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Franz Kafka (Fiction, p. 52), who died in 1924, wrote “The Metamorphosis” and “The Trial.” “The Lost Writings,” a collection of his short fiction, will come out in September.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

ANNALS OF ACTIVISM
Jia Tolentino on what’s next for bail funds, which have received an influx of donations amid recent protests.

DEPT. OF DESIGN
Kyle Chayka examines how the COVID-19 pandemic will reshape our homes, offices, and public spaces.

Download the New Yorker app for the latest news, commentary, criticism, and humor, plus this week’s magazine and all issues back to 2008.
THE TRUE IMPEDIMENTS TO RACIAL JUSTICE

Nicholas Lemann’s thesis, which ends his review of Walter Johnson’s book “The Broken Heart of America,” is a warning: we should expect only “partial victories” when it comes to racial justice in America, and we ought to beware the likes of Johnson, who insists on “deflating and deriding” past progress (Books, May 25th). To Lemann, Johnson errs insofar as he “discourages us from drawing much hope” from the election of an African-American President, the passage of civil-rights legislation, or the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. But Johnson’s contribution—like much of the recent scholarship on racial capitalism—reveals the poison at the heart of these and other celebrated steps forward. The Thirteenth Amendment, for example, contains, in its liberating language, the legal justification for convict labor and chain gangs, and amounts to an impetus for mass incarceration. White supremacy is indeed an adaptable and slippery monster, but the real hazards to forward motion are naïveté, white privilege, and a deficit of imagination and courage.

Bill Ayers
Chicago, Ill.

A CASE FOR JEEVES

I thoroughly enjoyed Rivka Galchen’s portrait of P. G. Wodehouse, one of my favorite authors (Books, June 1st). Galchen describes Wodehouse’s astonishing naïveté as a prisoner in German internment camps. Wodehouse was savvy, though, when it came to his livelihood as a writer. In 1938 and 1941, the author negotiated significant up-front, lump-sum payments from American publishers. The Bureau of Internal Revenue decided that Wodehouse’s advance earnings amounted to royalties, and were therefore subject to U.S. taxes. Wodehouse litigated the issue all the way to the Supreme Court, losing, 5–3, in 1949. But Wodehouse eventually won, in a way: in 1954, Congress overturned the decision, allowing for- eign authors to sell their work without being taxed for earnings other than sales. At least as far as his money was concerned, Wodehouse was far from oblivious; indeed, he was more Jeeves than Wooster.

Reuven Avi-Yonah
Lincoln, Mass.

THE MAIL

THE REAL ACTION IS OFF THE FIELD.
The latest record from HAIM, “Women in Music Pt. III,” has a slouchy, comfortable quality—as though the three sisters recorded it while lounging in the breeze, letting inspiration drift around them like dandelion seeds. The busy production of their previous work has been pared back to a crisp, easy buoyancy on upbeat tracks. Still, this apparent effortlessness doesn’t compromise emotional complexity; “Man from the Magazine” and “Hallelujah” are reflections on sexism and loss, made more powerful by the album’s carefree air.
DANCE

“Love from BAM”
The collection of archived dance footage that the Brooklyn Academy of Music is making available online while its theatres are closed expands greatly on June 25, with the release of seven performances by the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company. Chronologically, the selections range from 1984 (“Secret Pastures”) to 2008 (“A Quarreling Pair”). Near the middle of that span is “Still/Here,” a 1994 work that drew on interviews with people facing life-threatening illnesses. At its debut, it kicked up a storm of controversy. Now it’s hard to see what the fuss was about. It’s stylish, mournful, sentimental in spots, and timely once again.—Brian Seibert (bam.org/lovefrombam)

Miami City Ballet

“Nine Sinatra Songs,” a Twyla Tharp classic from 1982, projects an old-fashioned idea of American romance, as sexy, louche, and glam as the Sinatra standards to which it is set. When danced well, it gives off an aura of spaciousness and cigarette smoke. The dancers are clad in evening wear, now dated, by Oscar de la Renta. The soundtrack runs from “Strangers in the Night” to “My Way.” In this ambience, seven couples dance the night away as they play out their private stories: from the first blush of attraction to conflict and heartache. “Nine Sinatra Songs” will be broadcast by Miami City Ballet on its Facebook page starting on June 26.—Marina Harss

PNB @ Home

On the summer evening of June 24, Pacific Northwest Ballet streams “A Midsummer Night's Dream” on YouTube. The great two-act version that George Balanchine made for New York City Ballet has long been a signature work for the Seattle-based troupe, whose production distinguishes itself with suggestions of local flora and fauna. This 2019 performance capitalizes on the company’s strengths: the young, vibrant dancers; its superior orchestra, clarifying all the colors in the Mendelssohn score; and, in a supplemental video, the illuminating commentary of its erudite audience-education manager, Doug Fullington.—B.S. (pnb.org/pnbathome)

The Royal Ballet

What is a story ballet? The question has dogged ballet from the beginning, leading it to veer from near-abstraction to the literalism of pantomime. In “Woolf Works” (2015), the British choreographer Wayne McGregor attempted something akin to the modernist techniques of Virginia Woolf, his subject. The storytelling is impressionistic, stream-of-consciousness, oblique. The ballet is divided into three parts, each roughly aligned with a novel: “Mrs. Dalloway,” “Orlando,” and “The Waves.” Throughout, the figure of the writer, danced by Alessandra Ferri, returns, as others—Edward Watson, Federico Bonelli, Francesca Hayward—represent characters from Woolf’s life and work. The ballet will be broadcast on the company’s Web site starting on June 26.—M.H. (roh.org.uk/tickets-and-events/woolf-works-stream-details)

THEATRE

THE BEDROOM PLAYS

The Eden Theatre Company is investigating the house as a locus for drama with “The Room Plays”—three evenings of short pieces live-streamed on Zoom. First out of the gate was “The Bedroom Plays,” three ten-minute works that debuted on June 9 and remain available on the company’s YouTube channel. (Installments set in the living room and the bathroom are scheduled for July 9 and Aug. 6, respectively.) Of the three plays, Cassandra Paras’s “Daeva” makes the most ingenious use of the video format, with a couple’s excited FaceTime conversation devolving into a creepy scene that would belong in a horror movie. Jake Brasch’s punchy “The Man in the Fushcia Mask” provides a good vehicle for Audrey Rapoport, who plays an embittered homebound restaurant critic. Last and least is Tracy Carns’s “In a Bubble, with Only You,” whose physicality does not translate in a Webcast.—Elisabeth Vincentelli

THE ROYAL BALLET

The Bedroom Plays

If your nighttime routine now includes insomnia, Bassichis wants you to know that you’re not alone. Since March, this irresistibly charismatic New York-based performer—who sings in a style that blends cabaret panache and standup shtick with grace notes of klezmer—has been posting comforting “quotations” on Instagram, including the lullaby “I know it’s weird to go to bed now.” Like the full-length performances that have earned Bassichis a loyal following from Fire Island to the Whitney Museum, the intimate clip is funny, strange, exquisitely sung, and unexpectedly moving. Onstage, Bassichis often repeats simple lyrics—“I know you’re scared, I’m scared too”—until they accrue the power of incantations. The quotations have that same magic, along with some good advice for bad times: “I’ll tell you the secret. Take a shower.”—Andrea K. Scott (@morgankindof)

FÉLIX FÉNÉON

MOMA Online

This terrific show, now languishing in darkened galleries at the Museum of Modern Art, should not pass uncelebrated—or unvisited, to the extent that MOMA’s Web site ameliorates the lockdown. Its brilliant subject is Félix Fénéon, a shadowy French aesthete and political anarchist who was also a sometime art critic, dealer, collector, and journal editor, and a legendarily sardonic wit—not an artist but an art-world sparkplug. Best known for having coined, in 1886, the term “Neo-Impressionism,” and for his championing of Georges Seurat, he is characterized in the show’s catalogue as “implacable, incrustable, meticulous, and mysterious.” Lanky and sporting an Uncle Sam-like goatee (Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec portrayed him in profile), Fénéon was “the man in a black suit, a shadowy French aesthete and political anarchist.”

THEATRE LIVE STREAM

Last summer, Molière in the Park held its inaugural season in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park—a Francophile’s answer to Manhattan’s Shakespeare in the Park series. The company was set to return this May, with “The Misanthrope,” but a certain pandemic got in the way. Instead, it mounted the play on its YouTube channel, with cast members dropping in from places as far-flung as Milwaukee and Perugia, Italy. A second production, “Tartuffe,” Molière’s comic study of hypocrisy from 1664, will be live-streamed on June 27, starring the Broadway leading man Raúl Esparza and Samira Wiley (“Orange Is the New Black”) and staged by the group’s artistic director, Lucie Tiberghien. The play is performed in Richard Wilbur’s English translation, but viewers can opt for closed captioning in French. Visit moliereinthepark.org.—Michael Schulman
When the virtuoso Chinese realist Liu Xiaodong began making watercolors of locked-down New York, he had already hit Pause himself. The fifty-six-year-old artist had just finished a beautiful series of plein-air group portraits, painted on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, and was hanging out in Manhattan until the opening of a related museum exhibition at the Dallas Contemporary. When Liu and his family became stranded—the show was postponed and several flights home to Beijing were cancelled—he took up a new daily practice, documenting the eerily empty city: April brought blossoming trees in a closed playground; in early May, he captured a socially distanced game of chess at Astor Place. In late May, the energy shifted as Black Lives Matter protesters took to the streets (as seen in “At My Doorpost,” above). On June 29, the Lisson gallery launches an online exhibition (at lissongallery.com) of Liu’s new watercolors. It’s hard to imagine a better eyewitness to New York’s historic spring than this artist, who has been shedding light on social struggles for years, picturing everyday people, from Uyghur jade miners in northwest China to Syrian refugees in Turkey and Greece, with candor, affection, and respect.—Andrea K. Scott

Bananagun: “The True Story of Bananagun”

ROCK The Melbourne quintet Bananagun bears the hallmarks of one of the sunry sixties acts whose work slipped through the cracks of time, only to be salvaged, decades later, by sharp-eared record collectors. For proof, look no further than the players’ patent grooviness and the loopy album title “The True Story of Bananagun.” It’s an impressive feat: the LP actually marks the full-length debut of a young band entrenched in old sounds—in particular, the jocular psychedelia of the Turtles and the phony Tropicalia of Os Mutantes. In an era defined by weightiness, Bananagun plays as if held aloft by helium. “There is nothing special about me / Just another apple on the tree,” the musicians coo at the record’s outset. “Ahhhh, ahhhhh.”—Jay Ruttenberg

Chloe x Halle: “Ungodly Hour”

R & B Chloe and Halle Bailey caught the Internet’s eye nearly a decade ago, when they were just thirteen and eleven years old, respectively. The sisters, who’d both had careers as child actresses, started posting massively popular covers on YouTube that eventually got them signed to Beyoncé’s imprint, Parkwood Entertainment. Shaking off the remnants of juvenile stardom often requires delicate maneuvering, but the duo’s latest record, “Ungodly Hour,” is proof of a seamless maturation into complex R. & B. The album title “The True Story of Bananagun” is an impressive feint: the LP actually marks the

Pasquale Grasso: “Solo Bud Powell”

JAZZ An encounter with the album “Solo Bud Powell” will alert you to two things. First, Pasquale Grasso can play the guitar like ringing a bell. Second, Bud Powell, in addition to revolutionizing
For certain adults with newly diagnosed non-small cell lung cancer that has spread

1ST + ONLY
CHEMO-FREE COMBO
OF 2 IMMUNOTHERAPIES

If you have advanced non-small cell lung cancer, there’s been a new development. Today, if you test positive for PD-L1, the chemo-free combo OPDIVO* + YERVOY® is now FDA-approved and may be your first treatment. Ask your doctor if the chemo-free combo OPDIVO + YERVOY is right for you.

Learn more at lungcancerhope.com or call 1-833-OPDIVOYERVOY

Indication & Important Safety Information for OPDIVO® (nivolumab) + YERVOY® (ipilimumab)

What is OPDIVO® + YERVOY®?
OPDIVO® is a prescription medicine used in combination with YERVOY® (ipilimumab) as a first treatment for adults with a type of advanced stage lung cancer (called non-small cell lung cancer) when your lung cancer has spread to other parts of your body (metastatic) and your tumors are positive for PD-L1, but do not have an abnormal EGFR or ALK gene. It is not known if OPDIVO is safe and effective in children younger than 18 years of age.

Important Safety Information for OPDIVO + YERVOY
OPDIVO is a medicine that may treat certain cancers by working with your immune system. OPDIVO can cause your immune system to attack normal organs and tissues in any area of your body and can affect the way they work. These problems can sometimes become serious or life-threatening and can lead to death. These problems may happen anytime during treatment or even after your treatment has ended. Some of these problems may happen more often when OPDIVO is used in combination with YERVOY.

YERVOY can cause serious side effects in many parts of your body which can lead to death. These problems may happen anytime during treatment with YERVOY or after you have completed treatment.

Serious side effects may include:

- **Lung problems (pneumonitis).** Symptoms of pneumonitis may include: new or worsening cough; chest pain; shortness of breath.
- **Intestinal problems (colitis) that can lead to tears or holes in your intestine.** Signs and symptoms of colitis may include: diarrhea (loose stools) or more bowel movements than usual; blood in your stools or dark, tarry, sticky stools; and severe stomach area (abdomen) pain or tenderness.
- **Liver problems (hepatitis).** Signs and symptoms of hepatitis may include: yellowing of your skin or the whites of your eyes; severe nausea or vomiting; pain on the right side of your stomach area (abdomen); drowsiness; dark urine (tea colored); bleeding or bruising more easily than normal; feeling less hungry than usual; and decreased energy.
- **Hormone gland problems (especially the thyroid, pituitary, adrenal glands, and pancreas).** Signs and symptoms that your hormone glands are not working properly may include: headaches that will not go away or unusual headaches; extreme tiredness; weight gain or weight loss; dizziness or fainting; changes in mood or behavior, such as decreased sex drive, irritability, or forgetfulness; hair loss; feeling cold; constipation; voice gets deeper; and excessive thirst or lots of urine.
- **Kidney problems, including nephritis and kidney failure.** Signs of kidney problems may include: decrease in the amount of urine; blood in your urine; swelling in your ankles; and loss of appetite.
- **Skin problems.** Signs of these problems may include: rash; itching; skin blistering; and ulcers in the mouth or other mucous membranes.
- **Inflammation of the brain (encephalitis).** Signs and symptoms of encephalitis may include: headache; fever; tiredness; weakness; confusion; memory problems; sleepiness; seeing or hearing things that are not really there (hallucinations); seizures; and stiff neck.
- **Problems in other organs.** Signs of these problems may include: changes in eyesight; severe or persistent muscle or joint pains; severe muscle weakness; and chest pain. Additional serious side effects observed during a separate study of YERVOY alone include:
  - **Nerve problems that can lead to paralysis.** Symptoms of nerve problems may include: unusual weakness of legs, arms, or face; and numbness or tingling in hands or feet.
  - **Eye problems.** Symptoms may include: blurred vision, double vision, or other vision problems; eye pain or redness.
  - **Severe infusion-related reactions.** Tell your doctor or nurse right away if you get these symptoms during an infusion: chills or shaking; itching or rash; flushing; difficulty breathing; dizziness; fever; and feeling like passing out.

Pregnancy and Nursing:

Tell your healthcare provider if you are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. OPDIVO and YERVOY can harm your unborn baby. If you are a female who is able to become pregnant, your healthcare provider should do a pregnancy test before you start receiving OPDIVO. Females who are able to become pregnant should use an effective method of birth control during and for at least 5 months after the last dose. Talk to your healthcare provider about birth control methods that you can use during this time.

Tell your healthcare provider right away if you become pregnant or think you are pregnant during treatment. You or your healthcare provider should contact Bristol Myers Squibb at 1-800-721-5072 as soon as you become aware of the pregnancy.

Pregnancy Safety Surveillance Study: Females who become pregnant during treatment with YERVOY are encouraged to enroll in a Pregnancy Safety Surveillance Study. The purpose of this study is to collect information about the health of you and your baby. You or your healthcare provider can enroll in the Pregnancy Safety Surveillance Study by calling 1-844-593-7869.

Before receiving treatment, tell your healthcare provider if you are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. It is not known if either treatment passes into your breast milk. Do not breastfeed during treatment and for 5 months after the last dose.

Tell your healthcare provider if:

- Your health problems or concerns if you: have immune system problems such as autoimmune disease, Crohn’s disease, ulcerative colitis, lupus, or sarcoidosis; have had an organ transplant; have lung or breathing problems; have liver problems; or have any other medical conditions.
- All the medicines you take, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements.
- You are taking other medicines that may interact with OPDIVO or YERVOY, including corticosteroid or hormone replacement medicines.
- You have had a severe reaction to OPDIVO, YERVOY, or any of their ingredients.
- You have any other medical conditions.

The most common side effects of OPDIVO, when used in combination with YERVOY, include: feeling tired; diarrhea; rash; itching; nausea; pain in muscles, bones, and joints; fever; cough; decreased appetite; vomiting; stomach-area (abdominal) pain; shortness of breath; upper respiratory tract infection; headache; low thyroid hormone levels (hypothyroidism); decreased weight; and dizziness.

These are not all the possible side effects. For more information, ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects. You are encouraged to report negative side effects of prescription drugs to the FDA. Visit www.fda.gov/medwatch or call 1-800-FDA-1088.

Please see Important Facts for OPDIVO and YERVOY, including Boxed WARNING for YERVOY regarding immune-mediated side effects, on the following page.

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What is the most important information I should know about OPDIVO (nivolumab) and YERVOY (ipilimumab)?

OPDIVO and YERVOY are medicines that may treat certain cancers by working with your immune system. OPDIVO and YERVOY can cause your immune system to attack normal organs and tissues in any area of your body and can affect the way they work. These problems can sometimes become serious or life-threatening and can lead to death and may happen anytime during treatment or even after your treatment has ended. Some of these problems may happen more often when OPDIVO is used in combination with YERVOY. OPDIVO can cause serious side effects in many parts of your body which can lead to death. These problems may happen anytime during treatment with YERVOY or after you have completed treatment.

Call or see your healthcare provider right away if you develop any symptoms of the following problems or these symptoms get worse. Do not try to treat symptoms yourself.

Lung problems (pneumonitis). Symptoms of pneumonitis may include:
- new or worsening cough
- chest pain
- shortness of breath

Intestinal problems (colitis) that can lead to tears or holes in your intestine. Signs and symptoms of colitis may include:
- diarrhea (loose stools) or more bowel movements than usual
- mucus or blood in your stools or dark, tarry, sticky stools
- stomach-area (abdomen) pain or tenderness
- you may or may not have fever

Liver problems (hepatitis) that can lead to liver failure. Signs and symptoms of hepatitis may include:
- yellowing of your skin or the whites of your eyes
- nausea or vomiting
- pain on the right side of your stomach area (abdomen)
- drowsiness
- dark urine (tea colored)
- bleeding or bruising more easily than normal
- feeling less hungry than usual
- decreased energy

Hormone gland problems (especially the thyroid, pituitary, and adrenal glands; and pancreas). Signs and symptoms that your hormone glands are not working properly may include:
- headaches that will not go away or unusual headaches
- extreme tiredness or unusual sluggishness
- weight gain or weight loss
- dizziness or fainting
- changes in mood or behavior, such as decreased sex drive, irritability, or forgetfulness
- hair loss
- feeling cold
- constipation
- voice gets deeper
- excessive thirst or lots of urine

Kidney problems, including nephritis and kidney failure. Signs of kidney problems may include:
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- blood in your urine
- swelling in your ankles
- loss of appetite

Skin Problems. Signs of these problems may include:
- skin rash with or without itching
- itching
- skin blistering or peeling
- sores or ulcers in mouth or other mucous membranes

Inflammation of the brain (encephalitis). Signs and symptoms of encephalitis may include:
- headache
- fever
- tiredness or weakness
- confusion
- memory problems
- sleepiness
- seeing or hearing things that are not really there (hallucinations)

Problems in other organs. Signs of these problems may include:
- changes in eyesight
- severe or persistent muscle or joint pains
- severe muscle weakness
- chest pain

Additional serious side effects observed during a separate study of YERVOY (ipilimumab) alone include:

Nerve problems that can lead to paralysis. Symptoms of nerve problems may include:
- unusual weakness of legs, arms, or face
- numbness or tingling in hands or feet

Eye problems. Symptoms may include:
- blurry vision, double vision, or other vision problems
- eye pain or redness

Get medical help immediately if you develop any of these symptoms or they get worse. It may keep these problems from becoming more serious. Your healthcare team will check you for side effects during treatment and may treat you with corticosteroid or hormone replacement medicines. If you have a serious side effect, your healthcare team may also need to delay or completely stop your treatment with OPDIVO (nivolumab) and YERVOY.

What are OPDIVO and YERVOY?

OPDIVO and YERVOY are prescription medicines used to treat adults with a type of advanced stage lung cancer called non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC). OPDIVO may be used in combination with YERVOY as your first treatment for NSCLC:
- when your lung cancer has spread to other parts of your body (metastatic), and
- your tumors are positive for PD-L1, but do not have an abnormal EGFR or ALK gene.

It is not known if OPDIVO and YERVOY are safe and effective when used in children younger than 18 years of age.

What should I tell my healthcare provider before receiving OPDIVO and YERVOY?

Before you receive OPDIVO and YERVOY, tell your healthcare provider if you:
- have immune system problems (autoimmune disease) such as Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, lupus, or sarcoidosis
- have had an organ transplant
- have lung or breathing problems
- have liver problems
- have any other medical conditions
- are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. OPDIVO and YERVOY can harm your unborn baby. Females who are able to become pregnant:
- should use an effective method of birth control for at least 5 months after the last dose. Talk to your healthcare providers about birth control methods that you can use during this time.
- Tell your healthcare provider right away if you become pregnant or think you are pregnant during treatment.
- You or your healthcare provider should contact Bristol Myers Squibb at 1-800-721-5072 as soon as you become aware of the pregnancy.

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are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. It is not known if OPDIVO (nivolumab) or YERVOY passes into your breast milk. Do not breastfeed during treatment and for 5 months after the last dose.

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements.

Know the medicines you take. Keep a list of them to show your healthcare providers and pharmacist when you get a new medicine.

What are the possible side effects of OPDIVO and YERVOY?

OPDIVO and YERVOY can cause serious side effects, including:

- See “What is the most important information I should know about OPDIVO and YERVOY?”
- Severe infusion reactions. Tell your doctor or nurse right away if you get these symptoms during an infusion of OPDIVO or YERVOY:
  - chills or shaking
  - itching or rash
  - flushing
  - difficulty breathing

The most common side effects of OPDIVO when used in combination with YERVOY include:

- feeling tired
- diarrhea
- rash
- itching
- nausea
- pain in muscles, bones, and joints
- fever
- cough
- decreased appetite
- vomiting
- stomach-area (abdominal) pain
- shortness of breath
- upper respiratory tract infection
- headache
- low thyroid hormone levels (hypothyroidism)
- decreased weight
- dizziness

These are not all the possible side effects of OPDIVO and YERVOY. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects. You may report side effects to FDA at 1-800-FDA-1088.

This is a brief summary of the most important information about OPDIVO and YERVOY. For more information, talk with your healthcare provider, call 1-855-673-4861, or go to www.OPDIVO.com.
modern jazz piano, was a beguiling composer. No radical deconstructionist, Grasso—playing all by his lonesome and forgoing overdubs—approaches Powell’s songs in a conventional and respectful, if startlingly bravura, manner. Knotty tunes such as “Celcia” and “Dance of the Infidels” release the expected cascades of perfectly executed bebop runs, all couched in pearly tones. But Grasso also has a way with the ballads ‘‘T’ll Keep Loving You” and “Dusk in Sandi,” as well as the oddly constructed “Glass Enclosure.” Exchanging Powell’s manic intensity for his own measured focus, Grasso nonetheless lays garlands at the Master’s feet.—Steve Futterman

Hinds: “The Prettiest Curse”

Indie rock It was always a bit of a stretch to slap a “garage” label onto the Spanish indie band Hinds. Even on early records, such as “Leave Me Alone,” from 2016, a spunky, lightweight pop sound bubbled out from the foursome’s craggy guitars, messily delivered, and screechy choruses. Their latest album, “The Prettiest Curse,” is a capitulation to the bright commerciality their music has harbored: “Good Bad Times” features a sparkly, dance-inspired synth line, and “Burn” starts with a swinging, shout-it-out-loud verse, reminiscent of the unapologetically chipper pop punk of the early two-thousands. Some of the new entries to the band’s catalogue may seem too shellacked—and clearly aimed for auditorium sing-alongs—but the musicians keep the energy fun and rebellious, like a glitter bomb detonated in a stuffy conference room.—J.L.

“Otello”

Opera After the bottom fell out of the recording industry in the early two-thousands, opera headliners largely stopped making glossy—and costly—studio sets of full-length operas. Every now and then, though, a singer’s star power forces an exception, and such is the case with Jonas Kaufmann’s new recording of Verdi’s “Otello.” To make a hero worthy to sing his title track and again in the closing “Apolaki,” proclaiming the power of myth even as she demands to be seen and heard for who she is. Opera would do well to pay attention.—Steve Smith

White Boy Scream: “BAKUNAWA”

Contemporary classical Opera singers are, by definition, conservators of a cultural practice rooted in history and tradition. But Micaela Tolbin—a Los Angeles-based vocalist and composer whose résumé extends from the maverick oper troupe the Industry to the experimental hip-hop group Clipping—uses her classically trained voice to slash through the hissing static, clangorous percussion, and punishing noise that she employs in White Boy Scream. Her latest album, “BAKUNAWA,” is also a gesture of preservation: she invokes the pre-colonial mythology of her Philippine ancestry in songs that pivot between sublimity, contemplation, and terror. “They can’t erase me,” Tolbin chants in the epic title track and again in the closing “Apolaki,” proclaiming the power of myth even as she demands to be seen and heard for who she is. Opera would do well to pay attention.—Steve Smith

MISS JUNETEENTH

This début feature by Channing Godfrey Peoples, set in her home town of Fort Worth, Texas, is a warmhearted and pain-streaked melodrama that’s deeply anchored in observation and experience. It’s centered on the town’s annual Miss Juneteenth pageant, where young black women compete for the title and an accompanying scholarship to a historically black college. Nicole

Southern Shores: “Siena (Part I)”

Downtempo Under the name Southern Shores, the Toronto-based production duo of Jamie Townsend and Ben Dalton make blissed-out music that resembles the early albums of Air or the Avalanches, in which lush escapism was cut with a bittersweet tang. On “Siena (Part I),” they cunningly combine the usual elements of what electronic-dance aficionados dub “down-tempo”—conga-led beats, strings that waft and bellow, samples of loose vocal chants, lounge-ready trumpets—in ways that are instantly cozy without overstaying their welcome. That also goes for the EP itself, which comes in at under seventeen minutes.—Michaelangelo Matos

Bob Dylan’s new album, “Rough and Rowdy Ways,” enters the world at a fraught moment—as all of his prize records seemingly do—but his inherent gravity is a match for any tumult. This strangely gorgeous set, his first collection of original compositions in eight years, is by turns frisky and elegiac. Haunted by ghosts of the twentieth century, its lyrics raise a glass to a bounty of heroes both monumental and kitschy. In his patchwork, all figures coexist—General Patton surfaces to clear a path for Elvis and M.L.K.—and beauty often follows strife. Dylan’s early stirrings secured his spot on the Mt. Rushmore of American music, and here he still stands, approaching eighty and croaking fiercely intelligent songs of romance and history. Rock and roll, once the province of youth, becomes a conduit for grizzled wisdom, as voiced by its preéminent codger. Who else did anyone expect?—Jay Ruttenberg
Christopher Munch, who directed a drama about the Beatles (“The Hours and Times”) and another about Bigfoot (“Letters from the Big Man”), combines his fascination with the real and the unreal in “The 11th Green,” a wildly inventive new science-fiction film that’s also a work of meticulous historical reimagining. (It’s streaming on the Joma Films site, starting on June 26.) When an elderly retired general dies, his estranged son (Campbell Scott), an investigative journalist, rummages through documents at his father’s Palm Springs retreat and discovers a government cover-up, involving U.F.O.s and advanced energy technology, dating back to the Second World War. Munch’s cast of characters, seen in fanatically detailed faux archival footage, includes Dwight Eisenhower and his wife, Mamie; John F. Kennedy; and the first Secretary of Defense, James Forrestal, whose real-life suicide, in 1949, is a crucial part of the drama—as are invented tales involving aliens in Area 51 and the military-industrial complex’s cloak-and-dagger intrigues. With tight-lipped restraint, Munch giddily tweaks the past seventy-five years of political assumptions and the very concept of life on Earth.—Richard Brody

The Other Side of the Mirror: Bob Dylan

In the guise of a straightforward series of concert performances, the director Murray Lerner crafted a canny, revelatory documentary, from 2007, about how Dylan seized the day. Specifically, Lerner makes fascinating sense of the moment at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival when the folk-singer plugged in and all hell broke loose. Already a star, his celebrity rankled purists: as one young man tells Lerner, “He’s accepted, he’s a part of your establishment, and forget him.” When, that night, Dylan brought his electric band onstage, he assumed a role in the broadest commercial culture and, making use of the bully pulpit, turned it on itself. Lerner and his crew capture these vital performances in images of rapt attentiveness; the transition from the wider, calmer shots of Dylan’s earlier, unplugged performances to the intense intimacy of the 1965 closeups conveys the inner truth of the historic moment. Dylan was daringly spending the psychic capital of his fame to effect a risky self-transformation—the first of many.—R.B. (Streaming on Amazon.)

The Prison in Twelve Landscapes

This conceptually bold documentary by Brett Story, from 2016, considers the American carceral state as experienced in daily life outside prison walls. The film follows a chess player in Washington Square Park who mastered the game in prison, families enduring the practical and financial burdens of a relative’s incarceration, and a California convict risking her life fighting forest fires. Throughout, Story finds that both the threat and the reality of imprisonment exert grossly disproportionate and seemingly calculated pressure on black Americans. The police harassment of black Missourians (including those in Ferguson) is shown to involve weaponizing traffic violations as a pretext for incarceration, and Story interviews several of the victims. A historical sidebar about the 1967 Detroit riots presents the resulting militarization of law enforcement against black communities as a publicly acknowledged policy—and as a financial boon to some mainly white communities. The film also looks behind the scenes at large-scale industries that have arisen to meet—and profit from—the requirements of prison regulations. An empathetic observer and a probing analyst, Story suffuses the film with grief and indignation.—R.B. (Streaming on Amazon and Kanopy.)

The Story of a Three-Day Pass

Melvin Van Peebles directed this film, his first feature, in 1967, in France, where he had lived for years, and its boldly original inspirations reflect both local French cinematic styles and American politics—it’s at once a New Wave classic and one of the great American films of the era. It stars Harry Baird as Turner, a black American corporal stationed at a U.S. Army base in France. A manic white officer (Harold Brav) offers him a promotion and the leisure time of the movie’s title, which Turner uses for a jaunt to Paris. There, at a nightclub, he meets a white French woman named Miriam (Nicole Berger); news of their interracial relationship sparks turmoil at the base. Turner’s divided consciousness—defiant and dutiful, hip and nerdy—is the core of the film, which Van Peebles unfolds in a dazzling array of cinematic devices, including mirror images coming to life, scenes fragmented into snippets and still frames, and frenzied fantasy sequences that evoke the tale’s psychological and social complexities with wild humor.—R.B. (Streaming on Amazon and Kanopy.)

The World

Jia Zhangke’s drama, from 2004, turns Beijing’s World Park, with its tacky reduced-scale reproductions of cultural wonders (from the Taj Mahal to the Eiffel Tower), into a derisive microcosm of China. The central drama involves Tao (Zhao Tao), an actress in the park’s bland folklore pageantry, and her boyfriend, Taisheng (Chen Tao), a security guard, who ponder whether to marry and to escape the unreal, where shams prevail, and not just within the theme park: a busy factory produces only knockoffs of American merchandise and workers toil for funny money that buys nothing in the world economy and leaves even a plane ride an impossible dream. Cell phones and walkie-talkies convey an oppressive mood of surveillance, and the prospect of emigration (with its precious documents, real or fake) provides the only moment of true happiness. Jia’s tenderness for his characters is infused with a quiet rage: as the wide-screen views freeze them in a confining emptiness, dead zones of action and dialogue suggest a land where imagination itself has been suppressed. For more reviews, visit newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town
Bread to Go

Keep your sourdough starter to yourself: I value the staff of life too highly to leave it to anyone but professionals, or at least savants. Luckily for me, in New York, bakers, professional and savant alike, have more than risen to the challenges of the past several months. In March, Bien Cuit, a bakery with locations in Cobble Hill and Crown Heights, launched an online store called Bien Cuit Provisions, offering its superlative breads and pastries, including crunchy-crusted rye ficelles and salted chocolate-buckwheat cookies, for delivery in much of Manhattan and Brooklyn, and for shipping nationwide.

She Wolf Bakery, which is affiliated with the restaurants Diner and Marlow & Sons, and which, for my money, makes the best bâtards and miches in the city, has partnered with online purveyors such as Farm to People and Natoora. A new company called Bread Basket (which is on hiatus until the fall) designed C.S.A.-style boxes packed with a grab bag from various New York bakeries: half a dozen Kossar’s bagels, for example, with a Pain D’Avignon pecan-cranberry loaf and a berry-coconut tea cake from Baked.

More thrilling still is a speakeasy-style marketplace that has popped up on Instagram. One day in April, while scrolling mindlessly through my feed, I snapped to attention when I saw a picture of kardemummabullar, the Swedish confections whose buttery, flaky layers are coiled and knotted and coated in sugar and stirringly fragrant ground cardamom. They were attributed to @neighborhoodbread, a virtual Brooklyn-based bakery that was started by a pair of chefs who are furloughed from their high-end restaurant jobs (and who prefer to remain anonymous).

On a recent sunny afternoon, a masked bike messenger dropped off a pair of the flawless kardemummabullar, plus a crusty sourdough boule thickly scented with maple and fenugreek, a square of oily focaccia pocked with dollops of ricotta and pepita-parsley pesto, and a deliciously tangy Danish-style sprouted rye, whose fermented dough was so moist that it stayed good for weeks. In similar fashion, I received sacks of raspberry kouign amann, croissants, and English muffins baked by Billie Rushe and Peter Magestro, who had been furloughed from their jobs at Roberta’s and Williamsburg’s the Blue Stove, respectively, and who sell their wares from their apartment in Ridgewood as @gravy.bakery.

Another day, a trio of baguettes I summoned from Manhattan were still warm when they arrived on my doorstep in Brooklyn. They were made by Richaud Valls, a producer and an actor of some repute in his home country of France, who found that, in the U.S., he was often typecast, because of his heavy accent, as a chef or a maître d’. In March, while sheltering in place, he picked up a project he’d long ago abandoned: re-creating the baguette of his childhood. The desired texture had eluded him on previous attempts, but this time he was shocked to find that he managed it on the first try. Before long, he was running an Instagram bakery, too, called Richaud (tagline: “Baguette . . . about it!”).

The other day, the chefs behind @neighborhoodbread posted that they would donate fifty per cent of several days’ worth of sales to Color of Change, a racial-justice nonprofit. Rushe and Magestro pledged twenty-five per cent of what they made on doughnuts to the A.C.L.U. And Zoë Kanan, formerly of Simon & the Whale, and Dianna Daheung, of Black Seed Bagels, are just two of the many New York bakers who participated in a recent worldwide virtual bake sale to support the Black Lives Matter movement. The sale was spearheaded by Paola Velez, Willa Lou Pelini, and Rob Rubba, the three D.C. chefs behind @bakersagainstracism. All proceeds from Kanan and Daheung’s strawberry-glazed pound cake and Jamaican beef patties went to the Black Feminist Project, an organization in the South Bronx whose many efforts include the Black Joy Farm, a source of vegetables and a gathering place for the surrounding community.

—Hannah Goldfield
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HOW FREEDOM CAME

When word circulated earlier this month that Donald J. Trump would resume his campaign rallies on June 19th, with an event in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the confluence of date and location suggested that his typically leaden-handed racial trolling had taken on new levels of nuance. On its face, the choice of Tulsa defies political logic. In the upcoming Presidential election, Oklahoma is neither in play (Trump currently holds a nineteen-point lead there) nor lucrative (it will deliver just seven electoral votes to the winner).

By comparison, Trump trails Joe Biden by five points in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, and eight points in Michigan—all states that have more electoral votes and are crucial to Trump’s re-election hopes. But, when taken in conjunction with the date—June 19th, or Juneteenth, the informal holiday on which African-Americans recognize the delayed emancipation of the enslaved inhabitants of Texas—the choice of the second-largest city in a sparsely populated, deeply red state assumes additional significance. Ninety-nine years ago, the homes and the businesses of the black community in that city were levelled, and as many as three hundred people were killed by white mobs in what came to be known as the Tulsa Massacre.

To close observers, Trump’s move seemed like a knockoff of Ronald Reagan’s decision to speak in Philadelphia, Mississippi—the site of the murders of the civil-rights workers Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner—in August, 1980, immediately after he had won the Republican Presidential nomination. (In June, 2016, Donald Trump, Jr., made a campaign stop there on behalf of his father; Trump himself made three campaign visits to Mississippi, where, that summer, he polled higher than in any other state.) But Trump, and whoever in his Administration proposed the Tulsa rally, likely had more contemporary concerns. If the serial protests, the outrage, and the conflations of the past three weeks can be viewed as a statement about race in the United States, the rally was meant to be a response. Like Reagan in 1980, Trump is apparently seeking to shore up support among whites who not only tolerate racism but feel that they, in fact, are the group being persecuted.

Yet even this inspired bit of middle-fingering the movement was shot through with Trumpian ineptitude. For decades, even among African-Americans, Juneteenth was primarily celebrated by those who lived in or were from Texas. In recent years, it has been more widely observed, but still overwhelmingly by African-Americans. The Trump team, in designing the Juneteenth stunt, dramatically elevated awareness of the day. Companies across the country have made Juneteenth a paid vacation day; governors, including Ralph Northam, of Virginia, announced plans to declare it an official state holiday. The backlash prompted Trump to postpone the rally by twenty-four hours. In another sense, though, the Administration’s actions were entirely apt for a day bound up with the ambivalent history of freedom in the United States.

On June 19, 1865, when Major General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas, to deliver General Order No. 3, proclaiming emancipation, the Civil War had been over for two months and freedom, at least theoretically, had been granted two and a half years earlier, by President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. (Congress had passed the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished most forms of slavery, in January, 1865, though it was not ratified until December.) The size and the geography of Texas aided slaveholders in attempts to keep those enslaved from learning of emancipation. This was vital to the war effort: Lincoln’s edict had been calculated to disrupt the Confederate economy, which depended on enslaved labor. To the extent that Southern whites could keep the knowledge of emancipation to themselves, that labor force could be held in check. The strategy didn’t work: news
Corina Newsome, a twenty-seven-year-old graduate student in ornithology, studies threats to seaside sparrows that nest on the shore of southern Georgia. She has been avid—obsessed for six years, ever since she saw her first blue jay, during a college field course. She watches migrating flocks on weather radar like a sports fan watches a soccer match. Like many birders, she keeps lists on eBird, an online server, of the species she has seen (more than three hundred), and her own lists of those she hopes to see, but, unlike any other birder, she has released a remix, with new lyrics, of the Offset and Cardi B song “Clout,” called “Anything for the Count.” “Everybody wanna see Tits/Everybody wanna see Chicks,” she raps. “If I was you, I’d start my list.”

Growing up in Philadelphia, Newsome had no idea that she could be a wildlife scientist until a friend of a friend, who was a carnivore keeper at the local zoo, suggested that she apply for an internship. “It’s the only reason I’m here now and not working at Home Depot,” Newsome said the other day. She was in a humid salt marsh, in Brunswick, combing through green spartina grass, looking for sparrow nests. A cacophony of laughing gulls flew by. “That’s why representation is so important. I am now a crazy bird human.”

In early June, Newsome helped organize the inaugural #BlackBirdersWeek, as a response to what happened on Memorial Day to a man named Christian Cooper. He was birding in Central Park when he encountered a white woman named Amy Cooper (no relation), and politely asked her to leash her dog, per Park regulation. Instead, she called the police to report that “an African-American man” was threatening her life. (Later that day, George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis cop.) Newsome and her co-organizers—all members of an online group that called Black AF in STEM—planned an event series to promote black naturalists and anti-racism in the field.

Newsome, who is tall, with large eyes and long eyelashes, high-stepped across scattered oyster shells in a tidal creek. The week had been a huge success. The National Audubon Society had live-streamed two panels, featuring Newsome, Cooper, and other distinguished birders, to its 1.5 million followers. The events were the first in the organization’s long history to feature only black birders, promoting justice and inclusivity. “It can’t, of course, be compared to the risks that people take when they are out in the streets protesting police brutality,” Newsome said. “But both efforts are attempts to eradicate a culture steeped of the emancipation spread, and Confederate states were hampered by black people escaping to the Union lines, with many of the men enlisting in the Northern ranks. The language of the Texas order spoke to the fragile nature of this new freedom; the paragraph that affirms the end of slavery also warns the black population against idleness and notes that unauthorized gatherings at military posts will not be tolerated.

The Emancipation Proclamation itself had been hedged to balance Northern interests and to incentivize Southern states with at least the possibility of retaining slavery if they rejoined the Union: the order freed only those people enslaved in areas of the country that were rebelling against the federal government. But Texas was in rebellion, and its black population did qualify for freedom on January 1, 1863, when the proclamation took effect. Texas ignored the proclamation, as did the ten other Confederate states. This all indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of the significance of Juneteenth. The fact that slaveholders extracted thirty additional months of uncompensated labor from people who had been bought, sold, and worked to exhaustion, like livestock, throughout their lives is cause for mourning, not celebration. In honoring that moment, we should recognize a moral at the heart of that day in Galveston and in the entirety of American life: there is a vast chasm between the concept of freedom inscribed on paper and the reality of freedom in our lives.

In that regard, Juneteenth exists as a counterpoint to the Fourth of July; the latter heralds the arrival of American ideals, the former stresses just how hard it has been to live up to them. This failure was not exclusive to the South. Northern states generally abolished slavery in the decades after the American Revolution, but many slaveholders there, rather than free the people they held in bondage, sold them to traders in the South, or moved to states where the institution was still legal. The black men, women, and children who heard Granger’s pronouncement a hundred and fifty-five years ago in Galveston were not slaves; they were a barometer of American democracy.

There’s a paradox inherent in the fact that emancipation is celebrated primarily among African-Americans, and that the celebration is rooted in a perception of slavery as something that happened to black people, rather than something that the country committed. The paradox rests on the presumption that the arrival of freedom should be greeted with gratitude, instead of with self-reflection about what allowed it to be deprived in the first place. Emancipation is a marker of progress for white Americans, not black ones. Trump, in planning to go to Tulsa for Juneteenth, was not trolling black people. He was trolling the United States Constitution.

—Jelani Cobb

Corina Newsome
in white supremacy, and the valuing of white experience over all else.”

She wore a sun hat and quick-dry pants, which were sealed to her boots, to prevent snails from falling in. She carried a G.P.S. tracker and a clipboard with waterproof paper. “I’m always on guard. I try to prominently display my gear,” she said. “Even if I don’t see a bird, if I see white folks approaching me, I immediately look through my binoculars. I need them to know what I’m doing.” In February, a black man named Ahmaud Arbery was pursued by a group of white men and then killed, while out jogging, near Newsome’s field site. “The first time I came back out here,” she said, after Arbery’s death, “I drove around that neighborhood where he was jogging. On my way out — and this sounds crazy — I parked, rolled my windows down, and screamed at the top of my lungs. I was bursting on the inside and there was nothing I could do. I was sobbing. I felt like I was gonna vomit.”

A sparrow flashed up from the grass. “Pish pish pish pish,” Newsome called, and the bird continued chip — chip — chip. “You can’t see it.” But she had. “I’m so happy to be here,” she said, as if it were a confession.

—Carolyn Kormann

DON’T KISS THAT BABY PANDEMIC POLITICKING

Three days after her upset victory over a ten-term congressman in the 2018 Democratic primary, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tweeted a photograph of her cracked, battered sneakers. Some analysts had attributed her win to changing demographics, but she was having none of it. “Here’s my 1st pair of campaign shoes,” she wrote. “I knocked doors until rainwater came through my soles. Respect the hustle.” It was a tribute to old-school progressive campaigning and engagement, her viral videos notwithstanding. But what if door-knocking and hand-shaking and showing up for parades and community festivals and church-basement meetings are all off the table, because of a pandemic? How does a new candidate get her non-household name in front of voters when she’s mostly stuck at home — and when there’s a lot else going on?

That is the challenge facing Lindsey Boylan, the thirty-six-year-old who is running for Congress against Jerry Nadler, in New York’s Tenth District. Her candidacy would be a long shot even in normal times. Nadler, low-key but likable, is in his fourteenth term; he chairs the House Judiciary Committee and has been a steady media presence in recent weeks as one of the stewards of the Democrats’ police-reform bill. Boylan is part of a wave of progressive candidates who are challenging incumbents, inspired by Ocasio-Cortez and Representative Ayanna Pressley, of Massachusetts, who also knocked off a long-serving, supposedly safe congressman in 2018. But Nadler has one advantage those ex-incumbents didn’t: A.O.C. has endorsed him.

By the end of March, Boylan had raised more than seven hundred thousand dollars, enough to maybe get her foot in voters’ doors, metaphorically speaking. But how do you ask for more during an economic crisis? And how will the combination of a pandemic and New York’s first-ever experiment with early voting affect turnout? (Election Day is June 23rd.)

A few weeks ago, Boylan was sitting in her apartment, in Chelsea. (The gerrymandered Tenth District, which looks like Cape Cod rotated ninety degrees, encompasses most of Manhattan’s West Side, then skims the Brooklyn waterfront, taking in slices of Red Hook and Bay Ridge, before widening out to claim Borough Park and big bites of several other neighborhoods.) She was hosting a virtual coffee hour on Facebook, the pandemic alternative to canvassing a busy subway station. Upwards of two dozen people had tuned in, many of whom she seemed to know. Questions weren’t immediately forthcoming, so she filled the time with her thoughts on various issues: systemic racism, economic inequality, student loans. Still no questions? She could keep talking “day and night,” she said, adding, “At this point sometimes I feel like a standup comedian, even though I’m not that funny.”

The admission actually was sort of funny, at least by politician standards; it was definitely disarming. So was the way she talked about increasing access to mental-health care (a core issue for her) and about her own therapy sessions, which, she said, were essential “to rationalize all the new experiences that happen to you when you’re running for Congress.”

The thrust of her case against Nadler is that the congressman, while reliably progressive, hasn’t been very effective. By Boylan’s lights, he dragged his heels on whether to impeach President Trump, and many feel that he did a lackluster job managing his committee’s eventual hearings. Boylan’s pitch — basically: I’m new blood — is underscored by her wonky energy and a kind of “What do I have to lose?” enthusiasm for typing “fuck” and “shit” a lot on Twitter. But, to whatever extent an anti-Nadler vote exists, she will have to share it with a third candidate, Jonathan Herzog, a law-school student who helped organize Andrew Yang’s Presidential campaign.

Boylan isn’t a complete novice. In an update of the mythic moment in 1963 when sixteen-year-old Bill Clinton shook hands with President John F. Kennedy,
Boylan waited outside a Senate hearing room in 2001, as a high schooler, in order to meet Hillary Clinton, then a new senator. (“It changed my life, obviously,” Boylan said.) Following in Clinton’s footsteps, she went to Wellesley and became student-body president. She later got an M.B.A. at Columbia and, again like Clinton, spent time in both the private and the public sectors, including an unhappy year as deputy secretary for economic development under Governor Andrew Cuomo. “It was absolutely the most toxic experience of my life,” she told the virtual coffee group, alluding to a work environment rife with “egos” and “pissing contests.”

Her last pre-shutdown campaign event was on March 13th, when she handed out flyers on Broadway and 110th Street. But, as the city has started to open back up, she has ventured tentatively outdoors, attending several Black Lives Matter protests, including the June 14th rally for black transgender lives in front of the Brooklyn Museum. “I met so many New Yorkers,” she tweeted that weekend. “I had such wonderful conversations.” She also posted a picture of herself posing next to a rack of pastries at a Mexican bakery in Midwood. It looked like a classic New York campaign stop, but for her face mask.

—Bruce Handy

THE PICTURES

WITCHY

A t a Sundance Film Festival party in January—back when there were film festivals, and parties—the actress Elisabeth Moss felt a tap on her shoulder. She spun around, and a man in his seventies said, “Hi, Mom!” It was Laurence Hyman, the oldest son of the author Shirley Jackson. In “Shirley,” a new film directed by Josephine Decker, Moss plays a fictionalized version of Jackson, who died in 1965 and was known for her dark tales, such as “The Haunting of Hill House” and the New Yorker story “The Lottery.” At the Sundance premiere, Moss asked Hyman what he thought of the movie. “I’m digesting it,” he said, hedging. “Shirley” is now out on demand, and Hyman is still digesting. “If someone comes to the movie not knowing anything about my parents, they will certainly leave thinking that my mother was a crazy alcoholic and my father was a mean critic,” he said the other day. He and Moss were reconnecting on Zoom; he was at his home, in Northern California, and Moss was on the Upper West Side, curled up in a floral hoodie. Hyman handles his mother’s estate, but he wasn’t involved with “Shirley,” which is based on a novel by Susan Scarf Merrell. It imagines Jackson and her husband, the New Yorker critic Stanley Edgar Hyman (played by Michael Stuhlbarg), taking in and terrorizing a young couple at their home, in Vermont, while Jackson works on her 1951 novel, “Hangsaman.”

Hyman was eight when “Hangsaman” came out, but the Shirley and Stanley of the movie are childless. “She cooked three meals a day, and she drove us to dentist appointments and Cub Scout meetings,” he said. He objected to the film’s bleak depiction of his mother—in one scene, she goes to a party and douses the sofa with red wine—which he said did not “fairly portray her humor.” Moss nodded diplomatically. “It was a challenging experience for Michael and me, because we sort of fell in love with them and their work, and we did all this research,” she said. “We had to agree to let it go. I’m still so haunted by her—in a good way!” To prepare, Moss had read Jackson’s books and listened to a tape of her reading “The Lottery.” “I think I recorded that,” Hyman said. “My mother was terrified of, among other things, recording studios, so I recorded her on my father’s Revere reel-to-reel tape recorder. She’s got a drink with her, and you can hear, occasionally, the rattling of the ice when she takes a pause.”

Moss brought out her copy of Ruth Franklin’s biography of Jackson and read something she had underlined: “The demon in the mind, Jackson wrote, exploits one’s bad conscience, spinning ordinary worries and grievances into destructive obsession.” Hyman said, “She understood that human nature is flawed, and that underneath even the most benign of circumstances there lurks this potential for evil.” When he was a teenager, he recalled, “she would ask me to drive her around in her Morris Minor convertible, and we would go look for haunted houses.” Jackson was fascinated by the Salem witch trials, and was said to practice witchcraft herself. But Hyman insisted that this was more of her unsung humor: his father had been fighting with Alfred A. Knopf over a manuscript when the publisher broke his leg on a skiing trip, “and Shirley and Stanley circulated the rumor that Shirley had done it by black magic.”

In the film, Jackson gives one of her house guests a tarot-card reading—a detail based in fact. “She very deliberately wrote ‘Hangsaman’ around the structure of the Major Arcana,” Hyman said. On a nearby table, he had his mother’s old tarot deck, along with other momentos, including her pewter mask of Pan and a few ceramic cat figurines. “She loved cats,” Hyman said. “She usually collected black cats, and sometimes we’d have as many as a dozen. But she’d tell our father that we only had one or two, and he couldn’t tell the difference.”

Moss smiled. She has two cats, Lucy and Ethel, one of which was slinking in and out of the frame. “We’re talking about Shirley,” Moss whispered in its ear. “She also liked cats, Ethel.”

“You know, Desi Arnaz asked Shirley if she would write an episode for them,” Hyman said. (Jackson declined, but one imagines a vial of poisoned Vimentavegamin.) Behind him was his mother’s haunted music box, from her great-grandmother’s trousseau. “It would turn itself on at odd times,” he recalled. “It always favored ‘The Carnival of Venice.’” He played the ancient zinc record, and a spectral, circuslike tune emanated:

Elisabeth Moss

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Bruce Handy is a senior writer at The New Yorker.
What do you do after you've been fired from the Trump Administration? In the past, the President's axed staffers have hoped for jobs at Fox News or fellowships at the Harvard Kennedy School. But a new platform (no application required; work from home) has emerged for those who are willing to say literally anything. Cameo bills itself as an app for “personal video shoutouts from your favorite people”; for fifty dollars, a pseudo-celebrity such as Donald Trump’s disgraced adviser George Papadopoulos will wish your dad a happy Father’s Day, or any other message you might want.

When Cameo launched, in 2017, it trafficked in videos of C-listers such as Tony Hawk doing a “gender reveal” for a baby (price: two hundred dollars) or Caitlyn Jenner saying happy birthday (twenty-five hundred dollars). In recent months, the ex-Trump officials have come pouring in. Anthony Scaramucci used to be Trump’s mouthpiece, but he has extended his reach, offering himself as a spokesperson to anyone who can pay. On Cameo, he holds a pillow that says “MOOCH” and bellows, “I’ll talk about anything, as you guys know. So look me up, dial me in, and tell me what you want me to say to you!” He concludes with a loud kissing noise and promises to reply within three days. (Sebastian Gorka, Trump’s former deputy assistant, guarantees a same-day response.) Roger Stone, Trump’s longtime adviser, whose incarceration has been deferred, has started making Cameos for seventy-five dollars apiece—a quarantine pastime until he’s due in prison, later this month. The former press secretary Sean Spicer is on the app, too. “It’s like the Uber of fan mail,” he said. “People are paying for what they want.”

“Our mission is to create the most authentic connections on earth,” Arthur Leopold, Cameo’s C.O.O., said. “We’ve democratized access to talent and celebrity. You don’t have to go to a fundraiser at the Beverly Hills Hotel anymore.” He added, “Whether it’s Avenatti or Omarosa, they all have dedicated fan bases. People who support Trump think it’s cool to have someone in his inner circle wish them a happy birthday.” But customer reviews are mixed. One user wrote, of Scaramucci, “I appreciate the video, but wish he had sat up or made more of an effort or at least brushed his hair.” Another: “Mr Scaramucci did not identify himself, so this could have been anyone with a NY accent.” (One star.)

There’s one person on Cameo who still works for the President. Although Corey Lewandowski is a senior adviser on Trump’s reelection campaign, he appears to have ample time to make Cameos, which he films in front of an American flag and a Trump-Pence sign. He tends to insert his politics into his videos, such as when he commended a celebrity such as Donald Trump’s “Avenatti or Omarosa, they all have dedicated fan bases. People who support Trump think it’s cool to have someone in his inner circle wish them a happy birthday.” But customer reviews are mixed. One user wrote, of Scaramucci, “I appreciate the video, but wish he had sat up or made more of an effort or at least brushed his hair.” Another: “Mr Scaramucci did not identify himself, so this could have been anyone with a NY accent.” (One star.)

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PERSONAL HISTORY

HOMECOMING

There was no way to save Ma’s sense of community and hope.

BY HILTON ALS

By the late summer of 1967, when I turned seven, we’d been living in the house for six years. By “we,” I mean my mother, two of my four older sisters, and my little brother. And although we shared the place with a rotating cast of other relatives, including my mother’s mother and an aunt and her two children, I always considered it my mother’s home. The house was in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. Like all the moves my mother engineered or helped to engineer for our family, this one was aspirational. Despite the fact that Brownsville had begun its slow decline into drugs, poverty, and ghettoization years before, my mother’s house—the only one in her life that, after years of work and planning, she would even partly own—symbolized a break with everything we had known before, including an apartment in Crown Heights, with a shared bathroom near the stairwell, where, on Sunday nights, my mother would line her daughters up with freshly laundered towels so that they could take their weekly bath.

Privacy was something my sisters had to get used to. Our new house had doors and a proper sitting room, which sometimes served as a makeshift bedroom for visiting Bajan relatives. (My mother’s family was from Barbados.) The sister I was closest to, a poetry-writing star who wore pencil skirts to play handball with the guys, composed her verse amid drifts and piles of clothes and kept her door closed. My brother and I shared a smaller room and a bed. My mother had her own room, where the door was always ajar; she didn’t so much sleep there as rest between walks up and down the hall to watch and listen for the safety of her children.

The Brownsville summer of 1967 was like every other Brooklyn summer I’d experienced: stultifying. Relief was sought at the nearby Betsy Head Pool, and at the fire hydrants that reckless boys opened with giant wrenches. The cold water made the black asphalt blacker in the black nights. Gossip floated down the street from our neighbors’ small front porches and from stoops flanked by big concrete planters full of dusty plastic flowers. Nursing a beer or a Pepsi, the grownups discussed far-off places like Vietnam. So-and-So’s son had come back from there all messed up, and now he was on the methadone. Then the conversation would shift to the kids. Every kid in our neighborhood was everyone else’s kid. Prying, caring eyes were everywhere. Sometimes the conversation stopped—just for a moment—as girls in summer dresses passed. Men and women alike looked longingly at those girls, for different reasons, as they ambled down the street, pretending to pay no mind to the fine-built boys who called to them from a distance.

In short, what one saw in that place on those nights was what my mother had been searching for: community. She was a proud member of Mary McLeod Bethune’s National Council of Negro Women, and had attended Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1963 March on Washington. When she reminisced about that march, it was with a vividness that made her children feel shy: sometime in the long ago, Ma had been part of history. Nonviolent organization, picket lines, and marches: all these strengthened our mother’s conviction that inclusion worked, that civil rights worked, that the black family could work, especially if welfare officers and other professionally concerned people—journalists and sociologists, say—paid attention to what a black mother built, rather than to how she failed. (“I don’t think a female running a house is a problem,
a broken family,” Toni Morrison said in a 1989 interview. “It’s perceived as one because of the notion that a head is a man. . . . You need a whole community—everybody—to raise a child.”

If Ma failed, then we failed, and she never wanted us to feel that. Something else Ma wanted: for black people in Brooklyn, in America, not to forever be effectively refugees—stateless, homeless, without rights, confined by borders that they did not create and by a penal system that killed them before they died, all while trying to rear children who went to schools that taught them not about themselves but about what they didn’t have.

And yet there was no way to save Ma’s idea of community and hope when, in September, 1967, our neighborhood changed forever. Someone, or a bunch of someone(s), heard that a young boy, a fourteen-year-old black kid, Richard Ross, had been killed by a cop—a detective named John Rattley—in Brownsville. Apparently, Rattley believed that Ross had mugged or was mugging an old Jewish man; as Ross tried to get away, Rattley shot him in the back of the head. In those years, black boys were locked up or killed all the time; you didn’t think about it much, because to think about it was to remember what a killing field New York was, and how easily you, too, could become a body in that field. The detail we hung on to in the flurry of hearsay and speculation was that Rattley was black. The activist Sonny Carson was big then; it was that Rattley was black, too, we bent low in sorrow, or rose with arms high in grief and anger. What had civil rights wrought? Were powerful black men mere functionaries?

Standing by my mother’s living-room window, I tried, tentatively, to ask her why our world was burning, burning. She gave me a forbidding look. Boy, be quiet so you can survive, her eyes seemed to say. Did I want to be another Richard Ross, one of the hundred or thousand Richard Rosses out there? So many questions I could not ask—among them, had our desire for community also been reduced to rubble and ash? The chaos that night—it would last for two days before life went back to “normal”—was more vivid to my burgeoning writer’s mind than what I could not see: our mother’s vivid memories of King’s promise of a promised land. Where was that? And was it different from—or superior to—the world my poetry-writing sister was gradually entering, through her admiration for a number of the musicians and poets associated with the Black Arts Movement? A world that promised a cataclysmic end to whiteness, if only we could carry arms and follow the teachings of early Malcolm X? Was my mother a “better” forecaster of what was to come than my sister? Martin and Malcolm, like protest marches and riots, belonged to different generations. Because I loved my sister and wanted to think as she did, I was, presumably, part of the “riot generation”; I knew about violence from the teasing, taunting black boys in my neighborhood, and Sly and the Family Stone’s dark and furious live album “There’s a Riot Goin’ On,” released four years after the Brownsville uprising, stayed in my bones more than those of any weepy folk singer. But what about Ma and her dreams? I belonged to and was part of them as well.

Who would I be when the revolution finally came? A soldier for peace, or a man who might appear in “The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs. Negro,” a poem by the activist and writer Nikki Giovanni?

Nigger
Can you kill
Can you kill
Can a nigger kill
Can a nigger kill a honkie
Can a nigger kill the Man
Can you kill nigger
Huh? nigger can you kill
Do you know how to draw blood
Can you poison
Can you stab-a-jew
Can you kill huh? nigger
Can you kill
Can you run a protestant down with your ’68 El Dorado
(that’s all they’re good for anyway)
Can you kill
A nigger can die
We ain’t got to prove we can die
We got to prove we can kill . . .

But my brother and I weren’t niggers. And if called upon we wouldn’t have been able to protect our mother and our sisters. Whom could we rely on to protect them, let alone us? Would the young black men with bats and other weapons who were flitting down our street—they seemed to leap as they walked—come for us? Would they save us? Or destroy us, too? No door or lock could keep them out.

Ma had her girls first. I wonder what it was like for her to try to understand boys—to rear boys who were not a threat to women, who would grow up to support women’s dreams and protect them. In her world, men came and went and were Something Else. My brother and I were different, and, although we were our mother’s familiars, I wonder if she eyed our difference unbelievingly at times, even as she nurtured it.

When we finally left our house in Brownsville, we walked out into a changed world. Apparently, while we were inside, Lloyd Sealy, who was then the commander of Brooklyn’s North Borough, had ramped up the police presence in the area. One way to control unruly, ungovernable refugees, of course, is to remind them that they are guests of a mighty police state. Every billy club that cracks open a black skull anywhere is proof of that. Once we learned that Sealy was black, too, we bent low in sorrow, or rose with arms high in grief and anger. What had civil rights wrought? Were powerful black men mere functionaries?
for a white administration? Did black lives not matter to them, then or ever?

Brownsville was not their home. Was it even ours? The world that Ma desired just wasn't possible yet. We were still refugees living within certain borders. We would live and die in this amount of space and no more. Emerging from our mother's house, we smelled burning tires and bedding. (Our house was relatively unharmed.) I don't remember my mother crying; I remember entering that fetid air in silence. But you could hear our community mourning the loss of itself, if you knew how to listen; mourning was our language. The world around us was not the one we had worked hard to achieve but the quiet, degraded world that our not-country said we deserved. We couldn't keep nothing, the elders said, not even ourselves.

Had the uprising been a kind of temper tantrum? Acted out by a community that was, like me, looking for a black man it could trust to protect and lead it? Ratlley, Sealy, my only occasionally live-in father: there had been so many disappointments. Someone said that Sonny Carson had helped to quiet folks down. Someone said that a young Muslim man, a local youth-group leader, had also helped to calm things by serving as a liaison between the police and the crowds. Someone said that Mayor John V. Lindsay was around. And then there he was, our first celebrity, a tall white man, trailed by a group of photographers and tired-looking black people, walking through our streets, or someone's streets, surveying the damage. Lindsay also served on President Lyndon Johnson's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, more commonly known as the Kerner Commission, which had been established after riots took place in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit. He had access to a world beyond what we knew, and now he turned his attention to me, in this world. He took my hand. He was beautiful, like a star from a movie I had never seen. Mixed with the confusion and the vague erotics of the moment—it was a thrill to feel my small hand in his big one (was he my father?), though I had already learned to hide that part of myself—was my silent bewilderment over the fact that poverty and frustration could be an opportunity for a photograph, though no one asked us what it was like to lose a home or to dream of living in one.

Hope dies all the time. And yet we need to believe that it will come back and attach itself to a new cause—a new love, a new house, something that gives us a sense of purpose, which is ultimately what hope is. Ma always had hope, because she knew that it had helped to change the world, her black world. But I had no clear examples, growing up, of what might make a difference in mine. Guns? Death? Poetry? Would any of it dismantle the economic discrepancies, for instance, that defined our de-facto underclass, that kept us scavenging for a lifeline, even if it was just a pair of sneakers snatched through a pane of broken glass? When I finally saw the National Mall, in Washington, D.C., in person, the black-and-white pictures of King's historic gathering there played in my head, but alongside memories of 1975's Human Kindness Day. Established in 1972, Human Kindness Day—a series of exhibitions, concerts, and literary events meant to inspire racial pride—was spearheaded by the National Park Service, the D.C. Recreation Department, and Compared to What?, Inc., a nonprofit organization for the advancement of the arts. Each year, a concert by a great black artist capped off the festival—Roberta Flack the first year, Nina Simone the next. But in 1975, when Stevie Wonder was the headliner, vandalism broke out. Hundreds of folks were robbed and injured. It's cited as an early example of "wildin,'" but, when discussing it, people rarely mention the recession of the mid-seventies, or the way that bringing together haves and have-nots lent a stage, yet again, to the drama of inequality.

It was a drama that I saw play out, over and over again, as I was growing up. I don't remember when we moved to Bedford-Stuyvesant, but demonstrations and riots followed us there. Then, after a time, we moved to Crown Heights again; riots followed us there, too. No place was safe, because wherever we congregated was unsafe. The laws of real estate, economics, and racism made us unsafe. To cops. To landlords. To social workers, who "visited" our houses whenever they felt like it to see if our mothers were entertaining men (and, by implication, getting paid for it). To shopkeepers, who didn't understand that the deprivations of poverty were a pretty good incentive for us to take what we'd never be able to buy. To schoolteachers, who weren't paid to care. To a society that demanded our gratitude for the dried gruel at the bottom of the bowl which it tossed us after years of scarcely remunerated labor. To the black men whom we wanted to stay, but who couldn't for fear that our vulnerability would compound their own.

The question for me from Brownsville on was: how would I protect my mother and the other women in my family when the riots came again (and they always came)? Adults are supposed to protect children, yes, but when I was growing up it didn't necessarily work that way. It wasn't that your mother didn't care—you were all she had—it was just that she kept running out of time. In addition to her full-time job—and, often, a second job—there was the work that went into feeding you, listening to you, and making sure no one laughed at you or cracked you in the face because you had dreams.

As a boy in Brownsville and in Bed-Stuy, I was tormented by the question of protection, because, of course, I, too, wanted to be protected. Like any number of black boys in those neighborhoods, I grew up in a matrilineal society, where I had been taught the power—the necessity—of silence. But how could you not cry out when you couldn't save your mother because you couldn't defend yourself? Although I had this in common with other guys, something separated me from them when it came to joining those demonstrations, to leaping in the air when black bodies were threatened. My distance had to do with my queerness. The guys who took the chance to protect their families and themselves were the same guys who called me "faggot."

For a while, I thought their looting and carrying on had to do with enacting a particular form of masculinity: if white men and cops could wreak havoc in the world, why couldn't they? But, as I grew older, I realized that part of their acting out had to do with how we were...
brought up. They weren’t trying to be men—they were already men—but in order to have the perceived weight of white men they had to reject, to some degree, the silence they had learned from their mothers. If they were going to die, they were going to die screaming.

The silence that I was taught as a means of survival no longer fits me, either. But I know that I wouldn’t have given it up entirely—it’s hard to give up, Ma—if Christian Cooper hadn’t shown me another way in Central Park last month, if that fifty-seven-year-old thinker hadn’t woken up next to his slumbering boy friend, then left their shared love to look at birds, which he loved, too. By example, Cooper showed me that I was not alone. When a white woman tried to endanger him with a lying 911 call (“An African-American man is threatening my life!”), he did not run, and he did not, on a profound level, engage with his attacker’s theatrics of racism. Cooper’s actions that day said, Listen to yourself, not to your accuser, because your accusers are always listening to their own panic about your presence. And if what they are saying—or shouting—threatens your personal safety, protect yourself by any means necessary. If you can protect yourself, you’ll be around to love and take care of more people, and be loved and taken care of in return.

I don’t entirely agree with the great Ralph Ellison when he says, in his 1989 essay “On Being the Target of Discrimination,”

It isn’t necessarily through acts of physical violence—lynching, mob attacks, or slaps to the face, whether experienced firsthand or by word of mouth—that a child is initiated into the contradictions of segregated democracy. Rather, it is through brief impersonal encounters, stares, vocal inflections, hostile laughter, or public reversals of private expectations that occur at the age when children are most perceptive to the world and all its wonders.

The truth is that nothing is impersonal when it comes to racism, or the will to subjugate. Every act of racism is a deeply personal act with an end result: the unmooring diminishment of the person who is its target. If you have suffered that kind of erasure, you are less likely to know who you are or where you live. My brother has suggested that we moved so much when we were kids because our mother kept looking for safety. I don’t remem-

ber exactly how many times we moved; in those days, my focus was on trying to win people over, the better to protect my family, or—silently—trying to fend off homophobia, the better to protect myself. My being a “faggot” was one way for other people to feel better about themselves. My being a “faggot” let cops know what they weren’t.

At present, I live in a predominantly white neighborhood in Manhattan. For a number of reasons, I was stuck at home when the demonstrations started downtown last month. Panic set in when I heard the helicopters flying low and the police sirens going. I was convinced that the cops would run across my roof and, on seeing my black ass sitting in an apartment in a neighborhood where I had no business being, would shoot me dead. I asked a white male friend to come and be with me.

What I felt during that first wave of panic was a muscle memory of riots and rootlessness; the thought of those cops took away my feeling of being at home in my home. The real-as-hell feelings I had in my apartment that evening before my friend got there were also a metaphor, but I don’t know for what kind of story—and if it is all a story where do I put Richard Ross? Where do I put George Floyd, whose murder by a white police officer in Minneapolis launched those demonstrations? Where do I put Tony McDade, the black trans man who was killed by a police officer in Tallahassee on May 27th? Or Breonna Taylor, shot to death in her bed by Louisville police in March? Or Robert Fuller, whose death by hanging, in Palmdale, California, this month may have been a suicide or may have been a lynching, and how horrible it is that either is possible, in a world hellbent on a certain kind of extinction? And why are these stories becoming conflated? That is, why have they become one story in the media’s mind—a story of black death and black uprising and black hope and regeneration? Inevitably, we are losing sight of the individual stories, because it takes too long to consider them one by one. The rope around Robert Fuller’s neck becomes Billie Holiday trying to breathe out the choking words as she sings:

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

Are we a strange crop, constantly provoking strange responses—which...
are now out in the open, because, truth to tell, black people are also an important revenue stream, and Hulu wants to show us that, by streaming the "black stories" in its archives? Hulu is only one of any number of media outlets that are rushing blindly to show their solidarity with the cause, without mentioning the financial and political benefits that may accrue to them. We all hurt, but some of us want to continue to be paid. And what will the world look like after this period becomes just another moment in history (and it will). Will there be a backlash? Will culture become tired of his blackness and her difference and revert to what it's always reverted to—Andrew Wyeth—tinted dreams, impatience, or downright amnesia once black lives mattering doesn't pay, in all senses of the word? Is this all one story?

I keep looking for the loneliness inherent in black life, our refugee status dressed up in self-protective decorum, because if you can get to your loneliness and articulate it you can also begin to talk about community, and why it is needed in life, too. My community is my memory, which includes the image of my late best friend—he died of AIDS thirty years ago now—who was white and Catholic, being beaten up outside a gay Asian club he was exiting, and me asking later, when he showed up with blood on his jacket, if he'd called the police, and him staring me dead in the eye and saying, "Why bother?" I looked at him and heard the terrifying sound of him being punched in the head because he was interested not only in his own queerness but in Something Else, a gay world where he was not an outsider. Is this all one story?

As a writer, I inhabit a world or worlds where the prevalent ethos is presumed to be liberal, but I can't remember a time when the publishing industry, like other institutions devoted to the arts—museums, Broadway—didn't come down on the side of fashion and power. At meetings and parties, one spends a great deal of time with people I call the collaborators—functionaries in service to power—who'll step on your neck to get to the next fashionable Negro who can explain just what is happening and why. When white America asks black artists in particular to speak about race, it's almost always from the vantage point of its being a sort of condition, or plight, and, if those collaborators can actually listen, what they want to hear is, Who are we in relation to you? In his powerful essay "Within the Context of No-Context," published in this magazine in 1980, George W. S. Trow described that phenomenon further:

During the nineteen-sixties, a young black man in a university class described the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century as "belonging" to the white students in the room, and not to him. This idea was seized on by white members of the class. They acknowledged that they were at one with Rembrandt. They acknowledged their dominance. They offered to discuss, at any length, their inherited power to oppress. It was thought at the time that reactions of this type had to do with "white guilt" or "white masochism." No. No. It was white euphoria. Many, many white children of that day felt the power of their inheritance for the first time in the act of rejecting it, and they insisted on rejecting it . . . so that they might continue to feel the power of that connection. Had the young black man asked, "Who is this man to you?" the pleasure they felt would have vanished in embarrassment and resentment.

Why embarrassment and resentment? Because what passes for intellectual inquiry at cocktail parties and in many contemporary institutions is a way of masking the continued and seemingly endless grip that the cultural status quo has on blacks and whites alike. And, if you confront your white interlocutor with that truth, he has to confront why he thinks that he and his culture are better than yours. You may have blackness, but we have Rembrandt. Or, in the words of Saul Bellow, "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans? I'd be happy to read them."

Who will tell this story? Many of us and none of us. Because the "exceptional" black artists who are asked to sit around the fire and explain why riots, why death, or why a child has a mother and not a father, have a built-in expiration date: they function as translators of events and rarely as translators of their own stories, their own loneliness in a given place and time. As my friend sat with me earlier this month to help ease the terror I felt on hearing the helicopters, I thought about what certain other writers might have made of this place and time if life and our segregated society hadn't exhausted them long ago: Richard Wright, dead at fifty-two. Nella Larsen, prematurely silenced. Zora Neale Hurston, broke and forgotten by the time she was sixty. Wallace Thurman, drunk and disgraced, dead at thirty-two. James Baldwin, fatigued and lonesome, dead at sixty-three. Imagine all the things they didn't say because they couldn't say them. All those journeys abroad, all the shutting themselves off from the world.

Was it worth it, Ma? (You yourself died at sixty-two.) Was it worth Richard Wright spending so long on his book-length essay, "White Man, Listen!" (1957), in which he wrote about racism and his hopes for African nationalism, with all the sense and confusion that was in him? Racism can break your heart, break your body. Did Wright, Baldwin, Chester Himes, W. E. B. Du Bois, and so many others forgive their country before the end or did they die screaming? They were my parents, too. Are destruction and hope my only models? Ma, tell me where to begin this story, which will have to include your fear of my death— I'm sorry. Because we are all dying. Shall I begin by showing the collaborators the wounds I've suffered on the auction block of gay and black life and culture? Or should I shut up and learn forgiveness on top of forgiveness?

O.K., Ma, maybe forgiveness is the way, because I love you. But can I forgive myself for forgiving? For the temerity of wanting to be an artist and eating shit to support that impulse? An impulse, Ma, that you supported from the very beginning by writing your comments on the stories I shared with you ("Very good. Mommy"), just as you supported all those poems my sister wrote in her bedroom with the door closed in Brownsville. I've lived with forgiveness for so long—surely there is another language, a different weight on the soul? Ma, can I forgive the white movie executive who thought it might be "fun" to tell our black host at a luncheon that he'd...
IN A BORDER TOWN

In this version of the city, no one dares read, ragtime grows underneath Washington’s obelisk, not a monument but a threat to the clouded sky.

Next door to McCormick’s, a telescope sits, looking over the harbor, inside all of what is, for a new constellation, the hidden dancers,

a joining, convergences that come only when September moons bring heavy rains, a deluge to sound alarms to haul in the blue crabs.

In all of this we are overgrown ants, brittle on the tongue, held up above ourselves singing Southern chants for spells to soften the hard.

What names us? I ask a man shuffling in bags, a man who knows the giant ants we have become, who knows us, but says now we have no name, but purple iris in a golden vase over the harbor, peace wrapping itself over the city’s north border, where horses reign over the emptied corners,

where I climb back into the old way of dancing, wiping away the spinning-top hairdos with thick masks over the need to be naked and breathless so I can be freed from the one spent song.

—Afaa Michael Weaver

confused him with another black man? Can I forgive the white Dutch director who asked me to step in for a black actor—to play the character of an old family retainer—since I was, you know, black myself? Can I forgive the self-consciously “queer” white academic at a prestigious Eastern university who made disparaging remarks about my body in front of his class—I was his guest speaker—because he wanted to make a point about one of my “texts”? Can I forgive the white editors who ask me who the next James Baldwin might be, so that they can stay on top of the whole black thing? Can I forgive the white female patron of the arts who, after I’d given a lecture in Miami, at a dinner that was ostensibly in my honor, turned the party against me because I hadn’t paid more attention in my speech to an artist whose work she collected? Can I forgive the white former fashion–magazine editor who promised me a job but then discovered that his superiors would never hire a black man? Can I forgive the white magazine writer who, a day or two after I was hired by this magazine, yelled at me in front of friends—with whom I was celebrating the occasion—that I had been hired only because I was black? Can I forgive the white musician who “accidentally” faxed me a racist drawing that her child had made in school, which she thought was funny and his teacher saw no reason to criticize? Can I forgive the white couple who, at a memorial for a friend, made it a point to tell me they’d had no idea that I was so big and so black? Can I forgive the white book editor who said on a first date that his family had had some financial interest in Haiti, where they had owned people “just like you”? Can I forgive the white arts benefactress in Boston who, at another dinner after another lecture, told the table how much she’d loved spirituals as a child, and said, rhetorically, “Who doesn’t love Negro spirituals?” Can I forgive the white woman who sat next to me at a Chinese restaurant while I was enjoying a quiet dinner by myself and leaned over to ask if I was a cast member of “Porgy and Bess,” which was playing across the street? Can I forgive the white curator who shapes much of the city’s, if not the world’s, understanding of modern art, who, exhausted by the whole question of inclusion and apropos of an exhibition at her institution, said, “I’m just not into Chinese art”? Can I forgive the white editor who invited me to lunch and during the course of the meal defended his use of the word “nigger” in one of his predominantly white college classes with the Lenny Bruce argument that the only way to defuse the word is to take its power away by speaking it, and added that, besides, one heard it used all up and down Lenox Avenue, in Harlem, and what about that? The old model—Ma’s model—was not to give up too much of your power by letting your oppressor know how you felt. But, Ma, I was dying anyway, in all that silence.

You get it only when the shit happens to you, too; we all know that. And now the effects of our segregated democracy are happening to you. And now you can see or understand that, all along, I’ve been trying to get along, just like you. The way Ma taught me. To be independent and help my chosen family. I’ve tried to make a living at something I love and to explore the intricacies of love, just like you. I’ve lost friends and forgotten to pay a credit-card bill, just like you. But I wasn’t allowed to be like you. And now my “other” is happening to you. Now degradation and moral compromise and your body breaking down are happening to you. Because Donald Trump has happened to you. Oxycontin has happened to you. Broken families have happened to you. Gun violence—in schools, in supermarkets, in movie theatres, at concerts—has happened to you, along with riots, and frustration, and cops who can’t pass up an opportunity to flash their guns and their batons in your presence, even as you search for home, even as the dream comes tumbling, tumbling, tumbling down.
The call came in to the emergency department at Alice Peck Day Memorial Hospital, a twenty-five-bed facility in Lebanon, New Hampshire, around 2 P.M. on a weekday in mid-March. Patient X had arrived by car, and, by the time he reached the hospital, the pain in his legs was so severe that he couldn’t move.

Jesse Webber, a paramedic, donned full personal protective equipment (P.P.E.) before going outside with a wheelchair. Since the onset of the pandemic, almost all sick people who entered the hospital’s E.R. were considered, whatever their symptoms, to be P.U.I.s—persons under investigation for COVID-19.

As the U.S. went into lockdown, in-person primary care effectively vanished. The patient, a heavyset man in middle age, was lucid when Webber wheeled him into the emergency department’s negative-pressure room—a seven-by-eleven-foot windowless space fitted with a noisy exhaust fan that removes contaminated air. Once the man was inside, his mental state deteriorated rapidly. A team made up of Nancy Ferguson, a doctor, and two critical-care nurses, Kacie Boyle and Laura Williams, in full P.P.E., joined Webber and Patient X in the cramped room.

The patient was having difficulty breathing. “Very quickly, his respiratory rate dropped,” Webber later told me. He was “crumping,” as nurses say—not crashing, but failing fast. “His body essentially stopped breathing in front of us,” Webber said.

Ferguson ordered a rapid-sequence intubation, a procedure for swiftly connecting a patient to a ventilator. Ventilating a patient is a complex task that involves not just putting a breathing tube into the trachea but also inserting intravenous lines to deliver sedatives, so that the patient doesn’t fight the tube—known in hospitals as “bucking the vent.”

“As soon as I heard the doctor say that, I reached behind me and hit the emergency-telehealth button,” Webber recalled. Within seconds, the team at Alice Peck Day was connected, through a secure audiovisual link, to the tele-emergency hub at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, an academic training institution with more than five thousand employees, affiliated with Dartmouth College’s Geisel School of Medicine. Sadie Smith, a nurse, and Victoria Martin, a doctor, were in the middle of twelve-hour shifts, sitting side by side at one of the hub’s four-screen workstations. The workstations are hard-wired into the emergency department at Alice Peck Day, and also into those of ten other community hospitals across the region; the most distant is a hundred and eighty miles away.

Smith’s face popped up on the screen in the Alice Peck Day negative-pressure room. Smith is one of the most experienced tele-emergency nurses on the Dartmouth-Hitchcock staff, and she has an air of unflappable competence that would inspire calm in any crisis.

“How can we help?” she asked. Smith and Martin had control of a high-resolution camera mounted on the wall of the negative-pressure room. They could zoom in on Patient X, watch his cardiac monitor, and talk to the doctor, nurses, and paramedic on the scene. Electronic-record-sharing allowed them to “chart on” the patient—to have real-time access to his vitals and his medications, just as though they were there. But, unlike the staff attending to him, who were working elbow to elbow in the negative-pressure room, straining to speak over the noise of the exhaust fan, the tele-hub team was unharried and safe from possible COVID-19 exposure. The hub personnel could check records and arrange for transport to the medical center, on
the other side of town, without the nurses having to leave the room, thereby avoiding the hospital's P.P.E.-doffing procedure—a two-person, twenty-eight-step job—and the need to put on new P.P.E. on their return.

In the hub, Smith noticed that the hydration fluid the patient was receiving wasn't compatible with the sedative that he was on; the Alice Peck Day nurses switched fluids. The doctors decided to insert a second I.V. line, using the intraosseous method, which infuses medicine directly into the patient's bone marrow. Smith told me later that “really large patients are difficult, because it's really hard to find I.V. access. So I suggested going through the humeral head”—the top of the arm bone. “I'm standing there, with my camera view, going, 'Bring his arm over, lay it across his belly, then feel here, and right in the middle is where you want to go.'”

“Sadie kind of guided us in,” Webber said.

Finally, they got Patient X intubated, and “it turned out his expired CO2 was really quite high,” Smith told me. As the nurses used the ventilator to blow pressurized oxygen into his lungs, his CO2 level started to trend down. The crisis had passed.

Telemedicine and telehealth involve a myriad of remote-health-care technologies and services collectively known as “virtual care.” For years, virtual care played a minor role in the United States’ $3.6-trillion health-care industry; now, with the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people are discovering its benefits and its shortcomings for the first time. If virtual care is the future of health care, is it a future that we want?

In a narrow sense, the word “telemedicine” can mean the type of hard-wired hospital-to-clinic setup that allows workers in a large hub hospital to assist in complex emergency procedures in distant spokes. This approach is descended from NASA's pioneering research, in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, into satellite communications and methods of monitoring astronauts' well-being in space. One of the first telemedicine projects in a terrestrial setting, which operated between 1973 and 1977, offered remote health care on the Papago—now the Tohono O'odham—reservation in southern Arizona while also testing the technology for use in spaceflight. In the early eighties, NASA began developing a tele-I.C.U. for astronauts on Space Station Freedom. Telemedicine in the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Health system, a network of hospitals and clinics across New Hampshire and Vermont which serves 1.9 million people, is the twenty-first-century embodiment of the fifty-year-old prototype.

Telehealth also comprises virtual interactions between individual doctors and patients, in which the participants rely on an audiovisual hookup instead of an in-person visit. You have a bad sore throat but don't want to wait to see a doctor—or you are among the thirty per cent of millennials who don't have one. You could go to the E.R. or to a brick-and-mortar urgent-care center. Or you could download the telehealth app you saw advertised on MSNBC. Before long, you are connected to a physician, who, using your phone to look down your throat and relying on your description of the swollen glands in your neck, can prescribe antibiotics and other noncontrolled substances. You’ve saved yourself a trip to the clinic, and you haven’t made other people sick or caught something else yourself.

Online visits can be enhanced by Internet-connected devices that collect patient data at home and then send it to a doctor. These include fitness trackers, blood-pressure cuffs, pulse oximeters, and gadgets like Kinsa's smart thermometer and TytoCare's self-examination kit, which link up with a phone and make it possible to perform at least part of an annual wellness check on yourself.

Telehealth providers typically offer virtual urgent care for non-emergencies. And patients suffering from chronic conditions, such as diabetes and colitis, can conduct routine follow-ups online. Proponents of telehealth have long argued that fifty to seventy per cent of visits to the doctor's office could be replaced by remote monitoring and checkups. But, until the pandemic, most Americans weren’t interested.

Dartmouth and its affiliated think tank, the Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy and Clinical Practice, have been on the vanguard of health-care reform for decades. Twenty-four years ago, they began publishing the Dartmouth Atlas of Health Care, an annual survey of medical spending and patient outcomes in communities across the United States which was credited as an important influence on the 2010 Affordable Care Act. In 1999, Dartmouth-Hitchcock opened the Center for Shared Decision Making, with the aim of giving patients the tools to engage in their own health-care decisions. The Connected Care center, which was launched in 2012 and today includes the tele-emergency and tele-I.C.U. hubs, was an extension of its founders’ belief in patient empowerment and data-based medicine.

Among Dartmouth-Hitchcock’s patient base are members of a number of medically underserved communities, as defined by the Department of Health and Human Services: poor, elderly, and special-needs populations who lack easy access to primary-care physicians and medical specialists. Patients who routinely drive two hours to visit a cardiologist or a gastroenterologist can “see the doctor” through a secure smartphone app. Dartmouth-Hitchcock offers a diverse menu of services for distant patients, including tele-psychiatry, tele-neurology, and tele-urgent care.

But even in rural northern New England telemedicine has been a hard sell. “We have been struggling in some areas, to be perfectly honest,” Mary Oseid, the medical center’s senior vice-president for connected care, told me. Many rural clinics and community hospitals in small American towns fear that their already meagre medical staffing, and the revenues generated from procedures that can be performed on-site, will be further hollowed out by remote medicine. And often the patients who need care the most—the old and the poor—don’t have smartphones or broadband connectivity, or can’t afford extra minutes on their wireless plans, placing one of telehealth’s greatest promises, of allowing old people to “age in place,” out of reach. Before the pandemic, outpatient telehealth across the entire Dartmouth-Hitchcock Health network averaged only thirty visits a week.

This is representative of virtual care throughout the country. Telehealth totaled just 0.1 per cent of all medical claims filed in 2018, according to FAIR Health, a nonprofit that analyzes data
on insurance claims. The National Business Group on Health, which publishes an annual survey of employee health benefits offered by large firms, found that in 2016 seventy per cent of companies included telehealth as part of their plans, but only three per cent of their workers used it. Some employees weren’t aware that the service existed; others didn’t trust an anonymous doctor. According to a 2019 survey conducted by J.D. Power, forty-nine per cent of patients believed the quality of virtual care to be inferior to that of an old-fashioned in-person doctor’s visit.

Reimbursement has been another issue. Until recently, Medicare covered telehealth only in rural areas, and required patients to conduct visits in a clinical setting. And, in spite of the time- and money-saving advantages of telehealth, a lot of people clearly want to be in the physical presence of their physician, undergoing the familiar rituals of a checkup—the doctor’s scrubbed hands emerging from the crisp cuffs of a white lab jacket—that no screen can yet provide.

Doctors haven’t been sold on telehealth, either. In a 2019 survey conducted by the American Medical Association, only one in three specialists expressed full confidence that virtual care would benefit their practice, and only two in five primary-care doctors did. In addition to the diagnostic and therapeutic limitations of seeing patients on a screen, there are economic considerations, too: virtual doctors’ visits can actually take longer than in-person ones, owing in part to the widely varying ability of patients to operate the necessary technology. Local regulations present another barrier. Last December, a team of legal analysts determined that only ten states required private insurers to reimburse virtual visits at the same rate and with the same freedom from restrictions as in-person visits. Tele-doctors could spend more time with fewer patients for less money. What’s the appeal in that?

Then “lo and behold, a pandemic,” Oseid said. On Friday, February 28th, a Dartmouth-Hitchcock employee, recently back from a trip to Italy, reported flu-like symptoms to medical staff at the hospital. He was told to self-isolate, but instead went to a party, hosted by Dartmouth’s Tuck School of Business, at the Engine Room, a music venue in nearby White River Junction. Three days later, he tested positive for COVID-19—the first known case in New Hampshire. By the following Tuesday, a second Dartmouth-Hitchcock employee had tested positive. The story made national headlines. Thirty beds were allocated for the treatment of COVID-19 in the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center.

On an average day before the pandemic, Dartmouth-Hitchcock had all but shut down its ambulatory business and reduced its elective surgeries to only the most essential ones, in order to conserve supplies of P.P.E., and to protect both doctors and patients from COVID-19. By April 1st, the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Health system was managing two thousand outpatient telehealth visits a week. “Now everyone wants to do telehealth,” Oseid said. Still, Joanne Conroy, the C.E.O. of Dartmouth-Hitchcock, told me, “the chief financial officer and I exchange e-mails all the time at night.” The two discuss how they’ll make up for the shortfall in the hospital’s budget.

As the country went into lockdown, its health care went virtual. In-person primary care, which is responsible for nearly fifty per cent of medical visits, effectively ended. Some elective surgeries, like hip replacements, were postponed; patients who needed such procedures as a kidney-stone removal or a heart-valve replacement got sicker.

The regulations governing telehealth changed. On March 6th, President Trump signed the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act, which, in part, cleared the way for fifty million seniors to use their Medicare benefits for telemedicine, including physical therapy and psychotherapy, without the former restric-
Medicare claims for telemedicine jumped from ten thousand a week in March to well over a million a week in April. The government also temporarily waived privacy rules set by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), allowing doctors and patients to connect over FaceTime and Zoom. With White House encouragement, state governments suspended rules that limit doctors’ practices to the states they are licensed in; similar injunctions against writing prescriptions for out-of-state patients were also lifted.

These are boom times for businesses that offer telehealth infrastructure to hospitals and to health-care providers and make direct-to-consumer telehealth apps. In the states that were hit first by the pandemic, telehealth companies became “forward triage” centers, allowing doctors to prescreen patients who exhibited COVID-like symptoms, in the hope of preventing all but the sickest from going to an emergency department. Teladoc, the largest such company in the U.S., saw a hundred-per-cent increase in virtual doctor’s visits from the first week of March to the first week of April. Its C.E.O., Jason Gorevic, told me that within that approximate time span the company doubled its roster of doctors from three thousand to six thousand. It includes internists, dermatologists, dieticians, pediatricians, and psychiatrists, all of whom are turning to telehealth to keep their practices afloat. The platform now handles twenty thousand visits a day.

Both Teladoc and Amwell, a major competitor, also offer online doctor’s appointments, starting at about eighty dollars, to people without insurance. Other companies sell yearly memberships that offer access to a particular virtual specialist, rather than billing per visit. Among the advantages of virtual health care is that patients can talk to a doctor outside office hours—by secure chat, for example. You can request a doctor you’ve had before, or you can take the first one who’s available. The ability to text your physician or therapist whenever you need enables “less structured interactions,” Gorevic said—a convenience for patients, if not always for doctors.

Prior to the pandemic, virtual doctors had to be licensed in the state that the patient called from. Mia Finkelston, an Amwell family doctor I spoke with who works from a basement office in her home, in Leonardtown, near Chesapeake Bay, is licensed in twenty-nine states. She used to work in a practice nearby, but she “just got tired of the commute,” she said. Lindsay Henderson, an Amwell psychotherapist, told me that she switched to telehealth in 2016, after the birth of her second child; it allowed her to continue seeing patients without having to be away from her kids all day.

For many years, I have lived part time in rural Vermont, and I have had a long and painful relationship with Dartmouth–Hitchcock’s E.R. Most recently, my wife and my daughter drove me to the E.R. with a deep wound in my shin, the result of my aspirational belief in the health benefits of chopping firewood. (I now have a gas-powered log splitter.)

On a snowy day in early April, I visited the hospital’s Connected Care center remotely. Mary Oseid FaceTimed with me while standing in the center, which is divided by a glassed-in corridor, with the tele-emergency room on one side and the tele-I.C.U. on the other. Through the glass, I could see Sadie Smith at work in the tele-emergency hub, with Kevin Curtis, an E.R. doctor and the center’s medical director, next to her at a four-screen workstation. They were in the final stages of treating a patient who had suffered a cardiac arrest and been taken to one of their connected regional hospitals. Local staff had hit the emergency-telehealth button when the ambulance was on the way, and Smith and Curtis had been waiting in the hub when the patient arrived at the hospital, in Claremont, New Hampshire.

Both Oseid and Curtis have master’s degrees in health-care-delivery science from Dartmouth College. In their view, Dartmouth–Hitchcock’s advanced telemedicine infrastructure is an example of “reverse innovation”—technologies devised in the developing world that are later adopted by wealthier nations—a concept that was popularized by the Tuck School management theorists Vijay Govindarajan and Chris Trimble. In a U.S. setting, Oseid told me, “we think of our work as something we’ve developed in a rural market that can go to an urban market and be just as successful.”

Oseid turned around so that I could see into the tele-I.C.U., where Robert Westlake, a critical-care physician, was monitoring patients. The tele-I.C.U. is connected remotely to eighty-five I.C.U. beds—sixty in the main hospital, where the hub is situated, and twenty-five in the regional hospitals.

Oseid told me, “We have created a system where a patient who is potentially COVID-19-positive can be seen by a provider without going into the room. That’s a huge benefit for us. We save P.P.E., and we save exposing the health-care worker to COVID.”

The tele-I.C.U. uses a software platform designed for Dartmouth–Hitchcock by Philips, the Dutch technology company. It runs predictive algorithms powered by artificial intelligence to monitor patients’ prognoses. The system constantly updates each patient’s “acuity score,” a grade that reflects remotely gathered patient data—such as blood pressure, oxygen level, heart rhythm, and pulse—to evaluate the risk of a sudden deterioration. When Westlake, in hospital scrubs, came out into the corridor, he told me that, because of data analytics, “we here in the tele-hub often know what’s going on with the patients before the people who are ten feet away from them do.” One recent analysis suggested a correlation between equipping an I.C.U. room with telemedicine technology and a reduction in patient mortality.

The Dartmouth–Hitchcock hub closely reflects the founding idea of telemedicine. It’s space medicine, brought to a rural setting on Earth. According to some estimates, an I.C.U. can consume a quarter of a hospital’s budget. And COVID-19 patients are likely to remain in intensive care for longer than the average stay, of four days. Studies have shown that telemedicine can reduce the expense of intensive care, but the cost of equipping and running a single hardwired I.C.U. room can be as high as a hundred thousand dollars a year—prohibitive for many smaller hospitals.

At Dartmouth–Hitchcock, Oseid told me, there are also tele-I.C.U. carts, which cost about twelve thousand dollars each. The carts carry audiovisual equipment and can connect directly to the tele-I.C.U. software from any hospital room. Another critical-care doctor
I met at the hub observed, nodding at one of the carts, “We can just look at the patient and ask, ‘How are you doing, sir? How is your breathing?’”

In theory, portable units of this kind could be used to deliver care at home. But that would also undercut the prevailing business model at many hospitals, which is to get as many “heads in beds” as possible.

Corey Siegel, a Dartmouth-Hitchcock doctor who is one of the top specialists in inflammatory-bowel diseases in the country, was an early adopter of telehealth. Many of his patients, such as Jessica Caron, a young mother of two from Manchester, New Hampshire, who has Crohn’s disease, were driving an hour or more to see him at his office, in Lebanon, often with kids in tow. Siegel started to offer virtual visits in 2015.

“It was a big win for me,” Caron told me. “It doesn’t replace the brick-and-mortar visit, but it complements it.” Using the telehealth option, “Corey and I can get together and talk about what makes sense, and when we need to see each other in person.”

When Caron heard about COVID-19, she panicked. “Managing chronic illness never really stops,” she said. “I thought, Oh, gosh, I’m on immunosuppressant medication, is that going to be a problem for me?” Telehealth offered Caron a way to keep in touch with Siegel and manage her condition until she felt safe enough to visit the office again.

“I won’t say anything good has come out of COVID-19,” Siegel told me, in April. “But we’ve done almost seven hundred telemedicine visits since it hit. Already, my colleagues are saying, ‘This is great, let’s do this after the pandemic ends.’ We might have learned in a very scary way that this is a great way to deliver care to patients.”

But it’s one thing to offer tele-care to a patient you know; it’s another to try to distinguish a bowel disease from indigestion during a virtual first visit. A tele-doctor who misdiagnoses a stomach ache that turns out to be stomach cancer has the same liability that a traditional doctor does. For that reason, virtual doctors are supposed to tell patients whose symptoms suggest a more complicated underlying condition to make an in-person visit to an office, for lab tests and a hands-on physical exam.

Internists I spoke with in New York City were quick to point out the diagnostic limitations of telemedicine. “You can’t have a belly exam via a screen,” my New York doctor, Martin Beitel, said. He was doing virtual visits from home as a necessity, but he wasn’t a fan. He says that telehealth, at its worst, promotes a kind of “knee-jerk, ‘give them antibiotics for every cold that they get’ attitude. That’s the kind of medicine you are going to get if you switch to all telehealth.”

Thomas Nash, an internist whose practice is on the Upper East Side, said, “Is it doable? Of course it’s doable. I’m doing it now.” But, he added, “I worry that it’s going to delay a good exam, and get in the way of deeper interactions between people and their doctors.” David Avram, a dermatologist in Brooklyn, told me that telemedicine works well for checking moles, because you can look at a mole with a smartphone. But he’s postponing full-body exams until he can return to the office.

In recent years, a wave of app-driven direct-to-consumer telehealth startups have appeared, offering to be Marcus Welby, e-M.D., for millennials—a virtual doctor who makes tele-house-calls. The idea of having a doctor who makes the equivalent of old-fashioned home visits came up in several of my conversations with people at telehealth companies. Roy Schoenberg, a co-C.E.O. of Amwell, likened the Amwell experience to a visit from Hiram Baker, the fictional physician in “Little House on the Prairie.” In this idyllic view, virtual care is a way of returning the doctor-patient relationship to the pre-insurance days.

Zachariah Reitano is a twenty-nine-year-old co-founder of Ro, a telehealth company that allows consumers to request medications for erectile dysfunction and other sexual-health-related issues, in addition to those for allergies and weight loss, and get them delivered to their door. His father was a doctor. “When I think about what we are trying to build at Ro, I am really trying to re-create my dad in software,” Reitano told me. “The man has saved my life, truly, and he has saved every person in my family. When you have a doctor in the home, when he can solve a problem for you, he’d solve it right then and there.”

Our health-care system is user-unfriendly and wasteful. The average patient has to wait twenty-nine days to get a physician’s appointment, and in most cases you don’t know what the visit and the lab work will cost until you receive a bill. If you need a prescription, you have to make a separate trip to the pharmacy.

Reitano, noting that the annual deductible in employee insurance plans can be more than two thousand dollars, said, “That’s insane. When you turn patients into more traditional consumers, they get to determine what they find valuable. They Google. They compare. They demand price transparency, metrics on the quality and efficacy of care, and the consumer-driven experience they get from Amazon, Apple, or Nike.”

He added, “Look at Lasik, cosmetic surgery, breast augmentation. The technology dramatically improves, prices come
down, and the patient experience becomes better.”

But what’s to stop Amazon itself from offering health care to its hundred million Prime members? Amazon Care, a pilot program for Amazon employees and their families, was rolled out, in February, as a telehealth supplement to workers’ existing insurance plans. Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, and Alphabet, Google’s parent company, have also made big investments in the health-care field in recent years. Many of the health-care changes spurred by the coronavirus outbreak are in Big Tech’s wheelhouse. At the same time, the economic losses caused by fewer in-person visits are likely to force smaller hospitals into bankruptcy, a trend that began before the pandemic. By one estimate, as many as sixty thousand physicians in family medicine may lose their practices because of the coronavirus crisis.

It’s one thing to make an appointment with a virtual (but real) doctor at Amwell; it’s another thing to list your symptoms on an Amazon or a Google portal and get a diagnosis from an AI. So far, tech companies have focussed on developing diagnostic tools and sourcing supplies for medical workers during the pandemic. But how long are they likely to let the disaster go to waste?

On Good Friday, I had a Hiram Baker–like virtual house call in my home with Matthew Mackwood, a family doctor with a master’s in public health who is one of the physicians on Dartmouth–Hitchcock’s staff. There was a lump on my foot, and I worried that I might have stepped on a piece of glass, or that a critter had burrowed under my skin. Googling “chigger” only fed my cyberchondria.

Treatment at home offers certain advantages beyond those of keeping quarantine. Benjamin Fogel, a pediatrician at Penn State Children’s Hospital, in Hershey, Pennsylvania, told me about some of his patients. “They are in their room with the door closed, and they feel like it’s private, more than they feel like it’s private in a doctor’s office,” he said. “These kids are sitting at their desks or on their beds. I can tell they are more at ease.”

I’d had some experience with telehealth since the lockdown. My wife and I were having a weekly Zoom session with my therapist. To get some privacy from our kids, we had to sit in the back of our pickup truck, parked close enough to the house to get the Wi-Fi signal. (There’s no cellular service where we live, which is not uncommon in certain parts of Vermont.)

In person, doctors often spend the first ten minutes of an appointment studying records on their computer while you sit across from them, looking at their framed degrees and family photos. But during a virtual visit the doctor meets you face to face, and her gaze mostly stays on you (or on your records on her screen—it can be hard to tell the difference). For fans of telehealth, this is one of its most appealing features. “You’re looking at the physician, and the physician is looking at you,” Schoenberg, the Amwell CEO, told me. “This is a very intimate encounter. And, once you get exposed to it, at some point you’re going to say, ‘If this is available to me, why should I revert to the laborious, dangerous, hard effort of going into the practice?’”

Thomas Nash, in Manhattan, was skeptical. “Eyeball to eyeball is not a normal human interaction, right? A normal human interaction—you shift your body a little, you look to the left for a second, you gather your thoughts, you take a pause, which you really can’t do in this compressed screen-to-screen interaction.”

When my appointment with Dr. Mackwood rolled around, my daughter had the iPad I was planning to use, my son was in a bandwidth-hogging Zoom class, and the cat was howling for food, so I grabbed my phone and retreated to the bathroom.

Mackwood began, “Let me ask you a few questions, and then I’ll take a look at your foot. You said it hurts with pressure. What does that pain feel like? Sharp? Burning? How would you describe it?”

“It’s not a sharp pain,” I responded. “It’s more of a burning, generalized pain. I have my index finger on it. The circumference of it is about the size of a dime, though not as round. It doesn’t feel like there’s a splinter or a piece of glass in there.”

“Any numbness or tingling associated with that? Weakness in the foot or toes? Any drainage?”

“No, but it does have kind of a little dimple right in the middle of it. It’s possible that it’s a little critter that’s burrowed in there. Maybe a chigger?”

“Very uncommon in these parts.”

Using my phone, I showed the doctor my foot. I had to pretzel myself around to give him a good view.

Mackwood diagnosed my lump as an ordinary plantar wart. In normal times, he said, I would be able to come into the clinic, where, over a few visits, he would use liquid nitrogen to freeze it.

“There’s also the duct-tape method,” Mackwood added. You stick a small piece of duct tape to the wart, leave it on for a week, rub the softened wart with a pumice stone, and repeat, for four to six weeks.

I’m waiting for the clinic to reopen.

About a month after Patient X arrived at Alice Peck Day, I had a Zoom call with the team who had assisted him. Kacie Boyle emphatically stressed the benefit of having Sadie Smith there. “Jesse and I had no time to chart on this patient, so Sadie was writing down every medication that was given, every vital sign, reminding us to cycle blood pressures as needed,” Boyle said. “She was just there as an extra set of eyes, and when sometimes we didn’t feel we had enough hands.”

Laura Williams, the other nurse on the scene, said that, in spite of the high-tech nature of their teamwork with Smith and Martin in the hub, telemedicine is “a human connection for me. It can be isolating when you’re in one of those rooms with all your gear on. When I see Sadie pop up on the screen, I feel like she’s right there for me. It’s a reminder we’re all in this together.”

My daughter had made a colorful poster with a drawing of a masked health-care worker and lots of blue sky and rainbows. She asked me to hold it up in front of my laptop’s camera, during my call with the team, to say tele-thanks to everyone who had saved Patient X’s life. But Boyle and Williams were on audio only and couldn’t see the poster, so I did my best to describe it.
THE NEW YORKER, JUNE 29, 2020

THE POLITICAL SCENE

A DEVIL’S BARGAIN

Fiona Hill had hoped to guide the U.S.-Russia relationship. President Trump had other ideas.

BY ADAM ENTOUS

T he Brookings Institution is one of many think tanks in Washington, D.C., where scholars and bureaucrats sit in quiet offices and wait by the phone. They write op-eds and books, give talks and convene seminars, hoping that, when reputations falter or Administrations shift, they will be rescued from the life of opining and contemplation and return to the adrenaline rush and consequence of government. Nearly always, the yearning is to be inside. Strobe Talbott, who became the president of Brookings in 2002, served in Bill Clinton’s Administration as his leading Russia expert, and he was rumored to be on the shortlist for Hillary Clinton’s Secretary of State. Others, too, may have expected a call. But, after Donald Trump was elected, only one prominent Brookings stalwart was summoned, and her story became emblematic of all those in Washington who entered the Administration full of trepidation but hoping to be a “normalizing” influence on a distinctly abnormal President.

Fiona Hill, a leading expert on Russia and its modern leadership, had a reputation as a blunt speaker and an independent thinker and analyst. The daughter of a miner and a midwife, she grew up in Bishop Auckland, in northern England, and has a strong northern accent. She described herself to me as “politically engaged but antipartisan.” She has a distaste for the kind of ideological standoff that she observed in the eighties between Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the president of the National Union of Mineworkers, Arthur Scargill, which was, as she put it, “a clash of titans with regular people smashed in between.”

Hill, who was born in 1965, is a senior fellow at Brookings, and a denizen of the Eurasia Foundation, the Council on Foreign Relations, and Harvard University, where she got her doctorate in history. She was a national intelligence officer in the Administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. In 2013, she and Clifford Gaddy, an economic specialist at Brookings, published “Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin,” which traces Vladimir Putin’s path from his hardscrabble upbringing in Leningrad to his years in the government. She was wary of Obama’s efforts to downplay Russia’s importance in the world—he called the country a “regional power”—confident that doing so only provoked Putin to assert himself more forcefully.

In an updated edition of the book, published in 2015, Hill and Gaddy described Putin as “arguably the most powerful individual in the world.” Hill’s friend Nina Khrushcheva, the granddaughter of the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, said that Putin was “secretly flattered” by the portrayal.

In June, 2016, it emerged that Russia’s military intelligence agency, the G.R.U., had penetrated the Democratic National Committee’s computer servers and begun spreading derogatory information about Hillary Clinton and the Democrats. Many of Hill’s colleagues were disturbed that Trump had praised Putin as a “strong leader” and took seriously the growing speculation that the Trump campaign was colluding with the Russians to sway the election. Hill was skeptical of this theory, thinking it more likely that the campaign and Russia were working in parallel to discredit Clinton. She was less certain than her colleagues that Clinton would win the election, especially after the outcome of the Brexit referendum, that same month. Several of her family members had voted to leave the E.U., and in Bishop Auckland sixty-one per cent were in favor. She saw why Trump appealed to voters who felt that their concerns had long been ignored.

After Trump’s victory, the mood at Brookings was funereal. But, as Hill told K. T. McFarland, a former speechwriter in the Reagan Administration, on her FoxNews.com show, on November 15th, the President-elect’s overtures to Putin presented an opportunity: “Trump has certainly laid the ground for saying, ‘O.K., I’m going to give you a chance to explain yourself.’” After the interview, Hill joked that Trump might appoint McFarland to be his national-security adviser. Two days later, Trump named Michael Flynn to that post, and, the following week, chose McFarland to be his deputy.

In one of more than two dozen conversations that I had with Hill this spring, she told me that she had not been seeking a position in the new Administration, but that she was “open to advising whoever came along and offering my two cents’ worth.” McFarland called Hill on the afternoon of December 29, 2016, asking what she thought about the sanctions that the Obama Administration had just imposed on Russia in retaliation for Putin’s election interference. Hill urged McFarland to avoid thinking about them as a “political issue”; they were, she said, simply “the appropriate action.”

Earlier that month, Trump had rejected the C.I.A.’s assessment that Russia had sought to help his campaign. “They have no idea if it’s Russia or China or somebody,” he told Fox News. “It could be somebody sitting in bed someplace. I mean, they have no idea.” Hill respected the analysts who evaluated Russia’s activities, and she was alarmed by Trump’s denigration of their work. She was also troubled when, in January, 2017, she learned about a dossier, compiled by the former British spy Christopher Steele, that was circulating among journalists and experts in D.C. Hill had known Steele since 2006, when she was an intelligence officer and he worked for M.I.6, Britain’s foreign-intelligence service. Steele had been hired by Fusion G.P.S., a small American investigative firm that initially
Hill did not realize where her real challenges lay: "I know the intrigue in Russia better than the intrigue at home."
worked on behalf of a conservative cli-
ent and later the Clinton campaign, to 
gather reports about Trump’s ties to Rus-
sia. One of Steele’s more salacious find-
ings alleged that the Russians had a sex 
tape that would compromise Trump. The 
level of detail made Hill suspect that 
Steele’s sources had slipped him bits of 
misinformation to discredit the rest of 
his research. The dossier, she felt, would 
“pour gasoline on a raging fire.” Buzz-
Feed published the documents, and 
Trump denounced them as a fabrication 
by “sick people.”

Hill told McFarland about her rela-
tionship with Steele, and conveyed her 
doubts about the dossier. On January 25th, 
David Cattler, the deputy assistant to the 
President for regional affairs, called Hill 
to tell her that Flynn was offering her 
the position of senior director for Euro-
pean and Russian affairs on the National 
Security Council. Unsure whether to 
take the job, she sought Strobe Talbott’s 
advice. Talbott was a tough Trump critic, 
but he told her she should do it— she 
would be “one of the adults in the room.”

Graham Allison, Hill’s mentor at Har-
vard’s Kennedy School of Government,
also approved. “You’ve spent your whole 
life on this, and if things go very badly 
with the U.S.-Russia relationship, it could 
be catastrophic for everybody,” he said. 
The next day, she accepted the job offer, 
telling Cattler, with whom she had 
worked on the National Intelligence 
Council, in the two-thousands, that she felt “more comfortable” knowing that he 
would be at the White House.

Two weeks later, Trump dismissed 
Flynn, after it was reported that, in Jan-
uary, he had lied to Mike Pence, the in-
coming Vice-President, about a phone 
call he’d had with the Russian Ambas-
dor to the U.S., Sergey Kislyak. Obama 
Administration officials believed that the 
call had undermined their efforts to hold 
Russia accountable and to deter future 
election meddling, but McFarland as-
ured Hill that nothing improper had 
happened. (Transcripts of several calls be-
tween Flynn and Kislyak that were re-
leased in May made it clear that Hill’s ad-
doctor had been eliminated. Hill said he warned 
her, “ ‘Look, you could come in and do 
the job as you see fit, and succeed. You 
could come in and be miserable but still 
feel like you’re making a difference. But 
you could also come in and be fired. You 
could be fired capriciously.’ ”

Old acquaintances also pressured Hill 
to change her mind. On March 8th, be-
fore Hill was scheduled to meet with her 
staff for the first time, she had breakfast 
with Celeste Wallander, at the Blue Duck 
Tavern, near Georgetown. Wallander 
had worked as Obama’s White House 
adviser on Russia, and she and Hill had 
crossed paths for more than twenty years. 

There was clear evidence that Trump 
and members of his circle had coördi-
nated with the Russians, Wallander said. 
Trump’s recent attack on NATO as being 
“obsolete” showed that he intended to 
do whatever Putin wanted. To work in 
the Trump Administration was to en-
dorse its policies. “You can’t pick and 
choose,” Wallander said. “You can’t say, 
‘Well, I didn’t support that.’ You own 
those policies, even if you, on the inside, 
disagree with them.” Hill wasn’t per-
suaded, telling Wallander that the Ad-
ministration still needed advisers with 
“no illusions” about Putin to defend 
against future Russian election meddling. 
“When your house is on fire, you’ve got 
to go in and save something,” she said.

Hill’s decision to join the Trump 
White House was, echoing Samuel John-

son’s assessment of second marriages, a “triumph of hope over experience.” Her detractors called it a triumph of ambition over wisdom. Even Hill’s closest colleagues told me that her stubbornness could work against her. She acknowledged that many of Cohen’s and Walander’s warnings proved well founded. Little was done to address the threat of future election meddling, and Hill’s tenure was, in many ways, an extended exercise in futility. Ultimately, she will be remembered not for safeguarding the country but for the unvarnished testimony that she delivered in the impeachment proceedings against Trump, in October and November of 2019, which revealed how U.S. foreign policy was subverted for domestic political purposes. In her conversations with me, she offered a unique look at the dysfunction, the misogyny, and the corruption that have proliferated in Trump’s White House. She remained convinced that public service was a necessary and noble calling, but worried that partisan politics was hobbling the country and endangering its security. “We’re doing this to ourselves now,” she said. “The Russians don’t have to do a thing.”

Hill sees her willingness to take on undesirable jobs as part of a family tradition. Her maternal grandfather, an air-raid warden during the Second World War, used buckets of sand to put out flares dropped by German advance planes. Her father, Alfred, a miner since he was fourteen, lost his job in 1963, when a pit closed in Crook, and went to work as a porter in a hospital. Hill’s parents had little money, but they encouraged her and her younger sister, Angela, to take part in European exchange programs. Hill excelled at languages, and by the time she was fifteen she was fluent in French and proficient in German. Like many teen-agers, the Hill girls had nightmares about being caught in a nuclear war between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.; Hill wryly told me that on walks around Bishop Auckland she would look out for places to hide in the event of an atomic blast. Their father’s cousin Charlie Crabtree told them stories about his adventures sailing across the Arctic in convoys delivering supplies to the Soviet Union during the war. “Charlie couldn’t understand how we’d gone from being wartime allies to being enemies with the Soviet Union,” Hill recalled. “He kept on saying, ‘You’re good at languages, Fiona. You should study Russian and figure out what’s gone wrong.’”

Fiona was self-deprecating, awkward, and intelligent. The girls attended Bishop Barrington, a local school in a rough neighborhood. Angela, now an English teacher in Madrid, told them stories about his adventures listening to one of those BBC radio shows where the people were speaking Scottish and you couldn’t figure out what the hell they were talking about.”

At the end of her third year of university, Hill won a British government fellowship to study at the Maurice Thorez Institute, a language school in Moscow, before returning to St. Andrews. It was an era of shortages, and the general gloom in Moscow reminded her of the atmosphere in Roddymoor, the former coal-mining town where her grandparents had lived. Toward the end of her year abroad, Hill got a job as an assistant for NBC in Moscow, during Ronald Reagan’s historic summit with Mikhail Gorbachev. There, she met the political scientist Robert Legvold, who suggested that she study in the United States. The following year, Hill applied for a Kennedy Scholarship at Harvard, to pursue her interest in U.S.-Soviet relations. At her interview, the judges had trouble understanding her accent, and, as she was leaving, she opened a door and stepped into a closet. She didn’t get the scholarship. A few weeks later, she interviewed for and was awarded a Frank Knox fellowship, and in the fall of 1989 she enrolled in a master’s program in Soviet studies at Harvard’s Russian Research Center. Soon, she met a Soviet-studies student from Chicago named Kenneth Keen. They became friends and struck up a romance.

In the summer of 1991, Hill took a part-time job as a Russian translator at Graham Allison’s Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, which aimed to transform the Soviet Union, and, later, Russia, into a Western-style democracy. “We were trying to do something bold,” Allison told me. “Maybe, if you were criticizing it, you’d say romantic.” Hill arrived for her interview wearing a pair of ripped jeans and Doc Martens boots. Allison said, “Fiona was certainly, at best, a diamond in the rough, and there was a lot of rough. And her accent—it was like listening to one of those BBC radio shows where the people were speaking Scottish and you couldn’t figure out what the hell they were talking about.”

In 1993, Allison took a leave of absence from Harvard to serve as an Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Clinton Administration, and he asked Hill to run his project. She liked organizing conferences that brought together political, economic, and academic leaders from across Europe and the former Soviet Union. The next year, she had a professional breakthrough when a paper she had co-authored, about Russia’s intimidation of its neighbors, was praised in the Times. In 1995, Hill married Keen, and they became tutors in Cabot House, one of Harvard’s undergraduate dorms.

Three years later, Hill completed her doctorate. She and Keen moved into a
small two-bedroom house in suburban D.C. Keen worked as a business consultant; Hill got a job at the Eurasia Foundation. Horton Beebe-Center, the foundation’s then vice-president, described Hill as a “prolific networker” with “extraordinary connections in Europe, right up to heads of state.”

Hill believed at the time that Russia’s aggressive behavior had to be harshly condemned. When Russia launched its second war in Chechnya, in 1999, she told the Christian Science Monitor that the conflict “could produce a whole slew of Osama bin Ladens.” In 2000, she went to work at the Brookings Institution. Exploring the prospect of reconciliation between Moscow and the Chechens, she spent time with prominent Chechen separatists, whom she had gotten to know in the nineties and who were wanted by the Russian intelligence services. Some of Hill’s counterparts in Russia and Chechnya, she said, “were telling me, ‘Look, you’re a nice girl, Fiona, but you need to back off on this. This is getting dangerous.’” She soon came to understand what they meant. In September, 2002, while attending a conference in Sochi, Hill became violently ill after taking a sip of a drink at her hotel bar. An analysis of her blood showed that her liver enzymes were elevated, and she concluded that she had been poisoned.

On September 1, 2004, Chechen rebels demanding the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya took hostage more than a thousand people, mostly children, at a school in Beslan, a town in the Russian republic of North Ossetia. Two days later, Russian commandos attempted to free the hostages in what was widely viewed as a botched raid, and at least three hundred and thirty people were killed in the chaos. On September 6th, Hill encountered Putin for the first time, at a private tea that he hosted at his residence near Moscow to mark the inaugural meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club, a forum on Russia’s role in the world. The attendees had assumed that, given the disaster in Beslan, the conversation at the tea would be brief. Instead, Putin spent nearly four hours sparring with them. He said that the West had to stop criticizing him for the war in Chechnya without proposing any realistic solutions to address the demands of the region’s separatists. Hill was impressed by his political agility and command of the issues.

A few days later, Hill wrote an Op-Ed in the Times, which was published under the title “Stop Blaming Putin and Start Helping Him.” She described Putin’s event as “remarkable,” saying, “We have to show we are listening,” and proposed that the U.S. share intelligence with Russia to assist in its investigation of the Beslan attack. Some of Hill’s colleagues said that she was falling for Putin’s propaganda. “I got awful shit,” she said. “Some people accused me of being paid to write this by the Russians.” But Angela Stent, the national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia on the National Intelligence Council, who had also attended the private event with Putin, saw her proposal as “a sound suggestion.” In 2006, Stent recommended that Hill replace her at the N.I.C. Hill took the job—she was three months pregnant—and swiftly established a reputation for her unbiased assessments. As Daniel Hoffman, one of her C.I.A. counterparts, put it, she “simply looks at the facts and makes her conclusions.”

In November, 2009, Hill returned to Brookings and began to work with Clifford Gaddy on their book about Putin. In 2014, after protesters drove out Ukraine’s pro-Russian President, Viktor Yanukovych, Putin ordered the annexation of Crimea and initiated a military campaign to control eastern Ukraine.
phone with Putin about the conflict in Syria, where Russian forces were supporting the Assad regime and American forces were fighting Islamic State terrorists. Trump and Putin spoke through interpreters, and senior members of the White House staff gathered in the Oval Office to listen on speakerphone. McMaster and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had the seats closest to the President’s desk. Margaret Peterlin, Tillerson’s chief of staff, stood to one side, and Ivanka and her husband, Jared Kushner, sat on a sofa. Hill, who had a migraine, found a perch at the back of the room. Doubting the quality of the translation Trump was getting from Putin’s interpreter, she furiously took notes.

After the call, Trump told Tillerson and McMaster that he wasn’t happy with the pre-written press statement about the call, and he started dictating revisions. Hill wasn’t paying attention. “I thought we’d have a substantive discussion about the call,” she told me. “I thought my job was to say, ‘Well, this is what happened. Perhaps we need to think about this.’”

She noticed that Trump was looking in her direction and asking, “Can she do it?” Hill told me, “I’m thinking, Can she do what? My head is pounding. I’m thinking, What happened? She? No, not Margaret, not Ivanka. Huh. It must be me. I looked like a deer in the headlights. And the President said, ‘Hey, darling, are you listening?’” Hill suspected that Trump thought she was a secretary. McMaster handed Hill a piece of paper with Trump’s revisions, but Hill didn’t know what it was. “Nobody threw me a lifeline,” she recalled. “Nobody said, ‘Oh, this is Fiona.’” Hill got up and walked into the office of Madeleine Westerhout, Trump’s executive assistant. McMaster rushed in behind her. Hill thought that she should apologize to the President, but McMaster told her, “He’ll think it’s weakness.” Later, Hill learned that Ivanka had thought that Trump was “rougher” with women. “Central casting is a real thing for him,” a longtime Trump adviser told me. Trump addressed his female aides as “honey,” “sweetie,” and “darling.” If he didn’t like how an adviser looked, he would say, “Honey, you look so tired.” Trump would sometimes say of his female advisers, “They look O.K. in person, but on TV they look really bad. Why do they look so bad?”

After Betsy DeVos, the Education Secretary, was interviewed on “60 Minutes,” Trump complained that she wasn’t attractive enough. When officials were discussing the possibility of a new position for Nikki Haley, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Trump said he didn’t like how her cheeks looked. He complained to officials that Kirstjen Nielsen, the Secretary of Homeland Security, wasn’t sufficiently aggressive toward migrants—and she was too short. When Trump insulted a female adviser, the men in the room would look away. “It throws you off your game,” a former female adviser told me. “It demeans you.” Another former White House official, a man, told me that Trump was “rouglier with women. He has a problem with women.” It was soon evident that Trump had a problem with Hill. “Forgive me, Fiona’s attractive, but he doesn’t trust women that are kind of non-players in his world,” the former official said. He added, “Anyone who takes notes is suspect.” A former national-security official told me that, after the incident in the Oval Office, some of Trump’s top advisers, including Reince Priebus, his chief of staff, began referring to Hill as “the Russia bitch.”

Hill had seen how, during the Bush Administration, advisers to Vice-President Dick Cheney had excluded some of her N.S.C. colleagues from important discussions, believing that they weren’t hawkish enough. Still, she was unprepared for the viciousness of the infighting in the Trump Administration. Leaks to the press were a constant source of acrimony. Stephen K. Bannon, a senior adviser to Trump, along with Derek Harvey, the N.S.C.’s senior director for the Middle East, and Joel Rayburn, a Middle East specialist who worked in Harvey’s directorate, compiled and circulated lists of N.S.C. civil servants whom they wanted removed, suspecting them of being insufficiently committed to Trump’s policies. Bannon had read Hill’s book on Putin—twice, he told me—and said he considered her...
to be a “consummate professional.” Nevertheless, he had tried to block her appointment. He believed that she would resist the idea of joining forces with Putin to counter China’s influence, and urged Flynn to find someone “a little more malleable on Russia.”

In the spring of 2017, Hill was reviewing Obama’s policies on Europe and Russia. His Administration had shunned the autocratic Hungarian President Viktor Orbán, who was thwarting efforts to build a united front within the E.U. and NATO in support of Ukraine. Hill did not oppose a meeting between Trump and Orbán, but she wanted to make sure that Orbán was serious about changing his behavior. On May 23rd, Connie Mack, a former Republican congressman who was working as a lobbyist for Orbán, tried to persuade two of Mike Pence’s foreign-policy advisers to hold a Trump-Orbán summit at the White House. Trump had extended the invitation to Orbán by telephone in 2016; Mack wanted to know why the Obama policy remained in effect.

Mack told me, “It was clear that there was someone above who was saying ‘No meeting,’ and I knew it wasn’t Pence. So I started looking around, poking around, and I came across Fiona Hill’s name.” On the Brookings Web site, Mack discovered that Hill had worked with organizations that had ties to the Budapest-born financier George Soros, who is a frequent target of right-wing groups. Mack told Pence’s advisers that he believed that Hill was responsible for the holdup. According to an official who heard that conversation, Mack accused Hill of doing Soros’s bidding. On May 31st, the political operative Roger Stone, a longtime friend of Trump’s, appeared on Alex Jones’s television show, which traffics in far-right conspiracy theories. Stone told Jones, “This is very hard to believe, but I confirmed the facts again this morning. Soros has planted a mole infiltrating the national–security apparatus—a woman named Fiona Hill.” After the show aired, a woman called Hill’s house, and when her daughter picked up the phone the woman told her that her mother was “a cunt.” Hill started to receive death threats. In June, Mack began circulating a memo, titled “Fiona Hill Backgrounder,” to former congressional colleagues, documenting what he described as Hill’s purported links to “the Soros network.” Soon, one of Mack’s contacts told him that the memo was “in Trump’s hands.”

While many people in Washington believed that Trump’s friendly treatment of Putin was evidence of collusion, Hill saw the behavior as part of a pattern. Trump was equally reluctant to criticize other autocratic leaders, including President Xi Jinping, of China, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, of Turkey. He conducted diplomacy with these men the same way he ran his hospitality business, preferring informal, freewheeling conversations. He was happier when aides weren’t present and notes weren’t taken, which left Administration officials scrambling to figure out what, if anything, had been agreed upon. Foreign leaders often tried to take advantage of the distrust between Trump and his advisers. In a May, 2017, meeting with Erdoğan, whom Trump privately referred to as “the Sultan,” Trump made it clear that he disagreed with his military advisers, and didn’t want to provide support to the Kurds. After Erdoğan called him on Thanksgiving Day, presumably hoping to catch him alone on the golf course, Trump joked about having spoken to the President of Turkey on “Turkey Day.” Hill said, “He just wants to go in and shoot the breeze with these guys, because he thinks he’s got great chemistry with them.”

On May 10th, soon after firing James Comey, the F.B.I. director, who had refused to state publicly that Trump was not under investigation for possible collusion, Trump told Sergey Kislyak and the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, that Comey was a “nut job.” The conversation was leaked to the media, fuelling speculation about an allegiance with Russia, but Hill was less concerned. Trump had said something similar to Henry Kissinger, who visited him that day. “He talked the same way with everyone,” she said. “It could be a man on the street. This is how he is. Whatever’s on his mind in the moment is what he talks about, no matter who’s there.”

Trump’s first meeting with Putin took place in Hamburg, on July 7, 2017, during the G-20 summit there. The goal had been to discuss future objectives, including talks about an arms-control

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**FLAME IN THE CLOUD AT MIDNIGHT**

Flame in the cloud at midnight
Blankets my bed with light.
The scent of winter jasmine
Rises from a tomb to meet my eyes.

I watch you as if from my girlhood.
I watch as if from death, anonymous
Beneath a dim sky, holding aloft
The burden of my body. Death,

Bloodless and unfeeling, is familiar.
But what if we could live that way, too?
At the moment, darling,
At the moment I’m a woman without lust.

Moonlight, like new snow,
Covers the hands and feet of night.
Huge strange faces
Fade from my windows and doors.

—Yi Lei (1951-2018)

(Translated, from the Chinese, by Tracy K. Smith and Changtai Bi.)
deal. Such a deal would be the fulfillment of a fantasy that Trump had first articulated in interviews in the mid-eighties, when he claimed that it would take him “an hour and a half to learn everything there is to learn about missiles.” A former White House aide told me, “I heard him once, in the beginning of the Administration, say something like ‘Well, Obama got a Nobel Prize. I certainly should get one.’”

Hill, Tillerson, and McMaster had travelled to Germany, but Trump allowed only Tillerson to join the meeting, scheduled to last about an hour. After two hours, aides, concerned that Trump would be late for a meeting with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, of Japan, sent in Melania Trump to extract her husband. Later, Tillerson told Hill and other officials that Putin, evidently fearing that Trump would launch a pre-emptive military strike against North Korea, which shares a small border with Russia, had tried to convince Trump that Pyongyang’s latest missile test wasn’t as significant as U.S. intelligence officials had led him to believe. Tillerson also said that Putin, as expected, had denied that Russia had meddled in the 2016 election. Hill and a colleague pulled aside Trump’s interpreter, Yuri Shkeyrov, for more details. Shkeyrov told them that Trump had assured Putin that he believed his denials, and that Trump had confiscated his notes. (Shkeyrov declined to comment.) At the end of the meeting, Putin told Trump, “Let’s talk later.”

That night, the Germans hosted a dinner for the G-20 leaders, and they surprised the American delegation by seating Melania next to Putin. During the dinner, Trump came over to talk to his wife, and he and Putin had a long conversation. Neither Shkeyrov nor any of Trump’s advisers were present; Putin’s interpreter translated for the leaders. Hill and her colleagues later pieced together the conversation from information given by Melania’s assistant and other officials. The White House press secretary, Sean Spicer, didn’t disclose the exchange to the press. On July 18th, Ian Bremmer, a global consulting firm, made Trump’s objections to “promote discord in the United States and undermine public confidence in democracy.”

One of Hill’s hopes, in taking the N.S.C. job, had been to ward off future Russian election interference. But, beginning in May, 2017, after the special counsel Robert Mueller took over the investigation into ties between Trump’s campaign and Russian officials, Trump grew increasingly suspicious of anybody in the Administration who raised the topic. For Trump, acknowledging that Russia had meddled was akin to claiming that his campaign had colluded with Russia—an accusation that he saw as casting doubt on the legitimacy of his victory. “The ‘loyalty’ word got bandied around and was the shortcut that people would use to knife each other,” a former senior Administration official told me. “It only takes a couple seeds of doubt and then that’s it, you’re on the ‘They’re not loyal’ list.”

That summer, Steve Bannon was fired. McMaster, who was keen to put an end to the paranoia and infighting within the N.S.C., removed Derek Harvey. Hill recalled of Harvey, “He actually said to me, ‘I thought you’d have gone long before I did.’ I was, like, ‘Oh, thanks, Derek. It was lovely working with you.’” Meanwhile, according to former officials, Tillerson tried to cut McMaster out of the State Department’s talks with Russia, and, over Trump’s objections, Congress voted to impose more sanctions. (Tillerson denies excluding McMaster.) In response, Putin ordered the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to reduce its staff by nearly eight hundred people. Hill told me, “We were constantly trying to make progress, but something happened every time.

Nobody was coordinating at the top.”

Hill found that not even Trump’s closest advisers could get his attention. Trump often did not appear in the Oval Office until 11:30 A.M. Typically, the first item on his schedule was the President’s Daily Brief, a top-secret summary of the nation’s most sensitive intelligence. “It was awful,” a former White House official told me. “He just rants and raves. It’s mostly about what was on Fox News. He really does believe that he knows more than the generals, more than the intelligence professionals.” Trump’s chief of staff, John Kelly, a retired Marine Corps general, who had replaced Priebus, limited the P.D.B. sessions to three a week, to avoid wasting time. If Trump seemed to be in an especially foul mood, Kelly would cancel that day’s briefing.

Hill recalled, “I looked at other ways to have an impact, to be effective.” She focussed on trying to assist McMaster, but it was clear that he could be the next to go. Trump seemed to relish the fact that he could be rude to a decorated military leader with impunity. On one occasion, when Trump spoke disrespectfully to Emmanuel Macron, the French President, on a phone call, McMaster stormed out of the Oval Office, muttering, “Fuck this.” Hill followed him, and waited in an anteroom as Kelly pleaded with him not to quit.

On February 16th, 2018, Mueller indicted thirteen Russians. Rod J. Rosenstein, the Deputy Attorney General overseeing the inquiry, said they had sought to “promote discord in the United States and undermine public confidence in democracy.”

The next day, at a security conference in Munich, McMaster was asked about the prospect of increased U.S.-Russia cyber coöperation. He dismissed the idea, citing the indictment and calling the evidence of Russian meddling in the 2016 election “incontrovertible.” Trump tweeted, “General McMaster forgot to say that the results of the 2016 election were not impacted or changed by the Russians and that the only Collusion was between Russia and Crooked H., the DNC and the Dems.” On the flight back to Washington, Hill recalled, McMaster seemed subdued. The President’s tweets and his behavior “had a chilling effect on pretty much everybody,” she said. Hill rejected a suggestion that her directorate be part of a task force in
charge of dealing with the threat of Russian election meddling. Her team would only be persecuted for their efforts.

Trump and Hill were aligned on certain issues. Both were wary of the proposal, first raised in the Obama Administration and backed by foreign-policy hawks, to supply Ukraine with Javelins. Advocates of the missiles hoped that they would help demonstrate resolve against Russia, particularly at a time when Trump appeared to be allying himself with Putin. In the end, the Pentagon, worried about an escalating conflict, settled on sending Ukraine just a handful of the weapons, on the condition that they be stored in Yavoriv, a town about as far as possible from eastern Ukraine, where the fighting was taking place. As Hill had hoped, Putin did not retaliate in response to what he understood to be a symbolic gesture of support for Ukraine.

But the Russian leader remained as unpredictable as ever. Trump was taken aback when, on March 1st, Putin touted Russia’s development of a new nuclear-capable hypersonic missile using a simulation that depicted an attack on what appeared to be Florida. “That got Trump’s attention,” Hill said. “Trump was, like, ‘Real countries don’t do that. Why’s he doing that?’” Three days later, Sergei Skripal, a former Russian military intelligence officer who had been a double agent for the U.K.’s intelligence services during the nineties and the early two-thousands, and his daughter were found almost unconscious on a public bench in the English town of Salisbury. The cause was found to be a nerve agent called Novichok, a Soviet-era weapon. As Hill had hoped, Putin referred to a proposal in his briefing materials in all-caps letters stating “DO NOT CONGRATULATE.” Predictably, Trump was furious with McMaster, and Hill surmised that an official with access to the briefing materials had set him up. “We were all being used again, us and you guys in the press, by those who wanted H.R. to be fired,” she told me. Hill offered to quit in solidarity if he was let go, but he said that she should stay in the job to insure a smooth transition. A few days later, Trump fired McMaster and hired John Bolton, a foreign-policy hawk, as national-security adviser.

On July 15th, Bolton, Kelly, and Hill flew to Helsinki on Air Force One, for an arms-control summit between Trump and Putin. Hill knew that Trump wouldn’t read the materials she had prepared, but she hoped that he might sit through an oral briefing. Trump wasn’t interested. He, Putin, and the translators met in the Finnish Presidential palace. Putin, familiar with U.S. policy and with Trump’s habits, brought notes on topics to address. Notes had been prepared for Trump, but they were of limited use. After the two Presidents met, a group of senior officials asked Trump to tell them about the conversation. “He didn’t want to share,” the former White House official said. “His mind-set was: This is between me and my friend.”

Later, at a lunch, Trump invited Putin to share what he’d said in their private meeting. Putin referred to a proposal he’d made, to use an existing mutual-assistance treaty that would allow American law-enforcement officials to be present for interviews with the Russian intelligence officers who had been charged with election interference. At a post-summit press conference, Putin elaborated: he would make the indicted officers available if Trump allowed Russian law-enforcement officers to be present during the questioning of American officials in cases of interest to Putin.

Hill was again struck by Putin’s craftiness and gall. “My head was full of expletives,” she said. “Putin was setting us all up.” He knew that the U.S. would never allow the Russians to question American officials. “It was a distraction. He’s shouting, ‘Fire! Look over there,’ deflecting from what Russia had done in 2016.” At the press conference, Trump made it clear that he believed Putin’s denials of election meddling, and called his proposal “an incredible offer.” Hill recalled, “I just sat there and thought, maybe I should just fall over backwards onto the media behind me and fake a medical emergency just to stop this agony.”

State Department officials immediately rejected the proposal, but, on July 17th, Russia’s prosecutor general’s office announced that it was seeking to interview eleven U.S. intelligence officers, businessmen, and diplomats, including Michael McFaul, the former U.S. ambassador to Russia. McFaul, an outspoken critic of Trump, had recently published a memoir, “From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia.” Apparently seeking reassurance that he wasn’t in jeopardy, he asked to talk to Hill, and she agreed to see him. He told the Washington Post about the planned meeting, and one of Bolton’s deputies at the N.S.C. accused her of disloyalty.

Critics of Trump’s behavior at Helsinki were unhappy with Hill, too. Some members of the Obama Administration thought that she had become little more than a “beard” for the President. One of them told a member of Hill’s team that she thought that Hill
and her staff had become “collaborators” and “would end up going to jail for aiding and abetting a criminal.” Hill told me, “Everybody thought that there was this deep, satisfying conspiracy in Helsinki.” The press conference had been embarrassing, but she didn’t think she needed to resign over it. “There were no secret deals. This is not ‘The Manchurian Candidate.’ If there was something that I felt was really egregious, I would have quit.”

Bolsonaro and Hill developed a close working relationship. He respected her opinions and trusted her to carry out his instructions. But he never included her or her colleagues in meetings with Trump, and Hill generally attended Oval Office meetings on Russia only when Jon Huntsman, the U.S. Ambassador, was visiting. In those sessions, Trump had little interest in hearing the Ambassador’s thoughts about Putin, preferring to talk about Huntsman’s daughter, Abby, who was then the co-host of “Fox & Friends Weekend.” “Let’s call Abby!” Trump said on one occasion. “Get her on the phone!”

Difficult conversations with Putin were left to the President’s advisers, including Bolton and Hill. This was less than ideal, since Putin understood that they did not necessarily have the backing of the President. As the 2018 midterm elections approached, Hill accompanied Bolton to a meeting in Moscow at which Bolton warned Putin that meddling would not be tolerated. Putin, according to someone at the meeting, responded, “We understand that there are all sorts of people who interfere in elections, such as George Soros.” As Putin said the name Soros, he looked at Hill. She recalled, “I just returned the gaze, and I may have slightly raised an eyebrow to make it a hard stare back.” It was Hill’s fifty-third birthday, and on the flight home Bolton and other officials gathered for a toast and laughed about the Soros moment.

On September 5th, the Times published an Op-Ed by an anonymous senior official who claimed to be a member of a group “working diligently from within” Trump’s Administration “to frustrate parts of his agenda and his worst inclinations.” Hill told me that several U.S. ambassadors warned her that Rick Grenell, the U.S. Ambassador to Germany, who was a Trump favorite, was “gunning for her” and spreading a rumor that she was the Op-Ed’s author. The former national-security official told me, “Fiona was one of the top people on Grenell’s hit list.” On one phone call, Hill said, Grenell told her that she was “not part of the team.” (Grenell disputes this version of events.) In fact, Hill told me, she had been angered by the Op-Ed, which exacerbated distrust within the government. “I thought it was meant to make the author feel better to themselves about what they were doing,” she said. Hill believed that her role was to insure that decisions by policymakers were evaluated through the appropriate channels. She promised herself that if she ever learned of something improper or illegal she would alert Bolton and the Administration’s lawyers. “I would never have done anything anonymously,” she said.

Hill sometimes suggested to me that her time in the White House might have gone differently had she understood that her real challenge was in dealing not with Putin but with the Americans who sought to influence Trump. “There’s the irony,” she said. “I know the intrigue in Russia better than the intrigue at home.” In early 2019, she learned that the Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko, who was worried that Volodymyr Zelensky was surging in the polls, was passing messages to American officials, asking what it would take to get Trump’s support in the Ukrainian election. U.S. officials told Poroshenko that the Administration would not get involved. Hill had no idea that Rudolph Giuliani, Trump’s personal lawyer, was conducting his own private diplomatic schemes on behalf of the President.

Hill had planned to return to Washington by April, 2019, but, at Bolton’s request, she agreed to stay through mid-July, when Tim Morrison, who oversaw arms control at the N.S.C., would succeed her. In April, Hill met with Ukrainian energy officials, including Andriy Kobolyev, the C.E.O. of Naftogaz, Ukraine’s national gas-and-oil company, and his deputy, Andrew Favorov, to discuss a plan to buy from the U.S. large quantities of liquefied natural gas to tide the country over in the event that Russia cut off its supply. The Ukrainian delegation did not mention that they were about to meet with Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman, two Ukrainian-American business associates of Giuliani, and Tommy Hicks, a wealthy private investor and a close friend of Donald Trump, Jr. Favorov told me that Hill “just knew her shit.” By contrast, the meeting with Giuliani’s associates, which took place at the Trump International Hotel in Washington, was “dark and shady, like we were in some movie about corruption in D.C.”

In April, Zelensky won the election in a landslide. Hill heard that Marie Yovanovitch, the U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, had been asked to return to
Washington. On May 1st, she met Yovanovitch at Greenberry’s Coffee, near the State Department. Yovanovitch, one of the most respected and experienced ambassadors in the department, was clearly “rattled.” She told Hill that she didn’t know why she had been recalled.

Hill, increasingly aware that she herself was being sidelined, soon discovered that Gordon Sondland, an ambitious hotel magnate who, in 2018, became the U.S. Ambassador to the E.U., had begun to insert himself into discussions about Ukraine, even though it isn’t part of the bloc. Later that month, when the White House compiled a guest list of U.S. officials who would attend Zelensky’s inauguration, in Kyiv, Sondland successfully lobbied to have his name added, according to officials. (Sondland denies having lobbied for the invitation.) Alexander Vindman, the Ukraine specialist in Hill’s directorate, attended on behalf of the N.S.C. According to a former Obama Administration official, Hill saw “that she was being swindled, managed, handled, and ignored. She thought she was at the center of the Ukraine policy and realized that she wasn’t.”

On May 22nd, two days after the inauguration, Hill met with Amos Hochstein, a former Obama Administration official who was working closely with Kobolyev. Hochstein told Hill that he had recently met with Zelensky and other officials in Kyiv. Giuliani, he said, was pressuring the Ukrainians to launch an investigation into Joe Biden. Giuliani and his business associates were pushing a spurious narrative about Biden, claiming that he had engineered the firing of Ukraine’s prosecutor general to protect his son Hunter, who was on the board of the gas company Burisma. It was Giuliani, Hill later learned, who had orchestrated Yovanovitch’s dismissal.

“Amos knew so much more than I did,” Hill recalled. “He kept talking—’Burisma, Burisma.’ I was, like, ‘What? Burisma?’ He was, like, ‘The Hunter thing.’”

Later that month, Hill discovered that she had been excluded from another set of communications, about Viktor Orbán’s long-hoped-for meeting with Trump. Mick Mulvaney, the acting chief of staff, had known Orbán for several years, and had advocated for the two to meet. A former U.S. diplomat said that, in the meeting, Orbán had reinforced Trump’s negative views about Ukraine. Trump told reporters, “Viktor Orbán has done a tremendous job in so many different ways. Highly respected. Respected all over Europe.”

On July 10th, two of Zelensky’s top advisers were in Washington, trying to schedule a meeting with Trump. Bolton did not want to commit, but Sondland, who was still injecting himself into conversations about Ukraine, told Bolton that Mulvaney had already arranged it. Bolton asked Hill to attend a discussion between Sondland and the Ukrainian delegation. Hill told Bolton that she learned, in the discussion, that Sondland and Mulvaney had made Zelensky’s visit to the White House contingent upon Ukraine’s agreement to pursue investigations. She later informed the N.S.C.’s legal adviser that Sondland and Mulvaney had bypassed the N.S.C. (Under oath, Sondland said that he had no recollection of such an agreement. Mulvaney has denied pressuring Ukraine to investigate the Bidens.) When Hill learned that the group was considering a phone call between Trump and Zelensky, she cautioned Bolton and his deputies against it.

As planned, Hill ended her tenure at the White House on July 15th. Two days later, in her farewell toast, she referred to J. R. R. Tolkien’s “Lord of the Rings” trilogy; her “band of brothers” at the N.S.C. was now passing “the ring” to the next group. Shortly before leaving, she encountered Sondland, who told her that he was coordinating with Trump and Mulvaney, and gave her a friendly farewell hug. “Gordon, I think this is all going to blow up,” she recalls saying. (Sondland denies that this conversation took place.)

Hill, who remained on the payroll through August, continued to receive unclassified e-mails, including ones about the Trump-Zelensky phone call, which took place on July 25th. As she put it, “I had gleaned from a couple of these exchanges that maybe the call hadn’t been great.” In September, she visited her mother in Bishop Auckland, and so did not learn the details of the phone call until September 24th, when the White House released a summary of the call. It revealed that Zelensky had asked Trump for “more Javelins” and that Trump had asked Zelensky to investigate Hunter Biden. Later that day, Nancy Pelosi announced that the House of Representatives would launch a formal impeachment inquiry.

The House Intelligence Committee, led by Adam Schiff, Democrat of California, drew up a list of witnesses that included Bolton, Hill, Mulvaney, Sondland, Yovanovitch, and Kurt Volker, the former special envoy to Ukraine. Volker, the first witness, appeared voluntarily before the committee less than a week after resigning. The White House had told Bolton that he could not testify, and the Democrats on the committee, aware that a court fight over a subpoena would drag on for months, dropped efforts to compel him to appear. Hill insisted on being subpoenaed, and delivered her private deposition on October 14th. Before her closed-door appearance, she again began receiving death threats. An F.B.I. officer who had worked with her recommended that she tape shut her mail slot and put security cameras around her house. Still, Hill welcomed the chance to testify. “I was given my opportunity for a clarifying moment,” she said.

The dynamics during Hill’s private deposition, she said, reminded her of high school. Matt Gaetz, a Florida Republican, showed up uninvited at the hearing as a kind of protest against the impeachment inquiry, and engaged in “some absurd staring contest” with her. She was disturbed that her Republican questioners insisted on repeating the false theory that Ukraine had interfered in the election. She also sensed that they were trying to link her to Christopher Steele and his dossier. Hill told them that the dossier was a “rabbit hole”—which upset Steele, who had considered Hill a friend. Derek Harvey, who had been made an adviser to the House Intelligence Committee’s ranking Republican, Devin Nunes, passed notes to the Republican questioner Stephen Castor, whom Hill heard laughing while she described the lies that had been spread about her. (When Castor was called out during the deposition, he insisted that he had not laughed.) During a break, Harvey told Hill that he’d heard that the “trolls” were coming after her again.

Hill’s public testimony took place on
November 21st. Congressional hearings are typically dry affairs, followed mostly by lobbyists, political junkies, and retirees addicted to C-SPAN. But, when Washington is in the throes of a political scandal, a hearing can be riveting. In 1973, John Dean, Richard Nixon's former White House counsel, testified for five days before the Watergate committee. He surmised that he had been recorded in the Oval Office, a statement that led to revelations that Nixon had secret tapes of his meetings. In June, 2017, James Comey told the Senate Intelligence Committee that Trump had asked him “what we could do to ‘lift the cloud’” of the Russia investigation. Trump had implied on Twitter that he had tapes of at least one of his encounters with Comey, prompting Comey to say, “Lordy, I hope there are tapes.”

Hill, conveying a clear sense of the absurdity of the events she had witnessed, gave a brief opening statement, in which she pledged her loyalty to a country that had afforded her opportunities that would not have been available to her in the U.K., given her background and accent. Sondland had testified the previous day that he, Volker, and Rick Perry, the former Energy Secretary, had not wanted to deal with Giuliani but were “playing the hand we were dealt.” Hill described Sondland and his associates as having been involved in a “domestic political errand.”

Kelly, who had left the Administration at the end of 2018, and McMaster, who had taken a position at Stanford, had said little publicly about Trump, and they told Hill they admired her fortitude. Bolton, who was fired in September, 2019, had decided to save his revelations for a memoir. After Hill's testimony, he asked Sarah Tinsley, a longtime aide, to relay a personal message: “You did the right thing.” On March 1st, Hill received an e-mail from James Mattis, the former Secretary of Defense: “I’ve wanted to drop you a note paying my respects but hesitated in the immediate aftermath of your testimony to ask around for your email address. Had word leaked out that I wanted to be in touch I imagined it could/would have been misconstrued and add to the challenges you were dealing with.” He went on, “I doubt that I’ve ever felt the combination of pride, anger and contempt as I watched you testify and what followed. I was enormously proud of your demonstrated courage and poise as you stood tall; angry at those who chose to try to defame you (they failed); and contemptuous of what we witnessed in those weeks by supposed political leaders whose hear no evil, see no evil stance revealed profiles in non-courage.”

In the end, Hill said, the impeachment “came down to political mud-wrestling.” The Republican-controlled Senate called no new witnesses, and only one Senate Republican, Mitt Romney, voted to convict Trump on the charge of abuse of power. On February 5th, the day of Trump’s acquittal, the U.S. had a dozen confirmed cases of COVID-19. By June, the death toll in the U.S., the highest in the world, and the response to the pandemic had deepened doubts, at home and abroad, about the government’s competence. On June 3rd, Mattis, who until then had been publicly silent about Trump, criticized the Administration’s heavy-handed response to the protests triggered by the murder of George Floyd, in Minneapolis, denouncing Trump for dividing the nation and violating the constitutional rights of American citizens. For Hill, the government’s handling of these crises provides the Russians with yet another propaganda windfall. “If we can’t heal our own divisions, then we’re going to be exploited from here to eternity, and our allies will be turning away in horror,” she told me. “We’re an object of pity.”

In May, Hill delivered the commencement address to the class of 2020 at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. She had been invited by Eliot Cohen, who had warned that serving in the Administration would lead to “moral self-destruction.” Hill had been in lockdown with her husband and daughter for more than two months, talking to colleagues from Brookings and delivering speeches on Zoom. She was considering writing a book about her life and the international rise of populism. She prerecorded her remarks in an empty auditorium on the school’s campus in Washington. In full academic regalia, she sat in front of a blue Johns Hopkins backdrop. “Here, in 2020, everything seems to have come crashing down,” she said. Hill did not mention Trump or her time at the N.S.C., speaking allusively about “domestic and global crises compounded, blame cast, rumors spread.” Near the end of her speech, she quoted from one of her father’s favorite songs, with lyrics by Yip Harburg and Billy Rose, “It’s Only a Paper Moon.” “The song ends with lines that somehow capture our moment in time,” she said, quoting them: “It’s a Barnum and Bailey world, just as phony as it can be, but it wouldn’t be make-believe if you believed in me.” She got a thumbs-up from one of the camera operators, then took off her robes, put her face mask on, and drove home. When I texted her to ask how it had gone, she responded, “A bit wooden sitting on the stage, but I did my best.”
leyman, in the tenth century B.C., is an inhospitable place for farmers but a strategic location for men on the run. Human settlement in the Judean highlands is sparse: five thousand people, spread out in hamlets of about fifty families each. The landscape is rugged, veined with ravines and thicketed with oaks. Rain is unpredictable. To the east lies the desert, hushed and empty. To the west—teasingly close—are the lush lowlands of the Philistine city-states, with their seaside trade routes and their princely homes. Cut off from these coastal plains, life in the hill country is severe. Homes are made of unworked stone; sheep and goats are quartered indoors. There are no public buildings, no ornate furnishings in the shrines. Bands of fugitives, landless laborers, and tax evaders rove the Judean wilderness. These rebel gangs—viewed by the neighboring Egyptians as both a nuisance and a threat—maraud the nearby villages. They collect protection money and pillage the locals, making off with their women and their cattle. They terrorize the Philistines, and then, in a sudden turnaround, offer their services to a Philistine king in exchange for shelter. Their leader is a wily, resourceful man from Bethlehem, who decides that his people are meant for more than lightning raids and mercenary stints. He sends his men to rout an advancing force, then shares the loot—perhaps humanity’s first antihero.

The Bible depicts David as a brilliant but flawed figure, capable of unspeakable violence but also of remorse and tenderness—perhaps humanity’s first antihero. He is anointed by God to replace Saul, the first king of Israel, whose short rule was marked by bouts of rebellion. David is a handsome shepherd; he has a way with the lyre and a way with women; he slings a fatal stone at a giant. So far, these are the familiar tropes of the ancient hero. But David is also said to have impregnated Bathsheba—a married woman—and sent her husband off to die in battle.

Nadav Na’aman, an authority on Jewish history and a colleague of Finkelstein’s at Tel Aviv University, describes David’s story as “extraordinary fiction.” But he believes that it contains kernels of truth, preserved as the tale was passed down by oral tradition. The story, for instance, frequently mentions the Philistine city of Gath, which was destroyed in the late ninth century B.C.—a clue to its origins.

In the long war over how to reconcile the Bible with historical fact, the story of David stands at ground zero. There is no archeological record of Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob. There is no Noah’s Ark, nothing from Moses. Joshua did not bring down the walls of Jericho: they collapsed centuries earlier, perhaps in an earthquake. But, in 1993, an Israeli archeologist working near the Syrian border found a fragment of basalt from the ninth century B.C., with an Aramaic inscription that mentioned the “House of David”—the first known reference to one of the Bible’s foundational figures. So David is not just a central ancestor in the Old Testament. He may also be the only one that we can prove

King David’s story has been told for millennia. Archeologists are still fighting over whether it’s true.

BY RUTH MARGALIT
The evidence of David’s life is sparse. Was he an emperor? A local king? Or, as Israel Finkelstein claims, a Bedouin sheikh?
William Albright, the father of Biblical archaeology, seemed ill-suited to field work. Born in 1891, to Methodist missionaries from Iowa, Albright suffered from extreme myopia—likely the result of typhoid fever in infancy—and a left hand that had been mangled in a farming accident. At ten, though, he cobbled together enough money to buy a two-volume history of Babylon and Assyria. By sixteen, he was teaching himself Hebrew. In college, he studied Greek, Latin, Akkadian, Ancient Egyptian, Syriac, and Arabic, with breaks to travel to New York for meetings of the American Oriental Society.

Albright was a faithful Christian, and the inerrancy of the Bible was then under attack. Critics, mostly in Europe, argued that the first five books of the Old Testament were written not at the time of Moses, as the Scriptures claim, but by authors working centuries apart, weaving a patchwork of tales from early Judeans and later priests, and even from Babylonian myths. For Albright, the Bible was nevertheless a compendium of verifiable fact. In 1919, he arrived in Palestine, and began scouring the land of ancient Israel for findings that would illustrate and historicize the Scriptures.

In 1936, Albright named a successor in Palestine: Nelson Glueck, an American who is said to have boasted of digging “with a Bible in one hand and a trowel in the other.” He surveyed hundreds of sites in Transjordan, and found evidence of an ancient copper industry so extensive that he nicknamed the area “the Pittsburgh of Palestine.” By comparing potsherds he found there with those from other sites, Glueck grew convinced that the mines dated to the tenth century B.C. For Biblical archaeologists, this was akin to striking gold— “the ultimate fantasy,” one told me.

In the nascent State of Israel, there was real currency to research that could demonstrate the Jewish people’s connection to their ancestral land— especially if it ignored the other people living there. David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister, said, “Jewish archeology presents our past and shows our historic continuity in the country.” His Army’s legendary chief of staff, Yigael Yadin, became the country’s leading archeologist. In 1955, Yadin began an epochal excavation of the ancient city of Hazor, which, in the Bible, is destroyed by Joshua during his conquest of Canaan, and later rebuilt and fortified by Solomon. Yadin approached the dig like a military operation. He employed two hundred diggers, mostly immigrants from North Africa, and installed a network of field telephones and a miniature railway for transferring dirt. His men unearthed a six-chambered gate made of ashlar stones, which looked identical to a gate that Yadin had previously discovered in Megiddo— another city thought to have been built by Solomon. Here was evidence of a grand design, Yadin concluded. “Both gates were built by the same royal architect,” he wrote in 1958.

Finkelstein was nine years old at the time, and the romance of such finds was helping to inspire what one historian described as a “popular national cult” of archeology. The cult didn’t extend to Finkelstein’s house. He was raised outside Tel Aviv, in a family of citrus farmers. His father was a talented athlete and, he says, a “big macho,” who emigrated from Ukraine, joined his in-laws’ orchard business, and went on to become a successful sports executive. At age four, Finkelstein was considered a math prodigy. But, he said, “my parents did what you’re not supposed to do, which is to show off my skills with a slide rule in front of guests.” His father wanted him to be a nuclear physicist, and was baffled by his decision to go into archeology: “Until his last day, he couldn’t understand why someone would pay me a salary— ‘Who cares? What good does it do?’”

After serving in the Israeli Air Force, Finkelstein landed, in 1970, in the archeology department at Tel Aviv. The field was embroiled in debate. “There was a world war going on over whether Abraham was historical,” he said. “Then there was a big debate over the conquest of Canaan. Today, there isn’t. We know these things didn’t happen. But that’s how it all went—the salami method.” The most momentous events in the Scriptures were being pared away, one after another. Finkelstein found it easy to wonder whether any of the Biblical narrative was based on historical fact.

Thomas Römer, the head of the Collège de France, told me that Finkelstein developed “a reputation as one of the young generation who were about to challenge the traditional way of how Israel was doing archeology.” He also developed a reputation as a playboy. “I needed to calm down in every respect” is how he puts it. He was married when he accepted a two-year teaching position in Chicago, in the mid-eighties, but the marriage collapsed soon after his return home. He met his second wife, Joëlle Cohen, a Parisian émigrée, on a dig in southern Israel. By then, he was forty—and calmer.

After years of researching the highlands, Finkelstein wanted to take on a site in the lowlands, to see whether social structures emerged differently there. He chose Megiddo, Yadin’s old territory. It was the “switchboard of the Levant,” Finkelstein told me one afternoon a few months ago. We were in his office in the Tel Aviv University humanities building. He had settled in a lime-green armchair, and gestured for me to sit on a wooden daybed. An electric bicycle, which he calls his “Mercedes,” was parked in a corner. At seventy-one, Finkelstein is six feet two, bearded, with a deep baritone and elegant hands that always seem to be conducting an invisible orchestra. (I heard a janitor on campus address him as “Sean Connery.”) He is generous, witty, courtly,
overwhelmingly charming—and he knows it. “Israel Finkelstein is Israel Finkelstein’s greatest fan,” one scholar told me. More than once, when we spoke, he compared himself to Baruch Spinoza, “a great Jew,” who, in 1656, was excommunicated for challenging Biblical orthodoxy. In conversation, Finkelstein often refers to himself as “your slave,” “your loyal slave,” or “your wretched slave,” which has the strange effect of further elevating his self-image.

Finkelstein spent a year preparing for Megiddo, poring over stratigraphy and chronological charts. The more he read, the more confused he grew. Yadin had dated the site’s most substantial layer to Solomonic times. But there was confounding evidence, in the form of relics from a long-collapsed palace. The relics were inscribed with stonemason marks strikingly similar to those from a palace in the ancient city of Samaria—which had been persuasively dated to a century after Solomon’s rule. As Finkelstein considered this, he visited a friend’s dig in the Jezreel Valley, where excavators had noticed that the pottery—burnished by hand and painted red—was much like the ceramics of Megiddo. But his friend’s site was from the time of the Omrides, who ruled Israel in the ninth century B.C. Again, Yadin’s dating seemed to be off by a hundred years. “Something fundamentally didn’t make sense,” Finkelstein told me.

He began to think more broadly about ancient Israel in relation to its surroundings. For three centuries before the time of David, the pharaohs of Egypt’s New Kingdom had ruled over Canaan. But, by the tenth century B.C., the Egyptian empire had long receded, diminished by a withering regional drought. The same drought had also vanquished the Hittite empire, of present-day Turkey, and the Mycenaean empire, of Greece. What were the chances that a single empire would suddenly appear on the world stage—and in the neglected highlands of Judah, of all places? “An empire needs a capital,” Finkelstein has said. “There’s almost nothing in Jerusalem; a very small village. An empire needs manpower. There’s nothing in Judah; a few small villages. An empire needs administration. There’s no administration. There’s no scribal activity. Where is the empire?”

In 1996, Finkelstein published a paper in the peer-reviewed journal *Levant*, with a modest title, “The Archeology of the United Monarchy: An Alternative View.” To the uninitiated, his argument was technical and narrow: the stratum at Megiddo that had yielded the palace and other monumental architecture should be down-dated to the ninth century B.C., as should comparable layers at other sites. In effect, however, Finkelstein was stripping David and Solomon’s United Monarchy of any ruins attesting to splendor, and reattributing those ruins to the Omride kingdom of northern Israel. Omri is presented in the Bible as a marginal king—but, according to Finkelstein, that only underscores the authors’ Judean bias. The archeological record suggests that Omri’s kingdom was a dominant regional power, with the House of David serving as its vassal.

“The new dating calls for a re-evaluation of the historical, cultural and political processes that took place in Palestine in the eleventh–nineteenth centuries B.C.,” Finkelstein wrote. A “re-evaluation,” in other words, of the rise of ancient Israel. In a later addendum, he went further, accusing Yadin, who died in 1984, and his acolytes of being led astray by “irrelevant sentiments” regarding the “grandeur” of early Israel.

Finkelstein thought that he had settled the issue; the scholarly world would accept his theory, which came to be known as the “low chronology,” and move on. “I was naive,” he told me. “I didn’t know what kind of battle I was getting myself into.”

Finkelstein’s paper unleashed a torrent of academic rejoinders. His friend Amihai Mazar, a renowned professor of archeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, wrote that Finkelstein’s conclusions were “premature and unacceptable.” Amnon Ben-Tor, also of the Hebrew University, and long regarded as Yadin’s successor, accused him of employing a “double standard”: citing the Biblical text where it suited him and deploring its use where it did not.

In 1999, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* published a front-page story about this controversial new frontier in archeology. Written by Ze’ev Herzog, a colleague of Finkelstein’s, it was titled “The Bible: No Evidence on the Ground.” Herzog wrote, “Following seventy years of intensive excavations in the Land of Israel, archeologists have found out: The patriarchs’ acts are legendary, the Israelites did not sojourn in Egypt or make an exodus, they did not conquer the land. Neither is there any mention of the empire of David and Solomon, nor of the source
of belief in the God of Israel. These facts have been known for years, but Israelis are a stubborn people, and no one wants to hear it.”

For insiders, the Haaretz article read like a long subtweet of the archeology department of Jerusalem and its “stubborn people.” It drove a wedge between the Tel Aviv and the Jerusalem schools, which still holds twenty years later. Ben-Tor told me, “Because we have no evidence of Solomon, and there was no statehood, what do they say about him in Tel Aviv? ‘Chief.’ ‘A neglected backwater.’ What kind of talk is that? Chief? I can say, ‘The idiot that teaches archeology.’ Prove that he’s a chief! A hundred and fifty years later someone in Aramaic still talks about the ‘House of David.’ That’s more than a chief, no?”

Whenever Finkelstein visited the United States, with its heavy influence of religious seminaries, he was met with antagonism. At a conference in San Francisco, an audience member beseeched him, “Why are you saying these things?” The highly regarded Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research began rejecting his papers but continued to publish his detractors. In hindsight, Finkelstein told me in his office, he understands the uproar over the United Monarchy. “The description is of a glorious kingdom, a huge empire, authors in the king’s court, a huge army, military conquests—and then someone like me comes along and says, ‘Wait a minute. They were nothing but hillbillies who sat in Jerusalem in a small territory, and the rest of it is either theology or ideology,’” Finkelstein said. “So someone for whom the Bible represents the word of God views what I have to say with complete shock.”

For decades, Israeli archeology mirrored the country’s politics: it reconstructed the story of an unlikely conquest and a spectacular military expansion. Finkelstein opened up the discipline to larger questions of how peoples move and states form. William Schniedewind, a professor of Biblical studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, told me, “He’s an incredibly original thinker, and also a really brilliant scholar. But he’s also a person who’s trying to win the game of scholarship. So he’s laying down facts on the ground.”

Finkelstein is the author of several books, including two mass-market titles that he wrote with Neil Silberman, a journalist and historian. These books advanced his belief that the Bible should be understood from the perspective not of the events it depicts but of the period in which it was written. That period begins around 722 B.C., when the mighty northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria, leaving only its lesser southern neighbor, Judah. Like some other scholars, Finkelstein argues that, when the Assyrians seized Israel, waves of refugees began to flood Judah. In just a few years, he asserts, Jerusalem’s population grew from a thousand to twelve thousand. This mass migration brought with it the need to form a communal identity, backed by a “dream of a past golden age—real or imagined—when their ancestors were settled securely in well-defined territories and enjoyed the divine promise of eternal peace and prosperity,” Finkelstein and Silberman write, in “The Bible Unearthed,” from 2001.

That job fell mostly to Josiah, a direct descendant of David’s, who ruled Judah in the seventh century B.C. Josiah is described in the Scriptures as the saintliest of kings. No wonder, Finkelstein argues. The core of the Bible was composed during his time, as an attempt to lend its rule divine legitimacy by rewriting the stories of his ancestors—Moses, Joshua, and David. “The very outlines of those great characters,” Finkelstein and Silberman write, “seem to be drawn with Josiah in mind.”

The Times, reviewing “The Bible Unearthed,” praised its “bold imagination and disciplined research.” Not everyone agreed. William Dever, the longtime director of the Albright Institute of Archeological Research, in Jerusalem, wrote in the Biblical Archaeology Review that the book was “an archeological manifesto, not judicious, well-balanced scholarship.” Dever, who is eighty-six, is a swaggering, charismatic, and prolific author and excavator of ancient Israel—not unlike Finkelstein. For many years, the two men engaged in amicable competition. Finkelstein considered Dever a Bible literalist disguised as a liberal; Dever has never accepted Finkelstein’s low chronology.

When Dever’s review of “The Bible Unearthed” came out, Finkelstein was enraged. “His fury extended not only to Dever, but to me,” Hershel Shanks, who edited that review, wrote in a blow-by-blow account of the feud, in the Bibli-
cal Archaeology Review. In 2002, Dever and Finkelstein met in a Toronto hotel room, agreed to put their differences behind them, and signed a joint letter exploring the “polemics which all too often embarrasses our profession.” Finkelstein didn’t mention that he had recently given an interview describing Dever as a “jealous academic parasite,” or that he had written an article that called Dever’s life’s work of excavating the city of Gezer a “debacle,” and accused him of bulldozing part of the dig—a cardinal sin in archeology. Dever, who has said that he used a bulldozer only to remove dirt left by a previous excavator, withdrew his signature from their letter, and told Shanks that Finkelstein’s attack amounted to “character assassination.”

Once, after Finkelstein gave a lecture, Dever went onstage and accused him of pushing post-Zionism—the idea, popularized by some left-leaning Israeli historians, that the Jewish state has served its purpose. Finkelstein was affronted. “I don’t recall you standing next to me when I cast my vote in the last elections in Israel!” he snapped. In recent decades, post-Zionism has spread through academic circles, and the debates that it inspires have inevitably circled back to the Bible—specifically to a dispute between two opposing camps of Biblical scholars known as the maximalists and the minimalists. If maximalists treat the Bible as verifiable fact, the minimalists treat it as fiction: a near-mythological account, composed between 500 and 200 B.C., that should be understood within a purely literary framework. Their skepticism often manifests in a fondness for scare quotes. One book, from 1992, is titled “In Search of Ancient Israel.” Another, from five years later, asks, “Can a ‘History of Israel’ Be Written?” To the minimalists, David was an invention, and the inscription bearing his name was likely a forgery. “Just as Shakespeare’s play ‘Julius Caesar’ doesn’t teach us about ancient Rome, the Bible can’t teach us historic facts,” the Israeli historian Shlomo Sand said in an interview, from 2012, in which he praised Finkelstein’s work.

Finkelstein, whose theories call for the Davidic story to be reassessed, not abandoned, rejects post-Zionism and minimalism. Like Dever, he dates the bulk of Deuteronomistic history (the Books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) to the eighth and seventh centuries B.C., bringing it much closer to the events described. But the minimalists do not rile him. The maximalists do. “For me, the literal reading isn’t only wrongheaded but it actually detracts from the Biblical authors,” Finkelstein told me. “Only when you read them critically do you understand their genius.” He is especially disdainful of scholars who claim to have found archeological proof of the Bible’s veracity. “Just provide me with a few eroded sherds and the nightmare of critical scholarship will be beaten off,” he said in a speech in 2017. This was seen as a thinly veiled attack on one scholar in particular: Yosef Garfinkel, the head of the Institute of Archeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

In the past decade, as Finkelstein’s revisionist chronology of ancient Israel has come under fire, Garfinkel has emerged as its most prominent critic. Garfinkel is sixty-three, bald, round, and jocular, with a dimpled chin and a folksy, affable manner. When I visited him on a dig a few months ago, he offered me dried figs and dates, in celebration of Tu Bishvat, the Jewish new year for trees, and made me promise that I would return to the site with my children to see the “waterfalls of anemones” that were about to blossom.

The excavation was of Khirbet al-Ra‘i, in the rolling Judean foothills of central Israel. Usually, an archeological site in Israel is categorized as either a tel, meaning a mound formed during thousands of years of human habitation, or a khirbe, Arabic for “ruin,” a place of relatively short duration before its destruction. Finkelstein is drawn to the complexity of the former; Garfinkel likes the simplicity of the latter. “Destruction is a tragedy for the ancient people, but for us it’s a hidden treasure,” he told me.

Khirbet al-Ra‘i is dotted with almond trees and wheat fields—a green horizon stretching north toward Jerusalem and west toward the coastal plains. Garfinkel is “ninety per cent certain” that it is also the Biblical city of Ziklag, where David sought refuge after fleeing Saul’s envy. In the weeks before my visit, rainstorms had swept through the country, leaving the team of thirty excavators, most of them fresh-faced students from Australia’s Macquarie University, to sit idle for days at a nearby kibbutz. Now the weather was clear, and they were back, and eager. Their energy was devoted to a silo in one corner of the dig, where last year’s delegation had unearthed two potsherds bearing a script of five proto-Canaanite letters.

The volunteers treated the silo like forensic evidence. They cleaned it with soft-bristle brushes, then collected the dirt and sifted it in large mesh screens. Though the surrounding area was caked in mud, complicating their work, they marked each tiny artifact, then labelled and sealed it away. One student, on her first dig, let out a shriek. She had discovered four olive pits that could now be used for radiocarbon dating. (Short-lived organic materials make for the most reliable samples.) Another volunteer, wearing a billowy dress over sweatpants, trundled by with a loaded wheelbarrow that nearly tipped over. “The new ones will wear themselves out today and crash tomorrow,” an excavator told me. “The more experienced ones will pace themselves.”

Like most archeological digs, the site had been divided into a symmetrical grid, but digging across the grid wasn’t uniform. Some squares were knee-deep, while others dropped ten feet underground. Not only did the result look uneven—a topographical Tetris—but it meant that excavators were literally standing in different time periods. “Hellenistic,” Garfinkel said, pointing at one volunteer. “Iron Age,” he said, pointing at another. He shook his head at the mess. Then he alighted on something else: “We once had a volunteer from Papua New Guinea!” Garfinkel has a boundless, easily distractible curiosity, and a mind that fixates on eccentric facts. In the middle of showing me chambers that his team had unearthed, he veered off into a discourse on the holistic qualities of the mandrake.

Garfinkel grew up in a secular home in Haifa. He joined the archeology
department in Jerusalem in 1992, researching prehistory and writing books on Neolithic pottery and the origins of dance. At a kibbutz near the Jordan River, he unearthed a cache of human figurines from the sixth millennium B.C. that has since been exhibited in the Louvre and elsewhere. (“Gallery 1 at the Met is all me,” he told me.) He also brought up two sons, under demanding conditions. Since 2004, his wife, a scholar of women and gender in the Talmudic era, has spent half of each year in Berlin, teaching at the Free University. In 2007, Garfinkel changed specialties: noting a dearth of Biblical archeologists at the Hebrew University, he decided to switch from prehistory to the more “recent past,” as he put it. For that, however, he needed a dig.

As Garfinkel was making his foray into the Iron Age, Finkelstein’s theory sustained its first major blow. In East Jerusalem, an archeologist named Eilat Mazar uncovered the foundation walls of a large public building, on a slope that descends from the Temple Mount. That slope had been known since the early nineteen-hundreds as the City of David, the site of the Biblical capital. Its location neatly corresponds with a verse in the Book of Samuel, which describes a palace that the King of Tyre built for David. The palace is said to have been erected near a citadel—and Mazar’s find was bordered by a massive stepped-stone wall, believed by many archeologists to be part of that citadel.

It was nearly impossible to date conclusively: Jerusalem has been inhabited almost continuously for three millennia, with each generation building atop the one before. But Mazar’s structure created what’s known as an archological sandwich; pottery shards found directly above it were dated to the ninth century B.C., and those below it were dated to the eleventh century B.C. Mazar concluded that the structure was built in the tenth century B.C., and exclaimed in the Hebrew press, “I have found the palace of King David!”

Her announcement drew immediate rebukes. Finkelstein and three colleagues wrote a cutting takedown in Tel Aviv, a peer-reviewed journal of archeology that Finkelstein edits for Tel Aviv University. (“Our enemies call us Pravda,” he says proudly.) They claimed that the walls that Mazar had excavated represented several phases of construction, none of which originated when she claimed they did. “She says it’s a majestic building from the tenth century, and that it’s the palace of King David,” Finkelstein told me recently. “Not one word in that sentence is true.” Yet other archeologists found Mazar’s discovery jolting. After decades in which it appeared that there was no evidence of the United Monarchy, now there was at least the possibility of something.

Garfinkel followed this debate from the sidelines, impatient to join in. “I kept thinking, What’s the greatest intellectual contribution of Israel to world culture? The Bible,” he told me. One day, a student of his, who worked for Israel’s Antiquities Authority, approached him after class and described a promising site. Known as Khirbet Qeiyafa, it was a lush but abandoned ruin, twenty miles west of Jerusalem, ringed by what appeared to be a fortified wall. Garfinkel and the student, Sa’ar Ganor, decided to undertake a test dig. Within ten days, they had reached a layer containing ceramics that could be dated to the Iron Age. “But how ancient?” Garfinkel recalls thinking. “Tenth century? Ninth century?"

By the following year, it had become clear that they were unearthing a buried city. “A Biblical Pompeii,” Garfinkel called it. They managed to collect burned olive pits from the site, five of which were sent to Oxford University for dating. “I knew that King David— that all of it— might be solved by a handful of pits,” Garfinkel told me. Overcome by nerves, he accidentally shipped his credit card to the lab in the package containing the pits. If the results came back showing 850 B.C., he said, “I would have received an honorary doctorate from Tel Aviv University.” Instead, they pointed to a date range of between 1050 and 970 B.C. Bingo.

Even Garfinkel’s critics greeted his discovery with awe. “Before visiting there, I said to myself, ‘No way is this a site from the tenth century,’” Finkelstein told me. “And it is. He proved it.” But was Qeiyafa part of David’s kingdom, as Garfinkel claimed? After looking at the fortifications, Finkelstein decided that they couldn’t have been built by David, and should perhaps be attributed to a king in northern Israel. Other scholars suggested that the site was Philistine, because of its relative proximity to the coast. Still others said that it was built not by Judeans but by Canaanites, which seemed to make the most sense geographically. As Nadav Na’aman, of Tel Aviv University, said, “The burden of proof is on him to show that it isn’t Canaanite.”

Garfinkel dismissed these notions. Qeiyafa is too far removed to be an outpost of the northern kingdom. The site was conspicuously free of pig bones, ruling out the pork-eating Philistines. The structural features—a four-chambered case-mate wall, two city gates, and a clear delineation between private and public functions—were, he argues, the “blueprint” for what became Judean architecture.

Yet Garfinkel agreed with Finkelstein that David’s territory was likely smaller—perhaps only Hebron, Jerusalem, and Qeiyafa, which he identified as the Biblical city of Sha’arayim. This is a testament to how entrenched Finkelstein’s theory has become: the argument is now over a few decades and a few square miles. The salami slices are paper-thin.

But, within that narrow space, Garfinkel argues, David led an unprecedented political transformation. In a region surrounded by autonomous city-states, he slowly forms a kingdom. He builds a city, establishes a tax system, fosters a court of scribes. To confer legitimacy, he brings an old relic, known as the Ark of the Covenant, to Jerusalem, where it helps to anchor a centralized cult. His son erects a palace, large enough to store a year’s worth of oil and wine, and a temple, built from Lebanon cedar overlaid with gold.

“David was the greatest genius who ever lived between the Mediterranean and Jordan,” Garfinkel told me. “So what do they do? They come in and erase him. In a thousand years, no one will know who Garfinkel or Finkelstein or the minimalists are, but they will all know who David is.” Garfinkel has called his discovery of Qeiyafa “a death blow to minimalists.” In his presentations of the site, he has taken to including photographs of a cemetery, stating that he has “buried” Finkelstein’s theory.
Ben-Tor, of the Hebrew University, who is a friend of Garfinkel's, warned me that this kind of taunting inspired animosity. “When you go to Tel Aviv and mention Yossi Garfinkel’s name, they’ll stone you,” he said. He wasn’t wrong, exactly. Oded Lipschits, a professor of archaeology who has collaborated with Finkelestein, cut me off before I finished saying Garfinkel’s name. “Yossi Garfinkel is a prehistorian who hadn’t dealt with this period before, and he came into it with no real understanding,” he said. Finkelestein accused Garfinkel of excavating too hastily—the old bulldozer argument—and of a simplistic reading of Biblical texts. “I come from a generation that cares a great deal about how Israel and the Jewish people are perceived,” he told me. “When I sit in a conference abroad, and he goes onstage and says primitive things, I want to die from embarrassment.”

The issue of funding didn’t help. In digging for the past, Israeli archaeologists are painfully aware of the future: their excavations depend on donors whose interests often lie outside academic research. Many are religious, and titillated by the prospect of proving the written word; others are right-wing, and intent on justifying Jewish claims to the land of Greater Israel. Some are both. Schniedewind, of U.C.L.A., told me that Garfinkel’s excavations “have been seminal, but his interpretations sometimes are a little bit . . . Well, I mean, you need money, right?”

Garfinkel’s research has been supported by a French Algerian-born Israeli named Madeleine Mumcuoglu, who made a fortune from a homeopathic cold remedy. She is now a research fellow at the Hebrew University’s Institute of Archaeology and a co-author, with Garfinkel, of a book called “Solomon’s Temple and Palace.” “What fascinated me is if I can scientifically prove that one item or one word in the Bible is accurate,” she told me, when I met her at the dig. Garfinkel’s first season at Qeiyafa was underwritten by an organization called Foundation Stone, whose director lived in a West Bank settlement and which boasted of using history to inform “Jewish identity.” Garfinkel told me that Israeli archaeologists “have two huge weights on our shoulders. One is that the Bible is a religious manuscript—billions of people believe it’s the word of God.” This, he acknowledged, “can stand in the way of objectivity.” The other weight, he said, “is the current political situation.”

The City of David, in East Jerusalem, is both a settlement and an excavation site, a gaping maze of stones and stairs that run beneath the Palestinian village of Silwan. There are more than thirty thousand archeological sites in Israel—a country the size of New Jersey—but none scrutinized and fought over as those in Jerusalem, where history, religion, and politics are uniquely hard to separate.

On a balmy day in March, Arab children tricycled along a corrugated metal fence, while, on the other side, students from Germany trowelled the ground fifty feet below. Israel Finkelstein maneuvered his car into a narrow spot reserved for excavators as a cacophony of horns blared behind him. (Parking in the Old City is an extreme sport.) “What a dump,” he grumbled, then quickly added, “An important and interesting place—but what a dump.” He stepped outside. Blinded for a moment by the midmorning sun, he removed his cashmere sweater and tied it around his slim waist. (A tennis injury last year has converted him to Pilates.) Then he beelined to the dig’s visitor center, bought a ticket, and smirked at the brochure. It read, “City of David. Where It All Began.”

In the early nineties, a little-known organization called Elad began to buy and seize the homes of Palestinian families in Silwan, and install Jewish families in their place. Palestinian witnesses say that the organization, headed by a former military commander and yeshiva teacher named David Be’er, used threats, forged documents, and fraudulent statements in the process. (Elad denies any wrongdoing, pointing to recent victories in Israeli courts.) Finkelstein told me, of Be’er, “He looks like a paratrooper from the fifties, with his tzitzit”—prayer

“Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who talks to inanimate objects most of all?”
tassels—“and his sandals, but he’s extremely sophisticated.” Once Be’eri established himself, he started excavating under the houses of the village. “At some point this reached the court,” Be’eri told a group of visitors to the site, in 2008. “The judge asked me, ‘How can you dig underneath their homes?’ I told him, ‘I’m digging underneath their homes? King David dug underneath their homes! I’m just cleaning.’” The group erupted in laughter.

By then, the Israeli government had given Elad legal ownership of about a quarter of Silwan’s land, and awarded the group a contract to develop the City of David as a national park. Under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Elad has become the main sponsor of archeological excavations in East Jerusalem. It has renovated and opened to the public an array of ancient relics: a Herodian pool, a water tunnel believed to have been built by King Hezekiah, the large stone structure that Eilat Mazar excavated. There are three active digs, where spectators can observe the archeological work from raised platforms. Last year, more than a million people visited these sites.

Finkelstein objects to politicizing the site, but he credits Elad with making archeology accessible. “If you were to let the state do it, it would have taken four hundred years,” he said, as we descended the stairs of Mazar’s structure. “These are amazing things. They’re exposing the history of Jerusalem. So, O.K., they have their agenda, but they don’t interfere in the research.” In the eighties, Finkelstein led an excavation of the ancient city of Shiloh, in the West Bank, but he has since eschewed archeological work in the occupied territories. Still, he says, “Jerusalem isn’t Nablus,” adding, “I don’t see any reason, including international law, to stop Israeli research in Jerusalem.” The Palestinians see it differently. They regard East Jerusalem as the capital of their future state, and argue that Elad has made partition impossible. “The settler groups in Jerusalem, they are in control,” Jawad Siyam, who founded an information center based in Silwan, has said. Last year, after a three-decade legal battle, a Jerusalem court ordered Siyam’s family out of their home, and settlers from Elad moved in.

Yuval Gadot, who heads the largest active excavation in the City of David, defended his work. “Imagine going to Athens and what you see are people’s homes, not the Acropolis,” he told me. But Yonathan Mizrachi, the director of a group of archeologists who oppose digging on occupied land, said that Elad is disregarding four thousand years of other peoples’ history to focus exclusively on the Bible. “Elad realized long ago that archeology is the strongest ticket they have to justifying Jewish settlement,” he told me. He criticized not only the organization and its backers in government but also researchers from Tel Aviv University, whom he regards as complicit in laying waste to the area. “Research has its limit, and we are way past those limits,” he told me.

Though Finkelstein sees no moral impediment to excavating in the City of David, he says that it may not, technically speaking, be the City of David at all. Peering over Gadot’s dig, he told me, “I see a Byzantine building, I see a Roman villa, I see houses from the Second Temple period.” What he doesn’t see is evidence of a palace, or a temple, or a fortified wall, or an inscription, or substantial pottery—anything whatsoever from the early Iron Age period of the United Monarchy. He also doesn’t see evidence of a tel, the mound on which ancient kings resided. “Where is it?” he asked. Then, cheekily, he stuck out his index finger and pointed north. In the past several years, Finkelstein has become persuaded by a theory, published by the German Biblical scholar Ernst Axel Knauf in 2000, that argues that Biblical Jerusalem was situated atop the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism and home to two of the holiest sites in Islam: the al-Aqsa Mosque and the gold-capped Dome of the Rock. In a 2011 paper, Finkelstein and two co-authors suggested that during periods of expansion the city overflowed southward, toward what’s now known as the City of David. But its center—no more than a village chiefdom, in the tenth century B.C.—stood on the most elevated point of the Mount itself.

Aside from Finkelstein and his co-authors, almost no one accepts this idea. For one thing, the Temple Mount is far from the main water source of the Gihon Spring, which lies directly below the ridge of the City of David. But Na’aman told me that he had recently learned of a tiny clay shard, found at the foot of the Temple Mount, that contained sediment from the Nile. It appeared to have been part of a correspondence between the rulers of Egypt and Canaan in the fourteenth century B.C. How did the shard get there, if not by tumbling down from the royal center? By floating this theory, Finkelstein has, ironically, helped the maximalists come up with an explanation for the paucity of evidence from the United Monarchy: in the first century B.C., Herod the Great built a mammoth compound on the Temple Mount, and whatever had stood there before was lev-
elled. “In an upside-down kind of logic, who’s the greatest savior of Jerusalem?” he asked me. “Your miserable slave!” Yet there is no way to prove—or to refute—his theory. The Temple Mount is protected by Israeli law as a holy place, which clearly precludes excavation. Any attempt to disrupt the site’s intricate security arrangements, which have been in effect since 1967, has led to serious violence. Earlier this year, Finkelstein appeared on an Israeli podcast about the Bible, where he spoke of his growing conviction that the Temple Mount once housed David’s royal city. “Imagine if you could dig there,” the host told him. “How quickly would you rush out of the studio and go?” Finkelstein deadpanned: “I would rush out of the studio, head to the airport, and leave the country. Because you know what such attempts would lead to.”

There is another explanation for the failure to locate the ruins of David’s palace: he never had one. In this version of the tale, next door to the urban Philistines an extraordinary settlement of tent-dwellers rose, with David as its nomad king. From his roving capital, he oversaw a web of trade relations that stretched from Jordan to Cyprus and beyond—and also imposed taxes on neighboring peoples, setting up levy points along trade routes and threatening war if his men weren’t paid. Within the tent city, his wealth was manifested in feasts of tender calves, shellfish hauled in from the Mediterranean, ripe grapes, and pistachios. His ruling elite dressed in the finest clothes, made by boiling woad leaves and madder roots to produce dyes of dazzling cerulean and ruby. It was all glorious and undeniably regal—but none of it was permanent, and within a few generations every trace had vanished. The basis of much of this wealth, one theory holds, was mining. Close to the southern tip of Israel, nestled in the great expanses of the Arabah Valley, are the ancient mines of Timna. On a brisk evening, I was picked up from the local airport by Erez Ben-Yosef, a soft-spoken archeologist from Tel Aviv University who leads an expedition in the area. That day, he had been digging since first light, and was visibly beat, his small frame bent over the wheel. As we drove through empty desert roads, a wind kicked up little sand cyclones. Otherwise, it was quiet—so quiet that the entire valley seemed to hum. “There is nothing here,” Ben-Yosef admitted. Except, that is, for what had brought him out here: some ten thousand tons of ancient copper slag.

Ben-Yosef’s focus is metallurgy, “the temperature of the furnace, that kind of thing,” as he put it. But, at forty-one, he also belongs to a younger generation of archeologists steeped in Foucault and social anthropology. He believes that copper production holds the key to unlocking the truth about David and Solomon’s kingdom.

Timna sits in the valley where, in the thirties, Nelson Glueck declared that he had found Solomon’s mines. Three decades later, Glueck’s longtime assistant demolished his theory, by unearthing an Egyptian shrine, dating to the fourteenth century B.C. Since then, archeologists have attributed the local copper industry to the New Kingdom Empire of Egypt, a narrative so prevalent that, at the Timna campsite, we were greeted by cutouts of Cleopatra look-alikes: outstretched palms, beaded hair.

Yet Ben-Yosef, together with his mentor, Thomas Levy, of the University of California, San Diego, has been able to resolve, through advanced radiocarbon dating, that copper production thrived in the region between the eleventh and the ninth centuries B.C.—long after the Egyptians withdrew. Ben-Yosef attributes this flourishing industry to the Edomites, described in the Bible as descendants of Esau and, later, as vassals of King David’s.

Last October, twenty years after Haaretz had declared on its front page that there was “no evidence” for the Bible, Ben-Yosef published an article—also on the front page of Haaretz—challenging that notion. In it, he argued that some ancient societies may be invisible to archeologists but may nevertheless have created sophisticated social structures. In making his case, Ben-Yosef drew on one of the first archeologists to describe “invisible societies”: Israel Finkelstein, in his book “Living on the Fringe.” But Ben-Yosef believes that Finkelstein “missed the point,” and was perhaps blinkered by his own experience with the historic Bedouin tribes of Sinai.

The Bedouins who had informed the archeologists’ thinking on ancient Israel were “simple,” Ben-Yosef said: “No hierarchy, no law, and if you travelled through you had to pay them baksheesh.” But there are also examples throughout history of complex nomadic societies. Just look at Genghis Khan, Ben-Yosef argued. Or, for that matter, at the mounds of copper-production debris that we were driving through. Such an endeavor required a hierarchy of miners, smelters, and exporters, and a political structure powerful enough to sustain peaceful trade in the region. Theirs was the ancient “Silicon Valley,” as Levy told me. Because these were nomads, however, they did not leave behind substantial signs of habitation or material wealth. “As archeologists, we wouldn’t know about any of this had they not engaged in copper production,” Ben-Yosef said. If archeology nearly missed the Edomite kingdom, what other ancient kingdom might it be missing?

At dawn the next morning, some two dozen excavators drove in vans to an ancient smelting site near an area known as Slaves’ Hill. There they dispersed, pushing wheelbarrows across barren ground blackened by slag and mottled with craters. It was like digging on the moon. While most excavations have to go deep underground, in Timna the archeological find is right there, in the open, in the form of slag and charcoal—mountains and mountains of it. “There was only one trail climbing up, where two donkeys could pass each other,” Ben-Yosef explained as we crested Slaves’ Hill. I couldn’t resist scooping up a charred speck from the ground. Three thousand years old. I didn’t know whether to pocket it or return it, and so I held it in my fist while we spoke.

Conversation soon turned to David, the bandit leader, the Biblical shepherd turned king. Ben-Yosef believes that the Edomite kingdom may not have been solely responsible for the prosperous copper trade: David and Solomon may have presided over it. How else to explain the boom in industry during the tenth century B.C.? “The scale of production tells us that there was something bigger than a few tribes here,” he said. To view David as a marginal Bedouin sheikh would be a mistake, Ben-Yosef thinks. So would holding our breath for signs of his lavish kingdom. “If he came from a nomadic background, it doesn’t make sense that the first thing he would do is build a big stone palace,” Ben-Yosef said. “Why would he?”
THE RESCUE WILL BEGIN IN ITS OWN TIME
A legend is an attempt to explain the inexplicable; emerging as it does from a basis of truth, it is bound to end in the inexplicable.

We have four legends concerning Prometheus. According to the first of them, for betraying the gods to mankind he was shackled to a peak in the Caucasus, and the gods sent eagles that ate at his liver as it kept growing back.

According to the second, the pain of the jabbing beaks drove Prometheus ever deeper into the rocks until he became one with them.

According to the third, his betrayal was forgotten in the course of millennia: the gods forgot, the eagles forgot, he himself forgot.

According to the fourth, everyone grew tired of the procedure, which had lost its raison d'être. The gods grew tired, the eagles, too. Even the wound grew tired and closed.

The real riddle was the mountains.

A large loaf of bread lay on the table. Father came in with a knife to cut it in half. But even though the knife was big and sharp, and the bread neither too soft nor too hard, the knife could not cut into it. We children looked up at Father in surprise. He said, “Why should you be surprised? Isn’t it more surprising if something succeeds than if it fails? Go to bed, perhaps I’ll manage it later.” We went to bed, but every now and again, at all hours of the night, one or another of us got up and craned his neck to look at Father, who stood there, a big man in his long coat, his right leg braced behind him, seeking to drive the knife into the bread. When we woke up early in the morning, Father was just laying the knife aside, and said, “You see, I haven’t managed yet, that’s how hard it is.” We wanted to distinguish ourselves, and he gave us permission to try, but we could hardly lift the knife, whose handle was still almost glowing from Father’s efforts; it seemed to rear up out of our grasp. Father laughed and said, “Let it go. I’m going out now. I’ll try again tonight. I won’t let a loaf of bread make a monkey out of me. It’s bound to let itself be cut in the end; of course it’s allowed to resist, so it’s resisting.” But even as he said that the bread seemed to shrivel up, like the mouth of a grimly determined person, and now it was a very small loaf indeed.

A farmer stopped me on the highway and begged me to come back to his house with him. Perhaps I could help—he’d had a falling out with his wife, and their argument was wrecking his life. He also had some simple-minded children who hadn’t turned out well; they just stood around or got up to mischief. I said I would be happy to go with him, but it was doubtful whether I, a stranger, would be able to help him in any way; I might be able to put the children to some useful task, but I’d probably be helpless with respect to his wife, because quarrelsomeness in a wife usually has its origin in some quality in the husband, and since he was unhappy with the situation, he had probably already taken pains to change himself but hadn’t succeeded, so how could I possibly have more success? At the most, what I could do was divert the ire of the wife to myself. At the beginning, I was speaking more to myself than to him, but then I asked him what he would pay me for my trouble. He said we would rapidly come to some agreement; if I turned out to be of use, I could help myself to whatever I wanted. At that, I stopped and said that this sort of vague promise was not going to satisfy me—I wanted a precise agreement as to what he would give me per month. He was astonished that I’d demanded anything like a monthly wage from him. I in turn was astonished that he was astonished. Did he suppose I could fix in a couple of hours what two people had done wrong over the course of their entire lives, and did he expect me at the end of those two hours to take a sack of dried peas, kiss his hand in gratitude, bundle myself up in my rags, and carry on down the icy road? Absolutely not. The farmer listened in silence, with head lowered but tense. The way I saw it, I told him, I would

have to stay with him for a long time to first become familiar with the situation and think about possible improvements, and then I would have to stay even longer to create proper order, if such a thing was even possible, and by then I would be old and tired and would not be going anywhere but would rest and enjoy the thanks of the parties involved.

“That won’t be possible,” the farmer said. “Here you are wanting to install yourself in my house and maybe even drive me out of it in the end. Then I would be in even more trouble than I am already.”

“Unless we trust each other we won’t come to an agreement,” I said. “Have I not shown I have trust in you? All I have is your word, and couldn’t you break that? After I’d arranged everything in accordance with your wishes, couldn’t you send me packing, for all your promises?”

The farmer looked at me and said, “You would never let that happen.”

“Do what you want,” I said, “and think of me as you please, but don’t forget—I’m saying this to you in friendship, as one man to another—that if you don’t take me with you, you won’t be able to stand it for much longer in your house. How are you going to go on living with your wife and those children? And, if you don’t take a chance and take me home with you, then why not drop everything and all the trouble you’ll go on having at home and come with me. We’ll go on the road together, and I won’t hold your suspicions against you.”

“I’m not at liberty to do that,” the farmer said. “I’ve been living with my wife now for fifteen years; it’s been difficult, I don’t even understand how I’ve done it, but in spite of that I can’t just abandon her without having tried everything that might make her bearable. Then I saw you on the road, and I thought I might make one final effort, with you. Come with me, and I’ll give you whatever you want. What do you want?”

“I don’t want much,” I said. “I’m not out to exploit your predicament. I want you to take me on as your laborer for life. I can do all sorts of work and will be very useful to you. But I don’t want to be treated like other laborers—you’re
not to give me orders, I have to be allowed to do what work I please, now this, now that, now nothing at all, just as I please. You can ask me to do something as long as you're very gentle about it, and, if you see that I don't want to do it, then you'll have to accept the fact. I won't require money, but clothes, linens, and boots up to present standards, and replaced when necessary; if such things are unobtainable in your village, then you'll have to go into town to buy them. But don't worry about that, my present clothes should last me for years. I'll be happy with standard laborers' fare, only I do insist on having meat every day.

“Every day?” he interjected, as though satisfied with all the other conditions.

“Every day,” I said.

“I note your teeth are unusual,” he said, trying to excuse my unusual stipulation, and he even reached into my mouth to feel them. “Very sharp,” he said, “like a dog’s.”

“Well, anyway, meat every day,” I said. “And as much in the way of beer and spirits as you.”

“That’s a lot,” he said. “I drink a lot.

“So much the better,” I said. “Then if you tighten your belt, I’ll tighten mine. Probably you only drink like that because of your unhappy home life.”

“No,” he said, “why should that be connected? But you shall have as much as me, we’ll drink together.”

“No,” I said. “I refuse to eat or drink in company. I insist on eating and drinking alone.”

“Alone?” the farmer asked in astonishment. “All these wishes are making my head spin.”

“There’s not so much,” I said, “and I’ve almost got to the end. I want oil for a lamp that is to be kept burning at my side all night. I have the lamp here, just a very little one that runs on next to nothing. It’s really hardly worth mentioning, and I just mentioned it for the sake of completeness, lest there be some subsequent dispute between us; I dislike such things when it comes to being paid. At all other times I am the mildest of men, but if terms once agreed upon are violated I cut up rough, remember that. If I am not given everything I have earned, down to the last detail, I am capable of setting fire to your house while you’re asleep. But you have no need to deny what we have clearly agreed upon, and then, especially if you make me the occasional present out of affection—it doesn’t have to be worth much, just the odd little trifle—I will be loyal and hearty and very useful to you in all manner of ways. And I shall want nothing beyond what I have told you just now, except on August 24th, my name day, a little barrel of two gallons of rum.”

“Two gallons!” the farmer exclaimed, clapping his hands together.

“Yes, two gallons,” I said. “It’s not so much. You probably think you can beat me down. But I’ve already reduced my requirements to the bare bones, out of regard for you, of course; I would be ashamed if some stranger were to hear us. I couldn’t possibly speak as we just now have in front of a stranger. So no one is to hear of our agreement. Well, who would believe it in any case?”

But the farmer said, “It’s better that you go your own way. I will go on home and try to make things up with the wife. It’s true, I have beaten her a lot of late—I think I’ll let up a little, perhaps she’ll be grateful to me—and I’ve beaten the children a lot as well; I always get the whip out of the stables and beat them. I’ll ease up on that a bit, and maybe things will improve. Admittedly, I’ve tried it in the past without the least improvement. But your demands are too much, and even if they weren’t—but no, it’s more than the business will bear, not possible, meat every day, two gallons of rum, and even if it were possible my wife would never allow it, and if she doesn’t allow it then I can’t do it.”

“So why the long negotiations,” I said.

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To be perfectly honest, I am not very interested in the whole matter. I am lying in a corner, watching, inasmuch as you can see anything from a recumbent position, listening, inasmuch as I am able to understand anything, other than that I have been living in a sort of twilight for months, waiting for night to fall. My cellmate is in a different situation, an adamantine character, a captain. I can imagine his situation. He is of the view that his predicament is like that of a polar explorer who is frozen in some bleak waste but who will surely be rescued, or, rather, has already been rescued, as one will be able to read in some account of polar exploration. And now there is the following schism: the fact that he will be rescued is for him beyond doubt, irrespective of his will, simply by virtue of the weight of his victor’s personality. Now, should he wish for it? His wishing or not wishing will affect nothing, he will be rescued, but the question—of whether he ought to wish for it as well—remains. It is with this seemingly abstruse question that he is engaged: he thinks it through, he lays it out before me, we discuss it together. We don’t talk about his rescue. For the rescue, he is apparently content to pin all his hopes on a little hammer he has somehow obtained, the sort of little hammer you use to drive thumbtacks into a drawing board; he cannot afford anything more, but he doesn’t use it, either—its mere possession delights him. Sometimes he kneels beside me and holds the hammer I’ve seen thousands of times in front of my face, or he takes my hand, spreads it out on the floor, and hammers all my fingers in turn. He knows that this hammer is not enough to knock the least splinter out of the wall, and he doesn’t seek to do so, either. Sometimes he runs his hammer along the walls, as though to give the signal to the great waiting machinery of rescue to swing into operation. It will not happen exactly in this way—the rescue will begin in its own time, irrespective of the hammer—but it remains something, something palpable and graspable, a token, something one can kiss, as one cannot kiss rescue.

Of course, one might say that the captain has been driven mad by captivity. The circle of his thinking is so diminished that it barely has room for a single thought.

(Four stories translated, from the German, by Michael Hofmann.)

NEWYORKER.COM
On Kafka's previously untranslated work.
Frank Kameny’s crusade against discrimination began after his sexuality cost him his federal job, in the nineteen-fifties.

BOOKS

AN ACCIDENTAL ACTIVIST

The gay-rights movement’s unradical pioneer.

BY CALEB CRAIN

Was Franklin Edward Kameny crossed by his stars or favored by them? Growing up in Queens during the Great Depression, he knew at the age of six that he wanted to be an astronomer. By the time he was in his early thirties, he had realized his dream: he received a Ph.D. from Harvard, taught at Georgetown, and, in 1957, started working as an astronomer for the Army Map Service. But he lasted there only a few months: the U.S. government found out that he was homosexual, and he lost not only his job but also his security clearance, which almost all astronomy jobs then required. He spent the rest of his working life goading the government to treat homosexual employees fairly. By the time federal policy changed, in 1975, he had become a lion of the gay-civil-rights movement, which he seems to have relished, but his chance to study the stars had slipped away.

Kameny was square and unromantic—an unlikely combatant for erotic freedom. “Not gifted with obvious

Frank Kameny’s crusade against discrimination began after his sexuality cost him his federal job, in the nineteen-fifties.
A "charisma" is the polite formulation of one historian of the gay movement. He had no interest in movies, sports, or popular music. By the time he was fifteen, he had concluded that society was wrong to censure homosexuality, but, apart from a little experimentation in summer camp, he postponed acting on his desires for almost a decade and a half. He obscured his orientation when he enlisted to fight in the Second World War and took no advantage of wartime sexual opportunities while serving. Returning home, he enrolled at Harvard, and spent a year of his graduate training at an observatory in Tucson, Arizona, where, on the night of his twenty-ninth birthday, in 1954, he at last made love with a man: he and a young man named Keith drove out into the desert north of the city. There was a full moon, he later recalled, though almanacs show that it was actually waning gibbous.

The romance didn't outlast Kameny's stay in the Southwest, and though he claimed throughout his life that he hoped for a steady boyfriend, Keith seems to have been the closest he came. Despite impressively thorough archival research, Eric Cervini, the author of a brisk, clear-eyed new biography, "The Deviant's War" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), is unable to provide Keith's last name. Kameny, who died in 2011, never disclosed it to interviewers.

After Keith, so many of Kameny's loves were ephemeral that one suspects he came to prefer it that way. Cervini sets the opening scene of his book in what was known in gay slang as a "tea-room"—a public rest room where men negotiated, transacted, and hid homosexual activity, through a set of conventions that Cervini characterizes as a "silent choreography." Back when homosexual acts were illegal, tearooms were convenient and discreet—a hookup app avant la lettre—although subject to intervention by the police. "What the covert deviant needs is a sexual machine—collapsible to hip-pocket size, silent in operation," a sociologist wrote, in the late sixties, to describe the problem that rest-room sex almost solved. Kameny resorted to one in a San Francisco train terminal, in August, 1956, while in town for an astronomy conference. No sooner did he let his genitals be touched, by a six-foot-two blue-eyed man in public relations, however, than both were arrested by police officers spying from behind a ventilation grille. The next morning, Kameny, impatient to return to Washington, D.C., where he was about to start a yearlong teaching assignment at Georgetown, pleaded guilty to lewd conduct and paid a fine of fifty dollars. He expected the charge to be dismissed after six months of good behavior. Instead, it destroyed his career, and gave him his vocation.

Because the arrest occurred at a time before online mug shots, the blow to Kameny's career took more than a year to land. He finished up at Georgetown, and, at the Army Map Service, set about improving the precision of missile-guidance maps by comparing the moon's occultations of stars from different points on Earth. When the Soviets launched Sputnik, in October, 1957, prompting America to jump-start a space program of its own, Kameny thought of volunteering to become an astronaut. Later that month, however, the Map Service's personnel office wrote to him in Hawaii, where he was measuring occultations, and summoned him back to headquarters. There he faced a pair of government investigators. "Information has come to the attention of the U.S. Civil Service Commission that you are a homosexual," one of the investigators said. "What comment, if any, do you care to make?"

Kameny had disclosed his arrest on his job application, but he had listed the charge as disorderly, rather than lewd, conduct. (If he had omitted it altogether, he might never have had any trouble, Douglas M. Charles suggests in his 2015 history, "Hoover's War on Gays.") Not yet a champion of gay rights, Kameny claimed that he had let the other man touch him only out of curiosity, and he dodged the question about his orientation. "As a matter of principle one's private life is his own," he said. The Map Service fired him. The official reason was that he had falsified a government form.

Kameny was one of thousands of homosexuals dismissed from federal employment during the Cold War, but Washington had not always been so inhospitable. A park across the street from the White House—in Lafayette Square, where President Donald Trump recently held a photo op, after protesters there were driven out with tear gas—was a gay cruising ground from the late nineteenth century onward. A new government hire of 1933 recalled seeing men with gold-tinted hair dancing cheek to cheek at a party in a former stable behind two town houses on P Street. When government jobs multiplied during the New Deal, gay men flocked to the city, in part because many of them felt more comfortable in workplaces with a substantial number of women, and women, thanks to the impartiality of civil-service exams, had long fared better in the federal workforce than in the private sector. During the Second World War, Franklin Roosevelt resisted firing a key foreign-policy strategist at the State Department who had drunkenly propositioned several black train porters.

Roosevelt's hand was eventually forced, however, by less tolerant politicians and officials, including the head of the F.B.I., J. Edgar Hoover. As the Cold War took hold, conservatives argued that the government, confronted with the Soviet menace, couldn't afford any internal weakness; closeted homosexuals were vulnerable to blackmail, and unclosed ones, if there were any, would bring the government into disrepute. In 1947, Harry S. Truman ordered the vetting of all federal employees and job applicants. The same year, the U.S. Park Police started its so-called Pervert Elimination Campaign, to stamp out cruising areas in Washington, and the State Department, under pressure from the Senate, began quietly forcing homosexuals to resign, on the ground that they were security risks.

By 1950, the tally of "shady" individuals removed from the State Department, most of them homosexuals, had reached ninety-one, a deputy under-sec-
Secretary disclosed to Congress that year, in an attempt to counter accusations by Senator Joseph McCarthy that State harbored Communists and homosexuals. The disclosure backfired, however; voters were shocked that there had been so many homosexuals to get rid of in the first place. McCarthy soon dropped the issue—as a middle-aged bachelor, he was wary of being too closely associated with it—but other politicians kept hammering away. “Who could be more dangerous to the United States of America than a pervert?” a Republican senator from Nebraska demanded; he believed that Soviet intelligence agents were likely working their way through a list of homosexuals compiled by Hitler. Truman’s aides warned him that the issue was riling working-class voters, whom the Democrats, then as now, could ill afford to lose. Secretary of State Dean Acheson tried to assure a roomful of newspaper editors that his employees were “clean-living,” pointing out that one had even been the captain of the Princeton football team, but the Senate initiated an investigation anyway—led by a North Carolina Democrat so unfamiliar with the topic of homosexuality that he privately asked one of the lawyers involved, “Can you please tell me, what can two women possibly do?”

In Senate testimony, the director of the C.I.A. asserted that homosexual men were volatile, easily dominated, cowardly, promiscuous, often effeminate, indiscreet, readily seduced, defiant, gullible, and cliquish. Although homosexuals were often blackmailed for money, no example could be found of one who had been blackmailed into revealing U.S. state secrets. The historian David K. Johnson, in his book “The Lavender Scare” (2004), writes categorically that no such thing ever happened. (In 1957, in Moscow, the K.G.B. did photograph a closeted American journalist in bed with a male Soviet agent, but the journalist confessed to officials at the American Embassy, who helped him slip away to Paris.) In lieu of evidence, the C.I.A. director started talking about Colonel Alfred Redl, an Austrian spymaster before the First World War who sold secrets to Russia. The director claimed that the Russians had been able to compromise Redl by sending him a handsome “newsboy” and then surprising the two in a hotel room. As Cer-\vini writes, the story was “almost entirely, verifiably inaccurate.” Although Redl was indeed homosexual and a double agent, the Russians never procured him a newsboy, and he probably wouldn’t have been much frightened by blackmail; his lover accompanied him to society events in Vienna. His motive for treason was most likely simple greed.

The Senate committee’s final report contended that homosexuals were security risks with “no place in the United States government.” The F.B.I. began checking records of arrests for homosexual activity against federal employment records and forwarding names and fingerprints to the Civil Service Commission and various government agencies. The Bureau’s file on so-called “sex deviates” eventually ran to more than three hundred thousand pages. “Michelangelo might not be able to get a job under such terms,” Senator Hubert Humphrey, of Minnesota, joked in 1955.

Many homosexuals in federal employment resigned once detected; a number committed suicide. Kameny, however, waited to be fired and then wrote a twelve-page appeal. Not quite denying his homosexuality or quite owning up to it, he simply insisted that what he had been accused of doing in San Francisco had “no logical, rational connection with reliability, or with the ability to preserve proper security.” He solicited testimonials from friends and colleagues, as well as a letter certifying his heterosexuality from a prominent psychiatrist, whom he had duped by

“In this troubling time, I think we should extend to our customers our most heartfelt deals, deals, deals.”

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inventing a girlfriend. Cervini has discovered a draft of a letter Kameny wrote to the psychiatrist—on the same piece of paper as a draft of a birthday note to Keith.

The Army Map Service rejected Kameny’s appeal, and the Civil Service Commission, for good measure, banned him from any federal employment for three years. Kameny appealed the commission’s ban, was rejected, appealed the rejection, and was rejected again. His lie and his perseverance suggest a rule-follower in agony at finding himself on the wrong side of the rules for the first time. As a strategy for recovering a job, showing up unannounced at the office to ask why one was fired, as Kameny did more than once, is unlikely to succeed, but demands for justice have often looked initially like pointless self-sabotage; “She does not know how to bend before her troubles,” the Theban elders tsk-tsked about Antigone. Kameny may have been in the right, but in 1957 he was far from able to articulate that right; he was still in the closet.

In the spring of 1958, he pursued jobs in academia and private industry, but he was, as he wrote a few years later, “in the peculiarly ironic position of being in excessively great demand (as an astronomer at the commencement of the Space Age) and yet totally unable to get a job because of security problems.” In September, he was arrested near a men’s room in Lafayette Square; curiosity was no longer a convincing explanation, if it ever had been. A few days later, he wrote to the chair of the Civil Service Commission, calling him “guilty of gross immorality and grossly unethical conduct” and arguing that the commission, by pronouncing on a citizen’s morals, had violated the freedom of religion guaranteed by the First Amendment. Toward the end of the year, Kameny contacted the chair again to say that his unemployment compensation was about to run out, and, rather than take a job outside his field, he was going on a hunger strike. “Enjoy your Christmas dinner,” he wrote.

Kameny didn’t, in fact, starve himself, but in early 1959 his food budget was twenty cents a day, and he ate frankfurters and mashed potatoes, on the days he ate at all. When his landlord tried to evict him, a judge referred him to the Salvation Army, which gave him eleven dollars’ worth of groceries.

In June, 1959, with the help of a sympathetic lawyer, Kameny sued the Secretary of the Army. He worried that the case, which he allowed his name to be attached to openly, would scupper his chances of a job, but in September he was hired by a manufacturer of devices that tested paints and coatings (one of his specialties as an astronaut had been applying the reflective surface on a telescope’s focussing mirror). His lawsuit was dismissed, but Kameny did not give up, and, as he prepared an appeal, he approached the New York chapter of the Mattachine Society, an organization concerned with gay rights.

The Mattachine Society had been founded in California, around 1950, and was originally quite radical. Its founders theorized that homosexuals—they preferred the term “homophiles,” as sounding less medical—constituted a distinct social minority, who needed to embrace their group identity. The society retreated from activism during the Red Scare, and, by the time Kameny got in touch, its leaders were encouraging assimilation into the mainstream. “To keep quiet is not necessarily to deny the truth,” one of them had written.

Kameny told the Mattachine Society that he and his lawyer were going to strike a bold new line in their appeal, arguing that homosexuality was “moral in a positive sense.” It had occurred to Kameny that, when it came to security clearance, a homosexual who was open could not be blackmailed. As he explained to the Mattachines, “A homosexual who is willing, should the necessity arise, to stand up on his own two legs before the world, as he is, and to defend his right to live his life as he chooses, can get and retain a clearance.” Kameny himself wasn’t yet such a person—his mother didn’t learn he was homosexual until 1966—but he had figured out that he would have a better case if he were. It may sound odd to say that a person reached a new level of emotional and sexual honesty as a by-product of legal maneuvering, but in Kameny’s case that seems to be what happened.

Kameny’s new appeal was rejected, too, and, in the fall of 1960, after his lawyer bowed out, the New York Mattachines donated fifty dollars to help him take his case to the Supreme Court. By then, he was arguing that discrimination against homosexuals was as unsound as discrimination on the basis of race or religion. The Court declined to hear Kameny’s arguments, but the support of the Mattachine Society seems to have made a strong impression on him. Solidarity among homosexuals was then a fairly new phenomenon. Indeed, the near-ubiquity of betrayal may be the hardest aspect of Kameny’s world for a reader today to appreciate. A new lover could turn out to be a plainclothes officer; an old lover could become an informant. “Everybody was squealing on everybody else,” one person who lived through the era said. Not even the Mattachine Society was free of treachery and schism.

Perhaps it was the loneliness of Kameny’s crusade until then that enabled him to see past the movement’s infighting to its potential as a political weapon. He became involved in discussions to open a Mattachine offshoot in Washington. At one meeting, a friend whispered in his ear that the man sitting next to him was a police sergeant, infamous for an entrapment six years before that was so aggressive—he had followed his target from the men’s room of a movie theatre to its balcony and asked if he “wanted to take it”—that a judge threw out the case.

Despite the police attention, the Mattachine Society of Washington was founded, late in 1961, with Kameny as its first president. It had a bolder mission than the New York and California branches: the pursuit of equal rights for homosexuals was written into its constitution. The constitution also stipulated that socializing was not a purpose of the organization; Kameny no doubt had a hand in that clause, too.

The F.B.I. soon got wind of the new group, thanks to a blond nineteen-year-old who claimed to have been the lover of one of its members, and who, according to an F.B.I. memo, said “that
he was angry with the homosexual element in this town and that this is his way of getting even with them." Much of the granularity of Cervini’s account comes from F.B.I. files, rather than from what survives of Kameny’s papers or the society’s archives—a testament both to the garrulity of informers and to the Mattachine’s extreme caution about anything that might incriminate members. Because it was tricky to rally people to a cause that they could lose their jobs for supporting, the society’s membership list was confidential, and its members adopted pseudonyms as bland as grocery-store bread—Ellen Keene, Russell Brenner. (Your homophile name, I have decided, is the first name of your earliest same-sex crush plus the last name of your kindergarten teacher. This makes mine Christophe Osby.)

Only Kameny regularly used his own name. It was on a 1962 letter denouncing federal policy toward homosexuals as "archaic, unrealistic, and inconsistent with basic American principles"—which was sent to the President, the Vice-President, every Cabinet official, every Justice on the Supreme Court, and every member of the House and the Senate. "Please do not contaminate my mail with such filthy trash," a Missouri congressman wrote back, but the letter sparked meetings with a black congressman from Pennsylvania and an assistant to a white one from New York, who became allies. The society never had any black members, despite efforts at recruitment, but an alliance with a black politician must have seemed intuitive to Kameny, who was inspired by the civil-rights movement.

A newspaper finally identified Kameny as homosexual in 1963, after he became the first openly gay man to testify before Congress. The testimony did not go smoothly. After it emerged that the names on the Washington Mattachine Society’s fund-raising license were pseudonyms, a congressman from Alabama accused Kameny of fraud. Kameny did manage to get his radical valorization of homosexuality on the record: "Homosexual acts—when performed voluntarily by consenting adults—are moral in a positive and real sense." But he also made the mistake and real sense. But he also made the

**BRIEFLY NOTED**

**Death in Her Hands, by Ottessa Moshfegh (Penguin Press).** Moshfegh, known for her screwball subversions of genre tropes and her gleefully grotesque sensibility, here offers a thriller that glitters with jagged details and unfolds mostly inside the protagonist’s head. The unlikely detective is Vesta Gul, an elderly widow, who discovers an ominous note in a forest: "Her name was Magda. Nobody will ever know who killed her." Trying to solve the mystery, Vesta conjures up characters, backstories, and motives from her impressions of the small town where she lives. As her mind fills with misanthropic assessments of her world and memories of her controlling late husband (whom she was devoted to but resentful of), the murder of one woman becomes a soundboard for the internal monologue of another.

**The Taste of Sugar, by Marisel Vera (Liveright).** This capacious novel tells the story of a Puerto Rican family, against the backdrop of the Spanish-American War, in 1898. A young woman, relinquishing a dream of one day seeing Paris, marries a coffee farmer and struggles to find a role in her new household. When the U.S. invades, Puerto Ricans welcome the end of Spanish rule, but optimism is short-lived, and the family relocates to the sugar plantations of Hawaii. The book, yoking family crises to geopolitical ones, succeeds in creating characters who feel individuated rather than schematic. The coffee farmer, observing his disenchanted bride, wonders, "Why did all the women in his family stare out the window?"

**Prophetic City, by Stephen L. Klineberg (Avid Reader).** The author, a sociologist, draws on nearly forty years of data in this detailed, accessible portrait of the changing face of Houston, a city known for its free-enterprise ideology. (Around 1959, business leaders started to desegment it, not out of moral revulsion at racial inequality but because the optics were “bad for business.”) Klineberg finds a more tangled reality, a juxtaposition of progressive attitudes and conservative policies, of social inequalities—poverty, homelessness, opportunity gaps—and a striking culture of volunteerism. Surveying the shifting composition of the population, he argues that the city is a harbinger for the country as a whole: "Houston is America on demographic fast-forward."

**The Price of Peace, by Zachary D. Carter (Random House).** This biography of John Maynard Keynes is also an appraisal of the fluctuating fortunes of his intellectual legacy. Carter, a financial journalist, ably glosses Keynes’s economic ideas and the battles between disciples and detractors since his death, and gives a lively account of his outsized life. Although Carter admires his subject, he is clear-eyed about Keynes’s mistakes and his flair for melodrama. Assessing Keynes’s attack on the Treaty of Versailles—he predicted, correctly, that the terms of the peace would create chaos for Germany and then for Europe—Carter writes that it “is a provincial, short-sighted, vicious, and in many respects deeply unfair polemic. It is also a masterpiece.”
political blunder of admitting, with heedlessly unremitting logic, that he saw nothing wrong with group sex. “You can have a dinner party for two and have a dinner party for fifty as long as it is carried out in an orderly fashion,” he said.

Kameny prized orderliness. He kept the Mattachine Society of Washington under his thumb by enforcing a complex system of procedural rules. When the society mooted political demonstrations, he declared himself opposed to “off-the-cuffness and spontaneity.” When he helped organize the society’s first picket of the White House, in April, 1965, he stage-managed it in a way that maximized respectability—the men in suits and ties and the women in dresses. As far as Cervini could determine, only one newspaper, the Washington Afro-American, reported on the protest, but the picket was a milestone: the first by a homosexual organization in the nation’s capital. Kameny followed up with more at various locations in Washington and one in Philadelphia, which became an annual event. Kameny eventually specified even the number of staples (ten) that should be used to fasten each protest sign to its wooden pole, and he turned away would-be marchers dressed informally. “Picketing is not an occasion for an assertion of personality,” he said, but the buttoned-down protests he arranged perfectly reflected his.

Would it have furthered the cause if Kameny had left a couple of buttons unfastened now and then? Cervini includes in his biography several lives that ran parallel to Kameny’s, and that of a younger gay activist who went by the homophile pseudonym Randy Wicker is instructive. Wicker was much bolder much sooner. He went by the homophile pseudonym and that of a younger gay activist who joined the Washington chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis, a homophile women’s group. Neither Gittings nor Kameny was a lawyer; their work consisted of supporting those who had lost jobs as they exhausted their administrative appeals. In advance of one hearing, Kameny and Gittings sent the Department of Defense a copy of Kafka’s “The Trial.”

Shepherding the cases may have given Kameny a sense of purpose he had trouble finding elsewhere. He never held a job long, and after a few years he lost control of the Washington Mattachines, when a faction became frustrated with his persnickety, imperious style. “Break up Kameny Hall,” they wrote in an open letter. “I loved him dearly, but he was like a terrible father,” one of the members said, when Cervini interviewed her about Kameny. Despite the injury to his pride, Kameny did not relent in his activism, though his mother wished he would, for the sake of his career. “Though you may have a cause which you think you should emphasize, you must face up to facts and think of your own good first,” she warned. In his later years, he survived on financial support from her, supplemented by occasional speaking fees.

There were glimpses, during the administrative hearings, of how change was going to arrive. “Start with society,” a somewhat sympathetic Defense Department official advised Kameny in 1962. “There may come a day, gentlemen, when the homosexual in our society is not considered as an outcast, guilty of criminal behavior and an object of derision,” another official said, in 1967. Kameny was a martinet about respectability not merely out of fussiness but because he understood that appearances and openness were crucial to winning hearts and minds. Not only would openness eliminate concerns about blackmail but—at a time when the government claimed that disgust toward homosexuals was so widespread that their mere presence in federal jobs could impair “the efficiency of the service”—it might also remove the stigma of homosexuality itself. By stepping into the light when homosexuality was so taboo that most people knew little about it, Kameny and other homophiles got the chance to change minds.

And minds did change. By 1968, the Civil Service Commission was hazardous in its annual report that “as long as he behaved himself on the job and did satisfactory work, Michelangelo would probably be permitted to paint a post office ceiling.” That year, Kameny, inspired by the Black Power slogan “Black is beautiful,” compressed his assertion of homosexuality’s worth into the maxim “Gay is good.” Things accelerated after the Stonewall riots, of late June, 1969. “If you don’t change, you’re going to be left behind,” a longtime comrade told Kameny a few days later, after he had told two women at the homophile picket in Philadelphia to stop holding hands. It was true that Kameny’s movement was about to outstrip him; that fall, a regional conference of gay activist groups voted to replace the annual picket in Philadelphia with a New York march commemorating the Stonewall riots. But Kameny did change, shedding some of his respectability and becoming a rank-and-file member of the new movement. He joined the Washington chapter of the Gay Liberation Front, a somewhat anarchic group, and pushed its members to file lawsuits. In 1970, at the first of the annual Stonewall marches, he showed up in short sleeves, no tie. “I’ve never been that happy,” he later said. ♦
For readers in isolation, the novel’s claustrophobic dread closes in.

A CRITIC AT LARGE

RASKOLNIKOV’S DREAM

A class studies “Crime and Punishment” during lockdown.

BY DAVID DENBY

At the end of “Crime and Punishment,” which was completed in 1866, Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s hero, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, has a dream that so closely reflects the roilings of our own pandemic one almost shrinks from its power. Here’s part of it, in Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky’s rendering:

He had dreamed that the whole world was doomed to fall victim to some terrible, as yet unknown and unseen pestilence spreading to Europe from the depths of Asia. Everyone was to perish, except for certain, very few, chosen ones. Some new trichinae had appeared, microscopic creatures that lodged themselves in men’s bodies. But these creatures were spirits, endowed with reason and will. Those who received them into themselves immediately became possessed and mad. Everyone became anxious, and no one understood anyone else; each thought the truth was contained in himself alone, and suffered looking at others, beat his breast, wept, and wrung his hands. They did not know whom or how to judge, could not agree on what to regard as evil, what as good. They did not know whom to accuse, whom to vindicate.

What is this passage doing there, a few pages before the novel concludes? Recall what leads up to the dream. Raskolnikov, a twenty-three-year-old law-school dropout, tall, blond, and “remarkably good-looking,” lives in a “cupboard” in St. Petersburg and depends on handouts from his mother and sister. Looking for money, he plans and executes the murder of an old pawnbroker, a “useless, nasty, pernicious louse,” as he calls her; and then kills her half sister, who stumbles onto the murder scene. He makes off with the pawnbroker’s purse, but then, mysteriously, buries it in an empty courtyard.

Is it really money that he wants? His motives are less mercenary than, one might say, experimental. He has apparently been reading Hegel on “world-historical” figures. Great men like Napoleon, he believes, commit all sorts of crimes in their ascent to power; once they have attained eminence, they are hailed as benefactors to mankind, and no one holds them responsible for their early deeds. Could he be such a man?

In the days after the crime, Raskolnikov vacillates between exhilaration and fits of guilty behavior, spilling his soul in dreams and hallucinations. Under the guidance of an eighteen-year-old prostitute, Sonya, who embodies what Raskolnikov sees as “insatiable compassion,” he eventually confesses the crime, and is sent to a prison in Siberia. As she waits for him in a nearby village, he falls ill and has that feverish dream.

For us, the dream poses a teasing question: Is it just a morbidly eccentric summation of the novel, or is it also an unwitting prediction of where we are going? Dostoyevsky was a genius obsessed with social disintegration in his own time. He wrote so forcefully that Raskolnikov’s dream, encountered now, expresses what we are, and what we fear we might become.

I first read “Crime and Punishment” in 1961, when I was a freshman at Columbia University, as part of Literature Humanities, or Lit Hum, as everyone calls it, a required yearlong course for entering students. In small classes, the freshmen traverse such formidable peaks as Homer’s and Virgil’s epics, Greek tragedies, scriptural texts, Augustine and Dante, Montaigne and Shakespeare; Jane Austen entered the list in 1985, and Sappho, Virginia Woolf, and Toni Morrison followed. I took the course again in 1991, writing a long report on the experience. In the fall of 2019, at the border of old age—I was seventy-six—I began taking it for the third time, and for entirely selfish reasons. In your mid-seventies, you need a jolt now and
then, and works like “Oedipus Rex” give you a jolt. What I hadn’t expected, however, was to encounter catastrophe not just in the pages of our reading assignments but far beyond them.

In April, when the class began eight hours of discussion about “Crime and Punishment,” the campus had been shut down for four weeks. The students had arrived in New York the previous fall from a wide range of places and backgrounds, and now they had returned to them, scattering across the country, and the globe—to the Bronx, to Charlottesville, to southern Florida, to Sacramento, to Shanghai. My wife and I stayed where we were, in our apartment, a couple of subway stops south of the university, sequestered, empty of purpose, waiting for something to happen. I trailed listlessly around the apartment, and found it hard to sleep after a long day’s inactivity. I loitered in the kitchen in front of a small TV screen, like a supplicant awaiting favor from his sovereign. Ritual, the religious say, expresses spiritual necessity. At 7 P.M., I stood at the window, just past the TV, and banged on a pot with a wooden spoon, in the city’s salute to front-line workers in the pandemic. Raskolnikov has been holed up in his room for thirty days, give or take,

At 7 p.m., I stood at the window, just past the television, like a supplicant awaiting favor from his sovereign. Ritual, the religious say, expresses spiritual necessity.

Nick Dames led the students through close readings of individual passages, linking them back, by the end of class, to the structure of the entire book. He is also a historiist, and has done extensive work in the grasp of a single glance, the unification of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions.

The psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli. The rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions.

“The rootlessness that Simmel writes about comes from detachment and debt,” Professor Dames said. “And it produces a constant paranoia—a texture of the illogical. And dreams become very important.”

Dostoevsky ignores the magnificent imperial buildings, the huge public squares. He writes about street life—the voluble drunks, the lost girls, and the hungry children entertaining for kopecks. His Petersburg comes off as a carnivalesque world without gaiety, a society that is neither capitalist nor communist but stuck in some inchoate transitional situation—an imperial city without much of a middle class. It seems to be missing the one aspect of life that insures survival: work. “With very few exceptions, everybody in the novel rents,” Professor Dames observed. “They are constantly moving among apartments that they can’t afford.” Social ties were frayed. “And the absence of social structure destroys families,” he said. “To the extent

“She loves you . . . yeah . . . yeah . . . yeah . . .”
that families exist, they are really porous.”

Cast in this light, Raskolnikov’s rage against the pawnbroker looked quite different. He and a few of the other characters are barely clinging to remnants of status or wealth: a dubious connection with a provincial nobleman; a tenuous prospect of a meaningless job; or a semi-valuable possession, like an old watch. No wonder they hate the pawnbroker who helps keep them afloat, Alyona Ivanovna, “a tiny, dried-up old crone, about sixty, with sharp spiteful little eyes.” Raskolnikov is in a wrath of dispossession.

The city that Dostoyevsky experienced and Raskolnikov inhabited had long been a hothouse of reformist and radical ideas. In 1825, Petersburg was the center of the Decembrist Revolt, in which a group of officers led three thousand men against Nicholas I, who had just assumed the throne. The Tsar broke the revolt with artillery fire. In the late eighteen-forties, Dostoyevsky, then in his twenties, was a member of the Petrashevsky Circle, a group of literary men who met regularly to discuss reorganizing Russian society (which, for some members, included the overthrow of the tsarist regime). He was arrested, subjected to a terrifying mock execution, and sent off to Siberia, where he pored over the New Testament. By the time he returned to Petersburg, in 1859, he believed in Mother Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church, and hated both radicalism and bourgeois liberalism. He put his ideological shift to supreme advantage: he was now the master of both radical and reactionary temperaments.

“Crime and Punishment” is a religious writer’s notion of what happens to an unstable young man possessed by utopian thinking. Dostoyevsky certainly knew what was simmering below the surface: in March, 1881, a month after the novelist died, two bomb-throwers from a revolutionary group assassinated the reformist Tsar Alexander II in Petersburg. Thirty-six years later, Lenin returned to the city from exile and led the Bolsheviks to power. Raskolnikov was a failed yet spiritually significant spectre haunting the ongoing disaster.

The lively discussions around our seminar table earlier in the year were hard to sustain among so many screens; the students were often silent in their separate enclosures. But, as Professor Dames sorted through the form of the novel and the many contradictions of Raskolnikov, one student, whom I’ll call Antonio, burst out of the dead space.

“He’s arrogant,” Antonio said. “Self-righteous.” He noted that Raskolnikov seemed unbound by the rules that bound others. “But there’s something very appealing about this great-man idea,” he ventured. “Is this possible? Could somebody incarnate the ‘world spirit’ by murdering two women with an axe and getting away with it flawlessly? That some of us are rooting for Raskolnikov is a reflection of that question. Is someone really capable of rationalizing such a horrible action? After the twentieth century, this becomes a challenging question. What kind of person would you have to be to get away with it?”

Antonio, from Sacramento, was slender, a runner, with large glasses and a radiant smile. He had had a good education in a Jesuit school, and, at nineteen, he was erudite and attentive, abundant in sentences that sounded as if they could have been written. Listening to him, you heard a flicker of identification with the theory-minded murderer.

For all Raskolnikov’s sullen self-consciousness, he has moments of fellow-feeling and righteous anger. His family and friends adore him; even the insinuating and masterly investigator, Porfiry, believes that dear Rodya is worth fighting for. In our class, Raskolnikov’s feelings about the vulnerability of women—an important issue in “Crime and Punishment”—stirred a number of students, especially one I’ll call Julia, who often returned to the theme. There was the matter of Raskolnikov’s sister, Dunya, a provincial beauty, extremely intelligent but almost impoverished and therefore the victim of insolent monetary bids for her hand from two despicable middle-aged suitors. The situation incenses Raskolnikov.

“He firmly believes his sister is prostituting herself,” Julia said. “He has what seems to me a very radical and even progressive thought—marriage is a form of prostitution, a form of slavery. It’s kind of Catharine MacKinnon.”

Julia, who came from a Catholic Cuban family, had been an embattled feminist in her South Florida high school, which was filled with MAGA boys. In class, she hesitated for a second, but then, grinning in complicity with herself, moved swiftly through complicated feminist and social-justice ideas. Raskolnikov was a puzzle for her. “He’s using this philosophical defense to separate himself from the murder,” she said. Yet he wants to protect women, not just his sister but hapless young girls in the street. Was his interest a case of male “tri umphalism”—a way of enhancing his power over women by helping them? Dostoyevsky’s writing about the subservient status of women was as outraged as anything the Brontës had produced, with the Russian additive of persistent violence. The male characters, telling stories in jocular tones, assume their right to beat women. “She’s my property,” Julia mimicked. “I could have beaten her more.” In the course of the novel, three different women, all given to extravagant tirades—a Dostoyevsky specialty—fall apart and die in early middle age.

I couldn’t escape the novel’s larger theme of decline: the incoherence of Petersburg, the breakdown of social ties, the drunkenness and violence. At that moment in April, our own city felt largely empty, but I often imagined American streets filled with jobless people, some clinging to hopes of returning to work, many without such hopes. We were halfway through the novel, halfway to the confusion and proud madness of Raskolnikov’s dream. Would we go the other half? Julia’s feminist reading, new for me, opened still another connection. The newspapers were reporting that domestic abuse had gone up among couples locked together. Women were now being punished, as the critic Jacqueline Rose would note, for the recent liberties they had achieved.

Looking for present-day resonances, I knew, was a grim and limited way of reading this work. “Crime and Punishment” is about many things—the psychology of crime, the destiny of families, the vanity and anguish of single men adrift. But, midway through the...
book, Dostoyevsky’s writerly exuberance allayed my worries. He’s an inspired entertainer, with his own hectic style of comedy. His characters show up reciting their troubles and lineages, their lives “hanging out on their tongues,” as the critic V. S. Pritchett put it. I was now sequestered in a welter of betrayals and loyalties, gossip and opinion: the assorted virtuous and vicious people in the book believe in manners, but they never stop talking about one another. Even the company of Dostoyevsky’s buffoons was liberating.

And Dostoyevsky’s extremity—his savage inwardness, his apocalyptic feverishness—had never felt so right. How many millions were now locked in their rooms muttering vile thoughts to themselves, or wondering about the point of their existence? He wrote about the absolute rationality of evil and the absurd necessity of goodness. He taunted himself and his readers with alarming propositions: What happens to man without God and immortal life? Big questions can result in banality, but when an idea is put forward in Dostoyevsky’s fiction it goes someplace—runs up against an opposing one, or is developed and refuted two hundred pages later. Such contradictions notably exist within characters. Dostoyevsky turned Raskolnikov’s unconscious into a field of action.

The students had returned to familiar surroundings (dogs barked in the background), but they had three or four other courses—not to mention all the anxieties of a precarious future—to contend with. Their college careers were messed up, their friendships interrupted, their campus activities and summer internships wiped out. As we read together in April, the university’s hospital, New York-Presbyterian, was filled with victims of the pandemic. Across the city, hundreds of them were dying every day. So many elements of our civilization had shut down: churches, schools, and universities; libraries, bookstores, research institutes, and museums; opera companies, concert organizations, and movie houses; theatre and dance groups; galleries, studios, and local arts groups of all kinds (not to mention local bars). Who knew what would perish and what would come back?

The students were discomfited, often quiet, almost abashed. In between classes, they sent Professor Dames their responses to the reading, and he used their notes to pull them into the conversation. As we approached the final dream and its awful picture of social breakdown, I continued searching the novel for indications of what could summon so dreadful a vision—and also of what suggested its opposite, a possibly more benevolent world that was also presaged by Dostoyevsky’s whirling contraries. In class, the conversation turned toward questions of moral indifference and sympathy. What obligations did we have to one another? Was there any redemptive value in suffering? For Americans, that last question was strange, even repellent, but in mid-April the language of hardship was all around us.

Antonio remained fascinated by the idea that one might achieve greatness by doing wrong in the service of a larger right. But during the crime itself Raskolnikov falls into an abstracted near-trance and does one stupid thing after another. Antonio had noted that Raskolnikov, standing in a police station, faints dead away when someone mentions the pawnbroker: “His body shuts off. The consequences of the act become unstoppable, even if you try to take intellectual approaches to prevent yourself from getting caught.” Antonio’s flirtation with the murderer was short-lived.

Raskolnikov blurs out many griefs and ambitions, but is never able to say exactly what propelled his actions. Dostoyevsky doesn’t want the reader to solve the mystery: he makes the crime both overdetermined and incoherently motivated. It was hard to judge a young man so intricately composed, and, when Professor Dames asked, “Do we want him to get away with it?”, he got no better than a mixed response. Raskolnikov wants, and doesn’t want, to escape punishment. His sulfurous inner monologues alternate between contempt for others and contempt for himself. Professor Dames, answering his own question, said that Dostoyevsky creates extraordinary suspense, but it’s psychological suspense: “Is he going to crack?”

Dostoyevsky intended moral suspense as well: Would Raskolnikov come to recognize that what he did was absolutely wrong? In the last third of the novel, the gentle but persistent Sonya offers a way out for him. “She’s not coming to Raskolnikov from a position of judgment,” Professor Dames said, “nor from a position of implied moral superiority. She’s saying, ‘We are two sinners.’” A deeply religious girl, she had taken to working the streets in a failed effort to save her crumbling family, and must endure Raskolnikov’s taunt that she has given up her happiness for nothing. In return, she presses him hard: Was he capable of acknowledging his own misery? The subsequent conversion of the snarling former student to Sonya’s doctrine—the necessity of suffering and salvation through Christ—is perhaps the most resolutely asexual seduction in all of literature. What could it mean for us?

In the next class, we were guided through the epilogue. Raskolnikov is in a prison camp, and Dostoyevsky’s narration shifts to a more removed, third-person voice. “For the first time, we’re outside Raskolnikov’s head in a sustained way,” Professor Dames said. “We’re separated from psychology, and it feels like a loss.” But Julia said she felt “relief,” and quoted the narrator’s remark about Raskolnikov: “Instead of dialectics, there was life.” By dialectics, Dostoyevsky meant all the theories plaguing the former student. A young man with a head crammed full of ideas, Raskolnikov needed “air.”

And what was “air” in this claustrophobic novel? The word, Professor Dames said, “was an articulation of something transcendental, certainly religious.” Julia was right to steer us to the line “Instead of dialectics, there was life.” It was the most important sentence in the novel. “But what is meant by ‘life’?” Professor Dames asked. Raskolnikov tries strenuously to shape that life, but in the end transcendence comes from a surrender of individuality, not an assertion of it. “The novel is a strong rebuke to individual happiness and individual rights and autonomy,” he said. At the end
of the class, Zoom froze on Professor Dames, and he remained immobile on my screen, his dark eyes staring straight ahead. We all needed air.

The final dream is lodged in the novel’s epilogue. That dream is a creepy invention, evoking the genres of science fiction and horror: “Here and there people would band together, agree among themselves to do something, swear never to part—but immediately begin something completely different from what they themselves had just suggested, begin accusing one another, fighting, stabbing.” The struggle has a sinister dénouement: the few survivors of the disease are “pure and chosen, destined to begin a new generation of people and a new life.” The dream presents a vision of society even more feral than the author’s rendering of Petersburg earlier in the novel. Surely it’s also an extreme expression of Raskolnikov’s mind: having murdered two people, he now wants to murder the multitudes. But isn’t it the opposite as well? An expression of Raskolnikov’s sympathy, a boundless pity for a collapsing world? He remains complex and contradictory to the end.

I wasn’t the only reader in April to be alarmed by the dream of an “unknown and unseen pestilence.” As Julia wrote me in an e-mail, the dream was science fiction, but political science fiction; the notion of a few special survivors suggested a master race, a new form of white male privilege. She also saw the dream as reflecting on us: “I noticed that the infected persons who are stubborn in their beliefs to the point of madness bear a striking resemblance to Americans trying to talk politics,” she wrote. “The mobs of people described by Dostoyevsky recalled photos I saw of conservative folks in Michigan protesting stay-at-home orders at the capitol. The expressions on their faces and their screams, so convinced that their moral convictions are correct.” And Antonio wrote to me that “people can’t agree on what’s right and wrong, and, in our case, we know that ambiguity concerning the future can make people restless and highly partisan when reason and compassion is what’s needed in this situation.” His hope was that “we can humble ourselves enough to realize where we’ve gone wrong, to throw ourselves at the feet of the ‘insatiable compassion’ that Sonya represents and emerge better people. If we can do that, then we won’t have to simply survive.”

Two months later, my classmates had survived one experiment—the strangeness of intimate reading through remote learning. But the struggle for clarity and understanding had intensified on so many fronts. I thought of all the people acting with courage and generosity, not just the front-line warriors and the outsiders who rushed to New York to help when the outbreak began but the many people who created communities of faith or art online, or sent out all manner of useful advice on how to resist despair. The marchers protesting the murder of George Floyd and all that it symbolizes—risked disease to express solidarity with one another. As the summer began, Antonio, to make money, found work at a nearby country club—cleaning floors, windows, and golf carts. He told me that it was hard for him to “think about the future, because of the current situation, with the protests and the pandemic,” although he didn’t rule out a job in government. Julia was interning for a legal nonprofit, and making plans to become a human-rights lawyer, perhaps for Amnesty International.

Every day, in Trump’s America, it seemed as though we were coming closer to the annihilating turmoil—the mixed state of vexation and fear—in Raskolnikov’s dream. The disease was everywhere, and it only heightened our world’s fissures and inequities. More than a hundred thousand had died, tens of millions were unemployed, many were hungry, and, at times, the country appeared to be unravelling. Some spoke of racism as a “virus,” the American virus; and the language of disease, though it miscasts a human-made scourge as a natural phenomenon, captures just how profoundly it has infiltrated the life of the country. The President’s every statement, meanwhile, was designed to widen chaos. He spoke of the need to “dominate,” and many of us were determined not to be dominated. We would not lose our individuality, like the poor murderer in his exile. But neither could we escape responsibility for the mess we had made, a mess we had bequeathed to the students, and to all of the next generation. I kept returning to Dostoyevsky’s book, looking for signs of how collective purpose can heal social divisions and injustices, stoking hope and resolve alongside fear, anything that would overtake the desperate anomic that Raskolnikov’s dream had conjured: “In the cities, the bells rang all day long: everyone was being summoned, but no one knew who was summoning them or why.”
The Polish director Agnieszka Holland, now seventy-one, has toiled in many fields. “The Secret Garden” (1993) and “Washington Square” (1997) point to a predilection for bookish costume drama, yet Holland also made three episodes of “The Wire.” Her most tenacious work has centered on lone figures, as they seek to outwit, or simply to withstand, the weight of authoritarian threat. “Europa Europa” (1990) is based on the true story of a young Welshman who found a terrible tale to tell. Holland’s third tactic, as Jones journeys through the blighted landscapes of Ukraine, is to show us only what he sees, in the hope that a deep note of universality will resound through the particular. Thus, when Jones eats an orange on a train and discards the peel, his fellow-passengers lunge and scrap for the nutritious prize. Alighting at a secluded railroad station, he passes a body on the platform. Lying there, frozen and unremarked, it is meant to represent the innumerable dead who are strewn around the countryside like litter. The same goes for the scene in which a baby, though still alive and crying, is tossed onto a cart and quickly disappears into the crowded railroad station, he passes a body on the platform. Lying there, frozen and unremarked, it is meant to represent the innumerable dead who are strewn around the countryside like litter. The same goes for the scene in which a baby, though still alive and crying, is tossed onto a cart; the link is made explicit, as Jones, returned from his mission, is introduced to Orwell, though whether such a meeting ever took place is open to debate.

Holland’s response is threefold. First, she introduces none other than George Orwell (Joseph Mawle) as a framing device. At the outset, we find him at work on “Animal Farm,” the implication being that the novel—which boasts a Mr. Jones, a farmer, in the opening sentence—was inspired, or informed, by what we are about to witness. (A curious move; if, as a film director, you have faith in the strength of your narrative, why should it need an extra boost?) Later, the link is made explicit, as Jones, returned from his mission, is introduced to Orwell, though whether such a meeting ever took place is open to debate.

None of these monstrosities are in itself monstrous. Applebaum’s book includes a lengthy section on cannibalism. (Some parents consumed their offspring, survived, and, having woken to the realization of what they had done, went mad. By then, they were in the Gulag. How much hell do you want?) In a feature film, though, isolated horrors are liable to come across as eruptions of a foul sur-
realism rather than as testamentary evidence, and we don’t—or can’t—always make the imaginative leap in scale. When Jones himself grows famished, and chews in desperation on tree bark, we are scarcely moved, for the plights of one outsider, from the well-fed West, is of no consequence in the apocalypse of hunger.

This is no reflection on Norton, who is plausibly stricken as the pale and bespectacled Jones, and we share his frustration when his reports on the Holodomor, delivered after he is thrown out of the Soviet Union, have only a limited impact. They are scorned by the New York Times correspondent in Moscow, Walter Duranty, played by Peter Sarsgaard as a limping and low-lidded slimeball. (Just in case we doubt his nefarious credentials, he hosts a language orgy at his apartment.) It was Duranty who, in brushing off Jones’s account of the atrocities, blithely explained to Times readers, “You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs”—one of the most shameful phrases in the history of the newspaper. The eggs were human beings.

This determination not to know, or to look away when the facts admonish our beliefs, is among our most durable frailties, and Duranty was but the first of many skeptics. As late as 1988, an article in the Village Voice, reviling “one-note feminologists” and accusing them of falsehood, bore the subtitle “A 55-Year-Old Famine Feeds the Right,” as if the urge to verify hardship and grief were no more than a Reaganite affectation. Twenty years later, Dimitry Medvedev, Russia’s President at the time, referred to the “so-called Holodomor.” Any discussion of Ukraine’s being intentionally victimized, he added, would be “cynical and immoral.” As for the valiant Jones, he was murdered in Inner Mongolia, in 1935, allegedly by Chinese bandits, though suspicions linger that the Soviets had a vengeful hand in his demise. Is it conceivable that Holland’s bleak, murky, and instructive film could prompt a change of heart in the current Russian establishment, or even a confession of crimes past? Not a chance.

T

he new film from Olivier Assayas, “Wasp Network,” is a mirror image of “Mr. Jones.” Instead of a Westerner entering a Communist state, we have Communists infiltrating the West—Cuban spies, dispatched undercover to Miami. The decade is not the nineteen-thirties but the nineteen-nineties. The colors have changed from crow black and slush gray to sun-warmed pastels. And a hungry man eats a Big Mac, rather than chowing down on a tree. That has to be an improvement, though vegans may disagree.

First up is a pilot, René González (Édgar Ramírez), who defects, or appears to defect, by flying solo to the United States. His true function, once he’s in Florida, is to report to his superiors, in Havana, on the activities of anti-Castro groups. The trouble is that, regardless of his motives, he has to leave behind his wife, Olga Salanueva (Penélope Cruz), and their young daughter, and the film never quite faces up to the paramount question: In what universe would any sentient creature voluntarily abandon Penélope Cruz? Assayas gives her dorky spectacles and shapeless clothes, and shows her laboring in a tannery and mopping a hospital floor, all in a vain effort to quench the flame. Olga is easily the most fervid figure in the movie, and her reaction, when she’s finally told that René is not a traitor but a loyal (if secret) patriot, is an amazing coalescence of pride, exasperation, and weepy fatigue.

But wait. Suddenly, we switch from René’s adventures to those of Juan Pablo Roque (Wagner Moura), another component of the network. He embeds himself in the expatriate community by marrying Ana Margarita (Ana de Armas), whose beauty he admires almost as much as his own. Then, later on, we turn to a third man, Gerardo Hernandez (Gael García Bernal), who is sent to Miami to command operations. Oh, and there’s a semi-related subplot, in which a hapless youth is recruited in El Salvador and paid to plant bombs in Havana’s hotels, in a bid to curb the tourist revenue on which the Cuban economy relies.

So who’s the hero? Or, to put it another way, which of these agents would be the least boring to have dinner with? Assayas has often proved his skill with ensembles, in season-ripened movies like “Late August, Early September” (1999) and “Summer Hours” (2009), but the new work, alas, lacks a dramatic core. The story can’t keep still, shifting from year to year and place to place, and, whereas “Mr. Jones” appalls you into wanting to know more, “Wasp Network” is so temperate in its political approach that you start to forget what’s at stake. The fiercest speech comes from Castro (the real thing, in a TV interview, not an actor in a beard), who brands America “the biggest spy in the world.” Touché. •
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 Mort Gerberg, must be received by Sunday, June 28th. The finalists in the June 8th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week’s contest, in the July 20th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

"Looks like one of them has bad timing."
Mark Newman, New York City

"Who’s the clown in the suit?"
Joe Reeves, Big Bear City, Calif.

“I found something serious under the hood.”
Russell Keen, Paris, France

"All his pitches have been inside."
Ben Fishel, Washington, D.C.
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