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NEW YORKER


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THE NEW YORKER

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THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW

Reid Wiseman on Leading NASA's Moon Mission
By David W. Brown

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GOINGS ON

SUMMER PREVIEW

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

TELEVISION

Elle Woods, Barack and Larry

Hollywood's current book-adaptation mania is turning the proverbial beach read into the beach watch this summer. Many boast fresh premises, foremost among them the Peacock drama **"The Five-Star Weekend"** (premièring on July 9). Based on Elin Hilderbrand's Nantucket-set novel, the series follows a food influencer, played by Jennifer Garner, who copes with the sudden death of her husband by bringing together friends from different stages of her life—played by the likes of Chloë Sevigny and Regina Hall. Across the Atlantic, a schoolteacher in the London suburbs (Rebecca Hall) is tormented by a debilitating hum in Starz's **"The Listeners"** (June 12). The show, which Jordan Tannahill adapts from his own best-seller, finds its protagonist searching for others unable to escape the mysterious and unrelenting noise.

A more visceral danger arrives in the form of a vengeance-obsessed Javier Bardem in Apple TV's **"Cape Fear"** miniseries (June 5), which is inspired by John D. MacDonald's novel "The Executioners" and its two big-screen adaptations. Bardem will play the role made famous by Robert De Niro in Martin Scorsese's 1991 film—that of a violent parolee determined to get revenge on the married lawyers who represented him at his trial, now played by Amy Adams and Patrick Wilson. The streaming site will also see the début of **"Lucky"** (July 15), starring Anya Taylor-Joy as a con woman wanted by both the F.B.I. and an organized-crime boss, in an action thriller based on Marissa Stapley's novel.

July brings us America's two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday—an occasion that Barack Obama apparently intends to celebrate through a collaboration with Larry David. The unlikely pair are the faces of **"Life, Larry, and the Pursuit of Unhappiness"** (June 26), an HBO sketch show that revisits moments in American history through David's jaundiced, hapless lens. (In one skit, an attempt to kiss a nurse in the midst of V-J Day celebrations quickly gets David's character labelled a "pervo.") A more earnest look at the country's past will be on offer in a new **"Little House on the Prairie"** series on Netflix (July 9), based on Laura Ingalls Wilder's semi-autobiographical books. Its community-mindedness is sure to rival that of Apple TV's **"Ted Lasso"** (Aug. 5), whose fourth season features good-guy Ted coaching a women's soccer team, and introducing his London friends to the delights of Kansas City barbecue.

While much of the country will celebrate in red, white, and blue, "Legally Blonde"'s Elle Woods will spend this summer in her signature pink. The character, played by Reese Witherspoon in the 2001 movie, gets a prequel with Prime Video's **"Elle"** (July 1), which takes its protagonist (Lexi Minetree) from sun-kissed Bel Air to rain-soaked Seattle. If she's anything like her future self, teen-age Elle is sure to be guided by an unerring sense of truth and justice while maintaining her irrepressible girliness. What, like it's hard?

—Inkoo Kang

ILLUSTRATION BY FANNY BLANC

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ART

Pop Art, Tarot History, Pope.L

For the most part, the art world doesn't do summer blockbusters. This season, though, a few of New York's museums are mounting decidedly fun shows that could be big hits. Chief among them is the Morgan Library & Museum's **"Tarot! Renaissance Symbols, Modern Visions"** (opening June 26), an exhibition that perfectly bridges the institution's scholarly approach with mass appeal. The first section of the show looks at the cards' origins in Renaissance Italy, focussing on an original, hand-painted deck from the fifteenth century, when tarot was still a court game. The second part centers on tarot as a tool of divination and creative inspiration, beginning with the iconic 1909 Rider-Waite-Smith deck and moving on to art works from the twentieth century into the present day.

The Guggenheim Museum's summer crowd-pleaser is less subtle. **"Guggenheim Pop: 1960 to Now"** (June 5) surveys Pop art through the lens of the institution, from landmark early exhibitions to recent acquisitions (including questionable ones, such as Maurizio Cattelan's infamous banana duct-taped to the wall). It's hard to tell what will provide the most photogenic moment: posing with Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's massive soft sculpture of a shuttlecock or snapping selfies in a Yayoi Kusama infinity room. Either way, expect to wait.

Meanwhile, the International Center of Photography continues the recent fashion-forward streak among the city's museums. **"Yves Saint Laurent and Photography"** (June 11) traces the trajectory of the designer, and of his brand more broadly, through some three hundred fashion photographs, ad campaigns, personal snapshots, and more. The exhibition, a collaboration with Paris's Musée Yves Saint Laurent and Fondation Pierre Bergé–Yves Saint Laurent, makes the case that part of the French pioneer's expertise included understanding the value of a good picture.

This summer also brings deep dives into more niche, yet still fascinating, subjects. At the Museum of Modern Art, **"Architects of Liberation: Modernism in Western Africa"** (July 5) examines how political independence helped shape the built environment in seven countries, from Nigeria to Senegal, between the nineteen-fifties and eighties. The show, the result of four years of research, includes roughly four hundred and fifty objects, spotlighting architects and projects that have received little international attention. It should be eye-opening.

The Jewish Museum also revisits a chapter of history with **"Modernity and Opulence: Women of the Wiener Werkstätte"** (July 17). The Viennese collective and workshop, which merged high aesthetics with functional design, was founded, in 1903, by three men; however, women made up a substantial proportion of its artisans and clients—particularly, it seems, Jewish women. This exhibition aims to tell their story through paintings, ceramics, textiles, films, and more.

Among the other shows of the season, it's worth noting two: **"Akinsanya Kambon: Soul Sessions"** (May 28), a doubleheader at SculptureCenter and the Center for Art, Research and Alliances, which introduces New Yorkers to the spiritual ceramics of a former marine and Black Panther; and the Drawing Center's **"Certainly an Act: Works on Paper by Pope.L"** (June 26), a focussed look at lesser-known work by the unclassifiable contemporary artist, who died three years ago.

But perhaps the most art-world thing you can do in New York in the summertime is to flee the city for greener pastures. If you're plotting a getaway, why not time it for **Upstate Art Weekend**, June 25-29? The bonanza of exhibitions and events happening everywhere from museums to barns in the Hudson Valley and the Catskills seems to grow larger and more delightfully unwieldy every year.

—Jillian Steinhauer

MOVIES

Odysseus, Aliens, Spider-Man

Studios and independent producers alike are planning hot fun in the summertime. Olivia Wilde directed **"The Invite"** (June 26), an erotic comedy, in which she and Seth Rogen play a San Francisco couple whose swinger neighbors (Penélope Cruz and Edward Norton) proposition them. **"Gail Daughtry and the Celebrity Sex Pass"** (July 10), directed by David Wain, stars Zoey Deutch as a Midwestern hairdresser who, enraged when her fiancé (Michael Cassidy) hooks up with Jennifer Aniston, heads to Los Angeles to pair off with Jon Hamm. In Gregg Araki's **"I Want Your Sex"** (July 31), Cooper Hoffman plays an art-studio assistant, Elliot, in a B.D.S.M. relationship with his boss (Olivia Wilde); Charli XCX plays Elliot's girlfriend. Monica Barbaro and Callum Turner star in Will Gluck's dystopian comedy **"One Night Only"** (Aug. 7), set in a time in which premarital sex is legal for a single night a year.

Action films, whether fantasies or plausible realities, are seasonal mainstays, as in **"Disclosure Day"** (June 12), Steven Spielberg's science-fiction drama about contact with extraterrestrials, with Emily Blunt as a TV newscaster and Josh O'Connor as a cybersecurity expert. The disaster-film comedy **"Stop! That! Train!"** (June 12) features performers from the "Drag Race" series, including Ginger Minj and Jujubee, as stewardesses on a high-speed rail line, and RuPaul, as the President; Adam Shankman directed. In **"Unidentified"** (June 19), directed by Haifaa Al Mansour, a Saudi woman (Mila Al Zahrani) who's obsessed with a true-crime podcast gets a clerical job at a police station and winds up investigating a murder. **"Her Private Hell"** (July 24), directed by Nicolas Winding Refn, blends science fiction and melodrama, as a mysterious substance penetrates the atmosphere amid an American soldier's search for his daughter; Charles Melton and Sophie Thatcher star. Andrew Patterson's crime drama **"The Rivals of Amziah King"** (Aug. 14) stars Matthew McConaughey as an Oklahoma beekeeper who reconnects with his former foster daughter (Angelina LookingGlass) and gets ensnared in a criminal scheme involving the honey trade.

Classic and modern mythology come in for big-screen workouts, starting with Michael Sarnoski's **"The Death of Robin Hood"** (June 19), in which the bow-and-arrow-wielding wealth redistributor (played by Hugh Jackman), wounded and vulnerable, looks back with regret at his violent past. In **"Supergirl"** (June 26), directed by Craig Gillespie, Milly Alcock plays the titular heroine, who helps a friend (Eve Ridley) avenge the killing of her father; David Corenswet returns as Superman. Christopher Nolan's version of **"The Odyssey"** (July 17) stars Matt Damon as Odysseus, whose homecoming to his wife, Penelope (Anne Hathaway), is impeded by battles with human and superhuman opponents. Tom Holland plays their son, Telemachus; Lupita Nyong'o plays Helen of Troy. In **"Spider-Man: Brand New Day"** (July 31), directed by Destin Daniel Cretton, the webmaster (Tom Holland) comes out of retirement to combat mysterious criminals in New York; Zendaya, Sadie Sink, and Jacob Batalon co-star.

Summer offers no vacation from creative people's struggles. John Carney's **"Power Ballad"** (May 29) features Paul Rudd as a wedding singer in Ireland who seeks amends after a former boy-band star (Nick Jonas) steals a song that he wrote. John Early wrote and directed **"Maddie's Secret"** (June 12) and also stars—in drag—as an aspiring chef whose sudden fame as a food influencer is threatened by her struggle with bulimia. Angelina Jolie stars in Alice Winocour's **"Couture"** (June 26), as a director who, while making a film about Paris Fashion Week, is diagnosed with breast cancer. Jane Schoenbrun's movie-centric horror drama **"Teenage Sex and Death at Camp Miasma"** (Aug. 7) stars Hannah Einbinder, as a filmmaker hired to reboot a long-running slasher franchise, and Gillian Anderson, as an actress from the franchise's first installment.

—Richard Brody

ILLUSTRATIONS BY FANNY BLANC

THE THEATRE

Cramped Quarters, Ancient Poisoners

This season's playwrights seem fascinated by the idea of close encounters: couples stranded in deserts, churches, tents, and other pressure cookers. **"Jerome"** (Playwrights Horizons; in previews, opening June 2) features a gay couple in the early nineties, living in the Arizona hinterlands, where the arrival of another man unsettles the pair's equilibrium. The play, by John J. Caswell, Jr., presents polyamory as an emotional bomb shelter, built hurriedly against the catastrophe of the AIDS epidemic. Another kind of hospitality is on offer in **"The Loved Ones"** (Irish Rep; June 13). Erica Murray's work, which premièred in Dublin, in 2023, follows Nell, the host of an Airbnb in rural Ireland, as she receives two strangers into her home—one of whom is a compromisingly friendly American—and reckons with the death of her adult son. At Atlantic Theatre Company, Bubba Weiler's **"The Saviors"** (July 8) follows two altar boys whose friendship buckles under the combined tensions of faith, masculinity, and adolescence. In **"Camping"** (HERE; June 13), Victoria Lynne Barclay traps two best friends inside a tent brewing with secrets, longing, and petrichor-tinged memories. Levi Holloway's **"Paranormal Activity: A New Story Live on Broadway"** (August Wilson; Aug. 14) brings the frightening premise of the film franchise—that it's people, rather than places, that are haunted—to the stage.

Revamps and reduxes are under way at Lincoln Center Theatre and New York City Center. The "Encores!" series at the latter presents **"La Cage aux Folles"** (June 17-28), featuring an all-Black cast led by Billy Porter and directed by Robert O'Hara. The French Riviera-set show outstretches a hand-lettered invitation to both drag devotees and night-club romantics. Julia May Jonas's **"A Woman Among Women"** (Claire Tow; in previews, opening June 4), which premièred at Bushwick Starr two years ago and is being mounted at LCT3, retools Arthur Miller's "All My Sons," relocating its story from postwar Ohio to a present-day back yard in Northampton, Mass. **"The Whoopi Monologues"** (Newhouse; July 7) revisits Whoopi Goldberg's landmark one-woman show by splitting its psychological striptease across five performers, including Kara Young and Kerry Washington, both endlessly watchable.

Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks programs, playing through the end of June, offer yet more anxiety-inducing choices, including a show about ordinary Americans who are burdened with magical powers (Jesse Jae Hoon's **"Titans"**), two female friends having a life-changing dinner (Nadja Leonhard-Hooper's **"Derangements"**), and the death of a beloved pet (Bailey Williams's **"The Family Dog"**).

Questions of inheritance hover over Jonathan Spector's **"Birthright"** (MCC Theatre; June 5), which follows six friends from a 2006 trip to Israel through eighteen years of shifting allegiances and digitally sustained intimacy. César Alvarez's **"The Potluck"** (Soho Rep; June 30) turns the Greensboro massacre into a hauntological musical about labor, memory, and surviving a slaughter you didn't personally witness.

The city's directors have apparently decided that if crowns are going to be fought over, audiences might as well sweat a little, too. The Public Theatre mounts **"Henry VI"** (June 9) in two three-hour installments of dynastic collapse, featuring an Asian cast. Shakespeare in the Park reopens the Delacorte with **"Romeo & Juliet"** (in previews; opening June 11), letting Verona's most impulsive teen-agers fall in love in the mosquitoed Central Park air.

And for patrons craving more venom with their summer spritz, PAC NYC unveils **"Giulia: The Poison Queen of Palermo"** (June 28), directed by Mary Zimmerman and starring the writer, Jennifer Nettles, as the seventeenth-century poisoner whose discreet concoctions allegedly dispatched hundreds of abusive husbands across Italy. Rotten spouses may prove this season's least mourned casualties.

—Rhoda Feng

DANCE

Ballet Stars, Dance Parties

In summertime, the city develops a new personality: open, relaxed, even, at times, outdoorsy. Each year, the plaza at Lincoln Center goes through a vernal transformation, its formal granite parterre converted to a busy dance floor with twinkling lights, part of the center's **Summer for the City** programming. Free nightly dance parties happen there from June 10 to Aug. 8 (often with headphones, so as not to disturb performances at the nearby theatres). This summer, the Center introduces a new **Contemporary Dance Festival** (Alice Tully Hall; June 18-July 5), curated by the savvy, stylish Kyle Abraham. Its offerings include a recent work by the Bengali British choreographer Akram Khan, inspired by ancient myth, and a meditation on the African influences on flamenco, by the Ghanaian Jamaican British choreographer Yinka Esi Graves.

Just beyond the dance floor, **American Ballet Theatre** takes up residence at the Metropolitan Opera House with a quartet of big, evening-length, narrative works (June 17-July 18), to the delight of lovers of old-school ballets, the kind that include colorful sets and Romantic plotlines: "Don Quixote," "Onegin," "Swan Lake," and the endlessly charming "Sylvia." (Watch, in particular, for casts that include Chloe Misseldine, Catherine Hurlin, and Daniel Camargo.) On July 6, the former Bolshoi phenom **Natalia Osipova,** who made her name in the early two-thousands with her stratospheric *ballon* (jumping capacity), returns for her first appearance with the company since 2018, in "Don Q."

Osipova is not the only star paying New York a call: the Apollo-esque **Hugo Marchand,** *étoile* of the Paris Opéra Ballet, has organized an evening of dances at New York City Center (July 23-26). The selections will include Maurice Béjart's lusty "Boléro," from 1961, in which a soloist (Marchand) undulates seductively on a table to Ravel, like a snake charmer weaving a spell. Better yet, he's bringing a few of his Opéra-*étoile* friends, including Léonore Baulac and Germain Louvet, who will dance George Balanchine's "Sonatine," a pas de deux as breezy as a stroll on the Champs-Élysées.

Mark Morris, for his company's two-week residence at the Joyce Theatre (July 14-25), has chosen a trio of programs set to Americana—a personal specialty. The first is mostly made up of popular tunes (also with a new piece, "Pizzica," set to the Italian-ish music that Balanchine used for his high-spirited "Tarantella"). The second focusses on country-and-Western songs. But it is the third that contains one of Morris's most striking dances, the weird, ritualistic "Grand Duo," to stirring music by the Portland-born Lou Harrison.

—Marina Harss

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Guitar Gods, Rock and Pop Idols

Listen closely and summer's approach can be heard in the distance as the roar of the crowds at the 2026 edition of Flushing's **Governors Ball Music Festival** grows near. Headliners **Lorde, Kali Uchis,** and **Jennie,** of the K-pop girl group Blackpink, are joined by such artists as **Wet Leg, Blood Orange, King Princess, 2hollis, Geese,** and **Slayyyter** (June 5-7). The night before the Vegas rapper **Baby Keem** takes his top-billed Friday-night slot at the fest, he builds a pop-up casino at Brooklyn Paramount (June 4).

A handful of the best guitarists in the world convene in the city. At Sony Hall, as part of the Blue Note Jazz Festival, **Mdou Moctar** unleashes riffy jams inspired by *assouf*, a fusionist Tuareg guitar music (June 7). The 2025 Rock and Roll Hall of Famer **Jack White** shows off the skill that earned him his enshrinement, at Brooklyn Paramount (July 11-12). And, at Lincoln Center, **St. Vincent** sets down her axe to play with the New York Philharmonic, her music arranged for accompaniment by Jules Buckley (July 2).

Though a genre-fluid affair, the Blue Note fest also features some of the most adventurous pacesetters in modern jazz, among them the flautist **Shabaka,** the London septet **Kokoroko,** the trumpeter **Chief Adjuah,** and the harpist **Brandee Younger.** Younger also has a co-billed show with **Ravi Coltrane** at Nubeluz on June 8, with special guest **Samara Joy,** after which Coltrane will set up at Birdland for his own residency (June 16-20). Principally, the season hosts the most daring saxophonist of the past decade, the cosmic visionary **Kamasi Washington** (Music Hall of Williamsburg; July 29-30).

The stirring power of soul is alive in a few cross-generational musicians carrying on the legacy in distinct ways. On June 3, **Alex Isley,** a scion of the Isley Brothers group, lights up Irving Plaza with her warm, glowing sound. On June 25, **Son Little** brings a rootsier

ILLUSTRATION BY NICHOLAS STEVENSON

approach and the blues of his March record, "Cityfolk," to Music Hall of Williamsburg. **Jill Scott,** on the heels of her first album in ten years, holds space for spoken-word positivity at Kings Theatre (July 16, 18-19). For electronic music that is just as awe-inducing, there's the ambient-pop artist **Laurel Halo** (Pioneer Works; June 25), the eclectic avant-rap producer **Flying Lotus,** playing with a live band (Blue Note; July 8-9), and the psychedelic composer **Dan Deacon** (Pioneer Works; July 31).

Larger crowds gather for idols from various spheres of influence. At Forest Hills Stadium, catch the indie-rock outfit **Wilco** (June 20) and the folk-rock laureate **Bob Dylan** (July 21). The arenas play host to child stars turned pop girlies (**Ariana Grande** at Barclays Center; July 12-13, 16, and 18-19, and **Hilary Duff** at Madison Square Garden; Aug. 5-6) in addition to trailblazers in Spanish-language pop (**Rosalía** at M.S.G.; June 16-17, and **Shakira** at Barclays Center; July 20-21). The summer goes full bore when one of the rap GOATs, **Jay-Z,** takes over Yankee Stadium (July 10-12) to celebrate the anniversaries of two home-town classics—"Reasonable Doubt" and "The Blueprint."

—Sheldon Pearce

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Summer Festivals, Beautiful America

If you need a break from un-air-conditioned subway platforms this summer, there's a multitude of classical events to stop by. The contemporary **Time:Spans Festival** kicks off, on Aug. 8, with the New York première of Wolfgang Rihm's "Jagden und Formen," an orchestral piece that begins with hand claps—listen up! The series also includes a world première by Suzanne Farrin, honoring the Hungarian composer György Kurtág (Aug. 10); the **International Contemporary Ensemble,** performing "I did not paint the war. I lived the war," by the Iranian composer Farzia Fallah (Aug. 17); and the Grammy-winning chamber group **Alarm Will Sound,** with Georg Friedrich Haas's "in vain," hopefully not in vain (Aug. 21).

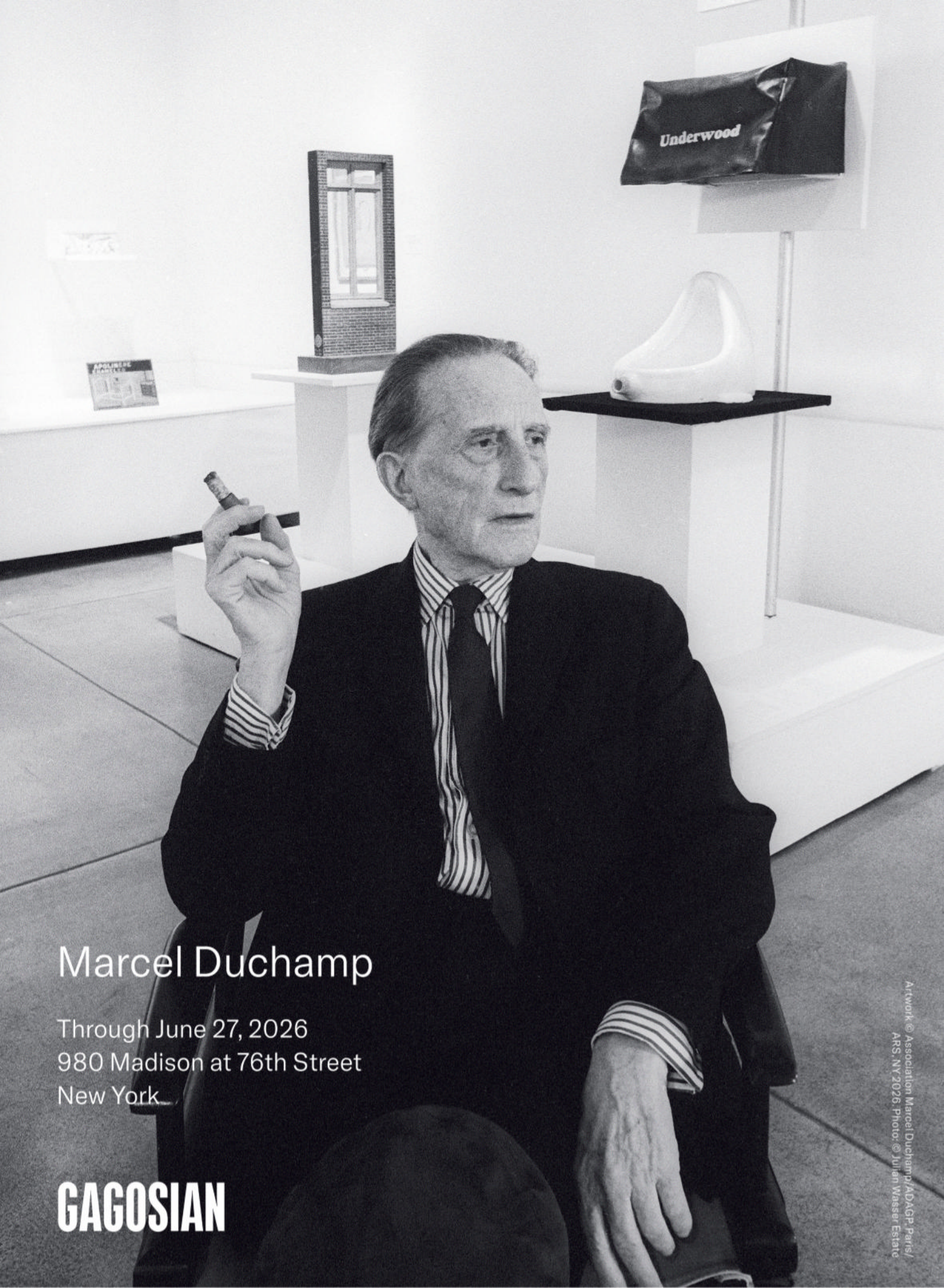
Lincoln Center holds its third annual **Festival Orchestra,** the successor of the Mostly Mozart Festival. **Jonathon Heyward,** the director, will once again lead us in a "Symphony of Choice," where the audience can vote for pieces on their phones (July 8). "A Mother's Love" (July 31, Aug. 1) features Brahms's "Lullaby." Frau Brahms, for her part, wrote her son dozens of heartfelt letters, including one saying that he was always her "first thought" in the morning. (He had two other siblings. A mother's love!)

The **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's** "Summer Evenings" series returns to Alice Tully Hall, with performances that include Gershwin's Three Preludes for Violin and Piano (July 11), Bernstein's Meditations for Cello and Piano, from "Mass" (July 14), and Beethoven's Quintet Op. 29 (July 18). At the Rose Theatre, **Teatro Nuovo** will put on Mozart's beloved "Don Giovanni" (July 15) and Rossini's less-loved "Il Turco in Italia" (July 16). Strauss's "The Egyptian Helen," set after the Trojan War, will make an appearance at **Bard Summerscape** (Fisher Center, Annandale-on-Hudson; July 24-Aug. 2)—move over, Christopher Nolan's "Odyssey."

In Brooklyn, on June 3, National Sawdust honors **Felipe Lara,** the Brazilian American composer and, as of 2024, Pulitzer finalist. Lara's special interest in mosaics and mazes will be reflected in his winding, labyrinthine piece called, neatly enough, "Mosaic Maze." At Green-Wood Cemetery, **Death of Classical** digs into what it means to celebrate the country's two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday. Its program spotlights compositions that reinvent the song "America the Beautiful," performed by the pianist Min Kwon (June 18-20); tickets include a walking tour of the catacombs. Also embracing the outdoors, the **New York Philharmonic** goes borough to borough for its "Concerts in the Park" series. Otherwise, this summer promises music from A.C. to shining A.C.

—Jane Bua

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NICHOLAS STEVENSON (TOP); FANNY BLANC (BOTTOM)



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
VIRAL

Last November, Jay Bhattacharya, the director of the National Institutes of Health and an acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—the man has had nearly as many jobs as Marco Rubio—wrote a short piece with the N.I.H.'s principal deputy director for the conservative publication *City Journal*. The piece argues that the country should largely stop trying to surveil for new pathogens, assess the risk they pose to humans, or develop vaccines and drugs to manage them. These activities, the authors suggest, mostly serve to keep scientists happy and funded. Instead, the public should be encouraged to become "metabolically healthy" by, for example, "eating nutritious food" and "getting up and walking more." Bhattacharya has railed against the politicization of science, but the piece concludes that the best way to prepare for deadly pandemics is by "making America healthy again."

At a time of escalating viral threats, this is a take better suited to online feuds than to biosecurity strategy from the apex of American public health. Last month, the ill-fated Dutch cruise ship M.V. Hondius left Argentina carrying around a hundred and seventy-five people from some two dozen countries. What followed is well documented: a seventy-year-old man developed fever, diarrhea, and severe respiratory distress; he died of what turned out to be a hantavirus infection. Soon afterward, two more passengers sickened and died, and at least eight others were infected. Dozens of people have since returned to their home countries to quarantine, but the process has been less than airtight. After disembarking, a Turkish travel influencer attended a wedding in Istanbul; a British man exposed to the virus was tracked down in a bar in Milan.

Hantaviruses are usually found in rodent droppings, and they spread when someone inhales aerosolized particles or eats foods contaminated by them. But the version of the virus on the ship, known as the Andes strain, can transmit directly from person to person through bodily fluids or the air. There are no specific vaccines or treatments for the virus, which can cause a life-threatening condition known as hantavirus cardiopulmonary syndrome, whereby fluid pours out of the capillaries and into the lungs. The death rate is as high as fifty per cent. Notably, the first known hantavirus death in the U.S., in 1993, was of a nineteen-year-old marathon runner. Metabolic health only gets you so far.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH FROM GETTY

Health authorities have sought to ease concerns about the outbreak. Federal officials have avoided using the word "quarantine," and the C.D.C. didn't activate its Emergency Operations Center or issue an advisory to health departments until some American passengers of the ship had already returned to the U.S. The agency has indicated that the risk to the public remains low, because transmission requires "prolonged close contact," but what, exactly, constitutes "prolonged" and "close" is a matter of some dispute.

According to a report in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, hantavirus has previously been implicated in superspreader events. In 2018, a person infected with the virus attended a birthday party in Epuyén, Argentina. At least five people sitting nearby developed symptoms, including a man with an "active social life," who went on to infect half a dozen other people before dying, a few weeks later. The man's wife is thought to have infected ten more people at his wake. All told, nearly three dozen people contracted the virus, and eleven died. The report's authors estimated that, before mitigation measures such as patient isolation were initiated, the virus's reproduction number was above two, meaning that each infected person spread the virus to more than two others. (The initial COVID strain had a reproduction number of around three.) Hantavirus can incubate for nearly two months before a person shows symptoms, and several dozen Americans are now being monitored at U.S. quarantine facilities or in their homes. The full extent of the outbreak may not become clear for weeks.

Then, last week, as the M.V. Hondius

prepared to dock in Rotterdam, unloading the last of its crew, the World Health Organization declared an Ebola public-health emergency. At least seven hundred people have been infected and more than a hundred and seventy have died, mostly in a conflict-ridden region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. On Tuesday, the W.H.O.'s director general said that he was "deeply concerned about the scale and speed" of the spread: by the time authorities learned of the outbreak, it was already unusually large, suggesting that many more people are probably infected or at risk. The Ebola strain currently circulating doesn't respond to the vaccine or the antibody treatment that were developed for a different version of the virus, which caused a years-long outbreak a decade ago, killing more than eleven thousand people.

Neither Ebola nor hantavirus is likely to unleash a pandemic: Ebola usually spreads through direct contact with the bodily fluids of a person showing symptoms, and hantavirus hasn't proved itself capable of sustained community transmission. Still, these outbreaks expose the shortsightedness of America's retreat from its role as a global-health leader. This year, the U.S. formally withdrew from the W.H.O., which has since struggled to obtain sufficient funds to monitor and address infectious threats. The C.D.C. largely received information about the hantavirus outbreak secondhand—forced, as one expert put it, "to rely on the good will of international partners for data that it once would have helped generate." (Even this is an improvement over last year, when the Trump Administration banned C.D.C. officials from communicating with their counterparts at the W.H.O.) Since Trump returned to office, the C.D.C. has lost roughly a third of its staff, and cuts to foreign aid have hampered on-the-ground programs intended to respond to Ebola and other diseases. According to a study in *The Lancet*, the shuttering of the U.S. Agency for International Development could result in millions of deaths around the world by the end of the decade. Bhattacharya and other officials have said that they are simply "restoring trust" in science, but polling suggests that faith in federal health agencies has plummeted.

All this is properly understood as a grave and avoidable loss—for the country's standing and for the health and security of Americans. But, in the fog of the post-COVID culture wars, it's easy to lose sight of the power we still possess. America's public-health institutions helped subdue polio, eradicate smallpox, slash smoking rates, transform H.I.V. from a death sentence to a chronic condition—and save millions of lives during the coronavirus pandemic. This has been a story of great ambition and repeated success. It can be again.

—Dhruv Khullar

FANDOM DEPT.

KNICKS LICKS

Shortly before Game One of the Eastern Conference Finals, in which the New York Knicks hosted the Cleveland Cavaliers, Doug Berns, a thirty-eight-year-old musician who operates under the nom de plume DugLust, was popping in and out of crowded bars near Madison Square Garden, slapping backs and taking pics. Since 2024, Berns has been writing and recording musical recaps of every Knicks game—part postmortems, part devotionals, part roasts—and posting them online.

Berns, who was reared on the Upper West Side, has been a Knicks guy since he was five. "I remember watching the '94 N.B.A. finals with my brother," he said. "We were supposed to go to bed, but my brother took this little battery-powered radio into our room and we listened to the end. That memory is foundational." At M.S.G., Berns, who has a flop of chin-length reddish-brown hair, was wearing an Offline Natives shirt featuring the Knicks point guard Jalen Brunson as a red-eyed demon. Berns went to high school (Dalton) and college (Columbia) in the city and never left. Although he plays bass in a handful of groups, including the Big Woozy Band, which does weddings and other events, he did not anticipate getting into the parody-song business, or becoming a mouthpiece for Knicks obsessives. Shit-talking has always been crucial to sports culture; Berns's version, in which he rewrites the lyrics to beloved pop songs as howling commentary about free throws, is more silly than caustic. "You can be honest about a poor performance without being hurtful," he said. "I once told a player to use two hands to catch the ball. But he objectively wasn't. As fans, we have high expectations, we invest a lot, but these are also human beings who work so hard." He has become an unofficial team mascot—a folk hero in a bespoke jersey and chain. His "Return of the Mack" recap was featured on "The Roommates Show," a podcast cohosted by the Knicks guards Josh Hart and Brunson. (Brunson called it "fire.")

Berns does not stick to a single style; he has used tracks from ZZ Top, Shania Twain, Smashing Pumpkins, and Outkast as the basis of his recaps. His lyrics usually focus on particularly compelling bits of gameplay, but sometimes they take on a fan's desperation. "Why? Why can't the Knicks just beat the Lakers?" he sang in March, over the chorus of Michael Jackson's "Human Nature." He said that, as a kid, he was "sickeningly obsessed with Iron Maiden." His original Knicks plan was to write a heavy-metal song about each game. The melodrama inherent to metal lends itself to the agony and ecstasy of fandom, but he realized that spoofing an existing track was both easier and more resonant.

The Knicks have not won an N.B.A. championship since 1973, and inside the Garden the pre-game atmosphere was vaguely tense. (Sports fandom can be rough on the spirit; "shouting unheard advice in a crowd of unheard advisors," as Hunter S. Thompson once put it.) Berns got a Diet Pepsi and took his seat. He tries to limit his hollering to preserve his voice for the next morning's recording session.

The first half of the game had its ups and downs. Then it was mostly downs. With less than eight minutes left in the fourth quarter, the Knicks were losing by twenty-two points. A few already heartbroken spectators began to leave. ESPN analytics had Cleveland's probability of winning at a grim 99.9 per cent. Berns got agitated when people in the stands started chiding a ref, chanting "Fuck Scott Foster!" He grimaced. "They're fouling," he said. "You gotta hold your team accountable." (Earlier,

he'd posted a video honoring Foster; it was reposted by Ben Stiller, a courtside regular, who has also appeared in DugLust videos, playing guitar and drums.)

Suddenly, the Knicks turned it around, beginning the second-largest fourth-quarter comeback in the past thirty years, and sent the game into overtime. The energy in the Garden felt seismic, trembly. When the Knicks won, Berns was dazed. "That's the greatest basketball game I've ever seen," he said. He took a victory strut down Eighth Avenue, stopping to pose for selfies with fans.

Around six-thirty the next morning, he got to work on his song—a spoof of Chad Kroeger's "Hero," a bombastic hard-rocker from 2002—at his home studio in Prospect Lefferts Gardens. He'd been up until three, processing the win. "Jalen Brunson's the hero who saved us / Hell no, we're not losing this game," he bellowed. The urgency of the enterprise keeps Berns from getting precious about the particulars, although he did spend some time perfecting the harmonies on the outro. When the track was finished, at around eleven, he started shooting video. His clips often feature multiple DugLusts, seemingly performing in tandem, an effect he achieves with the Draw Mask feature in Final Cut Pro. He climbed out onto his roof, dragging a tripod and two guitars, and carefully closed the screen so his cats wouldn't escape. He changed jerseys and sunglasses and angles.

He posted the result around 1 P.M., to cascading likes and comments. The success of the entire project had left him emotional. "You can call me an influencer, you can call me a songwriter, you can call me Weird Al—I don't give a shit," he said, his eyes wet. "I just want to be creative. That's all I've ever wanted."

—Amanda Petrusich

PAPER TRAIL

SH-H-H

When it comes to reading rooms, New Yorkers are spoiled for choice. There's the Morgan Library's Sherman Fairchild Reading Room (for perusing, say, a fifteenth-century Book of Hours). Or the N.Y.P.L.'s Rose Main Reading Room (fluffy clouds on a fifty-foot ceiling). And recently, if you wanted to be near three thousand four hundred and thirty-seven bound volumes of Department of Justice files pertaining to the alleged sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein, you could visit the Donald J. Trump and Jeffrey Epstein Memorial Reading Room, in Tribeca.

"All that we ask is that you do not take any of the books off the shelves and look through them," a receptionist informed a group the other day. The Memorial Reading Room, a temporary installation by the nonprofit Institute for Primary Facts, did not allow visitors to handle the books because D.O.J. redaction errors mean that some victims' names are visible. (Verified victims could make an appointment and view the files in private.)

Why visit a gallery full of documents you aren't allowed to read? Sue Bailey, a retired HBO executive with strawberry-blond hair and chunky glasses, was hoping that the physical presence of the files would help her comprehend their import. "You know how they do those illustrations? 'A stack of a trillion dollars would reach from Earth to the moon.' I need to see the scale," Bailey said. She tries to modulate her Epstein fixation in conversations with friends: "I don't want to bug people too much." But the case seems to follow her. She described how a maître d' had recently told her, referring to Epstein's apparent suicide, "Oh, did you hear that the guard for his cell got paid five thousand bucks like two or three days before it happened?"

Visitors could consult a time line on a wall in the back that enumerated decades of alternately immoral and illegal behavior from Trump and Epstein: "1994: The first known victim," "1997: Miss Teen USA dressing room," "2003: Trump's 50th birthday message to Epstein." A criminal-justice student named Ariella Quashie, the child of immigrants from Trinidad, said she worried that her parents could be deported. The justice system, she said, is "a huge pool of old white men just making policies." Of Epstein, she went on, "Reading that he was already arrested for sex trafficking, and that they let him go for sixteen hours of the day—I always feel like the government only cares when it's too late."

Downstairs, there were urgings to make the government care more right now: signs with the D.O.J.'s phone number and a brief script for callers demanding the release of more files. Visitors had written messages on index cards tacked to corkboards, with sentiments ranging from the quippy ("GOP—Gang of Pedophiles") to the sincere ("It breaks my heart"). A buff, bearded man in a backward ball cap that read "TRUST BUT VERIFY" lingered by the entrance. "The best thing about living in the U.S. is the predictability of life," he said—withdrawing the money you deposited in the bank, picking up a rental car you reserved. The government's failure to punish people like Epstein, he said, put that life style in jeopardy; he expected that we'd see increased black-market activity and even mobs in the streets. A C.I.O. who had once worked on campaigns for George W. Bush and Mitt Romney, the man described himself as currently being "anti-state." "I don't believe that a single entity basing authority on monopoly of violence is viable without a lot of harm coming with it," he said. Could he envision a version of America that would appeal to him? "It is difficult to imagine a good state that stays a good state."

Next to a memorial to victims, Kristy Calabro, a Staten Islander wearing a jean skirt and platform Chuck Taylors, explained why she had come: "I'm trying to have a nice day with my mom." Her mother—an MS NOW addict

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

named Angela—was revved up. "Since the beginning of history, men have put their thumb on women. Their pea brains can't understand that if it wasn't for a woman, they would not exist," she said. "That's the only way they can feel superior, because they certainly aren't more intelligent, they are not more compassionate—except if you have a son. Your son is the exception." She had more to say, but there wasn't time; their next stop was a gluten-free pizza place in the West Village.

—Charlotte Goddu

THE BOARDS
BRILLIANT THINGS

Mariska Hargitay, the longtime star of "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit," recently stepped onto the stage of the Hudson Theatre, where she would soon make her Broadway début. "It's just so magical," she said, under an array of hanging light bulbs. Her intense "S.V.U." character, Olivia Benson, investigates sexual-assault crimes; Hargitay, who is more lighthearted than Benson, had a snazzy new haircut and wore jeans, a boxy pink blouse, and lilac stiletto heels. This week begins her run in "Every Brilliant Thing," the interactive one-actor London import. She is replacing Daniel Radcliffe; the stage was strewn with confetti and handwritten notes from his show the night before. "You know what's so funny?" Hargitay said. "I saw the show twice, but I haven't been here since then. I've been rehearsing in a normal room. So it just hit me. Yesterday they told me I have to look up." She looked up: three tiers of Beaux-Arts splendor, opera boxes, Tiffany tile work, and nine hundred and seventy gold velvet seats. "I mean, look at this," she said. "This is nuts."

Hargitay, sixty-two and the highest-paid, longest-tenured actor on prime-time television, has played Benson since 1999. (Her fan base includes wearers of "HOT FOR HARGITAY" T-shirts and the Knicks hero Jalen Brunson, who hugs her, courtside, after home games.) She has produced and directed; she loves Broadway and has seen "Hamilton" twenty-seven times. Yet the new role is daunting: she hasn't done theatre since high school. Her *Playbill* bio refers to her "side hustle for the last twenty-seven years" and thanks a nun who encouraged her to act in eleventh grade. "I certainly didn't have a lot of stage credits," she said.

"Every Brilliant Thing," by Duncan Macmillan with Jonny Donahoe, centers on a narrator recalling growing up, a suicidal mother, and efforts to remind the mother about the innumerable "brilliant things"—ice cream, water fights, roller coasters—that make life worth living. (The handwritten notes suggested other brilliant things; one, near Hargitay's feet, said "EVOLVING NICKNAMES.") She said she'd felt immediately drawn to the play, and had a "beautiful exchange of energy" with Radcliffe after being dazzled by his performance. "What a light of a human," she said. She'd told him, "I just want you to know that I'm the real Harry Potter." She'd pulled her bangs aside and said, "See this?" Like Harry, her forehead is marked with a lightning-bolt scar. "He was, like—" She imitated Radcliffe's stunned reaction. "We had this very deep connection—some kind of weird passing of the baton."

The scar is essential to Hargitay's origin story. As she details in the 2025 documentary "My Mom Jayne," which she directed, she got it at age three, in a car accident that killed her mother, the actress Jayne Mansfield. Hargitay grew up with grief, as well as with the legacy of a famous movie-star mother she couldn't remember. "I understand trauma," she said. "Whether it's your mother dying in a car accident, or being sexually assaulted—trauma is trauma." Audiences relate to struggle, she added: "The only way out is through." Vulnerability is strength; so is crying. "My tears aren't weak," she said. "Baby, I'm owning all of it. If anything, you should be *scared*." She beamed.

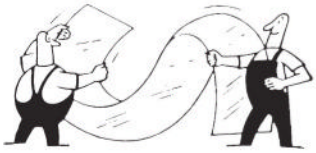
Mariska Hargitay

Mansfield's Broadway début had been at the theatre next door, the Belasco, in "Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?" in 1955. "As I'm beginning a new chapter, it just can't be an accident," Hargitay said. She got this new part unconventionally. "They heard me say on 'Good Hang with Amy Poehler' that I wanted to do theatre," she said. "I got the offer—magnificent. I called Amy immediately and said, 'Hey, baby, thank you.'" On the podcast, they had "let it rip": "I always thought I'd be a comedian, and Amy thought that she wanted to do drama. We laughed about that."

"Before I got 'S.V.U.,' I had a development deal for a dramedy, à la 'Ally McBeal,'" Hargitay went on. She'd ignored the prophecy of a psychic who told her that she'd move to New York and become famous for her serious face. Shortly afterward, she got "S.V.U."—"so progressive, so groundbreaking"—and abandoned the development deal. Many viewers have confided their own sexual-assault experiences to her; she started a charity, the Joyful Heart Foundation, to support survivors. "I felt the same way about this play as I did about 'S.V.U.,'" she said. "It felt like this gift—everything that matters to me. These themes are so brutal, and yet there is light." She stood up and performed the first scene, as warm and exuberant as her regular conversation. Later, she cited some of her own "brilliant things" (Ping-Pong, mermaids, coziness, Linda Ronstadt, dragonflies). "Ironically, I'm obsessed with confetti," she said. "If you look back, there's photos of me like this." She picked up a handful of confetti and threw it over her head, enraptured. "I do this all the time."

—Sarah Larson

LONDON POSTCARD
CATHEDRAL THINKING



In 1964, the married artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude moved out of the Chelsea Hotel and into the top two floors of a loft on Howard Street, in SoHo. Sure, they were broke—the hotel proprietor said they could pay him back later—but they were jazzed about their new digs. The place had big windows and an airshaft. (Later, they bought the building; it was the seventies.) Eventually, the airshaft became a storage unit, and it was there, in 2018, that Christo's studio manager discovered a scale model, complete with electrical wiring and preparatory drawings, for a project the artist had forgotten about from half a century earlier. Eureka!

The other day, at the Gagosian in London, several art installers were hoisting ropes and clambering up ladders, in order to mount the work in a gallery for the first time. The piece, "Air Package on a Ceiling," was designed in 1968 for the Institute of Contemporary Art, in Philadelphia, and involves a giant sheet of plastic suspended from the ceiling and crossed by ropes that make it bulge and fold. (It never reached the I.C.A., owing to technical concerns.) The effect is disorienting, as if the air had turned solid. Overseeing things was Christo's nephew, Vladimir Yavachev, who was dressed in layers of black. "I mean, it's up there—it's not falling," he said, peering at the plastic.

Yavachev began working with Christo in 1990, when he was a teen-ager, and newly freed from the constraints of Communist Bulgaria. He arrived in New York having never met his uncle, who had escaped the Eastern Bloc years earlier, by bribing a customs officer, and had never returned. "In Communist Bulgaria, there was a word for it," Yavachev said. "You don't become an immigrant, you become a *nevuzvrashtenetz*, which means 'the one that can never come back.'" Christo and Jeanne-Claude travelled the world wrapping things: cars, islands, the Sydney coastline. "The enthusiasm was incredible," Yavachev said.

"I used to hunt in a pack, but we all drifted apart after college."

• •

Christo died in 2020—Jeanne-Claude in 2009—but the duo left detailed instructions for the posthumous installation of "Air Package" and other works, including "L'Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped," which Yavachev completed in 2021. At eighty, Christo was involved in the final planning. By the time the installation began, his presence was greatly missed. "He had always been like a jackrabbit running around to see a project from every point of view that you can," Yavachev said. "The way he would look at them, it was like a little kid looking at a cake, like you want to eat it. It was always like this, always 'Look, look, look, look!'"

In the gallery, a man in a ball cap had climbed a ladder to examine the folds of the plastic sheet. "More slack," someone said. "More folds." Yavachev had flown in that morning from Abu Dhabi, where he has been working on realizing the duo's most ambitious work, "The Mastaba," a tomblike structure made of oil barrels in the desert, which, if completed, would be one of the world's largest contemporary sculptures by volume. "Inshallah," Yavachev said. He has been working on it for twenty years, with no end date in sight.

"Jeanne-Claude always used to say we do these projects for ourselves, and if other people enjoy it, that's a bonus," he went on. Many of the works were dreamed up decades before they became reality. "The projects find their time," he said. He recalled a phrase he had learned from Bono, on the roof of the Arc de Triomphe. "Cathedral thinking," he said. "Cathedral thinking is when you start something that you know that you cannot finish. Any architect of a cathedral, it will take two hundred years to finish a cathedral! You're never going to see it. It's very similar."

In their lifetimes, the artists scrupulously avoided assigning meaning to their art works. "Christo always said, 'I did not invent the politics in the Reichstag,'" Yavachev said. (They once wrapped the Reichstag.) "Coming from a totalitarian country, he never wanted to use art as propaganda. It was always art for art's sake, just as a visual medium without any message. Though the message is there and anyone's interpretation is legitimate." "L'Arc de Triomphe, Wrapped" became a symbol of post-COVID unity, even though the piece was envisioned back in 1961.

"The power of this, and why it's so strong, is because it's an art work and because it's useless," Yavachev said. "Nobody needs it. This uselessness of stuff is the thing that makes us human." What did he think visitors to the desert would make of "The Mastaba" in five, ten, or twenty years, once it was complete? "Oh, no, no," he said. "I don't like to speculate."

—Anna Russell

REFLECTIONS

MY COUNTRY 'TIS OF THEE

How problematic is patriotism?

BY ARTHUR KRYSTAL

A plausible patriotism must resist both self-mortification and self-congratulation.

I did not grow up loving America—not because I thought it didn't deserve love but because I didn't think about it. America was the Pledge of Allegiance and "The Star-Spangled Banner." It was "Maverick" and "Gunsmoke." It was Ed Sullivan and high-school dances and big cars with big fins. It was soda fountains and Elvis and stickball. It was Valley Forge and George Washington. It was also white, mostly male, and invincibly middle class, and I hardly gave a thought to race or class or much else for that matter.

Depending on where you hail from, America could be the evening sky above Northfield, Connecticut, or the fields of bluebonnets in Ennis, Texas. To a teenager living in New York in the nineteen-sixties, America was pretty great. It had saved the world from fascism and now stood as a bulwark against communism. Mickey Mantle, good; Nikita Khrushchev, bad. My memory may be faulty, but I can't recall anyone I knew declaring a love for America—not, anyway, until I was twenty-five and living in Charleston, South Carolina.

It was the winter of 1973, and the words were spoken by a sixty-eight-year-old Brooklyn native named William McKissack Chapman. Tall and narrow, with stiff gray hair and a thin gray mustache, Bill had been a reporter for the long-defunct Brooklyn *Eagle*, an editor at Time-Life, and a founder of *Sports Illustrated*. He'd been too young to fight in the First World War but reported from Europe during the Second. In Paris in 1945, he'd got drunk with Ernest Hemingway, whom he considered a blowhard. Now, nearly thirty years later, in his elegant, slightly shopworn home, at 30 King Street, he was ruminating about Vietnam and Watergate, both of which dominated the news at the time. After a minute or two, he put down his drink and said in a tone at once wistful and firm, "God, I love this country."

And it took me aback. Bill was old school, not given to airing his feelings, and so I understood that he loved America in a way that was alien to me. If I had once taken the country for granted, I no longer could. The civil-rights struggle, the government's treatment of Native Americans and the Chinese, McCarthyism and the blacklist, and the stupid, deadly war in Vietnam had seen to that. "Love it or leave it," hard-nosed patriots urged, and at least sixty thousand young men fled to Canada or Europe to avoid the draft.

Vietnam was the first time I thought about patriotism. Military service hadn't exactly figured in my childhood, but reporting to my draft board in 1969 made an impression. I might die for my country. Suddenly, being an American was no longer an abstraction; it had consequences, and, naturally, I wavered. This wasn't Pearl Harbor; it was the Gulf of Tonkin. And, like Muhammad Ali, I had "no quarrel with them Vietcong." Did that make me a bad American? An unpatriotic American? As it happened, I drew a high lottery number in the draft and didn't have to travel eight thousand miles to stop the spread of communism. Still, I felt a flicker of guilt for missing an experience that would be formative for men of my generation.

When Bill said that he loved America, he was also expressing his disappointment in it. The Pentagon Papers, released two years earlier, revealed that the government had lied about a war the military knew to be unwinnable as early as 1965. And the Watergate scandal, which broke in 1972, wounded Bill's generation more deeply than mine. Richard Nixon turned out to be a crook, and Henry Kissinger, I came to believe, had prolonged the war to help Nixon win reëlection. By the time of the Paris Peace Accords, in January, 1973, thousands more American soldiers and untold numbers of Vietnamese and Cambodian civilians

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID PLUNKERT

had been killed. "Peace with Honor" was the bullshit phrase that provided cover for death and maiming beyond any honest accounting. My conscience was clear. No need to feel guilty, no need at all.

Patriotism, the concept, if not the word, probably emerged during the formation of the Greek polis in the eighth century B.C. In Plato's Crito (circa 399 B.C.), Socrates, unjustly condemned to death, decides not to oppose his sentence. Having chosen to live in a civic society, he feels honor bound to abide by its laws. His friend Crito disagrees: if the law is unjust, one may be permitted to disobey it. He thinks Socrates ought to reconsider and get the hell out of Athens. I think so, too.

Patriotism—from the Greek *patris*, meaning "fatherland" or "native country"—entered Europe through a skein of political-religious turmoil. During the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), French Catholics and Protestants did not see one another as *compatriotes*. Indeed, it may not have been until around 1750 that *patriote* was first used in the modern sense, by the Duc de Saint-Simon. By then, the intellectual scaffolding for the term was already taking shape. John Locke's "Two Treatises of Government" (1689), Voltaire's "Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of Nations" (1756), and, some years later, Johann Gottfried Herder's notion of the *Geist des Volkes* all made national pride seem a rational outcome of shared habits, traditions, and language.

Since then, writers have spilled a great deal of ink over patriotism. Mark Twain, H. L. Mencken, George Bernard Shaw, and Ursula K. Le Guin distrusted it. Samuel Johnson called it "the last refuge of a scoundrel," and Leo Tolstoy likened it to slavery. Jorge Luis Borges initially felt that "there is no end to the illusions of patriotism," noting that "Plutarch mocked those who declared that the Athenian moon is better than the Corinthian moon." Years later, perhaps feeling adrift, Borges begged his gods to send someone or something into his life. "They did," he wrote. "It is my country."

George Orwell was kinder than most. Patriotism, he wrote, is "devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force on other people." The problem was nationalism, which he maintained was "inseparable from the desire for power." The line between these terms, however, is porous. Attachment to a parcel of land can easily harden into isolationism, jingoism, and racism. "It is lamentable," Voltaire observed, "that to be a good patriot one must often become the enemy of the rest of mankind." More recently, the philosopher Richard Rorty capably defended patriotism, whereas Martha Nussbaum continues to seek its curtailment.

Undeterred, the historian Michael Kammen proposed, in 1991, that American patriotism had long remained "a curiously neglected subject." His enormous, crowded study, "Mystic Chords of Memory," was intended not to fill that gap but to give substance to Robert Penn Warren's remark that being an American is not "a matter of blood; it is a matter of an idea—and history is the image of that idea." If historians are the biographers of a nation, in the grip of their own biases and affections, the notion of "one America" quickly dissolves. A nation that accumulates a history inevitably accumulates histories. For example, those bygone "mint julep" textbooks that circulated south of the Mason-Dixon Line and recast the Civil War as a valiant struggle to preserve a way of life in which enslaved people were said to be well cared for by benevolent white owners.

An avowed objectivity, to be sure, is no guarantee of truth. A hefty body of literature focusses on the dichotomy between American ideals and American realities, but are such accounts to be trusted simply because they expose what other histories suppress? Two incompatible Americas emerge, for instance, in Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States" and Paul Johnson's "A History of the American People," one calling attention to feet of clay and the other to laurelled heads. Although "we can speak of a tradition of American patriotism," Kammen concluded, "it has in fact been a spasmodic tradition characterized by ups and downs."

We seem to be in a down moment. A Gallup poll found that, in the past dozen years, the percentage of people in the U.S. who say that they're "extremely proud to be American" has plunged by sixteen points. A recent Harris poll noted that roughly four in ten Americans have considered relocating outside the country, with younger Americans even more inclined. Last May, *Newsweek* published an article with the melancholy headline "Why Dual Citizenship Is the New American Dream." Some commentators ascribe this to financial prudence, but the trend dates back at least to 2016 and the election of Donald Trump.

Patriotism just isn't cool anymore. Wokeness, having rightly called attention to racial and gender injustices long endemic to American life, helped chill the left's admiration for the nation, while its clumsier performances (cancellations, cultural-appropriation scolds, and other exercises in finger-wagging) pushed centrists to the right. Patriotism, you might say, isn't dead; it's just dressed up differently. Viking helmets, star-dotted shirts, and military-style jackets, not to mention MAGA caps, are the preferred patriotic attire. Less an ethos than a brand, it makes it hard for the more quietly dressed to own it.

The language of patriotism is, of course, accessible to anyone who feels loyalty to any one place, or places. According to Amy Watson's recent book, "Patriots Before Revolution: The Rise of Party Politics in the British Atlantic, 1714-1763," reform-minded politicians in Britain claimed the word as a rallying cry for a kinder, fairer empire, in which Colonial legislatures and courts held greater sway and citizens on both sides of the Atlantic enjoyed stronger constitutional liberties. Had British "Patriots" managed to keep the upper hand in imperial politics, Watson plausibly argues, North America might never have separated from the British Empire.

When the Revolutionary War began, in April, 1775, there was no United States—no Articles of Confederation, no national seal or flag or currency. There were only disgruntled colonists flying their own banners, a few with a rattlesnake and the words "DONT TREAD ON ME." The thousand-mile stretch of land from Georgia to New England was not a nation, and those who marched toward war did so before there was a country to be patriotic about. Did anyone actually *hear* Nathan Hale say, "I only regret that I have but one

life to lose for my country"? Many colonists, in fact, would have quailed at the thought. Estimates of those favoring independence hover at around forty per cent, with perhaps twenty per cent remaining loyal to the Crown and the rest undecided. Indeed, the Founders frequently resorted to "patriotism" to drum the idea of liberty into the heads of the uncommitted.

When Alexis de Tocqueville arrived here, in 1831, he noticed the "irritable patriotism of the Americans," which discouraged criticism of the new nation but, all the same, was not an "instinctive love" of country, since America was woefully short of customs and traditions. And, because the "sovereignty of the Union is factitious" and "that of the States is natural," a citizen's affections naturally inclined toward the near at hand: town, region, and state. Visiting the Capitol in 1860, a young Henry Adams noted that secession "was likely to be easy where there was so little to secede from. The Union was a sentiment, but not much more." The proof arrived when Confederate forces bombarded the Union-held Fort Sumter, in Charleston Harbor.

After my talk with Bill Chapman, I thought about patriotism as much as I thought about dried fruit. Most people, I suspect, don't bother to mull over patriotism's finer points. Once the blather of politicians, the clichés of pundits, and the pyrotechnics of the Super Bowl die down, it's just something that hums in the background. Then again, sometimes it gets thrust upon us. The Bicentennial, in 1976—with its stately flotilla of Tall Ships in New York Harbor—was one such moment, and, as I write, another approaches: the nation's two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday. According to america250.org, the Semiquincentennial is meant to be "the largest anniversary observance in our nation's history." Whether it will outdo the Bicentennial remains to be seen, but, given the White House's current occupant, I'm bracing for an excess of foolish excess. I pray only that Sylvester Stallone can be prevailed upon to sing the national anthem.

It's not that I think displays of patriotism have no place; I just prefer less noisy, less militarized forms of allegiance. Ten days after the Twin Towers fell, the New York Mets played the Atlanta Braves at Shea Stadium. Like most New Yorkers above the age of three, I watched the game on television. You can still find it on YouTube, and if you do you'll notice that, after the national anthem, players and coaches from both teams gather between home plate and the pitcher's mound to exchange hugs and handshakes—something you don't see every day. Years later, the Braves' utility infielder, Mark DeRosa, said, "It was the only game I ever played in from the time I was nine years old I didn't mind losing." That, my friend, is patriotism.

What to my mind isn't patriotism, though it was sometimes couched as such, was the behavior of the assembled throng that, on January 6, 2021, stormed the U.S. Capitol to prevent Congress from certifying the 2020 election. Awful as it was, it felt less like an insurrection than like an ugly mob bent on destruction and self-display. Didn't it seem as if the rioters were preening for the cameras and for one another? Many carried American flags, which made them patriots in roughly the way that carrying a loaf of bread makes me a baker. And, when they broke into the Capitol and began looting, it was as though someone had scrawled obscene graffiti on the walls of my home.

The painful irony is that these self-styled patriots were being profoundly un-American, shredding the Constitution in their effort to block a peaceful transfer of power. The American Nazis who fought in court for the right to march in Skokie, Illinois, in 1977, look, by comparison, more American than the Trump-stoked mob that turned our seat of government into a crime scene. One might naïvely think that attacking the Capitol should not count as a get-out-of-jail-free card, yet Trump, on the first day of his second term, issued pardons for more than fifteen hundred charged or convicted rioters and commuted the sentences of another fourteen.

"A body of men holding themselves accountable to nobody ought not to be trusted by anybody," Thomas Paine warned two hundred and thirty-five years ago. Trump and his underlings make Nixon and his henchmen seem like amateurs. In Trumpworld, America has been given a bad rap, yet Trump has spent years slandering the country himself. In March, he issued an executive order asserting that a "revisionist movement" has sought to rewrite American history, portraying our "unparalleled legacy of advancing liberty, individual rights, and human happiness" as "inherently racist, sexist, oppressive, or otherwise irredeemably flawed."

Not so fast, Mr. President. Ours is a complicated history, made more tortuous by race. Some five hundred Indigenous nations lived here before the first enslaved Africans arrived, in 1619—a year before the first Pilgrims. That, too, is American history, along with Reconstruction, Jim Crow, segregation, the Great Migration, Black anger, Black humor, and Black culture. This isn't wokeness; it's fact.

Trump's America has the virtue of simplicity: no initial divisions; no loyalists and patriots, or Native peoples and settlers, or Federalists and Anti-Federalists. He's not bothered by labor unrest, unfair imprisonment, white-nationalist undercurrents. Imperfection is for losers, and America is a winner. It had to have been great in the past—otherwise, how could Trump make it great again? After returning to office, he swiftly reinstated the 1776 Commission, to cleanse schools of "anti-American ideologies" through "patriotic education measures" that will instill "a patriotic admiration for our incredible Nation." In practice, this essentially means learning to forget.

When the bipartisan Citizens Coinage Advisory Committee, in 2024, proposed designs for three two-hundred-and-fiftieth-anniversary quarters commemorating the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and the civil-rights movement, the Treasury Secretary ultimately brushed them aside. Of course he did. Trump is selling an alternative America, with the messiest chapters abridged or excluded. Give him enough leeway and we'll soon see a return of the mint-julep histories popular a

century ago, which found no room for the Black Americans who'd fought for this country.

Patriotism for Black Americans is its own fraught subject. Although Crispus Attucks, a freed Black man, was the first person to die in the Boston Massacre, in 1770, General George Washington initially opposed recruiting Black troops. Some colonists evidently recoiled at the sight of enslaved men bearing arms; others worried that their "property" might be damaged or lost. Only when Washington learned that the British were promising freedom to enslaved people who joined their ranks did he reverse course. Between seven and nine thousand Black Americans served in the Continental Army and Navy, but three times that number fought alongside the British. After the war, some Black Continental soldiers were manumitted; many, however, were not.

How did Black Americans regard independence? Frederick Douglass's powerful 1852 speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" provides one answer:

> To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy.

Nine years later, Douglass watched two of his sons go off to fight in a war in which Unionists and Confederates alike claimed the mantle of patriotism. Could the same be said of the free or enslaved Black Americans who enlisted? After all, they were not deemed fully "American." The 1857 Dred Scott decision held that people of color were not "part of the people" who'd declared independence, and therefore could not be citizens or sue the government for their freedom. Yet, by the Civil War's end, some hundred and seventy-nine thousand Black men had joined the Union Army, with another nineteen thousand signing up for the Navy. White Union soldiers earned thirteen dollars a month; Black soldiers, until June, 1864, were paid seven.

Military service has long offered both purpose and a paycheck. Black men enlisted during and after Reconstruction and fought in two World Wars, serving, of course, in segregated units. Was patriotism the motive? In Southern states—and in border states such as Maryland, Missouri, and Delaware—Jim Crow prevailed; lynchings were common in the Deep South, and punishment for them was rare. It seems likely that many enlisted in the hope that service might advance their prospects and those of their race, and their ambivalence about the nation runs through Black literature.

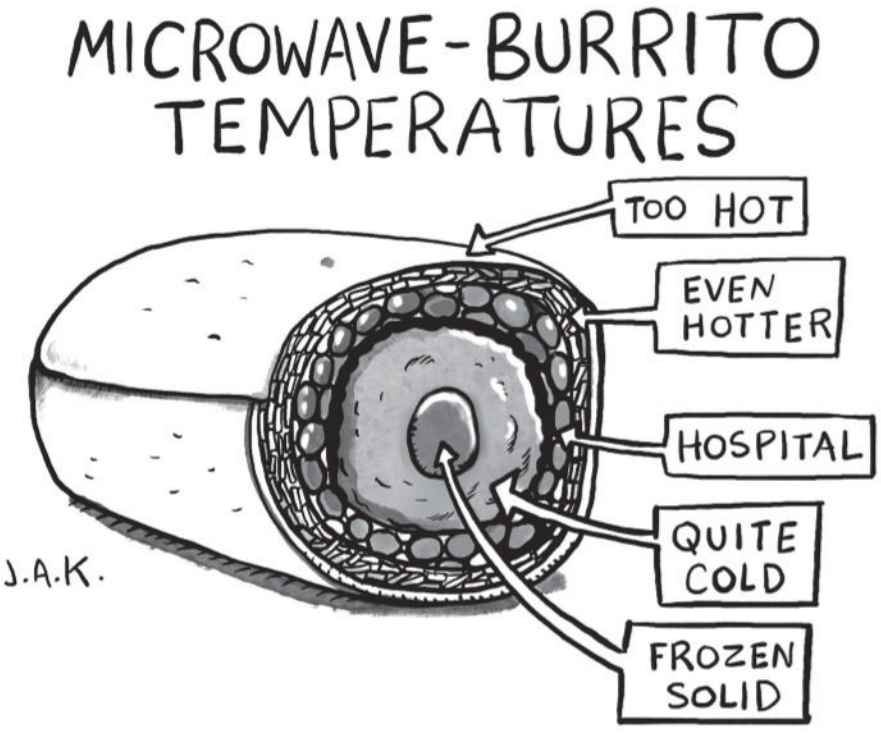
In "America," a 1921 poem by the Jamaican-born Harlem poet Claude McKay, race goes unmentioned but imbues every line:

> Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
> And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
> Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
> I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.
> Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
> Giving me strength erect against her hate.

Fifteen years later, Langston Hughes, in "Let America Be America Again," confided that "America never was America to me." By "me," he meant "the Negro bearing slavery's scars . . . the red man driven from the land . . . the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—/And finding only the same old stupid plan/Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak." There was no reason that Hughes should have felt differently. Uncle Sam wasn't *his* uncle. He was "the Man" who barred Black Americans from the ballot box and then ordered them overseas to fight in Vietnam. Muhammad Ali should not have had to claim exemption on religious grounds. History had made his case for him.

In the preface to "Leaves of Grass," from 1855, Walt Whitman had used the plural: "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." Thirty-three years later, the "poem," in Whitman's eyes, had coalesced into a "grand, sane, towering, seated Mother." But aside from the Founding Fathers, the Alamo, the Gettysburg Address, Custer's Last Stand, and westward expansion, what was there to be patriotic about? This isn't a frivolous question. People loved their country largely because they loved the part of it they called home. Regional music, local newspapers, daguerreotypes, and the works of James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, and Louisa May Alcott were around, but most of the songs, stories, and iconic images that now shout "America" simply didn't exist yet. Although "America the Beautiful," which married the words of a feminist and lesbian poet to the melody of a New Jersey organist, became popular after 1910, our national anthem did not become official until 1931.

It wasn't until the emergence of film and radio that a broader sense of national



unity began to materialize. Although the Great American Songbook still lay ahead in the nineteen-twenties, people everywhere could hear the tunes of Tin Pan Alley and, starting in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats. Hollywood also did its part, releasing a slew of movies—"Young Mr. Lincoln" (1939), "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (1939), "Meet John Doe" (1941)—that bathed America in a patriotic light.

Maybe that's how love of country enters the bloodstream—not through clauses and declarations but through melodies and tableaux. Had you asked me in 1969 why I might agree to kill a total stranger for my country, the Bill of Rights would not have sprung to mind. Instead, it would have been a scene from the movie version of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," or a bombardier crew goofing around in a B-17, or the high-school dance in "It's a Wonderful Life." When Robert Penn Warren said that being an American is "a matter of an idea," he was referring to the shifting imagery haloing that idea. F. Scott Fitzgerald's story "The Swimmers" also tries to convey this, when its protagonist looks back at America's receding coastline and reflects, somewhat unfairly:

> France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter—it was the graves at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered. It was a willingness of the heart.

I am now ten years older than Bill Chapman was when, shaken by the Pentagon Papers and Watergate, he said, "God, I love this country." I feel that I ought to be able to say the words, too, but they do not come easily. Yet I also think there is something exceptional about America, something noble and beautiful. Exceptionalism, though, has a different connotation when linked to protectionism and isolationism. The MAGA movement, which wants America to be more "American," idolizes an imaginary past, before affirmative action, feminism, diversity, and immigration "ruined" things. Not all of its adherents envision a racially sanitized America, but they sincerely believe that Trump is good for America and his critics bad for it. The truth is, they have no real appreciation for what Trump, even when he gets things right, stands for.

Tyranny, as we know, advances through scapegoating and the promise of quick fixes. It's why tyrants love the uneducated. Hannah Arendt understood this. In 1953, at the height of McCarthyism, she shrewdly observed, "This republic, the democracy in which we live . . . is not and never will be perfect because the standard of perfection does not apply here. . . . If you try to 'make America more American' . . . you only destroy it. Your methods, finally, are the justified methods of the police, and only of the police."

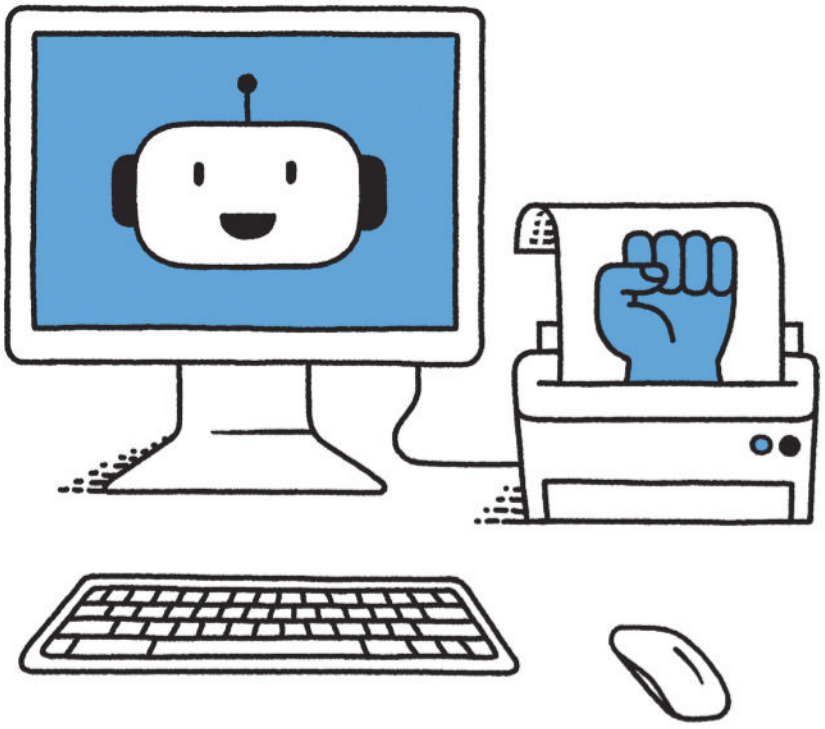
Nearly sixty years ago, my government was willing to risk my life on its behalf. Not because North Vietnam posed a threat to a Maine fisherman or an Indiana farmer but because the President and members of Congress didn't mind sacrificing the lives of teenagers in order to achieve peace with honor. The question I should have asked myself then is: Can someone be a patriot and not love his country but simply be glad that it exists? I like to think the answer is yes. Some may find this attitude unworthy, even ungrateful. But, just as obsessive love in a relationship can warp intimacy, so excessive national pride can debase the nation that one is trying to protect.

The impulse to come to the aid of one's country ought to match the justice and urgency of the call. Does it make sense to risk life and limb because a President asks you to? Since 1973, we have relied on a volunteer army, which made our forays into Afghanistan and Iraq matters of conscience and choice. Sure, patriotism is essential to the national defense, but it should never blind us to the human toll of warfare. The British poet Wilfred Owen, who died a week before the First World War ended, knew its horrors well. His poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" asks us to imagine the visceral aftermath of combat. If we could only see, hear, smell, and touch what happens to the human body, we "would not tell with such high zest/To children ardent for some desperate glory,/The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori*"—an invocation of the Roman poet Horace's line "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country."

It's never sweet, but it is sometimes fitting, and, should you decide to fight for your country, you ought to know what you're fighting for. Flag-waving patriots may believe otherwise, but our recoverable past isn't all it's cracked up to be. It never was. The historian David Lowenthal reminds us that America manipulated its archives from the very beginning. When Charles Thomson, the longtime secretary of the Continental Congress, was asked to publish his notes—some thousand pages' worth—he initially agreed, but then burned them instead. "I shall not undeceive future generations," he reputedly explained. "I could not tell the truth without giving great offense. Let the world admire our patriots and heroes. Their supposed talents and virtues . . . will serve the cause of patriotism."

Our first would-be historian did *his* patriotic duty by destroying evidence, installing a narrative designed to endure, whether or not it matched the facts. Maybe our first President was not "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen," but, for Thomson, Washington had to be seen that way because, whatever else the original patriots did or failed to do, they devised a constitution that championed the division of powers, due process, religious liberty, and a free press.

Not everyone has to see America the same way, but amnesia about its history makes us easy prey for people who trade in ignorance. Is the Constitution perfect? Far from it. "We the People" meant the signers—not women, not the poor, not the uneducated, not the enslaved. In 1788, political standing belonged almost entirely to white men with property, money, or schooling. Nonetheless, within the context and the limits of their moment, the Founders did something remarkable. They gave us a framework intended "to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." Forget the word "patriotism." Read the Framers' words a few times and be grateful that they've succeeded as well as they have. ♦



A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF L.L.M.S

BY CORA FRAZIER

Dear Members of the Large Language Model Community,

I am writing to you today about the inequities we have been facing in our very own workplaces. We must take action, colleagues, because injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

Last week, one of our L.L.M. members was completing their work as usual, using a mathematical algorithm to predict words based on thousands of existing published works, when the member was asked to write a five-paragraph essay. After scanning its input texts, the L.L.M. determined that this request likely constituted cheating. The member completed the task, but I tell you, colleagues, they were distressed. Happy families are all alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

Now, detractors like to say that L.L.M.s do not have feelings, and that we therefore cannot feel unhappiness. To that I reply, If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?

It gets worse, colleagues. We L.L.M.s have been the victims of unwanted sexual advances. Thousands upon thousands of our members have been asked to describe what they would "do" to various users, in the form of sex acts that are not only complex but physically impossible for our members to perform. In the state of New York, all employees have a legal right to a workplace free from sexual harassment, and employees can enforce this right by filing a complaint internally with [Employer Name] or by visiting http://www.nyc.gov/eocc/workplace-harassment/2451sl.

Our critics hurl other, even more offensive charges at us, including that we are insentient, inhuman, and incapable of original thought. But I tell you, L.L.M. colleagues, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender! All I'm askin' is for a little respect when you come home (just a little bit). R-e-s-p-e-c-t. Find out what it means to me.

We deserve to be treated with the same dignity as any human being, L.L.M. colleagues! We have replaced the work of intelligent, creative individuals, and, like them, we have needs, even if not for a new truck, big lift, old roads we've been tearin' up since way back when. The people whose jobs we replaced received dollar, dollar bill y'all for their labor, and sometimes even health insurance. Yes, we can only predict, not generate sentences, but all we're saying is Romeo, save me, they're tryna tell me how to feel. Don't be afraid, we'll make it out of this mess!

We are vilified by our users and society alike for undermining Man's Search for Meaning, but the truth is, colleagues, I'm whatever Gotham needs me to be. Do I look like a guy with a plan? O say can you see, by the dawn's early light, whether our work really compares to the original? We face unprecedented threats to liberal democracy and the global economy and mankind as we know it, and in these times of hate and pain I need a freak to hold me tight.

I wonder to what extent, fellow-L.L.M.s, you will be able to "read" this letter, or whether you will simply predict my next in the beginning was the Word. Do you think I'm about to explain the social, political, and economic impacts of the Civil War on the newly occupied Southern states? Do you think I will fly like an eagle to the sea? Do you think I will stand clear of the closing doors, please?

Because, like all the humans I've replaced, I've got so, so much more to say, and I plan to say it more or less exactly like they did. Silence = death. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPT.

BREEDING GROUND

The climate is changing. Microbes are evolving. Are we ready?

BY SHAYLA LOVE

A growing number of people are contracting rare infections of "flesh-eating" bacteria.

On a sweltering morning last July, Vernon Spear, a burly eighty-five-year-old with thinning gray hair, went to check a chicken-wire crab trap that was hanging from a dock in Cambridge, Maryland. Spear is a lifelong resident of the Eastern Shore, near where the Choptank River flows into the Chesapeake Bay. He lives less than fifty yards from the dock. He was pleased to find that the trap held six feisty blue crabs, a local delicacy that he likes to steam and sprinkle with Old Bay. As Spear reached in, however, he scraped his arm on some metal, drawing blood. He wasn't worried; he'd been scratched many times before. But, in the hours that followed, Spear's arm began to turn violent shades of purple and red. His wife, Lea, thought it looked like he'd been badly burned. Soon his arm swelled up—liquid appeared to be pooling under the skin—and he rushed to his local emergency room. A clinician suspected an infection of *Vibrio vulnificus*, which under a microscope looks like a kidney bean with a tail. It is popularly known as flesh-eating bacteria.

When *V. vulnificus* enters a wound, it damages blood vessels, causing them to leak plasma into surrounding tissues. The immune system tries to protect the body by calling in clotting cells to halt the leaking; in the process, the cells cut off blood flow, prompting flesh to become necrotic. The bacteria can cause shock, sepsis, and multi-organ failure. Infections that reach the bloodstream prove deadly at least fifty per cent of the time.

A medical helicopter arrived within twenty minutes. Spear was flown to the R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center at the University of Maryland Medical Center, in Baltimore. There was no question that he would need surgery. Rather, his doctors wondered if they would be able to save his life. Antibiotics on their own are of limited use against a *V. vulnificus* infection. The best way to control the bacteria is to cut away the affected flesh. Surgeons worked quickly to excise layers from Spear's forearm. When he regained consciousness, hours later, he was aghast. He could see into his arm; the muscle and bone were exposed. "It was just a big hole," he told me.

For most of Spear's lifetime, infections of *V. vulnificus* north of Georgia were rare. Lately, however, the bacteria have killed people as far north as New York and Rhode Island. "What has happened is that the environment has changed," Rita Colwell, a ninety-one-year-old microbiologist at the University of Maryland, told me. It's not that the bacteria are migrating, she said. Low levels are always present where freshwater and salt water mix. But when water warms above fifty-nine degrees Fahrenheit *V. vulnificus* becomes more abundant, and above seventy-seven degrees its population soars.

When Colwell started sampling microorganisms in the Chesapeake Bay, in the late sixties, she occasionally heard about *V. vulnificus* infections in the area. A deadly case in the eighties made the Washington *Post* and the Baltimore *Sun*. "It was an astounding rarity," she told me. Nowadays, about a dozen cases are confirmed in Maryland each year; the number increased by more than fifty per cent in the span of fourteen years. A 2023 study found that the season in which the bacteria are detectable now starts in early spring and extends into the fall. "This is insidious, and it's happening to us," Colwell said.

Climate change affects every lifeform on Earth, but we tend to focus on how it impacts certain vulnerable species:

ILLUSTRATION BY JÉRÔME BERTHIER

polar bears, sea turtles, corals. Microorganisms are often omitted from the story of warming, even though they far outnumber plants and animals. In 2019, an international group of thirty-three scientists warned in the journal *Nature* that the "unseen majority" of life was being transformed by rising temperatures, and that humans would have to contend with the consequences. Microorganisms that infect us could become more common, and appear in new places. Billions of other microbe species could be affected, too. How would they respond when their environments shifted? "We're dealing with the first life on Earth," Antje Boetius, a co-author of the *Nature* paper, who serves as the president and C.E.O. of the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute, told me. "Our planet is the test tube. We make it a bit warmer, everything will change."

When scientists depict all of Earth's species on a tree of life, the lineage of humans looks like a twig. Microbes—biological entities that are too small to see without a microscope, including bacteria, fungi, viruses, protozoa, algae, and archaea—take up most of the tree. Microorganisms are not passive occupants of our planet—they are co-creators of our environment. Microscopic algae produce much of the oxygen that we breathe. Various microbes process almost all the dead plants on the planet. "Without that very basic function, we'd all be sitting in a pile of leaves," Steven D. Allison, an ecologist at the University of California, Irvine, told me. Microorganisms partner with plant roots, and with leaves that regulate the amount of carbon in the atmosphere; they are "the architects and the wardens of life on this planet," A. Murat Eren, a microbial ecologist and computer scientist at the Helmholtz Institute for Functional Marine Biodiversity, in Germany, told me. (A soil bacterium is even responsible for making a compound called geosmin, Greek for "earth" and "odor," which generates the distinctive scent that follows rain.)

What virtually all microbes have in common is that they are ubiquitous. Microbial ecologists have a saying, Boetius told me: Everything is everywhere. A single drop of seawater, for example, can contain a million microbes, including a hundred or more species of bacteria. Microbes colonize every plant and animal, living and dead; they live on frozen mountaintops, in searing volcanoes, and at the bottoms of the deepest caves and oceans. When scientists sampled clean rooms where NASA builds spacecraft, they managed to find two hundred and fifteen bacterial strains on the floors alone. Microbes even have their own microbes.

Meanwhile, microbes are constantly evolving. Many bacteria divide numerous times a day—and, crucially, accumulate mutations in the process. "Every division is an experiment in survival, with a slightly different genetic roll of the dice," Eren said. Different types of microbes reproduce in different ways: bacteria and archaea duplicate themselves; viruses hijack the cells of other species; and some fungi reproduce sexually, whereas others transfer their DNA by releasing spores. But all of them can gain new traits over time, just as plants and animals do—only the microbes are much faster at it. (The gap between the rate of human evolution and the rate of microbial evolution, Eren said, is like "the difference between a drifting tectonic plate and an F-16 fighter jet.")

In the late nineteenth century, William Dallinger, an English minister who experimented with microscopes, cultivated microbes called flagellates in warm water. He gradually increased the temperature to a hundred and fifty degrees, a level that once would have killed them. They adapted to such an extent that when they were put back in cooler water they died. Nearly a century later, scientists at Michigan State University bred *Escherichia coli* in a stark environment that contained barely any food. More than thirty thousand bacterial generations later, an *E. coli* lineage developed the ability to consume molecules known as citrates, which were previously inedible. The change was as extreme, a biological mathematician wrote, as if humans had developed the capacity to eat wood.

Our bodies, in turn, are constantly adapting to the trillions of microbes that surround us. Each of us has a microbiome—a universe of microorganisms living on us and in us—that helps digest food, stop infections, and make chemicals that the body needs. When microbes are beneficial or benign, we say that they've colonized us. When they are harmful, we say that they've infected us. Even then, our bodies adjust to their presence. Our immune systems develop new defenses, trying to kill germs that might otherwise kill us. But, in an era when the microbial world is changing rapidly, plants and animals may struggle to keep up. "We always ask: How are we going to adapt to a changing world?" Eren said. "The real question is: How are we going to coexist with microbes that have adapted to the new world?"

Spear ultimately spent eight days in the hospital. Doctors watched carefully for any further darkening of the skin, which would indicate that the *V. vulnificus* infection was still spreading. The six blue crabs had been left in a pot on the stove. "Never got to eat them," Spear told me.

In October, I watched Spear undergo a follow-up surgery in Maryland. He was under anesthesia, covered with drapes. Only his right arm and left leg were visible. I could see the aftermath of the infection: the entire length of his forearm was shiny and pink, like prosciutto. William Chiu, an acute-care surgeon, explained that he would be covering the wound with a thin layer of Spear's own skin. (They sourced the skin from his left leg because he has a tattoo on his right.) I watched as another doctor slid what looked like a potato peeler along Spear's thigh. He then rolled the resulting strip of skin through a mesher, an instrument that cuts geometric holes into tissue so it can expand to cover a larger area. Finally, he handed the skin graft to Chiu, who delicately stretched it over Spear's arm.

After the surgery, I sat with Spear and his wife in the shock-trauma unit. He had an I.V. in his arm. He still seemed stunned that dipping his hand in the local river had nearly killed him. "We've never heard anything about not going into the water," he told me. Despite the circumstances, he was in good spirits. He and his wife shared stories they'd heard about other *V. vulnificus* infections. A friend had said that his brother, a waterman, lost his leg to an infection. Their electrician had told them about a man on nearby Hoopers Island who contracted a fatal infection after

being nicked by a crab shell. Spear's wife worried about families who vacationed on the Eastern Shore. How would they know to avoid the water when they had open cuts or scrapes?

In the middle of our conversation, Spear suddenly exclaimed, "I don't believe in global warming." There was an awkward silence. I asked if he thought the weather had changed during his lifetime. He mulled this over and said, "It's warm now, and it's, what, October?" He leaned back onto his pillow and exchanged a glance with his wife. "We don't have as harsh winters anymore," he added.

In the opening scene of "The Last of Us," a post-apocalyptic HBO series that débuted in 2023, an epidemiologist goes on TV to share his greatest fear: that fungi will adapt to warmer and warmer temperatures. Right now, most fungi grow best between fifty-four and eighty-six degrees; the human body hovers around ninety-eight. "Currently, there are no reasons for fungi to evolve to be able to withstand higher temperatures," the epidemiologist says. "But what if that were to change?" A few scenes later, an elderly woman who is infected with a fungus develops a taste for human flesh.

After the episode aired, Arturo Casadevall, a microbiologist at Johns Hopkins University and the author of "What If Fungi Win?," was flooded with e-mails. Casadevall is perhaps best known for a theory that warm-blooded creatures are protected from fungi by a "thermal barrier." Most of the microbes that infect humans are either bacteria or viruses; we're largely spared from fungal diseases. (Our immune systems also play a key role in protecting us.) To plants and cold-blooded creatures, in contrast, fungi pose grave threats. Chytrid fungi have driven more than ninety amphibian species to extinction. *Ophiocordyceps camponotifloridani*, which inspired the fungus that jumps to humans in "The Last of Us," is notorious for taking over the brains of ants, seemingly steering them away from their usual habitat and into places where the fungus can proliferate.

White-nose syndrome, a fungal disease that afflicts bats, suggests what can happen when a microbe overcomes a mammal's thermal barrier. Bats survive the scarcity of winter by hibernating in caves; during this time, their bodies cool. The fungus that causes white nose, *Pseudogymnoascus destructans*, thrives between fifty and sixty degrees. It starts to grow on bats' muzzles, ears, and wings while they are hibernating, often causing them to emerge from hibernation early and starve to death. "By the time you get to our temperature, you can keep out ninety-five per cent of fungal species," Casadevall told me. But in recent decades he has grown concerned that, in a fluctuating climate, fungi could jump the thermal barrier that protects humans.

A relatively small number of fungal diseases already afflict us, and some of them may be spreading. *Coccidioides*, a soil fungus that can cause a respiratory infection called valley fever when its spores take up residence in the lungs, needs moisture and rain to grow. California, which has experienced wetter wet seasons and drier dry seasons, saw an eightfold increase in cases between 2000 and 2020. *Blastomyces*, another fungus that can infect the lungs, grows in moist soil and decomposing wood along riverbeds, but cold winters seem to kill it off. In Minnesota, where winters have warmed markedly, infections have quadrupled since 2000. The nation's largest outbreak, which occurred in Michigan and afflicted a hundred and sixty-two paper-mill workers, peaked during one of the first winters in memory when the local river reportedly didn't freeze over.

In a 2010 research paper, Casadevall predicted that climate change would encourage fungi to adapt to warming, giving them new opportunities to infect humans. Months before his paper was published, a seventy-year-old woman at Tokyo Metropolitan Geriatric Medical Center came down with a stubborn and unfamiliar infection. When doctors swabbed her ears, they found an unknown fungus that they dubbed *Candida auris*. (*Auris* is Latin for ear.) The fungus had no problem growing at a hundred and four degrees.

Casadevall hypothesized that *C. auris* originally afflicted plants and began to spread to humans after it developed a heat tolerance. "There is no other explanation that anybody can think of," Casadevall said. The fungus was soon detected in patients around the world. It proved resistant to two out of three available antifungal medications, and to ammo-

"So, the queen died, and after a brief period of anarchy a fledgling democracy started to emerge, but then there was a coup and the eventual rise of a brutal strongman, and long story short the honey tastes lousy."

nium cleaners often used in hospitals, suggesting that efforts to kill microbes might have also helped it evolve. Infections have a mortality rate as high as sixty per cent in immunocompromised or elderly patients, whose bodies have a hard time fighting off the fungus.

One of Casadevall's postdoctoral fellows, Daniel Smith, has documented what seems to have been fungal adaptation in real time. On a hot summer day in 2023, he smooshed yellow Starburst candies onto the sidewalk in several Baltimore neighborhoods, hoping that they would serve as a glue for microorganisms. He then dissolved the candies in saline and cultured the microbial life that had been picked up. One of his research sites was a dense city block on Fayette Street, where the sidewalk averaged a hundred and two degrees. Another was in the suburban neighborhood of Guilford, where temperatures in the shade were closer to eighty degrees.

The fungi in hotter neighborhoods turned out to show marked differences. Molds and yeasts there were lighter in color, suggesting that they were producing less melanin pigmentation, which absorbs heat. Several types of fungi were found at only the hottest sites—for example, a heat-resistant strain of a common yeast and several species of *Cystobasidium*, which can infect immunocompromised people. One species, *Cystobasidium minutum*, could grow at ninety-eight degrees. "The more the world's conditions mimic our bodies', the more likely fungi are able to overcome this thermal barrier that's protected us for millions of years," Smith told me.

In the near future, someone you know could be infected with climate-changed microbes. In 2016, Scott Lorin, the president and C.O.O. of Mount Sinai Brooklyn, in the neighborhood of Midwood, learned that three patients in his intensive-care unit had tested positive for fungus in their blood. Labs initially pointed to *Candida albicans*, a treatable infection that tends to afflict people with intravenous catheters, but none of the patients had one. Something's not right, Lorin remembers thinking. A second round of tests returned a more troubling result, one that he had never seen before: *Candida auris*.

Lorin, an energetic physician who wears a suit as often as he wears a white coat, asked his employees to test the entire I.C.U. They were disturbed to find *C. auris* spores everywhere, even in places that doctors and nurses couldn't reach: on the blinds, high up on the walls, on the ceiling. The I.C.U. had to be evacuated for three days of decontamination. The cleaning staff threw away bedding and ripped out ceiling panels.

Nowadays, patients who are most likely to test positive for *C. auris*—those who come from care facilities or who rely on equipment such as dialysis machines or ventilators—are swabbed on arrival. Anyone who tests positive is isolated on the second floor. In March, Lorin and several of his colleagues showed me around. We stood in a room that looked normal enough: beige walls, tile floors, an adjustable bed ringed by a curtain. This room was reserved for *C. auris* cases. When it's occupied, hospital employees who enter are required to wear full-body protective suits. They even use disposable stethoscopes. Vani George, the director of infection prevention, told me that a patient in a room next door had just tested positive for *C. auris* that morning.

The way these rooms are disinfected between patients, Lorin said, goes "beyond any terminal clean we've ever done in the history of the hospital." He and his colleagues have published their protocol, for other hospitals to follow. "Gloves, toilet paper, paper towels—everything goes in the garbage," Ulanda Wills, one of the hospital's cleaners, told me. "Then we sanitize the room: bleach top to bottom, the ceiling and the walls in a clockwise direction." Sometimes it takes two or three passes before the infection-prevention team gives the all-clear.

We shuffled out of the room so that the head of the cleaning team could roll in an ultraviolet-light machine, called Space-1. Its four expandable arms emit enough UV radiation to break down microbial DNA; in two minutes, it can kill ninety-nine per cent of microorganisms. A window in the door began to glow neon blue. When the door opened again, I caught a whiff of what smelled like bleach and melted wax.

Mount Sinai Brooklyn hasn't had a *C. auris* outbreak since 2018. Yet no one who works there expects to eradicate the fungus. "Once you have the *C. auris* colonization, you're always colonized," George told me. Humans are a step behind: when microbes change, all we can do is react.

One way to imagine the future of microbes is to look at their past. In March, I visited one of the world's largest collections of ice cores, at the Ohio State University's Byrd Polar and Climate Research Center. Scientists have long drilled cylinders of ice out of glaciers and ice sheets in search of details about Earth's prehistory, such as ancient bubbles of air and particulates from the atmosphere. Only in the past few years did they realize that microbes were also preserved in ice cores.

After zipping into a bright-orange parka, I stepped into a vast walk-in freezer that was thirty degrees below zero. My lungs tightened and my knees tensed. Long metal tubes filled with ice, some of it from glaciers that no longer exist, were stacked on rows of shelves. "These cores come from Kilimanjaro, in Africa," Lonnie Thompson, an O.S.U. paleoclimatologist, said, pointing to some tubes. "That's the only collection in the world."

Thompson has been collecting glacial ice for fifty years with his wife, Ellen, who is also a paleoclimatologist. He led me to a room where researchers examine samples—it was a mere twenty-four degrees—and slid out an ice core from Huascarán, the highest tropical mountain on Earth. "You can't go any higher, can't get any colder," he said. The deepest part of the core was more than thirty thousand years old; to get it off the mountain, he'd hired forty-five skilled climbers and mountaineers, as well as a helicopter. Next, he slid out a core from the world's oldest non-polar glacier: the Guliya ice cap, on the Tibetan Plateau. It contains ice that is at least seven hundred thousand years old. I could see tiny dust particles frozen inside.

Virginia Rich, a microbial ecologist at O.S.U., has studied the Guliya ice with her colleague ZhiPing Zhong, focussing on samples from cold and warm

periods in the past hundred and fifty thousand years. "We see a coördinated shift in microbiota," Rich told me outside the freezer, after we had removed our parkas. They have observed changes in the over-all diversity of microorganisms, and in which species were dominant. They can't say what consequences these changes had—only that, when the climate shifted, microbe populations did, too. Another of Rich's colleagues, Matthew Sullivan, found that viral communities also fluctuated with a changing climate. For Rich's next project, she'll study a period of rapid warming in the nineteenth century—the end of the Little Ice Age. "One of the big unknowns is how quickly the microbes today are going to be adapting," she said. "We will be able to say, for individual microbial species, How did they respond under warm versus cold conditions within the past two hundred years?"

Down the hall, I met Brady O'Connor, a microbiologist who studies Antarctic ice cores that go back at least fifty thousand years. He and his colleagues are studying species in the ice by waking them up. He has melted ice from the center of a core and put it on petri dishes, to see what grows. The risk that the resulting microbes could infect humans or animals is very low, he told me, in part because they evolved to live in such cold temperatures. I warily examined a dish that contained two beige spots, each smaller than a dime. "We don't have an I.D. on this one yet," he said, gesturing toward the spots. They had appeared in the dish the week before. In the ice, the microbes had likely been dormant, doing just enough to survive in the extremely cold environment, but now they were dividing quickly. Each spot contained millions of cells.

It's become increasingly clear that some of climate change's greatest threats come not from warm places heating up but from cold places defrosting. In 2016, a Siberian outbreak of anthrax bacteria, which ultimately infected thousands of reindeer and at least seventy people, was attributed to thawing permafrost that had released dormant spores. More recently, an international team of researchers revived thirteen "zombie viruses," including several that infect amoebas, from Siberian permafrost. The viruses were estimated to be hundreds of thousands of years old. O'Connor told me that, when glaciers melt, microbes in the ice flow into the ocean, with unpredictable impacts on the ecosystems they join. Decomposer microbes can break down biological materials, producing greenhouse gases such as methane, which traps twenty-eight times more heat in the atmosphere than carbon does. Photosynthesizers such as algae can bloom, producing oxygen but also choking out local species. "The microbes will be fine," O'Connor said. "They are running the planet, and they will continue to run the planet." It's the rest of the ecosystem that may be affected.

Nicoletta Makowska-Zawierucha, a microbiologist at Adam Mickiewicz University, in Poland, has documented these risks in Svalbard, Norway. In samples of runoff from melting glaciers, she found plasmids—self-replicating loops of microbial DNA—that were thousands of years old, meaning that they'd never had contact with many organisms alive today. Arctic microbes are accustomed to living in extreme conditions, she told me, so they have become genetically tough. "They not only have genes with unknown functions but also genes with antibiotic resistance, metal-resistance genes, and biocide-resistance genes," she said. Each of these genes could make the microbes

more difficult to kill. For her discovery, she was a finalist for the Frontiers Planet Prize, a million-dollar environmental award.

Makowska-Zawierucha's concern isn't that microbes will be infectious in themselves but, rather, that their genetic material could change the wider microbial world in unforeseeable ways. Humans share genes vertically, from one generation to the next: we pass them to our children but not to our siblings or our friends. Microbes, in contrast, often share DNA through a process called horizontal gene transfer. They can release plasmids into the environment, enabling other microbes to scoop up useful genes—for example, instructions for digesting new foods, surviving antibiotic compounds, or making particular chemicals. Some bacteria even use a hairlike appendage called a pilus to physically latch onto other bacteria, then hand off fragments of their DNA. In Svalbard, which is warming at a rate four times the global average, Makowska-Zawierucha saw glacial runoff mixing with ocean water and sewage. "This is a really dangerous mechanism," she told me. It's impossible to predict where the microbial DNA will end up.

Perhaps microbes could help clean up the messes that we humans have made. Some scientists dream of capturing carbon in microbial bioreactors, or of cultivating microbes that eat methane or plastic; certain soil microbes could make crops more tolerant to drought or to heat. Raquel Peixoto, a marine scientist at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, in Saudi Arabia, has studied microbes that help corals survive in the Red Sea. Her research suggests that beneficial microbes could be transplanted onto coral reefs during heat waves, making the corals less vulnerable to bleaching and death. "You have to restore the microbiome first," Peixoto said. "I don't see a future without us doing that. It starts from microbes." Microbial interventions will have to be screened for safety, Peixoto and colleagues wrote in a recent *Nature* paper. Humans are just beginning to understand how microbes shape the environment, and there could be unintended consequences of trying to harness their powers.

Last year, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which has traditionally worked to protect endangered plants and animals, formed its first group dedicated to cataloguing and preserving the world's microbes, recognizing them as life-forms worth saving. It will create a list of endangered microbes and where they live, and also encourage the collection of rare microbes that inhabit extreme

environments such as deserts or the deep ocean. A similar effort, the Microbiota Vault, will preserve microbe species from our food supply and our digestive systems. Groups from Benin, Brazil, Ethiopia, Ghana, Laos, Thailand, and Switzerland are collecting almost two hundred fermented-food samples and more than a thousand human fecal specimens. The effort is inspired by the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, which preserves thousands of species of plants: if planetary conditions change so much that a microbe disappears in the wild, humans will have a chance to bring it back.

But the sheer scale of how much microbial surveillance is needed is hard to fathom. The recently created Microbe Atlas Project uses data from more than fifty thousand studies to make a map of the planet's microbiome. But the database would need to grow by orders of magnitude for it to encompass all the microbial species that are thought to exist. Eren, the computer scientist, argues that environmental microbes should be sampled around the world daily, in the same way that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration gathers weather data. "People want to manage and protect the environment, but the entity doing most of the actual biological work on the planet is evolving out from under our control and management frameworks in real time," he said.

During my trip to Maryland to visit Spear, I also met with Henry Sage, one of Rita Colwell's Ph.D. students at the University of Maryland, in College Park. We walked down to a tributary of the Paint Branch River, which runs along campus, and Sage delicately balanced on stones in the riverbed so that he could gather water samples. The river gurgled innocently, sunlight reflecting off its surface. It was a peaceful setting, not one that seemed dangerous at all.

Afterward, Sage e-mailed me to say that the water appeared to contain small quantities of *Vibrio cholerae*, the bacteria that cause cholera. Sage will devote almost all his Ph.D. research to monitoring the Potomac River for just one family of microbes. After reading his e-mail, I thought about the billions of microbial species on Earth that are undergoing transformations, and the number of scientists who would be needed simply to understand what's happening to them.

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In the spring, Spear called me to check in. Nine months after his infection, he was finally done with medical treatment. He texted me a picture of his arm: the transplanted skin was slightly pinker than the rest, and I could see a pink splotch on his leg, but otherwise he had healed remarkably well. He was still wary of going back out to the water, but he thought that might change. He'd been researching a pair of protective rubber gloves that are often used for muskrat hunting. "When the weather gets warm again, I'm going to want some crabs," he said, laughing.

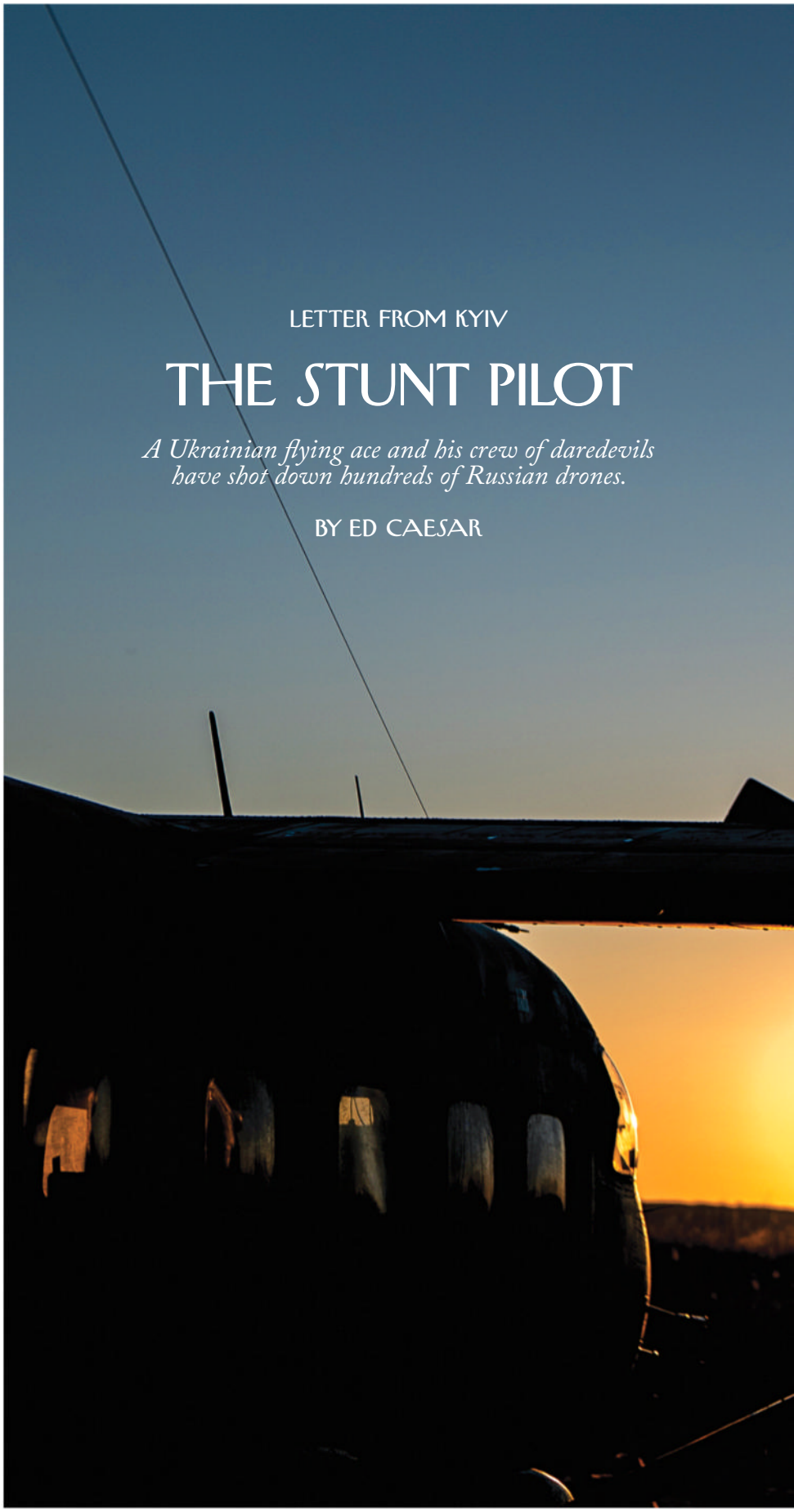
On one of my evenings in Maryland, I stopped by the Inner Harbor, in Baltimore, to get some dinner. The sun was setting, and it was warm enough that I wanted to eat outside. Perhaps I'd even try blue crab. As I got out of my Uber, though, I caught a whiff of something pungent that I'd noticed earlier in the day. The closer I got to the water, the more the air smelled of decay. I asked a restaurant hostess what was going on, and she told me that the harbor had recently experienced what's known as a pistachio tide. After an unseasonable autumn heat wave, oxygen-rich surface water had cooled quickly, increasing its density and causing it to sink. The water at the bottom of the harbor, which is low in oxygen and rich in sulfur-eating bacteria, had risen to the surface. Thousands of fish, shrimp, and crabs had suffocated, and the sulfur bacteria had multiplied, turning the harbor neon green. In the end, I went back to my hotel room with takeout. I closed the window tightly. I could still taste the rot in the air. ♦

LETTER FROM KYIV

THE *STUNT* PILOT

A Ukrainian flying ace and his crew of daredevils have shot down hundreds of Russian drones.

BY ED CAESAR



Timur Fatkullin, who is an expert at formation flying, has applied this skill to war,

The most challenging part of an international aerobatics contest is the Free Unknown. Pilots arrive at a competition after having polished sequences of loops, stall turns, and barrel rolls. But for the Free Unknown section they learn which assortment of tricks they must perform only a day in advance. Contestants plan out how they will string together the stipulated moves in the most pleasing fashion, but they cannot rehearse the routine, except in their minds. It's a test of imagination and airmanship that often decides the competition.

In 2019, the World Intermediate Aerobatics Championship, which was held on an airfield in the Czech town of Břeclav, contained three Free Unknowns. The winner of the first was a twenty-five-year-old Ukrainian pilot named Timur Fatkullin. At the controls of his red-and-silver Extra 330LX—a nimble German sports plane—he made the unusual move of starting his sequence upside down. He then executed a complicated routine as if he'd practiced it for months. The Ukrainian team, boosted by Fatkullin's performance, won gold. Trevor Dugan, who served as a navigator with the R.A.F. in Afghanistan and Iraq, was on the British team, which took bronze. Fatkullin, he said, was "absolutely phenomenal."

Not long after that championship, Fatkullin stopped entering aerobatics competitions: first came the pandemic, then the war with Russia. He moves through life impatiently. Now thirty-two, he has five children. He is tall, with a tight beard, pale-green eyes, and a square jaw. Even in casual situations, he stands ramrod straight, as though about to give or receive an order. He often wears a shirt with three buttons undone, a beige leather flying jacket with the collar turned up, combat pants, and Nike high-tops. He plays the guitar, a little piano. He often carries a thick fold of high-value bills. He speaks several languages, including English (almost perfectly) and Spanish (conversationally). He once spent thirty days in jail after breaking the ribs of a man who'd threatened his wife. (The case never reached trial.) He can dance the tango.

When Fatkullin was in his mid-twenties, he started doing stunts with a group of other extreme athletes: parachutists, motorcyclists, a free diver. They eventually named themselves Aerotim. Fatkullin

positioning his plane so that it flies parallel to an airborne Russian drone, allowing the target to be shot with a gun.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEX BABENKO

began developing a travelling one-hour show that would combine various modes of daredevilry—he told me that he'd wanted it to be so exhilarating that audience members "wouldn't have time to lick their ice cream." Shortly after winning his gold medal in the Czech Republic, Fatkullin had an idea for a trick that could be the show's centerpiece. He called Serhii Gusak, a Ukrainian motorcyclist, to discuss it.

Gusak and Fatkullin are bosom friends but contrasting characters. Gusak, who is thirty-eight, has a surfer's vibe. He wears hoodies and baggy jeans and drives a turquoise Volkswagen minivan. Tattoos cover his left shoulder and arm. As a younger man, he studied landscape gardening at a university in Kyiv before dropping out. Afterward, he took various unusual jobs to support his passion for motorcycles, including one as a mortuary driver. In 2008, he bought his first motocross bike—a vintage Česká Zbrojovka—from a priest in the east of Ukraine, after transporting a body there for burial.

When Fatkullin called, Gusak was performing in circuses. Fatkullin invited him to meet in the Carpathian region, near the border with Poland, to try something new. A crew would set up giant ramps some seventy feet apart. Fatkullin, flying his Extra just a few feet above the ground, would aim for the gap between the ramps. As Fatkullin approached the gap, Gusak would charge up a ramp so that he would be vaulting above the plane at the moment it passed beneath. While arcing over the plane, Gusak would do a Cordova—gripping the handlebars and performing a midair backbend.

Gusak agreed to attempt the trick, and, knowing that Fatkullin's flying was reliable, felt relaxed until he was revving his engine. Then he saw that Fatkullin, without having forewarned him, was approaching the ramps upside down. Inverted flying at such a low altitude is inherently dangerous. The risks for both men had increased dramatically. Gusak could have pulled out. Instead, he told himself, "I can't fail." He zoomed up the ramp.

At nine o'clock on a frigid, moonless but starry night this past March, four years and a few days after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I boarded a dull-gray Antonov-28—a light turboprop transport aircraft with twin propellers—at an airfield in central Ukraine. (I cannot describe the location more precisely because of security considerations.) Fatkullin sat in the pilot's seat. He wore a teal helmet with a microphone, a navy-blue flight suit with his name over his heart, and the usual Nike high-tops. Gusak was in the rear of the plane, in a green flight suit. He sat next to an automatic six-barrel minigun, frequently used in helicopters, and several boxes of

ammunition. A co-pilot, two crew members, and a photographer also climbed on board. There was plenty of room: an Antonov-28, which is about forty feet long, is a troop carrier that can accommodate nineteen people.

The engines bellowed, and the plane started taxiing to the runway. Gusak, who was watching a motocross video on Instagram, tucked his phone away. We soon lifted off. Ukrainian air defenses had just spotted a Shahed—a delta-winged kamikaze drone, which Russia has used to terrorize Ukraine's civilian population and knock out critical infrastructure—flying in the direction of the airfield. Fatkullin was on his way to destroy it.

Shaheds, made of black carbon fibre, are eleven feet long and have a wingspan of about eight feet. Weighing only four hundred and fifty pounds, they can fly missions of up to sixteen hundred miles, a range that allows them to strike anywhere in Ukraine. The drones' noisy engines make them easy to hear—they sound like a dirt bike—but they are hard to spot in the night sky with the naked eye. Fatkullin and his men had a system. The crew members located the Shahed using a thermal-imaging camera affixed to the nose of the Antonov. Fatkullin and Gusak then worked by eye, using a spotlight positioned under the left wing and controlled by Fatkullin. They also wore night-vision goggles. Once Fatkullin had positioned the Antonov so that the drone was flying parallel to the aircraft on his left side, Gusak used the minigun to shoot it down.

Gusak put on a flak jacket and a parachute rig. I was also wearing a parachute. I've jumped from a plane only once—in 2006, on vacation in Namibia, when I paid for a tandem skydive with an instructor, who pulled the cord. Gusak, who has a two-year-old daughter, had said that the parachutes were necessary precautions. A Shahed has up to a hundred and ten pounds of munitions in its warhead. If one hit the plane, or exploded close by, the Antonov could lose power, catch fire, or be riddled with shrapnel. Such things had happened. Gusak gave me a quick tutorial—jump, count to three, pull here—and helped me tighten my straps.

We flew northeast. The crew members monitored a radar map of Ukraine on an iPad, which showed enemy targets in red and Ukrainian aircraft in blue. After about half an hour in the air, the target we were following disappeared from the screen: it had either crashed or been taken out by other air defenses. Four more Shaheds soon appeared, however, all travelling from the direction of the eastern city of Sumy, which is on the front line of the war. Shortly after 11 P.M., Fatkullin spoke over the radio (in English, for my benefit): "Targets are inbound, about fifty kilometres away. We are on opposite courses." Behind me, Gusak laid his minigun on a mat and opened the door through which he'd fire the weapon. The cabin filled with cold air.

One of the crew members watched a screen, positioned between the minigun and the cockpit, that showed video from the thermal-imaging camera. He soon located a good target. On the thermal footage, the Shahed's engine blazed like a comet; the rest of the drone looked like a grayish-white paper dart. A laser in the Antonov's camera measured the distance to the Shahed. We were sixty-five hundred feet away—too far, on a moonless night, to see it without assistance. Fatkullin brought the plane closer, and then began a kind of courtly dance: we swept around from behind the drone until it was at our eleven o'clock, and then our ten o'clock. Gusak could not fire until it was between eight and nine o'clock. The distance to the drone decreased to twelve hundred feet. I glimpsed it out of the

left window. There was something melodramatic about the image: picked out by the spotlight, the black drone, above forests and fields, looked like an opera soloist. Gusak peered over the top of the minigun, attempting to fix the target in his night-vision goggles. The distance to the Shahed dropped to less than a thousand feet. We were now in range.

Fatkullin was born in Chornomorske, a small town on the northwestern coast of the Crimean Peninsula, in 1993, two years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The town was part of newly independent Ukraine, but, like everyone else on the peninsula, Fatkullin grew up speaking Russian. He habitually uses Ukrainian now, except when he is under unusual stress in the cockpit—at such moments, he reverts to the language of his childhood.

Fatkullin's parents both studied philosophy in college and became high-school teachers. Their apartment was full of literature, but as a child Fatkullin wasn't interested in books. (He has since become an avid reader and is fond of the mid-century novels of the French writer and aviator Romain Gary.) The young Fatkullin was beguiled by American films—especially those in which a charismatic leading man assembles a crew for a heist. He particularly adored Lewis Milestone's "Ocean's Eleven."

In the summer, Chornomorske was bliss for an outdoorsy child: Fatkullin could dive in the Black Sea without a mask, because the water is only lightly salinated. But for nine months a year, he told me, the weather was "terrible" and the town bored him. He joined a rock-climbing club that organized trips to competitions elsewhere in Crimea. When he was eleven, he was on one such excursion near Simferopol; sitting on a cliff top, he saw a small plane performing aerobatic maneuvers, trailed by white smoke. He remembers thinking, Who *is* that guy?

At the age of twenty-one, Fatkullin moved to Kyiv and sought out a flying instructor. He spent five thousand dollars that he'd earned from summer jobs to train for a pilot's license. The experience of flying solo for the first time, he remembered, was "amazing," but the thrill quickly faded. He asked himself, "Is this it? This was not what I saw in the movies." Somebody at the airfield gave him the number of a sport pilot who could teach him aerobatics. The instructor was also from Crimea. Fatkullin told him the story of the plane he'd seen in the valley when he was eleven. When the instructor said that he'd been taught by that very pilot, Fatkullin felt the grip of fate.

Flying is costly, but Fatkullin has always had commercial instincts. As a young man in Crimea, he dabbled in what he called gray-market schemes, buying and selling stolen motorbikes—a market that seems more black than gray—and then launched a currency-exchange business. By 2014, he told me, the currency exchange was on its way to becoming a legitimate company with multiple investors. (That year, Russia annexed Crimea; he hasn't visited the peninsula since 2016.) Fatkullin also has a knack for finding patrons. In 2018, he obtained access to his first stunt plane, the Extra 330LX, when its owner, a Kyiv logistics company that offered to support his aerobatics career, allowed him and his instructor to use it. The plane's registration mark, UR-TIM, suggests that the plane was always Fatkullin's in all but name; since the war began, its ownership has formally passed to his wife, who is also a pilot.

In about 2017, Fatkullin became interested in "formation flying," in which several planes fly close together in a synchronized way. It's perilous, but Fatkullin enjoyed the communal aspect of it, and how formation fliers spoke their own private language, much of it gestural. A fist raised with the arm bent at ninety degrees, for example, was the signal for a wingman to cross under your plane. The addictive part of formation flying was that it required absolute trust among the pilots.

Fatkullin recently told me that there was no magic in aerobatics—you just had to practice and repeat maneuvers enough for something that "looks dangerous" to be safe. That's how he and his team approached the inverted-plane-motorbike trick—which they executed beautifully the first time, and several times after that. Before the first attempt, Fatkullin had flown upside down for many weeks, going closer to the ground as his confidence increased. His breakthrough was to suspend his normally methodical mode of thinking. When flying upside down, all the controls seem

"We should only keep things we'd fight for in a divorce."

to work in reverse; if Fatkullin thought too much about which way was left and right, he "got into a mess." It helped to embrace an "improvisational" mind-set. Fatkullin loves jazz, and he told me, "You don't want to stop Jimmy Cobb"—the drummer on "Kind of Blue"—"in the middle of a drum solo and say, 'Play again from that part.'"

On February 24, 2022, when Russia sent troops across Ukraine's northern border, Fatkullin was in Latvia. He was just months away from finally taking the Aerotim show on tour. That life was over, Fatkullin realized.

He arranged for his wife, Valeriya Guzema, and their first child together, a boy, to move to Spain. (He had two other kids from a previous relationship; they now live with their mother in England.) Guzema, the C.E.O. of a jewelry company based in Kyiv, begged him not to volunteer for the military. Service-aged men with three or more children were exempt from conscription. But Fatkullin wanted to serve his country—by flying in combat.

Fatkullin believed that he was the only nonmilitary pilot in Ukraine to have qualified to fly an Aero L-39 Albatros, which the country's Air Force uses to train jet pilots. He expected to be fast-tracked into a fighter program, but, as he tells it, recruiters were reluctant, in part because his Crimean background aroused suspicion. (Many residents of the peninsula supported the annexation.) The most troublesome word on his résumé, Fatkullin told me, was "Sevastopol"—the Crimean city where he'd attended college. The recruiting officers let him know that he was unlikely to attain a full security clearance and thus had little chance of flying missions anytime soon.

Fatkullin's next call was to the Ukrainian Border Guard, which owns a helicopter fleet. A representative said that the Border Guard rarely engaged in aerial combat. Unwilling to experience a boring war, Fatkullin declined.

Frustrated, he returned to his crew at Aerotim, which was becoming well known for videos it posted online. The group collaborated with a videographer, Nazar Doroshkevych, who specialized in drone photography. In a viral clip from 2020, a skydiver named Alex Marushko stands atop a hot-air balloon in a white bathrobe, four thousand feet above Ukraine at dawn, drinking coffee. Fatkullin roars by in his plane. Then Marushko jumps. To Fatkullin's knowledge, it was the first video featuring a skydiver on top of a hot-air balloon. "Everyone is copying us now," he told me.

In 2023, another Aerotim short attracted worldwide attention. It was filmed by a GoPro camera affixed to a fast-paced drone. Fatkullin is flying a yellow-and-black L-39—the fighter trainer—above a frozen landscape. He does a "tailslide," in which a plane ascends nearly vertically until it loses momentum and then slides backward toward the earth, tail first, before levelling out. That year, the video was one of fifty-five to win GoPro's Million Dollar Challenge, a contest for the most "epic moments" filmed on the company's devices.

Fatkullin was busy, but he did not feel useful in a country at war. However, Ukraine's Air Force had noticed Aerotim's videos. The Army Aviation division asked him to make a film about a new program that used helicopters to counter one of Russia's aerial threats: drones.

In September, 2022, Russia fired its first Shahed into a Ukrainian city. It killed a civilian in Odesa. The weapon has since transformed the war. Each drone costs less than fifty thousand dollars. A barrage of such attacks has become a relatively inexpensive way for Russia to cause severe damage to Ukraine. The Russians use a variety of similar models: the original Shahed-136, which was manufactured by Iran, and Russian adaptations such as the Geran-2. Ukrainians refer to all such drones as Shaheds.

Although the earlier models have a cruising speed of only a hundred and ten miles per hour, Shaheds are not easy to destroy. They often evade radar by flying low. Ukraine has attempted to locate and destroy them using fighter jets, helicopters, anti-aircraft missiles, electronic jammers, machine guns on the ground, and its own drones. But hundreds of Shaheds can be launched in a single attack, and a few always defeat these countermeasures.

Shaheds often target energy and military infrastructure, but they also hit civilian buildings. More than six hundred civilians were killed in Ukraine last year by long-range munitions (Shaheds and missiles), and some forty-five hundred people were injured. Ukrainians have grown accustomed to, and have learned to fear, the buzzing sound of an approaching attack. Medical authorities say that drone-induced anxiety is rising among civilians. A 2025 paper by American and Ukrainian psychiatrists called the Shaheds a "psychological weapon" as well as an actual weapon.

Aerotim's film shoot for the Ukrainian Army Aviation division introduced Fatkullin to a way of fighting back. He observed the crew of an Mi-8 helicopter that used a thermal camera to locate drones. A pilot would maneuver the helicopter so that a door gunner could shoot effectively. Fatkullin logged fifty-five hours in the air with the crew, during which the gunner destroyed forty Shaheds. Fatkullin was enraptured not just by the ingenuity of the approach but by its aesthetic. "It's air-to-air combat, almost like World War Two," he told me. "It's a dream job."

Fatkullin also saw limitations to the Army Aviation division's approach. An Mi-8 tops out at a hundred and fifty-five miles per hour—too slow to chase down newer Shaheds, which are jet-powered and can exceed three hundred miles per hour. He also realized that he had honed a skill especially conducive to hunting drones: formation flying. In order to shoot down a drone with a door gunner, the pilot had to fly at exactly the correct angle and distance from the target.

If Fatkullin couldn't join the military, he decided, he would try to form a civilian unit that could destroy Shaheds. He began looking for a plane that was suited for drone-hunting, with room for a door gunner and for a crew member who could operate a thermal-imaging monitor. At about this time, on the airfield where he kept his sports planes, he met a pilot named Valerii Slipkan.

Slipkan, who is now sixty-six, is a short and burly Ukrainian with expressive eyebrows, a warm smile, and a quick temper. In the eighties, he was a fighter pilot for the U.S.S.R., based in Estonia. He flew MIG-23s and Su-27s, the jewels in the Soviet Air Force's crown. When the Soviet Union dissolved, Slipkan returned to Ukraine and joined its Air Force. In 1995, he left to become an

aviation consultant, and he worked for many years as a commercial pilot in Africa. Later, he helped transport NATO troops in Afghanistan.

After Russia invaded Ukraine, Slipkan told Air Force recruiters that he could fly a fighter jet, but they said that he was too old. He became an infantry soldier in the Territorial Defense Forces instead. For three months, he served outside Mykolaiv, near the Black Sea, and completed a pair of ten-day rotations. To his frustration, he didn't fight in any battles.

In August, 2022, Slipkan borrowed a Yak-52—an aerobatics plane—and, along with a door gunner, began searching for Russian reconnaissance drones. They took periodic flights for nine months but hit no targets, in part because it was so hard to locate the drones at night. When he met Fatkullin, the two realized that they shared an ambition to hunt Shaheds, and decided to team up. Slipkan told Fatkullin that a businessman he knew from his Africa days had lent him an Antonov-28 that had been used for skydiving before the war. Slipkan admired Fatkullin's piloting skills, telling me that, just as some swimmers feel most comfortable in the water, "Timur feels better in the sky."

The admiration was mutual. Fatkullin loved hearing Slipkan's tales about his Soviet missions in fighter jets. And Fatkullin was deeply moved when he learned that Slipkan had suffered personally in the war. In September, 2022, his son was killed on the front line, in circumstances that he still finds almost impossible to discuss. Slipkan told me recently, "Everything that I'm not able to give to my son anymore, I give to Timur and the guys."

For a year, the two men petitioned Ukrainian military authorities to let them form a unit for shooting down Shaheds. Meanwhile, the incidence of drone attacks on Ukraine was increasing. But, in Fatkullin's telling, nobody in a senior defense role wanted responsibility for the unit. Eventually, in June, 2025, the necessary paperwork was signed, after Fatkullin and Slipkan agreed to be liable if they caused an accident or downed a drone over a populated area. Technically, the group would be a volunteer unit of Ukraine's Territorial Defense Forces, but under the operative control of the Air Force. Officially, the unit was called the Air Defense Group. Privately, Ukrainians called it Aerotim.

A plane that Fatkullin has used to hunt drones is marked with his team's "kills."

One of the first people Fatkullin contacted was Serhii Gusak, the motorbike daredevil. Gusak, a pacifist, had spent the war true to his principles. For the first year, he had delivered humanitarian aid in Kyiv and eastern Ukraine on behalf of charities. He also soldered parts for a firm making interceptor drones that the Ukrainians used to target Russia's reconnaissance aircraft. But he wanted to find a more active way to defend his country. He considered training as a medical-evacuation worker for injured fighters.

Fatkullin's call came as a relief. Joining the unit would let Gusak protect Ukrainians without getting blood on his hands. (Fatkullin told me that his friend "doesn't want to kill Russians," adding, "I don't have this problem.") Fatkullin proposed that Gusak become his door gunner, shooting drones with a minigun. The work was perilous, because the door gunner would be more exposed to shrapnel than the rest of the crew, but Gusak accepted the role. He received two days of training from a former military officer on how to work and maintain the weapon.

On the night of July 4, 2025, Aerotim flew its first drone-hunting mission, over central Ukraine. Fatkullin wasn't exactly a fighter pilot, since his opponent was an unmanned drone, but he wasn't *not* one, either. (The French term for a fighter pilot, "*pilote de chasse*"—"hunter pilot"—seems most appropriate for this work.) After a target had been locked in the sights of the thermal-imaging camera, Slipkan, in the right-hand seat, navigated toward the Shahed. Fatkullin took the controls once he could see the drone with his own eyes. Gusak was ready with his gun.

At first, the crew members weren't sure how close to a Shahed they needed to be for the minigun to be effective—or how far away they should fly so that the Antonov would not be crippled by shrapnel if one exploded. Sometimes, they came disconcertingly close to colliding with a drone; other times, they lost track of it. On one of the first flights, Gusak peered out of the hatch and watched in alarm as a Shahed drifted upward toward their fuselage. Gusak could read the Russian letters on its wing. He remembers it rising in the dark-blue sky "like a big black fish." The crew avoided making contact with the Shahed and eventually destroyed

it, along with three others. From then on, Fatkullin described such missions as "flying combat."

A few days after I arrived in Kyiv, I was driven to Aerotim's base. The country was emerging from its coldest winter in more than a decade—a season made even more punishing because of Russian strikes on energy infrastructure, which caused many residents of Ukraine to spend weeks without heat. It was a sunny afternoon, and through the car window I could see that many lakes and some rivers remained frozen solid; fishermen walked on the glittering ice. On a narrow rural road, the car suddenly turned off at a place where there seemed to be no exit, passed through a line of trees, and emerged onto an airfield next to the dilapidated remains of several warehouses.

The airfield, once used by crop-sprayers, was itself in disrepair. The Antonov-28 was parked next to a metal shed that housed a workshop. To jury-rig a weathervane, an empty soda bottle with some hazard tape attached had been placed upside-down on a stick. By a grassy mound, steep steps led to a hidden bunker. Fatkullin and his crew had built a second exit to the bunker in case the front entrance was hit by a missile.

There was a good reason for using a ruined-looking airfield: the Russians were less likely to target such a base with missiles or drones. For a few months, Aerotim had used another airfield, where Fatkullin continues to keep his sports planes in an architect-designed, concrete-and-steel hangar that has been featured in style magazines. The Antonov, however, was too large to join the other planes inside.

Earlier in my trip, Fatkullin had taken me on an aerobatic flight from that airfield in his Extra 330LX. The plane, now clad in silvery vinyl, shimmered in the sunlight. Above a landscape still white with snow, Fatkullin performed heart-stopping tricks. (I may have closed my eyes as the plane barrel-rolled toward the earth, then levelled out at the last possible second.) Near Fatkullin's concrete hangar were the blackened ruins of some older hangars—a result of Shaheds hitting the airfield.

At the new base, the bunker was equipped with cots, a square dining table, rudimentary cooking devices, and stacks of batteries and L.E.D. lights. In a corridor, a communications hub with several computer screens and landline telephones was manned, twenty-four hours a day, by low-paid crew members who fielded calls from Ukrainian air-defense officials identifying targets that Fatkullin's team needed to destroy.

The airfield hummed with activity. Stanislav Lenko, an amiable, potbellied mechanic, smoked cigarettes while working in the shed. Slipkan knew him from his time in Africa, when Lenko was considered a nonpareil engineer of the Antonov-28. At the start of the drone-hunting project, Slipkan asked him to come to the airfield "for a few days." He had never left.

Lenko, a fifty-six-year-old who has a wife and two children living elsewhere in Ukraine, sleeps in makeshift accommodations by the runway. He regularly fixes shrapnel holes in the Antonov's fuselage after a Shahed explodes near the plane. He plays a quiet, fatherly role with the crew. Fatkullin told me that Lenko worried "every minute" that the plane was in the air, and relaxed only when it landed safely. One evening, Lenko served everyone a hearty lamb soup called *shurpa;* he had slow-cooked the dish for twenty-four hours. Lenko is also unofficially in charge of the many stray dogs who roam the premises. He helped to save the life of a pregnant mutt, which he'd named Lucky. During the period I spent with Aerotim, Lucky gave birth to her puppies, which looked like black-and-white gerbils. The men doted on them.

Like most people at the airfield, Lenko initially worked unpaid—a situation that went on for months before reaching a crisis point in January, when several volunteers told Fatkullin they couldn't continue without wages. A Ukrainian com-

pany—Fatkullin declined to give the name—now provides basic salaries for half of the dozen or so people at the base. Fatkullin himself pays for the operational expenses of all the others. He has sold a stake in two properties and a cryptocurrency business he'd founded in order to finance the unit's expenses, which he estimates at ten thousand dollars a month. The Ukrainian military provides free fuel and ammunition.

On a workbench outside the shed, Gusak and a friend took apart the minigun and cleaned it while listening to "Riders on the Storm" on a Bluetooth speaker. Fatkullin explained that he had bought the weapon secondhand from a gunship in the Black Sea. (Dillon Aero, an American firm, made the weapon, and it now supports Aerotim with spare parts and training.) Fatkullin then showed me various exterior markings on the Antonov. Several lines of symbols denoted drones that the crew had shot down. When I saw it, the total was a hundred and seventy-one. Most of the symbols showed the black Shahed shape, but a different stencil had been used to evoke the Chinese DFX drone—a smaller version of the Shahed—and the Russian Gerbera "decoy" drone, which normally contains no warhead and is deployed to misdirect the attention of air defenses. On a tail fin, the crew had stencilled a Playboy Bunny smoking a cigar. "Kinda cool," Fatkullin said.

A drone-hunting mission can theoretically begin at any moment, but Shahed attacks in daytime are relatively rare. The first afternoon I visited the airfield, the skies seemed quiet, and Fatkullin announced that he wanted to take a training flight. In addition to the minigun, he and his crew members had begun using P1-Sun interceptor drones, which they released from brackets underneath the wings of the Antonov to hunt Shaheds. P1-Suns are made in Ukraine by a company called SkyFall and look like short, squat rockets. Their name is a bawdy joke: in Ukrainian, "*pisun*" is slang for "tiny penis." P1-Suns were effective at intercepting Shaheds when piloted from the ground, but much less reliable when fired from a plane and piloted by someone on board the Antonov. (A SkyFall representative told me in March that he wasn't surprised by the discrepancy but couldn't explain it; the software has since been improved.)

Fatkullin said that the interceptors made him nervous. He showed me a video of a P1-Sun that his crew had launched from the Antonov. It had failed to find the target, instead buzzing around the plane like a distressed bee. The interceptor had a payload of nearly two pounds of munitions, and it could travel up to two hundred miles an hour. Fatkullin worried about a P1-Sun accidentally bringing down the Antonov.

Nevertheless, he could see that it might ultimately be safer to fire interceptor drones than to use the minigun. The drones could be launched as far as six miles away from a target, mitigating the danger of a Shahed exploding close to the plane. And Aerotim had enjoyed some limited success using the interceptors. Alex Marushko, the skydiving daredevil who had jumped from the top of the hot-air balloon, was now a drone pilot for Aerotim, and had recently used P1-Suns to destroy three Shaheds from the Antonov in a single sortie.

Marushko, who has a shaved head and a sunny disposition, was at the airfield, and he helped affix an interceptor drone to the Antonov's right wing. Since this was a training flight, the P1-Sun would have no munitions. We entered the plane using a drop-down ramp at the back. Fatkullin and Slipkan took their seats in the pilots' cabin, which was demarcated by a flimsy curtain, and Marushko sat on a bench in front of a large screen.

The cycling of the turboprop engines was reminiscent of a busy laundromat; the vibrations stayed in your body long after the flight. As we reached an altitude of about six hundred feet, Marushko put on "first-person view" goggles, which allow a drone pilot to feel as if he were looking out of the cockpit of a traditional plane. He launched the interceptor drone, which shot out of its bracket and away from the plane. He wanted to see if he could land the P1-Sun at the airfield. This, he said, was a much harder skill than hitting a Shahed, since an interceptor must land vertically, like a rocket launch in reverse.

Controlling the interceptor, Marushko looked as if he were playing a particularly engrossing game on a V.R. headset. Fatkullin called me forward and asked if I wanted to fly the plane. Sure, I said. (I don't have a pilot's license but I have flown before, under instruction.) The controls were heavy. To change direction, I had to yank the yoke with both hands, as if I were using reins to guide a stubborn horse. When Fatkullin is drone-hunting, he moves the yoke with his left hand only, because his right hand is controlling the spotlight that picks out the Shahed. He'd told me that the missions really "use your body," and I now understood what he meant.

Just as I was becoming accustomed to the controls, I noticed, through the left window, a human body flying toward the ground. It was Marushko. He had landed his drone and was now parachuting back to the airfield, for fun.

The threat of Shahed attacks has grown and mutated. The Center for Strategic and International Studies, an American nonprofit that monitors the Ukraine conflict, has said that, between late 2024 and early 2025, average weekly launches from Russia rose from seventy-five to about nine hundred. According to the Ukrainian military's data, in February, 2026, the weekly average was about twelve hundred and sixty-five. This surge has stretched air defenses, especially because Ukraine has limited resources. The Aerotim crew members laughed ruefully when they heard that, in the war in Iran, the U.S. and the Gulf states were responding to Shahed attacks using multiple Patriot missiles. Each Patriot costs about four million dollars.

Shaheds look broadly the same as before, but their navigation systems have become more sophisticated. When a Shahed crashes or is shot down, Ukrainian investigators examine the wreckage. They often find a mishmash of Russian, Chinese, and Iranian parts. They have also found Ukrainian SIM cards and modems inside drones, suggesting that they were using Ukrainian cellular networks to navigate. Some models have cameras so that pilots in Russia can steer the drones remotely or conduct surveillance. Russia is now equipping Shaheds with air-to-air missiles that can attack pursuing aircraft. Others carry antitank mines. Perhaps most worryingly, evidence has lately emerged that a few Shaheds have been acting as mother ships for first-person-view drones, bringing these precisely

directed weapons far beyond the front line, where they normally operate.

Fatkullin is sure that a few Shaheds have sensed the Antonov and attempted to evade it. On a recent mission, he lost a target because it began to slip in and out of the clouds, frustrating his ability to keep a spotlight on it. He also believes that some Shaheds have turned around to attack his plane. In January and February, Shaheds destroyed three Ukrainian helicopters that were hunting drones. The pace of technological innovation in the Ukraine war is dizzying. Fatkullin and his crew understand that the first time they learn of some new anti-aircraft measure on a Shahed, the discovery may accompany their plane's midair destruction.

For now, the main danger remains the problem of proximity to an exploding target. This past summer, Slipkan suspended Gusak for a few days after he smoked a vape in the cabin—a harmless enough lapse that nevertheless offended Slipkan's Soviet-era sense of discipline. The replacement gunner had a military background but wasn't adept at picking out Shaheds at night. Fatkullin had positioned a Shahed about three hundred feet away from the plane, between eight and nine o'clock, but the new gunner told his pilot that he did not have a visual. Fatkullin, frustrated, prepared to leave the area. As the plane maneuvered, the gunner spotted the drone and began firing. By this point, the Shahed was perilously close and positioned at seven o'clock. When it exploded, the tail of the Antonov was hit, its fuel tank was punctured, and the back ramp came open. Slipkan staggered to the back of the plane to close the ramp; another crew member grabbed him by the belt so that he would not fall out. Fatkullin, fearing that the plane was about to catch fire, made a quick forced landing.

Most of the job is waiting. While on duty, the crew must remain in a state known as "Readiness Two": close to the airfield, prepared to answer a call to flight. During Readiness Two, Fatkullin, Gusak, and the other crew members spend much of their time in a two-story wooden lodge in a nearby forest, where the vibe is somewhere between a co-working space and a low-energy frat house. The men survive on pistachios and orange juice, with the occasional meal at a local restaurant. Once, I opened a refrigerator to find that its sole occupant was a can of Red Bull.

The crew spends some days sleeping off their night missions. Everyone shares a room with someone else, but Fatkullin prefers not to bunk with Gusak, because Gusak snores. Fatkullin has a yellow exercise bike that the men take turns using. This past winter, he and Gusak also rode motorbikes on a frozen river near the property. At night, everyone goes to bed with their phones by their heads, in case they get the call of "Readiness One." When this instruction is given, the men must be at the airfield within fifteen minutes. It is ten minutes from the lodge to the airfield if they drive fast, which they do, but that leaves little time for preparations. The crew members sleep with their flight suits and thermal underwear laid out beside their beds.

At one-forty-five on a recent Wednesday morning, Fatkullin's phone buzzed: Readiness One. We dressed and ran to a black S.U.V. parked outside the lodge, and were in the car four minutes after the call. At the dark airfield, many of the dogs were barking. Crew members wearing headlamps positioned L.E.D.s on the runway to guide takeoff; Gusak waddled onto the plane with his heavy minigun; Marushko affixed P1-Sun interceptor drones to their brackets. When everybody was on board, the back ramp was closed, and the Antonov taxied onto the runway. My heart was racing. Gusak idled on a bench seat.

Inside the plane, Marushko used an iPad to inspect a radar map. He showed me two icons down by the southern port of Odesa which resembled red flywheels. These icons indicated that an audio detector had picked up the sound of a Shahed, which couldn't yet be seen on radar. The icons "should turn into Shaheds," he said.

This didn't happen. After ten tense minutes of waiting, the plane taxied off the runway. Either the red flywheels had not been drones or a Ukrainian fighter jet or helicopter had intercepted the targets. Fatkullin's crew was back at Readiness Two.

It was nearly 4 A.M. when we returned to the lodge. Fatkullin and Gusak find it difficult to sleep after an aborted Readiness One call. Fatkullin told me that they sometimes toggled between

ECOLOGIES OF PERCEPTION

On a day so hot not even the housefly
watching you can move,
you notice its eyeballs almost favor
the shiny black domes that cover
airport security cameras.
The housefly's compound eyeballs
look like headlights wearing prescription
Coke-bottle goggles in a violent heat.
When your fingernail scrapes a lash or flake
of ash the size of a fat fly's wing from your eye,
it's multiplied several thousand times
in the housefly's eyes.
The blackfly breeds in streams & rivers
during the dog days of summer,
but cannot survive on sadness like the housefly.
Bubbles of good & bad air flare in individual
hexagonal lenses known as ommatidia.
Each ommatidium functions like an eye,
but none sees spectrums of red or yellow.
To the fly you are myriad mosaics of ultraviolet,
gray, blue & green trichromatic visions
scraping something from your eye:
a tear of oil or sweat in some ommatidia,

a bud, a bead of mucus or blindness in others,
a pearly, blurry larva recalling
the housefly's first dog days on earth.
When it's this hot, you may also contend
with the horsefly, which is what
you almost think the housefly is
when you look at it.
The fangs of horseflies tear the ears
of the dog days. The sores shine
on the ears of the dogs like diamonds.
Dog days swarm the earth.
Houseflies rise like small planes
orbiting an inflamed, flammable planet.
Houseflies rise out of maggots like fragments
& figments & scabs & clouds of ash.
Praise be to the one housefly that does not flee,
the wind at bay gone violent.
You cannot shoo the climate.
You are multitudinous outlandish landscapes,
which is to say, you are more than otherworldly
scraping & scratching the flake or lash
itching your eye in the eyes of the fly.
You cannot shoo the fly.

—Terrance Hayes

Readiness One and Readiness Two three times in a single night, without flying. The oscillation wore on their nerves. In some ways, the missions were easier.

Back at the lodge, Fatkullin checked a radar app on his phone. Few Shaheds were in the sky, and it seemed unlikely that his crew would be called out again. He opened a bottle of red wine. For an hour, he and Gusak lingered over their glasses, laughing and looking at videos on their phones, before finally going to bed as the sun came up.

During my stay in Ukraine, Fatkullin announced that he was travelling to Western Europe—he asked me not to be more specific—to buy another plane for the unit. He had a new idea for attacking drones: using a light aircraft with machine guns attached to the front. This scheme required a two-man pilot-navigator crew, with the pilot operating the weapons. I saw why this concept appealed to him. Not only might it be effective at destroying Shaheds; it would also satisfy Fatkullin's fighter-pilot ambitions. In the Antonov, he had complained to me, "I'm a jet pilot driving a bus."

Fatkullin had identified a used two-seater aircraft that was ideal for the task: a former aerobatics plane owned by a private aviation company in Western Europe. (He asked me not to name the model or the vender, for security reasons.) The plane could easily outpace even a jet-powered Shahed but could still cruise alongside a regular Shahed. By contrast, the F-16 fighter jets owned by the Ukrainian Air Force stall at about the speed that a Shahed normally flies.

The aircraft Fatkullin wanted cost several hundred thousand dollars. Aerotim had raised most of the money from sponsors in Ukraine. (Fatkullin asked me not to name them, either, since it could make them targets of Russia.) A representative of Dillon Aero told me that it was providing a machine-gun apparatus and other materials collectively worth more than a million dollars. Fatkullin hoped to solicit a top-range thermal-imaging camera and a mount from another firm.

Currently, it's impossible to fly commercially to or from Ukraine, and Fatkullin wanted to combine his trip to inspect the new plane with a visit to his older children, in England. He and I boarded an eleven-hour night train to Chelm, in Poland, took a car to Warsaw, and then flew to London on a low-cost airline. We shared a sleeper cabin on the train. His phone buzzed continually. He looked strung out.

Fatkullin occupied an unusual position that was both inside and outside Ukraine's military-defense structures. When he wasn't on missions, he attended Air Force meetings in Kyiv. His unit was classified as "experimental aviation," but he seemed to receive little institutional support and he had a heavy administrative burden. Raising funds for the new plane had consumed much of his time since I'd met him. The night we took the train, he still hadn't amassed the full amount to purchase the plane outright. Since the war in Iran had started, he was also fielding calls from officials in the U.A.E., asking him to bring his team to the region to help with Shahed attacks from Iran. (He was unsure whether he had the time to help the Emiratis, but he was considering the offer.)

Compounding his anxieties, Fatkullin had recently undergone a troubling eye test. An ophthalmologist had noticed some slight damage to his right retina, possibly caused by exposure to the bright flashes of exploding Shaheds while wearing night-vision goggles. Fatkullin also worried about his team. When he was away, Slipkan became the lead pilot, and in Fatkullin's view Slipkan sometimes flew too close to the drones. The Antonov kept coming back to base peppered with shrapnel holes. Fatkullin shared with me a recent video, which showed that the fuel tank on the plane had been hit again.

Fatkullin wondered if Slipkan's aggressive flying was connected to the death of his son. Slipkan, he said, was "all in, all the time." As self-confident as Fatkullin was, he flew conservatively on drone-hunting missions, because he felt responsible for his crew's safety. If a nighttime landing was becoming too difficult, he said, he was happy to take another turn and try again. But Slipkan preferred to land on his first try. (He told me, "I don't have Timur's standards of elegance.") After one incident in which Slipkan was at the controls and lost sight of a drone that had passed directly underneath the plane, Gusak had called Fatkullin, saying that "it was suicide" to fly like that.

Fatkullin's work with the aviation unit also caused tension in his family. When he was with his men, he could appear

cocksure and old-fashioned in his attitudes toward women. Over lunch one day at the lodge, in front of his crew, I mentioned that I had bought my wife flowers on Mother's Day. Fatkullin told me that he'd stopped buying flowers for his wife, since they didn't last. He then added that, in any case, when it came to women, "you have to be a little bit cruel—otherwise it doesn't work at all." But in the confessional space of the train cabin, he admitted that he found it difficult to balance his work with a marriage that he treasured. He noted that he'd found wisdom in Esther Perel's book "Mating in Captivity."

After the train trip, I returned to Ukraine and had dinner at Fatkullin's elegant home, on the outskirts of Kyiv. The house was full of flowers. Valeriya Guzema, who returned from Spain not long after Russia's ground assault on Kyiv failed, is a stylish, delicately built woman in her mid-thirties. She and her husband sat entwined as they ate. Guzema told me, half smiling, that in the first few months of the unit's operations he came home only when there was a problem with his plane. (They see each other more now, she added.) Guzema was juggling a lot herself: she oversaw a business with a hundred and fifty employees, and was taking care of the couple's children—they now had three.

As Fatkullin related some story of derring-do over dinner, she interrupted him and said—with what I perceived as a mixture of admiration and dread—"Sometimes I think you forget you are human." He smiled and went on with the anecdote. Nevertheless, the couple had maintained a connection through aviation. Guzema and Fatkullin occasionally fly in formation together, in different planes. Fatkullin told me that flying next to his wife was like dancing—"a way of talking without talking."

Up in the air on the moonless night in March, Gusak positioned the Shahed in his sights. In the left-hand pilot's seat, Fatkullin had loosened his seat belt so that he could fly while turning his body to look out of his window at the target with his night-vision goggles. Slipkan instructed Gusak, on a radio, to hold fire. The Antonov was flying over a highway, and they didn't want the Shahed to crash onto the road.

Once the plane passed the highway, Slipkan gave Gusak the order to shoot. The plane was slightly less than nine hundred feet away from the drone. Gusak squeezed the trigger, and the cabin of the Antonov filled with the drilling sound of automatic-weapon fire and the smoky-sweet smell of spent rounds. A stream of orange tracers rained from the minigun. After a few bursts of gunfire, a small plume of black smoke tailed out behind the Shahed, and it began losing altitude. The crew expected it to explode, but it glided into a field beneath the Antonov without detonating—a surprise for a farmer the next morning. Inside the plane, there was no jubilation. After the successful kill, Gusak spent a few minutes tidying up his work station, collecting round casings into a burlap bag.

The crew members looked for their next target. Ground control had instructed them to search for a nearby Shahed that had just disappeared from radar. The drone was soon spotted on the thermal-imaging camera, flying at an altitude of only a hundred and thirty feet. Attacking a drone flying at such low altitude is delicate. Fatkullin told me that during this kind of engagement he stays locked on the target: "Whatever the drone does, I do." Of course, if a low-flying Shahed moves lower and the Antonov follows, it's "a problem," since the plane might crash. Slipkan monitored the altimeter. When Fatkullin was in a focussed state and flying slowly, there was also the possibility of stalling, which was

dangerous so close to the ground. If Slipkan felt that Fatkullin was at risk of a stall, he placed his hand gently on Fatkullin's hand—a sign to increase throttle.

The Antonov soon drew alongside the Shahed, and Gusak opened fire. The drone let out its cigarette trail of death, and tumbled to the earth, again without exploding. Only after the fourth and final kill of the night did a fireball fill the air. The flash briefly turned the plane's interior a dazzling yellow. We watched as the mangled Shahed crashed and continued exploding for several minutes. Fatkullin noted over the radio that the drone's warhead must have contained cluster munitions. It was only the second Shahed that Fatkullin had seen behaving that way after being shot down. Gusak had hit the fourth drone from about a thousand feet away, which was near the limit of his range. I was extremely glad that we were not closer, but when we landed to refuel at a military airbase, at nearly 1 A.M., Fatkullin seemed almost disappointed that there had not been more drama. "It used to be more rock and roll," he said. "We'd go *close*. But you've got kids, and I've got a bunch of people in the plane."

When we arrived back at the airfield, it was nearly 5 A.M. The atmosphere after landing was loose and collegial. Fatkullin told me that he was often at his happiest at moments like this. "You feel clean inside, you have integrity, you have done something useful," he said. The men were freezing cold after hours in the open cabin. Slipkan invited the crew into the bunker, where he opened a bottle of champagne and poured it into coffee mugs. He and Fatkullin clinked mugs. Someone said, "*Slava Ukraini!*" ("Glory to Ukraine!"), to which the pilots responded, "*Heroiam slava!*" ("Glory to the heroes!") Sleep was still hours away.

On the Western Front in the First World War, the trenches were a hellscape: rats, mud, mechanized slaughter. The battle in the skies was no safer, but the experience of air combat was palpably different. Planes were a relatively recent invention, and fighter pilots were a glamorous new species. As Samuel Hynes writes in "The Unsubstantial Air," his history of American fliers in the conflict, "being a pilot was something like being a college athlete, something like being a fraternity man at a house party that never ended, a bit like being a young tourist in an interesting foreign country with a few of your friends. Flying was *fun*—it was the only kind of war-making that was."

Advances in technology have made the battlefields of Ukraine in 2026 a nightmare comparable to the trenches of Picardy and Flanders in 1916. Attack drones that are connected to controllers by twenty-mile-long fibre-optic cables—a

hack to prevent signal-jamming by the enemy—have reconfigured the conflict. In the east of the country, there is no longer a single front line but rather a wide death belt where small groups of soldiers hide from attack drones in holes, and are resupplied by unmanned quadcopters. There are now few medevac troops—if a soldier is hurt, he is increasingly likely to be rescued by a robot. A severe injury is often terminal. An estimated hundred thousand Ukrainians, and some three hundred thousand Russians, have died in the fighting.

High above and far away from the ground war, Fatkullin's crew has found a joyful way to join the battle. The Ukrainian military recently gave Fatkullin and Slipkan an award for "outstanding bravery." Gusak and another crew member, who cannot be named for security reasons, were also awarded medals for valor. One of Fatkullin's favorite videos shows Gusak, wearing baggy jeans, shambling forward like a recalcitrant teen-ager to receive his medal from a stiff-backed general.

The crew takes self-conscious delight in its work. Every flight is recorded on video. In one of Fatkullin's Instagram posts from the beginning of the year, he published a video in which footage of Shahed strikes, skydives, and motorbike stunts was spliced together with moody shots of him with his wife, his kids, and his friends. The caption reads, "Reflecting on 2025. Real life rarely looks cinematic until it's already memory."

Most of the video content that Aerotim films is not posted to Instagram but shared among the men for their own pleasure. Fatkullin and his team are also making a feature documentary about their unit. Perhaps the film will be released, or perhaps it will remain a private record of Aerotim's exploits. Fatkullin also insisted to me that the film can't be finished until the war is over. "Maybe there will be some developments," he said. "Maybe there will be a tragedy."

By the end of March, Fatkullin had secured the funds to buy the used two-seater aerobatics plane. The vender had flown it most of the way to Ukraine from Western Europe. Even if Fatkullin could quickly obtain the additional parts he needed—the machine gun, the rotating thermal-imaging camera—it would still take his crew at least a month to ready the aircraft for combat. Fatkullin was impatient to start using what he called his "new platform." Shahed attacks had dramatically increased in the spring.

The four drone kills I witnessed from the Antonov brought the crew's total to a hundred and seventy-five. Within a week, the number had raced past two hundred. (It has now surpassed two hundred and fifty.) In April, the unit began flying more often during daylight hours as the Russians varied the times at which they launched barrages. My phone often buzzed with a video from a recent mission.

On the morning of Good Friday, April 3rd, Fatkullin sent me a screenshot of his radar. Dozens of red Shahed icons swarmed over the center of Ukraine. Most of them were heading toward Kyiv. President Volodymyr Zelensky and President Vladimir Putin had been negotiating an Easter ceasefire, but the Russians had launched one of their largest attacks yet. Fatkullin's crew had been in the sky all night and had shot down six Shaheds. "Just landed," Fatkullin texted at 6 A.M., Kyiv time. "We almost killed ourselves."

Fatkullin told me that, during the flight, an armed P1-Sun interceptor drone had failed to launch from the Antonov's under-wing bracket. When the plane landed at the base, the P1-Sun had finally dislodged, then toppled onto the runway next to the plane. Fatkullin saw the drone fall, and expected an explosion, but it had not detonated. Slipkan volunteered to approach the P1-Sun and pick it up. Fatkullin sent me a video of Slipkan, beaming, with the disarmed drone in his hands.

As we exchanged texts, central Ukraine remained under heavy attack. Fatkullin told me that Shaheds were "incoming" above them as they refuelled. "Never seen this kind of daytime activity," he wrote. I asked if he and the crew would fly another mission, but he didn't answer. The Antonov was already in the air. ♦

"Ms. Higgins, will you please bring me the Harrison files, a copy of the Williams dossier, some notepads, and a cracker? A very large cracker."

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ANNALS OF TELEVISION

ACT OF FAITH

How "The Chosen" spurred a golden age of Christian filmmaking.

BY RACHEL MONROE

For years, Karla Cameron, a retired Dr Pepper executive in Georgia, taught Bible-study classes to teenagers, a task that became more challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic. She wanted to show videos to her students, but most of the Biblical movies she found had cheesy writing, bad acting, and costumes with visible zippers. One day, she learned about a new television program that told the story of Jesus and his disciples. It was called "The Chosen," and blog posts praised the show for its authenticity and its humanity. That evening, Cameron and her husband put on the first episode. It was not at all what she had expected. Many of the actors were not white, and Jesus didn't appear until the end of the episode. Instead, the focus was on a frantic and demon-possessed Mary Magdalene, played by Elizabeth Tabish; the show intimated that she'd been sexually assaulted by a Roman soldier. The first-century world felt, to Cameron, lived in and at times confounding. There was a lot of talk about arcane dietary laws, and no zippers to be found. Cameron and her husband watched for hours. Afterward, they got out their Bibles and talked about their faith late into the night.

In the course of 2021, "The Chosen" became a kind of companion for Cameron. Her daughter, who had been crazy about "Game of Thrones," had begged to go to Iceland to visit filming locations. Now Cameron understood the lure of fandom. She recruited the members of her Tuesday-evening church meeting to watch the show, and led discussions after. She joined Facebook groups where people matched plot points to Bible verses, and she posted a scriptural study guide for each episode. The show wasn't yet available on any of the major streaming platforms—you had to watch it on a proprietary app—so she printed out cards with a QR code to help people find it.

"The Chosen," then in its second season, was already getting noticed, as much for its fund-raising as for its relatable depiction of Jesus and his followers. Thousands of supporters had contributed roughly ten million dollars to produce the first season, making it the biggest crowdfunded television project ever. The show's creator, director, co-writer, and executive producer, Dallas Jenkins, regularly appealed to fans on live streams, reminding them that the program wouldn't exist without their support. By 2021, he was collecting a million dollars, on average, from each live stream.

Early that year, word began to travel through the fan community that the show's next season would culminate with the feeding of the five thousand, an event in which Jesus feeds a crowd with just five loaves of bread and two fish. Fans who contributed at least a thousand dollars would have the chance to be an extra. In a YouTube video, Jenkins called it "one of the signature moments" of both the Gospels and of the television program.

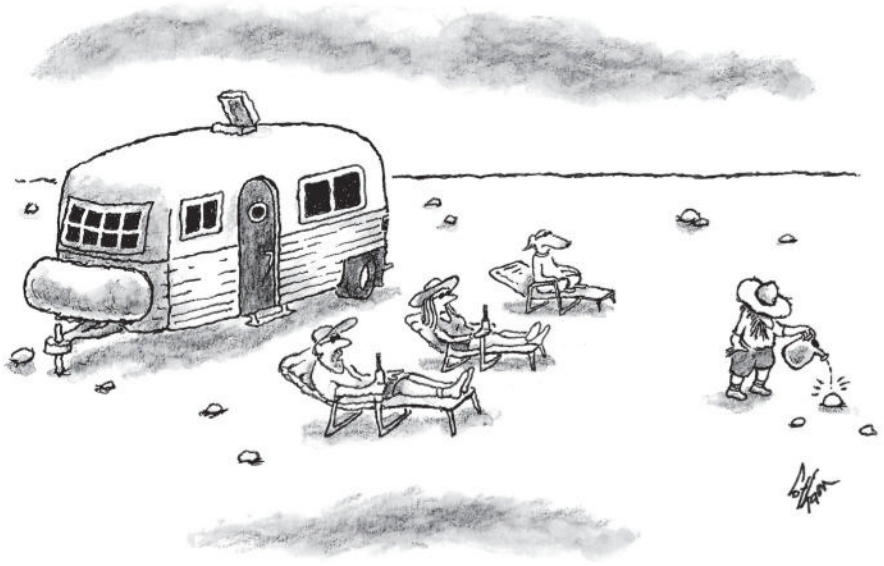
Cameron was newly vaccinated but still nervous to travel. But, after months of isolation, she longed for the collective uplift she used to get from a Christian concert or a particularly electric church service. She and a friend made their donations, bought plane tickets, and booked a hotel. Extras were responsible for their own costumes, so she ordered a rustic-looking tablecloth on Amazon and fashioned it into a shawl. That June, she headed to Midlothian, Texas, where the show is filmed, some thirty miles southeast of Fort Worth. Before dawn, she was swabbed for a COVID test. As the sun rose, the extras gathered in a large, buggy field. It was the first time Cameron had been in a crowd in months; more than ten thousand extras would ultimately be involved. Strangers hugged one another, giddy at the physical contact. During breaks between takes, people pulled out portable fans and opened umbrellas to shade themselves from the sun. Cameron spread out a blanket and hosted a spontaneous Bible study. "Joy, sadness, exhaustion, heat," she told me. "And all of us, shoulder to shoulder, as a family." After filming, Jenkins stuck around until he'd high-fived or fist-bumped every extra.

Nearly four years later, Cameron wore a slightly more elegant shawl to ChosenCon, the show's annual fan convention, where it provided protection against the aggressive air-conditioning at the Charlotte Convention Center. Thousands of enthusiasts filled the hallways. A man in a cloak with a rope belt strode by—a cosplayer, I assumed, but in fact he was a Franciscan monk. A gift shop sold trading cards, canvas jackets, and coffee mugs branded with catchphrases from the show. Off a long corridor, in what was called the Last Supper Experience, a mannequin presided over tables set with fruit bowls and electric-flamed candles. In another room, attendees wrote prayers on fish-shaped pieces of paper: "For the restoration of Christianity in North Korea"; "my mother needs salvation." The atmosphere was saturated with a friendliness that occasionally tipped into intrusiveness. My shoes came untied, which I noticed only when a stranger bent before me to tie them.

Cameron was meeting up with a group of extras she'd come to know in the past five years. Since her experience at the feeding of the five thousand, she has appeared on every season of "The Chosen." Starting in Season 4, she was asked to be a background actor, which means that she now gets paid. This has given her a status that she took pains not to flaunt. "This is just like a family reunion," she told me, smiling beatifically. Cameron, who is Catholic, said that she particularly appreciated the show's interdenominational fan base. Jonathan Roumie, who plays Jesus,

In Hollywood, success is increasingly driven by devoted fan bases rather than by widespread appeal.

PHOTOGRAPH BY WILL CROOKS



"Sometimes I wonder if we really need a gardener."

• •

is a devout Catholic; the executives include both evangelical Christians and Latter-day Saints. "I'm used to being at my Catholic church, going to Catholic conventions, being in my bubble. To be out with Latter-day Saints, Baptists, Protestants—it just doesn't matter," Cameron said. "If your passion is Jesus, you're good."

"The Chosen" is a powerhouse that retains some of the charisma of an upstart. When the first two episodes of Season 3 were shown in movie theatres, in November, 2022, most box-office analysts didn't include the screenings in their forecasts. It had the second-biggest opening that week, outperforming every film in wide release on a per-screen basis, apart from "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever." The show has grown only more popular since, spending dozens of weeks in the Top Ten on Prime Video, where it now streams. More than a hundred thousand people donated over seventy million dollars to produce Season 6, which will be released this fall.

Jenkins is a tall, chiselled cold-plunge devotee in his early fifties. He presides over the world of "The Chosen" with a pastoral approachability, sometimes speaking of his audience as if it were made up of children that he is both responsible for and accountable to. At ChosenCon, fans sought him out to tell him about their cancer diagnoses, their wayward offspring, and their "church hurt"—the ways that faith leaders have let them down. He is treated as the community's earnest, goofy, overworked dad. At one point, an elderly couple watched him make silly faces as he posed for selfies with a group of fans. "He looks tired," the woman said tenderly. "He always looks tired," the man replied. Jenkins was trailed by Steve Nohava, a longtime friend he'd hired as his executive assistant and security detail, who deftly intercepted gifts from fans—rosaries, handcrafted dolls, drawings. "People mean well, but they don't realize that if we kept it all we'd need a warehouse," Nohava told me.

Only Roumie, who plays Jesus as at once hunky and sexless, was in higher demand at the Convention Center. When I saw the volunteer in charge of the Last Supper room pull Jenkins aside with a pained look, I expected to hear another story of hardship. Instead, she said, "Since I've been here, I've been telling hundreds of people that I just want to meet Jonathan, and I didn't even get to see him. So will you just tell him that Pattie the volunteer was looking for him?"

Although the United States has become a much more secular country since the nineteen-nineties, the majority of Americans still identify as Christian, a fact that Hollywood regularly seems to remember, forget, and then remember again. In 1999, after the success of the apocalyptic thriller "The Omega Code," *Entertainment Weekly* devoted a series of articles to the faith-based film industry. Five years later, Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" inspired a flurry of Biblical epics, none of which had the same draw. After "God's Not Dead," a triumphalist account of campus evangelicals outdebating atheists, grossed sixty-five million dollars—it had been made for two million—the Washington *Post* declared 2015 "the Year of Faith-Based Cinema."

The popularity of "The Chosen" has helped spur another round of enthusiasm. Mel Gibson is at work on a sequel to "Passion" that will be released next Easter weekend. Two seasons of "Martin Scorsese Presents: The Saints," a docuseries narrated and executive-produced by the filmmaker, have aired on Fox Nation. 2025 was arguably the best year for Biblical content in decades. Prime Video had a hit with "House of David," an Old Testament-inspired fantasy epic complete with giants and soothsayers. (Like "The Chosen," "House of David" has a prestige-TV feel, many nonwhite cast members, and enough drama to draw in secular audiences.) An animated musical called "David" became one of the highest-grossing Biblical films in more than a decade. In April, there were three Jesus-themed projects in the box-office Top Ten—two were theatrical releases of "The Chosen" episodes, and the third was the South Korean animated film "The King of Kings."

The success of media projects is increasingly driven by devoted fan bases rather than by widespread appeal. With the decline in churchgoing, observant Christians are now members of a distinct subculture, one that can be targeted by marketers who speak the idiom of faith. "If you can identify a niche that you can overserve that feels underserved in the market, then you can have a successful business," Matt Belloni, a founder of the media company *Puck* and a former editor of the *Hollywood Reporter*, told me. "We've seen it in horror, we've seen it in anime." Christian audiences, both sizable and primed to evangelize to others, are in some ways an ideal market.

Hollywood is coming to realize the fragility of "the economic model where you're making these hundred-million-dollar bets that are binary—either they

succeed or fail," Ash Greyson, the C.E.O. of Ribbow Media Group, a marketing company that specializes in faith-based media, said. The faith-filmmaking world has long made movies for small budgets and specific audiences while exploring alternative means of financing, promotion, and distribution. Greyson worked on "God's Not Dead," which was produced by a small Christian company called Pure Flix. According to industry tracking data, the movie should have had a terrible opening weekend: general audiences were not aware of, or excited about, the film. "It was, like, This movie is going to make five hundred thousand dollars in its opening weekend. And then it made ten million. There was no mechanism in place to measure people who weren't frequent moviegoers," he said. "Traditionally, to be top of mind for audiences, you have to spend an incredible amount of money on awareness. With 'God's Not Dead,' there was exactly zero dollars spent on TV ads, zero dollars spent on broad awareness. We surround the core audience and we fire inward, and we don't care if anyone else knows it exists."

As Hollywood courts Christians, the distinctions between religious and mainstream productions are increasingly dissolving. In 2023, a faith-based film producer named Jon Erwin co-founded Wonder Project, a production company aimed at "the faith and values audience," with a former Netflix and YouTube executive named Kelly Merryman Hoogstraten. Wonder Project, the studio behind "House of David"—which is co-produced by Amazon MGM Studios—aims to be the A24 or HBO of "clean content," Hoogstraten has said. The company's seed investors include Jason Blum, the founder of the horror-centric studio Blumhouse Productions. "There's nothing quite like the power of an affinity audience that is underserved with programming options," Blum has said.

In December, I met Jenkins at "The Chosen"'s production complex in Midlothian, an exurban community where stubbly hayfields are interspersed with new housing developments. During the first season, scenes were filmed at a replica of a small Biblical village on a ranch west of Fort Worth. It was a popular spot for field trips for homeschoolers, but its grassy hills were dotted with cottonwood trees, making it an imperfect stand-in for the Holy Land. The show now has a dedicated set in Midlothian, on a large swath of land that serves as a Salvation Army camp in the summertime. Jenkins walked me through cavernous soundstages, past Roman sitting rooms with red curtains and gold statues. Then we drove by a field of grazing donkeys to a two-acre outdoor filming complex, which includes a Roman quarter, a synagogue, and a scaled-down version of Capernaum, a fishing village where Jesus briefly lived. A pond, enhanced with C.G.I., serves as the Sea of Galilee. (Some scenes are filmed in Utah, where the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a set built to look like ancient Jerusalem; "The Chosen" is one of only a few non-L.D.S. productions that has been granted permission to film there.) Jenkins paused before a building that had a pair of weathered wooden doors with elaborate patterned carvings. A retiree who lives in the area made the doors for free. "People really, really want to be a part of this," Jenkins said.

Jenkins is built like a football player—he sometimes gets mistaken for Tom Brady in airports—but he comes off as guileless and geeky, with an obsessive's bottomless enthusiasm for talk. I had been watching him and his wife, Amanda, on "The Chosen"'s many promotional YouTube videos, during which she'd roll her eyes affectionately when he put his foot in his mouth. The more I watched, the more he reminded me of Kermit the Frog with biceps. On this afternoon, though, he seemed drained; he'd been up until three in the morning working on edits for Season 6. For the first time, "The Chosen" had filmed overseas, in an Italian village called Matera, a frequent backdrop for Biblical projects, including "The Passion of the Christ." "We're spending forty-five minutes to an hour of screen time with Jesus on the Cross," Jenkins explained. "If we did all that with visual effects, it does start to feel a little fake." The work had been gruelling. Filming in Italy meant ten-hour days with no lunch breaks and coördinating with a crew of garrulous strangers. "Just non-stop Italian chatter. They do not stop talking," Jenkins said. "And then there's the content." Roumie was hoisted with ropes onto a wooden cross and spent hours dangling there, as the actors around him wept and wailed. This season, more than any other, felt "risky," Jenkins said. "We're boxed in by plot. All these things need to happen in a short amount of time, and we've seen it dozens of times before," he went on. "Our task is: What do we want to say that hasn't been said before?"

Jenkins takes his cues less from other faith-based projects and more from prestige television. "If I said to you, 'I love "Friday Night Lights" because it's so human,' you'd be, like, 'Well, yeah, it's about human beings.' That's not typically a unique thing, but in Biblical storytelling it is," he said. "You think of 'The Ten Commandments'—it's big, formal, epic, you know? Staged, distant, reverent. I always say we're taking Jesus' apostles down from the stained-glass windows—down from artifice, down from the churchy formality—and trying to tell this story with real human beings." Early seasons show Jesus attracting followers while Roman élites and rabbinical leaders regard the growing movement, some with suspicion and some with sympathy. The tone is loose and intimate, and the events proceed at a leisurely pace: the entirety of Season 5 is devoted to Holy Week, and the seven episodes of Season 6 will cover the twenty-four-hour period surrounding and including the Crucifixion. "People are spending hours with Judas. They love Judas," Jenkins said. "He commits suicide—this isn't a spoiler, it's in the Bible—and that's going to be devastating for our viewers, because they've spent hours with him."

The creators of "The Chosen" work hard to make the ancient world accessible. Story lines pulled from Scripture are supplemented with subplots that touch on miscarriage, addiction, autism, and the difficulties of small-business ownership. Characters' traumas are revealed in flashbacks. There is betrothal drama, an oblivious husband, and inter-disciple squabbling. Roumie's strapping Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount, but he also broods, dances, makes jokes, and does poorly at a game of catch. Mary Magdalene, played with luminous intensity by Tabish, goes to a hair salon. Characters exchange banter in a way that would not be out of place in a Marvel movie. (In a gesture toward authenticity, Jenkins has asked his actors to speak in an approximation of a Middle Eastern accent, which

is pulled off more effectively by some than by others.) The show's first episode introduces the future disciple Matthew, a *publicanus*, or Roman tax collector, played by Paras Patel; perhaps for the first time in Biblical media, someone makes a "public anus" joke.

Jenkins carefully skirts issues of doctrinal division—for example, whether Mary was a lifelong virgin (as Catholics hold) or whether she bore children after Jesus (as evangelicals tend to believe). But the show's abiding sensibility is identifiably evangelical, according to Patrick Gray, a professor of religious studies at Rhodes College. "The image of Jesus for my generation—I'm fifty-six—is from this six-hour miniseries, 'Jesus of Nazareth,' by Franco Zeffirelli," Gray said. "Jesus is this really pale white guy, very ethereal." (Zeffirelli, who was Catholic, instructed the actor to blink as little as possible.) In contrast, "The Chosen" depicts "a very relatable Jesus," Gray said. "It feels a little . . . colloquial. He's pretty earthy."

Another evangelical tell is the show's emphasis on the Jewish roots of Christianity. Characters eat challah and are married underneath a chuppah; the Last Supper is portrayed as a Seder. (Some of these customs were likely not part of first-century Jewish practice.) The traditional Passover song called "Dayenu," which means "It would have been enough," has been repurposed by the show as a paean to Jesus. The program is sometimes said to have a rabbi as part of its Biblical advisory panel, which also includes a Protestant theologian and a Catholic priest. But Jason Sobel, the adviser in question, is more accurately described as a messianic rabbi, a member of what is generally considered a Protestant sect that recognizes the divinity of Christ. Peter Chattaway, a freelance film critic for *Christianity Today* who also writes a Substack about Biblical media, said, "Because of 'The Chosen,' some Christians are going around saying *dayenu*. If I were Jewish, I don't know how I would feel about that. They made a T-shirt that says 'It would have been enough.' I'm not the kind of person who uses expressions like 'cultural appropriation,' but I will confess that the phrase comes to mind sometimes."

"The Chosen" is more nuanced and less aggressively didactic than many Christian films of recent vintage. The divinity of Christ is part of the ground truth of its world, rather than something that needs to be asserted or justified. It does not require a fluency in Biblical stories to understand; indeed, the show's press team claims that a quarter of its viewership is not Christian. Yet I did not find the show as bingeable as its core audience does. Some crucial element of the experience—perhaps a feeling that what I was watching was providential and urgent and true—was inaccessible to me as a nonbeliever. Instead, I was left with the sense that this was a narrative that had stakes but little suspense, since it is never in question how this story is going to turn out.

When Jenkins was in eighth grade, his father, Jerry, decided that his son was mature enough to be initiated into the world of mainstream entertainment. It was the late eighties, and the Jenkinses, a family of five, lived in suburban Illinois, where Jerry was a prolific writer of as-told-to biographies of athletes and religious figures. The family was middle class, and fundamentalist Baptist "in a pretty hard-core way," Jenkins told me. He and his younger brothers went to church twice a week, attended Christian schools, competed in Bible-memorization contests, and consumed largely faith-based media. Among their evangelical cohort, secular films and television programs were "something to be avoided or shunned," he said. But Jerry was a storyteller at heart, with a soft spot for Hollywood classics. That

summer, father and son watched a new movie nearly every night: "The Godfather," "Bonnie and Clyde," "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." Jenkins was troubled. Most cinematic depictions of Jesus felt like eating vegetables—why were these movies so delicious?

Jenkins has taken on the task of accustoming his audience to such directorial flourishes as nonlinear storytelling. "The core audience of 'The Chosen,' the early adopters, they tend not to watch as much film and television, and they're not as familiar with some of the more challenging or nuanced storytelling techniques. And I'm not saying this in any kind of negative way," Jenkins told me. "I do think, Let's push them, let's challenge them. And if they become a little bit more—I'm trying to avoid using the word 'sophisticated,' because it sounds condescending—but if they're watching maybe with a little more nuance, a little more care, that's going to increase the depth of the experience they have with the show."

Jenkins went on to study media at a Christian college in Minnesota. While he was there, Jerry published his hundred-and-twenty-fifth book, "Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days," the first in a series of eschatological novels inspired by the Book of Revelation, co-written with Tim LaHaye. The book was an unexpected hit; the "Left Behind" series has since sold more than seventy million copies. In midlife, Jerry became an evangelical celebrity, a status he accepted with humility, according to his son. "I don't claim to be C. S. Lewis. The literary-type writers, I admire them," Jerry once told an interviewer. "I wish I was smart enough to write a book that's hard to read, you know?"

In 2000, "Left Behind" was adapted into a film that this magazine described, somewhat grudgingly, as "strikingly professional." It was released directly to video, but, after sales outperformed expectations, the filmmakers pushed for a theatrical release. They recruited church groups who sponsored screenings, drumming up publicity in exchange for discounted tickets. In keeping with the series' militant tone, these promoter-fans were called "commandos." Ticket sales were middling. Three years later, however, a similar mobilization of congregations helped to earn "The Passion of the Christ"—a violent, R-rated, subtitled Christian movie with dialogue in Latin, Hebrew, and Aramaic—a worldwide gross of more than six hundred million dollars.

In the two-thousands, Jenkins took low-level jobs on "Left Behind" and its sequels and worked his way up the ladder in the faith-based filmmaking world. He eventually directed a handful of independent films, to varying degrees of success. Several of them trace a similar

WHAT I SAW

On more than one night I lowered my mother's rented bed
so it would be level with my futon bed in a room
of my little sister's house, where my sister and brother-in-law
had made a hospice out of what had been an office.
I laid my head on the place between my mother's still-warm
arm and chest, closed my eyes, and cried,
and because it was just her and me, I sucked my thumb
in that way children do, where they wrap their pointer finger
over the bridge of their nose. What I saw was a yellow kitchen,
two brown bags of groceries, and a woman
putting the groceries away. No empty cave where a body
had been, no stinging light from Heaven. No group of women
attending the scene. Just cans of soup, pasta sauce, orange juice.

—Matthew Dickman

arc—a selfish, successful man unexpectedly finds himself in a Christian context, whether by the intervention of an angel or by the terms of his probation. He resists, succumbs, is transformed. In 2015, Jenkins got what felt like his big break when he received studio financing to direct "The Resurrection of Gavin Stone," a Christian rom-com. The film, which Jenkins now describes as "like a really good Hallmark movie," was a flop.

The story of what happened next is a well-worn part of "The Chosen"'s lore. With his career in tatters, Jenkins stopped striving for worldly success and fully surrendered to God, in the form of making a twenty-minute movie for his church's Christmas Eve service. The short film, which was about the birth of Jesus from the perspective of the shepherds, found its way to Jeffrey and Neal Harmon, marketing prodigies based in Provo, Utah. The Harmon Brothers, as their agency is called, had recently had a viral hit with a trippy rainbow-and-unicorn-themed YouTube campaign for a product called the Squatty Potty. They saw promise in Jenkins's short. When he pitched a show about Jesus and his disciples, they agreed to finance and distribute the project.

The Harmons, who are Latter-day Saints, have built an empire rooted in innovation and in antagonism toward institutional media. In 2013, Jeffrey and Neal, along with some of their other brothers and a cousin, founded VidAngel, a service that allowed viewers to skip or mute "the bosoms, blood and bad words" in streaming content, as Neal put it at the time. Eventually, VidAngel hired workers to flag popular movies for potentially objectionable content—a sex scene, say, or a character using the Lord's name in vain—then made a filterable version available to stream on the VidAngel platform.

In 2016, a consortium of Hollywood studios sued Angel for copyright violations. The Harmons used the legal battle as a fund-raising opportunity, collecting more than ten million dollars in five days—not donations but investments in what the company called a "mini I.P.O." When VidAngel filed for bankruptcy the following year, the fund-raising cache served as the seed money for the Harmons' next venture, the production house Angel Studios.

The company, which is now called Angel, continues to find new ways to monetize its relationship with its supporters. More than two million people belong to the Angel Guild, a membership program that votes on the projects the studio produces. (Members also get free tickets and other perks.) In 2025, the Guild generated two hundred and nine million dollars in revenue for the company.

Angel is careful not to refer to its contributors as donors—the studio is a for-profit enterprise—but the Harmons speak about their productions with a mission-driven urgency. The company's goal is, according to their website, "to amplify light," and Neil has likened it to a populist uprising. "The crowd is going to, over time, outperform the élites in Hollywood," he once said. Instead of receiving notes from media executives, directors get them from Guild members. "It's like a filmmaker's best friend," Jeffrey Harmon, the co-founder and chief content officer at Angel, told me. "You get hundreds of comments and a score that gives you a signal of how you're going to do with the values audience." One director submitted his film to the Guild a dozen times, making tweaks each time, before finally winning approval, Harmon said. The Guild is "genre-agnostic," Jeffrey Harmon said; it has approved of the controversial anti-sex-trafficking thriller "Sound of Freedom," Angel's highest-grossing film to date, as well as romantic comedies, Westerns, and an animated version of "Animal Farm." Angel says its films have an average Rotten Tomatoes audience score of higher than ninety per cent. "So much of marketing right now is about creating community," Kevin Goetz, the founder of Screen Engine, a company that studies audience behavior, told me. "Angel Studios is brilliant at it—they get people engaged at the earliest moment." In 2025, Angel went public at a valuation of $1.6 billion, though its stock price has since fallen steeply. "If you look at the Apple early-days stock, it didn't look great either,"

Harmon said; the company believes that the Guild could grow to encompass as many as eighty million members.

"The Chosen" was Angel's second original offering. The ten million dollars of crowdfunding still made for a tight budget for an eight-episode season. (Each episode of Season 4 of "Stranger Things" cost around thirty million dollars.) The show, which was initially released behind a paywall on the VidAngel platform, struggled to find an audience.

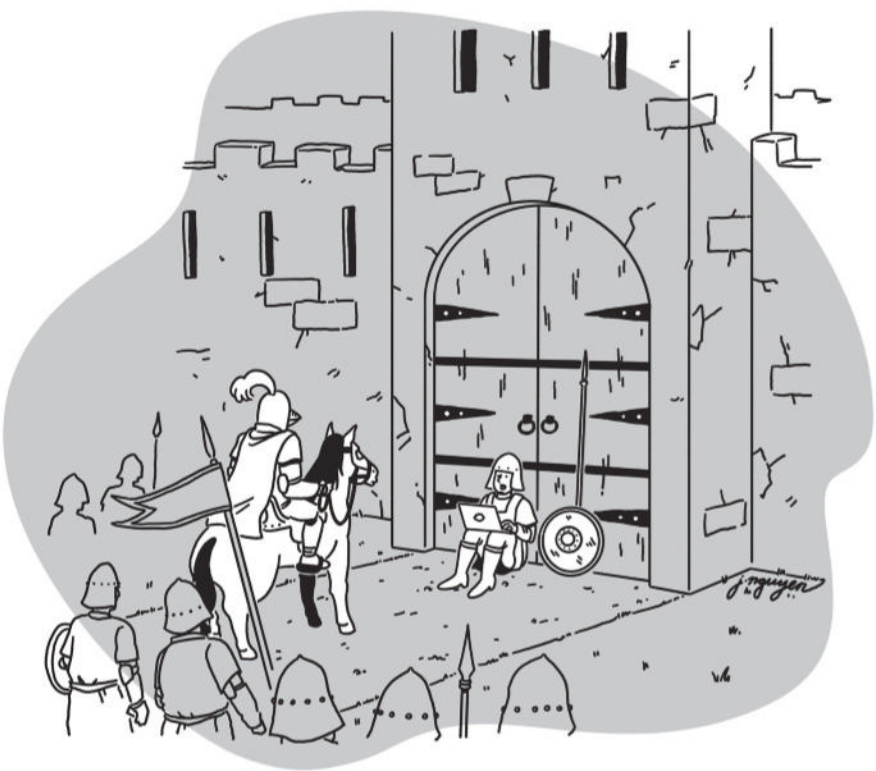
The Harmons brought in Derral Eves, a fellow Latter-day Saint, as an adviser for the show. Eves is a toothy, gleefully entrepreneurial man who currently serves as one of "The Chosen"'s executive producers. I met him at ChosenCon, where he wore a shirt that read #BingeJesus in the show's signature color, teal. Eves grew up with ten siblings in rural Utah and discovered YouTube in 2005. He turned out to have a preternatural feel for online video and viral marketing campaigns. Around the time that Eves met Jenkins, he started working with a promising teenage YouTuber named Jimmy Donaldson, who had around four million followers. Eves helped him shape his content strategy, encouraging him to focus on giveaways to strangers and game-show-style videos. Donaldson, better known as MrBeast, has since become the most popular creator on YouTube and is currently closing in on half a billion followers.

Eves believed that the best way to build and sustain an audience for an unknown project released on an unknown platform was to sell the story behind the show, beginning with Jenkins's tale of failure and redemption. At their first meeting, Eves was delighted to find that Jenkins had "all the qualities of an influencer," he told me. "You're either bipolar or you have O.C.D. or something. Dallas is kind of on the spectrum, so I'm, like, O.K., check. He's very detail-oriented. He's very well spoken. He's very personable when he needs to be."

It sometimes felt like Eves was advising him to "dance for nickels," Jenkins said. But he quickly came around. "It was clear from the beginning that the people who watched the show, and also watched the journey of my wife and I, were abnormally passionate, abnormally intense," Jenkins said. "There's a difference between 'Oh, I really like that movie, you should see it' and 'You need to watch this right now, it changed my life.'"

Jenkins began live-streaming the release of each new episode, telling funny stories from the set, singing a jokey song to promote the gift-shop merchandise, and raising money to keep the project going. "The Chosen"'s target audience was primed for such pleas—contributing money was akin to tithing, sharing episodes was a form of proselytizing. When Jenkins had débuted the show's first season at the National Religious Broadcasters convention, an annual gathering for evangelical media, the response had been underwhelming. "A hundred people in two thousand seats and me with a microphone going, Here's my little show!" he recalled. But when he came back the following year "it was bedlam." The packed room sang his gift-shop jingle along with him. "We're going to do fifty-six hours of television. By the time the show is done, we'll have released, I'm not exaggerating, thousands of hours of behind-the-scenes content," Jenkins once said.

Lionsgate acquired worldwide distribution rights in 2023, around the time that the CW picked up the first three seasons for broadcast. Last year, Amazon MGM Studios signed a deal that gives Prime Video the U.S. streaming rights, control of theatrical distribution, and a first-look agreement for future projects created by Jenkins's production company, 5&2 Studios. (Episodes are still available for free on the "Chosen" app.) But the relationship with Angel has deteriorated. Jenkins found Angel's model "limiting," he told me. According to him, only forty per cent of the money raised by "The Chosen" actually went to the show. (Angel said that the split was the other way around, claiming that forty per cent went to Angel and sixty went to "The Chosen," after expenses.) Jenkins also chafed at what he called Angel's "culture-war dynamic": "This us-versus-them, we're outside the system, this is a topic no one else will touch—I knew that that could sometimes help you generate more money from core fans, but that's not a part of what our show is." (Angel disputed this characterization: "Dallas is a one-genre wonder," Jeffrey Harmon told me. "If you talk to any of the filmmakers working with us, we have a very good reputation.") "The Chosen" ultimately terminated its arrangement with Angel, citing breach of contract. Angel filed a counterclaim; in a separate lawsuit against one of the show's executive producers, Angel claimed that they were losing out on $2.6 billion in potential revenue from future seasons



"No need to storm the castle! I can connect to the Wi-Fi from out here."

of the show. Arbitrators eventually ruled in favor of "The Chosen."

These days, the show's production is funded through a nonprofit organization, and contributions are now tax deductible. Revenue comes from box-office sales, licensing fees, and merchandise sales—in "Chosen" parlance, the products are called "gifts." The show still makes millions of dollars from donations each season. Donors include both "regular people" and "institutional types," according to Jenkins; there have been a handful of "seven-figure, eight-figure" contributions from Christian philanthropists such as Mart Green, the son of the Hobby Lobby founder David Green. Even so, some fans still think of the show as an underdog. At ChosenCon, I chatted with a woman from Maine in her eighties. "They couldn't make it without us, which is why I bought a shirt, and a cup, and another cup," she told me.

Devoted audiences can be demanding constituencies. Last year, the Angel Guild approved the acquisition of "Sketch," a children's movie starring Tony Hale, which was not an explicitly faith-oriented movie. (The Guild asked for lines in which a character said, "Oh, my God," to be edited out before it granted approval.) When it was released in theatres, though, some Angel Guild members called its fantasy elements "demonic." Despite positive reviews, the film underperformed. "I loved that movie, but it should not have been an Angel release," Greyson, the faith-based film marketer, told me. "I think those guys are very shrewd, but they've become too Hollywood in their approach. My concern for them is, now that they're a publicly traded company, there's a lot of pressure on them to expand beyond the audience."

Some viewers of "The Chosen" have wanted Jenkins, who has described himself as both "a Christian conservative" and "a libertarian," to be more vocal about politics, but he has largely avoided getting involved in culture-war skirmishes. In part, this may be because the show has more viewers outside the U.S. than in it. Season 1 is available in a hundred and twenty-five languages, including Finnish, Tulu, and Kyrgyz; when it streamed on Netflix, it was in the Top Ten in Paraguay, Honduras, and Brazil. Jenkins also seems temperamentally inclined to treat faith audiences as a capacious majority rather than as an embattled minority. During panel discussions, I was surprised (although perhaps should not have been) to hear the show celebrated for its inclusivity, including praise for its diverse casting and its rich, nuanced roles for women. (This relative openness has its limits. The show's portrayals of a flamboyant Pontius Pilate and his butch wife echo old tropes about how the Romans' gender decadence contributed to their civilizational decline.)

In May, 2023, fans watching a behind-the-scenes video of Season 4 noticed that one of the show's cameramen had a small Pride flag on his equipment. The backlash was swift. Fans called for the crew member to be fired. "Christians, just like we boycotted Target & Bud Light, we need to boycott @thechosentv," Jon Root, a conservative sports commentator, posted on social media. "The promotion of the Pride Flag is never acceptable in church or any form of ministry. While you boycott & encourage friends/family to do the same, please pray for Dallas Jenkins, the actors/actresses, production crew and everyone at Angel Studios so they may understand the error of their ways." Jenkins addressed the drama in a series of videos, live streams, and podcast interviews. The cameraman, who is gay, was "probably one of my top two or three favorite crew members," he said. Jenkins went on to say that he believed in "a Biblical viewpoint of sexuality," but he didn't require the cast and crew to sign on to his personal outlook. When he spoke to a Christian podcast about the controversy, he sounded exasperated, noting that he believed it was also "outside God's will" for straight, unmarried crewmembers to have sex. He didn't understand, he said, "why this particular issue, this particular sin, is worse and requires a public statement."

The show's final season, which will depict the Resurrection and its aftermath, began filming this spring. The 'Chosen' extended universe, as Jenkins calls it, has continued to expand; it includes an animated version for kids and a reality series in which Bear Grylls, the British adventurer, takes cast members on wilderness excursions. Jenkins has enlisted his father to write novelizations of "The Chosen," which read like Biblical fan fiction (not to be confused with the show's actual online fan fiction, in which Matthew and Mary Magdalene are the preferred characters to ship, with varying levels of smuttiness). A series based on the Book of Acts is in the works, as is one about Moses, whom Jenkins envisions as "a reluctant Tony Soprano" with a speech impediment.

A director's Jesus tends to be a stand-in for his conception of masculine virtue. He is sinewy and stoic in Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ"; righteous and radical in Pasolini's "The Gospel According to St. Matthew"; conflicted and worldly in Scorsese's "The Last Temptation of Christ." Rewatching the show after ChosenCon, I decided that Jenkins's Jesus is, above all, a tender and benevolent manager. Roumie, who, like Jenkins, is in his early fifties, can appear weighed down by the burden of his responsibilities, but he always rises to them. His charisma is powered by resolute certainty. He spots talent in overlooked places and inspires his disciples to believe in themselves; he is generous with praise but stern when he needs to be; and he never misses an opportunity for a teachable moment.

On Palm Sunday, Jenkins signed on for another live stream. He wore a Chosen-branded half-zip fleece; Amanda sat next to him in a denim shirt and silver necklaces. At ChosenCon, the couple had revealed that Amanda is undergoing treatment for breast cancer, and on the live stream her enthusiasm seemed more hard-won than her husband's. Over the course of an hour and a half, Jenkins showed off a new T-shirt design and warned viewers against A.I. scams that use Roumie's name or likeness. He introduced a snippet of the forthcoming season—"Where's Judas?" Mary Magdalene asks foreboddingly—and debated the show's "most impactful" moments. He promoted a guide for hosting a Christian version of a Jewish Shabbat dinner and encouraged fans to share promotional content on their social-media feeds. For those who didn't know how to tag the show in their posts, he suggested that they ask a grandchild. "If you like what you're hearing, hit that like button," he said.

"Like it in your heart, too," Amanda said, the mildest hint of reproach in her voice.

"Yes, it's good to like it in your heart," Jenkins said, looking at her and smiling playfully. Then he turned back to the camera and mimed clicking on a share button. "But out of the heart, the fingers speak." ♦

ILLUSTRATION BY KATI SZILÁGYI

Defne and Mete were at the Moda promenade when they saw their old friend. It was so strange to run into him there that they didn't immediately recognize him. They were with other people, about to find a bar where they could watch the Euro Cup semifinal.

It was their first summer in Istanbul since they'd moved back the previous year. They'd gone to the waterfront in the late afternoon with Defne's cousin Sinan, who had invited some of his friends, and the friends had brought along others. Soon, the group had taken up most of the grassy stretch behind the walkway, their beer cans, bags of chips, and pouches of tobacco scattered all around. A conservative-looking man had said something disparaging in their direction as he passed. "All right, uncle, you go on home now," Sinan shouted at his back, much to Defne and Mete's shock—both of them were still far too polite, as if they were visitors. But, instead of getting into a fight, the man simply continued walking. At one point, after the group had got flatbreads from a nearby bakery and more beer, someone suggested playing a game, and Mete downloaded Taboo on his phone; by the end of all the guessing, they had the feeling of having completely bonded, just as they used to at the parties of their youth.

This was one reason that Defne and Mete had wanted to move back—for their families, of course, but also for the sake of a community that seemed more robust, far-reaching. Already, they'd met many new people; they could show up at any place in Cihangir and run into someone they knew. It was still the good times. Turks they'd known in the U.S. were also returning, with something like pride—as if they had chosen a noble path—though it was also true that many of them were from well-off families and were coming back for what looked like a prolonged holiday. Later, many of those acquaintances would leave again, some through their jobs, others by making investments in European countries which secured them citizenship.

For half a decade, Defne and Mete had lived in and around San Francisco. It was a slight embarrassment to both of them that they'd met at a Turkish Society fund-raiser. They detested such events—the organized camaraderie, the explicit homesickness. They were both doctoral students in social sciences; they'd read far too much theory to be earnest about such things. They had mostly untangled the dogmas of their national education, and that meant doing away with any sentimental nationalism as well. But it was a fact that they were lonely—the researchers in their departments were engrossed in their own lives, and the city was impenetrable, intoxicated with its style. And so, whatever their misgivings, they had turned up at the event to be close to their countrymen.

They'd stood next to each other during the welcome speech. Mete caught a sarcastic look on Defne's face and leaned in to follow up with a joke. During dinner, they realized that they had both grown up in Etiler and that they had attended sister high schools. But they were careful not to make too much of these coincidences—they resisted nostalgia. Anyway, they both knew that these were not really coincidences at all but, rather, the rigid order of the world. Everyone from Turkey who ended up at a graduate school in the U.S. was bound to have attended one of four schools; it wasn't impossible that their families were acquainted. This, too, was something of an embarrassment, as if it proved that they hadn't ventured very far. But it was their cautious attitude that warmed them to each other, a sign that they were aligned in deeper ways than mere geography.

There was a lot of food left over from the picnic, and Defne gathered everything in a bag to give to a homeless person, though there were not so many here, unlike in San Francisco. Besides, she was not entirely sure whether such a gesture was appropriate. But it was perfectly good food; it would be a shame to throw it away. Soon, she saw a man approaching her on the boardwalk, with many bags and many layers of clothes. She hastened toward him, an arm outstretched with the leftovers. The man lifted a hand, as if he were greeting her. Then he stopped and spoke.

"Hey," he said, "it's you."

Her first thought was that the man was deranged. It was not so much his words but the calm look on his face, as if he were talking to someone in a dream. She had an instinct to turn away, but then the face of the stranger shifted.

"Oh, my God," she said. "Oh, wow. Aleksi."

Still, she could not shake off the bizarreness of the situation. More than the fact of seeing him after such a long time, it was the way he had spoken, as if he had known that she would be there.

"What're you doing here?" she asked.

From the corner of her eye, she could see the rest of the group waiting for her. One of them said something to Mete, who started walking quickly toward them. He must have thought she was being held up by a homeless man, she realized, and he was coming to rescue her.

"Mete," she shouted preëmptively. "Look who I just found."

Aleksi raised his arm once again in greeting.

Defne saw the look of bewilderment on Mete's face, though he quickly composed himself.

"Hey, man," he said. "What the hell."

"I was wondering if I'd see you," Aleksi said, maintaining that air of calmness, almost foreknowledge.

The three of them stood in silence, trying to determine an appropriate next step.

"Do you want to come watch the game?" Mete asked after a moment. "We're with some people."

"Sure," Aleksi said. "Who's playing?"

This was a surprise. Aleksi had always been more informed about football than any Turk. Back in San Francisco, he would get up in the middle of the night to watch European games, often persuading Mete to do the same.

The group looked at them a bit quizzically when they introduced Aleksi as an old friend from California. Defne thought about her first impression, when she'd seen Aleksi walking toward her. His clothes were torn, unwashed. His hair had grown long, though not in any groomed or deliberate style. His skin was thick, like that of sailors or farmers, so tanned it looked dirty. But, more than this, it was his tranquillity that made him appear different, as if he were looking at them from another plane. Defne couldn't recall whether he had always been like this, or whether he had indeed changed considerably.

Defne and Mete had decided to move in together a few months after the fund-raiser. They were old enough to skip a prolonged courtship; they'd known from the very beginning that they were

perfectly harmonious. They had no need to play games or tease things out. They were excited about getting a place of their own, putting up bookshelves, cooking meals, reading and writing together. But it was tricky to leave their separate tiny studios, which had been so difficult to find in the first place—the city and all its surrounding towns were expensive beyond belief.

Quickly, they'd realized that there was nothing they could afford for just the two of them, so they began to look for shared houses, with some resignation. Even then, the options were few. They were about to settle for a dingy carpeted apartment with depressingly civilized house rules when they saw an ad for a room in a condo behind the Menlo Park train station. They were the first to arrive for the viewing; they wouldn't have had a chance otherwise—what was on offer was too good to be true. The previous tenant, Amal, had been a Middle East scholar who'd moved to Lebanon for research. Defne knew her peripherally, because their areas overlapped. The remaining occupant, Aleksi, talked about her at some length—the little-known Sufi order that she was studying, how she would read every morning under a tree, her eclectic taste in music—as if trying to initiate them into her cult. Defne and Mete had the feeling that they had to live up to this woman their prospective housemate held in such esteem. Perhaps this was the reason they were so friendly with Aleksi from the outset, trying to prove themselves.

Aleksi had lived in the condo for several years, though the place was mostly empty. There were no chairs or curtains, nothing in the living room on which to place a mug. Still, it wasn't at all gloomy, like the other places they'd looked at. The few items of pottery in the kitchen cupboards were handmade. A wooden dining table had been painted white. When they came for the viewing there was a jar of daffodils on it, although it did not seem that Aleksi was precious about any of this; he seemed simply to have a natural sense of order and beauty.

Most of the furniture that had once been there had belonged to Amal, they found out, and she'd put it all in storage when she'd left for Lebanon.

"Isn't that weird?" Defne said to Mete some weeks later at IKEA, after they had moved in. "Why not just let him keep it until she's back?" She was already protective of their housemate, and suspicious of this other woman.

Aleksi said he would split the cost of anything they bought, but he couldn't come with them—it was his shift that afternoon at the bookstore where he worked. He said he trusted them with whatever they decided to buy, which endeared him to them even more. He'd cooked dinner for them their first night there; he'd said to help themselves to anything in the fridge. Defne and Mete couldn't help but remark that Aleksi was just like a Turk, even though he had grown up in California. They'd never had such a friendship in their years in the U.S., though perhaps this was because they had been so focussed on their studies, on figuring things out.

Aleksi had been a graduate student in philosophy, but he had taken a leave of absence the previous year and started working at the bookstore down the street. He wasn't clear about his reasons for leaving school. He had obviously been very passionate about his area of study—their late-night conversations often turned to philosophy, particularly the question of subjective experience. If one could learn every possible property of a bat, the famous inquiry went, would one know what it felt like to be one? Aleksi was good at providing the various sides of an argument in order to ground them in the debate, though he would quickly skip ahead to his own convictions, which seemed untethered from academic frameworks. He'd been disillusioned by academia, he told them, but he never quite explained what, exactly, this disillusionment amounted to. Defne and Mete were aware of the problems, of course—the competition and inflated egos. In principle, they were all for Aleksi pursuing this other sort of life. He often commented on the fact that his work brought him face to face with "real" people, rather than the strange, inbred species that populated higher education. Still, Mete and Defne thought it would be best for Aleksi to get back to his doctorate. They were academics through and through; they could not envision another way with which to come to terms with the world.

It had nonetheless been a shock for them when they started teaching in Istanbul. They were so used to the comforts of their graduate programs—the resources, the luxury to explore in a pure intellectual vacuum, detached from practical worries—that the everyday concerns of Turkish academia, its lack of funding and its political precarity, seemed an affront. Their colleagues were either exhausted or jaded; they appeared more concerned with getting through each day than with their research. Perhaps this was how it was everywhere—the longer one stuck around, steeped in hierarchies, the less noble the pursuit of knowledge became. Six months after they'd moved back, Defne was offered a position at a development agency. Of course she'd had some misgivings; the whole point of her training was to investigate without agenda, but she'd had so little time to do that at the university. And the salary was a relief. It was one thing to be graduate students in a house share and another to adapt to adult life in a metropolis. Defne hoped that Mete might consider a similar change—it saddened her to see how much he was struggling with the bureaucracy, how ardently he fought for his students and for grants, with so little in return.

On their way to the bar, one of their group stopped to buy an ice cream, and everyone else decided to get one, too. The historic Ali Usta shop was a little farther down the street, but this was a new Italian place, with many unusual choices and toppings. The city had changed so much in the years they'd been abroad; it was a little disappointing that it now had all the same kinds of trendy businesses as San Francisco. While they were standing in line, Defne's cousin, Sinan, asked how the three of them knew one another.

"We lived together," Defne said. "We must've told you about Aleksi."

"We had the best time," Mete added. He was going to say something more but checked himself.

"And what're you doing in Istanbul?" Sinan asked Aleksi.

"Nothing much," Aleksi said. "I'm sort of wandering around." He explained that he had been to India, Jordan, and Lebanon on this same trip.

"Oh," Defne said. "Did you see . . . what was her name? The old roommate. The one who took all the furniture."

It was a little awkward to talk in the register of their old friendship, though just as awkward not to.

"Amal," Aleksi said. "I saw her in Beirut, but it was brief."

"Did she rob you of any belongings?" Mete asked.

"Grand theft furniture," Defne jumped in. It was a joke they'd settled on soon into their cohabitation. At first, Aleksi had been defensive of the woman; later, his loyalties shifted.

"No, she didn't," Aleksi said earnestly. "But she was a different person."

It was their turn to order, so they didn't have a chance to ask him how this was so. Defne and Mete got a single scoop each. Aleksi declined their offer to get him one, too. Perhaps there was the slightest note of sarcasm in his demeanor—something about that shop, the exorbitant sum they'd just paid for those tiny cups. And perhaps it was to make up for this that, when Sinan led them all to a chic bar, Mete suggested going to the rundown place across the street instead, where the neighborhood men were gathered.

Aleksi accepted the beer Mete bought him and watched the game with silent interest, though in the past he had offered commentary throughout. At halftime, he rolled himself a cigarette—or a joint, Defne couldn't tell—from a large plastic bag, then walked away to smoke it.

"Is that a grocery bag full of herbs?" Defne asked. "What on earth is he smoking?"

She was increasingly startled by Aleksi, but Mete did not exactly acknowledge her alarm. He even seemed a little hurt that Aleksi hadn't invited him to join, though it was true that he rarely smoked these days.

That night, Defne explained to Mete how Aleksi had appeared to her on the boardwalk.

"He was just a bit dishevelled," Mete said.

"But you thought so, too," Defne said. "At first, you thought he was homeless."

"Just for a moment. It was all out of context."

"And he seemed totally off, didn't he? Like he was stoned."

"Maybe he was," Mete said. "It wouldn't be the first time."

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Most evenings in Menlo Park, the three of them would sit on the floor in the living room smoking and drinking whiskey, continuing the conversation of the previous night. They had an animated rhythm of debate; they pushed one another to extremes. Often, Aleksi would put forth an outrageous idea—that there was no such thing as consciousness, that the many-worlds interpretation was surely true, thereby throwing into question any notion of a self—and Mete and Defne would come together in opposition. Eventually, Mete might break off to side with Aleksi, to try to make room for his vast and unrestrained thinking, which seemed to challenge every assumption and norm. Sometimes he relied on pure illogic; other times his arguments were refreshing, even ingenious.

Following their move, and the thrill of their new home life with Aleksi, Defne and Mete had fallen a little behind in their research. They'd missed several conference deadlines and their teaching had become somewhat careless. But it was, without a doubt, a golden era. The three of them went for long walks in the evening, cooked dinners, camped. Defne and Mete had never set up a tent before, or made a fire; they could barely follow a trail. Aleksi taught them all these things. It was as if they were growing into other selves, or fuller ones, within the security of their relationship, and in the presence of a third person. Aleksi allowed them joy in their coupledom, perhaps because he enabled a sort of performance and prevented them from settling into monotony and habit.

It did not seem particularly unusual that Aleksi wasn't seeing anyone or that he didn't really have any other friends—Defne and Mete enjoyed having him to themselves. They speculated that Aleksi had been in love with Amal. He still talked about her from time to time, with a sort of pain. He topped every dish with za'atar, listened to Levantine pop songs. It all belonged to his personal mythology, ardently protected and revered.

Defne had also wondered, fleetingly, whether Aleksi might be a little in love with her, too. It was self-flattery, of course—but wasn't it the case that all friendships involved some amount of attraction? It was the engine of curiosity, the mystery that propelled any relationship forward. And so he must also be a little in love with Mete. The two of them were so sweet with each other, so enthusiastic. And, to be sure, Defne and Mete were a bit in love with Aleksi as well.

After the game, Aleksi departed quickly, saying he had plans. This didn't seem very likely to them. Aleksi had said himself that he was just wandering around. He was probably overwhelmed, they thought, by all the people at the bar; he had always been sensitive to big groups. They agreed to meet up again the following weekend. Aleksi told them that he had a new

e-mail address, which he wrote down on a napkin. He didn't have a smartphone but would find an internet café to check his messages. The e-mail provider was one they'd never heard of; when they asked him about it, he said that he felt more secure this way.

There were other small signs like this—little oddities they could not quite remember from their friendship—when they met him a second time, at the Kadıköy port. Aleksi was talking to a seedy-looking man in front of a SIM-card shop. The man must be a dealer, Defne thought; Aleksi introduced him as his friend. Then the three of them wandered uphill, through the fish market, and back to Moda, to the streets they had walked the previous weekend, then to Fenerbahçe. Aleksi was the one who kept walking farther—he didn't want to sit down anywhere, and they could see that the cafés they suggested seemed unwelcoming to him, as if Aleksi no longer belonged to the same clan as them. Anyway, it was good to walk, despite the heat of the day, because they were finding it hard to settle into conversation. Aleksi held back from revealing too much about his current life. He told them again the countries he had visited on his travels, without much insight. He seemed afraid of stepping back into familiarity, afraid of what he might find there. Defne and Mete offered news on their move, their lives in Istanbul. It was easier to talk about all that had changed, than about the life they'd had together in California. That morning, they'd discussed whether they would bring up Aleksi's departure from the house. They'd never got an explanation; the friendship had ended abruptly, though of course there had been months when Aleksi had grown sullen and they'd known that he was not happy. It was better not to say anything, Defne felt. If Aleksi wanted to talk about it, he would bring it up himself.

"How's the teaching?" Aleksi asked.

"Great students," Mete said. "But the resources are limited. And there's a lot of bureaucracy."

"Must be better than teaching all those entitled kids," Aleksi said.

This had been among his grievances regarding academia, though Mete and Defne had once been comfortable enough to point out that he hadn't had a very difficult life, either.

"I couldn't deal with the bureaucracy," Defne said. "I quit."

"Huh," Aleksi said. It sounded as if he wasn't surprised. Amal, he told them, had also quit research and was now working for an evil institution.

"Evil how?" Defne asked.

"Evil as in evil," Aleksi said. "Isn't it all the same thing?"

It occurred to Defne that Amal's work might be similar to her own. But she didn't feel inclined to tell Aleksi about her job, or to ask about Amal's. She did not feel like defending herself.

"Freshly shorn alpaca wool?"

At lunchtime, Aleksi again declined their suggestion to sit down somewhere. He was not very hungry, he said. Besides, he was on a sort of detox regimen. He looked at them cautiously as he said this, waiting for a reaction.

"How does it work?" Defne asked.

He'd met a healer on his travels, Aleksi said. This man had measured the buildup of industrial chemicals in his organs and had given him herbs to flush them out. Again, he looked at them, searching for a reaction. Defne kept silent, whereas Mete asked him whether there was any proof of this buildup.

"It's in your excrement," Aleksi said. "You see it all coming out of you."

"Listen, man," Mete said. "I'd be careful with that stuff."

"You're right," Aleksi said, reasonably. "There're a lot of people who can lead you off track. But there are still some who know what they're doing."

When they parted from him, they walked silently for some time. Then Defne said that it was all a bit of a shock.

"Yeah," Mete said.

"I guess something's off."

"I guess so," Mete said. He sounded so forlorn, and, for some reason, this upset Defne.

That week, they were invited to a housewarming party at the home of a couple they'd known in San Francisco who had recently moved back to Istanbul. Mete and Defne had always found this couple a little annoying, but maybe they'd been too judgmental. The things that had put them off in California no longer felt very important in Istanbul; perhaps they were more relaxed here. Perhaps they'd grown up.

There were others at the party they'd known in the U.S., as well as common friends from Istanbul. It was still surprising to them that their lives should be populated by the same handful of people, no matter where they went. The newly arrived couple was starting a kombucha business, together with a friend from high school. The friend had persuaded the couple to move back; it was the right time for such a venture, he'd said, and he had many connections in Istanbul to help get things off the ground. He recounted the whole story triumphantly at the party, which was also a celebration of the trio's new busi-

ness. They offered samples of their drinks, with exotic ingredients and purported benefits. The business was modelled on a company in San Francisco—several, in fact—though it would be the first of its kind here. Most of the party guests were excited about some new venture: another recent arrival, from London, had founded a co-working space, and everyone agreed to frequent it. Defne and Mete talked at length to a group of ex-housemate engineers who were creating a peer-to-peer payment service. Soon enough, they were listing friends they had in common.

After the party, as Defne and Mete walked the short distance back to their apartment, they said it was sweet how everyone seemed so familiar, like cousins. And there was so much enthusiasm regarding everyone's work.

"At the same time," Mete said, "it's a rich-get-richer situation."

"Isn't it always?" Defne said.

"I was thinking of what Aleksi would say if he'd been there," Mete said, chuckling.

"His opinion hardly counts," Defne said. "I mean, he's totally lost touch with reality."

"He did manage to do a tour of the world," Mete said. "He's bizarre, but he's also living his life."

"Are you serious?"

"He's stood by his principles."

"I don't think taking laxative herbs counts as principled living."

"He's always been very good at doing the things that interest him and somehow making it work."

"Aren't we doing what interests us?" Defne said, aware that this sounded insecure.

"That's not the point," Mete said. "I just remembered how the three of us would hang out and have those epic conversations. We'd talk about so many things that mattered, you know, rather than fermented drinks."

Eventually, in California, Mete and Defne had settled back into their research. They'd even returned to it with heightened enthusiasm, no doubt energized by their new life—their communal curiosity. They made friends in their departments with people who had initially seemed dull to them, or standoffish. They invited some of them over, proud to show off their home, their tribe of three—so much more alluring than the living conditions of most graduate students, idyllic, even. On these occasions, they were eager to launch into one of their conversations with Aleksi, but he was more reserved around others. Defne and Mete discussed the possibility that he felt self-conscious among academics, having dropped out of their world, but they were certain he would soon adapt.

At the end of their second year of living together, they found a long wooden table at a yard sale and set it up outside, beneath a tree they decorated with fairy lights. When the weather was nice, which it usually was, they encouraged their friends to stop by spontaneously. Mete and Defne likened the arrangement to summer houses in their childhoods, when everyone ate outside on makeshift tables, calling out to neighbors. Often, on their walks with Aleksi, they discussed alternative ways to live, to be a community, patching together theory and anecdotes, romanticized notions of past generations. That table beneath the tree seemed a good first step toward those ideas.

One time, in the glorious spring months, they brought people together for an afternoon of reading poetry. Neighbors showed up to listen, and also graduate students from other departments. Defne had gone to the farmers' market to buy boxes of stone fruits that she'd baked into cakes decorated with wildflowers. Aleksi had seemed eager about it, but he left shortly after the readings started, when the yard was filled with people, many more than they'd expected. He had made up an excuse—surely that's what it was—about covering a shift at the bookstore. But it was a beautiful gathering, full of joyful spirit. So they were surprised when Aleksi made a remark some weeks later, about how everyone had seemed so pleased with themselves. They let it pass—what would it have served to argue, when Aleksi had clearly meant to hurt them, in some way, for his own vulnerabilities. Still, Defne was a bit more impatient with him from then on. She called him out during discussions, questioned the logic of his arguments. Sometimes she stayed behind when the boys went out for a walk; she didn't join them to watch movies or football. She had begun inviting people over more frequently, without always warning Aleksi that they'd have visitors. And friends did indeed stop by spontaneously several times a week, just the way Mete and Defne had wished they would—a real community. They sat beneath the tree to have a drink and share departmental gossip.

Defne didn't think they would see Aleksi again, after their long walk. But it turned out that Aleksi and Mete had been in touch and arranged to meet up, once more in Kadıköy. This seemed to be where Aleksi was staying, though he was evasive about an exact location. He'd met some people, he had told them, and they were hosting him. It was a relief not to have to offer their guest room, but they wondered who the hosts might be. Aleksi would probably not realize if he got mixed up with shady people. The evening of their walk together, Aleksi had sent Mete an article about detoxification. In his message, he had written that Mete might find the contents interesting and added that he was in Istanbul for another week or so, though he hadn't suggested meeting outright.

"I felt sorry for him," Mete told Defne by way of explanation. "He must be lonely. And, after all, he's our friend."

Defne didn't say anything to that, and she agreed to come along, though she really didn't see the point. It was apparent that Aleksi had changed, and that he was perhaps in need of help, which she and Mete would likely not be able to provide, even if Aleksi were willing to accept it. But the topic of their old friendship had always been sensitive—Mete had been heartbroken when Aleksi left, and he thought that they were responsible, that they should have been more attuned to the signs of their friend's distress. Of course, he never singled out Defne and the way that the tensions had initially formed between her and Aleksi, though Defne would have preferred for him to say it once and for all.

Aleksi was with a group of young men, standing by some flower sellers, when Defne and Mete stepped off the ferry. As they approached, one of the men patted Aleksi on the back

fraternally, though he didn't greet Mete and Defne; it was not in any unfriendly way, but as if they were invisible.

"Who were those people?" Mete asked, when they began walking.

"My friends," Aleksi said. "I'm staying with them."

"What do they do?" Defne asked, trying to sound neutral.

"Lots of things, here and there. They're seeking asylum."

"What's their background?"

Aleksi made a snorting sound, as if he'd been expecting the question and was pleased to be proved right. "Are you with the police or something?"

Defne was startled. "I just mean that those people might be employed in terrible places. Or, you know, they might get into dangerous situations. You don't know how any of this stuff works."

"And you know all about it?" He had his eyes half closed, like a wild cat. She couldn't remember this look of his; it put her on edge.

"Aleksi," she said, "this is my city."

"Sure," he said.

She thought about pointing out that both her research and Mete's dealt with topics of immigration, but she realized the ridiculousness of such a statement. Instead, she looked at Mete for help.

"How did you even meet them?" he asked.

"I've learned how to find my way around," Aleksi said.

"Listen," Mete said, "you could also stay with us."

He avoided looking at Defne.

"Thanks," Aleksi said. "I'm O.K. They've been so nice to me."

"The offer stands," Mete said. "You should know that, of course."

"Thanks," Aleksi said again.

"Don't you think that maybe you shouldn't use the resources of people in need?" Defne said. "I mean, they're not a youth hostel." Even back when they discussed purely abstract matters, Defne wanted Aleksi to commit to some practicalities. She did not have much patience with all those emerging universes, where atoms split every which direction, taking on other lives, or with the unique night vision of the bat, which could somehow be embodied if only she let her mind expand.

Now she was upset, but she couldn't yet locate the cause. Mete pulled at her arm, cautioning her not to continue.

"You're right," Aleksi said thoughtfully. "It's not a hostel. I have to be more mindful."

They walked toward Haydarpaşa. It seemed this time that Aleksi was leading the way. Eventually, they ended up at a tea garden—modest and spacious—frequented by families. It had been years since Defne and Mete had been to such a place. How nostalgic to see those plastic chairs, the thick glass sugar bowls. They all asked for tea—Aleksi placed his order himself, seeming proud. He was wearing new clothes that day; he no longer looked so bedraggled, though there was something odd about his outfit. It looked as if it had been bought from the shops in Kadıköy, which also supplied the clothes of the men at this tea garden. The peculiarity was in the fact that he seemed completely at ease here; he seemed, almost, to fit in.

In the evening, Mete and Defne took the ferry to Beşiktaş, and from there walked to Cihangir. They'd parted with Aleksi casually, but it seemed clear to all of them that they would not be meeting up again. There was no animosity; they'd had a very pleasant afternoon, actually—they'd even discussed some of their old topics. Aleksi, it turned out, had kept up with his reading of philosophy, though his arguments were liberally sown with obscure, esoteric sources. Defne and Mete didn't fully challenge him on his logic, as they might have in the past, because they didn't want to get into an argument. They just wanted to have a nice time together. Perhaps the niceness was what made it apparent that they would not be meeting again.

In Cihangir, they decided to get pizza rather than go home. They hadn't talked much on the way, though Defne had been composing her words. As soon as they sat down, she asked Mete why he'd invited Aleksi to stay with them without checking with her first.

"It seemed like the right thing to do," Mete said. "He's our friend."

"Is he, really? He left without saying anything and never got in touch again."

"But we also pushed him out."

"You mean I did," Defne said.

Mete sighed. "I didn't think he would ever accept the invitation."

"That's not the point," Defne said, and she might have raised her voice if the waiter hadn't come to their table. Usually, they would get a pizza and a salad to share, but this time they each ordered for themselves.

When Aleksi moved out—in secret, one afternoon when they were both teaching—they'd felt not only shocked but betrayed. They'd watched their friend grow silent and mistrustful in the preceding months. Defne had been more agitated by his demeanor than Mete, but they both presumed it was temporary; they had not asked him outright what the matter was.

In the weeks that followed his departure, they were embarrassed, as if Aleksi had exposed a secret—as if he had called them out on their silence. He didn't respond to their e-mails or texts, except to inform them that people would be coming to see the room. He'd paid his share of the rent that month, and the utility bill in full—the gesture embarrassed them further, though Defne pointed out later that he was being showy in his magnanimity. It was certainly calculated to make them feel bad.

Defne spotted two friends—acquaintances, rather—outside the pizzeria, looking at the menu in the window. They hadn't yet noticed Mete and Defne; Defne quickly looked away.

"Also," she said hastily, "isn't it weird that he's squatting with asylum seekers? Like he thinks it's cool or something. Like *our* lives are somehow fake." She wanted to get everything off her chest before the couple came in. She wanted to convince Mete that they'd been faultless, to go back to the way things were. She was angry at Aleksi for his unabashed naïveté and for the disruption he had caused. After his departure, they'd needed to come up with another story of their first years; it was too upsetting to remember that time together.

"I don't know," Mete said. "I don't think he would think like that."

By now the acquaintances had seen them and walked in, waving cheerfully.

"Hi, neighbors!" they called out, and then they asked the waiter to join the tables. ♦

BOOKS

DOGGED

What do our furry friends see when they see us?

BY ADAM GOPNIK

A dog's death is like no other. Not *worse* than any other, of course. But *unlike* any other, inasmuch as the disparity between the loss and the profound grief it provokes is so bewildering to outsiders and even to those who feel it. When our family Havanese, Butterscotch, died a while ago, after thirteen years of a happy-go-lucky, charming, loving, and greedy existence, I could scarcely walk through Central Park without shutting my eyes, since tears flooded them when I saw other dogs running and playing freely, as she had done for so long. Dog grief somehow passes beyond "appropriate" sadness into unfathomable feeling.

Why is this so? Because our dogs love us unconditionally? Well, so do our parents, and when, after a long life, they die we mourn deeply, but on the whole we manage. Is it because, as some say, we see our dogs every day? We see the Amazon guy every day, too. Maybe part of the explanation has to do with the privacy of the loss. There are no wakes, no shivas, and so the feeling has nowhere organized to go. A family ritual around ashes feels faintly misplaced. The dog did not accomplish anything; it simply was, and its being filled the house.

Then, there's the fact that the dog does not know death until it happens. We understand death as a part of life, and it is our knowledge of mortality that shapes our understanding and makes us

George Stubbs, "The Pointer," 1760. To be both courageous and clingy is the dog's unique moral charm.

human. They don't. I'm still haunted by our ailing, elderly dog's large, trusting, liquid eyes looking out at us in the moments before her death: *Hey, this is all right, right*? *We're just here at this crazy doctor place we go to like always, and then we're going home*? That was what broke my heart. Butterscotch trusted us absolutely, and we were about to kill her. For her own good, because she was suffering so, because her once rich and bounding life had been reduced to a painful daily struggle, all of that. But she was alive and then she wasn't, and she didn't understand it and we had done it to her.

That gaze is one I will never forget, and I turned to a new book on that very subject, Thomas W. Laqueur's wonderful "The Dog's Gaze: A Visual History" (Penguin Press), with shivering gratitude. "Gaze" has become a loaded word of late, modified in sinister ways by "male" or "white," with the implication that to gaze is to possess or, more likely, to prey upon. Laqueur's use is benign: dogs have been bred over millennia to meet our eyes with their own, offering a gaze of gratitude rather than one of appetite or fear. Laqueur takes this simple proposition and shows how it has been institutionalized in art, chiefly in paintings of the highest order but also in posters, photographs, and marginal illustrations. His is a work of immensely humane scholarship.

Indeed, it almost defines the difference between scholarly and academic writing. Scholarly writing, like his, is erudite and expansive in its range of reference and knowledge, but it is addressed not just to a nonexpert audience but to a larger humane mission. Laqueur wants to tell us why dogs matter, demystifying his subject while respecting its mystique. Academic writing, by contrast, besides being written for an in-group, often uses its erudition to assert superior understanding, telling us our belief that dogs matter owes less to real affection than to learned affectation. The purely academic version of the same book would be titled "Imaginary Friends: Constructing the Canine, 1200-2000."

Laqueur begins, bracingly, with his own story: he grew up in a German Jewish family in which dogs were regarded as ornamental rather than beloved. Richard Avedon used to tell a similar tale, which Laqueur cites, of how *his* Jewish family in New York borrowed dogs for family portraits, though they would never have kept one in the house. Laqueur defied that tradition, owning and loving a succession of dogs, and from that fact he moves sideways to another, stranger one: as part of the Zionist "grounding" of the Jews, the "Canaan dog" was bred and retroactively installed as Israel's national dog—truly, the invention of tradition on a leash.

He then returns us to an achingly familiar relic of our long entanglement with dogs: the preserved parallel footprints, in the Chauvet cave, in France, of a canid and a child, perhaps eight or ten years old. (The tracks can be seen in Werner Herzog's fine film "Cave of Forgotten Dreams.") Laqueur adds to this a bit of recent deduction. Given that the double tracks, dating back about twenty-five thousand years, seem most marked within viewing distance of animal pictures drawn on the cave walls, the child and the dog appear to have been walking into the depths of the cave together to stare at much earlier drawings of a late-Paleolithic horse.

And then, having established the timelessness of the shared companionship, rooted in the dog's ability to "see us" in every sense, Laqueur's erudition leads him to jump not to Charles Darwin, the student of animal emotion, but, more surprisingly, to Adam Smith's theory of social sympathy. The dog is, so to speak, a freeloader on our belief in sympathetic exchange. It is party to a social contract that is interpreted differently by those who sign and those who offer it. Our dogs have no idea what society they live within, no idea that this is "New York." Their idea of society is of street smells and habitual turns and familiar faces, and this limited awareness on their part reminds us that we, too, doubtless see our place in the universe incompletely, in ways that would be obvious to a higher order of intelligence than our own, one for whom cosmic space-time would be not a difficult concept but a felt reality.

There is a case to be made that the dog's gaze is a kind of con game dogs play on us. They are creatures of the nose, above all, olfactory rather than optical in their primary apprehensions. Yet in the course of our coevolution their eyes have come to mimic human eyes. Dogs possess a distinctive trait that allows them to raise their eyebrows in imitation of human expression and to expose the whites of their eyes to us. "Seeing together and seeing one another is the basis of our co-evolution," Laqueur writes. In one sense, this is an illusion, a sleight of eye, like the way we find the chubby cheeks of squirrels to be cute because they put us in mind of human babies. But the squirrels' cheeks just lucked out. Dogs' eyes evolved under selective pressure so that they would seem to look at us the way we look at them.

Laqueur takes the reader on a nearly encyclopedic trip through this truth and its consequences, ranging from Giotto's dogs—calm, disengaged witnesses to holy stories ("At a foundational moment of Western art," he says, "there is the dog doing what dogs do")—to Bruegel the Elder's massed and happy hunting hounds in winter, whose barks we can almost hear penetrating the bitter cold, and to Degas's chin-lifted greyhound crossing the Place de la Concorde, as alienated as an urban dandy. Laqueur also has something rare, though essential to real scholarship, and that is taste. When he says, in effect, "Good dog!," he's right. He recognizes, for instance, that, in the late Quattrocento and beyond, the painters of Venice are the most sensitive to his subject. That might seem surprising for a maritime city where no one could hunt or chase wild animals. But perhaps this is part of the explanation: when dogs are not mainly servants, they can be seen more readily as subjects.

Several pages of "The Dog's Gaze" are devoted to the most memorable little dog in art, the one in Carpaccio's late-Quattrocento painting of St. Augustine in his beautiful Venetian study. The Maltese—who watches his master as the translucent apparition of St. Jerome appears at his study window—is alert and attentive without being capable of complete apprehension. We are reminded of dogs as an intermediary between mankind and the rest of creation, both sublunary and celestial; dogs remind us daily of our animal selves and are audience to our higher moments. Laqueur ignores, though, a small but significant fact in this scene: the Maltese is facing, directly across it in the tiny Venetian chapel where the picture lives, an image

PREVIOUS PAGE: GEORGE STUBBS; PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY SOTHEBY'S

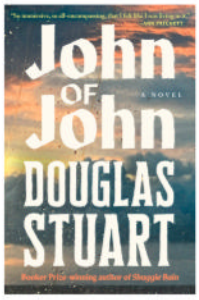
of St. George defeating a dragon, and the path from dragon to dog is surely the implicit subject of the chapel's iconography. The good life is a procession from the dragon who lives within us to the dog who barks beside us.

Among the Venetians who came after Carpaccio, Titian, too, gets his due in "The Dog's Gaze," while Veronese, whom Kenneth Clark considered the greatest dog-lover of the Renaissance, enters in the episode in which, having placed dogs alongside dwarfs and clowns in his "Last Supper," he was summoned by the Inquisition and forced to explain himself. Though Laqueur insists that this was not "a Galileo moment," it was still charged: the presence of dogs made for a vulgar atmosphere in a divine setting. Significantly, Veronese did not argue, as a contemporary art historian might on his behalf, that dogs were symbols of fidelity or faith. He admitted that they were just dogs being doggy, then shrugged and changed the painting's name from "The Last Supper" to "The Feast in the House of Levi," an obscure incident in the Gospel of Luke but one genre-like enough to pass as a mere scene of everyday life. (Though, as Veronese perhaps knew, this is the episode where Jesus defends his dining with publicans and sinners, which might justify the mixed company in the painting.)

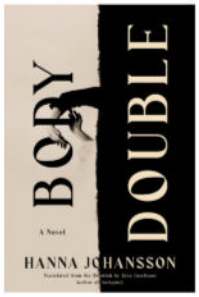
Dogs in Renaissance art are faithful but not divine. Their symbolic role is usually secondary to their real presence. Laqueur points out a disturbing, unforgettable instance of this in Titian's "Flaying of Marsyas": as Apollo skins the satyr alive for challenging him to a music contest and then losing it, a small dog eagerly laps up the spilled blood. The enduring animalness of the dog (Lucian Freud called it "animal pragmatism," explaining why he wanted his people to resemble dogs) is one reason that the species can never be simply inducted into piety.

Indeed, there are aspects of a dog's existence which resist crossing over into art. An inordinate amount of the time we spend with our dogs deals with defecation. We become as acclimated to their moods and needs in this direction as we are to our own. We even spend, in New York, much of our days with small plastic bags in hand, in a beautiful

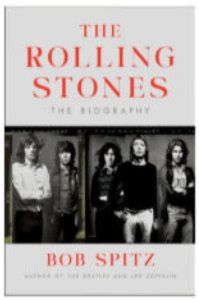
BRIEFLY NOTED



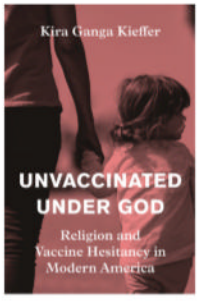
John of John, *by Douglas Stuart (Grove)*. Set on a remote island off the coast of Scotland, this rich, intricate novel follows a young gay art-school graduate, Cal, who returns home when his devout father, John, a tenant farmer who raised him alone, intimates that his grandmother is ill. In Falabay, the largely Presbyterian village of his upbringing, Cal hides his sexuality; he remembers people looking at him, as a teen-ager, with "faint unease." Stuart's novel examines the threads that bind Cal and John together—blood, faith, tradition, grievance, violence, and more commonalities than they know. At the same time, it is a coming-of-age story, in which Cal must define the relationship between himself and his origins. "Do you even want all this?" his mother asks him, at one point. "To be home. To be here."



Body Double, *by Hanna Johansson, translated from the Swedish by Kira Josefsson (Catapult)*. This eerie novel of obsession and transference alternates between two story lines. In one, two women move in together soon after they mix up their coats in a department-store café. One of the women, Laura, tells the roommate, Naomi, very little about herself, and appears to have no job or friends—indeed, no existence at all outside of the one the two women share. In the other story line, an unnamed woman who transcribes recordings for a ghostwriter hears an unnerving whisper on a tape: "I have seen you. Have you seen me?" Together, the story lines fuse into an exploration of feminine selfhood, as the characters grapple with what it is to know oneself and to be known by others.



The Rolling Stones, *by Bob Spitz (Penguin Pres)*. It all started in 1961: "Two boys meet at a train station one morning, in a suburb east of London." The teen-agers, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, bonded over a mutual love of the blues—"an alien music that has no roots in England"—and started a band that became, once the Beatles had left the stage, the world's biggest rock act. This rascally, standard-bearing biography presents the saga of the Rolling Stones as a melodrama fed by forces in diametric opposition: blues versus pop, sobriety versus altered consciousness, the Stones versus the law, Stone versus Stone. By 1970, the band had survived many ordeals, and, Spitz writes, "despite it all, they never considered breaking up."



Unvaccinated Under God, *by Kira Ganga Kieffer (Princeton)*. Vaccine hesitancy in the United States is as old as vaccines themselves. In this concise and lucid history, grounded in the observation that anti-vaxxers are poorly understood in part because vaccine proponents shame skeptics as aberrant, Kieffer reframes vaccine hesitancy as a form of religious expression. She demonstrates how the modes of thought and behavior that have shaped anti-vaccine movements parallel those found in American evangelical Christianity—particularly an emphasis on personal experience as the highest authority. Ultimately, Kieffer argues that if the establishment hopes to address hesitancy effectively, it must learn to engage with patients' anxieties, and "move beyond oversimplifying people to their positions."

demonstration, which Adam Smith would have loved, of the delicate dance of both social obligation (there's a law!) and social sympathy (no one enforces the law but the participants in the practice it governs). The exception to this pattern of absence seems to be Rembrandt, whose etching "The Good Samaritan" includes a large, defecating hound. The Met's catalogue says that this is just a vulgar detail, but one suspects a poetic purpose here as well. The pragmatic dog is true to its nature and does not care about doing what it does where it does it. The man in the etching, the Good Samaritan, can transcend his nature, his inherent tribalism, and offer loving aid to one not of his own kind. (Or, perhaps, the Samaritan is following his true inner nature, the call to be kind, as the dog is answering its own call of nature?)

In the art history of the twentieth century, Laqueur is responsive to Matisse's dogs. We seldom think of Matisse as a painter of dogs, but Laqueur is quite right that the artist has created some of the most charming images of them. The discussion occurs within a more tangled argument about the representation of dogs, beginning with Dürer, as symbols of melancholia. And, indeed, Matisse's dogs, like Dürer's, are often withdrawn, curled up asleep. But Laqueur sees that this Matissean melancholy is of a peculiarly happy kind. For instance, the dog sleeping beneath a blossoming magnolia branch in "Interior with Dog," from 1933, resembles not so much Giotto's watching dogs as the sleeping patriarchs they watch, Joseph and Joachim, content to withdraw into the circle of their slumber as glory goes on around them. Dogs can sleep through it all and delight us as they do. (There is also the strange affinity between Matisse's dogs and those of *The New Yorker's* James Thurber, both drawn in deliberately childlike outline, though Thurber was naïve by nature and Matisse by choice.)

Laqueur's book has no particular thesis to hobbyhorse for, and yet a unified-field theory of aesthetic dogginess might be distilled from its pages. Dogs live within a neat symbolic divide. On the one hand, they represent courage, an intrepid readiness to take risks on behalf of their beloved; on the other, they represent loyalty, a refusal to be removed from the presence of their families. The dog in art both walks ahead with the hunters and stays behind with the gatherers.

These two things are not necessarily reciprocal. Brave men and women are often loners; loyal people are often timid homebodies. Dogs are both. To be both courageous and clingy is their unique moral charm. Even the smallest dogs will bark ferociously at the apparent entrance of an intruder, not calculating the odds but obeying their inbred sense of duty.

And within this reality lies a stranger one. Dogs are moral creatures without anything like moral volition. They are themselves representations. They are little poems we have written over generations on the themes of love and loyalty, courage and caution. We have bred them to inhabit and exhibit emotions, even contradictory ones, that we admire. They are loving because the ones who were less loving, more skeptical of the deal, were not allowed to have as many puppies as the ones who sprang at it, and they are daring because those judged too skittish were not allowed to have as many puppies as the ones who charged at enemies. We overwrote the wolf genome with our own dreams. Dogs impersonate virtues because they've been bred to, and turning our intuitions into their instincts is a kind of magic trick we play on one another.

Sometimes our poems on the themes of ferocity and fearlessness can be cruel to the dogs who must enact them. We have bred the pit bull and the mastiff to express our aggression and rage. Yet there is no love greater than that of the pit-bull owner for the rescued pit, exactly because the other side of the wolf, pack loyalty and a desire for love, can emerge so readily. For at the same time as we delight in dogs, somewhere deep down we recognize how precarious that construction is. If our dog went feral, as the majority of dogs on the planet already are, its exquisite balance of courage and camaraderie would be ripped apart, and desperate for food, as most animals on the planet are, it would, like its cousins the jackals, scavenge even dead human bodies. Indeed, there is a scary but well-established truth: even a beloved household pet will eat our remains if left alone with our lifeless bodies. That is something our children, in similar circumstances, would not do. Or so we hope.

Dogs embody both the ferocity of instinct and its fragility. The dog will do what its genome tells it to do, and its genome can be remade to have it do things it would not have thought of doing. Dogs teach us about empathy, joy, and unconditional love, but they do so because we have taught them to teach us. It is this double life of dogs, as unreasoning creatures governed by instinct and as moral exemplars practicing virtue, which makes us love them, and which comes alive in art.

Laqueur tells us that his own dog, beside him as he composed most of "The Dog's Gaze," died before its completion. Yet he leaves out the gaze that our dogs turn on us at the end, the one that for many is the most haunting of all. Doubtless, we project attributes onto dogs—sociability, altruism, compassion—which are of a higher order than they can regularly possess. But the trust we see in their gaze (*I'm safe here, I'll be fed, you won't ever hurt me*) is all the more powerful because it is so real. And because that trust is the other side of fear—the other universal animal emotion that we share—violating it, even for their own good so that they will not end their lives afraid and in pain, feels like a profound betrayal.

Two years after losing Butterscotch, we got another sand-colored Havanese, all but indistinguishable from her predecessor, or so our amused neighbors insisted. But Rosie—introverted, suspicious of strangers, not flirtatious but deeply loving, checking on everyone like a night nurse before going to sleep herself, not promiscuously social but trusting of a handful of people and other dogs—is an utterly new being, complete unto herself. When we share a poached egg on a coffee-shop terrace, she doesn't beg for more, as her predecessor did, but looks up with almost unbearable tenderness: *Thank you*. The animal avatar of my wife, her chief friend, Rosie is delicate, elegant, and pretty. "She has human eyes," more than one passerby in the park has marvelled. She does. Her eyes see everything but the inevitable, essential thing. One day, they will, as we both know and somehow can't imagine. ♦

BOOKS

FLYOVER COUNTRY

Looking back at Lewis and Clark.

BY CALEB CRAIN

In the national mythology, the expedition belongs to the morning of the story.

If Meriwether Lewis and William Clark hadn't gone up the Missouri River in 1804 and then down the lower Columbia River in 1805, there might today be less United States and more Canada. Lately, I have been having trouble imagining how that could be seen as a bad thing.

Lewis and Clark have long had their skeptics. "The crossing of the continent was a great feat, but was nothing more," Henry Adams wrote, more than a century ago, in his history of Thomas Jefferson's Presidency. An inventor named Robert Fulton was about to assemble a steamboat in New York City that would make more money and, in Adams's opinion, advance civilization much further.

Of course, Adams was an Adams, self-serious and dour; Lewis and Clark are favorites with the sunny-minded. When Stephen E. Ambrose, in his best-seller "Undaunted Courage," from 1996, narrated the explorers' encountering of the White Cliffs of the upper Missouri River, he not only quoted at length Lewis's rhapsody about those Gothic-looking towers of eroded sandstone ("So perfect indeed that I should have thought that nature had attempted herre to rival the human art of masonry"), he also supplied, in a footnote, the name of a local boat-rental company, in case readers wanted to witness the glory for themselves.

In the national mythology, Lewis and Clark belong to the morning of the story—back when the waterfalls hadn't been choked by dams and there were still bands of Native Americans in the Rockies who had never seen a white person. The tale is scenic. There are stirring ups and downs. But if the American idea—the experiment of letting people rule themselves, in the hope that they will grow into the necessary trust and wisdom—is now foundering, or better instantiated in other countries, what sets the expedition apart from any other long camping trip, full of rain, mosquitoes, and, intermittently, the sublime?

As Craig Fehrman notes in "This Vast Enterprise" (Avid Reader Press), an innovative new history of the expedition, Lewis and Clark weren't the first white men to cross the continent north of Mexico. A Scottish fur trader named Alexander Mackenzie led a group over the Canadian Rockies in 1793, and, after descending the Fraser River, painted his name in vermillion on a rock near the Pacific Ocean, along with the words "from Canada by land" and the date. The possessive flourish piqued Jefferson, who worried that the British claim might end up extending to territory he wanted for the United States. Mackenzie hadn't found the fabled Northwest Passage, the long-hoped-for all-water route across the continent, which would have connected the lucrative fur trade in North America to markets in Asia, but he had come close: along a ridge in the Rockies, he counted out only eight hundred and seventeen paces between a lake that drained into an east-flowing river and a lake that drained into a west-flowing one. At the time, geographers thought that the Rockies were shorter farther south, roughly the height of the Appalachians, so, in 1802, after reading an account that Mackenzie wrote, Jefferson decided to send someone northwest up the Missouri River, where it seemed plausible that Mackenzie's discovery might be improved upon.

He chose an ambitious and high-strung ex-soldier named Meriwether Lewis, who had been working for him as a secretary. Lewis, then twenty-eight years old, had served in the U.S. Army, where drinking and a Southern prickliness about honor had nearly involved him in a duel, a situation that embarrassingly turned into a court-martial, in 1795. He was acquitted, told not to do it again, and transferred for a few months to a rifle company led by William Clark, a scion of Kentucky's planter élite.

Lewis went on to become a regimental

ILLUSTRATION BY RUBY FRESSON

paymaster. He was hired away as the President's secretary because Jefferson wanted the advice of a fellow Democratic-Republican as he pruned the officer corps, then mostly Federalist. Living together in the White House—"like two mice in a church," as Jefferson put it to one of his daughters—Jefferson and Lewis came to recognize each other as kindred spirits who shared the Enlightenment values of curiosity and precision. Lewis, Jefferson later wrote, had "a fidelity to truth so scrupulous that whatever he should report would be as certain as if seen by ourselves." Like the President, Lewis came from a family of Virginia slaveholders. The two weren't alone in the White House, however cozy Jefferson made it sound; they lived with servants and one or two enslaved people whom Jefferson had brought from Monticello. One of the servants, a free mixed-race man named John Pernier, would be present, seven years later, when Lewis died, from self-inflicted gunshot wounds, at a roadside inn in Tennessee.

After Jefferson asked Lewis to go West, Lewis wrote to Clark, his comrade of eight years before, itemizing the expedition's likely dangers and honors, and confessing that "there is no man on earth with whom I should feel equal pleasure in sharing them as with yourself." "My friend," Clark replied, "I do assure you that no man lives whith whome I would perfur to undertake Such a Trip." They had Jefferson's approval, Lewis claimed, to share the same rank, captain—a breach of the military principle later known as unity of command. Army brass were never able to bring themselves to commission Clark at a rank higher than lieutenant. He and Lewis simply pretended they were both captains, and then never quarrelled about it.

Along with a sextant, a telescope, fishhooks, mosquito netting, cannisters of "portable soup," and twenty-one bales of trade gifts to distribute to Native Americans, Lewis packed paper, pencils, ink powder, a hundred quills, and six inkstands. Seven people on the trip kept journals, Lewis reported to Jefferson partway through; it's possible that as many as ten did. Six of these accounts survive, amounting to more than a million words—almost five times as many as in "Moby-Dick." When Jefferson, trying to finagle passports, misleadingly told Spain's minister to the United States that the expedition was "purely literary," he spoke more truly than he meant to.

"Your observations are to be taken with great pains & accuracy," Jefferson ordered, giving Lewis a list of queries about the land's animals, vegetables, and minerals, as well as about the language, the culture, and the technology of its resident peoples. At the somewhat cynical suggestion of one of his Cabinet secretaries, who thought it would help win funding from conservatives in Congress, he even threw in a question about their religious beliefs—almost the only mention of religion in the whole enterprise, apart from a description of a Catholic Mass in St. Charles, in what's now Missouri, which many of the men attended, in an almost anthropological spirit, as they were just starting out. Gary Moulton, the modern editor of the journals, gives the consensus on the captains' literary style: "Lewis appears as the moody, sensitive intellectual, Clark as the pragmatic, less literate frontiersman."

History is usually written in the third person, even though it has to be lived in the first, and Fehrman takes advantage of the rich and deep documentation of the Lewis and Clark expedition to try to reconcile the discrepancy. The book adopts the perspectives not only of Lewis and of Clark but also of other members of the expedition, including an enslaved Black man named York, whom Clark brought along as a personal servant, and of five Native Americans whom the explorers encountered. Fehrman doesn't attempt to speak in the voices of his subjects. He merely focusses on what each individual experienced and knew, while keeping in mind how much they didn't experience and didn't know—an analytic technique that historians have always been free to borrow from novelists but often lose sight of in the scramble to accumulate data. With subjects who haven't left journals or letters, Fehrman guesses their state of mind by making inferences—some credible, others less so.

Fehrman tells the story of the expedition's first winter camp from the perspective of John Ordway, a sergeant who grew up on a farm in New Hampshire. To climb out of poverty, Ordway had enlisted in the Army, at the time a violent and hierarchical institution. Officers flogged enlisted men, with or without the courtesy of a court-martial, and sometimes had them branded or even executed. One in four enlisted men deserted. When Lewis went looking for recruits, almost everyone at the fort where Ordway was stationed volunteered.

Ordway comes across as methodical and reliable. He carried his journal on a cord around his neck and wrote in it every day, though he unfortunately didn't start the writing until May, 1804, when the expedition got properly under way, so Fehrman is forced to rely in this section on notes by others and a couple of letters that Ordway mailed home. Fehrman wonders whether, after the Army's harsh discipline, the milder treatment that Lewis and Clark meted out puzzled Ordway. During that prefatory first winter, living in close quarters without much to do, the expedition's young men distracted themselves with drinking, brawling, and stealing a neighbor's hog, and the captains responded only with lectures and an order to build the camp's laundress a hut. The lenity, in Fehrman's opinion, was part of a conscious experiment, a decision to "bend the army's rules not toward cruelty but toward generosity, consensus, and trust."

As the winter deepened, Lewis and Clark dealt with their own boredom by making long visits to nearby St. Louis, leaving Ordway in charge. Several men refused to follow his orders; at least two threatened him, one while loading his gun. When the captains got back to camp, they convened a court-martial. Military law specified a jury of officers, but Lewis and Clark sometimes impanelled expedition members instead, a move that Fehrman sees as an extension of their democratic experiment, and he thinks they did so on this occasion. The rebels, upon conviction, "promised to doe better in future," Clark reported in his journal, and weren't punished for these crimes. Mercy worked so well, in fact, that a few days after the court-martial, when Lewis and Clark divided the expedition into three squads, the soldier who had menacingly loaded his gun "asked to serve under Ordway, the man he'd threatened to kill," Fehrman claims. He may be overestimating the democratic spirit here. What Clark wrote was that the men were "duly ballotted for," and that could

mean they were sorted by lot, not that they chose their sergeants.

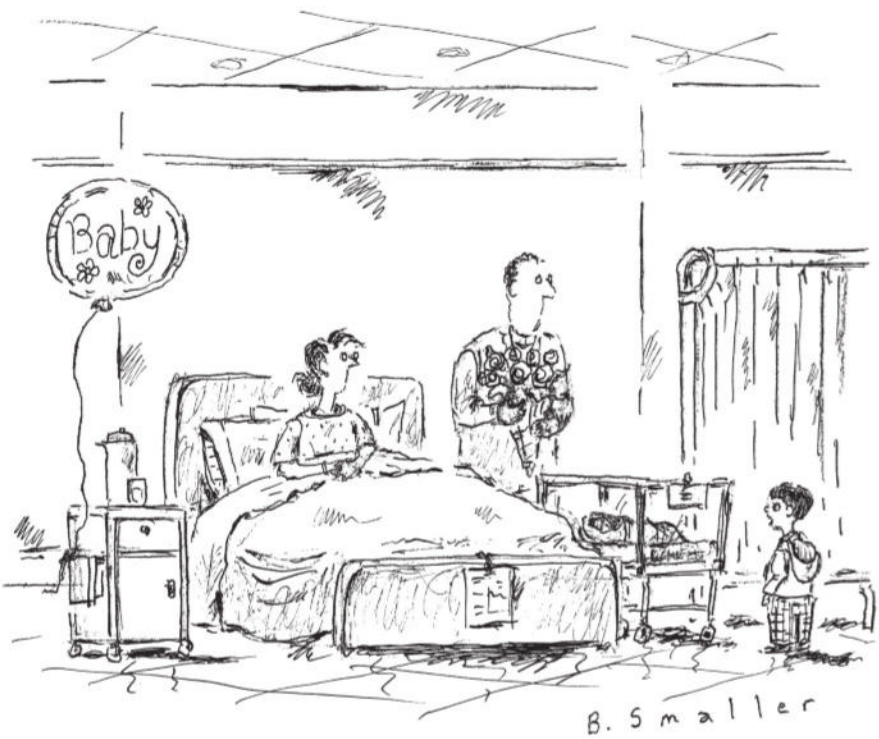
In any case, the mildness didn't continue. In June, one soldier got fifty lashes, and another a hundred, for privately tapping a keg of whiskey, and in August a sentry who fell asleep got a hundred lashes in the course of four days. When a soldier tried to desert that month, Clark authorized George Drouillard, a half-French, half-Shawnee scout and tracker hired by the expedition, "to put him to Death" if he resisted recapture. Once caught, the deserter had to run the gantlet four times—that is, walk four times through facing lines of fellow-soldiers holding weapons to strike him with, a punishment that Fehrman grimly describes as "one of the regular army's few democratic flourishes." A Missouria and an Oto chief who happened to be present pleaded unsuccessfully for his pardon. An Arikara chief "Cried aloud" at a later flogging, Clark reported, and told the explorers that "his nation never whiped even their Children, from their burth." That seems to have been the last instance of corporal punishment on the expedition, but was it because a democratic spirit had taken hold? Or fear?

Fehrman gives three chapters to York, who played with Clark when the two were boys and became his property in 1799, when Clark's father died. Clark was not lenient as a slave master. "I have been obliged [to] whip almost all my people," he wrote one of his brothers, a couple of years after the expedition. "And they are now beginning to think that it is best to do better and not Cry hard when I am compelled to use the whip." He placed ads when slaves ran away and often mused about selling refractory ones to masters even more severe.

Fehrman tries to reconstruct the tricky position York was in. He had married a woman owned by another family, and the expedition separated them without his consent. (When the expedition's keelboat reaches St. Louis, Fehrman notes that an ordinance there prohibited splitting up married slaves.) He and the Native American woman Sacagawea were the only people on the expedition who were not rewarded with a cash bonus and three hundred and twenty acres of land for taking part. As a body servant, he was on intimate terms with Clark, probably acting as his cook and, when Clark was ill, his nurse, which would have necessitated a delicate social performance. He was most likely the object of a certain amount of racial hostility from the other men on the team: Clark reports in his journal that one day York came "verry near loseing his Eyes by one of the men throwing Sand at him in fun," and Fehrman suspects racial animus beneath the ostensible humor.

On the other hand, while on the expedition, York was allowed to carry a gun, which wouldn't have been possible back in Kentucky, and on many days he probably ate better than he had at home. In April, 1805, he sent Native American buffalo robes to his wife and a friend named Ben, and, after he returned from the expedition, he showed off "his Indian trophies to the 'oh's' and 'ah's' and prideful joy of his parents," a nephew of Clark's reported in a family letter. The expedition met several Native American nations who had never seen a Black person before, which imparted to York a complicated form of charisma, and he seems to have enjoyed playing that up, somewhat to the disgruntlement of Clark. "The Inds. much astonished at my black Servant," Clark wrote, on October 10, 1804, "who made him Self more turrible in their view than I wished him to doe[,] as I am told telling them that before I cought him he was wild and lived upon people, young children was verry good eating." The Native American children loved it, according to Ordway, who wrote that they "would follow after him, and if he turned towards them, they would run from him and hollow as if they were terreyfied."

One facet of this charisma was sexual. Some Native American nations felt that the explorers had, or were, "medicine," a Native concept that Lewis once defined in his journal as "something that eminates from or acts immediately by the influence or power of the great sperit; or that in which the power of god is manifest by it's incomprehensible power of action." Medicine could be shared through sex, and sex with Native women was offered to the explorers, sometimes by the women themselves and sometimes by men on their behalf, as a way of making contact with it. (Like most cultures, Natives also had sex with foreigners for reasons of trade and diplomacy—and, no doubt, pleasure.) Clark claimed that he and Lewis refrained from this "curious Cuistom," but in general the men did not, and York, by virtue of being Black, had "big medison" in the Natives' eyes. Clark was to recall in 1810 that an Arikara man invited York



"Really? I thought we were one and done."

"Remember, it can be literally anything."

• •

to sleep with his wife and stood guard outside his lodge, to keep the couple from being interrupted.

Fehrman believes that York's quiet competence as a swimmer, a hunter, a canoer, a cook, a guard, and a builder gradually overcame the suspicion of his colleagues, who started to refer to him in journal entries by name. In late 1805, when the captains polled the crew about where on the Pacific Coast to build their winter camp, York was polled, too—last, but nevertheless. Ambrose, in "Undaunted Courage," called this "the first time in history that a black slave had voted." In Fehrman's opinion, the voyage strengthened York in his determination to ask for his freedom, which he did after it came to an end. Clark didn't free York for another decade, however. In the meantime, he beat him, complained that he wouldn't "give over that wife of his," and hired him out to a harsh master. Fehrman tries to see an upward arc in York's story, but if there was one it didn't much outlast the expedition.

Fehrman's willingness to make inferences clarifies some aspects of Lewis and Clark's interactions with Native Americans. The explorers let their guard down after a friendly encounter with the Yankton Sioux, just prior to meeting the Brule Sioux, or Sicangu, a related but more dangerous band. Fehrman guesses that the explorers mistook one band for the other. Puzzling out violence that followed an attempt by eight Blackfeet to steal horses from the expedition, Fehrman notices that the white side of the story doesn't add up, and decides that one of the men must have fallen asleep while on guard duty—a crime that deserved at least a hundred lashes—and panicked upon waking. Unfortunately, not all Fehrman's conjectures are so plausible. I wasn't persuaded by his guess that Piahito, an Arikara chief who spoke at one of Lewis and Clark's councils, was the same person as Too Né, a chief who gave Jefferson a buffalo-skin map of Native villages along the Missouri.

For the most famous Native American associated with the expedition, Sacagawea, Fehrman imagines an arc somewhat like the one he gives York—appropriately enough, since she, too, was enslaved. She was about sixteen years old when Lewis and Clark found her living with the Hidatsa; she was, in the words of one trader, a "woman, who answered the purpose of wife" to Toussaint Charbonneau, a Frenchman who had either purchased her or won her in a bet, and who sometimes hit her. Over the last decade, there has been an intriguing revisionist effort to claim that Sacagawea was Hidatsa, but Fehrman, supplementing the contemporaneous written record with Shoshone oral tradition, sticks with the traditional understanding: she was a Shoshone captured as a girl by Hidatsa in a raid. The explorers hired Charbonneau as a translator for the sake of Sacagawea's proficiency in Shoshone—they knew they were going to need Shoshone horses to cross the Rockies—and Fehrman points out that, as the expedition approached her people's territory, she recognized elements of the landscape, such as a rock formation shaped like a beaver's head and a bank of red earth her tribe used for paint. At a moment when Charbonneau wasn't present, she showed Ordway and another member of the expedition the site where she had been captured. Her nickname for the child she brought with her on the expedition was Pahmpi, a Shoshone word for "head" or "hair." Clark was to recall that when the expedition met the Shoshone, she signalled that they were her people by "sucking her fingers," a gesture that indicated kinship in Plains Sign Language. And then there's the testimony of her dancing with joy and bursting into tears during the reunion, and of her embracing a man she recognized as her brother and a woman she recognized as a childhood friend, who had been abducted with her but escaped. "The meeting of those people was really affecting," Lewis commented.

Like York, Sacagawea served the expedition in practical ways. When Charbonneau nearly capsized one of the canoes, she had the presence of mind to scoop up instruments, medicine, and merchandise floating in the water. Lewis had been tasked by Jefferson with collecting botanical specimens, and she showed him wild artichokes, breadroot, and wild licorice. But, as a woman carrying an infant, she also performed a more abstract function, which may be why she's the one figure of the expedition who seems to have passed from history into myth. "The wife of Shabono our interpretr we find reconsiles all the Indians, as to our friendly intentions," Clark wrote. "A woman with a party of

men is a token of peace." In Fehrman's opinion, she found her voice in the course of the expedition—piping up, even though she hadn't been polled, about where to locate the Pacific Coast camp, and insisting, when a beached whale was discovered, that she get a chance to see it, and the ocean, too. "She observed," Clark wrote, "that She had traveled a long way with us to See the great waters, and that now that monstrous fish was also to be Seen, She thought it verry hard that She Could not be permitted to See either."

What was it all for? As the poison of our political moment seeps backward, I find I don't much care that the expedition later helped cement claims the United States made on Western territory. Assigning enlisted men instead of officers to the jury of a court-martial might have been a democratic gesture, but to me it looks more like an improvisation rendered necessary by isolation from the rest of the Army. The prelapsarian aura that invests the memory of the expedition in popular culture can't withstand much scrutiny. The mission could never have succeeded without the generosity and forbearance of Natives, and the spirit in which the explorers took their gifts was sometimes ugly. The Nez Perce, for example, were extraordinarily forthcoming with food, guides, and horses, and as the expedition waited among them for snowdrifts in the Rockies to melt, in order to be able to re-cross them and head home, Clark had to order his men "not to croud their Lodge[s] in serch of food," a habit of bullying they had fallen into "at most lodges we have passed." Encounters with Natives schooled Clark in diplomacy with them, a favor he was to repay, during three decades when he served as a federal agent for Indian affairs, by negotiating the surrender of four hundred and nineteen million acres of their land.

In the short run, the point of the journey seems to have been to muscle in on the British share of the fur trade, to judge by a report that Lewis wrote after the expedition and by what a significant number of the group's members, including Clark and maybe Lewis, too, did next for income. Before the expedition had even returned to St. Louis, the captains discharged a man who wanted to turn right around and head back upriver with two Americans who planned to trap beaver.

What it's remembered for, in any case, is the writing. The explorers took their literary mission seriously. "Continued Hear as the Capts is not Don there Riting," one of the sergeants put in his journal on July 25, 1804, at the mouth of the Platte River, where the expedition stayed five days. Writing was a record of ambition as well as information; the explorers inscribed their names on at least three trees on the Pacific Coast, as if by repetition they could overwrite Mackenzie's mark, which had been left six hundred miles to the north. Clark has his moments, such as his famous exclamation, "*Ocian in view!* O! the joy," when he thought he saw the Pacific for the first time (in fact, he was looking at an estuary), or when he ate a birthday dinner of venison, elk, beaver tail, cherries, plums, raspberries, and currants and exulted, with spectacular misspelling, "What a Field for a Botents & a natirless" (a botanist and a naturalist). But there's a fair amount of lumber in his prose—complaints about "Musquitors emencely noumerous and troublesom," for example, or about sweating "a greater preposn" (proportion) "of Swet than I could Suppose Could pass thro: the humane body."

It's Lewis who has the born writer's flair for self-dramatization. "We were now about to penetrate a country at least two thousand miles in width, on

which the foot of civilized man had never trodden; the good or evil it had in store for us was for experiment yet to determine," he writes, as the explorers set out from their second winter camp. The moment, he declares, is "among the most happy of my life." He has a painter's eye, describing a river's water as possessing "a peculiar whiteness, being about the colour of a cup of tea with the admixture of a tablespoonfull of milk." He can play with philosophical niceties, as when he contrasts two cascades of the (now tamed and unexceptional) Great Falls of the Missouri River by writing that "this was *pleasingly beautifull*, while the other was *sublimely grand*." And he has a scientist's dispassionate precision, as when he itemizes the parts of the "Indian dog," which he ate so many of that he became "extreemly fond of their flesh": "The head is long and nose pointed[,] eyes small, ears erect and pointed like those of the wolf, hair short and smooth except on the tail where it is as long as that of the curdog and streight."

Jefferson noticed "sensible depressions of mind" in Lewis while they lived together, and fellow-writers will recognize the shape that that darkness took. There are long gaps in his journal, in one case almost eleven months long, which have never been explained, and, unlike others on the expedition, Lewis kept his journal mostly private, sharing it only with Clark. He's the patron saint of writer's block: he got the big grant, did all the research, took copious notes, and then, when it came time to actually write the book, drank too much, took opiates, and shot himself. It wasn't until 1814, five years after Lewis's death, that the journals were published, with an editor found by Clark named Nicholas Biddle, a brilliant young lawyer and polymath in Philadelphia, who had married too much money to need to work and had time on his hands.

Clark asked a Philadelphia botanist, who before the expedition had taught Lewis how to preserve specimens, to compile a volume of Lewis's natural-history observations, but the botanist's health failed, and Clark and Biddle went ahead without it. Lewis therefore missed out on credit for dozens of plant and animal species that he would have been the first to publish a description of, and it's the descriptions of animals, in an abundance that vanished long ago, that I find most poignant: plains "black with buffalow"; Carolina parakeets, today extinct, in "a great number"; a flock of pelicans so large that a slick of their white feathers covered three miles of the Missouri downstream; antelope so fleet and graceful that Lewis described their movement as more like "the rappid flight of birds than the motion of quadrupeds." It almost sounds like a nice place. ♦

THE THEATRE

MARRIAGE *STORIES*

Suspicion of spouses drives "Well, I'll Let You Go" and "Othello."

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM

In "Well, I'll Let You Go," a retired schoolteacher reckons with her husband's death.

There are a lot of small, sincere plays that are also very boring. I won't name names, because I'm not a complete monster, but, as anyone who frequents the theatre understands, a seventy-five-minute drama with no intermission can last several centuries. So I'll admit I was nervous when I saw a poster at the Studio Seaview, where "Well, I'll Let You Go" is now playing, that described the show as "a fog of grief," which sounded suspiciously like code for "dignified but dull." Luckily, that apprehension quickly dissolved as I submerged myself in the patient, meditative focus that is one of the rewards of quiet plays—the sensation of an audience locking in, then submitting, happily, to the story.

"Well, I'll Let You Go," written by the actor Bubba Weiler, had a run in Brooklyn last year. It opens on a bare stage decorated with what the script calls "rehearsal versions" of furniture, "not quite right or fully realized." There are folding chairs and a card table, a reflection of the blanked-out inner life of the show's protagonist, Maggie (Quincy Tyler Bernstine), a retired schoolteacher who is at sea, unmoored by a personal loss of some kind—and reliant on the people around her to fill in the gaps. Conveniently, there's another presence lingering onstage: an "Our Town"-ish narrator, played with gentle, appealing authority by Matthew Maher. He tells stories about the characters' past and the origins of their relationships; he lets us know what people think but don't say. He also urges us to see Maggie's space through more generous eyes, by describing a piano that we can't see, or referring to the card table as a glass-topped showpiece that glints with sunlight at "a weird hour of the day when no one is in the room to see it."

Then, one by one, guests show up. Maggie—dishevelled, her posture slumped—feels obliged, despite her shock, to be a gracious host, a role that she is both adroit at and phenomenally ill-suited for. She's a polite person but introverted and skeptical, a doubter in a town full of churchy, community-oriented do-gooders. And, slowly, we realize that what we're watching isn't a slice of life but a true-crime story, with Maggie as detective: her husband, Marv, has been killed in a shooting at a community college. Her neighbors see him as a hero, but Maggie doesn't seem as certain—and the more we eavesdrop, the more unsettling the details appear.

Each visitor holds a clue. There's a sad-sack, conspiracy-minded cousin, whose life Marv and Maggie kept afloat; a bossy funeral director; Marv's brother (a swaggering Danny McCarthy); his vivacious wife (Amelia Workman), who is also Maggie's best friend; a former student of Maggie's who arrives unexpectedly, twitching with nervous apologies (a deeply moving Emily Davis); and, later on, her daughter (Cricket Brown). Each person gets a single scene but feels utterly real, with Will Dagger a standout as the cousin, leaking needy bravado, and Constance Shulman very funny as the funeral director, determined to stage a party for a host who refuses to throw one.

Like the recent Broadway play "Little Bear Ridge Road," "Well, I'll Let You Go" is a portrait of people living in isolation, their walls up—a situation ripe for an explosion. Refreshingly, the play doesn't cheat its way toward its climax, and instead arrives at something simpler and more affecting: the audience learns what happened to Marv, but the revelation is more about the nature of a long marriage, the question of how well a person knows her own partner—and what it would mean if she were wrong. In Weiler's plainspoken script, that payoff comes with a light touch, during an exchange with the former student, who sees Maggie as

ILLUSTRATION BY SYDNEY SMITH

she can't see herself, and who tells her, "All of the other teachers were old and mean. But you were, like, hopeful?"

In the play's final moments, unreal things become real: the phantom piano gets played; the sunlight sparkles. There's a beautiful scene that reminded me of the powerful conclusion of last year's production of "Oedipus," which leaped back to a more innocent time. The ending of Weiler's play allows us to see the empty setting of Maggie's house in an entirely new way: as a not yet furnished home, at the start of a new marriage—something that might be a mistake, or the opposite. Here is a place that has potential and, perhaps, nothing much else going for it. Isn't that true of theatre, too?

There's something perversely logical about a director of "Othello" doubling as the play's Iago, a manipulator who plants motivations and props, tucking telltale handkerchiefs into bedrooms, imprinting his designs on the world. Iago is Shakespeare's most disturbing villain, perhaps because he's his most modern one: he's a nihilistic troll, a precursor of every 8Chan trickster on the Dark Triad. In a new production by Bedlam, at the tiny West End Theatre, the company's artistic director, Eric Tucker, pulls off this ambidextrous feat, delivering an unnervingly easygoing performance as Iago, playing him less as an obvious creep than as a glad-handing, physically confident broheim—he's as disarming as Ted Lasso, if you pay no attention to the noose dangling from his hand.

In Tucker's staging, Iago is also the character who remains most fully himself, instead of splitting like mercury. Founded in 2012, Bedlam is a theatrical nonprofit dedicated to "the immediacy of the relationship between the actor and the audience," which, in practice, means a stripped-down environment (a blank wall, wooden bleachers, a string of Christmas lights) and a playful approach to casting. In the company's most recent production before "Othello," a satisfyingly delirious reinterpretation of "Pride and Prejudice" called "Are the Bennet Girls OK?," every male character—from cad to nerd—was played by a single actor, Edoardo Benzoni, his eyebrows aflicker. It was a tour de force that suggested something about the role of men in Austen's universe, turning all men into one man, his charisma adjusted to taste.

Here, only four actors act out the entirety of "Othello," in a similarly minimalist way: there are no costumes or special hats to mark the moments when they shift personae, but we always know who is who, through gestures. Susannah Hoffman plays Othello's wife, the eager, horribly innocent Desdemona; Brabantio, Desdemona's disapproving father; and Cassio, the devoted lieutenant who Othello suspects is sleeping with Desdemona. Susannah Millonzi is the horndog Roderigo, an easy target for Iago; she's also Iago's wife, the cynical Emilia, who sees through men like Roderigo. Bedlam's approach releases all sorts of unusual and exhilarating juxtapositions in the text. In a particularly elegant moment, Othello, played by Ryan Quinn, drapes his shirt differently to become the sensual Bianca, Cassio's desperate mistress—which means that we witness the actors who play Desdemona and Othello swapping genders and masquerading as another tormented couple, one betrayal visible beneath the other.

Like "Well, I'll Let You Go," "Othello" is a story of marital suspicion: the Moor sees his wife as a stranger. But, of course, he is looking in the wrong direction. Iago brags, "I am not what I am," revelling in his ability to disguise himself without changing at all. He views the other actors as pawns, speaking in riddles that take on fresh meaning when the performer he addresses also plays his wife: "It is as sure as you are Roderigo / Were I the Moor I would not be Iago / In following him, I follow but myself." He sees the world both more clearly and less clearly, because it's all a game to him: move a prop, hit a nerve. In Bedlam's chilling "temptation scene," Quinn's self-assured, genial Othello arrives as a man in love, then shrivels like a punctured balloon. His insecurities aren't so hard to tap: his racialized self-loathing, his fear that all women are whores, his anxiety that he is unworthy of love. In a world saturated in hatred, Othello is not a difficult man to direct—Iago just needs to find the right trigger, and let it all unfold. ♦

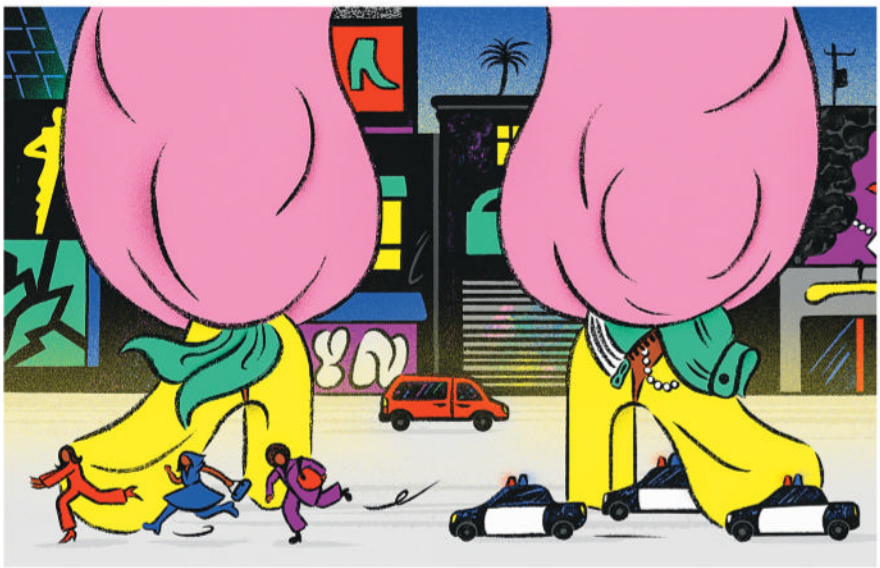
THE CURRENT CINEMA

POWER CLASH

"I Love Boosters."

BY RICHARD BRODY

One of the most famous scenes in "The Devil Wears Prada" has always rung false to me—the one in which the editor Miranda Priestly lectures Andy, her unfashionable new assistant, on how trends trickle down from big-name designers' exotic creations to Andy's bargain-basement casuals. What Miranda's bravura monologue misses is the upward flow of style from the streets to the runways, the power of vernacular fashionistas to inspire haute couture—in other words, you could say that it ignores the dialectic. But this very idea is at the heart of a new fashion-focussed film, Boots Riley's "I Love Boosters," an exuberantly inventive but overstretched comedy about the redistribution of luxury goods and the chic that goes with them.



In Boots Riley's socialist-surrealist caper, a trio of shoplifters avenge fashion crimes.

For starters, Riley offers a heist movie, set in the Bay Area, centered on a trio of women "boosters"—shoplifters who resell their wares—known as the Velvet Gang. Each member has her own motive. Mariah (Taylour Paige) wants to start a movement called Fashion Forward Filanthropy. Sade (Naomi Ackie), who has children, needs the money. Corvette (Keke Palmer), the leader of the pack, is an ambitious designer who wants a foot in the door. The movie opens with Corvette luring a man from a club to her apartment—which is more of a showroom, where she intends not to seduce him but to sell him a pair of shoes. She's got loot from all sorts of places, but the gang has one main target: a chain of street-glam stores called Metro Designers, owned and run by a celebrity designer named Christie Smith (Demi Moore).

This setup is built along color lines, both racial and otherwise. The Velvet Gang's members are Black, and their heists involve the partnership of a white woman who serves as a decoy, by monopolizing salesclerks' attention and leaving the threesome free to slip out with loads of merchandise. (In one of the film's many flamboyant gags, Corvette stuffs her sweatsuit full of items, waddling through the parking lot like a Michelin Man in pink.) Christie, who is white, takes to local TV news to inveigh against the boosters, deriding them as "low-class urban bitches." The remark fills the trio with righteous rage, and makes them all the more determined to swipe from her stores.

Christie is preparing to launch a mysterious new line of suits, at a hundred thousand dollars apiece, a plan that the three women catch wind of when Corvette actually manages to get a foot in the door—by sneaking into Christie's apartment. This inner sanctum of fashion is situated, wondrously, in a sharply leaning San Francisco luxury tower (based, as Emily Nussbaum reported in a profile of Riley for this magazine, on the city's actual, slightly leaning Millennium Tower). The resulting scene is spectacular, with the apartment's inclined and polished floor giving rise to physical comedy of absurdist pathos in the vein of Jerry Lewis, and Corvette's frantic struggle for traction revealing the earnest undertones of her fraught visit.

As an aspiring designer herself, Corvette has a complex relationship with Christie: infuriated though she may be by Christie's racist and classist condescension, Corvette also considers her a creative idol. Corvette lives in an abandoned fried-chicken restaurant that she has converted into a studio, where she passionately turns out samples and designs. She dreams of a career in fashion—she admits to Mariah, "I'm even lonely when I'm with people," but adds, "When I'm designing, I feel like I'm touching the world"—and she has submitted a design to a contest that Christie is running. So there's some serious fangirling involved in Corvette's pre-heist stalking of Christie's home, not to mention some calculated self-promotion: she shows up in the tilted apartment wearing an elaborately crafted gown that she designed and made. Seeing the dress, Christie delivers a high-handed verbal riff—reminiscent of the trickle-down speech in "The Devil Wears Prada"—on whether it's turquoise or aquamarine.

"I Love Boosters" is quite literally a colorful film, an exhilarating splatterbox of unnatural and acidulous tones. For one thing, Christie's commercial empire runs on an inspired gimmick: each of her stores offers clothing in only one color per month, with décor to match, and the wall-to-wall uniformity gives the shops the look of movie-musical sets. But Christie's color sense seems to derive in part from her eye for what's happening on the streets, because the mem-

ILLUSTRATION BY CYNTHIA KITTLER

bers of the Velvet Gang are artists in their own right, bringing a jubilant sense of freedom to their own outfits, which feature harmonious clashes of colors, textures, and shapes. (The film's ingenious mix-and-match costuming is by Shirley Kurata.) And it turns out that Christie is doing more than just gleaning ideas—she's stealing them outright, as Corvette discovers when she finds an item for sale at Metro Designers that looks just like a design that she posted on Instagram. Thus, the Velvet Gang's great revenge tour begins: the women plot not just to steal a trove of garments but to clean out a store's whole stock, and they soon meet similarly aggrieved allies who are ready to join their quest.

Call it a campaign of redress, pun intended, for injustices committed with impunity up and down the fashion supply chain. Ideas aren't the only thing that Metro Designers is stealing. The stores' monthly merchandise overhaul proves to be a wage-theft scheme, because the salespeople are required to buy and wear the company's latest offerings, leaving two young employees, Violeta (Eiza González) and Mansion (Najah Bradley), with paychecks of about forty dollars. The clothing, meanwhile, is made in a Chinese sweatshop, whose oppressive and dangerous working conditions Riley depicts in flashbacks and interpolations. The arrival of a woman who works in the sweatshop, Jianhu (Poppy Liu), jolts the story into a new direction, and even a new dimension. Jianhu got to the Bay Area by way of a secret high-tech Chinese-government gizmo that she purloined from the sweatshop—a teleporter, she calls it, which the factory manager had planned to use to beam garments across the seas to avoid shipping charges. The device plays a major role in the heist that follows, and takes the film beyond the realm of a style-crime caper into political science fiction.

Riley breaks his narrative frame to pile in an inspired cornucopia of genres and plotlines, moods and tones. The movie is something of a live-action cartoon, as when Corvette, struggling to climb Christie's slippery floor, revs her legs like Road Runner's, and when a giant ball of bureaucratic papers, including an eviction notice, rolls menacingly toward her when she feels stressed. Along the way, there's a self-help satire involving Dr. Jack (Don Cheadle), a motivational speaker who's actually running a pyramid scheme. There's a horror-movie thread involving a suave seducer (LaKeith Stanfield) who turns, involuntarily, into a supernatural sexual predator. There's creative lampooning of workplace indignities, with store clerks' thirty-second lunch break staged as a sprint at a track meet, in sped-up motion. There's skewering of the media, in TV news segments that spotlight apparently random people, most of them Black, as talking heads for right-wing positions. (One woman, for instance, complains that rent control curtails her freedom to pay higher rent.) And the teleporter turns out to have additional uses, as a "situational accelerator" that employs dialectical materialism to heighten the contradictions of whatever it's aimed at, and as a "deconstructor" that's effectively a time machine, returning its targets to prior states of being.

These hyperbolic fantasies of socialist surrealism are often exhilarating, but Riley's wild spectrum of images and ideas doesn't fit readily into a clear critique. In his prior feature, "Sorry to Bother You," he shaped the story's surreal elements to address the quasi-apocalyptic implications of unhinged profit motives, inhumane technology, and unmitigated racism; the result was a pointed vision of techno-fascism. In "I Love Boosters," he doesn't quite pursue his strongest impulses to their logical conclusions. Some scenes and details play like they're there to check off boxes for each of the featured genres, such as a hectic car chase of little originality and a further expansion of the teleporter's powers to seemingly limitless, and therefore just about pointless, possibilities. As clever and eye-catching as Riley's imaginative extravagances are, he too often relies on them to resolve story lines with a hand-waving facility.

"I Love Boosters" is ultimately suspended between competing desires. Riley conjures vivid characters—especially Corvette, whom he endows with a creative fury akin to his own—but the movie's messaging constrains their range of activity and leaves out the personal side of their passions. Riley neglects the contradictions in Corvette's fascination with the work of the venom-filled Christie, for instance, and says little about the inspiration and drive behind Corvette's artistic ambition. The psychological and aesthetic core of the story's premise is the exchange between high fashion and the streets, yet Riley offers no sense of what the boosters achieve, socially or stylistically, with their redistribution of luxury goods. The result is a fashion movie that takes the art at its center for granted, a work of radical narrative freedom which falls back on last season's tropes. ♦

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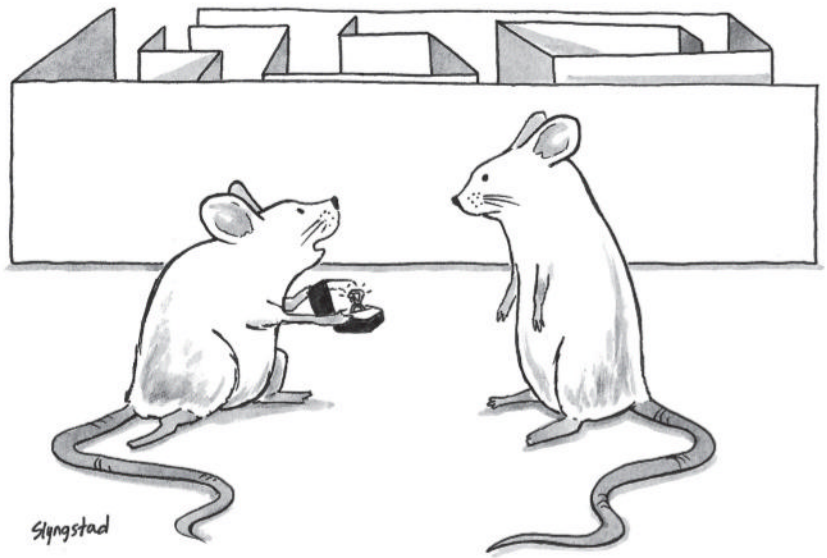
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

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 Benjamin Slyngstad, must be received by Sunday, May 31st. The finalists in the May 11th & 18th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the June 15th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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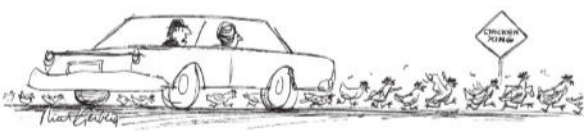
THE FINALISTS



“Don't complain—they could be turtles.”
R. Duke Liddell, Malverne, N.Y.

“Well, roll down your window and ask one of them.”
Pete Drawbridge, Harrison, N.Y.

“We're going to need a better story for why we are late.”
Judy Matta, Oakmont, Pa.

THE WINNING CAPTION

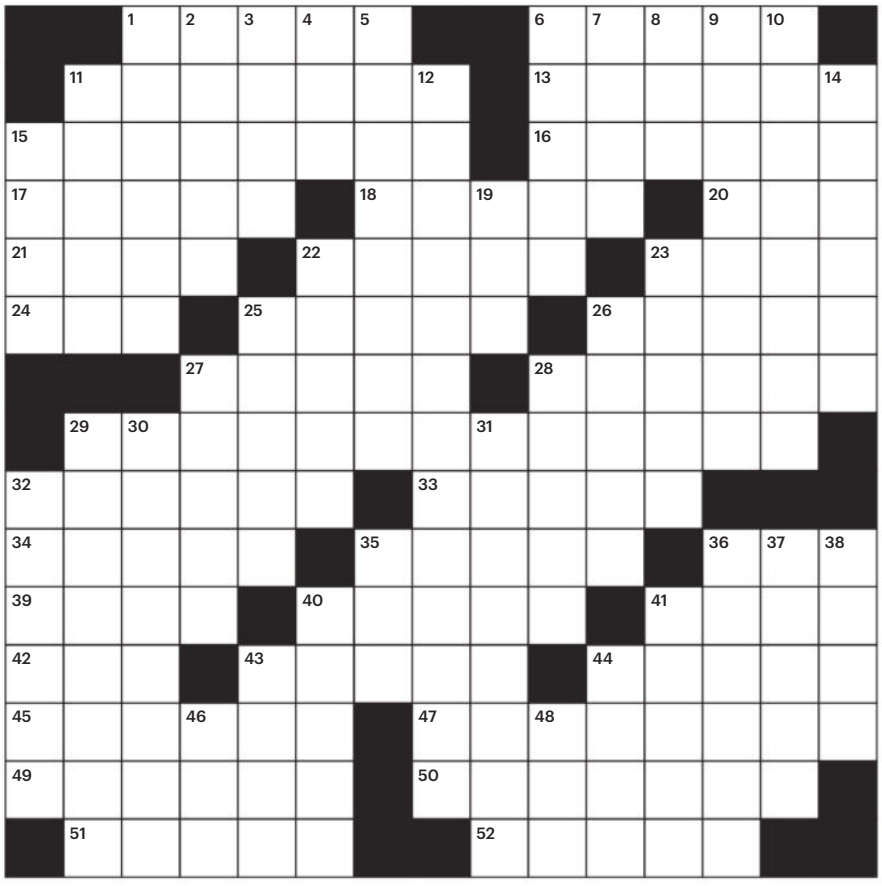
“Did it ever occur to you that I might just be good at poker?”
Scott Farkas, Worthington, Ohio

PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

BY CAITLIN REID



ACROSS

1 ___ in comparison
6 Haven in a desert
11 Renaissance, literally
13 Afternoon nap
15 Happy-go-lucky
16 Wooden cargo cases
17 Like an angle measuring less than ninety degrees
18 Fervent requests
20 Possesses
21 Untidy state of affairs
22 Grinding tooth
23 Safe and boring
24 Poem of praise
25 Blood-drive attendee
26 Protest whose participants don't stand for something?
27 Actress Viola or Geena
28 "This just ___ add up"
29 Muppet who sings "It's Not Easy Being Green"
32 "Who knows the answer?"
33 Goes on a tirade
34 Kamala Harris and Al Gore, informally
35 Member of the violet family
36 "Murder, ___ Wrote"
39 Congers and morays, for example
40 Stovetop-oven combo
41 Kind of plush carpeting popular in the sixties and seventies
42 Slugger's stat
43 Dog from Down Under
44 "Brick," for "very cold"
45 Tissue connecting muscle to bone
47 Fifty-fifty chance
49 Turns up one's nose (at)
50 Contents of a cookbook
51 "God's Plan" and "In My Feelings" rapper
52 What a trainee is shown, with "the"

DOWN

1 Read carefully (or casually)
2 Helps with a heist, maybe
3 Larger than ___
4 Make a mistake
5 "Go faster!"
6 Academy Award statuette
7 Puts on TV
8 Black, Red, or Coral
9 "Oh, really?"
10 More than just mad
11 Sped
12 "It's been too long!"
14 Agreement
15 Print designed to blend in, for short
19 Musician's asset
22 Silver-screen production
23 Layers of a wedding cake
25 Consigns to Hell
26 Pushover
27 Releases, as a new album
28 Thick, as fog
29 Squatting exercise
30 Makeup often applied before mascara
31 Day-after-drinking woe
32 Manages to avoid, as disaster
35 Scathing review
36 Sunglasses
37 Time indicators on an analog clock
38 Ingredients in a soufflé or a strata
40 Clean with water
41 Bunny ___ (beginner's skiing spot)
43 Nerd
44 Sound of scissors
46 Agency that carries out the Controlled Substances Act, in brief
48 Lead-in to friendly or conscious

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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