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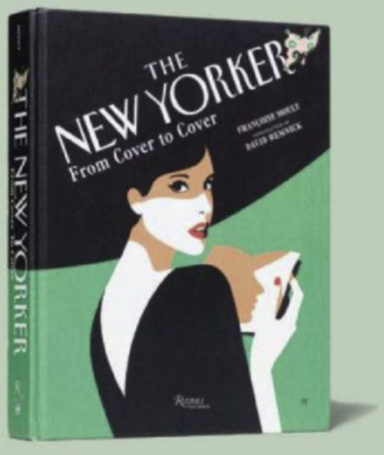
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WEEKEND ESSAY



Surviving "The Graduate"
By Dustin Hoffman

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GOINGS ON

WINTER PREVIEW

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

TELEVISION

Tech-Bro Backlash, Amy Poehler

Tech billionaires are inescapable this season, as the backlash against Silicon Valley gains momentum not only in our politics but in our entertainment. The documentary "Elon," the Sam Altman bio-pic "Artificial," and the Facebook feature "The Social Reckoning" spotlight the bros, while the Elizabeth Holmes-centered "You Can See Everything" and the crypto-focussed **"The Altruists"** (Nov. 19) take on the bilkers. In the latter, Anthony Boyle and Julia Garner star as Sam Bankman-Fried and Caroline Ellison, the romantically linked execs whose mismanagement of funds at the crypto exchange FTX led to an eight-billion-dollar hole in the company's balance sheet.

Audiences seeking a more traditional love story will find it in the latest page-to-screen rendering of **"Pride and Prejudice"** (Dec. 3), one of several literary adaptations to début this winter. The Jane Austen drama, a six-part miniseries on Netflix, features Emma Corrin and Jack Lowden as pop culture's most beloved enemies to lovers, and Olivia Colman as the silly Mrs. Bennet. Rose Byrne and Meghann Fahy star as two estranged sisters forced to revisit a violent turning point in their childhoods in Peacock's **"The Good Daughter"** (Nov. 12), based on the novel by Karin Slaughter. Controversy is already dogging **"Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone"** (Dec. 25), HBO's TV reboot of the Hogwarts franchise.

There are also less conventional picks for series adaptation. Jhumpa Lahiri's best-selling short-story collection **"Unaccustomed Earth"** (Dec. 17), about first- and second-generation Indian Americans navigating cross-cultural dynamics, is the unlikely source material for a Netflix series. William Gibson's landmark cyberpunk novel **"Neuromancer,"** from 1984—long considered "unfilmable" because of its virtual setting and its fragmented narration—will get its first screen adaptation (Jan. 22). Callum Turner stars in the dystopian Apple TV thriller as a traumatized superhacker named Case who partners with an assassin, played by Briana Middleton, to steal from a corporate dynasty; the title refers to an artificial intelligence that threatens to indefinitely trap Case in a comforting simulation.

Finally, in a comedy-starved television landscape, lighter fare offers some warmth in the coming months. More than a decade after the end of "Parks and Recreation," Amy Poehler returns with **"Dig"** (Nov. 23), a Peacock sitcom about a team of archeologists in Greece whose latest discovery sets off a far-reaching plot; co-created by the "Parks" showrunner Mike Schur, it co-stars Hugh Laurie and Geraldine Viswanathan. A different set of brainiacs get themselves into trouble in **"Prodigies"** (Feb. 10), an Apple TV romantic comedy about two former wunderkinds, played by Will Sharpe and Ayo Edebiri, reëvaluating the relationship that they've been in since they were nine. Beneath all the precocity might be a more consoling idea: that falling short is its own kind of charm.—*Inkoo Kang*



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Mozart's enchanting musical fairy tale returns in the Met's English-language production by Broadway legend Julie Taymor, running under 90 minutes. With dazzling puppets and a spectacularly vibrant setting, the Met's *Magic Flute* is one of the city's ultimate seasonal sensations for family audiences.

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THE THEATRE

Dolly's Musical, a Rocking Galileo

As fall whirls into winter, bracing depictions of people accused of horrific crimes hit Broadway. Bruce Norris's **"Downstate"** portrays convicted sex offenders (Booth; in previews); Tectonic Theatre Project's documentary play **"Here There Are Blueberries"** examines Nazi life at Auschwitz during the Second World War (Barrymore; previews begin Nov. 2); and Suzie Miller's **"Inter Alia"** examines the fallout of a rape accusation against a teen-ager whose mother is a criminal-court judge (Music Box; Nov. 10). In this dark wake come frothier crowd-pleasers, including the magic show **"Now You See Me Live"** (Hirschfeld; Nov. 11), inspired by the eponymous film franchise, and **"Galileo"** (Shubert; Nov. 10), a rock musical starring Raúl Esparza as everyone's favorite anti-authority scientist. The latter is followed by two other bio-musicals: **"Dolly,"** for which Parton wrote new songs to accompany her standards (St. James; Dec. 7), and the West End transfer of Jamie Lloyd's stripped-down **"Evita"** (Winter Garden; Feb. 27), the 1978 Andrew Lloyd Webber–Tim Rice megahit, with Rachel Zegler as Argentina's galvanizing former First Lady.

There's also such limited-run holiday fare as **"It's a Wonderful Life"** (Broadhurst; Nov. 4), an adaptation of the Christmastime staple, with a cast featuring Andrew Rannells, Megan Hilty, and Tituss Burgess; and the Blue Man Group's **"A New Holiday Surprise"** (Lunt-Fontanne; Nov. 12)—time will tell whether the surprise is that the troupe is painted red and green.

In the New Year, two star-powered solo shows spotlight moments from the past: in Jessica Dickey's **"The Amish Project,"** Jonathan Groff plays several members of a rural Pennsylvania community coping with a 2006 school shooting (Broadhurst; Feb. 10), and Manfred Karge's **"Man to Man"** sees Tilda Swinton reprise a role she originated in English, in 1987—a widow who begins passing as her dead husband in nineteen-thirties Germany (Lucille Lortel; Feb. 21). Clifford Odets's 1935 **"Awake and Sing!"** (Friedman; Dec. 15) dramatizes the same period in New York, via a family of Jewish immigrants; this revival's powerhouse cast includes Danny Burstein, Jessica Hecht, and Jeremy Shamos. The complexities of family life in early-twentieth-century N.Y.C. also shape **"Imitation of Life"** (the Shed; Nov. 21), a musical adaptation, by John Legend and Lynn Nottage, of the eponymous Fannie Hurst novel and Douglas Sirk film. It juxtaposes two single mothers, one Black and one white (Adrienne Warren and Jessica Vosk), each raising a daughter.

Winding the clock back further is a remounting of **"Spring Awakening"** (Studio Seaview; Nov. 27), about frisky teens bucking authority in an eighteen-nineties German town, with music by the late Duncan Sheik. Youthful passions also flummox the elders in **"Dirty Dancing"** (Horne; Feb. 12), a musicalization of the iconic eighties film. The script flips in Sarah Ruhl's **"Faydra"** (New York City Center Stage 1; Feb. 2), a reimagining of the mythical princess (played by Julianne Moore) stricken with lust for her stepson-to-be. If only she could decompress at the silent meditation retreat in Bess Wohl's **"Small Mouth Sounds"** (Barrymore; Feb. 18), getting a starry revival with Julia Roberts, Paul Rudd, Sarah Paulson, and Greta Lee.

Dominique Morisseau's **"Mix and Master"** (Haimes; Jan. 5) has the all-too-rare distinction of being a new play on Broadway. It concerns a d.j. desperate to keep the Bronx's last record store in business, and stars Kara Young and Ruben Santiago-Hudson. Cutting-edge works fill the **Under the Radar** festival (Jan. 6-24), including **"Yoroboshi"** (Japan Society; Jan. 14-16), a Japanese folktale retold through disturbing Barbie cosplay. The festival also hosts a second run of this fall's **"America, Who Hurt You?"** (Public; Jan. 6), in which the Tony-winning Sarah Jones embodies nineteen characters to critique our "low-key mid-apocalyptic moment."—*Dan Stahl*



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MOVIES

Mrs. Dalloway, Narnia

Youth will be served in the season's movies, as in **"Club Kid"** (opening Nov. 6), a comedy directed by and starring Jordan Firstman, in which a gay New York party promoter discovers that he fathered a son a decade ago and is given custody of the boy (played by Reggie Absolom). A teeming cast energizes Marine Atlan's **"La Gradiva"** (Dec. 18), about a group of French high-school students on a field trip to Naples that exacerbates conflicts and identity crises. Yet old age, too, is a major subject of new releases, as in the octogenarian Mike Leigh's **"Tender Loving Care"** (Dec. 4), which he says will be his last film, about a social worker who brings a colleague along on a visit to her elderly parents and finds them in physical decline. Ryûsuke Hamaguchi's **"All of a Sudden"** (Nov. 25) stars Virginie Efira as a manager of a French elder-care facility, whose new friendship with a visiting Japanese theatre director (Tao Okamoto) proves both personally and professionally rewarding.

Movies about movies are perennial enticements to filmmakers, as in **"I Play Rocky"** (Nov. 6), about the young Sylvester Stallone (Anthony Ippolito), a little-known actor whose signature screenplay nearly went unproduced because of his insistence on starring in the film. Quentin Tarantino wrote the script for **"The Further Mis-Adventures of Cliff Booth"** (Nov. 25), a sequel to his 2019 film "Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood," but he didn't direct the new installment; David Fincher did, and Brad Pitt returns as the titular stuntman, now working behind the scenes. Pedro Almodóvar's **"Bitter Christmas"** (Nov. 13) is an intricate and passionate double melodrama, in which a 2004 tale of a filmmaker (Bárbara Lennie)—who's written a script based on a friend's life—is actually a movie by a current-day director (Leonardo Sbaraglia) who's done the same thing.

Other forms of the art life figure prominently, as in **"Everybody Digs Bill Evans"** (Dec. 4), Grant Gee's tightly targeted bio-pic of the jazz pianist (Anders Danielsen Lie), who, in 1961, paused his career after the sudden death of his trio's bassist. Another bio-pic, **"Elsinore"** (Nov. 20), depicts the actor Ian Charleson (Andrew Scott) as he struggled to perform in a production of "Hamlet," in 1989, while weakened by AIDS. Jesse Eisenberg wrote and directed **"The Debut"** (Dec. 11), in which Julianne Moore plays a community-theatre actress who approaches a bit part surprisingly earnestly. **"Behemoth!"** (Dec. 4), written and directed by Tony Gilroy, stars Pedro Pascal as a cellist returning to Los Angeles to care for his ailing mother (JoBeth Williams) and forced to confront his past. In Judd Apatow's comedy **"The Comeback King"** (Feb. 5), Glen Powell plays a former country-music star who attempts to rebuild his life by pursuing a college degree.

The joys and troubles of family life get dramatic workouts all season, including in James Gray's crime drama **"Paper Tiger"** (Nov. 13), set in Queens, in 1986, and starring Miles Teller as an environmental engineer whose business deal with his ex-cop brother (Adam Driver) embroils him in conflict with the Russian mob. The twin brothers Arie and Chuko Esiri directed **"Clarissa"** (Dec. 11), an adaptation, set in present-day Nigeria, of Virginia Woolf's novel "Mrs. Dalloway," starring Sophie Okonedo as the titular heroine, whose party preparations cause her to look back at her life choices; India Amarteifio plays the same character, in her youth, seen in flashbacks. In **"Narnia: The Magician's Nephew"** (Feb. 12), Greta Gerwig's adaptation of a 1955 novel by C. S. Lewis, a Victorian-era London boy (David McKenna) is tricked by his uncle (Daniel Craig) into entering a portal that sends him back a thousand years, to the first days of the magical world of Narnia.—*Richard Brody*




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ART

Ancient Greece, Two Triennials

This winter in New York's art world is, more than usual, a season of extremes: you can see works that are incredibly old and others that are brand new—and, of course, much in between. One end of the spectrum is represented by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's **"Across Wine-Dark Seas: Art and Identity Beyond Ancient Greece"** (opening Dec. 20). The exhibition aims to reconsider ancient Greek art by asking: Who were the Greeks interacting with as they sailed throughout the Mediterranean? How did they view those people, and how did those cultures influence them? If recent "Odyssey" mania was a bellwether, then this show of roughly a hundred and eighty objects, with sources including some twenty-nine international lenders, should be a hit.

Not as old but still classic is the Neue Galerie's collection of twentieth-century Austrian and German art. The museum was closed all summer for renovation, and **"25th Anniversary Exhibition: Masterworks from the Neue Galerie"** (Nov. 12) marks its full reopening. A trip to the Neue is an experience of exquisite comfort: you can feast your eyes on works such as Gustav Klimt's glittering "Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I" (1907) and then treat yourself to a delicious tart at the museum's Viennese-style café.

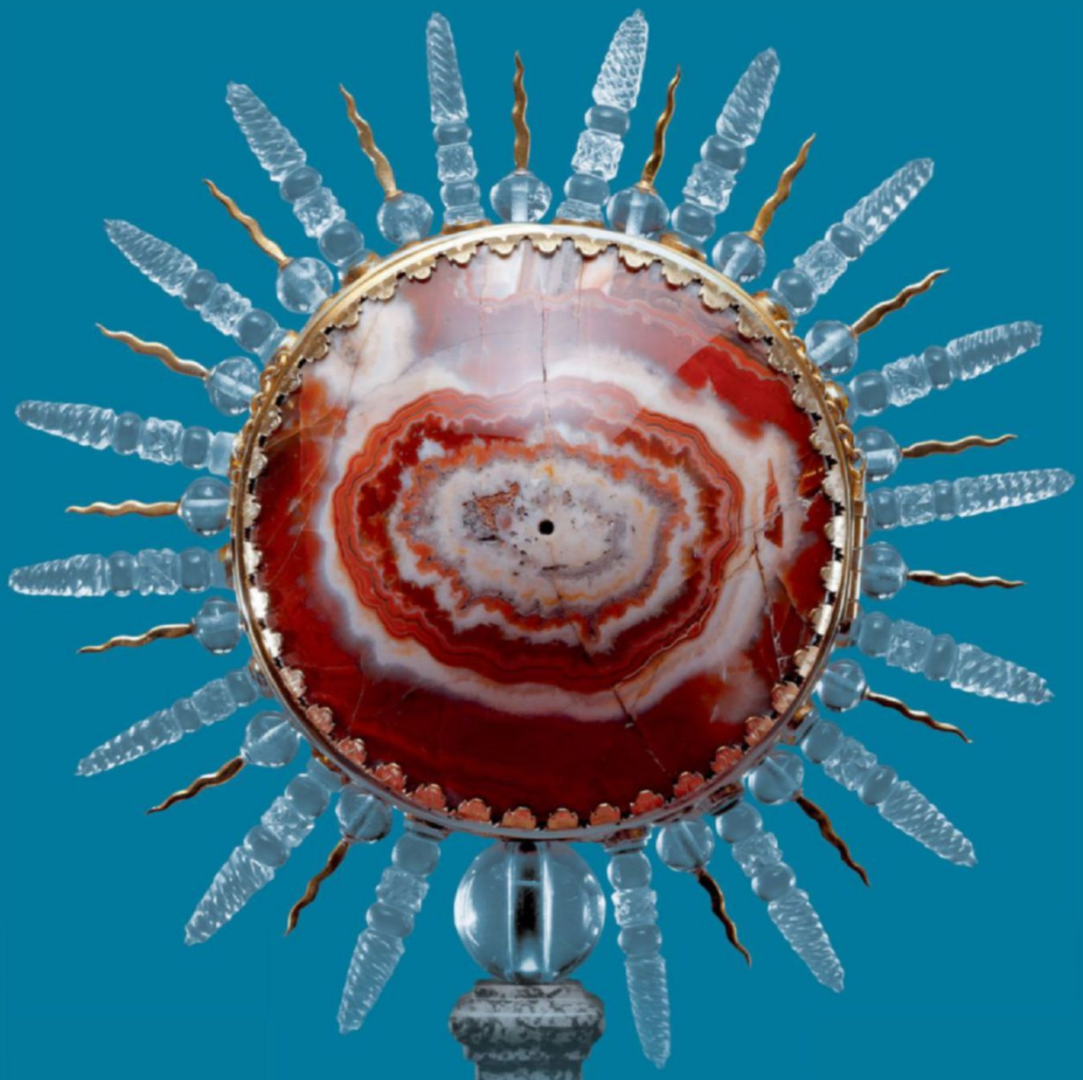
If novelty is more your thing, contemporary art is also on the menu. The Museum of the City of New York puts on **"The Photography Triennial: After Dark"** (Nov. 20). Last time, the focus was turned inward toward the home; this time, thirty-three artists train their lenses on New York City's night life. A few months later, the New Museum opens **"The Outside Expands"** (Feb. 4), the sixth edition of its triennial, which spotlights early-career international artists. The show's themes, listed in the press release, are impenetrably vague, but it should be eye-opening to see work by thirty-six up-and-coming artists, most of whom are exhibiting in a U.S. museum for the first time.

Two of the season's most enticing exhibitions offer micro-histories of specific categories of art. MOMA PS1's **"Hard Art"** (Nov. 5) traces Black abstract painting from 1969 to the present—a subject ripe for critical inquiry. It features still underappreciated artists from a pioneering generation alongside more contemporary practitioners, taking an expanded view of painting in the process. Meanwhile, the Whitney Museum is devoting an entire floor to digital art—a feat not often attempted at brick-and-mortar institutions. **"Artport: A History of Internet Art"** (Nov. 21) is a retrospective of the Whitney's online gallery of the same name, which has featured more than a hundred commissions in the past twenty-five years. This exhibition includes multiple cohorts of practitioners who have navigated a field that remains marginalized by the mainstream art world.

Of course, no art season is complete without solo shows. The most substantial of these is **"Jess: A Dialogue of Presences"** (Feb. 19), a survey, at the Drawing Center, of the hermetic artist Jess Collins, who went only by his first name. The exhibition concentrates on his dizzyingly complex collages—which he called "paste-ups"—along with the community that he and his partner, the poet Robert Duncan, formed around their home, in San Francisco. Meanwhile, several museums are homing in on niche aspects of canonical artists' careers. The Cooper-Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum offers **"Frederic Church in Jamaica"** (Oct. 30), showcasing the artist's rarely seen sketches from an 1865 trip to the Caribbean country; the Noguchi Museum's **"No Ordinary Light: Akari at 75"** (Nov. 4) looks at the history of Isamu Noguchi's once controversial, now beloved paper lamps; and the Morgan Library's **"William Blake: Paradise Lost"** (Feb. 26) examines the influence that the poet John Milton had on the visionary artist.—*Jillian Steinhauer*

SACRED SPLENDOR

Jewish Ritual Art and Christian Treasures from St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague



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Sacred Splendor: Jewish Ritual Art and Christian Treasures from St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague has been organized in collaboration with the Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus in Prague, represented by Vladimír Kelnar, Chancellor and Curator of the Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus in Prague. It is co-curated by Claudia Nahson, Morris & Eva Feld Senior Curator, and Abigail Rapoport, Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Curator of Judaica, in collaboration with Jiří Fajt, Consulting Curator. The presentation builds on *Fragments of Memory*, a 2024 exhibition at the Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau in Dresden, Germany, and its 2026 iteration at the Prague Castle Riding School, both curated by Jiří Fajt. The contemporary component of the exhibition is organized by Shira Backer, Leon Levy Associate Curator.

Sacred Splendor: Jewish Ritual Art and Christian Treasures from St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague, is made possible by Lilly Endowment Inc, with additional support from Jan Barta and the Knapp Family Foundation.

Ottavio (1567–1624) or Dionysio Miseroni (1607–1661) and Workshop, Monstrance, c. 1620 or 1640, Prague. Gold, coral agate, herbal agate, rock crystal, partially replaced by glass. The Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus in Prague. Photo: Martin Polák



DANCE

Nigerian Roots, "Romeo and Juliet"

The dancer-choreographer-actress **Okwui Okpokwasili** is a magnetic performer whose gravelly voice, challenging gaze, and physical intensity make it impossible to look away. Her recent work, of which "Adaku, part 2," a collaboration with Peter Born, is the second installment, has turned to her prehistory: her family's Nigerian roots, the slave trade, the rituals of survival and displacement experienced by African and African American women. Okpokwasili brings her piece—half mythology, half excavation—to the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Nov. 11-15.

There is always a positive charge to **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's** seasons at City Center (Dec. 2-Jan. 3). Who can resist "Revelations," or "Cry," Ailey's tribute to Black womanhood? This year, the company adds a mood boost of a groovier sort—the former Ailey dancer Jamar Roberts's "Power of Love," set to the soulful, upbeat songs of Luther Vandross and made in collaboration with the Vandross estate. Later in the season, the Ailey dancers take on William Forsythe's über-arch, technically dazzling "In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated," originally made in 1987, for the Paris Opéra Ballet.

The dancer, choreographer, and recent MacArthur Fellow **Shamel Pitts** creates worlds of almost painful intimacy, in which arduous encounters leave his dancers raw, vulnerable, exhausted. (He danced for years for the choreographer Ohad Naharin, whose technique seems to turn his dances inside out.) A recent work, "Touch of RED," locked two men in a battle that suggested violence, love, and the ecstatic release of club dancing. Pitts's latest, with his company, TRIBE, "Marks of RED"—part of the new Lincoln Center Contemporary Dance Festival (Alice Tully Hall; Jan. 17-18)—is for a cast of six women. Pitts has described it as "primitive, wonderful, groovy, wild," which also describes his over-all vibe.

There is an infinite appetite for balletic versions of "Romeo and Juliet," driven by the headlong rush of its love story and the cinematic sweep of Sergei Prokofiev's score. **New York City Ballet,** at the start of its winter season (David H. Koch Theatre; Jan. 19-Feb. 28), replaces its current, rather soulless production, by Peter Martins, with a poetic one by Alexei Ratmansky, in which the characters explode with life, and the streets of Verona erupt in kaleidoscopic formations. At the end of the season, Taylor Stanley, a dancer whose fluidity and delicacy have always set him apart, will give his farewell performance, which includes Jerome Robbins's otherworldly "Opus 19/The Dreamer" and a new solo by Kyle Abraham.—*Marina Harss*

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Stevie Wonder, Tyla, Olivia Rodrigo

The winter slate in contemporary music traces the many tendrils of modern rhythm and blues. The U.K. pop artist **Jorja Smith** veers from soft soul into club music (Kings Theatre; Nov. 21); the neo-soul singer **Jamila Woods** celebrates ten years since her début, "HEAVN" (Music Hall of Williamsburg; Nov. 22); and **Victoria Monét** upgrades to a stately, string-laden sound that honors her forebears (Infosys Theatre; Nov. 24). At Brooklyn Paramount, Nov. 28-29, the Afro-pop star **Tyla** synchs amapiano, a house music of South Africa, with American R. & B. And at Webster Hall, on Jan. 16, the **Womack Sisters,** birthright inheritors of soul tradition, carry a vintage sound into the future.

In jazz, the uprising of a boundary-testing vanguard continues. At Blue Note, the flutist, composer, and reputable utility player **Elena Pinderhughes** unveils her long-awaited solo début (Nov. 2-3), and the drummer Karriem Riggins partners up with the producer Liv.e for the genre-hopping project **GENA** (Dec. 7). The British quintet **Ezra Collective** (Webster Hall; Nov. 18) doubles down on its fusionist mission with "Here Because of Hope," melding Afrobeat, reggae, and grime into a diasporic storytelling exercise. At the other end of the spectrum, the experimental saxophonist **Josh Johnson** (Public Records; Dec. 10) uses electronic effects to manipulate the sonic world of his instrument.

On Dec. 18, the Carnegie Hall "Perspectives" artist **Esperanza Spalding** puts on a multidisciplinary performance at the venue, analyzing the history and science of musical anthems. On Feb. 5, Zankel Hall hosts **Caroline Shaw** and the **Attacca Quartet** for Mendelssohn's String Quintet No. 2 and original works sung by Shaw. Folk and country are headlined by first-rate singer-songwriters backing energized new albums. **Julia Jacklin** delves deeper into pop-rock for her pub-inspired LP, "The Gem" (Music Hall of Williamsburg, Nov. 18; Brooklyn

Paramount, Nov. 19). At Irving Plaza, on Jan. 16, **Jess Williamson** sustains a career-redefining turn in support of "A Mile South of Heaven." Meanwhile, the Americana iconoclast **Rhiannon Giddens** plays songs from "Hope Is the Thing with Feathers," a new live-recorded work navigating community and tradition (Kings Theatre; Feb. 27).

The arenas program a multi-ethnic, genre-fluid coalition of young female stars. At Barclays Center: the Puerto Rican rapper **Young Miko** (Nov. 5), the effervescent pop-soul artist **Jessie Reyez** (Nov. 19), and **Olivia Rodrigo** with a ten-night residency (select nights Feb. 11-28). On Dec. 1, at Madison Square Garden, the shape-shifter **Doja Cat** concludes the world tour for her eighties-inspired album, "Vie."

But the entire season is highlighted by the return of the icon **Stevie Wonder,** performing for the fiftieth anniversary of his classic 1976 album, "Songs in the Key of Life." The LP, the last in a quick-fire series of Album of the Year Grammy winners for Wonder, remains among the most impressive creative and technical achievements in popular music. At Madison Square Garden (Nov. 19), the Rock and Roll Hall of Famer kicks off the American leg of his tour, playing the timeless double LP in full to commemorate its seismic legacy.—*Sheldon Pearce*





CLASSICAL MUSIC

The Italian West, Songs for the Sea

The composer **Annea Lockwood** is only a bit younger than "Density 21.5"—the defining modernist flute miniature written by Edgard Varèse, in 1936. That piece marks the origin—and, in its centennial, the destination—of the flutist **Claire Chase's** twenty-four-year-long commissioning program, **Density 2036.** Varèse's piece is named for the density of platinum (in approximate grams per cubic centimetre). Lockwood, in contrast, has spent her life making music from more transient properties: the sounds of vibrating glass, of desiccating trees, of a burning piano. "Elwha!," her contribution to Chase's project, premières at the Kitchen (Dec. 11-12), with Chase playing flutes of seven kinds in concert with field recordings of Washington State's Elwha River. Lockwood's "Sound Map of the Columbia River," created with the trumpeter **Nate Wooley,** will have its first performance two months later, at Roulette (Feb. 5).

Most composers settle for metaphor when conveying the elements. The **Quince Ensemble** sings a selection of water-themed polyphony at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin (Feb. 11). Britten's Four Sea Interludes—even more aqueous, though only figuratively—open a **New York Philharmonic** program that also includes the Elgar Cello Concerto and the morbid song cycle of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 14 (David Geffen Hall; Jan. 21-26); the **Chelsea Symphony** also plays Britten's suite, on Jan. 22 at the DiMenna Center, alongside Mendelssohn's wave-running "Hebrides" Overture. At Carnegie Hall, the **Cleveland Orchestra** plays an all-Richard Strauss program, including his exquisite, anguished "Metamorphosen," scored for twenty-three solo string players (Jan. 20); the **Orchestra of St. Luke's** débuts Philip Glass's Symphony No. 15 on his ninetieth birthday (Jan. 31); and the **Vienna Philharmonic** stacks Mahler's Second, Fourth, and Ninth Symphonies (Feb. 26-28). Masaaki Suzuki conducts the **Monteverdi Choir** in Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" on the same stage (Feb. 23). Through the wall at Zankel Hall, **Decoda** presents their version of Mahler's "Songs of a Wayfarer," along with pieces by Björk, Berio, and Viet Cuong (Jan. 28).

Philip Glass's own ensemble gives a concert of his epochal **"Einstein on the Beach"** (Brooklyn Academy of Music; Nov. 19-21). The **Poulenc Trio** breathes life into the Morgan Library's exhibition on ragtime with a selection of Joplin and Ellington (Feb. 24). **Parlando,** a chamber orchestra, presents Ginastera's gaucho-inflected harp concerto (Kaufman Music Center; Dec. 4). For actual cowboys, head to the Metropolitan Opera, which opens a new staging of Puccini's ebullient **"La Fanciulla del West"**—California gold miners and Wells Fargo agents can sing in Italian, too—on New Year's Eve.—*Fergus McIntosh*

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
CORRUPTION ERUPTION

Sarah Chamberlain, the president and C.E.O. of the Republican Main Street Partnership, was observing a focus group of MAGA voters in Colorado in late August when she first started to hear a surge of complaints about government corruption. Chamberlain's organization is dedicated to electing House Republicans—it began with a moderate orientation but has been adjusting to the new world of Trump voters—and she was in the state to help insure that the MAGA faithful would turn out in close races. At that meeting of voters and at subsequent ones, Chamberlain recalled, "we didn't prompt them. It just came up." She added, "They are tired of watching their members of Congress get wealthy, and they're struggling to fill their gas tanks."

The polls would soon reflect the same angry sentiment, across the ideological spectrum. Most strikingly, a Fox News poll released in mid-October found that "corruption in government" was voters' top concern—above inflation, gas prices, and health care. Eighty-eight per cent said that they were "extremely" or "very" concerned about it. Corruption "has steadily gained in importance on the list of the most critical issues facing the country," Whit Ayres, a Republican pollster, said. "I never remember corruption as an issue being as important as it is now."

Corruption is always a tempting message for the party out of power. Donald Trump used that playbook in 2016, vowing to drain the Washington swamp. Bemoaning corruption is risk-free: no voters are in favor of it, even if they have differing interpretations of what the term entails. In the meantime, hitting corruption lets the opposition party duck the harder tasks of producing a detailed legislative agenda. But, in this cycle, what could catapult the issue from a topic of chronic bellyaching to an actual mechanism for changing votes is the gloomy economic climate. Voters who are feeling flush may be willing to tolerate a degree of self-dealing from politicians that becomes insupportable when grocery bills are high. Corruption "is always a useful word, but it's more effective at some times than others," Robert Boatright, a political-science professor at Clark University and the co-author of the 2025 book "American Corruption Talk," noted. "It's a way to put your finger on people's general dissatisfaction with our politicians, with our economy, with the state of the world."



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY

Then, there is the matter of President Trump. Chamberlain said that Trump did not come up in her focus groups, though participants did cite Donald, Jr.,'s oligarch-financed post-wedding festivities, along with stock trading by the husband of the former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi—this was a MAGA crowd, after all. But it doesn't take much to imagine that the swirl of self-dealing around Trump—the Qatari jet gifted for the President's use; the millions paid to Melania Trump's production company for her documentary; a billion-plus in crypto profits that flowed into the family coffers—contributed to the fury. Indeed, in a Washington *Post*/ABC News/Ipsos poll released on October 18th, sixty-six per cent of voters said that they believed Trump was using the Presidency for personal gain, up from fifty-six per cent a year earlier. Ominously for Republicans, the shift came largely from G.O.P. voters and Republican-leaning independents.

Even with an already cynical electorate, the toll is measurable. In September, Gallup found that Americans' perception of corruption in government was at its highest level in two decades of polling; eighty-nine per cent said that it is widespread, up ten percentage points from a year earlier. And the blame is not spread evenly. In an A.P.-NORC poll from September, forty-nine per cent of respondents said that the word "corrupt" describes Republicans extremely or very well; just thirty-seven per cent took that view of Democrats.

Little wonder, then, that Democrats

have jumped on the issue. According to the tracking firm AdImpact, Democrats have spent a hundred and eighty-two million dollars this year on corruption-focussed advertising in House and Senate races—far more than Republicans have and more than Democrats did during the previous four elections combined. Their strategy is not simply to highlight corruption but to link it to economic consequences. As a September memo from the Senate Majority PAC, the main super PAC backing Senate Democrats, advised, "The strongest reason to vote against a Republican continues to be that they have raised our costs; do not sacrifice the cost piece in favor of communicating about corruption alone, as corruption charges that are not anchored to costs do not clear the bar." Hence an ad run against Michael Whatley, the G.O.P. candidate for an open Senate seat in North Carolina: "He got rich lobbying for Big Oil, while they jacked up prices on you."

In the Maine Senate race, Democrats have launched a three-million-dollar ad buy, seizing on a report by *ProPublica* about an F.B.I. investigation, which was shut down last year, into whether Susan Collins, the Republican incumbent, had accepted illegal contributions from a defense contractor. (Collins has denied any wrongdoing.) "Maybe there's a reason Susan Collins does anything Donald Trump wants her to," a woman who looks like she's straight out of an L. L. Bean catalogue says to the camera. Geoff Garin, a Democratic strategist working with the Senate Majority PAC, said that the two points—Collins's support for Trump and her alleged ethical lapses—are intertwined. "If we only did the Trump without the other, I don't think we would have as good a chance of defeating her as we do," Garin said.

Nowhere, however, is spending on corruption ads greater—or the volume louder—than in the Texas Senate race, between the state attorney general, Ken Paxton, and the state representative James Talarico. Paxton's Republican-primary opponent, Senator John Cornyn, paved the way with commercials that urged, "Defeat the crook," citing, among other things, Paxton's pocketing of a fellow-lawyer's thousand-dollar Montblanc pen. (A spokesperson has said that Paxton took the pen by "mistake.") Talarico has called Paxton "everything that's wrong with this broken, corrupt political system." In a formulation used by other Democratic candidates, he told voters, "We have an affordability crisis because we have a corruption crisis." As a matter of pure economics, this linkage may be debatable. But, in a sour season, it could be enough to secure Democratic wins.

—Ruth Marcus

THE PICTURES
FAMILY PLANNING



Early on a recent Thursday, three of the stars of Jordan Firstman's directorial début, "Club Kid," were recovering from weeks of celebratory partying with caffeinated beverages in Seward Park, on the Lower East Side, near where much of the film takes place. A few older Chinese women were doing Tai Chi as a man in protective earmuffs and a neon vest blasted a leaf blower. The actors—Alaska Riley, Benny Jean Pierce, and Saturn Risin9—decided to take a stroll. Riley, sipping a chai, had been up for an hour; Pierce, latte in hand, had awoken at six to exercise; Saturn, holding a matcha, was unslept, having flown in from Los Angeles the night before and gone straight to the Swan Room for oysters and caviar fries. Firstman had cast all three for their real-life involvement in New York's night-life scene.

Riley, who was wearing a gray hoodie and kitten heels, is a twenty-seven-year-old model and writer. She had initially hesitated when she received Firstman's script. "A little too Method," she called it. Then she ran into Firstman at Basement, a night club in Queens, after which he demonstrated his street cred by partying with her for more than eighteen hours straight.

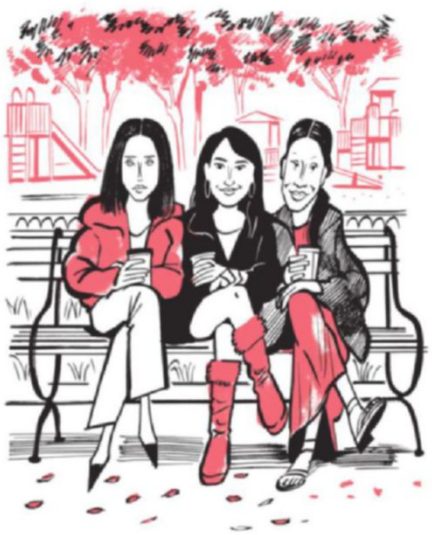
The movie premièred at Cannes, where it was nominated for the Un Certain Regard award. In the film, a strung-out gay party promoter named Peter (played by Firstman) learns that he has a nine-year-old son by a woman he doesn't remember sleeping with. Her best friend turns up with the kid, attempting to foist custody onto Peter, whose life is imploding. Riley, Pierce, and Saturn play his friends.

Saturn, a thirty-seven-year-old d.j. with a maternal disposition, has known Firstman for years. "Seeing Jordan's performance, the veil was thin," she said. "Like, Oh, wow, we're telling the truth."

The trio sat on a bench across from a playground full of clambering kids. "When I saw the film the first time, I ran up to Jordan and said, 'I need to get sober, and I need to be a gay dad,'" Riley recalled.

Pierce, a twenty-seven-year-old actress who wore fur-lined boots and a slouchy leather jacket, smiled at the squeals coming from the playground. "It was so Kismet that I got to do this movie," she said, "because the entire year prior to filming all I was talking about was family planning." But she said that she had struggled to find examples of trans mothers to be role models. Firstman's depiction of queer parenthood, a rarity in film, moved her: "When I saw it, I couldn't stop crying."

"I have always known that I would



Alaska Riley, Benny Jean Pierce, and Saturn Risin9

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

be a mom," Saturn said, tearing up. As a trans woman, she looks forward to having kids who won't face the pressures she's had to fight against. "But I'm probably just going to raise a football-playing straight son," she said. "He'll have to live in fear of coming out to me." A weary-eyed mom trudged by pushing a stroller.

The three actors had created found families through the club scene, and they demonstrate this closeness onscreen. The cast was just coming off of a unifying weeklong bacchanalia, which included a New York Film Festival after-party at Indochine. Riley, who is dialling back her partying, had kept it low-key, holding court at a corner table. Saturn had a long huddle with François Arnaud, the "Heated Rivalry" actor. "I'm trying to promote his bisexuality," she said. "Like, O.K. . . . but is it *in practice*?"

Pierce jumped in: "As a bisexual, I understand the tumultuous nature of bisexuality. I always say, Are you a questioning bisexual, or are you a bisexual being questioned?"

Riley shrugged. "I'm pretty sure I'm bisexual, but, like, I don't do anything about it."

Pierce had brought a guy she knew from work to the Indochine party—a first date. "Something about that Martini," she said. Cocktails had been passed on trays. "I'm at the point in my life where I have one shot and I'm, like, Should I get on the fucking table?"

"I looked over at her with this young man, who I now know is just some guy!" Saturn said. "And I saw that look in her eye."

"The sun came up, and I was awake," Pierce said. She'd ended up at a friend's place in Gramercy. "But a lot of people went to the 'S.N.L.' after-after-party."

Saturn put her head in her hands. "I was going to go, but my brain just forgot the invitation. I went with some gay boys to a place I could have just gone anytime."

Pierce: "It does really suck when you realize you picked the wrong party."

Riley, who'd been quiet, leaned back with a winner's smug calm. "I went home," she said.

—Holden Seidlitz

TIME TRAVEL DEPT.
BRONX TALE



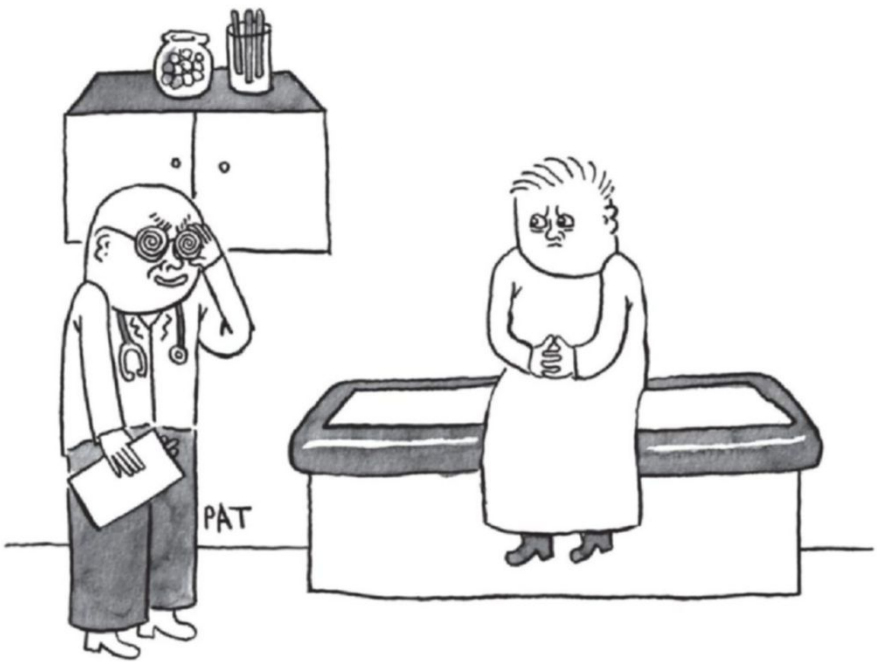
Glover's Rock, a glacial erratic boulder in Pelham Bay Park, in the Bronx, pushes through the tree branches around it like the prow of a beached ship. The Parks Department has put up an identifying marker next to a pullout on the road leading past the rock to Orchard Beach or to City Island. Two hundred and fifty years ago, the biggest battle ever fought in the Bronx began here. At dawn on October 18, 1776, four thousand British and Hessian soldiers marched along the narrow country road that followed the high ground the rock sits on. They had come ashore nearby and were trying to encircle Washington's army from the east as he attempted to get out of a dangerous position on Manhattan and escape across the Hudson River to New Jersey.

A plaque on the rock says it was named for Colonel John Glover. He commanded four regiments, a total of eight hundred men, which occupied defensive positions along the road. The odds in this fight were five to one, at best. Glover came from Boston, and his New England troops not only fought as infantry but also provided Washington with whaleboats and oarsmen when he needed them. The boat in which he is standing in the painting "Washington Crossing the Delaware" was theirs.

As soon as Glover had light enough to see, he knew the enemy was approaching, and he wished a general could tell him what to do. Improvising, he ordered three of his regiments to hide behind stone walls that lined the road. An advance guard stood in formation near the rock, ready to meet the British. The fourth regiment he put farther back along the road, in reserve.

Sunrise, according to contemporary sources, was at 6:32 A.M. Two hundred and fifty years later, on Sunday, October 18, 2026, first light came at about 6:30. At that hour, Glover's Rock is a lonely sentinel. A street light shaped like a "Y" casts bluish light over the boulder and an adjacent patch of lawn. Cars go by only occasionally. On the morning of the anniversary, four deer emerged from a reed thicket next to the lawn, and two Canada geese flew by. At 7:11, the sun came up blazingly over Long Island Sound, breaking through places in the previously all-dark tree line.

By ten o'clock, about a thousand people had shown up to watch a reënactment of the battle, sponsored by local historical societies, civic groups, and



"Let's see what the X-ray specs say before we start worrying too much."

schools. For logistical reasons, it had to be held in Orchard Beach Park. Spectators crowded the beach's promenade. A somewhat tall ship—a two-masted schooner called the Lynx—sailed in on the morning's mild breeze and anchored offshore. Reënactors dressed as British soldiers got in a dory and rowed from the schooner to the beach's edge. Then they rowed back and forth for a while. A member of the U.S. Coast Guard, who had been standing on the beach in a life vest to help them disembark, walked back to a tent on the promenade. "They don't want to get wet," he said. The dory rowed back to the Lynx.

Fortunately for the script, other British and Hessian reënactors had arrived via freeway and the incredibly vast Orchard Beach parking lot. These soldiers formed ranks—in numbers not at all near four thousand—and with bulletless muskets levelled began to march up a service road through the park's lawns and picnic tables. Opposing them were Continental reënactors led by Sean Grady, of Westchester, who impersonated Colonel Glover impeccably, down to the Boston accent. "We cannot expect any rein-*fahce*-ments!" he said.

The two sides fired white, smoky volleys, their guns making a black-powder hiss-bang. Glover's men retreated, then reformed; the determined British kept marching. An important thing had happened here, in what's now the Bronx. If the British had been able to swing around to the west and trap Washington, the Revolution might have ended right then. Glover and his men held them up long enough for the whole army to get away.

As the reënactors moved, the spectators moved with them. The actual battle had ended with Glover's men retreating across the Hutchinson River. The reënactment ended with a narrator, on a loudspeaker, saying it was over, and the reënactors and the attendees cheerfully mingling.

Four or five of the soldiers had "died" during the fighting. Even after the narrator announced the end, some of them stayed sprawled on the ground. One or two kids came up to them, but their spooky stillness kept most people away. The uniforms of these fallen were period authentic, except for the shoes. The patterns on their upturned rubber soles hurried the moment forward, time-travelling up to now. These reënactors seemed to be only teen-agers. They lay in uncomfortable-looking positions, pale and completely still.

—Ian Frazier

DUMB LUCK DEPT.
PRODIGY LOTTERY



Maternity wards are inherently stressful places. But on the night of September 3, 1997, the stakes were especially high for expectant parents. A few weeks earlier, the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music had decided that the first local baby born on the school's hundredth birthday would receive a lifetime of free music lessons. The anniversary date was September 4th. About ninety babies are born in Brooklyn every day. To locate the winner, B.K.C.M. employees called hospitals around the borough until they found their lucky newborn, at Brooklyn Methodist: a little boy by the name of Dante de Blasio—yes, relation.

"I was extremely punctual," de Blasio said the other day, standing by a Knabe piano in the center of a Park Slope loft. "I think it was, like, 12:30 A.M."

De Blasio, now twenty-nine and six feet three, was setting up for a fund-raiser he'd organized to give back to the Conservatory. It had come about largely out of guilt. "I started taking lessons around age eight, I think—I'll have to ask my dad," he said. "I just remember the rage. I was very stubborn and had no musical talent." (His father, the former New York City mayor Bill de Blasio, clarified: "He was positively sour.") Among piano, guitar, and singing, piano was the worst. "It was the social element," Dante said. "I did not like being told what to do." He quit after less than a year.



Dante de Blasio

Time passed, and other pursuits prevailed—debate at Brooklyn Tech ("Teenagers screaming at each other"), political science at Yale (because of Dad? "God, no"), soccer ("My left knee is busted"). Occasionally, de Blasio felt a musical itch. "There's a Steinway piano at Gracie Mansion, so I tried to teach myself to play it during the pandemic," he said. He used a German music app called Flowkey. "I didn't keep up with it," he said, as guests streamed into the loft and looked around.

Only recently did de Blasio finally have his come-to-Mozart moment. "I lived with a Whiffenpoof"—a member of Yale's premier a-capella group—"and he was, like, 'Let's see if you can sing.' We did it for a month, just me and him in our apartment," he said. Then he remembered his birthright and reached out to the Conservatory. "I had no documentation—my parents didn't have a certificate," he said. "I was, like, 'These people are going to think I'm crazy.'"

Chad Cooper, the head of B.K.C.M., thought no such thing. "The Dante story was relayed to me very early in my tenure," Cooper said. "I knew the lore. When he reached out, I had been waiting by the phone for years. I said, 'Our word is our bond!'" De Blasio soon enrolled in a group singing class, free of charge. "I tried to recruit them to come tonight, but everyone had a thing," he said, with a shrug.

As more guests arrived, de Blasio, wearing a brightly patterned button-down, a blazer, and dress shoes, sipped a Moscow Mule. "It's my favorite," he said. "The other is a White Russian. I've been reading a lot about Russia lately." The bartender, a short woman with bangs, was also a Whiffenpoof, and from New York. Had she been a contender for the B.K.C.M. prize? "I was born in 2002," she said. What can you do?

A jazz band started playing "Pent Up House," and de Blasio made the rounds, checking in on his soccer teammates, a

group of giggling girls, some Yale buddies, and his dad. "I was extremely aware," the elder de Blasio said, of the centenary contest. "It had been in the local paper, and they were really pumping it up." He took a swig of his beer. "I remember vividly that at 12:20 my heart sank. I was, like, There's no way we're going to win after this. We've blown it."

As it turns out, they *had* blown it. As devoted members of B.K.C.M. called around to hospitals, they found an infant who had been born just minutes before Dante. "They got hold of the first baby born after midnight, and apparently the mom was, like, not interested," Cooper said, in disbelief.

"They must've thought it was a scam," Dante said.

"You were the alternate!" Bill said. "I didn't know until tonight that someone turned it down."

Toward the end of the evening, the jazz pianist, a dapper man named Lafayette, took the microphone to thank each member of the band. "And where's that fellow who had all those lessons?" he asked. The young de Blasio raised his hand, to whoops.

Someone from the crowd shouted, "Sing!" De Blasio shook his head sheepishly. A chant began: "Sing! Sing! Sing!" Fervent fans awaiting, he strutted toward the piano and raised the mike to his mouth.

—Jane Bua

DEPT. OF CONTAMINATION
DUMPING GROUND



For people who worry about the health of the New Jersey Meadowlands, the giant tidal estuary that is the brackish heart of the Hudson-Raritan watershed, it was a complicated summer. During the FIFA World Cup, MetLife Stadium, built on what was once essentially an island in the middle of marshes, was described by organizers as being in a mythical-sounding land called "New York New Jersey." Then, last month, five thousand gallons of diesel leaked from a Secaucus data center that nobody really knew was there into a creek just off the Hackensack River, and suddenly, as guys in hazmat suits swarmed the noxious water, it was back to seeing the Meadowlands as both properly in New Jersey and a dumping ground.

Even New Jersey's environmental officials downplayed the spill's impact. But not Bill Sheehan, the Hackensack Riverkeeper. "The people talking for the people who spilled the diesel are saying that none of it got out here in the river," Sheehan said the other day, as he floated up the Hackensack on a thirty-foot pontoon boat. He was nearing some orange booms that blocked the entrance to Anderson Creek Marsh, at the mouth of the contaminated waterway. "I don't know how that's possible, since it took them something like fourteen hours to get these booms set up."

It was nearly high tide, and Sheehan was taking two scientists out to perform water-quality readings. Born and raised in Secaucus, Sheehan, who is seventy-seven and founded the Hackensack Riverkeeper advocacy organization in 1997, was wearing a hoodie and aviators; his white hair and horseshoe mustache made his silver hoop earring read "pirate." As the scientists readied their monitoring devices, Sheehan steered, cranking classic rock on the boat's radio. The floating booms, to starboard, looked like flimsy protection against the spill. "I know data centers are suddenly the cause célèbre, or whatever," he said. "But the damn thing was over there for twenty-five years and nobody cared, and nobody told me about the danger. I thought Data was a character on 'Star Trek'!"

He headed upriver to the testing sites. The scientists ducked as the boat floated beneath a rusty drawbridge, completed in 1911 and designed by Joseph Strauss, the Golden Gate Bridge's chief engineer. Picking up speed, Sheehan noted a fourteen-story hotel—windows all broken, rooms gutted. "It used to be the Crowne Plaza," he said. "I busted them because I found out they were dumping raw sewage in the river three times a week. They pled guilty, and took the Crowne Plaza name off it." Lately, he's been hearing that it will be "a Class A hotel." "We'll see," he said.

Sheehan steered north, past the American Dream mall, a liquid-natural-gas plant, ospreys and great-blue herons, the Moonachie and Bashes Creeks, Secaucus High School, the Mill Creek Marsh and park, a Bloomberg Radio tower, a power plant, and a tiny tugboat. Offshore from the Vince Lombardi Service Area, two fishermen were in a motorboat.

"Ahoy!" Sheehan shouted.

"Whatever you catch, don't eat it!" one of the scientists added.

"In the seventies, there were maybe, like, half a dozen species of fish that could survive in here," Sheehan said. "And now we've got well over seventy species, with striped bass up to thirty-five pounds being caught on a pretty regular basis."

The radio played Zeppelin, Petty, and Bruce as the scientists took readings under a Route 46 bridge. The temperature and the dissolved-oxygen levels weren't great, but they weren't terrible; back at their labs, the scientists would test for nutrients and fecal bacteria. (The lower Hackensack is an E.P.A. Superfund site.) They tested under the Turnpike, near a Bergen County sewage-treatment plant, and then in Kingsland Marsh, a wide tidal wetland filled with delicate spartina grass, which marks good food and habitat for aquatic life of even the most microscopic kind. The marsh had the day's best readings; being there felt like being on Cape Cod.

Back in Secaucus, Sheehan let the scientists off at a dock. He was frustrated with the newfound outrage over data centers, which he reckoned had more to do with utility bills than with larger water-quality concerns. He planned to urge the state to file a Natural Resource Damage claim, as it had in 1994, after a barge carrying more than three hundred thousand gallons of caustic-soda solution overturned. "That's the active ingredient in Drano," he said. Settlements for that spill—combined with settlements for groundwater chromium contamination and for an Exxon oil spill in the Arthur Kill—restored wetlands in Jersey City. A former dump got rehabilitated. "We also got a nine-hole public golf course, for people that want to shoot white balls around for no good reason, at the princely sum of about thirty dollars a round," Sheehan said. "On the Hudson River side, they've got to pay half a million dollars to join those clubs. I call this one the People's Golf Course."

—Robert Sullivan

THEATRE OF WAR

The films of Andrey Zvyagintsev take an unsparing view of contemporary Russia.

BY JOSHUA YAFFA



Gleb is a successful businessman, a Russian muzhik made good—wealthy, sturdy, practical—who owns a logistics company in a midsize, provincial city. His employees respect his competence and his no-nonsense direction; in turn, he looks after them, a stern but caring paternal figure. At home, things are different. His wife, Galina, a noble beauty, excels at the role of the plumed bird in a cage and yet suffers for it, fumbling around awkwardly for an escape. They are emotionally estranged but inexorably codependent, circling and watching each other in their tasteful lakefront home.

Two dilemmas that threaten to upend Gleb's life emerge early in "Minotaur," the new film by Andrey Zvyagintsev, the most celebrated Russian director of his generation, whose previous two movies were nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards. "Minotaur" is set in the fictional city of Krasnoborsk in the fall of 2022, half a year into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when Vladimir Putin announced a so-called partial mobilization, or military draft. At the headquarters of Gleb's company, workers huddle around a phone, watching a chaotic scene at the Russia-Georgia border. Thousands of Russian men fleeing the country to avoid being called up to fight are trying to cross, causing an enormous traffic jam. "Holy fuck," one of Gleb's employees says. Seven of them have already left; others are planning to.

"Reality is painful for him, but he's not afraid of it," a Russian film critic said.

This is one of the few glimpses that the film offers of the Special Military Operation, as Russia's war in Ukraine is known in official parlance. The others are subtle, likely to be missed by an untrained eye: a parked car has a "Z" decal—an early symbol of the invasion adopted as a show of support—on its rear window; at a crosswalk, the camera lingers on a woman pushing a wounded veteran in a wheelchair. "The war unfolds on the periphery," Zvyagintsev told me recently. "That was exactly the state of mind, the atmosphere, that defined the start of the conflict. Everything was hushed up—everything was taboo."

At first, Gleb is consumed by a more domestic matter. He suspects that Galina is cheating on him. There are furtive text exchanges and suspicious trips to town. The couple gets into bed with an icy distance between them. A boozy dinner out with friends turns awkward and then, back home, ugly. "I'm tired of being your shadow," Galina says. The plotline is borrowed from "La Femme Infidèle" ("The Unfaithful Wife"), a 1969 French psychological thriller, directed by Claude Chabrol. Like the husband in that film, Gleb sets out to uncover what he already knows.

The war in Ukraine, meanwhile, is closing in on him, too. The mayor of Krasnoborsk is demanding that Gleb and a handful of other local business leaders draw upon their employees to provide a quota of men for the invasion. The higher-ups in Moscow have made their needs clear, and the mayor dutifully transmits them. "We aren't here to bargain," he says. It's impossible to know what Gleb thinks about the war. What matters is the narrow personal implications. "Can't they achieve this without us?" he asks the mayor. They can't—draft lists must be submitted by next Thursday or the state will start sweeping up men on its own. "He stays silent," Zvyagintsev said, of Gleb. "Just sitting there with a total poker face."

Zvyagintsev is not an overtly political filmmaker, but his movies are unsparing in their portrayal of life in contemporary Russia. "He's a meticulous director, for whom mise en scène is

PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA HAYE AND CLARK HSIAO

absolutely central," Joël Chapron, a French film historian who first met Zvyagintsev in the early two-thousands, told me. Varvara Shmykova, an actress who has had supporting roles in two of Zvyagintsev's films, including "Minotaur," said that Zvyagintsev doesn't believe in the "magic of cinema," in which miracles happen spontaneously during filming. Rather, she said, he "composes and shoots each frame with textbook precision." The paradox, Shmykova continued, is that all this control produces something that feels uncannily genuine: "He manages to transfer the feeling of life itself onto the screen."

Iris Lebedeva, who plays Galina, called Zvyagintsev's process an "enormous puzzle, a moving mosaic." She told me about shooting an early scene in which Gleb drives her character to a café. He suspects that her plan to get a coffee before a haircut is cover for a rendezvous with a lover. Zvyagintsev had "imagined how it all should be beforehand," Lebedeva said. "That this tree has to stand here and be exactly this tall, with its leaves moving in just this way. That far off in one corner, behind a window, people should sit drinking coffee from exactly this kind of cup. That a couple with a little dog should walk past, at precisely this rhythm." As the scene unfolded, she went on, "I realized that, even though I was playing the lead, I was no more important in the frame than that tree, or these passersby, or that particular building. All of it exists in order to create a larger whole."

To date, no other independent Russian feature film has devoted itself to the subject of the war. "People are afraid to talk about reality, afraid to talk about the present—they simply don't know how to write a screenplay or direct a film about these subjects," Anton Dolin, a Russian film critic and a friend of Zvyagintsev's, told me. "If, instead of war, we were living through, let's say, an ecological catastrophe, Andrey would probably be the only one making a film about that, too. Reality is painful for him, but he's not afraid of it."

Ultimately, Gleb is forced to make an offering to the state: fourteen draftees for the war. The number is a gesture at the movie's titular allusion. According to Greek mythology, every nine years Athens had to send fourteen young people to the Minotaur's labyrinth, in Crete, where they were devoured as sacrificial victims. The implication is that power preserves itself at the expense of its subjects. Zvyagintsev paraphrased Gleb's reaction to being drawn into Russia's war effort: "Damn, why do *I* have to deal with this?" Gleb, he went on, "wants to stay on neutral ground, to not get involved, to keep from getting sucked into this nightmare."

Zvyagintsev and I met this summer in Jurmala, a charming Latvian resort town on the Baltic Sea. He had filmed "Minotaur" in Riga, Latvia's capital, a thirty-minute drive away, and was now spending a month at a rented house on a quiet lane, with a footpath leading through a patch of pine trees to the shore. "Minotaur" would have its theatrical release in the fall—November 20th in the United States—and Zvyagintsev was at work on a book about his directorial career. He treated my visits as a welcome distraction, and we spent the better part of several afternoons sitting in wooden deck chairs, nursing a pot of tea, and munching on local strawberries.

Zvyagintsev is sixty-two years old, with a shadow of a silver beard and chunky black eyeglasses. His gaze is intense yet fundamentally kind—he would regularly check to see if I was cold, hungry, or in need of a ride. He is intimidatingly well read, in the way of the Russian intelligentsia—one evening, at a garden party, I spotted him reading a translation of the Aeschylus play "The Persians"—but without coming across as haughty or pretentious. Zvyagintsev, unlike many prominent Russian filmmakers, was not born into the country's cultural élite: he grew up in Novosibirsk, in Siberia, and was brought up by a single mother who taught Russian language and literature at a local school. Zvyagintsev "comes from below," and is interested in the world of ordinary people, Dolin told me. "In the lives of mechanics and plumbers, he sees something mythological."

One evening, I met Zvyagintsev at a restaurant with a long terrace overlooking the sea. I arrived early, and, as I waited, he sent me a text message about where we should sit: "Ask whether the table in the corner is free—not the one diagonally across, all the way in the back, but just opposite the entrance. That spot is nice: it's by the window, you get the sunset, and there's more air than in the middle of the room."

Over dinner, I asked him about his childhood in Novosibirsk. Zvyagintsev's father abandoned the family when Zvyagintsev was five years old. "A man of no fixed occupation," Zvyagintsev said. He was a sculptor, a high-school gym teacher, a police officer. Then, one day, he was gone. Still, Zvyagintsev recalled an otherwise happy childhood in the Soviet Union of the nineteen-sixties and seventies: hanging out in the courtyard of his apartment block, playing soccer with friends, performing at a local youth theatre. When he was eighteen, his father made an unannounced visit to the apartment where Zvyagintsev lived with his mother. They exchanged an awkward hug but barely spoke. Zvyagintsev later learned that his parents had argued that day. His father asked his mother what Zvyagintsev was up to. She said that he was studying acting, at a drama academy in Novosibirsk. His father erupted. "What kind of nonsense is that?" he said, slamming his fist on the kitchen table.

Hearing about the exchange, Zvyagintsev told me, had produced relief: "What a joy that this person is absent from my life, that I don't have to overcome this negativity." His mother was open to his artistic pursuits and supportive of his move, at the age of twenty-two, to Moscow, where he enrolled at the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts, known by its acronym, GITIS, the country's oldest and largest theatre school.

It was the late eighties, the time of perestroika, a period of loosening state controls and burgeoning freedoms. Students at GITIS organized a boycott of a mandatory class on Marxism and Leninism. "By then, everyone knew Communism was over," Zvyagintsev said. "Why listen to all this bullshit?" Zvyagintsev had a friend who attended the Institute of Cinematography, Moscow's prestigious film school, which had a theatre that screened movies otherwise impossible to find in the Soviet Union. The friend would sneak Zvyagintsev in through a back entrance to see such films as Orson Welles's "The Trial" and Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho."

One day, Zvyagintsev attended a

screening of Michelangelo Antonioni's "L'Avventura," which is nominally about the disappearance of a young woman during a yacht tour off Sicily. Antonioni's great innovation was that the story line fades away, along with conventional expectations about action, time, and dramatic resolution. Psychological tension and narrative development come not from plot but from silence, duration, landscape, and movement. "My mind was blown," Zvyagintsev said. "I understood then that a film can be incredibly rich and meaningful even when hardly any action happens."

After graduation, Zvyagintsev found a job as a *dvornik*, a street cleaner. "You'd get up early in the morning, sweep up some cigarette butts, and the rest of the day belonged to you," he said. He spent most afternoons at the newly opened Museum of Cinema, which hosted retrospectives on German Expressionists and the French New Wave, and regularly showed the works of modern auteurs, from Fassbinder to Kurosawa. The idea of making films of his own still seemed far-fetched—that was for people with the right diplomas and connections. But then, when Zvyagintsev was twenty-seven, the Soviet Union collapsed, taking with it a rigid system of top-down management and state-directed job assignments. "It was a tremendous time," he said. "Everyone was free to do as they pleased, try out what they liked."

Eventually, he began to direct commercials—for a shoe store, a granite workshop, the soccer club Spartak. Through a campaign for REN TV, an independent television network launched in the mid-nineties, he met Dmitry Lesnevsky, who ran the channel with his mother. At the time, Lesnevsky was looking for directors to work on "The Black Room," a psychological drama series, with each episode unfolding in a confined, claustrophobic space. The minimalist format was a necessity, Lesnevsky told me, because "we didn't have the money to make real films." He gave Zvyagintsev a handful of scripts, and Zvyagintsev picked one about a wealthy banker and his bodyguard. He filmed it quickly, on a budget of a couple of thousand dollars. "To my amazement, from this rather absurd and ridiculous premise appeared something with style, air, atmosphere—everything we would see later in Andrey's films," Lesnevsky said. Zvyagintsev remembers Lesnevsky telling him, "Good job, you turned shit into candy."

Lesnevsky hired him to make two more episodes. "I can't take credit for discovering Andrey Zvyagintsev," he told me. "People with talent like his arrive to this world with their mission already defined, and sooner or later they carry it out."

"Lamentation Over the Dead Christ," an Italian Renaissance masterwork by Andrea Mantegna which shows Christ lying on a marble funeral slab, is known for its extreme foreshortening. Christ's feet are closest to the viewer, and his head and torso are enlarged beyond normal proportions. The effect is highly corporeal, a naturalistic confrontation with the immediacy of death. Zvyagintsev first saw the painting in an art-history class at the drama academy in Novosibirsk. It inspired a framing shot that comes nine minutes into "The Return," Zvyagintsev's first full-length feature: two brothers tiptoe into a hallway, having learned that their father, who has been missing for twelve years, has come home.

Mikhail Krichman, the film's director of photography, who has worked on all of Zvyagintsev's subsequent projects, told me that they spent close to an hour swapping out lenses to get the perspective exactly right, and ultimately set up the camera outside the bedroom where the brothers discover their father asleep. Zvyagintsev described the shot as the film's "tuning fork," a way to establish its tone. "I needed to find a certain register," he told me. "A way to lift the story above the mundane, so that it would transcend everyday realism and reach for the mythical."

"The Return," based on another script procured by Lesnevsky, was filmed near Lake Ladoga, north of St. Petersburg. The landscape is dotted with abandoned structures, decaying artifacts of a vanished civilization: a diving platform looming over a glassy lake, a rickety wooden observation tower. The father takes his two sons—Ivan and Andrey—on a camping trip that becomes something of a Biblical quest, a test of will and belief. The action, like God's creation of the world, takes place over seven days. Ivan, the younger son, is doubtful and skeptical of his father, whereas Andrey, the elder, is faithful and trusting—the twin archetypes of man's relation to the divine. "Two neophytes going through an initiation rite," Zvyagintsev said. The film ends in tragedy: a death that is both sacrifice and atonement. We never learn the father's name.

"The Return" was largely panned by critics in Russia. One wrote that the film revealed nothing more than a "commonplace truth," and was so banal that it resembled "the skeleton of an animal picked clean by vultures." Lesnevsky feared that the project was destined to air once or twice on REN TV and then effectively disappear. Zvyagintsev received one unexpected review: a woman who introduced herself as his half sister wrote to say that his father had seen the film on TV in Siberia. After it ended, he'd taken a cigarette out to the balcony of his apartment, where he'd stayed, on a frosty autumn evening, for the next two hours.

In September, 2003, "The Return" was shown at the Venice Film Festival, where it won not only an award for best début but also the Golden Lion, the festival's top prize. Two months later, Zvyagintsev got a call from the Kremlin, inviting him to meet with Putin, who was then in his first term as President. "There will be tea, something to eat—you'll sit down and have a chat," Zvyagintsev said, recalling the summons. In a reception room at Putin's residence, facing a suite of television cameras, the two had a scripted conversation that lasted barely a few minutes. "He said, 'Congratulations,' and that was it," Zvyagintsev said. "The camera crews left."

Afterward, he and Putin were chauffeured to a meeting at Mosfilm, the country's largest and most historic movie studio. "It was an ordinary, human conversation between two people," Zvyagintsev said, of the drive. "Putin wasn't yet what he later became. He was still mostly an unknown quantity." At Mosfilm, Putin presided at a large table, surrounded by titans of Russian cinema. "They were all sitting there, waiting to hear what His Majesty was going to say," Zvyagintsev said. "I found the whole context of the meeting befuddling." Later, Kremlin officials suggested that

Zvyagintsev take part in various public committees or initiatives, but he always declined. "Purely decorative, empty busywork," he called it. "Perhaps it sounds naïve, but I have never considered myself a political animal."

Zvyagintsev's indifference to official power made him unusual for a Russian artist, especially in the age of Putin. Filmmaking is expensive, and for many people in the industry the Russian government is both a source of funding and a powerful facilitator. "Plenty of other directors would have pissed themselves with happiness," Lesnevsky said. "But for Andrey it was awkward, as if one imperious nod from the tsar in his direction risked casting a shadow on the purity of his artistic expression."

On June 4, 2004, Marvin Heemeyer drove what the media later dubbed the "Killdozer" on a two-hour rampage through the streets of Granby, Colorado. Heemeyer owned a muffler shop in the town and had been engaged in a long-running series of property and zoning disputes with local authorities. He eventually lost, and then spent several months converting a bulldozer into an improvised armored vehicle, adding steel plates and gun ports. His spree ended when the Killdozer got stuck in the wreckage of a collapsed building; as police approached, Heemeyer shot himself. Zvyagintsev heard about the story during a trip to New York. "This initial impulse, the basic conflict, made quite an impression," he told me. "The desire for revenge, a thirst for retribution, for justice."

Back in Moscow, he and Oleg Negin, a frequent collaborator, began drafting the screenplay for what would become his fourth feature, "Leviathan," a story of a man's confrontation with an indomitable system, framed around his battle to save his home from demolition at the hands of corrupt local bureaucrats. In an early version, Zvyagintsev imagined a final scene in which Nikolay, the Russian Heemeyer, bursts out of his garage riding a bulldozer and uses it to topple an excavator. But that felt both too technically complex—"Who was going to give us an excavator to destroy?" Zvyagintsev said—and tonally wrong. His world view is harsher. "In Andrey's films, God is silent and never intervenes," Alexander Rodnyansky, Zvyagintsev's longtime producing partner, said. "No one is granted miracles or hears a voice from Heaven, and no one is saved."

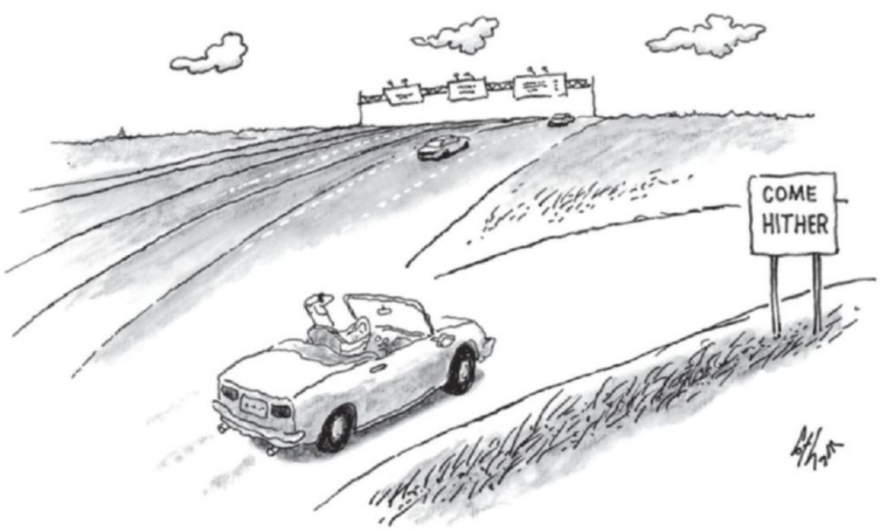
One of Zvyagintsev's references for the film was an early-nineteenth-century German novella, "Michael Kohlhaas," by Heinrich von Kleist, in which the title character, a horse trader, is wronged by a member of the Saxon aristocracy. He turns to the courts, but his appeals are quashed because of the aristocrat's political connections. Desperate, Kohlhaas mounts an armed uprising, which is quickly put down, and the story ends with his beheading. "There is always an aristocracy of some kind, in every society," Zvyagintsev said. "There are people who are allowed to do certain things, and people who aren't."

After "The Return," Zvyagintsev had made "The Banishment," an elusive film that was considered something of a sophomore slump, about a troubled couple who abscond to an unnamed countryside. Next came "Elena," a propulsive drama set in Moscow which a favorable review in the *Times* described as "a jungle teeming with predatory wildlife." The film was a critical success and marked an important turn in Zvyagintsev's cinematic vocabulary: he retained an allegorical dimension but grounded the action in the gritty, recognizable texture of contemporary Russia.

For the location of "Leviathan," Zvyagintsev considered several towns outside Moscow, and some as far away as Belarus. Nothing felt quite right, though, until Andrey Ponkratov, Zvyagintsev's longtime production designer, discovered Teriberka, a remote Arctic fishing settlement on the northern coast of Russia's Kola Peninsula, which Zvyagintsev called an "outpost of archaic reality." The coastline is severe, with boulder-strewn beaches and granite cliffs stabbing into icy waters. Away from the shore, the tundra is barren, a broad expanse of moss, lichen, and exposed rock. When Zvyagintsev first visited Teriberka, in 2012, a local driver told him about humpback whales that, in early summer, are visible from shore. Zvyagintsev thought it was a sign: "We came with a film called 'Leviathan,' and it turns out this place has actual whales."

The film's central motif came from the Book of Job, the story of an upright, God-fearing man who faces tragedy and suffering seemingly without reason. The Biblical story speaks elliptically of a Leviathan, a giant sea creature beyond human control: "Upon earth there is not his like, who is made without fear." To Zvyagintsev, modern Russia looked like the embodiment of yet another "Leviathan"—that of Thomas Hobbes, who imagined the sovereign state as an immense power entrusted by its subjects to protect them from disorder and violence. In Zvyagintsev's film, the state machine, rather than protect the individual, crushes him. That's a universal dynamic, Zvyagintsev insisted, "only in Russia it's more blatant, visible right on the surface."

"Leviathan" is unmistakably a critique of the venality and cynicism of the Russian state. In a courtroom scene,



a judge races through a ruling that favors the authorities, reading it in a nearly unintelligible monotone. Zvyagintsev had taken inspiration from the verdict in the trial of Pussy Riot, the feminist punk collective whose members were arrested and charged with "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred" after staging a protest in Moscow's central Orthodox cathedral, in 2012. "I was struck by the speed of it, the way the judge rattled through the decision so incredibly fast," Zvyagintsev told me. He asked the actress playing the judge, Alla Emintseva, to watch the footage. "I need you to do it like that," he told her.

Before "Leviathan" premièred, at the Cannes Film Festival, in 2014, Zvyagintsev and Rodnyansky hosted a private screening at the Russian Ministry of Culture, which had provided more than a million dollars of the film's budget. The funding was less a financial necessity than a political wager. "It seemed to me that simply having the words 'Made with the support of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation' in the opening credits would protect us and provide a certain degree of cover," Rodnyansky said. The Minister of Culture at the time, Vladimir Medinsky, was a conservative ideologue. After watching the film, he called Zvyagintsev into his office. "Why do you insist on painting Russia with a black brush?" he asked. "Why not use brighter colors?" Zvyagintsev replied that an artist merely represents the reality around him. "We're not in charge—you are," he said. "When life gets better, when things in the country change, then there will be a brighter side, and I'll reflect that, too."

Weeks later, "Leviathan" won the award for best screenplay at Cannes. It went on to win a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Film and earn an Oscar nomination. In Russia, the film was viewed widely—a pirated copy that circulated online before the theatrical release was downloaded more than a million times—and fiercely debated. The culture ministry distanced itself from the movie. "What and whom Zvyagintsev hates is more or less clear," Medinsky said in an interview with a pro-Kremlin newspaper. "But whom does he love? Fame, red carpets, and statuettes." A lawmaker called on the state to claw back the money it had given to produce "Leviathan," which he said was "a collection of Russophobic stereotypes aimed at creating a negative image of the Russian state and Russian society."

In our conversations, Zvyagintsev maintained a certain detachment from the controversy. "Once a film is finished, the closing credits are in place, the master print is approved—that's it, you're free," he told me. "From then on, everyone watches it through the lens of their own experience." Medinsky, for his part, changed the state's policies for film funding in the wake of "Leviathan." "I see no point in using Ministry of Culture funds to produce movies that spit on our elected government," he said. "I'm talking about those individuals whose films take the view of *Rashka govnyashka*"—Russia is a shithole.



"You were right—I am a witch. Now enjoy being frogs."

On the morning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in February, 2022, Zvyagintsev was in a hospital room in Germany. The previous June, during a COVID wave in Moscow, his wife, Anna Matveeva, a photographer and a film editor, had caught the virus, and Zvyagintsev, who had a long-standing lung condition and was fearful of falling ill, went to stay in his office. After a week, he decided to get a shot of Sputnik V, Russia's COVID vaccine. Within days, his temperature had spiked and he was racked with body aches and exhaustion. His doctor sent some blood samples for analysis. "Every single measure was wildly abnormal," Matveeva told me. Zvyagintsev was told he likely had an asymptomatic COVID infection that had been exacerbated by the vaccine.

To this day, his precise diagnosis remains a mystery. "I don't mean to sound like an anti-vaxxer," Zvyagintsev said, "but draw your own conclusions." Whatever the cause, Zvyagintsev was undergoing a cytokine storm, in which immune cells trigger a potentially deadly inflammatory response. He checked into a hospital in Moscow, where doctors performed a plasma transfer and delivered an intravenous infusion of monoclonal antibodies, to stem the inflammation. After two weeks, they sent him home. Several days later, a blood clot burst in his neck. He told Matveeva, "Honey, I'm fucked. I'm dying," and then collapsed.

An ambulance brought him to a different hospital, where he contracted a bacterial infection. Tests showed that he had damage to ninety-two per cent of his lungs; he was placed on a ventilator. Matveeva consulted with the doctors. They suggested a lung transplant, a risky procedure that, even if it was successful, lacked a clear long-term prognosis. One doctor pulled Matveeva aside

to speak with her privately. He said that she should consider taking her husband to Germany for specialized medical care. "I'm telling you honestly," he said. "We're not able to manage it here."

On August 17th, about seven weeks after Zvyagintsev first fell ill, he was flown to Hannover, Germany, where doctors at a university hospital put him into a medically induced coma. "A huge dark blur," he told me, of the experience. They used a bacteriophage, a type of virus that targets bacteria, to bring his blood markers back to normal. A month later, he woke up unable to move his arms and legs. "I was just lying there, motionless," he said.



Zvyagintsev spent the next three months learning to breathe without a tube, to sit up, to feed himself. Then the war broke out. He joined a number of Russian cultural figures in speaking out against the invasion. "I have no words, no productive thoughts, no ideas, just one proclamation," he said in a video address, his voice hoarse and weak. "No to war." Later, he addressed fellow-artists who might be tempted to remain silent: "What are you even doing here, taking up space in the world, if you can't speak about what you believe ought to be said?"

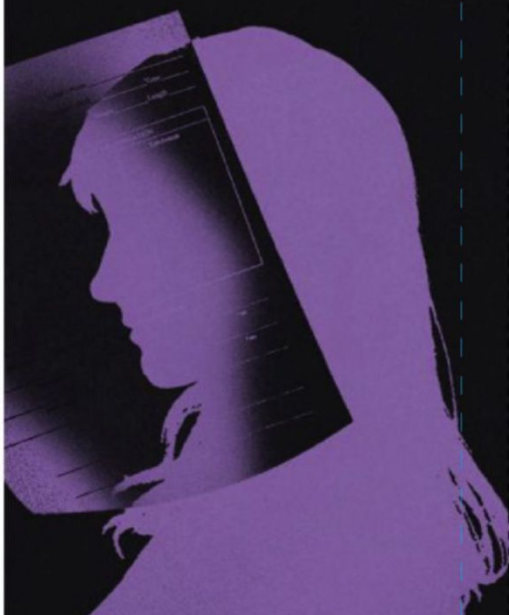
That summer, he moved to Paris with Matveeva and their son, Petr, who was twelve at the time. Zvyagintsev was still in a wheelchair, but he eventually progressed to using a walker. Chapron, the French film historian, introduced him to Nathanaël Karmitz, the head of MK2, a French film studio and distributor. "When he understood that he survived, he wanted to go on," Chapron said. "Which meant making movies, the only thing he knows." At their meeting, Karmitz noticed that Zvyagintsev's gait was still unsteady. "He almost died, left his home, had no money, and a wife and kid to support in France," Karmitz told me. "Of course he was focussed on working again."

Zvyagintsev's most recent film at that time, "Loveless," about the estrangement of a married couple, Zhenya and Boris, and the disappearance of their twelve-year-old son, had been nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscars. In the final scene, Zhenya and Boris, living apart, are watching the same state-television broadcast, a hysterical propaganda segment about supposed fascists taking power in Ukraine. It's hard not to connect Zhenya and Boris's inclination to wound each other with the violence of the Russian government, especially toward Ukraine. "Loveless" came out in 2017, five years before the invasion, and, viewed today, it carries a dark sense of foreboding. "The point isn't that propaganda makes people lose their empathy," Zvyagintsev told me. "It simply helps them remain in that condition."

After "Loveless," Zvyagintsev began developing a project about a Russian oligarch whose proximity to the state leads to his downfall. He called it "Jupiter," after the Roman king of the gods, a figure of supreme power and authority. According to Ilya Stewart, the film's producer, a fund established by Roman Abramovich, one of Russia's wealthiest oligarchs, had signalled a willingness to help finance the film. But, three months before shooting was set to begin, the fund declined to provide support. "We were told the economics didn't make sense," Stewart said. "In hindsight, I think it's obvious that people were scared, even if they never said so directly."

Zvyagintsev had hoped to resurrect "Jupiter" in France, but Karmitz thought that it would be too expensive and "too visionary" for a general audience. "I feared people wouldn't relate to the figure of the oligarch," he said. So Zvyagintsev instead returned to an idea that he'd had years earlier—remaking a French classic. He'd asked Chapron for a list of iconic films from the nineteen-sixties and seventies that centered on a marital drama. Chapron suggested nine titles, including films by François Truffaut and Jacques Deray. Eventually, Zvyagintsev settled on Chabrol's "La Femme Infidèle." What an interesting title, he recalled thinking—it says it all before the film has even begun, "as if to ruin the intrigue." Suspense would have to come not from a central mystery but from the experience of watching

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the characters observe one another. "A kind of game," Zvyagintsev said.

Zvyagintsev knew that he would set the film in Russia, and, as with "Elena," "Leviathan," and "Loveless," would overlay myth and allegory on a contemporary story. When he'd first conceived of the idea, nearly a decade earlier, that could have meant any number of things; in 2023, it could mean only war.

In the weeks following Putin's partial mobilization, Zvyagintsev had got a call from an acquaintance, a successful businessman in the Russian provinces. "I had the sense that he wanted to share this story with someone, maybe in his own circle, but didn't find anyone," Zvyagintsev said. "So he told me." The businessman said that he had been called to the mayor's office and told he must provide names from among his workers for the draft lists. Zvyagintsev asked the acquaintance how he had responded. "He said something along the lines of 'Well, Andrey, you know,' and trailed off," Zvyagintsev recalled. The details were a matter for the businessman's conscience, Zvyagintsev told me. But he had heard enough.

For Zvyagintsev, making a movie in Europe meant relearning much of his usual process. In Russia, Rodnyansky, his producer, had protected him from the fraught and unseemly aspects of securing financing. "He spoiled me," Zvyagintsev said. "If he said yes, then that was enough." But, in Europe, art-house dramas of the type Zvyagintsev makes are financed piecemeal, through an arrangement of co-producers, public subsidies, broadcasters, and private investors. "How much do things cost, how to find the money to pay for them, how to find outside investors and present your ideas to them—none of that existed for him back in Russia," Karmitz said. "Andrey had to learn an entirely new system."

In the end, "Minotaur" became a French-German-Latvian co-production, with additional money from private Russian-speaking investors in Europe. Then, there was the question of whom he would work with. "Andrey is a man of habit," Karmitz said. "Habits in terms of how he works, the people he works with, how they make art together." Negin, Zvyagintsev's longtime writing partner, was still in Russia. So he asked Simon Lyashenko, a former I.T. executive with whom he had collaborated on some side projects, to help write the script. Lyashenko told me, "He placed such trust in me, which made me feel an equally enormous responsibility toward him."

Many of the actors Zvyagintsev had initially considered for roles in "Minotaur" were in Russia. He told me that a number of them, in private conversations, said that they couldn't participate in a film that honestly addressed the war. "Each simply wanted to apologize," he said. When I tried to contact the actor who played Nikolay in "Leviathan," Alexey Serebryakov, he declined to speak with me, then deleted our text exchange. Zvyagintsev wasn't surprised. "Artists have to find a way to survive, stay off blacklists, preserve their ability to work," he said.

Others went further. Roman Madyanov, who played the mayor in "Leviathan," became an outspoken supporter of the war before his death, in 2024. He told a Russian paper that cultural figures who leave the country "spit on the graves" of their forebears and "have a bleak future ahead of them." Zvyagintsev seemed surprised when I told him about Madyanov's turn. "Seriously?" he asked. "It's disappointing, of course, but I don't judge anyone." Such people in Russia are in a "dependent position," he said. "It's a form of serfdom, really. Nothing has changed."

Ultimately, Zvyagintsev cast an actor named Dmitry Mazurov as Gleb, the



film's lead character. Mazurov is forty-five, a veteran journeyman with more than a hundred screen credits. He insisted to me that, for him, "Minotaur" is not a film about the war, or its effect on Russian society, but, rather, a kind of chamber piece—"a love story," he called it. "It's about my character fighting for his wife, for his son, for the preservation of his family, in whatever flawed way he can."

I had reached Mazurov in Moscow, where he lives. He acknowledged the political dimension of Gleb's dilemma with the mayor, but said that the mobilization of 2022 was "just another period of life that we lived through," a "historical fact" that "didn't carry any special significance" for how he played Gleb. "Minotaur" was "a work of art, a very deep and interesting story," he told me. "It certainly isn't a manifesto."

Riga, with its pre-Revolutionary buildings and rows of Soviet-era prefab housing blocks, provided a rather faithful replica of Russia. Only a few visual effects were added in post-production: Russian license plates on the cars and billboards offering four-hundred-and-ninety-five-thousand-ruble bonuses to anyone who joined the Russian Army. On set, Zvyagintsev didn't discuss the war, which by then had been going on for almost four years. "Obviously, the war is horrific," Shmykova, who plays the H.R. director at Gleb's firm, told me. But, she went on, "I don't think any of us needed to hear him pontificate on the subject to know what his views were."

The central event in "Minotaur" is a nearly twenty-minute sequence of violence and its aftermath, gruesome and slapstick, all without dialogue. "It's the kind of challenge that directors dream of," Zvyagintsev told me. "I wanted to stretch that section out, make it as expansive as possible, show every detail." The scene serves as an intimate and visceral analogy to the more diffuse horrors of war. "It lays it all bare," Zvyagintsev said. "Everyone can see the blood being spilled."

When "Minotaur" premiéred, last May, at Cannes, it received a ten-minute ovation and won the Grand Prix, the festival's second-highest honor. Zvyagintsev knew that he'd get to deliver a short acceptance speech. "A chance, maybe the only one, to say what really mattered," he said. "It won't change anything. But you still have to do it."

Onstage that evening, Zvyagintsev ran through a standard list of thanks. Then his tone shifted. "There is someone else I would like to address personally," he said. "Millions of people on both sides of the front line dream of only one thing: for the massacres to

stop. The only person who can stop this butchery is the President of the Russian Federation. Put an end to this carnage. The whole world is waiting for it."

Two days later, Dmitry Peskov, Putin's press secretary, addressed the speech at a Kremlin briefing, saying that Zvyagintsev had "no right to speak" about the war because he had not condemned Ukraine for its "bloody slaughter." Zvyagintsev responded by giving a comment to *Meduza*, an independent Russian news outlet. "Yes, quite right," he said. "I have no say in this, just as a hundred million Russians today have no say."

In Jurmala, Zvyagintsev told me, "It is obvious which side I am on in 'Minotaur'—certainly not on the side of the people who unleashed this hell." But he insisted that his was a humanistic view, not a political one. "I want to remain outside all parties, alliances, associations," he said. "What I know is that you must not kill another human being. You can't fire a tank at an apartment building." He mentioned Gleb's dilemma: "The act of sending fourteen people to their deaths is fundamentally the same thing as what was done by those who sent an entire army to war."

The Villa Rocabella, a colonnaded Belle Époque confection, sits on a sloping hillside near the French port city of Toulon, rising above terraced gardens and a private cove that opens onto the Mediterranean. One morning this August, I met Zvyagintsev in the villa's living room, an airy space softened by linen and rattan, with tall French doors looking out to the sea. He was pacing, his arms clasped behind his back, and looked displeased.

Zvyagintsev had first visited the villa in 2019, while scouting locations for "Jupiter," which he was again hoping to make. ("The figure of the oligarch has become more universal," Karmitz told me.) But, in the intervening years, Villa Rocabella had changed owners. Zvyagintsev thought it looked shabbier, plainer, cheaper. "It's starting to feel a bit like a sanatorium," he said. Some art work and furniture had disappeared; a pair of palm trees that once framed the vista out to the sea were gone. "Those palms said something," Zvyagintsev told me. "They conveyed something different about the place."



"Take out your phone—you're making me nervous."

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Ponkratov, Zvyagintsev's production designer, was also there, and the two men walked from room to room together. "You should enter a space and understand right away who this person is," Ponkratov said. "Andrey loves shots that speak for themselves—no dialogue, simply silence, but we form an idea about what is happening." In the villa, he and Zvyagintsev spoke in whispers, gesturing at an upstairs window where the oligarch would watch a woman walking in a garden, and at a glass-enclosed sitting room that Zvyagintsev called "the rotunda." At one point, Ponkratov told me, of the oligarch, "It's better not to make him some vulgar, tasteless nouveau-riche guy. He speaks well. He's educated."

Zvyagintsev quickly interjected: "Let's not talk about the concept for now." He told me that, given the film's earlier false start, he was wary of revealing too much about it. "I'd prefer 'Jupiter' to be mentioned nowhere at all," he said.

The day was hot and muggy, and late-nineteenth-century villas, however extravagant, don't come with air-conditioning. ("We'll have to shoot in November," Zvyagintsev said.) After a while, he walked outside and took a seat on a stone bench overlooking the sea. He seemed more at ease than he had surveying the interior. Cinema, he told me, speaks in "a synthetic voice," by which he meant the atmosphere that communicates the meaning of a scene. But it doesn't materialize on its own. "Even something that happened accidentally while you were shooting doesn't end up in the final cut by accident," he said. "Everything is chosen—everything has a reason." We talked a bit more about serendipity in art, how much to allow for the unexpected. "I never have a direct answer to any question right away," he said. "I have to find it."

A local camera crew had come to the villa to take a few test shots, so that Zvyagintsev could study the color and light and see what might be altered in post-production. They set up in the foyer, which was painted a soft pink and had a grand split staircase leading up to the second floor. The crew were not shooting anything to do with the film's story, but they still needed people in the frame for color and contrast. Ponkratov volunteered, as did Lyashenko, who was working with Zvyagintsev on the script for "Jupiter." Zvyagintsev told them where to stand, how to enter, where to walk. His posture straightened, and he announced, with a smirk, "The camera disciplines you." ♦

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

QUITTING TIME

Why don't more immigration agents reach a moral breaking point?

BY FRANCISCO CANTÚ

In the winter of 2018, Joshua Childress was sent to the Yuma Regional Medical Center, in southwest Arizona, to guard a man who'd fallen from a thirty-foot-high border wall. Childress was in his seventh year in the United States Border Patrol and had grown accustomed to doing hospital watch, in which agents monitor recently apprehended migrants to insure that they don't escape while receiving care. To Childress's surprise, the injured man spoke fluent English. Childress asked why he had come to the U.S. "Because this is my home," the man replied.

The man, who appeared to be in his early twenties, had lived in Arizona since he was eight years old—longer than Childress had been in the state himself. A few months earlier, the man had hosted a barbecue at his house, and neighbors had called in a noise complaint. The police came, asked for the man's I.D., and reported him to immigration authorities, who deported him to Mexico. Childress asked why the man hadn't sought Dreamer status under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which provides protection from deportation for certain undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children. The man explained that he had wanted to, but his father had been afraid that the paperwork was a trick meant to entrap them.

Childress listened as the man described the mountain town where he'd grown up, a place that sounded much like the community where Childress was raised, in rural Colorado. "I barely speak Spanish," the man told Childress. "I don't know anybody in Mexico. I've been down there wandering around for three months, trying to figure out what to do, and I decided, *You know what? I'll take my chances and come back here.* And then I fell from the fence and broke my leg."

The doctor arrived and announced that the man had suffered a complete fracture and recommended that he seek surgery as soon as he was back in Mexico. If the injury went untreated, the doctor warned, it could lead to sepsis. For now, he said, the man would be fitted with a temporary cast and returned to Border Patrol custody.

Like all agents, Childress had come face to face with countless migrants; he was familiar with their struggles. But he was adept at pushing aside stories of misfortune to focus instead on the border crossers who had serious criminal histories—the arrests he felt good about. Increasingly, however, Childress had begun to question whether the vast majority of the migrants he encountered, most of whom had come to the country to change tires or pick lettuce or work in construction, really posed a threat. Once, a man at the Yuma processing center had removed his shirt to show Childress marks on his back, where he had been whipped by smugglers after he refused to carry a bundle of drugs across the border. The lashes, it occurred to Childress later, were "Christlike."



RICHARD MISRACH / FRAENKEL GALLERY / MARC SELWYN FINE ART / PACE

"I knew things were messed up as I was doing them," a former Border Patrol officer said. "But I was justifying it."

As Childress transported the man with the broken leg to the Border Patrol station, it struck him that he was about to send someone many people would consider a "model immigrant" to potential doom. Nevertheless, he offloaded the man in the station's gated sally port and handed him over to a colleague to be processed for deportation, just as he had done countless times before. This, after all, was the job.

I first heard of Childress in the fall of 2018, when reading an article that he wrote for the *Daily Beast* titled "Why I Quit the Border Patrol." "I ultimately realized that I was putting people in cages for non-violent offenses, something I opposed in every other area of the law," he wrote. "I was impeding the movement of people when I wanted to be able to move freely around the world. I was enforcing the rules of a game I had won simply by being born on the right side of a line."

Reading Childress's account was like looking in a rearview mirror. I had quit the Border Patrol for similar reasons in 2012, after nearly four years as an agent, and had spent the next phase of my life trying to make sense of my participation in the militarized violence of immigration enforcement, working as a barista and a bartender while attending school to become a writer and a teacher. Childress's departure from the Border Patrol came shortly after the implementation of Donald Trump's "zero-tolerance policy," under which parents were separated from their children at the border, sparking a national uproar. At the time, it was possible to believe that agents' understanding of their work might be changing.

That summer, more than a dozen Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents signed a letter to the Secretary of Homeland Security, Kirstjen Nielsen, calling for the agency to be disbanded. In July of 2019, Jenn Budd, who had resigned from the Border Patrol nearly two decades earlier, wrote an "Open Letter from an Ex-Border Patrol Agent," calling on current agents to demand change or quit in protest of the immoral orders that they were being asked to carry out. The following year, Wesley Farris, a high-ranking member of the Border Patrol's notoriously hardline union, spoke out against the zero-tolerance policy, telling PBS's "Frontline" that separating children from their parents "was the most horrible thing I've ever done." But remarkably few agents followed in Childress's footsteps; Farris, for example, refused to participate in separations but did not quit, asking his supervisor to assign him elsewhere instead.

Much of the outcry stirred by the harsh policies of the first Trump Administration was quelled by Joe Biden's promise of a more measured approach. His Presidency saw a record increase in migrant encounters at the border, a fact that is often attributed to lax enforcement. In fact, the Biden Administration left several of Trump's restrictionist policies in place, and detentions at the border increased twelvefold while total removals tripled. Still, there was a feeling among immigration agents that they were being shackled by the new Administration. By 2024, the Border Patrol had lost a quarter of its workforce, with many longtime agents opting for early retirement. They often blamed the President. "Under Biden, things are the worst they have ever been by far," one agent told the Washington *Examiner*, adding, "Agents are afraid of ending up on the news for doing their job or getting in trouble for doing their job. There is no morale."

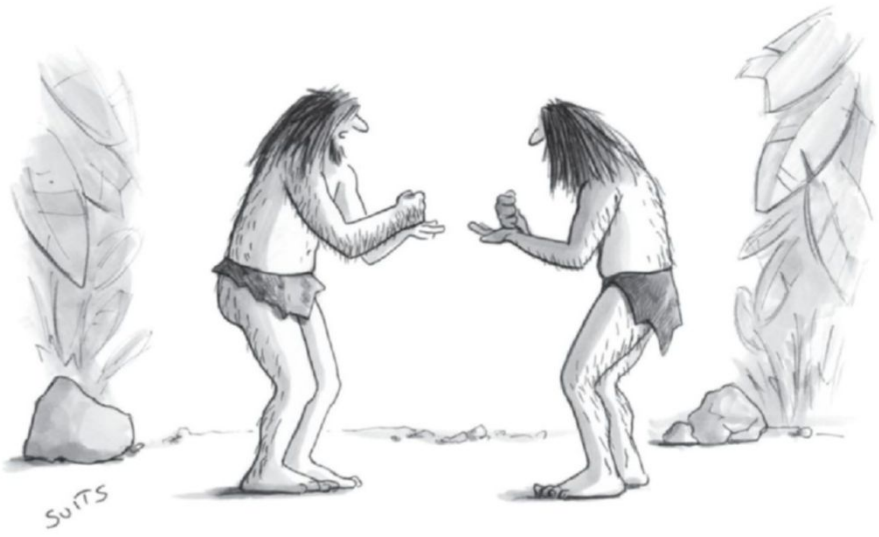
With Trump back in the White House, many agents now regard the Administration as once again on their side. But the demands of meeting its overarching goal—deporting a million people a year, per Trump's top domestic-policy adviser, Stephen Miller—have led to a new form of strain. In 2025, *The Atlantic* reported that ICE's workforce "has never been so miserable." Employees have become burned out and morally conflicted as their focus has shifted from pursuing drug smugglers and human traffickers to apprehending asylum seekers in courthouses and arresting day laborers at their worksites. Another agent said that he was contemplating quitting rather than continuing to spend his days "arresting gardeners."

In early 2026, after the murders of Renee Good and Alex Pretti during Operation Metro Surge, in Minneapolis, the journalist Ken Klippenstein reported that many immigration agents were "getting seriously paranoid" about the public backlash to the shootings. The operation was so unpopular with the rank and file that Border Patrol and ICE struggled to find personnel for the deployment. By July, morale among immigration officers had dipped below its nadir during the Biden Administration, with agents now complaining of being overextended, inundated with novice recruits, and undermined by inflammatory rhetoric from on high. Agents said that they had previously found motivation in their jobs by "being able to stop bad people and narcotics from coming in," and expressed frustration that the Administration's political posturing was distracting from their duty to "protect the public" and to focus on "the very worst of the worst."

The sociologist Irene Vega, in her 2025 book "Bordering on Indifference," draws on a series of interviews with Border Patrol and ICE agents to analyze the "moral economy" of the immigration-enforcement workforce. From the moment agents arrive at the federal law-enforcement academy, she writes, they "are trained and socialized as police officers, and taught that their raison d'être is to protect America by preventing the entrance and executing the removal of noncitizens deemed unwanted by the state." The inherently bureaucratic nature of enforcing immigration law has always been at odds with the paramilitary image that is sold to most recruits. Agents prepare for violent criminal encounters and cultivate a "warrior mentality" despite the fact that they are most often, as Vega writes, "at war with an enemy that does not fight back."

Many agents who have quit for moral reasons cite this tension. In a 2019 article for *The American Scholar*, Brendan Lenihan, a former Border Patrol agent, wrote, "The federal government taught me how to shoot an assault rifle from a moving vehicle and how to fast-rope from a hovering helicopter, but never did anyone explain how to go home at the end of a shift and forget about the migrants I'd apprehended and their stories." As with Childress, the accumulation of nonthreatening encounters eventually made his job untenable. "I left the Border Patrol because I was exhausted by the tragic stories," he wrote, "and because the more I saw, the less affected I was by events that had once seemed shocking."

How is it, then, that so few agents



"Rock, banana leaf, teeth."

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seem to arrive at this moral breaking point? Nearly two-thirds of Americans disapprove of the Trump Administration's immigration crackdown. It has become customary for agents to mask their faces from public view—D.H.S. maintains that this is to prevent doxing, but it is also emblematic of a growing perception of this work as shameful. In off-duty social situations, agents often obscure what they do to avoid awkwardness and scorn, even hiding the nature of their employment on dating apps. "We can't always support what happens just because it's one of us," a Border Patrol agent had told a private group chat in the wake of Pretti's killing. And yet, even as their work has grown increasingly cruel, there has been no exodus of agents who reject it.

Last spring, I began reaching out to my former co-workers to hear about their recent experiences in the job. The first who agreed to speak with me, an agent who now works for ICE, suggested that we meet at a diner in Arizona. It had been years since we'd seen each other; in greeting, we clasped hands and embraced. Over coffee, we talked about our families, and he asked about my life as a university professor. Gradually, our conversation turned to our old colleagues. He caught me up on who was still in the Border Patrol, who had transferred to the Canadian border, and who, like him, had gone to work for ICE. Many of my former co-workers, I learned, had become fathers; others had succumbed to alcoholism. A few, he told me, had died by suicide.

Eventually, I asked about his work. As he saw it, morale was good, far better than under Biden—his office had more resources and had expanded with new hires, many of whom had backgrounds in law enforcement and were hard workers. There were caveats, of course. He did not like being sent to arrest people at courthouses during immigration and asylum hearings, which felt like a trick. He thought that it had been a bad idea to send border agents to Minneapolis, since they were accustomed to patrolling barren deserts, "where everybody is an illegal," and not trained to police the population of an inner city. Something was bound to go wrong, he said.

But he quickly shrugged off any misgivings. The politicized nature of the work was unavoidable. He'd learned to take it in stride long ago. Often, when he was processing someone for removal, the person would sit across from him and begin to recount why they had come to the U.S. Maybe they had family here, maybe they even had kids. Everyone has a story, he said, but it was his job to tell them, "Look, I understand. But you can't be here."

In the weeks that followed, I connected with more former co-workers. One, a fellow-Latino whom I'd always known to be sensitive in his treatment of migrants, told me that he "agreed with the mission but not the tactics." An agent who was still working at the southern border said that, in recent years, ICE agents have become increasingly hostile toward the people they are arresting. "The growth in abuse of rank and authority has become so distorted that due process no longer exists," he told me, adding that standards of agent accountability had reached new lows.

Despite their qualms, none of the agents I spoke to—many of whom were nearly eligible for retirement—disagreed with current policies strongly enough to leave. But one of them mentioned Aaron Veckey, a former agent who, in 2024, gave a series of interviews to the right-wing media personality James O'Keefe. While in the patrol, Veckey had raised concerns about detention conditions with his superiors, who repeatedly dismissed the issue. He filed a whistle-blower complaint with the U.S. Office of Special Counsel and soon received a cease-and-desist order for "reporting sensitive information outside of Border Patrol," a charge he was cleared of after an internal investigation. With O'Keefe, he spoke of the "dogma of apathy" that prevailed among agents and compared the treatment of migrants at his station to the torture at Abu Ghraib.

As far as I know, Veckey, who was then less than a year from retirement, is the only non-anonymous active-duty agent to publicly blow the whistle on the agency's inhumane treatment of migrants. Over the phone, he described images from the peak of asylum-seeker arrivals, in 2023 and 2024, that continued to haunt him. As many as six hundred migrants were detained outdoors without shade in his station's parking lot and sally port, where temperatures reached a hundred and fifteen degrees in the summer and dipped below freezing in winter. He recalled a night when he found sixty migrants piled on top of one another for warmth. Another agent had shown him a photo of a half-dozen migrants jammed in a porta-potty to share body heat. Despite the freezing temperatures, agents confiscated the migrants' coats and refused to give them blankets. Veckey remembered

being ordered to remove jackets from breast-feeding mothers.

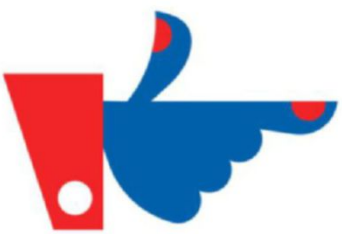
The conditions that Veckey described mirror those which have been reported at temporary ICE facilities during Trump's second term. In Chicago, hundreds of migrants were held for three or more days in facilities not meant for overnight detention; at the Mesa airport, in Arizona, more than seven hundred people were crowded into a deportation staging facility with a maximum capacity of two hundred and three. In downtown Manhattan, as many as eighty-six people were crammed for three or more days at a time into a temporary holding room on the tenth floor of 26 Federal Plaza. It was one of four immigration-detention spaces at the courthouse, which are designed to hold no more than twenty-two people combined. The Washington *Post* called the room "a closet of humanity that smelled of sweat, urine and feces."

"Not everyone felt the same way about how people were being treated," Veckey told me. "But a lot of people did. A lot of agents looked around, like, 'This is crazy. This is fucking horrifying.'" Others, however, were downright malicious. "There was a lot of petty abuse going on," he said. "They were relishing treating these people like shit, throwing their phones away for no reason, not giving them water." One day, while taking a family into custody near the border wall, Veckey watched a co-worker snatch a bowl of porridge from a mother who was shooing away a nearby street dog as she attempted to feed her infant. "That's my fucking dog," the agent sneered, taking the bowl from the woman and setting it down in front of the stray. Veckey's heart sank. "I just wanted to throw up," he told me. Finally, he intervened: "All I could muster up was 'Nah bro, we ain't doing that shit.'"

Veckey was also alarmed that other agents refused to stand alongside him after he filed his complaint. "Nobody would join me," he told me. "The best Christian men I know at that station all had their excuses." In his interview with O'Keefe, he said it was "one of the biggest pains in my career to know that so many good men are sitting on the sidelines on this." For the better part of two years, he urged his co-workers to file their own reports, but none did. "I told all these guys, 'Just call this lawyer. You can do it anonymously,'" Veckey told me. "But, nah, they won't do it. They won't do it. The guys just won't fucking do it."

The brutality of American immigration enforcement is nothing new. The U.S. Border Patrol was created with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, a piece of legislation championed by nativist politicians and self-professed eugenicists. The act, which imposed strict quotas on legal migration from Europe and banned migration from Asia altogether, exempted Mexico to appease U.S. agricultural interests and created the Border Patrol to police crossings and to insure that workers left the U.S. after the harvests. Early agents were often former enforcers of the Chinese Exclusion Act—"Chinese Inspectors" and "Mounted Guards"—and ex-Texas Rangers, who'd become notorious during the previous decade for terrorizing borderland Mexicans in a lynching campaign known as La Matanza. Many, too, were active members of the Ku Klux Klan.

According to the historian Greg Grandin, the Border Patrol in its earliest years was a "cult of brutality" that transformed the act of border crossing into "a ritual of abuse." Migrants were required to pay entrance fees, take literacy tests, and submit to delousing protocols, which meant stripping naked and being doused with kerosene, gasoline, or DDT. Their clothes and other belongings were fumigated with Zyklon B, a cyanide-based pesticide later used in Nazi gas chambers.



Five years after the creation of the Border Patrol, Senator Coleman Blease, an outspoken proponent of segregation and lynching, successfully led an effort to pass the Undesirable Aliens Act of 1929, which made crossing the border without authorization a criminal offense. By 1954, the agency was large enough to launch Operation Wetback, a mass-deportation campaign set in motion by the Eisenhower Administration that mobilized what the Los Angeles *Times* described as "an army of border patrolmen complete with jeeps, trucks and seven aircraft" in an "all-out war to hurl tens of thousands of Mexican wetbacks into Mexico."

The operation, now understood to be the largest such effort in U.S. history, has been enthusiastically invoked by President Trump. The methods of removal were indisputably harrowing. Deportees were placed in concentration camps and packed onto buses, trains, planes, and cargo boats for transport to the interior of Mexico, enduring conditions subsequently described in reports to Congress as akin to those aboard an "eighteenth-century slave ship." One roundup, conducted in hundred-and-twelve-degree heat, resulted in eighty-eight deaths.

In the 1983 book "The Tarnished Door," the investigative reporter John Crewdson detailed a litany of abusive tactics employed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the predecessor of ICE and C.B.P., including handcuffing migrants to moving cars, stealing their valuables, extorting them for sex and money, and pushing them off cliffs and then disguising their deaths as accidents. Crewdson described the agency as "shot through with nepotism, incompetence, corruption, and brutality" and recounted incidents of "men with drawn guns knocking on bedroom windows, shining flashlights on couples in bed, climbing in windows and barging through doors without permission, and taking occupants (usually aliens, sometimes citizens) away in various stages of undress." Establishing total control of the border and immigration, he concluded, could never be achieved "short of the establishment of a police state."

After 9/11, the war on terror wedded immigration enforcement to national security. The I.N.S. was dissolved, and its workforce was split across three agencies under the newly formed Department of Homeland Security: ICE, the Border Patrol, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Along with the bureaucratic reshuffling came a surge in funding and recruitment. Veterans of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, in particular, found post-deployment work in the new enforcement apparatus. In many

cases, they were using the same military equipment and technology that they'd used in the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Ever since, the border-industrial complex has thrived on the narrative that immigration is dangerous and out of control. But agents themselves have balked at the characterization. In a 2018 op-ed for the Arizona *Daily Star*, Chris Montoya, a retired Border Patrol agent, pushed back against agency claims of having "the most frequently assaulted and most frequently injured" federal law-enforcement officers as "outlandish," citing data that U.S. marshals and personnel at the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the National Park Service faced more attacks. Border Patrol agents, he concluded, "enjoy one of the safest law enforcement jobs in America."

Montoya's article was published in response to the killing of José Antonio Elena Rodríguez, a Mexican sixteen-year-old who was shot ten times in the back by an agent who claimed that he feared for his life after rocks were thrown at him over the border wall. The agent in the case was eventually acquitted of charges of second-degree murder and manslaughter. D.H.S. officers remained largely silent about the incident. James Tomsheck, the former head of internal affairs for the Border Patrol, who was forced out of his job in 2014, alleged a culture of rampant impunity and corruption, saying that very few agents are willing to publicly voice complaints. There was, he said, "a clear understanding on the part of the rank and file in the Border Patrol that if they should engage in whistleblower activities, or do anything to promote transparency, that they would be retaliated against in a way that would likely end their career."

Perhaps the most salient factor in this silence is agents' persistent belief that they are simply enforcing the law. "Conflating legality with morality is how agents can face the human suffering produced by immigration law and retain a sense of rightness," Irene Vega writes. Most of the agents she interviewed maintained that the laws they were enforcing were just, even if their interactions with vulnerable migrants often gave them pause. One agent confessed that, to bury her emotions, she would recite something like a personal mantra. "This is your job," she often told herself. "You're just doing what's legal."

Joshua Childress and I met on a bright spring morning in a Phoenix café not far from his home. The café was owned by Greek immigrants, he told me, and he'd heard about it at the Eastern Orthodox church where he worshipped and worked as a handyman. We ordered freddo espressos and soon began sharing stories of the low-level abuse and malfeasance we had witnessed in the patrol. Childress recalled how senior agents insinuated that trainees could mount searches and make arrests based on little more than a gut feeling, how a perceived aggression could be used to justify almost any use of force, and how the word of agents was almost always trusted over the testimony of the people they apprehended. "I knew things were messed up as I was doing them, as I was learning them," Childress told me. "But I was justifying it. You learn during training how to word things so it doesn't sound like you're doing what you're actually doing."

The Border Patrol began implementing Trump's zero-tolerance policy in May of 2018. "I kind of wish I had planted my flag at that point and said, 'No, no more,'" Childress told me. But his wife had recently lost her job, and the couple had twin boys starting at a new school. They decided to delay his resignation, and he stayed on for several more months. Driving in and out of the parking lot each day, he noticed that many of his colleagues' vehicles had DON'T TREAD ON ME bumper stickers. Childress recalled thinking, *They don't realize they're the boot.* In the end, he said, "it wasn't so much that I changed my mind as I started to be honest with myself."

When I asked Childress why he thought more agents didn't quit, he quoted Upton Sinclair: "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it." Indeed, in many ways, there has never been a more lucrative time to be an immigration agent or a more costly time to quit. As part of Trump's hiring push, new recruits enjoy up to fifty thousand dollars in signing bonuses on top of starting pay that ranges from sixty to ninety thousand dollars. Agents who stay on earn tens of thousands in retention bonuses, and those who rejoin after retirement can receive pension pay along with their salary. Most ICE and Border Patrol agents can expect to make about a hundred thousand dollars after just three years in the job, with many earning nearly two hundred thousand a year by the time they retire.

Especially in border regions, where the median household income is less than fifty thousand dollars, many Latinos see these jobs as one of the best routes to upward mobility. A former colleague confessed that he has long considered leaving and tried for years to lay the groundwork for an exit, even returning to school to earn a master's degree. "I would have one hundred per cent bounced if I didn't have a child," he told me. Another agent I spoke to compared the job to "golden handcuffs."

The day Childress finally mustered the courage to ask his superiors how to quit, he was met with bafflement. They had never heard of an agent quitting. Childress had no safety net and no backup plan. He found a job doing maintenance for an apartment complex, began publishing think pieces on the side, and made occasional appearances on libertarian-leaning podcasts. In one of Childress's interviews, the host, Thaddeus Russell, drove home the reality of his choice. He'd just gone from making more than a hundred thousand dollars a year to competing for the same kind of trade jobs sought by the migrants he had been arresting. "You took a tumble in terms of your class status," Russell told him.

When I asked how Childress viewed the decision now, nearly a decade later, he leaned back in his chair and shrugged. "I sleep good at night," he said.

What should be expected of agents who have qualms about their work? According to Bernardo Zacka, a political-science professor at M.I.T., the question misses the larger issue. In a conversation with *Vox* about why Border Patrol agents obey immoral orders, he warned against placing the moral onus on individuals over institutions. "The problem is that we put people in situations where they must either act immorally or act heroically," he said. "That's a recipe for disaster."

To Zacka, immigration enforcement is distinct from other bureaucratic func-

tions in that it requires agents to directly intervene in people's daily lives. "You know you are separating children from their parents—you can see the tears and hear the screams," he said. "It's not that bureaucracy shields you from experiencing morally agonizing situations, but that it exposes you to them so frequently that you must develop psychological coping mechanisms that reduce the strain." Agents asked to implement new enforcement policies might be outraged at first, he continued, but "how long can you go on living with yourself as someone who routinely does morally repugnant acts?"

According to Vega, one of the primary ways agents rationalize what they do is through denial. They downplay the suffering they cause migrants, minimizing arrest and detention as mere inconveniences or casting them as actually helpful for migrants in the long run. They insist on their own powerlessness, regarding themselves as witnesses to, not architects of, the policies they enforce, and blame migrants for their suffering, contending that they "put themselves in that situation" by violating the law.

Central to such denials is an all-encompassing dehumanization of migrants. Officers are acculturated to see migrants as entirely unlike them, despite the fact that more than half of Border Patrol's twenty-one thousand agents and nearly a third of ICE's twenty-two thousand agents are Latinos, many only a generation or two removed from their own family's migration. They come to think of migrants and asylum seekers as potential gangsters, rapists, or petty criminals, whose asylum claims are almost always suspect, their stories exaggerated to take advantage of the freedoms and generosity of the state.

It's one thing to theorize about this dehumanization but something else to hear it plainly acknowledged by the people enacting it. One former Latino colleague who still works as an agent told me that, at the height of COVID, "we were deporting everybody, and there was this mother who coughed on me in front of her kids, and I was like, 'Don't fucking cough on me!'" He shook his head recalling the encounter. "It was like a seesaw battle—I'm yelling, then I'm apologizing, then I'm giving all these people food, then I'm saying, 'Shut the fuck up.'" After a pause, he continued, "You see these people like cattle. So I remember I went home and I cried. You don't want to treat humans like that."

In 2021, I attended an online panel co-hosted by the group Veterans for Peace. The event commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Winter Soldier Investigation, organized by Vietnam Veterans Against the War, in which more than a hundred veterans spoke publicly about war crimes they had witnessed or participated in. At the time of the panel, Veterans for Peace was connecting the experiences of antiwar veterans with national conversations around police brutality in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd and the long history of racial violence that preceded it.

Jan Barry, a co-founder of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, has made the point that there are now established pathways for antiwar veterans to speak out and that no similar tradition exists for dissenters within law enforcement. And yet, the more I learned about Barry's movement, the more I imagined the possibility of a similar community of former immigration agents. There are, of course, obvious differences between soldiers and agents, for whom a readiness to kill on behalf of the state is generally understood to be a more distant prospect. But the lethality of deportation, an agent's primary tool for punishment, deserves recasting.

Last year was ICE's deadliest in two decades, with thirty-two reported deaths in custody, a mortality rate nearly four times greater than that under Biden. This year is on track to surpass even those figures. The A.C.L.U. has tallied a total of three hundred and sixty-seven deaths involving Border Patrol personnel since 2010, and, according to the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration, nearly seven thousand people have died or gone missing while crossing the U.S.-Mexico border since 2014. (Most experts agree that the actual number is likely far higher.) Being returned to their native country can have fatal consequences for migrants, too. In 2020, a study by Human Rights Watch found that at least a hundred and thirty-eight of the more than one hundred thousand Salvadorans deported from the U.S. between 2013 and 2019 had died upon returning to El Salvador.

Brittany DeBarros is the organizing director of About Face: Veterans Against the War, which she describes as a support network for post-9/11 veterans who were "disturbed by the gap between what they'd witnessed and what the American people were being told." About Face offers veterans a way to navigate shame, guilt, and rage by "standing in the truth of the harm you've done," something that DeBarros, a veteran herself, found liberating. The existence of such groups creates what political scientists call a permission structure: a framework that offers people an



"I told you they wouldn't think you were Winnie the Pooh."

opening to change their mind or their behavior and to embrace new, or deeply buried, ideals. In About Face, veterans find community in the shared experience and morals that caused them to reject the systems in which they once perpetuated suffering.

I have long believed that there is a kind of cosmic coin that links border agents and migrants. Just as many soldiers speak of being forever tied to the lives they have taken in combat, I consider myself to be eternally linked to the people I helped capture and deport, and to the people who died trying to evade me. But when I asked former agents about the possibility of forming a group like About Face, most of them reacted with apprehension. There was confusion over what such a group would even be: a support group? An advocacy group? A resource for current agents to find alternative employment?

I had no answers to these questions. Each of us had quit without a roadmap, led only by our own conscience—and conscience, as defined by Hannah Arendt in these pages, is inherently unpolitical. "The fear of being alone and having to face oneself can be a very effective dissuader from wrongdoing," Arendt writes. "But this fear, by its very nature, is unpersuasive of others." There is a difference, she argued, between "conscientious objectors," who act privately to keep their hands clean, and "civil disobedients," who act publicly and therefore become "bound together by their decision to take a stand."

Without coming together, I realized, former agents like me were leaving little sign for others to follow.

As the heat of summer began to settle over the Arizona desert, I reunited with Joshua Childress for a beer at a dark English-style pub. Ever since our last meeting, he told me, "all these things just keep popping up." He added, "I never think about it otherwise."

Of the few agents I know who have quit on moral grounds, Childress is the only one who did so publicly, speaking to the press within weeks of his resignation. He told me that he sometimes questioned the manner of his departure, whether everything he'd said and written had reached only those already inclined to agree with him. "I don't know that I've changed a single mind," he said. At times, he wondered if he might have made more of an impact by staying in his job and trying "a little harder to be that beacon of light in the darkness, to be that good example."

His comments brought to mind a friend who works in another branch of D.H.S.—the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services—which oversees asylum, naturalization, and citizenship applications. Under Trump, the agency rebranded its immigration officers as "homeland defenders," which recently departed officials have said is part of a "strategic demoralization and dismantling of the agency." (A similar overhaul has been taking place in the Department of Justice, where immigration judges are now commonly referred to as "deportation judges" and those perceived to be granting asylum too freely are fired.) Amid all the turmoil, my friend has persisted. "I don't know if it's something we just have to endure, or if being in the right position at the right time in history is going to give us an opportunity to do something meaningful," he told me.

Such thoughts raise the question of whether enforcement agents and bureaucrats of good conscience who leave their posts are only helping to fulfill the Trump White House's vision for a hollowed-out, even more violent immigration system. In other words, should lone dissenters stay and carry out orders with as much humanity and subversive resistance as possible, or should they abandon the institution to its cruel designs? The apparent dichotomy fails to account for a third option: that agents, once they leave, might work to change the terms under which the system still functions.

At the pub, Childress and I spoke briefly about ideas of reconciliation and national reckoning, trying to parse where our own actions fit within a larger whole. I explained how I found some solace in taking university students to the border, in working alongside migrant-aid groups, and in visiting asylum seekers in detention. Childress asked if I was religious, and if I thought of these acts as something like repentance. I told him that I wasn't, and that I understood them to be more like restitution—even though I knew whatever I was trying to redress could never be fully restored.

Childress nodded. He told me that he had recently discussed the very same thing with his priest, wondering how best to atone for the violence he'd participated in. I asked about his church, and he told me that he had been helping with a major renovation project, in which the walls and domes of the sanctuary were being painted with Eastern Orthodox iconography. I was intrigued. As a teen-ager, I had travelled in Eastern Europe and Turkey and seen the painted caves and monasteries of early Christians, who often practiced their faith in secret. Hearing this, he asked if I would like to see the paintings—it was after hours, but he had the keys to the building.

The church was a few miles down the road, and I trailed his car much in the same way, I briefly thought, that I used to caravan behind fellow-agents as we drove down to the border at the beginning of a shift. I pulled up alongside his vehicle in the empty parking lot and followed him through the door into the narthex, standing alone in the dark foyer as he left to turn on the lights. When he reappeared, he crossed himself before entering the nave, gesturing at the gallery of angels and saints above us, their heads ringed with golden halos. He explained that the icons had been painted in Greece to match the exact measurements of the church before being sent across the ocean. He led me to a panel along the wall that depicted St. Kassiani, the hymnographer, and St. Romanos, the melodist, showing me how he had helped paint the colored border.

Before leaving, Childress clapped his hands, demonstrating the resonance of the space, and described the echoing chants that filled it each Sunday. He invited me to attend a service whenever I wanted, promising that he wouldn't try to convert me.

A few weeks later, I walked back into the narthex, which was now filled with daylight and brimming with people. I passed the parishioners and found Childress standing near the aisle, a place saved for me beside him. Chanting in multiple languages filled the room and reverberated all around, the voices of the cantors at the *kliros* blending with the voices of the collective. The rising and falling of the ancient sound settled over me like a veil. I looked at Childress, standing in the sanctuary he had helped adorn. He started to sing. ♦



COMMON SCAMS TO AVOID

BY JACK HANDEY

Fake-Grandpa Scam
The doorbell rings, and a man who claims to be your grandpa is standing there. He says that you invited him to dinner. He's holding a box of candy. He looks and smells like your grandpa, but something seems "off." Grab the candy and yell, "Nice try, Gramps!," and slam the door. If he keeps ringing the doorbell, call the police. Later, you remember that you did invite him to dinner, but, still, it was probably a scam.

"Bridge Out" Scam
You're driving along and suddenly there's a barricade and a "Bridge Out" sign. That's funny; it wasn't there before. It looks real—of course it does. Somehow the scammers make money by getting you to turn around and go back. Drive around the barricade.

Listening Scam
An old friend calls you up and says he wants to meet you for a few beers. You're leery, but you go. It's a mistake. He's getting a divorce, and spends two hours telling you how he doesn't know what he's going to do. Is there any way you can get those two hours back? You can try, but you're probably out of luck.

Tennis-Ball Scam
You take your dog to the park and get out a tennis ball. Your dog jumps up and down, urging you to throw the ball. Against your better instincts, you throw the ball—and immediately realize you've been scammed. Even if the dog brings the ball back, it's just a setup to scam you again and again. Dogs often prey on old people and single people, because they know they're lonely. Instead of getting a dog, get a teen-ager, as the teen-ager will not get excited by the ball and doesn't care if you throw it or not.

"Help Wanted" Scam
You walk by a sign that says "Help Wanted." You're in a good mood, so you walk in and offer to help. But it's a trick! They want to hire you for a job. The next thing you know you're mopping the floor and watching the clock for quitting time.

Pretty-Woman Scam
You meet a woman online. A lot of her words are misspelled, but you let it go. She e-mails a photo of herself, and she looks young and pretty. She offers to meet you at the park for a game of tennis. She asks you to bring a pack of tennis balls. When you show up, it's not a pretty young woman but your dog! He grabs the tennis balls and runs off.

Free-Ticket Scam
A friend offers to give you a box-seat ticket to a Yankees game. Somehow he "can't go." What's the catch—how much does it cost? He says there's no catch, it's free. Then he ups the allure by saying it's some sort of championship game. You go to the game, but it's not a very good game, and the Yankees lose. Some friend!

Bank Scam
A guy you knew in high school calls and says he's going to rob a bank and wants you to drive the getaway car. You don't really know him that well, but you say O.K. The robbery is a success and you get away. When you ask him for your share, he says, "Here's your share," and pulls out a gun. You say, "That's not my share, that's a gun." After a few minutes of him pointing the gun at you, you realize you've been scammed.

Jury-Duty Scam
The scammers send you a notice that you skipped jury duty and owe a big fine. But you check the dates, and it turns out you were in the courtroom that day, because you were on trial.

Fake-Kidnapping Scam
You get kidnapped and call your grandfather. You tell him the kidnappers won't let you go unless he puts a thousand dollars in a box and leaves it at a certain street corner. He agrees and does it. The next morning, you realize that you were just really drunk and got tangled up in some ropes and thought you were kidnapped. You and Grandpa go to the street corner, but the box with the money is gone. Hey, maybe it was a scam! ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

ANNALS OF MATHEMATICS

PROOF OF CONCEPT

The year that artificial intelligence took over solving problems.

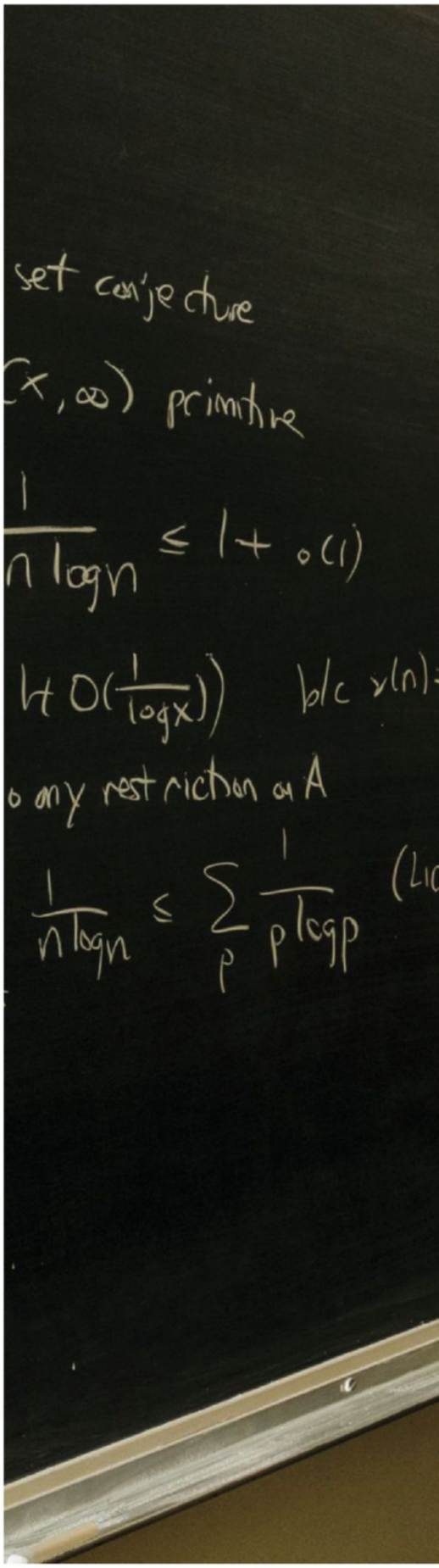
BY RIVKA GALCHEN

A mathematician is a machine for turning coffee into theorems. This was a line often invoked by the Hungarian mathematician Paul Erdős, who was fuelled by coffee and amphetamines, slept little, travelled near-constantly, never married or had children, and published almost fifteen hundred papers in his lifetime, in collaboration with hundreds of other mathematicians. But Erdős was, in most ways, not machinelike. He called lecturing in mathematics "preaching," woke friends at odd hours by asking, "Is your brain open?," wore only silk underclothing on account of his sensitive skin, and claimed not to have learned how to butter toast until he was twenty-one. He gave away most of his earnings to charitable causes and to young mathematicians in need of funds for their education, and he offered bounties (sometimes ten dollars, sometimes a thousand) for solutions to mathematical problems he'd proposed. Mathematics was his life. Mathematicians were his family. It has been said that, even above his remarkable contributions to the mathematical literature, he helped the discipline most profoundly by turning people who might otherwise have become hedge-fund managers or F.B.I. agents or lost souls into mathematicians. When he died, in 1996, at the age of eighty-three, he left behind about a thousand problems. Solving an Erdős problem is a great honor, as is having a low "Erdős number," a term that describes how many degrees of separation one is from having published work with him.

Terence Tao was ten years old when Erdős visited his home town of Adelaide, Australia, in 1985. Erdős loved children and called them epsilons. Tao, a mathematics prodigy, had started taking college-level courses at age nine. Erdős posed a problem for him and Tao to work on together. A photograph of their meeting, taken by Tao's mother (who had been a math teacher before having kids), shows the young mathematician and the old one deep in thought, hands at chins, looking at the notepad before them. "I wish I remembered more about the encounter," Tao recently said. Erdős later sent the Tao family a note, handwritten on Bell Labs stationery, that, after brief wishes of a good New Year, reiterated the problem they had discussed: "Let $1 \leq a_1 < a_2 < \ldots a_{t_n} \leq n$ be a sequence of integers . . ."

In May of 2023, the mathematician Thomas Bloom began gathering the known remaining unsolved Erdős problems on a website, erdosproblems.com. Their depth and difficulty vary, deliberately. Erdős described some of them as "marshmallows" and others as "acorns." In a talk in February of this year, titled "Machine Assistance and the Future of Research Mathematics," Tao quoted Erdős's characterization of a marshmallow as "a tasty tidbit supplying a few moments of fleeting enjoyment," and of an acorn as "requiring deep and subtle new insights from which a mighty oak can develop."

The role that artificial intelligence will play in research mathematics has been talked about a fair amount in the past five years, and a fearsome, unbounded amount in the past five months. Tao—a professor of mathematics at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a founder, in 2025, of the Foundation for Science and AI Research—has been one of the most prominent voices in this discussion. This is in part because he is a venerated mathematician who won a Fields Medal, the highest honor in the discipline, at age thirty-one; in part because, like Erdős, he is especially collaborative and community-oriented; and in part because he was already thinking seriously and publicly about A.I. when many of his peers still thought, as Tao put it, "Oh, it's a toy, it

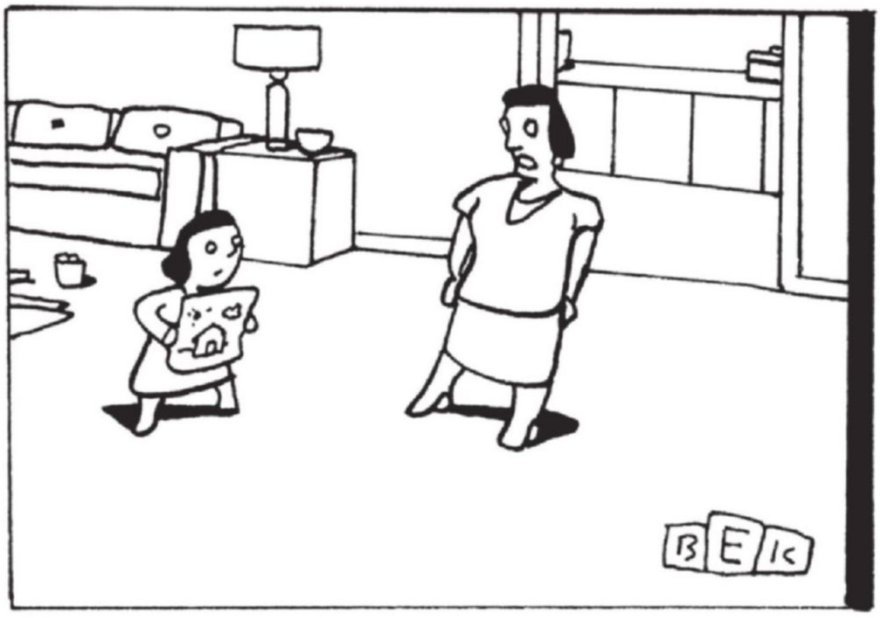


"I have had the strangest week ever in my



life," the revered mathematician Terence Tao said, after OpenAI announced the solution to yet another problem.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN VAN LAU



"It's O.K., but next time I'd like to see you wrestle with a little more self-doubt."

• •

makes so many mistakes, it's never going to be useful." A.I. labs such as Google DeepMind, OpenAI, and Anthropic were trying to demonstrate otherwise. From their perspective, math problems are practical benchmarks to measure the capabilities of their products. Mathematical proofs can be digitized and objectively verified, and the field of mathematics is highly respected. Early on, A.I. tools were conspicuously bad at basic math. When OpenAI's GPT-4 Turbo was asked to count the number of "L's in "lollapalooza," it answered "Five." The tools have since improved dramatically, but even now L.L.M.s find difficult some tasks that we find easy, and vice versa. "The means by which an A.I. solves a problem is just so orthogonal to the way a human solves a problem," Tao said, in a recent lecture. A.I. proofs often devote pages to what would be obvious to an undergraduate, then offer only a few lines on what to a human mathematician is a large, cloudy move.

In 2024, A.I. tools began performing well at the International Mathematical Olympiad, scoring at the silver-medal level and, in 2025, at the gold level. Only top high-school students and a handful of prodigies participate in the I.M.O. (Tao won a bronze at age ten, a silver at age eleven, and a gold the next year. His longtime friend and mathematical collaborator Allen Knutson recalled how an ex-girlfriend who had been on Mexico's I.M.O. team told him about an annoying little kid with a stuffed animal who would come out of the exams saying, "Too easy"—it was Tao.) Then, in early 2026, mathematicians and math hobbyists using A.I. tools started solving some of the more marshmallowy Erdős problems. In January, GPT-5.2 Pro appeared to have solved Erdős Problem #728 largely on its own; Tao and others took on the necessary task of verifying the proof. Then more Erdős problems began to fall. Tao explained that some of these problems had remained unsolved on account of "an attention bottleneck," meaning that no one had given much thought to them; others were problems that had already been solved, but the solutions were not widely known, and the A.I. had effectively retrieved them. But, on May 20th, OpenAI published a proof of Erdős Problem #90, the unit-distance problem, a combinatorics problem that involves arranging points on a plane so that as many pairs as possible are spaced an equal distance apart. This was not a marshmallow. Top-level mathematicians had spent time on it, nudging it forward.

Then, there was the Navier-Stokes existence-and-smoothness problem. The problem has to do with how a set of equations that model the movement of fluids seems to imply solutions with infinite speed, which should be impossible. In 2000, the Clay Mathematics Institute, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, had announced seven Millennium Prize Problems, chosen and formulated by the institute's Scientific Advisory Board, each with a million-dollar award for solving it. The Millennium Prize Problems are acorn problems, and Navier-Stokes was one of them. On September 8th, OpenAI announced that it had solved it. Much of the mathematical community, which was already distressed, tipped over into existential crisis.

"I have had the strangest week ever in my life," Tao declared at the start of a talk he gave three days later, at Caltech. Usually, when lecturing, he appears in a collared shirt, tucked in. At this talk, he wore jeans and a black T-shirt. The shirt featured the Edo-era woodblock print "Under the Wave Off Kanagawa," a famed art work noted for its fractal-like patterning—the wave comprises smaller, similarly shaped waves, which themselves comprise yet smaller ones. "Ordinarily, I would use A.I. and create some fancy version of this," Tao said, gesturing at the bare-bones graphic on the screen behind him. "I used PowerPoint," he admitted, to laughter. He then described the current state of the field. Solutions were being published, often with little explanation or detail, relying on the good will and free labor of mathematicians to verify and illuminate them. A.I.-generated submissions were overwhelming mathematics journals and databases, and the field's genteel ecosystem of people volunteering their time to referee submissions was collapsing under the weight of slop. Sometimes even the person submitting the paper did not understand it. Answers were being found, but, in math, answers are often not very important; the insights and inventions that arise while working toward an answer matter much more. "We have to slow down," Tao said. "It's insane, the pace." During the Q. & A. portion of the talk, an audience member observed that A.I. has thus far been solving problems that already exist. Where did Tao think new problems would come from? *New* problems, Tao said, emerge from

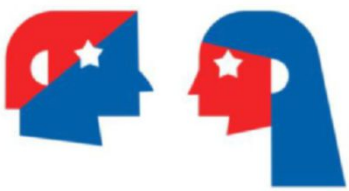
"the slow, deliberative process" of working toward a solution, "and this is what's being destroyed."

In another era of mathematics, which is to say, in April, I visited Tao at his office in the Mathematical Sciences Building at U.C.L.A. The building was connected through a mazelike series of corridors and stairs to Boelter Hall, where, in 1969, the first message was sent on ARPANET, the precursor to the internet. One of the hallways had a telephone booth. Tao's office was spacious and mostly unadorned, with beige carpeting and a beige sofa, six blackboards mounted onto two long walls, and stacks and shelves with hundreds of books bearing titles such as "Advances in Analysis: The Legacy of Elias M. Stein," "Number Theory Volume I: Tools and Diophantine Equations," and "The Arithmetic of Elliptic Curves." Near the light switch, there was a drawing of a toothy monster in a black suit and tie, next to a message in code ("LWKIRLCS," part of it read) written on a sheet of paper. His oldest child had made it for him years ago. "I don't think I remember how to decode it," Tao said. None of his many prizes and honors were on display, but there was a wall hanging—made by the Mathematics Genealogy Project, of North Dakota State University—recording generations upon generations of who had studied under whom.

Tao is slim, wears his dark hair boyishly grown out, and has a gentle and calm demeanor. He is fifty-one but looks a decade younger. He rides a bike to work, and he has several tennis racquets in the corner of his office, though he said that he hasn't really had time to play tennis in years, owing to his proliferating duties. "If you want to profile a mathematician, I'm maybe not a good example," he told me. "I get to do math on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And sometimes on airplanes." He lives with his wife, Laura, their two children, four cats, a dog, and three rabbits. The family had intended to give the oldest rabbit, Spumpkin, away to a friend, because Spumpkin was "traumatized by the traffic" outside their house, Tao said. But that didn't work out, so Spumpkin is still with them, which is O.K.; Spumpkin and the oldest cat are close friends.

Many mathematical geniuses have been as celebrated for their eccentricity as for their work. Erdős is only one of many examples. The eighteenth-century Italian mathematician Maria Agnesi, who wrote an early textbook on calculus, gave away most of her money and abandoned mathematics to devote herself fully to theology. The logician Kurt Gödel, whose incompleteness theorems revealed that no mathematical system could express every mathematical truth, came to believe that doctors had a secret book in which they wrote honestly about medications, that the I.R.S. was after him, and that his friend who had died decades before was still alive in the Soviet Union. John Nash (famous for contributions to game theory), Grigori Perelman (famous for solving the Poincaré conjecture), and Alexander Grothendieck (famous for developing a new foundation for algebraic geometry) all dramatically withdrew from their social spheres. Tao does not fit this tradition. He is very much of the world, which is somewhat surprising, considering that, when he was two years old, he was reportedly found typing out a favorite children's story on his dad's typewriter.

As a kid, Tao imagined that what professional mathematicians did was solve problems assigned to them, sort of like homework. By age sixteen, he was a graduate student in the mathematics department at Princeton University, and still somewhat in the dark about what he was meant to do with his mathematical



imagination. He played a lot of video games, easily completed his coursework, and almost failed the qualifying exam for his doctorate. Not all child prodigies go on to brilliant careers. Tao, however, went on to become one of the most revered mathematicians alive today, praised for his profound contributions to an astonishing range of subjects, from the study of numbers to the analysis of waves—a polymath of math.

The election of Donald Trump for a second term, in 2024, made Tao even busier. Federal funding for U.C.L.A.'s Institute for Pure and Applied Mathematics (IPAM), where he serves as the director of special projects, was frozen, as were National Science Foundation grants that supported his department's research, including his own. And, as the Trump Administration unrolled various anti-immigration orders, students and postdocs had visa troubles. Tao spent many months fund-raising among private donors to support the stipends and T.A. positions relied upon by his graduate students. Some of these donors were hedge funds and banks that had in the past offered him large sums to work for them. He had always declined, "but those connections were useful in that moment," he said.

One of the companies that offered funding to IPAM was OpenAI. Earlier this year, Tao was interviewed alongside an OpenAI executive, Mark Chen, in what the company called a fireside chat. In the interview, Tao expressed both hopes and concerns about A.I. in mathematics; OpenAI later used some of his bullish bits in a promotional video, which featured Tao saying that A.I. is "ready for prime time," and that it will reduce cognitive friction "down to zero." Tao has collaborated with researchers at Google DeepMind, and one of his projects was sponsored by the A.I. startup Math, Inc. For these reasons, among others, he was for a time portrayed as almost uncritically enthusiastic about the role of A.I. in math; in a June article in *Quanta Magazine*, he was described as an "evangelist."

It is true that, for a few years now, Tao has suggested that the chalkboard-dominated field of mathematics might be overdue for change. He has expressed hope that A.I. could help make a "living spreadsheet" of mathematics, which could self-update as new mathematical discoveries are made; he has worked to develop open-source A.I. tools, in addition to helping organize events to encourage a collaborative approach to A.I. In 2024, he started the Equational Theories Project, which involved dozens of professional and amateur mathematicians who, with the assistance of A.I., tried to determine the truth or falsity of about twenty-two million mathematical implications of some forty-five

hundred invented mathematical laws. He has spoken about how A.I. could enable even more large-scale collaborations. He would like mathematics to be able to ask questions more in the tradition of biologists' population studies ("What makes lemur populations rise and fall?") rather than case studies ("What can we say about this particular lemur and from there gain some insight into lemurs in general?").

Recently, though, Tao's muted optimism has given way to alarm. He has begun to speak in praise of cognitive friction, and has described A.I. companies as having "managed to optimize by removing all the humanity out of the process." In his office, he told me, "We have to actively experiment and figure out what works for us. Because otherwise what's going to happen is that the tech companies will release these products—you know, 'Here's my artificial scientist'—and there'll be no competing products." He doesn't advocate that mathematicians avoid using A.I. But, at his lecture at Caltech, he pointed out that the effect of A.I. on math followed what he called nonlinear dynamics. He went on, "Any kind of monotone, one-dimensional thinking—Oh, a little bit of this is good, therefore a lot of it is going to be a lot better—one of the lessons of math is that most systems don't work like that." Human understanding needed to remain central. For example, with a proof written by a human, he noted, "you can talk to that person and say, 'What was your experience? What was your inspiration?' You have some insight into the process. They can give talks. And, years later, they'll still be in the community, and they can pass on their expertise to their students. They contribute to the whole ecosystem of mathematics."

In his office, Tao had compared the crisis that the mathematical community was facing to the transition that cities underwent when the horse and buggy was replaced with the car. "You need parts of the city that are still for pedestrians and parts that make sense for travelling by car. But you can't have the whole city designed to be optimal for cars," he said. "Because no one wants to live in that city." This was an analogy he used often in talks and interviews. In a more recent talk, he recalled his reliance on the analogy with a slide demarcating lanes for pedestrians and ones for automobiles. "This is where we want to go," he said. "But, unfortunately, this is sort of where we are now—" He advanced to a slide that depicted people running away in terror from what appeared to be autonomous machines.

Much of the math we learn as kids is mechanical, which may be why mathematics is sometimes misperceived as an unimaginative field. A more accurate understanding might come from recalling that Charles Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, was a professional mathematician. In some ways, the writing of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" resembles mathematical research. Mechanical calculation, in this analogy, is the basics of composition: spelling, subject-verb agreement. But, in order to explore logic and whimsy and wonder and paradox, Carroll invented characters like the White Rabbit, the Cheshire Cat, and the Queen of Hearts, and situations like the Mad Tea Party and the Caucus Race. These characters and scenes are akin to the objects and techniques mathematicians invent as they explore mathematical ideas. When Andrew Wiles proved Fermat's Last Theorem, more than three hundred and fifty years after its initial postulation, mathematicians were thrilled, but not because of the answer, which wasn't surprising. (No, there are no positive whole numbers such that $a^n + b^n = c^n$ if $n > 2$.) What was wonderful about Wiles's proof was the mathematical techniques he'd developed along the way. That was what advanced mathematics.

But coming up with characters and story lines is challenging—which is probably why it's satisfying. I sat in on a meeting Tao had with his postdoctoral mentee, Iqra Altaf, who was working on a problem in geometric-measure theory. "Mathematically, the news is not good," Altaf said. She went to the chalkboard and began writing out a counterexample to a conjecture she had thought would prove true. "Math is like a video game, or like 'Groundhog Day,'" Tao said. "Every time you die, you come back." En route to failure, you learn something that aids you in the next go-around. He quoted the Russian mathematician Vladimir Arnold, who once said, "Mathematics is the part of physics where experiments are cheap." In another conversation, Tao compared learning mathematics to watching "Emily in Paris," a show that he and his wife enjoyed. "It's completely ridiculous fluff, but it's also fun. You learn the tropes, and you can kind of see how it's going to go," he said. "But if you're just given a synopsis of the plot, like, 'Here's the premise, and this is what happens'—that's not the point." And, if you want to learn how to write your own show, "then it's not helpful at all." Seeing scenes done poorly and done well, watching how plots are resolved even in formulaic shows—that's how you learn to direct your own series. Among the crises that the arrival of A.I. has brought to mathematics, "the most urgent one is, How are we going to train our graduate students?" Tao said. It is a question that he has been asking for several years. The modest-sized problems that graduate students would once have spent months on—learning to think mathematically in the process—can now sometimes be solved by A.I. tools in hours.

On October 9th, Tao gave a talk (another!) hosted by the American Institute of Mathematics. Three days earlier, OpenAI had released three hundred and seventy-two additional results contributing to or solving open problems in mathematics. (OpenAI's statement announcing the results briefly mentioned that four thousand problems had been tried, but that detail didn't get much notice.) Tao started out by explaining that, when he had been invited to give the talk, a year earlier, the title of it had been "Machine Assisted Proof"—that was, in fact, the title on the posters advertising the event—but that "by this point the idea that machines could assist proof was maybe not quite as novel." So he changed the title to "Math 2.0."

Math 1.0—"math up to 2025," Tao said—operated under the basic assumption of "proof scarcity." Proofs were a sort of currency, central to publishing papers, winning prizes, and getting jobs. The landscape had now changed to one of proof abundance, which Tao compared to food abundance, when "you become a bit pickier about what food gets crammed into your mouth." We would soon be living in a vast sea of low-quality A.I. proofs, with mathematicians left to

fish out what was worthwhile. Math 2.0 would follow from figuring out "how to actually integrate A.I. and humans" to "find a new frontier of tasks," only some of which would be problems.

During the Q. & A., a first-year graduate student at Caltech asked Tao what advice he would give to her generation. He hesitated. He blinked several times. He closed his eyes. "Get involved," he said. "In—um—you know, in policy. In general." He paused and then spoke more fluently: "Don't try to pretend A.I. doesn't exist. Actually learn what it can and can't do."

The mathematician Geordie Williamson, of the University of Sydney, in Australia, described one A.I.-assisted solution to me as "like this beautiful thing for the whole math community" and another as "like the weed killer Roundup being sprayed on a garden." Both results were published by Levent Alpöge, a mathematician at Anthropic. The beautiful thing concerned an eighty-seven-year-old problem, the Jacobian conjecture. We can think of the problem as having to do with the possibility of a one-to-one mapping from one shape to another. On July 19th, the day of the Spain-Argentina soccer game, Alpöge posted on X, "hello there the jacobian conjecture is false thanx to my close friend akhil"—a human—"for asking about it and my other close friend fable"—an A.I. model—"for working during the world cup final." Claude Fable 5 had produced a counterexample to the conjecture, much like how an ostrich is a counterexample to the conjecture that all birds can fly. Williamson said, "Within thirty-six hours, mathematicians had kind of understood where the counterexample comes from and why it's natural." A handful of mathematicians, including Tao, explored the proof, came to understand it—a process that I kept hearing mathematicians refer to as proof digestion—and reconstructed the algebraic geometry that underlay it. On July 21st, Tao posted the work on his blog, including the transcript of a conversation he'd had with ChatGPT as he looked into the details. By July 22nd, Semon Rezchikov, of Barnard College, had created a visualization of the counterexample using only high-school-level mathematics. The proof had opened up thinking, not decapitated it.

But then there was Williamson's Roundup story: On August 12th, Alpöge posted again, though it was not immediately clear what the new disclosure was about. "It was this crazy tweet, just a whole sequence of pluses and minuses. It looked like a secret code," Williamson told me. He soon recognized that it was the next in a series of what are called Hadamard matrices. The first few Hadamard matrices had been described in 1867, and the matrices have fascinated mathematicians ever since, with breakthroughs and new insights turning up every couple of decades or so, the most recent in 2004. At a talk not long before, Williamson had been encouraging mathematicians to find the next one. Then there it was, on X. "At first, I was, like, Awesome," Williamson told me. But then he saw that Alpöge had posted more than just the next matrix—"also the one after that, and the one after that, and the one after that," he said. Typically, someone solving this kind of problem would be transparent about the methods used to get there; for years, mathematicians have been sharing their work freely on the open-access website arxiv.org. Such is not the M.O. of the A.I. companies. Anthropic did not release logs showing how the solutions were reached. Williamson said that he felt as if an entire garden of mathematics had been killed. "It was the nightmare scenario, like, 'Here's the answer, it's forty-two.'"

It was less than a month later that OpenAI made its Navier-Stokes announcement. The day before, Tristan Buckmaster, a professor at N.Y.U., posted a statement saying that he and Alpöge, working with the assistance of A.I., had made significant progress toward a solution. OpenAI, which spent millions of dollars' worth of compute to get there first, said that it had taken less than a week. In Buckmaster's statement, he voiced concern that OpenAI had accessed his work (he and Alpöge had used OpenAI's public Codex model, among other L.L.M.s), which the company denied. According to Buckmaster, Sébastien Bubeck, the head of the team at OpenAI that was behind the solution, had offered him authorship of their paper, on the condition that he agree not to include Alpöge. Buckmaster said no. When he threatened to make his interaction



"I think he's coming over to talk to me about a career change."

with OpenAI public, Bubeck apparently responded by asking, "Why would you ruin your career?"

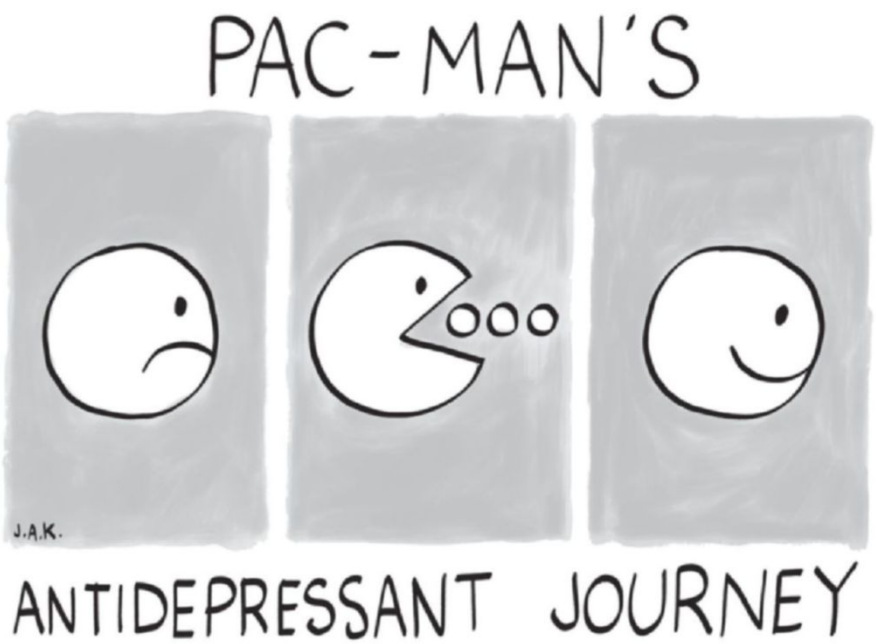
An initial group of twenty-five Fields medallists, Tao among them, responded with an open letter noting that "solving problems is only a tool and proxy for achieving the primary goal of conceptual understanding and insight." Problem-solving and insight were decoupling, it observed. "The letter was correct to call out bad behavior," Williamson said. "But my broader sense is that I don't think mathematicians had been grappling as much as we should have been with the impending reality of A.I., and I think that is somewhat visible in the letter. It's a letter that reflects what was already a reality six months ago."

Socrates is said to have worried that writing would ruin our memories—and Socrates' crowd probably did remember longer stretches of the Odyssey than any of us do. But the Fields letter argued that the use of A.I. was not like merely off-loading the memorization of poems or phone numbers; it was more like off-loading, or bypassing, daydreaming and debating and thinking. It's not that humans will come to know too much too quickly but that they will understand less and less—eventually less than we understand now. "The most precious resources of our profession are students and ideas, and these we nurture with great care," the letter said. Mathematics is a living discipline and an oral tradition, not just a written one. The symbol of the working mathematician is a chalkboard, representing knowledge that can be erased after it's understood because it is now in the mind.

The mathematical community has not reached a consensus on whether OpenAI has actually solved the Navier-Stokes problem, which has not yet been verified by humans. Charlie Fefferman, a professor at Princeton, wrote the description of the Navier-Stokes problem for the Clay Mathematics Institute. "I think it's probably correct," Fefferman told me. The A.I. relied on an approach that had been conceived by his former student Diego Córdoba and Córdoba's former student Luis Martínez-Zoroa. "And so, in addition to whatever other people felt, I felt personal joy at their achievement," Fefferman said.

Fefferman, like Tao, was a child prodigy, an early winner of the Fields Medal, and a professor of mathematics by his early twenties. He is now seventy-seven. I asked him how he would describe what working on a math problem *feels* like. He told me that he had sometimes described it to non-mathematicians as playing chess with the Devil, "but you get to take back moves." The Devil is a much better chess player—"he crushes you again and again." But then you go back to the beginning. You experiment with different approaches. You're still crushed and don't understand why. "But eventually you hit on something," Fefferman said. "The whole time, there's this angel whispering in your ear things like 'No, no, pin his bishop!'" Initially, the angel's voice is too quiet to make out, but it gets louder. "And your ears get better." Until, finally, you win one match. And then you're back at the beginning. "That's something I love about being a mathematician," Fefferman said. "If you have a thousand dumb ideas and one really good one, you're a good mathematician. And that's not true in many walks of life."

Like everyone I spoke to, Fefferman said that no one knows, really, what will happen to mathematics. He sees both pessimistic and optimistic scenarios, and he suspects that the future will consist of a bit of each. In an optimistic scenario, he can envision A.I. broadening the kinds of questions that can be asked. He explained that sometimes you have a line of thinking that feels like it has only a five-per-cent chance of working out. You might say, "I don't want to think about this, since it will take me a lifetime to find out." "That's different from 'O.K., it has a five-per-cent chance of working, and it will take me two days to find out,'" Fefferman said. "I think people will become more courageous and more imaginative and be freed." He said that mathematicians used to need both originality and technical power; he had known a very original mathematician who got lost teaching a freshman course. "I think that A.I. will take over power," Fefferman said. "It's natural for us mathematicians to feel anxiety. But I think there's a chance that A.I. will be a great accelerator of progress, and it will be our job to adjust to the new way of doing math."



"I thought the Fields medallists' letter was valuable," John Urschel, a mathematician at M.I.T., told me. "Though I understand that maybe it doesn't translate well outside of the mathematical community. I saw one person be, like, 'We're getting answers to cancer research too quickly, we must slow down for the sake of the field!'" Urschel is good friends with Alpöge, whom he remembers saying three or four years ago that A.I. was going to end math as they knew it. "I thought

he had lost all sense," Urschel said.

A deep problem in what is called Gaussian elimination has captivated Urschel for years. During the course of a decade, he developed a research protocol that he was confident could solve it—eventually. But, as A.I.-assisted solutions to Erdős problems started going up online, he worried that he was running out of time. "So I began to rush ahead," he said. "I had a postdoc, Rikhav Shah, helping me." Within a week, Shah told Urschel that "he had heard rumors that compute power was being thrown behind problems in Gaussian elimination," and Shah thought that they should consider using A.I. Urschel agreed. "So I paid the two hundred dollars a month or whatever," he said, and they worked with GPT-5.6 Sol and Claude Fable 5.

Urschel walked me through the collaboration with A.I. "So first I asked it, 'Can you solve this?' And it said no, and also that it didn't think what I was telling it was even true," he recalled. "I said, 'O.K., here's this object that has these properties that you didn't believe existed.'" He went on to feed it steps from his research program. The "conversation" went back and forth, with Urschel pushing the A.I. along the axis of his research program, and the A.I. responding in an irksome, sycophantic tone. Urschel directed it to change its tone to be straightforward and honest. Eventually, something "popped out" that was correct but "very, very ugly."

Erdős described proofs that are particularly concise and beautiful—proofs that give you deep insight—as "straight from the Book," by which he meant the Book of God, though he doubted the existence of God, whom he called the S.F., for Supreme Fascist. Erdős's first mathematical publication, at age nineteen, was a proof of Chebyshev's theorem on prime numbers, which had already been proved. But Erdős produced a much simpler proof, one that was succinct and revelatory. A.I. proofs (at least for now) tend to be nothing like straight-from-the-Book proofs. When Urschel looked at the A.I.-assisted proof, he said, "I thought, O.K., we can take this thing and with human work change it into this nice and intuitive thing." Urschel and Shah published their research, including a detailed endnote of which steps in the process were exclusively human-produced and which were assisted by A.I.

Urschel's program of research had brought about novel, important work. Shah would have a substantive publication behind him when seeking jobs. But Urschel did not feel celebratory. "Let me be clear. There was no fun in this for me," he said. "The fun was had before I gave it to this computer program. But talking to the A.I. about it—this is not fun." He recalled, as a kid, falling in love with logic puzzles. What he loved was being in the dark, trying to find his way forward. "The fun part was *not* understanding, and struggling to understand," he said. "Having all the solutions written down is the least fun part."



Mathematics "has been living a bit of a double life," he suggested, and the pressure from A.I. was making that visible. To people outside the discipline, the story is that math is important and that, even at its most abstract, it often ends up leading to all sorts of unexpected applications, like public-key cryptography and G.P.S. "This is the story one tells when one wants grant money," Urschel said. "But this story is not true. And it has never been true." Or, at least, it's mostly not true. Urschel postulated that every mathematician sees himself as being somewhere on a spectrum between scientist and artist. "I would say what I call the more scientist approach is being focussed on trying to push the frontier of things as far as we can as quickly as we can," he told me. "And the artist perspective is, Let me do something beautiful and enjoyable and manipulate these things, and the act of doing this is really, you know, a joyful thing."

Urschel has an unusual background for a mathematician. He played professional football for three years with the Baltimore Ravens, working toward his Ph.D. at M.I.T. at the same time. His wife is a writer for this magazine. I asked him what he planned to do next. "Well, we're gonna get a dog," he said. "And there's still lots of math to do in my area." Some of his students want to work with A.I., which he is O.K. with, and others don't, and he's O.K. with that, too. ("I have two A.I. vegans," he said.)

Tao also told me that the narrative of math as having practical importance was a half-truth, at best. Some of his own research has led to cheaper, faster MRI imaging; most of it has been about curiosity, wonder, and play. He told me a story about the mathematician John Conway, whom he knew at Princeton and whose office was crowded with what were, in essence, puzzles and toys. "I remember once he wanted to learn how to see things in four dimensions," Tao said. "He reasoned that, since our eyes can really only see in two dimensions"—it's the distance between the eyes that produces parallax and lets us see as if our vision were three-dimensional—"he invented this weird periscope thing, a goggle thing with mirrors, so that the parallax would not just be horizontal but also vertical. He thought this would give him a way to visualize in four dimensions." Conway built the device and walked around in it, looking like a mad scientist. "But he said the only thing that it ever gave him was a headache," Tao told me.

Tao never solved the problem that Erdős shared with him in 1985. That was done by Hoi Nguyen and Van Vu, in 2010. But Tao did solve a different famous Erdős problem, one that had been formulated around 1930, known as the Erdős discrepancy problem. It was one of the Hungarian mathematician's favorite problems. He is said to have brought it up often, especially toward the end of his life. It can be thought of as a question about a series of coin flips, continuing on infinitely, and whether that series inevitably becomes "unbalanced" if you look at every second, or third, or any-number-distance entry in it. Another mathematician, James Grime, made the problem more accessible by translating it into a puzzle narrative, involving someone held captive between angry snakes in front of them and a precipitous cliff behind them. The coin flips are steps forward or back, and the question is whether it is possible to survive. You could Google the answer. Or you could play around with the problem first. ♦

DEPT. OF MEDICINE

THE ALZHEIMER'S WARS

A contentious new definition of Alzheimer's could turn millions of people without symptoms into patients.

BY MANVIR SINGH

This July, some ten thousand people descended on London for the Alzheimer's Association International Conference. Another three thousand of us joined virtually. I'm an anthropologist, accustomed to conferences where croissants at coffee breaks count as a luxury. This one opened with six trumpeters dressed as Buckingham Palace guards, followed by dancers who discoed, vogued, and high-kicked through the history of British pop. After the first day's sessions, participants dispersed to parties; at one, singers in sequins belted out covers while someone played an illuminated, transparent violin. One night, the London Eye was lit purple to honor the people in attendance.

The mood matched the spectacle. Joanne Pike, the Alzheimer's Association's president and C.E.O., announced that recent advances had brought the campaign against the disease to a "pivotal moment." Maria Carrillo, its chief science officer, hailed a groundswell of progress.

That optimism followed decades of disappointment. Between 1974 and 2020, the U.S. government spent roughly twenty billion dollars on Alzheimer's research without seeing the approval of a single treatment designed to act on the disease's underlying biology, let alone stop or reverse its course. Today, Alzheimer's afflicts roughly one in nine Americans over sixty-five and, along with related dementias, has been estimated to cost the economy about three-quarters of a trillion dollars a year. In surveys, it ranks with cancer as the disease people fear most.

That's understandable. Alzheimer's dismantles the self by degrees. It typically starts by robbing patients of recent memories—conversations they just had, where they put important objects—before corroding the basic functions of adult independence, from paying bills to managing medications. Eventually, it leaves patients unable to speak, move, swallow, or recognize close relatives. "We estimate a man by how much he remembers," Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, about a decade before an Alzheimer's-like dementia left him scarcely able to write his name.

But at the conference many seemed to think that the disease could soon join scurvy and smallpox in the annals of yesterday's afflictions. That excitement is widely shared. In June, Bill Gates had posted about "a golden age of Alzheimer's research."

These high hopes rest largely on two developments. First: drugs. Since 2021, the Food and Drug Administration has approved three antibody treatments meant to slow the disease's progression. All target amyloid, a protein fragment that can accumulate into the plaques that have long been associated with Alzheimer's and that many researchers believe plays an important role in its development. Two drugs—lecanemab, sold as Leqembi, and donanemab, sold as Kisunla—are on the market and are covered by Medicare.

The second development concerns diagnosis. Until recently, measuring amyloid levels in living patients required expensive PET scans or invasive spinal taps. Blood tests developed over the past five years approach the accuracy of those methods. The F.D.A. cleared the first such test in May, 2025; three more have followed. "For the first time," Gates wrote, "we have simple blood tests that tell you whether you have Alzheimer's."

A disease that could once be confirmed only after death is now, in Gates's telling, as easy to detect as high cholesterol. Combined with drugs that promise to slow deterioration, such tests are raising hopes of achieving a long-sought goal: treating prospective patients early enough that symptoms never appear. The result has been to give new urgency to one of the most fiercely debated questions in contemporary medicine: What, exactly, is Alzheimer's disease?

At Donald Kewman's home, outside Sacramento, there's a sticker that reads "ALL ARE WELCOME" beside the front door. Inside, the living room shows signs of having been colonized by grandchildren. Bookshelves and a Persian-style rug share space with toy trucks, a purple plastic kitchen, and an easel with a basketball hoop attached to its back. Kewman, a seventy-six-year-old retired clinical psychologist, is "supremely good with little kids," his wife, Sandy, told me—"willing to voice all the stuffies in ways that they prefer." Kewman told me, "I like babies." They were attending a grandchild's eighth-birthday party later that day.

Kewman was adopted as an infant, and his concerns about Alzheimer's began in 2016, when he signed up for genetic testing through 23andMe. When his results came back, he was given the option of learning his genetic risk for late-onset Alzheimer's. "Of course, being a curious guy, I said yes," he told me, his hazel eyes alert behind brow-line rectangular glasses. It turned out that he carried two copies of a gene called APOE4, making him much more likely than the average person to develop Alzheimer's dementia. "It took a while to sort of absorb that information," he said. Several years later, he was informed that his brain contained a moderate accumulation of amyloid plaques.

Alzheimer's, he told me, is "at the bottom of my desirable ways to die." A Quaker from the age of seventeen, he worries less about what it might do to him than about what it might mean for his loved ones. He and Sandy do



Drugs that clear amyloid from the brain have been hailed as breakthroughs. Their clinical benefits can be hard to discern.

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL LIÉVANO

not have long-term-care insurance, and he knows that the disease can impose "a terrible burden on family," one that "can deplete your assets pretty dang fast."

Sandy spent more than twenty-five years as an intensive-care nurse and understands the difficulties that could come with the disease. Yet Kewman remains cognitively normal. "We've taken care of our bucket lists and keep making bucket lists," she said. When I asked him whether he thought of himself as having Alzheimer's, he paused. "It's a good question," he said. "I have some of the changes associated with Alzheimer's disease." He meant the amyloid deposits. "So, in some sense, I do." He quickly qualified his answer: many people with those changes never develop the "full-blown disease," with its deterioration of "memory, behavior, functioning, independence."

I asked Sandy the same question. "No," she said. Not long ago, most physicians would have agreed.

Since antiquity, people have known that old age can bring lapses of memory and judgment. Alzheimer's disease, however, was named barely a century ago. Coca-Cola and the automobile predate it, and its boundaries have repeatedly been contested and rewritten. The story conventionally begins on November 26, 1901, in an asylum in Frankfurt, where the physician Alois Alzheimer examined Auguste Deter, a housewife in her early fifties who had undergone a rapid mental decline. She had become suspicious of her neighbors and accused her husband of adultery. A photograph of her from around this time suggests an overwhelming sense of weariness. Deep lines mark her forehead as her heavy-lidded eyes gaze down. Her thin hands clutch each other over a white tunic. What most struck Alzheimer was Deter's "utter perplexity." His notes preserve their exchanges:

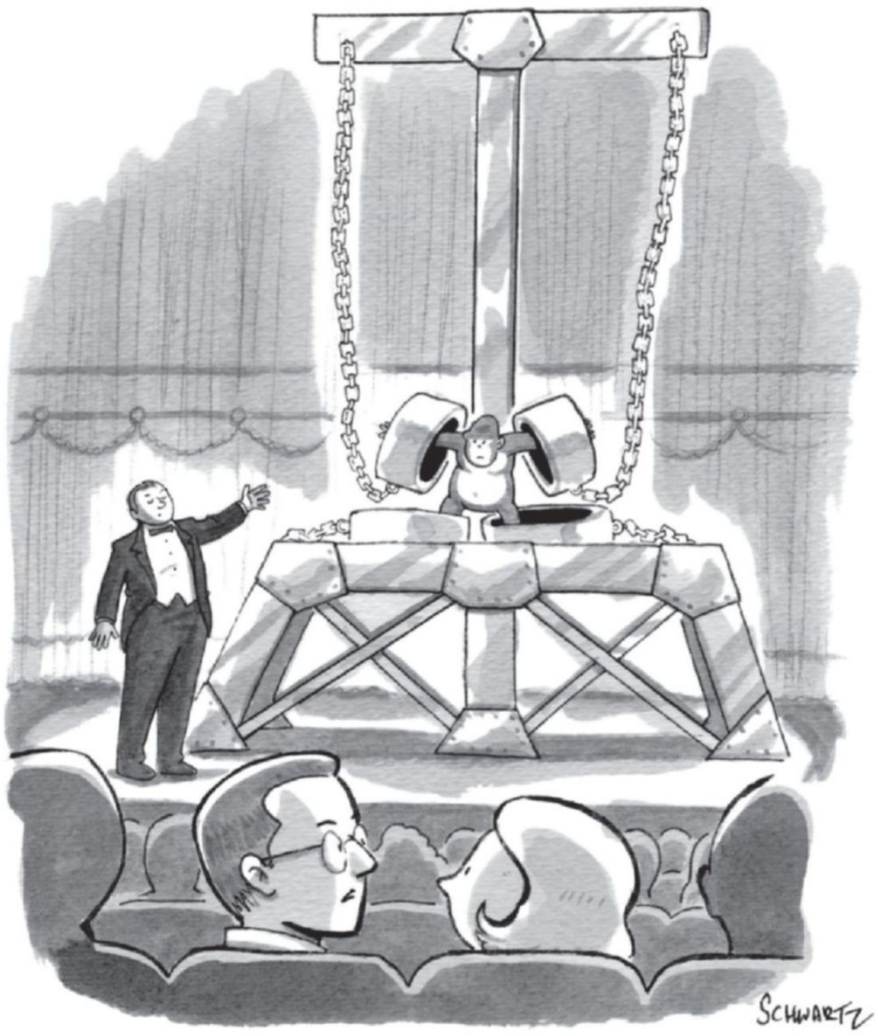
> "What month is it now?"
> "The eleventh."
> "What is the name of the eleventh month?"
> "The last one, if not the last one."
> "Which one?"
> "I don't know."

At times, Deter seemed to recognize what was happening to her. "So anxious, so anxious," she said when Alzheimer asked whether his questions were difficult. Told to write the number 8, she repeated, "I have lost myself, so to say."

Deter never left the asylum. Her speech deteriorated into shouts and hums and eventually almost disappeared. She died in 1906, roughly five years after Alzheimer first saw her. By then, he had moved to Munich, but he had her brain sent to him. Examining it, he detected three abnormalities: deposits of a substance, later identified as amyloid beta; tangles of fibrils inside neurons, now known to be composed largely of tau proteins; and a reduced number of neurons. In Deter, features that would become closely associated with Alzheimer's appeared together: amyloid plaques, tau tangles, and profound cognitive decline. Both amyloid beta and tau are normally present in healthy brains; the plaques and tangles are abnormal aggregations of these molecules.

At the time, however, Alzheimer's disease did not mean what it does today. When Emil Kraepelin, Alzheimer's supervisor, named the condition in the 1910 edition of his influential psychiatry textbook, he conjectured that it differed from dementia, then the catchall term for cognitive decline in old age. Although Kraepelin recognized that plaques, tangles, and neuronal loss could also occur in the ordinary dementia of old age, he noted that Alzheimer's patients were unusually young, sometimes in their forties or fifties, and that their illness could take an especially severe course. For much of the twentieth century, "Alzheimer's disease" was therefore virtually synonymous with "presenile dementia."

It was not until the nineteen-seventies, more than sixty years after Kraepelin named Alzheimer's disease, that it came to encompass late-onset dementia. The figure most responsible for this was



"Oh, great, it's the understudy."

Robert Katzman, a reserved, soft-spoken neurologist who chaired the department at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, in the Bronx. In the nineteen-sixties, his mother-in-law developed confusion and memory problems. She was sixty-four—just below the conventional cutoff for senile dementia—and so she was diagnosed with "presenile dementia," or Alzheimer's disease. The line struck Katzman as suspiciously arbitrary. "It became obvious that Alzheimer's disease was a single entity regardless of age of onset," he later recalled.

Medicine had a powerful model for deciding that apparently different illnesses were really one disease: identify a common cause. In the nineteenth century, the physician Robert Koch showed that pulmonary consumption, intestinal disease, and swollen lymph nodes could all result from the same bacterium, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. In a two-page editorial published in 1976, Katzman argued that some instances of early- and late-onset dementia should be grouped together as Alzheimer's disease. His evidence was chiefly descriptive. Both could involve plaques and tangles. He could not show that a single causal process produced both conditions, as Koch had done with tuberculosis. But the shared features, he maintained, were enough.

The consequences were enormous. A condition once considered rare now encompassed most forms of old-age dementia. Katzman himself came to regard the editorial as the most important paper he had written. The shift was institutional as well as scientific. In 1974, Congress had created the National Institute on Aging, as part of the National Institutes of Health, but it had struggled for attention. Aging was diffuse and abstract, a difficult cause around which to mobilize resources, in the manner of Richard Nixon's War on Cancer. But Katzman's enlarged conception of Alzheimer's provided a similarly compelling foe. In the opening paragraph of his 1976 editorial, he described the disease as a societal "malignancy" that ranked among the country's leading causes of death. "We had to make it a household word," Robert Butler, the first director of the National Institute on Aging, recalled, because funding didn't flow toward vague biological processes. "People don't die from basic research, they don't suffer from basic research. They suffer from specific diseases."

In 1977, Katzman, Butler, and others convened a conference at the N.I.H., in Bethesda, in part to settle the question of classification. Katzman remarked that he had expected "more argument," but the participants seemed to agree "that Alzheimer's disease and senile dementia are one." When the group discussed what to recommend to the American Psychiatric Association for the next edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, one attendee asked, "Does anybody here seriously believe they are two different diseases?" Three years later, the Alzheimer's Association was founded; four years after that, the new definition of the disease was formally codified, when six experts, including Katzman, published the first widely accepted diagnostic criteria for the disease.



These criteria remained centered on symptoms. A diagnosis of "probable Alzheimer's disease" depended primarily on progressive cognitive decline, particularly memory loss. Plaques and tangles could confirm it, but only after death. Although the diagnosis covered a much larger population, a living patient still had to show cognitive impairment to qualify. Back then, researchers would have had no way of knowing about Kewman's amyloid deposits. All they would have seen was a cognitively normal person—by their criteria, someone without Alzheimer's.

Then, in 1984, researchers at the University of California, San Diego, isolated the main component of the plaques that Alzheimer had first observed: aggregations of the peptide now known as amyloid beta. Months later, the same group identified a similar protein fragment in the brain of a person with Down syndrome, a condition linked to an unusually high risk of Alzheimer's-like pathology and dementia.

The discoveries helped elevate amyloid from a hallmark of the disease into a possible culprit. In 1992, the molecular biologists John Hardy and Gerald Higgins proposed what became known as the "amyloid-cascade hypothesis." Amyloid, they argued, was the "causative agent of Alzheimer's disease." Its accumulation, in their account, triggered tau abnormalities, killed neurons, and produced dementia.

The hypothesis soon became the leading model of Alzheimer's. Its champions, branded Baptists for their emphasis on beta-amyloid deposits, marshalled plenty of supporting evidence. Rare inherited mutations that virtually guaranteed early-onset Alzheimer's affected the production of amyloid. People with Down syndrome carried an extra copy of the gene for the amyloid precursor protein. These observations suggested that when amyloid accumulated more readily, Alzheimer's would follow. The therapeutic strategy seemed obvious: remove amyloid. If that worked, a treatment would be of enormous commercial value.

Promising evidence emerged from studies in mice. Scientists inserted genes associated with Alzheimer's into mouse genomes, breeding animals that had high levels of amyloid in their brains; the mice then began to struggle with spatial navigation. In 1999, researchers at Elan Pharmaceuticals reported that they had vaccinated mice against amyloid beta, provoking their immune systems to clear it. Plaque burdens plummeted. Howard Feldman, a neurologist at the University of California, San Diego, remembers thinking, "If this works out, it's a Nobel Prize."

The excitement spread widely. "A cure for Alzheimer's might be within the grasp of researchers," *New Scientist* announced. Elan quickly began testing its vaccine in people. In 2002, however, the trial was halted after some participants developed meningoencephalitis, a dangerous inflammatory condition.

Meanwhile, drugmakers explored a related approach: supplying the antibodies directly. They infused patients with laboratory-made monoclonal antibodies, or mAbs, designed to bind to amyloid and help clear it. The approach would eventually produce lecanemab and donanemab.

For years, though, it failed. The first

anti-amyloid antibody tested in large clinical trials appeared to affect amyloid but did not slow cognitive decline. MRIs also revealed, in some patients, brain swelling and microhemorrhages. (These were given the benign-sounding name "amyloid-related imaging abnormalities," or ARIA—which feels as abstruse as calling a knife wound a "blade-related imaging abnormality.") Other antibodies, such as gantenerumab and crenezumab, were also abandoned, after failing to produce clinical benefits. Researchers had learned how to attack one of Alzheimer's defining pathologies without meaningfully altering the illness.

The next problem was measurement: How could investigators be sure that trial participants actually had amyloid, or determine how much an antibody affected it? In 2004, the N.I.H., pharmaceutical companies, and nonprofit groups launched the Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative, in part to find biomarkers that could track the disease. With funding from the Alzheimer's Association, the project adopted a new tracer that, in combination with a PET scan, could measure amyloid burdens. Between 2007 and 2009, more than a hundred participants underwent amyloid scans.

The results were surprising. Some people with classic Alzheimer's dementia had little or no amyloid, while substantial amyloid deposits appeared in certain people who remained cognitively normal. "That was the revolutionary moment for me," Carrillo, the chief scientific officer of the Alzheimer's Association, told me.

One way of interpreting the findings was that amyloid had been assigned too large a role in Alzheimer's. Carrillo eventually drew a very different conclusion. The negative trial results, she thought, showed not that targeting amyloid was futile but that researchers had been treating the wrong people at the wrong time. She began to think, "We're too late." Amyloid seemed to accumulate years before dementia appeared, so perhaps drugs were needed in this presymptomatic period. And the fact that many participants in amyloid-targeting-drug trials turned out not to have amyloid at all? To her, it demonstrated that patients could look as though they had Alzheimer's and yet, biologically speaking, have something else.

I LOVE YOU IN THE MORNING

Haven't I slogged through enough regrets? Aren't my hooves
mud-caked and heavy? I used to think things like
How could anyone . . . ? and then I found out.
What makes up a life?
My father escaped the pogroms in Russia
on the shoulders of his mother and an older brother.
Hiding in the forest by day, they trudged through snow at night.
My father. Who stood hunched behind the counter
of Hy-Grade Wines & Liquors, who parted
his hair in the middle and left a grease stain on the couch.
Who loved watermelon.
Now I'm so much older than he lived to be.
Last week I couldn't remember Stevie Wonder's name.
I could see his big, beautiful head swaying.
But it took me all day to haul his name up, hand over hand,
from the murky well. That same night
I forgot Hemingway's first name.
Now I go around saying, *Ernest Hemingway*, *Stevie Wonder*.
Ernest Hemingway, *Stevie Wonder*.
And why then can I still recall
my legions of failures. Lashing out at my child
when I thought I'd lost her in a strange city.
The newborn possums I smashed
with a shovel in the garden shed.
And Celia who came to my door the night
she had nowhere to go. Yes,
there were circumstances, but
I didn't take her in. And everyone
I've lost or abandoned. What if
I didn't keep shuffling through the litter
of my sins and lamentations.
Tonight when I go out to lock up the chickens

Reisa Sperling, a Harvard neurologist, encountered the same puzzle from another angle. She had been studying the brain networks involved in memory and found that roughly a third of the cognitively normal older people she'd examined had amyloid plaques. Some of them showed patterns of brain activity like those of people with symptoms of Alzheimer's. To Sperling, the scans suggested that Alzheimer's could already be altering the brain before memory problems appeared. She remembers sitting at her computer at three in the morning, comparing images and thinking, "Oh, my gosh, oh, my gosh."

Cases like Kewman's forced the issue. In 2011, the N.I.A. and the Alzheimer's Association published new recommendations. One paper, led by Sperling and co-authored by Carrillo, proposed a category that would once have sounded contradictory: "preclinical Alzheimer's disease." A cognitively normal person with the relevant biological abnormalities could now be classified as being in an early stage of the disease. "It seemed heretical," Sperling told me. The authors were cautious. They described it as a research category, not a clinical diagnosis, and acknowledged that no "firm link" had yet been established between the biomarkers and later decline. But the conceptual break had occurred.

In 2018, another N.I.A.-Alzheimer's Association working group went further, defining the disease as a "biological construct," identifiable by evidence of amyloid plaques and tau tangles, independent of a person's cognitive state. In 2024, criteria published by the Alzheimer's Association went further still. Now

the orange dahlias glow, each petal
tender and suffused with the last light of day.
Beauty. That's an old story too.
I may never get to Paris again, but once I heard
Ghislaine Roux sing "Ave Maria" at Sainte-Chapelle.
Sun streamed through the dazzling stained glass.
I was so close I could see the fine mist of sweat on her throat.
I was washed in a river of splendor.
And yet I've been so unhappy.
I've thrown down a towel to soften the tile
on the bathroom floor, lain there and cried, *I can't bear it. I can't bear it.*
And then another voice said, not without pity,
Of course you can.
And I rinsed my face, opened the door,
and smiled at the child coloring at the table.
Have I had a good life? Once after sex
while I lay heavy on the body of my beloved,
for a second, two seconds, I could feel it—
good and bad collapsing
like a wave breaking into the sea.
And then the next second I thought about it
and it was the *aboutness* again.
The baby keeps saying, *I can't remember*.
At two, is she already forgetting everything
she knew before she was born?
Yesterday, she put a piece of paper
the size of her thumbnail into a toy mailbox.
Then she took it out and read the letter to me.
Dear Nana. I love you in the morning.
Then she put it back in the box.
Do you want to hear it again? she asked.

—Ellen Bass

amyloid alone was sufficient to establish the disease, and the criteria were meant to help inform clinical diagnosis. If a blood test could reliably detect amyloid, then a person with no memory problems could, in principle, have a needle stick and emerge with an Alzheimer's diagnosis.

Not everyone accepted this. The National Institute on Aging, which had issued the 2011 and 2018 recommendations jointly with the Alzheimer's Association, dropped its name from the 2024 criteria, citing an N.I.H. policy against endorsing private entities or services. The American Geriatrics Society, in response to a draft of the guidelines, called their potential use in clinical practice "premature." (The final criteria do state that they are not intended to provide "step-by-step clinical practice guidelines.") The society granted that biomarkers can define diseases, as with certain cancers, before symptoms appear, but only when their meaning is sufficiently well understood. Amyloid, it argued, had not reached that point. "As of now," the group stated, "there is no evidence that removing amyloid helps a cognitively normal person who is biomarker positive."

A related dispute, of intense interest to drugmakers, concerned what should count as evidence that a treatment worked. Was it enough for a drug to reduce amyloid? Or did it have to affect a patient's ability to remember and function?

Their most promising candidate was aducanumab, an antibody licensed by Biogen which aggressively stripped amyloid from the brain. In 2016, *Nature* put before-and-after PET scans from an early study on its cover, showing that, as the dose increased, bright patches marking amyloid seemed to melt away. The study was small and had not been designed to establish whether aducanumab preserved cognition; in addition, more than a quarter of participants experienced brain swelling or microbleeds. But there was also a tantalizing suggestion that patients receiving higher doses had a slower decline in mental functioning. Around this time, Biogen's market capitalization rose by twenty-nine billion dollars over the course of three months.

In March, 2019, Biogen and a Japanese partner, Eisai, halted two large trials of aducanumab after an independent analysis concluded that the drug wasn't working. Biogen's share price plunged. Seven months later, however, the company reversed itself. Newer data had been analyzed, producing an almost bewildering result: one of the two nearly identical trials remained negative, but, in the other, patients receiving a high dose appeared to decline more slowly. Biogen decided to seek F.D.A. approval.

The F.D.A. convened an advisory committee that included eleven outside experts. Aaron Kesselheim, a physician and a professor at Harvard Medical School, spent two weeks studying the conflicting results before the committee met, remotely, on November 6, 2020. He expected the meeting to revolve around the uncertainty. Instead, the F.D.A.'s biostatisticians, who seemed to have reservations about Biogen's interpretation, appeared only in a prerecorded presentation and a Q. & A. (A spokesperson for the F.D.A. said that the team's participation was typical of similar meetings.) Otherwise, Kesselheim said, "the F.D.A.'s presentation was about how the efficacy of the drug is obvious, and the company's presentation was about how the efficacy of the drug was obvious." He recalled thinking, "Well, it's not obvious to me."

The other outside experts largely agreed with him. The committee was asked whether the positive trial, considered alongside the other analyses presented, provided evidence that aducanumab worked. Ten members voted no. One was uncertain. None voted yes.

Seven months later, the F.D.A. granted the drug "accelerated approval" anyway. This status allows a drug for a

serious illness to reach the market on the basis of a surrogate measure considered reasonably likely to predict clinical benefit. Here, the surrogate was the reduction of amyloid plaques.

The decision was explosive. Kesselheim resigned from the advisory committee. In a *Times* opinion piece, he and a colleague accused the agency of having "shifted the goal posts." Subsequent reporting uncovered an unusually close relationship between Biogen and Billy Dunn, the head of the F.D.A.'s neuroscience office, who had met with the company ahead of the drug's approval. A congressional investigation documented "atypical collaboration" between the agency and the company. The potential financial consequences were enormous. According to the investigation, Biogen estimated that the company would be able to bill Medicare twelve billion dollars a year for the drug.

In fact, aducanumab, sold as Aduhelm, was tainted by the controversy and never achieved broad use. Medicare restricted coverage to clinical trials, and Biogen discontinued the drug in 2024. But the principle behind its approval survived. In January, 2023, the F.D.A. granted accelerated approval to Biogen and Eisai's lecanemab, again "on the basis of a reduction in amyloid beta plaque."

What has been hard to miss is the way pharmaceutical companies have been orbiting around the redefinition of Alzheimer's. Of the twenty authors of the 2018 framework, twelve disclosed professional relationships with Biogen, Eisai, or Lilly, the companies whose anti-amyloid antibodies would later reach the F.D.A. One author, Samantha Budd Haeberlein, was a Biogen executive involved in developing aducanumab. Another, Eric Siemers, had been a medical director at Lilly. A third was Billy Dunn.

None of those relationships establishes why the authors favored a biological definition of Alzheimer's; there were scientific arguments for the position. But the question of where risk ends and disease begins leaves room for interpretation. Lilly and Biogen have both sent comments to the F.D.A. on draft guidelines for the pharmaceutical industry, encouraging the agency to categorize symptomatic people with positive biomarkers as having "preclinical" Alzheimer's. Both have regularly been "platinum sponsors" of the conferences organized by the Alzheimer's Association.

One morning near the end of summer, Kewman handed me a pair of binoculars and led me from his house into nearby wetlands and open spaces. He carried a camera and wore a sun hat adorned with a peacock feather. At seventy-six, he set a brisk pace.

Not long into the walk, he stopped. "Belted kingfisher," he said, directing my gaze toward a tree across the water. "Around eleven o'clock. About three-quarters of the way up." I raised the binoculars and eventually found it.

Kewman walks about three miles most mornings, usually along the same network of paths. Familiarity had given him a sense of what to expect, and he paid attention to departures from the routine. White pelicans, he told me, had lingered unusually long that year. He knew where the beavers built their lodges and where the herons fished. As we walked, he picked individual birdcalls out of the mixture of natural and suburban noise. I depended on him to tell me what I was hearing.

Other walkers passed us on the paths; he knew most by name. There was something faintly absurd about accompanying him through this place while trying to understand whether he had a disease associated with losing one's bearings.

Howard Feldman, the U.C. San Diego neurologist who once thought an amyloid vaccine might garner a Nobel Prize, has spent nearly two decades helping develop diagnostic criteria through the International Working Group on Alzheimer's Disease, or I.W.G., which helped pioneer the use of biomarkers to identify the disease. Feldman told me that biomarkers generally improve diagnostic accuracy for patients already experiencing cognitive problems. The I.W.G. would describe Kewman's amyloid as a risk factor for Alzheimer's, rather than evidence of the disease itself.

Whether an amyloid-positive person eventually develops dementia depends on many factors, including the amount and distribution of tau pathology, vascular health, and age. Feldman favors individualized risk assessments rather than making amyloid deposits alone the basis of a diagnosis. Otherwise, he said, people may "experience the full brunt" of an Alzheimer's diagnosis without ever developing Alzheimer's dementia.

During our walk, Kewman and I came upon a flock of California quail beside the trail. He pointed out a male strutting among them—"a sentinel" keeping watch while his mate stayed close to cover. Birding, he said, was "a very soothing, almost spiritual thing." On a morning like this, the wish to preserve such moments was easy to understand, as was the hope that animated researchers who favored the biological definition. The difficulty was knowing whether Kewman was likely to develop dementia and whether treating the amyloid in his brain would make it any less likely.

The I.W.G. and the Alzheimer's Association have divided the field into two camps, but the camps agree about many of the underlying facts. Sperling, the Harvard neurologist, told me that separating the world into amyloid-positive and amyloid-negative people is "simplistic." She, too, thinks risk depends on tau, vascular disease, and other factors, including the *amount* of amyloid in brain tissues. She acknowledges that researchers still cannot explain why some people accumulate substantial amyloid without developing dementia. Yet, for Sperling, the disease process has already begun in anyone with amyloid deposits. From a treatment perspective, she said, "to pretend that they don't have Alzheimer's disease in the brain, to me, doesn't make sense."

Carrillo, the chief scientific officer of the Alzheimer's Association, was even more direct when I asked her for the strongest argument for defining the disease through biomarkers. "Treatment," she said. She echoed Feldman's observation that biomarkers help physicians distinguish Alzheimer's from other causes of cognitive decline and deliver more appropriate care. But, she pointed out, by the time a person has dementia, extensive neurodegeneration has occurred. "We can't bring those cells back to life," Carrillo said. "You can't get those memories back." If drugs are ever going to prevent Alzheimer's dementia, rather than merely slow it, they may have to be administered while people look much as Kewman did on our walk—training binoculars on a distant bird, with no outward sign of the process the drug is meant to stop.

"We don't understand—I don't, and

the authors of the criteria don't understand—how you can treat a person 'at risk,'" Carrillo told me. "You're treating a *disease*. You're not treating a person at risk." Doctors, she noted, do not wait for a heart attack before treating high cholesterol. Why wait for dementia before treating the biological processes thought to cause it?

But lowering cholesterol has been shown to prevent heart attacks. No treatment has yet been shown to prevent decline in cognitively normal amyloid-positive people like Kewman. There are trials under way of the two new F.D.A.-approved antibodies that are meant to test that possibility, but no positive results have yet been reported.

The biomarker definition works both ways. Just as asymptomatic people were drawn into the disease, some patients with Alzheimer's symptoms were kept out. "Why are we diagnosing people with Alzheimer's dementia," Carrillo asked, "when they don't have Alzheimer's because they don't have amyloid?" There was a good experimental reason to exclude amyloid-negative patients from an anti-amyloid trial. But using that logic to define the disease risks begging the question: if dementia without amyloid never counted as Alzheimer's, evidence that might complicate the amyloid theory would disappear by fiat.

Carrillo also offered a practical argument for the disease label. Calling an asymptomatic person merely "at risk," she said, "doesn't work for the U.S. in terms of approvals or coverage." The F.D.A. and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, she told me, "do not provide coverage for at-risk drugs. . . . F.D.A. approves drugs for a disease." The Alzheimer's Association, she added, worked closely with both agencies and therefore had "a better understanding of some of those regulatory processes" than some other researchers did.

I was surprised to hear Carrillo invoke the rules governing approval and coverage in justifying the new definition of Alzheimer's. As it happens, her account of those rules was mistaken. (A spokesperson for the association clarified that the F.D.A. can and does approve drugs to reduce disease risk, and that regulatory considerations are a consequence of defining the disease by biomarkers, not a reason for doing so.) Still, the exchange revealed how entwined the debate about diagnosis had become with the development and marketing of treatments.



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For all that, Carrillo herself stopped short of recommending that cognitively normal people be given an Alzheimer's diagnosis today. "There's no need," she told me, "because there's nothing actionable." The biological criteria, she said, were meant, in part, to encourage trials in asymptomatic people, which would help determine "if we were on the right path or not."

Well in advance of any such results, however, the definition has made an enormous population eligible for the label. One in four cognitively unimpaired people aged sixty-five and older is thought to have amyloid accumulation in the brain. Feldman estimated that there are hundreds of millions of such individuals worldwide. But only five to ten per cent of them will develop Alzheimer's dementia in the next five years. The proportion who will develop it over the rest of their lives is harder to pin down, but published studies generally put it at a quarter to a third. In other words, most people who might now qualify as having Alzheimer's disease will never develop the symptom that once defined it.

Kewman, with his two copies of APOE4, faces higher odds than those population figures suggest. For him, the more urgent question is what his biomarkers actually say about what will happen to him. Blood tests don't answer the question that Don and Sandy Kewman care about most: Will he develop dementia?

Soon after receiving his genetic results, Kewman began looking for clinical trials. It was a way, he told me, "to turn something that's maybe not so positive into something positive, and contribute."

The first study he joined, at Stanford, was testing an experimental drug intended to prevent amyloid buildup in cognitively normal people. The trial was halted early, though, when results indicated that the drug was *worsening* people's cognition. Kewman later learned that he had been receiving a placebo.

His study coördinator told him about another trial. It aimed to determine



"I pitch ideas all the time, but they just want big-budget productions based on existing I.P."

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whether lecanemab could prevent or delay cognitive decline in people with brain amyloid but no evident impairment. Joining took months. Kewman underwent blood work, MRIs, a physical exam, psychological testing, and two PET scans. Eventually, a neurologist and his study coördinator sat down with him and told him that his brain contained a moderate amount of amyloid buildup. The coördinator had tears in her eyes. Gayatri Devi, a neurologist who sees patients seeking second opinions after amyloid-based diagnoses, called the label "a psychologically large burden for someone to carry." Kewman was prepared for the news, though, having had time to process his genetic results. "It was sobering," he said. "But it wasn't surprising."

For the next four years, roughly once a month, a Lyft driver took Kewman to Stanford, where a nurse infused either lecanemab or saline into his bloodstream. Neither he nor the researchers knew whether the liquid entering his vein contained the drug. He completed cognitive tests and underwent, by his count, more than twenty MRIs. His cognition remained, as he put it, "pretty steady."

In 2025, the blinded phase of the trial ended, and Kewman entered an open-label extension, in which everyone receives lecanemab. He suspects that, until then, he had been on the placebo. During his career, he had studied placebo effects, and so it seemed to be "karma" that he landed in that group. But there was also physical evidence of a switch during the new phase. After each of his first two open-label infusions, he started shaking with chills, a reaction that can occur when patients begin receiving lecanemab.

Kewman showed me a photograph from one of his infusion days. He sits upright in a padded chair, an I.V. port in his hand, smiling broadly. An infusion pump hangs from a pole beside him; sunlight pours through tall windows in the background.

A day after one of his visits to Stanford, I asked whether he thought of himself as a patient.

"I did yesterday," he said. He reconsidered. "So the answer is: Yes, I do, because I'm receiving a treatment."

Half a year after lecanemab secured accelerated approval, the drug received traditional approval on the strength of a larger trial suggesting that it modestly slowed decline in people with early Alzheimer's. At eighteen months, participants on the placebo had worsened by an average of 1.66 points on an eighteen-point dementia-rating scale. Those on lecanemab worsened by 1.21 points. The difference, 0.45 points, was modest, but qualified as statistically significant.

It was harder to say whether patients or their families would notice it. In 2019, Lilly researchers had proposed a yardstick for clinically meaningful decline: about one point on the same scale for someone with mild cognitive impairment, and one and a half points for someone with mild dementia. Lecanemab's advantage over the placebo was less than half a point; donanemab's was about 0.70 points. Neither cleared those thresholds. But Lilly disputed the comparison. The thresholds described how much an individual patient's condition had worsened, a company employee told me; they couldn't be used to judge the average difference between patients receiving a drug and those receiving a placebo.

Not everyone accepts this argument. Edo Richard, a neurologist in the Netherlands who serves on an independent advisory group to the European Medicines Agency, balks at that distinction. "You can do a clinical trial at the group level, but you cannot apply a minimally

clinically important difference at the group level?" he asked me when we met in Amsterdam over the summer. "That's so inconsistent." Pria Anand, a neurologist at Boston University, said, "We've shown that we can change some of the underlying biology. The harder question is whether we can meaningfully change patients' lives."

The disagreement within the field widened this year. In April, Richard and other researchers published what's known as a Cochrane review, analyzing seventeen randomized trials of seven amyloid-targeting antibodies, involving more than twenty thousand participants. Cochrane reviews are prized in medicine partly because their methods are specified in advance, limiting researchers' freedom to search for an analysis that produces the desired result. "You cannot torture the data until they confess," Richard told me. "You just do what you promised you would do." The reviewers concluded that the antibodies "probably result in little to no difference" in the decline of memory and of cognitive ability, even as they increase the risk of brain swelling and microhemorrhages.

The response was fierce. In July, a group led by the Alzheimer's Association published a long rebuttal accusing the review of "serious flaws" and a "fundamental misunderstanding" of amyloid biology and calling for its retraction. Their strongest objection was that pooling antibodies that effectively cleared amyloid with ones that didn't could obscure the benefits of the newer treatments.

Richard agreed that the drugs were different. "Absolutely," he said. But the review had also analyzed each antibody separately. His conclusion did not change: "None of the effect sizes comes even close to what's clinically meaningful."

The Cochrane authors and their Alzheimer's Association critics also differed in their ties to the companies whose drugs were being assessed. None of the eleven Cochrane authors reported a relevant financial conflict. Of the thirty-seven authors of the rebuttal, six were employees of the Alzheimer's Association, and nearly two-thirds disclosed recent relationships with Biogen, Eisai, or Lilly.

Richard pointed out that another amyloid-targeting antibody, solanezumab, had already been tested in cognitively normal, amyloid-positive people. In a large trial led by Sperling, the drug slowed amyloid accumulation by about forty per cent and yet showed no evidence of slowing cognitive decline. Solanezumab was, as Richard acknowledged, not the most effective at removing amyloid; in theory, a more potent amyloid-clearer might have fared differently. But the result, published in 2023, was a disappointment for enthusiasts of early intervention. Richard objected to the habit of describing such trials as "failed." He observed, "These trials have not failed. These are very rigorously conducted, successful clinical trials. But they show a null effect, and it is equally important in science as a positive effect."

He saw a pattern in how disappointing results were minimized. He listed the explanations: "We're too late. The outcome measure is not sensitive enough. The intervention was not intense enough. It was not the right target population." Each possibility might be true. But, he argued, another possibility received much less consideration: "It simply doesn't work."

Carrillo and others at the Alzheimer's Association regard the major role of amyloid in Alzheimer's as essentially confirmed, but a number of researchers wonder whether it confuses an effect with a cause. Some disease models depict amyloid accumulation as downstream of failures in the cellular machinery that processes and recycles proteins. Other scientists argue that vascular dysfunction



hinders the brain's ability to clear amyloid and injures neurons through other routes. In such accounts, removing the deposits may be like battling a fire by clearing the smoke.

Alzheimer's might be better understood as a syndrome, several researchers I spoke with suggested; they saw a pattern of impairment arising from more than one biological process. The rare inherited forms differ importantly from the usual late-onset disease. The distribution of damage, the pace of decline, and even the molecular structure of amyloid filaments can vary. A therapy effective in one case may do little in another. Kewman, who has spent years reading about the disease that may determine his future, was sympathetic to this view. "There are many pathways to Alzheimer's," he told me. "I don't think it's a unitary disease."

The prospect of Alzheimer's has, in any case, already led Kewman to reorganize his life. He and Sandy have visited memory-care facilities, trying to imagine what they might someday need. He drinks less, goes to the gym three times a week, and makes a point of staying socially engaged. He's a volunteer for the Alzheimer's Association, and he advocates for more research funding and broader access to testing and treatment. He is, as he puts it, "the unusual person" in those advocacy spaces, being neither a caregiver nor someone in cognitive decline but an asymptomatic man whose genes and biomarkers have placed him inside the expanding boundaries of the disease.

Earlier this year, he went so far as to write his own obituary, or "memorial minute," as Quakers call it. It recounts his birth in San Francisco and adoption as an infant; his early love of nature; his career as a psychologist. It describes Sandy and their two sons; the discovery of his biological family and, later, of his genetic risk for Alzheimer's; his years in clinical trials. It ends with his becoming "Opa" to five grandchildren, "the frosting on his cake of life."

There's another way in which the trials have folded his past into his present. Kewman grew up in Palo Alto and attended Stanford. In the early nineteen-seventies, not long after graduating, he worked with a patient—a retired physics professor who had been diagnosed with what was then called "presenile dementia"—at a nearby nursing home. Once a week, they spent an hour or so together, sometimes walking through the oak and eucalyptus groves between Palo Alto and Stanford. "It allowed him to just wander," Kewman recalled.

The oak and eucalyptus groves are still there. More than fifty years later, on the days that Kewman goes to Stanford for lecanemab infusions, he tries to arrive early and spend an hour walking those same paths. "It's a full-circle sort of experience," he told me. ♦

FAMILY LORE



ILLUSTRATION BY TABBY BOOTH

They were just two lucky people, in the eighth year of their marriage, living in a high-rise in a Texas city that no one back home knew anything about, and they were being discharged from the hospital that afternoon in possession of a six-pound-eleven-ounce baby girl, who had been delivered three weeks early, and of whom they were both terrified.

The C-section had been in the cards since their twenty-four-week appointment, but the preeclampsia had been a surprise—or a surprise to him, at least. His wife had been insisting for months that she knew, that she *felt*, something was going to go sideways. She was full of such premonitions. The worst thing about them was that she only ever remembered the ones that bore out, and failed to recall the significantly more numerous ones that did not. An hour or so before the C-section, in a lull between visits from the surgical team, she'd had another one. She had grabbed his arm and said, "Something bad is going to happen."

For a moment, he'd believed her. He had never seen her so afraid. But his job was to keep the world at bay. "Nothing bad will happen," he said. "I promise. Everything's gonna be O.K." He outlined all the things she had done right: quit drinking, eaten healthily, taken her prenatals and her low-dose aspirin, gone on long walks with the dog, and so on.

His reassurance seemed to work its usual magic. She wiped the tears from her face and began making small talk with the head nurse, who was palpating her pale, swollen arms in search of a vein.

"How long have you two been married?" the nurse wanted to know.

"Eight years," his wife said. She pointed to the dome of her belly under the hospital gown. "We finally had sex."

The nurse's laughter was sincere, and he could tell his wife knew it. She sat there, pleased with herself, smiling for the first time since the doctor had sent them down to triage for blood-pressure monitoring. But then followed forty-seven minutes during which he was certain that something bad *would* happen—and perhaps already had. From his perch on the small stool beside the machine that periodically slurped his wife's blood out of her body, he watched the gleaming faces of the doctors, with the red of his wife's insides reflected in their goggles, and thought, Here it comes, the bad thing.

But he was wrong. The baby was pulled out, screaming but healthy. His wife was sewn back together and wheeled to her room. Her vitals and her blood-soaked pad were checked, then checked again. The flurry of people around her began to subside. The lactation consultant came in and explained the mechanics of the hospital breast pump. The night nurse took over and taught him how to swaddle the baby, whose name was written on the dry-erase board across from the bed.

And now here they were, three days later, and the only bad thing that had happened so far was that he couldn't find the hat that went with the baby's going-home outfit, a red onesie dotted with orange seeds that was meant to make her look like a tomato. The hat was green, and it represented the vine. They had bought the outfit months ago, despite themselves, when they were just beginning to believe that this baby might, in fact, stick around.

He searched for the hat while his wife staggered to the bathroom one last time. He could've sworn he'd brought it with him when he grabbed the go bag, had a clear memory of stuffing it into the front pocket.

His wife returned, bracing herself along the wall. "Any luck?"

He shook his head. "I must've left it at home."

"Are you sure? I thought I saw it."

"So did I, but it isn't here."

"We have to find it." There was a tremor in her voice. "We can't leave it here all alone."

"Don't worry," he said, feeling the immensity of this fuckup. "It's at home."

He checked under the hospital bed again, so that she would see him doing it, and then started to dress the baby in the tomato part of the outfit. While he tried to pluck their daughter's tiny hands through the sleeves, his wife went around the room picking up everything that wasn't nailed down: the diapers and creams that the nurses had insisted were free, the enormous bladder pads from the bathroom, the unopened grippy socks, the compression stockings, and even the box of tissues, or what was left of it after three days of her trying to get her milk to come in early. "Hon," he said, finding a teaspoon from the hospital kitchen in her pocket as he went to drape her jacket over the wheelchair handles. "Why?"

She burst into tears. "I don't know," she said. "To protect the baby."

She tried to explain this better in the car as he crawled home along the back roads. "I had such an awful feeling before, and we got *so* lucky and everyone made it out O.K. and the milk finally came in, and I don't know which of the things in the room was the one that made it happen, you know?"

He didn't know, wasn't like that, didn't imbue Kleenex and ketchup packets with apotropaic powers.

"*You* made it happen," he said. "*You* did."

At home, they changed the baby, put her in the bassinet on the wife's side of the bed, and counted her breaths together. She lay groaning in half sleep, dressed in the "AMERICAN BY BIRTH, TEXAN BY THE GRACE OF GOD" onesie they had bought to troll their parents.

While his wife stepped carefully into her pajama bottoms, he hunted around for the hat. It wasn't where he'd thought it would be, in the pile of baby clothes, tags still on, that had been growing on the nursery chair. It wasn't in the chest of drawers, either, or trapped in one of the dryer fins. He was a calm person, but he felt acutely the passing of each precarious second, as he waited for the baby to stir, to go from silence to noise, afraid of what she might need or do, of the possibility that the next waking would be the one that would render them helpless.

"Any sign of the hat?" his wife called.

He lied. "Yes," he said.

"Oh, thank God."

"It fell behind the coatrack. I'll just put it in the wash."

He ran a deceitful load of laundry, then went into the bathroom, turned on the tub to mask the sound of his voice, and called Labor and Delivery. By this point, he knew the number by heart. The nurse they affectionately called Longshanks, the one who had walked them to the car, answered. "Oh, hi," she said. "Is everything O.K.?"

"Yes," he whispered. "But I think we left the baby's hat there. Not the hospital hat, the one that we brought with us. It

looks like a green stem. For a tomato."

"Oh, no," Nurse Longshanks said. "I'll go check."

His wife knocked on the bathroom door. He hung up hurriedly. The baby had pooped again, and this had to be noted in the makeshift spreadsheet he had started, freehand, on printer paper back at the hospital. He splashed water on his face and went out to update the input-output log.



When their friends brought the dog back, there was a brief scuffle over the new gate that had been set up to keep him out of the bedroom. It didn't take the dog long to accept his exile, and he stood staring at the mysterious and fragrant bundle in the bassinet, with his big, curl-laden spaniel ears hanging ruefully over the gate.

When the wife went in to wake the baby for another feeding, the husband opened the sliding door and followed the dog out onto the balcony. It was a glorious late-October afternoon. The sun lolled drunkenly in the glazed windows of the half-built office building across the street. He could smell the smoke from the nearby barbecue joint. He had been planning to cook that night, but maybe takeout was the way to go. Didn't they deserve a bit of indulgence, all of them, even the dog, who was tolerating this disruption rather well?

He was mentally assembling a three-meat platter when he looked down and noticed that the dog was on top of something. At first, he mistook it for some old leather chew toy. But, when it moved, he realized that it was a bat.

"Jesus," he said, hooking the dog with his leg. "Leave it, leave it!"

The bat was lying on its back. The husband had never seen one up close before. It was bigger than he would have guessed, with a piggy, snub-nosed face and a scrawny tail and legs lying flat behind it, making it look as though its back was broken. The wings were awkward and ugly, tipped with crooked, writhing little hands, the outstretched skin loose and shivering between its fingers. The screeching he'd taken for some distant mechanical failure was actually emanating from the bat.

"Hello?" Somewhere behind him, his wife was calling his name. He looked over his shoulder. She was standing in the kitchen with the baby in her arms. "What should we do for dinner?"

"Barbecue?" he said.

When she turned to take the Frankie's Pit flyer off the fridge, he nudged the bat to the edge of the balcony with his sneaker and pushed it over the side. It landed on the balcony below, where it continued to twitch, in what he queasily assumed were its death throes.

The dog keened after it for a while, then came inside. They ordered barbecue and tried to eat it. The baby woke, nursed, slept, and woke again. They opened a fresh box of diapers, undressed the baby together on the changing mat, and wrapped a conga line of Piglets around her tiny waist, doing their best to avoid the terrifying, necrotic plug that would, in ten to fourteen days, fall off and reveal her belly button.

His wife attempted a nap, but every time he passed by the bedroom door he could see her peering into the bassinet, and then it was time to wake the baby for another feeding. After that, miraculously, they fell asleep, the wife and the baby, and he was alone. The sun had set. He washed the pump parts and got the pumping station ready for later, then sat down for the first time in the new strangeness of their apartment. An odd, dense unknowing seemed to have followed him home from the hospital. He felt separated from language, from thought.

The dog came over and nudged his hand. Other spaniels had noble lineages and gentle dispositions. Theirs was a beautiful idiot. Neurotic and entirely without manners. Prone to despair-inducing bouts of obstinacy.

He was scratching the dog's ears when the thought came to him. Rabies. Bats carried rabies. Why hadn't he remembered this? Warnings were posted everywhere in their neighborhood, which was named for the bridge that housed the city's bat colony. Hadn't he stood on that bridge, on their first night in town, shoulder to shoulder with all the teetering bachelorettes and Midwestern grad dads, to watch the column of clicking bodies course out into the night sky?

He stared down at the dog. "Did you touch it?"

The dog went on looking at him with his faintly smiling spaniel face.

The husband washed his hands and called Animal Control. It took a while to find the number because apparently the department's official name was Animal Protection. While he was waiting for his call to be answered in the order in which it had been received, he went out onto the balcony and looked over the railing. The bat was still down there. Even in the dark, he could tell that it was moving. Writhing on the Western-themed outdoor rug of whoever lived below them.

When the hold music cut out abruptly and a woman's voice said, "Animal Protection, can I help you?," every thought left his head. He stepped back inside and sat down on the plush little love seat that served as their reading nook. He needed to be able to see the bedroom door, so that he could hang up if the handle dipped to signal his wife's emergence.

"Hello?"

"Yes. Yes, hi, I'm wondering what the procedure is for when a bat has interacted with your dog."

"What do you mean by 'interacted'?"

"I don't know."

The woman on the line took a deep breath. "Sir, did your dog get hold of a bat?"

"No," he said. "Not exactly."

"Please tell me what happened."

"I came out on the balcony and found him standing over it."

"Was it in his mouth?"

"No—it was sort of skittering around on the floor at his feet."

"I see." He could hear her typing. "Did your dog make contact with the bat?"

"I don't think so."

"Are you certain?"

"No. I guess he could have. He was just sort of standing there, looking at it." More typing. Why? He felt a sudden need to distance himself from the situation. "Anyway. He's not *my* dog. I'm watching him for a friend."

"I see. I need you to understand, sir: bat bites are very serious."

"I know," he said.

"One per cent of the bats in our area carry rabies. That may not sound like a lot to you, sir, but, in a colony of one and

a half million, that's fifteen thousand bats. So, when you can't be completely certain that no contact occurred, we have to proceed as though contact *did* occur."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, assuming your dog has been vaccinated against rabies—"

"He's not my dog."

"—he will have to receive a booster as soon as possible, and then be quarantined in the home."

"Quarantined?"

"Yes. For a minimum of forty-five days. Unless you're still in possession of the bat."

"Oh!" he said. "I am."

He got up and headed for the balcony.

"In that case, we can collect the bat and test it. If it tests negative for rabies, the quarantine will be lifted."

"That's good! That's good. Do I put it in a Tupperware or something?"

He looked over the railing. The balcony below was now empty.

"No," the woman was saying. "Don't touch the bat, sir. I'll send an agent over to pick it up. Let's start with your address. Where do you live?"

He started to tell her, then he hung up. His wife had emerged and was moving through the apartment with the room thermometer held out in front of her like a divining rod. She was trying to locate a good spot for the living-room bassinet, somewhere that registered the recommended seventy degrees. She seemed almost blissful. She noticed him looking at her and waved. For a moment, she was herself again—not worry-free, she had never been that, but free of the pulverizing new weight of imagining the baby's demise. He could picture the arrival of the Animal Protection agent, some loud, careless government drone in huge boots who would inevitably pet the baby's head, cleaving into his wife's hard-won moment of peace. He couldn't do that to her. And, anyway, he didn't *have* the bat. It must have crawled to the edge of the balcony below and fallen off. He would try Animal Protection again when he found it.

He made the excuse of taking the dog outside, and went down to the fifth floor, where the twin behemoths of the gym and the pool deck blasted their relentless lights toward each other across a fake-grass bocce court. He tied the dog up, let himself through the security gate, and looked up. The balcony onto which the bat had fallen jutted out fourteen feet above him. If the bat had somehow crawled over the edge, it would have landed in the topiaries that separated the gym windows from the bocce court.

He looked around. The place was empty, as usual. People didn't come to this pool to swim on quiet, beautiful nights, as he and his wife did. The other residents only ever used it when a booze-sponsored summer bash brought some Instagram-famous d.j. to the building.

He hopped the little fence and shouldered in among the topiaries. They were thornier than they looked and snagged his clothes as he crouched down to swing his phone flashlight over the mulch around the roots. The search yielded a pineapple-flavored vape pen and a pair of Chanel sunglasses, but no bat. He straightened up to find a woman in matching lavender workout clothes staring through the gym window at him from one of the ellipticals. He waved stupidly, pointed at the ground, pointed to his phone, mimed laughter, and waved again. Then he stumbled back out to where the dog was standing on his hind legs, looking mistrustfully over the fence at him.

Upstairs, the situation with the baby had devolved. Mother and child were sitting up in bed, stripped down to their respective diapers. Apparently, the baby had treated her mother to what had at first seemed like a smile, but instead turned out to be a prelude to the biggest blowout she'd had to date. He threw the soiled linens into the washing machine, cleaned up the baby, then held the strange, weightless furnace of her tiny body in the crook of his arm while he helped his wife climb into the shower.

"Remember," he said, "don't use any soap on the incision. Just let the water run over it."

"O.K.," she said.

"Take your time."

He could tell that she was trying not to cry. How was he supposed to tell her about the bat without sending her into a tailspin? Imagine bringing up rabies to somebody who had just been bisected and then stuck back together with what,



"This generation acts like they invented not having any sex."

at least to him, looked like packing tape?

Once his wife was finally settled—cleanly outfitted, the backs of her earrings jammed tightly into her earlobes so that they wouldn't dislodge and fall into the baby's open mouth—he lay down on the couch with the spare pillow and blanket and looked at the dog, who had clambered dejectedly into his usual spot, on the armchair he had destroyed in puppyhood.

The husband opened his phone and thumbed "What is rabies?" into the search bar. Throughout much of the world, it turned out, rabies was a death sentence. An ancient, slow-moving, and catastrophically dangerous virus transferred from mammal to mammal through the saliva of the infected. He was unnerved to learn that the incubation period could be as long as three months. Fatal, the internet kept saying. Once symptoms began, the disease was almost always fatal. Comment sections were filled with glib condemnations of relatives who had behaved idiotically after exposure.

On the subject of boosters, the internet said, the sooner the better. But the vet clinic was on the other side of town. He couldn't just swing by. He would have to detour there during a grocery run, or some other plausibly lengthy errand. And, even if he could pull this off without alerting his wife, there was the matter of the dog's sedatives. The dog was an absolute demon at the vet. Dr. Hottie, as his wife had dubbed the handsome veterinarian when she first saw him, had prescribed a mandatory "chill protocol" of several pills before all visits. Without them, the dog would start shaking in the passenger seat the second you took the exit toward the clinic. If, by some miracle, you managed to get him into the building, after wrangling him out of the car in that nightmare of a parking lot with a blind curve that yawned out onto the road, he would hurl himself repeatedly against the waiting-room door, making a spectacle of himself in front of everybody else's mortified pets, until it was time to head to the exam area, where he would show his teeth and try for anyone who attempted to touch him (including, or perhaps especially, the husband himself).

No, the thing couldn't be done without pills, but his wife was their usual administrator, and, when the husband checked the labels on the pill bottles, he found that they were so faded he couldn't make out the prescribed dosage at all.

It would be so much easier if he could just get hold of the bat.

Maybe it hadn't fallen off the balcony at all. Maybe the downstairs neighbor had noticed it and put it in a shoebox, not realizing that you weren't supposed to do something like that. Tomorrow, first chance he got, he would go downstairs and ask.

He tried to sleep, but instead found himself studying anatomical drawings of the canine nervous system. He watched a video of a rabid dog convulsing in stark-ribbed agony. Then one of an infected man becoming unmade, wild-eyed, roaring in pain. Furious rabies, the captions said. Fatal.

At first light, he tried Labor and Delivery again.

"No sign yet," Nurse Longshanks said. "Here's my theory. Your hat probably got sent to the cleaners with all the other linens."

"Oh, no," he said. "That green'll destroy everything around it."

"That's all right. Worse things happen to our sheets, believe me." She paused. "How's the little one? You getting any sleep?"

He lied and said that he was. It occurred to him, after he hung up, that the hat might not make it back to them after all. Its disappearance had opened something, some emotional clause, and he might need to close it himself by ordering a duplicate. But they had bought the original outfit in a wildly expensive boutique in Petaluma, and all the searches for "baby hat tomato stem" produced ugly, coarse Amazon dupes that wouldn't fool his wife. He ordered one anyway, just in case, but it only made him feel worse.

While his wife was doing the morning feeding, he took the dog downstairs and knocked. The door swung open, and there, to his horror, stood Baby Jane.

He let go of the leash immediately and felt the dog take off in the direction of the elevator. Thankfully, Baby Jane didn't seem to notice. Her wild white hair was up in a listing bun. Her makeup was almost done: the black eyebrows were drawn on, and she had gone around her lips with what must have been a blunt pencil, but two globs of concealer sat unblended at the corners of her eyes.

The husband hadn't realized that *she* was their downstairs neighbor. He hadn't said a word to her since their now infamous exchange in the lobby that spring, when the dog had sniffed her in passing while she was berating the concierge, and she, only half turning, had hoofed the dog right in the ribs with the heel of her turquoise-studded boot. The husband had witnessed this from about ten yards away, his dog and wife having gone ahead of him, so it was the wife who had surged back and grabbed a fistful of Baby Jane's hair. Baby Jane had grabbed back. The two of them had been locked together, all elbows and teeth, frothing expletives into each other's faces. By the time the baffled concierge stood up, the husband had already crossed the lobby and seized a couple of the clenched hands—he wasn't even sure whose. He was shouting, "Take it easy, Baby Jane!," as he tried to yank his wife free.

Because both parties received only a verbal warning once police arrived, he never got her real name. Ever since, though, even residents who hadn't witnessed the incident had been calling her Baby Jane behind her back.

"You're early," she said, unfathomably failing to recognize him.

"I'm sorry."

Under normal circumstances, he would have resisted being dragged into her apartment, but he wanted her to remain oblivious to the dog in the hallway. Save for the light-killing velvet drapes that hung from every window, her place was laid out exactly like his own. He bumped into one crate and then another on his way to the middle of the room, where an enormous desk that looked like the prow of a ship supported the kind of Tomorrowland-era computer he hadn't seen since childhood. Baby Jane took a seat at the keyboard and gestured for him to choose between two mismatched armchairs. He perched on the armrest of the green velvet one, ready to sprint for the door the moment she realized who he was.

Baby Jane said, "Have you ever done this before?"

"Oh, I'm not . . ."

FORM AND FUNCTION

I tried, but I was too small to lift you
Up and out of that bathtub—

Your two arms cut open, your two legs—

You were January, bamboo shooting through darkness
In that village, monsoonal and rude, that you stopped imagining
Coming home to altogether—

I was bad at math, I had my two small hands—

Arrow fashioned from a jade comb telling me to go let go let—
A small voice crying out for help for—
What do you know—
Hands gathering all that was leaving—
All that was left—

I ruined the plans you had for your life.
I destroyed you, begging you to stay alive for me
When you no longer commanded your life.

I was a child, trying to keep a soul inside a body.

—*Paul Tran*

"What's your birth date?"

He hesitated. His mother had been scammed repeatedly by crooks disguised as authority figures when they first came to this country, and he had guardrails in place to prevent himself from giving out personal information under duress.

"October 22nd." This, he realized, too late, was the baby's birth date.

"Happy belated," Baby Jane said. "Year?"

"1986." This was the truth.

"And your time of birth?" He stared at her. Her face pooled into a sour frown. "This was all in the e-mail I sent you. The questionnaire? I can't do anything without your time of birth."

"Oh, yes," he said. "Sorry. 5:47 P.M."

This, too, belonged to the baby. She typed it into whatever form she was filling out, and asked him his birthplace. He said Belgrade—although he realized, moments later, that his parents had still been living in Sarajevo when he was born.

"Belgrade," Baby Jane said. "That's in Montana?"

"Sure." Anything, at this point, to keep her eyes off his face.

A printer whirred somewhere out of sight, and she pushed a printout of a rune-like wheel of symbols across the desktop toward him. It looked like a clock that had been in a car wreck. He examined it fretfully, upside down.

"Um," he said.

"Don't worry. You're not supposed to know what it means. That's my job. As you know"—she glanced up at him and frowned—"or maybe not: your sun is in Libra. Your moon's in Gemini, and you have . . ."

"I don't understand how any of this works."

She tapped her fingers on the table. "I'm trying to explain it to you." Now she was talking about ascendants and north nodes, trines and conjunctions. He wanted her to keep looking down at the star wheel so that she wouldn't study his face. It was also too late now to tell her why he had really come. How was he supposed to introduce the subject of the bat? Here she was, with the star chart outlining the fate of a fictitious person who shared his baby's birth date and time, and his birth year, and had come into this world in Belgrade, Montana, of all places.

"Wait," he said. "I have a question." He had blundered into a surprising thought. "Let's say I was born on October 22nd. But I was *actually* supposed to have been born on November 10th. Would this all be different?"

"Completely," Baby Jane said. "You'd be a Scorpio."

"But what happens to the person I was supposed to be?"

"What do you mean?"

"The person I would have been if I'd been born at the right time."

"But you *were* born at the right time. You were always going to be born when and where you were born."

There was a knock at the door, and he jumped. Here was her actual nine o'clock, right on schedule. How was he going to explain himself? Baby Jane half stood. "Come in!"

To the husband's amazement, in came Clownpants, from way up on the nineteenth floor.

"Hey there, darlin'!" he said in his usual, megawatt way. "Did you know there's a dog sitting outside your door?"

Baby Jane made a disgusted face. "I'm so fucking sick of this building," she said. "This used to be a classy place. Now it's nothing but mutts and rap music. You know?"

If the husband hadn't been frantically nodding in agreement, Clownpants probably wouldn't have paid enough attention to recognize him. "Well, hey there, chief!" Clownpants said.

"Hey."

They knew each other from the elevator and the refreshment table outside the gym, where they had bonded over their shared inability to resist cucumber water. The husband had recognized him right away as a character actor who often appeared in the late-career films of a controversial, perhaps even cancelled, director. Clownpants wasn't leading-man material, but his work was scene-stealing. He was humble about it, too. "Every day I get to play is a blessing," he'd say, crackling with a kind of intensity that had, at first, seemed like a performance, but was in fact just his way. The husband liked him, got a kick out of their interactions. It was the wife who had dubbed him Clownpants, for his tendency to



"This is all the stuff I bought to simplify my life."

• •

power clash the patterns in his outfits.

Clownpants turned to Baby Jane. "Where is it?"

She gave a little shudder. "Bathroom," she said.

Off went Clownpants in the direction of the guest bathroom. He emerged carrying a large plastic Tupperware, in which the bat was thrashing around.

"You weren't kidding," Clownpants said. "It's huge."

Baby Jane covered her eyes. "Get it out of here."

Clownpants was holding the Tupperware at eye level. "Look at his face," he said. "He's perfect. He's so *angry*. I guess I would be, too, if somebody put me in a box." He grinned meaningfully at the husband, as though there were some obvious profundity to this that harked back to a previous exchange. When the husband failed to reciprocate, he raised his eyebrows at Baby Jane. "What are you dressing up as tonight, darlin'?"

"Nothing," she said.

"Oh, come on. It's spooky season," he said, opening the door to leave. "You gotta get in the spirit! Bring your dancing shoes."

The door fell shut behind Clownpants. Baby Jane was rubbing her ears irritably. She snatched the star chart back toward herself and cracked her neck. When she looked up to resume the husband's reading, she finally recognized him. Her face went blank.

"Excuse me," the husband said. "I'll be right back."

He shot out into the hallway. Clownpants was already halfway into the elevator. The husband dived in after him. They ascended, side by side, Clownpants with the Tupperware tucked into the crook of his arm. The bat's claws skirled weirdly against the plastic as it struggled on. There it was, within arm's reach. All he had to do was explain, tell a few self-deprecating jokes, ask if he could borrow it.

"Hey, man," the husband said. "You really shouldn't be handling that."

"Oh, don't worry," Clownpants said. "I've done this before. I get one every year for my Halloween party. You should come tonight! Bring your girl."

"I would but, you know . . . we just had the baby."

"No kidding! Blessings, amigo." Clownpants absorbed him into a santal-perfumed half hug. "And your girl? Is she good?"

"She's all right. It's tough, you know, the recovery. It was a Cesarean," he said.

"Oh!" Clownpants clapped him on the back. "Well, that's good news for you, buddy."

"We were just going in for the weekly checkup." He was babbling, but he couldn't seem to derail himself. "And then they told us, 'You can't go home—this has got to happen today.' You know they had me just sit there while they cut her open? And when they said, 'O.K., here comes baby,' I stood up and looked right into her body."

"Wow." Clownpants shook his head.

"And then they just stitched her up and gave her Advil. You know?"

Clownpants looked at the panel of buttons. "I think we missed your floor."

"A hundred years ago—hell, maybe even fifty—she probably wouldn't have made it. I'd be a widower. And now it's just Advil."

"Well, like you said, she's tough." The elevator bell chimed, and Clownpants brightened. "It sounds like you got a lot on your plate, friend, but if you're up to it: tonight, 10 P.M. till dawn, my place. Dress up!"

He could still hear the bat screeching for a few seconds after the doors closed.

Downstairs, the apartment was quiet. The sandwich he had left for his wife sat half eaten on the kitchen island. The baby was in her bassinet, exactly as he'd left her, scowling and straining in her sleep. Her tiny red face flickered with some distant inner feeling. Was she dreaming? What could somebody who wasn't even meant to be in this world yet possibly be dreaming about?

His wife startled him with a nudge from behind. She held up her phone. "The front desk just called. Somebody found Murphy wandering around the sixth floor?"

The dog. He'd forgotten the dog. Now he had to stammer through some

song and dance about how he'd come upstairs to see if maybe the dog had managed to get home on his own. He could see her shaking the bolts of this story loose in real time. Why hadn't he called the dog's name as soon as he came in? Why had he lingered to watch the baby sleep for almost three minutes?

The dog was sitting cheerfully behind the concierge desk. The husband took him upstairs and got back to work. He called the pediatrician and made a well-child appointment for Monday afternoon. He called his company's H.R. department and added the baby to his insurance as a qualifying life event. This tickled the wife, who for the rest of the afternoon referred to the baby as a qualifying life event: "Hey, the qualifying life event just shit her britches. The qualifying life event needs a new burp cloth. The qualifying life event is finally down."

He settled on the couch after dinner with the qualifying life event in his arms while his wife took a shower. A "Buffy" marathon was on, part of the countdown to Halloween. He sniffed the tufted little head that rested on his chest, wishing there were something between him and the occasional pulse of the fontanel. This was why babies were supposed to wear hats. He listened for his wife. The shower was still running. He dialled Labor and Delivery and explained the missing-hat situation to the nurse who picked up. "Oh," the nurse said. "You're that guy who keeps calling. Let me see if Casey has an update for you."

A few moments later, Longshanks picked up. "Hi," she said curtly.

"I know you guys have a lot going on," he said. "It's just—her little hat. We bought it when we found out that she was gonna make it. Please."

Longshanks exhaled slowly. "I hear you," she said. "I *promise* that if I find it, I will call you. But we have to keep this line clear for our patients. O.K.?"

He wanted to ask her when they had stopped being patients, and how this ejection from the fold might be reversed. After his wife went to bed, he returned to the couch and set the alarm for the baby's next feeding. On the floor beside him, the dog was feebly pursuing some quarry in a dream. Outside, the city was tuning up for the first night of the weekend's Halloween festivities. The itinerant taco truck that sometimes parked on the corner had been discovered by clubgoers on their way across the pedestrian bridge; he could tell by their voices that the line was around the block. Somewhere, "Thriller" was playing again. And still, even with all this sound, the apartment felt quiet. As though it were moving through time alongside the world, lonely and small, inaccessible to help.

He shined his phone flashlight at the dog. Flat red circles flared in the dog's open eyes.

The summer the husband had turned six, a rabid fox had come down from the mountains into the seaside village where his grandmother lived and begun a small zombie apocalypse, infecting several local cats in the span of a few weeks, so that even after the fox had disappeared there was reason to fear the strays that haunted the restaurants and fish stalls. After a while, people had taken matters into their own hands. Cats with smashed-in skulls began appearing in dumpsters and street gutters. Was this what he was going to have to do to the dog? Take a rock, grit his teeth, and stave in that beautiful, trusting face? It was what his father would have done.

The husband imagined the virus, this ancient thing that he had let into the house, unfurling slowly through the dog's nervous system. The timeline of symptoms was greatly dependent on the location of the wound through which the virus had been introduced. If the bat had bitten Murphy, where had it bitten him? His leg? His face?



Maybe it didn't matter. Maybe there was nothing to worry about. The dog had been vaccinated in puppyhood. And only one per cent of the colony's bats were rabid. What were the odds that this particular bat numbered among them?

Higher, probably, than one per cent, since it had crashed on their balcony in broad daylight. But he could not be certain unless he got his hands on the bat. For a moment, the layers between thought and action lifted. Why was he sitting here, checking the dog's pupils? The bat hadn't disappeared. It was upstairs, in Clownpants's apartment.

When he got to the nineteenth floor half an hour later, with the dog at his heels, he found the door to Clownpants's apartment open. Some sort of fusion funk was pouring out into the hallway. A couple dressed as Roger and Jessica Rabbit stumbled out. He used their exit to make his way inside, where he hit the back of a line of extravagantly costumed bodies. He'd never seen so many white people in war bonnets. A Cleopatra with an actual snake wrapped around her neck cut in front of him. There was a sight-altering purple glare over everything. He struggled to make out the details of the room. On one wall sat a row of mounted cryptid heads: Bigfoot, Nessie, a chupacabra. On another, hologram portraits of Old West brothel girls changed to skeletons as he shuffled past.

One of the waiters put an appetizer plate into his hand. He was carried along the buffet line, gripping the plate and trying to hold the dog back from scarfing down the scraps that had made their way onto the floor: spiced almonds, roasted grapes, garlicky dolmas. Clownpants had separated everything into Halloween-themed categories: Slimy & Briny, Soft & Stinky, Sticky & Sweet. His wife would have appreciated such a playful little detail. Perhaps he could find a way to tell her about it, someday: "While you were picking the scabs from your nipples, I was hunting a rabid bat at a Halloween rager on the nineteenth floor." He reached the dessert table, which was tiered, like an altar. Its centerpiece was an enormous round stone, which had been carved to look like an Aztec-style skull. Candles stood burning in its eye sockets. The hollow of its nose had been fitted with a small black cage in which the bat—his bat, their bat, his and the dog's—was crashing around.

The husband jumped back so violently that a "Dark Knight"-era Joker behind him thought he had burned himself on one of the votives.

"You O.K., man?" the Joker said.

"That is a hygiene issue," the husband

shouted, pointing to the bat cage.

He tilted the contents of his plate into the nearest trash can and retreated to a corner to watch the glittering procession approach the dessert altar. Nobody seemed to give the live caged bat sprinkling its bat dust over the cake pops a second thought. Did none of these people think it was bizarre? Think it was dangerous and vile? Maybe it was a blessing that they didn't. Maybe that was why none of them said anything when he plucked the bat cage out of the skull's nose, and nobody stopped him when he made for the door.

The Animal Protection headquarters were right downtown, only a couple of blocks from their building, nestled innocuously beside a Western-wear shop on whose roof a massive neon boot rotated slowly against the dark. To his dismay, it was closed for the night. He rattled the door handle and waited to see if somebody would appear. What were people supposed to do if they had an animal emergency after 7 P.M.? He dialled the number and went through each of the menu items, sending two calls from his wife to voice mail until he was better situated to talk to her. His only after-hours option, according to the menu, was to call the police.

He bought the dog and himself a scoop of vanilla each at the soft-serve place next door and sat down on the curb in front of Animal Protection with the bat cage between his knees. The bat was still alive, dragging itself along the cage bottom in a manner that seemed to signal some new level of defeat. A couple of passing witches in distressed fish-nets aww-ed at the sight of the dog begging for the second half of his cone. Behind them came a strikingly handsome Captain Hook and, right on his heels, a passable seventies-era Elton John. A group dressed up as the Justice League paused to take a selfie in front of where the husband was sitting. Their Superman hadn't bothered to spring for the whole costume. As far as the husband could tell, he was just wearing a pair of dark-rimmed glasses and a tight suit with the shirt half unbuttoned and a Superman tee exposed beneath. For some reason, this made the husband wildly, irrationally angry. Everyone else had gone all out for this group undertaking. Wonder Woman even had a lasso that glowed in the dark. And here was Superman, half-assing it as usual. As the husband watched, Superman finished his cigarette and flicked the gleaming butt away. It flashed briefly in its arc before landing on the husband's pant leg. He swatted at it.

"What the fuck," he said.

Superman turned. "Excuse me?"

"Excuse me nothing," he said. "You don't see me? I'm sitting right here."

"Good. Stay sitting there. That way people don't have to look at you."

"I can tell by looking at *you* that you're a total cunt." The rest of the Justice League fell silent.

Superman—Clark Kent, really—took a step toward him. "What are you trying to do here, buddy?"

The husband said it again.

He hadn't been in a fight since high school. His former self, a handy enough brawler, not only would have seen the kick coming but would have deflected it and managed to send an opponent dishonorable enough to deal it sprawling. But the kick caught his current self right in the chest. He fell sideways, and from this position absorbed a few more blows before the rest of the Justice League jumped in and hauled Superman down the street.

He lay face down on the sidewalk, grateful that Superman hadn't displaced his rage onto the dog. The phone in his pocket was buzzing. His poor wife. There'd be a pile of pump parts in the sink by now, a tract of empty boxes on the input-output log. Somewhere, an indentured Amazon employee was probably already stuffing the knockoff tomato-stem hat into a plastic envelope. If he bled to death internally here, his wife would open the package in two days' time and know that he had lied. He would never get the chance to explain himself.

He sat up finally and took inventory of the damage. The dog was sitting beside him, obliterating the remnants of the ice-cream cone he'd dropped when Superman laid him out. The bat cage lay on its side. He righted it and discovered, to his horror, that Superman's kick had widened one set of bars. The bat was gone. He searched the ground for it on



"I don't need therapy—I'm lucky enough to have a great support system of people I make listen to me complain."

hands and knees, like a madman. Then he looked up at the dog and saw, dangling from the dog's guilty, greedy mouth, the tragic sag of the bat's legs and tail.

"Murphy, *no!*" He grabbed the dog's face. "Drop it, drop it, drop it."

Surprisingly, the dog obeyed. The bat lay on its back, soggy and wretched, here in the waning hours of this terrible day. Now the husband had to pick it up and return it somehow to its cage. In his pocket he found one of the green poop bags he had amassed from the Mutt Mitt dispensers at the park. It would have to do. He secured it over his hand and reached down, and this was when the bat, animated by some primordial force that would not let the curtain fall, sprang from the ground in a final, dizzying play for its life and flew away.

It was nearly dawn when he pulled off the freeway toward the veterinary clinic. The dog's teeth began chattering. He tried to relax so that the dog wouldn't smell the doom on him, but all he could think about was the distance between where he was and where he needed to be. His wife had probably called the police by now. Had likely started calling hospitals, shouting his name and description over the baby's guttering wails, into the ears of phone operators and receptionists all over town. Had she found the time to eat something? To pee, to shower? Was she remembering to use the nipple everter? Overhead, the trees were turning pale green with morning light. Around the next bend, the cursed driveway to the veterinary clinic opened up out of nowhere to his right. He kept going. Mostly to confuse the dog but also to give himself courage. He took the next right and went all the way around the block. Then he did it again. The dog pressed his nose against the glass, keening whenever the driveway whooshed by.

On the third pass, the husband swerved finally into the parking lot. It was empty. He drove to the far end to give himself space to maneuver. The moment he turned off the car, the dog sprang into the back, where he encountered the bewildering obstacle of the car-seat base. The husband climbed out and walked around the rear of the car and opened the door, to which the dog instantly responded by jumping back into the passenger seat. He turned around and showed his teeth.

"That's fine," the husband said. "You go right ahead. I got all day."

In truth, he had about twelve minutes until the clinic opened. He would get the dog out of the car by then, one way or another. Would carry him if he had to. Pin him down for the shot with his own two hands. He would obliterate all the tedious, delicate work they had put into insuring that the dog formed positive associations with this place. And then what? His wife would open the credit-card bill next month. She would see a charge for three hundred and sixty dollars at Clover Creek Animal Hospital. She would note the date of service. Within seconds, she'd be leaning against the door of his home office, going, "Why were you at the vet two days after we came home from the hospital?" And, in the end, he would have to confess that he had endangered them all.

He opened the passenger door. The dog scrabbled into the driver's seat. All this back and forth had knotted the leash around the center console. The husband freed one loop, then another, and used the momentum to pull the dog toward him and out of the car. The instant he hit the ground, the dog started struggling against the harness. This was why they kept it so tight. The husband grabbed the chest brace to hold him still, and for his gall received a strike to the arm from every tooth in the dog's crazy, contorted face. His skin started to bruise immediately. He didn't know if this technically counted as drawing blood. The dog didn't look the least bit sorry.

"Come on," the husband said, and grabbed him, but the dog twisted himself one last time and finally slid out of the harness like a banana coming out of its peel. Now the husband was standing there with the empty red tangle of clips and nylon in his hand while the dog fled, tail tucked, up the slope toward the parking-lot entrance and the road beyond.

"No!" the husband called. "God, *no!*"

He couldn't see the cars from where he was standing, but he could hear them zooming by the blind drive, going twenty over the limit because it was morning, because it was Saturday, because it was Texas. He listened for the screech of brakes and the heart-stopping yelp of the dog, saw his own headstone as he sprinted toward the road. The dog was sitting on the far side, at the edge of the woods, looking at him reproachfully.

The husband looked right, then left, then right again. The road was empty. He started across, but the dog moved away from him into the trees, so he stopped. He stood for a few seconds with his feet on the double yellow line, trying to figure out what to do next. If he started back toward his own vehicle, the dog might follow. Was that what he should do? Draw their dog into the path of some gleaming silver F-150? In puppyhood, he had held this beloved, preposterous animal on his chest, just as he now held their daughter, and waltzed around the room with him, humming "Moon River" until the warm little body went limp. If he could just let go of that, the dog's journey could end here. He could run off into the woods, taking the suspect contents of his cerebrospinal fluid with him. Not that this would change anything. The husband would have to offer himself up for a course of shots regardless. He'd suffered an exposure. He would have to fill out a bite report and put the dog's name down under "attacking animal." Wouldn't that spell doom, too?

He had been backing away slowly all this time. He only realized it now because the dog came swiftly out of the trees and into the road after him. A black car approaching from the left braked and swerved. The husband closed his eyes. He heard a yelp, but then the car sped relentlessly on. The dog was still standing nervously there, looking at him. Another car was coming up over the hill from the opposite direction. Ten, maybe fifteen seconds away. He knelt down and patted the ground in front of him. "Come," he said. "Come."

When the dog was finally in his arms, his whole body pulsing with the force of his heartbeats, the husband sank his face into the dog's musty neck and let himself be still. There was so much to lose, and so many different ways to lose it.

His phone was buzzing. He wiped his face, pressed the dog to himself, and, with his free hand, pulled the phone out of his pocket. He knew that number. He knew it by heart. ♦

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BOOKS

BAD CONNECTION

The history of the telephone is one of uneasy intimacy and corporate control.

BY CAL REVELY-CALDER

On May 25, 1943, millions of Americans sat down by the radio to hear a woman die. They didn't yet know this, or not exactly. All they'd been told by CBS was that the evening's episode of the drama series "Suspense" would revolve, unusually, around a single voice: that of the actress Agnes Moorehead. At 6:30 P.M. Pacific War Time, the broadcast began. Over suitably gothic chimes, the show's host introduced "a new study in terror." The episode's writer was Lucille Fletcher, its running time was thirty minutes, and its title was "Sorry, Wrong Number." Its atmosphere was somehow both frenzied and constrained. Mrs. Stevenson (Moorehead), a neurotic confined to bed, waits for her husband to come home. She tries to call his office, in New York—"Murray Hill 7-0093"—to urge him to hurry up, but, owing to some glitch, when the call connects she overhears two men planning a murder. In the course of another sixteen calls, she tries to get hold of her spouse, the police, and a local nurse, all to no avail. The lines seem constantly busy, and the operators incompetent. Mrs. Stevenson screams with rage—and then fear, because she gradually realizes, as you may have already, that she is the victim-to-be.

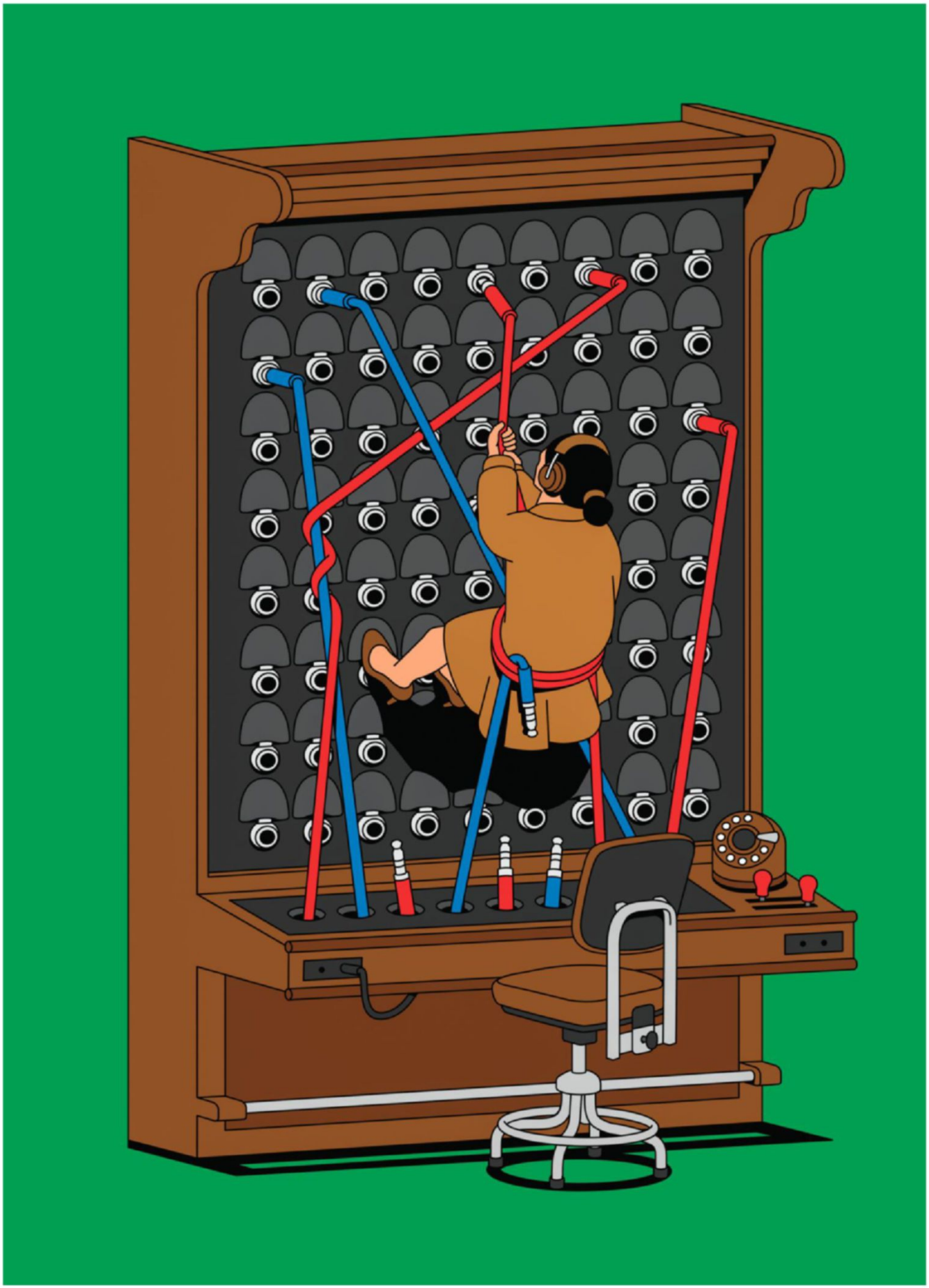
The victim is also you. One of the sinister appeals of "Sorry, Wrong Number"—which was praised by Orson Welles, a "Suspense" regular, as "the greatest single radio script ever written"—is that it makes us newly conscious of the menace lurking in an everyday technology: the telephone. For, as Mrs. Stevenson grows distressed, you become uncomfortably aware of her physical circumstance. Even as she casts her voice many miles away, she's trapped. Her telephone's wires have come to constitute the limits of her world. They're also the limits of your world, you come to see, whenever you place a call yourself. What you know about the people on the other end of the line—their faces, their postures; whom they're with, where they are, how truthful they're being—can stretch only as far as what you're told and what you choose to believe. Beyond that, you're making inferences in the dark.

This may strike you as a little paranoid. The rise of the telephone, in the past century and a half—from the rotary diallers at home and the boxes in the street to the smartphones in every pocket—is associated with a change that, broadly speaking, we consider positive. The telephone gave us back what distance had always stolen: the intimacy of voice. Now your parent or your friend or your lover could be a thousand miles away yet softly in your ear. Such was the promise made to America by A.T. & T., a.k.a Ma Bell, the behemoth that, from the turn of the twentieth century to the nineteen-eighties, ran most of the phone industry. Telephones, it declared, were a milestone for us all. One of the company's advertisements, from 1909, called them tools of "civilization . . . one of the most powerful influences for broadening human intelligence." By the time of my own childhood, in Britain, a century later, the upbeat mantras hadn't changed. Nokia: "Connecting People." T-Mobile: "Life's for Sharing." We surely want connection, and we surely want to share.

In "The Telephone: A New History" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), James Gleick begins in agreement, describing his subject as "an ordinary necessity" that has been "essential in the development of modern life." It would be churlish to say that he's wrong, or that the big carriers didn't deliver on part of what they sold. Today, I live in London, a city where I have no family, but, at the touch of a screen, I can talk to loved ones far and wide.

Yet that partial intimacy can be unsettling. The telephone seems to abolish distance, but the voice remains fundamentally physical, air percussed by flesh. The telephone is a conjurer: hearing someone speak, we imagine that person with us in the room. Deprived of body language, unable to gauge the person's tone against the way they touch their cheek or tilt their head, we invent what we cannot see, and may find ourselves wondering how much of our interlocutor is our own creation. The connection itself isn't entirely under our control. The system we have to use, those wires pulsing with current—or, today, the cell towers humming with signals—belongs to other parties, faceless corporations, themselves possibly under bigger thumbs. It can be hard to forget that, when we route our words through those matrices, there may be someone else listening: since their inception, the wires have been tapped by operators, by eavesdroppers, by what Gleick calls a range of "invisible interlopers." So we talk blindly into the receiver, and we're never quite sure of where or how our words will land. "Sorry, Wrong Number" shows the telephone

ABOVE: MIGUEL PORLAN



At first, it wasn't clear how to behave on a call. One company advised its users to end chats by declaring, "That is all."

ILLUSTRATION BY ROB EN ROBIN

in one of its less examined aspects, as a paranoia machine; but then, as Mrs. Stevenson learned too late, some paranoias are justified.

Alexander Graham Bell came, as it were, at the end of a line. His grandfather, Alexander Bell, born in Scotland in 1790, had started off as an actor, then moved into teaching elocution. He worked on stammers and other speech impediments, first in his home town, St. Andrews, then in the great metropole of London. His son, Alexander Melville Bell, born in 1819, went into the same profession, made a great success of it, and wrote popular manuals, including "The Science of Speech" and "Bell's Standard Elocutionist." By the late nineteenth century, the name Bell and the practice of elocution—the professional enhancement of the voice—had become close to synonymous. (Decades later, Melville Bell would be one of George Bernard Shaw's inspirations for Henry Higgins, the phonetics professor in "Pygmalion"; Higgins transcribes Eliza's pre-tutored voice in Melville's notation system, Bell's Visible Speech.)

Alexander, or Aleck, son of Alexander Melville, was born in Edinburgh in 1847. After his brothers died young, of tuberculosis, the family quit Britain for Canada, hoping to save their remaining boy. They did, and though Alexander, who added the "Graham" on his eleventh birthday, was rarely in great health, he lived to seventy-five—well beyond the average Victorian. In 1871, he moved to Boston to teach at the Horace Mann School for the Deaf, and soon, at the age of twenty-six, he became a professor at the newly founded School of Oratory. Already fascinated by human voices and other physical phenomena, he examined devices that played with waveforms, vibrations, and sounds. He toyed, in turn, with inventions of his own. In search of help, he visited a local electrical workshop, where he met Thomas Watson, another bright young thing. The two hit it off and began tinkering together above the shop.



In due course, with Watson's aid, Bell invented the telephone, or so many a schoolchild could tell you. It's true that, on March 7, 1876, he received a U.S. patent that declared it so, giving him the exclusive right to manufacture and sell the telephone, and assuring the Bell System's rise to preëminence. But, as Gleick reminds us, inventions rarely emerge from a single mind. By 1860, for instance, the German physicist Johann Philipp Reis had invented what he named the Telephon, two devices linked by an electrified wire. Sixteen years later, on the same day that Bell filed for a patent, the electrical engineer Elisha Gray filed paperwork with the patent office as well. Thomas Edison wasn't far behind, either; and so the queue went on. After the various claims were brought to a head before the Supreme Court, in a struggle so vicious that it may have caused the Chief Justice's premature death, the Court in 1888 upheld Patent 174,465—and that was that. Bell had invented the telephone, and off it went, expanding in skeins across the land.

Gleick has a rich supply of oddities and delights from the telephone's early history. Just a year after the patent was granted, we learn, America gained its first switchboard, a rickety thing run from a Hartford drugstore. Mark Twain, living nearby, installed a telephone line that he said was "the first one that was ever used in a private house." (Like many of his claims, this was almost true.) The following year, a commercial exchange opened in New Haven, forty miles south. Six years later, the figures had leaped: *Scientific American* reported nine hundred and six exchanges and 123,625 American telephone subscribers. (Gleick's interest, and mine, lies in the telephone's essential form—sightless conversation at a distance—but carrying the story to the present reveals a world where even Ma Bell and her core technology look modest. Witness the ubiquity of the smartphones on which we so expensively spend our lives.)

As the telephone proliferated, it began to remake the social rules. It wasn't clear, initially, how you ought to behave on it. Even beginning a call was fraught. Then as now, when you met someone in the street, you might greet them with a handshake, a bow, or a kiss, along with some less demonstrative signalling, such as a distance kept or closed, and a few introductory words, such as a formulaic greeting, or an offhand quip, or the thing you'd been longing to say for weeks. The telephone scrambled these habits. It wasn't just that you and your interlocutor couldn't see each other; because the earliest phones were always "on," your opening words had to grab attention. Bell preferred the nautical word "Ahoy," which was sometimes "Ahoy-hoy," presumably for the less alert, and, in our own time, for the ancient Mr. Burns of "The Simpsons." Edison liked "Hello," also known as "Hallo" or "Hullo" or "Hulloa." That was an early-nineteenth-century coinage, used for hailing a fellow from afar. Through a mixture of corporate encouragement and popular acceptance, it quickly became the norm. Other injunctions were ignored. The New Haven telephone company, in its early years, encouraged its users to end a conversation by declaring, "That is all."

The telephone could also upend the norms of civility. In 1905, the magazine *Telephony* cautioned readers against the "hasty communication of tempestuous thoughts to the telephone girl." Abusing the operator was apparently part of an epidemic of telephone behavior that *Telephony* deemed "the great ethical problem" of the day. During the same period, a Michigan telephone company offered subscribers bland advice—don't hog the lines, don't eavesdrop—but also warned that something deeper was at stake: "Some people take advantage of the telephone to say things to others they would not think of saying were they face to face with them. This shows a cowardly spirit." More than a century later, such behavior remains familiar. In this light, the telephone seems less like A.T. & T.'s beacon of civilization than like a strong intoxicant.

Controlling access to the telephone proved easier than controlling the speech it conveyed. Ma Bell aggressively enforced her patents and granted her subsidiary, Western Electric, exclusive license to make telephone equipment. By the mid-eighteen-nineties,

Bell's original patents began expiring, allowing independent telephone companies to spring up, but A.T. & T.'s infrastructure was already so widespread that denying competitors access to its network could freeze them out of the market. The farther the telephone spread across America, the clearer the problem became. As with the U.S. Post Office, a formal monopoly since the late eighteenth century, Americans rarely had a meaningful way to take their business elsewhere and so push to improve their telephone service. And, though Congress at least set postal rates, A.T. & T. initially charged whatever it liked. Bell's first telephone sets, which he rented out to users in 1877, were priced according to purpose: twenty dollars a year (six hundred and thirty dollars today) for "social" use and twice that for "business." By 1894, the average subscription in Manhattan cost two hundred and forty dollars (more than nine thousand dollars today). Not signing up cost both nothing and everything: an advertisement in the early nineteen-hundreds warned reluctant readers that "every new telephone makes you the more isolated."

Such slogans hinted at extortion, and onlookers were unimpressed. As early as 1886, the *Times* had had enough of the Bell System: "From the beginning it has plundered the people. A fraudulent patent at the foundation, and upon it a business built up by means of stock watering, collusive suits at law, secret alliances with other similar corporations, unjust discrimination and extortionate rates." That year, some seven hundred subscribers in Rochester, New York, furious at plans to raise their charges, withheld their payments for eighteen months, until the phone company backed down. Then again, perhaps they were lucky to be extorted. Compare Bell, once more, with the Post Office, which was ordered by Congress in 1916 to serve "as nearly as practicable, the entire rural population of the United States." A.T. & T. was under no such obligation. Theodore Vail, the company's formidable founding president, spoke airily of "one system, one policy, universal service," but all he meant by "universal" was the pursuit of monopoly—one nation under Bell. In parts of that nation where service provision would be too costly, A.T. & T. left people literally out of the loop.



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Some citizens came up with clever work-arounds. Gleick tells us about the "barbed-wire telephone cooperatives" created by farmers on the prairies, who used steel fence wires as cables, one connecting to the next, insulated by corncobs and leather straps. Multiple households shared a circuit, resulting in "party lines," on which anyone could pick up and join the call. This was a time when the Industrial Workers of the World had a serious foothold in U.S. labor and when sabotage, in the pursuit of workers' aims, was practiced in rural industries; the farmers' telephonic moonshine had a similar air of rebellion. Why go begging to Ma Bell when you could rig a contraption of your own? And these measures kept farmers from having their pockets picked in more ways than one: Gleick mentions a cheerful Iowan who, in 1905, declared that, thanks to the barbed-wire lines, "chicken stealing has become a lost art."

Still, such scattered acts of resistance, however ingenious, could do little to curb the company's power. For that, the government had to act. With antitrust law raising the spectre of regulation, Vail eventually accepted the need to change his tack. He did so with aplomb, cutting a deal, in 1913, with the Woodrow Wilson Administration. Bell would let smaller companies connect to its long-distance lines and cede control of Western Union, an old rival in which it had bought a controlling stake. In return, Ma Bell would continue to reign.

Leviathan, we might recall, was Hobbes's metaphor for the state. It mediated relations between little guys who'd otherwise hack one another to bits. Such was the authority we deserved. It might also serve as a metaphor for the telephone, not just because the Bell System long enjoyed a stunning monopoly—Gleick brands it "the greatest commercial enterprise the world had ever known"—but because this technology has always involved a third party controlling our two-party links. Originally, this control was open and obvious. Your leviathan was one human and a set of cords. You spoke into your transmitter to an operator at the nearest exchange, gave the number of your desired address, and waited as she plugged and unplugged switchboard jacks, completed circuits, and connected your call. Even after your loved one picked up, the voice of that operator lingered in

your ears, as if she were still on the line—which, quite possibly, she was. Reading Gleick's account of early switching, I came to think that a nineteenth-century time traveller might find nothing unusual about Cold War bugging or N.S.A. wiretapping. The telephone network was never private. Call no line secure until it's dead.

In Hartford and New Haven, the first operators were teen-age boys. As the network expanded, though, the jobs shifted to young women, who became known as Hello Girls. Marcel Proust would rechristen them "Guardian Angels . . . Danaids of the Unseen," which has more panache. But, as the number of customers soared, manual switching came under strain. By 1910, the New York City area had fifty-two exchanges handling calls to and from three hundred and seventy-six thousand "stations" (likely a telephone or a private switchboard), and the numbers kept climbing. Connecting a call within one exchange took twenty-two seconds, longer for transfers, and, where technology is concerned, impatience springs eternal. How many Danaids of the Unseen could A.T. & T. hope to hire? Still, the company was slow to embrace automatic switching. Operators were cheap and reliable, and, for a long time, executives believed that asking customers to dial numbers themselves was a step backward. Using the telephone was supposed to be effortless.

For all its growing pains, the Bell System had become an emblem of American progress. Presidents Wilson and Vail reunited in 1915 to join the first official coast-to-coast telephone call. Bell and Watson, now in their sixties, took their places in New York and San Francisco, respectively, where they reënacted their first exchange, in 1876, with a jokey twist: "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you"; "It would take me a week to get to you this time." Then Wilson joined the line from the White House, with Vail listening, too, from his Georgia estate. (Gleick writes that Vail had "a silent guest, J. P. Morgan, at his side," completing the picture of smoky-back-room power, though he means J. P. Morgan, Jr.—the old man had been dead nearly two years—and he could have added that William Rockefeller, Jr., was there as well.) The First World War did cause the telephone industry to be nationalized for a year, but this didn't make much difference for users, notwithstanding a decree in Indiana that banned speaking German on the phone. (It's another reminder that no one has ever talked with pure freedom on the telephone: the lines are subject to higher powers.) In April, 1920, Vail died, at the age of seventy-four. For one minute during his funeral, as a mark of respect, all Bell telephone service across America stopped.

The Bell System's growth did not. Automatic switching finally began to spread, first through local exchanges. Rotary phones let users enter numbers themselves, and, at least in American cities, the ability to make local calls by dialling had become commonplace by the nineteen-thirties. Dials also linked numbers to letters, an association that entire nations took to heart. The letters preserved the old exchange names: to call someone on London's Maida Vale exchange, for instance, you started by dialling 624, corresponding to M-A-I. Gleick mentions Hitchcock's 1954 film "Dial M for Murder" and its use of a telephone as death's handmaiden—a cheating housewife is phoned by her husband, who has hired an assassin to hide behind a curtain by the phone—but, when I rewatched the movie recently, I noticed something else. The opening credits show a closeup of a phone and superimpose an "M" on the relevant "MNO" finger hole without showing which number it replaces. A nineteen-fifties viewer would have found this unremarkable, but younger viewers today have no reason to know why "6" equates to "M."

Long-distance calls placed without human assistance started to emerge in mid-century. In 1947, A.T. & T. established a numbering plan with three digits for the area and seven for you. Four years later, customers in Englewood, New Jersey, became the first to dial calls across the country themselves. By the time Hitchcock made his movie, automation had put many of the Danaids of the Unseen out of work, though lots of Americans still waited for "Number, please" well into the nineteen-sixties. Over the following decades, the requests and delays while jacks were fiddled gradually receded. Yet Leviathan endured. By 1960, the country had around forty million telephones, carrying countless American conversations through Ma Bell's wires. When the system was broken up, in 1984, it had a hundred and fifty billion dollars in assets, nearly a million employees, and, it's said, enough wire to circle the planet forty-six thousand times.

The telephone rearranged social life wherever it spread. If some of those earlier habits seem wonderfully dated now, we might bear in mind that habits often do in retrospect, and ours are likely to go the same way. I think of the nineteen-nineties BBC sitcom "Keeping Up Appearances," in which Hyacinth Bucket, a middle-class woman with delusions of upward mobility—she pronounces her surname "Bouquet"—boasts of owning a "white slim-line telephone with last-number redial." She begins a call to her rebellious sister with a warning: "I hope you're wearing something sensible. . . . It always makes me very nervous to think I might be talking to a miniskirt." Part of these jokes was on Hyacinth; the rest was on the watching nation, still steeped in etiquette—a mutual surveillance system with its own unspoken force. The telephone merely gave that system new moments in which to exert its power.

Little has changed on that front. Think how odd it feels to end a call without saying "goodbye," yet what need is there to wish that your friends walk with God? (I've always liked that Leigh Bowery could end phone calls with "Bored now, bye!") Technology works on our conventions and behaviors, probing their weak spots, threatening to make them, and us, ridiculous. Yet we become entangled with new inventions—in one sense, unable to live without them; in another, unable to live with them. Whenever you speak to someone, you're both engaged in a performance, making characters of yourselves, perhaps even a spectacle. The telephone complicates this. It may carry voices, but it makes the absence of their bodies more acute.

A magnificent movie that I wish Gleick had mentioned turns on just this truth: "Locke," a 2014 one-hander

of sorts, follows a construction manager, played by Tom Hardy, driving his S.U.V. toward London while making, and taking, a series of painful calls. He tells his wife that a one-night stand with another woman has resulted in a pregnancy; he speaks with his sons, who are waiting for him to come home and watch a soccer match; and, because a huge concrete pour is scheduled for the next morning, he tries to manage the project remotely, talking to his boss, his underling, and others. Eventually, he speaks with the woman from that one-night stand, who's in the hospital about to give birth to their child. He laughs, pleads, bangs the wheel; like Mrs. Stevenson, he's pinned in place.

One more return to Gleick's history, and to my favorite of his many arresting facts: Clarence Hickman, an inventor who helped develop the bazooka, also built an early answering machine. The juxtaposition may seem merely cute, but to me, well, it rings too true. Answering machines let you speak to someone who may never answer back. They invite you to talk into silence, to wait and listen. They can devastate you without warning. Reading about Hickman's prototype, I thought of Jesse Pinkman, in "Breaking Bad." After his girlfriend dies from an overdose, he lies awake and alone, calling her number again and again, just to hear her voicemail greeting. Then, one night, the phone company disconnects her line, and, like Eurydice, she's gone.

I thought, too, as Gleick does, of the narrator in Proust's "Recherche," who, after his grandmother places a call to him from Paris, realizes that he has never properly listened to her voice: "It was sweet, but also how sad it was . . . fragile by reason of its delicacy it seemed at every moment ready to break, to expire in a pure flow of tears . . . without the mask of her face, I noticed for the first time the sorrows that had scarred it in the course of a lifetime." He can never see her quite the same way again. And I thought of my own grandmother, who died in 2008. I still remember her eleven-digit telephone number, the pattern that my fingers made on the buttons of my childhood Nokia. I think I remember her voice, too. But it's been nearly two decades, and I'm not sure I do anymore. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED



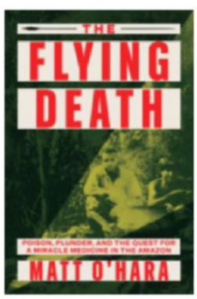
Music Against the Night, *by Yiyun Li (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. The first in a planned trilogy, this richly imagined novel reanimates two historical figures: John Field, the Irish-born pianoforte prodigy and inventor of the nocturne, and Adelaide Percheron, a mixed-race woman born in French India in 1790, whom Field would marry, then discard. The novel begins with Percheron contemplating news of Field's death, and proceeds to trace their youths, including their meeting, in 1807, when Field is humbled by Percheron's virtuosity on the piano. The two, Li shows, might have done well to consider the opinion of a minor character: "All this talk of being a prodigy or a genius—these things often lead to misery."



Her Kind, *by Sophie Lefens (HarperCollins)*. This début novel centers on Ada, a young mother marked by abandonments: when she was sixteen, her mother left her, and, at the book's outset, her husband has just done the same. The split prompts Ada to move, with her eighteen-month-old son, to an aunt's ramshackle house near Lake Michigan. While there, she is racked with visions of mortal danger, and invites three women friends—a violinist, a struggling painter, and a costume designer—to visit, in order to assess which of them she should ask to care for her son in the event of her death. As Lefens mixes spiritual elements with the quotidian, the novel examines the paradoxes of safety, responsibility, and trust.



A World We Share, *by Roger Berkowitz (Yale)*. Hannah Arendt never developed a general theory of friendship, yet the concept, as this study shows, anchors much of her political thought. Combining Arendt's written reflections with portraits of her relationships, Berkowitz offers a model of mutual understanding for our era of epidemic loneliness and polarization. For Arendt, friendship required only respect, duration, and ongoing conversation; ideological agreement wasn't necessary, as her own friendships bore out. Her correspondence records heated debates on contentious issues, including Zionism, and it's these encounters that give the book its force, revealing the effort needed to maintain intimacy across profound differences.



The Flying Death, *by Matt O'Hara (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. This unsettling pharmacological history is propelled by the story of two men: Richard Gill, an American with multiple sclerosis who became convinced, while living in Ecuador in the nineteen-thirties, that Kichwa plant medicine could heal him and make him rich; and Boris Krukoff, a Russian plant hunter who worked for Big Pharma. Gill and Krukoff separately pushed their way into Indigenous communities, bribing or cajoling elders to forage vines and process toxic plant compounds known as curare. By 1939, American companies discovered that a curare derivative could relax patients' muscles; they also erroneously believed that the drug could anesthetize. This innovation eventually contributed to a Nobel Prize win. It was also, O'Hara shows, founded on the drugs' use during operations by doctors who wrongly assumed that their patients could not feel pain.

CROSSTALK

In Jana Prikryl's poetry, borrowed voices tell intimate truths.

BY LANGDON HAMMER



"The Channel" turns to Shakespeare's Cordelia to explore exile and loss.

"While the others spoke," Jana Prikryl writes, "my meaning was coming through." That's how "Chorus," the first poem in her fourth collection, "The Channel" (Norton), begins. Who are "the others"? Prikryl doesn't say. Maybe she's thinking of the nattering media, or other poets, or just the ordinary chorus of voices absorbed in the course of a day, echoing in her head. "You shouldn't suppose they expressed my views / or even the opposite exactly," she cautions. Rather, "meaning was elsewhere and I kept it to myself." But how can you keep meaning to yourself and still write poems for other people to read?

"Basically I hate poetry that pretends it's possible to say what you mean," Prikryl has said in an interview. "For me, the excitement of writing something like a poem usually resides in prodding and questioning the words that claim to represent what my brain claims to want to be saying." This self-interrogating method makes for a nervy, difficult style. In "The Channel," Prikryl writes run-on sentences that layer fragmentary clauses, one after another. Her syntax twists this way and that, as if it were squirming to get out of her packed stanzas, before she pulls up short with a joke or breaks off altogether, choosing silence, with new questions floating in the air. A reader might reasonably decide that Prikryl is more interested in keeping meaning to herself than in getting it across. But that would be a mistake.

Prikryl's suspicion of easy self-expression leads her to try on other voices. "The Channel" is full of references to Shakespeare—to "King Lear" in particular, featuring extended monologues by Cordelia and the Fool. (Historically, Cordelia and the Fool could be played by the same actor, and the two truthtellers appear to merge when Lear mourns his daughter at the end of the play, declaring, "My poor fool is hanged.") These monologues are interspersed with short lyrics in what initially seems to be the poet's own voice. But the distinction doesn't hold. From the first, Prikryl mixes her life story into her characters' speeches, while the autobiographical lyrics begin to feel like dramatic monologues in disguise. In the poem "Cliff Notes," Cordelia declares, "Backstage I'm scribbling lyric poems / to prove there is a place where I can be."

The mingling of voices works best when the reader is unsure whether it's Prikryl or Cordelia speaking, and when they seem to speak together. Imagine that "Chorus" is spoken by Cordelia. Then "the others" would be her monstrous older sisters. Remember how the play starts: Goneril and Regan flatter Lear when he demands that they profess their love for him in exchange for a piece of Britain, whereas Cordelia, refusing the transaction, keeps meaning to herself. "What would I do without them," the poem ends. If this is Cordelia talking, it is an admission that her strict truth depends on her sisters' gross blandishments. If we hear it as Prikryl speaking, it is a wry acknowledgment that her style, for all its brio and individuality, is compelled by the poetic clichés she hates and, in that way, owes something to them.

In our era of No Kings rallies, the contemporary political relevance of a mad ruler demanding public displays of fealty is so obvious that Prikryl doesn't need to press the point very hard. Fathers are important in "The Channel," but Prikryl is less interested in Lear than in Cordelia, the banished favorite, who is known as much for what she

PHOTOGRAPH BY DINA LITOVSKY

doesn't say as for what she does. She's something of a missing character in "King Lear"—"an aperture in the story," as Prikryl puts it. When Lear disowns her, the King of France accepts Cordelia as his wife and takes her back to his homeland. She is offstage for much of the play, returning in the fourth act at the head of a French military expedition to rescue her father and restore his rights. These absences give Prikryl room to imagine what Shakespeare leaves unwritten. With titles like "Dover Calais" and "Calais Dover," Prikryl's monologues follow Cordelia back and forth across the English Channel, folding the poet's own journeys into Cordelia's. In "Calais Dover," an army approaches England on a passenger ferry "circa 1992." "Anachronism makes all this possible," the speaker observes.

Prikryl, the executive editor of *The New York Review of Books* (where I've published essays), was born Jana Přikrylová in Czechoslovakia in 1975. Five years later, her parents fled the Communist state with her and her older brother. The family moved first to Austria and then to Canada. This period was "baffling" to the child, as Prikryl has described it. When her parents told her that they would be going to a new country, she asked, "What is a country?" In "The Channel," the cognitive and emotional challenge of crossing borders is captured by Cordelia falling into the English Channel—a slapstick flourish that Prikryl adds to the source text. But Cordelia is not alone in the cold water:

> We passed
> dozens of the not yet drowned putt-putting
> up this way, no time or tongue in common
> but each looked out as in a looking glass.

Imagining this scene, Prikryl recalls an indelible image from the refugee crisis in Europe: "The two-year-old / left face-down on a beach nine years ago / came up for me." The border is a zone of peril and potential death, but also a space of personal transformation. Prikryl says that crossing a border into a new life takes "a special kind / of willing. Assertion without basis / in history, sort of like a person." Leaving one country for another requires an embrace of a life you cannot know in advance. Something similar happens when Prikryl speaks as Cordelia or the Fool. When she takes on another voice, who she is, how she speaks, and what she means change with the crossing.

Prikryl's early dislocations made language feel as fungible to her as national identity. In Austria, German replaced Czech; in Canada, English replaced German. Those shifts may help explain her relish for the oddities and varieties of English. The new collection combines Elizabethan locutions with scientific terms like "siliceous ooze," "vuggy leavings," and "coccolithophores," and sprinkles in French and Czech. "Haiku" is a seven-line poem written entirely in Czech. You can run its unfamiliar letter combinations and diacritical marks through Google Translate, but that's not the point of the prank. Prikryl wants us to confront the raw-material strangeness of language. For a moment, you're as baffled as a five-year-old who has just switched countries.

In "The Knots," one of Cordelia's monologues, Prikryl narrates a visit to her father. Dementia has made Czech more available to him than the English he has spoken fluently for decades. As words fail him, "what's left is tone / a style, the substance that composes him / unmellowed in the light." The juxtaposition of Prikryl's family with Cordelia's reveals the overlap of tragedy, fairy tale, and soap opera. Some memories are warm, almost cozy, as when Prikryl recalls, "So much television / as a family, I loved all kinds / through their eyes, facing the same way." But she hardly idealizes her family history. Another poem asks whether her grandparents were "true / and hurt or never all that nice." Its title, "Some Extra," alludes to Philip Larkin's "This Be the Verse," which begins, "They fuck you up, your mum and dad."

"Letter Home," which follows "Some Extra," starts by calling out to Prikryl's "brother never far, my only / ever nickname did he nick from where"—someone who knows her intimately and gets how she speaks. Midway through, Prikryl's "I" gives way to her brother's. In the book's acknowledgments, she explains that "more than half the lines" in the poem "are drawn from letters that my brother, Voyta, sent me in the early 1990s," making this another experiment in dramatic monologue. By taking on her brother's voice, she reaches out to him and, through him, to her younger self.

Prikryl's first collection of poems, "The After Party" (2016), was dedicated to Voyta, who died in a car accident in 1995. He reappears in "On Seeing the French Alps from a Distance," the final poem in "The Channel." That poem's tension comes from the simple fact that night is approaching. The "Small Hours," as another poem is titled, are the hours after midnight when, if we can't sleep, we're alone with our thoughts and the voices in our heads. Prikryl's Cordelia suffers from insomnia. The night is, you might say, another channel that she must cross. Outside her window, Prikryl sees "mountains folded up like dioramas." It's beautiful "while the summit glows majestic," but the sunset is too much of a cliché to be consoling. It will be dark soon, and Prikryl will be alone.

At midnight, "disarmed" by the view, Prikryl drops the device of Shakespearean monologue and reckons, "I might / be personal." In truth, she has been personal all along, but, until now, she has been defended by various ruses and loose ends. She indulges a fantasy of communicating with someone resembling her brother: "We liaise, distant energies / exchange." A "channel" opens, through which she can reach out and even

> punch him on the shoulder
> and muss his hair because the dead relate
>
> are here for you, are here, or some
> of them, a few.

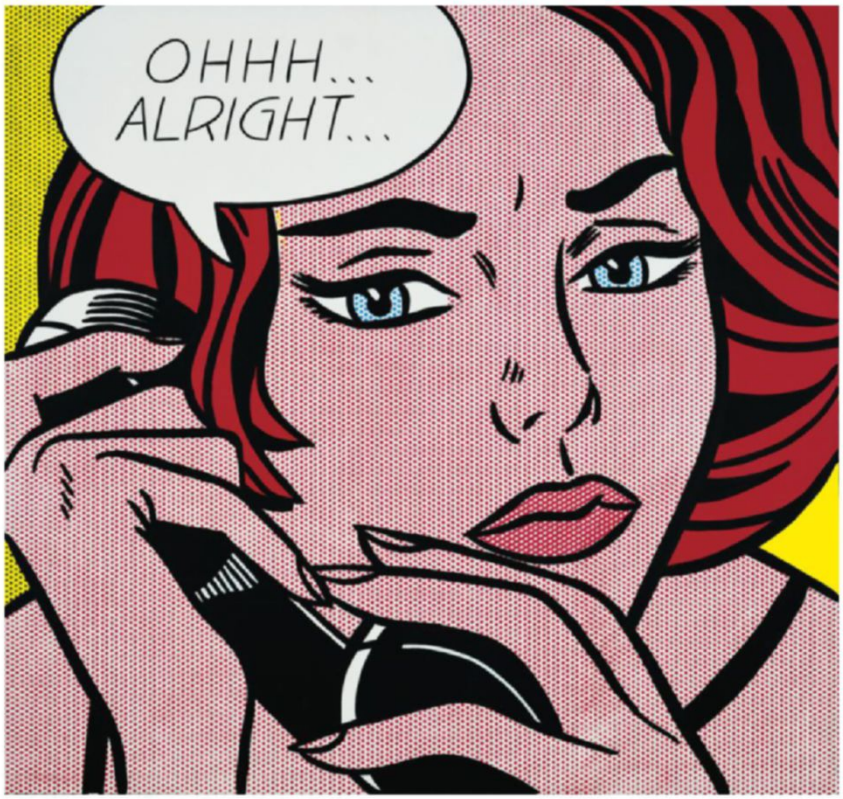
Prikryl initially describes the encounter at a distance: "A passerby notices her brother," imagined as "always older, kinder, with a glamour / fled these thirty years." Of course, the passerby isn't him. The "I" returns with the shock: "I turned away at the first hint / of recognition," feeling "petrified as when / the cable car stops halfway up and swings," like one of her incomplete sentences, left up in the air. Is the intense intimacy she had with her brother, then, impossible to establish with the reader of the poem? No. This time, Prikryl has the words she needs. It was "as if he were the one"—not her, or not only her—"who saw the mountain in the small hours." And you know exactly what she means. ♦

THE ART WORLD

SHINY, HAPPY PEOPLE

Roy Lichtenstein's witty critiques of masculinity.

BY HILTON ALS



"Roy Lichtenstein: Like New" (at the Whitney through May 10th) is a masterpiece of curation and design, an exhibition that positions Lichtenstein as the last happy white man in American art. Organized with esprit and imagination by the artist Alex Da Corte and the curator Meg Onli, it's the first retrospective of Lichtenstein's work in New York since his splash at the Guggenheim in 1993. The show takes up the museum's entire fifth floor and ends as it begins: with the artist's signature brightly colored brushstrokes, lines, and Benday dots causing pleasurable kinetic movements in the mind. Lichtenstein's dynamic style is ubiquitous by now—as are his professional sheen and finish—but that doesn't cancel out his winning charm, which, like most charm, can warm you up or wear you out. At "Like New," you may experience both feelings. It's a show that aims to keep the real world, our gothic political climate included, at bay, while also distracting us from what one might call the grief porn of contemporary art and its constant reminders of our failures as humans.

For years now, the Whitney has foregrounded race- and gender-based political art, and it's a little trippy to walk around this show's pearl-gray-painted rooms, looking at Lichtenstein's Fantastik-clean white world of orderly studios, shiny blondes, and square-jawed men, in a place where white male power has been repeatedly denounced and the sins of past neglect redressed. No one can make up for the past—certainly not by demanding that it be corrected in the present—and it was perhaps inevitable that the Whitney would have to turn, or return, to white men with name recognition to get people back into its galleries post-COVID. Exhibitions devoted to Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol helped, and still fit the Whitney framework: both artists were queer. And although Lichtenstein wasn't gay, there's enough irony about gender in his early work to qualify him as being interestingly gay-adjacent.

Still, it's difficult to entirely undo the way we've been viewing art for a while now, and, after having a great time at "Like New," you may find yourself feeling slightly guilty about it. But one of the more poignant subtexts of the show is that it's a reminder of the New York avant-garde in the sixties, and of what a beautiful, forceful energy there was to its various voices, with Lichtenstein the least dirty and anarchic of them all. There's a sweetness in that, and a sadness, too.

I first spent time with Lichtenstein's work in the early eighties, when I took a class at Columbia on the art of the nineteen-sixties. The professor led us from the glory days of Abstract Expressionism in the fifties, through the emergence of Robert Rauschenberg and Johns by the end of that decade, to this new era in American art. Inspired by Marcel Duchamp and his poetry of the everyday, Rauschenberg and Johns used commonplace objects—a flashlight, a bedspread—in their creations. But artists working under the Pop-art banner in the sixties, including Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, Tom Wesselmann, Marisol, and Warhol, picked at the surface of the world that had made them, in order to show us how much it could reveal about what lay beneath it. You can still feel, in the memorable work produced during that period, the critical embrace of all those dance-lesson diagrams, Campbell's soup cans, ice-cream cones, and Coca-Cola bottles, alongside images of electric chairs, car crashes, and atomic-bomb detonations.

In the Cold War universe, where everyone was isolated and class was defined by the power to acquire (and to oppress), Pop artists painted or sculpted what they saw and heard. The artist's "aura" had no place in those works; instead, Pop art was a kind of supersonic whistle heralding the disasters to come, that had already come. But unlike, for instance, Rosenquist, in such charged political pieces as "F-111" (1964-65), which

ROY LICHTENSTEIN / © ESTATE OF ROY LICHTENSTEIN / DACS 2026

juxtaposes consumer objects with missiles, Lichtenstein made work that was less about conscience than about control, and the eradication of mess, of feeling.

Lichtenstein became Lichtenstein in 1961, when he made "Look Mickey." He had flirted with cartoon characters before then, but "Look Mickey" took things further. Four feet by nearly six, the painting features the brightest of reds, blues, and yellows. In it, Mickey Mouse and the bombastic Donald Duck are standing on a dock, fishing. Mickey covers his laughing mouth because Donald thinks he's hooked a fish, but the hook is caught on his own coat. The delight of the painting is the pleasure that Lichtenstein took in the joke—and in this new way of making work that was both free and not free of the artist's hand. (In the age of Pop, achieving an automated look was part of the process.)

Decades before Richard Prince made his fantastic and forlorn cartoon paintings, Lichtenstein was already exploring the idea of entertainment and raising questions: If cartoons were a form of entertainment, was painting a cartoon a form of entertainment, too? Was modern art a put-on? Or something that could be put on? One question that the Whitney show didn't answer for me was how Lichtenstein got to cartoons, and then to his comic-strip paintings, with their speech balloons, women in distress, and silent men—whose reserve makes us wonder if their creator was a silent man, too.

Born in 1923, into an upper-middle-class German Jewish family in New York, Lichtenstein grew up on the Upper West Side, with easy access to museums and other cultural institutions. He loved music and art, and in 1940 he enrolled at Ohio State University, where he studied life drawing, painting, and the work of the masters, including Picasso. If he insisted on pursuing art, his parents felt, it would be good for him to get a degree, in case he had to teach to get by.

The Whitney retrospective includes "Drawing by Seeing," a short film about Lichtenstein's artistic education, made by Da Corte, whose own work includes video, performance, and installations, driven by the kind of avant-gardism that Lichtenstein espoused for a time. The film is shot in color, but with the performers and their costumes colored a "Twilight Zone" gray. It features a voice-over drawn from a text by Hoyt L. Sherman, Lichtenstein's teacher and mentor at Ohio State. Sherman's work centered on perception; he'd flash an image on a screen and then have his students draw what they had seen. Or hadn't. Da Corte's film also animates some of Lichtenstein's early works, including "Step-on Can with Leg" (1961), a two-panel painting that shows a woman's high-heeled foot stepping on the pedal of a closed garbage can, and then the same image with the lid open. Like Warhol, in "Before and After," a study of a nose job, also from 1961, Lichtenstein was interested in how time can be represented in a static medium, thus changing how we see a thing, or making us realize that we weren't really looking.

Lichtenstein's studies were interrupted when he was drafted, in 1943, but he returned in 1946 to finish his degree on the G.I. Bill. By 1949, he was married to the artist Isabel Wilson Sarisky, with whom he had two sons. (Divorced in 1965, he married Dorothy Herzka, a philanthropist, in 1968.) Lichtenstein, shy and reclusive, was a responsible fellow; he supported his family by teaching, while making art that was at first representational, then a little abstract, not terribly distinguished. The breakthrough came in 1960, when he was teaching at Douglass College (which later became part of Rutgers), where he met the performance artist Allan Kaprow, who introduced him to Claes Oldenburg and George Segal, artists who were as taken with the look and signs of masculinity as Lichtenstein was. (Oldenburg's 1959 work " 'Empire' ('Papa') Ray Gun," for instance, plays on the phallic shape of a firearm.) Surely the freedom that Lichtenstein saw in those sculptors' work and at Kaprow's "happenings" helped to release him and open him up to his strongest qualities as an artist: his interest in gender and his amused wit.

Lichtenstein's wonderful early work "Masterpiece" (1962) still makes me laugh. In it, a couple are looking at a canvas. The woman, a blonde, has a speech balloon issuing from her red lips: "Why, Brad darling, this painting is a masterpiece! My, soon you'll have all of New York clamoring for your work!" The man is silent, only partially visible, in profile; the woman is our focus. She may be the kind of woman who needs her man to be a success, in order to validate her power as a woman, one who, unlike Donald Duck, *has* caught a big one. It's a joke on the bright and shiny, profit-driven art world, where nothing resonates like success. Among other great early works, there's the funny, 'tude-filled "Ohhh . . . Alright . . ." (1964)—a closeup of a red-haired woman on the phone, looking slightly annoyed as she speaks the title—and "Drowning Girl" (1963), in which a blue-haired woman with tears falling from her closed eyes drowns as much in misbegotten love as in a swirl of black-and-white waves. A thought bubble reads, "I don't care! I'd rather sink—than call Brad for help!"

These are not really paintings about distress or isolation. They're about fake feelings in a manufactured world. What was real in Pop? What wasn't? I liked these works so much when I was younger, and still do, because, for me, Lichtenstein was at his strongest when he wasn't just a straight man but, rather, a Warhol-adjacent straight man who could critique both masculinity and the self-consciously feminine. The truth is that when Lichtenstein stopped painting "gay," I stopped looking. From the seventies on, in work that seemed influenced by Léger, Matisse, Picasso, and others, he appeared to be more at play with the straight boys than questioning their performative creativity. (The Whitney curators have put some of the gay back into his work by treating it as a kind of exquisite California-modern decoration; all that's missing are gray throw pillows.) Still, at the end of the show, I stood by Da Corte's replica of Lichtenstein's enormous 1967 work "Super Sunset Billboard," which shows a horizon and, above it, white streams of light shooting up and out, like klieg lights announcing a show. The painting *is* the show. Da Corte and Onli have placed the piece in front of a wall of windows overlooking the Hudson; it's a calming, lovely thing to see a "real" sky echoing Lichtenstein's. It's also a thrilling and moving coda to his work—so much so that I got goosebumps. It was the first time I'd ever thought of goosebumps as Benday dots. ♦

MUSICAL EVENTS

GHOST WORLD

"Lincoln in the Bardo," at the Met.

BY NATHAN HELLER



Missy Mazzoli's sixth opera adapts George Saunders's novel.

A measure of vitality in opera—or any creative form—is the number of interesting artists it carries into the open space of mid-career. The innovations of early work are frequently flukes. The middle years bring longer strides and deepening ambitions. The sixth opera by the forty-six-year-old American composer Missy Mazzoli premièred, last month, at the Metropolitan Opera, with an air of arrival that seemed leavened by relief. Mazzoli, once best known for her indie-electro band, Victoire, has emerged as one of our leading dramatic composers, and the opera, "Lincoln in the Bardo," written with her longtime librettist, Royce Vavrek, is both her first Met commission and the company's first première by a woman. An occasion like that deserves a charismatic, openhearted work, and Mazzoli and Vavrek deliver one in the form of a comedy with a melancholy guise. Based on the novel by George Saunders and set a year into the Civil War, the opera follows Abraham Lincoln as he visits his deceased eleven-year-old, Willie, in the cemetery where the boy lies amid restless ghosts. The President has not resigned himself to the death, and neither has his son.

"Bardo" is a Tibetan term, referring to an intermediate state following death, but its assonance with the English "bard"—one who recites, or sings, tales of lives and deeds—can't have been lost on Saunders. The residents of the graveyard rehash their pasts obsessively, ritualistically, and all the time. In a basic sense, they can't let go; they linger, fretting about experiences never tasted, errors left unremedied, vindications not received. Their self-absorption is so great that they do not realize they are dead. (They think they're convalescing.) They refer to their coffins as "sick-boxes" and complain, like captious hostel guests, about the lack of blankets.

Opera is a hybrid form, allowing for storytelling approaches not available to the novel. In the early scenes, Mazzoli and Vavrek weave two supporting characters, Vollman and Bevins, into a single aria of aggrievement. Vollman, a homely middle-aged printer (sung by the baritone Ryan McKinny), was on the verge of consummating his marriage when a falling beam killed him. Now he rests in a purgatorial state of sexual excitement, fitted onstage with a buffa penis that disturbingly resembles a piñata. (The appendage, lofted by a valiant puppeteer, is briefly played for laughs and never seen again.) Bevins, sung by the tenor Jonah Hoskins, is a young gay man who slit his wrists after being jilted by a lover. His song is an overwrought lament of curlicues and tortured intervals dancing around Vollman's squarer line, for an effect both dreamlike and uncanny. Their two complaints—love without sex and sex without love—mark a barycenter of human loss, the stuff of operatic duets.

Elsewhere in the Bardo we find three Black people who had lived through slavery and were buried in coffinless graves, and a ghoulish pair of boozy sadists, Mr. and Mrs. Baron, imagined somewhere between the Dickensian and the Dahlian as they teeter in a sick, odd-meter duet. But the heart of this production is the dramatic soprano Christine Goerke, who plays a deceased clergyman known as the Reverend. Goerke is a wonderful actress, funny and free, who can project irony while projecting her voice. The bravura aria that Mazzoli gives her at the start of the second act—soaring and droll, and slowly intensifying—is a musical delight. In another gender-swapped role, the celebrated countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo plays Miss Elise Traynor, a fourteen-year-old trapped in the Bardo. Her lilting, clucking vocal line may not contribute much to Costanzo's musical reputation, but the part adds mightily to his repertoire of outré costuming, which includes singing Philip Glass's "Akhnaten" nude. Miss Traynor—a kind of nightmare version of the Queen of the Night—appears swathed

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELE CASTELLANO

in an enormous, mildewing white dress, its hems nibbled by rubber pig heads. She's a cautionary tale of what awaits children who "tarry" in this world of irresolution, and the dramatic arc of the opera follows Bevins, Vollman, and the Reverend's scheme to compel the President and his son to move on.

To Lincoln, Willie's death is weighted with the Civil War. "I have exported this grief / three thousand times," he laments. When he enters the crypt and embraces his son's corpse, his shirtfront glows and throbs like a linked Bluetooth device—the way the production, directed with a marvellous contemporary edge by Lileana Blain-Cruz, signals Saunders's concept of "occupation," in which ghosts enter living people and their thoughts. The Swedish baritone Peter Mattei, who sings Lincoln, is tall and rightly renowned for his rich, unmuddy voice, here channelled into plausible Midwestern vowels. Yet his aspect onstage, vexed and exercised and diligently in tempo, is nearer in spirit to the Wagnerian mountaintops than to the lonely terrors of a plainsman, and the dazzling performance he delivers ends up seeming less specific than so singular an opera might call for.

Mazzoli, who has trained as a death doula, is known for burrowing deep into specific worlds. (For the reputation-making "Breaking the Waves," based on the Lars von Trier movie, she and Vavrek studied the language and the music of the Scottish Highlands.) In "Lincoln in the Bardo," she has produced a rich twenty-first-century score with musical shadows of both the Civil War era and the Halloween graveyard, opening with a spooky stacked minor tone cluster (made spookier by knitting needles rattling the percussion) and extending to gorgeous snatches of chocolatey writing in the low brass, befitting a bereaved President. The orchestra, under the direction of Yannick Nézet-Séguin, comes at this music with terrific confidence, delivering the sort of fully conceived performance that rarely awaits brand-new work (and only occasionally overpowering the singers). Mazzoli's setting of text can be a mixed bag; her melodies now and then seem to take a purgatorial path themselves, patiently cycling among set intervals when the ear, and the libretto, might wish them to move. But the intelligence of her dramatic writing haunts the score. She makes much of big glissandos, in which the men and women of the chorus slide together through a scale, like a winding siren. Heading upward, these slides impart moments of ecstatic, unworldly levitation. Sent downward, they plummet us into the earth.

Saunders's novel mixes his characters' epitaph-like accounts of their lives and other dialogue with real text from the historical record, blurring the boundary between speech, which rises in living time, and writing, which exists outside it. The page, we are meant to see, is an inherently ghostly place, at once a paltry shadow of the world it describes and a realm of empathetic reach. The written word, like the Bardo, carries both life, in all its specificity and imperfection, and abstractions of the sort that might define a nation, affording people trapped within themselves a chance to step into other points of view. In a climactic effort to enjoin Willie and the President to go on without each other, the spirits—not least Thomas Havens, a Black freedman, movingly sung by the young tenor Joshua Blue—gather in an effort to occupy Lincoln together. Union is the governing metaphor, and, in the book, it's a union carried by the intermingling of voice and text, of varied experience and inky phrase. "Lincoln in the Bardo," published in the first weeks of the first Trump Administration, today reads distinctly as a novel of the Obama years.

Despite an occasional groan of narrative machinery, Vavrek ably repaces Saunders's story line and carries its texty voices into song. Gnarled, consonant-laden phrases such as "conjoined, mass-minded, positive intention" and "two passing temporarinesses" are hard to say, let alone sing. They are retained here as if to underscore the messy peculiarity of the world left behind. The language of the afterlife, by contrast, seems flat and stutteringly insistent: "Lingering lingering lingering," the dead intone. "Worthy worthy worthy." In one of the opera's lovelier ensemble arias, the ghosts praise "the things of the world," enumerating the small, sticky details that they miss from human existence: "beerfroth," "toweling off one's clinging shirt post June rain." Language, like irresolution, is a thing that belongs to the living world. ♦

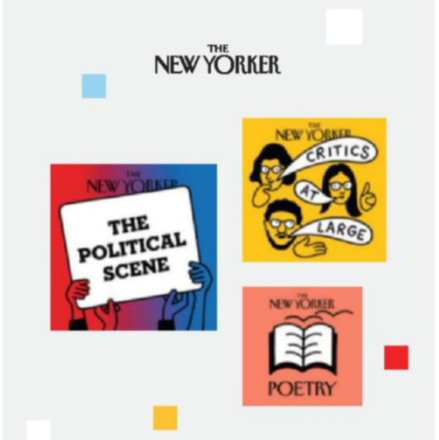


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THE CURRENT CINEMA

SUBTROPIC OF CANCER

"Wild Horse Nine."

BY JUSTIN CHANG

The first time John Malkovich played a killer trained by the C.I.A., he was a man of many disguises, elusive and unpredictable as the wind. The film was "In the Line of Fire" (1993), and his character, nicknamed Booth, was a psychotically disgruntled agency alum, plotting to murder the President with a custom-built plastic gun and a bullet that he stored in a rabbit's foot. His other weapon was his voice, at once coldly precise and dangerously soft; never before had Malkovich's distinctly odd cadences sounded so menacing. Booth spent a lot of time on the phone, taunting a veteran Secret Service agent (Clint Eastwood) about his failure, decades earlier, to protect John F. Kennedy. "Late at night, when the demons come, do you see the rifle coming out of that window?" he drawled. "Or do you see Kennedy's head being blown apart?"



Sam Rockwell and John Malkovich star in Martin McDonagh's film.

That tragedy looms heavily, but also with an air of jokey inconsequence, over "Wild Horse Nine," a new film written and directed by Martin McDonagh. It begins in 1973, in Santiago, Chile, where Chris Carlisle (Malkovich), a longtime C.I.A. operative, is stationed. Early on, he reminisces about the popularly elected regimes that he's toppled, from Guatemala to Congo, and—here his voice drops to a low murmur—acknowledges a prominent role in the Kennedy assassination. Yet, despite this dabbling in POTUS-cide, Chris is something of an anti-Booth; he has too much debonair wit, too much bon-vivant style. He and his loyal protégé, Lee Chesterfield (Sam Rockwell), are headed to Easter Island for a week, and Chris, looking dandy in bright-colored neckties and a porkpie hat, has no use for disguises. As for a rabbit's foot, forget it: Chris's luck has run out. He's dying of cancer and has decided that Easter Island will be his last hurrah. He wants Lee, whose marksmanship he trusts as much as his friendship, to hasten his departure.

Lee, whose frequent exasperation with Chris is a sure sign of love, has his own problems back home in the U.S., chiefly a "drunk wife who fucks clowns." That's Chris's odd, harsh appraisal, and it is repeated, mirthlessly, when we finally meet said wife (Parker Posey), badgering Lee over the phone. Whenever McDonagh hits a stale comic patch like this, he retreats swiftly into the trappings of plot: Lee is understandably less than thrilled about Chris's instant-death wish, but, by all appearances, M.J. (a cranky Steve Buscemi), the C.I.A.'s South American bureau chief, already has a finger on the trigger. Chris, often strung out on morphine, his memory and his wits addled by cancer, has become a jaw-flapping liability.

Despite the far-flung setting and the spy-thriller machinations, then, we are in terrain that McDonagh knows all too well: the bloody buddy comedy. Like his film "In Bruges" (2008), "Wild Horse Nine" follows two hit men on holiday, and, like "The Banshees of Inisherin" (2022), it conjures the verdant magic of a remote island setting. Yet the flavor of the proceedings is markedly different. In "Inisherin," a bitter clash between two friends, played by Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson (who both also starred in "In Bruges"), felt exquisitely of a piece with the local elements: the mists, the jagged rocks, the salty tang of the sea. The outdoors lent a wry, soulful grandeur to the characters' expletive-riddled bickering.

There are profanities aplenty in "Wild Horse Nine," as there are in all McDonagh's movies and plays. (Cut out the F-bombs and most of them would run barely an hour.) And the vast expanse of Easter Island, majestically filmed by the cinematographer Ben Davis, is astonishing to behold. (Lee himself can't resist filming with a Super 8 camera, and his grainy images add welcome blips of texture.) Feral horses roam the landscape, and they give the movie both its title and its desired genre: McDonagh strives for the laconic sweep of a classic Western. But not all material can command a space this vast, and I suspect that John Ford himself might have struggled to wring much poetry from Chris and Lee, two ugly-American blowhards wisecracking their way around paradise. Really, the shenanigans could have been transplanted anywhere: picture two guys farting at Stonehenge for an hour or two, only to realize, like the ancients before them, that it makes an awfully nice burial ground.

Within such comedic confines, and

ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTIAN HAMMERSTAD

with a surprising dearth of violent mayhem, "Wild Horse Nine" strains for thematic expansiveness. Ostensibly, the film is about the mixed blessings of friendship, the soul-corroding nature of violence, the horrors of U.S. foreign policy, the possibility of redemption, and the inescapability of death. But it's the stiffest, least cohesive film on those subjects you could imagine. McDonagh organizes his scenes into thematic blocks, and whenever he loses interest in one block he simply switches, mechanically, to the next. The conversations that he's written for Chris and Lee toggle between humor and pathos, between self-satisfied snark and self-conscious elegy, and there's barely a moment when you don't hear the grinding of tonal gears. (You hear it in the music, too; the Rolling Stones' "Out of Time" isn't the subtlest of needle drops.)

McDonagh's dialogue is famed for its staccato crackle, but here he slows the characters' rhythms, as if to accommodate the diminution of Chris's body and mind, and packs dead air around everyone's lines. Yet within those rhythms Malkovich does locate odd, narcotized flashes of poetry. His voice is lower and shakier than usual, and the gleam in his eyes sometimes goes ambiguously dull: are Chris's mental lapses real, or part of some long con? Chris hasn't lost his saucy erudition; one of his funnier bits is a mid-breakfast monologue on why "gay countries," like France, produce the highest-quality cheeses. But he seems on precarious ground, no longer certain of his punch lines. He is also rediscovering the guilt and terror of his Catholic upbringing, and he wonders if, after a life spent overthrowing democracies—the coup that will depose President Salvador Allende is in the offing—he has a chance in hell of entering Heaven.

Easter Island is, of course, dotted with towering volcanic-stone figures with large, elongated faces. Chris and Lee refer to them as "the big heads," and when a tourist couple gently note that the Indigenous term is "moai," Lee erupts in fury—though Rockwell, who's good at modulating an explosion, makes clear that Lee is exaggerating his rage for Chris's benefit. Earlier, at the Santiago airport, they had an awkward run-in with two Chilean college students, Monica (Mariana di Girolamo) and Alicia (Ailín Salas), one of whom explained that the Indigenous name for Easter Island is Rapa Nui. "You shouldn't even know the word 'Indigenous' at your age," Chris replied.

It's telling that McDonagh hammers the word "Indigenous" repeatedly and contemptuously—as opposed to, say, "local" or "Polynesian." Back in the seventies, the term was less prevalent in English than it is today, but McDonagh, not for the first time, is eager to mock the language of the contemporary liberal scold. Farrell's "In Bruges" character wasted no opportunity to call a dwarf a midget; in "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri" (2017), McDonagh's most pugnacious and polarizing work, Rockwell played a racist cop, annoyed that "persons of color" had replaced his favorite epithet. You could argue, I suppose, that a film shouldn't be reduced to its characters' politics. But, by now, it's hard to assume that these smug linguistic sensitivities—wielded only, of course, in response to *other* people's smug linguistic sensitivities—belong to anyone other than McDonagh himself. And they speak to the narrow view that he takes of his chosen setting and the harrowing historical episode into which he's seen fit to shoehorn his characters.

"Three Billboards" hinged on the racist cop's reformation, and "Wild Horse Nine," with less outrageousness and more finesse, undertakes its own dubiously reconstructive exercise. Despite its misanthropic pose, the film wants very badly for us to like and even love Chris, to find him as charming as he is cancel-worthy. Chris regards his role in the deaths and disappearances of thousands of innocents with a weary shrug—and, on rare dark nights of the soul, a piddling note of regret. At one point, he notes his incongruous fondness for the local insects. "Sometimes I feel like I care more about the moths of Chile," he says, "than I do about the people of Chile."

McDonagh grants us a touristic view of Chile masquerading as a geopolitical one, and his dramatic aims are as obvious and limited as his emotional agenda. We're meant to find Chris pitiable because of his diagnosis, and we're meant to find him redeemable when he offers sincere advice to the naïvely idealistic Monica, warning her of the forthcoming horrors of the Pinochet regime. The final passages of "Wild Horse Nine" are at once swift and interminable, the action-thriller elements snapping into place at last, only to be hijacked by an exceedingly long goodbye. You can't accuse McDonagh of not knowing his priorities; we are to shed bountiful tears for Chris, with perhaps a few to spare for his collateral damage. Some of us may be forgiven for resisting the invitation. I remained dry of eye—and rooted for the cancer. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby, must be received by Sunday, November 8th. The finalists in the October 26th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the November 23rd 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



"Tastes like regular spice to me."
Juan E. Garcia, Seattle, Wash.

"Actually, I did fall off the wagon."
Izabela Kline, Burbank, Calif.

"Looks like I'll be sleeping on the porch tonight."
Vincent Coca, Staten Island, N.Y.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"We will now deplane by conservation status."
Etan Berkowitz, Seattle, Wash.



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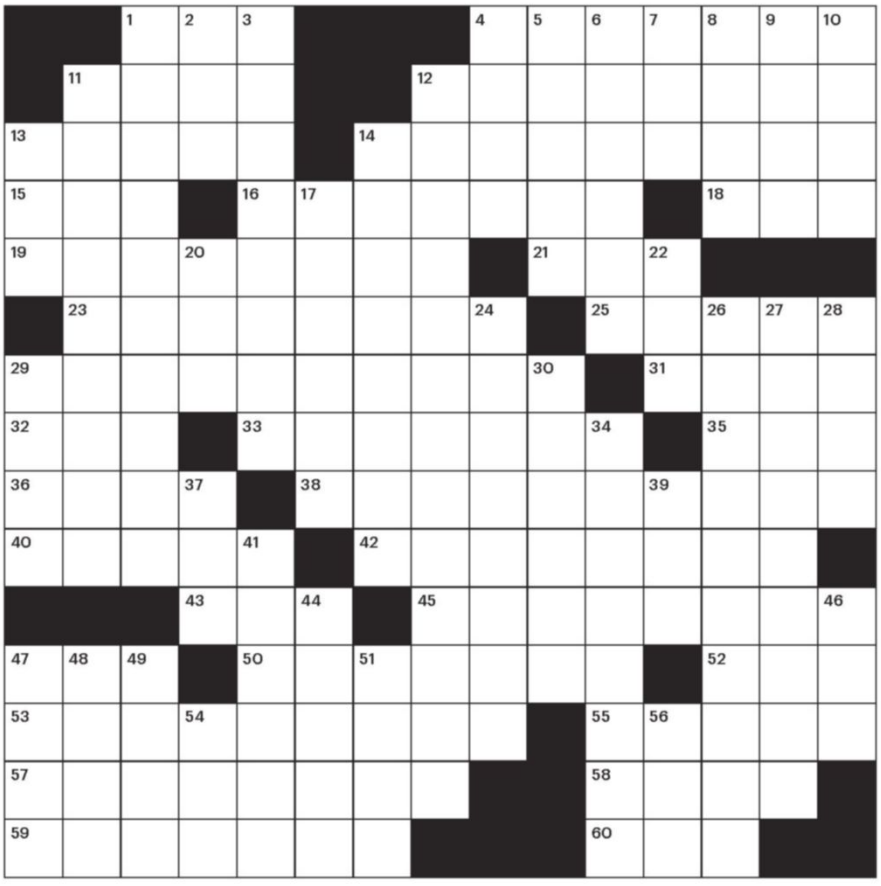
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PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY PAOLO PASCO



ACROSS

1 Many a Scott Joplin composition
4 Low-cost lodging options
11 Lack of hassle
12 Going for the gold
13 Famous, but not *that* famous
14 Song by the Knack whose title follows a stuttered "m-m-m-"
15 Muscles that might hurt after laughing
16 Embarrassed
18 Brewery vessel
19 What a placebo may have
21 Mishap for an origami artist
23 Forest seen in "Platoon"
25 Set one's sights on
29 Fifth wheels?
31 ___ Alto
32 The facilities, briefly
33 Outfit with joggers?
35 Mop & ___ (floor-cleaner brand)
36 They're exchanged at weddings
38 Like people's relationships to their favorite streamers, maybe
40 Vowellessly named art collective behind Lil Nas X's Satan Shoes
42 Niagara Falls or Rhine Falls, e.g.
43 Sound from an inebriated person, in cartoons
45 Dr. Seuss's "tiny Who daughter / Who'd got out of bed for a cup of cold water"
47 I.S.P. that merged with Time Warner in 2001
50 Antagonist of "The Wheel of Time," with "the"
52 Gerund suffix
53 Album-cover color that Charli XCX has called "actually quite disgusting"
55 Dressing that became virally beloved by some 2026 World Cup tourists
57 Person of faith
58 "The Oscar" actress Sommer
59 "You just got burned!"
60 Burn

DOWN

1 Cause chaos
2 Biblical beast of burden
3 Fervently pursue
4 Stillness
5 Cause to feel alienated
6 Citi Field and Fenway Park, for two
7 The Blue Jays, on scoreboards
8 Furry "Star Wars" creature
9 The High ___ (elevated public park in New York)
10 Unexpected problem
11 Joint protectors for skateboarders
12 Crunchy morsel eaten with chili or clam chowder
13 Outlaw
14 Island in Lake Huron where personal automobiles are not allowed
17 Shabby
20 Balsam ___ (Christmas-tree option)
22 One of twenty-one on a standard die
24 "No ___" ("The shared last name is a coincidence")
26 URLs that provide passwordless authentication
27 Suddenly
28 Screwdriver, e.g.
29 Like unfavorable odds
30 "Valley of the Dolls" author Jacqueline
34 Was adjacent to
37 Movie-theatre admonition
39 Island formed by a coral reef
41 Use a stim toy, say
44 Create, as a tiki
46 Verbal equivalent of an eye roll
47 Shortened wd.
48 Cookie-inspired name for a black-and-white dog or cat
49 "I'm not listeni-i-ing!"
51 Harmonica component
54 "___ a consummation / Devoutly to be wish'd": "Hamlet"
56 Boxer Laila who retired undefeated

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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