THE CELLINI MOONPHASE

Featuring one of the most classic complications in watchmaking, the Cellini Moonphase, with its patented moonphase module, will continue to be astronomically accurate for the next 122 years. This is a story of perpetual excellence, the story of Rolex.

#Perpetual
GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

David Remnick on the impeachment hearings; a Times Square summit; upping the score; land of hope and grime; Peter Sarsgaard is listening.

PERSONAL HISTORY

Adam Shatz 28 The Tyke with a Toque
How haute cuisine changed a childhood.

SHOUTS & MURMURS

Sarah Paley 35 Government Contract

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

Rachel Monroe 36 On the Nose
Exploring the cult of natural wine.

ANNALS OF GASTRONOMY

Burkhard Bilger 42 Open Wide
What should we be feeding our babies?

LETTER FROM BROOKLYN

Alexandra Schwartz 52 Bounty Hunters
Tales from the Park Slope Food Co-op.

SKETCHBOOK

Kendra Allenby 57 “How to Correctly Estimate Cooking Time”

FICTION

John Edgar Wideman 62 “Arizona”

THE CRITICS

Philip Deloria 70 Thanksgiving in myth and reality.
73 Briefly Noted

BOOKS

Casey Cep 75 William Monroe Trotter’s uncompromising life.

POP MUSIC

Carrie Battan 80 The rap of Wiki.

ON TELEVISION

Emily Nussbaum 82 Apple TV+ makes its début.

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Anthony Lane 84 “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,” “The Report.”

POEMS

Adrienne Su 46 “An Hour Later, You’re Hungry Again”
Edward Hirsch 66 “A Baker Swept By”

COVER

Wayne Thiebaud “Stuffed”
CONTRIBUTORS

Burkhard Bilger (“Open Wide,” p. 42) has been a staff writer since 2001. He is at work on a book about his grandfather’s experience in wartime Alsace.

Rachel Monroe (“On the Nose,” p. 36), a contributing writer for The Atlantic, is the author of “Savage Appetites: Four True Stories of Women, Crime, and Obsession.”

Philip Deloria (A Critic at Large, p. 70) is a professor of history at Harvard. His most recent book is “Becoming Mary Sully: Toward an American Indian Abstract.”

Carrie Battan (Pop Music, p. 80) started contributing to the magazine in 2015, and became a staff writer in 2018.


Casey Cep (Books, p. 75) is a staff writer and the author of “Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud, and the Last Trial of Harper Lee.”

Alexandra Schwartz (“Bounty Hunters,” p. 52) joined the magazine in 2013, and has been a staff writer since 2016.

Adam Shatz (“The Tyke with a Toque,” p. 28) is a contributing editor at the London Review of Books.

Rebecca Mead (The Talk of the Town, p. 26) became a staff writer in 1997. She is the author of “One Perfect Day: The Selling of the American Wedding” and “My Life in Middlemarch.”

Wayne Thiebaud (Cover) is a professor emeritus of art at the University of California, Davis.

Emily Nussbaum (On Television, p. 82), the magazine’s television critic, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. In June, she published “I Like to Watch: Arguing My Way Through the TV Revolution.”

John Edgar Wideman (Fiction, p. 62) is the author of many books, including, most recently, the story collection “American Histories.”

Adrienne Su (Poem, p. 46), a poet-in-residence at Dickinson College, has most recently published the book “Living Quarters.”

Kendra Allenby (Sketchbook, p. 57) is a cartoonist based in New York City.

Anthony Lane (The Current Cinema, p. 84), a film critic for The New Yorker since 1993, published his writings for the magazine in the 2003 collection “Nobody’s Perfect.”

Naomi Fry (The Talk of the Town, p. 27) became a staff writer last year. She writes for newyorker.com about culture.

Sarah Paley (Shouts & Murmurs, p. 35) has written for film and television. Her poetry has been featured in Barrow Street, AGNI, Magma, and other literary journals.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYOKER.COM

VIDEO DEPT.
In a new animated short film, Janelle Monáe talks about privilege, survival, and growing up black and queer.

ANNALS OF INQUIRY
M. R. O’Connor on the man who mapped America’s dirt roads and the pleasures of travelling them.

LETTER FROM THE U.K.
Anna Russell on how a British reality show featuring people watching TV became a chronicle of Brexit fatigue.

Download the New Yorker Today app for the latest news, commentary, criticism, and humor, plus this week’s magazine and all issues back to 2008.
DO YOU LIKE SAVING MONEY?

Get GEICO.

geico.com  |  1-800-947-AUTO (2886)  |  Local Agent

Some discounts, coverages, payment plans and features are not available in all states, in all GEICO companies, or in all situations. Rent and PNC coverages are underwritten by GEICO Marine Insurance Company. Motorcycle and ATV coverages are underwritten by GEICO Indemnity Company. Homeowners, renters and condo coverages are written through non-affiliated insurance companies and are secured through the GEICO Insurance Agency. GEICO is a registered service mark of Government Employees Insurance Company, Washington, D.C., 20076, a Berkshire Hathaway Inc. subsidiary. GEICO Gecko image © 1999-2019. © 2019 GEICO.
PERSPECTIVES ON AGING

Arthur Krystal’s meditation on the pains and opportunities of growing older was thoughtful and comprehensive, but, while reading, all I could think of was how many elderly people buck the trends that he writes about (A Critic at Large, November 4th). Picasso, for example, painted until his death, at the age of ninety-one, and his late work was pretty good. Although infirmity is unwelcome, and, for many of us, likely inevitable, we should keep aiming to get the most out of life—or die trying. I’m a septuagenarian, and I still go skydiving with my peers. When asked why I continue to do so, I say that I’m fairly healthy and am searching for the meaning of life—like many of us are, at all ages. Let’s not overthink the aging process.

Doug Garr
New York City

Like The New Yorker, I was born in 1925, meaning we are both in our nineties. This qualifies me, I hope, to comment on Krystal’s article, which examines manifold approaches to growing old. However, nowhere did I see a reference to what I believe to be the most effective one. My mother lived from 1901 to 2001, and I’m convinced that her long life stemmed from her sense of humor. Except for housework and gardening, Mother never exercised a day in her life. At about the age of ninety-seven, she was taken to a senior exercise class, and when they wheeled her back I asked her how it went. “I don’t know,” she said. “Most of us slept through it.”

Laughter, it seems, is still the best medicine, and, as long as I can laugh, my life remains worth living.

Vivian Douglas Smith
Falls Church, Va.

Krystal, at the end of his piece, observes that quality of life can decline as one ages. I have worked with the elderly in palliative and hospice care for nine years, and I have seen that the concerns and capabilities of a seventy-year-old can be very different from those of people in their late eighties and beyond. Even without the hardships caused by physical or mental deterioration, very old age can bring a staggering amount of loss: the deaths of a beloved spouse, siblings, friends, or pets; a move from the home where one has lived for decades; and the loss of mobility, independence, and, at times, the ability to take care of one’s basic needs. Many of my clients are full of grief, sadness, and, sometimes, rage at these changes. The very elderly deserve our compassion and understanding, and their stories should inspire the young to begin preparing early for long lives. How? Create a support network of loving people living close by. Save money, as quality care is extremely expensive. Cultivate awareness and savor every experience, as life flashes by in a moment.

Pamela Kuras
Gloucester, Mass.

Having worked on a manuscript about my father’s life for the past three years, I was interested in Krystal’s assertion that Ronald Blythe “must be one of the few living writers to have spoken to the last Victorians.” My sisters and I were lucky to have had several decades in which to speak with a Victorian. Our father, Jon Theodor Jensen, was born in Copenhagen in 1888, on the cusp of the technological and cultural changes that have led to our modern world. It sometimes feels to me that my father and his contemporaries were the last generation to live their lives with a sense of hope in human progress, but he didn’t always feel that way himself. One evening in our back yard, in 1960, as he and I talked about how the world might end, he reaffirmed my sense that my sisters and I were fortunate not to have witnessed, as he did, the chaos and destruction wrought by the beginning of the nuclear age.

Gail Jensen Sanford
Morro Bay, Calif.

The online title of Krystal’s piece proposes that his essay might explain “why we can’t tell the truth about aging.” Maybe it’s because aging has no single truth to tell. After teaching developmental psychology for nearly four decades, I hold in high regard the insights of Erik Erikson, a brilliant neo-Freudian thinker from the past century. He posited that as we move into our later years we can choose to either embrace all that was positive in our lives or, conversely, wallow in feelings of failure for all that we didn’t accomplish. Erikson presents these polarities as two ends of a continuum, “Integrity vs. Despair.” As we grow older, we must decide which word will better represent our experience of life.

Emery J. Cummins
San Diego, Calif.

READING THE ECONOMIST

Writing as a socialist who has nevertheless enjoyed reading The Economist for fifty years, I thought that Pankaj Mishra’s critique of the paper was not incorrect, though he failed to mention some of its admirable aspects (Books, November 11th). Yes, the editors parade their “liberalism” in editorials, but these are easily skipped. The bulk of each issue is filled with objective, exemplary reportage from places never mentioned in most news magazines. Even more distinctively, The Economist’s correspondents write with wit and humor.

In these divisive times, it is important to remember that reading The Economist does not amount to incessant indoctrination—on the contrary, one is making oneself more informed about the world through a different lens, an experience that is both enjoyable and educational. How often do you associate those words with economics?

Jack Winkler
London, England

Letters should be sent with the writer’s name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.
Our $0 > Their $0

Today Schwab offers commission-free online stock, ETF, and options trades, with no minimums.

With others following us to $0, you might ask, why choose Schwab? Only we have a 45+ year mission to make investing easier and affordable for all, award-winning service and superior value.

Oh, and our $0 comes with a Satisfaction Guarantee. Does theirs?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schwab</th>
<th>Fidelity</th>
<th>J.P. Morgan</th>
<th>E*TRADE</th>
<th>TD Ameritrade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you’re not happy for any reason, Schwab will refund your eligible fee and work with you to make things right.

Wealth Management at Charles Schwab

PLANNING | PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT | INCOME STRATEGIES | BANKING

1The standard online $0 commission does not apply to large block transactions requiring special handling, restricted stock transactions, trades placed directly on a foreign exchange, transaction-fee mutual funds, futures, or fixed income investments. Options trades will be subject to the standard $65 per-contract fee. Service charges apply for trades placed through a broker ($25) or by automated phone ($5). Exchange process, ADR, foreign transaction fees for trades placed on the US OTC market, and Stock Borrow fees still apply. See the Charles Schwab Pricing Guide for Individual Investors for full fee and commission schedules. Multiple leg options strategies will involve multiple per-contract fees.

2If you are not completely satisfied for any reason, at your request Charles Schwab & Co., Inc. (“Schwab”) or Charles Schwab Bank (“Schwab Bank”) will refund any eligible fee related to your concern within the required time frames. Schwab reserves the right to change or terminate the guarantee at any time. Go to Schwab.com/satisfaction to learn what’s included and how it works.

Wealth Management refers to a number of different products and services offered through various subsidiaries of The Charles Schwab Corporation. See Schwab.com/wealth. From Investor’s Business Daily, January 28, 2019, ©2019 Investor’s Business Daily, Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission and protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States. ©2019 Charles Schwab & Co., Inc. All rights reserved. Member SIPC (1019-9MSI) A0PT08677-00
It took the American artist Liza Lou five years, from 1991 to 1996, and thirty million beads to complete her life-size sculpture “Kitchen” (a detail is pictured)—both a labor of love and a feminist critique of undervalued domestic labor. It’s on view, starting Nov. 22, in “Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950–2019,” an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of more than eighty pieces by some sixty artists, from Robert Rauschenberg to Simone Leigh, who have experimented with unorthodox materials and hands-on approaches.
**CLASSICAL MUSIC**

**Splinter Reeds**

**Uptown Underground**

The bicoastal new-music series Permutations hosts the New York debut of Splinter Reeds, a Bay Area reed quintet—a grouping, distinct from the conventional woodwind quintet, that integrates a saxophone and a bass clarinet for a more closely related blend of instrumental voices. The program includes works by Matthew Shlolowitz and Sky Macklay from “Hypothetical Islands,” the impressive album that the group issued in March, plus additional pieces by György Ligeti, Dai Fujikura, Eric Wubels, and others.—**Steve Smith** (Nov. 20 at 7.)

**Conrad Tao**

**Weill Recital Hall**

In addition to being a pianist of consummate skill, Conrad Tao has emerged as a formidable thinker who pursues provocative agendas, as in the mix of socially conscious works on his newly released album, “American Rage.” This recital offers a similarly intriguing combination of pieces, placing canonical staples by Bach, Schumann, and Rachmaninoff alongside contemporary works of diverse styles by Elliott Carter, David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Jason Eckardt.—**S.S.** (Nov. 20 at 7:30.)

**Recitals at the Y**

**92nd Street Y**

Two adoptive New Yorkers bring solo piano programs to the Upper East Side this week. Alessio Bax’s is loosely Italian: a delicate opener by Bach has its roots in a Marcello oboe concerto, and a theme attributed to Corelli mutates in a set of slinky, swoony, salty variations by Rachmaninoff. Two days later, literary transformations provide the narrative for Benjamin Hoffman’s recital, which includes Chopin’s dreamy Ballade No. 4, Schumann’s “Carnival,” and Rachmaninoff alongside contemporary works by Elliott Carter, David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Jason Eckardt.—**F.M.** (Nov. 23 at 7.)

**Los Angeles Philharmonic**

**David Geffen Hall**

The Los Angeles Philharmonic, the nation’s most buzzed-about orchestra, returns to Lincoln Center with a pair of inviting concerts. For the first, which is part of the White Light Festival, Gustavo Dudamel conducts Bruckner’s Symphony No. 4 (“Romantic”)—just two days after Yannick Nézet-Séguin offers the same piece with his Orchestre Métropolitain de Montréal at Carnegie Hall, for those inclined to compare and contrast. Dudamel turns up the heat considerably for his second program, accompanying the pianist Yuja Wang in a new piece by John Adams, “Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?,” which is positioned between vivacious works by Gindsay and Stravinsky.—**S.S.** (Nov. 24 at 3 and Nov. 25 at 8.)

**Magdalena Kožená**

**Alice Tully Hall**

The Czech mezzo-soprano Magdalena Kožená has always had a unique voice—sinewy, flickering, sensitive—and on her most recent album, “Soirée,” its mercurial qualities are matched by the timbres of a seven-piece chamber ensemble, which includes her husband, the conductor Simon Rattle, at the piano. Accompanied by many of the same players, she comes to Alice Tully Hall with the album’s program, including Chausson’s shimmering “Chanson Perpétuelle,” Shakespeare-inspired works by Stravinsky and Brahms, and Dvořák’s “Gypsy Songs,” the latter of which has become a signature set of hers.—**O.Z.** (Nov. 26 at 7:30.)

**“Let ’Em Eat Cake”**

**Carnegie Hall**

Gershwin’s 1933 musical “Let ’Em Eat Cake” is a political satire in which the President, inspired by Fascism’s rise in Europe, decides to overthrow the government rather than accept defeat in his reelection campaign. Conventional wisdom says that the work, with its almost nihilistic sense of humor and guillotine plot twist, failed to connect with Depression-era audiences craving escapism; that may be, but a musical comedy that spoofs the solipsism of an American President who has his own clothing line and a predilection for dictatorship can provide escapism in a different context. Ted Sperling conducts the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, the MasterVoices chorus, and a cast led by Bryce Pinkham (“A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder”) in a concert staging of Gershwin’s ambitious, driving work.—**Oussama Zahr** (Nov. 21 at 7.)

**“Processing”**

**National Sawdust**

“Sorrow concealed, like an oven sealed, burns the heart to cinders.” So sings Lucy Dhegrae in Osnat Netzer’s “Philomelos,” a new piece Dhegrae performs this week at National Sawdust. In Shakespeare’s bloody “Titus Andronicus,” the sentiment is addressed to a woman who has been raped and mutilated. Here—undergirded by a violin, sand-filled drums, and pulsing, mewling electronics—the lyrics inaugurate Dhegrae’s “Processing Series,” which features works that touch on trauma recovery. This installment also includes “Her Disappearance,” a soaring song for voice and PVC piping, by Bethany Younge, and Maria Stankova’s sore-to-the-touch flute and soprano duet “Rapana.”—**F.M.** (Nov. 23 at 7.)

**AT THE OPERA**

The Metropolitan Opera’s marvellous production of Philip Glass’s “Akhnaten” (Nov. 19 and Nov. 23), from 1983—directed by Phelim McDermott, conducted by Karen Kamensek, and decked in gold by the costume designer Kevin Pollard—makes an opera about monotheism in ancient Egypt positively riveting. Glass’s score, which eliminates the violin section, feels mystical and incantatory thanks to the sensuality of low strings, the plaintive air of woodwinds, and the glow of brass; melodies unfurl like plumes of incense. In one scene, Akhnaten (the brilliant countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo) storms the temple where priests are practicing old polytheistic rituals, and his soldiers seize their totems and begin tojugle them; like the sun he worships as the supreme god, he pulls everything around him into his orbit. He and his wife, Nefertiti (the voluptuously voiced J’Nai Bridges), reign briefly, until a revolt topples their precisely constructed world.—**Oussama Zahr**
“Christmas Spectacular”
Radio City Music Hall
The Rockefeller Center classic, starring the leggy Rockettes, returns. Nostalgic numbers, such as the “Parade of the Wooden Soldiers,” in which the Rockettes collapse one upon another like dominoes, and “Sleigh Ride,” featuring children who prance and precision-step reindeer, are interspersed with high-tech visual effects and aerialists. And, just as it did in its first year (1933), the show offers the “Living Nativity,” a tableau vivant of the Bethlehem manger, complete with live camels. (Through Jan. 5.)

“Messiah”
Festive Sundays
The theme of this year’s eight hundred fold-paper ornaments is the festive predator T. rex. (Dec. 23)

“Unsere Nacht”
Washington Square Park
The Rockefeller notwithstanding, you’d be hard pressed to find a more authentically New York City holiday tradition than this annual boom-box carolling event, devised and led by the composer Phil Kline. Grab your portable cassette player—or download a sound file or an app from the event’s Web site—and join the procession, which produces ethereal, infinitely variable tintinnabulations throughout its one-mile trek from Washington Square Park to Tompkins Square Park. (Dec. 15 at 6.)

Origami Holiday Tree
American Museum of Natural History
Earlier this month, a seventy-seven-foot-tall Norway spruce made its way from Florida, New York, to Rockefeller Center, where it awaits the tree-lighting ceremony on Dec. 4. But it’s not the only tree game in town—a smaller evergreen, thirteen feet high, is tucked inside the largest natural-history museum in the world. Not to be outdone, Carnegie Hall hosts three performances by volunteer choruses—a massed choir presented by DCINY (Dec. 1), the Oratorio Society (Dec. 19), and the Masterwork Chorus (Dec. 25)—as well as one by the professional singers of Musica Sacra (Dec. 23). Among ecclesiastical outfits, the choir of St. Thomas Church (Dec. 12) and that of Trinity Wall Street (St. Paul’s Chapel, Dec. 20-22) stand out. Meanwhile, for life’s joiners, the Dessoff Choirs offer a come-and-sing version at the Union Theological Seminary (Dec. 7).

“Peter & the Wolf”
Guggenheim Museum
In the annual “Works & Process” show of Prokofiev’s symphonic fairy tale “Peter and the Wolf,” each character has a musical double: Peter is the violin, the duck is the oboe, and the ferocious wolf, a trio of brass instruments. The narrator is Isaac Mizrahi, the players come from Ensemble Signal, and the ingenuous choreography is by John Heginbotham. (Dec. 7-8 and Dec. 13-15.)

Festive Sundays
The Jewish Museum invites budding artists older than three to build Hanukkah lamps out of found objects and to sketch some of the eighty lamps in its collection. Children may take special interest in the white ceramic “menurkey”—a menorah shaped like a turkey—designed, in 2013, by a nine-year-old New Yorker. Joannie Leeds and the Nightlights provide musical entertainment, and they just might play their popular “Tofurkey Song.” (Dec. 19 at 5:30.)

“Ceremony of Carols”
St. Thomas Church
Jeremy Filsell leads the boys of the St. Thomas Choir in their annual performance of Benjamin Britten’s sublime sequence of traditional carols, accompanied by the harpist Sara Cutler. Brief works by Ned Rorem (“Alleluia”) and Peter haloX (“I Am Wisdom”) complete an appealing hour-long offering. (Dec. 19 at 5:30.)

“The Little Match Girl Passion”
The Met Cloisters
Christmastime performances of David Lang’s “The Little Match Girl Passion” have become a tradition for the Grammy-winning choral group the Crossing, which specializes in contemporary music. In Lang’s tender yet penetrating setting of Hans Christian Andersen’s story, the tale of a child who freezes to death on the street can be just as profound as Christ’s Passion. The group also performs Edie Hill’s new “Spectral Spirits.” (Dec. 21 at 12:30 and 3:30.)

New Year’s Eve Gala
Metropolitan Opera House
The Met typically introduces a new production on New Year’s Eve, but this season it gives operagoers a different reason to don their black-tie attire: an evening centered on Anna Netrebko. The velvety-voiced soprano stars in a fully staged, all-Puccini showcase, singing one act apiece from “La Bohème,” “Tosca,” and “Turandot,” alongside Matthew Polenzani, Yusif Eyvazov, and Évgeny Nikitin; Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducts. (Dec. 31 at 5:30.)
WE WERE CURIOUS ABOUT THAT TOO

Because you are our greatest curiosity. So we engineered one of the world’s most advanced safety simulators, where we can put you behind the wheel to see how you react to daunting situations. The things we learn in this virtual world help make the Lexus you drive in the real world safe. Because the most amazing machines aren’t inspired by machines. They’re inspired by you. What amazing ideas will you inspire next? Discover the answer at lexus.com/curiosity.
The playwright Lucas Hnath takes big swings: his back-to-back Broadway outings, “A Doll’s House, Part 2” and “Hillary and Clinton,” used iconic female characters to play out dialectical ideas about morality and self-creation. Hnath grew up in the church—his mother was a minister—and themes of faith and doubt infused his play “The Christians,” which ran at Playwrights Horizons, in 2015, and told the story of a pastor who declares that Hell doesn’t exist. Hnath returns to Playwrights Horizons with “The Thin Place” (starting previews on Nov. 22), a drama that comes at faith from a different angle: the main character is a young medium who claims to communicate with the dead. Her act may be an illusion, but then so is the theatre—a parallel that Hnath will inevitably put to use in his metaphysical mind games. Les Waters directs.—Michael Schulman

Marilyn Nonken
Frederick Loewe Theatre
David Rakowski, a prolific composer of brilliant piano music, crafts preludes and études packed with technical challenges and personality. It’s no surprise, then, to see one of his newest creations on this free program, assembled by the valiant new-music advocate Marilyn Nonken. “Eighters Gonna Eight” requires all hands from Nonken, plus three additional keyboardists: Donald Berman, Sarah Bob, and Geoffrey Burleson. Additional works for one or more pianists, including New York premières by deVon Gray and Stefanie Lubkowski, complete an intriguing bill.—S.S. (Nov. 26 at 8.)

THE THEATRE

Black Exhibition
The Bushwick Starr
A man who calls himself @GARYXXX-FISHER, but who, in every other particular, resembles the playwright Jeremy O. Harris (“Slave Play”), has gone to Fire Island hoping to write, but all he can do is “fuck and cry.” What ensues, in the avant-garde, intensely personal “Black Exhibition,” written by Harris and directed by Machel Ross, is refractory: an anti-epic, a fraught diabolic travelogue, and sometimes a night out at a dreamed-up club. Harris calls this work a choirpoem, linking it ancestrally to Ntozake Shange’s “for colored girls” (still in ecstatic revival at the Public). Like that forerunner, “Exhibition” proceeds a bit like a cabaret. Alongside Harris’s Fisher are performers acting as tripped-out avatars of famous figures—such as Kathy Acker (a hilarious Ross Days) and the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima (Miles Greenberg)—who trouble the text like ghosts. The show is sad and scatological, an intellectual collage and an essayistic provocation. It shows how “experimentalism” is often just an attempt to tell the truth.—Vinson Cunningham (Through Dec. 15.)

Brando Capote
The Tank
Written by Sara Farrington and directed by Reid Farrington, this jittery dance-theatre piece, performed by five actors in kimonos, begins in 1957, in Kyoto, where Marlon Brando was acting in the film “Sayonara” and Truman Capote interviewed him for a Profile in this magazine. (Jennifer Mcclinton stands out as a slinky Capote, as does Lynn R. Guerra as Brando’s mother.) It then imagines that interview extending to the end of Brando’s life, conflates his movie dialogue with his actual biography, tosses in bits of Capote’s “In Cold Blood,” and loops them, in a manner suggestive of Noh theatre. Why? It’s anyone’s guess, but it looks great, with sound (by Marcelo Añez), lights (by Laura Mroczkowski), choreography (by Laura K. Nicoll), movie clips, and props working together in sometimes dazzling concert.—Rollo Romig (Through Nov. 24.)

Broadbend, Arkansas
The Duke on 42nd Street
The Transport Group’s Jack Cummings III directs this pair of musical monologues, largely about the effect of police violence on African-American families, on a nearly bare stage. In the first act, written by Ellen Fitzhugh, it’s 1961, and Benny (Justin Cunningham), a nursing-home orderly and a single father to three-year-old twins, decides to follow a band of fearless Freedom Riders. In Harrison David Rivers’s second act, set a generation later, Benny’s daughter Ruby (Danyel Fulton) seeks solace in a graveyard after police brutally beat her fifteen-year-old son. A six-piece orchestra, fully visible behind the singers, performs Ted Shen’s subtle, questing compositions. The stories and melodies have a tendency to meander, but both singers have arresting voices and presences, and the whole project is admirably unconventional.—R.R. (Through Nov. 23.)

Cyrano
Daryl Roth
The smart, sensitive, always vaguely ravaged-seeming Peter Dinklage stars in the New Group’s musical version of a tale most of us know well. A brave, proud, warlike man with a big nose is jettisoned in this production) sheds all hope of a union with his true love, Roxanne (Jasmine Cephas Jones), and instead serves as ghostwriter and ventriloquist to Christian (Blake Jenner), a more handsome but basically empty-headed suitor. The music that accompanies Erica Schmidt’s adaptation of Edmond Rostand’s 1897 play (Schmidt also directs, in a graveyard after police brutally beat her fifteen-year-old son) is with his schnoz, although the nose is jettisoned in this production) sheds all hope of a union with his true love, Roxanne (Jasmine Cephas Jones), and instead serves as ghostwriter and ventriloquist to Christian (Blake Jenner), a more handsome but basically empty-headed suitor. The music that accompanies Erica Schmidt’s adaptation of Edmond Rostand’s 1897 play (Schmidt also directs, in danceler but often over-stylized fashion) is written by several members and collaborators of the rock band the National—there are some good (if largely sentimental) tunes, but they tend to drone on. The same can be said of the entire production, which stalls in almost every scene, never convinces us of the love that ought to be its engine, and leaves Dinklage’s charcoal charisma—undeniable even here—as a lonely encouragement.—V.C. (Through Dec. 22.)

Fires in the Mirror
Pershing Square Signature Center
For decades now, Anna Deavere Smith’s great works of probing, intracinctly latticecd,
confessional-historical theatre have asserted that a whole world of thought and feeling can be made, through art, to live in just one person's mind and body. This revival of her 1992 play, which is about the previous year's infamous riots in Crown Heights and is drawn from interviews with members of the black and Jewish communities, feels like a test of Smith's method: Can these old words live again in someone new? For the first time, the show is performed by someone other than Smith—the viscerally smart, endlessly empathetic Michael Benjamin Washington, under Saheem Ali's direction. Washington makes the work sing, and the voices of its real people sound eerily vivid. On a recent night, some audience members interacted with him, finishing his sentences and goading him forward, carrying on a conversation with the past.—V.C. (Through Nov. 24.)

Tina: The Tina Turner Musical
Lunt-Fontanne

This genuinely entertaining jukebox musical with some trouble at its edges—directed by Phyllida Lloyd, with a book by Katori Hall, Frank Ketelaar, and Kees Prins, and with seriously impressive choreography by Anthony Van Laast—is organized around Turner's religious experience: her childhood in the rural black church and her turn to Buddhism. The show opens with the adult Tina (Adrienne Warren) rapping out a mantra as her very young counterpart (a charming Skye Dakota Turner) sits through a jubilant musical number at church, unable to restrain her voice. The trouble comes when, as a young woman, she meets Ike Turner (Daniel J. Watts), who comes off more as a comic buffoon than as a real menace. Everybody knows, even before he shows up, that Ike is the villain in the Tina Turner story; on Broadway, this makes him a chintzy Big Bad Wolf. For the most part, the show is fun and the songs sound good—Warren's performance, which sometimes veers happily into an outright concert, is a two-and-a-half-hour hosanna.—V.C. (Reviewed in our issue of 11/18/19.) (Open run.)

Richard III
Gerald W. Lynch Theatre

Social maneuvering, political misdeeds, a lying politician—one may imagine that such tropes have outstayed their welcome of late, in both reality and fiction. But Druid's "DruidShakespeare: Richard III" (part of the White Light Festival), about the machinations and downfall of Shakespeare's vile malefactor, delivers a refined, well-executed take on the themes. The nefariously magnetic Aaron Monaghan serves Richard's duplicity with cloying obsequiousness and coy seduction; his Richard relishes in showing us the thinness of his performance. Afflicted with a lame leg, he hobbles around with two canes, his physicality its own kind of theatre: Richard cranes, leans, and contorts through his scenes of deception. Marie Mullen, as Queen Margaret, is also a standout, haunting the stage. Under Garry Hynes's direction, the production glimmers with Richard's winking moments of humor and dims with bloody brutality. The bold industrial set design and the costuming, full of texture and shimmery embellishments, crown the drama with visual riches.—Maya Phillips (Through Nov. 23.)

Fur
Fourth Street Theatre

Migdalia Cruz's 1995 play, directed by Elena Araoz, is the kind that leers at you over how transgressive it is. Citrona (Monica Steuer), whom Michael (Danny Bolero) bought from a freak show—she's covered in fur—and keeps in a cage in his pet shop, hoping to marry her, says, "My shit and urine is my company." "You pick up your lover's vomit and treat it like a jewel," Michael tells Citrona. But Citrona lusts for Michael's feet, Nena (Ashley Marie Ortiz), who washes Michael's foot with her own hair. It's a love triangle! The bright spot of this production is Steuer, who brings unexpected sass and verve to even the most nonsensical dialogue. A brief sequence performed in the style of a telenovela hints at the more enjoyable play that might have been.—R.R. (Through Nov. 24.)
bursts of color. Among the surreal outliers are "The Distance Involved," portraying an eerily animate candelabra, and "Mr. Peanut," in which the top-hatted legume feeds a strawberry to a buxom nude, who is clearly playingact her pleasure.—Johanna Fateman (Through Nov. 22.)

Baseera Khan

In this show, titled "snake skin," the New York-based artist has wrapped a column in cut-up custom Kashmiri silk rugs and sliced it into seven pieces that suggest sunbursts, the cogs of otherworldly wheels, or the cross-sections of a massive tree. (The "snake" is the column, the textiles are the "skin," and Khan thinks of their weavers as her collaborators.) Some of the sections are stacked, to display the patchwork of the woven designs (and also chunks of the column’s core of turquoise foam). Others rest on the floor, showing off stratified surfaces that are pink with fiery resin-dyed centers. The intricate textile exteriors have become something like contraband since the Indian government’s crackdown on Kashmir; elements of them also appear in the artist’s wonderful framed collages. These layered works, featuring images of ruins, vintage covers of the East German magazine Mosaik, and a text by Arundhati Roy, are a vibrant sidebar to Khan’s modular, ornate, and wholly impressive centerpiece.—J.F. (Through Dec. 22.)

David Lynch

Sperone Westwater

DOWNTOWN In this polymath filmmaker’s paintings, macabre micro-narratives are spelled out in scratchily handwritten captions, which float in gray skies above horrific scenes. Judging from "Bob Loves Sally Until She Is Blue in the Face," from 2000, and "Billy (and His Friends) Did Find Sally in the Tree," made this year, poor Sally has been murdered twice in two decades. Childlike, Expressionist figuration leaves the details somewhat vague, but scabby areas of pigment and collaged elements speak volumes. Lynch’s clean-lined lamp sculptures are foils to his lurid canvases; the graceful works in the "Douglas Fir Top Lamp" series, from 2002, resemble illuminated birdhouses on stilts. But two lovely new "lamps" combine the rusted and austere aspects of his sensibility: in each, lumpy, hand-formed red and yellow shapes join steel armatures and a single blue chandelier bulb to form objects of a quintessentially Lynchian hybrid of strangeness and precision.—J.F. (Through Dec. 15.)

Richard Serra

Gagosian

CHELSEA Great sculptors are rare and strange. In Western art, whole eras have gone by without one. Their effects partake in a variant of the sublime that I experience as, roughly, beauty combined with something unpleasant. Richard Serra, with current shows at three branches of the Gagosian gallery, is our great sculptor, like it or not. I say relax and like it. On West Twenty-first Street, a nearly hundred-foot-long elongated S shape of two-inch-thick weatherproof steel is sealed by a patina of softly textured rust. On West Twenty-fourth, standing steel cylinders, weighing fifty tons apiece, differ in proportion of height to breadth. On Madison Avenue, there are "drawings," rather a frail word for diptychs and triptychs of large sheets of heavy paper bearing thick black shapes in paint stick, ink, and silica—hardly pictorial, they are about as amiable as the front ends of oncoming trucks. There’s something profoundly satisfying—gravity as gravitas—about keeping company with all these new Serras, as if being entrusted with a home truth of your and, for that matter, anything’s earthly existence. The sensation might be a tuning fork to gauge the degree of fact in other aspects of a world awash in pixelated illusions. How real is real? How real are we?—Peter Schjeldahl (Through Feb. 1.)

"The Pencil Is a Key"

The Drawing Center

DOWNTOWN When Welmon Sharlhorne put ballpoint pen to manila file folder to make his clockwork-like drawing "The Eight Ball Company," around 1996, he was forty-four years old and had spent half his life in Louisiana’s notorious Angola prison. (He served twenty-two years on a single count of extortion.) The guards refused to give him art-making materials, so he requested office supplies, to correspond with a nonexistent lawyer. "When you are doing time, you have the time to realize how art can keep you free," Sharlhorne, who now lives in New Orleans, has said. That freedom is the subject of this revelatory show of some hundred and forty pieces by inca-
Founded almost fifty years ago, Ballet Hispánico doesn’t look its age. Eduardo Vilaro, its artistic director for the past decade, has been keeping the troupe up to date, encouraging contemporary choreographers to express the breadth and complexity of Latino identity today. The most fun way to check in on this effort is to attend the company’s annual shows at the Apollo Theatre, in Harlem. Even when the new works are misfires, the evenings have the energy of a special occasion. All the pieces on this year’s programs, Nov. 22-23, are by women. The in-demand Belgian-Colombian choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa offers a première, “Tiburones” (“Sharks”), about the role of the media in perpetuating stereotypes. But the sure winner is “Con Brazos Abiertos” (“With Open Arms”), a recent homegrown effort by Michelle Manzanares, the head of Ballet Hispánico’s school. Its subject is the difficulty of hyphenated identities, especially Mexican-American, but the treatment is light, funny, and fresh.—Brian Seibert

Peeping Tom
BAM Harvey Theatre
Founded in 2000, this acclaimed Belgian dance-theatre collective is only now making its United States début. “32 Rue Vandenberg” takes place amid trailer homes on a snowy mountaintop. To a semi-ironic soundtrack ranging from Stravinsky and Bellini to “Dreamgirls” and Pink Floyd, the inhabitants act out their desires and fears through contortion—bending backward, wrapping themselves around one another. Blown by the wind, they engage in silly slapstick (pratfalls, sinking pants) that swerves into noirish drama and darker surrealism à la David Lynch.—Brian Seibert (Nov. 20-23.)

Noche Flamenca
Joyce Theatre
“Entre Tú y Yo” (“Between You and Me”), Martín Santangelo’s evening of Spanish flamenco, is a stripped-down exploration of love in its various guises, expressed through solos, duets, and ensemble pieces. The company, led by Soledad Barrio, a dancer of burning intensity, is a real unit, made up of four dancers, two guitarists, and three singers. There’s little more to it than this: dancers responding to the words of the songs, the rhythm of palmas (handclapping), and the urgent call of guitars and the human voice.—Marina Harss (Nov. 19-24 and Nov. 26. Through Dec. 1.)

“Incomparable senior living in Bucks County.”

A unique senior living community in historic Bucks County, PA embraces the Quaker values of service, honesty, trust and acceptance. Pennswood Village features inspiring natural beauty, a welcoming atmosphere and a diverse group of neighbors who push the envelope of intellectual and cultural achievement.

Call 888-214-4626 for your FREE information kit.

1382 Newtown-Langhorne Rd • Newtown, PA 18940 www.pennswood.org

“Fridays at Noon”
92nd Street Y
The Merce Cunningham centennial is drawing to a close, but there are still a few opportunities to see his choreography in New York. This week, in fact, there are two events dedicated to Cunningham, the first of which is this talk and demonstration. Alastair Macaulay, the former dance critic
When the annual Germany-based festival Time Warp last visited New York, four years ago, its all-techno—all-the-time approach led to a surprisingly variegated weekend. Its return—at the New York Expo Center, Nov. 22-23—is well timed, as dance–music festivals increasingly focus on specific styles and as younger fans discover the rough joys of techno. Friday features the genre’s Old Guard, with a formidable selection that includes the producer Ricardo Villalobos—who, at the 2015 event, shocked the crowd by cutting his swampy techno with bawdy hip-house—and the duo Pan-Pot, whose sets are tonally kaleidoscopic. The second day spotlights a new and friskier generation, from the chugging grooves of the playful d.j. and vocalist Peggy Gou to the shamelessly anthem-heavy d.j. Amelie Lens.—Michaelangelo Matos

for the Times and a leading Cunningham expert, will discuss “August Pace,” a seldom seen work from 1989 with Patricia Lent of the Merce Cunningham Trust. Their talk will be intermixed with excerpts from the dance, which contains a series of strikingly original male–female duets.—M.H. (Through Nov. 22.)

Darrah Carr Dance
Irish Arts Center
The fiddler Dana Lyn and the guitarist Kyle Sanna are first-rate, versatile musicians and also concerned environmentalists. Their second album, “The Great Arc,” was organized around the idea of species extinction, and their latest, “The Coral Suite,” focuses its attention on fragile reefs, with a sequence of traditional Irish songs subtly arranged to evoke events in coral life. Last year, they performed “The Great Arc” with the addition of Darrah Carr’s modern Irish dancers; now they do something similar with “The Coral Suite.” The dancers respond to the musical rhythms amid video projections of Lyn’s drawings of the endangered ecosystems.—B.S. (Nov. 23-24.)

“Works & Process”
Guggenheim Museum
In the second of two Merce Cunningham-themed events this week, a group of dancers who took part in the epic “Night of 100 Solos”—a compilation of Cunningham solos performed simultaneously in three cities this past April—will reprise their roles in the small theatre tucked beneath the Guggenheim. This selection, curated by the former Cunningham company member Dylan Crossman, will be followed by a medley of Cunningham duets performed by Crossman and his former colleague Jamie Scott.—M.H. (Nov. 24-25.)

NIGHT LIFE
Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it’s advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

Daryl Sherman Benefit
The Clemente
A can’t-miss preview of the surreal live shows she’s presented so far, as Angel Olsen arrived on the indie-music scene, circa 2010, the singer-songwriter has sounded so fully formed that it seemed impossible to imagine her diverting from that style. But that’s exactly what she did with her latest album, “All Mirrors,” from October: on it, she built new dimensions from her songs, incorporating orchestral arrangements as she discovered herself through reinvention.—J.L. (Nov. 21-23.)

Kwesi Arthur
Chelsea Music Hall
The Ghanaian rapper Kwesi Arthur was eying a career in security, but, after hearing Drake’s debut studio album, he was inspired to give music a serious shot. On “Live from Nkrumah Krom, Vol. 2: Home Run,” from April, his blend of melodic hip-hop and Afro-fusion sounds drenched in sunshine, but his lyrics, which he spits in both Twi and English, incorporate the lows of his upbringing and a resounding sense of pride. As his West African country welcomes people of the diaspora for its Year of Return, Arthur helps bring Ghana to the world.—Briana Younger (Nov. 20.)

FKA twigs
Kings Theatre
It had been three years since the English artist FKA twigs last released music when, in April, she dropped the crushingly beautiful video for her single “cellophane.” In it, she steps onto a celestial stage and proceeds to pole dance toward the heavens, her muscles glistening as aching chords spilt out of a piano. The performance is gorgeous, entrancing, and frighteningly exposed—a preview of the surreal live shows she’s planned in support of her exquisite new album, “MAGDALENE.”—Julysa Lopez (Nov. 20-21.)

The Abyssinian Mass
Rose Theatre
Large-scale composition, among many other organized gifts, has long seemed as natural as breathing to Wynton Marsalis. Commissioned eleven years ago to commemorate the bicentennial of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, in Harlem, the eponymous Mass incorporates a seventy-piece gospel choir and the mighty Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, with the trumpet-playing leader in tow.—S.F. (Nov. 21-23.)

Jasmine Infiniti
Basement
The New York–based techno producer and d.j. Jasmine Infiniti has risen to clubland prominence in a very short time—her first release, the “SIS” EP, came out last year. Her blend of experimental electronics and straightforward beats is often ominous, but Infiniti is also an expansive and highly playful performer, cannily veering between wildly disparate tempos and moods, from kittenish R. & B. to blithering breakbeats.—Michaelangelo Matos (Nov. 22.)
Music Hall of Williamsburg

“Cracking,” the song that begins Crumb’s debut album, “Jinx,” is so spacious and atmospheric that it sounds as if it could float away at any second. The Brooklyn-based band has a special talent for weightless, antigravity compositions, but its repertoire is anchored by impressive jazz-oriented instrumentals and by the rich vocals of its front woman, Lila Ramani. The group headlines a pair of shows at Music Hall of Williamsburg; Divino Niño, a Chicago quartet that, in June, delivered one of the year’s prettiest shoegaze albums, opens.—J.L. (Nov. 22-23.)

Snoh Aalegra / Baby Rose

Webster Hall

Compared with the contemporary and pop-leaning songs that occupy most of R. & B.’s real estate on the Billboard charts, Snoh Aalegra’s and Baby Rose’s music sounds decidedly old school. Both singers’ recent albums—“Ugh, those feels again” and “To Myself,” respectively—emphasize the voice as its own kind of instrument and bask in the familiar warmth of traditional soul music. Snoh Aalegra’s smoky jazz tone evokes vintage drama; Baby Rose’s bluesy vocals sound possessed by the spirit of Nina Simone. Their pairing makes for a night that is equal parts melancholic and euphoric.—B.Y. (Nov. 24.)

Bob Dylan

Beacon Theatre

Bob Dylan famously maintains a restless touring schedule that renders him a nomad for much of the year but often returns him to the place of his artistic birth; this year, he settles in for a whopping ten-night stand. Among rock élites, Dylan remains peerless. His concerts are strictly pander-free zones—no cheesy pleases to clap or sing along, no glut of backup musicians, usually no “Like a Rolling Stone.” Rather, Dylan asks audiences to ignore his music. Snoh Aalegra’s smoky jazz tone evokes the familiar warmth of traditional soul music. Snoh Aalegra’s smoky jazz tone evokes vintage drama; Baby Rose’s bluesy vocals sound possessed by the spirit of Nina Simone. Their pairing makes for a night that is equal parts melancholic and euphoric.—B.Y. (Nov. 22-23.)

Son Little

Bowery Ballroom

The singer Son Little has a lithely expressive voice that can locate forgiveness, sorrow, and ecstasy in even the most hackneyed turns of phrase. Though he traffics in sounds sealed shut in the previous century—classic R. & B., some blues—his songs are rarely delivered without subtle contemporary flourishes. As his own star has inched up, his versatility has led him to the studios of various luminaries, including Mavis Staples and the Roots. At Bowery Ballroom, Little gives a peek of his third solo LP, due next year.—J.R. (Nov. 26.)

MOVIES

Aferim!
The Romanian director Radu Jude pioneers a new genre—the Wallachian Western—and brings style and insight to a historical tale of pursuit and persecution. The action is set in 1835, in the southern region of Romania, where the Roma people are held as slaves, noblemen wield tyrannical power, and Russian and Turkish occupiers terrorize the populace. There, a crusty lawman named Constantin and his awkward and mild-mannered son, Ionita, have been dispatched to find a warlord’s runaway slave, Carfin. Travelling on horseback through plains and swampland, Constantin abides the weak and grovels before the mighty, all the while sharing life-worn wisdom with his son. Their encounters—a revealing cross-section of ethnic and economic divisions—are tinged with collected ignorance and sedimented hatreds, especially in the name of religion, passed down through generations. Jude’s avid eye for material details and cultural nuances lends the drama an anthropological specificity; he captures the cruelty of the times and the pitiless course of history with a bitter majesty. Released in 2015. In Romanian.—Richard Brody (Film Forum, Nov. 23, and streaming.)

Burning Cane

The nineteen-year-old writer and director Phillip Youmans displays a preternatural maturity in this intimately textured, far-reaching drama, set in rural Louisiana and centered on a middle-aged black woman named Helen (Karen Kaia Livers), who is weary in body and in soul. She lives alone in a house near cane fields, with an ailing dog as her sole companion. Her dissolve husband died of AIDS; her son, Daniel (Dominique McClellan), a heavy drinker who can’t hold a job, physically abuses his wife, Sherry (Emyri Crutchfield), while nonetheless asserting his right to raise their young son, Jeremiah (Braelyn Kelly). Meanwhile, Helen’s friend and pastor, the recently widowed Reverend Tillman (Wendell Pierce), is undergoing a spiritual trial that makes him judgmental and aggressive. Youmans, who does his own cinematography, depicts these harrowing emotional crises in dramatic fragments and shadow-drenched, often oblique images; they suggest his anguish at a legacy of male frustration, violence, rage, and self-destruction that leaves the region’s women trapped in a futile silence.—R.B. (In limited release and Netflix.)
Dark Waters
The director Todd Haynes’s artistry is hardly detectable in this environmental thriller, yet the film, based on a true story, nonetheless offers a stirring and infuriating story of brazen corporate indifference to employees, neighbors, and the world at large—and the obstacles faced by those who challenge it. Mark Ruffalo stars as Rob Bilott, a Cincinnati lawyer who specializes in defending companies in Superfund-related lawsuits. When a West Virginia farmer, Wilbur Tennant (Bill Camp), shows evidence that the local DuPont plant is poisoning his herd of cattle, Rob defies opposition within his firm and takes the farmer’s case—which proves to be astonishingly wide-reaching. The script, by Mary Correa and Matthew Michael Carnahan, emphasizes Rob’s painstaking detective work in chemistry, public health, and regulatory law—and the personal price that he pays in his decades-long battle against corporate stonewalling and delays. Edward Lachman’s textured cinematography captures its façade of humor with a relentless onslaught of violence—much of it targeting women. The drama begins when Marlowe helps a friend, Terry Lennox (Jim Bouton), leave the country for Tijuana. When Lennox is found petrified little boy and who has, unsurprisingly, grown into an alcoholic adult. Yet his telepathic powers remain intact, and, after teaming up with a teen-ager named Abra (Kyleigh Curran), who possesses similar gifts, he sets about tracking down a murderous gang, headed by the rakish Rose the Hat (Rebecca Ferguson). The whole plot feels curiously random, and the pace is perilously cautious, but Ferguson, especially, brightens the gloom.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 11/18/19.) (In wide release.)

Doctor Sleep
The prospect of a sequel to “The Shining” (1980) is not to be scorned. The urge to discover what happens in the long wake of a movie is often acute, and Stanley Kubrick’s hypnotic work offers no exception; who could resist a return to the Overlook Hotel? Moreover, Stephen King has written a follow-up to his original novel, and it’s that new book, published in 2013, which forms the basis of Mike Flanagan’s film. Ewan McGregor plays Danny Torrance, whom we last saw as a petrified little boy and who has, unsurprisingly, grown into an alcoholic adult. Yet his telepathic powers remain intact, and, after teaming up with a teen-ager named Abra (Kyleigh Curran), who possesses similar gifts, he sets about tracking down a murderous gang, headed by the rakish Rose the Hat (Rebecca Ferguson). The whole plot feels curiously random, and the pace is perilously cautious, but Ferguson, especially, brightens the gloom.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 11/18/19.) (In wide release.)

Ford v Ferrari
Cheerful, robust, and well oiled, the latest film by James Mangold fulfills the plain promise of its title. In the nineteen-sixties, Henry Ford II—played with gusto by Tracy Letts—decides to beat Ferrari at its own game by designing a car that will triumph at the twenty-four-hour race at Le Mans. This ludicrous plan is put into effect by Carroll Shelby (Matt Damon), the upbeat Texan who oversees the project, and Ken Miles (Christian Bale), the lugubrious British driver behind the wheel. Bright and gutsy though the racing sequences are, the movie is not really about automobiles; it’s a multiple-character study that happens to barrel along at high speed, and much fun is to be had from the clash of the various egos, fender to fender. With Caitriona Balfe as Ken’s wife, Mollie, who, true to the spirit of the story, takes no nonsense.—A.L. (11/18/19) (In wide release.)

Varda by Agnès
For her posthumously released final film, Agnès Varda (who died in March, at the age of ninety) revisits her career in a work of multilayered self-portraiture. It’s anchored by two recent public appearances; in the first, at an opera house, she makes bold thematic associations that connect ideas in her films—in particular, the fusion of documentary and fiction—and dives deep into memories that illuminate them. Clips of movies are intertwined with archival interviews and new staged sequences, including a playfully earnest one featuring a camera dollly in an open field, where she interviews the actress Sandrine Bonnaire. In the second part, an outdoor discussion, Varda defines a dividing line in her career that threads into this movie—her discovery, around 2000, of miniature video cameras, which enabled her to work more spontaneously and to become her own central onscreen character. The result is a grand, warmhearted testament to her lifetime of creative connections, her art of self-transformation, and her relentless transformation of the art of cinema itself. In French.—R.B. (In limited release.)

Within Our Gates
Oscar Micheaux’s bold, forceful melodrama, from 1919—one of the oldest surviving features by a black American director—unfolds the vast political dimensions of intimate romantic crises. Evelyn Preer stars as Sylvia Landry, a young black woman in a Northern town who suffers a broken engagement. She heads home to the South and becomes a teacher in an underfinanced school; while fund-raising in Boston, she meets an ardent doctor (Charles D. Lucas) and a philanthropist (Mrs. Evelyn), who help with the cause. With a brisk and sharp-edged style, Micheaux sketches a wide view of black society, depicting an engineer with an international career, a private eye with influential friends, a predatory gangster, devoted educators—and the harrowing ambient violence of Jim Crow, which he shows unsparring and gruesomely. Micheaux’s narrative manner is as daring as his subject matter, with flashbacks and interpolations amplifying the story; a remarkable twist regarding Sylvia’s identity, slipped in at the end, opens up a nearly hallucinatory historical vortex. Silent.—R.B. (MOMA, Nov. 23, and streaming.)

In Robert Altman’s sardonic adaptation of Raymond Chandler’s “The Long Goodbye,” from 1973, Elliott Gould plays the private eye Philip Marlowe as a shambling New York ironist, transplanted to Hollywood in a rumpled suit and a vintage Lincoln Continental. (It screens on Nov. 23, at Metrograph, introduced by Noah Baumbach.) The quasi-spoof, written by Leigh Brackett (who also adapted Chandler’s “The Big Sleep,” three decades earlier), shatters its façade of humor with a relentless onslaught of violence—much of it targeting women. The drama begins when Marlowe helps a friend, Terry Lennox (Jim Bouton), leave the country for Tijuana. When Lennox is found petrified little boy and who has, unsurprisingly, grown into an alcoholic adult. Yet his telepathic powers remain intact, and, after teaming up with a teen-ager named Abra (Kyleigh Curran), who possesses similar gifts, he sets about tracking down a murderous gang, headed by the rakish Rose the Hat (Rebecca Ferguson). The whole plot feels curiously random, and the pace is perilously cautious, but Ferguson, especially, brightens the gloom.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 11/18/19.) (In wide release.)

Ford v Ferrari
Cheerful, robust, and well oiled, the latest film by James Mangold fulfills the plain promise of its title. In the nineteen-sixties, Henry Ford II—played with gusto by Tracy Letts—decides to beat Ferrari at its own game by designing a car that will triumph at the twenty-four-hour race at Le Mans. This ludicrous plan is put into effect by Carroll Shelby (Matt Damon), the upbeat Texan who oversees the project, and Ken Miles (Christian Bale), the lugubrious British driver behind the wheel. Bright and gutsy though the racing sequences are, the movie is not really about automobiles; it’s a multiple-character study that happens to barrel along at high speed, and much fun is to be had from the clash of the various egos, fender to fender. With Caitriona Balfe as Ken’s wife, Mollie, who, true to the spirit of the story, takes no nonsense.—A.L. (11/18/19) (In wide release.)
The Slice Renaissance
Pizza Joints Around the City

Until fairly recently, nostalgia was considered a disorder. It was conceptualized by a seventeenth-century Swiss doctor to diagnose the mental and physical pain of soldiers; they suffered, he theorized, because they longed for home. Now it’s widely recognized as quite the opposite: a powerful coping mechanism during difficult times. These are difficult times. Can it be a coincidence that pizza parlors gauzy with nostalgia’s glow seem to be multiplying in New York City?

At Paulie Gee’s Slice Shop (110 Franklin St., Brooklyn, $3.50–$5), in Greenpoint, which opened in 2018, there are laminate booths, glittery lime-green vinyl stools, and orange plastic trays. You can buy an ice-cold bottle of Coke from a vintage vending machine. Eating there makes me feel like a Carter-era teen-ager who’s saved up her allowance to buy a snack after a spin around the roller rink.

At Scarr’s Pizza (22 Orchard St., $3.50–$5.25), which opened in 2016, on the Lower East Side, there are wood-panelled walls, Tiffany-esque light fixtures that look as if they came from the original T.G.I. Friday’s, and a framed Mets pennant. Earlier this year, the brothers behind 2 Bros., a dollar-slice chain, opened a couple of more ambitious and slightly pricier places—Upside Pizza (598 Eighth Ave., $3–$5), in midtown, and Norm’s Pizza (345 Adams St., Brooklyn, $3–$5), in downtown Brooklyn—wit interiors that subtly evoke the eighties and nineties (a touch of Memphis) and pizza that comes on red-and-white checked wax paper.

All of these shops are counter service and focus on New York-style slices. All are in homage to long-running icons, such as Di Fara and Joe’s, and stand in stark contrast to the full-service pizzerias specializing in Neapolitan-style pies that proliferated the decade prior. All make very good to excellent pizza. Is there a reason that you should patronize them instead of their forebears?

Their proprietors would probably point to the fulfillment of modern standards. Paulie Gee’s offers Mike’s Hot Honey, a very of-the-moment pizza topping, as well as imitation cheese, sausage, and pepperoni. There are vegan options at Scarr’s, too, and flour for the dough is milled in-house, a practice both ancient and au courant—as is using natural leavening and allowing the dough to ferment, which they do at Upside and Norm’s (admirable choices that, in this case, make the crust a bit too one-dimensionally tangy). At Upside, they boast of “responsibly sourced produce” and make their own fresh mozzarella.

But only one of the newcomers truly stands apart. F&F Pizzeria (459 Court St., Brooklyn, $4–$6), which opened last month, in Carroll Gardens, is a collaboration between a duo known as the Franks (Castronovo and Falcinelli), of Frankies Spuntino, next door; Chad Robertson, of San Francisco’s Tartine Bakery; and Chris Bianco, of Pizzeria Bianco, in Phoenix. The shop is bright but bare bones. The menu is, for now, extremely streamlined.

The classic cheese slice is flawless: crust of optimal thickness (just floppy enough to fold easily); scant dollops of fruity but not too sweet sauce, made with Bianco’s line of organic Rustic Crush canned tomatoes, grown in California; extra stretchy, non-artisanal shredded mozzarella that goes brown and crackly at the edges; fresh basil.

Better still is the Sicilian, which is square, and which some will argue would be more accurately categorized as bread than pizza. (The input of Robertson, a wizard of sourdough, is unmistakable.) The other day, a man finishing a slice sighed in pleasure. “I could eat eight of these,” he said. I felt the same way. Is it pizza? Is it focaccia? Who cares? It’s exceptionally complex, light yet satisfyingly substantial, chewy and stretchy, shiny and moist, with a crumb so pocked with air bubbles that it looks like a system of caves, and a lacy pattern of oiled char on its underside. It’s timeless, it’s nostalgic, it makes me glad to be here now.

—Hannah Goldfield
INVEST LIKE YOU OWN THE PLACE.

We are 30 million investors who are also Vanguard’s owners, which means we made the radical choice to say our interests come first. Together, we are proving that this simple idea is a powerful one. Join us.

Visit vanguard.com or talk to your financial advisor.

HOW RADICAL.

Vanguard is client-owned. As a client owner, you own the funds that own Vanguard. All investing is subject to risk, including the possible loss of the money you invest.

© 2019 The Vanguard Group, Inc. All rights reserved. Vanguard Marketing Corporation, Distributor.
COMMENT
IMPEACHMENT WHIRLWIND

Long before Alexander Hamilton became an icon of the Broadway stage, he glimpsed the harrowing qualities of a man like Donald Trump. He did not like what he saw. As his definitive biographer, Ron Chernow, makes clear, Hamilton was an advocate of strong executive power, yet he also envisaged the rise of a demagogue who would put liberty and the rule of law at risk, and place his own interests before those of the country. Writing to George Washington, in 1792, Hamilton seemed to anticipate our current moment and the con on the golden escalator:

When a man unprincipled in private life desperate in his fortune, bold in his temper, possessed of considerable talents . . . is seen to mount the hobby horse of popularity—to join in the cry of danger to liberty—to take every opportunity of embarrassing the General Government & bringing it under suspicion—to flatter and fall in with all the non sense of the zealots of the day—It may justly be suspected that his object is to throw things into confusion that he may “ride the storm and direct the whirlwind.”

Hamilton also paid close attention to the crimes and misdemeanors that such a scoundrel might commit, and how the country could protect itself from them. He wrote two Federalist essays about impeachment, and, as Chernow noted recently in the Washington Post, he would “certainly have endorsed” the current inquiry in the House.

If we find that the President of the United States abused his power and invited foreign interference in our elections . . . must we simply get over it? Is this what Americans should now expect from their President? If this is not impeachable conduct, what is?

The first day of the hearings was notable for the sobriety, clarity, and unshakable dignity of the witnesses. William B. Taylor, Jr., a decorated Vietnam War veteran and the top U.S. diplomat in Ukraine, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Kent, who oversees Eastern European and Eurasian affairs, provided, as they had earlier in closed hearings, detailed testimony that the President of the United States sought to pressure the beleaguered President of Ukraine to sully the reputation of a Democratic rival, Joe Biden, in exchange for a meeting at the Oval Office and the release of the defense funds.

According to Taylor, Gordon Sondland, the U.S. Ambassador to the European Union, spoke with Trump by cell phone from a restaurant in Kiev; the President’s emphasis was single-minded. After finishing the call, Sondland told one of Taylor’s aides that “Trump cares more about the investigation of Biden” than about the fate of Ukraine. The date was July 26th—the day after Trump issued his now infamous demand that the Ukrainian President do him a “favor.”

Taylor and Kent were impassive, formal witnesses, but they were direct about their sense of dismay. Essential questions emerged from the stories they told: How could a President engage in such brazen self-dealing? How could he play games with the security needs of a state that had been invaded by Russia, first in Crimea and then in the Donbass? “To withhold that assistance for no good reason other than help with a political campaign made no sense,” Taylor said. “It was counterproductive
to all of what we had been trying to do. It was illogical. It could not be explained. It was crazy."

The President dismissed the hearings as a “hoax.” He insisted that he was “too busy to watch,” although he retweeted more than a dozen video clips, articles, and commentaries in his putative defense. Conservative media outlets, from Fox News to Breitbart, declared the hearings “boring” and hoped their audience, the Trump base, would remain unmovéd. Republican members of the Intelligence Committee, led by Jim Jordan, of Ohio, and Devin Nunes, of California, made every attempt to confound voters with misdirection and conspiracy theories. Nunes warned obscurely of the prospect of “nude pictures of Trump.” The Republicans complained that Taylor and Kent didn’t even know the President—their testimony was so “secondhand”—and yet these same legislators are in no rush to have the White House lift its block on witnesses with distinctly firsthand access—including Giuliani and the acting chief of staff, Mick Mulvaney.

As Hamilton, Madison, Adams, and their colleagues were drafting the founding documents of the country, they expressed concern about “foreign influence” on the Presidency. The sources of their anxiety then resided mainly in France and England. It was therefore powerful to hear Kent compare the plight of the American colonists in their struggle against the British crown to that of the post-Soviet Ukrainians as they have struggled against the Putin regime in Russia. Trump favors Moscow. He has repeatedly dismissed the intelligence community’s conclusion that Russians interfered in the 2016 election. As President, he has made it plain that he welcomes outside interference again, if it helps him win re-election.

The President and his confederates have warned of the consequences of impeachment. In 2017, the self-described “dirty trickster” Roger Stone, who is now on trial for lying to Congress, issued a characteristically Trumpish threat:

Try to impeach him. Just try it. You will have a spasm of violence in this country, an insurrection like you’ve never seen. Both sides are heavily armed, my friend. This is not 1974. The people will not stand for impeachment.

A politician who votes for it would be endangering their own life.

Impeachment is a grave business, and the risks are manifest. But no democracy can overlook evidence of abuse of power, bribery, and obstruction in the hope that an election will set things right.

These hearings and a potential Senate trial will never get to the full range of Donald Trump’s corruptions, be they on Fifth Avenue or Pennsylvania Avenue, in Istanbul, Moscow, or Riyadh. But the focus of Congress is on this particular and outrageous abuse of the public trust, and for now that must suffice.

—David Remnick

MIND MELD

MIRRERING

O ne rainy night in midtown, the playwright Jeremy O. Harris and the artist Kehinde Wiley took refuge in a covered alley next to the Golden Theatre, where Harris is making his Broadway début, with “Slave Play.” Around the corner stood “Rumors of War,” Wiley’s twenty-eight-foot-tall statue, which sends up Confederate monuments by placing a black man in a hoodie and jeans atop a rearing horse. Wiley’s postmodern take on Civil War iconography chimes with “Slave Play,” in which a series of antebellum sex scenes is revealed to be a spin on contemporary kink. Harris and Wiley had other things in common: both received M.F.A.s from Yale (Wiley in 2001, Harris this past spring), and both were making provocative incursions into Times Square, land of Coke ads and Elmos.

Harris and Wiley had met in passing, and Wiley attended the opening night of “Slave Play,” but they were overdue for a meeting of the minds. As patrons filed into “Slave Play” and tourists ate hot dogs beneath “Rumors of War,” the two sat on a bench. Harris (thirty, brash) wore sherbet-colored sneakers and a Gucci sweater that he’d picked up at Milan Fashion Week. Wiley (forty-two, sagelike) wore ripped jeans and an Oxford shirt. He would soon leave for Senegal, where he runs an artists’ residency. “I’m dividing my time between New York and West Africa, and Africa’s winning,” he told Harris.

“That’s amazing, to see Africa winning,” Harris said. “I’ve never been.”

“Too busy to watch,” he replied. “We’ve got to fix that,” Wiley said. “You’re coming with me.” Wiley grew up in Los Angeles, but his father lived in Nigeria. “When I was twenty years old, I got on a plane to find my father,” he recalled. “He disappeared shortly before my twin brother and I were born. Africa has been this constant, mysterious presence.”

Many of Wiley’s paintings, including his official Presidential portrait of Barack Obama, pair traditional Western portraiture with explosive floral backdrops. “When I look at your paintings,” Harris told him, “there seems to be this, like, not reframing or reimagining but undoing of history, and planting a new one inside of it. And the patterns are so African.”

“So much of the patterning comes from the marketplaces of Africa,” Wiley said. He mentioned the mirror that hangs from the set of “Slave Play,” reflecting the audience. “Mirroring is something that so many creative people do, this idea of shadow dancing—we’re touching the exterior world, but ultimately we’re defining the contours of our own interiority.” Wiley added that he’d found the second act of “Slave Play” particularly trenchant. “There’s this urge with so much of the hard work that needs to be

Jeremy O. Harris and Kehinde Wiley
done with race in this country to shuffle past all of the uncomfortable bits.”

Harris nodded. “Some people compartmentalize discomfort or don’t lean into it,” he said. “The one time I did move away from my discomfort, I really regretted it. I’m a music freak, and I was very talented at playing piano from age five to eight. But I switched teachers, because the teacher was teaching me how to play by ear. Then I had this older white lady, and she wanted to teach me notes. And she was mean. When it got too much for me—the pressure of having to be good—I quit.”

Wiley prodded him, like a therapist: “Tell me more about that.”

“She always talked about how ‘lazy’ these fingers were,” Harris said, looking at his hands. “I would go home and cry, because I was, like, I can’t make my fingers move faster! Even though you can—but at eight years old I didn’t know that.”

“There’s something beautiful about struggle,” Wiley said. “Just being able to be bad at something.”

“What are you bad at?” Harris asked.

“Arguably—I’m going to say something that makes me feel uncomfortable—I’m bad at painting. But I’m good at showing the parts that I’m good at.”

“That’s how I feel about writing,” Harris said. “Do you remember the first time I met you?” It was last year, Harris said. “I’ve met Nobel Prize winners,” Cunningham said. “I’ve met hard workers.” She added. “I’ve never met a genius. I’ve just met hard workers.” She nodded. Then Cunningham photographed her holding a small whiteboard with the date, her name, and the material covered that day. (“For my accounting assistant,” he explained.)

The next afternoon, he was headed to a palatial, “two Tesla” home, in Sherman Oaks, to meet with Jed, a junior at another private high school. (Jed also has a tutor for A.P. chem.) Cunningham tutored Jed’s older siblings, too. “The family has paid me thousands,” he said. It was algebra day, and the “eve of battle,” as Cunningham put it, for the December ACT. Wearing sweatpants and a hoodie emblazoned with the name of his school’s basketball team, Jed slumped in the dining room, at a large table, his family has paid me thousands,” he said. Jed shrugged. He and Cunningham had thrown the party, he said, to fill “an absence” of cool houseparties.

Next, he presented Jolie with “a private blend of peppermint,” he added. “It’s nature’s Adderall.”

Jolie, who wore green jeans, Doc Martens, and a look of mild confusion, opened the packet and took a whiff. “Oh, wow,” she said.

“Right!” Cunningham said. “It’s from the Willamette Valley, in Oregon.”

Jolie had a 4.4 weighted G.P.A. at a prestigious private high school, but her most recent ACT score was in the sixty-ninth percentile, a possible concern for admittance to Amherst, one of her target schools.

“What’s the point of it, though?” Jolie asked about the tea.

“There is a modest but growing amount of evidence that it will help you concentrate,” Cunningham said.

Next, he presented Jolie with “a test-scoring 100 pencil from the Musgrave Pencil Company, of Shelbyville, Tennessee,” which, he explained, was “developed in tandem with I.B.M. when they were developing their scanning machine” that grades standardized tests. (“The lead,” he said, “actually shows up better than the No. 2.”) Finally, he handed her some stickers bearing a cartoon of his face. The daughter of the Tears for Fears front man Curt Smith—also a client—had designed them. (“I don’t think my eyes are that far apart in real life,” Cunningham noted, “but she got the teeth.”)

“Rep the Prep!” he exhorted Jolie.

Cunningham is a thirty-seven-year-old Princeton graduate and Marshall Scholar, with graduate degrees in literature and filmmaking. He offers individual test prep for about three hundred dollars per session—more than he earned as a game-show writer when he first moved to L.A. “It pays my mortgage,” he said. “And I only work a few hours most days.” He sees a couple of students every day. “The kids of Coachella headliners,” he said. “Kids in baronial homes. And the über-rich.” He “shared a family,” he said, with Rick Singer, the orchestrator of this year’s college-admissions scandal, which turned the actress Felicity Huffman into a convicted felon. “That’s the world I tutor in,” he said. “The moms do the marketing for you.”

Jolie hoped to score a 30 on the ACT. “I’ve met Nobel Prize winners,” Cunningham told her. “I’ve never met a genius. I’ve just met hard workers.” She nodded. Then Cunningham photographed her holding a small whiteboard with the date, her name, and the material covered that day. (“For my accounting assistant,” he explained.)
ENJOY THE FINEST CUISINE AT SEA™
ABoard our intimate and luxurious ships.

For some, it’s sitting down to the first five-star dinner of the trip, and being transported by the rich, unexpected flavors awaiting you. For others, it’s sailing into an exotic, remote port without another ship in sight. And for you, it’s the little things. Discover your moment.

ENJOY THE FINEST CUISINE AT SEA™
ABOARD OUR INTIMATE AND LUXURIOUS SHIPS.
Now thirty-four, Robinson has developed a second career as an actor: he is one of the stars of “Top Boy,” a drama series on Netflix. Set in and around a housing project in the London borough of Hackney, the show is a reboot of a British show that ran for two seasons, in 2011 and 2013, and was created by Ronan Bennett, the Irish screenwriter and novelist. For an American audience accustomed to British imports like “Downton Abbey” or “The Crown,” the language of “Top Boy” might take some getting used to: the script is liberally sprinkled with instances of “bruv,” “allow it,” “inut,” and “wagwan.” Stefan, a young teen, says, of his history teacher, “He thinks he’s bare funny.” “Yeah, ‘bare,’ meaning ‘a lot,’” Robinson explained. It’s a flip on the actual, because ‘my fridge is bare’ means it’s fucking empty.”

Revised in part with the enthusiastic endorsement of a Canadian fan by the name of Drake, the show has been compared to “The Wire.” Robinson, who plays Sully, one of the show’s principal drug dealers, is an aficionado of the David Simon show: in one of his recent songs, he raps, “Used to be a Barksdale man, but now I fuck with Marlo,” a reference to two of the lead characters in “The Wire.” But the comparison is not entirely apt, he explained over coffee at an Italian restaurant in the leafy fringes of London, where he now lives. “The Wire’ was from a police perspective—in terms of the streets and that, it was probably like, thirty per cent,” he said. “ ‘Top Boy’ is really from the perspective of the quote-unquote criminal. It’s getting into the mind of these people and why they do what they do. It’s bigger than just ‘Woke up and wanted to be bad one day.’ No one wants to be doing this. They feel they have to be doing this. Why do people feel this is their only option?”

Robinson just released his sixth album, “Hoodies All Summer,” a forensic examination of the state of the nation in which neither Boris nor Brexit is mentioned. “Trouble,” a standout track, is a mournful, nuanced exploration of knife crime and its origins. In lieu of a music video, he made a seventeen-minute film dramatizing a teen-ager’s loving home—he’s playing the piano while his mother cooks—then his harrowing murder when he’s sent out to buy groceries. “For me, the piano is a metaphor for potential—I wanted to establish that he wasn’t quote-unquote on road,” Robinson said. “Everyone is always, like, ‘Where were the parents when this happened?’ But the moment a kid leaves the house—it’s not the parents’ fault.”

Robinson was raised by his mother, who immigrated to London from Jamaica. The last song on “Hoodies All Summer,” “SYM,” alludes to the Windrush scandal, in which Jamaican immigrants who have lived legally in Britain for decades have been threatened with deportation: “Let’s talk about the day the wind was rushed up on the shore/They promised us so much and then they left us to be poor.” The song ends with an appeal for unity: “If we don’t hold each other down, we won’t make it.” “It’s, like, those little reminders of the country we are actually in,” Robinson said. Throughout the years, his treatment of his birthplace has sometimes been more tender,
The actor Peter Sarsgaard made his way past Grand Army Plaza and through the north entrance of Prospect Park the other day, toward the low-slung tunnel known as Meadowport Arch. Once beneath the arch, which was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, in 1870, to provide a gateway to the park’s gloriously expansive Long Meadow, Sarsgaard snapped his fingers once, tentatively, then several more times, quickly. The snaps produced a hollow, vibrating echo, and Sarsgaard, who was wearing a worn blue T-shirt and brown lace-up boots, looked pleased. “Who doesn’t love a reverb?” he said. As he settled down in the cool dimness, on the wooden bench that lines the tunnel, a lightly panting jogger trotted by. “She seems to still be anaerobic rather than aerobic,” Sarsgaard, who is a runner himself, said. He cocked his head as if to better parse the amplified huff and puff of the woman’s breath.

Sarsgaard recently starred in the indie movie “The Sound of Silence,” in which he plays Peter Lucian, an emotionally detached sound expert who, in his job as a so-called house tuner—a profession that does not exist in real life—attempts to harmonize the soundscapes of people’s living spaces. In the process, he not only becomes the subject of a fictional Talk of the Town column but also develops an uncertain relationship with a woman, played by Rashida Jones, whose apartment proves resistant to tuning. “I like the strange frequencies, the uncomfortable frequencies.” He’d been coming to sit under the Meadowport Arch for years now—to read, to think, to catch his breath mid-jog, and to listen to whatever sound snippets come his way. “Everything is amplified here,” he said. “It’s like an ear, but made of stone and wood.” He turned toward the double entrance at one end of the tunnel, where a man, wearing an oversized pair of headphones, was passing by while singing, tunelessly but boldly. “I think that was a Meat Loaf song!” Sarsgaard whispered. He tore into a snatch of the rotund belter’s old hit “Paradise by the Dashboard Light”: “I’m saaaaaailing awaaaaay . . .” It sounded lovely, but humans are unbelievable with their music. We don’t just use our voice, but we amplify our voice through instruments, through horns, through a tunnel.” He gestured around him.

A chubby toddler with a tuft of Tweety Bird hair, accompanied by a caretaker with a mass of braids coiled on top of her head, passed by, enacting a kind of call and response, whose vibrations bounced off the tunnel’s walls: *Cuckoo? Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!* “My older daughter plays the oboe, and the younger plays the violin,” Sarsgaard said. “I’ve told them to bring their instruments down here, see how they sound, but I think they’d be too self-conscious. A little self-consciousness isn’t a bad thing.” The sound of a plane filled the air, then faded. “I don’t listen too much to music when I’m acting, because its influence can be really strong,” he continued. “For instance, the girlfriend from high school who broke up with me? Like, the tragic one? She liked the group Styx, and when she broke up with me she made me a mixtape that had the song ‘Come Sail Away’ on it, twice. So every time I hear that song I’m immediately, like, ‘She’s breaking up with me, because she needs to be free!’” He hummed a little, then broke into song: “I’m saaaaaailing awaaaaay . . .” It sounded pretty good.

—Naomi Fry
Twice a month, when my daughter, Ella, spends the weekend with me, my apartment turns into a cooking school. Ella is thirteen and started to make cookies and scones a few years ago. She moved on to tarts, fresh tagliatelle, and, lately, croissants. Early on Saturdays, before heading to our local green market, we have impassioned conversations about her dinner plans. Pork adobo with citrus and coriander, she asks me, or red lentils simmered Ethiopian-style, with fresh tomatoes and berbere? And then she’s sure to ask if she can bake. I’m already thinking of the scabs of flour I’ll be scraping off my counter on Monday morning, and of how much pâtisserie I’ll have consumed, but I give in. I love watching the skill and authority of her fingers in a bowl of flour, eggs, butter, and chocolate; her intensity as she pipes ganache from a pastry bag or dusts éclairs with finely ground pistachios.

When she’s not cooking, she often watches shows like “Chef’s Table,” the sumptuously produced Netflix series featuring sombre, admiring portraits of culinary stars. With painterly cinematography and introspective voiceovers, “Chef’s Table” pays professional cooks the kind of homage once reserved for artists. Most of the dishes are impossible to replicate in a home kitchen—who has the time to make Enrique Olvera’s thousand-day mole, or even find all the ingredients?—but Ella doesn’t watch the show for recipes. She watches it for the spectacle of mastery, much as other teens hang out on YouTube watching Lionel Messi’s greatest goals or Yuja Wang playing “Flight of the Bumblebee.”

The show’s self-serious musings on the mysteries of food make me cringe a bit, but I was once fluent in that idiom. From the time I was nine until well into my teens, I was determined to be a chef. I ran a catering business out of my parents’ house, in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, and did apprenticeships with notable chefs. So when I watch “Chef’s Table” I can’t help experiencing the slight pang you get from seeing someone living the life you chose not to live. Could I have been a contender? When I was cooking, food was everything to me; I haven’t known as consuming a passion since. The kitchen is where I learned the only foreign language I speak: brunoise, pâte feuilletée, and demi-glace were among the first French words I knew, and they retain an incantatory power.

I started to cook after my friends—at least, I thought they were friends—began to bully me for being overweight and Jewish. Pudgy was my nickname, and as they threw change at me in the hall I learned that to be a Jew was to love money. I punched one boy in the neck when he called me a dirty Jew, and felt very pleased as he fell to the ground. But the problem of my weight couldn’t be handled by vigilante justice. I wasn’t ashamed to be Jewish, but I was embarrassed to be plump. While vacationing at the Jersey shore with my family, I began to hide food, furtively removing items from my plate and placing them in a napkin. I would bury much of my dinner in the sand outside the house my parents had rented. I counted calories, and spent hours appraising myself in the mirror, measuring my progress.

This wasn’t much fun. For one thing, I was depriving myself of the pleasures of my mother’s cooking. Some families are brought together by faith; we
were brought together by food. By secretly not eating, I was isolating myself. As I grew thinner, I felt both proud and terribly lonely. Toward the end of the summer, my parents became aware that I wasn’t myself; in photos from that time I look gaunt and unhealthy. When we returned home from the shore, my parents took me to a child psychologist, Sidney Hyman.

Dr. Hyman was in his late fifties, wore a bow tie, and liked to crack silly jokes. He didn’t ask many questions, but I remember playing a lot of board games with him. I’d become very serious, and I think he wanted me to rediscover what it was like to have fun. Trying to have fun is what started me cooking. I opened a cupboard, found some chocolate—I’d hardly touched any since becoming obsessed with my weight—and decided to make what I called fudge. I put the chocolate in a plastic container and placed it in the toaster oven. The container melted a bit, but the warm, liquefied chocolate was delicious, and the fact that I’d melted it myself was exciting: I had transformed something.

The next thing I made was a simple chocolate cake. It came out well, and I even treated myself to a slice, although I was still carefully counting calories. Before long, I was spending all my free time in the kitchen. I worked my way up to more elaborate concoctions, like dacquoise, a hazelnut meringue layered with buttercream frosting, and then to making savory dishes. I especially liked sauces, which, in their textural variety—thick or thin, translucent or cloudy, syrupy or velvety—taught me the subtle poetry of haute cuisine. I became fascinated by emulsions, the mixing of liquids that happens in fancy sauces like beurre blanc and hollandaise but also in the simplest vinaigrette. I pored over my mother’s cookbooks and magazines, reading about the great chefs who had defined the world of my peers. True, I had a “regular poise,” who boasts that he “never cooks a dish more than once,” and says “airily” that he charges “about $25 a person.” I was devastated. And I’d got off easy compared with my parents, who’d done nothing more than take me to the event:

“Adam’s father wipes a few tears away. . . . Stage mothers were once all the rage, but now it’s time to bid farewell to the movie mama as we make room for the latest breed of pushy progenitor—the stove-top parent.”

In fact, my parents tried to protect me from the media. When ABC television approached them about making a movie based on my life as a child chef, they immediately rejected the idea.

Reichl described a boy with “extraordinary poise,” who boasts that he “never cooks a dish more than once,” and says “airily” that he charges “about $25 a person.” I was devastated. And I’d got off easy compared with my parents, who’d done nothing more than take me to the event:

“Adam’s father snaps a picture. . . . Before long there are four chefs surrounding the young prodigy. His proud papa is still snapping away. . . . Stage mothers were once all the rage, but now it’s time to bid farewell to the movie mama as we make room for the latest breed of pushy progenitor—the stove-top parent.”

In fact, my parents tried to protect me from the media. When ABC television approached them about making a movie based on my life as a child chef, they immediately rejected the idea.

Still, Reichl was right about one thing: I was awfully serious. But cooking, far from being an expression of my “extraordinary poise,” was a refuge from the world of my peers. True, I had a new circle of friends, who appreciated my cooking and didn’t taunt me, and I was no longer seeing Dr. Hyman. Yet I still kept fastidious track of what I consumed and felt terribly uncomfortable.
in my body. Giving shape to food, turning it into something artful, was an escape, and the kitchen became a laboratory in which I could lose myself in experimentation.

And I had so much to learn. Cooking was not just a skill but a practice with a remarkable history, requiring absolute devotion. My parents encouraged my ambition, buying me equipment, taking me to restaurants, and coming home with menus signed by chefs I followed in the food press. I read everything I could find on pioneers of the “New American cuisine,” such as Jeremiah Tower, the brilliant, bitchy Harvard-educated architect who created Stars, a dazzling brasserie in San Francisco; and Alice Waters, the owner of Chez Panisse, in Berkeley, where Towers had got his start before the two became bitter enemies over who had invented the Chez Panisse style. Once, I got to dine at the Campton Place Hotel, in San Francisco, where Bradley Ogden was developing a style based on local ingredients and regional recipes. “You seem to have a deep appreciation and dedication for this business, but don’t take it too seriously,” Ogden wrote afterward. Good advice that I wasn’t ready to hear; wasn’t taking it seriously the whole point?

Besides, my real heroes weren’t American but French: Paul Bocuse, the visionary of Lyon; the formidably articulate Joël Robuchon; the Troisgros brothers, renowned for their salmon with sorrel sauce; Michel Guérard, the inventor of cuisine minceur, a low-calorie version of nouvelle cuisine. I was fascinated by Bernard Loiseau, the moody creator of cuisine à l’eau, a style built around water-based sauces. (He later killed himself, fearing that he was about to lose his third Michelin star.) But the chef who most seized my imagination was Alain Senderens, a bearded, bespectacled intellectual who looked more like a post-structuralist theorist or a Kabbalah scholar than like a cook. At L’Archestrake, in Paris, he made daring adaptations of recipes he excavated from ancient Roman cookbooks, and shocked the culinary establishment with wonderfully mad flavor combinations, like lobster with vanilla sauce.

I was in awe of Senderens. Not that I’d ever tasted his food—I hadn’t even been to Paris—but merely to read about Senderens was to know that he was a genius. I discovered him thanks to my favorite food critics, Henri Gault and Christian Millau, who ran an opinionated, witty, literary rival to the staid Michelin Guide. They declared Senderens “the Picasso of French cooking.” He was certainly my Picasso, a bold and uncompromising revolutionary who’d re-invented the language of food.

My own cooking was more cautious. I was attached to traditional forms and intent on pleasing. I recently unearthed the menu for a dinner party I catered when I was maybe fourteen. The dishes—“Fricassée of Mussels with Yellow Pepper Cream and Spinach” or “Summer Fruits with a Sabayon Sauce Flavored with Framboise”—show that I was more interested in absorbing the great tradition of French cooking than in disrupting it. How could I break with a tradition if I hadn’t properly learned its techniques? Boning poultry, cutting perfect julienned carrots, peeling and dicing a tomato unblemished by skin or seeds, making a lumpless roux for béchamel, caramelizing onions without burning them, whisking pieces of butter into a wine reduction without curdling the sauce: such skills had to become second nature, like tying one’s shoes or swimming breaststroke.

These are physical as much as intellectual forms of knowledge. How do you know that a steak, or a piece of salmon, has been cooked to your liking? Not by a timer, or even by looking, but by the feel of its flesh when you press it, and the indentation left by your finger. I began to keep a food diary, charting my progress and recording my innermost thoughts about cooking. I was in—
terested in its relationship to art and politics, both growing enthusiasms, and to sex, an unknown terrain that I was impatient to explore. (One of my friends came across a cassette I had made, full of poetic confessions about food and sensuality; after enduring hours of ridicule, I destroyed it.)

In the kitchen, I sought out meats that I’d never eaten—rabbit, quail, pigeon—and discovered the voluptuous frisson of offal, on the delicate line between succulent and repellent. There were a few disasters. Once, I made pasta with chanterelles that had been picked in a forest in Maine by a family friend, an old Russian Jew who claimed to be a mycologist. Suddenly, my grandmother said she felt sick and started to panic. Everyone put their forks down. The mushrooms turned out to be fine. While my parents made sure that I hadn’t poisoned my grandmother, I went back to the kitchen and whipped up a simple spaghetti aglio e olio, which I secretly preferred to chanterelles.

Not long after Reichl’s profile appeared, I found a French culinary mentor, Gérard Pangaud. In Paris, he’d become, at twenty-seven, the youngest chef ever to receive two Michelin stars. Then Joe Baum, the themed-restaurant pioneer, persuaded him to come to New York and head the kitchen at Aurora, on East Forty-ninth Street. The restaurant was a chic and dreamy midtown oasis in muted shades of blue and pink. Bryan Miller, the restaurant critic for the Times, called it “the Versailles in Joe Baum’s impressive collection of culinary chateaus.”

I first went there for lunch with my grandmother, after writing Pangaud a fan letter. He was waiting when we arrived. For the next few hours, we ate rounds of lobster tail in a tangy, buttery sauce of Sauternes, lime, and fresh ginger, on a bed of spinach; a ragout of periwinkles, briny as the sea; and slices of grilled, rosy-pink pigeon breast with olives, tomato, and lemon confit, in a rich, sombre sauce that haunted the tongue. Pangaud wasn’t a revolutionary like Senderens, but he had a grippingly visceral imagination, an intuition for unusual combinations of flavor and texture, and an earthy elegance. After lunch, he invited me to study with him.

There was nothing unusual about a chef asking a teen-ager if he’d like to work in the kitchen. In France, culinary training is based on what’s known as the stage, an unpaid apprenticeship that all chefs pass through, beginning with the lowliest of activities and gradually rising to more complex tasks. French kitchens are deeply hierarchical institutions, run along essentially military lines. My studies with Pangaud weren’t quite a stage—living in Massachusetts, I could train for only a few days every couple of months—but my education there lasted several years. The days began at dawn and ended well past midnight, and I made the most of them. I usually worked in garde-manger, preparing salads and chopping vegetables, but I was occasionally allowed to work on the line, searing steaks, duck breasts, and thick slabs of foie gras.

Restaurant kitchens are enclosed worlds, and now that I was inside one I wanted to know who its players were and how they operated. The chefs on the line were mostly blue-collar white guys, though there were a few women. The only thing the line chefs talked about—other than food, keeping up with their orders, and who had screwed something up—was fucking, and I guessed that some of that was happening downstairs, in the basement kitchen, where the meat was stored. The prep cooks chopping vegetables in garde-manger were mostly East Asian and Central American immigrants. Once they graduated to the line, they adopted the brassier, saltier argot that cooking in conditions of extreme heat and pressure seemed to require. The intensity of the kitchen—the speed, the insults, the burns from hot oil splashing—was frightening at first, but soon I was intoxicated. And it was satisfying to be welcomed as one of the team. Some of the cooks referred to me teasingly as the Kid. But I was a kid, and I didn’t know a luckier one.

In the summer of 1987, just before I turned fifteen, I went to France for the first time, with my family. The highlight of the trip was a visit to Lameloise, a Michelin three-star restaurant and hotel in Chagny, a small industrial town in Burgundy. I’d written to Jacques Lameloise, the chef and owner, before we set out, and Pangaud had sent a letter of recommendation, too. Lameloise greeted us warmly, and I spent the next day in the kitchen. Afterward, he asked if I wanted to come back to do a stage there. My parents said I could, provided that I covered my living expenses, which meant that I needed to get a job back home.

So, when I wasn’t in school, I started working in a very different kind of kitchen, at the Student Prince, in Springfield. Known to its regulars as
the Fort, it was an old-school German restaurant, whose owner, Rupprecht Scherff, had fled the Nazis. The dining room was a festive place, but the kitchen was almost Dickensian in its sordidness and gloom. Whereas Aurora's employees were ambitious and obsessed with the art of food, no one at the Fort imagined that they were doing much more than punching a time card. Many of the waitstaff seemed to be on chemical mood enhancers. The Polish woman who chopped lettuce and placed it in bins the size of garbage cans wore gloves, because she had severe eczema.

If working at Aurora was an apprenticeship in haute cuisine, working at the Fort was an education in injuries of class that are invisible from the dining room. In school, I'd been reading “The Jungle,” Upton Sinclair's novel exposing exploitation in the meatpacking industry. Soon I understood Sinclair's fury that readers had been more alarmed by the book's food-hygiene implications than by its indictment of working conditions.

The kitchen was on two floors. I worked downstairs, in a basement that looked as if it hadn't been cleaned since the place opened. In the morning, I pounded veal cutlets for schnitzel; in the afternoon, I put scraps of pork through an electric meat grinder for bratwurst. One day, the grinder blew up. Sparks flew, and my face was pelted with bits of ground pork and slicked with brine. The only other person downstairs was Walter, a man in his sixties who bore a passing resemblance to Elijah Muhammad. He had recently returned to the Fort from a long leave of absence after being convicted of stabbing a fellow-employee; Rupprecht hired him back as soon as he was out of prison. Walter didn't talk much and had a way of chuckling to himself. I didn't think much about him, until one day he grabbed my meat tenderizer and chased me through the basement. He cornered me, and I pleaded with him. He broke out laughing, as if my terror was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. After that, we got along beautifully.

In school, meanwhile, I was channelling my food obsession into writing. I contributed restaurant reviews to the school newspaper, closely mimicking the style of Gault and Millau. I was also writing about politics and culture: editorials denouncing Reagan's support for the Nicaraguan Contras, essays on contemporary cinema. Reading “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” and Claude Brown's Harlem memoir, “Manchild in the Promised Land,” I was discovering a New York very far from the exclusive restaurants I expected to make a career in—closer, in a way, to the basement at the Fort. New interests were taking hold of my imagination. I immersed myself in French literature, dressed all in black, and thought of myself as an existentialist, although I couldn't have said what that meant. I looked forward to my adult life in New York, the only place in America where one could be an authentic existentialist.

In the summer of 1988, taking the money I had made at the Fort, I set off for France, and stepped into a gleaming modern kitchen where more than a dozen young chefs—mostly French, but also a few Japanese—worked with utter absorption, fired up by the idea that they, too, would one day run an establishment like Lameloise. I spent hours at a time paring turnips, trimming haricots verts, and shaving potatoes for potato tartlets; occasionally, I was permitted to sauté pieces of duck foie gras, which were then nestled on top of mâche dressed in sherry vinaigrette.

I became very efficient at my tasks—the whole point of being a stagiaire—but the kitchen was monastically quiet, and I missed the banter of the cooks at Aurora, their pleasure in conversational combat, their improvisatory élan. If Pangaud's kitchen was a jazz band of many voices, Lameloise's was a symphony orchestra performing high-fidelity versions of the classic repertoire. Lameloise's food was traditional Burgundian haute cuisine updated with nouvelle touches. I wondered what Alain Senderens would say, and was pretty sure that he would disapprove. One young chef, who had worked at L'Espérance, a three-star place an hour and a half's drive away, glumly admitted that Lameloise was a letdown. Soon
after, while we were in the middle of some task or other, I asked, “Is this how they do it at L’Espérance?,” imagining he’d appreciate my sarcasm. With sudden vehemence, he told me never to mention L’Espérance again. He left before the summer was over.

Jacques Lameloise’s son, Armand, was only a few months older than me but seemed vastly more sophisticated, especially about girls, who frightened me. A self-styled intellectual who worshipped New Wave cinema, he adored his mother, a reader of classical French literature with whom he would linger for hours in the morning over café au lait, croissants, and cigarettes. His father, who had probably never opened a book that wasn’t about food, was the odd man out in his own home. He was a kind, doting father, but Armand considered him a fool and believed himself to be cut out for grander things than inheriting the family restaurant, however many étoiles the Michelin inspectors had awarded it. I still wasn’t sure there were grander things than running a three-star, but I was becoming bored in the kitchen, so, whenever I could, I started joining Armand on excursions he took with his friends.

Our first trip was to Noyon, a hundred kilometres north of Paris, where Armand’s friend Jérémie, an actor-comedian, was throwing a Bastille Day party. Noyon had seen its share of luminaries—Charlemagne was crowned co-king of the Franks at its cathedral in 768, Calvin was born there, and through the centuries the town had fallen to Vikings, Habsburgs, and Nazis—but now it was a backwater. There were no adults in sight, and I watched a teen-age bacchanal unfold with fear and fascination. A group was roasting suckling pigs over a fire and opening bottles of beer and champagne; couples cavorted in the grass. Someone poured me a glass of punch. It went down easily, and I drank another. Next thing I knew, I had thrown a bottle into a wall and collapsed on the floor of someone’s bedroom. A couple came in and began to have sex on the floor next to me. “What’s wrong with the American?” the woman asked. “Oh, it’s just the jet lag, I hear he flew in today from California.” They continued their business and I passed out.

A few weeks later, in the Jura, Armand’s friends and I sped through a field on bicycles to a discothèque, and danced till early in the morning. When we left, a group of skinheads attacked us with baseball bats and stole our bikes. We spent the rest of the morning filing a report in a police station. Then we made fondue, smoked, and listened to Serge Gainsbourg, Sade, and the Cure. I had just read Camus’s “L’Étranger,” but I’d never heard the Cure’s song based on it, “Killing an Arab.” I was stunned by its blunt, angry insistence on the identity of the man Meursault had killed. Later that summer, I found myself in a car with a group of middle-aged friends of Jacques’s, who were joking about “the Arabs” (no one said “Muslims” then). It was Eid al-Fitr, and the men were talking about the blood that flowed when the Arabs sacrificed their sheep. They seemed to relish the image of Arab “savages.” Only a quarter century had passed since the liberation of Algeria from French rule, and some of these men had probably served in the Army there. I sat in silence, understanding almost nothing, and yet understanding everything I needed to know.

The most important things I learned that summer were outside the kitchen. I still enjoyed cooking, but the idea of a life of eighteen-hour days at the stove had started to seem less enthralling. Perhaps cooking had achieved its unconscious purpose: although I didn’t exactly like my body, I was no longer counting calories or scrutinizing myself in the mirror. Finding a refuge from the world seemed less necessary, too—indeed, I was impatient to plunge in and make a difference in its conflicts.

“Where I asked you if you were ready for this promotion, you flailed uncontrollably. Was that a lie?”
I lost touch with most of the people I knew in my cooking years. Armand became a filmmaker, and his parents sold Lameloise. Jérémie, the host of the party in Noyon, killed himself. Rupprecht and Walter died, and the Fort was sold to new owners. Pangaud left New York to open a restaurant in Washington, and then became a private chef and a teacher. Ruth Reichl, of course, went on to become the chief restaurant critic for the New York Times and then the editor of Gourmet. I wrote to her when she was at Gourmet, reminding her of the “tyke with a toque” and suggesting that we meet, since I’d joined her profession rather than becoming a chef. She never replied.

Restaurant culture has changed profoundly since the eighties. Food is glitzier and more international but also more politically conscious—militantly organic and swirling with debates about cultural appropriation. It’s arguably more democratic, too. Celebrity chefs, competitive cooking shows, and the collapse of French hegemony have made haute cuisine seem like a relic of the past. My daughter is less interested in the French sauces I revered than in berbere, za’atar, and dried rose petals. Perhaps one day we’ll see the reign of haute cuisine as yet another Eurocentric fable that propped up unthinking assertions of cultural superiority. The preparation of high-end restaurant food hasn’t been entirely democratized, but the best chefs today often come from countries in Asia and the Global South. An increasing number of them are women, and #MeToo has begun to challenge a culture of sexual predation that was widespread in the restaurant industry. Restaurant culture is more worldly, and more reflective of the revolutionary turbulence of our world, than it’s ever been.

The notion that food can be art no longer raises any eyebrows. When I was spending all my free time in kitchens, chefs could be artistic, but they couldn’t be full-fledged artists, partly because their “work” was, literally, consumed. Today, this fact is no strike against them; on the contrary, chefs are the signature achievement of firmness and crumbliness. I’m still alarmed when I see how rapidly she chops vegetables, until I remind myself that she’s just doing what I’ve taught her, and won’t cut herself. She has the “poise” that I was mostly feigning and is a much more relaxed and patient cook than I was. For her, cooking isn’t a professional ambition but simply a pleasure, and a way of sharing her pleasure with others.

Recently, Ella made croissants for the third time. Croissants are notoriously difficult: if you’re not careful as you fold the butter into the dough, you can easily end up with something stiff and hard, rather than a flaky, airy, multilayered marvel. As Ella rolled the dough after completing the first “turn,” I thought I saw butter oozing. When I started to speak up, she said I had to leave the room, and I did as I was told. Whatever she ended up doing, the croissants were the finest she’d made. I’m learning that the best thing I can do to encourage her in the kitchen is to stay out of the way. Becoming a cook is about achieving mastery, independence, and, for her, cooking isn’t a professional ambition but simply a pleasure, and a way of sharing her pleasure with others.

I don’t even know how to make a foam, and so far I’ve resisted buying a blowtorch, which Ella wants for making s’mores and crème brûlée. The food I make these days—like seemingly everyone in the age of Ottolenghi—is Mediterranean, a mélange of Italian, North African, and Middle Eastern influences. The French technique I absorbed during my culinary education still comes in handy: I can chop onions with a precision and speed that occasionally impresses friends who don’t have a culinary background. I know exactly when egg yolks have reached the perfect texture for a sabayon, or egg whites for a soufflé; I can whisk butter into a reduction sauce in a way that imparts just the right sheen. Small things, but I am very glad to have remembered them.

Ella is not particularly interested in my tales of the kitchen, and she loves to remind me of one awful dish I prepared for her: a botched experiment of roasted salmon flavored with honey. But, watching me when we’re at the stove, she has refined her skills, and taught herself new ones. Her fresh pasta is enviably delicate, her pastry crusts a sublime balance of firmness and crumbliness. I’m still alarmed when I see how rapidly she chops vegetables, until I remind myself that she’s just doing what I’ve taught her, and won’t cut herself. She has the “poise” that I was mostly feigning and is a much more relaxed and patient cook than I was. For her, cooking isn’t a professional ambition but simply a pleasure, and a way of sharing her pleasure with others.
Government Contract

BY SARAH PALEY

Privately, the president had often talked about fortifying a border wall with a water-filled trench, stocked with snakes or alligators.

—The Times.

GENERAL SERVICE AGREEMENT (the “Agreement”) Dated this October 3, 2019 Between UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT And ALLIGATORS & SNAKES

BACKGROUND

1. The U.S. Government is of the opinion that Alligators & Snakes have the necessary qualifications, experience, and abilities to provide services to the U.S. Government.

2. Alligators & Snakes are amenable to providing such services to the U.S. Government under the terms and conditions set forth in this Agreement.

IN CONSIDERATION of the matters described above and of the mutual benefits and obligations set forth in this Agreement, the U.S. Government and Alligators & Snakes agree as follows:

SERVICES PROVIDED

1. The U.S. Government hereby agrees to engage Alligators & Snakes to provide the U.S. Government with services consisting of: scaring the bejesus out of any persons who come near them.

2. The U.S. Government may also request other services, which both parties must agree on. Alligators & Snakes hereby agree to perform such tasks for the U.S. Government with the understanding that Alligators & Snakes are indemnified from any and all injuries sustained; expenses incurred; or loss of life, limbs, liberty, happiness, abilities, earrings, shoes, electronics, etc.

COMPENSATION

1. The U.S. Government is responsible for all moving expenses of Alligators & Snakes to water-filled trench. (For the purposes of this document, water-filled trench will be referred to as “Moat.”) Moat must be outfitted as outlined in Residency Contract (Appendix A), with accessible sunning areas on sides and rim. Alligators & Snakes (and any subcontracted Crocodiles) can bask for up to six (6) hours on partially sunny days and up to but not more than ten (10) hours on full-sun days.

2. The U.S. Government agrees to deliver all the garbage from Disney World (especially partially eaten giant turkey legs) to Moat, and said garbage will be distributed along its length.

3. The U.S. Government also agrees to provide weekly deliveries of members of the House of Representatives (either party), the combined weight of such members not to be less than six hundred (600) U.S. pounds.

INDEMNIFICATION

1. Alligators & Snakes will not be held accountable by relations, friends, or representatives of people whom the U.S. Government does not expressly want to be eaten, but who might be eaten anyway. These include but are not limited to: U.S. Border Patrol agents, campaigning politicians, drunk teen-agers, and/or thrill-seekers.

2. Alligators & Snakes are not required to consume a quota of humans per day, week, or annum. It is understood that Alligators & Snakes are a symbolic deterrent.

PROPERTY

1. Upon the expiry of this Agreement, Alligators & Snakes will return to the U.S. Government any objects, records, or confidential information that is the property of the U.S. Government. Unless it was eaten.

2. Alligators & Snakes will retain ownership of any copyrighted works, ideas, inventions, and products, including but not limited to: T-shirts, sunglasses, and beverage coolers with likenesses of Alligators & Snakes (and any subcontracted Crocodiles).

CAPACITY/INDEPENDENT CONTRACTOR

1. It is expressly agreed that Alligators & Snakes are acting as independent contractors and not as employees of the U.S. Government. This Agreement does not create a partnership or joint venture between Alligators & Snakes and the U.S. Government.

DISPUTE RESOLUTION

1. In the event that a dispute arises, the parties in this Agreement will attempt to resolve it through amicable consultation (unless one party is eaten).

SIGNED, SEALED, AND DELIVERED

______________________
U.S. Government

______________________
Alligators & Snakes

______________________
Crocodiles

THE NEW YORKER, NOVEMBER 25, 2019 35
Winemaking methods that once seemed suspect now look like authenticity.
at one point, Beinstock told me, their bottles were on the wine lists of a quarter of the San Francisco Chronicle’s top hundred restaurants.

Beinstock had studied to be a painter, but when, in his twenties, his paintings started to sell, he hated how even that small amount of success activated his ego. He had a seeker’s temperament and an appetite for discipline. Like many New Age dabbler in the nineteen-seventies, he was drawn to the Fourth Way—a brand of mysticism established by George Gurdjieff in the early twentieth century. The Fourth Way drew from, among other things, Zen Buddhism, Sufi Islam, and the occult; followers strove for unceasing self-awareness and self-mastery. In 1978, Beinstock came across a Fourth Way study group called the Fellowship of Friends, founded in the Bay Area a few years earlier. (The Fellowship recruited by strategically placing bookmarks in New Age texts in bookstores.) Beinstock attended a meeting and joined the group later that year. “The Fellowship was bursting with poets, writers, artists, musicians, actors—it was vibrating with an amazing energy,” he told me. The group’s founder, Robert Earl Burton, claimed to be in communication with forty-four angelic beings, including figures such as Plato, Shakespeare, and Abraham Lincoln. The Fellowship believed that humans spend their lives as if hypnotized, lulled into a trance by mental, physical, and emotional habits; in contrast, members of the Fellowship sought at all moments to awaken.

Beinstock began to spend time at the group’s headquarters, known as Apollo, in a rural community in the foothills of the Sierras called Oregon House. It was in one of California’s poorest counties, but the Fellowship worked to create an atmosphere of cultivation, planting rose gardens and erecting a central building in the style of a French château. The group, which had nearly three thousand members around the world, had its own orchestra and opera company, which performed in a classical amphitheatre called the Theatron; the Fellowship amassed a collection of Ming-dynasty furniture, which was later sold at Christie’s for more than eleven million dollars.

Wine fit in with the group’s commitment to spiritual work and high culture. Beinstock and other Fellowship members planted row after row of Cabernet Sauvignon, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, and other Old World varietals, the so-called noble grapes. The work was arduous—removing granite boulders, planting vines by hand—but the Fellowship prized the clarity and camaraderie that came from collective physical labor. Ultimately, the members planted three hundred and sixty-five acres of vineyard. “Then the spiritual leader said, ‘That’s a beautiful number. We can stop at that,’” Beinstock recalled. The Fellowship’s Renaissance Winery was soon producing thirty-five thousand cases a year, he said. “If there is a more remarkable vineyard in California, I did not see it,” James Hal-liday wrote, in the “Wine Atlas of California.” “Renaissance Winery is open to visits by appointment only. I can only suggest you move heaven and earth to make an appointment, for you will see both when you arrive.” Beinstock moved to England, where he studied for the prestigious Master of Wine qualification. In 1991, he returned to California and later became the Fellowship’s winemaker.

At the time, Beinstock said, the Fellowship made wine “with a lot of technology and quote-unquote scientific attention to detail.” After the Second World War, the wine world had been transformed by the same forces of industrialization that were changing all sorts of farming. There were now technical solutions for every enological issue. At Renaissance, the soil was sprayed with herbicides; after the harvest, the crushed grapes were spun in a centrifuge, until a precise percentage of solids was attained. The liquid was fermented in temperature-controlled tanks, its sugar content was measured and plotted on a graph twice a day, and during bottling the wine underwent sterile filtration. “It was the age of science in winemaking,” Beinstock said. “It gave people the illusion they were in the driver’s seat, that they can control everything and make perfect wines.”

“Wine geeks”—men, mostly—discussed wines in terms of chemical compounds and quantifiable metrics: pH, total acidity, months of barrel aging. They celebrated the modernization of the notoriously finicky winemaking process; the developments allowed for greater consistency and precision. A year of difficult weather no longer had to mean a bad vintage. Wines being shipped across oceans could have longer shelf lives and more predictable tastes. The consolidation of the wine industry accelerated the trend, since a mass-produced wine couldn’t afford to have an off year.

Beinstock believed that these methods suffocated the terroir, the grapes’ natural expression of the land, and he disapproved of the hubris of those who considered themselves vineyard managers. Beinstock saw himself as a midwife, encouraging the birth of something beautiful by staying out of the way as much as possible. Once he took over at Renaissance, he stopped filtering and dismantled the centrifuges; he wanted the winemaking to be less intense, less worried.

A critic for the Times called the 1995 Renaissance Chardonnay “excellent” and its Sauvignon Blanc “even better.” Esther Mobley, the San Francisco Chronicle’s wine critic, declared the years between 1995 and 2001 the winery’s “golden age,” when Beinstock produced “some of the greatest wines ever made in California.”

Beinstock loved making wine, but he was increasingly disillusioned with the Fellowship. Burton, its leader, had begun making doomsday predictions. In 1998, Burton claimed that an earthquake would destroy most of the West Coast but spare Apollo. A group of Fellowship members was charged with preparing for the tremors. “As a winemaker, I couldn’t stand it,” Beinstock said. “I made a lot of enemies back then, because I was kicking them out of the winery, and they would come back and strap the barrels to the racks.” When the apocalypse didn’t come, many members left the group. Burton was also dogged by lawsuits from former members who claimed that he had sexually exploited them. (The president of the Fellowship said that no lawsuits about sexual misdeeds have been adjudicated in court.)

In the mid-nineties, Beinstock and Rice, his wife, began tending four hundred vines in a thicket down the road from Apollo, with the goal of making wine outside of their work at Renaissance. Clos Saron used no pesticides or herbicides and even less intervention in the winery. They built a small house, a pen for their sheep, and a winery sunk into the ground, to keep the temperature...
stable. Beinstock auctioned off his collection of grand-cru Burgundies and other well-aged wines to help finance the construction. In 2010, they cut ties with the Fellowship.

They didn’t advertise Clos Saron as natural wine, because that wasn’t a widely understood term in the U.S. Instead, Beinstock described his wines as artisanal, terroir-driven, minimalistic, or low-intervention. “I was not thinking about being green or being politically correct or about being cool. To me, it was one thing only—how do you express the soil to the fullest extent possible?” Beinstock said. “And then, ten years later, came the natural-wine phenomenon, and we were discovered.”

In 2000, Alice Feiring, a freelance writer, was hired to create a wine guide for Food & Wine. “I had to do so much tasting for that book, and I realized that the wine world was in deep shit,” she told me. Feiring placed the blame largely on one man: Robert Parker, the critic behind the influential newsletter The Wine Advocate. When Parker launched his publication, in 1982, he considered himself an outsider in the snobbish world of fine wines. His most notable innovation was grading wines on a hundred-point scale. “Seeing a wine slapped with a number was new and startling,” Elin McCoy writes, in “The Emperor of Wine: The Rise of Robert M. Parker, Jr. and the Reign of American Taste,” from 2005. It was also enormously effective. Consumers intimidated by the mystifying language of wine labels now had an easy way to decide what to buy.

High-scoring bottles often sold out immediately. Vintages receiving a perfect score could quadruple their prices—which meant that there was strong financial incentive to make the kind of jammy and oakly high-alcohol wines that appealed to Parker’s palate. Wineries around the world adjusted their processes accordingly. This homogenizing effect appealed Feiring; Parker-anointed wines, she wrote, “had no sense of place.” (She also described wines she disliked as “stupid,” “emasculated,” “some Body Shop concoction,” “the vinous equivalent of bottle blonds,” “airbrushed,” and “dead.”)

Like Parker two decades earlier, Feiring saw herself as an outsider, revealing the wine world’s dirty secrets in several books and articles. She wrote about the lab-manufactured yeasts that allow growers to tweak their grapes’ naturally occurring flavors, the enzymes that shape aroma and texture, the powdered tannins that enhance mouthfeel, the colorants that deepen hues, the filtration and fining processes that remove particulate matter, the sulfites that aid in preservation, the micro-oxygenation machines that smooth tannins—or, according to Feiring, “turn wine into baby food”—the reverse-osmosis machines that she called “torture chambers” for wine. (Parker, too, is a prominent critic of filtration, and was an early champion of several key figures in the world of low-intervention wine, including the importer Kermit Lynch and the Sonoma winemaker Tony Coturri.)

A countervailing trend had taken hold in Beaujolais in the nineteen-eighties, where the winemakers Jules Chauvet and Marcel Lapierrre refused to use commercial yeasts and added little or no sulfites during vinification. Elsewhere in France, there was a growing interest in biodynamics—a mystical version of organic farming, based on the agricultural theories of the nineteenth-century philosopher Rudolf Steiner, which uses a planting calendar that aligns with the cycles of the cosmos. But consumers sometimes assumed that these wines were of lower quality. One study found that wines with eco-certifications earned slightly higher scores from critics but that listing those certifications on a wine’s label led, on average, to a twenty-per-cent reduction in price. Coturri, who began making natural wines in the nineteen-sixties, has said that his methods were long considered a liability, not a selling point. “I learned quickly that you couldn’t in and start talking about natural yeast and not adding sulfites and organics,” he told the Web site Sprudge. “When I did make the mistake of talking about how the wines were made, how the grapes were grown, there’s wine shops in the city that were afraid of the wine.”

By the mid-two-thousands, though, consumers’ tastes were changing. People who shopped at farmers’ markets, drank craft beer, and ate heirloom tomatoes at farm-to-table restaurants were alarmed by reports of lab-made yeasts, grapes doused in the weed killer glyphosate, and enormous corporate conglomerates. The qualities that had once made natural wines seem unsophisticated or suspect—the obscure grapes, the rustic producers, the natural yeast and not adding sulfites and commercial yeasts and added little or no sulfites during vinification. Elsewhere in France, there was a growing interest in biodynamics—a mystical version of organic farming, based on the agricultural theories of the nineteenth-century philosopher Rudolf Steiner, which uses a planting calendar that aligns with the cycles of the cosmos. But consumers sometimes assumed that these wines were of lower quality. One study found that wines with eco-certifications earned slightly higher scores from critics but that listing those certifications on a wine’s label led, on average, to a twenty-per-cent reduction in price. Coturri, who began making natural wines in the nineteen-sixties, has said that his methods were long considered a liability, not a selling point. “I learned quickly that you couldn’t in and start talking about natural yeast and not adding sulfites and organics,” he told the Web site Sprudge. “When I did make the mistake of talking about how the wines were made, how the grapes were grown, there’s wine shops in the city that were afraid of the wine.”

By the mid-two-thousands, though, people mean when they declare a wine “natural” or “biodynamic” requires following a long list of rules and paying for certification; to call it “natural” is merely to make a general claim of virtue. “Stasis, purity, unchanging essence—these are at the heart of the natural myth. Natural means the original version—and, as with holy books, original means best,” the scholar of religion Alan Levinovitz writes, in his forthcoming book, “Natural: How Faith in Nature’s Goodness Leads to Harmful Fads, Unjust Laws, and Flawed Science.”

But turning grape juice into wine means intervening in the course of nature. What people mean when they declare a wine to be natural, then, depends on a constellation of factors: the soil, the grapes, irrigation or its absence, the harvest methods, the amount of sulfur, what machines were or were not involved—even, perhaps, the winemaker’s personality and politics, and where and how the bottles were sold. There are many ways to be virtuous, or to fail at it. This vagueness is part of what has al-
I followed Beinstock’s practice: close at
on his own, as a learning exercise. Rozman
stock, in 2013, he had made two barrels
making his seventh California vintage.
Oregon House, and Dani Rozman was
was the beginning of harvest season in
August, I drove from Sacramento
to the Gadsden flags and back-yard goats of Yuba County, an hour away. It
was the beginning of harvest season in
Oregon House, and Dani Rozman was
making his seventh California vintage.
During his apprenticeship with Bein-
stock, in 2013, he had made two bar-
rels on his own, as a learning exercise. Rozman
followed Beinstock's practice: close at-
tention in the vineyard, a largely hands-off
approach in the winery. He, too, hoped
to make fine wines with enough struc-
ture—a balance of tannins and acidity—
that they could age for many years.
Rozman was living a largely itinerant life
at the time, and the resulting wine felt
almost like a liability. He let it age in
barrels as he returned to South Amer-
ica for the harvest, figuring that he'd
eventually give it away to friends and
family. When he came back to Califor-
nia several months later, the wine had
turned from what Beinstock called “cute”
into something much more interesting.
Beinstock urged him to bottle and sell
it. Rozman, calling his nascent winery
La Onda—Spanish for “the wave,” or
“the vibe”—hand-labelled and numbered
six hundred and forty-seven bottles, and
took samples to the Bay Area’s best-
known natural-wine shops: Ordinaire,
Terroir, Ruby. As the buyers sniffed and
sipped, Rozman watched their faces
closely for their reactions. In one after-
noon, he sold dozens of cases. Since then,
La Onda wines have appeared on the
wine lists of a number of highly regarded
restaurants: Ruffian, in Manhattan; Ro-
berta's, in Brooklyn; Quince, in San Fran-
cisco; Bavel, in Los Angeles.
For most of the year, La Onda, whose
vines are grown on Apollo land, is a
one-man operation, but harvest season
requires help. During my visit, Rozman
was aided by two cheerful, teasing in-
terns, Francesca DeLuca and Carly
Cody; his partner, Manuela Delnevo,
rounded—soulful, even. It seemed that certain grapes tasted
the sun was getting to my head, but
ning to happen on my tongue. Maybe
into the bushes, I felt something begin-
Rozman's laborious approach to grape-
Napa yields four to six tons of grapes;
pling eighty vines.) Now the crew some-
buffalo had gone on a rampage, tram-
(Previously, an electric fence had failed,
the grapes, further damaging the crop.
been lost to mildew. Some of the fences
it. The growing season had been alarm-
but less so for the farmer.
Rozman's methods were appealing,
but the harvest had a desperate edge to
she gestured to the hillside—”and turn the kind of
Profit they want.”
looking from the hillside—”and turn the kind of
profit they want.”

to DeLuca, who told me about the harvests
she'd worked at conventional wineries.
La in the Finger Lakes region
of New York, the vines were sprayed with
mildew-killing chemicals. In Oregon,
she had stood at a conveyor belt, trying
to pluck out bad grapes as they whizzed
by. After several hours, she felt sick from
the motion. She said, “People say it’s not
possible to do it like this”—she gestured
to the hillside—”and turn the kind of
Rozman's laborious approach to grape-
growing seemed sustainable for the crops
but less so for the farmer.
Later, Rozman drove to another plot
and asked the interns to walk the rows
of grapevines and assess the Cabernet.
“What did you guys see?” he asked when
they returned.
“Damage,” Cody and DeLuca said in
unison. “But the fruit that’s there is ripe,”
Cody added.
“If we don’t get enough fruit for the
big press, what do we do?” DeLuca asked.
“Cry?” Rozman said.

n 2011, Marissa Ross was working as
Mindy Kaling's personal assistant, in
Los Angeles, when she began making
videos about wine for the Web site Hel-
loGiggles. The videos were more come-
dic than beverage-focussed; Ross drank
and discussed cheap grocery-store stuff.
Beef and whiskey were young people’s
beverages of choice; wine was for lawyer
dads who bragged about their supple Cal-
ifornia Cabernets, or tipsy moms with
enormous afternoon glasses of Chardon-
ay. But Ross found that when she drank
better wines—particularly low-interven-
tion, additive-free ones—she felt better.
She started her own blog, which was
more informative, though she still often
chugged straight from the bottle.
There was a youthful enthusiasm and
closeness among the young sommeliers
and bartenders of L.A. that reminded
Ross of her years in the indie-rock scene.
People were making natural-wine zines,
markets the bottles it sells through mail-order subscriptions as sugar-free, mycotoxin-free, lab-tested, and paleo-, keto-, and low-carb-friendly. Since the company was founded, in 2015, it has amassed more than a hundred thousand customers through appearances at health fairs and partnerships with health-industry figures such as the blogger Wellness Mama and the celebrity fitness trainer J. J. Virgin. “I had five glasses last night and I woke up this morning, went to the gym at 5 a.m., and felt amazing,” Ben Greenfield, a triathlete and fitness influencer, enthused on his podcast. “Just like I can’t go to a steak house and order a filet mignon unless I know it’s grass-finished, I can’t order a Cab without thinking about seventy-two different toxins.”

Dry Farm Wines, which is based in Napa Valley, now has thirty-five employees. They begin every workday with a group meditation in a room that has nubby carpeting, cushions on the floor, and a couple of salt lamps. Fifteen minutes of quiet sitting is followed by a group visualization and a collective gratitude practice. When I visited, employees were grateful for YouTube and Netflix, for a new kitten, for a great workout, and for the practice of gratitude. Then everyone stood and hugged.

Todd White, the company’s founder, apologized for his rasp; he was getting over a case of bronchitis. “I’m usually a raging horse of health,” he told me. White follows a ketogenic diet—a lot of fat, drastically reduced carbs, regular fasting—and describes himself as a biohacker. He told me that Dry Farm Wines’ success was largely driven by meditation and the keto movement, and then corrected himself: “the keto revolution.” The company’s customers are health-conscious people who “are trying to optimize life, trying to optimize health, trying to optimize their aging experience.” Dry Farm advertises its wines as producing “no hangovers.”

White concedes that alcohol is “a dangerous neurotoxin” but has argued that “microdosing” wine has benefits: “When the dose remains low enough, you have an increase of creative expression, you have an opening of that window of vulnerability—we all just want to love, and love more. Wine helps that.”

Natural wine’s move into the mainstream posed problems, too. Marissa Ross told me, “The spotlight is really wonderful but also detrimental.” The community had positioned itself against the behemoth of conventional wine; now that it was accruing more capital, celebrity, and attention, it was increasingly prone to lengthy dissections of who was legit and who was just cashing in on a trend, and which makers were claiming to be more organic than they really were. New guys kept showing up on the scene, and so many of them were extremely dogmatic about sulfur. Part of Ross couldn’t wait for the trend-hungry hordes to move on. “Sake is going to be the new thing in a year,” she predicted, sounding hopeful.

This wasn’t the only thing troubling her. In the weeks after our conversation, Ross began collecting stories of women who claimed to have been sexually assaulted or harassed by the rising sommelier Anthony Cailan and others in the industry. After several of the accounts were reported in the Times, Cailan resigned from his job at a restaurant, although he denies the allegations. “Natural wine is all about celebrating pleasure and freedom and experimentation, which is great, until those things are used to excuse bad behavior,” Ross told me.

Bigger commercial interests were trying to capture a piece of the market. Aldi, the German grocery chain, commissioned an orange wine from Romania that sells for less than ten dollars. “It’s so polished, visually, but it’s very dead-tasting,” Feiring told me. “It wasn’t as disgusting as conventional wine, but it doesn’t go anywhere.” (The wine had been put through a centrifuge, a no-no according to Feiring’s principles.) A bio-science manufacturer now sells a yeast that promises to give conventionally made products the complex flavors of wines made with natural yeast. “I think it is going to go away,” Feiring said of the descriptor “natural.” “As conventional people start marketing their wines as natural, the people really making natural wines will stop using the word. It’ll be just wine. Like going back to pre-nineteen-eighties, when you’d just expect a wine to be natural.”

I felt unexpectedly low after I left Oregon House, dogged by the memory of how happy I had been during my time in the vineyard, waking up at dawn, communing with the earwigs that lived among the grapes. I went to a natural-wine bar on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and sat between two couples on what looked to be successful dates. I knew that farming was exhausting work and that I’d be terrible at it. Still, I liked imagining myself inhabiting a different kind of life, one that was more vital, less confined within various screens. I asked the server for the bar’s liveliest wine. “It’s going to have a farty smell at first, but pretty soon it should be jangling,” he told me when he brought me a glass. It cost sixteen dollars and tasted fizzy and dirty. If I was honest with myself, I didn’t much enjoy it, and that made me feel left out.

I thought about a conversation I’d had with Beinstock. We had been sitting under a large oak tree in a clearing near Clo Saron’s first plot of grapevines, and he was talking about how natural wine was a cult—but so was football, so was science. “Most people are cult members in some way,” he said. Midsentence, he cocked his head and looked up. “I wonder,” he mused. I became aware of a muted hum coming from the tree. “There must be a hive inside there,” he said. “It’s always full of bees.” The sun was setting, and he was growing more philosophical. “In the terminology of the Fellowship, you can lose your identity into anything. In Zen, they say that the last and the hardest step is to give up the struggle to awaken. Only when you let go of it can you make it—although you don’t want to anymore. It’s a paradox. That’s the way I feel—that by now wine is me in a deep way. And at the same time I’ve pretty much let it go.”

Yes, the natural-wine world could be both silly and dogmatic. And yet Beinstock still believed that there was something special happening, something worth paying attention to. “It’s a beautiful flower still opening,” he said. “Will it turn into a fruit? Will it reseed? Will it fade?” •
On any given day, American children are more likely to eat dessert than plants. Makers of baby food face a conundrum: If it
I n a laboratory in Denver, on a de-commissioned U.S. Army base, a baby sits in a high chair with two electrodes attached to his chest. To his left, on a small table, a muffin tin holds four numbered cups, each filled with a green substance. On the walls and the ceiling, four cameras and an omnidirectional microphone record the baby’s every burble and squawk, then transmit them to a secure server in an adjacent room. What looks like a window with blinds, across the room from the baby, is in fact a two-way mirror with a researcher behind it, scribbling notes. The baby’s mother takes a spoonful of the first sample and lifts it to the baby’s mouth, and the experiment begins.

Building 500, as this facility was formerly known, has the looming hulk of an Egyptian temple: it was once the largest man-made structure in Colorado. When it opened, in 1941, four days before the attack on Pearl Harbor, threats to American safety were much on the government’s mind. (After the war, President Eisenhower spent seven weeks on the eighth floor, recuperating from a heart attack.) The Good Tastes Study, as the baby experiment is called, is in a similar spirit. The two electrodes on the baby’s chest will monitor his heart rate and how it fluctuates with his breathing. A third electrode, on the sole of the baby’s foot, will measure his “galvanic skin response,” or how much he’s sweating. Together, they’ll indicate whether the green substance is triggering a fight-or-flight response. Does the baby sense danger?

The enemy in question is kale. The four cups are all filled with raw kale leaves whipped into a smooth purée, or slurry, as food researchers call it. One sample is plain, another sweet, another sweeter still, and the last one salted. Sugar and salt can mask the bitterness in kale, but this baby isn’t fooled. No matter which sample he’s offered, he grimaces and turns his head, purses his lips, and swats the spoon away. The more his mother tries, the grumpier he gets, till he kicks his foot so hard that he jostles the electrode, disrupting the signal. “It’s just a thing that happens,” Susan Johnson, the director of the study and a professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado, told me. “Completely throws off the galvanic skin
response. If you can find a body part that’s not in motion, let me know.”

Most babies could use a dose of kale: a half cup has more than a day’s worth of Vitamins A, C, and K. The only problem is that they hate it—or so parents and baby-food manufacturers seem to assume. Two years ago, when Johnson launched the study, she sent her graduate students to find some commercial baby foods made from pure kale or other dark-green vegetables. They couldn’t find any. The few that did exist were mixed with fruit. “I sort of blew it off at first,” Johnson told me. “I just sent them out again and said, ‘Try harder.’”

They went to Kroger, Walmart, Whole Foods, and Sprouts; they scoured the organic markets in Boulder, then widened their search to the Internet. Still no luck. The closest thing they could find was a Polish product made with Brussels sprouts. “That’s when I started to get less frustrated and more interested,” Johnson said.

Food preferences are a chicken-and-egg problem. Do we choose them or do they choose us? The Good Tastes Study was designed to tease such mysteries apart. Over the next six months, a hundred and six babies will pass through Building 500 and try the samples. Afterward, two experts in human expression will scrutinize their faces on the videos. They’ll divide their features into zones of activity and classify every twisted lip and wrinkled nose according to a Facial Action Coding System. The system can sort adult expressions into emotional categories: Happiness, Sadness, Surprise, Fear, Anger, Disgust, and Contempt. But baby faces are too pudgy for such specificity, Johnson says, so she’ll settle for positive, negative, and neutral. (When a baby makes a gesture known as “the rake” and claws the kale off his tongue, that’s negative.) She’ll correlate those responses with the electrode readings, compare them with the babies’ reactions to a control substance (oatmeal), and then circle back to see how the parents reacted to their children’s reactions.

Baby food shouldn’t be this hard. After a few hundred thousand years of raising children, humans ought to have this part down. No food has been more obsessively studied, no diet more fiercely controlled, no dining experience more anxiously stage-managed. Yet we still get it wrong. On any given day, a quarter of American toddlers eat no vegetables. When they do eat them, the most popular choice is French fries. Why don’t babies know what’s good for them? And why don’t we?

When my kids were young and peevish and a carrot could cause a revolution—when Ruby loved oatmeal but hated Cream of Wheat, and Hans loved Cream of Wheat but hated oatmeal, and Evangeline wanted no breakfast at all; when every dinner was like the Yalta Conference and the table like enemy terrain, booby-trapped with vegetables that could go off in your face—I took courage from Calvin Schwabe.

Schwabe was a man not easily disgusted. A veterinary epidemiologist at the University of California, Davis, he specialized in parasitic worms that get passed from dogs and wild animals to people and end up in their liver, lungs, and brain. When Schwabe moved to Davis, in 1966, after a decade studying tapeworm infestations in Lebanon and Kenya, he found the local culture a little tame. He was famous for taking grad students to ethnic restaurants and chiding the chefs for not using authentic ingredients. He hosted dinners of grilled guinea pig and deep-fried turkeys.

Squeamishness is more than a minor character flaw, Schwabe believed. It’s an existential threat. Even in America, people go hungry every day although they’re surrounded by perfectly nutritious food. Pets, for instance. “Some 3,500 puppies and kittens are born every hour in the United States,” Schwabe wrote in “Unmentionable Cuisine,” his cookbook of taboo foods, published in 1979. “The surplus among them represents at least 120 million pounds per year of potentially edible meat now being totally wasted.”

“Unmentionable Cuisine” is a work of calculated outrage, but it’s not “A Modest Proposal.” It’s a practical guide, Schwabe wrote, for the not too distant day when people may have no choice but to eat stewed cat (page 176) and beetles in shrimp sauce (page 372). If we were all just a little less finicky, we could feed the world.

It’s a sensible argument, but then food preferences are rarely amenable to sense. Our tastes are us, we like to think. We were born hating lamb or fermented fish, even if half the world loves nothing better. And it’s true that everyone experiences food differently. The woman beside you on the bus may have three times as many taste buds as you do, and different genes regulating those tastes. Depending on which version of the TAS2R38 gene you have, you may be highly sensitive to bitter foods, mildly sensitive, or not sensitive at all. People with dense, hypersensitive taste buds are often called supertasters, and are said to represent about a quarter of the population. Another quarter, with sparse, insensitive taste buds, are called nontasters, and the rest fall somewhere in between.

But it’s not that simple. Supertasters don’t always live up to the name—in some studies, they react to food just as regular tasters do—and genetic effects tend to fade. Children who are hypersensitive to bitterness are often especially fond of sugar. But that predilection disappears in adults, while the taste for bitterness grows. Being a finicky eater makes evolutionary sense for a toddler, lumbering around sticking things in his mouth. Better to spit them out if they don’t taste familiar. But we learn to pick our poisons, and then to love them beyond reason. We go from Pabst to I.P.A., milk chocolate to dark, latte to espresso, homing in on the bitterness we once avoided. “Our biology is not our destiny,” Julie Mennella, a biopsychologist at the Monell Chemical Senses Center, in Philadelphia, told me. “We’re omnivores, and there is a lot of plasticity in the brain.” Taste begins as nature and ends as nurture.

The index at the end of “Unmentionable Cuisine” is a gallery of horrors, or a good bedtime story, depending on the child: “Bat, baked,” page 209; “Donkey brains,” page 165; “Dormouse, stuffed,” page 208. Schwabe presents his book as a collection of culinary taboos,
but it’s really the opposite: a celebration of what people will eat. Some Chinese love earthworm broth, and Zanzibaris feast on white-ant pie; the French have been known to eat eels with sea-urchin-gonad sauce, and some Hawaiians have a taste for broiled puppy. Human beings will eat damn near anything, it seems. You just have to start them young.

Late one afternoon in August, in a suburban kitchen in Scarsdale, New York, I watched a woman named Saskia Sorrosa roast beets for a baby-food recipe. Beets are kale’s dark twin in the baby-food family. Something about their loamy sweetness, the taste of iron and manganese that seeps through them like runoff from a rusty pipe, turns children off. “I used to use a little magical thinking,” Sorrosa said. “When my girls were little, I’d tell them that if they eat beets they’ll make rainbow poop.” Slender and tan, in a denim shirt and black jeans, Sorrosa moved about the kitchen with an easy efficiency. She peeled and chopped the roots, spread them on a cookie sheet with some fresh fennel, and drizzled them with olive oil. She did the same with a tray of asparagus and leeks, then put the trays in the oven. “But they also learned pretty quickly that there was only one meal. That was that. If they didn’t eat it, there was no dinner.”

Sorrosa is the founder and C.E.O. of Fresh Bellies, a line of organic baby meals that Walmart and Kroger began carrying this summer. Seven years ago, when she made her first baby food, she was thirty-three years old and a vice-president of marketing for the National Basketball Association. She had a six-month-old girl and could find nothing in stores to feed her that wasn’t insipid or sweet. “So I’d come home from work and make the menu for the week,” she said. “Two or three flavors, purée and freeze, then the same thing again two days later. I wasn’t just making peaches. I was making peaches with lavender, figuring out which vegetables to cook with onions and which ones with garlic. It was like having a second full-time job.”

Born and raised in Ecuador, Sorrosa speaks with her hands and in a rapid, ebullient English with no trace of an accent. Her father was a general manager for Del Monte in Guayaquil, then a banana farmer and exporter. He could afford to send his three daughters to an international school. Sorrosa came to the United States at seventeen to study communications at George Washington University, found work in Miami and New York, and eventually married a childhood friend. “My friends said it was like dating your brother,” she said. After their second daughter was born, two years after the first, Sorrosa quit her job and launched her business. She rented a professional kitchen, hired a chef who’d worked for Mario Batali, and began selling her baby food at farmers’ markets up and down the Hudson. Within three months, she was making as many as two thousand jars a week. This year, Fresh Bellies will produce half a million. Next year, the company should quadruple that number.

Baby food is in the midst of a golden age. With the rise of two-income families, home delivery, and ever pickier eaters, the global market has grown to nine billion dollars a year, sixteen percent of it in the United States. Nine out of ten Americans have eaten commercial baby food for some period of time. Happy Baby, Tiny Organics, Once Upon a Farm, and dozens of other brands have joined in a scrum for the boutique market, over the bodies of fallen competitors like Bohemian Baby. One baby-food delivery service, called Yumi, promises to introduce babies to “over 80+ ingredients” in “the most nutrient-dense purées available.” Its lineup includes Kiwi Chia Pudding and Baby Borscht: “Superfoods for Superbabies.”

Sorrosa has a simpler goal. She wants her children to eat the way she ate as a child. “In Ecuador, we had whatever the adults were having—it was just puréed and given to babies,” she said. “I learned to eat spicy young.” On weekends, friends and neighbors would descend on her parents’ farm for buffets of ceviche and sancocho soup (a beef broth with mashed plantains and lime juice), braised goat stew and shrimp in peanut sauce. All of which found its way into Sorrosa’s mouth as she hung from her mother’s hip.

“Palate training” is the buzz phrase for this, though it makes babies sound a bit like interns at a wine bar. We learn to eat what we’re given to eat, and that education begins before we’re born. When a pregnant woman eats a green
bean, its flavor winds its way into the amniotic fluid around her fetus, and later into her breast milk. “Carrots, vanilla, alcohol, nicotine, mint—I’ve never found a flavor that didn’t get through,” Julie Mennella told me. Those tastes, and the colors and textures of things that contain them, come to signify food in babies’ minds. Children whose mothers eat potatoes with garlic while pregnant, a study in Ireland found, are more likely to enjoy potatoes with garlic ten years later.

By now, Sorrosa’s kitchen was filled with the smell of roasting vegetables, earthy and sweet. She took the trays from the oven and let them cool, then pureed the beets and fennel with an herb stock made with oregano from her garden. She was doing the same with the asparagus and the leeks when her daughters came tumbling in, wearing summer dresses and pink headbands. Sorrosa handed them bags of beet chips and freeze-dried red peppers to eat. When I asked what their favorite foods were, Alexa, the five-year-old, tilted her head and scrunched her eyes. “Chicken nuggets? Hamburgers?” Her mother laughed and waved her off. “We never eat chicken nuggets,” she said. Then she took a plate and spooned the two purées on it, bright green and red like traffic lights, and handed it to me.

This was cheating, of course. No commercial baby food could be so fresh. To keep for weeks on a shelf, food has to be pressure-cooked at two hundred and fifty degrees, or simmered at lower temperatures and spiked with an acid to help fend off bacteria. Fresh Bellies took the second approach. Its We Got the Beet flavor is tart with lemon juice and much rougher on the tongue than the suave purées she’d given me. It’s also three times as expensive as most baby foods and has to be kept refrigerated. Still, it’s recognizable as food in a way that the gray sludge in jars often isn’t. And it has no added sugar or fruit. “You could mix it with chickpeas to make a really delicious hummus,” Sorrosa said, and she was right. This was baby food for grownups.

Sorrosa wasn’t teaching her girls to eat as she did in Ecuador. She was teaching them to eat as she does now, in Scarsdale, with cookbooks by Ottolenghi and the Barefoot Contessa on the counter. Her girls were contented omnivores, as she intended. But what part of their training was essential to their good health, and what part was just teaching them to be foodies like their mother? “I like Chop’t salad!” Isa, the seven-year-old, told me, trying to cover for her sister’s chicken-nugget comment. “And chicken-noodle ramen!” Sorrosa gave her the side-eye. “Ramen?” Then her face brightened. “Oh, you mean at Momofuku! You do love that.”

Abies are creatures of fashion. They may not know what fashion is, but they’re under our control, so we dress them as we like and feed them what we want. Their diets distill our anxieties. In the nineteenth century, this meant breast milk for a year or until the first molars appeared. In the nineteen-thirties, with the rise of “scientific motherhood,” it meant formula at first, then cereal at seven or eight months. It meant jars of overcooked carrots in the nineteen-fifties, in the heyday of industrial food, and homemade purées in the nineteen-seventies. Babies have been early adopters of organic, low-carb, gluten-free, vegan, and hypoallergenic diets. But if the latest trend is to feed them what they’ll eat as adults we may be betting on the wrong horse. Our own diets seem to change every five years. Who’s to say what their diet will be?

Fruits and vegetables are the best proof of that fickleness. Until the early twentieth century, they were a suspect food, the cultural historian Amy Bentley writes in “Inventing Baby Food.” Raw fruit was thought to cause fever, based on medical theories that dated back to the second-century Greek physician Galen of Pergamum. Vegetables were seen as sources of dysentery and diarrhea. (The real problem was the polluted water used to wash them.) When canned fruits and vegetables were sold, it was mostly in apothecaries, as laxatives. Only the discovery of “vitamines,” so named by the Polish biochemist Casimir Funk, in 1912, restored their reputation. “Nowadays it has become a race between physicians and nutritionists to see who dares to feed vegetables and solid food the earliest,” a pediatrician at the Mayo Clinic wrote in 1954. “Vegetables have already been fed in the first month. We can now relax and see what it is all about.”

What it was about was business, abetted by bad medicine. Between 1921, when a restaurant manager named Harold Clapp made the first commercial baby food, in Rochester, New York, and 1960, the baby-food industry swelled into a quarter-billion-dollar business. In that same period, the average age at which
For the sea bass to give up its spine without resistance.
For your aunt to serve you nameless meats you love.
For your grandfather to assign everyone a favorite dish, incorrectly.

For the shrimp to have expressionless eyes.
For your grandmother to murmur “thank you” as everyone serves her.
For the owner to insist on calling your father “professor.”

For the ice water you requested but forgot to drink.
For the film of oil on your last grains of rice.
For the gift of red-bean soup with the oranges.

For the numbers on the check, in Chinese penmanship.
For the leftovers in their cartons, in tied plastic bags.
For the Chinese-newspaper rack in the vestibule.

For night to have fallen while you were eating.
For ginger and scallions to infiltrate the dreams from which you will wake in the only home you know.

—Adrienne Su

babies were fed solid food dropped from seven or eight months to less than two. Formula and “patent foods” were better than breast milk, pediatricians and advertisers claimed. Formula never ran out, and baby food could be enriched to suit an infant’s needs. “For Baby’s Sake, Stay Out of the Kitchen!” a Gerber ad insisted in 1933. Science could provide what mothers could not.

They weren’t wrong. Babies of that era were often anemic, so they needed food fortified with iron. But that was because physicians insisted on clamping their umbilical cords immediately after birth. This kept blood from flowing from the placenta, depriving the baby of up to a third of its blood supply. Instead of nursing at their mother’s breast, babies were carted off and given formula, which kept the mother’s milk from coming in. It was a self-perpetuating cycle, and it kept spinning long after children grew up. Just as eating broccoli as a baby can teach you to love it as an adult, eating foods full of sugar, salt, starches, and preservatives can give you a taste for those things later on. It’s palate training on an industrial scale.

Babies can get fat when fed solid food too soon. Before the age of five months, they’re often too weak to refuse a meal, and adults, in their way, follow suit. “Industrializing the food supply was a win for most people,” Bentley told me. “It created safe, affordable, shelf-stable food that only rich people used to be able to eat. The problem is that, when so much food is available, the rules around it disintegrate. We can afford to eat like cavemen now or to be gluten-free. We can eat anything, anywhere, anytime, and the really delicious stuff is not that great for you. So now we aren’t dying of disease or hunger. We’re dying from consuming too much.”

The beaming faces on baby-food jars can hide quantities of unhealthy additives and worse, Ralph Nader told Congress in 1969. Seven years earlier, Rachel Carson had found that chemical fertilizers could work their way into the fruits and vegetables in baby food. A year after that, a study found that rats fed a baby-food diet developed hypertension. A series of contamination scandals followed: rodent excrement in dry baby food, cockroach fragments in Beech-Nut jars, chips of enamel paint and high levels of lead in many others. “One of the enduring characteristics of the food industry is its penchant to sell now and have someone else test later,” Nader said. Even dog food was more clearly labelled.

The backlash was furious but brief. If the scientific mothers of the nineteen-thirties wanted baby food untouched by human hands, the natural mothers of the seventies wanted only handmade food. After a half century of being pushed around by doctors and industry, they were ready to “take mothering back,” Bentley writes. Pressing a button on a blender was easier than forcing squash through a sieve, and a spate of new cookbooks offered advice for the trickier parts. “Peel the banana,” a recipe for “Banana in ‘Making Your Own Baby Food’ explained, “and mash it in a dish with a fork.”

A third of all baby food is now homemade, yet the baby-food industry is bigger than ever. Its new products have more vegetables and fewer additives. They are better labelled and more cleanly processed (though a recent study found trace quantities of heavy metals in nearly all the baby foods it tested, probably from pesticides and airborne pollutants). Gerber even has certified dietitians, lactation experts, and sleep coaches on call for free. But the true attraction is still convenience. Grinding your own carrots is a drag, even with a Baby Bullet blender, and your child may like the stuff in jars better anyway. “We are concerned with the technical task of mass feeding,” Gerber’s director of research, Robert A. Stewart, concluded in 1968, after dismissing the notion that the company’s use of sugar, salt, modified starch, and MSG was bad for babies. “The quickest way to fail in such mass feeding is to prepare a nutritional product in a form that the consumer will not eat.”

The taste-testing center for the Gerber Products Company is in a town I may not name, in a facility I’ve been forbidden to describe in detail. It’s a kind of baby black-ops site. “Do you know where you’re going?” my driver asked, when he arrived in a Lincoln town car. “I know the address. But do you know what the business is?” Gerber has been conducting taste tests since the nineteen-fifties. At first, the samples were sent to panelists by mail; then the tests were moved to a hotel in Fremont, Michigan, where the Gerber factory is situated. But the company worried that the results were skewed: many of the panelists owed their jobs to Gerber. So the tests were moved to this town which I shall not name, in a state...
that will likewise go unspecified. “They rented out a church basement for a while,” Sarah Smith-Simpson, a chipper, speed-talking principal scientist with Gerber’s Consumer Sensory Insight division, told me. “But they kept getting bumped out by funeral lunches.”

We were waiting for the babies to show up. Gerber runs about a hundred and fifty taste tests a year—since this facility opened, in 1996, babies have tried more than a hundred and fifty thousand individual servings. As we watched, nine mothers and one father filed in with babies on their hips. They took their places in cubicles furnished with high chairs and desktop computers. Then a cart full of white ramekins was wheeled in. Half the ramekins were filled with a pale-yellow purée; the other half had a purée that was closer to beige. Across from me, a moonfaced girl in a white stegosaurus jumper, identified only as Judge No. 7, grunted and kicked her legs. She turned and gave me a long, level stare, then blew a raspberry in my direction.

For the next fifteen minutes, she and the other babies would taste the two samples and their parents would rate their reactions on the computer. It was the Good Tastes Study without electrodes. Only instead of kale the babies were eating applesauce. There aren’t many things that babies like better than applesauce. The two samples were subtly different—one was made from a single apple variety, the other from four—but they were equally sweet. And sugar is the great override button of infant taste. A few drops can calm a baby’s heart, release opiates in her brain, and settle her neural activity into a pleasurable pattern. Adults in taste tests reach a bliss point at about five teaspoons of sugar per cup of water. Babies prefer twice that amount. This test, in other words, was a no-brainer.

Judge No. 7 had had enough. She signaled this fact by grabbing the spoon from her mother’s hand, slapping it to her forehead like a salute, and shouting “Baaaat!” She’d eaten both dishes clean. “They like what they like,” Smith-Simpson said. After the parents had filed out of the room, sated babies back on their hips. We were standing in an observation room next door, looking out at the testing area through a two-way mirror. On Gerber’s old nine-point tasting scale (it has since switched to seven points), an eight or above was a home run—cause for a joyous announcement in Fremont. Vegetables averaged six and a half. “I don’t know that anyone likes Brussels sprouts or kale the first time,” Smith-Simpson said.

We know how to solve this problem. To learn to like a vegetable, children have to try it again and again, the psychologist Leann Birch found more than forty years ago. Sometimes it takes ten tries or more. But who wants to take that advice? Who wants to watch a baby toss a turnip across a room five times, much less ten? “Most of our research shows that parents will buy one container and give it three or four times, but they won’t buy it again,” Smith-Simpson told me. Good eating habits are the one skill that parents don’t mind their children giving up on, Saskia Sorrosa told me: “When they’re learning to ride a bike, they fall down a hundred times. Learning to read takes years. But when they’re learning to eat it’s ‘Oh, well, you didn’t like it the first time. Don’t bother.’”

Taste tests like Gerber’s miss the point, Sorrosa believes. Babies have no idea what’s good for them. If we want them to eat like adults, their food should taste good to adults. Yet Sorrosa can’t escape the logic of the market, either. The beet-fennel purée that she made for me was delicious, but she couldn’t risk it on a supermarket shelf. Beets are polarizing enough on their own, she said. “Add fennel and you have two things that people either love or hate.” It’s the basic conundrum of baby food: If it sells, it’s probably not best for babies. If it’s best for babies, it probably won’t sell.

Gerber doesn’t add sugar to most of its purées anymore, but it’s there just the same. The vegetables are almost always mixed with fruit—apple-blueberry-spinach, pear-zucchini-mango—or naturally sweet. “Production carrots like these grow bigger and set more sugar than the ones you get in a store,” Chris Falak, one of Gerber’s agricultural-team leaders, told me when we checked on a carrot crop outside Fremont. “They’ll get even sweeter after a week of sunny days and cool nights.” Of the more than
five hundred baby foods with vegetables that Susan Johnson’s graduate students surveyed for the Good Tastes Study, nearly forty per cent listed fruit as a first ingredient; another quarter listed red and orange vegetables first. Only one per cent were mostly dark-green vegetables.

The American diet is like a broken bridge, Johnson says. It’s missing a span of simple, savory baby foods that can lead to healthy eating habits. “There’s nothing wrong with fruit. But fruit in my dark-green vegetables? Who thought that was a good idea?” Getting children across the bridge has never been easy, but in a culture that always plays to their weaknesses it can seem impossible. American toddlers now eat an average of seven teaspoons of sugar a day, according to the Centers for Disease Control—more than the recommended allowance for adults. Even baby food made with a single, unsweetened ingredient may taste nothing like the real thing. Babies raised on the pressure-cooked bananas in jars, one study found, were no more likely than others to enjoy the fresh fruit.

The observation room had a second one-way mirror, which looked into a small working kitchen. “We wanted to figure out what parents do at home—how they store the product, feed it, and prepare it,” Smith-Simpson said. Then she pushed a button and the room began to revolve like the grand-prize booth on a game show. A minivan was now parked where the kitchen used to be. “The car is the second most used environment,” she said.

If convenience to a housewife meant not having to cook baby food, convenience to a working parent means not having to serve it. Drivers can’t spoon-feed babies in a car seat, but they can hand them a tube of banana puffs and let them feed themselves. The baby-food industry, having lost some of its youngest customers—the recommended age for starting solid food has crept back up to six months—has expanded its audience on the other end. That has led to a proliferation of new “delivery systems,” including squirt bottles and squeeze tubes and bags of dehydrated veggie chips. Babies once weaned from jars at twelve months now sip from pouches well into their toddler years. Half of American children under three use them.

The idea, as usual, came from the military. The baby foods of the nineteen-fifties and sixties were often based on foods developed for American soldiers in the Second World War. Their powdered, concentrated, and prepackaged ingredients were easy to serve and close to imperishable. What could be better for baby? And today’s pouches are direct descendants of the Army’s foil-packed field rations. If you want to see the future of baby food, look in a foxhole.

“War fighters are a weapons system. We fuel them with food,” Stephen Moody, the director of the U.S. Army’s Combat Feeding Directorate, told me, when I visited his labs in Natick, Massachusetts. Square-built and direct of speech, with ears like miniature satellite dishes, Moody runs a team of eighty-seven chemists, biologists, food scientists, and support staff, developing field rations for all five branches of the military. “We are building the fuel for that war fire,” he said. This seemed a world away from babies eating applesauce. But Moody’s goals were a lot like Gerber’s: mobility, nutrition, taste. The canned beef and soy biscuits of the Second World War have given way to a food court’s worth of flavors: buffalo chicken with brown rice, beef goulash with smoked paprika, mango-chipotle salmon. Toss a foil pack into a plastic sack with some salt water, add a tea bag of iron and magnesium powder, and the resulting chemical reaction will heat the meal to a hundred degrees in ten minutes. The pack can survive for three years at eighty degrees and withstand a thousand-foot drop from a C-17 cargo plane. Yet the chicken-burrito bowl I tasted was better than most fast food. Even the rice had kept its shape and bite, thanks to a special variety that had taken months to source.

“It’s only nutritious if they eat it,” Moody said, echoing the Gerber scientists of the nineteen-sixties. The soldiers in his field tests are a lot like the babies in taste tests. They get tired of eating the same dish. They refuse to eat some things even when hungry. They have limits to what they’ll do for a meal. “We always go to war with the perfect rations for the last war,” Moody said. “We are trying to get ahead of that.” Today’s military is focussed on counter-insurgency and mobile expeditionary squads—the equivalent of families in minivans, and similar concerns apply. How heavy is my backpack? What’s the most nutritious snack bar? What’s the simplest self-serve container? Three meals’ worth of standard field rations weigh just under five pounds. “First strike” rations for expeditionary forces weigh about three pounds. By microwaving foods in a vacuum or bombarding them with sound waves,
Moody’s team has managed to reduce their weight and volume by an additional thirty per cent, while improving their flavor.

The logical end to all this is personalized nutrition: to each according to his body chemistry. Field rations vary from thirty-six hundred calories for ordinary soldiers to six thousand for Army rang- ers or Arctic ski patrols. “You wouldn’t want to put the same thing in a fighter jet that you put in a tank,” Moody said. The next step is to tailor the rations with nutrients for specific tasks: tyrosine for improved cognition, anthocyanins to repair muscles, calcium to thicken bones. (Millennial recruits are prone to stress fractures, Moody said, their frames having gone soft from too much screen time.) One day soon, soldiers will come back from a patrol, download data from their smartwatches, and 3-D-print pills of the nutrients they’ve lost. The baby version won’t be far behind.

The two fields come closest to converging in the cockpits of spy planes. U-2 pilots need to keep a pressurized helmet on at all times, so they can’t use a spoon or a fork. To keep them nourished for flights of up to twelve hours, the Combat Feeding Directorate has designed what look like oversized tubes of toothpaste. Stick the nozzle in a socket on the dashboard and it heats up like a cigarette lighter; stick it in your helmet and you can squeeze the hot food into your mouth. “When we first developed them, we did a lot of surveys,” Jill Bates, the directorate’s sensory coordinator, told me. She squeezed two lines of food onto a plate, one beige and the other cream-colored. “And we realized that the pilots wanted more texture and mouthfeel in there. The idea that they were having a meal—not just grown men eating puréed meat.” The lines did look lumpier than expected, but I wasn’t prepared for the taste. I’d been imagining something like Plumpy’Nut, the nutritional paste given to starving children. Yet if I closed my eyes and forgot about the tube, my first taste was of apple pie—or a reasonable simulacrum, with bits of crust and real fruit. The second line tasted like a luxurious mac and cheese. It was made with real Gouda and truffle oil, Bates explained, and tiny beads of pasta: “That’s the only kind that can squeeze through.” Like the other tube foods they’d developed—tortilla soup, Key-lime pie, polenta with cheese and bacon—these were dishes meant to do more than nourish. They were designed to trigger sense memories: to call to mind a kitchen in Iowa, as a pilot circled the Syrian desert at seventy thousand feet.

It’s a lesson Americans learn early and never seem to forget—that even a replica of a replica of a thing can soothe the heart. That a rough facsimile is often enough. It’s why we have Velveeta and margarine and orange juice from concentrate, protein shakes and Soylent drinks and superfood smoothies, made for runners and hikers or just people in a hurry. We’re all eating baby food now.

My children have long since grown up and can feed themselves. The strange things I forced on them as kids—goat kefir gets mentioned more often than I’d like—seem not to have stunted them too badly, or twisted their palates into unseemly shapes. Two of them even like beets. Still, after a few months in the crosscurrents of baby-food research, I couldn’t help having second thoughts. Did I feed them right? Are their dietary foibles my fault? Would some magic combination of Swiss chard and tempeh, grass-fed beef and organic dragon fruit have made them stronger?

Food should be a comfort to us, but it’s just as often a torture. And so, one morning this fall, hoping to clear my head of theories and counter-theories and get a hint of how other babies eat, I went to an African farm stand in Maine. Portland has been a haven for immigrants for more than forty years, beginning with Vietnamese and Cambodians in the nineteen-seventies. In the past ten years, a stream of refugees have arrived from Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, among other countries, and a scattering of African markets have popped up to serve them. This stand was the brainchild of a group called Cultivating Community, which trained immigrant farmers to grow African produce in Maine. The Somali Bantu man who supplied the vegetables had leased an acre southeast of Lewiston, where he grew the crops these mothers missed most: amaranth greens, African corn, bitter eggplant.

By the time I arrived, a line of women had formed, most of them with babies in slings or strollers. Mariam, the good-natured Djiboutian who ran the stand, had told some of the mothers that I was coming, so a group of them stood to one side, eyeing me curiously, their hands on their hips or holding bags of greens. Four

“My computer ads don’t know me at all.”
were from the Congo, one from Angola, and one from Somalia; all were dressed for going out, in elaborately plaited wigs and weaves and carefully applied makeup. We talked for a while about what they feed their babies, and how it differs from what their older children ate in Africa—they’d all immigrated in the past two years. Then I made plans to watch three of them cook for their children. “But only if you buy the ingredients!” a feisty Congolese woman named Rachel, with long copper braids, told me. “This takes time, you know!”

Rachel was twenty-nine and had studied mathematics in Kinshasa. When she fled the Congo, two years ago, after a government crackdown on dissidents and student protesters, she had an eighteen-year-old boy and a five-year-old girl, and she was pregnant. The only visas that she and her husband could get were for Ecuador, so they flew to Quito with their children, and made their way north, country by country, on foot and by bus, until they reached Laredo, Texas, and were granted temporary asylum. Now here they were in Maine, on an alien continent. The climate was so cold that it seemed frankly hostile, and the government was less and less inclined to let them stay. The least she could do was feed her children some food from home.

The next day, I picked Rachel up at her apartment, in north Portland, and we went shopping at a Sudanese market in the East End. While I wandered among sacks of fufu flour and canary beans, bottles of palm oil and sorrel syrup, Rachel hitched her daughter Soraya onto her back with a blanket. Soraya was a year old now, with bright eyes and a look of plump, irrepressible health. She watched as her mother threw up at her with wide, inscrutable eyes, and slowly opened her mouth. No doubt there’s always something familiar from the bowl. She looked up at her mother with wide, inscrutable eyes, and slowly opened her mouth. No doubt there’s always something familiar from the bowl. She looked up at her mother with wide, inscrutable eyes, and slowly opened her mouth. No doubt there’s always something familiar from the bowl. She looked up at her mother with wide, inscrutable eyes, and slowly opened her mouth. No doubt there’s always something familiar from the bowl. She looked up at her mother with wide, inscrutable eyes, and slowly opened her mouth. She added peeled and cubed eggplant and some sliced leeks, then checked on the amaranth leaves boiling beside them, soft as lamb’s-quarters. Across the room, Soraya was slumped on the couch. She was watching a cartoon of a mother cradling her child, singing, “Hush, little baby, don’t say a word.” Rachel glanced over at her, then mashed the softened eggplant against the side of the pot with a wooden spoon. She poured the sautéed vegetables into the boiling greens, dropped in two bouillon cubes and the smoked catfish, boned but not skinned, and cut in two whole tomatoes. Then she covered the pot and set it to simmer.

Rachel was twenty-nine and had studied mathematics in Kinshasa. When she fled the Congo, two years ago, after a government crackdown on dissidents and student protesters, she had an eighteen-year-old boy and a five-year-old girl, and she was pregnant. The only visas that she and her husband could get were for Ecuador, so they flew to Quito with their children, and made their way north, country by country, on foot and by bus, until they reached Laredo, Texas, and were granted temporary asylum. Now here they were in Maine, on an alien continent. The climate was so cold that it seemed frankly hostile, and the government was less and less inclined to let them stay. The least she could do was feed her children some food from home.

The next day, I picked Rachel up at her apartment, in north Portland, and we went shopping at a Sudanese market in the East End. While I wandered among sacks of fufu flour and canary beans, bottles of palm oil and sorrel syrup, Rachel hitched her daughter Soraya onto her back with a blanket. Soraya was a year old now, with bright eyes and a look of plump, irrepressible health. She watched as her mother threw up at her with wide, inscrutable eyes, and slowly opened her mouth. No doubt there’s always something familiar from the bowl. She looked up at her mother with wide, inscrutable eyes, and slowly opened her mouth. No doubt there’s always something familiar from the bowl. She looked up at her mother with wide, inscrutable eyes, and slowly opened her mouth. No doubt there’s always something familiar from the bowl. She looked up at her mother with wide, inscrutable eyes, and slowly opened her mouth. No doubt there’s always something familiar from the bowl. She looked up at her mother with wide, inscrutable eyes, and slowly opened her mouth. She added peeled and cubed eggplant and some sliced leeks, then checked on the amaranth leaves boiling beside them, soft as lamb’s-quarters. Across the room, Soraya was slumped on the couch. She was watching a cartoon of a mother cradling her child, singing, “Hush, little baby, don’t say a word.” Rachel glanced over at her, then mashed the softened eggplant against the side of the pot with a wooden spoon. She poured the sautéed vegetables into the boiling greens, dropped in two bouillon cubes and the smoked catfish, boned but not skinned, and cut in two whole tomatoes. Then she covered the pot and set it to simmer.

Feeding children isn’t molecular biology; it just feels like it sometimes. The perfect diet is a target that’s both moving and receding, its bull’s-eye shrinking in the distance. The Recommended Dietary Allowances for calories and nutrients, first issued by the National Research Council in 1941, were deemed too permissive in 1994. The latest versions, called Dietary Reference Intakes, also include adequate, average, and tolerable nutrient levels—three more numbers for parents to keep in mind. And every year seems to bring more supplements to obsess over: probiotics, phytonutrients, antioxidants, adaptogens. “We’ve got solids down to a science,” the Yumi baby-food Web site promises. If only.

No doubt there’s always something better for babies to eat. But they’re resilient creatures, for all their flab. Any good, varied diet will get them through, and the components aren’t hard to figure out: a dark-green vegetable, an orange vegetable, a carbohydrate, and a protein for iron and B vitamins. A single egg or half a cup of milk, two or three times a week, can be the difference between a healthy child and a malnourished one, Mutinta Hambayi, a senior nutritionist with the World Food Program, in Rome, told me. “One mother said to me, ‘When you have a mouse hole and there are seven babies in there, I can feed one to my child every day!’ They are called hunger foods, but they are not. They are foods that countries have adapted to eating.” In Zambia, where Hambayi grew up, people eat caterpillars; in Kenya, termites; in Uganda, flying ants; in Cambodia, spiders. “People find it disgusting, but I’m from a landlocked country,” Hambayi said. “I had the same reaction when I saw prawns.”

Babies do have some sense of what’s good for them, it turns out. “Self-weaned” infants, who dispense with purées and just gnaw on their parents’ food, tend to be slimmer and healthier than those raised on baby food. But only if their parents eat healthy meals themselves. And there’s the catch. The average American’s diet is so abysmal, Amy Bentley told me, that most babies are better off eating commercial baby food: “They’ll get more and a greater variety of fruits and vegetables than those fed the family meal.” To learn to feed our children, we need to learn to feed ourselves.

Rachel’s lenga-lenga was like no baby food I’d ever seen. It was full of onions and garlic and bitter green pepper. It had mashed eggplant and leeks that could give a baby gas. It was salty from the bouillon—the rest of the family would be eating it, too—and far from sweet. By the time it was done cooking, it was a thick green porridge, pungent with smoked fish and sulfurous plants. It made kale look like Christmas candy. And yet, when Rachel brought a bowl of it over to Soraya on the couch, she bounced up and down and clapped her hands.

“With really young babies, it’s not about liking or not liking,” Susan Johnson had told me. “If they want to eat, they’ll eat.” That’s the most striking finding of the Good Tastes Study. In video after video, the babies grimace or purse their lips after the first taste of kale. But when offered a second spoonful, they eat it anyway. “It’s amazing that they do it, but they do,” Johnson said. “There seems to be this window of opportunity between six and nine months—maybe even twelve months—where they’re just interested in food. And that predisposes them to healthy eating. They’re like baby birds. It doesn’t even matter if they like it. They just try it.”

Soraya coughed a little and glanced at the TV. She shook her head and clutched at an empty Cheetos bag on the couch. The spoon was floating toward her now, filled with that smelly, familiar stuff from the bowl. She looked up at her mother with wide, inscrutable eyes, and slowly opened her mouth.
The sidewalks of north Park Slope must be among the narrowest and most uneven in Brooklyn. They crash against the stoops of landmarked brownstones and split over the roots of oak and sycamore trees, menacing the ankles of pedestrians. Baby strollers compete for space with dogs of all sizes, shoals of high-school students, and shopping carts from the Park Slope Food Co-op. Here comes one now, rattling catastrophically, like Max Roach whailing on the high hat. It’s pushed by a Co-op member, who is accompanied by another, in an orange crossing-guard vest: a walker, in Co-op parlance, who will return the cart after the shopper has unloaded her groceries at her house or her car, or hauled them into the Grand Army Plaza subway station. It is against one of the Co-op’s many rules for the shopper to have the walker do the pushing; that’s the shopper’s responsibility. It is also against the rules to drag a walker beyond the Co-op’s strict walking bounds, though some members, when they have escaped the reach of the institutional eye, will try to get away with murder. The noblest aspirations of civilized society versus the base reality of human nature is a theme that frequently comes up at the Park Slope Food Co-op.

The Co-op opened in 1973, in a room of the Mongoose Community Center, a leftist hangout on the second floor of 782 Union Street. There were no shopping carts. There were stairs, which members descended perilously, clutching boxes laden with peaches and tomatoes and other produce from Hunts Point, the wholesale market in the Bronx. For years, even after the Co-op took over the building and expanded its offerings to things like toilet paper and batteries, members kept lugging boxes around the store. But the carts, when they came, were not greeted with universal relief; one member wrote to the Linewaiters’ Gazette, the Co-op’s bi-weekly newspaper, to complain that they were turning the Co-op into “a suburban, John Sununu nightmare.”

Terminology is important at the Co-op. Sometimes on the building’s intercom system—available to everyone for paging out requests, announcements, or complaints—someone will make the mistake of using the word “customer,” and invariably someone else will page right back to point out that there is no such thing as a customer here. “Shopper” and “member” are all right, and so are “shopping member,” “member-worker,” and “member-owner.” Everyone who can afford it pays a twenty-five-dollar joining fee, plus an “investment” of a hundred bucks, returned upon leaving, and everyone works. The place runs on sweat equity: your blood for bread, your labor for lox.

In the late eighties, the Co-op had seventeen hundred members. Today, there are more than seventeen thousand, which makes it the biggest food co-operative run on member labor in the country, and, most likely, the world. Members unload delivery trucks and stock shelves. They ring up groceries, count cash, scrub toilets, and sweep the floor. They scan other members’ I.D. cards to admit them into the building, and they look after other members’ kids in the child-care room. In the basement, members with colorful kerchiefs tied around their heads bag nuts and spices, price cuts of meat, and chisel blocks of cheese. Bent over their walnuts and dried-apple rounds, they bear an unmistakable resemblance to Russian factory workers, one point in favor of Co-op critics who like to compare the operation to a Soviet work camp.

Upstairs, members answer the phones, speaking to other members who call to explain why they’re missing a shift, or to beg for an extension to make up the shifts they have already missed. With some exceptions (the milk-and-honey land of retirement is a distant possibility), members must work a shift of two hours and forty-five minutes every four weeks—not every month, because, as Joe Holtz, a co-founder of the Co-op and a longtime general manager, says, “months are notoriously not into equality.”

The place is always packed, though membership numbers are in constant flux, because, in addition to coming in, people go out. They take parental or sick leave, or fall so far behind on work shifts that they skulk away to Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s. They move to faraway neighborhoods or out of state, though even this is not enough to keep some people away. A few weeks ago, a member working at a checkout counter was ringing up an array of cucumbers, separating the Kirbys from the Persians. She was Claire Oberman, a tax preparer who lived in Brooklyn until she moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut! Connecticut! She takes the train in once a month to do her shift.

“It’s like coming home,” a member working next to her said.

It was August, and the Co-op was in a relaxed mood. “Grazing in the Grass” was playing on the speaker system. A middle-aged guy in a “Make America Read Again” T-shirt examined containers of ice cream. A small, sunny woman wearing a baseball cap that said “Life Is Good” was working the exit, highlighting the “PAID IN FULL” line on members’ receipts before sending them on their way. Like any other store, the Co-op has problems with theft. At one point, an elevated chair was installed so that a member could sit and surveil the shopping floor, like a lifeguard or a tennis referee. Members found this unfriendly. Then checkout workers were instructed to
In the late eighties, the Co-op had seventeen hundred members. Today, there are more than seventeen thousand.
do random bag inspections. Members found this racist. The highlighter system is the best method that has been arrived at so far.

Some Co-op members stick AirPods in their ears to get through their shifts, but others have a philosophy about the work. The woman in the “Life Is Good” hat had a philosophy. She made contact with each person who came her way, putting out positive vibes. “Hi, sis, how you holding up?” she said. “Your mind is somewhere else. Come on back. Enjoy this moment! Life is a journey, and we forget sometimes about our blessings.” She pointed to her cap. “People come through here all the time so stressed out. Why are you so stressed out? If you can’t handle it today, let it go. Put it on the shelf, come back tomorrow. It’ll be here.”

A cloud of notoriety and Schadenfreude surrounds the Co-op in a way that does not seem entirely fitting for a grocery store. When non-Co-op people think of the Co-op, they picture snobs and brats, self-righteous foodies, hypocritical hippies, bougie mothers who have their nannies do their shifts, adult professionals who melt down like tetchy toddlers when kale is out of stock. The New York Times, which tends to treat the Co-op like a rogue nation-state, has covered the hummus wars, the pension controversy; the rumor that Adrian Grenier was kicked out—strenuously denied by the actor. “These are the self-important twits who are running our society today!” a commenter wrote in response to a 2012 article about a contentious Co-op meeting.

Members’ own views on the place vary. “It’s a user-friendly way of experiencing the pitfalls of communism,” a friend and former member told me. “I have no hard feelings,” another friend, who was slowly working her way back from a suspension, said. “My hard feelings are about myself.”

“Have you ever had bad blood with someone?” a third asked, before recounting, at length, a fraught episode in the produce aisle. “At the height of the whole thing, I thought, This is a lot of angst over bananas.”

“I would chew off my own arm to get out of there,” a colleague told me. But her family saves too much money on food to quit. The Co-op has a flat, twenty-one-per-cent markup on most things it sells, which means that members pay fifteen to fifty per cent less than they would at another grocery store. The aggressively fresh produce is less expensive than the greenmarket’s. The spices go for pennies; the cheese is crazy cheap. One reason Co-op members get called snobs is that they have a habit of saying stuff like “That’s what you pay for Humboldt Fog?”

Because member labor keeps costs down, the Co-op insists that, for fairness’s sake, if one adult in a household is in the Co-op, all the others must be, too. The place is full of what I have come to think of as split couples: one Co-op devotee, one hater. “My fiancé loved being in the Co-op,” a woman told me, but she couldn’t take it. She informed the office that she was leaving New York; her fiancé, she claimed, was just some roommate she was leaving behind. “And then they called him: ‘Oh, but we Googled you guys and we found your registry.’” Back into the fold she came. “My fiancé was mortified. My reaction was: You should have told them that our engagement had ended.”

It’s this kind of thing that gives the Co-op a reputation for petty zealotry. “Did you hire a private-security detail?” a member asked, when she heard that I was writing about the place. People told me, with glee, that I should get ready to be kicked out.

In fact, I am not at all ready. I joined the Co-op in 2013, and found it to be claustrophobically crowded, illogically organized, and almost absurdly inconvenient. In other words, it was love at first sight. Suddenly, on my editorial assistant’s salary, I was eating like an editor-in-chief. I loved the communal, chatty ethos. And I loved that it looked like New York, with people of all colors and kinds: vegan Rastafarians next to paleo trustafarians, budget-conscious retirees and profligate brownstone owners, queer parents and Hasids, the very young and the very old.

I work checkout on the 10:30-to-1:15 shift on Sunday mornings: the height of the madness, when the queue to reach the registers winds intestinally through the cart-crammed aisles. (There is a reason the Linewaiters’ Gazette is called the Linewaiters’ Gazette.) I have to say that I am inordinately proud of my skills at that post. I am quick and ruthlessly efficient, which are not qualities that I tend to associate with my performance of my regular job. It is satisfying, for someone who spends so much time playing with words on a screen,
to be of practical use. I have the P.L.U. codes for bananas, avocados, and lemons in my fingertips. I know how to tell mustard greens from dandelion, quinces from Asian pears. Sometimes, cruising through a shopper's load in a blissful state of flow, I fantasize about racing other checkout workers for the title of Fastest Register, though this would surely be deemed "uncoöperative," the worst of all Co-op sins.

You learn something about people, working Co-op checkout. You see how they handle their kids, their parents, and their partners. You see friends greeting one another and exes steering clear. You ask about beautifully named foods that you have never engaged with before—ugli fruit, Buddha's hand, fiddlehead ferns—and then you chat with the people buying them about how they plan to prepare them. It is fascinating to observe what people eat, and almost prurient to be allowed to handle their future food, to hold their long green meat radishes and cradle their velvety heirloom tomatoes, as fat and blackly purple as a calf's heart.

Shoppers unload their produce in great wet heaps onto the checkout counters and do their own packing, using bags that they bring from home or the store's cardboard boxes, recycled from the day's deliveries; to ease congestion, members on the shift are depuritized to help, though not everyone appreciates an intervention. One Sunday morning, I heard a keening wail rise from a register near mine: it came from an older woman whose meticulous or- dered the amount that each had spent in purchases that year. "Buyer and seller appreciated the intervention. One Sunday morning, I heard a keening wail rise from a register near mine: it came from an older woman whose meticulous organization system, known only to her, was being cheerfully undermined by a well-intentioned assistant. And yet the Co-op's small-scale errors and outrages and inefficiencies make the place feel organic, in the non-U.S.D.A.-regulated sense of the word: funky around the edges, humanly fermented, alive.

One morning in September, I went to see Joe Holtz, keeper of the Co-op's institutional memory. Holtz is a wiry man with a lined face, a Brooklyn accent—he grew up in Sheepshead Bay—and a digressive speaking style that his colleagues like to josh about. He moved to Park Slope in 1972, when he was in his early twenties. Some people were starting a food cooperative in the neighborhood, he heard; he and ten or so others committed to the project. "We had a good, robust discussion of all the different models of co-ops that we knew and what we thought we should do and what problems we were trying to address," Holtz said. "But also, if I could jump around for a minute, the bigger picture is 'Why do we want to start a co-op?' For me, I felt that the whole idea of American culture being all about individual success—not that I didn't think that individual success was legitimate, but I thought that our society was too focussed on it, and not focussed enough on community success, and community institutions."

That was a sentiment shared by the Co-op's precursors. In 1844, following a failed strike, a group of desperate weavers in the rapidly industrializing English city of Rochdale created the first successful modern consumers' coöperative. The Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, as it was called, was run democratically, with one vote per member. (Women had full equality.) Its general store included a lending library, to promote education. Members invested in the Society by buying shares, and profits were divided proportionally to the amount that each had spent in purchases that year. "Buyer and seller meet as friends; there is no overreach- ing on one side, and no suspicion on the other," George Jacob Holyoake, the English reformer, wrote admiringly.

Across the pond, coöperative efforts began, haltingly, to flourish. During the Gilded Age, farmers came together in an effort to break the railroad companies' choke hold on food transportation. A late-nineteenth-century influx of Finnish immigrants brought coöperative boarding houses, restaurants, and bakeries. In the nineteen-twenties, the federal government passed a bill protecting coöperatives from antitrust laws, and during the Great Depression, when need bound people together, co-ops thrived. Upton Sinclair's "End Poverty in California" campaign led to the formation of buying clubs across the state. One grew into the Consumers Co-op of Berkeley, a food cooperative in the Rochdale model, which, by the seventies, had become the largest in the country, with twelve stores, seventy-five thousand member households, and more than eighty million dollars a year in sales.

But when people think of co-ops in Berkeley they do not tend to picture the Berkeley Co-op, with its bright supermarkets stocking just about everything a red-blooded American might want to eat. They imagine bowls of lentils and pans of scorched tofu, stretched loaves-and-fishes style to feed a houseful of hippies, dropouts, and dreamers. They are thinking of the sixties: the time of the co-op movement's new wave, when people raised on a postwar diet of TV dinners and Wonder bread—not to mention Cold War fears of collectivist politics—started asking where their food came from, and what it meant for the state of the world.

That, anyway, is what happened to Holtz. He had quit college after his sophomore year. "I thought I had more important things to do than go to college," he told me. "Protest against the war in Vietnam and protest against imperialism generally, and protest against racial injustice, injustice against women, injustice against gay people, and the violation of the environment. Although the environment thing came a little later. I must say I was a little slow to that." He stumbled onto the politics of food when he went to a rally on the first Earth Day, in 1970, to hand out leaflets against an antiwar protest. The next year, he read "Diet for a Small Planet," Frances Moore Lappe's best-selling tract on the environmental degradation wrought by the industrial production of meat. A stint in Berkeley exposed Holtz to coöperative living; his household banded stretched loaves-and-fishes style to feed whatever was fresh at the local market. "I was confronted with having to cook eggplant," he said. "I don't think I'd ever seen an eggplant in my home when I was growing up."

Holtz and I were sitting in a small meeting room on the Co-op's second floor, where the staff have their offices. He had left the door open, and our conversation was punctuated by the call-and-response patter of the intercom, the building's non-stop soundtrack.

"Do we carry gluten-free cornmeal? Can anyone tell me if we carry gluten-free cornmeal?"

"Shopping member, all cornmeal is gluten-free."

The Co-op's founders tried to be...
realistic about what their little store could accomplish. “It was not a do-gooder operation! It was a self-help operation.” Holtz thumped the table. “Because these folks, me included, didn’t have enough money to afford the diets we wanted to eat. If we were going to eat chicken, we weren’t going to eat factory-farmed chicken. And, if we were going to eat a diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables, that was more expensive.” Thump. “And, if we were going to avoid the Mazola, Wesson store-brand cooking oils, then we were going to buy expeller-pressed cooking oils.” Many thumps. “We were going to try to have a better diet. And we needed the Co-op to be able to afford that. And, of course, if we were going to do that, we were going to welcome everybody. Because we thought that it was joyful for people to work together and to have success together.”

People loved shopping at the Co-op. What they didn’t love was working at the Co-op. The founders had decided to run the place with volunteer labor, and put a sign-up sheet by the door so that people could arrange their own shifts. “We thought everybody would agree that this is a fantastic thing and sign up early and often,” Holtz said. Alas, the system fell apart.

After various fits and starts, the Co-op decided that member labor would be mandatory. Members would be put on regular squads, to create a sense of social cohesion: if you missed your shift, you would know whom you were letting down. And—in what has proved the most infamous of Co-op policies, the reason that members are forever climbing a Sisyphean hill of “work alerts” and suspensions—you would have to compensate for missing a single shift by working two.

Holtz hates to hear the Co-op smeared as a hippie enterprise. With nasal sarcasm, he rattled off a flower child’s dippy rosary: “ ‘Let it be. Live and let live. Everything is beautiful. We don’t want hassles, man.’ ” No business, even an anticapitalist one, can be run on peace and love alone. For Holtz, the most important day in Park Slope Food Co-op history was the one on which the first derelict member was prevented from shopping. A line had been drawn. The place had grown up. “And it really hasn’t changed that much.”

Well, yes and no. The little do-it-yourself operation is now a comparative behemoth. Food goes fast, fast, fast. Last year, the Co-op posted $58.3 million in sales; with the store’s six thousand square feet of retail space, that works out to just under ten thousand dollars per foot, a ratio unheard of in the country’s conventional supermarkets. (Trader Joe’s, which leads that pack, takes in around twenty-four hundred per foot.) Even a swelling membership can’t sustain such an intricate operation. The Co-op began hiring paid employees in the eighties; today, there are upward of seventy “area coordinators”—the egalitarian euphemism for staff—plus half a dozen “general coordinators,” or managers, like Holtz. They roam the building checking the shelves, handling deliveries, muttering into walkie-talkies, advising squad leaders, and encouraging members, like field generals rousing their troops.

The Co-op is a principled organization, not necessarily a purist one. Yes, there’s a list of Unacceptable Food Additives, but also (to the chagrin of some) non-organic produce next to organic, local fruits and veggies laid side by side with California strawberries and grapes. For all the heated talk of boycotts, only two bans have recently been in effect: on Coca-Cola Company products and on water bottles from CamelBak, which is owned by one of the country’s largest manufacturers of ammunition. The buyers’ mandate is at once straightforward and devilishly exacting: find the healthiest products at the lowest prices, from distributors and farmers with top sustainability and labor practices, in enough variety to please a bunch of American palates. “Which ones should we take?” Parham said. “Give them something red, something green.”

Filled with the smell of cooking, the kitchen had a cozy, common-room atmosphere. Someone had stuck a copy of “This Is Just to Say,” the William Carlos Williams poem, to the fridge. Ron Zisa, a goateed, aging-roadie type with a long gray ponytail and a serene aspect—he is a sought-after yoga teacher—sat down at the communal table and unwrapped a sandwich. Zisa is in charge of bulk products: grains, beans, spices, granola, nuts, dried fruit. August had wrapped a sandwich. Zisa is in charge of the company’s owners, began sizzling links as her business partner made a counterintuitive pitch: “We have to eat less meat.” Seemore dilutes the chicken and pork of its links with vegetables, to create a series of proprietary flavors in eye-candy colors. Competitors were trying to close in on the concept, Nicoletti said, as she passed around samples.

After asking about production details, Lempert announced her verdict: “They’re delicious. I want to buy them.” She turned to Charles Parham, a meat-buying colleague. “Which ones should we take?”

“Appearances downstairs are everything,” Parham said. “Give them something red, something green.”

A page came over the intercom: Lempert’s eleven o’clock was here, two representatives from a female-owned sausage startup (“by women for everyone”) called Seemore Meats & Veggies. In the staff kitchen, Cara Nicoletti, one of the company’s owners, began sizzling links as her business partner made a counterintuitive pitch: “We have to eat less meat.” Seemore dilutes the chicken and pork of its links with vegetables, to create a series of proprietary flavors in eye-candy colors. Competitors were trying to close in on the concept, Nicoletti said, as she passed around samples.

After asking about production details, Lempert announced her verdict: “They’re delicious. I want to buy them.” She turned to Charles Parham, a meat-buying colleague. “Which ones should we take?”

“Apart from other things, everything,” Parham said. “Give them something red, something green.”

Filled with the smell of cooking, the kitchen had a cozy, common-room atmosphere. Someone had stuck a copy of “This Is Just to Say,” the William Carlos Williams poem, to the fridge. Ron Zisa, a goateed, aging-roadie type with a long gray ponytail and a serene aspect—he is a sought-after yoga teacher—sat down at the communal table and unwrapped a sandwich. Zisa is in charge of bulk products: grains, beans, spices, granola, nuts, dried fruit. August had wrapped a sandwich. Zisa is in charge of the company’s owners, began sizzling links as her business partner made a counterintuitive pitch: “We have to eat less meat.” Seemore dilutes the chicken and pork of its links with vegetables, to create a series of proprietary flavors in eye-candy colors. Competitors were trying to close in on the concept, Nicoletti said, as she passed around samples.

After asking about production details, Lempert announced her verdict: “They’re delicious. I want to buy them.” She turned to Charles Parham, a meat-buying colleague. “Which ones should we take?”

“Apart from other things, everything,” Parham said. “Give them something red, something green.”

Filled with the smell of cooking, the kitchen had a cozy, common-room atmosphere. Someone had stuck a copy of “This Is Just to Say,” the William Carlos Williams poem, to the fridge. Ron Zisa, a goateed, aging-roadie type with a long gray ponytail and a serene aspect—he is a sought-after yoga teacher—sat down at the communal table and unwrapped a sandwich. Zisa is in charge of bulk products: grains, beans, spices, granola, nuts, dried fruit. August had wrapped a sandwich. Zisa is in charge of the company’s owners, began sizzling links as her business partner made a counterintuitive pitch: “We have to eat less meat.” Seemore dilutes the chicken and pork of its links with vegetables, to create a series of proprietary flavors in eye-candy colors. Competitors were trying to close in on the concept, Nicoletti said, as she passed around samples.
How to Correctly Estimate Cooking Time

"A great weeknight recipe—twenty minutes and dinner is on the table."

START

IS THE RECIPE ONLINE?

NO

COOL

YES

FIND OTHER RECIPES AND COMPARE

+5 min

GET DISTRACTED BY INTERNET

+6 min

POUR THAT WINE

+2 min

DO YOU HAVE BOURBON?

YES

DO YOU HAVE WINE?

NO

NO

DO YOU NEED A GLASS OF WINE?

YES

DO YOU NEED MUSIC?

NO

DO YOU HAVE THE PERFECT PLAYLIST?

YES

GREAT—POUR BOURBON

+10 min

OVER COURSE OR RECIPE

NO

CAN YOU MAKE DO?

NO

+45 min

ARE YOU DOUBLING THE RECIPE FOR LEFTOVERS?

NO

* YOU DIDN'T COOK DINNER, BUT NOW YOU HAVE A KILLER "DINNER COOKING" PLAYLIST

+5 min TO KEEP CHECKING RECIPE

+10 min

+10 min + MORE WINE

+15 min

IT DOES

I WANT TO MOVE TO YOUR HOUSE

BUT BASIC MATH SHOULDN'T TAKE THAT LONG

CONGRATULATIONS!

DINNER IS ON THE TABLE IN 25 MIN—1 HR 13 MIN
Like just about every successful small business in the city, the Co-op has survived by virtue of real-estate luck. Member investment money allowed the Co-op to buy 782 Union Street early on, and, later, when the buying was still good, the two buildings on either side. Its relationship to local change is complex. On the one hand, the Co-op was started by young, white newcomers to the Slope and served many of the same. On the other hand, it is one of the rare businesses that have come to resemble the city they’re part of more, not less, over time. The Co-op strives to be a good neighbor. Members can fulfill their shift requirement by hauling loads of compost to community gardens, or by preparing and serving food at CHiPS, a nearby soup kitchen.

The Co-op doesn’t keep demographic information on its members, but, by one estimate, half live at least a mile away. In a sense, the Co-op is a neighborhood unto itself, a majority-middle-class island in a swirling sea of homogenizing wealth. The wealth filters in, though. Weber told me that the past ten years have seen a spike in requests for fancy cheeses—“with truffles.”

In the age of one-click delivery, it can seem antediluvian to trudge home with brutally heavy sacks dangling from your shoulders. Still, there’s a comfort to bumping up against other humans around food. That’s what grocery shopping used to be, before supermarkets: a social, neighborly time, much like the meal to follow.

One day, I got to talking with the member ringing up my groceries in the express line, Peter Kim George, a playwright in his early thirties. He told me that he had joined the Co-op “for research,” to observe *Homo brooklycusus* at close range. “I like the weirdness,” he said. “I’m used to cultish spaces. I grew up with Korean evangelical parents.” George prefers the Co-op to the plethora of other options nearby, like Union Market, a handsome grocery that’s part of a small local chain. If the Co-op is the neighborhood’s shaggy mutt, Union Market is its well-groomed show pony; whenever I step inside, jazz is softly playing. “Everything there is nice,” George said. “It looks pretty. I hate it.”

I

ike houseplants, co-ops are easier to kill than to keep alive. Costs, logistics, conflict, and burnout can bring even the healthiest ones down. Perversely, the things that initially make a cooperative strong—utopian spirit, decisions made by consensus, political passion, no big bosses—can prove fatal in the long run. The mighty Berkeley Co-op went under in 1988. A hundred-plus-page study on its failure by a California body called the Center for Cooperatives is subtitled “A Collection of Opinions”; even in failure, every voice must be heard.

Opinions are something that the Co-op carries in bulk. Easymoving members show up for their shifts, shop, go home again, and don’t give it another thought. Everyone else has a point of view on everything. The fact that all members have equal status is, mostly, a beautiful thing, but, without figures of authority to appeal to in times of tension, minor disagreements get out of hand. Shaming is a popular tactic. A shift-mate of mine told me that she had recently been accorded for snacking in the building, an almost universally unenforced Co-op no-no, by a member who then got on the intercom to crow to the rest of the building that she had nabbed an offender. There can be a mania for fetishistic rule-following in the name of fairness, with citizen’s- arrest-style confrontations that feel more kindergarten bully than protector of the peace.

On a fresh, bright Saturday morning, I got a tip: people were standing in front of the Co-op, shouting about racism. Hurrying over, I found a dreadlocked woman in batik chanting “If you shop here, you are supporting a racist institution” at members walking through the doors. Next to her, two white women, one cradling a Chihuahua in a pink sweater, held a poster printed with text that read like a Beat poem:

**[Image](https://example.com)**

If the Co-op’s principles have held steady, the neighborhood around it hasn’t. Yuppification, gentrification—whatever you want to call it, Park Slope is its poster child. Back in the Mon-goose days, Union Street was the boundary between the neighborhood’s rival Italian and Puerto Rican gangs: “West Side Story,” outer-borough style. Then came white professionals—“pioneers,” real-estate agents unironically called them—to renovate ramshackle brownstones. Good luck finding one of those today. A recent addition to the street is 800 Union, a doorman building that looms over its low-slung neighbors like a cruise ship. “Live in the lap of luxury while still enjoying a downtown neighbor-hood feel,” its Web site touts.

Most coördinators don’t have a particular background in food. Weber, who wears a fedora and has the calm, inscrutable demeanor of an undercover agent, came white professionals—to the Slope and served many of the same. On the other hand, it is one of the rare businesses that have come to resemble the city they’re part of more, not less, over time. The Co-op strives to be a good neighbor. Members can fulfill their shift requirement by hauling loads of compost to community gardens, or by preparing and serving food at CHiPS, a nearby soup kitchen.

The Co-op doesn’t keep demographic information on its members, but, by one estimate, half live at least a mile away. In a sense, the Co-op is a neighborhood unto itself, a majority-middle-class island in a swirling sea of homogenizing wealth. The wealth filters in, though. Weber told me that the past ten years have seen a spike in requests for fancy cheeses—“with truffles.”

In the age of one-click delivery, it can seem antediluvian to trudge home with brutally heavy sacks dangling from your shoulders. Still, there’s a comfort to bumping up against other humans around food. That’s what grocery shopping used to be, before supermarkets: a social, neighborly time, much like the meal to follow.

One day, I got to talking with the member ringing up my groceries in the express line, Peter Kim George, a playwright in his early thirties. He told me that he had joined the Co-op “for research,” to observe *Homo brooklycusus* at close range. “I like the weirdness,” he said. “I’m used to cultish spaces. I grew up with Korean evangelical parents.” George prefers the Co-op to the plethora of other options nearby, like Union Market, a handsome grocery that’s part of a small local chain. If the Co-op is the neighborhood’s shaggy mutt, Union Market is its well-groomed show pony; whenever I step inside, jazz is softly playing. “Everything there is nice,” George said. “It looks pretty. I hate it.”

I

ike houseplants, co-ops are easier to kill than to keep alive. Costs, logistics, conflict, and burnout can bring even the healthiest ones down. Perversely, the things that initially make a cooperative strong—utopian spirit, decisions made by consensus, political passion, no big bosses—can prove fatal in the long run. The mighty Berkeley Co-op went under in 1988. A hundred-plus-page study on its failure by a California body called the Center for Cooperatives is subtitled “A Collection of Opinions”; even in failure, every voice must be heard.

Opinions are something that the Co-op carries in bulk. Easymoving members show up for their shifts, shop, go home again, and don’t give it another thought. Everyone else has a point of view on everything. The fact that all members have equal status is, mostly, a beautiful thing, but, without figures of authority to appeal to in times of tension, minor disagreements get out of hand. Shaming is a popular tactic. A shift-mate of mine told me that she had recently been accorded for snacking in the building, an almost universally unenforced Co-op no-no, by a member who then got on the intercom to crow to the rest of the building that she had nabbed an offender. There can be a mania for fetishistic rule-following in the name of fairness, with citizen’s-arrest-style confrontations that feel more kindergarten bully than protector of the peace.

On a fresh, bright Saturday morning, I got a tip: people were standing in front of the Co-op, shouting about racism. Hurrying over, I found a dreadlocked woman in batik chanting “If you shop here, you are supporting a racist institution” at members walking through the doors. Next to her, two white women, one cradling a Chihuahua in a pink sweater, held a poster printed with text that read like a Beat poem:
DID YOU KNOW
For 45 years members were not entitled to
Due Process, a basic American right?
Reginald Ferguson has been a Saturday
Squad Leader for
Over 20 Years.
He was asked to step down from his posi-
tion without a hearing
Because he played the music too loud.

And, at the bottom: “Free Reggie!”

In fact, Reggie Ferguson was free and
standing right there: a lightly bearded
black man in square-framed glasses and
a Malcolm X T-shirt, to which he had
pinned a red button that said “REGGIE
DESERVES A HEARING.”

“I grew up in a food-co-op environ-
ment,” Ferguson told me. He and his
mother lived in Greenwich Village; she
would take the subway to shop at a co-op
on the Upper West Side. He had been
a member of the Park Slope Food Co-op
ever since graduating from business
school at N.Y.U., and, indeed, for two
decades he led a Saturday-morning
shopping squad. “I’m all about getting
the call to serve,” he said. “I’m a leader
of men and women.”

When it comes to setting the store’s
musical mood, shopping-squad leaders
hold the keys to the kingdom; whatever
they play on the sound system goes.
“Every four weeks, I created organi-
cally—pun intended—a new playlist,”
Ferguson said. The soundtrack was eclec-
tic—rap, African music, sixties rock,
salsa, Prince, Amy Winehouse. “I’ve al-
ways said that ninety-nine per cent of
people love the music. But, whoa, that
one per cent.”

The one per cent did not like the
music, and they did not like the vol-
ume at which it was played. But, rather
than address Ferguson, they complained
“upstairs”—to the office. (“Entitle-
ment,” Ferguson said.) One day, he got
a call from a man on the Co-op’s Dis-
pute Resolution Committee, who asked
Ferguson if he remembered being asked
to turn down his music. “I said sure.
And then he asked me if I remem-
bered a situation involving the makeup
list”—an altercation with a member
who had grown incensed at the way
that Ferguson ran his squad. That, too,
Ferguson remembered. He was informed
that he would be removed from his posi-
tion as squad leader and should find
a different shift.

Thus began a saga for the ages. Fer-
guson demanded a full disciplinary hear-
ing; quickly he learned that none was
available for members who had been re-
moved from their posts. He brought his
complaint to a Co-op meeting, where
nineteen faithful members of his squad
testified on his behalf. In the midst of
this, Ferguson, who, in defiance of the
judgment against him, had kept show-
ing up for his shift, was informed that
he had been suspended from the Co-op
for eighteen months. He has been pro-
testing ever since, during his former work
slot. “They called my protest a ‘novel act.’
I found that amazingly offensive, and I’d
like to explain why. My mother was a
community activist. I’ve been taught to
fight for what I believe in. What would
they have said about my grandparents,
fighting against segregation? Was that a
‘novel act’ as well?” (A general coordina-
tor of the Co-op says that Ferguson’s ac-
count “is incomplete and misrepresents
the processes of the Co-op.”)

A woman in a leather biker jacket
came over. “I was suspended for eigh-
teen months for shopping for him,” she
said, introducing herself as Deborah
Murphy. “I know that is against the
rules. O.K. But why eighteen months?”
She thought that she had been caught
on the Co-op’s security camera, hand-
ling over food.

“Big Brother,” Ferguson said.

Some Co-op employees have their
own issues with the workplace culture.
This past spring, a group of Co-op coör-
dinators informed the membership that
they were trying to form a union. Their
goal, they said, was to “make the Coop
stronger and more sustainable”; what
could better reflect the institution’s own
values of democracy and equality than
a commitment to organized labor? Be-
hind the scenes, though, the situation
was tense. Joe Holtz announced in the
Linewaiters’ Gazette that a formal com-
plaint against the Co-op had been filed
with the National Labor Relations Board
on the unionizers’ behalf by the Retail,
Wholesale and Department Store
Union. Dogged Gazette reporters then
filed a Freedom of Information Act re-
quest to obtain the complaint, which
alleged, in part, retaliation and intimi-
dation against the unionizers by man-
agement. Meanwhile, forty-three area
They say that dogs are man’s best friend, but I’ve always said that man is dog’s fourth-favorite food.

unusually, issues such as pay parity were not at stake; most coordinators make the same wage, $28.57 an hour. But the unionizers raised concerns about safety problems, unfair disciplinary procedures, and racism in the workplace. The N.L.R.B. investigated nineteen allegations against the Co-op, and decided to move forward with four of them; the Co-op settled with the board without admitting to any violation. (The settlement agreement obliged the Co-op to distribute a notice to employees informing them of their rights.)

In the way of such matters, each side has taken the results as a vindication of its position. The general coordinators have declared themselves neutral on unionization—while refusing to sign a binding statement of neutrality. Messier still is member involvement, which the unionizers welcome, and which those opposed see as interference in the Co-op’s internal affairs. “Don’t adopt me as your cause,” one union opponent wrote in an open letter, after members organized a pro-union petition.

The main democratic organ of the Co-op is the General Meeting, a monthly two-hour-and-forty-five-minute gathering during which members discuss current Co-op affairs, vote on officers, and bring proposals for new projects, committees, and policies. Holtz goes over the month’s financial statement, and other general coordinators make announcements. There is a brief board meeting at the end, effectively a pro-forma affair to officially vote aye on the things that members have voted aye on, nay on the nays.

Each meeting tends to attract a group of a few hundred people—members can get work credit twice a year for attending a G.M.—but rarely the same group. This can make for a partial, haphazard sort of decision-making. “Pure democracy can be an invitation to little dictators,” Tom Boothe, a co-founder of La Louve, a Parisian co-op based on Park Slope’s, told me. As anyone who has been to a town-hall meeting, or just watched one on “Parks and Recreation,” knows, it can also be an invitation for obscure speechifying, quixotic schemes, and ad-hominem sabre rattling. “Sound and Fury at the General Meeting,” a front-page Linewaiters’ Gazette headline read, after the May session ended in a filibuster on the seemingly abstruse subject of the paper’s letter-publishing policy—a stalking horse for one of the biggest areas of Co-op contention, the proposal to participate in the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement against Israel. The issue is officially settled—membership voted down boycott at a legendarily acrimonious G.M. in 2012—although, much as with the deadlock in the Middle East, skirmish follows skirmish, with no resolution in sight.

The September meeting was held in a fluorescent-lit high-school auditorium. Members seeking work credit for attending sat toward the back, ready to run as soon as things wrapped. First up were various points of business, civil and low-key: a statement in favor of the staff union; a request for better labelling of kosher products; an update from the Labor Committee on the Co-op’s support of fair-trade tomato farmers in Florida. Members running for reelection to a disciplinary committee presented themselves: three candidates for three positions. People checked their phones. A woman graded papers. This was what democracy looked like.

After an hour came the heart of the evening’s agenda: a proposal to ban single-use plastic bags. The Co-op long ago phased out plastic shopping bags, but it continues to make plastic roll bags available for produce and bulk items. There was a sense, among various coordinators, that the initiative was a purity campaign pursued by members who had little concern for the difficulty of keeping a break-even business afloat. On the other hand, using disposable plastic at the Co-op is like wearing a fur coat to a PETA convention. How could we talk a big environmental game and still look ourselves in the face?

Tracy Fitz, a slight woman with a blue head scarf trailing, Davy Crockett style, down her back, took the floor to introduce the proposal: that all fossil-fuel plastic bags be replaced by compostable
ones, made from plant resin, by the end of the year. The Co-op currently spends around seven hundred dollars a week on plastic bags; Fitz, an “energy-resources and health consultant” and a licensed acupuncturist, acknowledged that, under her proposal, that number could go up to seventeen thousand dollars, but this was a small price to pay for building a more sustainable “future for the earth.”

She had begun to thrift and recycle everything in her private life: clothes, shoes, housewares. She wouldn’t get new bicycle tires, she announced, though hers had begun to crack. The room applauded. The head of the Chair Committee reminded people not to applaud.

Next came Aron Namenwirth, solemn and bearded. For many years, he had worked a food-processing shift bagging olives. But, after he learned about plastics, he said, “it became a more and more difficult job for me to do—it just felt wrong.” He called for a violation of procedure: “I propose that we have a vote right now.” The room erupted into cheers. The head of the Chair Committee reminded people not to cheer.

Questions about pricing and practicality followed, and then comments. A woman who identified herself as a walker had begun to crack. The room applauded. The head of the Chair Committee reminded people not to cheer.

Questions about pricing and practicality followed, and then comments. A woman who identified herself as a walker took the floor.

“Once plastic bags are made, they’re in the ocean, they’re killing the birds.” She was close to tears. “Greta Thunberg took a sailboat across the ocean for this. I don’t see how there’s another side to this issue!”

“Unfortunately, I’m opposed to this idea,” the next speaker—David Moss, a member of the Chair Committee—said, cool as a locally grown cucumber. His argument: compostable bags, which can require more energy to make than regular plastic, contribute more to global warming.

Susan Metz, a G.M. regular with an uncanny resemblance to a white-haired Bella Abzug, took the mike. At a previous meeting, Metz, a founder of an outfit called the International Trade Education Squad, had requested nearly four thousand dollars of Co-op funds to produce a “music-stand reading” of Lynn Nottage’s play “Sweat,” which she hoped would open members’ eyes to the horrors wrought by NAFTA on American workers. The request was voted down. She had spent the start of this meeting soliciting donations for the project; around her neck she wore a large laminated placard showing a photograph from a professional production of the play. “We have to solve this,” she said, of the bag proposal. “We know that kids are now striking over their future. And anything that gets fossil fuels out of the ground is a crime against them.”

On it went. The Chinese recycling situation was mentioned; the word “emotion-alism” was lobbed, and rebutted. Ann Herpel, a general coördinator, suggested forming a committee to look into a compromise, but Namenwirth smelled a deferral tactic. “This reminds me of Nancy Pelosi in Congress,” he shouted. An ant elitist current shot through the room. At the end of the meeting, a distressed board member stood to address the crowd, her voice shaking. “That was not in the spirit of cooperation,” she said.

September is a cornucopian time, when late-summer and early-fall harvests mingle, the first butternut squash next to the last Sugar Baby watermelons. Chayote from Costa Rica is on the shelves at ninety-one cents a pound. There are Pennsylvania pawpaws (“ripe when fragrant and soft to the touch,” a sign advises), burgundy beans, cactus pears, ground cherries, Key limes. Apples are in: Crispin; Jazz; Zestar!; Ginger Gold; Cox’s Orange Pippin; Hidden Rose, with its modest mottled skin and startled, blushing flesh.

In the produce aisle, a man with a young face and sincere glasses is peering into a crate of—something. What are these tawny fruits? Attached to thin branches, they are smooth and swollen, like olives before curing. More people come over to puzzle. “Fresh dates!” Someone knowledgeable has spoken. The crowd is astonished: a familiar thing has been seen in a secret state of being. Providentially, a laminated card is discovered hanging just above eye level: “As dates ripen they will deepen in color, wrinkle a bit, and the skin may begin to flake. Eat them as you would eat dried dates. Be patient, wait for them to ripen. Be brave and try something new.”

Could co-ops, on the decline in this country since the seventies, make a comeback? For the first time in ages, the label “socialist” is not slander; the moment is there for enterprising utopians to seize. With the help of the Park Slope Food Co-op, a small new member-run co-op called Greene Hill has sprung up on Fulton Street, a mile and a half away; the Central Brooklyn Food Co-op, which describes itself as “one of the only urban Black-led food cooperatives in the nation—and the only one in New York City,” is aiming to open its doors in the summer of 2020. The Park Slope Food Co-op itself is looking into expanding; it has formed a relationship, complete with Parisian shopping privileges, with La Louve, though after Holtz and Ann Herpel went to visit they were accused by membership of using Co-op business to enjoy a French vacation.

On a recent Sunday, I was at my register, getting into the checkout groove. The mood of the morning had the right combination of urgency and rhythm. The playlist blasted Paul Simon, Edith Piaf, “99 Luftballons.” “Turn around,” my neighbor told me. An older woman at the counter behind mine was dancing, not exactly to the beat, but in the spirit of it. “She’s been going the whole time.” At the end of the shift, our squad leader got on the intercom to announce that one of our group was retiring from working Co-op shifts. As the store applauded, the dancer took a bow.

I decided to hang around a bit, to see if anything juicy might go down. I was chatting with another checkout worker when a member with pearl earrings and a pair of glasses on her head came over and kissed her on the cheek. She lives in Clinton Hill, and has been coming to the Co-op for thirty years, or something like that. After a while, who’s counting? “I always say my first degree comes from here,” she told me outside the building, with her groceries at her feet. “Working here showed me how to deal with people. Be open to all cultures. Be human. Look here first”—she pointed if not exactly to the beat, then in the spirit of it.

The Chinese recycling situation was mentioned; the word “emotion-alism” was lobbed, and rebutted. Ann Herpel, a general coördinator, suggested forming a committee to look into a compromise, but Namenwirth smelled a deferral tactic. “This reminds me of Nancy Pelosi in Congress,” he shouted. An ant elitist current shot through the room. At the end of the meeting, a distressed board member stood to address the crowd, her voice shaking. “That was not in the spirit of cooperation,” she said.

September is a cornucopian time, when late-summer and early-fall harvests mingle, the first butternut squash next to the last Sugar Baby watermelons. Chayote from Costa Rica is on the shelves at ninety-one cents a pound. There are Pennsylvania pawpaws (“ripe when fragrant and soft to the touch,” a sign advises), burgundy beans, cactus pears, ground cherries, Key limes. Apples are in: Crispin; Jazz; Zestar!; Ginger Gold; Cox’s Orange Pippin; Hidden Rose, with its modest mottled skin and startled, blushing flesh.

In the produce aisle, a man with a young face and sincere glasses is peering into a crate of—something. What are these tawny fruits? Attached to thin branches, they are smooth and swollen, like olives before curing. More people come over to puzzle. “Fresh dates!” Someone knowledgeable has spoken. The crowd is astonished: a familiar thing has been seen in a secret state of being. Providentially, a laminated card is discovered hanging just above eye level: “As dates ripen they will deepen in color, wrinkle a bit, and the skin may begin to flake. Eat them as you would eat dried dates. Be patient, wait for them to ripen. Be brave and try something new.”

Could co-ops, on the decline in this country since the seventies, make a comeback? For the first time in ages, the label “socialist” is not slander; the moment is there for enterprising utopians to seize. With the help of the Park Slope Food Co-op, a small new member-run co-op called Greene Hill has sprung up on Fulton Street, a mile and a half away; the Central Brooklyn Food Co-op, which describes itself as “one of the only urban Black-led food cooperatives in the nation—and the only one in New York City,” is aiming to open its doors in the summer of 2020. The Park Slope Food Co-op itself is looking into expanding; it has formed a relationship, complete with Parisian shopping privileges, with La Louve, though after Holtz and Ann Herpel went to visit they were accused by membership of using Co-op business to enjoy a French vacation.

On a recent Sunday, I was at my register, getting into the checkout groove. The mood of the morning had the right combination of urgency and rhythm. The playlist blasted Paul Simon, Edith Piaf, “99 Luftballons.” “Turn around,” my neighbor told me. An older woman at the counter behind mine was dancing, not exactly to the beat, but in the spirit of it. “She’s been going the whole time.” At the end of the shift, our squad leader got on the intercom to announce that one of our group was retiring from working Co-op shifts. As the store applauded, the dancer took a bow.

I decided to hang around a bit, to see if anything juicy might go down. I was chatting with another checkout worker when a member with pearl earrings and a pair of glasses on her head came over and kissed her on the cheek. She lives in Clinton Hill, and has been coming to the Co-op for thirty years, or something like that. After a while, who’s counting? “I always say my first degree comes from here,” she told me outside the building, with her groceries at her feet. “Working here showed me how to deal with people. Be open to all cultures. Be human. Look here first”—she pointed if not exactly to the beat, then in the spirit of it.

The Chinese recycling situation was mentioned; the word “emotion-alism” was lobbed, and rebutted. Ann Herpel, a general coördinator, suggested forming a committee to look into a compromise, but Namenwirth smelled a deferral tactic. “This reminds me of Nancy Pelosi in Congress,” he shouted. An ant elitist current shot through the room. At the end of the meeting, a distressed board member stood to address the crowd, her voice shaking. “That was not in the spirit of cooperation,” she said.
Dear Mr. Jackson,

Thank you for your music, and thank you for reading this far in a letter, if it reaches you, from a stranger. Though we have never met face to face, I could say that I’ve known you since I was a teen-ager growing up in Pittsburgh, Pa., in the fifties, born fifteen years or so before you were born, Mr. Jackson, and I wanted to be you, or rather wanted with all my soul, a soul real to me as the faces of people in my family, to sing like you would sing the music we both inherited and you would keep alive in the eighties, nineties with your talent and gifts. Listening to your voice, I hear the old music again—the Dells, Diablos, Drifters, Flamingos, Spaniels, Five Satins, Midnighters, Soul Stirrers—and it takes me back to those voices on the corner, in church, on records, radio, teaching me the fires in my belly, dance steps in my feet, the hangings, fun, sadness, loves lost and found all around me. I only half understood and still don’t, old man that I am today, but yearn so badly, teen-ager and now, to stay part of; that swirling, full-to-the-brim, overflowing life that sometimes fills me up, sways and staggers me, sweeps me off my feet, that elusive, loud, shattering world that could sometimes go silent and disappear, here then abruptly gone, passing me by as if I were nothing, nobody, less than a speck of dust or a tear no one sees falling, all of that, and more bitter and more sweet because, like you, Freddie Jackson, I was a colored boy and my world, my people, surrounded by others not colored, others inexplicably mean, crude, intimidating, evil as death.

Anyway, I don’t need to tell you about coming up colored. When I hear you sing I remember you were there beside me and here I am now beside you, listening once more to all the stories, facts, times, people, voices that the music passes on, gives back, recalls, steals, wishes for, touches and lets go.

I should admit straightaway I can’t claim to be a devoted fan or student of your music. I’m writing to let you know one song in particular that you recorded, “You Are My Lady,” seems part of a story I’m trying to compose. Composing now as we speak. Or rather as I imagine myself speaking and imagine we are speaking together. Pretending to speak with you my way of telling a story. Our silences really, not our voices, engaged in conversation. Though I hear you singing. Softly. Clearly. Your song, “URML,” in my story, inseparable from it before there is a story.

Point of this letter is not exactly to ask permission to put you in a story I’m writing, Freddie Jackson. Rather, I’m letting you know (informing/fessing up/sharing) I have no choice. You are in it already without being asked, without any exit offered, like the color we share, which this country assigns to us before we are born.

Story I’m attempting to put together concerns my son, youngest of my three grown children, a prisoner now, in Arizona serving a life sentence for committing murder in 1986, when he and his victim both fifteen years old. I have tried to write his story many, many times—as a short piece of fiction that stands alone, as an episode in longer narratives, fiction and nonfiction, published and unpublished. Each attempt failed. Failed probably for a variety of complicated reasons in each case, but the simple fact is none of my efforts to write my son’s story freed him. And that one negative outcome they all share certifies their collective futility: my son remains incarcerated. Getting him out is the sole justification, if any, for my writing about him. Even a grieving, conflicted father possesses no right to ignore his injured son’s request not to discuss in public his son’s wounds, especially when at best the father able only to speculate, guess the nature of the wounds and their effects. No excuse for a story’s probes, prods, provocations unless they promise to produce, at a very minimum, the possibility of a cure. Why else disturb a son’s privacy (an inevitable result no matter how scrupulously I endeavor to avoid it), Why intrude after finally, expressly, he’s forbidden me to write about him. Why discuss in public a horrific series of events unless the retelling, the painful, incriminating exhumation liberates my son, sets him free. None of my previous efforts to tell his story have disentangled him from the consequences of a crime beyond my power to change. My helplessness feels unalterable. I find myself unable to foresee a different scenario. So I’m asking myself, asking you, Mr. Jackson, if I should try a story about my son once more. And if I try to write it, for whose benefit, whose sake, on whose behalf, for what purpose would I be performing.

I ask you because you are an artist, Mr. Jackson, and because sometimes your singing achieves what the best art accomplishes. A song you sing creates a space with different rules, different possibilities. A space opens that doesn’t exist until a listener tunes in and hears your voice, a sudden space that may disappear the very next instant but changes that instant, too, no doubt, and it doesn’t matter that the previous moment and the ones before remain whatever they were and lock a person down with un forgiving, unalterable rules and possibilities. None of that matters when I experience the undeniable presence, the unique truth a particular song can deliver—your song, “URML,” my best example—because then I know time, my time, my life is always more than it appears to me. Didn’t that voice, that snatch of music just remind me that there’s more in any moment, more to the life I think I’m caught up in, than I can ever know, ever understand, ever come to terms with, make peace with, survive, so much more and more and different and other than it had seemed an instant before the music. If I listen, if I let it be, let it alone, just listen to the music while it delivers inklings and intimations of things very different than I thought they were, are, and sometimes I do go there, into a different space, thank you, thank you, the music reveals, that other, more than possible place, and I go there, can’t help myself, because I need it, need help so much, I do, I do, I yearn, I hear the music and nothing is what it was an instant before or ever after, maybe, if I listen, keep believing, learning my life is less than nothing and also perhaps a tiny, tiny bit more than everything I believed I already knew, every damned body already knows, if I really listen, let myself hear when a song speaks.

How do you work the magic of your art, Mr. Jackson. What makes your music special when it’s special. How do you offer a space with your voice that feels real enough for a listener to enter. What secrets have you learned to please an audience. How do you put all of yourself into a song, but then disappear so there’s only music and it belongs to
the listener. When your voice breaks silence, how does it make silence speak. You did it at least once, certainly, for my son and probably countless times for others, including me. How does a song reach out and touch. Do you sing to please yourself. When a song feels good to you while you are singing it, is that the best test. Is that the answer to all this letter’s dumb questions. Or maybe simply an answer I want, need. “URML”’s secret.

I had a friend once who killed his lady. Crime occurred in Philly, about eight years before a song you addressed to your lady reached No. 1 on Billboard’s rhythm-and-blues chart. Years before he committed a murder, I’d lost touch with him, my former friend, occasional cut-buddy when I was an undergrad at Penn in the early sixties. A guy who hung out around campus, long-haired, scrappily-bearded, a kind of sloppy, happy-go-lucky, sinister phony, a powerfully persuasive and manipulative guy with a malodorous charm about him, Charlie Manson before anybody had heard of Charles Manson, other than my friend and his coterie of fellow eccentrics and visionaries who circulated among themselves counterculture news and views through a kind of crude precursor of the Internet before anybody else had heard of Internet or Manson. My friend, a nice kid on the lam from middle-class, suburban Jewish parents, had transformed himself into a Philly street character whose intimidating range of knowledge, arcane reading, provocative ideas, and batty eloquence, despite my reservations about his lack of personal hygiene, drew me to him as he was drawn to me, despite or because of our obvious differences, me growing up poor, therefore street tough, streetwise, he assumed, a jock who played college ball, physically attractive, smart enough, though intellectually underdeveloped, politically unsophisticated, naïve, poorly read, innocently gregarious, but my new buddy soon perceived that I was ambitious, ruthless and predatory in my dealings with other people as he was, my insightful, observant, pretentiously selfish, shamelessly inquisitive, greedy new acquaintance. In the role of professor/guru he enjoyed explaining himself to me. Claimed he answered to no one. Responsible only to himself. Made it clear that nobody possessed rights he was bound to respect. Even in Powelton Village, Philly’s wannabe version of the Village in New York—your city, Mr. Jackson, where you grew up in Harlem—we must have been an unusual sight: tall, fit black guy, and squat, flabby white guy, the unlikely pair of us roaming neighborhood streets, parties, participating in rallies, arts festivals, demonstrations, defying cops and authority, hitting on women, getting stinking drunk in local bars, but welcomed almost always, anywhere we showed up, by the helter-skelter mix of all sorts of people that constituted Powelton’s inhabitants. An odd couple, but didn’t we embody, maybe, a new day, a new dispensation, a social and cultural revolution everybody back then wanted to believe they desired or at least were willing to accommodate since it promised better sex, better drugs, unbounded freedom and license, an option to be contemptuous of traditional styles, conventions, and rules, an inalienable right to hit the road, Jack, and head out for far away, for exotic destinations when the place where we find ourselves becomes unsatisfactory.

My former hangout partner, whom the cops arrested in 1979 for killing his lady friend, who still maintains his innocence though convicted twice—once in absentia because while out on bail awaiting trial, he’d fled the States, then found guilty a second time in another Philadelphia courtroom after being extradited to America from a farm in France, a fugitive seventeen years on the run, hiding under assumed names and aliases, made it clear that he killed his lady for more or less the identical reason that I attribute to you as your explanation of why you sing as you do. He’d confess, just short of bragging, and perhaps with a wistful semi-grin, yes, he loved his lady but she split, and when she came back to pick up her stuff, he believed that if he killed her, not only could he keep her, he’d please himself, and pleasing himself always good, so he did.

as my once-upon-a-time friend's. Our feelings. Selfish, arbitrary, and dark trapped inside ourselves. Our minds. Involved in guesswork, after all. Gutwork. Choose. No matter our intentions, we're choose. No less mysterious after we choose. Whatever the ramifications of any choice—choices as different as how to sing or whether to kill or not kill—nothing is knowable until we choose. No less mysterious after we choose. No matter our intentions, we're involved in guesswork, after all. Gutwork. Trapped inside ourselves. Our minds. Our feelings. Selfish, arbitrary, and dark as my once-upon-a-time friend's.

And that truth cuts much deeper than different strokes for different folks, I believe. Any point of view not the only possible one. Always many. Always changing. Smallest piece of something represents, replicates, renews, becomes larger, becomes whole. The whole always fragile, shatters, incomplete as the smallest piece. Both the entire shebang and each infinitesimal byte forever exchanging places, and we can't have one without the other. Though often I wish I could forget, Mr. Jackson, Freddie Jackson, that endless simultaneity, recover those flurries of forgetfulness.

Distance from Phoenix to Flagstaff, Arizona approximately one hundred and forty-five miles. A drive north of about two hours, eighteen minutes on I-17. If you are interested, time-lapse videos posted on the Internet can get you there faster, in anywhere from 1:42 to 47:10. The two lawyers, one in charge, one to drive, who met my son's plane at Sky Harbor airport in order to escort him to a jail in Flagstaff, where he'd be locked up until tried for murder, may or may not have been in a hurry. Being in a hurry doesn't necessarily get you any quicker to where you wish to go. Nor does the wish to never arrive at a particular destination necessarily retard arrival. I wasn't in the car hauling my son to jail that day in Arizona, thus can't say who was in a hurry and who was not. My son a fugitive for twelve days before he called his uncle and asked for help. Before his uncle called us and we engaged lawyers. How do my son's twelve days of running compare to my old buddy's seventeen years of flight and hiding. I should know better than to ask such a silly question, Mr. Jackson. As if aging and loss and cancer and fear and mourning and despair are not species of time. As if instead, time consisted of a certain quantity of repeating, unchanging, definable units, like inches, miles, pounds. As if the length and weight of a boy's time on the road were measurable, a fifteen-year-old who hasn't maybe had sex yet or attended a funeral or slept alone away from home a single night with no family, no adult, no companions keeping him company, as if such a boy's terror after killing, for no reason, he comprehends his roommate in an Arizona motel on a pleasure trip supervised by an expensive, élitist boys' camp in Vermont, as if anyone not that boy might grasp how time passed for him on the run or passes now in prison where bars and cages do not stop the running, but torture and bend time so time collapses, empties, or swells like a corpse decomposing, or towers like some suppurating beast many stories tall with bloody talons pawing the air. Stink,
moans, a dreadful roaring to halt my son in his tracks, keep him fleeing.

Three days of running from the fact I did not know my son’s whereabouts had broken me. My son’s roommate, assigned randomly one August night from the pack of boys on a trip to the western U.S., boys who’d been summer campers together in Vermont for years, that kid found stabbed to death, and my son gone, no one knew where, perhaps a captive of the madman who stabbed my son’s roommate, perhaps my son bound and being tortured somewhere by the kind of marauding monster who would storm armed into a motel room, stab one boy and kidnap the other at gunpoint to enjoy, dismember, maybe eat him at his leisure, his pleasure—that’s what I could not stop myself from imagining as I ran away from and ran after facts that might explain a vanished son. Three days, three periods of twenty-four hours each on other people’s clocks, stretched for me longer than any life span I could bear, and I slid down a pine tree I’d been hugging in a Vermont forest, crumpled to a weeping heap on the ground beside the tree’s trunk, my life’s time abruptly passing, consumed. Enough. Nothing. More time than I could handle.

If I’d been an occupant of the car proceeding north on I-17 taking my son to stand trial in Flagstaff, I would not have been privy to what other occupants thinking, the lawyers’ thoughts, my son’s thoughts invisible to me then as now, tapping out letter by letter an invisible story to make it visible. And rescue him. Over the many years following that car ride, Mr. Jackson, I got to know both lawyers pretty well, stayed in one’s partially Phoenix home once, commiserated often in my mind with the other as he suffered problems threatening to drag him down, out of his profession, till he got well and practiced law again and still may be. On the afternoon I handed over my son to them, the lawyers were strangers to me, except for several phone calls exchanged and a description from a lawyer friend of my then wife, my son’s mother, recommending the one in charge more highly, without reservation. Strangers or not, men I’d never laid eyes on before, men into whose hands, literally and figuratively, I was placing my son’s life while I waited for my wife’s plane so we could drive to Flagstaff together. The two lawyers’ thoughts, my son’s thoughts unguessable in the car they were riding in to Flagstaff. Unguessable for me now, nor could the occupants see each other’s thoughts that day in 1986 on an Arizona highway, though each must have been wondering, more than wondering, probably searching for clues in each other’s expressions, gestures, silences, maybe asking out loud, Who are you, why are we here, where are we heading, what is happening to me, us, how will it end, whose story is this. As I try to tell mine, will I find myself rolling along, in a hurry or not, listening, learning their stories on the way to Flagstaff. Will all our stories end or start once more when the car doors open and cops stand there waiting with handcuffs …

At some moment before that Flagstaff arrival is when your voice, Mr. Jackson, your song, “URML,” entered the car. I want to say filled the car, but I wasn’t there, was I. Don’t know who in the front seats, who in the back. Was car radio on or music just in my son’s portable tape deck, earphones. Car radio playing I’m almost sure, somehow. Pods wired to machines not so ubiquitous in young people’s ears back in 1986. Element of surprise part of story. “URML” suddenly. A moment altered. Who is playing car radio. How loud. Who tuned it in. Who listens. How can a person help listening. No matter what else, where else your thoughts. If you wish to listen or not. Could you ignore the radio, drift off through a window, study fractured, flat desert, gaze at spines of mountains rimming the distance. Remember another’s voice you are missing or trying to forget. How can you not hear if a loud radio fills a car. Or a good tune fills it softly. “URML.” Did a lawyer or my son

---

**A BAKER SWEPT BY**

You were already losing your eyesight
last winter in Rome
when you paused in the doorway
at nine o’clock on a Saturday morning
and a baker swept by
on a shiny bicycle
waving a cap and singing
under his breath,
you didn’t know bakers wore
white aprons dusted with flour
and floated around the city
like angels
on a freshly baked day,
you weren’t sure why
morning halted
up and down the street
as you stood in the doorway
and a baker winged by
on a weekend morning
so new and pristine
that you looked into the sky
and for one undiminished instant
of misplaced time
you saw brightness,
brightness everywhere,
before a shadow crossed
the rooftops
and it was blotted out.

—Edward Hirsch
pick the station. Random d.j.,’ing. Let the kid do it. Let him play with the dial, push buttons, let him make this terrible ride shorter or longer or make it disappear. Just so he doesn’t drown us, sink us, minstrelsy us, mug us on some urban dark corner, station very, very, overbearingly loud, filling the car so impossible to think. Remember, young man, not just you inside here, as big, as sorry as your sorry story is, truly, truly, bad and ugly— we heard about the other poor gored kid in Flagstaff, son—but there’s three of us stuck together in here awhile, like it or lump it and the dead boy, too, but do not despair quite yet, young man, maybe we will plea-bargain the judge down from first-degree murder and death to life imprisonment (though Arizona looking for an under-sixteen to execute and thus lower the death–penalty age threshold and here comes your son, a handy colored killer to make the State’s case easy, the lawyers warned us). Our job to save your life, seems a nice enough scared kid, his skinny fear filling the car louder than anything he might punch in on the radio, but we are big boys, we can bear it, the noise, the heat, the fear, besides he won’t get that urban–station way–too–loud stuff way out here middle of nowhere, anyway let him d.j., seems a reasonable enough, smart enough kid, nice parents, what in the world happened—and just about somewhere in there, hills now to the left, one behind another to a hazy horizon, to the right, dramatic contours of frozen sand, countless cacti, layers of every drab–color cloud climbing, claming an endless sky to heaven, the thickets of thoughts coming and going to and fro and battering air inside the car like wings of gigantic bats too large to see, two middle-aged, palish human men and one slightly colored boy, three total to whom the thoughts belong, hovering in–substantial as images in desert heat, trapped on the road to Flagstaff and there’s Freddie Jackson singing “URML” suddenly there also in the car, and my son as if with wings not as big as the bats or so much larger, so, so much, he’s lifted, rides their draft and gone.

And if such were literally the case— my son free, Mr. Jackson—I wouldn’t be writing this letter or story, would I, Mr. Jackson. Yes and no, maybe. “URML.” a beautiful song. Worth a story at least. Many. One of my all–time favorites so perhaps one day I would be tempted to try. Try despite an incalculable sadness your song always invokes for me, whatever else. I keep going back to “URML” for many of the same reasons I believe people want to hear again songs they love. Revisiting unhappy songs as often as happy ones, and, strange as it seems, people recall sad ones, my guess, more than happy songs. Or perhaps no difference. Certain songs too deep to be happy or sad. Both. (Smookey’s “Tracks of My Tears.”) Neither. More. Less.

Who am I to tell you about songs, or singing. Or audience responses, Mr. Jackson. But I admitted from the git–go, I’m writing this to myself as much as to you. Plenty people (all?) sing to themselves, don’t they. I do. Even in the shower, or especially in the shower people sing— alone, wet, warm, soaping up, scrubbing up, usually not the worst of times. Rushing water’s close–up noise in your ears if it’s a good, strong shower, water to take the edge off false notes, water to swim in, drown in. Why not listen to myself. Though you are a pro and sing for a living, do you still sing to yourself. Do you listen, Freddie Jackson. In the shower. No offense intended, but could the shower be where you, too, do your best work. An audience of only one hears my best work. Hears the voice inside my head no other person will ever share. Better than anyone else’s voice. Unspeakingly good. Closer to what I wish to sound like than any sounds I’m able to produce. When I get it going in the shower, I give my voice more than the benefit of the doubt. All benefits. No doubts. Let imagination work between the lines, speaking a story for which there are no words, speaking for what’s missing always. I imagine more than what’s there, fill in what’s impossible, lost, searched for, those things a song desires to happen while it’s sung and plays inside, one listener only, only inner lips, ears, eyes, feet, hands working and the invisible elders busy remembering, reminding me how it goes, what it means and says, once and only once, audience of one, never exactly the same, never ever, because a person keeps it inside, alone always when she or he sings, writes.

I couldn’t help smiling, Freddie Jackson, thinking one afternoon about poor, long–suffering tough–guy mafioso Tony Soprano on TV, romanced and undermined by his female psychoanalyst as vice versa he endeavors to undermine and romance her in her office. She sits, big, nyloned legs crossed across the room and he leans forward in his chair strain– ing to hear her saying what she hears him not saying and he can’t say aloud even inside himself. Her office a shower of sorts, too, spa where Tony goes to come clean, wherever once in a while butt–naked Tony lets go, belts out his privacies, his innermost, imprisoned stories verse by verse, singing away, no holds barred, to seduce his shrink with beaucoup boo–hoos and hangovers from bad old days when he was coming up the hard way on mauling, murderous streets, and worse at home, Tony Soprano croons, chirps, coos to her. She hears, “URML.”

I wonder sometimes when I watch the classic video of you, Freddie Jackson, totally fly in your pure white suit, sere– nading a young woman, “URML,” with your eyes as much as your voice, if the face and body beside you in the video are the ones you are addressing or if, inside your head, in a song only you are able to see, there is another lover listening, not the pretty actress caught on tape smiling back at you. I wonder, of course, because I glide so seamlessly into the make–believe scene I’m watching, letting your voice be mine, wishful–thinking that voice into the ear of a woman you don’t know, have never seen, but I adore her, want her to admire me. Room for us, my lady and me, though you and your lady don’t disappear. Both of you professionals, more than convincing performers who reach out and touch, skilled, sticky as a tarbaby, who once Brer Rabbit pok–es in a paw, Gotcha, old Mr. Tarbaby say and he ain’t never gon let go. It’s once upon a time each time the “URML” video commences. Viewers see, listen, tumble live into a song’s story. Shape–shifting, Black holes. Voodoo.

Rumors, speculations, full–blown conspiracy theories circulate on the Internet, in fan magazines, newspapers, TV, and radio about the nature of your sex life, Mr. Jackson. According to the perspective of many commentators who get paid or blog to please themselves or maybe just can’t stop themselves from pursuing and commenting on such matters, you have been coy, evasive, manipulative, fearful, not helpful to the cause,
irresponsible, exploitative, naïve, inconsistent, dishonest for the long duration of a very successful, very public career because you never flat out declared your own gender identity, or gender preferences when it comes to choosing lovers. I’m no expert on this aspect of your life, any more than I’m an aficionado of the entire corpus of your work. However, searching for examples of what your voice might sound like when you’re not singing, I found an interview I particularly enjoyed in which you didn’t—as I’m pretty sure I would have—tell the interviewer to go fuck himself, yet still in your dignified and uncompromising fashion let him know in no uncertain terms that your business none of his business. Your life, your privacy not material for interviewers to label, commodify for other people’s consumption. You let him understand that simply because you possessed the gift, the art to sing your ass off, did not license him to be coy, evasive, manipulative, not helpful to the cause, irresponsible, exploitative, naïve, inconsistent, dishonest during an interview. Not forgetting to add your humble suggestion that perhaps in a contemporary world inches away from exploding or imploding there are more urgent, more germane issues for the media to attend to than the in–and–out gossip of your sex life.

Still, I’m guilty, more hungry than that interviewer to learn your secrets. But different secrets for different reasons, I hope. The most crucial reason being how much I’m moved by your song’s power to free my son. Not exactly envious, but more than desperate to know your story. I hope my intrusions into your privacy will do you no further wrong. Those of us who are driven by a sense of treacherous terrain. Travelling companions on an arduous journey. Help each other along the way in the best possible way. A choice to continue. Or not. And lo and behold . . . sometimes it works. “URML.” Song in a car. My son heard it, Mr. Jackson. Thank you.

I hope my intrusions into your private business, my questions, worries, and insinuations about your art haven’t chased you away. Who is this guy, what does he want from me, you may be asking yourself—if you’ve read this far. Let me assure you I expect no response to this

I’ve had mummies on my brain lately. They keep cropping up unexpectedly. In unpredictable, unlikely, unavoidable places, Mr. Jackson. Mummification old as the oldest documented civilization and practiced globally. My old Philly buddy who killed his lady attempted to mummify her, sealing her corpse in a box with stuff he believed would preserve it, stowing the box in the ceiling rafters of his Powelton Village apartment, hoping to conceal his crime by causing his lady to disappear. That mummy didn’t work. Leaked, stank. Led to my friend’s arrest.

I have no doubt his extreme oddness, bookishness, dabbles in the occult, fantasies of invincibility, though they failed to provide him with a proper chemical formula for mummmifying his lady’s corpse, supplied him copiously with lore, ritual, history, chants, prayers for launching her into immortality. Whether my former friend believed he could arrange life after death for his lady, I can’t say, but I know he thought a lot about his various projects. Often intelligently, with a meticulously organized, relentless, insane, patient thoroughness and self-assuredness. And that horrific launching my once-upon–a–time friend perpetrated, his desperate, doomed attempt to spare himself from the consequences of his crime and spare his lady’s body the indignities of decay and dissolution, his effort to save her and save himself, made the choice of mummmification perhaps an irresistible option. No matter what he was thinking, his choices, his actions barbaric, despicable, profoundly unacceptable. All of the above and more. Worse. His actions especially spooky and unsettling because they linked his crime to an ancient, honorable, sacred art, an art cultures devised to prepare their dead for a journey that would be a continuation of life.

As I learned more about the traditions (desperate, selfish, foolish) of mummy launching, their secret formulas, mysterious protocols, the motivations that conceived them—the imagining of a voyage that connects life and death, the envisioning of immortality, of the necessities humans would require and desire during a perpetual trip—the innocence of those practices of mummmification touched me, Mr. Jackson, revealed to me how a similar willed innocence possibly underlies all arts humans practice.

Same way people depend upon mummy–makers to insure the dead are ready and able to enjoy, to survive whatever pleasures and perils a journey that never ends might bring, people rely on artists and works of art (with equally scant, problematic, or no evidence at all, that such reliance achieves desirable results) to act as guides. Art embodies, Improves rules of sorts for negotiating imaginary worlds—defines rewards and punishments in such worlds—confirms the existence of those imagined worlds where occasionally a person can hang out, vacation on demand, daydream or chatter about without sacrificing too much time or energy better spent on the business of ordinary living. As if art—mummy–making, writing symphonies—changes time. As if certain artisans can lift the veil of mystery that divides life from death. As if lifted, there would be anything under the veil. As if consciousness might trump time.

Mummies intended to serve the dead. Just as songs you sing (story I compose) intended to serve the living. Make sense of treacherous terrain. Travelling companions on an arduous journey. Helping people along the way or opening ways. Opening time. Space to inhabit. A choice to continue. Or not. And lo and behold . . . sometimes it works. “URML.” Song in a car. My son heard it, Mr. Jackson. Thank you.

I hope my intrusions into your private business, my questions, worries, and insinuations about your art haven’t chased you away. Who is this guy, what does he want from me, you may be asking yourself—if you’ve read this far. Let me assure you I expect no response to this
letter that is not even a real letter. I’m asking you for nothing, Mr. Jackson, though I understand how you or other people might believe that I’m asking far too much. For a piece of you. Like any parasite demands. You must have encountered plenty of parasites, especially when you were at the top of the charts. Notorious pests in the entertainment industry as elsewhere. Parasites. A word I looked up once and discovered its origins Greek. In that ancient language the word signifies folks who are always showing up at your table for a meal, hands empty, mouths full of gimme and much obliged. Parasites. A word associated frequently with artists. With art’s arrogance when it proclaims art for art’s sake. With the proverbial, well-earned reputation of artists for laziness, greed, selfishness, nastiness, irrelevance, fecklessness, and fickleness. Parasites one more compromising word in this letter, this story. A word getting in line with murderers, mummies, mafiosos to suggest art’s unsavory and/or failed ambitions.

Walking last fall in Brittany with a neighbor on a 10K charity trek to earn money for the local elementary school’s arts program, I pointed to a stand of trees atop the crest of a low hill in the gently rolling terrain of mainly pastureland surrounding us. The trees I indicated were not quite bare of foliage but stripped enough for limbs and branches to reveal lots of roundish puffs or nests suspended in them, big blots, blobs within the larger, more or less oval-shaped crowns of five or six trees ahead in the distance. Gui, he said after I stumbled through an explanation in English and halting French of what had caught my eye and wanted him to give me the French word for. Closer up, they are networks of something like spider webbing or skinny threads of black bone on an X-ray plate of bright morning light. Gui, Mistletoe a loose translation. Mistletoe carrying, mixing, and matching stories from numerous languages, the plant’s name in each language suggests. Saying the word in English gets me thinking about Christmas. St. Nick. Santa. Love. Lovers and strangers tempted, ordered to kiss under mistletoe. Nat Cole crooning about chestnuts and fire. Druids with their mastery of oak lore and oak magic in charge of forests. Deer. Wizards and Witches. Elves. Gui are parasites, my neighbor said. Infest the host tree. Berries poison, I learned later. Sticky. Berries stick to a feeding bird’s beak and when a bird scraps them off on a branch, tiny, tiny patches of resiny stuff adhere to the tree’s bark, gradually penetrating it, though some species of gui in a hurry, I read, shoot missiles, clocked at fifty miles an hour when they exit, deep into a tree’s heart, where they begin to suck and grow and send back messages of food, water from the tree to nourish the microchip-sized growth on the surface, and if the chip is lucky, it flourishes and becomes a shadow, a cloud, a thriving, bulky colony of new life like I’d been curious about in those trees on the hill, silhouetted against the horizon we walked toward.

That morning in Brittany as my friend got me finally to repeat the sound of the French word he was pronouncing by spelling it aloud—g-u-i—and also explained in a slightly disparaging tone that gui a parasite, I resisted my usual negative reaction to the word parasite. Parasite. What was not a parasite. Who is parasitizing whom. From what privileged point of view do we decide parasite or host. Were gui parasites any more or less than those six or so trees, behind us now, scuffing for nourishment from sky, ground, neighboring trees, rain, stars, those trees feeding on birds, mice, cows, insects, microbes feeding on them, up and down the food chain, Great Chain of Being, the latter chain a concept originating in the fifteenth century, popular through the eighteenth, that I had come across when I studied the birth of the English novel, both chains signifying the same grand plan and interconnection and infinite coupling and interdependencies and eating and being eaten necessary to create and sustain each moment, everyone, everything large and small, past, present, and future, Mr. Jackson, all of us parasiting our way through. Chains linking, binding us, like slavery’s chains link and bind us, though slavery seldom if ever mentioned by my Oxford professors in the early sixties, whose stories taught me the origins of fiction.

Chain, Chain, Chain . . . like Aretha sings, Mr. Jackson. Like you sing.
Autumn is the season for Native America. There are the cool nights and warm days of Indian summer and the genial query “What’s Indian about this weather?” More wearisome is the annual fight over the legacy of Christopher Columbus—a bold explorer dear to Italian-American communities, but someone who brought to this continent forms of slavery that would devastate indigenous populations for centuries. Football season is in full swing, and the team in the nation’s capital revels each week in a racist performance passed off as “just good fun.” As baseball season closes, one prays that Atlanta (or even semi-evolved Cleveland) will not advance to the World Series. Next up is Halloween, typically featuring “Native American Brave” and “Sexy Indian Princess” costumes. November brings Native American Heritage Month and tracks a smooth countdown to Thanksgiving. In the elementary-school curriculum, the holiday traditionally meant a pageant, with students in construction-paper headdresses and Pilgrim hats reënacting the original celebration. If today’s teachers aim for less grim hats reënacting the original celebration. If today’s teachers aim for less, they must be more complicated history, many students still complete an American education unsure about the place of Native people in the nation’s past—or in its present. Cap the season off with Thanksgiving, a turkey dinner, and a fable of interracial harmony. Is it any wonder that by the time the holiday arrives a lot of American Indian people are thankful that autumn is nearly over?

Americans have been celebrating Thanksgiving for nearly four centuries, commemorating that solemn dinner in November, 1621. We know the story well, or think we do. Adorned in funny hats, large belt buckles, and clunky black shoes, the Pilgrims of Plymouth gave thanks to God for his blessings, demonstrated by the survival of their fragile settlement. The local Indians, supporting characters who generously pulled the Pilgrims through the first winter and taught them how to plant corn, joined the feast with gifts of venison. A good time was had by all, before things quietly took their natural course: the American colonies expanded, the Indians gave up their lands and faded from history, and the germ of collective governance found in the Mayflower Compact blossomed into American democracy.

Almost none of this is true, as David Silverman points out in “This Land Is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving” (Bloomsbury). The first Thanksgiving was not a “thanksgiving,” in Pilgrim terms, but a “rejoicing.” An actual giving of thanks required fasting and quiet contemplation; a rejoicing featured feasting, drinking, military drills, target practice, and contests of strength and speed. It was a party, not a prayer, and was full of people shooting at things. The Indians were Wampanoags, led by Ousamequin (often called Massasoit, which was a leadership title rather than a name). An experienced diplomat, he was engaged in a challenging game of regional geopolitics, of which the Pilgrims were only a part. While the celebrants might well have feasted on wild turkey, the local diet also included fish, eels, shellfish, and a Wampanoag dish called nasaump, which the Pilgrims had adopted: boiled cornmeal mixed with vegetables and meats. There were no potatoes (an indigenous South American food not yet introduced into the global food system) and no pies (because there was no butter, wheat flour, or sugar).

Nor did the Pilgrims extend a warm invitation to their Indian neighbors. Rather, the Wampanoags showed up unbidden. And it was not simply four or five of them at the table, as we often imagine. Ousamequin, the Massasoit, arrived with perhaps ninety men—more than the entire population of Plymouth. Wampanoag tradition suggests that the group was in fact an army, honoring a mutual-defense pact negotiated the previous spring. They came not to enjoy a multicultural feast but to aid the Pilgrims: hearing repeated gunfire, they assumed that the settlers were under attack. After a long moment of suspicion (the Pilgrims misread almost everything the Indians did as potential aggression), the two peoples recognized one another, in some uneasy way, and spent the next three days together.

No centuries-long continuity emerged from that 1621 meet-up. New Englanders certainly celebrated Thanksgivings—often in both fall and spring—but they were of the fasting-and-prayer variety. Notable examples took place in 1637 and 1676, following bloody victories over Native people. To mark the second occasion, the Plymouth men mounted the head of Ousamequin’s son Pumetacom above their town on a pike, where it remained for two decades, while his
The Indians who joined the mistrustful Pilgrims, Wampanoag tradition suggests, were honoring a mutual-defense pact.
dismembered and unburied body decomposed. The less brutal holiday that we celebrate today took shape two centuries later, as an effort to entrench an imagined American community. In 1841, the Reverend Alexander Young explicitly linked three things: the 1621 “rejoicing,” the tradition of autumnal harvest festivals, and the name Thanksgiving. He did so in a four-line throwaway gesture and a one-line footnote. Of such half thoughts is history made.

A couple of decades later, Sarah Josepha Hale, the editor of Godey’s Lady’s Book, proposed a day of unity and remembrance to counter the trauma of the Civil War, and in 1863 Abraham Lincoln declared the last Thursday of November to be that national holiday, following Young’s lead in calling it Thanksgiving. After the Civil War, Thanksgiving developed rituals, foodways, and themes of family—and national—reunion. Only later would it consolidate its narrative around a harmonious Pilgrim-Wampanoag feast, as Lisa Blee and Jean O’Brien point out in “Monumental Mobility: The Memory Work of Massasoit” (North Carolina), which tells the story of how the holiday myth spread. Fretting over late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century immigration, American mythmakers discovered that the Pilgrims, and New England as a whole, were perfectly cast as national founders: white, Protestant, democratic, and blessed with an American character centered on family, work, individualism, freedom, and faith.

The new story aligned neatly with the defeat of American Indian resistance in the West and the rising tide of celebratory regret that the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo once called “imperialist nostalgia.” Glorifying the endurance of white Pilgrim founders diverted attention from the brutality of Jim Crow and racial violence, and downplayed the foundational role of African slavery. The fable also allowed its audience to avert its eyes from the marginalization of Asian and Latinx labor populations, the racialization of Southern European and Eastern European immigrants, and the rise of eugenics. At Thanksgiving, white New England cheerfully shoved the problematic South and West off to the side, and claimed America for itself.

The challenge for scholars attempting to rewrite Thanksgiving is the challenge of confronting an ideology that has long since metastasized into popular history. Silverman begins his book with a plea for the possibility of a “critical history.” It will be “hard on the living,” he warns, because this approach questions the creation stories that uphold traditional social orders, making the heroes less heroic, and asking readers to consider the villains as full and complicated human beings. Nonetheless, he says, we have an obligation to try.

So how does one take on a myth? One might begin by deconstructing the process through which it was made. Silverman sketches a brief account of Hale, Lincoln, and the marketing of a fictionalized New England. Blee and O’Brien reveal how proliferating copies of a Massasoit statue, which we can recognize as not so distant kin to Confederate monuments, do similar cultural work, linking the mythic memory of the 1621 feast with the racial, ethnic, and national-identity politics of 1921, when the original statue was commissioned. One might also wield the historian’s skills to tell a “truer,” better story that exposes the myth for the self-serving fraud that it is. Silverman, in doing so, resists the temptation to offer a countermyth, an ideological narrative better suited to the contemporary moment, and renders the Wampanoags not simply as victims but as strugglers, fighting it out as they confront mischance and aggression, disagreeing with one another, making mistakes, displaying ambition and folly, failing to see their peril until it is too late.

In the story that many generations of Americans grew up hearing, there were no Wampanoags until the Pilgrims encountered them. If Thanksgiving has had no continuous existence across the centuries, however, the Wampanoag people have. Today, they make up two federally recognized tribes, the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head, and they descend from a confederation of groups that stretched across large areas of Massachusetts, including Cape Cod, Martha’s Vineyard, and Nantucket.

In the years before the Pilgrims’ landing, trails and roads connected dozens of Wampanoag communities with gathering sites, hunting and fishing areas, and agricultural plots. North America’s defining indigenous agriculture—the symbiotic Three Sisters of corn, beans, and squash—came late to the region, adopted perhaps two hundred years before Europeans appeared. That’s when the Wampanoags, who moved seasonally between coastal summer residences (not unlike Cape Cod today) and protected winter homes inland, took up farming. Cultivation and cropping created a need for shared-use land management and an indigenous notion of property. That led in turn to the consolidation of a system of sachems, leaders
who navigated the internal needs of their communities, established tributary and protectorate relationships with nearby communities, and negotiated diplomatic relations with outsiders. When the Pilgrims encountered Ousamequin, they were meeting a paramount sachem, a Massasoit, who commanded the respect necessary to establish strategy for other groups in the region.

The Pilgrims were not the only Europeans the Wampanoags had come across. The first documented contact occurred in 1524, and marked the start of a century of violent encounters, captivity, and enslavement. By 1620, the Wampanoags had had enough, and were inclined to chase off any ship that sought to land. They sent a French colonizing mission packing and had driven the Pilgrims away from a previous landing site, on the Cape. Ousamequin’s people debated for months about whether to ally with the newcomers or destroy them. When they decided to begin diplomacy, they were guided by Tisquantum (you may recall him as Squanto) and Epe-nwo, New England natives who had been captured, held in bondage in Britain, and trained as interpreters by the English before eventually finding their way back across the Atlantic.

Why would Ousamequin decide to welcome the newcomers and, in 1621, make a mutual-defense pact with them? During the preceding years, an epidemic had struck Massachusetts Bay Indians, killing between seventy-five and ninety per cent of the Wampanoag and the Massachusett people. A rich landscape of fields and gardens, tended hunting forests, and fishing weirs was largely emptied of people. Belief systems crashed. Even survival did not mean good health, and, with fields unplanted and animals uncaught, starvation followed closely behind. The Pilgrims’ settlement took place in a graveyard.

Wampanoag people consolidated their survivors and their lands, and re-established internal self-governance. But, to the west, the Narragansetts—traditional rivals largely untouched by the epidemic—now outnumbered the Wampanoags, and that led to the strengthening of Ousamequin’s alliances with the surviving Massachusett and another nearby group, the Nipmucks. As the paramount sachem, he also had to contend with...
challenges to his leadership from a number of other Wampanoag sachems. And so, after much debate, he decided to tolerate the rather pathetic Pilgrims—who had seen half their number die in their first winter—and establish an alliance with them. That history, understood through Wampanoag characters and motives, explains the “rejoicing” that Americans later remembered as a pumpkin-spiced tale of Thanksgiving conciliation.

This rejoicing arrives about a third of the way through Silverman’s four-hundred-plus-page book. What follows is a vivid account of the ways the English repaid their new allies. The settlers pressed hard to acquire Indian land through “sales” driven by debt, threat, alliance politics, and violence. They denied the coequal civil and criminal jurisdiction of the alliance, charging Indians under English law and sentencing them to unpayable fines, imprisonment, even executions. They played a constant game of divide and conquer, and they invariably considered Indians their inferiors. Ousamequin’s sons Pumetacom—called King Philip by the English—and Wamsutta began forming a resistance, despite the poor odds. By 1670, the immigrant population had ballooned to sixty or seventy thousand in southern New England—twice the number of Native people.

We falsely remember a Thanksgiving of intercultural harmony. Perhaps we should recall instead how English settlers cheated, abused, killed, and eventually drove Wampanoags into a conflict, known as King Philip’s War, that exploded across the region in 1675 and 1676 and that was one of the most devastating wars in the history of North American settlement. Native soldiers attacked fifty-two towns in New England, destroyed seventeen of them, and killed a substantial portion of the settler population. The region also lost as much as forty per cent of its Native population, who fought on both sides. Confronted by Mohawks to the west, a mixed set of Indian and Colonial foes to the south, and the English to the east, Pumetacom was surrounded on three sides. In the north, the scholar Lisa Brooks argues, Abenaki and other allies continued the struggle for years. In “Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip’s War” (Yale), Brooks deepens the story considerably, focussing on indigenous geographical and linguistic knowledge, and tracing the life of Weetamoo, the widow of Wamsutta and the saunskwà, or female leader, of her tribe, the Pocasset. Weetamoo was Pumetacom’s ally, his relative, and a major figure in the fight. In the end, not only Pumetacom’s head was stuck on a pike; hers was, too, displayed for Wampanoag prisoners who were likely soon to be sold to the Caribbean.

The Thanksgiving story buries the major cause of King Philip’s War—the relentless seizure of Indian land. It also covers up the consequence. The war split Wampanoags, as well as every other Native group, and ended with indigenous resistance broken, and the colonists giving thanks. Like most Colonial wars, this one was a giant slave expedition, marked by the seizure and sale of Indian people. Wampanoags were judged criminals and—in a foreshadowing of the convict-labor provision of the Thirteenth Amendment—sold into bondage. During the next two centuries, New England Indians also suffered indentured servitude, convict labor, and debt peonage, which often resulted in the enslavement of the debtor’s children. Thanksgiving’s Pilgrim pageants suggest that good-hearted settlers arrived from pious, civilized England. We could remember it differently: that they came from a land that delighted in displaying heads on poles and letting bodies rot in cages suspended above the roads. They were a warrior tribe.

Despite continued demographic decline, loss of land, and severe challenges to shared social identities, Wampanoags held on. With so many men dead or enslaved, Native women married men outside their group—often African-Americans—and then redefined the families of mixed marriages as matrilineal in order to preserve collective claims to land. They adopted the forms of the Christian church, to some degree, in order to gain some breathing space. They took advantage of the remoteness of their settlements to maintain self-governance. And by the late twentieth century they began revitalizing what had been a “sleeping” language, and gained federal recognition as a tribal nation. Today, Wampanoag people debate whether Thanksgiving should be a day of mourning or a chance to contemplate reconciliation. It’s mighty generous of them.

David Silverman, in his personal reflections, considers how two secular patriotic hymns, “This Land Is Your Land” and “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” shaped American childhood experiences. When schoolkids sing “Land where my fathers died! Land of the Pilgrim’s pride,” he suggests, they name white, Protestant New England founders. It makes no sense, these days, to ask ethnically diverse students to celebrate those mythic dudes, with their odd hats and big buckles. At the very least, Silverman asks, could we include Indians among “my fathers,” and pay better attention to the ways they died? Could we acknowledge that Indians are not ghosts in the landscape or foils in a delusional nationalist dream, but actual living people?

This sentiment bumps a little roughly against a second plea: to recognize the falsely inclusive rhetoric in the phrase “This land is your land, this land is my land.” Those lines require the erasure of Indian people, who don’t get to be either “you” or “me.” American Indian people are at least partly excluded from the United States political system, written into the Constitution (in the three-fifths clause and the Fourteenth Amendment, for example, where they appear as “Indians not taxed”) so as to exist outside it. Native American tribes are distinct political entities, sovereign nations in their own right. “American Indian” is a political identity, not a racial one, constituted by formal, still living treaties with the United States government and a long series of legal decisions. Today, the Trump Administration would like to deny this history; wrongly categorize Indians as a racial group, and disavow ongoing treaty relationships. Native American tribal governments are actively resisting this latest effort to dismember the past, demanding better and truer Indian histories and an accounting of the obligations that issue from them. At the forefront of that effort you’ll find the Mashpee Wampanoags, those resilient folks whose ancestors came, uninvited, to the first “Thanksgiving” almost four centuries ago in order to honor the obligations established in a mutual-defense agreement—a treaty—they had made with the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony.
The mustache had to go. A classic nineteenth-century handlebar, it was far too recognizable, so William Monroe Trotter shaved it off. In addition to the disguise, he arranged to take a cooking class in his boarding house, evincing a sudden interest that would have surprised his wife, mother, and two sisters. Then he spent six weeks skulking around New York, searching for a ship that would hire him, finally finding work as a scullion on a small steamer headed across the Atlantic. Seaman's papers carried him as far as Le Havre, where, to his dismay, the captain informed him that crew members were not allowed to disembark, so he devised a ruse that involved delivering a letter to shore. Once there, having left all his possessions behind and still dressed in his cook's outfit, he went looking for a train.

The year was 1919. Trotter was one of eleven delegates who had been elected by the National Colored Congress for World Democracy to carry the concerns of African-Americans to the Versailles Peace Conference, only to have Woodrow Wilson's Administration deny them passports. That did not stop Trotter—not very much stopped Trotter—and, alone among the eleven, he made his way to Paris. His subterfuge-filled travels took so long that he arrived after the treaty terms had been dictated to the Germans, but still in time to try to dictate some terms of his own. He was there to let "the world know that the negro race wants full liberty and equality of rights as the fruit of the world-war." He offered the press corps an account of a recent lynching in Missouri, described the segregated conditions and the discriminatory treatment of black troops, and distributed copies of the demands of the Colored Congress to diplomats at the conference.

Trotter was already a well-known advocate for the cause of civil rights, having published a weekly newspaper in Boston for nearly two decades, but his adventures abroad made him into something of a folk hero. In "Black Radical: The Life and Times of William Monroe Trotter" (Liveright), the historian Kerri K. Greenidge suggests that Trotter's time in Paris was typical of his activism, in that it was simultaneously a terrific success and a tremendous failure. On the one hand, dozens of newspapers carried reports of his presence at the conference and reproduced the grievances that he brought before the attendees. On the other, his detractors denied, "fake news" style, that he ever even made it to France, and none of his demands were included in the peace treaty. He also ran out of money so quickly—exhausting the three thousand dollars he had received from around the United States in donations as small as fifty cents—that he had to wait another two months for his supporters to raise enough funds to bring him back home.

Those supporters were, at one time, legion: few men have had so many friends to lose, and few have done so as efficiently. An uncompromising radical, Trotter refused to budge in his beliefs, and that rigidity eventually alienated nearly everyone in his life, straining his relationships and draining his finances. He fought not only white enemies but also would-be black allies, including Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. He never ran for political office, but he was forever priming the world from the left: the archive of the newspaper that he ran testifies to his willingness to attack anyone who did not share his exact vision of how to achieve racial justice.

Yet those same pages show just how
clear-eyed that vision was. Trotter called for an anti-lynching bill and for federal enforcement of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments—which, for years, were largely theoretical propositions—and he insisted that protest and civil disobedience were the only effective remedies for racial discrimination. His legacy presents a challenge to those who seek change today: is compromise a necessary evil of any social movement, or is it the original sin of collective action?

A descendant of the Hemings family at Monticello, William Monroe Trotter was born on April 7, 1872, near Chillicothe, Ohio, just south of Columbus. His mother was the great-granddaughter of Sally Hemings’s sister, born free into a mixed-race family only one generation removed from slavery; his father was the child of an enslaved black woman and her white owner. Trotter’s parents were married in Ohio, after his father returned from fighting in the Civil War with the Massachusetts 55th; eventually, the family moved to Boston, where they raised their son and two daughters.

Black Bostonians, a quarter of the city’s population today, were a small minority when the Trotters arrived. Trotter’s father became the first black employee of the United States Postal Service, but, after being passed over for promotions because of his race, he resigned. Around the same time, he split with the Republican Party and joined the emerging negrowump movement, started by the pioneering black journalist T. Thomas Fortune and apparently named by analogy to the mugwumps—Republicans who refused to back their party’s nominee in the Presidential election of 1884. The negrowumps were angry that the party of Lincoln was not enforcing Reconstruction in the South, and the elder Trotter was rewarded for his political independence with an appointment in the Democrat Grover Cleveland’s administration. As “recorder of deeds,” he was the highest-paid federal employee in the nation’s capital, earning forty thousand dollars in just two years. He invested much of it in real estate, before dying in 1892, of tuberculosis, at the age of fifty.

The younger Trotter inherited his father’s intellect and politics, along with, eventually, his wealth. After graduating as valedictorian and class president from Hyde Park High School, he enrolled at Harvard, where he became the first black member of Phi Beta Kappa. During college, Trotter was known for getting around on a bicycle before they were common. He also led the college’s abstinence club, hosted weekend Bible studies, and helped to push for an antidiscrimination law after a white barber refused to cut the hair of Harvard’s varsity football captain, a black All-American center and first-year law student. When the law faculty discouraged the student from filing a lawsuit against the barber, it became clear to Trotter and his friends that not even the Talented Tenth would be spared the humiliations of segregation or the faithlessness of ostensible white allies.

After graduating—with a bachelor’s degree, in 1895, and then a master’s, the following year—Trotter, who had toyed with the idea of becoming a minister, rejected a teaching job at a black school and spent a year applying for and not getting the banking and corporate jobs that he wanted. Meanwhile, his white peers, some of whom had weaker transcripts and thinner résumés than he did, were given opportunities more lucrative than the ones he was denied. He considered moving to Europe, where he felt he “would be recognized as a man,” but eventually found the kind of job he wanted with one of Boston’s most established real-estate firms. Between his salary and his commissions, he prospered, and soon broke away to open his own mortgage business. In 1899, he married his childhood friend Geraldine Pindell and bought her a stately home in Dorchester, one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city. Then he did the most radical thing he could think of: he started a newspaper.

He called it the Guardian. It was not the first black-owned newspaper in the United States—that was Freedom’s Journal, which began, in New York City, in 1827, the year that the state officially abolished slavery. “Too long have others spoken for us,” its founders declared. By the time that Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, more than twenty other black newspapers had been launched, including Frederick Douglass’s the North Star, published in Rochester. These papers were essential to promoting the abolitionist cause, allowing free blacks to tell their own stories and to spread the stories of people still living in slavery. Black churches went into the news business, too: in 1848, the African Methodist Episcopal Church started a weekly that is still published today, as the Christian Recorder.

After the Civil War, literacy rates...
surged, and the black press flourished. In 1880, there were some thirty black newspapers in the United States; by the beginning of the First World War, there were around three hundred, with a collective circulation of more than half a million. Millions of additional readers availed themselves of second-hand, third-hand, and fourth-hand copies, which they picked up in barbershops, diners, and church narthexes. Some of these papers survive, like the Philadelphia Tribune and the Chicago Defender. Others faded over time: the Elevator, in San Francisco; the Impartial Citizen, in Syracuse; the Mystery, in Pittsburgh; the Grand Era, in Baton Rouge. These papers celebrated black life, covering everything from academic achievements and musical performances to marriages, but they also documented the many injustices that constrained, denigrated, and imperilled it. As thousands of black men and women went missing, or were murdered by lynching mobs, the newspapers helped to publicize dangers, alerting readers to new Jim Crow laws and sundown towns, and identifying black-owned businesses where it was safe to eat or stay while travelling. They also helped raise funds for the survivors of racist attacks and supported investigations into crimes that local law enforcement had overlooked—or participated in.

In the years after Reconstruction, these papers were largely to thank for making episodes of racial violence causes célèbres. These included the murder of the postmaster Frazier Baker and his two-year-old daughter by a white mob right outside their South Carolina home, in 1898, and the dishonorable discharge of more than a hundred and sixty black infantrymen by President Theodore Roosevelt, after they were falsely accused of murder in Brownsville, Texas, in 1906. The black press turned these events into stories, and then turned the stories into movements to correct miscarriages of justice. It was the great era of muckraking journalism; objectivity was not a major tenet of most black papers—or, for that matter, of many white ones.

It was this opportunity for advocacy that made newspaper ownership so appealing to Trotter. As they still sometimes do, New Englanders liked to talk as if “the Negro problem” afflicted only the South, but Trotter looked around his beloved Boston and saw segregation in the city’s churches, gyms, and hospitals. This “fixed caste of color” meant that “every colored American would be a civic outcast, forever alien in public life,” he wrote; to counter it, he became involved in the Massachusetts Racial Protective Association, whose members included his future business partner, George W. Forbes. Forbes was one of Boston’s first black librarians. While working at the reference desk of the public library’s West End branch, he had also edited a newspaper. After that one folded, he and Trotter co-founded the Guardian, and the two men got an office on Tremont Row, near the Globe and the Herald, in the same building on the same floor where William Lloyd Garrison had published the white abolitionist paper the Liberator. The inaugural issue of the Guardian appeared on November 9, 1901. It started with four pages and later grew to eight; it had twenty-five hundred subscribers, each of whom paid a dollar-fifty a year for a weekly copy. Although it was never the largest or the most widely read of black papers, Trotter liked to call it “America’s Greatest Race Paper,” and its motto nicely encapsulated his own lifelong credo: “For every right, with all thy might.”

Trotter lived for a fight, and he did not confine his battles to the pages of the paper. Like his negrowump father, he felt that partisan politics deprived black voters of agency; as long as one party could count on African-Americans to support it en masse, neither that party nor any other would feel the need to take real steps toward racial justice. Trotter also rejected the conservative theory of racial uplift that called on African-Americans to accept with patience whatever gradual change white power brokers thought their constituents could handle. Such accommodationist politics had proliferated since 1881, when the twenty-five-year-old Booker T. Washington was recruited by the head of the Hampton Institute, in Virginia, to go to Alabama to help found the Tuskegee Normal School for Colored Teachers. Washington formalized his incrementalism in an 1895 speech that became known as the Atlanta compromise, in which he argued for a tactical and, as he saw it, lifesaving truce: African-Americans would cease opposing segregation and demanding political equality in exchange for guaranteed access to basic education and vocational training.

Trotter despised Washington. He called him “the Great Traitor” and the “Benedit Arnold of the Negro race,” and mocked him whenever he got the opportunity. When Washington came to Boston to address the National Negro Business League, in 1903, Trotter was waiting at the A.M.E. Zion Church to heckle him. Trotter’s fellow-radicals covered the dais in cayenne pepper and laughed as league representatives tried to speak through their sneezes. When Washington took the stage, Trotter climbed onto a pew and started shouting questions. The protest became known as “the Boston riot,” and it got Trotter arrested—a lucky outcome, in some ways, since league members had threatened to throw him out the window. He was sentenced to thirty days in jail for disturbing the peace.

Like many later civil-rights activists, Trotter understood his arrest as strategic. He bet, rightly, that it would generate headlines and force the white press to acknowledge the diversity of thought among black intellectuals: coverage of the “riot” amounted to column inches for criticism of the Tuskegee machine. For his part, Washington gave a statement to the Globe, claiming that “as a few flies are able to impair the purity of a jar of cream, so three or four ill-mannered young colored men were able to disturb an otherwise successful meeting.” But that airy public dismissiveness was belied by Washington’s private actions. He invested in rival publications of the Guardian, including the Boston Colored Citizen and Alexander’s Magazine, which criticized Trotter’s strategy and attacked him for jeopardizing the movement. Washington’s supporters pressured the Guardian’s printer to drop the paper, and Trotter’s business partner
to drop him. Forbes left the paper not long after the protest.

Forbes’s departure might not have been entirely Washington’s fault: almost everyone who ever worked directly with Trotter eventually soured on him. Du Bois, who had collaborated and corresponded with Trotter for years, decided to avoid a conference for the National Negro-American Political League, in 1907, on the ground, as he confided to a mutual friend, that it was “impossible to work permanently with Mr. Trotter.” Woodrow Wilson met with Trotter and other civil-rights leaders in the Oval Office during the fall of 1914; when the meeting turned acrimonious, the President accused Trotter of having “spoiled the whole cause for which you came.” Julius Rosenwald, the president of Sears, Roebuck and Company, who used some of his fortune to champion black causes, called Trotter a “notoriety seeker, whose methods are dismaying to the conservative members of his race.” Yet, for every one of these elites, there were legions of working-class readers who admired what the St. Paul Appeal called Trotter’s “unceasing warfare against injustice.” “While the majority of the so-called leaders have equivocated and compromised the people for gold or power, William Monroe Trotter has always stood as a stone wall against every form of injustice.”

For Trotter, these untrustworthy “so-called leaders” eventually included the N.A.A.C.P., even though he had helped to found its precursor. In 1905, he had joined with twenty-eight other anti-Bookerites to form the Niagara Movement, with the goal of opposing segregation directly. Within a few years, that national organization had dissolved, and by 1910 most of its members had been folded into the N.A.A.C.P.—but not Trotter, who believed that this new incarnation was fatally compromised by its largely white leadership and its dependence on white financial support. He had faith only in “an organization of the colored people and for the colored people and led by the colored people.”

The perfect is the enemy of the good, they say, but Trotter believed passionately that the good was the enemy of the perfect. To his mind, equality could not come in stages. Rejecting the gradualism of the N.A.A.C.P., he continued to work with rival organizations. And he continued to throw himself into the Guardian, where he could always have the last word. He used the paper to endorse Democrats over Republicans, not only in Presidential races but also in local ward elections, where a small number of black voters could swing an outcome. He also focused public outrage on cases that the N.A.A.C.P. was slower to pursue directly, like that of a young woman named Jane Bosfield, who was first denied employment outright at a state hospital in Medfield, Massachusetts, and then was allowed to work only if she agreed to live and eat separately from her white colleagues.

In 1915, Trotter helped to make D. W. Griffith’s “The Birth of a Nation” a public scandal. Five years earlier, he had succeeded in stopping a Boston production of Thomas Dixon’s “The Clansman,” the play, adapted from Dixon’s own novel, which was the basis for Griffith’s film. Dixon had been a classmate of President Wilson at Johns Hopkins, which is partly why “The Birth of a Nation” was screened, notoriously, at the White House. A thorough account of Trotter’s crusade appeared in 2014, in Dick Lehr’s “The Birth of a Nation: How a Legendary Filmmaker and a Crusading Editor Reigned in America’s Civil War” (Public Affairs), which formed the basis for a documentary, released in 2017, called “Birth of a Movement.” The N.A.A.C.P. put its energies into raising funds for a rival movie, to be called “Lincoln’s Dream,” hoping to answer propaganda with history. Meanwhile, Trotter organized mass protests at local theatres, city hall, and the statehouse.

Greenidge argues that these kinds of protests, dismissed by many people at the time as publicity-seeking stunts, are Trotter’s real legacy. They emboldened the blacks who took part in them and embarrassed the whites who opposed them, often stripping away racism’s mask of respectability. Trotter did not stop “The Birth of a Nation,” but his tactics were used by the civil-rights movement to integrate lunch counters, buses, schools, and other essential spaces. When legal challenges failed, and even when they succeeded, direct action brought the cause to a wider audience, recruiting more people to the movement and rousing bystanders out of their indifference. Before it happened with the footage of fire hoses and police dogs being used to attack black men, women, and children in Birmingham, Trotter made sure people knew it was happening in the Tremont Theatre, in Boston: the images of plantation scenes being staged there, and the news that white filmgoers had shouted “Kill the darkey!” at black protesters shamed the moral descendants of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips.

One of the most satisfying accomplishments of “Black Radical” is the way that Greenidge situates Trotter’s biography in the broader story of liberal New England. Boston, Greenidge reminds her readers, incubated the politics of Malcolm X and of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., not to mention the writers Pauline Hopkins and Dorothy West. Before the Civil War, Boston was known as a hotbed of abolitionism; after the busing crisis, in the nineteen-seventies—when white Bostonians worked to prevent the desegregation of the city’s public schools, more than a century after they were first integrated by state law—it got tagged as the most racist big city in America. In between, black Bostonians, despite never equaling in number their peers in Philadelphia or New York, advocated for an exceptionally radical civil-rights agenda. Trotter rallied that community across class lines for the cause of black liberation: not just individual improvement or success but a global fight for freedom; not just an end to discrimination in America but the end of colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean.

This personal militancy made for a radical periodical; Trotter was forever making his own beliefs the basis of the Guardian’s coverage. Like him, his news-
THE NEW YORKER, NOVEMBER 25, 2019 79

paper never compromised, which was part of the reason that it, too, failed. Some black-owned papers took whatever advertising came their way, but Trotter, true to his abstinence roots, refused to advertise alcohol. He also turned down ads for skin-whitening products and hair straighteners, which he felt dishonored his race. The paper’s popularity might have made that fastidiousness tenable, but Trotter did not always go after subscriber fees, either, as evidenced by a letter that the Ohio novelist Charles W. Chesnutt once wrote to thank Trotter for keeping him on the mailing list even though he could not afford the full cost of a subscription.

Trotter was more generous with his poor allies than with his elite peers. Old Mon, as he came to be known, spent his twilight not in Cambridge but with socialists, anti-imperialists, and the youth radicals of Roxbury. While the N.A.A.C.P. declined, at first, to work with Communists to defend the nine Scottsboro Boys falsely accused of raping two white women in Alabama, Trotter wrote letters on their behalf, and gave their case top billing in the Guardian. That solidarity with the marginalized and the poor, despite his privileged background, is part of what makes Trotter so appealing. “All that is of significance in my personal history,” he once wrote, “has been in connection with the contest against color-line discriminations.”

However significant those contributions may have been, they cost him greatly. By 1910, Trotter and his family had had to sell most of their investment properties to support the newspaper, and that year he and his wife had to leave their house in Dorchester. He and Geraldine never had children; she kept the books for the Guardian, and was devoted to charitable causes. It was her charity work that took her to Camp Devens, where she visited black soldiers and likely caught the flu that killed her during the epidemic of 1918. Sixteen years later, when Trotter died, Du Bois contributed a remembrance of him to the N.A.A.C.P. magazine, acknowledging their philosophical and tactical differences but also paying tribute to Trotter’s foresight. For the cause of racial justice, Du Bois wrote, “not one but a thousand lives, like that of Monroe Trotter, is necessary to victory.”

Trotter did not live to see such a victory, and he was, apparently, never satisfied with his accomplishments. “Black Radical” opens on the morning of Trotter’s sixty-second birthday, with him standing on the roof of the boarding house in Roxbury where he lived after selling his marital home, surveying the city that he had failed to change. Then he jumped. Others, contending with this shocking death, have made much of Trotter’s dizzy spells, his tendency to pace on that roof, and the drainpipe that he seems to have grabbed on his way down—evidence that perhaps, as his two surviving sisters insisted, the fall was accidental. But Greenidge presents it as a suicide, a reaction to his struggling finances and also those of the newspaper, and to the accumulating failures of his activism. Intentional or not, it was a tragic death for so courageous a life—but the real tragedy, Greenidge argues, is not that Trotter failed “but that the people whose rights he so passionately aligned with his own interests could so callously forget him.”

Yet not everyone forgot. In the acknowledgments of “Black Radical,” Greenidge describes how she first learned of Trotter from her grandparents, while at their home in Arlington, Massachusetts. They were watching a television retrospective on the busing crisis, which led to attacks on black schoolchildren by the parents of their white peers, and to the eventual flight of many white families from Boston. “If Trotter were alive,” her grandfather said, “none of that would have happened.”
THE NEW YORKER, NOVEMBER 25, 2019

THE NEW YORKER

The rapper's new album, “Oofie,” is a past-tense document of disillusionment.

POP MUSIC

Make It Here

Wiki and the endless return of New York hip-hop.

BY CARRIE BATTAN

In the summer of 2010, at a block party in downtown Manhattan, a sixteen-year-old named Patrick Morales did something that had become a habit for him: he charged his way to the front of the crowd and began to rap. Given his talent and charisma, the intrusion was welcome. In the audience was a Harlem producer named Eric Adiele, who later said that Morales struck him as “this kind of rapping . . . New York Bart Simpson.” At the party, once the background music stopped, Morales—who is half Puerto Rican and half Irish, and goes by Wiki—continued to rap. Adiele approached Wiki about collaborating. (“I make beats, you’re not corny,” Adiele, who goes by Sporting Life, told him.) Eventually, the pair, along with another rapper, named Hak (Hakeem Lewis), formed a group called Ratking.

Like most young artists full of intensity and ideas, the members of Ratking set out to do something novel—or, at least, to resist the temptations of nineties New York hip-hop. But they wound up honoring the city’s hip-hop heritage better than most. On Ratking’s debut album, “So It Goes,” from 2014, the trio painted New York as a creative playground, rather than as a city that had all but closed its doors to young and financially disadvantaged artists. New York authenticity was treated as a birthright, not as an object of aspiration or nostalgia. Ratking avoided the narrative of a New York flattened by money and technology. “Think the city has let up? Get up, wake up/Open your eyes,” Wiki implored on a song called “Canal.” Inspired by the nineteen-seventies electronic-art-punk act Suicide and the raucous dynamism of the Wu-Tang Clan, Ratking made the kind of noisy and confident hip-hop that the Beastie Boys, Dipset, and the A$AP Mob had before it. But the music didn’t sound as if it had been directly copied from these groups; instead, Ratking had cut its own path through a similar array of New York-specific experiences and touchstones—turnstile-jumping, uptown house parties, noodle houses and bagel shops, punk and rap music, intergenerational fraternization at skate parks, malt liquor and weed. “This ain’t nineties revival/It’s earlier/It’s tribal revival,” Wiki rapped on “Protein,” a frantic, skittering track from “So It Goes.”

Ratking soon disbanded, but Wiki, the group’s magnetic figurehead, was primed for a solo career. On his full-length début, “No Mountains in Manhattan,” from 2017, he sounded like the protagonist of a Harmony Korine fever dream, a tiny, petulant charmer fast-talking his way through bodega lines and subway stations. In Wiki’s cartoon-strip rendering of Manhattan, he could win over beautiful girls despite his small stature and missing teeth, and he could make it onstage in the nick of time, no matter how much he’d drunk. The album’s production created a collage of satisfying textures—soul samples, deep bass, gritty lo-fi noise arrangements, and careful orchestral flourishes—for Wiki to play with. In Ratking’s early days, his rhetorical virtuosity and forceful delivery earned him comparisons to Eminem, but on “No Mountains” that dense, brute-force style gave way to more complex and supple verses. Verbal gymnastics came easy to him, and he knew it. “You was the worst rapper/I was the best rapper!” he shouted on a track called “Mayor,” gleefully stressing “You” and “I”.

“Mayor,” which sampled a soul song by the Arrows, was like a campaign anthem, positioning Wiki as a quasi-political leader in his own neighborhood.
He wore a suit in the video, which featured him going around New York and meeting strangers. But his arrogance and self-mythologizing were substantiated by obvious lyrical talent. On the website Talkhouse, the New York rapper—and former member of Das Racist—Heems described “No Mountains” as “a love letter to New York I wish I could have written, but am happy someone else did.” Wiki found friends and admirers in high places: on “Made for This,” a song about being predestined for greatness, he went toe to toe with the Wu-Tang Clan’s Ghostface Killah. In a short time, he’d become peers with those who helped shape New York rap.

But the churn of the music business quickly turns young stars into grizzled veterans, and, in just a couple of years, Wiki has outgrown most of his boyish enthusiasm. His new album, “Oofie,” is a document of disillusionment—not with New York City but with the trials of young rap stardom. Whereas he used to rap mostly in the present tense, much of his new album switches to the past, offering a more rueful perspective on the hedonistic pursuits of his teenage years and early twenties. (There is even a song called “Back Then.”) The mythology of his youth collides with reality on this album, which has a slower, more laborious energy to it; he laments his inadequate streaming numbers, drained bank account, and drug and alcohol abuse. The record begins with a murky beat and murmuring voices speculating about Wiki’s decline. “He’s lost it,” one mutters. “Every time I’ve seen him, he’s been drunk,” another says. “He’s a scumbag.” Raw talent is a thrilling gift, but in the absence of friendship, commercial success, or infrastructural support—before this record, Wiki parted ways with his label, XL Recordings—it can be a torturous companion.

Still, Wiki’s verbal skills are just as effective when refracted through bitterness and regret. “Oofie” takes all the vividness he once levelled at New York and channels it inward, offering a dependent portrait of self-loathing that doubles as a critique of the hype-hungry nature of contemporary rap fandom. Nostalgia for an earlier sound or a different New York was once the enemy, but now it has become a potent tool for Wiki, who describes the rowdiness of his school days with longing and lust. “Oofie” makes Wiki sound like a gentrifying city block newly overrun with chain restaurants and 7-Elevens—under siege but full of pride and history, nonetheless. “I played this game too long to move on,” he says on a song called “Pesto,” describing his rapping ability as “ten thou”—not as a boast but as a matter of fact.

Of all the distinct regional sounds and scenes made obsolete by the Internet, perhaps none have been recast quite as dramatically as New York hip-hop. The city’s rising stars now show little interest in the past. The calm pugnacity of Pop Smoke, a twenty-year-old breakout star and Brooklyn native, fits nicely into the city’s hip-hop lineage, but his sound is, quite literally, foreign—most of his grimy beats are made by 808Melo, a producer in London. 808Melo is a key figure in U.K. drill, a lively and controversial scene of young rappers who give voice to the crime and despair of places that are often overlooked in mainstream rap. U.K.-drill rappers, in turn, were inspired by the vibrant toughness of Chicago drill, which originated almost a decade ago. A crop of emergent New Yorkers—Sheff G and 22Gz among them—are legitimating U.K. drill in the U.S.

Other young New York rap stars, such as Lil Tjay and Smooky MarGielaa, are indistinguishable from the streams of melodic singer-rappers coming out of Atlanta, hip-hop’s commercial epicenter. Their New York-ness seems incidental to their success. Regional heritage and lived experience do not count for much in the economy of music fandom, which feeds simultaneously on novelty and conformity.

These trends are the source of a deep well of resentment for Wiki. “I’m an enigma they tryna get rid of/Thought I was a contender until they forget ya,” he raps on “Downfall.” But Wiki is a gifted storyteller above all, and, just as his earlier work was an imaginative exercise that turned New York into an urban Atlantis, “Oofie” is, at least in part, a dramatization. The album takes Wiki, the protagonist of his own adventure, to rock bottom, and then hedges with hints of future triumph. “Gotta be better, not bitter,” he raps. “I’ll be back in all of my splendor.”
Midway through the dead-hearted new Apple TV+ series “The Morning Show,” there’s a scene that flirts with the unruly potential the series wastes. In it, Alex Levy, a beloved morning-TV anchor played by Jennifer Aniston, hosts a swank karaoke benefit for a Broadway charity. Naturally, she and her news-director nemesis—a smiling cobra played by Billy Crudup—end up singing a duet of Stephen Sondheim’s “Not While I’m Around.” Watching them, a minor character marvels, “What the fuck is going on?” His companion answers, “I don’t know, but it’s weird and fascinating and I’m super into it.”

That’s basically what I was hoping for with “The Morning Show,” the star-crossed series set at a fictionalized “Today” show, in the midst of the #MeToo crisis: something flawed but electric, full of odd, oversized media-élite gestures; something along the lines of, say, “Smash” or “Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,” borderline camp dramas that I couldn’t stop watching, however hard I tried. For all its bad buzz, “The Morning Show” has a terrific cast, with Aniston, Steve Carell, as the deposed anchor Mitch Kessler, and Reese Witherspoon, as the Southern spitfire/muckraker Bradley Jackson. It has an intriguingly chaotic origin story, too, having been adapted from the book “Top of the Morning”—which was about the battle between Matt Lauer and his co-host, Ann Curry—only to be reconceived, under a new showrunner, after Lauer was fired for sexual misconduct. Early episodes of the series, which opens with Mitch’s firing, hint, despite their clumsiness, at promising directions: a dark comedy about sexual harassment; a go-girl thriller about some Katie Courics getting payback; a taboo-flouting drama about the complexities of #MeToo. When, at the end of the second episode, Alex defies her bosses and brashly announces, in an award-acceptance speech, that Jackson—a scrappy nobody from Real America whom she’s just met—will be her new co-anchor, my skin tingled. I’m a sucker for any show where a character tears up a speech and just "wings" it.

As Julia Roberts once told some shopgirls: big mistake. Sadly, by its finale, “The Morning Show” is less addictive train wreck than glum clunker, symptomatic of peak TV: it’s yet another lacquered, poorly structured ten-episode story, whose sparks are dampened as it becomes more earnest. The best bits just make you miss livelier shows. It has the pedantry of “The Newsroom,” minus its screwball zest, and the sleekness of “The Good Wife,” minus its canny wit. If it were nuttier, it could be “Scandal”; meaner, “Veep”; more at ease with its characters’ amorality, “Succession.” If it had more profound insights into Hollywood misogyny, it could be “BoJack Horseman.” Frustratingly, the script won’t let assholes be assholes. Instead, it keeps burdening us with their divorces, their environmentalism, their grief over their dented brands.

The best bits of “The Morning Show” are actually its most warped, particularly its satirical portrait of the way people, no matter how complicit, mouth mealy platitudes about how much they care about the “brave victims,” even as many of those women stand among them, silent or silenced. “I feel so empowered,” one employee says, smirking. “Do I look empowered?” Carell certainly gives it his all as Mitch, a self-pitying rooster convinced that his comeback is imminent, and, if it isn’t, then he’ll take the network down with him. There’s an effective, creepy scene in which his character, pitching a fellow cancelled bigwig to direct a “nuanced” #MeToo documentary, realizes that his buddy is a predator, and not, as Mitch sees himself, a victim of cultural overkill. Crudup, too, is icyly terrific, adding wit where the script...
lacks it; Gugu Mbatha-Raw is touching, as a booker with a secret. But, criminally, the show wastes Aniston, whose Alex is a seething phony whom we seem meant to feel for, based solely on the fact that she’s accessorized with Aniston’s halo of vulnerable warmth. As an anti-hero, she’s less complex than incoherent.

It’s a shame, because the show keeps circling interesting themes, in particular the notion that from inside a system you can’t see how much it’s shaped you. There’s a singular late episode, an extended flashback to when Mitch was still an adored celebrity, that captures what it seems to be shooting for—a morbid map of a world in which women’s careers are snuffed as they become sexual trading pieces, while everyone shrugs. But by then it’s too late: when the show finally looks more closely at the women Mitch has messed with, it’s only to exploit their trauma, mawkishly so. They can’t stay in focus, because the camera has been facing the wrong way.

Elsewhere on Apple TV+, luckily, there’s the sweet surprise of “Dickinson,” which blossoms despite a premise that sounds like a gimmick: Emily Dickinson’s life, as a modern teen comedy. And, to be fair, the pilot is, as the kids say, “a lot,” giving the false impression that it’s a sketch show, like “Drunk History,” a hot take on the poet as a mouthy, death-obsessed feminist badass, scored to songs by Billie Eilish and Mitski. But keep watching and it quickly becomes clear that, for all the anarchisms and slang (“That is a sick locket,” one character coos, when she receives a necklace), there’s nothing essentially ironic about the production. It’s lovely and sincere, joyful and sensual—and, in its way, richer and more honest about teen-agers than nihilistic contrivances like “Euphoria” or “Riverdale” are. The category it belongs in is not campy teen soaps or costume dramas but playful genre experiments like “Crazy Ex-Girlfriend,” “Jane the Virgin,” and “Lady Dynamite,” series that sound silly in theory but are crafted well enough to teach the viewer, liberated from the need to be solemn, how to watch them.

At the show’s heart is Emily’s steamy affair with her future sister-in-law Sue, with whom Emily (Hailee Steinfeld) has her first orgasm, cued to her poem “I Have Never Seen Volcanoes.” But their relationship, which is backed up by recent Dickinson scholarship, isn’t treated as a dirty joke: it’s romantic and, eventually, tragic, an impossible dream in a world where women’s prospects are limited. The other characters, initially cartoonish, begin to feel real, too, including Emily’s vain sister Lavinia and her Whig politician father (a terrific Toby Huss), who has a deep bond with the daughter he has trapped in a box of domesticity. Emily’s goth bravado and her grandiose declarations that she’s a genius are made poignant by their historical context: we know that she’s right, and also that she’ll end up staying at home her whole life, largely unpublished.

Still, the key to the show’s effect is how well it grounds emotion in humor. Created by Alena Smith (a writer for “The Newsroom” and “The Affair” who, full disclosure, is a Twitter acquaintance and the author of witty Twitter feeds like Tween Hobo), “Dickinson” uses its freedom from bio-pic unfes to get frankly weird. Early on, the Dickinson kids host a bash, about which Emily effuses, “Parties are like shipwrecks. You should emerge from them soaking wet, out of breath and hopelessly disoriented.” We get opium and twerking, cleverly interwoven (you’ll have to take my word for it) with a traditional reel. But there’s also, at the climax, a hallucination of a bee, waggling antennae, whom Emily dances with, deliriously.

Things calm down after that, as, episode by episode, the show takes full advantage of its setting, with a freewheeling disrespect for verisimilitude. Emily meets a hypocritical Thoreau (a shirtless John Mulaney) and, later, Louisa May Alcott (a shirty Zosia Mamet). An amateur performance of “Othello” intersects with white teens debating abolition. (“This Shakespeare club has too much drama!”) There are sly references to the Trump era and kids screaming “No spoilers!” while discussing “Bleak House.” The visual design is just as endearing, down to the Monty Python-esque credits and details such as Emily stitching a sampler reading “F My Life.” Niftiest of all, each episode highlights one of Dickinson’s poems, which feel revivified, not merely invoked. The words float onscreen, in Dickinson’s handwriting, glimmering like a spiderweb—the best kind of message from beyond.
How nice was Fred Rogers? So pretternaturally nice that, when a youthful Eddie Murphy spoofed him in “Mister Robinson’s Neighborhood,” a running skit on “Saturday Night Live,” Mr. Rogers—as everybody called him then and still refers to him now, sixteen years after his death—replied with the mild suggestion, on “Late Night with David Letterman,” that many such parodies were done “with real kindness in their hearts.”

Pause. Mr. Rogers turned to the audience: “Do you think that?” He also showed a Polaroid of Murphy and himself, all smiles. Grudges were not worth the bearing. That’s how nice he was.

What matters most, in that clip, is the pause. And the pause is one of the many things—the litany of timings, expressions, and deeds—that Tom Hanks gets right in his depiction of Mr. Rogers, in Marielle Heller’s “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood.” As Mr. Rogers enters the house at the start of his TV show, we are offered the full range of ceremonial tropes. The jacket is hung up in the closet and replaced by a zipped sweater. The outdoor shoes are removed (Hanks makes sure to toss ‘em lightly from hand to hand) and replaced by footwear more suited to the home. No chore is a drag. No detail deserves to be ignored.

Whenever well-known gestures, manual or vocal, are re-created with this care, you are somehow compelled to examine them afresh. That’s why we cleave to great mimics; whether you prefer Jay Mohr’s Christopher Walken imitation to Kevin Pollak’s, for instance, the effect of the comparison is to leave you a little more Walkenized—always a blessing. Likewise, in the new film, Hanks leaves us not just consoled by Rogers but curious about what drove him. In addition to being the host, the composer, and the puppeteer on his own show, from 1968 to 2001, Mr. Rogers was a Presbyterian minister, and, thanks to Hanks, the business with the shoes and the sweater begins to resemble a secular robing, as if we were in a vestry rather than in a television studio. The pauses, too, are more liturgical than pastoral.

Mr. Rogers can’t see his parishioners, but he knows that they’re out there, and he waits for their response.

Fans of Mr. Rogers should have had their fill, you might think, after “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?,” last year’s affable documentary about him. Marielle Heller, though, is not content with affing. She likes to draw out recessive characters—the unhappy, the untrustworthy, or the downright unlikable—and bring them, however uncertainly, into the light. In “Can You Ever Forgive Me?,” also released in 2018, this tricky feat was accomplished with the help of Melissa McCarthy and Richard E. Grant; now, in the new film, Heller turns to Matthew Rhys. He plays Lloyd Vogel, a magazine journalist who, priding himself on tough assignments, is taken aback when told to interview Mr. Rogers. Lloyd has a smart and loving wife, Andrea (Susan Kelechi Watson), but a woeful relationship with his estranged father, Jerry (Chris Cooper). Not estranged enough, as far as Lloyd is concerned, and father and son come to blows at a family wedding. A bashful Lloyd rolls up to meet Mr. Rogers with his face cut and bruised. “A softball injury,” he explains. Yeah, right.

From here on, you can see where the story—wounded soul meets healer—is heading, and, to be honest, I was half dreading the result. It should be called “The Hack Whisperer,” and it’s not a film, let us say, that I would willingly screen for Billy Wilder. There are toy-town sequences, in which a puppet-size Lloyd suddenly finds himself, alive and plaintive, amid the model buildings on the set of the show. And I could have done without the scene in the New York subway, when Mr. Rogers is spontaneously serenaded by a carriage filled with admirers. Still, however obvious the emotional setup, Heller, Hanks, and Rhys manage, Lord knows how, to skirt the pitfalls of mush, and to forge something unexpectedly strong.

Anyone hoping for shocking disclosures from “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” will go away disappointed, and the article that Lloyd presents to his editor is clearly more paean than exposé. Yet the film, to its credit, provides far from comfortable viewing, and some of the silences are deliberately awkward. At the end of a show, once everyone has departed, we see Mr. Rog-
ers sit and play softly at a piano. Pause. Then he hammers down on the low notes, in one big boom, as if to vent a frustration at which we can only guess. His wisdom feels hard won, and his decency hedged with doubts. (His sole rival in this respect, perhaps, is Charles M. Schulz.) What we have here, in other words, is the long-awaited antidote to "Forrest Gump" (1994)—a huge hit from which, despite being an ardent Hanksian, I still flinch. That movie sanctifies ignorance, whereas Heller's, equally gentle, explores not simplicisticness so much as simplicity, a rarer gift. As Lloyd says of Mr. Rogers, "I just don't know if he's for real." Strange to say, he is.

If you had never heard of the United States, and saw a double bill of "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" and Scott Z. Burns's new movie, "The Report," what would you make of this unfamiliar land? On the one hand, it features acts of thoughtful kindness performed by men in leisurewear; on the other hand, it is a bleak zone, where acts of calculated malice are funded by taxpayers, investigated, and, in the mind of the nation, consigned to near-oblivion. The two films might as well take place on different planets. What's so united about that?

The title of Burns's movie refers to a study of the C.I.A.'s Detention and Interrogation Program that was commissioned by the Senate Intelligence Committee. In short, the high-ups, investigated, and, in the mind of the nation, consigned to near-oblivion. The two films might as well take place on different planets. What's so united about that?

The Nora is the long-awaited antidote to "The Report"...
Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week’s cartoon, by P. C. Vey, must be received by Sunday, November 24th. The finalists in the November 11th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week’s contest, in the December 9th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

**THIS WEEK’S CONTEST**

“**Oh, no. I have its little one in my backpack.**”
Stephen Hampson, Coram, N.Y.

“I think we’re O.K.—honey doesn’t go bad.”
Xavier Santarelli, Paris, France

“Stay calm. I think it just wants to be squeezed.”
Robert F. Stern, New York City

“I guarantee he brings up the whole discovering-fire thing within the first five minutes.”
Theo Gresh, Washington, D.C.
The first vermouth.

ENJOY IN A CLASSIC MANHATTAN