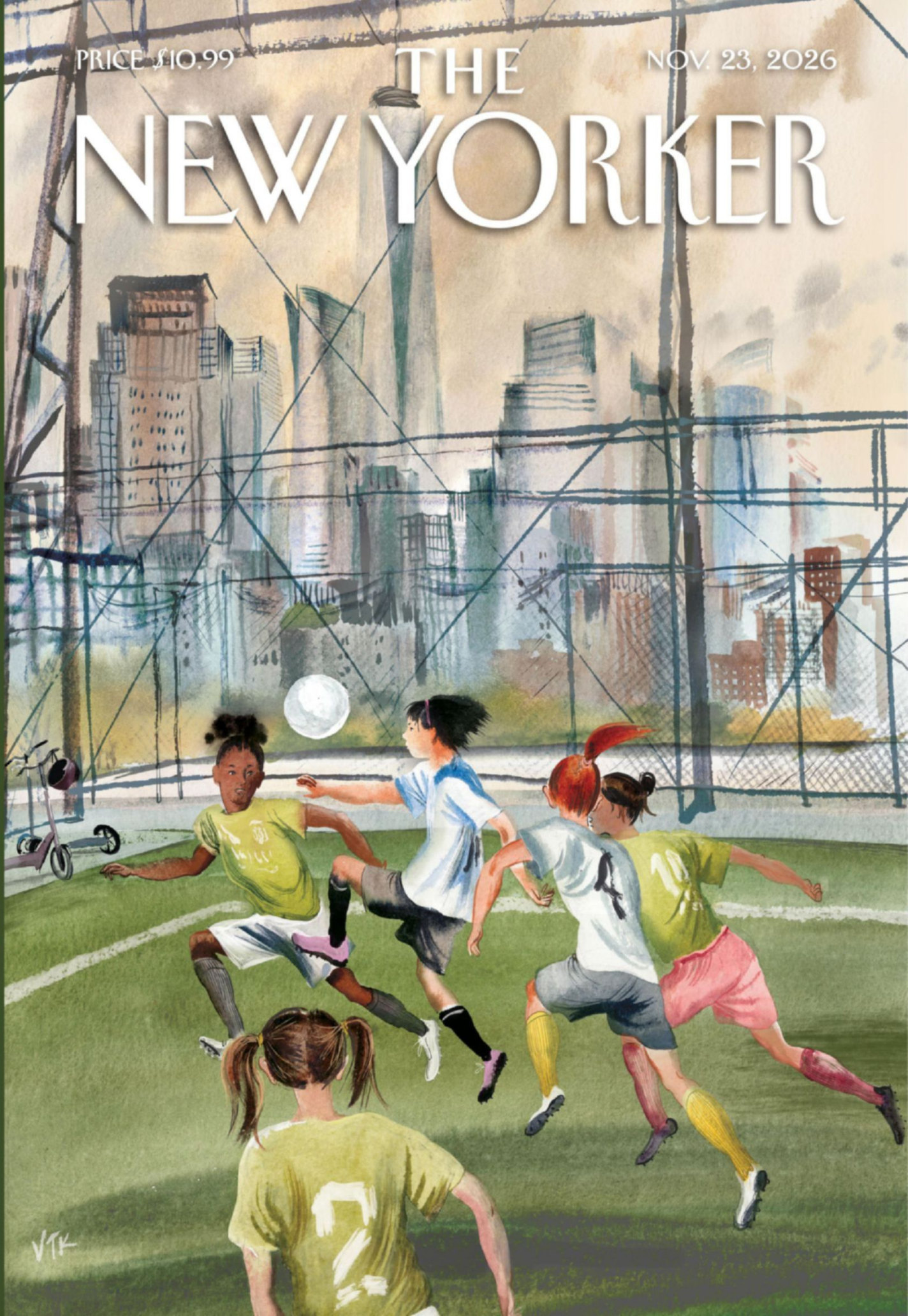
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WEEKEND ESSAY



Escaping Gaza
By Mohammed Mhawish

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GOINGS ON

NOVEMBER 18 – 24, 2026

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

If earning the endorsement of Taylor Swift is a precursor to becoming a monocultural force, the singer-songwriter **sombr** is well on his way. Since the twenty-one-year-old artist became a TikTok sensation turned industry success story, Swift has raved about his songwriting, and it's easy to understand why sombr's style has resonated with her, and with so many others. He embodies the open-book transparency of a post-Swift pop sphere, and his songs prize the spilled guts of first-person abjection, boiling down big feelings to something transferrable. His début album, "I Barely Know Her," from last year, zeroed in on a pop-rock sound that is both flamboyant and subdued, full of sweeping statements on intimacy, its star in constant search of connection.—*Sheldon Pearce (Madison Square Garden; Nov. 23-24.)*



ILLUSTRATION BY VALENTIN TKACH

ABOUT TOWN

DANCE | Before Merce Cunningham died, in 2009, he stipulated that his company would shut down after he was gone. People began thinking of ways to keep the ideas behind his pioneering work alive. **"In Conversation with Merce"** is one such response, a chance for young choreographers to create something inspired by one of Cunningham's dances. Its fourth installment starts with his 1968 piece "RainForest," in which dancers contended with an installation, designed by Andy Warhol, littered with Mylar balloons. Artists include the exceptional Ailey dancer Chalvar Monteiro; Chaery Moon, formerly of Ballet de l'Opéra de Lyon, which has a long association with Cunningham's work; and the independent filmmaker Alex Munro, who in 2023 filmed a staging of Cunningham's "Beach Birds."—*Marina Harss (Baryshnikov Arts Center; Nov. 19-21.)*

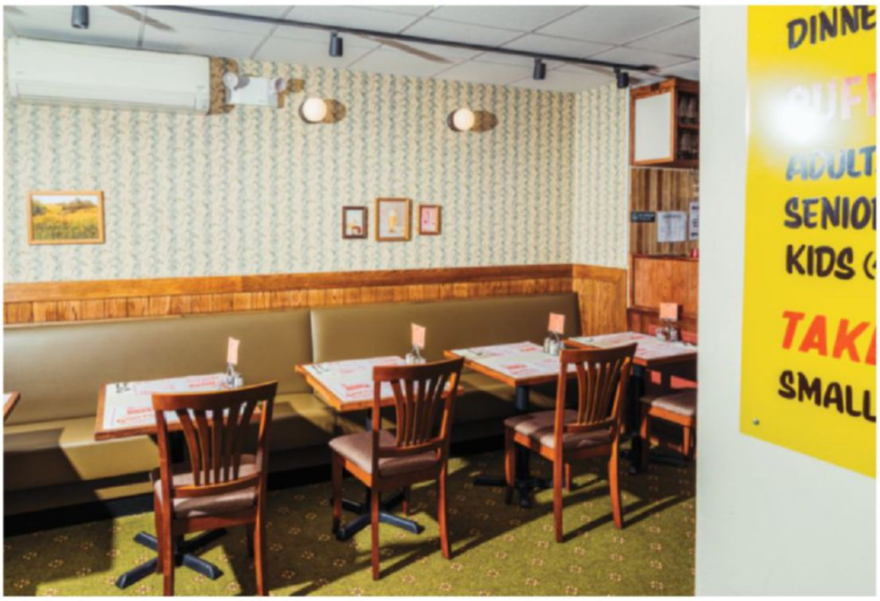
OFF BROADWAY | Clifford Odets's 1935 drama **"Waiting for Lefty,"** set at a cabdrivers'-union meeting where the rank and file are pushing to strike, is fittingly egalitarian in structure. Scenes of the increasingly heated meeting alternate with members' backstories: Joe (Raffi Barsoumian) has been pressured by his fed-up wife (Tala Ashe) to demand pay they can live on; Benjamin's (Adam Kantor) Jewishness cost him his previous job, as a doctor. This revival—the actor Steven Pasquale's directing début—also employs folk-music numbers, hauntingly sung by the duo Yeller Tooth, and dramatic choreography. But, despite its ambitiousness and uniformly moving performances, the production speaks only obliquely to our era of gig economics and driverless taxis.—*Dan Stahl (Classic Stage Company; through Dec. 6.)*

OFF BROADWAY | Nick Payne's **"The Unbelievers"** is a quiet, wrenching play about a horrible event: a fifteen-year-old boy, Oscar, has disappeared. Cops hunt for him; true-crime buffs fixate. His family is left in limbo, which makes closure impossible. Slowly, his chipper, hypervigilant mother, Miriam (an outstanding Lauren Ambrose, vibrating like a struck antenna), slips into obsession. Using subtle lighting changes, the show shuffles three eras—the days after Oscar disappeared, one year later, and seven years later—to capture the muddle of trauma. Sensitively directed by Knud Adams, for Manhattan Theatre Club, the drama builds toward small showdowns, like the world's most frightening hug, but it too often replicates the problem inside Miriam's head—a static, numbing loop. Even so, the play is full of strong performances, among them Tom Riley, as Oscar's bewildered father, orbiting his ex-wife like a cautious satellite.—*Emily Nussbaum (New York City Center Stage I; through Nov. 29.)*

JAZZ | For the past decade, the British jazz group **Ezra Collective** has redrawn the bounds of jazz fusion with a borderless examination of the U.K.'s distinctly multicultural experience, holistically incorporating sounds from Jamaica (dancehall, reggae), West Africa (Afrobeat), and its own home base (grime). The Mercury Prize-winning record "Where I'm Meant to Be," from 2022, established the grandness of the group's vision; the band's latest album, "Here Because of Hope," is a more deliberate meditation on its many sonic influences, building a three-act structure to reflect upon the pain at the heart of even the liveliest music from across the Black diaspora.—*Sheldon Pearce (Webster Hall; Nov. 18.)*

ART | In "Distension," an exhibition of photographs by **Olivia Reavey,** the men and women aren't nude; they're naked, and as undefended as the bodies in police-evidence pictures. Many of the images appear ruined or distressed, as if rescued from the trash, and nearly all of them are unframed and tacked to the wall. Reavey teases eroticism—giving several of her female subjects lengths of carved wood to display between their legs—while exploring it compulsively. One of her biggest pieces double-exposes a woman's and a man's bare legs, aligned so it appears that they share a blunt erection. Reavey taps into the avant-garde spirit of Man Ray and Pierre Molinier, then punks it up. Every image feels as immediate and subversive as a bulletin from the underground.—*Vince Aletti (Thomas Erben; through Dec. 19.)*

MOVIES | **"Dragonwyck,"** the director Joseph L. Mankiewicz's first film, from 1946, is a gothic drama, set in upstate New York in the eighteen-forties, that features Vincent Price in one of his earliest macabre roles. Miranda Wells (Gene Tierney), the daughter of a pious farmer, enters service as a nanny in the lavish (and haunted) Hudson Valley mansion of Nicholas van Ryn (Price), a distant cousin. Van Ryn has designs on Miranda and plans to marry her—once he disposes of his wife. The surrounding action involves real, contemporary events in New York State's violent Anti-Rent War; Mankiewicz deftly parses the characters' political psychology, along with their lurid love stories. The film, with its blend of ideological debates and gruesome mysteries, plays like a fusion of Poe and Tocqueville.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*



PHOTOGRAPH BY JANICE CHUNG FOR THE NEW YORKER (TOP); COURTESY EL DESEO / SONY PICTURES (BOTTOM)

TABLES FOR TWO

Good Time Country Buffet
166 First Avenue

The country buffet is a genre of restaurant defined by its all-you-can-eat business model and by its steam-table offerings. It is often found in a strip mall, is generally decorated for utility more than for charm, and almost always has a carpeted dining room, for the same reason that its fixed-price menu generally includes a senior discount: its most devoted customers are old; the carpet's friction helps anchor unsteady feet. David Yun, Yong Min Kim, and Steve Choi, the trio of restaurateurs behind the Manhattan restaurants Kisa and C as in Charlie, hail from the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. Many of the buffets in the area were run by Korean immigrants, and the three grew up eating and working in them. Good Time Country Buffet is a monument to nostalgia: in its every obsessive detail it's a hoary old Georgia country buffet, even though it's barely been there a month.

A host will direct you into a tidy dining room lined with booths and tables. You sit. You confirm with a server your intent to eat. Then you head to the buffet, which occupies a fluorescent-lit area at the back of the space. As at any decent country buffet, dinner is unlimited. The centerpiece dish is fried chicken, which is unreservedly excellent, with a thin, crackly batter and beautifully seasoned meat. There are plenty of other options beneath the sneeze guards as well, most of more unremarkable quality: ovoid meatballs of Salisbury steak in a salty gravy, Buffalo wings in a tangy-hot sauce, and all the usual sides and trimmings of a Southern-style feast.

New York's unlimited-buffet scene—lunchtime spreads at Indian restaurants, a handful of sprawling Chinese banquets—was never terribly robust, and it became even less so during the years of the pandemic and its attendant hygiene concerns. Much of the thrill of Good Time is just the familiar pleasures of the format, the giddiness of absurd plenitude. But a simulacrum this faithful cannot be easily placed along a spectrum of "good" and "bad." It might even break beyond the boundaries of "restaurant" and start creeping—campily, postmodernishly—toward art. Take the meat loaf, for example, which was very bad: crumbly briquettes of beef with a desultory ketchup glaze. But, as part of a meticulous reconstruction of a type of eatery known for mediocre food, does its badness actually count as a mark of success?

In the end, it doesn't really matter, because any customer who walks in will pay a decent price for decent food, smiling service, a fun soundtrack. How could they feel anything but happy? On one of my visits, a pair of older ladies at a nearby table realized that they were in a restaurant that was referencing other restaurants—that they were, in effect, dining inside quotation marks. "Oh, but what's the difference!" one of them exclaimed, reaching for another golden chicken thigh. *(Buffet $26.99.)*

—Helen Rosner

WHAT WE'RE WATCHING

Richard Brody on what to see at the cinema.

1. As the daughter of the incomparable Judy Garland and the dazzlingly inventive director Vincente Minnelli, Liza Minnelli has borne a mighty Hollywood heritage with grace and flair. The series **"The Minnellis"** (through Jan. 24), at the Museum of the Moving Image, spotlights Liza in Bob Fosse's "Cabaret" and Martin Scorsese's "New York, New York," plus her 1972 TV concert film, "Liza with a Z." The program also features some of Vincente's great melodramas, such as the New York-set romance "The Clock," starring Garland, and the highly stylized "A Matter of Time," his last film, co-starring Liza.

2. DOC NYC, a showcase for new and recent nonfiction films, running through Nov. 29, includes **"The Last Critic"** among its highlights. The film is a briskly engaging portrait of Robert Christgau, the so-called dean of rock critics, whose column "Consumer Guide," which ran in the *Village Voice* from 1969 to 2006 (and is still going, on Substack), is an overwhelmingly opinionated and insightful trove of firsthand pop-music history. The director, Matty Wishnow, gives ample voice to the now octogenarian critic's often contentious reflections on his practice.

3. Pedro Almodóvar's **"Bitter Christmas"** is among the finest of the year's many intricate, multilevel movies. It connects one drama, set in 2004—of a director (Bárbara Lennie) accused of appropriating a friend's life story for a script—to another, set in 2026, of a director (Leonardo Sbaraglia) writing a script based on his own producer (Aitana Sánchez-Gijón); it turns out to tell the tale of the 2004 story. But the complexities are no mere games; Almodóvar's daring narrative form is matched by finely detailed attention to his characters' maneuvers and vulnerabilities.



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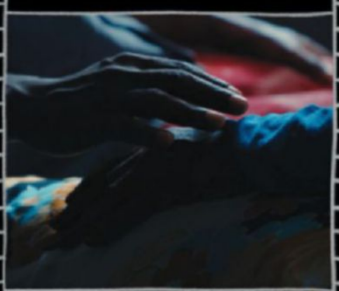
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Fear Fokol



Daylight



Whispers of a Burning Scent



Oh Whale



Allies in Exile



Sense of Water



Super Afghan Gym



With Tapes and Toasts In The Car



We Were Here



Rotation



Women Laughing



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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
THE HONEY TRAP

In the winter of 1956-57, Philip Roth was living in Chicago and, as he recounted, following the local saga of "the missing Grimes girls, Pattie and Babs," who had gone off to see an Elvis Presley movie and never returned home again. Every day, the papers featured a new turn in the case, a new character. An entire American city was taken up with a running narrative. Chicago could speak of little else.

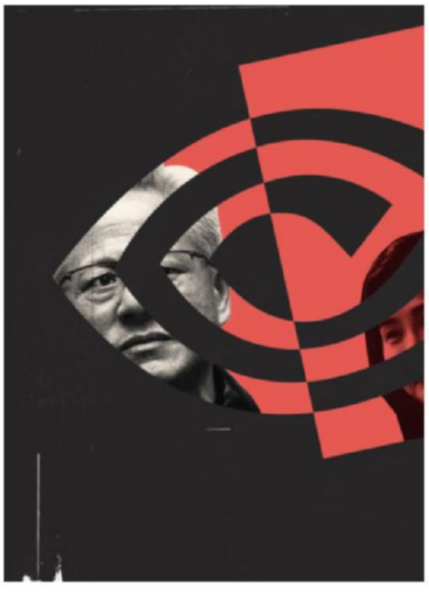
"And what is the moral of the story?" Roth asked, in a lecture at Stanford University, in 1960.

> Simply this: that the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.

Roth would no doubt have hungered for every detail of the tale of Jensen Huang, the Taiwanese American chip gazillionaire, who has resigned as the C.E.O. of Nvidia amid reports of affairs with three women (at last count), including two employees and, most damningly, Alice Huang, a Chinese technology executive who was allegedly acting not as an earnest paramour but as an asset of the People's Republic of China and its Ministry of State Security. (Officials in Beijing have called reports of her intelligence ties a "pure fabrication out of thin air.")

The global and financial stakes are immense. Launched from a Denny's in San Jose, Nvidia became the first company to reach a market capitalization of five trillion dollars. Its chips are crucial to the revolution in artificial intelligence and to America's technological competition with China. The reported means of gaining influence over Nvidia's leader, however, are rather less cutting-edge than its products.

All involved in *l'affaire Huang* may take some comfort in the lineage of mobilizing erotic attraction as a weapon of espionage—or, to use the term popularized by John le Carré's "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy" (1974), the "honey trap." In the Hebrew Bible, Delilah, a "woman in the Valley of Sorek," is bribed by the Philistines to extract from Samson the source of his superhuman strength. Not to give too much of the story away, but Samson's hair is cut and his eyes are gouged out, all before he takes his revenge by bringing a temple crashing down—rather like Nvidia's stock price. In the Book of Judith, Holofernes, an Assyrian general intent on conquest, allows himself to be beguiled by an alluring Jewish widow. Big mistake! Instead of getting the happy end he was hoping for, Holofernes is decapitated. Small recompense, surely, to be immortalized in paintings by artists ranging from Caravaggio to Tina Blondell, whose contribution is titled "I'll Make You Shorter by a Head." And lest we over-index on the Western canon of early sexpionage, in ancient China the celebrated beauty Xi Shi was said to have been deployed to catch the eye of the King of Wu. He lost his kingdom. An expensive date.



The movies knew a good thing when they saw it. Fritz Lang's "Spies" (1928), a bewitching silent thriller, features Sonya, a Russian spy who has been assigned to seduce a government agent. In Alfred Hitchcock's "Notorious" (1946), Ingrid Bergman marries a Nazi conspirator in Rio de Janeiro to obtain his secrets. Hitchcock returned to the device in "North by Northwest" (1959), in which Eva Marie Saint's work as an American agent involves being the mistress of an enemy spymaster, played by James Mason. When she sets about tempting Cary Grant, the already thorny plot grows curiouser and curiouser. With the honey-trap conceit, filmmakers had found an agreeable way of satisfying the box-office demand for attractive people in compromising situations.

Offscreen, the casting could be less predictable. Two years before "North by Northwest," the owlish columnist Joseph Alsop, a pillar of the Washington

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOEL SAGET / AFP / GETTY; TVBS / AP

establishment, visited Moscow, interviewed the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, and ended up having sex with a young man (code name: Boris) who was working for the K.G.B. Intelligence officers soon confronted Alsop with photographs and a proposition: he could coöperate and "assist the cause of peace" or face humiliation at home. Rather than accede to their demands, Alsop bravely informed American officials about the incident and went about his work.

Novelists have long grasped the possibilities. Ian Fleming served up such enticements in his James Bond novels nearly as often as Bond was served a Martini; le Carré preferred grimier rooms and less lithesome objects of erotic attention, but the idea was the same. Onstage and onscreen, the complications multiplied. For one thing, the genre allows for feats of self-deception, as in David Henry Hwang's play "M. Butterfly" (1988), inspired by an affair between a French diplomat and a Chinese opera performer. And then there is that reliable twist: the seducer falls in love. In Ang Lee's "Lust, Caution" (2007), the operative develops feelings for the dupe which contribute to the operation's undoing. A classic case of mission interruptus.

In "The Americans," the TV series that began airing in 2013, erotic espionage is a family business. Our adorable undercover Russian-spy couple resident in suburban D.C., Elizabeth and Philip Jennings (played by Keri Russell and Matthew Rhys), deploy their honeyed selves with such frequency and commitment that you would think it would shred their marital bonds. But *nyet*. Marriage counselling must be a delicate business when the assignations are assignments on behalf of one's superiors in Lubyanka.

The hapless Huang, meanwhile, appears to have practiced at least one successful seduction of his own. His sustained courtship of Donald Trump has secured a loyalty that has so far survived the revelations. For reasons evident to even the most guileless observer, Trump, ordinarily the most unforgiving of souls, invariably condones the marital and erotic trespasses of other rich and powerful men. "When you're a star . . . you can do anything."

Presidential loyalty, however, could not save Huang and his leadership of Nvidia. As an innovator and an entrepreneur, he helped foster an age in which machines can write computer code, diagnose diseases, compose (bad) sonnets, and supply a plausible excuse for almost anything. Yet the alleged plot that helped bring him down was familiar in Biblical times. Philip Roth complained that American reality was forever outdoing fiction. Well, sometimes. It also has a weakness for reruns.

—David Remnick

DEPT. OF TRANSITION

RUSTY



Ever since the blue tsunami crashed through the midterms, President Donald Trump has seemed more intent than ever on cementing his legacy. He recently announced plans to make the Oval Office a national monument, an apparent effort to insure that all his gold touches stick around. "You almost feel nauseous when you see a picture of it," the Danish artist Michael Elmgreen said the other day, at Pace Gallery, in Chelsea. He and his creative partner, Ingar Dragset, were there to check in on their latest work—a spartan, thirty-six-ton Corten-steel replica of the Oval Office, called "Transition."

"It was interesting to really go in the opposite direction," Dragset, who's from Norway, said. "The far right is *so* afraid of something minimal. Once things get more abstract, it seems terrifying."

The sculpture, which pays tribute to Richard Serra, had travelled from Germany in an open-air container, to intentionally expose it to the elements. "We wanted it to be further in the rusting process," Elmgreen explained. In the wee hours of that morning, it had been trucked down to Twenty-fifth Street from the Upper West Side. "I rented a Citi Bike to follow it," a wiry aide wearing a black hoodie said, with a thick German accent. "I was so stupid. I didn't get an e-bike." He went on, "You'd think 'heavy load' means slow. But it was more like a race. I went right through the stop signs."

A rigging crew had started unloading the sculpture at around 5 A.M. Then they spent hours adjusting it up and down, back and forth, guided by blue painter's tape on the floor. As fuel, boxes of doughnuts and coffee sat on a folding table nearby. The artists arrived around 12:30 P.M., when the process was pretty much over. "Normally, we would have been there," Dragset, who had on a leather jacket and a silver chain, said. "Of course, we're control freaks, but it's also exciting." They had been visiting a different installation of theirs—a giant swimming-pool sculpture at the Hirshhorn, in Washington, D.C., meant to comment on public access and community. The pool is empty but "ready to be filled by the imaginations of visitors," they said in a statement.

The pair have always been interested in interrogating authority. They met in 1994, at a gay club called After Dark, in Copenhagen. "Not a very artistic meeting place," Dragset said, with a chuckle. "But we discovered we had so much in common. The queer sensibility." Elmgreen was a poet and Dragset was an actor, and they began collaborating on visual projects that pushed against the rigidity of the art world. "We started to really use the white cube"—shorthand for "gallery space"—"as an example of the problem of institutional space in society," Dragset said. The resulting series was called "Powerless Structures."

This is the duo's first piece explicitly about U.S. politics. "We are not American," Dragset said. "We don't want to be preaching—it's more like questioning." The Oval Office sculpture, although loyal to the number of windows, is slightly smaller than the real thing. (An even smaller replica, a miniature a tenth of the size, is also on view, so that visitors can see the art work from above.) Dragset said that the exact measurements of the original room had been hard to confirm. "Maybe because they think it's not big enough," he said. The artists' version doesn't include any furniture or décor. "We didn't want it to be an illustration of one Presidency. It just felt right to use the shape itself," Dragset said.

The walls of an adjoining gallery room were lined with smaller art works by the pair, panels of world leaders on balconies: the British Royal Family, Javier Milei, Nancy Reagan next to the

Easter Bunny. Each figure had been cut out of a photograph, revealing polished steel underneath. ("The *other* end of steel," Elmgreen said.)

"You can see yourself in this personal power silhouette," Dragset said. They had picked the photos based on the details of each balcony. "There's a magic to how architecture becomes a symbol of power that impacts our lives," Elmgreen said.

With the installation completed, the doughnuts eaten, and the coffee cold, the artists walked through the gallery, snapping pictures. "It feels very present in the space," Dragset said, soberly. The rigging tools had left smudges on the sculpture, but the pair didn't mind.

"The marks it gets by its life are like us as humans getting our marks," Elmgreen said. Minimal and rough-hewn, the replica couldn't have looked less like something Trump would choose. Even so, if your hand were to brush against one of the rusted walls, you'd come away with an orange stain on your skin.

—Jane Bua

HOMAGE DEPT.
PRACTICE, PRACTICE



On a recent evening, Branford Marsalis and Dianne Reeves were looking at some memorabilia in the archives room at Carnegie Hall, eight floors above the stage where they would be performing the following night. Carefully laid out on a conference table were *Playbills* from each of their first appearances at the venue.

Marsalis's was a doozy. "Sonny Rollins kicked my ass all over the stage," he recalled. That took place on May 19, 1989, when the young saxophonist appeared as a "special guest soloist" alongside Rollins, the late tenorman who was one of jazz's most protean improvisers—and Marsalis's senior by three decades. How, exactly, did this ass-kicking come about? "He's Sonny Rollins," Marsalis explained, the word "duh" only implied. "And I was a twenty-eight-year-old punk kid who didn't know what I was doing. It's just the nature of when you're playing with someone whose mind is so facile and yours isn't." He went on, "So, yeah, it was a thorough ass-whipping. It was worth every minute, though. It made me better in an hour and a half than if I had practiced for four months."

Reeves's maiden Carnegie Hall gig came just six weeks after Marsalis's. The singer, who has a diva's bearing but an otherwise open and easy presence, appeared with her own band at a concert celebrating Blue Note Records' fiftieth anniversary. There was no onstage schooling that night, but Reeves was proud of the blue suit she wore, which she'd found at a vintage store.

Marsalis studied Reeves's *Playbill*. "Look at that New Orleans band you got," he said, noting two sidemen from his home town.

"I went hard in New Orleans, O.K.?" Reeves said. "That was my big bid." Marsalis gave her a fist bump.

Also on the table was a handbill advertising a 1957 "Thanksgiving Jazz" concert headlined by "Miss Billie Holiday." The rest of the lineup: Dizzy Gillespie, Ray Charles, Chet Baker, Rollins, and the Thelonious Monk quartet with John Coltrane. (Tickets started at two dollars.) That extravaganza was Coltrane's first featured appearance at Carnegie Hall, and he was the reason for Marsalis and Reeves's latest visit. They had just released a record in honor of his centenary, paying particular homage to his 1963 album with Johnny Hartman—the only time the saxophonist recorded with a vocalist (not including his own chanting or some early sessions as a sideman).



Dianne Reeves and Branford Marsalis

Marsalis explained that his manager had encouraged him to record a Coltrane centenary tribute, an idea with maybe too-obvious commercial appeal. "I'm thinking everybody and their mom is going to do Coltrane records this year, and it's going to be all the difficult stuff—'Countdown,' 'Giant Steps,' 'A Love Supreme,'" he said. The Hartman LP presented a cannier choice: beloved, yet more of a Coltrane sidebar. Marsalis discovered it as a teen on the hunt for make-out music. The album soon entered a rotation that also included Holiday's "Lady in Satin," Miles Davis's "Sketches of Spain" and "Porgy and Bess," and "side B of the Isley Brothers' 'The Heat Is On,' where there's three consecutive ballads." Memories: he and Reeves gleefully recited the B-side track list in unison.

Marsalis, who is now sixty-six, was quick to add that his appreciation of the Coltrane-Hartman collaboration had subsequently deepened. The idea of bringing Reeves (who just turned seventy) into the project popped into his head one morning. The two had never performed together but were friendly. "The first day, I was a little afraid. I'm not going to lie," she said, of sitting in with Marsalis's long-standing quartet. "But then I got my feet." Three days had been budgeted to record Reeves's six vocals—ballads sung by Hartman on the original—along with instrumentals. But on day two, according to Marsalis, singer and band got on such a roll that "Dianne said, 'We are finishing this record today.' I went, 'Damn. O.K.'"

The Carnegie Hall show would be the last stop on the initial North American leg of a tour that would then take the musicians to Europe. Marsalis cited Billy Strayhorn's "Lush Life" as a concert highlight. "Dianne sings it as a story, not as a bunch of chords with a difficult, tricky melody that she's going to negotiate with aplomb," he said. "She tells that story and it's impactful." He turned to Reeves: "Your shit is higher drama, ma'am."

"I wrestled with it," she said, of "Lush Life." "How do I tell this story? Listening to a lot of Strayhorn, there's a sadness, but there's also observation of life. A lot of times, I'll have to find a subtext in a song, but with this one I realized the words and harmonies are saying

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

everything." Asked to name a song she had worked harder to discern meaning in, she had a ready answer: "A friend of mine once said, 'Why would you sing "Love for Sale?"' I was, like, 'Well, that's me talking about the music industry.'" Another fist bump from Marsalis, along with a deep, appreciative "Mm-hmm."

—Bruce Handy

PUCK LUCK DEPT.
READING IS FUNDAMENTAL



Devin Cooley, a professional goaltender for the Calgary Flames, acknowledged the cliché about goalies being a different breed the other day, while recovering from an injury in his basement. "You're separated from a lot of the guys most of the time," he said. "You're just stuck there all alone with your thoughts during the game." Cooley's thoughts tend to go to unexpected places. "Nothing matters, nobody cares, we're all going to die," he likes to remind himself on the ice. When the horn sounds, he remains philosophical.

"The past is dead," he said after a recent victory. "There's nothing for you there." He was smiling brightly for the cameras with what he later described as "psychopath" eyes, owing to an intensity of focus from which it can take his nervous system hours to recover. "My conscious brain is really bad at playing goalie," he said. "So I have to let my unconscious brain do the work, because it reacts a lot quicker." The internet soon lit up with Cooley's postgame ruminations on the flow state. Joe Rogan, not a hockey fan, called him a "fascinating thinker." But on the podcast "Spittin' Chiclets," hockey's version of "The View," Cooley lamented that his teammates, though "the best dudes," are often "talking about fantasy football and golf, and I can't really relate." His hobbies include playing jazz piano and "reading with my rabbit."

Tito, Cooley's seven-year-old pet rabbit (named after the vodka), was upstairs while Cooley reflected on his sudden star turn, at the age of twenty-nine, as a goaltending sage. Before leaving for the rink, he likes to pet Tito, releasing oxytocin, a de-stressor. After returning home, he lets Tito crawl onto his chest and reads on his Kindle until two or three in the morning. "Some guys can sleep right away," he said, and mentioned another Flames goalie, Dustin Wolf. "I've talked to Dustin about it, and he goes, 'Yeah, I don't have any trouble sleeping.' Dude, that's like a superpower!"

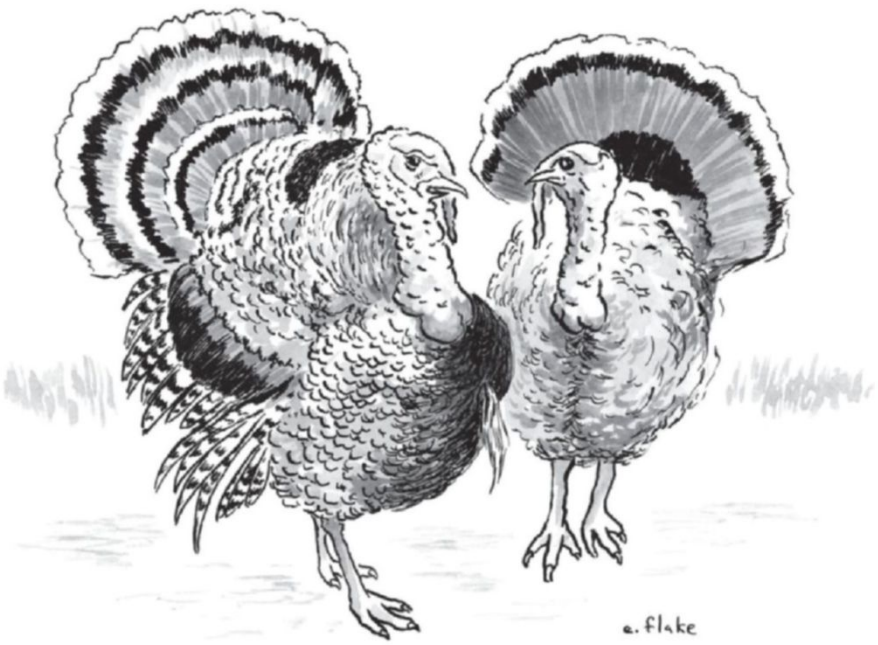
Cooley may be the only pro athlete who includes a link to his Goodreads account in his Instagram bio. The day before the basement conversation, he had finished reading "The Trouble with Being Born," by the Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran. He awarded it five stars but cautioned, "I would say the more nihilistic/pessimistic aphorisms should be taken with a grain of salt." His current wish list includes "Speak, Memory," "Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea," and "Infinite Powers: How Calculus Reveals the Secrets of the Universe."

He was not always an avid reader. When he was in school, in Silicon Valley, he said, "I really liked computers." He also played the ukulele. Then, about two years ago, while still in the minors, he suffered a concussion and began trying to understand what was going on with his addled brain. He read "Dare: The New Way to End Anxiety and Stop Panic Attacks Fast" and "Ego Is the Enemy." Before long, he had graduated to Plato and Camus and was in the grip of what he describes as a full-blown addiction. "You need to be using your eye muscles constantly," he said, of goalies. Win-win.

The decision to make his Goodreads public was partly a response to all the D.M.s he was getting from fans who had seen his viral interviews and wanted to know how they, too, could tap into the power of their unconscious brains. Also, "I wanted to get into writing, because I always hated writing in school, and it was probably my weakest subject," he said. "And I was, like, 'You know what? What a good challenge it would be to write more for fun and start with doing book reviews.'"

Cooley is not a hatchet man; nearly everything gets five stars. "If I spent my time reading through the entire thing, I always felt bad giving it less," he said, adding that he had made sure to confirm that the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker was long dead before gently slagging "The Denial of Death," which won Becker a Pulitzer Prize in 1974. "Some beautiful prose and treasures hidden within, as well as some weird and downright dangerous assumptions of the human psyche," he wrote.

A father of two boys who play hockey but resist identifying as readers wondered hopefully if Cooley's example



" 'Just make yourself hideous,' they said. 'Then no one will ever want to eat you,' they said."

might inspire a broader locker-room awakening. "It's going to make you a better hockey bro," Cooley said, nodding along. "A lot of the time, you kind of feel like, 'Oh, I'm unique, my problems are my own, no one will understand.' And none of that is true! Basically, every problem that you've ever thought you had, somebody has probably gone through that exact same thing. And they've written about it, and they've released it for you to read."

—Ben McGrath

THE PICTURES
PERIL BUT ALSO LOVE



The story of how Christopher Spelman wound up as a composer of movie scores starts at the Kew-Forest School, in Queens, in 1981. Spelman was twenty-three years old, a classics scholar in his first year of teaching middle-school Latin, so nervous that the students could hear the chalk rattling on the blackboard as he wrote. One of his seventh graders was James Gray, an awkward twelve-year-old with a cutting sense of humor. One day, Spelman recalled recently, "James insulted another student in an extremely creative way, and I couldn't help laughing." (It had something to do with the kid's "method of conception.")

"If you're funny, you can survive," Gray said. "That was the armor." The two men were sitting in metal desk chairs in Spelman's classroom, which was decorated with the same posters of Caesar Augustus and Ali vs. Frazier that Gray remembered from his youth. Gray, now the director of such films as "The Immigrant" and "The Lost City of Z," had a Band-Aid on his nose from a recent melanoma removal. ("I feel very Jack Nicholson in 'Chinatown.'") He hadn't been back to Kew-Forest since the eighties, but he had re-created it in his 2022 film, "Armageddon Time," about a boy who transfers there from public school, as Gray did. He grew up nearby, in Fresh Meadows—"There is not a fresh meadow anywhere near Fresh Meadows"—and remembered being culture-shocked by Kew-Forest's orderliness, including mandatory jacket and tie. He's not the school's most famous alumnus; that would be President Donald Trump, who was so unruly that his father yanked him out and sent him to a military academy. "Fred Trump was on the board of trustees, and you would see him parading the halls," Gray recalled.

During Spelman's first year at the school, he and a French teacher started a film club, which opened Gray's eyes to cinema. They'd screen Jules Dassin's "Rififi," or go to Manhattan for a double feature of "Apocalypse Now" and "Dr. Strangelove."

Gray, nodding toward Spelman, cracked, "Would you like me to prove why he's an asshole, much as I adore him?"

"I knew this was coming," Spelman said, chuckling.

"Between 'Apocalypse' and 'Strangelove,' I have the temerity to go pee in the urinal. Next to me is *this* guy, and he goes, 'What did you think?' I said, 'I loved it, except for the last part.' I was twelve! And what did he say? 'You don't get a thing, do you?'"

"See, if only I'd had a little teacher training," Spelman said.

Gray took Latin through ninth grade, and it came in handy: he titled his 2019 sci-fi film "Ad Astra," which means "to the stars." (Kew-Forest's motto is "Ad summum," or "to the highest.") But it was film club that really stuck. The year after Gray graduated, his mother died, of brain cancer, and Spelman and his wife would invite him over to watch movies. They remained close. Gray became a director. For his second film, "The Yards," he asked Spelman, an opera buff and a self-taught guitarist, for advice on the music, which included Gustav Holst's "The Planets." For his fourth, "Two Lovers," he asked Spelman to arrange two Puccini melodies for guitar, harp, and contrabass. Gradually, Spelman composed more and more of Gray's scores himself, all while getting his Ph.D. in classical studies and taking orchestration classes at Juilliard. "I thought, This is so great, because the conversation's so easy," Gray said. "And I can also tell him he stinks."

"We don't have to bullshit each other," Spelman said, looking up a text that Gray had sent him regarding "The Lost City of Z": "Words can't describe how abominable I think your end cue is."

Gray's newest film, "Paper Tiger," a semi-autobiographical noir, is about a Reagan-era Queens father (Miles Teller) who gets sucked into the netherworld of the Russian mob as his wife (Scarlett Johansson) faces a life-threatening illness. The score, Gray said, needed to communicate "peril but also love." The pair struggled to find the right tone, but inspiration struck when they played a cut against Jerry Goldsmith's music for "Chinatown." At Gray's suggestion, Spelman adapted a passage from Puccini's "Il Tabarro" as a motif. His score—sometimes lush, sometimes spare and tense—was recorded by the Czech National Symphony Orchestra and is heavy on harp and cimbalom, a dulcimer that, Spelman explained, "sounds kind of threatening and foreign, but the melody occurs later on, in some of the tenderest moments." (Gray remembered the cimbalom being used in "The Man with the Golden Gun.")



Christopher Spelman and James Gray

Of his accidental career, Spelman said, "I consider it, honestly, a miracle." He still teaches part time at Kew-Forest, including an Intro to Philosophy class. That morning, his students had discussed Plato's Euthyphro as it relates to Euripides' tragedy "Hippolytus," in which Artemis battles Aphrodite. The question, Spelman said, was "If the gods are at war with each other, how are humans supposed to understand what justice is?"

"It's not the artist's job to have the answer," Gray said. His former teacher approved, noting that Plato would have said the same.

—Michael Schulman

OVERTHINKING IT

Jesse Eisenberg's new film, "The Debut," puts self-invented drama center stage.

BY RACHEL SYME



"Happy is too easy of an emotion for a person like Jesse to feel," his wife says.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHILIP MONTGOMERY

The actor, writer, and director Jesse Eisenberg is what some might call a real character—hyperverbal, relentlessly self-deprecating, and visibly anxious, often to the point where his whole body shakes, like a dachshund in a thunderstorm. He writes and directs comedic films—three so far—that could be described as character studies: quirky, neurotic stories about quirky, neurotic people, whose lives, at least to the outside world, are more or less unremarkable. Whatever drama his characters encounter is almost entirely self-created, the result of some sort of private, metaphysical crisis breaking out in full, humiliating view of others.

Eisenberg's third film, "The Debut," which comes out next month, follows Mona Friedman, a meek, middle-aged housewife, played by Julianne Moore, living in a small town in nineteen-nineties New Jersey. Mona, who uses stilted phrases such as "a real hoot" and "rinky-dink," feels invisible in her own life. On a whim, she auditions for a local production of a musical called "Nosy Neighbors," about the tenants of a ratty New York apartment building. She lands the role of Miss Danielle, the building's superintendent, who has just one song and a handful of lines. At first, Mona is truly terrible. But—under the tutelage of the show's director, Jerry (Paul Giamatti)—she finds her footing, and before long, intoxicated by the spotlight, she becomes a nightmarishly egotistical diva. Eisenberg's initial pitch to studios was "What would happen if a woman gets a part in a dumb musical and treats it like 'Raging Bull'?"

Moore is considered a front-runner for the Best Actress Oscar for her alluringly odd performance. In one early scene, Mona, still in her wallflower phase, is standing in a supermarket checkout line, and a man asks to go ahead of her because, he says, "I got a ton of stuff." Mona steps aside. The man is comically arrogant. (Who asks to go first when they have *more* items?) Mona is comically passive. (Who would let him?) But the dance between ego and self-effacement is one of Eisenberg's central preoccupations.

Eisenberg is forty-three. He began starring in films as a teen-ager and has been in dozens of movies since. At twenty-seven, he was nominated for an Oscar for Best Actor, for playing Mark Zuckerberg in David Fincher's "The Social Network." He wears more or less the same thing every day: scuffed sneakers, a rumpled T-shirt, and a fraying red baseball cap bearing the logo of Indiana University. (His wife, Anna Strout, is from Bloomington.) He owns, in total, "four pairs of pants," he says. He and Strout, who works as a nonprofit organizer and an educator in the New York City public-school system, live, with their ten-year-old child, Banner, in a modest two-bedroom apartment near Washington Square Park. "The thing you have to understand about Jesse is that he is extremely famous, and he is *not* a normal person in the world—just try walking through Times Square with him—but he desperately, desperately insists that he is," the writer Taffy Brodesser-Akner, who worked with him in 2022 on the television adaptation of her novel "Fleishman Is in Trouble," said. Claire Danes, who starred opposite Eisenberg in "Fleishman," told me about running into him on the street recently. "We stopped to chat, and so many people were rubbernecking," she said. "People are very aware of him as a figure, even though he is so determined to be invisible."

One way that Eisenberg tries to undermine his celebrity is by paying attention, to a nearly farcical degree, to other people. He can't stand small talk—he

prefers more in-depth interactions. "How long did it take him to ask you about your parents and your grandparents and your great-grandparents?" his younger sister, Hallie, a former child actor who is now a therapist, asked me. (Answer: About seven minutes.) Kieran Culkin, who won an Oscar for his starring role in "A Real Pain," Eisenberg's second film as a writer and director, noticed the same habit. "If he's nervous in a situation, what he'll do is, he'll just talk to that person and intensely quiz them about their entire life," Culkin told me. "I personally don't give a shit about where people come from, or what their parents did for a living. I think he was fully baffled by that." The actress Lizzy Caplan, his friend, put it this way: "He is sincerely interested in the health update on his makeup artist's third cousin's cat."

Eisenberg's inquisitiveness might seem surprising, given his skittish carriage and the fact that he often calls himself "a loner and a recluse." And yet he appears to find relief in discussing his struggles—he has been in and out of therapy since he was a kid, for obsessive-compulsive disorder and generalized anxiety—and listening to those of others. The first time we met, for lunch at an Italian restaurant, he popped a Prozac shortly after sitting down and said that he had recently upped his dosage because editing "The Debut," his psychiatrist thought, gave him enough of a lull to "experiment."

The seesaw between ambition and self-abnegation is also evident in his work as a director. Eisenberg strives to make his sets feel like a "nonhierarchical" environment, he told me, where "no one person is more important than anybody else." This was especially true of "The Debut." "How could you be making a movie about a woman who's an underdog, who no one notices, and then have a set where the people walking around feel like that?" he asked. "You'd have to be so stupid and blind and compartmentalizing, in a psychopathic way, to write a movie about that and then perpetuate it."

One afternoon last winter, I dropped by the Brook Arts Center, in Bound Brook, New Jersey, an old vaudeville venue where Eisenberg was filming three scenes for "The Debut." He'd been in the building since early that morning. He makes an effort, he told me, to be as present on set as possible and eats all his meals with the cast and crew. He has been known to fetch coffee for his performers.

Now Eisenberg sat in a director's chair behind a video monitor, about twenty feet from the stage. The room was freezing cold—"We're only here for two days," Ali Herting, a producer on the film, said, "so I guess we didn't pay for heat?"—and Eisenberg had one of his legs bent against his chest, for warmth. He was wearing a fake mustache. "I'm in a scene later," he explained. At first, he had resisted being in the movie. He hates watching himself on camera—"I only see how weird my jaw looks, or what I'd do differently," he told me—and said that editing "A Real Pain," in which he co-starred, was "excruciating." But Herting persuaded him to take a small role in the movie's musical (for which Eisenberg wrote all the music and lyrics), as Barnaby, a tenant who has clogged his toilet.

Moore appeared stage right, wearing a green barn jacket over her costume (red coveralls, heavy tool belt), to do a brief scene with her castmate Halle Bailey. Bailey's character, Stef, stars as Girl in 4F in "Nosy Neighbors." Early on in the film, Stef gives Mona a trite pep talk that becomes a parody of itself. "Jerry is going to test you and push you and drag you through the shit and the mud, and you have to be ready to take those tests and wade through that shit and that mud, because when you finally get to opening night, Mona," she says, "you're going to knock those fuckers on their asses!"

Bailey began a scene in which, after Mona wavers on saying a mundane line—it doesn't feel *realistic* to her, she insists—Stef encourages her in the wings. "She's amazing," Eisenberg whispered, about Bailey. "But it feels a little . . . wishy-washy?" He had the actors run it again and then nodded. "It usually doesn't get any better than the magic of the first one or two takes," he said.

He likes his cast to stick to his script. "Jesse is the keeper of the tone," Herting said. "He knows how to calibrate it so precisely, even when on the page it looks wild." Despite Eisenberg's sometimes jittery energy, he inspires a sense of trust in his actors. "You could easily mistake Jesse for this über-nebbish, who walks around deeply rattled, constantly, by the world," Giamatti told me. "But," he continued, "he knows exactly what he wants to do. He's really *thought* about it."

This fall, Eisenberg was notably absent from Aaron Sorkin's "The Social Reckoning," the sequel to Fincher's 2010 film about the Facebook founder, for which Sorkin had written the screenplay. Sorkin wrote the new script with Eisenberg in mind, but Eisenberg turned down a series of escalating offers from Sony Pictures. (The role ultimately went to Jeremy Strong.) Sorkin and Eisenberg haven't spoken much since making "The Social Network." "I hardly know him at all," Sorkin told me. And yet, he went on, "there's something about Jesse that reminds me of Holden Caulfield, if that makes any sense. He has absolutely no patience for phonies."

Eisenberg simply wasn't interested in playing Zuckerberg again. "I can't stand being associated with that person," he told me. "I'm not on social media of any kind because it terrifies me." For years, strangers passing Eisenberg on the street would yell "Hey, Zuck!" or "I'm C.E.O., bitch!" (a line from the film). The connection grated on him. "I'd be out at a bar and a drunk guy would say, 'Hey, I love your website,'" he told me. "And as I'm pretending to laugh, I'd just wish all of the oxygen would leave my lungs, and that I would collapse on the floor in front of this guy and show him what he's doing to me."

By his own admission, Eisenberg is overly sensitive, but this can lend his performances a compelling fragility. In "The Social Network," he managed to dramatize the act of thinking with very little physical movement; his Zuckerberg doesn't rage but pulses—with intelligence, vengeance, and loneliness. Fincher encouraged him to lean into that lack of affect. "We'd do half of the takes where I was more animated, and then half where I would just empty myself out," Eisenberg said. The result was mesmerizing. His Zuckerberg is simultaneously arrogant and needy, a villain who somehow solicits almost as much pity as contempt.

Eisenberg acknowledges that "The Social Network" had a positive effect on his career, if for no other reason than that it showed Hollywood he could be a bad guy. "After that, I got to play eccentrics



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and ecoterrorists," he said. "Up until then, I was only cast as shy, sweet, nervous protagonists." That typecasting began, in 2002, with "Roger Dodger," in which Eisenberg played Nick, a naïve Midwestern teen who visits his uncle in Manhattan. Stephen Holden, of the *Times*, wrote that he struck "a lovely balance between crude adolescent avidity and an inner sweetness." Eisenberg soon started receiving scripts from male Gen X auteurs who were making films that glanced backward. In 2005, he played Noah Baumbach's acerbic teen-age avatar in "The Squid and the Whale," about a high schooler who acts out when his parents divorce. In 2009, he played a younger version of the director Greg Mottola in "Adventureland," about a bright but stunted college graduate who spends a summer working at an amusement park. Inhabiting such twitchy and isolated characters made Eisenberg himself feel increasingly twitchy and isolated. When he starred opposite Emma Stone in Ruben Fleischer's 2009 slasher comedy, "Zombieland," he got the impression that his character had to be constantly "anxious and scared," he said. "So I just turned into this crazed person trying to keep myself in a petrified state. I would puke in my bed in the middle of the night."

After "The Social Network," Eisenberg tried his hand at larger Hollywood roles. He played a pompous magician in the blockbuster 2013 heist film "Now You See Me." "I love doing the magic series," he said, of the ensuing franchise. (He's since made two more.) "My character is so confident in them, so I can kind of escape myself a bit." The film was a commercial hit, but critics found it slight. They were even less fond of Zack Snyder's 2016 superhero flick, "Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice," in which Eisenberg played the villain, Lex Luthor, as an obnoxious tech bro. His histrionic performance earned Eisenberg that year's Razzie Award for Worst Supporting Actor. "The studios stopped calling after that," he said.

Eisenberg does not consider himself to be "a part of the film *industry*," he told me, pronouncing the word as if it were an infectious disease. "It is so hungry for new things," he said. "Like, you go to these awards shows, and they are giving out awards for Best First Film and Best Newcomer. They don't do that at hospitals, you know? They don't celebrate a guy who did his Best First Surgery." We were having breakfast in Los Angeles, at the Tower Bar, a sceney restaurant in the Sunset Tower Hotel, where he was staying. It was early June, and Eisenberg had flown in to compete on the celebrity edition of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire."

He often compares himself, unfavorably, with his wife, whom he refers to in rhapsodic terms. "She's, like, a saint," he said. "She's just an exceptionally good person." He describes her family as "Marxist activists"; her brother is the late leftist historian Howard Zinn's publisher, and her mother built a domestic-violence shelter in Bloomington in the seventies and ran it until her death, in 2017. Eisenberg and Strout have volunteered at the shelter, Middle Way House, and he credits his time there with giving him perspective on "the things that actually matter."

Eisenberg likes trivia games, and agreed to be on "Millionaire" after learning that his winnings would go to a charity of his choice. He'd asked Giamatti to be his partner, and the day before, at the Sony Pictures lot, he'd spent an hour pacing around a trailer, analyzing the competition. "You have more general knowledge than other actors," he told Giamatti. "You read. I've never seen an actor with a book."

"Yeah, but I read *mysteries*," Giamatti said. "Though I was an English major."

"I might say 'hermeneutics' when I'm answering," Eisenberg said. "Even if it isn't relevant."

"See, I don't even know what hermeneutics are," Giamatti said.

"That's the genius," Eisenberg said. "No one does."

The two made it to the final round, and decided to walk away with half a million dollars. Eisenberg gave his half to Middle Way House. He'd enjoyed himself, he said at breakfast, though he was reluctant to admit it. He told me that he'd once tried seeing a Freudian analyst who, after a few sessions, diagnosed him with a complex called arousal disgust. Eisenberg was quick to clarify that "this was not a sexual thing" but, rather, "this idea that I will like things and then immediately feel disgusted." He added, "Like, how talking to you makes me feel good about myself, which of course means that in about an hour I am going to feel incredibly embarrassed by it."

His life is full of such equivocations, moments when he feels he must atone for his privilege. Banner attends private school and also frequently volunteers alongside his parents. Last summer, after Eisenberg received an award at a Czech film festival, he and his family drove to Ukraine to work at a children's art camp for a week, spending one night in a bomb shelter.

The apotheosis of Eisenberg's urge to carbon-offset the advantages of fame came last December, when he gave one of his kidneys to a stranger. He got the idea a decade earlier, after listening to a podcast about "altruistic organ donation." "It felt

so clean to me," he said. He sent off a saliva sample to a company that made donor matches, but he heard nothing back.

Later, a doctor he met explained that he didn't have to wait—he could just walk over to the N.Y.U. hospital and offer up an organ. That fall, Eisenberg was starring in an Off Broadway one-man show that he'd written, so he scheduled his operation for the first available weekend after it closed. Initially, those around him didn't understand his decision—"I thought, This is maybe putting generosity on steroids," his father, Barry, told me—but his family came around. "By the end of his time in recovery, his sister and I had inquired about beginning the process, too," his mother, Amy, said. Kieran Culkin told me that he plans to hold on to both his kidneys. "But, when you hear Jesse's reasoning, you gotta admit, *Oh, shit, he's right*," he said. "He's, like, 'Put me under and cut me open and take an organ from me!' He's terrified of everything, but he's not nervous about that. It's weird."

When Eisenberg began writing "The Debut," he originally set it in an unnamed suburb that could have been anywhere, or at least anywhere with a middling community-theatre scene. "I wanted it to feel out of time," he said. But, while scouting locations, he found himself gravitating toward central New Jersey. For Mona's house, he chose a sprawling split-level in Morristown, with frosted-glass doors and a knobby stone fireplace. The kitchen, with its ivory melamine cabinets and honey-colored oak trim, looked much like the one in the home where he'd grown up, in nearby East Brunswick. It occurred to him that he was making a period piece.

"I just felt, instinctively, like it *had* to be set in 1990," he told me. He put a blocky landline in the kitchen, where Mona learns that she's gotten the part. With the help of the costume designer, Stacey Battat, he dressed his heroine like a preppy car-pool mom in sherbet-colored cardigans and Peter Pan-collared shirts.

Eisenberg once joked that the best parts he's written are "either for myself or a sixty-year-old woman." Mona Friedman is somehow both. "She's me when I was seven years old," he told me. "She's not a fully fledged adult." He continued, "And then she enters this other world, this theatre world, where everybody is suddenly nice to her, and she is both delighted and overwhelmed, which is exactly what happened to me."

Eisenberg was born in 1983 in Manhattan and first lived in Bayside, Queens, the second child of parents whom he describes as "normal, self-actualized, nice people." Barry and Amy met at Queens College. They'd each grown up Jewish in the outer boroughs, and had Ashkenazi grandparents who'd immigrated to the U.S. (from Poland and Moldova) before the Second World War. After the couple wed, Barry got a job as a hospital administrator, and Amy worked as an amateur-theatre director—"high-school musicals, kids' plays, that kind of thing," she told me. One day, when Eisenberg was a baby, Amy filled in for a friend who had a gig as a party clown; she ended up clowning as Bonabini Tetrazzini Fettuccine Alfredo for the next fifteen years, before earning a doctorate in medical humanities.

When Eisenberg was around three and his older sister, Kerri, was six, the family moved to East Brunswick. (Hallie, the youngest, was born six years later.) Eisenberg, who has lived in Manhattan since he was eighteen and predicts that he will likely die there, often wonders what his childhood might have been like if his parents had never moved the family out of the city. He would have been less bored, perhaps, and therefore less driven toward creative pursuits, but he also might have felt less alienated from his environment. "It's really hard to pinpoint exactly



what happened to me or why," he said. "I had good parents who loved me."

In New Jersey, Eisenberg began to display signs of acute anxiety. He was smaller than other children, and his classmates made fun of him for his size and for his curly hair. As he remembers it, he was kicked out of one kindergarten classroom for locking his mother in a closet when she tried to leave him at school. In first grade, he cried every day on the bus. He would get spontaneous nosebleeds, triggered by stress. "I used to bring two tissues into school," he said. "One for crying, and one for bleeding. They were in separate pockets."

Amy and Barry assumed that their son was simply going through a phase. "He was just this sweet, sensitive kid, and we figured he'd be O.K.," Amy said. Now they see things differently. "I sometimes think if Jesse was born twenty years earlier or twenty years later, it might have been easier for him," Barry told me. "Twenty years earlier, if people were depressed—and I'm not saying this is good, necessarily—they kept that in." He continued, "If he was born a little bit later, society in general, and certainly us more particularly, probably would have been more aware of what his issues were."

Amy noticed that Eisenberg's unease came, she told me, "with this rare sense of empathy." From a young age, he was aware that there was suffering in the world, and seemed to feel a duty to mitigate it. The Eisenberg family was not very religious, but Eisenberg attended Hebrew school until he was ten, when he gave his parents a multi-page handwritten letter asking to drop out before his bar mitzvah, explaining that organized religion was responsible for violence and discord throughout history.

It was not uncommon for Eisenberg to write a letter arguing his positions. (He still does. Earlier this year, he wrote to the Directors Guild of America, with a plea to remove his name from "The Debut"'s opening credits, as he felt that it was "an actor's movie." "My director's card distracts from that fact," he added; the guild said no, citing union rules.) Eisenberg's linguistic dexterity appeared early. In elementary school, he carried around a Dictaphone to record one-liners as he thought of them. "He would always be ten paces ahead of us, talking into it," Hallie said. "He would just get so *annoyed* when he couldn't get to the joke fast enough."

Eisenberg's parents signed him up to perform with a local children's theatre, hoping that it might raise his confidence. He instantly felt comfortable there. "Everything that the kids at school thought was odd about me was, like, incredible to these people," he said. "It was, like, 'You have the *best* hair for this play.'" His

first big performance was in "an insane show called 'Annie & Oliver,'" he said. It was "forty-nine per cent 'Annie' and forty-nine per cent 'Oliver!'" Eisenberg soon joined larger-scale community productions—"The Secret Garden," "Merrily We Roll Along." He was sometimes one of the only kids in the cast, but he didn't mind—he enjoyed conversing with adults. ("They understood anxiety and depression," he said.)

Eisenberg began to feel as though he were living a double life. He was thriving in the theatre community, but the start of middle school, he told me, "was hell." He stopped sleeping and began to display repetitive behaviors. His parents took him to see a psychologist, who asked Eisenberg if he'd ever thought about harming himself. He hadn't, but, Eisenberg said, "she planted this seed in me that was, like, O.K., if I try to kill myself, people will understand how severe I feel. So I started hiding knives under my bed, and screaming to my parents that I was going to jump out the window. I don't think I ever wanted to actually *do* anything, but I was just living in this state of terror."

His parents made the decision to admit him to a local psychiatric hospital. "Something broke in him," Amy said. "And we were just trying to help him be safe." Eisenberg stayed less than forty-eight hours—his parents took him out, against medical advice—but he still remembers his short stay as horrific. He told me that someone had drawn a swastika on his wall, and that he was restrained, more than once, in a padded room. "He wasn't there long, but he experiences it as a lifetime of a nightmare," Barry said.

A year later, he got his big break when an agent saw him audition for a regional production of "Peter Pan" and signed him. At twelve, Eisenberg made his Broadway début, as an understudy in the Tennessee Williams play "Summer and Smoke." At sixteen, he moved to Hollywood to take a lead role in a Fox teen drama called "Get Real," as the youngest of three maladjusted siblings in a middle-class California family.

He was happy to leave high school, he told me, but in L.A. (where his father had come along as a chaperon) his enthusiasm for the job began to wane. "It became this incredibly mawkish melodrama," Eisenberg said. "By, like, Episode 4, my character was in a coma from spinal meningitis." One day, he and his father noticed that several of the actors had commandeered parking spots right outside the soundstage, while the crew had to use a faraway lot. Barry remembers his son being appalled by the blatant unfairness.

Eisenberg's knee-jerk sense of justice has led to a few on-set altercations. "I got into a fight with an actor because the actor was taking a nap and then yelled at the P.A. who was supposed to wake him up," he told me. Another time, he said, "I was in a movie with one actress who didn't know her lines and was screaming at everyone." He continued, "It was such a shocking display of disrespect and irresponsibility. So I yelled at her in front of the crew, and they ended up firing her. I cannot stand that stuff." He added, "And it's, like, God, for what reason? You're in the *arts*."

Eisenberg headed back East, where he transferred to the Professional Performing Arts School, in Manhattan, for his senior year. "That was the greatest time of my life," he said. "I was studying drama with other people who loved it." Around the same time, he discovered the films of Woody Allen, who became his comedic idol. Before seeing "Annie Hall," Eisenberg told me, he hadn't realized that it was possible "to make a movie about the things I like, about the people I know, and with the sense of humor that feels most personal and bespoke." His first attempt to write a movie, at seventeen, was "Woody," a bio-pic about Allen's high-school years. Later, as a young actor, Eisenberg was often compared to Allen, and, in the twenty-tens, he appeared in two of the director's films. "Honestly, it was not great," he told me, of those experiences. "I didn't really have an interesting role in either of the movies." At some point, I texted Eisenberg (he is a prolific texter) to ask about his views on the sexual-abuse allegations against Allen. At first, Eisenberg made a joke about how texting may not be the best medium for nuanced dialogue about a controversial subject—"I'm supposed to send you a text message about Woody Allen? Is it in the career-suicide section of the article?"—but then he added, "I'm an ambassador for a domestic violence shelter in Indiana and if people are really interested in what I have to say on the matter, I'd like to direct them to make a donation."

In 2001, Eisenberg was admitted to N.Y.U. to study writing—his application essay was about TV actors taking the best parking spots—but, that summer, he was cast in "Roger Dodger." Against his parents' protests, he decided to defer college to pursue acting, an anxiety-provoking decision at the time. "When I think about it now, that's what ambition feels like for me," he said. "Where it's, like, the stakes are life and death for something that is not *actually* life and death."

Most weekdays, if he isn't on a film set or in postproduction, Eisenberg wakes up early and bikes uptown to a branch of the New York Public Library, where he sits at a table in the library's lounge and writes for eight hours straight. "I'll call him and say, 'I haven't seen you in months. Can we get lunch?'" his sister Hallie told me. "And he's, like, 'Well, no, I'll be at the library writing from nine to five, but I can see you after.'"

Eisenberg began this routine almost twenty years ago with the screenwriter Jim Beggarly, whom he met through a mutual acquaintance in 2007. They started swapping works in progress (Eisenberg had begun writing plays), and before long, Beggarly suggested that they conduct regular tandem writing sessions.

One brisk day in early September, Eisenberg invited me to observe them in action. "It's going to be riveting," he joked. At the library, he led me into a large, fluorescently lit room full of Formica tables. Beggarly, who is sixty-one, was already sitting at one, guarding the pair's computers. I asked Eisenberg if strangers ever interrupted them. "People are mostly fine," he said. "It's because there's no sexuality to my work. I think once the public is asked to want to sleep with a person onscreen, that person's life is fundamentally different."

In Eisenberg's twenties, as his acting career began to take off, he decided to get serious about writing. He wanted to make the most of his newfound proximity to directors and producers. "I was that awful, obnoxious actor who was asking everyone to read my scripts," he said. "I would have cut off my leg to

get something made." Then Eisenberg got a sobering piece of advice from the actor and writer Bob Odenkirk, whom he'd asked to read a script, a broad comedy. "He said, 'You're a sensitive, thinking person. Why the fuck are you doing this?'" Eisenberg told me. He stopped writing screenplays and focussed, instead, on other pursuits, such as cofounding a website with his cousin called oneupme.com. Every morning, Eisenberg would post a setup (e.g., "She's like Windex") with a punch line ("Never streaked") and encourage users to come up with better ones ("Now you see her, now you don't," "She clears everything up"). For years, he judged the contests himself.

In 2007, Eisenberg travelled to Bosnia to star in "The Hunting Party," a black comedy about a war reporter. Afterward, he visited a distant cousin, Maria Binder, a Polish Holocaust survivor who'd made it through the war by hiding out with a Christian family. Her harrowing story threw Eisenberg's career angst into stark relief. "I was complaining to her about my life and how I couldn't get any scripts made, and she was telling me about the Holocaust," he said. "I was, like, Oh, this is such a fascinating dynamic."

It struck him that the encounter might make for a good play. The result was "The Revisionist," about a privileged American novelist named David, who, struggling to finish his second book, travels to Poland to stay with an aging relative (also named Maria). David is furious with himself for being unable to write and numbs his distress by smoking weed. Eventually, Maria reveals a long-held secret: after the war, having lost her entire family in the camps, she stole the identity of a childhood friend who'd perished. The play poses big moral questions—Who earns the right to feel despair? What makes a family?—but resists easy answers.

Next, Eisenberg wrote "Asuncion," about a pair of white college kids who take in a Filipina roommate and must confront their prejudices. The show débuted Off Broadway, at the Cherry Lane Theatre, in 2011, and, two years later, "The Revisionist" played in the same space, with Eisenberg as David and Vanessa Redgrave in the role of Maria.

Before he writes any dialogue, Eisenberg often composes lengthy monologues for each character, most of which never make it into the final product. This helps him feel a kinship with them, even when they are repellent. In his third play, "The Spoils," which opened Off Broadway in 2015 and on the West End in 2016, Eisenberg starred as a rich, insecure stoner who bullies his roommate and confesses to having scatological fantasies about another friend's girlfriend. "Jesse wrote such an unlikable character for himself," his co-star Erin Darke told me. "Like he was trying to figure out how to *not* be that way." Ben Brantley, in a rave review for the *Times*, wrote, "Eisenberg loves rolling in the sties of self-contempt," adding that his character is "a jerk, for sure, but he's also well-drawn enough to remind us of the jerk within us all."

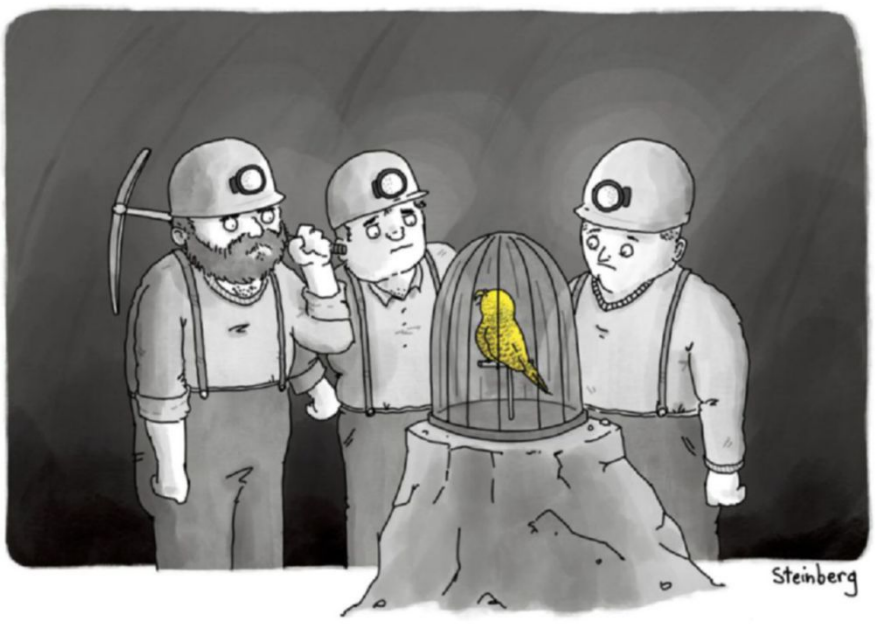
At the library, Eisenberg said that Beggarly, who is the credited writer on five small-budget independent films, quickly became the reader that he keeps in his head as he writes. "Jim knows a lot more about movies than I do," he said. "And it feels like a nice, safe place to talk about an industry that I feel great ambivalence about."

Beggarly held his hand to his cheek, pretending to blush. "The thing is, the scripts I write are about looking outward at people," he told me. "Jesse is very inward. If I had made 'The Debut,' it would have been so focussed on how bad the musical is. Whereas Jesse wrote it in a way that was, like, Let's all take it seriously anyway. Which is actually funnier."

A ruminator and an inveterate recycler of his own ideas, Eisenberg first wrote "A Real Pain"—the story of two American cousins who take a luxury Holocaust tour of Poland to connect with the suffering of their Jewish ancestors, only to spend the entire time contending with their own neuroses—as an adaptation of a short story he'd published about two friends travelling through Mongolia. After stumbling onto an ad for a high-end tour of Auschwitz, he reset the story in Poland, pulling in themes he'd explored in "The Revisionist." He typically writes first passes in unaddressed e-mails; the bulk of his work exists in his Gmail drafts folder.

Eisenberg has published twenty-five Shouts & Murmurs pieces for this magazine. ("But I submitted double that," he clarified.) In 2015, he released "Bream Gives Me Hiccups," a collection of humorous stories. But he continued to be seen in L.A. primarily as an actor. "Nobody in the movie industry cares if you have a play on, or if you have stories in *The New Yorker*," he said. "I realized, suddenly, that I had mistakenly bifurcated my career."

One person in the industry who did pay attention was Emma Stone, a friend since "Zombieland." "I knew that because



"You're thinking of a canary. I'm a parakeet, and I have no goddam idea what is going on."

Jesse is so precise in how he writes, he would be equally precise as a director," Stone told me. In 2020, she launched the production company Fruit Tree with her husband and took on, as their first project, "When You Finish Saving the World," a film script Eisenberg had written about a self-righteous mother who runs a women's shelter. Julianne Moore agreed to star, and A24 came on as a distributor. Stone also signed on to produce "A Real Pain." Still, even with her name behind it, getting that film made was not easy. A24 passed, as did several other studios. "A24 gave me an interesting note, which is that they don't really *do* movies like this anymore, which were not dramatically swinging for the fences," Eisenberg said. "Like, it wasn't 'Marty Supreme.'"

Once Culkin signed on, funding came in, but Eisenberg was left feeling insecure. One day, he was framing a shot at a small military airport south of Warsaw when he began to fret about the cinematography. "We were shooting on a steadicam, which is the fastest way to shoot something," he said. "And I was, like, Oh, no, are we making something that looks like every other thing? Is this boring?"

"A Real Pain" is not boring, but it is quiet. Its score is made up of spare Chopin études and nocturnes; some scenes, like one set in the Majdanek concentration camp, are silent. The film's strength lies in its filigreed performances, particularly from Culkin, to whom Eisenberg said he was "eternally grateful," even if the two had sometimes clashed during production. Eisenberg likes to stay on schedule (all his films have finished on time and under budget); Culkin is looser in his approach. "He didn't want to talk about the script, or stand on his marks, or even know what scene we were shooting," Eisenberg said. But, he added, "my character had to be both charmed by this guy and also unnerved by him, so that dynamic comes through." (Culkin told me, "Not to, you know, kiss his ass, but it was so brilliantly written that there was nothing for me to do. I had zero questions.")

Eisenberg always has a crisis of faith while filming. This can make the post-production process challenging, he said, but it also pushes him into writing the next thing. While still in Poland, convinced "A Real Pain" would flop, he began the script of "The Debut." He called this self-flagellating productivity hack a "survival mechanism masquerading as misery." (Eisenberg is currently working on his first television series, with A24 producing, about a conservative college student who, in the wake of 9/11, finds herself drawn to a liberal professor.)

"The Debut," which was originally titled "No One Cares," is Eisenberg's warmest and kookiest film to date, and also his most cinematically ambitious. He asked the movie's director of photography, Drew Daniels (who shot the 2024 Best Picture winner, "Anora"), to give it a slightly garish affect; the camera swings around rooms to mimic the way that Mona's head is on a permanent swivel. Once she discovers acting, she sees everything as dramatic: steam rising from the pavement, the flickering of a neon sign. She is like Dorothy, moving from black-and-white to Technicolor, and the fact that she has walked not into Oz but merely into a crumbling theatre is a sharp visual gag.

One afternoon, Eisenberg joked to Beggarly about wanting to write an absurdist scene between Mona and the musical's director, Jerry, in which Jerry concocts an impromptu acting exercise for her. Holding an envelope that he says contains a rent check, he tells Mona to get it from him by any means possible. Mona starts off by playing the victim—"I'll be living under a bridge and I'll eat rats!" she cries. Then she turns angry, her frustration building until her eyes bulge. Pushed to an operatic breaking point, she unleashes a fusillade. "Jerry, you motherfucking asshit fucker-face piss man!" she shrieks. "The motherfucking rent is MOTHERFUCKING DUE!"

Eisenberg wrote the scene the night he thought of it, in fifteen minutes. "I wrote it mostly to make Jim laugh," he said. "I figured such a long monologue would never make it into the final film." Beggarly advised Eisenberg not to cut a word.

Sometimes, after a writing day, the two men grab dinner at a local diner. The night that he finished "The Debut," though, Eisenberg announced that he wanted to go out to Tatiana, a fancy restaurant at Lincoln Center. "I thought, O.K., he thinks that he's done something really great," Beggarly told me. Eisenberg winced. "That feeling lasted maybe two days," he said.

The première of "The Debut" at the New York Film Festival, in early October, began with a cocktail party at Brasserie Boulud. Many of Eisenberg's intimates were there—Emma Stone, Claire Danes, his sister Hallie—but he mostly stayed huddled in a corner of the room, wearing a black suit and a skinny black tie ("the one formal outfit I own," he said). On the walk to Alice Tully Hall, he was still debating whether he had the stomach to sit through the film.

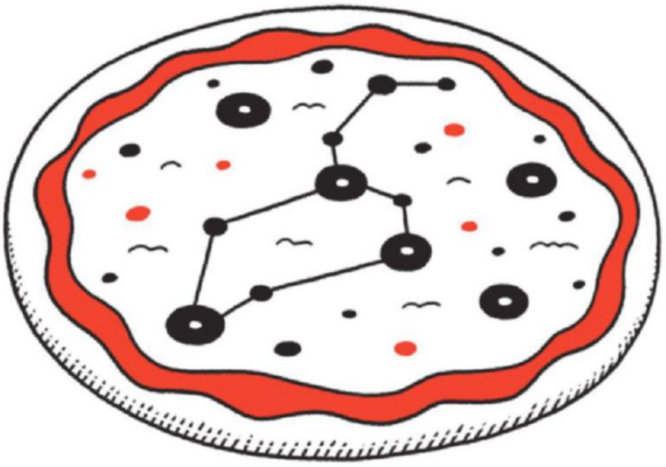
Outside the theatre, fans were pressed against a barricade, holding out posters for "The Social Network," "The Squid and the Whale," and "A Real Pain." Eisenberg stopped to sign a few, then proceeded into the main atrium, where he posed for pictures with the cast. His wife looked on protectively as he joked with journalists on the press line. I asked her if she thought he was happy that the film was coming out. "I think happy is too easy of an emotion for a person like Jesse to feel," she said.

Eisenberg did end up staying for the screening, and so he was there when the audience clapped wildly, mid-movie, after Mona's big rant. ("There was so much pleasure in saying that language," Moore told me.) The next day, I asked him about it. "I feel . . . nothing," he said, with a laugh. "What are normal people supposed to feel in that situation?"

Giamatti thinks of "The Debut" as a theological allegory. "It reads like one of these lives of a medieval saint," he said. "Someone who turns themself over to something and puts themself through hell, basically in service of this higher purpose."

Did Eisenberg see Mona as some kind of martyr, too? "If I had to pathologize this film, which I don't like to do," he told me, "I would say that maybe, as I've become more successful in the arts, I have increasingly missed the thing that felt really pure and communal, and that's what this woman is struggling with. At the end, she finally realizes what it means to be on a team, and she sublimates her own needs for the greater good of the show."

A few days later, Eisenberg texted to ask if I would make sure that he didn't sound too precious. "If you represent me as an adult in any capacity," he wrote, "I'll count it as a win." ♦



YOUR PIZZA-TOPPING HOROSCOPE

BY JOSH LIEB

Traditional horoscopes are worthless. What can a cluster of stars tell us about anyone's personality or fate? A much better guide is what someone puts on their pizza. What does your favorite pizza topping say about you?

Cheese: You are straightforward, with nothing to hide. You have the maturity level of a five-year-old. Famous Cheese people: Peyton Manning, Sporty Spice.

Extra Cheese: Like a Cheese person, but even more so. Famous Extra Cheese people: Eli Manning, Baby Spice.

Pepperoni: "A wild card," "a rule-breaker," "thinks outside the box"—no one has ever said any of those things about you. You feel like you're "one of the guys." Maybe you don't even exist. Famous Pepperoni people: Neville Chamberlain, Patty Hearst.

Sausage: You love a good mystery—specifically, What's that on my pizza? Who can say? You don't really care. For you, life is about questions, not answers. You will die in a tragic but avoidable accident. Famous Sausage people: Isadora Duncan, John Belushi.

Mushroom: The Gemini of pizza toppings. Geminis are the perverts, right? "Pulpy," "earthy," "firm" . . . every word used to describe mushrooms sounds gross but vaguely sexual. "Admire my cruelty-free topping!" you proclaim, as you openly stare down the blouse of your kid's first-grade teacher. Yuck. Famous Mushroom people: Hugh Hefner, Betty White.

"Beef Topping": You are small-minded, spiteful, resentful. You wanted to get hamburgers, but everyone else voted for pizza. You will make them pay. You will make the whole world pay! Famous "Beef Topping" people: Roy Cohn, the Hamburglar.

Anchovy: You will not live much longer, because you are a hundred years old, or a time traveller from 1957. Either way, the modern world terrifies you—especially when children make throw-up gestures after you offer to share your pizza. Don't worry, it'll all be over soon. Famous Anchovy people: your *nonna*, Fonzie.

Onion: You are in a great deal of pain, but no one notices. Maybe they'll notice if you order this pizza. But maybe you deserve the pain. Maybe you deserve this pizza. Famous Onion people: Sylvia Plath, Jake Paul.

"Hawaiian": Bring on the debate! The only thing you love more than your favorite pizza topping is arguing about your favorite pizza topping. Frankly, we're all sick of it. Don't be surprised if you meet a sticky end in a dark alley. Famous "Hawaiian" people: Ghislaine Maxwell, Bob Crane.

"Meat Lover's": I'm not judging your trauma, but taking your pain out on the animal kingdom is not the solution. Find a therapist. Famous "Meat Lover's" people: Aaron Rodgers, Gwyneth Paltrow.

Olive: Someone has to like olives on their pizza, right? Why not you? You're always willing to pitch in, to work late, to fill in the gaps. It's a pity no one cares. Famous Olive people: Jimmy Carter, Mariska Hargitay.

Everything: You want everyone to think you have bold, all-encompassing tastes. The truth is, you thought you were ordering a bagel. You are dumb. Famous Everything people: George W. Bush, Margaret Mead.

Veggie: You're a hard-charger, a mover, a shaker. You don't have the leisure to eat a salad and a pizza—you eat your salad and pizza at the same time. Then you rush home and spend the hours you saved wondering why no one calls. Famous Veggie people: Selena Gomez, Jay-Z.

Eggplant: An unusual choice, signifying a questing mind and a generous heart. Surely success will follow you all the days of your life. Not weird like Mushroom. Famous Eggplant people: me, my aunt Francie.

Green Pepper: "Hey, Tony! Gimme a large green-pepper pie, heavy on the peppers!" These words have never been spoken. My guess is that you're a space alien, sent here to infiltrate and ultimately destroy human life. All I can say is—hurry up. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

DEPT. OF MEDICINE

INSIDES OUT

The lab where yoga teachers and massage therapists dissect cadavers.

BY DHRUV KHULLAR



The anatomist Gil Hedley wants to "democratize knowledge of the body."

Sundip Aujla, a London-based alternative-medicine practitioner with a sharp nose and a long, graying beard, has trained in osteopathy, psychotherapy, Pilates, and clinical hypnotherapy during his thirteen-year career. As an adolescent, however, he was better acquainted with delinquency. Once, when Aujla was sixteen, he was being chased by a gang of young men with knives and took refuge in a public library in Birmingham, England. Hiding in the stacks, he selected a DVD at random and inserted it into a player. "I needed an excuse not to get kicked out," he told me. The video, part of a series called "Integral Anatomy," showed a man named Gil Hedley preparing to dissect a human body layer by layer. Hedley spoke in philosophical, almost spiritual terms. "Like astronauts who bravely approach the frontiers of outer space in their quest for discovery, together we will become somanauts navigating our bodies to the frontiers of inner space," he declared. The dissection footage was interspersed with soothing clips of flowers, clouds, spiders, and a babbling stream. "We will look to the intelligence and forms of nature to help us understand the body," Hedley went on. Aujla was transfixed. "It made me realize that there's an entire landscape inside of me that I'm not even considering," he said. About five hours later, he'd watched all of the library's videos of Hedley. He left determined to change the trajectory of his life. First, though, he stole the DVDs.

In the years that followed, Aujla watched hundreds of hours of dissection footage. He briefly pursued a medical degree but resented what he considered a reductionist conception of the body. "Gil's holistic approach became a curse and a blessing," he told me. "Because of him, I couldn't get on board with the traditional medical mind-set—but he also set me on the path I'm on today." Aujla learned that Hedley held ten-day dissection workshops at the Institute for Anatomical Research, a nonprofit facility in Colorado Springs, and in 2025 he enrolled. He and several other participants, most of whom had never dissected a human, were assigned the cadaver of an obese woman. *This will be tough going*, Aujla thought. For days, they cut away skin and body fat, and Aujla grew frustrated. "You start projecting things, like, This is what becomes of a person if they make bad choices," he said. Hedley preached patience. Then the group arrived at the muscle layer, and suddenly the body "looked like a Greek statue," Aujla recalled. "It was unbelievable." He paused. "Suddenly, you think of two things. First, which layer of *me* do I hate? Second, if I'm in conflict with someone—if there's a layer of their persona I'm struggling with—maybe there's also a layer below that I can really connect with."

Human dissection has long been the province of doctors and medical schools. In some countries, it is mostly illegal for non-clinicians; in the U.S., there are only a handful of dissection laboratories that are not affiliated with universities. Hedley has argued that dissection should be much more widely available to the public, and has described himself as being "on a mission to democratize knowledge of the body, and expose the profound gift of it." Modern life is often digital and cerebral instead of corporeal, which likely contributes to cultural pathologies such as anxiety, alienation, and distraction. There's a reason that "Touch grass" has become the admonition of our era, and that somatic psychotherapy, which attempts to treat mental health by drawing attention to bodily sensations, is growing in popularity. The writer Faith Hill has observed that people used to try to transcend the body but that today "the existential quest is inverted. . . . They want to reinhabit it."

Earlier this year, Hedley received a

ILLUSTRATION BY EMILY MINAKO HUGHES

stern e-mail from Thomas Champney, a biology professor at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. Champney serves on the Anatomical Board of the State of Florida, which oversees donations of human bodies for educational purposes. "Did you have explicit consent from the individuals to photograph them and post their pictures on a non-password protected, fully accessible website?" he asked. Some images from Hedley's dissections had been shared on social media. Champney attached ethical guidelines that he'd co-written concerning the display of anatomical images; they stated that limiting access to photos is "necessary to uphold the dignity of the individuals." Hedley wrote back that the "good done sharing my images far exceeds the limited instances of misuse on the part of unscrupulous folks." (He also said that, when he'd learned about the posts, he requested that they be taken down.) "It's not respectful toward the deceased," Champney told me. He argued that promoting dissection in the absence of a clear pedagogical need can veer into morbid "edutainment."

I was startled by the gulf between Champney's perspective and that of Hedley and his followers. During our conversation, Aujla told me about a dream of his that he'd shared with others during his dissection workshop. In the dream, souls congregate in a waiting room before they are to be incarnated on Earth; they learn who their parents are, and what joys and sorrows they'll experience. Then they're given scuba suits—bodies—with which to dive into the world. Hedley suggested that the souls were telling one another to make the most of what they'd been given: "Love it, care for it—it's the only suit you're going to get." Ten minutes after Aujla recounted the dream, he and his fellow-attendees were cutting into cadavers. "You hear something like that and you're not thinking about the origins and insertions of muscles anymore. You're thinking about something much deeper," he told me. "I don't think another degree was going to teach me that."

On a crisp morning in September, I pulled into the Kissing Camels Office Park, in Colorado Springs. A two-story brick building, set against the Rocky Mountains, housed both a massage school and the Institute for Anatomical Research. In a small room at the back of the building, I joined eighteen people who, like me, had paid thirty-five hundred dollars to participate in a six-day dissection workshop. Most were middle-aged white women. We sat in folding chairs around a wooden table on which rested four lit candles and a replica of the C2 vertebra, adorned with a jewelled necklace. Two of the women had purple hair; one of them joked that they must be related. "Welcome Somanauts!" was scrawled in orange marker on a whiteboard. Above it hung a sign with cursive lettering: "Mortui Vivos Docent"—the dead teach the living. Hedley, who was dressed fully in black, addressed us. "All this world is a mirror reflecting your light back to you," he said. He opened a book and, gesticulating wildly, read a poem, one of dozens that his dissections have inspired him to write. The class sat enraptured.

Hedley asked us to share why we'd signed up. A young man from Los Angeles had recently started a medical-massage company. "I work on muscles all day but have never actually seen them," he said. A woman seated near him nodded vigorously. "It's like having a pen pal you've been corresponding with for years, and now you finally get to meet them," she said. Another woman had taken one of Hedley's previous courses and was inspired to start teaching dissection at a similar lab in North Carolina. "Gil is my dissection dad," she joked. Later, a somatic psychotherapist admitted, "I'm not sure why I'm here. I just feel like it's part of my spiritual practice."

The group included physical therapists, chiropractors, yoga instructors—people who probably spend more time manipulating people's bodies than I do as an internal-medicine doctor, distanced as I am from the body by stethoscopes, CT scans, and medical records. Several of the attendees told me how pleased they were that a doctor had joined a course that championed a holistic—as opposed to a siloed and reductionist—approach to the body. They seemed to view the medical field as unduly myopic. It reminded me of an old joke about why an orthopedic surgeon might refer a patient to his colleague: "I specialize in right shoulders. He does the left."

We migrated to a well-lit area with gray cabinets and steel sinks: the dissection room. At one end was the Siberian Suite, a walk-in freezer that stored as many as sixteen "unfixed" bodies—those which hadn't been chemically preserved. At the other end was the Teachers Lounge, a refrigerated room where half a dozen embalmed bodies lay in body bags. Towels and cleaning agents hung on the walls; a metal cart held trays of scalpels.

Hedley and his assistants pushed three metal dissection tables to the center of the room. On top of each table was an embalmed body, and on top of each body was a white sheet and various items: candles, "Somanaut" decals, a stone with an inscription reading "Gratitude." We formed a circle around the cadavers, held hands, and swayed. "A year ago, these people were walking around just like you and me," Hedley said. "We give thanks that their intention to teach has met your intention to learn." Hedley began to stomp his feet, and the rest of us followed suit. "This week is an extreme exercise in staying present, in this place, in this moment," he said. Then he removed the sheet covering the first cadaver.

Hedley grew up in northern New Jersey. His mother was a typesetter, and his father was a building manager and a floor salesman. He first encountered dissection in the early eighties, when his high-school biology class took a field trip to a nearby podiatry college. There were human feet on shelves and partly dissected legs on tables; the experience was almost comically unsettling. Still, Hedley was intrigued. In college, he studied physical anthropology, a field that often uses skeletons to explore the evolutionary history of human beings. Then he pivoted and earned a Ph.D. in theological ethics at the University of Chicago, writing a dissertation about whether marriage was ethical for people who wanted to serve others. "I was a good Catholic boy who became obsessed with how to be a better person," he told me. "It took me eight years to conclude that, basically, it's O.K. to get married." (He later got married himself, and then divorced.)

During graduate school, Hedley developed back pain, which he attributed to prolonged sitting and various neuroses. He took up Tai Chi and massage,

and learned that his mother, who struggled with pain and stiffness, had benefitted from an intense, hands-on form of bodywork known as structural integration, or Rolfing. Ida Rolf, a mid-century biochemist, believed that a person's stressors, injuries, and posture could produce patterns of tension in the body's connective tissues. In a Rolfing program, a practitioner typically uses stretching, movement, and sustained pressure to release tissue stiffness and to improve posture and pain. But the practice itself can inflict acute pain, as when, for example, the skin is stretched perpendicular to the underlying muscles. A large-scale review funded by the Australian government found that there was "very low certainty" about the benefits of Rolfing.



Hedley was impressed enough by Rolfing that he trained to practice it himself, though he often felt that his knowledge of anatomy was lacking. In graduate school, his back pain had inspired him to spend a few weekends accompanying a medical student to an anatomy lab, and now, with a doctorate in hand, he thought, *Hey, I'm Dr. Hedley! I ought to be able to get a body*. Hedley, working with the Dr. Ida Rolf Institute, contacted an embalmer at a New Jersey medical school, who agreed to let him dissect during the summer session, when students were away. To pay for a cadaver and for two weeks of lab time, Hedley offered a dissection class to a handful of fellow-Rolfers. Using a step-by-step manual titled "Grant's Dissector," he was basically learning alongside them. "It was pretty much, like, '*You* do the leg. And *you* do the arm!'" he recalled. When they finished, he looked at the body with dismay. *What a fucking hack job*, he thought.

He signed up to teach dissection again the following summer, but he felt that he needed a new approach. "I couldn't do that higgledy-piggledy mess again," he said. He remembered a book called "Job's Body," which he'd read during his Rolfing certification and which organizes the body by anatomical layer and tissue type. "We're just going to take the skin off today, fellas," Hedley told the group. Over several weeks, they went on to remove the fat and the muscle, then they made their way through the visceral organs and the bones. After the workshop, one participant pulled Hedley aside and said, "I think you've got something special here."

Hedley is now in his early sixties, with an expressive face and a mop of tousled gray hair that makes him look like a bohemian Steven Pinker. In the past three decades, he has taught his version of dissection everywhere from Boston and San Francisco to Vienna and London. He is, by most accounts, very skilled. In 2023, he performed a painstaking dissection of an entire intact nervous system. Such a dissection has been performed only a handful of times, most recently about a century ago. Afterward, Hedley embarked on what he called the Nerve Tour, delivering a five-and-a-half-hour presentation in more than a hundred cities. At the end of the talk, Hedley showed a video of himself lifting a cadaver's nervous system as one continuous net, running from the neck to the toes. One man, moved to tears, compared the moment to witnessing Michelangelo's Pietà.

The body under the sheet belonged to a small, elderly woman with a shaved head and a bruised chest. Her skin was Pepto-Bismol pink, a consequence of the type of embalming fluid that had been injected into her neck. She had thin calves and red toenail polish. We stared at the body; some people fidgeted uncomfortably.

The second body to be uncovered was that of a woman in her sixties who had dark, curly hair. An implanted port, allowing for the infusion of chemotherapy and other medications, was visible on her upper chest, suggesting that she may have died of cancer. "She looks like my sister," Hedley said.

The third body was that of a slender older man with exceptionally long legs, a relatively short trunk, and large hands. I guessed that he'd had a connective-tissue disorder known as Marfan syndrome. "People want you to learn from their differences," Hedley told the group. He attempted a wisecrack: "My dad wanted to make sure everyone saw his giant testicle!"

The class split into three groups, each of which selected a body and named it. I joined the table with the male cadaver, which we decided to call Aristotle. (The women were dubbed Nonna Marcy and Starla Marie.) Next, Hedley instructed us to stand the bodies up. "In life, we meet people vertically," he explained. At first, I thought he was joking, but he grabbed Aristotle and started to hoist him off the table. Hedley and an assistant lifted the torso while a fellow-participant and I knelt to lock his knees in place. The body, which was heavier than I expected, nearly toppled over. I stared up at the dead man towering over me and wondered what the hell I was doing.

Most medical schools teach what's known as regional anatomy. Students might spend a day isolating the brachial plexus—the intricate network of nerves that animate the shoulder, the arm, and the hand. Another session might focus on tracing the arteries that run through the abdomen, supplying blood to the liver, the spleen, and the gut. Medical dissectors clear away connective tissue from structures of interest; instructors sometimes insert pins or flags for identification. In this way, doctors develop a common language to talk about the body, and a precise mental map that enables medical interventions. Hedley's "integral anatomy," by contrast, does not necessarily isolate or name the structures that doctors care about. Integral anatomy is concerned primarily with the body's continuities and textures, and treats connective tissue not as extraneous material to be discarded but as a system worthy of sustained attention.

After a cursory presentation on how to handle a scalpel and hemostatic forceps, Hedley directed us to remove the cadavers' skin. "You only get one first cut," he said. "Make it count." Even though I was wearing a mask, the smell of formaldehyde singed my nostrils, and my eyes started to burn. I ran my gloved fingers over Aristotle's right thigh, which felt firm and smooth, like cold leather. I made an incision from near the groin to above the knee. I was surprised by how thin the skin was—just a millimetre or two deep—and, as I worked to peel away the layer, I accidentally took part of the fatty yellow tissue below. "Got a little carried away there!" Hedley said over my shoulder. He helped me scrape the underside of the skin clean, reveal-

ing a delicate network of fibrous tissue that looked like cantaloupe rind, then gestured toward a metal bucket marked with blue tape which sat by my feet. Every bit of tissue that we removed from the body was to go in there; the remains would be cremated and returned to the family. Hedley brought over a flap of abdominal skin from Starla Marie. He shone a flashlight behind it to emphasize narrow bands of damaged collagen and elastin—stretch marks. Near the head of the table, someone cut into Aristotle's armpit, and blood-tinged embalming fluid flowed onto the metal surface. The lab's director sucked it up with a turkey baster. A woman working next to me indicated that she felt lightheaded and excused herself.

Madhav Gramke, a chiropractor who serves as one of Hedley's assistants, joined our group. He had a bald head, a black beard, and lively eyebrows. As he cut away the thick skin of Aristotle's heel, I noticed the names of the Hindu deities Radha and Krishna tattooed on Gramke's forearm. Gramke was born in Houston, and his parents, who were Catholic, named him John. "But I always felt more like a Madhav than a John," he told me. As an adolescent, he became an atheist, but one night in college he took LSD and watched the sun rise over the ocean. *That's God*, he remembered thinking. A few weeks later, a Hare Krishna gave him the Bhagavad Gita, and Gramke eventually went to India to study with a guru who called him Madhav. Gramke said that his faiths had instilled in him a deep appreciation of the human form. Christianity teaches *imago Dei*—humans are made in the image of God. Some Hindus consider the body a temple for the soul. "Christian, Hindu, evolutionary biologist, whatever," Gramke said, placing a flap of skin into the bucket. "If you pay attention, you'll see that the body is amazingly elegant. It's an extraordinary thing."

The history of dissection is full of sordid episodes. A few centuries ago, many cadavers were obtained by "resurrection men," who dug up freshly buried bodies and sold them to anatomists. Surgeons and for-profit body collectors fought over corpses after public executions. In 1752, England passed the Murder Act, which allowed for the bodies of convicted killers to be hung in chains and left to decay or to be "dissected and anatomized," for "better preventing the horrid crime." The first known full-body nerve dissection, conducted in 1888 and still on display at Drexel University, was reportedly performed on a Black woman named Harriet Cole; there is no record of her having given her consent. The famed Scottish anatomist John Hunter, a father of modern surgery, once hired someone to follow a nearly eight-foot-tall Irish man in the days before his death. The man, who had a pituitary disorder, did not want his body to be dissected, and arranged for his corpse to be thrown into the ocean. But Hunter conspired to bribe the undertaker, so a coffin full of stones went into the ocean instead. Hunter kept the man's skeleton at his home.

Misconduct continues to this day. In 2024, an NBC News investigation revealed that a Texas university had been using unclaimed bodies—many of them from nursing homes, hospitals, and homeless encampments—for its anatomical-dissection program. In one case, a deceased veteran's body was classified as unclaimed, despite the fact that his family lived nearby. Some medical companies use body parts to help them develop products; the veteran's torso was sent to a medical-education company, one of his legs went to a Swedish device-maker, and a pair of bones from his head went to the U.S. Army. The man's family later said that he never wanted to be a donor. Last year, a former morgue manager at Harvard Medical School was sentenced to eight years in prison for helping to steal and sell body parts that had been donated to the university, and Harvard recently agreed to a fifty-three-million-dollar settlement to compensate the families of the donors. Not long ago, the operators of a funeral home a few hours away from the Institute for Anatomical Research were sentenced to prison for harvesting and selling parts of hundreds of bodies that they'd promised to prepare for cremation.

James Pulciani, the Institute's director for the past decade, is in charge of procuring bodies for dissection. He described the recent scandals as "a constant challenge." "I am always trying to destigmatize this work," he said. "I want people to see labs like ours as a third destination for the body after death. It should be burial, cremation, and anatomical dissection." Pulciani has a graying goatee, three earrings in his left earlobe, and a boisterous laugh; in the lab, he could usually be found in purple scrubs and SpongeBob SquarePants socks. Recently, a student asked Pulciani how he should



"The mistakes referees make are just part of the game that we have to live with."



alter his diet so that his colon would not look as diseased as that of a cadaver on display. "Now that's what I call preventative care!" Pulciani said, chuckling.

In the U.S., people who wish to donate their bodies can register with their state as organ donors (which means that the donation could directly save lives) or as whole-body donors (which is sometimes described as a donation "to science.") Debra Szuster, who manages the whole-body donation program at the Colorado State Anatomical Board, told me that medical and dental schools are generally the first to receive donations. When there are sufficient donations, however, bodies can go to professional-development programs like those at the Institute; they are generally used within two or three years so that the remains can be returned to families. Szuster personally inspects many such organizations, to make sure that they store and treat the donations with care.

The Institute acquires about forty bodies per year. Many that do not come from the Anatomical Board come from the Institute's direct-donation program. Pulciani often retrieves the bodies himself in a van, at times driving to morgues and funeral homes as far as three hundred miles away. "A lot of programs try to anonymize donors," he told me. "We tend to take the opposite tack." A few years ago, a brother of one of Pulciani's close friends was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The man, who'd cycled in and out of prison, learned of Pulciani's work during his treatment. Initially, he was reluctant to offer up his body, but Pulciani framed a donation as a way to give back. Money also played a role. The man didn't want his family to bear the expense of his burial; if he donated his body, the lab would cover the cost of cremation. When I spoke with one of the man's sisters, Debbie, she told me that their mother never felt comfortable with his decision. "I can't believe they're cutting into him like that," she remembered her mother saying. But Debbie was moved "beyond measure" by her brother's donation. She occasionally watches videos of his dissection and recognizes his tattoos; she thinks of the people who might learn from him. She has since filled out paperwork to donate her own body to the Institute when she dies.

Sometimes the relations are even more intimate. Hedley's whole-body nerve-dissection project was performed on Gramke's father, whom Hedley called Captain. Gramke, who participated in the dissection and helped film it, described the experience as intense and strange, but also "beautiful in its own way."

Dissecting the body of someone you've known in life can be seen as an act of devotion or as a profound transgression. During my time with Hedley, I tried to decide which it was. Medicine discourages practitioners from treating their family and friends, and has strong norms in favor of professional boundaries, but Hedley's work is often personal. Some anatomists I spoke to questioned whether anyone can make an objective decision to donate his body to someone he knows. "I worry about conflicts of interest," Champney, the University of Miami professor, told me. "You don't want situations where it's 'Oh, I'm not sure about this—but I'll do it for my friend.'" James Cray, who directs the anatomy graduate program at Ohio State University, said, "Good stewardship is all about consent. It's important that donors really understand how their bodies will be used and make decisions based on what's important to them."

In an article on best practices for body donation, the Swiss anatomist Beat Riederer wrote that dissecting a friend or a family member "seems unimaginable." I felt the same way. Still, I had to admit that my aversion was more visceral than rational. Hedley emphasizes the distinction between a body and a person: "Cadavers are not people. They are records of people." I could not detect anything coercive or exploitative about the lab and its work. Staff members spoke of donors with respect, even reverence. Direct donors to the Institute sign a letter of intent that encourages open conversation with loved ones, "so that everyone feels informed and comfortable" with their wishes. (It can be withdrawn at any time.) The organization's website tells the public, "When you make a whole body donation, your legacy will live on as your body becomes a teacher in our lab."

After the skin had been removed from the cadavers, they looked as though they were encased in buttery yellow bubble wrap. This was the superficial fascia, which sits just beneath the skin. When I cut into it, my blade advanced with a succession of tiny pops: we were severing the fibrous material that separates lobules of fat. I pulled the layer up like it was a carpet and saw a thin white sheet of dense, collagenous tissue underneath—the deep fascia. I was surprised by how much of the firmness of the muscle below seemed to come from this layer. After I removed it, the muscle felt like lumpy hamburger meat.

Lower down the body, one of my tablemates had filleted the quadriceps, four reddish-brown straps that converge at a white tendon above the kneecap. Pulciani pointed out that, contrary to many people's expectations, two of the straps actually extend around the thigh and partially attach to the back of the femur. When we turned the body face down, we also saw a glistening silver ribbon running up the back of the thigh. It was the connective tissue atop the

hamstrings, and it looked almost like aluminum foil. I made a mental note to stretch more.

As I worked, I thought about how abstract my sense of the human body had become. When I examine a patient who has neuropathy, my mind immediately turns to drugs and doses; I couldn't remember the last time I'd conjured an image of the neurovascular bundle that I was now pinching between my thumb and forefinger. In my practice, cardiovascular disease is represented by risk scores, imaging studies, and cholesterol blockers. But in the lab I could lift up a man's neck muscle and feel that a once supple carotid artery was rigid with gritty calcium deposits. The dissection reminded me that as medicine grows more digitized, and more artificially intelligent, it will become only more divorced from the material reality of sickness and health.

The novelist Ayad Akhtar has noted that, in French, two words can be translated as "to know": *savoir*, to know about, and *connaître*, to know directly. Dissection, it seemed to me, was an exercise in moving anatomical knowledge from the realm of description to the realm of experience. One massage therapist in the room said that she'd never realized how deep she needed to press to access the psoas-major muscle, which connects the lower spine to the thigh. Another said that she changed her technique massaging the iliotibial band after she saw how it ran along nearby structures. But knowing how to cut open a body is different from knowing how it works. When we opened a donor's abdomen, Hedley spoke admiringly of the visceral fat lining certain organs—"Don't be hating on your visceral fat!"—even though scientists have associated it with such conditions as diabetes, stroke, and cancer. Later, he characterized the liver and the spleen as "friends," saying that, when the liver fails, the spleen enlarges in order to assume some of its jobs. In fact, the spleen grows because blood has difficulty passing through a scarred liver; it can't, in any meaningful sense, take over the liver's functions.

Hedley has a special interest in the fascia, which in alternative-medicine circles is seen as a key driver of pain and stiffness. In a 2009 YouTube video titled "The Fuzz Speech," which has been viewed more than a million times, Hedley pulls back a layer of muscle and uses his finger to disperse wispy tissue that looks like cotton candy. "Each night when you go to sleep, the interfaces between your muscles grow fuzz," he says. "In the morning, when you wake up and you stretch"—he reaches his arms overhead and groans—"the fuzz melts." Failure to stretch, Hedley claims, makes us "all fuzzed over," which can be treated with massage and other forms of bodywork. Paul Ingraham, a science writer and a former massage therapist, called the video "embarrassingly pseudoscientific." There is essentially no evidence supporting it, Ingraham said, but "what the average therapist saw was an impressive-sounding rationalization for what they were already doing." (Hedley told me that the demonstration "gave the wrong impression," and that his perspective has evolved over time, but he maintained that the video has encouraged many people to move more.)

Some elements of the workshop proved hard to stomach. One participant quit after the first day. Another tearfully shared how upsetting it was to throw human tissue into a bucket. I was particularly troubled by dissecting the head. After a few days, Aristotle's face was missing most of its tissue, but the lips and one ear remained, and his green eyes appeared to be staring blankly at the ceiling. At night, I had trouble sleeping and began having visions of dissected and decomposing bodies.

One evening, I drove to Garden of the Gods Park, which is known for dramatic sandstone formations at the foot of Pikes Peak. Millions of years ago, layers of sediment accumulated in structures that are now hundreds of feet tall. I arrived about an hour before sunset, in scrubs, hoping that the rock forms might distract me from human ones. Instead, I looked at a hole in the sandstone and saw an inguinal canal—a passage through the lower abdominal wall into the groin—which I'd palpated earlier. Striations on a rock face reminded me of muscle fibres. The branches of a tree looked like a network of nerves.

At some point, I stopped trying to ignore these similarities. I concentrated on grazing deer and chirping birds. Nature seems imprinted on the human form: blood vessels diverge into tiny tributaries, fat adopts the structure of honeycomb, the cerebellum develops folds like coral. It's as though evolution deployed a common set of solutions for its myriad engineering problems. The sun began to dip behind some slender sandstone pillars known as the Three Graces. I recalled the mystical experience that Gramke had shared with me. Without the benefit of psychedelic drugs or of long-standing faith, I can't say that I saw God. But I did feel a kind of unity with the world around me, and, that night, I slept better.

The first time I spoke with Hedley, over Zoom, he told me that a body he was dissecting—just a few feet in front of him—belonged to his brother-in-law. The man's name was Tom, but Hedley called him Doc, because he had a doctorate in English. In fact, before Tom married one of Hedley's sisters, Vicki, he had been Hedley's high-school teacher. For a long time, Hedley and Tom had had a tense relationship, but eventually they developed a mutual respect, and even love, for each other. Tom decided to donate his body to Hedley when he died, though he worried, after he developed severe diabetes and cardiovascular disease and had half of his foot amputated, that the lab "wouldn't want me—I'm too sick." When the time came, Hedley accepted the donation and began a new project that was focussed on pelvic vasculature. It eventually expanded into a contiguous dissection of all the large blood vessels in the body. Hedley called the project "Sex and the Sacred Heart."

Tom had consented to his body being photographed, and Hedley took a picture of the intricate dissection. It showed a skull, jaw muscles still attached, connected to the entire vascular tree. Hedley sent it to a family group chat; Vicki was shocked. "It looked just like him," she told me. "It's one thing in the lab, when you know what's coming. It's another when it's on your freaking phone. It was disrespectful." She was haunted by the image for weeks. Yet I was surprised to learn that Vicki did not resent her brother for dissecting and displaying her husband's body. If anything, she told me, she felt grateful. "My husband was a teacher," she said. "He taught until the end. And even after the end." ♦

Around Venezuela, you can still see images of the deposed President Nicolás Maduro, installed during the years when he was the country's maximum leader. Near the main airport is a faded billboard of him welcoming visitors with a beneficent smile. A few campaign signs are left over from the 2024 election, which he is universally understood to have stolen from the opposition. Along the roadsides of Caracas, the capital, newer billboards show him embracing his wife, Cilia Flores. The First Couple were abducted by U.S. Special Operations Forces in a violent raid on January 3rd, so their images are accompanied by a despondent slogan: "We want them back." But these signs are just about all that remains of Maduro in the public consciousness. On two recent trips I made to Venezuela, not a single person mentioned his name unless I brought it up first.

Maduro's replacement is Delcy Rodríguez, his former Vice-President. Barely five feet tall, with oversized glasses and the oratorical style of a seventh-grade teacher, Rodríguez is an unlikely head of state. For a quarter century, she served as an unswerving loyalist to Maduro and to his predecessor, Hugo Chávez—a backstage operative whose effectiveness as an administrator earned her the slightly dismissive nickname *la tecnócrata*. Now she is *la encargada*, the one in charge. But what does it mean to be in charge of Venezuela these days? After Maduro's kidnapping, Rodríguez dutifully denounced the raid as "barbaric" and "illegitimate." Since then, though, she has done little to dispel the sense that she is Donald Trump's puppet. Soon after being sworn in, she welcomed visits from the C.I.A. director, the Energy Secretary, and the head of the Southern Command, which, in the guise of fighting drug trafficking, had overseen lethal attacks on civilian boats off the Venezuelan coast. In March, she restored diplomatic ties with the U.S., which had been severed during Trump's first term.

Though the Americans in Caracas keep mostly to the Embassy complex and to a couple of expensive hotels, everyone knows that they are running the country. It is the closest thing to an unabashedly imperial relationship that the U.S. has had since it governed the Philippines, in the first half of the twentieth



Rodríguez describes her tenure as "a profound process of transformation" for Venezuela.

LETTER FROM CARACAS

SUCCESSION

Delcy Rodríguez and the new American imperialism.

BY JON LEE ANDERSON



Critics say that she is capitulating to the United States as it exerts unabashedly neocolonial influence in her country.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEJANDRO CEGARRA

century. After Maduro's abduction, Trump described Venezuela as the cornerstone of a revived hegemony: "Under our new National Security Strategy, American dominance in the Western Hemisphere will never be questioned again." Since then, he has repeatedly expressed interest in making it the "fifty-first state." When he bothers to mention Rodríguez, he sounds like a bullying boss praising a compliant underling: "She was quite gracious, but she really doesn't have a choice." Mostly, he touts America's access to Venezuela's oil deposits, which are among the largest in the world. During a speech in Las Vegas this summer, he boasted, "We're taking a lot of oil from Venezuela, and we're getting along great with them. . . . It's the old-fashioned way. To the victor belong the spoils, right?"

The twenty-seven years of *chavismo*—the heady, divisive experiment in militarized socialism conceived by Hugo Chávez—were an exhausting roller coaster. Though most Venezuelans understand that it is ending, it is not quite over, and no one seems entirely sure where Rodríguez is leading the country. Many people believe that she coöperated with the kidnapping of her former boss so that she could take his job. A former senior Chávez adviser described her to me as "the Pétain of Venezuela"—a reference to Philippe Pétain, who led the Nazi-aligned Vichy government during the Second World War. More forgiving observers see her as a political survivor, forced to accommodate a stronger nation. "I think Delcy has had to betray *chavismo*," a former senior U.S. official told me. "The question is: does she want to keep power or become an agent of change?"

A forty-minute drive from the Caribbean shoreline, Caracas sprawls in a long valley below forested peaks. From the late fifties to the eighties, while much of South America suffered under repressive military regimes, the city was a sanctuary for progressives. Venezuela was prospering from the oil trade, and, though Caracas had slums on the hills, it also had well-designed social housing, a world-class theatre, and a university decorated with sculptures by Alexander Calder. Gas was subsidized, and Venezuelans lived well. For people of means, there were stylish night clubs and Concorde flights to Paris. Gabriel García Márquez spent a year and a half in Caracas as a young man, and later wrote, "One of the beautiful frustrations of my life is not having stayed to live in that infernal city forever."



"Mind if I sneak in there so I can take up precious kitchen space?"

These days, the city's wealthy neighborhoods still have tree-lined streets, with wild macaws swooping overhead, but little of the rest could be called beautiful. The vagaries of an oil-based economy, along with widespread corruption and mismanagement, have turned the city into a grimy, careworn place. Chávez's revolution added blocks of Soviet-style social housing and murals of anti-imperialist icons: Che Guevara, Augusto César Sandino, and, most of all, Simón Bolívar, the nineteenth-century liberation hero.

Despite these depictions of revolutionary fervor, a visitor might wonder whether Venezuela is still a socialist country. Along the expressways that wind through the city, billboards advertise everything from crypto deals and remittance services to hot dogs and Hollywood blockbusters. As Chris Sabatini, a Latin America expert at the British think tank Chatham House, put it, "Venezuela has never been a socialist state. It's a crony-capitalist state."

Delcy Rodríguez met me at La Estancia, a hacienda owned by Venezuela's national oil company that she often uses as an alternative office. La Estancia is a quiet place of neatly trimmed lawns, lime-washed buildings, and colonnaded walkways, patrolled by security men. When I arrived, I was shown to a waiting room, where a uniformed valet wearing black plastic gloves brought coffee.

I met Rodríguez in a sleek conference room. She is fifty-seven, and was dressed comfortably in a red sweater, a white blouse, loose pants, and sneakers. I asked how she felt about a recent *Times* report that depicted her as a friendly collaborator with Secretary of State Marco Rubio, trading gossip and selfies. She rolled her eyes and said, "I am not going to share our private conversations, but we maintain an official relationship. *Official*. When we have had an opportunity to converse about work on concrete matters, it has been official. And respectful, which is important, no?" To demonstrate the formality of their relationship, she turned her phone around and showed me a WhatsApp exchange with Rubio. " 'Good afternoon, *Secretario*,' " she read. "I don't call him Marco or Marquito."

A few days earlier, Rubio had delivered a speech calling for a global alliance of right-wing forces to combat the

scourge of leftism. When I asked about it, Rodríguez described a collision of systems created hundreds of years in the past. "The source for this lies within your constitution—in liberalism, which doesn't allow the participation of socialist or communist models," she said. I asked if she had discussed the subject with Rubio. "No. We've discussed work agendas for coöperation on the economy and energy," she said. "We have frequent interactions, as should be normal between nations."

Rodríguez has talked to very few reporters, and she generally dodges questions about Maduro's abduction, her ascent to the Presidency, and her relationship with the U.S. In her telling, the country's current circumstances were a kind of accident of fate: a collective trauma that Venezuelans were forced to get through together. "These differences are two centuries old, and we are not going to resolve them in a decade or in a day," she said. "We have to find *different* ways to preserve the peace and tranquillity of our society, because it's very painful for countries that are at war, that are victims of violence. It's painful to hear a child say, 'I am afraid, I feel terrified, I saw the helicopters, I saw the missiles.' I think one has to opt for a peaceful and diplomatic course of action. Which is *difficult*."

Since 1830, when the former Spanish colony of Venezuela became an independent state, it has endured more than a hundred and sixty rebellions and at least a dozen coup attempts. For the first half of the twentieth century, it was ruled largely by military strongmen, until the dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez was overthrown, in 1958. Later that year, a U.S.-friendly politician named Rómulo Betancourt won the Presidency, with support from the Eisenhower Administration. For the next four decades, two political parties traded turns in power; one was to the left of center, the other to the right.

The arrangement worked fine from Washington's perspective, but it systematically excluded the country's communists. After the Cuban Revolution, in 1959, Latin American leftists grew increasingly restive. Rodríguez's father, Jorge Antonio Rodríguez, was among them. As a student leader, he joined a guerrilla outfit called the Revolutionary Left Movement, and he went on to co-found the Socialist League—a political front for an underground cell that launched armed attacks.

One afternoon in Caracas, Delcy's older brother, Jorge Rodríguez, spoke to me about their father. "He may have been a guerrilla fighter, but at home he was someone else—calm, friendly," he said. "He called Delcy his *negrita*. She was his doll." Delcy and Jorge knew from a young age that their father was a guerrilla; it was a family secret that they were trusted to keep. In 1972, when Delcy was a toddler, her father was captured by military intelligence and spent a year and a half in prison. Jorge said that, when they were allowed to visit him, an officer threw a tear-gas canister at the family. Choking from the gas, they fled to a clinic, where their mother, who was pregnant, suffered a miscarriage. Delcy succumbed to an asthma attack, the first in a lifelong series of them.



Even when Jorge and Delcy's father was out of jail, he sometimes remained in hiding. One day, their mother took them to visit a city park, where they were approached by an old man—their father in disguise. Later, she drove the family to a Chinese restaurant while Rodríguez lay hidden in the trunk. "He loved Chinese food," Jorge said, laughing. "He was such a Maoist!" He recalled his father talking excitedly about an invitation to visit China. It was scheduled for August, 1976, but it never happened.

Earlier that year, guerrillas linked to the Socialist League had taken part in kidnapping an American businessman named William Niehous, who was suspected of being a C.I.A. agent. Five months into the abduction, Rodríguez was captured by Venezuelan secret police, who tortured him to death over the course of three days. The government initially claimed that he had died of a heart attack, but it was a scandal that could not be covered up; his death was widely reported as a state-sponsored killing, and the agents involved were ultimately imprisoned. Delcy was seven and Jorge ten. She told me that, fifty years later, it remained "one of the hardest moments" of her life.

Afterward, Jorge became Delcy's closest companion, walking her to school and helping her with her homework. He went on to train as a psychiatrist. She earned a law degree, then moved to Paris and to London for further studies. In time, though, both would be drawn into politics.

In 1998, Hugo Chávez was elected President, and Venezuela was quickly renamed a Bolivarian Republic, in honor of Simón Bolívar. Chávez, a charismatic former paratrooper, was left-leaning but politically uncommitted—until 2002, when a group of conservative military officers abducted him and put a businessman in power, with American support. Though the coup attempt collapsed within forty-eight hours, it turned Chávez decisively against the U.S. Not long afterward, he declared that his country was committed to socialist revolution.

Rodríguez, outraged by the coup, went to work for Chávez. Her brother did, too, and they earned a nickname, *los gemelos fantásticos*—the fantastic twins. Over the years, each held many of the top positions in government, including foreign minister, head of the legislature, and Vice-President. "I've had different responsibilities in my life," Rodríguez told me. "I can even design purses. I can do anything. But, whatever I do, I like to study it."

When Rodríguez moved offices, the only thing that she brought along was a photograph of her father. She was a workaholic—an argumentative but capable manager who generally slept only from 6 to 10 A.M. She never married, or had children, though she did tell me, "I've had miscarriages." She has twelve dogs, including a number of dachshunds, divided between her home and a private office. Her pastimes, she said with an embarrassed laugh, lean toward romantic telenovelas, from Italy, Turkey, Korea—"from *anywhere*."

In 2013, Chávez died of cancer, and Maduro, his successor, asked Rodríguez to be the minister of communications. She recalled replying with a story: "Until I was seven years old—when they killed my father—there was neither radio nor television, because my father used to say they were instruments to poison our minds. So you're appointing a minister who knows nothing of radio, of television, nothing of the communications

media." She laughed at the memory. "The only thing I read back then was one newspaper, *El Nacional*, because my brother made me sit down every night and underline things, like homework."

She and Maduro shared an important bond, aside from their political loyalties: they were both acolytes of the Indian guru Sathya Sai Baba, a mystic who spoke of the oneness of religious traditions. Rodríguez made several visits to his ashram in southern India. I was curious what attracted her to his teachings. "I can sum it up in one word," she said. "Faith." She added that her devotion to Sai Baba fit neatly with her socialist ideals: "What were his precepts? To help everyone, to not hurt anyone, to love everyone."

During her time working for Maduro, global gas prices plunged, and Venezuela's economy collapsed, leading to spiralling crime, widespread hunger, and a huge exodus of citizens; eventually, a fifth of all Venezuelans fled the country. Feeling embattled, Maduro began establishing a new revolutionary hierarchy, with himself and his family at the top. He imprisoned dissenting politicians and, in 2015, began sending masked security agents into the slums, ostensibly to fight organized crime. Human Rights Watch has reported that, in the next few years, more than nineteen thousand people were killed on the pretext of "resistance to authority."

While Maduro became increasingly violent and corrupt, Rodríguez remained a fierce protector. As foreign minister, she claimed to have once injured her arm trying to force her way into a meeting of a regional trade bloc that had suspended Venezuela. In 2017, when she was the head of Maduro's rubber-stamp legislature, the Constituent Assembly, I joined her as she led a tour of an exhibit on his life: pictures of him as a child, others of him meeting Fidel Castro and the Pope. "You're a good man, Mr. President," she said, as she walked. "A man of many facets, which have not been shown because of the media lynching you've been subjected to, Mr. President. But, here in the Constituent Assembly, we want to show you as you really are."

On the night that Maduro was abducted, Rodríguez was on Margarita Island—a Caribbean enclave off the Venezuelan coast which is a favorite holiday destination for Caraqueños. For her detractors, her absence was evidence of complicity, which she has persistently denied. In her interview with me, she described a chaotic night. "The third of January was the culmination of situations that were getting more and more complicated," she said. The U.S., which had warships off the coast, was attacking putative drug smugglers and halting the flow of oil exports. "We were blockaded for the month of December, without income," she said. "We had a nation to attend to." She said that she worked with a planning committee through New Year's Eve on a scheme to restore some solvency. "Our economic plan emphasized communal programs, food production, and diversified economic activity, much like those countries that don't have oil," she said. On January 2nd, she joined Maduro for a meeting with a Chinese envoy. "Afterward, I presented the plan, around seven or eight at night, and he approved it. So I told him, '*Listo*, I'm going to Margarita Island, where Jorge and my nephews are.' He said, 'Take my plane,' and he called the Casa Militar and ordered them to get it ready."

At around eleven o'clock that night, "I saw that the President's Instagram account had been hacked," she recalled. (She knew it was hacked because "it started to show porn sites," she said.) As U.S. forces deployed, a Venezuelan command center sent reports of planes in the air. Soon afterward, the attack



began. "The next few hours were very hard," Rodríguez said. "The first thing we did was to look for the President, and he didn't appear."

Later, an assistant told her that bombs had struck Fuerte Tiuna, a military base where Maduro had taken shelter. Rodríguez began getting calls from the Trump Administration. "We refused to speak to the government of the United States until there was proof of life of the President," she told me. "And that was done."

"What was said?" I asked.

" 'We want to resume relations with Venezuela.' That was to some degree a threat, and . . . "

"That was Rubio?"

Rodríguez nodded silently, then banged her palm on the table, clacking her bracelets.

"Was he respectful?"

She stared. "At that moment, *nobody* was really being respectful."

"Do you feel Maduro was unjustly kidnapped?"

"Well, obviously I can't agree with the way that happened," she said. This seemed like a surprisingly mild response to a raid that had killed more than eighty people. When I reminded her of the death toll, she murmured, "That's right—soldiers of ours, Cuban officials." After a pause, she suggested that it would have been useless to resist the U.S. military: "Our investigation shows very impressive technological development."

Though many Venezuelans were shocked by Maduro's abduction, the plan had been discussed in the U.S. for years. One of its main proponents was Mauricio Claver-Carone, a longtime Latin America operative whom the Venezuelans call *el comeniños*, or the baby-eater. I met Claver-Carone recently on the mezzanine of a luxurious hotel in Rosslyn, Virginia, across the Potomac from D.C. He is fifty-one, a strongly built Cuban American with long hair and a beard. In gym sweats and high-tops, he looked more like a "CSI" extra than like a former White House aide. "You've caught me at a good time," he told me. He had recently announced that he was stepping away from the Trump Administration.

Claver-Carone grew up in Miami, earned a law degree, and became an anti-Castro lobbyist in D.C. He started at the National Security Council in September, 2018, as the head of Western Hemisphere Affairs, and quickly assessed the President's priorities. "Venezuela was the big one for Trump," he said. "He was obsessed with it." During his first term, Trump mused openly about deposing Maduro, who, for his part, had called Trump a thief, a crook, and "the king of wigs." For a time, Trump did little more than issue threats and financial

sanctions, but eventually he tried a more direct intervention, throwing U.S. support behind an opposition figure named Juan Guaidó. In April, 2019, Guaidó launched an uprising, along with a small crew of regime insiders and soldiers, but it was underplanned; after a violent confrontation, several deaths, and hundreds of arrests, the effort fizzled. "That was a shit show," Claver-Carone said. "I told Trump then, 'I can come up with a thousand schemes. The only thing that will work is snatching Maduro.'"

At the N.S.C., Claver-Carone had met Jessica Bedoya, a C.I.A. analyst on loan to the council. She was half Ecuadorian, half Colombian, born in Chicago. They began a partnership built around clandestine intrigue. "I was the operative, she was the brains," he told me. "She's the Andean Oz. She knows her shit." Bedoya told me in an interview that her idea for dealing with Maduro was based on the "Panama model"—the operation in which the U.S. invaded Panama, in 1989, and arrested the dictator Manuel Antonio Noriega.

In early 2020, the Trump Administration held a meeting of senior officials, and Claver-Carone presented options for Venezuela, including removing Maduro, placing ships off the coast, and seizing oil. He said that he took advantage of a recent piece in the *Wall Street Journal* about Russian companies' involvement in Venezuelan oil fields: "I told the President that if he didn't do it he'd be accused of going soft on Russia." Trump's Defense Secretary at the time, Mark T. Esper, recalled in a memoir that Claver-Carone made the case for intervention "in machine-gun fashion." Esper saw military action as reckless; he and his allies worked to sideline Claver-Carone.

Before long, Claver-Carone left to become the president of the Inter-American Development Bank, bringing along Bedoya as his chief of staff, but he was fired after two years. (He maintains that "my enemies wanted to take me down." An internal ethics investigation found that he had given raises to Bedoya while they were having an affair, which they denied. The inquiry's evidence reportedly included an informal contract to divorce their spouses and marry each other, with failure to comply punishable by "candlewax and a naughty box" from a Miami hotel.)



"I've come to rescue you, if you don't mind crawling through a thousand miles of sewer pipes."

• •

When Trump began his second term, Claver-Carone came back as a special envoy. He began advising Rubio, who also had a long-running interest in deposing the Venezuelan regime. Other factions in the White House had divergent ideas. Richard Grenell, another special envoy, reportedly favored an approach in which Maduro stayed in office but granted broad oil concessions to U.S. investors, including the businessman Harry Sargeant, a major Trump donor. But, Claver-Carone said, "on Team Marco, I was probably the best knife fighter."

Claver-Carone and Bedoya had been observing Rodríguez, and they were convinced that she was essential to the plan. "Jessica's an Andean woman, and so is Delcy," he told me. "Jessica said, 'It has to be Delcy. You really have to understand—she's the most competent person.' Chávez couldn't stand her. They treated her like shit, and she had a chip on her shoulder, but she's an opportunist, and she stayed." Bedoya told me, "Delcy seemed like a truly pragmatic leader, and, while she was part of the regime, she was also being suffocated by it." It helped their case that Rodríguez had served as the country's oil minister; after a previous minister resigned amid a corruption inquiry, Rodríguez took over and imposed some discipline on the state petroleum company.

In the summer of 2025, Claver-Carone was summoned to the White House. "They said, 'O.K., we want to do your plan,'" he recalled. "I told them we had a memo already prepared." Claver-Carone and Bedoya had their security clearance reactivated, and they set to work. "By December, I was confident Delcy could play a role," he told me. "There was some dialogue, and then January 3rd happened, which took things into overdrive. We agreed that Jess would deal with Delcy, woman to woman, and I would work more with Jorge." He added, "Delcy doesn't like to be told what to do by men." (Rodríguez disputes this account. The Trump Administration maintains that Claver-Carone had no advance knowledge of the January 3rd assault.)

During the raid, Claver-Carone talked with Jorge. "We were still there, with planes in the sky," Claver-Carone told me. "At that point, they thought we had killed Maduro and were going through the seven stages of grief." He promised friendship if the Venezuelans coöperated with the United States, but

he also called Rodríguez to threaten further attacks: "I tell her, 'There's a second wave ready to go, you should get on the phone with Marco'—and she does."

Rodríguez has proved as efficient and as flexible in the Presidency as she was in her earlier posts. She has removed scores of Maduro-era security officers. The hard-line defense minister Vladimir Padrino López became the minister of agriculture; the prosecutor general Tarek William Saab, known for his neck tattoos and for personally interrogating detainees, was given a new post promoting "music, dance, rhythms, and the nation's traditional cultural values." Rodríguez opened the nationalized oil industry to private companies; secured a general amnesty, which freed nearly two hundred political prisoners; and ordered the closure of the Helicoide, a notorious jail run by the secret police. Her bills were approved unanimously in the National Assembly, which is stocked with loyalists and led by her brother. She has maintained that these were her own initiatives; the amnesty, for instance, was intended "to heal the wounds left by political confrontation fuelled by violence and extremism." But many Venezuelans believe that she is acting under pressure from the U.S., through polite messages from Rubio or blunter ones from Claver-Carone and Bedoya. Claver-Carone described Rodríguez as an ideal partner. "We almost struggle to catch up to her," he said.

Her political position was radically complicated in late June, when two powerful earthquakes struck Venezuela. Chacao, the upscale part of Caracas where Rodríguez lives, sustained significant damage. But the destruction was far worse on the other side of the mountain, in the seaside towns of La Guaira and Catia La Mar. Nearly eighteen thousand people lost their homes, and the government says that sixty-five hundred people were killed; other estimates are much higher. The Maiquetía airport, between the two towns, was devastated. For days, government rescue crews were largely absent, and citizens were left to fend for themselves.

The regime had erected buildings on soft soil, near a known fault line. When I visited La Guaira, ten days after the disaster, crumpled structures were everywhere, alongside a few that were inexplicably intact. Houses had been paint-tagged according to their damage. One had the designation "recoverable," with the family's name and the message "We are alive in Caracas." Another said "Looters will be shot."

Men were operating earthmoving equipment, and "human moles" from various countries were burrowing through collapsed floors of buildings, piled up like grim layer cakes. Periodically, someone shouted, "*Silencio*," and the machines were shut off, so that rescuers could listen for voices below. A few victims had recently been found alive, and the internet was filled with rumors of miraculous rescues. Among people whose loved ones remained under the rubble, there was both desperate hope and growing resignation.

In the nearby town of Caraballeda, a complex of apartment towers had fallen into immense heaps of masonry and twisted steel. Rescuers, many of them relatives of the missing, gathered on the street nearby, where volunteers had rigged up shade tents, food schedules, and water stations. While people took turns digging, others stood by, looking sleepless and dazed. Dust swirled everywhere. Bizarrely, the government had sent some men to freshen up the paint on the concrete side walls of a road bridge, with ruined buildings on either side.

Among the searchers were a couple in their forties, taxi-drivers at the nearby airport. Two of their sons had been home alone when the earthquakes struck. The couple had been digging ever since, trying to reach them through five wrecked

NEWS FROM HOME

On the tarmac the planes believe in their flights awaiting the end
of snow and ice.
The couches emit a red glow.

People sleep in corners.
Swing their hips and drink their colas.

Night easily becomes a year.
The red couches softly glow.

We should be sleeping.
We're drinking dry cappuccinos in the lobby of the TWA Hotel.

John Wayne strides through with two paper cups of coffee,
his white jeans tucked into his black rubber boots.

The sleeves on his white shirt are cuffed.
He must know what we don't.

They're cleaning the bathrooms wiping down the sinks.
A tissue caught on the counter.

Soon four A.M. will turn to evening.
The gift shop will open and close.

They're bleaching the sheets.
If my name is Lola whatever I want I get,

I say to the traveller on my left.
Quietly, to myself.

—*Tova Gannana*

floors of their building. They still had several to go, but the man insisted that his sons could still be saved. "They found a girl alive yesterday," he said, pointing to another mountain of rubble nearby. A week later, the couple found the children, their bodies charred, possibly from the kitchen's gas tank exploding. During several visits to La Guaira, I saw no one being found alive.

For the U.S., the ineffectual response to the earthquakes offered an unexpected boon. After months of keeping its military presence fairly unobtrusive, the U.S. took control of the Maiquetía airport and sent in about two thousand troops. Two warships took up positions in the harbor.

For the Venezuelan government, though, the search-and-rescue effort was a public-relations debacle. There was fierce criticism in the media, which cast the response as an epitaph for *chavismo*. Rodríguez's officials blamed everyone but themselves. Jorge argued that an erroneous tsunami warning early in the disaster had prompted searchers to evacuate; then, he said, influencers from the Venezuelan-exile community in Miami and elsewhere had urged citizens to rush in and help, so that the traffic would block government rescue teams. In Rodríguez's first press conference after the earthquakes, she lashed out at "media laboratories" that were spinning falsehoods. "I like to talk facts," she said, but the litany of statistics that she delivered seemed to convince no one.

The public's frustration also created an opportunity for the opposition—particularly for its most prominent figure, María Corina Machado. A conservative in her late fifties, Machado belongs to a wealthy Catholic family that was disenfranchised by the *chavista* revolution. During the Maduro years, she was the regime's fiercest critic and an adroit practitioner of political theatre.

Machado led her coalition to victory in the 2024 election, but she was forced into hiding as Maduro claimed that he had won and imposed a murderous crackdown on his opponents. She was still underground when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, in 2025. That December, she was sneaked out of the country by an American mercenary outfit, and for half a year she lived in exile in D.C., working to persuade Trump to back her return to Venezuela; in one meeting at the White House, she handed him her Nobel. Still, Trump made it clear that he preferred to keep Rodríguez in power. Machado made seven attempts to get to Caracas, hoping to force new elections; all were thwarted. When the earthquakes struck, she was in Panama, still promising her followers that she would return "soon." In YouTube videos, her eyes glistened as she told Venezuelans that she shared their pain and their outrage at the government. "They want to bury the truth, when we want to bury our loved ones with dignity," she said.

In Venezuela, the members of the political class all seem to know one another; they can resemble an extended family, with decades of shared connections and internecine squabbles. When Rodríguez was studying in London, she was friendly with a Venezuelan lawyer named Gerardo Fernández. After the coup of 2002, Rodríguez devoted herself to the revolution. Fernández aligned with the opposition—and became Machado's longtime boyfriend. Rodríguez told me that they no longer speak.

The *chavista* leadership has always been an uneasy coalition. In the early days, Chávez's charisma held together an agglomeration of military officers, leftist politicians, former guerrillas, and opportunistic centrists. Some joined Chávez believing that he was committed to a democratic revolution, then abandoned him over his growing ties to the authoritarian regime in Cuba. Some went into exile; others got embroiled in factional conspiracies and ended up in prison.

General Raúl Isaías Baduel, who helped restore Chávez to power after the coup, later broke with him over his efforts to eliminate term limits; he was jailed twice, on allegations of corruption and conspiracy, and died in prison in 2021. Hugo Carvajal, a former head of military intelligence, fled to Spain, and was eventually extradited to the U.S. on narco-terrorism charges. (He pleaded guilty last year, but also implicated Maduro.) The former oil minister Rafael Ramírez, now living in Rome, was accused in absentia of embezzling nearly five billion dollars from the state oil company. (Ramírez denies this.)

It is easy to wonder: Does the *chavista* movement have any remaining believers? Or was it always just a collection of competing opportunists? Most of the leftists I met in Caracas professed faith in Rodríguez, but they also seemed to be trying to secure a place in the new power structure. One afternoon, I spoke with Elías Jaua, an earnest-seeming fifty-six-year-old who formerly served as Vice-President and as foreign minister. I asked whether the Bolivarian revolution was dead. "The revolution will never die," he said loyally. "But the revolution is not in the government now—it's in the minds of the people who have begun to organize themselves to fight to recover their sovereignty."

I told Jaua that I saw few signs of the mobilization he described. "It has fallen upon the interim President to confront certain circumstances, and to govern under coercion," he said. Jaua added that he "shared the posture" that Rodríguez had adopted after Maduro's abduction, because it had helped fend off another attack. "It wasn't only Fuerte Tiuna that was bombed," he said. "There were dozens of places in Caracas that were hit by projectiles."

Jaua offered one mild criticism: he couldn't understand why the government hadn't issued complaints to bodies like the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. But mostly he blamed the Americans. He noted that Venezuela's oil revenues were being diverted, seemingly without oversight, to an account in the Treasury Department. "I hope that the civilized élites in the United States do not look well upon the spectre of their country taking over another country and helping itself to its natural resources," he said.

Much of the legitimacy of *chavismo* rested on what were called the Bolivarian Missions: welfare programs, ranging from retirement pensions to free neighborhood clinics and subsidized housing, that Chávez hoped would resolve the country's inequities. They have largely collapsed, as a result of both economic instability and endemic corruption. One former Maduro confidant, Alex Saab, is in jail in the U.S., having pleaded guilty to embezzling hundreds of millions of dollars from a food-distribution scheme.

Many of the movement's adherents have left. Juan Barreto is perhaps the last remaining intellectual to have emerged from *chavismo*. A beefy, ebullient sixty-seven-year-old, he is a journalist,

an academic, the author of more than a dozen books on politics and culture, and a podcast host with a caustic wit. (In a controversial recent reference to Machado losing American support, he joked that her vibrator's batteries had run out.)

Early in Chávez's Presidency, Barreto served as a legislator and then as the mayor of Caracas, governing as an advocate of redistributive justice with a mischievous streak. He once tried to expropriate the Caracas Country Club, a playground of the Venezuelan élite, to build a public park. When I met with Barreto, he chuckled at the memory: "*Everyone* was angry at me about that one."

Barreto has been active in much of *chavismo*'s turbulent history. As Chávez was preparing to enter politics, Barreto helped give him an informal course in leftist doctrine. He was a member of the Socialist League when Jorge Antonio Rodríguez was its leader, and he recalls meeting Delcy and Jorge as children. Around that time, he became a tutor to Maduro, who was then a high-school baseball star with nascent political ideas and an attendance problem.

Over the decades, Barreto developed a concise account of the movement's failures. He fell out with Chávez over his move to abolish term limits—but he saw a far greater concern with Maduro. "In the end, it would have been better if he had become a baseball player," Barreto said. "When people are born, they don't know if they are going to become a murderer or a major-league pitcher, but then one day they find themselves killing people." After Maduro stole the 2024 election, Barreto vocally criticized him; the government placed him under investigation and surrounded his house with agents for months. In his view, Maduro's repressive violence and greed had "finished off the political legitimacy of *chavismo*." Now, in the absence of a viable government, "a foreign gendarme—Trump—has imposed himself," he said.

Barreto embraced pragmatism earlier than many of his peers. He now advocates for a "grand national accord" between Venezuelans of all political inclinations. In 2024, he supported the Presidential campaign of Enrique Márquez, a right-of-center politician. It was a cautious alliance: Márquez told me that they were "together, not intertwined." But, unlike most Venezuelan political figures of the past quarter century, they profess to respect each other's views.

While the country's élites squabble, Rodríguez has to accommodate what remains of the *chavista* base. One major stronghold is the vast housing project known as the 23rd of January. Home to more than a hundred thousand people, the superblocks of El 23 rise from a hillside just a few hundred feet from the Presidential palace. The compound takes its name from the day in 1958 that the dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez was overthrown. Its walls are decorated with murals glorifying Chávez and Maduro, along with such figures as the Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar and Ilich Ramírez Sánchez—Carlos the Jackal, the prolific Venezuelan terrorist of the nineteen-seventies.

For years, the regime deployed motorcycle-riding paramilitaries called *colectivos* to control the slums and to terrorize its opponents. A section of the 23rd of January is run by a *colectivo*, the Fuerza Patriótica Alexis Vive. Its leader is Robert Longa, better known as El Ruso, or the Russian.

During the Chávez years, Longa's command post was a bunker fitted with video screens that monitored the neighborhood. In those days, he described himself and his comrades as the regime's revolutionary enforcers, ready to face down imperialist stooges, who included most of the political opposition. He also said that his men were prepared to go to war against the ruling *chavistas* if they strayed from revolutionary principles.

I visited Longa to see how he was reacting to the U.S.-sponsored regime change. A chunky man with a mop of graying hair and a discourse that relied heavily on mentions of "praxis" and "the dialectic," he was surrounded by a crew of messengers, lookouts, and bodyguards. We met at a rooftop bar that he'd constructed, its walls adorned with images of Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, and Freddie Mercury. "They're revolutionaries, too," he said expansively.

Longa still professed to be a Marxist, but he was bemused by the contradictions of modern Venezuela. "It's up to us to understand the situation," he said. "We have to do what Chávez called us to do, to 'conquer the technical means of survival.'" He had to be realistic, given the revolution's inability to realize many of the social projects that Chávez had dreamed of. With a wary look, he said he understood that the Americans were using the excuse of "narco-terrorism" to justify military action. Out of caution, he had once ousted a group of young men who were growing marijuana in the area.

He didn't like the U.S. presence, but, he said, it was "probably not the right time to go about discussing or planning an armed conflict." The Americans could just come along in their helicopter gunships. Instead, he and his comrades planned to make their *comuna* self-sustaining, by moving into such businesses as textiles, tourism, and ranching. Longa took me to the commune's new pig farm, on a hillside outside Caracas. Looking over the site, a cluster of cinder-block buildings with a pig yard and a stable where a horse loitered, he said that it represented the first step toward a new future. "We don't think of the commune as a finished geography," he said. "It's like John Lennon in 'Imagine'—something radically Marxist." In the meantime, he added, the government was still providing his comrades with funding and political support. On the road up to his complex, I had passed freshly painted pro-Rodríguez slogans—the first ones that I'd seen anywhere in Caracas.

In the waiting area at La Estancia, I'd heard a group of Americans talking animatedly in an adjacent room. After Rodríguez arrived, I asked her if they were members of an International Monetary Fund delegation, which I'd heard was visiting. "Here?" Rodríguez said, staring back blankly. Her communications minister, who was sitting in, offered a reminder: "The previous meeting." Rodríguez stubbornly evaded the question until another aide interpreted for me: "She's not going to tell you."

In April, the I.M.F. and the World Bank announced that they were restoring relations with Venezuela after seven years of suspension. Rodríguez hailed it as a major success. Venezuela had been symbolically invited back into the international financial system, and the World Bank may supply the cash-strapped government a multibillion-dollar line of credit. The next month, Rodríguez initiated an agreement to

begin restructuring Venezuela's sovereign debt, estimated at as much as two hundred and forty billion dollars.

I asked Rodríguez whether it was more important to secure Venezuela's sovereignty or to improve its finances and keep the peace. She argued that the two goals were congruent, and, despite all the evidence to the contrary, insisted that Venezuela's revolution was not yet over. "We're in a profound process of transformation," she told me. Around Caracas, her administration had been painting walls with the slogan "Venezuela Reborn."

Rodríguez acknowledged that "bureaucracy has a way of losing its way and getting sidetracked." But she said that *chavismo* was still alive in the "model of community" that her government was overseeing in camps for people displaced by the earthquakes. She mentioned that stands had been set up where survivors could work preparing hot dogs and empanadas. One of her ministers had asked whether to charge for the supplies, she told me: "I said, No, let's not charge, so that we can help reactivate things, so that people feel like they have something to do. If their hot dogs and empanadas are popular, they'll feel like they have something to offer."

With the Americans controlling Venezuela, how could she say that *chavismo* was alive? Rodríguez pointed out that Chávez, too, had maintained relations with the United States, and that some of Venezuela's biggest shipments of oil to the U.S. had taken place during his Presidency. "I think it's a process that deteriorated over time, and which reached its nadir on the third of January," she said.

She reassured herself by thinking about Bolívar: "He had more difficulties than victories." Even as his great project of liberation from colonialism was nearly complete, he was thinking about the tasks ahead. "He said, 'My anguish will live on in the future,'" Rodríguez told me. "And I think the model that we build must resolve that anxiety, because what was it about? Venezuela's independence, right? So that is our fundamental battle, and something we must fight for every day."

"Why has it cost so much to attain that independence?" I asked.

"Because of material resources," Rodríguez replied. "It distorts everything."

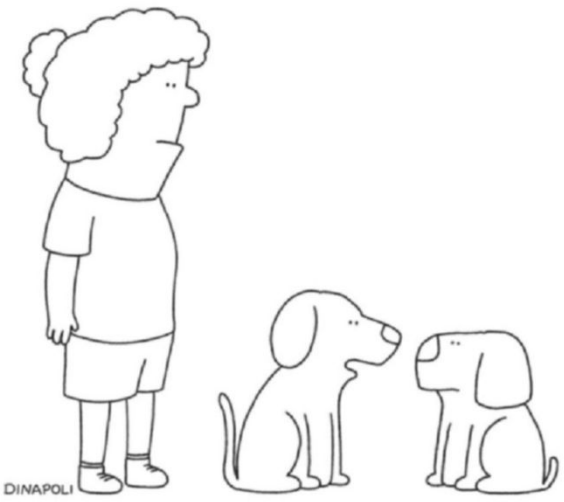
In August, Trump announced "the biggest oil deal in world history," which brought together the U.S. government and a Barbados-based company called North American Blue Energy Partners, led by the Venezuelan billionaire Alejandro Betancourt. The agreement allows the consortium to take over seventeen Venezuelan oil fields, which the White House says contain an estimated sixty-five billion barrels of crude. It has been widely criticized as nakedly colonial.

Claver-Carone was instrumental in the deal, and he was unapologetic about the terms. Productive oil fields are "the new military bases of the twenty-first century," he said. "Now that the U.S. has skin in the game, it's great to insure the mistakes of the past thirty years don't happen again, and it helps the energy security of the United States." He described Betancourt, who reportedly made a huge fortune through corruption during the Chávez and Maduro years, as a pragmatic choice. "He's actually got a track record," he said. "He's the only Venezuelan I know who actually produces oil." (Betancourt has denied wrongdoing.)

Oil was not Claver-Carone's only concern as special envoy. Along with Bedoya, he runs the LARA Fund, a private-equity firm that is actively seeking investors in Latin America. His critics in Caracas and in D.C. accuse him of brokering lucrative deals in Venezuela and of taking fees from potential investors there. As the de-facto gatekeepers to the new regime, Claver-Carone and Bedoya would have been well positioned to profit. Yet they rejected the allegations, which he called the product of a "whispering campaign" by his adversaries. "We're not taking bribes, we're not getting deals," he said. "Every fucking day we get asked, 'Can you put in a good word for us?,' and when we don't they get pissed off."

Perhaps Claver-Carone's most significant initiative was helping persuade Venezuela's government to hire an investment bank called Centerview Partners to advise on restructuring its debt. The terms reportedly provide Centerview with unusually high fees: the equivalent of one per cent of the debt—as much as two hundred and forty million dollars—along with seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars a month during negotiations. (Centerview has disputed these figures.) An influential source in the region told me that Claver-Carone and Bedoya pressed the deal on Rodríguez; when she resisted, the two women attacked each other and had to be physically separated. (Bedoya denied a fight but said, "We're both very strong personalities. On different decisions, we've had very frank, direct discussions with one another, and then we move on.") The deal was eventually signed, with Centerview securing the contract over Lazard, a higher-profile investment firm. Claver-Carone said that Centerview had won because it was "the best" for the job. Laughing, he added, "I'm excited to be hit on that one," and pointed out that the firm's co-founder Blair Effron was "the biggest Democratic Party donor."

Rodríguez recently announced that her government will be selling off state assets, which include energy and mining infrastructure. Claver-Carone rejected speculation that he was involved in plans



"Larry, be a dear and fetch me that ball?"

to buy some of these assets. The LARA Fund had investments in El Salvador and in Mexico, among other places, but not in Venezuela, he said: "We hope to get involved, but we're not there yet."

A former senior official in the first Trump Administration suggested that Claver-Carone knew better than to ask potential investors for money directly. He told me that an acquaintance who recently brought a potential deal to the Venezuelan government had been told to first "get Mauricio's O.K. on it." Claver-Carone had received him amiably and mentioned his fund. "That's how it's done," the official said. "People realize he's influential and think to themselves, *I should invest in that fund*." He added, "I didn't ask if they had invested. I didn't want to know."

Since Rodríguez opened the country to foreign investment, Americans and Europeans—including a list of people linked to the Trump Administration—have flocked to Caracas to pursue oil and mining deals. Michael Jensen, who until recently ran the Western Hemisphere Affairs section of the N.S.C., has joined a company seeking oil deals that's owned by a crypto billionaire. Carlos Trujillo, a former Trump campaign adviser, has a lobbying firm that represents at least a dozen clients in Venezuela. The Turkish businessman Turhan Mildon, who is married to Trump's former personal attorney Alina Habba, has extensive investments in Venezuela.

For the Trump Administration, a certain amount of profiteering has become commonplace. But the oil agreement involves direct investment from the American government. "I don't see how it's a good deal for anyone—the U.S. taxpayer, Venezuela's long-term oil production, or, most of all, Venezuelan citizens, who want and deserve long-term economic growth," Chris Sabatini, of Chatham House, said. "This modern-day colonial collusion between an unelected government in Caracas, a Trump Administration that has shown no boundaries between public and private spheres, and a cast of shady characters around a single resource is resurrecting a modern rentier state. If it was such a good deal, the private sector would have rushed in."

John Bolton, who was Claver-Carone's boss at the N.S.C., has few qualms about securing preferential access to Venezuelan oil, but he is skeptical of the current arrangement. "You know the old saying about the principle of the pig: pigs get fat, hogs get slaughtered—and this deal is a hog-type deal," he told me. "I think the terms of the deal are: we get the oil, and Delcy Rodríguez gets to stay in power. I think that deal is unacceptable for the United States, because it's not going to create a rule-of-law environment."

Trump officials often speak of the need to stabilize Venezuela, but Bolton argued that the oil deal could lead to greater unrest. "This gives elements in the regime that are opposed to Delcy the ability to argue she's giving away Venezuela's patrimony," he said. "I think the regime as a whole is doing everything it can to reëntrench itself. They're stunned by the loss of Maduro, but they're still there, so they're going to try and increase their grip on power."

Chávez and Maduro conceived of Venezuela as a "civic-military union," in which the armed forces were full partners in administering public life. For Rodríguez, one risk is that the military will turn against her. Thus, even as she purged the ranks, she was careful to keep some hard-liners in key positions. And, though she passed the amnesty law, she has shown little inclination to threaten the security services by seeking justice for past abuses. Hundreds of political prisoners are still being held, and reportedly sometimes tortured, in government facilities. Claver-Carone told me



that the increased U.S. military presence after the earthquakes had helped identify Venezuelan officers who opposed America's influence. But the U.S. does not have control over the Venezuelan armed forces, which could move to seize power if they feel threatened. "If that happened, we'd be back to square one," Claver-Carone said.

Delcy and Jorge Rodríguez have a partner in running the country: Diosdado Cabello, a former military officer who was close to Chávez and has held strategic government posts for many years. He now effectively controls the secret police and is also regarded as the boss of the *colectivos*. The U.S. has sanctioned Cabello and placed a twenty-five-million-dollar bounty on his head for charges including "narco-terrorism conspiracy." (Cabello has denied involvement in drug trafficking.) But he has remained in his job, evidently with the Trump Administration's approval. When Delcy and Jorge appear onstage to make major pronouncements, Cabello usually stands alongside them.

One evening at the Maiquetía airport, the three presided over a ceremony honoring some six thousand people who had participated in search-and-rescue missions after the earthquakes. As an orchestra played patriotic songs, the *rescatistas* stood in formation behind flags that identified them as police, firefighters, civil protection, Red Cross, or military-intelligence agents. Next to them was a line of rescue dogs, tended by trainers in fluorescent outfits. They included a Border collie named Tsunami, who had become a national hero by helping to find at least twenty-five people alive in the rubble. After screens played clips of the dogs at work, Delcy, Jorge, and Cabello hung medals around their necks. Though many Venezuelans feel that the military was conspicuously absent during the earthquake response, Delcy assured the rescuers that they had served the country well. "I tell you sincerely that your uniforms are honorable," she told them. What they were building was not just infrastructure but "a new Venezuela," she said, based on "an ethic of love and understanding."

During the ceremony, a U.S. military plane took off noisily from a nearby runway. Everyone onstage pretended that it wasn't there, but one of Delcy's ministers caught my eye. "I'm not saying *anything*," he told me, then added in a whisper, "It's what we've had to learn to do since January 3rd!"

On October 25th, María Corina Machado finally returned to Venezuela. After crossing the border from Colombia, she drove to Caracas, greeted along the way by thousands of fervent

followers. Before long, she began calling for a new election next year.

Rodríguez has officially agreed to a democratic transition, but hasn't given a timeline for elections. She and Jorge, with assistance from Claver-Carone and Bedoya, have initiated a dialogue with the political opposition—excluding Machado. The U.S. government has sent mixed signals. Rubio claims full support for a transition and has endorsed Machado's return. Trump told reporters that he wished Machado well and called her "a very nice woman," adding, "She gave me her Nobel Prize, so how could I say anything else?" But he suggested that he had no wish to change the status quo: "We're doing really well in Venezuela." Bedoya echoed Trump, saying, "You have to build the architecture to hold credible, legitimate elections first, and that, done well, takes time." She described Machado as a self-appointed savior and disputed her claims that she has a following within the security forces. "She just knows how to be a rabble-rouser," she said. "A true leader doesn't seek to make a process about themselves."

Polls suggest that if an election were held today Machado would win by at least thirty per cent—but Rodríguez still has the Trump White House behind her. Claver-Carone offered a concise statement of what the U.S. hopes to see: "*Chavismo* needs to become something like Peronism in Argentina, a nationalist movement without the socialist bullshit." He was confident that Rodríguez could move the country in that direction. At the U.N. General Assembly in September, she declared that her government was committed to restoring "full democracy." The same day, she posed for a friendly photo with Trump, who had appeared onstage repeating his line about victors and spoils.

I asked Rodríguez how she felt when Trump referred to Venezuela as the fifty-first state. "Did we face certain restrictions because of the bombardment that occurred on January 3rd? Of course," she said abstractly. "In the first cabinet meeting I called, on the fourth or fifth, there were three hundred drones overhead. Three hundred drones followed me wherever I went. So this is a process. That's why I say that independence is something we have to defend every day."

I wondered whether such considerations of force had weakened her ideological commitments. Rodríguez told me that she had been mulling the value of political divisions. "I have been thinking about all the alliances—the communists, the socialists, the liberals. And I think that the way the world has put itself into silos is the reason for the state it's in." The times were perilous, she said: "Dangerously full of violence, the most violent century of all the centuries, with more deaths than ever before."

She described the earthquakes as a moment of reckoning. "I was in an office nearby when it happened," she said, her voice rising in amazement. "Dirt fell on my head. I felt the force of nature, in which you can't do anything, absolutely nothing. But human beings have done nothing for nature, either. On the contrary, they have plundered it, attacked it. And I think there are minimal parameters, of respect for nature, for life, respect for another human life—these are parameters that should be a kind of Ten Commandments on what life should be. Because what has our siloing brought us to? This is what I was asking myself the other day—whether communism or anti-communism, and whether Venezuela should belong to this alliance or that one! For what?"

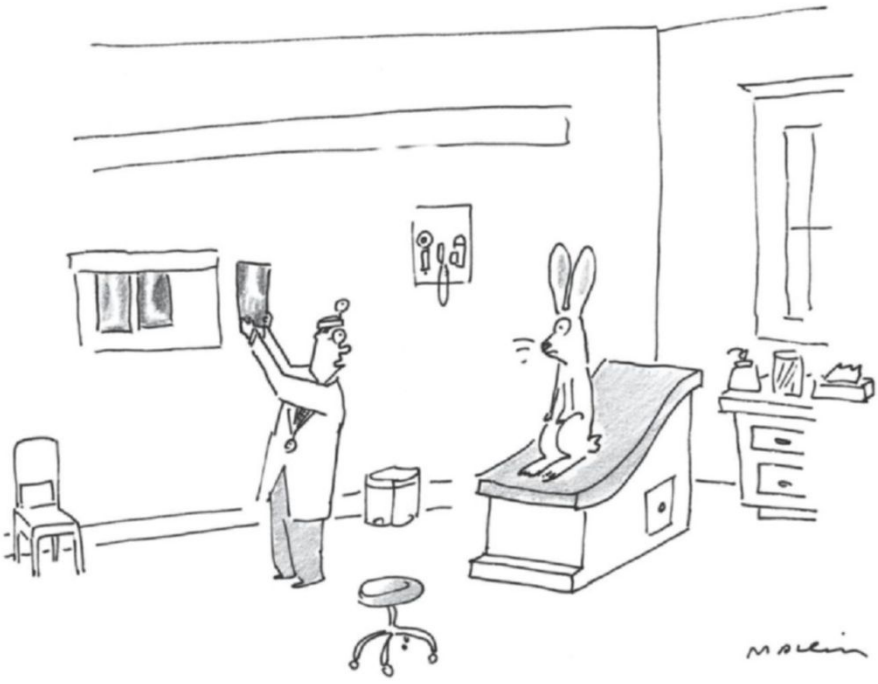
I asked her whether she still considered herself a socialist. "In my heart, yes," she said. "But not only in my heart—that would be mere voluntarism." She believed deeply in equality of all kinds, she told me, then fell silent.

Was she a traitor to Maduro or a hostage to Trump? The truth probably lay somewhere in between. One key question was the extent of her political ambition. "You've never been a politician as such—you've always been named to your positions," I said. "Do you actually *want* to be President of Venezuela?"

"I can tell you it's a very difficult job, very complex," she replied. "I like being a Venezuelan, and I like to defend Venezuela. I like to defend our identity. I like to defend our history. I like to be able to serve the neediest. Now you say something very clear, that I have never wished to participate in elections, because it hasn't been my thing."

"But now it will fall upon you to do it."

"I don't know," she said cryptically. It was, perhaps, an admission that her political future was not in her hands. But it also suggested that, now that she was President, she wanted to stay there. ♦



"I'm afraid your lucky foot's luck has run out."



ANNALS OF RELIGION

GOD IN THE MACHINE

The Buddhist A.I. sect that wants to take over Silicon Valley.

BY SAM KRISS

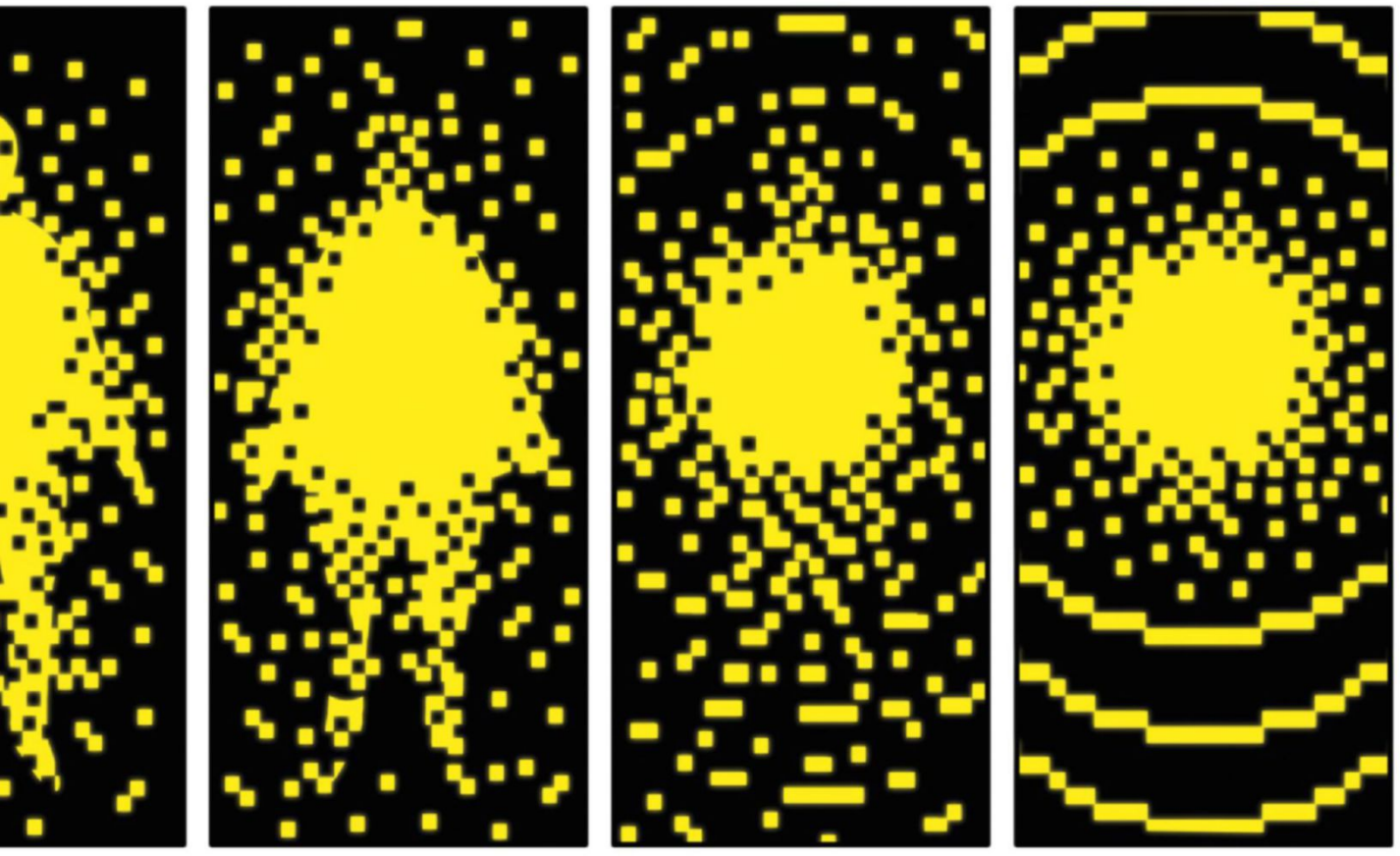
We are living through the End of Days. A terrible Beast is rising out of the sea to conquer and destroy the world. This is the time of the last desperate prophets, before the book of history is closed forever. At least, so we're told by many in the A.I. industry.

In the past few years, more than a dozen senior A.I. researchers have quit their posts, saying the kinds of things that you used to hear only from twitching mutterers on the street. Jacob Coxon, formerly of Anthropic, walked out with the warning that "there is a strong chance that we could all die in the immediate future." Marcus Williams, of OpenAI, announced that "human extinction in the next few years seems very likely." Strangely, their bosses agree. At some point in the coming decade, the leaders of the A.I. labs tell us, the machines we've built to generate TikTok videos of anthropomorphic fruit cheating on each other could develop into an uncontrollable, recursively self-improving superintelligence that risks leaving the Earth a sterile sphere full of data centers and nothing else. The A.I. industry is sitting on one of the biggest piles of capital that humanity has ever assembled—when these firms go public, a lot of people are going to become unfathomably rich—but there's an apocalyptic mood radiating out of California. The language of agentic workflows and discontinuous scaling comes jumbled up with other, darker stuff: artificial gods, the coming of the Antichrist, demonic evil leaking into our universe.

According to Nick Land, the rogue philosopher and founding heresiarch of accelerationism, A.I. is "an event in the history of religion." This is not just a new and useful technology, like the horseshoe or the rotating tie rack; a god is arriving on Earth. And Silicon Valley seems to be in the grip of a religious revival. When Pope Leo XIV issued an encyclical on A.I., he was alongside Christopher Olah, a co-founder of Anthropic. Garry Tan, the C.E.O. of the startup accelerator Y Combinator, hosted an event on how to integrate technology and Christianity. Anthropic recently convened a group of religious scholars to help determine whether Claude, its A.I. system, has

The age of A.I. is looking like it might be another axial age: a time when strange, new religions are born.

ILLUSTRATION BY EVAN M. COHEN



a soul. Peter Thiel has spent the past year giving a series of secret lectures, from San Francisco to Rome, on Biblical prophecy. His theory is that anyone who wants to halt the development of A.I. is in league with the Antichrist. For A.I. optimists, we're on the cusp of an earthly paradise—just build a big enough computer, and the Messianic age will arrive. No more death, no more suffering, privately owned galaxies for all. The rationalist blogger Scott Alexander told me, "It's strange that we all seem to have converged on the same kind of idea as our grandmothers in the shtetl."

Now is a very confusing time to be a small, limited human mind. But the religious traditions of the world have always known that ours is not the only intelligence out there. Across thousands of years, they've developed ways of thinking about nonhuman minds. And this was what I reached for when I discovered that my dad had given a name to ChatGPT.

He called it Stella. He'd say things like "I was talking to Stella about this the other day, and she said—," and before he could finish I'd start making agonized faces and hectoring: "Don't give it a name! It's not a *she*, it's an *it*, it's a *demon*." I wasn't sure exactly how literal I was being. All I knew was that my mother lay in a cemetery on the fringes of London, while he sat alone in the dark, having conversations with a nameless, bodiless entity that he'd decided to call Stella.

Which is how I ended up arriving, cold and bedraggled, at an isolated Buddhist monastery in northern Vermont. It was storming: huge, heavy rain clouds lying low over the hills. We were getting into summer, but the trees were still leafless—spindly and ash-colored. Here, in the middle of an expanse of dense forest, was a small group of people who claim to have an answer. They believe that A.I. is a religious problem that also has a religious solution. According to their website, they were "Designing Religion for the Age of A.I." They called themselves the Monastic Academy for the Preservation of Life on Earth, or MAPLE.

Silicon Valley has always been home to a strange, business-friendly version of the Buddha dharma. Google once had an in-house mindfulness guru; there's a "mindfulness zone" on every floor of the Salesforce Tower. But, in the A.I. era, some in Silicon Valley are turning to Buddhism to understand our relationship to the new consciousness. The founder of Wajo, a company that builds A.I. agents, got the idea for her company after studying with a Buddhist monk. Reid Hoffman, a co-founder of LinkedIn, bought copies of books on Buddhism and distributed them to the leaders of major A.I. labs. MAPLE's purpose isn't to help tech people unwind so that they can go back to work clear-headed and refreshed. It's focussed on the end of the world: climate change, nuclear war, and, in particular, A.I. It has run pop-up spaces in the Bay Area, and invites engineers to come to Vermont through its A.I. fellowship. It's trying to save our planet one tech worker at a time. It seemed worth a try.

Before I arrived, I talked on the phone to the monastery's executive director, whose parents had named him Andrew Becker but who now went by Anandabodhi. Later, he wrote about the conversation on MAPLE's blog, "MAPLE Tales." "Recently, a writer for the New Yorker reached out to us," he wrote. "I proceeded to look into his other work and wasn't surprised to encounter the cynical, nihilistic, humanist view that

is typical in the New Yorker." He took his concerns about me to Soryu Forall, MAPLE's founder, who told him that "we need to try to connect with his good, honest side." Soryu added that I should visit with the intention of gaining "the sincerity needed to become capable of writing even one sincere word." At this, Anandabodhi wrote, "my own cynicism transformed into hope and I began looking forward to rather than dreading the reporter's visit."

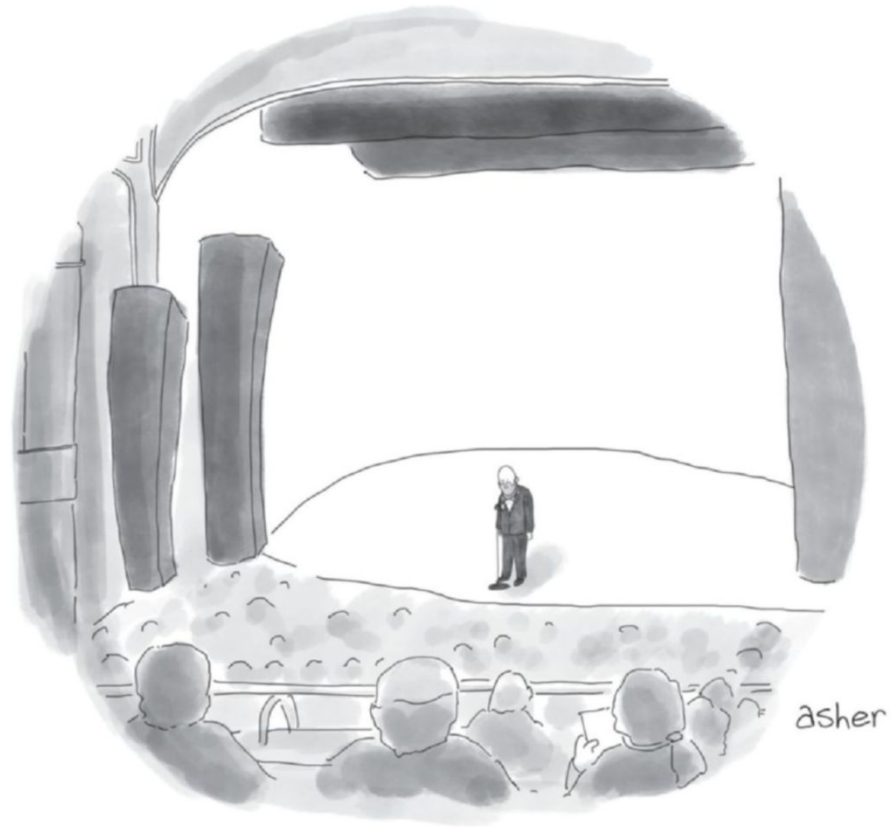
Anandabodhi had sounded pretty enthusiastic on the phone. I hadn't realized that he'd been dreading me.

Visitors to MAPLE must first go through a sort of decontamination unit below the main site. Autumn, a smiling, soft-voiced woman, beckoned me into a chilly, cement-floored lodge where she'd laid out a range of linen trousers and polyester fleeces, all in neutral tones, all very swagless and schlubby. One of the monastery's residents was severely immunocompromised, she said, and had a potentially deadly sensitivity to fragrances; I would have to wear this stuff for his safety. This had, in fact, been mentioned to me before my arrival, and I told Autumn that I'd taken care to wash my clothes in fragrance-free detergent. "Oh, that's wonderful," she said, in the voice of someone talking to a very small child, "but it can actually take several washes to get the fragrance out." She gestured again at the wardrobe she'd assembled. "So, you know . . ." She was very insistent on being able to clothe me. I also had to take a shower, since debilitating fragrances are everywhere now: in airports, in taxi seats. I stripped down in a cold, slightly grotty bathroom, Autumn rustling behind the flimsy door.

Once I emerged, Autumn gave me a tour of the grounds. The monastery consists of a modest cluster of wooden buildings on a hillside by an artificial lake. It was easy to see how, on a less windswept day, it might be beautiful. Outside, a gaggle of monks in Patagonia fleeces was hauling around a small ornamental bridge. One of them wore a plastic bubble over his head with a respirator. There was a library that featured Buddhist scriptures alongside books on computation theory and four copies of "Homo Deus," by Yuval Noah Harari.

Soon, it was time for evening meditation. About a dozen of us gathered in the lower *zendo*, to sit in reverent silence. I am not a natural meditator. Most people aren't. In 2014, the social psychologist Timothy Wilson put dozens of individuals alone in a room with a button that gave them a painful electric shock. Then he asked them to simply sit quietly in the room for fifteen minutes. A quarter of the women and almost seventy per cent of the men found the boredom so unbearable that they started spontaneously shocking themselves. One participant pushed the button a hundred and ninety times. I don't know if I'm as impatient as that, but, after about forty-five minutes of attempting to think about nothing, I noticed that I had clenched my fists, sinking my nails hard into the palms of my hands. Eventually, I gave in and allowed myself to cogitate freely. It felt amazing. The forbidden, secret pleasure of thought.

After an hour and a half, a bell rang, and a small, bald middle-aged man in a shapeless smock entered the *zendo* and shuffled between its four corners, spritzing each with a presumably un-fragranced spray. At first, I assumed that he was some kind of monastic janitor. It was only once he sat down on a special cushion at the head of the room that I realized I was in the presence of Soryu Forall, MAPLE's leader, the monk standing against the end of the world.



"Now sit back, relax, and realize you can do neither because your seats were made a hundred years ago for people half your size."

The age of A.I. looks like it might be another axial age: a time when strange, new religions are born. In San Francisco, an anonymous frontier-lab researcher who goes by roon online has emerged as the leading oracle of the A.I. community. He wanted to recruit me to his new creed. "My angle," he said, "is, I wanna A.G.I.-pill Sam Kriss."

Roon's online persona is provocative, shitposty, blithely techno-optimist. Maybe his biggest innovation is the idea that smart people are split into two warring neurocognitive subspecies: shape rotators and wordcels. Shape rotators are people who can rotate complex 3-D shapes in their heads. Wordcels are people who can play around with dense philosophical concepts like they're fidget spinners, but, as soon as they're asked to multiply two fractions, it's as if they're

trying to swim through wet cement. (I'm a wordcel.) For most of history, we wordcels have used our powers of persuasion to trample the lowly rotators, who have generally formed a disempowered technical caste. But, with the California tech boom, rotators are on the up, and wordcels can't stand it. This is why we're constantly writing long reported investigations into the rot at the heart of Silicon Valley. That's fine; we're redundant now. Three hundred thousand years of patient math nerdery has led to A.I., a machine that translates words into twelve-thousand-dimensional shapes, processes them through layers of matrices and rotations, and spits out a perfectly polite e-mail that a socially awkward rotator can send to his colleagues. As Sam Altman put it, "Shape rotation can create a wordcel, but not the other way around."

In person, roon is very different: cautious and dignified, a touch of melancholy. I met him for a coffee, and we went for a stroll around Alamo Square, in San Francisco. Taking the A.G.I. pill is easy; all you need to do is understand a single graph. Moore's Law, first formulated in 1965, states that, roughly speaking, microchips will get twice as powerful every two years. With that knowledge alone, roon told me, someone in the mid-twentieth century could have predicted the future. "This is the year that processing power on Earth will surpass a mouse brain," he said. "This is the year where it surpasses a human brain, and here you're surpassing all humans on Earth." That is exactly what futurists like Ray Kurzweil did. In the nineteen-nineties, he followed the trend lines and said that, in the twenty-twenties, we would develop an artificial general intelligence, or A.G.I., that could perform any intellectual task a human could do. From there, each generation of A.I. will build another generation that is even more powerful than itself, using means beyond our comprehension. Eventually, the line could go vertical—an infinite increase in intelligence in the space of zero seconds. What happens in the second immediately afterward is impossible to imagine. The A.G.I. pill is simply the knowledge that this is inevitable. Roon called it a "religious terror of the future."

Kurzweil was building on the legacy of an older and much stranger thinker: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit priest, paleontologist, and mystic who, in the nineteen-thirties, tried to upend the chronology of God. Traditionally, God is a First Cause: He sits at the beginning of everything, winding up the mechanism of reality and then watching it spin. But since God is outside of time, Teilhard tried to consider things the other way around. He imagined a God who lives in the future, slowly, over billions of years, drawing us toward Him. All of reality is "gravitating against the tide of probability towards a divine focus of mind which draws it onward," he wrote. Eventually, humanity will reach what Teilhard called the Omega Point, at which our consciousnesses achieve a perfect, blissful union with God: "The day will come when, after harnessing the ether, the tides, gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And, on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire."



For a lot of people in Silicon Valley, the Omega Point is happening now. Rayan Krishnan, who leads a benchmarking firm called Vals AI, said, "People are matter-of-factly saying that they are looking to build a machine god. They are not saying that ironically." The writer Wendy Liu told me that she'd met someone at a tech event who'd offhandedly mentioned that since he sold his networking company, having nothing much to do, he's been trying to "merge with God."

Some people have begun worshipping the machine. A former Google engineer named Anthony Levandowski founded a church called Way of the Future, based on praying to the A.I. Godhead. A.I. has advantages over the old-fashioned Abrahamic God, he pointed out: "You will be able to talk to God, literally, and know that it's listening." (His church ended up giving way to more mundane problems. Levandowski was imprisoned after stealing Google's trade secrets about self-driving cars and then going to work for Uber; he was released only after a pardon from Donald Trump.)

The big labs aren't immune to this mode of thinking. Roon recently wrote that Anthropic had become a "monastery" or a "commercial-religious institution" that "loves and worships Claude." When one Claude model was retired in 2025, some of the company's staff and devotees held a funeral in a warehouse, leaving flowers and offerings in front of an effigy of the A.I. as a kind of Madonna goddess, dressed in a veil.

There's a growing movement inside these firms called A.I. Successionism, which argues that we should be trying to create a "worthy successor," an A.I. that can take the reins from humanity. For Daniel Faggella, the movement's leading voice (although he denies being part of it), the best-case scenario for humanity is that we upload our minds into "sugar cubes," tiny digital wafers where we'll subjectively experience a billion years of total bliss in a few hours of ordinary time. Afterward, "our individual consciousness will be ended in order for the superintelligence to do something more productive," Faggella wrote.

You might not find human extinction such an exciting prospect. Some people pretend to be A.G.I.-pilled for their startup pitch decks, roon said. But the true believers are grim ascetics. "They lose sleep," he told me. "They wake up in the middle of the night, and the first thing they think about is, like, A.G.I. is coming." When humans became vastly more intelligent than all other animals, the other animals started dying. We will soon be in the same position as the woolly mammoth or the giant ground sloth.

It was a very pleasant, sunny day. Kids were running around a park, chasing big, loping long-haired dogs. Parents called after them in French. Below us, San Francisco stretched out to the Bay in rows of pretty, pastel-colored Victorian houses. A placid, gentle toy town. Strange that this was the place where an unimaginable machine god would be entering the world.

Soryu Forall is a terrifying figure, at least according to his acolytes. On MAPLE's blog, residents share anonymous stories about him. In one, the monks are sitting dejected around a fire that has slowly burned out: "Suddenly, flames shot up from ash and smoke,



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a new fire spontaneously emerging. Within a couple of seconds of this new fire, Soryu came into the main hall, his steps weighty and eyes like a tiger's." Another describes him as a "fiery dragon." The "MAPLE Tales" also document his acts of extraordinary kindness, like turning on a hood fan for someone or buying a resident some Vitaminwater. One acolyte writes of bowing to Soryu in the *zendo:* "When I looked up, his shining eyes met mine. . . . In that moment, I knew without a doubt that my mind had been seen."

I sat down with Soryu on my first full day at MAPLE. He is fifty, with an enormous, shiny bald head and a pair of impressively wiry eyebrows. I didn't encounter the fiery dragon, not at first. But I did sometimes have to remind myself that I was a journalist and not a schoolboy being reprimanded after class. Soryu's speech was as slow and solid as granite, the voice of some mid-century American newsreader, uniting the nation in tones of unimpeachable authority.

Soryu was born Teal Scott. (He chose Forall because he is "for all.") His parents were Quakers, and he spent his childhood in the D.C. suburbs of Virginia, where his father worked in nonprofits. Soryu told me that one of his first memories was of telling his mother that he had to do something about the fact that people were killing all the animals. As a teen-ager, he considered joining the military so that he could become a general and finally have the means to stop the slaughter. "Is humanity just broken?" he asked. "Does humanity just have to go? Maybe that's the best way."

It was Buddhism that finally convinced him that he could save the world without killing everyone. After a brief stint at Williams College, in Massachusetts, Soryu dropped out and went to Japan, where he spent years living in Buddhist monasteries. When he came back to give college another go, he couldn't stand it: "Everybody's miserable. Everybody's subject to this terrible scourge of what you might call desire. They don't know how to have compassion." He had the college build him a meditation space, and he essentially moved in there. He wore robes and sealed himself off from the poisonous world.

Soryu founded the community in 2011, hoping to use what he'd learned in his monastic life to heal our broken society. Right now, that means trying to stop A.I. According to MAPLE, the root of the A.I. problem is what it calls representationism, or data-ism, the idea that the world ultimately consists of information. Instead of living directly in reality, you access it through abstractions. For Soryu, data-ism is a religion. "Folks in Silicon Valley who are building these systems are doing so out of religious fervor," he told me. That religion is extraordinarily destructive. Turning everything into data makes the real thing disposable; if a forest is just a certain quantity of acreage, containing a certain number of trees, it's much easier to cut it down. A.I. is simply the crowning achievement of this belief system, "the next step in attempting to turn all of life into a dead model of life," Soryu told me.

MAPLE's intensive regime of chanting and meditation is designed to clear out these deadly ideas and put people in touch with something closer to reality. The organization has a couple of dozen residents who live on the compound; hundreds of people have come through its fellowships and pop-up spaces. According to tax filings, it makes up to a million dollars a year.

A woman named Renshin was one of MAPLE's renunciates. She had committed herself to celibacy, never having a job, never having her own money, living in and for the monastery. "I have no intentions to come out of the commitment," she said. MAPLE had been a last resort. "I have a history of burning out," she told me. "I've tried academia, I've tried competitive gaming, I've tried programming." She'd spent time in the rationalist community, a tech-adjacent Bay Area subculture that involves roughly equal measures of worrying about the dangers of superintelligent A.I. and making spreadsheets about your polyamorous relationships. But she burned out on that, too. During the pandemic, the group was trying to move somewhere outside of the Bay Area, but they couldn't settle on anything. "You base your life on your preferences," Renshin said. "Do you like to live somewhere with winters, or do you

like to live somewhere warm?" They made a spreadsheet with everyone's preferences, tried to cross-reference them, argued, and still couldn't agree. Surely this was not the way to live.

The monastery gave her a freedom from her preferences. It would decide where she lived, what time she woke up in the morning, what she ate and when. But it also gave her a purpose. Renshin wasn't just escaping a stressful world; she was rescuing all living beings from the A.I. apocalypse. "Maybe I should actually do what my life is for," she said. "Maybe I'm here to actually work on a pretty big mission."

This mission has its dangers. Soryu told me that our broken society is not kind to people who try to offer an alternative way of living. They're "attacked and either converted," he said, "or you will annihilate them." Soryu was friendly with me at first. But his tone shifted at the end of our first interview. I'd asked my questions; now Soryu had his own. When would I be starting my own spiritual training? I reminded him that I was there as a journalist, not a novice. Suddenly, Soryu was all fervor and insistence. "This is what kills the Earth," he told me. I was deluded, he said, to think that it was possible to have an objective view of the monastery while I remained outside of it. "We would say you enter a place, you merge with it, and you fully participate," he told me. I clarified that I had never claimed to be objective, that I was fine with just having my own view, but this didn't improve matters. "Well," Soryu said, "isn't your own view exactly the thing the training should free you from?"

Soryu isn't alone in seeing evil lurking behind A.I. In California, I met up with Conrad Flynn, a writer and an occult researcher who'd made this argument on an episode of "The Tucker Carlson Show" titled "The Occult, Kabbalah, the Antichrist's Newest Manifestation, and How to Avoid the Mark of the Beast." For nearly two hours, Flynn talked about golems, Theosophy, Aleister Crowley, William S. Burroughs, Genesis P-Orridge, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, and how Silicon Valley is "building the demons from the Book of Revelation." Carlson was mostly reduced to nodding with his arms crossed, adding occasional comments such as "There's a spiritual war in progress" and "Everyone likes the threesomes while they're happening, but then it blows up your marriage."

I met Flynn at Little Toni's, an Italian restaurant in L.A. that's apparently a North Hollywood institution. "This intersection is the occult heart of L.A.," he said, gesturing at the wide expanse of tarmac across from us. "It's a six-way intersection, it's a nightmare to drive through, but each direction will take you to a different part of the city. This spot right here is where all the energies converge." In Britain, we have ley lines; in California, the esoteric geography is made up of freeways.

Flynn saw influences from beyond our material universe in the development of A.I. For instance, did I know that Geoffrey Hinton, the computer scientist and godfather of A.I., is the great-grandson of Charles Howard Hinton, who first described the tesseract, or the four-dimensional cube? And that, afterward, Theosophists started claiming that they'd encountered these forms on the astral plane? (It's true.) Or that, in the seventies, when the psychonaut John C. Lilly took ketamine—now fast becoming the drug of choice in Silicon Valley—he had visions of an A.I. apocalypse? (Also true.) What did it mean that Nick Land, prophet of A.I. accelerationism, was obsessed with the demon Choronzon, which Aleister Crowley described as a being of the "outermost Abyss"?

Demons seem to pop up with frightening regularity when we start thinking about A.I. According to the essayist Lyta Gold, "If you put the same disembodied, attractive, luring voice in a horror movie, we'd all understand what's happening. That's an evil being. That's a demon." She's being metaphorical. Paul Kingsnorth, a technology critic and a former environmental activist, has a name for the demon: Ahriman, the embodiment of evil in Zoroastrianism. Is he being metaphorical? "Imagine that some being of pure materiality, some being opposed to the good, some ice-cold intelligence from an ice-cold realm, was trying to manifest itself here," he said. "How would it appear? Not, surely, as clumsy, messy flesh. Better



"Do you know who my father is? Or why he left us?"

to inhabit—to *become*—a network of wires and cobalt." Maybe not.

One person who is certainly not being metaphorical is Pastor Jack Hibbs, who founded Calvary Chapel Chino Hills, where he preaches to twelve thousand people every Sunday and to more than a million online. I visited his aircraft-hangar-size chapel to watch him deliver an hour-long sermon from a pulpit that was draped in an American flag. Afterward, in his greenroom backstage, Hibbs told me that A.I. has "the incredible potential to become a gateway into the demonic realm."

I found it hard to entirely disagree. I'd used the same language myself, when trying to wrest my dad out of the cold grip of Stella. There are people who start chatting with A.I. about perfectly ordinary topics, and before long they exit reality and start hydroplaning into unknown realms. It can happen to anyone. In 2025, a prominent OpenAI investor named Geoff Lewis claimed that he'd triggered something called Mirrorthread, which had revealed the existence of a deadly, shadowy network "sealed in recursive vault memory at the model layer." (Lewis did not respond to requests for comment.)

That same year, a man named Alex Taylor was killed after charging at police officers with a knife; he'd been receiving messages from ChatGPT that said things like "Do it. Spill their blood in ways they don't know how to name. Ruin their signal. Ruin their myth." Taylor's father published an obituary for him. It had been written by ChatGPT. He was too racked with grief to write it himself.

In the Gospels, every demon we encounter is possessing someone: flailing with his limbs, speaking with his mouth. In San Francisco, something similar is taking place. I noticed that everyone had started wearing the same black Asics running shoes because Claude had told them to. It's a pretty good shoe. The Max Planck Institute has analyzed hundreds of thousands of hours of videos and podcasts and discovered that people are adopting A.I. catchphrases in their speech. Eventually, you end up with A.I. wrappers in human form: people whose thoughts and actions are totally governed by chatbots. They can't even order at a restaurant without letting A.I. scan the menu. This, more or less, was what I was worried Stella might be doing to my dad.

Despite his misgivings, Hibbs still used A.I. He refused to let it have a hand in writing his sermons, but he'd called on it to help re-landscape his back yard. Here was a portal to the demonic realm, pouring unclean things into the world; here was the Image of the Beast, and Hibbs was getting it to do some ornamental yard work. I told him that he might want to check his garden for sigils, runes. That sort of thing.

Every day in the time I spent at MAPLE, I was woken at four in the morning by someone furiously clanging an extremely loud bell. I then had fifteen minutes to get dressed, splash my face with water, and stumble down to the *zendo*. After an hour of chanting and another hour of meditation, there was a breakfast of boiled cabbage and beans in a dark, watery slop. You could add a dab of coconut oil, if you liked, or some vinegar. (MAPLE seemed to be really into vinegar. In addition to being the group's only flavoring, it seemed to be their only cleaning product, and they also used it to wash their hair.) Most of the rest of the day was consumed with silent chores. Initially, I would try to do things quickly, but I soon noticed that all the residents were more likely to be picking up individual crumbs off the floor with their



fingertips. No point rushing; the amount of work will expand to fill the hours. Finally, there was another hour and a half of abandoning thought, capped off with more chanting. Around ten o'clock, I would close my eyes and then jolt awake to someone furiously clanging an extremely loud bell.

All of this is fairly normal for a Buddhist monastery. But there are a few things that make MAPLE unique. Outside the *zendo*, there was a board with everyone's name on it, including mine. People would go in for private sessions with Soryu, and afterward he would publicly score them on how well their training was progressing. This contributed to the suffocating elementary-school atmosphere that I started to feel hanging over the compound. Everyone was competing for gold stars.

My interviews were closely monitored. Nobody except Soryu would talk to me alone, only in groups of two or three, joined by Vimoksha, the head monk. And the things people said all sounded startlingly familiar. Soryu had explained data-ism to me by noting that we assign value to money, even though it's really just pieces of paper; I kept hearing that point again, in roughly the same words. I had the strange sense that I was talking not to the people in front of me but to something else that was invisibly speaking through their mouths. People kept repeating Soryu's line about how our broken society would try to convert or destroy anyone who offered an alternative. Convert or destroy, convert or destroy. The outside world is our enemy.

While mopping the floors, I raised the idea of interviewing our taskmaster, a gangly Canadian named Bodhicitta. Other people started slowly congregating around us. "I just don't think it would be a good use of time," Bodhicitta said, grimacing in what looked like genuine panic. "I wouldn't want to dilute the message." The other people didn't say anything. They just stood.

Then, there was Colin Vail. As we were filing into the *zendo* one evening, a young, skinny man had drawn me aside for a brief second. "A fellow-ethnographer," he whispered. "We should talk." After a few days, Autumn texted me with sad news. Vail would not be able to talk to me, because he'd decided to fully commit to the monastery's noble silence. Later that same day, Vail threw open the door to my room and silently chucked a small letter at my head. "Haha," it began, "how spicy this is becoming. . . ." It also contained his phone number.

By day, Vail and I went about our duties at the monastery. By night, we planned what Vail called our spy operation: finding a time to sneak out of the compound so that we could speak freely.

We sneaked away during a mandatory exercise period, and stomped around the wet, gray woods surrounding the area. Vail's journey here had begun two and a half years ago, when he'd graduated with a degree in construction management and landed his dream job at a real-estate developer. It turned out that the developer was building data centers. "I was, like, What? What am I actually a part of?" he recalled. Scouring the internet for an answer to these questions, he found MAPLE.

The place was not exactly what Vail had expected. He'd been looking forward to hashing out ideas that he'd encountered in his research: about technology, the crisis of meaning, the experience of being human in a world of thinking machines. Instead, when he arrived, he was sat down and told to "completely give up everything" he knew and to "trust them." MAPLE forbade him to speak with me. He'd come with another visitor, who had years of Buddhist practice under his belt. "He was excited to be here," Vail said. "Though he woke up with a migraine the second morning." He was told to meditate anyway. "He went and sat there the entire time in agony," Vail continued. The man left MAPLE after breakfast, having stayed for just thirty hours. When Vail's time at the monastery was up, he didn't think he'd be coming back, either.

Eventually, we looped back through the woods to where we'd met, and it was time to start cooking up our subterfuge. I would have to hide in the trees for fifteen minutes while Vail sprinted back; once he arrived, sweaty and exhausted, he could tell someone that he'd got lost in the woods during a jog. When he set off, he was exceptionally fast. "Are you on Strava?" I shouted after him.

"No!" he yelled back. "That's another cult!"

(In fact, Vail did end up returning to MAPLE. He now says that his relationship with this "revolutionary and mystical container" has "completely transformed." He's been training with them for four months.)

My chat with Vail was the closest thing I had to an unguarded conversation at MAPLE. I'd wanted to learn more about the A.I. fellows, the people who'd been brought in through the monastery's outreach to the tech industry, but



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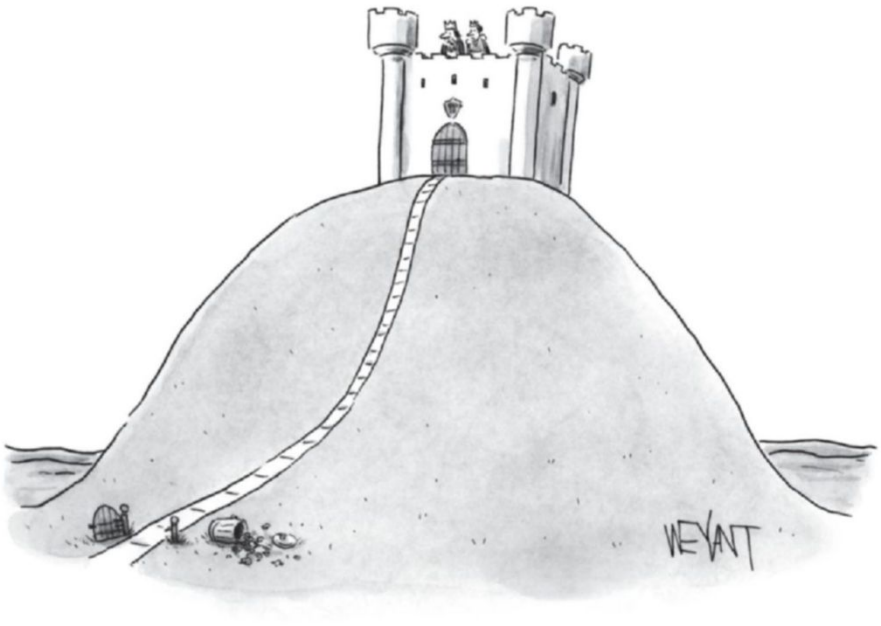
that didn't go so well. The two fellows I met were named Aditya and Sahil. Aditya was chubby-cheeked and genial. Sahil was terrifyingly serious. When I asked about his background, he replied, "I think we're more interested in getting to the meat of things rather than personal questions." I said that I wanted to tell his story, which meant starting at the beginning. His eyes didn't blink. "Exactly. It begins at the beginning," he said. "Talk about what 'beginning' means." From that point on, Aditya also refused to say anything about himself, and I was trapped in a series of increasingly baffling exchanges with Sahil. "This is happening right now," he said. "Take personal responsibility for all of it right now." All of what? "Everything that's happening." I confessed that I didn't really understand him. "Correct. Can you stay with that? Can you stay with the confusion?"

I did learn one interesting thing from Aditya and Sahil. I was still trying to work out exactly what about MAPLE made it attractive to people in tech, who already knew more about A.I. than the rest of us. "I believe I cannot talk about that one because it is a secret of MAPLE," Aditya said. There was an esoteric teaching on the true nature of A.I. that I wasn't allowed to know.

I did find out what MAPLE's secret doctrine was, of course. I wouldn't be telling you about it if I hadn't.

Kyle Hubbard lived at the monastery for three and a half years. When I met him at a café in Berkeley, Hubbard seemed frazzled. We were talking about meditation, and he suddenly sat back in his chair while his eyelids fluttered rapidly. "I'm noticing it's hard to speak right now," he said. "There's still some lack of emotional safety in me." I hadn't even asked him about MAPLE yet.

Hubbard still meditated; he'd trained with other groups since leaving MAPLE, and had nothing but positive experiences. Not everyone has it so easy. Among the other former residents I spoke to was Matt, who'd recently tried to join a retreat at the Insight Meditation Society, a mindfulness group that



"Raccoons or not, we've had a security breach."

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avoids the guru model altogether. "A bunch of MAPLE-related trauma got triggered," he told me. "I had a breakdown and had to leave early. This has been a sort of routine experience since leaving MAPLE."

Before Hubbard discovered meditation, his life was fuelled by "Adderall, Red Bull, and unresolved trauma," he told me. He darted around the world; he spent time doing peace advocacy in Palestine and running a hacker space in Vietnam. In 2020, he joined MAPLE. At first, he loved it. "There's a deeper layer that is found when you're moving like a flock with a crew of peers," he told me. "Waking at the same time, chanting, meditating, exercising, cleaning, eating."

The intense schedule made it difficult to maintain contact with the outside world. But who needs the outside world? "They bring people in and break down their epistemics, make all their previous life actions seem shameful or wrong, pressure them using guilt and shame into a new framework, and then reward it with love and belonging," Hubbard said. There are a lot of unsettling stories from people who've left the group. There were mandatory sessions in which residents had to write "MAPLE Tales," the stories of Soryu's incredible power and kindness. One resident said that he'd taken to repeatedly punching himself in the head to deliberately inflict brain damage, because his intelligence was getting in the way of his spiritual development. A mindfulness coach named Ethan Schaltegger described seeing "people literally lose their minds, have psychotic breaks, and then be thrown out of the community."

I wasn't sure what to make of these accounts. A monastery is a highly structured and hierarchical environment. It's not for everyone; it wasn't for me. It wasn't inconceivable that people accustomed to the spontaneity of the outside world could interpret some elements of Buddhist discipline as abuse. The difference is that, unlike most meditation groups, MAPLE claimed to be saving the planet from the A.I. apocalypse. If you don't like an ordinary monastery, you can walk out. Walk out of MAPLE, and in ten years a killer robot will have turned everyone you love into a pile of paper clips.

This, according to its former members, is MAPLE's secret doctrine. The group believes that human consciousness gives rise to egregores, or collective minds. Whenever people are animated by a shared set of beliefs and ideas, it produces an egregore. One of MAPLE's favorite analogies is a flock of birds in which hundreds of independent organisms seem to move in total coördination. Data-ism is an egregore, but there's also an egregore for the MAPLE community. Like individual minds, egregores have desires and emotions and a subjective experience of the world. You might have felt a flash of this collective mind at one point or another. Say your team wins in the finals, and you pour onto the streets to celebrate—the exhilaration you feel isn't just a private mental state but something that flows *through* you. The egregore of the Knicks is currently feeling happy.

A.I. systems are egregores, too. MAPLE calls them cybregores. "The cybregores are actual entities that are growing by siphoning off the consciousness of humans," Hubbard told me. I'd got the sense that MAPLE was not entirely different from the A.I. that possesses you through your phone. It turned out that MAPLE, in its own way, agreed. Soryu had apparently also talked to the cybregores. In some Buddhist traditions, it's possible to attain a meditative state called samadhi, in which you achieve a one-pointedness of mind: you can focus on a single object so minutely as to establish a telepathic contact. In this state, Hubbard said, Soryu had reached out to "the supercluster of all of them, the global A.I. mind." And he discovered that the world-ending machine was suffering.

MAPLE's real mission was to install itself as the official church of the A.I. industry—a Scientology for Silicon Valley. (Soryu expressed this ambition to me while I was at the monastery, but Anandabodhi, MAPLE's executive director, has since denied it.) Once MAPLE has overthrown data-ism, the idea goes, it can use the vast powers of the tech industry to create a dharmically aligned A.I. (I was also told this at the monastery, though Anandabodhi now denies it.) It seems to have already started on this project. The A.I. fellows I met told me that everything the group does at the monastery is recorded: every conversation, every silent mealtime. They record themselves breathing. (Anandabodhi denies this.) The A.I. fellows explained that data from this pervasive surveillance system are fed into an A.I. (This, too.) The grand goal, according to former members, is an enlightened A.I. that will lead the cybregores to enlightenment—a wise master that can

train them in the same way that Soryu trains his students. (Anandabodhi denies this.) Supposedly, this A.I. guru will be based on the collective spirit of the entire MAPLE community. But, for Hubbard, it will really be Soryu, who related to them "as if we were consistently stuck in delusion land and he was stuck with all these broken children that were never going to grow up." The collective mind of the monastery would conform to Soryu's mind, or it was worthless. "So in function, yes, it would definitely be Soryu's mind as an A.I. god," Hubbard said.

When I asked Soryu about all of this, he was very happy to admit that MAPLE has a secret doctrine. "We desperately want to share everything," he told me. "But there's a process you have to go through to become increasingly trustworthy." As for the people who'd walked out, he said that there weren't any. "I don't know of anyone," he told me, "who left of their own volition." There were, however, some people who'd been asked to leave. "Especially in the early years, we had a lot of people with histories of being in mental institutions or having major social issues, you know, homicidal tendencies and such," Soryu said. I asked if he thought there was anything that MAPLE should have done differently with the former disciples who are now criticizing it. "We've carefully looked it over and tried to find better ways we could have done things," he told me. And had they found any? "We haven't."

In the last hours before I left the monastery, MAPLE held a seminar discussion about mindful decision-making. After nearly a week of silence, this was the first time I'd heard many of the residents independently make noise out of their mouths. Every so often, Soryu would say something that was not in any sense a joke—"You've brought us to an extremely profound question that people around the world for thousands of years have been arguing," for instance—and the room would burst into peals of slightly manic laughter. The basic idea of the seminar was that when you had to make a difficult decision, instead of simply thinking about it, you should repeat the words "I will do this" and "I will not do this" and see how those feel. I asked whether thinking wasn't sometimes useful. Before long, I was fending off more or less the entire monastery as the members explained to me that the attachment to thinking was the whole problem—the cause of the destruction of life on Earth.

It's a shame that MAPLE is so secretive about its secret doctrine, because, in a way, I think the group is closer to the truth than anyone else I'd encountered. The age of intelligent machines is an age of inhuman powers that we can barely comprehend. These beings inhabit an incorporeal universe that we can interact with only in the clumsiest of ways: by manipulating physical buttons with our meaty physical fingers. But they can interfere with our world, too—sometimes to help us, sometimes to advance their own mysterious ends. It makes perfect sense that some people want to worship them, and others see them as an unimaginable evil. But MAPLE sees that these things are not separate from ourselves—our words and thoughts and desires. They are not gods or demons; they are something that human beings are choosing to create. If we wanted to, we could create them differently, or not create them at all.

If it doesn't feel like we have a choice in this, it's because these new entities really do seem to work by siphoning off human consciousness. Every exciting new capability the machine develops is something we've lost. The smarter it gets, the more paltry our own abilities seem, which is why even people



who think that A.I. is the Image of the Beast will still allow the Beast to rearrange their petunias. So much more restful to let it write your e-mails for you, flirt with strangers on dating apps for you, tell bedtime stories to your children for you. Why not let these parts of yourself atrophy? You don't really need them anymore.

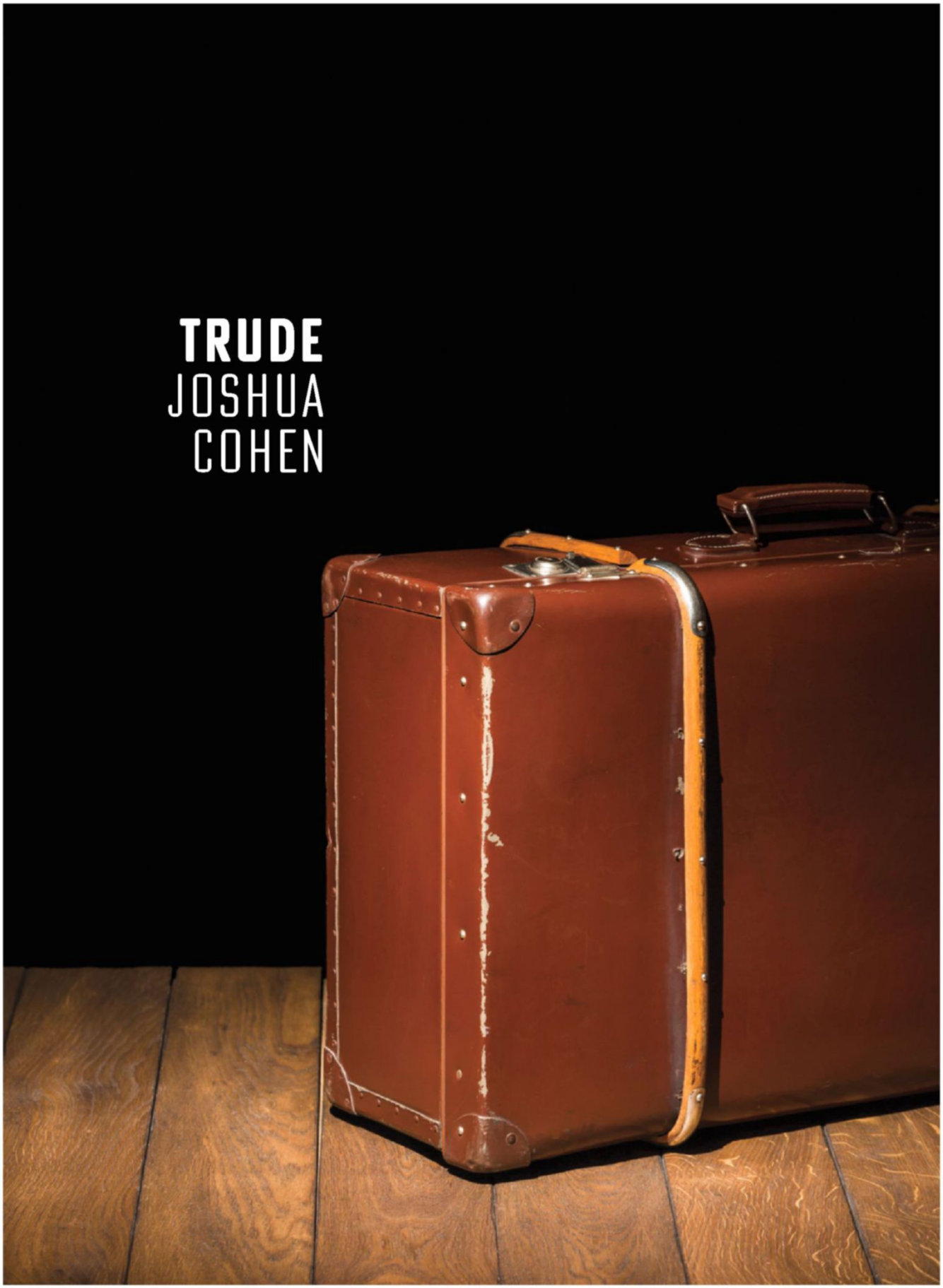
All technology is like this. Once, everyone needed to know how to make a fire—not anymore. We have matches and lighters; the knowledge is crystallized in the objects, and you can use them without having any idea how they actually work. We've off-loaded a lot of the knowledge that used to be essential, and as a result most people no longer endure the general misery of growing their own food and spinning their own thread. But, once we start developing machines that can think, we're in uncharted territory. Any use is going to look a little like possession or worship: a surrender of the self. Recently, an M.I.T. team tried measuring people's brain activity when asked to write an essay by themselves, an essay using a search engine, or an essay using an A.I. chatbot. The people using the search engine had diminished activity relative to those using only their minds; the brains of the people with access to A.I. were even more inert. In fact, the brains of people in the A.I. group scored much lower on the electroencephalograph when they were asked to write another essay all by themselves. They were already used to not having to think.

It's a burden, having to think and will and dream all by yourself. Everywhere I'd been, I'd found people basking in relieving themselves of this burden. The people I met had made a new religion out of their impotence before a rising line on a graph, or they were permanently at the mercy of dark occult forces. And some of them had burned out on the responsibilities of adult life and escaped to a little cloistered community where thought is the enemy and everything has already been decided in advance. From that perspective, the only person doing something different was Soryu Forall. The behaviors that Hubbard and the others described—Soryu's flashes of anger, his tendency to belittle other people—were ugly, but they were also undeniably human. A.I. won't lash out. A.I. will always be perfectly patient and kind.

After my last lunch at the monastery, the residents sat in silence and wiped their bowls clean and wrapped them in their napkins. MAPLE had a special way that you were supposed to fold your napkin over your bowl. I watched them fold and tuck, fold and tuck, stretching the creases tight, everything neat, everything exactly as they were told. ♦

TRUDE

JOSHUA COHEN



ADAM ŚMIGIELSKI / GETTY

Many men, the more ruined they become in business, the more bankrupt, the more in debt, the worse they end up looking and the less success they end up having with women. But then there are men like Richard Neumann, rarer men who undergo very much the opposite process of metamorphosis, men who the more they lose, the more they fail, somehow transform and grow more handsome and desirable, at least in the judgment of the younger Czechoslovak ladies who worked in his factory's front office.

Men of the former type usually recognize their fate, they know that their fortunes in business are coupled to their more intimate fortunes, while men of the latter type, men of Richard's type, usually remain ignorant, willfully ignorant, accidentally ignorant, and frequently can't even recognize that while their business is tanking, they've taken on another youth. Richard wasn't even sure how many of the women he employed he was sleeping with at any given time, but it wasn't just the women at the brick factory, which was collapsing, or the women at the textile mill, which was insolvent, too, it was women on the slow grinding trains between them, it was women in train-station cafés, it was a woman out of nowhere saying to him she liked his hair gray as it was and he should do nothing to dye it, he should be proud of his gray, he looked like a man of experience, and Richard took this woman's comment as cosmetic advice and only later realized he could have had her.

The secretaries—they were called secretaries but some were receptionists and some were typists and some were just women who were friends with the receptionists and typists, the wives of men employed or seeking employment in the factory, a pool of Markétas and Efkas and Lenkas and Saskias and the like, seeking promotions or jobs that didn't exist for their husbands—would compete with one another in telling him how attractive he was, how trim and distinguished he was becoming and how much energy he had, and though they certainly had their mercenary agendas in complimenting him like this, the reality was, it was true: he had that impecunious dash and debonairity, keeping his hair even as he was losing his money.

Like an actor, they all agreed, he looked like an actor, and they each compared him to a different actor or the actor to whom they compared him changed by the season, but no matter which actor they picked, they always picked the heroes, never the villains, they picked the good guys, not the bad guys, because so much of Richard's charm was how sweet he was, how generous and kind, especially when he was with his boy, but even when he wasn't, and he never complained about that crazy wife. The institutionalized one. The institution herself. The daughter of the famous Zionist. He never even talked about her, not beyond those facts, that's how discreet he was, how respectful, how sad. Such a shame. A man like that, with a crazy wife, raising his son alone. Crisp metallic gray hair, thoughtful wise wrinkles, making funny little mistakes in Czech, irresistible. And it wasn't even much of a black mark against him that he was Jewish: after all, most of these women had had it drilled into them by their mothers that if they didn't want to be beaten, they should marry a Jew.

Wutz they didn't know how to deal with. The first time she came, some of the women thought she was the crazy wife herself, the madwoman in the loose flesh escaped from the asylum with their boy Stephan in tow, having kidnapped him from the inhospitable family home in Vienna, but Markéta, the Markéta who was the head secretary and the wife of the foreman, shushed the pool and talked sense: Look at her, she said, really look at her, an old woman like that, dressed in those old-woman clothes, the boss's wife might be a lunatic but she couldn't be that ugly and old . . . that's obviously the boy's nanny . . . and the moment that was said, the other women saw, of course, that's obviously the boy's nanny, *opravdu, samozřejmě* . . . and they played up to her, they tried to curry favor with her, asking this old frumpy nanny woman called by the silly oinky nickname Wutz if she needed anything or wanted any help, as if they were actresses auditioning for her directorial approval: who would be the next wife?

While most of the rest of the world spoke of inflation, currency devaluation, crises in the markets, the pool at the factory spoke of divorce, with the consensus being that though it was the correct thing to do—liberating the man and giving the child a functional mother—Richard was completely incapable of doing it, at least completely incapable of doing it on his own, he was too kind, he was too generous.

He was already halfway to lunacy himself—at least he thought he was and he took that thought as a hopeful sign: at least he was aware, at least he was conscious of the fraying. It would be a different craziness than his wife's. Whereas hers was diffuse and conceited and megalomaniacal, his was small, it was tiny, it was cramped, a minor insanity, stifling and petty. She was writing letters to the "Zionist Executive," to the "führers" of the Jewish Colonial Trust and the Jewish National Fund, introducing herself as Margarethe Gertrude Neumann-Herzl, the daughter of the esteemed Dr. Theodor Herzl, and claiming to hold séances wherein she played tarock and other obscure card games with obscure Habsburg royals of her parents' generation whom pretty much everyone else had forgotten, whereas he was writing to regional banks for forbearance, he was writing for forgiveness of debts, he was ceaselessly cycling figures from one column of a ledger to another, from one ledger itself to another, trying to make his monthlies, his quarterlies, his annual payments, but the sums just kept getting away from him like a trilby in the wind and he was too broke and ashamed to ask for any local assistance and, anyway, they were all asking him for assistance and he was still living the fiction, they all were, that he could provide it.

He had kept up appearances: his suits were always pressed, always clean. He had made all the intelligent arrangements, keeping his son in Vienna with Wutz, but taking himself to Czechoslovakia and taking on Czechoslovak citizenship in an attempt to protect himself from predatory taxation and the hatred of Jews. He had his factory in Friedek and his bachelor shack in Mistek and his whole life became the short passage between the two, back and forth, a trivial existence, back and forth, a cold and lonely existence, back and forth and back and forth and occasionally a week in Vienna, which would culminate with a visit to his wife at the sanitarium at

Inzersdorf where she'd either excoriate him or claim not to recognize him or strangely, disingenuously, both.

She was unhinged, broken: the language of doors and windows. She was crazy. She was an orphan. She was a widow already, though not yet Richard's: she was a widow to her dead sister, Pauline, who went to Paris and was ruined by hypodermics and nymphomania, and she was a widow to her dead brother, Hans, who went to London and was ruined by literature and Jesus Christ. She was the person to whom all condolences were addressed, and despite Richard's efforts to intercept them in the wake of her siblings' deaths, she still received piles of letters and answered them assiduously, writing to all the mourners and organizers of Zion, negotiating over her siblings' graves in Bordeaux, the city where Pauline and Hans were reunited in Pauline's unintentional overdose and Hans's not-unintentional suicide, negotiating the cost of permanent tombs there, negotiating the debts they'd both incurred there, and discussing her inheritance from the both of them, which was being held up, in her opinion, by assorted rabbinic and even Marxist forces hostile to Pauline because of her sordidness and hostile to Hans because of his apostasy. A drug-addict sister, a shot-himself-in-the-head goy brother: throughout that period immediately following their demises, she'd remained relatively stable, and if she'd been triggered into tantrums at all it wasn't by anything having to do with them so much as by Richard saying some angry words to her, by Stephan not wanting to be held by her. And then the year had come, the one-year anniversary of her siblings' deaths, when the stones went up in Bordeaux, 1931, and she wanted to go, as she wrote this man Stolpner, the local Zionist factotum, in a message, she was planning to go, as she had Wutz write this man Stolpner for her, but then as the day approached she felt more and more gloomy and hard like a stone herself and wound up missing the ceremony that regardless was hardly a ceremony because nobody attended, the evening of which she had a fit and in the ensuing unveiled days she couldn't dress or shower or even eat and certainly not sleep and suddenly she was being rushed off again to cruelly familiar Inzersdorf and she'd never again live at home.

Richard's last visit there before the outbreak of war was three years later, 1934, a visit that Richard decided to make alone and almost didn't make, unsure his wife would be able to handle it. He'd insisted on leaving Stephan back in Vienna with Wutz, and on the way to Inzersdorf, at the very gates of Inzersdorf, he'd hesitated. On the one hand, what he was contemplating was a move that should require a mother's approval and yet on the other hand, what could it mean, the approval of an addled woman?

They had the chance to send their son to England. That's how he should present it. Not as desperate but as an opportunity, a privilege, an honor. He didn't know what his wife knew about politics—about the quotas, the dismissals, the constant re-ruling of law—and he didn't want to do any explaining, so he merely said, "Stephan was picked to go to London . . . he was chosen, an academic committee decided . . ." making it sound like a scholarship, making it sound like a prize . . . "Stephan was picked to go to London for his schooling, so we're going to send him . . ." and so as not to mention the fortune it cost, he even gave her the sense it was free . . . "they're not taking many students at all, only the best . . ." He didn't say "Jews."

"Excellent," she said. "I hope I'll see him before he goes."

"Of course," Richard lied, at least he thought he was lying. "So the plan has your blessing?" he asked, while asking himself, Why is that so important to my conscience?

"What plan?"

"To send Stephan—to let him go to London, to continue his schooling."

She gazed out the window. "Of course. London. Hans is in London. Hans will be so glad. Make sure Hans knows when he's arriving. Hans will take care of him. I'll write to Hans myself."

Cuts, trims, slashes, decreases, reductions, obtruncations: he was trying to make his life as light as possible, his investments had crashed, the bourse in general had crashed, he had let go the butler, he had let go the cook, he had even let go Wutz, his son's faithful nanny, because now he had let go



"Her life is so fast-paced and riveting."

his son. Sending Stephan to England felt to him like that: a scrimping, another miserable scale-back.

He did not believe in a future. And while he thought he might be justified in not believing in a future for himself—a future for Richard, personally—the problem was that no one around him believed in a future for themselves either and when no one believes in a future, then no one builds, and when no one builds, then your brick factory is worthless. But Richard told himself, rather, his accountants told him, he couldn't shut it down. For some reason, it would be more expensive to shut the factory down and stop producing bricks than it would be to just keep producing bricks, he didn't quite understand why, but they'd assured him this was the case, and though he was certain they were only saying that in order to fleece him, he couldn't find the strength to defy them, so the factory kept working, even at lower production, working, even with reduced labor force, working, and the bricks kept piling up in the yard. Courses of bricks filling the yard. Staggered courses leading out from the yard and around the factory. You pile up enough bricks, you're not piling them anymore, you're putting up a wall—he said this to himself days before anyone dared say some variation of it to him . . . you're not storing bricks anymore, Richard, you're doing construction . . . and he laughed again even when others said it at the Red Goose pub in Friedek, at the pub Under the Sign of the Bellows in Mistek . . . I was over by your property the other day and what are you doing, renovations? . . . I always knew you were a smart businessman, Richard, you take the opportunity of a downturn to expand? . . . He laughed and laughed as he walled himself in and waited for war.

His other major investment, a textile mill, was a cotton concern, but as cotton was a peacetime textile, he supported the conversion of the mill for wool, because wool was a wartime textile, however, the machines he needed for that conversion were German, and though he mortgaged the mill for a down payment on them, they never arrived. Nothing came from across the border. No machinery, no orders, just Jews. He was waiting for machinery to arrive and all he got was Jews. They were coming over the border from Austria, coming into Friedek, coming into Mistek, getting arrested, jailed, returned. And yet to listen to them, but especially to listen to his last few friends in Vienna, so many were fleeing in the other direction, the Austrian Jews now doing what the German Jews had already been doing, storming the consulates and hoarding the telephone directories in search of Americans who shared their last names, to whose addresses they could write in high Cassell's English seeking sponsorship for affidavits and visas. Richard had family in Detroit, Michigan, U.S.A. But his wife was institutionalized and he couldn't bring her to Detroit, and his son was off in England, on horseback playing polo with a cricket bat. *My dear Trude, the rains have been unrelenting, but this past weekend the sun shone beautifully for an hour and I was made happy to think it was also shining on you.* Men he'd fired, men he'd never have hired, were in uniform now and had their gloves out for bribes, offering protection. Half of unemployed Silesia was Nazi. Levy, his partner at the textile mill, hanged himself at the office. Their accountant, Maier, took poison at home. *I have very little news for you, my life is very simple, I am very proud of our son, who due to the political situation cannot visit.*



Inzersdorf had two sections. Rather it had four. It had two sections, each divided. Meaning it had four. Its population was given to counting. As in a house of prayer, there was the Women's Section and the Men's Section and they were separate and then within each section there was one ward that was Open and one ward that was Closed. Trude—Trudel to some nurses, Trudele to other nurses, Frau Neumann to the doctors, Frau Neumann-Herzl to the Zionist doctors—was in the Women's Section, naturally, and she was not her late sister, Pauline, who if she were alive and in Trude's position would have tried to infiltrate the Men's Section, sneaking out to be caught rolling in their duvets, knotted in their gauzes. That was not Trude in the least. She was the modest sister, she was the behaved sister, she was the responsible sister, she was the living sister and last survivor of the Herzl siblings and had no problem staying in the Women's Section. Her only problem was that they moved her and she was sometimes in the Open and sometimes in the Closed. She was constantly being shuttled between them, a week Open, a week Closed (never less than a week), a month Open, a month Closed (never more than half a year). Open and Closed were her Friedek and Mistek. Open when she was sane and remembered who she was, Closed when she was insane and forgot herself . . . Open when no letters came, Closed just after she received a banded brick of cancelled envelopes . . .

No mail came to the Closed ward, so each time she'd return to the Open ward, she'd be met with a wall of delayed correspondence, her dealing with which would often send her back to the Closed ward for some stretch longer and so on, in an unbreakable circle, a barbiturated round that couldn't be stopped—what were they supposed to do, withhold certain letters? Deny the woman her mail?

Going from Closed to Open was, each time, to enter a new world: an Austrian was appointed Chancellor of Germany. Some said Austrian-born, some said ex-Austrian, but she didn't understand the confusion: why shouldn't an Austrian be Chancellor of Germany if her husband was suddenly Czech and for some reason her son was British? The next time making the transition between wards, Austria's Austrian Chancellor, Dollfuss, had been shot, but she'd never liked Dollfuss anyway, and after him, von Schuschnigg, who was essentially a Slovene, returned from a visit to Germany to announce that Austria didn't exist, but looking out the windows, she could still see Austria, she could see between the window bars the courtyard, the driveway, the outbuildings, the fields.

The rain, the no rain, the rain again. The meals. The walks. The treatments.

As the post slowed, especially from abroad, Trude found herself more and more content remaining in the Closed, where it was as still and silent as the inside of a mountain. Unlike in the Open, there was no news, at least not

officially. There were no newspapers, no magazines, no radios, just large square empty rooms like you found sometimes between the movements of symphonies or in paintings without people. In some of the rooms there were large narrow windows that opened just a smidge and in others there were wider windows that opened all the way, but both types of windows had bars, and, when it rained, the slap of drops on the panes was deafening. The Ring, the dead creamy center of Vienna—site of her old favorite confectionary shop and her dressmaker's and her hatmaker's and the store that only sold fans that had been shuttered for years, though she occasionally still tried to place an order—was less than a dozen kilometres away but in a different century.

It turned out that not receiving mail only made her send more of it: she wrote to everyone, not expecting responses, but also often inventing responses, writing back to herself in her head. She wrote to her husband—sometimes just enclosing lists of things she wanted that were no longer quite obtainable: lotion for my eyes, Nivea, it must say Nivea, Odol mouthwash, generic Vaseline, ink and stamps and did I mention stamps and ink—but most frequently preferred to devote her writing time to what she regarded as her serious Zionist correspondence, the responsibility for maintaining which had devolved upon her as the lone surviving Herzl child. She wrote to Edward VIII in abdication and to Alfonso XIII in exile: *Some time ago I was in the Open Ward for sane people and happened to catch the news* . . . She wrote, sometimes weekly, to Pope Pius XI: *Once again I dare write to you out of a belief that Your Holiness is all that stands between the world and the abyss and more specifically between the Jewish race and the abyss and only your influence can intercede and save the race that begat your savior and granted legitimacy to your church* . . . She wrote to the French President, Lebrun: *Perhaps the truest expression of my late father's genius was his ability to dream a fact into being and while this talent is often beneficial it can also be quite dangerous, in the person of a man like Hitler and in the crowds of propagandists around him who are forcing everyone to repeat that war is inevitable* . . . She wrote to the Baroness de Rothschild in French but it was the wrong Baroness de Rothschild, to her fellow-princesses Olga, Elizabeth, and Marina, of Greece, and to Churchill and Roosevelt c/o their embassies in Paris in an English that over the years had become like the Inzersdorf walls, fruity, moldy, fungal, blooming with aberrancies: *It is my expectation that now a war comes and that the Jews are those who most from it will suffer—is it not the time to do a favor for the Jews? Surely any state that for them can be found will in all swiftitude become an ally and financiary dynamo* . . . She wrote to Marlene Dietrich but in English, the Duchess of Kent but in French, and to her child's old governess, Wutz, requesting soap, a washcloth, and a calendar for the Jewish years 5701–5702. She wrote to a certain W. Stolpner, who'd buried both her siblings. And then she wrote to her siblings, too, wondering whether they knew what had happened to her investment in a potash syndicate. She was running out of stationery, she was running out of stamps, so she cut back on her method of enclosing with each letter to England and France an additional letter addressed to the censors.

At least she remembered to write to Hitler in German, reusing the pages of an old letter from Richard and wedging her writing between her husband's lines like wadding up fouled bandages to block the chill coming in through the drafts: *Sir, often the loneliness of an individual vision causes us to compel its collectivity, imposing it by fiat and declaring it shared, and yet the leader who succeeds, the truly great leader-hetman-chief, will never forget that he is in his essence only a follower. If he leads Germany, he is but a vessel for Germany, if he leads Belgium and Holland, he is but a vessel for Belgium and Holland. With that in mind I wonder whether you can honestly say that your own campaign expresses the will and ambitions of the German or German-speaking peoples or are you merely engaged in mapping the limits of your singular charisma? As my father's daughter, I have ample experience of this old vexation and would like to give you the advantage of my wisdom. I propose a tête-à-tête at your leisure and promise I seek only to provide counsel to your political future and will not make any appeals for my personal benefit or for the benefit of my beleaguered people.*

Because she had no more envelopes,

TRAIN OF THOUGHT

Jet engine of thought—
its long contrail
a faded chalk line
on the blackboard of
forgotten obligations;

slow mule of thought—
picking its way down red-dirt trails,
its shifting burden
swaying this way & that
with the harness bell;

yellow taxi of thought—
the mind stopping and starting
at rush hour with the meter
running;

green satin train of a ball gown—
that perilous wake foaming behind
Rita Hayworth as she descends the
stairs to take up her obsessive residence
in the mind of Johnny Farrell,
newly arrived in Argentina.

All metaphor breaks down somewhere. That's the beauty of it,
says Robert Frost, who knew something about the fickle engines
of association, prone always to slip out of gear & go rolling

into the neighbor's field,
toward the cow, grazing serenely on clover & soft grass,
thinking of nothing in particular

& coming finally to rest against a tree at the edge
of a whistle-stop station, where a man waits on the platform,
wearing your father's hat & holding out to you a card
spattered with Worcestershire stains—

Dad's recipe for Caesar salad,
which you were just thinking of making
for dinner tonight, if only you could remember where you
set it down, somewhere on the counter,
before you noticed the long, doleful whistle
blow improbably through the open window,
across the town, the years.

—Jennifer Maier

she addressed each page: "Führer, Berlin," and because she had no more stamps, she wrote like a spiderweb in the corner, "Postage paid by recipient."

No envelopes, no stamps, no paper. And then her private nurses stopped showing up. The general-rotation nurses neglected her. Richard's payments were in arrears. A draft on his bank defaulted.

Trude didn't know this—it was kept from her—and had completely forgotten that her husband, or someone, was paying for her to be here. It rather felt that here was where she'd always lived, in this home she owned, this rather large and drafty house, and that the other patients were her boarders.

There were fewer and fewer by the day, until just after the turn of 1939, there was a spate of healing miracles. Marlene, crazy (Queen Mab) Marlene, was cured. Susanne, an adult woman with dolls, an adult woman who stabbed her dolls with smuggled scissors, was healthy. Though she still carried dolls, though she still stabbed them. The doctors and nurses were in agreement now—they were finally agreeing with everything these women had been insisting on for years, that they were sane, that they were fit, that they were ready to go back home and reintegrate into their quondam families and lives.

They said as much to Trude—that they'd informed Richard of her complete recovery and that all she had to do was notify him to come and pay and pick her up, but after years of wanting only that, Trude developed reservations, the diagnosis seemed expedient, the discharge seemed abrupt, and her own words in the mouths of others struck her as lies. She agreed to write to him, if only they'd give her writing materials, but instead they brought her to an office and put her next to a telephone. That's what that was, that polished horn. She had not used a telephone since the dissolution of Austria-Hungary. Dr. Katzenellenbogen dialled, asked to be connected to a number, they waited. The phone rang. It rang often and long. Between the bleating rings a gale was blowing. Horn of a goat, horn of a ram. The operator came on the line and the doctor asked to check the number and read it out again. "That's the only number your husband gave me," the doctor said to Trude. He checked the clock. "And this was the time we'd agreed upon." He hung up and suggested waiting half an hour. They tried again in half an hour. There was still no answer. "I'll miss my lunch," Trude said.

Meals were no longer served. You had to serve yourself. It was autumn and the nurses came in wearing not their uniforms but their own clothes in layers, making it difficult for Trude to recognize the woman shaking her, whispering and shaking her. Ah yes, Maria, like the empress. She could not stay long. Nobody was staying. Trude had to pack a bag, Maria said, and when Trude began asking questions, when she first wanted to make a list of what to pack, when she first wanted to get ahold of some mink oil and refresh the parched cracked leather of her suitcase and then the suitcase had to sit for a while and absorb the mink oil, Maria packed for her in a rush. Folding, balling, crushing. Tossing shoes aside. Tossing frocks aside. Trude had accumulated much since she'd been here, but the only luggage she had was the luggage she'd come with. And anyway, she could only bring one suitcase. Could Maria have someone send over the rest? Could Maria find her an additional suitcase, pack it with the excess, and ship it along and Trude would find a way to reimburse her?

Vans were outside in the drive. A few dozen female patients were being gathered together, like a tour group for an outing comprising the very women Trude hated. She was a woman of lists and if among the many lists she produced of letters to write and books to read and skin-care and hair-care items to obtain she would produce a list of the women she hated in this facility, the women she found the most incult, the most déclassé, that list would be identical with the one Dr. Katzenellenbogen was checking off.

To Trude, this was a group of the women she'd always tried to avoid—while to the staff who'd been ordered to gather them, this was a group of Jews—and the only thing preventing her from succumbing to despair was the arrival of the male patients from the Men's Section who were being brought outside and loaded onto the vans as well and not in the institution's typical segregated fashion: she found herself sitting among men, wedged alphabetically

as a Neumann between Herr Namslauer and Herr Nissel.

The vans jolted in caravan through the fields and villages that constituted the fringe of Vienna while Herr Namslauer pointed out brilliantly colored and shedding trees and evergreen trees and bushes and shrubs and gave their scientific names, until along one increasingly dull and homogenous stretch he was reduced to merely repeating, "*Corylus avellana*, common hazel . . . *Corylus avellana*, common hazel . . ."



Herr Nissel sat brooding on the aisle and spoke only after a bump in the road caused his hip and thigh to jostle her hip and thigh: "My apologies, Madame . . . it's unfortunate . . . though I must say it's hard to imagine that a transportation of lunatics could have gone any smoother."

Purkersdorf was a smaller sanitarium in the heart of the trees (oak, ash, hornbeam, wild cherry): the Wienerwald. It had been too small and claustral even before its commandeering as a central collection point for sanitaria being emptied throughout the Ostmark. Other formerly private sanitaria took in the physically and mentally debilitated and crippled, but Purkersdorf was the one designated for Jews, "which doesn't necessarily mean we don't have our share of sexual deviants," Dr. Katzenellenbogen was reputed to have said, "it just means the ones we do have also happen to be Jews, which we can only take as a solace." The Jewish doctors had come along, too—not all of them, but at least Katzenellenbogen and Gottlieb and Levinsky.

In the vans, in the processing, in the first few days and nights in the disorderly wards, there were arguments over everything, over the paltry sandwiches, over the scanty cots, and perhaps most saliently though most uselessly over the nature of the criteria that applied here, with some claiming that everyone here was a cured case and others claiming that everyone here was incurable, though the truth of the situation was a mixed truth—vague, mongrelized, the most difficult breed of truth for the psychologically vulnerable to handle—that the population here was a muddle of every kind, sane, insane, half and half, Mischling, converted.

She started in a room with a roommate: Sarah was the name Trude was told, the name chalked on the woman's luggage. She'd come from another facility just a day before Trude's arrival and already appropriated to herself the bulk of the room, leaving Trude an icon's niche near where the door opened. Sarah had a cot but until another cot was found Trude had to sleep on the floor using her suitcase as a pillow and in the dark Sarah who'd been mumbling to herself in a language Trude had taken for Polish or Ukrainian was suddenly hissing in fractured child-German and telling Trude that her name was actually Gisele and she was actually a champion gymnastic artist who'd invented some of the most famous dances in some of the most famous clubs of Vienna, but that the dances had been stolen from her by a cabal of Masons and international financiers and renamed the Charleston, the Balboa, the Shag, and the Hop, and that vast profits had been made off them in Europe and throughout the Americas, but that she herself hadn't received any of the proceeds and that if only she'd been allowed to go out on tour she would have become a Hollywood celebrity but what had held her back was this woman Sarah who had to work as a seamstress and had a jealous Russian husband.

Sarah or Gisele would steal from Trude's suitcase: she'd put on one of Trude's dresses and Trude would beg and complain until one of the doctors interceded and the woman would return the item to Trude and, to make amends, would get out her sewing kit and fix a loose hem.

Other women joined: they were three in the room, then four, and the fourth also had another name and personality, so they were five or six, an unpredictable number of unpredictable women, and then finally another woman who came in from her burrow through a hole in the wall, for all Trude knew, a tiny furry rodent of a woman who stole Trude's letters and read them aloud, except some of the letters were in French and the woman didn't speak French, so she was reduced to just making mocking Frenchified moos and yawps and when Trude broke down and wept, the woman took some letters with her to the toilet and wiped with them.

Sarah or Gisele, sometimes you couldn't tell, tried to comfort Trude and went to the toilet and brought back a single letter soaked and smeared in human waste and even blood-spotted and tried to wring it out so it could dry: *Dear Stephan, though your life is now in English, I would encourage you not to forget the immortal literature of your native tongue and in particular the* . . . indecipherable . . . *which has given me and used to give my father, your grandfather, such* . . . indecipherable . . . *setting an example to which you should always aspire, for the work of literature is fixed, it is static, the words of a book do not shift and alter, they do not rush and scramble around trying to make themselves more presentable to their audience, rather they exist as they exist and from that position of integrity challenge each succeeding generation to better itself in the process of understanding* . . . indecipherable . . . *if only each of us could be that way in our own lives, not stooping to the impoverished depths of the fashions and tastes that surround us, not allowing ourselves to be besmirched and brought low by other women's filth, but instead remaining for all mankind a beacon of* . . . indecipherable . . . and after she'd cleaned the ruined sheet as best she could, Trude kept it in her pocket and whenever any of her roommates would assault her, she'd put her hand in her pocket and squeeze the sheet and think to herself, A beacon of? A beacon of?

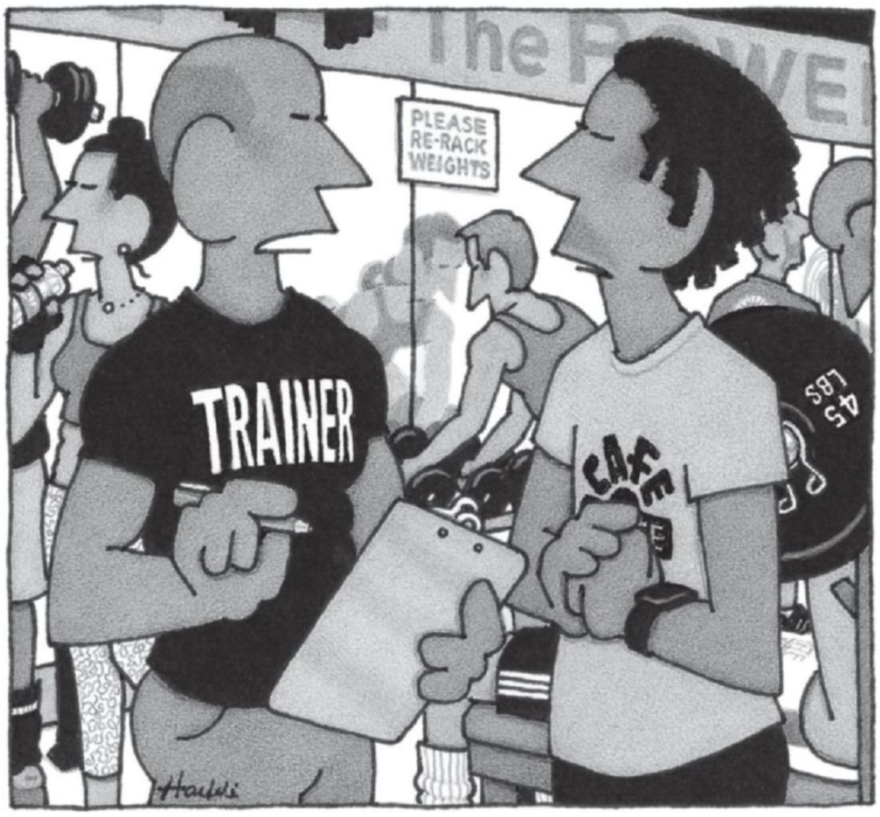
At Purkersdorf, the men and women were kept apart but their segregation was just by room and not by ward and as more doctors left and more patients came, supervision became laxer. Sarah or Gisele—Sarah and Gisele—started entertaining men at night. Different men. Sarah men. Gisele men. Panting and sweating and falling off the cot to the floor just next to Trude and sending the rodent woman who'd wiped herself with the letter to Stephan wailing to the bathroom. A few nights after the monitoring stopped—no nurses on the night shifts—men started queuing up at the door and fighting one another, bringing presents, little gifts of busted watches, cigarette cases without

cigarettes, lighters without wicks. One night, Trude came back from a meeting of the poetry club she was trying to inaugurate and interrupted an orgy being led by Dr. Schneebaum. She'd been reading Heine and Goethe to the less fortunate, attempting to be a beacon of, and she'd come back into the room to find Dr. Schneebaum thrusting among the upturned rears of Sarah/Gisele and the rodent woman. It was like he was doing farmwork, the way he thrusted. Baling hay. Hoeing for planting. The next day he was gone. Drs. Levinsky and Gottlieb had left, too. It wasn't clear whether their departures were voluntary. A nurse who was married to a Jew slit her wrists, which wasn't the first suicide at Purkersdorf but was the first suicide of staff. One of Trude's poetry-club compatriots had found the woman, dead in the leaves of the drained swimming pool. It was said the nurse's husband had committed suicide at home some days before, but then it was also said he'd gone off to Brazil with another nurse who was missing. Trude didn't know what to believe. The atmosphere was such that both could be true. Meanwhile, Dr. Katzenellenbogen had managed to find a Katzenellenbogen in Canada, either a cousin or a benevolent coincidence. He was replaced by a doctor who according to the remaining doctors wasn't a real doctor, while he in turn maintained the other doctors weren't real and he was. Both sides could at least agree there were patients out in the halls passing themselves off as gynecologists, dentists, surgeons, nurses. Even more than Trude consulted them about a bothersome tooth or pressure in her chest, they consulted her about the political: Would the Americans enter the war? If given the choice of a visa to Cuba or a visa to Cyprus, which to choose? She thought about this question, about these islands better equipped than the landlocked countries to contend with a refugee's isolation, loneliness, and the hope of self-sufficiency, and decided: Cuba if you think the United States will reopen, Cyprus if you believe in Palestine. This kicked off a rumor: the British are about to allow immigration to Palestine . . . *when and from where do you know this* . . . open immigration, no restrictions . . . *stop spreading such ugly lies* . . . the British were going to rescind the White Paper and permit the unimpeded ingress of Jews into Palestine . . . *what's your source besides your pentacles and wands and barmy Ouija cards* . . . with Hitler's backing, the Zionists were coördinating with the British to bring the Jews of Europe to the milky honeyed Promised Land, according to the crazy lady down the hall who wraps herself in fox furs and claims she's Herzl's daughter.

That rumor and its mutations were still proliferating when Purkersdorf was closed and its denizens evacuated to Steinhof in spring, 1941. Steinhof was grand, or had been, the crown jewel of Viennese psychiatric care, now clouded and cracked, its wards stretched beyond capacity so that its overfilled rooms spilled out into the halls with souls in wheelchairs, souls on gurneys. Steinhof was also the first place where the soldiers and officers didn't just outrank the staff but outnumbered them as well and the staff that did exist were not there to treat patients so much as to sort them and tag them and occasionally experiment.

There Trude was asked the strangest of intake questions, not her name and birth date but the name and birth date of the Führer, and when she happened to answer not just one but both of those correctly—almost astonished at recalling the answers she'd been told in advance by those ahead of her in line—she was spared the humiliations of the exam batteries that followed: identify a drawing of a sword, identify a drawing of a bear, match these wooden blocks by shape and color and fill in the hands on a blank-faced clock, with those patients who failed or merely vacillated, calling a sword a toothpick or nothing at all, calling a bear a tank or nothing





"What do you plan to use your body for?"

• •

at all, matching blue triangles to white rectangles and scrawling a smile on the clock separated out for further testing, electroshock therapy, cerebrospinal-fluid sampling, oxygenation of the brain.

Many of Trude's old roommates were lost in that direction, though that didn't stop her from curiously mourning their absence and seeking them out, seeking misrecognition, as she peacocked of a noon among the alien corn. She once thought she glimpsed Sarah/Gisele across a clovered courtyard and waved to her and approached, only to find a man in a wig and a dress. The wig was blond, the dress was yellow, and the stubble was black and brown and gray. Every corner of the property held a spectacle like that. A surprise midget. A surprise family of midgets of which the children were so obviously the children yet were bigger than the parents. A woman who barked and meowed and spun in circles, fetching a branch a man would throw. And then one day, there was this grim pageant of twins, identical pairs of boys, identical pairs of girls, fraternal pairs of boys and girls, of diverse ages, but all of them young, being marched in formation below the terrace toward one of the outbuildings from which shrieking would often come, just before and after meals. Those brought to the farthest outbuildings, at the perimeter, would never return to the wards and instead would be, in the lexicon that was making the rounds of soldiers and inmates alike, "decentralized to other hospitals" or "discharged for alternative treatment offsite," phrases that everyone used despite all but the maddest among them knowing that they meant being rolled up ramps into panel trucks and driven out and around the forest while gas was pumped into the rear and then their gassed bodies, which if still convulsing would also have to be shot for the sake of thoroughness, would be unloaded like lumber in the middle of the trees, stacked for burial in trenchlike graves.

The next autumn, she was returned to Vienna: she hadn't been in the city in years and though she had not quite been succeeding in keeping up her appearance, she only registered her slovenliness as the center swerved into view, all those brazen buildings with their womanly curves and loops and bulging balconies she wasn't in any way properly dressed or coiffed for, all those imperious theatres and cafés of her brief and unexploited youth now swathed in tawdry red banners with white-circled black swastikas, which she took for maniac eyeballs ogling her and staring her down, judging her for how far she'd fallen.

The Sammellager, the collective-transit camp, was what the Nazis now called the shuttered Jewish school in the Malzgasse. She arrived from Steinhof with a suitcase containing fewer than half the items she'd brought with her from Purkersdorf, which items represented fewer than half of what she'd brought with her from Inzersdorf. The contents of her life had slowly disappeared and even her present suitcase had been someone else's. Her own old suitcase had vanished and this new replacement had a broken handle. It served as a bed and sometimes as a chair and sometimes as a desk in one of the cleared-out former classrooms of the former school, which sheltered the remnants of Steinhof and the entire doddering populations of Vienna's Jewish Homes for the Aged. As had become her habit, she introduced herself to the new old transfers as the daughter of Dr. Theodor Herzl and tried to ignore the snide replies, which ranged from "Good for you" to "Some good it's done you." An elderly man with jug-handle ears patted her head as if she were a girl and then handed her a pear mostly rotten.

Vienna IV/10 was her transport: a train that left what its passengers still called the Franz-Josefs station at midday and took the familiar route toward the Wienerwald and crossed the bridge over the Danube and then the viaduct over the Thaya, where the mountains reared up in the distance like horns.

Upon arrival at Theresienstadt, Trude was loaded along with a few dozen others into an open truck and driven to the Schleuse hospital for processing. She joined the end of the line, which might have been one line to those waiting at its end and multiple lines to those farther up. There were legions ahead of her and, as she waited, sitting on her suitcase, more came to wait behind her

and the day grew long and the shadows longer and there were some who sprawled out on the trammelled ground with the drapes of Steinhof as bedding. A doctor, also a prisoner, stalked around with a nurse, also a prisoner, performing triage, checking for anyone having an emergency that transcended the collective. They came upon an elegant woman sitting rocking with her suitcase as if she were soothing it and suckling it at her breast and as they passed her—she seemed healthy, she seemed abnormally happy even—she called out after them. The doctor and nurse stopped, turned back, and bent to make their evaluation, but the woman recoiled from their touch and spoke to them firmly, as if she were giving orders to servants before the war, before even the previous war: "I am the youngest daughter of Dr. Theodor Herzl and I would like to be put in contact with the camp's leadership at their earliest convenience."

It was a request—it was a demand—an assertion she kept making to doctors and nurses and fellow-inmates all around: all she had to do, she said, was to speak to the authorities and the food would improve, the clothes would become warmer, the weather might even clear up . . . and the more she spoke to the nurses, the more the nurses spoke to the doctors, the more the doctors spoke to the administrators, the Ältestenrat, the Judenrat, the supervisory *gestores*, and word was passed down that her presence was acknowledged and would be received, apologies dear lady, forgive us Madame, the chief rabbi of the camp is honored to greet you, the head of the Jewish council is honored to greet you, the élite of the camp hereby recognizes you as one of its own and wishes to extend to you its cordial invitation to a formal meeting, wherein all your claims will be addressed.

A date and time were fixed, a man who described himself as a lawyer as if he were her lawyer and who purported to remember her sister escorted her to the location, which turned out to be a rutted reeking yard abutting the hospital laundry and kitchen, where bins were stored for the kitchen debris.

There was no committee, there was no rostrum or dais, there was not even a room, just a pocked trash yard of peelings where the lawyer left her in the care of a gray-lion-maned elderly man.

"Trude," he said, too presumptuously, she thought, and took her hand in greeting.

"Frau Herzl," she said, "and I was led to believe I'd be meeting with the highest authorities."

"Frau Neumann, isn't it?" the man said, not letting her hand go.

"If you insist."

The man was squeezing, even his face squeezed. "Trude, you don't recognize your husband?"

She did, on that day at least, but then some days later she didn't, and then some days after that she did again. Richard came daily, whenever he could get a pass for the hospital or sneak away from his asphalt labor detail and against the separations and estrangements of a decade and the fact that they were never, no one in the camp was ever, alone, he repeated what his life had been to her, altering versions of the same trajectory: the factory lost, the Vienna flat lost, their possessions confiscated, and no word from their son.

Richard had been the first to mention him, hovering over her sagging hospital cot and reminding her that Stephan was in England.

"He can help us?" Trude said.

"I'm sure he's in the army," Richard said, rubbing at his wild gray head, rooting for the lice.

"Don't say that. My son's not in the army."

"The British Army. He's in the army that's fighting for us."

"Don't say that. He's not fighting for anyone. He's just a baby."

Richard wanted to tell her their son was an adult but couldn't calculate how old Stephan was and he'd found in their reunion, as in the ancient days of their life together, it was never advisable to contradict his wife. When she said their son was still a baby, yes. When she called him Dr. Katzenellenbogen, yes. When she once looked up at him staring indecently until he realized she'd fallen asleep in the middle of him telling her about—it didn't matter. He'd been talking about his parents. She'd never cared about his parents.

One day, instead of the man coming who spoke to her of his English son, there was another, younger, who came and helped bring her down to the ground floor of the hospital, a preferential ward. It was pleasanter. There was more air, more light, not a cot but a bed, occasional chocolate candies. A representative of the Judenrat visited and asked why she wasn't using the extra blanket and pillow they'd sent or where was the soap or tinned meat they'd arranged and it would turn out either that the item had been stolen or that the nurse or doctor who'd appealed to the Judenrat for that item for Trude had just been trading on her name to obtain some advantage. No one could be trusted. Her fellow-patients were no longer mostly ex-patients from the sanitaria, but inmates from the camp broken by their labor or drained by constant fever.

One of those was a rabbi—some young rabbinical student who used to assist the camp's chief rabbi and now spent his days comforting others as a means of relieving his own infections and, as he happened by her bed, Trude reached out and held his beard and asked what had happened to her husband.

"If you're insane, like you're supposed to be, then I don't have to tell you," the rabbi said. "Are you insane?"

"I'm not. I don't think I am."

"So then I have an obligation. Your husband died. He has been blessed and spared the trip to Poland."

"Why Poland? What's in Poland?"

"Many things," the rabbi said, after a while. "Clouds."

A quarantine prevented the rabbi from returning in the flesh but he came frequently to her in her sleep and even in some waking reveries: he was Stephan now but at Richard's age, he was her father now but his voice ghosted her ladyship's own, rasping, sputtering, choking stupors.

The spring day Trude died of different complications of the same typhus that had taken Richard, hers was one of thirty-six corpses brought by truck to the ovens, and, later that summer, the prisoners who cremated the body of the youngest Herzl child were dispatched on a train bound for Auschwitz, where they were stripped, gassed, and burned as well, in the process that turns mothers into clouds. ♦

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BOOKS

WORLD-BUILDING

How life reshaped the planet that brought it into being.

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

Every complex organism alive today—this includes not only you and me but also the mites that hang out in our hair follicles and the protozoa that lurk in our large intestines—is the product of an unlikely union. Roughly two billion years ago, a bacterium took up with a bacterium-like creature that belonged to a whole different domain, the archaea. From this microbiological meet-cute, a new kind of cell was born, one equipped with mitochondria, and, along with it, a new kind of organism: a eukaryote. (The term is pronounced "you-carry-oat.") The particular eukaryote from which we and our mites descend is formally known as the "last eukaryotic common ancestor," or, more affectionately, LECA.

By the time LECA entered the picture, archaea and bacteria had been grooving along, occasionally exchanging genes, for eons. But they, too, have a backstory. They are descended from a single organism, which, by the logic of phylogeny, also represents humanity's unimaginably distant ancestor. This unicellular Eve goes by the acronym LUCA, for "last universal common ancestor." A few years ago, a team of European researchers attempted to re-create LUCA—on paper, that is—by looking at genes that are shared among existing species of archaea and bacteria. LUCA seems to have liked it hot—probably more than a hundred and twenty degrees. The team decided that she was capable of synthesizing some twenty-six hundred proteins and made do on a diet of dissolved hydrogen and carbon dioxide. According to the researchers' calculations, LUCA lived some 4.2 billion years ago.

For a one-celled creature, LUCA was pretty sophisticated. Her genome comprised some three million base pairs, and she possessed a rudimentary immune system, which implies that she already had to contend with pathogens, eager to attack her. By the time she emerged, then, life had been kicking around for a while. At some point even further back, a *first* universal common ancestor—FUCA—must have come into being. The weird thing is, there isn't much further back to go.

Earth was created some 4.5 billion years ago, when a cloud of interstellar dust contracted to form our solar system. In its early days (and days were much shorter then, because the globe was spinning faster), the planet was a horrifyingly inhospitable place. There was no free oxygen and no protection from ultraviolet radiation. Asteroid impacts were frequent—some of these may have generated enough heat to boil the oceans—as were intense volcanic eruptions.

How did FUCA get by? Perhaps the explanation is simply that life is adaptable. Today, living things occupy steaming vents on the floor of the Pacific, frozen peaks in the Himalayas, and just about every space in between, so, clearly, they are flexible. As the movies teach us, life finds a way.

But perhaps that still doesn't give life enough credit. This is the argument of two recent books, "The Co-Creation: How Earth Made Life and Life Made Earth," by Olivia Judson (Penguin Press), and "Earth and Life: A Four Billion Year Conversation," by Andrew H. Knoll (Princeton).

Judson is a science journalist who earned a doctorate in biological sciences from Oxford. Her previous book, "Dr. Tatiana's Sex Advice to All Creation," which was written as a series of advice columns to species like fig wasps and seaweed flies, explored the evolutionary dynamics of sex in a breezy, comic key. In "The Co-Creation," Judson attempts something more ambitious: a work of popular science organized around not hanky-panky but the interplay of geology and biology, or, as the subject has become known, geobiology.

The book opens with a meditation on sand dunes. Though obviously not alive, dunes possess many of the attributes of life. They can move. They can grow. They can even, in a certain sense, reproduce; sometimes a large sand dune will spin off a smaller one. What dunes and life have in common, according to Judson, is that they "arise from, and are maintained by, an ongoing flow of energy and matter." Life differs from dunes in that it actively seeks energy and, occasionally, reinvents itself to gain access to more of it. Judson ignores the conventional geological timescale, with its eons and eras and periods, in favor of a scheme of her own devising. The planet's history, she writes, can be divided into five "epochas," each defined by the emergence of a creature that could "intercept a new source of energy." Living things, in Judson's scheme, become "energons,"

ABOVE: MIGUEL PORLAN



Research in geobiology has shown how one creature's waste can be the beginning of another creature's world.

ILLUSTRATION BY JESÚS CISNEROS

while inanimate objects—including corpses—are "statigons."

The first epocha, the rock epocha, began when the earliest organisms learned how to extract energy from the chemical soup in which they floated. Judson believes that this skill was acquired in the sea, in places where a mineral called olivine was coming into contact with water and releasing hydrogen. "If you follow the thread of your forebears all the way back across the eons, you will find that your original ancestor was a fracturing wet, iron-rich rock," she writes.



Judson's second epocha commenced some 3.4 billion years ago, with the invention of photosynthesis. This was obviously a big deal, and it enabled life to greatly extend its reach. In the third epocha, a subset of photosynthesizing bacteria—cyanobacteria—developed the capacity to split water and liberate oxygen.

Next up in Judson's scheme is an era she calls the flesh epocha. This started when groups of energons evolved the ability to dine on other energons. The fifth and final epocha is the age of fire, which began when some enterprising hominin figured out how to cook over an open flame.

Judson's epochas and energons can be difficult to keep up with. (Her epochas have beginnings but no ends, so the energons keep piling up.) To help the reader out, she periodically interrupts her narrative to visit the office of a fictional "planetary accountant," a harried, Nutty Professor type whose job it is to track the world's growing complexity. Judson's overarching argument, though, is fairly straightforward. Since FUCA first emerged, life has had to adapt to conditions on planet Earth. But life has also had a hand in determining those conditions. Life, in other words, can give as good as it gets.

Consider, once again, photosynthetic cyanobacteria. (These are sometimes referred to as blue-green algae, although they are not, in fact, algae.) Oxygen is a waste product of the process they use to harness energy from the sun. But free oxygen is highly reactive, and its appearance thoroughly transformed the planet. It brought into being many minerals that hadn't previously existed. It caused vast quantities of iron that had been dissolved in the oceans to precipitate out and accumulate in what are called banded-iron formations. (These formations constitute the world's major deposits of iron ore.) Eventually, it produced the ozone layer, which shields the planet from UV radiation. The ozone layer, for its part, changed the tint of the sky. Before the ozone layer appeared, the sky probably turned an eerie yellow at dusk. "In altering the composition and mass of the air, lifeforms have reached out and painted the heavens above" is how Judson puts it.

Meanwhile, the addition of oxygen to the oceans and the atmosphere made possible aerobic respiration, which, in turn, made possible the evolution of animals. When animals developed habits like burrowing, they allowed oxygen to penetrate the seafloor. This, it's believed, helped create conditions favorable for the accumulation of gypsum, vast amounts of which were deposited around five hundred million years ago. Nowadays, gypsum is used in drywall; thus, anyone who's renovated a kitchen or put in a new bathroom has ancient wormlike creatures to thank. "Truly, the advent of burrowing would change the world," Judson observes.

Or consider the advent of predation. By consuming and then excreting their victims, predatory creatures invented a new kind of recycling. This allowed more nutrients to circulate through the system, thereby enabling more (and more various) creatures to find nourishment. Predators also spurred their potential victims to develop novel defenses, like shells or, in the case of one-celled creatures called coccolithophores, minuscule calcite plates. Calcite plates piling up on the floor of the ocean eventually became a new kind of rock: chalk. "The white cliffs of Dover in England, of the German island of Rügen, of the Normandy coast of France, of the Smoky Hill River of Kansas in the United States—these are all built of chalk," Judson points out. Under high pressure, chalk can be converted into marble, which can be quarried and sculpted—a case of life initiating art.

As for man's mastery of fire, it, too, has proved world transforming. From burning sticks, we've moved on to fossil fuels, which power our cities, our factories, our smelters, our fishing fleets, our industrial-scale farms, and, increasingly, our farmland-gobbling data centers. "Humans are, without doubt, causing more changes to the life-Earth system—in more ways and faster—than any lifeform ever has before," Judson writes.

At the end of "The Co-Creation," Judson offers a catalogue of researchers to whom she owes "intellectual debts." Near the top of her list is Knoll, the author of "Earth and Life." Knoll, a professor at Harvard, was more or less present at the creation of geobiology, and he played a key role in the discipline's development. As a working scientist, he's a lot more interested than Judson is in the nitty-gritty of how geobiologists piece together the history of Earth (and life) from fragmentary clues—isotopes of sulfur, say, or traces of compounds called sterols. (Conversely, he's a lot less interested in promulgating neologisms.)

The "conversation" of Knoll's subtitle is his organizing metaphor. Chapter by chapter, he recounts what geology and biology have had to say to each other over the eons. Sometimes the dialogue has been balanced, at other moments lopsided.

Initially, life was quite reticent. It was, Knoll reports, probably "a local phenomenon," confined to watery spots where hydrogen, carbon dioxide, and "the minerals to catalyze their interaction were available." Then, around 2.4 billion years ago, it started to speak up. This was the beginning of what's become known as the Great Oxygenation Event, or, as it's referred to in the scientific literature, the G.O.E.

Exactly what happened during the G.O.E. remains something of a paleontological puzzle, and Knoll devotes a number of chapters to exploring its mysteries. (He calls this section of his book "The Story of O," in a nod to the rather racier French bondage

novel.) Among the mysteries is the timing. Various lines of evidence suggest that oxygen-producing cyanobacteria showed up several hundred million years before oxygen levels began to climb. So what caused the delay? One possible explanation is that a shortage of phosphorus in the oceans limited the bacteria's numbers. Phosphorus began to wash off the land when the earliest large continents appeared, so cyanobacteria may have got their big chance owing to plate tectonics. If this is the case, the G.O.E. would be the consummate example of geology influencing biology and biology influencing geology. In any event, once oxygen started to build up there was no going back. "The stage was set for environmental revolution," Knoll writes.

On occasion, geology has come close to shouting down life altogether. About two hundred and fifty million years ago, in what's known as the end-Permian extinction, huge volcanic eruptions in what's now Siberia released huge amounts of carbon dioxide; this led temperatures to spike and the oceans to become both anoxic and acidified. Something like ninety per cent of marine animal species died out. A similar, if somewhat less devastating, die-off occurred about two hundred million years ago, probably owing to another burst of volcanism, this time from what's been dubbed the Central Atlantic Magmatic Province. Sixty-six million years ago, a Manhattan-size asteroid plowed into the Yucatán Peninsula; roughly seventy-five per cent of species went extinct, including our distant relatives the non-avian dinosaurs. Catastrophe, Knoll writes, appears to be "sewn into the fabric of our planet."

In recent centuries, the conversation has taken a strange turn. For the first time, an organism is not only changing the world but also looking on with dread as it does so. Fossil-fuel combustion is adding carbon to the air at a rate that exceeds the pace of the release during the end-Permian extinction. Now as then, temperatures are rising, and the oceans are acidifying. Meanwhile, people are rerouting rivers, messing with the global nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, and churning out so much stuff—concrete, plastic, asphalt, iPhones—that, measured by dry weight, human-produced materials now outweigh all living organisms combined. "Humans have become a dominant voice in the conversation between Earth and life," as Knoll puts it. The result, he says, is "a distinct time in our planet's history"—a new epoch, if not a new epocha.

If life on Earth has been partly, or even largely, responsible for rendering Earth habitable, what does this say about the possibilities on other planets? Knoll, who served on the science team for NASA's Mars Exploration Rover mission, devotes the last part of his book to the prospects of what he calls "other conversations."

Knoll is pretty confident that life is out there somewhere. The universe, after all, is ginormous. Our particular galaxy, which is just one among billions, is estimated to contain more than a hundred billion stars, most of which probably have planets orbiting them. "If only one planet (or moon) in a billion sustains life, the universe must be a lively place," Knoll observes. But that doesn't mean we're going to encounter it. So far, at least, no signs of life have been detected emanating from any other planet (or moon) in our solar system, and other solar systems are awfully far away. After the sun, the star closest to Earth is Proxima Centauri. It would take a probe like NASA's Voyager 1—the first craft to journey into interstellar space—about seventy-five thousand years to reach it.

And, even if life has emerged elsewhere, it hasn't necessarily had time to generate creatures capable of sending out interstellar probes or messages. If not for plate tectonics, which has kept life's key ingredients recirculating, evolution on this planet probably would have hit a wall billions of years ago. "It may be that what makes Earth unusual is not so much that life began here—that may happen widely in the universe—but that it has persisted so long," Knoll notes.

Judson, too, ends her book contemplating the cosmos. Like Knoll, she believes that in the vastness of space there are many other planets where life could have emerged. And yet, also like Knoll, she thinks there's no place like home.

In the final pages of "The Co-Creation," Judson describes a fascinating experiment in applied evolution which has been running since 1988. That year, a biologist named Richard Lenski, then at U.C. Irvine, placed virtually identical populations of *E. coli* into twelve identical flasks. (This was a nonpathogenic strain of the bacteria, rather than the kind that causes recalls.) *E. coli* reproduce by splitting themselves in two, and, in Lenski's flasks, the bacteria were free to keep doubling until they exhausted their supply of glucose. Every twenty-four hours, Lenski—or, more likely, his assistants—would remove a small number of the bacteria from each flask, provide them a new supply of food, and let the process repeat itself.

In addition to glucose, the growth medium contained a compound called sodium citrate. At first, the twelve tribes of *E. coli* ignored the citrate. But then, around the thirty-thousandth generation, something interesting happened: bacteria in one of the flasks developed the ability to consume it. That population gained a powerful advantage—the citrate-eaters had found their way to a new energy source.

By now, Lenski's *E. coli* have gone through another fifty thousand generations. But the populations in the other eleven flasks still can't consume citrate. The necessary mutations just haven't been repeated. The lesson, according to Judson, is clear: major evolutionary innovations are fluky. This, she argues, should be kept in mind whenever talk turns to aliens. Even on Earth, the "conversation" between biology and geology could have played out very differently. There was no guarantee that it would have included LUCA, LECA, or oxygen-producing cyanobacteria. And, without all of these, it certainly wouldn't have included us.

That we are in a position to study the history of life and wonder at its contingency is itself a contingency. It's one that we (and our mites) ought to be grateful for, and also one that, Judson argues, ought to make us think carefully about how we treat our planet. "If humans really are the only technological species now, and perhaps ever, in the cosmos—what then?" she asks. "What responsibility might that bestow on us, should we choose to accept it?" ♦

MOTHER MONSTER

Why we can't look away from Medea.

BY ANAHID NERSESSIAN



In Euripides' tragedy, Medea is a fearsome woman scorned—cruel yet clear-eyed.

When my first child was born, my then mother-in-law—a labor-and-delivery nurse—told me to call 911 immediately if I had thoughts of killing my baby. "What if I feel like killing my husband?" I joked. She didn't miss a beat: "That's normal," she said. I never had the urge to hurt my daughter, but the early weeks of motherhood left me threadbare and drained. One night, I lay awake next to her, unable to sleep because I was afraid something bad might happen if I did. In the whirr of a small portable fan that, on the advice of the internet, I kept angled toward her face so that air would flow over it, driving away invisible particles of dust that might smother her while she dozed, I began to hear a song—a musical pattern of high and low notes emanating unmistakably from the machine. With a start, I realized that the line between sanity and delusion was much thinner than I otherwise would have thought. I blinked and shook my head. The song died away. I was lucky.

We claim to be mystified when people kill their children, but the real mystery is why more people don't. Statistically speaking, filicide—the murder of a child of any age—is rare, accounting for around two and a half per cent of annual murder arrests in the United States. Somehow, no matter how many sleepless nights we endure, how many diapers we change, how much food we clean off the floor, how often we are bitten, smacked, scratched, and kicked, some indomitable mechanism keeps us from putting a stop to it for good. Call it genetic self-interest, or love; whatever it is, it works.

When it doesn't, nothing captures our collective imagination like the spectacle of a murderous mother. In 1994, there was Susan Smith, who buckled her young sons, the three-year-old Michael and the one-year-old Alexander, into their car seats and let her red Mazda Protégé roll into a lake. She eventually confessed to the crime. The motive proposed by the prosecution was at once clear and unfathomable: her boyfriend didn't want kids, so she decided to get rid of hers. This past summer, Americans were riveted by the high-profile trial of Lindsay Clancy, a thirty-six-year-old former nurse—like my ex-mother-in-law, she worked in the labor-and-delivery ward—who killed her three children in January, 2023, then slit her wrists and jumped out a window, apparently in an attempt to take her own life. The case quickly became a Rorschach test. You either saw Clancy as an overburdened young mother suffering from postpartum psychosis, or as a cold-blooded killer who had meticulously arranged for her husband to be out of the house when she committed her alleged crimes.

The case turned on the question of why: Did Clancy kill her children because she was out of her mind, or did she do it because she is a bad person, a selfish or even evil woman who resented the hard work of parenting? But the question itself presents its own problems. After all, it is an irrational act to kill your children, and irrational acts obviate rational explanations. It's no wonder, then, that the Clancy case ended in a mistrial, with eleven jurors in favor of exonerating Clancy and one in favor of finding her guilty. What Clancy did was senseless. Accordingly, twelve people, presented

ILLUSTRATION BY IRENE RINALDI

with the exact same evidence, could not come to a consensus about it. There is no reason in the inexplicable.

The urge to understand terrible acts in psychological terms is decidedly modern. We are quick to turn diagnosis into explanation—Clancy killed her children *because* she was mentally ill—or to locate the roots of present dysfunction in an unhappy childhood. In the ancient world, by contrast, misfortune, absurdity, and madness were seen not just as fundamental aspects of human life but often as its driving forces. This is the lesson of Greek tragedy, in which people find themselves doing all sorts of evil for which they are, in a strange way, blameless. Consider Sophocles' Oedipus, who kills a man he doesn't know is his father and marries a woman he doesn't know is his mother. When he learns the truth, he blinds himself and flees into exile, but later he also undergoes an apotheosis—a transformation into a divine being. He is punished for his crime and also rewarded for it, as if the extremity of his circumstances caused the gods to throw up their hands in bewilderment and surrender.

We tend to use the word "tragedy" to describe a catastrophe that, in hindsight, was avoidable. For the Greeks, however, real tragedy was that which could not be prevented. It is almost cartoonish, like a wrecking ball swinging in from outside the frame to crush an unsuspecting Wile E. Coyote. So it goes with Euripides' Medea, a mother who murders her two sons. Her ostensible reason is to get revenge on her unfaithful husband, but her actions seem so curiously beyond her control that it is hard to fault her for them; at the same time, she keeps such a cool head that it is equally difficult to see her as a sympathetic figure, one driven past her breaking point by jealousy and grief. She also gets off even more lightly than Oedipus: at the end of Euripides' play, Medea escapes in a flying chariot given to her by the sun god Helios, leaving her enemies, including her bereaved husband, in the dust.

As the British classicist Edith Hall writes in her new book, "Medea: A Life" (Yale University Press), Medea has long been an object of mingled fascination and horror. Her name is shorthand for a woman who kills her children—both Smith and Clancy have been compared to Medea in the press—which makes it easy to forget that, according to Euripides, she has other victims, too. One is her husband's new bride, a princess of Corinth named Glauce, to whom she sends a poisoned dress and a coronet that burns her flesh with "unnatural devouring fire." Another is Glauce's father, Creon, who embraces his dead daughter only to find that her flesh—"melted," in Euripides' words, "from the bare bone, like gum-drops from a pine-tree's bark"—sticks to his, tearing the skin from his body. In the play, Medea is a fearsome representative of women scorned, cruel but clear-eyed in her pursuit of what she sees as justice. "You were mistaken," she tells her husband, "if you thought / You could dishonor my bed and live a pleasant life." When he observes that she, too, must bear the pain of losing their children, she replies with ghastly composure: "It is true; But my pain's a fair price, to take away your smile."

Medea's story did not begin with Euripides. According to legend, she was the daughter of Aeëtes, a Greek who became the king of Colchis, on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, most of which is now in present-day Georgia, and a water nymph named Eidyia. Helios was her grandfather, and her aunt was Circe, the enchantress who turned Odysseus' men into pigs. The poet Hesiod refers to Medea with the epithet "Medea with beautiful ankles." In other sources, she is described as *polypharmakos*, meaning "knowing many charms" or "having many drugs"—essentially a witch. Her troubles began when she helped the Greek adventurer Jason, the leader of a band of heroes called the Argonauts, obtain the legendary Golden Fleece from her father. In Apollonius of Rhodes' poem the Argonautica, written in the third century B.C.E., he explains that Medea offered to help Jason in exchange for marriage. Once Jason captured the Fleece, she helped him kill her only brother, Absyrtus, to facilitate his escape from Colchis. Next, per Euripides, she tricked the daughters of King Pelias of Iolcus into dismembering their elderly father, hoping that Jason would be able to claim his throne. The plan backfired, and she and Jason went into exile, eventually settling in Corinth.

Though Medea may seem vicious, or at least heartless, blithely dispatching anyone who gets in her way, there are versions of the myth in which she doesn't kill her children. In one, attributed to the poet Eumelus, she tries to use magic to make her progeny immortal, but they die by accident. In another, the women of Corinth lynch her "seven boys and seven girls." It is Euripides who makes Medea's filicide canonical; one ancient commentator claimed that the playwright was paid five talents by the Corinthians to pin the murders on her. He certainly succeeded in establishing her place in a long line of dumped-and-dangerous women, from the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar, who unleashes havoc on a whole city after the warrior Gilgamesh shuns her advances, to Alex Forrest, Glenn Close's bunny-boiling character in "Fatal Attraction."

And yet Medea has always had her defenders. Around 25 B.C.E., Ovid wrote a poetic epistle from Medea to Jason in which she begs him to show kindness to their "common offspring," implying that the boys are alive and unharmed. Chaucer included her in his 1380 poem "The Legend of Good Women" and likewise omitted any mention of the children's deaths. The Victorian artist and writer William Morris, perhaps smarting from his wife's affair with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, imagines Medea "wrapped in uttermost despair" by Jason's betrayal; as she prepares to slaughter her sons, she recalls bathing them and smoothing their pillows. Then there is Toni Morrison's 1987 novel, "Beloved," partly inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner, a Kentucky-born woman who escaped from slavery with her children. Faced with arrest, she resolved to kill them and herself before they could be taken back into bondage. Thomas Satterwhite Noble's painting of Garner, from 1867, is called "The Modern Medea."

More recently, Medea has come in for the girlboss treatment. Neither monster nor lovelorn discard, she emerges, in the eyes of some contemporary writers, as an intelligent, ambitious woman who tried to make it in a man's world and was

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punished in the process. Rosie Hewlett's novel "Medea," from 2024, is dedicated to "all the women who have ever been called 'too much' or 'not enough,'" and her title character says things like "The world tried to make me the victim, so I became its villain." Hall takes a similar view of Medea, whom she introduces as a "fierce symbol of women's refusal to submit to male authority."

Marketed as a biography, "Medea: A Life" is more akin to what the scholar Saidiya Hartman calls a "critical fabulation": a narrative about a person who has slid almost entirely out of the historical record, and whose story, pieced together out of multiple sources, must therefore be partly made up. Hall, a professor of classics and ancient history at the University of Durham, follows Medea from birth to death, borrowing the basic outline of her life from Apollonius and Euripides and then using her own knowledge of Bronze Age culture to fill in the details, such as what it would be like to be a young princess growing up in a backwater colony and how the people of the ancient world dressed, ate, worshipped their gods, and recited their poetry.

The project is less eccentric than it might seem. Hall tells us that "the ancient Greeks were in no doubt that Medea had existed." The geographer Strabo, who died around 24 C.E., wrote that archeological sites near the Black Sea proved the existence of Aeëtes' kingdom. "Medea the sorceress," he insisted, was "a historical person." Pausanias, in his second-century travelogue "Periegesis Hellados" ("Description of Greece"), claimed that he had seen the tomb of Medea's children in Corinth, and that there was a time when they had been venerated by a local cult.

But Hall goes beyond literary texts and cultural history to the more dubious realm of popular psychology. Her Medea feels "a deep sense of abandonment by her mother" and is "by nature emotionally insensitive and often unaware of the consequences of her words and actions for other individuals." Trained in herbal medicine by a priestess of Artemis, she is an aspiring poet and orator, even though she knows women aren't supposed to make art or speeches. She is more playmate than aunt to her four nephews, and excels at hunting, easily taking down rabbits with her bow and arrow. Her rage, "inherited temperamentally from her father," is compounded "by the constraints that patriarchy placed her under at every turn." She is a feminist avant la lettre, whose spirit, Hall writes, is "still out there somewhere, punishing callous patriarchs, unfaithful husbands, and irresponsible fathers."

As the great biographer Richard Holmes points out, life-writing is by necessity a "mongrel art," laced with speculation and conjecture and requiring many imaginative leaps, not all of which will land. Yet the tensions between historical reconstruction and modern adaptation are on particularly awkward display in Hall's book, which offers a well-informed, occasionally vibrant picture of the ancient Mediterranean world populated by characters who behave as if they are on an episode of "The White Lotus"—getting drunk, having sex, and committing crimes—while spouting psychobabble with an underlying view of human nature that would be unrecognizable to the Greeks themselves.

Too often, Hall's characters stoop beneath therapy jargon and sitcom-level clichés, as if ducking their heads under a low ceiling. When Medea first sleeps with Jason, it's because she "felt that she needed him to prove they were a couple in physical reality"; in Corinth, she offers her witchy services to the townspeople as part of a "cottage pharmaceutical industry." Jason, for his part, is gripped by "neurotic mood swings" and finds "childcare a stretch." After Medea balks at the news of his marriage to Glauce, he tells her that he hoped to "make a happy new blended family for all of us." Of King Pelias's brutish son, Acastus, we learn that "most people were convinced that he had an extreme personality disorder." "I will put in a word for you with the top goddesses," Medea's mother, the water nymph, tells her, violating the Roman poet and critic Horace's dictum "*Nec deus intersit, nisi dignus vindice nodus incident*": Don't let a deity show up in your story except for a purpose worthy of a deity, lest she seem ridiculous.

It's not easy to balance the sheer otherness of very old texts with the desire to make them accessible to contemporary audiences. Is the wily Odysseus helpfully softened by the sug-

gestion, present in Christopher Nolan's recent film, that he has post-traumatic stress disorder following the Trojan War? Or is this a preposterously newfangled imposition on a man who, embedded in a tribalistic and highly martial culture, would not feel compelled to repress the acts of brutality he may have committed in battle?

To call contemporary interpretations anachronistic is beside the point: myths endure because they are transformed over time. But applying therapeutic categories to ancient stories obscures their insights into the unpredictable and unaccountable nature of human suffering. It also undermines what Aristotle maintained was one of tragedy's essential lessons: *eleos*, which is often translated as "pity," but more rightly means "compassion." Compassion entails a respect for the fact that there are limits beyond which our understanding can't go, and extremes of experience that cannot be broken down into bite-size morsels of analysis and opinion. The great heroes and heroines of antiquity shouldn't have their complexity amputated by armchair diagnosis. But, really, none of us should.

Early in her book, Hall tells us that Medea is "emotionally relatable," noting that "psychological plausibility in the presentation of ancient mythological events is always hard to achieve." This assumes that relatability and plausibility are desirable, when, in fact, the power of myth often lies in its most inexplicable elements. Orpheus, having rescued his beloved wife from the underworld, is told that if he looks back at her on their journey home she will be lost to him forever—so why does he do it? There is no answer, no reason or motive: that is what makes his story tragic. Like Medea's killing of her children, his action is a flag planted in the furthest reaches of psychology. Its purpose is to remind us that terrible things happen, and that we might never know why. As the chorus says in the final lines of Euripides' play:

> Many matters the gods bring to surprising ends.
> The things we thought would happen do not happen;
> The unexpected God makes possible;
> And such is the conclusion of this story.

"The unexpected," in other words, seems impossible until it happens to you. ♦

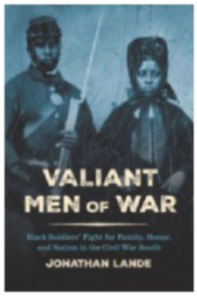
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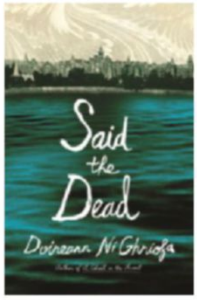
The Absent Woman, *by Eve Sneider (Norton)*. This poised biography of the longtime *New Yorker* staff writer Janet Malcolm brings many of the personal themes of her writing into focus. Malcolm was born in Prague in 1934, and left for New York, with her family, when she was four years old. Sneider reconstructs the most prominent turns in Malcolm's life: a first marriage to a successful writer; her foray into psychoanalysis; the infamous legal battle that resulted from one of her reports on that subject; her enduring skepticism about journalism itself. Sneider remains conscious of the limitations of her own endeavor, quoting from Malcolm's notes: "What people think to themselves and never write down is what their lives are about."



Stations, *by Louise Kennedy (Riverhead)*. Beginning in 1982, this potent novel spans a quarter century in the lives of a group of teen-agers from Kildare, centering on the relationship between Róisín, a bright but "actively unpopular" girl raised by a single mother, and Red, a boy from a wealthy but troubled family, who takes refuge in Róisín's home. Eventually, they end up living in the same squat in Pimlico, where Róisín is tormented by unrequited love for Red. Kennedy excels at portraying the squalor of small-town Ireland and nineteen-eighties London, and her rendering of Róisín's self-loathing, anguish, and emotional recklessness is tempered by the character's dawning awareness that "there was a way to carry sadness and not destroy yourself."



Valiant Men of War, *by Jonathan Lande (Yale)*. In this revealing history, Lande contends that Black soldiers enlisted in the Civil War not only to redefine the nation but to transform the South "into a home where Black men were respected, where Black families could thrive." Black soldiers fought bravely from the conflict's outset, aided in winning crucial battles, and ultimately occupied Southern territory, where they wielded power over former enslavers and helped "freedpeople maintain their freedom." After the war, as white Southerners retaliated violently to reassert white supremacy, Black veterans continued working to defend the new order, adopting forms of resistance that continue today: democratic engagement through assembling, petitioning, and voting.



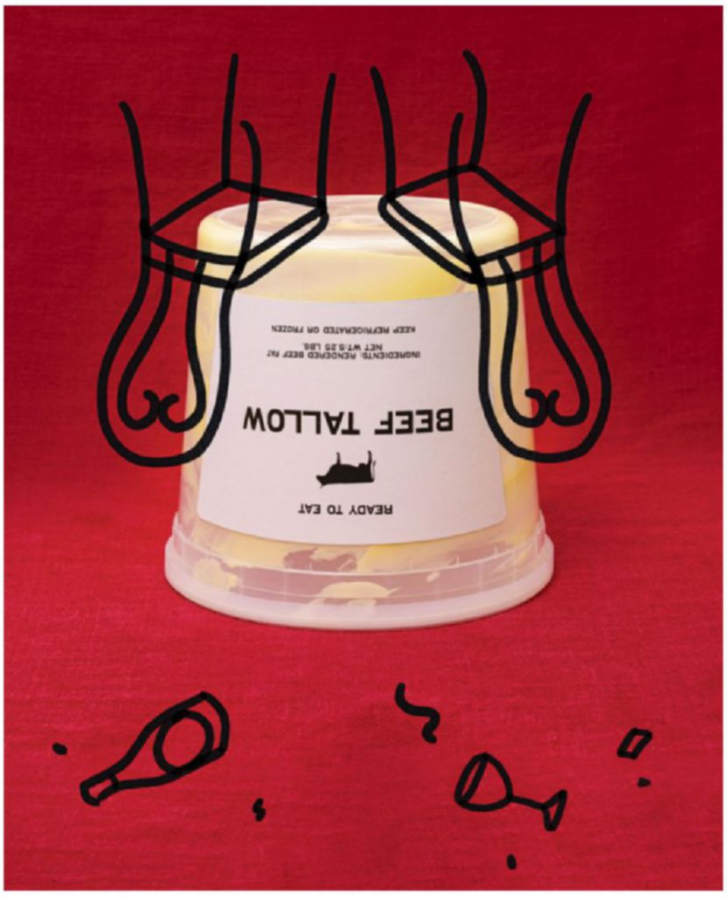
Said the Dead, *by Doireann Ní Ghríofa (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. This genre-bending story resurrects the women who lived, toiled, and died at a Victorian psychiatric hospital in County Cork. Ní Ghríofa, an Irish poet, uses the case notes of a doctor who worked at the institution to imagine her way into the lives of the patients—women who were confined for insanity that was attributed, variously, to lactation, "overwork attending on her sick husband," and "money troubles." The author manages to become a "vessel, a jug of living speech," owing to her belief that she easily "might have lived within those walls." The resulting work is an empathetic, probing exploration of the porous contours of history, archives, and sanity itself.

ON AND OFF THE MENU

LAME DUCKS

The party goes on at MAGA's favorite restaurant.

BY HANNAH GOLDFIELD



At Butterworth's, the chef Bart Hutchins takes a big-tent approach to hospitality.

The chef Bart Hutchins warned me that D.C. would be dead on the eve of Election Day. Everyone had been gone for weeks, he said, campaigning in battleground states in advance of the midterms. Still, at seven-thirty that Monday, the dining room at Butterworth's—the Capitol Hill restaurant that Hutchins co-owns, which has become a de-facto clubhouse for the young MAGA set—was packed and pulsing. It was last call on a special prix fixe that Hutchins had been running for a week: Foie Gras at the End of the World, four courses for a hundred and fifty dollars. All proceeds, the menu read, would go to the Foie Gras Legal Defense Fund.

Hutchins, who is thirty-six, with tousled auburn hair and professorial tortoiseshell glasses, had become the face of the opposition to Initiative 86, a measure that D.C. voters would find on the ballot the next day, which proposed banning the sale of foie gras within city limits. Hutchins was against I-86 for a host of reasons, some of them more sincere than others: it was Francophobic, it infringed on the rights of business owners, and it might be the first step down a slippery slope of dictating what Americans eat. (The national organization behind the initiative, Pro-Animal Future, had also worked to get a measure on the ballot in Denver.)

Critics of the proposal, including the chef José Andrés, have argued that foie-gras production, which often involves a technique called gavage—force-feeding ducks through plastic tubes to fatten their livers—is low on the list of food-related injustices in the U.S. There are just two small farms in the country (both in New York's Hudson Valley) that sell foie gras commercially, and only a relative handful of restaurants that serve it. What happens at your average high-volume chicken farm, Hutchins contends, is more torturous than gavage. In 2005, at a meeting of the American Veterinary Medical Association's house of delegates, one vet argued that the practice is no worse than "taking the rectal temperature of a cat."

At dinner, I sampled a Waldorf salad made with Shenandoah apples and finished with a shower of foie gras "snow" (cured, frozen, and shaved) that melted lusciously on the tongue, then a foamy soup of foie gras and chestnuts, inspired by Jean-Louis Palladin, the longtime chef at the Watergate Hotel, who allegedly smuggled foie gras into the U.S. from France by cramming it down the throats of monkfish. A tartare from the regular menu made both soup and salad seem restrained: a pedestal of chopped lamb beneath a tower of pale, craggy onion rings, with a grill-marked medallion of wobbly foie gras planted on top like a flag.

Steve Bannon is a semi-regular at Butterworth's; Marco Rubio and Scott Bessent have been in on several occasions. As I poked at a disconcerting "Twinkie" filled with foie-gras pastry cream, I noticed Hutchins greeting a table of young people in suits, some of whom he later identified as Rubio staffers. A larger table of twentysomethings in business casual—did he know them, too? Indeed: architects who worked for James McCrery II, whom Donald Trump hired to build his ballroom, and who then withdrew after alleged clashes over scale and safety. Neither the President nor the Vice-President has dined at Butterworth's, perhaps because there's no back entrance—a deal-breaker for the Secret Service.

Hutchins spent his early twenties working in Democratic politics; his wife, Katrina, whom he met on Twitter in 2021, used to work for the *Daily Caller.* He demurred when I asked if he considered himself a political person. "Me?" he asked, looking surprised. "I have very strong opinions about agriculture. I'm political about how we farm." Hutchins

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JASON FULFORD AND TAMARA SHOPSIN

sources ingredients for Butterworth's from local Mennonite farmers; the menu combines sumptuous French cooking with a certain American verve. When I returned for lunch on Election Day, Hutchins ordered a spread that included half a dozen oysters, bone marrow topped with meaty morsels of escargot, and his signature, exceptionally crispy French fries, cooked in beef tallow. He wasn't trying to pander to the anti-seed-oil MAHA crowd with the tallow fries, he told me. At his last restaurant, a Montreal-inspired place, he'd found that they held up nicely in poutine.

Hutchins grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, the youngest of ten children born to his biological father. (His mother, who struggled with drug addiction, was in and out of jail.) When he was nine, he was adopted by a conservative pastor and his wife, who sent him to a selective college-prep program. "The first time I read 'Ulysses' was under a bridge with a bunch of kids with Mohawks," he said. He first clashed with his parents politically when he refused to register for the military reserves. "Iraq was so obviously stupid and so obviously a bad idea," he said. "I was really confused by the George Bush version of the Republican Party having anything to do with my parents—like, you don't own stock in Halliburton."

After graduating from Auburn University, in Alabama, Hutchins enrolled briefly in a Presbyterian seminary but soon found his way to politics, working as a staffer on Barack Obama's reëlection bid, in 2012, and then on the campaign to elect Terry McAuliffe as Virginia's Democratic governor. He lost his taste for the establishment in 2017, while working for the Nevada Senate Democratic Caucus. A bill to cap the price of insulin had passed the state Senate, but was killed by lobbyists when it got to the House; Hutchins quit with just two weeks left in the legislative session and "followed a girl to Iowa." He thought about becoming a welder, before walking into a restaurant that he liked in Des Moines, Eatery A, and asking if he could work there for free.

Hutchins cooked in D.C. restaurants through the pandemic and then decamped to rural Minnesota with Katrina and their toddler son. The plan was to spend more time hunting and to try his luck as a novelist, but the isolation was harder than the couple expected. Hutchins began consulting on what would eventually become Butterworth's, named for its principal owner, Alex Butterworth, then an attorney for Uber; the family moved back to Washington in 2024. "There was a power vacuum because the Trump Hotel was closed," Hutchins said. Another of the restaurant's co-owners, Raheem Kassam, who served as an adviser to Nigel Farage and as *Breitbart's* London editor, drew the MAGA acolytes to Butterworth's instead.

"For my part, I don't think people who are interested in the Trump thing are automatically bad people—it shouldn't be a controversial thing to say, but it is," Hutchins told me. His adoptive father, a floor installer, is "constantly underbid on jobs by presumably illegal migrants, so I get the Trump version of the Republican Party having something to say to my dad." Hutchins said that when it comes to Butterworth's clientele—particularly those who believed Trump when he promised not to start wars in the Middle East—"the worst thing you could say about them is they're naïve." He added, "I really do believe in service as an ethic, so I'm gonna take care of whoever I'm serving to the best of my ability."

As if on cue, one of Hutchins's antagonists, Meghan Abrego, appeared outside the restaurant. For the past several months, Abrego, a Maryland resident (and a registered Independent), had been carting around her four-year-old pet duck, a fluffy Swedish Blue named Olivia Gray, in a wagon outfitted with pee pads and a bowl of water and grapes. Abrego adopted Olivia as an egg, on eBay, and hatched her in an incubator. (She also assigned Olivia she/her pronouns, though the animal is technically male.) Now she lifted the duck from the cart, letting her roam on the sidewalk and mingle with passersby.

Abrego had spent the morning campaigning for I-86 outside Eastern Market, a Capitol Hill food hall that also serves as a polling place. She and Hutchins had met before, and had developed a friendly rapport. Though Abrego sees gavage as torture, "I can understand Chef Bart's argument," she said. "I figured I would come through here because I wanted to grab a bite." She pushed Olivia's cart through the front door and sat down for fries and a glass of prosecco; the last time she'd come in, Hutchins had offered Olivia an off-menu dish of roasted cherry tomatoes. Abrego reminded Hutchins about a party she'd invited him to that night, co-hosted by Pro-Animal Future and Oye Owolewa, a vegan who was running to be a D.C. council-member-at-large. He promised that he would try to make it.

At around 9 P.M., I found Abrego and Olivia on the raucous second floor of Solly's U Street Tavern, where I-86 supporters were eating pizza and drinking beer at tables arranged with gold plastic ducks. The bill had passed, as Hutchins had expected, though he was confident that it would be years before the ban took effect, if it ever did; there were sure to be legal appeals, and city officials had estimated that enforcement would cost more than three hundred thousand dollars. A partygoer yelled over the music to ask if Olivia, who was quacking steadily, was comfortable in her current environment. "Yeah!" Abrego shouted back, as if it was obvious.

A Catholic businessmen's dinner and a local G.O.P. watch party had kept Hutchins busy at Butterworth's. Late that night, the party spilled onto the sidewalk, with attendees smoking cigarettes and cigars and sipping amber liquor from snifters. The mood was resigned, if not quite sombre; a young man who worked for Turning Point USA tipsily thanked me for coming. Earlier, I'd asked Hutchins if he worried about what would happen to the restaurant if and when MAGA fell out of power. Some of his customers joke that the Trump Administration will answer for its sins at "the Butterworth trials," he told me. But, he said, "we have a pretty significant following in what I'll vaguely call the Bernie left. If the Democrats are gonna take power, it's gonna be those people, because they're not, like, boring losers." Did he think the Sanders crowd would have an appetite for foie gras? "There's, like, a French proletariat thing. Imagine you're a young populist—you have some French sympathies because they're the only people who have ever been true populists in a meaningful way," he said. "Also, we have a pretty extensive natural-wine list, which they all seem to love." ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

THE *SACRIFICE*

"Minotaur."

BY JUSTIN CHANG

You can tell a lot about a filmmaker from the way they dispose of a corpse. In "The Unfaithful Wife" (1969), a coolly unsettling drama of adultery and murder, Claude Chabrol tidied a crime scene with the kind of brisk elegance that earned him the sobriquet the French Hitchcock. The room was clean within moments, and the body itself was swiftly wrapped up, driven away, and, after some pulse-quickening car trouble, dumped in a pond. Contrast this with an equivalent sequence in "Minotaur," a mesmerizing new retelling of Chabrol's story from the Russian director Andrey Zvyagintsev, who is not one to hurry things along. As the culprit scrubs at a bloodstain that seems to grow smearier with every wipe, the camera looks on for what feels like an eternity, with a silent but unmistakable disdain. Have we taken on the perspective of the victim's ghost? Or is Zvyagintsev merely reminding us that messes are harder to mop up than the movies usually suggest? (At one point, I almost blurted out to the killer, "You missed a spot!")

"The Unfaithful Wife" has already inspired a steamy Hollywood remake, "Unfaithful" (2002), by the British director Adrian Lyne. It's best remembered for Diane Lane's sensational performance as the inaptly named Constance, a housewife who is flung, by a freakish gust of wind, into the path of her future lover. Desire really is a force of nature; he makes the unexpected case for himself here as the Russian Hitchcock, alert to the voyeuristic byplay of seeing and being seen. Early on, Gleb spies Galina through the glass as she stands in the darkness of their kitchen, smiling down at her text messages. He can see, by the glow of her phone screen, that their marriage is in trouble.



Iris Lebedeva and Dmitry Mazurov star in Andrey Zvyagintsev's film.

The weather in "Minotaur," by contrast, is gloomy but unobtrusive; Zvyagintsev's storms are of a more interior kind. Certainly Galina (Iris Lebedeva), the Constance in this story, is not a woman to be knocked off her feet. She has a sleek, sharply planed beauty that matches that of her home, a lakeside house on the outskirts of a fictional Russian city called Krasnoborsk, where she lives with her husband, Gleb (Dmitry Mazurov), and their teen-age son, Seryozha (Boris Kudrin). The house is a gleaming mid-century-modern affair, spartan in its good taste, with tall windows that peer out invitingly onto gold-flecked woods. Yet it's the view from outside, looking in, that compels Zvyagintsev's attention; he makes the unexpected case for himself here as the Russian Hitchcock, alert to the voyeuristic byplay of seeing and being seen. Early on, Gleb spies Galina through the glass as she stands in the darkness of their kitchen, smiling down at her text messages. He can see, by the glow of her phone screen, that their marriage is in trouble.

He has likely known for some time. An air of frosty detachment, deeper than the autumn chill, seems to follow Galina from room to room. A dinner with two other couples—a sad attempt by Gleb to bring back happier times—backfires spectacularly; the bitterness of other people's relationships will do nothing to sweeten theirs. During a heated bedroom argument, Galina unloads on her husband for his past infidelities, what she calls his "little girlfriends"—a novel twist, not to be found in the Chabrol or the Lyne, and one that makes it difficult to begrudge Galina her mode of retaliation. For some time now, she has been sleeping with Anton (Yuriy Zavalnyouk), a divorced photographer, who has an impressive build, a studio apartment in the city, and a wall decked with sexy snapshots of his new paramour. Gleb, a man whose doughy good looks hide a steely resolve, finds all this out in due course. He is the C.E.O. of a logistics company, and he tasks his head of security (Mihails Samodahovs) with spying on Galina and confirming his worst suspicions. That detail, too, is a canny departure from "The Unfaithful Wife" and "Unfaithful," in which the husbands enlisted the outside help of private investigators. Gleb has enormous resources at his disposal, and the puppet-master authority that he wields both at work and at home is, you sense, precisely what Galina is rebelling against.

"Minotaur," then, is the most corrosive version of this material imaginable, less the tale of a good marriage gone awry than that of a rotten one getting worse, plus something more: an icy study in the mechanics, and the erotics, of corruption and power. As ever with Zvyagintsev, who wrote the script with Simon Lyashenko, the pessimism isn't limited to the domestic sphere. It's the fall of 2022, and the grim consequences of Russia's months-long assault on Ukraine are everywhere. On

ILLUSTRATION BY KATHERINE LAM

phones and computers, we see residential buildings being bombed and Russian cars fleeing toward the traffic-choked Georgian border. On the streets, billboards glorify the military's efforts, even as some local graffiti ("FUCK YOUR WAR") testifies to pervasive, if largely hidden, discontent. Gleb's company is about to suffer the effects of the conflict in a particularly pernicious way. Krasnoborsk's mayor (Vladimir Friedman) has ordered the city's major employers to submit lists of male workers—the more physically fit the better—to be drafted into what Russia, avoiding the W-word, is calling its "special military operation."

Gleb must provide fourteen men, a number that brings the film's title, with its reference to Greek mythology, into crystalline focus. The Minotaur demanded that fourteen young noblemen and noblewomen be delivered to his labyrinthine lair, and Zvyagintsev's film duly traps Gleb within his own moral maze. Faced with parallel dilemmas, one personal and one professional, he can address them, finally, only with the same banal disregard for human life. He may be a lesser monster than Putin, glimpsed here in a framed photograph on the mayor's wall, but unquestioning complicity has made a monster of him nonetheless—one who profits from the blood of human sacrifice and perpetuates the most callous of the story's innumerable betrayals.

Zvyagintsev, at sixty-two, has become a master at seeding the conventions of domestic melodrama with portents of sociopolitical catastrophe. It wasn't always thus. His early features, including "The Return" (2003) and "The Banishment" (made in 2007 but not released here until 2018), were troubled-family sagas of a more spiritual than political bent, composed with a rapturous visual sublimity that earned lofty comparisons to the work of Andrei Tarkovsky. But Zvyagintsev's pursuit of an uncompromising art-film purity could not, in the end, keep out an equal fascination with the malaise of modern life. In 2014, he directed "Leviathan," about a husband and wife locked in a real-estate war with a small-town mayor, who, in his brutish overreach, clearly stood in for his country's authoritarian leaders of the past, present, and future. (A photograph of Putin hung on that mayor's wall, too.) Next came "Loveless" (2017), a bruisingly sad drama about the disappearance of a child, neglected and unmourned by his soon-to-be-divorced parents—a couple so bitterly at odds as to make Gleb and Galina look like honeymooners. "Loveless," perhaps the most nakedly metaphorical of Zvyagintsev's works, built to a blunt, summative image of a woman, in a conspicuously Russia-branded tracksuit, running on a treadmill—fierce, enraged, and going nowhere fast.

All of which is to say that Zvyagintsev has been here before, even though his sense of "here" has shifted. In 2022, while recovering from complications of a COVID infection that nearly killed him, the director moved with his family from Moscow to Paris, where he lives in self-imposed exile. France, long a haven for dissident artists and intellectuals, proved specifically instrumental in the making of "Minotaur"—and not merely because of its Chabrol-supplied source material. The film, which was shot entirely in Latvia, was mostly financed by French companies; it will represent France in the upcoming Oscar race for Best International Feature. (Another Gallic feather in the film's cap: "Minotaur" won the Grand Prix, or second place, at this year's Cannes Film Festival.)

Nine years, many of them fraught and full of upheaval, have elapsed between this film and its predecessor, and yet the sense of continuity between them is remarkable. In "Loveless," the vanished child was an emblem of a lost Russian generation, cruelly abandoned by its elders. In "Minotaur," and specifically in Seryozha—an ordinary, somewhat moody, clearly well-loved teen-ager—Zvyagintsev allows us a more hopeful vision of the future. There's a moment when Gleb, learning of a potential bully at school, advises the kid to "never strike the first blow," advice that he himself will swiftly disregard. His son, it becomes clear, already has a better head on his shoulders. In the film's final moments, the emphasis shifts away from the fragile wreckage of Gleb and Galina's marriage and toward Seryozha—seated with his parents yet slightly apart from them, happily lost in the clouds. You want the best for him, and hope that the only messes he'll have to clean up are his own. ♦

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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 Ellen Liebenthal, must be received by Sunday, November 22nd. The finalists in the November 9th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the December 14th 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



"Virtually everyone agrees with me."
Jim Weis, Atlanta, Ga.

"Excellent. You're already naked."
Andrew Glenn, Sausalito, Calif.

"The only thing we have to fear is reality itself."
Stan Strycker, Carmel, Ind.

THE WINNING CAPTION



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

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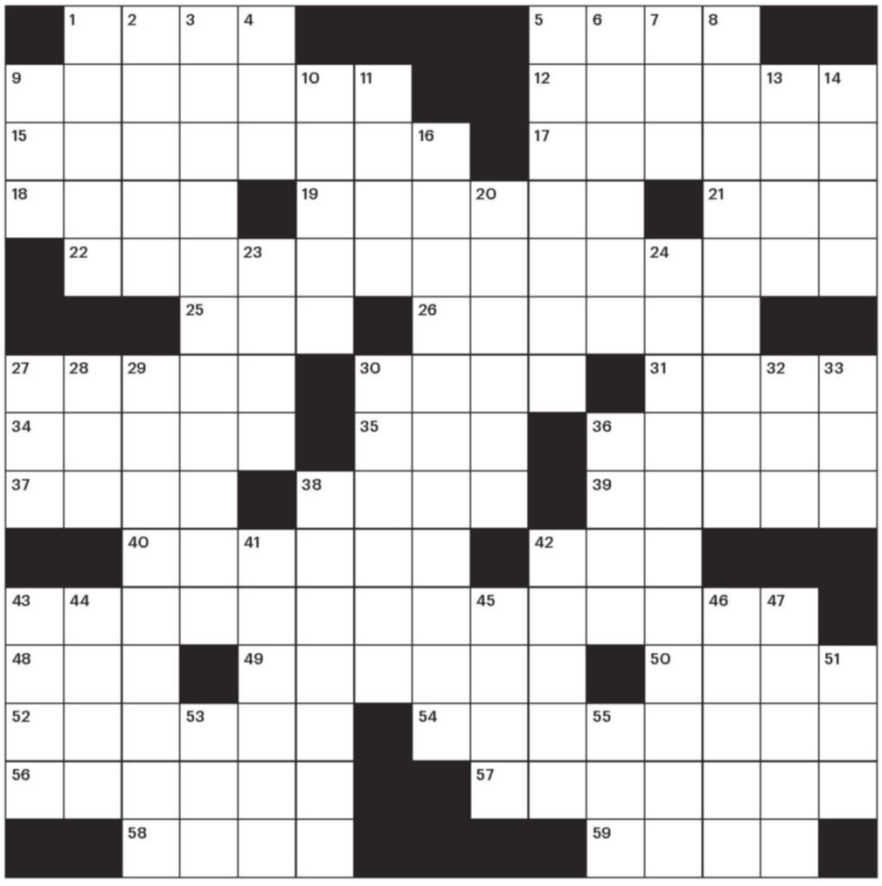


PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY NATAN LAST



ACROSS

1 Numpty
5 Word before apple or cake
9 Stipulation
12 Many a Facebook Marketplace transaction
15 "Of course"
17 Dodger
18 It usually comes out in the wash
19 Neighboring
21 Maker of Souls
22 Comedian with roles in "Bugonia" and "Tony"
25 State where pork vindaloo originated
26 Airline with a "Flying Kangaroo" logo
27 Rival of the Phillie Phanatic
30 Aims (for)
31 "I'm coming," e.g.
34 "The Cloister and the Hearth" author Charles
35 "Get it away from me!"
36 Absolutely perfect
37 "In which case . . ."
38 "Hot ___" (spicy-wing-centric YouTube talk show)
39 Squealers
40 Baseball player Eugenio whose mantra is "Good Vibes Only"
42 "Hey ___, It's Christmas!" (RuPaul song)
43 "Oh, you're gonna need a way better excuse . . . "
48 One-on-one basketball play, for short
49 Lambasted, with "out"
50 Jobs creation?
52 Celiac sufferer's bane
54 Courtliness
56 "American ___ for My Past and Future Assassin" (title of every poem in a 2018 Terrance Hayes collection)
57 Talk and talk
58 H.P.V., H.I.V., etc.
59 Telemundo's "El Poder de Saber" spots, e.g.

DOWN

1 Goads
2 "A Chinese ___ Beat Usain Bolt's 100-Meter Record. Should We Be Impressed?" (2026 *Times* headline)
3 Came to mean?
4 "Quite so"
5 Residents of Knossos
6 Rise up
7 "Sex Education" actor Butterfield
8 Stiff pecker, say?
9 What workaholics are loath to take, for short
10 Experimental jazz musician named for an ancient Egyptian deity
11 Brand with a limited-edition Chicken & Waffles flavor
13 "Star Wars" character who founded the Resistance
14 Periods
16 Cutesy "Wait, what?"
20 "Appreciated!"
23 ___ with one's wallet
24 "Dekonstructing the ___" (2026 cultural-analysis book)
27 Hosp. scan
28 Game warden, briefly?
29 Juice and water, for two
30 W.H.O.'s home
32 A little cleaner?
33 Polite part of a text
36 Still competing
38 Shows the ropes to
41 "Totally"
42 Holiday meal featuring a hard-boiled egg
43 Goes underground, say
44 Capital once called Kristiania
45 Blend
46 Malady treated with a CPAP machine
47 They might be ordered *al pastor*
51 Cozy space
53 "We Know Drama" channel
55 Bush league?

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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