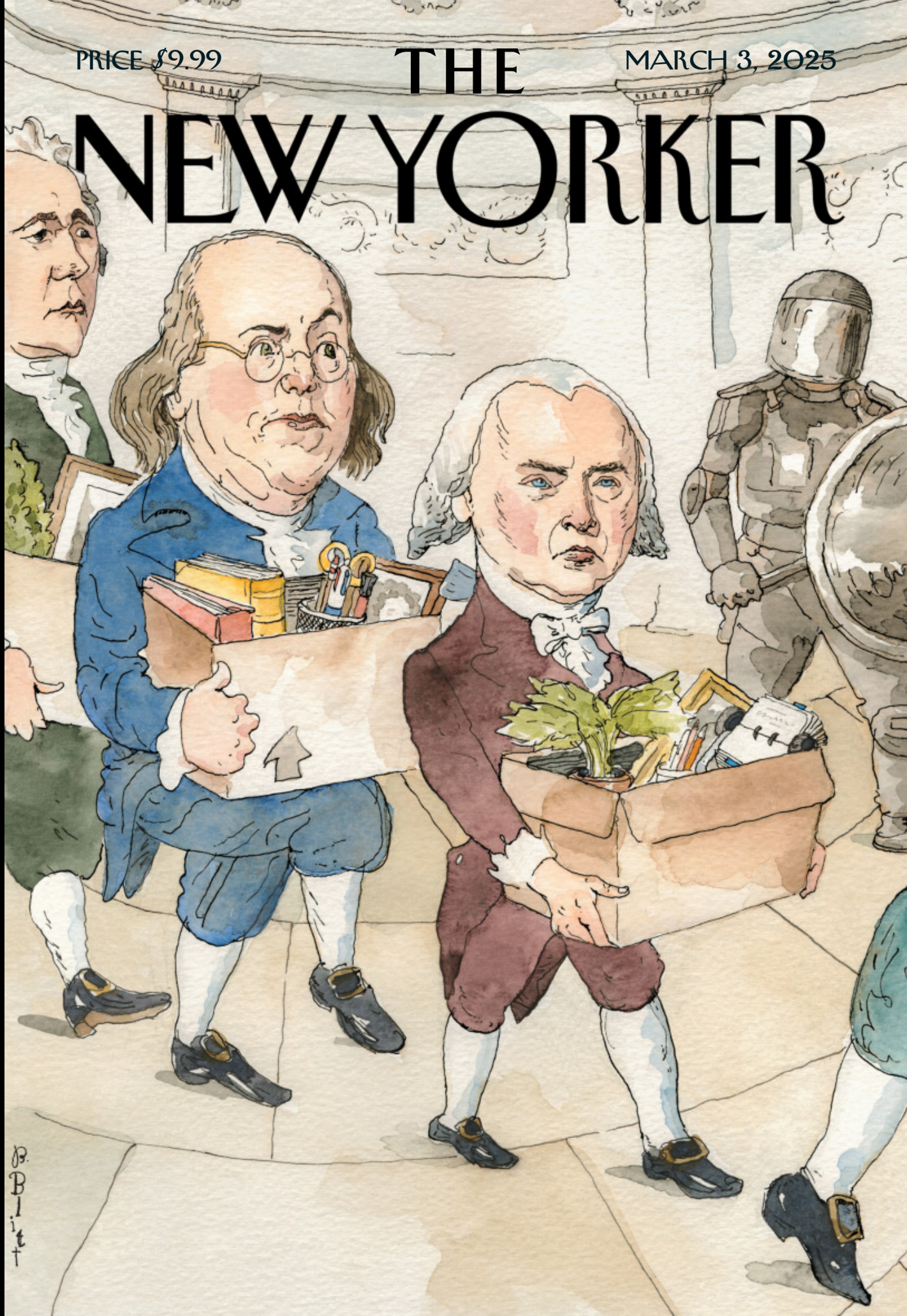
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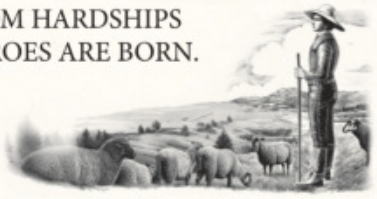
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Danielle Legros Georges (*Poem, p. 58*), who died in February, was a poet and a translator whose books include "Three Leaves, Three Roots: Poems on the Haiti-Congo Story" and "Blue Flare," a volume of translated Haitian poetry.

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ARIEL DAVIS

THE MAIL

CUTTING ROOM

Michael Schulman's piece about Charlotte Zwerin was an important reminder of the overlooked role of women editors in the history of film ("Charlotte's Place," January 27th). The first great documentary, Dziga Vertov's silent city-symphony "Man with a Movie Camera" (1929), slyly undercuts its title—and its male director—by observing the painstaking labor of its editor, Elizaveta Svilova, Vertov's wife. She is shown whirring through the reels, cutting out celluloid strips of scenes, and placing them on a light box to figure out how to rearrange them. The camera stops, as if in thrall to her, and lingers over a few frames, before the image comes to life again.

Brian Gibson
Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia

In 1989, I attended the première of Zwerin's "Thelonious Monk: Straight, No Chaser," at the New York Film Festival, with my late husband, the filmmaker Christian Blackwood. As Schulman mentions, Zwerin's film was edited from fourteen hours of footage taken, in the late sixties, for a German TV special that Christian and his brother Michael had produced. Christian, a gifted cinematographer and documentary director, had followed Monk at home and on tour in Europe for more than six months. As I sat in the audience that night, watching Charlotte's brilliant edit of Christian's footage, I could not understand why Christian wasn't given a co-director credit. Although Zwerin was overshadowed by the Maysleses, at least they gave her credit where credit was due.

Carolyn Marks Blackwood
Staatsburg, N.Y.

REMEMBERING WEMBLEY

Ian Parker's Profile of the architect Norman Foster reminded me of growing up as a soccer-mad boy in London ("The Master Builder," January 27th). Whenever I took the Tube to my school, there was a thrilling moment when the two white towers of the old Wembley Stadium came into view. For British sports fans, the iconic towers of "the cathedral of football" were as beloved as Fenway Park's Green Monster or the ivy-covered walls of Wrigley Field. The stadium needed to be updated, but the towers could have been incorporated into a new structure. Instead, Foster, who purportedly regarded them as "dead space," tore them down. The new stadium is functionally adequate, but it is just one more example of an architectural establishment that chases after innovation at the expense of local communities.

Bernard N. Howard
Birmingham, Ala.

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Gary Shteyngart equates Canadians with capybaras when discussing his devotion to the animals, but he could have pursued the Canadian connection further ("Capybara, Mon Cœur," February 3rd). In May, 2016, two capybaras escaped from Toronto's High Park Zoo; dubbed Bonnie and Clyde, they spent several weeks on the lam in High Park, sometimes frolicking within plain sight while eluding capture, even by a Brazilian capybara wrangler. Many Canadians went from not knowing that such critters existed to becoming capybara-crazy. Months later, back behind bars at the zoo (where they still live as star attractions), Bonnie and Clyde became parents to three "capybabies," a term coined by Toronto's then mayor, John Tory. Tens of thousands of Canadians participated in a contest to name them, resulting in Alex, Geddy, and Neil, after the members of the beloved Canadian rock band Rush. Bonnie and Clyde's saga appealed to the Canadian predilection for rooting for the little guy, central to our sense of national identity.

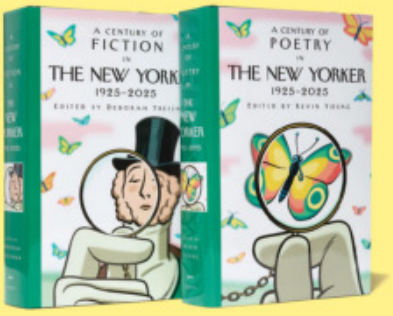
Christine Sharp
Aylesford, Nova Scotia

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GOINGS ON

FEBRUARY 26 – MARCH 4, 2025

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

The opera "Moby-Dick," adapted from Herman Melville's 1851 novel, with music by Jake Heggie, a libretto by Gene Scheer, and direction by Lenny Foglia, premièred in 2010; now at the Metropolitan Opera (March 3-29), the production reaches new heights, with sailors climbing masts and ropes that extend up to the rafters. The principal vocalists—including the tenor Stephen Costello, as Greenhorn (the stand-in for Ishmael), and Brandon Jovanovich (pictured), as Captain Ahab—and a robust chorus are bolstered by the Met's orchestra. Will the famous whale continue to elude the audience as it has Ahab? "We may see a little bit more of it this time," Foglia hinted, coyly.—*Jane Bua*



ZENITH RICHARDS / COURTESY MET OPERA

ABOUT TOWN

INDIE ROCK | As **Father John Misty**, the singer and multi-instrumentalist Josh Tillman stages albums as little psychodramas. Since his brief stint with the band Fleet Foxes, Tillman has built out existential concept records that span folk, big-band jazz, soft rock, and indie pop, with a satirist's eye for the disturbingly absurd. His sophomore record, "I Love You, Honeybear," which turned ten this month, was a breathtaking and baroque deconstruction of self, but subsequent releases have looked outward (and skyward), considering nihilism, celebrity, mortality, divinity, and their intersections. On his album from last year, "Mahashmashana," which takes its title from a Sanskrit word for the cremation pit, he riffs on the idea of the place where the universe dies and is reborn, continuing a probing journey toward spiritual revelation.—*Sheldon Pearce (Beacon Theatre; Feb. 26.)*

OFF BROADWAY | Hal (Elijah Jones), the young protagonist of Dakin Matthews's **"Henry IV"**—an amalgamation of Shakespeare's "Henry IV, Part 1" and "Part 2"—lives so dissolutely that his father (Matthews), the king of England, openly wishes his son had been switched at birth with the spitfire soldier Hotspur (James Udom). Yet Hal's shenanigans, pursued in the company of Sir John Falstaff (Jay O. Sanders), that poor man's bon vivant, mask aspirations of greatness. Likewise, this production meets the eye humbly, no more than a small stage with two chairs. Then, largely through the force of its language—wisely foregrounded by the director, Eric Tucker, and vivified by a cast with several standouts, including Udom and Sanders—it grows to encompass a murmuring woods, a raucous pub, and the rocky, sometimes treacherous terrain of personal ambition.—*Dan Stahl (Polonsky Shakespeare Center; through March 2.)*

ART | In **Paul Mpagi Sepuya's** elegant new show, "TRANCE," there are two pictures redolent of nineteenth-century spirit photography (which purported to record the departed). In them we see hands hovering near a translucent crystal ball that transfix, in part because Sepuya lets them rest in the scale that suits the intimacy of the spirit within. For years now, the forty-two-year-old artist has included a silver globe in his large-scale color photographs, and it's back again here, sometimes representing the act of seeing itself. Taking the studio as a big theme, Sepuya uses photography to describe what Matisse tried to get at in his "Red Studio" (1911): the question of what is the artist's home? A place of rest, or repose? And without the artist in the picture, what does it tell us about his spirit? Sepuya's studio is a queer space, affording him the "trance" of artistic creation, maybe with a little trance music in the background; each photograph brings about a heightened consciousness.—*Hilton Als (Bortolami; through March 1.)*

OFF BROADWAY | Bess Wohl's deft, discursive memory play **"Liberation,"** directed by Whitney White, mainly takes place in the nineteen-seventies, in an Ohio rec center, during the weekly meeting of a consciousness-raising group. Struggles abound: Lizzie (Susannah Flood) worries she's insufficiently radical; Margie (Betsy Aidem) regrets her marriage; Celeste (Kristolyn Lloyd) compartmentalizes her emotions. (They almost all hate their bodies, then strip in a liberatory scene.) Wohl, seemingly using Flood as her avatar, tells us she's simultaneously paying tribute to her mother—the real Lizzie—and grieving feminist progress itself. Wohl admits her own limitations (particularly on matters of race), and doesn't offer explicit solutions. The play implies one, though: every scene shows the women gathering, week by week, in person, as the work of solidarity moves over and through them.—*Helen Shaw (Laura Pels; through March 30.)*

DANCE | The annual **Flamenco Festival** returns to City Center with a strong lineup of familiar artists spread across three productions. "Alter Ego" is a two-hander for Alfonso Losa and Patricia Guerrero. He's polished, she's playful; what happens when they get together? "Muerta de Amor" is the latest from Manuel Liñán, whose signature cross-dressing is just the most obvious sign of his open imagination. He's backed by men in black in an exploration of desire and its absence. The closer is reserved for the august Eva Yerbabuena, still a wonder. Her "Yerbagüena (Oscuro Brillante)" is built around contrasts combined, like the "bright darkness" of the subtitle, or the traditional and the avant-garde.—*Brian Seibert (City Center; March 6-9.)*

MOVIES | For her first feature, **"L'Homme-Vertige: Tales of a City,"** the Guadeloupian filmmaker Malaury Eloi Paisley returns, after years abroad, to her home town of Pointe-à-Pitre and interviews a few fascinating but troubled residents. Among them are Eddy, an energetic rapper who's addicted to crack; Ti Chal, a former revolutionary activist who, long ago, met Fidel Castro, and now lives in a retirement home while battling cancer; a grizzled and taciturn poet named Eric; and Priscilla, a young woman who lives in a housing project that's being demolished. In poised and probing images of the cityscape in decay, Paisley conveys the participants' grandeur amid ruins. Above all, she reveals a state of mind—people frozen in time by the cold and distant grip of metropolitan France on their lives and their history.—*Richard Brody (BAM Cinemas; March 1.)*



TABLES FOR TWO

L&L Hawaiian Barbecue
201 Allen St.

There's something ritualistically precise about the Hawaiian plate lunch. A scoop of pale macaroni salad, almost quietly radical in its steadfast, defiant plainness, nestles next to two scoops of white rice (it must be two, never three, never one). The rice serves as both a foundation and a mediator, bridging the creamy blandness of the pasta salad with the blunt-instrument intensity of the plate lunch's third and central component, one kind or another of salty, savory meat.

The plate lunch's origins lie in the colonial plantations of the late nineteenth century, when agricultural workers—Indigenous Hawaiians and people brought in from Japan, China, the Philippines, and elsewhere—broke at midday for easy, cheap meals of rice packed up with leftovers. As Hawaii's economy shifted, so did lunch: ersatz food carts sprang up, serving Japanese katsu, Chinese char siu, Filipino adobo, along with rice and macaroni salad, bland and mayonnaise-y, the indelible influence of the American mainland. The soul of the plate lunch remains unchanged: caloric and rib-sticking, elevated, through the decades, to something approximating an icon.

L&L Hawaiian Barbecue began in Honolulu in 1976. After blanketing Hawaii's islands with some forty-nine shops by 1999, the company's founder, Eddie Flores, Jr., and his business partner expanded to the mainland; New York got an L&L in 2004 and lost it about a decade later. At last, L&L is back, now run by the franchisees Henry and Sephra Engel, siblings from Oahu, with branches on Allen Street, East Harlem, and, soon, Bushwick. L&L is a mid-tier fast-food chain and looks every inch of it. As on most fast-food menus, what appear to be a vast number of options are actually just a few core elements, remixed: teriyaki-marinated chicken thighs; kalua pork, pulled with just a hint of smoke; salty-sweet beef ribs cut kalbi-style, crosswise against the bones; big, meaty shrimp tossed in a gorgeously garlicky sauce.

L&L's food hits with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer, and that's precisely the point. There are leavening notes: a jazzy sliver of cruciferousness from the cabbage that comes with the kalua pork, or the sharp whistle of vinegar that runs through the thin, sweet sauce drizzled over the juicy, panko-crisped chicken katsu (my clear favorite of the proteins). Get a musubi or two, which is marvellous, the squishy pillow of rice, the ineffable Spamminess of Spam, the sweet smear of teriyaki. With the exception of the loco moco (hamburger patties doused in flavorless gravy and topped with fried eggs), the plate lunch doesn't miss—even the macaroni salad, in its plain, soothing simplicity, is exactly right—it's a big, brawny meal to fuel a hard day's work, or a long afternoon's nap. The portions are enormous, the prices reasonable, the flavors straightforward: salt, fat, acid, meat. *($6.75–$19.75.)*

—Helen Rosner



ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

The Penny Lane Is Back

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Cameron Crowe's "Almost Famous," the director's stylish semi-autobiographical film about an aspiring teen-age music critic in the nineteen-seventies who goes on tour with a sybaritic rock band. The film remains beloved for many reasons—including Philip Seymour Hoffman's perfect performance as the unsparing critic Lester Bangs, who dishes out the indelible advice that "The only true currency in this bankrupt world is what you share with someone else when you're uncool"—but chief among them may be the louche, bohemian costumes, designed by Betsy Heimann. Perhaps the film's most iconic piece is a long, green suède coat with an oversized white shearling collar and matching cuffs worn by Kate Hudson, as the ingénue Penny Lane, a free-spirited moppet who follows the band around but insists she is not a groupie. (She prefers the term "band aide.") Heimann later admitted that she cut up an Urban Outfitters shag rug to make the coat's furry trimmings. What began as a unique D.I.Y. project has spawned many riffs—and has come roaring back into fashion. The **"Penny Lane coat"** seems to be newly everywhere this season; Dua Lipa recently stepped out in a Bottega Veneta burgundy-leather version, Bella Hadid was spotted wearing a tawny suède-and-shearling coat by Anna Sui this winter, and, over Super Bowl weekend, Taylor Swift swanned around New Orleans in a fluff-lined number by **Charlotte Simone,** a London-based outerwear designer whose vintage-inspired faux-fur pieces have become highly coveted owing to the fact that Simone releases just three limited drops per year. The next Simone drop, which will last only one week online, is on March 26—but, if you can't wait, you can find plenty of authentic, pre-owned Penny Lane coats on Etsy and eBay. Nothing is more rock and roll, after all, than the real thing.—*Rachel Syme*



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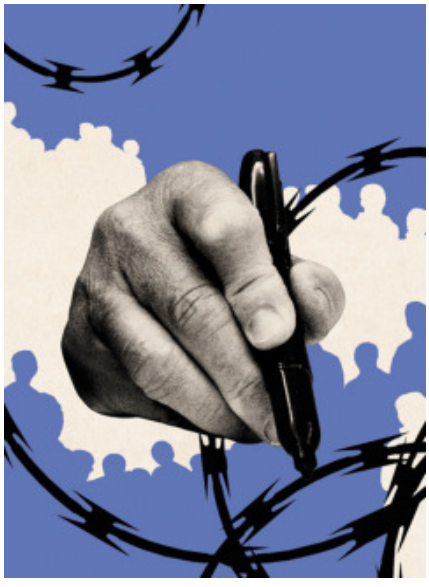
COMMENT
ABOUT-FACE

The military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, has long occupied a blighted corner of the American legal system. Multiple Administrations have tried, and failed, to close the facility, which opened in 2002 and at one point held nearly eight hundred terrorism suspects, commonly called "the worst of the worst" because of their purported ties to the attacks of 9/11. Many of them spent at least a decade there without facing actual charges or having a trial. All but fifteen had finally been released or transferred when, earlier this month, Donald Trump added a fresh indignity to Guantánamo's dark history.

Over several days, beginning on February 4th, the government sent a hundred and seventy-eight Venezuelan migrants apprehended on U.S. soil to the site. They were held incommunicado; a hundred and twenty-seven of them were in Camp 6, which was once reserved for alleged Al Qaeda combatants. On February 12th, four legal groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union, filed a lawsuit on behalf of three of the Venezuelans. "Remarkably," the emergency motion noted, "these detainees now have less access to counsel than the military detainees at Guantánamo who have been held under the laws of war in the aftermath of September 11." This past Thursday, before a judge could issue a ruling, the Trump Administration announced that it had deported nearly all the Venezuelans to an airbase in Honduras. From there, they would be flown back to Venezuela.

The episode featured all the elements of the new political order. Migrants were villainized and treated like an existential threat to the country. There was not even a semblance of transparency or accountability. Amid the chaos, it was easy to overlook the fact that the Venezuelans were being returned to a brutal dictatorship; in 2022, Marco Rubio, Trump's Secretary of State, said that deporting people there was "a very real death sentence."

Guantánamo provided the ideal stage for Trump's brand of political theatre. His "mass deportation" agenda is premised on the idea that all undocumented immigrants are criminals, and that any differences in the labels used to describe them—whether gang members, terrorists, or, to quote Kristi Noem, the Secretary of Homeland Security, "dirtbags"—are merely semantic. "Some of them are so bad we don't even trust the countries to hold them, because we don't want them coming back," Trump said of the Venezuelans sent to Guantánamo. He offered no evidence. Neither did Noem, who said that they were "mainly child pedophiles" who were "trafficking children, trafficking drugs."



But, owing to the work of journalists and lawyers, information slowly trickled out about the detainees. Then, on Thursday, the government acknowledged that more than fifty of them had no criminal record apart from entering the country unlawfully. One was an asylum seeker who had passed his preliminary screening, but had lost his case while representing himself before an immigration judge. His sister learned that he was in Guantánamo when the Trump Administration posted photos of the first migrants arriving there.

The abruptness of their removal from the facility, however, shouldn't be mistaken for a broader lack of planning. Trump wants to systematically expand the role of the military in his immigration crackdown. Usually, deportations are carried out by planes chartered by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which can accommodate about a hundred and fifty passengers. But the Administration has taken to using military aircraft. These planes are smaller, carrying roughly eighty people, and, as a Reuters analysis pointed out, the cost per person can be more than five times that of a first-class ticket on a commercial airline. Late last month, Trump signed a memorandum with the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security authorizing the transfer of thirty thousand migrants to Guantánamo. The plan continues apace. In a

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY

court filing, an ICE official said that the base "will temporarily house aliens before they are removed," and that doing so is "necessary to complete the ongoing removal operations." Meanwhile, according to the *Times*, the Administration is making preparations to hold thousands of undocumented immigrants at military sites across the U.S.

There are many logistical impediments to Trump's agenda. One is tied to foreign policy. Planes need a place to land, and many countries, including Venezuela, have typically refused to receive deportees. The government claims that Guantánamo helps it address this challenge. But, at the end of January, Nicolás Maduro, the Venezuelan leader, agreed to start accepting deportation flights. Other countries, including Panama, are now receiving migrants from around the world deported by the U.S. Given all that, sending the detainees to Guantánamo seems more like a public-relations stunt than like an operational decision.

Trump, on his first day in office, signed a dozen immigration-related executive orders, in which he described global mass migration as a form of "invasion." According to one order, the military has a "well-established role" in repelling "unlawful forays by foreign nationals." Another invokes the Alien Enemies Act, a remnant of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which could allow the Administration to detain and deport immigrants, including those who are here lawfully, if they were born in countries that it considers hostile to the U.S. That order defines a Venezuelan gang called Tren de Aragua, Mexican cartels, and the Central American street gang MS-13 as "foreign terrorist organizations." During Trump's first term, when the majority of migrants at the border were Central Americans, he turned MS-13 into a byword for migrant crime. Now that Venezuelans are the most visible group, he is focussing on Tren de Aragua. The gang is real, but the gambit is to make it seem as though any Venezuelan in the country might be a member.

The only way to counteract such maneuvers is to call them out—something that the Democrats have yet to do. The President spoke publicly about the Guantánamo plan at a press conference where he signed the first law of his second term: the Laken Riley Act, named for a Georgia nursing student murdered by an undocumented Venezuelan immigrant last year. The law, which requires the detention of any undocumented person charged with a misdemeanor, such as shoplifting or minor theft, passed with bipartisan votes. Congressional Democrats and their staffs say privately that, on immigration issues, the voters "have spoken." Trump's promise to execute mass deportations may have helped him win, but it's one thing for Americans to support a slogan and quite another for them to face up to the human consequences. If Democrats don't look away, maybe the public won't, either.

—Jonathan Blitzer

AWARDS SEASON UPDATE
LOST AND FOUND



The fresh batch of Oscar statuettes that will be handed out in Hollywood this weekend are actually New York natives—cast in bronze and electroplated in gold at a Hudson Valley foundry called Urban Art Projects. Meanwhile, in Brooklyn, another august award, only six years younger than the Academy's, is being raised from the dead. The New York Drama Critics' Circle was founded in 1935, by a fractious group of theatre critics who were outraged over the Pulitzer board's selections, particularly its snub of the playwright Maxwell Anderson. The next year, the Circle gave its inaugural award for Best American Play to Anderson, for his verse drama "Winterset." The prize was a nickel-bronze plaque with an intricate relief depicting a 1790 performance of "The Contrast," the first American comedy staged by a professional troupe, framed by the billowing curtains of the John Street Theatre, in lower Manhattan.

In the nineteen-forties, in support of the war effort, the Circle announced that the prize would be cast in plaster instead of metal. Along the way, the matrix for the plaque went missing. Brooks Atkinson, the Circle's founding president, later wrote that "the first thing a drama critic has to do when he applies for admission to heaven is to convince St. Peter that he is not personally responsible." For decades, the group handed out paper scrolls. Its current president, the Time Out critic Adam Feldman, used to print them at Kinko's. But "it's a prestigious old award, and it deserves to be something more substantial," he said.

Feldman became president in 2005, and, when he discovered a photo of the original plaque, he went on a hunt. He tried Anderson's archives—no luck. Then, in 2009, he got an e-mail from Caroline Hannah, a design historian at Bard who was writing her dissertation on Henry Varnum Poor, the artist who designed the plaque, and was seeking more information about it. "I told her that I had looked for it, but I hadn't had any success," Feldman recalled. In 2023, Hannah contacted him again: the John Steinbeck estate was having an auction at Bonhams, and the items included the plaque he'd won in 1938, for the stage version of "Of Mice and Men." Feldman nabbed it for three grand.

"I wanted to 'Jurassic Park' this," Feldman said the other day, at his West Village apartment. He took the subway to Greenpoint, where he was meeting Hannah and the sculptor Anna Poor, the artist's granddaughter. (They're distantly related to the Standard & Poor's Poors,



Bill Makky

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

but "we didn't get any of the money," Anna said. "We were the artist Poors.") They convened at Bedi-Makky Art Foundry, whose steward, a stout, kindly man named Bill Makky, had agreed to reproduce the plaque in bronze. The century-old workshop occupies a brick building surrounded by auto shops, with cinder-block walls covered in antique tools. On one table was a giant human arm, part of a monument of Father Capodanno bound for Staten Island; in back was a plaster mold of the head of Martin Luther King, Jr., for a bust that sits in the Oval Office. The foundry is also responsible for the Iwo Jima memorial, the Wall Street bull ("I made eight of them," Makky said), and his weirdest job, "an eighteen-to-twenty-inch bronze dildo, for Madonna."

The Steinbeck plaque was face up in a metal contraption called a casting flask. Makky was using a method known as French-sand casting, which he'd determined was used for the original plaque—possibly at the very same foundry. (The Oscars are now made with 3-D printing and lost-wax casting.) In the corner, he had a vat of silty brown sand from a French riverbed, which the foundry has used and reused for a hundred years. First, he dusted the plaque with talcum powder, then sprinkled on fine sand with a sieve. He layered it with more sand, until it looked like a chocolate sheet cake. "A lot of what I do is almost like cooking," he said, as he patted the sand down with a mallet.

"This is the moment of truth," Makky announced, carefully lifting the sand mold from the plaque: a perfect negative.

"Beautiful," Poor said, gasping. Makky would make at least ten molds off the Steinbeck plaque, then cook them in a kiln at a thousand degrees, pour in molten nickel bronze, break the molds off, and water down the sand for reuse. Come spring, the Circle will award a playwright a metal plaque for the first time in eight decades. "It's a thrill to see it rejuvenated," Poor said, of her grandfather's creation.

Makky learned his trade from his father, a Hungarian immigrant, and is teaching it to his three sons. But the foundry, among the last of its kind, may not survive. Makky can't afford to buy out his sister, so he's planning to sell the foundry, perhaps as soon as this spring. "This place is going to be bulldozed," he predicted. Some things, once they're gone, can't be resurrected.

—Michael Schulman

WHERE THE TIME GOES DEPT.

TURN, TURN, TURN



In March, Judy Collins, the ethereal, blue-eyed folksinging legend, will celebrate her eighty-fifth birthday with a concert at Town Hall and the release of a book. "I tell people that I'm eighty-five and it's the new twenty-seven," Collins said on a recent morning. Her hair is now short and white, her vibe eternally beatific. She showed a visitor around her sunny, colorful, maximalist Upper West Side apartment, where she has lived for fifty-five years, full of evidence of a robust and Zelig-like life. In a hallway, a photograph of Collins on the set of "Sesame Street," with the Muppets ("I sang an aria with Snuffleupagus"), and gold and platinum records, framed; in the dining room, an Al Hirschfeld portrait of Collins in "Peer Gynt" at the Delacorte, in 1969, wide-eyed and looming over Stacy Keach. "I played the long-suffering Solveig," she said. "The songs were by John Morris, who wrote music for Mel Brooks movies, like 'Blazing Saddles.'" A recent note from her friend Bill Clinton sat on a table; Collins performed at his inaugural gala in 1993. Once, while staying at the White House, Collins knocked her travel-coffee setup off the bathroom sink. "There I was in the middle of the night, cleaning up coffee grounds in the Lincoln Bedroom," she said. "In the morning, they brought me the most wonderful coffee."

She glided past a sculpture of the Buddha topped with a Viking helmet and proceeded into a splendiferous living room: a mint-green floral diptych, beautifully eerie Walton Ford bird paintings, plants and Tiffany lamps galore, couches piled with needlepoint pillows ("TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING IS WONDERFUL"). Two Persian cats exuded fluffy gravitas. "The white one is Tom Wolfe, and Rachmaninoff is hovering somewhere," Collins said. She bent to stroke Tom Wolfe's head, then sat on a couch and talked about her new book. She has written several, including a memoir, "Sweet Judy Blue Eyes," from 2011, named for the Stephen Stills song about her. (A guitar that Stills gave her in 1968 was propped against a wall.) The new book is a collection of poetry. "I have always tried to write poetry because I can try to turn it into songs," Collins said. "In 2016, I said to my husband, 'I'm going to write ninety poems in ninety days.' And he



"Maybe let's get your misplaced car keys at the end."

said, 'Why don't you write three hundred and sixty-five poems for the year, and then you'll have a whole book at the end?' Well, he was right, and that book is 'Sometimes It's Heaven.'"

"I got hooked with songwriting because Leonard Cohen said to me, in 1966, 'I don't know why you're not writing songs,'" she continued. "So I went home, and I wrote a song called 'Since You've Asked.' And it took me forty minutes. That's how they hook you. And then the next song took about five years." Collins and Cohen had a symbiotic artistic friendship. "Leonard Cohen was one of those rare people in the world who is actually grateful when you make him famous," she said. They met through their mutual friend Mary Martin. ("Not the one who flies.")



Judy Collins

"All of Leonard's friends, a lot of them women, were just wild about Leonard," Collins said. "They thought he was the smartest person they'd ever known. Mary was working for Warner Bros., and also for Bob Dylan's manager, and she and I and Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner used to hang out in the Village together. Mary would talk about Leonard in a kind of disgusted way—'He's so brilliant, and he's really going nowhere.' And I said, 'Why is that?' And she said, 'Because he writes these obscure poems.'" In 1966, Martin told Collins that Cohen wanted to meet her and play her his new songs. He came over, and, Collins recalled, "he said to me, 'I can't play the guitar, and I don't know if this is a song, and I can't sing.' Then he played me 'Suzanne.'" She told him that it was a song, and that she was recording it the next day. Her version was a hit. Later, she encouraged Cohen to sing, and he encouraged her to write.

Collins's husband, Louis Nelson, died suddenly, in December, of cancer; the Buddha in the helmet is for him. "I call him my Viking angel," Collins said. "He designed the Korean War memorial on the Mall. He was a brilliant designer, a brilliant man, a great partner for forty-six years." It was a season of striking loss. Within a few weeks, Collins also lost her brother, her friend Marshall Brickman, and her friend and fellow-folk-singer Peter Yarrow. "It was like a mass exodus," she said. "Here comes Gabriel with his horn! Get ready." In 1992, she lost her son to suicide, and Joan Rivers, empathizing, called with advice: "She said, 'I know that you'll want to cancel everything, and you can't do that, because if you cancel you're not going to get over this.'" A few days later, Collins played a show in Palm Springs. "It absolutely works," she said. "You have to be focussed. You have to be present. The work is healing, and being at a certain place at a certain time."

Collins seems youthful, despite everything. "As long as I can keep my bones," she said. "I gave up skiing, which I hate, but I can't afford a fall." What about cross-country skiing? "No! I like the thrill of the snowstorm and all the pine trees being filled with snow and me in the middle of it all, just racing down a hill. That's what I want. I don't want the other stuff."

—Sarah Larson

GEORGIA POSTCARD
DR. WATERFALL



What is a waterfall, exactly? "It can be controversial," Mark Oleg Ozboyd said the other day, in Rabun County, Georgia. "There are fifty different answers." Ozboyd leans conservative when it comes to applying the designation. "A random cascade out in the woods is not a waterfall," he said. "Neither is a little white water. Personally, I think it needs a ten-foot sheer vertical drop. If it's more gradual, it should be at least twenty feet high." He went on, "There are people, like my dad, who think a waterfall has to be thirty feet high. I disagree there, but I see where he's coming from."

Ozboyd is a waterfall wunderkind who has been chronicling waterfalls in Georgia since he was a homeschooled teen. At thirteen, he started a hiking blog. At seventeen, he compiled the Georgia Waterfall Database, which lists every qualifying cataract, and, soon afterward, began researching a book that he recently published. (He is now twenty-three.) "Waterfalls of Georgia" makes the case, Ozboyd said, "that Georgia is just as impressive a waterfall state as Pennsylvania, and not far off from North Carolina and New York. We'll never be Hawaii or Washington, of course." He added, "But Georgia should be known for its waterfalls, too."

The book, full of Ozboyd's splashy photography and descriptions, identifies seven hundred and thirty-five waterfalls across the Peach State, fourteen of which were "undocumented"—a more precise term than "undiscovered"—before he arrived. (Hunters and fishermen may have encountered them first.) The waterfaller's tools: obscure blogs, Google Earth, lidar data ("a topographic map on steroids"), and hundreds of hikes with his dad, a chess master and accordion teacher from Belarus. Ozboyd also benefitted from the legwork of several other Georgia-waterfall mavens, including a physicist in his late eighties, a manager at a Publix grocery store, and a charismatic Christian pastor who says "Praise the Lord" every time he sees falling water. "He always chooses the craziest names," Ozboyd said, of the pastor. "Like, 'Breath Away Falls.'" Thanks to technology, Ozboyd added, "this is a golden age for waterfall discovery and documentation."

Last year, a friend dubbed Ozboyd "Dr. Waterfall." The doctor has a few advantages: he's not allergic to poison ivy, and he likes driving. It took about fifteen thousand miles in his truck and another fifteen hundred miles on foot to reach all the falls. He created an Excel sheet noting ratings for hiking difficulty and waterfall beauty. He said, "The beauty ratings were harder to come up with than the difficulty ratings. I decided, I'll have

a few tens and a few fours." Among the tens: Angelica Falls, in Rabun County, which he was the first to document. He named it after his mother.

On a recent Sunday, Dr. Waterfall, who is tall and bespectacled, took a few students bushwhacking to Cliff Creek Falls (beauty: nine; difficulty: eight), one of his finds, a hundred miles northeast of Atlanta. He invited along Ken Steinkamp, a customer-service manager at a steel company who moonlights as a waterfaller. "I think I've been to around a hundred," Steinkamp said. He met Ozboyd through a waterfalling Facebook group. "I didn't know how old he was at first," Steinkamp, who is forty-three, admitted. "I was reading his stuff, showing it to my wife, like, 'Wow, this guy is good.' Then I found out he was fourteen."

Steinkamp recalled one of their earliest adventures. "We dropped over the side of the highway railing," he said. "People are driving by, probably thinking, like, What are these guys doing? We just disappeared." "That was Spoilcane Falls," Ozboyd remembered. "Beauty rating six, I think. Difficulty nine." Steinkamp's childhood, in Indiana, was basically waterfall-free.

The group trudged down a leaf-covered drainage, through oaks and pines, some of which had been toppled by Hurricane Helene, stopping to examine a possum skull. After a while, they arrived at a steep but manageable drop-off. Ozboyd was navigating from memory. "Moving through an off-trail landscape is like a chess game," he said. "You have to know your next move."

The waterfallers plunged downward. Eventually, they found the waterfall, whose essential waterfallness was clear. It made two nearly ninety-degree chuted turns, dropping forty feet into an emerald pool surrounded by rhododendrons and gneiss cliffs flecked with quartz. "Cliffs make any waterfall more interesting," Ozboyd said. He rock-hopped around one side of the falls, climbed a hill, and disappeared into a damp-looking grotto. A companion pulled himself up the slippery rocks along the flank of the falls until he felt its spray. He took a deep breath. There was a technical term for what he was doing, Ozboyd told him, emerging from the cave: "You are being one with the waterfall."

—Charles Bethea

SKETCHPAD BY IVAN EHLERS
BILLIONAIRE MERIT BADGES



ANNALS OF THE SEA

THE SUNKEN PLACE

What secrets lie in the holds of slave ships?

BY JULIAN LUCAS



On the way down I saw nothing. The water was a blur of teal fringed with rusty shadows, darkening, about twenty feet below, to a sickly emerald. I followed a rope strung between a buoy and a stake in the seabed, pausing occasionally to pinch my nose and adjust my sinuses to the pressure. Just beyond the thermocline, where the temperature abruptly drops, a hand emerged from the murk and grabbed me by the wrist, dragging me the last few inches to the bottom. The silt was as soft as tapioca pudding. It swallowed my hand, then my arm and shoulder; the deeper I pushed, the more I suspected that it might go on forever. Finally, I touched wood, feeling a chill colder than the water's as I ran my fingertips over the grooves and splinters of submerged planks. This was the slave ship Camargo, which carried five hundred souls across the Atlantic before it burned.

It was the sixth of November, and I was diving with a group of maritime archeologists in Angra dos Reis. A verdant bay three hours from Rio de Janeiro, it's a kind of Brazilian Hamptons, where yachts fill the marinas and *Vogue* once sponsored a party for New Year's Eve. But in the nineteenth century it was mostly plantations—sugarcane near the water and coffee just beyond the jagged mountains that ring the area like snaggleteeth. They thrust up around me as I resurfaced, pressing a button to inflate my scuba kit's buoyancy-control device. The researcher who'd guided me to the wreck showed me the soot under our fingernails. Then we swam back to the dive boat, a creaky, flat-bottomed rental whose Portuguese name meant "With Jesus I Will Win."

On board, preparations were under way to disinter the Camargo, a two-masted brig that sank in 1852. A storm had buried the ship shortly after its discovery the previous December; now it was time to clear away the mud. Divers had spent the morning setting out buoys, running submarine guidelines, and surveying the site, working creatively with modest tools. Two men assembled a dredge from a PVC pipe and a household grease trap. Another hailed a nearby megayacht to borrow its "sub-bottom profiler," a costly sonar device that exposes buried features. "We're using the rich," he said. "It's reparations."

Ten years ago, not one ship that sank in the Middle Passage had ever been identified. The African diaspora's watery cradle was an archeological blank, as though the sea had erased all trace of what the poet Robert Hayden called a "voyage through death / to life upon these shores." Then, in 2015, a Portuguese ship called the São José was discovered off the coast of Cape Town. Three years later, the Clotilda, America's last known slave ship, turned up in Alabama's Mobile River. The most recent find is believed to be L'Aurore, a French vessel that sank off the coast of Mozambique after an attempted uprising. Meanwhile, in Dakar, researchers are closing in on the Sénégal, which exploded after its capture by the British Navy, in 1781.

Behind this fleet of revenants is a network called the Slave Wrecks Project. Coördinated by the Smithsonian—along with George Washington University, the Iziko Museums of South Africa, and the U.S. National Park Service—the S.W.P. combines maritime archeology with reparative justice, tourism, and aquatic training in Black communities. Its work is too new to gauge its impact on scholarship, but it has already made a meaningful contribution to public history. Artifacts from the São José have become a centerpiece of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (N.M.A.A.H.C.). The Clotilda inspired a Netflix documentary and a new museum in Africatown, Alabama, and similar hopes are

The Slave Wrecks Project aims to reconnect Black communities to the deep.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL KENNEDY

riding on the Camargo in Angra dos Reis. The enthusiasm reflects an oceanic turn in understandings of heritage among diasporic writers, artists, and scholars, who are increasingly preoccupied with what the influential theorist Christina Sharpe calls slavery's "wake."

Before my descent, I spoke with Gabrielle Miller, a maritime archeologist at the Smithsonian, whom I found strapping a stainless-steel knife to her muscular calf. A thirty-two-year-old with cowrie shells in her long box braids and a pierced septum, she teared up describing her underwater work. "There was a hush over it, almost like a church," she said of her first dive to a slaver's wreck. Feeling the Camargo was even more uncannily intimate: "The black stayed on my hands for a long time." Miller works for the N.M.A.A.H.C. and contributed to an ongoing exhibition, "In Slavery's Wake," which features beads and shells that enslaved Africans likely carried to Brazil. But she'd rather talk about being in the water than about what divers can retrieve from it. "It's very antiquarian to put all of the emphasis on a physical object," she said. "The ship is a catalyst."

Miller started off in terrestrial archeology and once worked for the Nez Perce Tribe in Idaho. But a research trip to St. Croix, where her family originated, led her to become a scuba diver, and to apply her skills to the histories of her own people. In 2021, Miller enrolled in an S.W.P.-affiliated internship program, which she now helps to run. She also teaches the basics of maritime archeology through the Slave Wrecks Project Academy, which works with archeology graduate students in Senegal and Mozambique. The academy's two-pronged goal is to diversify the ranks of archeologists, a minuscule fraction of whom are Black, and to include people from across the diaspora in the study of its history. Yet it's also a kind of exorcism—an exercise in dispelling history's haints.

"They say that the African diasporic relationship to water equals 'trauma,'" Miller told me, alluding to an all too familiar tale of Middle Passage drownings, contaminated taps, and segregated beaches. It wasn't exactly false, she conceded. But didn't Black people also have a privileged connection to the sea? She spoke rapturously of coral architecture in the Caribbean, of water spirits venerated by Senegal's seafaring Lebu, and of work by the artist Ayana V. Jackson, who was inspired to learn diving by the Afrofuturist myth of Drexciya. Created in the nineties by a Detroit electronica duo, it imagines a Black Atlantis populated by the water-breathing issue of women who drowned in the crossing. The idea fortified me when I sat on the dive boat's rail and prepared to fall overboard. Within the siren call of the sunken place is an invitation to courage, Miller suggested: "Our ancestral relationship to water is not one of fear."

"The slaver is a ghost ship sailing on the edges of modern consciousness," Marcus Rediker writes in his harrowing history "The Slave Ship." The vessels were floating torture chambers that devoured more than twelve million lives, and their finely calibrated cruelties—lightless holds fetid with vomit and excrement, sick people bound to anchor chains and thrown en masse to waiting sharks—fuelled the global economy for half a millennium. They left a psychic imprint so deep that Black people still speak of them in terms of personal experience. "I remember on the slave ship, how they brutalized our very souls," Bob Marley sings in "Slave Driver."

One might have assumed that a handful of these vessels, at least eight hundred of which are known to have wrecked, would have turned up long ago. But those equipped to search for them have lacked incentives to do so. In 1972, commercial treasure hunters stumbled on the wreck of the Henrietta Marie, an English ship that sank near the Florida Keys after a slaving voyage—and moved on as soon as they realized that it wasn't the Spanish galleon they were seeking. (It was later excavated.) Maritime archeologists, meanwhile, largely ignored the Middle Passage. Stephen Lubkemann, a professor at George Washington University, told me, "There were more archeological studies of cogs in bogs in Ireland than of slave ships."

Lubkemann conceived of the S.W.P. in 2003. Slavery wasn't his field, but he'd long marvelled that historians, who'd recently unveiled the monumental Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, were so far ahead of his social-science peers. Because of its expense, maritime archeology is reliant on funding from governments, few of which wanted to pay for the exposure of their historical crimes. An exception was post-apartheid South Africa, where Jaco Boshoff, a researcher at the Iziko Museums, was looking for a Dutch slaver called the Meermin. He and Lubkemann joined forces and expanded the search to other ships, shuttling between nautical archives and Cape Town's wreck-strewn littoral.

For years, both dollars and discoveries eluded them. Then, in 2008, Boshoff encountered a scholarly citation about a Portuguese ship that sank en route from Mozambique to Brazil, carrying two hundred Africans to their deaths. Further research led to the captain's testimony, which indicated a spot under a mountain known as Lion's Head. Soon, Boshoff and his team were diving at what he called "one of the worst wreck sites I've ever worked on." The archeologists were dashed against the very reefs that had sunk the vessel; one almost drowned. Still worse, the wreck was itself a wreck, having already been stripped by treasure hunters in the nineteen-eighties. (They found human remains, which have since disappeared.) Just enough remained to identify the vessel: crumpled copper sheathing from the period; iron ballast blocks that were mentioned in the manifest; and, most crucially, timber from a tropical hardwood that grew in Mozambique. By 2015, Boshoff and Lubkemann were confident enough to announce that they'd found the São José—the first known wreck of a ship that sank during a slaving voyage.

Their discovery was perfectly timed. In the early twenty-tens, Lonnie Bunch, the founding director of the soon-to-open N.M.A.A.H.C., was determined to acquire a relic of the Middle Passage. "The slave trade was where the modern world began," Bunch, who is now the secretary of the Smithsonian, told me. "I needed to be able to tell that story in an intimate way." After realizing how few existed, he negotiated a partnership with the S.W.P. and supported its search for the São José. The museum opened, in September, 2016, with artifacts from the ship showcased in a subterranean gallery evocative of a slaver's hold. Bunch attended a ceremony to honor the São José's victims in Mozambique, where traditional rulers presented him with a

container of earth to scatter over the wreck. When a young Mozambican tearfully thanked him for bringing her kidnapped countrymen home, Bunch had a revelation: "What we were looking for wasn't about yesterday but today."

Every morning before diving, and every evening afterward, the team excavating the Camargo dined on a local historian's back porch. Her mint-green house in Frade, a gated condominium on the bay, served as a base for the expedition, whose members would relax around a table near a pool and a tree with fuchsia blossoms. Leaving their wetsuits to dry on the patio furniture, they'd feast on *feijoada* and other Brazilian specialties, speaking in a mix of Portuguese, English, French, and Spanish that they'd christened "Portuglaisñol." Having no common language was no obstacle to camaraderie. Miller entertained the table with the story of the "Notilda," a wreck mistakenly identified as the Clotilda. I was teased for having studied with the "wrong" dive federation. The expedition's genial young field coördinator, Luis Felipe Santos, drew the most laughs, because he couldn't pronounce "buoy."

Santos is a stout thirty-five-year-old tattooed with nautical motifs, orisha symbols, and a demon's head captioned "TROPICAL PUNK." He's a professor of maritime archeology at the Federal University of Bahia and serves as the president of AfrOrigens, a nonprofit established to find the wrecks of slave ships. (Having found the Camargo, they've begun surveying near the town of Maricá for the wreck of the Malteza, which was sunk by the British Navy.) A self-identified Afro-Indigenous Brazilian, he co-founded the country's first organization of Black archeologists. But his work hardly touched on slavery until he was invited to join a yearlong search for the Camargo, which then began appearing in his dreams. Several other archeologists experienced similar visions, and he speculated, half playfully, that "African cosmology" was responsible: "The energy of the wreck called all of us."

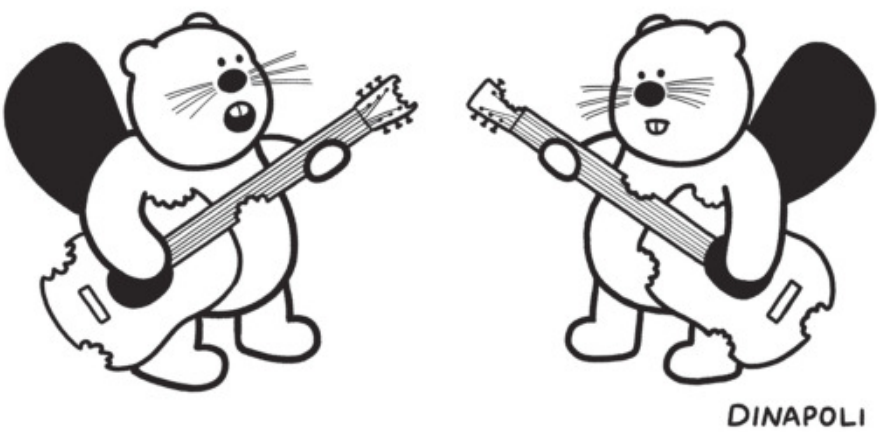
Nothing so dramatic had befallen me. Yet the prospect of coming so close to an "unknowable" history, which my own ancestors had survived, did inspire me to learn scuba. Just a month earlier, I'd enrolled at a hole-in-the-wall school in New York, where the instructor taught me and two white bankers to "maximize our bottom time." Surrounded by decorative shark plushies, I couldn't have felt farther from the grim story of the Camargo. I didn't yet know that Manhattan was where its captain financed his slaving expeditions—and, eventually, met an unexpected end.

Of the thousands of vessels involved in the Atlantic slave trade, the Camargo has two distinctions. It's the last slaver known to have reached Brazil, which outlawed the slave trade, though not slavery, in 1850. And its captain, Nathaniel Gordon, an American from Portland, Maine, was the only man ever executed for slave trafficking in the United States. Gordon had absconded with the Camargo while transporting ordinary merchandise from San Francisco to New York. He then set a more profitable course for Mozambique, where he purchased his human cargo. Pursued by the British Navy, he torched the ship after unloading its five hundred captives, who were sold to local plantations. Brazilian authorities arrested several crew members, but Gordon managed to escape, disguised in women's clothes.

He made two more slaving voyages before the U.S. Navy finally caught him, in 1860. Even then, he likely expected to go free. Although the international slave trade had been illegal for decades, the ban was hardly ever enforced—especially not in New York, which Horace Greeley described as "a nest of slave pirates." Wall Street investors regularly financed slaving expeditions, and bribery of customs officers and juries was rife. But Gordon was tried by Lincoln's Justice Department, whose attorneys were eager to make an example of a brazen trafficker as the Civil War got under way. Gordon was convicted and sentenced to death.

The ruling sparked a nationwide argument. Was it fair to execute a man for violating a dead-letter law, particularly when the domestic slave trade was perfectly legal in much of the country? Ralph Waldo Emerson lobbied for the captain's execution; Gordon's wife presented Mary Todd Lincoln with a rhyming plea for clemency. The President decided to let the captain hang, telling one petitioner that "any man, who, for paltry gain and stimulated only by avarice, can rob Africa of her children to sell them into interminable bondage, I never will pardon." After an unsuccessful suicide attempt, Gordon was duly executed at the Tombs on February 21, 1862. He insisted, from the gallows, that he was an innocent family man, who'd never intentionally harmed another human being in his life.

Yuri Sanada, a filmmaker with an unruly salt-and-pepper bowl cut, found the story irresistible. "Nobody knows more about shipwrecks than I do," he told me. "I had my own." Although he lacks a degree in archeology, Sanada is a consummate adventurer who's done everything from sailing a replica Phoenician galley across the Atlantic to salvaging his own furniture from the wreck of the houseboat where he and his wife lived for twelve years. He read about Gordon's misadventures in a 2006 book by Ron Soodalter and immediately proposed a film adaptation. He also pitched



"I think we should go electric."

the author a daring idea. James Cameron had descended to the already discovered Titanic to research his "Titanic." Sanada would out-Cameron Cameron by locating the wreck of the Camargo.

He teamed up with Gilson Rambelli, a maritime archeologist at the Federal University of Sergipe who had led an unsuccessful search for the Camargo in the early two-thousands and was trying to renew the effort. (He had come within a few yards.) Rambelli led the campaign, which the S.W.P. agreed to fund and support beginning in 2022. "We spent hundreds of hours poking the bottom with this big nine-foot iron rod," Sanada recalled, as target after target revealed by a magnetometer survey let them down. One day, a passing fisherman boasted that he knew the wreck's location. "It was the last dive of the last day of the last expedition," Sanada explained, and they were desperate enough to invite him aboard. He took them to an island that his father had known as a popular spawning ground. Yet even he looked surprised when a diver resurfaced with fragments of charred wood.

"We came to legitimate something that was already legitimate," Santos said of the discovery, which corroborated local lore about the wreck. He believes that archeology can be a tool for justice—particularly in Brazil, where the omissions of colonial archives have underwritten the displacement of Black and Indigenous peoples. Santos's research hadn't previously focussed on the African diaspora, but he began to feel an ancestral call. "For me, it's not about the study of the other," he told me. "I see myself in the artifact."

Miller sat cross-legged on a paddleboard and rowed toward the mountains with slow, deliberate strokes. She dipped her face into the water at intervals; once or twice, she slid herself off the board, inhaled sharply, and dived to the bottom. But there was no sign of the Camargo in the "miasma," she shouted back to Santos, who tossed her a plastic-wrapped G.P.S. Soon, the wreck found, Miller and another archeologist were descending to it with a dredge, which was attached, via fire hose, to a motor on deck. They signalled with a stream of bubbles once they were ready to begin. Sanada yanked a pull cord, and the contraption roared to life. But the hose clogged with debris and popped off, soaking everyone on deck. Sanada grinned ruefully: "One point for the pump, zero for the archeologists."

In the popular imagination, excavating a shipwreck is like exploring a ruin—an odyssey through a drowned world. The reality is that many shipwrecks are found in pieces. Looted by salvagers, gnawed at by shipworms, and damaged by passing vessels, they become hard to distinguish from anonymous debris. The difficulty is heightened by zero-visibility conditions; ensconced in a turbid bay, the Camargo had become a puzzle for "braille archeology," the art of forensic reconstruction via touch.

"We have to feel for each metre," Miller, back on deck, explained. The archeologists were using their hands, arms, and wingspans to map the site. They'd begun by outlining the wreck with twelve numbered stakes, each attached to a buoy on the surface. Then they had run a line between them, using two other lines to trace the axes of a rough grid. Now they were digging square-metre test pits in search of distinctive features, which they sketched, by feel, on waterproof slates. Eventually, a site plan would emerge from this collaborative hallucination, hopefully revealing the wreck's orientation on the bottom.

The plan was already beginning to emerge on a sheet of Mylar graph paper—an oval, surrounded by arrows, with a handful of anomalous objects marked. Santos had found a huge hunk of metal near one end of the site. Miller, when she examined it, had felt a smaller one with the tip of her fin, which turned out to be hollow and cylindrical. She lay face down on deck to show the distance between the two to Sanada, who planned to photograph the objects by pressing a clear plastic bag of water against them. He invited me to watch; before long, we were feeling our way along the seafloor, pausing briefly where the two rope axes converged.

I couldn't help but think of the crossroads: a geometric figure, common throughout the African diaspora, that symbolizes the boundary between the living and the dead. According to certain cosmologies, their souls take on the guise of marine creatures—an idea that struck me as strangely comforting. During my certification dive, at a flooded quarry in eastern Pennsylvania, I'd felt surreally out of place, balking at the vast darkness around me as I stared into the eyes of a bass who'd taken up residence in the cockpit of a submerged Cessna. Here, though, I could imagine myself surrounded by kindred spirits.

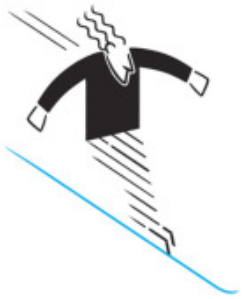
We swam on to the object that Santos had found earlier. It was barrel-shaped and about the diameter of my wingspan, with a pocked and pitted texture that prompted intrusive thoughts of tetanus. For a few seconds, the water cleared enough to see something that resembled a cross between a hairball and a meteor. It's what's called, in maritime archeology, a "concretion," which forms when an iron object corrodes in salt water. Ferrous ions precipitate around its dissolving form, which is preserved as though in a mold. The result is exceedingly fragile and disintegrates if allowed to dry. But, when X-rayed, concretions yield manifold secrets. The renowned Canadian maritime archeologist Marc-André Bernier told me that he's watched cannons, kettles, muskets, and even a finely wrought scale emerge from lumps of "nothing."

Later that day, Bernier led a discussion of the concretion in the historian's living room. He clicked through reference images of nineteenth-century brigs as the other archeologists nursed beers and hazarded hypotheses. Could it be the anchor? Santos thought it might be the hatch. Bernier asked Miller about the tubular object that she'd found nearby. He suspected that it was the hawsepipe, an outlet for the anchor chain. In that case, the bigger object was likely the windlass, a winchlike machine used to hoist the anchor.

Bernier tested his hypothesis the next day. He dived to the wreck several times and sketched the bigger object, which seemed to have two barrels and a shaft in between, before resurfacing with a triumphant announcement. "The widths are the same size, the holes are the same size, the shafts are the same size," he said, outlining each shape with his hands. "It's the windlass." Miller closed her eyes and extended her arms like a mystic: "He sees the ship in his *mind!*"

Given how much is known about slave ships, it's fair to ask if excavating them will fundamentally alter conceptions

of the Middle Passage. Rediker, the historian, praised maritime archeologists for retrieving palpable traces of what the enslaved suffered, but doubts that they will learn much from the vessels themselves. "It's one thing to have plans," Bernier said of such skepticism. "But a ship is a living thing." Most slavers were ordinary vessels that crews modified en route, adding features like the barricado—an anti-mutiny fortification—and the cramped compartments belowdecks where captives were stowed. In Alabama and Mozambique, researchers are excavating such holds for the first time and hope to retrieve objects that captives smuggled across the Atlantic.



Their ultimate goal is to link these discoveries to slavery's contemporary legacy. Studying the São José has taken researchers to the ruins of its owner's palace in Lisbon. The excavation of L'Aurore is proceeding in tandem with field work in rural Mozambique; in one village, an oral tradition pointed to a ruin on a nearby island, which had once been a barracoon. Members of a Black scuba nonprofit called Diving with a Purpose, which joined the S.W.P. in 2014, recently led a delegation to Liberia, where they met with descendants of escapees from the Guerrero, a slave ship that sank in the Florida Keys.

Diving with a Purpose was established, in the mid-aughts, to find the Guerrero, which remains at large. But the group's annual searches have become a floating school for Black scuba divers, including teens from Florida high schools. "African Americans have a particular connectedness to the ocean," Jay Haigler, a lead instructor with the program, told me. "How the hell did we get over here? On a goddam boat. And it wasn't the Niña, the Pinta, or the Santa Maria." An affable, mustachioed former real-estate developer, Haigler joined the group after meeting some Black scuba divers at a wedding. Now he has worked on wrecks all over the world, including the Clotilda and the downed planes of Tuskegee Airmen in the Mediterranean. To him, it's not an accident that recent breakthroughs in the archeology of the Middle Passage have involved the participation of Black divers: "If we're not part of the ocean, our stories are never told."

Overlooking the bay from the foothills of the Serra do Mar is the Quilombo Santa Rita do Bracuí. Situated between a muddy river and a tropical forest, it's a historically Black community that is home to three hundred and seventy-three families, many of whom live in unfinished houses with corrugated roofs. The *quilombo*—a term for a rural settlement established by the formerly enslaved—is less than ten minutes from the water. Yet it's practically unknown to the area's more affluent residents. "Like a lot of people from Rio de Janeiro, I had never heard of them," the historian Martha Abreu, who vacationed nearby in her youth, recalled. "I was a white person with a white family who came to have pleasure in Angra dos Reis."

Abreu, a tiny, ebullient scholar with a high-pitched voice, was the archeologists' host. Her father had purchased the property where they were staying in the nineteen-eighties, when a new highway was transforming the bay into a tourism hub. With the assistance of Brazil's military government, speculators seized valuable waterfront land from Black residents, who retreated to the hills.

Their *quilombo* dates back to the eighteen-seventies, when the owner of a sugar plantation bequeathed it to those he'd enslaved. He was one of the planters who'd illegally bought Africans from the Camargo, and they'd disembarked on his property, arriving on canoes in the dead of night as the ship was set aflame. The aftermath brought Brazil's clandestine slave trade to a permanent end. As police scoured local plantations for the trafficked Africans, a number of their "legitimately" enslaved brethren ran away. (Some posed as new arrivals to avoid reënslavement.) The chaos stoked fears of "another Haiti" before it was quashed and forgotten.

When Abreu first visited the Quilombo Bracuí, in the early two-thousands, she'd already published an article about the incident—and was shocked to discover that its memory had endured in the *quilombo's* oral tradition. Certain aspects of the narrative had assumed legendary dimensions. *Quilombolas* told Abreu that Gordon, fearing discovery, had let most of those aboard the Camargo drown, while archival sources suggested that they'd landed safely. Other particulars were almost uncannily precise, she said: "They knew everything about slavery, the owner's will, and the traffic.' "

"This was a hidden story," Marilda de Souza Francisco, a former leader of the *quilombo*, said when I visited. "Now we want everyone to know." A subsistence farmer in her sixties, she and other community members set up a memorial to the brig's victims near her house—an airy, low-slung building covered in old pink plaster, where dogs barked under the banana and palm trees. A sign on her wraparound veranda cites Brazil's post-dictatorship constitution, which grants "the remaining members of the ancient runaway slave communities" ownership of their traditional lands. The provision was ratified in the late nineteen-eighties, but conservatives allied with the country's agricultural lobby have long impeded its enforcement. Only a handful of the nearly three thousand communities that have applied for official status have been granted land titles. Francisco hopes that the attention brought by the Camargo's discovery will make hers one of them: "We are in a hurry, but the law is very slow."

The *quilombolas* suffer from unemployment, the illegal destruction of the mangrove swamps where they've traditionally fished, and the theft of land and water for wealthier neighborhoods on the waterfront. (Their access to the river was recently blocked.) Last May, Lonnie Bunch visited, bringing a burst of attention from government officials, who had previously neglected these problems. But the immediate hope is that the Camargo will create jobs and attract tourists. AfrOrigens recently constructed a small base in the *quilombo*, where it plans to exhibit artifacts from the excavation. The organization is training young *quilombolas* to scuba dive, with the aim of allowing them to become stewards of the wreck site.

Although the excavation has just begun, there's also talk of commemoration. Francisco's dream is a floating memorial to the Camargo. She recently

watched a documentary about the discovery of another slave ship, which had revived a small town on Alabama's Gulf Coast. Perhaps it would happen again.

Eight years after the Camargo's destruction, America's last slave ship met an identical fate. Returning from Ouidah, in present-day Benin, the schooner Clotilda stole into Alabama's Mobile River with a hundred and ten Africans—a victory for its owner, Timothy Meaher, who'd wagered that he could defy the country's slave-trade ban. The captain burned the ship and sank it in a bayou; the captives, nearly all Yoruba speakers from the same village, toiled on plantations for the next five years. After the Civil War, a few dozen survivors banded together to buy land from Meaher and established a community called Africatown.

The settlement's recent memory of enslavement was unique in the United States. In the late nineteen-twenties, Zora Neale Hurston interviewed one of its founders, Cudjo Lewis, née Oluale Kossola, who vividly remembered the terror of the crossing. (The sea growled "lak de thousand beastes in de bush.") But the town's cohesion frayed in the late twentieth century as factories shuttered, leaving behind dangerous pollution, and the construction of an interstate highway demolished the historic downtown. Africatown's population plummeted, and its singular history threatened to fade. Then, in 2018, a local journalist, Ben Raines, located the wreck of the Clotilda, whose identity was confirmed the next year by archeologists. It was the most intact wreck of a slave ship ever found.

Africatown was deluged with attention. A filmmaker interviewed tearful residents for a documentary, which was subsequently acquired by the Obamas and Netflix. National Geographic made two others; for the second, Clotilda descendants travelled to Benin, where they confronted the king whose predecessor had enslaved their ancestors, scattered soil taken from their graves in Alabama, and visited the Door of No Return, a monument that frames the Atlantic. Back in Africatown, a modest museum, the Heritage House, opened in 2023, with fragments of the Clotilda exhibited in pH-controlled tanks.

Some descendants have begun running boat tours in the Mobile River. Others are receiving free swimming and scuba lessons through the S.W.P., in the hope of eventually visiting the wreck site. "I just want to touch it," Evelyn Milton, an I.T. professional who plans to earn her scuba certification this spring, told me. "If I could take a rose, or some type of pennant—something all the '-ologists' think is safe—to leave on the ship, as a way to say, 'Hey, I'm your fourth-great-granddaughter. You're never going to believe this, but I work from home. Thank you.'"

Anderson Cooper recently moderated an on-air reckoning between the Clotilda Descendants Association and two members of the Meaher family, which still owns a substantial amount of property in and around Africatown, and has rented it to the very factories that locals blame for occurrences of cancer. After the Clotilda was discovered, the family sold a plot of land to the community for a fraction of its market value; it has since become a food bank. During the interview, they also presented one of the descendants, Pat Frazier, with a silver-tipped cane that had belonged to the enslaver of her great-great-grandparents. It was a set-piece moment of racial reconciliation. Still, Frazier regarded the heirloom skeptically, as though she'd expected more.

"I thought I was going to see Montgomery again," Frazier told me, alluding to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which has revitalized the state's capital. The dream of "communal archeology" is that communities might benefit from the excavation of their history; a few years ago, Bolivian Indigenous groups sued for salvage rights to a Spanish treasure galleon, arguing that its unprecedented haul of gold, silver, and emeralds had emerged from mines where their ancestors were enslaved. But it isn't easy to parlay excavations into reparations. Frazier believes that the effort has been hindered by friction between local and out-of-state descendants, and between those groups and non-descendant residents who feel excluded from the media bonanza. Others feel that the ship is a distraction from the community that its survivors established.

And then there's the question of what to do with the wreck. Initially, Africatown was abuzz with talk of raising and exhibiting the Clotilda, like the Vasa warship in Stockholm; perhaps it could be a tourist attraction, a memorial, and an implicit rebuke to conservative lawmakers who wanted to erase slavery from the state's textbooks. But this hope was dashed by a recent report from the Alabama Historical Commission, which concluded that the wreck was more fragile than previously believed, and that raising it would cost upward of thirty million dollars. The recommended alternative was to rebury the Clotilda in the mud, preserving its archeological integrity for future generations. (Scientists have already attempted to extract DNA from the ship's bilge.)

Many descendants were persuaded. "This community doesn't even have



"Rakish angles don't work for you."

a grocery store," Frazier told local television, suggesting that thirty million dollars could be put to better use. But Raines, the ship's discoverer, sees a missed opportunity to create a global landmark. "I hear a lot of people giving up," he said of the descendants, many of whom he has taken to the site. Their reluctance hasn't stopped him from launching a crusade to raise the wreck. (He wants to enlist Oprah.) "The Clotilda is an internationally important artifact," he told me. "It's not up to the descendants what happens to the ship. It belongs to the world."

Darron Patterson—whose ancestor Polee Allen spoke of his yearning for home until he died, in 1922—wants to build a replica of the Clotilda, which he envisions facing east, toward Africa. "Yorubans are very ingenious people," he said. "For my money, if they could have gotten their hands on a boat, they would have gotten back home." He was surprised when I told him that a similar project was under construction at the other end of the Clotilda's voyage. The Beninese government is building an enormous heritage-tourism complex in Ouidah, with a replica slave ship as its main attraction. Visitors will embark from a beach near the Door of No Return via small boats, then explore a hold crammed with more than three hundred resin sculptures of captives. Groans and rattling chains may play over a speaker system; the French company designing the experience previously worked on a themed restaurant for children, called Pirate's Paradise.

Memorialization easily curdles into kitsch. There's also a certain awkwardness in Ouidah marketing such "heritage" to tourists whose ancestors it sold into slavery. Yet a Beninese tourism official assured me that diaspora historians had consulted on the replica, which wouldn't be "too Disney." It might even educate his countrymen about slavery. "There was something missing after the Door of No Return," he insisted. "For the Beninese, it wasn't clear why those from the diaspora were crying in front of the ocean."

My first memory of the Atlantic slave trade is of a childhood visit to the Freedom Schooner Amistad, in Sag Harbor, New York. I was dimly aware that I had enslaved ancestors. But seeing and hearing how they'd come to the country—even on a museum ship, built to commemorate the famous maritime slave rebellion—was a shock. It deepened when, as a teen-ager, I took up genealogy and realized that, although I could trace my white mother's ancestry across centuries and continents, my Black father's ended, conclusively, with a man named Moses, who'd escaped from slavery in Virginia, swam across the Rappahannock River to join the Union Army, and left whatever he knew of his forebears behind.

I'd arrived at what the poet Dionne Brand describes as "a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being" that is distinctive to the African diaspora. "We were not from the place where we lived and we could not remember where we were from or who we were," she writes in "A Map to the Door of No Return," recalling the childhood realization that her own grandfather was ignorant of their roots. The title evokes a watery void "where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast."

The archeology of slave ships has such appeal because it promises to fill this void. But it can do only so much to turn back time. Clotilda descendants are still waiting for DNA from the ship's timbers. Residents of the Quilombo Bracuí were taken aback to learn that many of the Camargo Africans were dispersed throughout southeastern Brazil—contrary to their oral tradition, in which the majority were killed and a few survivors joined their community.

The emphasis on precise continuity may be self-defeating. In Brazil, conservative media outlets have attempted to expose "false" *quilombos* by casting doubt on their origin stories. In the United States, private reparations initiatives have been repeatedly undercut by debates over who, exactly, deserves to pay or be paid. During one of my Africatown calls, which I made from the lobby of a hotel in New Orleans, a white man who overheard me began shouting that the wreck of the Clotilda was a "scam" and a "hoax."

The obsession with lineage is at odds with the solidarity of the Middle Passage, which created new forms of kinship. Africans who survived it had a word for those who travelled with them, whether or not they came from the same places or spoke the same languages: "shipmate." The poet Derek Walcott, in his masterpiece "Omeros," describes this emergence from anonymity as a kind of grace:

> But they crossed, they survived. There is the epical splendour.
> Multiply the rain's lances, multiply their ruin,
> the grace born from subtraction as the hold's iron door
> rolled over their eyes like pots left out in the rain,
> and the bolt rammed home its echo, the way that thunder-
> claps perpetuate their reverberation.

Last May, during a celebration of the Camargo's discovery, a young priest from the *quilombo* went to sea to bless the excavation. A practitioner of candomblé, whose pantheon syncretizes Catholicism with various African cosmologies, he prayed to the spirits of his ancestors and those of others, and prepared a tiny ceremonial urn called a *quartinha* as a symbolic coffin for those who'd perished on board. He also scattered flowers for Iemanjá, orisha of the sea, as a way to conciliate her for the violation of the Camargo's voyage.

The priest had learned to dive from the archeologists, who watched from the dive boat's stern as he took a giant step overboard. A few moments later, he resurfaced, extending his hands to receive the *quartinha* from a man on deck. Then he released the air from his vest and dropped to the bottom, cradling the urn as he vanished into the murk. He was descending not just into the bay but also into *kalunga*, the watery underworld of Kikongo tradition, which fused, in the Americas, with memories of the crossing.

A few months later, one of the archeologists descended to the Camargo, searching for the buried cable that demarcates its location. Herself a devotee of the orishas, she describes herself as a "daughter of Ogum Marinho, whose point of strength is the bottom of the sea." That day, she struggled to find the vessel and wasted precious minutes of air groping in the mud. Suddenly, she felt something and froze. It was the *quartinha*, with a string of rosary beads beside it, both sitting on what she soon realized was the hull. She took a moment to pray. Then she plunged her hand into the silt and swam on, feeling for the line that crossed and circled the wreck. ♦



YOU HAVE REACHED THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

BY PATRICIA MARX

You have reached the U.S. government. We are currently unable to answer your call, because everyone has been fired except Bob. If you would like to leave a message, listen carefully, as most of our menu options have been fed into the wood chipper.

Please note that this call is being recorded so that we can use it against you.

For your safety, do not press the number 9. It is a trigger number for President Trump. That's as much as we can say about that.

If this is Melania, press 183 if you wish to accept the buyout.

If you are trying to reach the Department of Education, press 167, assuming you know numbers that high. Never mind. The Department of Education is now a subdivision of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives. Ditto for the Environmental Persecution Agency.

If you are calling to inquire about vaccines, they have been replaced by Trump Bibles. To purchase, push 666, and at the sound of the beep leave your credit-card information. On second thought, we already have that.

If you are a federal employee in Washington, D.C., working remotely from your home on Mars, and would like an exemption from our return-to-office requirement, press 437. If you do not have an oil derrick in your back yard, see you at the office tomorrow, 7 A.M.!

If you are calling to request a pardon, press 517 to make a sizable donation to the Reëlect Trump Campaign. Do you think you might give a little more if we told you that the ambassadorships to Albania and Tonga are still available?

If you believe you are gender-nonconforming, press 1 and 0 at the exact same time. See how it doesn't work? See how God doesn't like it?

If you are the Pope, press star to surrender. You have twenty-four hours to vacate Vatican City before we send the bulldozers. Leave the tchotchkes, especially the gold ones.

Press 603 if you wish to reserve a suite at the beautifully appointed Trump Sistine Chapel Resort and Spa. (It's not too late to purchase oven mitts in the gift shop! Made from real Raphael tapestries!)

If you are Adimir-vlay Utin-pay, press 854 to R.S.V.P. "yes" to our off-the-record meeting about you-know-what.

If you are calling from China, fifteen-per-cent network charges may apply. I'm not sure yet about Canada and Mexico. I mean, President Trump isn't sure.

To make the Department of Government Efficiency more efficient, opt out of your Social Security benefits by pressing 746. If you also opt out of Medicaid and Medicare, as a thank-you we will send you a solid-gold-plated box of R.F.K., Jr., Band-Aids and a bottle of raw milk.

If this is an emergency, do not call FEMA. The agency is installing more fountains near the seventeenth hole of the Trump International Golf Club in Dubai and moving the Persian Gulf in order to create the biggest and best views ever seen in history.

To leave a message for Bob, press 24. He can't talk right now, because he's a cat.

If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands, but also stay on the line so a representative can take your address. We'd like to send you a complimentary MAGA hat.

If you are still waiting for Bob to return your call, don't hold your breath. He was just laid off, along with all the other D.E.I. hires with dark fur. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

FLIRTING WITH DISASTER

"Chicken Shop Date" gives the celebrity interview a screwball spin.

BY REBECCA MEAD



On her YouTube series, Amelia Dimoldenberg pretends to be comically insecure.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MAISIE COUSINS

Brick Lane, in London's East End, is famous for its bustling commerce, from sari shops to graffiti-splashed vintage-clothing stores. At 9 A.M. on a recent morning, however, nearly all the storefronts were shuttered. One exception was Morley's, a takeout fried-chicken restaurant, where bright lights were shining behind closed glass doors that had been covered with translucent paper, and a hubbub of voices could be heard coming from inside.

Seated at a white plastic table in the center of the small shop was Amelia Dimoldenberg, the creator and star of "Chicken Shop Date," a popular YouTube interview show. Despite the early hour and the raw winter weather, she was dressed as if for a night at the club, in an asymmetrical one-sleeved top made from clingy metallic jersey, and a matching skirt so short that, when she sat down on a cold metal chair, she squealed. Swirling around her was a team of half a dozen people, who were preparing to record a new episode. In the background, slushie machines started to whirr, and a pungent vat of oil sizzled. Dimoldenberg thumbed through a sheaf of pages listing questions that she'd prepared for the guest who would soon arrive—the actress Cynthia Erivo, who'd recently been nominated for an Academy Award for her performance as Elphaba, the green-skinned witch in "Wicked."

Dimoldenberg's show is shot in fried-chicken restaurants around the city. In the episodes, which are typically less than ten minutes long, she unleashes a fusillade of left-field questions and sometimes interrupts her guest midsentence—techniques designed to elicit an unpredictable exchange. Dimoldenberg began running through possible approaches to Erivo with her producer, Liv West. Noting that Erivo had attended drama school, Dimoldenberg imagined proposing some absurd theatre exercises: " 'Be an inanimate object' might be fun. I could get her to try to be a water droplet, or something. A lettuce." West laughed. Dimoldenberg scanned her list and read aloud, " 'Have you ever used your acting abilities on a date to pretend like you are having a good time?' " She then read a question that would flirtatiously address Erivo's queer identity: " 'What's the best thing about dating a woman?' "

Dimoldenberg continued, " 'What's the best musical to take someone to right before a breakup?' 'I'm thinking of turning "Chicken Shop Date" into a musical—can you help me write the songs?' "

"Perfect," West said.

Dimoldenberg, who turned thirty-one in January, celebrated ten years of hosting "Chicken Shop Date" last year, proving herself to be one of YouTube's more durable entertainers. Nearly three million people subscribe to the show. Each episode has the format of a first date, conducted in the unlikely setting of an unflatteringly lit fast-food outlet, and is freighted hopelessly with the longing for enduring love. Dimoldenberg's first guest was the British rapper Ghetts, one of the foremost figures in the London grime scene, who is a decade her senior. The episode, which aired in March, 2014, established her disarmingly direct technique. "What would you say your type is in a girl?" Dimoldenberg asked. "I like girls with a sense of humor," Ghetts replied. "O.K., so, me," Dimoldenberg swiftly retorted, with a straight face, nodding.

On "Chicken Shop Date," Dimoldenberg plays an exaggerated version of herself: more awkward, more brusque, more grandiose. Celebrities on the publicity circuit who are accustomed to the usual techniques and tricks of interview-

ers—softball questions, fawning compliments—find themselves in a different and disconcerting dynamic. The brittle self-confidence of Dimoldenberg's character can seem like a mask for a painful neediness, and her strategies of redirection can subvert even the most self-assured of interlocutors. Whenever a "date" seems to be going well, she undermines it. After Jack Harlow, the American rapper, said that he liked the phenomenon of community library boxes, from which passersby can borrow books at will, Dimoldenberg's follow-up question was "Can you read?" On "Chicken Shop Date," Dimoldenberg courts compliments, then receives them with deadpan discomfort. After Mahalia, the British R. & B. singer, said that Dimoldenberg's skin looked "amazing," Dimoldenberg replied, "Thanks. It's my own. It's my own skin."

Dimoldenberg prepares for each exchange with extensive research, but she also deftly improvises, and her onscreen style of flirting is sometimes indistinguishable from cutting critique. When the pop star Ed Sheeran started to play the ukulele, she told him, "Don't give up the day job." At moments, though, her guests show unexpected vulnerability. On an episode two years ago, Dimoldenberg asked Central Cee, the British rapper, "How long does it take you to fall in love?," and he responded with a meandering and strangely touching discourse on the unreliability of romantic feeling. "I just think it's a delusion, innit?" he said. "Maybe I'm a bit pessimistic, I don't know, but if you're going against the grain, trying to secure something rare, I feel like you just have to be a bit deluded." The episode was "Chicken Shop Date" at its best, offering a surprising disclosure in which the border between performance and authenticity was impossible to pinpoint.

Dimoldenberg's interviews have a surreal strangeness reminiscent of the work of Sacha Baron Cohen, another high-wire, always-in-character comedian. She once asked Beth Mead, the record-holding forward of the Lionesses, the English women's soccer team, "Would you say you are a competitive person?" But the distance between the highly capable Dimoldenberg and her "Chicken Shop Date" persona hasn't stopped her followers from becoming invested in the most promising-seeming encounters. (She hasn't seriously dated anyone from the show.)

In the past three years, Dimoldenberg has leveraged her "Chicken Shop Date" fame into a new line of work, as a red-carpet interviewer—including, last year, at the Oscars, a role she will reprise at this year's ceremony, on March 2nd. Her flirty but jarring red-carpet exchanges with the actor Andrew Garfield blew up on social media. "It's weird what you do," Garfield told her at a 2022 event. "Weird as in good." The two ran across each other again the following year, at the Golden Globes. After Garfield teased Dimoldenberg that she'd been eying him "like a capybara in the wild" and observed that they had compatible astrological signs, he insisted that he wasn't interested in her: "I don't think we should explore this!" She replied, "Well, I'm not even asking to." When Garfield eventually joined Dimoldenberg at Sam's Chicken, in northwest London, fan anticipation was high, and the pair did not disappoint.

"Come on, we can own that it's been vibey," Garfield said.

"It's been vibey to the point where you've been avoiding me for two years, because the vibes were too much for you to handle," Dimoldenberg shot back, in undermining-girl-boss mode.

The ensuing ten-minute battle of wits had a screwball energy that Preston Sturges would have appreciated.

"I'm not going to be who you want me to be in this moment," Dimoldenberg offered.

"I'm not asking you to be anything but what you are," Garfield said, shifting around in his chair. "I'm just holding a mirror up."

"Yeah, and I look good," Dimoldenberg retorted.

Later, Garfield asked, "Do you think this"—he gestured toward the cameras and the mikes—"has fucked up the fact that we could actually have gone on a date at some point, maybe?"

"Yeah, because you're afraid of it," Dimoldenberg said, popping a French fry between perfectly glossed lips. The episode, which aired late last year, has been viewed more than ten million times.

In the decade since launching "Chicken Shop Date," Dimoldenberg has attempted to diversify her comic output. Among other things, she launched a YouTube show in which she cooked alongside guests—the gag being that she cannot cook. Most of her income now comes from sources other than "Chicken Shop Date," including her red-carpet work and one-off appearances or videos. But none of these projects has had the resonance or the authenticity of her first show. Dimoldenberg, being in the happy position of owning the show outright, is writing and producing a romantic comedy set in what she describes as "the 'Chicken Shop Date' world."

Each episode costs only about six thousand dollars to make, though Dimoldenberg now has three employees—a creative producer, a social-media manager, and a personal assistant—on her payroll. Because "Chicken Shop Date" appears just once a month or so, she is selective about her guests. "It has to be an organic fit," Dimoldenberg told me. "I need to be a fan of them and their work. If I fancy them, it helps, too. It is a dating show, after all."

"I recently found out that I like a Pinot Noir," Dimoldenberg said the first time I met her, as she settled into a low armchair at the Dean Street Townhouse, a restaurant in London's Soho neighborhood. It was a week into the New Year, and Dimoldenberg was not observing Dry January, but she had plans for a first date the following evening with someone who was. She explained, "I was Googling 'Things to do when you're sober,' and I found it so funny. It was, like, 'An escape room.' 'A horse-drawn carriage around the park.' 'Indoor rock climbing.'"

So what plan had they settled on? "We're going to go to the pub, obviously, and have Diet Cokes."

For "Chicken Shop Date," Dimoldenberg likes to dress up, usually in an outfit that has some interest around the neckline or the arms, given that she and her guest are seen only from the rib cage up. This evening, she was dressed less flamboyantly, in chic black pants and a black top. She ordered roast chicken—it's actually her favorite meal, she said, not just an on-brand choice. "But I have to ask what part of the chicken it is, because I only like breast," she told me. (On "Chicken Shop Date," she eats only nuggets and cringes at wings.) When



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the waitress came, Dimoldenberg politely asked to have the chicken leg left off the plate, though not before asking me if I would like it. "I'm not going to eat the leg, so I'd rather give it to someone else," she said.

Dimoldenberg's onscreen character is in many ways formed in the editing process, which she supervises. Moments of standoffishness or awkwardness are emphasized with jump cuts to her face, the camera lingering on her expressive, quizzical features. In person, though, Dimoldenberg is warm, open, and relaxed. "My character is equal parts desperate and uninterested," she told me. In the earliest iteration of the show, the comedy lay in part in the rap-world interviewees' amusement at being asked deadpan, rapid-fire questions by a scrupulously prepared but apparently clueless girl eating fries across the table. ("You have another name, Murkle Man," she said to Jammer, a grime artist who was the fourth guest on her show. "Does that have anything to do with Angela Merkel?") Dimoldenberg told me, "I talk more now—I'm leading the conversation now. Before, it had more staccato energy, and now it's quite fluid." These days, Dimoldenberg is well known enough not just to perform celebrity interviews but to be the object of them. Last year, she ate chicken with Drew Barrymore on Barrymore's talk show, and appeared on "Late Night with Seth Meyers," where she explained the British art of banter: "British people, they flirt like they don't like you. Make someone think that maybe they actually hate you, and I feel like that's how you fall in love." Having become a public figure in her own right, she plays with the equilibrium of mutual celebrity for comic ends. On a recent episode, the actor Paul Mescal asked what kinds of movies she liked. "I think I've seen all yours," she told him, then added, condescendingly, "You've not done loads."

David Letterman, who began subverting the celebrity interview more than forty years ago, is among Dimoldenberg's obvious precursors. But her closest contemporary peers are not the hosts of network television shows but, rather, YouTube and TikTok interviewers such as Nardwuar—a character created by the Canadian journalist John Ruskin—who stuns rappers and other musicians with his prodigious research into their early lives, and the New York-based comedian Kareem Rahma, who, on his online show "Subway Takes," invites comedians, influencers, or actors to offer miscellaneous critiques of social mores while riding mass transit. (Jeremy O. Harris: "We should have gatekept being woke a little bit longer." Cat Cohen: "You can't text someone just 'hey' and say nothing else.") Like these interviewers, Dimoldenberg permits the interviewee to be in on the joke.

But if part of the joke of "Chicken Shop Date" is Dimoldenberg's insistence that every episode really is a date, and not just another stop on a publicity tour, part of the show's success is the degree to which the encounters generate genuine chemistry. "I don't know why I wouldn't be able to meet someone on the show—like, that's how we meet, right?" she told me. "But I also know that it's not real, and that the person I'm meeting is not going to think that it is." Although Dimoldenberg has had one long-term relationship in the decade of making "Chicken Shop Date," she is currently single. (Of her sparks with Andrew Garfield, she said, briskly, "I don't think it's going to happen, otherwise I would be going out with him already, wouldn't I?") She told me, "Part of me thinks that the reason I've been single for so long is because I have this dating show, and it's easier for me that I'm single, because I'm living the character." In her private life, Dimoldenberg goes on the apps and has friends set her up, with varying degrees of success. "I go through waves of finding it really hard to meet people, and then my first thought is 'I'm so unattractive,'" she told me. "When I'm super single, I just go into this place where I convince myself not that I'm unattractive—like, I know that I'm not—but more, like, 'Every single person thinks I'm ugly, but they're wrong.'" Sounding like a more self-knowing version of her "Chicken Shop Date" identity, she added, "I do have good self-confidence, but it just manifests in a different way, where I just think people are out to get me."

Most of Dimoldenberg's guests are familiar in advance with the show's format, though there are exceptions, such as Cher, who made an appearance in

early 2024. "She was told to do it by her godson, and she nailed it," Dimoldenberg said. (In the episode, Dimoldenberg confided that she once had a terrible kiss with a man who didn't open his mouth. "English?" Cher asked, with a knowing shrug.) When Shania Twain came on, Dimoldenberg arrived at the restaurant swathed in leopard-print pants and a matching top with a draped hood—an outfit impressively similar to the one that Twain wore in the video for her 1997 hit "That Don't Impress Me Much." Twain wrote to me in an e-mail that she was "not at all prepared for it, in a chicken shop of all places." They got along beautifully, and by the episode's end the singer was tossing chicken nuggets across the table and Dimoldenberg was attempting to catch them in her mouth. Twain told me, "I'm not sure how the nugget-tossing began. With Amelia, these things just happen."

Initially, Dimoldenberg's guests were all male; she was reluctant to invite women on the show, for fear that the dating conceit would founder. "I was always, like, 'It's not going to work with a woman—I'm straight,'" she said. But she decided that her thinking was too literal, and in 2017 she began having women on. Some of her most popular episodes have been with female stars, and Dimoldenberg is as likely to seek dating advice from them as she is to engage in flirting. With Billie Eilish, it was both. "You're pretty mesmerizing," Eilish told her. Dimoldenberg punctured the moment with "Your glasses—are they real?"

In moving from the chicken shop to the red carpet, Dimoldenberg retained her flirtatiousness and shed her clumsiness. "Chicken Shop Date" alums treated her like an old friend: Eilish sidled up to her at the Oscars and gave her a long squeeze, saying, "I've been thinking about you." At first, Dimoldenberg tended to avoid including anything in the final edit of "Chicken Shop Date" that carried a whiff of sincerity, on either her part or that of her guest. "I was always, like, 'If it's not funny, it's not going in,'" she said. Recent experience, though, has made her reconsider. "With Andrew Garfield, I loved that you could feel there was some sincerity there, and I kept that in," she said. "I was being real. He's an actor, so I didn't know what was going through his head. But I was being somewhat true. And afterward it was, like, 'People are really liking this, actually.'" She was thinking of trying something similar with Erivo, whose earlier interviews indicated that she was inclined toward earnestness. "She seems very sincere—she's not really my type," Dimoldenberg said. "I'm excited to have a conversation that shows her to be funnier than ever—but also, maybe, we could have some serious chat."

It is estimated that there are more than four thousand chicken shops across the U.K.—one in every postcode except three, according to a 2020 assessment by the *Financial Times*. (The chicken-free zones were on far-flung Scottish islands.) Although there are a few big chains, such as Morley's, which originated in South London and now has nearly a hundred outlets all across the capital, many are independent businesses, though they hew to a similar model: laminate countertops, fluorescent lighting, and food that can be made quickly, at low cost, in deep fryers. Culinarily, KFC is the U.S.'s closest parallel to the U.K. chicken shop. But culturally—in New York, at least—a better comparison might be to the corner pizzeria swiftly doling out slices on paper plates to schoolkids, budget-minded parents, and late-night revellers.

A chicken shop is not what most people would consider an ideal venue for a date, hence the comedy of Dimoldenberg's premise, but it is a space accessible to a broad swath of London residents, and it holds a particularly cherished place in rap and youth culture. Not long after Dimoldenberg launched "Chicken Shop Date," another London YouTuber, Elijah Quashie, started his own chicken-shop-based humor series, "The Pengest Munch"—"peng" is slang for "good"—in which, in the role of Chicken Connoisseur, he reviews different establishments. (On Valentine's Day, 2017, Dimoldenberg and Quashie collaborated on an episode of "Chicken Shop Date" in which they ate together after Dimoldenberg was supposedly stood up by a date.) The pairing of poultry and celebrity is also central to "Hot Ones," the American online series in which Sean Evans interviews famous people while feeding them increasingly spicy chicken wings. Not long ago, Evans appeared on "Chicken Shop Date." The gag was the similarity of their shticks—"I basically want to date myself, in a male form," Dimoldenberg told Evans—but, in fact, the shows are quite different. "Chicken Shop Date" depends on an audience's suspension of disbelief about the date scenario, whereas Evans offers a more conventional interview exchange, albeit with the added possibility of acute digestive distress.

From the start, "Chicken Shop Date" has been shot in real chicken shops. "Yes, it's a pain, because there are so many noises, and you're on the main road, and the fryer's on, and the phone rings—but it's great," Dimoldenberg said. When a guest is from London, a shop appropriate to his or her neighborhood is chosen; though Dimoldenberg makes accommodations for certain of her guests' dietary requirements—for Eilish, the nuggets were vegan—she is unwilling to compromise the show's geographic and cultural integrity. (An exception was made for Cher, because she's Cher; her episode was shot in Paris, at Chicken Hub, a fast-food joint in the Tenth Arrondissement.) Dimoldenberg's efforts to land Drake for "Chicken Shop Date" have been a running theme; for years, she has said that he will be her very last guest. "We were meant to film together numerous times, and for numerous reasons it didn't happen," she told me. "The last message he sent me was about me coming to Sweden to film. And I was, like, 'Well, there's no chicken shops in Sweden.'"

Dimoldenberg grew up in northwest London, not far from Paddington Station. Her mother is a retired librarian; her father, a director at a public-relations firm, is a member of the local government, representing the Labour Party. Their home was middle class, but the social environment that Dimoldenberg grew up in was economically diverse, and she attended local, state-funded schools that had students from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Dimoldenberg was one of the few Jewish students in her elementary school. "When it was show-and-tell, I did Jewish prayers—that was my talent," she told me. At home, she was known for her creativity—she was always roping her younger sister into putting on plays—and, as a teen-ager, for her stinging sarcasm. Her mother, Linda Hardman, told

me, "She's lovely now, but she could be quite alarming at times—but in a way that was probably funny if you were watching it." Dimoldenberg attributes a prudish tendency to her mom's influence. "Like, when we were watching television and people were kissing, my mum would be, like, 'Oh, look away, everyone!'" Dimoldenberg told me. When Matty Healy, of the band the 1975, appeared on "Chicken Shop Date," three years ago, and leaned across the table for a kiss—the only time a guest has ever attempted to take things to first base, at least on camera—Dimoldenberg initially refused, and then gave him a dismissive peck on the forehead.

The very specific territorial allegiance of Londoners to their postcodes was important to the show's original identity. When, in an early episode, Dimoldenberg asked A. J. Tracey, a rapper from Ladbroke Grove, in West London, which part of the city the best girls come from, his reply—"West, definitely. Where in London are you from?"—prompted an extended comic prevarication on her part: "West. Northwest . . . I'm from West." The porosity of London's social and economic strata among young people was crucial in establishing the "Chicken Shop Date" premise: Tracey knew of Dimoldenberg before going on the show because she'd attended the same elementary school as a cousin of his, also a rapper, who goes by Big Zuu. Tracey's episode, the sixth in the series, was unusually combative. At one point, he said that Dimoldenberg's face was only "O.K."; he later instructed her to get into a garbage can in the corner of the shop. "My intention was to make her feel as awkward as possible, honestly," Tracey told me recently. "I just wanted to see her get a taste of her own medicine." (He added, "She didn't get in the bin.") Dimoldenberg's sister, Zoë, who trailed her by a year at school and is now a video producer who collaborates behind the scenes on Dimoldenberg's red-carpet interviews, told me, "The funniness of the show at the beginning was kind of Amelia as an outsider—that's how it hinged. But, actually, she was an insider, because it was just people we had connections to and people we would meet. That's how the show is really kind of representative of London."

"Chicken Shop Date" originated not on YouTube but as a Q. & A. column in the pages of a print magazine, *The Cut*, produced by members of a youth club that Dimoldenberg attended in her high-school years. (She joined the club on the advice of a teacher who knew of her ambitions to become a fashion-magazine editor; she had already received a rejection letter from Condé Nast, the publisher of *Vogue* and of this magazine, with which she had sought a work placement at the precocious age of thirteen.) Even in print form, the scenario of a date in a chicken shop was already in place, as was Dimoldenberg's unnerving technique. "Do you get fan mail?" she asked the rapper It's Nate, one of her first interview subjects for *The Cut*. Her follow-up was "Do you get fans that are male?" While studying at Central St. Martin's, where she majored in fashion journalism, Dimoldenberg transferred the chicken-shop concept to YouTube, roping in friends with video-production skills to help her make it. After graduating, Dimoldenberg worked as a journalist. She contributed to various publications that would later cover her, such as *Vice* and the *Guardian*, where she wrote about Internet phenomena ("How a Dog Named Tuna Became Beloved, Rich, and Famous on Instagram") and gave cheeky advice to young people on how to get a start in a desired career ("Don't eat lunch alone in the local cemetery. I did this on one internship. . . . I could have been mingling instead.")

The youth club where Dimoldenberg got her own start has since been shut



down, as have many comparable programs, because of cuts to local government funding made by the Conservative government in the twenty-tens. Dimoldenberg feels strongly about the value of such institutions, especially for young people without her cultural capital. "I didn't even need those services—I was probably the poshest person in the youth club," she said. "But I don't think I would be anywhere without *The Cut*." When, in 2018, her former classmate Big Zuu appeared on "Chicken Shop Date," Dimoldenberg asked him what law he would like to implement. "It would be that youth clubs have to be built in every area, and run in an amazing way," he said.

"Love that," she replied.

"It would change the country," he said, with feeling. This moment of sincerity, unusually, made it to the final edit. "Vote for Zuu," Dimoldenberg said.

A few days after the Cynthia Erivo episode was shot, I joined Dimoldenberg at her airy apartment, in Hackney, in East London, where she was reviewing the footage and making notes for her editor. Typically, Dimoldenberg records for thirty to forty minutes. In the early days, the final episodes lasted for three or four minutes; now they can run as long as twelve.

We watched as, onscreen, Dimoldenberg's producer, Liv, smeared a patch of green color onto Dimoldenberg's cheek. "Why is this green on your face?" Erivo inevitably asked. Dimoldenberg paused the playback on her laptop and typed an instruction to the video editor: "Before this, have a shot of me doing nothing. Maybe looking awkward." She pressed Play to review her response: "Oh, sorry, I've just, like, been using a new foundation. I feel like it's not rubbed in. Has it not rubbed in properly?"

That bit having landed, the tape continued to roll. Dimoldenberg had read that Erivo received a Radcliffe Fellowship at Harvard. "So, when are you going to start your Ph.D.?" Dimoldenberg asked. Erivo responded at length: "I'm hoping in the next couple of years—well, it just depends on when I can get the time to actually be in the place, or if I can convince someone to let me do it as I'm moving around." She went on, "I guess it would be the study of voice and psychology, and how it all works."

"Wow, it's fascinating," Dimoldenberg replied.

Now, in reviewing the footage, Dimoldenberg seemed a bit impatient. Erivo's response had been full and informative, but not at all funny. Watching Dimoldenberg's face onscreen, it was possible to see her calculating in the moment how to divert the conversation into

richer comedic territory. Eventually, she cut Erivo off: "I can sing live on set. I don't, because it gives the crew migraines." (When the finished episode dropped, at the end of the week, Dimoldenberg's migraine was in it but Erivo's doctoral plans went unmentioned.)

As playback continued, Dimoldenberg typed notes to her editor about what she liked, including a moment when Erivo gamely pretended to be a head of lettuce, shrugging her shoulders from side to side. Among the material left on the cutting-room floor was an account that Erivo gave of meeting Aretha Franklin after a performance of the musical adaptation of "The Color Purple," which Erivo starred in on Broadway. The story—Franklin had appreciatively sung back to her a line from the performance—might have been the lead anecdote in a profile of Erivo that sought to place her in a lineage of distinguished vocalists. But for Dimoldenberg's purposes it was useless: "I just feel like, yeah, it's interesting, but it doesn't really have a place in 'Chicken Shop Date.'"

More promising was an exchange in which Erivo, who is a marathoner, talked about the addictive qualities of running.

"I'm addicted to dates," Dimoldenberg replied.

"What's the end goal?" Erivo asked, sounding genuinely inquiring. "Do you want to fall in love?"

"That's the thing I'm thinking about—do I even want to fall in love?" Dimoldenberg replied. "Because, if I actually wanted to fall in love, maybe it would have happened by now." Dimoldenberg pressed Pause again: this was useful material. "I like that, because I'm talking about the story arc of the show," she said. She pressed Play and watched as she turned the conversation back to Erivo.

"I feel like you are very good at being sincere—you have a sincerity about you that I run away from in my own life, and I just hide it with flirting," Dimoldenberg said. "Have you always been able to be naturally sincere?"

"I think so," Erivo said, utterly earnest. "I think I am actually interested in a person, and I think that makes it easy to be sincere, because I'm actually, like, listening, and I'm paying attention."

"See, I do that, I listen," Dimoldenberg replied, abruptly. "I then think, O.K., let's just move on."

"That doesn't to me sound like you're insincere. It sounds like there's, like, nervousness," Erivo said, gently. The exchange was no longer exactly Dimoldenberg's "Chicken Shop Date" character seeking to elicit a usable bit from her guest; it was the real Dimoldenberg seeking advice from someone she admired.

Dimoldenberg pressed Pause again and sighed. "I'm not really good at listening," she told me, with a tight laugh. "In the show, I don't really listen. When I'm watching the rushes back, I can see that someone said something, and then I asked them a completely different question, rather than asking a follow-up." She paused and considered this. "But it's kind of created the energy of the show, and my character." "Chicken Shop Date" had been built on Dimoldenberg's character being so insecure and self-involved that any deeper engagement with a guest was impossible—or at least impossible to include in the final edit. In reviewing the Erivo footage, though, Dimoldenberg could see the possibility of a different kind of exchange, one in which self-sabotage was replaced by a half-real, half-comedic pursuit of greater mutual understanding, and even self-knowledge.

The Erivo episode wasn't Dimoldenberg's funniest, but it was winning nonetheless, with Dimoldenberg striving to match Erivo's empathetic energy, rather than Erivo being obliged to match spiky wits with Dimoldenberg. Dimoldenberg's plans for her comedy career will eventually require her to retire the "Chicken Shop Date" format, perhaps sooner than her fans expect. Drake needs to get a move on. (He certainly could use a viral boost.) Increasingly, Dimoldenberg told me, she feels able to inhabit a larger emotional space. "Maybe before I was scared of being the real me," she said. "It's easier to hide behind a persona. Or this idea of 'It's funnier if you're a character—you're not funny enough on your own.'" Still, Dimoldenberg's wistfulness about her former guests—her "exes," as she calls them—is entirely genuine, and it's also familiar to anyone who has ever tried to bond with a stranger under charged circumstances, and to anyone who has ever hoped for that bond to last. "I always feel really connected to everyone on the show," she told me. "I think about them all the time. But they probably don't think about me." ♦

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A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE END OF CHILDREN

Birth rates are crashing around the world. What does that mean for our future?

BY GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

Societies do collapse, sometimes suddenly. Nevertheless, prophets of doom might keep in mind that their darkest predictions have been, on the whole, a little premature. In 1968, Paul Ehrlich, a lepidopterist, and his largely uncredited wife, Anne, published a best-seller called "The Population Bomb." For centuries, economists had worried that the world's food supply could not possibly be expected to keep pace with the growing mobs of people. Now there was no postponing our fate. "The battle to feed all of humanity is over," Ehrlich wrote. "In the 1970s the world will undergo famines—hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death." This was the received wisdom of the era: a decade earlier, an only slightly flippant article in *Science* estimated that in November, 2026, the global population would approach infinity. Ehrlich prescribed a few sane proposals—the legalization of abortion, investments in contraception research, and sex education—but he also floated the idea of spiking the water supply with temporary sterilants. Americans might protest such extreme measures, he allowed, but people in foreign countries should have no choice. It was only reasonable that food aid be conditioned on the developing world's ability to exhibit civilized restraint. Nations that tolerated a free-for-all of unrepentant copulation—he singled out India—would be left to fend for themselves.

"The Population Bomb" transformed regional unease into a global panic. India, in less than two years, subjected millions of citizens to compulsory sterilization. China rolled out a series of initiatives—culminating in the infamous one-child policy—that included punitive fines, obligatory IUD insertions, and unwanted abortions. Ehrlich can hardly be blamed for the most coercive incarnations of population control. He might, however, be accused of impeccable comic timing. By the time "The Population Bomb" was published, the population-growth rate had already peaked. For hundreds of thousands of years, we had gone forth and multiplied. This epoch was coming to an end.

The "total fertility rate" is a coarse estimate of the number of children an average woman will bear. A population will be stable if it reproduces at the "replacement rate," or about 2.1 babies per mother. (The .1 is the statistical laundering of great personal tragedy.) Anything above that threshold will theoretically generate exponential expansion, and anything below it will generate exponential decay. In 1960, the tiny country of Singapore had a fertility rate of almost six. By 1985, it had been brought down to 1.6—a rate that threatened to roughly halve its population in two generations. As the economist Nicholas Eberstadt told me, "For two decades, the leaders of Singapore said, 'Oh, uncontrolled fertility has terribly dangerous consequences, so the rate has to come down,' and then, after a semicolon, without even catching their breath, said, 'Wait, I mean go up.'" The nation's leaders launched a promotional campaign: "Have-Three-or-More (if you can afford it)." Singaporeans were known to be good national sports, but, despite the catchiness of the slogan, they proved noncompliant. From one nation to the next, the nightmare of too many descendants turned into the nightmare of too few. In 2007, when Japan's total fertility rate hit 1.3, a conservative government minister referred to women as "birth-giving machines." This didn't go over particularly well with anyone, including his wife.

Today, declining fertility is a near-universal phenomenon. Albania, El Salvador, and Nepal, none of them affluent, are now below replacement levels. Iran's fertility rate is half of what it was thirty years ago. Headlines about "Europe's demographic winter" are commonplace. Giorgia Meloni, the Prime Minister of Italy, has said that her country is "destined to disappear." One Japanese economist runs a conceptual clock that counts down to his country's final child: the current readout is January 5, 2720.

It will take a few years before we can be sure, but it's possible that 2023 saw the world as a whole slump beneath the replacement threshold for the first time. There are a couple of places where fertility remains higher—Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa—but even there the rates are generally diminishing. Paranoia has ensued. In the past year, hundreds of men in the Central African Republic have reported the presumably delusional belief that their genitals have gone missing. In Nigeria, where the fertility rate has fallen from seven to four, a widely read tabloid blamed a conspiracy of perverts in the French intelligence services who had been "using secret nanotechnology innovations to steal penises from African men in order to reverse the extinction of Europeans unwilling to bear children."

The phenomenon exerts a peculiarly deranging force, and until recently Americans remained oblivious. In the past two decades, however, the American fertility rate has dropped roughly twenty per cent, to 1.6. The right wing sees depopulation as a greater threat than climate change. Elon Musk describes it as "the biggest danger civilization faces by far," and is trying, in his quiet way, to compensate on his own. He has sired, at least in a technical sense, thirteenish known children, and has reportedly offered the dispensation of his sperm to friends, employees, and people he met once at a dinner party. (Musk denies this. Skeptics of the strategy, though, might recall that Genghis Khan, according to legend, had more than a thousand offspring.) Vice-President J. D. Vance has blamed this "catastrophic problem" on the "childless



If current trends hold, every hundred Koreans of childbearing age will produce, in total, about twelve grandchildren.

ILLUSTRATION BY JAVIER JAÉN

left." Liberals more often dismiss the issue, not without reason, as scaremongering in service of the Republican assault on reproductive rights. Some go further: a dwindling population is a more environmentally sustainable one.

Anyone who offers a confident explanation of the situation is probably wrong. Fertility connects perhaps the most significant decision any individual might make with unanswerable questions about our collective fate, so a theory of fertility is necessarily a theory of everything—gender, money, politics, culture, evolution. Eberstadt told me, "The person who explains it deserves to get a Nobel, not in economics but in literature."

The global population is projected to grow for about another half century. Then it will contract. This is unprecedented. Almost nothing else can be said with any certainty. Here and there, however, are harbingers of potential futures. South Korea has a fertility rate of 0.7. This is the lowest rate of any nation in the world. It may be the lowest in recorded history. If that trajectory holds, each successive generation will be a third the size of its predecessor. Every hundred contemporary Koreans of childbearing age will produce, in total, about twelve grandchildren. The country is an outlier, but it may not be one for long. As the Korean political analyst John Lee told me, "We are the canary in the coal mine."

In Seoul, an endless, futuristic sprawl of Samsung- and LG-fabricated high-rises, an imminent shortage of people seems preposterous. The capital city's metropolitan area, home to twenty-six million citizens, or about half of all South Koreans, is perhaps the most densely settled region in the industrialized world. When I visited, in November, I was advised to withdraw my phone from my pocket on the metro platform, because it would be impossible to do so once on board the train. Fuchsia metro seats are reserved for pregnant women. Those who aren't yet showing are awarded special medallions as proof of gestation. A looping instructional video reminded passengers of the proper etiquette. Even amid the rush-hour crush, these seats were often left vacant. They seemed to represent less a practical consideration than an act of unanchored faith—like a place for Elijah at a Seder table.

Portents of desolation are everywhere. Middle-aged Koreans remember a time when children were plentiful. In 1970, a million Korean babies were born. An average baby-boomer classroom had seventy or eighty pupils, and schools were forced to divide their students into morning and afternoon shifts. It is as though these people were residents of a different country. In 2023, the number of births was just two hundred and thirty thousand. A baby-formula brand has retooled itself to manufacture muscle-retention smoothies for the elderly. About two hundred day-care facilities have been turned into nursing homes, sometimes with the same directors, the same rubberized play floors, and the same crayons. A rural school has been repurposed as a cat sanctuary. Every Korean has heard that their population will ineluctably approach zero. Cho Youngtae, a celebrity demographer at Seoul National University, said to me, "Ask people on the street, 'What is the Korean total fertility rate?' and they will know!" They often know to two decimal places. They have a celebrity demographer.

Outside of Seoul, children are largely phantom presences. There are a hundred and fifty-seven elementary schools that had no new enrollees scheduled for 2023. That year, the seaside village of Iwonmyeon recorded a single newborn. The entire town was garlanded with banners that congratulated the parents by name "on the birth of their lovely baby angel." One village in Haenam, a county that encompasses the southern extremity of the Korean peninsula, last registered a birth during the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

Haenam disappears into the sea at a windswept cape called Ttangkkeut, or "End of the World." Not far away, there is a school that once had more than a thousand elementary-age students. When I visited, in November, it had five. A pastel rainbow brightened the façade, and out front was a statue of a singlet-clad boy with a raised torch; the plinth's inscription read "Physical strength is national strength." A pair of slippers had been left for me at the entryway, beside a trophy case crowded with bygone glories and a laminated poster that introduced the names and career aspirations of the three first graders (policeman, architect, idol singer) and the two sixth graders (truck driver, fighter pilot). In a memorable scene in Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film, "Children of Men," a dystopian vision of a sterile world, a deer bounds through a trash-strewn school hallway. Here, dereliction was kept at bay: the corridors were bright, broom-swept, and freshly painted. The former chambers of a departed principal, dusted as if in anticipation of parent conferences, were spectral; the empty room next door had a hulking public-address console, with five microphones set at varying heights. It was as if everyone had evaporated overnight.

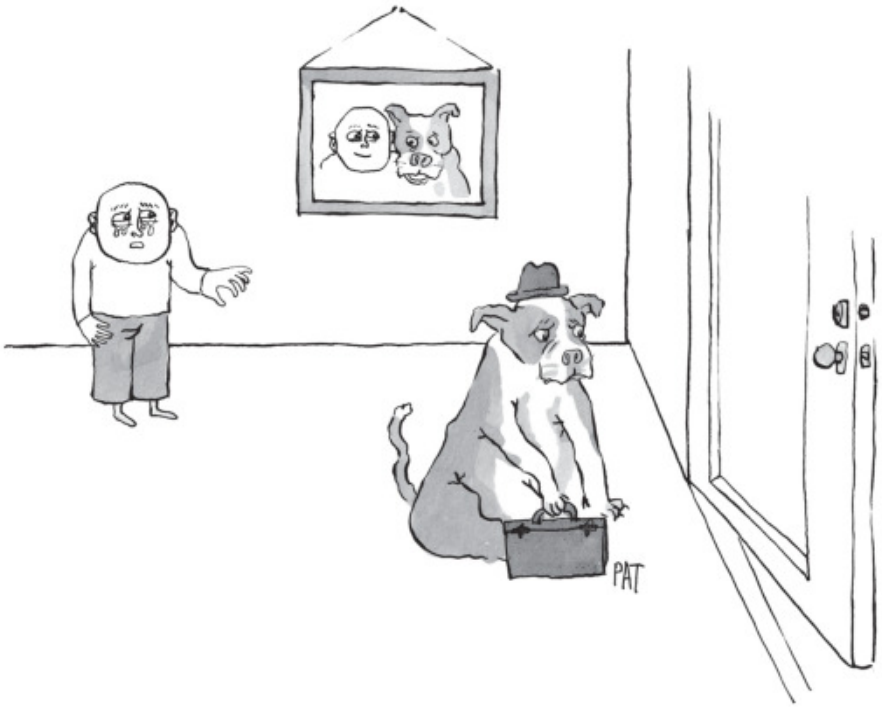
The school administrator, Lee Youngmi, efficiently if warily welcomed me into a main office lined with spotless devices—a spiral-binding machine, a laminator—and offered me ginger tea and cookies. When she'd first arrived, ten years ago, there were sixty students. But the surrounding town had since drained away. The large cattle market, which used to be candlelit until well after dark, is gone, as are the brewery, the lumber mill, the police station, and the post office. Parents fought to preserve the school as a center of civic life, but their children now complained that there was no one left to play with. Teachers called the current group of students, in a reference to an old Korean superhero cartoon, the Eagle Five Brothers. Lee was accustomed to solitude. When she left me in the room, she reflexively flicked off the heating.

The sixth-grade teacher, Kang Wooyoung, a man in his twenties, had a similar air of resignation. His two students had been together since they reached school age. When I asked if they got along, he seemed baffled by the question: they fought sometimes, sure, but they didn't know any other children their age. "The advantage is that I can be super intimate with the students," he said. "The disadvantage is that they cannot learn to socialize in a group setting." One of his sixth graders was disabled; a special-education teacher was retained on his behalf, but the line item was hard to justify. The patterns of the children's lives were unlikely to be upended by the arrival of a strange new kid or the torment of an unapproachable crush. The school may be closing next year. Kang had loved his first teaching job, his own childhood dream. But he didn't have any friends in town, either.

The after-school program was about

to start. It featured two options: 3-D printing and something Lee called "a new sport." She could give me no details on the new sport, which was played on Tuesdays. In the past, they had offered volleyball, badminton, and soccer, but such extravagances required a critical mass. She let me wander the school, which felt like a museum of childhood artifacts: an unlit but well-stocked gymnasium, a darkened cafeteria outfitted with a little proscenium stage, enormous forsaken playgrounds, ballfields gone wild. The only apparent concession to the demographic reality was a robotic apparatus for playing Ping-Pong by yourself.

The end of the world is usually dramatized as convulsive and feverish, but population loss is an apocalypse on an installment plan. At one point in "Children of Men," the protagonist, played by Clive Owen, regards a private archive of cultural treasures—Michelangelo's "David," Picasso's "Guernica"—and turns to its proprietor to say, "A hundred years from now there won't be one sad fuck to look at any of this. What keeps you going?" The man responds, "I just don't think about it."



"Stay…"

• •

Hysteria about the number of children is often an alibi for hysteria about who is having them. In the first decades of the Roman Empire, Augustus Caesar grew fixated on the decadent urban élite's apparent refusal to perpetuate itself. The patrician class, he said, was betraying the country "by rendering her barren"; to deny their ancestors the immortality of their lineage was an act "worse than murder." In 9 A.D., he legislated that high-status men who remained single by the age of twenty-five would forfeit their inheritances. In addition, the élites were forbidden to marry actors. Their infertility probably owed less to dalliances with thespians than it did to the presence of lead in their utensils, cosmetics, and pipes. Either way, their biological legacies were in fact extinguished: imperial Roman urbanites left little detectable genetic trace in subsequent Europeans. The population as a whole, however, was fine.

Aside from the blips of the Mongol invasions, the Black Death, and the Thirty Years' War, the human number in Eurasia grew steadily, if slowly, for the bulk of the next two millennia. As the economist Thomas Malthus famously observed, the only effective deterrent to the otherwise consuming "passion between the sexes" was the fear that one's children would starve to death. Families were just large enough to compensate for the fact that nearly half of all babies born would never celebrate their fifth birthday. In about 1805, we crossed the threshold of a billion people. That had taken the entirety of human history. Our next billion took just a hundred and twenty-three years.

This population explosion coincided, oddly, with a downward fertility drift in Europe. The pioneers were French aristocrats: in the interest of consolidating familial wealth and prestige, the nobility increasingly delayed marriage, and then sought to limit the number of offspring who might expect their share of an inheritance. This made sense. But the practices diffused, through mimicry, to the lower orders. This made less sense. Evolutionary imperatives, it seemed, could be eclipsed by cultural contagion.

By the twentieth century, more rational explanations had caught up. An industrializing economy no longer required children to help on the farm. Women were free to enter the workplace. At the same time, improvements in medicine and sanitation radically reduced the rate of childhood mortality. Children became capital assets, and investments in their education were understood to beget healthy returns. Economists likened this to other consumer durables: as families get richer, they don't just keep buying cars; they buy nicer ones.

If economic prosperity decreased fertility, it seemed intuitive that lower fertility should, in turn, increase prosperity. During the Cold War, population control came to be seen as a kind of master key—a panacea for social and political ills. In a forthcoming book, "Toxic Demography," the scholar Jennifer Sciubba and her co-authors write that American élites believed "population growth caused poverty, and poverty caused communism." It was in the best interests of the West, leaders such as President Lyndon Johnson affirmed, to subsidize the proliferation of birth control and sex education. It was unfortunate but apparently unavoidable that the principal instrument of family planning was the female body. The president of Planned Parenthood, an organization founded in alignment with the eugenicist sympathies of early-twentieth-century

progressive movements, warned that an overly precious concern for "individual women" would impede progress: "We dare not lose sight of our goals—to apply this method to large populations."

South Korea stood at the vanguard. A decade after the Korean War, the country's per-capita G.D.P. was below a hundred dollars—less than that of Haiti. People ate tree bark or boiled grass, and children begged in the streets. After a military coup in 1961, the new authoritarian leadership tied its economic program to the cultivation of a citizenry that was smaller and better educated. It was an all-hands-on-deck approach to the labor force. Social workers fanned out to rural communities, where they encouraged women to have no more than three children. The government legalized contraceptives and pressed for the use of IUDs. These initiatives dovetailed with an emphasis on ethnic homogeneity and traditionalist values. Biracial children of American servicemen, along with the children of unwed mothers, were shipped abroad for adoption, and Korea became known as the world's largest "exporter" of babies.



The program was regarded as a smashing success. In the span of twenty years, Korea's fertility rate went from six to replacement, a feat described by Asian demographers as "one of the most spectacular and fastest declines ever recorded." A crucial part of this plan was the educational advancement of women, which the same demographers called "unprecedented in the recent history of the world." Far fewer Koreans came into existence, but those who did enjoyed a similarly improbable rise in their standard of living. Parents who remembered hunger produced children who could afford cosmetic surgery.

Fertility all of a sudden seemed like a knob that governments could turn at will. It was simply assumed that the "demographic transition"—the shift from many deaths and many babies to far fewer of both—would settle naturally around the replacement rate. Like a restaurant at capacity, our unconscious maître d's would regulate our numbers on a one-in, one-out basis. It never really occurred to anyone that governments might want to turn the knob the other way.

Except, as a Dutch demographer once dryly put it, "the drive in human populations to procreate may long have been over-estimated." When Korea neared replacement, in 1983, its leadership might have reconsidered its policies. Instead, it doubled down with a new slogan: "Even two are too many." By 1986, the Korean fertility rate reached 1.6. This remained stable for about a decade, then fell off a cliff. The government has now devoted approximately two hundred and fifty billion dollars to various pro-natalist efforts, including cash transfers and parental-leave extensions, to no avail. Two years ago, the legendary feminist legal scholar Joan Williams was shown the most recent Korean fertility data for a documentary. She drew her hands to her face in open-mouthed shock—like Edvard Munch's "Scream"—and the image instantly became a meme.

Korea's demographic collapse is mostly taken as a fait accompli. As John Lee, the political analyst, put it, "They say South Korea will be extinct in a hundred years. Who cares? We'll all be dead by then." The causes routinely cited include the cost of housing and of child care—among the highest in the world. Very little in Korean society seems to give young people the impression that child rearing might be rewarding or delightful. I met a stylish twentysomething news reporter at an airy, silent café in Seoul's lively Itaewon district. "People hate kids here," she told me. "They see kids and say, 'Ugh.'" This ambient resentment finds an outlet in disdain for mothers. She said, "People call moms 'bugs' or 'parasites.' If your kids make a little noise, someone will glare at you." She had recently vacationed in Rome, where adults drank at bars while their kids ran amok. She said, "Here, people would say, 'What the hell are you doing?'"

The online responses to media accounts of the crisis tend to be aggressively cynical: "Just wait, we can go lower than that," or "You can't just birth the slaves." The reporter said, "When I write about this, I think, Well, what would change *my* mind? The answer is nothing. It's the norm not to want kids." Like many Koreans, she dotes on her dog. Finding gifts in Seoul for my two little soccer fanatics at home required deliberate planning—I schlepped all over town looking for national-team jerseys in child's sizes and had to settle for black-market knockoffs—but there is a pet depot on practically every block. Last year, strollers for dogs outsold those for babies. She said, "I'm not saying people value dogs more than they value children." She paused to gesture to the other patrons: "But all you have to do is look around."

American conservatives have become preoccupied with foreshadowings of "civilizational suicide." A year ago, the *Times* columnist Ross Douthat, a father of five, published an opinion piece that invoked the Korean example as a "warning about what's possible for us." America's birth rate started to slip in 2008, with the onset of the financial crisis; by 2022, the U.S. had caught up, or perhaps caught down, with the Korea of the nineteen-eighties. Douthat and others see worrisome parallels here: marriage rates are in retreat; gender polarization is rising; young people aren't even having sex for fun, let alone productively; the meritocracy is a grind; we're all rotting in front of our phones. Douthat has been circumspect about the issue in a way that MAGA Republicans are not. The Trump Administration's new Transportation Secretary has already instructed his department to prioritize "communities with marriage and birth rates higher than the national average." As the young right-wing activist Charlie Kirk put it last summer, "The childless are the ones that are destroying the country."

A childless vacuum, by this account, is the future liberals want. Kirk's conservative compatriots point to such examples as the young progressive activist David Hogg, who once tweeted that he would "much rather own a Porsche and have a Portuguese water dog and golden doodle" than have children. "Long term it's cheaper, better for the environment and will never tell you that it hates you or ask you to pay for college." These liberal caricatures perceive family commitments as a drag on "self-actualization," which often becomes an excuse for hedonism. Conservatives instead call for a rehabilitation of family values. The "trad wives"

of social media make cornflakes from scratch and would never let their husbands milk the cows. As the self-described "domestic extremist" Peachy Keenan has put it, "The home with the mom and dad is the little factory to produce the future, like, literally." Others have reached for more nefarious explanations for languishing birth rates. Tucker Carlson made a documentary about "collapsing testosterone levels" in America; a far-right influencer known as Raw Egg Nationalist blames endocrine disruptors in perfume. There is no evidence, however, that the epidemic is one of infecundity. It may be wishful to think so: it's easier to avoid leaden dishware than it is to reinvigorate a society's desire for children.

The narrative of moral decay also sits uneasily with the underlying data. In 2011, forty-five per cent of American pregnancies were unplanned. This has come down dramatically, in large part owing to an astonishing reduction in the incidence of teen-age pregnancy. Fresh-faced "trad" milkmaids, for their part, do not seem to have more children. Where female professional ambition once tracked with smaller families, this is no longer the case: in Tunisia and in southern India, where women make up a very small fraction of the labor market, fertility has dropped below replacement. Recent research indicates that fertility rates now trend higher in countries where more women work. In America, the decline cuts across demographic groups. Even Mormons are barely replacing themselves.

Carlson has accused liberals of a plan to replace native-born Americans with immigrants. Even if this were true, it might not be the most provident strategy. Studies have shown that newcomers from high-fertility countries tend to adopt the reproductive customs of their host nation within a generation. Hispanic women account for a large share of America's recent fertility decline. Only two communities appear to be maintaining very high fertility: ultra-Orthodox Jews and some Anabaptist sects. The economist Robin Hanson's back-of-the-envelope calculations suggest that twenty-third-century America will be dominated by three hundred million Amish people. The likeliest version of the Great Replacement will see a countryside dotted everywhere with handsome barns.

Fertility decline is a polarizing issue in Korea. Lee Jun-seok, a thirty-nine-year-old Harvard graduate who is sometimes compared to J. D. Vance, is the most popular conservative politician of his generation. We met late one Friday evening for beer and *soju*, and our conversation was interrupted every five minutes by drunk revellers who bowed deeply to him and took selfies. In the 2022 Korean Presidential race, Lee helped mobilize disaffected young men to turn out in support of the conservative candidate, who promised to abolish the gender ministry, which coördinates the country's equity policies. His victory, in what some observers called the "incel election," prefigured Trump's triumph last year. Lee told me, "When many women get to thirty-five, they start bitching about being duped by the feminists who told them they could have it all. It's literally impossible for them to meet someone with the same socioeconomic status at that point, so they have to degrade themselves. Now half of us are unmarried, and I'm part of that." When I asked about his American analogue, he said, "J. D. Vance should not have been talking in a way that stereotyped people." He paused, then continued, "Although in Korea there's more of a reality of childless cat ladies."

If Koreans aren't reproducing, it's not for lack of traditionalism. Their culture, as one pro-natalist told me, is already "based." Pornography and sex work are illegal, and abortion was decriminalized only a few years ago. A negligible proportion of Korean babies are born out of wedlock. Korean men don't do much at home, and those who do are often branded "*pongpongnam*," a reference to dish soap that means "foamy man." Paternity leave remains relatively rare, and men who take it are called "latte papas," as if they're using the leave as a vacation. Women fear they are assigned low-level professional tasks in anticipation of their departure from the labor force. As Kim Jeongmin, the editorial director of the news organization Korea Pro, told me, "In H.R. interviews, women feel pressured to show that they're so dedicated to their careers that they have no plans to get married."

The insinuation that women are at fault for the demographic crisis has turned gender friction into gender war. In 2016, the Korean government issued a "birth map," in which, as one blogger put it, "They counted fertile women like they counted the number of livestock." A conservative member of the National Assembly recruited his own chorus line to demonstrate a novel dance move he thought might help strengthen women's pelvic floors. Many young women now



"I'm just spitballing, but it might be fun if your next play was about a lone skull making his way in the big city."

flirt with the "4B" mentality, a term for those who eschew dating, sex, marriage, and children; some even forgo friendships with men. Yeho, a nineteen-year-old sophomore at a prominent women's college in Seoul, described the routine misogyny of her male classmates in high school: boys habitually recited lines they'd heard in porn, or illegally circulated pornographic memes.

She had no interest in dating or children. She told me, "They might not grow up well, or they might fall into an incel community—and, besides, children aren't a necessary part of the good life." Women in her mother's generation often regretted the sacrifices they had been expected to make, and they raised their daughters to prioritize their careers. Yeho's college has an anonymous Reddit-like forum. The basic ground rule, she said, was that "to give space to feeling good about men and relationships is to ignore or minimize the dark side. Posts about heterosexual romance require a trigger warning!" The most common such advisory is a derogatory portmanteau of the words "love" and "hate." In one typical reply, a woman wrote, "Can you please stop posting about dating, it's secondhand embarrassment? Your dick-to-ride-on is not special at all, seriously."

I asked around in Seoul about where I might encounter children in the wild, and was directed to Daechi-dong, an affluent neighborhood notorious for its gated high-rise fortresses, luxury S.U.V.s, and after-school academies, or *hagwons*. These institutions have names such as Groton, Swaton International, and Emilton Academy, and each has its own faux heraldry. The most privileged students spend their afternoons, evenings, and weekends at as many as a dozen different *hagwons*. Eighty per cent of Korean families purchase private education; poor families tend to spend as much on *hagwons* as on groceries. Aggregate spending on educational enrichment exceeds the R. & D. expenditures of Samsung, a conglomerate that makes up a fifth of the entire Korean economy. At school dismissal, students climb into yellow buses that ferry them from one *hagwon* to the next. Through the plate-glass window of a building stacked with *hagwons*, I could see an orderly queue of elementary schoolers—so colorful, so small—awaiting their turn in the elevator.

Koreans cite the pressures and costs of excessive education as a large part of their reluctance to have children. (American parents in liberal enclaves might share a version of these misgivings.) An auspicious Korean childhood culminates in acceptance to one of Seoul's three most prestigious universities. Admission is primarily based on a student's performance on the national collegiate entrance exam, or Suneung, which is administered every year on a Thursday in November. The opening of the stock market is delayed that day, and many construction sites are closed. Bus and metro services are increased to ease traffic congestion. Students running late may avail themselves of a police-motorcycle escort. During the English-comprehension section, which requires absolute silence, air-traffic control suspends all takeoffs and landings.

At some *hagwons*, fifth graders learn calculus. Elementary students take premed courses. Some focus on sports or musical instruments. There's a Korean saying that "a dragon emerges from a small stream"—that talent can be identified and nurtured in any backwater. But the political analyst John Lee, who was once a *hagwon* instructor, was dubious about this meritocratic ideal: "I was given a score range for students. If I gave a score that was too high, the parents would think that their children should be at a 'better' *hagwon*. If I gave a score that was too low, the parents

IZZY KASOFF

Who was he, why was he the one assigned
To drive me from the house to the cemetery?

The two of us in his Buick or Packard or some
Colonial make, De Soto, Pontiac, Plymouth.

I don't remember who had died, what aunt
Or uncle or cousin we were going to bury.

I don't know why he spent the hour-long drive
Lecturing a twelve-year-old about the faults

Of Peggy Lee, whose singing he denounced.
I barely knew who she was. Maybe he'd heard

That I was "musical." I do remember
That was the year new cars were all bright colors:

Two-toned vermillion and baby blue, heraldic
Wing shapes with edgy arabesques of chrome.

Some other uncle explained that ten years after
The war it was to hell with black and khaki,

People want spices. On the road to the graveyard,
Maybe the singer and I both stunk of the present

To Izzy Kasoff, who married Dave Pinsky's sister
And adopted Dave's daughter when the mother died—

Maybe his grievance was with not death or music
But the great story of it all becoming past.

—Robert Pinsky

would think, This is wasting my money, it's not working." Some *hagwons* are extremely selective. As one young woman said, "If you don't go to a certain one, you're not part of the group." Historically, at the strictest cram schools, social interactions were carefully circumscribed. Some forbade any conversation between boys and girls that were not directly related to study. Hugging, or the exchange of romantic notes, might have resulted in bathroom-cleaning duty.

Four out of five children in Korea today describe school as a "battlefield." In 2012, the advocacy group World Without Worries About Private Education helped develop an ad campaign that showed a baby bottle full of fried rice, with a caption that read, "Mom! It's too early for me." Curfew laws prohibit *hagwon* classes after about 10 or 11 P.M. The issue nonetheless remains a society-wide prisoner's dilemma, and even those who strenuously object in principle frequently relent in practice. When I visited the advocacy group, one employee told me, "In the macro, everyone understands it's a problem, but in the micro, for *my* family, and *my* kids, I have to do it." When I commented that the children must be miserable, he corrected me: "If you don't send them, the kids feel bad! That's the only place they can see their friends, because no one is at the playground." The leading cause of death among young Koreans is suicide. More than one Korean described their culture to me as "broken."

It is not easy to opt out of the system. One morning, I met with half a dozen members of an unorthodox day-care collective in a neighborhood called Hapjeong. This patch of Seoul, they told me, was distinctive for its lack of chain stores, and they convened at an otherwise empty local bakery; it was next to a Starbucks, across the street from two other Starbucks, and catty-corner from a fourth Starbucks. Forty years ago, Seoul had practically no child care. Some working parents locked their children in their apartments and hoped for the best. Children died in house fires. In 2002, a group of grassroots organizers formed this communal alternative.

The current parents were nostalgic for their own alleyway childhoods. An artist named Daum told me that, when he was young, "if you kicked a ball into someone else's property, you went and rang the doorbell and got it back." That city no longer existed: "Now you get yelled at—'You could've broken my window!'" There's a special word for noise between floors. Complaints forced Daum and his wife, Dani, to leave their previous building; one neighbor said, "I can't stand your children anymore!"

The day care took the kids outside every day. They learned about plants and animals, and were taught to mark the seasons with the old festival days. The use of standard honorifics was discouraged, and children spoke to teachers in "half speak," the register ordinarily reserved for informal address. The parents agreed not to send their children to *hagwons* for the time being. This ethic of mutual care had made parenting "less scary," one mother remarked. Still, when their children aged out, they would be fed to the educational machine. Another mother said, "When they get to normal elementary school, the other little kids are already accustomed to a full-day schedule—they have more stamina, they're used to *hagwons*—but these kids are still used to nap time."

Hwang Ock-kyeung, the president of a government-sponsored think tank, told me that changes in policy can't mend a culture that marginalizes children. "My own employees tell me their babies look alien to them," she said. "Young people want the government to increase the child-care hours, but then the time people spend with their children decreases!" An obsession with social status turns children into tokens of parental achievement: "Many parents take the subsidies and spend more money on extra *hagwons*, and that becomes a vicious cycle." Enhanced professional productivity for parents, and the ability to enjoy one's free time, were not just collateral benefits. She added, "There's a reason that if you go to Daechi-dong you'll see *hagwons* and Pilates in the same building."

Just before Christmas, when a viral tweet announced a record low for American fertility, some liberals blew confetti. One young woman was retweeted twenty-six thousand times for writing, "Amazing keep it up everybody!!!!!!" A comedian urged her followers to "HOLD THE LINE!!!!!" Last year, the philosopher Anastasia Berg and the editor Rachel Wiseman, who seem otherwise unimpeachably progressive, published a book called "What Are Children For?" It builds to a thoughtful, nuanced, heavily qualified endorsement of childbearing as kinda nice. In a scathing review, the writer Moira Donegan observed that ambivalent American women do not lack for such counsel. Any leftist who feels the need to emphasize that babies are good, Donegan argues, might not be a leftist after all: "It may be that on some level, perhaps not always a conscious one, the millennial pro-natalists are trying to convince American women that the freedom they lost with Roe v. Wade was not worth having."

Given the stakes for reproductive autonomy, Donegan's reservations are entirely comprehensible. Most left-leaning Americans are similarly distrustful of the pro-natalist discourse. Leigh Senderowicz, a feminist demographer at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told me, "There is fundamentally no way to do this that doesn't end up treating women's bodies as a tool." According to the U.N., countries with pro-natalist policies tend to be less democratic. A baby-bonus initiative in Italy's Piedmont region was given a name and logo that seemed an awful lot like an homage to Fascism. Eberstadt, the economist, told me, "In China, the mechanics are in place to say, 'Oh, I'm sorry, Miss Wong, you can't fly on airplanes anymore, because you're unmarried.'" Local Party officials are already knocking on doors to track menstrual cycles. The Russian government recently passed a law that criminalizes "child-free propaganda," potentially including the representation of a happily childless couple on television or social media.

Some progressives seem fine with child-free propaganda. The BirthStrike Movement proclaims that "not having children is the single most impactful decision that a person can make to reverse climate change." This might seem sensible, but depopulation will happen far too slowly to alleviate the worst effects of climate change. The children who would have traded their own existence for a cooler planet have already been born. In "What Are Children For?," Berg and Wiseman suggest that such environmental logic provides a cloak of moral legitimacy for personal preferences that feel otherwise difficult

to articulate. One scholar called this the "socio-political weaponization of fertility."

Liberals are right to point to immigration as the obvious way to mitigate the economic effects of demographic contraction. Italy currently has a shortage of nurses, and Germany has a shortage of plumbers; a baby born today does nothing to unclog a Düsseldorf sink. Even immigration, however, is a stopgap measure: by 2100, ninety-seven per cent of the world's countries are predicted to be below replacement. In the meantime, pro-immigration policies will continue to generate nativist backlashes. Last year, Seoul sponsored a pilot program to import a hundred nannies from the Philippines. The project, despite its lack of ambition, was wildly controversial. This was perhaps unsurprising: Korean women have been known to berate their Vietnamese daughters-in-law for peeling apples in the wrong direction. American liberals are quick to associate the fear of cultural corrosion with xenophobia. But Korea was long a vassal state of China, and then a Japanese colony, so the question of civilizational survival has a slightly different valence there than it does here. And even liberals tend to get understandably sentimental about, say, the loss of linguistic diversity. The Finnish demographer Anna Rotkirch pointed out to me that fewer than ten thousand babies were born in Estonia last year. "What will happen to the Estonian language?" she asked. "Seriously, this is not a far-off thing!"

The most sophisticated liberal arguments interpret fertility decline as a symptom of more serious underlying problems—economic precarity and an "incomplete" gender revolution. Men and women alike struggle to provide for their families, but the participation of fathers at home has not caught up to the participation of mothers at work. A more generous welfare state, and a more equitable culture, should therefore produce more children. This does not seem to be the case. Finland famously provides all new parents with "baby boxes" full of useful, high-quality products, and Sweden has normalized extended parental leave, especially for fathers, and flexible work hours. The Nordic countries are wonderful places to be parents, but their fertility rates are lower than our own. These trends are not reducible to budgetary concerns. Child care is virtually free in Vienna and extremely expensive in Zurich, but the Austrians and the Swiss have the same fertility rate.

The incidence of childlessness among Democrats is significantly higher than it is among Republicans. This appears in part to be an artifact of educational polarization. Lower fertility rates seem correlated with the perception that proper child development depends upon enormous amounts of personal attention. Some economists attribute our recent fertility slide to a generational shift: people who were born in the nineties are less likely to remember a time when children were largely left alone. Working mothers today devote more time to active child care than stay-at-home mothers did in previous generations. Mothers with a college degree spend about four more hours per week with their children than mothers without one, and they are also less likely to live in proximity to extended family. In an economy biased in favor of highly skilled employees, a protracted education followed by a long career apprenticeship seems like the only way to secure a dependable income. But the longer people wait to try to form a family, the less likely they are to have one.

We all might agree that everyone deserves the financial security to afford the number of children they desire. The word "afford," however, means different things to different people, and in the coastal precincts of "achievement culture" it has been inflated to encompass individual bedrooms, piano lessons, travel lacrosse teams, Russian math, and single-origin organic peanut butter.

For most of human history, having children was something the majority of people simply did without thinking too much about it. Now it is one competing alternative among many. The only overarching explanation for the global fertility decline is that once childbearing is no longer seen as something special—as an obligation to God, to one's ancestors, or to the future—people will do less of it. It is misogynistic to equate reproductive autonomy with self-indulgence, and child-free people often devote themselves to loving, conscientious caretaking. At the same time, we should be able to acknowledge that there is something slightly discomforting about a world view that weighs children against expensive dinners or vacations to Venice—as matters of mere preference in a logic of consumption.

In the southern city of Gangjin, I stopped at a coffee shop and encountered a sign on the entrance that read "This is a no-kids zone. The child is not at fault. The problem is the parents who do not take care of the child." The doors of Korean establishments are frequently emblazoned with such prohibitions. The only children I saw on Seoul's public transit were foreigners. Kim Kyu-jin, who is by all accounts part of Korea's first openly lesbian couple with a child, told me, "Five years ago, we didn't think too deeply about 'no-kids zones.' Now we think it's discriminatory. We always call places beforehand to ask if we can bring our daughter." Children remain welcome and visible at malls. The Seoul government offers a "Multi-Child Happiness Card," which gives parents discounts at select amusement parks and theatres. When it was first introduced, you needed three kids to qualify; now you qualify with two. Daum, the artist, told me, "We joke that soon enough they're going to give the 'multiple-kids card' to households with only one."

It is a poignant irony that among Korea's few child-friendly places are former schools. In a picturesque river valley outside the northern city of Chuncheon, an old elementary school has been converted into a café and resort that resembles a high-end sanatorium, with blond wood and poured concrete. Alongside nostalgic references to the "innocent smiles of children long ago," its brochure offers a family photo-shoot package; the price includes basic retouching, although they promise not to "go overboard." For families who can't afford premium coffees, the Seoul government has repurposed a collection of rural schools as family campgrounds.

One lies in the mountains not far from the D.M.Z.; I visited at the tail end of foliage season. An uneven parking lot had been outfitted with a matrix of black tents erected atop low wooden platforms. The old cafeteria featured a few game tables. A pink-sweatsuited adolescent played a desultory Ping-Pong match against his uncle. The boy's father told me, "We come here with our children so

Michael Cunningham on Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain"

When I first read "Brokeback Mountain," Annie Proulx's seminal short story about gay cowboys in love, I wondered how I might carry it with me forever, literally, in the form of a tattoo. I'd loved countless stories before then but had never before felt the urge to actually wear one.

I did not tattoo even a single phrase anywhere on my body, although I can still feel the urge as powerfully, and mysteriously, as I did in 1997, the year that "Brokeback Mountain" was published. The urge is all the more mysterious for the fact that although I'm a gay man, I am now in my early seventies and have never ridden a horse, and am unlikely to become a cowboy. I don't expect ever to fully understand my desire to hold on to those two doomed cowboys in the most literal way possible.

The boys, Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist, not yet twenty years old, have taken summer jobs guarding sheep from coyotes in the Wyoming wilderness. Ennis and Jack come from practically nothing—little money, little education, little luck—and are doing whatever they need to do to survive until the nothing from which they emerged sucks them back in again. It's only the two of them up there on the mountain, with the sheep and the constant, watchful hunger of coyotes, waiting for Jack and Ennis to drop their guard for the several minutes it'd take to snatch a lamb and slice it open, as quick as unzipping a sleeping bag.

As far as we can tell, any attraction Ennis or Jack may have felt to another man has been repressed right out of existence. What they've both known of love is punishment for imaginary crimes, and a local religion that offers Jesus' tears of forgiveness in place of affection. And yet, alone together with only the sheep and the mountain, they soon fall almost violently in love.

Things aren't going to go well for them. They don't know that yet, and neither do we. But, about halfway into the story, Proulx abandons her customary prose style, which is as coiled as a rattlesnake and about as sentimental, in order to cut loose and give the boys their first moment of physical tenderness. Ennis comes up behind Jack and holds him:

> Stars bit through the wavy heat layers above the fire. Ennis's breath came slow and quiet, he hummed, rocked a little in the sparklight, and Jack leaned against the steady heartbeat, the vibrations of the humming like faint electricity and, standing, he fell into sleep that was not sleep but something else drowsy and tranced until Ennis, dredging up a rusty but still usable phrase from the childhood time before his mother died, said, "Time to hit the hay, cowboy. I got a go. Come on, you're sleepin on your feet like a horse," and gave Jack a shake, a push, and went off in the darkness.

Ennis has just repeated to Jack a few lines from his long-dead mother, to whom shows of affection did not come particularly naturally but whose spirit arises, nevertheless, to deliver a benediction that the living woman would have meant as mere domestic ritual. I wonder sometimes if most great love stories aren't also ghost stories, all the more so as we, temporarily still alive, speak unknowingly to our loved ones about the ways in which we'll come to haunt them: the off-kilter joke; the snatch of song; the imprecation to go to bed, for God's sake.

Life is generally all as ordinary as the rooms we rent, as the last bottle of beer when we forgot to buy more on our way home from work. It may, however, momentarily shed its ordinariness if, say, we pick up a magazine, take a swig of that last beer, start reading, and, before too much time has passed, ask ourselves, Is there any way I could render this story and myself inseparable, for the rest of my life?


FICTION

BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN

Cowboys and horses and long, lonely nights in the wilderness

BY ANNIE PROULX

October 13, 1997

Reading can, every once in a while, have an effect like that. You may pick up the right story on the right night and submit to a playful little shove from the boyfriend you'd almost stopped waiting for, in a place so remote that everything's possible. You may get yourself the slap of love from a dead woman—an invented dead woman, at that—who, as the ghost of a ghost, may convince you that you'll be back again in the morning, even as you head out into the darkness. ♦

To celebrate its centenary, The New Yorker has invited contributors to revisit notable works from the archive. See the collection at newyorker.com/takes.

we won't be bothered by other people's judgment." Outside, dry brown leaves blew around in a light rain, and most of the families huddled under awnings that had been installed to protect the tents. One solitary little girl played with a bright bird-shaped kite attached to a plastic fishing pole. As I left, I noticed a statue of a boy with a torch, identical to the one I'd seen at the school in Haenem, but considerably the worse for wear.

Countries have tried everything to reverse demographic collapse. In Hungary, women with four or more children gain a lifetime exemption from income tax. In Georgia, the Orthodox Patriarch offered to personally baptize any baby born to the parents of more than two children. Although some nations have stabilized at a low level, there is not a single modern example of one that has managed a sustained recovery from very low fertility to replacement. The world's most lavishly pro-natalist governments spend a fortune on incentives and services, and have increased the fertility rate by approximately a fifth of a baby per woman. Some observers believe that subsidies could succeed, but they would have to be on the order of three hundred thousand dollars per child.

One smoggy morning, I visited Oh Se-hoon, the mayor of Seoul, at his City Hall office, which recalled the captain's deck in a space opera. He has focussed primarily on the dire shortage of housing in Seoul, a city where almost fifty per cent of people now live alone. He listed his other initiatives: the Childbirth Encouragement Project, which included "eighty-seven subprojects," and the Mom and Dad Happiness Project, which comprised "twenty-eight subprojects." While the Mayor lectured me, a large screen on the far wall ticked through an optimistic slide show of inverted pyramids and other fanciful renderings of urban futurism. When I mentioned that some demographers now regard population decline as a phenomenon to be managed rather than remediated, he intimated that voters were an obstacle to more profound adjustments. On my way out, two of his aides directed my attention to a lobby café where espresso drinks were prepared by a robotic barista arm.

Some Korean companies pay their employees to have children, but the private sector now generally accepts that it must adapt to a world where children are luxuries. Analysts anticipate a hundred-and-sixty-billion-dollar "silver industry" to meet the needs of healthy pensioners. One travel agency expects that seniors, in the absence of grandchildren to spoil, will spend their disposable income on pricier trips. Conglomerates like Hyundai are planning high-end retirement communities for those who cannot rely on their families for elder-care. Companies that once catered to the mass market will have to pivot to a premium clientele. Samsung has long relied on wedding registries for the sales of large appliances. Cho, the celebrity demographer, praised a recent company plan to sell a few really fancy refrigerators in place of many adequate ones. The new line is called Samsung Bespoke.



"My productivity apps weren't working, so I hired a goon."

The United States is nowhere near the point of robotic baristas. The current "crisis" might well go the way of the population bomb. The sociologist Philip N. Cohen told me, "If you think you have a model now that predicts birth rates in two hundred years, you're just drawing lines on a chart." Most scholars deem our nascent panic to be counterproductive; in the reassuringly titled "Decline and Prosper!," from 2022, the Norwegian demographer Vegard Skirbekk reiterates that "low, but not too low," fertility is a good thing. There is, however, an asterisk attached to this. Two decades ago, Skirbekk helped contrive a thought experiment called "the low-fertility trap hypothesis," which proposed the possibility of an unrecoverable downward spiral. Ultra-low fertility meant far fewer babies, which meant far fewer people to have babies, or even to *know* babies; this feedback loop could even shift cultural norms so far that childlessness would become the default option.

This eventuality had seemed remote. Then it more or less happened in Korea. When I asked Skirbekk if other countries might follow suit, he replied, "Quite a few, possibly." Rotkirch, the Finnish demographer, underscored the notion that reproductive cues are social. "In a forthcoming survey, I want to ask, 'Have you ever had a baby in your arms?'" she told me. "I think in Finland it's a sizable portion that hasn't." These mimetic dynamics play out not just within coun-

tries but between them. Hwang Sun-jae, a sociologist who studies fertility norms, traces the swift dissemination of low fertility in part to social media's role as an accelerant of global monoculture. It has never been easier to acquaint yourself with the opportunity costs of childbearing—the glamorous destinations unvisited, the faddish foods uneaten. "People once had only local comparisons," he said. "Now they see other people's lives—in New York City and England and France—and they have a sense of relative deprivation: my life is not good enough."

The costs of an aging and diminished society feel more abstract. Last year, an online sketch portrayed a traditional Korean first-birthday celebration in ten years' time: the World Cup stadium hosts the festivities for a crowd of ten thousand, including the country's President. Regular life, in the video, is peppered with minor inconveniences: food orders can take more than ninety minutes. The actual inconveniences might not be as minor. By 2050, Korea's labor force will be about two-thirds of its current size, and food delivery might be a thing of the past. Cho advised the Nongshim noodle company that it would soon be impossible to hire anyone in Busan, Korea's second-largest city.

Retirement ages will continue to increase. Autocratic countries, where politicians can ignore older voters, might simply deny pensions to the childless. New forms of factionalism could test the limits of liberal coexistence. Younger workers in social democracies might increasingly resent the taxes they pay for entitlement programs that they will never themselves receive. Men, especially those of low status, are currently much less likely to have the number of children they desire, if they have children at all. If this trend continues, every election will be an incel election. In "The Children of Men," not the film but the original novel, by P. D. James, the social order cannot withstand such a void. Great Britain is an island of twilit senility overseen by a strict Warden. Basic infrastructure is shored up by an immigrant underclass, and the elderly are chained to barges that disappear beneath the sea. (A few years ago, Yusuke Narita, a Japanese economist at Yale, called upon Japanese seniors to perform seppuku.)

Many Koreans told me that they look forward to a society with less competition—a smaller, gentler world with a greater share of resources for all. In this picture, the future is exactly the same as the present, except with fewer people. It is just as probable, however, that inequality will increase. As universities close en masse, the remainder might prove even more selective. If Korea's labor force becomes insufficient to produce and distribute basic goods—a distinct possibility by the end of the century—they could be hoarded by those of means. The demographer Dean Spears noted that the more idiosyncratic our needs and desires the more we rely on the fact that other people share them: "If you need specialized medical care, you're less likely to find it in a rural place than in a big city, where there are more people who need the same sort of thing you need." If current trends continue, in several decades there will be many fewer Koreans, and virtually all of them will live in metropolitan Seoul—a city-state surrounded by wilderness, ruin, and, if they are lucky, robotic rice cultivation.

Economic prosperity has long relied on an expanding population to drive greater output, increased demand, and new markets. Advocates of degrowth have pointed out the manifest unsustainability of such intergenerational pyramid schemes, but their implosion will probably not be peaceful. If the bottom falls out of, say, the Chinese real-estate market—among the largest asset classes in the world—the entire global economy could totter. Iroquois "mourning wars" against neighboring tribes—raids to replenish their own numbers with captives—intensified in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, after disease and colonial violence depleted the nation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine seems to have been motivated in part by Vladimir Putin's desire to increase the motherland's quantity of ethnic Russians.

In a grotesque way, the "Mad Max" scenario represents a comforting fantasy. A steampunk world—with war-making vehicles lashed together from old radiators and Atari circuit boards—is at least a vital one. But a depopulated landscape might actually be characterized by quiescence. There is an extensive literature that links economic dynamism to youth. Young people, who have wilder imaginations and a greater appetite for risk, drive the bulk of entrepreneurial activity. For Elon Musk and his followers, children are technological lottery tickets: we never know which genetically enhanced baby might at last invent a functional warp drive. One technological pro-natalist told me, "We do not exist just to consume, and we don't want the end state of humanity to be the Villages in Florida."

The most persuasive aspect of technological pro-natalism is not what we might theoretically gain from a larger population. It is the foreboding of what we might lose with a diminished one. The evolutionary anthropologist Joseph Henrich has summoned the example of the aboriginal Tasmanians, who were cut off from mainland Australia about ten thousand years ago. Their population was too small and too diffuse to preserve their expertise, and they apparently forgot how to make complex bone tools, how to make warm clothing, and even how to fish. And sheer numbers are only part of the story. For a culture to evolve, it needs a lot of different kinds of people—stubborn, nutty people with outlandish proposals. The weirdest people around are almost always children.

Demographers often worry that indulging in sci-fi speculation might inadvertently prompt governments to adopt draconian measures. Still, the demographer Leslie Root admitted that she sometimes wonders, "Is it possible we actually evolved to be too smart for our own good, and we're just too interested in other things to go along with the bullshit of having to have enough kids to perpetuate the species? I don't know! Maybe?" She collected herself, then added, "What's most interesting to me, when I think about what it might be like to maintain a stable human population, is that there's a very real possibility that we'll need to reinvent society."

A decade ago, a Korean reality program showcased wealthy celebrities in unattainably idyllic scenes with their children. A more realistic portrayal of family life might have been more fruitful. Miji and Ho-gil are a shy, attractive, and slightly unusual couple, the parents of two boys. Miji, who is thirty-three, studied media in Seoul, and then freelanced for a broadcaster in Gwangju. Ho-gil, who is thirty-eight, got a job after college at a children's foundation,



"You know how sometimes you say you're not hungry, but then you see what I'm eating and ask for a bite, and I always let you and I'm never annoyed?"

• •

where the "strict milestones" that govern Korean aspirations lost their hold on him. He recently saw a report that Korea was the only wealthy industrialized nation where the highest personal priority was economic improvement rather than love. He told me, "In Korean society, we are educated to have one single goal, but then, once you're grown up, you don't know what to do with your freedom—you get lost in the world, and you don't know how to have a good life."

They met at a book club in 2016. Miji matter-of-factly characterized herself as "the kind of person who is always swayed by other people's opinions," and she was drawn to Ho-gil for his independence. After five years of living separately, they decided to get married. She wanted a large, formal wedding, but he imagined something more intimate, and they compromised. Miji told me, "I can't ignore social norms, but I have to strike a balance between what society wants and his beliefs."

She hoped to have children, but at the time he felt "selfish"—he wasn't used to being around kids and wasn't sure what to do with them. He read some books about children, and they had a "very intense debate and discussion." She had no job security, and he told her, "If you're serious about this, change your job fast." She found a position as a museum curator. Ho-gil told me that he "isn't interested in moving up the ladder," so he wasn't worried that he'd be penalized for taking time off. But Miji seemed more ambivalent: "If you have career ambitions, it's really hard to make the decision to go on leave for children." (She noted that she has been passed over twice for a promotion.) At the time, Gwangju offered a monthly payment to parents of about a hundred and fifty dollars, on top of a five-hundred-dollar subsidy that the federal government paid each month until the child went to day care. For Ho-gil, the money made the prospect thinkable. "All his decisions were down to the numbers, and the numbers worked out," Miji said.

Their first child, Wooju, was born in 2022. When they brought him home from the hospital, the first thing they did was apologize to their neighbors, warning them that they "might move around and make noise." Fortunately, the elderly couple downstairs was "more forgiving than most." Miji and Ho-gil were very happy. It was easy to imagine having a second.

Regional birth subsidies sometimes succeed on paper, but these statistics are artificially inflated by "take and dash" parents, who move to a place temporarily for the money—as if the entire country were playing a bizarro version of musical chairs. In 2023, Gwangju curtailed the subsidies. But, just as Miji became pregnant again, Gangjin, a small city about an hour and a half away, announced an offer three times as generous. As it happened, Ho-gil's parents worked a farm there. Much of what Miji knew about the area was gleaned from a reality-television show about the renovation of ghost-town houses; her friends found the prospect of their moving to Gangjin inexplicable, even shameful. Still, this past October, the family relocated.

On a weekday morning, they had me over to their tidy, spare apartment. One of the only adornments on the walls was a long-defunct video-intercom console, its molded curves like a "Star Trek" fossil. The meagre trappings seemed like a defiant statement of their priorities, and the home was warmed by their togetherness. Their younger son, ten-month-old Eun-byul, was a round child dressed in a green bib that made him look like a little flower. He had only just begun to say "Mommy." They were impressed by how dissimilar the two boys were—the older one sensitive and introverted, the little one active and outgoing. Their lives are largely isolated. They're grateful for the region's rural beauty, but the closest pediatrician is about a twenty-minute drive away. Miji said, "If your baby isn't healthy, you can't live here."

They had noticed one neighbor with a baby, and they were hoping that at some point they'd say more than "hello." They have otherwise resigned themselves to the fact that they'll have few opportunities to meet other parents until school begins, when they'll join a parent group chat for logistics. The town features three places they can take the kids, including an indoor playground run by the local district office. They showed me photos of Eun-byul in a little sandbox on a linoleum floor. The town's one "trendy Instagrammable café," as Miji put it, has declared itself a no-kids zone.

They seemed pleased for the chance

to discuss the banalities of rural family life. Miji's friends weren't interested in hearing about it. They told her, "Once the children are older, you'll come back to Gwangju for their education." She'd attended a *hagwon* to prepare for the college entrance exam, and she wasn't inclined to deny her children the same advantage. Ho-gil had not, and he didn't think it was necessary. In fact, he wasn't convinced that a college degree was essential, which to most Koreans is as radical as saying that he didn't need hot water.

When they do return to their jobs, they will both face an hour-and-a-half-long commute each direction. They consider that a concern for another day. Ho-gil picked up Eun-byul, who bounced on his lap with a contented sigh. He said, "Of course I have doubts, and I wonder what my life would have been like if I hadn't chosen to have a family." But he'd been wrong to assume, as his friends did, that "fatherhood eats away at your personal life." Still, my (male, unmarried, dog-owning) interpreter, who told me later that such affectionate behavior was uncommon among Korean fathers, couldn't help but ask him, "Aren't you bored?"

There's a philosophical view, best associated with the scholar L. A. Paul, that the decision to have children is fundamentally irrational. A rigorous cost-benefit analysis might produce an estimate of a child's expected value, but the experience is transformative in a way that renders the calculation irrelevant. You will have made a decision by the lights of a person you will no longer be. There's something inescapably patronizing when parents make this argument. I remain unsure if it's true, yet I've heard myself repeat it. For the usual reasons of work-life intractability, writing this piece has taken me away from my own little boys. When I asked my eight-year-old why someone should have children, he stopped punching his little brother long enough to say, "We're excellent company."

The leap-of-faith argument makes sense only if we, and the society we live in, remain open to such transformation. In Korea, one graduate student told me, "The standard life course is boring. Surprises are not virtues. We can imagine all of the things until we die." Before the Asian financial crisis, in 1997, the economist Kim Seongeun told me, the top scorers on the collegiate entrance exam often went on to Seoul National University to study physics. When a faltering economy prompted large companies to fire their scientists, he observed, many parents converged on the idea that medicine was a safer path. It didn't take long for the top scorers to become doctors instead. Kim wasn't exempt from the tendency to hedge his bets: "How can I place my own son in a small boat?" To become a parent at all, I remarked offhandedly, was to perceive all boats as too small. He laughed and thought for a moment, then said, "Maybe the low fertility rate here is because people are smart. The risk-free asset in a diversified portfolio is zero kid." He just wasn't sure what to make of it all in the end. He said, "The low fertility rate is not really good or bad. We just don't know."

This is the intellectually responsible position. Emotionally, it's a little evasive. Rotkirch, the Finnish demographer, recalled a newspaper item in which a young woman asked why she should sacrifice her body and her partnership for a pregnancy. Such anxieties are a natural prelude to any vault into the unknown. Still, Rotkirch marvelled, "My idea was that it just happens and it's normal to be nervous." Chang Pilwha, who has been an influential women's-studies scholar for forty years, echoed this bewilderment. "Many of my best feminist friends say



the best thing they've ever done is have a child, and nobody should brand that as conservative or liberal," she said. She is apprehensive about what society will look like once fewer and fewer people are parents. As she put it, "Becoming a mother or a father is a precious process of learning to be human, and the lack of that experience with vulnerability is only going to create more ruthlessness."

Child rearing is not a necessary condition for vulnerability. It's not even a sufficient one. But there may nevertheless be something irreducible about the shared experience of parenthood—a life in which your fragile heart now seems to beat on the outside of your body. You see the guardians of a sleeping child on the subway and think, These are not just random strangers but fellow-passengers with utterly exasperating human beings for whom they would unequivocally die.

Children have long played a symbolic role in a debate that was carried out far over their actual heads. For everyone who saw them as the ultimate affirmation of life itself, someone else saw our treatment of them as reason to despair. The poet Philip Larkin wrote, "Man hands on misery to man. / It deepens like a coastal shelf. / Get out as early as you can, / And don't have any kids yourself." It didn't much matter. Most people went ahead and had them anyway.

It seems as if we might now be transforming an old and insoluble philosophical conflict into an empirical experiment with real stakes. Sometimes it seems as though we're in a hurry to do so. The fertility-rate culture war wields children as symbolic extensions of ourselves. People look to the birth rate as an index of what is normal, and no one is safe from the dread of judgment. Conservatives with large families fear they are seen as zoo animals. Liberals without children fear they are seen as selfish careerists or libertines. This may not just be a consequence of the fertility decline; it might be intensifying it. Children could survive being yoked to the value of humanity as a whole. It feels much more perilous to treat them as instruments of our own identities.

Children are variables in our lives. But they are also strange birds of their own. Religious people talk about them as carriers of the divine spark, technologists as messengers from the future. Secular humanists are content to mumble something about the imagination. In any case, they should probably be prevented from sticking their fingers into sockets or setting fire to our homes. But we might otherwise trust them to figure out what they mean, or how to mean it. We might stand before them as models of humility and ambivalence. It is not fair for us, as individual parents or as a society, to expect them to bear the weight of our certainties. They are, after all, just children. ♦

LETTER FROM UKRAINE

SHADOW WARRIOR

How a career spy helped shape his country's defense against Russia.

BY JOSHUA YAFFA

On September 26, 2022, seismic-monitoring stations in northern Europe picked up signals that resembled small earthquakes—rumblings below the surface of the Baltic Sea detected as far as a thousand miles away. Soon after, operators in charge of the Nord Stream pipelines, two seven-hundred-mile-long underwater conduits meant to bring Russian natural gas to Germany and onward to the rest of Europe, noticed a sudden drop in pressure. The Danish Air Force dispatched an F-16 interceptor, which captured images of what was unmistakably a huge gas leak: escaping methane had turned the water's surface into a bubbling froth.

In the weeks that followed, underwater drones captured images of wide gashes in the pipelines. Swedish authorities found blast residue at the scene, and called the rupture an act of "gross sabotage." In Germany, which had imported more than half of its natural gas from Russia, investigators declared that the explosions represented "an attack on the internal security of the state."

Nord Stream was destroyed less than a year into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It seemed likely that the two events were linked, but it was not immediately apparent how. Speculation initially centered on Russia, which had experience with undersea operations. Weeks earlier, Gazprom, the state-owned Russian energy company, had shut down Nord Stream 1, claiming that Western sanctions had undermined its ability to maintain the pipeline. (Nord Stream 2, which was completed in 2021, had not yet become operational.) Officials in the U.S. and Europe had accused the Kremlin of using energy exports as an economic weapon, and Russian Navy vessels were spotted in nearby waters in the days before the attack. But Western intelligence agencies couldn't find any other evidence that the Kremlin was responsible. The Kremlin, for its part, blamed the United Kingdom and the United States. "The sanctions were not enough for the Anglo-Saxons," President Vladimir Putin said. "They moved on to sabotage."

In January, 2023, four months after the attack, German police showed up at the offices of a boat-chartering company in Dranske, on the German island of Rügen, in the Baltic Sea. They had a warrant to search the Andromeda, a fifty-foot sailing yacht described by *Der Spiegel* as "not exactly elegant, but practical, a bit like a floating station wagon." The boat had been rented the previous fall by six people using forged passports, booked via a Polish travel agency with Ukrainian owners, and paid for by a Ukrainian businessman. Investigators suspected that a photograph in one of the passports, which ostensibly belonged to a Romanian citizen named Ştefan Marcu, was that of an active-duty Ukrainian soldier. On board the Andromeda, they found traces of HMX, a powerful explosive whose blast signature was consistent with the damage at the site.

That March, the *Times* reported that U.S. intelligence agencies had reviewed evidence indicating that "a pro-Ukrainian group carried out the attack," while allowing for the possibility that "the operation might have been conducted off the books by a proxy force with connections to the Ukrainian government."

The news came as a surprise. Many experts believed that whoever planted the explosives would have needed access to a mini-submarine or a decompression chamber—neither of which a proxy force, even one backed by Ukraine, was likely to possess. Another reason that Ukraine had been ruled out as a possible perpetrator was the unbelievable political risk: a country defending itself from invasion and desperately reliant on foreign military aid could hardly afford to blow up the energy infrastructure of one of its



"You look at him and see this absolutely ordinary



person," a former collaborator said of Roman Chervinsky. "Then you come to understand who he is and what he's capable of."

PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA KOCHETOVA

primary Western backers. Still, even as mounting intelligence pointed to Ukraine, it remained unclear who, exactly, had ordered or carried out the attack. "A real brain-twister," a high-ranking German official said.

In November, 2023, a suspect emerged. A joint investigation by *Der Spiegel* and the Washington *Post*, citing sources in both "Ukrainian and international security circles," identified Roman Chervinsky, a former Ukrainian intelligence officer, as the operation's alleged lead organizer. By then, Chervinsky, who had spent two decades directing secret operations for Ukraine's intelligence services, including assassinations and multiple acts of sabotage, was under house arrest in a suburb of Kyiv. He had been charged in two separate criminal investigations, for extortion and abuse of authority, both of which he denies. Neither case, at least formally, had anything to do with Nord Stream. When I visited him recently, at his apartment, he was unequivocal about his involvement in the Nord Stream attack. "I didn't do it," he told me.

Chervinsky, who is fifty, with a slight frame and a head of thinning hair, wore a loose-fitting polo. An electronic monitor was affixed to his ankle. He made a pot of tea, and we sat at his kitchen table. "You look at him and see this absolutely ordinary person you could imagine standing next to on the bus that morning," one person who has collaborated with him told me. "Then you come to understand who he is and what he's capable of."

Recently, the Trump Administration has begun negotiating with the Kremlin to end the war in Ukraine. Those talks have excluded Ukraine itself, prompting President Volodymyr Zelensky to warn against dealmaking "behind the backs of the key subjects." The conditions that the Trump Administration envisions, which have been spelled out by top U.S. officials, have caused alarm in Ukraine and Europe: no relinquishment of all territory taken by Russia since 2014; no NATO membership for Ukraine; no U.S. peacekeepers to enforce a ceasefire. Instead, the emphasis has been on big-ticket deals, such as a proposal to grant the U.S. a fifty-per-cent stake in Ukraine's rare-earth minerals. (Zelensky turned down the deal.) After Zelensky suggested that President Trump was repeating Russian misinformation, Trump lashed out, calling Zelensky a "dictator" who wants the war to continue to keep the " 'gravy train' going."

Chervinsky represents a less visible but no less decisive aspect of the conflict, in which a nation facing a superior enemy fought back from the shadows. "If there is a ceasefire, this part of the war will only intensify," Roman Kostenko, a special-forces colonel who now serves in the Ukrainian parliament, told me. Chervinsky, for his part, wanted to correct the record, both about his past exploits and about what they've achieved for his country. "I'm ready to speak about these things, even if it goes against the usual rules of intelligence work," he said. "Ukraine is a full-fledged state—not some province of Russia—with the right to defend itself and to set its own course."

Chervinsky grew up in Kamyanets-Podilskyi, a medieval city in western Ukraine, where his father was a construction foreman and his mother worked at a grocery store. As a teenager, he competed in soccer and target shooting. He briefly considered enrolling in an I.T. program at a local technical college, but everyone there seemed to just sit around and smoke cigarettes. He was sixteen when Ukraine gained its independence from the Soviet Union, in 1991. Not long after, recruiters from the S.B.U., the Ukrainian offshoot of the K.G.B., visited his school, and spoke of a new academy in Kyiv—the first in the country to train its own intelligence officers. Chervinsky's father, who had dark memories of the K.G.B., urged him not to apply. "You should know this system will, sooner or later, make you fire on your own," he said. Chervinsky was accepted as a cadet on his second attempt.



As a junior officer, he was sent to Kamyanets-Podilskyi, his home town, where he unravelled a kickback scheme between the agriculture ministry and the chair of the village council. He spent the next decade in Kyiv and the surrounding region, launching stings to catch drug traffickers, criminal gangs, and corrupt politicians. In the northeastern city of Poltava, he planted listening devices in a *banya* and recorded a gang of police officers discussing under-the-table agreements with local mafiosi. "People didn't always love Roman," a law-enforcement officer who regularly collaborated with Chervinsky told me. "Not just because he had no tolerance for corruption but because he could be so set in his principles."

At the time, the S.B.U. resembled many other bloated Soviet-legacy bureaucracies. Corrupt dealings with local officials and organized crime were common. The agency was also thoroughly compromised by Russian intelligence. An assessment from the C.I.A. at the time concluded that in some regional bureaus, such as Kharkiv, in the northeast, as many as sixty per cent of the officers were either working directly for Moscow or otherwise carrying out its interests. Valerii Kondratiuk, who held top positions in several Ukrainian intelligence agencies, told me that many of the S.B.U.'s leadership appointments were made in consultation with the F.S.B., Russia's security service.

In December, 2014, Chervinsky was sent to the Donbas, where Ukraine was fighting Russian-backed militias in what the country then called an "antiterrorist operation." Since the incursion, many of the S.B.U. officers who had been stationed in occupied territories had switched sides. Officers who had evacuated to areas controlled by Kyiv often didn't want to take part in operations against their former colleagues. But the front line was porous, with locals travelling back and forth to visit relatives, obtain medical care, and collect pensions. Chervinsky and his colleagues exploited the flow of people to recruit agents. "Everyone has a certain hierarchy of values," he told me. "For some, it might be as simple as money. Others want drugs and nothing else. And there are those who think in terms of justice and honesty. You can make your approach from any of those angles."

That year's Maidan Revolution, in

Kyiv, followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea and its proxy war in the Donbas, had reoriented Ukraine's politics. The country was turning to the West for support—and, for the intelligence services, that meant the C.I.A. "We provided information on Russia," Kondratiuk told me. "When they realized it was often of better quality than what they were getting from their own officers and agents in Moscow, their interest in helping us spiked." A former U.S. intelligence officer estimated that the new partnership effectively doubled the amount of information that the U.S. was able to collect on Russia. In one case, the S.B.U. passed along the source code used in a Russian hacking attack, allowing U.S. agencies to build their own defenses. "That's tens of millions of dollars in value right there," the former U.S. intelligence officer said.

In early 2015, the C.I.A. agreed to help fund a new spy outfit within the S.B.U. called the Fifth Directorate. "The idea was to blend counterintelligence with special operations," a U.S. official said. The C.I.A. provided tactical gear and communications equipment, and ran training courses for the department's officers, most of whom had come of age after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The head of the Fifth Directorate reported to the deputy director of S.B.U., bypassing the usual layers of bureaucracy. "If, before, the service was hostage to statistics and plans set from above," one Fifth Directorate officer said, "now we were freed of all that, with full creative license."

Chervinsky joined the department shortly after its founding, and helped its officers build a network of informants and conduct surveillance of militia forces. A microphone hidden inside an extension cord in the office of the prosecutor for the so-called Donetsk People's Republic allowed the department to listen to interrogations of Ukrainian P.O.W.s. A female officer in a pro-Russian militia was duped into placing a bugged table lamp in the headquarters of a tank battalion. Another agent whom Chervinsky had recruited from that battalion hid improvised explosives, provided by the S.B.U., under the tracks of eight tanks parked on a training ground. After the tanks were destroyed, Chervinsky listened to the stunned reactions of commanders inside the headquarters.

The Fifth Directorate was also involved in assassinations of pro-Russian field commanders. There was no legal framework for targeted killings on internationally recognized Ukrainian territory. S.B.U. officers concluded that, because Ukraine was at war with terrorists backed by Russia, the usual rules didn't apply. "When a state is at peace, it has one way of dealing with its enemies," Chervinsky said. "But during wartime, when your territory is occupied, you have to be more forceful."

U.S. policy prohibited C.I.A. officers from having any involvement in such operations. "Officially, the Americans were opposed," Kondratiuk said. But behind the scenes, he went on, C.I.A. officers often expressed their appreciation: "They would shake our hands and say, 'Good work.'"

On December 12, 2015, Pavel Dremov, a thirty-nine-year-old bricklayer who became the commander of a self-proclaimed Cossack battalion in occupied Ukrainian territory, set off for the town of Pervomaisk in a Range Rover. He had got married a week earlier, and was still celebrating in his home town of Stakhanov, less than ten miles away, when he got a call to attend to some urgent business. On an empty stretch of road, Dremov's car exploded, killing him and his driver. Dremov had promoted the establishment of a Cossack-run republic within the Russian-occupied territories. It was widely assumed that he was offed by rivals within his own ranks, perhaps on the orders of Moscow, which had little tolerance for outspoken rebel leaders.

In reality, the blast had been orchestrated by the S.B.U. Some months earlier, a source on the ground, a local businessman in the Donbas, had told the Fifth Directorate about Dremov's interest in cars, especially Range Rovers. The department imported one from Europe, and, once it was in the separatist territories, agents placed hidden explosives inside the doorframe. The businessman brought it to the headquarters of Dremov's battalion in Stakhanov, where, as Chervinsky and his fellow-operatives had hoped, he asked to take it for a drive. The businessman handed him the keys. The next day, the S.B.U., which was remotely following the Range Rover's movements, triggered the explosion. A Fifth Directorate officer, who in the wake



"You get in there, you give it a hundred and ten per cent, and a leftover slice of lasagna and two episodes of your favorite TV show are waiting for you at home."

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of such killings was responsible for writing false statements that blamed the pro-Russian factions, told me that, in this case, "we didn't need any P.R."

Chervinsky's next target was Arsen Pavlov, a former car-wash employee who went by the nom de guerre Motorola. At the start of the war, Pavlov led a group of pro-Russian militants, whom he called the Sparta Battalion, in a siege of the Donetsk airport. He was later implicated in the torture and execution of Ukrainian P.O.W.s, including a captured machine gunner he shot twice in the head. "I don't give a fuck," he told a reporter from the Kyiv *Post*. "I kill if I want to. I don't if I don't."

Chervinsky oversaw a handful of failed attempts to assassinate Pavlov. The Fifth Directorate prepared a crate of poisoned vodka, which a middleman was supposed to give to Pavlov and his soldiers. But when the middleman couldn't find money that the S.B.U. had buried for him at a drop point, he called the soldiers and told them not to drink it. ("That was stupid," Chervinsky said. "They detained him and threw him in prison.") Another time, a local agent hid an antipersonnel mine near the exit of a hospital where Pavlov regularly received treatment for an eye injury. The mine detonated, but the shrapnel missed Pavlov's car—a good thing, in the end, Chervinsky said, because Pavlov's wife was in the passenger seat. They were both unscathed.

Chervinsky had another idea. He had enlisted an agent to wear a pizza-delivery uniform and to sneak into Pavlov's building. The agent reported that Pavlov was usually accompanied by a security guard who stood watch outside Pavlov's apartment, which was on the seventh floor. But there was one place where the pair were confined and usually alone: the elevator. Chervinsky sent two other agents—a Donetsk local and a former special-forces soldier—to Chernobyl, where, in an abandoned apartment building, they practiced the basics of the operation: prying open the doors to the elevator shaft, jumping down to the compartment's roof, placing an explosive packet on top and a surveillance microphone in the ventilation slats, and making a quick exit. The whole sequence took about a minute. "They were motivated," Chervinsky said. "They knew what they were doing and why."

Back in Donetsk, the pair took up a position down the street from Pavlov's entryway. When one of Pavlov's guards came outside for a smoke break, the local agent—"He looked like the most peaceful guy, you'd never suspect him of anything," Chervinsky said—caught the door before it closed. He and his partner got into the elevator shaft and out of the building without being noticed. A week later, Pavlov arrived at his building and walked inside. The agent from Donetsk called Pavlov's cell phone and heard, via the hidden microphone, that it was ringing inside the elevator. Pavlov picked up. "Is this Arsen Pavlov?" the agent asked.

"Yes," Pavlov replied.

"This is the *Moskovsky Komsomolets* newspaper—we'd like to interview you." The agent pressed a button, detonating the explosives. S.B.U. officers in Kyiv had tapped Pavlov's wife's phone, and listened in as she frantically called her husband, who didn't pick up.

Afterward, some C.I.A. officers received a commemorative patch that read, simply, "Elevator." But, even in private, Chervinsky never acknowledged his role in Pavlov's killing. "Oftentimes, inside secret services, people are eager to claim credit," a former U.S. intelligence officer said. "They want influence, attention, promotions—it's politics, basically." But Chervinsky, the former officer went on, "didn't seem to care about any of that. If we heard about any of these operations, it certainly wasn't from him."

Chervinsky had learned that every target has a vice that lowers their defenses, even for a moment. For Mikhail Tolstykh, the commander of the pro-Russian Somali Battalion—so named for the ragtag appearance of its fighters—that vulnerability was women. Tolstykh regularly invited prostitutes to his headquarters in Donetsk, where he also kept a bedroom.

The S.B.U. maintained contact with several sex workers whom it used in its operations. Chervinsky dispatched one of them from Kyiv—I'll call her Katerina—to occupied Donetsk in early 2017. A local taxi-driver typically brought women to Tolstykh's place. The S.B.U. learned that the driver frequently used amphetamines; not coincidentally, so did Katerina. In Donetsk, she caught a series of rides with the taxi-driver, during which she unspooled her cover story: she was a university student whose parents had recently died, and she needed money, both for her studies and for a persistent drug habit. The driver made a proposal: he had a client who would pay well—was she interested? He brought her to Tolstykh's headquarters, where she spent the night. A week later, Tolstykh called Katerina and asked her to return.

Before their third meeting, S.B.U. agents passed her a package, which contained a cell phone and eight hundred grams of explosives wrapped in plastic. Early the next morning, when Tolstykh got out of bed, Katerina taped the case under the bed frame. Chervinsky was waiting for her at a makeshift operational base in Ukrainian-held territory. The next day, they drove to a spot near the front line, in range of Russian cell-phone towers, to conceal their location. The S.B.U. had tapped Tolstykh's bedroom; Chervinsky and Katerina listened for the sound of him turning over in bed. Chervinsky pressed a button. "That's it?" Katerina asked. "So quiet."

That spring, Chervinsky was named the head of the Fifth Directorate. He had earned a reputation as an ambitious, even aggressive, operational chief. The S.B.U., meanwhile, was suffering its own losses. In the first half of 2017, a series of car bombs killed several Ukrainian intelligence officers, including one of Chervinsky's friends in the service. He assumed that the assassinations were the work of the F.S.B., in Moscow, which enlisted agents in the Donbas. "Inside the occupied territories, we felt like we had a good sense of who they are and where to find them," Chervinsky said of Russian intelligence officers. "But, as we should have known, they were watching us, too."

In the summer of 2018, Chervinsky received a list of people wanted in connection with the attack on Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, which had been shot out of the sky over the Donbas four years earlier, as it flew from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, killing all two hundred and ninety-eight people on board. A Dutch-led investigation determined that Russian-supplied rebel forces fired on the plane, with a Buk anti-aircraft missile system. Ukrainian investigators had been collaborating with the Dutch on a multiyear effort to locate and detain those

responsible. To Chervinsky, one name looked especially promising: Vladimir Tsemakh, a Donbas native in his mid-fifties who had served as the head of air defense for Snizhne, a town near where the plane was shot down.

Around that time, a man in a pro-Russian battalion in the Donbas, whom I'll call Stepan, got in touch with the S.B.U. Stepan had initially fled Ukrainian-held territory after getting into a hit-and-run accident. He then fought as a foot soldier in a pro-Russian militia but had begun to suspect that he was being prepared for a kamikaze mission. He decided to defect again, this time to the Ukrainian side. Chervinsky told him, "We can guarantee your safety, but we have a job for you."

The following June, Stepan pulled up to Tsemakh's apartment building in Snizhne. By then, Tsemakh had left the ranks of rebel fighters and was, in the words of Chervinsky, "an ordinary-looking older retiree." The S.B.U. had placed a transponder under his car and knew his schedule: every morning, he drove his wife to work at a local technical college, then returned home. Stepan was waiting for him, and forced his way into Tsemakh's apartment. "Some people in Donetsk want to speak with you," he told him. When Tsemakh refused to leave, Stepan pistol-whipped him and stuck a syringe filled with a tranquillizer into Tsemakh's leg. "Let's go," Stepan said, holding up Tsemakh, who fell into a groggy, weak-kneed trance.

The S.B.U. had procured a getaway car for Stepan, a clunky old Lada, with a folding wheelchair stored in the trunk. Fake medical records showed that Stepan's passenger suffered from a terminal illness. When they reached the rebel-controlled checkpoint, Stepan told the guards that Tsemakh had grown up in Marinka, a town on the front line, and wanted to see his childhood home one last time. The soldiers waved them through.

Four Ukrainian special-forces operatives were waiting for them on the other side of a pedestrian bridge on the outskirts of Marinka. The bridge was crumbling and pockmarked by explosions, too difficult for a wheelchair to navigate. Stepan decided to walk Tsemakh down to a dry riverbank below. The lead Ukrainian operative on the other side, a recon officer, began to approach them, triggering a mine. The explosion blew dirt and smoke into the air and flipped him on his back. Lying on the ground, he triggered another. The second blast sent shrapnel up through a gap in his helmet, into his brain. Another special-forces soldier ran to his partner, detonating a third mine. Stepan turned back and dragged Tsemakh several hundred feet across the bridge. Within days, the lead officer was dead; doctors amputated the leg of the other soldier.

The remaining operatives took Tsemakh to Kyiv. That afternoon, Chervinsky was at the grave site of his friend who was killed in one of the car bombings two years earlier. He got a call from a subordinate at the Fifth Directorate. "We have him," the voice on the line said.

Ukrainian prosecutors charged Tsemakh with terrorism for his role as a field commander in the pro-Russian militia. Dutch investigators were eager to question him about the Malaysia Airlines attack. "A risky, bold action," a member of the Dutch-led investigative team told me of Tsemakh's arrest. "The sort of thing we could never have done ourselves."

At the time, the Ukrainian and Russian governments were discussing a large-scale prisoner swap. Zelensky had been inaugurated as the President of Ukraine a month earlier, and one of his central campaign promises had been to find an end to the conflict. On September 7th, Tsemakh was among the prisoners included in the trade, a condition that Ivan Bakanov, S.B.U.'s director at the time, said had been set by Putin himself. Zelensky called the exchange "the first step to end the war." The Dutch were disappointed. "People were irritated, even astonished," the team member said. (Tsemakh has denied any involvement in the Malaysia Airlines attack.) Chervinsky thought that the Zelensky administration was overly credulous in its dealings with Russia. "All this effort to locate and apprehend this one person," he said. "And just like that we let him go."

By then, Chervinsky was watching from the sidelines: shortly after Tsemakh's detention, he was dismissed as the head of the Fifth Directorate and relieved of his duties by the S.B.U. Chervinsky said that he never received an official explanation for his dismissal, but Kondratiuk, the former spy chief, told me, "His competencies suddenly felt out of vogue." The war in the Donbas had shifted to a less active phase; for better or for worse, the time of blowing people up in elevators seemed to have passed. "These people are adventurists



"I don't really like him, but he doesn't shed."



"Hey, are my glasses at the house?"

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by nature," Kostenko, the special-forces officer in parliament, said. "They get bored and frustrated by routine. They want more lively work."

Vasyl Burba, a former director of HUR, Ukraine's military intelligence agency, is a barrel-chested career officer who, like Chervinsky, started out in the S.B.U. and ran operations in the Donbas. In late 2019, he offered Chervinsky a job overseeing a unit that blended human intelligence with covert operations. "They say that, for an assassin, his weapon should be an extension of his hand," a former HUR officer said. "For Roman, that meant something else—his mind, and how he used it to recruit people, to bring them over to his side. These agents became an extension of him."

Chervinsky's new unit had launched an operation to gather intelligence on Russian mercenaries who had taken part in the Donbas war. A source in the Russian security services—"He loved money," the former HUR officer said—had helped the team repurpose a defunct Russian private military company to recruit fighters. Applications poured in, including one from a militia commander named Artyom Milyaev, whose nom de guerre was Shaman.

Milyaev soon got a call from a Syrian phone number. The man on the other end introduced himself as Sergei Petrovich, a "curator" from the Russian security services. He asked Milyaev if he could recruit fighters for a deployment to Syria, where, since 2015, Russia had been deploying mercenaries, mostly from Wagner, the private military company, in support of President Bashar al-Assad. "We have a lot of tasks," Sergei Petrovich said. "We need people who are ready to go." Milyaev soon gathered a group of nearly two hundred Russian mercenaries willing to join the mission.

Sergei Petrovich told Milyaev to send detailed résumés of his team members, with documentation showing their deployments to war zones, including Ukraine. Some mentioned Russian medals that they'd received for participating in the annexation of Crimea or the Battle of Debaltseve, a bloody fight in the winter of 2015. A handful boasted of guarding a Buk anti-aircraft missile system in the Donbas around the time that Flight 17 was shot down. "We asked them, 'Do you have combat experience?' And they replied, 'You bet I do!'" Chervinsky said. "They were building the case file against themselves."

What began as an intelligence-gathering operation grew into a plan, codenamed Project Avenue, to interdict and arrest the fighters and charge them in Ukraine. Chervinsky brought the list of mercenaries to his contacts at the S.B.U. "You can't just arrest someone and put them in jail for being a Wagner fighter," he said. "There has to be particular criminal conduct, and some evidence proving it." Eventually, the list was whittled down to twenty-eight persons of interest—fighters who had taken part in pivotal episodes, such as an attack on a Ukrainian military helicopter, which killed a general, and the downing of a Ukrainian plane carrying forty paratroopers. But there was a problem: Russian mercenaries were flown directly to Syria on Russian military aircraft. The fictitious Syria mission would have to be, as Chervinsky put it, "zeroed out."

In June, 2020, Milyaev received an e-mail with some tragic news: Sergei Petrovich had been killed in Syria. Soon after, a man who introduced himself as Artur Pavlovich called from a Venezuelan number to say that he had taken over the project. "Don't worry," he told Milyaev. "You and your men won't be left without work."

Artur Pavlovich proposed a new mission. Milyaev and his men were needed to guard drilling sites in Venezuela for Rosneft, the Russian state oil company. It was a believable cover story. As Oleksandr Zholobetskyi, a former HUR officer who was among the leaders of the operation, told me, "Is Rosneft a genuine, well-known company? Do they have documented interests abroad, and in Venezuela, in particular? And do they have the budget to pay for security contractors? Yes, yes, and yes."

The plan was to put the group of mercenaries on a commercial flight to Caracas, with a connection in Istanbul, and to force the plane to land as it crossed over Ukrainian airspace. Flights from Moscow to Istanbul passed over Ukraine for nearly an hour, but Russia, owing to the COVID pandemic, had cancelled flights to Turkey. Instead, the mercenaries would have to travel by bus to Minsk,

in Belarus, where they could catch a direct flight to Istanbul. It would be a tighter window: the flight from Minsk passed over Ukrainian airspace for only twenty-eight minutes.

Chervinsky enlisted the help of a military official in Ukraine's air-traffic center to learn the rules laid out by the Convention on International Civil Aviation. For Chervinsky's purposes, there were two scenarios in which a commercial flight could be forced to land before reaching its destination: a medical emergency or a bomb threat. HUR officers found an agent willing to board the plane and take a substance that induced seizure-like symptoms, and ran a test under the supervision of doctors. "He didn't know why he was supposed to do this or who else would be on the plane," Zholobetskyi said. "We only told him it was for an important operation."

But, in cases of onboard medical emergencies, the pilot was in control of whether, and where, to land the plane. That left a bomb threat. Just after takeoff, an agent recruited by HUR would place a call from inside the Minsk airport to Ukraine's antiterrorism center, reporting that he had overheard two people discussing plans to carry out a terrorist attack on board the flight. In such cases, security agents would contact air-traffic control. Ukrainian dispatchers would then be in charge: if they ordered the pilot to land in Kyiv, the pilot was required to comply. Once the plane was on the ground, the passengers would be led off, and the mercenaries would be arrested.

HUR officers used black-market payment networks to wire a tranche of funds to Milyaev—fifteen thousand rubles per person—and told him that he and his men would be meeting a Rosneft employee named Larisa in Istanbul. "From then on, they were relaxed," Chervinsky said. "They were certain their contracts had started."

Burba, HUR's director, has repeatedly told the story of what he claims happened next. He went to Bankova, the Presidential-administration building in Kyiv, to brief Zelensky on Project Avenue's next phase. Zelensky was unable to attend, but his chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, told Burba that the operation would have to be delayed. Zelensky and Putin had agreed to a ceasefire in the Donbas that would take effect that Monday, two days after HUR planned to conduct the operation. Yermak didn't want anything to undermine one of Zelensky's key political initiatives. Burba agreed to delay the plan by five days, enough time for the ceasefire to take hold. The HUR team was nervous. "These guys had prepared themselves to get to work and earn money," Zholobetskyi said. "Telling them at the last minute to wait even longer risked losing them forever."

The officers used pandemic travel restrictions as an excuse for the delay. A Ukrainian travel agent working with HUR booked rooms for the group at a hotel in Minsk. Milyaev laid out the rules to his men: no drinking, no leaving the hotel without approval, and everyone had to eat meals at predesignated times. "Over many months, we led him to think of himself as their commander," Chervinsky said. "So it was him, not us, who was in charge of keeping them disciplined." Two days later, HUR relocated the men to a sanatorium in the woods outside Minsk. "We needed to find a quiet, hidden place that could house a large number of people on short notice," Zholobetskyi explained.

Then there was another hiccup. On July 29th, a day before the mercenaries were supposed to fly to Istanbul, Milyaev sent an urgent message to Larisa, his Rosneft contact: he and his men had been arrested in Belarus. That morning, a Ukrainian intelligence officer got a call



from a contact in the Belarusian security services: "Why the hell did we receive an order to arrest thirty-three mercenaries?"

Kyiv and Moscow jockeyed over where the men would be sent. Ukrainian prosecutors, noting that the mercenaries had committed crimes in Ukraine, filed extradition requests. Zelensky called Aleksandr Lukashenko, the President of Belarus, to press the case. Russian authorities, meanwhile, were piecing together what had happened. A report in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, citing the Russian secret services, noted that the phone numbers from Syria and Venezuela were fakes, and that the airline tickets purchased for the group had been booked by a travel agency in Kyiv. Ten days after the arrests, Lukashenko was reëlected to a sixth term as President. His victory, which much of the West condemned as illegitimate, led to wide-scale protests. Lukashenko turned to Putin for a guarantee of security. Belarus handed the men over to Russia.

Burba was consumed by his suspicion that, before the arrests, an official in Zelensky's office had tipped off Lukashenko, perhaps thinking that Belarus could be persuaded to hand over the mercenaries to Ukraine—no complicated sting operation required. Burba wanted to launch an internal investigation, with polygraphs conducted on high-ranking officials, including Yermak, Zelensky's chief of staff. But he never got a chance: on August 5th, he was fired as HUR's director.

Reports of the failed operation began to appear in the Ukrainian press, where it took on the moniker Wagnergate. At first, Yermak denied that such an operation had been attempted. "A fictional detective story from beginning to end," he said. Zelensky eventually acknowledged its existence, but he said, "It was the idea of other countries, not Ukraine." Opposition members of parliament, from the party of the former President Petro Poroshenko, accused Zelensky of treason. "If the President was involved in falsifications and lies," one declared, "this means impeachment."

A special commission was formed in parliament to investigate the incident—the first in Ukrainian history to deal with such highly classified material. Its members worked inside a specially prepared room, where cell-phone reception was blocked. "I hoped this commission could grow into a proper intelligence-oversight committee," Mariana Bezuhla, a thirty-six-year-old parliamentarian, who chaired the effort, told me. "I now realize there was little hope of getting accurate or reliable information on what really happened." According to the commission's report, released in November, 2021, its members were "unable to clearly establish by whom and at what level in Ukraine the decision to postpone was adopted."

In June, 2021, Chervinsky, who was

then forty-six, left HUR. He was entitled to his state pension as a retired officer and considered joining an acquaintance's private law practice in Kyiv. Like Burba, he believed that Project Avenue had been undermined from within. That December, he appeared on a political talk show in Kyiv. It was the first time that Chervinsky had shown his face to the public; a man who spent his career in the shadows was now in the klieg lights of a television studio. He said that Project Avenue's failure was the result of a "betrayal" and alleged the President's office had a mole: "I am ninety-nine per cent certain that this was an act of treason."

A former U.S. intelligence officer said of Chervinsky and his allies, "When these guys felt like they were being thrown under the bus, they decided to throw back." But a senior official in Ukraine's intelligence apparatus said that the fallout from Wagnergate amounted to "total silliness." "In this trade, you have to be able to admit your mistakes," the senior official said. "If they did that, the operation would have ended in a normal, ordinary failure—the kind of thing that happens all the time. Instead, they kept pushing and pumped the story into a huge political scandal."

Whatever the case, the battle lines surrounding Wagnergate were clear: those who favored a more hawkish policy toward Russia, including powerful figures in Poroshenko's camp, had used the incident as a cudgel against Zelensky and his team. Kondratiuk, the former spy chief, called Chervinsky "an extremely talented operative and tactical thinker," but added, "The tragedy is that he didn't figure out the moment when others began to use him." The officials he had upset were vindictive, Kondratiuk said. "They are always sure to get their revenge."

The scandal, however, proved short-lived. Two months after Chervinsky's TV appearance, Russia launched its full-scale invasion. Bezuhla and I spoke about the legacy of Wagnergate in the context of the current war, during which the Ukrainian military and the secret services have undertaken far more ambitious operations. In October, 2022, for example, the S.B.U. hid explosives in rolls of cellophane and shipped the cargo from Russia to Crimea; a truck, packed with the explosives, detonated as it was driving over the Crimean Bridge, destroying a key overland route that Russia used to resupply its troops. Earlier this year, a HUR source told me, operatives rigged explosives in a batch of goggles used in drone operations, which middlemen passed to pro-Russian volunteers, who donated them to Russian military units. The goggles subsequently exploded in the faces of Russian drone pilots. Wagnergate, Bezuhla said, "removed the taboo for carrying out crazy operations. Now we are very crazy."



"Honey, wake up, I can't live with this lie any longer—I actually <u>can</u> fold laundry. Really well, in fact."

On the morning of Russia's invasion, as armored columns bore down on Kyiv, Chervinsky's wife, Olha, and their three children fled to Kamyanets-Podilskyi, where Chervinsky's mother lived. That evening, Chervinsky met up with former colleagues from HUR, some of whom, like him, had been pushed out after Project Avenue. Their former colleagues in the service helped procure automatic rifles and antitank mines. "At the lower levels," Chervinsky said, "we never had any misunderstandings."

The group headed toward Makariv, a settlement thirty miles west of Kyiv, where a Russian armored column was trying to press toward the capital. The men went on scouting missions to plant mines on roads and highways where Russian tanks and other vehicles were passing. When a Russian convoy triggered the mines, the group opened fire. "I had been at war," Chervinsky told me. "But not like this."

In the Donbas, he had fought the enemy at a distance; now he and the others were operating in Russian-held territory, moving at night, sleeping in the woods or, when sympathetic locals allowed, in an empty storage shed or an abandoned house. They regularly came under fire. The former HUR officer, who was a member of the group, told me, "Overnight, a bunch of guys who not

long before had been commanders, running large-scale operations, became ordinary soldiers, not showering for weeks, eating canned meat out of metal tins."

After a month, Chervinsky and a few of the others were invited to join the S.S.O., the special-operations branch of the Ukrainian military. They were put in charge of an effort to prepare populations in areas at risk of Russian occupation for partisan warfare. "Let's say Ukrainian forces retreat from a certain territory," an officer in the S.S.O. said. "Everything should be set up in advance—sources and agents on the ground, hidden weapons and explosives, a system for coördinating operations."

In early April, the group was assigned to the Zaporizhzhia front, in Ukraine's southeast. They searched for people in occupied zones who could help their cause, from pro-Ukrainian patriots to small-time criminals. "It may sound pompous," the former HUR officer told me, "but, after two decades of doing this work, we have a pretty good sense of who the strong-willed people are in any community and how to find them." They divided jobs among the residents. "One person performs a rather meagre task, such as counting the order in which military supply trains pass through a certain crossing," the S.S.O. officer said. "And another, who never met or saw the first, goes at night to lay an explosive on the tracks."

Chervinsky was in touch with colleagues throughout the secret services, sharing ideas for new operations. "Roman can't sit still for long," the former HUR officer said. In the spring of 2022, one of Chervinsky's contacts at the S.B.U. told him about a civilian who, on his own initiative, had begun communicating with Russian fighter pilots, trying to persuade them to defect to Ukraine along with their aircraft. What they needed, the S.B.U. operative said, was money—did Chervinsky know where to find some?

That April, the Ukrainian parliament passed a law declaring that any Russian serviceman who provided Ukraine with one of Russia's more advanced military planes would receive a million dollars. An amateur pilot in Kyiv with a background in I.T. and cybersecurity, who asked to be called Bohdan, began thinking about how he might lure Russian airmen to take up the offer. "One plane more or less wouldn't change the military picture for Ukraine," Bohdan told me. "But if even one pilot, a member of Russia's military élite, defected in such a public way it would be a blow to morale, and a sign for others to consider the same. Not all of them want to bomb cities, after all—maybe they'd prefer a million bucks."

Bohdan found a publicly available list of Russian pilots who had received medals for flying combat missions in Syria. He ran the names through a dark-Web database, which generated about a hundred phone numbers and e-mail addresses. Most pilots didn't answer; others told Bohdan to get lost. But several seemed interested. He asked them to take photos of their aircraft while holding up a piece of paper with a number that he dictated to them—proof that they were really pilots and still flying combat missions.



Bohdan brought the idea to HUR. "It's impossible," the senior Ukrainian intelligence source said, citing the difficulty of flying a plane low enough to evade Russian radar detection. "You'd have to either be an idiot or incompetent to propose such a thing." An officer in the S.B.U. was more receptive. He helped Bohdan communicate with the pilots, who often demanded money for the photos and the videos they sent. The S.B.U. officer had previously worked with Chervinsky in the Donbas, and he asked his former colleague to join the effort. "It seemed like a classic PsyOp," Chervinsky told me. (The S.B.U. has since said that it did not approve the operation.)

Chervinsky approached a Ukrainian businessman, who agreed to chip in a few thousand dollars to pay the Russian pilots. "Roman is a brilliant saboteur, an assassin of the state," the businessman, who had worked with Chervinsky on some previous operations, told me. "I felt obligated to help him do what he is capable of—no questions asked." Chervinsky also got assurances from his contacts in the military that Ukrainian air-defense units would not fire on the target aircraft as it made its approach.

Bohdan had identified three possible candidates. One of the pilots, who flew a long-range bomber on missions to Mariupol, said that he was worried about getting his wife and their three children out of the secure military town where they lived. "I don't want to have the same story as Skripal," he told Bohdan, referring to the former Russian intelligence officer who, in 2018, was poisoned in the U.K. Another pilot wanted to defect not with his wife—"It's a complicated relationship," he said—but with his mistress, a fitness trainer in her twenties. Chervinsky asked Christo Grozev, then a researcher at the open-source-intelligence outfit Bellingcat, to share a trove of Russian cell-phone billing records. Geolocation data showed that the pilot's mistress had visited F.S.B. facilities in Moscow. Soon, both candidates disappeared.

That left Roman Nosenko, a thirty-six-year-old who flew fighter jets from a Russian base in Morozovsk, near the southern city of Rostov. Over Signal, Bohdan told him that his wife should leave Russia through Belarus. Once she arrived in Minsk, Ukrainian agents would provide her with a European passport issued to a false identity. Nosenko, meanwhile, would slip a sedative into his co-pilot's coffee before takeoff, knocking him unconscious, and then report to his superiors that his jet was struck by Ukrainian anti-aircraft fire. At one point during the planning phase, according to Yahoo News, Nosenko told Bohdan, "This is like a movie."

But, while Nosenko's wife was in transit, Chervinsky and the other operatives learned an unsettling fact. Phone records showed that she had made calls to an F.S.B. counterintelligence officer. "Are you sure this is legit?" Grozev asked Chervinsky. "It looks like a setup." When Chervinsky asked Nosenko about his wife's calls to the F.S.B., Nosenko had a ready answer: she worked as a military psychologist at the same airbase where he was stationed—a fact that checked out—and she was in contact with F.S.B. counterintelligence as part of her normal duties. "You could see that being true," Chervinsky said. But, he added, "it was even more likely a double cross."

The operatives on the Ukrainian side instructed Nosenko's wife to return to Moscow and debated what to do next. "Maybe he actually shows up," Chervinsky

said. "Even if he doesn't, we don't lose anything." Chervinsky relayed a new plan: Nosenko's wife would leave Russia for Kazakhstan, where a team of agents would be waiting for her. When they confirmed her arrival, the operation would commence. "That would show he's for real," Chervinsky said. Nosenko was told a password—a string of numbers that he should say over a prearranged military frequency as he was approaching the front line—which would signal to Ukrainian anti-aircraft units to hold their fire. A pair of Ukrainian fighter jets would then escort Nosenko to the Kanatove airfield, in southeastern Ukraine. Nosenko's wife was supposed to get to Almaty at two in the morning; by six, Nosenko would take off in a Su-34 fighter toward Ukraine.

On July 22, 2022, Chervinsky and three other operatives set up a temporary command center at the Kanatove airfield. The soldiers at the base were told that the new arrivals were conducting a training mission to prepare for Russian sabotage. At midnight, Chervinsky spoke with Nosenko, who said that his wife had boarded a flight to Almaty. But a couple of hours later Chervinsky's contact there said that the wife had not landed. "We knew it was over," Chervinsky said. At four-thirty, an air-raid siren went off. Chervinsky rushed to a nearby bomb shelter, where he could hear explosions ripple across the earth—six missile strikes in all. After half an hour, he resurfaced to see blown-out windows, a collapsed roof, and several burning aircraft. The base's commanding officer, a lieutenant colonel, was dead. Seventeen other soldiers were injured. "Was Nosenko a double agent from the beginning?" Chervinsky told me. "Or did he turn at some point?" (Nosenko, who remains in Russia, could not be reached for comment.)

Within days, the F.S.B. boasted of disrupting a Ukrainian operation to lure Russian Air Force pilots to defect. A video report released by the Russian agency featured images of the Ukrainian chats with the pilots and, in one instance, Chervinsky's own voice. "Our goal is the plane," he says. "We're ready to pay."

The following April, Chervinsky was arrested by investigators from the S.B.U. and charged with abuse of authority. According to a statement I received from the S.B.U., "Chervinsky's unauthorized actions led to the enemy's missile attack on the Kanatove airfield." To many of Chervinsky's former colleagues, the criminal charges seemed flimsy. His superior in the S.S.O., a major general named Viktor Hanuschak, testified that the operation was carried out with the knowledge and approval of military leaders, the Air Force, and the S.B.U. When a prosecutor asked Hanuschak whether someone could gain access to the Kanatove airfield without an order from on high, he answered, "Are you joking?"

Kostenko, the former special-forces colonel in parliament, told me, "Lots of operations don't work. To prosecute Chervinsky because he wanted to harm the enemy is like fining a Formula 1 driver for breaking the speed limit." But the case took on political overtones from the outset. Poroshenko, the former President, who still has political ambitions, paid Chervinsky's two-hundred-thousand-dollar bail. Chervinsky, for his part, believes that his arrest was less a legal matter than one of personal animosity, perhaps even payback for how he publicly broke ranks in the wake of Wagnergate. "I'm a convenient target," he told me. "The goal is to discredit me, to make me look uncontrollable, to find a reason to go after me."

That spring, when evidence began to emerge tying Ukraine to the Nord Stream attack, Zelensky issued blanket denials. "I am President, and I give orders accordingly," he said in an interview with the media company Axel Springer. "Nothing of the sort has been done by Ukraine. I would never act that way." Even in private, Yermak, Zelensky's chief of staff, told German officials that the Ukrainian government was not involved. "It was so blurred," the German official said. "It felt like no one knew the whole story start to finish."

The murkiness had its advantages. Last February, Denmark and Sweden closed their investigations into the explosions. A diplomat from one of those countries told me that there hadn't been enough evidence to mount a prosecution that would hold up in court, calling the outcome a "matter of investigative luck." After all, the diplomat said, "it could have put us in a position of having to point fingers at one of our allies for blowing up undersea infrastructure in the Baltic Sea."

In June, German prosecutors issued an arrest warrant for a suspect they identified as Volodymyr Z., a diving instructor in his mid-forties who, before the Nord Stream attack, lived in a small town outside Warsaw. Soon after, he crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border in a car reportedly used by the Ukrainian Embassy. As it became clear that the Zelensky administration could not simply disavow any Ukrainian connection, officials in Kyiv began to shift their behind-the-scenes messaging: Zelensky himself wasn't involved, but, if rogue elements inside the Ukrainian state were to blame, Ukrainian authorities would help track them down. At least one journalist told me of an S.B.U. briefing where Chervinsky was named as the organizer of the attack. (The S.B.U. said that this was "completely untrue.")

Last August, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Valerii Zaluzhnyi, then the chief military officer in Ukraine, had authorized and overseen the plot. Zaluzhnyi had "enlisted some of Ukraine's top special-operations officers with experience in orchestrating high-risk clandestine missions against Russia to help coordinate the attack," the *Journal* said. Chervinsky was the only operative named in the story. One participant told the *Journal* that the operation, which was said to have cost three hundred thousand dollars, resembled a "public-private partnership," in that it brought together wealthy businessmen, active military officers, former spies, and private citizens with useful skills.

Some participants worked on preparations and logistics from Kyiv. According to a well-placed Ukrainian security source, this was likely Chervinsky's role—coördinating efforts among various stakeholders in the military and intelligence services. The crew, dispatched on the Andromeda, was composed of civilian divers and active-duty Ukrainian soldiers on leave from the front. They set off from Rostock, a German port city on the Baltic Sea, and made a stop in Sandhamn, in Sweden, before arriving at their target coördinates, a stretch of open water near the Danish island of Bornholm. A little more than two weeks later, they returned to shore, having finished their supposed pleasure-

cruise holiday. The source involved in the initial planning told me that Zelensky might not have been informed of the operation. Nevertheless, the source insisted, it was carried out within the military's chain of command: "We are not the types to act out of order."

The closest to an official comment on Nord Stream that I managed to secure came from Kostenko, who sits on the security committee in the Ukrainian parliament. "Everyone who needs to know the answer to this question knows the answer, and this answer is enough for them," he said. "Our Western partners understand everything perfectly well."

A rough outline of a plan to blow up Nord Stream had been circulating in Ukrainian security circles for some time. "Russia lives off of selling raw materials—oil and gas," the Ukrainian source familiar with the planning for the Nord Stream operation said. "It's what finances Putin's aggression and helps him manipulate Europe." The source added that Gazprom, the Russian energy giant, is linked to two private military companies that have deployed fighters to Ukraine.

In the course of my reporting, I learned that, in early 2022, Chervinsky was part of a group of people who approached their C.I.A. contacts with the idea of blowing up Nord Stream. The C.I.A. officers strongly opposed the proposal, and urged the Ukrainians to abandon it. "There was a constant flow of novel, creative ideas," a U.S. official who worked with Ukraine told me. "Some were good, others not so much."

An officer in Ukraine's military told me that a group of operatives—the source wouldn't name any of them—had proposed the same plan to Zaluzhnyi: "It was in the spirit of 'There's this idea, this possibility. Are we doing it or not?'" The source said that Zaluzhnyi signed off. (Zaluzhnyi has denied any knowledge of the sabotage.)

According to this source, Zaluzhnyi informed Zelensky of the operation. For a while, everything proceeded as planned until, at a certain point, the source said, Zelensky gave an order to cancel the mission. But it was too late. "When you enter the zone of operations, you activate a regime of total silence," the source said. A single connection, a ping from a phone to a cell tower, can be enough to give away not only your location but whom you're talking to. As a result, the source said, "going dark is textbook procedure for any special operation."



"Let's see which of our phones has better weather."

• •

Despite the initial speculation that the attack required highly specialized equipment, it was a rather simple affair. "For a normal, professionally trained diver, placing an object on an underwater pipeline is no problem," the source said. Narrowly speaking, the mission was a success. The target was destroyed, and, "most importantly, everyone involved left the field safe and whole." In private, a handful of participants, those who were active-duty soldiers, received awards from the military's general staff. "On paper, it was for something vague, like 'For the defense of Ukraine,'" the source familiar with the plans told me. "We wanted to show them they are valued."

The problem, the military officer told me, is that "if you judge them strictly according to the law, they're not heroes but criminals." Of course, that is the nature of espionage—every country, including the United States, technically breaks the laws of foreign nations to execute missions in its own interest. Zelensky, the source offered, could simply say, "We will carry out whatever operations we have to, in any theatre in the world, in order to defend the country." Instead, the officer went on, "it's as if the country has turned its back" on its own operatives.

In Kyiv, when I asked Chervinsky again about Nord Stream, he said, "Someone did a good thing. It must have been a difficult decision, but I'm convinced it benefitted Ukraine, and the West, too." I mentioned that I had learned he was among the Ukrainian intelligence operatives who first proposed to the C.I.A. the idea of blowing up the pipelines. He seemed surprised. "I'm not going to talk about that," he said, before adding that he couldn't confirm that such a meeting had taken place. He insisted that his name had been falsely linked to the operation. "Let them point fingers at me," he said. "I'm no better or worse off from all the attention." He declined to comment further. "I get why people are interested," he told me. "The story of Nord Stream is a compelling mystery. Let people speculate. One day we'll find out what really happened." ♦



Keuka Lake

Joseph O'Neill

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNIE COLLINGE

Between the ages of fourteen and fifty-four Nadia does not for a single minute not have an admirer or a boyfriend or a better half. Then Drew, her husband, disappears forever.

Each minute of the next six months is a thicket. The thickets contain police officers, undertakers, insurance agents, attorneys, claims adjusters, benefits counsellors, human-resources workers, notaries, friends. Unforeseen names—Emmaline Cortez, Omar Eaton, Dalary Mason, Clyde Bender—become very important then very unimportant. Somewhere in there her two daughters fly in from and back to their respective lives, in Chicago and Asheville. In early January, Nadia emerges from the last thicket. She drives up to Montreal.

Her consciousness has changed—it, the consciousness, has made her more optically alert. She notices, first, that a beautiful spare brownness has befallen the forests; and, second, that she could not care less about the brownness of the forests, not even if she turned into an orangutan. Orangutans are on her mind because she has been watching orangutan videos. Farther north, the sights—the snowy mountaintops, the ice cascades, the towers on the St. Lawrence—insist on stronger emotions. These emotions are not in her possession.

She does have one encounter with the sublime. It happens in the Adirondacks. The dense dark of night has gathered on every side, but in the west, above the heights to her left, there is a peach-colored patch of last light. Something about the peach light feels abnormal—does not conform to the sense of dusk. The light is extraterrestrial, she grasps. It has come from far, far, far, far away. The Earth has no light of its own.

Nadia addresses these thoughts to an interlocutor who is nowhere to be seen. She has only recently become aware of this inner other. Seemingly neither male nor female, the other listens patiently. When it speaks, it does so carefully. It does not take offense. None of these traits were Drew's. He was an unreliable listener, an interrupter, a blurter. He was sensitive to criticism. Who, then, is this internal entity, who has no counterpart in her past or present?

When Nadia's feet drop on her sister's doormat, she perceives that the mat is saying something. *Bonjour Hi*, the mat is saying.

In the morning, she drinks coffee at the kitchen window. Runners singly crisscross the street in black balaclavas and tight-fitting black tops and black tights and black gloves. It is a neighborhood of assassins in training. The suspicion comes to Nadia that her husband was murdered.

That seems unlikely, no? the internal interlocutor asks.

Everything is unlikely, Nadia replies.

Drew was reportedly killed on a country road near a Finger Lakes town called Hammondsport. A pickup truck swerved across the line and struck his car head on. According to the police, the pickup truck swerved because its driver was having a cardiac arrest. This individual—Dwight Bloomer was his name—survived both the cardiac arrest and the collision. None of it makes sense to Nadia, including the fact that Drew was driving on the country road in question. He was bound, on a work mission, for Rochester. Neither the work mission nor the driving directions involved a detour to Hammondsport.

"Maybe he was taking a scenic route?" Yolanda, her sister, suggests. They have sat down for breakfast.

Nadia says, "Yeah—maybe."

Maybe Drew had taken a scenic route, even though scenic routes were not his thing. And maybe Dwight Bloomer, if that was his real name, was as blameless as the police report and the medical report separately maintained. Maybe his heart attack, if it occurred, did occur in the moments before, and not the moments after, the crash. Absolutely.

But maybe not. That's how "maybe" works.

Yolanda's boyfriend—he is named Laurent, as in the saint of the river—approaches with three egg cups, each containing a soft-boiled egg. He has already set out a baguette, a tiny jug filled with milk, and dishes holding butter and wild-blueberry jam and haskap jam, whatever that is. With a conjurer's flourish of his napkin, he takes a seat. His first sedentary act is to place a light kiss on Yolanda's lips. His second is to offer Nadia the salt and pepper.

"Thank you," Nadia says.

Yolanda, her younger by six years, was always the sister with the worse name, the worse body, the worse career, the worse life, the one who had long been lost in a "fuckup labyrinth" (Yolanda's description) in New Jersey, where she had a dead-end pharma job and a never-ending on-off thing with a married co-worker. Then, about a year ago, everything suddenly changed for the better, as in a stupid movie.

One evening, over dinner, the visiting Yolanda triumphantly produced her first-ever Canadian passport. Nadia didn't understand—until she remembered that her sister had been born (randomly, ridiculously) in a Canadian place called Saskatoon. Within three months Yolanda had sold her place in Teaneck and bought, all cash, a third-floor walkup in a "charming" Montreal neighborhood. Drew, who loved corporate-style humor, said, I didn't have that on my bingo card. Within another two months, Yolanda was claiming to have landed herself a "fun job in the farm-to-table sector" and a man friend who was "kind of farm-to-table himself." Yolanda sent a picture in which she, unathletic and unathletic-looking, wobbled on a two-foot-high tightrope strung between two trees. Her right hand was stretched out for balance. Her left hand was held up by a muscleman in an unbuttoned white shirt. Drew said, I'll have what she's having.

Laurent didn't accompany Yolanda to Drew's funeral. Now here they both are, in the flesh—the happy couple.

Their relationship doesn't add up. A piece of information is missing.

Nadia's egg has no taste, no matter how much salt and pepper she puts on it.

Before Yolanda leaves for work she says, "One thing: don't touch the jigsaw puzzle."

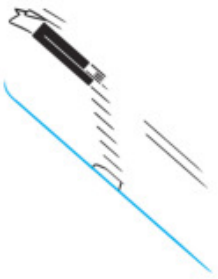
The jigsaw puzzle occupies the card table in the corner of the living

room. Somebody has made a start on it.

Laurent, Yolanda elaborates, is possessive about his puzzles—displeased if anyone else so much as turns over a single piece. "It's kind of an O.C.D. thing of his," she says.

"Of course," Nadia says.

Yolanda delivers remarks about the therapeutic value of jigsaw puzzles and their importance to Laurent, this man friend who is not only a master puzzler but a deep and deeply well-read person who has taught Yolanda so much, taught her about her own body, no less, and so on and so forth and excruciatingly on and on, all while she is standing by the front door in her coat and hat and tantalizing Nadia with her unrealized departure. Maybe it's Canada, maybe it's the mimbo, but Yolanda is boring, boring, boring, boring, boring.



When Nadia's sister at last exits, Laurent—whose occupation remains obscure; it would be wrong to press for details; the guy is obviously unusual; something shameful is being hidden—also absents himself. Nadia is alone.

She is supposed to stay for two more nights. That doesn't seem doable. One more night doesn't seem doable.

She steps out. She is wearing Yolanda's coat and Yolanda's snow boots and Yolanda's insulated mittens. Somewhere nearby, she's heard, is a famous open-air market. Nadia will find her way there by intuition. If she doesn't find her way, whatever.

The sidewalks have been cleared of snow by little sidewalk snowplows. She walks the length of one block, then of another, then of another. At every crossroads, it seems, a child holds hands with, or rests in a stroller pushed by, or sits on a sled towed by, or is ensconced within the coat of, a parent who turns out to be a dad. Where are the mothers? What's going on?

It begins to snow. The flakes are as grand and as intricate as shuttlecocks. Nadia gives up on her walk. She goes back to the red brick triplex on the top floor of which her sister and her man friend live in the relationship that will not add up.

That night, the sisters go on foot to a restaurant. They will be joined by Yolanda's best friend in Montreal, a Frenchwoman whose name is Élise, or Alise, or maybe Alice, or maybe even Éloïse. Does it matter which? No.

As they walk along a tree-lined street, Nadia experiences a powerful feeling, neither agreeable nor disagreeable, of recurrence—as if long ago, once upon a time, the two sisters tramped outdoors just like this, side by side in the cold in big coats, into and out of the soft glow of the street lanterns, each escorted by a small spook of breath.

"There are marmots here," Yolanda says. "Under the sidewalks. Under our feet. Lots of them. They come out in the spring."

"Marmots?"

"Groundhogs, you'd call them," Yolanda explains as if she's no longer a U.S. national.

On they walk. The feeling of recurrence has gone.

Yolanda discloses that the Frenchwoman they're meeting has also lost her husband.

Nadia hates being thought of as a widow, hates any suggestion that she must identify with other widows, hates the very idea of widowhood. But she says nothing. She is caught up in an awareness of the marmots—of a concurrent marmot universe, of a concurrent marmot metaphysics. The awareness is visceral—the touch of a small clawed internal hand.

When they arrive at the restaurant, the other widow isn't there. They wait at the bar.

Nadia notices something odd: the clientele consists almost completely of pairs and trios and quartets of women. Where are the men? Don't they eat out? Nadia is about to mention the mystery to Yolanda when the other widow materializes. She doesn't seem French. She is a laughing and solid-looking woman who looks, even after she's removed her coat, like she's about to chop wood. Nadia likes her right away.

The three women are shown to a table among tables filled with women.

The widow from France speaks very good English, with an accent that's more British than American. She and Yolanda met at a spin class, Nadia learns. There is some discussion of the spin class. Nadia says, "Orangutans like to spin. From a rope, I mean. You know—dangling and going round and round. They like the feeling of dizziness." Orangutans, Nadia hears someone say—someone who, it turns out, is herself, as if in addition to an inner other she now has an outer other—orangutans use medicine. "They'll chew on a leaf to make a paste out of it. Then they'll apply the paste to a wound."

"That's amazing," Yolanda says.

"I've adopted an orangutan," Nadia continues, falsely. The adopted orangutan, she narrates, is a little guy whose parents were murdered by poachers. He is six months old—a baby. He lives in an orangutan orphanage on the edge of the jungle.

"Does he have a name?" Yolanda asks.

"His name is Arnold," Nadia says. "I chose it. If you adopt a baby, they let you choose the name."

The women talk. For some reason the other widow asks how Nadia and Drew met. Nadia answers, "In a cigar bar in Syracuse." It is the truth, and also it is a joke. Nadia adds, "My date had stood me up."

"You never told me that," Yolanda exclaims. "Who was the date?"

Nadia says, "His name was Davy O'Connor."

This is an untruth. There was no date with Davy O'Connor or anyone else. Davy O'Connor, however, is not an invented character. He was a boy Nadia knew at Michigan. These days, Nadia has discovered from her online searches, Davy O'Connor is a lawyer in Yonkers.

Meanwhile, the French widow is saying that it took three years after her own husband's death before she properly felt single. She had not expected it to last so long—the monogamy of

mourning. Another surprise awaited her: the shocking reality of dating men in their fifties and sixties and seventies. They were, almost without exception, bad lovers.

Nadia wants to break in—wants to say, This is going to sound weird, but what is your name, exactly? Could you write it down for me? Doesn't it bother you that you have this name that sounds like ten other names? Didn't your parents know better than to give you a name like that?—but the interior other commands her, Just stop, and her exterior self, jumping in, says, "Bad lovers how?"

It wasn't a question, the woodcutter widow answers, of the physical. The bad backs, the bad knees, the pills, the drugs, the intimate malfunctions—such things were to be expected. The shock came on the level of the mental, of the psychological. These men were like ruins of men. The most meaningful parts of their lives—their marriages, their families, their work—had overwhelmed them. In the place of maturity, she encountered childishness. In the place of self-confidence and tenderness, she encountered disappointment and fear and anger—especially anger.

Her most recent date, the French widow goes on, presented as a normal guy. He had good things to say about his ex-wife, he was proud of his kids, he had no complaints about his career in the medical-supply business. Anyway—twice she and this man went out to dinner. After the second dinner, he invited her back to his house.

The three Nadias—internal, external, and essential—are listening.

The date lived out in Laval, in the suburbs. After a drive of more than half an hour, they came to some houses. It was night. Dark fields and dark woods lay beyond the houses. The date's house sat atop a knoll. The car paused at the foot of the knoll while the garage door slowly rose, exposing a dark grotto. The car climbed the knoll. Its headlights lit up the garage interior.

A dead deer hung in the beam of the headlights. A wire cable, suspended from a ceiling hook, was attached to its neck, twisting the head toward the wall. A long pink tongue protruded from the mouth. The two front legs stuck out at a grotesque angle. In the place of the stomach was an enormous red cavity held open by sticks in the shape of a cross.

The widow jumped out of the man's car and started running. There was nowhere to go but the neighbor's front garden. On the lawn was one of those pretend cars for children to pretend drive. Standing next to the car, she called a taxi.

The date remained on his property, laughing. He yelled that he hadn't shot the deer—that it had jumped in front of his truck.

Yolanda says, "What does it matter if he hits the deer or if he shoots the deer? He should have warned you what to expect. Weirdo."

Nadia says, "He must have had a pickup truck."

The other widow says, "Yes, he did."

"My husband was killed by a pickup truck," Nadia says.

A man appears. It is the waiter. He is a boy, really. He slowly and anxiously fills Nadia's wineglass, then Yolanda's wineglass. He is sweating. The women silently wait for him to be gone.

Nadia resumes: "Why was he driving a pickup truck? He was driving to the Lions Club. That's what he told the police—this story about going to the Lions Club. But nothing had been picked up by him; nothing was going to be dropped off. There was no load. So why was he driving a pickup?"

Nobody responds, not even the internal interlocutor.

Nadia goes on, "His truck weighed six thousand pounds. It's a death machine. Why was he driving it? Why was he driving a death machine?"

The other widow finally says, "Yes, that's a good question."

"When you start thinking about it," says Nadia—the new Nadia, the one who has powers of vision, the essential Nadia—"you realize these killer cars are everywhere. Which means there are killers everywhere. Thousands and thousands of killers, ready to kill. They're almost all of them men, but



"Oh, look, it says this book has more than ten thousand likes."

some of them are women. I kind of wonder if I could become a killer, too. I mean, why not? It's allowed, right? There are so many people I would like to kill. I wouldn't enjoy killing them, but I'd like to see them dead. I really would. It would make me so happy. You know what I'd do, if I had powers of invisibility? I would kill people. Bad people. There are so many of them out there—people who deserve to be killed. Especially in America. In Canada it's probably different."

Yolanda looks at the other widow as if it's her job to say something.

Before the other widow can speak, she is interrupted by Nadia, who says to her, "Isn't hanging up a deer carcass, like, a venison thing? A meat thing?" Nadia looks at Yolanda. "You know—a farm-to-table thing?"

In the morning, Nadia stays in bed until she is certain that the sister and the mimbo man friend have gone. When she achieves this certainty, she makes herself a cup of coffee. It is ice-cold outside, and there's nothing to do in this apartment—other than the jigsaw puzzle, of course.

The jigsaw puzzle is a classic tiger-face thousand-piecer.

A task lamp is attached to the nearby bookshelf. Its purpose is to illuminate the table. One turns on the lamp. One removes one's reading glasses from one's pocket and puts them on.

The puzzle's four edges have been completed. The pieces that go into the body of the puzzle have been placed outside the edges and turned right side up. A few have been sorted into the beginnings of groups.

Stop right there, the internal entity says.

One examines the scene of the puzzle. One senses, again, one's altered consciousness—one's heightened optical powers. One moves closer to the table.

It is not a question of doing the puzzle as such. It is a question, rather, of entering a kind of raptor state, of hovering and hovering over the puzzling table to study the tiger image on the lid of the puzzle box, of studying the shades and the variants of the colors of the tiger, the oranges and the golds and the blacks and the yellows and the whites, of focussing and focussing until one notices, for example, that certain parts of the tiger fur consist of gradually more tangerine golds, that the tiger's irises are uniquely amber, that the darkness of the black fur in one part of the puzzle is different from its darkness in another part, and it is a question, too, one learns, of becoming attentive to differences and similarities of pixelation—color blurriness and sharpness, in other words—produced by the disuniformity of the photographic focus, a question, in short, of seeing more and more and acting accordingly, that is, of picking up puzzle pieces and comparing them inter se, these paperboard amoebas, for correspondences of shape and agreements of color, and fitting together one apt and concolorous pair at a time, the nectarine with the nectarine, the banana yellow with the banana yellow, the unusual outie with the unusual innie, and so on, raptly, beginning with the distinctive, more easily recognizable elements of the jigsaw (the very white whiskers; the pinks and the peaches of parts of the tiger's neck fur) and then moving on to subtler, more unlikely compatibilities and contiguities, including the rare ecstasy of making a hybrid or parti-colored pair, in which two wholly unlike and apparently disjunctive pieces join to form a twosome, an entirely gold piece and an entirely non-gold piece, say, and so on and so forth, one tiger fragment at a time, so that there occurs a gradual, ever-growing convergence of the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, even as the integration of the puzzle is not the true purpose of the puzzling. It is not a question of revealing the face of the tiger. It is a question of rapture.

Hours pass. One takes stock of the jigsaw puzzle. It is more than half complete. Laurent, one calculates, will be back within the hour.

Undo it all, the inner other commands. You've had your fun. Now put all the pieces back as you found them. Do it now. There's still time.

One does not heed this other one. One gathers one's things and flees to New York a day early.

When Nadia enters the United States, she simultaneously enters night. Soon she is driving on an empty road through forests and mountains devoid of a single particle of illumination except for the white roadside posts tipped with small glowing reflective spectres.

Out of nowhere comes an alien blaze and brilliance. Nadia pulls over. Why does she feel so happy?

TO SEW A FREEDOM SUIT

Take measurements to determine the size of it.

How lavish the jacket and sleeves, the inseam.

Appraise from shoulder to shoulder its width.

Measure neck, chest, waist. Note

Its dimensions on brown paper. Otherwise

In the green field of your imagining.

When and where you will wear your suit.

Consider. Running

An errand in town, as if for another?

(Knowing to hide in plain view as a kind of candor.)

Jumping the broom or another revelation

Of a grand joy? Which design to espouse?

Three-piece with jacket and pants ideal for winter?

Vest for keeping cool where there is

No winter? Dress of preposterous number

Of buttons? Make the pattern. Choose

Your fabric. Pin the paper blueprint to your

Cloth. Cut along the edges of the paper

Pattern pieces, then cut again along the flanks

Of your green field's imagining.

—Danielle Legros Georges (1964-2025)

The cop car stops thirty yards distant, twinkling like a spaceship. After a delay, its traveller emerges. His slowly approaching silhouette—he wears a wide-brimmed trooper's hat—is visible in the side-view mirror. Nadia lowers the window. Freezing air penetrates the cabin, as does a black glove. She hands the glove her driver's license.

"Do you know why I pulled you over?" the cop asks.

Nadia answers him with a smile.

The cop looks left and right, as if somebody might be watching.

When he returns with the speeding ticket, Nadia says, "Ninety-one miles an hour? My goodness."

He stoops down and touches the brim of his hat. "Farewell, ma'am," he says.

His transporter rockets away and upward. Either it climbs a steep mountainside, or it soars into the atmosphere—the dark permits no distinction. The scarlet and blue and yellow lights dart, dart, dart and disappear.

She already knows her next move.

Two weeks later, Nadia is in the Yonkers office of David O'Connor, Esq.

A woman—attractive, in her forties—approaches her. "I'm Beatriz," she says. "I work with Mr. O'Connor. We spoke on the phone."

"Yes," Nadia says. Beatriz was reluctant to schedule a meeting with Davy O'Connor. We don't do speeding cases in person, she told Nadia. Nadia replied, It's not just speeding. There's something else—a sensitive matter.

Beatriz now says, "So: I'm afraid that Mr. O'Connor is in court. It's unclear when or if he'll return."

"I've come all this way," Nadia says.

"Yes. I'm so sorry."

"I'll go grab a coffee," Nadia says. "Do you have a number I can text you at?"

It's drizzling when Nadia steps out. She spies, among the dreary office buildings lining the street, a lime-green door. She goes through it and enters a tiny Irish-themed corner of the galaxy. She has not been in a joint like this in years, certainly not at four o'clock in the afternoon.

She orders an Irish coffee, a drink she's never had before. She texts Beatriz:

Hi this is Nadia! I'm in the Dunmanway pub, lmk if DO returns thx

Instantly there's an incoming text—not from Beatriz but from Yolanda:

Hi, it was great seeing you. One crazy little thing. L has finished his puzzle but seems to be missing a piece. He wants me to ask if by any chance you saw it around lol. So that's what I'm doing lol

Hope everything is OK. It must be so hard. Love you. Y

Nadia types back:

100%! thanks for the great stay!

The bartender turns on green, white, and gold Christmas lights. What are you doing? Nadia is asked, by herself.

What Nadia knows is this: in Ann Arbor, Davy O'Connor was the boy on campus with beautiful long hair, the clever, dreamy, strolling boy, the boy who was amiable to all but also so quietly arrogant that he could, at no cost to himself, be amiable to all, the boy who dreamily strolled from class to class and A to A, who went amiably from one sought-after girl to another, one of them Nadia: for four days they were entangled, as students are, unclearly. After graduation, everyone faced facts and put their noses to the grindstone and learned hard truths. Not Davy O'Connor. He embarked on a series of adventures and special projects that reportedly took him from the Yukon to Borneo and finally deposited him in an upstate New York cabin without electricity but with a beautiful wife. Nadia's thought, on hearing about the cabin, was, He'll get his comeuppance soon enough, after which she paid no further mind to Davy O'Connor. So why is she in Yonkers?

Hi Beatriz! Update?

Beatriz responds by entering the bar. She's nearsighted; it takes her a moment to identify Nadia. "Hey! I wanted to tell you in person: David won't be back today." Her umbrella violently contracts. "The speeding ticket? He says he can turn it into a ticket for an unattended motor vehicle. That'll save you six points on your license. He'll do it remotely. No need for a meeting."

Davy O'Connor has definitively given Nadia the brushoff. She ought to feel humiliated. Instead, she feels relief and an unaccountable power. "O.K.," she says, laughing.

Beatriz doesn't move. She stands there, greenly lit up by a huge electronic shamrock, seemingly on the verge of saying something important. It comes to Nadia that Beatriz fears

her as a rival for Davy O'Connor. To put it another way: Beatriz is an admirer.

"How about a drink?" Nadia says.

"A blast from the past?"

"That's what he called you," Beatriz says.

Nadia, pleased, tells Beatriz, We dated in college for about five minutes, literally, but I never got a spark out of him, zip, and honestly there's still no spark, to which Beatriz says, So why'd you come here, if there's no spark? and Nadia replies, Honestly, I don't know; I'm very disoriented right now; and, look, it is true that I need to talk to an attorney, a street-smart attorney, not about speeding but about a private matter, and Beatriz says, What's it about, this private matter?

And so, as Beatriz listens with sympathetic little nods and frowns, Nadia again tells the story of Drew's inexplicable detour into Finger Lakes country, tells of his killing at the hands of one Dwight Bloomer, with his lethal pickup truck and convenient heart attack, and tells of the authorities' bizarrely rapid agreement that Drew's death was wholly accidental and its consequences wholly resolvable by the writing of checks to cover, first, funeral costs; second, the replacement value of Drew's wrecked car; and, third, the value of Drew's life-insurance policy. One minute these teams of professionals were all over the case; the next minute, bam, they were gone. What was the rush? Since when did lawyers settle things so easily? Something was off. That was her strong feeling at the time. Something was not right. Nadia still feels that way, she tells Beatriz.

"You wanted closure," Beatriz suggests. "What you got wasn't closure."

"What I want," Nadia says, "is a private detective."

"A private detective? What for?"

"To get to the bottom of it—all of it."

Beatriz reflects. Then she looks Nadia in the eye and says, I'm not a licensed investigator, but it's a field I've always wanted to get into, I can do the work, and Nadia replies, The important thing is that you're smart and determined, to which Beatriz says, I am, and I'm also experienced, I'm a grandmother, you know, and Nadia says, You look amazing, Davy's lucky to have you, and Beatriz says, I think I make him happy, and Nadia says, I am sure you do. I can't tell you how happy that makes me, that Davy is happy.

Then Nadia says, "You know what I'd like to be? An assassin."

"You mean like a hit man?"

"Not a hit man—not a killer for hire. I mean killing bad guys for the sake of it. Pro bono. Like a vocation. God, I'd love that. If I had the power to be invisible, that's how I'd use it: to take out bad, powerful people who are making the world horrible. Really evil people, people who had it coming. Just imagine how good that would feel. Oh, man."

Beatriz says, "Yeah, that would be satisfying."

They laugh loudly, drink from their beers. Then Nadia says, "You know what would be great? To be able to point at someone and say, 'See that guy? That's a guy who's never had a comeuppance.' I'm talking about a good guy. A good guy whose feet have never touched the ground. A guy who has lived up in the trees, the way an orangutan lives, up in the canopy, jumping around from tree to tree. Orangutans are tree dwellers. It's part of what makes them special. They almost never come down to the ground."

Beatriz says, "So—am I hired?"

Nadia says, "What are your fees?"

Beatriz hesitates for less than a second. "Seventy-five dollars an hour. Plus expenses."

Nadia listens for an inner voice of counsel. There is no inner voice of counsel. In Beatriz's company, there are no other Nadias.

"You're hired," the one Nadia says.

Beatriz's hands rise to her mouth. Then she reaches into her bag and takes out a pen and a yellow legal pad. She writes something down. She says, "I'm going to need all the documents. And I'm going to need his e-mails, texts."

"Yes," Nadia says.

"I'm going to need to go on a site visit. You know, to—"

"Yes," Nadia says. She has retrieved an object from her pocket.

"What's this?" Beatriz says.

"It's for your new career," Nadia says. "For luck."

Beatriz grips the puzzle piece. "I need a logo. This can be my logo."

Nadia doesn't send Beatriz her deceased husband's e-mails. Nor does she send her the police report or the coroner's report or the insurance paperwork. She does not contact Beatriz at all. Nor does Beatriz contact Nadia.

Then it is springtime. Groundhogs come out of the ground at Hammondsport. The reflections on Keuka Lake grow greener and greener. When the lake warms, smallmouth bass swim toward shallower water to spawn. Early-morning sportsmen easily fish them there on the fly. The beeches and the black-locust trees display white flowers. Then it is summer. Children jump from a jetty and hurriedly swim back to the jetty and jump again. Anglers fishing for trout drift in small craft on the lake's deeper waters. The lake came into existence ten thousand years ago when a long upland of ice withdrew. At the lakeside ice-cream stand, lines ceaselessly form and re-form. Visitors eat thousands of fall-colored slices of pizza. Thunder comes with great camera flashes made by the former god, now photographer, Thor. Crafters—quilters, jewellers, potters, leatherworkers, floral artists, and candlemakers—come to Hammondsport; crafts fans McKenna Poole, Morgan Albalos, Fred Aesoph, Madalynn Cast, Rashaad Jamal, and Dominic Groeder come to see the craftwork. Then the blue of the sky over Keuka Lake clarifies and intensifies, then the reflections of the foliage on the lake go yellow and red and copper and purple. People come by car to take pictures of the leaves. Then the cars go. Then the leaves fall and then snow falls and then, after two very cold weeks, ice forms thickly on the lake. Snow gathers on the ice. The water under the ice goes quiet and dark. Then a bright hole appears in the ice, and into the water enters a little fall of light. Fish go toward the light. One is all at once lifted lightward and cannot breathe at all. Then the same one, again all at once, is back in the water and can hurry away from the light and breathe again in the dark. ♦

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A CRITIC AT LARGE

GILDED

Plutocrats and anarchists, now and then.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

When, in the nineteen-nineties, people decided that we were living in a new Gilded Age, the meaning was plain. The term, borrowed from the 1873 Mark Twain novel of the same name—a mediocre book by a great writer with a memorable title, like Anthony Trollope's "The Way We Live Now"—indicated an efflorescence of wealth and display, of overabundance and nouveau-riche excess. It referred mostly to the Veblenian side of American life: status competition through showy objects, from the cloud-level duplexes of the New York skyline to the Met Gala. Perhaps not enough attention was paid to the original concept, which implied a contrast between the truly golden and the merely gilded.

What we didn't anticipate was that our new Gilded Age would become even more like its precursor—not only in the seeming concentration of overwhelming wealth into fewer and fewer hands but in the gravitation toward a plutocracy. In the industrial age, the totemic figures were Frick and Morgan and Rockefeller; in our post-industrial era, they are Bezos

More than a century before Musk and Mangione, Henry James captured something about the romance of revolution.

ILLUSTRATION BY LA BOCA

and Musk and Zuckerberg. During that first Gilded Age—if we imagine it running from the eighteen-seventies to 1910—a counter cast of characters had a glamorous appeal of their own. These were the anarchists, whose isolated but highly publicized acts of individual retaliation were intended as inspirational melodramatic theatre rather than as actual revolutionary politics. In these years, anarchists claimed the lives of a French President, an American President, an Italian king, and a Russian tsar, and threw bombs at several American tycoons. Whether or not Luigi Mangione's recent alleged murder of a helpless insurance executive on a cold New York morning belongs to this tradition, its affect and effect certainly evoke the past, with the curly-haired Ivy-educated youth conferring, in the realm of social media, an improbable aura of martyrdom and purpose on what otherwise would have seemed a sordid act.

How to make sense of their age and ours, one Gilded Age long gone and one now getting stripped of its shine? Henry James—famous for his timidity, his fastidiousness, his suspicion of anything meretricious or gaudy—might seem an unusual figure to lead this investigation, but he does just that in Peter Brooks's new book, "Henry James Comes Home" (New York Review). Brooks tells the story of James's return to America in 1904 and his observations of the country, after his happy childhood in pre-Civil War New York and his sojourns in Paris and London. The study is a companion piece to a volume that Brooks, an emeritus professor at Yale, wrote almost two decades ago, the wonderful "Henry James Goes to Paris." That book sought to understand why James, an abiding Francophile and a prescient admirer of French modernism, could not make a home for himself in Paris in the eighteen-seventies. Brooks offered, on James's behalf, some finely wrought speculations about the deceptively open nature of Parisian intellectual life which remain true to this day.

This book is not as good as that one, in part because it is more narrowly moralistic, with too much tut-tutting about New York as it was, and in part because, where the Parisian story had to be extracted from letters and novels, this story is one that James himself laid out in a published account of his return, "The American Scene." Inevitably, the job is given over more to paraphrase and gloss than to original narrative. We miss James's mature prose, the tension between endless fuss and decisive lucidity, the beautiful Whistlerian fog that somehow lifts just long enough to show us things exactly as they are. Because the fog sometimes turns out to be the actual transmitter of illumination—the clarity rising from within the confusions—any simple summary or attempt to distill objective lessons betrays his mind. James was a racist of a sort, while also an advocate for the writing of W. E. B. Du Bois. He could be anti-immigrant and vestigially antisemitic; his visit to Ellis Island and the Lower East Side is one of the more disagreeable things in all his writing. (The "denizens of the New York Ghetto, heaped as thick as the splinters on the table of a glass-blower, had each, like the fine glass particle, his or her individual share of the whole hard glitter of Israel.") But he was too intelligent not to recognize that the energy and purpose of the new New Yorkers would eventually overwhelm that of his class and kind.

It is easy to become impatient with James, since the beautiful confusions sometimes recede to reveal simple hypocrisies. James (and Brooks after him) rasps indignant at the "cottages" built in Newport by members of the nouveau regime—he was thinking of Vanderbilt and Whitney. But James rhapsodized about the stately homes of England, which differed mainly in having been built centuries instead of minutes before. "Of all the great things that the English have invented and made part of the credit of the national character," he wrote, "the most perfect . . . is the well-appointed, well-administered, well-filled country house." England, not just America, was full of newly ascendant plutocrats, something that James himself acknowledged at the beginning of "The Portrait of a Lady," when a lovingly detailed country house turns out to be the recent acquisition of a man with a freshly minted fortune. James had a weakness for new money that bought old houses, rather than new money that built its own.

And then James had loved the New York of his childhood, which he beautifully detailed in his memoir "Notes of a Son and Brother." The new New York he saw rising around him was, to his mind, uglier and coarser. But this holds true for everyone in every period, even when the New York we cherished in our youth was roundly condemned in its day as uglier and coarser than any that had ever been before. For those of us who first got to know New York in the "Taxi Driver" hellscape of the nineteen-seventies, the city was also irresistibly full of artistic explosions in neighborhoods like SoHo, while the last sweet renaissance of American swing was blooming beautifully in the still-cheap supper clubs. Now with all these things vanished, along with the bookstores and repertory cinemas, the city seems impoverished and disfigured. James remembered Fourteenth Street and Barnum's museum in its heyday and could see no point in the new Fifth Avenue. This is a cycle that never ends.

Though James never uses the term "plutocrat," plutocratic America is what he was examining. To what extent were his plutocrats like ours? The Gilded Age plutocrats made their money in steel (Carnegie), oil (Rockefeller), mining (Frick), and railroads (Vanderbilt), but in the main their business models were not so different from those of their counterparts today. Musk makes most of his money in hard industrial goods, mainly cars and satellites, while losing money on the digital-media front—just as that other carmaker, Henry Ford, futilely poured money into his antisemitic newspaper, the Dearborn *Independent*. Bezos, meanwhile, made much of *his* money by finding new ways for consumers to shop for more goods more efficiently while forcing smaller retailers out of business, exactly like Wanamaker and Woolworth in their day.

Yet real differences persist. The typical plutocrat who built the America, and particularly the New York, that James visited was a businessman with almost absolute freedom to act, and his political power was enormous. (It is worth recalling that Hitler's constant insult to the democratic governments of Britain and America was that they were simply screens for predatory plutocrats.) Yet these men's behavior was tightly circumscribed, at least in appearance. The plutocrats of the first Gilded Age were mostly content to influence from a dis-

tance, through intermediaries. For one thing, they were busy and living far away from Washington, at a time when that still mattered. For another, discretion had political advantages. When J. P. Morgan met with President Grover Cleveland in 1895, to discuss a deal to supply the government with gold while enriching Morgan's syndicate with government-issued bonds, it was a scandal that contributed to Cleveland's ouster the following year. Bezos and Musk have made a bet that increasing their economic power requires increasing their political power, in a fairly direct way.

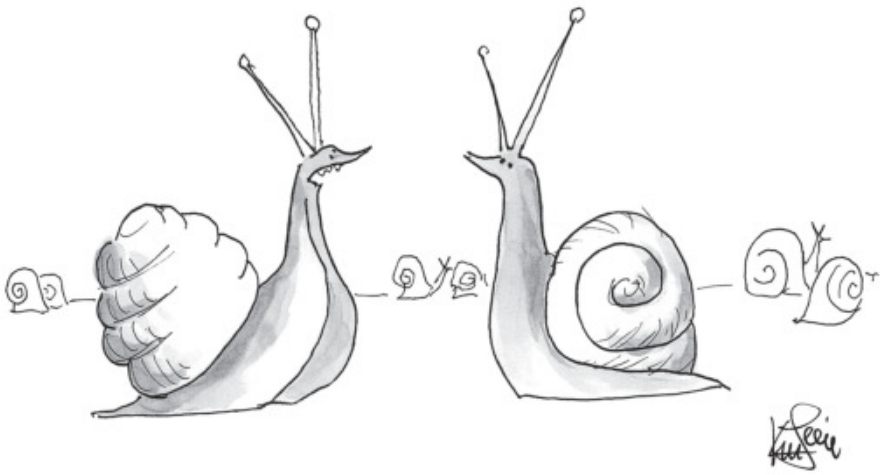
There is another difference between their plutocrats then and ours today. Our plutocrats despise the arts as an emblem of the cautious, encumbering ancien régime they reject. But James's plutocrats respected art, even if their motive was just to buy their way into the upper classes, and they did this by collecting the Old Masters or by opening libraries or building concert halls. The history of Gilded Age philanthropy is genuinely remarkable, and although it is easy to dismiss Rockefeller's motivation for starting the University of Chicago or Frick's reason for collecting Bellini as the empty acts of aging villains—arthritis producing altruism—they did ennoble the public realm. It is no accident that our great concert hall is called Carnegie, nor that, stuck in traffic round one of our greatest public spaces, Grand Central Terminal, we halt in front of a statue of Cornelius Vanderbilt.

Indeed, to a first approximation, the most notable examples of New York architecture are plutocratic projects from the first Gilded Age or its aftermath, whether the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the first great skyscrapers, most of which are associated with individuals like Woolworth. They are triumphs of the capitalist imagination as much as the Gothic cathedral is of the Catholic imagination, and no less for it. One need only visit the Met's newly reinstalled American Wing to delight in the restored Gilded Age interiors—the La Farge and Tiffany glass pieces are ineffable objects of delicate beauty, as poetic in their way as the marriage chests that we are asked to admire in Medici Florence. Plutocrats they may have been; philistines they were not.

Some are too easily forgotten. The grand master and manager of Penn Station, Alexander Cassatt, was among the most interesting men of the time. Brother to the great painter Mary (she was the rare American who, unlike James, did enter inner Parisian circles in the eighteen-seventies), and one of the first collectors of French Impressionist painting in America, he was both an engineer and an aesthete, combining an appreciation for the less visible work of public good with the unmissable acts of plutocratic ostentation. While building the old Penn Station in the image of the Baths of Caracalla, in Rome, he was also responsible for the construction of the railroad tunnels under the Hudson on which we still depend—as wholly admirable a modern Medici as one can hope to find.

Today's plutocrat, on the other hand, sees the cultural élite as part of the burdensome past. One prophetic peculiarity of Donald Trump's rise in New York was his scanting of any philanthropic role—those who did fill that role, as he felt acutely, had rejected him. Almost uniquely among New York real-estate tycoons, he never served on the board of any important cultural institution—at least until he staged a coup at the Kennedy Center. There will be no Trump museums, except those devoted to his glory.

This turn away from patronage has been gradual, evolutionary, and partial. David Geffen could still play the classic plutocratic part a decade ago, using a fortune that he'd made in entertainment to sustain the permanence of art, while Bezos clearly was on his way to the older role—the purchase of the Washington *Post* was a classic plutocratic gesture, the billionaire saving an American institution—when the new reality caught up with him. Where the plutocrats of the first Gilded Age built the New York we love, our own plutocratic class has scarcely built a monument or public building of beauty.



"O.K., I'll eat decaying organic matter with you, but it's not a date."

• •

Everyone likes anarchists. When Charlie Chaplin called the Marx Brothers "anarchists," it was taken as high praise. Insert an anarchist philosopher into a play and he will walk away with the action. Indeed, in Tom Stoppard's "The Coast of Utopia," the anarchist Bakunin, played by Ethan Hawke on Broadway, always upstaged the actual hero of the play, the liberal Herzen. Bakunin's character was not merely more leonine; he was more *lovable*. The anarchist Emma Goldman's autobiography remains read nearly a century after its first appearance and is one of the golden books of its time—in its novelistic detailing and historical sweep, it's a superior "Reds." Meanwhile, the memoirs of the humbler Fabian politicians of the day are left to the dry dust of secondhand bookstores. Anarchists were fierce but somehow funny. In the silent-movie era, they were still so much a part of the fabric of American life, or at least of its mythology, that a Billy West comedy centered on the pitching back and forth of anarchist bombs, those bowling balls with lit

fuses, and Buster Keaton innocently turned the same kind of bomb into a cigarette lighter in his film "Cops."

This despite the reality that what the Gilded Age anarchists mostly did was kill people, or try to, and mostly pointlessly. The Haymarket anarchists in Chicago in the eighteen-nineties may not all have been directly responsible for the bombs that killed seven policemen on a fateful day, but at least one of them had certainly built the bombs. Leon Czolgosz, who shot President William McKinley, in Buffalo, was inspired in part by Emma Goldman, who later wrote in his defense. And Goldman herself—under the crucial influence of the anarchist philosopher Johann Most, who impressed on her the anarchist ideal of "propaganda of the deed"—worked hard on a plan to kill Frick, sending her lover, Alexander Berkman, off to Pittsburgh with a revolver that he didn't know how to use. Neither Goldman nor Berkman knew anyone in the labor unions that were striking against Frick, nor ever asked them if his assassination would be helpful to their cause. (It wasn't; it only helped turn popular opinion against the unions.) But few remember the organizers who in the same period helped build the American union movement, while Emma Goldman's name still rings.

Why is this so? Henry James, once again, explored the allure of anarchy in what may be his finest Gilded Age novel, "The Princess Casamassima"—this one a major book by a great author with a hard-to-remember title. Published in 1886, it tells the story of a young man, improbably named Hyacinth Robinson, who becomes entangled in an almost love affair with a radical-chic aristocrat, the princess of the title. It's notable that the names of the characters in this book about violence and poverty are pure, high James: Hyacinth Robinson, Paul Muniment, Christina Light (the princess), Lady Aurora Langrish—these are meant to key us into the fact that this is thoroughly stylized fiction, less a realist novel than an allegory of anarchism and its temptations.

Hyacinth has a dark background (his mother has murdered his father and is now in prison), and he has become involved with an anarchist philosopher named Hoffendahl, who has entrusted him with a nebulous plan to assassinate someone important, though Hyacinth isn't sure who. The princess is a philanthropist who has taken a subversive turn, and whose purpose is to elevate Hyacinth, whom she flirts with without ever consummating the affair. James is quite tough-minded about the limits of radical chic. To the princess, "it's an amusement, like any other," Hyacinth's anarchist minder, Paul Muniment, says dismissively, and we are meant to think he's right.

Though the novel is European rather than American in setting, what is remarkable and universal is the connection drawn between the aestheticism of Hyacinth's nature and the magnetism that anarchism holds for him. Much of the novel is taken up by Hyacinth waiting to learn what his mission is while discussing with the princess the necessity of *some* mission. Hyacinth is drawn to the propaganda of the deed not for any specific purpose but because it is the fulfillment of the romantic ideal. With Marxism tainted by its aggressive materialism, and mere democratic socialism so *mere*, anarchism could be imagined as a series of defiant spiritual acts. This is both the contradiction and the appeal of Goldman's memoirs. Famous for her love of dancing and celebration and her rejection of the puritanical side of the Marxist inheritance, she saw no contradiction between that sensuality and random acts of violence directed against the plutocrats. They were both steps in the same dance.

Hyacinth has a harder time reconciling his political convictions with his increasing love of beautiful objects, a struggle that culminates in a trip to Venice in which he writes to the princess and bemoans, in a voice improbably like James's own, the contradiction between the beauty he loves and the social creed to which he is committed: "There are things I shall be too sorry to see you touch, even you with your hands divine; and—shall I tell you *le fond de ma pensée*, as you used to say?—I feel myself capable of fighting for them." He means "the monuments and treasures of art, the great palaces and properties, the conquests of learning and taste, the general fabric of civilization as we know it, based if you will upon all the despotisms, the cruelties, the exclusions, the monopolies and the rapacities of the past, but thanks to which all the same the world is less impracticable and life more tolerable."

At one level, the novel is a simple saga of a hero's choice: pursuing beauty with the princess in a Venice of the mind or advancing democracy with the anarchist Muniment through the murder of a stranger. As Muniment instructs him, the assassination will be a purely theatrical action: it will be helpful to the democrats that "the classes that keep them down shall be admonished from time to time that they have a very definite and very determined intention of doing so." The anarchist act is meant as an ornamental admonishment, not as an actual accomplishment.

Yet as the novel moves along, and the target chosen for Hyacinth by his anarchist superiors—an unnamed duke—hovers into view, the tangle of motives becomes subtler. We see that the appeal of the anarchists is essentially churchlike, akin to the appeal of Catholicism in parallel nineteenth-century novels and lives, rooted in the seductiveness of mystery and of obedience. "I was hanging about outside on the steps of the temple, among the loafers and the gossips, but now I have been in the innermost sanctuary," Hyacinth says of his assignment, and the language is ironic only because it italicizes the original religious spirit so well: "I have seen the holy of holies." Just as the Catholic Church would hold a perverse appeal to the decadents of the period, eventually drawing in figures as seemingly resistant as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, anarchism held out a similar enchantment at the other end of the political spectrum. Catholicism offers ritual without the tedium of rationality; anarchism offers revolutionary action against inequality without the taint of materialism, the prospect of personal gain. Anarchist violence is an *unworldly* action, a protest against fallen existence itself on behalf of the possibility of a beautiful life, rather than an act of practical and therefore mundane consequence. Indeed, the future that Hyacinth thinks will be secured by the anarchist assassinations is comically innocent: a "vision of societies where, in splendid rooms, with smiles and soft voices, distinguished men, with women who were both proud and gentle, talked of art, literature and history."

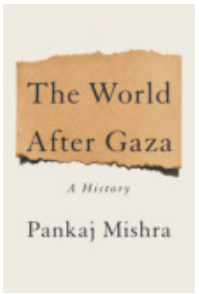
This double nature, both appealing in its sweetness of soul and alarming in

its lack of realism about what a program of public murder can achieve, is central to the first Gilded Age's anarchist philosophy. Prince Kropotkin's famous condensation of anarchist beliefs, "The Conquest of Bread," is notable today for its techno-optimism. The world has been conquered, agriculture is amazing, we can do anything now: "The wild plants, which yielded nought but acrid berries, or uneatable roots, have been transformed into succulent vegetables or trees covered with delicious fruits. Thousands of highways and railroads furrow the earth and pierce the mountains." (In the same spirit, the Futurist leader Filippo Tommaso Marinetti proclaimed, in the first decade of the twentieth century, "Combustion engines and rubber tires are divine!") Yet this complacent optimism sat side by side with an apocalyptic appetite for random assassination, the propaganda of the deed. Anarchists offered a perpetually moving Möbius strip, encouraging violent acts and dreaming of abundant dinners, shooting emperors in the back while dancing in their hallways.

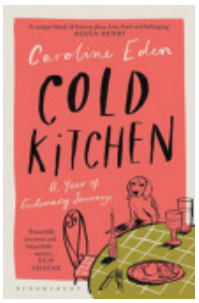
It is perhaps unsurprising to find that the ideology of anarchism is anarchic. What is surprising is to find it so hardy and contagious. For, as our plutocrats become ever more like oligarchs, the philosophy that they embrace is ever more anarchic—with the same mixture of technological utopianism and technological apocalypticism. Today's fascination with destruction and disruption is continuous with the passion of the anarchists. Musk and Mangione bear a striking stylistic resemblance, that combination of rakishness and slightly deranged intensity, the weird self-satisfaction of the crooked smile—the troll, in the Internet sense, who looks like a terrorist and a boy-band member at the same time.

How is it that we have plutocrats who play the role of anarchists? Billionaires want to burn down the system that gave them their billions—even though recently arrived immigrants of the kind who fathered certain startups would have a much harder time creating businesses in systems with no rule of law, where you have to grow up knowing who the bosses are and must pay them bribes from the beginning. The biggest plutocrats of the first Gilded Age, for all their brutalities, played an essentially stabilizing role from behind

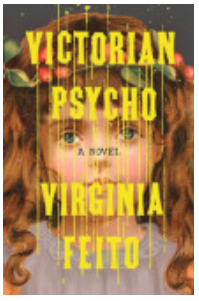
BRIEFLY NOTED



The World After Gaza, *by Pankaj Mishra (Penguin Press)*. This swirling intellectual history places the Israeli regime's invocation of the Holocaust to justify its assault on Gaza in a provocative global context. Noting that, "for an overwhelming majority of the world's population," decolonization—rather than the Holocaust—was "the central event of the twentieth century," Mishra draws parallels between militant Zionists, Hindu nationalists, and even white supremacists, stressing the way that "siege mentalities come to be mutually intensifying." He fears that the "survivalist psychosis" of Israel's leaders may portend "the future of a bankrupt and exhausted world." Instead, he urges, we must seek "affiliations that cut across politically defined borders" and a recognition of "indivisible suffering" and shared humanity.



Cold Kitchen, *by Caroline Eden (Bloomsbury)*. Primarily unfolding in the kitchen of an Edinburgh apartment, this cozy memoir offers rich descriptions of international foods stored in the pantry and cooking on the stove. But "a kitchen is a portal," Eden writes. These domestic scenes spark recollections of visits to Central Asia—Istanbul, Riga, Siberia—and each chapter closes with a recipe for a now familiar dish. In the book's strongest moments, Eden gestures toward the political significance of her culinary escapades abroad. At a café in Poland, she reflects on the legacy of the Second World War; in Kyrgyzstan, she ventures out for clover dumplings in the aftermath of protests there. In so doing, she asserts that food can be as valuable as a place's "history, architecture and civic life."



Victorian Psycho, *by Virginia Feito (Liveright)*. Winifred, the protagonist of this Victorian-era grotesque, takes a position as a governess at an English manor. The lady of the house, Mrs. Pounds, has instructed her to cultivate "good moral character" in her children, but Winifred senses "a Darkness" in Mrs. Pounds, one that she herself shares: it "rests within my rib-cage, a jailed animal grown listless with domestication." Vandalism and lechery are among the milder affronts that occur on Winifred's watch, and her narration, though sombre, sparkles. "It fascinates me," Winifred reflects, "that humans have the capacity to mortally wound one another at will, but for the most part, choose not to."



Code Noir, *by Canisia Lubrin (Soft Skull)*. This collection of "fictions"—many too strange to be called stories—is filled with disappearances, deaths, and gnomic pronouncements. Lubrin, a St. Lucian-born Canadian poet, writes that "the murderers in this draft are those who write the laws," referring to the titular seventeenth-century French edict that governed the traffic and ownership of Black people. Text from these regulations appears between Lubrin's pieces, hauntingly drawn over by the artist Torkwase Dyson. The collection displays tremendous stylistic breadth: one work simply describes seventeen dogs, another features a mathematically gifted conch shell, and others are closer to poetry, with only a few plotless lines. The over-all effect is a dizzying, disorienting view of "history's wide grave."

the scenes—the Cardinal Richelieu role, the wise banker in the background. A role that J. P. Morgan helped perfect, it's a billionaire fantasy of benevolence which runs right through a mythological figure like Bruce Wayne.

But Musk, like Trump, is a Joker, with the comedy and tragedy masks flipping deliriously around. G. K. Chesterton's great Gilded Age anarchist novel of 1908, "The Man Who Was Thursday," defined this doubleness. All the anarchists in a hyper-powerful ring that is the secret engine of Europe are secretly policemen—or is it that the secret policemen are actually indoctrinated anarchists? Both are true. Chesterton was officially against anarchism, of course, but he was against it in a way that fully accepted its allure; the anarchist's hatred of bourgeois materialism is so obviously attractive, so close to the holy, that, though evil, it is irresistible. The appetite for romantic destruction is the flip side of the desire for authoritarian order, and, like the Joker's merry grin and sadistic grimace, one comes right after the other so quickly that they can't be told apart. (It is also significant that steampunk, the projection of today's concerns into an imaginary world of late-nineteenth-century technology, is the signature surrealism of our time.)

Then, as now, the real work of reform was done in large part from the ground up, via the creation of unglamorous organizations like local Rotary Clubs, which, as the political scientist Robert Putnam has pointed out, amassed enormous social capital for progressive causes by . . . holding lunches. Meanwhile, the glamorous forces of resistance had largely absorbed the tastes of their supposed opposites in the plutocratic caste. They expected the people to admire wild and ostentatious assassinations in the same way that people admired the jewel-studded shirt front of Diamond Jim Brady. Mangione, after all, has been charged with shooting an unarmed stranger in the back, just as James's Hyacinth is expected to do, and his public aura is clearly tied to our longing for clear, clean acts of assertion on the part of vaguely defined purposes—what an earlier generation would have celebrated as existential actions, however self-defeating or cruel.

This Gilded Age rule—that those who act violently against individuals inherit the mantle of religious martyrdom, while those who act practically to improve a system are dismissed as impotent proceduralists—is visible in the continued appeal of the anarchist imagination. Whatever it is they're accomplishing, they're not just holding lunches. Spending our lives captivated by glittering façades and hypnotic spectacles, we dream of the one decisive act that will break us from our chains, even if, in fact, it forges only another link within them. It is a permanent move in our modernity.

The first Gilded Age, though its injustices were remedied in part by the Progressive movement, was suspended decisively only with the arrival of the Great War, and what is so ominous about that conclusion is that the victims believed, even before it began, that the war would be the ultimate act of creative destruction, a weapon against decadent materialism. People in Britain, France, and Germany were convinced that their countries, along with Europe itself, would be better off if they burned everything down, cleared out the rot, and started over. What they got was suffering and destruction on a scale that still staggers the imagination.

At the time, the cleansing-fire credo was slower spreading to America, where the war came later and cost much less, and, indeed, ushered in something like yet another Gilded Age, the Jazz Age of the twenties, built on cheap credit and with its own cast of tycoon characters. (Throughout that decade, the Secretary of the Treasury was Andrew Mellon, who had assembled a banking empire and who, like his father, was a business partner of Frick's.) We have lived within the insulation of the abundance that began then and, despite the Depression that soon followed, became a nearly permanent part of the American condition.

If the outcome of this new Gilded Age seems likely to be dark, it is perhaps because we have fallen into the trap that Europe fell into in 1914, the belief that by burning down flawed institutions we can somehow relight a charismatic glow. They didn't, and we won't. The real riddle of the Gilded Age, then and now, is that, by objective historical standards, both times were as close to golden as any age can get. The onset of the first Gilded Age corresponds to the greatest uptick in common prosperity in the known history of humankind, while our own age, despite its persistent inequities, is at least as astonishing in the global expansion of prosperity. The common people of 1900 were far wealthier than the common people of 1860. But they were not wrong to sense that they were not participating adequately in the prosperity. As Tocqueville demonstrated long ago, we grade our well-being on a curve. Rising expectations, not mass immiseration, produce revolutionary sentiments. If we *feel* ourselves victims of injustice and inequality, the practical effect is that we are.

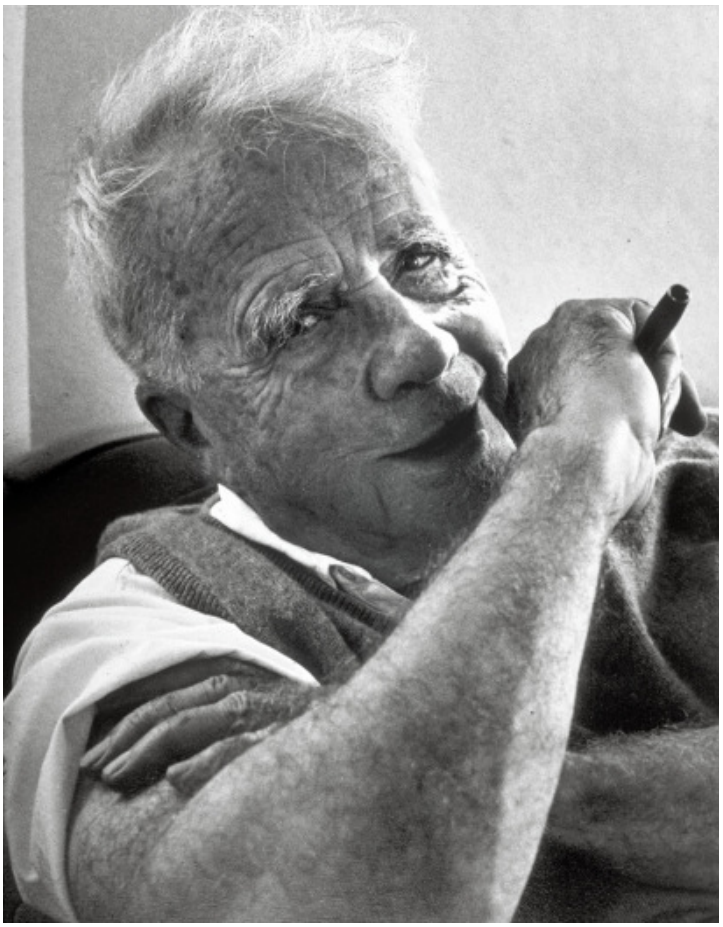
To say that America is, across the quintiles, an incredibly wealthy nation and that, on the whole, it has been a well-run nation is almost taboo. We point to obvious deficiencies, from one political side or the other: we don't build enough housing in big cities, we don't pay workers enough, everyone should have health care. Or: the family is collapsing, what's become of our subways, why can't we stop the shoplifters? All of these are problems open to, so to speak, lunchtime solutions, but we dream instead of all-night fires. We want to burn the system down, it seems, in part because it works too well for people we don't like.

Every modern age is known by the medievalism it spawns. The first Gilded Age swooned over the melancholy maidens and poesy-minded, grail-seeking Galahads of Tennyson's "Idylls of the King," and so it is perhaps striking that our own medievalist saga, the "Game of Thrones" cycle on television, with its spinoff and its knockoffs, is notably more brutal and less aesthetic than any that has come before. When the most beautiful church in King's Landing blows up, all we see is Queen Cersei, celebrating sneeringly with a glass of wine. The same brutal philistinism of the new Gilded Age as we have come to know it—that of Trumpism, as of the Putinism it admires—is essential to its ideology: there is only power and domination, dragons and destruction, and anything more is a fool's deception. Hierarchies of power are intrinsic to human societies, no doubt, and sometimes the best we can hope for is that those on top become devoted to a higher ideal of education or common welfare or simple beauty. Without that impulse, we live in a truly barren time. Golden is better than gilded, but even gilt is better than iron. ♦

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN

The many guises of Robert Frost.

BY MAGGIE DOHERTY



RAY FISHER / GETTY

In poetry and in life, Frost was a trickster, saying one thing and meaning another.

Robert Frost presented himself as a simple man. Not for him the literary circles of London or the stilted dinner parties of Brahmin Boston. Nor was he at home in academia. He dropped out of college twice, citing a need for independence, and although he spent his middle and later years teaching at universities, he was constantly fleeing them, retreating to farms in rural New England. He didn't read book reviews—or so he claimed—and he didn't write them, preferring instead to let his poems find their natural audience, which turned out to be a wide one. He mocked literary critics and shunned intellectual debate, though he was a great talker and loved to tell stories. His ideal days, he said, were spent in the countryside, going on long, solitary walks or chatting with his farmer neighbors, appreciating the patterns and tones of their speech.

The simplicity of his life informed his work. Ascending to fame at a time when Anglo-American poetry was growing increasingly difficult and obscure, Frost set himself apart. A lyric poet inspired by Longfellow, he described the hard lives of country folk—a war widow, a hired man—and the hard landscapes that they worked to tame. In "'Out, Out—,'" a poem from 1916, a boy loses his hand to a buzz saw and dies, perhaps from shock; his family, "since they/Were not the ones dead," swiftly move on. Some of Frost's poems have the lilting quality of lullabies; others seem to deliver their morals in unambiguous terms. "I took the one less traveled by," declares the speaker of "The Road Not Taken," perhaps Frost's most famous poem, after meeting a fork in the path. "And that has made all the difference." His were, and still are, poems for everyone: schoolchildren, casual readers, the makers of greeting cards. One doesn't need to be versed in the literary tradition to read a poem by Frost—only, as one poem goes, to be "versed in country things."

But, as with most aspects of Frost's persona, his simplicity was a pose, an act, one that concealed its opposite. Frost was very much a man of letters, a classicist and, alongside his future wife, Elinor, a co-valedictorian of his high school, in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He was steeped in the literary tradition, as well as in philosophy and psychology (he was a big fan of William James). Ambitious and competitive, he orchestrated positive reviews of his early work and became enraged about negative reviews of later collections. A failed poultry farmer and a listless homesteader, he never quite fit in with the country people who populate his poems.

The poems, too, are deceptive. A Frost verse may be written in plain language, but it is tonally ambiguous and open to competing interpretations. Take "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," from 1923, which ends like this:

> The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.

Are these lines said gratefully or ruefully? Is the speaker appreciating a peaceful winter scene or barely suppressing a death wish? One could ask similar questions about "The Road Not Taken": How sincere is our speaker, who imagines his future self "telling this with a sigh"? Has his choice of road made any difference at all? It's tempting to understand the poem as ironical—a "cunning nugget of nihilism," as Dan Chiasson wrote in this magazine—but, as soon as you do, its rousing ending and triumphant "I" urge you to consider that it may well be in earnest.

To read Frost is to wonder which

parts of a poem to take seriously—and to sense his presence over your shoulder, laughing at your mistakes. "I like to fool . . . to be mischievous," he told the critic Richard Poirier in an interview, in 1960, for *The Paris Review.* One could, he suggested, "unsay everything I said, nearly." By his own account, he operated by "suggestiveness and double entendre and hinting"; he never said anything outright, and, if he seemed to, then suspicion was warranted. In both his poetry and his personal life, Frost was a trickster, saying one thing and almost always meaning another, and perhaps another still. He was like the playful boy described in the lovely poem "Birches" (1915), bending tree branches beyond recognition, then letting them snap back to their natural state, all for his own amusement. As readers of his poetry, we're just along for the ride.

The critic Adam Plunkett expertly teases out the many meanings of Frost's poems in "Love and Need: The Life of Robert Frost's Poetry" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Blending biography and criticism, Plunkett shows how the circumstances of Frost's peripatetic life gave rise to some of his most successful poems. As in the best critical biographies, Plunkett does not merely track down real-world inspiration for a given work. Rather, he brings together Frost's personal life, literary sources, and publication history to enrich our understanding of the poems, then uses the poems to enhance our understanding of the life. The result is a thorough, elegant, and, at times, surprising study of Frost, who emerges as a remarkably complex poet and a compelling but complicated man.

Plunkett is not the first critic to trouble the popular conception of Frost as a wise woodsman dispensing comfort and inspiration. Astute readers have been challenging the naïve interpretation of Frost's work for decades. The effort could be said to have started with Lionel Trilling, who, at a party for Frost's eighty-fifth birthday, declared the guest of honor to be "anything but" a writer who "reassures us by affirmation of old virtues, simplicities, pieties and ways of feeling." Frost was, rather, "a terrifying poet" and "a tragic poet." (Frost, listening in the audience, appeared nonplussed.) Trilling was channelling the poet and critic Randall Jarrell, who, for years, had urged readers to turn away from Frost's sentimental poems and consult instead the writer's darker, spikier efforts, such as "Provide, Provide," a sardonic paean to success, and "Acquainted with the Night," as lonely a poem as there ever was.

Frost's first major biographer, Lawrance Thompson, seemed to take his cue from such critics. In a three-volume biography published after Frost's death in 1963, Thompson emphasized Frost's darkness, detailing the poet's frequent depressions and his jealous rages, such that reviewers declared Frost to be "a monster of egotism" and "a mean-spirited megalomaniac." In the decades since, critics and biographers have pushed back on this dim view of Frost. William H. Pritchard, in "Robert Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered," from 1993, which has long been the gold-standard biography for many Frost enthusiasts, emphasized the poet's ingenuity and playfulness, both in his work and in his life. Even when Frost was boastful or inconsiderate, Pritchard suggested, one couldn't help but appreciate his cleverness.

Plunkett, like Pritchard, admires Frost in all his guises. Throughout, he stresses the poet's multiplicity, his ability to exhibit opposing attitudes in the same poem, sometimes in the same line. Interpreting "The Pasture," an early poem, Plunkett shows how its refrain—"You come too"—can be understood "in at least four ways at once," as "a suggestion, an insistence, a command, a plain statement." Recognizing all possible meanings, Plunkett argues, allows us to access "a mind in its nakedness weighing how it means to use the phrase, why it means to use it, and what it wants and needs of you." To read the line simply as a benign invitation—or, conversely, as a straightforward command—is to miss the point: the poem is exploring the different ways that people connect, rather than insisting on one kind of intimacy.

"Love and Need"—which takes its title from Frost's poem "Two Tramps in Mud Time," from 1934—proceeds in loosely chronological fashion, taking us from love poems that Frost wrote for Elinor during their courtship to later poems such as "The Gift Outright," which an eighty-six-year-old Frost recited at John F. Kennedy's Inauguration. (Kennedy went on to eulogize Frost at Amherst College, noting that many readers "preferred to ignore his darker truths," just weeks before the President's assassination.) Frost was born in San Francisco in 1874, moved across the country following the death of his dissolute, larger-than-life father, and made a series of homes in mill towns north of Boston with his mother, who was a schoolteacher, and his younger sister. He came to poetry in high school—his first poem, "La Noche Triste," composed when he was a sophomore, was inspired by a book about the Aztec



"It's become extremely important that you sign those papers."

Empire—and published the lyric "My Butterfly" in *The Independent* in 1894. A long fallow period followed, during which he married, raised four children, tried his hand at farming, and taught high school, all the while writing poems but publishing very few. In 1912, he moved his family to England, where he met Ezra Pound, who championed his work. Frost's first book, "A Boy's Will," was published in 1913. At thirty-nine, he finally had a taste of literary success.

In Plunkett's hands, "A Boy's Will," sometimes seen as one of Frost's less impressive collections, becomes newly intriguing. (In a generally positive review, Pound called the book "a bit raw.") Plunkett reveals the book to be a "spiritual autobiography" modelled on Tennyson's poem "In Memoriam A. H. H." (1850), which commemorates the poet's friend Arthur Henry Hallam. There are striking similarities between Frost's collection and Tennyson's poem; many of Frost's poems refer directly to a corresponding canto in Tennyson's work. The difference is that Frost's poems are mourning not a friend but the pastoral life the poet has left behind, and mourning, too, his eldest child, Elliott, who died at age three, of cholera, in 1900. "Though not a literal story of mourning, *A Boy's Will* suffuses its every texture in an atmosphere of mourning," Plunkett writes. "The poems are tinged throughout with a sense of amorphous loss, the other side of which is a depth of gratitude."

The connections Plunkett draws between Frost's lyric poems and their literary influences are valuable, particularly for anyone taken in by Frost's aw-shucks persona. Though Frost sometimes disavowed his literary education—"I haven't had a very literary life," he told Poirier in the *Paris Review* interview—he was an avid reader of poetry and the owner of several well-thumbed poetry anthologies, which he regarded as superior to any literary magazine. (Too many critics in the latter.) He used canonical poems to inspire his own. The early poem "Flower-Gathering" is patterned on "Carpe Diem," a love song from Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night," and the late poem "The Wind and the Rain" owes something to Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode." Frost's range of references was as impressive as that of any modernist poet—though his poems, unlike T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," didn't come with a set of footnotes.

At times, Plunkett's painstaking efforts to track each poem's influences can be tiresome. My appreciation of the exquisite late sonnet "The Silken Tent" did not increase upon learning that it borrows an image from the seventeenth-century poet Robert Herrick's "The Bracelet to Julia." But, more often, Plunkett's work pays off. Many know that "The Road Not Taken" was written for the English poet Edward Thomas, Frost's close friend, a romantic and an idealist, who, walking with Frost, often dithered about what path to take. But it's less well known that Frost was inspired by a poem by Emerson, "Étienne de la Boéce," about Montaigne's relationship with a close friend. With these sources in mind, we read the poem's tone and aims differently: Frost may be mocking Thomas's indecisiveness, but he is also legitimating the dilemma of choice. The poem is skeptical of the idea of life-defining actions but not entirely cynical, Plunkett concludes; it is "not a denial of epiphanic self-realization but a questioning of it." Situating the poem within a tradition softens its bite.

In tracking Frost's influences, Plunkett shows just how invested Frost was in the literary tradition—how the poet had, despite his protestations, led a "literary life." Unlike those who obeyed the modernist imperative to "make it new" by inventing poetic styles and forms, Frost stuck with the templates available to him but changed them in subtle ways. He didn't slavishly imitate the poets he admired but, rather, riffed on them. This approach produced, in Plunkett's estimation, "the greatest achievements of Frost's lyric style: to contain the growing complexity of his poetry in forms that were no more difficult than those preceding them, that were in most instances simpler, belying the turbulence one is made to feel under the surface."

What accounts for this turbulence? Frost offered one answer in a letter from 1914, in which he described the unusual rhythm of his poems. He preferred to write in regular meter, usually "the very regular pre-established accent and measure of blank verse," but he also worked to incorporate "the very irregular accent and measure" of human speech. "I am never more pleased than when I can get these into strained relation," he wrote. "I like to drag and break the intonation across the meter as waves first comb and then break stumbling on the shingle."

That "strained relation" is what we find in a poem like "Home Burial," which appeared in Frost's acclaimed second collection, "North of Boston," from 1914. The poem, one of Frost's finest, comprises a dialogue between a husband and wife who have recently buried a child in a small graveyard near their home. The husband, a loquacious man, wants to talk about the loss; his wife thinks he doesn't know how to talk about it and tries to leave the house when he broaches the topic. Frost captures the friction between the couple:

> "Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?"
>
> "Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
> I must get out of here. I must get air.
> I don't know rightly whether any man can."
>
> "Amy! Don't go to someone else this time.
> Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs."
> He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.
> "There's something I should like to ask you, dear."
>
> "You don't know how to ask it."
>
> "Help me, then."
>
> Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

The dialogue is both realist, full of the ejaculations and repetitions that characterize human speech, and poetic, with only the occasional anapest interrupting the poem's iambic pentameter. So much remains unsaid between the couple; the wife's gestures—her hand on the latch—say more than her words. The poem ends abruptly, with the wife halfway out the door and the husband threatening to bring her back "by force." There is no epiphany and no resolution, only a rupture that even the husband's eloquence can't heal.

"Home Burial" doesn't appear in "Love and Need," nor do some of the better-known poems from "North of Boston," including "Mending Wall" and "After Apple-Picking." On the whole, Plunkett gives the collection short shrift, perhaps because it is Frost's most original book and thus his least indebted to the literary tradition. Though there are

precedents for Frost's dialogue poems—Virgil's Eclogues, Browning's dramatic monologues—they are nonetheless distinctive and hard to pin down. They are somehow both fiction and poetry, at once evidently crafted and seemingly transcribed. "It speaks, and it is poetry," Frost's friend Edward Thomas wrote in a review. He rightly observed that "North of Boston" was "one of the most revolutionary books of modern times."

When Frost returned from England, in 1915, he was pleased to see that he'd become a public figure in absentia. *The New Republic*, a recent addition to the magazine world, carried both a poem of his and a positive review of "North of Boston," by the critic and poet Amy Lowell. More positive reviews followed, as did dinner invitations, magazine commissions, and a teaching opportunity at Amherst College. It was the beginning of a swift and irreversible ascent. In the decades that followed, universities competed over Frost, young people flocked to him, and statesmen solicited his opinions on world affairs. His books sold well, even those which were reviewed tepidly, and he was frequently invited to lecture and to read. By 1939, his publisher could describe him as "the best-loved poet in America without a question." He won a Pulitzer Prize for poetry four times—the only poet ever to do so.

Becoming a public figure, one called on to perform himself to audiences nationwide, affected Frost's style. Plunkett describes the change as "a shift in relative emphasis from experience to reflection," and he thinks the results were mixed. "At their undramatic best," he writes, Frost's "reflective lyrics would embody ideas and impressions with an elegant compactness unmatched in his earlier work." One thinks of "Nothing Gold Can Stay" (1923), a tight, gemlike poem that muses on impermanence. But "at its worst," Plunkett writes, Frost's new style amounted to "versified thinking rather than poetry unfolding in its own movements of thought." A poem such as "New Hampshire" (1923), which, according to Plunkett, Frost wrote in "a spirit of reactive pique" after Eliot published "The Waste Land," is long, loose, and undramatic; it lacks the force of "Home Burial," in part because its characters don't come alive. It is a poem written to do something in the world—namely, to shore up Frost's reputation as superior to his rival's—rather than a poem, like so many of his greatest, that captures the world as it is.

Roughly half of "Love and Need" dwells on Frost's later decades, a difficult period for the poet, and Plunkett focusses more on biography than on criticism. In 1934, Frost lost his favorite child, Marjorie, to a postpartum infection. Four years later, Elinor died of a heart attack while the couple was wintering in Florida. Frost had been known to complain to friends about Elinor—she "has never been of any earthly use to me," he confided to the poet Louis Untermeyer—and had at times felt oppressed by her sullenness. (In one poem, he figured his wife as "my sorrow.") Elinor, for her part, sometimes resembled the wife in "Home Burial": sad, taciturn, determined to keep her distance from her husband. But the two had been together for decades, and without her Frost was at sea. "I shall be all right in public, but I can't tell you how I'm going to behave when I am alone," he wrote to a friend.

Put simply, he behaved badly. He drank far more and acted erratically. He became infatuated with Kay Morrison, a married woman twenty-four years his junior, whom he employed as a secretary, and he badgered her to leave her husband. He had strained relations with his grown children—one of whom died by suicide, despite Frost's belated attempts to help him—and insulted old friends. To the critic Bernard DeVoto, a longtime friend who fell out with Frost during this period, the great poet appeared nothing short of "evil," a selfish and domineering man who ruined the lives of others.

This was "Frost in his third act," as Plunkett calls it, a man who, in private, seemed far different from the benevolent sage he played in public. Plunkett argues that too much emphasis has been placed on this version of Frost, "this storyteller driven in the early years after his wife's death to extremes of grief and self-laceration." He thus works to explain away Frost's confessed shortcomings as a husband and a father. He also notes that the poet's affair with Morrison was never substantiated and points out the various biases of those who testified to it. Plunkett aims to be fair, but his efforts, at times, seem defensive of the poet. When you admire your subject, as Plunkett does, it can be tempting to dismiss his failings, to argue that the creator of great art has simply been misunderstood.

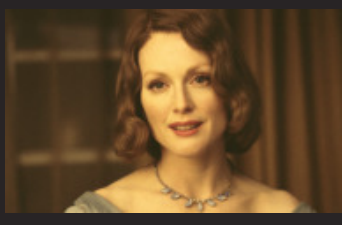
Frost, to his credit, seemed to accept his dark side; he knew it powered his poetry. When aspiring poets asked him about his sources of inspiration, he told them, "It's mostly animus." He wanted to best his rivals—Eliot, Amy Lowell, Edwin Arlington Robinson—or, at the very least, impress them. He succeeded in every case. At a formal dinner in London, in 1957, Eliot toasted Frost as "the most eminent, the most distinguished . . . Anglo-American poet now living," to the latter's great satisfaction.

A younger generation of American poets seemed to enjoy Frost in all his opacity. In the summer of 1947, Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke visited the older poet for lunch at his new home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Frost talked in riddles, as he was wont to do, speaking obliquely of poets who poured out their words noisily, in contrast to the writer whose pour was smooth. (It's not clear if his guests realized he was criticizing *them*.) "I've got a devil in me," he joked to a friend when the lunch was over. Lowell, as if picking up somehow on Frost's self-characterization, praised his host in a letter as "a marvelous devil of a man."

A devil and a sage, a trickster and a teacher, a farm owner incapable of farming, a professor without a college degree: Frost was always two incompatible things at once. He had a doubleness at the very heart of him, and he put his contradictions into his poetry. "You do throw people off track in your poems again and again," Thompson, the biographer, wrote in a letter to the poet, not without admiration. Frost's poetry matched who he was in life: a man who, in Thompson's words, had "a tendency to play hide-and-seek around a half-truth," throwing friends and acquaintances off the scent. More than sixty years after his death, Frost remains a cipher; it's hard to think of a better-known poet who is more difficult to know. "I maintain my mystery for no one to pluck the heart out," Frost once wrote. In that respect, and in so many others, he achieved what he set out to do. ♦

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MUSICAL EVENTS

A BELATED DÉBUT

An 1887 opera by the Black composer Edmond Dédé finally appears onstage.

BY ALEX ROSS



The orchestration, heavy on winds and brass, is especially distinctive.

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, in 2020, and the cultural upheavals that ensued, classical-music organizations began including more composers of color in their programs. The Philadelphia Orchestra recorded the symphonies of the early-twentieth-century Black composer Florence Price. The National Symphony did the same for the modernist George Walker. The Metropolitan Opera presented two works by Terence Blanchard. Jessie Montgomery, Carlos Simon, Huang Ruo, and other nonwhite composers benefitted from an upsurge of performances. These initiatives elicited predictable backlash from musty corners of the Internet, where it was said that D.E.I. radicals were promoting mediocrities and trashing the canon. Yet apprehensions of a classical "great replacement" proved unfounded. A 2024 report by the Institute for Composer Diversity showed that seventy-six per cent of works played at American orchestras were still by Caucasian males. Furthermore, only sixteen per cent of pieces by underrepresented composers lasted longer than twenty minutes—evidence that administrators were making token gestures of inclusion while saving the prime spots for the usual suspects.

Those who scowled at such modest steps in programming are presumably hailing the Trump regime's ugly crusade against D.E.I., which has broadened into an assault on decades of civil-rights progress. President Donald Trump has crowned himself the chairman of the Kennedy Center and complained about its "wokey" events. As a result, Renée Fleming, Ben Folds, Issa Rae, and others have cut ties with the center. The remainder of the classical world appears, at first glance, relatively unaffected. But, as 2025-26 seasons are announced in the coming weeks, subscribers might look to see whether progressive programming is being quietly rolled back. Will opera companies become nervous about politically pointed works? Will Trump-friendly artists get a boost? Will formerly disgraced Russian performers return to American halls? Will solidarity with Ukrainians dissipate?

Because orchestras, opera houses, and festivals rely almost entirely on private funding, they ought to be in a position to resist Trump's stabs at Stalinist control. The question, though, is whether even the slightest hint of trouble—a commission for a transgender composer that annoys a reactionary board member, a Latino-oriented series that receives closely monitored N.E.A. funding—will trigger what Timothy Snyder calls anticipatory obedience. In more than a few cases, organizations seemingly launched diversity programs not out of a committed belief but out of a fear of being chastised on social media. Now fear could push them in the opposite direction. This dire moment in American history is forcing a test of character. As Thomas Mann said, in another fraught period, there is no escaping politics in the arts.

A couple of weeks after the Inauguration, I attended a concert performance of Edmond Dédé's opera "Morgiane" at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, at the University of Maryland, just outside Washington. Dédé was a Black composer born in 1827 in New Orleans. In 1855, he immigrated to France, where he made his way as a composer and conductor. "Morgiane," which he completed in 1887, was intended to be his breakthrough, but no one took it up. The score resurfaced in 2008, in the collections of Houghton Library, at Harvard. The Washington-based company Opera Lafayette and the New Orleans group OperaCréole came together to bring "Morgiane" to life; its first outing was at St. Louis Cathedral, in New Orleans, in January. "Morgiane" displays sufficient inspiration that it would have merited attention no matter who had composed it. With Dédé's personal story in

ILLUSTRATION BY JAN ROBERT DÜNNWELLER

mind, the undertaking became essential.

The little that is known of Dédé is gathered in Sally McKee's 2017 book, "The Exile's Song," alongside vivid evocations of the social and artistic worlds through which he moved. In New Orleans, he was shaped by a culturally flourishing Black population, with its manifold Haitian connections. He also had the advantage of growing up in what was then America's opera capital; the genre had yet to find a stable home in New York. The Théâtre d'Orléans hosted a polished opera troupe that presented the latest French works, as well as Mozart and other classics. And, though New Orleans theatres were segregated, Black opera lovers enthusiastically filled the upper tiers. We don't know whether Dédé attended the opera in his youth, but "Morgiane" gives the impression that he was steeped in the art form from an early age. He knows all the tricks.

Deteriorating conditions for people of color in New Orleans likely precipitated Dédé's decision to seek his fortunes abroad. After failing to gain admittance to the Paris Conservatory—he was too old to do so—he attended classes as an auditor, studying with Fromental Halévy, the composer of "La Juive." Dédé later moved to Bordeaux, where he first took a job conducting at the Grand-Théâtre and then supervised more popular fare at *cafés-concerts*, or music halls. In 1893, he briefly returned to New Orleans, where he felt ill at ease. He died in Paris in 1901. Scattered glimpses of his personality suggest a man of imposing presence and intelligence.

The libretto of "Morgiane," by a Bordeaux journalist named Louis Brunet, tells a not especially compelling story inspired by "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." As the opera begins, a young woman named Amine is marrying Ali, while her mother, Morgiane, and her stepfather, Hassan, look on. Then Amine is kidnapped by a functionary of a Persian sultan—shades of Mozart's "Abduction from the Seraglio." Ali, Morgiane, and Hassan disguise themselves as entertainers and infiltrate the Sultan's court. Eventually, Morgiane reveals that the Sultan is, in fact, Amine's father. The Sultan repents and sets her free. The choice to situate the action entirely in a mythical Middle East mitigates the Orientalism of the piece; there is really no Other here.

Nothing in "Morgiane" betrays the awkwardness of a first-time composer. The melodies exude charm; the harmonic design mirrors the changing moods of the plot; the climaxes are surely plotted. Gounod and Massenet are clear influences, but Mozart and Offenbach are also present. Dédé indulges in jangling percussion but avoids crude, exoticizing gestures. One allusion jumped out at me. In the prelude to the fourth act, set in the Sultan's prison, cellos and bassoons play an upward line that resembles the lyrical second theme of Beethoven's Violin Concerto. Given Beethoven's associations with revolutionary liberation, this seems a deliberate nod.

Particularly distinctive is the orchestration, which makes heavy use of winds and brass. Dédé's father, Basile, played clarinet in New Orleans, and that sound may have mixed with opera in his son's ears. When Morgiane furnishes proof to the Sultan that Amine is his daughter, she sings a lullaby-like arietta in A major, and a solo horn accompanies her with sympathetic reserve, first intoning the single note E and then unfolding a winsome countermelody. Here and elsewhere, the intermingling of voices and instruments is masterly.

Mary Elizabeth Williams, a soprano with a strong lower extension, was mesmerizing in the title role, her superb diction giving emotional edge to a sometimes wooden text. Kenneth Kellogg brought an almost Wagnerian weight to the Sultan. Chauncey Packer, Joshua Conyers, Jonathan Woody, and Nicole Cabell gave persuasive accounts of the other roles. Singers from OperaCréole constituted the chorus. Patrick Dupre Quigley conducted expertly, though I wished at times for more zest and bite in the playing. Let's hope that an opera house with lavish resources—whether in the United States or France—soon gives "Morgiane" a full staging.

The year Dédé died, Louis Armstrong was born. Givonna Joseph, the co-founder of OperaCréole, noted in a pre-performance discussion that Armstrong had adored opera. Legends of Dédé's French career circulated in New Orleans, and the young Armstrong might have heard them. When the jazz titan echoed coloratura in his improvisations, he was not borrowing from a foreign source: opera belonged to him as it belonged to all. ♦

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ON TELEVISION

TOURIST TRAP

"The White Lotus," on HBO.

BY INKOO KANG



"The White Lotus" offers a murder mystery in reverse: who dies, and how?

Given the number of murders that have taken place at White Lotus resorts since the HBO series began, in 2021, one wonders why visitors continue to flock to them. It's clear that at least some of the guests at their Thailand property—the setting of the third season, which premièred on February 16th—haven't done their research: Timothy Ratliff (Jason Isaacs), a compulsively plugged-in finance guy, only learns of the hotel's phone-free "digital detox" policy when he and his family arrive. But being at "the antipodal, opposite end of the Earth," initially a torment to him, is exactly the appeal for other travellers. Some of them decide to stay forever. Faced with one of these long-term residents, Timothy recalls an ominous adage: "Anyone who moves to Thailand is either looking for something or hiding from something."

This season of "The White Lotus" continues the tradition set by the previous two, opening with a dead body at a luxury destination, then flashing back a week, with the implicit promise of a murder mystery in reverse: who dies, and how? It also introduces fresh questions about what each guest is hiding or seeking. Not all of their motives are persuasive. Rick (Walton Goggins), a middle-aged man who spreads misery wherever he goes, at first simply clams up when pressed by his much younger girlfriend, Chelsea (Aimee Lou Wood), about why they've come to the island; his decision is eventually explained via a tragic backstory so unconvincing that I thought he was messing with the hotel employee he disclosed it to. The most straightforward rationale is that of the Ratliff clan, a Southern family of five with only one functioning moral compass among them. The middle child, Piper (Sarah Catherine Hook), hopes to interview a renowned Buddhist monk for her college thesis, which becomes the occasion for their stay at the wellness-oriented White Lotus Thailand— though she herself derides the place as "a Disneyland for rich bohemians from Malibu in their Lululemon yoga pants." Her comment is a dig at another group of guests: a trio of fortysomethings on a girls' trip who seem into the resort's carefully curated atmosphere of mindfulness until, suddenly, they're not.

At this point in the show's award-laden run, it almost goes without saying that its creator, Mike White, glamorizes the lodgings as avidly as his most grounded characters scorn them. One guest is led through a personalized meditation session by a hotel staffer in a glass-walled hut, behind which lies a sun-kissed tropical grove that evokes both the wildness of nature and how it can be tamed for the enjoyment of the über-rich. You can practically smell the bespoke scent that might have been spritzed into the lobbies of each of the international chain's locations, a bouquet that's soft, sophisticated, and unmistakably synthetic.

There's something similar at work in the third season, a promiscuous application of the formula that yields diminishing returns. It isn't just the characters who seem a bit lost in Thailand; White does, too. The showrunner has spoken of his interest in exploring spirituality tourism, a bout of which kicked off his previous HBO series, "Enlightened." But the first six episodes of the season's eight—the portion allotted for review—scarcely touch on Eastern religion, framing Piper's interest therein predominantly as a threat to her mother, Victoria (Parker Posey), and her way of life. (The Ratliff matriarch, whose favorite pastimes are popping lorazepam

ILLUSTRATION BY MAX GUTHER

and obsessively assessing the "decency" of those around her, tells her daughter that she can't be a Buddhist: "Honey, you're not from China.") The only other theological commentary we get is from Victoria's obnoxious firstborn, Saxon (Patrick Schwarzenegger), who declares that Buddhism is for cowards. "They're afraid," he says, summing up his view of their credo as "Don't get attached, don't have desires, don't even try."

Season 3 isn't without its spiky observations, especially of the dynamics of Western jet-setters in Southeast Asia. Victoria exemplifies the kind of international traveller who's utterly oblivious to her offensiveness, at one point confusing Thailand for Taiwan, and an early scene mocks so-called L.B.H.s—Losers Back Home—the unlovely, well-off white men who descend on the region to attract the kind of women who wouldn't look at them twice in their native countries. Accordingly, the season is rife with transactional relationships. Chelsea, a gold-digger with a heart of gold, seems capable of charming everyone except her own foul-tempered partner. Her new friend Chloe (Charlotte Le Bon) is a former model who's convinced herself that she's caught a good-enough prize in Greg (Jon Gries), the older man who married—and then murdered—the hapless heiress Tanya (Jennifer Coolidge) in Season 2. (Why he feels comfortable setting foot inside a White Lotus property after *that* incident is another mystery; his paper-thin disguise is that he now goes by Gary.) When Chelsea complains that Rick's chronic wretchedness has sucked the air out of their relationship, Chloe replies, with a smile, that she believes Gary could actually kill her if she stepped out of line.

The season as a whole feels trapped between tones: not quite dark enough to confront what happens in a country where foreigners can buy nearly anything they want for the right price, nor frothy enough to simply showcase the baroque weirdness of the wealthy. Rick has dragged Chelsea to Thailand for a preposterous act of personal vengeance, and seems to be in a completely different show than the three blond girlfriends, who've known each other since childhood but spend most of their time drinking in twos while gossiping cruelly about the absent third. All three—one a successful actress in L.A. (Michelle Monaghan), one a stressed-out lawyer in New York (Carrie Coon), one an increasingly conservative socialite in Austin (Leslie Bibb)—are written with a surprising shallowness, especially considering White's other female creations. (It's also disappointing that White, whose own friendships with Hollywood actresses are well known, offers so little insight into the effort that it takes to maintain relationships across differentials of fame and fortune.) He brings back Natasha Rothwell's Belinda, a put-upon masseuse from Season 1 who was promised the opportunity of a lifetime by Tanya after a few rejuvenating sessions and discarded just as quickly. He also casts the Thai K-pop star Lisa as an aspirational hotel employee in a sweet, low-simmer romance with a fellow staff member (Tayme Thapthimthong). But they mostly serve as reminders that White is much better at writing nasty characters than nice ones.

By default, then, the Ratliffs emerge as the figures to follow. Victoria boasts early on that they are "a normal family," and the most interesting thing about them is the repression necessary to appear so unremarkable. Though she's surrounded by loved ones, Victoria seems just as vulnerable as the lonely Tanya was; her arrogance and knee-jerk contempt have made her blind to the actual dangers to her household and vicious to anyone outside it. (Posey makes her character painfully recognizable but no more sympathetic for it; predictably, she's also an excellent vehicle for White's withering one-liners.) While Victoria catastrophizes about her daughter's search for an alternative value system, Saxon—an all too believable alt-right nightmare with an unhealthy interest in both of his siblings' sex lives—tutors his younger brother, Lochlan (Sam Nivola), in a puerile, hookup-centric, empathy-free masculinity. When the pair are alone in their shared room, Saxon strips down and speculates about their sister. "She's pretty hot," he muses, "but I don't think she's ever been laid before."

This repression is primed to be punctured as soon as they land, and it's not Saxon or Victoria but the Ratliff paterfamilias who cracks first. On the verge of being exposed for his role in some substantial financial crimes, Timothy hands over all of his devices and begins to down his wife's pills. No one is in more urgent need of the Buddha's teachings—"Don't get attached, don't have desires, don't even try"—than a man whose wants have doomed his family. But it doesn't occur to him that the solution to his distress may be staring him in the face. What we get instead is rather Christian: a Boschian vision of nudity and woe. ♦

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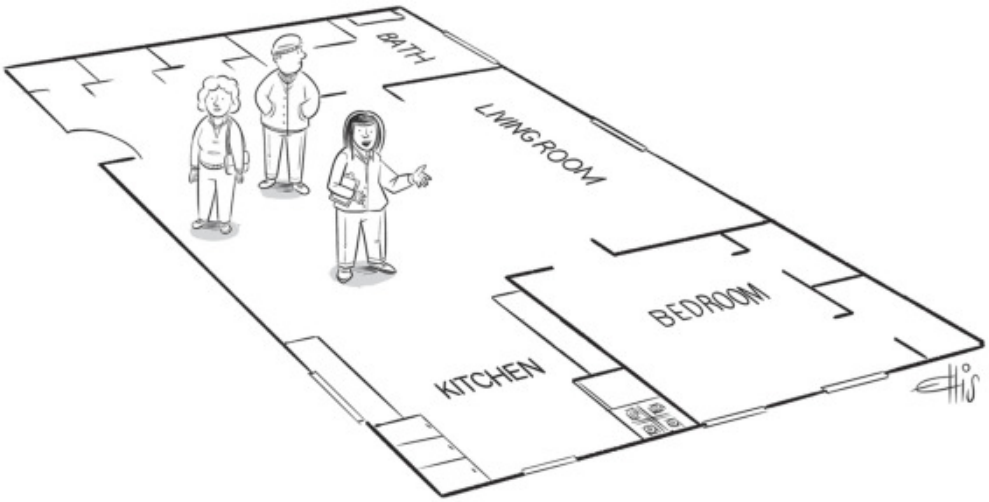
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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Ellis Rosen, must be received by Sunday, March 2nd. The finalists in the February 10th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 17th 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



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THE FINALISTS

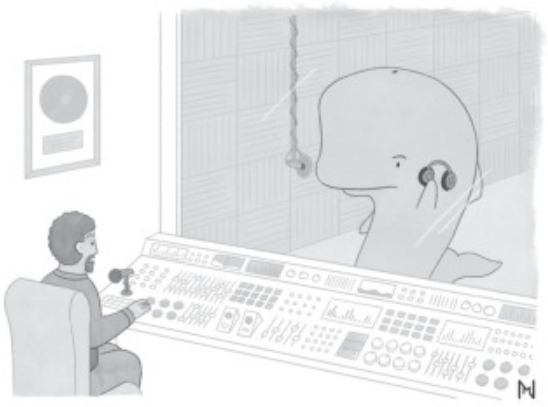


“It's the camera crew that worries me.”
Chris Abernethy, Corona, Calif.

“Let's just cut to the chase.”
Ryan Ulrich, North Arlington, N.J.

“You definitely turned off 'share location'?”
Hugo Gabriel Bennett, Nashville, Tenn.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“It's a whale song. It doesn't need to make sense.”
Nathan Keker, Oakland, Calif.



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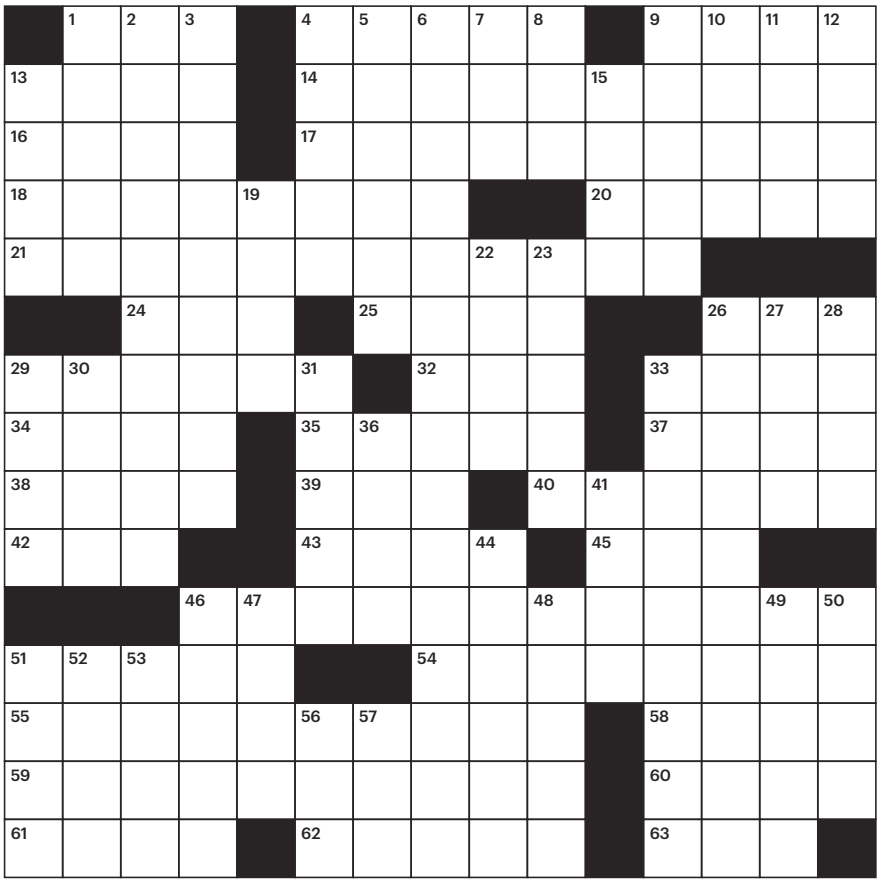
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THE CROSSWORD

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

BY ROBYN WEINTRAUB



ACROSS

1 Like Bashful
4 Bird that delivers babies, in folklore
9 Bringing up the rear
13 Soothing botanical
14 Beauty-industry metaphor for the optimism that cosmetics represent
16 Michael of "Superbad"
17 Twenty-four-hour markdown
18 University of Maryland athlete
20 Sends blue messages on an iPhone?
21 Person who might shout "*¡Goooool!*" or "Going . . . going . . . gone!"
24 Marsupial pal of Pooh
25 Reason for some flight cancellations
26 Procedure done at a hundred to a hundred and twenty b.p.m.
29 Check from the I.R.S.
32 Beats co-founder Dr. ___
33 It gets a new ring annually
34 One-eyed Norse god
35 "I wish I could ___ that!" (response to a cringeworthy video)
37 Hydrant hookup
38 Far from tongue-burningly spicy
39 "I'll pass"
40 Camera stand
42 Bank-lobby fixture
43 Word before soda or sandwich
45 Co.-name ender
46 Parochial-school attire that's a challenge to iron
51 Forbidden by polite society
54 Unburdened by worries
55 Provide art for a picture book, say
58 Measure of land area
59 Unexpected developments in a story
60 Shut forcefully
61 Woodworkers' tools
62 Follows orders
63 Number of Canadian provinces

DOWN

1 "To ___, perchance to dream": Hamlet
2 Typical Wes Craven flick
3 Not just for a season or two
4 Makes some purchases
5 Health potions of old
6 Easy job for a detective
7 Like London's iconic phone booths and double-decker buses
8 Automaker owned by Hyundai
9 Eye-surgery tool
10 Cleaning product that shares its name with a Trojan War hero
11 Mineral that's put on pretzels and icy roads
12 "___ *bien!*" ("Very good!," in French)
13 Talent-show routines
15 Financial landmark on Wall St.
19 Lots and lots
22 Feeling yesterday's workout, perhaps
23 Chirp
26 Pattern in a field sometimes attributed to aliens
27 Mexican coin
28 Vibrating part of a clarinet
29 Capital of Italy, to the locals
30 How to make a long story short?
31 ___ cap (antiquated form of schoolroom punishment)
33 "Heads up!"
36 Simba's childhood best friend
41 What unleavened bread doesn't do
44 Warren who starred in "Dick Tracy"
46 Sulks
47 Not sure which way to turn
48 ___ rehearsal
49 Aired again, as a TV show
50 Abound (with)
51 Undrinkable contents of a certain coffee-shop cup
52 Penne ___ vodka
53 Try to extinguish a birthday candle
56 Number of towers in a Tolkien title
57 Chest bone

Solution to the February 10th puzzle:

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

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