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THE NEW YORKER

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THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW

THEA TRAFF

Laura Dern Has the Spirit of Seventies Cinema
By Michael Schulman

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THE MAIL

TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Emma Green's piece provided a thorough examination of the effects that the Trump Administration's attacks on higher education are having on research ("Degrees of Hostility," October 20th). After twenty-four years of teaching at a suburban public university—one that primarily serves working- and middle-class students—I find that this is not the aspect of the Administration's actions that frightens me most. What I see today is that, under Donald Trump's direction, critical thinking is under assault. Across disciplines, Trump's agenda threatens one of higher education's core missions—to teach the next generation to think critically about power's relationship to knowledge. When the search for knowledge is subsumed by ideology, we're no longer in the business of education so much as that of teaching people to accept the dictates of official power.

Eric J. Weiner
Professor of Education
Montclair State University
New York City

According to Gallup, the share of Americans who view college as "very important" has declined sharply in recent years, from seventy-five per cent in 2010 to thirty-five per cent today. Many commentators have framed this as a symptom of anti-intellectualism. In my opinion, what this transition really reflects is decades of capitalist individualism. We stopped treating higher education as a shared civic good, and started selling it as a private investment promising personal prosperity. When the investment failed to pay off as promised, public trust collapsed.

In this respect, universities bear some blame for their own decline. Chasing privilege, tuition revenue, and rankings has blurred their mission. Green shows how federal strategy has weaponized this distrust by building on a feeling, already possessed by much of the public, that universities are not public partners but misbehaving contractors. This strategy deepens the cynicism that it exploits. If we want people to value higher education again, we must stop marketing it as a luxury with uncertain returns, and restore it to the status of a public good with collective benefits.

Sarah Mosby
St. Louis, Mo.

I appreciated the insightful piece by Green, but, as an architect, I wish that she had refrained from architectural criticism. The Lyndon Baines Johnson Department of Education Building, in Washington, D.C., is not, as Green calls it, an "ugly" "concrete shoebox" but an elegant example of International Style modernism, and an important part of our capital's modernist heritage.

When it opened, in 1961, Federal Building No. 6, as it was then called, was lauded as the first modernist building in the capital's monumental core, befitting the very modern mission of one of its first occupants, NASA. The austere structure, made of limestone (not concrete) and glass, demonstrated the compatibility of modern design with D.C.'s classicism—a concept that has since been attacked by Trump's regressive executive order on "Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture," which aims to purge modern architecture from the federal real-estate portfolio. Just as this Administration seeks to diminish or eliminate social-welfare agencies—the Department of Education, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Environmental Protection Agency, the list goes on—it is moving to dispose of the mid-century-modern buildings that house them.

Belmont Freeman
New York City

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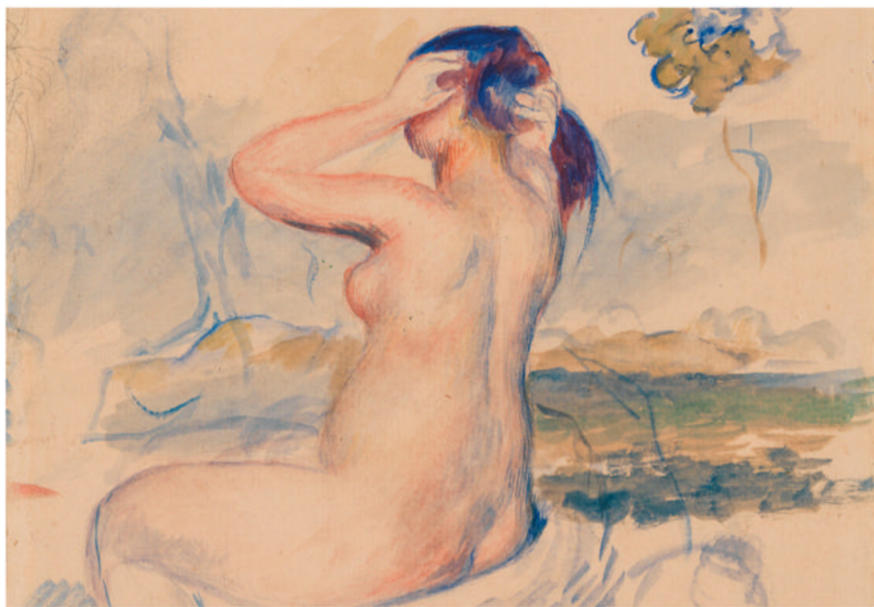
GOINGS ON

NOVEMBER 12 – 18, 2025

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

When it comes to Renoir, we think of his paintings—all those apple-cheeked ladies and children living in a kind of bourgeois haze of comfort. But what the terrific and surprising exhibition **"Renoir Drawings,"** at the Morgan Library & Museum (through Feb. 8), shows us is his process as an artist. Renoir couldn't have given us captivating images like his 1876 stunner "Bal du moulin de la Galette," his grand, kinetic painting of a crowded outdoor dance hall in Montmartre, without knowing as much about form as anyone. But the drawings at the Morgan ("Female Bather," c. 1886-87, is pictured) are quieter, closer to the bone, and in a way let us see more of what Renoir felt. It's a privilege to become more intimate with his experiments in perception and the evocative beauty of things being left unfinished.—*Hilton Als*



AUGUSTE RENOIR / COURTESY RISD MUSEUM

ABOUT TOWN

DANCE | First a double-album rock opera by the Who, then a film with Sting, **"Quadrophenia"** is now a ballet, too. It's still a tale of tortured youth in the nineteen-sixties—mods versus rockers—with a sensitive antihero whose personality is split four ways. But, in this British production, Pete Townshend's music comes in a posh arrangement for orchestra, and the story is told using versatile choreography by Paul Roberts, best known for his work with One Direction and Harry Styles. Directed by Rob Ashford, the veteran of many musicals on Broadway and the West End, the show is slick, dressed in Paul Smith fashions and drenched in projections to suggest a rain of love.—*Brian Seibert (New York City Center; Nov. 14-16.)*

OFF BROADWAY | The Irish company Druid's virtuosic **"Endgame,"** directed by Garry Hynes, joins a season suddenly rife with Samuel Beckett plays: our moment is certainly right for Beckett—catastrophe served in a wry ennui sauce. Hynes and the designer Francis O'Connor embrace the title's post-apocalyptic implications, and the set looks like a nuclear silo, where waste (read: human beings) is stored. "There's no more nature," says Clov (Aaron Monaghan), a perpetual servant, who still obeys his blinded, chair-bound master, Hamm (Rory Nolan), long after the logic of doing so is gone. Human nature, of course, does persist, most poignantly in Hamm's parents (Bosco Hogan and the great Marie Mullen), whom Hamm has stashed in garbage cans; they occasionally pop their heads out, looking for crusts of bread or affection.—*Helen Shaw (Irish Arts Center; through Nov. 23.)*

DANCE | "American Street Dancer," the latest production by the preëminent street-to-stage choreographer **Rennie Harris,** is similar in outline to countless other tracings of the cultural diaspora from Africa to African American communities. But it has a distinct regional focus, and the representatives of each style are topnotch: Creation Global demonstrating the lightning-fast kicks and swivels of Chicago footwork, the House of Jit displaying the slightly slower and more airborne Detroit jit, and Harris's own company, Puremovement, elegantly grooving to the street style Philly GQ. Tap is embodied by the masterly Ayodele Casel, and the beatboxers and bucket drummers are also tremendous.—*B.S. (Joyce Theatre; Nov. 11-16.)*

HIP-HOP | In a banner year for rap from the U.K., the rapper, singer, and producer **Jim Legxacy** has taken his place among the vanguard of the next generation. In 2023, his wide-ranging mixtape "homeless n*gga pop music" broke ground on a landmark sound that casually blended music of the British diaspora—grime, drill, garage, emo, and Afrobeats. After co-writing and co-producing the international hit "Sprinter," for the dynamic rap duo Dave and Central Cee, and contributing to "ten days" (the 2024 album by the esteemed London d.j. Fred again..), Legxacy released his début with XL Recordings, "black british music (2025)," in July. It's a twenty-first-century marvel and a cultural milestone, as personal as it is communal, pulling a quarter century of history into his singular orbit.—*Sheldon Pearce (S.O.B.'s; Nov. 12.)*

BROADWAY | In Bess Wohl's galvanizing show of the hour **"Liberation,"** directed by Whitney White, the women in a nineteen-seventies consciousness-raising group wrestle with questions political (should they join a general strike?) and personal (can they celebrate their own naked bodies?) while building solidarity and coalition. Susannah Flood, in the role of a lifetime, addresses us directly, playing both Wohl's avatar and Lizzie, a fictionalized version of Wohl's own mother. Somehow, in honoring the group's women, from the rageful housewife Margie (Betsy Aidem) to the radical author Celeste (Kristolyn Lloyd), Flood's outpouring becomes a lament. Where has all that progress gone? The friends, speaking out of the past, don't dwell in despair; their only answer is to continue the fight.—*H.S. (James Earl Jones; through Jan. 11.)*

MOVIES | Commercials are a generally neglected or even disdained distant relative of film and TV, but Anthology Film Archives comes to their rescue with **"Avant-Garde Ads: Part 1,"** an ambitious series of thirteen programs filled with a century-plus of enticing creations by cinematic luminaries for hire. Some of the most inspired entries are directed by David Lynch, whose spots for Adidas, PlayStation, and a brand of Swiss cigarettes could fit seamlessly into "Twin Peaks." Ingmar Bergman's early-fifties soap commercials put daring methods—metafiction, animation, and even a 3-D parody—to comedic ends. Len Lye's rapid-fire, hand-painted abstractions from the nineteen-thirties are jazz in images; Frank Zappa's 1967 soundtrack of music and effects to sell cough drops and Philip Glass's brief scores for four 1979 "Sesame Street" promos distill bold innovations into dazzling epigrams.—*Richard Brody (Nov. 15-Dec. 16.)*

ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

Let There Be Light

Every year, around early November, daylight-saving time kicks in—and my serotonin suddenly goes into hibernation. When it gets dark outside at 4:30 P.M., how is a gal supposed to absorb enough vitamin D to make it through the winter? With everything going on in the world right now, it is far too much to expect a person to channel an inner sunniness. You could, of course, lean into the void; there's nothing wrong with curling up until first thaw—I recommend a weighted napping blanket from **Bearaby** ($199), for this purpose. But for those of us who have to remain upright, why not try light therapy? A recent study from the N.I.H. found that light exposure is a deeply effective treatment for seasonal-affective disorder; if you're feeling yucky, it's worth a shot. You could go the traditional route and sit in front of a bulky SAD lamp—I've used the **Carex Day-Light Classic Plus** ($170) for years, and it works like a dream—but if you're looking for more handsome solutions, there are plenty. The British company Lumie, which specializes in modern-looking light-therapy lamps, recently launched the **Lumie Dash** ($225), a compact, ten-thousand-lux model that comes in friendly colors like terra-cotta and pistachio. Northern Light Technologies, out of Canada, offers a pyramid-shaped light box called the **Luxor** ($190) that looks less like an appliance and more like an enchanted relic. If you're yearning to beam lumens right into your pores, you can look into L.E.D. red-light masks; these (generally quite pricey) at-home skin-care devices, which sit directly on the face and claim to reduce wrinkles and discoloration, have become the product du jour among beauty influencers. I recently tried out the **CurrentBody Skin Series 2** ($470) (the brand is allegedly a favorite of celebrities like Kim Kardashian and Renée Zellweger), as well as the bionic-looking **Foreo FAQ 202** ($799), and while I've yet to see dramatic results from either, there is something mood-boosting (and pleasantly disassociative) about being engulfed by a neon glow.

Perhaps the most heartening light source I've found of late, though, requires leaving the house. A few weeks ago, I walked by **Perspire Sauna Studio,** in Williamsburg (there is another New York location in Flatiron, and dozens around the country), and found myself drawn in by a street sign boasting the healing benefits of infrared saunas. I purchased a single session ($40 for first-timers) and was led downstairs into one of several individual sauna suites—each like a little hotel room, complete with a TV and a rain shower—where I had forty minutes all to myself (this privacy allows a person, if they so choose, to sweat in the nude). I turned up my sauna to a hundred and seventy degrees, pumped up the overhead red light, and felt my malaise melt. I was hooked—I've been back several times since. Hey, whatever gets you through the gloom.

—*Rachel Syme*

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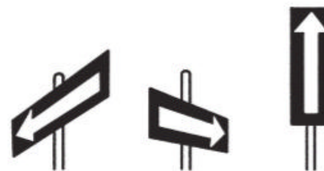

PICK THREE

Jennifer Wilson on the cultural business of affairs.

1. The British pop star Lily Allen's new album, **"West End Girl,"** is an autopsy of her marriage to the "Stranger Things" actor David Harbour, filled with gory details like the discovery of a secret Duane Reade bag filled with butt plugs and "hundreds of Trojans." (Allen caveats that the songs are part "fantasy.") Bad news for Harbour—each track is an absolute earworm. Headphones on, I found myself swaying on the subway to track four, "Tennis," as Allen melodically interrogates her ex: "Da, da-da, da-da, who's Madeline?"

2. In **"Mistress Dispeller,"** a new documentary from Elizabeth Lo, currently at IFC, a housewife in Luoyang spies an odd text message on her husband's phone. Someone fearful that he'll catch a cold teases: "Am I like other women in reminding you to wear long johns?" Too intimate! The wife hires a Ms. Wang, a mistress dispeller (a burgeoning profession in China), to break up her husband's affair. Lo's film was more moving than I expected, especially in its tenderness toward her antagonist, a lonely young frozen-food delivery worker named Fei Fei looking for a glimmer of warmth.

3. For context, there's a new podcast called **"Mistresses"** from the pop historian Dr. Kate Lister and the TV personality Jameela Jamil. A standout is the first episode, devoted to Madame de Montespan, *maîtresse-en-titre* to Louis XIV (yes, the French court gave mistresses official titles), who got caught up in a seventeenth-century alchemy panic. Montespan's rivals accused her of ensnaring the king using the dark art of potions. The king ultimately decided it was safer to exchange fluids with the governess.

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
THE MAMDANI ERA BEGINS

It's ancient history now, but, when Zohran Mamdani first entertained the notion of running for mayor, he imagined himself running against Eric Adams. It was 2021, and Adams had just won a squeaker of a primary, convincing New Yorkers that what they needed in the post-COVID moment was a swaggering ex-cop who believed in good old-fashioned law and order. This summer, while I was reporting a Profile of Mamdani, Kenny Burgos, an old classmate of his from high school and a colleague in the New York State Assembly, recalled Mamdani's being despondent at Adams's victory. "He was, like, 'Who are we going to get to run against this guy in four years?' " Burgos told me. "I said, 'Why don't you do it?' He said, 'I'm too young, they won't take me seriously.' "

Four years later, every apprehension that Mamdani and other leftists and liberals had toward an Adams mayoralty has proved justified. The Adams administration unravelled in a spray of cartoonish corruption charges that brought to mind the old grafts of Tammany Hall; the Mayor saved himself from prosecution by cutting a deal with a newly reëlected President Donald Trump. Now, as masked federal agents snatch weeping fathers and mothers from immigration court, just a few blocks from City Hall, Adams, having dropped his campaign for reëlection, is enjoying his lame-duck period. He just went on a sightseeing trip to Albania.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY

Where others saw a city with no one at the wheel, Andrew Cuomo, the scowling former governor who resigned in 2021 amid sexual-harassment and abuse-of-power allegations, saw opportunity. Earlier this year, Cuomo emerged from his sister's lavish estate in Westchester, kicked his daughter out of her apartment in midtown, and entered the mayoral race intending to win City Hall in an act of pure power politics, to remind us of his ability to bend both friends and enemies to his will. Yet his plodding and depressing campaign pleased almost no one. Cuomo barely veiled his contempt for most New Yorkers and for the grubby office of the mayor. His trash talk of Mamdani became openly Islamophobic. The day before Election Day, he bizarrely drove around the city in a white Ford Bronco, which he later clarified was similar to but not the same model as the one O. J. Simpson made famous.

In the end, Mamdani won New Yorkers over, in an election with higher turnout than any mayor's race in fifty years, by suggesting that the city's politics could look a little less depraved. At a time when leading figures in the Democratic Party seem practically complicit in the abuses and outrages of the Trump era, Mamdani offered his supporters an unsullied message of hope. He emphasized the similarities between Trump, Cuomo, and Adams—all figures forged in the New York political scene of the past century, trapped in a psychodrama where 1983 never ended. Much of New York still bears the imprint of Cuomo's decades in power, yet his long record proved only a liability in his contest with Mamdani. "What I don't have in experience, I make up for in integrity—and what you don't have in integrity, you could never make up for in experience," Mamdani told Cuomo in an October debate. Mamdani wound up netting more than a million votes.

During the campaign, Mamdani liked to remind his audiences that New York is the richest city in the richest country in the history of the world, and that its government could do more for the people who live here. While his opponents described New York as broke, dysfunctional, and crime-ridden, Mamdani talked about the city as a lovely, if chaotic, place—full of tumult and injustices, yes, but also of life and possibilities. The Mamdani Cinematic Universe is a place where you can take the subway to the

city clerk's office to marry the girl you met on Hinge, where you can do Tai Chi and salsa dance with old folks on the Lower East Side, where you can go for a polar plunge off Coney Island on New Year's Day and walk the entire length of Manhattan on a hot summer night.

The feel-good content complemented his sharp-elbowed politics. Mamdani's most Cuomo-esque quality is the evident pleasure he gets in public political combat—"*Habibi*, release your client list," he taunted the former governor, over the mysterious legal-consulting practice that made him some five million dollars last year. When pressured to temper his criticisms of Israel, Mamdani has barely flinched. These qualities convinced many young voters, in particular, that he might have what it takes to follow through on his promises. They voted for him because they could imagine a city with free buses; because they thought that the idea of freezing rents in the city's million or so rent-stabilized apartments sounded fair, even if they didn't live in rent-stabilized apartments themselves; and because they liked the idea of New York being a place that offers universal child care to kids as young as six weeks old. The alternative that Cuomo offered—thoughts and prayers for high rents, more games and opaque machinations in City Hall, Democratic officials skirting around the bloodshed in Gaza—was simply too bleak.

Since the primary, senior figures in New York's Democratic establishment have continued to hold Mamdani at arm's length. House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries put off endorsing him for so long that he embarrassed himself. Senators Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand (the latter of whom had to apologize after suggesting on public radio that Mamdani supports "global jihad") never came around. But former President Barack Obama saw something in Mamdani—he's called to check in with the young guy twice since June—as has New York's moderate governor, Kathy Hochul. At a rally in the campaign's closing days at Forest Hills Stadium, in Queens, Hochul warmed up the crowd for Mamdani—or tried to. "Tax the rich!" the crowd jeered at her. The shy, tax-averse governor struggled to maintain her composure. "I can hear you!" she said. Mamdani appeared on the stage, strode over to Hochul, and held one of her hands in the air. The heckling transformed into a roar of approval.

"I'm ready to take things to the previous level. In time, I think we could be acquaintances—maybe even strangers!"

When I first talked to Mamdani, two years ago, he was an Albany backbencher with few allies in the legislature. He called me a few days after October 7th, worried about Islamophobic backlash in the city. Shortly afterward, he got arrested while protesting for a ceasefire outside Schumer's apartment building. He was, at that moment, about as far out on the margins of power as an elected official can be. In the past few months, Mamdani has looked more comfortable navigating the compromises and contradictions that being mayor will impose on him. He has expressed newfound appreciation for the role of private real-estate development, and has promised to ask the police commissioner, Jessica Tisch, a favorite of the city's wealthy establishment, to stay on in his administration. "If he becomes mayor, so be it," Jamie Dimon, the C.E.O. of JPMorgan Chase, said recently. Mamdani is untested, his network of longtime allies is small, and he lacks the connections and history in the city's power structure that even an ambitious progressive like Bill de Blasio relied on to get things done. But that's the point. New Yorkers didn't want an insider with decades of experience. They wanted Zohran Mamdani.

"Do we Americans really want good government?" the muckraker Lincoln Steffens wrote in *McClure's* magazine in 1903. "Do we know it when we see it?" Steffens had spent months investigating the peculiar limitations and outrages of New York City's Tammany Hall-era bureaucracy. It wasn't that the people of New York didn't know that the machine was corrupt; it was that they only rarely could be bothered to care. "Tammany

is corruption with consent," Steffens wrote. "It is bad government founded on the suffrages of the people." Occasionally, when the excesses of the machine grew "rampant," the people were moved to throw the bosses out. An outsider mayoral candidate would put himself forward, pledging to make a "clean sweep," organizing the various factions of the city's political opposition, and galvanizing the city with a "hot campaign." But it never ended well. Inevitably, the bosses were voted back to power. Steffens called this frustrating pattern "the standard course of municipal reform."

With the exception of Fiorello LaGuardia, every liberal, reform-minded mayor since the late nineteenth century has met some dismal version of the "standard course." Seth Low, the wonkish former Columbia University president who was mayor when Steffens was writing, was denied a second term by George B. McClellan, Jr., a favorite of the Tammany boss Richard Croker. In the sixties, John Lindsay came into office riding a wave of charisma and good feeling, and left behind frustrations and disastrous city books when he departed eight years later. David Dinkins, the city's first Black mayor (and also the first mayor who had been a member of the Democratic Socialists of America), saw his administration undone by racial violence and concerns about crime, and was beaten by Rudy Giuliani when he ran for a second term. De Blasio, whom Mamdani considers the best mayor of his lifetime, accomplished much of the agenda that he ran on in 2013, but New Yorkers got sick of him anyway. "The good mayor turns out to be weak or foolish or 'not so good,'" Steffens wrote. "Or the people become disgusted."

Can Mamdani avoid the standard course? Certainly he's a different stripe of outsider than the genteel reformers who emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, or the Progressives who came after them. Before the First World War, socialist candidates for mayor appeared on ballots in more than half a dozen elections, though most struggled to find support outside the German and Jewish immigrant neighborhoods of the Lower East Side. (Henry George, a socialist-backed land-tax reformer, was among the most successful, coming in second in 1886, ahead of the Republican candidate, a young reformer named Theodore Roosevelt.) Yet Steffens wrote with a warning to those who put their faith in any single election to deliver lasting change. "Any people is capable of rising in wrath to overthrow bad rulers," he wrote. "New York has done it several times. With fresh and present outrages to avenge, particular villains to punish, and the mob sense of common anger to excite, it is an emotional gratification to go out with the crowd and 'smash something.'" The machine was durable—it adapted itself, and was always ready to rev back up when the outsiders inevitably stumbled. Steffens wondered if it was really possible for any individual leader to break this pattern.

In the early twentieth century, reformers in cities such as Chicago and Detroit were so disillusioned by the failures of their city governments that they talked about stripping mayors of their powers. But New York City wanted, and still wants, for its mayors to be quite powerful. No other elected official in the country so completely embodies the urban experience as the mayor of New York, and no other is so empowered to change the nature of city life. This power has made heroes of some mayors but turned others into buffoons and heels. Certain hurdles are inevitable: police scandals and debates about crime and policing have defined mayoralties for more than a century. Mayors have tangled with governors and Presidents, sometimes disastrously. Private interests in real estate and business have been willing to criticize and undermine a mayor's position even while profiting from his policies. And the people, as Steffens knew, are fickle. Just ask de Blasio.

A bad blizzard, a power outage, a big labor dispute, an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease—any number of things can stymie a mayor. But at Mamdani's Election Night party on Tuesday, at the Brooklyn Paramount, a twenty-seven-hundred-person concert venue in downtown Brooklyn, the daily challenges of running the city still felt a ways off. The crowd was filled with young people in campaign beanies and head scarves. The atmosphere wasn't one of sated backslapping, as it was at Adams's Election Night party four years ago; it hummed with the frisson of the newly victorious. Mahmoud Khalil, the Columbia graduate-student activist who was kidnapped by ICE and detained for three months, was there, as was New York's attorney general, Letitia James—an adversary of both Cuomo and Trump. The leftist internet personality Hasan Piker commanded a gaggle of reporters. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez brushed by me, positively bopping to Lil Wayne's "A Milli," which boomed from the loudspeakers. When Cuomo's concession speech was projected onto a giant screen, thousands of people delivered the happiest boos you've ever heard. Standing in one corner of the cavernous room, several City Hall veterans in attendance marvelled at how few lobbyists, donors, or people over fifty were present.

When Mamdani took the stage, smiling and sporting a freshly trimmed beard, he projected the certainty of someone whose improbable vision was coming true. He skipped most of the usual victory-speech clichés of coming together, and instead argued that the fight was just beginning. He quoted Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, and Eugene Debs, the socialist who ran for President from prison. He took a moment to relish the toppling of one of the Democratic Party's political giants, wishing Cuomo "only the best in private life." Then, looking directly at the cameras, Mamdani addressed the President, who has already threatened to withhold federal funds and flood the city with National Guard troops. "If anyone can show a nation betrayed by Donald Trump how to defeat him, it is the city that gave rise to him," Mamdani said. "So Donald Trump, since I know you're watching, I have four words for you: turn the volume up." The crowd devoured this. The Mayor-elect seemed to hold back laughter, steeling himself for what comes next.

—*Eric Lach*

THE BOARD
CHECKMATE

The actor Nicholas Christopher—brawny, bald, with a perpetually cocked eyebrow that brings to mind Yul Brynner—strode through the aisles of Tashkent Supermarket in Brighton Beach one afternoon. He surveyed the Russian delicacies: beef tongue, Olivier salad, "herring under fur" (shavings of beets and egg). "It feels like a time capsule of Old Russia," he said. "The grannies walking around—you'd better get out of their way, otherwise they will just knock you over."

Christopher has been making pilgrimages to Brighton Beach since this summer, after he was cast in a Broadway revival of the musical "Chess." The show, by Tim Rice and ABBA's Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus, flopped on Broadway in 1988, when its Cold War setting was contemporary, but it retained a cult following. Christopher plays Anatoly Sergievsky, a Soviet chess champion who faces off against an American (Aaron Tveit), with a woman caught between them (Lea Michele). Christopher's character has shades of the grand masters Viktor Korchnoi and Anatoly Karpov. The problem: Christopher knew little about chess, or about being Russian.

Nicholas Christopher

To learn the game, he practiced on the Chess.com app and watched YouTube tutorials. "Once you learn how the pieces move, it's just about memorizing positions," he said, walking toward the beach. "You set up a position. The other person is setting up something else. Then you adapt. Set up and adapt, set up and adapt. It's very much like acting." On the boardwalk, he sat at a concrete chess table. While preparing for the show, he would go there to play for research and "lose miserably against strangers," he recalled. He put out the chess pieces, which looked not unlike the cast of a Broadway musical: a chorus line of pawns, the leads (king, queen), and the supporting players (rooks, knights). His favorite piece is the black king, which he would fiddle with in rehearsal as a nervous habit. "Now that's embedded in the show. Anatoly carries a black king with him," he said.

Christopher was born in Bermuda, where his father is a reggae musician and the town crier of Hamilton, the capital city. "It's a British colony, so he reads royal proclamations," Christopher said. "Three-cornered hat and everything." Christopher's love of theatre began when he saw his father perform in Christmas pantomimes. When he was seven, his mother, a Massachusetts native, took him and his siblings to Boston for better educational opportunities, leaving his father back on the island to pursue his booming town-crying career. Christopher went to a performing-arts high school and enrolled at Juilliard, but he dropped out to tour with Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical "In the Heights." He went on to play George Washington and Aaron Burr in "Hamilton" on Broadway, and he caught the eye of Michael Mayer, the director of "Chess," while playing Signor Pirelli in "Sweeney Todd"—an Irish con man posing as an Italian barber. "I guess Michael thought, Oh, maybe he could take a swing at a Russian dialect."

To practice being Russian, Christopher was helped by two friends, who joined him at Brighton Beach: half brothers named Roman and Pasha Gambourg. Roman, a lawyer and sometime theatre producer, was born in Leningrad; Pasha, a screenwriter, was born in the U.S. They had Christopher over for family dinners. "Ate Mama's food and drank Papa's vodka!" Pasha said. Christopher met both their fathers. Roman's had stayed in Russia and Pasha's had left—each was resonant for Anatoly, who in "Chess" is torn over whether to defect. "His character really opened up, between these two men who made different choices," Roman said.

They sat at Tatiana, a restaurant on the boardwalk, and ordered a Russian feast: caviar, lamb, the herring under fur. "Russians are often very mysterious people," Christopher said. "You never really know what they're thinking, and then all of a sudden you're a few vodkas in, and they tell you their life story."

The night before, Pasha had been on a chess-playing date. "I threw a couple games," he said. "I'm a gentleman."

Christopher: "That's the Russian manipulation!"

"You have to know when to push, when to pull," Pasha replied. "That's ingrained in us."

A waiter named Denys came by. He had been a chess champion in Ukraine but emigrated after Russia invaded. "In United States, sometimes I am playing in the tournament, maybe two times in a month," he said. "I want to be the master. But now it's just a hobby. I feel so good when playing the chess. I go to tournament, I am relaxing." Pro tip: he always takes the garbage out before a competition. "I need to throw out this bad energy, you know?"

"I love that," Christopher said. Vodka was poured, and the actor joined the Gambourg brothers in a toast they had taught him: "*Kto yesli ne ya*? *Kto yesli ne mi*?" Who if not me? Who if not us?

—*Michael Schulman*

THE PICTURES
CLICK

A few years ago, the German actress Nina Hoss, who'd already played the title role in "Hedda Gabler" onstage, got a phone call. Hedda, Ibsen's great antiheroine, is one of the canon's

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

most enigmatic female characters: a woman hemmed in by men and adept at manipulating them. The filmmaker Nia DaCosta ("Candyman") had transposed the action from nineteenth-century Oslo to nineteen-fifties Britain, and Tessa Thompson would star. Was Hoss interested in reading for a part? She said yes, hung up, and then remembered her Ibsen. If Thompson was Hedda, who would *she* be?

The answer was Eileen Lovborg, a gender-swapped version of Hedda's ex, Eilert Lovborg. As a woman with autonomy—an ascendant lesbian professor whose subject is "the future of sex"—Eileen becomes a foil for the bored newlywed Hedda. She's also a threat to Hedda's husband, an academic rival. Hoss said, "There's something other than just the power struggle going on between these two characters, because they want the same job, or they want the same woman, which is basically just two—" She paused, searching for the word in English, and flapped her elbows to illustrate. "Would you call them cocks?"

"Wait—never mind, everyone back to the roof."

Hoss was sitting in a booth at Russ & Daughters, a New York haunt of hers since the avant-garde artist Laurie Anderson introduced her to it in 2016. She wore a boxy blazer with the sleeves rolled up, her blond curls pulled back in a short ponytail, and ordered black coffee, a cherry shrub, and an everything bagel with lox. Hoss, who has played a quietly complicit wife in "Tár" and an icy executive in "Do Not Expect Too Much from the End of the World," can leave an impression without speaking a line: often, she's the one arguing that dialogue should be trimmed, trusting that a wordless exchange is more effective. "The camera will take what she needs," she said. "I enjoy that reduction, the precision—and the listening. There's so much going on when someone is listening!"

Hoss grew up in Stuttgart, surrounded by activists and artists. Her mother was a theatre director and actor; her father was a trade unionist and a founder of Germany's Green party. At his fiftieth birthday, the five-year-old Hoss climbed onto a stage, unprompted, and sang the antiwar ballad "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" The adults in the room thought her parents had put her up to it. "I was so angry that they wouldn't take me seriously," she said. "In hindsight, I think that's where I thought, I'm gonna show them!" By age nine, she was doing radio plays, sitting in on her father's parliamentary sessions, and watching classic films with her mother, who liked to analyze the actresses: Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Marilyn Monroe.

The family also attended protests; at one anti-nuclear action in the eighties, they all dressed up as clowns. "We would keep a colorful, light component," Hoss said. "But I also saw my dad being carried away by police into a van." The jolly strategy and swift retaliation weren't far off from today's showdowns between costumed protesters and ICE. "I mean, here we are again," she said.

Her mother directed her in her stage début, at fourteen; by eighteen, she'd done a film. Hoss, now fifty, has alternated between the two mediums ever since. When a play brought her to New York in 2018, she was astonished by how "free" the crowd felt: reacting aloud, even shouting back at the actors. "That would never happen in Germany," she said. "They all check in on each other in the audience, like, 'Behave!' Which is frustrating for us up there." A waiter refilled her coffee for the fourth time. She thanked him, miming hyper-caffeinated jitters.

Hoss had a week in town before flying to London to start shooting "The Julia Set," with Gillian Anderson and Chase Infiniti. When brunch was over, she stepped outside and put on a pair of round sunglasses. She ambled down Orchard Street, window-shopping, until a small, cluttered camera store caught her eye. She moved between glass cases stuffed with vintage equipment, cooing over some Leicas before stopping to admire a classic Hasselblad. "Those were used for the first photo shoots I did," she said. She loved the satisfying *chh-chhk* of the shutter. "When people take photos these days, they don't do that," she said. "So you stare into the void, thinking, Did they get it?" She laughed. "I still wait for the click!"

—*Alex Barasch*

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

REVOLUTIONARY WHIPLASH

Commemorating a nation's founding in a time of fear and foreboding.

BY JILL LEPORE

Frightened of controversy, some cultural organizations have decided to do nothing.

This past June, at a No Kings rally outside a white clapboard church in a little brick town in the lower right-hand corner of Vermont, Green Mountaineers huddled together in raincoats under a pearl-gray sky. Some ironic anti-royalists wore golden paper crowns from Burger King, but the more sartorially, not to say lepidopterously, dedicated came dressed as orange-and-black butterflies, these being the only monarchs allowed in America. "Rejecting Kings Since 1776" read a sign carried by a woman wearing a rainbow bucket hat. In the matter of handmade placards—Magic Marker on cardboard, duct-taped to wooden yardsticks—there was a certain amount of politico-literary one-upmanship. "Cry My Beloved Country" was clever, but was "Make Orwell Fiction Again" cleverer? Abraham Lincoln was there, grim-faced and sepia on a sign that read "Government of the People, by the People, for the People." A red-white-and-blue printed poster quoted Thomas Paine's "Common Sense": "In America, the Law Is King!"

With or without the No Kings movement, the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the American Revolution is, inevitably, an occasion to ask what the Revolution meant, whether the people really do rule, and whether the law is still king. The jubilee began in earnest in Lexington and Concord on April 19, 2025—the anniversary of the shot heard round the world, marking the start of the war—with an early-morning battle reënactment, and very tasty cider doughnuts. It will reach its peak on July 4, 2026, the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, with fireworks all over the country, plus hot dogs and bicycle races and pompoms and drum majors. Between now and then, there will be exhibits and parades and lectures and picnics and protests and rallies and, one dearly hopes and prays, no more political violence, no more blood on the streets, no more shots fired. But, in a year that has already seen multiple political assassinations, the deployment of the National Guard to American cities, and masked agents of the federal government hauling people off the streets and into unmarked vans, the prospects for a peaceful anniversary appear remote. A revolutionary year seems far likelier, and, politically, that could go either way. Whatever you believe about the state of the Union, you might want to be careful what you wish for.

As for history—and the story told about the American Revolution in museums and classrooms, on walking tours, and, inescapably, once the marketing kicks in, on cereal boxes and highway billboards and cans of soda—the Trump Administration has its version, and it wants that version to be everyone's version. But the problems with the federal government's interest in controlling the story of the American Revolution began long before Donald Trump was reëlected. The U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, a bipartisan body orchestrating the celebration, better known as America250, or A250, was established in 2016 during Barack Obama's last year in office. Almost immediately, it descended into internecine war, and, in the near-decade since, its dysfunction has greatly impeded the ability of the rest of the country to get any planning done. This is measurable. Near the end of the Biden Administration, A250 contracted with iCivics, a civics-education organization founded by Sandra Day O'Connor, to research activities planned around the country. These turned out to be very difficult even to discover since, as the iCivics C.E.O. told me, "People are very underfunded and just really didn't have anything together by that point." That's still true.

This summer, the partnerships that A250 had with several respected institutions—including iCivics, the Bill of Rights Institute, the National Cathedral, More Perfect, and the American Association for State and Local His-

 ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH NEGLEY

tory—quietly ended. The commission, which is congressional, has struggled to maintain even a semblance of independence from the White House. In September, Ariel Abergel, a twenty-five-year-old former Fox News producer who had been appointed by Trump to preside over the commission, posted on A250's official Instagram account, "America is in mourning. God bless Charlie Kirk." Days later, the commission fired him, citing "serious and repeated breaches of authority and trust." Then came the government shutdown, which closed the doors of both the National Archives, postponing the October opening of its exhibit on "The American Story," and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, likely delaying the début of its "In Pursuit of Life, Liberty & Happiness" exhibit, slated for March. And both institutions, like every other museum with any relationship to the federal government, have been in the stranglehold of imperious demands from the White House; do-as-we-say pressure from state governments is becoming increasingly common, too.

There's no shortage of reasons that the celebration of the American Revolution has been, at least thus far, so half-assed. A lot of places began their planning for the two-hundred-and-fiftieth in 2020, in the aftermath of the 1619 Project (itself marking an anniversary) and during the George Floyd moment; their plans therefore tilted in the direction of racial justice. But, after Trump's victory in 2024, they were told they needed to tilt the other way. An early executive order denounced "the influence of a divisive, race-centered ideology" abroad in the land and called for "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," under which the Administration has sought to dictate what the American story is, and who can tell it. Much federal funding now requires celebrating American greatness, military valor, and exceptionalism. In response, some local, state, and national organizations have simply refused to apply for it. John Dichtl, the head of the American Association for State and Local History, told me that people have said to him, "The money is tainted, and I can't take it no matter what." Others have fought back. After DOGE ended all National Endowment for the Humanities grants to state humanities councils in April, Oregon Humanities, joined by the Federation of State Humanities Councils, sued the federal government, arguing that the funds had been unlawfully revoked. The Oregon council is using its reduced N.E.H. money to hold a series of community conversations, especially in rural public libraries, trying to build bridges across the national political divide, under the heading "Beyond 250." That's one of the better stories. Another is the work of the Bill of Rights Institute, which has partnered with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation to hold civics bees in schools all over the country. "Whether you're a sixth grader or an eighth grader, when you're grounded in the documents and you're getting to the 'why' questions and you're going deep about what it would mean to put these principles into practice, something profound can come of that," David Bobb, the institute's defiantly optimistic president, told me. But even Bobb admits the scale of the problem: civics teachers are afraid to teach civics, concerned about the government or about parents, or both. "Teachers feel very, very worried. We see it all the time. It's hard for them to go there, to the contentious topics that they want to talk about and know they need to talk about." This is America at two-five-oh.

Under the threat of censorship and other forms of menace (the Trump Administration this year has so far fired the Archivist of the United States and the Librarian of Congress and has tried very hard to get the Smithsonian Institution to do its curatorial bidding), some organizations have decided to do nothing at all, as if they could simply pretend that the nation was not about to celebrate the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of its birth. "People are terrified," one art-museum curator told me, not only about what to exhibit but about what to write on labels. She says she keeps asking herself, "Should I just put the stuff on the wall and say, 'This was made in this period?'" Others are opting to un-celebrate and, instead, to denigrate the anniversary, following the logic of Nikole Hannah-Jones's original introduction to the 1619 Project, which cast the Revolution as regrettable. "One of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery," Hannah-Jones had written, a claim to which some prominent historians publicly objected, leading the *Times* to issue a partial correction ("some of the colonists"). One group of historians, for instance, is planning a panel discussion at an academic conference on whether it would be better to "smear" the Revolution than to commemorate it.

Even those cultural organizations, from historic houses to public-school districts and universities, that have decided to do something for the two-hundred-and-fiftieth appear to be doing considerably less than they did for the two-hundredth. For the bicentennial, the Metropolitan Museum of Art staged a nearly seven-thousand-square-foot blockbuster exhibit on Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson; critics may have found it tacky, but it became a hugely successful travelling show. For 2026, the Met is planning to display, in the American Wing, thirty-two works from its own collection; one colleague of mine referred to putting on this exhibit as effectively "staging a die-in." A frustrated curator told me that this modest scale is all the Met can do because "Look at the moment we're in."

Another option is to try to capture this moment. The New York Public Library's bicentennial exhibit, "The American Idea," displayed the Bay Psalm Book, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights, but for next year the library is planning to ask visitors to reflect on the meaning of the anniversary, and to archive their answers. In the nineteen-seventies, National Public Radio, with generous funding from the N.E.H., staged a yearlong series of three-hour Saturday-morning call-in programs called the "American Issues Radio Forum." Given that the Trump Administration has gutted the N.E.H., defunded NPR, and shut down the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, it's difficult to see how public media can mount anything as ambitious as was achieved a half century ago. A spokesman for NPR told me that its two-hundred-and-fiftieth agenda is "still in the planning phase."

A year, these days, is a lifetime. In 2024, the Declaration House in Philadelphia—a bicentennial-era reconstruction of the building where Jefferson wrote the Declaration of

Independence—installed "The Descendants of Monticello," a hauntingly beautiful and provocative work by the artist Sonya Clark. Clark placed large video monitors behind the building's windows, turned outward toward the street, so that passersby were met by the filmed and photographed eyes of the descendants of the people Jefferson enslaved, including his own descendants by way of Sally Hemings. Declaration House is part of Independence National Historical Park; under the new regime, no Park Service site will be allowed to display any exhibit that does the essential work of scrutinizing the relationship between liberty and slavery in American history, or the relationship between Native nations and the federal government, because to do so is now considered advancing a "corrosive ideology." The President's House Site, built atop the foundations of the mansion where George Washington resided while in Philadelphia, has been asked to review panels describing the lives of nine people who lived there as Washington's property, owing to the Administration's requirement that any displays that "inappropriately disparage Americans past or living" be removed. Under this logic, to note that Washington owned slaves is to disparage him but to pretend that those nine people never existed comes at no cost to their memory. (Online, citizens have been archiving signs slated for destruction under the hashtag #SaveOurSigns.)

The hurdles facing museums and other institutions make it particularly impressive that many have already launched or are about to launch remarkably thoughtful two-hundred-and-fiftieth exhibits and activities. This month, History Colorado will open an N.E.H.-funded exhibit called "Moments That Made US," featuring artifacts that mark turning points in American history, including Nixon's tape recorder, the inkwell that Grant and Lee used to sign the surrender at Appomattox, one of the first copies of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo printed in Mexico, and some moon rocks brought to Earth on Apollo 11 in 1969. Jason Hanson, History Colorado's effervescent chief creative officer, told me that he thinks of the two-hundred-and-fiftieth as "a once-in-a-generation opportunity to talk about what it means to be an American and what we want it to be going forward." He also thinks that it's easier to be sunny about the two-hundred-and-fiftieth outside the original thirteen colonies, which he calls the "OG13." "We are ready for an American history that doesn't always say, 'The meaning of this event is this,'" Hanson told me. "We are having an argument in the country about the meaning of events." He's up for it. He's likewise excited about the state's plan to commemorate the nation's birthday, which is also Colorado's hundred-and-fiftieth birthday, by organizing teams to climb the state's fourteeners, mountains taller than fourteen thousand feet. (Climbing mountains turns out to be wonderfully semiquincentennial. "Climb the Mountain, Discover America" is the slogan for the two-hundred-and-fiftieth used by Monticello, Jefferson's mountaintop home, which will be unveiling a new center for history and citizenship.)

Back on the edge of the Atlantic, another early stunner is "The Declaration's Journey," which opened on October 18th at Philadelphia's Museum of the American Revolution and traces the travels of the ideas in the Declaration of Independence across centuries and continents. "We tell the story of the Revolution all the time," the exhibit's curator, Philip Mead, told me. (Mead is a former doctoral student of mine, and I should be clear that I've got about as much distance from this topic as a letter has from an envelope.) He said, "You know what they say about stories? There are two plots. A stranger comes to town, or a man goes on a trip. We're telling those two stories here. The Declaration comes to town. The Declaration goes on a trip." The exhibit opens, by way of prologue, with two borrowed artifacts: the wooden Windsor chair in which Jefferson is believed to have written the Declaration, on loan from the American Philosophical Society, and a rusted metal prison bench, on loan from the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, from which Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." The Declaration comes to town. The Declaration goes on a trip.

My informal survey suggests that the Eastern Seaboard states are by far the most stressed out about the coming anniversary. Compared with the OG13, the rest of the country is chill. Kansas

City is getting ready for about six hundred and fifty thousand visitors at World Cup games next summer; on the Fourth of July, the city's National WWI Museum and Memorial will light its two-hundred-and-seventeen-foot Liberty Memorial Tower after a Stars and Stripes picnic. Arizona is planning a travelling museum that will bring the state's most treasured historical artifacts to all fifteen of its counties, setting them up in parks, schools, libraries, and civic centers. Its A250 commission, on which the Tohono O'odham Nation leader, Verlon Jose, serves as the vice chair, is also using the occasion to tell the story of Indigenous peoples and the West, and to celebrate Arizona's outdoors, including birding and fishing. "We have Operation Freedom March, a veterans-and-military-member relay along the Arizona Trail," the executive director of the commission told me. "It runs from Mexico to Utah. People sign up to do it over the course of the year. You can walk, bike, run, horseback-ride."

Sweating your way up and down a mountain, as opposed to, say, pondering General John Burgoyne's underestimation of the strength of the American forces in the Battle of Saratoga, seems an excellent way to mark the two-hundred-and-fiftieth, not least because, as Caroline Klibanoff, the head of an organization called Made By Us, told me, "Gen Z does not care about this moment." She's leading a charge to "youthify" everything that's going on, finding a way to involve young people in the planning of what she calls Youth250, and to use the anniversary to talk not about the past two hundred and fifty years but the next.

"Make this about the future rather than the past" is also the advice given by Sarah Jencks, a consultant who works with organizations all over the country, trying to help them figure out what to do for the two-hundred-and-fiftieth. The idea here, it seems, is to look to the future because the past is polarizing and the present is worse.

Amid this American crisis arrives Ken Burns's six-part, twelve-hour PBS documentary, "The American Revolution," funded in part by the now defunct C.P.B. The series, which is directed by Burns and his longtime collaborators Sarah Botstein and David P. Schmidt and written by Geoffrey C. Ward, has much of the majestic scale, mournful tone, and sombre feel of Burns's breakout eleven-and-a-half-hour "Civil War" series, from 1990, which both secured him a well-earned reputation as the nation's foremost documentary-film historian and established a style in the representation of the past on television that has been so widely (and very often poorly) imitated that it has become at

once inescapable and exhausted. What's so astonishing about "The American Revolution" is how it deploys what has long been called the "Ken Burns effect" to an altogether sharper end, something you can see in his deeply serious 2017 series "The Vietnam War," directed with Lynn Novick, which was something less gauzy than "The Civil War," something as pointed as a bayonet. The new series is the best film out of Burns's shop and, I suspect, the hardest to make.

What makes "The American Revolution" so singular and unfamiliar is neither its writing—Ward wrote for the Civil War and Vietnam War films, too—nor its style. It features fiddly, moody eighteenth-century-style music and pitch-perfect actors reading pithy, moving excerpts from eighteenth-century letters: Mandy Patinkin as Benjamin Franklin, David Oyelowo as Olaudah Equiano, Claire Danes as Abigail Adams. In place of the Mathew Brady photographs of "The Civil War," "The American Revolution" lingers over eighteenth-century oil-on-canvas portraits and more than a thousand still images housed in archives, libraries, and museums (many of which, presumably, may not be on display in 2026 because of funding cuts and government censorship). The film's familiar visual vocabulary consists of slow pans over these images, alternating with more than a hundred animated maps of battlefields, loving and exquisite footage of American landscapes—stone walls, cornfields, campfires—and scenes of anonymous reënactors marching and loading muskets and firing cannons, riding on horseback by moonlight, spinning and carding wool in pine-floored rooms, washing and wringing clothes by riverbanks. There are a lot of muddy boots and many guttering candles.

Instead, what distinguishes "The American Revolution" is its fidelity to the best and most sophisticated scholarship—searing, challenging, and explosively interesting, especially as intellectual history. The Trump Administration won't "restore truth and sanity to American history." But this film does. (Burns, who seldom takes political positions publicly, has spoken out against Trump since 2016, when he said that Trump belongs to a type that "emerges everywhere and in all eras.") Especially in his earlier films, Burns deferred to the storytelling of popular historians, with mixed results. David McCullough narrated "The Civil War," which chiefly featured Shelby Foote, and the most memorable talking head in "Baseball" (1994) was Doris Kearns Goodwin. Much academic history suffers from pedantry and an almost willful irrelevance, but much popular history fails to tell you anything new or to ask you to confront anything difficult or unsettling (or, in Trumpspeak, anything "inappropriately disparaging"). "The American Revolution" relies on some terrific popular historians, including the journalist Rick Atkinson, who helpfully explains battle after battle. But Burns and his colleagues far more often rely on scholars, including Friederike Baer, Ned Blackhawk, Christopher L. Brown, Kathleen DuVal, and Alan Taylor, who appear onscreen not to recount what happened, or not only that, but to explain what it means. They are fierce.

"What the American Revolution gave the United States was an actual idea of a moment of origin, which many other countries in the world don't have," Maya Jasanoff says in the documentary. The consequence, she continues, is that Americans have "invested these particular years of these particular people with a set of stakes that are so far beyond what any set of events and any set of people can plausibly carry." (Jasanoff, like four more of the film's chief

storytellers—Vincent Brown, Philip Deloria, Annette Gordon-Reed, and Jane Kamensky—is a friend and colleague of mine. Letter, envelope.) "If one wants a national origin story that's clean and neat and tells you very clearly who the good guys are and who the bad guys are," Vincent Brown says, the American Revolution is not that story.

The story that "The American Revolution" tells is of the emergence of the most important ideas of the modern world, fought over in a bloody and courageous rebellion against tyranny which was at once a civil war and a global war whose notions of freedom and slavery and conquest and independence tangled together the fates of British soldiers and American militiamen, Lenape diplomats and Seneca warriors, German mercenaries and French sailors, Akan men and Igbo women, backwoods pioneers and city ladies, the free and the unfree, the rich and the poor. It's a canvas, part Bruegel, part Goya, a political carrousel, a teeming, moving, terrifying story, relating a chain of events forged of bravery and betrayal, of ferocity and torment, of ambition and terror, and yet a chain held together by the single organizing idea, as Kamensky points out, of possibility, of a sense of living on the edge of a knife: "Everybody on every side, including people who were denied even the ownership of themselves, had the sense of possibility worth fighting for." Throughout history, humans had been ruled by tyrants and armies, without their consent. Americans fought for the freedom to rule themselves, and, more miraculously still, they won. Even after Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, King George III told Parliament that he remained determined "to restore to my deluded subjects in America that happy and prosperous condition which they formerly derived from a due obedience to the laws." Parliament, though, voted to give up on America. As the wryly smiling Stephen Conway, a distinguished British military historian, observes in the PBS series' stirring final episode, "The American Revolution changed the world."

The series' achievement lies in honoring the dignity and meaning of the founding's revolutionary ideals, and the sacrifices of all who fought for them, while taking an unsparing look at the war's cruelties and costs, especially for women, Black Americans, and Native nations denied the equality, liberty, and sovereignty the Revolution promised. The Revolution that failed is the Revolution the Trump Administration cannot bear for Americans to know and mourn. The Revolution that succeeded is the one some American institutions are determined to ignore.

And maybe this is a balm, or false comfort, but "The American Revolution" is also a reminder that this very division was a feature of the eighteenth century, too, when there seemed, to many observers, to be so many different kinds of Americans that it was exceedingly difficult to believe they could ever constitute a people. No army in history seemed ever to have been more ragged and motley and mongrel and polyglot than the Continental, rich and poor, learned and illiterate, from boys to old men, skilled and unskilled, born all over the world, speaking dozens of languages, believing in different gods and in no god. It beggared belief that they could fight as one, and for no more than an idea. As a Hessian officer asked in his diary at the close of the war, "Who would have thought a hundred years ago that out of this multitude of rabble would arise a people who could defy kings?"

A tragedy of this year, if, admittedly, a small one relative to what else is going wrong in the United States, is that the two-hundred-and-fiftieth will be a missed opportunity to wrestle with the meaning of the American Revolution and of the principles on which the nation was founded at a time when debating those ideas and confronting their implications are desperately needed. For better or worse, the No Kings movement, and the opposition to it, is where that debate is now happening. Revolutionary reënactment as political theatre is scarcely new. Americans have been dressing up in three-cornered hats and knee breeches almost since the War for Independence ended, insisting that they, and not their political opponents, are the heirs of the Revolution. This has been true of the left, from suffragists to civil-rights activists, and of the right, down to the Tea Party that began during Obama's first term, protesting both the bank bailouts and the Affordable Care Act. That's what happens when a nation's founding document makes universal claims about self-evident truths and inalienable rights: anyone can use those claims, and arguing over them is how American politics works. But the Declaration was also a secessionist document, establishing revolution *as a right*. Nations born in revolution frequently die in revolution. The United States is, in this case, very much an exception for having lasted as long as it has. That founding moment and this long history—what historians like to call the "unfinished revolution"—requires examination and argument, at least every fifty years or so. Are the people still their own rulers? Is the law still king?

Last month, as many as seven million Americans gathered for another day of No Kings protests, or what congressional Republicans took to calling "Hate America rallies." On Truth Social, the President posted an A.I.-generated video of himself—wearing a gold crown and an Air Force jumpsuit—in a fighter jet emblazoned with "KING TRUMP" on the side, flying over a generic downtown and dumping a payload of excrement onto No Kings protesters.

I went back to that city in the lower-right corner of Vermont. A man wearing a green hat carried a cardboard sign that read "Maple Syrup Makers for Sanity." Django Grace, a college sophomore in a blue oxford shirt, spoke from a wooden gazebo, calling for common ground and common sense. I hadn't made a sign; I was there to report. But, if I had, I'd have quoted not "Common Sense" but Paine's lesser-known 1776 pamphlet, "The American Crisis." After the war had begun, Paine, a volunteer in the Continental Army, indicted loyalists who continued to pledge themselves to King George. "Let them call me rebel and welcome, I feel no concern from it," Paine wrote, "but I should suffer the misery of devils, were I to make a whore of my soul by swearing allegiance to one whose character is that of a sottish, stupid, stubborn, worthless, brutish man." If it'd fit, I'd wear it on a hat, except that I have a better hat. I got it at the Minnesota History Center, in St. Paul, twenty years ago, before all hell broke loose in this country. It's black and a little threadbare, with a fraying brim, and it says "HISTORY MATTERS." ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS

I BITE BACK

BY IAN FRAZIER

Best practices require that I state at the outset that I do not possess a law degree, paralegal training, formal or informal knowledge of the laws of this city, county, state, or country, or any familiarity whatsoever with the traditions of conduct associated with Judeo-Christian law. In any legal proceeding, I have no authority to represent anybody but myself.

However, as you can see from my billboards and bus-shelter ads, I do possess a dog and a bull. The dog, when it opens its mouth, shows off its large, pointed teeth, connected top to bottom by strands of saliva. My bull is of the breed that, when you mess with it, you get the horn. If you're wondering why my bull has only one horn, that is the reason. As for my own teeth, they make the dog's teeth and the bull's horn seem like nothing. Though I cannot sue the people or entities that have wronged you, I BITE BACK, and you will owe me nothing until I bite.

Injured at work? I will bite the headquarters of the company that's responsible, chew up the chain-link fence around its employee parking lot, and gnaw the vents of its HVAC system from the outside. After seeing this, the wrongdoers usually rush to settle. Trip on a sidewalk? I will bite that sidewalk. I crush the concrete or slate or asphalt with my powerful molars, and snip the nearest street sign off at the base with my incisors. Then—watch the compensation dollars roll in! Maybe some powerful biter has bitten you, and you are thinking of biting back on your own. I strongly recommend against that. The big biters out there are well protected. Perhaps you've heard the phrase "eat the rich"? Maybe you've even seen the recipes—Filet of Ackman au Gratin, Roast Bezos Stuffed with Kochs?

Members of the wealth-intensive class know very well that people want to bite and even eat them, and they have taken precautions. The strong-jawed, sharp-toothed individuals they have in their employ would masticate you to a paste in about ten seconds. So leave the biting to me!

If you want references, check out my résumé. Forty years ago, in a class-action biting, I chewed a sizable chunk off of the nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island, then dragged it into the Susquehanna River, worried it into pieces with my scythe-like canine teeth, and partly buried it in the sand. This so impressed a federal judge that he awarded plaintiffs some of the largest damages in history. I bit the nuke plant at Fukushima, so now, on top of everything else, my choppers are radioactive—defendants, take note! (I am not technically allowed to represent anybody in a lawsuit or to refer to anybody I bite as "defendant.")

I bit Swift's Premium Bacon, Inc., but that was just because I was hungry. No matter—they settled anyway. I bit the dog belonging to another personal-injury biter, which made the papers. You may have seen the headlines: "Biting Man Bites Other Biting Man's Dog." The Sackler family has me on permanent retainer, but I take it out when I want to bite somebody, including them. If you have been injured in an automobile accident, I will chase that automobile, or any other vehicle that goes by my office. My door is always open, and that's why. I also chase ambulances and catch and bite them in my spare time.

Hurt in a slipper-and-fall accident? That's something that happens all too frequently. You go to slip your foot into your bedroom slipper, it slips out from under you, and you slip and fall. Somebody—or something—must pay! In this case, it will be the bedroom slipper itself. Nothing gives my clients more satisfaction than watching me chew slippers. I take them in my teeth—both slippers, because in cases like this no slipper is innocent, not even the one that technically didn't cause the slipper-and-fall—and I chomp down on them. Then I shake my head vigorously back and forth while pieces of leather and the highly culpable fleece lining go flying in every direction. Then I leave the slippers, bitten and head-thrashed to shreds, lying in disgrace on the closet floor. This way, the general slipper-wearing public is protected from future hazard.

What won't I do? Bite mailmen or mail-ladies. They have plenty to contend with already. I leave that for the dregs of the personal-injury biters. Whatever the grievance, I will not bite Sid Taser, Annette Taser, or any other member of that family, so please don't ask me to. I don't bite Reddy Kilowatt, regardless of the losses you may have incurred in a power failure. (I learned my lesson there.) And I don't bite bear-spray sales reps. Those exceptions aside, I am ready and eager to bite everything right again for you. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

MYSTERY MAN

How Rian Johnson became an Agatha Christie for the Netflix age.

BY ANNA RUSSELL

When the film director Rian Johnson was a child, he picked up the final book that Agatha Christie published before her death, in 1976: "Curtain: Poirot's Last Case." The novel was sitting on a shelf in his grandparents' sprawling home, in Denver. It had a moody black cover that featured an illustration of the mustachioed detective Hercule Poirot. "It felt very adult," Johnson told me recently. "Very creepy." The story takes place at a grand country house where the guests have an unfortunate habit of dying, or nearly dying, under seemingly unrelated circumstances. A hunting accident. A poisoning. A bullet to the head.

The book was not only a dynamite mystery; it also represented a kind of magic trick. Although it was published at the end of Christie's life, she wrote the manuscript in the middle of her career, in the nineteen-forties. Then, in a twist worthy of Poirot, she sealed it away in a bank vault for thirty years, insuring that it was kept secret. As her popularity waned, she suddenly produced—voilà!—a book written at the height of her powers. The novel was, Johnson said, "very mysterious and awesome, and very, very weird." Soon, he was bingeing Christie novels two or three at a time. He once walked into a fire hydrant while reading one.

In Los Angeles, earlier this year, Johnson's normally mild countenance grew animated as he recounted the plot of "Curtain." "Do you want it spoiled?" he asked. "Do you really?" We were sitting in the sunlit offices of his production company, T-Street, surrounded by shelves filled with trinkets: a hollow Bible concealing a cigar, an engraved knife. On the wall was a print by the eighteenth-century artist Matthias Buchinger, who was born without hands or legs, from the collection of the late magician Ricky Jay. Johnson, who is short, with a salt-and-pepper beard, has a nerdy, understated demeanor. He was dressed casually, in the type of short-sleeved button-down you might wear to a family barbecue. He believes that people-pleasing leads well into directing. If you didn't know better, you might mistake him for a particularly nice I.T. guy.

In 2019, Johnson tried his own hand at a murder mystery with the film "Knives Out." Close-quartered and stylish, the movie begins at a Gothic New England mansion where the wealthy patriarch Harlan Thrombey has been found with his throat slit. Harlan has an avaricious family, each member of which has something to gain from his death. Like Christie's novels, the film is a study of its time. The Thrombeys argue bitterly about politics, money, and immigration. ("Alt-right troll," Harlan's granddaughter says to her cousin. "Liberal snowflake," he responds.) Like Christie, Johnson gave his mystery a detective with a high regard for his own intellect: the Southern gentleman Benoit Blanc, played by Daniel Craig. The film was a surprise hit with critics and audiences. The *Guardian* called it "deliciously entertaining."

At fifty-one, Johnson is a Hollywood rarity: a writer-director with a singular vision, able to turn his oddball, idiosyncratic stories—written by hand, in moleskin notebooks—into blockbuster hits. He flits among genres, creating intricate, puzzle-like plots that reward multiple viewings. The success of "Knives Out" cemented Johnson's status as an Agatha Christie for the Netflix age. Natasha Lyonne, who stars in his mystery TV series, "Poker Face," told me, "His plots are all right there in his mind's eye." In the writers' room, he will quietly flesh out inventive killings while others are discussing home

The "Knives Out" sequels sold for four hundred and sixty-five million dollars.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SINNA NASSERI

renovations, then reveal them with a flourish. Craig said, of Johnson, "He's always playing 4-D chess."

This fall, Johnson will release the third Benoit Blanc mystery, "Wake Up Dead Man." Unlike the second, "Glass Onion," which veered into slapstick, "Wake Up Dead Man" shares the cloistered tone of the first "Knives Out." The story takes place at a parish in upstate New York, where the charismatic Monsignor Jefferson Wicks (Josh Brolin) exerts a magnetic pull over his flock. The parishioners, played by Glenn Close, Andrew Scott, and Kerry Washington, among others, are a paranoid bunch. They resent the intrusion of Father Jud (Josh O'Connor), an idealistic young priest sent to assist Wicks. When Wicks is murdered, Jud looks likely to take the fall. Enter Blanc.

At the T-Street offices, Johnson sat in an armchair near his longtime producer Ram Bergman. They had recently finished the film's final cut and were anxiously awaiting its première. Nearby was a faithful scale model of the Titanic, constructed out of nine thousand Lego pieces, which Johnson had built to keep his hands busy during a film edit. Both men turned to regard a giant pinboard outlining the film's plot. It was covered in Post-its and string, like the work of a conspiracy theorist. "Rectory Rant," one note read. Another read "Death." Johnson said, "It looks insane." Earlier, he had told me that there were times, during the writing of the script, when he'd worried that he wouldn't finish the film. The puzzle seemed unsolvable. He couldn't see his way out of the maze. "This was a very hard movie," he told me. "The hardest thing I've ever made."

The next morning, I met Johnson at his house, a pink Spanish Revival in the hills. Posters of old movies hung on the walls. In the kitchen, Johnson made coffee. He and his wife, Karina Longworth, had stayed up late watching the sixties film "Judgment at Nuremberg." ("Incredible," Johnson said.) Longworth hosts the podcast "You Must Remember This," which resurfaces stories about Old Hollywood. The pair met on film Twitter, and Johnson has said that cohabiting with her is like "living in film school." On the countertop, a TV was playing "Arsenic and Old Lace," the 1944 film about elderly ladies who poison people. "Just something comforting," Johnson said.

Johnson comes from a large and argumentative family. (He is the eldest of twenty-five cousins.) The family revolved around his paternal grandfather, a self-made man who ran a home-building company. His father worked for his grandfather, as did his uncles. The grandparents, Johnson told me, "had money, and they did a lot to kind of make sure the family all stayed really close." Once, there was a raging fight over whether salt was a taste or a flavor. "It literally ended with people shouting 'Fuck you' at each other and storming out," Johnson told me. The scene is mirrored in "Knives Out," when Harlan's grandson ends an argument by pointing at each of his relatives. "As a matter of fact—eat shit, how's that?" he asks. "Eat shit, eat shit—eat shit—*definitely* eat shit." Johnson told me, "That's how our fights always end."

When Johnson was twelve, his father, Craig, moved the family to Orange County. Craig was still in home-building, but he liked the area's proximity to Hollywood, "the sunshine and the glamour of it," Johnson recalled. Craig was handsome, with a movie-star smile. He also had addiction issues and was sometimes a "scary guy." He wasn't abusive, but he could be a looming presence in the house. "I think my dad was always kind of a frustrated artist," Johnson said. "He always wanted to make movies." Johnson's parents separated when he was eighteen, and, for a time, he stopped speaking to his father. "I had a lot of anger toward him," he said. They eventually reconciled, and when Craig accidentally died while intoxicated, years later, Johnson was bereft. "I loved him so much, but it was always complicated," he said.

As a teen-ager, Johnson was absorbed into the politically conservative Christian youth culture of the area. "My whole perspective on the world was framed through the lens of a relationship with God," he told me. His faith began to slip away when he left for college, and he spent much of his twenties trying to replace it with something else: Carl Jung, magic shows. He missed the immersive, all-consuming world view that his religion had given him. "That's a dragon I'll be chasing the rest of my life," he told me.

Johnson went to the University of Southern California, where he tried repeatedly to get into the film school. (He was accepted in his junior year.) After graduating, he found work filming promos for the Disney Channel. "I was in L.A., kind of feeling trapped," he said. For years, he struggled to get his first feature, "Brick," made. Part of the difficulty was that the story was undeniably weird. "Brick" is a noirish detective tale in which the detective is a teen-ager named Brendan who attends a bucolic California high school. There are next to no adults, and the characters speak in dense jargon, like Dashiell Hammett cosplay. "Quit your yappin' and fix me one," a slinky popular girl tells Brendan in one scene. Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who eventually played Brendan, said, of reading the script, "The whole time, I was wondering, What is this?" Tonally, it was peculiar. It seemed like it might be a parody, yet the violence was realistic and gruesome.

Eventually, someone sent the script to Bergman, the producer. Johnson had been trying to raise a few million dollars to get the film made, but Bergman told him that he was going about it backward. "He said, 'What you do is you figure out how much you can get your hands on, and then you figure out how to make your movie for that,'" Johnson recalled. His family donated three hundred thousand dollars to the project, and he filmed the movie at his former high school, San Clemente High. The actor Noah Segan recalled Johnson moving furniture around in his living room to host rehearsals, and making burgers for the cast.

Some critics found "Brick," which was released in 2005, overwrought. The *Times* wrote that the film's "ham-handed reliance on period argot not only wears thin; it keeps the characters, such as they are, at a chilly distance." When I first watched it, I kept expecting the story to take a comedic turn. (It doesn't.) The female characters were mostly femme fatales, or dead. But there was something mesmerizing about watching hard-boiled teen-agers beat the shit out of one another. It was like holding a slanted mirror up to your worst, most raw days in high school. "Brick" won a Special

Jury Prize at Sundance, but Johnson shied away from the attention. "He was just, like, 'I just want to make another movie,'" Bergman said.

One afternoon, Johnson suggested that we take a drive. He loves driving in L.A. and works out many of his plots on the road. "The vastness, the flatness of the city, means that you just get continual vistas and strange angles of view," he said, as we sped off toward the freeway. We passed a psychic's office and a Scientology building—strange angles—before arriving at an Italian restaurant called Little Dom's, where Johnson often writes. We settled into a booth. A page from the notebook where he first outlined "Knives Out" is headed "1:48 pm Little Doms."

Sometimes Johnson's interest in film history can get in his way. He always starts with genre as a framework, rather than with character or plot. This can lead to movies that feel overstuffed, as if the mechanics of form were competing with the emotional heart of the film. After "Brick," Johnson made "The Brothers Bloom," a con-man caper that follows a pair of brothers—Adrien Brody and Mark Ruffalo—as they scam their way through Europe. Johnson told me that he had tried to put everything he loved into one film. The result was rambling, like a charming yet sweaty mixtape. It flopped. The *Times* called it a "fancy, not-quite-two-hour stunt." "At the time, it felt like getting a black eye," Johnson said.

His next film, a time-travelling epic called "Looper," was tighter, with a sense of humor about its limitations. Gordon-Levitt plays an assassin hired to kill criminals who have been sent back in time. At one point, he meets an older version of himself, played by Bruce Willis, at a diner. "Have you done all this already, as me?" Gordon-Levitt asks. Willis responds, "I don't want to talk about time-travel shit, because if we start talking about it then we're gonna be here all day talking about it and making diagrams with straws."

"Looper" positioned Johnson for a leap into blockbusters. In 2017, he wrote and directed "Star Wars: Episode VIII—The Last Jedi." Starting the film was difficult. Johnson's father had recently died, and he was flooded with memories of seeing "Star Wars" with him as a child. "He was definitely a ghost throughout the whole process," he told me. To outsiders, the film had the predictable fun of a Disneyland ride. But, in the "Star Wars" universe, Johnson's choices were rogue. Luke Skywalker was a hermit living on a remote island. Rey, the main character, seemed to be a nobody. A small but vocal group objected to the diversity of Johnson's cast. Some fans petitioned to purge the episode from the "Star Wars" canon. Still, the movie grossed more than a billion dollars. Afterward, people started recognizing Johnson on the street. "Before that, he didn't really feel to me like a famous person," Longworth said.

After "The Last Jedi," Johnson surprised many people by announcing that he wanted to make a murder mystery. The genre had fallen out of favor. It seemed dusty and cozy, like something your grandmother would watch while getting over a cold. "People were skeptical," Bergman told me. "'Who's watching murder mysteries?'" But Johnson had been sitting on the idea for years. The central premise—a wealthy patriarch dies, leaving his family to fight over his money—was "like a hypothetical scenario of what could happen in his family," Longworth told me. Many relatives had been employed by Johnson's grandfather, and they had all been in thrall to his generosity. Growing up, Johnson had feared his grandfather's death. He told me that he'd wanted to explore how, "once money enters the conversation, it can poison the well."

In 2018, Johnson was on vacation with Longworth in Turks and Caicos when Daniel Craig got in touch. He had read a script for the film and asked if they could meet in upstate New York, where Craig was staying. Johnson got in a speedboat, and then on a plane, and then in a car to get to the meeting. ("I was annoyed," Longworth told me.) The meeting was unnecessary: Craig had already decided that he wanted to do the film. He plays Benoit Blanc as brilliant, moral, and a little vain, with a love for fine linen suits. He worked with an accent coach to develop Blanc's deep Southern drawl. "The thumbs-up from Rian is just sort of this giggle that happens from behind the monitor," Craig told me. He said that when he heard that reaction to Blanc's voice he thought, "O.K., we're good to go."

"Knives Out" has a firelit quality. The Thrombeys' turreted house is red brick, and filled with talismanic objects. The Thrombeys are delightfully awful, trading barbs as easily as another family might pass food around a Thanksgiving table. Johnson had wanted the mystery to be "set in the current social climate," he told me, "and to engage with that in the way that Agatha Christie did with her time." There are references to "Hamilton" ("I saw it at the Public," someone says smugly) and to Donald Trump ("He's an asshole, but maybe an asshole's what we needed"). The cringiest interactions are between the family and the "help," including Harlan's nurse, Marta.

Marta, played by Ana de Armas, is at the center of Johnson's puzzle. (Spoilers ahead.) After a party, while Harlan and Marta are playing the Chinese strategy game Go, Marta realizes that she has accidentally given him a lethal dose of morphine. Harlan uses his final minutes to devise a plan for her to evade suspicion in his death which includes slitting his own throat. All this happens in the first third of the film. When I first watched it, in a theatre, the audience gasped when the cause of Harlan's demise was revealed so early. An exquisite tension formed: we were sympathetic to Marta's plight, yet we also wanted the satisfaction of seeing Blanc solve the case.

"Knives Out" blew through its profit estimates. A sweater worn by one of Harlan's grandsons, played by Chris Evans, went viral. By the time Johnson finished the script for the second Blanc film, "Glass Onion," the pandemic was in full swing, and theatres were closed. A bidding war transpired among streamers. Netflix ultimately bought the rights to two sequels for four hundred and sixty-five million dollars, one of its largest-ever acquisitions. *Variety* quoted an anonymous losing bidder who said, "There's no way to explain it. The world has gone mad."

But, at the time, streamers were desperate for quality content. And audiences, in the midst of a global crisis, were yearning for tidy solutions—for a detective to make sense of it all. The director Karyn Kusama, a friend of Johnson's, told me that on vacations with their families she and Johnson will spend hours puzzling over the motivations of others. (They also spend hours on actual jigsaw puzzles.) "I

feel like his work is his personal effort to get closer to comprehension," Kusama said. "Some measure of control over an out-of-control, irrational world."

In a murder mystery, a character can die in any number of horrible ways: death by poisoning, by electrocution, by candlestick. Any heavy household object or lethal mushroom will do. An icicle is not above suspicion. A good whodunnit should create "the illusion of solvability," Johnson told me. But a great one must transcend the dry work of clue gathering. Alfred Hitchcock hated whodunnits. "They're simply clever puzzles, aren't they?" he remarked. "They're intellectual rather than emotional, and emotion is the only thing that keeps my audience interested."

When Johnson wrote "Knives Out," he was thinking about the flaws of the murder-mystery genre. "It's very possible to write one of these and have the entire thing be based on surprise as opposed to suspense," he said. Surprise is a one-off, like a jump scare. Suspense lasts. Johnson envisioned a structure that resembled a capital "H": a whodunnit bridged by a Hitchcockian thriller. "Suddenly, you have somebody that the audience cares about who's in this nightmare situation," he said. At the end, the film returns to the whodunnit form with a scene in which the detective lays out the case.

In all his films, Johnson walks a fine line between wonky puzzle-making and telling a story that moves people. Stacy Chariton, a friend who helps Johnson fine-tune his scripts, told me that his "puzzle-maker mind can sometimes get a little carried away." This has become a meta-theme of the series, with Blanc as an avatar for Johnson. Chariton continued, "Blanc can sometimes forget why he's solving the mystery. He has to be reminded of what's actually at stake." Johnson agreed: "You can't fall under the delusion as a writer that all this clever shit you come up with is going to be actually satisfying for an audience."

In "Wake Up Dead Man," Johnson has tried a fiendishly difficult type of whodunnit: an "impossible crime" story. A classic setup: a man goes into his room and locks it from the inside. Later, he's found dead with a knife in his back. How did it happen? The danger of an impossible-crime story is that, as Johnson put it, the endings "are inevitably a little bit of a letdown." In the golden age of detective fiction, in the twenties and thirties, the master of the impossible crime was John Dickson Carr. "Why are we dubious when we hear the explanation of the locked room?" Carr wrote. "Not in the least because we are incredulous, but simply because in some vague way we are *disappointed*."

Johnson said that when he told Otto Penzler, who runs the Mysterious Bookshop, in lower Manhattan, that he was planning to do an impossible-crime story, Penzler raised an eyebrow and said, "It's not supernatural, is it?" In fact, like most of Carr's books, the film does gesture toward the unexplainable. It raises the possibility that Monsignor Wicks was killed by some otherworldly event—a choice that I found affecting, in a spooky, tales-around-the-campfire way. Other aspects of the film fell flat for me. The motives of the various suspects are less convincing than those of the characters in the first "Knives Out." The details of the killing felt tedious at times. But I also found the film more heartfelt than the previous two, with an appealing earthiness, as if Johnson were examining the underside of a stone or the gnarled roots of a tree.

Johnson set "Wake Up Dead Man" around a parish in part to allow him to interrogate his relationship with his faith. Jud and Blanc sit on opposite ends of the faith spectrum: someone who admires mysteries and someone who solves them. Johnson told me that each character—even the repugnant ones—is a facet of his own personality. When Blanc argues with Jud about religion, as he does throughout the film, Johnson is arguing with himself.

In October, Netflix flew the cast to London for the film's U.K. première. Before the screening, they gathered in a conference room at a performance venue south of the Thames. The vibe was convivial and giddy, like a summer-camp reunion. Craig swept into the room and ordered a beer. Glenn Close and Andrew Scott embraced, Scott balancing a champagne glass. Close was wearing a sparkly jumpsuit and black velvet gloves.

Bergman had described Johnson as an introvert. But, when he arrived, he seemed relaxed. ("Flow with the river," he told me, multiple times, moving through the crowd.) He tapped Close on the shoulder and she gasped. They discussed a snippet of Andrew Lloyd Webber's music that is used in the film. "I think I paid him a lot!" Johnson said. Bergman appeared, looking harried. The film "played insane" in Toronto, he said, but British audiences were more reserved. Would they laugh? (They managed.) Josh O'Connor was running late. "He's been on a train," a publicist said. "We tried a helicopter." When he arrived, he held out his hands in apology. "Oh, shit!" Johnson said. O'Connor told me that the atmosphere Johnson had created on set reminded him of a theatre company. "You're all mucking in together," he said.

For all the talk of a higher power in "Wake Up Dead Man," Johnson is still the one pulling the strings. Kusama brought up a scene in which Jud and Blanc are speaking inside the church. A ray of light suddenly filters through a window, and the mood lifts. Kusama interpreted this change as a spontaneous flash of beauty. When she mentioned it to Johnson, he told her that he had rigged the lighting. "The fucker engineered it!" she said. "Those are the moments I see in his movies where I feel like he's at his best. Where he does something very simple, and elemental, and sly, and yet it's actually quite hard to achieve."

After the London première, I thought back to our time in L.A. Johnson has a subtle way of retaining control. One afternoon, we visited a house that he uses as an office. A bookshelf held dozens of Agatha Christie novels, and a banjo hung on a wall. He asked if I'd like to play Go, the board game that Harlan plays with Marta in "Knives Out." He began laying out the stones. Very quickly, his pieces had surrounded mine. "Oh, dear," he said. Then, skillfully, he let me win. ♦

THE POLITICAL SCENE

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Laura Loomer has the President's ear. Who has hers?

BY ANTONIA HITCHENS

Laura Loomer has long believed that she is some sort of modern-day oracle. For years, she would scream in public places, trying to get people to listen to what she knew. Usually they would send in security to remove her. One afternoon in 2018, she was crying in a bathroom at the U.S. Capitol after being hustled out of a hearing room, where she had interrupted a meeting of the House Energy and Commerce Committee to warn its members about a conspiracy to steal the 2020 election from Donald Trump. Her dress had ripped in the scuffle, and her underwear was showing. "Like Cassandra, the Trojan priestess of Apollo in Greek mythology who was cursed to utter true prophecies, I have been given the gift of prophecy," she later wrote. "But I am a prophet of doom whose warnings of disaster are condemned and ignored."

As Loomer saw it, civil disobedience was the only tool she had left to save Western civilization from the menaces of immigration, Antifa, feminism, liberalism, Islamic terrorism, the Chinese, wokeness. She had already been kicked off most mainstream social-media platforms for things like "hateful conduct" and being a "dangerous individual." She took to carrying a bullhorn around and contemplated driving her car off a cliff. In 2020, she ran for Congress, in the Florida district that included Mar-a-Lago, but she couldn't make a candidate Facebook account or use PayPal to raise money. Her Democratic opponent refused to say her name, instead referring to her as a woman with the darkest heart she had ever known. Loomer lost the election by twenty points. She descended even further into what she called her "oubliette." Increasingly, she had the sense that she was taking part in an ongoing conversation with Trump, almost like a shared inner monologue. "I don't want to say, 'Oh, President Trump is me,' or, 'I see myself in Trump.' But I do. I mean, I do," she told me recently. "Every time I listen to him speak, I feel like I'm listening to myself speak to myself. Does that make sense?"

We were at the memorial service for Charlie Kirk, the right-wing activist, at a football stadium in Glendale, Arizona. (Kirk, who founded the youth organization Turning Point USA, had just been assassinated while speaking at a campus event in Utah.) The service, which was attended by nearly a hundred thousand mourners, began with three hours of live Christian rock. A man dragged a large wooden cross around the arena; babies wore noise-cancelling headphones while their parents swayed to the music. Loomer, who is thirty-two, casts herself as the President's chief loyalty enforcer. She lives her life largely online—her Twitter account was reinstated in 2022, after Elon Musk purchased the company—where she posts long threads questioning the credentials and allegiances of Trump Administration officials, among other suspects. It's always a bit disorienting to see her in person. She is slight and fairly sedate. At the memorial service, she wore a blue blouse, black slacks, and white loafers. "Since they tried killing Trump, I try not to go to events," she said. "I've just been hiding in my hotel room."

For twenty hours a day, from about 5 A.M. to 1 A.M., Loomer releases torrents of accusations and invective, an infinite scroll of alleged misdeeds and nefarious connections. She writes with the urgency of an Amber Alert, or of an incensed traveller tweeting at United Airlines in the middle of a flight delay. ("NEW: Anti-Trump, Islamist, Pakistani Immigrant State Department Employee Who Attacked Trump's Islamic Travel Ban And Advocated For Islamic Foot Washing Stations At @StateDept Still Employed At US State Department Under Trump's Administration. SHE JUST DELETED HER LINKEDIN!") Though many of Loomer's posts read like empty threats being pushed out into the void, they often reach more than a million people. She has credited herself with purging dozens of people from both the Administration and high-ranking roles in the private sector. Her motives apparently range from a desire to save the country to unabashed, petty vindictiveness; the two often overlap. She has a receptive ear in the White House. Despite never working for Trump in an official capacity—a job offer was rescinded after staffers opposed bringing her on—he has, since retaking the Presidency, allowed her to "come and visit occasionally," Loomer told me. Trump, she insisted, is the only "other person on this planet who I think can actually empathize with me and who I can actually empathize with. I really do believe that." He recently told her, "You're great, and you're difficult."

On the floor of the stadium, the music was so loud that it was almost impossible to hear anything. I stood behind a woman who was swirling her white dress around before falling to her knees to pray. Above, I could see Trump in his glass-encased skybox. Two planes full of Administration officials, practically the entire Cabinet, had come from Washington for the funeral, as had a cross-section of the wider MAGA universe—from Tucker Carlson to the guy who shows up at rallies dressed as the border wall. Near the stage, where V.I.P. guests were filtering through the crowd to take their seats in a roped-off section, a woman on a motorized scooter backed up to hug Loomer and congratulate her on her work. Two teen-agers in Trump hats asked her for selfies. "I love when you drop the teasers and it's, like, 'I'm going to kill you later!'" one said. (Loomer will often post a red siren emoji with a directive to keep watching her account for a bombshell reveal.) Jacob Wells, a founder of GiveSendGo, an online fund-raising platform that Loomer has used to solicit donations for her "lawfare fund," came up to shake her hand.

Sean Curran, the director of the Secret

Loomer casts herself as Donald Trump's chief loyalty enforcer. "If you're Loomered, you're in deep trouble," he has said.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHILIP MONTGOMERY

Service, approached the V.I.P. area, flanked by a coterie of other agents. Loomer recognized him immediately; Curran had jumped on Trump during the attempted assassination in Butler, Pennsylvania.

"Oh, my God, that's the hero that saved President Trump!" Loomer said.

She went up to say hello. They, too, hugged and took a photo together.

"I'd love to talk to you sometime," Curran said. "I'll give you my contact." He pressed a Secret Service commemorative coin into her palm.

Loomer has described her work by quoting Plato: "No one is more hated than he who speaks the truth." At the memorial, at least in some corners, she was being received with reverence. "People who are entrusted with the life of the President value the work that I'm doing," she told me. She radiated a sense of weariness that this grand task, of being Trump's protector and soothsayer, fell to her. "Why is it that I'm the one that has to identify people who are actively working against him?"

One afternoon in September, Mark Warner, the Democratic senator from Virginia, was scheduled to visit the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency for a classified oversight briefing and a meeting with Vice Admiral Frank Whitworth, the agency's head. "Why are the Pentagon and IC"—intelligence community—"allowing for the Director of an Intel agency to host a rabid ANTI-TRUMP DEMOCRAT SENATOR," Loomer posted in advance of the visit. "Clearly, a lot of Deep State actors are being given a pass in the Intel community to continue their efforts to sabotage Trump." Warner's meeting was abruptly cancelled. "I was in disbelief," Warner, who is the ranking member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, told me. "You've got an individual that the Trump Administration was reluctant to hire because she was so far out, yet seems to have unbelievable access to call the shots and then brag about it on her social-media feed." (Loomer told Warner to "cry more, bitch!")

Loomer had started to attack Warner the previous week, after he visited an ICE detention center. (Members of Congress are allowed to conduct such visits for oversight purposes, but many have been turned away or arrested.) "I don't follow Ms. Loomer's tweeting," Warner told me. "But I was told that she'd gone on a screech for some time, calling me out." He wasn't sure whether to categorize her as a "trolling blogger" or a shadow member of the Administration. "When Laura Loomer tweets, Trump's Cabinet jumps," he said. Some of Warner's Republican friends on the Hill had been attacked by her, too. Warner went on, "She's an equal-opportunity offender."

By then, Loomer's interference in government matters had become a regular occurrence. In early April, Mike Waltz, then the national-security adviser, walked into the Oval Office to find Loomer sitting across from the President, in the midst of a presentation that questioned the allegiances of a number of members of his National Security Council. After the meeting, Trump hugged Loomer, then promptly fired six members of the N.S.C. He also fired General Timothy Haugh, the head of the National Security Agency and of U.S. Cyber Command. According to Loomer, Haugh, a thirty-three-year veteran of the Air Force, was close with General Mark Milley, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, whom Trump had appointed and then clashed with during his first term. Wendy Noble, Haugh's deputy, was also fired; she was apparently connected to another Trump critic, James Clapper, Barack Obama's director of National Intelligence.

Loomer wanted Waltz gone, too—he had been tagged as a neocon who, in her estimation, was contravening Trump's desires. She was also concerned about his judgment: his deputy, Alex Wong, was married to a career prosecutor who had worked at the Department of Justice during the Biden Administration. A few weeks later, they both departed. Loomer posted, "SCALP."

According to three people with direct knowledge of Waltz's ouster, Loomer had nothing to do with it. "It wasn't working out with him," someone with close ties to the White House told me. "She ends up getting the credit for it because she's the one out there talking." (Weeks before, Waltz had inadvertently added Jeffrey Goldberg, the editor of *The Atlantic*, to a Signal chat in which members of the Administration were discussing plans to bomb Yemen.) Still, White House officials—and operatives across Washington—have no choice but to deal with her. "I was on an hour-long Zoom call, which probably cost, when you think of how much everyone was getting paid, at least fifty thousand dollars, to talk about what to do about Loomer," a consultant who works with the Administration told me. Her screeds are routinely cited in major newspapers and footnoted in lawsuits; her targets range from low-level government employees to the Pope. Recently, Loomer posted that an official at Customs and Border Protection was "Anti-Trump, pro-Open Borders, and Pro-DEI." Three days later: "Now he's FIRED." She described Lisa Monaco, Microsoft's new head of global affairs—and Joe Biden's Deputy Attorney General—as a "rabid Trump hater," and demanded that the company's government contracts, which total billions of dollars, be revoked. "Wait till President Trump sees this," she wrote. Not long afterward, Trump called for Monaco to be fired. Loomer picked up the baton, tagging Satya Nadella, Microsoft's C.E.O. "Are you going to comply? Or continue to be two-faced?" she wrote. "How dare you."

Loomer's influence extends beyond the realm of personnel. In August, a group of Palestinian children who had been severely injured in the war in Gaza arrived in San Francisco after the State Department issued around two hundred temporary visas for medical treatment. Loomer posted a video of the children being received with flowers at the airport. "Why are any Islamic invaders coming into the US under the Trump admin?" she wrote. "Who signed off on these visas? They should be fired." She tagged Marco Rubio, the Secretary of State, who was with Trump on Air Force One, having just met with Vladimir Putin in Alaska to try to broker an end to the war in Ukraine. "Look, President Trump has said he wants to crack down on Islamic terror, that he wants to crack down on Hamas," Loomer told me. "I'll tag whoever's in charge of the agency, the offending agency, and I'll say, 'Are you going to be prepared to tell President Trump how this is in compliance with his agenda?'" She and Rubio spoke that evening. "He took a hands-on approach," Loomer told me. The next day, the Administration suspended all visitor visas for anyone from Gaza. Republican lawmakers celebrated online. "I'm not saying Rubio is trying to run a

fast one on Trump, but obviously there's a lot of people at the State Department who shouldn't be working there," she said. "Bad actors."

During Trump's first term, his agenda was frequently stymied by what MAGA acolytes consider disloyal political appointees and deep-state bureaucrats. "Trump One was a disappointment in a lot of ways," a strategist with close ties to the Administration told me. "People got let in that were not aligned. Everybody is super psycho afraid of being screwed over again." This time, rooting out perceived internal enemies has become an obsession. Cabinet secretaries have required staff members to take random polygraph tests. A high-level Administration official told me that, during one of the interviews for her position, her interlocutor opened his mouth to reveal that he had a MAGA tattoo on the underside of his lower lip. "It's over the top, but it's the currency of the realm," the high-level official said. As the strategist put it, "We've fought too hard to get here—that's just the feeling that permeates everything." At dinner one night, a lawyer with ties to the Administration told me, "We took power, but we're in a cold war, and we may not win."

Loomer thrives in this paranoid ambience. "I am screenshotting everyone's posts and I'm going to deliver them in a package to President Trump so he sees who is truly with him and who isn't," she wrote recently. (Like Trump, she prints everything out.) Her vetting crusades have brought about a new Washington colloquialism. "Bro, I got Loomered," a current Administration official said over drinks. David Sacks, Trump's A.I. czar, mentioned on a podcast that A.I. critics ought to be "Loomered." Trump himself has said, "If you're Loomered, you're in deep trouble. That's the end of your career, in a sense." Loomer describes her project as a constant purge. "Every day, I find a new one," she told me. "It's never going to end."

Loomer was born in 1993 in Tucson, Arizona. Her father worked as a rheumatologist; her mother was a nurse. In her memoir, "Loomered: How I Became the Most Banned Woman in the World," she says that she has worried about threats to the country since 9/11, when she was eight years old. In the aftermath of the attacks, she tried to see "the equal value in every person, regardless of skin color or faith," but found that the inclusive premises she was taught in school rang false. (Muslims: "They don't make it easy!" she wrote.)

Growing up, her household was generally conservative. Loomer has two brothers, one of whom suffers from schizophrenia, and when she was twelve her father enrolled her and the other brother in a private boarding school to keep them away from what could be a violent home environment. The school, on a ranch in the Arizona desert, was selective and remote. (Ronald Reagan and James Stewart sent their children there.) It had an internet curfew and almost no cell service. "Fear of being cut off from the world has stayed with me my whole life," Loomer wrote. She moved across the country to attend Mount Holyoke College, a women's liberal-arts school in Massachusetts. It was not a good fit. "Militant Marxist lesbians who, as soon as they got wind of my politics, wanted my head on a pike," she wrote. She transferred to Barry University, a Catholic college in Miami. It wasn't much better: "An impossible nightmare of woke from which I barely escaped without having my life ruined and almost going to jail." In her senior year, she vehemently protested an interfaith 9/11 memorial service that included Muslim prayers, which she found deeply offensive. "The administration feared that I was either mentally ill or that I was in need of an urgent spiritual intervention," she wrote.

Loomer's outburst garnered enough attention that, in 2014, she was invited to a yearly retreat hosted by the late conservative writer David Horowitz, whose organization centers on opposing "efforts of the radical left and its Islamist allies to destroy American values and disarm this country." Candace Owens was among the other aspirational activists who got their start there. Horowitz also mentored Stephen Miller, now a deputy chief of staff in the White House, whom he met when Miller was a teen-ager in Santa Monica. (Later, under Horowitz's supervision, Miller set up an "Islamo-fascism awareness week" at Duke.)

At the conference, which was held at the Breakers hotel, in Palm Beach, Loomer saw a presentation by James O'Keefe, the founder of the undercover-sting outfit Project Veritas. "I loved his videos, especially the video where he dressed up like Osama bin Laden and crossed America's southern border with Mexico to emphasize our lack of border security," Loomer wrote. After the talk, she approached O'Keefe and told him that she would do anything to work at Project Veritas. She was so persistent that he was initially a little disturbed, thinking she was a mole who'd infiltrated the conference. "She appears to be functionally immune to fear, to shame, and to embarrassment," O'Keefe later wrote.

A month later, he summoned her to New York for a trial run. It was winter,

"You can turn off the flight tracker, Bill. We landed three days ago."

and Loomer had bronchitis and no warm clothes. O'Keefe's team gave her a script and a long-sleeved shirt fitted with a hidden camera. The target was Black Lives Matter activists—that summer, a Black man named Eric Garner had died after being put in a chokehold by an N.Y.P.D. officer, leading to protests around the city. Loomer managed to share a cab with Erica Garner, one of Eric's daughters, and secretly recorded her talking about Al Sharpton, who was organizing demonstrations on behalf of the family.

"So, what, you think Al Sharpton is kind of, like, a crook, in a sense?" Loomer asks.

"He's about this," Erica replies, rubbing her fingers together.

"He's about his money with you?"

"Yeah."

The cover of the New York *Post* read "ALL ABOUT THE MONEY." Loomer was hired. Soon she was baiting her own university by trying to start an "ISIS club"—Sympathetic Students in Support of the Islamic State—and recording her interactions with school administrators using her hidden camera. (The school was open to the idea, but tried to steer her away from putting ISIS in the name.) After her "exposé" was published, she was expelled and banned from campus. But Project Veritas implemented versions of her "ISIS club" script at colleges around the country. Trump, who was a few months away from announcing his run for President, heard about the videos on Sean Hannity's Fox News show and faxed a message to O'Keefe, asking him to come to Trump Tower. Loomer was in Florida dealing with her expulsion and had to miss the meeting. "I certainly couldn't have predicted how intertwined Donald J. Trump would later become in my life," she wrote. Her father, meanwhile, was crestfallen that there would be no college graduation for him to attend. (He could not be reached for comment.) "This won't matter," she told him. "You'll see. By the time I am twenty-eight, I will be in the Oval Office some way or another. I'm doing things my way."

After college, Loomer moved to New York to keep working with Project Veritas, and began to carry out political stunts full time. She defined her remit as "the legalized, livestreamed torture and ritual public humiliation of hypocritical elitist politicians and celebrities."

In the run-up to the 2016 election, Hillary Clinton became a favored target. Loomer started sneaking into her fund-raisers. "People think political royalty like the Clintons and the Trumps are untouchable and impossible to reach," she wrote. "That's where most people are wrong." Her advice: act confident, use hair dye and glasses if you need to disguise your appearance, and go for the "ninja aesthetic." Don't worry about the Secret Service. At one event, Loomer, with her hidden camera, filmed Huma Abedin, a longtime Clinton aide, talking about Clinton's commitment to admitting refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war. Two weeks before the election, Trump tweeted, "Wow, just came out on secret tape that Crooked Hillary wants to take in as many Syrians as possible. We cannot let this happen." (Loomer has maintained that it was her video that "undeniably shaped the outcome of the Presidential election.")

In 2017, Loomer confronted Clinton at a launch event for her book "What Happened," Clinton's election postmortem. Loomer was recovering from a nose job and was still meant to be wearing a cast on her face; she asked her plastic surgeon to take it off early, covered her bruises in layers of concealer, and headed to the Barnes & Noble in Union Square. At the book-signing table, she grilled Clinton on Benghazi, the "missing e-mails," and a former staff member whose death has been the subject of various conspiracy theories. "You know what, I'm so sorry you believe things that are untrue," Clinton responded, before Loomer was removed by security.

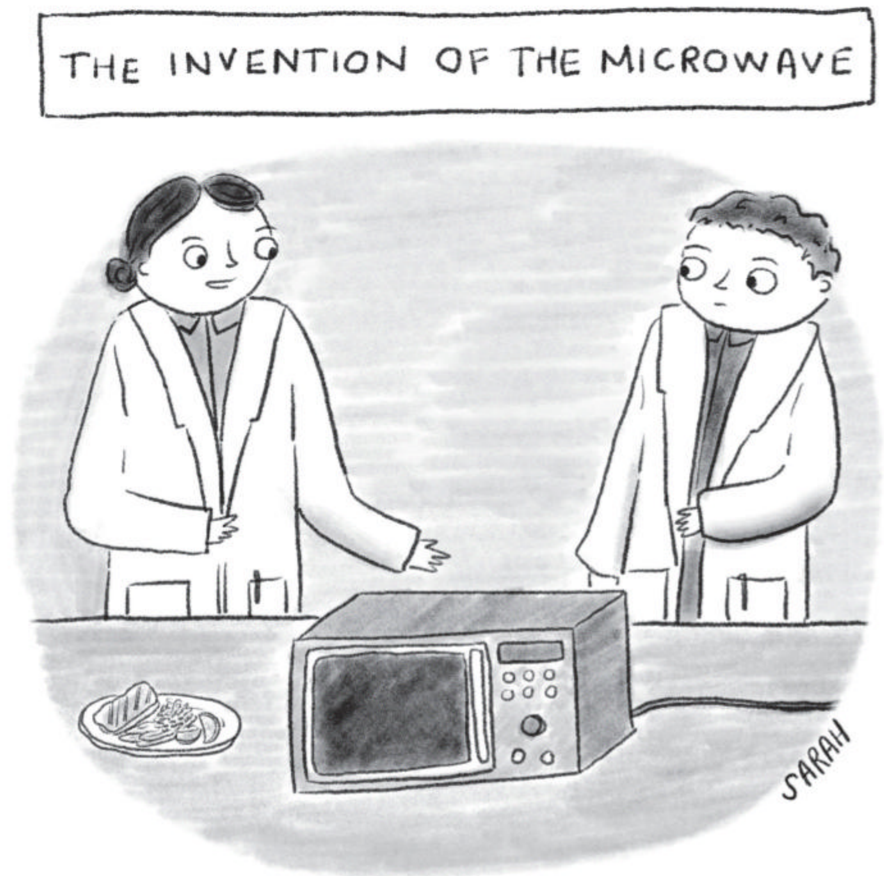
The next year, during the midterms, Loomer, who identifies as a "proud Islamophobe," travelled the country "investigating jihadi candidates." After the election, she was banned from Twitter for posting that Ilhan Omar, the Democratic congresswoman from Minnesota, was "anti Jewish" and "pro Sharia," which the site labelled as hate speech. Loomer was twenty-five. "I will never truly recover," she wrote. Her life's work had been "incinerated by gleeful vandals." She went to dinner in Fort Lauderdale with Trump's longtime adviser Roger Stone, who had become one of her mentors. He told her that she had to carry on. A few days after the dinner, while live-streaming, she handcuffed herself to the front door of Twitter's New York headquarters, wearing a Star of David to convey, as she put it, "the fact that Jack Dorsey and Big Tech were behaving like Nazis with the same type of censorship tactics Hitler and the Gestapo utilized in 1930s Germany." She threw the key to the handcuffs down a storm drain and yelled into a megaphone. (After several hours, police used a bolt cutter to free her.)

Other bans followed: Facebook, Instagram, PayPal, Venmo, GoFundMe. (She'd already been kicked off Lyft, Uber, and Uber Eats.) Loomer entered what she described as a "deep dark pit of depression and anxiety." She asked a prominent MAGA lawyer to help her sue various tech platforms. "This was right after a woman had gone to YouTube and shot it up," the lawyer told me. "Laura was, like, 'I'm going to be like that woman!' She was threatening to murder everyone, and then commit suicide. She was insane." (Loomer told me that she would never "incite violence" and that she brought up the YouTube shooting to illustrate how deplatforming could cause someone to "snap.") She felt like she was enduring a form of drug withdrawal. "Sometimes I worry that I will be alone forever as a result of being digitally erased in a world where all aspects of life seem to take place online," she wrote.

Loomer soon figured out a way to get herself back into the conversation. One night in 2019, furious that she couldn't post about "selfish open-borders Democrats," she decided to pull another stunt. The next morning, she drove from Tucson to Napa Valley, hired several day laborers, and instructed them to set up a tent in the front yard of Nancy Pelosi's vacation home. She used zip ties to hang up pictures of Americans who had allegedly been murdered by immigrants. (The presentation looked quite a lot like the mug shots of "illegals" that Trump subsequently displayed at his rallies, and

then, earlier this year, on the White House lawn.) Infowars broadcast her stunt, which went viral. "There is no feeling more exhilarating than seeing your name trend as the number one topic in the world on a site you're banned from," Loomer wrote. "It makes you feel supernatural, like you're coming back from the dead." She claims that Trump saw and "loved" the video, and that he was inspired to replicate it on a larger scale by having ICE deposit immigrant detainees in sanctuary cities. (This plan never came to fruition, though Republican governors later picked it up during the Biden Administration.) "That's when I realized, Donald J. Trump wasn't just my president, he was also a fan!" Loomer wrote.

Stone had identified Loomer as a "young person who would say and do these wild things," a Trump official told me. "When Trump needed to build kind of an untraditional cadre outside of the establishment Party, we leaned on people like her." In 2020, Karen Giorno, a former Trump adviser who ran his Florida operation through the 2016 primary, was tapped to put together a congressional campaign for Loomer. Giorno imposed some conditions: don't lie about other candidates, and prioritize your mental health. (Loomer had been in therapy for what she described as "PTSD I have developed as a result of being silenced.") Giorno bought her an English bulldog, which Loomer named Loomer.



"People will become so dependent on this device that inconsistently heats up their food that they will be lost in any kitchen that doesn't have one."

Doug Dechert, a conservative writer and consultant, met Loomer at a restaurant in Palm Beach at the start of her campaign. "We agreed intensely on the issue of the Muslim invasion," he told me. "I opened my Rolodex to her." Loomer courted wealthy patrons, including Julie Fancelli, the heir to the Publix grocery-store fortune, who was a main financial backer of the Stop the Steal rally that preceded the January 6th Capitol riot. Caroline Wren, Trump's former campaign-finance director, said, of Loomer, "The MAGA donors love her."

Loomer lost the election. Two years later, she ran again. Trump declined to endorse her; he told Giorno that she was too controversial. Loomer picked fights with Trump-backed candidates in Florida and alienated several political operatives, some of whom went on to work in the White House. "Her ability to shoot at her own team gets tiresome," the Trump official told me. She started to say that she planned to lead a hostile takeover of the G.O.P. When she lost the second race, she declared victory anyway, claiming voter fraud and election interference. ("YOU DO NOT CONCEDE WHEN THERE IS THEFT INVOLVED!")

This was one of several issues on which she aligned with Trump. Loomer had felt a kinship with him since high school, when she watched him on Fox News. Back then, she relished that "he was one of the first people that had the courage to speak the truth about Barack Hussein Obama being a Muslim with a fake birth certificate." Now she was convinced that their desires and struggles—the stolen elections, the deplatforming—were intertwined. "I see my fight as his fight," she told me. "They did to Trump what they did to me. And they did it to me first." In March, 2023, Trump invited Loomer to Mar-a-Lago. (She had just Loomered a book event for Ron DeSantis, the Florida governor who was emerging as a challenger to Trump in the upcoming Republican Presidential primary.) Trump had occasionally reposted her content on Truth Social, and she had screamed at him from rope lines to get his attention, but this was the first time that they met formally. "He's my favorite person in the world," Loomer told me.

I first encountered Loomer in real life in Iowa, in the snowy week leading up to the 2024 Presidential caucuses. I was at the restaurant in the Hotel Fort Des Moines when she stormed in to film DeSantis's campaign spokeswoman, Christina Pushaw—"Are you excited to lose?"—who was eating dinner. People glanced over but mostly carried on with their meals. When DeSantis still looked like a viable alternative to Trump, Loomer

was at work on projects such as accusing his wife of "exaggerating" her breast-cancer diagnosis to generate sympathy for his candidacy. "Even people who supported Trump were not being vindictive to DeSantis supporters, but she was, and that got her extra points with Trump," the consultant who works with the Administration told me. "She was fanatically loyal." She flew on Trump Force One from Florida to Iowa, and then followed the campaign to New Hampshire. After DeSantis dropped out, Trump called Loomer to thank her.

That fall, she accompanied Trump to Philadelphia for his debate with Kamala Harris, in which he claimed that Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, were eating their neighbors' cats and dogs. In the previous weeks, Loomer had already been, as she put it to me, "holding people accountable" for the alleged pet-eating on her show, "Loomer Unleashed!," which streams twice weekly on Rumble. When I talked to her after the debate, she was cagey about confirming whether she and Trump had spoken about the matter. "Whether or not we did, didn't it work?" she asked. The Trump official told me, "There were moments where you could see 'Laura could help with this.' "

Still, in the final months of Trump's campaign, seemingly everyone in MAGA world, even those on the furthest fringes, acknowledged that Loomer felt like a liability. Reporters started to ask Trump whether he was going to distance himself from her. That autumn, when I saw him at a campaign event on one of his golf courses, outside Los Angeles, he said, "Laura has to say what she wants. She's a free spirit."

This June, I ran into her in Washington, D.C., at the Waldorf Astoria, the former Trump Hotel. Though she comes to D.C. on occasion, she mostly stays home, in Pensacola, Florida, with her live-in boyfriend and her four dogs. (Loomer, the gift from Giorno, is now six years old. When we spoke on the phone, I often heard Loomer saying "Loomer, stop that" or "Loomer, come here.") As we said hello to each other on the hotel's stairs, Jacob Helberg, an Under-Secretary of State, walked by. "Your stuff has been great," he said. Since Trump took office, her "scalps" had been steadily accumulating. "I think that President Trump knows who's been for him and who has been against him," she told me. "I mean, I would hope, right? I think there's some cases where maybe he isn't as aware as one would think." Loomer is deeply aware. On the phone with me one afternoon, she offhandedly listed a number of people she was keeping on her radar. An Arizona politician whom Trump "half endorsed" had at one point donated to Chris Christie. Dusty Johnson, a Republican congressman from South Dakota, was only proposing legislation about the U.S. taking control of the Panama Canal, she said, because he wanted to paper over the fact that "he's a strong ally of Liz Cheney." They were all compromised, guilty by association. "Kevin McCarthy's son worked with a venture capitalist who was holding fund-raisers for Ron DeSantis," she went on. "From what I've seen, there really isn't much vetting going on."

Loomer sometimes casts her self-created role of "accountability enforcer" as no different from an investigative reporter informing the public. "I get demonized for it, which is kind of crazy," she told me. "They don't say Maggie

MODERN EUROPEAN

We shared today not even filthy weather
John Berryman, Sonnet 13

1

Although we speak, now, to each other in new ways
we can still meet here, I think. We always have.
Rain outside, my sky all whites and grays;
this week the leaves have started coming down.
I'm not sure where—a sea away, one hour—
you'll be right now; outside, I'm sure, a hike.
But I watch you, with a single, hedge-discovered flower
fill the tiny brown clay vase you love,
and move across my room, unspeaking, as I write,
and bend, like you have done, to two candles
standing in the fireplace, to give them light.

2

I don't want to forget this current sense
of being twinned, these two, concurrent, lives:
in one *I work and I remember*. Once
the other takes the wheel I'm by your window,
in the blue room, which you've left—as always—
open; a breeze for us to sleep through, wake to.
Midsummer, with all its bonfires, the scent stays
on the air long into morning, you told me,
later. I'd dreamed of you that night, and woke
as church bells rang for eight. A wood pigeon's
owl impression, incense in imaginary smoke.

3

We're good at tables, dinners, meeting across
little wooden spaces. I'm thinking of a lighthouse,
our walk along the sand; foam dross

where two seas met, and where we stood,
our black trousers rolled up to the knees.
Dinner after, *Modern European*,
all locally sourced; line-caught; white strawberries
in a blue bowl. A blanket round you, as wind
started to pick up, disarranging blond hair
into your eyes. The train back south, "home," I almost said.
Lifting an arm to trigger automatic doors, you parted air.

4

We're starting to carve out rituals, or at least our places.
The French café we can somehow never find,
for a champagne; the Orchard, its southern-facing,
sun-filled, mock beehive display. The barns
which we could picture full of music, our friends,
and fairy lights some evening. All our frequent
visits to Louisiana, which start to blend
together, except its Christmas restaurant fireplace,
hours before a storm. The purple mirror-room
we kissed in, to seem more part of eternity.
Coffees at your swimming spot, purple in your costume.

5

Sunset's getting earlier again. I'm sure you'll be heading
back soon from your day, whatever day it's been.
The flat will fill with the percussion of your sons, then bed-
negotiations; an hour or two on the green sofa after,
to yourself. Soon we'll speak, and soon we'll be in the same
place, where sunset might mean watching you
walk down along the Jutland strand, again,
into the sea, dipping low to let a wave roll over you,
then see you turn and walk back toward
me, squeezing out the water from your hair. I take salt
you'll taste of from my shelf, and put on our favorite record.

—*Declan Ryan*

Haberman is a national-security threat." Recently, the editor of a conservative magazine asked me, "What *is* Laura Loomer?" He knew who she was. "But is she a journalist? A company? A grifter? Can you be all?"

Around D.C., analogies abound—she was everything from Trump's Rasputin to the "MAGA Grand Inquisitor." A prominent D.C. lobbyist called her a "one-person Washington *Times*"; no, said a nominee for a senior Administration post, she was a "one-person wrecking crew." The nominee went on, "She's part loyal bagman, part Roy Cohn figure," referring to Trump's ruthless New York lawyer. ("I'm just a professional woman who supports President Trump," she told me. "And he's a very hospitable person.") Tucker Carlson told me that Loomer was "so poisonous, I don't like to speak her name." A former N.S.C. official compared her to Jiang Qing, a wife of Mao Zedong and his partner in enforcing the Cultural Revolution. "This histrionic, conspiratorial, and aggressive woman was the keeper of a list of those to be purged," he said. "She used her power to rain hell on her enemies, while also carrying out her fair share of personal vendettas." He went on, "She described herself as Mao's dog—absolute subservient loyalty, and of course she bit when he wanted her to."

Loomer thinks the most apt comparison is to Joseph McCarthy, a parallel she finds flattering. "I think people now realize he wasn't as crazy as they thought he was," she told me. "He's one of the most underrated and underappreciated political figures in history. He was trying to warn us about the rot and the infestation in our government and within our educational institutions. People acted like he was un-American for simply trying to protect America. Everything he said turned out to be true."

In September, at the Kirk memorial, Erika Kirk, Charlie's widow, said that she had forgiven the man who killed her husband. The crowd stood to applaud her, many in tears. "I could never feel that," Loomer told me. Kirk's assassin, she added, "deserves a bullet to the head." She preferred Trump's line: "I hate my opponent." Loomer told me that she had already been saying those words to herself before Trump took the stage. "I don't believe in kumbaya," she said. After Kirk was killed, Trump spoke with more frequency about "the enemy from within"; Loomer appreciated the renewed focus. "I have to say, I do want President Trump to be the 'dictator' the Left thinks he is, and I want the right to be as devoted to locking up and silencing our violent political enemies as they pretend we are," she wrote. She was offering cash donations to anyone who gave her the names of pro-Palestine protesters, and began encouraging her followers to start Loomering people who'd made disparaging comments about Kirk, with the aim of getting them fired.

Whenever I pressed Loomer on how exactly she conducts her work, and what she can take credit for, the conversation veered into the woo-woo zone. "I'm manifesting my role," she told me. "You have to manifest what you want. My hope is to continue using my large platform to develop policy, but I don't want to say I'm actually developing policy." It was late at night, and we were walking around outside the Turning Point headquarters after the memorial. Loomer kept looking back to make sure nobody was following us. Flowers and crosses had been laid on the ground in the parking lot. "I'm not

saying that I'm an adviser, but I can manifest it," she said. "Do you understand what I'm saying? I'm manifesting it." I was reminded of an early conversation I had with the strategist who is close to the Trump Administration. "Influence is perceived power," he told me. "That's what it is with Laura. If people think you have power, then you do."

Though Loomer's stated mission is loyalty enforcement, many in D.C. chalk up instances of Loomering to other motives. She has long operated a tip line so that supporters can alert her to matters of interest; these days, she's often provided with the information she uses by parties inside or close to the Administration who are advancing their own agendas. "I guess you could say that my tip line has come to serve as a form of therapy for Trump Administration officials who want to expose their colleagues who should not be in the positions that they're in," she told *Politico*.

The strategist close to the Administration described Loomer as a "tool of people who have factional intentions." At the State Department, for example, there is a "very zealous MAGA crowd who don't like Rubio's people. So they use Laura Loomer to say, 'Those guys aren't MAGA, these guys aren't America First. They're coming from Swampland.'" The consultant who works with the Administration told me that, whenever Loomer launches a new campaign against someone, there's an "immediate witch hunt" at the White House "to see who told her to post." Loomer told me that her targets sometimes call her to defend themselves, or go to Trump to ask if he can get her to stop. She is largely despised by people who work in the West Wing, aside from the President. "She has this itchy trigger finger," the strategist said. "Sometimes she pulls the trigger and you're, like, Oh, look, So-and-So is dead now. Isn't that nice?" He went on, "But sometimes it's, like, That is friendly fire, Laura, that is friendly fire. What are you doing?"

Loyalty enforcement can also provide cover to obscure something else. One afternoon in March, Loomer posted about Adam Schleifer, an Assistant U.S. Attorney in Los Angeles. "Fire him," she wrote. "He supported the impeachment of President Trump and said he wanted to repeal Trump's tax plan. We need to purge the US Attorney's office of all leftist Trump haters." About an hour after Loomer's post, the Presidential Personnel Office e-mailed Schleifer to say that he had been terminated. It's very unusual for the White House to directly fire a career prosecutor. Schleifer happened to be at work on a case against a Trump donor, Andrew Wiederhorn, a food-industry executive who was indicted for fraud last spring. (Wiederhorn pleaded not guilty.) Wiederhorn's lawyers had been urging the Justice Department to remove Schleifer from the case; a new attorney handpicked by Trump soon dropped it entirely.

David Feith, one of the N.S.C. officials Loomer was credited with removing, was on her target list because his father, Douglas Feith, had served in the George W. Bush Administration. Feith's removal, however, appeared to be about more than familial association. The N.S.C. had been split over whether to end a Biden-era restriction on the sale of A.I. chips to the United Arab Emirates. Feith wanted to keep export controls in place, on national-security grounds. A faction within the Administration wanted to remove them, as did the U.A.E. and Nvidia. "Loomer did hit jobs on people who were inconvenient to very powerful interests, inside and outside the Administration," the former N.S.C. official told me. The strategist said, "Laura isn't just this wild attack dog. Those who know how to spot it can see where she's being influenced."

"I bet you're one of those guys where beneath a tough exterior is a kind, sensitive, disgusting slug-like thing."

Loomer has told me that she would never "make the sacrifices" she's made for Trump for someone else. Yet many people in Washington who are familiar with her work have started to wonder whether she is being compensated for what she portrays as a selfless mission. Earlier this fall, at a cocktail party convened around the National Conservatism Conference, I joined a group debating that question in a hotel basement. The pace of Loomer's posts had been consistent, but some of her attacks were becoming impenetrable. When did the original Loomer transform into the Loomer who cared so much about, say, Hewlett Packard Enterprise's acquisition of Juniper Networks? Someone pointed out that this wasn't front-page news, or even news you'd follow at all if you weren't a shareholder. Loomer's Rumble show has included branded partnerships—she has, for example, posted ads to promote investing in gold, and has eaten dog food live on camera to plug a particularly high-end pet product. But the diatribes have generally been assumed to be her own, not sponsored content.

The consultant who works with the Administration, however, told me that some of his clients have hired Loomer to post. He took out his phone to show me a screenshot of a message exchange on Signal. "We're already ginning up a

Loomer tweet," read one. (He covered the contact's name with his hand.) "I honestly tell my clients not to," the consultant said, of partnering with Loomer. "It works, like, one in a hundred times." Still, he added, they see her "get a couple people fired, so they're, like, If someone is doing something in the Administration that's harmful to my interests, this will do it." At minimum, he went on, "you scare them into changing their policies. They don't want to be on the wrong side of Loomer."

This summer, Vinay Prasad, a top scientist at the Food and Drug Administration, was working to place a regulatory hold on a muscular-dystrophy drug, owing to safety concerns. Soon after the hold went into effect, Loomer started criticizing him in a series of posts, writing that he had "infiltrated" the Administration as a "Marxist Trojan Horse." Prasad resigned, under pressure, the following week. Sarepta Therapeutics, the drug's manufacturer, stood to lose millions of dollars; to Loomer's critics, the timing and intensity of her campaign against Prasad seemed like a form of lobbying. Ned Ryun, a conservative activist, summed up the sentiment on X: "The fact of the matter is you got funded by Sarepta Therapeutics to take Vinay out; probably thru a middle man for deniability but still pharma money funding it all." (Loomer maintains that the timing of her tirade was a coincidence.) The current Administration official told me that "the consensus among political leadership was that this was a directed assault by corporate forces." Prasad was reinstated less than two weeks later.

One night at Ned's Club, a members-only lounge with views of the White House, Nigel Farage, the British politician who heads the populist Reform Party, was hosting a bash for the right-wing television channel GB News, which was opening a bureau in D.C. Several members of Trump's Cabinet were there; Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary, gave a toast. Loomer was at home in Florida, but longtime lobbyists and consultants were discussing her activities on two separate floors of the club. "It's like this pay-to-play Tasmanian devil," one veteran political operative told me. "You just feed her any sort of D.E.I. comment that some executive made over the last twelve years—then you just expect total anarchy and a wide blast zone." On a lower floor, a prominent lobbyist said, "She doesn't want to be seen as a hired gun because that would undermine her credibility with her base. She's saying, 'I just believe in the President and MAGA!' But in certain instances, when she starts opining about public-policy issues, it raises questions." He drew a comparison to his own work on the Hill: "I would call the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board, and then Larry Kudlow, who had a CNBC show, and tell them a few things to say. Laura's doing her own version of Larry."

The next morning, I met a popular Trump-connected lobbyist at his office downtown. He put chewing tobacco in his mouth, and some of it scattered down the front of his shirt as he described the stance on Venezuela he was pushing—that the U.S. should buy Venezuelan oil, which was currently sanctioned, because otherwise China would. Loomer had been posting about Venezuela, advocating for lifting sanctions on its oil sector and allowing American companies to operate there. "Hell, yeah, she's getting paid!" the lobbyist said. "It's just not a thing someone's really passionate about—oil licenses in Venezuela. That's not anyone's natural position. It's my position, and it's the right position, but not because I just woke up one morning and was, like, 'I'm going to get really involved in Venezuela.' No, it was, like, 'I have clients.'" Loomer sometimes corresponds with Harry Sargeant, a Florida oil magnate and a Trump ally who had several licenses to operate in Venezuela. When I asked her about the origins of a long and very technically detailed post she wrote just after the Administration revoked Sargeant's licenses, among others, she told me, "I am actually very qualified, and I'm highly accomplished. These people constantly disparage me like I'm some kind of no-name floozy."

The person with close ties to the White House said, "Do you really think Laura Loomer has an organic interest in the intricacies of Venezuelan oil leases? Give me a fucking break. Someone's paying her to put out those tweets. Ditto with her interest in the Puerto Rican issue." This summer, Loomer started weighing in on Puerto Rico's bankruptcy crisis, calling on Trump to fire the island's financial-oversight management board, which, among other things, oversees public-utility contracts. Trump dismissed the majority of the board members. Various companies and financial institutions promoted new ones who were friendlier to their interests. "She tweets about the most obscure things that only a lobbyist would care about," the person with close ties to the White House said. "She's a P.R. firm that the press likes to write about as if she's the MAGA vanguard, like she's there to police the movement. It's horseshit." The Trump-connected lobbyist told me, "Her whole shtick is purity, and so she believes getting paid is a dirty word—that it takes away her purity."

I'd heard from several people that various middlemen were used to set up payments to Loomer, in some cases using a maneuver called the "Loomer two-step." I called a D.C. operative to ask him about it. "What is that, a dance move?" he said, before speaking energetically about the practice for fifteen minutes. "I mean, I would assume, like, whatever major investment firm isn't going to pay DC Draino directly," he said, referencing a popular MAGA social-media account. "In the past, you would do a Fox banner, but now it's moved toward this ecosystem of paying people who tweet about Trump all the time."

Of course, plenty of people are compensated for posts in Washington's influence ecosystem. One afternoon not long ago, I met up with a source who had just taken out cash to pay a right-wing outlet to write an article. "DC Draino and Libs of TikTok take thousands of bucks per post for this stuff," the strategist who works with the Administration told me. (Neither account responded to a request for comment.) The Trump-connected lobbyist said, "I literally just ran two campaigns with MAGA influencers—by paying them to tweet."

It is an ascendant model. Although lobbyists are required to register with the government and disclose their funding, influencers operate in a gray zone. "If Laura is taking meetings on the Hill with members of Congress and asking

them to change a policy position, that's lobbying," another Trump-connected lobbyist said. "But if Laura is posting something on her Twitter to her almost two million followers—just because the U.S. government sees it and then decides to change their position, it doesn't mean that's lobbying."

This gray zone extends beyond Loomer, and beyond domestic politics. In September, as Israel's increasingly unpopular war in Gaza ground on, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with a cohort of influencers on a visit to New York; his government has reportedly started paying accounts in the U.S. to post pro-Israel content. (A spokesperson for the Israeli government said no payments were made.) Last year, a federal indictment alleged that Russia funnelled almost ten million dollars to a number of pro-Trump influencers, including Benny Johnson and Tim Pool, to push Kremlin-backed messages. (The influencers claimed they hadn't known the funders were linked to Russia.) Popular online activists can be useful tools. As the high-level Administration official told me, "People start out as zealots—then they realize everything is for sale, even zealotry."

In this new paradigm, there's a term to describe the startlingly porous barrier between the internet and the government: "posters in control." "Really a huge amount of policy is being driven from my group chats," the nominee for a senior Administration post told me. "If we have something that's popular in right-wing Twitter, the White House is acting on it ninety-plus per cent of the time. I mean, it's really kind of amazing. Say someone is writing a speech, and he's this totally online guy who puts what he sees into the mouth of a senior official. All of a sudden that's policy, and that's the message that people are talking about."

Loomer still presents her social-media posts as a public service supported by a ragtag group of fans and concerned citizens who send her small donations via the grassroots platform Buy Me a Coffee. In addition to the income from her Rumble show, which she says earns her around a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year, she now takes on paid business at Loomered Strategies, where she does opposition research. (Tagline: "Information is a weapon. Time to get armed.") She told me that the services she provides range from background checks to "matrimonial due diligence" to determining whether "a judge is corrupt."

Her activism has never been completely independent. Early in her career, she sold her sting videos to Infowars and to the *Gateway Pundit*. She has been funded by Robert Shillman, the billionaire founder of Cognex Corporation, an industrial-automation company. (Shillman declined to comment for this article.) A former board member of the Friends of the Israel Defense Forces, Shillman supports a variety of Zionist causes. "With this pen and my checkbook, I provide ammunition," he has said.

Shillman paid for Loomer to attend Horowitz's conference, and also underwrote the work she produced at Project Veritas. "They were ahead of the times," Raheem Kassam, who runs the *National Pulse* ("Where 'MAGA' Goes To Know") and also received funding for "anti-jihad" work from Shillman, told me. "It was proto-influencer culture." Shillman has also reportedly financed the British anti-Islam influencer Tommy Robinson and the far-right Dutch politician Geert Wilders. (Shillman was a major donor to Turning Point USA, though he recently withdrew funding when its conferences hosted guests, such as Tucker Carlson, who weren't seen as reliably pro-Israel.) According to reporting in the *Wall Street Journal*, Yaacov Apelbaum, an Israeli American cyberintelligence analyst, has provided Loomer with some of the research behind her recent attacks. "I just say what I say," she told me when I asked about these connections. "I'm not a puppet."

In 2018, Shillman contemplated cutting Loomer off because she didn't seem "trainable" enough. It's true that her willingness to go scorched earth is unique, even among MAGA influencers. "I want to be friends with the people I influence and not have people hate me," the consultant who works with the Administration said. "Using Loomer is vindictive—it's seen as 'I'm going to sic this psychotic, dishonest woman on you.' It's not honorable." As the nominee for a senior Administration post put it, "She has power to the extent that she's willing to transgress any normal boundary of human behavior."

Still, the power she has is precarious. "She has no underlying coalition there to back her up if the President were to shift in his view of her value," the former N.S.C. official said. "She's one of those courtiers who are essentially useful megaphones, useful foils, and useful agents, but disposable." It's not clear what her future with Trump would be if the appearance of pure loyalty were stripped away. Trump doesn't like when people seem to be making money off him. "If he hears, you know, she just put down a hundred eighty thousand dollars for a new Land Rover, that would make him bananas," the veteran political operative said. "It'd be the kiss of death for her."

Recently, I went to see Loomer in Florida. As I drove toward her house, stray dogs roamed in overgrown grass near a gas station that advertised "LOWEST CIGARETTE CARTON PRICES." Her boyfriend met me at the door, collecting a few Amazon packages as he led me inside. The dogs barked from the kitchen. Loomer called out that she was almost ready. On my way over, I'd wondered for a moment if everything I had heard in Washington about her web of influence was somehow distorted. "The beauty of today's world—you don't need to be in the White House," she said, emerging from the bedroom in TV makeup and a blazer. "I can break my stories from here with four dogs licking my face. I can call the President from here."

She led me to a converted bedroom where she films her show. Studio lights illuminated her version of a contemporary podcasting backdrop: potted plants, signed MAGA hats arranged on a shelf, an alligator skull. On the wall hung framed photos of Loomer with Roger Stone, Alex Jones, Trump—and the Clintons, from times when she Loomered them. I joined her as she listened to a roundup of the day's TV news clips about her, which her producer compiles each night. "Laura Loomer, the conspiracy theorist . . ." She petted Mecca, one of her dogs, whom she says she rescued from a meat market in China. Mecca was seated atop a desk, paws on a yellow pad. "Laura Loomer takes responsibility for the deportation . . ." Loomer keeps a panic button, which automati-

"His name is Brayden, sire. He's brought a pitch deck, sire."

• •

cally dials 911, in the studio, and in every other room in the house. The police recently arrested a man who had threatened her online, accusing her, in part, of secretly working on behalf of Israel. "I'm not a foreign agent," she repeatedly told me, unbidden, throughout the evening. "I don't even think these other people believe what they post about—they just do it because they get paid. They're all LARPing, like, 'We're Hitler Youth now that it's cool. Oh, we're Nazis now.' It's just this performative circle of content and rage bait. I have actually had strong views for years."

At sunset, Loomer drove us to a seafood restaurant for dinner. As we waited for a table, she started fighting with a State Department spokesman on X. It is difficult to hold her attention. Over oysters, when my questions were met with silence as she typed on her phone, her boyfriend said, "She can't hear you—she's locked in." (He and Loomer met on a plane to Belize. "I liked the abrasiveness," he told me. Loomer occasionally shows him drafts of her posts. "She's about to eviscerate someone, and I'm, like, Maybe leave a body part for their family?" He paused. "She doesn't listen.") Loomer read us a draft of a tweet thread about Elaine Chao, Mitch McConnell's wife, attending a party at the Qatari Embassy. "This one's ready to go," she told me. She texted Andy Ogles, a MAGA congressman from Tennessee, to see if he could come on her show the next day. He called her. "You can talk about why you want to denaturalize Mamdani," she told him, referring to the next mayor of New York City, who was born in Uganda. "Are you free?" She disappeared into her phone again, until a video by Benny Johnson popped up on her feed. The right-wing media sphere is often a sensitive subject. She talked without interruption for the rest of the meal. "I hate conservative commentary," she said. Her peers were too performative, too pliable. She went on, "They don't want me on the plane with Trump. The President has to be diplomatic and whatnot, but I'm exposing how our country is playing footsie with the most brutal Islamic regimes. Everything I do is in support of helping his Administration, even the things that might hurt to hear. My life is like an episode of 'Survivor.' I've been crawling through the mud by myself for years, eating berries." (Last week, Loomer, who has been repeatedly denied access to the White House press room, got credentialled to cover the Pentagon—as did Kassam and Pool—after dozens of mainstream outlets refused to sign on to farcically strict reporting restrictions imposed by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.)

Loomer suggested that we head back to her house to "start breaking stories." She said that she could lend me comfortable pants and a sweater—"Twitter clothes." In the car on the way home, as her boyfriend tried to tell me what he liked about her documentary on the "great replacement" theory, she scrolled through loud videos on her phone, then took a call from a *Politico* reporter. ("That guy always wants to call me," she said. He asked her who her "next target" was. "Sean Duffy," she told him, the Secretary of Transportation.) Back inside, her boyfriend let the dogs out of their crates and brought tea and Diet Cokes for us. We set up with her phone, laptop, and iPad on a couch in the den, surrounded by dog fencing. The Real Disaster Channel was playing in the background, on mute, showing videos of plane crashes, until the TV eventually kicked into a screen saver of a fish tank. Loomer had entered a seemingly meditative state, tapping away frantically. "I'm pushing out this thing about Mitch McConnell's wife," she said a few minutes later, as if responding to a question.

Eventually, I moved to an office chair at her desk—her real one, not the one in the studio—where her boyfriend had set down my cup of tea. I glanced absentmindedly at some stacks of paperwork she had left out, pausing on a contract with a consulting firm whose name I recognized. "What are you looking at?" Loomer asked, suddenly focussed. She bustled over to clear the area, sweeping things into a drawer, handing files to her boyfriend, until only an asthma device with a mask attachment remained. "See, this is what my life is," she said, gesturing at the couch, which was covered in a blanket for the dogs. "This is all it is. I'm going to do this until four in the morning." She picked up the asthma mask. "Do you ever notice I'm out of breath on my show?" she asked. She put the mask over her face, paused, stared straight ahead, and inhaled the vapor. ♦

PROFILES

GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS

David Byrne's songs and choreography of earnest alienation.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

If you spend enough time wandering around downtown Manhattan, the odds are that you'll eventually encounter the musician David Byrne riding a bicycle. (He owns four: a folding bike, an electric, an eight-speed, and a single-speed, which he recently lent to the pop singer Lorde.) One day this past June, pedalling alongside Byrne from his apartment in Chelsea to the Governors Island ferry, I watched at least a dozen New Yorkers clock his profile, whipping around to squint, softly pinching the arm of their companion and whispering, "Was that . . . ?" By then, Byrne was gone, a tuft of white hair whizzing toward the horizon. Spotting Byrne on two wheels has become a New York City rite of passage, like sussing out the best halal cart in midtown, or dropping something important onto the subway tracks. During the few months that Byrne and I spent together, I never saw him traverse the city via any other mode of transportation, even when the heat index was approaching hellscape and he was overdue for a meeting in Brooklyn. He simply reapplied sunscreen and pushed off. In 2023, he rode a custom white Budnitz single-speed directly onto the red carpet at the Met Gala while wearing a cream-colored turtleneck under a bespoke white suit by Martin Greenfield Clothiers. (The bike featured a belt drive, which prevented chain grease from smearing his pants; he had placed his parking placard for the gala in the basket.) In 2019, Byrne rode a bicycle onstage at the "Tonight Show" while promoting "David Byrne's American Utopia," a Broadway production that he wrote and starred in that year. (In 2020, it became a film, directed by Spike Lee.) Byrne, in a gray suit and flip-flops, took a couple of laps around the stage; Jimmy Fallon chased after him as the Roots played a skronking version of Frank Zappa's "The Man from Utopia." This fall, while Byrne is on tour supporting his new solo album, "Who Is the Sky?"—the title is a mondegreen, a voice-to-text flub of the phrase "Who is this guy?"—he is travelling with several folding bikes stowed on the bus.

That June afternoon, as Byrne and I waited for a ferry outside the Battery Maritime Building, we bought cups of sliced mango from a street vender and watched a dance crew work the crowd for tips. Byrne has been biking around the city since the early eighties. In 2008, he designed a series of whimsical bike racks—one shaped like a high-heeled shoe, one like a dollar sign, one like a dog—that were installed in Manhattan and Brooklyn. He still feels exhilarated when he rides. "I stuck with it, despite the aura of uncoolness and the danger," he wrote in his book "Bicycle Diaries," published in 2009. "It just felt good to cruise down the dirty potholed streets."

A few years ago, Byrne repurposed an abandoned U.S. Army clubhouse on Governors Island as a rehearsal space for "Theater of the Mind," an immersive experience about the plasticity of cognition, which recently completed a run at York Street Yards, in Denver, and which will open in Chicago in March. Byrne thinks a lot about the psychogeography of New York City and its abandoned places. In 2008, he transformed an empty hangar at the ferry terminal into a booming and dissonant musical instrument, an installation that he called "Playing the Building." "I had an idea that I could mechanically make sounds from the infrastructure of an old building—exposed pipes, exposed radiators, girders that support things, whatever," he said. He had gutted an old pump organ and retrofitted the keys so that they activated various mechanical devices. There was no amplification beyond the terminal's own strange acoustics. Visitors were invited to mess around with the organ as they pleased. "Hit this key and a hammer comes down and blows air through a pipe—hit a different key, something else happens," he said. "People would come and say, 'I'm not a musician,' then they'd see little kids start to play, and go, 'Well, if they can do it, then I can do it.' I thought it would be about revealing the inherent sound of the building, but once it was installed I realized, no, it's actually about the people, about enabling creativity."

Byrne is not without affect, or energy, or enthusiasm—he laughs often, tossing his head back and letting out a big, chewy guffaw, sometimes in response to something funny, other times for largely indiscernible reasons—but I also noticed that there's a preternatural quietude about him. Byrne's musical career has been marked by experimentation and intensity, first as the front man of Talking Heads, the new-wave band that he started in 1975 with the drummer Chris Frantz and the bassist Tina Weymouth, two friends from art school, and then as a solo artist. Yet there's a stillness at its center. Take the song "Slippery People," from "Speaking in Tongues," Talking Heads' fifth album, released in 1983. It has some gospel fervor—the chorus is a call-and-response: "What's the matter with him? (He's alright)/How do you know? (The Lord won't mind)"—and a starched, funky beat, but it's also rickety and slow, like a fawn trying to stand up for the first time. Even the earliest Talking Heads tunes contain an uncanny, almost alien quality. Though the swagger and cockalorum of much of the band's art-rock cohort was easily replicable (hunt down some safety pins and leather, get a chaotic haircut), Byrne's particular individuality proved harder to emulate, which is perhaps why there's no other American band so highly regarded but so rarely imitated.

In the past, Byrne has suggested that he has a "very mild" form of Asperger's syndrome, though he has never been formally assessed or diagnosed, and he

"When you step onstage, it's a very artificial situation," Byrne said. "To pretend it's not—that isn't being authentic."

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID LaCHAPELLE

believes that his symptoms have waned as he has aged. "I think there were times when I realized that I wasn't perceiving things a hundred per cent the way that other people were," he told me one day over lunch. But he came to consider his singularity to be part of the human condition, the way our desires and biases render us unique, aberrant, perfect. Byrne was born in Scotland in 1952. "Being an immigrant myself and having immigrant parents, I realized, Oh, we don't all share the same little cultural things," he said. "We eat differently, or we listen to different kinds of music, or we hold our knives and forks in different ways. Everybody's not the same."

Byrne is generous with his time and attention, but there's also a Warholian air of mystery about him—a gentle impenetrability, a feeling of separateness. "David is not one to reveal his innermost secrets," Frantz told me. In 2012, Byrne and Annie Clark, who records as St. Vincent, worked together on "Love This Giant," an elastic, outré pop record. "There's an off-kilter kindness to him," Clark said. "You're not necessarily gonna get a direct 'I love you.' But what you do get is better. It takes him getting to know you, then you start to decode these really sweet gestures." She went on, "In some ways, you can trust it more than somebody who's over-the-top, razzle-dazzle gregarious. You have to earn it, and you get to it slowly, but it's so incredibly rewarding and generative."

Byrne's music has grown increasingly earnest over the years, but it is still almost always about alienation. Conversely, it is also about searching for home—how to find synchronicity, peace, wholeness. In September, Byrne married Mala Gaonkar, who founded SurgoCap, a wildly successful hedge fund. (Gaonkar started SurgoCap with $1.8 billion under management, the largest opening ever for a hedge fund run by a woman.) They were introduced by their mutual friend Brian Eno, who produced several Talking Heads records; "Theater of the Mind" was born from their early conversations. (Gaonkar is a co-creator of the show.) "We'd have these long walks and talks—the subjects ranged all over the place," Byrne recalled. "And I thought, Wow, this person's really different from a lot of my other friends. And I would like to do this again." Byrne was married once before, to the costume designer and artist Adelle Lutz. (They have a daughter, Malu Byrne, born in 1989, and two grandchildren.) "I said I would never get married again, after I got divorced," Byrne admitted, laughing. He demurred when I suggested that marriage was in fact a very passionate gesture. "It was just working out really well, so we said, 'Well, let's do this for our friends and family,'" he told me.

A few days before the wedding, Byrne and I met up at his office, a bright, loft-like space near Union Square. One wall was covered floor to ceiling with banana-yellow shelves, stuffed with books, records, and ephemera (two cans of Spam; a captain's hat; an Oscar, which Byrne won in 1988 for a score that he wrote, with Ryuichi Sakamoto and Cong Su, for Bernardo Bertolucci's "The Last Emperor"). A side table held an enormous Rolodex. On "What Is the Reason for It?," a new song featuring Hayley Williams, of Paramore, Byrne wonders about the purpose and nature of love. "Does it do something useful?/What is it for?/Is everyone else the same as me?" he sings, his voice wobbly, plaintive. (He asked similar questions on Talking Heads' "I'm Not in Love," a cut from the 1978 album "More Songs About Buildings and Food": "What does it take to fall in love?/Do people really fall in love?")

"We keep coming up with theories that it's a biological imperative, or that it allows us to bond and raise children, very practical things like that. That doesn't explain everything, though," Byrne said. "When it happens, you really feel like you're a different person. You feel different physically. It's this amazing thing." He added, "It's not just about dating. There are places that we love. You may have a very strong emotional bond to a house." On another new song, "My Apartment Is My Friend," Byrne sings of his current home in Chelsea, where he rode out part of the pandemic: "You held me in your arms/Secure and safe within your halls/Free from fear and free from harm." (Byrne has said that one of his favorite Willie Nelson tunes is "Hello Walls," in which a lonesome Nelson asks, "Hello, walls/How'd things go for you today?")

Byrne turned seventy-three this year, but he is still curious about what it means to be alive. "I feel like asking the questions doesn't immediately give you the answer, but just asking puts you in a different frame of mind," he said. "You start to go—we really don't know. We really don't know what it's about." Byrne's lyrics are famously inquisitive. On "Once in a Lifetime"—co-written with Eno, and a frequent entry on lists of the greatest songs of all time—he questions almost everything. The fourth verse builds to a kind of hysterical climax:

> You may ask yourself, What is that beautiful house?
> You may ask yourself, Where does that highway go to?
> And you may ask yourself, Am I right, am I wrong?
> And you may say to yourself, My God, what have I done?

Talking Heads played their first gig in June, 1975, opening for the Ramones at CBGB, a rock club on a mangy block in the East Village. CBGB had been around for only about a year and a half, but it was already an established hub for lawless, willfully provocative guitar music. The bands best known for coming of age there (the Ramones, Blondie, the Patti Smith Group, Television, Suicide, Richard Hell and the Voidoids) were united perhaps more in spirit than in sound. The scene was famously wild, sometimes savage, often disgusting (Byrne later called the men's bathroom "legendarily nasty"), yet it also allowed for a certain kind of sweetness, a freedom to try new or outlandish things in a culture that was punishing to outsiders. In the afterword to "CBGB & OMFUG: Thirty Years from the Home of Underground Rock," a book of photographs, Byrne suggested that the artists hanging around CBGB were merely responding to the spectacle of arena rock, which he described as "being light years away from any sense of street reality—these bands were entertaining, but completely distanced from any sense of what it felt like to be young, energetic, and frustrated."

The club was comfortable for Byrne, who was then twenty-three and still figuring out a future. In 1970, after graduating from high school in Arbutus, Maryland, Byrne had moved to Providence to study at the Rhode Island School of Design. A year later, he transferred to the Maryland Institute College of Art, in Baltimore. "I ended up

being there for maybe a year, year and a half," Byrne said. "Then I hitchhiked and bummed around the country before going back to Providence. It was kind of a little scene there. I thought, Oh, this is pretty cool, there's bands and artists. I can be part of that."

Frantz said, "I didn't get to know David until after he quit RISD and then returned to Providence." (Frantz and Weymouth started dating as undergraduates; they've now been married for forty-eight years.) "A mutual friend asked us to record some music for a student film he was making about his girlfriend getting run over by a car. We did this in Tina's apartment, where she had kindly been letting me keep my drums. I thought David was an interesting rhythm guitarist and had a high degree of je ne sais quoi, so I asked him to join a band I was forming, called the Artistics."

After graduation, Byrne, Frantz, and Weymouth all moved to New York. Byrne arrived first. "My ambition was to be an artist that would show in galleries," he said. "I was enamored with the contemporary-arts scene at the time, especially conceptual art. I got room and board from this painter who had a loft on Bond Street, right next to Bowery, in exchange for helping him sand the floors, paint the place, that kind of stuff. I also got a part-time job as a movie-theatre usher."

Byrne, Frantz, and Weymouth eventually moved into a loft together, on Chrystie Street, near CBGB. It's possible to excavate grainy black-and-white footage of one of the band's earliest appearances, from the summer of 1975. "We're the Talking Heads," Byrne says. Long pause. "The first song we're gonna do is called 'The Girls Want to Be with the Girls.'" Byrne is dressed as though he files briefs at a law firm, in dark slacks and a collared shirt. In "Remain in Love," a memoir published in 2020, Frantz wrote, "For the longest time people called us preppy because I would often wear the clothes my mom had given me for Christmas, and she did like to buy at Brooks Brothers. . . . We were not afraid to appear straight."

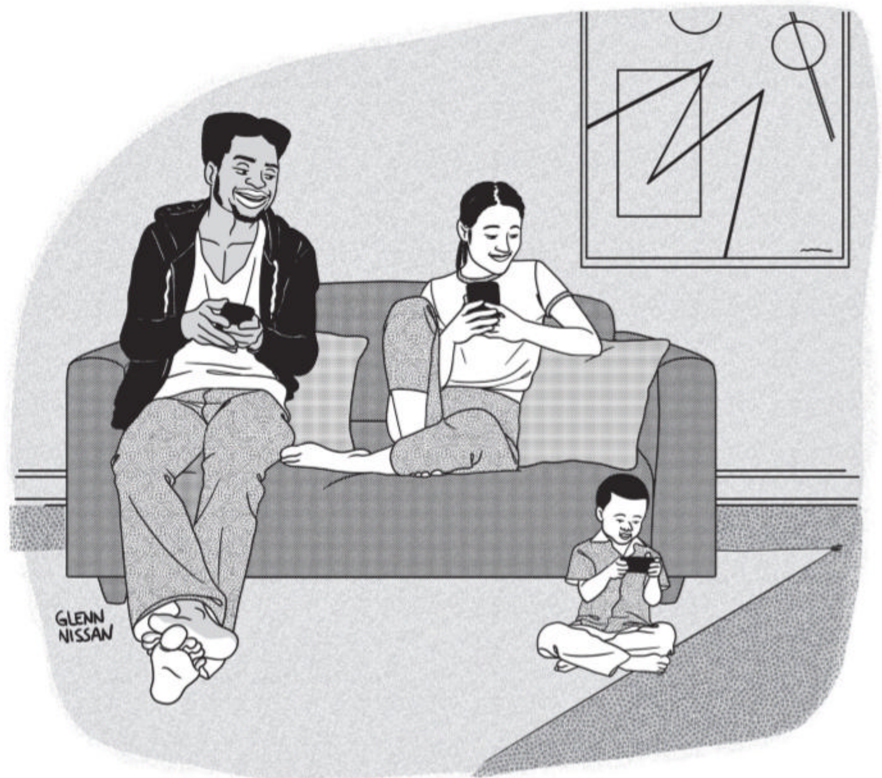
"We wanted that Everyman look that, in Chris's and my case, was inspired by working people's clothes," Weymouth said. "Jeans and button-down shirts were our American answer to Mao and his Chinese two-piece outfits. David initially chose to wear polyester clothing, which he abandoned early on as uncomfortable and smelly. When a journalist incorrectly wrote something to the effect that he wore 'Hush Puppies shoes that looked like industrial waste,' he went out and bought a pair."

Frantz added, "We knew we couldn't beat David Bowie, T. Rex, or the New York Dolls at their own game. Style was important to us, but rock-and-roll style was not."

Byrne later described the group in those early days as less a band than "an outline for a band." He didn't worry much about musicianship. "Some of us were sort of competent musicians, but that wasn't something that we held in great esteem," he said. "I remember when the Police appeared, we thought, *Oh, this is unfair. They're really good.* We were guided more by our feelings, by our aesthetic choices, which may have made us seem a little bit cold. But so was everyone else. It'd be hard to deny that the Ramones were a conceptual band." He added, "As intense and fun as they were, the Ramones were also an idea."

For years, there was a rumor circulating that Johnny Ramone wanted Talking Heads as an opener because he thought they were so weird and terrible that they would make the Ramones look good. Yet, almost immediately, Talking Heads pulled crowds. "We were incredibly lucky," Byrne recalled. "I think we played a handful of shows, really, and suddenly there was an article about the scene in the *Village Voice*, and we were on the cover." That piece, by the critic James Wolcott, ran with the headline "A Conservative Impulse in the New Rock Underground." Wolcott described the scene at CBGB as "a counterthrust to the prevailing baroque theatricality of rock," Talking Heads as "presenting a banal façade under which run ripples of violence and squalls of frustration," and Byrne as having "a little-boy-lost-at-the-zoo voice and the demeanor of someone who's spent the last half hour whirling around in a spin dryer."

Part of the "conservatism" that Wolcott cited was surely tangled up in Byrne's self-awareness and his developing preference for stylized choreography over the kind of visceral, reactive pageantry synonymous with punk. In 1973, at Max's Kansas City, Iggy Pop tumbled to the floor and gashed his chest open while performing with the Stooges;



"Aww, from this angle, his phone looks like a book."

• •

he kept singing, squirting blood. Credibility was tied to ideas of violence, rebellion, bodily sacrifice. Byrne's vibe could not have been more different. Alan Vega, of Suicide, once complained of Byrne, "He wasn't performing up there, he was just going through the motions. He didn't make any twitchy gestures without something in his head saying, 'Make a twitchy gesture now.'"

"I sensed that, Oh, not everybody's gonna like this. Some people are gonna think, This is very inauthentic. You're not being true to yourself. It's too showbizzy," Byrne said. "Totally understandable, because punk emerged out of a kind of counter-sensibility, a resistance to the slick stuff that we saw around us. But when you step onstage it's a very artificial situation to begin with. To pretend it's not—that isn't being authentic."

Annie Clark told me, "I came up with a Gen X ethos that was very much, like, 'If you are crying onstage, or performing, or doing anything other than wearing the street clothes that you wore all day, you're a poser.' Especially in indie music, there's a premium on authenticity. Of course, that particular authenticity was a guise like any other." She continued, "But what was unlocked for me while working with David was the idea of putting on a *show*. It's not that everything has to be choreographed, but bodies in space is a beautiful thing. He's one of the great dancers and choreographers of our time."

By 1976, Byrne was transforming into an idiosyncratic but magnetic front man, jerky and handsome. He was awkward, but in a determined, outsized way. "I think I might have exaggerated my social discomfort a little bit, for effect," Byrne said. "I remember being conscious of forming this character, of being quirky and odd, being intentional about that. Which now seems . . . not phony, but, eh, you know."

In the fall of 1975, Seymour Stein, a founder of Sire Records, had been standing outside CBGB on a night when Talking Heads were opening for the Ramones. He was intrigued enough by what he heard to go inside the venue early. "I remember seeing him standing there as if he were a statue, eyes popping out," Frantz recalled in his memoir. Stein offered the band a deal with Sire the next day. Talking Heads declined. They didn't even have a manager. "We watched Blondie get signed, the Ramones get signed, Patti Smith get signed. We felt like maybe we shouldn't be in too much of a hurry," Byrne said. "One of the reasons we could take our time was that we could play a weekend at CBGB's, and then maybe another gig somewhere else in town, or in Boston or wherever, and make enough money to pay rent and feed ourselves and all that. We didn't have to sign to a label right away."

The band received some oddball counsel from elder statesmen of the scene. One afternoon, Andy Warhol invited the group over for lunch. "By then, the Factory was on Union Square—it wasn't the decadent silver loft in midtown. It was now this kind of business place," Byrne said. "I recall a conference table, and Andy was there, being his amusing, enigmatic self. And then we were all given boxed lunches from somewhere. We were of course really flattered, and it was very exciting. But I don't remember anything of consequence happening." Frantz said that Warhol told him, "Go easy on the vodka or you're going to lose your figure." (Warhol later recorded a radio commercial for the group, directing listeners to "buy the new Talking Heads record and tell them Warhol sent you," though Frantz also remembers Warhol sometimes thinking that the band's name was Talking Horses.)

In late 1975, Talking Heads met with Lou Reed. At the time, Reed was living in an apartment on the Upper East Side, near Bloomingdale's. According to Frantz, he invited the band over in the middle of the night, and ate an entire quart of Häagen-Dazs while sitting cross-legged on the hardwood floor. It appeared as though the spoon that he used might have once cooked heroin. Reed told Byrne that he should never wear short-sleeved shirts, because his forearms were too hairy. "I might not have picked Lou Reed to be someone so aware of my appearance onstage," Byrne said.

The keyboardist and guitarist Jerry Harrison joined the band in 1977, after

his previous group, the Modern Lovers, had broken up. (Jonathan Richman, the lead singer, had decided that he wanted to make sweeter, less aggressive music.) Harrison had recently enrolled in architecture school at Harvard. The previous April, Talking Heads had booked a gig at a place in Cambridge called the Club; Harrison went to the show. "I remember thinking they were really interesting, but it didn't a hundred per cent get across to me," Harrison recalled. Nonetheless, that summer, he drove to New York to audition. "We went out for Chinese food," he said. "We started playing at about two in the morning. It just jelled right away. I think a lot of the other keyboard players attempted to show how versatile they were." He went on, "I listened to what David was doing and what Tina was doing and then did something compatible, rather than being totally contrapuntal."

Talking Heads finally signed with Sire, more than a year after they'd first been offered a deal. The band, now a four-piece, recorded its début album, "77," the following spring. The single "Psycho Killer" reached No. 92 on the *Billboard* Hot 100. The song is still, in some ways, the band's most emblematic tune: lyrically incomprehensible, rhythmically invigorating, full of menace but still inviting, groovy, exultant. "Some of our influences, people picked up on right away," Byrne said. "Obviously, we were enamored with Bowie, the Velvet Underground, Iggy. But that was only half our record collection. The other half was Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, the Three Degrees, Hamilton Bohannon, the O'Jays. Dance music."

In subsequent years, the influence of Afrobeat—an expansive term for music that combines West African polyrhythms, particularly from Nigeria and Ghana, with elements of jazz and funk—became increasingly palpable in Byrne's writing. In 2018, the Beninese musician Angélique Kidjo released a track-by-track remake of "Remain in Light," Talking Heads' fourth album, from 1980. When I interviewed her that year, Kidjo told me that she was drawn to the record in part because, when she heard the single "Once in a Lifetime" at a party, she presumed it was by African musicians. "That music brought me back home, without me understanding what the Talking Heads were about," she said. Byrne said that he never worried too much about potential accusations of cultural appropriation. (Incidentally, "Remain in Light" preceded Paul Simon's "Graceland" by six years.) "I didn't think about it all that much, because we weren't directly copying anything," Byrne said. "There was an obvious influence, and I made that clear." When "Remain in Light" was released, he provided critics with a short bibliography, including books on Haitian voodoo and African musical idioms. "People thought it was very pretentious at the time," he recalled, laughing. "But it encouraged people to challenge us with those kinds of questions."

One day, I asked Byrne if, when the band was starting out, he would have known what to say if someone had asked him what type of music he played—or, actually, if he knew how to answer that question now. He thought about it for a moment. "No," he finally said. "I don't know how to answer it."

In 1984, Talking Heads released "Stop Making Sense," a concert film directed by Jonathan Demme. The movie opens with Byrne walking onstage carrying an acoustic guitar and a boom box, which he places on the floor. He looks gaunt, almost haunted; his affect is erratic, chilly. "Hi," he says flatly. "I've got a tape I want to play."

Over a prerecorded beat, Byrne launches into "Psycho Killer." In a review of the film in this magazine, Pauline Kael described Byrne as having a

"withdrawn, disembodied, sci-fi quality," adding, "He's an idea man, an aesthetician who works in the modernist mode of scary, catatonic irony." (To be clear, she loved the film, which she called "close to perfection.") "Stop Making Sense" is extraordinary on its surface, but if you rewatch it enough you'll start noticing spontaneous flashes of unmediated humanity that, collectively, do something nutritive for the soul—the moment, say, about four minutes into "Girlfriend Is Better," when Byrne holds the microphone out to a gaffer clutching a light, who leans forward and very calmly says the words "Stop making sense," or, about three minutes into "This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody)," when the rhythm guitarist Alex Weir whips around to look at the keyboardist Bernie Worrell and Worrell, who is not in focus, does this glorious little snaky dance, a flawless expression of pleasure. For me, "Stop Making Sense"—possibly the entire nineteen-eighties—peaks with the band's performance of "Burning Down the House." By then, Byrne has been joined onstage by the rest of Talking Heads, as well as Weir, Worrell, the percussionist Steve Scales, and the vocalists Lynn Mabry and Ednah Holt. At the start of the second verse, Scales turns to the camera and sticks out his tongue. "Strange but not a stranger/I'm an ordinary guy!" Byrne shouts. Watching it, I suddenly feel as though I could lift a small car. Demme lingers on Weir, who is clearly having the time of his life; there's a moment, not long before the end of the song, when Byrne and Weir start dancing together, running in place, kicking their knees up, and then they exchange the sort of look—pure rapture, a kind of impeccable joy—that I've only ever seen on the faces of small children when a beloved parent returns home and throws open the front door.

For "Girlfriend Is Better," Byrne puts on the enormous suit that makes his head appear tiny. Even now, forty-one years later, the look is striking. In a "self-interview" that accompanied the film, Byrne said that he liked the proportions of the suit because "music is very physical, and often the body understands it before the head," and that he liked the phrase "Stop making sense" because it's "good advice." There is, of course, a strong current of senselessness running through the film. During "This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody)," the band's most sparsely arranged song, and also its most tender, Byrne dances with a floor lamp. "That's a love song made up almost completely of non sequiturs, phrases that may have a strong emotional resonance but don't have any narrative qualities," Byrne once said of its lyrics. That might be true in some technical way. Or

it's possible that love itself doesn't have any narrative qualities. Cumulatively, the language adds up to something:

Hi yo, I got plenty of time
Hi yo, you got light in your eyes
And you're standing here beside me
I love the passing of time
Never for money, always for love
Cover up and say goodnight.

"This Must Be the Place" is uneasy, both musically and lyrically. It's heavy with yearning, though it also sounds as if Byrne might be lamenting his inability to comprehend or control love. There's resignation in his vocal: "I feel numb, born with a weak heart/I guess I must be having fun." That precise sensation—a vague disquietude, a vexation—is central to the band's distinctiveness. Harrison referred to it as a feeling of "danger," and attributed it to Byrne. "He would do things that just were totally unexpected," Harrison said. "And that was part of the excitement. Even though we were the straightest, most buttoned-up group, because of David there was a sense of 'I don't know what to expect.'"

Talking Heads broke up, acrimoniously, in 1991. Byrne had launched a solo career a decade earlier with "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts," a strange and thrilling experimental record he made with Eno. That year, Frantz and Weymouth had also started their own band, Tom Tom Club, and scored a hit with "Genius of Love," a song that went on to be sampled relentlessly, by everyone from Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five ("It's Nasty") to Mariah Carey ("Fantasy"). Byrne gets a little glazed-over when speaking about Talking Heads' dissolution. He has been pestered about it for more than thirty years; it's hard to find an interview in which he is not asked, yet again, if the band will reunite. (It isn't likely.) Mostly, he chalks the ending up to his inability, at the time, to gracefully cede creative control: "My impulse was to micromanage everything, especially all the creative stuff."

There is some irony, then, to Byrne's post-Talking Heads career, which is marked not just by collaboration but by a staggering amount of it (and with a diverse lineup of artists, including Fatboy Slim, Caetano Veloso, Dirty Projectors, Selena, Oneohtrix Point Never, Philip Glass, Rufus Wainwright, Robyn, and Miley Cyrus). Through the years, Frantz and Weymouth have expressed frustration with Byrne. (Weymouth once described him as "Trumpian," which she later clarified to mean "transactional" and "very insecure.") The band played its final full concert in 1984. "After the last show, which happened to be in New Zealand, David told our manager that he would no longer perform onstage with Talking Heads," Frantz said. "He did not attend the end-of-tour party that night. To say that there was frustration and hurt is putting it mildly." Still, Talking Heads did go on to release three more studio albums, an arrangement that worked in part because Frantz, Weymouth, and Harrison were pursuing other projects and starting families. The band's official end was even less ceremonious. One day, Byrne, who was becoming increasingly focussed on his solo work, told the Los Angeles *Times*, "You could say broken up, or call it whatever you like."

His comment was startling to the rest of the band. "David's departure was disappointing, not the least because we had to learn of it from a newspaper," Weymouth told me. Harrison is a little more magnanimous about the breakup, partly because his experience in the Modern Lovers prepared him for intra-band tumult. ("When I went into the Talking Heads, I was thinking, Bands have a lifetime, they are not forever," he said.) Still, he called the decision to split "idiotic." He speculated that, for Frantz and Weymouth, it probably felt especially bitter. "Tom Tom Club was even more successful than Talking Heads when that first album came out. 'Genius of Love' was as huge a song as you can imagine," he said. "They did not nourish that with the intensity needed to keep it viable, because their first love was Talking Heads." Harrison also said that, in 1985, the band had been approached about performing at Live Aid, but that Byrne wasn't interested. "We would have been great," Harrison said. "David didn't want to be bothered with it. We could have been the biggest band in the world if we did that. I, once again, thought it was stupid."

In 1996, Frantz, Weymouth, and Harrison, as the Heads, released a record called "No Talking, Just Head," featuring a series of guest vocalists. Byrne sued the group, claiming that the name was a trademark violation. (The case was settled out of court; the trio did not make another record together.) "I tried to have a good relationship with everyone," Harrison said. "That was a very awkward moment, because, A, I was now lumped together with Chris and Tina, whereas up until this point I felt like I had my independent relationship with David, and, B, I thought it was unfair of him to be suing us. It codified that we really don't get along, and it was unnecessary."

Talking Heads did play together again, in 2002, when the group was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. It was a three-song medley: "Life During Wartime," "Psycho Killer," and "Burning Down the House." I mean—it sounded awesome. Buoyant, alive. The band briefly reconnected (in conversation, at least) to promote a reissue of "Stop Making Sense," first appearing on a panel, moderated by Spike Lee, at the Toronto International Film Festival. The conversation was gracious and thoughtful, if not particularly revelatory. "We've had cordial moments" is how Harrison described it. Weymouth said, "For Chris and me, there is no looking back."

One morning, at his office, Byrne and I were discussing the economics of reunion tours. He told me that most of the offers he'd fielded were underwhelming, once you did the math. But the bigger issue was that he believed such an effort would be regressive. "Have you seen any reunion tours where you felt, like, 'Oh, they've really evolved and they're bringing something new to the table, and this is the next step they would have taken'?" he said. He's right—with a handful of exceptions (Oasis, the Stooges featuring Mike Watt), those sorts of outings tend to be bleak.

I suppose the impulse to raise the dead shouldn't always be so easily indulged. Or, as Byrne yelps on "Life During Wartime," a song about navigating apocalypse, "No time for dancing, or lovey dovey/I ain't got time for that now."

This past May, Byrne hosted a variety show at the Town Hall called "Amazing Humans Doing Amazing Things." The event was a benefit for *Reasons to Be Cheerful*, an online magazine and newsletter founded by Byrne and dedicated chiefly to sharing heartwarming stories. It's a winsome idea, though that sort of insistent optimism has by now been so thoroughly oversold

TAKES

Hannah Goldfield on Anthony Bourdain's "Don't Eat Before Reading This"

I'm not being facetious when I say that I remember exactly where I was when I first became aware of Anthony Bourdain. It was the summer of 2002, two years after he published "Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly," a seminal and unsparing account of life as a chef in restaurant kitchens. I was fifteen, and on vacation with a friend and her family, on Long Island. My friend's father was reading the paperback and shared aloud one of the dirty secrets in the book, which we all took, immediately, as gospel: one should never order fish on a Monday.

Bourdain's elaborate passage explaining why this was true had first been published, in *The New Yorker*, in the 1999 essay "Don't Eat Before Reading This," which he expanded, rapidly, into "Kitchen Confidential." (The short answer was that "many fish purveyors don't deliver on Saturday, so the chances are that the Monday-night tuna you want has been kicking around in the kitchen since Friday morning, under God knows what conditions"; the long answer took you deep into the culture and psychology of the restaurant business.) He wrote it, originally, for an alt-weekly called the New York *Press*, which had slated it as a cover story before the editor killed it at the last minute. Bourdain had imagined his audience would be insular and small: "I thought, I'm going to write something that will entertain other cooks, maybe I'll get a hundred bucks, and my fry cook will find this funny," he recalled in 2017, during an appearance at The New Yorker Festival. When the article found its way into *The New Yorker*—after Bourdain's mother suggested to a New York *Times* colleague, Esther Fein, that Fein's husband, David Remnick, the magazine's new editor, might want to take a look—"it transformed my life within two days," he said.

You could explain the splash by pointing to the essay's tell-all nature, the invitation it offered into a thrillingly seedy world that had been right under everyone's nose. The chefs cooking your meal are not wearing gloves or hairnets; the waitstaff is recycling the remnants of your bread basket; on average, you're consuming probably a stick of butter per restaurant meal: "sauces are enriched with mellowing, emulsifying butter. Pastas are tightened with it. Meat and fish are seared with a mixture of butter and oil. Shallots and chicken are caramelized with butter. It's the first and last thing in almost every pan: the final hit is called '*monter au beurre*.'" But Bourdain was much more than a whistle-blower, even at the very beginning of what would become his second, highly significant career. The aw-shucks way he sometimes told the story of writing the essay and getting it published belied the years he had spent pursuing his literary ambitions, even while working the line and maintaining a heroin addiction; in 1985, he took a workshop with the renowned editor Gordon Lish, and before he made it into *The New Yorker* he had published two novels, including a crime thriller, and was sitting on a novella based on his kitchen experiences.

The voice he introduced in "Don't Eat Before Reading This" is not just brash and ballsy; it reverberates with style and poetry, from its tantalizing opening lines: "Good food, good eating, is all about blood and organs, cruelty and decay. It's about sodium-loaded pork fat, stinky triple-cream cheeses, the tender thymus glands and distended livers of young animals. It's about danger—risking the dark, bacterial forces of beef, chicken, cheese, and shellfish." Though it was Bourdain's documentary television shows that made him extraordinarily famous—the sort of celebrity whose face ends up on novelty votive candles and tattooed onto people's biceps, who persuades a sitting President to eat grilled pork and noodles and drink beer on a plastic stool in Vietnam—"Kitchen Confidential" has become canonical, and everything he did was writerly, vividly observed, and incisively interrogated.

ANNALS OF GASTRONOMY

DON'T EAT BEFORE READING THIS

A New York chef spills some trade secrets.

BY ANTHONY BOURDAIN

April 19, 1999

As Bourdain himself pointed out, before his death by suicide, in 2018, the no-fish-on-Monday rule expired many years ago, thanks to improvements to the supply chain. What will far outlast him is his example, his uncommon ability to show thorny things exactly as they were without ever making them seem ugly. ♦

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

by whoever manufactures the throw pillows at HomeGoods that it can feel corny. *Reasons to Be Cheerful* emphasizes "smart, proven, replicable solutions to the world's most pressing problems." The magazine began after Byrne found himself routinely getting "agitated, depressed, and angry" while reading the newspaper. It's true that it's never been easier to blow past good news, and it seems reasonable to argue that a feeling of overwhelming dread—enabled and exaggerated, if not engineered, by social media—is also a pervasive evil, in the sense that it stupefies and paralyzes us. "We're genetically evolved to pay more attention to the doom and gloom, to stuff that's scary," Byrne said. "It's kind of a survival mechanism: better to run away, even if we're not sure if that's a lion behind those bushes." He laughed. "Don't be so paranoid!"

The show featured the comedians Ramy Youssef and Reggie Watts, the ventriloquist Nina Conti, the magician Steve Cuiffo, the beatboxer Kaila Mullady, the burlesque artist Julie Atlas Muz, the Zlatne Uste Balkan Brass band, and Annie and the Caldwells, a fiery disco-soul group from Mississippi, signed to Luaka Bop, Byrne's record label. Between performances, participants in the Free to Be Youth Project (which provides legal counsel to young L.G.B.T.Q. people) and Rocking the Boat (a group in the Bronx that teaches kids and teens how to build and row wooden boats) spoke about their organizations. At the end, Byrne came onstage to play "Slippery People," and led the crowd in an exuberant sing-along. "Love from the bottom to the top," we hollered. Byrne and Gaonkar stopped by the after-party, shook some hands, laughed, drank rosé from plastic cups.

Byrne considers "American Utopia," the Broadway show that he launched in 2019, based on a solo album of the same name, to be part of the broader *Reasons to Be Cheerful* cosmos. "The journalism project and the show were a kind of counterforce to what I saw happening in the country," he said. "I thought, Oh, maybe we can show rather than tell that there are encouraging things going on—or we can be that encouraging thing." It's a jukebox musical of a sort, punctuated by moments of Byrne in soliloquy, urging people to see and support one another, and also to vote. (A review in the *Times* called Byrne "an avuncular, off-center shepherd," and compared him to Mr. Rogers.) The central themes of "American Utopia" are affirmation and connection. The show also features Byrne questioning once again why people are the way they are. At one point, before singing "This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody)," Byrne jokingly (and randomly) divides the audience into people who met "on apps" and people who didn't. Then he says, "Objectively, I could never figure out why looking at a person should be any more interesting than looking at any other thing, like, say, a bicycle or a beautiful sunset or a nice bag of potato chips. But, yeah, looking at people—that's the best." Yet Byrne has always had an unusual interest in the inanimate. His gospel of connection is expansive: love one another, love the world.

The most recent era of Byrne's life has been dedicated to perpetuating ideas of hopefulness and service. He has come to understand this as a kind of mandate. "The days of just providing entertainment, they're over—we have an obligation to do more," he said in a conversation with Spike Lee. It's an interesting shift. At the start of Byrne's career, his approach was less didactic, and his stance was more confrontational. For Talking Heads fans, it's easy to resist this type of softening—to decry it, yet again, as inauthentic—but it also feels to me like a truthful, maybe even aspirational way to age. Perhaps the longer we hang around, the more we simply want to somehow be of use.

"As a learning opportunity, the surgery was a success."

The weekend after "Amazing Humans Doing Amazing Things," Byrne joined the pop star Olivia Rodrigo onstage at the Governors Ball, a multiday music festival held at Flushing Meadows Corona Park, in Queens. Byrne first met Rodrigo, who is twenty-two, after her show at Madison Square Garden in 2024. When Rodrigo learned that she'd be headlining Gov Ball this year, she reached out to see if Byrne might want to collaborate on a cover of "Burning Down the House." "I was so stoked that he agreed to do it," Rodrigo told me. " 'Burning Down the House' is one of my favorite songs." (Byrne has said that his favorite song by Rodrigo is "Obsessed," a prickly and very funny tune about stalking your current squeeze's ex, just to feel a little more inadequate.) "Learning the dance moves together was particularly surreal, because I've been so moved by videos of his performances," she said. The pairing was just aesthetically incongruous enough to be delightful. Byrne wore a white T-shirt under tomato-red overalls; Rodrigo wore

tall boots, hot pants, and a matching bra. At some point, Byrne ditched his acoustic guitar, and he and Rodrigo ran onto a walkway jutting out into the crowd, where they performed a goofy, joyful dance, tossing their arms in the air, jogging in place.

These days, Byrne keeps busy. He often arrives at meetings with a tablet, and takes copious notes. When I told him that he seemed unusually organized for a rock star, he laughed. "My brain only has the capacity for a certain amount of things," he said. "We like to think when we're sitting in a meeting and talking we're gonna remember it all. Well, you're not gonna remember it all!" ("After working with David, I became a person who showed up to the start of rehearsals with a binder and a pencil," Annie Clark said.) This past summer, Byrne was concurrently planning his wedding, the "Who Is the Sky?" album launch, and a sixty-eight-date world tour, which kicked off in Pittsburgh in mid-September. In August, I attended a rehearsal. Byrne, his band, and his dancers were wearing coördinating bright-orange sneakers (on the road, everyone would alternate between orange and periwinkle blue, each paired with a matching suitlike ensemble by Veronica Leoni for Calvin Klein) and running through some songs with the choreographer Steven Hoggett, who, on that afternoon, had them marching in concentric circles. Byrne tends to favor movement that's kinetic but a little crooked—the sorts of blunt gestures that, theoretically, anyone can do. When I spoke to him on the phone a few dates into the tour, he was still working out some details. "We're shifting things to keep the momentum going," he said. "The audience got up and started dancing at one point, and then I started talking, and they all sat down. You just don't know until you put it in front of people. So we make a note, and we react. In a sense, the audience becomes our collaborator that way."

One morning before he left for the tour, Byrne and I met at Pace Gallery, in Chelsea, to review proofs of a collection of large-format photographs that he was preparing to show there later in the year. "I rarely, rarely take pictures of people," he said. "I take pictures of things that people have made, evidence of what humans have done." That might include a bizarre storefront display (one of the photos in the running that day featured mannequins in sundresses, with boom boxes as heads), or a road sign totally obscured by stickers, or a pile of laundry in an inexplicably compelling arrangement. Sometimes Byrne's assistant posts the photos to Instagram. "That's the only thing I do on Instagram," he said. "In fact, I've never looked at it. I think I might be terrified." Byrne's interest in photographing man-made jetsam feels aligned with his point of view—the way his lyrics often resemble narrative experiments more than romantic confessions. "It's Duchamp's idea that the everyday, looked at through a different lens, can be incredibly artistic," Harrison said of Byrne's style. "He's going to talk about the structure, the house, the building, the staircase, you know, rather than the way the light casts itself through the window."

Byrne has been making visual art for a long time, but he remains grateful for the emotional range that music enables—how it allows for the synchronous expression of diametric feelings. "Lyrically, you can talk about something kind of depressing, but it can be buoyed by beats and sounds. It works together—one balances out the other. I don't know where else we can do that," he said. "In writing or film, you can cut from one thing to another. But simultaneously? No."

Byrne is unusually open to change, and this might be why his career has lasted for more than fifty years. One evening, I asked if he could isolate a through line in the work—some philosophy uniting the records, the books, the theatre, the art, the dance, the installations, the bike racks, the films. "Well, they're definitely asking similar kinds of questions: Who are we? How do we see the world? How do we make the world for ourselves? How do we make ourselves as individuals?" he said. "What might appear to be negative—the fact that we can adapt to things that are not real, that we can change in other ways—is actually positive, because it means that your perception of the world around you, of other people, of yourself, is not fixed.

In early September, Byrne released a music video for "What Is the Reason for It?" It was directed by Dustin Yellin, an artist and the founder of Pioneer Works, a nonprofit performance-and-gallery space in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Yellin took twenty or so of Byrne's line drawings (several of the same figures are also painted in the stairwells at the Pace Gallery) and used A.I. to awaken them: they danced, they sang, they melted, they blinked, they pawed at an iPhone screen. When Yellin showed a rough cut to Byrne, in Brooklyn, Byrne clapped. "Very nice!" he said, smiling.

Yellin and Byrne had run into each other just a month before, at a benefit for the A.C.L.U. "I said to him, 'Have you ever thought about using A.I. to bring your drawings to life?'" Yellin recalled.

Byrne said, "I came out here and took a few drawings, mainly this spiky man, and said, 'Let's see what it does.'"

"His fucking face when he first saw his drawings moving," Yellin said. "You're looking at your art, and then all of a sudden it's alive."

Byrne has an appropriate amount of trepidation about the intersection of A.I. and music ("It's frightening when you're asking it to create songs out of whole cloth," he said), but in his own way he has been animating the inanimate for years, enlivening and romanticizing objects, structures, whatever—finding meaning in entities that other people might dismiss as inert or unimportant. Occasionally, he even sees himself in things, as on "(Nothing but) Flowers," a track from "Naked," the final Talking Heads album:

> Years ago I was an angry young man
> And I'd pretend
> That I was a billboard
> Standing tall
> By the side of the road
> I fell in love
> With a beautiful highway.

The lyrics are about dissociation and distance (the song describes the narrator's fear of a landscape scraped of modernity, reclaimed by nature), but they are also about connection—hope in a damaged place, love where we least expect it. ♦

ILLUSTRATION BY EVAN M. COHEN

This happened after the war. I was twelve, almost thirteen. My brother was five years older. We had ended up in a small city in the center of the country, not too far from the western coast. A train line had been rebuilt and was running, and that summer you could travel to the coast if you had the money, it would take only a few hours.

I think that was how it started, with word spreading about the opening of the train line.

Mrs. S mentioned it one day. "Have you heard?" she said. "We have access to the coast."

Then other people began to imagine what the coast might look like these days, and we heard someone say, "Well, everything must be new, if they're letting us go there!"

Then someone else called it the "new coast," and the name stuck.

Not that any of us could afford to see it ourselves, but it was something to talk about, to think about—those new buildings, new rooms, the beach.

We were all neighbors in one of the many settlements that had sprouted up in the city, and we had been waiting there for everything to be rebuilt. Or that was what the officials kept telling us—to stay where we were so that they could begin restoring the city.

But no one seemed convinced that the city would ever be restored, and this was a big reason people came and went, looking for someplace better. By then, my brother and I had passed through enough places—we had been wandering for two years, from one settlement to another—to know that the community here was better than most. Neighbors tried to be good neighbors. It was peaceful. There were plenty of supplies to fix roofs. We lived on a hill, and if you looked past the rubble you had a view of the river, which Mrs. S said looked pretty much the same as before to her.

Mrs. S was from this city. We, of course, weren't, but she never treated us differently because of it, didn't tell us to leave, didn't even ask where we were from originally or where our parents were because she knew it no longer mattered: we had no place, and nobody, to go back to.

On the day we arrived, she came out of her shanty, a woman around the age our grandmother would have been. Her back was bent, and she was wearing brightly colored woven bracelets around both her wrists. She introduced herself as Mrs. S (we would never learn her full name) and told us that, if this was where we wanted to be, then we should be good to people here and start again. That was all that mattered to her.

We promised we would. Then she made us tea and came up with a list of what might make the shanty that a city worker had sent us to—an empty shanty usually meant someone had either left or died—a little more comfortable.

I told my brother that I would hunt for something to use as a door while he was at work the next day. And then together, the three of us, we looked out at the river, where people were washing clothes, and then a little beyond it, and Mrs. S pointed out where her house once was, the house she was born in, and where there was now the severed tail of a bomber rising from the earth like a great, alien tree.

It was a soldier who noticed my brother writing in a notebook one afternoon. This was right before we came to the city and met Mrs. S. We were sitting outside the fence of a military camp town a few kilometres away, waiting for food. We had learned over the years to go to camp towns when we could because the soldiers often left food in boxes beside the trash bins, or came to the gate and handed out tins of meat and, on rare occasions, other things, too: a notebook, a pen, spare clothes, a pack of cigarettes, which usually made me sick.

Often, while we waited, my brother wrote poems, though he never shared them with me. I just knew he had begun to write them because it was what our father used to do in his spare time, and on nights when he couldn't sleep. Our father would then give his poems away in our mountain village. For a long time, I was convinced my brother and I would find one of our father's poems—a piece of paper in a shanty, perhaps, or stuck between blades of grass in a field—imagining it was possible that people's possessions might have moved much as we had moved, ending up elsewhere still intact.

I liked imagining this—that it wasn't just us moving around during those years but all things.

In any case, writing a poem was what my brother was doing outside the fence of the camp town; I was watching a group of women on the other side, hanging out in front of a bar with a blinking motorcycle sign on the front. There was one who was very young, a teen-ager, in a dark button-down shirt, and I looked hard, as I always did, in case it was our sister, but of course it wasn't. Yet I continued to watch as she approached the passing soldiers and touched their arms and stole their hats and giggled a little too enthusiastically, though it seemed to work on the men: they began, one by one, to follow the women into the bar.

We heard footsteps and turned to see a very tall man looking down at us. To our surprise, he was from this country, or his parents were from this country, and he asked my brother, "What are you writing?"

My brother didn't respond, but the soldier didn't seem to mind. I remember the man had tired eyes. He asked my brother if he was good at writing and whether he could do some math, and my brother nodded. (It was true, my brother was good at writing and math, though I believe that in this moment he would have nodded at anything the man said, thinking there was going to be food.)

The soldier then said that in the nearby city they were looking for people who could write and do some math. He said the word "job" and mentioned clean clothes, a uniform, and maybe some housing. He told my brother to write down an address, which was actually more of a description of a building on a street whose sign might or might not be there, but it was one of the few buildings in the city that had survived—we couldn't miss it.

Then the soldier gave us a bag of food and left. A moment later, the young girl stumbled out of the bar and started to curse and spit. She was barefoot and had a bruise beginning to bloom across her face, and her shirt was hanging wide open, revealing one of her breasts. She looked across at us through the fence and stopped, a little startled to see us there.

With my mouth full of food, I waved

to her. She wiped her mouth, straightened her hair, and then, not bothering to button up her shirt, she smiled, ignoring the pain, and waved back.

In the city, my brother was hired to survey the population. He was one of a few surveyors, each assigned to a different area. His job was to find out how many people were coming in and out of the settlements and shantytowns: their names, their ages, and where they were from; how many still had families who had not been accounted for; whether they appeared healthy or sick, and, should they look ill, he was to describe their condition in the hope of figuring out what kind of medicine was needed; and, lastly, what kind of work they'd done before the war.

It turned out that the surveys were not only part of a census—they were a way for the country to begin building a national database to try to reunite family members who had been separated. They were also a means of identifying people by profession so that they could help in the country's recovery. If my brother encountered, say, a roofer in one of the shantytowns, the roofer's name would be collected by someone else in the office and then sent to another office somewhere else, where they might know of all the places that needed a team of roofers.

My brother was given a ream of carbon paper to write on, a bag that had once been carried by a mailman, and a pale brown uniform he got to wear every day, the collar and the sleeves so clean and crisp that when he brought it back to the shanty he was hesitant even to put it on.

So we left the uniform there on the floor for a while, left it folded in the sunlight beside the bowl and cup we shared, and a pile of magazines we had found in the otherwise empty shanty, with pictures so faded I couldn't tell what they were of.

The first week, my brother's bag was stolen from him. Someone ran by so fast he didn't see who it was, felt only the speed and then the absence of the bag. The office gave him another one. The second week, my brother got into a fight with a young man who believed he had food in the bag, and my brother came back to the shanty with a bruise around his eye, which was nothing compared with the one I had seen on the young girl in the camp town that day.

I didn't mention this to my brother, but the girl had begun to appear in my dreams, her face painted an array of colors that blended until the face became faceless—a far, bright moon.

Mrs. S brought some cold river water up and soaked a rag and told my brother to keep it on his face for as long as it stayed cold. I wanted to be near him, but he was embarrassed and told me to go away.

On the far side of the river, two stray dogs chased each other around the airplane tail. A moment later, I heard my brother coming up behind me.

"I don't want to be inside," he said.

So we went down to the river to get some more cold water. We ended up staying there, sitting on the bank. When my brother's arm grew tired, I soaked the rag and held it against his head for him. I wanted to tell him that I had begun to have a recurring dream, my first in a long time, but the words vanished as soon as I opened my mouth.

Instead, I asked when I could work the way he worked, and he laughed. He asked if I liked it here, which was his way of asking, I understood, if I thought we should stay put for a while or keep going the way we had these past few years.

It felt to me like we had been moving for so long that there was nowhere else to go. If we kept moving, we would end up back in a place we had already left or run away from. That was what I wanted to tell him.

"I like Mrs. S," I said. "And I like the dogs."

"You always like the dogs," he said.

He dipped the rag into the river again, loudly. The smell of cooking came to us, carried by wind.

"Why do you think she goes by Mrs. S?" my brother asked.

But I knew he wasn't expecting me to answer.

There was a time when we'd wondered a lot about the people and even the animals we met: how they all survived, what it took, and all the things one did to survive. This was something we used to want to know. But, the more we listened and the more we saw, the more the wanting stopped.

We heard a distant boom. It sounded as if the remnants of a building were being razed. My brother didn't bother to turn.

"I like the old lady, too," he said.

"You always like the old ladies," I said, and took over pressing the rag against his head, the sunlight now turning darker on the water as the dogs barked and chased each other up the hill.

I don't know if this will come as a surprise, but my brother didn't get into many more fights that year. Maybe it was his uniform. Maybe over time the people in this area could tell that he wasn't a threat or wasn't worth the bother. Maybe it was thanks to Mrs. S. Maybe people decided they liked what he was doing, even if they didn't entirely trust the program or whoever was in charge of it.

There were several instances of people not wanting to give him any information, but that was all it came to. He kept doing the work, first in one section of the city, then in another, going a little farther each morning as he wrote down names, all the information. Then he would walk back to the office and turn in his report and get paid. And he would do it again the next day.

Unless Mrs. S needed help of some kind—fixing up her shanty, heading to the clinic to see if there was any medicine or food that day—I wandered what was left of the streets, or, at least, the streets Mrs. S told me to keep to. On occasion, I could hear a loudspeaker blaring news about another building that had collapsed or an incoming rainstorm or the nighttime curfew, which no one ever followed.

I avoided any passing vehicles, kept close to any remaining walls, and looked for things for the shanty. I found a wool blanket in an alley to replace the ragged one we had been using as a door. I found an unbroken teacup as well as a hook I thought we could nail into the shanty wall. I found a cat playing with a boot with a good sole, and I sat there in the dirt not far away and watched as the cat eventually grew bored and went down into the ruins of a fallen building and carried out another boot. I waited some more.

Then I took the boots. In the river, I washed off the blood they were stained with as best as I could, and I left them for my brother to find when he came back after work. They were too large for him, so we tore out magazine pages and shoved them into the toes and he told me it worked; they were better than the shoes he'd been wearing, which had practically no soles at all.

Mrs. S and I watched as he walked back and forth in the settlement, his bruise long vanished by then, pleased as the sun went down on another day.

I loved pleasing my brother. I always had. I loved pleasing my sister, too, though she knew it was my brother I looked up to, and she was O.K. with that.

I was the youngest. I didn't know where my sister was. We had stopped looking for her a long time ago.

In later dreams I had, the moon, when it appeared, said, "Surprise," and looked down at me as I swam across the river and ran toward the tail of the airplane because I was convinced my sister was in there, alive and living with her own magazines and bowls and teacups and boots. But, try as I might, the metal cutting into my fingertips, I could never get inside.

Toward the end of that summer, Mrs. S, sitting in front of her shanty one evening, mentioned that she'd heard about someone who had visited the new coast. She had a friend in the settlement who knew a person elsewhere in the city who had saved up for a train ticket. Expecting to find a resort town, or new villages that had been built along the shore, the traveller had encountered only more wreckage and rubble and more soldiers and loudspeakers and more shantytowns and camp towns.

The exception was a building facing the water. It was new. Or had been fixed up well enough to appear new. The traveller wasn't sure if it had always been intended to be an orphanage, but that's what it now was, with more than a hundred children of varying ages living there. They took classes, gardened, played soccer on the beach.

It was seeing the children that made the trip worth it, the traveller said. That, and all the birds gliding above.

I was trying to remember the last time I had seen a flock of birds when Mrs. S asked my brother if there was any record of this orphanage in the office. Without hesitation, my brother said that he would find out. Ever since my brother started working on the census, he had been trying to help Mrs. S locate her granddaughter, but without success.

So we weren't surprised that she wanted my brother to see if a survey had been taken of the orphanage. In fact, Mrs. S admitted for the first time that she had a feeling her granddaughter was dead, but said it couldn't hurt to keep looking.

She said, "Who knows? If her name is on a list, maybe I'll take a trip to the coast myself." Then she winked at me as though she had just told me a joke, trying to keep the conversation light.

The truth was, we had never seen her leave the city. It wasn't because of her age, or an issue of money—my brother would gladly have given her some of what he was making, if she'd asked. It was as if the community on this hill wouldn't be what it was without her, or that was how she felt, anyway—that she couldn't just leave. She was originally from here, so people relied on her and looked up to her. They approached her when they were seeking advice on how to obtain things, where to go, whom to talk to.

Still, I kept wondering why she didn't go to the orphanage herself and take a look, just to be sure. She wouldn't have to be gone long, she could do it in a day. It was my brother, a few nights later, the two of us lying beside each other on the floor, who said that was a stupid question: "It would be harder. To simply go, not knowing anything, only to find nothing."

I didn't respond to that. I kept thinking about what I would say if Mrs. S ever asked us if we were looking for anyone, which she never once had. All the words became a stone in my head which kept rolling back and forth.

The day before, someone who had lived here for years died in a shanty not far from ours. I could hear a group of people walking over to it and talking about how to divide up the things that were inside. Someone claimed a basket; another, a shirt. There was an argument about who got the radio.

And then my brother, who had fallen asleep and must have been dreaming, began to say names out loud, the names of people he had written down on the carbon paper that afternoon.

I listened. To the names and to the argument outside, and I looked up at

"Well, if you would prefer it prepared and baked, it sounds like your wish writes itself."

my brother's uniform hanging on the hook we had installed on the wall. If I looked hard enough, it was as if the uniform were flying away or as if I were falling, as if the stone in my head and I were now falling together.

My brother did eventually find a list of who was at the orphanage on the western coast. But the name of Mrs. S's granddaughter wasn't on it. One name he found, however, listed in the staff column, was the name of our sister.

He didn't tell me right away. If it were me, I probably wouldn't have told him right away, either. In truth, it was probably a stranger with the same name. That had happened to us before, in another town. We had stumbled upon our sister's name carved into a tree in front of a farmhouse that had survived. We stood there for a long time, staring as though our sister had become the tree, until a man appeared, carrying a rifle, and explained to us that it was a tree his daughter had once liked to climb.

In any case, after my brother saw the list, he stopped by the settlement in the middle of the day and told Mrs. S that her granddaughter wasn't on it.

Mrs. S, without looking at him, tugged at one of her bracelets and picked up a basket of laundry.

"Well," she said. "There you have it," and went down the hill to wash her clothes and the clothes of her neighbor.

My brother went back to work, revisiting a section of the city he'd already covered to see how many people were new and how many were no longer there.

I spent the day with the two dogs. They had grown comfortable with me, and they followed me all the way to a bend in the river, where I discovered there had once been a bridge, and I jumped on one of the broken pillars, which made them nervous, and they barked at me to come back down.

I came back down. Retracing my path along the river, I watched a man from the settlement who was a stonemason climb into a military truck to be taken to wherever it was he was needed. I found Mrs. S and helped her with the laundry. I carried the basket up to her shanty and we hung the clothes to dry, and then she told me to go and help a neighbor who was patching her roof, so I did that.

The dogs never left my side, resting beside me when I rested, their chests moving like small waves as they breathed.

I wondered if dogs ever dreamed of the moon. The sky.

To my surprise, I fell asleep quickly and deeply that night. I had no dreams. When I woke, my brother was lying beside me, eyes open, holding the tin box he kept buried behind the shanty with the little money he had saved. The morning leaked through the holes in the wool blanket hanging over the entrance.

"It could be her," he said.

I wasn't fully awake yet and had no idea what he was talking about. Shadows passed by outside, the holes in the blanket going dark and then light again. I could hear a fly buzzing somewhere.

"It could be her," my brother said, again. "At the orphanage. On the new coast."

He opened and closed his hands, and, as I thought of all the times we had said that to each other, he told me he had been granted a day off and that we were going to go right now on the train.

To see for ourselves. If she was there.

"Right now," he said.

I rubbed my eyes; the fly vanished.

"It isn't new," I said.

"What?"

"The coast. It isn't new. I don't know why people call it that."

I thought he would smack me on the head or get up and tell me to hurry,

but he did nothing, he just lay there, the tin box now balanced on his chest as he continued to open and close his hands in the air as if the answer were there in his palms.

It occurred to me that I had not seen him write a poem in a while.

More shadows passed.

And then a child peered in. I could see the child's eye through one of the blanket holes, and I said, "O.K.," and got up.

The trip took four hours. We hadn't been on a train in almost two years. Or not a train where there were seats and we had tickets. The car was nearly empty. There was an old woman at the far end who unfolded a fan and stared out the window. A pair of soldiers in their uniforms were nearby, drifting in and out of sleep. I thought maybe the one on the left was the one who'd told my brother about the job in the city, but I wasn't sure anymore what the man had looked like.

Some of the windows were open but it was still hot, and I could see the sweat around the collar of my brother's uniform, which he'd decided to wear. Every now and again, he smoothed the points of his collar and looked at himself in the window's reflection.

I don't remember us speaking at all during that trip. We travelled through farmland with large craters in the fields, and we saw an abandoned tank with its treads blown out, its cannon aimed at us. I thought I saw someone climb out of the top, but then the train swerved and we headed toward a mountain, the car growing dark as we began to travel around the base. My brother looked down at his lap; I leaned against the window and tried to look as high up as possible, searching for sky.

Eventually, the mountain opened up into a wide valley where there were scattered piles of enormous stones, and dead trees stacked one on top of the other like bodies. I spotted some undamaged houses with their windows open, and a man and a woman carrying a heavy ceramic pot across the grass and laughing.

At least, I thought I could hear them laughing. Then I realized it was just the wind and the train creaking.

We smelled the ocean before we saw it.

Then we did see it, the flat expanse of it under the sun, and the train whistled and slowed, turning north to follow the coast, and we approached what that traveller had said to expect: what was visible through the window was just like the city, all the wreckage and broken pieces of buildings and the ruined land, except it was much brighter here, the sun all over and the smell of the ocean all over, too, wafting into the train.

There was no station. The train

BLACK SNOW

falling in Austria and the Himalayas,
deliquescing into the dirt of Russia,

unloading its burden of soot and dust
from the coal plants, the coalfields and pits

of Prokopyevsk, Kiselevsk, Leninsk-Kuznetski,
their soldiers deliquescing into the local cemetery,

returned from Afghanistan, Chechnya, Ukraine—*black*
snow, the words sound so pretty, like black apples

from Arkansas, or the Black Diamond apple of Tibet,
stained purple by sunlight, expensive and rare,

or black ice, which is treacherous, near-invisible—
words like *glory* and *country*, *Motherland*,

Fatherland, what do they mean, does it depend, what
do they depend on, what tree or cross or bridge hang from

while black snow falls on Greenland, its glaciers
deliquescing, another word I love, though not

what it means, what it portends, while the wind
spins another cluster of dead leaves from a limb

and a man in a faraway office leaves work for his home
and fire, and ice deliquesces into his glass of gin.

And what about the stars? They're already char
and the moon is a miner's lamp to light the workers

forever going down and in.

—*Kim Addonizio*

stopped at a platform near a road. On the other side of the road was the beach. We were the only ones who got out at this stop. The train barely waited for us to disembark before it kept going, farther up the coast. From here, we could see another settlement in the distance, on a hill facing the water.

I remember my brother remarking on what a view we'd have if we lived there. I remember, also, that there was no one around.

We crossed the road, heading toward the beach, distracted by it suddenly, wanting to touch the sand, which we did, digging our hands into it, my brother grinning. The wind blew against us as he threw a clump at me and I threw some back. He shouted. I thought he was about to run into the water, but he stopped. I followed his gaze to a point behind me, and saw a long, two-story concrete building with many windows.

I think it was at this moment, on the beach, that everything seemed the most possible. That our sister was alive and in that building somewhere.

We hurried. Inside, we were greeted by a man who was walking down the hall. We could hear the echoes of voices. We told him whom we were looking for and he said, "Just a minute," and kept walking.

We waited. There were more footsteps, and a young woman appeared, holding a mop and a bucketful of water. She was wearing overalls and had tied a bandanna over her hair. Her face was covered in scars as if she had been burned or cut up with a small knife.

She looked at both of us, expectant. Then something passed across her eyes and she placed the mop and the bucket down and clasped her hands together as though she were about to recite a prayer.

We had no idea who she was.

The stranger took us to an empty classroom and had us sit at the desks like we were students. There was a blackboard up front. On the table was an open box of scissors and crayons and a stack of blue paper. From here, through the wide windows, we could see the train platform we had come from and the distant settlement on the hillside.

She turned a chair and sat in front of us. She didn't speak for a while. I thought maybe she was a few years older than my brother, but it was hard to say because of the scars. She sat there not knowing what to do with her hands, which were also scarred, I saw now.

Then she spoke: "You're his children, aren't you? I knew this day would come. I knew at least one of you would survive and come here to find her. I knew it the moment I said that I was her. You have to believe me, it was the only way they would let me stay here. It was the only way."

She was speaking fast but steadily and avoided looking at us. I couldn't stop looking at her. Not because of her scars but because of how calm she was.

She went on, "I came here thinking maybe they had a space for me. But I was too old. So I asked if there was any work I could do. There's always work to do, no? I said I would work for free as long as I could stay here. The thing, of course, was that I wasn't the only one asking. Every day, people came and asked and begged. They still do. And I begged. I had been walking for so long. Up and down the coast. I had nowhere else to go. I wasn't ever going to go back there"—she pointed out the window at the hillside settlement—"I will never go back there.

"So I kept begging. I cried. And then a woman working here asked where I was from, and so I told her. And that was when the woman's eyes lit up. She mentioned she knew where that was because she knew a man from that area

who used to come to her village to fix roofs. He was the best in the mountains. And sometimes he came with his kids, two boys and a girl, and they helped. Or, if he thought it was too dangerous, they stayed on the ground and watched and directed him. The woman said she remembered their laughter.

"And you know what I did? I said to the woman, without thinking, 'That was me.' And she said, 'That was you?,' and I nodded. And she said your sister's name, and I said, 'Yes.' I kept pointing at myself and saying, 'Yes, that's me.'"

The stranger leaned forward in her chair. She meant to stand, perhaps. To walk away. Or to run away. Instead, she slowly picked up a pair of scissors, and grew so still I could hear the tide outside and my brother's breathing and footsteps from the hallway, she was so still, except for her eyes, which fluttered and welled as my brother got up first, without a word, touched my shoulder, and we left.

We never saw her again. We never spoke about her or the orphanage after that day, and we never again spoke out loud about our sister to each other, either. In less than a year's time, my brother would put on his uniform one morning, head out to keep surveying the city's population, including all the new people continuing to come in, and my brother would vanish.

I never found out if someone hurt him, fighting him once again for his bag, or whether he just left. I don't know which is worse.

Mrs. S lived long enough to see the tail of the airplane get lifted away—it turned out the other half wasn't underground after all—and the land was cleared for her house and her neighbors' houses to be rebuilt. But Mrs. S had no way to prove that her house was hers. And so, one afternoon, I helped her down to the river so that we could watch the young woman I had seen outside the bar at the camp town move into the property that had been Mrs. S's home.

"Well," Mrs. S said. "There you have it."

She tugged on my arm as if she wanted to return up the hill, but she didn't move.

That is one of my last memories of her.

I spent a year looking for my brother, convinced that he had simply left—that visiting the orphanage had made him determined to keep looking for our sister.

I travelled far. I retraced our steps the best I could. I returned to the coast. By then, the woman who was using our sister's name had gone, too. A route into the mountains where we were born opened up, so I travelled there as well. It turned out that a village near ours had been rebuilt, and when I arrived there an old man came up to me and said, "You're one of the roofer's children, aren't you?," and I told him I was.

"But you're all grown up," he said.

This made me laugh. (I was fifteen by then.) I asked him if he had seen my brother or sister during these years, and he shook his head. He said I was the first person he recognized from our village. And then the shock of seeing someone he had known a long time ago overwhelmed him—he buried his head into my shoulder and wept and asked me how we were all supposed to keep living.

Eventually, I returned to the city, though by then someone had taken over the shanty that my brother and I had made our home. I moved into another, where, to my surprise, there was one of Mrs. S's bracelets hanging on a nail. I slipped it on, then thought better of it and put it back.

In the morning, I went to the office where my brother had worked and asked if I could have my brother's job.

I still do that now. I walk the sections of the city that are slowly being rebuilt and collect names and information, and I go out to the new towns on the new train lines and do the same. I try to collect as much information as possible.

I look after my neighbors. I help them wash their clothes. I leave food out for the new dogs.

When I think of that day with my brother on the coast, we are standing on the beach some distance away from the orphanage, not far from the train platform. This was afterward. But in my imagination it is as though we are about to visit the orphanage again, as though we are about to start over. The sand in our hands.

My brother asked if I was all right. I nodded, even though I had been crying.

"You're not that strong," he said, and I could tell he was trying to get me to smile.

We had yet to look at each other. We were facing the water, my brother in his uniform and boots, and he asked, shyly, whether I had ever thought of doing that.

I didn't understand what he meant.

He hesitated. Then he said, without looking at me, "The way she held the scissors. Toward herself."

And then I did understand. But I didn't respond.

I watched the moving water and the far horizon.

I asked if the woman was O.K., as though he would know if she was O.K., and my brother said, "She's O.K."

"You won't tell?" I asked.

I meant he wouldn't report her to the orphanage for having taken our sister's identity.

My brother shook his head. "I won't tell," he said.

The relief that came over me turned into a sudden desire to see the woman again, to call her by our sister's name. The feeling passed, but was so strong I grew embarrassed by it.

My brother took a step closer to the water. It was then that he took out his notebook, which he always carried in his shirt pocket, opened it, tore out the pages, and threw them into the water.

I remember gasping and wanting to plunge into the sea. But my brother took my hand and held me in place, and I grew quiet, not because of what he had just done but because I couldn't remember the last time my brother and I had held hands. Not, I thought, since the long field where we had run for our lives and he'd kept shouting at me over the horrible noise and the earth breaking open not to let go of our sister's hand, which I also held. He kept shouting, Hold your sister's hand. And, for a long time, I thought I was doing just that. But then I wasn't holding her hand anymore, I wasn't holding his hand, I was only screaming and running across a field that kept breaking apart into the smallest of pieces underneath me.

The tide carried the pages away. And then we heard the whistle of the train approaching and distant voices. And we turned to see a group of children coming down from the orphanage to play soccer on the beach.

And then, a moment later, we saw them: all the birds gliding up the coast. So many of them, right above us, I lost count. ♦

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THE CRITICS

THE ART WORLD

ART OF THE REAL

Robert Rauschenberg's transformative energy.

BY HILTON ALS

On certain days, I'd cut school and head over to the Museum of Modern Art to dream awhile. This was in the mid-nineteen-seventies, and my high school—then called the High School for Performing Arts—was on West Forty-sixth Street. I lived in Brooklyn, and the world within the walls of that school, and beyond them, was a wonderland to me. In addition to all that I was learning in my classes, there was Manhattan itself, and, a block or so away, the Gotham Book Mart, Frances Steloff's fabulous bookstore stuffed with treasures, and, a little farther, the MOMA. I didn't know much about modern art, European or American (though I'd seen some African art at the Brooklyn Museum), but I was porous, and entering that storied building one afternoon and encountering a stuffed goat on a multi-panelled wooden platform remains one of the more destabilizing experiences of my life. The goat had a goatee, horns, and a long-haired silver torso. Its head and neck were streaked with several colors of paint, as though it had put on makeup while

"Monogram" (1955-59). Rauschenberg loved life—the life that went into art—just as much as he loved the art.

drunk. Not only that—there was a black-and-white rubber tire around its middle. Standing before the goat, I felt as if I were having the worst or best possible dream, and, to steady myself, I read the wall label. Titled "Monogram," the piece had been made in 1955-59 by an artist whose retrospective I'd walked into: Robert Rauschenberg. (I learned later that, in his twenties, he'd changed his name from Milton to Robert, because he liked the approachable sound of "Bob.") Who was this man? And what did the word "monogram" mean in this context, or in any context? I remember perspiring, not because the museum was too hot but because something was happening to me: an aesthetic experience I did not understand was changing my body temperature, changing my mind.

It was March or April, 1977, and I was sixteen years old. In those days, the museum employed docents who shared their expertise with visitors, and I remember following a docent that seismic afternoon as she talked about another piece that sent my mind reeling. "Bed" (1955) didn't live in space the way that unmooring goat did; it hung on a wall. But its conventionality ended there. The docent explained that, as a young artist, Rauschenberg was often short of cash, but felt—knew—that art could be made out of anything, even a bedcover. Marcel Duchamp had freed artists from the tyranny of "high" and "low": art was what an artist chose to make. "Bed" had a wooden frame and supports. At the top was a pillow, and below it a partially turned-down bedspread; both were thick with paint, yellows, whites, reds, and blacks that dripped down the surface of the "canvas" like sleep spit—or just like paint—making something new out of this signifier of domesticity and dreams. The docent said that Rauschenberg called pieces like "Monogram" and "Bed"—art works that had elements of both painting and sculpture—"combines."

But that goat. It resonated with a strange energy that went beyond wall labels and neat definitions. I didn't have words for it then. The docent told me that, if I came back the next day, we could talk about Rauschenberg some more. I did go back the next day, and the day after that, because what that marvellous woman was giving me was something I hadn't known could be given: a way of looking that language only deepened. I wanted to know more about the artist and about the world that had made both him and that goat. Together, they prompted me to *see*.

Rauschenberg, who died in 2008, was born a century ago this year, and two major New York institutions are exhibiting works from his vast and riveting œuvre. (A third show, on Rauschenberg's activism and "ecological conscience," is up at the Grey Art Museum, and Gemini G.E.L. has an exhibition of prints.) But, as thrilled as I am to be in his company again, it says something about the art world and its ethos—an ethos ruled by the laws of fashion, and hovering, just now, between the woke and the pretty—that there is no large-scale retrospective of his work in the city that was his primary home for decades, a place that he, with his collagist's mind and eye, made us see in all its odd and beautiful juxtapositions. In order to honor Rauschenberg and the city that plays a part in many of his photographs, paintings, silk screens, and combines, which, taken together, say so much about the transformative power of *energy*, take a walk through Manhattan, and try to view it through his eyes: the refuse beside a discarded chair, the rushing cars and charming legs, a pile of leaves, and a wall of torn and splattered posters. And, as you walk, think about the artist's journey from his birthplace, Port Arthur, Texas, a refinery town where his father worked for the regional utilities company.

Rauschenberg started making art early, drawing on walls, painting furniture. He had it all along—his imagination. And he had another thing that gave him the strength to keep going: his innate drive, which counteracted the conservatism around him. Janis Joplin was born in that same port town seventeen years later, and I like to think of these two big personalities, both marked by extreme vulnerability and toughness, as cousins of a kind, Southerners who made their way out of Port Arthur but had no way of leaving behind what Flannery O'Connor called the "Christ-haunted South."

Raised as a fundamentalist Christian, Rauschenberg considered becoming a pastor, but squelched the idea when he realized that fundamentalists weren't allowed to dance, one of his passions. If you've spent time in any of those Gulf towns in Texas or Louisiana or Mississippi, you know how segregated that world was and still is, and how much the Black imagination—the Africanist spirit—dominates. Not just in the blues that influenced Joplin, say, but in the habit of what I call "making do" in art. When art schools are segregated or unaffordable, you learn to build your own garden—and sometimes it *is* a garden, a place to transform by arranging stones, potting plants in discarded cans, or it's a house painted to match its owner's emotional timbre, or a mural in a public space, or a quilt, a story told through fabric.

This kind of art-making is rarely discussed in relation to Rauschenberg, but I saw the effect of that culture at MOMA as a teen, and again, later, in pieces he made that were inspired by the Arte Povera—or "poor art"—movement in the early seventies. Some critics were dismissive of Rauschenberg's "decoration," as they called it, but they espoused the white art world's view of what constituted art at that time—heaping bowls of Abstract Expressionism, with a side of postwar Europe. For many art critics and theorists then, and even now, the South was a place of "folklore," a word you trotted out when you wanted to talk about Black aesthetics without understanding their roots or their power. To really see what Rauschenberg was doing, one should take a page from the legendary historian Robert Farris Thompson's books. In his 1983 study, "Flash of the Spirit," he describes how, in Yoruba culture, people made art with whatever material was at hand; it was their hands—and their hearts—that imbued their creations with spirit. Thompson saw that spirit in Black American art as well. For Rauschenberg, who once carved a Roman palace in a bar of Ivory soap, it was life that was always at hand. Art was more powerful when it incorporated the real, even if the real was injurious. As a boy, Rauschenberg had a pet goat he loved; his father slaughtered it for food—a shattering loss he never got over. I thought about "Monogram"'s layers for years. I knew that goats in mythology were often mischievous, symbols of randiness and

PREVIOUS PAGE: ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG / COURTESY
© ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION / VAGA / ARS

disorder—"queer" animals. Was that goat a combination of the real, the queer, and the mythic? Was I?

After graduating from high school, in 1943, Rauschenberg briefly attended the University of Texas at Austin. His parents encouraged him to study pharmacology, but his resistance to dissecting a frog in one of his science classes, combined with undiagnosed dyslexia, led him to drop out. The following year, he was drafted into the United States Navy. When he made it clear that he would not hurt a living thing, he was transferred to a post as a neuropsychiatric technician in the Navy Hospital Corps, in San Diego. The damaged soldiers he worked with there only reinforced his pacifism. One day, he travelled north to visit his first museum—the Huntington, in Pasadena. There, he encountered in person Thomas Gainsborough's romantic and sumptuous "Blue Boy" (1770) and Thomas Lawrence's ethereal "Pinkie" (1794)—paintings he had seen before only on the backs of his mother's playing cards. It was a transformative visit, and thereafter Rauschenberg determined to be a painter. It's one of the best feelings in the world to find your vocation, and Rauschenberg never lost the illuminating joy that came with that discovery; indeed, his extraordinary output attests, again and again, to his excitement at what he could do with art, and *for* art, using art's particular vocabulary, which allowed him to say, *There's you. And look at the world with me and you in it.*

In 1946, Rauschenberg was honorably discharged. He hitchhiked back to Port Arthur to see his family, but, as he told the story, they weren't there. They had neglected to tell him that they had moved. Perhaps it was inevitable that they would choose to "forget" this boy who couldn't be the Southern Christian man they wanted him to be, and who found his inspiration not in Christ but in the physicality of the secular world. Within a few years of leaving Texas, Rauschenberg had upended everything the place had meant to him, smashing through the parochialism of small-town Southern life, where necks were broken in Jesus' name, and families indentured or murdered.

After some time in art school in Kansas, in 1948 Rauschenberg left for France on the G.I. Bill. He enrolled at the Académie Julian, in Paris, but, disappointed by what he saw as his fellow-students' lack of drive, he spent much of his time haunting the city's galleries with another American art student named Susan Weil. The two became lovers, and headed back Stateside, to Black Mountain College, in North Carolina, where the artist Josef Albers held sway. But, soon, Rauschenberg felt boxed in by Albers's boxes, both on canvas and in life, and so, in 1950, he and Weil moved on, marrying and setting up house in New York. They had a son in 1951, and divorced the following year.

If you want to get a sense of who Rauschenberg was and what he saw during his years in New York, check out "Robert Rauschenberg's New York: Pictures from the Real World" (at the Museum of the City of New York through April 19th). Curated with acuity by Sean Corcoran, the show comprises eighty works, plus a well-edited selection of related ephemera.

I found myself drawn to the gelatin-silver prints that the very young Rauschenberg made at Black Mountain. Rauschenberg learned from artists who passed through the school, including Harry Callahan, but already he was taking photographs that no one else could take, and the best ones have "mistakes"—the mark of real life in them. In his 1950 portrait "Susan, N.Y.C. (III)," we see a seated Weil. The skirt of her patterned short-sleeved dress is spread out, her hands on either side. Her bare feet poke out from under the skirt, but what we notice more powerfully is how the shades of black in the dress echo the black of her hair, below which we see her close-mouthed face, slightly out of focus—and it's that "mistake" that makes the photograph. She's an avenging angel waiting to avenge something. But what? The man on the other side of the camera, who may already be falling out of love with her?

Also in the show are two portraits of Rauschenberg's second significant male lover, the formidable Jasper Johns, from Augusta, Georgia. The two met at the end of 1953, and were involved until 1961, living in adjacent studios near Coenties Slip, in lower Manhattan, where many other artists, including Agnes Martin and Ellsworth Kelly, also settled. It was cheap down there, and you could smell the river air—the kind of air that helps to open your mind. Merce Cunningham and his partner, John Cage, were frequent guests. (From 1954 to 1964, Rauschenberg was the resident designer for Cunningham's dance company, making ingenious stage elements, including a chair he strapped to Cunningham for the dance "Antic

Meet"—a human combine.) Whereas Weil's energy leaps out of the image at you, Johns's self-containment, his inscrutability, in "Jasper—N.Y.C. (I)," from 1954, makes the portrait more formal, like the beautiful overcoat he wears as he stares out of the frame at the waiting world, his hands in his pockets. I didn't see the beauty of Johns's hands until I got to "Jasper—Studio N.Y.C." (1958). In this image, Johns sits on a table littered with liquor bottles. He's off center, one leg resting on the table, his left hand on his ankle, the right holding a drink—and that's when you notice his long, tapering fingers, and his eyes, looking at the photographer straight on, which seem to say, *I am here, but I could be over there, too.* Behind Johns are two of his target paintings, a series that changed everything.

The work that Rauschenberg made that decade changed American art, too: his extraordinary "White Paintings" from 1951, say, whose white-painted canvases reflect light and shadow, or his "Black Paintings" (1951-53), to which he added texture by painting over newspaper, creating craters you can get lost in. But you wouldn't know this if you were just looking at the photographs, which is one of the problems of not having a retrospective: you have to piece the history together yourself, instead of luxuriating in hall after grand hall. As I looked at "Jasper—Studio N.Y.C.," a kind of sadness descended on me. Because it was during this period that Rauschenberg was becoming more entrenched in the New York art world, and whereas the South was about feeling through culture, New York was falling under the sway of Johns's tremendous art about the denial of feeling and the mitigation of queerness.

Rauschenberg's bold "Erased de Kooning Drawing" (1953)—which is not in any of the current shows—is just what it says it is, and is also one of the more beautiful and enigmatic works of the mid-twentieth century. By partially erasing the Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning's work, Rauschenberg made himself visible as a playful, Duchampian smudge on the landscape of the world ruled over by that Dutch Big Daddy. But, at the same time, in adopting the vocabulary of modernism, Rauschenberg took on a language that his heart didn't speak. Andy Warhol, in his fantastic book "Popism: The Warhol Sixties" (1980), asks a friend why Rauschenberg and Johns had cut him dead, and the friend says because he was "too swish." In the butched-up art world of the mid-century, to be successful you had to be a "real" man beneath all that paint. Has any ambitious person—as ambitious as Rauschenberg was—ever been able to reject the compromises that fame demands?

My spirits lifted, though, when I got to the silk-screen works of the early sixties. Rauschenberg's world became bigger, grander, a sky filled with unbridled gesture and thought. He was no longer rolling around in ideas about modernism but standing up straight and queer in them. In the M.C.N.Y. show, I loved "Soviet/American Array VI" (1988-90), an intaglio with a gorgeous blend of politics, nature, and the everyday, featuring photographs that Rauschenberg took in Moscow and New York. On the left side of the piece, we see a statue of Lenin; it floats by an image of grass, and another of an oval car mirror reflecting the road we've just travelled. Nearby, a man crosses the street in what could be the ghastly heart of an endless New York summer. We're living both in the real world and in the dream world that Rauschenberg often places before us, asking us to think not about where we stand but about what we can love or learn there.

Rauschenberg loved life—the life that went into art—just as much as he loved the art, and it's the broad sweep of his energy which makes "Robert Rauschenberg: Life Can't Be Stopped" (at the Guggenheim through May 3rd), curated with care and a sure eye by Joan Young, so essential. There are fifteen works in the Guggenheim show, and Young has done well to space them out, allowing for a certain stillness between pieces—though stillness didn't really appeal to the dervish Rauschenberg. He was interested in the next and the next and the next. The future: he imagined it, and, once it arrived, he'd leap past it, giddy for the still unknown.

Although there is one piece in the show from the Arte Povera-inspired seventies, there's no major work—like the fabulous "Untitled (Venetian)" (1973), in which a tire tread is stretched into a line between two rough-hewn wooden bookends—to give a sense of Rauschenberg's Fluxus-meets-Africanist heart or to demonstrate that his form of recycling was an acknowledgment of how quickly things can disappear or become something else.

I spent some time with "Untitled (Red Painting)" (c. 1953), a piece that gives you a new way of seeing a color that's difficult to manage. (Rauschenberg's red paintings came after he had wrestled with white and black.) This vertical work, more than six feet high, is, for me, less about texture than about expanse, how to make something reach *up*, rather than from side to side, which is how we view most paintings. "Barge" (1962-63), a silk screen on canvas, on the other hand, extends across the wall. It's thirty-two feet wide, an astonishment not only of black and white but of verve and placement. With no three-dimensional objects stuck to it, "Barge" has only Rauschenberg's brilliance as a collagist to rely on. It's a funked-up Chinese scroll of a painting, without a set story to tell. Rauschenberg is said to have executed "Barge" very quickly, in less than a day, and the improvised feel of it—the big drips and swaths of paint over or near images of "real" things, including birds, athletes, and an umbrella in a downpour of paint—keeps you looking, as if you were in a rehearsal studio watching a choreographer perform steps, just for you, that no one could ever reproduce.

Rauschenberg was intensely interested in performers and performance—how time worked with, or created tension in, a finite dance or theatre piece. (One wonders what he would have made of the event-based work of artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose art sometimes consists of cooking and sharing a meal. What would Rauschenberg cook and serve? Certainly not goat.) Some years ago, when I visited the actress Lily Tomlin and her wife, the writer Jane Wagner, I saw two enormous Rauschenberg prints in the entryway of their home. Tomlin told me that the artist was a fan of her work and had said that he wanted her to play him in a movie of his life. That ability to see himself in other bodies, in other cultures, is what remains once we free Rauschenberg from the restrictions of fashion and climb onto his barge, guided as much by the authority of his hand as by his certainty that none of us knows a thing. But he does know barges and how to steer them. They were a familiar sight on the waterways of Port Arthur. ♦

BOOKS

UNTIL TOMORROW

Solvej Balle's philosophical time-loop saga.

BY KATY WALDMAN

"On the Calculation of Volume" imagines a woman trapped in November 18th.

Before Tara Selter, the protagonist of "On the Calculation of Volume," a series by the Danish author Solvej Balle, gets trapped in a time loop, she is one half of a unit called T. & T. Selter. It's a joint marital and business concern in the fictional village of Clairon-sous-Bois, France: an antiquarian-book dealership that Tara runs with her husband, Thomas, who shares her devotion to material history and her flair for noticing. "Maybe we are a weather system," Tara considers. "We look at one another, we touch one another, we condense."

Their twosome ruptures when Tara, who has travelled to Paris for an auction, wakes up on what should be the morning of November 19th to shimmers of déjà vu: the headlines in the newspaper look familiar; at breakfast, the same hotel guest drops the same slice of bread. A horrified Tara soon realizes that she is living in a repeating November 18th, while Thomas and the rest of the world go on without her.

The story, which unfolds in slim, strange installments, becomes, among other things, a parable of marital loneliness. Balle's time loop operates according to inscrutable rules: although Tara's day refreshes, her body continues to age and her geographical location can change. Certain objects that she acquires, such as a toothbrush, stay with her, whereas others disappear overnight. When Tara first returns home to Clairon, she and Thomas orbit each other in their bucolic cottage, and she observes him with a keen tenderness, listening for his gentle thuds on the floorboards. On some days, Tara lets her husband in on her predicament; on others, she trails him like a shadow. The strategy she chooses makes no difference. Every morning, his memory resets.

Balle's series has grown into a cult hit, both in Scandinavia, where the first five of a planned seven books have been released in the original Danish, and, more recently, in the U.S., where New Directions has published English translations of Books I through III. (Barbara Haveland rendered the first two; Sophia Hersi Smith and Jennifer Russell deliver the third, out this month.) The novels, composed of Tara's diary entries, meld metaphysical inquiry with an intimate attention to the natural world and the domestic sphere. Balle's prose—repetitive, hypnotic, and as balanced as a small plane—sustains an atmosphere of illuminated ordinariness. Here is "a drawer being opened, wood sliding across wood." There, a light drizzle builds into rain "bucketing down." The effect of the time-loop device is propulsive yet lulling: the premise grabs us with its gimmickry, then it amplifies the motions and textures that we already know.

Under the magnifying lens of Balle's conceit, marriage appears hyperreal, a peaceable yet doomed circuit of pleasant meals, purposeful silences, and household routines that fall gradually out of synch. To Tara, Thomas dwindles to the sounds he makes when carrying his teacup up and down the stairs. On day three hundred and thirty-nine, when Tara implores him to join her on a trip to Paris, a familiar impasse turns strikingly literal: "He didn't want to go with me. He wanted to stay in his pattern." Eventually, despite their best efforts—the pair movingly tries to merge their time lines over long nights spent awake together—Tara leaves her house and her husband behind. "Too many days had come between us," she says.

A current of grief and longing runs through the series. Condemned to an eternal autumn, Tara looks out at the tree in her garden and can see only absence: "the lack of winter

ILLUSTRATION BY BIANCA BAGNARELLI

branches covered in frost, the lack of spring blossoms, the lack of green leaves." She swears that she can hear other seasons "sighing through the chinks" of her repeating November 18th. If the series' conceit literalizes the mismatches in our intimate relationships, it also dramatizes a person grappling with her finitude. Like all of us, Tara has a limited window in which to accumulate sensations, to participate in the happenings of the world. Death, in the guise of the nineteenth, presses up against her time line, both haunting and evading her. She sits on the cusp of a future that she knows she will not see.

Upon entering the time loop, Tara cycles restlessly through phases and responses, trying to decide how to use the days. First, she wills herself and Thomas into a sweet somnolence—"we made the horizon vanish," she writes—and then she craves clarity, drawing up tables and charts. She can't decide whether to keep up her diary. On day one hundred and eighty-five, she supposes that "sentences are not necessary." On day one hundred and eighty-six, she doubles back: "But if sentences are not necessary why do I sit down at the table and write?" Her life becomes periodized, with stretches spent in Bremen and Düsseldorf. An antique coin that she bought for Thomas on the original November 18th becomes a talisman, vanishing from the time line and then resurfacing.

The artifact fuels Tara's fleeting but intense fascination with ancient Rome. She confesses that she never cared much for history in the sense of grand thematic arcs. She's drawn to old things for their voluptuous qualities: "the slow *flick-flick* when you leaf through thick pages, the whisper of thin paper, a gilt edge and the split second's resistance as the gilding leaves the fingertip." She becomes an expert in wine production and olive harvests, in grain storage and women's hair styles—fixations that evince her new interest in what makes ephemeral lives persist in time. Is it the headiness of military campaigns and imperial dramas? Or is it the past's tangible detritus: "plates and jars . . . a glass cup . . . wood for the ovens"?

Inside November 18th, Tara's sense of time transforms into something stern and architectural, less a conveyor belt than a mausoleum. "Everything in the Roman world is a container," she declares, thinking of the amphoras and cauldrons and woven baskets. Later, she reflects, "I had landed in the vast container of history. It was overflowing with things." This claustral existence would seem to suit Tara; the novels distinguish her via her eye for detail, placing her in a coterie of alienated, observant female narrators who drift through recent fiction. Such a person might embrace an eternity in which to marvel at the etchings on a Roman coin, or the weight of a leek. But Tara's sensualism also isolates her, emphasizing the narrowness of a life crammed with dead things.

Near the end of the first book, Tara wonders whether her material connoisseurship has put her at odds with the world she loves. She notices that her groceries, unlike the foods that Thomas eats, don't replenish when a new day begins. She is disturbed by the sight of "shelves growing barer and barer," resolving to eat expired goods that nobody will miss. Here, the time-loop metaphor reinvents itself as an environmental allegory: Tara's loss, and the book's ambient melancholy, may be her fault. Her journal entries turn despairing and remorseful, colored by moral outrage. "I have become a ravening monster," she writes. "A swarm of locusts. How long can my little world endure me?"

Most time-loop stories build toward a moment of escape: characters earn their freedom by changing their behavior, or by rectifying a wrong that's lodged in their past. Tara, by contrast, settles into her new life. "I no longer believe that I will suddenly wake up to a time that has returned to normal," she writes. But soon a different sort of disruption occurs. Tara meets Henry Dale, a fellow-prisoner of November 18th. Henry is a thirty-seven-year-old sociologist who wears his hair in a man bun and specializes in what he calls "abruptive capacity," the "distinctly human" ability "to sever ties with the past and chart an entirely new course." He has a young son in Ithaca, New York, and, like Tara, he has resigned himself to the chronological standstill.

"He knows we're using up the world," Tara writes, of Henry. "He's seen it too, the empty shelves." But, she notes, "he believes my urge to eat garbage is an overreaction." Whereas Balle's first two books are inward and meditative, her third witnesses an eruption of politics. Or perhaps a constructive metaphor is better—a social order starts to creak into place. The pair spars at first: Henry condescendingly surmises that Tara must feel "excluded from historical accounts since they had never been written by women, for women," while Tara can't fathom "why he wanted to split the world in two." But she takes pleasure in arguing with him. That night, Tara tells Henry that she is "glad to have found a playmate in the eighteenth of November."

Tara's eviction from the human time line initially affords her space for an irradiated everyday, and a sprawling, shape-shifting consciousness. "A fluctuating mood is rather like a dance, it really swings, even though there isn't much room," she proposes on day one hundred and twenty-nine. In the third novel, she discovers a comparable delight in other people. With Henry's arrival, Tara gains an identity in the contemporary sense—a gender, a particular disposition toward the world that is legible through her speech and actions. She may be more constrained and finely drawn than before, but she welcomes feeling anchored. "We each have our role to play," she says.

The book's social ecosystem doubles when Tara and Henry encounter a second pair of November eighteenthers—Olga, a steely seventeen-year-old, and Ralf, an I.T. programmer for a logistics firm. Full of youthful idealism, Olga and Ralf believe that they've been trapped in time in order to save the world. But they can't agree on how. Olga insists that "the foundation itself" must change—the imprecision of her vision gently amuses Tara—whereas Ralf wants to focus on preventing the "constant stream" of daily tragedies that he now knows about in advance: car crashes, falling roof tiles, rickety scaffolding. Olga accuses Ralf of seeking to treat symptoms instead

of root causes; Ralf maintains that individual lives and deaths are more than "mere symptoms." Their well-meaning conversations, unfolding in a temporal deadlock, echo our own political stalemate.

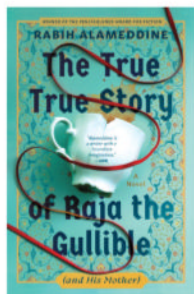
At one point, Henry tries to restore consensus by suggesting that such disagreements are simply a matter of age. Olga retorts that his bird's-eye analysis is a clever way of doing nothing. Meanwhile, she says, "Tara just gazes out of windows, thinking about love." The line prickles with self-critique, as if Balle were mocking her own philosophizing and inturned romanticism. Why did Tara spend hundreds of days contemplating Thomas, hair styles, loneliness? Why didn't it occur to her that she might be able to help people?

Together, the foursome appoints themselves custodians of their world: they monitor their food intake, hold interminable meetings about "trash and things," and scan the news for preventable misfortune, hoping to reduce suffering for November 19th. They won't be there, but they care anyway. Balle, who studied philosophy at the University of Copenhagen, may be flirting with the work of Derek Parfit, who found solace in the self's impermanence. For Parfit, meaning grew out of transcendent moral imperatives rather than individual lives. But Tara is reinvigorated by her closely realized relationships with Henry, Olga, and Ralf—"a strange bunch inside a container of time," by her description.

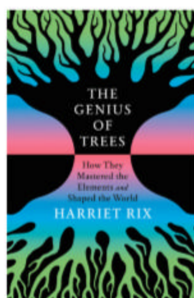
The provisional nature of this society mirrors an improvisatory quality in the books, with their changing casts of characters and fluid metaphors. Balle's protean impulse—her constant rewiring of thematic attachments—makes our reading experience varied and rich. Equally rich experiences, one suspects, might result from breaking more egoistic attachments, from "severing ties with the past and charting an entirely new course." It's a philosophical experiment illuminated by a novelist's sensuous and humane way of looking. What if you relinquished the idea that the future was yours? What might you start to see? ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

Palaver, *by Bryan Washington (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* At the outset of this understated yet potent novel, a Jamaica-born woman travels from Houston, where she lives, to Tokyo, to visit her estranged adult son. After a dozen years in Japan, the son, an English teacher, has developed a surrogate family among the regulars at a local gay bar. Washington examines varying experiences of displacement, writing with tenderness about the tolls of emigration and exile, both cultural and familial. "The mother couldn't help but wonder how little control she had over her life, and how little say everyone has in where they end up." The text is enhanced by the inclusion of numerous black-and-white photographs of Tokyo.



The True True Story of Raja the Gullible (and His Mother), *by Rabih Alameddine (Grove).* As the title suggests, this sprawling tale centers on Raja, a man in his sixties who lives with his mother in Beirut, a city shaking with political and ecological turmoil. While the duo—both outsized personalities—navigate their cohabitation, Raja must weigh the responsibility he feels as a son against an opportunity to attend a writing residency in America. Raja's energetic narration is relentlessly funny, even (or especially) when it's turned to dark or disturbing events from his past. The story jumps back and forth through time and across continents, but Raja's sensitive and ultimately optimistic point of view is a gripping anchor.



The Genius of Trees, *by Harriet Rix (Crown).* The central argument of this wide-ranging treatise is that trees are ecosystem engineers par excellence, capable of influencing "water, air, earth, and fire" as well as the behavior of other organisms in their effort to create the conditions necessary for the trees' survival. Using recent science, reports from field research, detours through evolutionary history, and sometimes surprising literary references, Rix reveals the myriad ways in which trees bend the natural world to their own ends, from seeding clouds with volatile organic compounds and mining minerals with their roots to wielding forest fires against their competitors and tempting animals (including dinosaurs, dodos, and humans) into spreading their seeds. In her telling, trees emerge as beings with "profound agency," worthy of our continued attention, care, and respect.

Flashes of Brilliance, *by Anika Burgess (Norton).* In this lively history, Burgess, a photo editor and writer, traces the dawn of early photography, a period of restless ingenuity when, she writes, "innovations were sometimes misguided, occasionally obsessive, periodically dangerous, and perpetually fascinating." She recounts feats both scientific and artistic, including Nadar's shots taken from a giant hot-air balloon, and underwater images captured in cumbersome diving gear. Most striking are some of the hazards that early photographers encountered—in the nineteenth century, their work required handling cyanide fixatives and flash powder that was explosive enough to shatter windows and blow up houses.

BOOKS

MOVING THE DIAL

The comic genius who pushed early TV further than it could go.

BY DAVID DENBY

Sid Caesar and his scene partner Imogene Coca on "Your Show of Shows."

EVERETT

The great silent comics—Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Harry Langdon—were compact men, resilient and sprung-wound yet graceful as they coped with menaces like recalcitrant umbrellas, stick-wielding cops, and collapsing buildings. They made minimal demands on the world; they wanted only to survive its aggressions. Sid Caesar, who was equal to them in talent and who dominated television comedy for most of the nineteen-fifties with "Your Show of Shows" and "Caesar's Hour," was large and beefy, a noisy, lunging Everyman, a tumult of dissatisfied flesh. Caesar did not look like a comic. As a young man, he might have passed for a macher on Queens Boulevard—a lawyer, say, or a department-store manager. But this average-looking citizen could become almost anything, throwing himself into roles with shattering power.

"Every gag that can possibly be told," he once remarked, "has already *been* told, but there's something funny in everything, even the way a man opens a door or sits down to read a newspaper." Standup wasn't his thing. He wasn't political or hip. Working from observation—sometimes affectionate, sometimes withering—he created characters. He could play a genteel clerk, polite but so lustful that he can't handle a cup of tea without scalding the woman he's smitten with; as he wrecks her parents' house, his manners never fail. The external world threatened Caesar less than the vexations of ordinary life. He and his performing partner, the saucer-eyed Imogene Coca, who was thirteen years older and half his size, played a married couple who'd open many episodes of the show. Their skits could be a little unnerving. A famished Caesar, longing for steak, gets taken by Coca to a pretentious health-food restaurant where he's served a meal of beautifully arranged flowers. In another, she slowly lets him grasp that she has totalled his beloved car. Coca, flirting with the truth like a desperate teen, is the star of the scene, but the way Caesar's rage and love for his wife play across his face is wonderful to watch. Capable of great delicacy in monologue and pantomime—he could convey the interiority of a six-month-old—Caesar was most brilliant as a man at the end of his tether.

"Your Show of Shows" drew early TV owners in New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles—a well-off, educated crowd ready for whatever curves Caesar threw. He and his writers steered clear of politics but satirized the movies and TV of the moment. In the 1954 sketch "This Is Your Story," they went after the treacly show "This Is Your Life," which hauled unsuspecting guests before the cameras to confront their past—even survivors of the Holocaust and Hiroshima. (The latter was introduced to a member of the Enola Gay's crew.) Caesar, as the aghast "Al Duncey of Darling Falls, Montana," tries to bolt, only to be dragged back and drowned in maudlin hugs from relatives, including Uncle Goopy (Howard Morris), who clings to his leg like an aroused sloth. The laughter soon curdles: it's a vision of how mass media can hijack private lives and dictate feeling. Pauline Kael, in a mixed 1973 appraisal of Caesar for this magazine, wrote, "I never felt that he personally was funny—that his core was funny." I'd argue that his core was both funny and tragic, which explains his peculiar fate. He was a revolutionary talent whose particular success may have been possible only in a brand-new medium.

In the late forties, no one quite knew what to make of television—an expensive nine inches of glass in a yard of mahogany. Was it a utility, an ugly appliance? Its small black-and-white screen was often blurry, sometimes blank and buzzing, the programming sporadic or lame. In 1949, the empty screens needed filling, and a few people realized that bringing in fresh talent from resorts, clubs, and the-

atres was the way to do it. David Margolick's "When Caesar Was King: How Sid Caesar Reinvented American Comedy" (Schocken) is both a portrait of an unstable genius and a cultural history of a medium coming to life. Margolick writes in vibrant detail not only of the Caesar shows but of the early-TV world around them: the risk-taking, then timid, network executives; the volatile changes in American tastes; and the lovable, artery-threatening New York restaurants—Lindy's, Dubiner's, the Stage Deli—where Caesar and his writers met for cheesecake and tiered corned-beef sandwiches. Food, at least in its advanced-deli version, was the spiritual center of Caesar's life.

The book, ardent yet measured, is unsentimental in a way few show-business bios are. Margolick has been a *Times* legal correspondent, and his books include "Strange Fruit," his account of the Billie Holiday song. He's an ideal cultural historian—curious and loving enough to incorporate every telling detail, but too wary of nostalgia to slip into ballyhoo. Entertainers tend to bend memory to their advantage; Margolick, contemptuous of myth, straightens the record, especially the legends spun by Mel Brooks, Caesar's protégé. A small objection: Brooks is an exuberant fabulist, and I'm not sure fact matters more than art in his case. I'll go on believing that Caesar, exasperated, once hung a noisy Brooks out of a Chicago hotel window to shut him up.

When it comes to Caesar's own recollections, Margolick knows that truth is hard to come by. Caesar wasn't articulate, and what he later revealed about himself in his autobiographies sounds like guff. During the weeklong buildup to the broadcast, he was brooding and silent among his writers, springing to life only when he heard something he liked. He drank heavily, though not, he insisted, during working hours. When frustrated, he might put his fist through a wall or rip out a sink. Once, after a horse rolled over on his wife, he punched the horse—an episode Brooks later stole for "Blazing Saddles." Caesar loved Cadillacs, suits, cigars, and guns, one of which, loaded, he sometimes waved around the office. He prized his writers ("I'd like to have seen Edison ad-lib the electric light") but made them prove themselves every week.

At its peak, "Your Show of Shows" had twenty-five million viewers, and Caesar was hailed as a genius. Albert Einstein and Leonard Bernstein were fans; on Saturday nights, when the show aired, Broadway theatres went half empty. Yet Margolick chronicles Caesar's miseries as well as his triumphs, and the story slides inevitably into sadness. In show biz, those whom the gods would destroy they condemn to live in Beverly Hills. After his second show, "Caesar's Hour," was cancelled, in 1957, he stopped drinking and lost weight. He lived for another fifty-seven years, during which he was never more than intermittently employed. How could so brilliant a talent have had so brief a run at the top?

Sid Caesar was born on September 8, 1922—not in folkloric Brooklyn or the Lower East Side, like so many Jewish entertainers, but in the dour industrial city of Yonkers, just north of the Bronx. His father was Polish, his mother Ukrainian. The family name was Ziser ("*zee*-sir"), easily Anglicized to Caesar. As a boy, he didn't speak much but made faces and noise; some adults thought him "impaired." His parents ran a luncheonette and rooming house near factories whose immigrant workers came in to eat. Busing tables, Caesar heard Italian, German, Polish, and other tongues, absorbing their music without grasping the words. He became a master of foreign gibberish, his doubletalk—animated by expressive pantomime—conveying more meaning than anything he could say in English. When President Eisenhower complimented Caesar's Russian, he was apparently in earnest.

Caesar was never sure his parents loved him. A fear of abandonment and of the fragility of success (the luncheonette had been sold during the Depression) haunted him. A mediocre student, he was saved by chance. One tenant left behind a saxophone—a Selmer Cigar Cutter tenor—which Caesar claimed as his own, later saying that he was glad it hadn't been a shotgun. He took lessons at the Hebrew National Orphan Home, practiced obsessively, and, as a teen-ager, played all over Westchester, then "in the mountains"—the Catskills, where pale, urban Jews came to gorge on sunshine, blintzes, and comedy. At hotels like the Avon and Vacationland, he watched the working comics, "picking up tools of the trade like rhythm, timing, discipline, and improvisation," as Margolick writes, and soon began taking the stage himself.

Caesar joined the Coast Guard in 1939, when he was seventeen, and married Florence Levy (once and forever) in 1943. In the Coast Guard, he performed in the service revue "Tars and Spars," under the eye of Max Liebman, the extraordinary Vienna-born impresario, who could, despite shaky English, build a full musical at a Poconos resort in a week—dancers, jazz players, even opera singers—and then start over the next. He was rehearsing for an unknown future. "More than anyone else," Margolick writes, "Max Liebman made Sid Caesar Sid Caesar."

In 1949, the Admiral Corporation, a television-set manufacturer, took the plunge into production, mounting the "Admiral Broadway Revue" on both the NBC and DuMont networks. Liebman produced and directed. A *Variety* headline read "Admiral Bows Sock Revue with Top Artists, Yocks, Sizzling Pace Comparable to Best Broadway Hits." The theatre was still the gold standard, but Caesar himself, as the Chicago *Tribune* noted, was "one of the soundest arguments for buying a television set." The performers on Admiral's show were selling the hardware that made their performances possible.

Admiral, bizarrely, gave the series up after half a season, preferring to spend its money on making more television sets than on production costs. ("We were cancelled because we were too good," Caesar said.) In late 1949, one of Margolick's heroes, the NBC vice-president Pat Weaver, rescued Liebman and his troupe. A high-minded man, Weaver believed that the country craved dancers and opera singers, as well as comics. On February 25, 1950, at 9 P.M., "Your Show of Shows" was launched.

Much like "Saturday Night Live" a quarter century later, "Your Show of Shows" was hell to put together. It was ninety minutes long, week after week, with commercials often lasting no more than a minute, and without cue cards. (Caesar thought they stifled spontaneity.) Lodged between musical numbers, the comics, Imogene Coca among them, did six sketches, having already discarded dozens of ideas earlier in the week. On broadcast day, they rehearsed three times, with constant eleventh-hour subtractions

and additions. When the show was over, the cast and writers would head to Danny's Hide-A-Way, on Steak Row (East Forty-fifth Street), where Caesar would down a bottle of Stolichnaya and lead the others in a Trimalchian feast—sometimes throwing up, either from nerves or from the desire to keep eating.

Caesar and Coca were soon joined on the show by the diminutive Howard Morris, whom Caesar could hoist from the ground and glare at face to face, and by Carl Reiner, tall like Caesar but as happy as Sid was miserable—the ideal second banana. Together, the four could send up almost anything: melodrama, tragedy, operetta, game show. Reiner joined the writers' room, an orderly place at first but eventually the loudest, most combative fourteen-by-twenty enclave in New York. At various times, and in changing combinations, Caesar's writers included Mel Tolkin (a doleful Ukrainian with serious literary tastes), Lucille Kallen (who later became a mystery novelist), Larry Gelbart (responsible for the TV version of "M*A*S*H" and most of "Tootsie"), Michael Stewart (the book for "Hello, Dolly!" and "Bye Bye Birdie"), Joseph Stein (the book for "Fiddler on the Roof"), Neil Simon, and, toward the end of Caesar's eight-year run, Woody Allen.

The room was hazy with cigar smoke and strewn with pastrami and coleslaw. Margolick devotes much space to the writers' quarrels, their gripes, their resentment of one another. All were vying for Caesar's approval, throwing their best lines at him, hoping to get their ideas into the show. Simon later turned the room itself into a comedy, "Laughter on the 23rd Floor" (1993), which made clear the general exasperation with yet another of the room's stalwarts, Mel Brooks. Bearing rugelach, Brooks arrived late, shouted everyone down, and then—infuriatingly—made their work better. He wasn't a starter, but he was an exquisite finisher, able to take a half idea and make it sing, and the others, for all their irritation, knew that they couldn't do without him. They also admitted, ruefully, that their time with Caesar had been the greatest experience of their professional lives.

Unlike so many gifted people working in movies or television, Caesar's writers didn't bend their talents to the medium's commercial demands. Much of early TV was repackaged radio junk; the field was wide open, an invitation to go for broke. In 1956, the writers produced a sixteen-minute historical epic, "Ubetu" (pronounced "*you*-betcha"), a parody of Kenji Mizoguchi's "Ugetsu," complete with painted screens, Edo-period hair styles, swordplay, much hissing and stomping, and ersatz Japanese liberally sprinkled with Yiddish. The brazen, silly grandeur of the piece was astounding. Few watching on TV had seen "Ugetsu," but that didn't matter. The point wasn't to trash the original but to honor it with affectionate exaggeration.

"Let's have a look in the hat, Mr. Miraculoso."

Caesar and his team trusted their audience to understand movies—never more so than in their parody of a D. W. Griffith-style silent film, "The Sewing Machine Girl" (1953), starring a consumptive Coca mired in Victorian melodrama and pathos. The actors moved in jerky spasms, replicating a quirk that film lovers would catch: after 1928, with the introduction of the talkies, silent films were almost always projected at the wrong speed. At other times, the writers' knowingness was fed by rage. In the classic skit "All Slicked Up" (1954), Caesar plays a German general and Howard Morris his adjutant, scurrying around his master as he dresses him. The general, obsessed with perfection, bellows, "*Das Monokel ist geshmutzig*!"—which is sort of Yiddish, sort of German. Lasting under eight minutes, the sketch evokes German uniform worship and the accompanying demand for humiliation as powerfully as the stern psychosocial analysis of the day did.

Margolick argues that Caesar avoided topical satire out of fear. Except for Coca, the principals were Jews, and though Jews were prominent in film, theatre, and the networks, there was enough antisemitism around to make them cautious. Still, a second-generation Jewish American sensibility permeated Caesar's shows—not just in Yiddish tossed into barbarous tongues but in the pervasive mood of streetwise distrust. As Gelbart insisted, the show's writers went to plays and read books; they were all in analysis. They knew how the world worked. Tolkin, Caesar's head writer, was appalled by the sandy discomforts Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr must have endured making love on the beach in "From Here to Eternity." In the Caesar parody, "From Here to Obscurity" (1954), Caesar and Coca writhe on the studio floor, doused again and again with buckets of cold water.

That was broad enough comedy, but highbrow shenanigans can leave people feeling left out. In 1950, when "Your Show of Shows" began, nine per cent of

American households had a TV set; by 1953, forty-five per cent did. Television had become a true mass medium, and Caesar saw his audience share shrink. In 1953, "Your Show of Shows" fell out of the top twenty-five Nielsen ratings (though it still drew sixteen million viewers). Margolick quotes letters to local newspapers from viewers almost vindictive in their displeasure. They felt that they were being condescended to.

"Your Show of Shows" was expensive to produce, and, at the end of the 1954 season, NBC cut it down from ninety minutes to sixty as a new program, "Caesar's Hour." Caesar got a ten-year contract, but Liebman left to make color "specials," and Coca was given her own show. (Brooks followed her briefly, then returned.) The core writers stayed on, and for three years "Caesar's Hour" was often brilliant. But the ratings kept sliding, and, in 1955, the show ran into something unaccountable: Lawrence Welk, a Saturday-night bandleader who would turn to a row of trumpets and identically dressed party girls, wave his baton, and say, "anna *one*, anna *two*," as bubbles drifted over the orchestra. Outraged, the Caesar gang struck back with "The Lonnie Bilk Show" (1956), with Caesar leading a band in a lopsided wig. They parodied Welk twice more, but the game was over. Always smiling, Welk offered the kind of soothing entertainment that small-town and rural viewers wanted, and he became a sensation. "These people," Gelbart said later, "would have much rather seen bubbles coming out of Lawrence Welk's ass than Sid Caesar doing a parody of 'Rashomon.'"

It's tempting to see Caesar's defeat as a watershed, an early culture-war skirmish between the wised-up urbanites and what one paper called the "still Christian soul of America." But the shift was inevitable. By the mid-fifties, network TV had become big business; in 1955, gross revenues topped four hundred million dollars. TV schedules filled up with Westerns, detective shows, and easy-to-take comedies both gentle ("Ozzie and Harriet") and rambunctious ("I Love Lucy"). The other funnymen of the time—Milton Berle with his lewd suggestiveness, Jackie Gleason with his baleful roar—did the same shtick over and over. Caesar cut closer to the bone. Amid parodies and marital sketches, he'd deliver a drunkard's solo rant, or play a teetotaller undone by a single drink. His face could collapse in shame, his jaw sliding sideways; neither Goya nor Ensor painted despair more vividly. He even created a full musical episode, "The Dancing Towers" (1956), featuring a star dancer who can't stop eating. Was he confessing his own troubles? Psychoanalysis licensed his candor, but the audience didn't always join him on the couch. Some of his comedy was harrowing, including parts of "The Dancing Towers"—closer to "Long Day's Journey Into Night" than to "Singin' in the Rain."

Caesar's downfall came years before public television, cable, or streaming opened space for minority art to flourish again. In the mid-fifties, he was television's avant-garde, and Margolick follows him to the end—sometimes week by week, show by show—as if he can't quite believe that work this good failed to secure an audience. He records Caesar's memory lapses and stuttering mistakes, and then, after "Caesar's Hour" went dark, the botched comebacks, the endless tributes. Caesar was defiant at first, then plaintive. Faced with another show's higher ratings, he asked, "Does that mean that *nobody* wants to look at Caesar?"

By the late nineteen-fifties, he had entered his long second act. At the tributes, everyone hailed Sid Caesar as one of the great comics, yet no one knew what to do with him. Healthy at last, Caesar was also tame—perhaps he needed gluttony and drink to be great. The Queens Boulevard macher had become a Beverly Hills elder statesman: svelte, a little vague, and not always funny. Like Orson Welles, he haunted late-night talk shows as an impotent ghost.

Caesar was undone by both his own vulnerabilities and the changing economics of broadcast television. When NBC was finished with him, it was so careless that it failed to preserve the existing records of his shows—the kinescopes, filmed directly off TV screens as the programs aired. Fortunately, many privately held reels have survived. They're a little blurry, but Margolick makes the achievements of Caesar and his gang shine through. Caesar may rise again—in the love of young comics willing to push themselves, and their audiences, further than either wants to go. ♦

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POP MUSIC

HARD MODE

Rosalía's intense, expansive new album.

BY KELEFA SANNEH

Rosalía was an unusual hitmaker. Now she wants to be something else entirely.

Sometimes it seems as if everyone wants to be a pop girlie. Last year, Taylor Swift counted herself among the "tortured poets," but nowadays she is a self-described "showgirl," having released a short album full of bite-size songs co-produced by the distinguished hitmakers Max Martin and Shellback. The year's biggest new musical act is probably Huntr/x, the fictional girl group from the animated Netflix film "KPop Demon Hunters." When Demi Lovato, the former Disney teen idol, wanted to go back to her roots, she released "Fast," a perfectly superficial club track; the accompanying album is called, appropriately, "It's Not That Deep." Even MGK, the rapper turned rocker, tried to reinvent himself earlier this year with a video called "Cliché," in which he danced and lip-synched like a boy-bander desperate for one last hit. It was an amusing pivot, although it inspired such intense mockery that MGK felt moved to record an Instagram reel explaining himself. "It's a pop song, man," he said.

In this way and in many others, Rosalía is exceptional. She is a trained flamenco singer from Spain who found an international audience in 2018, when she released "El Mal Querer," an album full of diaphanous flamenco-pop experiments, which also served as her thesis project at the prestigious Catalonia College of Music. Rosalía's sound, full of curlicued vocal melodies and precise hand-clap rhythms, didn't resemble anything else in the pop universe, but Rosalía herself was obviously a star, and she followed the album with a series of high-profile collaborations, including reggaetón hits with J Balvin ("Con Altura") and Bad Bunny ("LA NOCHE DE ANOCHE"). With her fierce, beat-driven album "MOTOMAMI" (2022), she took her place among the Spanish-language artists who have lately transformed popular music. But these days she has something different in mind. When she announced that the first single from her new album was going to be called "Berghain," some fans expected dance music—Berghain is the name of the world's most famous techno club, in Berlin. What they got, instead, was essentially a three-minute opera, complete with an orchestral overture and a guest appearance by the avant-garde singer and composer Björk, who arrives as a deus ex machina, howling, "This is divine intervention." The accompanying album, "Lux," turns out to be a sharp swerve away from the logic of the pop economy, in which songs compete to provide the most pleasure to the most people. "Lux" sounds less like a streaming playlist and more like a cult film, or perhaps an art installation: there are fifteen songs (eighteen on the vinyl and CD versions), divided into four movements, with lyrics in thirteen different languages, and Rosalía's most constant companion is not the beat of reggaetón but rather the swooping and swelling of the London Symphony Orchestra. Having conquered the pop world with ease, Rosalía is now embracing difficulty.

A certain recalcitrance has always been part of what makes Rosalía so compelling. As a teen-ager, she appeared on "Tú Sí Que Vales," a talent-competition show on Spanish television; when one judge wasn't impressed, she said, in Spanish, "I didn't come here to accept criticism," and the audience whooped in encouragement. Early in her career, she was sometimes celebrated for fleeing the strictures of flamenco music in order to find freedom on the dance floor, and on the charts. But dance floors and charts have their own rules, and one

 ILLUSTRATION BY ROCHE

of the functions of an album as intense and expansive as "Lux" is to remind pop listeners of all the limits that they typically take for granted. The album has a notably wide dynamic range, which means that listeners who lean in during the quiet passages may find themselves blasted backward by the thunderous climaxes. In "De Madrugá," she sings a few lines in Ukrainian to evoke the fervor of Olga of Kiev, the tenth-century ruler who massacred the tribe responsible for killing her husband. And for "Mio Cristo" she basically wrote herself an Italian aria and then learned to sing it, building to a glorious high B-flat that she hits and holds; we hear a quick snippet of Rosalía's studio banter ("That's going to be the energy, and then—") before the orchestra cuts her off with the reverberant final note. Pop stars often talk about working hard, but Rosalía makes most of her peers seem lazy, and, indeed, any listener not inclined to embark upon a multilingual research project may end up feeling a bit lazy, too. Rosalía's representatives asked journalists to listen to this album in the dark, while reading the lyrics on a screen—logically impossible, for most of us, but doubtless Rosalía herself could find a way.

There is a story to "Lux," or maybe there are a few different stories. The lyrics hint at love, betrayal (one song includes the phrase "*un terrorista emocional*"), revenge, and acceptance. The combined effect can be exhausting, in ways Rosalía's previous albums never were: the twists and turns of "La Yugular," a theological exploration inspired by Islam, are easier to admire than to enjoy—at least until the finale, a pleasingly earthy clip from an old Patti Smith interview. Sometimes the lightest moments are the most affecting, such as when, in "Reliquia," Rosalía floats into her upper register, delivering a sumptuous and faintly sacrilegious expression of love and loss. "I'll be your relic/I am your relic," she sings, in Spanish, and for a moment it all seems simple.

Like virtually all musicians, Rosalía seems to have mixed feelings about how separate she wants to be, really, from the pop marketplace. "I need to think that what I'm doing is pop, because otherwise I don't think, then, that I am succeeding," she told the New York *Times*, in a recent interview. "What I want is to do music that, hopefully, a lot of people can enjoy." But of course that's not all she wants. The single most surprising contributor to "Lux" is Mike Tyson, who during a chaotic 2002 press conference told a journalist, "I'll fuck you till you love me, faggot." This phrase, without the incendiary final word, interrupts the otherwise elegant coda of "Berghain," shouted a few times by the electronic producer Yves Tumor. The interruption is a shock—startling enough, perhaps, to dissuade some listeners from adding the song to their favorite streaming playlists, lest it ruin the mood. Maybe that's the idea. Music-streaming services encourage us to mix and match, so perhaps they also encourage us to spend more time listening to songs that fit pleasantly alongside other songs. A small but significant number of musicians have begun to withhold their music from these outlets, some for economic reasons (the sites don't pay much), some for political reasons (Daniel Ek, the C.E.O. of Spotify, is also the chairman of a military-technology company), and some for no stated reason at all. The new Rosalía album is available everywhere, but it echoes this desire to withdraw from a big, messy system, in the hope of encouraging listeners to engage in a more intentional, single-minded way; it's an album that's not designed to be ubiquitous, or to slip smoothly into our lives and playlists. "Lux" wants to make us stop whatever we're doing and listen, which inevitably means that it's less broadly appealing—less listenable, in a sense—than albums that ask less. It's also much harder to forget. ♦

Constabulary Notes from All Over

From the Nacogdoches (Tex.) Daily Sentinel.

A man said his live-in girlfriend believes the decisions she makes are always correct, that she is unwilling to accept others' advice, and that she does no wrong. The deputy responded by saying "dealing with an individual with those standards is an uphill battle. But with a positive attitude, issues (can) be reconciled."

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

BAD DADS

"Sentimental Value," "Jay Kelly."

BY JUSTIN CHANG

When I first learned about the Norwegian director Joachim Trier's new picture, during a press conference for this year's Cannes Film Festival, I could have sworn I heard the title, "Affeksjonsverdi," translated into English as "Sentimental Valium." It's actually "Sentimental Value," which certainly makes more sense, although, now that

Stellan Skarsgård and Renate Reinsve star in Joachim Trier's film.

I've seen the movie, the unintended pun seems closer to the truth. Trier's work often throws off a hyper-caffeinated energy; "Reprise" (2006) and "The Worst Person in the World" (2021), both portraits of early adulthood, are as winningly mercurial as their protagonists. His latest movie skews older, and it feels zonked out by comparison. Scene by scene, it's impeccably crafted, flawlessly acted, and emotionally anesthetized. Trier can do restraint beautifully—"Oslo, August 31st" (2012) is an addiction tale of shattering stillness—but "Sentimental Value," which he wrote with Eskil Vogt, mistakes whispery sedateness for maturity. It sets up understatedly fraught situations, plants meaningful glances and allusive ambiguities everywhere, and assumes our tears will trickle forth.

A septuagenarian Norwegian film director, Gustav Borg (Stellan Skarsgård), awkwardly tries to reconnect with his two long-estranged daughters, Nora (Renate Reinsve) and Agnes (Inga Ibsdotter Lilleaas), after the death of their mother, his ex-wife. Nora is an accomplished stage actress, and she's startled when Gustav, who hasn't made a film in years, hands her his new script and asks her to play the lead role, Anna. She refuses, not because the material isn't good—as we're told repeatedly, it's very good indeed—but because she can't stand Gustav, who left her and Agnes when they were still young. Gustav has his own abandonment issues. When he was seven, his mother died by suicide, a detail that he has woven into his script, with baldly autofictional intent. He plans to shoot the film in the beloved family abode where his daughters grew up, and which he has fitfully called home over the years.

This home, an enchantingly gabled, leafy affair, is no mere house; it is a Repository of Themes. The white-walled rooms spill over with natural light, but also with dark memories, stretching back to the Nazi occupation of Norway. Some of these are described by a narrator and visualized as ghostly incursions from the past. The sense of place is unerring, the chamber-piece atmosphere exactingly Bergmanesque. Even so, we sense a fairly elementary principle—the emotional, spiritual, and historical significance of the spaces we inhabit—hardening into a conceit. Trier, aiming for a diaphanous touch, ends up with something perilously diagrammatic: more a blueprint for a drama than the drama itself.

Thank goodness for actors: that's part of the thesis of "Sentimental Value" and its own saving grace. Everyone onscreen makes it look easy, but Trier knows better. Waiting in the wings on her play's opening night, Nora experiences a severe bout of stage fright—a price she must pay for her performance, which is brilliant. It's as if the tension underlying her choice of career, which is both an attempt to one-up Gustav *and* a grudging acknowledgment of creative kinship, were tearing her apart. Reinsve, who made such a radiant scatterbrain in "Worst Person," seems incapable of an inexpressive note, and "Sentimental Value" leans as hard on her overflowing responsiveness as it does on Skarsgård's irascible charm.

Gustav, it seems, can parent only through a camera lens. No wonder he gets along a bit better with Agnes, who, as a child, starred in one of his films—a brief bonding experience in between years of neglect. (Lilleaas superbly rounds out the inner life of a woman now operating, mostly contentedly, outside the spotlight.) No wonder, too, that Gustav reserves his tenderest, most paternal moments for Rachel Kemp (Elle Fanning), an American star whom he eventually casts as Anna. Rachel, who doesn't speak Norwegian, is all wrong for Gustav's film, but Fanning, at once inquisitive and unassuming, is just what Trier's needs. In keeping with a pleasing streak of industry satire here—Michael Haneke and Netflix get hilarious shout-outs—Fanning has a bracing directness that cuts through all the dramaturgical throat-clearing.

"Sentimental Value" ruminates—oh, how it ruminates—on the ever-permeable membrane between art and life, and the complicated equation of what art giveth and taketh away. But I think Trier taketh a bit too much for granted. His

ILLUSTRATION BY FANNY BLANC

point is that art can speak for us when words fail, but he doesn't seem to discover this truth so much as assume it. Gustav, irresistible as he is, gets off predictably and much too easily; his hoped-for reconciliation arrives right on shooting schedule. The family survives. The show must go on.

Like "Sentimental Value," "Jay Kelly," an inside-Hollywood comedy directed by Noah Baumbach, follows a man who was too busy making movies to raise his two daughters properly. Here, he's an actor in his sixties, Jay Kelly—a name with Gatsbyesque overtones and a fortune to match. You'll be forgiven, though, for thinking of him as George Clooney, as he not only is played by Clooney but has been blessed with Clooney's career. Jay's highlights reel includes clips from "Three Kings," "Ocean's Eleven," "Syriana," "Michael Clayton," "Up in the Air," and other Clooney hits, plus a generous excerpt of Clooney's single scene in Terrence Malick's "The Thin Red Line." (Even with limited screen time, a true star always shines through.)

"All my memories are movies," Jay murmurs wistfully, noting that every personal milestone—including the birth of his elder daughter, Jess (Riley Keough), more than three decades ago—is inextricably tied to what he was shooting at the time. But Baumbach, who co-wrote "Jay Kelly" with the actor Emily Mortimer, cleverly literalizes Jay's words, filming his memories as mini-movies, with the actor looking on from a quasi-Brechtian distance. Jay watches, and regrets, his final meeting with Peter Schneider (Jim Broadbent), the director to whom he owes his career—a debt that he callously fails to repay. He relives a fateful audition, where his younger self (Charlie Rowe), tagging along with a more serious-minded acting pal, Timothy (Louis Partridge), lands a star-making role—a turn of events that the older Timothy (Billy Crudup, sensational) has neither forgotten nor forgiven.

Other people, in other words, have paid dearly for Jay's success, none more so than Jess, who resents her dad for having spent her childhood away on film sets. Jay resolves to do better with his younger daughter, Daisy (Grace Edwards), who's college-bound, and crashes a last-hurrah Eurotrip that she is taking with her friends—a journey that will coincide with a tribute he's receiving in Tuscany. The film's centerpiece is a lengthy episode of controlled chaos, set aboard an Italian train, where Jay slides his way past various shocked and delighted passengers, with an entourage of grumbling handlers in tow. These include his longtime manager, Ron (Adam Sandler), and his publicist, Liz (Laura Dern), who take this latest complication in stride, at least at first. They've been riding the rails of Jay's career for decades, and they've absorbed his impulse to prioritize work over family—just without the multimillion-dollar paydays.

Baumbach, a skilled neo-screwball farceur, pays extended homage to "Sullivan's Travels" (1941), Preston Sturges's comedy about a commercial Hollywood filmmaker who, in a fit of high-mindedness, seeks to rub elbows with the common man. Those of us who have always regarded "Sullivan's Travels" as minor Sturges, a movie that valorizes but ultimately patronizes "real people," will not be surprised by the whiff of condescension that permeates Jay's Italian escapade. But if "Jay Kelly" is accordingly minor Baumbach, it has nonetheless set itself an impressively tricky task. It wants to darken, without fully dispelling, Clooney's supernova charisma—to expose, if only for a moment, the hollowness beneath his savoir-faire and his megawatt smile. For some, this will seem as revelatory as exposing the hollowness of a steel drum. The problem isn't that Clooney's charm might be superficial—that's always been part of its appeal—but that it's so resistant to anything approaching warts-and-all portraiture. He turns a pimple into a beauty mark.

If Clooney's self-reflection feels skin-deep, Baumbach seems to undergo a thornier reckoning. He began his career with a healthy suspicion of stardom, and anyone who thrilled to the deglammed indie vibes of "Margot at the Wedding" (2007) and "Greenberg" (2010) may find a slick, starry bauble such as "Jay Kelly" to be a journey into uncharted realms of schmaltz—a sentimental valley. But Baumbach's sensibility cuts both ways. You can knock him for going soft or praise him for finding the sharp edges in soft material. The argument is settled in his favor by Sandler, who did some of his finest work ever in Baumbach's "Meyerowitz Stories" (2017) and does still more here as Ron, a hardworking, long-suffering family man who gradually wises up to the truth about his close yet hardly unconditional friendship with Jay. Sandler isn't doing a strained meta riff on his persona; he's playing an honest-to-God character, plagued by stress, uncertainty, and an unfashionably big heart. There's art to his performance, and no shortage of life. ♦

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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 Kate Isenberg, must be received by Sunday, November 16th. The finalists in the November 3rd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the December 1st 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

"No one ever tells you how lonely it gets at the top of the pyramid."
Boshy Deak, Westlake, Ohio

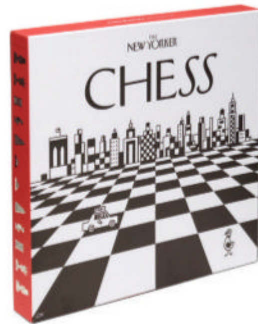
"It's not a midlife crisis. It's halftime."
Vincent Coca, Staten Island, N.Y.

"I realized that cheering for our team to win meant cheering for the other team to lose, and now I'm racked with guilt."
Lawrence Broch, Studio City, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"Twenty dollars says he makes the catch but not the postgame interview."
Lee Stillerman, Riverside, Calif.

THE NEW YORKER 100



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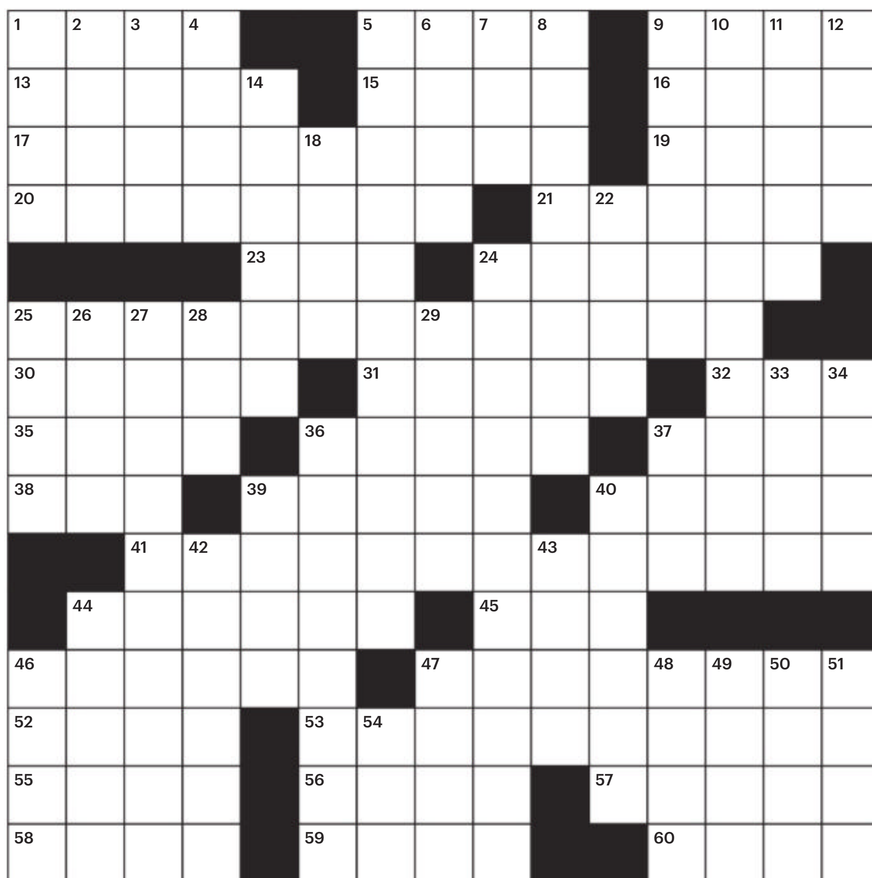
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

BY ROBYN WEINTRAUB



ACROSS

1 Tooth pain
5 Lose traction on an icy sidewalk, say
9 Features of distressed jeans
13 Tree limb
15 Christmas-candy shape
16 The Buckeye State
17 Like books with lots of big words?
19 Typical high-school student
20 Sang the praises of
21 ___ public (official who certifies documents)
23 Seating for the masses?
24 Brings in food for an event
25 "That's exactly what I was thinking!"
30 Possessed
31 Wearable hotel amenities
32 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade day: Abbr.
35 Sneakers since 1916
36 Attacks, à la Dracula
37 "___ Is Spinal Tap"
38 Type of poem that's a homophone of 26-Down
39 Party gift
40 Fiction authors?
41 Thrill ride that anagrams to "terror's locale"
44 "Objects in mirror are closer than they ___"
45 Sprinted
46 Like the egg whites in a soufflé
47 Place for a parakeet
52 Coffee containers at a banquet
53 Chowder leftovers?
55 What a Pirate might have on hand?
56 Governess Jane created by Charlotte Brontë
57 First in the rankings
58 Coin in Cozumel
59 Rooms for recliners
60 "Our ___" (Thornton Wilder play set in Grover's Corners)

DOWN

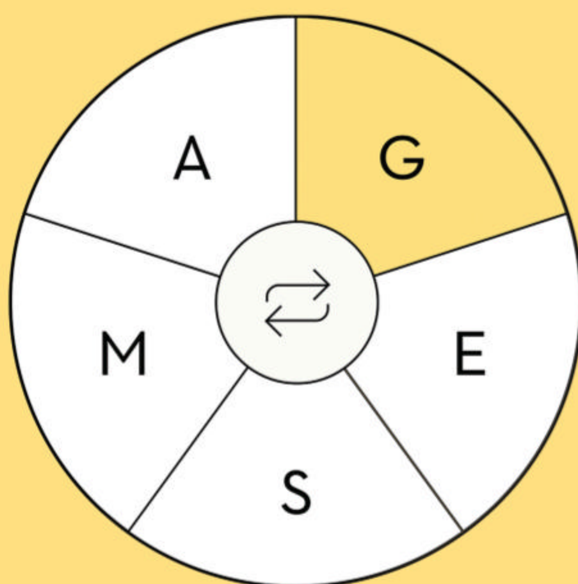
1 Qualified
2 Gently persuade
3 Injured
4 Frozen-waffle brand with a Chocolatey Chip Banana variety
5 Vodka-and-orange-juice cocktail
6 Dismissed from a job, with "off"
7 Cozy lodging for a leaf-peeping weekend, perhaps
8 Terms of endearment
9 Way past ripe
10 "Hey, whisper a little quieter if you don't want me listening in!"
11 Boat-docking spots
12 PlayStation 5 maker
14 Assisted
18 "Not guilty," for example
22 ___ Spunkmeyer (baked-goods company)
24 Phishing, identity theft, and the like
25 Tokyo-born singer and artist Ono
26 Was indebted to
27 Captain ___ (book series featuring a tighty-whities-clad superhero)
28 Low-___ image
29 The "M" of D.M.V.
33 Bring on new employees
34 Cold War superpower
36 Like some budgets and breakfasts
37 'Twas now?
39 Make a break for it
40 "Mateys, I see the shore!"
42 Decides that one will
43 Rowboat rowers
44 American Eagle sister brand named for an eagle's nest
46 Baby ___ (visible sign of pregnancy)
47 Farm building
48 $0.01
49 Vocal range lower than soprano
50 Display bioluminescence
51 Channel broadcast in many bars
54 Chemical used for drain cleaning and pretzel-making

Solution to the previous puzzle:

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at **newyorker.com/crossword**

THE NEW YORKER'S

SHUFFALO



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