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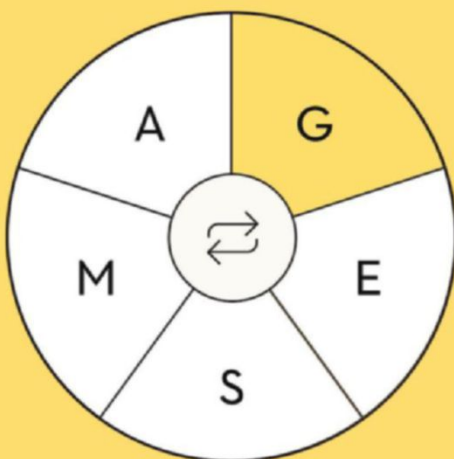
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THE NEW YORKER, JULY 27, 2023

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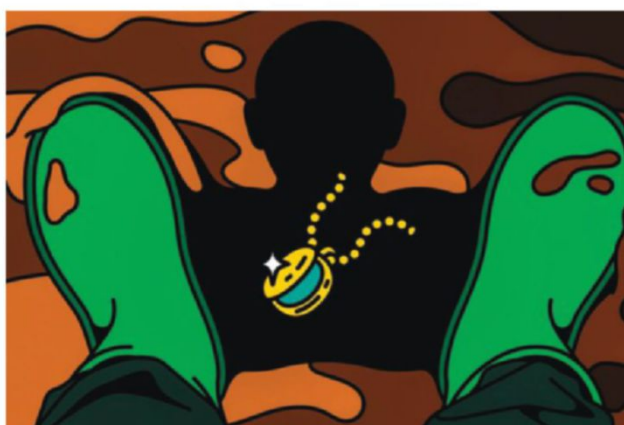
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LETTER FROM THE U.K.

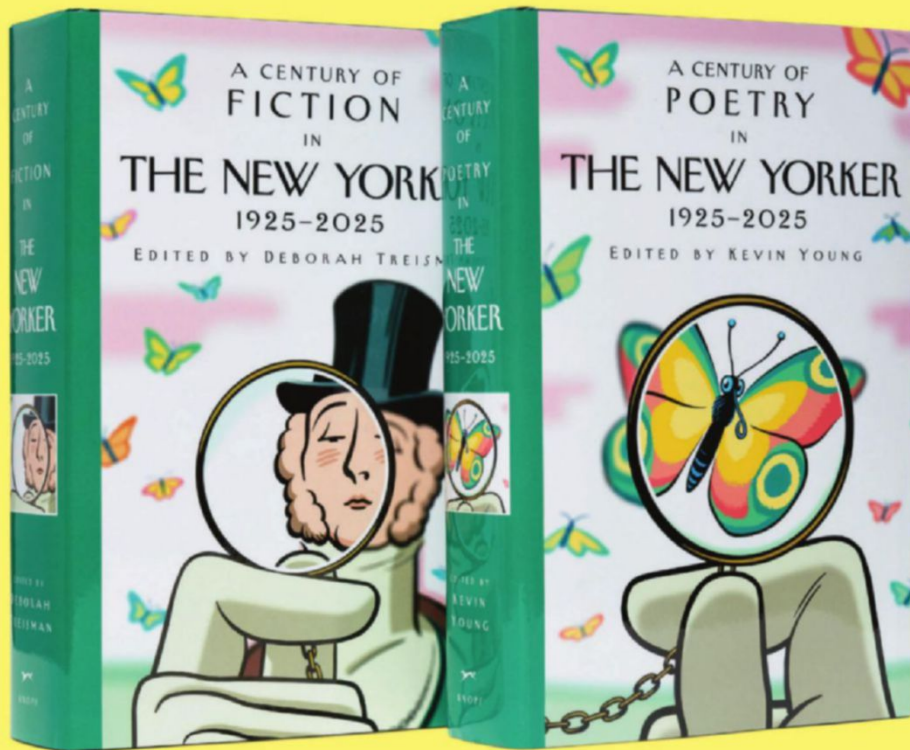


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GOINGS ON

JULY 22 – 28, 2026



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

The Venezuelan director Lorena Alvarado's real-life family is the basis for her first feature, **"Lost Chapters,"** a lyrical, multigenerational fiction. Ena (Ena Alvarado, the filmmaker's sister), a twenty-five-year-old writer, returns home to Caracas to visit her father, Ignacio (Ignacio Alvarado, the filmmaker's father), a bookseller and collector. He shares a house with his elderly mother (Adela Rodríguez, Alvarado's grandmother), whose memory is failing. After getting wind of an unusual novel, from 1912, Ignacio tries to find it, while Ena makes the elusive tome the basis of her own docu-fictional novel. Father and daughter reconnect through book hunts and research trips; tender reunions over poetry recitations fuse literary passions and family bonds with cinematic grace.—*Richard Brody (Opening July 24 at IFC Center.)*



ABOUT TOWN

OFF BROADWAY | Remarks are "not literature," as the quippy modernist Gertrude Stein once remarked. Yet, in Eric Bentley's 1972 docu-play, **"Are You Now or Have You Ever Been,"** a revealing tapestry of testimonies from Hollywood actors, writers, and directors ensnared in America's mid-twentieth-century anti-Communist purge, they are woven into something unexpectedly dramatic. Under the sharp direction of Anna D. Shapiro, the play hugs the corners as it pivots from the authority of the House Un-American Activities Committee chairman (Michael McKean, in a rotating cast) to the blustery self-justifications of Elia Kazan (Frederick Weller) to the administrative recitation of names by Jerome Robbins (Steven Boyer). Paul Robeson (Billy Eugene Jones), in his refusal to name other suspected

subversives, lends the production its clearest moral voice.—*Rhoda Feng (City Center Stage I; through Sept. 11.)*

INDIE ROCK | The singer and multi-instrumentalist **Kurt Vile** started his career making lo-fi home recordings in Philadelphia, so it's fitting that the album he made as if it might be his last was created as an homage to the City of Brotherly Love. Released this May, "Philadelphia's Been Good to Me" is mostly self-produced, with a hazy sense of space and time apropos of the ways in which his sound has gradually expanded over the years. Since leaving the band the War on Drugs, in 2008, Vile has become a solo avatar for psychedelic guitar music, his rich catalogue easygoing and nonchalant, but also sprawling. Alongside his

backing band, the Violators, he wades into its depths.—*Sheldon Pearce (Brooklyn Paramount; July 23.)*

ALT-POP | In the nineties, **Tori Amos**—a survivor of wunderkind expectations (she was a piano prodigy at five) and of a failed stint in a synth-pop band—proved too ambitious not to join a generation's creative vanguard. Her seminal 1992 debut, "Little Earthquakes," introduced her biting point of view, and the singer-songwriter continued to straddle alt-rock, baroque pop, and more, across a long, adventurous career that included the polarizing, ayahuasca-fuelled "Boys for Pele" (1996) and the acoustic boomerang "Unrepentant Geraldines" (2014). Her latest record, "In Times of Dragons," is no less bold, starting down threats to American democracy; Amos shares the stage with **Barteas Strange**, a kindred spirit, politically, whose fanciful music can be similarly boundary-pushing.—*S.P. (Beacon Theatre; July 24–25.)*

DANCE | In France, **Hugo Marchand** is a ballet superstar in a way we seldom see here. He walks fashion runways and appears on chat shows, where interviewers fawn over him. He is also a very good dancer, with a sinuous grace and an intense commitment to his roles. For "Artists at the Center," an evening of dances chosen by Marchand features him in a famous, over-the-top table-dancing solo by Maurice Béjart—"Boléro," set to Ravel's eponymous score. Marchand also performs a rather dreamy duet with the equally glamorous Dorothee Gilbert—"Le Parc," by Angelin Preljocaj—and another, by the Dutch choreographer Hans van Manen and set to Satie, with another French star, Léonore Baulac.—*Marina Harss (New York City Center; July 23–26.)*

ART | The eclectic artist **Paul Thek** (1933–88) is the subject of Andrew Durbin's very fine book "The Wonderful World That Almost Was: A Life of Peter Hujar and Paul Thek," and of two shows up now, at the Galerie Buchholz (through July 25), and at Pace (through Aug. 14). Thek's working in various styles confounded the art market—in addition to painting and sculpture, he designed theatre sets, and used his own body as an object—and he wasn't easily categorizable, which is a good thing. But Thek's fascination with spectacle—his intriguing "Red Shrine," from 1964, inspired by mummified corpses he saw in the Capuchin Catacombs of Palermo, is up at Pace—didn't necessarily serve him well as an artist, nor did his resistance to curators and gallerists who believed in him: he could have benefitted from distillation, and from editing.—*Hilton Als*

MOVIES | The comedy-drama **"A Sad and Beautiful World,"** by the Lebanese director Cyril Aris, maps a young couple's romantic destiny along the country's political and social agonies. Yasmina and Nino, born a minute apart in the same Beirut hospital, become childhood sweethearts but lose touch; they reconnect as adults through the antic calamity of a minor but spectacular car crash. The fiercely critical Yasmina (Mounia Akil) is a business consultant whose parents are divorced, and Nino (Hasan Akil), funny and optimistic, is a restaurateur who was orphaned as a child; their efforts to build a relationship and form a family are strained to the breaking point by war, civic strife, and economic disaster. The decades-spanning tale, told in sketch-like anecdotes highlighting witty and fervent performances, is sentimental and tender, clear-eyed and melancholy.—*Richard Brody (Opening July 24 at Quad Cinema.)*

COURTESY SEVERAL FUTURES



TABLES FOR TWO

Zoli
312 Maujer St., Brooklyn

Richard Olney, the great American food writer and Francophile, did not really believe in recipes, but he was obsessive about ingredients: the best meat and produce at the best time of year. He was perhaps most fastidious about salads, to which he devoted pages and pages of near-philosophical instruction across his cookbooks and memoirs. Yet I'm fairly sure that the marvellously cranky man would have adored the Olney salad at Zoli, a new restaurant in East Williamsburg: a mountain of ever-changing greenery, fluffy as an eiderdown, and dressed in a perfectly smooth salt-edged vinaigrette.

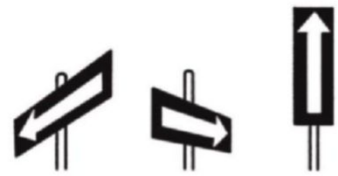
Zoli is part of the campus of Amant, a sprawling contemporary-art complex from Lonti Ebers, an art collector and MOMA trustee. The space opened, in 2021, to notice in the art world and comparatively little beyond it, but Zoli has put it on the map for people who don't otherwise monitor the gallery circuit. The room splits the difference between industrial brutalism and mid-century sleekness, and somehow avoids the predictability of either. The dining room and the bar are separated by an aquarium installation by Pierre Huyghe—murky and rock-filled, with the occasional antenna-waving crustacean—which lends the otherwise sunny interior an edge of imminent apocalypse.

The kitchen belongs to the chef Ned Baldwin, of Houseman, one of Manhat-

tan's great under-the-radar restaurants. Where Houseman's food is posh-rustic and a little lusty, Zoli's menu is frillier and just a bit more challenging, and it earns its experimental flourishes by delivering pleasure at every turn. Fuzzy-fresh cucumber leaves in a chilled dashi vinaigrette riff cleverly on spinach *ohitashi*. Sautéed day-lily shoots, with the faint chlorophyll snap of asparagus, get tossed with bitter greens in an anchovy-spiked vinaigrette. Fascinating things are happening with chilled seafood, including gloriously chewy surf clam, sliced into sashimi-like slivers and served in a tart tamarind dressing. The menu's puckishness fades slightly in the larger dishes, though I loved a fillet of fluke, doused in a lovage-scented cream sauce bubbling with fish roe of varying hues and sizes, and a whole butterflied black bass with a garlicky Basque *pil-pil* sauce makes for an attractive centerpiece.

Zoli's association with the art world has earned it inevitable comparisons to Marcel, the ritzy new restaurant anchoring the Sotheby's headquarters, in the Breuer Building, on the Upper East Side. But where Marcel is a cathedral of luxury, Zoli seems primarily interested in playful exploration. (Ebers has said that the restaurant is named after her beloved, and entirely imaginary, dog.) You can taste it in the desserts: a chocolate layer cake laced with fermented black garlic, which functions a bit like miso swirled into butterscotch, and an airy cheesecake funky up with shavings of fresh Taleggio. It's weird, but it really works. (*Dishes \$10–\$65.*)

—Helen Rosner



PICK THREE

*Amanda Petrusich on
Grateful Dead ephemera.*

"Summer Tour," a new documentary about the famously fervent and nomadic fans of the Grateful Dead (and of the band's later iteration, Dead & Co.), débuts this week. It's a heartening reminder that, despite enormous changes in the way we consume and share music, there are still vital, real-life scenes unfolding out there. Though I wouldn't dare describe myself as a scholar of the band (I'll leave that to the Grateful Dead Studies Association), here are three Dead-related things that bring me tremendous joy.

1. "MORNING DEW," CORNELL UNIVERSITY, 5/8/77. Admittedly, this is not an especially adventurous pick for the best Grateful Dead performance (this particular show, disseminated via bootleg for decades, was reissued as a five-LP set, in 2017), but I do think it's a true apotheosis: thrilling, transporting, startlingly lovely.

2. THE THIRD VERSE OF DON HENLEY'S "THE BOYS OF SUMMER." "Out on the road today / I saw a Deadhead sticker on a Cadillac / A little voice inside my head said 'Don't look back, you can never look back,'" the Eagles front man sings on his swooning, synth-driven solo hit, from 1984. I've always loved the way that lyric encapsulates both the inevitable sublimation of counterculture, and also a certain gnawing, beautiful nostalgia.

3. DOUBLE WONDERFUL. Perhaps no group before or since has merchandised better than the Dead. That tradition is carried on by Gordon Kenny, the artist behind Double Wonderful, a (deliberately) inscrutable T-shirt brand. Kenny makes incredibly funny, weird shirts about the music he loves (especially Steely Dan and Phish).



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT UNDER THREAT

For years now, in office and out, Donald Trump has been unabashed about his desire to see reporters behind bars. The President's fantasies can, at times, take on a lurid tone. Campaigning for Republican candidates during the 2022 midterms, Trump assailed the leak of the Supreme Court's draft opinion in *Dobbs*, the landmark abortion case, and outlined his preferred approach to identifying the source: "The reporter goes to jail. When the reporter learns that he's going to be married in two days to a certain prisoner that's extremely strong, tough, and mean, he will say, he or she, 'I think I'm going to give you the information. Here's the leaker, get me the hell out of here.'" This April, after it was reported that a crew member was missing from an American fighter jet that had been shot down in Iran, Trump vowed that the person who had spoken to the press would be quickly outed: "We're going to go to the media company that released it, and we're going to say, 'National security. Give it up or go to jail.'"

No one went to jail, but Trump has seized on another opportunity to threaten journalists. Earlier this month, the *Times* reported that he was forced to ditch his new Air Force One, given to him by the Qataris, for part of the ride home from the NATO summit in Turkey; the plane allegedly lacked anti-missile capabilities. (Trump had claimed that he was taking a last spin in the previous Air Force One "for old time's sake.") According to the *Times*, a senior F.B.I. official asked the newspaper to hold the story, citing na-

tional security. The *Times* declined to comply. Two days later, three journalists received subpoenas to appear before a federal grand jury in Manhattan. The *Times* later reported that the White House had instructed the director of the F.B.I., Kash Patel, to oversee an investigation into the leak, and that Patel had spent the day the subpoenas were issued holed up at the White House—not the ordinary locus for a law-enforcement operation. The *Times*, in a sealed filing that it sought to have publicly released, moved to quash the subpoenas, saying that they were "brought in bad faith to punish The Times for its coverage."

The Justice Department has depicted the subpoenas as a benign move. "We're not targeting reporters. They're material witnesses, just like a reporter would be a material witness to a car crash," Todd Blanche, the acting Attorney General, said at his confirmation hearing

Wednesday. "The question we want to ask them is who provided them with classified national-security information." That is scant comfort. Journalists' access to information will evaporate if they cannot assure their sources of confidentiality. This risk is omnipresent, but it is heightened in the current moment, when reporting about the inner workings of government is more crucial than ever, and when Administration officials appear determined to close off any channels of information that are not officially sanctioned. As the *Times*' executive editor, Joseph Kahn, explained, in a video, "There's nothing more important that an independent news media does in a democracy than reporting fully and fairly on the way public officials protect national security and use taxpayer dollars." Was Trump, reportedly livid over the Air Force One leak, concerned about the risk to security—or about the prospect of personal embarrassment due to the failings of a questionable gift that had cost taxpayers tens of millions of dollars to upgrade?

When it comes to the media, Trump appears to be moving from the unsettling rhetoric that began during the 2016 election ("scum," "enemy of the American people") to his long-promised assault. He has continued to file a barrage of defamation lawsuits—with some news organizations choosing to capitulate rather than risk harm to planned mergers or broadcast licenses. Trump is also now harnessing the processes of criminal law to intimidate and punish. In the early-morning hours of January 14th, F.B.I. agents arrived at the home of the *Washington Post* reporter Hannah



Natanson and seized her computers and phones, as part of an investigation into a government contractor charged with retaining classified information. So far, judges have blocked the Justice Department's efforts to gain unsupervised access to Natanson's devices. In recent months, the department subpoenaed reporters from the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* in national-security cases. The subpoenas were withdrawn after the news organizations challenged them. Media lawyers fear that the Administration could deploy a nuclear option: using the Espionage Act to prosecute journalists themselves for publishing classified information. Bruce Brown, the president of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, told me, "Short of prosecuting a reporter under the Espionage Act, the word 'escalates' doesn't mean anything

anymore. It's just open season now."

Administrations of both political parties have subpoenaed reporters to testify before a grand jury in past cases involving national-security leaks, but rarely, and as a last resort. Gabe Rottman, of the Reporters Committee, told me he counted just three such instances since 2000. Justice Department regulations, first formulated in 1970, stipulate that reporters are to be subpoenaed only when the government is seeking information that is "essential," and it has made "all reasonable attempts" to obtain that information elsewhere. But these protections are illusory in the hands of an Administration determined to ignore them; they are not enforceable in court. Court rulings on reporter's privilege have not been favorable. "Newsmen are not exempt from the normal duty of appearing before a grand jury and answering

questions relevant to a criminal investigation," the Supreme Court said in a 1972 ruling, though it left open the possibility of protection in cases where the government was engaged in harassment or bad faith, as the *Times* now claims it is.

There seems little chance that *Times* reporters will be in jail cells anytime soon; judges are unlikely to order that extreme step this early in the legal process. But it's not clear what will happen if the Administration insists that forcing reporters to testify is its only option. Just as worrisome, though the *Times* has the resources and fortitude to withstand this pressure, the same may not be true of other news organizations. Such outlets may become wary of pursuing stories that could put them in the Administration's crosshairs. That chilling effect, of course, is precisely what Trump is after.

—Ruth Marcus

YANKEE DOODLE DEPT. THE ARCH GUY



Rodney Mims Cook, Jr., chairman of the United States Commission of Fine Arts, old Atlantan, chum of King Charles, and unapologetic Russophile, recently gathered fifty guests inside a replica Roman triumphal arch, in downtown Atlanta, for an intimate performance by Mikhail Simonyan, a Russian violinist and a Deputy Minister of Culture. An hour before the show, Simonyan, who lives in Siberia, wandered into Cook's office atop Millennium Gate Museum—the anomalous arch's name. He walked by framed photographs of Cook with heads of state, looking for something to eat. "Is there any steaks around here?" he asked.

Cook, a ruddy-faced seventy-year-old, whose reading glasses teetered on the tip of his nose, directed Simonyan, whom he called "one of the greatest talents in the world," to the first floor. Cook built the arch two decades ago, when resurrecting classical architecture in America was an eccentric idea. Now it's an official plan. Empowered by his friend

Donald Trump ("I had shrimp with him on his desk a few weeks ago," Cook dropped), he's focussing on the nation's capital: more arches and monuments, huger facilities. It was Cook's commission that green-lighted the plan for a ninety-thousand-square-foot White House ballroom that one prominent architecture critic described, in the *Times*, as a "huge, dumb box."

"The White House has been insufficient since the Harrison Presidency," Cook declared later, during a cocktail reception on his arch's first floor. Among the attendees was a chronicler of Georgia's waterfalls, two longtime members of Little Richard's band, a retired Russian N.H.L. player, and a contingent from Atlanta's country-club set. Cook went on, "Trump is fixing it, and I'm helping." He added, "I assure you, you can paint things gold left and right, but you can also tone that down later. As long as the proportions are right—which they are—this man is going to leave us a legacy of such astonishing beauty!"

Another thing Cook considers beautiful is classical Russian architecture. He built a large turreted dacha in North Atlanta, "in the Russian wooden vernacular," he said. In June, he showed photographs of the place at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, a gathering known as Putin's Davos, which he said he'd attended as, "essentially, the

Minister of Culture for the United States." During a Senate hearing, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that he was "unaware" of an American delegation at the forum; none had attended in nearly a decade. Cook, however, insisted that "State pushed me to go. It was entirely designed around me." His mission, he indicated, was soft diplomacy. He recalled a State Department official telling him, "Many guys in your position would say, 'This is quite dangerous.'" The actor Steven Seagal, who has had Russian citizenship for ten years, attended, as did the far-right podcaster Candace Owens, although their seats weren't as good as Cook's. "My six State Department dudes had me first row direct center," he said. He added, "I requested and received Coca-Cola—not sold there currently." (Coca-Cola suspended business dealings with Russia in 2022, but the soda is imported through other countries.)

At a filmed Q.&A., Cook rose to address Putin. "I appreciate all of the hospitality that has been afforded to me on my return to St. Petersburg," he said. "I love this city, and I think you're aware of that."

"Hooray, I also love St. Petersburg," Putin, looking amused, responded, through a translator.

The State Department, Cook recalled, "was shocked but pleased" by his polite dialogue with the Russian leader, and

also with the hockey puck he'd put on President Trump's desk as a gesture of good will from Putin. (Cook obtained the puck himself, though he would not say from where.) Simonyan's visit, Cook said, was a thank-you from Russia.

The violinist still hadn't got any steak when he began to perform in the ersatz arch. He opened with Brahms, followed by Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff, and ended with a tune generally credited to an eighteenth-century British Army surgeon intent on mocking Colonial Americans. Members of the audience laughed as they began to recognize the strains of "Yankee Doodle Dandy."

"I wanted 'The Devil Went Down to Georgia,'" a lone dissenter said later.

Cook was misty-eyed at the music. Back in his office, he told an intern to order pizzas. As he waited for dinner, Simonyan sat on a couch with Little Richard's bandmates Shawn (Swift) Johnson and James (Big J) Nelson, who both kept their sunglasses on. They'd come to pitch Cook on building a statue of the deceased rock-and-roll legend, in Macon, Georgia. "Anything monument-related, he's the guy," Johnson said.

As Cook made the rounds, pouring glasses of wine, Simonyan pitched Johnson and Nelson an idea of his own. "You know what we need?" he said. "A big peace concert at the residence of the American Ambassador. Then some stadiums in Siberia."

"I've never been to Russia," Nelson said. "We'll bring the whole band. It'll be like Live Aid." They considered who else might join them.

"Steven Seagal can play guitar," Simonyan said. "He's actually pretty good."

—Charles Bethea

THE PICTURES MARK-MAKING



Julian Schnabel took his first trip to Italy fifty years ago. "When I was in college, I was looking at these art-history books, and I thought, You can't tell a damn thing about these things unless you go there and stand in front of them,"

he said recently. So, he went there and stood in front of them: Giotto's frescoes in the Cappella degli Scrovegni, Piero della Francesca's paintings in Arezzo, some Duccio, some Caravaggio. He liked the art, and he liked the Italians. "In the United States, everybody knows Abraham Lincoln," he said. "In Italy, everybody knows Caravaggio." He stayed. He sold some paintings. That was 1976. Italy has often been on his mind. This year, Netflix released his film "In the Hand of Dante" (as in Alighieri), and Pace is hosting an exhibition of his paintings of Italy's umbrella-pine trees.

Schnabel was in his studio inside Palazzo Chupi, his pink Venetian-style building in the West Village. He wore slippers and paint-splattered coveralls, unbuttoned, with chest hair poofing out. A work crew was about to pack up his paintings to send to the gallery. "Want to start with this one?" a worker asked.

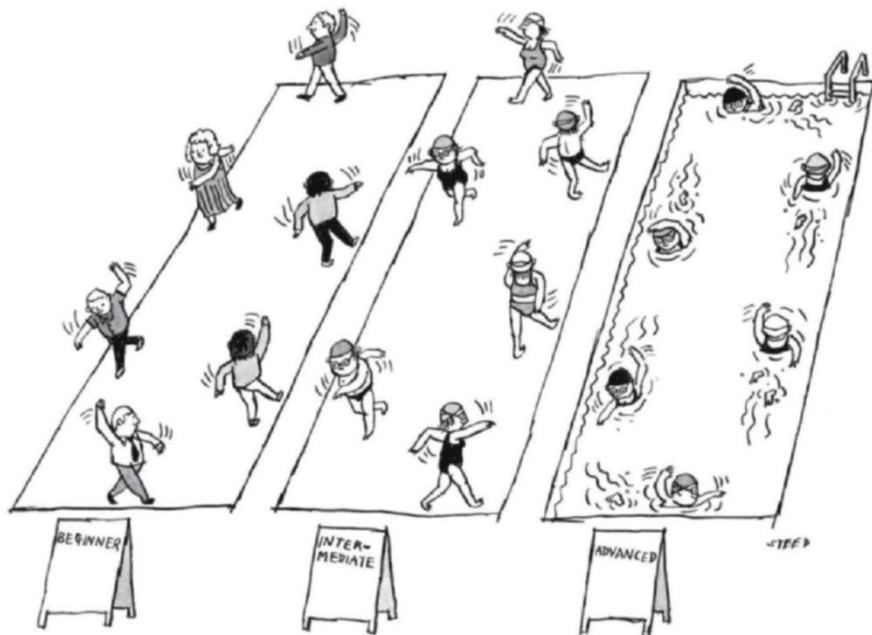
"No, I'm standing here because I want to start with that one," Schnabel said. Of the paintings, he said, "I was living in Rome, near the Villa Borghese, and they've got these trees there. I was down in Sicily, shooting in Trapani and San Vito Lo Capo. We shot in Tarquinia. We shot in Bracciano, Venice, Verona, Padua. The whole thing is called 'Italy Through Its Trees.'"

He'd painted on broken plates or on old maps. He pointed to a plate painting on the floor. "I painted this in my outdoor studio in Montauk," he said. "I

painted flat, which is unusual. For example—Michael, give me a brush on a stick." Michael, an assistant, gave him a brush on a stick. "You see those round marks? That's me going like this." He jabbed, as a janitor with a broom might jab at a drunk. The color of the sky through the branches was remarkable.

As the workers packed, Schnabel reviewed photographs from a newly opened exhibition. Another assistant handed him the catalogue, balling up its plastic wrapping stamped with promotional copy. "You just scrunch that up?" Schnabel said. "Give that to me, please." He unscrunched and read, "Julian Schnabel has been exploring ways of painting for the last five decades. From his initial wax paintings and plate paintings to his most recent works, he's contributed to the shaping of the ever-open vocabulary of mark making. . . ." He concluded and said, "Anyway, it's a pity to throw that away."

Schnabel wanted lunch, so he headed upstairs to his apartment. Palazzo Chupi has twelve stories and a pool. Schnabel constructed it, atop an old perfume factory, in 2007. To help finance it, he sold a Picasso. Being pink, tall, and a palazzo (a critic described it as an "exploded Malibu Barbie house"), it was controversial. Schnabel sold some units—Richard Gere bought one—and kept some. He gave a tour on the way up. In a bedroom: "My first plate painting, from 1978." In a room with two grand pianos, a Pilates machine, and a taxidermied



bear: “Andy Warhol painting of me.” In a foyer with a sculpture: “Sculpture.”

In the kitchen, Schnabel sat in a big wooden chair with cherubs carved into the arms. He ate a tuna-fish sandwich with oat milk. “I learned Italian watching Italian movies,” he explained. “‘L’Ultima Donna,’ by Marco Ferreri, where Gérard Depardieu cuts his dick off with an electric knife. I saw Bertolucci’s ‘Atto Due,’ the second part of ‘Novecento,’ in Paris, in Italian, with French subtitles. I didn’t speak French or Italian. I became very good friends with Bernardo Bertolucci over the years. When I met Bernardo, I hummed the soundtrack of ‘Novecento’ to him, and he just melted.”

Schnabel’s son Vito (as in Corleone) was a producer of “In the Hand of Dante,” and Martin Scorsese was an executive producer. Its stars include Oscar Isaac, Gal Gadot, Gerard Butler, Sabrina Impacciatore, Jason Momoa, and John Malkovich. It’s two and a half hours long and intersperses black-and-white. “People invested in the film wanted me to make it two hours, in color. But Marty loved it, the actors loved it,” Schnabel continued. “What did they think, I’m making a fucking Marvel movie?”

Scorsese appears in the film as a mystical Jew. Al Pacino has a part, too. “I met Al through Diane Keaton,” Schnabel said. “Diane said to me, ‘Whatever you do, don’t do your Tony Montana routine.’” He did his Tony Montana routine. “Al just said, ‘O.K., we’re friends forever.’”

Several actors play multiple parts. Butler plays a hit man and the Pope. “I sent him the script, and he wrote me back a

text that was pretty spectacular,” Schnabel said. He pulled out his phone and recited a long text. It concluded, “What is life all about, through all the hardships and roughness, what is it all about? What’s its saving grace? This is all examined so profoundly here and yet done with a mix of ‘Goodfellas,’ ‘Paradise Lost,’ and ‘Love Story.’ No matter what happens with me and doing this role, you’ve created a masterpiece.” Schnabel rubbed the cherub heads. “When I got that, I wrote, ‘Beautifully written message. I think we can collaborate.’”

—Zach Helfand

NEW JOURNALISM DEPT. VAMPIRE MOMENTS



Recently, the actor and playwright Eric Bogosian, seventy-three, was relaxing in his sunny, cactus-filled office, in Tribeca. Bogosian, who plays the interviewer on AMC’s adaptation of Anne Rice’s “Interview with the Vampire,” is wiry and affably neurotic; onscreen and off, he seems to be urgently looking for answers. The office was homey—incense, couch, art, kitchen, books. “This is the funnest place in town,” he said. Bogosian and his wife, the director Jo Bonney, live in the building. When their sons were little, he bought a tiny second unit to write in. Later, a neighbor wanted to annex it for a piano, and in exchange Bogosian got this—a one-bedroom corner apartment with views of lower Manhattan. “I keep winning lottos in my life,” he said. “I can’t explain it beyond that.” He poured a glass of water and sat down to talk vampires.

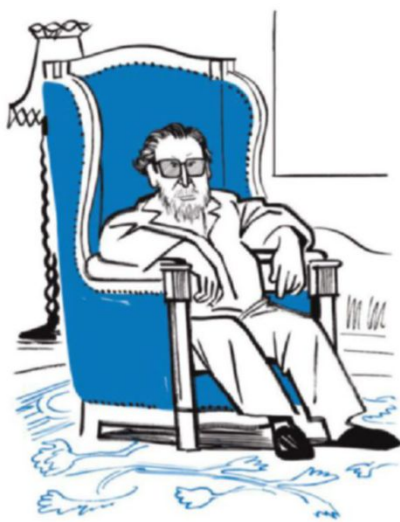
In the series’ latest installment, titled “The Vampire Lestat,” Bogosian’s character has also become a vampire. “It was a dream come true,” he said. In 2022, he recalled, he was flying to Chicago to see a play of Bonney’s. “On the plane, I’m just, like, musing,” he said. “I go, Yeah, I’ve done a lot of stuff I’ve wanted to do. I was a bad guy in a Steven Seagal movie. I did a lot of ‘Law & Order’ episodes where I never smile in any scene”—sixty-one of them, as a police captain on

“Criminal Intent.” “And, of course, ‘Talk Radio’”—starring in his Pulitzer-nominated play, from 1987, and the movie adaptation, directed by Oliver Stone. “Great, very dramatic. So what’s left? Oh, I want to be a vampire.” In Chicago, he went to Bonney’s place, “and there’s a call waiting for me, and it’s the offer to do ‘Vampire.’” Another lotto won.

As in recent roles in “Uncut Gems” and “Succession,” Bogosian makes ample use of no-bullshit directness and a piercing stare; yellow vampire eyes intensify it only slightly. “I read the book in the seventies, when it came out. I loved it,” he said. “I saw Frank Langella on Broadway playing Dracula, in 1977, around the same time. He was so powerful. I don’t know if I’m ever going to get to be that sort of vampire on this show.” Others do, “like Ben Daniels, in the second season, at the Theatre of Vampires”—debonair m.c. of a campy Parisian theatre act that disguises a coven’s live-action bloodsucking. “That’s my fantasy. I’m kind of dicey this season. I’ve had a couple of moments—I actually kill a couple of people, or I bite people.” In one, biting someone in a dressing room, he’s startled and looks up. “It’s like when you surprise a raccoon going through your garbage,” he said. Inelegant, in other words—“more like weird.” (His sort of vampire also wears a leather jacket and yells things such as “I heard there was an after-party on the asshole floor!”)

He gave a tour: black-and-white photos from his plays, including “Talk Radio,” at the Public (“Joe Papp kind of adopted me”); a Silver Bear from the Berlin International Film Festival (“I guess I should polish him”); rock memorabilia (“AC/DC is my favorite band”); a “Taxi Driver” poster, which he fondly rapped with a knuckle (“I named my second kid after Travis Bickle—I told De Niro that, and he really didn’t know what to say”). He opened a door to a library/weight room. “This is about half of the research I had to do for my book, a true story of a cadre of assassins who killed the leaders of the Armenian genocide,” he said. “So I ended up having to read all this shit.” It took seven years. “What the fuck did I know what I was doing? But, anyway, I wrote this scholarly book.”

Bogosian grew up in an Armenian community in Watertown, Massachusetts, and then in a nearby suburb. Some



Julian Schnabel



Eric Bogosian

of his forebears emigrated before the genocide; others barely got out. “My mom’s dad escaped while his village was burning and got his mother out of there—that kind of hellacious shit. We were a typical immigrant-type family”—some accents, cousins, “and it’s all about food.” At school, he felt like an outsider. After an English teacher had him play Lord Capulet, Juliet’s father—“I rose to the occasion, very histrionic”—he joined the theatre club, where a “marvellous” teacher had students write plays. Writing and acting “were fusing from the get-go.”

Back in the cactus room, a final mus-ing. “I don’t completely understand acting,” he said. “For me, it’s pretending to be somebody that I can’t be in real life. I saw ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ when I was a little kid and got a sheet and ran around the yard being Lawrence of Arabia. I love to make believe. That’s my place, a very happy place. More happy than actual . . . being alive.”

—*Sarah Larson*

DEPT. OF NEW TRICKS BA-DUM-BUM



Certain New Yorkers manage to create a spinning orbit of other New Yorkers around them, and that is why we call those groupings circles—as in, the Gershwin circle, or the Algonquin

circle. Very few New Yorkers get two distinct orbits. David Rothenberg, who, at ninety-two, recently made his début as a standup comic, at 54 Below, is one of those few.

One circle that revolves around Rothenberg is made up of show-business veterans, of the kind that he interviews on his Saturday-morning radio program, on WBAI; the other is a circle of formerly incarcerated people who view him as a secular saint. Rothenberg is both a theatrical P.R. man—he worked for Liz and Dick when everyone knew who Liz and Dick were—and the defiantly un-pious founder of the Fortune Society, an institution devoted to humanizing life after prison. The latter was the result of an epiphany, in 1967, when Rothenberg produced a play about prison life. Starting as a desk in his office in Times Square, Fortune has grown, with a community residence based in a rehabbed school building known as the Castle, up at 140th and Riverside.

Before the recent matinée, 54 Below was filled with some stars (Christine Ebersole kicked off the show), and with many members of the Fortune circle. (Stanley Richards, the new head of the Department of Correction and himself a former inmate, is a Fortune alum.)

“What made me want to do it?” Rothenberg asked backstage. “It was my Walter Mitty moment! Does anyone still know who Walter Mitty is?” (His conversation is sprinkled, as a hyper-alert ninety-two-year-old’s must be, with the question of whether an apropos reference he has just made is apropos to anybody else still breathing.) “I’ve always loved people who made other people laugh,” he went on. “My aunt Hilda was the person who made me believe in myself, and the first time she took me out at night was to see the movie ‘Kismet,’ with Ronald Colman and Marlene Dietrich. Afterward, she said to somebody, ‘We just saw a movie about Baghdad. Ronald Colman was the dad, and Dietrich was the bag.’ I loved that!”

“Using humor to communicate with people who are angry and hurt and broken is part of the mission of Fortune,” he continued. “I’ve always said that, at Fortune, the first thing is to gain trust, since the people who come home to us have been so misused, abused, wounded, hurt. If they see you as someone who

can start them laughing, their truth and pain come out. The first time it happened was with a kid named Abe, who was seventeen. We played Ping-Pong. I was still in show business, so I was dense with one-liners. He threatened to smile a couple of times, and then he laughed. And he started getting better.”

Rothenberg had been considering opening his set with a joke that, he knew, was likely to lose the audience. He’d planned to say, “This is Mr. Norman Maine,” a twist on the last line of the 1954 film “A Star Is Born,” where Judy Garland announces that, although she is Vicki Lester, the movie star, her true allegiance is to her husband, Norman, who has just drowned himself. Rothenberg’s bit would be him declaring that Mr. Norman Maine had faked his own death to get away from Garland.

Rothenberg nixed that and started his act more directly: “I’m the oldest standup comedian in America—the operative word here is ‘standing up.’” He did some material on the women in his life: “There was a woman I knew very well. Let’s call her Mother.” He then told a racy story about meeting Charles Laughton, who groped Rothenberg’s innocent and much younger thigh at the Algonquin, and added an anecdote about being thrown out of an upstate prison while trying to visit two inmates. He was told to “go back to New York and get some Jew liberal lawyer to help you.” He said, “I did. His name was William Kunstler.”

Afterward, everyone in the room agreed that the best story had been about a phone conversation with Peggy Lee. “She called, you see, at midnight!” Rothenberg had said. “Big stars assume that everyone is awake whenever they are. So, she asked me to assemble some sheet music for her, for her next gig in New York, and I said, ‘Yes, of course, Miss Lee.’ She wanted some tunes by Frank Loesser, and I said that I had never heard her sing ‘Spring Will Be a Little Late This Year,’ a lesser-known Loesser. So, she began it, right there on the phone, and kept on till she had finished it!”

“The next morning, my mother called me and said, ‘I was trying to get through to you on the phone all night! The line was busy. What were you doing?’ I said to her, ‘Mom, I was in bed with Peggy Lee, and she wouldn’t stop singing.’”

—*Adam Gopnik*

OPPOSITION IN EXILE

María Corina Machado wants to lead Venezuela, but she'll need Trump's help.

BY STEPHANIA TALADRID



When Venezuela was struck by a series of catastrophic earthquakes this June, the exiled opposition leader María Corina Machado decided that she needed to return home. She had spent nearly six months in Washington, carrying on a frustrating fight over her country's political future—and her own. But the earthquakes created a crisis too great to ignore. City streets cracked, and buildings were reduced to rubble. Hospitals were overwhelmed. It was estimated that more than a hundred thousand Venezuelans could die.

Machado was accustomed to managing difficult conditions. She had made a career in Venezuela as a woman in a

macho political culture, and as a wealthy conservative in a place where socialism was the national ideology. She built a following by accusing President Nicolás Maduro of waging a long-running war on his own people, including thousands of arbitrary arrests and killings. In 2024, she led her party to victory in the Presidential election, winning two-thirds of the vote. Rather than cede power, Maduro sent his security forces to attack protesters and round up opponents.

After the U.S. military surged into Caracas and arrested Maduro, on January 3rd, many Venezuelans expected Machado to be the country's new leader. She had worked insistently to secure

recognition from the United States and other allies abroad. Just three months before, she had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her “tireless work promoting democratic rights for the people of Venezuela.” But, when Donald Trump announced the operation, he did not refer to Machado, or even mention the word “democracy.” Instead, he talked about Venezuela's huge petroleum reserves. “We're going to get the oil flowing the way it should be,” he said. In the interest of stability, Maduro's Vice-President, Delcy Rodríguez, would be left in charge.

Observers around the world accused Trump of heedlessly toppling a foreign government, with no plan for the future. Machado, though, was careful not to issue a single criticism. Instead, she commended Trump's “courage and vision” and took every opportunity to thank him. After arriving in Washington, this January, she handed Trump her Nobel. In exile, Machado kept working toward a vision of Venezuela that seemed increasingly elusive: a free country, with her as President. The Trump Administration has laid out a three-phase plan, entailing stabilization, recovery, and, ultimately, a political transition. But the Venezuelan government has not yet put forth a timeline for elections, much less shown a willingness to surrender power.

After the earthquakes, however, the regime seemed newly vulnerable. Despite its efforts to suppress the media, images of the destruction spread online, along with anguished calls for help. Rescue workers from around the world rushed to Venezuela but found that equipment was outdated and scarce. Fuel was in short supply, and cranes stood idle beside flattened buildings.

With the regime so ill-prepared, the Venezuelan people were left to gather whatever tools they could to dig their relatives and neighbors from the rubble. From D.C., Machado mobilized teams to set up aid centers. If a hospital needed a computer to read CT scans, or a rescuer was held up at the border, her people would assist. Still, Machado's phone filled up with desperate calls. “I know that you will help us,” one elderly woman said.

The morning after the earthquakes, Machado told Secretary of State Marco Rubio that she had resolved to go back. She insisted that it was in everyone's

Machado's return would pose an urgent question, a diplomat said: “Who's in charge?”

interest—including the United States'. Though there was no guarantee that the regime wouldn't arrest her, U.S. officials acknowledged that she had a right to return.

Early the next day, Machado went to the Manassas Regional Airport, in Virginia, and boarded a small jet with a few aides. She planned to fly to the island of Curaçao, then proceed to Venezuela. About an hour into the flight, though, a message came through: the plane was not authorized to land in Curaçao. Machado dismissed the message, convinced that it was a misunderstanding. Then, a few minutes later, the pilot got a direct order. The plane's landing rights had been revoked, apparently under political pressure. They had to return to Manassas at once.

For Machado, it was another setback in a long campaign. She remains the most popular politician in Venezuela, but she can't lead unless she goes back. The Trump Administration, which substantially controls the Venezuelan state, seems convinced that her return would deepen the country's tumult—destabilizing both the regime and the United States' aims there. "Politics is a contact sport," James Story, the former American Ambassador to Venezuela, told me. "The regime sees Machado as an existential threat. Her return raises the question: Who's in charge?"

Machado's office in Washington sits not far from the White House, in a nondescript building off Connecticut Avenue. When I visited, soon after she arrived in D.C., the office had a transient air. The space belonged to a lobbying group for maritime workers: paintings of sailing ships hung above Chippendale-style furniture. Aside from some placards with slogans for her party, there was no indication of who the new occupant was. "It's our shadow embassy," David Smolansky, one of her advisers, told me, with a thin smile. The office was staffed with longtime Machado aides, who had left families behind in Venezuela. Most had fled the country after the 2024 election, but there were some she hadn't seen in nearly a decade. Smolansky had escaped across the Brazilian border in 2017, dressed as a priest and carrying a Bible.

From the office, Machado shuttled to meetings with foreign ministers, Trump's

Cabinet officials, Congress members on both sides of the aisle, and various benefactors. During my visit, she walked down the hallway with Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, the son of the Shah of Iran. Trump hadn't yet declared war on Iran, but the country was roiling with protests, which had been harshly suppressed. Pahlavi and Machado posed for pictures and agreed to issue a joint statement, endorsing the "liberation of Iran and Venezuela from oppression."

Machado, fifty-eight, wore a red cashmere sweater and black pants; her brown hair hung to her shoulders. In person, as onstage, she tends to talk in absolutes. "I have a mandate from the Venezuelan people to free this country *together*," she told me. "We will accept nothing less than full democracy." Critics had described Trump's invasion as a violation of Venezuelan sovereignty. "My answer is: Well, what is the basis of sovereignty?" she said. "I believe it is the will of the people."

In Caracas, Delcy Rodríguez had taken pains to project compliance. For decades, she had been a fierce anti-imperialist, earning the nickname La Tigresa. Now she welcomed back American diplomats, and the U.S. flag was hoisted at the Embassy. Declaring a "new political moment," she overhauled Maduro's cabinet and stacked the government with her loyalists. Perhaps most important, she delivered more than seventy million barrels of oil to the U.S. When Trump's Energy Secretary, Christopher Wright, visited a Venezuelan oil plant, she guided him to a table set with glass flasks full of crude. Wright held one up like a trophy, then gleefully pressed it to his lips.

Machado's years in the opposition had taught her that the regime would adapt to nearly any circumstances to remain in power, but she insisted that Venezuelans wouldn't allow it. Her tone grew defiant as she talked about Rodríguez's Presidency. "You cannot sustain an arrangement in which the entire country is against you. 'The people don't matter'? The people *do* matter, *coño*," she said, slapping the table. (Machado says "*coño*"—a favorite curse word—far more than you'd expect from a woman educated by nuns.) "Wait until I go back to Venezuela. What are they going to do? Throw me in jail? What are the grin-

gos going to do? Negotiate a transition while I'm behind bars?" Machado flashed a derisive look. "Help me get there. Otherwise, I'll swim."

Machado, born in 1967, grew up during an unusually peaceful time in Venezuela. She was the oldest of four sisters, in a prosperous Catholic family. "It was an excessively protected childhood," she said. "I always say that I was raised on my grandmother's lap, because we grew up in her house—one of those very old, big houses, full of people."

After decades of dictatorship, Venezuela had become a democracy, and its oil deposits made it the richest country in Latin America. Caracas built sprawling road networks, a state-of-the-art subway system, and towering skyscrapers. Venezuelans became prodigious drinkers of Scotch. Machado's father, Henrique, was an executive at Sivena, the country's largest private steel producer. As an adolescent, Machado was a regular visitor at the plant.

In 1985, Machado enrolled at the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, in Caracas. "I went from an all-women school, run by nuns, to studying engineering with only men, and many of them came from humble backgrounds," she said. "On the first day of class, I took a desk at the very rear and kept my mouth shut." Machado ended up becoming a student-government leader, but she never shook the feeling of being out of place—a cockroach at a hen's ball, in the Venezuelan expression.

After graduating, Machado went to work at Sivena. "I came of age with a very clear life project," she said. "I was going to prove to my father that he never needed a male successor." Then, in 1992, when Machado was twenty-five and pregnant with her second child, she joined her mother on a visit to a state-run shelter for troubled youth. "What we found was a children's prison," she said. "To make matters worse, the center bore my great-uncle's name."

Machado quit her job and devoted herself to improving conditions at the shelter, by starting a foundation that would bring in aid from both the private sector and the state. In time, though, she became aware that the real power was in politics. "I've always been obsessed with scale," she said. "When

you're working in the private sector or an N.G.O., you can innovate and set benchmarks, but at some point you're going to need the power of the state to shape public policy."

By then, the state was in upheaval. In 1998, a former paratrooper named Hugo Chávez assumed the Presidency and began remaking Venezuelan politics. In an unequal country, he built a following by promising to end poverty and redistribute wealth. At the same time, he installed a patronage system, rewrote the constitution, and repealed term limits. As part of what he called the Bolivarian revolution, he expropriated a wide swath of businesses—including several that Machado's father had overseen.

For more than a decade, Chávez kept winning elections. As it became clear that his government had rigged the system, Machado founded Súmate, a group dedicated to monitoring elections and mobilizing citizen observers. Eventually, she won a seat as a congressional representative, and aligned herself with the opposition, a fractious coalition known as the Democratic Unity Roundtable.

Among the opposition, Machado was an outlier. She was seen as too strident, too radical to appeal to voters—and she was a woman. "We'd walk into meetings, and politicians would literally clutch their left ball, because a woman had entered the room," Magalli Meda, a longtime Machado adviser, said.

Machado was also more conservative than her peers, a free marketeer who warned that the country was locked in an "existential struggle" with socialism. In the 2012 Presidential primaries, she earned less than four per cent of the vote. "She was seen as a niche politician, representing a sliver of Venezuelan society," Maryhen Jiménez, a Venezuelan political scholar, said.

Yet her instinct for confrontation captured attention. In 2012, when Chávez was in his third term, he convened the National Assembly for a state-of-the-union address—a daylong marathon, during which politicians wandered out for coffee, cigarettes, and bathroom breaks. Machado, intent on not leaving the room, sat and stared at the President.

At one point, she rose and spoke to Chávez indignantly. "We've spent eight hours listening to you describe a country far removed from the reality that Venezuelan women and mothers are living," she said. "There are women, mothers, who go to corner stores and supermarkets and end up fighting over a single litre of milk." She went on, "How can you claim to respect the private sector in Venezuela when you've dedicated yourself to expropriation—which is to say, stealing?" As boos and catcalls resounded in the room, Machado told Chávez, "Your time is up."

There was a tense silence, before Chávez said, "You're out of your league debating me." He went on, "You called

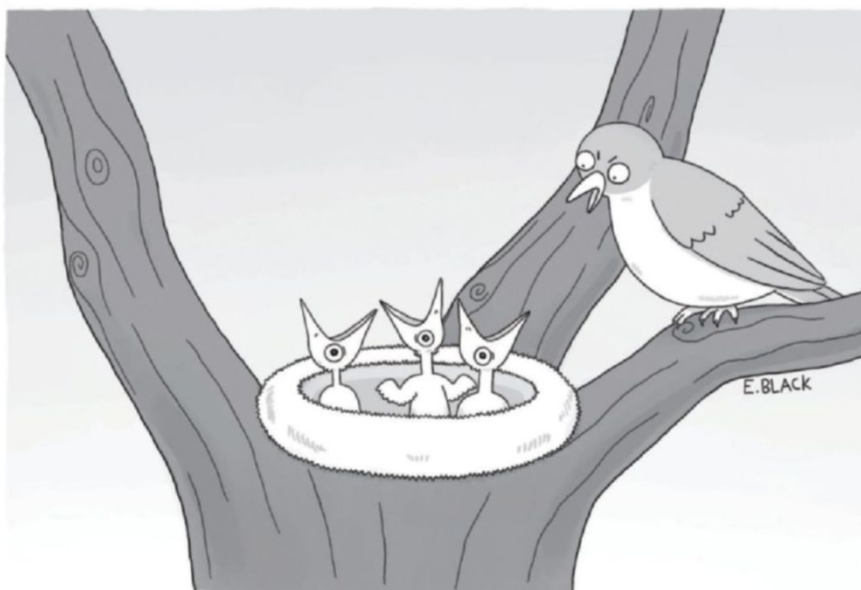
me a thief in front of the entire country. But I will not insult you. An eagle does not hunt flies, Congresswoman."

Chávez died of cancer in 2013, and his Vice-President, Nicolás Maduro, a former bus driver, took power in a contested election. Venezuela's situation only worsened: the G.D.P. plummeted, and inflation rose thousands of percentage points. Armed government supporters took over distributing food, and shortages became part of everyday life. By 2016—the "year of hunger," as it became known—the average Venezuelan had lost almost twenty pounds. People fled the country, in an exodus that would eventually involve a fifth of the population.

Maduro insisted that the crisis was the invention of imperialist elites, and dismissed complaints by saying, "Enough with the whining." What money reached the state's coffers was distributed among a select few, leaving little to pay for social programs. "The regime understood that it could only hold on to power through repression," Génesis Dávila, a Venezuelan human-rights lawyer, said. Pro-Maduro militias terrorized protesters on the streets. Opponents of the government were imprisoned, forced into exile, or banned from public office. Machado's outspokenness made her a target, and the regime repeatedly threatened to seize her house. Out of concern for her children's safety, she had arranged for them to leave Venezuela while she stayed behind. "I had to choose—either take care of my children as a mother or serve my country as a congresswoman," she told me. "The only way I could do both was by separating from my children."

During a legislative session after Chávez's death, the head of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, demanded that the opposition recognize Maduro as the President. When they protested, a group of *chavistas* attacked. They beat and kicked Machado and her colleagues, while Cabello looked on with a mocking expression. Machado was taken to the hospital for surgery. Afterward, her face was so swollen that her daughter, Ana Corina, could barely recognize her.

Finally, in 2015, the opposition had a short-lived victory: it won the National Assembly, securing two-thirds of the seats. Maduro reclaimed control by simply creating a separate legislature of loy-



"Your generation is so entitled."

alists. By then, Machado had started her own party, Vente Venezuela, and she found herself increasingly at odds with the coalition's more moderate voices. "She is a difficult person—authoritarian, intolerant, sharply critical—and she won't let her arm be twisted," Margarita López Maya, a prominent historian, said. In 2017, Machado decided to break away from the coalition. "People kept saying, 'You're dividing the opposition!'" she told me. Yet, she argued, "the same mistakes were repeated over and over. What was the regime seeking? Money, time, legitimacy—but, above all else, time."

The following year, Maduro claimed victory in an election beset by fraud. The prevailing sense among opposition members was that they had exhausted all routes to change: political campaigns, hunger strikes, more than a dozen rounds of negotiations. López Maya described waves of demonstrations that "yielded no tangible results other than deaths in the streets. Each time, the repression grew worse. Venezuelans came to feel that only a powerful external actor could change the situation."

The opposition coalesced around the thirty-five-year-old head of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, insisting that he was the rightful President. Trump and Rubio threw support behind the effort. They helped secure funding and international recognition for Guaidó and, as the crisis deepened, dispatched military planes with relief supplies to a town across the Colombian border. In response, Maduro sent soldiers to block their entry. The relief effort fizzled, and Trump's attention drifted away. Soon, Maduro cracked down on Guaidó's inner circle, and the opposition submitted to another round of inconclusive talks.

Machado, who had initially endorsed Guaidó, watched his unravelling with dismay. In 2020, she issued a public letter, saying, "The country gave you a task that you've been either unable or unwilling to fulfill." When I saw her in Washington, she talked about what she had learned from the episode. Guaidó's movement had secured international help before securing its base, she said, but "we understood it had to be the other way around—first the legitimacy from the Venezuelan people and then the international support."

Trump apparently took a different

lesson from the failed attempt at regime change. "It weighed heavily," a longtime operative in U.S.-Venezuela relations told me. "The Americans thought, We gave the opposition everything, and they still couldn't govern. We're not going to make the same mistake again."

This January 15th, just after midday, Machado went to visit the White House, with a Venezuelan-flag pin on her lapel. She entered through the building's west side—typically reserved for staff and service personnel—for a closed-door meeting with Trump. Afterward, she joined the President for lunch, alongside Rubio, J. D. Vance, and the chief of staff, Susie Wiles.

Machado had an ally in Rubio, who described her as "the personification of resilience, tenacity, and patriotism." Their relationship dated back to his time as a U.S. senator representing Florida. Rubio, the son of Cuban immigrants, urged a hard-line response to the *chavistas* and argued that an intervention would serve America's national-security interests. In the lead-up to January 3rd, his office had been in contact with Machado's team, which presented a plan for how democracy could be restored after the regime was dismantled. But, when Rodríguez was installed, he made no public protest. He went on to consolidate his influence in Caracas, becoming known as "the viceroy of Venezuela."

At the White House, Machado argued that Venezuela was "a country in a state of upheaval, long repressed through fear and terror." She had told the Administration that she didn't need money. But, she said, people's expectations had to be "channelled in a civic and orderly manner" by assuring them that "ultimately this will be resolved through the exercise of popular sovereignty."

Machado's implication was that if she couldn't stand for election, the country might fall apart. But some Administration officials worried that she didn't have enough support in the military to hold power. Others thought that she was too uncompromising to reconcile with her enemies. Machado's most potent argument was her victory in the Presidential elections in 2024. As a parting gesture, she

gave Trump a pointed reminder of the campaign: a rosary, one of thousands that her followers had pressed into her hands.

That campaign season had begun with the opposition in disarray, as the government banned leading candidates. With the national mood desperate, López Maya said, "Machado's radicalism became what made her successful." She travelled the country in a two-car caravan, crawling up on the roof of her car at campaign stops. At rallies, audience members poured out grievances, and she began to share the mike. "People would jostle to the front and tell me their stories—things of such intimacy that I kept wondering, How can this person be saying this out loud?"

For a politician of the center right, Machado's campaign was surprisingly reminiscent of a guerrilla effort. The regime banned

her from running for office, so she designated a stand-in: Corina Yoris, a respected academic who shared her given name. "Our goal was to make people feel that it was still her," Meda, her adviser, said.

When the government banned Yoris, too, opposition leaders urged Machado to consider a more agreeable replacement; they'd cleared a list with Maduro officials. Machado refused. "The regime isn't going to pick our candidate," she said. Instead, she selected as her proxy a seventy-four-year-old diplomat named Edmundo González Urrutia. At campaign events, she carried a poster with González's image, and declared, "If you want to vote for me, vote for him."

Maduro disrupted her appearances by seizing sound systems or shutting down electricity. At times, on her way to an event, Machado found heavy machinery tearing up the ground, or tractors piling soil in the road. She learned to get out of her car and walk, and people began following her, clearing the debris with their hands. "The regime didn't realize that they were turning it into a collective epic," she said.

One day, driving through the western part of the country, Machado stopped at a restaurant off the highway. "A waiter came running over," she recalled. "He



hugged me and said, 'María Corina, I'm your campaign manager in the village next door!' Perplexed, she asked, 'Who appointed you?' The man replied, 'I did!'

The waiter explained that there was no party office in his village, so he'd started one himself. The encounter inspired an idea: the creation of *comanditos*, small units of citizens that could serve as informal party representatives. Machado's team wound up registering nearly seventy thousand such groups. At campaign stops, Machado encouraged people to announce the names that they'd selected for their *comanditos*. In conservative places like Mérida, the names tended toward Holy Virgin and the Trinity. Then, Machado recalled, she showed up at Maracaibo, where the locals are famously profane. "And it was Son of the Big Bitch! I'd tell them, 'Coño, I can't say these names—not during children's hours.'"

As election day approached, the regime ordered the leaders of Machado's campaign to be arrested for plotting against the government, and a group of them took refuge at the Argentinean Embassy. One was Humberto Villalobos, an authority on the regime's subversion of electoral systems who had been tasked with figuring out how to expose Maduro's tactics. "Fraud leaves traces," he told me. "If you know what to look for, you can build a stronger defense."

In Venezuelan elections, each voting machine prints out an *acta*—a document enumerating the votes cast for each candidate. By law, candidates are allowed to register one electoral witness per voting machine, and each is entitled to an *acta*. Villalobos's team concocted a plan: every witness would pass her *acta* to an accomplice, who'd snap a photograph to send to Machado's headquarters. A driver would convey the *acta* to an intermediary, who would take it to a safe location, where a team with a generator and a scanner could make a high-definition copy.

The project was dubbed "600K," for the number of people who would have to take part. At trainings—held online, and in kitchens, basements, and alleyways—people were taught what to do if they were denied an *acta*, and how to

handle the *militares* guarding the premises. Everyone's identity was kept anonymous. Only a handful of people knew the full details of the operation.

Villalobos asked Machado for one big purchase: a hundred and sixty Starlink antennas. The antennas represented a quarter of the campaign budget at the time—but, Villalobos noted, vast areas of Venezuela did not have a reliable internet signal. Antennas were bought in Caracas, or smuggled in from Colombia, packed in with produce and livestock on trucks or hidden in suitcases on buses. They were shipped across the country, under the name of José Gregorio Hernández—a Venezuelan saint and a common name on the voter rolls.

On election day, staffers gathered at Machado's campaign headquarters, a small brick house known as El Bejucal. When the polls closed, at six o'clock, thousands of *actas* started pouring in. Less than an hour later, though, the flow dwindled to a trickle. "What the hell is going on?" a campaign staffer said.

As it turned out, witnesses were being denied access to the *actas*, and in some cases violently ejected. At midnight, the regime made a pronouncement: Maduro had won, with fifty-one per cent of the vote. No precinct-level results or specific vote counts were released. Machado rushed out a statement: "Venezuela has a new President-elect, and it is Edmundo González Urrutia," she said. "We will defend the truth." Then she picked up the phone to rally people trying to retrieve the *actas*.

Not long afterward, the doorbell rang at El Bejucal. On the doorstep, a visibly shaken visitor said, "No one can know that I'm here." The person described being at the National Electoral Council offices when votes were being counted, and said that, as the opposition's numbers increased, "they shut everything down."

Yet the 600K conspirators kept working, at times with help from the *militares*. Early the next morning, the number of submitted *actas* began to rise. The count would eventually surpass eighty per cent—a mathematical point of no return. Even if Maduro won every remaining vote, the opposition could still prove a landslide victory. Soon, Machado shared the results online, and urged

people to take to the streets and denounce the regime's fraud.

By then, though, Maduro's armed loyalists had begun delivering on his promise to unleash a "bloodbath" if he lost. Thousands of people were arrested, beaten, or killed. As Machado led a demonstration in Caracas, a member of her team approached. The regime was investigating the opposition, and rumors were swirling that Machado would be arrested. "You need to go into hiding," the person said.

In the next year and a half, Machado relocated more than a dozen times, taking refuge in people's homes. While she was in hiding, Maduro ordered security forces to employ "an iron fist." People close to Machado were tortured and questioned about her whereabouts, and state agents ransacked El Bejucal, searching for clues. "They were gradually closing in on me," Machado said. Still, she kept communicating with supporters on social media. "You are not alone—they are," she said. "There has already been a change of regime." She maintained contacts with allies, headlining conferences and holding virtual meetings. The day after Rubio was sworn in, he phoned Machado, whom he called the Venezuelan Iron Lady.

When Machado was awarded the Nobel, in October, 2025, she received the news with both excitement and trepidation. Her youngest sister, Clara, remembered being on the phone with her and their two sisters: "We were all, like, 'This is wonderful!' And she kept saying, 'I'm not so sure.'" Machado knew that Trump coveted the award. "From the start, she said, 'What matters to me is how this will affect the only ally that we have,'" Clara recalled.

To accept the prize, Machado first had to figure out how to get out of Venezuela. The Trump Administration recommended seeking help from Bryan Stern, an American military veteran who runs an outfit called Grey Bull Rescue. On December 5th, five days before the ceremony, Machado's team got in touch with Stern, who agreed to facilitate an escape.

Maduro's regime was "full shields up," Stern told me—there were checkpoints on all the major roads. He needed to throw the *chavistas* off the trail. "I know

what they consider to be a reliable source,” he said. “So we fed them.” The plotters circulated rumors that Machado had fled east, through Guyana. Instead, she headed to a marshy beach on the country’s western coast, Stern recalled. After dark, she boarded a skiff manned by two fishermen, who were instructed to travel to a point in the middle of the sea, about fifteen miles from shore.

Stern predicted that the trip would take less than three hours. But, when his crew got to the meeting place, the fishing boat wasn’t there, and calls to Machado weren’t going through. The waves were rough that night—as high as ten feet. Stern knew that, in such conditions, the boat might not be able to use its radar effectively, and there was virtually no moonlight to navigate by. He deliberated with his crew: What if her skiff had already passed in the dark? What if it had sunk?

Finally, one of their calls went through to Machado, who said, “We don’t have the slightest clue where we are.” The fishermen had lost G.P.S. signal hours earlier, and had been drifting. The two teams agreed on a new rendezvous point. A few hours later, Stern saw the skiff swing into view, and shone his flashlight toward it: there was Machado, drenched to the bone. In the rough conditions, she’d suffered a bad fall. Now she felt like a rod had been dug into her spine.

In Oslo, the atmosphere was tense. The Nobel Committee was used to dealing with absent laureates, but it had never waited while a laureate escaped. “It pushed the Norwegians into a situation they never could’ve imagined, given how rule-bound they are,” Meda said. “Two months earlier, they were obsessing over whether she had a peanut allergy or preferred her napkin on the right.”

By the time Machado reached Oslo, she’d missed the ceremony—but she was reunited with her family, for the first time in two years. Outside the Grand Hotel, a crowd of Venezuelans assembled to see her. Around two in the morning, Machado stepped onto the balcony to thunderous applause. She looked strikingly pale, and wore a heavy-lidded expression. She had fractured a vertebra on the journey. “*Valiente, valiente!*” the crowd chanted. A few blocks away, ten



sample *actas* were exhibited in a glass case—they had been smuggled out of Venezuela by volunteers.

In Washington this April, Representative María Elvira Salazar led an offensive on Machado’s behalf. Salazar represents a district in Miami-Dade County, not far from the one that Rubio represented when he was a state legislator. South Florida has a large population of Venezuelan immigrants—a stridently anti-*chavista* voting bloc that many politicians see as crucial to winning elections.

In Congress, a State Department official named Michael Kozak had been brought in to testify about the post-Maduro future. Salazar, a fierce interrogator, chided him about leaving Rodríguez in charge. “We do not like Delcy,” she said. “Delcy is part of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.” She asked whether the Administration had a date for new Presidential elections, and whether it would protect Machado if she went back.

Kozak said, “We expect all the people—including María Corina Machado, who I also respect very much—to be able to go back and participate.” First, though, there were “milestones” that needed to be reached. The initial phase

of Rubio’s plan, stabilization, was done, he said. But phase two, recovery, was still in progress, and required “getting oil-industry revenues flowing back in again.”

Venezuela has an estimated seven-teen per cent of the world’s untapped oil, but these resources were plundered and mismanaged for decades. After Maduro’s capture, the Trump Administration pressed Rodríguez to pass a hydrocarbons law that incorporated longstanding demands from oil companies. Still, there have been only modest investments, mainly from companies like Chevron, which has been operating there for years. For many potential investors, an underlying concern is how long the Americans would enforce a receptive environment. “It’s not enough for the United States to simply say, ‘Invest,’” Luisa Palacios, a Venezuelan expert at Columbia’s Center on Global Energy Policy, said. “I don’t believe real recovery—economic or national—is possible without a political transition.”

This spring, Machado spoke at CERA-Week, an energy conference in Houston. From a ballroom stage, she addressed the crowd in the tones of a startup founder pitching investors. “I am here to speak about our future—a future which is *extraordinary*,” she declared. “And I want all of you to be part of it.” The



"I also treat my body like a temple—an ancient structure in desperate need of repair, long ignored and of rapidly decreasing significance to a largely indifferent society."

country's oil production could quintuple, she said—if the right leader was in charge. She vowed to usher in "clear rules, stable conditions, and a legitimate, democratic government you can really rely on." There'd be a new, independent hydrocarbon agency, and royalties would be kept low. The "Venezuelan state will get out of the way," she promised.

The consensus at CERWeek was that Machado had made an enticing case, Francisco Monaldi, the director of Rice University's Latin America Energy Program, told me. But executives were skeptical that she would have a chance to prove herself anytime soon. The Trump Administration has control of Venezuela's oil revenues, and has authorized the disbursement of more than six billion dollars to Rodríguez's government, according to a senior U.S. official.

In the meantime, Rodríguez has been solidifying her influence in Washington—hiring a lobbyist and cultivating people who might benefit from stalling a transition. "No one in the Republican Party wants to talk about elections," a Republican aide told me. "Many people are thirsty for Venezu-

ela's resources. Those interests override everything else."

Rodríguez's advocates include Richard Grenell, who, as Trump's representative, held negotiations with the regime before Maduro's ouster, and Harry Sargeant, a prominent Republican donor who recently began exporting Venezuelan crude. Perhaps most significant is Mauricio Claver Carone, who previously served as Trump's special envoy to Latin America and remains hugely influential. Carone, who has been described as the "Jared Kushner of Latin America," manages a private-equity fund, and is said to be promoting his own interests in Venezuela. (Carone denies having any investments in the country.) The longtime operative said, "There's an economic clique whose priority is to extract as much money as possible before Trump leaves office, and that means keeping Delcy in power."

Throughout the spring, Machado made appearances at which she was treated almost like a head of state. She met with Emmanuel Macron at the Élysée and with Giorgia Meloni at the

Chigi Palace. In Madrid, she held a rally that drew more than ten thousand supporters to a vast square at the heart of the city. Onstage, she proclaimed, "We Venezuelans are sending a clear message to the world: Venezuela *will* be free, because that is what we Venezuelans have chosen!"

Not long afterward, she summoned the leaders of the main opposition parties to a meeting in Panama City, where they issued a manifesto declaring her the "steward of the country's democratic process." Yet people in Venezuela saw few indications of an incipient transition. López Maya, the historian, noted that after the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez died, in the thirties, prison gates were opened. "Political prisoners ran out to the sea and threw their shackles in the water," she said. Since Maduro was deposed, only one detention center has ceased operations. Hundreds of political prisoners remain in custody. And, though Rodríguez passed a law offering amnesty to dissidents, the language seems designed to exclude Machado and her allies.

Venezuelans often compare the regime to a hydra, with only one of its heads chopped off. The *chavistas* still control the country's institutions, including the Supreme Court and the National Electoral Council. Diosdado Cabello, who spent years overseeing Maduro's apparatus of repression, remains in the cabinet. Despite having a twenty-five-million-dollar U.S. bounty on his head, Cabello has participated in meetings with Trump officials, whom he has called "the real pirates of the Caribbean." His language toward the opposition has been no less scathing. After the 2024 election, he declared, "*Los vamos a joder*"—"We're going to fuck them."

In recent months, the regime has worked to displace Machado from the public consciousness. After a television network aired a clip of her promising to return to Venezuela, Cabello threatened retribution. "Machado is running out of options," he said on his weekly TV show, "Beat Them with a Club," adding, "Her room to maneuver is shrinking at break-neck speed." In Caracas, the government has hung posters depicting Rodríguez on a blue backdrop, a color associated with the opposition, alongside the words "Delcy, move ahead, you have my trust."

Yet the earthquakes exposed the re-

game's precarity. It took the government roughly seventy-two hours to dispatch rescuers to La Guaira, where the damage was most severe. And, when the military was eventually deployed, the most visible intervention was thousands of armed men controlling traffic and standing idly by the ruins. In a visit to a stricken area, Rodríguez was booed and shouted down. She had dismissed the criticism of her government as the product of a "media laboratory." But a recent poll showed that more than ninety per cent of Venezuelans disapproved of her leadership. Even Trump, who was the most popular politician in Venezuela after Maduro's arrest, has seen his ratings slide.

Initial estimates show that the earthquakes caused more than six billion dollars in damage. For Benigno Alarcón, a prominent political analyst in Caracas, the flow of recovery funds presented opportunities for corruption. "This is where the rush for spoils begins," he said. "And there lies the fatal mistake of moving forward without institutions." Alarcón went on, "A tragedy of this magnitude could have given Rodríguez's government an opportunity to earn some legitimacy through its actions, despite lacking legitimacy at the start." Instead, the regime had floundered. "White House officials must be asking themselves whether it is even possible to rebuild the country with these people still in power," he said.

The Administration remained committed to Rodríguez, at least in public. The U.S. chargé d'affaires in Caracas, John Barrett, defended her handling of the disaster, noting that her government had been "fully compliant" with the United States. Even as an estimated fifty-thousand Venezuelans are missing, Barrett chose to emphasize that the oil industry remained intact, and that "production continues." When protesters gathered outside the U.S. Embassy, Barrett asked to have them cleared away. Story, the American diplomat, said, "Unless democracy is restored soon, we're just working towards a more profitable authoritarian regime."

Al along, Machado has maintained that Trump's vision for Venezuela is aligned with hers—a claim that seems harder and harder to sustain. In promoting an intervention, she yielded

some real part of her agency to the United States. For nearly half a year now, the Administration has been stalling her return; at one point, Trump officials offered to have her named Secretary-General of the United Nations. Meanwhile, the longtime operative said, "Trump uses the María Corina issue to keep Delcy on her toes—'Don't get too comfortable, because at any moment I can send María Corina after you.'" Recently, the Administration announced that Rodríguez had agreed to talks with a group of opposition figures. But, instead of including Machado, the U.S. promoted another exiled leader, Dinorah Figueroa, who is seen as more conciliatory.

As Machado prepared to return to Venezuela after the earthquake, Trump evidently set aside his reservations. He called Rodríguez and told her not to allow Machado to be harmed. But then her flight was diverted, apparently on orders from someone in the Administration. Though Machado's U.S. counterparts assured her that it was all a misunderstanding, the longtime operative described it as the result of infighting. "There are factions regarding Venezuela," he said. "And the faction that's winning today says, Don't rock the boat between now and November."

The day after her flight was grounded, Machado flew to Panama City, planning to catch a plane from there to Venezuela. Before she could board, an official from the airline called and told her that Rodríguez's government had threatened to revoke its license if she were allowed on the plane. Machado issued a frustrated message to followers. "I will be in Venezuela so we can mourn our losses together, pray together, hold one another, and organize ourselves," she insisted. "I will do *whatever* it takes for us to be together."

Not long afterward, I reached Machado at a hotel in Panama. The rescue efforts in Venezuela were flagging. Morgues were at capacity, so corpses had been laid in a parking lot, then moved to a seaport, where the stench of death hung heavy. Thousands of families continued to search for loved ones, with little help. "This earthquake shook the foundations of everything," Machado said. "It caused all the masks to fall away."

There was a note of exhaustion in

Machado's voice. She has characterized her return as "a stabilizing force." But it is also possible that conflicts over who is the rightful leader of Venezuela will inspire violence—particularly from the supporters of the regime, who have the majority of the country's guns. Even Machado has argued that if "there is growing anxiety that the regime might prevail unchecked, the risk increases that the situation could become chaotic."

As if to convince herself, Machado repeated one of her most fundamental ideas. "The people *do* matter," she said. "And I was, in fact, elected. I have what's most valuable—people's trust."

Recent polls show that Machado is the only politician whom a majority of Venezuelans support. In private, Rubio has promised that elections would take place—but did not commit to a date. In Machado's absence, the Venezuelan opposition has been hobbled, as the accommodationists try, with little success, to effect change from the inside. Machado's party, Vente Venezuela, is essentially just a vehicle for her. It isn't registered officially; the National Electoral Council never accepted the applications. "If Machado fades politically, there's very little chance of democratization," López Maya said.

In Panama, Machado was still insisting on her version of political reality. She said that she remained in contact with Trump's people, but didn't address the underlying question of why the Administration hadn't interceded on her behalf. I asked if she had ever doubted the Americans' commitment to democracy in Venezuela. "The Secretary of State has repeatedly assured me of it, and I take him at his word," she said.

When I asked whether her current situation could have been prevented, she shot back, "What situation?"

"The limbo of being in Panama, unable to enter Venezuela," I said.

"I'm not in limbo," she countered. "I'm in the middle of a process, like so many times before, working harder than ever, coordinating with our people, leveraging support from all over the world." The only uncertainty she would allow was around a question of efficiency. "When we look back," she said, "we may find that there was a faster way to carry this through." ♦

LETTER FROM TENNESSEE

DRIVEN

Few people know guardrails can be deadly. Steve Eimers wants to fix them all.

BY CHARLES BETHEA



Eimers roams the country inspecting highway barriers for fatal flaws.

Steve Eimers met Melissa Falk at Bethel Baptist Christian Academy, in upstate New York, when she was a senior and he was a junior transfer student. Steve, the son of a local preacher, bet a classmate that he'd be dating Melissa by Christmas; to expedite the process, he superglued his hand to hers in class. He lost the bet, but still managed to win her over. They married in 1996. Their first child, Hannah, arrived three years later. She had her father's blue eyes, and, as she grew up, his sympathy for outcasts and his love of J. R. R. Tolkien became hers, too.

Steve and Melissa homeschooled Hannah. They had moved to eastern Tennessee in 2001, for lower taxes and more land. Steve started a window-washing business, and they began ac-

quiring goats and chickens. Soon, they had two more children. Steve had always imagined that he'd adopt one day, and, when their kids were growing up, he travelled to Eastern Europe with their church to donate supplies to orphanages. In 2007, he and Melissa went to Ukraine, where they met children who, he said, "were going to get trafficked or conscripted—who had no chance." The couple came back with three boys. They had another biological son a few years later. That made seven. Steve thought that was plenty, but, in 2013, he and Melissa heard about a pair of siblings in northern Tennessee, ages nine and thirteen, whose parents were opioid addicts, and so the family took them in, too. Then, in 2016, a friend of Hannah's accidentally became pregnant, and Me-

lissa gave Steve a familiar look. "We were in our early forties," he told me. "We were tired. But Hannah said they were talking about termination." They decided to adopt the baby. That made ten.

The Eimers bunch enjoyed playing Uno—the Ukrainian boys learned the game before they understood English—and walking to local waterfalls together. Hannah was a generous older sister. She'd contributed to the cost of her siblings' adoptions by putting on magic shows, and, once they arrived, gave up her own bedroom. She was bright, curious, cheerful, and easily fixated on unusual things, another quality she shared with her dad. "She'd sing at the top of her lungs in Walmart to test societal norms," Steve told me. She trawled thrift stores and worked at the mall as an Easter bunny. By twelve, she was reading Tolstoy. By fifteen, she'd matriculated at a local community college. The summer after her freshman year, she interned on the set of a Burt Reynolds film. She wanted to work in costume design one day.

Melissa remembers watching Hannah dress up for a party on Halloween in 2016. She was going as an obscure character from a live-action role-playing game. Hannah had told her parents that the party was in Athens, and at first they had assumed she meant Athens, Tennessee, about forty minutes away. But the party was actually in Athens, Georgia: a four-hour drive. That night, Hannah and a friend set out in Hannah's Volvo S80, a car her father had picked because it had a good safety rating. "I remember it like a snapshot," Melissa told me. "Hannah putting on red lipstick and a white shirt, looking in the mirror across the hall. She was super chipper. It was a singsongy goodbye."

In the early hours of November 1st, Hannah was driving home when her Volvo drifted off Interstate 75 and collided with a steel guardrail. She was sober and was going under the speed limit but was tired—she'd nodded off, apparently, as her friend slept in the passenger seat. Hannah's car hit a safety feature known as a terminal end, a black-and-yellow-striped rectangular box at the end of the rail, designed to absorb kinetic energy. In a collision like this, the terminal end should give way and slide along the metal strip of the rail, slowing the car down and forcing the

rail to curl up before it. Instead, this guardrail tore through the Volvo and cut Hannah's body in half.

Steve was filling a coffee mug, preparing to go deer-hunting, when Hannah's friend's mother called to tell him there had been an accident. (The friend was unscathed.) When he reached the authorities, they said that no emergency transport had been dispatched to the scene. Steve understood that this meant there had been no doubt that Hannah was dead. He and Melissa got in their car and drove toward the crash site, but stopped midway. "I lay down in a Walmart parking lot," Steve told me. "I couldn't move. Our pastors came and picked us off the ground and took us home." Eventually, Steve collected some of Hannah's hair from the Volvo's back seat. Months later, Tennessee's Department of Transportation mailed the Eimers household a bill for three thousand dollars, asking Hannah to pay for the guardrail that killed her. (The agency eventually apologized, claiming that there had been "a mistake somewhere in processing.")

One day not long after Hannah's death, Steve Eimers felt an urge to look up "guardrail crashes" on the internet, and discovered hundreds of news stories about cases where people had been maimed or killed when striking them. He learned that what happened to Hannah occurred often enough that the guardrail world has a term for it: "spearing." As he carried out more research, he also came to believe that the guardrail involved in Hannah's crash was defective. In 2017, he filed a wrongful-death suit against Lindsay Corporation, the manufacturer of the rail, alleging that it did not follow federal and state guidelines for the design of guardrails, and that, because the company had failed to provide adequate instructions, the rail had been improperly installed. The suit was settled in 2022 for an undisclosed sum. (The settlement terms prohibit Eimers from discussing what was wrong with the rail involved in Hannah's crash.) After that, Eimers shut down his window-washing business and began to focus full time on a new mission: preventing anyone else from dying the way Hannah did.

Eimers has since driven some forty

thousand miles through twenty-five states to inspect guardrails. "I can identify types of guardrails from satellite view," he told me. "It's urban bushcraft." He documents many of these inspections on his YouTube channel, best known by its handle, @TheGuardrailGuy, where he posts videos of himself roaming the country with calipers, a six-foot level, and an eye for backward bolts and loose cable anchors. The videos, which he broadcasts to some quarter of a million subscribers, have an endearingly unvarnished quality. In a typical one, Eimers might choke up; break down a complicated concept in physics; quote one of his favorite film protagonists, the bumbling shopping-mall security guard Paul Blart; or utter an adopted Southern colloquialism such as "dadgummit."

Melissa is astounded that he has so many fans. She finds the minutiae of guardrails "extremely boring." While she sleeps, Eimers stares at images of guardrails across the world, checking for fatal flaws. Faulty rails spring from his memory the way other people recall bad dates. He told me about a rusted-out guardrail in Townsend, Tennessee, with a mouse living inside of it that bit his finger, and a guardrail in rural Georgia from the fifties that was missing eighty-five bolts. He continued, "I once walked from Constitution Avenue to the White House and found that the five guardrails closest to the President were installed with random parts. They still are."

Based on his research, Eimers believes that there are about a thousand guardrail-related deaths each year in the U.S.—virtually all of them preventable—and tens of thousands of miles of dangerous guardrails presently on the country's roads. He maintains an extensive archive of research, which includes a record of every time a President mentions guardrails (as Donald Trump did in 2018, when he remarked on a "sucker" guardrail: "I want to hire whoever their salesman is . . . that is the worst crap"). In what Eimers calls a "master impalement log," he keeps lists of various kinds of crashes—crashes involving the brand that killed his daughter, crashes involving a rail installed upside down or backward, crashes involving celebrities. Also "oddities," as when "a truck full of Pop-Tarts hits a guardrail days after the inventor of Pop-Tarts dies," leaving Pop-

Tarts "all over Interstate 640." He uses this material to work the press. Jennifer Titus, a Tampa Bay TV reporter, has done dozens of stories with Eimers, and remembers the first call she got from him. "I had no clue what he was talking about," she told me. "I said, 'Look, can you just find me a dozen improperly installed guardrails on Florida roads?'" The next day, he sent her a list of seventy; Titus confirmed their dangers independently. "The state reinspected all the guardrails in Florida as a result of our inquiry," she said. "He files as many open-record requests as I do."

"I know I'm not normal," Eimers told me. "I'm one of those people who count ceiling tiles. My weird brain latched on to guardrails, and it won't let go." A guardrail-company executive recently told me, "Steve evolved from a grieving father to a vindictive-seeming father to a credible individual to the Erin Brockovich of the guardrail industry." He went on, "He's in the top ten per cent of the most knowledgeable people in the room at a meeting of guardrail experts."

On a Saturday in early March, I met Eimers on the shoulder of a four-lane highway outside Lenoir City, Tennessee, the town near Knoxville where he and his family live. Many of his neighbors were fishing for crappie. But for Eimers, who is fifty, it was a big day: he was going to meet his congressman, Tim Burchett, whom he'd been lobbying about guardrails since 2017. As I approached, Eimers, in jeans, a reflective vest, and a cap that read "Guardrail Guy," was looking at a steel rail a few feet from the blacktop. The rail, he said, had been damaged by "reckless pounding." He recalled Trump's rhetoric about bureaucratic obstacles to solving relatively simple problems. "We have the President talking about 'the speed of Trump' and 'we're going to break down these walls,'" he said. "Well, break down *these* walls, for crying out loud!" Soon, Burchett pulled up in an oversized pickup with expired tags. He is a sixty-one-year-old MAGA conservative who lives on a farm and builds longboards from scrap wood. Wearing a suit, seemingly against his will, he offered Eimers a fist bump. "Hey, dude," he said turning to me.

To the casual observer, which is to say virtually everyone, a guardrail is just

a long wavy strip of steel, about a foot wide, set thirty inches or so off the ground, which keeps a car from going off the road. But, in reality, guardrails are carefully calibrated systems of interlocking parts, every one of which is critical to its function. They rely on complex physics to insure that a car that hits the end of a guardrail doesn't get impaled, and that a car that hits it from the side can't crash through. Some guardrail injuries result from antiquated designs, or designs that manufacturers know to be dangerous. Others result from botched installation.

Eimers directed Burchett's attention to the rail he had been looking at, and pointed out that it had a misshapen post, which had probably been damaged during installation. In a head-on crash, posts like these and their special bolt notches should release the rail, causing it to curl up like ribbon beside the vehicle. "I call this the LeBron James post, because when it's hit, it has to flop over," Eimers told Burchett, who stared silently. This one, Eimers went on, was unlikely to do that, because of the bludgeoning of the post and the placement of the bolts. Many guardrails, he added, are even more messed up. In 2022, Eimers bought a few thousand stickers with an arrow and the words "THIS SIDE UP" on them, which he then slapped on guardrails installed backward or upside down. He made a video of the stickers, which has been viewed sixteen million times; a major guardrail manufacturer, Valtir, subsequently produced an installation sticker of its own.

Eimers wants the government to do more to encourage good corporate behavior. "They've abdicated their role to a guy from rural East Tennessee with ten kids, thirty chickens, and a bunch of goats," he said. Burchett, who had previously been in the state legislature and now chairs DOGE's congressional subcommittee, which examines the use and misuse of federal resources, said, "We hated the federal government for good reason. I hate it and I'm *in it* now. I hear you." He told Eimers that he'd try to get a congressional hearing on the topic of guardrails.

After the meeting, Eimers and I drove to his house, where I met Melissa, who was fixing sweet tea, and a few of their children. Then we walked

around the back, to what the family calls Hannah's Garden, a little pergola featuring painted references to some of her favorite things—Dorothy's ruby-red pumps from "The Wizard of Oz," the time machine from the TV show "Doctor Who"—alongside a typewriter and a ukulele. "There wasn't a whole lot to bury," Eimers said, before he turned away and began to cry.

The term "highway" can be traced back to Old English, and originally referred to elevated Roman thoroughfares. In the U.S., the word came into circulation around the start of the twentieth century, to denote roads that were grander and more adaptable than rural post routes, which were maintained by the government, or the longer, privately funded thoroughfares known as "auto trails." In 1921, the Federal Aid Highway Act gave the word an official definition, subjecting it to regulation. At that point, the country had some nine million touring cars, including the popular Ford Model T, which could reach a white-knuckling forty miles per hour. Road surfaces were disconcertingly variable—dirt was most common, but pebbles, bricks, and creosote-soaked wooden blocks were also used. There was no overarching plan connecting the states. As a later report put it, the Federal Aid Highway Act aimed to, at minimum, "get the farmer 'out of the mud.'"

Thirty-five years later, President Dwight Eisenhower signed another



major highway act, which would create more than forty thousand miles of federal highway—still the largest public-works campaign in American history. As cars and roads multiplied, accidents began to pile up; by the mid-sixties, there were more than fifty thousand fatal highway accidents per year. The automobile industry downplayed the dangerous designs of vehicles and pointed to unsafe drivers instead. Many of the highway-

safety features that we consider standard now were afterthoughts. "A lot of people felt you should not light highways—that it was distracting—and that a nice wide median was all you needed between opposing lanes," Earl Swift, the author of "The Big Roads," a history of America's highways, told me. "So these things, like guardrails, came along piecemeal."

The earliest guardrails, constructed in the thirties and forties, basically resembled those of today. But their blunt ends, which did not release upon impact, were even more deadly. In 1932, as the *Times* noted, in one of many such stories, a sailor on furlough died when his Ford V8 Tudor "impaled itself" on a Nebraskan rail. Among the earliest proposed solutions was the turn-down guardrail, which, instead of ending abruptly, gradually slopes downward into the ground.

In March, Eimers and I visited Dean Sicking, a mechanical engineer and an inventor, who has contributed to almost every major guardrail innovation of the past four decades. Sicking, a bearded and bespectacled sixty-eight-year-old, lives with his wife in Birmingham, Alabama, in a large French-country-style house. Sitting in his kitchen, he remarked, dryly, that the turndown was "a brilliant idea, apart from one thing." Where it had prevented the possibility of spearing, it introduced a new problem: the launch. "It's like 'The Dukes of Hazzard,'" Eimers explained.

Sicking has designed and patented groundbreaking safety technologies for football (helmets), equestrian sports (helmets), and hockey (boards). In 2007, President George W. Bush honored him with the National Medal of Technology and Innovation, which hung on one of the walls in his kitchen. Guardrails have proved to be his greatest challenge. He began working on them in 1980, when he was a junior researcher at the Texas A&M Transportation Institute. Using data from General Motors, he started to predict accident rates, and came to believe that safety was a tractable problem. "Our basic philosophy was that running off the road shouldn't carry a death sentence," he said.

Today's guardrails are designed to absorb or redirect collisions coming from angles of less than twenty-five degrees, as the overwhelming majority of

guardrail crashes do. When a vehicle hits the face of the rail—the side you see when driving past—the rail should bend but not break, holding tension, like hockey boards or seat belts. This prevents the car from crashing through the rail—known as “gating”—or flying over it. Though turn-down guardrails can still be found, most now begin and end with the rectangles of steel known as terminal ends. Their ability to absorb the energy of colliding cars—forcing rails to curl up, rather than spear—is the result of decades of clever engineering.

Sicking’s inventions include the ET-2000, patented in 1989, a terminal end that would grab on to a colliding car to slow it down; the Sequential Kinking Terminal, from 1997, which used kinks or bends in the rail to help absorb an impact; and the Next Generation Terminal, the first design to prevent cars from breaching a rail when they hit it from a glancing angle. “Assuming installation isn’t fucked up,” he said.

In America, guardrail systems are sometimes installed—and, much more often, repaired—by local crews of laborers who have no real familiarity with how they work. As one guardrail executive told me, “Often you get guys that are plowing snow in the winter and cutting grass in the summer.” He went on, “They go to a yard where they’ve got a pile of parts—a bracket here, bolt there, a rail that looks like it’ll fit—and they install it.” In guardrail jargon, the practice of assembling a rail with a hodgepodge of parts is known as Frankensteining. Because Frankensteining disrupts the physics involved in guardrail systems, it can be deadly. In 2010, a man in Florida swerved to avoid an animal in the roadway, striking a guardrail maintained by untrained prison inmates. He lost a leg. According to the man’s lawsuit against the state Department of Transportation, the rail had been constructed using a “random collection of parts . . . including an obsolete piece of guardrail built in 1965.” Eimers estimates that about five per cent of the guardrails he inspects are Frankensteined together.

On our visit, Sicking told Eimers that if Hannah had crashed into one of his innovations, correctly installed, she’d be alive. This wasn’t news to Eimers, but he began to sob. Then he suggested

THE PERIOD AT THE END OF A TEXT



PENNÉ

that we take a ride. Eimers drove the two of us to the closest guardrail, which was also the closest defective guardrail. “Dr. Sicking lives around the corner from a monstrosity,” he said.

The rail, which lined a four-lane road near an overpass, was an egregious assembly of one of Sicking’s older designs. “We have some major, major issues here,” Eimers said. He pointed to an empty inch-long opening in the middle of a steel panel, then to a bolt drilled into a post a few inches away. The empty slot was where the bolt should have been. He surmised that the installers had mismeasured the length of the panel and “solved” the problem they’d created by drilling a hole where there hadn’t been one. When struck, this bolt wouldn’t release—the improvised slot was the wrong size—and the rail would not curl up, as it should. Instead, a terminal-end collision would likely result in a spearing or a rolling of the vehicle, Eimers said, and if a vehicle hit it from the side the rail might rupture. Sicking looked on mournfully. “If you’re drilling holes in my guardrail, you’re fucking up,” he said.

I asked Eimers, who once worked as an emergency nurse, how the guardrail might damage a human body if it was hit head on. “A C1 or C2 fracture,” he guessed, referring to potentially fatal neck injuries. “A lacerated aorta. A mutilated victim.” He guided Sicking around some fire ants to inspect a bearing plate—a small piece of metal that anchors the first post to the guardrail

and helps distribute force. It was also misaligned. “They just pounded the ever-living snot out of this,” Eimers said disgustedly.

In April, Eimers and Melissa travelled to Atlanta to meet with a few families who had lost relatives to guardrails. Eimers lists his phone number on his YouTube page to make it easy to reach him. “Every time I see a number I don’t recognize, I get this feeling in the pit of my stomach,” he told me. “But I have to pick up.” All of the families he met that day had relatives who, like Hannah, had been killed on I-75, the highway that runs from near Miami all the way up to the Canadian border. Jaida Payne, a doctoral student in physical therapy, was killed in January, 2023, when she crashed into a damaged rail in Tampa. In March, 2020, Hunter Burns, a garage-door installer, hit a guardrail installed upside down and backward in Bradenton, Florida. That same day, Isabella Alonzo, a high-school senior, hit a Frankensteined guardrail near Warner Robins, Georgia. Payne was twenty-three, Burns twenty-two, Alonzo eighteen.

Eimers had already been in close touch with their parents. “It takes a special kind of person to live through the horror, and then to keep putting himself in position to see it, experience it, on a daily basis,” Cathy Alonzo, Isabella’s mother, told me, of Eimers. “But sometimes you have to slow him down and tell him to explain all these darn guardrail abbreviations in English.” Cathy has a tribute to Isabella

tattooed on her forearm that reads “SHE IS THE MOON, A SHINING LIGHT IN THE DARK SKY.” Mark, her husband, remembered their daughter’s accident and the attempts to save her. “She had a strong heart, and they brought her back four times before she just bled to death. I had to stop them from reviving her, because . . .” He paused. “And the bad thing about it is they left that guardrail there for months.”

Christy DeFilippo, Hunter Burns’s mother, who was wearing a polo shirt with the words #HuntersMom embroidered onto it, described the rail that killed her son. “Instead of crumpling like an accordion, like it’s supposed to, it launched him in the air,” she said. Payne’s father, Stewart, a former Marine drill instructor, had been dabbing his eyes with a napkin. He had recently become the newest member of what Eimers calls his Army of Davids—as in David and Goliath—a group of guardrail-reform advocates which is trying to get companies to release more detailed instructions for installers and lobbying governments to enact installation and maintenance laws. He had started a guardrail-focussed TikTok account called Exit 261, named for the location of his daughter’s death. He described Jaida’s guardrail impact as “like an I.E.D.”

“If that guardrail was repaired right, she would have survived,” Payne said.

“We shouldn’t know each other,” Eimers agreed.

The morning after Eimers showed Burchett the faulty rail near Lenoir City, he forwarded me a bill he’d stayed up late drafting, titled “Guardrail Manufacturer’s Transparency Act.” (He considered putting “IKEA” in the name, to signal the simplicity that guardrail installation should aspire to, but decided against it.) Among other things, the bill sought to mandate clearer labelling for guardrail parts, and to require that manufacturers distribute setup manuals in various languages, including Spanish. He sent it to Burchett’s office, then e-mailed to follow up, writing, “Somebody’s child hangs in the balance.” A few hours later, he e-mailed again with a message about a girl who had just been killed by a guardrail in Maine.

In late April, Eimers went to D.C. to

make his case in person. He wore a “Guardrail Guy” T-shirt, and carried an Emmy won by a TV reporter for a segment they’d worked on together. The city was choked with traffic thanks to a visit from King Charles. Eimers had a tea bag in his pocket, which he occasionally pulled out while remarking, “No kings.” He was accompanied by several families who had been affected by guardrail accidents. One of the people with him was Jett Weinstein, a twenty-year-old from Arizona who lost a leg in 2024, when, on the way back from a snowboarding trip, a car he was in hit a guardrail and was speared. His friend, who was driving, was cut in half and killed. “I’m always in pain,” Jett said, matter-of-factly.

The group’s first meeting was with Steve Cohen, a Democratic congressman representing a West Tennessee district. Seated beneath a poster on the wall reading “One man can make a difference, and every man should try,” Eimers placed the Emmy on a table before him and delivered his pitch. At one point, he offered Cohen the opportunity to be “the Guardrail Guy’s assistant.” Cohen was surprised that systems as complex as guardrails didn’t come with instruction manuals. “It’s hard to believe,” he said. “I’ve got a CD: thirty-two dollars, and it’s got thirty-four dollars’ worth of instructions.”

After bumping into Senator Richard Blumenthal in a hallway—“I’m Steve, the Guardrail Guy,” Eimers began, to Blumenthal’s bewilderment—they met with Senator Mark Kelly, an engineer and a former astronaut who represents Arizona, in Kelly’s office, where he displays one of his old space suits. Kelly was particularly struck by an e-mail from 2005 between executives at Valtir—then known as Trinity—which Eimers had obtained through an anonymous source and printed out. It showed an executive discussing a guardrail the company had modified in 2005, and effectively admitting that it had become more dangerous. “What will be our liability exposure if someone has an accident and the folded rail enters into the vehicle [and] kills or maims someone? Then the lawyer finds this crash test and says that it is inherent to the design for this to happen. It did it during the crash test.” The company, the executive acknowledged, “put a faulty de-

sign into the world.” Kelly kept the printed e-mail.

A few weeks after Eimers’s D.C. trip, Burchett’s legislative director e-mailed him a draft of the Surface Transportation Reauthorization bill. The bill would be part of the proposed reauthorization of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, a trillion-dollar funding package passed in 2021, which expires in September. Of the eight-hundred-odd-page bill, more than eight pages—the entire section on guardrails—were effectively lifted from Eimers’s “Transparency Act.” When Eimers called me to share the news, he was nearly shouting: “It’s almost one per cent my language!” The bill’s text is currently being finalized before a likely vote this fall. In late June, Eimers also learned that the guardrail we looked at with Sicking had been fixed, after the state carried out a reinspection, prompted by a complaint Eimers had filed. The Frankenstein guardrails closest to the White House were finally scheduled for replacement, too, thanks to him. “I often get cynical, because I expect one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turns,” Eimers told me. “I once had someone tell me that the most influential people in history often only ever get a one-degree turn of the ship, which seems inconsequential—but over time you end up at a completely different destination.” He added, “My problem is that I know that I am, on a subconscious level, looking for something that will take away the pain. I could get every highway guardrail in the world fixed, and it wouldn’t fix me or bring Hannah back.”

Eimers is fond of quoting from a scene in Tolkien’s “Return of the King,” when the humble hero Sam thinks, “In the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.” Hannah loved the hope in that line, Eimers told me. He mentioned something she’d written in her diary ten months before she died. “I realized why I’m writing this journal,” she wrote. “I am absolutely terrified I’m going to die and just be another face in the photographs. . . . Names are forgotten. They don’t have stories.” She went on, “As long as I can keep the interest of whoever is reading this, I have a reader. There. Now you’re in my story. Hope that keeps you interested, whoever you are.” ♦



I GIVE MY KID THE TALK

BY JESSE EISENBERG

ME: Come sit down, honey.

MY KID: Is something wrong, Dad?

ME: No, nothing's wrong, sweetheart. Nothing at all. We just need to have a chat.

MY KID: Is it about the broken vase? Because I cleaned it all up!

ME: You did clean it up. You did a great job cleaning that vase up. It's something else. You're getting older, and there are some things you don't know about. And I want you to hear it from me, your father, instead of some kids at school.

MY KID (*fdgety*): O.K.?

ME: We need to talk about Stephen Sondheim.

MY KID: St-st-st-stephen who?

ME: Stephen Sondheim. He was a composer and a lyricist. He wrote the best musicals of the twentieth century.

MY KID (*anxiety building*): Uh, Dad, I don't know if I should hear this.

ME: You have to! The shows are great!

MY KID: O-O-K., Dad.

ME: You've probably heard of some of the more popular ones, like "Sweeney Todd" and "Into the Woods"? Maybe from some of the older kids at school?

MY KID: I did hear an eighth-grade boy say something about "Sweeney Todd."

ME: What did he say, honey?

MY KID: I can't remember. Just something about the score using dissonant chords?

ME: That's right, kiddo. That's very good. What else did he say? It's O.K. Don't be scared.

MY KID: He said something about the lyrics being adjusted for Len Cariou, who was the original Sweeney.

ME: That's true, too. What else?

MY KID: I don't know, Dad, it was confusing. Something about the story being told exclusively through song?

ME: No! That's not true! This is what I was worried about. This is why I'm glad we're having this talk. That older boy is wrong—he's just trying to scare you. "Sweeney Todd" is not exclusively music. There is actually a libretto by Hugh Wheeler.

MY KID: H-h-hugh who?

ME: Hugh Wheeler. A frequent Sondheim collaborator. They met through Hal Prince.

MY KID (*momentarily charmed*): They met through a prince?!

ME: Not a real prince, sweetheart! Just a man named Prince. Now, this older boy—did he mention anything else? Anything that made you feel weird? Did he bring up any of Sondheim's lesser works?

MY KID: Sondheim had lesser works? I'm scared, Dad!

ME: Don't be scared, honey! They weren't lesser in the qualitative sense. Just lesser known. Did he say anything about "Pacific Overtures"? Or "Anyone Can Whistle"? Or "Frogs"? Did this older boy mention "Frogs"?

MY KID (*really nervous now*): When's Mom coming home?

ME: Mom is out all night.

MY KID: But, Dad, I'm tired!

ME: Then drink a cup of coffee! You must know about Sondheim!

MY KID: O.K., O.K.

ME: Good. I'm sorry I got so upset. It's just, he's written so many important songs! (*Composing myself; a beat*) I love you. You know that, right?

MY KID: Yeah, I know.

ME: Good. You might be tempted to go online and watch videos.

MY KID: W-what kinds of videos?

ME: Videos of "Cats," "Les Mis," "Rent."

MY KID: What's wrong with those?

ME: They're not—*real*, honey. They make musicals look fun, but they're not real life. Not like Sondheim's "Company" or "Assassins" or his newly reconsidered "Merrily We Roll Along." Those shows are real. They'll stand the test of time. They'll be revived at City Center and still feel relevant to a modern audience.

MY KID: That's a lot to remember!

ME: Don't worry. You're not navigating this alone. Now I need to know—have any of the older kids invited you to see "MJ the Musical" or "Mamma Mia!" or even "Moulin Rouge"?

MY KID: No, I don't think so.

ME: Good. Those are jukebox musicals. And they killed Sondheim!

MY KID: S-s-sondheim was killed?

ME: Yes, he was.

MY KID (*starting to cry now*): But, Dad! Why?! Why did they kill him?!

ME: Because they were taking shortcuts and pandering. Like parasites, those jukebox musicals wormed their way into Broadway and slowly killed the medium.

MY KID: Daddy, I'm scared! Are the jukeboxes going to kill you and Mama? Or me?

ME: No, sweetheart. As long as they keep reviving Sondheim's work and occasionally gender-swapping Bobby, we'll be fine.

MY KID: Are you sure?

ME: I'm sure, honey. Everything's going to be O.K. (*My kid sniffles and calms down. A nice pause.*)

MY KID: Dad?

ME: Yes, hon?

MY KID: I thought you were going to finally tell me about sex.

ME: No, kiddo. As a Sondheim fan, you'll never have to know about that. ♦



Jake Sullivan, Biden's former national-security adviser, told me, "I will say straightforwardly—we should have put more pressure



A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE ENABLER

How Biden emboldened Israel's aggression toward Gaza—and Iran.

BY DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK

On March 5, 2024, five months into the war in Gaza, Mirjana Spoljaric, the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, sent a confidential letter to President Joe Biden. Under the Geneva Conventions, the Red Cross holds a unique responsibility to counsel states about avoiding war crimes. In the letter, which I obtained from a former United States official, Spoljaric reminded Biden that the organization had condemned the “horrific” October 7th massacre of Israelis by Hamas, and remained “relentless” in pressing the group to release the hostages it had taken. But she was now appealing to Biden “with profound alarm” because Israel, which had been pummeling Gaza with heavy munitions since October, was ignoring the Red Cross as never before. “The way the hostilities are being conducted by Israel is incompatible” with the laws of armed conflict, she wrote, “particularly the obligations to protect civilians and distinguish between military targets and civilians or civilian infrastructure, to ensure dignified treatment of detainees and the dead, to protect medical installations and personnel, and to provide and enable access of humanitarian aid.”

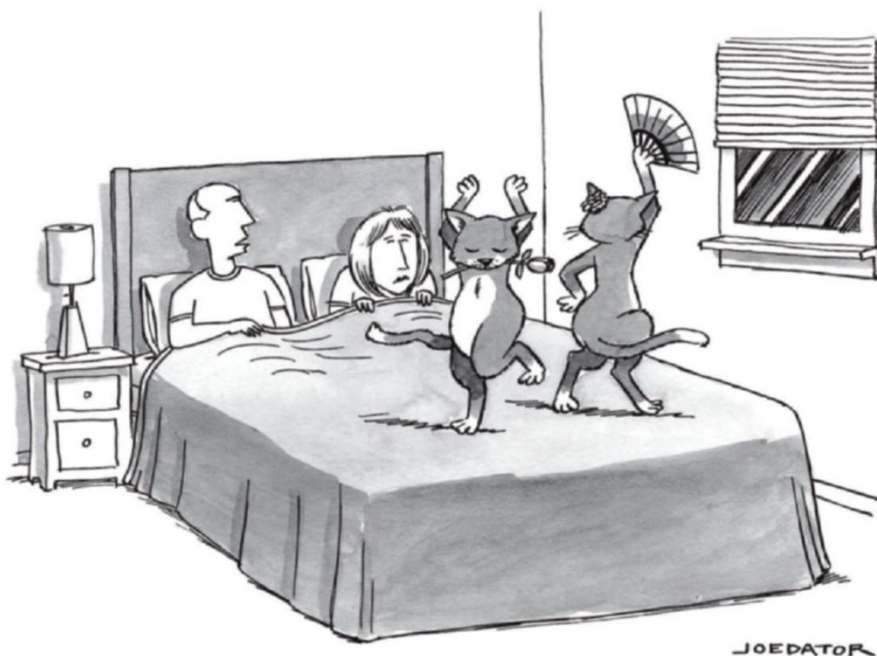
Allowing the Red Cross to visit detainees during a war or an occupation is one of the brightest lines established by the Geneva Conventions. Yet, after October 7th, Israel, for perhaps the first time in its history, fully blocked the organization's access to Palestinian detainees from Gaza and the West Bank, putting it in the company of pariah states such as North Korea and Eritrea; even the warring factions in Yemen allowed Red Cross visits. Spoljaric noted that humanitarian groups and journalists had reported a “massive surge” in the number of Palestinians in Israeli prisons. At least a thousand had been released back into Gaza, and many of them gave accounts of torture, even though the Israeli military had

concluded that they were not Hamas fighters. The *Times* reported that one released detainee, a law student named Fadi Bakr, described being beaten so severely that his genitals turned blue and blood still appeared in his urine weeks later. He said that Israeli guards had played music so loudly that one of his ears bled. (An Israeli military spokesman told the *Times* that the captors followed “Israeli and international law” and played music at a “low volume,” to prevent detainees from coordinating.) But the Red Cross couldn't address such allegations: Spoljaric said that Israel had suspended all “legal-operational dialogue.”

To try to influence Hamas to release hostages, Spoljaric had appealed to Qatar and other patrons of the group; she now implored Biden to “bring about an immediate change” in Israel's conduct. An appendix to the letter cited U.S. laws and Administration policies that prohibited the transferring of weapons likely to be used in war crimes, and Spoljaric urged Biden to withhold weapons “that should not be used in densely populated areas, in light of their devastating humanitarian impacts.” She warned Biden that failing to “uphold minimum standards of humanity” would be a “moral defeat” that “future generations are unlikely to forgive us for failing to avert.”

Two years after Spoljaric's letter, President Donald J. Trump ordered the U.S. military to join Israel in attacking Iran. Some former senior officials in the Biden Administration told me that, in certain ways, the war in Iran was an extension of the Gaza conflict. Iran had been central to Biden's thinking about the Middle East, several top advisers said. He'd feared that any public pressure the U.S. put on Israel—any “daylight” between the allies—could invite attacks by Iran or its Lebanese client, Hezbollah. The U.S. would then be compelled to defend Israel in a regional

on Israel to take a different approach.”



"We should never have taught them flamenco."

conflagration. Brett McGurk, Biden's White House coordinator for the Middle East and probably his most influential adviser, championed this position, arguing that rock-solid support for Israel would help contain Iran, whose proxies killed three U.S. soldiers in the region during the first months of the Gaza conflict.

At the same time, the Biden Administration's staunch public backing of Israel during the Gaza war had created what Philip Gordon, the national-security adviser to Vice-President Kamala Harris, described to me as a "moral hazard"—it had invited the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to try to expand the battle into a regional one. Even though Biden and his advisers privately told Netanyahu many times not to provoke Iran, the Israelis repeatedly blindsided the Americans by doing exactly that: a January, 2024, strike on Damascus killed five senior Iranian military advisers; an April, 2024, strike on an Iranian diplomatic mission in Syria killed more than a dozen; a July, 2024, strike in Tehran assassinated a top Hamas political leader; a September, 2024, operation in Lebanon detonated explosives planted in thousands of walkie-talkies and pagers carried by Hezbollah fighters; a subsequent air strike killed Hezbollah's leader,

Hassan Nasrallah. The Israelis gave U.S. officials no meaningful warning in advance of these attacks, and, in what a former White House official called a "humiliation" of Biden, Netanyahu ordered the Nasrallah assassination just two days after the U.S., France, and several other allies called for Israel and Hezbollah to observe a three-week ceasefire. Yet the White House never publicly criticized Israel for acting unilaterally—and each time one of these actions triggered a clash the U.S. felt compelled to defend Israel. In April and October of 2024, the U.S. helped fend off Iranian counterstrikes so effectively that Israel suffered little harm. After the second round, Biden sent Israel about a hundred U.S. service members and a missile-defense system.

Some Biden advisers privately lamented the fact that U.S. protection was unintentionally encouraging Netanyahu's brinkmanship. Gordon told me, "We could advise them very firmly—and Biden did that with Bibi repeatedly—'Goddammit, take the win and don't drag us into a further war.' But the Israelis knew we were going to defend them." Lloyd Austin, Biden's Secretary of Defense, reportedly likened Netanyahu to a gambler "playing with house money."

As part of these clashes, Israel twice launched significant air strikes on Iran—

the second time ravaging Iran's air defenses. Several Biden Administration officials told me that Netanyahu tried to go further. He sought American support for additional attacks on Iranian infrastructure, and he backed down only reluctantly. But Netanyahu had been asking the U.S. to help him attack Iran for more than fifteen years, and Biden's team felt certain that he'd try again. A former senior Pentagon official told me that, after Trump won the 2024 election, Biden advisers warned their successors that, with Iran the most "vulnerable" it had been in decades, "the Israelis were not going to let this opportunity go." (A former Trump transition official disputed this account.)

Trump went along with Netanyahu. In June, 2025, the Israelis conducted an extended assault that appeared partly aimed at overturning the Iranian government. After about a week, Trump directed the U.S. military to join in a night of air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, perhaps because he feared missing out on a chance to take credit for the blow. But when Trump and Netanyahu launched a surprise attack eight months later, Secretary of State Marco Rubio explained that, this time, the President had decided to strike Iran "preemptively," because "there was going to be an Israeli action" that "would precipitate an attack against American forces." Trump later claimed, unconvincingly, that he'd taken the lead with the Israelis and might even "have forced their hand"; Rubio's account more credibly suggested that the Trump Administration had believed it couldn't stop Israel from launching an attack but would nonetheless shoulder any backlash—a pattern painfully familiar to the Biden White House. Indeed, in retrospect, Biden and his closest advisers seem to have been perversely passive about Israel's dissembling and defiance, especially when it came to the protection of Palestinian civilians.

Jake Sullivan, Biden's former national-security adviser, told me that Biden and his advisers had often privately debated ways to restrain Israel. Inside the Oval Office, Sullivan said, "we repeatedly raised and discussed options for withholding weapons," but, excluding the suspension of one shipment of bombs, "the President always deferred on that decision, because we kept thinking that we were close to getting a deal" for a hostage

release and a ceasefire. Sullivan said, “When you look back at it in the cold light of day, the trap in that kind of thinking is easier to recognize.” He added, “I will say straightforwardly—we should have put more pressure on Israel to take a different approach.”

The Israel Defense Forces say that they always follow the laws of armed conflict and try to minimize civilian harm. But alarms about potential war crimes began ringing inside the Biden Administration soon after Israel began its counterattack on Gaza. By November 1, 2023, the Palestinian death toll was at least eighty-eight hundred, including more than fifty-eight hundred women and children. Israeli jets were conducting as many as eight hundred strikes a day on northern Gaza, and Administration officials who were closely tracking the war told me that Israeli military planners could not possibly have preselected or so quickly identified that many legitimate military targets, such as tunnel entrances, rocket launchers, and Hamas leaders. Nor could the Israelis have carefully weighed whether the risk to civilian lives and infrastructure was proportionate to the military value of each target. Startlingly, the strikes appeared to move in a geographical line from the northeast to the southwest, flattening whole neighborhoods in a way that suggested little differentiation between civilian and military structures. Biden’s Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, anxiously asked his staff how Israel could justify this scale of destruction. A senior State Department official told me, “We were all shocked at how aggressive and deadly it was, and asking, ‘What the fuck are they doing?’”

The *Times* later reported that, on the day of the Hamas massacre, the Israeli military formally revised its “rules of engagement” so that mid-level officers could authorize strikes that risked killing up to twenty civilians in order to take out a rank-and-file Hamas fighter. Previous rules had allowed strikes that risked up to five civilian deaths, or in certain cases ten. Former U.S. officials pointed me to an article in the Tel Aviv-based news site +972 about the war’s first weeks, which they said was consistent with intelligence reports. According to the article, during this period Israeli war planes deliberately targeted civilian structures such as office

towers, apartment buildings, government ministries, utility companies, banks, and universities. Israel used phone calls, texts, and air-dropped flyers to warn civilians to evacuate, but, the article reported, it appeared to be more lax about those precautions than it had been during previous conflicts. These “power targets,” which were attacked in an effort to terrorize Palestinians into pressuring Hamas to capitulate, accounted for about half the strikes in the first five days of Israel’s air campaign. (A spokesman for the I.D.F. denied to me that it had hit civilian targets to pressure the population.)

Blocking humanitarian aid as a method of warfare violates the laws of armed combat, and a decades-old U.S. law bars the provision of weapons to any government that restricts the delivery of American-supported assistance. Before the war, Gaza imported about five hundred truckloads of food and supplies each day, through multiple border crossings. Two days after October 7th, Israel shut all the crossings down. Yoav Gallant, Israel’s Defense Minister, said that he’d ordered a “complete siege”: “No electricity, no food, no water, no fuel—everything will be closed. We are fighting human animals, and we are acting accordingly.”

Blinken flew to Israel a few days later. He met with Netanyahu and Gallant, and, according to people present, told them that letting in food was not only “a moral responsibility” but also “a strategic imperative and a legal imperative.” Yet Netanyahu wouldn’t budge until Blinken threatened to cancel a planned visit by Biden. Even then, Netanyahu agreed to let in only a small amount of supplies, which would have to come through Rafah, on Gaza’s border with Egypt; he also asked that this minor concession remain secret. He feared a domestic backlash for *not* starving Gaza’s women, children, and other civilians. Biden made his visit, and as he left Netanyahu bragged publicly that he’d defied the President. He declared that Israel “will not allow humanitarian assistance” from “our territory into the Gaza Strip.”

The Israeli military was so resistant to allowing in humanitarian aid that, virtually every day during the conflict, Blinken and Sullivan had to spend part of their limited time with Israeli officials haggling over such details as the number of trucks that could enter Gaza. Israeli in-

spectors maintained a constantly shifting list of items that were barred for having potential “dual uses” as weapons—fertilizer might be used in explosives, tent poles might become javelins, and so on. Certain medical equipment was sometimes forbidden, including oxygen cylinders, X-ray machines, and even childbirth kits (which held small scissors). And any truck containing a single forbidden item could be turned back, no matter how innocuous the rest of its contents.

In December, 2023, two months into the war, United Nations staff in Gaza reported to the State Department that the I.D.F. had been depositing scores of Palestinian detainees at a Gaza border crossing at night, in the freezing cold. They had been cleared of any military role in Hamas, and many said that they’d experienced horrific abuse. The State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor took steps to invoke the decades-old U.S. statutes known as the Leahy Laws, named for the former senator Patrick Leahy, which block the provision of assistance to any military unit credibly accused of a “gross violation” of human rights. But, under a special procedure negotiated with Israel, this process happened behind closed doors over many months, and it had no effect on Israel’s actions in Gaza.

The scorched-earth tactics of Israel’s assault concerned the Biden Administration for hard-nosed reasons. Biden and his team had entered office determined to restore at least symbolic American support for the formation of a Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank. Given that roughly equal numbers of Muslims and Jews lived in territory now under Israeli control, the logic went, peaceful coexistence with a Palestinian state was the only way to keep Israel secure, Jewish, and democratic—and was therefore a core American national interest, even if Netanyahu and members of his Cabinet had repeatedly vowed never to allow it. Former officials told me that, during Biden’s first year in office, Blinken had challenged Netanyahu: “No one’s going anywhere, no matter what some people on both sides want. So how does this end?”

After winning the 2016 election, Trump, disdainful of international law and untroubled about the fate of the

Palestinians, became the only President in fifty years not to support Palestinian self-rule. But Biden's Presidential transition team drew up detailed plans to restore what Trump had undone. The Biden Administration would promptly reinstate a fifty-year-old U.S. policy declaring Jewish settlements in the West Bank to be in violation of international law; reimpose a requirement that imports from the West Bank be labelled as such, rather than as "Made in Israel"; and reopen the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem, which had served as a de-facto diplomatic mission to the Palestinians. A former transition planner described the strategy to me as "rip the Band-Aid off."

By October 7, 2023, Biden still hadn't carried out these plans, which have not previously been disclosed, in part because of anticipated Israeli push-back. But some U.S. officials, led by Blinken, attempted a new gambit to bring about Palestinian statehood. Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, had signalled a willingness to normalize relations with Israel in exchange for access to U.S. nuclear technology. He was happy to accept only lip service from Israel about the future of the Palestinians, but Blinken and other U.S. diplomats pushed the Saudis to demand a more ironclad commitment to a two-state solution. Former officials told me that, inside the White House, Blinken argued that normalization was "the one leverage point we had" to get Israel to reopen "a pathway for the Palestinians."

The apparently indiscriminate Israeli bombing that followed October 7th also undermined other Biden Administration priorities. Austin, Biden's Secretary of Defense, was a retired Army general who had fought in every major U.S. military action since 9/11. He often said he'd learned that causing unnecessary civilian harm made it harder for a military to achieve its objectives, from capturing territory to defeating an insurgency. "You create more terrorists," Austin said. Under his influence, Biden had done more than any President since the Second World War to institutionalize the wartime protection of civilians. In his first foreign-policy address, Biden announced that he

was cutting off Saudi Arabia's access to some of the American-made munitions that it had been dropping on Yemen for six years. These air strikes, intended to defeat the Iranian-backed side of the Yemeni civil war, had killed more than eighteen thousand civilians, at an average rate of more than three thousand a year—a number that was considered astronomical before Israel's campaign in Gaza. Blockades by the Saudis and

the Emiratis led to a famine that killed many thousands more. Echoing Austin, Biden called the Yemen war a "humanitarian and strategic catastrophe" that "has to end." The factions reached a ceasefire the next year.

One of Austin's signature achievements as Secretary of Defense was the adoption of a formal policy to

reduce civilian harm by U.S. forces and their military partners. Biden's State Department committed to a complementary policy—Civilian Harm Incident Response Guidance—mandating an investigation of any report that a foreign military had deliberately, or even negligently, used U.S. weapons to hurt civilians. In early 2023, Biden issued a policy banning a transfer of U.S. weapons if they were "more likely than not" to be used in war crimes—even without proof of a specific atrocity. A State Department press release said that the policy codified "the principles the Administration have been operating under since Day-1."

Everyone who spoke to me insisted that Biden—whatever indications later emerged of his cognitive decline—played a vigorous role in Gaza policy. He bragged that his experience in the region extended back to the early seventies, when he'd visited Israel as a senator, and he remained so confident in his expertise that he often patronized even his most senior advisers. Blinken, who was sixty-one on October 7th, had worked at Biden's side for decades, in the Senate and in the Obama White House. His position at the State Department put at his disposal the insights of the U.S. Foreign Service, which included seasoned diplomats who, unlike the circle around Biden, had spent years living in the Middle East. Sullivan, who was

forty-six at the start of the conflict, was a former Rhodes Scholar and Supreme Court clerk who'd been at the center of the Democratic foreign-policy establishment for more than a decade. Yet, White House officials told me, Biden sometimes brusquely dismissed the views of both men, raising his voice as though berating children. (Biden, through a spokesperson, declined to speak with me.)

After the horrors of the October 7th attack, no one in the Administration questioned Israel's right to retaliate. Nor did anyone question the imperative for U.S. military backing. But the White House disagreed with Netanyahu about how best to crush Hamas. Biden, Blinken, and Sullivan all worried privately that the ferocity of Israel's retaliation could put U.S. forces at risk, complicate negotiations to release the hostages, and undermine the region's long-term stability.

Several days after the attack, Netanyahu surprised the White House by ordering preemptive air strikes against Hezbollah. As Israeli warplanes were preparing to bomb Lebanon, Biden, in a hurried phone call, urged Netanyahu to ground them, stressing that the U.S. wasn't yet ready to defend its forces or Israel from any blowback. One U.S. aircraft-carrier group had just arrived in the region, but a second was still on the way. A newly formed Israeli war cabinet, part of an emergency unity government, was already divided over the wisdom of the attack, and Netanyahu agreed to call it off. But Biden's appeals for restraint were less successful once those U.S. forces were in place.

The next week, in a speech from Tel Aviv, Biden publicly acknowledged his concerns, advising Israelis to avoid the mistakes that the U.S. had made in its responses to 9/11. "While you feel that rage, don't be consumed by it," he said, adding, "The vast majority of Palestinians are not Hamas." Privately, Biden and his advisers used the visit to Israel to try to persuade Netanyahu's war cabinet to postpone an invasion of Gaza. The Americans warned—correctly, as it turned out—that Israeli troops would get bogged down in a ground war that would hinder efforts to negotiate the release of the hostages, a dozen of whom held American passports. An invasion would also drive Hamas further under-



ground. The Biden team argued that precision strikes facilitated by U.S. intelligence could kill the greatest number of culpable leaders faster and more effectively. That had been the lesson of America's wars against the Taliban, the Iraqi insurgency, and ISIS, and the White House dispatched a three-star general and other senior officers to share with the I.D.F. their battlefield experience.

At one meeting, McGurk made this case to Benny Gantz, a former Israeli Defense Minister and a moderate rival of Netanyahu who had joined the war cabinet. According to people familiar with the meeting, Gantz insisted that Israeli troops had to move into Gaza immediately, both to extinguish the Hamas threat and to deter other enemies. On a piece of paper, he sketched a map of how the territory should look after the operation: divided into sections by an Israeli-controlled corridor, and surrounded by a cordon of Israeli military forces, so that "anyone looking into Gaza would see the backs of Israeli soldiers." (Netanyahu and other Israeli officials seldom articulated such specific goals, yet the I.D.F. now occupies these positions, and more, in Gaza.)

Several senior Biden advisers told me that they'd privately pushed to get Netanyahu to clarify Israel's objectives. On October 7th, he vowed to "destroy" Hamas and turn anywhere it operated "into rubble." This sounded to them like a promise to kill every last fighter—an impossible goal that would lead to endless war. Moreover, officials across the Administration agreed that any lasting defeat of Hamas would require a credible alternative Palestinian government to assume control of Gaza.

A paper circulated by the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs argued that Biden should follow the model of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Before Roosevelt sent U.S. troops to defend Britain from Hitler, he'd required Winston Churchill to sign the Atlantic Charter, which clarified that the Allies were fighting to liberate Europe, not to preserve Britain's colonial empire in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. By this logic, the U.S. had the most leverage to get Israel to commit to a realistic goal for the war before expediting weapons sales and committing to billions of dollars in assistance.

The three-star general and his delegation also attempted to get the I.D.F. to define its operation more concretely. Eventually, on November 1, 2023, during a diplomatic summit in Tokyo, Blinken unveiled a wish list of "key elements" that the U.S. sought in postwar Gaza, including "no forcible displacement of Palestinians," "no re-occupation of Gaza," "no reduction of territory in Gaza," and "Gaza unified with the West Bank under the Palestinian Authority"—the Western-backed governing body once envisioned as the nucleus of a future state.

The next day, Christopher Le Mon, the deputy assistant secretary for the State Department's bureau of human rights and one of the Administration's most vocal critics of Israel's conduct, sent Blinken a classified note urging him to warn Netanyahu of the Biden Administration rule banning the transfer of weapons "more likely than not" to be used in war crimes, and of the requirement to investigate specific allegations of harm done to civilians. In public appearances, Le Mon wrote, U.S. officials should avoid "dismissing civilian harm as inevitable."

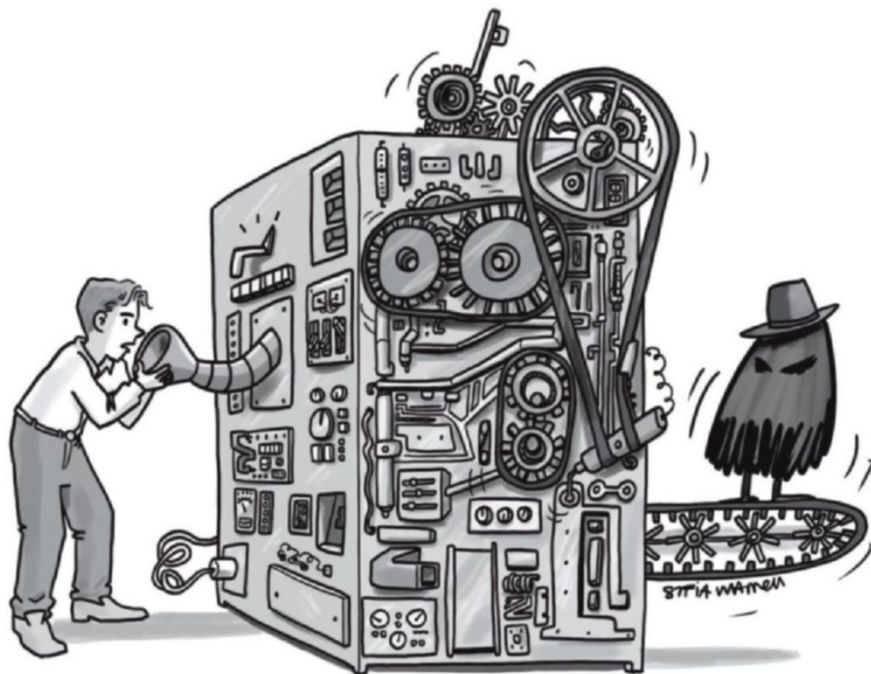
Blinken flew to Tel Aviv, and in a television interview he appeared to echo Le Mon by observing that Israel's failure to protect civilians "plays into the hands of Hamas." But he said nothing publicly about war crimes or U.S. obligations.

In December, 2023, when the Palestinian death toll surpassed seventeen thousand, Defense Secretary Austin declared in a speech that better protecting civilians was "a strategic imperative": "If you drive them into the arms of the enemy, you replace a tactical victory with a strategic defeat." (In a television interview, the Republican senator Lindsey Graham called Austin "naïve," claiming that Palestinians were already "radicalized" and taught "to hate the Jews.") Blinken met with Israel's war cabinet and argued that no military operation alone could kill an ideology like Hamas's.

Still, Netanyahu refused to spell out a more feasible objective of the military operation. In fact, he expanded his stated goal to "total victory"—whatever that meant. And Biden and his advisers all but gave up on pinning him down. Amos Hochstein, a senior adviser to the President who was born in Jerusalem to American parents, told me, "We tried, but we had no chance of success, in retrospect, because Netanyahu wasn't talking to us—he was talking to his own public." Indeed, senior White House officials described themselves to me as almost powerless in the face of Israel's emotional response to October 7th. Blinken told me, "This was a societal trauma that, rightly or wrongly, was seen as existential."

A senior Israeli official involved in conversations with the White House

MACHINE THAT EXTERNALIZES YOUR PROBLEMS



said that there'd been a pervasive "mentality gap." Whereas the Americans sought detailed advance planning, the Israelis demanded immediate military action, even though each step had to be improvised. Moreover, the official said, Netanyahu feared that declaring specific end goals in Gaza would set off disputes in his Cabinet and fracture his fragile coalition. In any case, the Biden Administration's grudging acquiescence now looks like the beginning of a pattern of credulous capitulation. Even as Blinken outlined America's vision for postwar Gaza, Netanyahu was already defying it. Israel had ordered open-ended evacuations from Gaza City that resembled forcible displacement. Netanyahu had rejected any role in Gaza for the Palestinian Authority (without publicly endorsing an alternative). He had also hinted at an occupation, vowing that after the war Israel would assume "overall military responsibility" for Gaza.

Nevertheless, in December, 2023, Biden went around Congress to authorize the emergency sale of millions of dollars' worth of weapons to Israel. Soon after, he pushed Congress to pass an additional \$8.7-billion assistance package, which he signed into law in April, 2024. The Biden Administration ultimately agreed to sell Israel more than twenty billion dollars' worth of weapons during the Gaza campaign, on top of the \$3.8 billion in military aid that the U.S. provided annually. Whatever Administration officials were saying behind the scenes, these commitments of military assistance publicly conveyed full-throated support for Israel's vague goal of "total victory."

Whether and how to use America's military support as leverage to restrain the Israeli operation was debated for months inside the White House. About seventy per cent of Israel's weapons, including nearly all its missiles, aircraft, and bombs, came from the U.S. Finding an alternative supply during a war would have been almost unthinkable.

Jon Finan, Biden's deputy national security adviser, was a former correspondent for the *Washington Post* who had covered previous Israeli military operations in Gaza. Finan oversaw a small team of National Security Council staffers who presented various ways to re-

strict Israel's use of U.S. weapons without undermining its security. These included withholding America's largest bombs, which the Red Cross had deemed inappropriate for use in densely populated areas like Gaza; withholding some exclusively offensive weapons; and allowing the use of certain weapons only outside Gaza. Biden had already vowed that the U.S. would severely punish any opportunistic attack on Israel. ("Don't. Don't. Don't," he warned more than once.) Surely, some American officials argued, the threat of superpower retaliation would help deter Iran or its allies, even if the U.S. was simultaneously limiting Israel's assault on Gaza.

During the first months of the war, Biden and his top advisers began debating whether the President should de-

liver what some called a "tough love" speech, bypassing Netanyahu and addressing Israelis directly. Biden, in the weeks after his empathetic speech in Tel Aviv, was more popular in Israel than its Prime Minister. Capitalizing on that credibility, Biden would argue that an all-out war, though it might satisfy a hunger for revenge, would needlessly harm innocent civilians, isolate Israel, and doom Israeli Jews to perpetual conflict with a growing Palestinian population under Israeli rule. By contrast, pursuing a narrower fight against the terrorists behind the October 7th attack could free the hostages, bring about normalized relations with Saudi Arabia, and possibly lead to a secure coexistence with a Palestinian state. If this path were pursued, the U.S. would assure Israel's

CUL-DE-SAC

Like all tyrants,
my mother made
decrees. The last
straw was the law
that said: no frogs
inside the house.
The lousy universe!
I was seven and ready
to flee with nothing. At
least take a sandwich,
my mother said,
tucking a foil brick
into the kerchief
I'd tied to a stick. I
was a real hobo.
I barely watched her
watch me walk off.
I got all the way
to the cul-de-sac
and sat down to eat.
It was a sandwich
full of grief—
grief and salt,
grief and tomatoes,
grief and cheese.
How far into
far did I go?
How is it
my glass of milk
was still cold
when I got home?

—*Andrea Cohen*

security at every step. There was no guarantee that such a speech would convince Israelis. But it would at least clarify that the Biden Administration would be making its own judgments about U.S. interests—not simply deferring to Netanyahu.

But Biden and his advisers remembered previous diplomatic and political tangles with Israel over Gaza. In 2014, President Barack Obama had responded to a clash between Israel and Hamas by saying that he was “deeply concerned” about the disproportionate killing of Palestinian civilians. After two days of fighting, Obama publicly offered to help mediate a ceasefire; after twelve days, he pressed Israel to declare one unilaterally. Congressional Republicans, and some Democrats, torched him for rewarding “terrorists,” and Netanyahu defiantly waged a seven-week ground invasion anyway. The Israeli death toll was seventy-three; about twenty-two hundred Palestinians died. So when another round of violence broke out in May, 2021, Biden chose to publicly express only support for Israel’s response. Israeli air strikes destroyed scores of civilian buildings, including several residential towers, fifty-three schools, seventeen medical facilities, and the bureaus of both Al Jazeera and the Associated Press. At least two hundred and sixty Palestinians were killed; rockets from Gaza killed thirteen Israelis. But Biden didn’t join calls for a ceasefire until Israel’s military leaders signalled their readiness. White House officials boasted anonymously to journalists that Biden’s “hug-Bibi strategy”—“I don’t agree with you, but I love you”—had ended the fighting in eleven days, more quickly than Obama’s public hectoring had. For Biden, a senior White House official told me, the episode reinforced the sense that “public daylight between the U.S. and Israel could actually be counterproductive.”

The “no daylight” approach was especially appealing to the White House in the months after October 7th because Netanyahu and Ron Dermer, his longtime adviser and emissary to Washington, kept insisting that they expected the fighting to be over very soon. “Just two more weeks,” they repeatedly promised. As one White House official told me, “If it is just a few more weeks, why have a huge fight with Israel?” Another official said, “We thought that this could,

would, and should be over in December.”

Yet Israeli leaders frequently said that some new revelation—about the extent of Hamas’s tunnel network, for example—had forced an extension of their battle plan. After the death toll from Israel’s assault on Gaza City hit ten thousand, Blinken personally implored Dermer, Netanyahu, and Michael Herzog, the Israeli Ambassador to Washington, “Don’t do in the south what you did in the north!” But, on December 1, 2023, Israel laid siege to Khan Younis, in the middle of the Strip, and by December 20th the total death toll had hit twenty thousand. Sullivan then demanded assurances from Dermer and Herzog that the campaign wouldn’t extend further, according to two officials familiar with the conversations: “After Khan Younis, you are going to want to go to Rafah!” The Israeli officials insisted, “No, no, no, we are not going to go after Rafah!” Yet, by January, 2024, Netanyahu had signalled that Israel would indeed take Rafah, and he soon accused anyone who questioned that plan—implicitly, Biden—of “essentially telling us, ‘Lose the war.’” Netanyahu promised, “We won’t capitulate to any pressure.”

In early 2024, Blinken told Dermer, “I don’t want to hear that phrase ‘two more weeks’ ever again!” Dermer responded with a joke: “O.K., I will say ‘fortnight.’” Blinken told me, of the Israelis, “Were they being genuine, or were they being disingenuous? I think it’s a combination.” He added, “I would take them at their word, certainly into very early ’24—less so as time went on, and that was a huge frustration.” (A senior Israeli official insisted that Netanyahu and Dermer had, at each moment, accurately relayed what they heard from the Israeli military.)

Other officials told me that, in meetings of White House staff, Finer, the deputy national-security adviser, often asked what civilian death toll would be deemed unacceptable. Where was the line? Finer declined to comment on such internal conversations but said, of the Israelis, “It’s obvious now, and was pretty clear then, that they simply did not tell us the truth about their plans and their timelines, and it made no sense to accept those claims at face value.” Indeed, several Biden officials told me they came to believe that the Israeli leaders had

continued to repeat “two more weeks” in part to buy more time before, as one put it, “the U.S. brought down the hammer.”

By February, 2024, there were hints that the hammer might, in fact, come down. Senator Chris Van Hollen, a Maryland Democrat, proposed a controversial amendment to the bill providing Israel military aid. It called for adherence to the rules requiring the U.S. to cut off weapons to any country obstructing American-backed aid or likely using U.S. weapons in war crimes. Although the amendment didn’t mention any specific country, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee opposed it, accusing Van Hollen of “trying to make it harder for Israel to defend its families.” Yet, with the Gaza death toll exceeding twenty-eight thousand, the amendment had enough support among progressives that Senator Chuck Schumer, the Democratic leader, asked the White House for help heading off an intraparty feud.

Sullivan, Blinken, and others in the White House saw an opportunity. By publicly recommitting to follow preexisting rules—and saying, in effect, that U.S. laws might *force* the Administration to cut off weapons—Biden could indirectly pressure the Israelis to better protect Palestinian civilians. On February 8, 2024, Biden signed National Security Memorandum 20, which doubled down on the existing rules about aid and war crimes in essentially the same way as Van Hollen’s amendment. After ninety days, Blinken would be required to send Congress a report attesting to the compliance of each country that received U.S. weapons. Van Hollen, satisfied, withdrew his amendment.

Biden seemed to be losing patience with Netanyahu. The day he issued the memorandum, he walked back to the podium after an unrelated press conference to answer a shouted question and pronounced the Israeli campaign “over the top.” He declared that “innocent people” were “starving” and “dying,” adding, “It’s got to stop.” Three days later, according to a White House statement, he told Netanyahu in a call that Israel’s forces should not move on Rafah without an “executable plan” to protect the million-plus Palestinians who had fled there to shelter in tent camps.

The letter from the Red Cross, which

keeps such communications strictly confidential, arrived the next month. The organization had been facilitating hostage releases and providing services in Gaza since the start of the conflict. In the appendix, Mirjana Spoljaric stated that Israel was creating “obstacles to the entry and distribution of humanitarian aid” and issuing “evacuation orders that result in repeated population displacements to areas that are neither safe nor have the infrastructure to cater for the population’s most basic needs.” The Red Cross, even without visiting prisons, had documented “numerous and credible allegations” of “inhumane conditions” and noted “an unusually high number of deaths in Israeli custody.” Spoljaric wrote that Israel appeared to be invoking certain principles of the Geneva Conventions “not to spare civilians from the effects of military operations and avoid or at least minimize civilian harm, as is their object and purpose, but rather to justify death and destruction.”

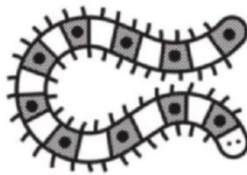
Four days later, Biden impulsively declared in a television interview that Israel could not “have thirty thousand more Palestinians dead” and suggested that any operation in Rafah would cross “a red line.” But a moment later he walked that back, saying it didn’t mean he would cut Israel off from all American weapons.

Then, on April 1st, Israeli drone strikes killed seven aid workers in a convoy organized by World Central Kitchen, a nonprofit whose founder, the celebrity chef José Andrés, was a friend of Biden’s. Israel had killed some two hundred aid workers since October 7th, but nearly all were Palestinians. The World Central Kitchen fatalities included a dual citizen of the U.S. and Canada, along with citizens of Poland, Australia, and the U.K. Biden, irate, publicly warned for the first time that ongoing U.S. support would be determined by an assessment of Israel’s “specific, concrete, and measurable steps” to reduce civilian suffering. A couple of weeks later, Blinken sent a letter, which has not previously been disclosed, to Gallant, the Israeli Defense Minister, warning him of the requirements reinforced in National Security Memorandum 20 and demanding improvements in the delivery of aid.

That month, at least eight State Department bureaus, agencies, or missions sent in assessments that Blinken had re-

quested for his required review of Israel’s conduct. At least five argued that Israel had likely used U.S. weapons in violations of the laws of war and had impeded the delivery of U.S. humanitarian aid. (Officials told me that Barbara Leaf, the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, agreed.) On the other side, Jacob Lew, the American Ambassador to Jerusalem—and Israel’s principal defender within the Biden Administration—argued that Israel was complying with the relevant laws. The Political-Military Bureau, which oversees weapons sales, concluded that Israel had not committed violations with U.S. weapons. Deborah Lipstadt, the special envoy for combatting antisemitism, urged against holding the Jewish state to a higher standard than other countries, but she stopped short of claiming expertise in warfare or aid distribution.

On May 5th, Israeli officials, in an apparent attempt to stir up American supporters on the eve of the report’s release to Congress, told *Axios* that the Biden Administration had quietly put a hold on a shipment of what the publication called “ammunition.” The withheld ammunition turned out to be thousands of enormous bombs: about half weighed two thousand pounds, the others five hundred pounds. (A two-thousand-pound bomb kills anyone within a radius of twelve hundred feet.) In an interview on CNN three days later, Biden said, of the two-thousand-pound



munitions, “Civilians have been killed in Gaza as a consequence of those bombs.” If Israel attacked Rafah’s “population centers,” he continued, he would not be “supplying the weapons.” Israeli officials said that their military used the two-thousand-pound bombs to destroy fortified tunnels, and although there are less indiscriminate ways to accomplish that objective, Republicans pounced. Senator Tom Cotton, of Arkansas, declared that Biden’s “position is de facto

for Hamas victory.” Representative Keith Self, of Texas, called Biden “Benedict Arnold.” Sixteen House Democrats joined Republicans in condemning the decision to withhold the large bombs.

Inside the White House, meanwhile, the debate was turning back to Iran. The day of the World Central Kitchen incident, Israel had struck the Iranian mission in Syria. Iran, for the first time in its history, launched a direct attack on Israel, firing more than three hundred missiles and drones. The U.S. military (and some Arab allies) intercepted almost all of them and, with difficulty, persuaded Netanyahu to limit Israel’s next round to a token demonstration of its power—taking out an Iranian radar installation near Isfahan.

Iran let that attack go unanswered, and intelligence officials and some National Security Council staff argued that this decision showed that the Islamic Republic’s leaders, as a senior U.S. official told me, “were not itching for a bigger conflict.” Perhaps, then, Biden could stop worrying that daylight between the U.S. and Israel would tempt Iran to start a regional war.

But McGurk and other hawks countered that Iran’s aerial attack had nearly succeeded. U.S. Central Command had been unsure whether the U.S. could deflect so many missiles. The military leaders said that Israel had been lucky, and they worried that more barrages would deplete U.S. interceptor stockpiles. What’s more, some of Iran’s weapons had reached Israeli airspace, arguably giving Hamas more reason than ever to hope for a regional war.

McGurk, who was helping lead the talks to release the hostages, had repeatedly urged colleagues to take seriously the long history of Iranian rhetoric about wiping Israel “off the map.” He had been a clerk to Chief Justice William Rehnquist and a legal adviser to the American occupation of Iraq, and he reminded colleagues that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s vows to found a new caliphate had also sounded far-fetched—until he declared himself caliph of the Islamic State. Although U.S. intelligence agencies considered Iran’s aging Ayatollah risk-averse and inclined to leave any actual fighting to foreign clients such as Hezbollah and Hamas, intelligence

reports generated after October 7th indicated that at least some Iranians were thinking that this was their moment. McGurk and other hostage negotiators, backed up by more concrete intelligence, noted that whenever Biden put public pressure on the Israelis—such as warning them not to rush into Rafah—it revived the hope of Hamas leaders that Iran might come to their rescue, and prompted them to up their demands, including how many Palestinian prisoners needed to be released in exchange for each hostage. McGurk argued that, if the return of the hostages was the only way to end the war, then publicly squeezing Israel to protect civilians could paradoxically prolong the fighting, resulting in more Palestinian deaths.

Several senior U.S. officials told me that virtually everyone involved in Gaza policy—including Secretary Austin—thought that Israel was killing more Palestinians than was necessary to achieve any legitimate objective. Nevertheless, the Administration gradually came to believe that it could not persuade Israel to alter its approach in Gaza. As a senior White House official put it to me, the Israelis “just operate totally differently than we operate as a ground force.” Biden, in this view, faced a stark choice: he could more or less back the Gaza campaign as Israel fought it, or he could force Israel to stop by cutting off its supply of weapons, potentially leaving Hamas both in control of Gaza and still holding hostages.

Biden’s bluster toward Israel, it turned out, was less fierce than it seemed. White House officials told me that his comments on CNN about not supplying the weapons if Israel attacked Rafah had been unplanned and hadn’t reflected a formal decision. In fact, other officials told me that, after the suspension of the large-bomb shipment, Finer proposed that the five-hundred-pound bombs be withheld, too, as they were packed alongside the two-thousand-pound ones. But, after Sullivan had him present that question to Biden, the President ordered that the smaller bombs be shipped separately. The five-hundred-pound munitions—the largest that the U.S. dropped on the evacuated Iraqi city of Mosul during the fight against ISIS—will kill anyone within a radius of sixty-five feet and injure anyone within a hundred and fifty.

National Security Memorandum 20,



“Throw him a fastball so he hits a walk-off home run, they win the World Series, and we don’t have to go to the White House.”

with its apparent pledge to withhold weapons, looked increasingly awkward. Blinken and the White House turned to lawyers at the State Department and the National Security Council, who took a highly technical approach. How many civilian casualties were “proportionate” to an attack’s military advantage? The answer depended on what its planners knew and intended. Although the Israelis seldom, if ever, shared the raw intelligence behind a specific air strike, they provided voluminous information about their sophisticated protocols for selecting targets and warning civilians—even if the soaring death count raised questions about the effectiveness of those precautions. How carefully did the Israelis distinguish between military and civilian targets? That line could be blurry—for example, any three-story building could arguably be a potential military “observation post,” from which Hamas fighters might spot oncoming

Israeli ground forces. And Israeli officials invariably insisted that Hamas had operated inside hospitals and other civilian infrastructure that their forces destroyed. A U.S. lawyer involved told me, “Hamas *was* embedding in the civilian population, so everyone talked about these nuances and complications for months and months.”

The Biden Administration’s ban on the transfer of weapons likely to be used in war crimes appeared to provide a clearer standard. Yet lawyers involved told me that Administration policymakers seemed to want specific proof of a war crime, and since the State Department doesn’t run courts to weigh evidence, the lawyers couldn’t prove anything. The U.S. lawyer explained, “The subtlety of the language—things like ‘We don’t have definitive proof, but we are very concerned that Israel is committing war crimes’—seemed to be understood by the most senior people

to mean, in effect, ‘We’re all good!’”

The requirement of the Geneva Conventions that a warring party “facilitate” the delivery of humanitarian assistance “by all the means at its disposal” also had loopholes. The Conventions granted belligerents the right “to search the consignments,” “to regulate their passage according to prescribed times and routes,” and “to be reasonably satisfied” that supplies weren’t intended to benefit a military opponent. Moreover, the State Department did not consider Israel’s months-long pattern of obstructing aid; the department only assessed the volume of aid flowing when the report was being finalized. And after the World Central Kitchen strike, on April 1st, Israel had briefly increased the number of supply trucks entering Gaza to nearly prewar levels.

A senior White House official paraphrased the lawyers’ message as “We’re not telling you there’s a violation—we’re saying it’s plausible to conclude that,” and said, “The President wanted to continue unless told ‘You can’t,’ and he wasn’t told that.” Another White House official said that, if the Administration had found Israeli war crimes to be more likely than not, then “the Republicans in Congress would have screamed, ‘Show me the evidence!’ and we would have had lawyers on their side saying, ‘Bullshit, this is inconclusive!’”

State Department reports to Congress are typically drafted by multiple contributors in an online document, and the Israel portion of the report required by Biden’s memorandum quickly devolved into an almost unreadable mish-mash of conflicting edits and comments. Then, on April 27th, some of the assessments submitted to Blinken were leaked to Reuters. Furious, he ordered that the draft be shifted to a classified system, where a line-by-line battle ensued over almost every sentence. Two senior advisers to the Secretary of State took the delicate assignment of squaring the draft with the uncomfortable facts. Working against them were the State Department dissenters, represented by Uzra Zeya, the Under-Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, and, most forcefully, by Christopher Le Mon, who spent days in a secure facility trying to insert damning evidence about the Israeli campaign.

The result, released on May 11th, was

schizophrenic. The report noted that Israeli officials had formally stated that they were strengthening “efforts to minimize civilian harm.” It observed, charitably, that a country’s “overall commitment” to international law “is not necessarily disproven” by individual violations if it is “taking appropriate steps to investigate.” It offered the caveat that the U.S. lacked the battlefield awareness necessary “to verify” that American weapons had been used in specific incidents, and praised Israel for implementing “additional measures” to avoid killing aid workers. Yet the report also said it was “reasonable to assess” that Israel had, in fact, used U.S. weapons in ways “inconsistent” with the laws of war or with “established best practices for mitigating civilian harm.” It pointedly noted that some Israeli equipment was both “entirely U.S.-origin (e.g. crewed attack aircraft)” and “likely to have been involved” in war crimes, that the U.S. government was “unaware” of any prosecutions resulting from the Israelis’ own investigations into violations, and that Israel’s pledges to protect aid workers after the World Central Kitchen strike “did not fully prevent” additional deaths. The words “however,” “nevertheless,” and “despite” appear a dozen times on as many pages—a pretzel of logic demonstrating the extent to which the Biden Administration was contorting itself.

Philip Gordon, the Kamala Harris adviser, told me that National Security Memorandum 20 “could have been, and should have been, the tool that we used to get the Israelis to do things differently.” But, after the final report, “they knew that we wouldn’t.” Van Hollen, the author of the shelved amendment, was outraged. He told me that he considered the report to be “a complete whitewash” and in “bad faith.”

By the time of the report’s release, Biden, encouraged by both Blinken and Sullivan, had decided to deliver the long-discussed “tough love” speech. Some U.S. officials involved in talks to release the hostages had concluded that Netanyahu, for domestic political reasons, preferred to extend the fight rather than make a hostage-release deal, and so Biden planned to try to go around Netanyahu and urge the Israeli public to turn away from all-out war. After multiple revi-

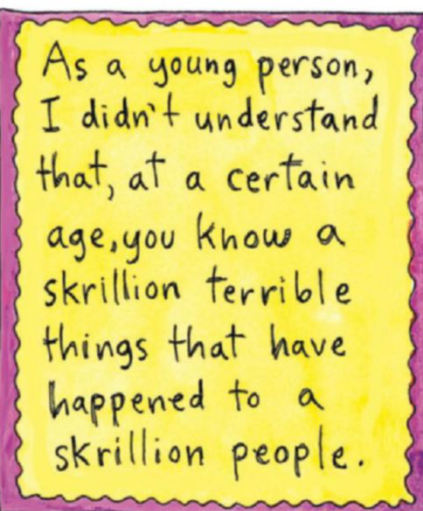
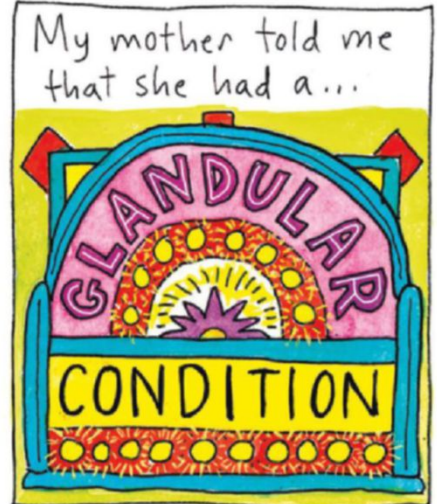
sions, however, Dermer and Netanyahu—perhaps aware of what was in the works—interceded. They told the White House that Israel was seriously considering a phased ceasefire-and-hostage-release plan that the U.S. had put forward and that Hamas appeared to accept. (People involved in the negotiations told me that, throughout the conflict, Hamas generally sought to bargain its hostages for prisoner releases, an end to the war, and a chance to retain control of Gaza; the Netanyahu government considered that outcome unacceptable.)

Biden abandoned the tough-love speech and asked for it to be transformed into a call for Israeli leaders to take the deal on the table. In a May 31st address from the White House, Biden said that the proposed agreement would begin with a six-week ceasefire. If Hamas released female, elderly, and wounded hostages, Israel would withdraw from population centers in Gaza and release hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. After that, pending unspecified further negotiations, Israel would fully withdraw from Gaza and commit to “the cessation of hostilities permanently” if Hamas released the remaining hostages. In an effort to get Netanyahu on board, Biden misleadingly credited the Israelis with the blueprint for the deal, even though his repeated pleas for the Israelis to accept the terms raised questions about its true authorship.

A few holdover passages from the “tough love” draft remained. Biden told Israelis that the war had already “devastated Hamas,” and insured that the group couldn’t launch another attack like October 7th. “Indefinite war in pursuit of an unidentified notion of ‘total victory’” would trap the Israeli military in a quagmire and alienate other nations, he said. Moreover, such a war could not deliver a return of the hostages or any “enduring defeat of Hamas.” Nevertheless, the heart of the speech praised what Biden portrayed as Netanyahu’s ceasefire proposal.

Was Netanyahu sincere about such a deal? A senior Israeli official close to him insisted that he had been, and blamed Hamas for pulling back because it still hoped for Hezbollah and Iran to enter the war. But several senior American officials and an Israeli close to the Cabinet’s deliberations told me they believed that Netanyahu had only feigned

Memory Lane



R. Chast

interest. The Israeli said that Netanyahu had done so to mollify internal critics pushing for the release of the hostages. The Americans suggested to me that he'd also hoped to manipulate Biden. Hamas agreed to the terms Biden outlined, but, once the milder "take the deal" speech was given, Netanyahu began making new demands that he knew Hamas would reject, such as allowing Israel to retain control of both a central corridor through Gaza and another corridor inside the Egyptian border. Then, a few weeks later, Israel blew up the ongoing talks by assassinating both Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas representative leading peace talks in Qatar, and Mohammed Deif, a top decision-maker inside Gaza. "Bibi was playing games," a former White House official told me.

In September, 2024, a new Labour government in Britain conducted its own review of Israel's compliance with international law. Citing Israel's obstruc-

tion of "lifesaving food and medical supplies," its mistreatment of detainees, and the "clear risk" that British weapons might be used in war crimes, Foreign Secretary David Lammy declared, with "regret," that British laws imposed a "legal duty" to suspend arms transfers to Israel for use in Gaza. But Israel relied on Britain for relatively little military equipment—only about thirty British export licenses were affected—so the decision was largely symbolic.

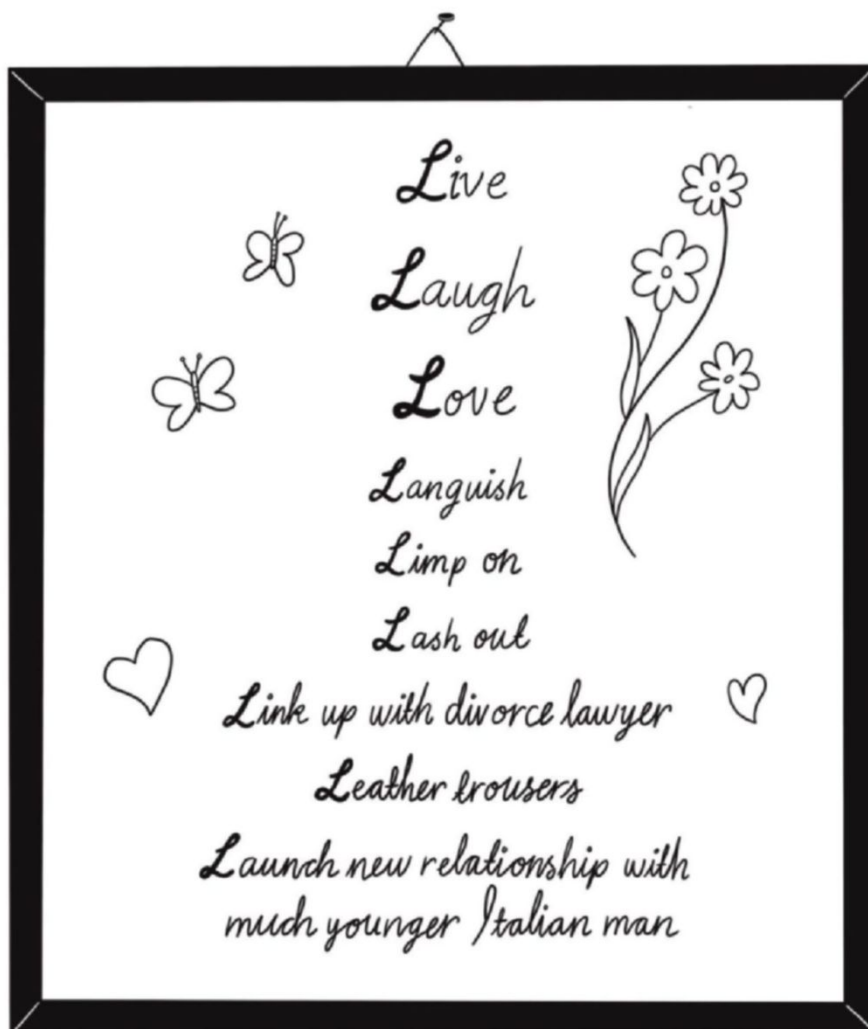
The next month, Zeya, the Under-Secretary of State, and Lise Grande, a veteran U.N. aid administrator who was Biden's special envoy for Middle Eastern humanitarian issues, led the drafting of a private letter to Gallant and Dermer warning that National Security Memorandum 20 required periodic reevaluation of Israel's conduct. The letter noted that Israel was currently blocking perishable U.S.-funded aid and that the monthly quantity of assistance crossing

the border had recently fallen to a new low. "Starting now and within 30 days," the letter said, Israel needed to comply with about twenty demands, including restoring Red Cross visits to detainees. Austin and Blinken both signed the letter on October 13th. Two days later, the document was leaked to *Axios*—presumably in another attempt by the Israelis to get their U.S. supporters to pressure Biden into abandoning threats of a weapons cutoff.

Still, the letter appeared to prompt Israel to once again dramatically increase the amount of aid entering Gaza. Israel also scheduled a bilateral meeting in November to cooperate with the U.S. Civilian Harm Incident Response Guidance protocol. The State Department by then had a list of several hundred incidents of civilian harm to discuss.

A few weeks later, though, Trump won the election. The next day, Israel called off the meeting. By April, 2025, Israel had reduced the flow of humanitarian aid more than ever before; by August, there was a full-blown famine. In September, Gaza health officials attributed four hundred and forty deaths to malnutrition, including those of a hundred and forty-seven children.

Today, many former Biden Administration officials argue that their pressure on the Israelis prevented a famine from happening sooner. Over time, the officials contend, Biden's efforts also slowed the killing: about twenty-five thousand Palestinians died in the first three months of the Gaza conflict, and it took twelve months for the death toll to double. (The Gaza Health Ministry, which tracks fatalities, does not differentiate between civilians and combatants.) In particular, Biden's warnings about Rafah appear to have prompted Israel to do far more to evacuate civilians than it had done before levelling Gaza City and Khan Younis. A senior White House official told me that American pressure had made the destruction of Rafah "less horrific for civilians than it might have been," even if Israel nonetheless "flattened it." Several former officials noted to me with pride that after October 7th the Administration became the first to sanction violent West Bank settlers. Everyone in the Biden Administration blames Trump for allowing the



war to continue until last October, for leaving Israeli forces occupying at least sixty per cent of Gaza, and for allowing the war to inflame the Middle East.

McGurk, the most hawkish voice around Biden, declined to be quoted for this article. But people close to him told me he believes that his warning proved true: the limited public pressure that the Biden Administration imposed on Israel to protect civilians actually extended the war. In an op-ed in the *Washington Post* last year, he argued that Hamas released the hostages because Israel had decimated its fighters while the “force of arms across the Middle East” by the U.S. and Israel crippled Iran and its proxies, leaving Hamas “isolated and no longer able to count on a multifront conflict.” Despite the war’s grim toll, he concluded, “there was no shortcut.”

Yet, with more than seventy thousand Palestinians dead, most of Gaza’s remaining population displaced, and the Israeli military occupying much of the territory, the conflict undermined the long-term U.S. interest that the Biden Administration claimed to have pursued: a democratic Jewish state coexisting peacefully with a Palestinian one. Among Israelis, the protracted ordeal of the hostages hardened opposition to the already fading prospect of Palestinian statehood. Settlement of the West Bank has accelerated steeply. Among Palestinians, the civilian death toll has only increased the appeal of Hamas-style armed resistance, just as Secretary Austin warned. And Hamas—which ended the war with about twenty thousand fighters, some recruited and trained during the war—controls the remainder of Gaza. Before October 7th, Israel and the U.S. estimated that Hamas had fewer than thirty thousand fighters. The ranks of Hamas decreased by around ten thousand; more than seventy thousand Palestinians were killed in the process. In the U.S., moreover, the death toll has severely damaged the historic American sympathy for the Jewish state. In congressional primaries, an acrimonious debate over continued U.S. support for Israel has riven the Democratic Party to an extent unimaginable just five years ago—and it threatens to divide Republicans as well. Jon Finan told me that the hallmark of the Gaza conflict has been that, for both Hamas and Israel, “civilian harm was not a side effect but

part of the strategy.” The U.S., he said, “shouldn’t tolerate wars in which civilian harm is a goal, and shouldn’t allow our weapons to be used for that purpose.”

Blinken and Sullivan told me that they, too, felt remorse. Blinken said, “How can you not have regrets given the toll that this took on innocent men, women and children?” But he repeated a quote from Biden: “Question my judgments. Don’t question my motives.”

Sullivan, whose role as national-security adviser made him the last to leave the room before Biden made a decision, told me that he had lain awake many nights thinking about what the U.S. might have done differently. On humanitarian aid, he said, “we’d get progress and backsliding, progress and backsliding, over and over again,” adding, “We should have found a way to get out of that constant push and pull.”

Yet Sullivan said that Biden and his top advisers had worried that a taking action to make Israel better protect civilians “risked both failing to change Israeli policy and leading Hamas to increase its demands.” And, he continued, “when was the moment?” He told me that the Administration had “seriously thought about making a decisive break with Israel” in the spring of 2024, “in the run-up to Rafah, when Hamas was stalling in negotiations,” and again in July of 2024, “when Hamas was coming back.” But, at each point, there were risks: “What about the hostages? What about Israel under attack from all sides? What effect would it have on the ceasefire talks and bringing this god-awful war to an end?”

Near the end of Biden’s term, the Leahy Laws investigation prompted by the former detainees who’d been dumped back into Gaza focussed on a military base called Sde Teiman. That summer, a Palestinian prisoner from the base had arrived at an Israeli hospital with broken ribs and a torn rectum. Leaked video footage showed Israeli soldiers holding up riot shields to block security cameras as they appeared to beat and abuse him. The Leahy Laws process culminated with a document for Blinken to sign that would cut off U.S. aid to Sde Teiman. Yet Blinken told me that he’d once again believed “we

were on the verge of a ceasefire, which I did not want to jeopardize.” (A ceasefire-and-hostage-release deal that McGurk had been working on was announced as Biden left office, but it was fleeting.) Michael Herzog, the Israeli Ambassador, had also pleaded with Blinken not to carry out the sanctions. An Israeli military prosecutor had detained several soldiers for questioning, and Herzog assured Blinken that an indictment was coming; Blinken left office without signing the document.

This past March, the Israeli military dropped charges filed against five of the soldiers, on the basis that the leaked video had compromised a fair trial and that the injured witness had been

returned to Gaza. Netanyahu lauded the dismissal and called the case a “blood libel.”

After Biden lost the election, a working group of Administration lawyers disseminated a forceful new set of talking points for U.S. officials to raise with their Israeli counterparts. Many of the points could have been written any time since the spring of 2024: “In light of the extensive destruction and damage in Gaza, as well as our understanding that Hamas has been devastated as an operational force . . . we in the U.S. Government do not see a clear military imperative for continued operations.” Under the heading “Forced Displacement,” the lawyers noted that “the displacement seems increasingly both clear and purposeful.” Under “Starvation of Civilians,” they wrote that “the facts on the ground” raised “grave concerns” about “intentional starvation of civilians to drive them from the area,” and that aid restrictions by Israel were harming Palestinian civilians “well in excess of any further anticipated military advantage.” Under “Targeting/Conduct of Hostilities,” they observed that the civilian harm looked increasingly “deliberate,” adding, “We are really struggling to understand the military necessity of taking strikes that have resulted in such high levels of civilian casualties and extensive property destruction.” The talking points called for follow-up, within “days not weeks,” about “plans for improvement.” But by then surely nobody was listening. Trump was on his way back to the White House. ♦



RENAISSANCE WOMAN

Florentina Holzinger wakes up the art world.

BY LAUREN OYLER

It was the day before the press preview for the Venice Biennale, and the toilets at the Austrian pavilion were broken. In Venice, plumbing problems are routine; the city doesn't have a modern sewage system, so it relies on its canals and the tides to flush out wastewater treated in thousands of septic tanks. A heavy rain can flood the streets, and private bathrooms. But the two bright-blue porta-potties were not here for convenience. They were part of an installation opening the next day.

Between the toilets, Florentina Holzinger was naked, in a decent-sized tank of water, maintaining a defiant, full-frontal pose, wearing a diving mask and breathing through a scuba. A steady stream of bubbles was making chunks of her long hair float straight up. Occasionally, her left pinkie twitched. Otherwise, she barely moved. The water contained urine from the porta-potties that had been filtered through a system visible beneath the tank. "It is maintained by the pee of the people," Giulia Messia, Holzinger's publicity manager, explained. "But no shitting."

Most often referred to as some combination of choreographer, director, and performance artist, Holzinger, who is forty and goes by Flo, usually works in a theatre, though what she makes is not necessarily, or only, theatre. Before she was selected to represent her birth country at the most important event in the art world, she had never done an installation. Two years earlier, she and her stage designer, Nikola Knežević, had visited the Biennale, and when they saw the Austrian pavilion, an austere, geometric building, they thought they could "for sure do something interesting there," Holzinger said. At the time, she had just premiered a blasphemous stage production, "SANCTA," described by the *Daily Mail* as "a radical feminist opera which includes explicit lesbian sex scenes, real blood and injuries, and naked roller-

skating nuns," and the pavilion reminded her of a cathedral: nave, transepts, altar. She and her team agreed that a "radical gesture was needed" to justify participating in the art-market "circus." They'd fantasized about putting the building in the lagoon and guiding visitors through in scuba gear, but this wasn't practical.

Instead, at the pavilion's entrance, they hung a huge church bell from a crane. Every hour, for eight hours a day, a performer in a rotating cast climbs a rope hanging from the bell, flips herself upside down inside it, and acts as a Boschian clapper, using the force of her body and a heavy metal belt. That's the cue for most of the other performers—who range in appearance from basically unassuming to covered in tattoos and piercings—to change shifts, in what Holzinger calls a "ritual." In addition to the "piss tank," the pavilion has four other enclosed spaces, each flooded with water and featuring a different attraction. When I arrived at the rehearsal, these were: a naked woman riding a Jet Ski in circles, going faster and faster until the air smelled of gasoline; naked performers slowly climbing a utility pole, pausing in languid acrobatic poses like live nudes; the artist Hannah Finn, also naked, performing contortion on a raised platform, mirroring two robot dogs splashing around her; and a room lined with machinery, where the water was ominously brown. Nearby, two performers were smoking in white Monobloc chairs, costumed in long aprons and scrubs, rubber gloves close at hand. Other performers dressed as cleaning ladies circulated throughout the space, occasionally running lines: "We tell people not to shit in the toilets. . . ."

The atmosphere was relaxed, though various collaborators assured me, looking haunted, that the technical coordination of this work was more challenging than anything they'd ever done. In the tank, Holzinger's hands were now

pressed against the glass. The dramaturges Sara Ostertag and Michele Rizzo discussed: Was it too much? Yes. Rizzo began roaming around and dropped an open notebook that he'd been using in front of me. I could make out typical production notes, in both English and German; a doodle of Holzinger's current pose, with starfish hands and exaggerated goggles; and the phrase "slapstick in shitstorm."

A scripted plumbing issue was unfolding alongside the actual one. As a producer hunched beneath the tank to show a service technician the filtration system over video call, a cleaning lady entered the room with machinery. Brown water suddenly spewed from the equipment, shooting into her mouth and eyes. Hoses in the water flailed. The performer yelled, splashed, and fell, trying futilely to fix it. Holzinger and her technicians had arrived in Venice only three weeks before; since then, the cleaning ladies had taken on a much bigger role than planned. Now that the show, "SEAWORLD VENICE," has opened—to long lines and a deluge of press that have made it, without question, the most discussed work at the Biennale—visitors often assume that they are actual janitorial staff, and treat them accordingly.

In the tank, Holzinger crossed her arms. Since the Biennale began, in May, performers have remained in the tank for four- or eight-hour shifts; sometimes they face visitors directly, or they may be eating, sitting, or sleeping, with a blanket and pillow. What each performer does is up to her, but Holzinger enjoys the break from the outside world. For years, she has been a star of the European experimental-theatre scene; in 2021, she became an artist-in-residence at Berlin's Volksbühne, where her productions sell out within minutes. But a durational exhibition requires a totally different allocation of time and

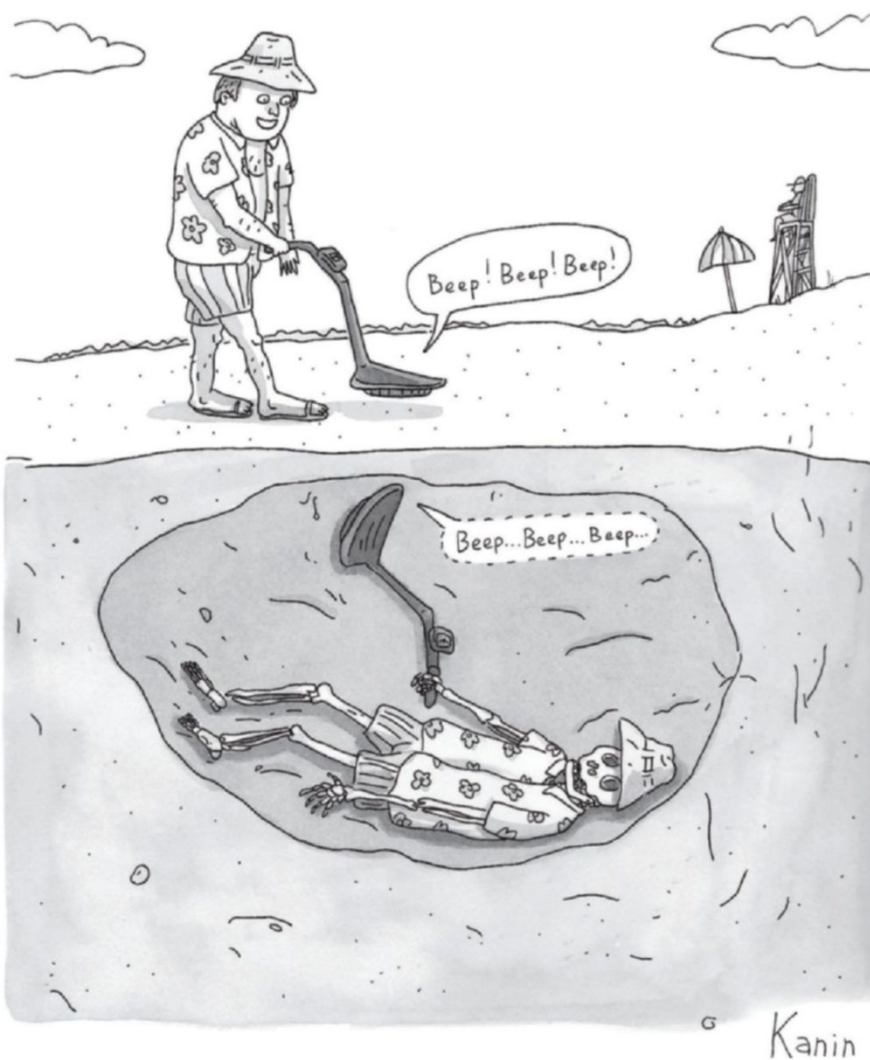


Holzinger's humor, ambition, and extreme use of the body have made her the toast of the Venice Biennale.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LUCIA BURICELLI

THE NEW YORKER, JULY 27, 2026

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energy, and the frenzied interests of private donors can be draining. “I can have amazing naps in there, in the water,” she told me.

After an hour, the bell rang, and Holzinger handed off the scuba and emerged from the water. Her face lined from the goggles, she put on a huge tie-dyed sweatshirt, baggy shorts, and reflective Oakley sunglasses. She then immediately removed the shorts and began going over notes with Rizzo and Ostertag. The hands were too much, yeah. The crossed arms were O.K., except that she looked cold. She hadn’t had a problem with the temperature, but performers would stay in the tank for longer, so they should warm it up. It was then that Ostertag explained what was happening with the portapotties—the pressure levels kept changing, which is why they couldn’t flush the toilets earlier.

“Are you kidding me?” Holzinger replied, calmly. She put her shorts back on and asked how the shitstorm had gone.

It’s hard to imagine Holzinger freaking out about anything, except maybe slowing down. While “SEAWORLD VENICE” is on view, through November, she is also touring three ensemble productions and organizing several one-off performances, which she calls “Études.” The last time we spoke, on a video call from her apartment in Venice, she described the Biennale piece as “minimal.” “It gets depicted as this shocking, radical thing, but if you come from experimental theatre there is nothing shocking or radical about it,” she said. “Actually, my biggest complex was that it’s so gentle. You know, not much happening.”

She was being serious. A typical Holzinger show lasts for around three hours and begins with a premise that is

abandoned when it no longer suits her “schizophrenic” pace. In “TANZ” (2019), it’s a ballet class; in “Ophelia’s Got Talent” (2022), a talent show; in “SANCTA” (2024), the one-act Paul Hindemith opera “Sancta Susanna,” in which the title character has heretical visions of lesbian sex that Holzinger represents live, followed by a “Mass.” Her most recent stage work, “A Year Without Summer” (2025), reimagines the summer of 1816, when a volcanic eruption in Indonesia blocked out the sun and, among other consequences, led to Mary Shelley writing “Frankenstein.” (The show is a musical.) The productions may feature aerial pole dancing, live tattooing, hook suspension, hair hanging, wood chopping, the heavily sound-effected masturbation of ceramic penises, hypnosis, blood, and flesh eating (a very small piece of skin). Performers change roles throughout, and during onstage interludes they narrate autobiographical confessions, near-death experiences, and sexual assaults. Almost everyone is naked, including opera singers, musicians, old women, disabled women, camerawomen, and women with no formal dance training.

Like all interdisciplinary artists, Holzinger is constrained by the language of category. She is often linked to the Viennese Actionists, of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, and to performance artists like Marina Abramović, but figures from theatre and dance are more helpful in answering the question “But what is it?” Formally, her closest predecessors are probably post-Wall, post-dramatic German directors like Christoph Schlingensiefel and René Pollesch, whose political, self-referential work pushed beyond traditional literary elements like plot, dialogue, and character to examine the relationship between performer and audience. (Theatre for people who hate plays.) Much of the action in Holzinger’s work, especially the body horror, is projected live onto large screens on either side of the stage—common in European theatre, but used here to show what is otherwise hidden, often some kind of upsetting process. (In “Ophelia,” the professional sword-swallower Fibi Eyewalker seems to swallow a fish, followed by an endoscopic camera.) The result is not just a spectacle but something that produces the satisfaction of narrative, as the songs, dances, scenes, and feats of daring accrue:

a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that knows and resists the term. “She’s always kind of saying ‘Fuck you’ to Wagner,” Brandon Woolf, a professor of dramatic literature at New York University, told me.

Though Holzinger views each of her pieces as research for the next, and though there is no skill or concept in “SEA-WORLD VENICE” that she hasn’t worked on in some way before, it makes sense that the installation is what has brought her widespread attention. It’s her most accessible work, not only because it’s fairly easy to say what it’s about (“How we live in crisis,” as Holzinger offered at a press event) but also because it doesn’t *really* challenge the viewer’s gag reflex, endurance, or sense of good taste. The first time a porta-potty appeared in a Holzinger piece, for example, it was a gateway to Hell, chasing a pantsless Dante in “A Divine Comedy” (2021). Later in that show, four women shit simultaneously, downstage, directly in front of the audience.

Given Holzinger’s notoriety, and her own ironic relationship to extremes, her use of trigger warnings, posted before every performance, may seem beside the point, or even hypocritical. “I don’t want to traumatize people forever,” she told me, messing with her dirty-blond hair, putting it up and taking it down again with the controlled power of a butcher preparing cuts of meat. Still, people sometimes pass out, or have to leave, during her shows. The Vienna run of “SANCTA” was particularly chaotic; during one performance, even the show’s first violinist fainted, breaking both his nose and his instrument, after accidentally glimpsing a scene in which someone sticks a finger into an open wound. “It was like a field hospital!” Holzinger said. “People were being very dramatic.” She did a squeaky voice: “‘Ah! My husband is not moving anymore! Help!’” The glee, or Schadenfreude, in her retelling comes from her uneasy relationship with Austria and its sometimes “grumpy” press—you’d expect such a response in the provinces, not in supposedly sophisticated Vienna. It’s “almost like a joke” that she’s representing the country in the Biennale, she told me, adding that she “really needed to leave this country in order to finally do what I wanted to do, to express myself.”

Feminism-wise, Holzinger uses the obviousness of nudity to make fairly nu-

anced interventions. Sometimes you can catch a glimpse of a tampon string, just as you might see the complicated rigging of a set; the effect is to emphasize what the female body can be and do. The scholar Caroline Lillian Schopp has described Holzinger’s mode as “feminist decadence” that “luxuriates in the violence that so-called high art and its histories conceal.” In other words, Holzinger is funny. In “Ophelia,” she perverts “Apocalypse Now,” among other works, by having five women—herself included—literally have sex with a helicopter, which is suspended from the ceiling and piloted by Saioa Alvarez, a little person who, elsewhere in the Holzinger universe, gives a furious sermon as “the first lesbian Pope.” The performers grind and moan as rain pours from above and a wind machine roars. Eventually, the helicopter ejaculates a waterfall from its door, and the storm subsides.

At the same time, the helicopter represents a fundamental pragmatism in Holzinger’s work. She feels a responsibility to do something with the resources she has; more than pushing the boundaries of feminist performance art, she pushes the boundaries of logistical and technical coordination. “When we came into the Volksbühne for the first time, we saw this high fly space that you don’t actually see from the perspective of the audience, but that’s fucking unique about this theatre,” she told me. “A helicopter could fly into the building, I mean, we feel an obligation to use this.”

The blatant ambition comes with its own drama; Holzinger’s work can feel



rough around the edges, creating the sense that, at any level of a production, something might go very wrong. “Viewers should doubt whether we really have everything under control,” Holzinger has said. In addition to the helicopter, “Ophelia” involves a pool and two dunk tanks. Water “always finds a way to mess with the infrastructure,” Knežević, Holzinger’s

stage designer, told me. When they met, he had never done professional theatre before—he trained as an architect—but Holzinger asked a question that excited him: Could he make her a ballet barre that would hold weight but also, eventually, break?

Holzinger was born in Vienna, and her parents, a lawyer and a pharmacist who dislikes the sight of blood, are normal. When she was ten years old, she developed anorexia and drank so much water, trying to weigh herself down for doctors’ appointments, that she gave herself water poisoning. She spent nearly a year in a rehabilitation center, living with “troubled kids” whom she found “much more interesting,” she told me, than her “evil group of friends” from a conservative public school. When she was seventeen, she took a contemporary-dance class, and loved it. Because her parents didn’t want her to pursue the profession—and because she wanted state funding—she took a year of architecture and business courses while training and auditioning for dance schools.

Journalists often claim that Holzinger wanted to be a ballerina but started too late, and with the wrong body, to do so. It’s a compelling narrative: it allows a writer to imply, in an ostensibly feminist maneuver, that Holzinger is kind of short and has the body of someone who could play an M.M.A. fighter in a film, which she has also done. Actually, she’d wanted to be “a really good contemporary dancer,” she told me, but was “very unsuccessful.” (She is “really not good” at remembering choreography.) Eventually, she was accepted into the School for New Dance Development (S.N.D.O.), in Amsterdam, but she never wanted to make her own work. “I wanted to just learn how to move and be a part of a group,” she said.

At S.N.D.O., she met Vincent Riebeek, a Dutch choreographer and director who was a year below her. They were both adventurous, rebellious, and interested in challenging ideas about what a man and a woman could do onstage; they were also both, Riebeek told me, kicked out of school for periods of time. “She was super enigmatic,” he said. “She would do everything a little bit different. Even watching her make a sandwich could be super fascinating.”

They quickly became inseparable. They

didn't really plan or rehearse; they just spent all their time together, making work "for each other and not for somebody else," Holzinger said. Only later, when they were introduced to production houses, did they realize that other people practiced. An adapted version of a school project, "Kein Applaus für Scheisse" (2010), became a hit on the European avant-garde-theatre circuit; several other works—sexual, aggressive—followed. For years, they travelled and lived together, developing a reputation as enfants terribles. "We were lucky," Holzinger said of their early success, because it meant that they "never had to hustle for a job." Onstage, Riebeek was the campy, effortful foil to Holzinger's relentless cool; watching her today, you can see how she would have been stoic even when her partner was vomiting on her, or slowly pulling a long string out of her vagina with his teeth.

Over time, though, what they called their "codependent" relationship became, in Holzinger's words, "torturous." Riebeek was frustrated to be pigeonholed as "queer"—"I'm licking pussy onstage," he said, "but that's queer, apparently, when I do it"—but Holzinger felt the label was important to the work. They were increasingly at odds about credit and vision. "Maybe we were a bit doomed from the start because we were obsessed with Marina and Ulay," Riebeek said, laughing, referring to Abramović and her long-time companion and collaborator, Frank Uwe (Ulay) Laysiepen. There's a scene in "Kein Applaus" that's inspired by Abramović and Ulay's first work together, "Relation in Space" (1976), in which Holzinger and Riebeek hurl themselves at each other. But "Relation in Space" attempts to create a unity called "That Self" from male and female energy. In "Kein Applaus," Holzinger and Riebeek appear to be interrupting each other, hurting each other, as they try to perform something for themselves. "We always knew it was going to end," Riebeek said, "but it seemed unimaginable at the time." Maybe, Holzinger proposed, it was just a "typical fag-hag relationship."

Finally, in 2017, Riebeek needed knee surgery, and they had to take a break. "All of a sudden," Holzinger told me, "we just never saw each other again." After that, she stopped working with men onstage, beginning with her first large ensemble

MICE

1

You may take my word
for their being very nearly as hard to herd
as people.
Whereas the curlew may "wheep" or "wheep"
depending on the stretch of salt marsh
or other harsh
terrain from which it happens to hail,
a mouse will whisper-wail
a single ultrasonic
note that resonates through the chthonic
zones beloved of Hecate. A mouse will blithely throw
down this ultrasonic "hey for houghmagandie"
to attract the doe
some still take for eye candy.

2

With regard to the edible dormouse, *glis glis*,
on which the Romans loved to reminisce
long after they stopped roasting him in honey
and poppy seed, finally running out of dinner money
with the arrival of the Goths,
he's scarcely cut from the same cloth
as the beastie overturned
by the plowman-poet Rabbie Burns,
himself subsisting on gruel and a little beef suet.
Despite the capacity to intuit
outcomes we now ascribe to *Mus musculus*,
it's unlikely Rabbie—not much of a Latin scholar—
would ever have sussed
a mouse flexing itself under the skin of "muscular."

3

To say she has "sweetie mice between the ears"
is to say she isn't the keenest spear
in the rack, your own latest lady.
Situated as they are in a hot press or shady
pantry and incorporating foil off Polo mints,
blue-tinged lint

piece, "Apollon" (2017). "I haven't followed his work recently, but he used to be a great artist," she said. "I think that's not something you really lose."

In the spring of 2024, I attended several "SANCTA" rehearsals at the Mecklenburgisches Staatstheater, in the German city of Schwerin, where it premièred, hoping to understand how a Holzinger production comes together.

I concluded that it happens mostly through doing it. There was a little box of sushi from an Asian grocery store—Holzinger has no special diet—and a very large binder. After an idea for a new piece congeals, a core group travels for research. For "SANCTA," they went to Rome, and to Barcelona, where roller-skating on a half-pipe could be practiced in nice weather. Meanwhile, Holzinger was going to the opera, which

from a tumble dryer, fibreglass, Styrofoam,
 their homes
 are no longer those rural slums exposed by Rabbie
 but penthouses taunting the tabby
 with tabbed silk, buttonhole twist—all such pelf
 as would befit any yarn-spinner
 like myself
 who's also well-nigh resistant to blood thinners.

4

While it's clear that Cooper drew heavily on Scott
 for the plot
 of "The Last of the Mohicans," the psalm-singing Gamut
 being a version, goddammit,
 of Wamba the fool,
 and Rebecca and Rowena are retooled
 as Cora and Alice Munro, he also draws
 on his own braw
 dexterity much as a mouse will raid our autumnal
 hoard with the aid of a thumbnail
 that's little more than a thumbnail sketch,
 that rudimentary
 development nonetheless allowing it to fetch
 an illimitability of corn past Egyptian corn sentries.

5

You may take my word
 that what you've faintly overheard
 from library or laundry room is the shutting of a visor
 followed by the tut-tutting of a steel-tipped incisor
 as mice enter the lists
 against any and every Ivanhoe. It's all grist
 to the mills at which they tilt. Sennacherib and sahib
 have withered before the steel-tipped nibs
 by which they take on the hellish
 zone beloved of Hecate with something of the relish
 and resolution ascribed by Conan Doyle
 to a blowpipe-wielding Andaman Islander
 till, holy shit, they've stripped the soy-oil
 insulation from the wiring of your Toyota Highlander.

—Paul Muldoon

she initially didn't like, and to Mass, which she grew up attending. Once the whole team assembles, professors and other experts visit rehearsals, offering insights on the production's themes; for "SANCTA," Felix Ritter, a former teacher of Holzinger's and a dramaturge who also worked on "SEAWORLD VENICE," led them in Bible study. "She never goes blind into a fight," he said.

In the theatre, Holzinger's instruc-

tions were direct, never agitated or hostile, spoken into a microphone from the front row. She periodically took notes, which she would later go over with the cast. She watched in different postures: with one or both legs stretched out on the wall that divided the orchestra pit from the front row; with both legs dangling into the pit; with her butt balanced on a closed theatre seat. During one dress rehearsal, when her cue to go on-

stage arrived, she took off all her clothes, put on a metal belt, and left her spot. Soon, a rope hanging from a giant church bell above center stage went taut, and Holzinger appeared, climbing up from a trapdoor to call the theatre to "Mass." Then she returned to her spot, put her pants back on, and remained topless as she watched the rest of the run, which went on for nearly two more hours.

Holzinger emphasizes that her work is not a "community project"—it's not that kind of feminism, and if you don't want to be naked onstage you probably can't join this group. She enjoys the responsibility, and everyone respects that it's ultimately her show. During one "SANCTA" rehearsal, I watched the cast perform "Blow, Gabriel, Blow," by Cole Porter, a number in which the opera singer Emma Rothmann is raised in a harness over the rest of the performers as they dance. Initially, this was supposed to happen for about thirty seconds, in the middle of the song, but the transition didn't work. Rothmann looked nervous as she tried to strap herself into the harness while smiling and belting the lyrics. Holzinger interrupted the run-through: Rothmann needed to sing the entire song in the air.

Concern fell across the face of Sophie Duncan, a choreographer and an aerialist. "But that means she's gonna hang in the sky for three and a half minutes," she said. Later, Rothmann and Duncan told me that Rothmann had never been in the stage harness before that rehearsal, which was a little more than two weeks before the premiere. Duncan, who has worked with Cirque du Soleil, also noted that no one looks good just dangling for that long.

"But she can do it," Holzinger replied. She was right. Later, she told Rothmann to perform it "more like a Nazi," which was also right.

Still, Holzinger's process is inherently collaborative, and the team appreciates the platform that she gives them. Anina Machaz, an actress who often plays the role of deranged m.c.—in "SANCTA," she's a douchebag Jesus, vaping and ranting—has been working with Holzinger since they met at a dance festival, a decade ago; she writes her own lines. "She really gives me carte blanche," Machaz told me. Duncan joined the team for "Ophelia," in 2022, after she saw a casting

call on a circus forum; she became the unofficial harness adviser after noticing the lackadaisical way the group had been using them. Earlier in her career, Holzinger found performers by posting a Craigslist ad seeking “women with special talents.” Many of her performers stick around, or return, teaching others and learning from them. The motorcyclist and stunt rider Keity Meier, who appeared in “Divine Comedy,” riding laps around the stage with a skeleton on her back, is performing in Venice, and not only on the Jet Ski.

Holzinger is also open to networking, if you’re really interesting. Ruby-Kale Roberts, who performs under the name Fleshpiece and works with ceramics, hook suspension, and a host of other things, got Holzinger’s number through some performers in “Ophelia.” She’d heard that “SANCTA” would involve skating. “I sent a sassy text message that said, Hey, I have a beard and a cunt, and I love being naked. By the way, I also skate,” Roberts said, laughing. Holzinger replied that her cast was full, but two weeks later—late in the production process—she wrote back asking for Roberts’s availability. She became a huge part of the show.

It’s appropriate, Ritter told me, leaning over the back of his chair during a “SANCTA” rehearsal one afternoon, that Holzinger was doing a show about nuns. She and her group are kind of like a convent: “sisters,” childless, dedicated to a higher power. “This is our church,” Roberts, channelling an evil evangelical preacher, bellows in the final sequence of the show, “and we will nail you to the present moment like Jesus was nailed to the Cross.” Then she squats, her vagina directed toward the audience, and issues a semi-improvised, sexually explicit monologue as the entire cast sings “Don’t Dream It,” from “The Rocky Horror Picture Show.”

All of Holzinger’s work, even the early pieces, made during what she calls her “trashy days,” exhibits a poignant belief in what is possible, not just for an individual body or an intrepid audience but for the collective. Without an extreme perspective, this message would be sentimental, and she has refined it as she’s matured. In 2013, during a show with Riebeek, a screw holding her weight during an aerial stunt came

loose, and she fell sixteen feet. “I saw her whole body snap over her neck, and I was sure I was going to have to take care of my friend for the rest of my life,” Riebeek told me. “I felt like, Now it’s over.” At the hospital, doctors resisted giving Holzinger an X-ray; in the show that she and Riebeek had been performing, Holzinger was “pregnant,” which the doctors assumed to be true. “We had to fight for her to get proper medical care,” Riebeek said. “Like, ‘It’s theatre! It’s fiction! I didn’t really make her pregnant!’” When the doctors finally scanned her, she had only a concussion, a broken nose, and a missing tooth.

Since then, she has professionalized and become fastidious about safety protocols, but she continues to “play with risk and the unforeseen and the possibility of failure,” as she puts it. Scenes of care, and of redemption, often ensue. In “Ophelia,” the artist Netti Nüganen performs a Houdini act underwater, with her limbs and her neck chained inside a dunk tank. After more than two minutes, she begins to flail, pulling frantically at her collar. Holzinger jumps into the tank, her movements inelegant and panicked, and pulls Nüganen out. The stage, now covered in water, is quickly cleared as Holzinger comforts Nüganen; the fake-out isn’t entirely apparent until Saioa Alvarez comes out dressed as a plumber to take a look. Then Nüganen, who until recently had been holding her breath for nearly three minutes, begins to tap-dance.

Holzinger appears in her shows less than she used to, but she tries to experience

with dignity and artistic integrity seems to be bothering her. She developed another little “complex” about “A Year Without Summer,” which required a much slower pace than comes naturally to her. No one else would consider the show calm, of course. It begins with a huge, multigenerational orgy that lasts for twenty minutes, becoming increasingly absurd before morphing into a musical loosely organized around the history of science and medicine and its careless approach to women. (Briefly, Machaz plays a douchebag Freud, skipping through a pile of cocaine and screaming about vagina dentata; Alvarez plays Josef Mengele.)

The production ends with an extended hospital scene that parallels the orgy. What starts as a tender image of elder care, with younger performers slowly helping older women into robes and beds, transforms. One embarrassing “accident” follows another until, by the end, everyone is screaming, crying, throwing up, shitting, and panicking. Toilets appear, hopelessly. There is no effort to hide the tubes and apparatuses from which fake bodily fluids gush. It is relentless, hilarious, tiresome, and disgusting. It is also brave—not because everyone is, as always, more or less naked but because it is over the top and ugly about what, in life, is the same.

Finally, the drama lets up. Small groups form; sex returns, softly. A selfie stick circulates, and the results are projected onto screens flanking the stage. It is sweet, and sickening, the impulse to take pictures at the end of the world. Then Bláthin Eckhardt, a guitarist and a dancer, climbs a platform at the back of the stage and begins, incredibly, to ice-skate. On the screens, a message appears. It’s a succinct statement about the duty of the individual, the artist, to others within a haywire system: “NO END.” Eckhardt continues skating in exquisite, small loops, showing her exhaustion at times, through the curtain call. The mess below remains, but it’s no longer ugly. She doesn’t stop skating until every single audience member has left.

On the second day of the Venice preview, it was raining, and a group of curators, journalists, and V.I.P.s met at 9 A.M. to take two chartered boats to an “Étude” that would



most of what she asks her collaborators to do, and she obviously loves performing. (She first learned hook suspension for “SANCTA,” as “a treat to myself.”) Given that she casts women of all ages—the legendary dancer and actress Beatrice (Trixie) Cordua performed with her until she died, at eighty-two, last year—there is no reason to think she will stop, but the question of how to age

be performed in the middle of the lagoon. While waiting to board, Knežević told me that the crew had been at the pavilion until eleven the night before; one of the robot dogs had stopped working, and they'd had to reconfigure the room, installing a dartboard so that Finn, the contortionist, could do archery (with her feet). Still, he and Holzinger seemed in good spirits. "It fits the concept somehow, that it is about failing systems," Holzinger said of the malfunction. Ultimately, she added, the only thing that really needed to work was the toilets.

On the boat to the performance, Holzinger and the pavilion's curator, Nora-Swantje Almes, held a brief discussion about the work. Holzinger isn't very good at speeches—her perpetual state is that she's either about to perform or has just performed—but she was charming, cheekily vulgar, and intelligent. "This is really not theatre," she said, mischievously. "This is really not a spectacle." She concluded by exclaiming "I have to stretch!" and decamped to a partitioned area of the boat.

Nearly two miles offshore, we approached a barge carrying a crane. We disembarked onto another barge and sat on a set of bleachers. On the stage barge, seven naked performers climbed on the crane, and a noise band assembled at the bow. Machaz followed the musician Gibrana Cervantes with an umbrella to protect Cervantes's violin. The mezzo-soprano Andrea Baker, nude but for a wing-tip collar and rubber hip waders, took the position of conductor.

They played ambient drone for a while, menacing, anticipatory. Baker was going to summon something from the depths. Lane Shi, a musician and an artist who uses vocal techniques from Mongolian throat singing, issued high-pitched squeals like a creature. Then Eckhardt, with her electric guitar, began to ascend the crane, pausing to perform rock-star maneuvers. Shi followed her halfway. In position, she sang, and then screamed, conjuring sounds from the sea, mountains, and dirty basement gigs.

Finally, the music reached a crescendo as the crane started to pull something from the water. A bell appeared, and then, inside, Holzinger herself, upside down, her long hair hanging like sea-



"Not that one. I can only taste five of its seven grains."

weed. Underwater, a rope had been tracked from the boat to the bell so that she could find her way—the lagoon is basically opaque—but she said that the most stressful part was communicating the timing to the Italian crane operator. She had been going into the water with industrial divers for months, as research. It gives you a rash.

The music stopped. Eckhardt and Shi climbed down from the crane; when they disembarked, Eckhardt took Shi's head in her arms and hugged her tightly, for several seconds. Everyone watched in silence, in the rain, as Holzinger tolled the bell.

Knežević told me that, while visiting the Sistine Chapel for "SANCTA" research, the team noticed how Michelangelo had painted women to look like men: something about them being upside down. In the bell, Holzinger's previously compact torso becomes long and androgynous, her arms and lats titanic. But it's in her neck, the way she controls her head to follow the violent motion of the rest of her body, the force of which seems to come from somewhere beyond herself, that you get the

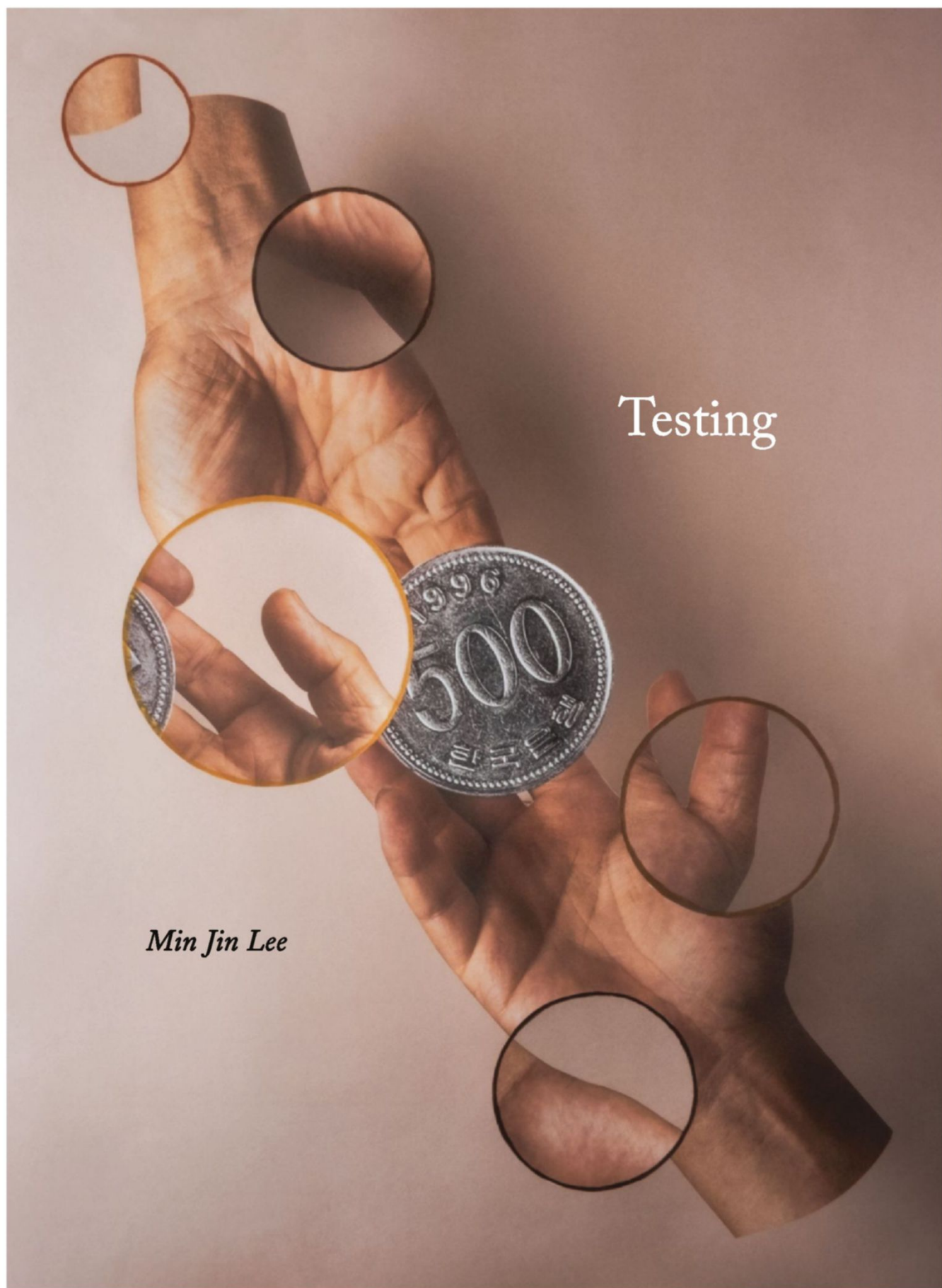
rare chance to see it: she's a very good contemporary dancer.

The crane moved Holzinger closer to a boat that was stationed next to the barge. Luna Duran, whose brown hair hangs almost to her knees, waited there, with hooks installed in the flesh on her thin shoulder blades. Holzinger picked her up by a cable attached to the hooks. As the pair were lifted back above the water, still hanging from the bell, the band started thrashing and screaming for the climax. With Holzinger in control of the cable holding her, Duran twisted and swung, sometimes like a nymph, sometimes like a caught fish, bleeding from the wounds in her back.

Eventually, they were lowered back onto the boat. They had rehearsed this only once, for "about ten minutes," Holzinger said, owing to the cold, boat-traffic regulations, and the expense. "With these 'Études,' it's always fucking kamikaze and last-minute everything," she added, but "they always work out." As she dropped back onto her feet, she was beaming and, seeming to forget the audience, gave Duran a high five. ♦

Testing

Min Jin Lee



Even as an infant, Helen and John Koh's firstborn had a calm temperament and an accommodating disposition, as if he appreciated what it meant to be a jangnam, with the attendant privileges and responsibilities of primogeniture. Bo never seemed to let the burdens of being the eldest child overwhelm him. He exerted himself in the classroom and on the sports field; he got along well with his peers. A nice-looking and thoughtful young man, Bo was a blessing and a relief to his busy parents.

All three children had been born in Paramus, New Jersey, while John was working for a Japanese trading company in New York City. The Koh family had lived in New Jersey for six years, Seoul for four, then Sydney for almost six, prior to their return to Seoul. In the U.S., Australia, and South Korea, Helen's friends had constantly asked her how she was bringing up her eldest son. Was there a method to rearing such a fine student and good boy? Helen, however, insisted that the credit belonged neither to her nor to John. "Bo came that way," she would say.

Bo's mother could admit this truth not because she was modest but, rather, because the experience of having more than one child in the same household amply demonstrated to any self-aware parent that each child was entirely unique. Eventually, all small humans—even when they were flesh of one's flesh, which should have provided some illusion of predictability—asserted their individuality, no matter how much a parent tried to control, shape, or design them.

As educated and earnest middle-class parents, Helen and John had provided more than the basics, and certainly more than they themselves, both the children of poor parents, had been given. Parenting was a haphazard experiment for even the best intentioned, and Helen and John observed their offspring, Bo, DH, and Mido, with profound fascination, as only parents can. Each child was immutably distinct from the others.

When Helen read a sad story in the news about a child who had gone astray, she very rarely assigned blame to the parents. Life had taught her that the debate between nature and nurture was almost moot: Excellent parents sometimes had badly behaved children, and

careless parents could have progeny who performed admirably. The bond between a mother and her child was binding, yet it had to be loosened. A mother had to love, and a child had to grow up. The results were often out of one's hands.

In America, Bo was eighteen years old, but his Korean age was nineteen, as the time in the mother's womb was counted. Girls admired his glossy chestnut hair, olive complexion, and large brown eyes. He spoke English like a native, which had made him an exotic curiosity at a public high school in Gangnam, and he studied from morning into the night, barely sleeping. In the evenings, his sister, Mido, studied as well, but she could never stay awake as long as he could. Helen did her best to stay up with Bo, but even she had to turn in eventually, because she had her job the next day and had to prepare breakfast for the family.

Most remarkably, Bo had maintained an impressive grade-point average, in the second stanine nationally, and he was now allowed to apply to Yonsei University. His school did not think he should test for Seoul National, his father's alma mater, which was reserved for the very top students, but his rank was high enough that his advisers thought Yonsei might be possible, especially if he applied for sociology, which was a subject he wanted to study. This was fine by Bo. He preferred Yonsei's old-fashioned campus and admired the university's alumni.

In Bo's homeroom class, there was a precocious beauty named Ara Yang, whom he liked, and who adored him. After school, Bo usually went to his cram school, and, once, she showed up at the hagwon and invited him to her house to study, and, right there in her bedroom, she proposed sex. Stunned, grateful, and naturally tempted, Bo made a deal with her: after they were accepted into college, they would make love. Whenever he masturbated after that, he fantasized about the twin possibilities of attending the college of his dreams and having sex with Ara.

Bo took the Suneung in November of 1994. In addition to that dreaded national college exam, in his year he also had to take the bongosa, a specific exam

for Yonsei. He believed that the tests went well enough.

As soon as Bo and his classmates finished the bongosa, they rushed back to their hagwon. Their tutors had been more or less flying blind, because there were almost no prior tests from which to teach. Each student, fresh from having taken the exam, was asked to recall the test questions, and three tutors recorded the questions and typed out their speculated answers. The bongosa question Bo would never forget was "Describe the difference between digital and analog." For his answer, he had written that a digital clock stated a moment in time, whereas an analog clock revealed the process of time. Bo's tutor said that this answer was terrific. Not that it mattered.

Bo's Suneung score was what kept him out. A perfect score was 200. He received 153, a strong showing but not invulnerable, and, predictably, given his focus on studying for the college exams, his high-school G.P.A. had fallen to the lower end of the second stanine, so he was no longer in the top four per cent nationally.

Ara had been accepted to Sungkyunkwan University, but she told him she'd be happy to wait for him as he prepared to take the Yonsei exam again. Almost everyone took these exams more than once, especially for schools as hard to get into as Yonsei, she said, trying her best to encourage him. Bo, guilt-ridden at the heavy expense of his failure, told her firmly that he would not hold her back. To make the situation clearer, he told her that they should not even be friends.

Bo wanted to take the exams again. Helen did not know what to do. The Suneung was offered only once a year, in November. And John, after falling out with his boss and not finding anything good in Seoul, had just been rehired at his old office in Sydney, albeit with a demotion and a lower salary. He and Mido were now staying with Helen's brother, Kenny, who worked for Qantas, and his wife, Lily. Thankfully, DH was still doing fine at Andover. Helen had to consider the cost of maintaining housing in Seoul and Sydney, Bo's hagwon fees for another year, and the family's stretched expenses.

Helen's sister, Sonya, lived in an apartment complex made up of many

separate towers in Appujeong. In the elevator in Sonya's building, Helen finger-combed her hair, tucking the loose wisps behind her ears. That morning, she'd noticed new gray hairs sprouting from her side part. No doubt her sister would comment on this. Each week that Helen held off on getting her cut-and-color, she could put aside more for the children's school and hagwon fees.

When the elevator opened on Sonya's floor, a uniformed maid stood waiting at the apartment's front door. Sonya's home, which was owned by her husband's uncle, Chairman Mun, was larger than most houses in Seoul—a full floor, two apartments combined. Three generations lived in the two units, separated by a small hallway. Sonya spent her days taking care of the household—her husband, Yong-gil, their two sons, and the Chairman. She managed a sizable staff, with a formidable housekeeper, two maids, a cook, and a driver.

The maid guided Helen to Sonya's home office, which was the size of Helen's living room. A large square of southern light flooded the elegant space. Behind the modern oak desk was a green mohair-wool sofa where Sonya read in the evenings. Stacks of art books covered a low hand-carved Korean-pine table. Tall branches of persimmons filled

an enormous cobalt-blue fishbowl on a rosewood pedestal.

The maid remained at the door while Helen took a seat on the sofa, and Sonya frowned.

"I can't believe you're going to leave. Again. You've barely been here," Sonya said, too exasperated to bother with pleasantries. She asked the maid for tea, and the young woman bowed before closing the door.

"Is she new?" Helen pointed toward the door.

"Just the niece of the cook," Sonya said, then regretted sounding so dismissive. "She is part time. I don't really need her, but the cook asked me. She's recently divorced. There are two little kids."

Helen understood. Everyone asked her older sister for help, and Sonya had a hard time saying no.

"Did John find a house in Sydney?"

"They're still at Kenny's."

"Still?" Sonya raised an eyebrow.

"Well, Kenny and Lily said it's fine, and Mido is helping with the kids."

"Are you O.K. with money?" Sonya asked bluntly.

"It's tough," Helen admitted. She drew a breath. "Bo didn't get in."

"Oh, no!" Sonya exclaimed. "Was he close? I bet he was close. Bo is very smart. The hardest-working boy. I shouldn't

have favorites, but he is the best. Nicer than my sons," Sonya said, then smiled. "Then, are you going to stay another year so—"

"I can't stay. The apartment lease is ending, and we need that deposit back so we can get a place in Sydney. We can't keep relying on Kenny and Lily. Bo missed the test by just a few points, and the counsellors said that this year's Suneung was a nightmare."

Helen folded her arms and closed her eyes, unable to forget what her son had said after the test results came out: "Umma, I want to take it again. I failed you and Appa. I'm sorry."

She'd told him that he hadn't done anything wrong. He had never failed them, but Bo could not be consoled. Her oldest child did not cry or waste more words. He was certain that, if he had studied harder, he would have passed. Acceptance was within his grasp. Three points, maybe four? He did not want all this expense and time to be squandered. How could she say no to a child who wanted to study harder? Helen could not. For her son, passing that test would be his redemption.

The boy's apology continued to press down on his mother's brain like a tiny ball of tungsten, a deceptively heavy metal she had once held in her palm in a chemistry class.

"It doesn't make sense for me to stay here and lease a smaller place," Helen said.

Sonya shook her head. She understood. Helen's growing expenses were unsustainable, and how would she ever save for the children's weddings and her own retirement?

"Sister, I was wondering, I know the Chairman wouldn't like it, but do you think Bo could stay here to take the test again? He'd be at the hagwon most of the time and wouldn't be underfoot. I know it's a big—"

Sonya had been afraid of this. She felt unable to refuse her little sister but unable to say yes either, because this was not her house. With her head bowed down, Sonya sat, not saying a word.

"Never mind," Helen said. She understood. Her sister couldn't ask the Chairman. He felt strongly about not allowing anyone outside Yong-gil's immediate family to stay overnight. He had never liked Sonya's relatives. For



"Sure, you remember me. I zoomed past you at an incomprehensible speed in a Tic Tac-shaped object."

her sake, he tolerated them. "I was thinking of renting a room for Bo. I can't decide if he should stay at a boarding house or a gosiwon."

"I've heard that boarding houses can be terrible about meals," Sonya said, wanting to be helpful. "The newer gosiwon can be nicer," she said. "They're more like motels now than dorms. The rooms are small, but some of them are better run. I can help you with that. I am sorry about this. You know that if the Chairman and my husband weren't so against—"

"We'll be fine," Helen said, feeling foolish.

"I can help you with the cost," Sonya assured her. "Find the best gosiwon for him, right next to the hagwon. The boarding houses are often far away, and you don't want him to waste time commuting. Just pick the best one, and I'll take care of it. I'll check in on him often. I promise."

Sonya paused. "You look tired," she said. "The sweater is pretty, but the lilac color highlights the gray in your hair. You look older than me! Get an appointment and get your roots done. I'm a mean older sister, aren't I? But who else is going to tell you to take care of your looks?"

Helen touched her head. Her sister was picking on her because she felt bad. Sonya had married a man from a wealthy family but had quickly learned that none of the family money was hers. The Chairman controlled every decision and expense, and Sonya did everything she could to please him. She nagged or teased only two people in the world—Kenny and Helen. With everyone else, she was detached, her behavior unimpeachable. To everyone else, she appeared flawless.

Sonya crossed her arms and tilted her head slightly. "Why is Bo doing this? It makes no sense. He should be studying in America."

"He likes being here. He feels closer to the people. He was even thinking of trying to get into military service," Helen said, mystified.

"Has my favorite nephew lost his mind? My sons would be overjoyed if they didn't have to go through this. It's crazy enough that Bo wants to take the test again and live in Korea. Do not allow him to give up his American citizenship to do service. I will not allow that," Sonya said sternly.

Helen nodded.

Sonya glanced at the clock. "Listen, let's have something to eat now. The Chairman will be back soon."

Bo failed on his second try. An impossible philosophy passage and a confounding geometry proof. A few points shy.

On November 13, 1996, he took the Suneung for the third time.

The day before, after his last hagwon class had ended, he'd got on a mostly empty subway car heading to the Yonsei campus and sat in a seat near the back. Cold, he tried to warm himself by tucking his blue woollen scarf into his faded black parka.

"If you want to be a Yonsei student, you have to behave like one," Kim Teacher, his hagwon instructor, had told him. "Go to the cafés where Yonsei students have their snacks, read the books they read, and inhabit the peace of mind of being an admitted student. Visualize. Draw the picture in your mind."

A Suneung wizard who got one of the top scores in the country for his year, Kim Teacher charged an extraordinary tutoring fee, which Bo's aunt Sonya paid. As a bachelor, not yet forty years old, Kim Teacher earned more than several lawyers and judges combined and already owned two commercial buildings in Hongdae. It was rumored that he didn't have to work for money anymore; he just enjoyed teaching. His specialty was retakers, the ones who had not passed on their first or second tries. Kim Teacher was convinced that Bo would pass this time. His practice scores were in the safety zone, so he focussed on building Bo's mental game.

At a corner table, by the window of a popular two-story café near Sinchon station that was frequented by students, Bo picked up a discarded copy of a Yonsei literary magazine and read it while drinking his tea. All around him, young men and women huddled together, warming their cold hands on hot coffee cups. Attractive girls in bold patterned sweaters and jeans discussed politics in hushed tones, ignoring the boys sniffing around them.

Bo tried to imagine himself as one of the young men writing in their notebooks or reading. A female student with short, permed hair resembled Isul, his friend at the gosiwon who was studying for the civil-service exam. The woman was reading "The Stranger" in French.

Bo hadn't had time to read fiction since the summers during high school, when he used to read classic European and American novels in English.

He'd always imagined himself living and working in Korea, but he also wanted to be the kind of Korean who knew more about the world—through books, film, and history.

In less than twenty-four hours, he would take the Suneung again, and, for the past three years, he had done little but sleep, eat, and study for this exam. He had failed the Suneung in his last year of high school, and then again after graduation, and he hoped that tomorrow's Suneung would be his last. He felt good about the test this year and ready to put it behind him.

Earlier that morning, after class ended, Kim Teacher had asked him to stay behind for a moment. Bo stood awkwardly while the teacher remained seated, his long brown face tilted in deep thought. The teacher was unusually tall, with broad shoulders and a square jaw. Even when he smiled, he looked more like a former professional athlete than a once stellar student from a strawberry farm in Goseong.

"You will do very well," Kim Teacher pronounced. He handed Bo a paper box filled with the customary taffy. "Make the score stick! This is the best yeot in Seoul. Not everyone can get this."

Bo smiled his thanks.

"One more thing," Kim Teacher said, digging into his vest pocket to pull out a five-hundred-won coin. "Take this with you tomorrow. It's a good-luck charm from your old teacher. When you get nervous, just touch it. Remember, you're not alone. Think of the millions and millions of students who have taken difficult exams before you. Now you're part of this group of strugglers. It is good to be examined. A young person should learn and be tested so that he can retain knowledge."

Surprised, Bo stared at the coin in his palm. He wouldn't have pegged his teacher as superstitious.

"My hagwon teacher gave me a coin when I took my test. I passed and got into S.N.U. for the hardest course. A farm boy got a top score!" he said, laughing. "So here I am, training you to take an exam, giving you a coin, and wishing you luck."

Bo bowed and thanked him.

"How are you feeling?" The instructor prided himself on checking in with

his students. He felt that his personal approach was the reason that his students got their best scores and shook off their past failures.

Bo grinned, staring at the pale-blue walls of the large classroom.

"I'm well, Teacher. I believe I've prepared as much as I could."

"You will have fine luck, too. You deserve it."

"I guess I haven't had much luck before."

"Sometimes it isn't just preparation. It's timing, circumstances, and personality. You have good habits, and you did the work, Bo. You're a good person. Go easy on yourself. Make sure you go to sleep early tonight. Tell yourself that the exam is just another practice test. You'll be fine."

At the café, several tables had cleared out, and Bo was alone in his corner. He put down the literary magazine for the next person who might want something to read. When he went to the cashier to pay the bill, he could feel the worn edge of the five-hundred-won coin in his coat pocket. He took the train home and stopped at the grocery store near the gosiwon to pick up supplies for dinner.

Sonya had selected the best gosiwon near Bo's hagwon, and it rarely had a vacancy, because it was so well maintained. But it was still a pay-by-the-week lodging, filled with transient students, day workers, and ghostly figures who came and went, and, of course, it was nothing like home. The kitchen for the residents was a modestly sized rectangular room. There were three rice cookers and three electric kettles on a long white counter by a deep sink and a dish rack. Residents were required to wash their own dishes.

Bo found Isul at the communal table, her eyes closed, with her head propped up on a civil-service study guide. An aluminum ramyeon pot with rounded handles simmered on the stove. Isul wore her usual indoor clothes—black sweatpants, gray sweatshirt, white ankle socks with black-and-white plastic slippers. She was bone thin and tiny, and although she was four years Bo's senior, she looked like a primary-school girl wearing her older brother's clothes. Severely nearsighted, Isul wore eyeglasses with thick plastic lenses, which obscured her lovely, small eyes.

Bo had met Isul in the communal

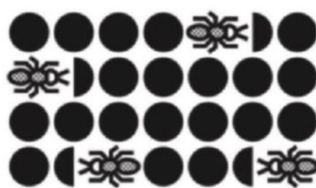
kitchen on his first day at the gosiwon. Within a week, she'd made a point of sitting him down to tell him that he was nothing like the other residents.

"You're not a loser like most of us. You'll have a bright future. Keep studying."

She had already graduated from Pusan National with good marks, but she hadn't been able to get any office jobs. Dejected at the thought of continuing to apply for white-collar positions, she had taken a break for a few months to work as a bartender at a restaurant owned by her aunt, who had borrowed money so that Isul could study in Seoul for the civil-service exam. Isul had failed twice already. On her first try, she'd made it to the interview stage but had caught a severe cold and lost her voice on the day of the interview.

Isul's windowless room was one of the smallest in the gosiwon, and she had to share a bathroom on the women's floor. She teased Bo for being a rich kid, because he had his own bathroom and a transom window that opened, allowing him to get fresh air from the lobby windows. Isul and Bo had made a deal that whoever passed on the third try would buy the other a beef barbecue dinner.

Every day, they ate at least one meal together in the third-floor kitchen, where they could have as much rice, kimchi, and ramyeon as they wanted, all supplied by the gosiwon. With the allowance that his parents sent, Bo bought eggs, sausages, tofu, and tins of jjajang tuna, and he shared his groceries with her, though she ate so



little that her intake was hardly noticeable. Whenever her aunt sent her fish or banchan from home, she shared it with him. She called him her little brother.

The ramyeon in the pot bubbled over, and Bo hurried to the stove to turn off the gas.

"Sister! It's done, right?"

Isul didn't open her eyes, and he nudged her shoulder gently, feeling the sharp edge of her shoulder blade beneath the thick sweatshirt.

He saw that she was sleeping soundly and had forgotten to take off her eyeglasses. As he removed them from her small face with both hands, Isul still didn't wake up.

Big Uncle, a middle-aged security guard at a downtown bank, peeked into the kitchen. A longtime resident and a kind of mayor of the gosiwon, he favored Isul and Bo. Six years ago, after his elderly father died, Big Uncle had moved into one of the back rooms with a bathroom and never saw the point of finding a bigger place of his own. He preferred the bustle of the gosiwon to the idea of living alone and took great care to remember the birthdays of both residents and staff. On a birthday, he'd buy a red-bean bun from his favorite bakery and leave it in the kitchen with the person's name and a smiley face in a heart drawn neatly on the paper bag.

"Our little Isul looks tired," Big Uncle said. "Maybe we can get Manager Hwang to open her room, so she can sleep properly. Her neck is going to hurt if she sleeps that way," he said, clucking his tongue. "Manager Hwang is at the store now. He'll be back in half an hour or so."

"Sister, Sister!" Bo jostled Isul's shoulder but got no response. He spotted the familiar green lanyard with her room key in her sweatpants pocket. He turned to Big Uncle. "Maybe we can take her ourselves. She must weigh forty kilos, if that."

Big Uncle bent over her chair and scooped up the young woman in his arms like an infant.

"She weighs less than a small sack of rice," he said with concern.

They both checked that she was breathing.

Taking her key, Bo walked ahead of him to open Isul's door. Having never seen the inside of her room before, he was startled by how small it was, less than half the size of his.

She had almost no possessions. The white walls were bare and the sheet-of-paper-size patch of floor immaculate. On the clothing rack hung a navy winter coat, a black interview suit, one white dress shirt, and a Burberry scarf that Isul's aunt had sent last Christmas. Every centimetre of her desk was covered with heavy piles of test guides and notebooks. Her bed was made and covered with a thick red-and-green checkered blanket. On the pillow was an open box of cold

medicine from the corner drugstore. Six of the capsules had been removed from the tabbed aluminum sheet.

At the hospital, the doctor pumped Isul's stomach and gave her fluids. She would be fine, the nurse told them. Big Uncle had to meet someone and asked Bo to stay with her until her aunt could come from Busan. When Isul woke, a few hours later, Bo was struggling to stay awake in a chair next to her bed. Isul looked startled.

"Bo, what am I doing here?"

"You troublemaker," he said, relieved that she was back to normal.

"Where are my glasses?"

Bo picked them up from the bedside table and handed them to her.

"Did you take all six pills?"

"What pills?"

"The cold medicine."

"I don't think so. I took two at first. They didn't work, so I took some more."

"You dummy," he said. "You need to take a child's dosage, and you probably didn't eat. I can't believe you have a college education and still don't understand basic science." He looked at her sternly but started to laugh.

"Watch it. I'm still your elder," she said, smiling weakly.

"How do you feel?"

"I have a cold. And my throat hurts."

"They pumped your stomach. They thought you tried to—"

Isul raised her hand briefly from the bed as if to stop him from speaking, then let it drop. "Bo, I'm so tired. Let me sleep. I just want to stop feeling so tired and sick. I keep getting these colds, and it makes it hard to study. My poor aunt. She wants me to work in an office. I'd better get well soon."

Bo watched her fall asleep. When her aunt finally arrived, he left Isul a note, promising to return the next day.

It was four in the morning when Bo returned to his room, and he closed his eyes for a couple of hours, washed, and remembered to pack what he needed for the test, including his exam ticket, identification, a packet of tissues, and the hard candies he liked. He tossed the box of taffy into his backpack.

As soon as the proctor allowed them to open the exam booklet, Bo plowed through the questions. After the first



"O.K., you all know why we're here—to keep male friendship alive."

section, there was a short break, and that was when he began to feel dizzy, the exhaustion hitting him all at once. He had taken his seat at 8:10 A.M., and the exam would end at 5:20 P.M. There would be another short break and an hour for lunch, and it was during the breaks that he felt most nauseated.

His head was heavy and hot. When he reached the literature section, he couldn't puzzle out the meaning of the questions. He stared at the reading passages, trying to make sense of the sentences. The short questions were more confusing than the longer ones. He reached into his trouser pocket and fumbled with the five-hundred-won coin. The indecipherable words began to swim in his mind.

What had made him think that he could go to Yonsei at all? He was born in New Jersey, and grew up there and in Sydney, before moving to Seoul, and he was sitting in a room filled with students who had been living, breathing, and eating in anticipation of this exam since they were in primary school. This year, the bongosa exam had been eliminated, so the Suneung was everything. Bo opened his eyes as wide as he could, doing his best to wake himself from his stupor.

His mind didn't go blank; rather, all the what-ifs multiplied like exponents, crowding his thoughts and rendering him unable to envision anything else.

The proctor told the students to stop, and Bo handed in his exam papers.

At the train station, a beggar was sleeping soundly on a bench. Easily over eighty, the man had a deeply furrowed brow, but the lower half of his face was oddly cherubic—jowls plump and a small pink mouth, almost smiling. By his left hand, there was a polished brass bowl and a laminated sign: "Blind from birth and abandoned by my mother. I ask for mercy. I wish you good fortune."

Bo placed the coin in the man's bowl.

Kim Teacher paged him twice but Bo did not call him back.

The results came out right before Christmas. Alone, Bo read his scores on the slip of paper and sat down on the bed in his rented room. That year, the number of possible points had changed from two hundred to four hundred, and the newspapers reported that this test had slaughtered hordes of top students. The highest scorer hit 373. Bo had not cleared 300. He felt as if he couldn't breathe. He



"It turns out all he wanted was a big glass of ice water."

didn't know how long he sat in his room, but eventually he walked out of the gosiwon and applied for a job at the nicer of two convenience stores, a block away.

Working full time as a cashier and stocking shelves, Bo felt productive. The store manager, a thirty-two-year-old man from Daejeon, admired Bo, who was punctual, responsible, and honest. When other employees came late or didn't show up, he picked up extra hours. One evening, the manager mentioned in passing that he had graduated from a college that no one in Seoul recognized and hadn't been able to get office work no matter how hard he'd tried. He didn't see the point of the years and years of hagwon payments and countless job applications, all to end up at this convenience store, but the degree, matted and custom-framed, had made his late parents proud. The manager's cheerful wife, who was a head taller than he was, also worked at the store. They did not plan on having children.

Bo's parents offered him a ticket to Sydney, but he asked for time to consider his options. Moreover, he asked them not to send any money until he knew what he was doing. With his own earnings, he was able to keep living at the gosiwon.

At the end of the workday, a store employee could purchase discounted meals, and often the manager and his wife saved him the best of the expired goods, which were still perfectly fine to eat.

Between Bo's mother and father, it was Helen who took the news harder. She had trouble sleeping and couldn't focus at work. Even as Helen completed everything she had to do—her job, family-meal preparation, housecleaning—her mind dwelled on her disappointed son in Korea. It was difficult to imagine her brightest child selling cigarettes and beer and sweeping the sidewalk. Hearing that the manager and his wife were being kind to him gave her little comfort.

If Helen hadn't been worried about losing her job, at a department store in Sydney, she would have flown back to Seoul to get him. Her husband asked her to be patient.

"Bo will figure it out," John said.

Helen called Sonya anyway.

When Sonya met Bo at a tonkatsu restaurant, she wore a simple camel-colored dress and wasn't carrying one of her expensive handbags. Bo arrived on time and took a seat

across from her. He looked remorseful, as if he deserved to be reprimanded.

"I ordered your favorite set and a cola with ice," Sonya said, smiling.

"Thank you, Aunt."

Her nephew had just turned twenty-two, but to her he was still a boy. He was the size of a man, but she could see only his familiar baby face behind his glasses.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you. The tutor you found me was very good. It isn't his fault."

"What are you talking about? I think you're amazing, Bo. I imagine this feels awful right now, but this could be providence," she said. "I believe this needed to happen. Your aunt is over fifty years old, and this is what I've learned. Sometimes the things you wanted most and didn't get are terrible things you've been delivered from."

Bo looked up, his mouth open a little.

"It's still upsetting. I understand."

She paused, sensing that he might resist her next proposal.

"I talked to an admissions counselor about you, and she said that you should go to America."

Bo's expression darkened. "Aunt, I can't give up. I should take it again. I already spent three years on this, and my scores were really high in my practice exams. I don't even have to learn that much more for the next Suneung. I just have to wait another year."

"The admissions counsellor had an idea, and I think it can also help your parents."

The server placed the tonkatsu sets on the table and left them. They bowed their heads and prayed silently, then she gestured for him to eat.

"Nephew, this admissions counselor is famous. She is the best in Seoul, and she has a plan, which apparently she's used many times with her students who can get visas. You move to California and go to a community college for two years. After you establish residency, then the cost will be almost nothing. You can pay for it by doing part-time jobs if you like working so much. If you do well, and I know you will, you can transfer to a Cal State school, or one of the University of California schools, or any four-year school. You could transfer to an Ivy if you wanted to. The rich schools give financial aid.

Bo, you can start again. I know you will flourish. It's not your fault that—"

She stopped herself. The boy was obviously upset, but trying not to show it.

Bo felt worse. She was clearly assuming that he couldn't pass, yet he could not defend himself, because the evidence against him was irrefutable. He had failed. Three times. None of the context mattered, only the results. He chewed the fried pork but tasted nothing.

"Aunt, I can pass. I know this has been a terrible burden, so I thought I'd save the money from this job and try to do it alone—"

"Bo. Listen to me. I know you can pass, too—but what for? Is it worth it? Do you really want to live here, or did you just want to know that you could get into Yonsei University? If you really wanted to live here, you could have chosen an easier school to get into, isn't that right? This system of testing just to weed children out is unfair and unpredictable, and I don't know why you should bear it any longer."

Bo said nothing. He had believed in his plan, and in a few sharp, well-reasoned words his aunt had pierced his logic and his purpose.

"How would I get there?"

"Uncle Kenny will get you a ticket to Sydney, and then, after you see your parents, you can go to Los Angeles." Sonya held her breath.

"I guess no one thinks I can get into Yonsei."

"You're wrong," she said, unwilling to indulge his self-pity. "I get that you feel embarrassed. You want proof that you can get in. That's normal."

Bo put down his fork and knife and wiped his mouth with the paper napkin.

"I know you can get admitted. There were some tough breaks, and I'm positive that if you keep taking it, you will pass. But, if you go to California and study there, you won't be vulnerable to all these exam and admissions changes. You won't keep delaying your life year after year to prove you can do something that everyone already knows you can do. None of this is your fault. Life is terribly unfair but we have to—"

Seeing his disheartened expression, Sonya took another breath, not wanting to say any more. Then she continued.

"I spoke to Kim Teacher. You're the

best retaker student he's ever had. All of us believe in you, Bo. We don't believe in this exam."

He stared at his barely touched plate.

"We don't believe in the Korean education system. Do you understand?"

"I don't blame Korea," he said.

"Eat your food," she said as kindly as she could.

After he finished, he told her that he'd think about it.

Two days later, he ran into Isul in the kitchen. She was drinking her first coffee of the morning and looked chipper.

"Thank you for the toast bread and strawberry jam."

Isul was referring to the day-old baked goods and expired jams he'd brought back the night before. The gosiwon residents were delighted to supplement their rations with Bo's regular food bonuses. No one paid any attention to the expiration dates. More than one of them had joked, "If only the store could give us expired soju." She slid her plate of toast toward him.

Bo nodded thanks but didn't say anything. He poured boiling water over the powdered coffee in the bottom of his mug.

"My parents want me to go to America."

"Go," Isul said. "I'm glad somebody is making sense. Yah—you better go. I'll kill you if you don't go." She raised her fist, grinning.

On seeing his expression, she put her fist down.

"You don't want to go? Why?"

"You, too?" He shook his head. "I want to take it again."

"Forget Yonsei. You can pass next time. I'm positive. I would bet my eye-surgery savings on that. And when you pass, so what? Have you seen how hard it is to get a good job here? You don't have any connections, right? Does your rich aunt know any conglomerates that are hiring?"

"I spent three years," he whispered.

"Big deal. Go. Listen to your parents. I wish I had smart parents." Isul smiled to soften the blow of her words. "You speak English perfectly, you have U.S. citizenship, and you're a genius. Forget this hell. If I had your choices, I would've been gone a long time ago.

You foreign-born Koreans are all messed up. You think you have to prove something. Prove you're Korean. C'mon. There's no test for that. There are Koreans who are born here who hate being Korean. Hey, maybe that's what it means to be Korean!" She laughed, then grew serious. "Do you need money for the ticket? I don't have much, but I would give my little brother some of my eye-surgery money." Isul still felt terrible that he had not slept the night before his Suneung on account of her.

"My uncle works at Qantas. He can get cheap tickets."

"Wow. If you weren't such a nice little brother, I would not like you. You have it made. What are you upset about?"

"I failed the Suneung three times. I'm twenty-two years old." It occurred to him that in the U.S. he would be twenty-one, and it sounded much younger, though he was still the same person.

"So damn what? I failed my exam twice. By the time I get a job, if I get a job, I will be an old lady with thicker glasses. But you know what? Your gosiwon sister will pass this son-of-a-bitch civil-service job test, ace the interview, and I'm going to get my nearsightedness corrected. I'm not so bad-looking, and I'm going to have some fun. I'll have tall, good-looking boyfriends who like short women, and, one day, I'm going to buy my aunt a little building back home. It's not expensive like Seoul." She put her hands on her hips, her bent arms as thin as twigs. "This is my plan. I believe it is a good plan. Every day, I work to make my plan into reality."

"You will definitely pass. I'm positive you will," Bo said.

"Go. You go to America. That's a better plan. But, first, you have to get to work." Isul gestured to the kitchen wall clock, then picked up her toast and jam.

Bo laughed.

"I'd better go."

Isul winked, and, when Bo left the kitchen, she imagined the big gosiwon without him, which was depressing. She made herself another coffee and opened her study guide. ♦

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

MAKING CONTACT

Peter Hujar's portraits are a search for the secrets his sitters don't know they have.

BY HILTON ALS

It's a fine measure of the curator Joel Smith's visual and emotional acuity that the first standout images one encounters on entering "Hujar: Contact," his fabulous show of Peter Hujar's photographs and contact sheets (at the Morgan Library, through October 25th), are of the performer, writer, and director Jackie Curtis. Hujar, who was a friend of Curtis's, photographed him, circa 1970, in Jackie drag. (Curtis alternated between "boy" Jackie and "girl" Jackie throughout his too brief life.) Resplendent in a dark top and flowered scarves, Jackie has his hair ratted out, creating a kind of nimbus around his poignant, ready-to-laugh face, which is powdered white, with shiny, metallic-looking paillettes around the eyes. It's a great face, a great look, one that speaks to—or, more precisely, articulates—hip, vital New York as it was during the years of Curtis's ascendancy, as a playwright at La Mama and as one of Andy Warhol's more comedically gifted superstars. Twiggy's youthquake glam was out. Something darker, funnier, and more lucid was taking the stage, dressed in down-at-the-heel platform shoes and stockings with runs and sporting Corey Tippin-inspired maquillage—shaved eyebrows and brightly rouged cheeks. Gender, seemingly, was the least of anyone's problems, and who needed Broadway? One's life was the performance, and one's friends the only audience that really mattered.

You can see at least some of that spirit in the dozen or more frames of Jackie that Hujar shot in his studio, which was also his home—a loft, at 189 Second Avenue, that was owned by

Jackie's grandmother. With a minimum of props—a chair here, a mattress there—Hujar posed his sitters in front of a gray backdrop or a white wall. No matter how outrageous his subjects seem—they include the San Francisco performance troupe the Cockettes and cast members from Robert Wilson's early spectacles—his photographs are some of the most silent images I have ever seen. The silence grows out of Hujar's high style, the way the people he photographed appear motionless while their eyes are alive with thought and spirit. In his work, Hujar returned again and again to the spiritual life of his sitters—an invisible presence in his images. Hujar's best pictures are still-lives that feature not apples but queer fruit. The camera he habitually used in the studio, a 120-mm. twin-lens reflex, gave his photographs a strong graphic quality infused with warmth. It also allowed his subjects to see his face without a camera blocking it—a handsome face, with pale skin, dark eyebrows, and a small mouth. But, as he looked down into the ground glass, his being wasn't the point; his sitter's was.

According to Andrew Durbin's essential "The Wonderful World That Almost Was: A Life of Peter Hujar and Paul Thek," published earlier this year, Hujar told the writer Jill Johnston that he saw his photography as a "search." What he was searching for, Johnston concluded, were the secrets we have without knowing it. If we can't bear witness to ourselves, what allows the camera to dance in and draw us out? I think it begins with the implicit understanding that photographer and

sitter are making a story together, with the sitter as protagonist, and sometimes the combined reality and artificiality of the exchange brings certain truths to the surface. When that didn't happen for Hujar, it was likely because of a sitter's resistance. In 1980, he invited members of the London-based drag troupe Bloodlips to pose. The episode was described by the group's founder, Bette Bourne, in Cynthia Carr's "Fire in the Belly" (2012), a graceful, affecting biography of the artist David Wojnarowicz, who was a friend of Hujar's. "We couldn't reveal," Bourne said. "Hujar's big thing was that you had to reveal. I know that now, but I didn't know it at the time. In other words, blistering, blazing honesty directed towards the lens. No pissing about. No putting anything on. No camping around. Just flat, real who-you-are. And then he could go inside."

It wasn't until I saw Hujar's pictures of Jackie Curtis at the Morgan that I began to see Jackie's dress-up as a display of innocence which evoked a time when little boys were not made to feel ashamed for playing with Mother's pearls or Sister's tea set. Just look at his eyes in the image, taken from the contact sheet of Jackie in drag, that Smith has hung near the entrance: they're the eyes of a newborn (albeit one with cigarette breath), seeing the world fresh and without fear. Next to this picture is a blowup of part of the contact sheet. One frame has been outlined in orange grease pencil with the word "Vogue" written across the top. The implication: though Jackie couldn't have his *Vogue* cover, because of the way the world



Jackie Curtis, circa 1970. Huijar returned again and again to the spiritual life of his sitters—an invisible presence in his images.

was back then (and still is), Peter was determined to give him one. Jackie is not only Hujar's cover girl; he's also Smith's, a star among the fantastic performers, artists, writers, and leather queens whom Hujar photographed in the sixties and seventies, who bring such *life* to this exhibition crackling with insight, density, and love. What we see, in the sectioned gallery of "Hujar:Contact," is all that New York created and made significant and lost in the thirty-two years—from 1954 to 1986—that the exhibition covers. (The Morgan houses nearly six thousand of Hujar's surviving contact sheets.)

When I got to the end of the show, and happily turned around to walk through it again, one picture of Jackie stayed in my mind; it existed in memory and wasn't at the Morgan. Taken by Hujar in 1985, the black-and-white image shows Jackie in repose, dressed in a suit, with a fresh white flower in his buttonhole and a lovely drawing of him, in full makeup, positioned near his left shoulder. In this frame, Jackie's eyes are closed, his mouth shut, because he's dead.

Art remembers long after we have forgotten. Hujar's work is so rooted in transience and in the slippery nature of identity—the quick shutter click between being and not being—that mounting a show of his contact sheets makes great aesthetic and political sense: Who are we, moment by moment? What is our final image? Does death have a shape? A color? Hujar's exquisite early pictures, such as "Seaweed" or "Dead Fish, Fire Island," both from 1960–62, teach us how to see life's erosions. The former shows us nine images of seaweed that has washed up on the sand. Each strand is like a beautiful clump of calligraphy all tangled up in itself, as captivating and lonely as any earthwork. "Dead Fish, Fire Island"—whose title is self-explanatory—tells us so much about time and the beauty of unadorned decomposition that we have to accept the knowledge that we ourselves are always in the process of decay.

These early works also establish Hujar's sense of color within the black-and-white image. Throughout his career, he used gray tones to illuminate the mys-

tery of his images. Gray dominates his thoughtful, sensual black-and-white portraits of his friend Susan Sontag reclining on a light-colored blanket and wearing a turtleneck, from 1975. Even his pictures taken outside can give the feeling that the world he's capturing is overcast—as in his portraits of the trans activist Marsha P. Johnson, so tender in her bonnet, on the Christopher Street Pier, on Easter Sunday, 1976. Hujar's gray is a curtain—a scrim—that he rarely lifts, bringing to mind Elizabeth Bishop's 1964 description of sea air: "Like a first coat of whitewash when it's wet,/ that thin gray mist lets everything show through." While his lighting is the light of romance: the queer cinema light that you see in early Richard Avedon and George Platt Lynes, transformed and flecked with danger and allure.

But can we use the word "allure" when it comes to Hujar's self-portraits with his mother from 1977? In the images at the Morgan, we see the tall, thin Hujar in a plaid shirt and jeans. His attractive mother, whom he always referred to as Rose Murphy when speaking with friends, is a head or so shorter than her son, standing by his side. Her hair is done just so. In some of the frames, Hujar's right arm is on his mother's shoulder. What could he have been hoping to record in these images, if anything?

He did not grow up with Rose. Soon after giving birth to him, in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1934, she went to work as a waitress in Manhattan—his father, Joseph John Hujar, a baker and maybe a bootlegger, had split before his birth—and left Peter with her parents, Ukrainians who had a farm in Ewing Township. He spoke Ukrainian before English, and the farm animals were his earliest and most trusted friends. He got his first camera from Rose, on one of his visits to the city. As a boy, he took a picture of cows in the distance. The closeup portraits of cows and other animals that he took later were the first Hujar images I saw that I understood. They seemed to be marked by a kind of spiritual deprivation and longing—the work of an orphaned child who wanted to connect with the other vulnerable creatures of the world. The animals in his photographs are monuments to the difference

between man and beast; and, because the animals got here first, the images seem to say, they have ancient qualities that trump ours—even those of the photographer and his modern camera. Like the French director Robert Bresson, in his unspeakably heart-wrenching 1966 film, "Au Hasard Balthazar," which sees the world—a black-and-white world with lots of gray—through the eyes of a donkey, Hujar blames us humans for disfiguring the natural world with our cruelty and our neglect. His animals are infused with the weight of his childhood, his wounds.

When Peter was eleven, his beloved grandmother died, and his grandfather, worried about how badly the boy was being treated by an uncle who lived with them, sent Peter to stay with Rose and her husband, Ed (Snookie) Murphy, a bookie, in their one-bedroom apartment on East Thirty-second Street. The Murphys drank; in Carr's "Fire in the Belly," Hujar's friends remember him being humiliated and dismissed by them. Nevertheless, at the School of Industrial Art, Hujar flourished under the tutelage of his English teacher, a young gay poet named Daisy Aldan, who not only supported Hujar's dream of becoming a photographer but introduced him to her chosen family—other women, including the actress Tallulah Bankhead, who gathered at Aldan's on weekends to play poker.

Sometime before Hujar graduated from high school, his mother threw a bottle at him, and he left her apartment for good, staying at first with friends. No one in his family came to his graduation, so he sat in the audience and, when his name was called, he applauded for himself.

Durbin's book is visceral in its narrative drive; he wants you to feel what he feels about his subjects, and to share his admiration for Hujar's photographs. Inevitably, you are inspired to assess them for yourself. As I looked at photographs that Hujar had shot at the Capuchin Catacombs, in Palermo, in 1963—a trip he made with his then lover and friend, the avant-garde artist Paul Thek—I remembered why it had taken me years to get into Hujar's work.

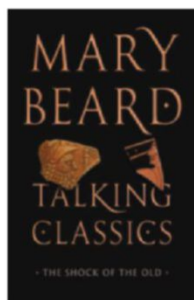
After leaving home, Hujar, with Aldan's encouragement, worked for fifteen years as an assistant in various photo

studios. In 1956, he became involved with the painter Joseph Raffael; two years later, the pair went off to Italy, where, given time and space, Hujar was able to find what interested him most as an artist: making images that explored tenderness and what we do or don't do to protect it. At the Morgan, there are about a dozen photographs that Hujar took at an institute for neurological disorders in Florence, in 1959. I was especially drawn to two of them. In each of these, a nun is helping a boy with his movement. The nun's habit falls in beautiful folds to the floor, and in one picture we see the child's head in profile, as though it were jutting out of the nun's wimple. In the second image, the nun faces the boy; she is smiling gently at him, and we see both figures in a mirror, the camera reflecting the reflection.

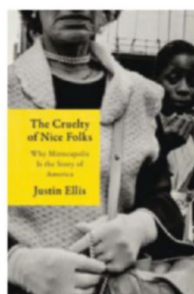
Hujar returned to Italy in 1963, by which point he was involved with Thek. The two had met in Coral Gables, Florida, in 1956, but had been with other partners then. By 1961, they were together, albeit in a way that Durbin is right to point out was different from heterosexual coupling. First of all, at that time, a man could be arrested for loving another man, and the layers of complication in being together—how out could you be, and how traditional in your expectations?—no doubt amplified the vulnerability and the risk of their love. Hujar loved Thek, but Thek often needed to be away in order to make his work, and he became enmeshed in other situations, which sometimes involved women. (He and Son-tag were lovers intermittently in the early sixties; she dedicated her 1966 collection, “Against Interpretation,” to Thek, whose ideas about making helped her declare, at the end of that now famous title essay, “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”)

“You’re never in love with the people you love,” Hujar once said to a friend. “Being in love is all the anticipation; it can’t really be there when you’re actually with him.” But, no matter what Hujar thought about love, it was, in the end, just thought, his own hermeneutics of the erotic. Ultimately, for him, love was probably driven by fear. Fear provoked his legendary rages—breaking chairs, throwing things, cutting people out of his life. Fear of the injury caused

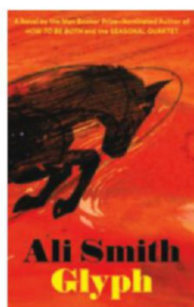
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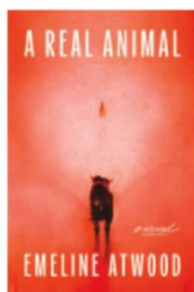
Talking Classics, by *Mary Beard* (Chicago). This companionable book, by a Cambridge classicist, marvels at the ancient world. Beard's subjects range from artistic achievements to signs of ordinary life: scrawled Roman graffiti, a piece of ancient bread. Simultaneously rendering the past less remote while relishing its radical foreignness, Beard presses readers to grapple with alien ideas, reckon with gaps in their knowledge, and confront complexity. She also critiques the Classics' history of exclusionary requirements, such as mastering accent marks the ancient Greeks never used, and challenges modern leaders who signal legitimacy through simplistic references to Greece and Rome. Throughout, she shows how the classical world can sneak “up from behind, as it were, to surprise us, and make us think again.”



The Cruelty of Nice Folks, by *Justin Ellis* (Harper). Minneapolis has long been a stronghold of progressivism: slavery was banned there upon Minnesota's statehood, and it was an early adopter of public housing. But, as Ellis demonstrates in this survey of the city's racial history, liberal policy achievements tend to obscure more insidious forms of exclusion. A Minneapolis native, Ellis returns to his home after the murder of George Floyd. His resulting exploration tracks the ways in which Black residents were effectively segregated, through racial covenants and redlining, and overpoliced. Though Ellis's long view of the city is tinged with cynicism, its response to last winter's ICE invasion creates, he contends, an opening for hope.



Glyph, by *Ali Smith* (Pantheon). Continuing its decorated author's project of devising a contemporary language for fiction while revisiting the past, this novel follows two sisters, Patricia and Petra, long estranged, who are haunted by stories from their childhood: one of a man who was shot during the First World War, and the other of a person who met a gruesome death in the Second. Amid the disappointments of the present—oppressive digital technology and work uncertainty—ghosts and shared recollections bring the sisters together, and closer to Patricia's adopted daughter, Bill, who represents both the pessimism and the idealism of a younger generation. Animated by dialogue and wordplay, Smith's novel shines with her intuition, and her ability to surprise.



A Real Animal, by *Emeline Atwood* (Catapult). In the course of ten years, Lucy, the narrator of this effortful novel, has three serious boyfriends: one in college, in New England, who, try as he might, cannot help her recover from a rape she experiences while living overseas; one in Indianapolis, who cajoles her into having sex with countless other men in front of him; and one in Texas, whom she loves most, but loses when she cannot overcome post-traumatic anxiety. As Atwood traces these romances, we learn that Lucy's suffering started much earlier than perhaps even she realized, and that healing will require independence. “Ultimately, it’s just about being good with yourself,” she discovers. “Once you can stand being out in the dark cold alone, you’re good anywhere.”

by others' words and actions, which was his primary experience of love.

I think that, when I first saw Hujar's pictures of the catacombs in Palermo, in the only book he published during his lifetime, "Portraits in Life and Death," from 1976, I was less taken by the gothic nature of all those bodies in repose—mouths sometimes open or twisted in a grimace, hands folded over hearts that had long ago dried up—than put off by Hujar's interest in a death drama that was gawked at, rather than observed and felt. His eye does not live in these pictures; it's subsumed by them. The truth is that I discovered the book in the early eighties, when so many people were dying or beginning to die, and the catacomb pictures felt too easy to me, like talismans in a collapsing world—my collapsing world—which was infected with a form of death that would take Hujar in 1987, and Thek a year later, and Wojnarowicz in 1992, the same year that Marsha P. Johnson died, probably the victim of a hate crime.

Avedon, whose work and career had a big influence on Hujar early on, had produced a series of images of the Palermo catacombs in 1959. (Avedon's final large-scale fashion story, which appeared in this magazine in 1995, showed a live model cavorting with skeletons in a version of the catacombs.) And, when I turned to Robert Mapplethorpe at about the same time that I first saw Hujar's book, I was reminded of another Sontag essay, "Fascinating Fascism," in which she writes that the Marquis de Sade

had to make up his theater of punishment and delight from scratch, improvising the decor and costumes and blasphemous rites. Now there is a master scenario available to everyone. The color is black, the material is leather, the seduction is beauty, the justification is honesty, the aim is ecstasy, the fantasy is death.

Hujar, like Avedon before him and Mapplethorpe after him, had a fairy's love of costume and an understanding of appearance as an expression less of truth than of lies—lies about who we were and are, just like the lies that gay men had to tell in order to be themselves in Hujar's time. The images of the mummified bodies in the Palermo catacombs, wearing the clothes of whoever they used to be, struck me not as beautiful or true but as evidence of Hujar's interest in display and fiction. Where

was the "truth" in these pictures? What did we become when we marvelled at a dead child's hair ribbon, or a mouth stretched in a scream? We all die, but not all of us view existence as a pathway to death, or death as the ultimate game of dress-up. I side with Philip Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb," which says of depictions of the dead, "Time has transfigured them into untruth." Truth happens only when we're alive to write it, to photograph it, to live it. I didn't think of Hujar's catacomb pictures as a testament to the artist's ecstatic honesty, or even as an example of perversion, in which the ghastly truth of those corpses, mediated by the camera, was a kind of payback to society and the law. I closed "Portraits in Life and Death" and didn't look at it again for years.

After Hujar returned to the States from Italy, in 1964, he took a job as an assistant to the commercial photographer Harold Krieger. A few years later, he was admitted to a master class that Richard Avedon and Marvin Israel held in Avedon's studio, and, emboldened by their support, he quit the Krieger gig and opened his own studio for a time. By 1973, he was determined to work independently as an artist. Carr writes, "He had disdain for the whole process of selling himself. Fran Lebowitz pointed out that 'he also had a profound distrust of authority, and that he couldn't make a distinction between someone who owned some little photography gallery, and the Pope.'" To get the check, you have to kiss the ring, and Hujar couldn't. So he lived as he lived. He was "the poorest grown-up I have been personally close to in my life," his executor, the writer Stephen Koch, once said.

The portraits he made between 1965 and 1975 are phenomenal and often sexy, particularly those of his close friends Lebowitz and the writer Vince Aletti, seen in different beds in Lebowitz's childhood home in New Jersey; of the artist Brigid Berlin for *New Times* magazine; and of the fashion model Maxime de la Falaise, her husband the curator John McKendry, and her daughter, Loulou de la Falaise, in 1968. In his portraits of that fashionable family, Hujar suggests the world they came from, one where you wouldn't blink an eye at a topless woman wink-

ing at *you*; by then, flirting had been replaced by the art of the put-on. One of the strongest contact sheets from this time period is of the fashion editor Diana Vreeland. In Hujar's images, this formidable woman is drained of esprit; what remains is the mask. Fame does not console. Vreeland's isolation is Rose Murphy's isolation and her son's as well. And it's a godless place.

I stayed a long time in this part of the show, a fabulous wonderland in which the photographer leaves behind the entombed and joins life as much as he can, and his voice rings out loud and clear and essential. Smith notes in his very helpful catalogue essay, which is supplemented by Olivia McCall's thorough annotation of the contact sheets, that it was during this period that Hujar became interested in posing subjects in groups, gatherings of theatre people, activists, chosen families of a kind. And, as I looked at his contact sheets of the Cockettes, shot in 3:4, and his great 35-mm. picture of the Gay Liberation Front (1970), I thrilled to the energy of the images, every one of them, because they were about joy—even though Hujar had a hard time feeling it himself. But who can blame him? You can take the fatherless boy out of his belligerent mother's home, but you can't take the parents out of the boy. Looking at the Cockettes, those wonderful queens in their thrift-store finery, and knowing that they bombed when they tried to put on a show in New York—too much California hippie love and drift for the professional-minded New York audience—and looking, too, at all those smiling, committed, excited people with the Gay Liberation Front, seeming to rush toward Hujar's lens, I remembered how, when I was a photo editor in the late eighties and early nineties, before digital was the dominant format, and a photographer came to show me images, what I most wanted to see was not the single image but the contact sheet and what it represented: it was evidence of the photographer's hope, evidence of the dreams that he, she, or they didn't even know they were having. ♦

Therein Lies a Tale Dept.

From the Loudoun (Va.) Times-Mirror.

STERLING WOMAN CAN KEEP LIVE CHICKENS
AFTER TAKING SACRIFICE COURSE

MOUTH TO MOUTH

Languages are dying. Is that necessarily a problem?

BY NIKHIL KRISHNAN



How sad should we be when a language dies? Consider the case—call it callous or simply tough-minded—for saying, “Not at all.” A language, when it comes down to it, is a means of communication. When too few people are using it to communicate, it has stopped doing its principal job, and it may as well be allowed to die. It is, of course, a tragedy when languages are *killed*, especially when they are killed out of malice or bigotry. But death by natural causes—well, that’s just how things go.

Despite its ominous title, Sophia Smith Galer’s “How to Kill a Language: Power, Resistance, and the Race to Save Our Words” (Crown) is not a guide for

would-be perpetrators of linguicide. Smith Galer has much to say against the case for putting languages out of their misery, but her focus is on a point with which even the most unsentimental can surely sympathize. Whatever the wisdom of letting dying languages die, the ethics of killing a thriving language are quite another matter.

Take Kurdish. The 2023 earthquake that left more than fifty thousand people dead in Turkey and Syria was particularly devastating in Turkey’s Kurdish-speaking southeast. Turkish administrators announced translation support for earthquake victims in several languages, including Russian, German, and Pashto—

but not Kurdish, the language of some fifteen million Turkish citizens. Smith Galer tells us that the decision was a continuation of decades of official policy. It has been, at different times, illegal in Turkey to teach Kurdish, to publish books in Kurdish, even to speak the language while occupying public office. There were earthquake survivors who feared calling out for help in the language, in case the rescuers turned away.

Or consider Ukrainian. A long essay that Vladimir Putin wrote in 2021 characterized it as, at best, a regional variant of Russian—a sort of uppity, upstart dialect—whose speakers lacked a legitimate claim to national self-determination. Seven months after the essay appeared, Putin invaded Ukraine. Since 2022, wherever Russian forces have occupied Ukrainian territory, they have torn down Ukrainian road signs, and insisted on Russian as the language of schooling and administration. When Ukrainians see books in their language being burned, some of them are reminded of a longer history of persecution, such as Catherine the Great’s ban in 1784 on Ukrainian-language church services. (That’s one of several dozen events commemorated in “Linguicide,” a Kyiv public-history project made up of QR-coded plaques and a companion app.)

In these cases, I’d say, talk of “killing” is justifiable: the intended destruction of the language is part of a coordinated assault on a people’s collective existence and their claim to nationhood. But how far might one extend the term before it does start to seem an overstatement? Smith Galer writes powerfully about the experiences of Kichwa speakers in the Ecuadorian highlands. Here we see fewer overt acts by tyrannical states to suppress the language. What we find, instead, is a history of colonial contempt, of treating fluency in Kichwa as a marker of poverty and backwardness. And the death of the language comes from choices made by Kichwa-speaking Ecuadorians to stop speaking Kichwa to their children. One way languages gain and lose adherents is through calculations people make about what a given language can do for them.

Of course, those choices are not made against a background of equal power, which is why the situation is morally weighted. Still, the ideal case of a language chosen, or abandoned, under conditions

Assimilation and economic aspiration can usher people away from native tongues.

of equal power is scarcely to be found. There is a fallacy in thinking of languages as brute and unchanging facts, laid out distinctly like elements in the periodic table. Languages are historical formations. They emerge, spread, splinter, standardize, contract, and disappear, much as peoples, states, and religions do, through forces like conquest, exchange, and chance.

More boldly, Smith Galer's story of linguicide encompasses her own loss of the Emilian dialect—or, as she prefers to render it, Emigliän *dialèt*—of northern Italy (“more like a kind of angry French”) that her mother and grandmother spoke to each other. She did not learn either standard Italian or the Emigliän variant for the simple reason that she was brought up in London by a family who had decided to speak to her entirely in English. That decision surely belonged to a wider history of migration, aspiration, and accommodation to the dominant language. Yet Smith Galer, citing the linguists Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson, suggests that linguicide might refer not just to the “outright killing of a language” but also to “letting a language die, or not supporting its coexistence”—which amounts to “covert language murder.”

The linguist David Crystal, in his indispensable scholarly survey “Language Death,” has a term for the sort of thing that happened to Smith Galer and her *dialèt*: cultural assimilation. The pressure to assimilate linguistically can be, he points out, either “top down” (laws, incentives) or “bottom up” (fashion, peer pressure). But it is hard even for dispassionate surveys to avoid lapsing into an elegiac mode in which these important distinctions are flattened into a single tragedy. It is one thing to be indignant about a Kenyan schoolchild asked to wear a sign reading “I AM A DONKEY” for speaking Kikuyu. But how should we feel about a Kichwa speaker who moves to Lima and starts living her life in Spanish in response to the demands of the labor market, especially when the Kichwa speaker doesn't see the switch as involving any great loss?

The idea that we have a special duty to prevent the death of languages is instantly compelling to anyone who loves languages; it has a good deal in common with that other conservationist instinct

directed at giant pandas and polar bears. The essential argument runs something like this: language death is very bad, and therefore we must do everything we can to prevent it. But does that conclusion follow? And is the premise true?

Smith Galer briskly gives us many reasons to accept the premise. The loss of a language, she writes, is the loss of “the wellspring of information that flows from it—its sayings, its means of identifying and perceiving the world, its character. Languages aren't dictionaries, but encyclopedias, containing entire worlds of often irreplaceable information.” A compound called prostratin, she recounts, was discovered to be a potential treatment for H.I.V. by a scientist who knew Samoan well enough to have spoken to tribal healers in Samoa about the healing properties of a certain tree. Speakers of the Iwaidja language in northern Australia have long had different words for two distinct dolphin species; modern zoology wouldn't have taken so long to recognize their distinctness if scientists had, Smith Galer writes, “bothered to speak to the Iwaidja people, or learn their language.” There are also documented links, she tells us, between a language's health and the mental health of the communities that speak it. Communities in Canada that could “hold a conversation in their Aboriginal language experienced low to zero youth suicide rates. In communities where fewer than half could speak their language, suicide rates were six times higher.”

In general, Smith Galer's empirical examples tend toward the optimistic. The clinical value of prostratin, for one, has yet to be established. And if languages can encode traditional knowledge they can also encode and perpetuate traditional error. We need no exotic examples to see that the folk category of “fish” (in English as in many other languages)—as something that, understandably enough, included whales, dolphins, and porpoises—was genuinely improved upon by the scientific term “mammal” and its associated taxonomies. Nor is factual error the only thing a language can preserve. Languages also encode values—gender hierarchies baked into pronouns, honorifics that perpetuate caste distinctions—that liberal-minded activists may not be eager to preserve as valuable pieces of linguistic heritage.

One may wonder, too, about those vaunted correlations between language health and a community's psychological well-being. Isn't it at least as plausible that some more basic social or economic fact explains the health both of the language and of the community? If that's true, we shouldn't be so confident that communities will be happier if only we enrolled their members in language lessons.

Even if we grant Smith Galer the premise that language death is always a terrible thing, it doesn't follow that we ought to do everything in our power to stop it. That's an extremely demanding standard that we adopt in no other policy domain. The death of human beings is also a very bad thing, but all health systems have to make hard choices about how they use their finite resources. There is no reason for language death to be an exception to the general principle. Even where the death of a language would be acknowledged as a tragedy, what we should do—what costs we should be willing to bear—in trying to stop it must remain an open question.

The interventions that are easiest to get behind are the ones aimed at the lowest-hanging fruit. There is a great deal that states and other coercive institutions could simply stop doing: they could stop banning the teaching of Kurdish in schools that want and have the resources to teach it; they could stop rejecting the names Kurds want for their children because they are not on the list of approved ones; they could stop denying Ukrainian defendants interpreters in court.

Individuals, too, may find that they have more power than they realized. Immigrants might continue to speak their native languages to their children without worrying that it might affect their acquisition of their new country's dominant tongue. (The current research suggests that bilingualism poses no threat to speech development.) Where a school offers the heritage language of your family, consider allowing your children to study it. Maybe, other things being equal, choose a school for your child that offers a program in your native language.

What happens when other things are not equal? When it's a matter not of killing a language but of striving, officially, to keep it alive, even though it's no longer being reliably transmitted at

home? Smith Galer praises a master-apprentice program in the U.S. that partners younger adult learners of Karuk (an Indigenous language from northwestern California) with one of the very few fluent speakers and pays the learners a fifteen-dollar-an-hour stipend for their participation. She deplores the fact that the American federal government has earmarked only a hundred and eighty million dollars for language revitalization since 2005—a relatively paltry sum. Still, once numbers enter the discussion, as they must, there are uncomfortable questions that can't be evaded.

David Crystal refers to a 1992 controversy about whether it was appropriate for the Academy of Mayan Languages, in Guatemala, to devote resources to a reforestation project. Shouldn't we take more seriously the claim, made by defenders of the decision, that improving the community's economic security was the most effective route to saving the language? Crystal mentions this episode as an aside in "Language Death," but anyone who hopes to move from plaintive elegy to policy proposal must make such questions central. If saving a language takes money, how should that money be spent? Perhaps the Karuk people would prefer to use their own judgment to decide whether they want to spend it on language-learning programs or on direct support. That argument is sometimes made cynically, by people who'd rather no money were given to anyone for any reason at all. But these are real questions that organizations working in the field have to face.

Passionate preservationists—whether they hope to save a rare species of newt, or a beloved old railway station threatened with demolition, or coal-mining jobs in a Rust Belt town—share with campaigners for endangered languages a habit of presenting their case as if it were a contest between a real value on their side and nothing at all on the other. Preserve this language (or species or building or mine) or else surrender to indifference, cynicism, and nihilism. But is that ever the choice we face?

Every dollar dedicated to a language-revitalization program could, in any realistic budget, go toward something else: a school, or a hospital, or

AND AFTER FORTY DAYS MOSES CAME DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN AND WAS HONESTLY A LITTLE DISAPPOINTED—SURE, HE HAD THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, BUT HE'D THOUGHT HE'D GET A BIT MORE READING DONE AND MAYBE START ON HIS OWN NOVEL.



even another language program. The language program may well be of real value. But the value of the hospital or the school we might instead build is also real. To pretend otherwise, and to accuse everyone who points to these difficult trade-offs of bad faith, is to duck a confrontation with the deepest problems of politics and policy.

Isaiah Berlin famously observed that there is no social world without loss. We want and value many things that cannot be had at the same time. Say we want people to be free and also to be equal and to live in happy, unalienated communities. What if some people's exercise of freedom renders things less equal, or less happy and more alienated? Berlin thought it a contemptible sleight of hand to insist that such freedom was not "true freedom." To hope to honor *all* our values, he believed, is not simply overoptimistic but incoherent. What makes some political choices tragic is not that we have failed to think hard enough about how to have it all but that there is, in fact, no way to have it all. Politics, then, is the always un-

satisfying project of managing loss; at its best, it consists of doing this without self-deception.

Berlin's thesis lands with special poignancy when we consider the question of language loss. When French people today complain about the diminished international prestige of their nation and language, and wince when their teens talk about "e-mail" rather than the approved "*courriel*," they might remember that their ideal de-Englished French was itself a construction built on the graves of the dozens of languages and regional forms of speech which dominated much of rural France well into the nineteenth century. The historian Eugen Weber wrote influentially of how peasants who spoke languages like Occitan, Breton, or Basque became—or, more honestly, were made—Frenchmen. Weber's account does not play down the violence and humiliation of the process. Smith Galer herself notes that, as late as 1949, one could find children wearing slates around their necks with the degrading confession: "*Je parle Breton*" ("I speak Breton"). These were

not cases of languages being allowed to die a natural death.

But Weber's account is also a reminder that the project of linguistic homogenization had a republican, and not merely an administrative, justification. During the Revolutionary period, Abbé Grégoire held that a true republic could not flourish if its citizens could not understand one another; in the Third Republic, the push for universal primary education in French explicitly framed it as the condition for civic participation. Kings may have wanted a single language for the convenience of their scribes and tax collectors, but republicans wanted it for the sake of the citizens.

The French republican project did, in fact, succeed in creating a public sphere where a farmer from Brittany and a lawyer from Provence might read the same newspaper, serve on the same jury, and vote in the same election, without some Parisian smart-ass claiming not to understand what they were saying. What was erected on the site of that linguisticicide could be something of real value. A similar story might be told of Italy after unification, or of the ambitious effort to find a lingua franca to connect the vast and diverse islands of Indonesia without giving the country's dominant Javanese even more power than they already had.

There are, of course, other models of languages coexisting, with varying levels of amity. The Flemish-French divide in Belgium has not exploded in tumult but has nevertheless left the country in a state of institutional paralysis. French thrives in Quebec, supported by some extremely assertive language legislation, but the threats of secession in the province are a persistent nuisance. And in India, whose constitution recognizes twenty-two languages, the ill-starred attempt in the nineteen-sixties to make Hindi the sole language of the union foundered in the face of violent resistance from speakers of southern languages such as Tamil, leaving the country with a "three-language formula" governing its school system.

The Indian case speaks to both the possibility of a genuinely multilingual society and its risks. Linguistic diver-

sity is not a good acquired at no expense to the societies that have chosen it (or been forced to choose it) over homogeneity. Indian multilingualism, no less than French or Italian homogeneity, is a ledger with its own column of costs—communal tensions, constant incomprehension—to be weighed against its undoubted benefits.

If India has managed to avoid a single national language, there has been a considerable amount of linguistic consolidation *within* language groups: what's called Hindi is really a bureaucratic attempt to unify a quite disparate group of languages and dialects spoken across the north. Tamil itself is no less a political construction, with public discourse and education carried out in a self-consciously

archaic form of the language only half-intelligible to many speakers of its multifarious vernaculars. (My own first language, notionally a dialect of Tamil, takes a good deal of its vocabulary from Malayalam; my attempts to speak the standard forms of both languages nearly always occasion laughter.)

Not even those linguistic underdogs Kurdish and Ukrainian are exceptions to this pattern. In Syria and Turkey, the standard form of Kurdish is Kurmanji, written in Latin script; in Iran and Iraq, the standard form of Kurdish is Sorani, written in an Arabic-based script. Both standardizations have tended to push aside smaller, related tongues such as Gorani, which had been a literary language in its own right, and Zazaki, whose classification as a variant of Kurdish or as a separate northwest-Iranian language remains contested. Ukrainian, meanwhile, was built on the prestige of the Poltava-Kyiv tongue of the Middle Dnipro region; Rusyn, which enjoys protected minority-language status in Slovakia and Poland, is treated within Ukraine as a mere dialect. Kichwa trails a similar history. Spoken today by hundreds of thousands, it descends from the Quechuan language carried north by Inca imperial expansion. In southern Ecuador, the Cañari were conquered by Quechuan speakers, and their own language went extinct. We can condemn the perpetrators of linguisticicide without

assuming that their victims must themselves be blameless innocents. It's graveyards all the way down.

What would a preservationist victory actually look like? It may look like contemporary Wales. Some six decades ago, the writer and politician Saunders Lewis was predicting that the Welsh language would be dead by the year 2000. Instead, it is now an official language of Wales, taught throughout the public-school system, broadcast on its own television channel, used in courts, in the national assembly, on road signs, and in public documents as a matter of routine. It is spoken, to a greater or lesser degree of fluency and often mixed with bits of English, by around a sixth of the population of Wales. The Welsh government hopes to see the number who speak it almost double, so that the language will have a million speakers by 2050.

The health of Welsh has much to do with the fact that it is being transmitted, particularly in north Wales, by parents to children in the ordinary, unself-conscious way one associates with any living vernacular. Welsh is still not, in the permanent sense, "safe"; English exerts a constant pressure. But it is a good deal better off than Scottish Gaelic. Fluent speakers of Scottish Gaelic number at around seventy thousand at most, and the great majority of those who use it as their vernacular are elderly. Intergenerational transmission in the home is now the exception, even in the traditional Gaelic heartlands of the Western Isles. What competence there is among the young appears to be almost entirely the product of institutional intervention. It is a substantial achievement of Gaelic's defenders that there are children who learn Gaelic at a Gaelic-language school in Glasgow or Edinburgh, from teachers who themselves learned the language as adults—all in cities where Gaelic is spoken by almost nobody outside the classroom. But this is a long way away from even the precarious health that Welsh now enjoys.

One cannot avoid the uncomfortable image of a wildlife sanctuary, where endangered animals live in some barely adequate simulacrum of a wild existence but are constantly monitored for the disease or the excessive predation that might finish them off. Keeping a species alive



even under these conditions is, again, an achievement. Yet it is a lesser order of achievement than that much rarer case, where the thing comes back not as a museum exhibit but as a living population reproducing itself unassisted—like the gray wolves reintroduced into Yellowstone.

The one case of revitalization that comes anywhere close to the Yellowstone analogy is Hebrew. Smith Galer's account of its revival makes the scale of the accomplishment clear: a language with few, if any, native speakers for the better part of two thousand years, heard mostly in synagogue and study hall, was deliberately and programmatically turned, by a generation of inspired nation-builders, into the first language of a modern state, Israel. And somehow, the process managed to produce a nation where children curse, dream, and throw tantrums in Hebrew without anyone feeling for a moment as if they were trapped in a historical reenactment.

Hebrew has been contemplated with some envy by campaigners in other societies. There are, for instance, still Indian nationalists who fantasize about a Sanskrit revived as the common language of India; perhaps there are people in Cornwall or the Isle of Man wondering if, with the right will (and pots of money), we might not see a Cornish or Manx revival to match it. We won't. The success of Hebrew is obviously due to a convergence of circumstances historically unprecedented and unrepeatable. And is there a linguistic community that would *want* the experience of the European Jewry reprised, even if it would mean a revitalized language? And, if Hebrew now thrives, what of Yiddish? Or Ladino, the Iberian-descended language of the Sephardic Jews, once widely spoken in Thessaloniki?

One of the historical fallacies that an honest preservationist must avoid is presenting the conflict as one between an eternal, authentic linguistic heritage and a rootless, contingent modernity. For surely the heritage was once the rootless, contingent upstart; we forget this fact simply because it won. Were there not earlier languages in western Britain supplanted or absorbed by Welsh or its Brittonic precursors, not unlike the better-attested displacement of Occitan by French? Everything old, after all, used to be new.

To acknowledge this contingency—as wildlife conservationists must acknowledge that the fossil record is full of creatures that went extinct long before there were any humans around—doesn't mean abandoning the worthy instincts that animate Smith Galer's book and others in its genre. We can sympathize with her when she writes that "of the rich seven-thousand-plus body of thoughts, feelings, vocabularies, and grammar systems that exist today, well over three thousand languages will go. No funerals will be held; no cemeteries will fill. Some languages will leave behind dictionaries, novels, hours of radio; others will leave nothing save for a relative's turn of phrase someone still remembers with affection." And yet the language of bereavement has its limits.

What are the dying really owed? It rather depends on whether we are thinking of the old man lying peacefully on his deathbed after a long life well lived or the child run over by a drunk driver. If the latter fills us with rage and despair, the former need not. We don't have to conclude that the old man was failed by medicine, or that there was a conspiracy to kill him. Nor need we demand that his death must be prevented at any cost, or that he be kept alive on a respirator for another decade with no thought to what it would exact from everyone around him. But to say that he should be allowed to die does not mean we shouldn't grieve his loss. He is owed comfort, dignity, and the assurance that he won't be forgotten by those who loved him, that he will be genuinely mourned.

Freud once helpfully distinguished that healthy thing, mourning, from melancholia—the mourning that never ends, grief that is unable to let the lost object go. The literature of linguistic preservation is a literature of mourning when it calls for languages to be documented, honored, and, in the rare instance where a revival might be a real option, revived. At its most culpably self-deceiving, it comes closer to melancholia: a refusal to recognize when the time for salvation is past and the most we can hope for is salvage. In acknowledging that not all languages can or should be rescued, we do not love the dying languages less. In a world where resources are scarce and values conflict, it may be the only way to love them wisely. ♦

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NO WAY HOME

"The Odyssey."

BY RICHARD BRODY

It is probably viewers who haven't read Homer who are likeliest to enjoy "The Odyssey," Christopher Nolan's new adaptation. This is not for the obvious reason that much is left out—putting any extended literary work onscreen inevitably involves omission and compression—but because of a more pervasive absence: the

ticements to the man-eating Cyclops' rage, his wife, Penelope (Anne Hathaway), has been fending off the attentions of scores of Ithacan noblemen, who are demanding that she marry one of them and are living lavishly on the royal household's store of food and wine as they wait. Her son, Telemachus (Tom Holland), an infant when



Matt Damon plays Odysseus in Christopher Nolan's Homer adaptation.

gods. In the poem, the first scene is of a council in Zeus' palace, on Mt. Olympus, at which the gods argue over Odysseus' fate. In Nolan's film, people refer to the gods, but there are no divine debates on Olympus, and, indeed, the only member of the classical Greek pantheon who actually appears is Athena (Zendaya), watching over the action intermittently.

Instead, Nolan unfolds a purely human drama. As the film opens, Odysseus (Matt Damon), a leader of Greek forces in the Trojan War, has been away from his homeland of Ithaca for some twenty years—at war for ten, wandering since. While he has been delayed by a series of encounters and obstacles ranging from Calypso's en-

his father set off for war, is now a young man intent on driving out the suitors—a primordial coming-of-age plot. And, when Odysseus finds his way home, father and son join forces to battle the usurpers.

Told in this way, with divine intervention at a minimum, the story remains an exciting adventure filled with passion, terror, tenderness, and wonder, but it lacks the particular thrill that comes with reading Homer, a sense of the gulf that separates modern minds from Bronze Age ones. Homer depicts a strange and troubling world, in which human existence is continuously subject to the deliberations and whims of deities who have motives of their own. By suppressing this continuity between

the natural and the supernatural realms, Nolan omits much of what makes the Homeric age so different, including the ambience of the divine and the distinctive moral realm that goes with it.

I had wondered how Nolan would handle some of the other archaic aspects of the story, such as its violence and its ritualism: sacrificial ceremonies with animals gushing blood; the supernatural fury of a monster consuming men who scream in agony as they're eaten; the chopping off of hands and genitals; the reliance on torture; the deep satisfaction taken in cruel vengeance. How would Nolan deal with the extravagant expressivity of the Homeric world—as when people rend their clothing in anguish or when Odysseus (in Emily Wilson's 2017 translation of the poem) is "sobbing and rolling round in grief"? Or with the realm of picturesque fantasy, as when Athena, with Telemachus, in Book I, "flew away like a bird, up through the smoke," thus revealing her divinity? But, rather than trying to take the audience inside the ancient Greek mind-set, Nolan chooses a slimmed-down, almost naturalistic approach, tamed and tempered. Violence is rendered largely generic with quick-cut battle scenes merely hinting at gruesome deaths; sacrifice, seen only briefly, is surgically clean; vengeance is bloodless and horror-free, meted out very sparingly; tears drop with maudlin precision down a single cheek; and grief is expressed with the stiff-upper-lip silence of modern martial valor.

Nolan advances his vision, however crowd-pleasing and anachronistic, with vigorous confidence and unimpeachable clarity. The dialogue, terse and contemporary, puts his distinguished cast of actors in their comfort zone and turns ancient, iridescently complex figures crystalline and hard-edged. As Penelope, Hathaway has a laser gaze to match; she borrows a sublime gesture from classic Hollywood when, informing Telemachus that he's not yet enough of a man for a big fight, she momentarily glances down mockingly from his eyes to his body. Menelaus, the king of Sparta, gets, from Jon Bernthal, an oddly apt New York white-ethnic outer-borough accent. As Helen, who is somewhat uneasily married to him and whose abduction led to the Trojan War, Lupita

Nyong'o rises to a quiet pitch of fierceness when she laments being used as a justification for death and destruction. In the role of the enslaved swineherd Eumaeus, who is deeply devoted to Odysseus and fiercely protective of Telemachus, John Leguizamo exudes worldly wisdom and rough-hewn poise, an inner nobility contrasting with the venality of the lordly suitors. Samantha Morton's bluff, country-tough performance as Circe almost sells the script's revisionism, which transforms Homer's enticing-voiced singer and dangerous seducer into a moralizing critic of manners, who says that she has turned Odysseus' men into pigs because they ate like pigs.

The actor whose performance is most closely bound to Nolan's conception of the character is Matt Damon, as Odysseus. Homer's character, notorious as a schemer, here comes off as plain and direct—a gruff, practical tactician, rather than something more energetically inventive and morally dubious. It's a role that calls for a performance that's both muscular and glib, powerful and mercurial, but Damon follows Nolan's premise by making Odysseus impassive and burdened.

And what is Odysseus' burden? To define the hero's troubles and thus his character, Nolan boldly expands things referred to only glancingly in the *Odyssey* into major scenes. Chief among these are the Trojan horse and Odysseus' leading role in its deployment, which, for Nolan, becomes the crux of the story, shaping Odysseus' personality and determining the course of his life through his wanderings.

The Trojans unquestioningly bring the horse, apparently a religious offering, within their city walls, only for a handful of Greek troops hidden inside, led by Odysseus, to open the gates, letting in a horde of warriors who lay waste to Troy.

Odysseus is portrayed as enduringly guilt-ridden over the ploy; in making an ostensible gift into a deadly weapon, he believes that he has violated Zeus' law of hospitality. It's also suggested that he suffers from P.T.S.D., and that his years of wandering are also years of inability to reintegrate into post-combat life. After he's held by Calypso for seven years, taken to her bed as a virtually captive lover, numbed by the lotus that she feeds him, she says that her actions were a means of healing him: "You weren't ready to go home."

Psychologizing Odysseus like this lends "The Odyssey" a readily digestible modernity—ancient Greeks, they're just like us!—but does so at the expense of the richness of detail and the societal complexity that makes reading Homer such a vital and immediate experience. And the suppression of much of the story's cruelty is more than mere bowdlerizing; it represents an effort to redeem Odysseus for modern times and to render him both sympathetic and tragic. The movie has no room for the Odysseus who, in Book IX of Homer's poem, matter-of-factly tells one of his hosts about an earlier stop in his itinerary, "I sacked the town and killed the men. We took their wives and shared their riches equally among us." I won't give away the film's ending, but it's not the one in the poem and it's thrillingly audacious, far-reaching, socially conscious, and ultimately undeveloped.

cious, far-reaching, socially conscious, and ultimately undeveloped.

As a director, Nolan seems to have paid much more attention to the plot, the dialogue, the performances, the landscapes, the settings, the décor, and the costumes than to the images in which he presents them. For the most part, the visual compositions depict the action neutrally, offering little sense of style or texture to suggest an aesthetic conception of the world on-screen. Nolan brought far more visual intensity to such sci-fi tales as "Tenet" and "Inception," but it's notable that the world-building in those films was culturally continuous with the present day. By contrast, the plain realism of "The Odyssey" seems inextricable from Nolan's effort to rationalize an irreducibly ancient sensibility.

As I watched Nolan's film, I found myself recalling, with renewed admiration, a pair of movies about the ancient Greeks by Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Oedipus Rex" (1967) and "Medea" (1969), the latter starring Maria Callas in her only feature-film performance. In both works, the disturbing cruelty of the classical age is matched by an audiovisual sublimity that reflects the poetry of the tragedies—by Sophocles and Euripides, respectively—on which the films are based. Pasolini's emphasis on the violence and mystery of Bronze Age life extends to elaborate presentations of religious pageantry, including human sacrifice, that are both choreographic and anthropological, in images as formalized as the on-screen action. Nolan, energized by the self-restraining power of modern morality, turns an epic poem prosaic. ♦

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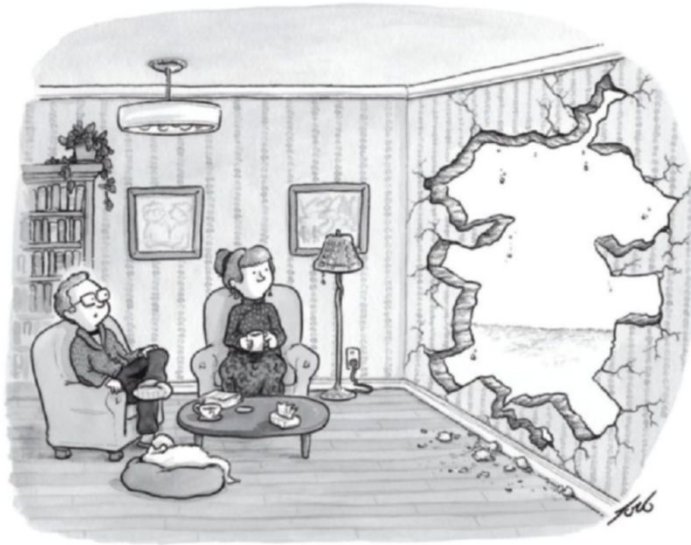
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Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Tom Toro, must be received by Sunday, July 26th. The finalists in the July 6th & 13th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the August 10th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

THE FINALISTS



“I understand that service has been partially suspended.”
Jeff Van Wagenen, Middlebury, Conn.

“It thinks it can.”
Shelagh Johnson, Ellicott City, Md.

“See, I knew the train would turn up soon.”
Gideon Litoff, Washington, D.C.



THE WINNING CAPTION



“I’m headed to the 2030 games.”
Eric Schares, Ames, Iowa

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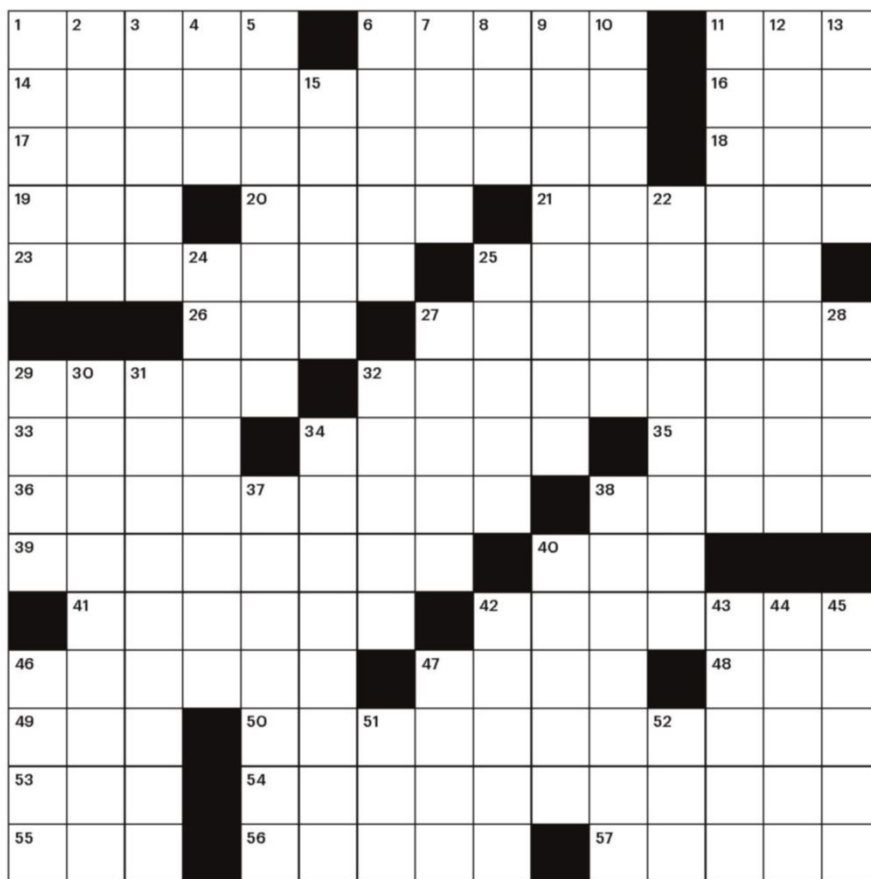
THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY WYNA LIU

ACROSS

- 1 Like newly ruly hair
- 6 Santa ____
- 11 Had been
- 14 "So-called" surroundings?
- 16 Mimic
- 17 "The 36th Chamber of Shaolin," for one
- 18 No-win situation
- 19 *Printemps* follower
- 20 Stretched out
- 21 Buffet, say
- 23 Get off at the station
- 25 Soap-making compounds
- 26 Busiest airport by passenger volume, briefly
- 27 Mammalian pollinator
- 29 Sex educator Hite
- 32 Genre parodied by the show "American Vandal"
- 33 Centers of activity
- 34 Trickles
- 35 North Carolina college town
- 36 Hot oil, perhaps?
- 38 Specialty of Sweetgreen or Chopt
- 39 Exert total control over
- 40 Word with drum or press
- 41 Extracts metal from
- 42 Member of an anti-Yankee camp
- 46 Seals the deal
- 47 Secular
- 48 Critter in a pouch
- 49 Conjunction used in logic
- 50 Classical reminder of the inevitability of death
- 53 Background figure in a video game, for short
- 54 They might be popped before a kiss
- 55 "What did I tell you?"
- 56 Naomi who, in 2021, became the first tennis player to light the Olympic cauldron
- 57 Sticky food?



DOWN

- 1 Expressed disapproval
- 2 Sharp
- 3 "A Bar at the Folies-Bergère" painter Édouard
- 4 Unit of work
- 5 Become less full, in a way
- 6 Common spice in chutneys
- 7 Avian nickname for a Minnesota United F.C. player
- 8 Four-by-four, for one
- 9 Old records that are sold anew
- 10 Sterile
- 11 A drip may cause it to rise
- 12 Capital on the island of Upolu
- 13 Number in a bracket
- 15 Bird in a covey
- 22 Team-building trips
- 24 Unusual finds
- 25 Explode
- 27 French relative
- 28 Take care of
- 29 Luge, for one
- 30 Chart featuring houses and signs
- 31 Prime retail, e.g.?
- 32 Udder parts
- 34 Goes in different directions

- 37 Playing the waiting game
- 38 Prime-time staples
- 40 Richards of the Rolling Stones
- 42 Large ray
- 43 "Down in ____!"
- 44 Heart line
- 45 Strepitous
- 46 Road-trip respites
- 47 Divulge, as classified information
- 51 Start of an apology
- 52 Goth of film

Solution to the previous puzzle:



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