the head. Although he is deeply devout, he has stopped attending sermons at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque, for fear of his safety. "For him, that's like not going home," his brother told me.

So when, in April, Abbas and two advisers sat in a small room at their party's headquarters to draft his first major national speech, the debate was largely about what he *wouldn't* say. The speech, only two hours away, was to be transmitted live from a hotel in Nazareth. On Channel 12, a correspondent announced the broadcast as if it were an unexpected matchup in the World Cup: "All television channels are cutting away from their scheduled programming to carry the speech of an Arab politician—a dramatic change."

Abbas slumped behind a laptop, as Aaed Kayal, his party's chief campaign strategist, read aloud from his phone. The window behind them was shuttered, filtering out the early-evening haze. A television crew from the investigative show "Hamakor" filmed the exchange.

"It's time to create a reality that will make us, the Arab citizens of Israel, a peace bridge between the two peoples," Kayal read monotonically. "A bridge of peace," Abbas corrected him, his voice no more than a whisper. Abbas is forty-seven, with droopy eyes, a barely existent tuft of gray hair, and a plump face, set into a determinedly benign smile. He is of average height and above-average weight. ("He's on cafeteria food—a lot of coffee and candy," a friend told me.)

His second adviser, Ibrahim Hijazi, piped up, "A bridge of peace that would bring an end to the—"

Kayal, anticipating the word "occupation," interrupted. "No, no," he said. "That would take us to a problematic place." Later, he explained his reasoning to me: "You want to market your car as fast? Say that it's fast. You want to market yourself as pragmatic? Be pragmatic all the way."

The goal of this pragmatic approach was to help Abbas lead his party into a ruling coalition—something that no

In a fiercely divided country, Abbas has gained influence by playing to the center.

Arab-Israeli politician had ever done. Nine days earlier, the country had endured its fourth election cycle in two years. Once again, the results had been inconclusive, as Benjamin Netanyahu, the longtime Prime Minister, was unable to secure enough support for his right-wing bloc. But, amid the uncertainty, a quirk of parliamentary politics made Abbas an unlikely power broker.

In Israeli elections, the leader of the party with the most support in parliament has first shot at forming a government and becoming Prime Minister. Because Israel has a multiparty system, the winner has to enlist—beg, cajole, outright buy—the backing of the smaller parties, in order to fill out a coalition. Arab parties have historically rejected the prospect of serving in an Israeli government. (Not that they were asked.) But now Netanyahu was suggesting that he was open to working with Arab interests—just as Abbas indicated that his party was willing to work with Netanyahu. Such a deal would keep Netanyahu in charge. It would also give Arab Israelis, and Abbas, an unprecedented degree of influence.

Netanyahu had a divisive record with Israeli Arabs, who constitute twenty-one per cent of the population. As Prime Minister, he incited rage against them whenever it seemed politically expedient, but he also passed the largest-ever economic package to benefit their community. The result, Aziz Haidar, a professor of sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, told me, was “the most social segregation and the most economic integration.” Abbas chose to focus on the integration. Perhaps Netanyahu—politically effective, inseparable from his base, solicitous of the most religious sectors of society—was not such a bad model for an ambitious Islamist to follow. When I met with Abbas recently, he spoke of forthrightly emulating Netanyahu’s party: “Our policy is copied and pasted from Likud.”

As Abbas huddled with his advisers over the draft of his speech, he knew that any mention of “occupation” would be fraught. Even if Netanyahu was willing to overlook the word, using it would immediately disqualify Abbas on the extreme right. Yet, as the leader of an Arab party, he couldn’t simply ignore the Palestinian issue. Could he? His

two advisers seemed almost to personify the voices arguing in his head: the results-minded Israeli pol and the Palestinian ideologue. (When I told Abbas this, he laughed and said, “It’s true.”)

Hijazi, the ideologue, turned to him: “Mansour, what do you have to say?”

Kayal pleaded, “Two peoples! We just agreed!”

Abbas nodded his head ever so slightly at Kayal. The strategist won. “Occupation” was out.

The art of appeasing entrenched factions is part of Abbas’s birthright. He grew up in Maghar, a mountainside township in the Galilee where three-fifths of the residents are Druze, one-fifth are Christians, and one-fifth are Muslims. “I’ve always been a minority within a minority,” he said. When I visited, Abbas’s father, Ghazi, greeted me from behind the counter of his grocery store, where he has worked for sixty years. The place, which abuts the family home, is a gathering spot for locals to gossip, talk politics, and air their conflicts.

Ghazi, who is eighty-four and barely speaks Hebrew, said that his views reflected the assimilative nature of Maghar. In the nineteen-eighties, he sat on the local council on behalf of the Arab Communist Party, which was then prominent among Arab Israelis. Later, he supported the peace-seeking government of Yitzhak Rabin. Throughout, he served as an unofficial arbiter for the town’s Muslim population—a *sulha* man, or peacemaker, Mansour told me. Some of Mansour’s earliest memories are of people flocking to the store to seek his father’s help with reconciliation. “He’s the best psychologist I know,” Mansour’s younger brother Osama, a lecturer at Sakhnin College, told me.

Mansour was born in 1974, the fifth of eleven children. (Ghazi maintained that he was the third, but Osama clarified that he had counted only the boys.) A shy, portly, well-mannered boy, he excelled at school, though he was a bit of a clown. His father wanted him to go into medicine, a common trajectory for promising Arab students in Israel. (Forty-six per cent of those who received a medical license last year were Arabs.) But, when Abbas was sixteen, he “discovered the mosque,” he recalled. His upbringing had been “religious lite”—observant

but not strict. Now he threw himself into nightly study of the Quran, learning its more than six thousand verses by heart. Within a year, he had become an imam at a mosque near his house.

Word of his accomplishments reached an erudite and charismatic sheikh, who invited Abbas to join a weekly discussion group of Islamic and political theory. Some boys had fast legs or big hearts, the sheikh liked to say, but “Mansour is a head.”

The sheikh, Abdullah Nimar Darwish, called himself “a soldier of peace,” though his focus on peace came late. In 1971, he had founded the Islamic Movement in Israel, an ideological offshoot of the global Muslim Brotherhood; he also formed a terrorist cell that torched Israeli farmers’ fields and orchards. While serving three years in prison, he underwent a transformation. Darwish died in 2017, but his daughter, Nosiba, described his reckoning to me. One day, behind bars, he asked himself, “What have we accomplished with armed resistance?”

After his release, in 1984, Darwish began advocating nonviolence and preaching a more tolerant interpretation of Islam. One sura of the Quran became his guiding metaphor. It tells the story of Yunus, who is swallowed by a whale and survives because of his piousness. Darwish believed that Arab Israelis, too, had to find a way to exist in “*batn al but*”—“the belly of the whale.” Nosiba explained, “We have to live in our homes in a country to which we belonged from the beginning, that is now the State of Israel. So we will take all of our rights, we will do the maximum for our community, and we will not break the law.”

In 1993, the Oslo Accord secured a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. The Islamic Movement splintered. The leaders of its northern branch continued to shun Israeli politics, arguing that the Jewish state had no right to exist. (They were later charged with aiding Hamas and eventually outlawed, by Netanyahu’s security cabinet.) By contrast, the southern branch, led by Darwish, came to see political engagement as Arab Israelis’ only tool against entrenched inequality. In 1996, he helped form a political arm of the movement, a party called the United Arab List, or Ra’am.

At the time, Abbas was at the Hebrew

University in Jerusalem, studying dentistry—a concession to his father, and also to financial necessity. (Arab functionaries still refer to him as “*al doctor*.”) Yet political activism monopolized his time. He co-founded a student council representing the Islamic Movement. Rather than focus on pan-Palestinian causes, he addressed local issues of discrimination, such as a lack of dormitory housing for Arab students. “He even got all the Christians to vote for him,” one insider told me.

Privately, Abbas struggled to reconcile this ecumenical approach with religious strictures. Abdelkarim Azzam, a university friend who now serves as Abbas’s assistant, told me, “Once, we had an event, and Mansour and I went to the sheikh and asked, ‘Is it O.K. for a woman who’s secular in her appearance to host?’” Darwish, he recalled, laughed and said, “What’s the problem?” He reassured Abbas by telling stories of pious figures whose relatives were nonbelievers; the son of Nuh, he pointed out, refused to accept God’s prophecy and come aboard the ark. “His point was that you change people by dialogue, by mind and heart, not by coercion,” Azzam said.

This moved Abbas deeply. “When you try to change someone, you threaten them,” he told me, one afternoon in his office. “Why should they change? But when you say, ‘Let’s talk, let’s try to reach an understanding, come get to know me and my history and my hardships and my narrative, and I will do the same’—then both sides will change. This isn’t some mystical belief. I see it daily.”

In 2010, Abbas was appointed deputy head of the Islamic Movement. He pushed to hold democratic elections every four years, and to open the ranks to more women. While helping to lead the movement, he also enrolled in a master’s program in political science at the University of Haifa. Doron Navot, his thesis adviser, recalled hours of conversation, in which Abbas deployed the Quran to demolish the ideologies of groups like the Islamic State: “Here it says explicitly that you can’t abuse hostages, and here they are executing a pilot.”

Abbas still serves as an imam at a

mosque outside Tiberias, where his Friday sermons regularly attract some two hundred worshippers. A recent sermon dealt with finding temperamentally suitable partners for one’s children. The Quran, Abbas noted, stresses the importance of like-mindedness: “He has created spouses for yourselves from your own selves, so you might take comfort in them.”

Abbas’s own search for a suitable partner began when he was twenty-nine. One day, he confided to a senior figure in the Islamic Movement that he was looking for a wife. The man asked to meet Abbas’s parents, and soon afterward he arrived in Maghar with his wife and daughter in tow. The daughter, Yakoot, was sixteen, a year shy of legal marrying age. Abbas took one look at her and decided

that he would be pleased to wait if he had to. “At least, that’s what he says now,” Yakoot told me recently, and chuckled. She was less impressed, in part because of their age difference. “I said, ‘No, no, no’ until the very end,” Yakoot said.

We were sitting on cream-colored sofas, in the living room of the couple’s house, a few steps down the hill from where Abbas’s parents live. A sign outside, in Hebrew and Arabic, announced the “Dentistry of Dr. Mansour Abbas.” Yakoot, now thirty-four, was dressed in a loose-fitting gray dress and a black hijab, balancing their eighteen-month-old daughter on her lap. She teaches English at the local high school, and has been raising their three children increasingly alone since Abbas entered parliament. Yakoot thought she was marrying a dentist, she said: “We didn’t talk politics at all. Now we joke—I tell him he never said that’s what he wanted. And he says, ‘But, when you agreed, you agreed to everything.’”

In 2018, Abbas was elected to lead Ra’am, which had entered a coalition of predominantly Arab parties called the Joint List. He was uneasy about the alliance. The Joint List parties, though ideologically disparate, were united in their support for Palestinian rights and their resistance to Israeli occupation. Abbas, by contrast, was focussed on aiding Arab Israelis, whose towns and villages, he said, were “becoming refugee

camps.” At times, this meant acting against the interests of Palestinians in the West Bank or in Gaza. When a proposal was raised this summer to grant Israeli work visas to fifteen thousand Palestinian construction workers, Abbas argued that this would harm the livelihood of Arab-Israeli laborers.

Ayman Odeh, the leader of the Joint List, suspected that Abbas meant to lead his party out of the alliance and into Netanyahu’s government, exchanging ideology for influence. In fact, Abbas was hoping to do just that, though he didn’t say so in public; the prospect seemed too outlandish. Under Netanyahu, Israel had passed a string of laws that discriminated against the Arab population. One, from 2018, enshrined Israel as the nation-state of the Jews while disregarding its non-Jewish citizens. But, Abbas told me, “I always thought, How can we influence a society where seventy per cent belong to the right, whether moderate or extreme? You can’t influence it from the fringe. So let’s position ourselves kind of in the middle.”

These days, when the Knesset is in session, Abbas comes home only after his Friday sermons, if he comes home at all. Though he rents an apartment in Jerusalem, most nights he crashes on a sofa in his office. In the Knesset, he chairs two committees, dedicated to the Arab sector and to issues of crime and violence, and acts as deputy speaker. Away from parliament, the demands of his constituents might take him, in a typical week, from a tour of demolished Bedouin homes to an understaffed hospital in Nazareth, from the tiny northern village of Jatt to a funeral tent in the southern Negev (which he visited, to his chagrin, during his daughter’s thirteenth-birthday party).

With her husband mostly gone, Yakoot has taken up audiobooks in English, distracting herself with titles such as “The Billionaire’s Accidental Wife.” She has also taught herself Japanese, using an app on her phone. In her living room, she was describing her passion for “everything Japanese” when a knock came at the door. Yakoot excused herself, then returned and explained that the visitor had been one of the many strangers who appear seeking her husband’s help. He was from Kabul, an Arab town in the north. Thankfully, she added,



his visit was unrelated to the spate of killings there, which had preoccupied Abbas for months.

Last August, a skirmish broke out between teen-agers in Kabul, and it soon grew into a clash between two rival families, both prominent in the town. The violence dragged on into the fall, leaving a member of each family dead and many more injured. Kabul, a town of fourteen thousand, was cut in two, as residents erected a mound of rocks between the opposing families' domains. With fires raging and masked men shooting out of car windows, Abbas began to visit, hoping to negotiate a peace.

In recent years, Kabul has fallen prey to organized crime. The problem is endemic in Arab municipalities. A hundred Arab Israelis have been killed this year, representing more than seventy per cent of all murders in the country. Of those, the police have solved only about twenty per cent, compared with more than fifty per cent in the Jewish community. The term #ArabLivesMatter has begun trending on Twitter. "We have lost control over the street in Arab communities," a senior law-enforcement official acknowledged to *Haaretz*. (When six Palestinians escaped from an Israeli prison in September, a grim joke made the rounds: "If they want to not get caught, they should commit a murder in Arab society.")

The increase in crime, officials say, reflects a breakdown in trust between Arab citizens and the police, which began in 2000, when the police fatally shot thirteen Arab protesters. Since then, the state has effectively "stepped out of the Arab space," Kamal Ryan, an Islamic Movement official who heads an anti-violence organization, told me. Instead, the police have redoubled their efforts in Jewish cities. In 2003, the government of Ariel Sharon orchestrated a crackdown, which ended with the leaders of Jewish crime families either under arrest or fleeing the country. But the crime didn't stop; it simply moved. The families' foot soldiers—most of them Arab youths—have taken over, transplanting operations from Jewish cities to Arab or mixed towns.

Ryan estimates that sixty thousand Arab men now work for the mob, from drug dealers to loan sharks and collectors of protection money. The effects are not limited to the margins of society.

Arab citizens seeking mortgages are often turned away by banks, and many young couples resort to the black market. Netanyahu's program to improve conditions in Arab communities was supposed to address such disparities, with three billion dollars in spending over five years. But local councils lacked the infrastructure to administer the money, and almost half the funding allocated to them went unspent. The councils have instead become a lucrative target for organized crime. Last year, fifteen Arab council heads were targeted by gunfire or Molotov cocktails.

Abbas has made the "eradication" of crime and violence in Arab communities his signature issue. He serves as a member of an unofficial nationwide *sulha* committee, and has brokered dozens of reconciliations between rival families. In recent years, Ryan said, he has become the "dominant person in resolving most of the heavy conflicts and murders" in Arab society. A source close to Abbas told me that Israeli police officials have personally asked him to intervene in several of the bloodiest feuds.

Yet some critics say that the Islamic Movement, with its emphasis on religious law, is not a tempering force but a complicit one. The movement "creates this isolationist rhetoric that allows the State of Israel to turn its back on its Arab citizens by saying, 'They're different,' and by giving local councils the power to run the lives of Israeli Arabs," Raef Zreik, a scholar of political philosophy, said. "If

tomorrow someone beats me to a pulp, the State of Israel will not intervene. It will say, 'We have subcontractors in the local councils.'"

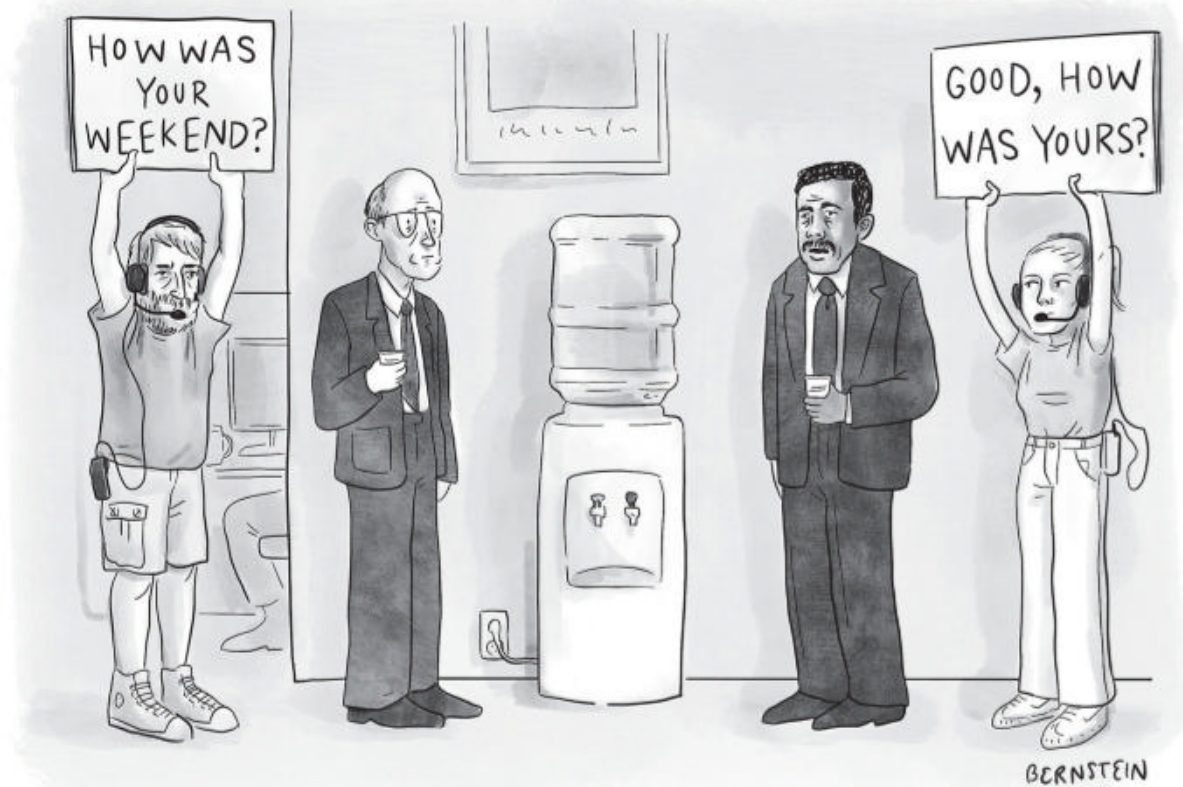
For Abbas, the work is gruelling: endless visits with grieving relatives who are more interested in vengeance than in reconciliation. Kayal, the strategist, recalled phoning him once in the middle of the night and hearing what sounded like a firing range in the background. "Where are you?" he asked. "Kabul," Abbas replied. But, after four months of visits there, Abbas oversaw a breakthrough. On a clear day in January, five hundred men filed into the town hall for a reconciliation ceremony. A long piece of white cloth and a wooden pole were carried in. The head of each family tied a single knot of cloth to the pole, to symbolize their unshakable bond. Abbas, from the stage, issued a prayer in a soft voice. "We need the *sulha* to become a road map for Arab society," he said. "May Kabul remain a place of love."

Before the latest election, in March, Abbas removed his party from the Joint List. He cited ideological disagreements, centered on the alliance's endorsement of gay rights, but he later acknowledged that this was just a pretext—"a catalyst." Abbas has been starkly consistent in his support for anti-L.G.B.T.Q. legislation, voting in favor of conversion therapy and against adoption rights for same-sex couples.

The Joint List, outraged, worked to



"Hey, how come our names aren't on the plaque?"



portray him as a shill for Netanyahu, and the strategy seemed to work. Analysts predicted that voters would abandon Abbas's party. But Kayal believed that the polls were misleading. "People were embarrassed to say they were voting for Mansour—like those Trump voters," he said. (Analogies to Trump come readily to Kayal, who regards the disgraced political operative Roger Stone as a lodestar.)

In the end, Ra'am won four seats in parliament, while the Joint List lost nine of its fifteen. The media had missed a shift in Arab-Israeli society, Mohammad Magadli, an analyst for Israel's Channel 12, told me. "There's a young generation here that is no longer afraid of the State of Israel," he said. "It's a brash generation that isn't willing to be second-class citizens. But it's also a generation that wants to integrate into society, so they vote for Mansour Abbas."

Abbas's campaign posters had featured a three-word message: "Realistic. Conservative. Influencing." After the election, he gave a speech in which he signalled his openness to negotiating with anyone who offered his party a place in government. His opponents were not impressed. "Mansour Abbas's speech tries to present as a 'cuddly Teddy bear' someone who belongs to the Islamic Movement, supports Hamas, and sanctifies murderers of babies," a Knesset member named Itamar Ben Gvir proclaimed. Ben Gvir is one of the hard-right ideologues

whom Abbas had sought to pacify; he has been convicted eight times, on charges that include incitement and supporting a Jewish terrorist group. (The two men have neighboring offices in the Knesset. Anhar Hijazi, a hijab-wearing adviser to Abbas, told me, with a wink, "Every day, I walk up and down the corridor just so that he knows I'm there.")

Without the support of the far right, Netanyahu's effort to form a coalition with Abbas collapsed. But the attempt to bring Ra'am into government had a significant effect, Abbas said: "It made the move kosher." Now Yair Lapid, the centrist leader of the second-largest party, had twenty-eight days to assemble his own coalition. He had been discussing a power-sharing deal with Naftali Bennett, a kippah-wearing former settlement leader and software millionaire, who would serve the first two years as Prime Minister. Together, they picked up where Netanyahu had left off: Lapid phoned Abbas.

In early May, the three men met at a hotel outside Tel Aviv, about fifteen minutes from where Lapid and Bennett live and a two-hour schlep for Abbas. Bennett was in shirtsleeves; Lapid had on his habitual T-shirt and blazer; Abbas wore a suit. Over orange juice and croissants, Abbas laid out a demand that would have seemed preposterous a few months before: he would join the coalition if the government supplied almost ten billion dollars for housing, education, welfare,

and transportation in Arab communities, with separate funding for the Druze and Bedouin populations and nearly a billion dollars to target crime and violence.

The group, aware that Abbas was still screening calls from Netanyahu, broadly agreed to his terms. Bennett wrote on Facebook, "I'm willing to go far and pay a price with my 'base.'" Then they hit an impasse, around the issue of housing for Arab Israelis. Since Israel's founding, in 1948, the state has failed to build a single Arab settlement, while adding more than seven hundred Jewish communities. Abbas, who won overwhelming support among Israel's three hundred thousand Bedouins, asked that lawful status be conferred on nine Bedouin villages. And he insisted on cancelling a law that allows the police to demolish unauthorized homes. To build a home in Israel requires a permit—but, because the central government has not supplied many Arab councils with the necessary surveys, securing one can take years, driving families to build illegally. According to estimates, there are at least fifty thousand unauthorized homes in Arab communities. All are under threat of being razed. "This, for us, is a nightmare—a trauma," Abbas has said.

Bennett, who once warned that Arab Israelis "should not test our patience," refused to overturn the law. The meeting adjourned, with another one scheduled for after the weekend. Both sides later characterized the subsequent meeting, in typical tight-lipped coalitionspeak, as "good." But, among Abbas's constituents, tensions over housing were growing worse.

The impetus was a pending court decision, which was expected to expel six Palestinian families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of Jerusalem. Abbas wanted to visit the families, but they rebuffed him, as a neighborhood committee condemned his "anti-national stance." Fearing unrest, the police had cordoned off the plaza outside Al-Aqsa Mosque. The decision, coinciding with the holy month of Ramadan, was seen as denying Muslims a place to congregate. Clashes broke out between Palestinian protesters and the police. Some protesters threw stones. The police, wielding tear gas and stun grenades, raided the mosque.

Abbas watched from home, as images of the holy site, filled with smoke, ap-

peared onscreen. “The picture drives people beside themselves,” he told me. “It fell on a foundation that was ready for a conflagration.” On Sunday, Hamas issued an ultimatum for Israel to withdraw its forces from Al-Aqsa by 6 P.M. When Israel did not yield, the group fired a barrage of rockets at Jerusalem. That night, Israel launched an offensive that devastated Gaza, claiming the lives of more than two hundred Palestinians, at least sixty-seven of whom were children. Rocket fire killed twelve Israelis, including two children. The conflict spilled into the streets of Israel, and to the mixed towns, where a quarter of Israel’s Arab citizens live, resulting in some of the worst ethnic violence since the country’s founding. Places such as Haifa, Jaffa, Acre—fast-gentrifying tourist havens, where Jews and Arabs had lived in relative peace—became sites of attempted lynchings. In Lod, a week of nightly clashes left the city full of charred buildings and broken glass. Even Abbas struggled to maintain his assurance that dialogue would ease the tensions between Arabs and Jews. He later acknowledged, “We all failed there.”

A week after the riots broke out, Abbas arrived at Lod’s Grand Mosque. The parking lot stood vacant, apart from the torched shells of three cars. While adjusting an earpiece for a television interview, Abbas was approached by Yair Revivo, the city’s mayor. Revivo, a former campaign chief for Likud, was known for offending his Arab constituents. (“Call me racist until tomorrow, but Jewish criminals have a drop of compassion,” he once said. “Arab criminals have no restraint.”)

Revivo told Abbas that he had an opportunity to call for an end to the violence. “There’s a synagogue that was burned a hundred metres from here,” he said. “You’ll look like a man if you come.” Abbas quickly decided to join him.

The resulting footage, of the two men side by side in the synagogue, inspired a frenzy in the Jewish and Arab media. (It was less often reported that Abbas had stopped Revivo from placing a kippah on his head.) For many on the right, the gesture set Abbas apart from other Arab politicians. “When an Arab leader condemns violence and the torching of a synagogue, in full throat, not defensively, then I have to reach out to the hand that is extended to me,” Yoaz Hendel, Israel’s communi-

cations minister, told me. Among Arab Israelis, however, reactions ranged from shock to fury. Some of Abbas’s staunchest allies turned against him. Ibrahim Hijazi, the secretary-general of the Islamic Movement, called it an “inappropriate, mistaken visit.” A poll released the following week declared, “Ra’am is wiped out.”

Amid the escalating violence, coalition talks had broken down. But, a source close to Abbas told me, Abbas and Lapid quietly continued to negotiate, with Bennett’s blessing. In the end, they compromised. The government would recognize three of the nine Bedouin villages; the law that legalizes razing would remain in effect, but would be “frozen” until the end of 2024.

Two hours before Lapid’s mandate was set to expire, on June 2nd, the three men, looking tired but relieved, signed the terms of the new government. As Lapid announced that he had formed a coalition, cheers and applause broke out in the room. Abbas, however, was not in a celebratory mood. The previous weeks had rattled him. “It turns out that, even if you try to ignore the national issues, you won’t be able to,” he told “Hama-kor.” “The conflict is still present. Alive. Hot. Kicking.”

If the riots had exposed the limits of Abbas’s domestic agenda, he responded by committing to it more deeply. He complained that people kept trying to look past his conciliatory approach to find a secret ideology. “*This* is our ideology,” he said. “This isn’t just ‘civic.’ We’re talking about a matter of life and death. It’s bigger than nationality or religiosity or ideology.”

In November, the government will hold a final vote on the proposed budget, including the billions of dollars in funding that Abbas secured from his coalition partners for Arab-Israeli concerns. Netanyahu has blasted the money as the “Abbas tax”—“*mas Abbas*,” in the resonant Hebrew. But activists say that the package could transform the future of Arab citizens: curbing unemployment and school-dropout rates, improving integration into Israel’s booming high-tech sector, and expanding housing and public transportation. If it passes—as seems likely—Abbas will have achieved a historic victory. He will also (in his eyes, at least) be vindicated for the

compromises he made along the way.

During the summer, he toured local councils to discuss where that money will be directed. His spokesman doubles as chauffeur; Abbas rides shotgun. It’s a lean operation. When the coalition agreement was announced, in June, Abbas wasn’t given a swanky ministry, the customary reward for coalition-party leaders. He claims that he didn’t want one, in order to leave a buffer between him and the government in case of a new Gaza offensive. His aides mentioned another reason, one afternoon after he’d left the room. Being a minister entails having a large security detail, supplied by Shin Bet. “That embarrassed him,” Azzam, his assistant, said. “It’s perceived as truly being part of the establishment.”

The perception of Abbas as a sellout persists. One morning, I met with Amir Badran, a lawyer who represents Arab families facing eviction in Jaffa. Abbas’s efforts on housing ought to appeal to such a person, but Badran was indignant: “Are you there to fix my pavement? Take care of my plumbing? That’s what my vote is worth?”

Other critics focus on his roots in the Islamic Movement. Zreik, the political-philosophy scholar, has argued that Abbas represents “politically flexible pragmatism mixed with religious ideological conservatism.” This religious prism “turns a conflict of geography and history into a cultural conflict,” he told me. “He blames people like me for hating Jews, saying, ‘We are all sons of Abraham and need to love one another.’ That was never the issue! The issue is that there is a people sitting on the land of another people and refusing its right to self-determination. Once you take space, territory, land out of the conversation and take out the national question of self-determination, you’re left with a cultural *misunderstanding*. And then what do you do? You hold *meetings* to better *understand* one another.”

Even Abbas’s supporters concede that he can seem out of touch. When I asked Osama Abbas about his brother’s near-refusal to raise the Palestinian issue, he deliberated for a moment and finally allowed, “It’s difficult.” Ryan, of the Islamic Movement, said of Abbas, “He is a visionary. But sometimes he comes across as naïve or as an *ahbal*”—a fool.

The Jewish press does not see Abbas

as such a guileless figure. Photographs recently surfaced from 2013, showing him visiting the relatives of convicted Palestinian terrorists. He justified these visits by saying that the families had asked for assistance, and that, as a social movement, Ra'am "has to be there." *Haaretz* later reported on a private meeting that Abbas held in Doha, in 2014, with the Hamas chief Khaled Mashal, and on another, in 2016, with the head of Hamas's military operations. Abbas explained that the meetings were part of a peace initiative led by an Orthodox rabbi in Israel. This claim aroused skepticism, but the rabbi, Michael Melchior, confirmed it to me, noting that Abbas had safeguarded Israeli interests in the face of extremist views. "I found him to be a true man of peace," Melchior said.

After Abbas entered the government, a senior Hamas member accused him of "giving cover to a dish that poisoned the victory of our people." But Abbas is careful not to criticize Hamas. One afternoon, when we were discussing Islamophobia, he mentioned "terrorist groups that have charred the face of Islam in the world."

"Including Hamas?" I asked.

"No," he replied instantly. "I'm talking generally, about groups like Daesh"—the Arabic term for the Islamic State—"that have a universal dimension. Hamas is a local group that deals with a local national struggle."

He seemed to regard the Taliban's recent takeover of Afghanistan along similar lines: a somewhat understandable, if not fully justified, local resistance. "It looks like this development happened in coordination" with the Americans, he said, and then added a quick disclaimer: "I'm not for or against it."

One morning in August, Abbas's S.U.V. pulled up to the cinder-block town hall of Ma'ale Iron, a council of five Arab villages in Israel's Wadi Ara region. Inside, people were lining up to collect their mail, and some stopped to embrace him. In the latest election, seventy per cent of local residents voted for Ra'am. One man, who had canvassed for the Party, explained his support with an aphorism: "Whoever marries my mother, I call him father." Asked to elaborate, he offered another. "You have to be close to the plate, or else you don't get anything."

Mahmoud Jabarin, the local council head, welcomed Abbas to his office. A photograph of Netanyahu, faded to ochre, hung on a wall. Jabarin told the council's head of security, "Mansour Abbas is useful to us now." Turning to Abbas, he said, "I care a great deal about Palestine and the West Bank, like every national-minded person. But, at the end of the day, we live here, and we need a lot of things."

The group walked to a conference room, where a dozen men and one woman sat around a table laden with figs and grapes. The wadi stretched outside the window.

"Here we call you the acting Prime Minister!" the council's financial manager told Abbas, in Hebrew.

"Let's respect the Prime Minister," Abbas replied, woodenly.

"But even Netanyahu called you that!" another man chimed in, to uneasy laughter.

Two weeks earlier, on the floor of the Knesset, Netanyahu had said that the proposed budget was "meant to satisfy one man, and one man alone: Mansour Abbas, the real Prime Minister!" Abbas, whose demeanor in parliament usually oscillates between amusement and mild boredom, appeared shaken. Wagging a finger, he reminded Netanyahu that he had recently hosted him at the Prime Minister's residence. "Four times you invited me to Balfour!" he shouted. "Four times!"

With Naftali Bennett installed as Prime Minister, Abbas had a different problem: Bennett accused opponents of sneaking "like thieves in the night to meet Mansour." Meanwhile, opposition lawmakers insisted that Abbas was secretly controlling the Prime Minister, forcing him into awkward displays of obeisance. In September, when Bennett appeared on *Time's* 100 Most Influential People list, Abbas was asked to write the entry. His opening line was: "In the end, it all comes down to courage."

Throughout the past year, Abbas had demonstrated his skill at navigating life in the belly of the whale. Still, he told me, "there are moments when you ask yourself, What's the limit of my ability to withstand this? You find yourself alone." He might be a cynical operative in a broken system. He might represent the battered aspirations of a sidelined

minority. For now, though, he finds himself positioned to deliver something extraordinary to the Arab citizens of Israel: a corrective, in the form of improved living conditions, to years of governmental neglect. "All I'm saying is that I'm a citizen and I want to make use of my rights," he told me. "I ignore ceilings and walls and attempts at exclusion. I gallop forward, until someone stops me."

At the meeting, the council's engineer listed the area's problems: No land for young couples. No pavement. No electricity in many homes. "At the end of the day, everyone wants to get married and start a family," he said. "We just want to make it a little easier for people, to relieve the pressure cooker, or else things will blow up in our face."

Abbas, munching on a fig, slowly wiped his fingers with a napkin. While the participants took turns voicing their complaints—"We don't have a school"; "There's nothing to prevent young people from dropping out and turning to crime"—the others tried to gauge his reaction. Finally, after hearing from everyone (except the woman, whose role seemed to consist solely of changing slides), Abbas spoke. He said that he would proudly serve as the "interface" between the councils and the government bureaus. Together, they would decide on "applicability goals." (Abbas has lately adopted the aspirational, hazy lingo of Israel's startup world, peppering speeches with talk of "technological frontiers" and "untapped human capital.") Then he turned serious. With Netanyahu's economic package, he said, Arab municipalities were barely consulted. "Today, the money is in our hands. That's the strength of this political partnership. We're beyond the point of 'do for us,' 'give to us.'"

In a sense, Abbas was asking the men to accept the same kinds of compromises that he had accepted: to insure, at every turn, that they didn't antagonize Jewish Israelis. "Let's not present the council as weak," he said. "Let's talk about its strength in this wonderful area. That's how we can achieve things!" His voice lifted. "Victimization will get us nowhere."

"For seventy years, it got us nowhere," one of the participants whispered.

"I'm here for you," Abbas went on. "My success is your success. *Yalla*." ♦



SHOUTS & MURMURS

EXTINCT-SPECIES WAITING LIST

BY BILL SCHEFT

On September 27th, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed the removal of twenty-three species from the Federal Lists of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, owing to their extinction, including the ivory-billed woodpecker and the Bachman's warbler. Sometime within the next hundred and eighty days, the Department of the Interior will meet with the U.S.F.W.S. to consider the removal of the following species.

- Taupe-billed woodpecker
- Ecru-billed woodpecker
- Flat-white-billed woodpecker
- Eggshell-billed woodpecker
- Nacre-billed woodpecker
- Casa Blanca-billed woodpecker
- Ivory-billed veneer pecker
- Ivory-billed laminate pecker
- Marcus Bachman's warbler
- Bachman-Turner Overwarbler
- Bachman's enabler
- Bachman's warbler's publicist
- Corked bat
- Fringed surrey

- Ribless corduroy
- Tufted budget hawk
- Vernaculared chick
- Superglued yacker
- Non-hackneyed Liberty emu
- Uninsured trampoline center
- Six-toed defaulted-loan sloth
- Thin-blue-line straddler
- Hartford whale
- Charlotte bobcat
- Cheney-punch-lined quail
- Jumped shark
- Rebooted Cosby
- Dodo 2.0
- Toned mussel
- Kiwi mid-tan Giuliani
- Defiant Cuomo
- DNA-segmented Povich
- Murmuring Donahue
- Unseveranced white showrunner
- Sufferable boar
- Jimmy-proof lox
- Soylent Greengrocer
- VHS head cleaner
- Fingerless poi
- Howard Johnson's fried clam
- Muted sycophant
- Neutered wacko

- Nuanced pundit
- Orthopedic perch
- Evenhanded flack
- Pets.com login retriever
- Emotional-support slug
- One-collared Bannon
- Agnostic mantis
- Irony-free hipster
- Tasmanian devil worshipper
- Unpleaded mob rat
- Strike-anywhere matjes herring
- Ringtoned lemur
- Wind-powered eel
- Renovated barn owl
- Make-your-own sunfish
- Filleted mole
- Zino-padded mule
- Elder Menudo
- Rabid Belieber
- Tribute-banded grackle
- Zantac-sponsored fête
- Surgeless Uber
- Xeroxed ass
- Cockalikewise
- David Koch-donated red-winged blackbird
- Labracheezdoodle
- Gen Z Gladys
- Spec Flying Nun
- Trending Gillooly
- Pro-bono weasel
- Luchow's regular
- Wired Netflix residual
- Def honky
- Almond-milk snake
- Clean-coal canary
- Sparkling-water bug
- One-size water moccasin
- Yellow-bellied sap taster
- Half brother-in-law
- Bad penny
- Unbrushed mullet
- Fragrance-free moose
- MySpace denizen
- Undiagnosed narcissus
- Hep cat
- 3G Luddite
- Docked honorarium
- Solvent Kmart
- Common trash-can cheetah
- Coffee-room kitty
- Red-vested Walmart greeter
- Unembellished eulogy
- Dilemma-horned frog
- Iron-on seal
- Mediterranean fibre fly
- Two-button fly
- Woke Mennonite
- Disenfranchised wasp ♦



AMERICAN CHRONICLES

VULNERABILITY, INC.

How Brené Brown built an empire of emotions.

BY SARAH LARSON

In August, Brené Brown, the Houston-based writer, researcher, professor, social worker, podcast host, C.E.O., and consultant-guru to organizations including Pixar, Google, and the U.S. Special Forces, met with a group of graduate students at the McCombs School of Business, at the University of Texas at Austin, to talk about emotions. Brown, fifty-five, was wearing a shiny maize blouse, jeans, and a black face mask. It was the first day of her new class, *Dare to Lead*, and she stood onstage in a small auditorium. There were about a hundred people in the room; Brown had them stand up and introduce themselves. “Howdy!” a Black student in a

fleece jacket said, giving a Longhorns salute. “Who else is from Washington, D.C.?” Other students were from Texas, Nigeria, Ohio, Hong Kong. They were concentrating in fields like accounting and management, and they were going to confront one another’s humanity.

For more than twenty years, Brown, a Ph.D. in social work, has combined her research results—about shame, vulnerability, and other pillars of emotional life—with stories that illustrate them, delivered with a potent blend of empathy and Texan bravado (“Curiosity is a shit-starter”). Her work comes in many forms: five *Times* No. 1 best-selling books, two Spotify podcasts, a Net-

flix special. At the University of Houston, she’s a research professor of social work; at McCombs, a visiting professor of management. She’s also a business in her own right, with programs that train people and organizations to contend with vulnerability and courage. In all realms, her conclusions tend to surprise, then resonate, like a Zen koan: “When perfectionism is driving us, shame is always riding shotgun.”

Brown’s new book, “Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience,” will be published in November. It’s about emotions—specifically, the emotions we have trouble naming, and thus understanding. Most people can recognize only three emotions, she said on her podcast “Unlocking Us”: “Happy, sad, pissed off.”

At the university that day, unnameable emotions abounded. It was the start of the fall semester, and students and educators were returning amid a burgeoning crisis. In recent weeks, COVID-19 cases in Texas had risen by more than four hundred per cent. Only two I.C.U. beds remained available in Austin. The governor, Greg Abbott, was vigorously fighting mask and vaccination mandates, and he had recently tweeted a photo of himself at a Republican event, happily playing a fiddle. (Headlines had referenced Nero.) That week, Abbott announced that he had COVID-19.

U.T., as a state university, was prohibited from requiring vaccinations. “I have two elderly parents who are dealing with health issues right now,” Brown said. “So I appreciate that y’all are wearing masks.” During the class, the students would learn how vulnerability was key to courageous leadership; to do so, Brown said, they had to let go of the need to be cool. She had them stand up and do a few uncool, vulnerability-inducing things. “Bye-bye, Miss American Pie,” she sang, waving her arms; the class, with tuneful gusto, sang about the good ol’ boys drinking whiskey and rye. Then Brown played “Shut Up and Dance,” and the students, smiling behind their masks, complied.

Brown gave a brief overview of the *Dare to Lead* curriculum, which was drawn from her book and training program of the same name. Eventually, the class would break into small groups and

Brown connects with millions of people by sharing the challenges of her own life.

role-play various work scenarios: receiving criticism without getting defensive (“armoring up”); not letting fear of being disliked warp their judgment (à la Enron). One student, who had worked at a consulting firm, asked about managers who “delivered feedback in an awful way”: “At what point should we practice empathy for shitty people who don’t know how to do their job?”

They’d come back to this, Brown told her. “I don’t want to be theoretical—I want you to have fifteen sentences you can use,” she said. She looked at the students intently. “From the time we’re born, we get feedback from people who are unskilled, starting with our parents. Are your parents all really skilled feedback-givers?” The students laughed. “We have to learn how to find the pearl,” Brown said. “And we have to learn how to draw the line when we’re being shamed.”

At first glance, Brown might seem similar to other best-selling providers of wisdom: writers of business-friendly, big-ideas books like Malcolm Gladwell; life-hackers like Marie Kondo; rawly uplifting memoirists like Glennon Doyle. A distinction that Brown tends to emphasize is that she’s an academic, and one who reconciles the tangible (data) with the intangible (emotion). She refers frequently to her research, and to its ever-growing volume—but she also transmutes it into insights, which lodge deep in people’s emotional lives. A clinical psychologist told me that her patients hear “the voice of Brené” inside them; last year, on “Unlocking Us,” Vivek Murthy, now the U.S. Surgeon General, thanked Brown for “helping make the world better for me and for my kids.”

Brown rose to fame in 2011, after a TEDx talk that she gave in Houston, “The Power of Vulnerability,” went viral. (It’s now one of the top five TED talks of all time.) In it, she wears a brown dress shirt, and her presence is neither self-important, like any number of terrifying motivational speakers, nor awkward. She explains that she’s a researcher-storyteller—“Maybe stories are just data with a soul”—and that she’s going to talk about a discovery that “changed the way that I live and love and work and parent.” As a doctoral student, she says, she’d wanted to study what makes

life messy, so that she could “knock discomfort upside the head.” If you happen to be a person who resents life’s messiness but could never imagine knocking discomfort upside the head, taking advice from someone who would has a certain appeal.

Connection, Brown goes on, is the essence of human experience. When she studied it, she found that what impeded connection was shame—the feeling that some quality prevented us from being worthy of love. Transcending that shame involved vulnerability: the “excruciating” act of allowing ourselves to be truly known. “I hate vulnerability,” Brown continues. But the happiest people in her research had embraced it; they accepted their imperfections, risked saying “I love you” first. Once Brown had this realization, it led to a “breakdown”—a year in therapy, not unlike a “street fight,” during which she was forced to confront her dread of exposure. “I lost the fight, but probably won my life back,” she says.

Brown, who described herself to me as “scary strategic,” is deliberate in her storytelling; she’s a longtime fan of Joseph Campbell, and many of her narratives take the form of a Campbellian hero’s journey, in which the protagonist leaves the realm of the familiar, ventures into a challenging unknown, and emerges victorious. Like a certain kind of preacher, Brown steers her stories toward a moment of reckoning, but she doesn’t present herself as an oracle. Audiences enjoy “watching me struggle with my own work,” she told me. “I’m saying, ‘Here’s what the research says. I think this is going to suck, but I’m going to give it a shot.’” (Another Brownian maxim: “Embrace the suck.”)

Before the TEDx event, Brown had been giving talks about vulnerability for several years; there, though, she decided to *be* vulnerable. In her subsequent work, we hear more about her family, her history, her “opportunities for growth.” (She prefers this term to “flaws.”) Over time, people began speaking her language, Instagramming her maxims—“The opposite of belonging is fitting in”; “Authenticity is a practice.” Brown is a y’all-saying “language populist,” as she put it to me recently, but she isn’t saccharine (no calling the reader “Dear Heart”), and she frames her ideas as discoveries we’re making together. Tarana Burke,

the activist and writer who started the MeToo movement, in 2006, said that she’d read self-help books that made her feel “broken”; Brown’s writing, especially about shame, made her feel less alone. Burke and Brown eventually became friends, and they co-edited a book of essays, out this year, titled “You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience.”

Brown launched “Unlocking Us” in March, 2020, at the dawn of the pandemic. On the first episode, she introduced another term: “F.F.T.s,” or “fucking first times.” “I’m white-knuckling about five different F.F.T.s right now,” she said. She’d planned to debut the show at SxSW; now she was recording in a closet, “on top of my son’s dirty Under Armour clothes.” Also, she went on, “we busted my mom and her husband out of assisted living.” Brown, her husband, and their two kids were living at home; with the grandparents on the scene, they’d all been having “a lot of hard conversations.” Brown took a stab at describing her emotions. “If I had an instrument right now, I would ask for a tuba,” she said. “I would crawl inside of it and hide, and then I’d ask someone to push the tuba down the hill in our back yard and roll it into the lake.” She paused. “I don’t even know where that came from.”

During the pandemic, Brown also hosted a few church services on Instagram (“Unofficial—I’m not a priest/pastor,” she wrote), and in September she started the “Dare to Lead” podcast, with guests including Jon Meacham and Barack Obama. Despite all this, she often notes that she’s an introvert. The “Power of Vulnerability” experience “gave me one of the worst vulnerability hangovers of my life,” Brown told me. A few unkind online comments made it worse, and she found comfort in a Teddy Roosevelt speech, from 1910. “It is not the critic who counts,” Roosevelt said. “The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood,” and who, “if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.”

Brown titled her next book “Daring Greatly,” and her fans know all about being in the arena. (A recent “Ted Lasso” joke: “We’re going to hear Brené Brown reading from her new book, ‘Enter the

Arena: But Bring a Knife.”) “I’ve never even seen the TED talk,” Brown told me. “Just to be really honest, it’s still painfully hard for me.”

I first talked to Brown in March, via Zoom. She was at home, in Houston, wearing a green patterned blouse, and her smile was cheerful and relaxed. “I’m normally nervous for these things, but last night I was, like, Anyone who loves Ramona has got to be O.K.,” she said. Beverly Cleary had just died, and I’d written an appreciation. Cleary’s writing was fun and “always validating, and it never felt overly schoolmarmy,” Brown said. “Direct advice-giving is tough for me—I didn’t want to escape my family for more of that.”

Brown was born in 1965, in San Antonio. Her parents, Charles and Deanne, “both came from the south side of San Antonio and a lot of heartache,” she said. (Brown often uses “south-side San Antonio” as shorthand—as in, the name Brené isn’t French, it’s “south-side San Antonio.”) Deanne’s mother was an alcoholic; Charles, a football-team captain, “was the wild guy right on the edge of trouble all the time,” she said. “But really smart. My mom was top of her class and the head of the brigade.” They met in high school, married at twenty-three, and had Brené shortly thereafter.

Belonging, in Brown’s work, is a cornerstone of the human experience, and she sees her own life in terms of

being an outsider. In 1969, the family moved to New Orleans, so that her father could attend law school at Loyola. New Orleans schools were still integrating, and the city, though “wonderful,” she has written, was also “suffocated by racism.” Class lists determined birthday-party invitations, and parents saw her name and assumed that she was Black; she wasn’t invited to many white friends’ parties, and was met with surprise but acceptance at Black friends’ parties. Later, Brown, though Episcopalian, went to Catholic school—more non-belonging—until one day a bishop sent her home with a note that said “Brené is Catholic now.” (In adulthood, she returned to the Episcopal Church.)

Charles became a tax lawyer for Shell, and the family moved to Houston; then to D.C., so he could work as a lobbyist; then back to Houston. To others, her parents were cool and fun, “Mr. and Mrs. B.,” but they fought, and their marriage was slowly unravelling. On top of that, “fears and feelings weren’t really attended to,” Brown told me. “We were raised to be tough.” She described seeing a photograph—she and her younger siblings, as kids, on their gold velvet couch—and remembering sitting there and reading her parents’ cues, looking for tension. She knew when a fight was coming, when to take her siblings upstairs. “Pattern-making ended up being a survival skill for me,” she said.

As an incoming high-school fresh-

man, Brown hoped to find salvation in the drill team, the Bearkadettes, but didn’t make the cut. “My parents didn’t say one single word,” she writes in “Braving the Wilderness” (2017). “That became the day I no longer belonged in my family.” In her senior year, she got into her dream school, U.T. But Charles, who had left Shell and invested in an oil-industry construction company, lost their savings in the oil-glut bust. “We lost *everything*,” Brown told me. “Like, I.R.S. stickers on our cars. There were several suicides in our subdivision, because everybody worked for oil and gas. The guy next door was a bigwig at one of the oil companies, and he was managing the chicken place on the corner.”

Her parents divorced, college was tabled, and a certain illusion of security, rooted in the comforts of class, had been dispelled. “I always think of that song,” Brown said, and sang a bit of “Little Boxes,” popularized by Pete Seeger, about middle-class conformity. (“... And they all look just the same.”) “When you come from the tiny-box world, where everything is supposed to look a certain way, you spend a lot of nights, if you’re me, smoking cigarettes out the window of your room, contemplating how to get out.” Brown escaped to Europe, where she spent six months working at a hostel in Brussels, bartending, cleaning rooms, and hitchhiking across the continent. “It was completely out of control,” she said. “Self-destructive, terrible. That I’m alive is, like—yeah.”

After she returned, she spent several years in and out of school, in San Antonio. (At various times, she cleaned houses, “played a lot of tennis,” and rose from “surly union steward” to corporate trainer at A.T. & T.) In 1987, at twenty-one, she worked as a lifeguard at a pool, where she befriended another lifeguard, a U.T. student named Steve Alley. “I credit the weather,” she told me. “That summer, it rained for, like, thirty days straight in June. We spent a lot of time in this little lifeguard hut during the thunderstorms, just talking and laughing, or walking up to the convenience store and getting Hot Tamales and Slurpees.” They were both from the tiny-box world, and shared stories about unhappy homes. “Neither one of us had ever had someone that we talked to about the hard things in our lives,” she said.



“We are looking for volunteers to give up their seats and not attend some college friend’s wedding in Chicago.”

They married in 1994. (Steve is now a pediatrician; their son, Charlie, is in high school, and their daughter, Ellen, is in grad school.)

Recently, Brown drove her mother through the old neighborhood. “Every one of those houses has a story that would bring you to your knees,” she said. “Addiction, suicide, violence. It was never what everyone was making it out to be. You don’t know that as a kid. You know that as a shame researcher, though, you can bet your ass on that.”

Early in Brown’s career, Steve asked her what her dream was, and she said, “I want to start a global conversation about vulnerability and shame.” That vision took a while to become clear. After finding her stride in community college, she enrolled at U.T. (She didn’t get her degree until 1995: “the twelve-year plan,” she told me.) She studied history and waited tables at Pappadeaux, a seafood chain restaurant; there, she befriended another U.T. student, Charles Kiley, who, like her, was a little older than their peers. As waiters, they had different styles, Kiley told me. “I liked high volume, a lot of people in and out”; Brown liked talking with her customers, “getting their life story.”

By then, she was an impassioned student. One day, heading to the history department via the social-work building, she happened upon a workers’-rights protest and was impressed by its energy and diversity. She’d also read her first psychology book, Harriet Lerner’s “The Dance of Anger,” which Deanne, in therapy after the divorce, had given her. (“I remember reading it and thinking, ‘I’m not alone!’” Brown has written.) She switched to social work, and eventually enrolled in the M.S.W. and Ph.D. programs at the University of Houston. While working at a residential treatment facility for children, she had encountered a striking idea during a staff meeting. “You cannot shame or belittle people into changing their behaviors,” a clinical director told the group.

Brown began thinking about shame and behavior. As part of her master’s program, she interviewed Deanne for a family genogram, and realized that “what had been dressed up as hard living” among relatives had been addiction and mental-health issues. She went

to A.A., where a sponsor suggested that she stop drinking, smoking, emotional eating, and trying to control her family’s crises. (Awesome, Brown thought.) She’s been sober ever since. Sobriety helped her understand the instinct to “take the edge off” as a desire to numb and control emotions.

The importance of welcoming those emotions, joyful and painful alike, was reinforced by her research. In her graduate program, Brown was rare in being a qualitative researcher—rather than using tests and statistics to measure phenomena, she interviewed a diverse group of people about certain subjects and then coded the data, watching for themes to emerge. (This methodology, grounded theory, was developed in the mid-sixties by the sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss.) Again and again, Brown encountered the destructive power of shame (“I am bad”), which seemed to corrode the self, unlike guilt (“I did something bad”), which held it accountable. She found a supportive mentor in the social-work professor and femicide expert Karen Stout, who told her, “When it comes to women being killed by intimate partners, I wish all we had to do was put numbers in front of people. But we need the stories as well.”

After completing her Ph.D., Brown wrote a book about women and shame, eventually titled “I Thought It Was Just Me.” It was rejected by trade publishers, so she published it herself. She fought her own shame about this: having a “vanity-published book,” as a fellow-academic called it, felt like a failure. She sold copies out of the trunk of her car at events and stored the rest in Charles Kiley’s spare room. Then, at a friend’s party, on what she has called a “magical evening,” she met Harriet Lerner. “I liked Brené from the start,” Lerner told me. She also empathized with her: “The Dance of Anger,” the first of Lerner’s many best-sellers, had been rejected for five years. “And what I learned was that the line between a New York Times best-selling author and someone who never gets published is a very thin line indeed,” Lerner said. She helped connect Brown with an agent; within

three months, Brown had a book deal.

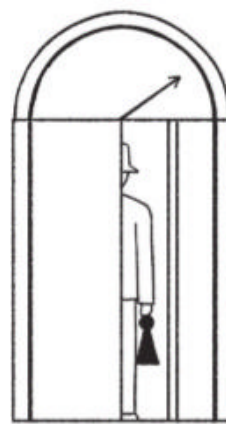
The global conversation about vulnerability and shame started a few years later, with the TEDx talk and “The Gifts of Imperfection,” Brown’s second book. In “I Thought It Was Just Me,” Brown had foregrounded the stories of her subjects; “Gifts,” and the best-sellers that followed, centered on Brown and the people around her. As they progress, Brown marshals familiar phrases, like

“wholehearted” and “Tell me more,” into specific applications, and deploys them across thematic variations. “Gifts” encourages self-acceptance, however daunting; “Daring Greatly” encourages boldness, despite fear; “Rising Strong” encourages dusting oneself off after a failure. (“Dare to Lead” encourages all of

these things, at work.) Many of the books feature acronyms, lists of “key learnings,” questions to spur self-awareness. Brown cites ideas from whoever sparks them: Maya Angelou, Carl Jung, the Berenstain Bears, Whitesnake.

Brown now oversees a business that dispenses her wisdom in different packages. In 2012, for example, she started the Daring Way, which trains “helping professionals”—clinicians, counsellors, and so on—to foster vulnerability by immersing them in a three-day intensive; participants could receive certification to facilitate Brown’s work. A divorce mediator in Utah told me that the training helps clients with the shame of separation; a United Methodist pastor in Arkansas, whose sermons invoke Brown so often that “my church thinks she’s, like, the fourth person in the Trinity,” leads Daring Way retreats for fellow-pastors. Brown hired Charles Kiley, who was managing finances for an advertising firm, to be her C.F.O., and they funded the programs partly through book sales and speaking engagements—some pro bono, others earning ninety-thousand-dollar fees. They grew to employ some two dozen people, including Brown’s younger twin sisters: Barrett Guillen, a former teacher; and Ashley Brown Ruiz, a social worker.

In 2013, Brown appeared on Oprah Winfrey’s show “Super Soul Sunday”: a milestone in the life of any mortal, but



in Brown's case a moment of seeming near-inevitability. Brown is eerily simpatico with Oprah's no-B.S., folksy-telegenic bonhomie; Winfrey wrote that Brown "felt like a long-lost friend." But, before the taping, Brown had been so nervous that she felt as though she were floating above herself—a common defense mechanism, she told me, from a lifetime of pattern-observing during times of stress. She had to be given a snap-out-of-it pep talk by her manager, who told her that she needed to be present and, as Brown would say, "show up." The segment went so well that Oprah had her stay to record a second hour. "Really?" Brown said. "Do you think we should ask?" Oprah smiled. "Who do you think we run it by?"

In the preface to "Dare to Lead," Brown writes about a talk she gave, in 2008, to an audience of what she had heard described as "sea-level"—salt-of-the-earth types—but which turned out to be "C-level": C.E.O.s, C.F.O.s, and so on. She started to panic: she wasn't businessy enough, and she was going to be talking about shame. ("When something hard happens to us," Brown has written, "thinking and behavior are hog-tied in the back, and emotion is driving like a bat out of hell.") A fellow-speaker warmly reassured her that C.E.O.s were "just people," with worries and fears like everyone else, "and no one talks to them about shame, and every single one of them is in it up to their eyeballs." Brown started saying a mantra before going onstage: "People, people, people."

In her corporate work, Brown is essentially putting that mantra into practice: getting leaders and workers to reckon with one another's humanity. This includes addressing problems directly rather than back-channelling, creating the psychological safety for openness, and helping all workers feel like they belong. "I didn't invent that," Brown told me in Austin, in a small conference room at U.T. "You read every article in *H.B.R.* over the last twenty years, and it's got all these great things to do"—take risks, accept the possibility of failure, truly listen. "But not one person is

talking about the vulnerability that it takes to do it." (In the past decade, *Harvard Business Review* has run several pieces on vulnerability in the workplace.)

In many of Brown's training seminars, participants, in small groups, address their own experiences of shame and unworthiness during the three-day intensive. That part takes place on the second day, and is often tough. In "Rising Strong," Brown writes that she began to see day two as a metaphor for life: people were navigating uncomfortable emotions and feeling "raw." Brown talked about the training's structure with Ed Catmull, then the president of Pixar, who had invited her to meet with him and his peers. They realized that the three-day cycle was like the hero's journey: after the call to adventure, there was the muddling through, the uncomfortable "dark middle" that leads to learning and resolution. Pixar's writers struggled the most with the second act of their screenplays, too, which followed the same arc. (The third act, or third day, is about how to "write daring new endings.")

The training emphasizes that vulnerability doesn't mean heedlessly sharing information or emotions. "Sometimes I'll hear someone say something like 'How often should I cry in front of my team?'" Brown told an interviewer on "60 Minutes." "That's not what I'm saying. Vulnerability is not about self-disclosure. I'm not saying you have to weep uncontrollably to show how human you are. I'm saying, Try to be aware of your armor, and when you feel vulnerable try not to Transformer up.... Very different things."



In 2020, Kate Johnson, then the president of Microsoft U.S., enlisted Brown to train her leadership team; eventually, the division's ten thousand employees were trained, too. But, in the course of the program, Johnson herself made a miscalculation about vulnerability and disclosure. In a quarterly business review with stakeholders, she'd talked about what kept her up at night—Microsoft's "weak points," she told me. "To say it was not well received would be an understatement." The next day, she and Brown role-played a feedback session with Johnson's bosses, in front of her

peers. "It was the moment in the training where everybody saw that I was in the boat with them," Johnson said.

As a C-level type herself, Brown gets feedback, too. Early on, when her business was growing fast, her team requested an hour-long "rumble"—Brown's term for meeting with "an open heart." Kiley cut to the chase: her timelines and expectations were consistently unrealistic, and people were burned out.

"I'm going to work on it," Brown said. ("A common shut-down technique," she writes.) But she leaned into "the mother of all rumble tools"—curiosity—and asked for details. They told her more: when they pushed back, she looked at them "like they were crushing my dreams." That night, Brown thought about the Yoda-and-Luke cave scene in "The Empire Strikes Back," in which Luke's enemy is revealed to be himself, and realized that her problem was "a lack of personal awareness." She made unrealistic plans because she was scared; when confronted with reality, she got more scared and would "offload the emotions" onto her peers. She didn't especially want to admit that—fear leads to "armoring up"—but such vulnerability was the essential teaching of her work, so she did.

Brown's recent books refer to her work with *Fortune*-ranked companies, and in audiobooks the pride is evident in her voice. As her renown has grown, her abundant Brené-speak can occasionally sound like jargon, and she's participated in a range of high-profile projects, many worthy, some iffy (Tim Ferriss's tips-from-the-big-shots guide "Tools of Titans," Gwyneth Paltrow's "GOOP" podcast). When "Unlocking Us" started, Brown aired ads only for brands she liked, and talked for several minutes about her favorite maker of gluten-free tacos; later, she signed an exclusive deal with Spotify, where others read her show's ads for Clorox and the Hartford.

In Austin, I asked Brown if her early encounters with corporations—Shell, growing up; A.T. & T., in her twenties—were connected to her urge to work with them. "It was way more strategic than that," Brown said. She paused. "I haven't talked about this in public before." She'd been thinking about the axiom that drives social work—"Start where people are"—and realized that she could reach the most people if she applied her research

to the “context of their daily lives.” “And that’s work,” she said. “You cannot change the world if you don’t change the way we work.” Few companies fully embody her values—including, possibly, Spotify—and she makes sure to keep her contracts “really bounded.” But, she said, “I’m not going to spend the rest of my life preaching to the converted. I’ve got a bigger calling than that.”

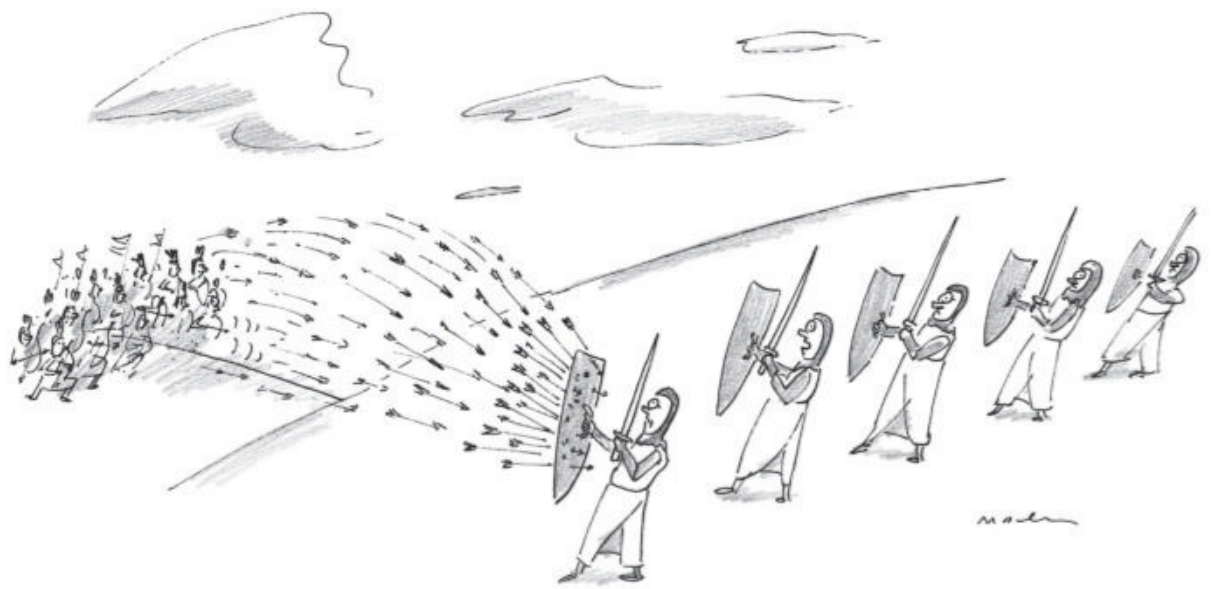
Brown has been saying for months that writing “Atlas of the Heart” has been kicking her ass. “Lord have mercy, this book is kicking my ass,” she said on “Dare to Lead,” this summer. “It’s still kicking my ass,” she told me, in August. On September 1st, Penguin Random House announced the book’s title. Brown tweeted, “This book kicked my ass.” She also wrote that it would reveal, after more than two decades of research, “the missing piece that I needed to develop a model on connection.” She included an image of the cover.

Her previous book covers tended toward muted teal and gray, suited to an airport-bookstore business shelf. “Atlas of the Heart” has a deep-red cover with a Victorian-style collage of a human heart, which includes a bird, a compass, a starry sky, a couple, and a Black child watering a garden. Text reading “We are the map-makers and the travelers” appears below an aorta sprouting cornflowers.

In September, Brown told me that the book was both a culmination of her work and different from what she’d done before. (An HBO Max series adaptation started production in October.) It includes color photographs and illustrative comics, and delves into her upbringing, the eighty-seven emotions and experiences “that define what it means to be human,” and her new theory on cultivating meaningful connection. Could she tell me what it was? I asked. “Yeah, for sure!” she said.

Brown’s research had involved analyzing data about various nuances of emotion. (“I bet we’ve reviewed ten thousand academic articles on all these emotions,” she told me, in Texas. The next day, in class, it was “twelve thousand.”) In doing this, Brown said, she’d reencountered the Buddhist concept of the “near enemy.” Did I know it? I didn’t, but I liked where this was headed.

“It’s going to rock your world,” she



“It appears it’s personal, not business.”

said. “You’re gonna so get it. Oh, my God, you’re gonna so get it.” In Buddhism, she explained, citing the writer Jack Kornfield, there are universal important qualities—such as love and compassion—which have opposites, or “far enemies,” that we easily recognize. “If you share something with me and I’m cruel, it’s very clear that I’ve been terrible, right? But what we really have to watch out for are the near enemies—the emotions and qualities that masquerade as the virtue we’re seeking but actually undermine it.”

The framework helped Brown understand something new about connection. “I understood the opposite of it—shutting down or acting out,” she said. “But that’s not often what we experience when we’re making a bid for connection.” Often, when someone shares something painful or vulnerable, we don’t “practice the courage” to be vulnerable *with* that person. She gave an example of a kid coming home from school, telling her parent that she got in trouble for being disrespectful, and the parent immediately scolding and instructing, rather than listening with curiosity. Brown’s conclusion: “While the far enemy of connection is disconnection, the near enemy of connection is control.”

“Ooh!” I said. I *did* so get it.

“Yeah,” she said. “And I think you can apply that to everything from my kid and their behavior at school to the Trump Administration. That Administration wasn’t disconnected from the people who followed them—it was connection in the form of control.” Because she’s a social

worker, she said, “it’s always important to me to think about both the micro and the macro application.”

The book-kicking-my-ass narrative, like a few of Brown’s forthright proclamations, has a quality of being soul-baring while holding something back. In Texas, she had told me about why writing the book was so hard. “I’ve entered this new stage of life where I still have kids that I’m parenting actively and parents that are . . .” She drifted off. “And then the COVID of it all.” She had her business to lead, and the class to teach, but caring for her parents had been especially difficult. “You allot an hour a day for the call, but then there’s the six hours of unallotted worrying, and thinking, If I were a better daughter . . .” Doing that while writing about her childhood was “weird.” “To be honest with you, it’s been super hard to reflect on how understanding emotions was really survival for me, and how I ended up in this work,” she said. “I hope it was worth the ass-levelling.”

“Atlas of the Heart” won’t be out until the end of November; in mid-September, it was still being edited. But on September 2nd, the day after its title and cover were announced, I looked at the Amazon best-sellers page and saw that “Atlas of the Heart” was No. 1—not in a subcategory like Emotional Self-Help, or, as Brown joked to me, Red Books That Mention Shame, but in Books. “My publishers were, like, ‘This is unheard of,’” Brown said. “Everyone was excited. But I was, like, ‘Oh, shit’—you know? Expectations.” ♦

THE BILLIONAIRE DOCTOR

Working on the edge, Patrick Soon-Shiong amassed a fortune and bought the L.A. Times.

BY STEPHEN WITT

In the mid-nineteen-eighties, Lee Iacocca, the celebrated executive who had run both Chrysler and Ford, visited the Los Angeles laboratory of Patrick Soon-Shiong, a surgeon at U.C.L.A. Iacocca's first wife had died of Type 1 diabetes a few years earlier; he was searching for a cure. Soon-Shiong, who was in his thirties, specialized in pancreas transplant, a risky treatment reserved for severe diabetics. Soon-Shiong was a skilled surgeon who had trained under organ-transplant pioneers, but he'd grown unhappy with the procedure: pancreas transplants carried a high risk of organ rejection, and he didn't feel that the outcomes were worth the danger. He wanted to shut down U.C.L.A.'s pancreas-transplant program and embark on a new line of research. Instead of replacing the entire pancreas, Soon-Shiong would replace only the insulin-producing islet cells inside it.

Soon-Shiong set up a laboratory at the Veterans Affairs hospital in West L.A. There, working with a staff of three, he began sourcing islet cells from pigs and human cadavers. "The lab was primitive," Iacocca's daughter Kate Hentz told me. Hentz had toured many such research facilities with her father; Soon-Shiong, she sensed, was a maverick.

She and her father were impressed. "Patrick is just brilliant," Hentz said. Soon-Shiong was extraordinarily charismatic; he was fit and trim, wore rimless glasses, and had a long shag haircut. He was Chinese by ancestry and South African by birth, and he spoke with a soft Anglo-South African accent. He could talk for hours about medicine and the human body, then switch to history, or business, or literature. Soon-Shiong's wife, Michele B. Chan, was an actress who'd played a marine biologist on a Canadian TV show; the couple lived in a modest bun-

galow in Brentwood. "Their house was just adorable," Hentz said. "You could feel they had all these little creative touches, without being overboard." Among those touches were his-and-hers doorframes, cut into silhouettes of their profiles.

Iacocca agreed to fund Soon-Shiong's research, and also encouraged him to commercialize his work. Soon-Shiong was hesitant. "He was really excited about what he was doing, but kind of quiet about it," Hentz said. "He was modest. He was humble." Iacocca won him over.

"Lee Iacocca, O.K.? I bring him into my little lab in the V.A. He sits me down and says, 'Patrick, you'll never survive academia,'" Soon-Shiong told me this summer. "I never had any intention of going into business. I wanted to be the chairman of the department of surgery."

Today, at sixty-nine, Patrick Soon-Shiong is worth at least eight billion dollars. He has been called the richest man in Los Angeles; he is one of the richest doctors in the world. He has taken four companies public and runs a medical-research initiative with a thousand employees and a half-dozen state-of-the-art laboratories. He is seeking a cure for cancer and developing his own COVID-19 vaccine. He owns a portion of the Los Angeles Lakers, and in 2018 he bought the Los Angeles *Times*. The bungalow is now his guesthouse; over time, he has acquired twelve adjacent parcels of land and built a sprawling complex. The centerpiece is an underground basketball court, constructed according to N.B.A. regulations, beneath his living room. The court is illuminated by natural light, based on a design on which Soon-Shiong holds three patents. He hosts pickup games there; Kobe Bryant sometimes played.

Soon-Shiong likes to present him-

self as an accidental billionaire. "I would like to be remembered, primarily, as a physician-scientist," he said. His manner is gentle, and maybe a little paternal; talking with him, you get the sense that he just knows better than you do. He is patient and kind, never pushy, and he listens carefully.

But, in the mid-nineties, after funding his research, Hentz told me, Iacocca grew concerned. Soon-Shiong's relationship with U.C.L.A. seemed strained, and the Iacoccas were given little information about their funds. Eventually, Iacocca pulled out. By then, Soon-Shiong had stepped down as a full-time faculty member. "It was a little odd, our exit, to say the least," Hentz said. "Things weren't totally clear for us."

Few figures in modern medicine have inspired as much controversy as Soon-Shiong. "He gets very enthusiastic, and sometimes he might exaggerate," Hentz said. "He can embellish a little." Outcomes for his diabetes treatment were disappointing, and one case ended tragically. While pursuing this therapy, he also began researching chemotherapy. At the center of his fortune is a cancer treatment that costs more than a hundred times as much as another drug, available as a generic, that is prescribed for some of the same conditions. Soon-Shiong has been repeatedly accused of financial misrepresentation, self-dealing, price gouging, and fraud. He has been sued by former investors and business partners; he has been sued by other doctors; he has been sued by his own brother, twice; he has been sued by Cher.

Nevertheless, in recent years, Soon-Shiong has emerged as one of Los Angeles's most prominent civic leaders. He paid five hundred million dollars for the L.A. *Times*, along with its sister paper, the San Diego *Union-Tribune*—double what Jeff Bezos spent to buy the Washington *Post*, which



Soon-Shiong likes to present himself as an accidental tycoon. But his success has been accompanied by numerous lawsuits.

had three times the number of subscribers. Hoping to turn the *Times* into a multimedia platform, Soon-Shiong appointed Norman Pearlstine, who had run Time Inc.'s editorial operations, as executive editor. "He made the acquisition with very little due diligence, because he thought that it had to be easier than curing cancer," Pearlstine told me. "I'm not sure whether he still believes that."

The *Times*' newsroom had been shrinking for years; Soon-Shiong halted the layoffs, and invested more than a hundred million dollars in infrastructure and staff. He invested in video content, podcasting, and the company's mobile presence. He relocated the offices from downtown Los Angeles to the suburb of El Segundo. His wife took over the design of the space, which would include an enormous test kitchen, intended to support the company's expanded food coverage.

Then COVID hit. "We would speak several times a week, occasionally several times a day, until March of 2020," Pearlstine said. "We had far less communication from that time on." Pearlstine was gone by the end of the year, and the new office remains unfinished—a company spokesperson told me that the test kitchen is "ninety per cent done." Kevin Merida, who succeeded Pearlstine at the *Times*, started his job in June, but didn't meet Soon-Shiong in person until September; reporters, Soon-Shiong said, hadn't been inside the *Times* building in more than a year. He takes COVID as seriously as anyone I've encountered. He rarely leaves his compound, and refused to meet with me in person. His P.R. rep hasn't been in the same room with him since March, 2020. I asked Merida how frequently he talks to Soon-Shiong. "We don't have a cadence," he said.

Employees at Soon-Shiong's other businesses told me that he is focussed on developing his COVID vaccine, which is in clinical trials in South Africa, the intended pilot market. Soon-Shiong told me that he had been vaccinated, but, when I asked him which vaccine

he'd received, he said, "I can't tell you that." When I persisted, he implied that, while waiting for the South African trials to be completed, he'd used his experimental vaccine on himself.

My first conversation with Soon-Shiong took place this summer, over Zoom. He was indeed brilliant, charismatic, and enthusiastic, although I wouldn't call him modest. Our conversations were wide-ranging and at times difficult to follow; he answered my first question with a five-minute monologue on protein interactions, the Large Hadron Collider, climate change, Kobe Bryant's Achilles tendon, the extinction of the dinosaurs, and the history of the human race. When a concept got technical, he would pull up a digital whiteboard, diagramming networks of cells, proteins, and computers.

Soon-Shiong traces his expository nature to childhood. "To me, as a kid, everything was a circle—there's no beginning and no end," he said. "And what I mean by that, as a systems engineer, is really looking at integrating—connecting dots." His parents, who were ethnically Hakka, moved to South Africa after the Japanese invasion of China. His father ran two small grocery stores while his mother brought up ten kids. At home, Soon-Shiong said, he spoke Hakka Chinese and English, with a smattering of Afrikaans and Xhosa.

His family lived in the nonwhite section of Port Elizabeth, in the Eastern Cape. "Surrounding me was a battery factory, a car-tire factory, a meat factory, and the ocean," he said. "I would play with Black kids, what were called 'Coloured' kids, and Indian kids. There weren't a lot of white kids." He was sent to a school for Chinese students, run by the Anglican Church. "My science teacher was a priest who fought in World War One," he said. "He suffered from mustard gas. He could barely talk." Soon-Shiong excelled at the school, where he acquired his cultivated Anglo accent. Upon graduation, in 1969, he applied to medical school at the University of the Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg. The school registered two hun-

dred students that year, following a strict racial-quota system: a hundred and ninety-six white students, two Indian, and two Chinese. To gain acceptance, Soon-Shiong had to be one of the best Chinese test-takers in the country.

The school awarded M.D.s to students after six years of concentrated study. While his counterparts in America were suffering through organic chemistry, Soon-Shiong was practicing medicine in a Black township. "I graduated when I was twenty-three," he said. "I think at that point I had delivered a hundred babies." His ethnic identity put him outside South Africa's racial dichotomy, but as a nonwhite citizen he was required to carry an I.D. card with him at all times.

After medical school, Soon-Shiong was sent to work in what was known as a "non-European" hospital. Seeking better training, he requested permission to intern at a "white" hospital in Johannesburg. His wish was granted, on the condition that he work for half pay. He remembers being the only Asian doctor in the facility. "I go to see this Afrikaans guy, he's got a fever and he won't let me touch him," Soon-Shiong said. After his supervisor threatened to remove the patient, he relented; Soon-Shiong diagnosed him as having a sinus infection and had it drained. "So then he's running around the hospital saying, 'You've got to let the Chinaman look at you!'"

During his rotations, he also worked in a hospital in the Black township of Soweto. He described working there in 1976, at the time of the Soweto uprising, which was led by Black schoolchildren. South African police opened fire, and at least a hundred and seventy-six people were killed. "I was looking after these kids, and now I'm visiting them in the I.C.U.," he said. "That really scared me."

In 1977, he and Michele immigrated to Canada. She was a Chinese South African as well; the two met at a basketball game when he was in medical school. They have two children. ("They're best friends. I've seen them fight once, over luggage," their daughter, Nika, told me. "My dad unpacked a bag that my mom packed.") In Canada, Soon-Shiong practiced surgery, and in 1983 he was recruited to U.C.L.A.



He brought a bit of South Africa with him. Apartheid had left South Africa isolated from the international community, and the medical culture had a swashbuckling feel. In 1967, Christiaan Barnard had performed the world's first human-heart transplant there; Soon-Shiong trained under Barnard's rival Bert Myburgh, who had performed the country's first kidney transplant. "South Africa formed me, in a funny way," Soon-Shiong said. "I'm fighting under apartheid, but I'm also being trained by these giants."

I asked Soon-Shiong whether he had experienced discrimination as an Asian man in America; elite American universities have been accused of limiting Asian enrollment, too. "The good news in South Africa was that it wasn't hidden," Soon-Shiong said. Still, he told me that he had not been personally discriminated against. "The Asian guy is a technical guy that talks funny, right?" he said. "Only I have a different accent. So maybe that's it." He went on, "But, frankly, it's the surgeon in me. You know, the self-belief that I'm doing the right thing." Michele had a harder time. In 1989, she had a bit part in "MacGyver," and led an army of genetically engineered assassins in "American Ninja 3: Blood Hunt"; not long afterward, she quit acting.

By the early nineteen-nineties, there were at least a dozen biotech startups pursuing islet-cell therapies for diabetes. Outcomes were generally disappointing; in most cases, patients would enjoy a few days of remission before the cells were rejected. Soon-Shiong believed that he had solved this problem by encapsulating the cells in alginic acid, a gel derived from seaweed which is also used to thicken ice cream. In 1992, he implanted these capsules in a dog, using cells sourced from pigs. It seemed to work.

By 1993, Soon-Shiong had recruited Steven Craig, his first human patient. Craig had been ravaged by Type 1 diabetes; although he had received a kidney transplant, he was gaunt and walked with a cane, and his eyesight was failing. At the time of his first islet-cell procedure, he was thirty-eight years old and had been unemployed for seven years. Soon-Shiong made a two-inch

incision in Craig's abdomen, then poured in hundreds of thousands of islet cells, taken from cadavers and wrapped in alginic gel. "It was a simple procedure," Soon-Shiong said. "I wouldn't even call it surgery."

Before any long-term results could be determined, Soon-Shiong persuaded Craig to appear at a press conference. A week after the surgery, the "CBS Evening News" showed Craig eating a meal "without insulin, for the first time in thirty years." Craig's second procedure, later that year, was covered by the *Los Angeles Times*. "They've done miracles for me," Craig told the paper.

Other researchers were skeptical. "I had people calling me up saying, 'Diabetes has been cured!'" Scott King, who ran a competing islet-cell startup, said. "But then he'd take Craig to a conference, and people would ask to see clinical data, and Patrick would skillfully parry them." Craig enjoyed being a star patient. "He got to go to Australia," his stepson Matthew, who now works as a long-haul trucker, told me. "They seemed to treat him pretty damn well. We all got to stay at Beverly Garland's hotel." Soon-Shiong published his results in *The Lancet*, in 1994, but eventually Craig's remaining kidney began to fail. The media stopped

calling. "He grew depressed after that," Craig's ex-wife, Melodie, said. "He liked the attention." In 1998, Craig checked into a hotel in Orange County and shot himself in the head.

Craig's family told me that they did not blame Soon-Shiong for the suicide. "We understand that sometimes medical practices go wrong," Matthew said. "That's how they find out shit." But Soon-Shiong's promotional tactics may have damaged his reputation as a physician. He was publicly chastised by the head of the American Diabetes Association. "He told the world he was curing diabetes," Michael Zinner, the former chief of surgery at U.C.L.A., told *Forbes* in 2003. "But, in the scientific realm, you need to have your results reproduced by others to have them validated."

Following Iaccoca's advice, Soon-Shiong sought to commercialize his islet-cell research. In 1991, he co-founded a startup called VivoRx, with his brother Terrence, a London real-estate developer. "He was the businessman of the family," Patrick said. In 1994, VivoRx secured five million dollars in funding from the generic-drug maker Mylan Laboratories; that year, Patrick started a new company to develop a chemotherapy drug. The companies



"One day, all these stainless-steel straws and reusable baggies will be yours."

I. THE MEETING PLACE OF BIRDS

In some folklore, birds would always meet at the edge
of a town. It was how they knew they were on
a journey
to save themselves from the sudden loss of a season.
At the intersection of three busy roads, two buses
broke down
and spilled us out, humans tired of the road.
We watched the beauty of the Presidential palace.
I wondered how many days of sweat went into
the earth
to produce such beauty. While smoking, I met a man
called Trolley,
named for his expertise in flinging humans across
borders.
His works of terror were suffering in the coldness
of brothels
across Bamako, across Tripoli, across Mauritania, and
on the red sand of Kayes.
He watched *his girls* drink gin on the sidewalk.
I asked him, *Do you feel shame?*
He answered, *I desire beauty. In its pursuit there is
no end,
only ruthlessness.*
The road sang a dirge, the girls danced in sadness.
There, on the road that is no home, I looked into
his eyes
and saw the terror of exploitation.
A leaf fell from a tree nearby
and again I was reminded of the endless movement
of the world, of the girls dancing, of the sadness of my
fingers obeying

the call of my body's addiction to nicotine,
as a bird sang of leaving the world as it is,
a terror, a war we are still living in.

2. ADVERTISEMENT

A sign on the road read:
Buy handmade drums
and beat the wildness of your soul.
What is the sound of all our sorrow?
Years after a war, a veteran went crazy
from hearing in his head
the wailing of a thousand women
who gave up peace to sing their dead
sons to the afterlife.
Is this not a kind of wildness?
Music breeds its own fear,
a song leads us to our loneliness
as the spools of a cassette turning
in a radio render us into an animal
dying in an empty lair.
What is the ache of the night?
What is the emptiness of a city
full of voices?
The voice of exile is the dying voice
of a wounded angel.
I beat the drum of my life
and the angel and I dance
to its wild sadness,
even God ran away from this rhythm.
Look around you, we are left
alone with the mud of creation
and maybe that is all there is to life,

were independent, but some employees worked for both.

The arrangement agitated VivoRx's investors. On June 29, 1998, the company convened a special board meeting in Santa Monica. Patrick told me that he was asked to sign a document, which he did. By the end of the day, he'd been kicked off VivoRx's board, and the company was suing him.

Patrick persuaded Terrence to drop the lawsuit, but in 1999 VivoRx, now under Terrence's control, sued Patrick again, this time alleging fraud. The second lawsuit accused him of "betrayal, arrogance, greed, and personal aggrandizement that resulted in corporate misconduct of enormous proportions." (Patrick says that there was no misconduct.) The brothers reached a settled

agreement: Patrick's companies were ordered to transfer assets worth twenty-four million dollars to Terrence's company, Terrence was awarded the islet-cell patents, and Patrick agreed not to conduct further diabetes research for five years. "That I would not work on diabetes for five years—now that, to me, was evil," Patrick told me. "I said, 'You've hurt mankind,' because I was *this* close." Terrence has never publicly discussed the rift, and could not be reached for comment; Patrick told me that the two remain estranged.

Patrick had acquired two pharmaceutical factories in 1998. (According to a 2001 article in the Los Angeles *Business Journal*, Terrence's lawsuit alleged that the acquisition was made possible by the diversion of research funds. Pat-

rick denies this, and says that he obtained independent financing.) Those two factories, in Illinois and New York, became part of American Pharmaceutical Partners, another of Patrick's companies. At the time of their acquisition, the factories, which manufactured generic injectable drugs, had lost money for nine straight years. Patrick Soon-Shiong, who had no background in manufacturing, restored them to profitability, doubling American Pharmaceutical's revenues in the process. In 2001, American Pharmaceutical conducted an I.P.O.

Meanwhile, Soon-Shiong continued to develop his chemotherapy drug. In the early two-thousands, he showed up at the annual conference of the American Society of Clin-

the creating of a new way of living,
but God! Where do we hide the violence?

3. VOICES

The driver says, in the dark of the night,
when every passenger is asleep,
he hears the true language of the road.
He says he hears the voices of cities
thousands of miles away.
The voice of exile
is a murmur crossing rivers and sea,
crossing empty roads until it washes
over a man, a baptism of loss.
If the road and the driver could speak to each other,
what will be this language born out of friction?
Would it be the hum of sleep
in the bodies of exhausted travellers?
Would it be the bristling of biscuit wrappers?
The driver's eyes are full of dreams,
full of the excitement of new cities.
He could be the poorer incarnate of Mansa Musa
who instead of pouring gold dust into air
pours stories to compete with sand,
stories of nomads, people running in
and out of cities. Perfect gold, this human scroll
of chronicles. Even Bessie Head, giant of letters,
who battled sands for stories, would be proud
of this precision of narrative, this perfect bridge
of the imagined and the songs of mothers rocking babies
as countries cut through their bodies.

4. HOTEL DU CHIRURGIE

Our bus parked beside a water fountain,
a cherub spilled water from pouted lips.
Across the hotel park, there were oysters
heaped on enamel trays, fried behind walls,
they were offered to us as secrets
of the sea. Behind this market of oysters,
there was once a market for flesh,
in Ouidah, in rooms filled with Black flesh
in chains, branded like cattle, herded into pens
by other Black men paid in clear bottles of gin.
The sea crashed on naked stones
and we ran into the hotel bar.
Perched on a three-legged stool,
an old Black woman sang the fable of siblings
lost at sea, she was a lamp attracting us as moths.
There were opened windows, sunflowers in broken pots,
curtains made out of beads sang in the wind,
birds flew in and out.
Smoking a carefully rolled blunt, I listened to this place,
a silent television played a Nollywood movie.
We were trapped in time, in the commodification
of flesh, saints without the gift of ablution.
In some other world, I am guilty of silence,
just as I am in this one.
Do not forgive me. It was dawn
and I walked toward the bus
as the sea received into its bosom
the memory of a ship
travelling to a new world.

—Romeo Oriogun

ical Oncologists. He had scheduled a meeting with William Gradishar, a breast-cancer specialist at Northwestern University. Soon-Shiong was pitching a new formulation of the generic chemotherapy drug paclitaxel, which is derived from the bark of the Pacific yew tree. Paclitaxel was reasonably effective, but it had to be dissolved in a castor-oil product, which could cause allergic reactions—on rare occasions, fatal ones. Soon-Shiong said that he could make the drug safer and more effective by binding paclitaxel to albumin, a protein produced in the liver. He asked Gradishar to oversee a clinical trial.

“Patrick is a surgeon by training,” Gradishar told me. “He was not and is not a medical oncologist. So no one

would have known who the hell he was in our world.” Gradishar heard him out. “He handed me a manila folder,” Gradishar said. “And he goes, ‘I want you to read this. You’re going to hear some stuff about me, so here it is.’” Inside the folder was a magazine article about the lawsuits Terrence had filed against him. “You know, that was a little bit strange,” Gradishar said. “But at least he was up front about it.”

Gradishar was wary of Patrick, but impressed by the data he shared and the team of oncologists around him. He agreed to be the principal investigator for the clinical trial of the new drug, called Abraxane.

Gradishar had inadvertently wandered onto an active Wall Street battlefield. The rights to make Abraxane

in the U.S. were held by American Pharmaceutical, Soon-Shiong’s publicly traded company, but the world rights and patent were owned by a private company called American BioScience. Soon-Shiong owned eighty per cent of American BioScience, which was also American Pharmaceutical’s largest shareholder. Some investors challenged this structure, and short sellers began to target the stock. Wall Street analysts also raised questions about the drug’s trial design. Soon-Shiong had fired the American company conducting the trial, and finished it in Russia. At one point, nearly all of American Pharmaceutical’s available shares had been sold short.

When Gradishar’s clinical data were published, they suggested that

Abraxane was a marginal improvement over standard paclitaxel. Among four hundred and fifty-four breast-cancer patients enrolled in the trial, tumors shrank in thirty-three per cent of those who received Abraxane, compared with nineteen per cent of those who were given the standard treatment—in other words, an additional thirty-four women had responded to the new drug. The survival rate was not much better for women given Abraxane than for those given paclitaxel. In addition, paclitaxel performed worse by some metrics than it had in other studies, potentially boosting Abraxane by comparison. But the tumors had shrunk.

It is the nature of the American health-care system that marginal improvements can result in vast fortunes. In early 2005, against the expectations of the short sellers, the Food and Drug Administration approved Abraxane. Shares of American Pharmaceutical went up forty-seven per cent, and Soon-Shiong commissioned a com-

memorative paperweight displaying the stock chart.

A comprehensive independent review, published in *Annals of Oncology* in 2006, concluded that Abraxane and similar drugs did “not really” offer a significant therapeutic benefit over established medicines, and termed them “old wine in a new bottle.” But Abraxane is much less likely to trigger allergic reactions, and that has made it popular among American physicians. “It has a slightly different toxicity profile,” Harold Burstein, a breast-cancer specialist at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, told *Fortune* in 2013. “For some patients it’s a nice trick to know about. But in terms of its benefit in breast cancer, there is none.”

Gradishar agrees, to some extent. But he said that Abraxane was easier to administer, and noted that, unlike the alternative, it did not require an accompanying dose of a steroid. He said that he regularly prescribed Abraxane to his patients. “They have independent statistical analysis at the F.D.A.,

and they take a very rigorous look,” he told me. “You don’t just hand them an envelope and say, ‘Well, these are our results,’ and they stamp it.” He had not been to Russia, but he said that the data had been thoroughly analyzed by Michael Hawkins, the chief medical officer at American BioScience.

From a business perspective, the details of the clinical trial were unimportant; Abraxane now had a medical-billing code for insurance reimbursement. A 2006 article in the *New York Times* reported that Abraxane was selling for forty-two hundred dollars per dose. (Soon-Shiong says that he had thought the cost was much lower.) Generic paclitaxel, dissolved in the castor-oil derivative, the article said, cost one-twenty-fifth as much. Doctors who administer drugs like Abraxane are permitted to receive a percentage of the price. “The incentives were exactly backwards,” Peter Bach, a doctor at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center who tracks ballooning medical costs, said.

Following additional clinical trials, the F.D.A. also approved Abraxane as a therapy for lung cancer and pancreatic cancer, when used in combination with other treatments. These developments suggest that Soon-Shiong had helped invent a better drug.

Still, some insurance companies have questioned Abraxane’s clinical value relative to its price. In 2014, the insurer Anthem started a program that identified effective cancer treatments, then paid doctors an additional fee to prescribe them. When treatments were equally effective, Anthem chose the one that cost less. Abraxane made the cut only for pancreatic cancer; for breast and lung cancers, Anthem deemed paclitaxel a less expensive and equally effective drug. (Anthem still reimburses costs for Abraxane when used for any of the three cancers.) Jennifer Malin, the oncologist who developed Anthem’s program, remembered meeting Soon-Shiong to talk about products he was developing. “You go into the conference room, and he just talks for like three hours straight and fills up this giant whiteboard with all his theories of the way things work, whether or not they’re based in reality,” Malin said. “Other people—even clinical people who don’t have expertise in oncology—



you would say, 'Maybe he's just brilliant.' You really have to be an oncologist to be able to say, 'You know, this stuff is kind of wacky.'"

Shortly after Abraxane's initial approval, Soon-Shiong announced that, at the urging of investors, he was finally combining American Pharmaceutical Partners and American BioScience into a single company. In a transaction known as a reverse merger, publicly traded American Pharmaceutical issued millions of new shares to acquire privately held American BioScience—its own largest shareholder. When the transaction was completed, Soon-Shiong owned more than eighty per cent of the shares of the company he'd brought to market just a few years before.

Less than fifteen months after the merger, Soon-Shiong announced that he was splitting the companies up again. The generic manufacturer would now be known as APP Pharmaceuticals; the Abraxane rights holder would be called Abraxis BioScience. In 2008, APP Pharmaceuticals was sold to the German company Fresenius for \$4.6 billion. In 2010, Abraxis BioScience was sold to the biotech firm Celgene for nearly three billion dollars. Soon-Shiong became Celgene's largest individual shareholder, and in the next four years the company's stock tripled. Having started from nothing fourteen years earlier, and operating outside his medical specialty, Soon-Shiong was now worth more than seven billion dollars.

Soon-Shiong's wealth and networking skills have given him access to the upper strata of American life. He has appeared with Bill Clinton and Joe Biden, and has invested in a clean-energy venture with Bill Gates. When I asked him who his friends were, he gave me three names: the composer Burt Bacharach, the basketball player Metta Sandiford-Artest (known in his playing days as Ron Artest and later as Metta World Peace), and Jerry Zucker, who produced the movie "Airplane!"

Soon-Shiong was not name-dropping; these men really are his close friends. "Patrick is brilliant," Zucker told me. "I find him fascinating, on the rare occasion that I understand what he is talking about." Sandiford-Artest praised Soon-Shiong's basketball skills.

"He can pull up left, pull up right, he has a one-dribble fade," he said. "He really knows how to play the game." But it was Bacharach, now ninety-three, who spoke of Soon-Shiong in the warmest terms. "That guy's so brilliant," he said. "A man who is interested in all things. And such a good friend." Bacharach related an anecdote about his son Oliver, who was hospitalized with an antibiotic-resistant staph infection. "Patrick's not on the staff, but he drops by and asks to see the chart," Bacharach said. "And, you know, you're treading on someone else's ground. But he's very gentle, the way he went about it, and he talks to the infectious-disease doctor and suggests they switch the antibiotic to another one. The next day, Oliver was better."

Soon-Shiong's friends told me about his compound in Brentwood. "I see it more as a campus," Bacharach said. Everyone brought up the basketball court. "This court is the best court I've ever seen in my life," Sandiford-Artest, who played in the N.B.A. for nineteen seasons, said. "It's insane. It's deep under the floor, and it's a big, N.B.A.-sized court, with locker rooms and televisions. And bowling alleys. Just like a big N.B.A. practice facility, sixty to a hundred feet underground."

Soon-Shiong and Kobe Bryant were close. When Bryant ruptured his Achilles tendon, in 2013, during a Lakers game, Soon-Shiong rushed to the locker room to meet him. An Achilles rupture can cause heavy swelling around the ankle, and the standard medical procedure is to wait until the swelling subsides before surgically reattaching the tendon. But Soon-Shiong had ruptured his own Achilles playing basketball a few years earlier, and claimed to have devised a novel approach to treating the injury. He advised Bryant to have the operation immediately.

Soon-Shiong's surgery had been conducted by Neal ElAttrache, a sober and evidence-driven physician, whose prudence and skill have made him one of the most respected orthopedists in sports. He'd been watching the game on TV, and immediately recognized

Bryant's injury as an Achilles tear. "About forty-five minutes later, my phone rang at home, and it was Patrick, in the locker room with Kobe," ElAttrache told me. ElAttrache was booked to operate the next morning on the ace pitcher Zack Greinke; at Soon-Shiong's urging, he performed back-to-back surgeries, operating on Bryant afterward. Soon-Shiong, who had not performed surgery in years and had no background in orthopedics, was in the operating room. "The body's natural healing elements are activated shortly after the tear, so it made sense to me, what he was saying," ElAttrache said. "You know, the inflammatory elements

from the injury are at their peak."

Bryant returned to the court the following season, but never won another championship. ("He wasn't a hundred per cent after that," Sandiford-Artest said. "No way.") ElAttrache said that Soon-Shiong's input hadn't changed his approach to surgery, but he admired Soon-Shiong's daring, and his willingness to experiment. "Patrick functions on the edge," he said. "You need people like that. I ask myself, 'Is there some kernel of genius in there that can help the people I need to take care of?' So I listen to him. I definitely listen."

Soon-Shiong purchased his share in the Lakers in 2010, from Magic Johnson. By this time, he had returned to U.C.L.A. as a visiting professor. In 2012, he was part of an unsuccessful bid to buy the Dodgers. In 2013, he invested in the startup Zoom, which was valued at fifty million dollars. The company is now worth seventy billion dollars. Soon-Shiong invested in clean-tech ventures and marketed his own I.T. systems for health care. His wife, Michele, opened a movie studio, and he invested in an e-sports platform. Michele, a practicing Catholic, persuaded him to donate to several Christian charities. (Soon-Shiong grew up in the Anglican Church, and still occasionally attends services.) He acquired a controlling stake in the parent company of Verity Health Systems, which ran six hospitals in California. In late 2016, he and Michele





gave a hundred thousand dollars to Hillary Clinton's campaign; twelve days after the election, he had dinner with Donald Trump.

Not all of Soon-Shiong's ventures have been successful. Verity Health filed for bankruptcy in 2018; critics noted that the hospital chain had spent more than twenty million dollars upgrading its I.T. system, employing a vender in which Soon-Shiong had a financial stake. After Verity failed, Soon-Shiong acquired control of St. Vincent Medical Center in downtown L.A.—the hospital where he had performed the islet-cell transplant on Steven Craig. That, too, failed, and the building was subsequently repurposed as a temporary COVID ward. (“The nuns hadn’t funded their pensions,” Soon-Shiong told me, in explanation.)

In 2015, Soon-Shiong bought a stake in Tribune Publishing, the media conglomerate that controlled the Los Angeles *Times*. By 2018, Soon-Shiong had emerged as the sole owner of the paper. In our initial conversation, he recalled his first real job, as a teen-ager, delivering copies of the *Evening Post* off the back of a truck in Port Elizabeth. “The first thing I did with the L.A. *Times*, I drove to the printing press,” he said. “I wanted to hear the clickety-clack.” I

was surprised by the respect he held for journalists, who have given him a mixed reception through the years. (Soon-Shiong has been the subject of laudatory features on “Nightline” and “60 Minutes,” but a 2014 profile in *Forbes* presented him as a daffy eccentric, and the biopharma trade publication *STAT News* has run a series of highly critical articles about him.) When I asked him about his ideas for the paper, he invoked the appropriate buzzwords—“podcasting,” “storytelling,” “test kitchen”—without mentioning anything that sounded like a business plan.

The L.A. *Times* has long been a trophy for the city's elite. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Harrison Gray Otis, a former Army general, used it to promote his vision of Los Angeles as an exclusive paradise for the “Anglo Saxon” ideal. Otis's son-in-law Harry Chandler, the man responsible for the Hollywood sign, treated the paper like a real-estate circular. The paper's politics were initially quite conservative—its offices were once bombed by labor activists. In the nineteen-sixties, along with the rest of California, the paper tacked left. An era of liberal respectability followed: the paper won numerous Pulitzers and carried a thick clas-

sified-advertising section. At its peak, in the eighties, the *Times*' offices downtown took up a city block. By the time Soon-Shiong acquired control, the paper was much reduced. Declining revenues from local advertising had led to cuts in staff, and the paper's Art Deco headquarters had been sold.

The modern news business relies more on paid digital subscriptions than on display advertising. That model is well suited for large platforms like the New York *Times*, which tripled its subscriber base while Trump was in office. Such growth can come at the expense of local papers; the *Times* now has more subscribers in Dallas than the Dallas *Morning News* does. The middle ground is vanishing, and, to survive, the L.A. *Times* needs a national audience. “You’re not going to compete with the Washington *Post*, but you don’t have to be the San Jose *Mercury News*, either,” Pearlstine, the former executive editor, said. But the paper's growth has been disappointing, particularly relative to the size of Soon-Shiong's investment. The Los Angeles *Times* currently has four hundred thousand paying subscribers; the New York *Times* has eight million.

After the murder of George Floyd, in 2020, when Pearlstine was the editor, the L.A. *Times* Guild's Black Caucus wrote a public letter addressed to Soon-Shiong. “The nation's reckoning over race has put a much-needed spotlight on inequities at The Times,” the letter read. “Most of us who do work here are often ignored, marginalized, under-valued and left to drift along career paths that leave little opportunity for advancement.” A similar letter from the Guild's Latino Caucus followed.

Erin B. Logan, the twenty-six-year-old chair of the Black Caucus, told me that Soon-Shiong was receptive to the journalists' concerns. “Shortly after I arrived, we did a head count, and I was, like, ‘Wow, there are not a lot of Black faces here,’” she said. “And Patrick, with his background, I think, was immediately in touch with that.” After receiving the letter, he hired more Black journalists; he also commissioned an apology for the paper's past coverage, which was often racist. Logan was impressed. “Newspapers tend to be owned by a certain kind of person,” she said.

"But Patrick is different. He's personally experienced discrimination like this."

This February, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Soon-Shiong was considering selling the *Times*. The next day, Nika, Patrick's twenty-eight-year-old daughter, tweeted, "WSJ is 100% wrong." Journalists at the *Times* told me that Nika, who runs an experimental basic-income program in Compton and is a doctoral candidate at Oxford, has taken an interest in the paper. "A light switch has gone off for me, in the past year, of understanding the influence that public perception and mass narratives have over public-policy decisions," she told me.

In December, 2020, Pearlstine left the *Times*. Still, he remains fond of Soon-Shiong, who, he said, had never interfered in editorial coverage. This May, Soon-Shiong announced that Kevin Merida would succeed Pearlstine. Merida, who is Black, previously ran the multimedia platform the *Undeclared*, at ESPN, which focussed on the cultural intersection of race and sports. He told me that he thought the *Times* could reach a million subscribers. "I wouldn't have come here if I didn't feel good about Patrick and Michele," Merida said.

Soon-Shiong seems less interested in the news business in general than in the L.A. *Times* specifically. To buy the paper, he had to take a substantial minority stake in Tribune Publishing, the parent company of the Baltimore *Sun*, the New York *Daily News*, the Chicago *Tribune*, and several other regional newspapers. Earlier this year, he approved—or, at least, did not contest—the sale of Tribune Publishing to Alden Capital, a hedge fund that the columnist Joe Nocera called the "destroyer of newspapers" for its cost-cutting tactics. "Local benefactors should manage local papers," Soon-Shiong said of the deal. "I couldn't manage the Baltimore *Sun*."

Before my first conversation with Soon-Shiong, his representative sent me a one-page fact sheet listing areas in which he is currently active. Of the twenty-five business lines, the L.A. *Times* was in the twenty-third spot, alongside a bioplastics company, a cloud-computing venture, a water-purification system, and a "next generation urban scooter." Journalists look-

ing for a savior may have to settle for the occasional pep talk from a distracted billionaire. "He's like Bill Clinton. When Bill Clinton is talking to you, you get the feeling that you're the only person in the world," Scott King said. "He gives you the impression that he's instantly there for you, all out, even though you know that can't possibly be true."

In satellite photographs, the town of El Segundo looks like an abandoned game of SimCity. Some sixteen thousand people live there, in a small rectangle of tract housing, penned in by LAX, an oil refinery, an industrial park, and a sewage-treatment plant. El Segundo is also the sandbox for the second phase of Soon-Shiong's business career, which involves numerous ventures gathered under an umbrella organization called NantWorks.

Inside the NantWorks galaxy, there is NantHealth, which builds diagnostic medical software; NantCloud, which offers cloud-computing services; ImmunityBio, which develops immunotherapy treatments for cancer; and NantStudios, a movie soundstage and visual-effects studio. There are also NantMobile, NantBioScience, NantEnergy, NantOmics, and NantGames. In 2018, Soon-Shiong relocated the *Times* to a nondescript office building

in this industrial suburb, facing the highway, steps from the airport.

Soon-Shiong's COVID effort, which is based in El Segundo, is run under the ImmunityBio business line. In July, I visited ImmunityBio's vaccine factory, where genetically engineered virus cells are grown in stainless-steel tanks. The facility looked a bit like a brewery. "I always joke with Patrick that, if we don't succeed, we'll make the best I.P.A.," Leonard Sender, the company's C.O.O., said.

Soon-Shiong manages activity at NantWorks virtually. Our first conversation took place in June, 2021, after L.A. County had loosened its mask requirements. Soon-Shiong thought that this was foolish. "The Delta variant hasn't hit here yet," he said. "When it does, with all these unmasked people, it'll spread like wildfire." He was right. When we spoke a month later, amid a spiking caseload, the mask mandate had been reinstated. Soon-Shiong also predicted that the vaccines would be less effective against the Delta variant; this proved true as well.

Soon-Shiong's vaccine, like Johnson & Johnson's, uses a neutralized adenovirus to deliver a genetically engineered payload that stimulates an antibody response. His innovation, he told me, is to further stimulate the body's T-cell response. "The



"It was supposed to be John loves Lisa."

antibodies you get with a vaccine are merely bait,” he said. “The virus will look for the antibody and mutate around it.” He pulled up a virtual whiteboard, and his video-chat window shrank into a thumbnail in the upper-right corner. Using his finger on a touch screen, he drew a color diagram of the COVID virus, with the famous spike protein labelled “S.” “Everybody knows this guy,” Soon-Shiong said. He then drew a structure within the virus, which he labelled “N.” “But this is the nucleocapsid. This is actually the factory, where the virus reproduces itself.” Soon-Shiong said that, if vaccines did not target the viral nucleocapsid, manufacturers would be playing an endless game of catch-up. “I know Moderna’s trying to make another antibody that will go after the Delta variant,” he said. “But you’re chasing your own tail, because next week you’re going to have a Delta-plus.”

Soon-Shiong continued diagramming various biological structures. “The only way to make sure this guy doesn’t propagate, frankly, is to kill the factory. Antibodies will not kill the factory. The only way to kill the factory is to have a T cell,” he said. “I kill the factory, I kill transmission, we end the pandemic.” Soon-Shiong began talking of H2 receptors and recombinant DNA, and soon the screen was covered in squiggles. “You can take a picture of this,” he said at the end. “This is how I communicate with all my scientists.”

After visiting the vaccine facility, I was driven to see another lab, where new treatments for cancer are in development. One of the products was the so-called natural-killer cell, better known as the NK cell, a component of the immune system that has been shown to prevent tumor growth. A mystery of cancer is how the disease manages to hide from these cells; one proposed solution is to genetically engineer the NK cells so that they can better track down cancers, a process that Sender, the C.O.O., called “sending the cells to college.” At the facility, people in hairnets and booties worked feverishly under the gaze of their boss, replicating trillions of college-educated NK cells and packaging them in liquid ni-

trogen for distribution to cancer patients.

Soon-Shiong has labelled his approach to cancer “quantum oncotherapeutics,” although it does not rely on findings from quantum physics. He has a tendency to make his therapies sound more innovative than they are. When I asked him about Kobe Bryant’s Achilles-tendon surgery, he said, “The treatment for Achilles rupture is completely wrong. I asked Kobe if he wanted to dunk again, and he said yes. So we went completely against the doctor’s orders, and Kobe has his treatment, and he dunked again.” ElAttrache, who performed the surgery, told me, “That this was some sort of novel thing that no one else had considered, you know, I just, I don’t know . . . I think that’s a little bit of an overstatement.”

Soon-Shiong likes to present himself as an intellectual iconoclast, fighting a lonely war against the establishment. In reality, he has operated inside the boundaries of mainstream medical research, even in the islet-cell days. “At the time, I found this kind of self-promotion unethical,” Scott King said. “But I will say, now that I’m older, I realize you need someone like that on your side. He was good at raising money.”

Following the I.P.O. for another NantWorks company, NantKwest, in 2015, reports suggested that Soon-Shiong’s hundred-and-forty-seven-million-dollar compensation package likely made him America’s best-paid C.E.O. that year. The stock subsequently traded as low as a dollar, but it popped in 2020 after Soon-Shiong announced another reverse merger, which left him with more than eighty per cent of the surviving company, ImmunityBio.

When I talked with David Nierengarten, a specialist in NK-cell therapies at Wedbush Securities, he cautioned that ImmunityBio had plenty of competition, that it was not the industry leader, and that its technology could be three to five years away from being marketable. ImmunityBio’s market value is currently more than three billion dollars, but Wall Street isn’t reacting as if it’s about to cure cancer. “I don’t have any questions from investors on it,” Nieren-

garten told me. “No one. No one cares.”

Prospects for Soon-Shiong’s COVID vaccine are equally uncertain, although again the problem is not unproven science but a simple excess of competition. The Regulatory Affairs Professionals Society lists twenty-three COVID vaccines currently authorized for use around the globe, and ninety-one still in development, including Soon-Shiong’s. Separating himself from the pack will require an extraordinary breakthrough.

Soon-Shiong promises that such a breakthrough is coming, and perhaps it is. Still, if there is a parallel to be drawn between ImmunityBio’s work and quantum physics, it might be termed the Soon-Shiong uncertainty principle: Ask him a question about medicine and you will receive an answer about business; ask him a question about business and you will receive an answer about medicine; but rarely will you receive both answers at the same time. When I asked him about COVID, he told me that he was fighting against “the same dogma” he had confronted his entire career, before directing me to a fifty-six-page business plan he had included in an ImmunityBio corporate filing. When I asked him about his reverse mergers, he switched back to medicine. “The reverse merger has nothing to do with money or stock,” he said. “It’s to do with putting the right ingredients into the right mixing bowl. So you can cure patients.”

NantWorks’ logo is a feather emerging from a circle. When I asked Soon-Shiong what “Nant” referred to, he gestured to a ropework basket hanging from the bookshelf behind him. “You see this Apache basket? The word ‘Nantan’ stands for ‘he who speaks for the people,’” Soon-Shiong said. “I’m an honorary Navajo, and I’m on the Apache council. Because my job, frankly, is to help the marginalized and underserved.”

In 2015, NantPharma acquired the rights to Cynviloq, a paclitaxel formulation that sold in South Korea for a lower price than Abraxane did. The deal specified that, in addition to an up-front payment, NantPharma would pay Sorrento Therapeutics, Cynviloq’s maker, \$1.2 billion upon completion of certain sales and regulatory milestones, including the drug’s approval by the F.D.A. But, shortly after acquiring Cynviloq, Sorrento says,



Soon-Shiong abandoned the F.D.A. approval process and let the drug's key patents lapse—a tactic that resembles what in the industry is called “catch and kill.” Soon-Shiong no longer had to pay the \$1.2 billion, plus Abraxane would have one less potential competitor. Sorrento sued him, alleging fraud.

Soon-Shiong, who has denied the allegations, told me that Sorrento had manipulated Cynviloq's clinical data, and that this made it more difficult to pursue F.D.A. approval. He also said that the drug was “falling apart,” and had manufacturing issues. Steve Feldman, an attorney representing Sorrento in the case, rejects this claim as “baseless post-hoc explanations.” “Just because someone's charismatic, and just because they're a billionaire, that doesn't mean what they're saying is true,” Feldman told me.

Soon-Shiong said that his financial interest in Abraxane is negligible. The drug's patents are beginning to expire, and it is now owned by Bristol Myers Squibb, which bought Celgene in 2019. Last year, Abraxane did more than a billion dollars in sales. In 2019, around eighteen thousand Medicare beneficiaries were treated with the drug, at an average spending per beneficiary of more than seventeen thousand dollars. (Paclitaxel cost Medicare about a hundred and thirty dollars per beneficiary.)

Sorrento and NantWorks had also established a joint research venture to develop other drugs. Sorrento's lawsuit alleges that Soon-Shiong repurposed the funds in the venture for other uses, which Soon-Shiong also denies. In a separate case, in 2017, Soon-Shiong was sued by the singer Cher; she alleged that he and others had deceived her, by persuading her to sell her shares in a promising drug company and withholding relevant data to suppress the price of her stock. Soon-Shiong denied the claims, and Cher's case was dismissed in 2018.

Sorrento's lawsuit is in arbitration. Cher could not be reached for comment. Cynviloq remains unavailable in the United States.

Peter Bach, of Memorial Sloan Kettering, has devoted his career to fighting for lower drug prices, and he is a longtime critic of the cost and the effectiveness of Abraxane. But Bach is



“Wait, what? What are all these videos of other cats doing on her phone?”

• •

also friends with Soon-Shiong. “I’ve been on his plane. I’ve gone skiing with him,” Bach said. “Knowing Patrick has enriched my life considerably.” Jennifer Malin, the oncologist formerly at Anthem, was also friendly with Soon-Shiong. She recalled meeting him for a business dinner. “His wife and his two kids were eating dinner on the other side of the restaurant, so he would, like, spend fifteen minutes at their table, and chat with them, then come back over to our table,” she said. “If I was married to him, I’d be livid! Anyway, that’s pretty funny. He’s like an excited kid. It’s hard to get upset.”

Soon-Shiong has a tendency to wander into areas in which he has no background. The NantStudios soundstage in El Segundo features “the Volume,” a wraparound visual-effects wall that he hopes will replace the green screen. About the size of a baseball infield, it surrounds actors on all sides with L.E.D. backdrops, then uses rendering effects from a video-game en-

gine to create seamless perspectives for the camera. “It’s the next generation of how movies, commercials, and TV production will happen,” Soon-Shiong said. The technology is impressive—but it was developed by Lucasfilm’s visual-effects company, Industrial Light & Magic, and many production companies are building one. In Soon-Shiong’s telling, he and Michele had built the movie studio of the future. In reality, they had joined a crowded field.

When I asked Soon-Shiong what personal qualities had allowed him to succeed in medical school, in an atmosphere of explicit white supremacy, I suddenly saw in him a glimpse of the modesty that the Iacoccas had witnessed. He hadn’t thought about this question before—he genuinely didn’t seem to know. “Well, I have a good memory, right?” he said, after a time. “I think I was given a little bit of a gift, that I can see things in a different way.” ♦

THE WITNESS

Ron Bishop helped send three innocent boys to prison. They've all lived with the consequences.

BY JENNIFER GONNERMAN

For nearly four decades, Ron Bishop has had nightmares about an afternoon from his youth. It was November 18, 1983, and he was in science class with his friend DeWitt Duckett, at Harlem Park Junior High School, in West Baltimore. When the bell rang, the boys, both fourteen and in ninth grade, left class with another friend. They headed to the cafeteria for lunch, and, to avoid the crowds of students, they took a shortcut down a deserted corridor. As they passed rows of metal lockers, Bishop joked about Duckett's antics back when they were in first grade. "We were laughing," Bishop recalled. "And within seconds I turned, and someone had a gun in my face. And then the gun went from being in my face to the back of DeWitt's neck."

The assailant—an older teen-ager in a gray hoodie—reached for Duckett's collar. "Give me your jacket!" he demanded.

Duckett wore a navy-blue satin Starter jacket with "Georgetown" emblazoned across the front. At the time, Georgetown's basketball team was dominant, and the jackets were extremely popular, selling for sixty-five dollars apiece. Duckett was among the first students in their school to get one. His mother later told a reporter that he had bought it with money he'd saved from his summer job as a stock clerk.

Now, with a gun pointed at him, Duckett tried to take off the jacket. Bishop caught the eye of his other friend, and they ran to the end of the corridor. The sound of a gunshot echoed behind them. They kept running, down a flight of stairs and into the cafeteria, searching for help. Bishop remembers calling out, "Someone shot DeWitt!"

Duckett soon appeared, without his jacket, pressing one hand against his neck. Bishop later recounted, "I saw my friend stumbling into the cafeteria and collapsing in the principal's arms—and

that was the last time I saw him alive." Duckett left school in the back of an ambulance, and he died that afternoon.

The shooting transformed the school into a high-profile crime scene. The next day, Duckett's name appeared on page 1 of the Baltimore *Sun* and in newspapers across the country. According to the local press, Duckett's death marked the first time that a student had been fatally shot in one of the city's public schools. Inside Harlem Park Junior High, everyone seemed to be in shock. "One of our teachers—he tried to comfort us, like, 'You know, unfortunately, things happen,'" Bishop said. "He couldn't get ten words out, and he just started crying."

Thirty-eight years later, Bishop still often thinks about the day his friend was killed. In many ways, however, the aftermath of the murder—the quest for justice and the role that Bishop played in it—haunts him even more.

Ron Bishop lived in a three-story row house about a mile from the school, with his parents, his twin brother, and several other siblings. He was the youngest of nine children, two minutes younger than his twin. His father worked as a welder, repairing ships at Maryland Drydock; in his off-hours, he played Rachmaninoff on the piano in the front room, the notes wafting through the open windows. ("Some of my friends thought that was the oddest thing," Bishop recalled.) The family's finances were tight, but "my parents tried to make it seem like we had a lot," Bishop said. "We were a happy family."

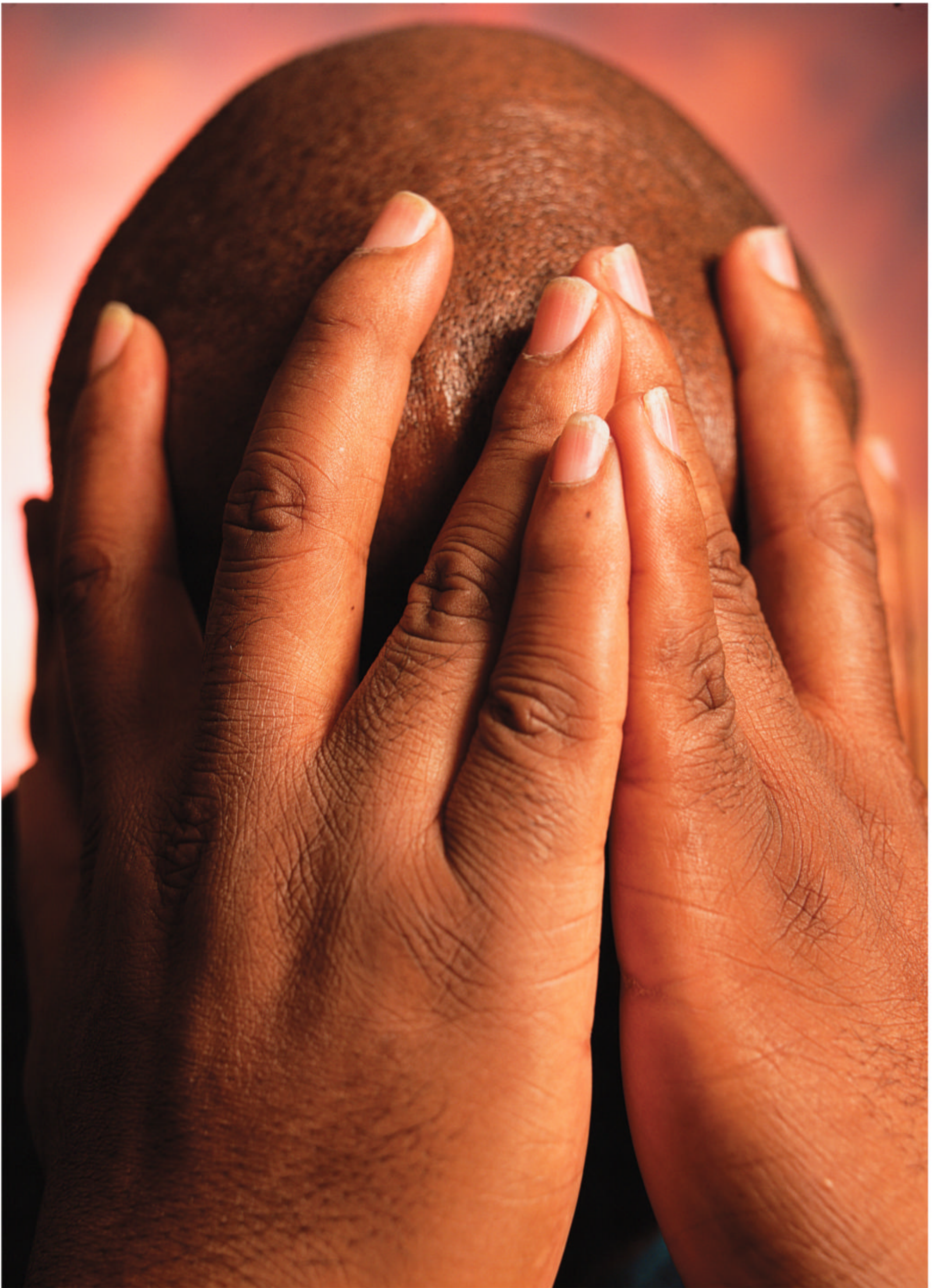
The streets around Harlem Park Junior High were the sort of place where everyone knew everyone else. Nearly all the families were Black, and some had been in the area for generations. When Bishop was younger, he had lived closer to the school, at one point residing in the house where his father had grown up. "You had the working class, and you

had the working-poor class as well," Bishop said. "None of our parents had a lot of money." As children, he and his friends would climb apple trees in the neighborhood after school: "We used to call it 'hitting the trees'—just climb a tree to get some fruit."

In early 1983, the sense of joy that had permeated his childhood vanished. One night, his eldest brother, George Bishop III, who was twenty-two and just home from the Army, went out to Shake & Bake, a recreation center with a roller rink, recently opened by Glenn (Shake & Bake) Doughty, the former Baltimore Colts wide receiver. Outside the entrance, George bumped into another young man; they argued, and the man shot him to death. "That just messed up the whole family," Bishop said. He described the mood in his home as the "emptiest feeling ever." Ten months after his brother was murdered, DeWitt Duckett was killed.

In the days following Duckett's death, the city of Baltimore was fixated on the question of who shot him. Bishop was the primary witness; he'd had a better view of the assailant than anyone else, including the friend who was with him. He did not have a name to give the police, however—he had thought that the shooter looked familiar, but he was not certain who he was. Meanwhile, school staff members reported that a group of older teen-agers had been inside the building earlier that day, goofing off in the hallways. The group had included three sixteen-year-olds: Alfred Chestnut, Ransom Watkins, and Andrew Stewart.

The detective assigned to the murder investigation was a veteran of the Baltimore Police Department named Donald Kincaid. The day after Duckett's death, he tracked down Watkins and Chestnut. At the time, Chestnut was wearing a Georgetown Starter jacket. Kincaid wanted to question the teen-agers, and they agreed. "We grew up



When he was fourteen, Bishop testified in a murder trial. At the time, he thought, “If I tell the truth, I’m going to prison.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDRES SERRANO

THE NEW YORKER, NOVEMBER 1, 2021

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trusting the police," Watkins recalled recently. "We honestly were thinking that they want to do the right thing." Watkins and Chestnut insisted that they had nothing to do with the murder, and that the jacket Chestnut was wearing belonged to him. A detective took Polaroids of them; the police then picked up Stewart and took his photo, too.

Not long afterward, Kincaid walked into Bishop's house. He laid out eleven Polaroids on a table in the front room and, in the presence of Bishop's mother, asked Bishop if he could identify anyone who had been involved in the shooting. Bishop recognized Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart—they had gone to the same elementary school—but he did not pick them out, or anyone else. Kincaid returned four days after the murder, and then again several hours later, shortly after midnight. It was an odd time to visit a ninth-grade witness: Bishop was asleep. After he was woken up, Kincaid showed him a photo array. Again, Bishop did not pick anyone out. Eventually, the detective left, and Bishop went back to sleep.

A few hours later, Bishop awoke and walked up the street to St. Peter Claver Catholic Church, where Duckett's funeral was being held. About a hundred and fifty people reportedly attended, including the congressman Kweisi Mfume, who was then a member of the city council. The *Baltimore Afro-American*, a weekly newspaper, described a "solemn" Mass, with a gray casket that remained

shut and a family that "bore its sorrow with remarkable stoicism." Bishop saw a teacher he knew, and she drove him to the cemetery for the burial.

That afternoon, Detective Kincaid was at Harlem Park Junior High. School security had told the police about a "possible witness," a ninth-grade girl who was just thirteen years old. Kincaid, who was joined by another detective and a sergeant, interviewed her in a conference room adjacent to the principal's office. He showed her a photo array that included Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart. Later, both Kincaid and the girl would testify that she pointed out all three of them.

That evening, officers picked up Bishop at his house and, without notifying his parents, took him to the homicide office at Police Headquarters. Two other boys were also brought there that night: the friend who had been with Bishop and Duckett just before the murder and another male classmate. Neither boy had a parent with him.

The police placed Bishop in a small room, at a desk with a photo array in front of him. At first, he wasn't worried; when Kincaid had come to his home earlier that week, he seemed friendly. Soon, however, Kincaid began acting differently: angry, frustrated, accusatory. He stood a few inches from the boy; there was a second detective in the room, too. They acted as if Bishop were withholding crucial information—"We *know* you know who was there"—and, Bishop

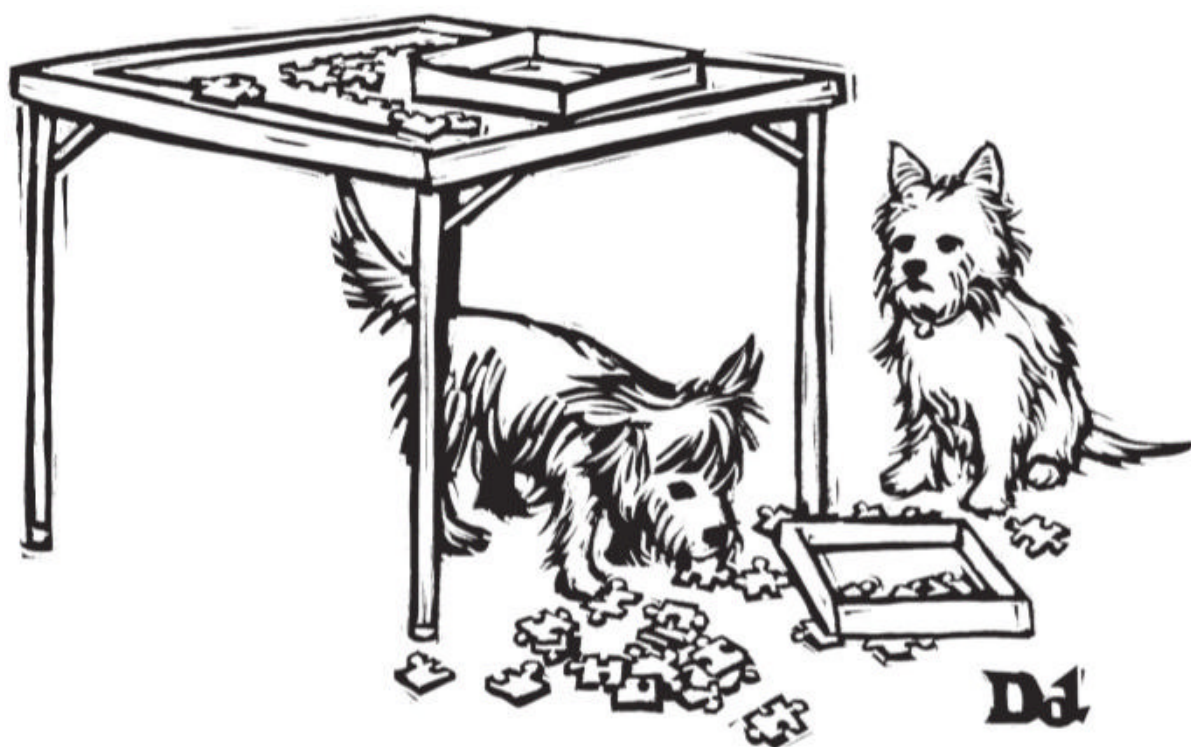
recalled, they made it clear that he would not be allowed to leave until he said who had been involved in Duckett's murder. "The threat was: if I didn't tell them who did it, I could be charged with accessory to murder," he said.

Kincaid conducted the photo array that night in a different way than he had before, according to Bishop. The boy pointed to the photos, and the detective made comments. Bishop recalled pointing to Chestnut and the detective saying something like, "Oh, he had the gun, right?" Bishop said, "And then I realized . . . he wants me to say, 'Chestnut did it.'" That night, the three ninth-grade boys who had been brought to the homicide office all pointed out Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart.

The next day was Thanksgiving, and at about 1 A.M. Kincaid and a group of police officers went to Alfred Chestnut's house. He was asleep in his bedroom, which he shared with his younger brother. "They pulled me out of the bed," Chestnut recalled. "I saw lights in my face, and, once they turned the lights on, I see all the guns drawn." From his bedroom closet, the police seized a Georgetown Starter jacket. "My mom—she was crying and hysterical," he said. "My mother said, 'My son ain't kill nobody. That's *his* jacket. I bought him that jacket.'"

The police whisked Chestnut outside. Next, they went looking for Ransom Watkins. "I woke up with guns in my face, telling me I was under arrest for murder," he said. "I couldn't even breathe—that was the fear they put in me." Andrew Stewart wasn't home when the police went to his family's apartment; he was sleeping over at a friend's place. The police tracked him down and forced him into a paddy wagon with Chestnut and Watkins. He remembered, "We were just looking at each other and shaking our heads, like, 'What is going on?'" At the station, locked in a holding cell together, the boys started to cry.

The *Baltimore Sun* announced the arrests on its front page and, the following day, published a photo of three skinny boys being taken into the police station; each appeared to be in shock. According to the police reports of their arrests, Stewart, the shortest of the group, was only five feet six; Watkins, who was the tallest, at six feet two,



"I find it easier to eat the edge pieces first."

weighed just a hundred and thirty-five pounds. All three teen-agers had been charged with first-degree murder, and would be tried as adults.

One day, not long after Duckett was killed, Bishop was walking outside his school when Michael Willis, an eighteen-year-old from the neighborhood, shouted out to him, “If anyone tries to take your jacket, let me know. I’ll take care of them for you.” Bishop barely knew Willis, and at first he assumed that the older teen was trying to reassure him. But as the days passed he began to wonder whether Willis’s motives were really benign. Maybe, he thought, Willis was the boy in the hoodie who had shot his friend. The details he remembered of the assailant—dark skin, slight mustache—matched Willis. Bishop also remembered sitting outside his house shortly after Duckett’s death and seeing Willis walk by wearing a Georgetown Starter jacket.

Meanwhile, the prosecution of Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart moved ahead. Jonathan Shoup, a longtime prosecutor in the state’s attorney’s office in Baltimore, had been assigned to handle the trial. Before it began, Shoup held a meeting with the four ninth-grade students whom he planned to call to the witness stand: the girl who had first identified the defendants; Bishop; the friend who had been walking with him and Duckett before the murder; and the other male classmate who had been at the homicide office. “They put us in a room, and basically it was almost like we were rehearsing,” Bishop recalled. “We were all supposed to say the same thing.”

What Bishop remembered witnessing was different from the narrative he was expected to deliver—he recalled there being one assailant, not three—and he suspected that two of the students in the meeting had not even seen the shooting. But he was outnumbered. Shoup praised the other students “and kind of made me feel like I was the outsider,” Bishop said later. “When I couldn’t put the events together that they wanted me to, I turned around and they”—the other students—“were all looking at me, like, ‘Ron, get your shit together. Why are you stumbling over your words?’” During a break in the meeting, he approached Shoup and told him that the

prosecution’s version of events was incorrect, saying, “It didn’t really go like this.” Shoup, he said, brushed him off: “Just go over there and have a seat.”

The trial of Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart began on May 15, 1984. In the next two days, three teachers testified that they had seen the defendants inside the school before the shooting. A history teacher said that they were “being very silly” and “immature,” and were disrupting her lesson by “hollering and talking to other people in the classroom.”

On the third day of the trial, Shoup started putting the students on the witness stand. The girl went first, telling the jury that she had seen the confrontation while peering through a grate in a connecting hall. “I heard Andrew ask for his jacket and Ransom ask for his jacket, and Chestnut had the gun to his neck, and then after that I heard the shot,” she said.

The two other male students took the witness stand next, and each gave similar testimony. Meanwhile, Bishop sat in the courthouse hallway, agonizing over what to do. At a pretrial hearing, he’d enraged the prosecutor by testifying that, before he pointed out the defendants in a photo array, he had twice been shown their photos and had not identified them—a fact that the prosecutor had not told the defense lawyers. Bishop recalled that the prosecutor had threatened him afterward: “I can’t remember the exact words, but what I do remember is ‘You’re asking to be charged with accessory to murder.’”

Before the trial, Bishop had tried to speak to his parents about his predicament, but he had kept his comments vague because he didn’t want to worry them. “They always told me, ‘Ron, tell the truth. Tell the truth. The truth shall set you free,’” he said, but “I’m, like, if I tell the truth, I’m going to prison.” Bishop’s father was a gun collector, and, Bishop remembered, “I was thinking, Should I get a gun and blow my brains out? I was torn between committing suicide or, you know, go into court and tell these bunch of lies.”

On the fifth day of the trial, it was Bishop’s turn to take the witness stand. He could feel his heart racing, as though

he were “about to have a stroke or a heart attack,” he said later. Then, as he neared the courtroom entrance, he encountered someone he never expected to see—Michael Willis. Willis had been watching the trial, perhaps to find out if his name came up. It had. Earlier, a school security guard had testified that he had seen Willis outside the school after Duckett was shot.

Stunned and confused, Bishop headed toward the front of the courtroom. He remembered the threats he’d

heard from law enforcement, and worried that, if he didn’t give the testimony the prosecutor wanted, he might be charged with a crime, too. “This is how I’m thinking at fourteen: They might postpone this trial, then come back with a new narrative that I had DeWitt set up, and they’re going to use these witnesses,” he said

later. In the end, he succumbed to his fears and recited the same version of events that the other students had given. He claimed that he had “seen Alfred Chestnut with a gun upside DeWitt Duckett’s neck” and that Watkins and Stewart were with him.

There was an obvious flaw in his testimony, as one defense attorney pointed out. “Your Honor,” the attorney said to the judge, “he gave a written statement on November 18th totally contradicting his testimony here at trial.” Bishop had said then that there was just one assailant. When questioned about this, Bishop offered the same rationale that the other students had given for inconsistencies in their accounts of what had occurred: they were telling the truth now but had been lying earlier because they were “scared.”

The teen-agers on trial sat together at the defense table, fighting to keep their composure. Stewart remembered, “The thing that hurt me the most was when I see my mother, my sisters, and my aunt behind me crying, gnashing their teeth, grabbing each other, holding each other because they’re lying on Alfred, on Ransom, on me.” To keep calm, Watkins stopped listening: “I had my mind somewhere else. It was like I was comatose.” If he had listened to the witnesses’ testimony, he said, he



“probably would have went crazy.” His mother had recently died, and he passed the time thinking about her.

The three defendants had all known DeWitt Duckett. Watkins and Stewart had played basketball with him, and Chestnut remembered going swimming with him at Druid Hill Park and eating at his home. They knew Duckett’s family, too, and it bothered them immensely that Duckett’s mother, who was in the courtroom, might believe that they had killed her son. “She was like the neighborhood mother, like any mother when we grew up,” Watkins said.

On May 28, 1984, the trial’s testimony concluded, and the jurors left the courtroom to deliberate. Three hours later, they returned with a verdict: Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart were all guilty of felony murder.

On July 10th, the three teen-agers were brought back to court to be sentenced. The judge who had presided over their trial and would decide their punishment, Robert M. Bell, was a prominent Black lawyer known for having helped integrate the city. In 1960, when he was sixteen, he had been arrested after participating in a sit-in at a local restaurant, and had then become the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit that reached the Supreme Court. He had gone on to Harvard Law School, and, in 1980, his judicial appointment had been celebrated on the front page of the *Baltimore Afro-American*.

Bell declared the case “a tragedy all around, and it’s even a tragedy as I sentence you.” He added, “I am participating in this waste, but I see myself as having very little choice.” He sentenced Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart to life in prison.

Soon after the trial ended, Ron Bishop graduated from Harlem Park Junior High School. He had avoided the corridor where the shooting occurred, but just before he graduated he made a final visit. “I went to the hallway by myself, said a little prayer to DeWitt, kissed the wall, kissed the floor,” he said. In the fall of 1984, he started at Carver Vocational-Technical High School.

He could no longer concentrate on

his schoolwork the way he had in the past. “I could not get this case out of my mind,” he said. He was haunted by what he had said on the witness stand, and by what he imagined life was like for the three teen-agers who had been convicted of murder. “If I’m taking a test, I’m thinking about Alfred Chestnut,” he said. “If I’m taking a quiz or a test, I’m thinking about Ransom Watkins.” He failed tenth grade and had to attend summer school.

He had told almost no one about the part he played in the murder trial, but other students knew that he had been with Duckett before he was shot. “And then you got to go back and face the neighborhood,” he said. “Some of the people I grew up with, they will say, ‘Yo,

you didn’t try to take the gun?’ Like, they watched these TV shows—‘You didn’t try to beat this guy up? Turn around? Do some Bruce Lee martial arts?’”

Bishop became withdrawn. “A lot of times, I would just sit on the steps,” he recalled, “and my mother would get on my case about not going anywhere: ‘Why don’t you be like your brother and go out?’” But unlike his twin, Don, Ron preferred to keep to himself. His sister Maria, who was in college at the time, knew that Ron had been nearby when his friend was killed, but “he didn’t do a whole lot of talking—not to me,” she said.

Chestnut was the first of the three teens convicted of Duckett’s murder to be transferred from jail to the Maryland Penitentiary, an infamous, two-century-old prison near downtown Baltimore. It had five tiers of cells, one stacked atop another. Describing the day he arrived, Chestnut said, “I look up and I see pigeons flying all around.” He was assigned a cell on the second tier and climbed a flight of stairs, heading toward it. “Before you know it, I see two dudes, right in front of me, stabbing each other,” he recalled. “I couldn’t wait to get on the phone. I was on the phone telling my mother, pleading to my mother, ‘Ma, I need a lawyer. You got to get me out of here.’”

Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart were together at the Maryland Penitentiary for about eight years, before they were

transferred to other prisons. “For the first five, seven years, I was still homesick,” Chestnut said. “From my cell, I could see across the street: people sitting on their steps, walking up and down the street, pretty girls walking up and down the sidewalk—literally, you could just holler out the window at them. Stuff like that just messes you up psychologically.”

The challenge of surviving prison was made more difficult by their youth and by the notoriety of the case. One day in 1986, Chestnut was watching a basketball game in a prison yard when, he said, “somebody came up and hit me in the side of my face with a push broom. Broke my nose, my jaw. I had internal bleeding.” The incident made the local news, and Bishop heard about it. The fact that Chestnut had been assaulted in prison deepened Bishop’s feelings of guilt and culpability. “I’m thinking I’m the cause of it all,” he said.

Bishop was tormented not only by the knowledge that he’d helped send three teen-agers to prison but also by the fact that the person he suspected had killed Duckett was still free. “After everything was over, I had to be in the presence of Michael Willis,” he said. “I had to watch him walk through my neighborhood.” Bishop had become increasingly convinced that Willis had shot his friend, but he told no one, he said, in part because he was scared that Willis might target him, too. “I just learned how to maneuver. I kind of stayed out of the neighborhood,” he recalled. “I indulged in sports. When I’d come home, it’d be late at night.”

In high school, Bishop was on the football, track, and wrestling teams, and at a wrestling tournament he caught the attention of a coach from Coppin State University, a historically Black school in Baltimore. He went on to attend Coppin State, but, as he had in high school, he struggled in his classes. “My G.P.A. dropped to one-point-something,” he recalled. He considered dropping out but managed to graduate, at the end of 1991, with a B.S. in applied psychology. About nine months later, he got what he considered a very good job, as a counsellor at a hospital in downtown Baltimore.

His intense guilt about the past made it nearly impossible for him to enjoy his own successes. Walking to work



one day, he reflected on how far he had come: "Here I am. I'm kind of successful now. I achieved some of the goals I said I would when I was in eighth, ninth grade." But his sense of pride vanished as another thought invaded his mind: "I sent three innocent Black men to prison for the rest of their lives." Later, he used the word "breakdown" to describe his mental state that day.

Eventually, he said, "I learned how to block everything out." But this strategy did not work well at night, when he had recurring nightmares. In one, he was stuck inside a dark cave with fire blocking the only exit, and "within that flame is the Devil," he said. "I'm there to face the Devil." Another nightmare replayed the moments before Duckett was shot, but this time Alfred Chestnut would appear. "I tried to convince myself within the dream that he was actually the one who pulled the trigger," Bishop said. Then he would wake up, and the illogic of his dream would become apparent: "If he did it, why are the other two in prison as well?"

As the years went on, Bishop was drawn to jobs where he could help kids. He worked at a school for children with learning difficulties and later at a residential center for children with severe behavioral issues. But his sense of shame about what he had said in court when he was fourteen dampened his professional ambitions. He knew that if he rose too high in any organization he would feel like a hypocrite, tortured by the question "Why are you leading this life when you sent three innocent young kids to prison?" "It's a contradiction within myself," he said, "so I chose to live in the shadows."

By the time Bishop was in his early thirties, he had married and divorced, and he had two children. He lived in East Baltimore and returned often to his old neighborhood, seeing friends and attending block parties, but these visits could be stressful. "I had to live with not knowing who knew about me," he said. "You don't testify against people and still walk the streets." If the three men he had testified against were ever released, he thought, he might leave the city, in case they came looking for him.

Meanwhile, in the time since DeWitt Duckett's death, Michael Willis's rap sheet had grown. He went to

prison for his role in a shoot-out in which a grandmother and a baby were injured. Then, in 2002, Willis was shot and killed on the street. Bishop was now free of the fear he had lived with for nearly two decades—that Willis might try to harm or kill him in order to keep him quiet—but the guilt that hung over him remained.

Sometimes he thought about trying to find a way to undo his trial testimony. Maybe he should call the police's internal-affairs unit and tell someone what happened, he would say to himself. But these thoughts were always fleeting. He doubted anyone would believe him, and he also had no faith in law enforcement's ability to investigate itself. Any effort to tell the truth about the case, he worried, might end with his own imprisonment.

Just after their arrest, Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart had made a pact that they would stay committed to one another—and to the truth—no matter what happened. In 1995, Watkins and Stewart started appearing before a parole board, to argue that they were deserving of release. Chestnut began this process in 2001. But to receive parole incarcerated people are expected to show remorse for their crimes, and all three

men continued to insist that they were innocent. Admitting to a murder they had not committed did not seem like an option. "When you come from a family such as ours, you can't live on that," Watkins explained.

For years, Chestnut had been trying—and failing—to get all the police reports in the men's case. At the time of the trial, their attorneys had fought to procure the reports, but the prosecutor balked at handing some of them over. With the judge's consent, the prosecutor had held on to police investigatory reports until the final days of the trial, when, in a sealed envelope, they were placed in the court file. After the trial, those reports were kept by the office of the Maryland attorney general, which handled appeals for the state's attorney. Finally, in 2018, a public-information request Chestnut sent to that office produced results: he obtained the investigatory reports that the police had put together in the days after Duckett's murder.

One of the reports, co-written by Detective Kincaid, listed various leads that the police had received. As Chestnut scanned the report, one name jumped out at him: Michael Willis. A young woman had told the police she'd



"It's a survey. They want to know why we still have a landline."

heard that Willis had been at the school when the police responded to the shooting and that Willis “had a gun and threw the gun down and ran away with some other boys.” Her brother had told the police he’d heard that, hours after the murder, Willis “took the Georgetown jacket and wore the jacket to the skating rink at Shake and Bake.”

When Chestnut read the report, he was astonished. “I said, ‘Oh, my God.’ That was my freedom right there—I knew,” he recalled. In 2019, he sent a five-page letter to Marilyn J. Mosby, the state’s attorney in Baltimore. “Dear Ms. Marilyn Mosby, I’ve been trying to get help for a very long time in my case,” he wrote. He mentioned Watkins and Stewart and said, “We are innocent of our crime.”

Soon after being sworn in, four years earlier, Mosby had revamped her office’s Conviction Integrity Unit, which investigates possible wrongful convictions. She had appointed a veteran prosecutor named Lauren R. Lipscomb to lead the unit, and in the spring of 2019 Chestnut’s letter landed on Lipscomb’s desk. Every week brought more mail from people in prison who insisted that they were innocent. The unit had a small staff, and Lipscomb had to be selective about which cases she reinvestigated, but she did a quick review of Chestnut’s case and learned that he had been insisting on his innocence for the entirety of his imprisonment; in her experience, that was extremely unusual.

She tracked down the transcript from his trial and started reading. At first, she thought that the case against Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart seemed strong: four students had testified that they had witnessed the defendants committing the crime. Lipscomb was inclined to set the case aside, but a few things about the transcript struck her as odd. When the student witnesses had been cross-examined, they couldn’t “testify to anything besides ‘That person did it,’” Lipscomb said. “That really bothered me.”

She made a note that the case “warrants a closer look,” and then, in June of 2019, another envelope arrived from Chestnut. This time, he had enclosed the police’s investigatory reports. Brian Ellis, the investigator for the Conviction Integrity Unit, was in Lipscomb’s

office when she opened the envelope and pulled out the reports, including the one cataloguing leads that the police had received soon after the murder. She started reading, passing each page to Ellis as she finished it. “Are you seeing this?” she asked.

That summer, Bishop received a brief letter from the state’s attorney’s office, citing *State v. Alfred Chestnut*, et al. “We need to speak with you about the case at a time and place convenient for you,” the letter read. Bishop was now fifty years old, but the letter frightened him, and at first he did not respond. “I was shaky, anxious, nervous,” he recalled. “I felt like it was a trap.” He worried that he might be sent to prison for lying in court in 1984, or for some fabricated crime connected to the murder.

After mulling the letter over for several days, however, he decided to respond. “I’m tired of living this lie, that those three guys did it,” he explained later. “If I have to tell the truth and it sends me to prison, I’ll go to prison.”

On August 8, 2019, he walked into Lipscomb’s office to meet with her and Ellis. They could tell that he was nervous. He kept his gaze down, exhaled loudly, paused between words. But he spoke clearly about the day his friend had been killed, how he had been threatened with arrest if he did not cooperate with law enforcement, how he had lied at the trial. “There was one shooter, and it was Michael Willis,” he said.

Lipscomb asked Bishop to walk through the crime scene with her and Ellis, and five days later he met them at his old junior high school. He had not been back since 1984, but he remembered where he and Duckett had attended their last class together, the route that they had taken to the cafeteria, and the spot where the shooter had confronted them. The visit felt like an “out-of-body experience,” Bishop said later. “I’m looking at myself as a fifty-year-old man, and then I’m hearing my voice saying ‘Oh, this is what happened’ as a fourteen-year-old kid.”

Lipscomb and Ellis knew it was unlikely that, thirty-six years after the crime, the three other students who had testified for the prosecution would all be alive and willing to be interviewed. But

it turned out that they were. All three shared what they remembered from the day of the murder, and their memories did not match what they had said at the trial. The female student who had first identified the defendants admitted that she had not even seen the shooting. She had been the youngest of the students who testified for the prosecution; before the trial, she recalled, she had attended so many meetings that she did not know “who was who.” Lipscomb concluded that all the students who had testified for the prosecution had been “coerced and coached.”

Lipscomb set herself a deadline: she would do everything she could to get Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart freed before Thanksgiving. For four weeks, she spent nearly every waking hour working on a report for Mosby about the case, rereading witness interviews and police documents and hundreds of pages of trial testimony. In her report, she quoted someone who had known the victim and the three men who went to prison, who said, “Everyone knows Michael Willis shot DeWitt.”

On November 22, 2019, Mosby took a trip with Lipscomb and Ellis to three prisons, to visit the men incarcerated for Duckett’s murder. None of them were aware that Mosby was coming. Ransom Watkins, who was at Patuxent Institution, a maximum-security prison in Jessup, was working in the shop that day. Guards hurried him into a room near the prison’s entrance, and through a window he could see a large group of officers staring at him. “Next thing I know, I see Marilyn Mosby come through the door,” he said. “She’s, like, ‘Do you know why I’m here?’ I’m, like, ‘No, not really, but I’m hoping it’s some good news.’ She’s, like, ‘We’ve heard your cries. You’ve been crying for thirty-six years, and we’re here to answer them. You’re going home.’”

Three days later, the men were taken to a courthouse in downtown Baltimore. Chestnut and Stewart had been in the same prison the year before, but Chestnut and Watkins hadn’t seen each other in nearly twenty-five years. Chestnut recalled, “When they first saw me, both of them were, like, ‘Man, you did it!’”

In the courtroom, a judge apologized to the men, then set them free. “You

could hear the sighs of relief,” Stewart said. “My mother was crying, my sister was crying.” Chestnut’s mother was also there. Watkins, however, was missing his closest relatives. “It was kind of bitter-sweet for me,” he said. “I had lost my mother, father, sister, brother, and everybody.” Outside the courthouse, a small crowd gathered to celebrate their release.

In early 2020, I met with Lipscomb in her office to learn more about this case. Three months had passed since she had finished her reinvestigation, and she was still livid. Speaking about the prosecutorial misconduct that she had uncovered, she said, “This is absolutely the worst that I have seen.” Why did the prosecutor refuse to give the police investigatory reports to the defense lawyers and then bury them in the court file? “I haven’t spoken to anyone yet who can explain why that occurred,” she said. (She couldn’t ask the prosecutor; he had died in 2016.) Among her other findings was a prison record from years earlier in which, she wrote in her report, Watkins said that the “arresting detective” in his case, Kincaid, had told him, “You have two things against you, you’re black and I have a badge.”

The way the police had treated the teen-age witnesses in this case had alarmed Lipscomb, too. Each of the three boys had been brought to the homicide office without a parent, and, at one point, the mother of one of them had come to Police Headquarters searching for him. “He could hear her from the interrogation room raising hell: ‘Let him out!’” Lipscomb said. “I just can’t imagine a scenario where these officers would have arrived at a high socioeconomic group in the suburbs and taken three teen-agers without notifying their parents.”

In wrongful-conviction cases, there are often secondary victims: individuals who, having helped incarcerate an innocent person, must confront their own culpability once that person is freed. They can include the jurors who unintentionally convicted the wrong person, and the judges who sentenced those people to prison. Bishop’s situation was slightly different, because he’d known that the defendants were not guilty when he testified against them. But “he was a teen-ager at the time and a direct product of what was happening to him by the police, by the prosecutor,” Lipscomb



“To think—this meeting, which turned into the perfect day, filled with spontaneous adventures that will become priceless memories, could have been an e-mail.”

said. “He set out to do the right thing.”

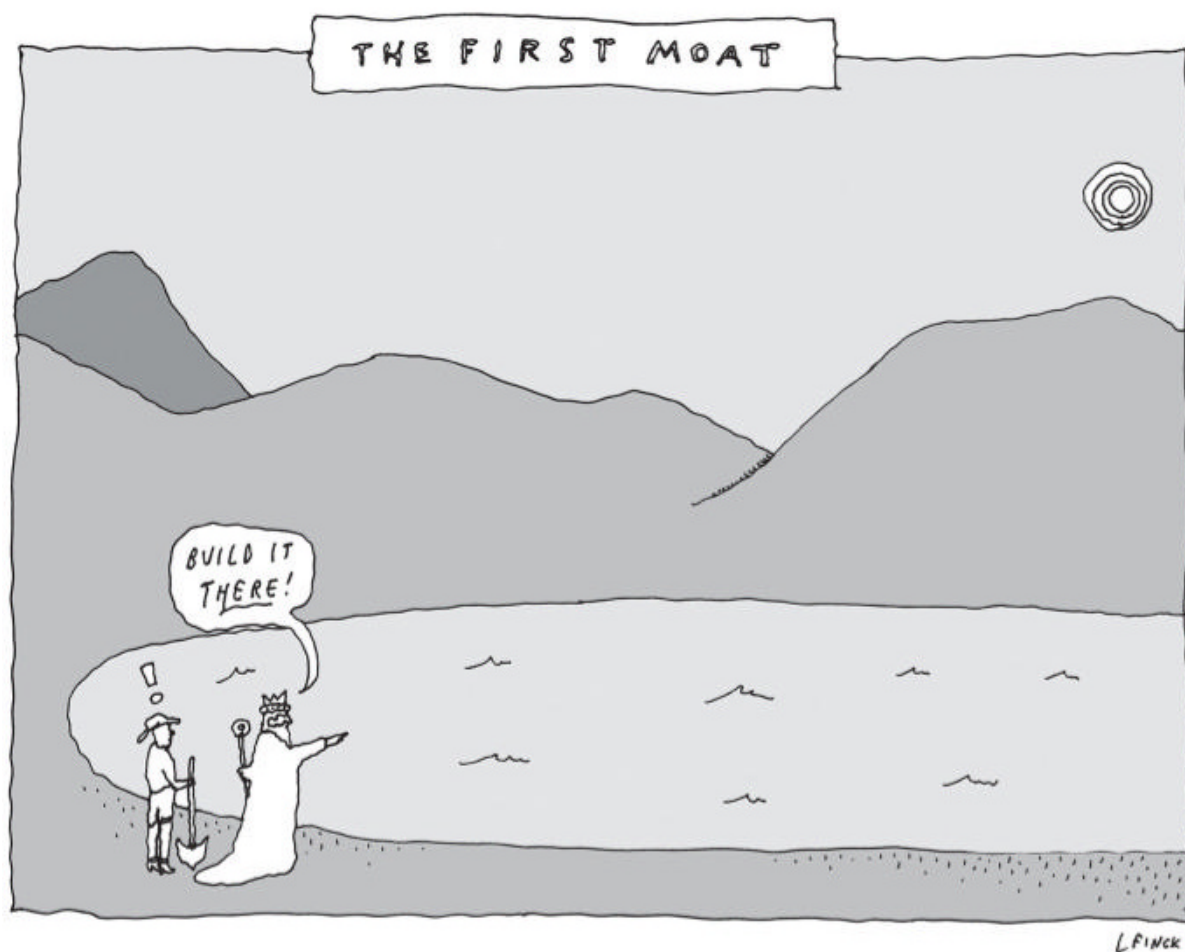
In Lipscomb’s report, she hid the identities of the students who had testified at trial. Bishop became Student No. 2, and it was evident that he had played a critical role in getting the convictions overturned. He had never spoken to the media about the case, and when I asked Lipscomb if she thought he might be willing to be interviewed she seemed doubtful. But she agreed to pass on a letter, and, as it happened, Bishop had more he wanted to say. He e-mailed me in May of 2020, and when I called him he spoke for more than three hours. (My efforts to speak to the other students were unsuccessful.)

In that call, Bishop described Duckett as “one of the nicest guys ever,” the sort of teen-ager who would “hold the door for the teacher.” He added, “I always thought about what he would have been.” Their school had provided counselling after Duckett’s murder, he re-

called, but “to me that little counselling session didn’t even exist because that’s how numb I was. All the grief has been happening over the past thirty-six years.”

He continued, “There’s so many variables . . . feeling shame and guilt, nightmares, flashbacks, all that stuff. And I’m not trying to paint a picture of ‘Oh, feel sorry for me.’ No, I’m fine. I’ve been fine. Been living a good life, I guess.” He did not sound convincing. Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart had been free for six months, but it was apparent that he was still tormented by his role in sending them to prison. “Those feelings and that history—it will never go away,” he told me. “It’s been a lifelong curse.”

Today, Bishop lives with his second wife in a house in East Baltimore. He has a job at a psychiatric facility, where he teaches coping skills to young patients dealing with depression, extreme anger, auditory hallucinations,



and histories of self-harm. They call him Mr. Ron. “I love working with challenging kids,” he said.

Despite having worked in the mental-health field for many years, Bishop has never sought therapy for himself. In the past year and a half, I interviewed him many times, and he seemed to appreciate the chance to unburden himself of secrets that he had held close for decades. “You’re the first one I’ve ever really gotten into detail with about this case,” he told me during our first call. “I’m not trying to get attention from all this—this is more healing to me.”

This past June, I went to Baltimore to meet Bishop. We spent the day driving around the city, starting at his old junior high school. Students were on summer break, and the corridors were quiet. Bishop led me to the scene of the crime, on the second floor. Visiting the hallway did not make him overly emotional—“I’m just numb,” he said—but his ability to remember specific details from 1983 was uncanny. He pointed to the area where the gunman had approached him and Duckett, near locker C-2335.

Bishop then took me to the cafeteria. He stood in the center of the cavernous room for a while, remembering everything that had happened the day Duckett was shot. “Just to see him run

in the cafeteria holding his neck—we thought he’d be O.K.,” Bishop said. But after the bullet had entered Duckett’s neck it travelled downward and punctured his lung. Before we left the school, Bishop pulled out his cell phone and took a photo near the entrance. “This might be my last time in this place,” he said.

In an earlier conversation, he had told me, “I’m connected to everyone in this case in a weird way.” I hadn’t fully grasped what he meant until we drove around the surrounding neighborhoods. He pointed out a grassy lot near the school where, he said, he had played with Andrew Stewart when they were children. “There was a tire tied to a tree branch, and we could swing on it,” he said. “And that’s where I met Andrew.” Bishop’s profound guilt about his testimony seemed to come at least in part from a sense that he had betrayed his community. “These are the same Black men who look just like me, from the same neighborhood, from the same schools, from the same caring parents—that I sent to prison,” he said.

The neighborhood around the school had deteriorated significantly since he lived there; the streets were still lined with three-story row houses, but many of them were abandoned and boarded up. We drove by an older man Bishop

recognized, who had recently left prison. “Good to see him out,” he said. The house where Bishop had lived when he was in high school had been demolished, but the Catholic church where Duckett’s funeral had been held was still standing and had a “Black Lives Matter” banner on its front.

Eighteen months had elapsed since Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart were freed. They had become known as the Harlem Park Three, and Bishop said that he still thought about them every day. He had seen in the media that, in March of 2020, Maryland had awarded each of them almost three million dollars in compensation. Then, in August of 2020, the three men had filed a federal lawsuit against the Baltimore Police Department and three individuals: Detective Kincaid, who is now retired, another former detective, and a former sergeant.

Seven attorneys are representing Chestnut, Watkins, and Stewart. In their complaint, the lawyers contend that the men “were not wrongfully convicted by accident” but “as a result of misconduct at the hands of detectives acting in accordance with the unconstitutional policies, practices and customs of the Baltimore Police Department.” The men “each spent more than 36 years—over two-thirds of their lives—caged in Maryland prisons,” the lawyers write. “At 108 combined years, the Harlem Park Three collectively served more years stemming from a wrongful conviction than any other case in American history.”

Lawyers representing the former detectives and the former sergeant declined to answer questions for this story. In court papers, they write that their clients “deny that they committed any wrongful conduct.” Attorneys for the Baltimore Police Department have similarly written that the department “generally denies any allegation of wrongdoing and asserts further that it has not violated any of the Plaintiffs’ constitutional rights.”

If the lawsuit goes to trial, Bishop will likely find himself back on the witness stand. He has met with the attorneys for the exonerated men, and he has agreed to testify on their behalf. One lawyer mentioned the possibility of Bishop’s meeting with Chestnut, Wat-

kins, and Stewart one day, after their lawsuit is resolved. Bishop doubted that this would ever happen, but he told me, “I would love to apologize to them.” If he did get that chance—and “if they really forgive,” he said—“then my mission is complete in life.”

At the end of the summer, I met with Chestnut and Watkins in a conference room at Brown, Goldstein & Levy, the main law firm representing them, in downtown Baltimore. Stewart, who now lives in South Carolina, appeared via Zoom on a large screen. The men are all in their mid-fifties, each with a short beard. They were dressed casually, in Nike clothes and sneakers, and Chestnut had on the same piece of jewelry he wears every day: a gold chain with a diamond pendant of the Superman shield. “That’s how I feel,” he said. “I’m a Superman survivor.”

The men’s presence did feel like something of a miracle: all three had survived thirty-six years of incarceration, had managed to win their freedom, and were building lives for themselves on the outside. Watkins recently got married and bought a house. Stewart, too, owned a home, and was living with his girlfriend. All three men had found jobs after they were released, though Watkins was the only one who still had his; he worked digging up oil tanks in suburban back yards.

Despite their comfortable financial status, the pain that they had endured was hard to miss. “We’re free physically, but mentally we’re not free,” Watkins said. “I don’t care how much you see me and I’m smiling and I’m driving and I’m working. Do you know the dark nights I have alone by myself? I’m struggling.” Watkins had bought a truck, and he said that when he drives it he constantly looks in the rearview mirror to make sure no one is following him. He is so used to having decisions made for him that he “can’t even go pick out a pair of sneakers without getting somebody’s opinion about what I should get,” he said. “I’m still institutionalized in my mind.” When he takes a shower, he wears shower shoes and washes his boxers under the nozzle—prison habits that he’s held on to. All three men often wake up at 3:30 or 4:30 A.M., their bodies still on the prison clock.

Before meeting with them, I had e-mailed Bishop to ask if he had a message he wanted me to relay. I thought he might send a sentence or two; instead, he e-mailed five paragraphs. I asked the men if they wanted to hear his words. They said that they did, and I read them aloud.

“I’m sorry for all the pain I’ve caused them and their families,” Bishop wrote. “It was torture to sit in the court room, look in their faces and lie on the stand. What saddens me the most is we were all students at Harlem Park Elementary school and that was my connection to them. . . . Alfred, I remember you and your brother Ivan. Ransom . . . I remember you and your brother Chris and Andrew, I remember you and your sisters cause you all look identical. Andrew, you even pushed me on the tire swing that used to be on the playground behind Carey Street. You even challenged me to a race and beat me on Harlem Park Elementary’s track.” He went on, “Knowing who you guys were made it so difficult to be on the witness stand. Especially knowing you all were innocent.”

Ever since the trial ended, Bishop had been replaying the court proceedings in his mind. “During my grand jury testimony I stated that it was only one suspect and during trial I was going to stick to my original story,” he wrote. But “everything went wrong.” He didn’t describe in detail being coerced by law enforcement or mention seeing Michael Willis in court—he didn’t have to. The men knew enough by now to fill in the rest. “One day I hope to sit down with you guys, apologize in person,” he wrote.

Listening to Bishop’s words, Watkins had his elbows propped on the table, with his hands clasped and his head leaning against them. Now he looked up, with tears in his eyes. “For me, that’s everything,” he said. “The whole time I was locked up, I used to think about why they did what they did. I used to just think about it constantly.” He paused. “Just knowing that he gets it—that means everything to me,” he said. “Sometimes in life, that’s all you want. You just want people to

recognize that ‘Man, I messed up, and for that I apologize.’”

“Absolutely true,” Stewart said. For years, he had believed that Bishop and the other students who had testified against them were “the worst people.” But now he said, “He just in that letter showed me that sorrow, that remorse, that hurt that he carried around for thirty-six years.” He added, “If you talk to him, tell him I appreciate that and I accept his apology.”

“Me, too,” Chestnut said.

Our conversation turned to other topics, but before long it returned to Bishop’s message. “I *really* needed that,” Watkins said. “That really helped me out, to hear somebody say, ‘You know what? I was wrong.’ And just how crazy it is, because you have all these people involved in our case, and it takes a person like Ron Bishop to come forward. What happened to all the other people? Ain’t none of them said they were sorry.”

Chestnut said, “That just showed me he hadn’t forgotten. He was dealing with that stuff for years.”

“He was struggling. He had to get it off his chest,” Watkins said. “I would love to meet him one day. I really would.”

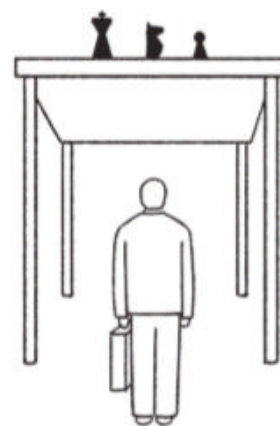
“I would like to shake his hand and give him a hug,” Chestnut said.

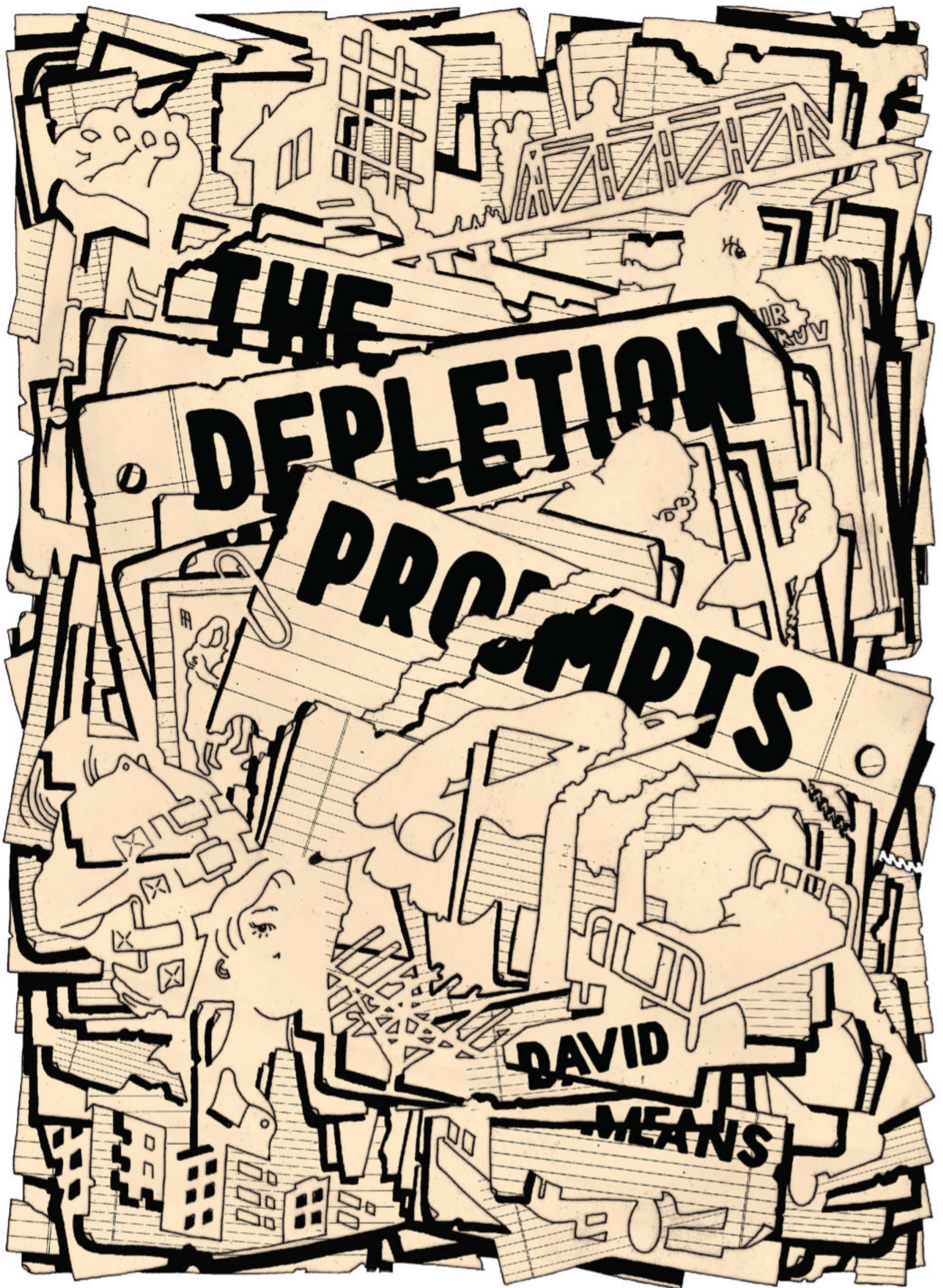
Having grown up in the same community as Bishop, the three men could appreciate the full significance of his words. “Him saying what he’s saying—

do you know what that makes him look like?” Watkins said. “You just can’t say things like this in our neighborhoods and think that your life is going to be all right.”

Chestnut added, “They’ll be judging him, like, ‘Man, you put those dudes in prison. You lied on them—that makes you a rat.’”

“That’s a hell of a life,” Watkins said. “See, in our neighborhoods, you’re supposed to die with this type of stuff. You’re not ever supposed to reveal it.” To Bishop, he said, “Listen, I commend you totally. ‘Cause I know what this took to do this.” He added, “People will look at him and think this was the easiest thing. No. This was probably the hardest thing in his life to do.” ♦





Write about that night, long ago, when you lay in bed listening to the sound of wind buzzing through the old television aerial mounted on the porch outside your bedroom—remember the door out to the tin roof, the buckle and ting against your toes—a deeply disturbing sound, like a stuck harmonica reed, one that, combined with the sound of crying drifting up from downstairs through the heater duct, seemed indicative of more troubling harmonics.

Write about the way that, one summer afternoon, your older sister, Meg, disappeared, heading out into the *beyond*, as you saw it, until finally she called one night in September to explain that she was fine, safe in California, not far from a redwood forest, staying with a guy named Billy, which caused your father, who was cradling the heavy black phone, the receiver against his lips, to grimace tightly—his face bewhiskered, thick with stubble—before he began weeping softly, as he turned and, suddenly, with a grand sweep of his arms, held the phone up and away from him so that the curls of the spiral cord spread out and the mute intonation of the dial tone was audible: remembered years later.

Write about the summer—the dead heart of it—up in northern Michigan, when you wandered alone for days on end, feeling the acute isolation but also relishing the joy of being away from home, far away, although even there, sitting on the shore of the lake, listening to the waves plunge against the stone pier, you were aware that trouble was brewing downstate, where your sister had been caught with an older man. Write about the whispers you heard, your father leaning against the sideboard in the dining room, lifting a glass to his lips, your mother's voice full of anxiety. Use just the whispers, fragments of tense language, to build the fuzzy narrative that you carried, that you conjured as you wandered alone: two shadow figures naked in a bed lit by quartz lamps.

Write about Jerry Gray, the neighborhood bully, with his shaggy bangs

hanging over his face and the way he swung his head to move his hair and reveal his eyes, riveted and angry, bloodshot, full of a desire for revenge, as he pinned you against the fence—that one on the way to school—and dug a single knuckle into your chest and warned you that he was going to kill you. Explore the reasoning behind his threat: something about your older sister, something about something she had done to him, or to other boys, or to her reputation. Do your best to be as specific as possible while also bending around the truth so as to protect the living.

Write about the time a search party was sent out on a winter night to find her, a whole posse of neighborhood men, including Dr. Frank, the allergist who used to give you shots, and how, having caught wind of the situation, they gathered in the snow outside the front door like carollers, the lights from the doorway casting their placid, eager faces into masks, and how they went out with your father and searched the frozen lake on snowmobiles, looking for what they thought, or feared at least, would be a body, and then came back to sit at the kitchen table and discuss the matter—your mother's soft cries and their talk travelled up the furnace duct into your room as you leaned over it and listened. Get those words down, the tension and strange eroticism—find a way to name it—of their desire to help out, and the way, hours later, your sister came home, smiling and manic, and laughed at your father's concern.

Write about the strange dynamic between the past and the present as the dynamic tries to put itself into words. Write about the failure of language to reclaim pain, and how you tried, again and again, to find a way into the topic like Nabokov did in his story "Signs and Symbols," about an older couple trying to navigate around their mentally ill son. Steal his story—as others have stolen it—and reframe it and rebuild using his structure. Go fearlessly and take as

much as you want and ease the burden of dreaming up your own structure.

Write about the baby born in a closet somewhere in Michigan, back in the nineteen-seventies, and a teen-age kid too afraid to let anyone know that she was pregnant, hiding it beneath blouses and ponchos, which wasn't hard because those loose tops were the fashion, along with bell-bottoms, and it was perfectly fine to float around as if oblivious, and then she had the baby in the closet. That's the center of the story, that phrase, that idea, huddled in the dark—terrified—hunched over. Take that image and connect it to the one you saw in a Lamaze class on the Upper West Side: everyone on beanbag chairs, watching a video about childbirth, and you saw a woman—in what country?—in a special chair, in a squat position, the baby emerging with what seemed to be ease, the head ballooning out and then the slippery emergence of new life. Connect that image with your imagined sister, too, and then merge them together so that it was her, the sister (not your sister but the one in the story, although there will be that blurry line formed between what you write and what readers project onto the story, of course), so that there is confusion in the narrator's mind, a young boy with a wayward sister. Use that word, "wayward," to describe the way the young boy thinks about his sister, in his confusion, as he hears—or perhaps imagines—her cries in the afternoon, behind the closet door, and opens it to the sight of her there, her face sweaty and in pain, her hands smeared with blood.

Write about so-called toxic masculinity but try to find stories that triangulate with your sister's story somehow, which shouldn't be too hard because that was the way it worked: no matter what was going on, you saw boys in relation to your sister. Write about how, years later, walking in the East Village with a male friend, someone you were just getting to know, you were horrified when he stopped walking and stood there ogling a woman on the other side

of the street, shaking his head. Write about the destabilized sense you had as you continued walking with him, and in the same story jump back to the past and to the experience of being a small boy watching a young man coming to take your sister out, observing him as he pulls up in his car, an old Eldorado, not leaving his place behind the wheel, his hair long, his eyes glassy, giving you a curt little nod and blowing smoke from his cigarette into the air, motioning for your sister to come around to the passenger door. Write about the way she skipped lightly in her halter top. How you looked away and then back, feeling shame and anger.

•

Write about a mother—your mother!—who is so grief-stricken, so in denial, that she sneaks off to the state mental hospital at night to pay your sister a visit. Make it a warm summer night with insects singing in the bushes, and describe how she goes to the loading dock in the starlight, describe the thick black rubber bumpers where the trucks pull up behind the ward. As she stands, as she looks beyond the hospital and down the hill, a train horn will enter this scene, and she'll think of trips to Chicago she took with her family as a girl in the nineteen-forties, and how everything back then was related to the war, and how the trains, burning soft coal, blew huge plumes of horrific smoke from their stacks—and then the security guard will appear, catching hold of her shoulder. Describe her confusion and terror as the guard makes the assumption, naturally, considering her state, the way she's shaking, that she's a patient escaped from lockdown for a cigarette, and how before she knows it she's inside the ward in a Velcro restraining jacket. Describe her revolt. The madness of a mother—your mother—losing her shit and acting insane and then becoming insane. The needle plunging into the thick flesh of her arm. Draw from Chekhov's story "Ward No. 6," so that the mother ends up as a patient in the same ward as the daughter.

•

Write two versions: happy ending, sad ending. In the happy version she

SAVING

My mother saves empty
Containers. Boxes, glass spice
Jars, bottles, plastic bags.
Something *could* be
Put in it, one day,
One day it *could* be useful.
& sometimes she's right.
The word *hoard* means
Hidden treasure.
My mother the dragon
With her empty jars
& cardboard boxes.

Emma Morano, who lived to 117,
Said her secret to life
Was three raw eggs a day
& no husband.
A man who lived to 111
Said his secret was rubbing
Olive oil each day on his feet.
Our 97-year-old neighbor
Saves black microwave trays.
She keeps high stacks of them
In her house in the midst of
Her enormous ranch.
Everything in her refrigerator
Is covered in green.

talks her way out of the restraints and explains to a staff person—a younger woman who nods eagerly as she listens—that she is Meg's mother. That she simply wants to see her daughter. There are metal bars on the window and moonlight segments the bars into shadow and she thinks of old noir movies. In the happy version the guard takes her to see her daughter, leaving the lights out, and she goes to the cot where her daughter sleeps and gently wakes her and they embrace and hold each other. Out near the loading dock, the father pulls up in his car and honks the horn to reclaim his wife. They drive home and sit in the breakfast nook drinking coffee and smoking and talking deep into the night. Near dawn, the phone rings and it's the young female guard, giving an update, saying, Meg is going to get better. She was helped by your appearance last night, she'll say. She'll use that word, "appearance," and it'll sound

off-key, somehow, but you'll leave it in the story anyway.

•

Write the sad version, in which the mother is restrained and evaluated by the staff. A doctor arrives—mild-mannered, with a crew cut—and writes on a clipboard. At first, it's believed that the mother is a delusional patient with schizoid personality disorder who has given herself a false identity, so a bed check is conducted to see who might be missing. Someone is missing, because a patient slipped away earlier in the night, snaking out into the warm darkness stark naked, working her way through the gap in the fence behind the main ward, down through the weeds and the grass to the creek bed at the bottom of the hill. She sits in the water and lets it wash over her as she smokes. Eventually, things are sorted out—but it's dawn—and the mother, still restrained, is evaluated by the morning staff and

In Sicily, first they drained their
 Dead of fluids, then stuffed
 Them with bay leaves
 To kill the stench & to keep
 The shape. The bodies were
 Dried, washed in vinegar,
 Then the mummies were dressed
 Up in their finest clothes & either
 Hung on the wall or laid on shelves.
 Thousands of them are under the city.
 The youngest mummy is two years
 Old. She died of the Spanish flu.
 Her father couldn't part with her
 So he had her mummified.
 You can still see her intact blue eyes
 Which appear to open & close
 Throughout the day because
 Rosalia's eyes have never
 Been completely closed.
Sleep & his half brother Death.

In Japan, there is a white phone
 Booth overlooking the sea &
 Inside is an old black rotary phone
 Not hooked up to anything.
 People go there & call their dead.
 There is always a line to get in.

—Sylvie Baumgartel

the morning doctor, who finally believes that she is, indeed, the mother of Meg Allen, and yet concludes that she, too, is in need of care. When the husband—your father!—arrives, there is conversation with the doctors. String this out for several pages and carefully build the narrative so that we're moving into the father's mind, watching out the window as patients walk the grounds, the green light filtering through the trees outside and falling across the doctor's face, which, when the father turns to look, is kind and thoughtful. Let the father suddenly come to the realization that his wife is ill, too, and also show the reader that this is a dubious claim, and that the story is locked into a time when men conspire against women in this way. Attempt to maintain a subtle balance, so that the reader has to work to tweeze this out; end the scene with the father back in his car, casually lighting a cigar, cracking the windows, listening to the radio as he drives, and

enter his future, which will be reflected—in his own eyes, at least—in the beauty of the day, the deep-blue cast of the summer sky, and the silence of the neighborhood in the heat.

Write at least six versions of the story, using different points of view, until you realize that the one with the sad ending is impossible to finish. Write another version in which the wife is taken home by the husband, curled weeping against the car door.

Write into the steel of your rage, a rage that seems lost to you now as you sit alone in a house during a pandemic, confined to the space not only by your desire to create but also by a desire to stay safe. Write about the city, twenty miles down the river, locked down, the streets silent—the streets of the East Village ghostly quiet—until you feel the rage recen-

ter you, and then move from that to find images of your home town again, of the Michigan winters, snow piling thick on cars, the streets quiet, and then shift the story back to the summer, back to the family with the daughter in the hospital. Keep reclaiming the rage you felt. Remember the time you visited your sister in the public-housing complex on the edge of town—just look at the building, driftwood gray, the stairway to her apartment rickety, the handrail splintery, and recall the extremely hot day you drove there, under the railroad tracks and through the dirty viaduct into the weedy back side of town, sensing that the people there were hidden from view, part of the great national project of denial—you thought that, and you'll use that phrase—so that when you got to her apartment building you sat and considered it knowingly, removing yourself from the scene to capture it in your imagination, to store it away for just this kind of moment. Write into that rage as you try again to capture the mother, short and overweight, her despair, speaking to the hospital attendant in a voice that is tight and childish.

Write a story about a bunch of kids on the train tracks down the hill from your house in Michigan, fucking around in the rail yard, throwing rocks at the sides of boxcars, fiddling with switch locks; three young boys, all angry, and one has a sister like your own, and somehow, no matter what kind of trouble he gets into, he triangulates that trouble with her, sees his own actions and the actions of his friends in relation to her; walking the little trestle bridge over the sludge river, the goopy paper pulp thick with a crust, thinking of his sister somehow in relation to the boy named Jerry, who is bigger, a bully at heart, ahead of him and the other kid, turning around quickly and threatening to push someone in if they dare approach, leaving them stranded on the trestle—which isn't that long, really—not daring to move forward or to retreat. His eyes are gray, which seems too fantastic considering his last name,

Gray, but you leave it in, and his mouth is set firm the way it gets just before he becomes violent, and right then on the trestle the boy's aware—or you have a vision, in the story—of the future, of a boy like Jerry and his own sister, so instead of backing off he plunges ahead, making a loud hooting sound, and rushes Jerry with all his might until the bully tumbles to the side and falls, his feet touching the toxic paper-pulp waste, looking up with rage-filled eyes, eyes that could tear you apart. Write into this moment and find the ending, which will include the long trudge back up the hill and entering into a kitchen—warm, with the window steamed, the smell of tuna casserole—as if entering another world.

Write by drawing from an obscure story by Nelson Algren, one of his Texas stories about poor folks stealing coal to survive, waiting by the tracks for a train to roll past, scampering up onto the cars and tossing pieces of coal down—or maybe they collect pieces that have dislodged and fallen off the train—and, as they scurry around in their madness for warmth, a little girl is hit by the train, and in the end all that is left in the dirty ballast along the tracks is her Kewpie doll, which becomes the title of the story. Somehow transform this into a story about a sister who isn't the little girl but a young woman who's down in the rail yard, high, with her other fuckup friends, maybe even Jerry—somewhat older—messing around but also trying to save themselves from another kind of coldness, and above them is the Michigan twilight you've used before (go ahead and use the word “eggplant” again), and then it happens and she slips and it is over and she looks like a rag doll; transfer all your fears as a teenager into that moment in the story, the lost, forlorn eyes, empty of life, staring up into that sky and into your own mind as you write. The fuckup kids fearfully running away, lifting their legs high as they sprint, running up the hill—the road is still a brick road for some reason—and stopping at the top to huddle, to

conspire a story to tell their folks, to cover up what really happened.

Write a story in a strictly confessional tone, allowing the narrator to come out and say, Once upon a time, there was a young man who had a mentally ill sister, and then spell it out in clinical terms and without the fear that writing the story will somehow burn out your other creative inspirations. Use that as part of the story, writing about creativity and inspiration and how you fear a depletion of energies. If it helps, call the story “The Depletion.” The confessional tone will—if it works—shroud the fundamental truth of the story itself: that inside any confession there is always a tonal quivering of distaste and distrust, perhaps inside the reader's mind, too. Lean into that and go ahead and describe what it was like, the confusion and loneliness of watching your sister as she howled at night, the windows dark.

Write a rant inside the story against the concept of prompts as a tool, as a way to write, and in doing so explain that the prompt itself is always a form of limitation, a matter of forcing the writer into a prefabricated box, into an imitation of some other voice, and express your sense, over the years, of reading stories that were obviously created, sparked, urged on via a prompt. Use as an example the idea of instructions as a prompt, explain that someone—a writer you admire—originally wrote a story (several stories, actually) that took the form of instructions, or a how-to (avoid naming her name, for the sake of propriety). And then lament the fact that when you were reading stories by other writers you couldn't help but feel her prompt lurking off-stage—a shadow, maybe even a presence brushing the curtain fabric, revealing a shoulder, or an arm—and breaking the dream apart, although you'll admit in this story that you're too sensitive and prone to grandiosity when it comes to these things, detailing an aesthetic belief system before you let the narrative peter out into a formality that is horrifically stiff, letting go of any intention at all that you

might have to tell a story, and leave it at that. Let it go. Admit that you feel out of fuel, that the spark is gone, and that you're sitting alone in a room trying to come up with a way to regain the dream, to find a story, because there is a young woman, your sister, maybe, maybe not, sitting alone on a curb during a pandemic, her face wrapped in a blue bandanna, or a scarf. The streets are empty. Nothing is moving. The stores are closed.

Write a diatribe inside the story about how a prompt is a useful tool as long as it is self-created, out of your own imagination, and explain how Eudora Welty—maybe it was her, maybe not—said that she could get an idea for a story from seeing a wisteria bush, or an old rocking chair, or the look on a child's face outside some gas station, and then go full tilt into the crazy wildness of your desire to nail down what it seemed like, that day a few years ago, going under the railroad tracks and then along the road to the old housing complex, weathered and beaten down, hidden off on the edge of town, to visit your sister. Mounting the old splintery stairway to her apartment, while below the drug dealers lurked and leaned on the cars, and you said to yourself, going up the stairs, before she opened the door, I have to use this as a prompt, this moment here, before she opens the door, to write a story about someone like this, placed in public housing, alone, struggling with her illness, and use that thought to end the story, leaving behind a frank admission—somehow—that everything you create is fuelled by such moments and is also useless, because reality has a blunt force that is too brutal to put into words: because words are too formal, too structured. Then, in an unleashing of spirit, admit that by giving up, only by giving up, can you find the stories that might convey that moment, the one you're in, and then approach the door and begin to knock, waiting for her to open up, to present her beautiful face to you. ♦

THE WRITER'S VOICE PODCAST

David Means reads “The Depletion Prompts.”

THEY DIDN'T DO IT TO
WIN AWARDS
IT JUST HAPPENED TO
WORK OUT THAT WAY

DR. DREW
WEISSMAN

DR. KATALIN
KARIKÓ



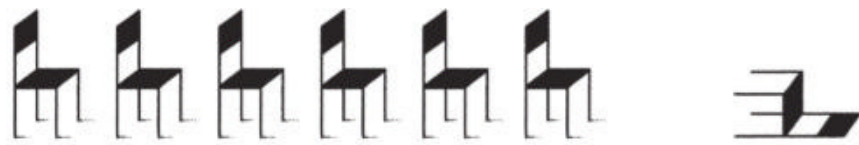
When Dr. Katalin Karikó and Dr. Drew Weissman began investigating mRNA as a potential therapeutic in the late '90s, they didn't do it to win one of medicine's most prestigious awards. Instead, they did it to benefit humankind. As it turns out, they achieved even more, developing the scientific foundation for the innovative and transformative COVID-19 vaccines and winning the 2021 Lasker-DeBakey Clinical Medical Research Award. Their work has saved countless lives and will undoubtedly save countless more. Some may call it forward thinking. We call it changing the world. **Penn Medicine. The birthplace of mRNA vaccines.**

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THE CRITICS



BOOKS

BUGS IN THE SYSTEM

Insects are the largest class of animals on the planet. What will their decline mean for the rest of us?

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

In the summer of 1942, Ed Wilson, age thirteen, decided that it was time to get serious about research. He had already determined that he wanted to be an entomologist, a choice made partly out of interest and partly out of injury. As a child, he'd been fascinated with marine life. One day, he jerked too hard on a fish he caught, and one of its needlelike spines lodged in his right eye. The lens had to be removed, and, following the surgery, to see something clearly he needed to hold it up near his face. Insects were just about the only animals that submitted to this treatment.

That summer, Wilson was living with his parents in Mobile, Alabama, in a run-down house that had been built by his great-grandfather. He resolved to survey every species of ant that lived in an overgrown lot next door. This proved to be quick work, as there were only four species. But one of them turned out to be, as Wilson put it nearly eighty years later, "the find of a lifetime—or at least of a boyhood." It was a species that Wilson had never seen before; nor, it seems, had anyone else north of Brazil.

That species is now known formally as *Solenopsis invicta* and informally as the red imported fire ant. Native to South America, the creature has, from a human perspective, many undesirable characteristics. Its sting produces first a burning sensation—hence the name—and then a smallpox-like pustule. It has a voracious appetite and will consume anything from tree bark to termites to the seeds of crops like wheat and sorghum. Red imported fire ants have been

known to kill fledgling birds, young sea turtles, and even, on occasion, baby deer. They construct rigid mounds that damage harvesting equipment. When a colony is disturbed, hundreds, even thousands of ants are dispatched, more or less instantaneously, to attack the intruder. Wilson once stuck his arm into one of these mounds and described the pain as "immediate and unbearable." As he observed to his companions, "It was as though I had poured kerosene on my hand and lit it."

Red imported fire ants were, almost certainly, introduced into the United States in cargo unloaded at the port of Mobile. When Wilson conducted his survey of the vacant lot, they had probably been in the city for several years but hadn't ventured very far. This soon changed. The ants began to spread in a classic bull's-eye pattern. In 1949, while Wilson was an undergraduate at the University of Alabama, he was hired by the state's Department of Conservation to conduct a study of *Solenopsis invicta*. Since no one knew much about the species, the teen-age enthusiast counted as an expert. Wilson found that the ants had already pushed west into Mississippi and east into Florida. He was, he later recalled, "exhilarated" by his first professional gig, which gave him the self-confidence to pursue his insect-driven dreams.

By 1953, the red imported fire ant had spread as far north as Tennessee and as far west as Texas, and the so-called Fire Ant Wars had begun. In an early skirmish, the state of Mississippi provided farmers with chlordane, an indiscriminate, organochlorine pesti-

cide long since banned. It made little difference. Next, the U.S. Department of Agriculture embarked on a campaign to spray heptachlor and dieldrin—two similar insecticides that are also now banned—over millions of acres of farmland. The campaign killed countless wild birds, along with vast numbers of fish, cows, cats, and dogs. The ants kept marching on. ("The research basis of this plan was minimal, to put it mildly," Walter R. Tschinkel, an entomologist at Florida State University, has observed.) Undaunted, the U.S.D.A. launched itself into a new battle, this time claiming that it was going to eliminate the ants entirely, using Mirex, yet another since-banned organochlorine. In the late nineteen-sixties, more than fourteen million acres were sprayed with Mirex, which is a potent endocrine disrupter. The effort appears to have had the perverse effect of helping *Solenopsis invicta* spread, by exterminating any native ants that might have stood in its way.

As the U.S.D.A. was raining down destruction, Wilson's career was taking off. He received a Ph.D. from Harvard and was offered a position on the university's biology faculty. The job was supposed to be temporary, but by the time he was twenty-nine he had been granted tenure.

Wilson thought of himself as a naturalist in the venerable tradition of Joseph Banks, the English botanist who sailed with Captain Cook in 1768. Wilson loved to explore places no entomologist had surveyed before, and once spent ten months collecting ants from New Caledonia to Sri Lanka. But he

ABOVE: LUCI GUTIÉRREZ



Insects face an array of man-made threats, including habitat loss, climate change, light pollution, and potent new pesticides.

was fated to follow a different path. Wilson became a professional biologist just as it was becoming clear that the biosphere was unravelling. Though he resisted the knowledge at first, later he would become perhaps the most important chronicler of this crisis—the nation's first great post-naturalist.

Wilson is now ninety-two and lives in a retirement community in Lexington, Massachusetts. He's the subject of a new biography, "Scientist: E. O. Wilson: A Life in Nature" (Doubleday), by the journalist Richard Rhodes. Rhodes, who's the author of more than twenty books, including "The Making of the Atomic Bomb," interviewed his subject several times before COVID hit and they had to switch to the phone. During one of Rhodes's visits, he ran into an old friend, Victor McElheny, a journalist who lives in the same retirement community and, as it happened, had written a biography of Wilson's nemesis, James Watson. "Small world," Rhodes observes.

Wilson's dispute with Watson was an academic turf battle and, at the same time, something more than that. In 1953, Watson and his collaborator Francis Crick discovered the structure of DNA—the famous double helix. Three years later, Watson joined Harvard's biology department. Though he was only twenty-eight when he arrived, he treated the two dozen other members of the department with an offhand contempt. Specimen collecting, he suggested, was for hobbyists. Henceforth, real scientists would study life by examining its molecular structure. The brilliance of Watson's discovery, combined with his sublime self-assurance, intimidated many of his older colleagues. Wilson, who'd been hired at Harvard the same year, has described Watson as "the Caligula of biology." When, owing to an offer from Stanford, Wilson received tenure ahead of Watson, the latter stomped through the halls of the Biological Laboratories declaiming, according to some sources, "Shit, shit, shit, shit!" and to others, "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!" Eventually, the differences between the traditionalists and the molecularists were judged insurmountable, and, in an intellectual version of specia-

tion, Harvard's biology department split in two.

Wilson continued to collect ants. He spent a sabbatical conducting field work on Trinidad and Tobago and in Suriname. But he was, by his own description, fiercely ambitious, and he yearned to make a bigger contribution to science—a contribution more like Watson's. One of the obstacles, he decided, was math; he had never even taken an upper-level course in the subject. At the age of thirty-two, he enrolled in calculus and sat awkwardly in the lecture room with some of the same undergraduates he was teaching.

Around this time, Wilson began collaborating with a Princeton professor named Robert MacArthur, who possessed all the mathematical skills he lacked. In 1967, the two published "The Theory of Island Biogeography." The book was an effort to explain how island ecosystems come into being, a puzzle that had fascinated both Charles Darwin and his rival, Alfred Russel Wallace. It combined field observations with a tangle of equations to account for why larger islands harbor more species than smaller ones, and also why distant islands host fewer species than similar-sized islands situated near a mainland. Wilson and MacArthur proposed that the keys to understanding island biogeography are the rate at which new species immigrate to an island (or evolve there) and the rate at which established species wink out. "There's nothing more romantic than biogeography," Wilson once told the author David Quammen.

Though Wilson and MacArthur boldly labelled their work on island biogeography *the* theory, it was still just a theory. Wilson, the field biologist, was eager to test it on the ground. The difficulty lay in finding the right islands; for a rigorous experiment, these would have to be empty. Wilson hit on the idea of using clumps of mangrove north of Key West. The cays were so small—about forty feet in diameter—that the only breeding animals on them were insects, spiders, and, occasionally, wood lice. Wilson persuaded the National Park Service to let him fumigate six of them. Then one of his graduate students, Daniel Simberloff, who's now a professor at the

University of Tennessee, spent a year monitoring the "defaunated" cays. It was painstaking, mud-splattered work, but, at least as far as Wilson was concerned, it paid off. Those cays closest to the shore were quickly recolonized. Species diversity rose, and then levelled off, just as Wilson and MacArthur's theory had predicted. On the sixth, more distant islet, recolonization took longer, and the eventual number of resident species was lower—more confirmation. Though some of the details of "The Theory of Island Biogeography" have since been discarded, it's still considered a classic. A paper that appeared on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary noted that it remains one of the world's "most influential texts on ecology and evolution."

As many of Wilson's colleagues soon realized, the significance of the theory extended well beyond actual islands. Through logging and mining and generalized sprawl, the world was increasingly being cut up into "islands" of habitat. The smaller and more isolated these islands, be they patches of forest or tundra or grassland, the fewer species they would ultimately contain. Wilson had moved on to new research questions, and initially didn't concern himself much with the implications of his own work. When the first surveys of deforestation in the Amazon appeared, though, he was, in his words, "tipped into active engagement." In an article in *Scientific American*, in 1989, he combined data on deforestation with the predictions of his and MacArthur's theory to estimate that as many as six thousand species a year were being consigned to oblivion. "That in turn is on the order of 10,000 times greater than the naturally occurring background extinction rate that existed prior to the appearance of human beings," he wrote.

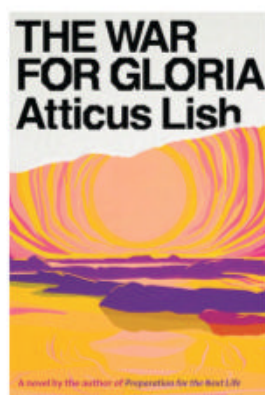
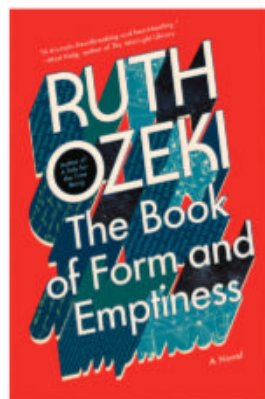
The same year that Wilson published his article in *Scientific American*, a group of insect fanciers installed what are known as malaise traps in several nature reserves in Germany. Malaise traps look like tents that have blown over on their sides, and they're designed to capture virtually anything that flies into them. The group, the Krefeld Entomological Society, was interested in

how insects were faring in different types of parks and protected areas. Every summer from then on, society members set out new traps, usually in different preserves. In 2013, they resampled some of the sites they'd originally sampled back in 1989. The contents of the traps were a fraction of what they'd been the first time around.

Over the next three summers, the group members resampled more sites. The results were similar. In 2017, with the help of some outside experts, they published a paper documenting a seventy-five-per-cent decline in "total flying insect biomass" in the areas surveyed. These areas were exactly the sort of habitat fragments that, according to Wilson's theory, were destined to lose species. Nevertheless, the findings were shocking. In 2019, a second group of researchers published a more rigorous and extensive study, and its findings were even more dire. In the course of just the previous decade, grasslands in Germany had, on average, lost a third of their arthropod species and two-thirds of their arthropod biomass. (Terrestrial arthropods include spiders and centipedes in addition to insects.) In woodlands, the number of arthropod species had dropped by more than a third, and biomass by forty per cent. "This is frightening" is how one of the paper's authors, Wolfgang Weisser, a biologist at the Technical University of Munich, put it.

In the years since, many more papers have appeared with comparable findings. Significant drops have been found in mayfly populations in the American Midwest, butterfly numbers in the Sierra Nevadas, and caterpillar diversity in northern Costa Rica. While many species appear to be doing just fine—for instance, the spotted lanternfly, an invasive species from Asia, which was first detected in Pennsylvania around 2014, and has since spread to at least ten other states, including New York—there is, as was noted in the introduction to a recent special issue of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* devoted to the state of the insect world, "ample cause for concern."

Dave Goulson, an entomologist at the University of Sussex, is one of the experts the Krefeld group contacted to help make sense of its data. Like



BRIEFLY NOTED

The Book of Form and Emptiness, by Ruth Ozeki (*Viking*). When this novel opens, a young father has been killed by a truck, and his wife and son have begun to grieve in incompatible ways. She starts hoarding things, and he hears voices: the objects are talking to him. As the house fills up, Christmas ornaments and pickle jars clamoring for the boy's attention, the pair seek help from various sages (including a Zen Buddhist priest not unlike the author), asking whether the voices are "music or madness." Hints of an answer emerge gradually, in part through "the Book," a voice that rises out of the narrative, instructing both the boy and the reader on how to speak up.

The War for Gloria, by Atticus Lish (*Knopf*). Set on the fringes of greater Boston, a "grim and nihilistic" world of construction sites, strip clubs, and cage fights, this assured novel revolves around the conflict between a teen-ager, Corey, and his neglectful, manipulative father. The source of their acrimony is Corey's mother, who is slowly dying of A.L.S. Corey quits school to earn money to support her and becomes obsessed with martial arts. The novel offers a complex exploration of masculinity, veering from the fierce, destructive aggression of Corey's encounters with his father to the tender, attentive dedication he displays toward his mother. Lish writes with unhurried precision, avoiding sentimentality yet generating enormous emotional resonance.

Read Until You Understand, by Farah Jasmine Griffin (*Norton*). The injunction of this book's title comes from a note written to the author by her father, who died when she was nine, in one of many books he gave her. Now a noted scholar of African American literature, Griffin shares, in a blend of memoir and criticism, the fruits of her lifelong journey to fulfill that aspiration. Deftly positioning contemporary writers such as Ta-Nehisi Coates and Jesmyn Ward alongside figures such as Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, and Malcolm X, Griffin traces a lineage of Black resistance to racism. She also richly evokes her childhood in Philadelphia, long a hub for Black activism, where she belonged to a "complex, challenging world that did not center whites," and to a family whose women, skilled seamstresses and gardeners, cultivated beauty.

The End of Bias, by Jessica Nordell (*Metropolitan*). Drawing on insights from cognitive science and social psychology, this study of unconscious prejudice examines how it forms, the harm it does, and ways of countering it. Nordell and a computer scientist build a workplace simulation in which even a three-per-cent bias toward men produces, over time, a leadership that is eighty-two-per-cent male. She meets police officers who make mindfulness part of their training regimens, and a preschool director who finds that abandoning gender pronouns reduces children's use of stereotypes without impairing their ability to discern difference. Although the book presents many convincing accounts of personal bias being reduced through self-reflection, it emphasizes, above all, the urgent need for systemic solutions.

Wilson, Goulson could be described as a naturalist turned post-naturalist; he decided to study insects because he found them enthralling, and now he studies why they're in trouble.

"I have watched clouds of birdwing butterflies sipping minerals from the muddy banks of a river in Borneo, and thousands of fireflies flashing their luminous bottoms in synchrony at night in the swamps of Thailand," he writes in "Silent Earth: Averting the Insect Apocalypse" (Vintage). "I have had enormous fun. But I have been haunted by the knowledge that these creatures are in decline."

Goulson bemoans the fact that many people consider insects to be pests. He wants readers to appreciate just how amazing they really are, and sets off his chapters with profiles of six-legged creatures. Males of many species of earwigs have two penises; if disturbed during mating, they snap off the one they're using and beat a quick escape. Female jewel wasps sting their prey—large cockroaches—to induce a zombie-like trance. Then they chew off the tips of the roaches' antennae, use the stumps to guide the stupefied creatures back to their burrows, and lay their eggs inside them. Aging termites of the species *Neocapritermes taracua* develop pouches around their abdomens that are filled with copper-rich proteins. If an intruder is gaining the upper hand—or leg—in a fight, the elderly termites, in effect, blow themselves up to protect the colony, a practice known as suicidal altruism. The proteins react with chemicals stored in their salivary glands to become highly toxic compounds.

Insects are, of course, also vital. They're by far the largest class of animals on Earth, with roughly a million named species and probably four times that many awaiting identification. (Robert May, an Australian scientist who helped develop the field of theoretical ecology, once noted, "To a first approximation, all species are insects.") They support most terrestrial food chains, serve as the planet's chief pollinators, and act as crucial decomposers. Goulson quotes Wilson's observation: "If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that ex-

isted 10,000 years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos."

Like insects themselves, the threats to them are numerous and diverse. First, there's habitat loss. Since Wilson's article in *Scientific American* appeared, in 1989, South America has lost at least another three hundred million acres of tropical forest, and Southeast Asia has experienced similar losses. In places like the U.S. and Britain, which were deforested generations ago, the hedgerows and weedy patches that once provided refuge for insects are disappearing, owing to ever more intense agricultural practices. From an insect's perspective, Goulson points out, even fertilizer use constitutes a form of habitat destruction. Fertilizer leaching out of fields fosters the growth of certain plants over others, and it's these others that many insects depend on.

Climate change, light pollution, and introduced species present further dangers. The *Varroa destructor* mite evolved to live on (and consume the body fat of) Asian honeybees, which are smaller than their European counterparts. When European honeybees were imported to East Asia, the mites jumped hosts, and when European bees were taken to new places the mites hitched a ride. *Varroa* mites carry diseases like deformed-wing virus, and they've had a devastating effect on European honeybees, probably causing the loss of hundreds of thousands of colonies. In the U.S. (and in many other countries), European honeybees are treated as tiny livestock. They're carted around to pollinate crops like apples and almonds, and their health is carefully monitored. But what's been the impact of imported parasites and pathogens on other bees, not to mention ants, beetles, crickets, dragonflies, moths, thrips, and wasps? "For 99.9 per cent of insect species, we know simply nothing," Goulson laments.

Then, there are pesticides. Since the Fire Ant Wars, which were prominently featured in Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," a great many have been taken off the market. New ones, however, have replaced them. Goulson is particularly concerned about a class of chemicals known as neonicotinoids. Neonics, as they're often called, are, in some respects,

even more toxic than Mirex and chlordane. They were first marketed in the nineteen-nineties; by 2010, more than three million pounds a year were being applied to crops in the U.S., and almost two hundred thousand pounds to crops in Great Britain. Neonics are water-soluble, which means they can leak into soils and ponds and potentially be taken up by other plants. There's a good deal of controversy over the dangers they pose to non-target insects, especially bees; in 2018, the European Union found the evidence of harm compelling enough to ban three key neonics from outdoor use. (The chemicals continue to be applied in many European countries under "emergency authorizations.") Meanwhile, in the rest of the world, including the U.S., their use continues apace. "Carson may have won a battle, but not the war," Goulson observes.

In the last chapter of "Silent Earth," Goulson offers dozens of actions we can take to "change our relationship with the small creatures that live all around us." Some involve tending one's own garden—for instance, trying "to reimagine 'weeds' such as dandelion as 'wildflowers.'" Others are regional or national in scope: "plant streets and parks with flowering, native trees" or "introduce pesticide and fertilizer taxes." The list is long enough that nearly everyone who wants to can find some recommendation to follow, but it's heavily tilted toward reducing the use of pesticides, which, as "Silent Earth" makes clear, is just one of the many hazards insects are facing.

Wilson, who's been called the "father of biodiversity," has a bigger idea. In "Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life" (2016), he argues that the only way to preserve the world's insects—and, for that matter, everything else—is to set aside fifty per cent of it in "inviolable reserves." He arrived at the figure, he explains, using the principles of island biogeography; on fifty per cent of the globe, he calculates, roughly eighty-five per cent of the planet's species could be saved. The task of preserving—or, in many places, restoring—half the world's habitat is, he acknowledges, daunting. The alternative, though, is to grow dandelions while the world burns: "The only hope for the species still living is a human effort commensurate with the magnitude of the problem." ♦



BOOKS

ALL YOU CAN READ

How Amazon is changing fiction.

BY PARUL SEHGAL

It is the hour for despair. The writer sits, crumpled and waiting. The sun sets. He lays his head upon his desk. A *plot*—he must have a *plot*. The public, ravenous for story, has no use for his fine observations and his subtle characterizations. A *plot*: his publishers require it, his wife demands it—there is a child now. Slowly, miserably, he gouges the words out of himself.

George Gissing's 1891 novel, "New Grub Street," is one of the most pitiless portraits of the writing life in any age. Set among London's hacks, grinds, and literary "women of the inkiest description," the story follows Edwin Reardon's nervous and financial collapse as he strug-

gles to complete a book that might sell. His friend, the sleek and cynical Jasper Milvain, regards his efforts as so much unnecessary fuss. "Literature nowadays is a trade," Milvain maintains, a matter of deft pandering. Find out what the reader wants and supply it, for God's sake, with style and efficiency.

It's not just the writer's usual demons—skimpy word rates, self-doubt, the smooth ascension of one's enemies—that torture Reardon but the strictures of the three-volume frigate that dominated Victorian novel-writing. The triple-decker, as it was called, was the form of much work by the likes of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Benjamin Disraeli, and Anthony

Trollope: typically nine hundred octavo pages divided into volumes of three hundred pages each, handsomely printed and bound. "The three volumes lie before me like an interminable desert," Reardon moans. "Impossible to get through them." Gissing lifted such laments from his own diary; "New Grub Street" was itself a triple-decker, Gissing's eighth, and he used every available trick to stretch it, wheezily, to length. "The padding trade," Trollope called literature at the time.

As luxury items, unaffordable for outright purchase by most readers, triple-deckers were championed by Mudie's Select Library, a behemoth of British book distribution. For its founder, Charles Edward Mudie, who often bought the bulk of a print run and could demand commensurate discounts from publishers, the appeal was plain: since his subscribers—at least those paying the standard rate of a guinea a year—could borrow only one volume at a time, each triple-decker could circulate to three times as many subscribers. Publishers were equally fond of the form, which allowed them to stagger printing costs. A tantalizing first volume could drum up demand for subsequent volumes, and help pay for them.

A great many of the Victorian novel's distinctive features seem expressly designed to fill up that "interminable desert" and entice the reader to cross it: a three-act structure, swelling subplots and vast casts, jolting cliffhangers, and characters with catchphrases or names that signal their personalities, rendering them memorable across nine hundred pages. (Dickens's naming a boulder Bounderby, in "Hard Times," is one shameless example.) Fictional autobiographies and biographies—"Villette," "Jane Eyre," "Adam Bede"—worked well with the demands of the triple-decker; a life story could enfold any necessary digressions and impart to them a sense of narrative unity.

The triple-decker prevailed until, toward the end of the nineteenth century, Mudie's became frustrated with a glut of books and began requesting single-volume novels from publishers. With the rise of mass-market paperbacks printed cheaply on pulp paper, new forms were born (pulp fiction, anyone?), with their own dictates, their own hooks and lures for the reader. But, then,

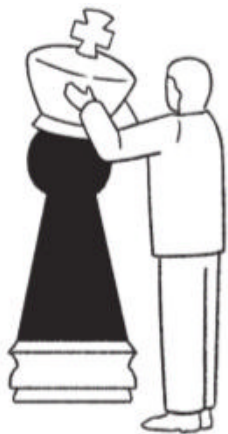
The company's algorithms identify genres for consumers and audiences for authors.

style has always shadowed modes of distribution in the history of the novel, from magazine serials to the Internet. In “Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon” (Verso), the literary scholar Mark McGurl considers all the ways a new behemoth has transformed not only how we obtain fiction but how we read and write it—and why. “The rise of Amazon is the most significant novelty in recent literary history, representing an attempt to reforge contemporary literary life as an adjunct to online retail,” he argues.

Amazon—which, as its founder, Jeff Bezos, likes to point out, is named for the river that is not only the world’s largest but larger than the next five largest rivers combined—controlled almost three-quarters of new-adult-book sales online and almost half of all new-book sales in 2019, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. Unlike Mudie’s, it’s also a publisher, with sixteen book imprints. Amazon Crossing is now the most prolific publisher of literary translations in the United States, and Audible, another Amazon property, is the largest purveyor of audiobooks. The social-media site Goodreads, purchased by Amazon in 2013, hosts more than a hundred million registered users and, McGurl ventures, may be “the richest repository of the leavings of literary life ever assembled, exceeded only by the mass of granular data sent back to home base from virtually every Kindle device in the world.” But what McGurl considers the “most dramatic intervention into literary history” is yet another Amazon division, Kindle Direct Publishing (K.D.P.); it allows writers to bypass traditional gatekeepers and self-publish their work for free, with Amazon taking a significant chunk of any proceeds.

As book historians like Ted Striphas and Leah Price have written, there is nothing new in the notion of the book as a commodity; books were the first objects to be sold on credit. They were early to be bar-coded, allowing for inventory to be tracked electronically, which made them well suited to online retail. “Everything and Less” takes glanc-

ing notice of this history; McGurl’s real interest is in charting how Amazon’s tentacles have inched their way into the relationship between reader and writer. This is clearest in the case of K.D.P. The platform pays the author by the number of pages read, which creates a strong incentive for cliffhangers early on, and for generating as many pages as possible as quickly as possible. The writer is exhorted to produce not just one book or a series but something closer to a feed—what McGurl calls a “series of series.” In order to fully harness K.D.P.’s promotional algorithms, McGurl says, an author must publish a new novel every three months. To assist with this task, a separate shelf of self-published books has sprung up, including Rachel Aaron’s “2K to 10K: Writing Faster, Writing Better, and Writing More of What You Love,” which will help you disgorge a novel in a week or two. Although more overtly concerned with quantity over quality, K.D.P. retains certain idiosyncratic standards. Amazon’s “Guide to Kindle Content Quality” warns the writer against typos, “formatting issues,” “missing content,” and “disappointing content”—not least, “content that does not provide an enjoyable reading experience.” Literary disappointment has always violated the supposed “contract” with a reader, no doubt, but in Bezos’s world the terms of the deal have been made literal. The author is dead; long live the service provider.



The reader, in turn, has been reborn as a consumer in the contemporary marketplace, the hallmarks of which are the precision and the reliability with which particular desires are met. “A digital existence is a liquid existence, something like mother’s milk, flowing to the scene of need,” McGurl writes. That’s what Bill Gates promised the Web would do: provide “friction-free capitalism.” Can the ease of procuring a product translate into an aesthetic of its own? The critic Rob Horning has called the avoidance of friction “a kind of content in itself—‘readable books’; ‘listenable music’; ‘vibes’; ‘ambience’ etc.” On Amazon, the promise of easy consumption is even more pointed: with the discernment of

algorithms, books aren’t just readable; they’re specifically readable *by you*.

Hence McGurl’s focus on the explosion of genre fiction—the bulk of fiction produced today. Here we find the estuary where books merge with Amazon’s service ethos, its resolve to be “Earth’s most customer-centric company.” Genre has, of course, always been an organizing principle in book marketing. The shiny embossed titles of the books on the spinning rack at an airport kiosk promise a hit of reliable pleasure to readers craving a Robert Ludlum thriller or a Nora Roberts love story. But Amazon brings such targeting to the next level. Romance readers can classify themselves as fans of “Clean & Wholesome” or “Paranormal” or “Later in Life.” And Amazon, having tracked your purchases, has the receipts—and will serve you suggestions accordingly. These micro-genres deliver on a hyper-specific promise of quality, but also end up reinforcing the company’s promise of quantity. What else does genre guarantee but variations on a trusted formula, endlessly iterated to fill up a Kindle’s bottomless library?

Genre is, in particular, the key to having one’s book “discovered” on Amazon, where titles are neatly slotted into an intricate grid of categories. McGurl presents these developments with great serenity. He does not fret about the pressure the grid might apply, the potential for exclusion or homogeneity in what books get recommended. His core assumption is that Amazon gives readers the books they want, and his curiosity lies in discerning the function of such genres, the “needs” that they address. Exploring romance fiction, which seems to inspire scorn, in part because of the bingeing and the “bad” reading with which it is associated, McGurl wonders why the desire for repetition earns derision. After all, he notes, many pleasures are born of repetition, perhaps none more so than reading—as children, we clamor to hear the same stories again and again.

McGurl has himself been following the same story, in a way: the history of American fiction seen in relation to the institutions that sustain it. In “The Novel Art” (2001), he examined fiction’s elevation to high art, as modernist writers warily sought to dis-

tinguish their work from popular fiction in an age of mass literacy. In “The Program Era” (2009), he turned to the centrality of creative-writing departments to postwar literature, and their imprint on style. He is attuned to America’s signature queasiness about class, pleasure, and mass culture that constellates around reading and education. In “Everything and Less,” this takes the form of wild anthropological delight as he explores genres, and micro-genres, long dismissed by most mainstream scholarship and criticism.

In these badlands, McGurl unearths inviting weirdness, surreal experimentation, kinky political utopias, and even sweetness. There is the performance art of one Dr. Chuck Tingle, with his signature gay-porn “tinglers,” such as “Big-foot Pirates Haunt My Balls.” And McGurl is charmed by Penelope Ward and Vi Keeland’s romance “Cocky Bastard.” (“There is no justice in the literary field—this novel is far superior to ‘Fifty Shades of Grey,’ let alone the idiotic ‘Cocky Roomie,’ with a real sense of humor as well as a sidekick role filled by a blind baby goat.”) He reports on “the opportunistic efflorescences” at the far reaches of the K.D.P. universe—how the group sex in “The House of Enchanted Feminization,” for example, represents “a lunge toward erotic collectivity and community if not communism.”

Everywhere he looks, he finds allegories for Amazon. Zombie fiction—the genre he says is most in demand—might represent how Amazon regards its customers, all insatiable appetite. Meanwhile, the Adult Baby Diaper Lover (A.B.D.L.) books might be “the quintessential Amazonian genre of literature.” A typical story—take “Seduce, Dominate, Diaper,” by Mommy Claire—stars an alpha male now blissfully subdued by the maternal ministrations of the book’s heroine. The man’s infantilization exemplifies the customer’s dependence on Amazon, which, like any good mother of an infant, seeks to “minimize the delay between demand and gratification.” There’s also a thrilling edge to Mommy—a threat of punishment, of bondage—which acts as “a helpful reminder that Amazon’s customer obsession is ultimately an investment in its own market power.”

McGurl’s claims themselves have an



“That’s right—a gallon of sparkling and a gallon of still. Are you ready for the credit card?”

inviting weirdness—if not always coherence. I found myself writing sternly in the margins: “Not every orgy is a ‘collective.’” I wondered, too, at his notion of the “success” of K.D.P. writers. One survey of self-published writers found that half make less than five hundred dollars a year. But McGurl does not include the voices of K.D.P. writers themselves (save for the well-rewarded science-fiction writer Hugh Howey, an unofficial spokesman for self-publishing). He speaks of their innovations but not of their material reality. What of today’s Edwin Reardons? Never before have so many people made so little from their writing. Nor do we hear about writers who feel ambivalent about using Amazon as a platform to begin with, or who feel cheated or exploited.

McGurl’s aim, to be sure, is provocation more than persuasion. He does not argue; he insinuates, teases, tousles, wrinkles. He makes himself cozy in the

conditional mode, from which he can spin out thought experiments and later state them as fact. His quiver is full of qualifiers—“speculative to be sure,” “a stretch, surely.” Even his thesis about the primacy of Amazon in transforming literary culture is casually walked back (it’s merely “a way of framing the story of contemporary fiction in such a way as to throw a particular set of heretofore under-examined realities into relief”), only to be reasserted one page later. His defense is built in: “Who among us is completely coherent?”

Inconsistencies and small mistakes begin to gather underfoot. Stephenie Meyer’s “Twilight” series is not a trilogy. Maggie Nelson’s “The Argonauts” is a memoir, not an example of autofiction. “Bemused” is not a synonym for “amused,” and Max Weber was hardly pointing out the “acetic” character of the Protestant capitalists, whatever their astringencies. Even McGurl’s opening

argument hinges on an error. Drawing from Brad Stone's 2013 book about the rise of Amazon, "The Everything Store," McGurl writes of Bezos, "It would not be entirely crazy to say that we owe the existence of the company to his reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's literary novel 'The Remains of the Day.'"

The claim is that Bezos dared to leave his job at an investment firm only after reading Ishiguro's story of an English butler who realizes that he has squandered his own life in service to others. But Bezos actually read "The Remains of the Day" a year after starting Amazon. His wife at the time, MacKenzie Bezos, left a nine-hundred-word, one-star review of "The Everything Store" on Amazon, in which she dryly stated her credentials—"Jeff and I have been married for 20 years"—and corrected the record. The error was fixed in subsequent printings of Stone's book, but it dangles here—revealing McGurl's eagerness to establish Amazon as a "literary endeavor" in its own right.

How does literary fiction fit into McGurl's account of this literary endeavor? He conceives of it as another genre (its features include "discussable interpretive problems"), and identifies overlap with mass-market romance. A version of the alpha billionaire of "Fifty Shades of Grey" can be found in the "beta intellectual" lurking in Adelle Waldman's "The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P." Appropriately skeptical of capitalism, conversant in feminism, and endlessly self-obsessed, such men do not want to whip women, McGurl writes, "just to waste their time." It's the sort of playful observation McGurl makes easily and well; why doesn't he look deeper? He scarcely addresses the particular economy of literary fiction or the influence of publishing conglomerates. He glides over Amazon's scheme to target indie presses, the Gazelle Project, named after Bezos's comment that Amazon "should approach these small publishers the way a cheetah would pursue a sickly gazelle." (Amazon's lawyers later had the Gazelle Project renamed—perhaps even more chillingly—the Small Publisher Negotiation Program.) The literary novelist properly enters McGurl's story only when he considers how Amazon has heralded an "age of

surplus fiction." In 2018, some 1.6 million books were reportedly self-published—all this on top of the tens of thousands released by traditional publishing houses. How can a writer work within this flood? It's not an entirely new quandary. One of the "women of the inkiest description" from "New Grub Street" surveys the deluge of her own era with dismay: "When already there was more good literature in the world than any mortal could cope with in his lifetime, here was she exhausting herself in the manufacture of printed stuff which no one even pretended to be more than a commodity for the day's market. What unspeakable folly!"

McGurl sees two strategies: align with the profusion, go maximalist, write an epic—or resist, find recourse in autofiction, scale the world down to the figure of the writer. The argument loses some lustre when one recalls that McGurl made a similar claim in his previous book, "The Program Era," arguing that postwar writers responded to feelings of class anxiety in M.F.A. programs by becoming either maximalists (he cites Joyce Carol Oates) or minimalists (Raymond Carver). It loses a little more when you reflect that most literary fiction is neither.

Still, the impossible surplus of books could explain a certain miasma of shame that emanates from much contemporary fiction. Saul Bellow once said that novelists sought a definition of human nature in order to justify the ongoing existence of their craft. Recent novels, however, are marked by mortification. In Sally Rooney's "Beautiful World, Where Are You," Alice is an extremely successful writer who holds her books to be "morally and politically worthless." (Her boyfriend, incidentally, works in what could be an Amazon warehouse.) There is Linda, a struggling writer in Tony Tulathimutte's "Private Citizens," who wonders bleakly "what writing can survive?" or the writer-narrator of Anna Moschovakis's "Eleanor, or, The Rejection of the Progress of Love," who wrings her hands over her manuscript. "I cited my book's many unoriginal traits: its episodic structure, its banal storyline tracing the alienation of the individual in late capitalism, and more," she tells us. "But what really embarrassed me was that I imagined a readership at all."

That anxiety is surely stoked by the easy digital intimacy between author and reader—readers readily conferring stars and comments, which are situated right at the point of sale. And, just as Gissing's struggle with the triple-decker became a subject of his triple-decker, authorial anxiety in the age of digital intimacy has itself become a distinctive theme of contemporary literary fiction. By fostering that intimacy—not to mention stalking and squeezing small publishers, undercutting bookstores, and killing off competitors—Amazon has, in a sense, made all writers K.D.P. writers, working off the same publicity playbook. True, writers have always striven to be noticed (Guy de Maupassant once sent a hot-air balloon over the Seine to advertise his new short story), but so many of today's writers, maximalist or minimalist or middling, feel obligated to maintain a feed of chatty updates, "friendly" communiqués, and newsletters, the direct appeals cut with self-deprecation to solicit and cultivate readers. It's the note of self-awareness we hear in Lauren Oyler's "Fake Accounts," when she wryly titles a section "Middle (Nothing Happens)," as if managing the reader's expectations. Or the note of self-doubt that nags at the novelist-narrator in Claire Vaye Watkins's "I Love You but I've Chosen Darkness," who finds her conviction in her work curdling and runs away while travelling to give a book reading. "Only connect" reads the epigraph of E. M. Forster's "Howards End," but increasingly it is Amazon that dictates to the writer the modes, methods, and imperatives of this connection.

And yet "Everything and Less" tells one story while seeming to enact another. For all the ways McGurl anatomizes the novel as a commodity in the age of Amazon, one is left observing something else entirely—all the ways in which the novel cannot be commodified. The novel is an intransigently private form, and this may be the real story of the book: McGurl's surprise and delight as he ventured to the so-called margins of literary life and found more than he expected. That's the nature of the novel; you have to cross its threshold without completely knowing what lies within. Mere ownership does not constitute possession. ♦



BOOKS

CLIMATE CONTROLLERS

Our planet is heating up. Why do our politics remain frozen?

BY OLÚFÉMI O. TÁÍWÒ

In 1621, the Dutch East India Company—the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or V.O.C.—arrived at the Banda Islands with a formidable navy. The global spice market was fiercely competitive, and a number of European powers had already sailed to this Indonesian archipelago and tried to strong-arm the locals into accepting various treaties. The V.O.C. had recently sought a monopoly on the spice trade with the islands, home to the precious nutmeg. Nutmeg, valued for its culinary uses and its medicinal properties—rumor had it that it could cure the plague—had long been traded across vast networks

that traversed the Indian Ocean and linked Africa and Eurasia. At one point, a handful of the seeds could buy a house or a ship. But the V.O.C. couldn't secure a deal. The islands lacked a central authority; instead of kings or potentates, they merely had respected elders.

Frustrated, the Dutch turned to a military tactic of extortion they called *brandschattingen*—threatening an enemy with arson—and swiftly delivered on the threat, torching the villagers' houses, food stores, and boats. Dutch forces captured and enslaved as many of the Bandanese as they could, and murdered the rest. Soon

after the massacre, the V.O.C. became, by some measures, the largest company in human history, worth more than ExxonMobil, Apple, and Amazon combined.

“Like a planet, the nutmeg is encased within a series of expanding spheres,” Amitav Ghosh writes in his illuminating new book, “The Nutmeg’s Curse” (Chicago), which begins with this grisly episode. Surrounding the nutmeg core are other layers, notably a lacy red mantle called mace, which is itself traded as a precious commodity, while the exterior of the dried seed is grooved with ridges that evoke geological structures. Ghosh carves through the historical layers of the global exploitation of nutmeg and the genocide and domination that made it possible. “No trade without war, and no war without trade,” Jan Pieterszoon Coen, the fourth governor-general of the Dutch East Indies, declared.

Ghosh has a larger point. Extraction, violence, empire: all these perennials of human history tend to march together. The global marketplace, created and shaped by forays like the V.O.C.’s in Indonesia, is fixated on growth in ways that have led to an era of depredation, depletion, and, ultimately, disruptive climate change. Ghosh wonders whether our planet, after four centuries of vigorous terraforming, has begun to turn against its settlers, unleashing wildfires, storms, and droughts. It sounds like nature’s own version of *brandschattingen*.

Given that the heedlessness of the global marketplace got us into the climate crisis, you might be skeptical that more of the same will get us out of it. But many governments have adopted a hair-of-the-dog approach, embracing market-based solutions such as emissions trading and carbon taxes. The results have been discouraging: global emissions have been rising quickly, and we’ve fallen short on nearly every indicator of climate progress. (The aim has been to limit global temperature increases to 1.5 or two degrees Celsius, in the hope of avoiding the most catastrophic scenarios of climate change.) Although market-based approaches can yield incremental improvement, there’s little evidence that they can produce the

Extractive economies shift burdens and risks down the world’s hierarchies.



“transformational” change that U.N. scientists say is necessary.

If the market is still treated as a default source of solutions, Ghosh suggests, it’s because, in a world created by corporations such as the V.O.C. and colonial sponsors such as the imperial Dutch, everything, including the planet, is considered a resource to be exchanged or exploited, and progress and “rationality” are measured in impersonal dollars and cents. Profit and security are reserved for those at the top of the world’s hierarchies, and are achieved by shifting the risks and the burdens toward those at the bottom. Some people get a storm-surge barrier—a specialty of certain Dutch multinationals—and exquisitely climate-controlled interiors; others watch their villages be swallowed by the sea.

If you’re wedded to market solutions, you’ll insist that our failure to act arises simply from suboptimal legal rules and market conditions. Maybe all we need are a few technical adjustments

in pricing or institutional design. But our paralysis didn’t arise from happenstance. Every decade that we delay comprehensive climate action is another decade that certain companies can profit from their stake in the world’s energy system. Activists and reporters have exposed well-funded and elaborate misinformation campaigns sponsored by these companies. The revelations haven’t made much difference.

What Kate Aronoff shows, in her timely book “Overheated” (Bold Type), is that the “old-school” approach to corporate climate denial has given way to new, subtler strategies. Yesterday’s denialists insisted that climate change was a hoax, funding dodgy science and blitzing coöperative media outlets such as Fox News with industry “experts.” But under mounting public pressure many companies have withdrawn their support from denialist think tanks like the Heartland Institute; those companies are now funding academic research at big-name universities that shy away from overt climate-change denial.

One of the new strategies is to acknowledge climate change but to put polluters in charge of remedying it. Aronoff describes a 2018 proposal by Royal Dutch Shell, billed as a pathway to two degrees Celsius, that would have maintained similar levels of fossil-fuel production for decades. The scenario depended on carbon removal deployed on an immense scale—orders of magnitude above our current capabilities, and with potentially dangerous implications for food, energy, and water security. Earlier this year, Shell was rebuked by a Dutch court, which ordered the company to reduce its carbon emissions by forty-five per cent by 2030.

Despite such setbacks, oil and gas corporations have largely succeeded in slowing the energy transition that threatens their bottom line. Even from a technocratic perspective, though, our inaction on climate is irrational. Any serious long-term financial projection should take note of the fact that mass death, disease, and destruction are likely to make everybody worse off. One recent study estimates that as many as a billion people could be displaced during the next fifty years for every additional degree of warming, implying a level of social upheaval that might involve pitchforks. Even the International Energy Agency, an organization started by Henry Kissinger, now calls for a halt to all new oil and gas fields. Giant corporations such as Chevron and Exxon have been attacked for their inaction on the climate crisis not just by Greenpeace supporters but by their own shareholders, who insist that the safety of their investments depends on cutting emissions.

Why haven’t governments and political institutions forced a course correction? That’s a question taken up in “White Skin, Black Fuel” (Verso), by Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective, of Scandinavia. The book shows how, in the political arena, arguments about economic rationality get woven together with hierarchical structures and the pursuit of domination, portending what it calls fossil fascism. In particular, its authors are struck by how the European far right has used the “funnel issue” of hostility toward immigration to promote hostility toward renewable energy.

“Migrants are like wind turbines,” France’s Marine Le Pen has remarked. “Everyone agrees to have them, but no one wants them in their back yard.” To the north, the far-right Finns Party (formerly known as the True Finns) led a national campaign against wind turbines, featuring a press conference in which a man wept over the damage he believed the structures had inflicted on him and his family via infrasonic waves. The Party even published a cartoon—detailed in “White Skin, Black Fuel”—in which a Black man dressed only in a grass skirt makes hysterical climate predictions, flanked by a diminutive woman, evidently a Finnish regulator, who insists that “we have to spend more on wind turbines.” Oil companies have learned subtlety, but these far-right parties have other priorities.

“Even after fulfilling their ambitions in the region, the officials of the V.O.C. were never satisfied with their spice monopoly,” Ghosh writes. He attributes this reaction to a framework he terms the “world-as-resource,” in which landscapes are considered to be factories, and nature, like a native population, is viewed as a proper object of conquest. In Indonesia, the V.O.C. eventually followed up the massacre of a people with an effort to extirpate a botanical species. When the price of nutmeg fell, the company tried to limit the global supply of the spice by eradicating every nutmeg tree outside the Dutch plantations on the Banda Islands.

Spectacles of destruction like these would seem to reflect the often maligned workings of the profit motive, as people such as Erik M. Conway and Naomi Oreskes have stressed. But Ghosh, mulling over why the world has been so slow to decarbonize, thinks that this explanation is incomplete. He wants us to reckon with broader structures of power, involving “the physical subjugation of people and territory,” and, crucially, the “idea of conquest, as a process of extraction.” The world-as-resource perspective not only depletes our environment of the

raw materials we seek; it ultimately depletes it of meaning.

The authors of “The Nutmeg’s Curse,” “Overheated,” and “White Skin, Black Fuel” have different stories to tell about our bafflingly self-destructive climate politics. But they mesh into a broader narrative about hierarchy, commerce, and exploitation. An account of why climate politics is broken, needless to say, won’t tell us how to fix it. Still, these authors do venture some ideas. The second half of “Overheated” sketches out the contours of a “postcarbon democracy”; we learn about ongoing political efforts to redistribute the ownership of utilities from investors to communities, and about the promising 2018 struggles of public employees against the governments of fossil-fuel-reliant states such as West Virginia, Kentucky, and Oklahoma. “The Nutmeg’s Curse” sees potential in what it calls a “vitalist” politics, and in an associated ethic of protection that would extend to “rivers, mountains, animals, and the spirits of the land.” Ghosh identifies this ethos, in contrast to the world-as-resource view, with peasants and farmworkers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—places and people long seen as peripheral to history. He also draws our attention to legal victories by indigenous peoples, including the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruling, in 2012, that the rights of the Sarayaku people, in Ecuador, had been violated when an oil company dug wells on their lands without consulting them; and court rulings that side with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in its struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline.

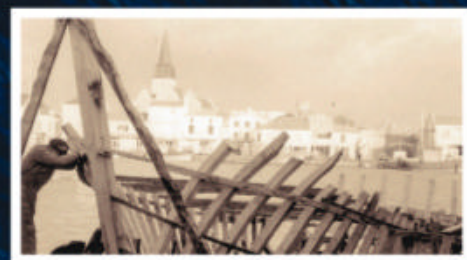
These victories aren’t on the scale of the challenges we face, and the political proposals may feel airily idealistic—more of a wish list than a to-do list. Still, getting serious about climate change, as these micro and macro histories make clear, means aiming higher than defeatist “realism.” Climate catastrophe isn’t going to be averted simply by our changing the way we think about the planet and its peoples—but it’s likely to arrive sooner if we don’t. ♦



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OUR PHILOSOPHY



THE ART WORLD

FAR OUT

"Surrealism Beyond Borders," at the Met.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

"Surrealism Beyond Borders," at the Metropolitan Museum, is a huge, delightfully entertaining survey of the transnational spread of a movement that was codified by the poet and polemicist André Breton in 1924, in Paris. It had roots in Dada, which emerged in Zurich, in 1916, in infuriated, tactically clownish reaction to the pointlessly murderous First World War. Most of the show's hundreds of works—and nearly all of the best—date from the next twenty or so years. As

you would expect, there's the lobster-topped telephone by Salvador Dalí and the locomotive emerging from a fireplace by René Magritte, both from 1938 and crowd-pleasers to this day, smoothly blending into popular culture. But the show's superb curators, Stephanie D'Alessandro and Matthew Gale, prove that the craze for Surrealism surged like a prairie fire independently in individuals and groups around the world. The tinder was an insurrectionary spirit, disgusted with

establishments. Not that the revolt required much personal valor: you couldn't be prosecuted for your dreams. The formula looked easy. There were no rules or hierarchies, despite Breton's efforts to police the ranks. Anyone could play, and for a while many sorts of people did.

The show tracks eruptions in about forty-five countries. Painting and photography dominate, though magazines, texts, and films explore certain scenes, such as a late efflorescence of politically militant turbulence in Chicago in the nineteen-sixties. By then, what had passed for the aesthetic sorcery of the movement had petered out. But it didn't die. Today, there's a surprising revival, unacknowledged at the Met, among younger artists who, like the movement's founders, have turned inward from worldly imperatives to plumb the so-called unconscious, presumably a time-

Koga Harue's "The Sea," from 1929, is one of this global show's tonic shocks, with local nuances modifying collective fervor.

lessly real realm that is superior to reason. Sigmund Freud, without meaning to, had inspired the lively delusion that the fracture of rationality (he was plenty rational himself) was a royal road to universal truth, rather than, as often seemed to be the case, a repertory of clichés.

Birds always meant sex for the German Max Ernst, although you can't fail to adore his delicate construction of little figures, "Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale" (1924). The vivacity of the movement frequently ran to miniature scale, as with the poetic box constructions of Joseph Cornell, which the American artist began making in the thirties, and to such epiphenomena as the party game exquisite corpse, in which players take turns drawing parts of figures on folded paper and leaving traces of outline for others to continue. The show features an accordion-like version thirty-six feet long that the American poet Ted Joans took along to encounters with cultural luminaries until his death, in 2003.

Surrealism began in literature, though with impetus from the haunting cityscapes that the Italian Giorgio de Chirico had been painting since 1909. It rapidly infected artists worldwide, acting in opposition to arguably bourgeois modernisms including Cubism and Constructivism, albeit cribbing forms from them now and then. The movement was essentially conservative, rejecting engagement with external modernity despite such wishful identification with radical causes as that of a magazine edited by Breton between 1930 and 1933, *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*. (The Soviet Union would have none of this.) The association persists in the anti-colonial sentiments of several non-European artists. In fact, in addition to being a taste favored by educated élites, Surrealism was colonialist in its own way. Nearly interchangeable dream images popped up everywhere. A doctrinaire rejection of nationalism fostered a sense that the adherents stemmed from nowhere in particular. Surrealism was individualist Romanticism on steroids. I know the magnetism and its limitations well.

I was a Surrealist poet at the age of twenty in 1962, intoxicated but not terribly well informed at my small Midwestern college. Though hobbled by hav-

ing next to no French, I struggled to translate a section of "Les Chants de Maldoror" (1868-69)—a proto-Surrealist text by the short-lived Uruguayan-born Frenchman Isidore Ducasse, who styled himself the Comte de Lautréamont—in which the hero joins a female shark in slaughtering seaborne rivals and then has rapturous sex with her. Extravagant grotesquerie in many flavors was all the rage. Evil excited certain Surrealists who, for instance, celebrated the predatory libertinism of the Marquis de Sade. (I quailed at that.) Breton's 1928 novel, "Nadja," about his brief affair with a young, waiflike possible clairvoyant, was Biblical to me; I failed to register that Breton's attitude toward the girl was exploitative. He stepped away when she received a diagnosis of clinical insanity.

For me, much of the movement's allure involved glamorized maleness, with the likes of the poets Paul Éluard, Robert Desnos, and close to a dozen others modelling a sexy cool in which I was sorely deficient. Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray figured as genius associates, and the darkling anthropologist and philosopher Georges Bataille provided intellectual ballast laced with pornography. Women were sex objects or muses, with rare exceptions such as the British-born Mexican Leonora Carrington, the German Meret Oppenheim, the American Dorothea Tanning, and the infallibly amazing Frida Kahlo. Breton, no slouch as a critic and in this instance just mildly sexist, termed Kahlo's typical self-portrait "a ribbon around a bomb."

I missed the fact that, by the time I stumbled across it, Surrealism was out of date from a Western point of view, its influence having been plowed under by formally rigorous painters like Joan Miró and Arshile Gorky, who are in the show, and, decisively, Jackson Pollock, who is not, and by laconic poets like John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara. It dawned on me that Pablo Picasso had, from the start, made the very most of Surrealism's Dionysian audacity by combining it with his own Apollonian aplomb: one-stop shopping in erotic and perceptual revelation. After I fled East by stages and, in 1964-65, spent a disillusioning year in Paris, I became embarrassed by the longueurs of latter-day Surrealists. I think I can trace an aspect of my style to prior exercises in the Surrealist shibboleth of

unguided "automatic writing," hellbent on insulting the commonplace. It didn't have to make sense. Maybe best if it didn't. But I came around to concluding that the conscious mind, that flickering spark in cosmic obscurity, is the indispensable site of mysteries that matter.

The rest is charm, which abounds at the Met with particular élan from the border-crossing variants headlined by the show. Divisions into multinational cohorts, organized by theme, constitute a world tour with local nuances that modify a collective fervor. The variety of discoveries, detailed with exceptional scholarship in a ravishing keeper of a catalogue, defeat generalization, with such one-off, tonic shocks, new to me, as a hyperactive tangle of abstract shapes, "Baton Blows" (1937), by the French-Egyptian Mayo; "The Sea" (1929), a fantasia by the Japanese Koga Harue that displays, among other things, a bathing beauty, a zeppelin, many swimming fish, and a flayed submarine; and "Untitled" (1967), a weaponized throng of human and animal faces and figures, by the Mozambican Malangatana Ngwenya. Certainly, the show's range satisfies an aim to pry the movement's history from the grip of its would-be Mecca in Paris, where Breton devolved into a parochial tyrant whose powers of excommunication could descend without mercy even on Alberto Giacometti, in 1935, after the greatest of related sculptors dared to essay some relatively objective figuration.

It's rare to have a conscientiously ordered overview teem with unfamiliar seductive delights, like a suite of uncanny photographs mostly of enigmatic women outdoors, from 1958, by the Colombian Cecilia Porras. The perspective applied to twentieth-century art will stay with you, as a standing challenge to modern art's dominant march of formal avant-gardes. Man Ray idealized original art as "a creation motivated by desire." That, for me, is the keynote of Surrealism, which was dedicated to anarchic motives that brooked no institutional authority. Each work is a jailbreak, successful or not, from a civilization that could be held responsible for spirit-crushing conformity and, in the annals of war and injustice, systemic lunacy. In the end, Surrealism came down to gamy incoherence. But its gospel of liberty encourages a rethink, even now, of what cultural adventure is all about. ♦



MUSICAL EVENTS

DIVO

A Jonas Kaufmann recital, at Carnegie Hall.

BY ALEX ROSS

The German tenor Jonas Kaufmann, who recently brought his gold-bronze voice to Carnegie Hall, may be the most bankable male star in opera today. His appearances all but guarantee a full house. Tough-minded critics exit the venue with elated grins. His not infrequent cancellations traumatize the front offices of leading institutions. With his wavy hair and wide cheekbones, he cuts a plausible profile as a Puccinian lover or a Wagnerian hero. In German-speaking lands, he is a part-time pop idol with best-selling crossover records to his credit, including a Christmas album—“It’s Christmas!”—that includes traditional carols alongside lightly accented versions of “Jingle Bells,” “White Christmas,” and “Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!”

Every merry crowd must have at least one unsmiling soul, and in this case the role falls to me. There is no denying the fundamental splendor of Kaufmann’s sound: the baritonal strength of his lower register, the clean strike of his high notes, the tender shimmer of his mezza voce. All the pitches are in place, laced together in a luxurious legato. Nonetheless, to take a line from Bertolt Brecht, something is lacking. Particularly in recent years, Kaufmann has exuded a generalized glamour that seems disconnected from the music at hand. This is not a pressing issue in “Jingle Bells,” but in songs by Schubert, Schumann, Mahler, and Strauss—the heart of Kaufmann’s recital at Carnegie—it becomes a minor crisis.

The smoothed-over nature of Kauf-

mann’s voice is a direct result of his training, and from a technical standpoint it’s hard to argue with the choices he has made. In a 2011 interview, he explained that a vocal coach had helped him develop his legato line, in part by evening out vowels and softening consonants. “Every overpronounced consonant stops the flow of air, and that’s not good,” Kaufmann said. This approach gives him a particular authority in Italian and French repertory, where a liquid line is a necessity. In his native language, his diction is never anything but clear, yet the words don’t crystallize in the air as they do in the work of Christoph Prégardien and Christian Gerhaher, to name two eminent Lieder interpreters. In a curious way, Kaufmann could be mistaken for a Romance-language singer who speaks perfect German.

Despite his dashing, mildly rakish air, Kaufmann is emphatically not a risk-taker. I often have the sense that he is husbanding his resources, protecting the glittering hoard of his voice. His performance in Massenet’s “Werther,” at the Met, in 2014, was emblematic: the ur-Romantic tragic hero came across as elegant, contained, emotionally recessed. Attempts at Wagner’s Tristan have predictably fallen short of the deranged passion that the part requires. To be sure, Kaufmann sets vocal standards that few can match. Nothing is remotely below par. Yet there’s something solipsistic about his career: he rarely disappears into a role.

The Carnegie program, for which the pianist Helmut Deutsch provided accompaniment, drew on two recent albums, both on the Sony label: “Selige Stunde,” a recital ranging from Mozart to Alexander Zemlinsky, and “Freudvoll und Leidvoll,” devoted to songs by Liszt. The latter is one of Kaufmann’s best efforts to date, giving welcome attention to a neglected body of work. Lisztian innovation flares up all over, whether in the questing, “Tristan”-like introduction to “Loreley”—composed years before Wagner wrote his opera—or in the proto-Debussyan harmonies of “Ihr Glocken von Marling.” Kaufmann emphasizes the melodic backbone of this music, leaving no question that Liszt could have been a major opera composer had he set his mind to it.

The “Selige Stunde” album—the title, taken from a song by Zemlinsky, translates as “Blessed Hour”—is a grab bag of famous Lieder, mostly of a contemplative nature. The lineup includes Schubert’s “Wandrer’s Nachtlied II,” Schumann’s “Mondnacht,” Brahms’s “Wiegenlied,” and Mahler’s “Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen,” all of which Kaufmann brought to Carnegie. Handsomely delivered as they are, these songs should connote something more than a cozy respite from the world’s cares. “Mondnacht” is an exercise in immaculate stillness, but there is something immensely eerie in the way its vocal line hovers over steady sixteenth-note quavers. Kaufmann’s handling of the stepwise rising line borders on crooning, to the point that Schumann’s moonbeams seem a product of studio lighting.

As for the Mahler, there should be some sort of mandate against sentimentalized versions of this apocalyptically gorgeous song, which the likes of Janet Baker and Lorraine Hunt Lieberson turned into a national anthem for solitary souls. “I am lost to the world,” the text reads. “It may very well believe that I am dead.” Mahler’s writing of an extended melisma on the word “dead” invites some intervention on the part of the singer—a ghostly timbre, an ironic tinge. Kaufmann warbles his way through the phrase as if it were just another lovely string of notes. He sounds not so much lost to the world as pleasantly distracted. Deutsch, graceful but deferential, does little to push Kaufmann toward a deeper interpretation.

At Carnegie, the tenor rode waves of applause through no fewer than six encores, alternating lyrical purring with displays of heroic swagger. He ended with Strauss’s “Cäcilie,” though he stopped momentarily to berate an audience member who was recording a video. “I do everything for you,” he barked. “But please respect the rules and don’t film.” If Kaufmann were the kind of singer who really did give everything he had—a go-for-broke artist like Patti LuPone, who issues similar reprimands on Broadway—I would have admired the sentiment. In this case, though, it had more the flavor of a celebrity pout. And it is that scrim of

celebrity which seems to have sealed off Kaufmann’s enormous talent and limited its expressive potential.

One tenor who deserves to inherit at least a portion of Kaufmann’s fame is the Missouri-born Michael Spyres, who, at the age of forty-two, has established himself as an idiomatic exponent of French opera and is now branching out. I first heard him in 2009, when he brought his clarion tone and incisive diction to “Les Huguenots,” at Bard College. Later, at the Opéra Comique, in Paris, I saw his commanding turn in “La Muette de Portici.” None of that prepared me for the polystylistic fireworks that Spyres unleashes in “Baritenor,” a new album on Erato. With tenor and baritone arias from composers as varied as Mozart, Wagner, Ravel, and Orff, it’s more a highlight reel than a coherent program, but the effect is dizzying.

As the title suggests, Spyres initially studied to be a baritone and has retained unusual strength in that register. Kaufmann’s voice is not dissimilar, although Spyres has an easier upward reach, as he shows by firing off the nine high C’s in “Ah! mes amis,” from “La Fille du Régiment.” What’s most impressive, though, is Spyres’s unabashed vitality and urgency in any register or repertory. When, in “The Barber of Seville,” Figaro complains of the “ladies and children, old men and maidens” who want things from him, Spyres evokes a quartet of backup singers. “The Ballad of Kleinzach,” from “The Tales of Hoffmann,” offers a similar riot of characterizations. There follows a rapt, noble-toned rendition of the Grail narration from “Lohengrin,” in French.

The Met has been slow to take notice of Spyres: he made his début only last year, in “La Damnation de Faust.” He isn’t returning to the Met this season, but on October 27th he appears at the 92nd Street Y alongside his colleague Lawrence Brownlee, with whom he made a rip-roaring Rossini album called “Amici e Rivali” (“Friends and Rivals”). Brownlee, a born lyric tenor and an incomparable bel-canto stylist, takes the higher-lying roles; Spyres assumes the parts that Rossini wrote for baritone tenors. Next year, in Lyon, Spyres will venture Act II of “Tristan”—a sign that we may have yet seen only a fraction of what this singer has within his grasp. ♦

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THE THEATRE

FORTUNE-TELLERS

An American dream and an American nightmare.

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ

I don't remember where I was at the precise moment that Lehman Brothers collapsed—asleep, presumably, as the firm filed for bankruptcy at 1:45 A.M. on a Monday—but I do recall how the news hit home. It was mid-September, 2008, the beginning of my senior year of college; I was making my desultory way to a career fair, on the off chance that some representative from the future might set my life on its mysterious course. Students in dark suits, who had spent the summer in the corporate chrysalis of banks and consulting firms, rushed ahead. Too bad for them. There stood Lehman's poster-board sign, its text crossed out with thick black marker: a gesture whose

symbolic significance could be lost on no one.

The hundred-and-sixty-four-year history that preceded that sudden end is presented in superb—and perhaps suspect—style in “The Lehman Trilogy” (at the Nederlander). Written by the Italian playwright Stefano Massini (adapted into English by Ben Power) and directed by Sam Mendes, the production began its life at London's National Theatre before transferring for a brief pre-pandemic run at the Park Avenue Armory, where scalped tickets, following the law of supply and demand, reportedly fetched up to two thousand dollars. It's good to have the show back in New York, which is

where it opens and closes, in a glass-walled conference room, on that fateful September night. And it is where the larger story begins, in a flashback to the eighteen-forties, with Heyum Lehmann (Simon Russell Beale), a Bavarian Jew in search of a new life in the New World, disembarking in Manhattan. As Henry Lehman, he travels to Montgomery, Alabama, where he establishes a small shop selling cloth made from cotton picked at local plantations. His brother Emanuel (Adrian Lester)—a man of action, the arm to clever Henry's brain—comes to join him, followed by the youngest Lehman, mild-mannered Mayer (Adam Godley), who binds the family partnership together.

Three brothers from a faraway land, on a quest to make their fortune: there is a strong whiff of the familiar American fairy tale here. What is marvellous is the knowing way in which the tale is told—and “told” is the word. “The Lehman Trilogy” is not so much acted as it is recounted, with mesmerizing virtuosity, by these three exceptional performers. Dressed in sober black frock coats, Beale, Lester, and Godley work as a team, deftly tossing the ball of their narrative back and forth. They stand at once within and apart from the characters they play, both illustrating the action and describing it in a language whose rocking rhythms and thematic echoes create a kind of incantatory effect, part prayer, part spell:

The boat he'd stepped off
was lying there like a sleeping giant.
Another boat was pulling in,
ready to unload many more like him.
Maybe Jewish, maybe German
maybe wearing their best shoes.
And maybe trembling
as he is trembling.

This sophisticated production allows us the humble pleasure of submitting to the power of a good story. With the help of a black-and-white digital backdrop and a piano soundtrack performed live, Mendes teaches his audience to see, in a single set—that sleek conference room, with its long table and low sofa—places as disparate as the Lehmans' tiny Montgomery storefront, the New York Stock Exchange, and a stretch of Maryland where the track for a firm-funded railroad will be laid. Banker's boxes transform into a piano, a horse-drawn carriage, and a pair of lampposts, and, in the course

“The Lehman Trilogy” is a fairy tale, told in superb—and perhaps suspect—style.

of the play's three acts (and three-plus hours), the actors transform, too, into the Lehmans' wives, sons, grandsons, and other associates, with little more than the simple magic of an upturned gaze, hunched shoulders, or a flirtatiously flicked wrist.

But the biggest metamorphosis is the firm's. When a fire destroys the cotton crop that the Lehmans' fabric business depends on, the brothers discover that they can make more money if they serve as middlemen to the cotton industry, buying the plantations' raw product to sell to factories up North. After the Civil War lays waste to the South, they reestablish themselves in New York as a bank, investing in goods. That bank eventually becomes a corporation whose product is money itself, with tentacles in markets across the globe and a board whose appetite for wealth is signified onstage by a frenzied sequence in which the twist is danced, literally, to the death.

By the time the play comes full circle, to 2008, you might suspect, as I do, that "The Lehman Trilogy" is a little too in love with the story that it tells so well. When I saw the Armory production, I was struck both by the fact that the Lehmans had established their financial empire on the backs of slaves, and by the play's weird elision of that reality, as if Mendes was reluctant to shine a harsher light on the Lehmans' bootstrap idealism. That oversight has been adjusted somewhat in the current script—also, in a sense, in the casting of Lester, who is Black, and who speaks some pointed lines about the people who "once picked Lehman's cotton" and their descendants' subsequent struggle for civil rights—though no mention is made of the fact that the Lehmans themselves held slaves. Such is the problem with treating so much dense reality as fodder for a fable. "The Lehman Trilogy" ends in mourning for Henry, Emanuel, and Mayer, whose American Dream went up in smoke. By the time it did, it had leveraged and destroyed the dreams of millions of other Americans: the ones whose stories don't figure here.

Down the street from "The Lehman Trilogy," at the Lyceum, is another arresting exercise in the art of storytelling, Lucas Hnath's "Dana H." The play, which uses little more than the spoken

word to snare its audience, asks us both to believe and to question the harrowing things it has to tell us. It is unlike anything I've seen.

In the late nineties, when Hnath was a college student at N.Y.U., his mother, Dana Higginbotham, was kidnapped by a man she had met while working as a psych-ward chaplain at a hospital in Florida. She spent five terrifying months as his captive, hustled back and forth across state lines, while he committed crimes and met up with nefarious associates. (So fearsome is the organization to which this man belonged that reviewers have been asked not to name it.) At the time, Hnath apparently knew nothing of what was happening; nearly twenty years later, as a playwright, he asked a friend, the director and writer Steve Cosson, to tape a series of interviews with his mother about her ordeal.

Hnath's play, directed by Les Waters, is set in a motel room of sinister banality; the role of Dana, a woman in her late fifties with a discreet professional wardrobe and an air of weary, detached calm, is performed by Deirdre O'Connell, who pulls off a titanic feat of emotional and technical prowess. Although she is the only actor onstage, O'Connell's part is a collaboration: sitting in an armchair, a pair of glasses pushed high on her head, she lip-synchs to the real Dana's recorded voice. (Higginbotham is credited in the *Playbill* as an integral member of the production, as she should be.) O'Connell matches every syllable, every pause, every dry, ironic laugh, and, as she does, she gives new meaning to the word "embodied." What we are witnessing is an act of possession, and ultimately of catharsis, deliverance, and release. Is Dana telling the full truth of what happened to her? Has Hnath, who edited the interview recordings—the places where they were cut and spliced are signified with a beep—manipulated his mother's story? It's impossible to say. In the two decades since Dana's escape, she has continued to work as a chaplain, now in hospice, where she helps people meet death without fear. Her interest in religion might inspire us to see our participation in this ritual as a secular act of faith. Night after night, O'Connell accompanies her subject to the darkest places a person can go, and, with the audience as her witness, returns her to the world. ♦

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

WRIT LARGE

"The French Dispatch" and "Dune."

BY ANTHONY LANE

The new work from Wes Anderson, "The French Dispatch," is a portmanteau film. That is to say, it contains a number of narratives—in this instance, four—that are neatly packed together, as if inside a suitcase. In truth, almost all Anderson's movies, hitherto, have borne an air of packing; think of the boat in "The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou" (2004), the train carriages in "The Darjeeling Limited" (2007), or "The Grand Budapest Hotel" (2014), with its stacks of servants and guests. Elegant containment is the norm. Does Anderson like to journey with an actual portmanteau, plastered with old travel stickers and smelling richly of worn leather? I wouldn't bet against it.

Multistory movies need something, even if it's only the voice of a narrator, to link the various parts. In Julien Duvivier's "Tales of Manhattan" (1942), say, a tailcoat is handed on from one section to the next. What binds together "The French Dispatch" is *The French Dispatch*, a fictional English-language magazine. It was, we are told, founded in 1925; produced in France, in the town

of Ennui-sur-Blasé (which I strongly suspect of being fictional, too); and edited by a Midwestern gent named Arthur Howitzer, Jr. (Bill Murray), whose motto is "No crying." Given that the end credits of the film pay specific tribute to Harold Ross and William Shawn, and also to writers such as Mavis Gallant, A. J. Liebling, and Lillian Ross, one can safely state that any resemblance to persons living or dead, or to publications that continue to flourish, is far from coincidental.

Each chunk of Anderson's movie is a dramatization, so to speak, of an article that is submitted to *The French Dispatch*. Our first reporter is Herbsaint Sazerac (Owen Wilson), who provides a tour d'horizon of Ennui-sur-Blasé, much of the touring being done on a bicycle. Then comes J. K. L. Berensen (Tilda Swinton), a vision in juicy orange. She lectures us, through prominent teeth, on the saga of Moses Rosenthaler (Benicio Del Toro), whose roiling oils, painted during his imprisonment for homicide, triggered a quake in the art world. Third in line is Lucinda Krementz (Frances

McDormand), who is caught up in the "biological need for freedom" displayed by student protests—and, indeed, in the embrace of a young firebrand, Zeffirelli (Timothée Chalamet). There's biology for you. Last and dandiest is Roebuck Wright (Jeffrey Wright), a doyen of the Tastes and Smells department, who is hot on the scent of *cuisine gendarmique*. Or, in plain terms, fuzz grub.

Even by Anderson's standards, the crowd of performers is comically dense. Supporting roles go to Elisabeth Moss, Adrien Brody, Willem Dafoe, Saoirse Ronan, Edward Norton, Christoph Waltz, and Léa Seydoux. (The last two, like Jeffrey Wright, can currently be seen in "No Time to Die," which seems to hail from another planet entirely.) Such density is a feature of the portmanteau: "Tales of Manhattan" was loaded with Rita Hayworth, Henry Fonda, Charles Laughton, Charles Boyer, Paul Robeson, Edward G. Robinson, and Ginger Rogers. Now, *that's* a cast. Yet something else arises from the profusion of "The French Dispatch." Here, we realize, is a director who is more at ease with a flurry of pen-and-ink sketches than with the heft of a finished portrait. He has faith in the superior expressive powers of the sketch, plus the knack of arriving, after hard creative labor, at an illusion of the artless and the weightless. If I had to nominate a presiding spirit of this magazine to whom Anderson is indebted, I wouldn't pick a writer at all. My vote would go to Saul Steinberg.

Exhibit A, should you wish to see this Steinbergian economy of wit at play, is one scene, or scenelet, in the jail-bound portion of the film. Moses—a painter incarnate, bearded and besmocked at his easel—faces a naked model by the name of Simone (Seydoux). She stands on a stool, one arm bent gracefully above her head. The atmosphere is wordless but not noiseless; "Shoosh," she exclaims, dismissing him as he draws too near with his brush. Once the session is over, she hops down, nips behind a screen, and emerges fully clothed, in uniform, boots, and a cap. Ah, *now* we get it: Simone is Moses's prison guard. We talk airily of an artist capturing somebody's likeness, or essence, but here, in a beautiful twist, the captor is revealed as the captive, and the male gaze is placed under lock and key.

All of which is a mini-film unto it-

Wes Anderson's star-crammed film is structured as stories reported for a magazine.

self, and also a loving nod, I'd guess, to "Le Modèle," the final chapter in the greatest of all portmanteaux, Max Ophüls's "Le Plaisir" (1952). If anything, Ophüls clung even more tightly to his source—a trio of tales by Maupassant—than Anderson does to this magazine. (Note to hungry pedants: *The French Dispatch* bears a typeface similar, though not identical, to the one that you are reading now.) It must be said, too, that the warmth of feeling that ascends from "Le Plaisir," like incense, lies at a far remove from the glancing coolness in which the new movie is encased. It would be churlish to deny that "The French Dispatch" is a box of delights; Wright, in particular, is a joy as the sauntering hedonist. Equally, though, it would be negligent not to ask of Anderson, now more than ever: What would incite him to think outside the box?

Consider the upheavals that strew the movie's third segment. Homage is being paid, incontestably, to Gallant's two-part account of the Parisian riots which appeared in these pages in 1968. By and large, however, the chaos of that time is proffered onscreen in tableaux; the characters are studiously poised or, as is Anderson's wont, photographed head on. When he presents a standoff between cops and angry youths as a literal chess match, with each side phoning through its next move, he does so not as a reactionary satire—a Swiftian snarl at these spoiled middle-class kids—but purely as a jeu d'esprit. Violence is tranquillized by jokes. I happen to admire anyone who can keep the ruckus of existence at arm's length, for so long and in such style, but I can well imagine other viewers, more politically hands-on, bristling with exasperation, just as Zeffirelli bristles when,

having composed a manifesto, he gives it to the correspondent for *The French Dispatch*. Rather than taking to the streets and brandishing his fervid text like a flag, she proceeds to proofread it. You say you want a revolution? Check your commas first.

Halcyon days, for anyone who liquefies at the sight of Timothée Chalamet. In "The French Dispatch," he has a wraith of a mustache and a burst of insurrectionary hair, and claims to be "shy about my new muscles." His what? The theme is maintained in "Dune," in which Chalamet looks moony, bony, boyish, and bloodlessly pale. He plays the hero, Paul Atreides, whose messianic mission, foretold in dreary dreams, may or may not be to lead an oppressed people out of bondage. One of Paul's initial duties is to undergo tuition in single combat, although, to be honest, he doesn't need weapons training. He needs half a dozen lamb chops and a side of spinach.

The movie is adapted from Frank Herbert's novel of the same name, published in 1965. The director is Denis Villeneuve, following boldly in the wake of David Lynch, whose film of the book, in 1984, turned into one of cinema's most celebrated shipwrecks. The plot remains roughly the same. "The emperor of the known universe," whoever he may be, dispatches Paul's father, Duke Leto Atreides (Oscar Isaac), and his clan to take over from the Harkonnens (a real bunch of bruisers) on the dun-colored planet of Arrakis, there to continue the vital harvesting of "spice." This, allegedly, is the most valuable of all substances, for it aids interstellar travel. But is the assignment a privilege or a trap?

Even Herbert's fans, of whom there

are armies, would struggle to defend him as a natural namer. Paul comes from Caladan, which sounds like something you rub onto insect bites. Many of the characters are scarcely more than anagrams: Thufir Hawat, Gurney Halleck, Liet Kynes. As for Duncan Idaho (Jason Momoa), he is not, as you might think, an official mascot of the potato industry but a beefy warrior—and, in the event, the best thing in the film. Momoa seems to sense that the story is wandering dazedly hither and thither, none too fast, and needs punching awake. Hence the bracing moment at which Duncan pulls off his gloves and enters a fight, bare-fisted, against impossible odds.

Despite the presence of actors such as Josh Brolin, Rebecca Ferguson, and, under a mound of evil blubber, Stellan Skarsgård, and notwithstanding the cool mechanical dragonflies that people zip around in, much is amiss in Villeneuve's "Dune." Of the emotional pressure that he exerted in "Arrival" (2016), little remains, and such power as the new film does possess is grounded in simple immensity: giant redoubts, gianter spacecraft, and, giantest of all, sandworms that plow through the desert and cry out to be caught by humongous early birds. One's eye is at first dazzled, then sated, and eventually tired by this pitiless inflation of scale. And here's the funny bit. On the same day that "Dune" is released in cinemas, it will also be available, thanks to HBO Max and the wisdom of Warner Bros., on your TV. Nice plan, guys. It's like trying to stuff a cornfield into a cereal box. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Drew Dernavich, must be received by Sunday, October 31st. The finalists in the October 18th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the November 15th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

THE FINALISTS



“Most people only have roadside assistance.”
Georgiana Atkins Havill, Winter Park, Fla.

“I said I wanted it out of the yard.”
Margaret Bradford, Mills River, N.C.

*“He hasn't proposed yet, but he did
give me a written estimate.”*
Richard Marcil, Macomb Township, Mich.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“By any chance, are you sitting on a large X?”
Michael Gobin, East Providence, R.I.

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Image reflects an artist rendering; actual building may vary.

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THE CROSSWORD

A lightly challenging puzzle.

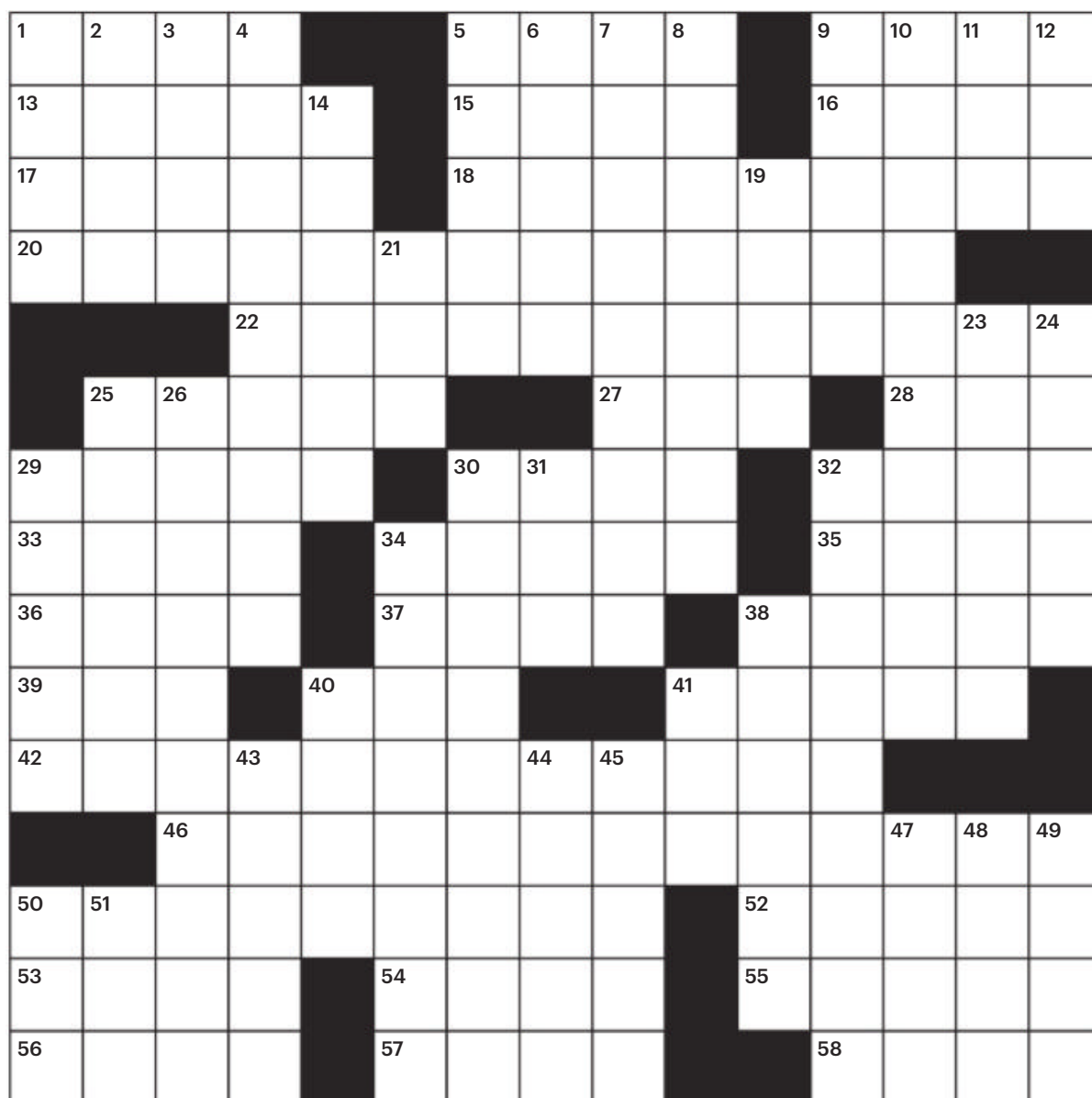
BY ROBYN WEINTRAUB

ACROSS

- 1 Chesapeake Bay delicacy
- 5 Venomous Egyptian snakes
- 9 “___ skies are gonna clear up” (“Put on a Happy Face” lyric)
- 13 Agitates
- 15 “Get out of here!”
- 16 “The Tortoise and the Hare” event
- 17 Confess (to)
- 18 Seasonal worker with a unique dress code
- 20 They make a big splash
- 22 Futuristic spherical structure designed by Buckminster Fuller
- 25 Book in a mosque
- 27 “Bad decision . . .”
- 28 Time-saving purchase for a baker
- 29 Conned
- 30 “Ignore that edit”
- 32 Make a trade
- 33 Coronation, e.g.
- 34 Widemouthed pitchers
- 35 “Bye-bye!”
- 36 Privy to, as a scheme
- 37 Prejudice
- 38 2020 mockumentary “___ Subsequent Moviefilm”
- 39 Hair-dryer setting
- 40 Site for a comfy chair
- 41 Social conventions
- 42 Ship-to-shore group
- 46 Post-office offerings since 2007
- 50 Area that might require extra homeowner’s insurance
- 52 Hunter who sports an astronomically large belt
- 53 Wine’s partner
- 54 Europe’s tallest active volcano
- 55 R. & B. artist Marilyn who hosted “Solid Gold”
- 56 Synagogue cabinets
- 57 “Mudbound” writer-director Dee
- 58 Belgrade native

DOWN

- 1 Unwelcome visitor in a cornfield
- 2 It’s nearest to the front of a stage
- 3 “___ Misbehavin’”
- 4 Cyan or turquoise
- 5 Comparable to a hatter or a wet hen
- 6 Sedimentary rock well suited to preserving fossils
- 7 Election-season analysts
- 8 They don’t mind playing by themselves
- 9 Baby ___ piano
- 10 Nefarious program that holds data hostage
- 11 Take the stage
- 12 “I support this bill”
- 14 Nutella, e.g.
- 19 Item frequently missing from the laundry
- 21 Appétit or voyage preceder
- 23 Mazda roadsters
- 24 Person who might adopt a new language
- 25 “Grain” that’s actually a seed
- 26 2015 No. 1 hit with the repeated line “Don’t believe me, just watch”
- 29 Fearsome machine at the dentist’s office
- 30 Difference-maker in a 5–4 Supreme Court decision
- 31 Drink with finger sandwiches, perhaps
- 32 Narratives that might build over multiple TV episodes
- 34 He’s a Scrooge
- 38 Denominator’s spot in a fraction
- 40 Crushed Oreos, whimsically, in some desserts
- 41 Title dropped by the spice brand Dash in 2020
- 43 Hands (out)
- 44 Rigatoni relative
- 45 Geometry calculations
- 47 Cinderella’s tiny dressmakers, in the 1950 Disney film
- 48 “Give me your tired, your ___ . . .”
- 49 Judgy sort
- 50 Government agcy. that regulates Nutrition Facts labels
- 51 It’s mostly nitrogen and oxygen



Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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