PRICE $8.99

THE NEW YORKER

NOV. 29, 2021

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC AND ROLEX PERPETUAL
PLANET TUPUNGATO VOLCANO EXPEDITION TEAM

TOPHER WHITE,
CONSERVATION TECHNOLOGIST

CRISTIAN DONOSO,
EXPLORER

FRANCESCO SAURO,
EXPLORER

GHISLAIN BARDOUT,
EXPLORER

WHAT DO THEY SEEK?

Explorers, adventurers, scientists. Men and women who always broadened the horizons, for all humankind to share. Rolex was at their side when they reached the deepest point in the oceans, the highest summits of the Earth, the deepest jungles and both poles. But now that we know, more than ever, that our world has its limits, why do they continue to venture out there, again and again? Certainly not for kudos, accolades, or an ephemeral record. What they truly seek is to understand more intimately how complex and delicate our planet is, to document its change and how together, we can affect it for the better. So as long as they need it, we will be at their side. Because today, the real discovery is not so much about finding new lands. It's about looking with new eyes at the marvels of our planet, rekindling our sense of wonder, and acting to preserve our pale blue dot in the universe…
Doing our very best for a Perpetual Planet.

#Perpetual

OYSTER PERPETUAL
EXPLORER II

ROLEX

FOR AN OFFICIAL ROLEX JEWELER VISIT ROLEX.COM
ROLEX ♛ OYSTER PERPETUAL AND EXPLORER II ARE ® TRADEMARKS. NEW YORK

THE NEW YORKER

THE TRAVEL ISSUE

NOVEMBER 29, 2021

DRAWINGS *Robert Leighton, Farley Katz, Barbara Smaller, Edward Koren, Johnny DiNapoli, P. C. Vey, Victoria Roberts, Liana Finck, Harry Bliss, Oren Bernstein, Max Wittert, Paul Noth* SPOTS *Giacomo Gambineri*

"Our relationship with First Republic has helped us change the way that we bank and run our business."

THE URBAN GRAPE

TJ Douglas, Co-Founder and CEO (left); Hadley Douglas, Co-Founder and CMO (right)

FIRST REPUBLIC BANK

It's a privilege to serve you®

(855) 886-4824 | firstrepublic.com | New York Stock Exchange symbol: FRC

MEMBER FDIC AND EQUAL HOUSING LENDER

CONTRIBUTORS

William Finnegan (*"Finding a Way Up," p. 46*) has been a staff writer since 1987. His book "Barbarian Days" won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for biography.

Rebecca Mead (*"Pompeii's Hidden Layer," p. 38*), a staff writer since 1997, is the author of "My Life in Middlemarch." Her memoir "Home/Land" is forthcoming in 2022.

Greg Jackson (*Fiction, p. 72*) has published the short-story collection "Prodigals." His début novel, "The Dimensions of a Cave," will be out in 2023.

Megan Fernandes (*Poem, p. 53*) is the author of the poetry collection "Good Boys."

Carlos Lozada (*Books, p. 86*), a book critic at the Washington *Post*, received the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. His first book, "What Were We Thinking," came out last year.

Emily Flake (*Sketchbook, p. 70*), a *New Yorker* cartoonist, most recently published "That Was Awkward."

Nicola Twilley (*"The Garden of Forking Paths," p. 58*), a frequent contributor to the magazine, is a co-host of the podcast "Gastropod." She has written, with Geoff Manaugh, "Until Proven Safe: The History and Future of Quarantine."

Ed Caesar (*"Only Disconnect," p. 30*) is a contributing staff writer. His latest book, "The Moth and the Mountain," came out in 2020.

Rachel Betesh (*Poem, p. 77*), a registered nurse, a gardener, and a poet, is at work on her first book.

Roz Chast (*Sketchbook, p. 70*), a longtime *New Yorker* cartoonist, published, with Patricia Marx, "You Can Only Yell at Me for One Thing at a Time."

Natan Last (*Puzzles & Games Dept.*) researches and writes about refugee and immigration issues. He is also a poet and the author of "Word."

Diana Ejaita (*Cover*) is an illustrator and a textile designer based in Berlin and Lagos.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

ANNALS OF INQUIRY

Zoey Poll writes about a dispute over a mountain lodge on the Alpine border between Italy and Switzerland.

ANNALS OF MEDICINE

Matthew Hutson on the search for a "universal" vaccine that could bring the flu pandemic to an end.

Download the New Yorker app for the latest news, commentary, criticism, and humor, plus this week's magazine and all issues back to 2008.

LEFT: ZOEY POLL; RIGHT: NICHOLAS KONRAD

THE MAIL

ABUSING TROUBLED TEENS

Rachel Aviv's disturbing dive into the cultlike affairs of the Christian teen-reform organization Teen Challenge reminded me of the notorious Magdalene Laundries, which existed in Ireland for more than a century ("Lost Youth," October 18th). These institutions isolated and essentially imprisoned young mothers, harmed them psychologically, and separated them from their children—and Teen Challenge does the same. Readers should be angered that the Teen Challenge network continues to operate with the tacit acceptance of, and little oversight by, legal authorities. I hope that Aviv's exposé will open the eyes of parents and bring an end to these hellish, un-Christlike facilities.

Richard H. Allan III
Charlottesville, Va.

GENERATIONAL DIVIDES

As an associate professor of psychology and the author of the book "Generation Disaster," about today's emerging adults, I share much of Louis Menand's skepticism of broad-brush assumptions about generational differences and similarities (Books, October 18th). I also believe that there is value in recognizing how the timing of collective events affects individuals' experiences. What's often missing from these conversations, however, is an assessment of just how calamitous the world has felt for current adolescents and young adults. Thanks to the rise of 24/7 media exposure and connectivity, those born in the decade leading up to 9/11 and since have only known a world immediately threatened by terrorism, war, school shootings, economic collapse, racial inequities, a growing wealth divide, and the existential peril of climate change.

This cohort is socially, politically, and economically diverse, and I would never attempt to reduce its members to a sound bite. But, for many of them, the "normal" we've arrived at seems anything but, and the power structure, dominated by older adults, seems hopelessly entrenched. These perceptions, accurate or not, shape their world views and affect their mental health. In the words of one man, born in 2000, whom I interviewed for my book, "I've grown up in the twenty-first century, where disasters happen every twenty minutes." I hope we can be more understanding of why people in this generation are often anxious and angry about the world they're inheriting, instead of reflexively comparing their situations with those of past generations.

Karla Vermeulen
SUNY New Paltz
Clintondale, N.Y.

Menand cites the media's imprecision and misrepresentation as reasons to disregard generalizations about Generation Z, millennials, Generation X, and baby boomers. As a Gen X-er, I might react to that rationale by ignoring distinctions between these groups. However, as a psychologist who studies generations and intergenerational conflict, I think that if researchers stopped studying concepts that are imprecisely measured or inaccurately discussed by the media we would quickly run out of topics to study. Differences between generations have become more important because the pace of technological and communication innovations has created age-based disparities in what we collectively experience and value. We all would benefit if the media focussed on how cross-generational collaboration and generational distinctions can improve society, rather than on their roles in fostering the culture wars.

Jennifer Wisdom
Professor of Public Health
Oregon Health and Science University and Portland State University
Portland, Ore.

•

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

AS

"ASTONISHING"

"JUBILANT"

"MESMERIZING"

"HOPEFUL"

AS IT EVER WAS.

DAVID BYRNE'S AMERICAN UTOPIA

NOW ON BROADWAY

STRICTLY LIMITED ENGAGEMENT

ST. JAMES THEATRE • 246 W. 44TH ST. • AMERICANUTOPIABROADWAY.COM

As New York City venues reopen, it's advisable to confirm in advance the requirements for in-person attendance.

NOVEMBER 24 – 30, 2021

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

Ice-skating has been popular in New York City since at least the seventeenth century, when the Dutch laced up on the frozen ponds of New Amsterdam. And the father of modern figure skating, Jackson Haines, was a native New Yorker, born in 1840. There are plenty of ice rinks in the five boroughs, but only the seventeen-thousand-square-foot **Rink at Bryant Park** (pictured) is free. Whether you rent skates there or bring your own blades, masks are required, as are timed-entry tickets (available via bryantpark.org).

PHOTOGRAPH BY DIANE COOK AND LEN JENSHEL

MUSIC

Dev/Null: "Microjunglizm"

ELECTRONIC The Bostonian Pete Devnull, who produces electronic dance music as Dev/Null, is a self-described "rave archivist"; he posts many excellent mixes of nineties tracks on his site, Blog to the Old Skool. His new album, "Microjunglizm," is a modernistic variation on early-nineties breakbeat hardcore, the slap-happy style that would later take sleeker shape as jungle and drum and bass. Devnull occasionally upends a track's tonal center with contemporary production tricks—effects that pop out of the mix and float along its already effervescent surface.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

Mary Lattimore

EXPERIMENTAL In more than a decade of work as a celestial composer and a prolific collaborator, the harpist Mary Lattimore—who is Los Angeles-based, but often roves—has earned a reputation for modular movement: fitting into physical spaces and sonic contexts that one might not expect from the carrier of such a colossal instrument. Her recent endeavors put the literal weightiness of the harp itself into her deep, entrancing music, including the EP "GAINER," with the noise band Growing, and her quaking 2020 album, "Silver Ladders"—produced by Neal Halstead, of the shoegaze band Slowdive—in which her chiming notes glide into and echo beyond blistering drones. A predilection for adventure, and an embrace of the unknown, ring loud and clear. Lattimore shares this sense of fluidity with her current tourmate, Ana Roxanne, an ambient artist whose poetic début album, "Because of a Flower," from 2020, was a luminous balm. They each fill the intimate room of Union Pool with poised possibility.—*Jenn Pelly (Dec. 1 at 8.)*

Metropolitan Opera: "La Bohème"

CLASSICAL Franco Zeffirelli's production of "La Bohème," a sure thing with audiences season after season, has long provided a platform for introducing new talent to the house. In its present run, the focus is on the orchestra pit, where Eun Sun Kim—who's already made history as the first female music director of the San Francisco Opera—is conducting at the Met for the first time. This year's appealing cast includes Anita Hartig as Mimì, Federica Lombardi as Musetta, Charles Castronovo as Rodolfo, and Artur Ruciński as Marcello.—*Steve Smith (Metropolitan Opera House; Nov. 26 at 7 and Nov. 29 at 8.)*

New York Philharmonic

CLASSICAL The outsized celebrity Joshua Bell has attained during a professional career that now extends past the three-decade mark can overshadow an enduring truth: Bell's sterling technique and onstage impetuosity make him an ideal advocate for thrice-familiar works from the mainstream canon, which assume new life in his hands. For his latest Philharmonic appearance, he performs Beethoven's Violin Concerto in D Major; the Phil's music director, Jaap van Zweden, also conducts Chen Yi's "Duo Ye" and Stravinsky's "Pulcinella" Suite.—*S.S. (Alice Tully Hall; Nov. 24 at 7:30 and Nov. 26-27 at 8.)*

SOUL

After a lengthy delay, the singer Bruno Mars and the drummer Anderson .Paak finally share their long-awaited collaborative album, **"An Evening with Silk Sonic,"** which finds comfort and warmth in the earnestness and fidelity of throwback soul. Originally conceived during the pandemic as a tonic for an extended period without concerts, the record attempts to simulate the feel of live performance. The actual project comes up short of this objective, but it stands as its own lower-stakes achievement. Teaming up with prominent soul figures of the past and present—the P-Funk legend Bootsy Collins, the R. & B. crooner Babyface, the H.E.R. producer D'Mile, the bassist Thundercat, the multi-instrumentalist Boo Mitchell, and more—the duo create a meticulous pastiche that plays into their individual skill sets and their unbelievable chemistry. Though only nine tracks long, with four of those previously shared, the feel-good album has proved worth the wait, if only for "Put On a Smile," a charged avowal that finds the two playboys penitent.—*Sheldon Pearce*

Wadada Leo Smith: "A Love Sonnet for Billie Holiday"

JAZZ One might assert that Wadada Leo Smith has had the most momentous second act in jazz history, considering how few witnessed his first one. But there is a noteworthy disparity between the decades that saw this ceaselessly creative trumpeter and composer investigating the outer boundaries of the avant-garde and his years of visible ascent, beginning in the nineties, which found him continually performing and recording (and even making room for a Pulitzer Prize nomination, in 2013). Among the avalanche of albums that celebrate Smith's eightieth birthday is the new "A Love Sonnet for Billie Holiday," which puts Smith in the inspiring company of both the pianist Vijay Iyer and the drummer Jack DeJohnette for the first time.—*Steve Futterman*

THE THEATRE

Cullud Wattah

This powerful new play, written by Erika Dickerson-Despenza and directed by Candis C. Jones, begins with a poetic overture: Five Black women are dressed in white, like priestesses. One of them, seemingly the youngest, gets into a tub; the rest stand around her in a semicircle, spouting phrases and snatches of song. Then a family play begins—utterly realistic, but shot through with the spectral music and religious intensity of that opening. Marion (Crystal Dickinson) is a stressed-out mom, sister, and daughter in Flint, Michigan. She counts bottles of clean water, and money for her multiplying bills. She's a G.M. employee, like her mother, Big Ma (Lizan Mitchell), before her. Her daughter Plum (Alicia Pilgrim) is sick—likely poisoned by the water—and her sister, Ainee (Andrea Patterson), has her eye on a lawsuit against the state. On an astounding water-overwhelmed

ILLUSTRATION BY RACHELLE BAKER

Google

We keep more people safe online than anyone else in the world.

Safer with Google

What do the movie star Cary Grant, the Republican diplomat Clare Boothe Luce, and the author Aldous Huxley have in common? One answer: they all experimented with LSD before its hippie heyday. Another: they are the protagonists of the new musical **"Flying Over Sunset,"** which imagines the three mid-century luminaries taking an acid trip together in nineteen-fifties Hollywood. James Lapine wrote the book and directs the Lincoln Center Theatre production (in previews, opening on Dec. 13, at the Vivian Beaumont), with music by Tom Kitt and lyrics by Michael Korie. Tony Yazbeck plays Grant, Carmen Cusack plays Luce, and Harry Hadden-Paton, last seen at the Beaumont as Professor Henry Higgins, in "My Fair Lady," plays Huxley.—*Michael Schulman*

set by Adam Rigg, the women grope toward a future but keep sifting through their shared past.—*Vinson Cunningham (Public Theatre; through Dec. 12.)*

Dana H.

In the late nineties, when the playwright Lucas 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. Nearly twenty years later, as a playwright, Hnath asked a friend, the director and writer Steve Cosson, to tape a series of interviews with his mother about her ordeal. In Hnath's play, directed by Les Waters (in repertory with "Is This a Room," at the Lyceum), the role of Dana 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 takes part in a collaboration: sitting in an armchair, she lip-synchs to the real Dana's recorded voice. What audiences witness is an act of possession, and ultimately of catharsis, deliverance, and release.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Reviewed in our issue of 11/1/21.) (Through Nov. 28.)*

Is This a Room

Conceived and directed by Tina Satter, this play—in the Vineyard Theatre's stellar Broadway staging, at the Lyceum—takes as its text the transcript of the F.B.I.'s visit to the home of the whistle-blower Reality Winner, on June 3, 2017. The production pounces on its found script with perverse, bravura precision. Reality Winner (Emily Davis) was a twenty-five-year-old former Air Force language analyst who had been working as a Farsi translator for a military contractor when the F.B.I. agents Garrick (Pete Simpson) and Taylor (Will Cobbs) came to interrogate her at her house, in Augusta, Georgia. The naturalism demanded by the script—all that fumbling and crosstalk—requires razor-sharp timing, and Simpson and Davis have honed theirs to metronomic precision. It is startling, while watching these two formidable actors match each other beat for beat, to realize the extent to which the actual Reality Winner accepted the conventions of the genre she found herself trapped in. Deflection, denial, confession, motive: they are all there.—*A.S. (10/25/21) (Through Nov. 27.)*

Medicine

In the common room of a psychiatric hospital, an inmate (Domhnall Gleeson) attempts to tell his life story with the supposed aid of two drama therapists named Mary (Clare Barrett and Aoife Duffin) and a drummer (Sean Carpio). Written and directed by Enda Walsh, this absurdist drama never says what's real and what isn't, but its theme—the lovelessness with which mental patients are too often treated—is chillingly clear. This particular blend of slapstick and despair inevitably brings to mind Walsh's fellow-Irishman Samuel Beckett, although only Walsh would include an extended dance break to Earth, Wind & Fire. Gleeson, with his gangly, wounded presence, somehow makes his character's very unobtrusiveness loom over the stage, and Barrett and Duffin make a superb comic duo.—*Rollo Romig (St. Ann's Warehouse; through Dec. 5.)*

Morning Sun

Simon Stephens's new play (directed by the talented Lila Neugebauer, for Manhattan Theatre Club) is a dreamily extended riff on the life of Charley McBride (Edie Falco), who has lived in the same apartment, in Greenwich Village, for most of her life. She's sandwiched between generations—her mother, Claudette (Blair Brown), and her daughter, Tessa (Marin Ireland). Her life is unsung, and the telling of it is a chance to make it all glimmer, however softly, with meaning. A fleeting encounter gives her the sharp surprise of a baby—Tessa—and a subsequent life as a single mom. Later, she meets a man at a museum who guards a room with a painting by Edward Hopper, her favorite painter. The procession of place names that runs through the play can feel like corny pandering, but it's to Stephens's credit that he keeps the particulars of Charley's life pinned to the political and cultural events that spin around her. Edie Falco is a wonderful vehicle for all this thought. Her face is open and tender; her eyes stretch out easily, embodying all the wonders and the unspeakable fears of childhood—including the ones that last a lifetime.—*V.C. (11/15/21) (City Center Stage I; through Dec. 19.)*

Nollywood Dreams

The diasporic mélange of a culture forged in both Africa and the Caribbean—a product of troubled national and colonial histories and irrepressible creativity—is the theme that hums excitingly under this new play by Jocelyn Bioh (directed by Saheem Ali, for MCC). Set in Lagos, Nigeria, in the Technicolor nineteen-nineties, it tells a story whose backdrop is the early upsurge of Nollywood, that burst of off-kilter, melodramatic cinematic invention which has, in the decades since, helped make Nigeria a formidable engine of global entertainment. Ayamma Okafor (Sandra Okuboyejo) and Dede Okafor (Nana Mensah), sisters who work at their parents' travel agency, have a finely honed comic patter. When Ayamma auditions for the leading female role in a new film by a famous Nigerian director, Gbenga Ezie (Charlie Hudson III), she is pitted hilariously against Fayola Ogunleye (Emana Rachelle), an established starlet whom the tabloids call "the Nigerian Halle Berry with Tina Turner legs." The show is quick and bodacious, funny and well built. It avoids smoothing itself down into an onstage sitcom—a possible risk in hands less sure than Bioh's—by keeping its focus on the many kinds of performance that it takes to create a new industry.—*V.C. (MCC Theatre; through Nov. 28.)*

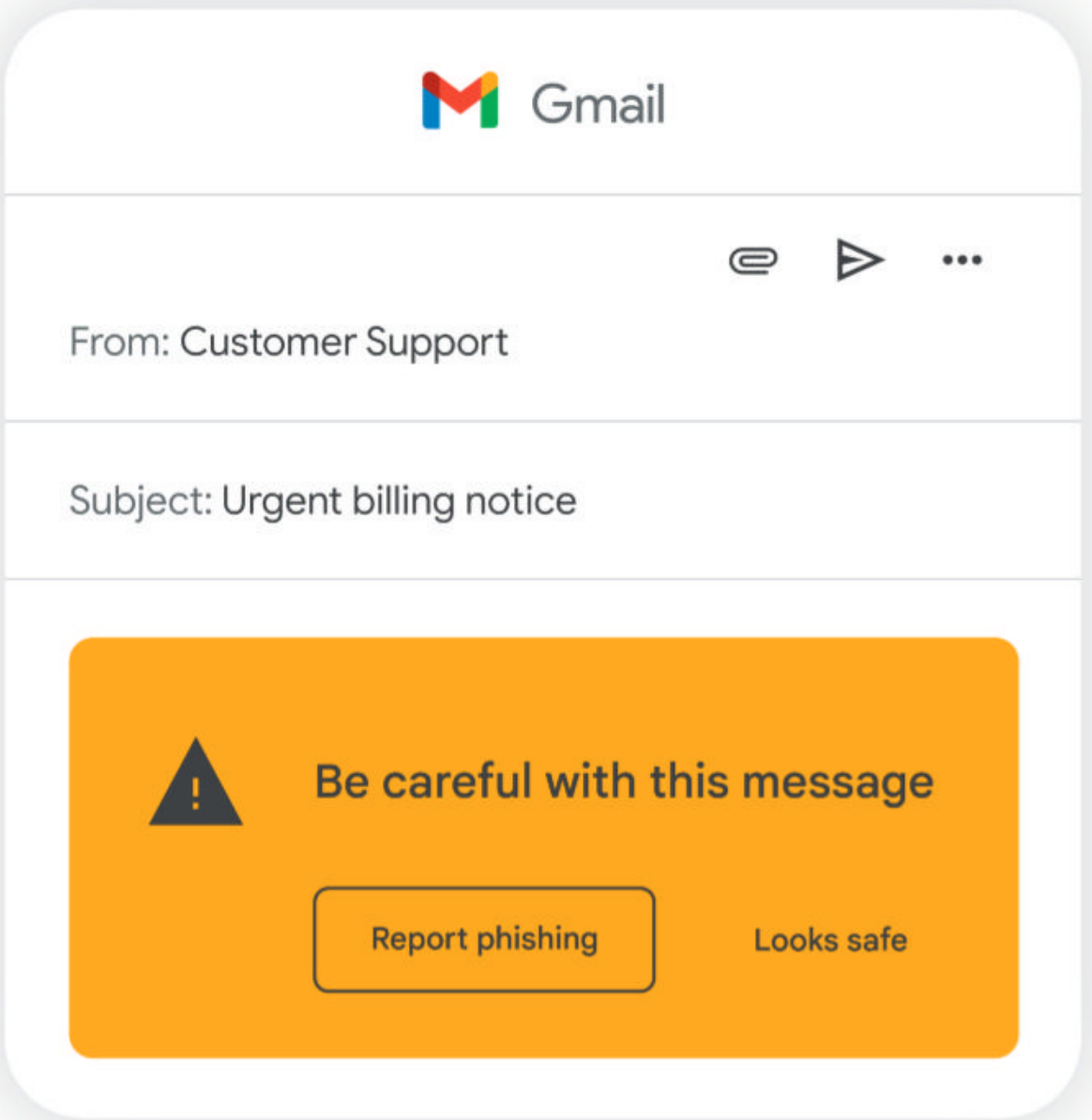
while you were partying

This show, created by Peter Mills Weiss and Julia Mounsey with Brian Fiddyment, begins with Mounsey playing a recording of herself telling a (possibly true) story: after an extremely awkward pandemic-era evening she spent with a childhood friend named Brian, she promises him that she'll write a "comedy sketch" about his recent suicide attempt. The rest of the play is that sketch, and it is deranged. Mills Weiss, as Brian's mom, has a deadpan so impenetrable that it reads as pure menace. Fiddyment, at the other end of the spectrum, plays Brian as so giddy with unfocussed energy and so red with rage that you fear he'll pop. The piece's unnerving tastelessness feels highly attuned to the current moment, in which everyone is angry and everything is mediated.—*R.R. (Soho Rep; through Dec. 12.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW KAM

Google

Every day Google blocks 100 million phishing attempts,



keeping scammers out of your inbox.

We keep more people safe online than anyone else with products that are secure by default, private by design, and put you in control.

Safer with Google

g.co/safety

CELEBRATING THE HOLIDAYS

"Christmas Spectacular Starring the Radio City Rockettes"

The country's leading precision dance troupe, the leggy Rockettes, strut their stuff once more at Radio City Music Hall. Several times per day, the theatre is engulfed in video projections and torrents of fake snow, and, in one sweet passage, the stage is transformed into a miniature skating rink. *(Through Jan. 2.)*

Neapolitan Crèche

A spruce tree graces the entrance to the Medieval Sculpture Hall at the Metropolitan Museum. Eighteenth-century terra-cotta angels in silk robes deck its boughs; at the tree's base is an elaborate tableau of Baroque figurines, representing both the Nativity, in Bethlehem, and the bustle of daily life in the Italian port city of Naples. *(Through Jan. 9.)*

Holiday Train Show

Santa's sleigh isn't the only magical transportation this time of year. At the New York Botanical Garden, model trains chug past some hundred and seventy-five New York City landmarks—from the Statue of Liberty to One World Trade Center—each enchantingly re-created, at Lilliputian scale, out of acorns, pine cones, twigs, and other plant matter. To mark the Holiday Train Show's thirtieth anniversary, the nearly half-mile-long track will be graced for the first time by a model of the Garden's own LuEsther T. Mertz Library, a Renaissance Revival building that was completed in 1901. *(Through Jan. 23.)*

Origami Ornaments

In the nineteen-sixties, Alice Gray, an entomologist at the American Museum of Natural History, and an origami enthusiast, decorated a small tree in her office with folded-paper insects. The festive practice caught on, and, in 1971, it became a formal fixture of the museum's holiday season. The tree's theme each year aligns with a concurrent exhibition; to celebrate this year's golden anniversary, the ornaments include gilt-paper replicas of the geological marvels on view in the recently renovated Halls of Gems and Minerals. *(Nov. 24-Jan. 2.)*

"A Christmas Carol"

Beginning on Nov. 24, the Morgan Library & Museum continues its long-standing tradition of displaying the original manuscript of Charles Dickens's holiday classic "A Christmas Carol," first published in 1843. This year, in a gift for ghost-story fans, the museum turns to page 5, which contains Scrooge's first mention of his former business partner, Jacob Marley, who will soon haunt the tale: " 'Mr. Marley has been dead these seven years,' Scrooge replied. 'He died seven years ago, this very night.' " A less spooky mood will prevail on Sunday, Dec. 12, when the Morgan hosts its Holiday Family Fair (2-4 P.M.), featuring a screening of "The Muppet Christmas Carol," among other events. *(Nov. 24-Jan. 9.)*

"George Balanchine's The Nutcracker"

New York City Ballet's "Nutcracker" is back, and so are the battalions of young dancers, all vaccinated, who fill out its ranks. This is the only production in the city in which one can hear Tchaikovsky's full, sparkling score played live, and see such dancers as Sara Mearns, Tiler Peck, and Megan Fairchild fly through the air as the Sugarplum Fairy and Dewdrop. *(David H. Koch Theatre; Nov. 26-Jan. 2.)*

"SLEIGH at BAM"

If holiday sweetness has you longing for vinegar, look no further than Kiki and Herb, the ferocious nonagenarian creations of Justin Vivian Bond and Kenny Mellman. Since forming their demented lounge act in San Francisco, in the late eighties, the duo has become an undying fixture of the downtown cabaret scene. At BAM's Harvey Theatre, the clawed diva Kiki DuRane performs off-brand covers and spiked holiday classics with her devoted accompanist, Herb. *(Nov. 30-Dec. 4.)*

Jingle Ball 2021

In the past decade, iHeartRadio's Jingle Ball has become a modern tradition that invites megastars to perform never-before-heard covers of holiday favorites in sold-out arenas. Last year, with COVID still raging, the show could be experienced only online, but the festive extravaganza returns to Madison Square Garden for 2021. Pop music gets merry with performances from the dance-pop diva Dua Lipa, the provocateur Lil Nas X, the multi-hyphenate Doja Cat, the singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran, the pop-rock trio the Jonas Brothers, the progressive country star Kane Brown, and more. *(Dec. 10.)*

"Messy Messiah"

Heartbeat Opera has moved its annual drag show from Halloween to Christmas, and it's dialling up the audacity with an original pastiche. A veritable smorgasbord of holiday fare, the show serves up bite-size portions of Handel's beloved oratorio alongside bonbons from Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker" and Strauss's "Die Fledermaus." This broad sampling of winter-themed selections extends far enough to include "A Charlie Brown Christmas." It's either a skewering of the predictability of classical holiday programming or an embrace of the comfort such productions represent—or perhaps both. *(Roulette; Dec. 16-17.)*

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

In 1993, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center started a holiday tradition with its presentation of Bach's dazzling, uplifting Brandenburg Concertos. Proof that absolute music has a place in year-end celebrations, this collection of concerti grossi bursts with moment-to-moment buoyancy, born out of compositional invention and lively solo writing. Bach expounded on the typical form of a concerto grosso—in which a small string contingent share soloist duties against a larger band—by including brass and woodwinds. The result is joyful, effervescent, and, yes, festive. *(Alice Tully Hall; Dec. 17, Dec. 19, and Dec. 21.)*

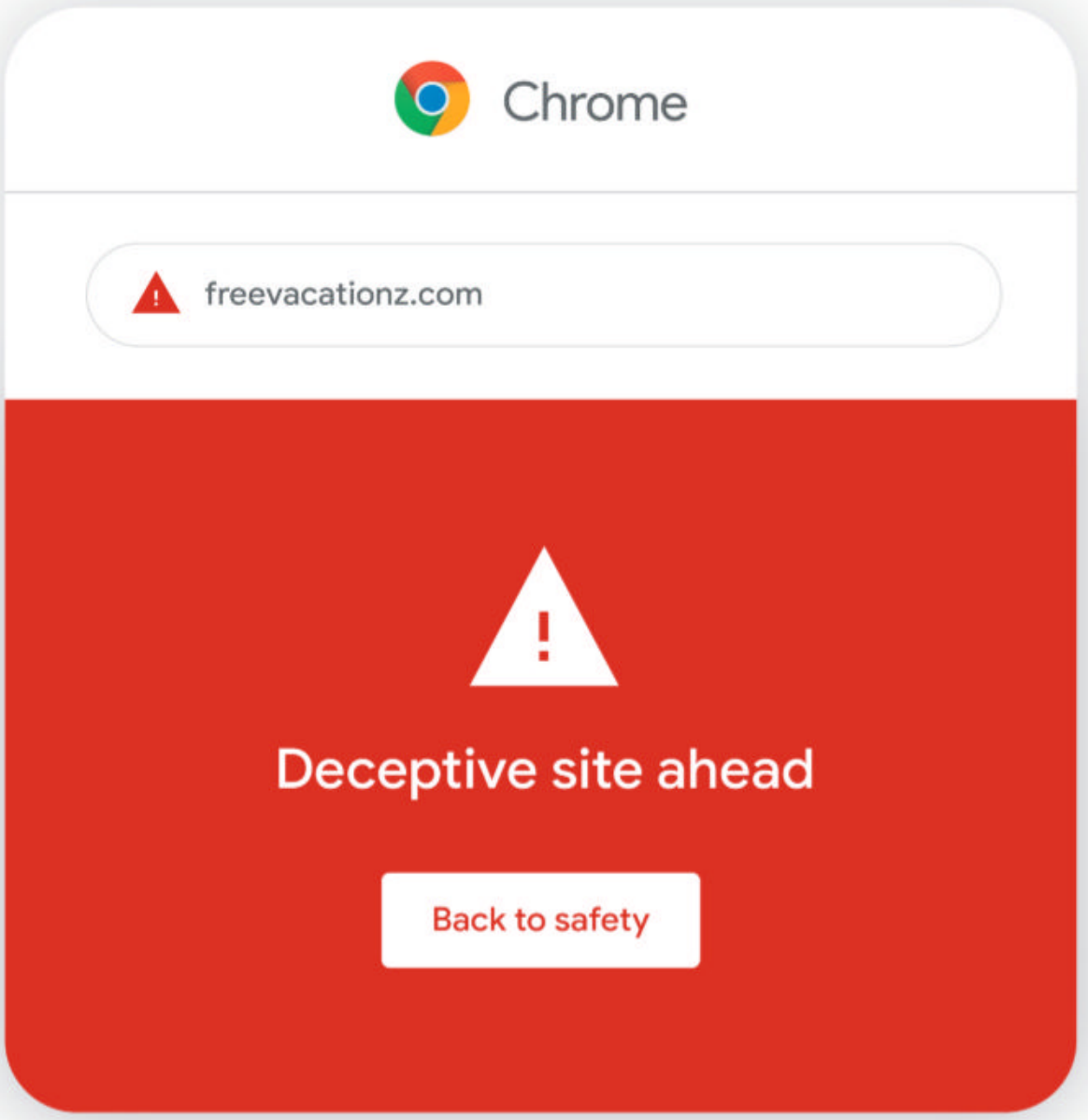
"Unsilent Night"

New Yorkers have been gathering for Phil Kline's "Unsilent Night" since 1992, but his work is uniquely suited to these pandemic times. The free, outdoor event began as a modern-day update to carolling: instead of singing, participants set off from Washington Square Park carrying boom boxes, each blaring one of the composition's four instrumental parts, which commingle in the winter air as an atmospheric cloud of electronics and samples. Nowadays, most carollers attach speakers to their smartphones, but Kline still loans out his vintage Panasonic stereos to those who are susceptible to nineties nostalgia. *(Dec. 19.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY MIN HEO

Google

Every day Google protects 4 billion devices from risky sites,



shielding you from malware.

We keep more people safe online than anyone else with products that are secure by default, private by design, and put you in control.

Safer with Google

g.co/safety

ART

Genieve Figgis

The faces of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century nobility—unidentified characters, unbound by obligations to historical accuracy—are rendered stricken, smushed, or cadaverous in this Irish artist's gooey whorls of acrylic paint. In some dozen recent canvases, on view at the Almine Rech gallery, Figgis imagines a fanciful European past, populated mostly by ladies, who appear both sickly sweet and ghastly. Powdered wigs, parasols, parlors, and formal gardens emerge from muddled flurries of wet-on-wet brushwork. The seductive, ham-fisted weirdness of her figuration (not to mention her interest in aristocracy) may recall the paintings of Karen Kilimnik, but Figgis takes a distinct pleasure in her medium's cake-frosting viscosity, and has an Edward Gorey-worthy flair for the macabre. Group portraits are a favorite motif; among the highlights of this exhibition are the cream-and-coral-hued "Trip to Egypt," which shows an imperialist entourage posing beside the Sphinx, and "Victorian People," in which a colorful crowd is haunted by more than a few drippy pastel ghosts.—*Johanna Fateman (alminerech.com)*

"Milford Graves: Fundamental Frequency"

The extraordinary percussionist Milford Graves didn't keep time—he set it free, seeing beyond the convention of drummer-as-metronome and tuning into the polyrhythmic vibrations of the body. (His interest in heartbeats led to professional training as a cardiac technician and years of EKG-inspired improvisations.) Graves, who died in February, at the age of seventy-nine, is legendary for his metamorphic free jazz, but his creative vision enlightened much more than music, as this abundant exhibition at Artists Space makes joyously clear. A revered martial artist, Graves invented a new form called Yara—Yoruba for "nimble"—which he taught in a dojo he ran from his family's Queens home, where he also maintained a lush garden in his role as an herbalist. The hand-painted, embellished "Yara Training Bag," made around 1990, that greets visitors at the entrance to the show prefigures the bristling, shamanic sculptures Graves began to create near the end of his life—always breaking new ground.—*Andrea K. Scott (artistsspace.org)*

Paulina Olowska

Earlier this year, Helene Winer and Janelle Reiring announced that they were closing Metro Pictures, the gallery that they co-founded in 1981, marking the end of an era. Its first exhibition, which opened in November, 1981, was a group show of artists—Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, and Robert Longo among them—who went on to define their generation. Now Metro Pictures signs off with a solo exhibition by Paulina Olowska. In a short video and large, lush oil paintings, the Polish artist draws on both American and Eastern European popular culture, notably fashion photography, to memorialize women's collectives. In the show's title work, "Haus Proud," four young women (who might be taken for members of a New Wave band) stand before a mural that pays tribute to Soviet technical schools but is stencilled with graffiti that reads "capitalism also depends on domestic labour." Another canvas combines a social-realist subject with a glam-squad perspective, portraying a pair of broom-wielding cleaners as runway models. In a sly homage to the gallery's swan song, Olowska accessorizes one of the women with a metal pail emblazoned with the word "Metro."—*J.F. (metropictures.com)*

AT THE GALLERIES

Johannes Vermeer and the aerospace industry rarely come up in the same conversation. But they connect in the celestial sculptures of Helen Pashgian, who should be as acclaimed as James Turrell or Robert Irwin. All three artists were part of a loosely affiliated (and mostly male) group, based in L.A. in the late nineteen-sixties, that shared an interest in geometric abstraction and luminosity, experimenting with new materials then being developed by NASA. Pashgian first set out to be an art historian, making close study of the Dutch Masters' translucent layering, but when offered a spot in a Harvard Ph.D. program, in 1958, she declined in order to concentrate on her own art. Within a decade, she had pioneered a radical process of casting hot resin with elements of solid acrylic, resulting in small, lambent orbs that appear, somewhat miraculously, to contain infinite shafts of light. (A recent series is pictured above.) The transcendently beautiful exhibition **"Helen Pashgian: Spheres and Lenses"** at the Lehmann Maupin gallery (on view through Jan. 8) is the artist's first solo show in New York City in fifty years. Linger in the "Lens" installations, in which epoxy discs seem to float, vanish, and rematerialize in two darkened rooms over the course of five mind-expanding minutes.—*Andrea K. Scott*

"Surrealism Beyond Borders"

This huge, deliriously entertaining show, at the Met, surveys the transnational spread of Surrealism, 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. 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 in some forty-five countries around the world. The tinder was an insurrectionary spirit, disgusted with establishments. Painting and photography dominate, though magazines, texts, and films explore certain scenes. The variety of discoveries, detailed with exceptional scholarship in a ravishing keeper of a catalogue, defeat generalization, with such tonic shocks as "The Sea" (1929), a fantasia by the Japanese Koga Harue that displays, among other things, a bathing beauty, a zeppelin, swimming fish, and a flayed submarine, and "Untitled" (1967), a weaponized throng of human and animal faces and figures, by the Mozambican Malangatana Ngwenya.—*Peter Schjeldahl (metmuseum.org)*

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN

COLLECTION

Ladybird

JB 1735

BLANCPAIN

MANUFACTURE DE HAUTE HORLOGERIE

NEW YORK · 697 FIFTH AVENUE BETWEEN 54TH & 55TH STREET · 212 396 1735
LAS VEGAS · THE FORUM SHOPS AT CAESARS PALACE · 702 369 1735

ON TELEVISION

Going to therapy always involves some level of transference between the analyst and the analyzed, but it does not often become as toxic, let alone as criminal, as it does in **"The Shrink Next Door,"** a new AppleTV+ black comedy that covers thirty years of a disastrous relationship between a slick con-man therapist and his gullible schlump of a client. Paul Rudd—going against his squeaky-clean type as a bad guy for once—plays Dr. Isaac (Ike) Herschkopf, a weaselly and wholly unprofessional psychologist who sees an easy mark in Marty Markowitz, a basket-case nebbish played by Will Ferrell. Across three decades, beginning in the eighties (among the show's pleasures are its throwback big glasses, chunky knitwear, and cozy beards), Ike slowly takes over every aspect of Marty's world, from joining his business to commandeering his home and torpedoing his relationships—and leeches gobs of Marty's money in the process. Ike crosses every medical boundary and then some, and Marty is too much of a pushover to do much about it. The real-life story—which is the basis for both the series and a popular Wondery podcast—is a bit thin to merit eight episodes. Still, it's fun to watch Rudd and Ferrell bouncing around, playing head games.—*Rachel Syme*

TELEVISION

Tha God's Honest Truth with Charlamagne tha God

The ignorance of the population has compelled Charlamagne, a radio personality turned member of the commentariat, to dispense his wisdom on this new weekly late-night series, which he hosts on Comedy Central. He is the latest pop-cultural figure to convince Americans that he is a race whisperer, purporting to offer an "unapologetically Black" perspective on such crises as the backlash against critical race theory and the discourse surrounding mental health. Charlamagne, born Lenard McKelvey, has long been a provocative co-host of "The Breakfast Club," Power 105.1's four-hour morning show; he's older now, this show seems to say, and he wants to use his talents to bring about social change. But, when presenting mini histories on, say, the F.B.I. or German de-Nazification processes, he is weirdly uncharismatic. The intended audience may be the white viewers who will earnestly come to Charlamagne for a laugh and a lesson. For every doubter, like myself, there are hundreds of diehards. A lot of people believe that he speaks truth to power. But he *is* the power. And he is too big to fail.—*Doreen St. Félix (Reviewed in our issue of 10/25/21.)*

Succession

This brilliant tragedy-satire of the corporate élite, created by Jesse Armstrong, is centered on the question of who will succeed Logan Roy (Brian Cox), the fearsome head of the right-wing media conglomerate Waystar Royco. Although his son Kendall (Jeremy Strong) is initially presented as the heir apparent, it becomes clear that he is not cut out for the job, and that neither are his equally power-hungry siblings: Shiv (Sarah Snook), a shrewd political operator; Roman (Kieran Culkin), a squirrelly nihilist; and Connor (Alan Ruck), a nincompoop libertarian. There are other candidates, including Tom Wambsgans (Matthew Macfadyen), Shiv's sycophantic, tortured husband; Gerri Kellman (J. Smith-Cameron), a general counsel with a naughty side; and Cousin Greg (Nicholas Braun), an ingenuous arriviste who provides much of the show's comic relief. Season 3 begins after Kendall's Judas moment, in which he effectively declares war against his father following Logan's attempt to sacrifice him as a fall guy in a congressional investigation into a coverup of sexual assaults at Waystar. In the new season, it feels as if "Succession" is becoming more pleasurably itself with every episode, drilling down into its core as a study of the human thirst for domination. There are times when the series feels almost Seinfeldian in its cyclical efforts to capture a group of eccentric, petty characters as they try, again and again, to one-up one another.—*Naomi Fry (11/8/21)*

DANCE

Big Dance Theatre

"The Mood Room," the latest work by Annie-B Parson ("American Utopia"), performed by her company, Big Dance Theatre, focusses on five sisters in their childhood home, in Los Angeles. The time is 1980, and Reaganism is on the rise. Much of the concept is derived from "Five Sisters," a 1982 play by the French-born, Los Angeles-based Conceptualist Guy de Cointet, which itself drew on the soap-opera genre to poke fun at sun-addled California self-indulgence. To this, Parson adds a little of Chekhov's "Three Sisters," an electronic score by Holly Herndon, and her own meticulous choreographic spin.—*Brian Seibert (BAM Fisher; Nov. 30-Dec. 5.)*

Parsons Dance

As we head into another pandemic winter, Parsons Dance returns with its sunny, easygoing attitude and undemanding displays of smooth skill. For the company's program at the Joyce Theatre, Nov. 30-Dec. 12, David Parsons has made a new work, "The Road," set to mellow, vintage Cat Stevens tracks. "Balance of Power," a new solo for the adept dancer Zoey Anderson, features live music (at the evening performances), as does "On the Other Side," a recent piece by Chanel DaSilva. Also on the bill: "Past Tense," an ensemble première by Matthew Neenan, and, as always, the troupe's strobe-lit signature work, "Caught."—*B.S. (joyce.org)*

MOVIES

Drive My Car

Patience is richly rewarded in the three-hour span of Ryusuke Hamaguchi's theatre-centered

ILLUSTRATION BY BIANCA BAGNARELLI

FOR PEOPLE WHO COULD
USE A TRIPLE LIFT

 *percentage of subjects noticing an improvement with twice daily use

NEW RAPID FIRMING

92% SAW VISIBLY FIRMER SKIN IN 4 WEEKS

Neutrogena

FOR PEOPLE WITH SKIN™

LEARN MORE

tale, adapted from a story by Haruki Murakami. The first forty minutes are a long setup involving the strange collaboration of a Tokyo couple—an actor named Yusuke (Hidetoshi Nishijima) and a screenwriter named Oto (Reika Kirishima). Then, after Oto's sudden death, from a cerebral hemorrhage, Yusuke accepts a job directing a production of "Uncle Vanya" at an arts festival in Hiroshima; his method involves listening, in his car, to a cassette tape of the play recorded by Oto. The drama is centered on Yusuke's friendship with his driver, a young woman named Misaki (Tôko Miura), whose bitter past gets sublimated behind the wheel, and on his complex relationships with his cast—an international group, all of whom perform in their own first languages (including Korean Sign Language). Hamaguchi ingeniously and movingly weaves Chekhov's play into the lives of Yusuke and his associates; the film's essence is the continuity of art and life, and the playwright's reflections merge with the characters' confessional monologues to fill cityscapes and rural vistas with their grand passion.—*Richard Brody (In limited theatrical release.)*

Tick, Tick . . . Boom!

Lin-Manuel Miranda, in his feature-film directorial début, expands the late playwright and composer Jonathan Larson's quasi-autobiographical solo show into an exuberant and hearty musical filled with fantasies and flashbacks. In early 1990, Jonathan (Andrew Garfield) is about to turn thirty, with little to show for his exertions. He's working as a waiter and pinning all his hopes on a workshop performance of a science-fiction musical that he has spent eight years writing. Meanwhile, his girlfriend, Susan (Alexandra Shipp), a dancer, has been offered a permanent out-of-town job, but still can't get Jonathan's attention; his best friend, Michael (Robin de Jesús), has traded acting for advertising; the AIDS epidemic is ravaging his circle of friends; and, amid conflict, temptation, and tragedy, he has just a few days to compose a new song for the play. The movie's clever production numbers are held together by Jonathan's onstage performance of the show; though the eager and energetic Garfield invigorates the drama, he isn't enough of a musician to hold the camera's attention when he sings, and much of the film's busyness appears to be merely an elaborate workaround.—*R.B. (In limited theatrical release and streaming on Netflix.)*

The Virgin Suicides

For her first feature, from 1999, Sofia Coppola adapted Jeffrey Eugenides's novel, about the desperate escape of five teen-age girls from their repressive family, as a surprisingly intricate struggle with absence, grief, and memory. The story (set in suburban Michigan in 1974, and told mainly in flashbacks) is anchored by the charismatic Lux (Kirsten Dunst), the most daring of the Lisbon sisters, whose golden dreams appear fleetingly onscreen. But she, like the other girls, remains alluringly elusive as Coppola evokes, with poised and precise images, the bemused frustration of the boys—now men—who knew them, and who are still trying to read the pages that were torn from their lives. Coppola deploys an evocative batch of period Top Forty tunes and flashes of backlit cinematography to summon the characters' lost world, with its stifled experience and receding fantasies. What remains tantalizingly out of reach for the girls—as for the boys who have lost them—is ordinary life. In her first film, Coppola is already a master at rendering inner depths startlingly, immediately visual. With James Woods and Kathleen Turner, as the girls' parents.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel, Pluto, and other services.)*

The Wrestler

This straightforward tale is given tremendous extra punch by its leading man, Mickey Rourke, who plays Randy (the Ram) Robinson, a wrestler whose career has tumbled from a high of twenty years before. No one else, it seems fair to say, could have played the part; for one thing, no one but Rourke combines a gently spoken sweetness with so glazed and inflated a physique, together with a willingness to be treated by his peers like a veal chop. The scenes in the ring, in which Randy, despite a heart attack, struggles to prolong the dregs of his appeal, are often hard to take, but even more agonizing are his attempts to forge enduring bonds with his estranged daughter (Evan Rachel Wood) and a tired stripper (Marisa Tomei). The film has a grainy, bloodied sadness that slips at times into the sentimental, but the director, Darren Aronofsky, knows precisely where the heart of the story beats. There is nothing less mystical, or more moving, than watching the Ram reduced to serving at a deli counter: a good man at the end of the line. Released in 2008.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 12/15/08.) (Streaming on Hulu, iTunes, and other services.)*

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

ON THE BIG SCREEN

COURTESY A24

Mike Mills's tender and turbulent new melodrama, **"C'mon C'mon"** (in theatrical release), amplifies its emotional power with a documentary current that runs throughout the action. When Viv (Gaby Hoffmann), a Los Angeles writer, has a family emergency, her brother, Johnny (Joaquin Phoenix), a New York radio producer, flies over to take care of her idiosyncratic and imaginative nine-year-old son, Jesse (Woody Norman). The loving yet uneasy bond between uncle and nephew is drawn in discerning and passionate detail, which the cast brings vividly to life. (Norman, spontaneous and intensely focussed, is among the great child actors.) Johnny's work involves travelling to interview young people about their lives and aspirations, and that project is integral to the drama: in off-hours, he speaks trenchant and self-searching monologues into his tape recorder, giving rise to an intricate interplay of flashbacks. Johnny takes Jesse on a working road trip that challenges and deepens their relationship, and Mills weaves real-life interviews with kids into the fabric of the film, along with Johnny's extended riffs on the power of recording to, as he tells Jesse, "make mundane things be immortal."—*Richard Brody*

esmadrid.com

MADRID

TABLES FOR TWO

Soothr
204 E. 13th St.

There's something at once jovial and jarring about Soothr, the rare restaurant born in the age of COVID that has not only survived but thrived, by adjusting to the erratic rhythms of pandemic dining. Securing a table begins on the pavement, where patrons line up to flash proof of vaccination. The maître d' facilitates these exchanges from the window of a glass-box foyer; no one leaves without a pithy reminder of the restaurant's ninety-minute table limit. "The clock starts at the time of the reservation," someone called out one recent evening, prompting a flurry of phone tapping from aspiring diners, presumably relaying the message to less punctilious companions.

Such militaristic timekeeping has undoubtedly become more necessary since Soothr's acquisition of a Michelin Plate, in May, but the tempo contrasts sharply with the lethargic mood of mid-century glamour inside the restaurant, evoked through carved wooden screens, a rotary pay phone, and vintage tasselled lampshades. The drinks, too, nod to an enchanted past; each of nine cocktails is named after an auspicious gemstone, which might seem hokey if the beverages were less well made. The River's Topaz is Soothr's take on an Old-Fashioned, a mixture of Thai golden rums with toffee notes that round out the smokiness of cinnamon and star anise; All That Jade (Kahlúa, matcha, honey, egg white) is indulgent enough to be dessert.

Start with the duck rolls, the outer crunch of their deep-fried shells echoing the springy filling of wood-ear mushroom, both of which heighten the decadent richness of the duck meat. Pair that with the Yum Nuer, a fine, fierce braised-beef salad tossed with makrut lime and gooseberries. A number of Soothr's dishes are made from the proprietors' old family recipes. "My mother used to stew this often for us," Chidensee Watthanawongwat, one of the co-owners, who grew up in northeastern Thailand, said of the braised beef. Soothr also inherited its meatballs from Watthanawongwat's family, who once ran a sausage-making factory. "We know how to season ground pork," Watthanawongwat added with a grin.

Originally conceived as a noodle shop, Soothr has grown its menu to reflect the merry eclecticism of a street fair. "Hunt for the best food in Thailand and, sooner or later, you'll find yourself on Yaowarat Road," Watthanawongwat said, referring to the thoroughfare of Bangkok's Chinatown, renowned for its bustling food stalls. The Had Yai chicken, a popular street food, is a lighter, less greasy version of its Western fried-chicken counterpart. Marinated in a coconut-milk paste with ample cilantro root, cumin powder, black pepper, and garlic, it's studded with a crackly, caramelized lace of fried shallots.

Among the entrées, Koong Karee, a shrimp-and-egg dish, is the standout. The mellow sweetness of its cream sauce fortifies the flavor of scallions and celery while balancing the brininess of the shrimp. Watthanawongwat's partners, Kittiya Mokkarat and Supatta Banklouy, hail from Sukhothai, an ancient city in central Thailand, from which Soothr's Sukhothai Tom Yum soup takes its name. Lacking the firepower of its noodle siblings, the soup persuades rather than stupefies. Watthanawongwat admitted that it's his favorite dish; despite eating it day and night, he said, he can't seem to tire of it. His second favorite is also the boldest: Nam-Tok Moo, a pork-blood soup heaped with rice noodles, meatballs, and morning glory, so hearty and comforting that one wonders why it doesn't appear on more menus.

Sooner or later, no matter how escapist the ambience, there's no avoiding the ninety-minute timer on your table. On a recent evening, a waiter tried to remove a half-finished cocktail from a table no fewer than three times in five minutes. One of the diners looked at her watch after the third attempt—there were still thirty minutes left on the clock. After downing the rest of her drink in a single gulp, she decided that there was just enough time to order another. *(Dishes $12–$32.)*

—Jiayang Fan

PHOTOGRAPH BY INA JANG FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

ZABAR'S®

START YOUR OWN TRADITION
GIVE ZABAR'S!

ZABAR'S
REUBEN TWO CRATE

NOW $149 (reg $225)
FREE 1-DAY SHIPPING

Use code NYDELI
at zabars.com

Shop zabars.com for our complete selection of gifts, food & gourmet coffee!

Use code NYDELI for Zabar's Reuben Two Crate only.
Online Only. Cannot be applied to other products or combined with other offers. Offer expires 12/11/2021.

Zabar's & Co., Inc. | 2245 Broadway, NY, NY 10024 | 212-787-2000 (in NYC) or 800-697-6301 | zabars.com

Handled with care.

Reliable and personal claims handling.

GEICO®

1-800-947-AUTO | geico.com | Local Office

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
REPUTATION LAUNDERING

For a long time now, the American electorate has been resigned to a "permanent campaign," an unceasing carnival of exploratory committees, chicken dinners, and cable excitements. The 2024 campaign for the Presidency is unique in that it kicked off at around 2 A.M. on November 4, 2020, with a brazen act of seditious rhetoric broadcast live from the East Room of the White House. With the outcome still in question, Donald Trump declared "fraud." And, when all the votes were counted with Biden as the winner, Trump set about fomenting the insurrection that ended with a mob of his delusional loyalists storming the U.S. Capitol.

Trump remains unapologetic, even serene, about those events. He told the journalist Jonathan Karl that he recalls January 6th as "a very beautiful time with extremely loving and friendly people." Five people died as a result of that "very beautiful" moment, and nearly seven hundred of the "loving" marauders have been charged with various crimes. No matter. Just as pro-slavery Southerners refused to accept Lincoln as their President after the election of 1860, millions of Americans have been convinced by Trump and the social-media swamp that Biden's Presidency is illegitimate.

Even as Trump is threatened with prosecution, he could run again. And he could win. Or he might step aside for one of his maximalist imitators: Ron DeSantis, of Florida; Josh Hawley, of Missouri; Ted Cruz or Greg Abbott, of Texas. The recent gubernatorial race in Virginia, however, hints at another sort of Republican future. Glenn Youngkin, a demi-billionaire, who made his pile in private equity, defeated the Democrat, Terry McAuliffe, an echt Clintonian, by carrying out a shrewd strategy of MAGA lite. Youngkin, a sober cynic, recognized that, in a state such as Virginia—which went for George W. Bush twice, then Barack Obama twice, then Hillary Clinton, in 2016, and Biden, in 2020—he would do well to gesture in Trump's direction without mimicking his most lurid tactics. Youngkin never quite endorsed Trump's election-conspiracy theory but said that he would vote for him if he got the Republican nomination in 2024, and that he was all for "election integrity." He made a point of vowing to ban critical race theory in schools, even though it's not part of the state's curriculum. This kind of slick signalling allowed him to hold on to the Trumpian purists in rural areas, while luring back just enough swing voters in the suburbs. Youngkin beat McAuliffe by two per cent in a state that, just a year before, Biden won by ten.

Last week, Chris Christie, the former governor of New Jersey, published "Republican Rescue," a book that seeks, in effect, to take the Youngkin strategy national. Many erstwhile members of the Trump circle have written books or blabbed to receptive journalists in the hope of cleansing their reputations. Christie is going to the literary laundromat because he may want to run for President in 2024. It's hard to see how he has enough detergent.

Christie has been Trump's friend, dinner companion, and adviser for two decades. He endorsed Trump early, wrote memos for him, prepped him for debates with Clinton, and encouraged him to appoint right-wing judges and to follow the path of America First. He ran Trump's transition team—until Jared Kushner and Steve Bannon pushed him out. In fact, he writes, "very few people were as publicly invested in the success of Donald Trump as I was."

Christie wants Republicans to accept him as the one member of Trump's circle who always gave him unvarnished advice, who was always out for the good of the country and the Administration, never for himself: "I told him hard truths when no one else would." But the portrait he paints of his friend is laughably selective. He ignores or doesn't much care about the racism, the cruelty, the assault on voting rights, the authoritarian impulses. He describes Trump's fits and furies as quirky charm—"norm-busting behavior." As governor, Christie

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

revelled in his own tantrums. And so, when he allows that he admires Trump's "let-'em-squirm fearlessness," he is also admiring himself.

Christie finally reaches his limit when Trump refuses to accept the election results and helps provoke the January 6th insurrection. Not that Christie, for all his insider status, had thought it was in Trump's character to do so. The night before the election, he assured a Canadian interviewer that Trump and Biden were "both responsible men" and that, should Biden win, there was "no question in my mind that President Trump will participate in a peaceful transition of power." Rather than admitting that he was wrong all along about Trump, he touts his own bravery when he tells George Stephanopoulos, on ABC, that "I disagree" with Trump's seditious course. This is rather like disagreeing with the assault on Fort Sumter.

Christie is a canny narrator. He maintains over-all fealty to Trump, but wants you to know that he understands what kind of human being Trump is. In the waning months of the Administration, Christie was invited to the White House to attend the Rose Garden introduction of Amy Coney Barrett as a Supreme Court nominee and to help prepare Trump for a debate with Biden. Christie confirms how heedless Trump and his Administration were about COVID—masks were scorned in the White House—and, predictably, many officials and visitors, including Trump and Christie, got sick. While Trump was hospitalized at Walter Reed, he called Christie, who was suffering at a hospital in New Jersey. The President wanted to know one thing: "Are you gonna say you got it from me?"

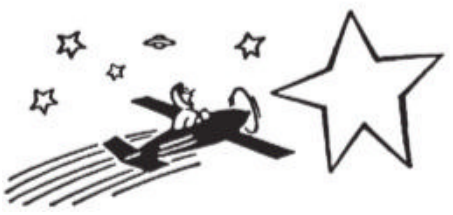
Christie doesn't blame Trump. He doesn't dare. He lets him off the hook. "And that was the last call I got in the hospital from Donald Trump," he writes.

Christie will never say bluntly what he knows to be true: that Trump's Presidency had dire consequences for the country. Trump was impeached twice, yet Christie does not grapple much with that record. Instead, he insists that the Republicans must look forward. They must part ways with the militia crazies and the conspiracy theorists, to be sure, but above all they must wage battle with Biden, an "anticapitalist" who is imposing critical race theory on "unsuspecting" children. The climate catastrophe, the menace of authoritarianism at home and around the world—the biggest challenges that we face seem to interest Christie no more than they do the political party he hopes to lead. In "Republican Rescue," he is asking the G.O.P. to support him because he was by Trump's side until the ugly coda, when he wasn't. The campaign slogan that comes out of this book might as well be "Vote for Chris Christie. Saner than Rudolph Giuliani." Not exactly "Tippecanoe and Tyler too," but it's what he's got.

—David Remnick

STRANGER THAN FICTION

SPACE GUARDIANS



The U.S. Space Force—the sixth military service branch, which turns two years old next month—provides resources to protect and defend America's satellites from the likes of the Chinese and the Russians. Space Force members also operate the Global Positioning System satellite constellation, providing G.P.S. services, for free, to everyone on the planet. All extremely important stuff. Yet the Space Force is considered something of a joke—the subject of late-night gibes and Internet memes. Critics have derided it as a vanity project of President Trump, a campaign-rally applause line somehow made real. Last year, when Trump unveiled the Space Force logo, which bears a striking resemblance to "Star Trek"'s Starfleet insignia, Twitter lit up. ("Ahem," tweeted the original "Star Trek" cast member George Takei. "We are expecting some royalties from this . . .") Also undercutting the serious nature of the service: the Netflix comedy series "Space Force," which stars Steve Carell as the branch's bullheaded leader.

If any of this bothers General John W. (Jay) Raymond, the inaugural head of the Space Force, he doesn't let on. The memeification of the force? "To me, it means that there's a lot of excitement about space," he said recently, sitting in a meeting room in Columbia University's International Affairs Building. The four-star general, who is based at the Pentagon, was visiting between rounds of the Cyber 9/12 Strategy Challenge, a largely virtual competition in which thirty-two student teams from across the globe made policy recommendations in reaction to a hypothetical cyber-warfare scenario. (This one began with a breach made in "U.S. space sector ground stations' systems," an attack apparently undertaken by "Chinese state-sponsored actors.") The event at Columbia, a partnership with a think tank called the Atlantic Council, was organized by the Digital and Cyber Group, which is run by graduate students at the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA).

Raymond, who is fifty-nine, with a head shaved bald, pointed to a space-operations badge pinned to his jacket. He noted that the delta symbol at its center had been used by the Air Force—from which the Space Force sprung—years before "Star Trek"'s 1966 début. Raymond explained that the branch "was not a President Trump thing" but had been under discussion for decades, and came about owing to bipartisan support in Congress. The service now has close to thirteen thousand members, known as "guardians." "Everybody said we stole it from 'Guardians of the Galaxy,'" Raymond said. "Well, no." The term derives from the Air Force Space Command motto from 1983, "Guardians of the High Frontier."

Raymond comes from a military family going back to 1865. His great-great-grandfather, great-grandfather, grandfather, and father all went to West Point and had careers in the Army. Raymond broke with tradition by attending Clemson University on the R.O.T.C. program and joining the Air Force. Still, he's a little bit rock and roll: at the Patriot Fest 2017 concert at Peterson Air Force Base, in Colorado, he sat in on drums with the country duo Thompson Square, for a performance of its hit "Are You Gonna Kiss Me or Not."

Raymond made his way to speak to about thirty people gathered in an auditorium, including a half-dozen members of the Digital and Cyber Group, who were wearing matching space-graphic

drinkaware

WHITLEY NEILL GIN... INSPIRED BY THE WORLD, DISTILLED IN LONDON.

The founder of Whitley Neill Gin, Johnny Neill, is from a family of gin masters going back to 1762. He has sourced 29 botanicals from around the world, creating an innovative and award winning range of gins.

Whitley Neill Original Dry Gin is inspired by his travels to South Africa and contains Cape gooseberry and baobab fruit.

Whitley Neill, the UK's number one premium gin, is crafted at the City of London Distillery.

THE UK'S NUMBER ONE* PREMIUM GIN

*Nielsen Scantrack UK value MAT to 07.17.21.

whitleyneill.com

masks that made it look as though they had turquoise nebulae for noses. "The average person in the United States probably doesn't understand just how reliant their day-to-day life is on space capabilities," Raymond told those assembled. "If you use your smartphone, you're using space. Your smartphone would be called a 'stupid phone' without space."

He sat for a Q. & A. with SIPA's dean, Merit E. Janow, who asked about China's recent test of a nuclear-capable hypersonic missile, a development said to have taken U.S. intelligence by surprise. "What keeps me awake at night is the speed at which China is moving," Raymond said. The Chinese, he'd noted earlier, have a satellite (the Shijian-17), equipped with a robotic arm, that has the potential to grab other satellites and disable them. Even scarier is a bit of Russian technology that Raymond described as a "nesting doll": a satellite that releases a smaller satellite armed with a projectile capable of taking out our own orbital tech.

Afterward, a student approached Raymond with a question about whether we were entering a space arms race. "That's why the Space Force was so important to create—to move fast and stay ahead of that," Raymond said. Then the student pivoted to a less dire topic: "Have you watched Steve Carell's 'Space Force'?"

He had. "The only thing is, they picked the wrong actor," he said. "They should have picked Bruce Willis." He expressed curiosity about an unexplained plot point. "In Season 1, 'my wife' is in jail for, like, forty years," he said. "Nobody knows why. So I keep teasing my wife: 'What did you do?'"

—Mark Yarm

GROWNUP IN THE ROOM
CHEERFUL SHADE

What becomes a legend most? On a brisk day last week in downtown Newark, the answer was a floor-length plaid wool coat; a pair of Uggs with half-dollar-size Swarovski crystal buttons; big glasses with violet lenses; what appeared to be a hand-tooled leather fanny pack; and a tan baseball

Dionne Warwick

cap. It was a look that said, "I'm older, I like comfort, but don't you *dare* picture me in a tracksuit."

The legend was Dionne Warwick, a month shy of her eighty-first birthday and still possessed of cheekbones that could slice open a thumb. The occasion was an art exhibition partly inspired by her six decades as an award-winning entertainer, but fully in thrall to her late-blossoming Twitter account, which in the past year has added a new and sometimes crotchety dimension to her public profile. As a singer, she is known for the light, soulful touch with which she navigated tricky Burt Bacharach melodies in such hits as "Walk On By" and "I Say a Little Prayer"—performances celebrated for their precision. Millennials may have first encountered her in the nineteen-nineties, as the genial star-next-door host of infomercials for the Psychic Friends Network, always hitting her marks but sometimes allowing a hint of aggrieved incredulity to flicker across her face. On Twitter, she just lets fly, dispensing straight talk, blunt advice, wit, and non sequiturs in roughly equal measure.

Although she'd had a quiet, backwater account for years, she went unexpectedly viral last December 5th, after tweeting at Chance the Rapper, "If you are very obviously a rapper why did you put it in your stage name? I cannot stop thinking about this." A half hour later, she took aim at the Weeknd: "Why? It's not even spelled correctly?"

She now has more than half a million followers and has been the subject of a "Saturday Night Live" impersonation by Ego Nwodim. Her online voice is so well established that, like Jack Benny, she can get a laugh with the Twitter equivalent of a raised eyebrow. A simple but piercing "What?" was her riposte to some recent gobbledygook from @Meta about the coming wonders of "the metaverse." She added, in a jab at the company's pretensions and also at her own Golden Girl persona, "I still call it 'Book Face.'"

Today was her first chance to see the art exhibit, titled "Dionne Warwick: Queen of Twitter." Dignitaries greeted her, including the mayor, Ras Baraka. Warwick, who grew up nearby, in East Orange, and now lives in South Orange, allowed that she felt "not only blessed but overwhelmed."

Strolling through the gallery, she smiled as several of the artists explained their works, occasionally at some length. A large installation by Dianne Smith featured a proscenium made from braided butcher paper, surrounding a screen playing a video that intercut current and historic clips of Warwick with scenes from the civil-rights struggles of the nineteen-sixties and today. The work was inspired in part by Warwick's tweet about the killing of Daunte Wright by police, last April, in Minnesota: "Before I go I would like to ask when will this madness stop!" On a lighter and more Instagrammable note was a neon sign spelling out "Auntie." This was the artist Pamela Council's response to Warwick's 2021 New Year's Day proclamation: "I am everyone's Auntie."

On the whole, Warwick seemed both delighted by the fuss and a little amused. "It's amazing what these artists have been able to accomplish," she said. "And off of tweets? Come on, *please*." She betrayed a maybe understandable ambivalence toward her new platform. (After all, she still sings and tours!) "I don't do it every day," she insisted. "I don't get up in the morning and say, 'Oh, I gotta tweet, I gotta tweet.'"

All the same, she said she enjoys being Twitter's "grownup," throwing mostly cheerful shade as an antidote to the usual toxicity—the "bashing" she disliked when her nieces and nephews first introduced her to the medium. Although one of those nieces handles her other social-media accounts, she said

YOU
DON'T
JUST
TASTE IT.

You feel it.

PHILADELPHIA

· SINCE 1872 ·

FIND THIS ***White Chocolate Mousse Cheesecake with Sugared Cranberries*** RECIPE HERE.

that her tweets are all hers. "I have no filter when it comes to being honest," she added. She credited her grandfather, a minister in whose church she sang as a girl. "He told me *ages* ago, and I didn't forget it, 'Why tell a lie when the truth is available?'"

Was she always so unfiltered? Before she could answer, her cousin Diane Whitt, seated next to her, nodded yes with comic forcefulness. "Oh, yeah, my foot has been in my mouth several times," Warwick said, laughing. "I never find any reason not to be straight up. I have no reason not to be me." Cousin Diane nodded again.

—Bruce Handy

DEPT. OF RELICS
COMMUNE

Evictions have been mercifully rare in New York during the past year and a half, thanks in part to city, state, and federal moratoriums that have kept people in place through the pandemic. But those protections weren't able to save Aubergine, a picturesquely decrepit flophouse, salon, and culture-freak commune at 546 West 113th Street. For half a century, a rotating cast of urban homesteaders—mostly young, often artists or academics—have found refuge in the five-story Beaux-Arts building, which is owned by Columbia University. Rent: five hundred and forty dollars a person. Earlier this year, citing safety concerns, Columbia moved to repossess the building.

A couple of weeks before the movers arrived, a few housemates gathered for a stroll through the place. Emilyn Brodsky—thirty-six, a physical-therapy student and a musician, whose most recent record is called "Emilyn Brodsky's Digestion"—stood in the musty front hall. Having spent the past seventeen years at Aubergine, hers was the longest tenure of the bunch. Tall, with bleached-blond hair, she had been out of town for most of the pandemic, and she looked around in wonder. "It's all still here!" she said.

Brodsky and company continued the tour. In one bedroom—tall windows, double-height ceiling—Cassandra Long, a thirty-four-year-old painter and teacher, and an Aubergine resident for two years, pointed to some elaborate original molding. "The plaster falls off," she said. A chunk is said to have brained a guest in the mid-seventies, sending her to the hospital. Long said that her own space once had a leak so big that the ceiling "looked as if it were pregnant."

The group moved downstairs, shuffling past a bare mattress on a landing, a hi-fi, and an LP called "Don Rickles Speaks" and into the basement, which was littered with ancient chalkboards and old school chairs. Before its days as an intellectual flophouse, the building was home to Columbia's Department of Slavic Languages. "It's actually a lot better than it used to be!" Long said brightly.

Aubergine, named not for a French eggplant but as a twist on the French *auberge* (inn), was launched, in 1973, by a group of young people, half of them students, who responded to an ad that the university placed in the *Times*. The city was in fiscal crisis; two years later, President Gerald Ford told New York to drop dead.

On the tour, some parts of the house appeared to be uninhabited. The front parlor contained only a Warholesque silk screen of Bill Clinton. A ground-floor kitchen was nearly free of appliances. The back yard, occasionally used as a party space, was bare, save for a medieval-style plowshare.

"We've never had rats," Siena Oristaglio said. She is the founder of an arts organization and was a tenant for nine years. "But there was one in the yard. His name was Frankie. He died during COVID."

After the walk-through, the group sat down in a big dining room, reminiscing under the gaze of a mounted mannequin head wearing a Viking helmet. Past roommates were enumerated. There was the sculptor who, in the late nineties, filled the living room with giant wooden pylons. ("The big dicks," Brodsky said.) There was the dominatrix who absconded with fifteen thousand dollars from the joint household account. (Brodsky said that she spent a portion of her twenty-first birthday in a McDonald's, psyching herself up to confront the culprit.) There was the tenant who launched a sauerkraut business out of the building. "They called it Brine and Dine," someone recalled. Dinners and parties were recounted. Sting is said to have come to one, Kathy Bates and Marina Abramović to others. Group meals ranged wildly in edibility; several

"I can't wait to get home and insult my parents from a position of authority."

people remembered a particularly dreadful crab curry.

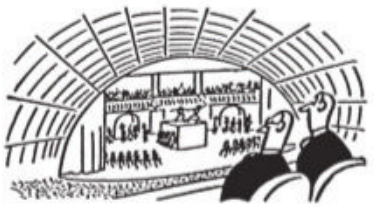
The six tenants, who were among the last in residence, concluded that the vibe at Aubergine had become less communal in recent years. Most of them seemed ready, if not quite eager, to move on. "None of us were the keepers or creators of this," Brodsky said. "If this is the end, it was a wonderful gift."

Not everyone was going peacefully. One tenant, who had holed up in a bedroom during the tour, has refused to leave the building, choosing to wait out the eviction moratorium alone.

But it looked as if the end were near. Upstairs, in the eccentrically shaped, subdivided bedrooms, books had been emptied from shelves, leaving their outlines in the dust. In the basement, a forlorn puppet theatre sat in a corner. "Does anybody want this?" Brodsky asked. "I think I found it on the street, like, twelve years ago." The group decided that the puppets should stay, a housewarming gift for the next inhabitants, whoever they may be.

—Ian Volner

WAGNER FILES
ENDURANCE TEST



Few operas are as mountainous as Wagner's "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg." The rarely performed work, rich with sonic booming and spitty glottal fricatives, has a running time of almost six hours. It ends with a troubling flared-nostril paean to the purity of German art. One of its more deadly lyrics addresses the shoemaking trade with the aperçu "Cobbling certainly has its share of problems." Wagner's only comedy is, in a word, impossible.

Cue the composer Matthew Aucoin, who recently attended the Metropolitan Opera's production of "Die Meistersinger." Aucoin's opera "Eurydice," a retelling of the Greek myth from Eurydice's perspective, based on a play by Sarah Ruhl, made him, at twenty-nine, the youngest composer to have a Met début since the twenty-seven-year-old Gian Carlo Menotti, in 1938. Aucoin is also the author of the upcoming book "The Impossible Art: Adventures in Opera," a celebration of the genre's inherent challenges and its carnivalesque excesses.

At the Met, a correspondent asked Aucoin to rate "Die Meistersinger" on a scale of impossibility. "I'd give it a nine," Aucoin said. He wore a long-sleeved black T-shirt, black jeans, and lots of stubble. "It's a feat of stamina, probably more for the string players than for anyone else—they almost never stop." Aucoin is known for his own kind of endurance training: prior to spending four years as the Los Angeles Opera's artist-in-residence and starting his own opera company, he got his graduate diploma in music composition at Juilliard while working as an assistant conductor at the Met.

Once Aucoin had hunkered down in an orchestra seat for "Die Meistersinger"'s first act, he cautioned, "There's a kind of opium haze that sets in with Wagner. If I end up keeling over into your shoulder, be warned." Eighty-five minutes of keelinglessness later, during the first intermission, Aucoin said, "One down, two to go. We're still at the base of the mountain." He added, "I'm finding that one part of my brain is registering, Well, that's a terrible line. But most of me is kind of hooked. It's that narcotic quality I mentioned. And that's opera's 'thing': Can you overcome the skepticism that remains present in one part of your brain?"

Aucoin finds impossibility to be a constant in the history of opera. "The art form's first practitioners, in seventeenth-century Italy," he writes in his book, "strove to re-create the effect of ancient Greek drama, which of course they had never *heard*, and which no one can be sure was sung in the first place." Or consider the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the subject of Aucoin's own opera: Orpheus's singing is so beautiful that animals and rocks dance in its presence. No pressure, dude.

When the "Die Meistersinger" curtain rose for Act II, revealing nine medieval half-timber buildings, Aucoin whispered, "This set looks like an Advent calendar." For the duration of the second act, he remained sentient and unslumped; at its conclusion, he reported, "I'm holding up pretty well." He confessed that he and his husband, Clay Zeller-Townson, a bassoonist who specializes in Baroque music, had attended this very same production of "Die Meistersinger" two weeks earlier, and, at Zeller-Townson's urging, had walked out after the first act. "As soon as my husband realized that the blond hero is a stand-in for Wagner the rule-breaking innovator, he was, like, 'I'm sorry, I'm done, I cannot watch Wagner perform this masturbatory act for six hours.'"

Matthew Aucoin

Aucoin took the opportunity, during the two-hour-long Act III, to whisper premonitory commentary: "Here comes the uncomfortable German nationalism"; "Here's where it sounds like the chorus is telling us to fuck off." (In the latter case, more than two hundred singers—all in peasant dress, some of them holding bouquets—encourage the world to wake up: *Wach auf!*) Additional gems of the third act include the lyrics "*Hungersnot! Hungersnot!*" and the line, in translation, that all Wagner listeners have secretly longed to utter: "Hear now of the thunder that bespelled me." Before the final scene of Act III, the curtain came down, and the orchestra kicked into some interlude music; Aucoin adopted the flat tone of a nineteen-thirties telephone operator as he muttered, "Hold, please."

When it was over, Aucoin cheered and applauded heartily during the curtain calls, but he remained seated until the female star, the soprano Lise Davidsen, took a solo bow, whereupon he jumped to his feet. "Not gonna argue with that," he said. "Also, we get to stand at last."

—Henry Alford

LETTER FROM MOROCCO

ONLY DISCONNECT

Wealthy travellers are paying people to dump them in the middle of nowhere.

BY ED CAESAR

One recent afternoon in Morocco, a fifty-nine-year-old former Royal Marine Commando named Phil Asher walked me into a desolate valley in the Atlas Mountains, shook my hand, and abandoned me. Asher, whom I had met only the previous evening, has a gray beard, a piercing gaze, and a bone-dry sense of humor. He teaches survival skills to people who have never fast-roped from a helicopter or killed their dinner. That morning, he had spent several hours educating me on the rudiments of living in the wilderness, alone. Now I was in the wilderness, alone.

The travel firm that organized my trip, Black Tomato, calls this experience Get Lost—a playful misnomer, since the idea is to do the opposite. A client is dropped somewhere spectacular and scantly populated, and challenged to find his or her way out within a given time period. From the moment that Asher left me in the valley, I was allotted two days to walk to a rendezvous point eighteen miles away, over and around mountains.

I had stuffed my backpack with everything that I thought I might need, within strict guidelines set by Asher: no matches, no tent, no phone. My pack contained clothes, paper maps, a compass, two G.P.S. trackers, spare batteries, notepads and pens, a big knife, a sleeping bag, flashlights, fire-lighting equipment, dried food, a few energy-rich snacks, three litres of water, a mosquito shelter, a roll mat, and a tarpaulin. I also carried an old Samsung handset with its SIM card removed, so that I could take photographs. Asher reckoned that my bag weighed fifty pounds. I was going to trek for two days, at altitude, with the equivalent of my six-year-old daughter strapped to my back.

If I got hurt, I was to press an SOS button on one of the trackers, which also featured a rudimentary text-message capability, for sub-SOS emergencies. Asher would leave another three litres of fresh water at the site of my next camp, along with some firewood. Other than that, the assumption was that I'd navigate unassisted to the finish line.

"See you in a couple of days," Asher said, as he left me. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

He walked away at 3 P.M. Soon afterward, I deliberated whether or not to erect the tarpaulin. The mosquito shelter was mesh: excellent for keeping out bugs but not the rain. Though the area where I found myself was close to the desert, it sometimes rains—and sometimes violently. The tarpaulin was waterproof but tricky to set up. That morning, in a tarp-training seminar, Asher had emphasized the need for geometric precision, accurate assessment of wind direction, the proper use of knots for the guy ropes. I'm not a knot person, and I had butchered every attempt to make the correct series of loops to fix the ropes.

I decided to skip the tarp. The sky had been blue all afternoon. I wanted to gaze at the stars once the sun went down. Moreover, I was uncertain about what kinds of animal or human threats I faced. On the long drive into the mountains, I had been informed that I was in a part of the Atlas range known as the Anti-Atlas, which is near the Sahara desert. That morning, Asher had aired the possibility—rather casually, I thought—of "the odd scorpion, and maybe some snakes." It also seemed possible, if unlikely, that someone living in the area might choose to do a lone hiker harm. I preferred a clear view of whatever might approach my sleeping spot.

On a flat and sheltered patch of gravel, I laid out my roll mat and put up the mosquito shelter. Satisfied to have completed these tasks, I admired

During the various lockdowns, unable to travel, I had longed for adventure. Here it was—with an enticing sense of scale.

ILLUSTRATION BY TOM HAUGOMAT

my surroundings. My home for the night was a dry riverbed, at about seven thousand feet above sea level. Obelisks of dark volcanic rock towered on the far side of the valley. I looked up and to my right, where a mountain loomed. The next morning, according to my maps, I would need to spend my first hour or two climbing a thousand feet toward the peak. For now, the views were too gorgeous to contemplate such labor. The afternoon sun was like olive oil; the rocks in the valley glistened.

In the early evening, I gathered fuel: tiny pieces of dried bush, slivers of wood I'd sliced off a larger log. I made a circle of stones for a fireplace, and inside it I placed my dried bush stems, with a pyramid of wood shavings on top. To start a fire, I used the Asher-approved technique of striking a fire steel, so that a glowing piece of ferrite flew away from me. A spark lit the stems, and I added ever-larger pieces of wood. My fire was soon crackling. I had not excelled in fire-making school earlier in the day, and I felt like shouting joyfully to my teacher. But he was long gone.

I boiled water, then rehydrated a dried meal-in-a-bag. It was among the worst dining experiences of my life. The texture of my "Burger and Beans" brought to mind viscera. ("It's just calories," Asher had said, when we ate a similarly unappealing bag dish during training.) With the leftover boiled water, I made a billycan of instant coffee, to take the taste away.

By 6:30 P.M., the sun was falling behind the mountains. I brushed my teeth and removed my contact lenses, then took a shit behind a huge rock, armed with a packet of Kleenex. When the light died, I climbed into bed, began charging one of my G.P.S. devices with a battery pack, and made notes in a rainproof pad, which was illuminated by a flashlight strapped to my chest. Soon I flicked off the light, then I stared for a while at the thousands of blazing stars, before trying to close my eyes.

I was half asleep when I was jolted awake by beams of light and the sound of crunching rocks. Two men with flashlights were headed toward me, with some urgency, and they were calling out something. I caught a glimpse of one of the men: his face was partially obscured by a scarf. I unzipped the shelter, scrambled for my flashlight, put on my boots, and, in a panic, tried to remember where I had packed my knife.

The Black Tomato travel company has predicated its business, in part, on the notion that many affluent vacationers no longer wish to lounge for a week by an infinity pool: they want to *earn* their enjoyment in some way, either through physical exertion or by doing good works abroad. Black Tomato specializes in adventure, and its Web site beckons daring customers with such offerings as "ICELAND: SNORKEL AND DIVE BETWEEN TECTONIC PLATES." The company's packages are expensive. Some cost more than fifteen thousand dollars per person.

The concept of Get Lost isn't only that clients must find their way out of desolate situations; they have no clue where in the world they are going, until the last minute. Participants are also encouraged to surrender their cell phones. The imperative is not just to disappear but to disconnect. After an expedition ends, clients are pampered at a beautiful hotel before flying home. The locations for Get Lost range from the Mongolian steppe to the jungles of Costa Rica to the deserts of Namibia. Its clientele is similarly various. Predictably enough, several tech bros have taken such trips. But the firm has also arranged an ambitious expedition for a newlywed couple, and for a stay-at-home mother—who, upon returning home, applied to join the Air Force.

As soon as I read about the idea, I also wanted to get lost—although I couldn't quite explain the urge. I live in Manchester, England, and, unlike many of my friends there, I have never been an enthusiastic camper. In fact, I avoid such weekends if I can, not least because British campsites are laden with persnickety rules about where you can wash up and where your kids can play sports. It's like being back at school, except less comfortable. You have to put on your shoes if you need to pee in the night. Also, I'm a huge man, and I find crouching in tents annoying. Yet the Get Lost concept had an enticing sense of scale, and there didn't seem to be too many rules. During the various lockdowns, unable to travel, I had longed for adventure. Here it was.

I had some reservations about Get Lost. It would feel strange for me to travel without having first researched my destination. In my work as a reporter, I go abroad often, and I would never fly to a new country without at least reading a few books, or talking to other journalists about their experiences there. But I realized that it might be freeing, just this once, to travel with few preconceptions and with no control. I discussed Get Lost with my wife. She said that it sounded fun; I also detected an eye roll. We agreed on my taking a trip lasting six days. Black Tomato started preparing an itinerary that would begin in early October.

Two weeks before takeoff, Black Tomato sent me a packing list. The suggested items—not too many warm clothes, sunblock, hiking boots, long-sleeved shirts, a waterproof jacket—indicated some mixture of desert and mountain terrain. Because the trip's time frame was tight, I thought that it wouldn't make sense for the company to send me too far from Greenwich Mean Time. I guessed I'd be going somewhere in North Africa. Two days before I flew, I received my tickets: Manchester to Marrakech.

The morning after my arrival in the city, Rachid Imerhane, a genial mountain guide with slicked-back hair and an impish smile, collected me from my hotel. I turned off my phone and put it in a bag in the back of the car. We travelled ten hours to the starting point of my adventure. I tried to winkle out my destination from Imerhane, but he was implacable. Once we left Marrakech, I did a lot of staring out the window. The experience was like a very pleasant kidnapping, with coffee breaks.

We drove over high, winding passes and down into a desert plateau, through the city of Ouarzazate, which is sometimes called the Hollywood of Africa, because it has a thriving film business. A giant clapper board adorns the entrance to the town; "Gladiator" was filmed there, among many other movies. After Ouarzazate, the High Atlas Mountains rose to our left. On our right was the Anti-Atlas. We turned right onto a deserted tarmac road, and out of the plateau.

The elevation increased, the roads

"Funny how this happens when we're supposed to have dinner with my friends."

• •

becoming narrower and snakier. We swapped cars, to let our driver return to Marrakech. A sturdy white Toyota took us up gravel and dirt tracks, higher into the mountains. We gave a farmer and his two bashful, doe-eyed children—a boy and a girl—a lift to a small homestead at the top of a remote road. They were about the same age as my kids, who are nine and six, and evidently not used to seeing tourists. Their father—speaking Berber, which Imerhane translated—said that his son had once visited a city, but his daughter had never left the mountains. Imerhane remarked to me, "This is a Morocco that most *Moroccans* don't know."

Finally, at sunset, after many harum-scarum switchbacks, we reached an apex where two high valleys met. Standing there, in a black T-shirt and combat pants, was Phil Asher. He shook my hand firmly and suggested that I put on a jacket. "It's about to get cold," he said, and he was right. He tended to be right about things like that.

Asher motioned toward one of two camp chairs that had been set up beneath a tarpaulin. He explained what my expedition would entail, which seemed daunting; what lessons he would try to impart to me the following morning, in a brief period of training that seemed insufficient; and where I was going to sleep that night, which was not in the comfortably adorned canvas tent where Asher himself was staying but beneath a mosquito shelter, on a roll mat, by myself. As a first-night treat, I was allowed to eat tagine in the canvas tent with Asher, Imerhane, and Hicham Niaarebene, the driver, who prepared the meal—it turned out that he was also a chef. The three men composed Black Tomato's support team in the mountains.

Asher, looking me dead in the eye, asked, "What do you want to *get* out of all this?"

I didn't have a good answer. I also felt a jangle of nerves.

As the two men with flashlights approached me in the dark, I realized that they were calling out in French, which I know well enough to get by. They were curious about what I was doing alone in the mountains. I clambered to my feet and shook hands with them while trying to explain that I was going on a long walk. They shrugged, looked at each other, and left.

I wasn't sure what to think. Although I was almost certain that this encounter was no cause for alarm, I got out the tracker and sent a text saying that I had received a visit from some locals. Imerhane knew people in a nearby village. I figured that he could make a call and work out whether I was in any trouble. I received no reply to the text. It took me a couple of hours to fall asleep.

I woke up at 5:30 A.M.—long before dawn. I was cold, and I hunkered in my sleeping bag, looking at the stars. I think I saw the Plough, although I've always been baffled by the constellations—it seems as if one could link any group of stars together to make a pattern. As the light in the valley became milkier, I put on my boots and began my morning chores. I filled my water bottles for the day from a large drum that Asher had left, built a fire for breakfast, cooked a meal, struck the shelter, charged my Samsung, brushed my teeth, and packed my bag. I also donned my yellow-and-black *shemagh*, or head scarf, which Asher had insisted I wear, telling me that it might be more than a hundred degrees in the sun in the hottest part of the day. In Asher's words, the scarf would stop my head from "boiling." I felt ridiculous wearing the *shemagh*, as if I were in costume as an Afghan warlord, but I wanted my head to remain unboiled. I folded the loose ends around my head and took a selfie. My kids, I knew, would laugh themselves silly when they saw the picture.

As I started on my route for the day, at around 8:15 A.M., I received a message on the tracker, from Asher: "How was your night?" I replied that it was good, but did not receive a response.

According to my maps, I needed to follow the riverbed where I had slept, then take a hard left up a steep valley toward a high peak called Jbel Kouaouch. After I had climbed to about eight thousand feet, I would start to pick my way along an escarpment, eventually descending plateaus and valleys to a plain, where I'd spend the night. The day's walk was about nine miles.

The first hour was hard. I run most days when I'm at home, but there's a difference between running and hauling weight. Loose rocks on the ground often gave way, particularly on steep grades. Navigating posed its own chal-

lenges. The G.P.S. kept me pointed in the correct general direction, but it was sometimes fiendish to pick out the precise path that I was supposed to take. Asher had encouraged me to follow goat droppings or boot marks. Sometimes I found them, but for nearly two hours I frequently found myself off course, scrabbling up and down steep banks to relocate a path. After a while, I became better at spotting the slightly different shade of the zigzagging trail.

I stopped to catch my breath, and looked behind me. Across the valley, perhaps a mile away, I could see the white Toyota. My eyesight wasn't good enough to discern any people, but I imagined Asher and Imerhane watching me with binoculars as I ascended Jbel Kouaouch. I waved, but couldn't see if anyone returned the gesture.

After about an hour, I reached a view so stunning as to be almost comical. In front of me was a deep valley, gouged as if from clay by a potter's thumb, with reddish mountains beyond. I stopped for a few minutes and took a long drink. My shirt was wet with perspiration, and the wind was cool enough to cause me to shiver. I pressed on.

A rhythm set in. I'd walk for about fifty minutes, then rest for ten. At one stopping point, I noticed some men with mules at the bottom of a nearby valley, headed roughly in the same direction. The previous day, Imerhane had pointed out some nomads making their way from the mountains to the desert as the temperatures cooled, telling me that the range was one of the last places in Morocco where traditional nomads still lived. I wondered if the men I was watching were also nomads. I was jealous of their pack animals: they were progressing much faster than I was.

Usually, I'd look out and see nothing moving in the landscape. Some rocky expanses reminded me of footage from the Mars Rover. I also thought about Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy, with its hardy teen-age heroes crossing the American West. Those books were the first adult novels I truly loved, and a friend had read a passage from "All the Pretty Horses" at my wedding. Some of McCarthy's lines came back to me as I walked: "Things separate from their stories have no meaning," and "Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting." There was a great bit about courage that I couldn't quite locate. It was irritating not to be able to check it. In my twenties, I could recall whole poems and passages from novels, and sometimes say on what page of a book the lines fell. No more. I thought about how much of my memory I had outsourced to Google. (I found the McCarthy quotation when I got home: "All courage was a form of constancy. . . . It was always himself that the coward abandoned first.")

The sun remained hidden behind thin clouds all morning, and the temperature was about perfect for walking. I finally spotted some living creatures: small birds with yellow bellies, flitting from bush to bush. I didn't know what they were called. Every time I rounded a corner, I'd encounter a sublime new gorge or escarpment. In the haze, the horizons of distant peaks braided together. The nature writer Robert MacFarlane observes, in his book "Landmarks," that a Scottish painter once described this phenomenon to him as *landskein*. "Skein" can mean either a coil of yarn or a flock of birds flying in a V formation. *Landskein,* a neologism, uses both, knitting the V's of mountaintops together. Each time I saw the jagged, braided horizon, I thought about how happy I was to know the word.

Now and then, I'd hear something scurry beneath a bush as I walked past—Asher's warnings about scorpions and snakes kept rattling in my head. At other times, I'd half turn at the sound of a distant rockfall whose provenance I could not place.

At around lunchtime, I was on a sharp descent when I noticed some mules tethered in a clearing to my right, and a tent from which men's voices could be heard. It was the group I had seen earlier in the day. I put my head in the entranceway and said hello. The men were making Berber tea, which is the color of rust. They seemed delighted to see a stranger, and came out to greet me. Their grooved, hard faces confirmed a lifetime spent outdoors. Next to them,

I looked like a newborn. They gave me bread, a tin of sardines, and a glass of the tea, which was as sweet as a candy cane. I happily devoured all of it.

A couple of the men spoke French. As far as I could understand them, they were indeed from an itinerant local group, but a French hiking tour had employed them as porters, to carry luggage in advance and to establish camps. I never saw the hikers—who, unlike me, had a guide—but one of the men gestured toward a pile of heavy bags. I wanted to ask the men more questions about their lives, but they had questions of their own. What had I brought to eat? Where had I slept the night before? Why didn't I have a tent? And they were astonished that I was alone. "*Vous êtes seulement . . . un*?" one of them asked.

"*Oui*," I replied.

A silence ensued.

"*Je suis anglais*," I said, as if that explained everything.

It was time to go. I needed to arrive at my camp with enough time to set up for the night. Before I left, one of the men insisted on checking my maps. I pointed to the spot where I planned to sleep, which was perhaps three miles away. I said, "*Pas trop loin*"—"Not too far."

I was impersonating a brave solitary explorer, but I would have been elated to stay in their camp until the next morning. This mountain range was their home turf: they weren't on some ersatz vision quest. They also seemed to have plenty of food, and would probably cook some for me. Their tent looked comfortable and watertight. They already had a fire going.

I made myself leave. The rules of my expedition demanded that I reach a certain point on the map by a certain time. It wasn't lost on me how perverse it was to break off an authentic and unusual experience—a chance exchange between mutually interested parties—in order to hew to an arbitrary timetable, on a trip supposedly designed to reconnect me to authentic modes of living. Nevertheless, after snapping a selfie with two of the men, I put on my backpack, consulted the G.P.S., and began to walk down from the clearing. I didn't turn around. I wasn't sure that I could stand to see their doubtful looks.

As the elevation decreased, I saw more signs of human activity: the occasional mud-walled farmhouse, an enclosed and irrigated field that seemed like a marvel of engineering in this dusty landscape. My ignorance gnawed at me. I wondered what crops these people grew, and how they survived the winters here. A couple waved at me from the door of their home. A farmer's dog chased me for a few hundred yards, barking, and then got bored. It was early afternoon, and hot. I was still an hour from camp. My legs were beginning to quiver with the effort of the day. I decided that I needed some sugar.

I removed my pack, and hunted for a bar of Kendal Mint Cake, which I had bought in Manchester specifically for such a moment. Kendal Mint Cake, a chewy and calorific peppermint bar, is made in the Lake District town that bears its name, and has been beloved of British mountaineers and explorers for a century. Ernest Shackleton took Kendal Mint Cake on his Antarctic expeditions. I had last eaten it twenty-eight years ago, when I was thirteen, on the island of Ru'a Fiola, off the west coast of Scotland.

Between the ages of ten and thirteen, I visited Ru'a Fiola three times, to attend a summer camp run by an exuberant, posh man named Torquil Johnson-Ferguson, who had children about my age. Everything about the trip was an adventure. At least twice, I travelled to the camp on my own. My mother put me on a train from London to Glasgow Central, a journey of five hours. I had coins in my bag to call home from a pay phone when I arrived in Glasgow. I walked half a mile from Glasgow Central to Glasgow Queen Street station to catch another train, to Oban, on the Scottish west coast. I called home again from Oban. I also had a ten-pound note to spend on a meal. I went both times to a chip shop in Oban, and ordered a "sausage supper": battered sausage, chips, salt, vinegar. After dinner, I'd meet up with an employee of the camp, who took me and other children out to Ru'a Fiola. It seems impossible now to imagine that my mother sent a preteen alone on this journey. But she was a widow working two jobs, and there didn't seem another way for me to get there.

My memories of the camp itself are golden. The kids bunked in the main house on the island. The days were full of abseiling, rock climbing, sea fishing, and expeditions to other parts of the Hebrides, where we'd stay in caves. I remember lying flat on my belly with some other children at the edge of a cliff, watching an eagle slalom through the air below us. At night, we'd tell ghost stories by a fire. Johnson-Ferguson told a terrifying one about a local "madwoman" who, long after her suicide, still lit a candle in the window for her husband, who had abandoned her.

At the end of the camp, the children were divided into pairs for an exercise called Survival. You spent a night or two in a deserted patch of a nearby island. You weren't allowed to take food, but you were given instructions on what you might be able to find to eat—say, rock-pool cockles to boil over a fire. Every few hours, an instructor motored past you on a boat to check that you were all right. There was a distress signal for emergencies, although I can't remember what it entailed. In any event, Survival didn't feel dangerous; it felt liberating. In my final year at Ru'a Fiola, I completed the challenge alone. It struck me, while I was muddling my way through the Atlas range, that Get Lost had attracted me because it echoed those early, happy experiences, in which I first felt independence—or a convincing illusion of it.

Time had both burnished and tarnished these memories. I looked online recently to see if there was still a summer camp at Ru'a Fiola. There was not. In 2015, Johnson-Ferguson was jailed for sexually abusing three boys who had attended the island camp in the eighties. The victims, now men, had come forward after some thirty years; they had wept in court while recounting their stories. Two of the incidents of abuse had taken place in caves, presumably during one of the expeditions I had so loved.

I was chilled to learn that I had been exposed to a predator, and felt terrible

for the victims. Was it wrong, then, that I remained grateful for my own experiences on the islands? I had been shaped by those summers at Ru'a Fiola. They had encouraged me to be self-sufficient. I wondered whether my children—with their phones, and my ability to digitally track them—would ever feel as free as I did, or whether they should. In Morocco, I was being tracked, yet I was nonetheless enjoying prelapsarian sensations of daring and solitude. It was a strange gift to have nothing to think about but where to take my next step.

I walked into a gully at the edge of a vast plain that abutted a string of hills. In the middle of the plain, thin columns of sandy-colored rock rose to a bulbous overhang. The outcrop looked uncannily like a group of elephants whose trunks were hanging down. The formation was bewitching; I couldn't stop staring at it. The curves of the elephants' heads were as clean and smooth as a Barbara Hepworth sculpture.

This was the spot indicated on my map for my camp that night. When I arrived, I discovered that there was no cache of water or firewood, which worried me a little. I had only a litre of water remaining in my pack, and no wood. But there was a dirt road nearby, and, I concluded, someone would surely drive over with supplies. It didn't seem like Asher to break an agreement, and Black Tomato wasn't about to let a client die of thirst.

In any event, I had made good time: it was barely 3 P.M. There were four remaining hours of daylight in which I could set up camp and explore my surroundings. If the water and the wood arrived, I'd make a meal on a fire. If not, I'd have more Kendal Mint Cake, and some energy bars.

All day, the clouds had been turning from wispy white to gray. It was a night for the tarp. I was just getting the ropes tied when Imerhane appeared from the direction of the road, with a box of wood and water, and some extra food pouches. We exchanged salaams, and agreed that it might rain. Then he left. Watching him walk out of sight, I felt a pang. Imerhane was such a cheerful man—it would have been fun to sit and get to know him a little better.

I decided to make my meal early, so that I'd have enough time to enjoy the sunset, and then get a good night's sleep. I was tired, and I needed to be alert the next day. My G.P.S. had run through one set of batteries and would likely need my last remaining pair the following morning. It was possible that I'd have to navigate the final miles of my journey using my map and compass alone. Having looked at the route, I felt reasonably comfortable with the idea of losing my electronic guide. The last section of my trek appeared to follow a dry riverbed. All I had to do was keep walking west. Still, I was liable to make a stupid mistake if I was exhausted.

The main part of my meal—"Veg Chilli and Rice"—was surprisingly edible, and the only thing missing from the sunset was a cinematographer: the whole plain glowed red. The view made me ecstatic but also a little blue, because there was nobody to share it with. I fell asleep in no time, waking only to the sound of rain on my tarpaulin, and a clap of thunder at around 11 P.M. As the eye of the storm grew closer, lightning illuminated the plain, and the raindrops grew heavier. I wondered for a few anxious minutes how much rain would have to fall to send a flash flood down the gully I was in. My conclusion: a hell of a lot. I went back to sleep.

It was still dark when I woke. I was dry, and so was my firewood, but—with a lack of foresight for which I cursed myself—I had left my tinder exposed to the rainstorm. To start my breakfast fire, I resorted to a cheat that Asher had shown me: using distressed cotton wool and lip salve, I made an accelerant. The blaze started instantly, as if I were using a gas cooker. I was pleased, but it made me consider how contrived the rules of this experiment were. If I was in possession of exactly the right items to start a fire, I might as well have brought a stove. Yet, had I not accepted Asher's terms, I would not have mastered any new skills. Oddly, the expedition's most artificial boundaries helped generate its most satisfying moments.

On the second day's walk, the views were even more arresting, and I stopped frequently to take pictures. The sun was also brighter, and the temperature soon reached a hundred degrees, making the hike commensurately

"I don't know about a playdate. Why don't we just meet up for some juice boxes and see how it goes?"

tougher. My head pounded, and my pee turned the color of Berber tea. I had tried to drink plenty of water the previous day, but clearly it had not been enough. (I concluded, too, that an insufficiently rehydrated dessert I'd eaten the previous evening—an egg-custard imitation—had sucked some moisture out of me.) I resolved to stop more often and drink more. Given my G.P.S.'s unreliable battery supply, I also used the rests to pay attention to my paper maps. It was pleasing to reacquaint myself with analog navigation, and my compass replaced my G.P.S. around my neck.

The final stretch of the journey was along a dry riverbed that widened as it descended. There were a few houses, and occasionally I exchanged greetings with residents. All of them offered me tea or water, but I had plenty to drink, and I wanted to reach my destination before the heat became unbearable. I smiled, declined, shared pleasantries, and moved on. The riverbed was now fringed by palm trees, and flanked by vertical slabs of rock that threw shade into the valley.

I could see from my maps that I had only a few hundred yards to walk. Suddenly, I did not want the experience to end. I slowed down, to revel in my last minutes of simplicity. Eventually, I rounded a bend, and saw Asher perched on one of the escarpments overlooking the valley. In front of me was a tiny village called Ichazzoun. After another hundred paces, I saw the Toyota. Asher scurried down from his vantage point to meet me.

"Damn good effort," he said. "You should be very proud."

Childishly, I was.

The itineraries of Get Lost packages suggest that rich clients will accept privation as long as it is followed by luxury. After my expedition, I spent two nights at a chic hotel called Dar Ahlam. It's situated at the edge of the desert, in a two-hundred-year-old casbah surrounded by palm and almond trees. The hotel has fourteen rooms and about a hundred staff members.

For many people, Dar Ahlam is Heaven: every guest I saw wore a beatific smile. The staff could not have been more accommodating. Nothing was too much trouble for them—the moment you thought about a drink, it was in your hand. The food was a thousand times better than "Burger and Beans." The pool was exactly the right temperature. I had a massage. But I didn't relish my time there. The hotel was full of Western couples who were either on their honeymoon or taking the trip of a lifetime. I was *seulement un*.

There was no restaurant at the hotel. Instead, at mealtimes, individual tables were scattered throughout the grounds. I always dined alone, out of sight of other guests. I was also encouraged to leave the hotel for lunch, and for a sunset drink. Both trips required a drive to a picturesque location, where staff waited on me as I sat by myself. I felt mortified at the effort that had gone into pouring me a glass of wine in the desert. I longed for a cheap, noisy bar, and the chance to swap stories with strangers. Dar Ahlam was as serene as a monastery.

My adventure in the mountains had ended more ebulliently. On the afternoon that I arrived in Ichazzoun, there was a wedding in the village. Four musicians performing at the ceremony had heard about my trek, and they all came to greet me, in matching white-and-green outfits. They sang and clapped, and formed an honor guard for me to walk past, as a finish line. Imerhane joined in with the clapping, a broad smile on his face. It was a surreal, embarrassing, joyous moment.

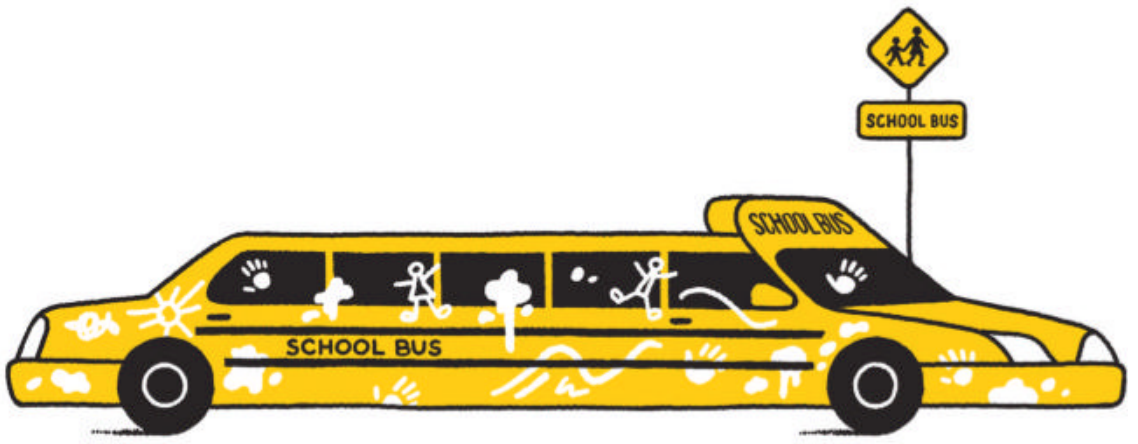
When the music stopped, Asher told me that he had been tracking me the entire way on foot—at a distance of about five hundred yards. He had even slept outdoors with Imerhane on the second night. Realizing that Asher looked as dirty as me, I laughed. I had never realized that I was being followed. (Later, I wondered whether some of the sounds that I had occasionally heard on the trek had been Asher displacing rocks.) He said that the text I sent on the first evening, about my unexpected nighttime visit, had prompted a string of phone calls between Imerhane and people in the village nearby. Imerhane had been told that my visitors were only worried about my well-being: they were not accustomed to lone hikers sleeping outside. I wondered why Asher had not sent some words back to reassure me. He said that he didn't want such messages to become a "crutch." The only time Asher was actually concerned about me was when his G.P.S. showed me veering off course during the middle of the first day. There were some cliffs near that part of the route. When Asher reached a vantage point, he saw me having tea with the local men, and his anxiety faded.

My experience had been both real and extremely theatrical. The mountains and the rocks were solid enough to have broken my bones. But I was able to travel as I did only because a group of experts had prepared a route customized for my level of fitness, and had monitored my every move so that I could feel danger without actually being endangered. There was a touch of "Westworld" to Get Lost. And I hadn't been truly disconnected; rather, I had been given the luxury of living for a short while under the illusion that I was. The adventure was every bit as confected as my hotel stay.

Nevertheless, my hike in the mountains was deeply gratifying. Asher and I had formed a bond, even though I did not see him during my two days alone. In my giddy debriefing, we talked about the route, the overnight thunderstorm, and the noisy dog, which had also chased him. I detected no insincerity when he remarked, "You and me are the same tribe."

All of us were invited to the wedding. I was as filthy as a chimney sweep, but nobody seemed to mind. Beside a single-story mud house, about fifty men were sitting in the shade, some of them dressed in formal clothes. There were no women outside, but we could hear a group of high voices indoors, singing to the newlyweds. We were invited to take off our shoes, and to sit in the shade. Asher and I sat with our backs against a cool wall. Everyone looked happy to see us. A group of kids came near to take a closer look at the foreigners who had just walked out of the mountains. I made faces at them and they giggled. A steaming dish of lamb couscous emerged at a low table in front of us, along with glasses of tea. We ate like starvelings.

"My God, that's delicious," Asher said, and he was right. ♦



SUCCESSION, JR.

BY TEDDY WAYNE

Int. Montessori preschool.

Logan: Put away your goddam childish things and listen up, thumb-suckers! What's that hellacious racket?

Gerri: Shazaming it . . . Dan Zanes, "Father Goose."

Logan: Is Raffi not good enough for you callow fucking philistines? It's no secret that I'm retiring from preschool. Which of you short-pantsed mama's boys thinks he can step into my size-4 Crocs?

Kendall: Respectfully, I have three years of day care under my belt, I'm intimately familiar with our Lego and Lincoln Log operations, I can finger-paint like . . . like fucking Picasso—

Roman: I think what my bed-wetting brother is trying to say is that I would clearly make the best leader, owing to my impeccable motor skills.

Logan: Roman, do me a teeny-tiny favor? Stick a fucking pacifier in your drooling piehole.

Siobhan: Aren't you overlooking someone with, say, pigtails, a constantly runny nose, and a backless onesie?

Logan: Siobhan, you don't want this. Dealing with that ballbuster Miss Claudia at check-in, sweeping the room for tree nuts, staying up till seven, eight at night learning numbers . . . It's like a bad skinned knee, sweetheart. Like a bad fucking skinned knee.

Siobhan: Don't you think I can decide for myself? And what are numbers?

Logan: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. That's all of 'em.

Cousin Greg: Sir, if I may be so bold as to not necessarily "pitch" you, but perhaps make babbling sounds—

Logan: For fuck's sake, Greg, go get changed. You smell like a Diaper Genie in a Soviet orphanage.

Cousin Greg: Of course—I can't smell myself, so thank you for alerting me to my, uh, olfactory affront. (*He exits, stumbles and falls twice.*)

Logan: Jesus H. Christ, what is he, four foot fucking eight? Is this a preschool or an Old MacDonald's farm for feckless, stammering Sasquatches?

(*Opening credits, scored to xylophone.*)

Ext. Waystar Royco-sponsored playground.

Kendall: Who do you think the old boy's gonna pick?

Roman: He's looking for a comer who sleeps with two night-lights and has the social-emotional skills and testicular volume of a newborn, so I'd say you're a lock.

Siobhan: Word around the sandbox is it's Connor.

Kendall: No, our half brother's been out all year with a sore throat. School board would shit their "Frozen II" underpants.

Roman: Is a half brother the same thing as a cousin?

Cousin Greg: If that's the case, then by the reverse logic—if it, uh, pleases the court—it would, ipso facto, mean that I might be referred to as "Half Brother Greg," not "Cousin"—

Roman: Shut the fuck up, Greg, before we throw you off the jungle gym.

Cousin Greg: Might I suggest a less physically painful—but still psychically wounding—schoolyard humiliation involving a wedgie?

Int. hallway. Logan walks with Hugo.

Logan: Get me a ring-around-the-rosy with the recess committee! (*He clutches his stomach.*)

Hugo: What's wrong?

Logan: I'm fine, just a tummy ouchie. We'll fucking duck-duck-goose 'em. We'll go *full . . . fucking . . . duck-duck-goose!*

Int. art room. Tom tentatively approaches Siobhan with a construction-paper heart.

Tom: I made this for you.

Siobhan: Tom, that's so . . . sweet.

Tom: Did you . . . make one for me?

Siobhan: Oh, honey, you know I've been swamped looking for glue sticks that aren't dried up—

Tom: I get it. I was thinking, with the D.O.E. on our ass for the cubby-room scandal, we need a fall guy. Maybe I should take the hit and go to public school.

Siobhan: No! *Public school*? With the free lunches and the critical race theory? You wouldn't last a day. (*Beat*) Hmm . . . it *is* kind of Baby Einstein.

Tom: Ulp. Could I at least first move to Scarsdale?

Siobhan: Bad optics.

Tom: Montclair? (*She grimaces. He sobs uncontrollably.*)

Int. limo-bus.

Logan: I've chosen Connor. He has maturity, killer instincts, and he knows most of the alphabet. I don't want anyone leaking this to the parent Listserve—*not word fucking one!*—or no more Go-Gurt privileges. (*He exits.*)

Siobhan: Bastard. I've been learning my ABCs, too.

Roman: Oh, really, Shiv? Is that what you're doing every afternoon? You're not just passing out on the nap rug with a juice box in your mouth?

Siobhan: Fuck off, Rome. Aren't there some worms you should be eating?

(*Kendall gobbles a box of raisins.*)

Roman: Whoa, buddy, that's an intense fructose rush there. Why don't we try a nice sippy cup of the old H_2O?

Kendall: Hey, *buddy*? Thanks for the concern, but I can handle my sugar.

(*He tries to stare solemnly out the bus window, but he's too short.*) ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

DEPT. OF ARCHEOLOGY

POMPEII'S HIDDEN LAYER

New excavations expose how ordinary residents slept, shopped, and snacked.

BY REBECCA MEAD

The journey from Naples to the ruins of Pompeii takes about half an hour on the Circumvesuviana, a train that rattles through a ribbon of land between the base of Mt. Vesuvius, on one side, and the Gulf of Naples, on the other. The area is built up, but when I travelled the route earlier this fall I could catch glimpses of the glittering sea behind apartment buildings. Occasionally, the mountainous coast across the bay came into sight, in the direction of the old Roman port of Misenum—where, in 79 A.D., the naval commander and prolific author Pliny the Elder watched Vesuvius erupt. Pliny, who led a rescue effort by sea, was killed by one of the volcano's surges of gas and rock; his nephew, Pliny the Younger, provided the only surviving eyewitness account of the disaster. My view sometimes opened up in the opposite direction, toward the volcano, to reveal farmland or a stand of umbrella pines, their tall trunks giving way to billowing needle-covered branches. Pliny the Younger compared the shape of these trees to the volcanic eruption, with its column of smoke rising to a puffy cloud of ash that hovered, and then collapsed, burying a good part of what is now the Circumvesuviana's route.

I got off at the stop called Pompeii Scavi—"the ruins of Pompeii"—and headed toward the modern gates that surround the ancient city. Before Pompeii was drowned in ash, it had a circumference of about two miles, enclosing an area of some hundred and seventy acres—a fifth the size of Central Park. Its population is estimated to have been about eleven thousand, roughly the same number as live in Battery Park City. After the ruins were rediscovered, in the mid-eighteenth century, formal excavations continued throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, with successive directors of the site exposing mansions, temples, baths, and, eventually, entire streets paved with volcanic rock. About a third of the ancient city has yet to be excavated, however; the consensus among scholars is that this remainder should be left for future archeologists, and their presumably more sophisticated technologies.

At some ancient Roman sites, such as nearby Herculaneum, unexcavated areas have been topped with contemporary buildings. But at Pompeii, once you walk inside the gates, you can almost block out the modern world: the ancient city is full of spectacular vistas, with the straight lines of its gridded streets leading to Vesuvius in the distance. And, every so often, a visitor comes across a street or an alleyway that dead-ends at a twenty-foot-high escarpment covered with scrubby grass. This is the boundary between Pompeii's revealed past and its still buried one.

I had come to Pompeii to explore one such boundary, at the abrupt terminus of the Vicolo delle Nozze d'Argento—the Street of the Silver Wedding—in a corner of what archeologists have designated as Regio V, the city's fifth region. For many years, the formal excavations stopped here, just past one of Pompeii's grandest mansions: the House of the Silver Wedding, which was uncovered in the late nineteenth century and named, in 1893, in honor of the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of the Italian monarch, Umberto I, and his wife, Mar-

The ancient city was two miles in circumference. A third of it is still unexcavated.

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELE CASTELLANO

gherita of Savoy. The spacious house, which is believed to have belonged to a Pompeiian bigwig named Lucius Albucius Celsus, included a salon fitted with a barrel-vaulted ceiling supported by columns of trompe-l'oeil porphyry, and an atrium, decorated with frescoes, that scholars regard as the finest of its kind in the city.

I discovered that the mansion was closed for renovations: the clattering of workmen emanated from behind its high brick walls. But I wasn't too disappointed—my interest was in what lay just beyond it, at a newly exposed crossroads. This is the site of the first significant excavations in decades of ruins embalmed by the 79 A.D. eruption. Since 2018, restoration work has been under way in Regio V to reshape and shore up the escarpment. Made up of impacted ash and lapilli, or pebbles of pumice, it had become increasingly vulnerable to collapse, especially after heavy rain. (When chunks of the escarpment broke off, artifacts and structures buried inside it were often obliterated.) Collapses aside, the weight of the unexcavated land in Regio V put the adjacent excavated area at risk by exerting immense pressure on exposed walls, some of which date to the first or second century B.C. The fragile escarpment threatened to make a ruin of the ruins.

Through a careful combination of archeology and engineering, the escarpment has been reshaped into a more gradual slope, with an exposed surface of rocky fragments secured by sturdy mesh. In order to lessen the gradient, it has been necessary to unearth a small area of previously buried streets and structures. In recent decades, most archeological excavations at Pompeii have been of layers that predated the first-century city—digging down to reveal, for example, that several of the town's temples were built on structures that dated to the sixth century B.C. The new excavations in Regio V—conducted with the latest archeological methods, and an up-to-the-minute scholarly focus on such issues as class and gender—have yielded powerful insights into how Pompeii's final residents lived and died. As Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, a professor emeritus at Cambridge University and an authority on the city, told me, "You only have to excavate a tiny amount in Pompeii to come up with dramatic discoveries. It's *always* spectacular."

My guide to the restorations of Regio V was Gabriel Zuchtriegel, who this past February was appointed the director of the Archeological Park of Pompeii. Forty years old, the German-born Zuchtriegel was formerly the director of the archeological site at Paestum, forty-odd miles south of Pompeii. As we walked around Regio V, he deftly navigated the uneven roads and talked about ongoing work: "We are not going to excavate just for the sake of excavating. It would be very problematic, and somehow irresponsible." However, in the course of stabilizing this stretch of the boundary, in 2019, archeologists realized that they had come upon a structure worthy of a full excavation: a *thermopolium*, or snack bar, which was situated just across the street from the House of the Silver Wedding, as if the Frick mansion were cheek by jowl with a Gray's Papaya.

The *thermopolium*, which opened to visitors in August, is a delight. A masonry counter is decorated with expertly rendered and still vivid images: a fanciful depiction of a sea nymph perched on the back of a seahorse; a trompe-l'oeil painting of two strangled ducks on a countertop, ready for the butcher's knife; a fierce-looking dog on a leash. The unfaded colors—coral red for the webbed feet of the pitiful ducks, shades of copper and russet for the feathers of a buoyant cockerel that has yet to meet the ducks' fate—are as eye-catching now as they would have been for passersby two millennia ago. (Today, they are protected from the elements and the sunlight by glass.) Another panel, bordered in black, is among Pompeii's most self-referential art works: a representation of a snack bar, with the earthenware vessels known as amphorae stacked against a counter laden with pots of food. A figure—perhaps the snack bar's proprietor—bustles in the background. The effect is similar to that of a diner owner who displays a blown-up selfie on the wall behind his cash register.

It turns out that few of Pompeii's more straitened residents had a place at home to cook. "Rich people had kitchens in their houses, and banquet rooms and gardens," Zuchtriegel told me, as we walked around the *thermopolium*. "But most inhabitants *didn't* live in such places—they had small apartments, or even one-room flats. During the daytime, their place was a shop or a workshop, and at night the family would just close up the front and sleep there. And, when they could afford it, they would come here and have a warm meal, and take their plate and eat it on the street."

Several tourists were peering through the glass into the *thermopolium*, as if they were hungry Pompeiians surveying the fare on offer. Zuchtriegel took a step back, toward a fountain; it would have provided fresh water for drinking, bathing, or cooling down. "It was life on the street, as today we can still see in Naples," he said.

The *thermopolium* on the Vicolo delle Nozze d'Argento is far from unique—through the centuries, about eighty such establishments have been identified in Pompeii. But archeological science is now more evolved, Zuchtriegel told me, and at the new site scholars "can use modern technologies and methodologies to analyze what was *inside* the pots." Fragments of duck bone were discovered in one of the containers, which are known as *dolia,* suggesting that the paintings of ducks served not just as decoration but as advertising. In other *dolia*, scholars found traces of cooked pig; what appears to be a stew of sheep, fish, and land snails; and crushed fava beans. A book of recipes attributed to Apicius, a celebrated Roman gourmet from the first century A.D., explains that "bean meal" can be used to clarify the color and flavor of wine.

These near-invisible remains of foodstuffs do not just provide information about the diet of Pompeii's working classes. According to Sophie Hay, a British archeologist who has worked extensively at Pompeii, they also shed new light on the rhythms of civic life. "Up until this bar was excavated, people who study these things

have gone around believing that the *dolia* contained only dry foodstuffs," she told me. "There are Roman laws that said bars shouldn't serve this kind of warm food, like hot meat, so we've been guided by the classical sources. Then, suddenly, there is this one bar that is definitely serving hot food. And is it the only bar in the Roman world to have done this? Unlikely. So that is *huge*." A new story appears to be emerging from the lapilli: of a cunning bar owner who reckons that an authority from distant Rome isn't likely to shut down his operation, or who is confident that the local authorities—the kind of Pompeiians who live in grand houses—will turn a blind eye to an illegal takeout business that keeps their less affluent neighbors fed with cheap but tasty fish-and-snail soup.

A decade or so ago, a different story about the walls of Pompeii prevailed—that they were crumbling from neglect and from the ineptitude of the site's custodians. In late 2010, a stone building known as the House of the Gladiators imploded after heavy rains, severely damaging valuable frescoes inside. That disaster was followed by the collapse elsewhere in the city of several other walls. The media responded with a wave of alarmed stories; a typical headline, from *National Geographic*, asked, "POMPEII IS CRUMBLING—CAN IT BE SAVED?" Italy's President at the time, Giorgio Napolitano, declared the condition of Pompeii "a shame for Italy." Pompeii was also afflicted with human corruption, with the Camorra—the Neapolitan Mafia—exerting influence over its custodial ranks and on the local businesses that catered to the 2.3 million tourists who visited annually. In 2012, the European Union intervened, underwriting the Great Pompeii Project, which offered a hundred and forty million dollars to Pompeii for conservation and restoration.

Despite this narrative of decline—much of which presumed that Italy was unwilling, or unable, to take care of its greatest asset, its cultural patrimony—the deterioration at Pompeii was inevitable. In some instances, what had given way and caused walls to crumble were not bricks laid by ancient Romans but concrete restorations carried out after the Second World War, during which Pompeii was assaulted by Allied forces who mistook corrugated-metal roofs covering excavation sites for Nazi barracks. Mary Beard, a professor at Cambridge University who is among the Anglophone world's best-known interpreters of Roman history, told me, "The fate of Pompeii is quite mythologized, and has become a shorthand symbol for lots of other issues in heritage management. The P.R. used to be 'Well, we can't even keep Pompeii up, the place is falling down, it's a terrible disgrace.' Of course the place is falling down—it's a *ruin*. There are totally unreasonable expectations of what Pompeii can be, and how it can be preserved."

In 2014, the archeologist Massimo Osanna was appointed director of Pompeii, and he immediately launched an effort to restore confidence in the future of the ancient past. Sophie Hay told me, "I went to Pompeii shortly after Osanna got the job, and after five minutes on the site with him I got the idea of where he was going. He walked down the main street, the Via dell'Abbondanza, and there was all this horrible plastic netting in the doorways of buildings, the sort used on building sites to keep people out." The site looked bandaged and bruised. "He was absolutely horrified—he called people over who were working there and said, 'Can't we just *remove* all of this?' " Osanna made Pompeii more inviting to visitors, and by 2019 their numbers had swollen to four million annually. That year, the House of the Gladiators reopened to the public after a reconstruction of its damaged frescoes, becoming a symbol not of Pompeii's decline but of its renewed vitality.

Meanwhile, the charismatic Osanna won over the press by trumpeting discoveries resulting from the restoration work in Regio V. "He was absolutely brilliant at it," Beard told me. "Without actually doing any major excavation, he gave a series of carefully timed bits of good news." A headless male skeleton was discovered at a crossroads next to the House of the Silver Wedding, as was a huge block of stone, which lay, almost cartoonishly, right where the skull should have been. (The gruesome suggestion that the man had been decapitated was overturned by later analysis, which suggested that he had been suffocated by the pyroclastic flow—superheated rock, ash, and gases that rushed down Vesuvius's flank.) In a house that had been buried beneath a swath of rough land, a fresco depicting the god Priapus weighing his oversized member on a scale was uncovered. The press hailed the new discoveries, and in 2020 Osanna was named director general of Italy's state-run museums.

One day during my visit to Pompeii, I was wandering alone when I came upon the house with the Priapus, which is around the corner from the House of the Silver Wedding, on the Via del Vesuvio. The fresco of the erect god was in the entrance hall. Phallic imagery was common in Pompeii, and according to scholars such images were usually seen as symbols of good luck, rather than of ostentatious lewdness. It would have been interesting to know whether Priapus' facial expression was one of pride or discomfort, but the fresco was missing the disk-shaped area where his head had once been. In a nearby room, a better-preserved painting depicted the mythical story of Leda and the Swan, in which Zeus assumes the form of a bird and copulates with a Spartan queen. After archeologists discovered the painting, in late 2018, and peeled back its curtain of gray, crumbly lapilli with scalpels, Osanna unveiled it to the public by describing the "pronounced sensuality" of Leda, who, he declared, was "welcoming the swan into her lap." Examining the painting, I decided that Leda could just as easily be said to have an expression of trepidation, even panic.

Archeologists have since excavated the room to which the painting belonged: a small, richly decorated chamber featuring wall panels festooned with floral motifs. The lower half of the walls were painted in the rich red color indelibly associated with Pompeii. This look is consistent with what historians have classified as the city's Fourth Style, which was prevalent in

In the ruins of Pompeii, discovery has often gone hand in hand with destruction.

MICHELE AMORUSO / GETTY

the years immediately before the cataclysm. The décor—now nearly two thousand years old—had been freshly installed when the volcano exploded.

Since the remains of Pompeii and the other ancient Roman settlements inundated by Vesuvius first came to light, some three hundred years ago, discovery has often gone hand in hand with destruction. An eighteenth-century visitor to the site of Herculaneum described the methods used by the workmen under the command of Roque Joachim Alcubierre, the artillery engineer who had been appointed to oversee the excavation by the Bourbon monarchy then ruling the Kingdom of Naples. Unlike Pompeii, Herculaneum was not blanketed with ash and pumice; it was buried only by a series of pyroclastic flows, which hardened into a layer of deep rock, through which workmen could dig narrow tunnels only with great difficulty.

The workmen of that era, upon finding a mansion or other building, would extract any objects of obvious value, such as marble statues, bronze lamps, and decorative mosaics, without taking note of their location or of the architectural context. Because of the treacherous conditions—among them, inadequate light and air—workmen did not trouble to excavate doors. They broke through walls to get from one room to another, regardless of what decorations in the adjoining room they might be destroying. At Pompeii, it is not uncommon to see a wall with a hole smashed through it, including the wall perpendicular to the Leda and the Swan, where another painting has been partially destroyed—the handiwork of heedless laborers in centuries past, who dug down and rooted around through the ash and lapilli, which is shallower and easier to penetrate than the rock of Herculaneum.

Alcubierre operated with barbaric efficiency, especially when it came to wall paintings that his workers hacked off from their brick underpinnings. When a painting was deemed insufficiently different from those already unearthed, workmen pulverized it underground. These excavations were focussed on finding masterpieces to augment royal or aristocratic collections, rather than on discovering the mundane objects of everyday life—or material evidence of the complexities of Roman social structures. Today's archeologists are happy to retrieve beautiful objects, but they are also intent on finding clues that will help them better understand how slavery functioned in the Roman world, or how women could acquire power.

Even the best-intentioned archeologists are only as good as their methodologies, and the primitive approaches of eighteenth-century pioneers are sometimes enough to make a modern observer shudder. In the seventeen-fifties, a large villa near Herculaneum was discovered, and archeologists were so transfixed by its handsome courtyards and garden that they barely registered the lumps of blackened charcoal that workmen were tossing aside. Many had crumbled before the lumps were belatedly identified as charred scrolls of papyrus. Did they record any lost works of antiquity? The first efforts to render the scrolls legible—by

soaking them in mercury, or dunking them in boiling water—resulted in the scrolls turning to dust or mush. In a potent example of the advantage of waiting a few hundred years for technological advances to occur, scientists are now hoping to develop techniques for reading carbonized scrolls virtually, using microscopic-imaging tools devised for use in the drug and chemical industries.

Archeological techniques became more sophisticated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and at Pompeii there was a breathtaking innovation. Preserved in the compacted ash were numerous oddly shaped holes, and artisans made plaster casts of these cavities, thereby creating vivid representations of the city's residents in their final moments: writhing helplessly on the ground, seeking to protect a loved one from the rain of ash. But Pompeii's rising popularity as a tourist destination paradoxically contributed to the site's erasure. Charles Dickens, who visited in 1844, writes, in "Little Dorrit," about a family of tourists who made off with pocketed fragments—"morsels of tessellated pavement . . . like petrified minced veal."

Less than a century after Dickens's visit, much of the buried city had been unearthed, largely under the watch of Amedeo Maiuri, Pompeii's director from 1924 to 1961. At the bidding of Mussolini, who sought to connect the grandeur of ancient Rome with the triumphs of contemporary Italy, Maiuri significantly accelerated the pace of excavation, exhuming residential areas of the city, and also the buildings that lined the Via dell'Abbondanza. The scale of activity made it hard to protect the site from weeds and looters. But experts praise Maiuri for having a scholarly interest not only in grand houses but also in the simpler structures—workshops, brothels, public latrines—that have increasingly become a focus of Pompeii scholars.

"What a year! I've been having terrible trouble hibernating—I wake up at 3 A.M., sweating with anxiety."

Astonishingly, the new excavations in Regio V have prompted historians to reconsider one of the fundamental facts they thought they knew about Pompeii: the date of the eruption. In Pliny the Younger's first-person account, he writes that the disaster occurred on August 24th. But, in a house down the street from the newly discovered *thermopolium*, archeologists have found a wall bearing the charcoal inscription of a date: the Roman equivalent of October 17th. Though the inscription doesn't include a year, many scholars suspect that it dates from 79 A.D. Paul Roberts, a Pompeii scholar at the Ashmolean Museum, at Oxford University, told me, "Charcoal doesn't tend to hang around too long. I am quite convinced that this was put on the wall not long before it was buried." The inscription backs up a theory that another former director of Pompeii, Grete Stefani, proposed in 2006: that the correct eruption date was late October. Stefani based her argument on an array of archeological evidence, including the discovery of fruit that would have been out of season in August.

The charcoal marking is in a newly excavated residence that has been named the House of the Garden, because it once featured a lovely, verdant courtyard surrounded by a low wall decorated with images of plants. I visited it not long before the site closed for the day, when the declining sun was casting slanted light over Pompeii's largely emptied streets, tinting the clouds beyond Vesuvius a gorgeous gold-pink. The inscription, at eye level on a wall, had a makeshift shield propped in front of it, protecting it from light damage. When a custodian removed the shield to show me the writing, I found it both indecipherable and disconcertingly familiar—it was the jotting of someone keeping track of housekeeping, just as I might use a whiteboard calendar to note a forthcoming appointment with the dentist.

The other rooms of the mansion were sumptuous, especially one in which a round fresco of a woman's

face—handsome, with deep-set eyes and a long, straight nose—looked out from a wall. Perhaps it was a portrait of the lady of the house. During the excavation of the mansion, a horrifying scene had been found: the skeletons of men, women, and children who had sought refuge in an inner room of the house, trying to shield themselves from the ash, the heat, and the gases spewed by the volcano. In the same building, archeologists discovered a box filled with amulets: figurines, phalluses, and engraved beads. In announcing the find, Massimo Osanna, ever the showman, had called it a "sorcerers' treasure trove," noting that the items contained no gold and therefore might have belonged to a servant or an enslaved person. Such items were commonly associated with women, Osanna had noted, and might have been worn as charms against bad luck.

Other scholars have warned that the suggestion of a sorcerer, or sorceress, verges on embellishment, given the paucity of material evidence. The contents of the box are now displayed in the Pompeii museum, with no mention of a sorcerer in the accompanying text. Yet, as the daylight dwindled in Pompeii, it was tempting to follow Osanna's lead and imagine the scene: terrified members of the household clutching one another, their social differences levelled by disaster, as a Pompeiian who believed in dark magic made unavailing imprecations against unrelenting gods. My mystical vision evaporated, however, after the mansion's custodian showed me another inscription, which had been scratched into the lintel of the house's external doorway. It read "*Leporis fellas*": "Leporis sucks dick."

When Zuchtriegel, the current Pompeii director, was overseeing the site at Paestum, where three Greek temples have stood since the fifth and sixth centuries B.C., he made a number of innovations. Visitors were invited to watch ongoing excavations, and the storerooms inside the site's museum were opened for public perusal.

Zuchtriegel told me that, in his leadership role at Pompeii, he intends to continue embracing new approaches. As we walked along the Via Stabiana, with its narrow, elevated sidewalks that helped Pompeii's residents skirt the muck of its streets, he emphasized that archeology "is a field that is very much evolving, thanks to new discoveries and methodologies, but also thanks to new questions." He went on, "Today, we have a much broader view of ancient society. Archeology started as a field dominated by male, upper-class, European, white scholars, and noblemen and connoisseurs, and this very much conditioned archeological research, and what people were interested in. Now, thanks to new perspectives—post-colonial studies, and gender studies, and feminism—we have a really different perspective on antiquity."

Among the discoveries being examined through these new interpretative lenses was the first significant find announced under Zuchtriegel's tenure: the remains of a man identified as Marcus Venerius Secundio. The tomb was found not in Regio V but east of Pompeii, where a necropolis had been unearthed close to one of the city gates. Unusually for an adult burial, the deceased had been embalmed rather than cremated, and the body was so well preserved that hair and even part of an ear were intact.

Secundio, Zuchtriegel explained, was a freedman, having formerly been a public slave—essentially, a municipal worker owned by the city. "Of course, nobody wanted to be a slave—it was very humiliating to be the property of someone," Zuchtriegel said. "On the other hand, if you were a very poor freedman you were less well off than a household slave, some of whom were educators of the children of rich people, or secretaries who were part of the team that carried on the business of the owner." It is unknown how Secundio gained his freedom, but historical records indicate that a public slave could raise funds to buy himself out of servitude. Evidently, Secundio ascended within Pompeiian society, becoming an *augustalis,* or a priest in the imperial cult—one of the few high-ranking positions open to men who were not freeborn. According to the funerary inscription on his tomb, Secundio was a patron of the arts, paying for *ludi*—musical or theatrical events that were performed in Latin and, significantly, in Greek. "This is the first time we have this direct evidence of Greek plays in Pompeii," Zuchtriegel told me. Scholars had hypothesized, based on evidence in wall paintings and graffiti, that such events took place, but the inscription provides exciting confirmation.

In the decades before the eruption of Vesuvius, Zuchtriegel went on, there was a fashion in the Roman Empire for Greek-language performance, which was established by the emperor Nero, who ruled from 54 to 68 A.D., and who fancied himself not just an aficionado of Greek drama and song but also a performer. (According to the historian Suetonius, Nero "made his début" as a singer in Naples, so enjoying himself onstage that he ignored the rumblings of an earthquake in order to finish his performance.) Nero's reputation as a tyrant has lately been reconsidered by scholars, and the evidence of Greek-language *ludi* in Pompeii buttresses the revised image of the Emperor as a popular leader; it also underscores the extent to which even a provincial city like Pompeii was influenced by the cultural fashions of the capital. "Pompeii and Campania had this really multicultural environment," Zuchtriegel said. "People came from the Eastern Mediterranean, and there were the old Greek colonies at Naples and Paestum. We have evidence of Jewish people here at Pompeii." (Graffiti found in the city cite individuals with the names Sarah, Martha, and Ephraim.)

Zuchtriegel told me that, as director, he intended to build on Osanna's work, a decade after the rescue operation of the Great Pompeii Project was initiated. Other damaged fringes of Regio V are to be shored up, and new, limited excavations are to take place in another district, Regio IX. Similarly, work is continuing to protect areas outside the gates of Pompeii

which have remained vulnerable to the incursion of illegal diggers. Scholars have made various new discoveries in these outlying areas, such as the remains of a horse that died during the eruption; the cavity formed in the rubble by the horse's body has now been cast in plaster. Earlier this month, Zuchtriegel announced the discovery of slave quarters: a humble room, equipped with three wooden beds and amphorae stacked in a corner. "It is certainly one of the most exciting discoveries during my life as an archeologist, even without the presence of great 'treasures,'" Zuchtriegel said. "The true treasure here is the human experience, in this case of the most vulnerable members of ancient society."

But Zuchtriegel is likely to be less hyperbolic in his promotion than Osanna sometimes sought to be. I asked him how he could make preservation as exciting as discovery. He paused, then said, "Well, it doesn't have to be so exciting. But we have to do it, anyway. I think what Massimo showed in these years is that excavation, research, and preservation are not opposites. As we see with the *thermopolium*, this was an excavation that had as a primary goal to preserve the conservation of the site." He went on, "It's very important to explain that archeology is very complex—from the excavation to the restoration to the exhibition, analysis, publication, and study. It's important to make this transparent, and share it with the public, so that people understand that archeology is not about treasures and precious objects—that's only a small part. It's really about reconstructing the life of people in the distant past."

Zuchtriegel and I wandered over to a section of the city that was closed to visitors. A custodian holding a bunch of keys seemed on the verge of warning us off when he recognized his relatively new boss. We then entered another of Pompeii's grand mansions, the house of Maximus Obellius Firmus, one of the city's most prominent citizens in the period before the eruption. This mansion also demonstrated the Pompeiian fascination with Greek culture, Zuchtriegel explained. An interior garden was surrounded by a peristyle—a rectangular perimeter of covered columns—which was popular in classical Greece. "There is an attempt to transform a traditional Roman house into a Greek space," Zuchtriegel said. "You could be here in the middle of Pompeii, and feel like you were in a different space."

He encouraged me to look upward. A restored rafter was serving as a perch for a few pigeons, whose droppings are especially damaging to wall paintings and stucco. Zuchtriegel had introduced a program whereby trained hawks sweep the ruins, frightening off the pigeons. "I did the same in Paestum," he said. "You can reduce the pigeon population by eighty-five to ninety per cent!"

One of the challenges facing any director of Pompeii is coping with the tourists who flock, like pigeons, to explore the ruins. As Italy reopens for both domestic and international tourism, crowds are again lining up to enter Pompeii's more celebrated locations, including the street-corner brothel in which partitioned chambers equipped with masonry beds are decorated with obscene wall paintings—an X-rated version of the dead ducks painted on the counter of the *thermopolium* in Regio V. A feminist interpretation of the practice of sex work, and its role in Pompeiian society, has not yet been incorporated at the site. An official guide who showed me around the city one day regaled me uncritically with the anecdote, found in the satires of the poet Juvenal, that Messalina, the wife of the emperor Claudius, liked to moonlight in a brothel—a story that Mary Beard and other contemporary critics view with a witheringly skeptical eye.

Counterintuitively, one of Zuchtriegel's goals as director of Pompeii is to persuade visitors to go elsewhere—to the ruins of Herculaneum and to other, smaller sites that lie in the shadow of Vesuvius. One day, I got off the Circumvesuviana at Torre Annunziata Oplonti, and walked from the station for ten minutes through the town's steep, scruffy streets to reach a site known as the Villa Poppaea—once a luxurious suburban domicile with views of the islands of Ischia and Capri. The villa gets its name from Nero's second wife, Poppaea Sabina, whose family is believed to have come from Pompeii; it is thought to have been her country residence.

The site had just opened for the day, and I had it to myself as I descended to the 79 A.D. level and walked through a garden, where what looked like carbonized tree stumps remained in the ground. The villa, a sprawling complex of reception rooms and gardens and walkways which dates to the first century B.C., was stunning. First rediscovered at the end of the fifteenth century, when engineers were digging a canal, it was partially excavated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then more fully exposed in the late twentieth century. Archeologists cleared away pumice and ash, and in rooms edging a garden they uncovered magnificent frescoes of the birds and plants that appear to have once flourished there. A large, decorated peristyle surrounded another garden: Greek-style living at its finest.

For all the interest offered by the new discoveries of the modes of everyday living at Pompeii—with its snail stews and its Greek theatrics—an empty, unfamiliar, luxurious villa retains an irresistible allure. The grandeur of the Villa Poppaea brought to mind images of an élite class of individuals who thought themselves safely removed from the grubbing hardships endured by the poor, but whose vast wealth provided them with no protection from a titanic natural disaster. At the eastern perimeter of the site, there was a feature to stir the envy of a Silicon Valley plutocrat: a swimming pool more than sixty metres in length. It was filled with weeds and gravel now, but in 79 A.D. it would have been edged by lavishly decorated salons and gardens—and it was easy to imagine Roman aristocrats lounging around a glittering pool, gazing across the sea with the dormant mountain at their backs, confident that the world was—and always would be—theirs to enjoy. ♦


With access to contraception,
THIS GIRL COULD SAVE LIVES
Worldwide, an estimated 23 million adolescent girls want to avoid pregnancy, but don't have access to contraception. MSI is working around the world to change this and we need the generous support of people like you, who know that access to contraception gives girls opportunities to complete their education, claim their equal place in society, and earn a living. We provide comprehensive sexuality education and help adolescent girls make informed decisions about the method of contraception that will help them complete their schooling.
Just $32 provides 4 years of contraception that can help a girl finish school and study to be a doctor, an engineer, a teacher, or whatever she chooses.
Help Her Finish Her Education.
MSI UNITED STATES
Make reproductive choice possible.
msiunitedstates.org

THE SPORTING SCENE

FINDING A WAY UP

After decades of dominance, Tommy Caldwell still seeks new ascents.

BY WILLIAM FINNEGAN

"Come on, Tommy!" Becca Caldwell was urging her husband on. "You got this! Try hard!"

Tommy Caldwell was already trying hard. Known for climbing cliffs that rise for thousands of feet above remote places, he was spread-eagled this morning three feet off the ground, clinging to an overhanging boulder in a pine forest near Estes Park, Colorado. The climb he was attempting went from a fiercely difficult start to a desperate right-hand pinch, and he was falling flat on his back each time he tried the move. It was a short fall onto a soft pad beneath him, but still.

"Come on, Tommy! This is Tommy's Arete!" An arete is an outside edge—in this case, the razor edge of a rather tall boulder.

Caldwell hit the pad again. He was bare-chested, wearing gray shorts and banged-up climbing shoes, and he was breathing heavily. He cocked his head to study the rock above him. Almost to himself, he said, "This isn't Tommy's Arete." Caldwell stood up, skipped the difficult first move, and climbed swiftly toward the top of the boulder to get his bearings. He laughed ruefully. "This is Tommy's *Other* Arete."

Every crag, every climbing region, has its heroes—the locals who did the first ascents, who identified and climbed the hardest routes. The cantons of Switzerland have them. Caldwell is Colorado's. He emerged in the mid-nineties, a spindly teen-ager who quickly became known as the strongest climber in the state. If you look through climbing guidebooks at the most difficult routes in Colorado, which has more than its share, the first ascent was very often done by Caldwell.

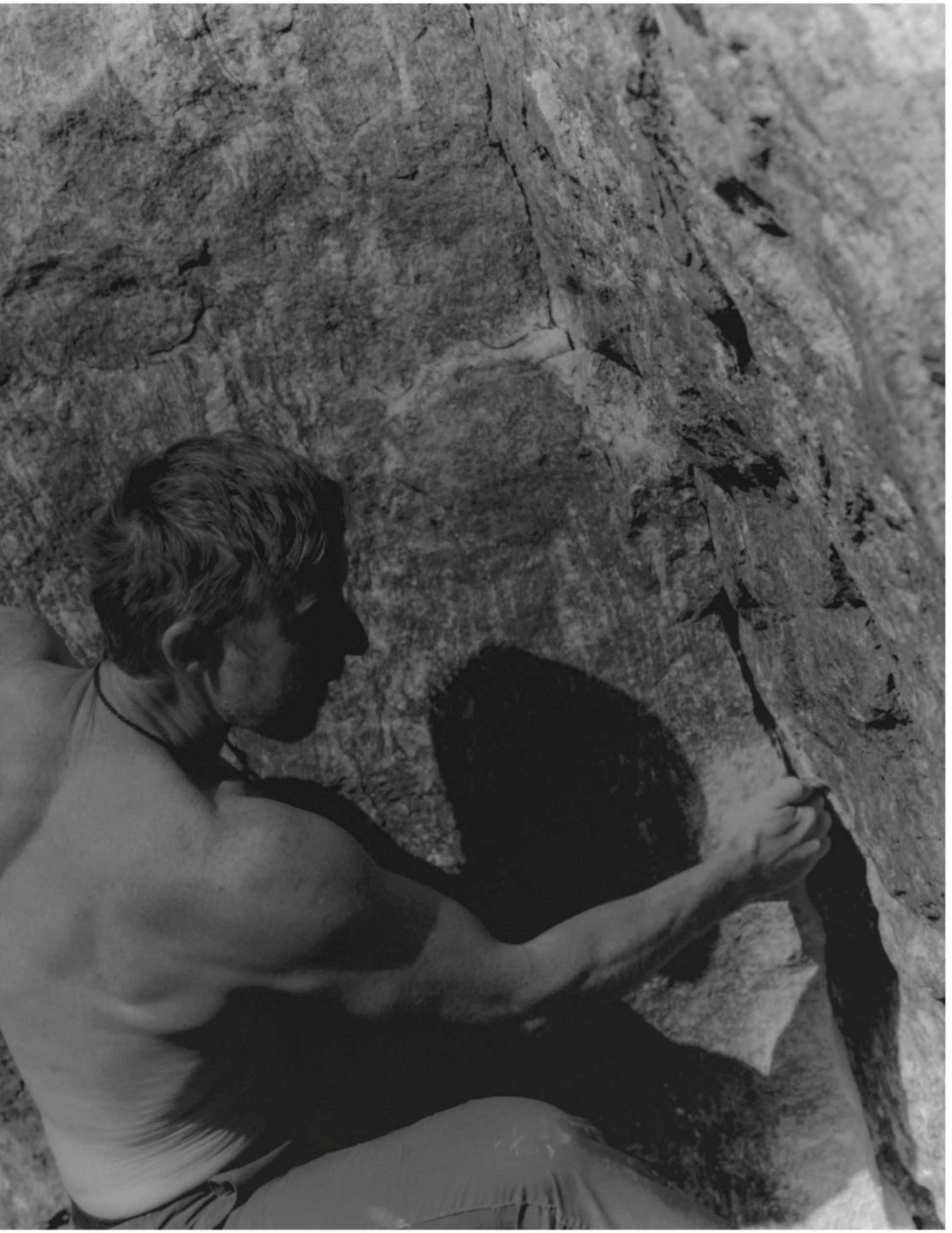
It's not just Colorado. In the past twenty-five years, Caldwell has made his way up many of the world's most forbidding pitches. His best-known first ascent is the Dawn Wall, the hardest route on El Capitan, the tremendous granite monolith in Yosemite, which he completed in 2015. President Obama tweeted congratulations from the White House. The climbing shoes he wore went on display at Colorado's state-history museum. At forty-three, Caldwell has been dominant for so long that I figured it must get annoying to other climbers. "You don't understand," Peter Mortimer, a filmmaker who grew up in Boulder and has worked with Caldwell, told me. "Tommy is so beloved. He is the nicest guy in the world and a total mountain badass."

The boulder problem known as Tommy's Arete was, Caldwell noted from the top of Tommy's Other Arete, actually in Chaos Canyon, one valley south of where we were. But Becca's point stood. He had done the first ascent of this route himself, as a kid. Surely he couldn't let it defeat him now.

He could, though. In summer, when it's often too warm for ambitious climbs (too much sweat, not enough friction), Caldwell goes bouldering—unroped climbing, usually intense, nearly always low-altitude. It's good training for bigger projects, building strength and explosiveness. He wasn't out here to compete with his younger self. And yet these high canyons, every buttress and couloir, were dense with memory and association and the ghosts of past companions. He first bouldered here with like-minded young crushers, including Dean Potter, a charismatic daredevil whose girlfriend lived for a while in the Caldwell family's basement. Potter died in 2015, while BASE jumping in Yosemite.

Boulderers are still finding new challenges in Chaos Canyon, naming them—"projecting" them, as climbers say, with the emphasis on the first syllable, meaning that they're working on something. Rock climbing was included,

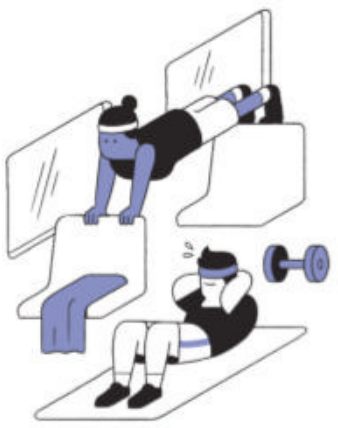
Caldwell, known for scaling enormous cliffs,



trains during the off-season by bouldering—intense, typically low-altitude climbing with no ropes.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NOAH SAHADY

for the first time, in this year's Olympics; it's a proper sport now, replete with rules. But that's gym climbing, on artificial holds. Outdoor climbing remains largely a do-it-yourself affair. Any rules emerge from a rough consensus among climbers. Around the world, they scout the landscape for interesting faces, picking routes up the rock and grading their difficulty. What's legit and what's not, who first climbed what, how hard a climb is—these questions get hashed out in random fora, from belay ledges to guidebooks to a host of Web sites, none of them definitive or infallible.



Caldwell has a restless mind, always assessing and reassessing. On the hike back to the car, he talked about how he and his friends had explored the area: "Now it seems slightly colonistic, the way we used to come out here and put our names on things, you know?" I asked what grades they were climbing back in the day. Caldwell shrugged. "The grades went up when we started carrying old couch cushions up here, bound together with duct tape. Suddenly, the landings weren't so bad, and we could go for more." He laughed lightly through the words "weren't so bad." That's a tic of his. He'll take a reference to pain and peril—which come up a lot in his line of work—and treat it as a private joke, a comic riff, removing any drama.

We came to a busy trail. It was a glorious afternoon, dry and sunny. While the rest of the West struggled with drought last summer, this part of the high Rockies received plentiful rain, and wildflowers—columbine and fireweed and mountain parsley—lit the deep-green meadows. Passing hikers started doing double takes. Yep, that was Tommy Caldwell. Caldwell didn't seem to notice.

He is the opposite of imposing. Five-nine, a hundred and fifty-five pounds, with a scruffy beard and a boyish face. He giggles a lot and has none of the swagger of an alpha athlete. His default manner is gentle, slightly dithery, how-can-I-help. He looks very fit, but that's not unusual in this part of Colorado, and the fact that his fingers are built with some type of steel alloy is not evident at a glance. The ditheriness is like the little laugh—it acts as a pleasing distraction from the real Tommy, who is intensely observant and has the ability to focus ferociously. Both are useful traits for rock climbing at your limits.

Caldwell's limits have fascinated the climbing world for decades. He has very likely free-climbed more routes on El Capitan than anyone else, and has been featured on the cover of *Climbing* magazine an unseemly number of times. This small but intense community made him famous young and has not let him go. It pays his bills, relishes his struggles, celebrates his suffering, gilds his image, and assumes, in its opaque way, that he will continue to climb at the highest level and will not fall.

When Caldwell was a kid, he just wanted to be like his dad. That was a tall order. Mike Caldwell was manic, massive (he was a competitive bodybuilder, Mr. Colorado 1977), a popular schoolteacher and mountain guide. Tommy, who came along in 1978 and weighed only four pounds at birth, was scrawny and shy, with developmental delays. Mike, who could do seventy-five pullups, devised a credit system for preschool strength training—twenty-five cents for a hundred sit-ups, an ice cream for twenty pullups.

Tommy was a dreamy child with obsessive tendencies. He began digging a hole in the back yard, planning to tunnel through to China—not an uncommon project for a certain type of American kid, except Tommy kept digging, banging on Colorado Front Range bedrock, for more than two years. With Mike's fitness program, he took the bit between his buck teeth and did not let go. There's a family photograph of him at age three, showing good form with a weighted barbell across his shoulders. He did it to please his dad, and to soothe himself. Getting strong felt good.

But Mike and Tommy's real bond was forged in the mountains. Mike was an avid rock climber. He hauled his family—including his wife, Terry, whom he'd met when they were students at Berkeley, and their daughter, Sandy, who was three years older than Tommy—to Rocky Mountain National Park, which abuts Estes Park, the small town where they lived. Rocky Mountain National Park straddles the Continental Divide and is known for fierce and unpredictable weather, especially in winter, when temperatures can fall to thirty below. Mike revelled in harsh conditions, and Tommy took pride in toughing it out beside him. With Mike, Tommy later wrote, "adventure wasn't adventure without an unplanned night out. We didn't just hike and camp on family outings. We summited mountains and slept in snow caves." Even when outings went sideways, which was not infrequently, Tommy felt safe. Family lore has Mike changing his diapers in a high-country snow cave.

Mike believed that the risks of rock climbing could be managed with proper preparation and correct technique. He drilled his kids on knots and rope management, footwork, belaying, rappelling, all the things to watch out for: loose rocks, frayed rope, rocks that might fray a rope. In summer, the family rambled around the West to far-flung climbing areas. When Tommy and Sandy showed interest in Devils Tower, the otherworldly butte in northeast Wyoming, because of its role in the film "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," Mike took them up it—five hundred vertical feet in homemade harnesses and improvised climbing shoes. Tommy was six.

Tommy was unhappy at school, where he never fit in. Things improved when he switched to the school where Mike taught. Tommy remembers his dad as the mad, fun English teacher who wore Spandex and threw candy to kids who got answers right. Mike also taught gym, and the school let him put up an indoor climbing wall. As climbing became more popular, kids turned to Tommy for guidance. At twelve, he became the youngest person to climb Colorado's most imposing wall, a nine-hundred-foot sheer face, on the east side of Longs Peak, known as the Diamond.

When Caldwell was a kid, a new style of climbing, known as sport, was flourishing in Europe. He and Mike

read about it in the climbing magazines that they pored over each month. It involved drilling bolts into routes, so that climbers could clip in for protection against falls. There was resistance to the practice in the U.S., at least at first. Traditionally, you protected yourself from falls by "placing gear"—finding cracks in which to cram one device or another and clipping to it. The last climber in a party removed the gear on the way up. Fixed bolts were considered a failure to deal with nature on its own terms, but they were more reliable, and they gave climbers confidence to try increasingly difficult routes. Mike and Tommy began making their way to some of the few places in the American West with bolted routes. When Mike got a guiding gig in the Alps, on Mont Blanc, Tommy went along, and they detoured to overhanging limestone crags where French climbers were killing it with light ropes and futuristic technique. It was the first time Tommy saw his father physically overmatched.

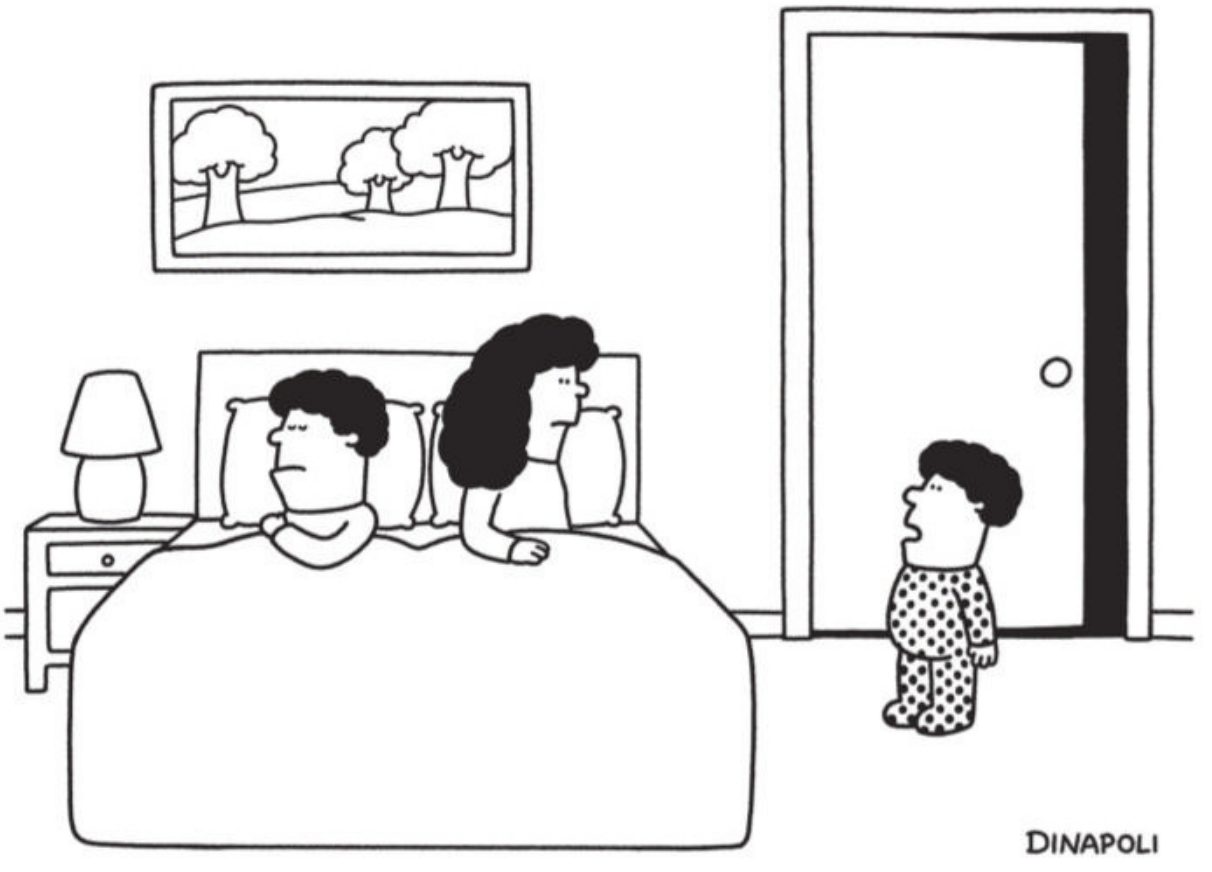
The advent of sport climbing led to the first modern climbing competitions, in Europe and then in the U.S. In 1995, while climbing in Utah, Mike and Tommy headed to a major competition at the Snowbird ski resort, in Little Cottonwood Canyon. A hundred-foot wall had been built with an overhanging upper section. Mike persuaded Tommy to enter an amateurs event, and when Tommy won that he was automatically registered to compete against the pros. He was sixteen, still shy and small, and he would be climbing against the supermen he read about in the magazines. Tommy topped every route and won. Mike was apoplectic with joy. Tommy was mortified by the fuss. "Tommy has never been a seeker of notoriety," Mike Caldwell told me, at his house in Estes. "It just sort of found him."

Tommy and Becca Caldwell have spent much of their marriage on the road, usually camping in a buffed-out Sprinter van. Becca, a photographer and a registered nurse, radiates cheerful command. When she and Tommy met, she didn't know who he was, which he found refreshing. She was "way out of my league," he remembers thinking, but she was interested in learning to climb. They met up at a local crag. It turned out that he had brought two left climbing shoes. She thought he was a flake, and didn't approve of his plan to wear one climbing shoe, one tennis shoe. Then he ran a rope up the cliff in his mismatched shoes. "I had to admit he looked like he knew what he was doing," she told me.

Their house, on a hill southwest of Estes Park, among ponderosa pines, is a work in progress. The roof is on, and the plumbing and electricity are installed, but the outer walls are still green sheathing and bare plywood. There's a big deck with a solid carved railing except where it devolves into a half-built jumble of two-by-fours. From the deck, one takes in dozens of high peaks to the south, the west, the east. Ladders and piles of lumber flank the driveway and fill the yard, alongside a swing set, a horse trailer, a basketball hoop nailed to a tree, and a tiny homemade climbing wall. The Caldwells have two kids—Fitz, who is eight, and Ingrid Wilde, five. This is the fourth house that Tommy has built or gut-renovated. He does most of the work himself, including the plumbing. He likes to have a big project going. "My favorite part is actually the mindless stuff," he told me. "The roofing, the flooring."

On a cool evening, we sat on the deck. Mountains stood against the still-bright sky. I asked Caldwell about his most frightening experience while climbing. He had to think. O.K., he decided, it was probably a close call that occurred on El Cap, just after he summited a route called the Salathé Wall. He was staggering toward a tree thirty feet back from the cliff, doing a little victory dance in his head. He was about to tie off a haul bag. Haul bags, full of gear, food, and water, are typically about eighty pounds. Caldwell had left this one sitting on a small ledge just under the lip of the cliff, connected by a rope to his harness. Before he reached the tree, he ran out of rope and was jolted to a stop. The jolt dislodged the bag from the ledge. It was a pretty clean fall from there, no significant obstacles for perhaps three thousand feet. Caldwell was yanked off his feet and dragged over the rough ground toward the edge. He clawed at bushes and rocks and the earth, sliding backward on his belly, until finally, using every bit of his strength, he managed to stop his progress, his fingers dug into stone. He was alone, and still had to figure out how to secure the bag and not follow it into space. "So that was pretty legit," he said. He didn't laugh even faintly. He just watched me, both present and far away.

"I know that any day I go into the



"I had a bad dream. The plot was a mess and the characters were hardly believable."

Caldwell chalks up while assessing a rock face. "I don't really have an emotional reaction to danger," he says.

mountains I might not come back," he went on. "You try to control for everything you can. But things happen. This house is my life-insurance policy." Living with such an acute awareness of mortality sounds painful, but Caldwell doesn't seem to experience it as such: "At first, you're trying to push the fear out of your mind, but then you just get better at it over time."

Caldwell's most frightening non-climbing experience came in Kyrgyzstan, in 2000. Caldwell says that he was there only because his girlfriend at the time, a professional climber named Beth Rodden, persuaded North Face, her sponsor, to include him on the expedition team, as a rope rigger for the photographer. Rodden was twenty, tiny, and a bit of a prodigy herself. She and Caldwell got together in Yosemite. It was his first serious relationship.

People were calling the Ak-Su Valley, in eastern Kyrgyzstan, the Yosemite of Central Asia. Four young Americans made the trip—besides Rodden and Caldwell, there was a photographer, John Dickey, and another North Face climber, Jason Smith. They reached the remote valley by Russian military helicopter. Caldwell celebrated his twenty-second birthday camped on a portaledge halfway up a twenty-five-hundred-foot wall.

The next morning, they were awakened by gunfire striking the rock around them. Three men in fatigues wanted them to come down. The men were Islamist rebels, from a movement associated with Al Qaeda, which was battling the Kyrgyz military. When the Americans reached the ground, the rebels took them hostage.

Horrors ensued. The Americans, travelling with the militants, found themselves trapped in gun battles. They spent hours huddled behind a rock, under fire, sprawled beside the corpse of a soldier executed by their captors. The militants, young and desperate themselves, had no food, and for six nights they drove the terrified Americans on a forced march through the mountains. They spent the days hiding. During the frigid nights, everyone was on the verge of hypothermia. The Americans were starving, slowly and then not so slowly. Dickey, at twenty-five, was the oldest in the group, and he did his best to buoy morale. He and Smith whispered about overpowering their captors, but they never acted. Finally, on a night when they were being guarded by only one rebel, Caldwell took the initiative. He crept up on the guard, whose name was Su, and pushed him off a cliff.

The climbers found their way to an Army base. They had survived, but

Caldwell, who in the past had found it difficult to set a mousetrap, was devoured by guilt. Rodden went into a prolonged post-traumatic depression. Back in the States, she and Caldwell were inseparable. He tried to comfort her, refusing what he felt was an action-movie version of their ordeal spread by Smith and others. A rush of media attention culminated, many months later, in an interview in Kyrgyzstan, broadcast by "Dateline NBC." Su had somehow survived the fall, but wound up in prison. Mike and Terry say that learning Su was alive was the turning point in Tommy's recovery.

Caldwell remembers it differently. He was hugely relieved, but the news didn't change what he had learned about his own character, his capacity to kill. At the same time, he had found in himself the strength to do what had to be done in extremis. The terror, the helplessness, the anguish of freezing and starving, none of it had essentially weakened him. And the difficulties of ordinary life in the West would never again seem truly arduous, he thought. Even today, Caldwell divides his life into two parts: before and after Kyrgyzstan.

One afternoon, I watched Caldwell work out in a homemade gym in his garage—a gruelling routine that included hours of hangboarding (fingers), campus boarding (hands-only climbing, no feet), treadwall (don't ask), MoonBoard (ditto), pullups, pushups, hard stretching. Rock climbing at a high level requires enormous core strength, yogic flexibility, and unusually strong hands, fingers, forearms, and shoulders. Strong legs also come in handy. Ultimately, it's technique that gets you to the top of a wall, and Caldwell has the experience and raw ability to find his way up almost anything. But none of that means he can skip intense daily training. At one point, he said, panting, "I've been lucky. Most climbers struggle with finger injuries. I've never had a serious finger injury." He went back to the brutal, relentless treadwall, which he claimed to love.

It's not quite true that Caldwell has never had a serious finger injury. Less than eighteen months after the ordeal in Kyrgyzstan, he was ripping two-by-fours with a table saw at the little house that he shared with Rodden, in Estes Park. The saw jammed and cut off his left index finger. Multiple surgeries failed to reattach it. Caldwell remembers a tense exchange in the hospital. One of the doctors, who was also a climber, told him that he would need to find a new line of work. When the doctor left the room, Rodden said, "Fuck that guy." Caldwell concurred.

Mike Caldwell was so distraught that he offered his own finger, but a transplant wasn't feasible. Instead, Tommy began a self-designed rehab program, plunging the tender stub into increasingly rough materials to desensitize it, and then icing, icing. The finger had phantom pains; the missing fingertip itched. Mike built a finger-strengthening machine for the other nine. Strong fingers are a rock climber's indispensable tool. Now Caldwell had to develop adaptive techniques. For holds like left-hand pinches, which he could no longer pinch, he learned to apply extreme outward force from his shoulders. He had been known as an intuitive climber. "I had to become more cerebral," he told me. "Figure out ways to compensate. I wasn't going to be the world's best boulderer now, or the world's best sport climber." His footwork actually improved. "I figured I could concentrate on big walls."

Caldwell first attempted El Capitan with his father, when he was nineteen, and got thoroughly frightened and spanked. Before long, though, he began to unlock some of the great cliff's secrets. He climbed the Salathé Wall at age twenty. This was the fifth "free" ascent of the Salathé, meaning a climb accomplished purely by hands and feet and other body parts, with rope and gear used only to protect against falls. After Kyrgyzstan, Caldwell found strange comfort alone on El Cap. "Nonjudgmental and brutally honest," he called the monolith, in a 2017 memoir, "The Push." Six months after losing his finger, he free-climbed the Salathé Wall again, this time in a single day, which struck climbers familiar with the route as superhuman.

His next big project was an odd choice. It was a sport climb on a remote limestone cliff in Colorado known as the Fortress of Solitude. He and his father had "developed" the area—found likely-looking lines and bolted them—in the late nineties. It was a demanding hike to the crag. Mike told me that they dug a hole near the cliff, put a trash can in it, and stashed their tools, to reduce the loads they had to carry in and out. The cliff was tall and heavily overhung, and the lines they put up were unusually long and difficult. Tommy graded one climb, called Kryptonite, a 5.14d. (The Yosemite Decimal System, used in the U.S. and Canada, originally graded climbs from 5.0 to 5.9, but as techniques and gear improved it became necessary to add higher numbers and then letters, a through d.) At the time, it was the hardest grade ever climbed in North America. It took him weeks of furious work.

The route Caldwell picked now was even harder, a monster that he called Flex Luthor. It was as though a pianist who had lost a finger chose to play the most technically demanding sonata in the canon. Rodden gamely agreed to help. She and Caldwell set up camp at the Fortress of Solitude, where they stayed, on and off, through the Colorado winter. The south-facing, overhung cliff trapped heat, so the temperatures were relatively comfortable. The hikes through deep snow for supplies were another matter. Caldwell hurled himself at the route, with Rodden belaying. It was a hundred and twenty feet of supreme difficulty, nearly all of it upside down.

Climbers who complete a route say that they "sent" it. When Caldwell finally sent Flex Luthor, he declined to grade it. He simply said that it was much harder than anything he had climbed before. It was widely considered North America's first 5.15—a grade that had only recently been broached in Europe—but it remained unrepeated for eighteen years. *Climbing* magazine called Fortress of Solitude "the crag of the future" and Caldwell, who was then twenty-five, "without question the country's top all-around climber." (Flex Luthor was finally repeated, this October, by Matty Hong, a leading American sport climber.)

Having made his point, perhaps above all to himself, Caldwell turned away from sport climbing. He devoted himself to big walls, particularly to his brutally honest touchstone, El Capitan. He spent thousands of hours on its granite faces,

exploring new ways up, free climbing routes that even he thought looked impossible. He sent two major routes, Freerider and the Nose, in a single day. He became the dominant climber on El Cap, and he began to see lines that no one had ever considered.

He and Rodden got married in 2003 and built a house in Yosemite West, but the marriage didn't last. Rodden met someone else, and they divorced in 2009. Caldwell, devastated, buried himself in climbing projects, including an El Cap route on the Dawn Wall, which is named for the way it catches the rays of the rising sun. It was the blankest single face on the monolith, and he had no reason to believe that it would ever go. He worked on it for seven years, slowly putting the moves together, finding tiny nubbins where a climbing shoe might stick, if fiercely applied at just the right angle in cold weather.

He found a partner, Kevin Jorgeson, a strong young boulderer, and they began the final ground-up push in midwinter, at the end of 2014. The ascent, generally considered the world's hardest rock climb, took nineteen days. Jorgeson was often on social media when they rested. This discomfited Caldwell at first, but by the final push he had reconsidered and started telling stories on Instagram himself. His account blew up. The *Times* followed the Dawn Wall story closely, day after day. Caldwell dropped his phone off the portaledge and concentrated on the climbing. He had been training harder than ever, had built a mockup of the most challenging single move on a wall at home. He was ready. Jorgeson struggled for a week with the crux pitch, but in the end they sent. A documentary, "The Dawn Wall," released in 2018, won a slew of well-deserved awards.

"There's non-stop, rip-roarin' cowboy action in store for rodeo fans," the Estes Park *Trail-Gazette*, a weekly that recently marked its hundredth anniversary, proclaimed. Caldwell isn't one of those fans. "I don't really like rodeos," he muttered to me, as riders did involuntary backflips off angry bulls. Taking the family to the rodeo had been Mike's idea. "Well," Tommy allowed, "I kind of like the mutton bustin'." That's a kids' event: a sheep running full speed across the rodeo ring with a small human sprawled on its back, clutching wool till he or she falls off.

Estes Park is less a cow town than a mountain-recreation town—its population increases exponentially in summer—but the stands were crowded with local folk, including Caldwell's extended family. Mike wore a gray cowboy hat, turned up at the front, that looked like it had barely survived a stampede. "It came from the store that way," Terry Caldwell told me. We all sang "The Star-Spangled Banner." The anthem sounded better, I thought, more heartfelt and searching, as a chorale than as a solo performed by some entertainer.

Mike, who seemed to know everybody at the rodeo, had chivvied Tommy and his kids into kicking off the night by riding in an old horse-drawn wagon filled with local celebrities. Mike, in his pre-crumpled hat, was the only one who looked comfortable waving to the crowd. Well, there was another cheerful performer: the Rooftop Rodeo Queen, a high-school student who mentioned in the promotional material that she was looking forward to getting closer to the Lord and, in the meantime, looked sharp in a flashy cowgirl costume. Fitz, Tommy and Becca's eight-year-old son, ducked out of sight behind the wagon's side. Ingrid, five and far-sighted, looked around curiously. I caught Becca's eye. She gave me a look that said, "I got this."

Later, Fitz had his nose in a book, "The Mysterious Benedict Society," while the mutton bustin' went down. Fitz was the right age for it, but no one would mistake him for a mutton buster. He has his father's shyness, and maybe some of his stubbornness. His interests run more to history and dinosaurs than to bleating livestock. He loaned me one of his books, about the world's oceans, on the understanding that I would not take it home. Tommy and Becca try to get Fitz and Ingrid out in the mountains as much as possible. "Kind of like my dad did," Tommy told me. "Letting them learn to love nature. But dialled way, way back." His laugh was both cheerful and rueful.

Caldwell expresses some of his own love of nature through environmental activism. He advocates for threatened wilderness areas like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Bears Ears National Monument, works closely with Indigenous activists, argues against mining and oil development, has testified at a United States Senate hearing. His political work is supported by Patagonia, which employs him full time as a Global Sport Activist. In 2020, he campaigned hard for Biden. His positions draw fire from the political right.

There is some sorrow surrounding Caldwell's politics. His parents have joined the large faction of Republicans who suspect that last year's Presidential election was stolen. They're persuaded by the MyPillow guy, Mike Lindell, who churns out allegations of voter fraud. Mike Caldwell told me, and Terry confirmed, that turnout in November, 2020, in Larimer County, where they live, was a hundred and four per cent—you could look it up. I looked it up. Official records show that turnout in Larimer was eighty-nine per cent.

In addition to his environmental lobbying, Caldwell serves on boards and committees and campaigns, taking meetings when he can. On a mountain called Twin Sisters, we climbed a steep approach through the forest to an area known as Wizard's Gate. We were above ten thousand feet, but the cell service was good, and Caldwell kept his phone tucked into his shoulder so that he could follow what seemed to be a series of strategy sessions. While he listened and talked, he was sorting through gear, putting on his harness, and studying the routes running up overlapping granite slabs into the sky.

A few days later, Becca and the kids were out of town with friends. Tommy headed for the Diamond, on Longs Peak. The Diamond is the highest-elevation big wall in the Lower Forty-eight. Many people bound for Longs start hiking soon after midnight, to avoid afternoon thunderstorms, which are common in summer. But Caldwell thought the weather forecast looked favorable, with a nice high-pressure sys-

MAY TO DECEMBER

By August, we are sluggish with love and slide two barrettes into the night of my hair. Like twin fireflies. Like rabbit feet dyed blue and downhearted, stamping the side of my head. July's shadow is almost rot and we haven't spoken in days. I play pool with Mik and count the ways he sinks ball after ball while I await the doom of going second, soon regret letting him break. I bet on this game. I bet on the waning of light, fame. I know most things dim. It's hot when I leave the bar and I say *Come, sun, you muscular star*, thinking heatstroke might strike this state of weather from my heart. The trigger of seasons, the treasons of these city streets. Orchard and Broome. We loom. We make reasons and room for why things can't work; we lurk into autumn. We warm our hands for October's plume. We say soon, soon, soon something will be revealed. We fool no one and are no one's fool, least of all the late summer gods who know a burn, who rope in hope, who prepare us for a meal of dead light. In August, I want snow. I want July. Midsummer prophet sight. Belief. Faith. A cathedral with all her weight. A winter love. A new year. A regal infancy. A Sunday, born.

—Megan Fernandes

tem in place, so he rose early and left the trailhead at first light. It's about five thousand vertical feet from there to the top of Longs. He was carrying two sixty-metre ropes, and all the gear he would need to "rope solo"—an experts-only method that would allow him to belay himself as he climbed sections of the great face, proceeding basically from top to bottom. I carried a sack of vegetarian burritos, which he had asked me to pick up in Estes the day before.

We climbed through a forest of spruce, aspen, and lodgepole pine. The trail switchbacked out of the trees into alpine tundra as the sun rose. We kept moving west, to a saddle called Granite Pass, and then turned southwest. We saw a herd of elk and a yellow-bellied marmot, its coat shining in the morning sun. No other people in sight. We talked about politics, of all things. Caldwell asked me to explain critical race theory. I made a hash of it, but it helped distract from the pounding in my head as we moved past twelve thousand feet elevation.

In a huge boulder field, Caldwell stopped to refill our water bottles from a creek, filtering for giardia. Longs Peak loomed above us, its north flank's black rock ringed with snow, its east face a sheer red-gold granite wall—the Diamond, cleaved improbably by an enormous glacier millions of years ago, striated by vertical cracks, and plunging into an unseen chasm. Caldwell asked for his burrito, which was soggy and not warm, and wolfed it down as he gave me instructions. He would hike to the summit, across the boulders and snowfields and up the black-rock ramparts, and rappel into the Diamond. If I felt up to it, I could make my way to a snowy notch on the side of the wall called Chasm View. From there, I could watch him climbing on a route called Dunn-Westbay Direct.

Chasm View was flush against the wall, seemingly hanging in midair at the edge of the abyss. Below the great face was a small glacier, and beyond that was Chasm Lake, cobalt blue, nearly two thousand feet down. The view was slightly overwhelming. Vertigo nips at the photoreceptors, or maybe it's the neurotransmitters. Caldwell and I called back and forth—the acoustics were uncanny—and he sounded strangely carefree for someone clinging to a cliff by his fingernails.

There are dozens of routes on the Diamond, none of them easy, but Dunn-Westbay Direct is the hardest—the "king line," as climbers say, going basically straight up a series of cracks for nearly a thousand feet. Caldwell did the first ascent in 2013. There is video of him trying to climb the most difficult pitch (a pitch is a rope-length), which is graded 5.14a. The climbing looks so strenuous, the footholds so sketchy, the hand jams so painful, that it's difficult to watch, and yet Caldwell's careful ferocity is mesmerizing. Today, there was no other climber in sight, and the scale of the wall made Caldwell look like a gnat in red fleece. "That's what I love about big walls," he said later. "When you're young, it can be intimidating, but once you get used to it the awe just gives you so much energy."

The summer thunderstorms hit Longs from the west. Climbers on the Diamond never see them coming. Caldwell says you can sometimes feel them even before you hear them—your hair stands up from static electricity, bits of metal in your gear may start to hum. Many climbers on the Diamond have had harrowing experiences with rain, hail, and snow. In July, 2000, near the apex of the wall, a young man named Andy Haberkorn was struck by lightning and killed. People die of hypothermia, even in midsummer. For now, the weather was holding, a bluebird day.

What Caldwell was doing on these super-technical pitches was rock climbing, but it was also mountaineering, in the sense that weather, topography, and survival tactics were key. His power derives partly from what he calls "hacks," which range from route finding to rope management. Some are fiendishly complex. Others are more basic, like warming numb fingers against your belly at one-hand rests. Mike Caldwell taught Tommy that.

I watched him finish a pitch on Dunn-Westbay, rappel back down to a tiny ledge, pull his ropes, thread into a new anchor, and get to work on the next absurdly thin pitch. He was turned inward, testing his finger strength, trying to remember the

sequences. He was also inspecting the route, looking for loose rock or anything new that a climber or a rope might dislodge. He was testing his pain tolerance, an essential component in hard climbing. Push it too far and you may rip a finger pulley, a bad but common injury, or tear a callus. Skin, especially fingertip skin, is an obsession among serious climbers. A single "flapper" can sink a multi-day climb. I had seen Caldwell on another peak, staring intently at his hands while being lowered after failing to stick a move. When he reached the ground, I asked if his hand was O.K. He laughed. "Yeah, I just always do that when I fall," he said. "It's a way to deal with the shame. Pretend it was your skin."

The inwardness, the microscopic focus—on rock texture, gravity, body position, movement, skin integrity—offers such a high contrast to the grandeur of a big wall that one can almost get a contact high from watching. But this was an ordinary training day for Caldwell. He had no doubt sharply slowed the pace of his usual approach to accommodate my presence, but otherwise was doing exactly what he would do alone. He seemed to be having what climbers call a "low-gravity day," just floating up the pitches. He likes to whistle when he works, and I tried to catch a faint tune drifting up the wall as he paused on a decent hold, chalking his hand and studying the difficulties above him.

Corey Rich, a photographer who has been shooting Caldwell climbing for decades, including on El Cap, told me, "He is absolutely a hundred per cent unaffected by three thousand feet of exposure. It's like his body is tuned to live in a vertical environment. It's so intuitive to him. But it's not like he gets up on the wall and turns into a warrior and an asshole. He always tries really hard, but he's also got this lighthearted thing, slightly removed from whatever's stressing everybody else. His brain works really fast. We'll be thinking about whether to move a rope or not, but he's already doing it. On big shoots, it's kind of funny. We'll have a budget for a rigger, but Tommy's so much faster and more efficient, and he really enjoys doing it. Believe me, that doesn't happen with anybody else. Lance Armstrong is not going to show up at your house and offer to tune your bike."

What drives Caldwell to climb so hard, to keep looking for first ascents, or, barring that, to do top-speed "linkups" of big, difficult climbs? It's partly just to see what he can do, or still do. But it's also the deep allure of new places, new mountains. Caldwell never stops training, and he likes to have something to be training *for*.

Mike Caldwell told me that he had drawn a firm line with his son: "If you go ice climbing, you're out of the will." Mike has lost friends to avalanches, and he considers the dangers of ambitious alpine climbing unacceptable. Tommy has lost friends himself. Now that he and Becca have children, he tries to keep the risks on his projects as low as possible. But he sometimes talks about remote, ice-prone destinations like Patagonia, or Baffin Island, or Greenland: "There's so much to do up there."

I was curious about what Caldwell might be planning for fall, the season for launching serious climbs. He mentioned a new sport route in California, a 5.15a called Empath, which "all the hard men want to try now." He and Alex Honnold, the subject of the Oscar-winning documentary "Free Solo," and Caldwell's consistent climbing partner for the past decade, were both interested in Empath. But it's considered bad style to talk about climbs you're planning. The maxim is "send, then spray"—talk about it only after you do it, and only if you must.

Honnold grew up admiring Caldwell as the boldest climber on El Cap. "He was, like, this mythical hero," Honnold told me. "I was afraid to talk to him." But he was soon putting up his own routes—not first ascents, as a rule, but free solos, climbing without a rope, in Yosemite and beyond. Free soloing is a niche activity, too terrifying for most mortals. Honnold has the rare mental discipline for it. He and Caldwell started doing big climbs together, roped, in 2012. Honnold eventually worked his way up to free soloing El Cap itself, on the Freerider route, in 2017. Caldwell disapproved of the project as just too dangerous, but nonetheless practiced with Honnold on Freerider, in the hope of improving his friend's chances of success. Afterward, he called it a "generation-defining climb."

Teaming up with Honnold electrified Caldwell. Honnold, after getting over his youthful awe, had asked him, "Why don't you free-solo big walls? It would be so easy for you." That was out of the question, as far as Caldwell was concerned, but he let himself be talked into an ambitious linkup of three big Yosemite Valley peaks—Mt. Watkins, El Capitan, and Half Dome—which, using a high-risk belaying method called "simul-climbing" for all but the hardest pitches, they finished in a single day. "Pitch after pitch flowed by effortlessly," Caldwell later wrote. "Somehow [Honnold's] boldness, the confidence that he wouldn't fall, was contagious." Caldwell was hooked. "Alex was inspiring and fun to climb with. Our respective strengths and styles jibed like a perfectly humming engine."

Caldwell, sitting on his deck as night fell, brought up Honnold. On his most recent trip to Patagonia, he said, he had brought Becca and Fitz, who was then still a baby. They stayed in a village that serves as a base camp for climbers, who come from all over to try their luck in needle-sharp mountains with some of the world's worst, most unpredictable weather. Caldwell and Honnold had planned a first ascent that would leave them unable to communicate with the outside world for an unknown number of days. It suddenly struck Caldwell how hard that silence would be on Becca. "It really wasn't fair to her," he said quietly. She and Fitz were set to return home as the climb began, and Caldwell thought that the waiting would be easier among friends and family, less stark. But he still felt guilty.

Another American climber, Chad Kellogg, who was staying near the Caldwells, was killed in the mountains that week. His rappel line dislodged a rock above the ledge where he was standing. The ice is melting in Patagonia, as it is everywhere, causing increased rockfall as long-frozen boulders break loose from the melting slopes. "It could have been

any one of us," Caldwell said. He longs to return to Patagonia—there are so many mountains calling him—but feels that he shouldn't. Global warming is changing the glaciers that are the primary approach to the big peaks. They're becoming unstable, too, with unpredictable new crevasses.

His adventure with Honnold that week went well. They made the first ascent of the Fitz Traverse, which runs the length of the Fitzroy range, across seven ice-capped peaks with descents even more treacherous than the ascents. They did it free climbing, at high speed (they carried all their supplies, including a single lightweight sleeping bag to share), in just five days, across extreme terrain that they had never seen before. Although they had no photographer, for obvious reasons, they carried a simple camera, collecting footage that became a charming film about their feat called "A Line Across the Sky."

"I don't really have an emotional reaction to danger," Caldwell said. "Alex doesn't, either, which is a big reason why we're such good partners. The difference, though, is that he's proud of that quality. I'm ashamed of it."

Honnold had no quarrel with that assessment. He has always had an air of detachment, of devotion to pure performance, that Caldwell does not. He lived in a van for ten years and did almost nothing but train and climb, and his unsentimentality is legendary, earning him the nickname Spock. But he does not deserve the comparisons he gets to aliens who happen to rock climb. He recently married a woman, Sanni McCandless, whose emotional intelligence is clear in "Free Solo," and moved out of his van into a house in Las Vegas. He gives a significant portion of his income to his foundation, which offers grants to organizations and community groups working on solar-energy projects.

"Tommy likes to style himself as risk-averse," he told me. "The safe climber. But a lot of the media representations around that and our partnership just aren't true. He has the exact same risk tolerance that I do, and he's capable of the exact same things. Maybe he's ashamed of that capacity. But it's not like we're ever pushing each other to do things. We make decisions together. That's part of why he's such a pleasure for me to climb with. We can swing leads as total equals."

Caldwell officiated at Alex and Sanni's wedding, last year. His kids call Honnold Uncle Alex. Onscreen, the two men have developed a buddy act. In circumstances that would be desperate for anyone else—on a wind-whipped peak in Patagonia, say, after climbing two thousand vertical feet of granite and ice—they can joke around, with Caldwell playing it straight, the low-key stalwart trying to anchor their tent for the night, and Honnold goofing with the camera, focussing on Caldwell eating some kind of energy bar: "Zooming in as you masticate, I'm starting to feel somewhat artistic."

Caldwell, deadpan, brow raised: "I don't know if I want you to video me masticating."

There is a searing moment in "Free Solo" when Caldwell is trying to understand why Honnold, while training for his big solo, took an uncharacteristic fall on a low-angle pitch and sprained his ankle. "He really doesn't even say he knows what happened," Caldwell tells the camera. "Which is kind of surprising, because I feel like he's always so aware." The fall deeply rattled Caldwell. "Normally, I'm just, like, 'Oh, he's got it. He's such a beast . . .'" Caldwell's faint laugh seems to turn to ash in his mouth. He bites his lip, looks up, can't find his voice. He eventually turns back to the camera and tries to speak, but what he says is unintelligible. Something about being "stressed out," maybe. Caldwell, the aw-shucks superman, seems stricken with panic and premonitory grief.

Caldwell and Honnold are both past the point in their careers where they need to come up with flashy ideas to keep their sponsors happy. "I'm not looking to top the Dawn Wall," Caldwell has said, "so I'm already on the downward spiral." But they are not unaware of their brands as fearless hard men, and of what sorts of projects might keep those burnished.

When I brought up the new California sport climb, Empath, Caldwell gave a let's-keep-this-in-perspective laugh. "Nobody will care if we send it or not," he said. "On a single-pitch sport

"Our pumpkin pie is loosely based on our apple pie."

climb like that, we're like the J.V. squad. So many people are better at it than we are. We just kind of like to hold ourselves accountable." The proposed difficulty grade on Empath, 5.15a, is part of the attraction—Honnold has never sent 5.15, which remains a fairly exclusive club—though they both say that they expect it to be downgraded. It's been repeated already by several climbers. But they're still excited to try it. Honnold says sport is his favorite type of climbing—a little-known fact, simply because he's not extremely good at it. He remains intent on improving. "Tommy's always been stronger than me," he said. "Though I might be slowly edging up on him." (Empath, it turns out, won't happen this fall. It was in the burn area of the Caldor Fire, which started in August and consumed more than two hundred thousand acres. Maybe next spring.)

The world of outdoor climbing runs on an old-fashioned honor system. If you say you sent something, you sent it. You don't need proof or even witnesses. Climbers will add "asterisks" to a send—where they compromised, where the style was flawed. Honnold gave me a list of asterisks for his 2019 climb of an El Cap route, Passage to Freedom, with Caldwell. It was Honnold's first El Cap first ascent, and a beautiful line, but the idea was Caldwell's. The project took a month, and toward the end they were cutting corners, not doing every pitch without falls, because Caldwell wanted to see his family, who were waiting in the valley. They topped out on Halloween, and Caldwell sprinted down the back of the mountain just in time to throw on his Obi-Wan Kenobi costume and go trick-or-treating with the kids in Yosemite Village. A couple of days later, the two men returned to one of the pitches, a long and perilous traverse, and added a few more bolts, to make it safer for the next party that might attempt it. Calling big-wall climbing a sport doesn't really capture much about it.

Technology is affecting the old honor code. Boulderers, in particular, can easily video their efforts now, and breakthrough boulder sends without video might not get the benefit of the doubt. But sport climbs, let alone big walls, can still go without documentation. Nobody asks Caldwell for proof that he sent Flex Luthor in 2003. He laughed when I asked about it. "Getting somebody to film your every attempt would have been seen as shameless self-promotion," he said. Caldwell half admires certain younger pro climbers who "monetize" their climbing with millennial ease, though he finds some of the product placement and self-promotion "cringeworthy."

Wall-to-wall recording might be more feasible now, but it's still not really in the spirit of the thing. Consider what is likely the most celebrated competition in outdoor climbing: the speed record for summiting El Capitan by the Nose route. This is not free climbing, with its meticulous, self-reporting ethos of using gear only to catch falls, not to help you climb. (Caldwell free-climbed the Nose in 2005, in slightly under twelve hours, which was eleven hours less than the next-fastest climber.) For the Nose speed record, you can grab anything you want—old pitons, belay anchors, your own rope. It is a mad dash in which style goes out the window. It is also a supreme test of skill, endurance, and route knowledge, with few standard precautions observed.

The Nose speed record fell below ten hours in 1990, and it has been easing down ever since. In 2012, Honnold and a partner moved it below two and a half hours, and when that mark was beaten, five years later, he drafted Caldwell to regain it. They recorded their time for posterity by Honnold pressing a timer on his phone at the bottom and yelling, "Go!" When they slapped a designated tree on the summit, he stopped the clock, and they stared blearily at the time.

After numerous practice runs, Caldwell and Honnold got the record back. Their belaying was unorthodox, inevitably, as they raced upward, mostly simul-climbing but adapting their approach to various pitches, obstacles, and pendulum swings, dashing through bivouacked parties waking up on ledges. On one practice run, in a section of the wall called the Stovelegs, Caldwell fell, about a hundred feet. On video, it's heart-stopping. A falling body accelerates exponentially. Honnold caught him, of course, and Caldwell arrested, slammed into the wall, and immediately began traversing left to get back on route. He could have safely fallen three hundred feet from that spot, he told an interviewer afterward—it's not how far you fall, it's what you hit—but the truth was that this orgy of brilliant coördination was surrounded by peril.

As they were projecting the Nose, two highly experienced El Cap climbers, Tim Klein and Jason Wells, were on another route, Freeblast, and fell on a moderate pitch. It was never determined who fell first or why, though it was clear that they were not conventionally belayed. They were simul-climbing. Later reporting found that, shortly before the accident, Wells had been chatting with another climber about Honnold's free solo from the previous year. Klein and Wells were both killed, leaving families behind.

Caldwell and Honnold were climbing through another scene of dread. Less than a year before, Quinn Brett, a pro climber who had held the Nose speed record for women, had fallen a hundred and forty feet from a feature called the Boot Flake, landing behind an outcropping called the Texas Flake. She had been left permanently paralyzed below the waist. Brett lives in Estes Park; she and Caldwell are old friends. Climbing the Boot Flake, Brett had minimal protective gear. Caldwell, sprinting up the Boot Flake, was supremely comfortable, but he stopped on every lap and placed solid protection. "All of the accidents surrounding the Nose and speed climbing lately have stressed out my friends and family more than they have me, honestly," Caldwell told a podcaster who interviewed him and Honnold. But Becca was down in El Cap meadow with the kids, watching. Four days after the accident on Freeblast, Honnold and Caldwell broke the Nose speed record again, with a time of less than two hours.

These virtuoso performances carry a moral hazard. Caldwell admitted on the podcast that he felt uncomfortable about setting a mark that other climb-

ers might endanger themselves trying to beat. Pause. "But should nobody ever do anything extreme?" A friend had suggested that the two climbers consider getting "headsets like spies," to improve communication while simul-climbing. Honnold liked the idea, but Caldwell, laughing, said that he thought Honnold might not appreciate his transmissions. All the heavy breathing, he said, "might wig you out."

Caldwell and the kids pulled up to the house on an electric cargo bike on a sunny afternoon. Little Ingrid jumped off. They'd been to the library, and she had a copy of "Curious George Makes Pancakes" clutched to her chest as she ran into the house. Fitz, more diffident, headed into the Sprinter with his books. Caldwell uses the big van, parked in the driveway, as an office sometimes. He wouldn't make it into the mountains that day, which meant he'd work out in the gym in the garage. "I've always overtrained," he told me. "Then, if you take a few days off before a hard climb, you feel light and strong."

Caldwell sometimes questions the depth of the pro climber's life. "I mean, just always looking for the next thing to send, it's kind of immature," he told me once. Jim Collins might be interested to hear that, I thought. Collins, an author and management guru who grew up in Boulder, discusses Caldwell's life and outlook in a recent book. He believes that Caldwell's climbing and his ability to solve seemingly insoluble problems are intellectual achievements of a high order—"like gigantic game-theory problems"—and that his tenacity and curiosity mark him out as something rare. He has taken Caldwell to meet with West Point cadets in a leadership program that he was helping to run, and with C.E.O.'s from multinational corporations. In an essay called "Luck Favors the Persistent," he examines the careers of Caldwell, Steve Jobs, and Winston Churchill. "I won't be surprised if Tommy becomes a leader on a whole different level," Collins told me. Caldwell might disagree; he does a lot of public speaking these days, including motivational talks in corporate settings, but says that he will never be comfortable in front of an audience.

I am not privy to Caldwell's post-climbing plans. But some of his humility about his place in the rankings these days is warranted. There are always new waves of strong young climbers coming up. "I was cutting-edge when I was a kid," he told me. "Bouldering V12, sport climbing 5.14. Now these kids warm up on those grades!" That's not quite true—nobody warms up on those grades—but the broader point is taken. Caldwell put up routes that no one else could climb, or even imagine. Then, slowly or not so slowly, they have been repeated.

Even the Dawn Wall. The world's best sport climber, it is generally agreed, is Adam Ondra, a twenty-eight-year-old Czech maestro who a few years ago put up the first-ever 5.15d, in a cave in Norway. That route, called Silence, has not been repeated. Ondra, meanwhile, has sent almost every ultra-hard route there is. Less than two years after Caldwell and Jorgeson established the Dawn Wall, Ondra came to Yosemite to repeat it. He had barely ever climbed a big wall before. He did it in eight days. Caldwell told Ondra, wryly, that he wished he could have waited a couple more years.

Ondra gave Caldwell credit for pioneering the route. "Tommy Caldwell was a huge visionary to see this in the middle of the blank wall," he said. Caldwell said that he found Ondra's mastery inspiring. But it was as if they were playing different sports. Ondra is a competitor, built and trained to win. Caldwell is a mountain djinn, a problem solver at home in the high country.

One morning, we went looking for boulders in a quiet corner of Rocky Mountain National Park called Wild Basin. We were navigating from screenshots that Caldwell had taken of a Web page that morning, and I was not sanguine about finding anything. But suddenly, by God, there they were. "Check it out!" A huge, deeply overhanging boulder called Thug Roof topped a grassy rise in the woods. Caldwell seemed enthralled. There were numerous high-quality cave problems, including some that he might be unable to do without a great deal of effort, and possibly not even then. He worked a couple of the more tractable lines. He and Thug Roof had a future, clearly. It was difficult to picture him getting tired of this.

The kids don't come out here as often as Tommy went out with Mike, but they do come. In August, Caldwell spent his forty-third birthday high on Longs Peak with Fitz. They had set off with a plan to build a Lego set at fourteen thousand feet, and instead ended up camping in the boulder field on the north side of the peak, their summit push shut down by wildfire smoke from California. Their tent was blown flat in the night, but they got the Lego set mostly built. They will be back. ♦

"Dear Peg, it's my third day back at the office and I'm so homesick. I miss you, I miss the dogs . . ."

ANNALS OF DESIGN

THE GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS

How the world's foremost maze-maker leads people astray.

BY NICOLA TWILLEY

On the afternoon of March 25, 1980, Robert Runcie was enthroned as the hundred-and-second Archbishop of Canterbury, senior prelate of the Anglican Communion. For his first sermon following his ascension to the Chair of St. Augustine, Runcie told the assembled ranks of bishops, bewigged members of the judiciary, and assorted royalty about a recent dream. "You know how sometimes in an English garden you find a maze," Runcie said. "The trouble is to get to the center of all those hedges. It is easy to get lost." The Christian church, in Runcie's slightly strained analogy, was in such a maze, and could progress toward its goal only by turning back, toward the periphery, in order to engage with those still outside the church's embrace.

"He said, 'I had a dream of a maze, and in this maze blah, blah, blah,'" the maze designer Adrian Fisher recalled, when I visited him late this summer, at his home in Dorset, in southwest England. In 1980, Fisher was twenty-eight years old and working for I.T.T., a multinational manufacturing company, where he was responsible for productivity enhancement. He was increasingly drawn to the idea of designing mazes; he'd even formed a company, Minotaur Designs, with a wealthy labyrinthologist and former diplomat, Randoll Coate. But public commissions proved elusive. "At first, I thought it was impossible," Fisher said. "How do you start? How do you do it?"

Runcie's dream gave him an idea: Fisher wrote to the letters page of the London *Times*, briefly outlining the maze's long history as a Christian symbol and noting that, as in the Archbishop's dream, a maze's goal is typically reached not by "pressing toward the center" but, rather, by "returning almost to the edge," in order to find the proper path. In his signature, Fisher styled himself a "Maze Consultant," and, before long, this stealth marketing had reeled in a customer, and Minotaur's first public commission. Lady Elizabeth Brunner, a former actress who was married to a chemical magnate, invited Fisher to tea. Over scones and jam, she wondered aloud whether he might create an Archbishop's Maze, inspired by Runcie's words, in her garden at Greys Court, a Tudor manor house in Oxfordshire.

Fisher didn't yet have official stationery, or even a typewriter, so he submitted his proposal as a handwritten letter. His design was circular: a brick path, set in a lawn, that formed seven concentric rings winding toward a sundial in the center. At first glance, it seemed to replicate the traditional Christian pavement labyrinth, the most famous example of which is found in the nave of Chartres Cathedral. Medieval labyrinths of this kind aren't puzzles; there is only a single path, arranged in a snaking pattern of concentric folds, and to process along it to the center is to participate in a physical allegory of the soul's progress through life and toward salvation. But at Greys Court a maze walker—or aspirant, to use the technical term—encounters a junction within seconds and has to make a choice. Fisher cunningly combined the appearance of the old Christian labyrinth with the function of the puzzle maze, whose solution, taking its cue from Runcie's metaphor, involves turning away from the center initially, to journey around the entire periphery.

The new Archbishop dedicated the Greys Court maze in October, 1981, and the resulting publicity generated more maze commissions. With new customers lining up, Fisher took out a business loan, bought a computer, a printer, and a secondhand car, and reinvented himself as a full-time maze designer. The course of his career, built on equal parts passion and self-promotion, was set. "See, you create events out of nothing," he told me. Fisher realized that if he wanted to make mazes he first had to make people want mazes. From his Runcie letter to his (successful) campaign to have Britain declare 1991 the Year of the Maze, he has devoted the past four decades to creating both the market and the product. Today, at the age of seventy, he seems to have no intention of retiring. By his own count, he has created more than seven hundred mazes, in forty-two countries. He is the world's leading maze-maker by a margin so large that he has no real competition.

"He's the only one who's managed to make mazes a business rather than a hobby," Jeff Saward, a historian of mazes and labyrinths, told me. Saward, who edits the research journal *Caerdroia*—the Welsh name for a turf labyrinth—estimates that, when Fisher started out, there were no more than fifty public mazes and labyrinths in the U.K. There was just one text on the subject: "Mazes and Labyrinths: A General Account of Their History and Development," by W. H. Matthews, from 1922. Matthews, a civil servant who had fought in the First World War, wrote the book in the Reading Room of the British Museum on his return from the trenches. Despite his fondness for mazes, Matthews was convinced that they were no more than a historical curiosity. "Let us admit at once that, as a favorite of fashion, the maze has long since had its day," he wrote. The book, proving his point, sank almost without trace, and its poor sales became a family joke.

Yet today maze observers agree that there are more mazes than ever before, and more being built each year. Mazes, under Fisher's watch, have become part

The Blenheim Palace maze, which Adrian Fisher co-designed in the eighties, is now featured on Britain's five-pound note.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY OLAF OTTO BECKER

of the British heritage business, de rigueur at stately homes, where, along with tearooms and gift shops, they can raise money to pay for otherwise crippling repair and tax bills. They have also diversified: Fisher helped invent the corn mazes that pop up alongside pumpkin patches on farms across America each fall, and reintroduced mirror mazes to piers, theme parks, and malls worldwide. He will happily design a labyrinth inscribed with religious quotations for a megachurch in North Carolina; a maze adventure with an artificial volcano, lake, and safe room for a Middle Eastern princess; a thumb-size maze tattoo for an anonymous female client; and a vertical maze for a fifty-five-story skyscraper in Dubai, with meanders that double as balconies. He does eighty per cent of his business overseas, and he told me that he has won nine Guinness World Records for superlative mazes of various sorts. "Of course, I wrote the rules about how a maze qualifies for the Guinness Book of Records," he added.

If you rely on G.P.S. directions to visit Fisher, you will arrive at the wrong place: in front of an imposing Regency mansion, built two centuries ago to adorn the estate of the local landowner, the First Viscount Portman. Fisher used to live there, but he and his wife downsized a few years ago, after the youngest of their six children went to college. They moved to a modest brick cottage in the stable yard and sold the main house, but retained much of its seven-acre garden. The fact that Fisher's new address forces unwary visitors to perform a three-point turn on a narrow country lane and then retrace their route, craning their necks to spot a lengthy driveway that loops around to the correct entrance, is an ancillary benefit.

In person, Fisher cuts a Colonel Blimp-ish figure, barrelling along rural roads in his battered four-by-four, noshing on suet-crusted steak-and-kidney puddings with lashings of Lyle's Golden Syrup, writing a column for his local newspaper, and airing his pet peeves: "woke" culture, Eastern European immigrants, and, above all, the French. Portly, white-haired, and clean-shaven, he sports the uniform of middle-class Englishmen of a certain age—pleated chinos, a collared shirt, and a jewel-tone sweater, down which he has invariably spilled some of whatever he was eating.

At his home, Fisher first talked to me in his studio, a big shed stuffed with books, models, and vast amounts of clutter. His wife, Marie, who is also his business partner, brought us coffee and biscuits. "It's a colorful existence I lead, I suppose," he said, as he rattled off his past projects and expressed the hope that I would be able to capture the fullness of his talents, "as a Renaissance man of diverse fields of endeavor and creativity." (These efforts include an unfinished novel involving astronauts, Admiral Nelson, and Arthurian knights; and elaborate mosaics made using his own geometrically advanced tiling systems.) As he told me story after story about the stuff in his office—a tapestry he'd embroidered depicting the Blenheim Palace maze, which he co-designed in the late nineteen-eighties and which is now featured on Britain's five-pound note, and a rather fetching Scottish tartan created for Queen Victoria by a distant ancestor—I concluded that Fisher is either slightly deaf or given to ignoring questions he doesn't find interesting.

Fisher's relentless drive—"he's just carried forth on the crest of the wave of his invention and energy," as his friend the artist Patrick Hughes put it—makes him both difficult and admired. Several of the maze experts I talked to, while conveying great respect for his work, hinted that they did not necessarily appreciate his company. His business partners prior to Marie ended up parting ways with him; so, for that matter, did an earlier wife.

Born in 1951, Fisher grew up in Bournemouth, on the south coast of England. As a boy, he liked to make up his own riddles and card games. "I took a book on recreational mathematics on holiday once," he recalled. "My father said, 'That'll do you a fat lot of good.'" Fisher's father was a family doctor, like his father and his father's father before him. "He couldn't see how I could get a livelihood out of it," Fisher said.

Fisher was sent to Oundle, a posh school in the Midlands, and then he took a course in accounting at Portsmouth Polytechnic (now the University of Portsmouth). He spent the next eight years in industry, conducting time-and-motion studies in order to help businesses, including a paper-and-packaging conglomerate and I.T.T., the manufacturing giant, optimize efficiency. But his obsession with mazes, above all other puzzles, had already taken hold. In 1975, several elm trees in the Fisher family's back garden succumbed to disease. Fisher, by then in his twenties, and his teen-age siblings decided to bend and weave a newly exposed thicket of holly bushes into a maze shape. His younger brother, Bill, told me, "We used to have big parties every summer, and friends would use it and go through the little tunnels and things, usually completely drunk."

The oldest hedge maze still in existence is, coincidentally, the one with which I am most familiar. As teenagers, my brother and I lost at least half a dozen French and German exchange students within the clipped evergreen walls of a small yew maze tucked into an odd triangle at the northern edge of the gardens of Hampton Court Palace. The Tudor palace, which lies southwest of central London on the banks of the Thames, was a favorite residence of Henry VIII, who received it as a gift—albeit one offered under some duress—from Cardinal Wolsey, his chief minister. Today, the palace is perhaps best known for its maze, the lone survivor of three or four labyrinths built there around 1690, as part of a substantial redesign that converted what had previously been an orchard into a fashionable new garden called the Hampton Court Wilderness.

"The word 'wilderness' doesn't mean the same as we know it today," Graham Dillamore, a head gardener at Hampton Court, told me, as we strolled past beds filled with the last of the summer roses on a misty September day. "This would have been an area where you could have had some mystery and some thrills in an orderly fashion, without having to go somewhere and actually be lost." The maze, which consists of a

Fisher's career has been built on equal parts passion and self-promotion. "See, you create events out of nothing," he says.

single continuous hedge, was a labyrinth within a much larger labyrinth of crisscrossing, tree-lined paths—part of a series of amusements and delights concealed within each slice of garden. An ambling prince or courtier might have happened upon a fountain, a folly, a sculpture, or even a banquet hall in which to enjoy music, sweetmeats, and wine, depending on which garden bower he chose to enter.

At the time, a hedge maze had been an essential element of European formal gardens for centuries. The first evidence of a labyrinth formed from hedges can be found in a record of the removal of one on a royal estate in Paris in 1431. An anonymous courtly poem written in England in the late fourteen-hundreds describes a group of women "disportying" themselves "in crosse aleys" before enjoying a carefree "walke aboute the mase." In paintings and engravings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, hedge mazes are populated mostly by couples; according to Saward, the maze historian, the air of privacy created by their shady twists and turns made them an ideal location for romantic dalliances. (As Dillamore and I walked past a champagne cork nestled at the base of the hedge, he told me that the maze is a popular spot for marriage proposals.)

Garden mazes such as the one at Hampton Court grew out of a much earlier tradition of labyrinth carvings. The oldest such inscription that can be scientifically dated is a squared-off, single-path labyrinth scratched into the back of a clay tablet at the Palace of Nestor, in Pylos; when the palace burned down, in about 1200 B.C., the tablet, whose other side recorded a goat-related transaction, was accidentally baked, and the labyrinth was preserved. "It's not some sort of magical, mystical object at all," Saward told me. "It's just a doodle." Still, the spiralling arms of a labyrinth have—at various times, in parts of the world as far afield as Tamil Nadu, India; Knossos, Crete; and Flagstaff, Arizona—represented the journey of life, the cosmos, and the womb, while serving as a trap for evil spirits, a cage for monsters, an ancestral abode, a ritual dance floor, and a path for pilgrims. Untangling where the design first arose is all but impossible, Saward explained: because the symbol's shape has remained essentially unchanged across time and place, there's no real way to date labyrinth petroglyphs. "Thus, considerable confusion abounds," he concluded. "The history of mazes is a maze in itself."

Today, the Hampton Court maze is a victim of its own popularity. Its yew trees, themselves a replacement for the original hornbeam, are threadbare in places where eager visitors have brushed up against them. Dillamore, a tall, slope-shouldered man sporting a quizzical air and a stylish fedora, seemed pained by the state of the maze. "We try," he said, gesturing to a rust-brown shrublet at knee height. "It's very difficult to get new yews established."

Occasionally, British newspapers carry rumors of a threat to uproot the entire thing. Dillamore assured me that he has no such plans, even for restoration purposes, but the maze has faced the chop before. In 1764, the Hampton Court Palace grounds came under the management of the celebrated landscape designer Lancelot (Capability) Brown. He was opposed to hedges because he disliked visible boundaries of any sort—he relied, instead, on a ha-ha, or a fence built in a ditch, to create the illusion of an endless, rolling pastoral vista. In any case, the maze by then had become extremely overgrown and hard to manage. The novelist Samuel Richardson wrote that "to every Person of Taste" the Hampton Court Wilderness and its mazes "must be very far from affording any Pleasure, since nothing can be more disagreeable than to be immured between Hedges."

Throughout Europe, formal gardens and their mazes were being replaced with new, less cluttered landscaping. The tall hedges bordering the long paths of the Wilderness were removed, and its tree-lined, folly-filled garden "rooms" were replaced with open lawn, studded with drifts of daffodils. Yet, despite Brown's antipathy, the Hampton Court maze survived. No one is quite sure how: there are no records of its being used or maintained until considerably later.

It was in the late nineteenth century that the Hampton Court maze became famous. New labor laws had given the working class regular time off, leisure was becoming a formalized activity, and the maze—easily accessible by rail from London—was opened to the public by Queen Victoria. In a classic comic novel of the era, Jerome K. Jerome's "Three Men in a Boat" (1889), one of the characters describes a disastrous visit to the maze. He enters before lunchtime, intending to "just walk round for ten minutes," and ends up leading an irate group of people "who had given up all hopes of ever getting either in or out, or of ever seeing their home and friends again" in circles until a groundsman rescues them, late in the evening.

This isn't as fanciful as it sounds. Old postcards of the maze show a warden atop a ladder, offering assistance to the panic-stricken and the perplexed. Dillamore told me about a sunny summer afternoon in the early nineteen-nineties. "I hadn't been here very long, and it was very busy," he said. Suddenly, he heard a commotion coming from the Wilderness. "I thought someone had taken their clothes off or something," he said. "But the screaming continued." The sprinkler system within the hedges had malfunctioned and was sending high-powered jets of water into the air. "It was an absolute monsoon," Dillamore said. "Everyone was running around the maze, lost and trying to get out, and at the same time getting soaking wet." Even with this additional incentive, they could not find the exit. "We had to pay a few dry-cleaning bills from that," he said, smiling.

The entrance to Longleat Safari and Adventure Park, on the grounds of the ancestral home of the Marquess of Bath, is one of the more depressing sights that modern England can offer. On a Tuesday in September, under cement-gray skies and the occasional spit of rain, stony-faced families queued for hot dogs, fries, fudge, and rows of portable toilets, recharging in between rides on a miniature railway, visits to a plywood "medieval" adventure castle, and the chance to gawk at some bored-looking gorillas. A short distance away lies the largest hedge maze in Britain: unrolled, its winding pathways would stretch more than three times as far as those at Hampton Court.

I had enlisted Jim Rossignol, a computer-game designer and critic from Bath, to tackle the Longleat maze with me. Enthusiasts see Longleat, planted in 1975 and opened to the public in 1978

(once the yews had grown in), as marking the beginning of the current maze boom. During the first half of the twentieth century, mazes had again been in decline. But, starting in the nineteen-sixties, they found new champions in the arts and literature. Jorge Luis Borges's labyrinthine short story "The Garden of Forking Paths" found an Anglophone readership in 1962; in 1967, the British sculptor Michael Ayrton, known for his chunky Minotaur statues, published a fictional biography of the original maze-maker, Daedalus. W. H. Matthews's long-out-of-print history was reissued, and, in 1973, Atari débuted the first screen-based maze, "Gotcha." In the New York *Times*, the popular mathematician Martin Gardner wondered where the "sudden hankering for mazes" came from: "Is it because millions feel trapped in various kinds of labyrinths—religious, moral, economic, political?" Finding a way out of a puzzle maze might, he supposed, somehow help relieve that larger, existential anxiety.

Longleat's layout has been adjusted a number of times, including by Fisher, but its original creator was a mysterious figure named Greg Bright. In 1971, after attending the second Glastonbury Festival, Bright, a nineteen-year-old high-school dropout, stayed on at the farm where the festival is hosted and spent a year digging a maze in a field that was too damp to graze cows. A dozen or so miles away, at Longleat, the heir to the estate, Alexander Thynn, heard about Bright's serpentine excavations. After climbing a ladder to view the results from above, he commissioned Bright to add a hedge maze to Longleat's revenue-generating attractions.

Bright's design was deliberately fiendish. Even today, the paths are narrow and whirlpool-like, frequently sending visitors around in spiralling loops and depositing them at one node or another again and again, until they pick the route that releases them into the next part of the maze. Bright wanted to incorporate tunnels, to increase the complexity, but budgetary constraints forced him to settle for covered bridges. A sign at the mouth of the maze warns that it takes an average of forty-five minutes to complete, though "some never make it to the tower in the middle."

"It's too clever by half," Fisher told me. "It's very angry, very hostile." It wasn't long before Longleat started getting complaints from guests whose visits had extended well past the point of amusement. The staff installed clue stations: directional arrows each covered by small metal panels labelled "Lift if Lost." Eventually, Longleat turned to Fisher for advice on how to make the experience more enjoyable. By then, Bright had made himself unavailable. Having arguably triggered a global maze renaissance, he had turned his attention to paper mazes, creating increasingly confusing designs that he accompanied with comments like "Solving the mazes is of little significance" and "I do not expect you to do this one." He turned down lucrative maze commissions, including one from Disney. Then, in 1979, he disappeared, never to build or publish a maze again.

At Escot, a series of gates allows groundskeepers direct access to the maze's interior.

Fisher tempered Bright's fierceness, uncovering the bridges, so that visitors could orient themselves and spot missing friends, and slicing a corridor through one edge of the maze, so that successful aspirants could exit directly from the center, without having to plunge back in and navigate the whole thing in reverse. Some might appreciate the metaphor of an unavoidable descent from a moment of triumph back into life's labyrinthine struggles, but not Fisher. "Where in a film should you have the final chariot race, the most exciting car chase, the most romantic love scene?" he said. "Right before the credits."

Since Fisher's interventions, Longleat has been altered again: the bridges have been removed altogether, creating a handful of incongruously spacious

mega-junctions as well as some awkward dead ends. Jim Rossignol and I reached the goal in nine underwhelming minutes, after barely even trying. "It feels like a seventeen-minute guitar solo railroaded into a four-minute pop song," Rossignol said. So, rather than take advantage of Fisher's escape valve, we decided to deliberately enmaze ourselves, venturing into more feral regions, where we were soon completely alone. Greener, taller hedges encroached on already cramped, mossed-over paths, and clusters of ripe blackberries poked through the yew walls. Around one corner, a wood pigeon landed, gave us a hard stare, and flew away. "Perhaps the maze is a sorting mechanism?" Rossignol suggested. "Only those who want to get lost do."

As we wandered around in circles for nearly an hour, Rossignol explained that the question of difficulty is controversial in the gaming community. "Should you have to get good at a game to enjoy it?" he said, summarizing the terms of the debate. "Or should there be an easy mode?" These days, game designers study heat maps to see how players move through a virtual maze. Just as maintenance of the less trafficked sections of Longleat's maze had clearly lapsed, programmers will often streamline their virtual environments accordingly, decluttering a game's memory budget.

Saward sees Longleat as representing a moment of transition between modern, Fisher-style puzzles that are optimized for entertainment and the less user-friendly, more atmospheric mazes of the past. "A lot of modern mazes are designed with an eye to how many people can we get through the gate per hour and how quickly can we get them to the gift shop," he explained. "Longleat is a bit old school."

I cannot recommend attempting an Adrian Fisher maze in the company of its designer. At Escot, a country house and estate in Devon, we spent a full hour lost within a hedge maze just half the size of an American-football field. On a Wednesday afternoon in early September, a handful of families were also crunching through its wide gravel paths, between well-maintained beechwood hedges that turn from verdant lime green to autumnal rust as the seasons change. Small kids raced ahead in twos and threes, shouting confidently that they knew the way. Their mothers and grandmothers moved at a more leisurely pace, carrying sweaters and snacks. And, as I became hopelessly lost, Fisher provided a teasing commentary in the old-fashioned tones of a zany children's-TV presenter.

"Which way should we go?" he asked at a four-way junction under a pergola. "I don't know! We *are* spoiled for choice." As I returned to the entrance for the third time in thirty minutes, he asked me whether I'd noticed that we'd probably already walked twice the length of the maze. And, when I foolishly dared to speculate that I'd finally found the right path, only to end up on the other side of the hedge from the goal, he gaily pretended to commiserate: "Who would have guessed? What a beastly joke!" Most enraging of all, he swore that he also had no idea of the correct route, having designed the maze way back in 2004. Still, I couldn't help but feel that I was being tested, and, to Fisher's evident delight, failing. (When I told his brother Bill about this adventure, he laughed and said, "It depends on how he was feeling on the day, whether he actually got lost or whether he was having fun with you—and you'll never know, because you'll never get a straight answer.")

Fisher's design at Escot combines several features intended to create maximum disorientation for the minimum cost. At their most basic, all hedge mazes rely on turns and high hedges to disrupt the kind of landmark-based navigation on which humans rely. The homogenous nature of maze materials—gravel paths and beech leaves, all shadowless under the diffuse light of a cloudy English sky—is important, too. Paul Dudchenko, a behavioral neuroscientist at the University of Stirling and one of a handful of researchers in the world who study getting lost, told me that our sense of direction often fails in environments that are "difficult to disambiguate"—forests, say, or airports.

Fisher had added another layer of ambiguity, by placing a number of identical square wrought-iron pergolas at four-way junctions. "If the design has more than one of these, you may mistakenly think you're in the same place, when in fact you're in a different place," Fisher warned, as we emerged from a hedge corridor and encountered one. Because the paths to the pergolas meet at right angles, and because Escot's maze is square, people arriving at a pergola tend to assume that its edges are parallel to those of the maze. They are unlikely to suspect that the pergola is one of five, positioned in pentagonal symmetry around the center of the maze—an orientation inherently confounding to our anatomically derived propensity to think in terms of forward, backward, left, and right. Even aspirants who happen to know that there are five pergolas have to remember not just which of the three other paths they have chosen before but which one of the twenty such choices they face in total.

"Options are opponents," Bret Rothstein, an art historian who studies puzzles, told me. Fisher's design, he explained, deliberately "weighs one down with options, each of which creates further options, while closing off others." Many of those pergola paths led around in a loop, straight back to the same pergola. "You made your choice, and, blow me down, it was just two sides of a single hedge," Fisher said, as he followed behind me, narrating my wanderings.

Elsewhere in the maze, there were long stretches without any junctions. Oskar van Deventer, a Dutch telecom engineer and a renowned designer of mechanical puzzles, told me, "This is something you will recognize in all Adrian Fisher mazes: that it has some long corridors with no decision to be made." This provides the choice-fatigued aspirant with a brief, blissful break, but, of course, as I discovered when I hit one and thought I must finally be on the right track, it also serves Fisher's wily purposes. "A long journey with no choices reinforces the feeling that either you're going to solve it—or you're getting very lost," Fisher explained.

Escot's bridges are similarly misleading: I approached my first with a sense of relief, only to discover that they offer just enough vertical perspective to make you think you can plan your route but too little to actually figure out the whole maze. "It's sort of, like, Let me give you

Hedge mazes rely on turns and high hedges to disrupt the kind of landmark-based navigation on which humans rely.

a hint that's not as much of a hint as you think it is," Rothstein said. "It tantalizes."

Fisher had even employed the classic Runcie trick: a turn toward the periphery in order to reach the center. Hugo Spiers, a cognitive neuroscientist at University College London, told me he has found that humans are seemingly helpless to resist the magnetic attraction of a goal. "They kind of hedge-scan when they know they're near the goal," he said. "They look over to it, like they're longing to get to it." That single-minded focus makes it all too easy to discount paths that lead backward, away from the goal. At Escot, the bridges, as well as several paths that run immediately around the edge of the goal without providing access to it, offer tempting views of the maze's central tower, while the path to reach the center requires aspirants to maintain their distance, travelling under rather than over the bridges.

Van Deventer, who lives near another Fisher hedge maze, Europe's largest, built at the point where the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany meet, attempted to make me feel better about my miserable maze-solving skills. "In that maze, the final path to the exit is going outwards, so you have to walk away from your goal," he said. "And, for the first and the second time there, I missed that one path, so Adrian's trickery works on me, even though I may be prepared for it."

Fisher frequently likens his role as a maze designer to that of a chess player faced with unusual constraints. "I have to play all my moves in advance, and I have to let you win, and I have to let you win *just* before you've had enough," he said. "I'm here to entertain." Part of a maze's amusement value lies in presenting a decent yet surmountable challenge; the other part involves engineering the conditions for a fun family day out. After all, chess is, like most puzzles, a fairly solitary activity. Mazes, on the other hand, tend to be social spaces, and Fisher's designs are especially, and intentionally, so.

"I'm not bragging," van Deventer told me, "but I believe that by walking through a maze I'm able to recognize whether it is an Adrian Fisher." One of the clues, he said, is long loops that repeatedly throw people back together. "We've seen you before," a young woman at Escot said as we passed each other going in opposite directions. Two little girls huddled under one of the pergolas, developing a leaf-based divination system; when we came across them again, at the center, they explained that the leaves had failed to provide the solution, but that they'd found a spot where a very small person could squeeze through the hedge instead. Running into the same people while failing at the same puzzle fosters a curious camaraderie; even when we were visually alone, we could hear the comforting sounds of our comrades-in-confusion through the hedge walls.

"I think he is the world's best maze psychologist," van Deventer said. "He has a mental model of what people would be doing, and he is using that against the unsuspecting solver and even against the suspecting solver."

One day in 1898, Edmund Sanford, a leading professor of psychology at Clark University, was discussing the extraordinary navigational skills of rats with two graduate students, Linus Kline and Willard Small. Kline later recalled that Sanford, having just returned from a trip to London, "at once suggested the possibility of using the pattern of the Hampton Court maze for purposes of constructing a 'home-finding' apparatus." Kline, who had never heard of a maze, looked up the design of Hampton Court's horticultural puzzle in the Encyclopædia Britannica, warped it to fit into a square box, scaled it down to rodent height, and replaced the hedges with gnaw-resistant mesh. A few years later, Small published the first research on the intelligence of white rats, as evidenced by their maze-solving ability. Together, as the historian of psychology C. James Goodwin has written, "they launched a rats-in-mazes tradition that continues to this day."

For decades, the behavior of albino rats in mazes—and, by extension, that of the humans who studied them—was turned into a science: something that could be explained and, ultimately, engineered. As a challenge, the maze translated well across species, unlike tests involving, say, symbols or color; as a model, the maze was "the most general, the most representative, and the most perfect" simulation of the larger, choice-filled problem of life itself, as Rebecca Lemov writes in "World as Laboratory," a history of behavioral research. For a new generation of researchers, mazes became "a shorthand way of asking, 'Why does the self behave as it does?'"

Over time, the Hampton Court design has been superseded: today's cognitive-enhancement-drug trials are typically carried out in something called the Morris water maze, in which swimming rats must respond to various spatial cues to reach a platform. Still, the importance of mazes in research persists, as does the sense that mazes reveal something about our minds. The great Italian Renaissance mathematician Luca Pacioli, who laid the foundations of modern accounting by inventing double-entry bookkeeping, suggested that maze-like puzzles might be a useful tool to "sharpen the ingenuity of youths," in much the same way that sudoku is now recommended for seniors.

Speculation about the point of a maze leads, inevitably, to the question of why one would choose to get lost in the first place. The psychologist Kenneth Hill, an emeritus professor at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, who spent his career doing seminal work studying how lost people behave, told me that he found it hard to see the attraction of a maze. "When I talk to people who've been lost, they say it's the scariest, most frightening thing they've ever experienced," he said. "That's not something I want to pay to do."

On the other hand, with rare exceptions, no one dies in a maze: like a roller coaster, it's a safe way to experience danger. And, assuming you reach the goal and then make it out, you will come away with a sense of triumph—a tamer version of the heroic narrative that Hill has found is common among people who have been truly lost. "If you talk to them right away, they can't say much—they're still in shock," he said. "If you wait a couple of days, what you get is this saga about conquering their emotions and their fears and how they pushed through."

Some scientists hope that understanding the ways in which humans get lost in mazes will offer useful insights into how to design the built environment, as well as techniques we can use to train ourselves to pay better attention to our surroundings. As Spiers told me, "A major part of being human and living life is adapting to change, remembering what you can do, exploiting short-

The maze at Hampton Court Palace, dating from around 1690, is the oldest hedge maze still in existence.

cuts to get to your goal—the kind of flexibility of thinking you need to navigate a maze." My repeated returns to the mouth of the Escot maze illustrated the point: the puzzle would not change, which meant that my approach had to.

"Well, that was up to the usual high standard," Fisher said as we exited the Escot maze. While I said hello to Escot's newly rescued orphan bear cubs, housed in a temporary enclosure just behind the maze, Fisher returned to the parking lot to fetch a drone that he would use to shoot aerial footage of the maze, in order that I might describe his masterpiece as it looked from above. Within his mazes, Fisher is used to pulling the strings to manipulate a captive audience, and it frequently seemed as though he had trouble switching off his inner puppet master in his dealings with the rest of the world.

As I watched tiny humans filmed by the drone make exactly the same mistakes that I had, I recalled that a German word for maze, *der Irrgarten*, translates as "error garden," and that, during the first golden age of hedge mazes, they were often positioned beneath terraces or high windows, so that spectators could savor the confusion of others. Meanwhile, Fisher, who favors a Socratic style of conversation, directed my attention to a series of locked gates near the entrance. "What might they be for, I wonder?" he said. When I declined to guess, he provided the answer: "They're for the groundskeepers, so they can get the clippings out without walking for miles." With similar pride, he pointed out the roof over the maze's central tower. At half the size of the square platform it covered, it left four triangular corners exposed to the elements—and used fifty per cent less lumber. "This is one of my hallmarks," he said, perhaps even more delighted by the maze's practical and cost-saving measures than by its ingeniously disorienting layout.

Fisher is in many respects interested in his projects only while they are still unrealized designs—Escot's owners were left to plant all its beech trees. Nonetheless, solving the challenges faced by maze managers, like hedge maintenance, customer throughput, and budget balancing, is at least as fascinating to Fisher as creating puzzles for public enjoyment. Not that he gets it right every time. As he gleefully ignored his G.P.S. on the way home, squeezing into the inside lane to sail past traffic, he told me that his most recent maze, in Ningbo, despite being the world's largest, was not tough enough. "I was

frightened that it was too big," he said. "But the Chinese are utterly driven."

He pulled out a worn road atlas and balanced it on the steering wheel, tracing our new route before pointing out that the crucial element of all networks is the node, not the channel. "There's no point making planes fly faster and burn up more fuel," he said, while attempting to overtake a tractor on a single-lane road going uphill. "The crucial thing is, can you shave twenty-eight minutes off from the moment of touchdown to the moment of picking up your car?"

"Chop-chop," he said, chivying the car in front of us, before describing a bus map that he had designed for London Transport in the eighties, in order to solve overcrowding on the Tube. At the time, he said, the average bus journey in London was only three-quarters of a mile in length. "If you could get that up to one and a half miles," he told transit officials, "it would give you another five-, ten-, or even fifteen-year lease of life on the existing underground network." Travelling by Tube was, for most riders, easy but inefficient. What was missing was a bus version of Harry Beck's famous simplified map of the London Underground: something that would make it straightforward for passengers to see what bus number they should take, where they should get on, and when they should get off.

Fisher's prototype, which he dubbed a "star map," depicted the immediate location in a central circle, with schematic bus routes radiating outward, so that riders could find their desired destination and then trace the bus route back to see where their nearest stop was. Officials declined to pursue Fisher's idea, but, a few years later, London's bus system, which had by then been reorganized into a different agency, came up with and implemented a similar design independently—one that, under the name "spider maps," is still in use today.

This intervention is just one of many redesigns that Fisher has in mind for England's entire transportation network. Perhaps his most far-fetched dream is to rename London's Tube stations using a numbered grid, for international legibility. "Tottenham Court Road will be Sixty-six instead," he said, explaining the system, which, to his disappointment, has been met with a singular lack of enthusiasm. "Most people don't ask the right questions," he said, "because most people don't know how to think."

Before Fisher successfully contrived his career as a maze designer, he spent some years working at Sellotape, an adhesives manufacturer. Back then, the company made two hundred different adhesive formulations, but its factory had only sixteen mixing tubs. One of Fisher's proudest achievements there, he told me, was redesigning the incentive scheme, so that workers got bonuses not for keeping tubs full but instead for how little time their colleagues at the next stage of the production process spent waiting for a fresh tub. "I squeezed another three or four per cent of downtime out of the system," he said.

A man whose early career revolved around industrial efficiency might seem like an odd candidate to become the world's leading designer of landscape-scale devices for wasted movement and lost time. Then again, as Bret Rothstein pointed out to me, Fisher was uniquely equipped for the job: "Being a specialist in path optimization is going to help make you a specialist in path de-optimization." Beyond that, however, I started to sense that Fisher sees mazes as "machines for helping people think," to borrow Rothstein's construction. Rather than single-handedly attempt to improve the time-and-motion efficiency of a nation, Fisher has undertaken a more streamlined, if quixotic, process: build mazes that nudge millions toward a puzzle-solving cast of mind. The English hedge, historically uprooted by protesting peasants as a hated symbol of common-land enclosure, industrialization, and wage slavery, has, in Fisher's hands, become an engine of twenty-first-century productivity—all the while generating revenue for what remains of Britain's ruling classes.

Nearly twenty years ago, after two decades spent building mazes for other people, Fisher decided that it was time to build one for himself, in Dorset. The hedges, made up of nine hundred yew plants, are arranged in an octagonal design, with a turreted brick folly in the center. A couple of years after planting it, he took a TV reporter from a BBC culture show on a tour and launched into a detailed description of two nonexistent features: a rotating hedge and a trick seat that, when you sat on it, would trigger an entire hedge wall to slide back, revealing the goal. "It's only when you give in to Fisher and sit down in despair that, finally, you can solve the maze," he said to the camera, referring to himself in the third person and gesturing at a row of spindly yew bushes that barely reached his thigh. A voice-over explained, in neutral tones, that this maze "exists mostly in his imagination."

Fisher frequently calls his back-garden maze a "party machine," capable of reshuffling visitors more efficiently than the most accomplished hostess. But when he and his wife took me outside to see it, a classically damp British summer had left it looking neglected and sodden. The yew bushes were shaggy, and the grass paths between them were strewn with dandelions. The plywood floor of the central folly had rotted through entirely. Evidently, Fisher had moved on: the fibreglass ribs of a pseudo-Gothic pavilion were scattered on the grass near the swimming pool, awaiting construction. Earlier, in his office, he had told me that he was determined to build a thirty-foot-tall pagoda but had yet to tell his wife. "The whole thing is: What joyful things can you put in the garden?" he said.

I entered Fisher's maze. With just one dead end, and several possible ways to reach the center, the puzzle took me all of three minutes to solve. It takes considerably longer to trim the hedges, Fisher told me: fourteen hours a year. He retrieved a power trimmer—a shoulder-mounted, gasoline-fuelled pole topped with a two-foot blade—to demonstrate, much to Marie's dismay. "There's no time for faffing about," he said, disappearing around the corner with an ear-splitting whine, shaving the feathery, light-green growth atop each hedge wall into a military-style buzz cut. "He just trims everything and leaves it for the minions to clean up," she sighed, fetching a wheelbarrow. "That's me." ♦

The maze at Fisher's home, in Dorset. He often calls it a "party machine," for its ability to efficiently reshuffle guests.

A NEW YORK CITY FIELD TRIP

WITH ROZ AND EMILY

Drinking a diet cola, because that is the kind of poisonous swill I like.

DRINKING A FANCY MOCKTAIL, BECAUSE NOT EVEN FANCINESS CAN CHANGE THE FACT THAT IF I BOOZE IT MIDDAY I'LL GO RIGHT TO SLEEP.

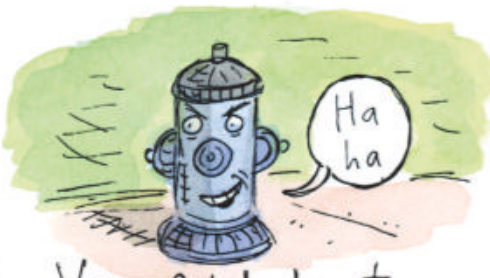
OF COURSE, THE REAL STAR IS THE MURAL:

WAIT, A RABBIT-MAN IN A WALKMAN AND ROLLERBLADES? IS THIS SOME AFTERMARKET ADDITION OR WAS LUDWIG BEMELMANS A TIME TRAVELLER?

Why, hello, Mrs. Snake!

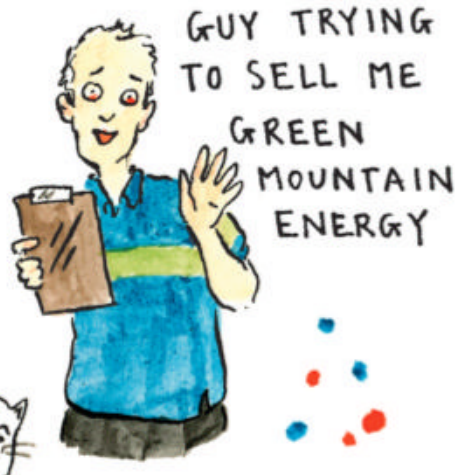
ROBBING A PLUTOCRAT, A TIME-HONORED NEW YORK CITY TRADITION...

...as is a rabbit in a suit smoking a cigar.



Vengeful hydrant

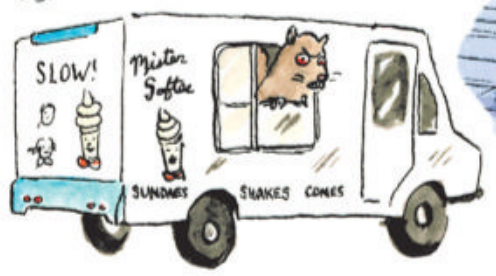
Lady with granny cart



Pizza rat

MORBIDLY OBESE BODEGA CAT

Not-in-service bus whizzing by



A MISTER SOFTEE TRUCK OPERATED BY AN ANGRY SQUIRREL

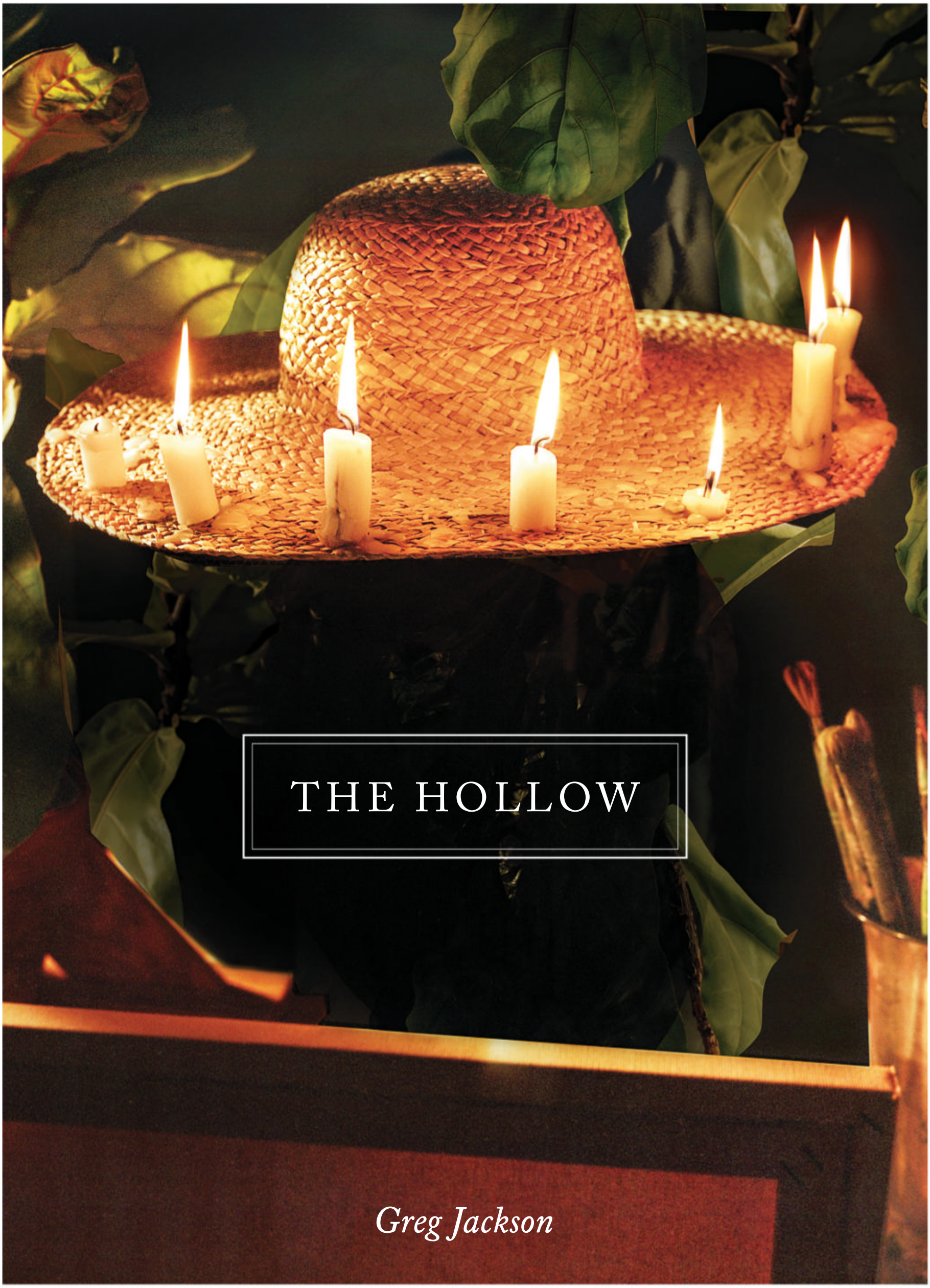
Water bug in a tuxedo

Sad street tree

Standpipes

Lots of pigeons.

DRIFTS OF USED MASKS AND PARKING TICKETS



THE HOLLOW

Greg Jackson

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUCAS BLALOCK

Jonah Valente had been an object of amusement to Jack and his college classmates, and presumably he had gone on being one to other people ever since. An awkward, intense, muscle-bound young man, the sort you could imagine crashing through a wall accidentally, he had had the dim, muddled quality of students recruited to play football at the school, who either didn't measure up academically or didn't believe they did. Valente's claim to fame, what had made him a *figure* on campus—one of that subset of maybe fifty classmates who, possessing some extravagance of character, defined the larger composite character by which the student body understood itself—came from his having abruptly quit football during sophomore year to take up painting, a passion he had developed apparently out of the blue and with a single-minded earnestness that embarrassed his more sophisticated classmates, who knew to disguise their sincerity. When Valente left the football team, changed his major, and began hanging out with a group of druggy slackers who loitered around the Visual Arts department like sun-drunk flies, the school paper ran a feature on his unusual transformation and he acquired the nickname Beaux Arts. This got shortened to B.A., and then Baa, Balente, Ballantino, the Baleen Whale, simply the Whale, and, by a different route altogether, Picasso. A year later, after spending the summer in Florence on a painting scholarship, Valente got kicked out of school. According to rumors at the time, his expulsion had to do with drugs, but Valente maintained among his friends that it was the school's way of punishing him for quitting football. Jack had no basis for judgment. Nor did he really care. You knew very little about your classmates in the end, their real lives and disappointments and hopes, and what you did know was mostly hearsay, and often dubious and even somewhat fantastical.

In the indolent, halcyon days before graduation, Jack had thought about Valente exactly once. He had been lying completely stoned in a friend's common room, gazing up at the crown moldings, when he realized that people called Valente "the Whale" not simply because of the association pattern in certain words but in reference to the story of Jonah. When this insight lit up within him, it seemed to glow for a minute with a profound and inarticulable meaning. Then he forgot it, and he probably would have forgotten Valente, too, if years later he hadn't moved to the rural area where, according to their mutual friend Daniel, Valente lived at home with his mother. Jack's house was in the next county over, half an hour away by car, but he was a newcomer and he didn't know anyone else yet.

He had moved there with Sophie. "Sophie's choice," he jokingly told people. Really, they had both made the choice. But then, shortly after buying the house and leaving the city, he had, in quick succession, lost his new job and lost Sophie. She hadn't left him because of the job (at a large financial firm), though she didn't like his new job or believe that he liked it. Apparently, she didn't like their new life in the country, either. Sometimes she called herself a journalist, but that wasn't quite right. She *wrote*—nonfiction, she had a degree in it—but she picked up magazine assignments infrequently and had trouble finishing pieces. Some fire was missing in her, she'd be the first to admit. She bit off more than she could chew, spent months diving deeply into projects, then found herself paralyzed, unable to write a word. Jack had long ago stopped giving her advice. He simply assumed that he would earn the money, and she would (or would not) figure out how she wanted to spend her time, and either way they would have kids and a home, a garden, friends, vacations, and so on. Buying the house had taken the better part of a year. Then in the space of four weeks everything had collapsed.

Sophie said that her feelings for him hadn't changed, but she now understood—it had surfaced inside her with a force she could scarcely describe—that something was wrong, wrong for her, anyway, with the life they had laid out before them, and if she didn't get out now she never would. Jack pointed out that their new life had hardly begun. But she was unshakable. "I know myself," she said. "Once I settle in, once we have a kid and the rest, I'll never leave." She looked not exactly desperate but as if she were drowning in a substance his words were forcing her beneath. "Please." She placed her fingers on his forearm. And he didn't argue. Better to give people space. Either they came back to you, he reasoned, or they disappeared into their own confusion and misery. With people he didn't like, he thought of it as giving them enough rope. With Sophie, it was the usual indecision, the usual flightiness. That's what he believed.

The house was in Trevi, a small hamlet upriver from the city, out past the suburbs, picturesque and quaint (if not quite as grand as its European name), with Bradford pear trees all along the main street, which in spring so filled the roadway and the air with petals that it resembled a snow scene. A water tower bearing the town's name and stilted up on arachnid legs, with water stains rusting its gray-blue paint, dwarfed the two-story houses and brick storefronts and shops. Years ago, some local wag had christened this Trevi Fountain, and more recently a group of friends from a nearby college had purchased a disused bank building in the heart of town and opened a lunch counter of the same name.

Trevi sat on the train line north of the city and laid claim to the only stop for twenty miles in either direction, and, naturally, this brought a certain wealth and cosmopolitanism you did not find everywhere in the region, and certainly not in Rock Basin, where Jonah Valente lived with his mother. Initially, Jack had planned to take the train to work. He had been at Tabor Investments only a short time when he was fired. Before that, he had spent half a decade in the D.A.'s office and seemed in line for a political career. But he had burned out on that life, or that's what he said, anyway, and in anticipation of starting a family he had signed on for what he believed would be a cushier position all around. Perhaps his new employer didn't agree with this interpretation of his job, because, as soon as he gave his bosses a chance by making an impolitic remark on a business-news show, they had wasted little time firing him. No, they had *dangled* the threat. He could have fought to stay, but, instead, haughty

and superior, he had called their bluff and forced them to follow through.

The house was an early-nineteenth-century farmhouse, fixed up and expanded over the years, painted charcoal following the new style, a color like smoke against the pitch-dark sky. It had clapboard siding and a metal roof, a mostly private small field with an old stone wall and a falling-down chicken coop, a tiny creek, and a wild profusion of ivy and flowers. Toward the main road there was an unpainted barn. Jack, who had been so invested in settling in—furnishing, repainting, touching up the trim, replacing cracked windowpanes, talking to contractors, landscapers, and arborists about what to do with the chicken coop, the yard, the silver maples and pin oaks—found himself overcome with apathy. He could hardly bring himself to wash the dishes or take out the trash. The mail piled up unopened on a chair in the entryway. Not long before, he had been a dynamo, on the phone with lawyers and water-treatment specialists, septic contractors, electricians, and insurance agents. He had learned about ground wells and leach fields, UV water-purification systems, sump pumps, pipe fittings, cell-foam insulation, byzantine tax exemptions and property-tax schedules, the life span of roofing shingles, aluminum roof coating, and septic-tank baffles. *Baffles*. He liked that. That just about said it! Finally, he'd simply stopped.

Daniel, Jack's friend from school, said that Jack's state of mind made a lot of fucking sense. "Jesus, considering everything. Get drunk, get laid," he said. "The French would go out whoring." Jack supposed that he had been the one to phone Daniel, but it no longer felt that way.

He had called for news of Sophie. Daniel was a successful magazine writer and someone Sophie often turned to for professional advice. It was Daniel, in fact, who had written the article on Valente for the school paper ("Portrait of the Artist as a Young Lineman"), and who now told Jack that he should give Valente a ring.

"Any word from Sophie?" Jack asked.

"Soph? She's all right. She's staying at her parents', but I guess you know that." Daniel laughed suddenly. "The last time I saw her, she was hanging out in bars, writing in a notebook, waiting for guys to text her."

Jack responded stoically. "What guys?"

"Dates? I don't know. I think she said she was writing a book. About contemporary dating, or dating apps. Something like that. Maybe she said 'mating.'"

"I see. So she's the one out whoring," Jack said.

"Yeah, you're the only one not having any fun."

Jack could picture her sitting at the bar, her black hair unfurling about her face as she bent over her journal, pensive and daydreaming. It surprised him to find this thought, the image of her sitting there, poignant, rather than upsetting.

Still, when he reached her on the phone, he said, "So I hear you've been out whoring."

She didn't laugh at this but made a noise that suggested fatigue or annoyance, or perhaps both. "What did Daniel tell you?"

Jack gave an inaccurate, largely imaginative account of the conversation. He did not want to hurt Sophie, but at times he felt the urge to be crude, and even sometimes mean. It welled up in him like an irresistible pressure, building behind the prim dishonesty that obscured the raw, dark realities of the heart.

When he had finished, Sophie was quiet for a moment, then said, "I don't want to get in the habit of explaining myself to you. So I guess I'm not going to."

"If it's freedom, it has to feel like freedom," he suggested.

"Something like that."

Later, with nothing to do, he telephoned Valente. "Holy shit! Jack Francis?" Boy, was it Valente—that same deep, echoic, excitable voice. "*Dude*, am I glad you called," Valente said. "My mom is driving me crazy."

It was Valente who noticed the hollow. This was not during his first visit, which he and Jack spent getting very drunk. Jack told him about Sophie, the D.A.'s office, and his brief foray into the private sector—the general cul-de-sac into which he seemed to have driven his life. Mostly, though, he listened to Valente talk about the years he had spent trying to get his artistic career off the ground, keeping body and soul together on part-time work. Valente had been employed by a house-painting crew, but something had happened and now he coached women's rugby at a Catholic college across the river. The school was on spring break that week.

They discussed college, of course, and Jack was taken aback to find that their memories of this time did not align. He shouldn't have been surprised by this—Valente had many strange notions—but it was vaguely unnerving to see that two people could live through the same experience and understand it so differently. Jack said that he had found everyone at college interesting at first—unique and particular and destined, it seemed, for some extraordinary future—but they had all turned out to be dull and conventional, and he increasingly saw himself as dull and conventional, too. Valente disagreed. He thought that their classmates had been deeply weird and had clung to the idea that they were dull and conventional to keep from sliding off the face of the earth.

"Look at you!" he exclaimed. "You tried to be the man in the gray plaid suit, and you got fired for mouthing off on one of those scam shows."

This was only partly accurate. Jack, on that fateful day, had been listening to an overgrown child in what he believed were nonprescription glasses hyperventilate about the earnings figures for a Chinese company that Tabor did business with. While the man grew practically breathless and goggle-eyed at the company's undervaluation, a graphic overlay showing a buy-sell meter flashed "Buy! Buy! Buy!"—and Jack, exhausted by this prattle, sick of Tabor and the expectation that he appear on these shows, the little devil in Jack, with an imperceptible smirk, said, "Well, yes, if you believe those figures."

It would have been a stretch, but he could have told his bosses that he had been confused about which company Tabor was working with. Not particularly plausible, but they would

have permitted him the one strike. Instead, he just said, "*You* really believe those numbers?" At times he felt so clear about his rightness and other people's dishonesty that he could scarcely breathe.

He and Valente remembered the aftermath of Jonah's expulsion differently as well. Valente seemed to believe that some sort of popular movement had arisen to reinstate him. Jack recalled nothing of the sort. He remembered *jokes* about Valente, and the sense, if not the outright suggestion, that it was just as well, what had happened, since there was clearly something off about their former classmate. Mythologies about Valente sprang up in his absence, as predictable as they were unlikely, but mostly he was forgotten.

Jack and Valente were sitting outside under a pergola heavy with potato vine and clematis. Jack had built a fire in the fire pit, and the wood crackled and sparked, dashing the flowers and vines in a shifting light. Valente said that he was rereading his favorite biography of van Gogh, and that the artist, who claimed to find the darkness more colorful and vivid than the day, had painted at night with lighted candles in the brim of his straw hat. "A great fire burns in me, but no one stops to warm himself," he recited. "They pass by and see only the wisps of smoke." That was van Gogh. Valente leaned back and tilted his head to the sky. He had lost bulk since college and now was almost thin, carved in intense relief. The light and shadow accentuated the bones and hollows of his face. He told Jack he was saving up for a summer program in France, a painting course. Not the usual bullshit, he said. You studied with some real masters. And they took you to all the famous spots: Auvers, Arles, Saint-Rémy. But it was expensive, and he couldn't save enough unless he lived with his mom. Was he showing work? Jack wanted to know. There was a café in Rock Basin, Valente said. It wasn't much, but it had a little gallery and he had some work up there. He told Jack that van Gogh's first public exhibition had been in the window of an art supplier, a man he owed money to in The Hague. Van Gogh talked the guy into putting up a few of his paintings; if they sold, he said, he would use the money to pay off the debt. Well, they didn't sell, and the dealers who saw them in the window didn't like them, either. Valente laughed. "It just shows you," he said, smiling at nothing but the dark. "Everyone has to start somewhere."

"Dude, what's in the middle of your house?"

This was how Valente greeted Jack on his third visit.

Jack handed him a beer and retrieved another for himself from the fridge. "What do you mean, the middle?"

Valente explained that he had awoken in the night with a strange intuition that there was something wrong with Jack's house. "I kept walking around it in my head. Like circling the downstairs. Then I realized there's an area that's not part of any room."

Jack shook his head; he didn't understand. Valente said he would show him and led Jack to the closed-off section of the house, demonstrating how, approaching it from any of the six adjoining rooms, you wouldn't notice anything odd and might even confuse it for part of the stair column. It was smaller than a room and could, he conjectured, be a sealed-in linen closet or pantry, or perhaps a disused chimney shaft—though when they walked above and below the area on the second floor and in the basement, no vertical element carried through.

Valente asked Jack for a tape measure and a pen and paper and set about sketching a rough floor plan. He drew with surprising efficiency and ease. Jack watched him. The low sun barrelled through the west-facing windows, penetrating the colored glass jars along the windowsill and painting forms like watercolor blotches on the wall. Valente guessed that the sealed-off area wasn't much bigger than three feet by six. To know more, he'd have to go through the wall. But Jack had just finished repainting the walls. So there was a hollow, so what?

They moved out into the warm, silken dusk. A golden light crested the hill, attaching to the drifts of pollen and follicles of grass flower that rose and trembled in the air. Valente gazed into the setting sun.

He spoke at times in a way that made Jack think of a boulder tripping down a hill—slow, inexorable, always in danger of veering perilously off course.

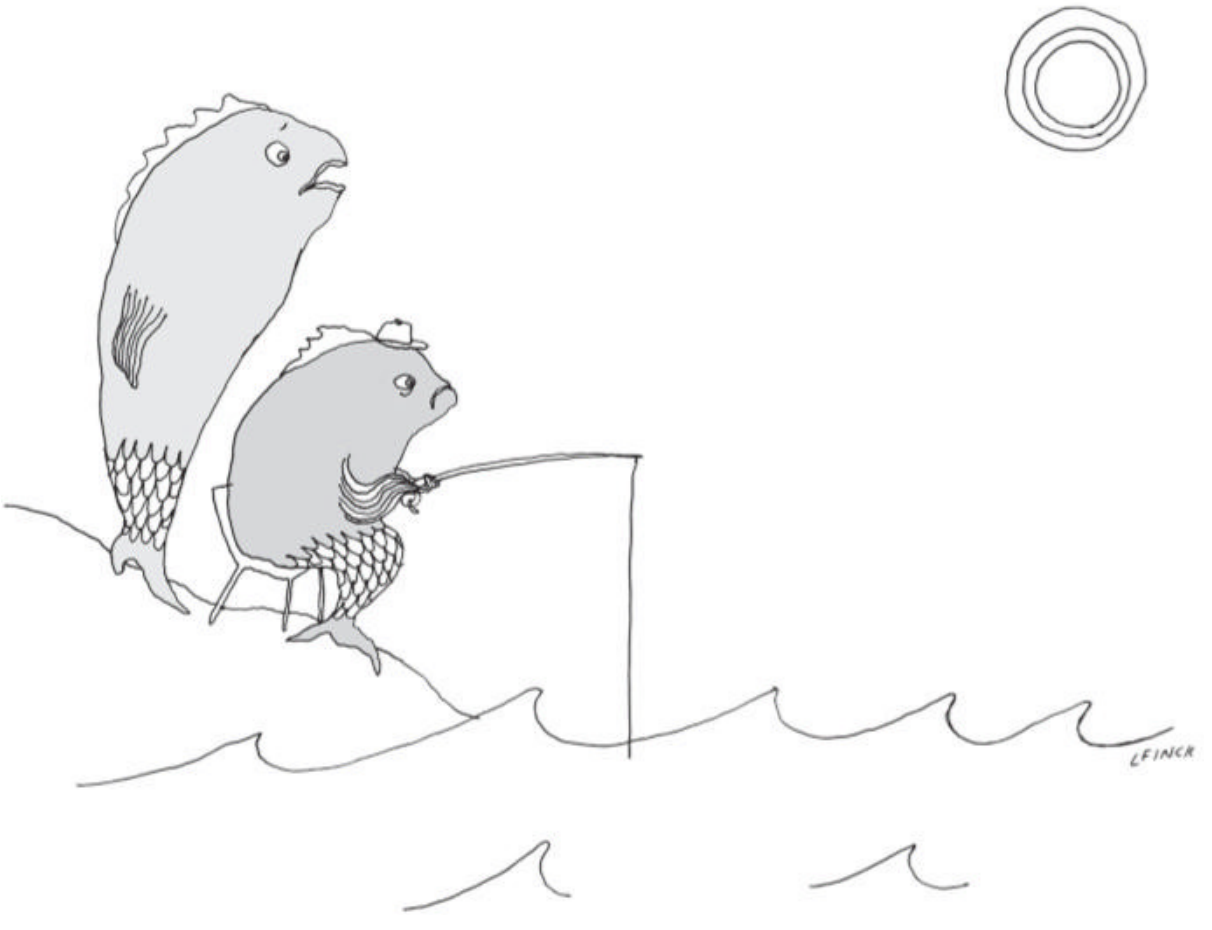
"When you said moving here was 'Sophie's choice,' were you quoting that movie?" he asked.

"It's a book," Jack said. "Or it was a book first."

"About the Holocaust."

"So they say."

Valente squinted in perplexity. "What



"There's got to be an easier way to find a girlfriend."

does the Holocaust have to do with moving here?"

"Nothing," Jack said. "It's just a bad joke."

Valente paused and frowned like a mime feigning thought. "When the Gestapo came to Picasso's studio during the Occupation, there was a photo of 'Guernica' lying around. They asked him, 'Did you do this?' and he said, 'No, you did!'"

Jack looked at him. "Is that true?"

Valente shrugged. "I don't know. That's what they say. Picasso said art is a lie that makes us see the truth."

Jack didn't respond, and Valente closed his eyes. In the distance, the sunlight caught a window on the toolshed and burned a liquid, blinding gold. Valente's face had folds and pleats like an accordion. He's aged more than the rest of us, Jack thought.

"There's a water tower in Rock Basin," Valente said, "just like in Trevi." His eyes were still closed as he spoke. "For years, Rope Man and I talked about climbing up one night and painting it. Probably we were going to paint some bullshit—something lewd, you know. But now I think I'd just paint big letters that say 'You are free.'"

The wrens made their evening call—*jiminy*, *jiminy*, *jiminy*.

"Rope Man?" Jack said.

"Friend from high school." Valente opened his eyes. "We called him Rope Man because he had this Polish last name no one could pronounce. It started with 'rope.'"

"What's Rope Man up to now?"

"He's dead." Valente's voice was flat and he stared straight ahead at the chicken coop with its busted-up lath buried in honeysuckle.

"What happened?"

For a second, Jack thought he saw a savage fire in Valente's eyes, then the fire blinked, settling into mildness, like a star.

"When van Gogh's cousin wouldn't marry him, he put his hand in a lamp flame," Valente said. "Her family wouldn't let him see her, and he said, 'Let me see her for as long as I can keep my hand in the flame.' I guess it was something like that with Rope Man."

"I don't know what that means," Jack said.

Valente picked at the grass where his fingers hung. "Nobody noticed he was burning up."

"And what happened with van Gogh?"

"They blew out the lamp," Valente said. The sun had gone mostly behind the hill. A single ray wavered above the ridge like a filament of glass. "Van Gogh didn't kill himself, you know. Everyone thinks he did, but it was some teenagers that liked to prank him. They shot him—probably by accident."

"I never heard that."

"Look it up."

Jack closed his eyes. A faint residue of red or orange seeped through his eyelids. "Tell me more about van Gogh," he said.

And Valente spoke, of wheat fields and flowers and crows and turbulent skies, of painting loneliness and sorrow and anguish, of moments when the veil of time and of inevitability (to use the painter's own words) seems to open for the blink of an eye, of boats in storms, and boats pulling other boats—towing them, tugging them—and how one boat sometimes pulls another, while that second, helpless boat prepares to reverse roles someday and pull the first boat through a storm, or a time of special need. Valente described an impossible person, a scoundrel, a tramp, difficult and gruff, prone to fighting, taking up with prostitutes, rejected by everyone, repulsive even to his parents, unlovable, homeless, driven by inexpressible love, or love that was expressible only in a particular form that did not allow it to be shared between two people, and that was therefore cursed, a love that was refused while he was alive, and only, when this cretin, this parasite, offensive to every standard of good taste, was gone, did everyone see how much they *did* want his peculiar, displaced, and overripe love, and the same respectable people who had found him so revolting now clutched him to their breast with the fiercest longing, because a certain intensity of color reminded them, or so Valente said in his own way, of intimations of such intensity in moments of their own that they had forgotten or suppressed.

Jack had intended to get past the hollow, but he found that he couldn't. At night, before falling asleep, or having awoken to darkness, he felt the eerie, mystical nearness of it, and this unsettled him. He started, without realizing it at first, to orient himself in the house and on the property in relation to the hollow. "Like Mecca, or Jerusalem," he said, chuckling to himself as if the joke would rob the hollow of its power. Inspecting the walls, he found no crack or crease; the paint and plaster ran flawlessly to the corners, the ceiling, the baseboards—there was no easy way in. He began to feel angry with the sellers. Surely they had known about this secret hollow and said nothing. Maybe they had even closed it up.

Spring break ended, and Valente returned to coaching. Jack saw less of him. Jack did not miss seeing him, but not seeing anyone presented its own problem; namely, what to do with himself. He felt a great restlessness growing inside him, something vast and formless. He lay in the sunlit grass on the hill, watching the leaves migrate in the breeze. The fields and orchards in the distance appeared overexposed, gilded on one side with seams of light.

The days were blending together into one composite day. He was drinking too much, but what else was there to do? He kept thinking about a concert in the city that he and Sophie had gone to over the holidays. It was at a church uptown, somewhere on the East Side. Dark, heavy stones composed the walls and vault of the church—an intimate, tall, solid space. He no longer remembered what the concert was—a mixed program of canonical and newer pieces, played by a spare, shifting ensemble. The church was small, and attendance was sparse. What he remembered was the sound of trucks, garbage trucks, on the street outside, heavy, vibrating, accelerating, braking, letting out hisses of compressed air, and the complaints of their straining engines as they stopped and started along their route. The sound of the trucks, low and sonorous through the stone walls, had made the music more beautiful somehow, accentuating

BUILT TO WAIT

coarse skin, like a laborer;
shoulders up, like horses;
made for cold, like fire is,
a radish holds its heat.
in winter, we keep
the least
becoming, what's not bright,
what burns your throat,
these old,
strong roots.
black radishes:
my back ached, i suppose,
from taking them—
the way you feel sore
when you've loved
with effort. when you've
stilled your thoughts
with work.
bitter flesh, like wanting;
smoky gray, like coal;
built to wait, like stones are,
even winter needs to eat.

—*Rachel Betesh*

perhaps the simultaneous existence of the disparate realities that hold our fragile world together in its brittle shell. The music tiptoed along the knife edge of its key, its tones, giving the illusion of freedom when there were always far more missteps than safe harbors and nimble plunges into grace.

When Valente came over on a Friday evening, his long hair hung in greasy locks and his face was patched with dirt.

"We had a match today," he explained and took the beer Jack offered.

"I thought you were the coach," Jack said.

Valente drank deeply, answering too quickly and choking. "Yeah, but when we win I let the girls tackle me." He coughed to clear his throat. "*Blood in, blood out*, you know—like the military."

"Blood in, blood out? How many girls tackle you?"

"I don't know. Fifteen? You should see me," Valente said. "I'm like Gulliver."

Jack pointed at his face. "Did someone punch you in the eye?"

Valente's voice was soft and wistful. "Man, those girls are crazy," he said. "They love to beat me up."

A silence fell, and they briefly regarded the birds streaking through the backlit trees, stencilled silhouettes against an aureate sky.

Jack coughed lightly in his fist. "So . . . what should we do about this hollow?"

"Hollow?"

"The chamber in the wall."

Valente seemed not to understand. "Oh, *that*," he said after a minute. "But who cares about that?"

Who cares? Jack thought. You were the one who brought it up!

"Here's what you do," Valente said. "Drill a hole in the wall and run a fibre-optic spy camera through it."

"I don't have a fibre-optic spy camera," Jack said.

"Yeah." Valente nodded. "Too bad."

In the creek at their feet, tiny fish idled and darted in the current. Jack watched them move beneath the braiding water.

Valente finished his beer, crushing the can between his strong, heavy hands, and grinned.

Jack grinned back. "Hey, why'd you get kicked out of school?" he asked.

Until that moment Jack had felt indifferent to this question, or worse than indifferent: he felt the answer would disappoint him. But a sudden annoyance at Valente had overcome him, a sense of the precise limit to what Valente could be or do, a sense—how to put it?—of some insuperable grossness in Valente's character that would never, even with boundless fellowship and care, settle into sufficient self-awareness. Standing beside the green-violet *Ricinus*, the former football player kicked at tufts of moss and a crust of caked mud that lay along the bank of the creek. He smiled without turning, as if at the little swimming fish.

"I wasn't, you know, 'kicked out,'" he said.

"You weren't."

"I could've come back." Valente gazed at the trees. "Didn't want to."

Why was that? Jack asked.

Valente squinted inquisitively as the leaves above them shook like silver-green sequins. "I was doing so much acid that summer," he said after a minute. "Summer after they told me to take a year off. I don't remember why, but I had keys to George Diehl's apartment. You remember Diehl? I never liked that kid, but he was always down to get high. Well, George was away for some reason, and I'd been tripping all night. I couldn't come down. I remember it was sunrise when I got to his place, and I lay down in his bed, but I couldn't sleep. So I started pacing from room to room. For, like, hours. There were just four rooms, but I couldn't stop. I was getting spooked, so I decided to watch something. George had this projector hooked up to a DVD player, but I couldn't find any DVDs, so I just pressed Play to see what was in there. All of a sudden there were these people dancing and singing. Tons of them, in matching costumes, doing elaborate routines. They made shapes like flowers, geometric shapes. All this stuff. Too much to follow. At first I thought, This is cool, but then I started to get a bad feeling. They were like aliens. Like they were on a different planet, dancing in outer space. Somewhere you could never get to, you know? And then I thought, No, I was wrong. It *was* our world, the

dancing planet, and I was the one who couldn't get there."

Jack stared at him. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"What?"

"I asked you why you didn't go back to school."

"Oh, yeah. Shit . . ." Valente laughed. "I guess that's when I knew I'd never go back. I was covered in dust."

Jack shook his head. "Dust?"

Valente nodded. "Picasso said art washes the dust of the everyday from the soul. You get it?"

A splitting pressure had arisen in Jack's head, and the day's brightness was making him nauseous. "Dude, you got to get off this Picasso and van Gogh thing."

"What do you mean?"

"No one's ever going to take you seriously, going on about Picasso and van Gogh, and wildflowers and shit," Jack said. "I'm not telling you anything you don't know. Find some obscure artist to talk about. Better yet, shut up. Don't say anything. Christ!" he burst out. "You have to show people you can play the game."

"What game?"

Jack massaged his forehead with his hand. "Don't be obtuse."

"But they're the best," Valente said quietly.

"And you know"—Jack continued without really hearing him—"it's not like because some artist was poor or misunderstood, and you're poor and misunderstood, things are going to work out for you. Millions of people fail. Millions for every Picasso. It's not like *failing* means you're the next van Gogh."

"I don't think that," Valente said.

"Good. Baby steps toward sanity. But don't think the people who succeed don't play the game. They all do. Picasso did. They dance the goddam dance. Purity of spirit's just some shit they talk about once they've made it to make the rest of us believe—"

Jack shut up. Valente looked so dirty and bedraggled, leaves and twigs feathered in his hair and something fierce and sad in his look. Jack could only say, more softly, "Look, kemo sabe. Tell me, where does it go from here?"

Valente didn't respond. That haunted, confused kid they'd once called Picasso, as if in affection, with no affection, with laughter, with doubt, said nothing. He walked off. After maybe ten paces he stopped, as if about to turn, but then continued on to his car.

Jack watched him go.

The ignition sounded, and from the open window of his Toyota Valente shouted, "You're covered in dust!"

"So what?" Jack said

"You covered me in your dust," Valente yelled at him, putting the car in gear and lurching forward.

"I didn't do it," Jack shouted back. "It was those fucking rugby girls!"

But Valente was already speeding down the drive and most likely didn't hear him.

"We've got a hollow," Jack said. He was talking to Sophie on the phone.

"Am I supposed to know what that means?"

"Between the walls. There's an empty space."

She spoke with a certain circumspection. "Isn't that . . . normal?"

"Not like this. It's a big hollow. Not as big as a room, maybe, but close."

A longer pause accreted on the line. "Jack, what's this about?"

"It's your house, too," he said. "I thought you'd like to know there's an unexplained cavity in the wall."

"Is everything all right?"

"Besides the unexplained cavity in the wall? Yeah, everything's awesome."

"You sound . . . I don't know." She sounded tired herself. "Is everything really all right?"

Jack soothed his hot cheeks and brow against the cool wood of the doorframe. "Do you remember that concert we went to over the holidays, Soph? Somewhere uptown, off Park maybe. There were these trucks moving in the street. You could hear them through the walls while the music played."

She didn't respond for so long Jack thought the line had gone dead. "I remember the concert," she said finally. "I don't remember the trucks."

"There were trucks."

"All right, there were trucks."

"And the sound of the music . . ." He no longer knew what he meant to say.

The scope of something inexpressible, a mammoth, ungraspable intimation, had overtaken him.

Jack called Valente to apologize. He had heard nothing from him in a week. To his surprise, Valente's mother answered the phone.

"Jonah's in the hospital," she said. "He's all right, don't worry, but he's not supposed to see anyone yet."

"What happened?"

There was a pause. "How do you know Jonah?" she asked.

Jack told her they were old college friends, and that he'd recently moved to the area.

"Maybe Jonah would like to tell you himself, when he's feeling better," his mother said.

Jack pondered this briefly but soon turned his attention to other things. A week later, quite unexpectedly, he received a letter from Valente in the mail. It was written on brown card stock in a large, handsome hand:

Hey Jack,

First off, don't feel bad when you hear what happened or like you owe me an apology or whatever. We argued, so what? I don't take it personally. But don't add this to your list of reasons I'm crazy. I'm not that crazy. Just a little crazier than you. Or maybe not—ha-ha!

I never told you this but sometimes I get pretty low. Van Gogh's last words were "*la tristesse durera toujours*," which in French means "the sadness shall last forever." But he died with a smile on his face, they say, and sometimes I think about that and think life isn't so bad.

You're right, I talk about van Gogh and Picasso a lot. What can I say? They're my heroes and it gives me comfort to keep them close. It isn't cool, but I guess I'm not cool. When I try to be, I feel like I'm suffocating, you know? I told myself, I'll just say what's on my mind and people can think what they want. Dumb, huh? I don't think I'll ever learn to play the game you were talking about, but maybe that's O.K., too, do you think?

The doctors say my main issue is a lack of proportion. Well, I can't argue with that. I get strange notions and it's like I can't resist. After our argument I was thinking about Rope Man, and I got it in my head I was going to climb the water tower and paint it, like Rope Man and I always talked about. I guess I was pretty drunk. Everyone says I'm lucky I didn't hurt myself worse. Rugby's out for a while, but the doctors are coming around to the idea that I'm not a danger to myself.

One more van Gogh story, if you won't chop my head off for telling it—ha-ha! I don't have my books here so it's from memory. In a letter to Theo, van Gogh says he knows he's a nonentity, a bum, basically, in the eyes of the world. And despite that, he says, he'd like to show in his work what's in the heart of such a nobody. I think that's pretty cool.

The rugby girls came to see me the other day, six or seven of them. They're crazy, those girls! They brought me brownies they baked. I wish I'd known they were pot brownies before I ate so many. . . . I think the girls felt bad they couldn't fight me, 'cause two of them started wrestling right there in the hospital until Nurse Ratched kicked them out. (Actually, her name's Sally and she's all right.) But it cheered me up to see the girls. Hey, don't worry about me! In no time at all I'll be back out there painting with birthday candles burning in my hat.

Your bro,

Jonah

It was two years before Jack saw Valente again. On the day in question, he and Sophie were across the river, poking around in antique shops and cafés while their infant daughter napped in her papoose. In Chandor, a town just north of Rock Basin, Jack found Valente at a craft fair, working one of the stalls. All around him were small garish canvases, showing still-lifes and cottages and bright flowering bushes.

"Jack Francis!" Valente bellowed when Jack approached.

"Hi, Jonah." Sophie was in a different part of the fair, looking at jewelry, or retailored vintage dresses.

"What's crackin'?" Valente appeared genuinely pleased to see him. Jack, at least, read no trace of their last encounter or the intervening years in his look, just that restive quality, as if every instant teetered on an uneasy precipice.

"Nothing," Jack said. "Driving around. I'm here with Sophie. And a little human that popped out of her."

Valente grinned. "Sophie finally made her choice."

"Yeah, I guess." Jack had forgotten his old joke. "These yours?" he said and pointed to the paintings.

"These?" Valente's face went blank and a sudden humorless fire appeared on it. The shift was so precipitate that Jack wondered for a second whether he had, in fact, said something different and unforgivable.

"What?" Jack said.

Valente threw his head back and laughed. "Man, you must really think I suck at painting. This shit?" He cast a hand about. "I'm just doing my friend Raj a favor. I wouldn't be caught dead painting this bullshit."

"I see," Jack said, not entirely sure that he did. "How's your stuff going?"

Valente shrugged. "I'm not in the Louvre yet."

"No." Jack picked up and put down a canvas that seemed to show a strangely colored child or doll, or possibly a clown.

Valente was asking him a question. It took Jack a moment to realize that he was asking about the hollow. What had happened with it. "Hollow?" Jack repeated. The word triggered something in him, a sense of déjà vu, but he couldn't quite catch the recollection. He hadn't thought about the hollow in months, years. It seemed much longer ago than it could have been that Valente had brought it to his attention, a memory far more deeply buried in the past than the facts allowed. He stared at Valente impassively, although some slight mirth may have danced in his eyes. "What hollow?"

Valente narrowed his eyes, trying to assess what was taking place. He held Jack's gaze, then he smiled. A snort erupted from him, a laugh, and then Jack was laughing, too. They laughed with a gathering force, truly cracking up. Jack didn't know the last time he'd laughed so hard, or why, really, they were laughing, but they were roaring, fighting for breath.

"What's so funny?" Sophie was tapping Jack on the shoulder. "What are you laughing at?"

Jack turned, grinning, and was about to shrug, when Valente cut in and in his loud, abrupt voice answered, "Sadness."

Their laughter petered out. Jack studied the thinning, wrinkled skin around Valente's eyes, waiting for something to happen. Valente was smiling broadly, entirely in earnest. It was the earnestness of a large, clumsy person, crashing through a world of glass doors and gossamer screens. Jack realized that he was waiting for Sophie to suggest that she had misheard, but she said nothing. Only pursed her lips. He breathed quietly. The day was crystalline, blue, touched by clouds. Cool. A light breeze. The market hummed. A burble of chatter. Dogs' barks. The smell of cut flowers, of burning. Colors. Crushed leaves. Exhaust. A chime, tinkling. A yellow shawl. Time pooling. Opening. A moment, before anyone spoke. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Greg Jackson on bohemians and the bourgeoisie.

BOOKS

WHAT THE *STONE SAID*

How Egyptian hieroglyphs were deciphered.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

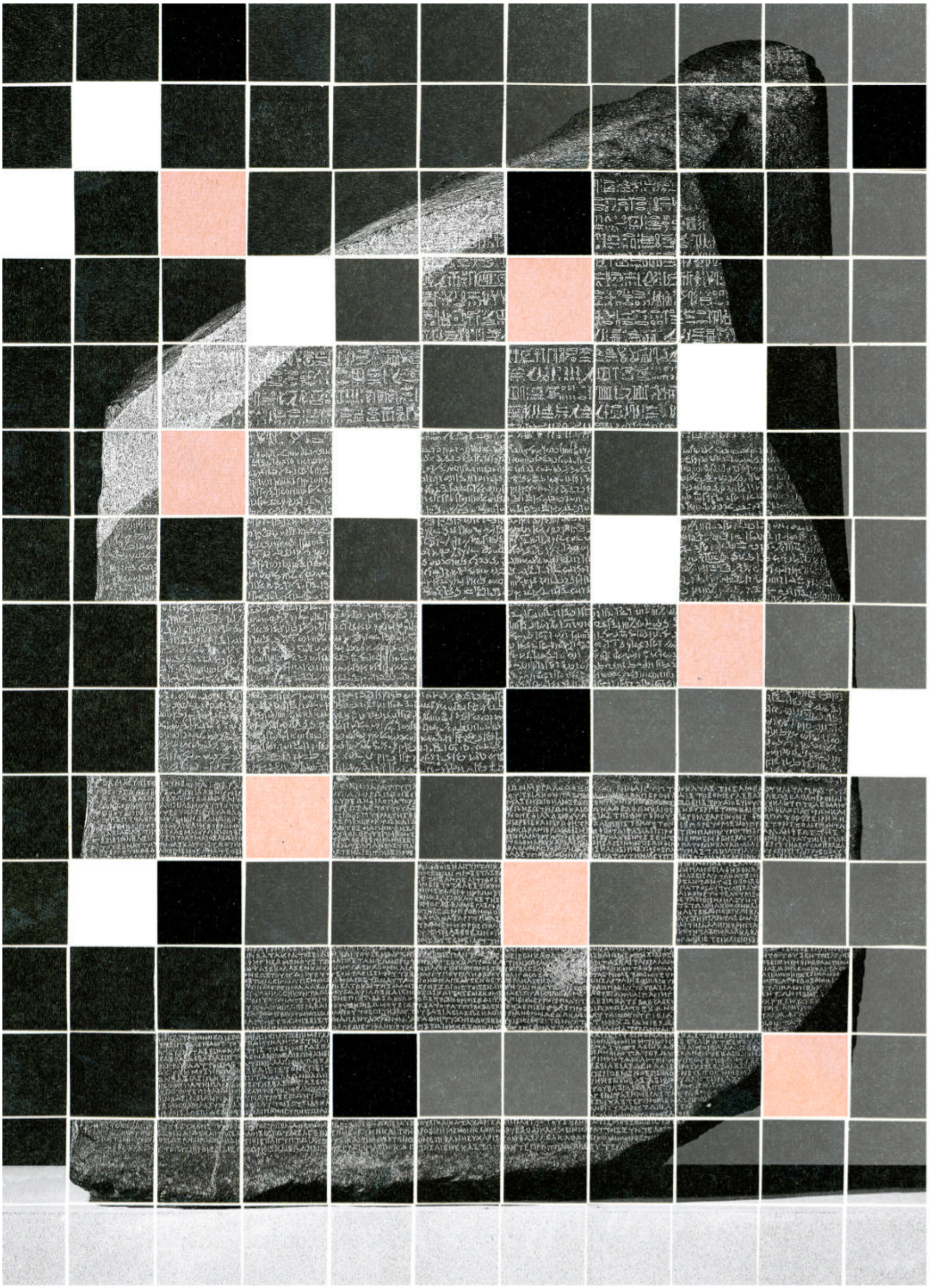
In 1798, Napoleon, with some four hundred ships, set sail across the Mediterranean, bound for Egypt. He had a practical purpose: he wanted to kick the English out of the eastern Mediterranean and block their lucrative trade with India. But he was also interested in Egypt itself, which his idol Alexander the Great had conquered in 332 B.C. By the nineteenth century, Egypt was no longer the glamorous prize it had been for Alexander. It was a backwater, hot, dry, and poor. "In the villages," Napoleon said, "they don't even have any idea what scissors are." Still, from its astonishing ancient monuments—pyramids and obelisks piercing the clouds—and its strange, beautiful picture-language, called hieroglyphics, which everyone admired and no one could read, people knew that this had once been a formidable civilization. So Napoleon brought with him not just soldiers but some hundred and sixty so-called *savants*—scientists, scholars, and artists, with their compasses and rulers and pencils and pens—to describe what they could of this fabled old realm.

The French, however, were no sooner launched than the English Navy, under Horatio Nelson, was on their tail, and shortly after they landed they were pretty much routed, at the Battle of the Nile, in which they lost eleven of their thirteen warships. "Victory is not a name strong enough for such a scene," Nelson said. Napoleon moved on to an ill-fated campaign in Syria and eventually headed back to France, instructing his army in Egypt to go on fighting and, in particular, to fend off British incursions along the coast. They complied, dispiritedly, for two more years. So it was that, on a hot day in July of 1799, a team of laborers, working under a French officer to rebuild a neglected fort near the port city of Rosetta—now known as Rashid—discovered a stone so large that they could not move it. Under a different officer, the men might have been told to maneuver around it somehow. But their supervisor, Pierre-François Bouchard, was one of Napoleon's *savants*, trained as a scientist as well as a soldier. When the dirt had been cleaned off the front of what is now known as the Rosetta Stone, he realized that it might be something of interest.

It was a slab of granodiorite (a cousin of granite), about four feet tall, two and a half feet wide, and a foot thick, inscribed on its front with three separate texts. The topmost text, in Egyptian hieroglyphs, was fourteen lines long. (It was probably about twice that length originally; the top of the slab had broken off.) The middle section, thirty-two lines long, was in some other script, which nobody recognized. (Called Demotic, it turned out to be a sort of shorthand derived, ultimately, from hieroglyphs.) But—eureka!—the bottom section, fifty-three lines long, was in Ancient Greek, a language that plenty of Napoleon's *savants* had learned in school. One can only imagine what these men felt when they saw the third inscription, like a familiar face in a room full of strangers. Furthermore, the Greek writing explicitly stated that its text was the same as that of the two preceding inscriptions. Bouchard surely saw what that meant: the Greek text, if indeed it matched the others, would allow them to translate the hieroglyphs and hence, eventually, all the other hieroglyphic texts that people had been puzzling over for two millennia. The stone was swiftly carted away, to the tent of Jacques-François de Menou, a commander of the French forces.

When, two years later, the French finally surrendered to the British, they said that, by the way, they were taking home the antiquities they had discovered in Egypt—or what they liked—including the Rosetta Stone. The English replied that that was most definitely not going to happen: these things were spoils of war, and they, the British, had won the war. According to a witness outside General Menou's tent, a great deal of shouting ensued. In the end, the French were allowed to keep a number of small things. The British took the big items, including the Rosetta Stone, which was then tenderly escorted to England and given to King George III. He, in turn, sent it to the British Museum.

Museum officials, worried about the strain that the stone, which weighed three-quarters of a ton, would inflict on the floor of their fine old building, put it in a temporary facility while they had a new wing erected for it. It went on public display in 1802. From that time on, the Rosetta Stone has been the most prized object in the British Museum, and the subject of any number of close studies. Now there is a new one, "The Writing of the Gods: The Race to Decode the Rosetta Stone" (Scribner), by Edward Dolnick, a former science writer for the Boston *Globe* and the author of



SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH © TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM; OPPOSITE: GIACOMO GAMBINERI

With the same message in both hieroglyphs and Greek, the Rosetta Stone made three thousand years of writing readable.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANTHONY GERACE

several books on the intersections of art, science, and detection. According to Dolnick, the Rosetta Stone was not only, as its discoverers suspected, a key to Egyptian hieroglyphs, and thereby to a huge swath of otherwise inaccessible ancient history. It was also a lesson in decoding itself, in what the human mind does when faced with a puzzle.

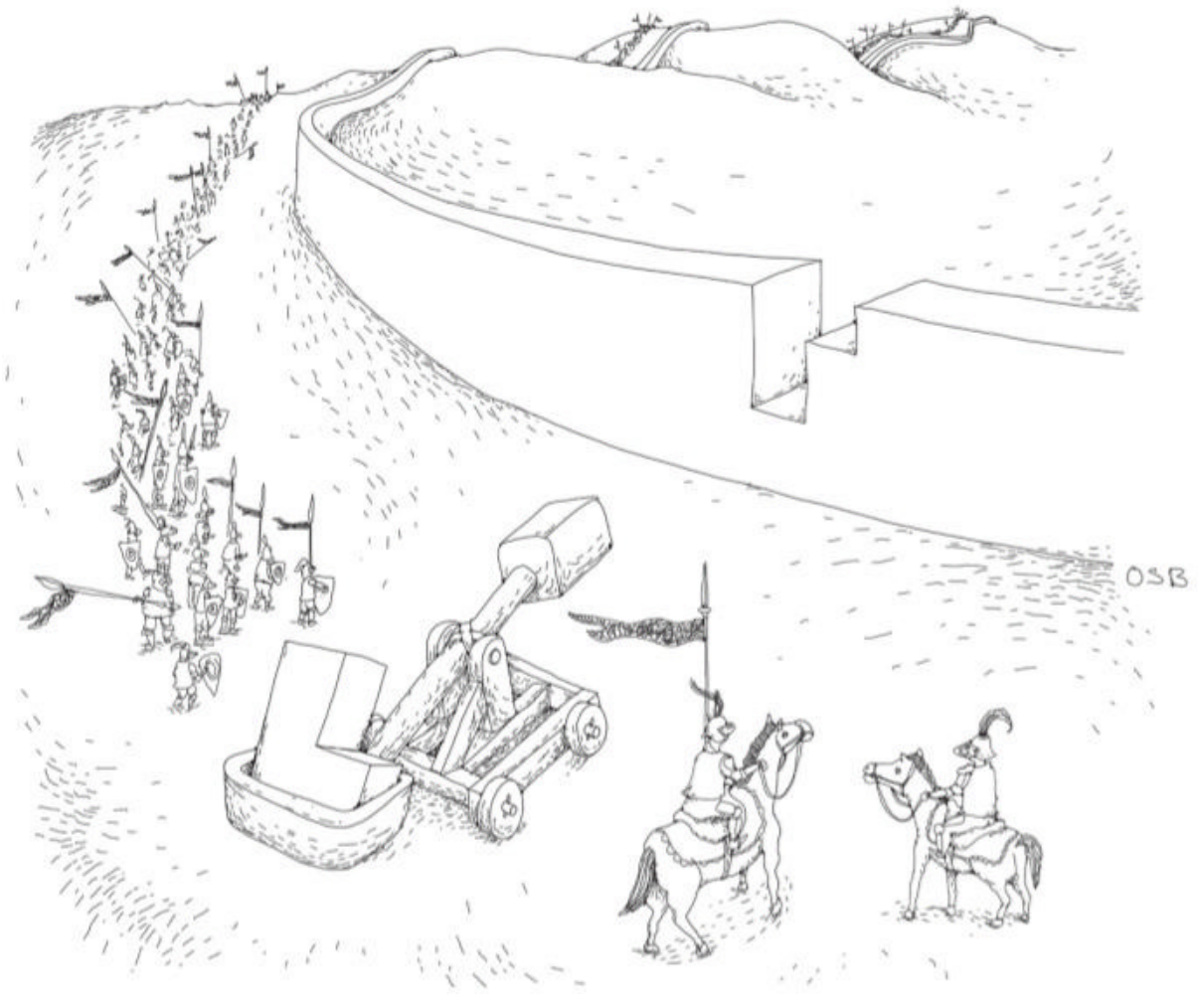
The discovery of the Rosetta Stone was not kept secret. The *Courier de l'Égypte*, the newspaper of the French expedition, carried the news a couple of months later, and within a few years plaster replicas had been sent to scholars in Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, and Dublin. Copies of the inscription were dispatched to a number of European capitals and also to Philadelphia. You'd have thought that this would have set off a stampede to decipher the stone, but in fact the response was slow. As Dolnick tells it, "Most scholars took a brief look, gulped in dismay, and skittered back to more congenial ground." In the end, more than twenty years passed before the stone was made to yield a key to the hieroglyphs.

One can see why. First, the script was dead. Egypt fell to Rome in 30 B.C., after Caesar Augustus (at that time still called Octavian) defeated the forces of Cleopatra and Mark Antony at the Battle of Actium, and the Queen, according to a version given by Plutarch—and then, memorably, by Shakespeare—placed an asp on her breast and died. Three centuries later, the Egyptians' religion died. After the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, in 312 A.D., he began rolling it out as the official religion of the Roman Empire. By the end of that century, the Emperor Theodosius outlawed all pagan worship, and many temples were destroyed. (The Rosetta Stone had likely been displayed in one such temple.) There is no evidence that hieroglyphs were ever used after the fourth century A.D. No surprise, then, that nearly fifteen hundred years later there wasn't any text, let alone any human being, to help European scholars decode them.

But wasn't there the Rosetta Stone? Yes, but it was frustratingly incomplete. Pieces had broken off, not just from its hieroglyphic text but from the Demotic and Greek texts as well. What had the missing lines said? Then, too, no one was sure, early on, which way hieroglyphic writing ran: from left to right, as in European languages, or, like Hebrew, from right to left, or even going back and forth between those two, like ribbon candy. (This last pattern is called boustrophedon, from the Ancient Greek *bous*, or "ox," and *strophe*, or "turn"—hence, "as the ox turns" while plowing—and was sometimes used for Ancient Greek, Etruscan, and a few other writing systems.) Or might the text be running vertically—perhaps top to bottom, as with traditional Chinese, or even bottom to top (much rarer, but found, for example, in ancient Berber)? Never mind that, though. Where did the words begin and end? Like classical Greek and Latin, the inscriptions had no spaces, not to speak of punctuation, between words. Were they even what Europeans called "words"?

Furthermore, whatever the would-be decoder figured out regarding one hieroglyphic text might not be transferrable to another. Modern readers of English can go back maybe six centuries and still hope to understand a text written then. Chaucer, who died in 1400, is readable after perhaps a day of practice. But hieroglyphs developed over some *thirty* centuries. The Rosetta Stone, as one can deduce from its inscription, was carved in 196 B.C. How could its decoders claim that the lessons they derived from it applied to, say, a text from the time of Ramses II, who reigned from about 1279 to 1213 B.C. and is considered to have been ancient Egypt's most important pharaoh? And, if scholars couldn't apply what they learned from the Rosetta Stone to documents written under Egypt's most important ruler, what could they say with confidence about ancient Egypt as a whole?

Finally, according to Dolnick, a major impediment to any kind of useful transcription was something less technical: the widely held belief that hieroglyphs communicated deep spiritual truths, which could not be lightly disclosed. Almost certainly, no one in the world could read hieroglyphs during the nearly fifteen hundred years or so before the Rosetta Stone was discovered, but that doesn't mean that people weren't looking at hieroglyphs, or reproductions of them, and at Egyptian monuments, or drawings of them, and thinking about what these things meant. Nature abhors a vacuum, and the vastness of Egyptian statuary made the vacuum left by the hieroglyphs' impenetrability seem comparably great. From the early Middle Ages through the eighteenth century,



"Don't waste your time on video games, they said."

thinkers recorded their sense that profound, perhaps even occult, teachings were lurking there. According to the third-century philosopher Plotinus, Egyptian scribes did not bother with "the whole business of letters, words, and sentences." Instead, they used signs. And each sign, Plotinus said, was "a piece of knowledge, a piece of wisdom." In the absence of anything to oppose this rather spooky and thrilling idea, it persisted, even into the Enlightenment. Isaac Newton firmly believed that the ancient Egyptians had solved all of nature's apparent mysteries—that, as Dolnick writes, "they had known the law of gravitation and all the other secrets of the cosmos; the point of hieroglyphs was to hide that knowledge from the unworthy." This belief, a sort of curse of the mummy *avant la lettre*, did not encourage the average linguist to have a go at the Rosetta Stone.

The first person to make real progress with the stone was Thomas Young (1773-1829), an English physician who had come into a large inheritance when he was still in school and therefore did not have to confine his adult years to the treatment of patients. Young began work on the stone in 1814, when he was in his early forties. A brilliant, ambitious, and modern-minded scientist, he was wedded to empiricism and did not stand back in awe before the hieroglyphs' supposedly ungraspable truths. He just went ahead and looked at them for a long time and counted things and took notes and then drew conclusions. His most important conclusion was that some hieroglyphs appeared to give phonetic cues, signs of a word's sound. That is, a hieroglyph might not represent the riddle of the sphinx or the meaning of the universe, but maybe just the sound "d." Young cushioned this finding in caution, saying that it was true only of names, and names only of non-Egyptian rulers, and only when the names were set within cartouches, oval-shaped enclosures in the Rosetta Stone text, because those were the only cases in which he could demonstrate the truth of his claim. But even this modest assertion was significant, because it said, implicitly, that hieroglyphs obeyed rules. They were something you could figure out.

Young opened the door, but he wasn't the one who walked through it. Young was a born scholar, the kind who seldom left his desk and was proud of that. When he proposed the creation of a society to collect and publish hieroglyphic inscriptions, he maintained that he saw no need to "scramble over Egypt" looking for more; that task could be left to "some poor Italian or Maltese." As for him, he would stay home, where, if, say, he was caught up in his speculations when dinner was announced, his meal could be brought to him on a tray. Besides, he was a polymath. He was interested, and expert, in many things. Hieroglyphic writing commanded his attention for only about three years, until 1817, and, for the most part, only during his summer breaks. In 1819, he summarized his findings in the "Egypt" article of the Encyclopædia Britannica and turned to other matters. By then, he knew that another scholar, in France, was working on decoding the hieroglyphs. Within a few years, it was evident that he had fallen too far behind to catch up.

The other scholar was Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832), seventeen years Young's junior. Champollion grew up in southwestern France, the youngest of seven children. His father was a bookseller; his mother couldn't read or write. He had little money. Until he was middle-aged and had already, more or less, founded Egyptology, he could not afford to go to Egypt. But, from an early age, he had shown an extraordinary gift for languages. While still in his teens, he acquired not only Greek and Latin but also Hebrew, Arabic, Amharic, Sanskrit, Syriac, Persian, Chaldean. Most important for his future work, he set about learning Coptic, the language of the Egyptian Orthodox Church, which was thought (correctly, as it turned out) to be descended from Ancient Egyptian.

Champollion was aided in his studies by his brother Jacques-Joseph, who was twelve years older than Jean-François and not just his brother but his godfather, too—an important job in the old days. Seeing Jean-François's genius, he was happy to support him, even housing him when necessary. A linguist himself, he encouraged his brother's passion for languages. Once, when the young man was recovering from an illness, he asked Jacques-Joseph for a Chinese grammar, to help him recuperate.

At sixteen, Champollion presented his first paper, on place-names in ancient Egypt, and announced to the Grenoble Society of Sciences and the Arts that he was going to decipher the hieroglyphs and reconstruct the history of pharaonic Egypt. He devoted himself to that project for the rest of his life. Dolnick takes Champollion as a sort of paragon of the scientific mind, above all in his willingness to dwell on a problem without ceasing. (He quotes Newton, who, when asked how he arrived at the theory of gravitation, replied, "By thinking on it continually.") In such an endeavor, it helps to love one's subject. "Enthusiasm, that is the only life," Champollion proclaimed. The great moments of his life were his advances in research. After one breakthrough, he gathered up his papers, ran out into the street, and raced to his brother's office. Bursting through the door, he yelled, "*Je tiens l'affaire!*" ("I've got it!"), and fainted on the floor.

In time, Champollion wrested from the Rosetta Stone most of its secrets. First, he showed that Young was right: hieroglyphs did communicate through sound, like English and French. But, whereas Young believed that this was true only with names, and only foreign ones, Champollion showed that it was also the case with many other words. Furthermore, phonetic communication did not rule out its supposed alternatives. A hieroglyph might be phonetic (sounding out a word), or it might be pictographic (giving you a picture of the thing being indicated, as in "I ♥ NEW YORK"), or it might be ideographic (giving you an agreed-upon symbol, such as "XOXO" or "&," for the thing indicated). As Champollion wrote, a passage in hieroglyphs was a script "at the same time figurative, symbolic and phonetic, in one and the same text, in one and the same sentence, and, if I may put it, in one and the same word." Going

further, Champollion showed that the system also used rebuses, a kind of linguistic pun simultaneously pictorial and phonetic. An example in English is "👁CU" for "I see you." Dolnick asks us to imagine writing "Winston Churchill" by drawing a pack of cigarettes followed by a picture of a church, then a picture of a hill.

That's not all. The phonetic values of hieroglyphs, as with the Hebrew alphabet, included consonants but not vowels. What if a reader encountered "bd"? Did it mean "bad" or "bed" or "bud" or "bid"? Writers of hieroglyphs solved this problem by following the ambiguous word with a so-called "determinative," a hieroglyph saying, in effect, "I know that looks confusing, but here's what I mean." Dolnick explains, "*Old* and *praise* look identical, but the hieroglyphs for *old* are followed by a hieroglyph of a bent man tottering along on a walking stick; *praise* is followed by a man with his hands lifted in homage." This sounds like a useful study aid, until Dolnick tells us that about a fifth of the characters in a typical hieroglyphic text are determinatives—not so much words as glosses on words.

Collecting all these different modes of communication, one can safely say that ancient Egypt's written language—if we choose to speak of it, developing over more than thirty centuries, as a single language—was an enormous ragbag, full of smoke screens and stumbling blocks and tricks and puns and redundancies. Why, then, did the Egyptians keep it for so long? First off, for most of its existence it was not intended for use by the general public, the vast majority of whom could not read or write. Literacy was the preserve of priests and some of the nobility, together with scribes, people whose profession it was to read and write for others. Given that situation, those who could read hieroglyphs probably weren't sorry that others couldn't. By being difficult, the script kept the riffraff out. (Demotic, the shorthand version of hieroglyphs, eventually developed as more of the riffraff learned to read.) Finally, hieroglyphic writing, with its suns and seas, its lions and snakes and beetles and bulls, was beautiful, and some people no doubt cared about that. Dolnick points out that there are hieroglyphic texts in which it seems that the order of symbols has been adjusted to make a sequence more pleasing to those with an eye for such things.

So, what does the Rosetta Stone actually say? Alas, after all our pop-culture experience of ancient Egypt—Cecil B. DeMille's Red Sea parting, the blockbuster King Tut exhibitions, Elizabeth Taylor's cleavage—the stone's text is a bit of a letdown. A few thousand words long in translation, the inscription is formal, fulsome, and rather boring. It tells us that the stone was to be installed in a temple wall in honor of the ruler Ptolemy V Epiphanes Eucharistos, and its ceremonial purpose presumably accounts for its tone. The text was inscribed in 196 B.C., to celebrate Ptolemy's coronation. (He had become pharaoh about nine years before, but, as he was only five or so at the time, a series of regents initially handled affairs of state.) It begins with a long invocation of the king:

> The lord of the sacred uraeus-cobras whose power is great, who has secured Egypt and made it prosper, whose heart is pious towards the gods, the one who prevails over his enemy, who has enriched the lives of his people, lord of jubilees like Ptah-Tanen [the god of Memphis], king like Pre [the sun god], ruler of the upper and lower provinces, the son of the gods who love their father, whom Ptah chose and to whom the Sun gave victory, the living image of Amun, the son of the Sun, Ptolemy, who lives for ever, beloved of Ptah, the god manifest whose beneficence is perfect.

The inscription then catalogues the pharaoh's benefactions to his people. The list sounds a bit like something out of a reëlection campaign. The great man, it says, has lowered taxes, secured benefits for soldiers, amnestied prisoners, made splendid offerings to the gods, and put down rebellions, impaling the rebels on stakes. The decree goes on to specify the processions to be performed, the libations to be poured, the garlands to be donned, and the statues to be venerated in recognition of the pharaoh's accession and his birthday. It ends with the instruction that this text is to be copied and installed in Egypt's important temples. (Other stones have since been found, with various fragments of the Rosetta text.)

The quotation above is not from Dolnick but from a competing book, "The Rosetta Stone and the Rebirth of Ancient Egypt" (2007), by the Egyptologist John Ray. Dolnick quotes only a few snippets. This stone, which was hidden for maybe two thousand years and then, once discovered, caused an international decoding competition that eventually opened up more than three thousand previously illegible years of ancient history—this world-famous text receives merely a nod from Dolnick.

Indeed, throughout his book, Dolnick seems almost to punish the Rosetta Stone for its stuffiness and to channel, in however sophisticated a manner, the sizzle-and-pop style common in histories of ancient Egypt. If he has some information on how Nile crocodiles managed to have sex without causing themselves bodily harm, or how the Egyptians mummified not just people but also snakes and dung beetles, he manages to get it in. Qualifiers are kept to a minimum, quantifiers to a maximum. Cliff-hangers are welcome, hyperboles likewise. At the Battle of the Nile, Napoleon's naval commander loses both legs to a cannonball. Does this make him want to go lie down? No. He "remained on deck, tourniquets on his stumps, giving orders from a chair, until another cannonball blasted him apart." Others on deck are having similar difficulties: "For several minutes, mangled bodies . . . rained from the sky."

One hesitates to scold Dolnick for this sort of thing. He does the hard stuff, too—he is good on the intricacies of decipherment—and it is not a crime to keep things lively. John Ray may have made room for the actual Rosetta text, but, perhaps to reward us for soldiering through that, he reproduces some very hot Egyptian pornography from a papyrus now housed in Turin.

Dolnick has not just a journalist's fondness for narrative color but also an affection for England that plays, like a basso ostinato, beneath his text. For a long time, there was disagreement between the British and the French about who should get credit for the Rosetta Stone's decoding: Young, who had the first, crucial insight, or Champollion, who did the rest? Today, almost everyone gives the palm to Champollion, and Dolnick does, too, but his book repeatedly makes reference to the British love of decoding. Sherlock Holmes, needless to say, was English, and, in the years between the two World Wars, England enjoyed the so-called golden age of detective fiction, with Ag-

atha Christie leading the pack. The English are also connoisseurs of the crossword puzzle, and Dolnick notes that Bletchley Park, England's decoding center during the Second World War, recruited its cryptographers not just from Oxford and Cambridge but also from among known crossword champions.

He seems to see a relationship between England's decoders and its nonconformists. He gives a whole chapter to William Bankes, a rich collector who practically killed himself and a number of workmen while transporting an obelisk from Egypt back to his estate in Dorset. It's still there, though he eventually had to say goodbye to it. Arrested in 1841 for sodomy, a crime that was at the time punishable by death, he spent his later life in exile in Venice, buying up Italian paintings and other exquisite things and sending them back home.

Another English favorite of Dolnick's is the Victorian archeologist Flinders Petrie, also well connected and tireless:

> Indifferent to hardship, or perhaps even fond of it, Petrie labored away under the desert sun in a pink onesie or sometimes in the nude. . . . "He served a table so excruciatingly bad that only persons of iron constitution could survive it," one dismayed visitor reported. The food was canned, and much of it dated from digs in previous seasons. Petrie and the other archeologists "tested for freshness by throwing the cans at a stone wall," one historian writes. "If a can did not explode, the contents were deemed fit to eat."

There is surprisingly little about politics in Dolnick's book. It is safe to assume that whatever workman first laid eyes on the big stone near Rosetta in 1799 was Egyptian, but, to my knowledge, he remains nameless. Likewise, throughout those fights about who owned the unearthed Egyptian antiquities, Egypt was not among the contenders. Only in the twentieth century did repatriation—the return of art works removed from countries by conquerors, scholars, grave robbers, and wealthy Western collectors—become an international issue. And only in 2003 did Egypt, in the person of Zahi Hawass, of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, ask that the British Museum send the Rosetta Stone back. The museum declined, whereupon the Egyptians modified their demand, asking only that the stone be *loaned* to them. Again, the British demurred.

Against the Egyptians' claim that the Rosetta Stone, and thereby a portion of the Egyptian people's identity and pride, had been stolen from them, it was argued that, whatever the stone represented under the pharaohs, it now belonged to the world, and furthermore that the Egyptians would not be able to take proper care of it. Nor, it was said, had they been the ones to uncover it and study it, enabling it to tell its story. Unlike other antiquities under dispute—the Elgin Marbles, say, which Greece has long demanded that the British Museum return—the stone's glory is a matter not of beauty but of information. The reason it is the Rosetta Stone rather than just any old stone is that it allowed scholars to recover an immense tract of ancient history. And if that is the case, some Western scholars have argued, the stone was lucky to have been carried off to Europe, where linguistics was, at the time, far more advanced than in Egypt.

This is not a line of reasoning that Egyptians are likely to embrace. To them, the stone was made by Egyptians, about Egyptians, at a time when Egypt was one of the oldest, richest, and greatest powers on earth. When much of the world, Dolnick writes, "shivered in caves and groped in the dirt for slugs and snails, Egyptian pharaohs had reigned in splendor." Egyptians would like people to know that.

This is a huge, complicated story, one that involves not just Egypt and the Rosetta Stone but the farthest reaches of modern geopolitics. Dolnick's book is really just about the decipherment and the people involved in it: how they solved this fantastic puzzle and how their personalities and circumstances affected their procedures. His tale ends poignantly. Both Young and Champollion died before their time, Young of heart disease, Champollion three years later, of a stroke. Young was fifty-five, an honored scientist; Champollion was forty-one, the world's first professor of Egyptology, at the Collège de France, in Paris. On his deathbed, he grieved that he hadn't finished his "Egyptian Grammar." "So soon," he said, as he felt the end coming. Putting his hand to his forehead, he exclaimed, "There are so many things inside!" After Jean-François's death, Jacques-Joseph completed his brother's "Egyptian Grammar" (1836-41) and then his "Egyptian Dictionary" (1841-43): a life, two lives, well spent. ♦

"Don't you just love curling up with a good phone?"

• •

BOOKS

THE GOOD FIGHT

The costs of sentimentalizing the Second World War.

BY CARLOS LOZADA

The terrorist strikes of September 11, 2001, supposedly launched a new kind of American war, with unfamiliar foes, unlikely alliances, and unthinkable tactics. But the language deployed to interpret this conflict was decidedly old-school, the comfort food of martial rhetoric. With the Axis of Evil, the menace of Fascism (remixed as "Islamofascism"), and the Pearl Harbor references, the Second World War hovered over what would become known as the global war on terror, infusing it with righteousness. This latest war, President George W. Bush said, would have a scope and a stature evoking the American response to that other attack on the U.S. "one Sunday in 1941." It wouldn't be like Desert Storm, a conflict tightly bounded in time and space; instead, it was a call to global engagement and even to national greatness. "This generation will lift the dark threat of violence from our people and our future," Bush avowed.

Elizabeth D. Samet finds such familiarity endlessly familiar. "Every American exercise of military force since World War II, at least in the eyes of its architects, has inherited that war's moral justification and been understood as its offspring: motivated by its memory, prosecuted in its shadow, inevitably measured against it," she writes in "Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). A professor of English at West Point and the author of works on literature, leadership, and the military, Samet offers a cultural and literary counterpoint to the Ambrose-Brokaw-Spielberg industrial complex of Second World War remembrance, and something of a meditation on memory itself. It's not simply that subsequent fights didn't resemble the Second World War, she contends; it's that the war itself does not resemble our manufactured memories of it, particularly the gushing accounts that enveloped its fiftieth anniversary. "The so-called greatness of the Greatest Generation is a fiction," she argues, "suffused with nostalgia and with a need to return to some finest hour." Those who forget the past may be condemned to repeat it, but those who sentimentalize the past are rewarded with best-seller status.

The mythology of the Second World War features six main elements, by Samet's tally: that the United States joined the war in order to rid the world of tyranny and Fascism; that "all Americans were absolutely united" in their commitment to the fight; that "everyone" in the country sacrificed; that Americans got into the war reluctantly and then waged it decently; that the war was tragic but ended on a happy note; and, finally, that "everyone has always agreed" on the first five points.

The word choices here—"all," "absolutely," "everyone," and "always"—do stretch the myths to the point of easy refutability, but some of the best-known popular chronicles clearly display the tendencies Samet decries. "Citizen Soldiers," Stephen Ambrose's 1997 book about Allied troops in Europe, presents the reticence of American G.I.s in describing their motivations as a kind of self-conscious idealism and aw-shucks humility. "They knew they were fighting for decency and democracy and they were proud of it," Ambrose writes. "They just didn't talk or write about it." But, without such oral or written records, can one really divine such noble impulses? Samet dismisses Ambrose's œuvre, including the nineteen-nineties best-sellers, "Band of Brothers" and "D-Day," as "less historical analysis

"We search for a redemptive ending to every tragedy," Elizabeth D. Samet writes.

ILLUSTRATION BY GÉRARD DuBOIS

than comic-book thought bubble." Obsessed with notions of masculinity and chivalry, Ambrose indulges in "a fantasy that American soldiers somehow preserved a boyish innocence amid the slaughter," she writes. If anything, the boyish innocence may belong to Ambrose himself, who admits that he grew up venerating veterans of the Second World War, a youthful hero worship that, Samet notes, "tends to overwhelm the historian's mandate."

For a more accurate account, Samet highlights a multivolume study, "The American Soldier," by the sociologist Samuel Stouffer and a team of collaborators. During the war, they studied the ideological motives of American troops, and concluded that, "beyond acceptance of the war as a necessity forced upon the United States by an aggressor, there was little support of attempts to give the war meaning in terms of principles and causes." Samet finds this real-time depiction of a nonideological American soldier to be credible. In the words of the military sociologist Charles C. Moskos, who studied the motivations of soldiers in the Second World War and in Vietnam, each man fights a "very private war . . . for his own survival." Or, as John Hersey put it in a later foreword to "Into the Valley," his narrative of U.S. marines battling on Guadalcanal, the soldiers fought "to get the damn thing over and go home."

Samet argues that Steven Spielberg's blockbuster movie "Saving Private Ryan," from 1998, is "wholly unrepresentative" of Second World War attitudes toward the individual soldier. She contrasts the 1949 film "Twelve O'Clock High," in which a brigadier general (played by Gregory Peck) insists that his men place collective loyalties above personal ones. After one pilot breaks formation, during a sortie over Nazi Europe, in order to assist a fellow-aviator at risk of being shot down, Peck lashes out, "You violated group integrity. . . . The one thing which is never expendable is your obligation to this group. . . . That has to be your loyalty—your only reason for being." By focussing on the fate of a single survivor, Samet writes, Spielberg's film "effectively transforms the conflict from one characterized by mass mobilization and modern industrial warfare to something more old-fashioned, recalling the heroism of ancient epics," in which individual glories and tragedies take narrative precedence over the wider war.

Samet is particularly harsh on Tom Brokaw's "The Greatest Generation," also from 1998, with its "explicitly messianic agenda" of showing us a cohort so packed with honor and honesty and self-sacrifice that it was, as the newsman writes, "birthmarked for greatness." In a section titled "Shame," Brokaw acknowledges the racism that was so "pervasive in practice and in policy" in this greatest of eras, but he responds with uplifting sketches of members of racial minorities who manage to overcome it. ("It is my country, right or wrong," one of them concludes. "None of us can ever contribute enough.") Samet dissents, stressing, for instance, that the conflict in the Pacific, "begun in revenge and complicated by bitter racism" against the Japanese, has been overshadowed by the less morally troubling sagas of European liberation.

"Unity must always prevail," Samet writes of the war myths. "Public opinion must turn overnight after Pearl Harbor, while the various regional, racial, and political divisions that roiled the country must be immediately put aside as Americans rally toward a shared cause." A more complicated reality emerges in Studs Terkel's 1984 "'The Good War'" (the title includes quotation marks because the notion of a good war seemed "so incongruous," Terkel explained), an oral history that amasses the recollections of wartime merchant marines, admirals, U.S.O. entertainers, G.I.s, and nurses. Their views on the war span "the sentimental and the disillusioned, the jingoistic and the thoughtfully patriotic, the nostalgic and the dismissive," Samet writes.

To investigate cultural attitudes toward G.I.s in the aftermath of the war, she considers such novels as John Horne Burns's "The Gallery" (1947), in which American soldiers in Italy engage in black-market transactions with locals; and such movies as "Suddenly" (1954), in which Frank Sinatra portrays a veteran turned contract killer who hopes that his war record will win him sympathy. ("I'm no traitor, Sheriff. I won a Silver Star.") In other noir films of the

era, returning G.I.s are loners disillusioned not just with the war and the years taken from them but also with what their country seemed to have become in their absence: hard, greedy, indifferent. Samet even scours military handbooks, including a 1945 one, memorably titled "112 Gripes About the French," which admonished American G.I.s that they "didn't come to Europe to save the French," or "to do anyone any favors," so they should stop stomping through the Continent as though expecting everyone's gratitude. Not exactly "Band of Brothers," is it?

There is a before-and-after quality to the Second World War in American political writing. The adjective "postwar" still clings to this one conflict, as if no American soldiers had wielded weapons in battle since. But if memories of one conflict shape attitudes toward the next, Samet writes, then the Good War legend has served "as prologue to three-quarters of a century of misbegotten ones." There's plenty of support for this quandary. In "A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam" (1988), Neil Sheehan identified the "disease of victory," wherein U.S. leaders, particularly in the military ranks, succumbed to postwar complacency and overconfidence. Samet recalls the reflections of Rear Admiral Gene La Rocque, a Second World War veteran who retired during Vietnam, and who told Terkel that "the twisted memory" of the Good War "encourages the men of my generation to be willing, almost eager, to use military force anywhere in the world."

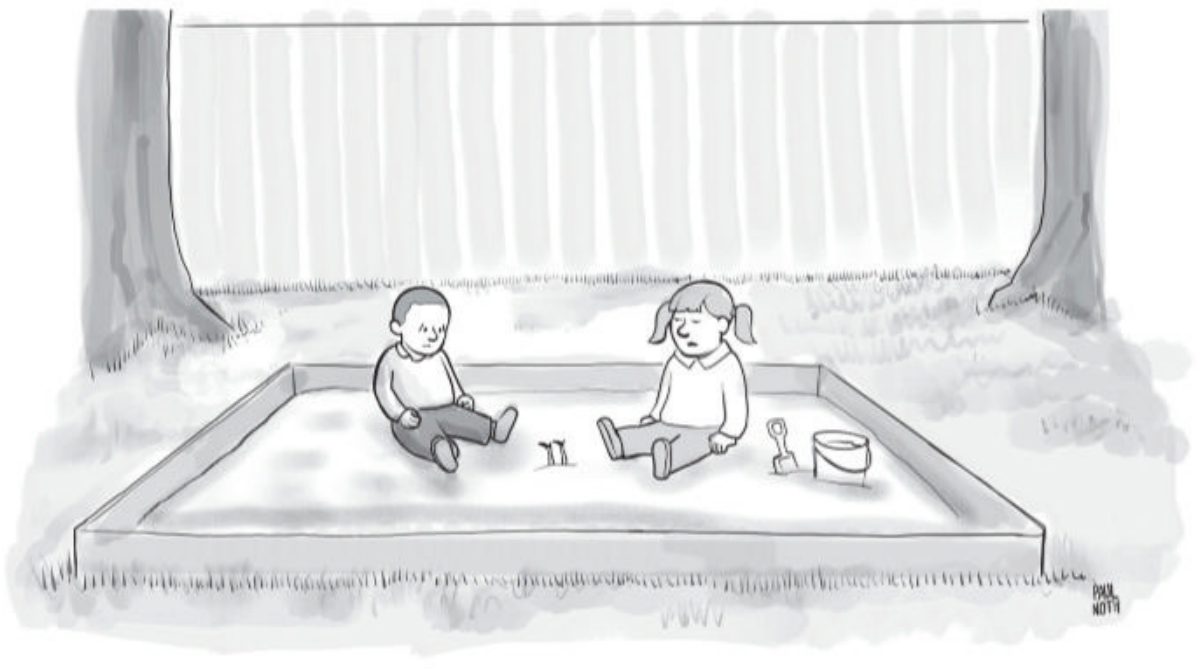
Memories of the Good War also helped shape the views of military life held by the men who fought in Vietnam. Samet takes up Philip Caputo's Vietnam memoir, "A Rumor of War," showing how the author's notions of war and service were influenced by youthful fantasies of the Second World War. "Like thousands of boys," she writes, "he imagined himself performing heroic feats in the style of John Wayne." Caputo, a decorated Marine Corps infantry lieutenant, described the looming threat of "moral and emotional numbness" during his service, and how war transforms callousness into savagery. In his memoir, earnestness mingles with bitterness: "In the patriotic fervor of the Kennedy years, we had asked, 'What can we do for our country?' and our country answered, 'Kill VC.'"

The war in Vietnam, Samet suggests, still functions as a counterweight to the legacy of Good War mythology in America's national-security discussions. President George H. W. Bush, in expelling Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991, believed that he had also exorcised the demons of that bad war. "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all," he exulted in a White House speech. This past summer, amid worries that Kabul 2021 would resemble Saigon 1975, President Biden declared, "There's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy of the United States." (He was technically correct; the landing pad used to evacuate Embassy personnel a few weeks later was next door.)

Yet the enduring power of Vietnam in the American imagination may have a paradoxical effect: its badness bolstered a sense of the Second World War's goodness. Decades after George H. W. Bush was shot down in the Pacific by Japanese forces and rescued by an American submarine, the old bomber pilot justified Desert Storm in explicitly Second World War terms. His collection of correspondence, "All the Best, George Bush," includes various letters from 1990 and 1991—to King Hussein of Jordan, to Cardinal Law of Massachusetts, to his children—invoking the enemies and the stakes of the Second World War in arguing for action against Saddam Hussein. For the record, Kuwait was Poland, Saddam was Hitler, and Bush would not be Chamberlain.

The U.S. exit from Afghanistan and the coinciding twentieth anniversary of Al Qaeda's 2001 attacks have precipitated a spate of memory-mongering over the global war on terror. Samet identifies several verdicts already in contention: that it was a "tragic coda to the American Century," a two-decade transition from end-of-history swagger to end-of-empire fatalism; a "valiant crusade" undone, as ever, by insufficient political will to carry on; or a regrettable misstep by a country that really should know better. She is particularly skeptical of the notion that liberating Afghan women was a vital part of the original U.S. mission. "How easily consequence is becoming justification," she scoffs. "How flattering it will be one day to reimagine it as an original objective." The search "for a kind of honor amid the ruins" shapes the literature of Iraq and Afghanistan, Samet writes, a tendency that she also finds in works that revisit Vietnam, such as Errol Morris's 2003 documentary, "The Fog of War," in which Robert McNamara, L.B.J.'s Secretary of Defense, says, "We all make mistakes." It's not much as regrets go, though it tops the Rumsfeldian "Stuff happens" response to the looting that took place in Baghdad in 2003.

"We search for a redemptive ending



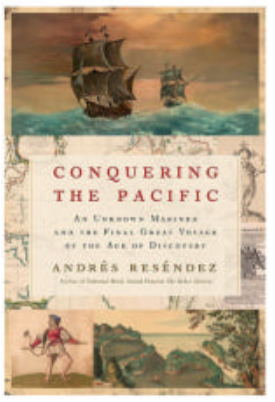
"If I do that to my own Barbie, imagine what might happen to a tattletale."

to every tragedy," Samet writes. "We find no solace in the inconclusive." The writings we have so far from the post-9/11 era do not, in truth, appear to be particularly redemptive or sentimental; they are, in the main, pitiless. We've been offered a painful roster of bureaucratic stasis and missed warnings, while the narratives of how the United States waged the war reveal a nation that betrayed its values in a conflict allegedly waged in their defense. The centerpieces of the fight against terrorism were the unnecessary war in Iraq and the failed one in Afghanistan, with little vindication to be found in either. These initial interpretations reflect a refusal to let the defining conflict of this early twenty-first century fade into the safety of nostalgia, or be twisted too soon, or too long, by remembrance.

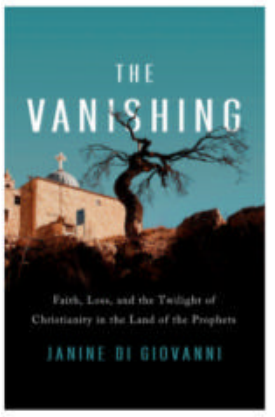
If the cumulative frustrations of Vietnam and the post-9/11 wars produced a nation more reluctant to go abroad in search of monsters to slay, would that mean that the Good War myth was finally losing its authority? Samet is doubtful. She fears that the Second World War will go the way of the American Civil War, "an epic past that we can no longer retrieve," national remembrances of which have amounted to a "theme park" of mendacity and nostalgia only partially redressed by the recent push to dismantle Confederate statuary. It may be only a matter of time, she thinks, before "we transform utterly those who fought it into symbols of an erstwhile greatness bought by blood."

Samet could take heart from the current renderings of our 9/11 wars, yet she remains vigilant. "In a climate in which the pressures to sentimentalize are so strong and victory and defeat are so difficult to measure," she writes, "it seems a moral imperative to discover another way to read and write about a war." Her retrospective on the Good War is another such way, and a worthwhile one. Time can indeed sand down the jagged edges of a war, and sentiment can reshape it into something unrecognizable. Still, sentiment always distorts, whether it comes late or early, and time enables every new generation to rethink and redefine a conflict with a more dispassionate and informed gaze—as this book itself proves. ♦

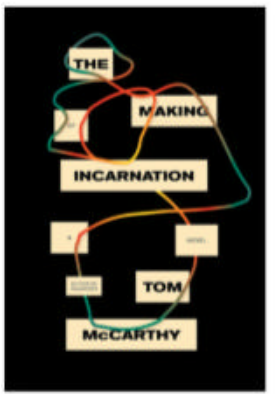
BRIEFLY NOTED



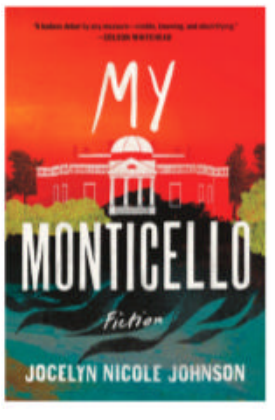
Conquering the Pacific, *by Andrés Reséndez (Mariner)*. In the middle of the sixteenth century, Spain and Portugal were competing for access to the Asian silk and spice trades. Reséndez's taut reconstruction of the first recorded west-to-east crossing of the Pacific traces a Spanish fleet from the Americas to Asia and back, focussing on the Afro-Portuguese pilot Lope Martín. His vessel, the San Lucas, navigated the capricious Pacific gyre, linking the world's major landmasses, despite the lack of a common standard for measuring longitude. Martín's nautical talent was not rewarded. After being accused of absconding from the mission fleet for self-enrichment, he was ultimately left deserted on a Pacific island.



The Vanishing, *by Janine di Giovanni (PublicAffairs)*. These dispatches, by a longtime war reporter, document the erosion of Christianity in the Middle East. A pair of Orthodox Christian sisters in Gaza refuse to leave a world shrinking around them; the religious leaders of a town in Syria swear, futilely, that it will never be touched by sectarian upheaval. The book illustrates the fine balance in which many of these communities now hang, examining how violence, economic instability, persecution, and emigration are leading to the dissolution of cultures forged both by land and by religion. "This is a book about dying communities," di Giovanni acknowledges. "But it is also about faith." Even after Mosul's churches were razed, its people continued to worship.



The Making of Incarnation, *by Tom McCarthy (Knopf)*. The legacy of time-and-motion studies animates this propulsive, thought-provoking novel, which centers on a quest across London, Indiana, and Latvia for a missing entry from the archives of Lillian Gilbreth, a pioneer in the automation of labor. Set in the anonymous conference rooms, hotel lobbies, and archives where scientific breakthroughs are disseminated, the book wields technical jargon to both comical and chilling effect. Framing multiple plotlines around the story of "Incarnation," a baroque space opera employing legions of C.G.I. experts and consultants, McCarthy interrogates the disinterested manner by which scientific progress bypasses public comprehension and the pervasive systems that render human activity as raw data.



My Monticello, *by Jocelyn Nicole Johnson (Henry Holt)*. This formally experimental début story collection addresses the shadow of slavery in America. In one story, a Black college professor writes to his son, whose life he has made into a case study to measure the privileges of white American men. The title novella, set in an apocalyptic near-future, is narrated by a young Black woman descended from Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. After fleeing a white-supremacist attack, she and her neighbors take shelter on Jefferson's abandoned plantation. As they prepare to defend themselves against their pursuers, she reckons with her legacy at Monticello, and also with her relationship with her white boyfriend: "Why is it we love what we love?"

POP MUSIC

TAKEBACKS

Taylor Swift reclaims control of her work.

BY CARRIE BATTAN

In the early years of her career, Taylor Swift stepped lightly, transforming from a precocious country musician into a global pop star. She shifted her sound and her image gradually, a strategy that seemed less about allegiance to a particular genre than about personal traditionalism. (She did not start cursing in her music until she was in her late twenties.) Swift has always been a rule-follower—a diligent songwriter with a wholesome image—which made her a kind of renegade in a brash, hypersexualized pop landscape. On "Red," her fourth album, from 2012, she began dipping a toe into modernity. In the song "I Knew You Were Trouble," she nodded to the aggressive and trendy sounds of E.D.M., adding a light dubstep drop before the chorus. By most pop standards, it was a subtle flourish, but for Swift it was like an earthquake. In "Treacherous," she incorporated sexuality into her lyrics for the first time: "I'll do anything you say/If you say it with your hands."

On "Red," Swift also experimented with grander sounds that translated better in arenas, which she had begun to sell out. The album's opening track, "State of Grace," is more U2 than Emmylou Harris—a dramatic number with huge drums and echoey electric guitars. Her voice, too, soars above her preferred conversational register. At the end of the song, she offers a bit of doctrine: "Love is a ruthless game/Unless you play it good and right." As with much of Swift's music, it seemed like an innocent declaration, but it also carried a threat: *play by the rules*, she implied, *or else*. Swift was a moralist in matters of the heart, and once someone broke her trust all bets were off. Anyone who dared to injure her—as many of her romantic interests seemed to do—would be subjected to retaliation in the form of withering lyrics.

Swift's thirst for justice, in recent years, has carried into business affairs. As a teen-ager, she signed to a small independent label in Nashville called Big Machine, run by an executive named Scott Borchetta. After six albums, she moved to Republic Records, a major label. But as she grew more popular her back catalogue, which Borchetta owned, became more valuable. Swift—a stockbroker's daughter, who once told her childhood classmates that she would be a financial adviser when she grew up—attempted to buy back the master recordings. In 2019, in a Tumblr post, she described a galling proposal from Borchetta: she could earn back her masters if she returned to Big Machine; for each new album, she would regain control of an old one. (In a statement, Borchetta described the proposal differently: "We were working together on a new type of deal for our streaming world that was not necessarily tied to 'albums' but more a length of time.")

Swift declined the offer, and Borchetta soon sold Big Machine—and the six Swift albums—to one of her enemies, Scooter Braun, a music manager who had handled the career of her longtime adversary Kanye West during the peak of the artists' feud, in 2016. Even a deft storyteller like Swift couldn't have dreamed up a betrayal like this. "All I could think about was the incessant, manipulative bullying I've received at his hands for years," she wrote of Braun. "Essentially, my musical legacy is about to lie in the hands of someone who tried to dismantle it." (Braun told *Variety*, "All of what happened has been very confusing and not based on anything factual," and he denied bullying Swift, saying, "I'm firmly against anyone ever being bullied. I always try to

Swift's rereleases seem designed to punish her transgressors and fortify her legacy.

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH FROM GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY LAURA LANNES

lead with appreciation and understanding." He has since sold the catalogue to the Disney family's private-equity firm, Shamrock Holdings.)

A dauntless strategist, Swift found a satisfying recourse. Last year, she began rerecording the six albums. This past April, she released a new recording of "Fearless," her sophomore album, and this month she released "Red (Taylor's Version)." The new recordings are not designed to recast the music. Instead, the records have been dutifully rerecorded note for note, with the intention of supplanting the originals and thereby collapsing their value. It's an ambitious project that could be pulled off only by someone with Swift's extensive resources and passionate fan base. And it's the kind of emotional gesture that Swift lives for: a counterpunch designed to punish her transgressors while fortifying her legacy.

"Red (Taylor's Version)" has new cover art, featuring an older Swift wearing a page-boy cap that is a demure dusty red. Musically, the album is nearly indistinguishable from the original. Some of the instrumentation is a bit more forceful, like on a recording of a live performance. For the first iteration of "Red," Swift collaborated with bold-faced pop songwriters such as Max Martin and Shellback. This yielded some of her most beloved songs, including her first *Billboard* Hot 100 No. 1 hit, "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together." Some of the songs, like "Stay Stay Stay," had the feel of cheesy jingles, and Swift has used this opportunity to make them slightly more sophisticated. Still, the new recording is more a facsimile than an addendum. The album feels a bit like a cherished garment after it's been through the wash.

If there are revelations to be found on "Red (Taylor's Version)," they are in its previously unheard bonus tracks, which Swift excavated from her vault. For "Nothing New," Swift invited the indie-rock darling Phoebe Bridgers to record with her. The song, a downcast acoustic track, sounds more of a piece with the folksy poeticism of Swift's latest albums, "folklore" and "evermore," than with "Red." Swift and Bridgers sing about the passage of time and the inevitability of their irrelevance. "Lord, what will become of me / Once I've lost my novelty?" Swift asks. "How can a person know everything at eighteen / But nothing at twenty-two?" Some of the new songs have exhilarating flashes of Swift's quintessential vitriol, which has faded over time. On "I Bet You Think About Me," she returns to a favorite subject: the disdain she holds for the pretentious, coddled men she's dated. "I bet you think about me when you're out / At your cool indie-music concerts every week," she sings. "In your house / With your organic shoes and your million-dollar couch." The album also contains an epic, ten-minute version of "All Too Well"—an addition so momentous that Swift created a high-drama short film to go along with it. On the extended track, she lets her scorn off its leash: "I'll get older, but your lovers stay my age." Lines that might have sounded gratuitous back then become delicious a decade later.

There is perhaps no performer of the modern era with a more intuitive understanding of pop stardom and its demands. Swift has mastered all of the elements, including songwriting, music licensing, and social media. This year, as part of her catalogue-reissue project, she joined TikTok—an obligatory step for an artist whose fan base straddles the millennial-Gen Z divide. TikTok is known for springboarding new talents and unknown tracks to fame overnight, but it also often resurfaces old songs in strange new ways. "No Children," a 2002 song by the indie band the Mountain Goats, recently went viral after drawing the attention of young TikTokers dealing with parental divorce. As a marketing strategy, joining TikTok was a shrewd move. Yet the platform runs on chaos and serendipity, and it wasn't as gameable as Swift might have hoped. In September, as Swift was preparing to reissue "Red," TikTokers seized on "Wildest Dreams," a track from her 2014 record, "1989," and began using it as a backdrop for silly videos in which they slowly zoomed in on their own faces. Sensing the buzz, Swift released her newly recorded version of the song. If it wasn't her original plan, it must have satisfied at least some of Swift's intent: using the platform of the future to revisit her past. ♦

THE THEATRE

NOTORIOUS

President killers and Princess Diana find musical immortality.

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ

A revival of Stephen Sondheim's dark musical "Assassins" couldn't be more upbeat.

The pleasure to be had from the stripped-down revival of Stephen Sondheim's "Assassins" at the Classic Stage Company (under the direction of John Doyle) is so giddy and deep that it occurred to me only after I had left the theatre, with the show's jauntier melodies still ringing in my ears, that it might count as guilty, too. "Assassins," which skips through more than a century of bloody American history in a little less than two hours, is about losers: the desperate and the deluded, people who were stepped on and ground down until they decided that their only recourse was to grab a gun and point it at the President. "Free country / Means they listen to you," the show's opening number goes, and we do listen, thanks to Sondheim's music and lyrics. (The show's book is by John Weidman, based on a great, perverse idea by Charles Gilbert, Jr.) Try not to hum along as John Wilkes Booth (Steven Pasquale), John Hinckley, Jr. (Adam Chanler-Berat), Lynette (Squeaky) Fromme (Tavi Gevinson), and the rest of this band of murderous misfits serenade you with their conviction that, per Thomas Jefferson, "everybody's got the right to be happy."

That this pitch-dark show should be so light on its feet reverses the recent trend of musical revivals that cast a chilly shadow over familiar song and sunshine. In 2019, Daniel Fish turned "Oklahoma!" from a celebration of American expansionism into a grim treatise on American selfishness and brutality. "Carousel," with its themes of violence and murder, grew gloomier still in Jack O'Brien's 2018 production. But "Assassins," which deals with the slimy underbelly of American dreams, couldn't be more upbeat. That's what gives the show its eerie power. These grandiose lunatics and disappointed idealists have us grinning along from the get-go; they all sought fame, that elixir of eternal life, and Sondheim has given it to them. So who gets the last laugh?

According to the Balladeer (the appealing Ethan Slater), we do. Armed, like Woody Guthrie, not with a pistol but with a guitar, he guides us through this particular circle of the American underworld with optimistic sanity, starting at the barn where an injured John Wilkes Booth is hiding out. Booth wants it recorded, for posterity, that he put a bullet through Abraham Lincoln's head to avenge the South, to save the nation from tyranny, yada yada yada. The Balladeer has other ideas. "Some say it was your voice had gone / Some say it was booze," he taunts. "They say you killed a country, John / Because of bad reviews." He's more sympathetic to the downtrodden anarchist Leon Czolgosz (Brandon Uranowitz), a factory worker whose furious analysis of capitalist oppression is spot on—though his assassination of William McKinley doesn't do much to stop it—and to Charles Guiteau (Will Swenson, electric with comic charisma), an unhinged self-promoter who cakewalks his way to the gallows after he offs James Garfield for refusing to name him Ambassador to France. "Lots of madmen / have had their say," the Balladeer reassures us, "but only for a day." Because this is Sondheim, and all harmonies are bound to curdle into dissonance, you can guess that that message won't stand up to scrutiny. By the end of the show, the Balladeer will have shed his hopeful pep and, in a moment of pure horror, transformed into Lee Harvey Oswald.

There's something of a "Breakfast Club" feel to this ragtag crew, united in the detention hall of history. Booth suggests to the luckless Italian immigrant Giuseppe Zangara (Wesley Taylor) that he try to cure his intractable stomach problems by shooting F.D.R. Gerald Ford's pair of would-be killers—Fromme,

ILLUSTRATION BY MANDDY WYCKENS

an acolyte and self-described "lover and slave" of Charles Manson, and Sara Jane Moore (Judy Kuhn), a square serial divorcée with mysterious motives—didn't schmooze in life, but onstage they bond over their daddy issues while using a bucket of KFC chicken for target practice. Then, there's Samuel Byck (Andy Groteluesch en), the disgruntled crackpot who tried to hijack a plane and fly it into Richard Nixon's White House, pouring out his troubles on a tape recording that he intends to send to Leonard Bernstein. (Sondheim has fun riffing on "West Side Story"; if you've got the rights, flaunt 'em.) Byck may be nuts—he wears a grungy Santa suit—but his grievances don't sound all that unreasonable. The world is increasingly unmanageable. There's a hole in the ozone layer; a Saudi prince has bought Howard Johnson's. You can see where he's coming from.

When "Assassins" premièred, in 1990, reaction to it was sharply divided; a retooled revival, slated for 2001, was postponed for three years, for fear of offending audiences' resurgent patriotism after 9/11. The current production was intended for 2020; thematically, the delay has been Doyle's friend, though he faces other challenges. Surrounded by the audience on three sides, the C.S.C.'s peninsula of a stage makes it hard to hear the performers when they turn their backs, and the quality of the sound was uneven the afternoon I saw the show, with Pasquale's quiet menace, for instance, oddly muted compared with Swenson's antic, clarion command. But the unusual space, with its wooden roof and brick walls, makes the production feel intimate, and the musicians who wander among the cast in red, white, and blue jumpsuits give the setting a square-dance atmosphere, with a sound, heavy on the fiddle, that suits Sondheim's Americana inspirations.

"There's another national anthem playing/Not the one you cheer," someone sings, late in the show. We know that other anthem, laced with cynicism and despair, and some of us like to sing it, too. At the show's end, an image of the January 6th riot is projected above the stage, but though Doyle's message seems to be *plus ça change*, the past we've just watched makes an ill-fitting precedent for the uncharted present. We know what it looks like for someone to want to kill the person in charge. What we don't know is what happens when the person in charge wants to kill us. "Something just broke," as the show says. It won't be fixed soon.

As bright American myths are being popped in "Assassins," anemic English ones are sprouting like weeds in the lustreless "Diana: The Musical" (at the Longacre, directed by Christopher Ashley, with music and lyrics by David Bryan and additional lyrics by Joe DiPietro, who wrote the book). The show's accomplishment is to make you wish, after two hours of power-pop crooning, that the poor Princess of Wales (Jeanna de Waal) had been allowed to keep some last shred of her mystery and celebrated glamour. The extraordinary circumstances that brokered Diana's marriage, and then trapped her in it, are, as the show keeps pointing out, those of a fairy tale gone wrong, but the troubles of the marriage itself—a bad match compounded by philandering—could hardly be more banal. When, in the first act, Diana considers ditching her wedding, it's too late; her name and image, as one character says, are already being used to sell tea towels and mugs. Now they're being used to sell tickets on Broadway. *Plus ça change*, indeed.

With documentaries, miniseries, movies, and now a musical, we're reaching a Diana saturation point. One odd new perspective that this show has to offer is its take on victimhood. Diana is presented as a victim of circumstance, naturally, but so are Prince Charles (Roe Hartrampf) and, weirdly, Queen Elizabeth (Judy Kaye), who is given an eleventh-hour number in which she gets to feel sad about abandonment issues in her own marriage. Prince Philip, who, whatever his other qualities, stuck by his wife for seventy-three years, is really the abandoned one here; we see neither hide nor hair of him. The show's villains are the paparazzi, who are dressed like Inspector Gadget and do some twirly dances (choreographed by Kelly Devine) involving flashbulbs and flaring trenchcoats, and Camilla Parker Bowles (Erin Davie, bringing subtle feeling to the bland proceedings), who manages to once again upstage Diana by being infinitely more interesting. Actually, the story does turn out to be a fairy tale: Camilla, deprived for years of her heart's true desire, finally gets her prince. ♦

ON TELEVISION

LADIES' NIGHT

Season 5 of "Insecure," on HBO.

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX

When the series finale of "Insecure" airs, next month, on HBO, it will mark the end of a fascinating decade for Issa Rae, television's heretic maven. In 2011, Rae débuted a YouTube series called "The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl," a rogue comedy of humiliation that attracted a cult following of young Black Internet addicts. (A stoner college freshman at the time, I was a proud member.) Rae played J, an angsty, alternative version of herself, who lived in Black Los Angeles, where she struggled to navigate work, friendship, and romance. An awkward public presence, she vented by writing aggressive raps in private. Her maladjustment was distinct from that of the contemporaneous blipster or blerd, who felt that he was specially persecuted because of his tastes; J's awkwardness was personal, and what made "A.B.G." click was her wry, outlandish subjectivity. She was more Larry David than Moesha.

"A.B.G." became an example of the kind of art that Black writers could create if they sidestepped the traditional models of television-making. The Internet afforded Rae creative freedom, but it came with financial constraints: although fans funded the production of the show via Kickstarter, it was impossible for the series to turn a profit. And, besides, the box was still king. Like her contemporaries Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson ("Broad City") and Katja Blichfeld and Ben Sinclair ("High Maintenance"), Rae turned her Web series into a network deal. She would create an HBO show with Larry Wilmore, and star in it as well. Eventually, the trades shared the title of the project—"Insecure." The artist faced an interesting dilemma: How do you preserve and transfer to an established medium the gonzo vibe of art made for online consumption? Or, better yet: Should you?

Rae, smartly, adapted to her new home. When "Insecure" premièred, five years ago, "A.B.G." fans searched for the connective tissue. An actor or two from the Web series popped up, in minor roles. The rapping became interior monologue. The milieu was still Black L.A., but the aesthetic, pioneered by Melina Matsoukas, then a music-video director for Beyoncé and other artists, had been glammed up. "A.B.G." was lo-fi; "Insecure" was Instagram pretty. The characters were still twentysomething and struggling to have it all, but they were decked out in designer clothes while doing so.

J was gone, and in her stead was Issa Dee, a millennial similarly frustrated by her professional and romantic ruts, which were clearly of her own creation. The explicit allusion to Rae's name suggested a stronger link between alter ego and artist. Issa's social world was more realized, sprawled out, bougier. (And hotter: "Insecure" will be partly remembered as a shrine to graphic hetero sex.) Some of "A.B.G." 's acid humor came from J's disdain of her snide, "light-skinned bitch" colleague, Nina. "Insecure" has explored the vicissitudes of friendship—in particular, the prickly and passionate bond between Issa and her best friend, Molly (Yvonne Orji), an edgy corporate lawyer who can't submit to love. Across its five seasons, "Insecure," an ever-changing and imperfect exploration of modern Black adulthood, has always been at its most acute when it focusses on their relationship.

I love "Insecure." But I have also found it exasperating. Maybe it's my stubborn "A.B.G." allegiance. I wanted "Insecure" to lock into a tone as quickly as its progenitor did. The early episodes felt tyrannized by their tight, half-hour structure. Although the music supervision was inspired, I tended to find the needle

The series is at its best when it focusses on the bond between Issa and Molly.

ILLUSTRATION BY TYLER MISHÁ BARNETT

drops excessive. Sometimes the characters spoke not like people but like sentient trending topics. Conversely, the hammy what-do-Black-people-do conversations are part of the show's charm. An enduring problem has been the depiction of Issa's failing romance with her long-term boyfriend, Lawrence (Jay Ellis), a depressed, out-of-work software developer. Issa supports them both with a job she hates at We Got Y'All, a white-savior nonprofit. Their apartment doesn't get good light, submerging the couple in darkness. Early on, Issa cheats on Lawrence with an ex, Daniel (Y'lan Noel), in what should be a shattering affair, an original sin that sets in motion Issa's spiral of transformations. But because there's no chemistry between Issa and Lawrence—even the chemistry of detachment, the glimmer of love lost—it's hard to stay invested in their on-again, off-again dynamic.

What did devastate and exhilarate, all these years, was Issa and Molly. The two were part of a bigger girl group, including Tiffany (Amanda Seales), a bougie sorority sister with a seemingly picture-perfect marriage, and Kelli (Natasha Rothwell), a party-animal accountant. (As the show progressed, it gave more depth to Kelli, but Rothwell, the best performer by far, who also wrote for the series, was still drastically underused.) The intimacy between the two best friends ran bone-deep. In the pilot, Issa dragged Molly to an open-mic night, where she performed "Broken Pussy," a rap inspired by Molly's romantic frustration. It was funny, but it was also a violation, one that came from profound connection. The show is so good at tracking the highs and lows of this kind of platonic knowledge. The two are able to hurt each other as no man can. Much of Season 4, the strongest in the series, quietly traced the painful devolution of their trust. The final episode of Season 5 has yet to air, but I'd argue that "Insecure" has already played, in the second episode of this season, a scene of consummation: Issa and Molly, in bed, gazing at each other in platonic ecstasy.

There is "Insecure" the art work, and "Insecure" the phenomenon. The show benefitted from the chatter in the late twenty-tens about television undergoing a "Black Renaissance." It was true, for a time, that Rae was the only Black woman with a premium-cable series. But that statistical fact obscured what made "Insecure" compelling: its sense of history and community and genre. The series has always been a sitcom about sitcoms, television about television. It was not radical; it liked tradition. There's no "Insecure" without "Girlfriends." Rae employed a retinue of primarily Black writers and directors who gave the show a house style. And every season, except for this last one, contained a satirical show within a show. References were made to "Living Single," "Martin," "Scandal." These gags clarified the ambition of this suave experiment: to gussy up the familiar with the aesthetics of the new.

At the end of the fourth season, there was a "twist" that many viewers found intolerable. It was soapy, critics argued, to tease another reunion of Issa and Lawrence, and then to introduce an unplanned pregnancy. Fair, but "Insecure" never promised realism. It was a risk, and an admirable one, to refurbish the tropes of romantic comedy. Still, "Insecure" could surprise. Some of the best episodes were references to Richard Linklater's "Before" trilogy: long, meandering dates, with L.A. glittering behind the lovers.

"Insecure" filled the hunger we had for a low-key Black comedy of errors. It could have remained comfort food, but as the seasons went along the storytelling matured. The characters changed; aspirations to Black excellence were refreshingly disavowed. The shenanigans alternately vexed or tantalized you. Were you Team Nathan (Kendrick Sampson) or Team Lawrence? Was Molly ridiculous for shunning a lover because he had once hooked up with a man? (She was.) You became dedicated to "Insecure" as you might become attached to a sport.

The theme of this final season is growth. The episodes I've seen are funny, melancholic, and not too ambitious plotwise. The gentle momentum suggests that the series will give us an old-school, satisfying closure. The season opens with a reunion at Stanford, where the girls confront the spectres of their past selves. Molly chucks the weaves and crops her hair. Kelli is Cali Sober. Issa realizes that she has a knack for entrepreneurship. She's empowered by her quirks, but she's still prone to those reveries of ascension. Still Issa, in other words, but thinking about levelling up. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

ALL IN THE FAMILY

"The Power of the Dog" and "King Richard."

BY ANTHONY LANE

The new film from Jane Campion, "The Power of the Dog," is based on Thomas Savage's novel of the same name, published in 1967. The title echoes the Twenty-second Psalm, in the King James Bible: "Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog." As the movie ends, you can't help asking yourself: Who exactly is the dog, and who's the darling?

The year is 1925, and the place is Montana, which is played onscreen by Campion's native New Zealand. Whether it fulfills the role convincingly—not least in regard to trees and vegetation—is a question that only Montanans will be qualified to answer. What's undeniable is the glory of the hills, camel-colored and weirdly folded, that loom in the backdrop of the tale. We are in ranching country, though *where* we are, at any given moment, isn't always clear; it takes a while to get one's bearings, economic as much as geographical. As Annie Proulx has noted, in an afterword to Savage's book, few of us can understand "the combination of hard physical work and quiet wealth that characterized some of the old ranches."

This is especially true of the Burbank clan. Their bastion is a mansion, richly furnished, with dark wood panelling, like a gentlemen's club. But look at the gentlemen. George Burbank (Jesse Plemons) is stout, compliant, and ill at ease; even on horseback, he wears a black suit. By contrast, his brother, Phil (Benedict Cumberbatch), cuts a lean and leathery figure and spurns the trappings of his affluence, preferring the great outdoors. We learn that he graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Yale, yet refinement of any sort disgusts him; when the governor of the state comes to dine, George requests that Phil clean himself up beforehand. No luck. As Phil says, "I stink and I like it."

This rub of the rough against the smooth—of wilder ways confronting more cultivated ones—will be familiar to followers of Campion. Who can forget "The Piano" (1993), and the sight of Holly Hunter, in her bonnet and her billowing skirt, being borne ashore, amid a surge of waves, and deposited on the alien sands of New Zealand? As for ill-matched siblings, they were crucial to Campion's début film, "Sweetie" (1989), whose title character trampled on the life of her sister. Yet something about the clashes in "The Power of the Dog" feels overworked and set up. On a prosaic level, I never quite believed in George and Phil as brothers, and the movie's closeups tend to belabor a symbolic point: artificial flowers, crafted from cut paper; a hand caressing the curves of a well-buffed saddle; a bull calf being castrated. On the page, mind you, Savage describes the discarded testicles being tossed onto the fire, where they explode like popcorn, so moviegoers get off lightly.

The pivot of the plot is Rose Gordon (Kirsten Dunst), a widow who runs a boarding house. She has a son, an otherworldly creature named Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee); as thin as a sapling, and flitting to and fro in white shoes, he is the one who makes the flowers. When the ranchers stop at Rose's place for a meal, Phil taunts Peter, to the amusement of the tough guys, and to Rose's evident dismay. George, abashed by his brother's bluntness, offers his apologies to Rose, and that's not all. Reader, he marries her! The upshot is that Rose and Peter move in with George and Phil. The latter, as you might imagine, despises the intrusion; he calls Rose "a cheap schemer" to her face. Campion now has her principal characters where she wants them.

And there they stay. Do not be misled by the setting into construing this movie as a Western. It's more of a chamber piece with chaps, largely roam-free, and you soon realize that it ain't going anywhere. Rather, it's sticking around and digging into the various cruelties and miseries on display, like a surgeon exploring a wound. Rose, humiliated by Phil, and socially out of her depth, takes to drink, her features increasingly ruddied by liquor and tears. (It's a major role for Dunst, yet so oppressive as almost to grind her down.) George dwindles from view. Phil, for reasons that he chooses to conceal, draws unexpectedly close to Peter, and takes him out riding. Peter, in return, has secret ambitions of his own.

One way to measure "The Power of the Dog" is to lay it beside Elia Kazan's "East of Eden" (1955)—another saga of fraternal rivalry, laden with Biblical overtones. (Kazan's leading man, James Dean,

Benedict Cumberbatch stars in Jane Campion's film, set in Montana in 1925.

ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICK LEGER

reads out the Thirty-second Psalm.) Both films are too inward-turning, and too sombrely shadowed, to count as epics, despite the grandeur of their landscapes. Why, then, in terms of momentum, should "East of Eden" be so much the stronger? Perhaps because of Dean, and the twisted, unslackening, near-laughable grip of his presence; *he* doesn't seem to know what he's going to do next, and the suspense is contagious. Though Cumberbatch, too, can be compelling, and though you constantly wonder what is stored in reserve behind his wintry gaze, he is at heart a master of urbanity, and not everyone will be convinced that he's truly at home on the range. Still, you should certainly seek out the movie, and relish its central standoff: Rose, downstairs, stumbling through an awkward tune on a piano, versus Phil, plucking away on his banjo, without mercy, in a room overhead. The scene is as tense as the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. Guess who wins.

There are helicopter parents, and then there are tennis parents. Tennis parents are more like the choppers in "Apocalypse Now" (1979), overcoming every little setback with the help of napalm and Wagner. Even among tennis parents, however, few have matched the firepower of Richard Williams, the father of Venus and Serena Williams. He is now the hero of the modestly titled "King Richard," a new film from Reinaldo Marcus Green, which follows Venus and Serena—played with robust good humor, and stinging forehands, by Saniyya Sidney and Demi Singleton, respectively—from girlhood to the brink of stardom. Yet the movie isn't really about them. How come?

Because Richard is played by Will Smith. It's one of Smith's all-consuming performances. He's often alone in the frame, and, when other folks do cluster around, he remains the hub of dramatic attention. Hunching his shoulders, lowering his head, and thrusting out his jaw, Smith looks ever-primed for the fray—startlingly so, because we know how loose and gangly he can be. He still gets plenty of laughs, but there's a militant edge to the comedy. Simple shots of him, at the wheel of an old camper van, show a soul no longer capable of repose. At night, Richard works as a security guard, and carries a weapon; by day, he favors tennis shorts and sneakers. Either way, he's like a soldier who won't get out of his uniform. The call to action can come at any time.

Richard and his wife, Brandi (Aunjanue Ellis), live in Compton with their five daughters. I kept hoping to hear the other three girls talk among themselves about Venus and Serena, but no such scene occurs. (Any whisper of disunity would be inimical to the purpose of the film; solidarity is all.) The domestic regime is stern, with obligatory straight A's at school. Tennis practice continues even in a downpour—volleys and smashes only, since the balls won't bounce. Now and then, Richard falls foul of local thugs. "Daddy got beat up again," the girls report, with a sigh. When cops and social services come by to check on the family, Richard responds by commanding his kids to spell the word "civilization." He declares, "We got future doctors, and lawyers, plus a couple of tennis stars in this house." For Venus and Serena, he has a particular plan. It runs to seventy-eight pages. He wrote it before they were born.

The movie's big reveal is withheld until the end credits, in which Venus and Serena Williams are named as executive producers. So much for objectivity. Yet audiences know when they're being sold something, and they would balk at "King Richard" if it were merely a slab of promotional P.R. As it is, when I saw the film, with a big crowd, you could sense people leaning into the story and feeding off its verve. The atmosphere that is brewed by Green and his director of photography, Robert Elswit, is a blend of the aggressive and the benign. Nothing is more welcoming or more sun-smothered, for example, than the Florida tennis academy to which Venus and Serena are invited by a leading coach, Rick Macci (Jon Bernthal), with their sisters and their parents in tow; no sooner do they arrive, however, than Richard announces that Venus will *not* be competing on the junior circuit. She will bide her time and then, at his behest, turn pro.

Is there madness in Richard's method? Unquestionably. Even if he began by deliberately pushing two of his children into a super-white sport, could he honestly have foreseen that they would indeed conquer the field? Surely not. What makes Green's film so persuasive is that other characters—above all, the redoubtable Brandi Williams—are alive to everything that's absurd and overbearing, as well as noble, in the hero's cause. "You are the most stubborn person I've met in my life," one guy says to Richard. "And I coach *McEnroe*." ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

VOLUME XCVII, NO. 39, November 29, 2021. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for four planned combined issues, as indicated on the issue's cover, and other combined or extra issues) by Condé Nast, a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Eric Gillin, chief business officer; Lauren Kamen Macri, vice-president of sales; Rob Novick, vice-president of finance; Fabio B. Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast Global: Roger Lynch, chief executive officer; Pamela Drucker Mann, global chief revenue officer and president, U.S. revenue; Anna Wintour, chief content officer; Jackie Marks, chief financial officer; Elizabeth Minshaw, chief of staff; Sanjay Bhakta, chief product and technology officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO THE NEW YORKER, P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037. FOR SUBSCRIPTIONS, ADDRESS CHANGES, ADJUSTMENTS, OR BACK ISSUE INQUIRIES: Write to The New Yorker, P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037, call (800) 825-2510, or e-mail help@newyorker.com. Give both new and old addresses as printed on most recent label. Subscribers: If the Post Office alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within one year. If during your subscription term or up to one year after the magazine becomes undeliverable you are dissatisfied with your subscription, you may receive a full refund on all unmailed issues. First copy of new subscription will be mailed within four weeks after receipt of order. Address all editorial, business, and production correspondence to The New Yorker, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. For advertising inquiries, e-mail adinquiries@condenast.com. For submission guidelines, visit www.newyorker.com. For cover reprints, call (800) 897-8666, or e-mail covers@cartoonbank.com. For permissions and reprint requests, call (212) 630-5656, or e-mail image_licensing@condenast.com. No part of this periodical may be reproduced without the consent of The New Yorker. The New Yorker's name and logo, and the various titles and headings herein, are trademarks of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. To subscribe to other Condé Nast magazines, visit www.condenast.com. Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services that we believe would interest our readers. If you do not want to receive these offers and/or information, advise us at P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037, or call (800) 825-2510.

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 Meredith Southard, must be received by Sunday, November 28th. The finalists in the November 15th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the December 13th 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

"Apparently, I was mistaken. He's not in over his head."
Edmond Overbey, Oneonta, N.Y.

"How soon can you start?"
Mason A. Porter, Los Angeles, Calif.

"He was skating on thin ice for some time."
Doug Seville, Chicago, Ill.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"Don't sell him short. He did solve that crossing-the-road thing."
Gary Daily, Terre Haute, Ind.

CITY HARVEST

RESCUING FOOD FOR NYC

FEED HOPE. FEED LOVE.

FEED GOOD

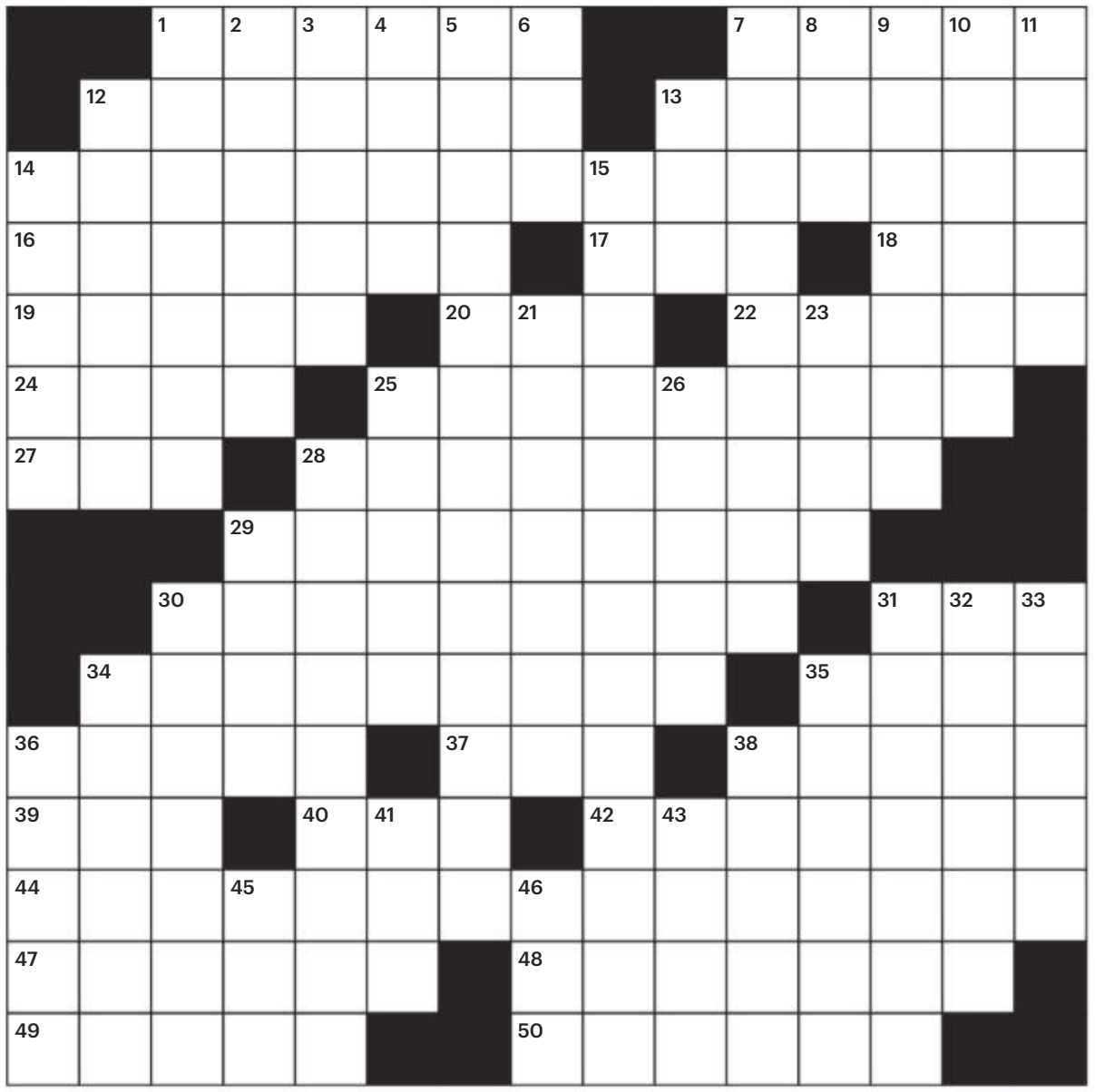
DONATE NOW AT CITYHARVEST.ORG

PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY NATAN LAST



ACROSS

1 Breed seen on bags of Cesar dog food, for short

7 Squeeze into a ball

12 Widely inclusive

13 "___ Iguana" (Bobby McFerrin song)

14 First African American to win the Scripps National Spelling Bee

16 Active stratovolcano situated mere miles from Peru's second most populous city, Arequipa

17 Jethro Tull front man Anderson

18 Rio maker

19 Trudge through ankle-deep water, say

20 Situation Room grp.

22 Johnson Sirleaf who won a Nobel Peace Prize during her time as the President of Liberia

24 Lug

25 Brunch order

27 ___ for peace

28 Fits together nicely

29 2021 film starring Billy Crystal and Tiffany Haddish

30 Guys on the take?

31 "Miracle Workers" network

34 Piece of climbing equipment

35 Like everything one guard says, in a classic riddle

36 Smiley smile, for short

37 Kim ___-hyung, a.k.a. V of the K-pop group BTS

38 Captain von Trapp's given name

39 Transgress

40 *El Nuevo* ___ (Puerto Rican newspaper)

42 Bakin' strip?

44 Film character whose midi-chlorian count is more than twenty thousand

47 Eager

48 Snaps

49 Lit, for fun

50 They might get whacked

DOWN

1 Gaming device with an accelerometer

2 French church

3 Drug-sniffing dog's discovery

4 Nipple

5 Buzz saw?

6 Text to a friend who's late, perhaps

7 Like the classic Bugs Bunny cartoon "What's Opera, Doc?"

8 De Armas who is slated to play Marilyn Monroe in the forthcoming film "Blonde"

9 "It ___, (tinct, tint) all this our funnaminal world": "Finnegans Wake"

10 Briefs, in brief

11 Joyful hymn

12 Cat played by Jane Fonda

13 L.I.R.R. overseer

14 Mulled-wine ingredients

15 It's said while shaking

21 "Má Vlast" composer

23 Plant that's toxic to cats

25 Mountain in Deuteronomy

26 Soundboard component

28 No walk in the park

29 Fabled also-ran

30 Tuscan city famed for its marble

31 Triumvirates

32 Insulted

33 "Old Time Rock & Roll" rocker

34 Lustful

35 "Spill the tea!"

36 "Three ___" (Paul Cézanne still-life)

38 Grind

41 Dutch financial giant

43 Floors

45 Blood

46 Grp. in Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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

kamikoto / 神箏

Japanese Honshu 日本製 鋼 Steel

A Thousand Years of Craftsmanship.

Exclusive Offer For Readers

- Kamikoto Kanpeki Japanese steel knife set (would-be-retail price of $1,295)
- The 1000/3000 Kamikoto Toishi whetstone (sold individually for $210)

Together for just $255 with free shipping.

Offer is only valid for readers of this issue.

Only available at

Kamikoto.com/Readers

SCAN FOR OFFER

TOWARDS A DREAM

LOUIS VUITTON