DECEMBER 2021
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The Bad Guys Are Winning

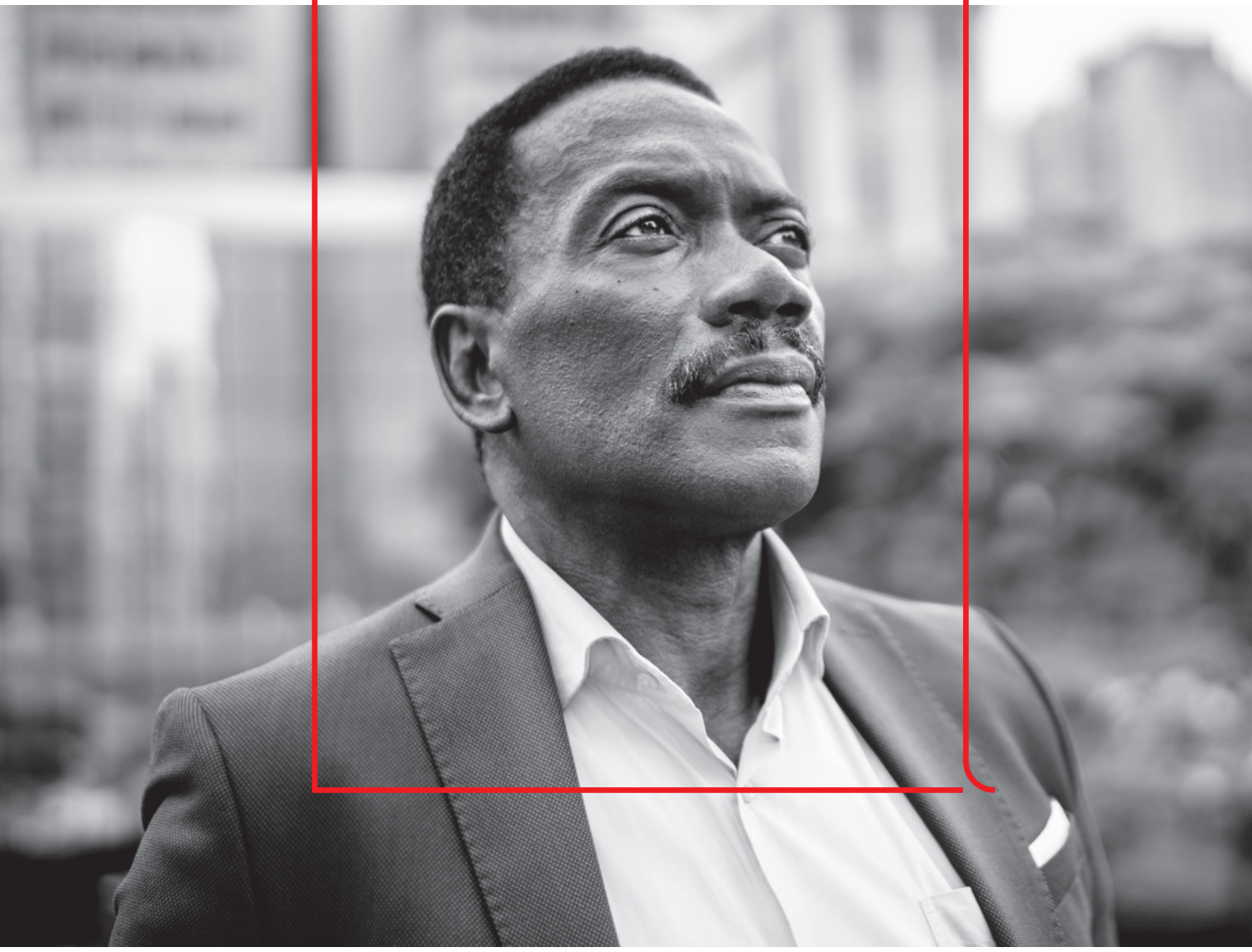
The Atlantic
EST. 1857

How a new league of autocrats is outsmarting the West

By Anne Applebaum

How can I prosper in changing markets?

Should I adjust my portfolio?
How do I come out ahead?



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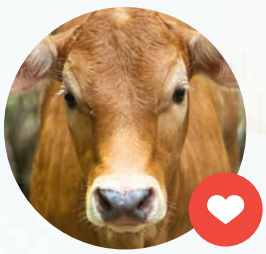


Holly Heifer

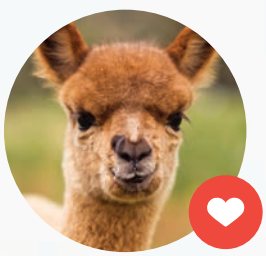
Holly is a cheerful doer and moo-er who can make a hefty impact on families in need.

Chelsea Chick

Chelsea is focused on the future — when she grows up she wants to lay more than 200 eggs a year.

Hector Honeybee

Hector is a hard worker dedicated to sweetening the financial futures of families around the world.

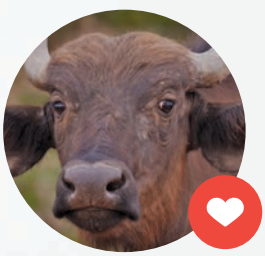


Al Paca

Tall with a touch of mystery and a heart of gold, Al is someone worth writing home about.

Sheena Sheep

Warm and welcoming, Sheena always goes above and beyond to help those in need.



Walter Buffalo

Walter is a gentle giant who helps people plow through their goals — literally. Power couple!

OF NO PARTY OR CLIQUE

VOL. 328–NO. 5 DECEMBER 2021 CONTENTS

Features

Charles Conwell prepares for a fight in Ashland, Kentucky, in June 2021.

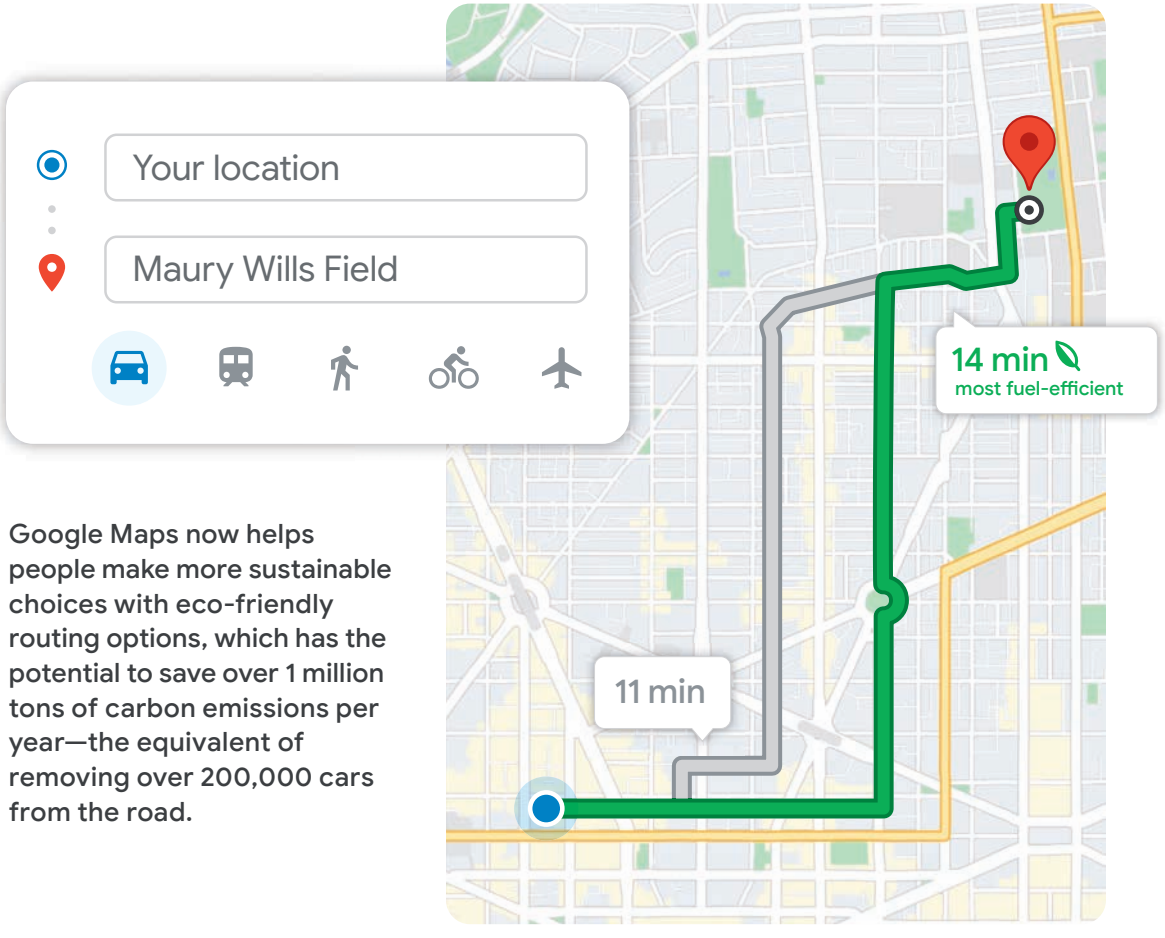
On the Cover

ILLUSTRATION BY OLIVER MUNDAY

COVER SOURCE IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): SVEN CREUTZMANN / MAMBO PHOTO / GETTY; ANDREA VERDELLI / GETTY; MIKHAIL SVETLOV / GETTY; TPG / GETTY; MIKHAIL SVETLOV / GETTY

Google

Helping people choose more eco-friendly routes



Google Maps now helps people make more sustainable choices with eco-friendly routing options, which has the potential to save over 1 million tons of carbon emissions per year—the equivalent of removing over 200,000 cars from the road.

Learn how Google is making the sustainable choice an easier choice at sustainability.google

The New Puritans

A growing illiberalism, fueled by social media, is trampling democratic discourse, Anne Applebaum argued in October. The result is a chilling atmosphere in which mob justice has replaced due process and forgiveness is impossible.

Letters

The paramount value of the university has always been academic freedom, the freedom of university departments and professors to decide what to teach and how. But academic freedom cannot survive in an atmosphere of academic cowardice, where its beneficiaries—those who were assumed to have the courage to protect it from destruction by either governmental or ideological interference—are willing to sacrifice it to pacify their students.

The "new Puritans" can succeed only if they're joined by these "new academics," who have forgotten what a university education is all about.

Rick Nagel
Mercer Island, Wash.

Thank you, Anne Applebaum. We cannot leave it to the likes of Tucker Carlson to define this issue and use it as another culture-war weapon. Enlightened minds of all political stripes need to speak out with courage and force.

Joseph Urbano
Audubon, Pa.

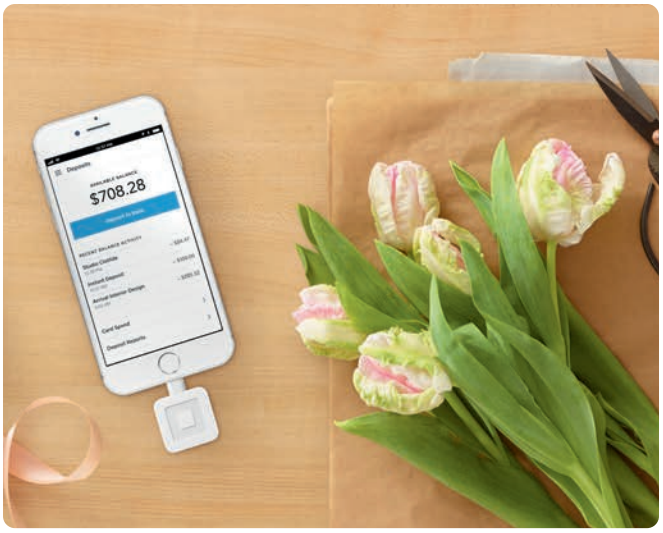
Perhaps the overwhelming lack of "due process" involved in this social shunning is a direct result of decades (centuries, really) of our existing justice system protecting and insulating such actors from any sort of accountability whatsoever. When so few rapes are prosecuted, and so few of those prosecutions lead to conviction, what hope can anyone reasonably have that mere claims of sexual harassment—even a pattern of repeated offenses—can be adequately addressed and remedied through our justice system?

Teresa McQuade
Inman, S.C.

THE FACTS

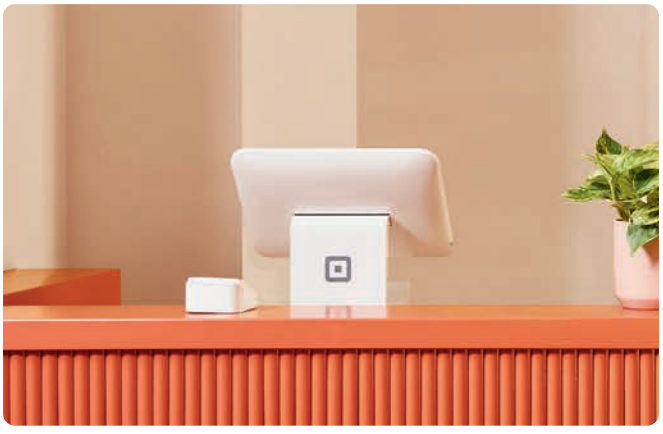
What we learned fact-checking this issue

In "The Autocrats Are Winning" (p. 42), Anne Applebaum invokes a popular historical example of autocratic indignation: Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev brandishing his shoe during a United Nations meeting in 1960.



How it started.

How it's going.



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The moment is often referred to as the "shoe-banging incident," in part because *The New York Times* reported the next day that Khrushchev had slammed his footwear on a desk after a Filipino delegate criticized the U.S.S.R. In the following decade, references to the event appeared in such diverse locales as an episode of the spy series *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* and a chapter of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

More recently, historians and journalists have debated the details of how this moment unfolded. Did Khrushchev really bang the shoe, or merely wave it around? Did he remove his shoe during the meeting, or had it slipped off on his way to the desk? Some have speculated premeditation: the presence of a third shoe.

Although images of Khrushchev wielding a superimposed loafer have occasionally fooled the public, actual photographs of the session attest only to a shoe on his desk. Still, the supposed shoe-pounding remains a common reference in discussions of national leadership—an image of authoritarian belligerence or righteous political umbrage, depending on one's outlook.

In his memoirs, Khrushchev conflates the incident with an earlier UN outburst, summing up his diplomatic method like so: "I decided to add a little bit more heat."

— Sam Fentress,
Assistant Editor

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Q · & · A

Facebook is acting like a hostile foreign power, Adrienne LaFrance argued in "Facebookland" (November). Here, she answers questions from readers about her essay.

Q: LaFrance writes, "Facebook is a lie-disseminating instrument of civilizational collapse. It is designed for blunt-force emotional reaction, reducing human interaction to the clicking of buttons. The algorithm guides users inexorably toward less nuanced, more extreme material, because that's what most efficiently elicits a reaction. Users are implicitly trained to seek reactions to what they post, which perpetuates the cycle." There's no real arguing with that. But think about how much those same words apply to Twitter. Yes, you can argue that Twitter does a better job of policing and removing misinformation. But is it not designed for the same sort of blunt-force emotional reaction?

— Bert Clere, *Durham, N.C.*

A: Twitter can be an absolute cesspool, it's true. But it's also a much, much smaller cesspool than Facebook. (Twitter has roughly 200 million active daily users; Facebook has nearly 2 billion.) Facebook's enormity matters; its size is a major part of what makes it so influential, and so dangerous. That said, addressing the threats posed by Facebook alone wouldn't be enough. The public deserves a better understanding of several other platforms that disproportionately and opaquely shape our informational environments. In my view, Google and YouTube (which Google owns) both deserve far more scrutiny.

Q: What Facebook has become leads us to what ought to be a blindingly obvious question: Why are social-media companies still immunized from lawsuits under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act? They are not, and never really were, neutral content transmitters, and the notion that we have any chance of reining them in while immunity remains is a fantasy.

— Steven E. Mittelstaedt, *Ferndale, Wash.*

A: Without these 26 words of Section 230, passed in 1996, some of the most powerful companies in the world would not exist: "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider." It's kind of amazing, isn't it? Facebook would never have achieved megascale if it had been liable for the toxicity and harm posted on the platform. Instead, the law treats social platforms as though they're neutral distributors—like telephone wires. But I'm with you: It's obvious that the major social platforms aren't neutral at all. Their algorithms are designed to add weight to different kinds of content, and to different user reactions, in ways that affect distribution and virality. I believe you're right that Facebook is not going to change without substantial intervention. I used to believe that market competition would eventually do the trick—that consumers would have the opportunity to flock to better-quality platforms. Now I've been convinced by arguments that government regulation is not just necessary but overdue—and perhaps inevitable.

Behind the Cover:

In "The Autocrats Are Winning" (p. 42), Anne Applebaum argues that democracies like the United States are losing influence across the globe as the leaders of Russia, China, Turkey, and other autocratic states strike self-interested deals to circumvent sanctions and ensure their own political longevity. On the cover, five world leaders—Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, Belarus's Alexander Lukashenko, Russia's Vladimir Putin, China's Xi Jinping, and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—stand in a row, suggesting a coordinated threat to liberal democracies the world over.

— Oliver Munday,
Design Director

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

THE SINGULARITY IS HERE

Artificially intelligent advertising technology is poisoning our societies.

BY AYAD AKHTAR

Something unnatural is afoot. Our affinities are increasingly no longer our own, but rather are selected for us for the purpose of automated economic gain. The automation of our cognition and the predictive power of technology to monetize our behavior, indeed our very thinking, is transforming not only our societies and discourse with one another, but also our very neurochemistry. It is a late chapter of a larger story, about the deepening incursion of mercantile thinking into the groundwater of our philosophical ideals.

This technology is no longer just shaping the world around us, but actively remaking us from within.

That we are subject to the dominion of endless digital surveillance is not news. And yet, the sheer scale of the domination continues to defy our imaginative embrace. Virtually everything we do, everything we are, is transmuted now into digital information. Our movements in space, our breathing at night, our expenditures and viewing habits, our internet searches, our conversations in the kitchen and in the bedroom—all of it observed by no one in particular, all of it reduced to data parsed for the patterns that will predict our purchases.

But the model isn't simply predictive. It influences us. Daniel Kahneman's seminal work in behavioral psychology has demonstrated the effectiveness of unconscious priming. Whether or not you are aware that you've seen a word, that word affects your decision making. This is the reason the technology works so well. The regime of screens that now comprises much of the surface area of our daily cognition operates as a delivery system for unconscious priming. Otherwise known as advertising technology, this is the system behind the website banners, the promotions tab in your Gmail, the Instagram Story you swipe through, the brand names glanced at in email headings, the words and images insinuated between posts in feeds of various sorts. The ads we don't particularly pay attention to shape us more than we know, part of the array of the platforms' sensory stimuli, all working in concert to adhere us more completely.

Adhesiveness. That's what the technology aspires to achieve, the metric by which it self-regulates and optimizes. The longer we stick around—on YouTube or Facebook, on Amazon, on the *New York Times* app—the deeper we scroll, the greater the yield of information, the more effective the influence. We are only starting to understand just how intentional all of this is, just how engineered for maximum engagement the platforms are. In fact, the platforms have been built, and are still being optimized, to keep us glued, to keep us engaged.

IT WOULD BE HARD TO PRINT MONEY FASTER THAN THESE AD-TECH AUCTION MARKETS CAN RACK UP PROFITS.

Merchants of attention have learned that nothing adheres us to their traps like emotion, and that some emotions are stickier than others. The new and alluring, the surpassingly cute. The frenzied thrill at the prospect of conflict or violence. The misfortune of others. Perhaps most emblematically, the expression of our anger, rightful or hateful. All of this lights up a part of our brain that will not release us from its tyranny. Our fingertips seek it. To say that we are addicts does not capture the magnitude of what is happening.

The system is built to keep us riveted, to keep that neurochemical leak of dopamine steadily coursing, and it operates with a premium on efficiency, which is to say, the platforms optimize for performance based on empirical feedback. An early architect of the ad-tech model writes that the largest monolingual dictionary in the world, the *Dictionary of the Dutch Language*, has more than 350,000 entries, and yet is

> dwarfed by the size of the keyword lists maintained by … search engine marketers. Like a stock portfolio manager, who keeps a set of assets with a theoretical and current price, the paid search manager maintains encyclopedic word lists along with dollar-sign values, and constantly adjusts bids to reflect realized performance.
>
> "divorce lawyer in reno" / cost per click $1.45 / revenue per click $0.90
>
> "nevada cheap divorce" / cost per click $0.75 / revenue per click $1.10
>
> "nevada divorce lawyer" / cost per click $5.55 / revenue per click $2.75

A decade ago, attorneys seeking damages and making fortunes on contingency fees bid up the value of the word *mesothelioma* as high as $90 per click, making it the most expensive word in the English language. It would be hard to print money faster than these ad-tech auction markets can rack up profits.

This technology is self-regulating by nature—it evolves, like a virus needing a healthy sampling of the population in order to spawn variations. For the tech to be able to tailor and deliver advertising in its various forms, it needs eyeballs. The more of them, and the longer they stay, the more adhesive the platform becomes and the more revenue it can generate.

John Stankey, the current CEO of AT&T, was unusually clear about this prime directive in 2018, as he addressed his new employees at the just-acquired HBO.

"We need hours a day," Stankey said, referring to the time viewers spend watching HBO programs. "It's not hours a week, and it's not hours a month. We need hours a day. You are competing with devices that sit in people's hands that capture their attention every 15 minutes." Continuing the theme, Stankey added: "I want more hours of engagement. Why are more hours of engagement important? Because you get more data and information about a customer that then allows you to do things like monetize through alternate models of advertising as well as subscriptions."

The platforms that churn through content with the greatest velocity shape the emotional responses of consumers almost in real time. Watch a video on YouTube, or like a post on Facebook or Twitter, and you will be offered another, and another, and another. Behind the suggested offerings is a logic of emotional response. The technology is

seeking your trigger, whatever draws you deeper and keeps you clicking. Nothing quite does it like outrage. Moral outrage. Those we know are right to hate; those we love because we are united together against those we know are right to hate. This is the logic behind the viral campaigns leading to the slaughter of Rohingya in Myanmar. And the logic of the increasingly truculent divide between right and left in America today. Driven by engagement and the profit that it generates, each side drifts further and further from the other, the space between us growing only more charged, only richer with opportunity for monetization. The cultural clash in America today has more electrical engineering behind it than we realize.

FOR MORE THAN a generation, science-fiction writers and aficionados have speculated about the possibility and imminence of the singularity—that is, the moment when AI will finally eclipse human intelligence. To many, it's meant the robot capable of thinking, and with an intellect surpassing our own. Let me suggest that digital problem-solving has already surpassed human capacity. Indeed, our advanced societies are now being ordered by a digital matrix of data collection, pattern recognition, and decision making that we cannot even begin to fathom—and that is happening every single successive millisecond. The synergy of data technology, computer-processing speeds and capacity, and an almost frictionless interconnectivity—all of this enables exchange; delivery of services; production of goods; growth of capital; and, most centrally, the endless catalog of our every interface, however glancing, however indirect, with this system's sprawling and ubiquitous apparatus. The singularity is here—we could call it the era of automation—and its inescapable imprint on our inner lives is already apparent.

In pursuit of what John Stankey called more hours a day, the technology metes out its steady stream of tiny pleasures as the reward for your sustained attention. Touch the screen—respond to the offered stimuli like a rat in an experiment—and receive what some are now calling a dopamine rush.

What follows from this engagement with the devices is an education, in which the system absorbs our responses and begins to shape them. The fetishizing modality of the human unconscious, until now ever-elusive, is given ordinal form as the technology channels the nebulous pull of our proverbial id with Cartesian clarity, our deepest currents of desire rerouted toward the system's mercantile ends.

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL SPELLA

This careful, unceasing, inhumanly methodical curation of our pleasure principle becomes a larger force in our psyches, as the devices drip-feed us incremental stimulation, which in turn becomes coextensive with the native ground of our very cognition.

We may not notice that there is less and less time passing between touches of the phone. Every 15 minutes? That was so 2018. We're in 2021, and the urge to reach out for the screen now feels like a rightful impatience with boredom of any sort. But it isn't that. It's withdrawal. And from this endlessly recurring neurochemical deficit is born a sense of circumstance and a syllogism that goes like this: *Something is wrong if nothing is happening. Something is always happening on this screen. Nothing's wrong when I'm on this screen.* The habit of succumbing to the syllogism—daily, hourly, minutely—charts a course into an undiscovered country of distrust. Distrust of interior discomfort, whatever its texture. Anxiety and uncertainty on the one hand; boredom on the other.

Embedded in this scheme of endless distraction is a deeper logic. The system has come to understand the fundamental value of always reaffirming our points of view back to us, delivering to us a world in our image, confirmation bias as the default setting. This is the real meaning of contemporary virtuality. In the virtual space, the technology combats and corrects our frustrations with reality itself—which defies expectation and understanding, by definition.

> *I seek. I find what I know. I enjoy this recognition of myself. I am trained over time to trust in a path to understanding that leads through the familiar, that leads through me. "I" am the arbiter of what is real. What is more real than me?*

In its basest form—and make no mistake, the baser the form, the stickier the engagement—what we're describing here is a profound technological support for primary narcissism. We don't need to know our Ovid in order to understand the perils of all this self-gazing, and yet, we may nevertheless fail to appreciate just how pervasive the social attitudes engendered by this orientation have become.

SELF-OBSESSION AS A route to self-realization is, of course, not a new idea. American advertising has been foisting this fiction on us for quite some time, exalting attention paid to even our most fugitive and trivial desires, encouraging us to think of their fulfillment as the ultimate purpose of our national politics. But now the scale of the messaging is unprecedented. Technology floods the zone; the waters never recede. In the process, the landscape and its use are entirely remade. The affirming predicate of exhibitionist displays of self-esteem are conflated with instances of political defiance. Self-valorizing anthems abound. "Me" and "my" have been elevated to epistemological categories. And the now widespread misreading of the self's fragility as resulting not from the contingent situation of selfhood itself, but from society's failure to protect and recognize "me."

Accustomed to gossamer-thin ad-and-subscription-supported satisfactions, absorbed and convinced by the moralizing rhetoric that passes off our dependence on technology as righteous activism, we internalize another pernicious untruth, deeply damaging to our social fabric—namely, that the path to redemption and change will be paved by our personal pleasure, pleasure we come to feel we shouldn't have to suffer even a moment's discomfort in order to enjoy. To use a beloved locution borrowed from the lexicon of contemporary self-esteem culture, we deserve this pleasure because we deserve better; we deserve to feel good.

> WHILE THE WAY TO WISDOM LEADS THROUGH KNOWLEDGE, THERE IS NO PATH TO WISDOM FROM INFORMATION.

All of this points to a new social ontology, an evolving set of behaviors guided by the shift in incentives that the technology has created. It's the advertising model of thought; the entertainment model of consciousness. Self-promotion, self-commodification, self-marketing—all are now taken for forms of legitimate commentary and critique; ceaseless affirmation of our biases emboldens the strident certainty of our moral positions. This is the complexion of public exchange in the newly shaped public sphere, where ideas are little more than bait for the hours a day of human attention at stake, yet another demonstration of just how much the technology is reshaping our relations with one another. In fact, we are little more than grist for a monetizing mill that mixes, like cattle feed ground from cattle bones, our own deepest intimacies with the system's digital slop, feeding it back to us wholesale. In the process, we are being remade by what we consume. In the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's words: "I notice what I find increasingly troubling: a cold-blooded grasping, a hunger to take and take and take, but never give; … an ease with dishonesty and pretension and selfishness that is couched in the language of self-care; an expectation always to be helped and rewarded no matter whether deserving or not; … an astonishing level of self-absorption; an unrealistic expectation of puritanism from others; an over-inflated sense of ability, or of talent where there is any at all; an inability to apologize, truly and fully, without justifications; a passionate performance of virtue that is well executed in the public space of Twitter but not in the intimate space of friendship." Stirring words. I doubt anyone will fail to see some truth in what she's saying. But perhaps even more disturbing than the pain behind this passionate indictment is

the predicament of those who occasioned it. The rest of us. Because who, if they're truly honest, would dare think they'd somehow escaped?

> IN THE END, a writer survives only if there's wisdom in their work.
>
> A hundred years later, a reader has to recognize the emotional patterns as their own, no matter what the social circumstances of the writer was.
>
> — *Vivian Gornick*

As a writer, it seems to me that the most baleful development in our collective contemporary life is the preponderance of a practice derived from digital technology that treats knowledge and information as synonymous. For while the way to wisdom leads through knowledge, there is no path to wisdom from information. Especially when that information is being used as a training treat in what has come to feel like a wholesale attempt at permanent reeducation.

Having one's bias confirmed endlessly by a curated cascade of information reflecting back to you your preferences and opinions, second after second, understandably breeds an illusion of certainty. But certainty is nothing like wisdom; it might in fact be something closer to wisdom's opposite. Wisdom: a kind of knowing ever-riven with contradiction, a knowing intimate with the inevitability of uncertainty. In *American Pastoral*, Philip Roth writes:

> Getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive.

A commitment to recognizing that one is wrong, to the necessity of failing to come to a conclusion and needing to make sense again, and again, and yet again—this is the path to what Gornick identifies as that which endures in literature. For Saul Bellow, novels were tests of his best ideas, in which he hoped, indeed expected, that those ideas would ultimately fail. Certainty is anathema to art, to wisdom, and ultimately, as Roth writes through the voice of Nathan Zuckerman, to living itself.

The regime of screens afflicting our cognition has elevated the centrality of certainty in our public spheres, which are increasingly indistinguishable from our private ones. And even more alarming for the writer, who cannot trust certainty as a guide to her work, it is pilfering our elective affinities, transforming these into ones selected for us. By using the term *elective affinity*, I am invoking an idea that runs from alchemy through Goethe and into the social sciences of the 19th century. The notion being of chemical elements, or people, or cultural forms that evince analogy and kinship, and which, therefore, enter into mutually arising relationship. For a writer, affinity is the guide, the lamp that lights the way.

It was ever so for Roth, a writer of fearless and passionate affinities, if there ever was one. Affinities he felt toward the great American writers, even at a time when the prevailing social thinking imagined him as Jewish first and American second, if at all; affinities that led to his embrace of even a virulent anti-Semite like Céline. "Céline is my Proust!" Roth once said. "Even if his anti-Semitism made him an abject, intolerable person. To read him, I … suspend my Jewish conscience … Céline is a great liberator." The path of affinity often leads to contradiction, like that of an American Jewish novelist emulating an avowed anti-Semite. Contradiction, which, if F. Scott Fitzgerald is right about the test of a first-rate mind, is but another shape that wisdom takes.

In Benjamin Taylor's *Here We Are*, a touching account of his friendship with Roth, Taylor writes of Roth reading aloud a passage in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*:

> A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns. The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up … In the destructive element immerse.

And Roth looks up and adds: "It's what I've said to myself in art and, woe is me, in life too. Submit to the deeps. Let them buoy you up." The downward movement that lifts. Or the ascent that sinks "slowly as a kite"—as Elizabeth Hardwick writes in *Sleepless Nights*. The paths to the wisdom of contradiction are legion, which is why any artist with a nose for a possible route, alive to her own affinities, will not ultimately be bucked by the concerns of the many.

Whether the concerns of the many are louder today than before is hard to know. But they may be more inescapable. One of the characteristics of the automating technology is how effective it is in herding opinion in ways not meaningfully different from policing it. The tech has created gathering places for our various camps of confirmed bias. These agglomerations of outrage are not just left-leaning or right-leaning, groupings superintended by slogans of belonging and creedal statements honed, like trademarks—or shibboleths—to the very locution. The result is a widespread and punitive stridency.

The writer today, wherever she is, must not be cowed by fear, however real, of opprobrium, retaliation, and group exclusion. She must know that the path to the transmutation of knowledge that produces the wisdom of literature can, in the end, lead only from her own sense of things. Information masquerading as knowledge will not lead her there, nor will the metaphysics of group belonging redeem her in the form of monetized moral certainty. Attention paid to her own affinities, however heterodox, may be all she has to go on, and the fear of doing so is what she must defy. Which is why any defense of the path to literature, to the writing of it—and by extension, to the reading and teaching of it—can only be as strong as those willing to heed it. Fundamentally, this is not a matter of judgment, not for a court of public opinion or of any other sort. It is a matter of the heart, a matter of that wisdom we call love. *A*

Ayad Akhtar is a playwright and a novelist. This essay has been adapted from a lecture delivered at the Newark Public Library in honor of Philip Roth.

THE END OF TRUST

Suspicion is undermining the American economy.

BY JERRY USEEM

Manufacturer inventories. Durable-goods orders. Nonfarm payrolls. Inflation-adjusted GDP. These are the dreary reportables that tell us how our economy is doing. And many of them look a whole lot better now than they did at their early-pandemic depths. But what if there's another factor we're missing? What if the data points are obscuring a deepening recession in a commodity that underpins them all?

Trust. Without it, Adam Smith's invisible hand stays in its pocket; Keynes's "animal spirits" are muted. "Virtually every commercial transaction has within itself an element of trust," the Nobel Prize–winning economist Kenneth Arrow wrote in 1972.

But trust is less quantifiable than other forms of capital. Its decline is vaguely felt before it's plainly seen. As companies have gone virtual during the coronavirus pandemic, supervisors wonder whether their remote workers are in fact working. New colleagues arrive and leave without ever having met. Direct reports ask if they could have that casual understanding put down in writing. No one knows whether the boss's cryptic closing remark was ironic or hostile.

Sadly, those suspicions may have some basis in fact. The longer employees were apart from one another during the pandemic, a recent study of more than 5,400 Finnish workers found, the more their faith in colleagues fell. Ward van Zoonen of Erasmus University, in the Netherlands, began measuring trust among those office workers early in 2020. He asked them: How much did they trust their peers? How much did they trust their supervisors? And how much did they believe that those people trusted them? What he found was unsettling. In March 2020, trust levels were fairly high. By May, they had slipped. By October—about seven months into the pandemic—the employees' degree of confidence in one another was down substantially.

Another survey, by the Centre for Transformative Work Design in Australia, found bosses having trust issues too. About 60 percent of supervisors doubted or were unsure that remote workers performed as well or were as motivated as those in the office. Meanwhile, demand for employee-surveillance software has skyrocketed more than 50 percent since before the pandemic. And this spring, American employees were leaving their jobs at the highest rate since at least 2000.

Each of these data points could, of course, have multiple causes. But together they point in a worrisome direction: We may be in the midst of a trust recession.

TRUST IS TO capitalism what alcohol is to wedding receptions: a social lubricant. In low-trust societies (Russia, southern Italy), economic growth is constrained. People who don't trust other people think twice before investing in, collaborating with, or hiring someone who isn't a family member (or a member of their criminal gang). The concept may sound squishy, but the effect isn't. The economists

Paul Zak and Stephen Knack found, in a study published in 1998, that a 15 percent bump in a nation's belief that "most people can be trusted" adds a full percentage point to economic growth each year. That means that if, for the past 20 years, Americans had trusted one another like Ukrainians did, our annual GDP per capita would be $11,000 lower; if we had trusted like New Zealanders did, it'd be $16,000 higher. "If trust is sufficiently low," they wrote, "economic growth is unachievable."

If you can rely on people to do what they say they're going to do—without costly coercive mechanisms to make them dependable—a lot of things become possible, argued Francis Fukuyama in his 1995 book, *Trust*. In the late 19th century, it was "highly sociable Americans" who developed the first large-scale corporations, effectively pooling the ideas, efforts, and interests of strangers. In the late 20th, some of the earliest iterations of the internet emerged from the same talent for association. Throughout nearly all of America's history, its economy has benefited from a high degree of trust.

But leaks in the trust reservoir have been evident since the '70s. Trust in government dropped sharply from its peak in 1964, according to the Pew Research Center, and, with a few exceptions, has been sputtering ever since. This trend coincides with broader cultural shifts like declining church membership, the rise of social media, and a contentious political atmosphere.

Data on trust between individual Americans are harder to come by; surveys have asked questions about so-called interpersonal trust less consistently, according to Pew. But, by one estimate, the percentage of Americans who believed "most people could be trusted" hovered around 45 percent as late as the mid-'80s; it is now 30 percent. According to Pew, half of Americans believe trust is down because Americans are "not as reliable as they used to be."

Those studies of suspicious Zoom workers suggest

ILLUSTRATION BY ALBERT TERCERO

the Trust Recession is getting worse. By October 2021, just 13 percent of Americans were still working from home because of COVID-19, down from 35 percent in May 2020, the first month the data were collected. But the physical separation of colleagues has clearly taken a toll, and the effects of a long bout of remote work may linger.

WHY? ONE REASON IS: We're primates. To hear the anthropologists tell it, we once built reciprocity by picking nits from one another's fur—a function replaced in less hirsute times by the exchange of gossip. And what better gossip mart is there than the office? Separate people, and the gossip—as well as more productive forms of teamwork—dries up. In the 1970s, an MIT professor found that we are four times as likely to communicate regularly with someone sitting six feet away from us as with someone 60 feet away. Maybe all that face time inside skyscrapers wasn't useless after all.

Trust is about two things, according to a recent story in the *Harvard Business Review*: competence (is this person going to deliver quality work?) and character (is this a person of integrity?). "To trust colleagues in both of these ways, people need clear and easily discernible signals about them," wrote the organizational experts Heidi Gardner and Mark Mortensen. They argue that the shift to remote work made gathering this information harder. Unconsciously, they conclude, we "interpret a lack of physical contact as a signal of untrustworthiness."

This leaves us prone to what social scientists call "fundamental attribution error"—the creeping suspicion that Blake hasn't called us back because he doesn't care about the project. Or because he cares about it so much that he's about to take the whole thing to a competitor. In the absence of fact—that Blake had minor dental surgery—elaborate narratives assemble.

Add to the disruption and isolation of the pandemic a political climate that urges us to meditate on the distance—ethnic, generational, ideological, socioeconomic—separating us from others, and it's not hard to see why many Americans feel disconnected.

What has suffered most are "weak ties"—relationships with acquaintances who fall somewhere between stranger and friend, which sociologists find are particularly valuable for the dissemination of knowledge. A closed inner circle tends to recycle knowledge it already has. New information is more likely to come from the serendipitous encounter with Alan, the guy with the fern in his office who reports to Phoebe and who remembers the last time someone suggested splitting the marketing division into three teams, and how that went.

Some evidence suggests that having more weak ties can shorten bouts of unemployment. In a famous 1973 survey, the Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter discovered that, among 54 people who had recently found a new job through someone they knew, 28 percent had heard about the new position from a weak tie, versus 17 percent from a strong one. When the weak ties fall away, our "radius of trust"—to borrow Fukuyama's term—shrinks.

That's a problem for individual employees, as much as they may appreciate the flexibility of working anywhere, anytime. And it's a problem for business leaders, who are trying to weigh the preferences of those employees against the enduring existence of the place that employs them. They don't want to end up like IBM. It saved $2 billion making much of its workforce remote as early as the 1980s, only to reverse course in 2017, when it recognized that remote work was depressing collaboration. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella recently wondered whether companies were "burning" some of the face-to-face "social capital we built up in this phase where we are all working remote. What's the measure for that?"

A TRUST SPIRAL, ONCE BEGUN, IS HARD TO REVERSE.

A TRUST SPIRAL, once begun, is hard to reverse. One study found that, even 20 years after reunification, fully half of the income disparity between East and West Germany could be traced to the legacy of Stasi informers. Counties that had a higher density of informers who'd ratted out their closest friends, colleagues, and neighbors fared worse. The legacy of broken trust has proved extraordinarily difficult to shake.

It's not hard to find advice on how to build a culture of trust: use humor, share your vulnerabilities, promote transparency. But striking the right tone in today's pitched political climate, often over Zoom, possibly under surveillance, is no easy feat.

Even so, it may be instructive for companies trying to navigate this moment to remember why they were formed in the first place. By the late 19th century, it was evident that some jobs were too crucial to leave to a loose association of tradespeople. If the mill had to be running full steam at all hours, you needed to know who could handle the assembly line, who could fix a faulty gasket, and above all who would reliably show up day after day. Then you needed those people legally incorporated into one body and bound by the norms, attitudes, and expectations baked into the culture of that body.

Not so incidentally, those first corporations went by a particular moniker. They were called "trusts." And without that component underpinning all the industrial might and entrepreneurial ingenuity, you have to wonder if they could ever have been built at all. *A*

Jerry Useem is a contributing writer at The Atlantic.

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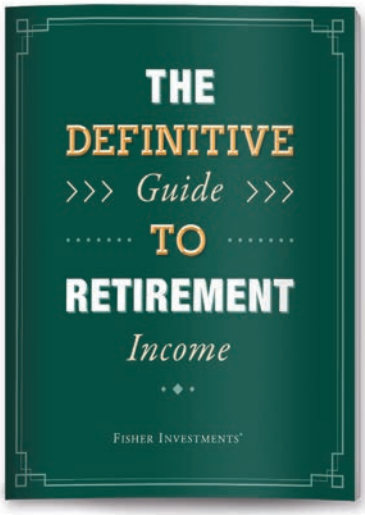

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UNWRAPPERS' DELIGHT

Americans can't resist the lure of elaborate packaging.

BY AMANDA MULL

Of all the things I've purchased during the pandemic, the most useful has been a box cutter. Until last summer, I had put off buying one for more than 15 years, through no fewer than nine apartment moves' worth of unpacking with dull scissors and countless struggles against shipping boxes bound by tape reinforced with tiny threads. This knife entered my life as a tool for some minor home repairs, but it's scarcely exited my right hand since. It doesn't even have a place to be put away. It is never away.

For more than a year, I have wielded my box cutter like a machete in a jungle of packaging, disassembling boxes taller than I am and smaller than the palm of my hand. I've ordered things online that I might have previously picked up on the way home from work, as well as a slew of things that I needed or wanted as life changed: disposable masks, sweatpants to replace the pairs that sprouted holes, a desk chair after my sciatic nerve began to throb. Many of the boxes those items came in contained other boxes that also needed to be broken down. In the at-home hair-dye kit I ordered to cover my roots while salons were closed, for example, almost everything inside the box (itself sheathed in a cardboard sleeve) came in its own, smaller box—the tube of hair dye, the disposable gloves, even the single-use plastic bonnet.

That's to say nothing of the crumpled brown paper, the air-filled clear-plastic buffers, the little cardboard inserts used to hold a product within an exterior box's transparent window, the generic thank-you-for-your-purchase cards, the stickers and refrigerator magnets that come tucked inside orders from venture-backed lifestyle brands. No matter how much I have tried to consolidate orders; to buy in unglamorous, low-waste bulk; or to just go without, the cardboard and paper and plastic keep piling up. A certain amount of it is necessary for transportation purposes, but much of it is just for show, with no way to opt out of being in the audience.

I would be giving myself too much credit if I claimed that I hated creating all this refuse. I hate looking at it in a sad, flattened stack in the corner of my apartment, hate that there isn't an obvious use for almost any of it, hate that it's a physical manifestation of my occasionally poor impulse control. But opening up a brand-new purchase is the carefully orchestrated emotional crescendo of the consumer experience, and it has the power to give basically anyone a dopamine hit.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JASON FULFORD AND TAMARA SHOPSIN

These opportunities used to be more isolated—maybe you went to the grocery store once a week and the mall a couple of times a month. Now, if you have an internet connection and a credit card, something new to open can always be on the way. It feels good to dig through all those layers and unearth a little treat, no matter if it's just hair dye or sweatpants. Even the most mundane of purchases has taken on a *matryoshka*-like quality.

This phenomenon has only accelerated as Americans have shifted more of their consumption online, where they can't touch or smell or otherwise size things up the way they would in a store. On the internet, packaged products are often judged by how attractive they look in photos, and there's no shortage of alternatives on offer. As the sheer number of consumer choices has grown exponentially, the purposes that packaging serves have grown more intricate. At this peculiar moment in American consumer history, the experience of opening and handling a purchase can be more important than the thing itself.

ACCORDING TO THOMAS Hine, the author of *The Total Package: The Secret History and Hidden Meanings of Boxes, Bottles, Cans, and Other Persuasive Containers*, packaging isn't just a product of consumer culture; it helped create that culture. Before industrial production spread packaged goods across the United States in the late 19th century, most people grew or made most of the things they needed; what they couldn't make, they bought from general stores or local peddlers. You'd take a sack into the store and ask for however much flour or sugar you needed, you'd negotiate a price, and the shopkeeper would scoop your purchase into your sack.

Mass production replaced this more quaint shopping experience, but only with the help of packaging. Goods prebundled in predictable quantities allowed for fixed pricing, and branding gave the impression of standardized quality. "The promise of packaging is that you don't have to worry about the process that brings a product into being," Hine writes. "You can make a good decision without even having to think about it."

The boxes and bottles in which things are packaged give us a heuristic for decisions that would otherwise be complicated. Hine argues that this has long been crucial to creating demand that matches the scale of what modern manufacturers can produce. And these days, they can produce a lot—from 1997 to 2019, the annual net value of the goods manufactured globally nearly tripled, to more than $13 trillion. "How many fewer items would be purchased on impulse if you couldn't see and grab the package off a shelf?" he asks. Thanks to packaging, shoppers can look for brand names they already trust, read labels to compare their options, and use visual cues to figure out which products are *for them*.

For these tactics to be effective, a person has to have internalized the logic of marketing—you have to know, on some level, the aesthetic signifiers that indicate that a brand is trying to get the attention of someone like you. I'm a 35-year-old white female college graduate with disposable income who lives in a big, liberal city, which means that although I am more of a jewel-tone person myself, I know that companies that swathe their products in murky pale pinks and sage greens are more or less opening their trench coats to show me their wares.

THE EXPERIENCE OF OPENING AND HANDLING A PURCHASE CAN BE MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE THING ITSELF.

Sometimes, packaging arbitrage is the raison d'être for a whole company. Dollar Shave Club, the direct-to-consumer start-up, didn't make or even design its own razors. Instead, it bought inexpensive ones from the Korean brand Dorco, wrapped them in slick, Millennial-bait branding, and found a sector of the market that hadn't yet been spoken to by the old guard of Schick and Gillette. In 2016, Unilever bought Dollar Shave Club for a reported price tag of $1 billion.

Carefully considered packaging is one way new brands can claw market share away from existing juggernauts, Samantha Bergeron, the owner of Uncover Research, told me. Her firm helps clients such as Target and Amazon measure consumer sentiment toward new products and concepts, including how the minute details of packaging design influence shoppers' thoughts and choices. There's not much genuinely new under the sun, but some things can be made to *look* new in compelling ways.

Bergeron singled out the cleaning-products brand Method, which hit the market in 2001, as a prime example of the difference that appearance can make for even the most quotidian goods. In a grocery-store aisle dominated by the opaque white, silver, and blue bottles—the colors of cleanliness!—that bear generations-old names such as Clorox and Lysol, Method was "packaged beautifully and became a sensation," she told me. Even if you're not familiar with the brand name, you'd likely recognize its super-simple clear-plastic bottles, most of which hold soaps and cleaners in cheerful shades of pink, purple, orange, green, or blue. At a time when many shoppers were beginning to be suspicious about the vague scourge of "chemicals" and search for more eco-friendly cleaning supplies, Method responded to their concerns and, perhaps more important, *looked* like it did, too—the bottles are, quite literally, transparent.

When you buy a bottle of Method cleaner, you're choosing to buy the emotional value that its packaging creates as

much as you're choosing to buy the cleaner itself. You are probably paying for the belief that Method's cleaner is more appropriate for a person like you—stylish, discerning—than are the alternatives in bottles festooned with cartoon suds mascots or logos that haven't been significantly redesigned in decades. It looks modern, it looks considered, it looks *expensive*—even if it's the same price as the cleaners from all the other brands. That's differentiation, baby.

Manufacturers' capacity to produce consumer goods has become so enormous that, for people with money, there are seemingly endless versions of every product in every category. That means new things become mundane very quickly, so product and packaging developers are constantly trying to figure out how to make things worth a second look. If everything around you seems more *designed* than it used to be—uncluttered labels, sans serif fonts, clean lines, matte finishes—that's why.

In the past two decades, this premium on aesthetics has created a packaging arms race. Packaging is now typically developed right alongside the product that will go inside it, not as a last step before the product meets the public. "Designing an experience and a beautiful package is kind of the price of entry," Bergeron said. "Making sure that package sends the right message about the brand and the product and speaks to the right consumer, that's where the really hard work comes in."

WHEN THOMAS HINE wrote his history of product packaging in the 1990s, the stuff largely hid in plain sight, an ignored if crucial mediator in scores of everyday decisions. Its role has changed considerably since then, as American culture and commerce have moved online and, with the help of smartphones and social media, become much more visual. Regular people are conversant in the language of branding now—they consciously package themselves, their social-media presences, and their creative output for sale. They're tougher critics of those who do it for a living.

As consumers have become more sophisticated, packaging "has become a product in itself," Stuart Harvey Lee, the creative director and owner of the design-and-branding firm Prime Studio, told me. When people leave reviews of their purchases online, he pointed out, they frequently include their opinions about packaging—and not just when the container is essential to the use of the product, as it is for, say, lipstick. They critique how the packaging looks and feels, both physically and emotionally; there's no better compliment than when someone says a package *feels expensive*.

Opening something really fancy is often a lengthy process, taking you through layers of boxes and ribbons and tissue and storage containers modeled philosophically on the wooden display boxes that encase fine watches, or the thick, soft protective sacks that drawstring shut around designer handbags. With the right packaging, this moment can feel a bit like Christmas morning.

Anyone with a smartphone can now see these premium details up close, no purchase necessary, because packaging is also a form of entertainment. YouTubers and Instagram influencers don't just show followers their shiny new toys; they "unbox" them, taking viewers through the layers of packaging so they get to vicariously live the full emotional experience of having just bought something new.

But in a time when educated, worldly people—the same ones who likely have enough disposable income to be prized consumers—are growing more concerned about climate change and expressing support for the measures necessary to stop it, why do they also gush about how expensive thick paper feels? Why do they love getting a cotton tote bag they'll never use again when they buy a new dress, instead of a less resource-intense and fully recyclable paper shopping bag? For small purchases, why do they expect to be given a bag at all?

Packaging designers have to thread this needle, giving people both what they insist they want and what their actions indicate they actually want. For some companies, this means figuring out how to make packaging sustainable; for others, it means making their stuff *look* that way. Any company can adopt the aesthetic signifiers of sustainability (think earth tones and clean design). Brands that don't care about waste are free to use the same colors and fonts as the companies that do.

At its best, well-designed packaging means that some stuff doesn't get discarded at all, because it's sturdy and beautiful enough to be repurposed. This isn't a new concept—Bonne Maman jam jars have been used as everything from wineglasses to spice storage for ages, and opening what looks like a butter-cookie tin to find your mom's sewing supplies might be one of the most universal experiences of 20th-century American childhood. But these packaging methods, Stuart Lee points out, tend to be more expensive than their more modern and less sustainable counterparts, such as the single-use plastics that now encase many cookies at the grocery store. That means those reusable containers are usually paired with goods marketed to people who aren't "price sensitive." When sustainability is a consumer choice, access to it accrues to those who already have lots of choices.

Choice is, of course, the whole point, and the whole problem. Americans have far more consumer variety than the human brain can really contend with, and more than any objective measure of need could conceivably support. But the consumer market isn't searching for equilibrium, and it's certainly not looking to provide everyone with the things they need. Instead, the sheer volume of what can be produced necessitates the creation of ever greater demand among people who can pay. That's why none of this seems to slow down, and why it's difficult to reduce your own participation in it, even if the tall stack of cardboard in your recycling bin troubles you. Consumerism is how Americans construct their identities, express their opinions, and mediate the drudgery of everyday life. And companies know that almost anything you value can be alchemized into branding—including your desire to use less packaging. *A*

Amanda Mull is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Snowbirds

Photographs by Naomi Harris

In December 1999, Naomi Harris turned down a job offer, left her apartment in New York, and checked into the Haddon Hall Hotel, in Miami Beach. She was 26. She wanted to be a photographer.

The hotel was a year-round home for some and a seasonal residence for others—snowbirds, mostly in their 80s and 90s, who came down from New England or Canada and stayed all winter. They didn't have a lot of money, and they didn't go there for luxury. Their days were spent together: eating, dancing, flirting, playing bingo. They welcomed Harris, allowing her to photograph intimate moments of joy and vulnerability.

Haddon Hall was "the last of the old-time hotels," Harris writes in her recently published photography collection of the same name. In the 1980s and '90s, Miami Beach was a city in transition. The run-down Art Deco hotels, which had flourished during the city's mid-century golden era, were home to working-class families and retirees on fixed incomes. This was my city. Every day, I passed Haddon Hall on my walk from my day job to my night job. Miami Beach was gentrifying, but it still had a mix of people from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Russia working the

hotels and retirement homes; Jewish retirees going for early-bird dinners at Wolfie's; club kids lining up at Crobar and Warsaw. South Beach, with its large LGBTQ community, had become an AIDS epicenter. Everyone was trying to survive.

Haddon Hall, Harris writes, had all the standard types: "the popular girl, the comedian, the loner, the jezebel." Harris captured them all in Technicolor. She took photos of women sunbathing by the pool and couples tearing up the dance floor at a hotel party. Some had lost spouses and siblings. Some had survived the Holocaust. Sam (shown eating Corn Flakes above), who mostly kept to himself, had lost his first wife and child at Auschwitz.

By the late '90s, most of the South Beach hotels had been renovated to cater to wealthy tourists. Haddon Hall would soon be renovated too, and its residents, much like the rest of us, would be priced out of South Beach. Today, Miami Beach feels like a different city: glittering storefronts, tech moguls in Lamborghinis. In the 20 years since Harris started her project, everyone in these photos has died, but she remembers their stories—the gossip, the laughter, the misbehaving. How once, she and Sylvia stood in line outside Club Madonna, only to turn around when they realized they couldn't afford the two-drink minimum. These were her friends.

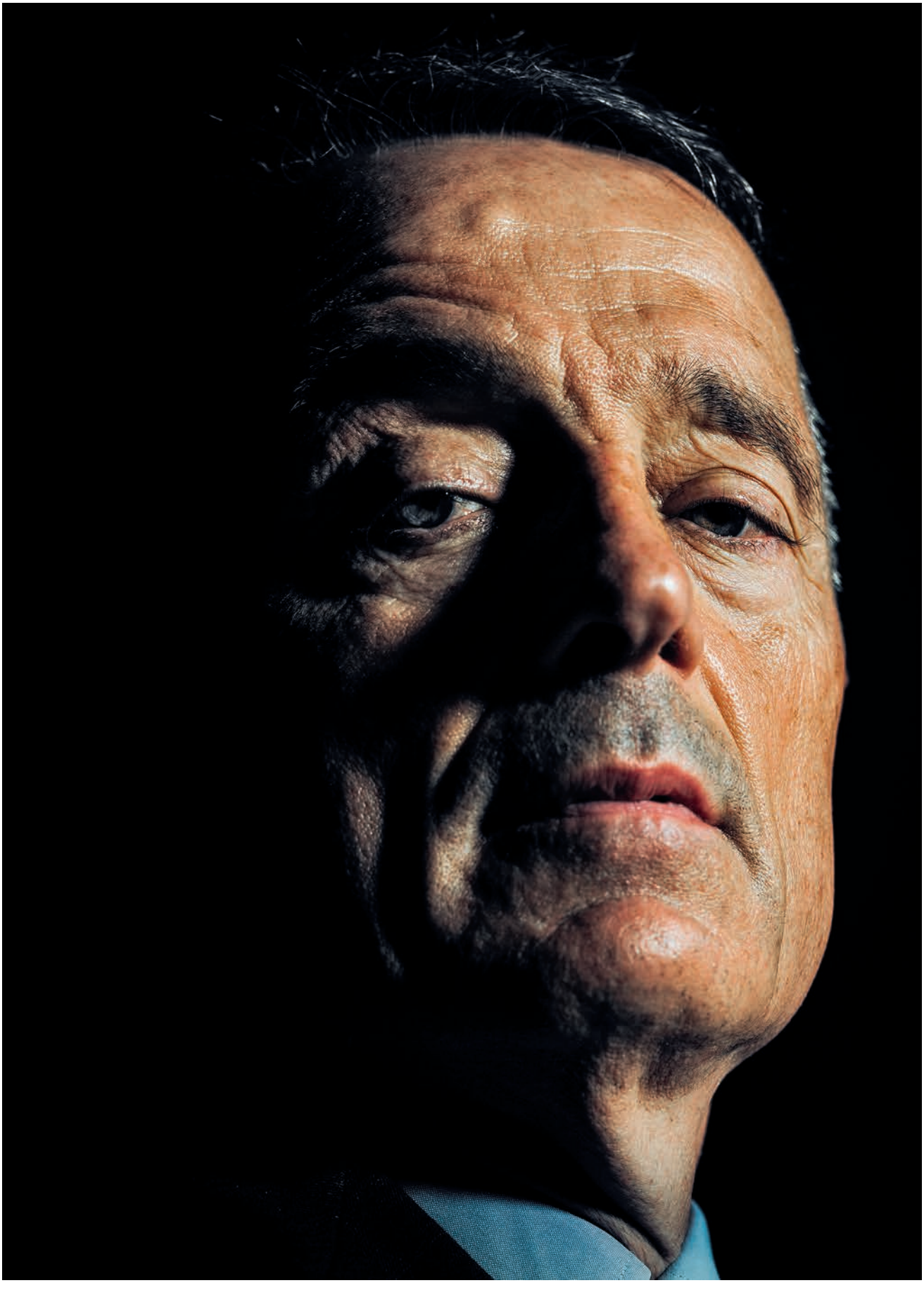
— Jaquira Díaz

THE ANTIQUITIES COP

BY *Ariel Sabar*

Matthew Bogdanos is on a mission to prosecute the wealthy dealers and collectors who traffic in the looted relics of ancient civilizations.

When Matthew Bogdanos got a tip about a looted mummy coffin whose corpse had been dumped in the Nile, he approached the coffin's buyer—the Metropolitan Museum of Art—with few of the courtesies traditionally accorded New York's premier cultural institution. ¶ Bogdanos, a 64-year-old prosecutor in the Manhattan District Attorney's Office, is chief of its Antiquities Trafficking Unit. The only one of its kind in the world, his squad of prosecutors, criminal investigators, and art specialists



PHOTOGRAPH BY MALIKE SIDIBE FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

Kim Kardashian at the Met Gala in 2018, posing with a coffin that the Manhattan DA later discovered had been looted from Egypt

LANDON NORDEMAN / TRUNK ARCHIVE

polices the loftiest reaches of New York's art market—a genteel club of museums, collectors, and auction houses that buy and sell the relics of ancient civilizations.

People in Manhattan's antiquities trade tend to carry themselves with an air of refinement. Bogdanos does not. He's a retired Marine colonel and amateur middleweight boxer who likes to drive opponents "into the corner and beat the living shit out of them," his trainer told me.

In the case of the Met's mummy coffin, Bogdanos got off the phone with a smuggler turned informant in Dubai and, by day's end, had opened a grand-jury investigation in Manhattan. He subpoenaed the emails, texts, and handwritten notes of every Met employee involved in the coffin's purchase.

What Bogdanos found "shocked the conscience," he told me. According to an official summary of the grand-jury investigation, the Met had acquired the golden first-century-B.C. coffin, for $4 million, despite what Bogdanos saw as a sea of red flags: three conflicting ownership histories, the involvement of known traffickers, a forged export license that bore the stamp ARAB REPUBLIC OF EGYPT before the country used that name. The Met had allegedly deleted emails at the dealer's request and deflected questions from Egypt. Smugglers had so hastily disposed of the coffin's occupant—an Egyptian priest—that the museum's conservators found a finger bone still stuck inside.

According to a 2019 search warrant, the Met was the probable site of criminal possession of stolen property in the first degree, a felony punishable by up to 25 years in prison. The intimation was that Met officials knew—or should have known—that the coffin was looted, but bought it anyway. (A Met spokesperson said the museum had been deceived by an "international criminal organization." Though never charged, the Met apologized to the people of Egypt, reformed its acquisitions process, and forfeited the coffin to the DA.)

Over the past decade, Bogdanos and his agents have impounded more than 3,600 antiquities, valued at some $200 million. They've raided art fairs on Park Avenue, and Christie's in Rockefeller Center. They arrested a dealer at the five-star Mark Hotel and seized statues on display at the five-star Pierre.

Tips from scholars, dealers, and other informants have repeatedly led Bogdanos to the Upper East Side. The enclave of old-money families along Fifth Avenue's Museum Mile is America's worst neighborhood for antiquities crime. It's a long way, culturally, from Bogdanos's New York. He grew up busing tables at his parents' Greek restaurant in Kips Bay, and his court filings are salted with sarcastic, class-conscious asides. The problem with "these gentlemen of stature and breeding," he told one judge, is that they "would never be so gauche" as to check the legal status of ancient art before buying it.

BEHROUZ MEHRI / AFP

Bogdanos in front of the Iraq Museum in 2003, briefing the press on the status of missing antiquities

Some dealers have shut down rather than fight back. A 2019 journal article found that the number of ancient-art galleries with Manhattan storefronts had plunged over the preceding two decades from a dozen to three. Other Manhattan dealers continue to operate online or by appointment, but almost none has been spared Bogdanos's subpoenas and search warrants. Sotheby's ceased its New York auctions of ancient art in 2016, confining such sales to London. (Sotheby's says this reflects "demand from collectors.")

"Reputable galleries that have been in the business for a few decades or more have never seen an environment like this," David Schoen, a lawyer for the venerable Safani Gallery (and also, incidentally, for former President Donald Trump at his second impeachment trial), told me. "It's like being hit by snipers," one person complained to *The Art Newspaper*.

WHEN BOGDANOS WAS 12, his mother, Claire, a waitress at the family restaurant, gave him a copy of *The Iliad* to stoke his pride in his Greek heritage. During his parents' sometimes violent fights, he would take Homer's epic into a closet and read it obsessively, electrified by Achilles's rageful war on Troy. When I asked why the tale so moved him, he said, "Everyone acted with honor."

After earning a law degree at Columbia, he stayed for a master's in classics. His thesis was a psycho-historical study of how Alexander the Great galvanized followers despite being a genocidal alcoholic with parents who loathed each other. Of the masterworks of classical antiquity, he once said, "I don't view them as literature," but as "a travel guide for life."

Bogdanos served as a military lawyer at Camp Lejeune for three years before joining the Manhattan DA's Office in 1988 and becoming a top homicide prosecutor. When a jury returned an acquittal in his best-known case—the prosecution of the rapper Sean "Puffy" Combs in connection with a nightclub shooting—he took it as a personal failing and, he says, offered to resign. At the trial, Bogdanos had sat alone at the prosecution table, casting himself as a lone warrior against an army of high-powered defense attorneys. "But at times," the *Daily News* reported, he "seemed more like a pit bull on the loose than a hero fighting the dark side."

Six months later, on September 11, 2001, he was getting ready for work when an explosion rattled the windows of the building where he lived with his wife, Claudia, who is also a lawyer, and their young children. American Airlines Flight 11 had crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, a block away.

Recalled to active duty, Bogdanos was tasked with improving security at the Kabul airport. He quickly got his hands on travel ledgers that led to the identification of hundreds of senior Taliban and al-Qaeda

leaders, including 11 of the 25 most-wanted figures in the War on Terror. According to the citation for his Bronze Star, Bogdanos pulled off this improbable intelligence coup by "seizing unexpected opportunities and relying on his personal courage often at great personal risk." He was promoted to colonel and named deputy director of the Joint Interagency Coordination Group, a counterterrorism team of agents from the armed forces, FBI, CIA, Treasury, and other agencies, under U.S. Central Command.

The group had decamped to a pair of southern-Iraq port cities in April 2003 when a scandal broke up north. Just days after the U.S. invasion of Baghdad, looters sacked Iraq's national museum. The Pentagon was savaged for failing to protect the compound, which housed irreplaceable artifacts from the cradle of civilization.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld dismissed the controversy: "Stuff happens," he told reporters. Bogdanos felt differently. "It just hit me in my gut … like a body blow," he told me. "This stuff matters. It matters forever, and once it's gone, it's gone."

He asked his superiors if he could borrow a dozen or so of his counterterrorism agents, drive them into downtown Baghdad, and get things under control at the museum.

"I said, 'Well, that's kind of a wild-ass idea,'" his then-commander, the retired four-star Air Force general Victor "Gene" Renuart Jr., told me. Historic preservation lay far outside Bogdanos's counterterror mission. Bogdanos promised Renuart that the job would take just a few days, and Renuart relented, ordering the Marine not to get himself or anyone else killed. Bogdanos's team bunked in the museum's library and somehow extended the assignment to several months. Through a combination of amnesty offers and armed raids, the crew recovered thousands of antiquities across Iraq.

When Bogdanos got back to the States, he published a memoir called *Thieves of Baghdad* and shook hands with President George W. Bush, who awarded him a National Humanities Medal. A speaking tour and Warner Bros. movie option followed. Military leaders liked the press, but made clear to Bogdanos that his foray into war-zone museum protection was over.

Bogdanos had other plans. In speeches, interviews, and op-eds, he began promoting the notion that Iraqi insurgents were using the antiquities trade as a major revenue source—"a cash cow"—for terrorism. "In a modern-day version of the old 'molasses to rum to slaves' triangle trade," he wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed in 2005, "the cozy cabal of academics, dealers, and collectors who turn a blind eye to the illicit side of the trade is in effect supporting the terrorists killing our troops in Iraq."

He'd identified—or, as critics saw it, invented—an alarming link between his official duties and his personal obsessions. A Rand Corporation study last year found insufficient evidence for his claim. (There are stronger signs of organized looting in Syria by the Islamic State, though few objects appear to have reached major markets.)

"I have never said and never will say that all antiquities trafficking is funding terrorism—that's absurd," Bogdanos said in one of our Zoom interviews, anticipating my questions about the Rand report. "But some is, and some's enough." He had focused on terrorism, he said, to keep antiquities in the news after interest in the Iraq Museum waned.

He'd also begun plotting a new assignment back home. In the same 2005 op-ed, published soon after his release from active duty, he declared that he would return to the Manhattan DA's Office the next year and "head the city's first task force dedicated to investigating and prosecuting antiquities theft and trafficking."

When I asked why that unit took 12 years to materialize, he acknowledged that he'd gotten ahead of himself. He said that then–District Attorney Robert Morgenthau had allowed him to pursue antiquities along with his other work. But Bogdanos had never asked about a task force, much less gotten approval for one.

So why had he pretended otherwise?

"You know how when you want something to happen, you say it as if it's true?" he asked me.

Maybe some people do, I thought. But about your employer? In the *Times*?

On his first day back in the DA's office, supervisors informed him that he could, in effect, "go fuck himself," a high-ranking official in the Morgenthau administration told me. The antiquities unit "was completely a figment of his own imagination and his self-aggrandizing personality."

In the end, Bogdanos prosecuted no antiquities cases under Morgenthau. He says his bosses rebuffed every request for a grand-jury investigation; those bosses, now retired, told me he never presented a viable case.

Undeterred, Bogdanos spent off-hours meeting with art dealers and law-enforcement agents, building contacts in hopes that one day things would change.

In January 2012, 10 officers in law-enforcement windbreakers raided the Waldorf Astoria.

MORGENTHAU RETIRED IN 2009. Two years later, Bogdanos received a visit from Brenton Easter, an investigator in the New York office of the Department of Homeland Security. Easter told him that a collector was bringing millions of dollars' worth of suspect coins to the 40th New York International Numismatic Convention. The collector, a hand surgeon named Arnold-Peter Weiss, was a professor at

A 2,300-year-old marble bull's head stolen by Lebanese militants

A 2,500-year-old limestone relief of a Persian soldier that Bogdanos's team seized in 2017

Brown University's medical school, a former treasurer of the American Numismatic Society, and a member of Harvard Art Museums' collections committee.

Bogdanos began working his sources. He was at his family's lakeside cabin in New Jersey on Christmas Eve when an officer he knew in the Italian Carabinieri called with the investigation's missing piece: The coins, the officer told him, were Italian national property. Italy had never authorized their export.

Bogdanos called his supervisor, Karen Friedman Agnifilo: Could he set up a sting?

"You've lost your mind," Agnifilo told him. Coin enthusiasts—"the nerdiest people"—hardly fit the criminal stereotype. "How sure are you about this?"

Bogdanos walked her through the evidence, and she gave the go-ahead. "It was indisputable," she told me.

Bogdanos and Easter prepped an informant to pose as a high-end buyer. Over pizza on the Upper East Side, Weiss told the informant about a rare coin—a fifth-century-B.C. tetradrachm bearing the head of Apollo. Weiss wanted $300,000 for it. "There's no paperwork," Weiss told the informant, according to the criminal complaint that Bogdanos's team would file. "I know this is a fresh coin; this was dug up a few years ago." (Weiss also knew that recently excavated coins were rightfully the property of the Italian government, he later admitted to a federal agent.)

A recording of the conversation—the informant was wearing a wire—seemed to give Bogdanos probable cause for arrest. But on what charge? Unlike federal prosecutors, who have broad jurisdiction over U.S. ports and customs, Bogdanos had only New York laws at his disposal. One of the plainest caught his eye: criminal possession of stolen property. The charge was typically brought against pawnbrokers, chop shops, and other businesses popular with thieves seeking no-questions-asked buyers. If a junkyard with an inexplicable surplus of copper wire could be charged, why not an antiquities collector with one too many Sumerian statues?

In January 2012, with the coin convention under way, 10 officers in law-enforcement windbreakers raided the Waldorf Astoria and arrested Weiss in the conference room where he had his booth. Weiss pleaded guilty to three misdemeanors, and the DA agreed to 70 hours of community service, a $3,000 fine, and a requirement that Weiss write an article for a numismatics journal on the perils of unprovenanced coins. In a twist, all of the coins that Weiss and investigators thought had been looted from Italy—including the tetradrachm—turned out to be fake, so the charges were reduced to *attempted* criminal possession of stolen property. The Manhattan DA gave the fakes to the Smithsonian Institution to educate federal agents and returned other coins to Greece.

In a single stroke, Bogdanos had criminalized common behavior in the coin world. But as precedent for a broader dragnet, it was limited. Weiss admitted knowing—or believing—that his goods had been looted. What of the far greater number of dealers and collectors who didn't know, because they didn't ask?

WILLFUL IGNORANCE—the "ostrich defense," as Bogdanos calls it—is endemic in the antiquities trade. For much of the 20th century, few Westerners cared to look too closely at how an ancient object came to be removed from its homeland. The important thing was that it had found its way to Europe or America. The grand civilizations that had produced the art were long gone, leaving behind people too poor and ignorant to appreciate, much less protect, their own cultural heritage. So went the colonialist mindset.

MANHATTAN DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE

Bogdanos needed to pierce the ostrich defense, and he found an awl in the same stolen-property law that had brought down Weiss. A little-noted provision, absent from the New York law's federal counterpart, said that if dealers failed to make a "reasonable inquiry" into an object's true ownership, those dealers were "presumed" to know it was stolen. Willful ignorance, in other words, was tantamount to guilt. Bogdanos's team began seizing not just antiquities, but computers, cellphones, emails, notes, and other personal records showing whether buyers had taken anything more than the most perfunctory steps to investigate provenance.

One recurring target of his search warrants and subpoenas has been the billionaire financier and collector Michael Steinhardt, who has a Greek-art gallery at the Met named after him. Bogdanos's team has carted off 80 antiquities, valued at more than $20 million, from Steinhardt's Fifth Avenue office and apartment. It also took one he'd loaned to the Met: a 2,300-year-old marble bull's head that militants had stolen from Lebanon four decades ago. Steinhardt has openly wrestled with the temptations of the trade. Years earlier he'd lost a federal lawsuit over an illegally imported golden bowl from Sicily—after paying $1 million for the relic and another $1 million for lawyers. "It should have turned me off antiquities," Steinhardt told an interviewer, "but it's like an addiction." (Steinhardt, who has not been criminally charged, did not respond to requests for comment.)

By 2017, Bogdanos had become so buried in antiquities work that he was sleeping in his office. Supervisors alerted Cyrus Vance Jr., the DA, to the swelling caseload, and that December Vance announced the formation of the Antiquities Trafficking Unit—the fulfillment of Bogdanos's long-deferred fantasy. Vance obtained $2.2 million from a money-laundering settlement for five years of salaries. In addition to Bogdanos, its chief, who still spends at least half his time prosecuting homicides, the unit has three other assistant DAs, five analysts (with degrees in fields like art and archaeology), and two detectives, as well as half a dozen special agents from the Department of Homeland Security.

The DA's office has returned more than 1,300 antiquities to their homelands: a marble sarcophagus fragment to Greece, a Buddha's footprint to Pakistan, and, to Italy, a first-century mosaic from a ship in the emperor Caligula's fleet. The rest, a couple thousand artifacts, occupy so much space that Bogdanos has taken to referring to their storage sites—in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and, until recently, Long Island City—as "wings."

The unit's biggest case is a sprawling 86-count indictment against the renowned Manhattan dealer Subhash Kapoor, who is now on trial in India on similar charges and has denied wrongdoing. In July, the DA extradited from the United Kingdom a restorer who cleaned Kapoor's antiquities, in part to hide dirt, rust, and other signs of their recent theft. "I avoided asking questions," the restorer told a New York court before pleading guilty, "because I was suspicious that the answers would reveal that the objects were stolen."

THOUGH THE FBI has an art-crime squad and some countries have police teams that chase antiquities, Bogdanos's group appears to be the only unit led by a prosecutor. Advocates say the distinction is crucial: Too many police probes of antiquities theft go nowhere because prosecutors lack the expertise or political will to take them on.

The problem is plainly visible, scholars say, at the Department of Justice, which has a history of treating ill-gotten antiquities as a civil matter. Federal prosecutors might sue to return relics to their homelands—a practice known as "seize and send"—but seldom charge the people who buy or transport them. This has been true even in cases as striking as Hobby Lobby's import, a decade ago, of $1.6 million in illicit Iraqi artifacts, some in boxes labeled CERAMIC TILES. The arts-and-crafts chain paid $3 million to settle a federal civil action and has forfeited thousands of antiquities to the U.S. government. But federal prosecutors filed no criminal charges, even though the company had been warned against importing the objects by a hired expert.

The politics are especially delicate when collectors have reputations as public benefactors. More than 90 percent of the art in American museums has been loaned or donated by private collectors, a fact celebrated by the Association of Art Museum Directors as a "distinctly American tradition of philanthropy."

Karen Friedman Agnifilo, who until her recent departure was Vance's second in command, received a call a few years ago from a friend of someone whom Bogdanos was investigating. The caller described the target as "an important philanthropist, a good person," and asked the DA to lay off. "I was appalled," Agnifilo told me. "It showed me the world we're dealing with: these very wealthy, very powerful, very connected people, some of whom think the law doesn't apply to them."

When Bogdanos executes search warrants, it's "like their heads explode," he told me. "You can't believe the number of times lawyers will come in and say, 'All you had to do was call me up on the phone … It's the way we've always done business, the way the feds have always done it. Closed door. No one has to know anything.'

"Are you kidding me? I wouldn't do that for a drug dealer on 155th Street or a gunrunner on 187th Street, but I'm going to do it for your client?"

Bogdanos's crackdown comes amid a broader reckoning over the West's extraction of wealth from

The galleries of the Upper East Side have proved a tougher testing ground in some ways than the battlefields of Baghdad.

poor countries and people of color. The fiercest activists want Western museums to return all antiquities to their homelands, on the grounds that even legal acquisitions were tainted by colonial-era imbalances of money and power. Randall Hixenbaugh, one of Manhattan's last surviving ancient-art dealers, told me that he has lost sales of well-provenanced objects, in part, he suspects, because sensational news stories have soured collectors on the entire sector. The push to make antiquities "unpalatable," he contends, has less to do with the law than with an anti-European cultural politics.

Particularly galling to Bogdanos's detractors are his seizures of antiquities that have circulated, unquestioned, for decades. Among them is a 2,500-year-old limestone relief of a spear-toting Persian soldier, valued at $3 million. In 2017 Bogdanos removed it from an art fair at the Park Avenue Armory, as its enraged British dealer sputtered curses. The object had been owned by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts since the 1950s. Spurred by a tip from a scholar, Bogdanos's team used archival records, decades-old photo negatives, and interviews in five countries to argue that the relief had been filched in the 1930s from an excavation in Iran. The British dealer and a colleague agreed to surrender the relief without admitting guilt, and in 2018, a New York judge ordered its repatriation.

If an object with seven decades of documented provenance could be labeled stolen, "then so can tens of thousands of other items in American museums," Kate Fitz Gibbon, a lawyer who consults for art collectors, dealers, and museums, told me. Bogdanos is "applying standards today that simply didn't exist in the past." Some people have decided not to fight Bogdanos's efforts to repatriate their art, even when they've done nothing wrong, Fitz Gibbon said. What spooks them are the stratospheric legal costs—and public opprobrium—if Bogdanos follows through on threats of criminal prosecution. A climate of fear, she said, is chilling the legal trade, imperiling the city's vaunted cultural life.

Bogdanos counters that he's not killing the market but saving it, by purging it of loot and effectively raising prices for pieces with unassailable provenance. Dealers who gripe about his clampdown are like pharmacists complaining about drug busts. "I'm ruining the *illegal* business," he told me. "If people in the trade are leaving New York, that speaks volumes about their own consciousness of guilt."

BOGDANOS USED TO give interviews that sounded like closing arguments on *Law & Order*. "You want to know what will get the vast majority of them to stop?" he once said of unscrupulous dealers. Prison for "some 65-year-old person who has never seen the inside of a jail"—"a nice sentence among one of their own."

Yet Bogdanos's dream job, now that he has it, has been chastening. In all 11 of his antiquities convictions, the defendants pleaded guilty before trial. But none of those convictions resulted in prison, the one penalty that antiquities watchdogs had hoped to see more of.

The Met's golden coffin had been the centerpiece of a new exhibit, visited by nearly half a million people. French officials used Bogdanos's evidence to charge the coffin's Paris dealers with money laundering, forgery, and fraud, and the Manhattan DA returned the relic to Egypt in 2019. But no Met employees were ever charged. The museum's failures of due diligence were deplorable, Bogdanos told me, but fell short of a provable crime.

Nancy Wiener, a prominent Manhattan gallerist, pleaded guilty to three felony counts in September, after selling millions of dollars of stolen South Asian antiquities over more than a decade. She admitted in court that she had covered up evidence of theft by falsifying ownership histories and having a restorer rid objects of suspicious marks. Yet Bogdanos asked the judge to impose no penalty and no probation—nothing beyond the several hours she'd spent being fingerprinted and photographed at the DA's office after her 2016 arrest. Her extensive help on other cases since then, he told the judge, warranted "evenhanded justice" rather than "absolute justice."

I asked Bogdanos how he squared these nuanced outcomes with his once-strident calls for "shame and prison." He rubbed a hand across his lips in a pained gesture, and there was a silence, the longest of our many interviews. "It's a legitimate question," he conceded.

Proving mens rea, a suspect's guilty mind, has been harder than he imagined, he told me. He's had to reconcile himself to extremely light sentences for some culprits in exchange for testimony against the worst offenders, most of whom have yet to face justice. And though New York is the world's largest art market, some antiquities have slipped his grasp simply by crossing state lines. In the face of murders, robberies, and violent mayhem, few prosecutors outside his office—and truth be told, few in it—share his sense of urgency.

For a man who styles himself after the code-bound warriors of Greek myth, these deviations from the Platonic ideal haven't been easy. The galleries of the Upper East Side have proved a tougher testing ground in some ways than the battlefields of Baghdad.

"Sometimes you have to make deals that make you sick," he said. *A*

Ariel Sabar is the author of Veritas: A Harvard Professor, a Con Man and the Gospel of Jesus's Wife.

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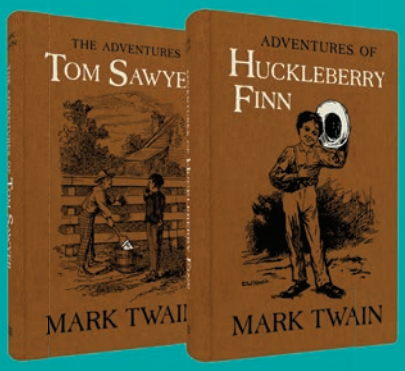

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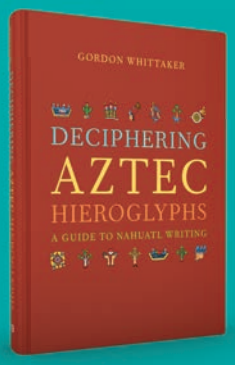

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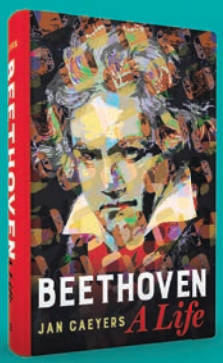

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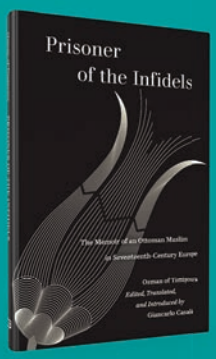

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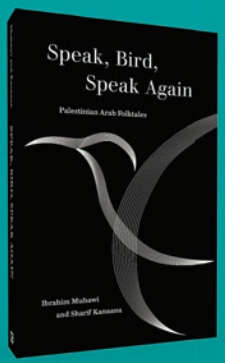

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THE AUTOCRATS

If the 20th century was the story of liberal democracy's progress toward victory over other ideologies—communism, fascism, virulent nationalism—the 21st century is, so far, a story of the reverse.

ARE WINNING

By Anne Applebaum

Illustrations by Michael Houtz

The future of democracy may well be decided in a drab office building on the outskirts of Vilnius, alongside a highway crammed with impatient drivers heading out of town.

I met Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya there this spring, in a room that held a conference table, a whiteboard, and not much else. Her team—more than a dozen young journalists, bloggers, vloggers, and activists—was in the process of changing offices. But that wasn't the only reason the space felt stale and perfunctory. None of them, especially not Tsikhanouskaya, really wanted to be in this ugly building, or in the Lithuanian capital at all. She is there because she probably won the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, and because the Belarusian dictator she probably defeated, Alexander Lukashenko, forced her out of the country immediately afterward. Lithuania offered her asylum. Her husband, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, remains imprisoned in Belarus.

Here is the first thing she said to me: "My story is a little bit different from other people." This is what she tells everyone—that hers was not the typical life of a dissident or budding politician. Before the spring of 2020, she didn't have much time for television or newspapers. She has two children, one of whom was born deaf. On an ordinary day, she would take them to kindergarten, to the doctor, to the park.

Then her husband bought a house and ran into the concrete wall of Belarusian bureaucracy and corruption. Exasperated, he started making videos about his experiences, and those of others. These videos yielded a YouTube channel; the channel attracted thousands of followers. He went around the country, recording the frustrations of his fellow citizens, driving a car with the phrase "Real News" plastered on the side. Siarhei Tsikhanouski held up a mirror to his society. People saw themselves in that mirror and responded with the kind of enthusiasm that opposition politicians had found hard to create in Belarus.

"At the beginning it was really difficult because people were afraid," Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya told me. "But step-by-step, slowly, they realized that Siarhei isn't afraid." He wasn't afraid to speak the truth as he saw it; his absence of fear inspired others. He decided to run for president. The regime, recognizing the power of Siarhei's mirror, would not allow him to register his candidacy, just as it had not allowed him to register the ownership of his house. It ended his campaign and arrested him.

Tsikhanouskaya ran in his place, with no motive other than "to show my love for him." The police and bureaucrats let her. Because what harm could she do, this simple housewife, this woman with no political experience? And so, in July 2020, she registered as a candidate. Unlike her husband, she was afraid. She woke up "so scared" every morning, she told me, and sometimes she stayed scared all day long. But she kept going. Which was, though she doesn't say so, incredibly brave. "You feel this responsibility, you wake up with this pain for those people who are in jail, you go to bed with the same feeling."

Unexpectedly, Tsikhanouskaya was a success—not despite her inexperience, but because of it. Her campaign became a campaign about ordinary people standing up to the regime. Two other prominent opposition politicians endorsed her after their own campaigns were blocked, and when the wife of one of them and the female campaign manager of the other were photographed alongside Tsikhanouskaya, her campaign became something more: a campaign about ordinary women—women who had been neglected, women who had no voice, even just women who loved their husbands. In return, the regime targeted all three of these women. Tsikhanouskaya received an anonymous threat: Her children would be "sent to an orphanage." She dispatched them with her mother abroad, to Vilnius, and kept campaigning.

On August 9, election officials announced that Lukashenko had won 80 percent of the vote, a number nobody believed. The internet was cut off, and Tsikhanouskaya was detained by police and then forced out of the country. Mass demonstrations unfolded across Belarus. These were both a spontaneous outburst of feeling—a popular response to the stolen election—and a carefully coordinated project run by young people, some based in Warsaw, who had been experimenting with social media and new forms of communication for several years. For a brief, tantalizing moment, it looked like this democratic uprising might prevail. Belarusians shared a sense of national unity they had never felt before. The regime immediately pushed back, with real brutality. Yet the mood at the protests was generally happy, optimistic; people literally danced in the streets. In a country of fewer than 10 million, up to 1.5 million people would come out in a single day, among them pensioners, villagers, factory

workers, and even, in a few places, members of the police and the security services, some of whom removed insignia from their uniforms or threw them in the garbage.

Tsikhanouskaya says she and many others naively believed that under this pressure, the dictator would just give up. "We thought he would understand that we are against him," she told me. "That people don't want to live under his dictatorship, that he lost the elections." They had no other plan.

At first, Lukashenko seemed to have no plan either. But his neighbors did. On August 18, a plane belonging to the FSB, the Russian security services, flew from Moscow to Minsk. Soon after that, Lukashenko's tactics underwent a dramatic change. Stephen Biegun, who was the U.S. deputy secretary of state at the time, describes the change as a shift to "more sophisticated, more controlled ways to repress the population." Belarus became a textbook example of what the journalist William J. Dobson has called "the dictator's learning curve": Techniques that had been used successfully in the past to repress crowds in Russia were seamlessly transferred to Belarus, along with personnel who understood how to deploy them. Russian television journalists arrived to replace the Belarusian journalists who had gone on strike, and immediately stepped up the campaign to portray the demonstrations as the work of Americans and other foreign "enemies." Russian police appear to have supplemented their Belarusian colleagues, or at least given them advice, and a policy of selective arrests began. As Vladimir Putin figured out a long time ago, mass arrests are unnecessary if you can jail, torture, or possibly murder just a few key people. The rest will be frightened into staying home. Eventually they will become apathetic, because they believe nothing can change.

The Lukashenko rescue package, reminiscent of the one Putin had designed for Bashar al-Assad in Syria six years earlier, contained economic elements too. Russian companies offered markets for Belarusian products that had been banned by the democratic West—for example, smuggling Belarusian cigarettes into the European Union. Some of this was possible because the two countries share a language. (Though roughly a third to half of the country speaks Belarusian, most public business in Belarus is conducted in Russian.) But this close cooperation was also possible because Lukashenko and Putin, though they famously dislike each other, share a common way of seeing the world. Both believe that their personal survival is more important than the well-being of their people. Both believe that a change of regime would result in their death, imprisonment, or exile.

Both also learned lessons from the Arab Spring, as well as from the more distant memory of 1989, when Communist dictatorships fell like dominoes: Democratic revolutions are contagious. If you can stamp them out in one country, you might prevent them from starting in others. The anti-corruption, prodemocracy demonstrations of 2014 in Ukraine, which resulted in the overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovych's government, reinforced this fear of democratic contagion. Putin was enraged by those protests, not least because of the precedent they set. After all, if Ukrainians could get rid of their corrupt dictator, why wouldn't Russians want to do the same?

Lukashenko gladly accepted Russian help, turned against his people, and transformed himself from an autocratic, patriarchal grandfather—a kind of national collective-farm boss—into a tyrant who revels in cruelty. Reassured by Putin's support, he began breaking new ground. Not just selective arrests—a year later, human-rights activists say that more than 800 political prisoners remain in jail—but torture. Not just torture but rape. Not just torture and rape but kidnapping and, quite possibly, murder.

Democratic revolutions are contagious. If you can stamp them out in one country, you might prevent them from starting in others.

Lukashenko's sneering defiance of the rule of law—he issues stony-faced denials of the existence of political repression in his country—and of anything resembling decency spread beyond his borders. In May 2021, Belarusian air traffic control forced an Irish-owned Ryanair passenger plane to land in Minsk so that one of the passengers, Roman Protasevich, a young dissident living in exile, could be arrested; he later made public confessions on television that appeared to be coerced. In August, another young dissident living in exile, Vitaly Shishov, was found hanged in a Kyiv park. At about the same time, Lukashenko's regime set out to destabilize its EU neighbors by forcing streams of refugees across their borders: Belarus lured Afghan and Iraqi refugees to Minsk with a proffer of tourist visas, then escorted them to the borders of Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland and forced them at gunpoint to cross, illegally.

Lukashenko began to act, in other words, as if he were untouchable, both at home and abroad. He began breaking not only the laws and customs of his own country, but also the laws and customs of other countries, and of the international

community—laws regarding air traffic control, homicide, borders. Exiles flowed out of the country; Tsikhanouskaya's team scrambled to book hotel rooms or Airbnbs in Vilnius, to find means of support, to learn new languages. Tsikhanouskaya herself had to make another, even more difficult transition—from people's-choice candidate to sophisticated diplomat. This time her inexperience initially worked against her. At first, she thought that if she could just speak with Angela Merkel or Emmanuel Macron, one of them could fix the problem. "I was sure they are so powerful that they can call Lukashenko and say, 'Stop! How dare you?'" she told me. But they could not.

So she tried to talk as foreign leaders did, to speak in sophisticated political language. That didn't work either. The experience was demoralizing: "It's very difficult sometimes to talk about your people, about their sufferings, and see the emptiness in the eyes of those you are talking to." She began using the plain English that she had learned in school, in order to convey plain things. "I started to tell stories that would touch their hearts. I tried to make them feel just a little of the pain that Belarusians feel." Now she tells anyone who will listen exactly what she told me: *I am an ordinary person, a housewife, a mother of two children, and I am in politics because other ordinary people are being beaten naked in prison cells*. What she wants is sanctions, democratic unity, pressure on the regime—anything that will raise the cost for Lukashenko to stay in power, for Russia to keep him in power. Anything that might induce the business and security elites in Belarus to abandon him. Anything that might persuade China and Iran to keep out.

To her surprise, Tsikhanouskaya became, for the second time, a runaway success. She charmed Merkel and Macron, and the diplomats of multiple countries. In July, she met President Joe Biden, who subsequently broadened American sanctions on Belarus to include major companies in several industries (tobacco, potash, construction) and their executives. The EU had already banned a range of people, companies, and technologies from Belarus; after the Ryanair kidnapping, the EU and the U.K. banned the Belarusian national airline as well. What was once a booming trade between Belarus and Europe has been reduced to a trickle. Tsikhanouskaya inspires people to make sacrifices of their own. The Lithuanian foreign minister, Gabrielius Landsbergis, told me that his country was proud to host her, even if it meant trouble on the border. "If we're not free to invite other free people into our country because it's somehow not safe, then the question is, can we consider ourselves free?"

Tsikhanouskaya has acquired many other supporters and admirers. She has not only the talented young activists in Vilnius, but colleagues in Poland and Ukraine as well. She promotes values that unite millions of her compatriots, including pensioners like Nina Bahinskaya, a great-grandmother who has been filmed shouting at the police, and ordinary working people like Siarhei Hardziyevich, a 50-year-old journalist from a provincial town, Drahichyn, who was convicted of "insulting the president." On her side she also has the friends and relatives of the hundreds of political prisoners who, like her own husband, are paying a high price just because they want to live in a country with free elections.

Most of all, though, Tsikhanouskaya has on her side the combined narrative power of what we used to call the free world. She has the language of human rights, democracy, and justice. She has the NGOs and human-rights organizations that work inside the United Nations and other international institutions to put pressure on autocratic regimes. She has the support of people around the world who still fervently believe that politics can be made more civilized, more rational, more humane, who can see in her an authentic representative of that cause.

But will that be enough? A lot depends on the answer.

All of us have in our minds a cartoon image of what an autocratic state looks like. There is a bad man at the top. He controls the police. The police threaten the people with violence. There are evil collaborators, and maybe some brave dissidents.

But in the 21st century, that cartoon bears little resemblance to reality. Nowadays, autocracies are run not by one bad guy, but by sophisticated networks composed of kleptocratic financial structures, security services (military, police, paramilitary groups, surveillance), and professional propagandists. The members of these networks are connected not only within a given country, but among many countries. The corrupt, state-controlled companies in one dictatorship do business with corrupt, state-controlled companies in another. The police in one country can arm, equip, and train the police in another. The propagandists share resources—the troll farms that promote one dictator's propaganda can also be used to promote the propaganda of another—and themes, pounding home the same messages about the weakness of democracy and the evil of America.

This is not to say that there is some supersecret room where bad guys meet, as in a James Bond movie. Nor does the new autocratic alliance have a unifying ideology. Among modern autocrats are people who call themselves communists, nationalists, and theocrats. No one country leads this group. Washington likes to talk about Chinese influence, but what really bonds the members of this club is a common desire to preserve and enhance their personal power and wealth. Unlike military or political alliances from other times and places, the members of this group don't operate like a bloc, but rather like an agglomeration of companies—call it Autocracy Inc. Their links are cemented not by ideals but by deals—deals designed to take the edge off Western economic boycotts, or to make them personally rich—which is why they can operate across geographical and historical lines.

Thus in theory, Belarus is an international pariah—Belarusian planes cannot land in Europe, many Belarusian goods cannot be sold in the U.S., Belarus's shocking brutality has been criticized by many international institutions. But in practice, the country remains a respected member of Autocracy Inc. Despite Lukashenko's flagrant flouting of international norms, despite his reaching across borders to break laws, Belarus remains the site of one of China's largest overseas development projects. Iran has expanded

its relationship with Belarus over the past year. Cuban officials have expressed their solidarity with Lukashenko at the UN, calling for an end to "foreign interference" in the country's affairs.

In theory, Venezuela, too, is an international pariah. Since 2008, the U.S. has repeatedly added more Venezuelans to personal-sanctions lists; since 2019, U.S. citizens and companies have been forbidden to do any business there. Canada, the EU, and many of Venezuela's South American neighbors maintain sanctions on the country. And yet Nicolás Maduro's regime receives loans as well as oil investment from Russia and China. Turkey facilitates the illicit Venezuelan gold trade. Cuba has long provided security advisers, as well as security technology, to the country's rulers. The international narcotics trade keeps individual members of the regime well supplied with designer shoes and handbags. Leopoldo López, a onetime star of the opposition now living in exile in Spain, has observed that although Maduro's opponents have received some foreign assistance, it's "nothing comparable with what Maduro has received."

Like the Belarusian opposition, the Venezuelan opposition has charismatic leaders and dedicated grassroots activists who have persuaded millions of people to go out into the streets and protest. If their only enemy was the corrupt, bankrupt Venezuelan regime, they might win. But Lopez and his fellow dissidents are in fact fighting multiple autocrats, in multiple countries. Like so many other ordinary people propelled into politics by the experience of injustice—like Sviatlana and Siarhei Tsikhanouski in Belarus, like the leaders of the extraordinary Hong Kong protest movement, like the Cubans and the Iranians and the Burmese pushing for democracy in their countries—they are fighting against people who control state companies and can make investment decisions worth billions of dollars for purely political reasons. They are fighting against people who can buy sophisticated surveillance technology from China or bots from St. Petersburg. Above all, they are fighting against people who have inured themselves to the feelings and opinions of their countrymen, as well as the feelings and opinions of everybody else. Because Autocracy Inc. grants its members not only money and security, but also something less tangible and yet just as important: impunity.

The leaders of the Soviet Union, the most powerful autocracy in the second half of the 20th century, cared deeply about how they were perceived around the world. They vigorously promoted the superiority of their political system and they objected when it was criticized. When the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev famously brandished his shoe at a meeting of the UN General Assembly in 1960, it was because a Filipino delegate had expressed sympathy for "the peoples of Eastern Europe and elsewhere which have been deprived of the free exercise of their civil and political rights."

Today, the most brutal members of Autocracy Inc. don't much care if their countries are criticized, or by whom. The leaders of Myanmar don't really have any ideology beyond nationalism, self-enrichment, and the desire to remain in power. The leaders of Iran confidently discount the views of Western infidels. The leaders of Cuba and Venezuela dismiss the statements of foreigners on the grounds that they are "imperialists." The leaders of China have spent a decade disputing the human-rights language long used by international institutions, successfully convincing many people around the world that these "Western" concepts don't apply to them. Russia has gone beyond merely ignoring foreign criticism to outright mocking it. After the Russian dissident Alexei Navalny was arrested earlier this year, Amnesty International designated him a "prisoner of conscience," a venerable term that the human-rights organization has been using since the 1960s. Russian social-media trolls immediately mounted a campaign designed to draw Amnesty's attention to 15-year-old statements by Navalny that seemed to break the group's rules on offensive language. Amnesty took the bait and removed the title. Then, when Amnesty officials realized they'd been manipulated by trolls, they restored it. Russian state media cackled derisively. It was not a good moment for the human-rights movement.

How have modern autocrats achieved such impunity? In part by persuading so many other people in so many other countries to play along.

Impervious to international criticism, modern autocrats are using aggressive tactics to push back against mass protest and widespread discontent. Putin was unembarrassed to stage "elections" earlier this year in which some 9 million people were barred from being candidates, the progovernment party received five times more television coverage than all the other parties put together, television clips of officials stealing votes circulated online, and vote counts were mysteriously altered. The Burmese junta is unashamed to have murdered hundreds of protesters, including young teenagers, on the streets of Yangon. The Chinese government boasts about its destruction of the popular democracy movement in Hong Kong.

At the extremes, this kind of contempt can devolve into what the international democracy activist Srdja Popovic calls the "Maduro model" of governance, which may be what Lukashenko is preparing for in Belarus. Autocrats who adopt it are "willing to pay the price of becoming a totally failed country, to see their country enter the category of failed states," accepting economic collapse, isolation, and mass poverty if that's what it takes to stay in power. Assad has applied the Maduro model in Syria. And it seems to be what the Taliban leadership had in mind this summer when they occupied Kabul and immediately began arresting and murdering Afghan officials and civilians. Financial collapse was looming, but they didn't care. As one Western official working in the region told the *Financial Times*, "They assume that any money that the west doesn't give them will be replaced by China, Pakistan, Russia and Saudi Arabia." And if the money doesn't come, so what? Their goal is not a flourishing, prosperous Afghanistan, but an Afghanistan where they are in charge.

The widespread adoption of the Maduro model helps explain why Western statements at the time of Kabul's fall sounded so pathetic. The EU's foreign-policy chief expressed "deep concern about reports of serious human rights violations" and called for "meaningful negotiations based on democracy, the rule of law and constitutional rule"—as if the Taliban was interested in any of that. Whether it was "deep concern," "sincere concern," or "profound concern," whether it was expressed on behalf of Europe or the Holy See, none of it mattered: Statements like that mean nothing to the Taliban, the Cuban security services, or the Russian FSB. Their goals are money and personal power. They are not concerned—deeply, sincerely, profoundly, or otherwise—about the happiness or well-being of their fellow citizens, let alone the views of anyone else.

How have modern autocrats achieved such impunity? In part by persuading so many other people in so many other countries to play along. Some of those people, and some of those countries, might surprise you.

If the stories told by the young dissidents in Vilnius make you angry, the stories told by the Uyghurs of Istanbul will haunt your dreams.

A few months ago, in a hot, airless apartment over a dress shop, I met Kalbinur Tursun. She was dressed in a dark-green gown with ruffled sleeves. Her face, framed by a tightly drawn headscarf, resembled that of a saint in a medieval triptych. Her small daughter, in Mickey Mouse leggings, played with an electronic tablet while we spoke.

Tursun is a Uyghur, a member of China's predominantly Muslim Chinese minority, born in the territory that the Chinese call Xinjiang and that many Uyghurs know as East Turkestan. Tursun had six children—too many in a country where there are strict rules limiting births. Also, she wanted to raise them as Muslims; that, too, was a problem in China. When she became pregnant again, she feared being harassed by police, as women with more than two children often are. She and her husband decided to move to Turkey. They got passports for themselves and for their youngest child, but were told the other passports would take longer. Because of her pregnancy, the three of them came to Istanbul anyway; after she and her daughter were settled, her husband returned for the rest of the family. Then he disappeared.

That was five years ago. Tursun has not spoken with her husband since. In July 2017, she spoke with her sister, who promised to take care of her remaining children. Then they lost contact. A year after that, Tursun came across a video being passed around on WhatsApp. Shot at what appeared to be a Chinese orphanage, it showed Uyghur children, heads shaved and all dressed alike, learning to speak Chinese. One of the children was her daughter Ayshe.

Tursun showed me the video of her daughter. She also showed me a picture of her husband standing in an Istanbul mosque. She cannot speak to either one of them, or to any of the rest of her children in China. She has no way to know what they are thinking. They might not know she has searched for them. They might believe she has abandoned them on purpose. They might have forgotten she exists. Meanwhile, time is passing. The child in the Mickey Mouse leggings, who sang to herself while we talked, is the one born in Turkey. She has never met her father, or her brothers and sisters in China. But she knows something is very wrong; when Tursun fell silent for a moment, overcome with emotion, the girl put down her tablet and put her arms around her mother's neck.

Sinister though it sounds, Tursun's story is not unique. The translator for my conversation with Tursun was Nursiman Abdureshid. She is also a Uyghur, also from Xinjiang, also married, also with a daughter, also now living in Istanbul. Abdureshid came to Turkey as a student, convinced that she had the backing of the Chinese state. A graduate of Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, she had studied business administration, learned excellent Turkish and English, made ethnic-Chinese friends. She had never thought of herself as a rebel or a dissident. Why would she have? She was a Chinese success story.

Abdureshid's break with her old life came in June 2017, when, after an ordinary conversation with her family back in China, they stopped answering her calls. She texted and got no response. Weeks passed. After many months, she contacted the consulate in Istanbul—she asked a Turkish friend to call for her—and officials there finally told her the truth: Her father, mother, and younger brother were in prison camps, each for "preparing to commit terrorist activities."

A similar charge was thrown at Jevlan Shirmemet, another Uyghur student in Istanbul. Like Abdureshid, he realized something was wrong when his mother and other relatives stopped responding to texts. Then they blocked him on WeChat, the Chinese messaging app. Nearly two years later, he learned that they were in prison camps. Chinese diplomats accused him of having "anti-Chinese" contacts in Egypt, as well. Shirmemet told them he had never been to Egypt. *Prove it*, they responded, then added: *Cooperate with us, tell us who all of your friends are, list every place you have ever been, become an informer*. He refused and—though not temperamentally inclined to be a dissident either—decided to speak out on social media instead. "I had remained silent, but my silence didn't protect my family," he told me.

Turkey is home to some 50,000 exiled Uyghurs, and there are dozens, hundreds, perhaps thousands of such stories there. İlyas Doğan, a Turkish lawyer who has represented some of the Uyghurs, told me that, until 2017, very few of them were politically active. But after friends and relatives began disappearing into "reeducation camps"—concentration camps, in fact—set up by the Chinese state, the situation changed.

Tursun and a group of other women who had lost children staged a protest walk from Istanbul to Ankara, a distance of more than 270 miles, and then stood in front of a UN building, demanding to be heard. Abdureshid spoke at the conference of one of the Turkish opposition parties. "I haven't heard my mother's voice for four years," she told the audience. A video of the speech went viral; when we had lunch at a restaurant in a Uyghur neighborhood, a waiter recognized her and thanked her for it.

In another era—in a world with a different geopolitical configuration, at a time when the language of human rights had not been so comprehensively undermined—these dissidents would have plenty of official sympathy in Turkey, a nation that is singularly linked to the Uyghur community by ties of religion, ethnicity, and language. In 2009, even before the concentration camps were opened, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was then the Turkish prime minister, called the Chinese repression of the Uyghurs a "genocide." In 2012, he brought businessmen with him to Xinjiang and promised to invest in Uyghur businesses there. He did this because it was popular. To the extent that ordinary Turks know what is happening to their Uyghur cousins, they sympathize.

Yet since then, Erdoğan—who became president in 2014—has himself turned against the rule of law, independent media, and independent courts at home. As he has become openly hostile to former European and NATO allies, and as he has arrested and jailed his own dissidents, Erdoğan's interest in Chinese friendship, investment, and technology has increased, along with his willingness to echo Chinese propaganda. On the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, his party's flagship newspaper published a long, solemn article—which was in fact sponsored content—beneath the headline "The Chinese Communist Party's 100 Years of Glorious History and the Secrets to Its Success." Alongside these changes, government policy toward the Uyghurs has shifted too.

In recent years, the Turkish government has surveilled and detained Uyghurs on bogus terrorism charges, and deported some, including four who were sent to Tajikistan and then immediately turned over to China in 2019. In Istanbul, I met one Uyghur—he preferred to remain anonymous—who had spent time in a Turkish detention center, along with some of his family, following what he said were bogus charges of "terrorism." The presence of pro-Chinese forces in Turkish media, politics, and business has been growing, and lately they are keen to belittle the Uyghurs. Curiously, Abdureshid's speech was cut from the public-television broadcast of the opposition-party conference she attended. After it started circulating on social media, she was publicly attacked by a Turkish politician, Doğu Perinçek, a former Maoist who is pro-Chinese, anti-Western, and quite influential. After Perinçek described her as a "terrorist" on television, a wave of online attacks followed.

The atmosphere worsened in late 2020, when a delayed Chinese shipment of COVID-19 vaccines coincided with Beijing's pressure on Turkey to sign an extradition treaty that would have made deportation of Uyghurs even easier. After opposition parties objected, both the Turkish and Chinese governments denied that delivery of the vaccine shipment was in any way conditioned on deporting Uyghurs, but the timing remains suspicious. Several Uyghurs in Istanbul told me that corrupt elements in the Turkish police work directly with the Chinese already. They have no proof, and Doğan, the Turkish lawyer, told me that he doubts this is the case; still, he thinks that, despite all of the old cultural ties, the Turkish government might not mind if the Uyghurs stopped protesting or quietly moved elsewhere.

For the moment, the Uyghurs in Turkey are still protected by what remains of democracy there: the opposition parties, some of the media, public opinion. A government that faces democratic elections, even skewed ones, must still take these things into account. In countries where opposition, media, and public opinion matter less, the balance is different. You can see this even in Muslim countries, which might be expected to object to the oppression of other Muslims. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan has stated baldly that "we accept the Chinese version" of the Chinese-Uyghur dispute. The Saudis, the Emiratis, and the Egyptians have all allegedly arrested, detained, and deported Uyghurs without much discussion. Not coincidentally, these are all countries that seek good economic relations with China, and that have purchased Chinese surveillance technology. For autocrats and would-be autocrats around the world, the Chinese offer a package that looks something like this: Agree to follow China's lead on Hong Kong, Tibet, the Uyghurs, and human rights more broadly. Buy Chinese surveillance equipment. Accept massive Chinese investment (preferably into companies you personally control, or that at least pay you kickbacks). Then sit back and relax, knowing that however bad your image becomes in the eyes of the international human-rights community, you and your friends will remain in power.

And how different are we? We Americans? We Europeans? Are we so sure that our institutions, our political parties, our media could never be manipulated in the same way? In the spring of 2016, I helped publish a report on the Russian use of disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe—the now familiar Russian efforts to manipulate political conversations in other countries using social media, fake websites, funding for extremist parties, hacked private communications, and more. My colleague Edward Lucas, a senior fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis, and I took it to Capitol Hill, to the State Department, and to anyone in Washington who would listen. The response was polite interest, nothing more. *We are very sorry that Slovakia and Slovenia are having these problems, but it can't happen here.*

A few months later, it did happen here. Russian trolls operating from St. Petersburg sought to shift the outcome of an American election in much the same way they had done in Central

Europe, using fake Facebook pages (sometimes impersonating anti-immigration groups, sometimes impersonating Black activists), fake Twitter accounts, and attempts to infiltrate groups like the National Rifle Association, as well as weaponizing hacked material from the Democratic National Committee. Some Americans actively welcomed this intervention, and even sought to take advantage of what they imagined might be broader Russian technical capabilities. "If it's what you say I love it," Donald Trump Jr. wrote to an intermediary for a Russian lawyer who he believed had access to damaging information about Hillary Clinton. In 2008, Trump Jr. had told a business conference that "Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross section of a lot of our assets," and in 2016, Russia's long-term investment in the Trump business empire paid off. In the Trump family, the Kremlin had something better than spies: cynical, nihilistic, indebted, long-term allies.

Despite the raucous national debate on Russian election interference, we don't seem to have learned much from it, if our thinking about Chinese influence operations is any indication. The United Front is the Chinese Communist Party's influence project, subtler and more strategic than the Russian version, designed not to upend democratic politics but to shape the nature of conversations about China around the world. Among other endeavors, the United Front creates educational and exchange programs, tries to mold the atmosphere within Chinese exile communities, and courts anyone willing to be a de facto spokesperson for China. But in 2019, when Peter Mattis, a China expert and democracy promoter, tried to discuss the United Front program with a CIA analyst, he got the same kind of polite dismissal that Lucas and I had heard a few years earlier. "This is not Australia," the CIA analyst told him, according to testimony Mattis gave to Congress, referring to a series of scandals involving Chinese and Chinese Australian businesspeople allegedly attempting to buy political influence in Canberra. *We are very sorry that Australia is having these problems, but it can't happen here.*

Can't it? Controversy has already engulfed many of the Chinese-funded Confucius Institutes set up at American universities, some of whose faculty, under the guise of offering benign Chinese-language and calligraphy courses, got involved in efforts to shape academic debate in China's favor—a classic United Front enterprise. The long arm of the Chinese state has reached Chinese dissidents in the U.S. as well. The Washington, D.C., and Maryland offices of the Wei Jingsheng Foundation, a group named after one of China's most famous democracy activists, have been broken into more than a dozen times in the past two decades. Ciping Huang, the foundation's executive director, told me that old computers have disappeared, phone lines have been cut, and mail has been thrown in the toilet. The main objective seems to be to let the activists know that someone was there. Chinese democracy activists living in the U.S. have, like the Uyghurs in Istanbul, been visited by Chinese agents who try to persuade them, or blackmail them, to return home. Still others have had strange car accidents—mishaps regularly happen while people are on their way to attend an annual ceremony held in New York on the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Chinese influence, like authoritarian influence more broadly, can take even subtler forms, using carrots rather than sticks. If you go along with the official line, if you don't criticize China's human-rights record, opportunities will emerge for you. In 2018, McKinsey held a tone-deaf corporate retreat in Kashgar, just a few miles away from a Uyghur internment camp—the same kind of camp where the husbands, parents, and siblings of Tursun, Shirmemet, and Abdureshid have been imprisoned. McKinsey had good reasons not to talk about human rights at the retreat: According to *The New York Times*, the consulting giant at the time of that event advised 22 of the 100 largest Chinese-state companies, including one that had helped construct the artificial islands in the South China Sea that have so alarmed the U.S. military.

The list of major American corporations caught in tangled webs of personal, financial, and business links to autocratic regimes is very long.

But perhaps it's unfair to pick on McKinsey. The list of major American corporations caught in tangled webs of personal, financial, and business links to China, Russia, and other autocracies is very long. During the heavily manipulated and deliberately confusing Russian elections in September 2021, both Apple and Google removed apps that had been designed to help Russian voters decide which opposition candidates to select, after Russian authorities threatened to prosecute the companies' local employees. The apps had been created by Alexei Navalny's anti-corruption movement, the most viable opposition movement in the country, which was itself not allowed to participate in the election campaign. Navalny, who remains in prison on ludicrous charges, made a statement via Twitter excoriating American democracy's most famous corporate moguls:

> It's one thing when the Internet monopolists are ruled by cute freedom-loving nerds with solid life principles. It is completely different when the people in charge of them are both cowardly and greedy … Standing in front of the huge screens, they tell us about "making the world a better place," but on the inside they are liars and hypocrites.

The list of other industries that might be similarly described as "cowardly and greedy" is also very long, extending even to Hollywood, pop music, and sports. When distributors became nervous about a possible Chinese backlash to a 2012 MGM remake of a Cold War–era movie that recast the Soviet invaders as Chinese, the studio had the film digitally altered to make the bad guys North Korean instead. In 2019, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver, along with a number of basketball stars, expressed remorse to China after the general manager of the Houston Rockets tweeted support for the democrats of Hong Kong. Even more abject was *Qazaq: History of the Golden Man*, a fawning eight-hour documentary about the life of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the brutal longtime ruler of Kazakhstan, produced in 2021 by the Hollywood director Oliver Stone. Or consider what the rapper Nicki Minaj did in 2015, when she was criticized for giving a concert in Angola, hosted by a company co-owned by the daughter of that country's dictator, José Eduardo dos Santos. Minaj posted two photos of herself on Instagram, one in which she's draped in the Angolan flag and another alongside the dictator's daughter, captioned with these immortal words: "Oh no big deal … she's just the 8th richest woman in the world. (At least that's what I was told by someone b4 we took this photo) Lol. Yikes!!!!! GIRL POWER!!!!! This motivates me soooooooooo much!!!!"

If the autocrats and the kleptocrats feel no shame, why should American celebrities who profit from their largesse? Why should their fans? Why should their sponsors?

If the 20th century was the story of a slow, uneven struggle, ending with the victory of liberal democracy over other ideologies—communism, fascism, virulent nationalism—the 21st century is, so far, a story of the reverse. Freedom House, which has published an annual "Freedom in the World" report for nearly 50 years, called its 2021 edition "Democracy Under Siege." The Stanford scholar Larry Diamond calls this an era of "democratic regression." Not everyone is equally gloomy—Srdja Popovic, the democracy activist, argues that confrontations between autocrats and their populations are growing harsher precisely because democratic movements are becoming more articulate and better organized. But just about everyone who thinks hard about this subject agrees that the old diplomatic toolbox once used to support democrats around the world is rusty and out of date.

The tactics that used to work no longer do. Certainly sanctions, especially when hastily applied in the aftermath of some outrage, do not have the impact they once did. They can sometimes seem, as Stephen Biegun, the former deputy secretary of state, puts it, "an exercise in self-gratification," on par with "sternly worded condemnations of the latest farcical election." That doesn't mean they have no impact at all. But although personal sanctions on corrupt Russian officials might make it impossible for some Russians to visit their homes in Cap Ferrat, say, or their children at the London School of Economics, they haven't persuaded Putin to stop invading other countries, interfering in European and American politics, or poisoning his own dissidents. Neither have decades of U.S. sanctions changed the behavior of the Iranian regime or the Venezuelan regime, despite their indisputable economic impact. Too often, sanctions are allowed to deteriorate over time; just as often, autocracies now help one another get around them.

America does still spend money on projects that might loosely be called "democracy assistance," but the amounts are very low compared with what the authoritarian world is prepared to put up. The National Endowment for Democracy, a unique institution that has an independent board (of which I am a member), received $300 million of congressional funding in 2020 to support civic organizations, non-state media, and educational projects in about 100 autocracies and weak democracies around the world. American foreign-language broadcasters, having survived the Trump administration's still inexplicable attempt to destroy them, also continue to serve as independent sources of information in some closed societies. But while Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty spends just over $22 million on Russian-language broadcasting (to take one example) every year, and Voice of America just over $8 million more, the Russian government spends billions on the Russian-language state media that are seen and heard all over Eastern Europe, from Germany to Moldova to Kazakhstan. The $33 million that Radio Free Asia spends to broadcast in Burmese, Cantonese, Khmer, Korean, Lao, Mandarin, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Vietnamese pales beside the billions that China spends on media and communications both inside its borders and around the world.

Our efforts are even smaller than they look, because traditional media are only a part of how modern autocracies promote themselves. We don't yet have a real answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative, which offers infrastructure deals to countries around the globe, often enabling local leaders to skim kickbacks and garnering positive China-subsidized media coverage in return. We don't have the equivalent of a United Front, or any other strategy for shaping debate within and about China. We don't run online influence campaigns inside Russia. We don't have an answer to the disinformation, injected by troll farms abroad, that circulates on Facebook inside the U.S., let alone a plan for countering the disinformation that circulates inside autocracies.

President Biden is well aware of this imbalance and says he wants to reinvigorate the democratic alliance and America's leading role within it. To that end, the president is convening an online summit on December 9 and 10 to "galvanize commitments and initiatives" in aid of three themes: "defending against authoritarianism, fighting corruption, and promoting respect for human rights."

That sounds nice, but unless it heralds deep changes in our own behavior it means very little. "Fighting corruption" is not

just a foreign-policy issue, after all. If we in the democratic world are serious about it, then we can no longer allow Kazakhs and Venezuelans to purchase property anonymously in London or Miami, or the rulers of Angola and Myanmar to hide money in Delaware or Nevada. We need, in other words, to make changes to our own system, and that may require overcoming fierce domestic resistance from the business groups that benefit from it. We need to shut down tax havens, enforce money-laundering laws, stop selling security and surveillance technology to autocracies, and divest from the most vicious regimes altogether. "We" here will need to include Europe, especially the U.K., as well as partners elsewhere—and that will require a lot of vigorous diplomacy.

The same is true of the fight for human rights. Statements made at a diplomatic summit won't achieve much if politicians, citizens, and businesses don't act as if they matter. To effect real change, the Biden administration will have to ask hard questions and make big decisions. How can we force Apple and Google to respect the rights of Russian democrats? How can we ensure that Western manufacturers have excluded from their supply chains anything produced in a Uyghur concentration camp? We need a major investment in independent media around the world, a strategy for reaching people inside autocracies, new international institutions to replace the defunct human-rights bodies at the UN. We need a way to coordinate democratic nations' response when autocracies commit crimes outside their borders—whether that's the Russian state murdering people in Berlin or Salisbury, England; the Belarusian dictator hijacking a commercial flight; or Chinese operatives harassing exiles in Washington, D.C. As of now, we have no transnational strategy designed to confront this transnational problem.

This absence of strategy reflects more than negligence. The centrality of democracy to American foreign policy has been declining for many years—at about the same pace, perhaps not coincidentally, as the decline of respect for democracy in America itself. The Trump presidency was a four-year display of contempt not just for the American political process, but for America's historic democratic allies, whom he singled out for abuse. The president described the British and German leaders as "losers" and the Canadian prime minister as "dishonest" and "weak," while he cozied up to autocrats—the Turkish president, the Russian president, the Saudi ruling family, and the North Korean dictator, among them—with whom he felt more comfortable, and no wonder: He has shared their ethos of no-questions-asked investments for many years. In 2008, the Russian oligarch Dmitry Rybolovlev paid Trump $95 million—more than twice what Trump had paid just four years earlier—for a house in Palm Beach no one else seemed to want; in 2012, Trump put his name on a building in Baku, Azerbaijan, owned by a company with apparent links to Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. Trump feels perfectly at home in Autocracy Inc., and he accelerated the erosion of the rules and norms that have allowed it to take root in America.

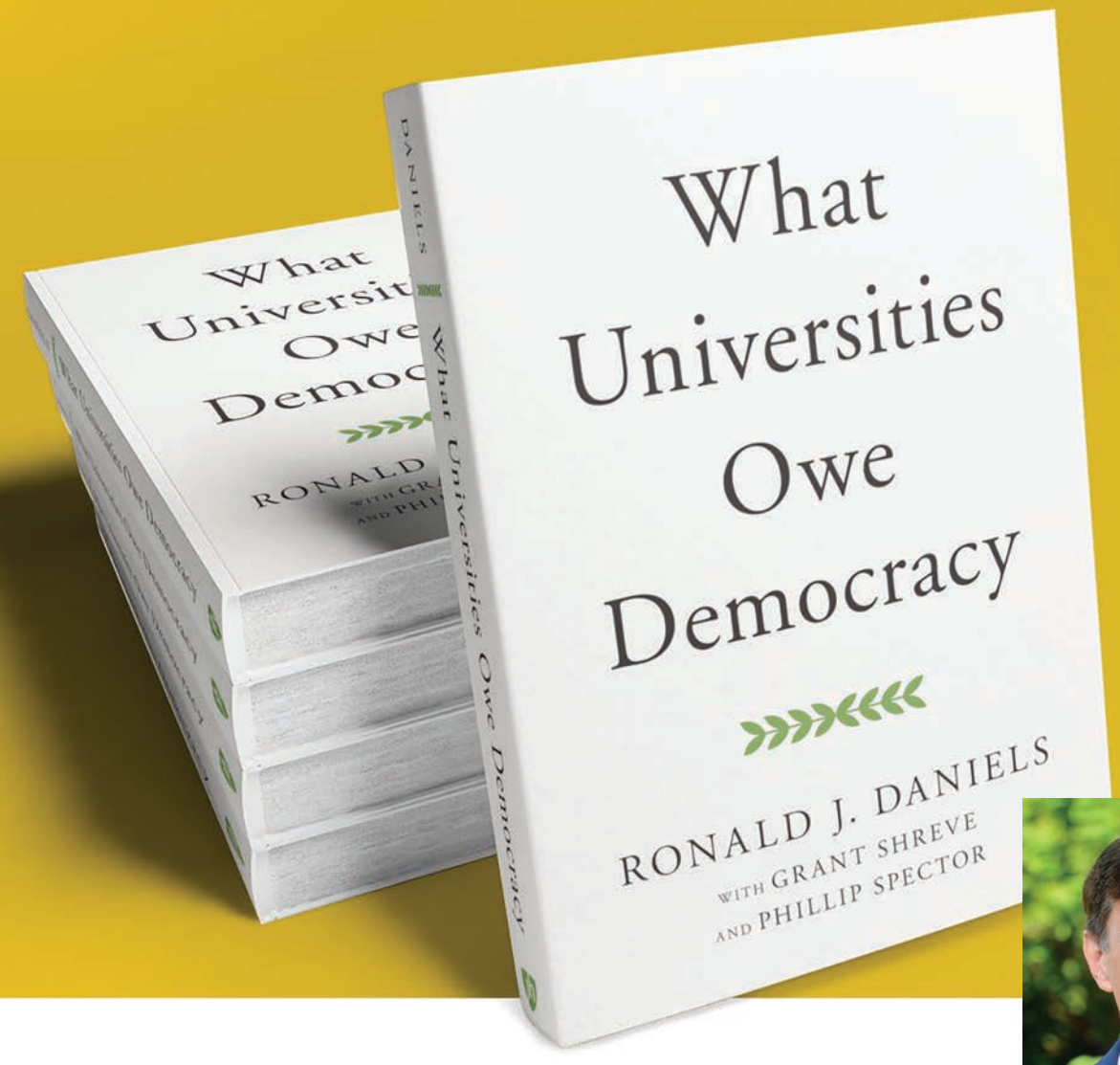
At the same time, a part of the American left has abandoned the idea that "democracy" belongs at the heart of U.S. foreign policy—not out of greed and cynicism but out of a loss of faith in democracy at home. Convinced that the history of America is the history of genocide, slavery, exploitation, and not much else, they don't see the value of making common cause with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Nursiman Abdureshid, or any of the other ordinary people around the world forced into politics by their experience of profound injustice. Focused on America's own bitter problems, they no longer believe America has anything to offer the rest of the world: Although the Hong Kong prodemocracy protesters waving American flags believe many of the same things we believe, their requests for American support in 2019 did not elicit a significant wave of youthful activism in the United States, not even something comparable to the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s.

The centrality of democracy to American foreign policy has been declining for many years.

Incorrectly identifying the promotion of democracy around the world with "forever wars," they fail to understand the brutality of the zero-sum competition now unfolding in front of us. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so does geopolitics. If America removes the promotion of democracy from its foreign policy, if America ceases to interest itself in the fate of other democracies and democratic movements, then autocracies will quickly take our place as sources of influence, funding, and ideas. If Americans, together with our allies, fail to fight the habits and practices of autocracy abroad, we will encounter them at home; indeed, they are already here. If Americans don't help to hold murderous regimes to account, those regimes will retain their sense of impunity. They will continue to steal, blackmail, torture, and intimidate, inside their countries—and inside ours. *A*

Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Democracy is in danger.
Universities may be our last, best hope.



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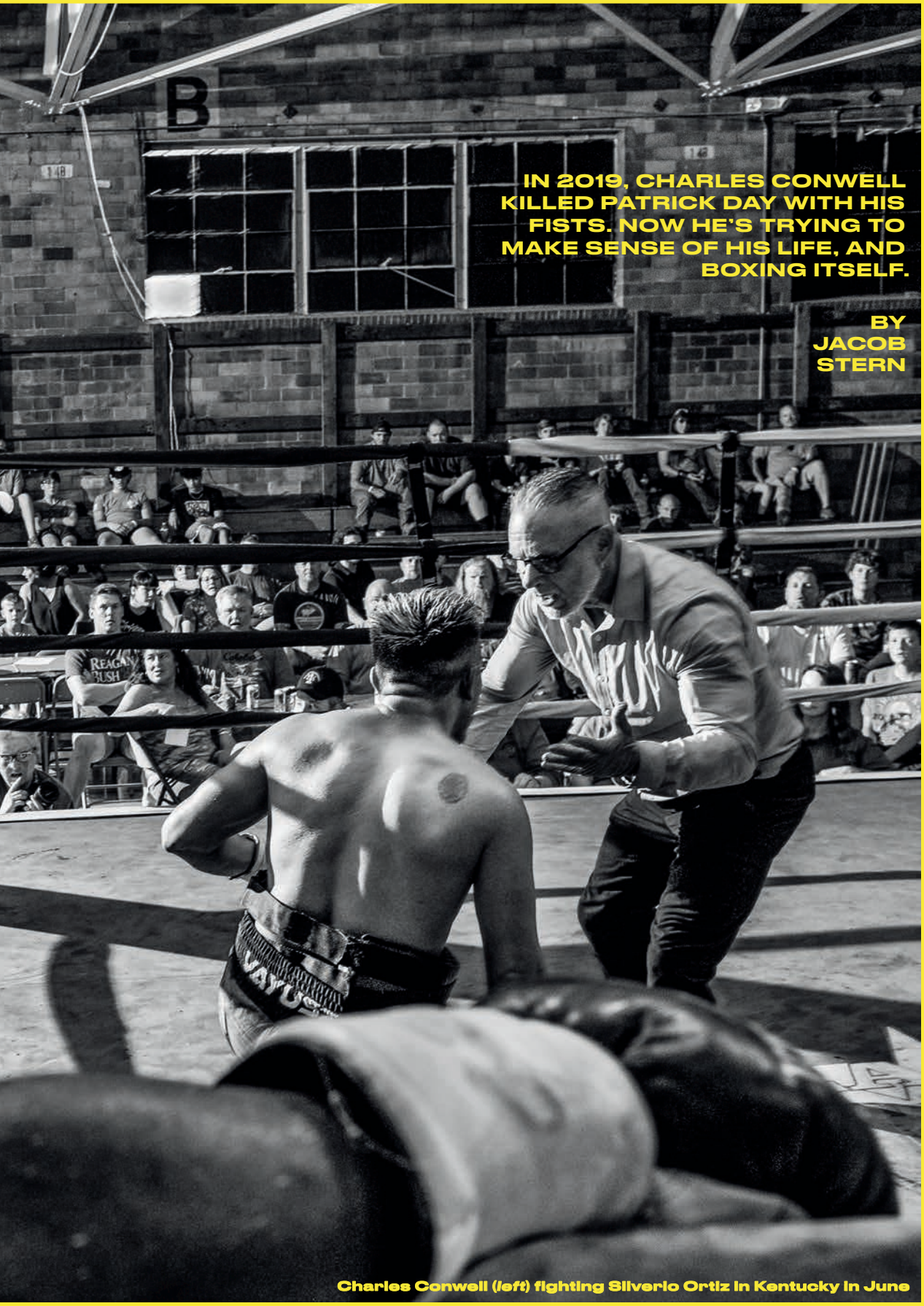
WHEN DEATH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DEVIN YALKIN

COMES TO THE RING

IN 2019, CHARLES CONWELL KILLED PATRICK DAY WITH HIS FISTS. NOW HE'S TRYING TO MAKE SENSE OF HIS LIFE, AND BOXING ITSELF.

BY JACOB STERN



Charles Conwell (*left*) fighting Silverio Ortiz in Kentucky in June

IT'S THE TENTH AND FINAL ROUND,

and Patrick Day is fading. He's still circling the ring in search of an opening, but his punches have lost the switchblade quickness they had in the early rounds. If he doesn't do something dramatic, he is going to lose this fight.

He had once looked like a star: No. 1 amateur welterweight, Olympic alternate, undefeated in his first 10 professional fights. But boxing is unforgiving. One bad loss to a weak fighter, and the glow was gone. Now not even a comeback can restore it. Just a few months ago, he was overwhelmed by a Dominican prospect who called himself "El Caballo Bronco." On this October night in 2019, at the Wintrust Arena, in Chicago, there is a sense that the 27-year-old Day is fighting for a good deal more than the mid-tier title belt officially under dispute. If this bout does not go well, Day's career could be over.

And it is not going well: Day went down in the fourth round and again in the eighth, and he's way behind on points. "You got no choice," his coach told him before the final round began. Either he scores a knockout in the next three minutes or he loses.

So he presses. He jabs, then hooks, then jabs again, but his blows all deflect off Charles Conwell. At 21 years old, Conwell is everything Day once was and more: an 11-time national champion, a 2016 Olympian, a perfect 10–0 since he went pro. He is a defensive virtuoso, but he hits hard enough to crumple a body like cardboard, and even as he repels Day's blows, he stalks forward in a spring-loaded crouch, peering over the tops of his gloves with a kind of predatory patience.

Conwell knows that he can wait this round out. The fight is already his. But he also knows, as all boxers do, that people don't pay to see a 10-round decision. They pay to see a knockout. Sometimes, before fights, Conwell will write himself a short note to hang above his bed. Before this one he wrote I WILL KO MY NEXT OPPONENT AND DOMINATE.

Conwell throws a straight right and an uppercut left, and another right and another left, the punches flowing together in quicksilver combinations, and all Day can do is bear-hug him. But Conwell will not have it. He shoves Day off. Day tries to wheel away, as he has done all night, but this time his legs fail him, and Conwell is ready for the maneuver. As Day retreats, Conwell stuns him with an overhand right. Day staggers. His guard falls away. Another overhand right whistles by his cheek, but a big left hook hits him square on the chin and he collapses onto the canvas.

The referee doesn't even bother with the 10-count. It is clear that this fight is over. The crowd is roaring, and Conwell is pounding his chest. He vaults onto the ropes and flexes his biceps, then leaps down and flashes an electric smile.

A man shoves his way into the ring. His voice is sharp with panic. "Get away! Get—get away from him!" Only now does Conwell turn and see that Day has not moved. EMTs climb through the ropes. Day's chest heaves and heaves, but he does not blink, just stares glassy-eyed into the floodlights. The crowd has gone quiet. The house music plays on.

Charles Conwell stands in the neutral corner, rocking from one foot to the other. He blinks a lot. Someone points a camera in his face. He looks out at the crowd and up toward the lights and anywhere but into the lens. He looks across the ring, where physicians are crowding around Day. One checks his watch.

Conwell looks the way fighters sometimes do after suffering a big knockout, as they struggle to stand, desperate and uncomprehending. He has never felt this way before. He has never been knocked out, and while he has knocked out many opponents, he has never, until this fight, knocked one out cold. He looks at the body convulsing on the mat. And for the first time in his career, he is afraid.

WHEN PATRICK DAY'S HEAD hit the canvas, it bounced once, then again, then settled and was still. A blood vessel had burst in the thin space between his brain and its protective covering beneath the skull, and now this space was filling with blood, compressing the brain. Oxygen flow weakened. Neurons began to blink out.

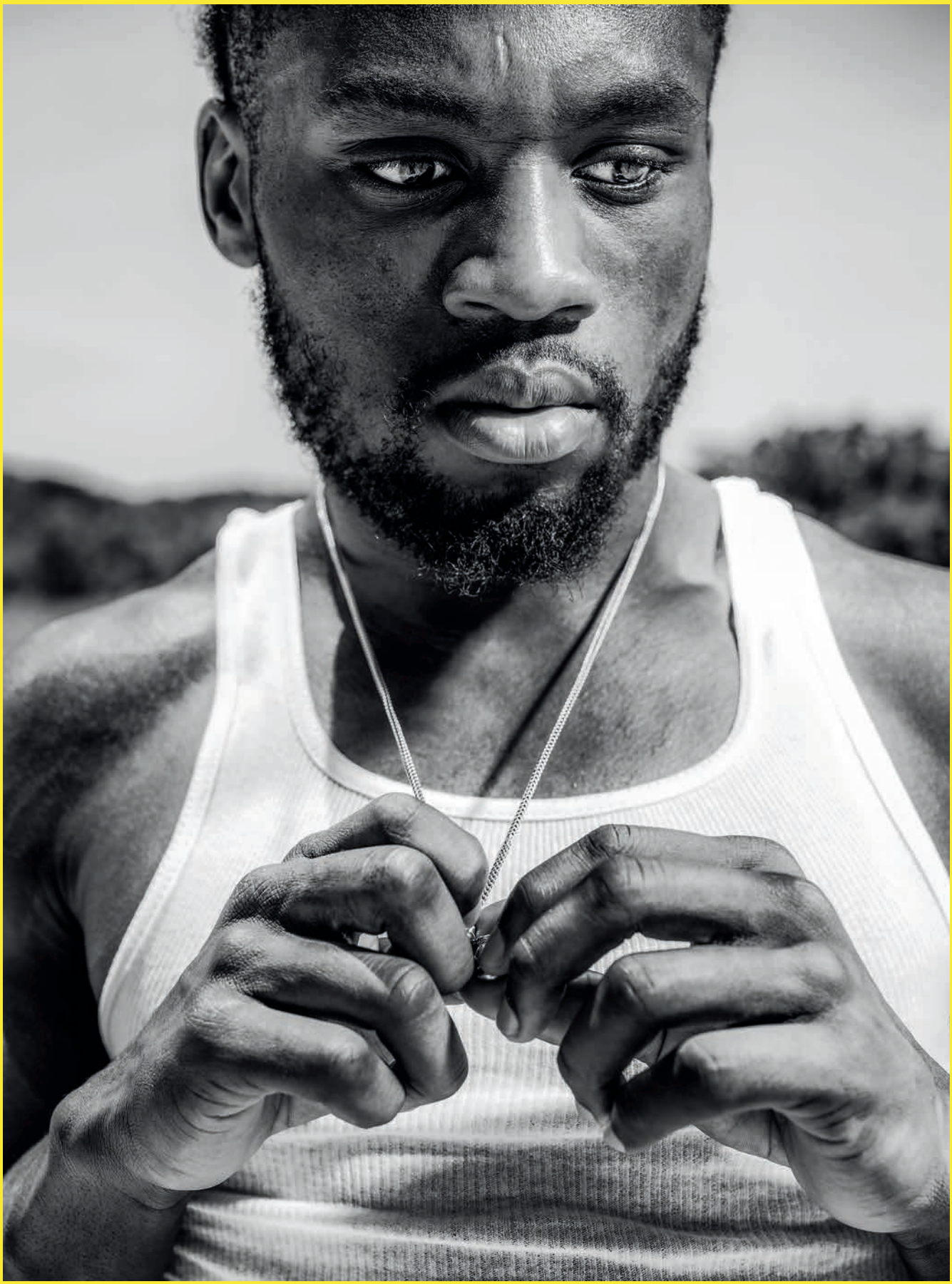
The ringside physicians stabilized Day's spine and held an oxygen mask to his mouth, then the EMTs loaded him onto a stretcher and passed it carefully through the ropes. On the way to the ambulance, he had a seizure. The EMTs tried to intubate him but could not insert the breathing tube. This unsettled the doctors at the hospital. Even five minutes without oxygen can do the brain permanent, catastrophic harm; nearly half an hour had passed before Day was finally intubated.

Conwell had a cut above his right eye stitched and then made his way to the locker room, where he changed into street clothes. When he heard about Day's condition, he broke down in tears.

At the hospital, doctors removed part of Day's skull to alleviate pressure on his brain. His camp prayed in the waiting room. Joe Higgins, his coach and manager, wore the red-and-blue silken robe that Day had entered the ring in. The next morning, his parents and one brother arrived. Then his other brothers, his friends, and other fighters. They sat in the waiting room and took turns visiting him. "It was very, very surreal," Higgins says. "Being in there with him and feeling his hands and his muscles—they're all still there. But he wasn't. We sat there for two days and prayed for a miracle."

Conwell flew back to his training camp in Toledo, Ohio, and drove home to Cleveland the next day. His girlfriend was waiting to greet him. When she started to unpack his black gloves and bloodstained uniform, he asked her to take them away. He said they scared him.

Charles Conwell before a match in June



DEVIN VALKIN FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

He kept his phone on silent and hardly left the house. He couldn't sleep. When he tried to watch a fight on TV, his heart started racing, and his hands started sweating. He felt like he was having a panic attack. He turned it off and told his girlfriend he didn't like boxing anymore. He said he was done.

Two days after the fight, he wrote Patrick Day a letter. He didn't know how to reach Day's family, so he posted it to Instagram in the hope that it would make its way to them. He cried as he wrote.

> Dear Patrick Day,
>
> I never meant for this to happen to you … I replay the fight over and over in my head thinking what if this never happened and why did it happen to you … I see you everywhere I go and all I hear is wonderful things about you. I thought about quitting boxing but I know that's not what you would want. I know that you were a fighter at heart so I decided not to but to fight and win a world title because that's what you wanted … With Compassion, Charles Conwell

Two days later his girlfriend called to tell him she was pregnant, and for the first time since the fight, he felt happy. That evening, the two of them were at the mall when his phone rang again. Patrick Day had died.

PATRICK DAY'S FATHER was a doctor. His mother was a multilingual secretary at the United Nations. Most boxers come from poverty. Day did not.

His parents were Haitian immigrants who settled in Freeport, Long Island, in a pleasant little burgundy-and-yellow ranch house so close to Baldwin Bay that, some evenings, you could feel the salt breeze blowing off the water. They had four sons and named the youngest Patrick. Then they divorced, and Patrick's father moved out, but Patrick never did. He lived all 27 years of his life in that house by the bay, made honor roll there and earned his college degree there.

On a summer day in 2006, at the age of 14, he walked into a neighbor's open garage and started hitting an old Everlast heavy bag. He was a quiet freshman, a *Dragon Ball Z* fanatic who sometimes got picked on at school.

He'd never boxed before, but his father used to buy Mike Tyson fights on pay-per-view. And one of his older brothers had started training at a nearby gym. As Day hit the bag, his neighbor appeared in the doorway. Joe Higgins was a former New York City firefighter who could still remember how the air at Ground Zero had tasted like metal and sparkled at night. He'd lost a brother there, and he figured he might die soon, because so many of his crewmates were getting sick. Since 1992, he'd run the Freeport Police Athletic League Boxing Club. He showed Day how to jab and throw a simple one-two and told him, "Don't do nothing more than this, and you do it 150,000 times." Day stayed all afternoon, then returned the next day, and the day after that.

Higgins wanted to bring Day to the gym, but first he would have to speak with Day's mother, a Christian who did not tolerate violence. She told Higgins that she did not want her son to box. She worried he would be injured. "I understand, Mrs. Day," he told her. "He's just gonna come and work out." By the end of the year, he was entering tournaments, and winning them. Six years later, he went pro. His gym-mates idolized him. "He could be working on something by himself, and it would still seem like the light was on him," one said. And then he'd come talk to you, and you'd feel like the light was on you, and for a moment you were at the center of the world.

His mother refused to watch him fight. When other family members tried to talk to him about the risks of head injuries, he got annoyed—not because he denied the risks but because he'd already taken them into account. Once, after his brother Jean-philippe voiced concern about brain injuries, they didn't speak for a week. "He wasn't ignorant about that," his former girlfriend, MaryEllen Dankenbrink, says. "He knew there were consequences." But he never thought about them in the ring. That was part of what he loved about fighting. In the heat of combat, he told her, everything else fell away.

Day understood that he was not like other boxers. He said as much at the press conference before his fight with Conwell: "People look at me, look at my demeanor, and they're like, 'Oh, you're such a nice guy, well spoken, why do you choose to box?' But, you know, it's about what's in your heart, internally, and I have a fighter's soul, a fighter's spirit, and I love this sport … Hopefully you guys enjoy the show that me and Charles are going to put on. It's going to be an entertaining fight. You don't want to miss it."

Day was confident. Young boxers with stainless records didn't faze him. He knew they could be beaten, because he'd been one of them and he'd been beaten. Coming out of the amateur ranks, he'd been the top fighter in his weight class. He was undefeated in his first 10 professional bouts. When he lost his 11th in a close decision to an exceptionally tall super middleweight with an elastic reach and a near-perfect record, that was all right—an off night, a bad break. But three fights later, when a journeyman with fewer wins

Patrick Day (*right*) and his brother Jean-philippe Day after Patrick won an amateur championship

COURTESY OF JEAN-PHILIPPE DAY

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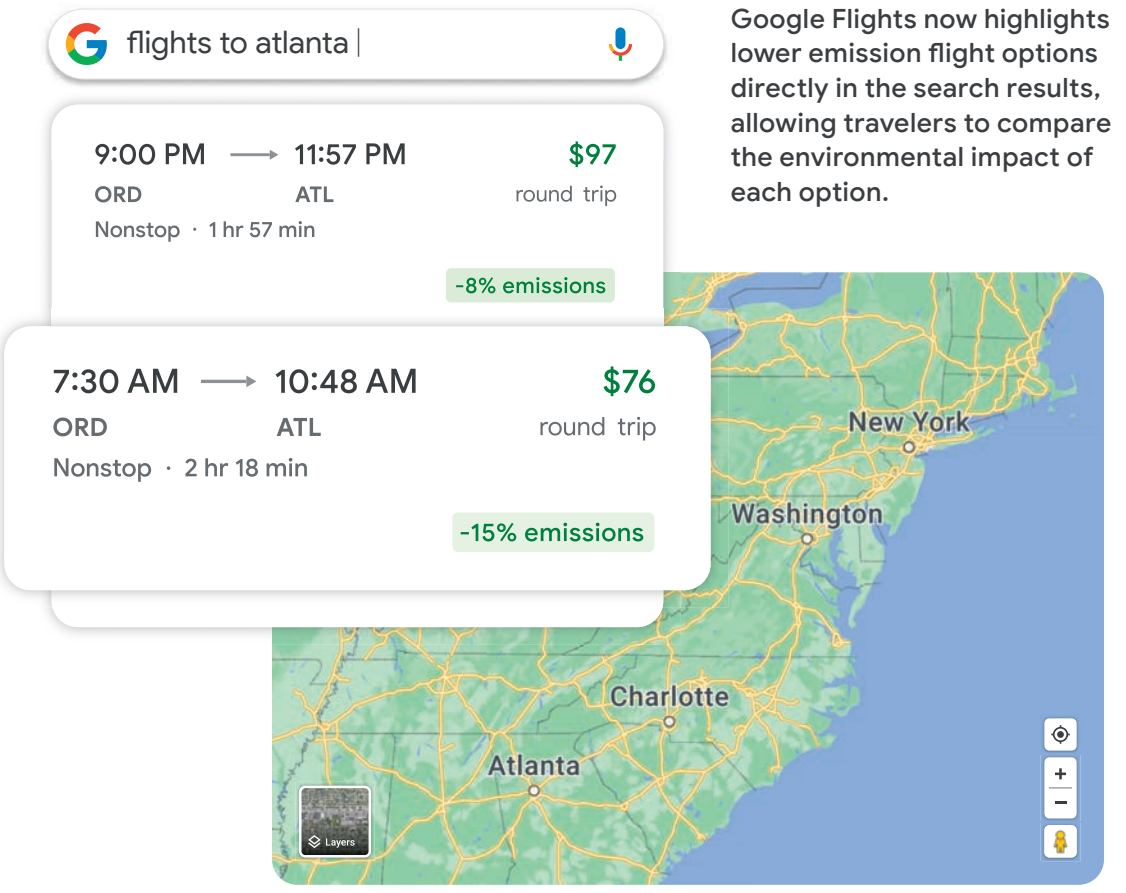

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than losses beat him in just 79 seconds, that was different. His promoter quickly dropped him. In the locker room after the fight, he rushed to Dankenbrink to explain what had happened. They'd just started dating, and this was the first time she'd seen him fight. "He thought I would leave him because he lost," she says.

For the first time in his career, it seemed like boxing just might not work out. He'd always been a good student—his gym-mates called him "Straight-A Day"—so he enrolled at an online university and earned a bachelor's degree in health and wellness. He wanted to have a backup plan. The prospect of having to use it terrified him. "That was his nightmare," Dankenbrink says. Boxing was his identity. He loved it, he once told his brother, "because it tells you exactly who you are."

But the golden-boy days were over. Now he was a B-side fighter, an opponent, the guy promoters brought in to give their top prospects a good workout and a résumé boost. He hoped to resurrect his career, and over the next three years, he won six straight fights, all against highly regarded prospects who by rights should have beaten him. "I love humbling these undefeated guys with the big egos who think they're invincible," he told a reporter. "In life, nobody is invincible."

His streak ended in June 2019 against "El Caballo Bronco," the Dominican fighter, who looked more like a heavyweight than a super welterweight. Next came Conwell. From the opening bell, he was landing big punches. This unnerved Day, an elusive fighter unaccustomed to getting knocked around. In the fourth round, Conwell floored him with a straight right to the chin, but Day hopped up immediately. It was only a flash knockdown. In the eighth, though, a hard one-two left him sprawled against the ropes and sent his mouthpiece spinning into the crowd.

It was at this moment that Higgins thought, *No more. I should stop this fight.* But at the end of the round, Day jogged back to the corner. His eyes looked clear, and his legs looked good. Higgins decided not to throw in the towel. *Keep your stance angled and your guard tight, and tie him up when you need to.* Day did all of this, and fought the ninth round to a stalemate.

HE HAD CONCEIVED A CHILD AND KILLED A MAN AND LEARNED OF BOTH ON THE SAME DAY, HOURS APART.

In the corner before the tenth, Higgins knew a win was unlikely—Day would need a knockout. *But if he can give me a round in the tenth round like the ninth round*, Higgins thought, *he goes out with respectability.* Day would win the round, and on the plane home Higgins would suggest that he retire. With his degree and his title belts and his raw charisma, Day could get a job as a health-and-wellness instructor, maybe at a school. The kids would think he was so cool.

Day rose from his corner for the beginning of the tenth round. Higgins laid a black-gloved hand on his neck, tenderly. "You good?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yeah," Day answered.

He looked Higgins in the eye. Higgins touched his cheek. The bell rang.

CONWELL WEPT AT the news of Day's death. He had conceived a child and killed a man and learned of both on the same day, hours apart. At first, he thought maybe it was reincarnation, but later he decided it was only chance, because the baby turned out to be a girl, and anyway he was not a particularly religious man.

His phone rang all the way back from the mall and kept ringing when he got home. It was his mom, his dad, his brothers, his coaches. He shouldn't blame himself, they said. He was just doing his job. It was just boxing. But he kept thinking, *Did I really do that?*

He'd never liked telling people that he was a fighter, and now when strangers stopped him to ask, "Hey, are you that guy who boxes?," he'd say, "Nah, that's not me, I don't box," and for a moment they'd stare, but then they'd leave him alone. One time, he'd noticed a man eyeing him from across the barbershop. Eventually the man asked if he boxed, and this time he couldn't deny it—everyone else at the shop already knew. The man didn't say anything more. *He must know what I've done*, Conwell thought.

Several major news outlets had covered his open letter to Day, and since then hundreds of people had commented on it. Most were supportive. Some were cruel. He knew he shouldn't read their comments, but he did: "Go retire before you kill more people"; "U need to be in prison for murder"; "I hope u go to jail and get raped for killing someone"; "Bro you killed him"; "You killed Patrick"; "You killer"; "Killer."

ON A BRIGHT September afternoon in 1842, the Englishman Chris Lilly and the Irishman Tom McCoy met in a makeshift arena on the eastern bank of the Hudson River for a bare-knuckle boxing match. Two thousand spectators looked on. McCoy had not wanted to fight, but when he'd rebuffed the challenge weeks earlier, Lilly had punched him in the face, and so here they were. That morning, McCoy had vowed "to win or die."

For a time, it seemed like he might win. He knocked Lilly down early. But by the 30th round—which, back then, meant the 30th knockdown—it was all Lilly. Forty rounds later, McCoy staggered and gasped and spat blood, and some in the crowd cried, "For God's sake, take him away!," but the doctor did nothing, and McCoy's second snapped back, "He ain't half licked yet!" So the fight went on. McCoy wouldn't quit. In the 120th round, he fell on his back and did not get up. The first casualty of the American prize ring drowned in his own blood.

More than 2,000 fighters have since died in the ring. They have died in backroom brawls and at intercollegiate

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competitions and, occasionally, after fights viewed on live television. Several rule changes have made the sport safer now than it once was, but it is not safe: Most professional fighters suffer brain injuries. About nine or 10 still die each year.

There has long been a sense, on account of this carnage, that boxing is merely the vulgar vestige of a less enlightened time, destined to go the way of bloodletting and cockfighting. After the Lilly-McCoy bout it seemed as though it might: 18 men faced manslaughter charges, including Lilly, the seconds, and the ringside physician. The jury deliberated for three hours before convicting all of them, and for a time boxing virtually disappeared in America. Within five years it was back—it has always come back.

By the 1920s, it had made its way from the seedy peripheries of American culture to the roaring center. When Gene Tunney fought Jack Dempsey for the heavyweight title in 1926, *The New York Times* ran a banner headline and six front-page stories about the match. By the 1950s, boxing was one of the most watched sports on television, and by the 1970s, Muhammad Ali was the most famous athlete in the world.

Over the years, boxing's demise has been prophesied again and again, but each time the sport has come back. In 1965, the *New York Times* editorial board forecast that "a sport as sick as this one surely cannot survive much longer." More than half a century later, the members of that editorial board are dead, and boxing has survived.

But it is not what it once was. Today, few people can name the heavyweight champion. Fights have retreated to pay-per-view. And the ones that generate the most hype usually involve aging titans necromanced out of retirement or B-list celebrities clamoring for attention—sometimes both. These are not so much fights as circus acts.

Boxing no longer faces any real risk of extinction on account of its brutality. Now the threat comes from the opposite flank. Why watch boxing when you could watch mixed martial arts? Why settle for mere punching when fighters elbow and kick and choke each other into submission? Boxing, once both celebrated and reviled as the most primal of all sports, has been made to look a little prudish, a little repressed.

Conwell has his hands wrapped before a fight in Cleveland.

HE STARTED WINNING FIGHTS, AND HE KEPT WINNING FIGHTS, AND IN TIME HE CAME TO LOVE IT—WHETHER THE WINNING OR THE FIGHTING, IT'S HARD TO SAY.

In a way, it always has been. It has always felt the need to justify itself by appealing to something loftier, to be more than violence for violence's sake. It is the sweet science. It is the manly art. It is, as David Belasco, the famous theater producer, once put it, "show business with blood." For years, each big fight was a parable; an allegory; a morality play staged, quite literally, on canvas. Such grandiose pretensions have come to sound a little silly, but the pageantry persists. Just look at the referee, in his starched shirt and bow tie. What boxing promises spectators is the chance to indulge their appetite for violence without offending their self-image as good people. For the most part, it delivers on this promise. Except, that is, on those rare occasions when something goes very, very wrong.

CHARLES CONWELL SR. wanted desperately to be a fighter, but he didn't have the stuff. He trained and sparred in the basement of the local Salvation Army with a coach everyone called "The Godfather," but he never fought a single bout. He always had the desire to box, but he had neither the discipline to work at it consistently, nor a disciplinarian to make him. His own father wasn't around much.

Conwell Sr. became a brick mason. He bought a house in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, and he hung a heavy bag in the living room and another in the basement, and when he had children, he taught them to punch, same as he taught them to walk and read. The neighborhood kids came by too. They'd try on the gloves, and he'd show them the right way to hit the bag. They started calling him "Coach Chuck," then just "Coach." By the time Charles Jr. was born, people he'd known for years couldn't have told you his real name.

His first four children all tried their hand at boxing, but none of them took to it. The next two, Charles and his half brother Isaiah, started competing when they were 11 and 7 years old, respectively. Charles's earliest memory is play-boxing with his older brothers with cheap gloves from Walmart—and losing badly. He and Isaiah would hit the bags that hung around the house with the gloves they got each year for Christmas. When they were older, their father asked if they'd like to box for real, and they said they would. The one condition, he said, was that if they started, they couldn't quit until they were 18. They agreed.

Charles hated it at first. He wasn't used to the hard work, and training sessions made his whole body hurt. He wanted to quit, but his father wouldn't let him. In the backyard, Chuck hung lights and a third heavy bag from a tree so that the boys could train after dark. Some nights, at 3 or 4 a.m., he would wake them and make them run laps around a nearby graveyard in the headlights of his pickup truck. Other nights he would dream of some new combination, and when he awoke in the middle of the night, the vision still ablaze in his mind, he would rouse Charles and Isaiah so the sons could lace up their gloves and animate the father's dreams.

Charles got good. He started winning fights, and he kept winning fights, and in time he came to love it—whether the winning or the fighting, it's hard to say. All boxers have nicknames, and his, at first, was "The Body Snatcher." Then one day he was pounding some hapless opponent, and his father started shouting, "Bad News! You got 'em, Bad News!" and he kept shouting it at the next fight and the one after that too, until his son became Charles "Bad News" Conwell.

By ninth grade, Charles had begun telling his classmates he wasn't going to college. He spent most of high school on the road for tournaments and rarely went with his friends to parties or basketball games. Mostly this did not bother him. He does not drink or smoke, and he has always been reserved. He is, in his words, "the Kawhi Leonard of the boxing game." But even so, he occasionally chafed in high school at the strictures of his vocation and wondered, *Why can't I just do normal-people stuff?* "I don't think he knows how to have regular fun," his mother says, "because all he's ever done was box."

He was in Miami, he was in Morocco, he was on the news, and then he was walking in the opening ceremony at the Rio Olympics, just two months after he walked at his graduation. The school still displays his photo and one of his title belts in a trophy case.

Chuck was at every fight, even after Charles moved to Toledo to train with Otha Jones Jr., an elite coach, at his gym. After one bout, the three of them convened in their casino hotel room for a midnight film session among unfolded clothes and grease-stained pizza boxes. Charles had fought well enough—he'd commanded the ring from the bell and finished his opponent in the ninth round with a nose-breaking uppercut. But for stretches, the fight had looked like a stalemate. It was not a dominant performance, and did not make for good TV. This bothered Chuck: "The fuck is you doing, man!?" He turned to Jones. "You gotta cattle-prod him, man. I'm sorry, man, you gotta light a fire under this motherfucker's ass!" Charles said nothing.

After they watched the video replay, Chuck turned back to Jones. "He's mad at you now, but he'll love you later," he said, laughing. "If he wins, he'll love you later."

A DEFENSIVE POSTURE, the pastor thought. It was Sunday morning, an hour before the service started, and Bible school was still in session. The church halls were quiet. The pastor sat behind his desk, and Conwell sat on a couch across from him, hunched over a little, elbows on his knees. *He's only a child*, the pastor thought, *young enough to be my son*. They made small talk.

DEVIN YALKIN FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

SOME FIGHTERS CAME BACK FINE AFTER A KILLING; OTHERS COULD NEVER HIT THE WAY THEY ONCE HAD.

Conwell hadn't been to church in years, but his mother, his father, and his grandmother had all suggested he seek spiritual counsel. "You're going to be facing a lot of demons in your life," they'd told him. And he was. He sometimes felt as though he should never fight again. He could not bear the thought of hurting anyone else. At random moments, he would think of Patrick Day and wonder, *Is he looking down at me? Is he in the room?*

"Your grandmother kind of explained to me what was going on," the pastor said. "But tell me how you feel. What's going on in your mind?" Conwell's eyes started to well up. What he needed to know, he said, was whether he was going to hell. He had killed a man, and he was afraid that God would not forgive him.

The pastor assured him that God would. He spoke of grace and mercy and redemptive love. He said that if Conwell requested forgiveness, he would receive it. But even then, he said, Conwell must also forgive himself. "It was not in your heart to kill him. You're a man who was doing your job."

But Conwell wanted to be certain: Was the pastor sure he would not go to hell? Was he sure God would forgive him? The pastor reassured Conwell that he was, then rose and laid a hand on his shoulder. He closed his eyes and asked God to protect this fighter and grant him "peace as he moved on with his career." He invited Conwell to come back anytime, and Conwell said he would. When he left the church, he felt lighter. He was ready to box again.

His promoters wanted to take things slow, so they scheduled a fight on a small card in Hammond, Indiana. The competition would be tame, the crowd small, the TV cameras absent—a perfect comeback bout. Conwell understood his promoters' concerns. Some fighters came back fine after a killing; others could never hit the way they once had.

When he returned to the gym he looked tentative, and Jones said, "You ain't look like you was … You gotta come on, B! You gotta go back to how you used to be!" Conwell wasn't trying to hold back. He felt like he was hitting hard. He kept at it.

Every so often, the pastor would text him messages of encouragement, which he appreciated. But he couldn't imagine returning to the church. "Maybe I should," he says. "It's hard, though. I just don't want to feel—I know he's not judging me, but it's just hard to look at somebody. I feel like—I don't know. I just—I don't know."

He's never gone back.

GOD MAY HAVE FORGIVEN Charles Conwell, but Jean-philippe Day has not. He has not forgiven him for the way he stood over Patrick in the moments after the knockout, or for the way his camp talked about his brother's death as an obstacle to be overcome rather than a loss to be grieved. Nor has he forgiven Lou DiBella, Patrick's promoter and Conwell's too, for the way he profited at Patrick's expense. Most of all, he has not forgiven Joe Higgins for taking the Conwell fight so soon after Patrick's last loss, or for failing to stop the fight after the second knockdown, or for trying, since that night, Jean-philippe says, to cast himself as a victim, even a tragic hero.

Sometimes, Jean-philippe struggles to forgive himself. He had a bad feeling about the fight from the moment his brother mentioned it. "I just wish I could have been there that night, so I could have said something, or jumped into the ring and stopped the fight, or been there to catch his head when he fell," he says. "But instead I was sitting in front of the TV like a fucking sap."

His mother, his father, and his two other surviving brothers try not to think about all of this. Two years have passed, and they do not want to talk about the fight anymore, do not want to be drawn back into the emotional riptide. They are exhausted. Jean-philippe understands this, though he does not feel the same. He intends to talk about what happened "until I take my last breath."

For the past two years he has been turning over in his mind the circumstances of Patrick's death. He has come up with theories; he has questioned the cosmos; he has always run up, in the end, against the blank senselessness of what happened. In these moments, he wishes that his brother had died pushing his mother out of the way of oncoming traffic. That way at least his death would have meant something. But boxing matches, he knows, are not parables or allegories or morality plays. "To die in the ring," he says, "means nothing."

IT WAS SNOWING when Conwell and his camp drove into Indiana. Fight night was three days away. The boxers all stayed at a truck-stop hotel where the concierge was always pissed off and someone had carved the words BEST FUCK EVER into the elevator doors and the quilts had little black-singed holes where guests had put out their cigarettes. The only store within walking distance was an old liquor shop across the iced-over parking lot. A sign out front advertised CARRY-OUT JACK. Conwell understood why he was here. But he sure as hell wasn't fighting on another card like this ever again.

At the weigh-in he got his first look at his opponent. The guy he was originally supposed to fight had bailed at the last minute, and word around the camp, maybe apocryphal, was that he got scared when he heard about the Day fight. No matter—the promoters had lined up a replacement, a journeyman from Mexico named Ramses Agaton who'd lost 10 of his previous 15 fights. They'd called him up on Wednesday, flown him in from Mexico City on Thursday, and here he was on Friday. That morning, Conwell had watched one of Agaton's old fights and said, "I can't lose to this guy."

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Agaton evidently had not studied Conwell's old fights, because he knew almost nothing about him, and the little he thought he knew—"he moves fast and he doesn't punch hard"—was wrong. No one, it seemed, had thought it worth mentioning that the fighter he was about to face actually punched quite hard—hard enough to kill. Conwell had been training for a couple of months; Agaton appeared to have hardly trained at all. He had a visible paunch and was over the weight limit, but Conwell's camp told the officials to let it slide.

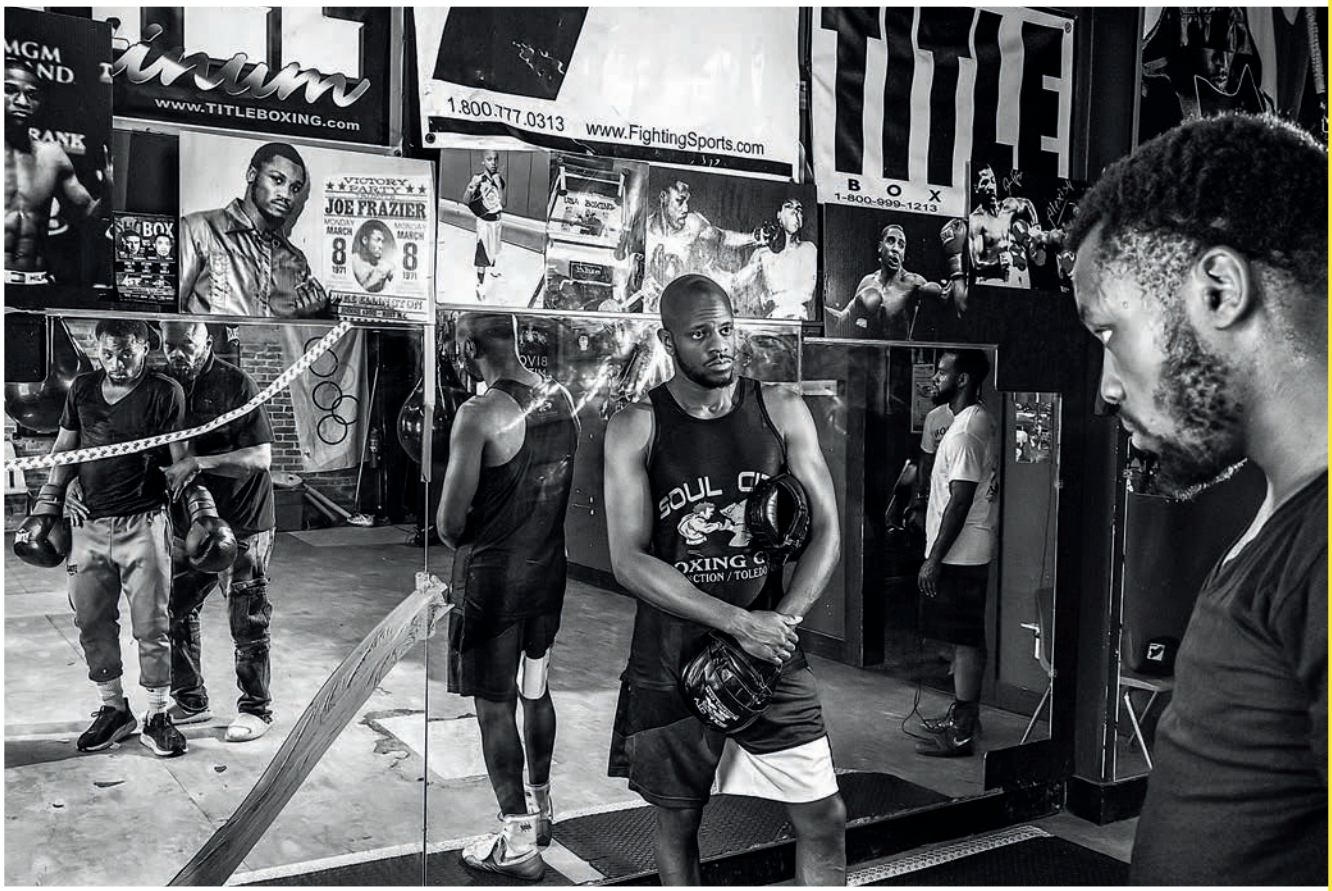
After the weigh-in, Conwell and his team ate lunch at a Red Lobster—lobster rolls, shrimp platters, biscuits—and then had nothing to do but wait. Conwell ran on a treadmill and threw punches in the hotel gym, but mostly he lay on his unmade bed chewing gum and watching reality TV.

He would be all right tomorrow, he told himself. He would go in there and fight like he always did. Lead with the jab, break down the body, finish strong. In his mind he envisioned ending the fight with a heavy blow to the body—but he knew the crowd would not like that. *You just can't win in boxing*, he thought. You go for the knockout—you must go for the knockout—and yet you have feelings. You strike your opponent down, and yet you wish him no harm. *It must get easier with time*, he thought.

Conwell wasn't worried much about getting hurt himself. He trusted his defense. And later in his career, after he'd won all there was to win and made all the money he could ever want to make, if he started taking damage, he'd quit. He'd go into real estate, flip houses maybe—nothing to do with boxing. Unless his kids boxed, that is, but he'd much prefer that they didn't. He doesn't think any boxer would want their kids to fight. When asked whether his own parents should have let him, he pauses, then says, "At this point …" then trails off.

By nightfall, Conwell's girlfriend and mother had joined him in his hotel room. The TV played softly. Conwell and his girlfriend sat side by side on the bed, and she ran one hand through his hair, and he held her other hand in his, and they murmured to each other in the low light. He sat up and shadowboxed a little. Then, to no one in particular, he said, "One fight can change your life." Everyone was quiet. The TV filled the silence.

TO STEP INTO A BOXING RING, a fighter must convince himself that several things he knows to be true are, in fact,



Conwell (*far right*) training at his Toledo, Ohio, gym

false. He must convince himself that the blows he sustains to his brain will not do irreparable damage and that the accretion of these blows will not, eventually, destroy him, as it has so many others. He must convince himself that his opponent is not altogether human, because otherwise how do you strike someone toward whom you bear no ill will, and strike him not just for show but savagely, to hurt him? Above all, he must convince himself that what goes on inside the ring and what goes on outside it are separate matters entirely, that the one has no relation to the other. And he can have no doubt, because doubt breeds hesitation, and in the ring, hesitation can be deadly.

Charles Conwell has never had much trouble with any of this. He always found it easy, he says, to "turn the switch on and off." But that was before the Day fight. Now he has knocked out a boxer in the ring, and a human being has died in the hospital. The wall between the boxing ring and the real world has come down. Having been made to see in the worst way that all those things a boxer convinces himself are false are in fact true, he must again convince himself that they are false. He has killed a man with his fists, and now he must get back in the ring and punch another man in just the same way.

So he does the only thing he can do. He tells himself what he needs to believe, and the people around him do too: "Maybe there were some prior issues going on with the man." "I've seen fighters get knocked out and take a harder punch than that and get right up." "We really think it was something that happened prior to this. It didn't have anything to do with us."

Conwell has his own version: "I've fought hundreds and hundreds of fights before, and it never happened. What makes this fight different from any other fight? I just try to think about it like that. Maybe there was something wrong with him rather than what I did to him."

DEVIN YALKIN FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

Conwell back in the ring in August

These stories may or may not be true. What matters, when the lights come on and the bell sounds and he meets the gaze of his opponent, is that he believes them.

THE NERVES BEGIN with the hiss of the tape winding around his wrists. The locker room smells of leather and sweat. The chords of the national anthem echo through the hazy halls. A door opens. "Charles," someone says, "it's time."

He skips down the hall with his entourage, throwing one-twos at phantom foes. He bounds up the steps two at a time and into a dim backstage corridor, where EMTs wait with stretchers. He removes his hood and stamps his feet. His shoes squeak on the linoleum. He wears red, white, and blue, as he often does, to remind the crowd that this isn't just anyone they're watching—this is an Olympian. Sewn onto his trunks is a red-and-white patch that says ALL DAY PAT DAY—his idea. Earlier that evening, as he dressed in the locker room, he had paused for a moment to look at it. On the ride over, he'd gotten a text from Joe Higgins, Patrick's coach and manager, wishing him luck. "Pat is watching over you," it said.

The ring announcer bellows his name and the speakers blare Kanye West's "All of the Lights" and he bursts through the curtains and into the smoky glare of the arena. The arena is not much of an arena at all. It's a New Deal–era gymnasium with rickety bleachers. Conwell's coaches strip off his shirt and Vaseline his face until it shines. They massage his shoulders and review the plan one last time. Now the nerves are gone. "Ain't no point in being nervous," he will later say. "Now you're here."

The bell clangs. Conwell has always been, by his own admission and to his coaches' chagrin, a slow starter. He almost never throws the first punch of a fight. Agaton opens with a series of jabs, then tries a one-two. He doesn't get anywhere near Conwell. His punches have no pop. When Conwell fires back with a jab of his own, there's no comparison. The punch doesn't connect, but it goes off like a warning shot. He begins to stalk Agaton, working him into the corner until Agaton, unable to escape, tries to tie him up, but before he can, Conwell catches him with a pair of hard left hooks to the ribs. The crowd loves it.

No one seems to notice the man at ringside with tears in his eyes. He is a cutman, the person who treats a boxer's wounds during a fight, and as such has an intimate familiarity with the damage the sport can inflict. He has worked some of Conwell's fights before, but at this one he is only a spectator; he is here for another fighter. He has not worked a corner since October, when he watched the live broadcast of Day's fatal bout with Conwell. Day was one of his fighters. They were both from Long Island, and the cutman had known him since he was an amateur. After Day's death, the cutman thought about quitting boxing altogether, but he reconsidered, because he thought that Day would have wanted him to continue on. Tonight, as he watches Conwell pound Agaton, he can't help but see Conwell pounding Day, and he can't take it anymore. At the end of the first round, he walks out.

In the next two rounds Conwell's body blows seem to almost literally deflate Agaton. Early on he had tried to match Conwell punch for punch, but now he simply leans on him. When, in the fourth round, Conwell breaks Agaton's guard and lands a powerful shot to the head, Conwell does not flinch. "In the moment," he will say after, "it's just boxing."

Nothing extraordinary happens. If some subterranean psychodrama is playing out deep within Charles Conwell, the surface registers no tremors. At the end of the fourth round, as he leans against the turnbuckle and drapes his arms over the ropes, he looks at ease. One of his coaches wipes his brow. Jones pours ice water over his chest. And then, all of a sudden, the referee is waving his arms. Agaton will not come out for the fifth round. The fight is over.

There will be no brutal knockout, no paralyzing flashback, no moment of reckoning. Just two human beings fighting for some money, and a thousand more intoxicated by the spectacle, and an empty folding chair at ringside, where not long ago the cutman sat, until he couldn't watch anymore. *A*

Jacob Stern is an assistant editor at The Atlantic.

France's God Complex

Is religion a threat to national identity?

By Rachel Donadio

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO

What forces hold a liberal democracy together?

What forces can tear a liberal democracy apart?

These were some of the questions on my mind as I listened earlier this year to the French education minister, Jean-Michel Blanquer, defend a proposal that had been placed before the nation.

The setting was grand: the French Senate, a chamber as elegant as an opera house. The bill he was presenting was equally grand, at least in name: Principles of the Republic and the Fight Against Separatism. Blanquer spoke under the marble gaze of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the architect of early modern France, who stood high in an alcove behind him. Colbert's shoulder-length curls made for a contrast with Blanquer's polished crown. Now enshrined in law, the anti-separatism bill is the latest salvo in a centuries-old battle between the French state and organized religion. Pushed through by the government of President Emmanuel Macron, it was designed to put even more official weight behind the idea of *laïcité*, a term that loosely translates as "secularism" but is significantly more complicated and politically charged.

Everyone knows about "*Liberté, egalité, fraternité.*" But it is *laïcité* that defines the most ferociously contested battle lines in contemporary France. The term has come to express a uniquely French insistence that religion, along with religious symbols and dress, should be absent from the public sphere. No other country in Europe has followed this path. The word itself derives from the ancient Greek term for "the people," or "the laity," as opposed to the priestly class. *Laïcité* is not the same thing as freedom of religion (the free exercise of religion is guaranteed by the French constitution). What it sometimes means is freedom *from* religion. At a time when religion-fueled terrorist attacks continue to traumatize France, *laïcité* has become inextricably tangled with questions of national identity and national security.

The bill that Blanquer was discussing in the French Senate that day represented a multifront political maneuver—a classic example of triangulation by Macron, a centrist who founded a new political party and has been trying to draw votes from the right. It was, first, part of France's efforts to combat Islamist fundamentalism after years of violence. Second, it implicitly pushed back against Turkey, a main supporter of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, which is influential in some French mosques. And finally, because it appeals to the lofty notion of "republican values," it was also a way to deprive the right and the far right of oxygen ahead of national elections next spring. Macron will likely face off once more against Marine Le Pen and her National Rally party, which thrives on fear of immigrants and Islam in a country where Muslims now make up 8 percent of the population.

In September, a network of jihadists went on trial for the 2015 attacks in Paris that killed 130 people, including 90 inside the Bataclan concert hall. Those attacks occurred only months after the slaughter by Islamic terrorists of staff members at the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. For those who lived through that terrible time in the capital, as I did, the trial has brought back grim memories. It is the biggest trial in French history, with more than 1,000 plaintiffs, and is expected to last for nine months. A more recent tragedy has also darkened the mood: the October 2020 beheading outside Paris of a high-school teacher, Samuel Paty. Paty had shown his class offensive cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in order to explain the principle of freedom

PREVIOUS SPREAD: BENJAMIN CREMEL / GETTY; GODONG / GETTY; JOELLE ICARD / GETTY; MIGUEL MEDINA / GETTY; MYCHELE DANIAU / GETTY

of speech; he did so after reportedly urging anyone who might be disturbed—who might think the images blasphemous—to leave the room. Paty paid with his life at the hands of an 18-year-old terrorist, an immigrant from Chechnya who was soon cornered and killed by the police. The murder, provoked by Paty's defense of a fundamental French value, freedom of speech, did not precipitate the anti-separatism bill, but it has haunted the country and weighed heavily on the government. "He wanted to strike the republic and its values," Macron said of the killer. "This is our battle. And it is an existential one."

The anti-separatism bill became law in July under the name Confirming Respect for the Principles of the Republic. It places stricter controls on religious associations (many mosques in France are funded from abroad) and gives the state broad authority to temporarily shut down any house of worship if there is a suspicion that it is inciting hatred or violence. It puts tighter restrictions on asylum seekers. It denies residency permits for men who practice polygamy and gives state officials more power to block a marriage if they believe a woman is being coerced into it. It also bans doctors from providing women with virginity certificates, a practice linked to some religious marriages. The Senate, with its right-wing majority, had proposed further amendments, later dropped, that would have banned women from wearing burkinis (a garment that allows women to swim while dressing modestly) in public pools, and from wearing headscarves when accompanying students on school trips. French law already forbids the wearing of what it calls "ostentatious" religious symbols in public primary and secondary schools, including headscarves, yarmulkes, and large crosses.

Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christian leaders have denounced the new legislation, saying that it restricts freedom of association. (France's Jewish community, traumatized by hate crimes and anti-Semitism, has largely kept its head down, though some of the organized leadership has supported the legislation.) Scholars and historians generally condemned the measure as a needless overhaul of existing laws and a muscular encroachment of state power into matters of religion.

On that afternoon in the Senate, Blanquer was railing against homeschooling, a form of education sometimes embraced by religious minorities, although more often by families of children with health issues or special needs. The cultivation of such "parallel spaces," Blanquer told the senators, represented "the negation of the common space"—a space where individual talents are recognized, "which is the *république*." The new law requires a special authorization from the government for homeschooling, and none of the allowable circumstances involves religion.

Here was France in its philosophical essence. In the United States, the concept of *E pluribus unum*—"Out of many, one"—is a foundational ideal. At least in theory, unity can accommodate difference. In France, difference is seen as tantamount to fracture.

The contrast between France and the U.S. could hardly be sharper—but it conceals a common challenge. Whether the issue is religion, race, or region, both nations are trying to set the rules by which diverse groups exist and function within a unified whole. It is not an academic exercise. Liberal democratic states will not survive if they cannot strike a balance. Alternatives are lying in wait: chaotic fragmentation in one direction, and "blood and soil" nationalism in the other.

THE HISTORIES OF FEW COUNTRIES are as deeply intertwined as those of France and the United States. Both nations are products of the Enlightenment, and each sees itself as a beacon among nations. Both embody a clear separation of Church and state. In the United States, the separation is defined by the establishment clause of the First Amendment, which prohibits the government from making any law "respecting an establishment of religion" or obstructing the free exercise of religion. The First Amendment was inspired by the earlier Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, adopted in 1786, the work of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was ambassador to France when the French Revolution began, and the Marquis de Lafayette consulted him when drafting the revolutionary Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, passed in 1789. Article 10 of that document states, "No one may be disquieted for his opinions, even religious ones, provided that their manifestation does not trouble the public order."

Today, in France, separation of Church and state is largely defined by a 1905 law that emerged from a hard-fought battle to end the lingering temporal power of the Catholic Church. The law declares that "the republic guarantees freedom of conscience" as well as religious freedom, and stipulates that the state will not discriminate among religions. The 1905 law set the initial terms of *laïcité*; the word itself was introduced in France's 1958 constitution.

The intentions in France and the United States seem similar, but they are not the same. The United States, in guaranteeing freedom of religion, sought to shield religion from state involvement. France, in guaranteeing freedom of religion, sought to shield the state from religious involvement. This distinction has consequences.

As an American who lives and works in Paris, I have become an insider-outsider in both places. Every time I return to America from France, I am startled to hear television hosts sign off with a "God bless" and to hear presidents quote the Bible or ask God to protect the United States and its troops. In the U.S., it is unusual—probably even impossible—for a candidate to run for president without invoking God. In France, bringing private beliefs into the public sphere would be seen as a violation of *laïcité*, and extremely gauche. In the United States, Representative Ilhan Omar can proudly wear her headscarf in the halls of Congress. In France, members of the French National Assembly or Senate are prohibited from wearing religious attire in state buildings, though not from wearing it in public spaces. Macron's own party recently reprimanded a Muslim candidate for wearing a headscarf in campaign posters—while acknowledging that it was legal for her to do so—and withdrew its support for her candidacy in a local election. Each country is shaped by the wounds of its past. America fought a civil war over slavery. France's civil wars were over religion.

The principle of *laïcité* is instilled early. Every public-school student is taught the same curriculum from first grade through high school. Schools are seen as a crucible where citizens are forged, a place that instills values—*laïcité*, freedom of expression, equality between men and women—along with reading, writing, and math. The watchword is *universalism*, referring to an abstract notion of citizenship to which all must subscribe. In a recent interview with the newspaper *Le Parisien*, the French feminist philosopher Elisabeth Badinter, who favors a forceful application of *laïcité*, was asked, "What can hold the nation together today?" She answered, "The schools!" She went on: "*Laïcité* and *république*, that is the heart of the French nation." That the Macron government included measures about schools in its anti-separatism bill came as no surprise.

Americans often self-identify along ethnic, racial, and religious lines. The assumption is that we can embrace our hyphenated identities without disloyalty to a broader national project. France demands more in the way of public conformity. The notion of *communautarisme*, or defining yourself by your particular ethnic or religious identity group, is seen as corrosive to the polity. Whereas it is common in the United States to be asked one's race on forms and surveys, the French state recognizes people as individuals, not as members of groups, and does not formally collect census data on race or ethnicity—that would be seen as a betrayal of universalism and a violation of privacy. (The dark cloud of the Second World War, when the Vichy regime identified and rounded up French Jews for deportation to Nazi death camps, also hangs over this kind of data collection.) The flip side is an expectation that people should be left alone to their beliefs and their private lives. France is not a nation of oversharers. There is a *froideur*, a coldness, in some interactions. But such distance can be a form of respect.

The principle of *laïcité* is instilled early. Every public-school student is taught the same curriculum from first grade through high school.

Laïcité, which makes international headlines with each new controversy over the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women, must be seen in the context of another tenet of French public life: assimilation. "It's not really about religion," the French writer Marc Weitzmann told me recently. "It's much deeper than that. Americans are constantly publicizing who they are in every way possible. The French way is to show *what* you are instead of *who* you are—through manners. It's all about conforming to a certain environment." Weitzmann brought up characters in Honoré de Balzac's 19th-century novels who arrive in Paris from the provinces, reinvent themselves, and achieve social, political, or literary success. Hakim El Karoui is a Franco-Tunisian writer and consultant who has informally advised Macron; he has advocated for (among other things) the development of French-trained imams who would foster an Islam that is compatible, as he sees it, with French republican values. When we spoke recently, he smiled as he explained the deal on offer: "France is open to anyone, but there's only one path, and that's universalism," he said. "That's the French paradox. It's very open and very closed." In your private life, you can cultivate your culture, your language, your religion; in public, you assimilate.

American politicians develop an iron stomach as they celebrate the cuisines of many cultures—tamales, pierogi, cannolis, ribs. In France, it often seems as if a single type of cuisine is the true carrier of national identity, and food can be a flash point. Macron's hard-line interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, perhaps the second-most-powerful man in France, said in a television interview last year that halal-food aisles in supermarkets represent a form of religious separatism. Those applying for French nationality are advised to learn not only about France's history and geography but also about *confit de canard* and *salade niçoise*. There are occasional blowups about whether school cafeterias should serve vegetarian meals and halal and kosher meat, or whether this, too, would be a concession to separatism. I am always struck by the sense of national fragility that seems to inform these assertions—the idea that a cafeteria meal could somehow threaten the foundations of the republic.

Darmanin, a man of the right whose ministry controls the police, published a small book this year, *Le Séparatisme Islamiste: Manifeste Pour la Laïcité*, in which he declared that the republic was "losing its transcendence"—losing faith in its universalist ideals. The assumption was that France has, or ought to have, a fixed and settled idea of itself, and is not (unlike everywhere else in the world) caught up in a process of continual change. Marine Le Pen often says that if she were elected, France would "re-become itself." Darmanin, the president's chief weapon when it comes to co-opting the right, dedicated a chapter of his book to "the fight against Islamist separatism," which he called "a Trojan horse that carries within it a bomb that will fragment our society." French assimilationism at its most extreme can be distilled into the person of Éric Zemmour, a far-right journalist and radio and television commentator who is now flirting with a run for president. Zemmour, a son of Algerian Jewish immigrants, endorses the "Great Replacement Theory" popular among white supremacists. He tells parents that they should give their children only French names and argues that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with France. Zemmour's books, including one called *Le Suicide Français*, have been instant best sellers.

IN THE HISTORY of *laïcité*, three dates stand apart from all others: 1789, 1905, and 1989. The French Revolution, in 1789, did away with aristocratic status inherited at birth; since then, France has recognized only two categories of person, citizens and immigrants—a bedrock of its universalist ideals. But despite the revolution, remnants of the ancien régime remained in place. Under a "concordat" system, established by Napoleon, the state paid the clergy and had a say in appointing Catholic bishops. After Napoleon's defeat, France became a monarchy again; a durable

MICHEL SETBOUN / GETTY; WESTEND61 GMBH / ALAMY

democratic republic did not take hold until 1870. Throughout the 19th century, Catholic schools remained the only form of education for many French children, especially in rural areas. A fervent right-wing Catholicism, with royalist inflections and the blessing of the Vatican, remained influential. The chalky-white basilica of Sacré Coeur, the inescapable domed landmark atop Montmartre, is the handiwork of these right-wing Catholics. Until well into the 20th century, the Vatican advocated for a restoration of the monarchy in France.

A modern French republic eventually came into its own, at once centralizing and secular. New roads and railways bound the country together. Regional languages—Breton, Occitan—were quashed in favor of an officially constructed French. The government created and pushed a system of public schools and mandatory education. Catholic and other parochial schools still exist, of course—and many of them receive public funds. But they must teach the same national curriculum as any public school.

At the turn of the last century, the National Assembly began debating what would become the 1905 law on secularism. Islam was on no one's mind; the target was the Catholic Church. A coalition of socialists and radicals was in power, with broad popular support and a platform of anticlericalism and labor protections. Few laws in French history have produced such thunderous debate. The unfinished work of the revolution clashed with France's Catholic heart. In the end, the government prevailed. The 1905 law guarantees freedom of conscience and the free exercise of religion except when it interferes with public order. All religious buildings built before 1905—including the cathedral of Notre Dame—came under the ownership of the state. The concordat system was abolished.

The 1905 law put to rest the question of separation of Church and state for the better part of a century. What changed was politics and demographics. With the end of French colonial rule in North Africa, in the 1950s and '60s, hundreds of thousands of people immigrated to France from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. Jews from former French territories were automatically granted the right to French citizenship; Muslims were not, a lingering source of tension. But the former territories sent imams to France and helped build mosques there. Today, estimates place the Muslim population in France at more than 5 million. Many live in low-income *quartiers* outside the major cities. They may be generations removed from the countries their families left behind; at the same time, they often struggle to find social mobility as citizens of France.

The third date is 1989, the bicentennial of the French Revolution and a moment of intense national pride. In October of that year, three Muslim girls at a middle school in Creil, north of Paris, refused to take off their headscarves. The principal suspended the girls, saying that the headscarves violated the neutrality of public space, as represented by the school. For the first time, Islam entered the national conversation in a significant way. The headscarf became a visual shorthand for political Islam and remains so to this day. A 1989 cover story in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, an influential weekly magazine, carried the headline "Fanaticism: The Religious Threat" beneath a photo of a young girl in a black headscarf.

The government sought a ruling from the Conseil d'État, the country's highest administrative court. The court decided that expressing one's religious convictions in school through clothing should be allowed as long as it doesn't constitute "an act of pressure, provocation, proselytism, or propaganda." In short, it was the girls' behavior, not their clothing, that should be judged. (In this case, the behavior was deemed problematic, and the girls were expelled.)

The issue faded for a while. Then came the outbreak of the second intifada in Israel and the occupied territories, in 2000, when Palestinians rose up in violent protest. Many French Muslims mobilized in solidarity. The 9/11 attacks came a year later, followed by the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. The spring of 2002 brought the surprise success of Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine's father, who made it to the second round of the presidential election with his National Front, a party drenched in anti-Semitism and hatred of Muslim immigrants. Right and left united to block Le Pen and elect Jacques Chirac. A year later, the United States invaded Iraq, an invasion that France vehemently opposed. The consequences of that war, and of the broader violence and chaos that ensued, are still reshaping Europe. Years of Muslim migration from the Middle East to Europe have resulted in a rise in France and elsewhere of anti-immigrant sentiment and nativism.

In 2003, with the threat from Le Pen very much on his mind, Chirac appointed a 20-member commission, led by the government ombudsman, Bernard Stasi, to reconsider the requirements of *laïcité*. The Stasi Commission issued a report whose main recommendation was to ban "ostentatious" religious symbols in French schools. A piece of cloth—the headscarf—had become a redline. The historian Patrick Weil served on the Stasi Commission and spoke with me recently about some of its internal debates. At the time, he said, there were concerns about the Muslim Brotherhood promoting headscarves as part of its recruitment efforts in the *quartiers*. Asking individual school principals to adjudicate the headscarf issue—when did the coverings constitute political statements as opposed to merely religious observance?—was too much to expect. Hence the outright ban. The idea, Weil explained, was to declare the schools neutral in order to prevent school-age girls from being coerced into wearing a headscarf. "It was to protect those who didn't wear it," Weil told me. "It was not a law against the headscarf. It was a law against religious pressure." Whatever the intention, the law, predictably, made many Muslims feel discriminated against.

The only member of the commission to abstain from the vote was the historian Jean Baubérot, the author of a multivolume study of France's 1905 law. Baubérot told me that the commission had interviewed only a handful of observant Muslim women. He believed that the original Conseil d'État ruling—the one that said a student's behavior, not her clothing, was the issue—should have been enshrined as law. But he knew he would be outvoted. It was "what Chirac wanted," Baubérot said. Baubérot happens to be Protestant, in predominantly Catholic France. "I know what it's like to be a religious minority," he explained.

In the United States, banning an article of clothing associated with a religion would be an unambiguous violation of the First Amendment. The ban in France easily passed both houses

of Parliament, though with continuing confusion over the rules for religious clothing outside school (not to mention over what, exactly, constitutes religious clothing in the first place). In 2011, the government went further, banning full-face coverings such as the niqab and the burqa. Few things hit more of a nerve in France than attire worn by observant Muslim women. In 2016, right-wing mayors on the French Riviera sought to ban the burkini. A French court reversed the ban, but not before images ricocheted around the internet of French police harassing Muslim women on the beach, drawing outrage in the Muslim community.

In 2018, the leader of a university student group set off alarms when she wore a headscarf in a television interview, even though no law prohibits wearing religious symbols on a university campus. (University students are seen as adults, able to make their own choices.) The following year, Decathlon, a sporting-goods chain, pulled a sports hijab from its shelves after a public outcry. Some public pools in France have banned burkinis, carefully citing public-safety concerns, such as hygiene, as justification.

IN DEBATING THE ANTI-SEPARATISM LAW, the French Senate devoted long hours to the amendment that would have prohibited women from wearing headscarves while accompanying students on school trips—volunteer work that makes the trips possible. "We spent three hours discussing the headscarf, then three hours on the burkini," one Socialist senator complained.

It is easier for people to react to a headscarf than to notice changes in the machinery of governance whose effects may be more far-reaching. The new law places greater restrictions on houses of worship; some must now reapply every five years to keep their status. To counter militant Islam, the law also places stricter controls on foreign funds sent to religious associations from abroad. And it compels religious organizations to sign a "charter of republican principles," expressing a commitment to the equality of men and women and renouncing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. All of this is part of a government effort to create "an Islam of France," as Hakim El Karoui and others have proposed.

Laïcité has become a campaign issue ahead of next year's national elections. In February, Darmanin, the interior minister, debated Marine Le Pen and accused her of being soft on *laïcité*. Her far-right party had traditionally been critical of *laïcité* because it diminished the power of the Catholic Church. Le Pen's father, the founder of her party, is a Holocaust denier who spoke of France as a Christian nation. Le Pen has now shifted her rhetoric, understanding that the term *laïcité* can be weaponized against Muslims and immigration. Éric Zemmour, meanwhile, has pushed the entire debate further to the right by asserting that there is no difference between Islam and Islamism.

But *laïcité* is an issue that cuts across any conventional right-left divide. Although many French feminists see the headscarf and other traditional dress as signs of submission, and *laïcité* therefore as a means of emancipation, it's more complicated than that. I had a long conversation this spring with Yousra, a young woman who attends a university outside Paris (and who asked that I not reveal her last name so as to protect her privacy). Yousra represents a point of view that has been almost entirely absent from the *laïcité* debate in France. She is a Muslim woman who since the age of 16 has worn a headscarf outside school by choice. "I accepted not wearing it at school, because that's the *république*," she said. She told me that she didn't like men looking her up and down when she walked along the street; wearing a headscarf and dressing modestly was a way of reclaiming her own power. "I didn't submit," she told me. "It was really an affirmation." And yet, in a country where until recently there was no age of consent for sex (it is now 15), headscarves are banned in secondary school, which ends around age 18.

Yousra's experience seems to me to embody many of the contradictions of modern France. The same headscarf she put on as a personal assertion, a form of self-protection, was seen by the state as a political provocation. The abstract battles over *laïcité*—"between the republic and religion, modernity and tradition, reason and superstition," as the historian Joan Wallach Scott has written—are in a concrete way battles over women's bodies.

Geopolitically, *laïcité* cuts yet another way. Macron and Darmanin have insisted that France does not conflate Islam and jihadist terrorism. But the anti-separatism law speaks directly to matters of national security and national values. Dominique Schnapper, a prominent sociologist, believes that France must assert its democratic convictions, including *laïcité*, in the face of rising autocracies such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, India, and China. Schnapper has an impressive pedigree—she is the daughter of Raymond Aron, the French philosopher, sparring partner of Jean-Paul Sartre, and scourge of French Marxist intellectuals. She wrote to me recently: "The experience of the 1930s shows that it is not in ceding to the demands of one's enemies, and seeking compromise, that democracy has a chance to save itself, but rather in affirming its values and being ready to fight to defend them."

Those applying for French nationality are advised to learn not only about France's history but also about *confit de canard*.

It is one thing to make magisterial pronouncements about *laïcité* and another to deal with the implications on the ground. This spring, I watched a Zoom presentation by Jean-Louis Bianco, who at the time was the head of a government entity called the National Observatory on Secularism. The group was started under President François Hollande in 2013, ostensibly to help officials, businesses, and citizens make sense of how to apply separation of Church and state in practical situations. Do Sikhs need to wear hard hats on work sites even if the hard hats don't fit over their turbans? (Yes.) Can a Muslim woman delivering prepared food refuse to serve pork? (She should respect the terms of her contract.) Can an evangelical Christian hand out pamphlets for his church at his

place of work? (No. It would disturb the freedom of conscience of his colleagues.)

Bianco told me he had spent significant time last spring answering questions about how to apply *laïcité* at COVID-19 vaccination sites. The specific issue: Should Muslim women be allowed to wear their headscarves while giving vaccinations or being vaccinated? (It depends whether the vaccination is being done by a public or private entity.) France is facing a high death toll, significant vaccine skepticism among health-care workers, and immense economic damage, but its officials had the time to get tangled up in elaborate debates over *laïcité*.

If the history of religion reveals anything, it is that attempts at suppression tend to strengthen the determination of believers.

The Macron government recently disbanded the Observatory on Secularism amid accusations that it was too "soft" on *laïcité*, replacing it with a new entity. Even so, enforcement by the government itself is sometimes less doctrinaire in practice than in theory. Universalism is not always universal. The French government does not formally collect racial, ethnic, or religious data, but French law does acknowledge the existence of hate crimes, which de facto requires official recognition of ethnic and religious difference. And because the 1905 law also guarantees freedom to exercise one's religion, the state provides chaplains for citizens in certain institutional contexts: the military, hospitals, prisons. Soldiers in the French armed forces not only are permitted to make the hajj, if they are Muslim, or a pilgrimage to Lourdes, if they are Catholic; they also have those pilgrimages subsidized by the French government through associations of military chaplains.

IN A SPEECH earlier this year, President Macron's minister for citizenship, Marlène Schiappa, launched a series of national meetings about *laïcité*. As if to offer a peremptory *voilà*, she delivered her speech at a site carefully chosen for the implicit message: a deconsecrated church in central Paris that is now a museum of the history of science. No one, it seems, can resist exploiting symbols in a way that gets under the skin.

The fear that France has lost its way pervades much of the current political discourse, on both the right and the left. In truth, France, like the United States, is one of the most sophisticated multiethnic and pluralistic polities on Earth, a country of immigration, a thriving democracy with freedom of religion and freedom of speech where 67 million people, including the largest Muslim and Jewish communities in Europe, live mostly in harmony. France has arguably the most secularized Muslim community in the world. But because the terrorist threat remains high, and France is heading toward an election, a variety of distinct matters—freedom of worship, freedom of expression, national identity, law enforcement—combine into a volatile and often toxic argument over the idea of Frenchness itself.

The French establishment sees *laïcité* as a core proposition of universalism and of the *république*—a way of preventing social fracture. Surveys find that most people in France regard *laïcité* as an important precept. (They also find a generational divide: Younger citizens of all faiths, more observant than their elders, demonstrate greater comfort with the idea of wearing religious symbols and clothing in public spaces and asserting their identities, American-style.) But French universalism has become its own very specific particularism. A hard commitment to *laïcité* may cause as many fissures as it heals. If the history of religion reveals anything, it is that attempts at suppression tend to strengthen the determination of believers.

A tension between diversity and unity lies at the heart of any democratic polity. The tension is not new, particularly when it comes to matters of religion. Autocratic states have faced it too—think of the Romans, the Ottomans, the Habsburgs. But the tension is especially hard to resolve in democratic states, where the people have power and often exercise it in blocs. The balancing act becomes a test of liberal democracy itself—of its legitimacy and its ability to function.

The tensions we see on a national scale play out within most of us as individuals. I'm aware of it in myself. When I return to America or view it from afar, I love the exuberant public expression of cultures and beliefs. But it's hard to see what holds fragmentation in check over the long haul. By design, American government is decentralized. Schools no longer spend much time teaching civics. The loudest voices defining what is and isn't (or shouldn't be) "American" are often the ugly and nativist ones.

When I look at France, I have to admire an educational system that at least tries to give everyone a common grounding in the core principles of national life. At a time when everything is being privatized, from running elections to fighting wars, it's useful to be reminded that there is something important called "public space," beyond the market economy, and that we must protect it. In the Cartesian construct that is France, there's a place in the garden for any flower that accepts the design. But as *laïcité* illustrates, the formal system can be rigid and unforgiving. Individuals and groups are constrained by law in ways that have no parallel in other democracies. The French may be more multicultural in practice than in theory, but theory carries weight. In France, individuals are expected to suppress fundamental parts of themselves in public life.

Emmanuel Macron was right that an existential battle is under way. But the larger war is about democracy itself, and it is being waged on a bigger field than France. *A*

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Birthday

By Kathleen Rooney

At first, birthdays were
reserved for kings and saints.
But it's rainbow sprinkles and
face painting for everybody
these days.

The best way to avoid having
your birthday ruined is to avoid
having any expectations for
your birthday.

Without the delineation of
years, time would become
an expanse of open water.
Horizonless, shark-filled. One
of my biggest fears.

A rush of Orange Crush—that
sparkle on the tongue—and
"Make a wish!" shouted at the top
of tiny lungs are a couple of things
I recall. Balloons and streamers
and the first piece of cake. Conical
hats with elastic chin straps.

Is a birthday party an instance
of what Durkheim meant
by *collective effervescence*?
Profane tasks cast away for
a sacred second?

Whence my ambivalence about
birth as metaphor? Birth for
entities not brought forth from
a womb?

"Happy Birthday to You" is
a bit of a dirge.

It's said that the party hat may
have originated with the dunce
cap. An abrogation of social
norms? Not punishment in
school, but foolish cavorting.
Worn for the pinning of tails on
donkeys. The tossing of eggs.
Sported for a sack race.

Don't say "A star is born" unless
you're talking about the movie.
Don't tell a woman her books
are her babies.

For my next birthday, please
remember that I love getting
mail. You could send me a
funny card, and maybe a
package. A package full of
money. Or a necklace made
of lapis lazuli, believed by the
ancients to ward off melancholy.

What an ego boost, to have
one's birthday suit evaluated by
another person as cute.

"Today is the oldest you've ever
been, and the youngest you'll
ever be again." Supposedly
Eleanor Roosevelt said that.

I wouldn't say I have a problem
with mortality. If anything,
I tend to gravitate toward the
timeworn: a neighborhood
where the roots of the trees
crack the sidewalks.

Birthdays are about pleasure—
excess and decadence.
But pleasure is painful.
Because memento mori.
Because hoary cliché: We're
not getting any younger.

The candles gutter; the candles
go out. Better to blow them
dark yourself.

Birthdays are okay, but what
about death days? Of the
365 days we cycle through
annually, on one of them,
we'll cease to be alive.

Should the hour of arrival be
more of a factor? Should some
of us have birthnights?

Mayonnaise is my favorite
secret ingredient for cake,
birthday or otherwise.

There's no predicting the
days of greatest significance.
Best simply to be vigilant.
Like my friend Beth said, not
even trying to be wise, "In
my life, the piñatas come
around pretty quick—I just
swing at them with my stick."

Kathleen Rooney's most recent book is the novel Cher Ami and Major Whittlesey *(2020). She is a founding editor of Rose Metal Press, a nonprofit publisher of literary work in hybrid genres.*

OMNIVORE

The Martial Art I Can't Live Without

Brazilian jiu-jitsu has been compared to chess, philosophy, even psychoanalysis. But its real appeal is on the mat.

By Stephanie Hayes

On November 12, 1993, in a sports arena in Denver, a lean Brazilian man in an outfit resembling a pair of pajamas stepped into an octagon to fight. There were no weight classes or judges, and very few rules. His opponent, a dead-eyed Dutch karate champion named Gerard Gordeau, had already beaten two other men that night, including a 420-pound Samoan sumo wrestler he'd kicked so hard that bits of tooth got lodged in his foot. But Royce Gracie was unfazed. In less than two minutes, the jiu-jitsu black belt brought Gordeau to the ground, got behind him, and wrapped an arm beneath his chin to secure a rear naked choke. Gordeau tapped frantically on the mat to signal his submission. The audience at the inaugural Ultimate Fighting Championship event went wild.

Up until then, martial arts in the American popular imagination had featured fighters in cartoonish striking mode—a bare-chested Bruce Lee sending men flying with a single kick or punch, or Ralph Macchio, as the Karate Kid, raising his limbs like a praying mantis. The ground-fighting art honed in Brazil over generations by an entire Gracie dynasty was virtually unknown here. Within months of UFC 1, which both critics and fans saw as a Gracie infomercial, membership quadrupled at the California academy that Rorion Gracie, one of Royce's brothers, had started a few years earlier. In the decades

MILJAN ŽIVKOVIĆ / GETTY; VM / GETTY

since, Brazilian jiu-jitsu has exploded in the United States, and not just under Gracie leadership; every day, thousands of devotees head into humid, rank basement academies across the country, hoping to … well, what are we looking for?

For a discipline that involves getting sat on, sweated on, and uncomfortably entangled with another person—your knee torqued, your arm hyperextended, your carotid artery crushed in a choke hold—Brazilian jiu-jitsu elicits surprisingly cerebral comparisons: to chess, philosophy, even psychoanalysis. Another of Royce's brothers—he has six, each with the first initial *R*—is the legendary Rickson Gracie, considered by many to be the greatest jiu-jitsu practitioner of all time. Rickson leans into the elevated rhetoric around jiu-jitsu in his new memoir, *Breathe: A Life in Flow*, the latest installment in the family's long promotional campaign. "I know this might sound like an exaggeration," he writes of his father, "but Hélio Gracie was to Jiu Jitsu what Albert Einstein was to physics."

Frail and prone to fainting (he suffered from vertigo), Hélio started out as a spectator at his family's academy in Brazil, run by his more athletic brother, Carlos. When Hélio finally began training in the late 1920s, his approach to jiu-jitsu, a martial art first developed in 15th-century Japan and then modified into judo, had to be strategic. "You can't lift a car, but when you use a jack you can easily lift it," Hélio explained in a family history called *The Gracie Way*. "I simply adapted the use of a 'jack' to every position of jiu-jitsu." Leverage, tension, and timing were the secret to his techniques, rather than speed or strength. Sidelining the dramatic throws of judo, he experimented with new ways of fighting while seated or on one's back. In *Breathe*, Rickson goes all in on the art's David-beats-Goliath theme of tactical mastery over physical attributes.

We spend hours drilling a single move, figuring out how to react should our opponent put his leg an inch farther to the right, or shift her weight forward, or, or, or.

THIS BRAINS-OVER-BRAWN emphasis is a large part of the appeal for someone like me, who, at 5 foot 3, spent years loving the wrong sport (basketball). That jiu-jitsu really is like solving an ever-shifting puzzle—calculating your opponent's potential next moves and trying to trap him in a choice between, say, getting shoulder-locked or choked—also helps account for its incongruous acolytes. Take John Danaher, a monklike New Zealander who got his first taste of jiu-jitsu as a graduate student studying epistemology at Columbia University; a guy half his size challenged him to a fight (in the philosophy-department office) and wore him out in minutes. Danaher started training, and eventually abandoned his pursuit of a doctorate to teach at the Renzo Gracie Academy in Manhattan, where he helped revolutionize the way grapplers think about leg attacks.

BREATHE:
A LIFE IN FLOW

Rickson Gracie with Peter Maguire

DEY ST.

But the blend of underdog appeal and mental challenges goes only so far to explain why practitioners flock to their gyms with a mangled finger buddy-taped to its neighbor, a swollen elbow strapped to the torso, or—as one longtime training partner of mine did while suffering a groin strain—legs bound together like a mermaid. CrossFit fanatics fade in comparison with *jiu-jiteiro* who consider cauliflower ear—ear cartilage so damaged by external pressure that it hardens in pale bumps—almost a rite of passage. (Draining a teammate's fluid-filled ear using a diabetic needle is something we take in stride too.) We plan our travel around must-visit gyms and our days around training schedules. We spend hours drilling a single move, figuring out how to react should our opponent put his leg an inch farther to the right, or shift her weight forward, or use a hand to block our foot, or, or, or. We crave the adrenaline-fueled part of class when we get to roll. In round after round of live sparring with partners of all sizes and skill levels, we test new moves, polish old ones—or just try to survive while a heavyweight rests on our rib cage.

I realize this sounds like a commitment verging on cultishness—and some degree of that is inescapable in a grueling discipline that emphasizes rituals, routines, community, and mind-body synchrony. The Gracie family definitely doesn't hide its fanaticism: Carlos, a self-taught nutritionist with mystical leanings, urged the clan to follow a strict alkaline diet, and believed that certain letters were powerful (hence all those unusual names starting with *R*). Today, a pseudo-religious reverence for instructors is all but baked into the art: In many gyms, students bow to a portrait of an elderly Hélio as they step on and off the mats, and address certain instructors as "Master."

YET IT'S precisely in ascribing quasi-spiritual powers to jiu-jitsu that *Breathe* misses the art's real appeal. Rickson peddles jiu-jitsu as a way for students to discover their "true personalities," for parents to raise good and robust children, for people of all walks of life to harmoniously mingle. But what keeps me coming back isn't its loftiness but its groundedness. For a couple of hours each day, in a basement with leaky pipes and the heat cranked up in all seasons, jiu-jitsu demands that I focus only on the problems I'm facing right there, on the mat—or else I'll get choked. Sparring offers brutal real-time feedback, its rhythms forcing you to bounce back from failure—if you (or your partner) "tap out," you slap hands and start over. Anyone who trains will tell you that there is some life crossover: When you've had your joints bent to the breaking point, stressful situations off the mat don't seem so daunting. And as an antidote to our distracting, screen-driven lives, you can't beat the true absorption and slow grind of jiu-jitsu.

But Rickson offers something closer to a cure-all, rhapsodizing about the academy as a "neutral place" where the hierarchies and hatreds of the outside world dissolve—a view I've heard many echo. "It was hard and sometimes awkward when a pot grower rolled with a cop," he writes, but "mutual respect" wins out in the gym. I've seen some unlikely friendships forged on the mats (between conspiracy theorists and journalists, between doctors and anti-vaxxers); I've made some of my closest friends there. But *Breathe* doesn't just overpromise; it overlooks glaring departures from this creed. Rickson says nothing about racism in the jiu-jitsu world (as in the UFC, some of its biggest stars spout far-right rhetoric). He hardly mentions women, a growing presence but still a clear minority in most gyms. Recent revelations of sexual abuse of women and minors by prominent instructors have drawn serious attention to the dangers of undue reverence for black belts, whose stature often shields them from censure. Jiu-jitsu involves extreme physical intimacy and poses extreme risks—we have to trust our training partners to respect the tap and other boundaries. Does Rickson have any idea that as we women suss out a new gym, we often rely on a network to know who is safe to roll with and whom we should avoid?

As jiu-jitsu's allure grows—a proposed police-reform bill in Michigan would require all officers in the state to hold at least a blue belt (or have equivalent martial-arts experience), as though a scrap of fabric is a surefire way to avoid the use of excessive force—Gracie-style hype becomes even more important to avoid. Thankfully, as the reckoning with the mistreatment of women in jiu-jitsu shows, plenty of its devotees are clear-eyed. The philosophical black belt John Danaher, who wears a skintight rash guard at all times, ever-ready to teach a technique, once offered an unillusioned verdict: Jiu-jitsu "doesn't make you good, it doesn't make you bad. It will just reinforce what you already are," he told *The New Yorker*. "If you're an asshole, it will make you a worse asshole. If you're a good person, it will make you a better person."

That is right in line with a jiu-jitsu mantra you'll hear yelled from the sidelines during sparring: "Position before submission," which amounts to "Don't get ahead of yourself." Even as we're taught to think three steps ahead, we're encouraged to practice restraint. In the quest for a careful balance, any practitioner might at least have a shot at humility. *A*

Stephanie Hayes is the deputy research chief at The Atlantic.

Pear

By Erica Funkhouser

All fruits are not created equal.
In September the pear tree produces
an army of hard pellets tasting
of twine, of whining,
tasting of the word *but*.

What animal sprayed
its body's bitter water
across this bark year after year?
Who knelt here to bury
amulets forbidding flavor?

Other pears require company
to produce fruit,
but this tree bargained
with the local devil:
Permit me to self-fertilize
and I shall forevermore
yield the inedible.

On a day when the world
is full of poison, this is
a good place to harvest wrath,
to spit venom and crush
any yellow protest
rising from the grass.

Erica Funkhouser's most recent collection is Post & Rail *(2018).*

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5 Handcrafted Chianti Classic

4 Multi-Gold Portuguese Fave

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BOOKS

Shape-Shifting Animals on an Inhospitable Planet

Lizards' feet are morphing, squid are shrinking, butterflies' wings are growing stronger.

By Rebecca Giggs

In June of this year, not long before the midwinter solstice, catastrophic floodwaters draining from the Gippsland Plain, in southeastern Australia, left in their wake an otherworldly phenomenon: Translucent spider silk, extending half a mile in some places, trailed over riverbanks, roadsides, and fields, rising into glistening spires atop highway signs and shrubbery. On once-humdrum stretches of road, drivers pulled over to stare, take pictures. When a breeze ran through the membrane, it rippled with the fluency of a tide surging in a mangrove swamp. Light trembled on the sodden turf beneath. How improbable that something so delicate, sensuous even, might remain after something so destructive.

To spot the creatures responsible, you would have had to draw close. Sheetweb spiders—constellations of them—clustered in a cosmos of their own froth and protein. A mature sheetweb is rarely bigger than a contact lens; the spiderlings are best made out with a magnifying glass. On days of ordinary weather, millions live in the earth, but when threatened by inundation, the spiders abandon their belowground niches. Each fashions a single thread, a streamer, to function as an emergency airlift. Lofted up by atmospheric currents, and possibly by electrostatic crackle too, the spiders sail on the tips of their lines toward higher terrain, alighting, in time, on fence posts or treetops or ascending farther still. In 2011, a pilot reported crossing paths with clumps of spiders at 2,000 feet. In a departure from habit—wingless as they are—the sheetwebs fly. The tracers of their mass decampment, a strand of silk for every spider, settle on a scale so vast, so uniform, the result looks less like the work of animals than like something mythological or architectural: a mysterious Christo at work, festooning the landscape.

The weather in Gippsland is changing, as is true everywhere. The variability of the region's climatic extremes has become more pronounced since the 1960s: hotter hot spells, fiercer floods. Scientists foresee longer dry periods split by downpours of worsening severity. When sheetwebs appear, we would do well to view them as a premonition of a future we are failing to avert. That which elevates the spiders out of crisis—their ribbons of silk—attests to how deeply they are, in fact, enmeshed in a nature that grows more chaotic. Weaving is the way arachnids make themselves at home in the world, their webs functioning as dormitories, trip wires, and traps for prey. But as the sheetwebs spin silk to flee an inhospitable habitat, their webs are flotsam from an evacuation.

Though evolution has endowed these tiny asterisks of life with a flight instinct, and an ingenious strategy for extricating themselves from disaster, the spiders cannot stay aloft forever. When the sheetwebs drifted back down in Gippsland, that was not the end of their emergency. Not until after the waterlogged soil dried out did they shrink once more into their myriad hideaways. In countryside mauled by storms, with land submerged below rising rivers, we will see more of the spiders, it seems, for they cannot escape us. And should waters recede too slowly, they may be doomed. If we can set aside our anxious wonder, perhaps we may see in the sheetwebs' adaptive resources, and their limits, the challenges that await in the quest to acclimate to crisis.

HOW TO INHABIT a world in profound transformation? In this era of climate-change anguish, all field biology might be said to be underpinned by that question. The answers emerging from studies of the animal kingdom shed light not only on the capacity of individual species to accommodate less favorable conditions, but on the guide rails that will govern whether, and how, every life form on the planet will be remade as the coming decades unfold. Conservation movements have historically coalesced around vanishing animals (whether African elephants, Bengal tigers, or monarch butterflies), but a significant line of research in the natural sciences has pursued a different concern: What must animals do now to persist?

Two new books on this subject—*Hurricane Lizards and Plastic Squid*, by Thor Hanson, an independent conservation biologist, and *A Natural History of the Future*, by Rob Dunn, an ecologist at North Carolina State University—explore the startling ways in which, short of extinction, fauna (and flora) are responding to cascading changes wrought, in varying degrees, by humankind. They direct their attention not to large mammals imperiled by dwindling wilderness, but to

ILLUSTRATION BY DANI CHOI

an assortment of minifauna: reptiles, fish, birds, insects, and even—particularly in Dunn's writing—microbes. Synthesizing a wealth of recent findings, both books open trapdoors onto the vivid lives of other beings in hopes of giving humans a close-grained understanding of our role in habitat change and the varieties of adaptation that may be in store for our species too.

Hanson's subtitle, *The Fraught and Fascinating Biology of Climate Change*, clues us in to the author's goal of spotlighting strategies that permit animals to withstand (perhaps even to exploit) environments in transition. Right away he makes clear that vulnerabilities to change are not evenly distributed: Miseries hovering on the horizon for our species have already arrived for creatures that are susceptible to finer fluctuations of conditions, or that have lower thresholds of tolerance. Yet animals are not all equally entrenched in their existing habits and habitats. Some demonstrate surprising plasticity of behavior, geographic range, and even appearance. A remarkable few have evolved resilience in the face of disasters that human communities already experience as ruinous.

Conditions don't have to be lethal, Hanson notes, to be consequential. To a sun-basking reptile—a "heliotherm" that regulates its internal temperature by scampering in and out of the shade—high heat is an acute stressor. Hotter weather hasn't killed fence lizards outright, but when these wriggly reptiles are forced to shelter for almost four daylight hours or longer, they hunt fewer insects, consume fewer calories, and cease reproducing, so their populations wink out all the same.

Other lizard species have demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to expand the breadth of the extremes they can inhabit by revamping their bodies. For anole lizards living on the Turks and Caicos Islands, in the Caribbean—an archipelago wracked by ever more severe weather—the solution to enduring hurricanes lay underfoot, literally. Researchers have documented lizards evolving heritably longer front limbs and larger toe pads on their forefeet, the better to grip onto anchor points when buffeted by gales that damage buildings, uproot trees, and fell electricity poles. The lizards have transmogrified—engineers might say "ruggedized"—to hold their ground in a nature that is more capricious today than at any time in their past.

Our mental models of climate change portray the process as ambient and inanimate—manifest in the air and ocean, in melting ice and multiplying dunes. By contrast, the anole lizards' story is disquieting in its intimacy. It suggests that the legacy of extreme weather is legible in the flesh too, that physical appendages can be recast by hurricanes, over generations. As human actions alter the atmosphere in ways that guarantee more frequent and severe windstorms, in some sense we could be said to have become indirectly responsible for what some animals *are*, their very shape. Call to mind the Platonic ideal of a lizard—bony, bronze, and flick-tongued, on the sand of a deserted beach. Do we now have a hand, so to speak, in its feet?

Even as human activities obliterate wilderness, closer to home we are expanding the range of the bedbug, housefly, rat, bat, pigeon, crow.

The climate has always driven evolution, of course. The surprise, Hanson points out, is how fast some animals are modified by their surroundings—and in pulses of sudden, lasting change, not by increments. Speckled wood butterflies are developing stronger wing muscles as their borderlands in Scotland warm up and move northward, opening territory to those butterflies best able to cover the distance. Male collared flycatchers on Sweden's Gotland Island are becoming less ornamented as temperatures climb. Fluffy white forehead patches on the birds (a feature of courtship displays) have perhaps become too burdensome: Males with striking plumes get drawn into more confrontations with rivals, and in hotter weather that competition expends reserves of energy to their detriment. Male three-spined sticklebacks (fish) likewise have grown duller. A flush of bright scales, hitherto enticing to female sticklebacks, proves a fruitless adornment in waters clouded by algal blooms.

In the soot-soiled cities of the Industrial Revolution, peppered moths famously evolved to be darker in color, less visible to birds that sought to eat them. When the air grew clearer, lighter moths prevailed again. Likewise today, where once-durable snowpack has become transient and patchy in Finland, a once predominantly gray species of owl trends toward brown plumage, better camouflage in a tawny domain. Air pollution is still at work here, though it is not smog that dims the owls. Carbon emissions beget snowmelt by way of milder winters. Between the natural selection of adaptive traits and the artificial selection of desirable characteristics (that is, animals domesticated by humans), genetic variation in the wild is today subject to the inducements and penalties introduced by manufactured conditions.

The effects are cumulative and disorienting. Familiar animals lose their familiarity to us. Visually striking animals decline in visibility. These examples augur a less colorful, less pattern-filled world to come. Some animals appear to vanish entirely, only—as if in a fable—to be rediscovered in miniature, having passed through the eye of a crisis. The Humboldt squid was thought to have departed, or died in, Mexico's Gulf of California after a hot streak in 2009–10. In fact, the squid remained profuse—but they had downsized to a fraction of their former dimensions, living half as long on a different diet. Trawlers seldom caught them, because their lures were mismatched to the adapted cephalopods, and the squid had so radically changed in appearance that people didn't know how to see them anymore. When the lines were pulled up, crew

members examining the catch classed what few Humboldts they handled either as unsalable juveniles or as species of littler squid. What else, by shape-shifting to keep pace with conditions that we helped alter, has escaped our notice?

ROB DUNN steers our attention toward the biota under our noses as part of a broader project to explicate the circumstances that prompt new life forms, and adaptive behaviors, to appear. As his subtitle—*What the Laws of Biology Tell Us About the Destiny of the Human Species*—signals, he's also interested in extrapolating to how we ourselves might adjust, to what kind of changed world. Dunn is focused on the "species that live not in the green spaces but in gray ones"—species that cohabit in the built environment, populating our households, cities, nationwide infrastructure, feedlots, fields. "More than half the Earth is now covered by ecosystems we have created," Dunn writes. He reports that "humans now eat half of all the net primary productivity," that last phrase denoting "the green life that grows." Taken together, these spaces, far from being devoid of fauna, represent an "inadvertent ark," an "urban Galapagos" where opportunistic animals shelter and flourish. Even as human activities, both direct and indirect, obliterate wilderness, they are having a different effect closer to home. We are expanding the refuge and range of the bedbug, housefly, centipede, rat, bat, pigeon, parrot, crow. German cockroaches in China, for instance, are believed to have ridden climate-controlled trains through inhospitable (to them) territory and colonized far-flung buildings.

Scientists monitoring urban wildlife point out that built-up areas also provide cover to larger numbers of vulnerable species than we might imagine: A 2015 study showed that Australian cities contain substantially more threatened species, per square kilometer, than nonurban areas do. Certain kinds of tortoise and orchid survive now only within city limits. Meanwhile, pockets of acorn ants and water fleas have become more heat-tolerant living among us, potentially arming them to repopulate greener contexts as temperatures rise there.

Most astounding, as Dunn draws on several fascinating case studies to demonstrate, is that organisms, in evolving to leverage conditions and resources in these manufactured settings, sometimes change so much that new species emerge. Grain silos have given rise to unique songbirds and beetles that prosper off a filched, high-starch diet. Brown rats in some cities—gird yourself—have begun to form insular populations. In New Orleans, waterways divide colonies of rats. In New York, rats seem reluctant to pass through Midtown Manhattan—perhaps because they find less to eat there. And the city's rats have developed distinctive features: They have longer noses and shorter teeth than elsewhere, possibly thanks to a diet of softer food. As rats in these subgroups cease interbreeding, sequestering novelty into distinct gene pools, they are more likely to speciate into new kinds of rat, the way house mice did upon reaching new continents.

Among low-mobility organisms, those rooted in place or slow-moving, some can begin to fork into separate species within a surprisingly small domain. "The minimum area for a snail to evolve a new species is tiny—less than a square kilometer," Dunn observes, "roughly the size of Tesla's factory in Fremont, California." As more and more of the globe is renovated to meet our needs, chances are that our homelands are where we can expect rodents, mollusks, insects, and some birds to evolve anew. Indeed, for all we know, unnamed fungi, ants, spiders, and more already thrive within reach—awaiting study.

HURRICANE LIZARDS AND PLASTIC SQUID: THE FRAUGHT AND FASCINATING BIOLOGY OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Thor Hanson

BASIC BOOKS

A NATURAL HISTORY OF THE FUTURE: WHAT THE LAWS OF BIOLOGY TELL US ABOUT THE DESTINY OF THE HUMAN SPECIES

Rob Dunn

BASIC BOOKS

WE HAVE "secreted a human age out of ourselves as spiders secrete their webs," the philosopher Fredric Jameson wrote, and "it absorbs all the formerly natural elements in its habitat." In the less hospitable world we now face, we need to learn how to live with conditions approaching the outer edges of our tolerance. In six decades, 1.5 billion people will find themselves living beyond the bounds of what Rob Dunn calls "the human niche"—the footings on which large populations of humans can survive and prosper. And that's under a generous scenario in which greenhouse gases peak in 2050 and are then globally reined in. If business as usual prevails, the number left stranded rises to 3.5 billion people.

In mapping guidelines for human responsiveness to crisis, Dunn is well aware that one principle is inescapable: anthropocentrism. But like so much else, perhaps that built-in bias of ours is adaptable. Close study of how animals are living with climate change reveals that humans are at the center of more things than we realize—shaping the lives of many more species than those we love or regard as familiar. Yet the quest to understand the remarkably varied array of pressures and possibilities involved in that dynamic should help keep hubris in check. Though we are a species long wedded to assertions of control over nature, these books make glaringly clear that we are not in command of what we have set in motion. The biodiversity and versatility on display in the animal kingdom of which we are part have lots to teach us. To remain at home in the world, we too will need to change. *A*

Rebecca Giggs, a writer from Perth, Australia, is the author of Fathoms: The World in the Whale.

ILLUSTRATION BY KATRIEN DE BLAUWER

The Miraculous Sound of Forgiveness

In his thrillingly transgressive opera The Marriage of Figaro, *Mozart pulled off his most amazing musical feat.*

By Matthew Aucoin

Opera is impossible and always has been. The operatic ideal, an imagined union of all the human senses and all art forms—music, drama, dance, poetry, painting—is unattainable by its very nature. This impossibility is opera's lifeblood: Most of the art form's bizarre and beautiful fruits are the result of artists' quest for this permanently elusive alchemy. But if any one work is capable of evading or surmounting this foundational impossibility, for me it's Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* ("The Marriage of Figaro"). *Figaro* would likely be my pick if I had to choose a single favorite work of art—and that includes books, movies, plays, and paintings as well as music.

In this three-hour transfiguration of Pierre Beaumarchais' politically charged comedy, Mozart and his librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte achieve an aerial view of the human soul, a portrait both of everything that's irresistible and brilliant and sexy about human beings, and of the things that make us so infuriating to one another. The opera's secret ingredient is love. Mozart loves his characters, even when they're at their lowest, and so we end up loving them too. *Figaro* also has the unique ability to make me forget, whether I experience it as a conductor or a listener, that I'm hearing an opera at all. This is abnormal. In opera, artifice typically reigns supreme; usually this is part of its fun. When I perform or listen to Verdi or Wagner, I never forget that I'm experiencing a capital-*O* Opera, nor am I supposed to. The same is true, I think, of Mozart's other operas: As I experience *Don Giovanni* or *Die Zauberflöte*, I never quite forget that I've been transported to a fantastical imaginary world.

But *Figaro* is a different beast. It is so close to reality that, in its uncannier moments, its artifice can't be perceived. Its music seems somehow to bypass my ears and enter my heart and psyche unmediated. The sensation of being immersed in *Figaro* is no different, for me, from the feeling of gratitude for being alive.

I'm hardly alone in my baffled amazement. "It is totally beyond me how anyone could create anything so perfect," Johannes Brahms once said of *Figaro*. "Nothing like it was ever done again, not even by Beethoven." And *Figaro* is the only opera I've ever conducted that, over the course of a given production, daily provokes some cast member to pause, shake their head, and say, "This is just the greatest fucking thing ever, isn't it?"

In some ways, *Figaro* is responsible for my being a musician, and it's certainly responsible for my work in opera. When I was 8 years old or so, I loved classical music but couldn't stand opera, which I'd heard only bits of on Saturday-afternoon radio broadcasts. Operatic singing struck me as jarring and unpleasant. I was even a little embarrassed on the singers' behalf: They seemed to have no idea how silly they sounded. For whatever reason, maybe because I was enthusiastic about Mozart and was playing some of his easier piano music at the time, my parents bought me a VHS tape of *Figaro*—Peter Hall's production, recorded at Glyndebourne in 1973. I realize now that this production had a dream cast of leading ladies: a young Kiri Te Kanawa as the Countess, an even younger Frederica von Stade as Cherubino, the Romanian soprano Ileana Cotrubaș as Susanna.

This video had a huge impact on me. It gave me the sense of suddenly having direct access to formerly unknown adult emotions. I felt a visceral connection to Mozart's characters, a sympathy for them in my gut and my throat, in spite of their confusing grown-up problems. I didn't grasp the nuances of *Figaro*'s plot, but something communicated itself to me nonetheless. In the opera's ensemble scenes, Mozart has a way of layering his characters' psychic states so that we experience the sum total of the spiritual energy in the room. In these scenes, no emotion or intention can be hidden; every secret feeling is brought to light. All the guilt and desire and insecurities and loathing and love accumulate and cause the musical air molecules to vibrate furiously.

I think what moved me, in these ensembles, was the sheer self-contradictory mass of them, the sense that I was in the presence of a complex, tightly wound ball of emotions whose strands I could never untangle. Precisely because Mozart leaves nothing out and shows each person in all their messy contradictoriness, it's impossible to condemn his characters, no matter how awful they are to one another. The music is itself an act of forgiveness.

Figaro affected me in less lofty ways, too. One thing I love about Mozart is the inextricability, in his music, of the spiritual and the sensual, and *Figaro*, in addition to constituting a thorough spiritual

education, is also very sexy. The dangerous, painfully prolonged erotic games in the opera's second act made me feel queasy when I returned to the piece a couple of years later, on the verge of adolescence. What on earth was I looking at? The androgynous Cherubino—the character is a teenage boy, but he's sung by an adult mezzo-soprano—is stripped of his page-boy outfit by two women, Susanna and the Countess, so that they can dress him up as a woman. (Cherubino is in big trouble, and they're trying to disguise him as a woman so he can avoid being sent to the army.)

It sure looks as if Cherubino and the Countess might end up having sex—or maybe the two of them and Susanna are on the verge of a threesome. I reasoned that the extreme erotic tension between these women was okay because Cherubino was "really" a boy—but then, I also tried to reason away my crush on von Stade's Cherubino by insisting to myself that Cherubino was "really" a girl. What was reality here, anyway?

Whatever I was looking at, it was mighty queer. I had no idea music could embody such transcendently transgressive sensations, these fleeting surges of warmth, of uncontainable desire for … *something*. I'd just begun to experience such sensations myself, and they made me feel very guilty. What did it mean that Mozart, that most angelic-sounding of composers, also evidently felt such things?

What moved me, in the opera's ensemble scenes, was the sense that I was in the presence of a tightly wound ball of emotions whose strands I could never untangle.

FIGARO'S SCORE consists of miracle after miracle, but its final scene might be the most astonishing of all. I've turned to these few minutes of music many times in my life, in times of both difficulty and joy. Many before me have highlighted this sequence as one of the wonders of the operatic world: For the philosopher Theodor Adorno, *Figaro*'s finale was among those moments "for whose sake the entire … form might have been invented." I wouldn't dare to claim that I can explain what makes these few minutes so magical. But maybe I can offer some clues.

Figaro is riddled with numerous interleaving subplots, but to appreciate its finale, you need to understand only the main thrust of the narrative. Count Almaviva, a Spanish nobleman, has been lusting after Susanna, his wife's chambermaid, who is about to be married to the Count's manservant, Figaro. The Count has recently abolished the feudal *droit du seigneur*, the legendary right of the master of an estate to sleep with his female servants on their wedding night. He knows that this enlightened gesture has earned him significant social capital among his servants, but he wants to sleep with Susanna anyway. He figures he just has to be a little sneakier about it than prior generations were.

But the Count underestimates the strength of Susanna's friendship with his wife: Susanna tells the Countess everything, and they join forces with Figaro to expose the Count's hypocrisy. At her wedding dinner, Susanna slips the Count a note inviting him to a nighttime rendezvous in the garden. But when night falls, Susanna and the Countess trade outfits; unbeknownst to him, the Count ends up wooing his own wife. Across the garden, Figaro and Susanna, who is dressed as the Countess, pretend to be overcome by passion for each other. The Count overhears them—just as they intended—and believes that Figaro has seduced his wife. Enraged, he yells bloody murder; the whole population of the estate comes running. But just as the Count prepares to punish his wife's wrongdoing, his actual wife steps out from behind him. He realizes that he has been tricked. Everyone stands dumbstruck, waiting to see how he'll react.

It's worth noting how fraught this moment would have seemed to a European audience in 1786. A nobleman has been outsmarted and publicly humiliated by his servants and his wife. Surely the Count's father or grandfather would have fired Figaro and Susanna on the spot, or sent them off to prison, or worse. But the question of how a man was to respond to such a situation was a borderline issue at the time, not so different from the question of how certain companies were supposed to react when their CEOs were accused of sexual harassment in the fall of 2017. We all know what used to happen, and we all know what the right thing to do is—so what'll it be?

The whole cast waits, breathless. All eyes are on the Count.

He falls to his knees. "*Contessa, perdono*," he sings. "Countess, forgive me."

Mozart sets these words to an ascending major sixth, starting from the dominant, D natural. It is a gesture of supplication, an aspiring upward from a point of abasement. The Count's first *Contessa, perdono* concludes by relaxing a half step downward from the tonic, G, to F-sharp.

He pauses. He realizes that he doesn't sound quite sorry enough.

He repeats himself: *Perdono, perdono*. This time, he stretches his first syllable upward across the interval of a seventh, a slightly wider reach, the sense of entreaty intensified. His last *perdono* finishes with a drawn-out ascending slide from A-sharp to B-natural. It is a pleading, childlike gesture, one that barely dares to hope. The Count sounds anything but authoritative. His "Forgive me" is not a command, as it easily could have been. This final *perdono* is almost a prayer.

The Countess pauses. When she begins to sing, her phrasing is almost identical to the Count's; they are married, after all, and they speak in the same aristocratic cadences. But compare the placement of each of the Count's pitches with each of the Countess's. Whereas the Count starts on the dominant and yearns

upward with a plaintive major sixth, the Countess begins on G, the tonic, and reaches beneficently up a perfect fifth. This gesture bespeaks a profound serenity and poise; she is entirely in control. "*Più docile io sono*," she sings, "*e dico di sì*." "I am gentler"—a moment before, when the Count thought he'd caught his wife in the act, he had loudly refused to forgive her—"and I will say yes."

The first time the Countess sings the words *e dico di sì*, she doesn't sound especially convincing. Mozart places the word *sì* on a gentle slide from D down to C, a gesture that might be taken as a weary sigh of resignation. She knows it doesn't sound quite right. It's not easy to forgive. Just as the Count realized, after his first *perdono*, that he needed to try again, the Countess realizes that her first "yes" wasn't quite generous enough.

She repeats herself—*e dico di sì*—this time coming gently to rest on the tonic. No more hesitations, no drawn-out dissonances, just: yes.

The violins songfully outline a G-major chord with a descending motion that—how to put it?—is a blessing, light breaking through clouds. Each member of the cast gives voice to their hushed wonder at the reconciliation they have just witnessed. Now, they say, we will all be happy.

So why, the listener might wonder, are they singing the saddest music ever written? The double gesture of the Count's humility and the Countess's forgiveness causes an overwhelming release of energy: The cast is transformed into a huge pipe organ. But what is this energy that's suddenly unleashed? Why is this moment so heartbreaking? What are they really saying?

Look closely at the words they sing. *Ah, tutti contenti / Saremo così*. An idiomatic English translation would be "Ah, we will all / Be happy like this." But an awkward, word-for-word translation reveals something else: "Ah, all happy / We will be like this." The separability of that last line—"We will be like this"—makes all the difference. Mozart sets this text as a slow, inexorable chorale, and he repeats the words again and again until repetition uncovers a meaning that's in direct opposition to the literal one. *Saremo, saremo così*. "We will be, will be like this."

They know. The whole cast knows that what they've witnessed is a beautiful illusion. They know the Count won't change, and neither will the Countess, and nor will any of them. Life will stay complicated. They'll still marry one person and fall in love with another; they'll still get jealous, and misunderstand one another, and hurt one another without meaning to. And maybe, once or twice in a lifetime, they'll be granted a moment of utter clarity. A sense that it's all beautiful, even if it's not beautiful *for them*. An aerial view of their own souls. For whatever that's worth.

WHAT COULD BE LEFT to say or do? Once this heart-scouring chorale has floated home to G major, the strings trace a descending line that gradually outlines a dominant seventh chord: G–E–C-sharp–A. I can't describe this passage any other way than to say that, in the afterglow of the chorale, it feels like someone is choked up, and when the strings descend from G to a fleeting E minor, a tear finally breaks free and runs down their cheek. (In some productions, the Count and Countess embrace at this point.)

But this naked emotion lasts only an instant. That C-sharp has a gleam in its eye, a welcome hint of Mozartian mischief: It contains the possibility of modulation out of G major into D major, the key of the opera's famously frenetic overture. Together with the high E that the flute plays above it, the C-sharp seems to be asking, "Are we finally ready to have some fun?"

Yes indeed. The music bursts open into a jubilant, hard-won allegro. After all these exhausting excavations of the human heart, everyone is ready to party. This moment is challenging for conductors, and the reason has everything to do with the characters' psychological state. In fast quarter notes, the whole cast sings the words *Corriam tutti*: "Let's all run" (that is, run to get drunk and forget themselves as soon as possible). Beneath them, the strings and bassoons play a giddy, light-speed line of running eighth notes that practically recapitulates their part from the overture.

The singers inevitably rush here. It's a law of nature. In no performance, ever, have the singers not felt the urge to push forward at this moment. After all, their part is much easier than the orchestra's, and both the music and the words ("let's run let's run let's run!") egg them on. The poor orchestra, meanwhile, is down in the pit breaking a sweat just trying to stay together. Even on some rather well-known studio recordings of the opera, singers and orchestra come egregiously unstuck here.

You know what? I think the singers are right. These characters are trying to outrun reality itself. Damn right that they should speed up. It's the conductor's job, and the orchestra's, to keep up with them. The end of *Figaro* should go up in smoke. Having examined the heart's every crevice, having exposed every weakness, every selfish or shameful desire, and still insisting that love conquers all, there's nothing left for Mozart to do but light the fireworks. *A*

Matthew Aucoin is a composer. His opera Eurydice *is having its Metropolitan Opera premiere this fall. This essay has been adapted from his new book,* The Impossible Art: Adventures in Opera.

BOOKS

How Self-Reliant *Was* Emerson?

Transcendentalism, the American philosophy that championed the individual, emerged from an exceptionally tight-knit community.

By Mark Greif

In the lead-up to the bicentennial of American independence in 1976, a graduate student sent a proposal to an editor at a trade publisher in New York. Would he consider taking on a book about the Minutemen and their "shot heard round the world," set painstakingly in a history of Concord, Massachusetts, the town where the North Bridge fight broke out? In 1977, that book—which was also the student's dissertation—won a Bancroft Prize, the highest honor in the history profession. *The Minutemen and Their World* remains a classic, memorable within a wave of "community studies" that sought to explain big turning points—such as the outbreak of the Revolution and the Salem witch trials—at the level of local ties, focusing on loyalties and antipathies among neighbors, families, holders of property and office, laborers and servants.

The author, Robert A. Gross, went on to teach at Amherst, then the College of William and Mary, and finally the University of Connecticut. Rather than abandon his chosen locale of Concord, he has devoted half a century to an encompassing reconstruction of the town's politics, economy, and society from 1790 to 1850. His databases, begun on "punch cards and mainframe computers," have become ever-larger repositories, progressing from tapes to floppy disks to CD-ROMs to online storage. He has traced the scraps and details of scandals and human tragedies through newspaper columns, property deeds, tax records, and genealogical trees, detecting whiffs of disappointment and ecstasy in the scattered letters and memoirs of town descendants who were becoming more numerous, itinerant, and verbose as the United States matured. In *The Transcendentalists and Their World*, Gross has delivered a second harvest of his career-long work. It is a measured, beautiful volume that brings warm life, accuracy, and complexity to local history, swooping between the bird's-eye view and the tracery of many individual destinies.

After the yeomen with muskets had been memorialized, Concord became famous a second time, in the 1840s, for its writers. Ralph Waldo Emerson, his disciple Henry David Thoreau, the Alcott family, Margaret Fuller, and Nathaniel Hawthorne (whose residence was brief but significant)

ILLUSTRATION BY VEDRAN ŠTIMAC

made the place a byword for the movement called Transcendentalism. Gross uses our devotion to those familiar heroes to interest us in the ordinary story of a tight-knit town turned unusual birthplace. He explores the communal web that supported the emergence of a philosophy steeped in romantic nature worship and dedicated to the lone soul—to the inner growth of the individual, untethered from social convention and tradition. The Revolution, he makes clear, was about community and self-governance, and it unfolded under the leadership of a group bound by ties of duty. How to explain the subsequent emergence of the most celebrated cultural development in 19th-century America, which raised doubts about just such commitments, defying family and propinquity in the name of "man alone"?

FOCUSED PRIMARILY on the years 1825 to 1845, Gross's 600 pages of absorbing narrative, plus 200 more of illuminating notes and documentation, are a refresher course in the birth of a market culture and a mass democracy in the age of Andrew Jackson, followed by the rise of the antislavery cause and stirrings of sectional conflict. Gross gives these grand trends a habitation in 25 square miles of Massachusetts farmland, where he detects a steady erosion of social unity.

For the future Transcendentalist leaders, who proselytized on behalf of the inner spirit empowered by solitary communion with nature, social embeddedness came in many forms. People who have never read *Walden* know that Thoreau lived alone for two years in his late 20s in a cabin beside Walden Pond, paring life down to the necessities. Almost as many are familiar with a seeming contradiction: Thoreau went home some weekends to his parents' house. Ardent defenders respond that young Henry was still a good son, assisting in the family pencil factory. This detail of filial loyalty is so unexpected that it usually ends the conversation.

The Transcendentalists and Their World puts Thoreau's experiment in solitude in context. In early-19th-century Concord, as Gross establishes with evidence from the census, no one lived alone who could help it. In 1837, the year of Thoreau's return from college, only a dozen people did, out of a town population of 2,000, and nearly all of them were widows in perilous situations. Family support was assumed in every enterprise, whether farming or law or keeping the town jail.

When Thoreau went to the woods to live deliberately, he had long been enmeshed in common forms of living together that are rarer today. His mother took in boarders throughout his childhood to supplement the family income. Reaching adulthood, he moved into Emerson's house to be handyman, gardener, and babysitter to Emerson's two young children. The family pencil manufacture was dependent from the start on contributions from kin and on local know-how. Thoreau's ne'er-do-well uncle on his mother's side had stumbled on a lode of "plumbago," or graphite, on a New Hampshire farm, snapped it up, and drafted his more business-savvy brother-in-law to hold his scheme together with the unemployed cabinetmakers of Concord. This was the small-scale enterprise that helped the family pull itself into the middle class and send Henry to Harvard (with help from a scholarship that required Thoreau to collect rents from the university's tenants in the town of Chelsea).

Emerson substituted "Nature" for God, proposing that the soul was roused most readily on walks in the woods, apart from society.

Emerson, in contrast, was to the manor born—to "the Old Manse," to be exact. This was the grandparental home in Concord, residence of the Reverend Ezra Ripley, a figure out of a storybook. Still clad in breeches and hose decades after other men had switched to trousers, he instructed children in their catechism and parents in their duties to the community. Young Emerson occasionally visited from Boston, where he grew up as the scion of six generations of New England ministers—and where he proceeded, after Harvard, to occupy a pulpit at the city's Second Church. His move to Concord in 1834 has been rightly seen as one in a series of risky breaks with expectations: Following his bride's death from tuberculosis 17 months after their wedding in 1829, he'd resigned his pulpit and traveled to Europe. Yet Gross describes another man soon well rooted.

In his telling, Emerson's mother was ensconced in Concord, keeping house for Reverend Ripley, and upon his arrival in town, Emerson was already the ninth-richest taxpayer before starting his career there or acquiring fame, thanks to an enormous inheritance from his first wife's estate. He was still very much a minister, though one spared daily pastoral responsibilities. His own home front tended by his second wife, Lidian, and assorted hired help, Emerson was free to travel around giving guest sermons—ideally positioned to then do the same on a paid-lecture platform as a popular sage and orator.

Emersonian Transcendentalism, too, had roots in his ancestral world. A current of mild awakening had already coursed through a liberal and generous Congregationalism, which had largely done away with the Puritan belief in inherent sinfulness and predestination. Ministers in Emerson's circles espoused inborn goodness and a knowledge of God at birth. The "sentiment of religion," an inner divinity, was to be cultivated through self-improvement and service. Emerson substituted "Nature" for God, proposing that the soul was roused most readily on walks in the woods or on a muddy common, apart from society. And it was Emerson who turned Transcendentalist inner divinity into the secular gospel of "Self-Reliance." "I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me," he boasted. (This gave the aged Ripley infinite heartache.)

Emerson's extreme doctrine of individualism emerges in Gross's account as an utter contradiction of the visible, practical interdependence of Concord life. In his eagerness to elevate exemplars of his creed, Emerson plucked up young Thoreau, a nature-loving schoolteacher with a gift for classical languages, and encouraged his development as a representative character, "*the* man of Concord." He even installed him beside Walden Pond on acreage he had bought on a whim. The extent to which each man perhaps chafed at communal and family constraints, laboring under an unwelcome sense of dependence, isn't really Gross's concern. His point is social: Transcendentalist philosophy expressed a profound intuition of changes that were under way in America, in the details of work and the economy, but that had not yet obviously touched the family and the spirit. The movement was so successful because it rechanneled religious rhetoric to address modernizing shocks, otherwise unspoken, and tried to reassert an individual's control of his fate.

THE QUEST of *The Transcendentalists and Their World*, as Gross turns from the luminaries to the daily Concord round, is to show that the transformations taking place in communication, travel, capitalism, and national party politics had been subtly diminishing the bonds of local feeling for decades since the Revolution. Emerson and Thoreau proposed that personal will and spiritual renewal could face down an atomization and sense of alienation that were spreading without anyone's deliberate choice. Gross takes up the challenge of revealing how that erosion and resistance were felt by ordinary people as they navigated their lives in the local community.

Transcendentalist philosophy expressed a profound intuition of changes that were under way in America, in the details of work and the economy.

The old self-sufficiency that had anchored New England farm life entailed steady family labor and collaboration with other farmers to fulfill quite modest tastes, wants, and expectations of life. "Dinners followed a regular round," Gross writes: "baked beans one day, boiled dish another, and a roast next, in strict succession." He documents that, as transport improved, "progressive" agriculture switched to intensive crops for market, and tastes turned to regional imports, bought with cash. "Why raise flax and wool in the fields and devote endless hours to the spinning wheel and loom when machine-made fabrics and ready-made clothes were available?" In the "new agricultural capitalism,"

> the ties that once bound together the rural community frayed, and new lines of division separated a successful minority of progressive agriculturalists, attuned to the latest science and responsive to markets, from struggling neighbors hanging on by traditional means and from a transient class of landless laborers arriving from elsewhere.

A familiar story, but one etched with especial vividness here, as Gross introduces his dramatis personae in one generation, and we watch their children wrestle with the changes their parents have made. When the book opens, in the politically quietist "era of good feelings" of the 1820s, two lawyers, Samuel Hoar and John Keyes, have spun their legal practices into wealth and political dominance, vaulting to positions in the state legislature and in local offices. Rival store owners Daniel Shattuck and Samuel Burr control the merchant money. The cast is filled out by an aged physician, Isaac Hurd, and the jailkeeper, Abel Moore, both fierce speculators in real estate, aided by special access to knowledge of who is dying or being foreclosed on. Reverend Ripley is their long-lived Greek chorus, showing up on any occasion to croak a benediction upon tradition.

The members of the town establishment meet in the Freemasons' Hall and in the Social Circle (a club for the rich male elite), and on their own initiative decide to undertake urban redevelopment in the town center. They set restrictions to force out "any blacksmith shop … or building in which any filthy or offensive business shall be carried on," including carpenters and wagonmakers, the old mainstays of village life; they make way for retail and brand-new banks and insurance companies, to which these rich men supply the chief capital.

In the decades to follow, we witness a variety of insurgencies against this elite: an anti-Masonic movement that accuses the secretive Freemasons of dark homicidal conspiracies, as well as upsurges of partisan democracy in the Jacksonian era. These national trends and movements are given flesh and spirit in Concord, in alternately comic and terrifying chronicles of individual and group conflicts.

Equally illuminating are the struggles of sons and daughters who are expected to sustain their parents' projects but have inclinations of their own. John Shepard Keyes, a son of the politician, is among the most poignant figures. "Young Keyes loved the outdoors as much as anyone of his class in Concord except for Thoreau"; high-spirited and mischievous, he just couldn't please his dad. Plus he had bad luck. Teasing another boy one afternoon, he earned a rock thrown in his face, breaking his teeth and plunging him into excruciating pain:

> The treatment—an application of nitric oxide—deadened the nerves but "killed" the teeth, which ultimately had to be removed, in an age before novocaine, with "old-fashioned twisters." Not only was Keyes without his two front teeth, but he also had to endure a lifetime of dental misery, from which he obtained relief only by smoking cigars.

He wished to join the Army or embark on some other kind of physical adventure. Instead, he was sent to Harvard, where his father paid surprise visits and once snooped in his desk and read his diary. Even as a graduate, he could get no freedom from surveillance: "My 'foolish abominable infernal habits' … were blasted and why? Because I drank a mug of flip at the ball."

Gross's fascinating revelation is that boys like Keyes came under the spell of Emerson. Rereading a lecture of Emerson's 50 years after he had heard it in person, "Keyes, a man in his seventies, felt once more 'the stir to … life and spirit' evoked by the orator's 'power and eloquence.'" George Moore, a son of the jailkeeper, followed Emerson's lectures devoutly if obtusely: "What I understood … I liked very much, but there was a good deal I could not understand." Gross observes that "Emerson highlighted the distinctive dilemmas faced by youth coming of age"—impatience with established ways, spiritual yearnings, longing to make a mark—and as their attendance grew, his "lectures targeted the young … as his special constituency."

The Emersonian vision of mental power and refusal of constraints affected young women too—teenagers who thrilled to his call but knew too well, as his brother's fiancée, Elizabeth Hoar, told Emerson directly, that "no 'idealizing girl' in her experience had ever fulfilled her early promise after coming of age and marrying." The fate of Martha Hunt—a brilliant young woman sent to Groton to study by her sacrificing farmer parents—was emblematic. "Emerson … encouraged her ambitions and lent her books," Gross writes, but prospects remained limited. The only paid role commensurate to talents like hers was that of teacher—a job that approximately 20 percent of white women in antebellum Massachusetts held at some point. But "managing sixty children in a cramped schoolhouse" as a summer schoolmistress was demoralizing, and Hunt's thwarted interests left her "a strange girl," according to a contemporary, "not content to milk cows and churn butter, and fry pork, without further hope or thought." At 19, she drowned herself in the river. Nathaniel Hawthorne helped fish out the body.

Gross also shows that most of those who were galvanized by Emerson moved on from him. The few women who truly opted for an independent, risky life—plunging, as Margaret Fuller did, into authorship, feminism, reform efforts—"accused him of settling for a placid suburban existence." Other townsfolk, like Keyes, settled into family expectations, marriage, and continuity themselves, and remembered the Transcendentalist inspiration fondly but vaguely.

THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS AND THEIR WORLD

Robert A. Gross

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS AND THEIR WORLD emphasizes throughout that individualism helped dissolve organic community. No doubt this was the long-term trend. Citizens aspired to self-reliance and spiritualized egotism, and the many revolutions of the period facilitated the shift. And yet in the detailed life stories with which this book swells, Gross reveals, over and over, Concord's residents returning to family, tradition, responsibility, and the demands of neighborhood.

One of Gross's own quieter formulations captures this truth: "Community was not so much declining as shifting forms." The contours of this shift are discernible in the rise of ardent moral reforms with wider geographic range, such as abolitionism, the defense of the Cherokees, and women's participation in the petitioning of Congress. It was as if earlier moral policing in one's own parish—monitoring sin in oneself and in neighbors, creating tight but short-range bonds—split along two tracks. One led to individual self-improvement and self-realization, and the other to reform of "the nation" or "the people," each mission cosmic rather than local, yet both with a communal thrust.

Quite subtly, the book fuels a certain suspicion of Emerson as an enthusiast and inspirer, a figure more capable of expansion than depth, impressed more by the "manly power" of merchants and capitalists than by the circumspection of scholars. He joined the Social Circle with the other nabobs of the town. Though a powerful spokesman once roused, he lagged behind his abolitionist neighbors and family members. Emerson's racial attitudes were not admirable.

Meanwhile, a surprising hero emerges in his one truly unwavering and stubborn young follower. By the end of Gross's story, a new vision of Thoreau has taken shape. He is the townsman who turned his withdrawal into a conspicuously individual performance—"his well-built house" by Walden Pond "readily visible to passersby on the carriage road"—in order to take his neighbors and family along on his journey. Thoreau and his family were ardent abolitionists (his sister Helen was a friend of Frederick Douglass's), and he continued to hide enslaved people on their flight to Canada even while living at the pond.

The famous early chapters of *Walden*—which seem so brutally insulting toward greedy, wasteful, acquisitive farmers and townsfolk—turn out to have been delivered, face-to-face, as lectures to his neighbors in the Concord Lyceum in 1847, by a self-revealing Thoreau under the title "History of Himself." Such chastisement was in the old New England spirit of calls to the congregation. "Thoreau never sloughed off the heritage of Ezra Ripley and the message of community," Gross writes. "In his mind he was never alone. The community came with him."*A*

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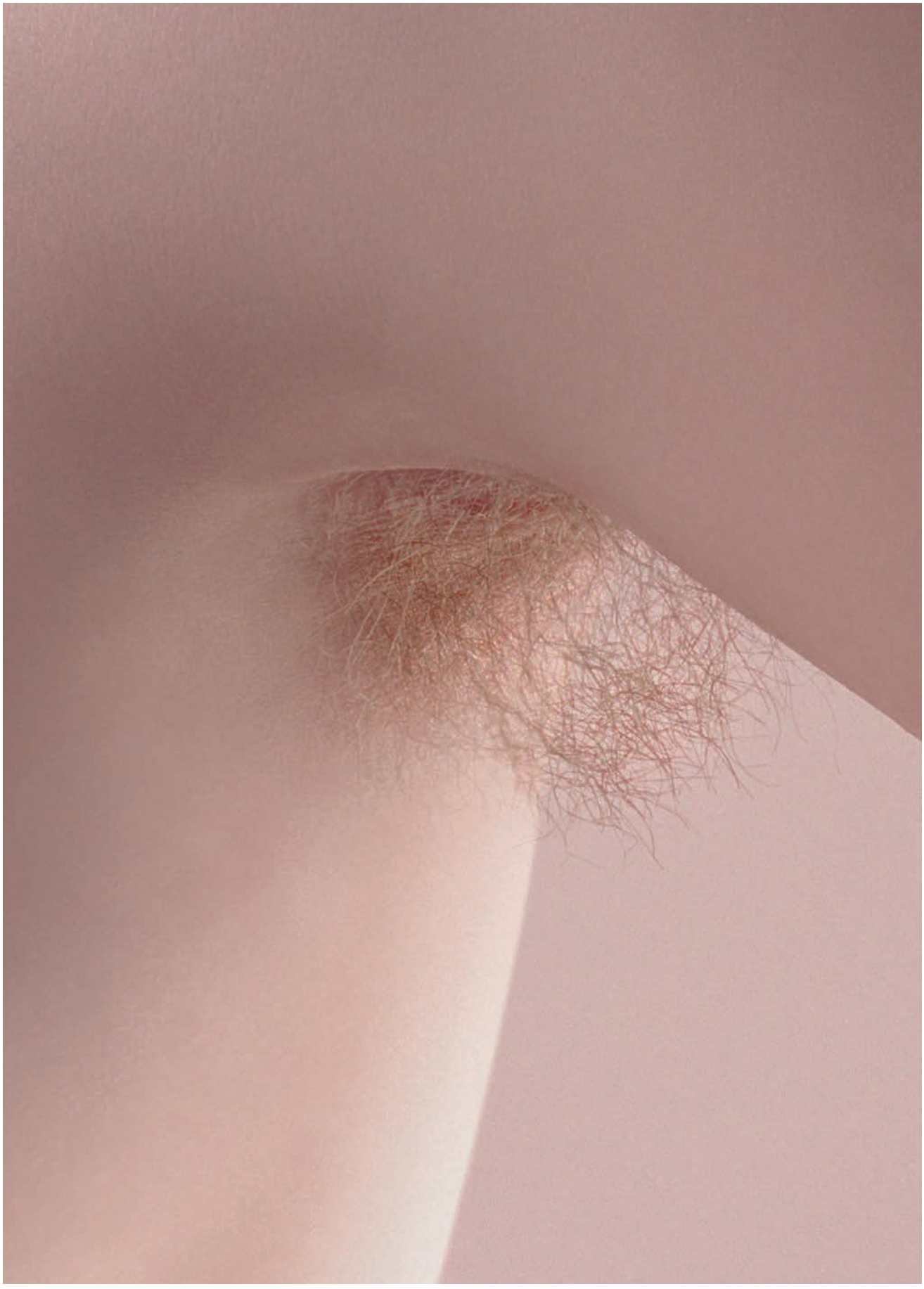
FICTION

The Armpits of White Boys

By hurmat kazmi

During the predeparture orientation at the crumbling three-star hotel by the sea—with its white portico and its lobbies smelling like a Native Jetty swamp—the exchange student is warned about a number of things. Ex-exchange students—by now so Americanized, you would think they had spent their entire lives in the U.S.—regale him with anecdotes both funny and scary: host fathers casually dropping



the bass during dinner-table conversations, and host mothers quietly letting one or two rather pungent ones slip during walks in the park; host fathers letting their hands hover too close to the breasts and buttocks of their host daughters, and host mothers soliciting bare-bodied massages from their host sons.

In Washington, D.C., where he arrives in August along with all the other exchange students from his home country, he has another set of orientations. Exchange students get a monthly stipend of $125 from the State Department. The host families report to the local coordinator, the local coordinator to the regional coordinator, the regional coordinator to the national coordinator, and the national coordinator communicates directly with the State Department—a chain of command through which news of discontent or concern ascends like an elevator. The prime warning here is loud and clear: Be rude to your host family and you'll be thrown out of their house, put up for adoption by another host family; get caught drinking, doing drugs, shoplifting, impregnating someone, planning to flee or overstay, and you'll be sent back home.

It is the first time that the exchange student has fully escaped his family's supervision, and although the temptation to hook up here—to give himself to another exchange student—is immense, and although the hotel rooms allow for such opportunities, he has that warning tucked securely in his mind. His days in D.C. are marked by strict celibacy. After four days in and out of orientations, sightseeing around the big, historic city, he boards a flight to his assigned state for a school year of cultural and academic exchange.

He gets lucky with his placement: Visalia, California, middle-aged host parents. He is aware that many exchange students get sent to remote nooks in Iowa or Kentucky; he is also aware that many exchange students get stuck with elderly couples looking for company after their own kids stop bringing their families around for Christmas with the grandparents.

On his first night, he anxiously eats a single slice of pizza for dinner. He is disappointed by his room initially, small and plain, devoid of character. Despite his disappointment, he lays out on the bed all the gifts he has brought from back home: embroidered Sindhi hand-fans studded with golden beads; a small, hand-painted rickshaw figurine; packets of Laziza kheer and Shan korma masala; kundan bangles for his host mother; a white kurta for his host father.

His host mother is a stay-at-home mom to two kids, a 4-year-old boy and 2-year-old girl, and his host father is a sergeant with the City of Visalia Police Department. They live in an ordinary house on an ordinary street, not unlike the ones he has grown up seeing in American movies. His host mother is all safari shorts and spaghetti-strap tops, baseball caps and mineral sunscreen. Her freckles change color under variations of light. She is about the yard-sales-and-Costco-membership life. She uses phrases like "none'ya business" and "alrighta-Idaho-potato," and is all about holding hands and saying grace before every meal. His host father is a big guy, a regular guy, unhandsome in a way that suggests he has never been handsome—thin lips, cheeks like a hairy fruit. He is mostly away at work and mows the lawn and rakes the leaves when he is home. He says things like "funk up my trunk" and "drop a deuce." His host siblings are small: nubby shoulders and jutting knees, ribbons of coagulated snot in their snub noses. The brother is boisterous arms and a screaming mouth, smelling of the sweet rot of Jell-O and Go-Gurts; the sister is a fat, white fermented dough waiting to rise, smelling of soiled diapers, rash cream, and no-tears shampoo.

The exchange student surprises himself by not getting homesick. He doesn't miss Pakistan, or his family. He is in awe of his hosts, astounded that they've allowed a stranger—from a whole other country, no less—such uninhibited access to their house, to their lives, for 10 months. His family back home has barely any patience with external intrusions—relatives, guests, house-helps, even his sisters' children.

For the exchange student, school is a maze, a confusing colosseum. A boy, his first-day "buddy," takes him around and shows him his classes, the gym, the cafeteria. A girl in his U.S.-history class offers him a dented Tootsie Roll, to "introduce you to American candy." The kids in his debate class ask him questions about Pakistan, about terrorism and homemade grenades and Osama bin Laden.

At home, when he has settled into the family well enough to not feel awkward calling his host mother Mom and his host father Dad, his host mother asks him if the bangles his mother has sent for her are expensive and whether she should put them on their family insurance plan. The bangles are cheap, fake gold, purchased from Liaquat Market, he knows, but he pretends to be clueless, says that he will ask his mother when he speaks with her next. He tells his mother that his host family loved all the gifts. Each time he thinks about the bangles, he pictures his mother in the sweltering Karachi heat, bent over a dilapidated kiosk in Liaquat Market—her kamdani chador clinging to her damp back—haggling furiously, excited to buy presents for his new family in America. He avoids the subject with his host mother, but she eventually brings it up herself. "Don't ask your mother about the bangles," she says with a pitying smile. "I don't want her to get embarrassed."

Embarrassed on his mother's behalf, he feels a lump in his throat, a sensation that returns during a mild altercation about coffee creamers. He starts drinking coffee—real coffee, made in a coffee machine, with ground beans, and not the stupid instant coffee that he is used to drinking back home—and to soften the edges of the bitterness that jabs the corners of his mouth, he pours in half a cup of creamer. For a few days his host mother lets it slide, allowing him to unabashedly splash his coffee with caramel, hazelnut, toffee, pumpkin spice, and French vanilla. Then, one day: "Coffee creamers are expensive," she says in a tone that takes him by surprise, a tone laced with anger. "You cannot keep doing that. Use milk, or don't drink coffee."

BY OCTOBER, from the pictures other exchange students post on Facebook, he gathers that snow has begun to fall in some parts of America, but the heat doesn't relent in dry, sandy Visalia. At school, boys continue to wear tank tops, shorts, and flip-flops—yet another cultural shock for

PREVIOUS SPREAD: ILAN RUBIN / TRUNK ARCHIVE

him, the school's lack of a uniform code making him feel like a guest, not a student. What shocks him more are the armpits of these boys: unshaved, thick hair shimmering with sweat, flattened to swirls on their skin. He averts his eyes from the exposed armpits almost as quickly as he does when he sees anyone making out in public, which is something he was warned during the orientations never to stare at. Eventually, out of curiosity if not desire, the armpits of these boys become a bizarre receptacle for his attention.

He notices that there is hair in the armpits of boys who do not even shave yet, boys still in the throes of puberty. Turfs, scant and abundant, black, brown, and golden, muddled with tiny white crumbs of deodorant, like snow caught in foliage if they use the white, powdery kind, or matted flat and wet-looking if they use gel. He notices the intricate web of wrinkles around the edges of their pits when they hold their arms too close to their bodies. He hears the susurration of wind passing through the abyss between a raised arm and a torso. He wants to bury his face under their arms and smell them all.

At home, too, he notices his host father taking a plunge into the swimming pool, arms raised over his head to form an inverted *V*. The cords of his triceps snap, and the tender skin under the arms dips to form a cavity, ripe with two tracks of hair, dark-black and disorderly. His host siblings are too young to have any body hair at all; they are shiny and smooth like mannequins.

He has a hard time making friends at school. The girl who offered him candy does not speak to him again; his "buddy" does not recognize him in the hallways, does not return his smiles or nods. His only friends are other exchange students from Croatia, Senegal, and Indonesia.

Thankfully, he does not allow the early rifts with his host mother to convince him that his time with his loving American host family will be unpleasant, and in fact, soon enough, in his host mother he finds one of his closest friends in Visalia. She takes him along on every trip to the supermarket (she prefers WinCo over Vons and Shasta Cola over Coke; both choices save her money) and takes him to her loquacious hairdresser, who gives him a Justin Bieber hairdo with blue streaks. With parents, host or otherwise, he cannot be close to both, so he chooses sides, plays favorites. He is devoted to his host mother, and without protest, his host father recedes into the background, emerging every now and then to take him to a lake or to watch a bicycle race.

His host mother, too, he notices, lacks friends—her days are chores-oriented; she keeps the house immaculate and cooks uncomplex but delicious meals. Or if she has friends, she does not invite them over for kiddie parties and brunches, or speak with them for hours on the phone; or if she does any of that, she does it while he is away at school. Sometimes he returns home to find her napping in the middle of the day, errands behind her, nothing else to do.

He imagines covering the pores up with tape or glue, or better still with cement, so he never has to shave again. And then it hits him, the jubilant realization that here, in this place, he really doesn't have to.

His host mother is the coolest person he has ever met. The two of them talk over dinner, post-dinner, while putting the kids to bed, late into the evening. They end the day with a sweet "Goodnight," picking up the conversation the next day exactly where they left off. They buttress each conversation about the present with anecdotes about the past, filling each other in on the parts of their lives the other has missed: siblings' weddings, vacations, deaths in the family. They fall into a daily routine. He tells her each and every thing that happens each and every day at school; so what if one day she says—when he tells her about the boy who, during the first numismatics-club meeting, seeing the blue streaks in his hair and the skinny jeans hugging his skinny legs, walked up to him and volunteered the fact that he is gay—"Ugh, stay away from him."

In December, the central heating is turned on too high and he lies in bed naked, a thin throw blanket draped over half of his body. After an entire day of wearing a jacket, a feral, fermented scent rests in his armpits. He rubs his nose on the papery edge of one and sniffs. He imagines that the smell emanating from his armpit belongs to a white boy. He thinks about their bare, milky limbs coruscated with golden hair and ears pierced with diamond studs, their perilously sagging jeans and exposed boxer briefs. He thinks about standing close to them and inhaling their tangy white-boy breath and the antiseptic fumes of cheap aerosol sprays masking their sweet boy smells. The hardness between his legs makes its presence felt. He touches himself.

He thinks about how the white boys carry triumphant gains in their arms and shoulders, the bulks of their chests, flaunting their physicality. How some of them wear tank tops and even in profile you can see the geometry of their hard abs, the plush palimpsest of hair on their navels. He thinks about the nebulous glow of their skin, about how the faintest trace of hair on their Adam's apple catches the light in the sun, how a lone bead of sweat dangles for dear life from the bristles on their chins. They always smell so clean that he imagines God softened their flesh with laundry detergent.

Then he thinks of fathers back home, pressing razors into their sons' palms after Friday prayer, after the sermon in the mosque, the shrill voice of the maulvi echoing in his ears. *Cleanliness is half the faith.* He hears the hushed tones of fathers

whispering to their sons, instructing them to cut—to a size smaller than a grain of rice—the hair in their armpits and above their members; to follow the Sunnah, the lifestyle of the Prophet. He imagines all of these scenarios in his head because his own father has never had such a conversation with him, never pressed a sharp razor into his soft palm. These are scraps of information he has picked up from boys around him, in school and in his family.

He folds his arms behind his head to look at the skin of his armpits, razed to the texture of sandpaper, each pore agitated and red. Soaped and scraped, soaped and scraped, ardently scratched with a razor every week, the sharpness tingling long afterward. And before he was big enough to hold a razor, he remembers how his mother used to strip his armpits clean with homemade wax. How she stood him in front of the mirror to show him how the wax had to be heated on a steel plate that had been blackened over the stove, and then a stick, usually from a leftover ice pop, had to be dipped into the hot, gluey wax, which was then immediately smeared in an even sheet over the hair. His mother taught him to wait and blow gently on the wax, let it harden and shrink and tug on the skin, and then to pull, always in a single direction, and always quickly. Sometimes the pain made his eyes water and sometimes little ellipses of blood formed on the broken skin. And sometimes, even worse, especially when he started waxing his own pits, he tugged too hard, or too slowly, or in the wrong direction, causing a violent breaking of a hair or two—causing within a week the problematic hairs to grow inward when they returned, causing boils to emerge in his pits, boils that grew and grew until they waged war against the tensile strength of his skin, and the skin eventually gave way, causing the boils to burst open, oozing pus before becoming small again, disappearing over time, leaving behind shriveled dark spots and congealed skin. Days later, hair would appear in his armpits again, tiny and prickly, like the heads of toothpicks in a jar.

He looks at the mutilated pores in his armpits and wonders, *This is what they come out of, the hairs?* The pores are, he thinks, tiny portals—the birthplace of hair. *And what is inside?* he wonders. Long spools of hair coiled and resting under the warm skin? Coils of hair unwinding themselves every week and squeezing out of the sievelike membrane of skin? He imagines covering the pores up with tape or glue, or better still with cement, so he never has to shave again. And then it hits him, the jubilant realization that here, in this place, he really doesn't have to.

HALF OF HIS TIME in America has passed, and yet each time he visits a grocery store with his host mother, he experiences afresh the joy of seeing all things familiar and unfamiliar. Every time he purchases Aquafresh toothpaste, St. Ives body wash, and Clinique moisturizers, he feels like he has moved up in life. Yes, these products are available back home too, but in large, shiny marts frequented by the rich, where each time he goes, just to lurk, he is trailed by store clerks, their suspicion barely masked by their eagerness to offer advice and answer questions. Everything tastes different here, though. Pineapples are hard and dry; mangoes are sweet ghosts of themselves, sold in a box or a can, dipped in cancerous syrups. Milk is not delivered by a fat man on a scooter every morning at the break of dawn but pulled down in cool bottles from pristine shelves. It does not smell of the warm, febrile belly of the cow. It smells of nothing and tastes like chalk.

Undoubtedly his host mother knows what he is, they both know, but he is scared to say it.

On nights when his host father is away at work, he and his host mother—after putting the kids to bed and cleaning up the mess of swimming-pool noodles and dismembered limbs of toys—watch TV late into the night. *Project Runway* and *America's Next Top Model*—they love these shows. There was a time in his life, around when the Bollywood film *Fashion* came out, when he grew obsessed with the idea of becoming a dress designer. His family found him one day—tangled in fabric that he had taken from his sisters' creaky closet, face made up like a Barbie's—and the successive name-calling, shaming, and blackmailing eventually subdued his interests; but as he sits down to watch these shows with his host mother, a rekindling occurs in his heart. He finds himself unable to speak, the words slipping further and further away from him after his host mother says—as he comments one night on how talented the men on the show are, how beautiful the dresses they design on such short notice, using such scant materials—"If they can be called men at all."

Undoubtedly his host mother knows what he is, they both know, but he is scared to say it. He does not have words yet to argue about or explain how he feels to his host mother—the shape of his hurt remains unknown to him—so he argues with her about milder things: petty arguments about his chores and about spending more time on Facebook than with the family. When he tells his host mother it's sunny outside and he wants to tan—and she says that he already has really dark skin and doesn't need to—he says she is being racist. When she yells and flings things in the air, he locks himself in the bathroom and pretends to cry. The State Department issues him its first disciplinary warning.

For his 16th birthday in March, his host family takes him to Vegas, a city he has expressed a desire to see ever since he arrived. They don't do much there other than walk up and down the strip, in and out of hotels, but it is the best birthday of his life. During the last ride from the strip to the hotel, he gets into the cab

and murmurs—under his breath so the driver doesn't hear, in a voice full of mock amusement—"So now, where are you from?" Thinking that he is making fun of his host father for being nice and conversing with the cab drivers (when he's simply remarking on the fact that in the two days in Vegas, every single cab driver has been a non-American, from Bulgaria, Ethiopia, Bosnia, or Ukraine, speaking accented English, just as he does), his host mother scolds him in front of everyone, lecturing him on the American values of politeness and kindness.

A few months have passed since he last shaved his armpits. The hair has exposed its unseen potential, growing longer and longer every month. Though he should be sickened, he is delighted to find, post-shower, the solvent smell of fresh sweat beneath his arms, his pits mildly sticky like a Post-it pressed and plucked too many times. In his more daring moments, he steps outside the house wearing tank tops recently purchased from Target. He finds excuses to expose his armpits, to show the world his new, benign development. He scratches the back of his neck to rid himself of a nonexistent itch; he reaches for the top shelf in the library to grab a book that he replaces seconds later. He is fascinated by how the barest puff of air provokes the hair in his pits into motion, flickering like a hundred candlewicks. How devoid of shame this ostentatious display of virility, how lacking in grace. How beautiful.

THE APPLICATIONS arrive for the next year's crop of exchange students and are sent to the current host families, neatly plastic-coated. His host family goes through all the forms, asking his opinion on each applicant. His host parents decide not to host next year. They want to take a break, they say. He feels two things simultaneously: A part of him is happy that for a while, he will be their only exchange-child experience, and a part of him feels he has let them down so much that they will never want to host again.

Several months later, when he is back in Karachi, he will learn that in the end they did decide to host another exchange student, from Senegal, and a year later he will learn that they decided to adopt him, to keep him forever. They will announce it on Facebook, *our new son*, and set up a GoFundMe to pay for his college education. They will make him a permanent member of their family, just as he had imagined they would—but didn't—make him.

AS SPRING ARRIVES, his host parents go out together—to an annual police officers' dinner—which is something they do not do often. His host mother's sister, the one who lives in Fresno, comes over to babysit the kids, along with her hot jock of a husband and their son. When his host parents leave, she invites her half brother and his girlfriend over too. He sits talking to these people, telling them, yes, he is from Pakistan; no, that's not in Saudi Arabia; yes, he is a Muslim; and no, he doesn't speak Islam. The girlfriend is especially impressed by the exchange student's school newspaper, which has recently published a heavily plagiarized feature he has written. Eventually, boredom stalks the gathering. Smiles are exchanged. A bottle of wine is produced. Passed around and gulped down. Another bottle. It is not his first time drinking alcohol—he has been stealing vodka and rum from the pantry throughout the year, mixing it with orange and cranberry juice—but he says that it is. This fascinates the group, and they fill his glass again and again. His host siblings sleep in their room peacefully, soundlessly, but when his host parents return home to a party of half-passed-out babysitters, their yelling wakes them up.

She will, of course, read all his chats—with the boy in his Spanish class, with the one who is a peer tutor, and with the one he met at a debate tournament.

Later, when his host father's younger brother is getting married, his host parents let him drink under their supervision. They don't seem to notice that he gets drunk out of his mind. In the privacy of the bathroom, where he runs to throw up, he thinks to himself, *Now I am drunk and should act like a drunk person*. Drawing on images of drunk people—mostly from Indian movies and TV shows, because he has never seen a drunk person in his life in Pakistan—he begins to sway and stagger and slur his speech, much for his own amusement, but more for the drunken girls in short, shiny, sequined dresses, who call him cute and take selfies with him on their iPhones. When he is no longer able to walk or even stand, his host father carries him to his room and puts him to bed. For years he will replay this memory in his head again and again, trying to conjure the exact image of his host father lovingly planting a kiss on his forehead and covering him up with crisp white sheets and whispering, "Goodnight, son." He will remember, too, how minutes later, he purposely rolled off the bed, just to be held again and be put back in by his host father.

"Grounded and phone is taken away": He uploads a status on Facebook several weeks later, using the small laptop his host parents have loaned him for schoolwork. As he had hoped, his host mother comes out of her room, into the living room, where he is sleeping—his own room is occupied by his host father's parents, who are visiting. "Give me the laptop," she whisper-yells. "Now." His phone has already been confiscated, all his messages on it, conversations with the boys he has pursued at school—to no avail—and the phone has no lock. He shuts the laptop and hands it to her.

She will, of course, read all his chats—with the boy in his Spanish class, with the

HOME
A CELEBRATION

NOTABLE VOICES REFLECT ON THE MEANING OF HOME

Edited by CHARLOTTE MOSS

IN COLLABORATION WITH NO KID HUNGRY

"Philanthropy is an extension of heart—and that we all have."

- CHARLOTTE MOSS

one who is a peer tutor, and with the one he met at a debate tournament. Later, she will confront him not about the risqué messages to these boys, but about the fact that he lied to one of them, told him that during his visit to Las Vegas, his host family had taken him to a Dev concert, and also to the VMAs, where he had seen Taylor Swift perform live, all of which showed that he was ungrateful and did not fully appreciate what his host family had actually done for him.

After a few days, his host father takes him out for coffee, tells the exchange student that they love him very much, but if he continues to disrespect his wife, they will have no choice but to ask him to leave their home.

IT'S MAY—one month to go. The thought of leaving crushes him. Despite the fights with his host mother, there is no place else he would rather be. He feels bad about not missing his family, his real family back home, his sisters, his father, his mother—especially his mother—who has torn her clothes to dress him, has flung pieces of meat from her plate onto his. His mother whom he loves but has never spoken with the way he speaks with his host mother: endlessly, 'til he runs out of breath. Sometimes in the middle of the night he wakes up from nightmares—he dreams that he is already back home, in Pakistan. His body breaks out in a cold sweat and his armpits, now so full of hair, are clammy.

His fights with his host mother become more frequent, more virulent. He has figured out ways to hurt her, and he finds it thrilling to watch her face dissolve in a mix of anger and sadness. Calling her "Host Mom" does the trick. Telling her that he is not interested in going to family events and wants to focus on community service—so he can get that certificate from the White House, signed by Obama—works too. So does eating a snack as soon as he gets home from school, and then, at the dinner table, telling her he is no longer hungry for the meal she has spent a lot of time preparing. Some days he does not understand why he pushes her buttons. His host mother sings Lady Gaga with him. She puts together his costumes for the spring-fling week at school. She passes down Aveeno skin-care products for his cystic acne. She trusts him to take care of the kids while she does quick errands. She tells him that as a teenager she was very rebellious and belligerent—getting suspended from school, bringing back bad boys, calling her mother a bitch, etc. Some days the exchange student wonders if he has been karmically brought into her life, to give her a taste of her own medicine. Despite the ceaseless chatter, he never feels truly seen or accepted by her. Isn't half-formed love what he's received all his life?

On the night of his graduation, as a surprise for him, his host mother cooks chicken korma using the spices he has brought from home. His local coordinator and a few other exchange students, and his host mother's sister and her hot jock of a husband and their son and his host father's brother and his newlywed wife and their unborn child, are invited. When he comes home from the graduation ceremony, he is greeted by the smell of garam masala and for a second, he thinks his mother has come all the way from Karachi to cook dinner for him. Before he sits down to eat, his host mother grabs him by the arm, drags him to his room, to the dresser in the corner, on the shiny surface of which he had left, while rushing to get ready for the graduation ceremony, the clippings of his fingernails. Their ragged edges streaked with black dirt stare at him. "Do not do this ever again," she says, her eyes aglimmer with fury. "I almost threw up." Then, she leads him back out and smiles at the guests. He feels ashamed, his hunger replaced by sadness. Later at night, crying in his bed, he thinks that he did not even ask her what she was doing in his room, and then he remembers that it isn't his room at all.

One week before he is to officially return home, he is asked to leave. The reason for the argument with his host mother is irrelevant, as it always is. They are hurtling along Church Street at high speed to the Hair Mania for what will be his final haircut in America; tumbleweeds hurl themselves in their way with a suicidal ambition. The steering wheel is slapped; words like *fuck* and *goddammit* fly from his host mother's mouth. He—sensing that he has set in motion something that cannot be reversed—clutches his breath. The warm June sun shines in his eyes.

His local coordinator comes to pick him up from the salon, not his host mother, and he knows what this means. On the ride home, his neck and back itch, chopped hair clinging to the damp skin. His host mother is waiting for him at the door, the cordless phone in her hand, host father on the line. After a preamble about his disappointment and hurt, the father says, "I will have to ask you to leave our house," and though he has expected this, he allows himself to be shocked by the dictate. He falls to the ground, cries.

"I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry," he says now to whoever will listen to him: his host mother, who averts her eyes; his local coordinator, who shrugs; the elder of the two host siblings, who watches with wide-eyed horror, and the younger girl, who puts her foot in her mouth. "Pack whatever you can," his local coordinator says. She will send for the rest later.

At his local coordinator's parents' house, he will occupy an empty room until his future is decided by the national coordinator. He sleeps in a foreign bed all over again. Outside the window, an unfamiliar street, with identical cream- and beige-colored houses; the moon is full, and full of scars.

In the morning, post-shower, post-breakfast, his local coordinator calls. She speaks in a low, mournful voice. "Yeah, dude, sorry, we are putting you on a flight back home tomorrow." There is a silence, because he doesn't know what to say, what to do with his voice. Then there is laughter, a thigh being slapped. "I am kidding, dude, relax. You'll go home after a week, with everyone else. As planned." Relief spreads; his eyes fill with tears. A knot loosens somewhere inside of him. "Your dad will come to pick you up tomorrow afternoon." The muscle of his heart unfurls. But then: "No, they are not taking you back in." A pause. "For, like, a last family meeting. To talk."

The next day his host father runs late but eventually comes to pick him up.

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While he is not exactly hostile, he is not cordial either. His host father asks if he is hungry, if he has eaten. The exchange student explains his lack of hunger. "Anxiety," the host father concedes, and buys him a sandwich anyway.

At the dining table in their house once again. His host parents on one side, their backs to the kitchen, and he on the other, his back to the window that looks out onto the backyard and the pool. His host parents' English is calm and impeccable, their words like birds returning at night. He feels the language sharp in his mouth; his tongue chafes against his teeth. He gathers his shattered voice, shard by ragged shard. He begins with a dramatic prelude—the memory of which will flush his cheeks and make him cringe for years to come, though later he will not remember if this was rehearsed or spontaneous. "Home is where the heart is," he says, voice quivering, snot halfway between his nose and lips. It is a phrase he has picked up from a Christmas ornament. He tells them they are—this is—his home.

He apologizes, accepts his mistakes, makes no excuses. A laptop screen is flipped open, turned in his direction. His eyes take a moment to adjust to the brightness. A Word document, a couple of thousand words long. A diary of his arguments with his host mother, trifling skirmishes, cataloged by date and time. The fog in his head clears, things come into focus. Words such as *annoyed* and *too long* glisten on the page. It feels like a betrayal that his host mother has kept a diary all along.

A copy of the document has been emailed to his local coordinator and to the national coordinator, who upon reading his host mother's notes will, the exchange student later learns from his local coordinator, question whether it was a loving household for him anyway. "Feeding off of each other's negativity," someone will suggest. The document is also emailed to the exchange student's family back in Karachi, but he will log in to his father's account to delete the message before his father can read it.

When his host family says that they forgive him, that in the future the doors of their house will be open to him, he feels irritated. These wrapped gifts of kindness, packaged in a supremely American brand of congeniality.

BACK AT THE HOUSE of his local coordinator's parents, he is surprised when, for the first time during his nearly year-long stay in America, the electricity goes out.

How much he has lied to others, to himself, he thinks, everything a deception, a facade.

He is used to load-shedding, which happens almost every day in Karachi, but he has allowed himself the luxury of getting used to the constant presence of artificial light and air around him. The whir of the refrigerator disappears, and the restless shadow of the ceiling fan attains a state of uncanny calm. Soon the recycled air in the house begins to shift, an osmosis from cool to warm to unbearably hot. His hairy armpits are damp; a wet film of sweat has formed where his left foot rests on his right. He mistakes the churning in his stomach for hunger. He goes to the kitchen and retrieves the leftover sandwich from the fridge. He feels queasy—sick, not hungry—and tosses it in the bin. He wants to throw up, so he goes to the bathroom, leans over the toilet, and heaves. Nothing. He remains hunched over the bowl, his mouth dry and tears in his eyes. How much he has lied to others, to himself, he thinks, everything a deception, a facade. When his parents come to pick him up at the airport a week from now—reunited with the well-disciplined boy they know from back home—their eyes will swell, faces pasty with pride.

He should shower, he thinks, and takes his shirt off and then his shorts and hangs them up. He looks at his face in the mirror. Rheumy, jaundiced eyes; ruddy, terra-cotta complexion. Sunlight makes the patina of sebum on his skin gleam. The boy he sees is not the one who arrived here 10 months ago. He has a small belly now, lean muscles on his arms from all the swimming, and pimples scattered all over his forehead. Face saturated with fat, cheeks the size of apricots. He has lost fluency in the language of his body; only now is he noticing.

He picks up the razor. For a split second the blade catches light from the sun streaming in through the window, a small spot in its center, from which brightness explodes. But the hair in his armpits is too long and unruly now. He imagines it will get caught in the blade, tangle, and become stubborn knots. He puts the razor back down. He raises both his arms and places them on his head. He turns his head left and then right, sniffs—that new scent of his body: animal and ethereal and smarmy. When did he become this person, and how? *A*

hurmat kazmi has published fiction in The New Yorker, American Short Fiction, *and* McSweeney's.

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ODE

— *to* —

BARBECUE POTATO CHIPS

By James Parker

How they call to you, call to you.

At the gas station, at the supermarket, at the 7-Eleven: Barbecue potato chips. Delicately bristling in their half-inflated bags. Grating, one against another, in their syllables of trapped air. Do you want to eat them? No, it's more frenzied than that—this desire has the flavor of addiction. You want them all at once, immediately, stuffed into your mouth and shattering gorgeously between the millstones of your molars. You want the entirety of them. And then you want it all over again, until you feel ill.

Why BBQ chips? Why not, say, Sour Cream and Onion? I'm from Britain, land of the gourmet chip: Prawn Cocktail crisps were one of the staples of my young life. Smoky Bacon, Thai Sweet Chili—I've had them all. I should be jaded, my palate exhausted. But no. That trashy, voluptuous, salty-sweet synthetic BBQ flavor; that sticky, musky powder—it's amazing. Utterly denatured, completely divorced from the intense, long-haul culinary process that is actual barbecuing, it miraculously retains a suggestion of charcoaly maturity. Of experience. It tastes like it's been through something.

You cannot consume them elegantly. There are noises, breathings, gushings of drool. Your mouth must open wide, dentist's-chair wide. At some point you're going to have to lick—or suck—your fingers.

And there's no satiety with BBQ chips, no natural limit. You want them, you want them, and then you never want to see them again. Nausea is their shadow companion. Between writing the second and third paragraphs of this ode I ate half a five-ounce bag, and now my stomach is involved: It's shifting, rinsing, distending, bulging toward some kind of utterance, as if trying to have an actual thought. Don't they call it the second brain? What have I done to my second brain?

Their nutritional value is of course nil. *Empty calories*: what a beautiful phrase. Negligible minerals (other than sodium), negligible vitamins, no virtues, as food, whatsoever. Floating zeros of energy, with the Buddha's own white light coming through them. These fried and flimsy discs are of no benefit to you. You know it and your body knows it. You're enjoying them for their own sake, their own taste, their own slant on the cosmos. So congratulate yourself, you powder-stained and gasping BBQ-chip lover. *Ars gratia artis*. You're an aesthete. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

Fact: You have options when facing a lung cancer diagnosis.

Learning all that you can about a diagnosis and what options are available can bring more than just hope. It can be the key to accessing treatments that help make long-term survival possible.

Lung cancer clinical trials may be the right option for you or a loved one.

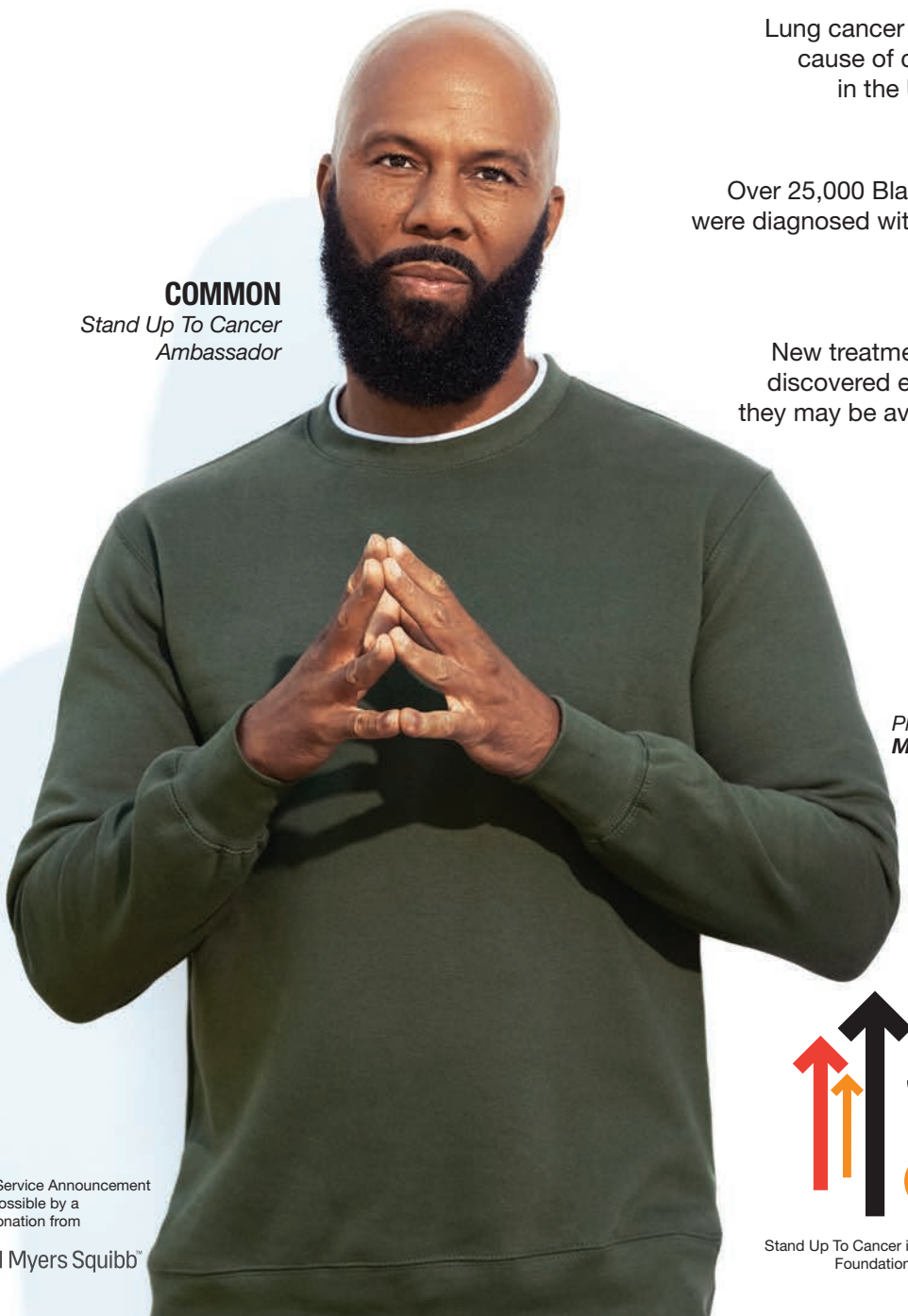
For more information on lung cancer and cancer clinical trials, visit StandUpToCancer.org/LungCancer

Fact:
Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in the United States.

Fact:
Over 25,000 Black Americans were diagnosed with lung cancer in 2019 alone.

25K

Fact:
New treatments are being discovered every day, and they may be available to you.



COMMON
Stand Up To Cancer Ambassador

Photo By ***Matt Sayles***

STAND UP TO CANCER®

Stand Up To Cancer is a division of the Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF), a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

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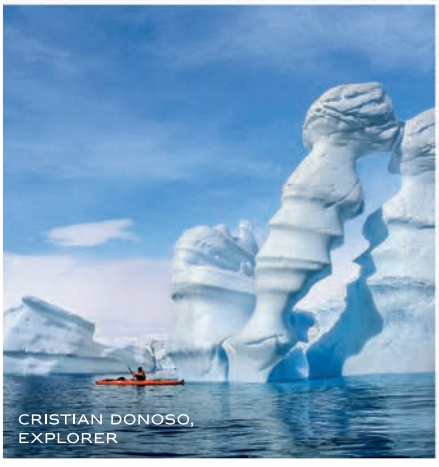
Bristol Myers Squibb™

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC AND ROLEX PERPETUAL
PLANET TUPUNGATO VOLCANO EXPEDITION TEAM



CRISTIAN DONOSO,
EXPLORER

TOPHER WHITE,
CONSERVATION TECHNOLOGIST

FRANCESCO SAURO,
EXPLORER

GHISLAIN BARDOUT,
EXPLORER

WHAT DO THEY SEEK?

Explorers, adventurers, scientists. Men and women who always broadened the horizons, for all humankind to share. Rolex was at their side when they reached the deepest point in the oceans, the highest summits of the Earth, the deepest jungles and both poles. But now that we know, more than ever, that our world has its limits, why do they continue to venture out there, again and again? Certainly not for kudos, accolades, or an ephemeral record. What they truly seek is to understand more intimately how complex and delicate our planet is, to document its change and how together, we can affect it for the better. So as long as they need it, we will be at their side. Because today, the real discovery is not so much about finding new lands. It's about looking with new eyes at the marvels of our planet, rekindling our sense of wonder, and acting to preserve our pale blue dot in the universe…
Doing our very best for a Perpetual Planet.

#Perpetual

OYSTER PERPETUAL EXPLORER II

ROLEX