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WHY FAULKNER ENDURES

Casey Cep, in her review of Michael Gorra’s new book about William Faulkner, writes that “there is no defending Faulkner's character, only his characters” (Books, November 30th). As with all things Faulkner, the interplay between personal life and fiction is complex. Take, for instance, Faulkner’s relationship with Caroline Barr, whom Cep identifies as the “family’s Black maid . . . to whom he dedicated his book ‘Go Down, Moses.’” Faulkner may have based the character of Dilsey, in his 1929 masterpiece, “The Sound and the Fury,” on Barr. The book’s final section is often called the “Dilsey chapter.” Almost two decades later, Faulkner added an appendix to the novel, providing more detailed biographies of many of its characters. As in the novel, Faulkner leaves the final words for Dilsey, saying, simply, “They endured.”

A few years later, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, delivered at the start of the Cold War, Faulkner articulated his belief that “man will not merely endure: he will prevail.” The choice of the word “endure” is significant. In his novels, few characters endure or prevail. But the use of “endure” in both the appendix and the Nobel speech seemingly connect Faulkner’s personal belief in the promise of man with the lives of his characters. Arguably, Faulkner provided the best example of what he believed to be the goal of all authors and poets: to depict “the human heart in conflict with itself . . . because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.”

Jason Dittrich
Germantown, Md.

DESIGN WITHIN REACH

The New Yorker’s issue of November 30th contains two articles that address the purpose of design. Burkhard Bilger’s Profile of Mark Ellison, a master craftsman, focuses on high-end residential renovations in New York City—a service rendered to well-off people who agonize over ceiling curves and stair balustrades (“Building the Impossible”). I, too, work in architecture in the city, and I found Bilger’s presentation of the politics of this world to be well observed. One thing that Ellison said was particularly revealing: “No one does what we do to an apartment for value or resale. No one needs it. They just want it.” In contrast, Alexis Okeowo writes movingly about how the confluence of racism, poverty, public health, and municipal infrastructure has led to a lack of essential sanitation design services in Alabama's Black Belt (“Tainted Earth”). This vacuum insures the continued marginalization of communities like that of the late Pamela Rush. It is not difficult to see that equitable design through the provision of basic septic systems would be of great value to many residents of Lowndes County.

Aoife O’Leary
Brooklyn, N.Y.

As a retired carpenter with experience of New York City’s elite renovation culture, I’m impressed by Mark Ellison’s skills and achievements. But construction that only the wealthiest city residents can afford is one thing—doing high-quality work when resources are more limited is another. Though some of the most beautiful spaces I ever had a hand in creating overlook the city from fifty stories up, others are more down-to-earth. One of my proudest professional moments came when a woman whose staircase I had replaced stopped me in the supermarket to tell me how much she appreciated the beauty and singularity of something designed and built with care. Such things should be accessible to everyone.

Lon Bull
New York City

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In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed. Here’s a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming.

DECEMBER 30, 2020 – JANUARY 12, 2021

Since 1907, the **Times Square Ball** (pictured) has dropped in New York City for all but two New Year’s Eves. (The exceptions were the wartime dimouts of 1942 and 1943.) On Dec. 31, the ball descends at midnight, as usual, but the party is virtual: the public isn’t invited to gather in Times Square this year. But there are still festivities—broadcast on TV and live-streamed via nye2021.com—including a performance by Gloria Gaynor, whose rousing disco anthem “I Will Survive” is the perfect song to ring in the New Year.
**MUSIC**

**Dolores Diaz and the Standby Club: “Live at O’Leaver’s”**

In 2015, the audio engineer Corina Figueroa Escamilla was living in Omaha with her then-husband—Bright Eyes’ Conor Oberst—and a housemate, the singer-songwriter Miwi La Lupa. Oberst and La Lupa conscripted Figueroa Escamilla into a country-covers band, in which she assumed the front-woman role under the moniker Dolores Diaz. The band soon swelled to ten members but played only a handful of shows. “Live at O’Leaver’s” documents two of them. The album wears its nonchalance with pride, from the loose leads to the repertoire, which is heavy on beery standards. From the current vantage point, the album’s star attraction may be an uncredited one—the audience, blithely enjoying the spirited bar band, every communal cheer now a source of envy.—Jay Rattenberg

**Les Arts Florissants**

*Classical* The last time Alex Weiser set out to compose a song cycle incorporating modern Yiddish poetry, the result was “and all the days were purple,” a gracious, moving work that was a Pulitzer Prize finalist. Weiser returns to that same wellspring for “in a dark blue night,” a three-song sequence based on poems by Morris Rosenfeld, Naftali Gross, and Reuben Iceland. The work’s digital première, featuring the mezzo-soprano Annie Rosenfeld and the pianist Daniel Schlosberg, streams for free at sundown.—Steve Smith (Jan. 5 at 4:43; alexweiser.com/nakht.html)

**Chris Potter**

*Jazz* It’s little wonder that the musical whirlwind Chris Potter, a revered saxophonist who can make his horns effortlessly jump through hoops, played all the instruments on his listener-friendly, and isolation-appropriate, new album, “There Is a Tide.” The ripsnorting improviser of more general renown is on display at this live-streamed New Year’s engagement, featuring David Virelles on piano, Joe Martin on bass, and Marcus Gilmore on drums.—Steve Turrentman (Dec. 31-Jan. 1 at 8; villagevanguard.com)

**Prototype Festival**

*Opera* Since 2013, the Prototype Festival has turned the desolate weeks of early January into a vivid celebration of contemporary opera and music theatre, but this year it tackles a performing-arts void of far greater magnitude. The in

**THE THEATRE**

**Meet Me in St. Louis**

The challenges of mounting a full-scale musical in the age of COVID are immense, and the Irish Rep, under the direction of Charlotte Moore, wrestles them to a well-earned draw in this colorful but necessarily static production. Based on the stories of Sally Benson and on Vincente Minnelli’s 1944 film, the gentle action, set in 1903, revolves around the middle-class concerns of the large Smith family. Each of the thirteen cast members was filmed separately at home. Hugh Wheeler’s book takes the biggest hit, with the actors unable, of course, to create their own onstage rhythm, but the sound recording is excellent, the orchestration and the singing first rate. (Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane’s score includes “The Boy Next Door” and “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.”) Shereen Ahmed tackles the Judy Garland role, and Melissa Errico plays the mom. Charlie Corcoran’s design of the Smiths’
The Public’s Under the Radar festival is known for testing the bounds of theatrical convention, making it well positioned for a year in which stage artists have no choice but to experiment. The 2021 edition, running Jan. 6-17 (at publictheater.org), once again draws on the international avant-garde, including Chile’s Teatro Anónimo, in Trinidad González’s “Espíritu,,” and the Nigerian-born British poet-performer Inua Ellams, who contemplates migration in “Borders & Crossings.” Performances are virtual, and many selections embrace the challenge. The American collective 600 Highwaymen explores distance and closeness via telephone in “A Thousand Ways (Part One): A Phone Call,” which gives audience members automated prompts. The Iranian-British playwright Javaad Alipoor uses a live Instagram feed in “Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran,” about the global wealth gap. And “Disclaimer,” from the New York City-based Piehole, takes the form of an online cooking class.—Michael Schulman

I Hate Suzie
The violation of digital exposure is the subject of this destabilizing, off-kilter show (on HBO Max), created by Billie Piper and Lucy Prebble. Piper stars as Suzie Pickles, an actress who, like Piper herself, found teen-age stardom as a singer and is now entering the career descent of early middle age. She lives in the English countryside with her husband, Cob (Daniel Ings), and their young son, who is deaf. After her phone is hacked, nude photos of her are splashed all over the Web, in flagrante delicto with a man whose cob is visibly not Cob’s. “There is a penis of color in the pictures,” she is told—an absurdist phrase, at once respectful and rude, that typifies the show’s tart tonal mix. Each of its eight episodes is named for a stage in coping with trauma, but the artificiality of that structure is undercut by the show’s genuine, exploratory weirdness. Berated by the furious, wounded Cob, Suzie goes off the rails, and the show takes us into a mind altered by drugs, alcohol, and anxiety. But it’s Piper’s raw, comical performance as a not so smart woman on the verge that stands out.—A.S. (12/7/20)

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom
George C. Wolfe’s film (on Netflix) of August Wilson’s 1984 play—the second in Wilson’s ten-play cycle about Black American life—stars Viola Davis as Gertrude (Ma) Rainey, the singer often described as the “Mother of the Blues.” It’s 1927, and Rainey is in Chicago with her female lover, Dussie Mae (Taylour Paige, overdubbing her sweet-thang thing), to cut records for a white man named Sturdyvant (Jonny Coyne). Ruben Santiago-Hudson, who adapted the play for the screen, has done a creditable job of making some scenes more cinematic, but Wolfe is not at home with moving a story along pictorially. When the ambitious young horn player Levee (the late Chadwick Boseman) is frustrated at not being able to play his own music, the literalization of the character’s feelings in clichéd images makes the film dull to watch. Still, there is so much poetic realism in Wilson’s script that it’s hard to pick a favorite moment. His language leaves us with the impression that this woman is a wound, and that her injury lives right next to her cynicism and her defensiveness.—Hilton Als (12/21/20)

Roadkill
David Hare’s new political thriller in four episodes (on PBS’s “Masterpiece”), full of small-town scandals and Victorian twists, follows the career implosion of Peter Laurence (Hugh Laurie), a Tory transport minister in England. As the show begins, Peter has just had a triumph in court—after a newspaper accused him of profiting from his government position, he tampered with the evidence and sued for contempt of court. The jury, dazzled by the buffet of tropes and their own familiarity with the show’s appeal lies in its embrace of the familiar, but Hare, dazzled by the buffet of tropes available to him, can’t keep himself from loading up his tray. We get riots in prisons, vodka glasses thrown at heads in the heat of domestic anger, and vague, faceless foreign calamities. What kept me watching was Laurie, who is understated, that typifies the show’s tart tonal mix. Each of its eight episodes is named for a stage in coping with trauma, but the artificiality of that structure is undercut by the show’s gen-

— Ken Marks (irishrep.org)
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May combine déjà vu and surprise. You likely know the look, loosely termed Constructivist: off-kilter geometries, strident typography, grabby colors, and collaged photography, all in thrall to advanced technology and socialist exhortation. But you won’t have seen about two-thirds of the three hundred pieces here (they’re recent acquisitions). The scope is encyclopedic, surveying a time when individuals sacrificed their artistic independence to ideological programs of mass appeal. As the exhibition unfolds, artists-penitent, shrinking from the perils of originality, dominate in Russia. Careerist designers teem in the West, with such fecund exceptions as Le Corbusier and Kurt Schwitters. Some work will surely be enjoyed for its formal ingenuity and rhetorical punch. The architectonic and typographical razzmatazz of the Austrian-born American Herbert Bayer affords upbeat pleasures; a strikingly sensitive Dada collage by the German Hannah Höch feels almost overqualified for its company. But art unaffected by personality is sterile. That needn’t constitute a failure. It may be a clear-eyed choice made on principle. What needs saying conditions how it’s said, which means accepting the chance that, should conditions change, the work may prove to be ephemeral.—Peter Schjeldahl (moma.org)

Isa Genzken
An austere, magnificent wooden sculpture, resting diagonally across the floor, presides over this singular German artist’s show at Galerie Buchholz. Titled “Schwarzes Hyperbolo Nüsschen,” the object, made in 1980, seems to belong to a different world than Genzken’s more recent (and more familiar) assemblages—bright, aggressive composites of consumer goods and building materials. This sculpture’s elongated form is based on computer-aided calculations, but it is as broadly allusive to the known world (to oars and tibia bones, for example) as it is coolly mathematical, making it an elegant misfit in the canon of Minimalism. On the surrounding walls, digitally generated drawings and freehand preparatory sketches provide context for the centerpiece. A large color photograph of an ear, also from 1980, is the show’s wild card—fitting for Genzken, an unpredictable artist with an irreducible career.—Johanna Fateman (galeriebuchholz.de)

“Making the Met: 1870–2020”
The Met is our Home Depot of the soul. It has just about whatever you want, and it has a lot of it, very largely the harvest of past donations. (It needs to be said that recent scholarship has cast shade on the colonialist provenance of many of the Met’s treasures—a problem shared by other formerly piratical museums.) This huge show (which closes on Jan. 3) roughly tracks the sequence of acquisitions since the museum’s founding, in 1870. It opens in a chapel-like room, containing a van Gogh painting, a Rodin sculpture, a sixteenth-century Nepalese mask, a wooden power figure from the Kongo Kingdom, a Greek marble stele, a Surrealist sculpture by Isamu Noguchi, and a Richard Avedon photograph of Marilyn Monroe. Do the juxtapositions disorient? Good. You’re primed for the panoply of incongruities that follow, which, the more you marvel and embarrass yourselves at what has been mirrored to us as the sum of a comprehensive civilization. In such company, it’s satisfying to see Faith Ringgold’s “Street Story Quilt” (1985), a formally charming array of three large sewn panels that captures sprightly imagery and dialogic words a host of Black citizens—real lives, really led—in the windows of tenements along a city street that’s past due for intersecting with Fifth Avenue.—P.S. (metmuseum.org)

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein
The dozen fiery and aqueous paintings in this gripping exhibition, at the Andrew Edlin gallery, represent just one facet of Von Bruenchenhein’s vast and eclectic output. The Milwaukee artist, who died in 1983, was unrecognized during his lifetime (he worked as a baker for many years). He left behind a houseful of jaw-dropping creations for a rapt post-humous audience: enchanting foliate vessels sculpted from clay that he dug himself, erotic photographs of his wife, intricate miniature thrones assembled from chicken bones. In the lush oil-on-Masonite pieces here, from 1957-61, Von Bruenchenhein rendered a turbulent cosmos using an innovative combination of finger painting and tools (sticks, combs, crumpled paper). His fear of war in the atomic age haunts the pictures of roiling apocalyptic skies and fantastic supernatural battles. But there are quieter images, too, including one that suggests a hybrid of octopus and bromeliad in a vaporous swamp—a brooding character in the visionary artist’s otherworldly melodrama.—J.F. (edlingallery.com)

AT THE GALLERIES

In 2019, the mighty American sculptor Martin Puryear represented the U.S. at the Venice Biennale—and about time, too. In a career spanning nearly fifty years, the artist, who was born in Washington, D.C., in 1941, has mined the great narrative of American life and history for his elegant, intellectually astute, and distancing work. In his current show—six large pieces created in the past three years—at the Matthew Marks gallery, Puryear employs a variety of materials, ranging from twine to bronze, to explore emblematic shapes that bring to mind the Civil War, humanity’s destruction of the natural world, and the Black body. What unites these sculptures, other than the delicate and sturdy latticework in several of them, is Puryear’s interest in, and rendering of, loneliness. In the understated but dramatic “New Voortrekkers” (pictured), from 2018, a wooden covered wagon rests on a sharp incline; there are no figures present in the vehicle, which evokes all that was left behind in order to forge ahead in the New World.—Hilton Als

MOVIES

An Elephant Sitting Still
The only feature film by the Chinese director Hu Bo, who died by suicide in 2017, at the age of twenty-nine, soon after completing it, is one of the great achievements of recent cinema. The nearly four-hour drama follows the crosscutting fortunes of embittered residents of a remote and dilapidated industrial town, where a dispute between high-school students over a cell phone leads to a spiral of violence and revenge. Hu builds an intricate grid of conflict-ridden connections among the movie’s main characters to form a bleak panorama of degradation. People live in halting ruins amid garbage-filled alleys and rubble-strewn streets; parents, exhausted by stress and fear, neglect and berate their children; sex is heartless and predatory; public institutions are cruel and corrupt; crime is casual and endemic. Hu’s
Volatile, roving long takes pursue the characters to the deepest corners of their explosive despair and find a core of fierce resistance; his view of social breakdown rises to a total vision of existential rage. In Mandarin.—R.B.

Night Across the Street

The late Chilean director Raúl Ruiz’s final film, released in 2012, is a uniquely expansive and graceful farewell. Its protagonist, Celso Robles, an aging bachelor and small-town office clerk on the verge of retirement, is a poetic dreamer whose premonition of his own mortality arises in the person of his landlady’s nephew, whom he suspects of plotting to kill him. The town’s romantic intrigues meld with Celso’s reminiscences of childhood; his erstwhile fantasies—involving Long John Silver, who taught him the art of living; the novelist Jean Giono, who awakened his literary imagination; and Beethoven, whom he introduced to electricity and movies—join with visions of the grudges, joys, and political conflicts that marked his prodigious youth. But fate intrudes in a series of fanciful inspirations—such as a rechanneling of 007’s spiral-grooved gun barrel—that exalt the last glimmer of life and embrace death with noble serenity. Ingenious digital effects turn nostalgic home-town strolls into dreamlike adventures, but ultra-low-tech toys become Ruiz’s nostalgic home-town strolls into dreamlike adventures. In Spanish.—R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, iTunes, and Kanopy.)

20th Century Women

In Santa Barbara, in 1979, Dorothea Fields (Annette Bening) presides, with genial tolerance, over a mixed household. She is in her mid-fifties, with a teen-age son, Jamie (Lucas Jade Zumann), who is nurturing an interest in feminism, and a couple of lodgers—Abbie (Greta Gerwig), a russet-haired photographer in feminism, and a couple of lodgers—Abbie (Greta Gerwig), a russet-haired photographer (each of whom is given a potted biography) and conjuring the past in sequences of stills. Plenty of time is also devoted to the friendship, threatened by looming desire, between Jamie and Julie (Elle Fanning), who is older and wiser than he is, but no less confused; at one point, they take his mother’s car—a VW Beetle, naturally—and elope. The movie be longing wits, and to her stirring portrayal of a woman whose ideals have taken a hit but have not collapsed, and who strives, in the dolldroms of middle age, to defeat her own disappointment.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 12/19/16.) (Streaming on Netflix, iTunes, and other services.)

The Witness

This extraordinary documentary, from 2015, reconsiders one of the most infamous of all modern crime stories—the 1964 murder, in Queens, of Kitty Genovese, whose screams were reportedly ignored by dozens of neighbors. It’s directed by James Solomon, but its main character and virtual auteur is Bill Genovese, one of Kitty’s three younger brothers, who was sixteen at the time of her murder. His on-camera investigation brings him back to the crime scene, where he visits apartments, calculates sight lines, and interviews current and former residents about the crime. He also consults trial transcripts and police records and does meta-journalistic research involving reporters, editors, and producers—some who broke the story, others who later revised it—yielding discoveries at odds with the headlines. The film raises crucial questions about domestic violence, police procedure, the penal system, and journalistic ethics; it also offers a moving, complex vision of gay life in nineteen-sixties New York. The movie’s one reenactment—an ingenious forensic experiment—unites drama, journalism, and firsthand experience in a masterstroke of pure cinema.—R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, IMDb TV, and other services.)

Wonder Woman 1984

There’s a brisk and kicky B movie trapped in the banal grandiosity of this bloated superhero sequel, directed by Patty Jenkins, which is indeed set in 1984, amid the Cold War. Gal Gadot returns as the title character, incarnated as Diana Prince, a scientist at the Smithsonian, where stolen antiquities have turned up. One of them, a stone that grants wishes, is borrowed by Maxwell Lord (Pedro Pascal), a TV celebrity and financial scammer whose self-aggrandizing schemes—involving a global-communications satellite that presages Twitter—usurp the President’s power and threaten to destroy the world. Diana’s effort to stop him is complicated by her relationship with a pilot named Steve (Chris Pine) and by her friendship with a colleague, Barbara Minerva (Kristen Wiig), a nerdy scientist who’s in love with Maxwell. Past and present intertwine in the details: Russia looms large, the public proves gullible, a cruelly divisive wall is built, and Diana’s obsessively explicit pursuit of truth calls out a regime of lies. Only these resonant symbols, some hectic set pieces, and Gadot’s campy stolidity break through the bombastic slog.—R.B. (In theatrical release and streaming on HBO Max.)

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If you’ve ever wondered what it’s like to live with a Michelin-starred chef, you might try ordering from the delivery pop-up Ribs n Reds, available most weekends in Manhattan and parts of Brooklyn. During the first few months of the pandemic, the chef Bryce Shuman, whose midtown restaurant, Betony, closed in 2016, found himself cooking at home, for his wife, Jennifer—the special-events director at the NoMad Hotel, who was on furlough—and their six-year-old daughter, Emilia, a lot more than usual. Before March, he’d been working as a consultant and a private chef. Family dinners were something of a rarity, and suddenly having time for them felt like a silver lining.

But, Jennifer told me recently, “we did miss being in restaurants, and, doing what we do, we wondered, How could we still serve our community during lockdown? What’s something that would travel well and something that we ourselves enjoyed that we could share with other people?” Emilia was especially fond of her father’s spareribs. Those checked all the boxes. So Bryce, who grew up in North Carolina, built a heat-and-serve menu around them: half and full racks, delivered with a choice of sauce—smoked-honey barbecue, hot pepper, or sweet molasses—to glaze them in before warming them in the oven.

In the summer, when the Shumans launched what was at first called Ribs n Rosé, they layered juicy greenmarket tomatoes and peaches in a salad with fragrant basil; as temperatures dropped, it was replaced by a composition of tart pickled beets, watercress, and turmeric yogurt mixed with tahini. Half of an eggplant, crosshatched before being charred until lusciously pliant, was bench in favor of a frothy butternut-squash soup (made with a variety grown on Jennifer’s uncle’s farm, in Maryland), served with crème fraîche and brioche croutons and packaged, sweetly, in a Mason jar. And cans of Vinny sparkling rosé were switched out for bottles of Terrassen Cabernet Franc, both made with grapes grown in the Finger Lakes by the NoMad’s wine director, Thomas Pastuszak. The Shumans offered a special menu for Thanksgiving, and there’s another for New Year’s Eve, including beef tenderloin, brown-butter carrots, and maple-roasted Brussels sprouts (plus optional caviar).

A wonderfully coarse, crunchy coleslaw, featuring tightly ruffled wedges of cabbage, sliced green apple, carrot, and parsley in a honey-mustard dressing, has transcended seasonal shifts. So have the jarred dilly beans; the light, crumbly corn bread with honey butter; the bubbly baked mac and cheese, dense with Cheddar and paccheri noodles; and the excellent fried chicken, which comes with green-pepper ranch and is much better than it has to be, given the obvious emphasis on “the other white meat.”

Speaking of which: the ribs. Each rack—St. Louis cut, meaning that it comes from the belly side of the pig and gets trimmed into a neat rectangle—is slow-cooked and then finished under a salamander, a high-powered stovetop broiler found in commercial kitchens, resulting in fatty, crisp-edged meat that shreds easily off the bone, plus connective cartilage so soft and rich that you can eat it, too. (For those who avoid animal products, there’s also a whole roasted, molasses-glazed Koginut squash, its caramelized surface coated in toasted nuts and seeds.)

“It’s not exactly like what I do at home,” Bryce admitted the other day. “It’s kind of a step up.” Still, as exquisitely rendered as the dishes are, they all retain a humble, familiar, unpretentious quality. Before the pandemic, he had been looking toward opening another restaurant, something in the vein of Betony, which was a place I loved in spite of itself: the atmosphere was almost comically stuffy, the menu rife with luxury clichés, but the food was undeniably fantastic. I hope that Ribs n Reds—a portion of whose proceeds are donated to the Brooklyn Community Bail Fund—lives on indefinitely, and that whatever Bryce does next leans even further into its spirit. (Dishes $7-$45.)

—Hannah Goldfield
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FINDING SOMETHING OF REAL SUBSTANCE TO ENJOY.

Celebrate The Small Wins
Readers of “Through the Looking-Glass” may recall the plight of the Bread-and-Butterfly, which, as the Gnat explains to Alice, can live only on weak tea with cream in it. “Supposing it couldn’t find any?” Alice asks. “Then it would die, of course,” the Gnat answers. “That must happen very often,” Alice reflects. “It always happens,” the Gnat admits, dolefully.

How the Bread-and-Butterfly survives, given the impossible demands of its diet, is a nice question. Lewis Carroll was in part teasing Darwinian ideas, which depend on a struggle for existence in which, eventually, we all lose—nonexistence being the norm of living things, over time. But the plight of the Bread-and-Butterfly comes to mind, too, when we contemplate what is called, not without reason, America’s crisis of democracy.

It always happens. We are told again and again that American democracy is in peril and may even be on its deathbed. Today, after all, a defeated yet deranged President bunkers in the White House contemplating crazy conspiracy theories and perhaps even martial law, with the uneasy consent of his party and the rabid support of his base. We are then told, with equal urgency, that what is wrong—nonexistence being the norm of living things, over time. But the plight of the Bread-and-Butterfly comes to mind, too, when we contemplate what is called, not without reason, America’s crisis of democracy.

Lurking behind all of this is a faulty premise—that the descent into authoritarianism—what needs to be explained, when the reality is that . . . it always happens. The default condition of humankind is not to thrive in broadly egalitarian and stable democratic arrangements that get unsettled only when something happens to unsettle them. The default condition of humankind, traced across thousands of years of history, is some sort of autocracy.

America itself has never had a particularly settled commitment to democratic, rational government. At a high point of national prosperity, long before manufacturing fell away or economic anxiety gripped the Middle West—in an era when “silos” referred only to grain or missiles and information came from three sober networks, and when fewer flew over flyover country—a similar set of paranoid beliefs filled American minds and came perilously close to taking power. As this magazine’s political writer Richard Rovere documented in a beautifully sardonic 1965 collection, “The Goldwater Caper,” a sizable group of people believed things as fully fantastical as the Trumpite belief in voting machines rerouted by dead Venezuelan socialists. The intellectual forces behind Goldwater’s sudden rise thought that Eisenhower and J.F.K. were agents, wittingly or otherwise, of the Communist conspiracy, and that American democracy was in a death match with enemies within as much as without. (Goldwater was, political genealogists will note, a ferocious admirer and defender of Joe McCarthy, whose counsel in all things conspiratorial was Roy Cohn, Donald Trump’s mentor.)

Goldwater was a less personally malevolent figure than Trump, and, yes, he lost his 1964 Presidential bid. But, in sweeping the Deep South, he set a victorious neo–Confederate pattern for the next four decades of American politics, including the so-called Reagan revolution. Nor were his forces naïvely libertarian. At the time, Goldwater’s ghostwriter Brent Bozell spoke approvingly of Franco’s post–Fascist Spain as spiritually far superior to decadent America, much as the highbrow Trumpites talk of the Christian regimes of Putin and Orbán.

The interesting question is not what causes autocracy (not to mention the conspiratorial thinking that feeds it) but what has ever suspended it. We constantly create post-hoc explanations for the ascent of the irrational. The Weimar inflation caused the rise of Hitler,
we say; the impoverishment of Tsarism caused the Bolshevik Revolution. In fact, the inflation was over in Germany long before Hitler rose, and Lenin came to power not in anything that resembled a revolution—which had happened already under the leadership of far more pluralistic politicians—but in a coup d'état by a militant minority. Force of personality, opportunity, sheer accident: these were much more decisive than some neat formula of suffering in, autocracy out.

Donald Trump came to power not because of an overwhelming wave of popular sentiment—he lost his two elections by a cumulative ten million votes—but because of an orphaned electoral system left on our doorstep by an exhausted Constitutional Convention. It’s true that our diagnoses, however dubious as explanations, still point to real maladies. Certainly there are all sorts of reasons for reducing economic inequality. But Trump’s power was not rooted in economic interests, and his approval rating among his followers was the same when things were going well as it is now, when they’re going badly. Then, too, some of the blandest occupants of the Oval Office were lofted there during previous peaks of inequality.

The way to shore up American democracy is to shore up American democracy—that is, to strengthen liberal democracy—that is, to strengthen liberal democracy out. The way to shore up American democracy if we are to make what always happens, for a little while longer, happily unhappen.

—Adam Gopnik

O
n a recent gray morning, John Brown Gordon sat astride his horse outside Georgia’s capitol building. Gordon, a Confederate general, was Georgia’s governor in the eighteen-eighties. Today, tax dollars pay for the upkeep of his large bronze likeness. A temporary barricade stood between the century-old statue and the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia. “A particularly cruel person,” Rose said. “And that he was quoted saying that interracial marriage was evil,” she read. “Erected 1928.”

Two years later, a company called 22Squared pitched the Atlanta N.A.A.C.P. an idea that Rose called a “Christmas present.” Using the Southern Poverty Law Center’s map of more than eighteen hundred symbols of white supremacy around the country—street names, flags, park benches, statues—22Squared created a Web site called Invisible Hate. Its purpose, Courtney Jones, a twenty-eight-year-old 22Squared employee, said, is “identifying and dismantling symbols of systemic racism.” She stood on the sidewalk with Rose, providing tech support.

“You open up the map and zoom in,” she said. “Find the closest monument. Read some fact-checked history about it. Take a pic. Add a sticker. Then post to social!” The site’s digital stickers bear slogans such as “Silence is Compliance”; “Shame on You”; “Hate Is Not Heroic”; and “Statue of Non-Liberty.” Jones said, “Our main one, of course, is ‘Tear Them Down’”—Rose affixed it to his picture of Gordon. “We’re talking to Snapchat about custom filters,” Jones added. “And trying to get more influencers on board.”

“Hey, I know I been kinda tough on you, but come on, let’s—” He laughed again. “You open up the map and zoom in, then take a pic. Add a sticker. Then post to social!”

They continued on. “I had a white guy tell me once that Alexander Hamilton Stephens was being satirical in his Cornerstone Speech,” Rose said. “Are you kidding me? He gave an hour-long satirical speech on how the war really was about slavery?” He laughed. “And this business about how there were a hundred thousand Black Confederate soldiers. It just didn’t happen! Think how that would’ve gone: Slave master says, ‘Hey, I know I been kinda tough on you, but take this gun and defend this arrangement.’” He laughed again. “Because it could be worse if they win the war!”

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“Hey, I know I been kinda tough on you,” Rose said, peering at his phone. He walked along the capitol’s lawn. “This is Governor Joseph Brown and his wife,” he explained, stopping before a bearded man and a seated lady. Jones pulled up the monument on her phone. “He was quoted saying that interracial marriage was evil,” she read. “Erected 1928.”

“It’s infuriating,” Rose said. “But, again, it’s educational.” Jones took a picture and added a “Shame on You” sticker.

They continued on. “I had a white guy tell me once that Alexander Hamilton Stephens was being satirical in his Cornerstone Speech,” Rose said. “Are you kidding me? He gave an hour-long satirical speech on how the war really was about slavery?” He laughed. “And this business about how there were a hundred thousand Black Confederate soldiers. It just didn’t happen! Think how that would’ve gone: Slave master says, ‘Hey, I know I been kinda tough on you, but take this gun and defend this arrangement.’” He laughed again. “Because it could be worse if they win the war!”

“Hey, I know I been kinda tough on you,” Rose said, of that argument. “Listen to Trump.”
“He’s the worst racist in office since Woodrow Wilson,” Rose said. “The worst President in the history of America. I don’t think he’ll get a statue on government property.”

“They’ll have to put it outside one of his hotels,” Jones said.

The two walkers squeezed through a gap in a fence, passing a statue of Eugene Talmadge, a governor in the nineteen-thirties and forties. “The best thing I can say about Talmadge is that he wasn’t as racist as Richard Russell,” Rose said, citing an earlier governor, also memorialized on the lawn. Rose pointed across the street: “See those buildings? They’re named for this legislator they called Sloppy Floyd. Sloppy Floyd Towers. Well, those buildings face Martin Luther King, Jr., Drive, but the address is on the side street.” He continued, “They didn’t want Sloppy Floyd to have an M.L.K. address. That’s how insidious this is.”

Around the corner, a Black man and a white man were working on a fence. “Ebony and ivory,” Rose said. Nearby stood a statue of Martin Luther King, Jr., dedicated in 2017. “Right by the back door,” Rose said.

“Half the size of John B. Gordon,” Jones added.

But the arc of the moral universe? “The DeKalb County Confederate Monument was just removed,” Rose said. “Henry County came down. Rockdale County came down.” On the Invisible Hate map, these sites had become red “X” marks. “We’re working on one in Newton County.” He kept walking. “We’re working.”

—Charles Bethea

EXTRACURRICULAR KIDS IN HIGH PLACES

One striking innovation of modern meritocracy is the teen-age executive. High-school students used to spiff up their college applications with extracurriculars like Model U.N. and student council. Today’s overachievers want to grace their résumés with the words “founder and C.E.O.” When schools in Fremont, California, shut down in March, Jagannath Prabhakaran, a sixteen-year-old, seized the opportunity to join the ranks. He and three friends began writing a curriculum for what he dubbed CELLS Academy, an organization devoted to getting kids excited about science. In June, it launched two courses, Python for Beginners and Intro to Genetics, on a digital learning platform called Udemy. More than two thousand students signed up.

In the next couple of months, CELLS added to its programming: a virtual camp in the U.S.; a tutoring program in Malaysia. Prabhakaran and his friends weren’t the only students in their highly competitive school district who decided to change the world during quarantine. At least sixteen other ventures were launched in the months after learning went remote. Arav Tewari founded ShareNext, a food-drive group that describes itself as “Uber for donations.” Nihar Duvvuri started Project SD, a nonprofit that creates and funds debate clubs at schools in low-income areas. When classes resumed, in the fall, it seemed like every other teen-ager was running a company.

“It’s not just test scores and G.P.A. that get you into a top school,” Christopher Rim, a college-admissions consultant in New York City, said over the phone. “You need really great extracurricular activities.” Rim is twenty-five years old. When he was in high school, in New Jersey, he founded an anti-bullying organization called It Ends Today, which put him on Lady Gaga’s radar. Rim credits the nonprofit with helping him get into Yale. (He dissolved the group when he was in college.) After graduating, in 2017, he founded an admissions-counselling firm, Command Education, where his services start at around a thousand dollars an hour.

Command Education specializes in “activity development,” which turns the company’s teen-age clients into founders, executive directors, and patent holders by connecting them with lawyers, accountants, engineers, event planners, and designers who can help them realize their adolescent ambitions. During lockdown, Rim saw a four-hundred-per-cent spike in inquiries. “With school being remote, how are you supposed to participate in the school musical?” he asked.

Student founders who don’t hire consultants can find starting a company without adult supervision difficult. Aditi Morumganti, the sixteen-year-old secretary of Project SD, got tangled up in legal paperwork: “You’ll think you have everything down, and then you’re looking at a form, and you’re, like, Oh, my God, I need to file for this thing as well?”

The young founders of Fremont are an especially scrappy and well-credentialed bunch. Their Web sites have tasteful fonts, well-lit head shots, and graphics that slide like automatic doors. Many
of them enunciate like high-ranking debaters—because they are high-ranking debaters. Some of them sit on one another’s executive boards.

Although the intended beneficiaries of these student-founded organizations tend to be other young people, some kids are skeptical. Aditya Prerapa, a junior at the district’s Mission San Jose High School, has a cynical take. “How do you know you started junior year?” Prerapa tweeted a few months ago. “Every student and their mother are creating a non-profit for ‘social good’ for college apps.” Attached to the post was a screenshot of Prerapa’s Facebook notifications, filled with invitations to support his peers’ ventures. He argued that it would be more effective for them to join existing organizations than to start new ones. “But no,” he wrote. “We all have to be founders.”

Prerapa eventually deleted the tweet, at the request of a school administrator. He later clarified that he’d meant to criticize the admissions rat race, not his classmates. “Everybody’s trying to get into a good college,” he said. An amateur computer programmer, he spends much of his time working on open-source software, but he lacks the TED-talk affect of some of his peers. “I don’t blame the kids themselves,” he said. “I blame the system that’s been created.”

The teen-age Fremont execs are ambivalent about the high-pressure environment. “It’s intense, but in a good way,” Asavari Gowda, who co-founded a science-and-technology blog called STEAM Engine, said. “It’s just that everyone here has a lot of goals.” As for the glut of student-run companies, she said, “It’s better when these things are run by kids. Well, not better, but good in the sense that we’re more idealistic. Right?”

—Marella Gayla

POLYMATH DEPT.
ZIG AND THEN ZAG

Quarantining, for months on end, on the same premises as one’s extended family might sound like a recipe for interpersonal disaster. But not if you’re a member of the Coppola clan and can spread out over more than fifteen hundred acres in Napa. “It’s been wonderful to have this time with my mom and dad,” Roman Coppola, the fifty-five-year-old director, producer, and screenwriter, said the other day, over Zoom. “My kids were able to be around their aunts and uncles and cousins, so we’ve been having a lot of sleepovers—it’s been a little like summer camp.” Coppola’s parents, the director Francis and his wife, Eleanor, an artist and a writer, own a vineyard. Roman and his family moved up there from L.A. in March; his sister Sofia, the director, had been in residence and with her family as well.

Coppola’s manner is gently formal; with his trim salt-and-pepper beard and dark-blue blazer (accessorized with a natty pocket square), he brings to mind an artistically inclined merchant banker. While in Napa, he has been teaching animation classes to his three children: Alessandro, who is five, Marcello, seven, and Pascal, nine. “I showed them a YouTube video where Terry Gilliam talks about the animations he made in his Monty Python days,” Coppola said. “They’ve been doing these cutouts, and then we have this little animation stand and a stop-motion app we use.” He hanned his laptop to reveal the kids’ arrangements of pictures clipped from magazines—a knight in armor, big red lips, Mt. Rushmore.

“Marcello made up a joke the other day,” he said. “Do you want to tell it, silly?” Marcello’s sandy head popped into view. “O.K.!” he began. “What did the charming Italian man say when he got a crazy-bad sunburn?” He waited a beat. “He said, ‘I’m a-peeling!’”

Coppola has directed two feature films, “CQ” and “A Glimpse Inside the Mind of Charles Swan III,” but most of his career has charted a more diffuse approach. “Anything that goes zig and then zag draws me in,” he said. “My heroes have always been polymaths like Buckminster Fuller.” In his thirties, he directed several music videos, including the Strokes’ “Someday” and “Last Nite,” which helped imprint the group’s scruffy, denim-and-sneakers look on the public’s imagination; later, he produced and co-wrote films with his friend Wes Anderson. (They collaborated on the script for Anderson’s upcoming movie, “The French Dispatch.”) He also established the Directors Bureau, which produces commercials and music videos, started a tote-bag company, and co-created the Amazon TV show “Mozart in the Jungle.”

Coppola’s quarantine schedule has been hectic. He co-directed “Mariah Carey’s Magical Christmas Special,” a glitzy-strewed extravaganza, for Apple TV, and reunited with the Strokes to direct a video for their new song “The Adults Are Talking,” in which the band plays baseball against robots. He also directed a video for Paul McCartney’s “Find My Way,” from his latest album, “McCartney III,” on which the former Beatle plays all the instruments himself.

It was shot remotely, with Coppola in Napa and McCartney at his home studio, in Sussex: “I was thinking, What if we get a crazy amount of security cameras that can be controlled through one brain—we ended up having fifty-three, I think—and then have him just do his thing?” McCartney ran through the song once at the piano. “I was, like, ‘Mr. McCartney, that was great.’ Then on to the harpsichord. We did vocals, backing vocals, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, drums, and we hardly needed to adjust the cameras.” He went on, “We took a couple of breaks, he had a cup of tea—”

A shriek was heard from off camera. “Hey, guys? Guys! Just keep doing your animation, O.K.?” Coppola called. The scrunching stopped, then resumed. Coppola laughed. “It was really just a document of an artist at work,” he continued, referring to the McCartney video. “The only thing I was sad about was...
that I didn't get to meet him in person.”

The footage from the fifty-three cameras was edited into a tapestry of tightly framed squares that appear to slide and shift, tile-puzzle style, to evoke the layered nature of McCartney’s work with his instruments.

Certainly, Coppola has been thinking about making a third feature. “I’d like my kids to have the experiences I had as a kid, being on my dad’s movie sets,” he said. “Like, ‘Oh, they’re doing the napalm drop today, so I’m going to skip school,’ which in retrospect was kind of remarkable.” Meanwhile, he’s creating a communication platform called CASBU, which aims to be a more efficient alternative to e-mail and texting.

It was time to look at what the kids had made. Coppola tapped the animation app on his phone. A screech rose up, scoring a scene of Mt. Rushmore hardening to escape from a farting baby chick; in another scene, huge lips danced above a knight’s body. “When they were screaming, I thought they were just missing around, but they were making their animation!” Coppola said. “Hey, Alessandro, I saw your movie! It’s amazing! Yours, too, Marcello!”

—Naomi Fry

COUNTERINTUITIVE

Anthony Weiner

Not long ago, at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Anthony Weiner, the former seven-term congressman, mayoral hopeful, registered sex offender, and cameo star of “Sharknado 3: Oh Hell No!,” pointed a temperature gun at a guest, grabbed a bright-green hard hat, and stepped onto the factory floor of IceStone. “So, we make countertops here,” Weiner said, of the company that he’s been running since May. Notable clients: NASA (bathrooms), Whole Foods (salad bar), Ed Norton (residence). “Fairly low-tech. It’s like what you did in elementary school making pottery.”

Weiner wore an orange zip-up sweater, blue khakis, and tennis shoes. “This checked a lot of boxes for my dream next thing,” he said, rapping his knuckles against a five-hundred-pound slab of Portland cement mixed with broken Heineken bottles, which created the flecked appearance of granite. “I’ve done a lot of consulting in the years since I left Congress. Being the fifth guy wearing a suit and tie on a Zoom call, trying to figure out how to help some big company get even bigger—it has some value, and it pays the bills, but it’s not something where I hung up and thought, Oh, I can’t wait to do that more. Countertops are about as real as you can get.”

Reality was all around him: forklifts, calibrators, an overhead crane rolling along tracks near the ceiling. Sacks of broken glass sat in a corner. Weiner plunged a hand into one and came out with a fistful of sage-green particles—“aggregate,” in countertop parlance. “Looks a little bit like a car windshield, which is a big source of our light greens and light blues,” he said.

The glass is mixed with cement and natural pigments and poured into long rectangular molds, which cure for a day and a half in kilns before being levelled and polished. Nearby, an employee in an apron and a do-rag buffed a nearly finished slab. “Everything before it goes out gets one last round of tender loving care,” Weiner said, sidling up to the man. “How’re you doing, brother? Tell me how it’s going today.”

The retail politician comes alive in the warehouse. “I still get to scratch that itch,” he said. “But I don’t, like, stand at my desk and give a speech on whatever outrageous thing the Iranians did this week.” What the Iranians were doing hadn’t been a priority for Weiner since the fall of 2017, when he began a twenty-one-month prison sentence for sexting with a minor. Asked about life on the inside, he said, “I wouldn’t recommend it to others.” One of his prison visitors was Dal LaMagna, the beauty-tools magnate known as Tweezerman, who later pivoted to environmentally friendly countertops. The two had met, years ago, on the political circuit. (LaMagna considered running for mayor and sought Weiner’s counsel. Weiner advised against it.)

“When COVID was crushing the company, and crushing everything else, Dal approached me and said, ‘What if I stepped back and just kind of gave you the keys?’ Weiner recalled. IceStone, a certified B Corp, has a history of helping the downtrodden, including formerly incarcerated people. “I would be a high-profile example of that category,” Weiner said. “For years, this company has also hired refugees from Tibet.”

In Congress, Weiner was an exacting boss, known for throwing salads and BlackBerrys. Nowadays, he’s mellowed. “Back then, I always had the sense that I knew how to do my staff’s job better than they were doing it,” Weiner said. “Here, I rely on people who are a lot smarter than I am. It’s a more collaborative environment.”

The switch from public service to private life hasn’t been totally smooth. Vocal citizenry still want Weiner to settle scores and log complaints. “A guy stopped me this morning, when I was getting my Citi Bike,” Weiner said. “Tell Biden this. How come Harris didn’t say that? Sometimes it’s about politics, sometimes it’s about the price of things at the supermarket. For whatever reason, I’ve always been someone who people come up to, and they feel they can say stuff to me.”

That afternoon, Weiner would turn his attention to IceStone’s warranty, which he wanted to beef up from ten years to lifetime. “It’s a very durable product,” he said. Even slabs that break in the production process get saved. “We keep them around for smaller jobs,” he said. “Very little goes to waste.”

—Micah Hauser
A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE PLAGUE YEAR

The mistakes and the struggles behind an American tragedy.

BY LAWRENCE WRIGHT
I. “AN EVOLVING SITUATION”

There are three moments in the year-long catastrophe of the COVID-19 pandemic when events might have turned out differently. The first occurred on January 3, 2020, when Robert Redfield, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, spoke with George Fu Gao, the head of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, which was modelled on the American institution. Redfield had just received a report about an unexplained respiratory virus emerging in the city of Wuhan.

The field of public health had long been haunted by the prospect of a widespread respiratory-illness outbreak like the 1918 influenza pandemic, so Redfield was concerned. Gao, when pressed, assured him that there was no evidence of human-to-human transmission. At the time, the theory was that each case had arisen from animals in a “wet market” where exotic game was sold. When Redfield learned that, among twenty-seven reported cases, there were several family clusters, he observed that it was unlikely that each person had been infected, simultaneously, by a caged civet cat or a raccoon dog. He offered to send a C.D.C. team to Wuhan to investigate, but Gao said that he wasn’t authorized to accept such assistance. Redfield made a formal request to the Chinese government and assembled two dozen specialists, but no invitation arrived. A few days later, in another conversation with Redfield, Gao started to cry and said, “I think we’re too late.”

Perhaps Gao had just been made aware that the virus had been circulating in China at least since November. Certainly, Redfield didn’t know that the virus was already present in California, Oregon, and Washington, and would be spreading in Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Iowa, Connecticut, Michigan, and Rhode Island within the next two weeks—well before America’s first official case was detected.

Redfield is convinced that, had C.D.C. specialists visited China in early January, they would have learned exactly what the world was facing. The new pathogen was a coronavirus, and as such it was thought to be only modestly contagious, like its cousin the SARS virus. This assumption was wrong. The virus in Wuhan turned out to be far more infectious, and it spread largely by asymptomatic transmission. “That whole idea that you were going to diagnose cases based on symptoms, isolate them, and contact-trace around them was not going to work,” Redfield told me recently. “You’re going to be missing fifty per cent of the cases. We didn’t appreciate that until late February.” The first mistake had been made, and the second was soon to happen.

Matthew Pottinger was getting nervous. He is one of the few survivors of Donald Trump’s White House, perhaps because he is hard to categorize. Fluent in Mandarin, he spent seven years in China, reporting for Reuters and the Wall Street Journal. He left journalism at the age of thirty-two and joined the Marines, a decision that confirmed everyone who knew him. In Afghanistan, he co-wrote an influential paper with Lieutenant General Michael Flynn on improving military intelligence. When Trump named Flynn his national-security adviser, Flynn chose Pottinger as the Asia director. Scandal removed Flynn from his job almost overnight, but Pottinger stayed, serving five subsequent national-security chiefs. In September, 2019, Trump appointed him deputy national-security adviser. In a very noisy Administration, he had quietly become one of the most influential people shaping American foreign policy.

At the Journal, Pottinger had covered the 2003 SARS outbreak. The Chinese hid the news, and, when rumors arose, authorities minimized the severity of the disease, though the fatality rate was approximately ten per cent. Authorities at the World Health Organization were eventually allowed to visit Beijing hospitals, but infected patients were reportedly loaded into ambulances or checked into hotels until the inspectors left the country. By then, SARS was spreading to Hong Kong, Hanoi, Singapore, Taiwan, Manila, Ulaanbaatar, Toronto, and San Francisco. It ultimately reached some thirty countries. Because of heroic efforts on the part of public-health officials—and because SARS spread slowly—it was contained eight months after it emerged.

The National Security Council addresses global developments and offers the President options for responding. Last winter, Pottinger was struck by the disparity between official accounts of the novel coronavirus in China, which scarcely mentioned the disease, and Chinese social media, which was aflame with rumors and anecdotes. Someone posted a photograph of a sign outside a Wuhan hospital saying that the E.R. was closed, because staff were infected. Another report said that crematoriums were overwhelmed.

On January 14th, the N.S.C. convened an interagency meeting to discuss the virus. Early that morning, the W.H.O.—relying on China’s assurances—tweeted that there was no evidence of human-to-human transmission. The N.S.C. recommended that screeners take the temperatures of any passengers arriving from Wuhan.

The next day, President Trump signed the first phase of a U.S.-China trade deal, declaring, “Together, we are righting the wrongs of the past and delivering a future of economic justice and security for American workers, farmers, and families.” He called China’s President, Xi Jinping, “a very, very good friend.”

On January 20th, the first case was identified in the U.S. On a Voice of America broadcast, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said, “This is a thirty-five-year-old young man who works here in the United States, who visited Wuhan.” Trump, who was at the World Economic Forum, in Davos, Switzerland, dismissed the threat, saying, “It’s one person coming in from China. It’s going to be just fine.”

On January 23, 2020, all the members of the U.S. Senate gathered for the second day of opening arguments in President Trump’s impeachment trial. It was an empty exercise with a foreordained result. Mitch McConnell, the Majority Leader, had already said that he would steamroll Democratic attempts to introduce witnesses or new evidence. “We have the votes,” he decreed.
The trial posed difficulties for the four Democratic senators still running for President. As soon as the proceedings recessed, on Friday evenings, the candidates raced off to campaign for the weekend. One of them, Amy Klobuchar, of Minnesota, recalled, “I was doing planetariums in small towns at midnight.” Then it was back to Washington, to listen to an argument that one side would clearly win. In the midst of this deadened theatre, McConnell announced, “In the morning, there will be a coronavirus briefing for all members at ten-thirty.” This was the first mention of COVID in Congress.

The briefing took place on January 24th, in the hearing room of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, which Lamar Alexander, Republican of Tennessee, chaired. Patty Murray is the ranking Democratic member. A former preschool teacher, she has been a senator for twenty-seven years. Her father managed a five-and-dime until he developed multiple sclerosis and was unable to work. Murray was fifteen. The family went on welfare. She knows how illness can upend people economically, and how government can help.

A few days earlier, she had heard about the first confirmed COVID case in the U.S.—the man had travelled from Wuhan to Washington, her state. Murray contacted local public-health officials, who seemed to be doing everything right: the man was hospitalized, and health officials were tracing a few possible contacts. Suddenly, they were tracking dozens of people. Murray said to herself, “Wow, this is kinda scary. And this is in my back yard.”

But in the outbreak’s early days, when decisiveness mattered most, few other politicians were paying attention. It had been a century since the previous great pandemic, which found its way from the trenches of the First World War to tropical jungles and Eskimo villages. Back then, scientists scarcely knew what a virus was. In the twenty-first century, infectious disease seemed like a nuisance, not like a mortal threat. This lack of concern was reflected in the diminished budgets given to institutions that once had led the world in countering disease and keeping Americans healthy. Hospitals closed; stockpiles of emergency equipment weren’t replenished. The spectre of an unknown virus arising in China gave certain public-health officials nightmares, but it wasn’t on the agenda of most American policymakers.

About twenty senators showed up to hear Anthony Fauci and Robert Redfield speak at an hour-long briefing. The health authorities were reassuring. Redfield said, “We are prepared for this.”

That day, Pottinger convened forty-two people, including N.S.C. staffers and Cabinet-level officials, for a meeting. China had just announced a lockdown of Wuhan, a city of eleven million, which could mean only that sustained human-to-human transmission was occurring. Indeed, Pottinger’s staff reported that another city, Huanggang, was also locked down. The previous day, the State Department had heightened its travel advisory for passengers to the Wuhan region, and the meeting’s attendees debated how to implement another precaution: sending all passengers coming from Wuhan to five U.S. airports, where they could be given a health screening before entry.

The next day, Pottinger attended a Chinese New Year party on Capitol Hill. Old diplomatic hands, émigrés, and Chinese dissidents relayed stories about the outbreak from friends and family members. People were
frightened. It sounded like SARS all over again.

Pottinger went home and dug up files from his reporting days, looking for phone numbers of former sources, including Chinese doctors. He then called his brother, Paul, an infectious-disease doctor in Seattle. Paul had been reading about the new virus on Listservs, but had assumed that, like SARS, it would be “a flash in the pan.”

If flights from China were halted, Matt asked, could America have more time to prepare?

Paul was hesitant. Like most public-health practitioners, he held that travel bans often have unintended consequences. They stigmatize countries contending with contagion. Doctors and medical equipment must be able to move around. And, by the time restrictions are put in place, the disease has usually infiltrated the border anyway, making the whole exercise pointless. But Matt spoke with resolve. Little was known about the virus except for the fact that it was spreading like wildfire, embers flying from city to city.

Paul told Matt to do whatever he could to slow the virus’s advance, giving the U.S. a chance to establish testing and contact-tracing protocols, which could keep the outbreak under control. Otherwise, the year ahead might be calamitous.

No one realized how widely the disease had already seeded itself. Fauci told a radio interviewer that COVID wasn’t something Americans needed to “be worried or frightened by,” but he added that it was “an evolving situation.”

2. THE TRICKSTER

In October, 2019, the first Global Health Security Index appeared, a sober report of a world largely unprepared to deal with a pandemic. “Unfortunately, political will for accelerating health security is caught in a perpetual cycle of panic and neglect,” the authors observed. “No country is fully prepared.” Yet one country stood above all others in terms of readiness: the United States.

During the transition to the Trump Administration, the Obama White House handed off a sixty-nine-page document called the Playbook for Early Response to High-Consequence Emerging Infectious Disease Threats and Biological Incidents. A meticulous guide for combating a “pathogen of pandemic potential,” it contains a directory of government resources to consult the moment things start going haywire.

Among the most dangerous pathogens are the respiratory viruses, including orthopoxviruses (such as smallpox), novel influenzas, and coronaviruses. With domestic outbreaks, the playbook specifies that, “while States hold significant power and responsibility related to public-health response outside of a declared Public Health Emergency, the American public will look to the U.S. Government for action.” The playbook outlines the conditions under which various federal agencies should become involved. Questions about the severity and the contagiousness of a disease should be directed to the Department of Health and Human Services, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the Environmental Protection Agency. How robust is contact tracing? Is clinical care in the region scalable if cases explode? There are many such questions, with decisions proposed and agencies assigned. Appendices describe such entities as the Pentagon’s Military Aerial Medical Evacuation team, which can be assembled to transport patients. Health and Human Services can call upon a Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team, which includes medical examiners, pathologists, and dental assistants.

The Trump Administration jettisoned the Obama playbook. In 2019, H.H.S. conducted Crimson Contagion, a simulation examining the government’s ability to contain a pandemic. Among the participants were the Pentagon, the N.S.C., hospitals, local and regional health-care departments, the American Red Cross, and twelve state governments. The scenario envisioned an international group of tourists visiting China who become infected with a novel influenza and spread it worldwide. There’s no vaccine; antiviral drugs are ineffective.

The Crimson Contagion exercise inspired little confidence that the government was prepared to handle such a crisis. Federal agencies couldn’t tell who was in charge; states grew frustrated in their attempts to secure enough resources. During the simulation, some cities defied a C.D.C. rec-
ommendation to close schools. Government policies, the report concluded, were inadequate and "often in conflict." The Public Health Emergency Fund and the Strategic National Stockpile were dangerously depleted; N95 masks and other medical essentials were in short supply, and domestic manufacturing capacity was insufficient. Congress was briefed on the findings but they were never made public. By the time COVID arrived, no meaningful changes had been made to address these shortcomings.

"I just love infectious diseases," John Brooks, the chief medical officer of the COVID response team at the C.D.C., admitted to me. "I know diseases are terrible—they kill people. But something about them just grabs me."

Each generation has its own struggle with disease. In 1939, Brooks’s mother, Joan Bertrand Brooks, developed polio. Her legs were covered with surgical scars, and her right leg was noticeably shorter than her left. "She spoke about that experience often—how she was teased, stigmatized, or blatantly discriminated against," Brooks recalled.

For Brooks, who is gay, the disease of his generation was H.I.V./AIDS. He grew up near the Dupont Circle neighborhood of Washington, D.C., which had a large gay population, and watched men he knew disappear: "Guys would get thin and develop lesions and then die. It was scary." Science offered no solution, and that was on Brooks’s mind when he decided to become a doctor. The day he was accepted at Harvard Medical School, he and his mother went to lunch to celebrate. "Afterward, we dropped into a ten-dollar palm reader, who said she saw me marrying a tall Swedish woman and owning a jet with which I flew around the world with our three children," he told me. "We had a good laugh. I should have asked for a refund."

In 2015, Brooks became the chief medical officer of the H.I.V./AIDS division at the C.D.C. Every H.I.V. researcher has been humbled by the various manifestations of this disease. "At every turn, there was something different," Brooks said. "All these opportunistic infections show up. What in the world is this all about? Very cool." The experience of studying H.I.V. helped prepare him for the myriad tricks that COVID would present.

The C.D.C. was founded in 1946, as the Communicable Disease Center. Atlanta was chosen as its home because the city was in the heart of what was called "the malaria zone." Five years later, America was declared malaria-free. The C.D.C.’s mission expanded to attack other diseases: typhus, polio, rabies. In 1981, the organization, by then renamed the Centers for Disease Control, reported the first known cases of AIDS, in Los Angeles. Until this year, the C.D.C. maintained a reputation as the gold standard for public health, operating above politics and proving repeatedly the value of enlightened government and the necessity of science for the furthering of civilization. During the twentieth century, the life span of Americans increased by thirty years, largely because of advances in public health, especially vaccination.

The C.D.C. campus now resembles a midsize college, with more buildings under construction, including a high-containment facility for the world’s most dangerous diseases. Lab animals—mice, ferrets, monkeys—inhabit cages inside Biosafety Level 4 chambers. Humans move around them like deep-sea divers in inflated suits, tethered to an overhead airflow system. The Emergency Operations Center is a large, bright room, with serried rows of wooden desks facing a wall of video screens. The place exudes a mixture of urgency and professional calm. On one side of the room, operators triage incoming phone calls. In 2014, during the Ebola crisis, Brooks received a call from Clay Jenkins, a county judge in Dallas. A Liberian citizen visiting the city, Thomas Eric Duncan, had contracted the disease. Jenkins wanted advice about how to safely approach Duncan’s fiancée and her family members. On a monitor, Brooks could see the fiancée’s apartment complex, shot from above by cameras on helicopters. Brooks told Jenkins that he could safely enter the apartment as long as the family had no symptoms: it would be an important public gesture for him to choose compassion over fear. Brooks watched footage of Jenkins escorting the family out of the complex. (Thomas Duncan eventually died; two nurses who had cared for him were infected but survived.)

Brooks was working on the COVID response team with Greg Armstrong, a fellow epidemiologist. Armstrong oversaw the Advanced Molecular Detection program, which is part of the C.D.C.’s center for emerging and zoonotic infectious diseases. (Zoonotic diseases come from animals, as coronaviruses typically do.) Humanity’s encroachment into formerly wild regions, coupled with climate change, which has forced animals out of traditional habitats, has engendered many new diseases in humans, including Ebola and Zika. At first, SARS-CoV-2—as the new virus was being called—presented itself as a less mortal coronavirus, like the common cold, spreading rapidly and sometimes asymptotically. In fact, SARS-CoV-2 was more like polio. Most polio infections are asymptomatic or very mild—fever and headaches. But some are deadly. The polio cases that doctors actually see are about one in every two hundred infections. Stealth transmission is why polio has been so hard to eradicate.

Armstrong was in Salt Lake City, conducting a training session, when he noticed an article on the Web site of The New England Journal of Medicine: “Early Transmission Dynamics in Wuhan, China, of Novel Coronavirus-Infected Pneumonia.” The article was one of the first to describe the virus’s spread among humans, a development that didn’t surprise Armstrong: “Anybody with any epidemiology experience could tell you it was human-to-human transmission.” Then he noticed Table 1, “Characteristics of Patients,” which noted the original source of their infection. Of the Chinese known to have contracted the virus before..."
January 1st, twenty-six per cent had no exposure either to the Wuhan wet market or to people with apparent respiratory symptoms. In subsequent weeks, the number of people with no obvious source of infection surpassed seventy per cent. Armstrong realized that, unlike with SARS or MERS—other coronavirus diseases—many infections of SARS-CoV-2 were probably asymptomatic or mild. Contact tracing, isolation, and quarantine would likely not be enough. These details were buried in Table 1.

Other reports began to emerge about possible asymptomatic spread. Although SARS-CoV-2 was genetically related to the SARS and MERS viruses, it was apparently unlike them in two key ways: people could be contagious before developing symptoms, and some infected people would never manifest illness. In late February, University of Texas scientists, led by Lauren Ancel Meyers, reported that it could have a “negative serial interval,” meaning that some infected people showed symptoms before the person who had given it to them.

The C.D.C.’s early guidance documents didn’t mention that possibility, because the evidence of asymptomatic spread was deemed insufficient. “In the beginning, for every mathematical analysis that indicated a shorter serial interval than incubation period, others reported no difference,” Brooks said. “When the science changed, we changed. And our recommendations changed, too.” But, by that time, the C.D.C. had been muzzled by the Trump Administration.

There are three things this virus is doing that blow me away,” Brooks told me. “The first is that it directly infects the endothelial cells that line our blood vessels. I’m not aware of any other human respiratory viruses that do this. This causes a lot of havoc.” Endothelial cells normally help protect the body from infection. When SARS-CoV-2 invades them, their powerful chemical contents get dumped into the bloodstream, resulting in inflammation elsewhere in the body. The rupture of individual endothelial cells coarsens the lining in the blood vessels, creating breaks and rough spots that cause turbulent blood flow.

The second surprise was hypercoagulability—patients had a pronounced tendency to develop blood clots. This reminded Brooks of Michael Crichton’s 1969 novel, “The Andromeda Strain,” in which a pathogen causes instant clotting, striking down victims in mid-stride. “This is different,” Brooks said. “You’re getting these things called pulmonary embolisms, which are nasty. A clot forms—it travels to the lung, damaging the tissues, blocking blood flow, and creating pressures that can lead to heart problems.” More puzzling was evidence that clots sometimes formed in the lungs, leading to acute respiratory distress. Brooks referred to an early report documenting autopsies of victims. Nearly all had pulmonary thromboses; until the autopsy, nobody had suspected that the clots were even present, let alone the probable cause of death.

“The last one is this hyperimmune response,” Brooks said. Most infectious diseases kill people by triggering an excessive immune-system response; COVID, like pneumonia, can unleash white blood cells that flood the lungs with fluid, putting the patient at risk of drowning. But COVID is unusual in the variety of ways that it causes the body to malfunction. Some patients require kidney dialysis or suffer liver damage. The disease can affect the brain and other parts of the nervous system, causing delirium, strokes, and lasting nerve damage. COVID could also do strange things to the heart. Hospitals began admitting patients with signs of cardiac arrest—chest pains, trouble breathing—and preparing emergency coronary catheterizations. “But their coronary vessels are clean,” Brooks said. “There’s no blockage.” Instead, an immune reaction had inflamed the heart muscle, a condition called myocarditis. “There’s not a lot you can do but hope they get through it.” A German study of a hundred recovered COVID patients with the average age of forty-nine found that twenty-two had lasting cardiac problems, including scarring of the heart muscle.

Even after Brooks thought that COVID had no more tricks to play, another aftereffect confounded him: “You get over the illness, you’re feeling better, and it comes back to bite you again.” In adults, it might just be a rash. But some children develop a multi-organ inflammatory syndrome. Brooks said, “They have conjunctivitis, their eyes get real red, they have abdominal pain, and then they can go on to experience cardiovascular collapse.”

3. SPIKE

When I was around six, I woke up one morning and couldn’t get out of bed: I was paralyzed from the waist down. It was during the polio era, in the early fifties, before there was a cure. I remember the alarm in my mother’s eyes. Our family doctor made a house call. He sat on the edge of the bed, and took my temperature and pulse; there was little else he could do. The terror of polio haunted children and parents everywhere.

I was lucky. After a day or so, I could move my legs again. I was never certain what had caused my brief paralysis, but the memory was searing. Soon after the polio vaccine, invented by Jonas Salk, became available, in 1955, I was inoculated, along with millions of other children.

So I had a personal interest when I entered Building 40 of the main campus of the National Institutes of Health, in Bethesda, Maryland, which houses the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Dr. Barney S. Graham, the deputy director of the Vaccine Research Center and the chief of the Viral Pathogenesis Laboratory and Translational Science Core, works on the second floor. He studies how viruses cause disease, and he designs vaccines.

The first thing you notice about Graham is that there’s a lot of him: he’s six feet five, with a gray goatee and a laconic manner. Graham’s boss at NIAID, Anthony Fauci, told me, “He understands vaccinology better than anybody I know.”

Bookshelves in Graham’s office hold colorful 3-D printouts of viruses that he has worked with, including Ebola, Zika, and influenza. While I was researching “The End of October,” a novel that I published earlier this year, about a deadly pandemic, Graham helped me design a fictional
virus, and then concocted a vaccine for it. As we collaborated, I came to understand that researchers like Graham are essentially puzzle solvers. This past year, he solved one of the most consequential puzzles in modern science. He is the chief architect of the first COVID vaccines authorized for emergency use. Manufactured by Moderna and Pfizer, they differ only in their delivery systems.

On Graham’s wall is a map of Kansas, where he grew up. His father was a dentist and his mother was a teacher. For part of his childhood, they lived on a hog farm. Barney and his brother did much of the farming. Working with the animals, he learned a lot about veterinary medicine. At Rice University, he majored in biology. He earned a medical degree at the University of Kansas, where he met his wife, Cynthia Turner-Graham, a psychiatrist. In 1978, on an infectious-disease rotation in medical school, he spent time at the N.I.H., where he first encountered Fauci. “Cynthia noticed when I came back how excited I was,” Graham recalled. “People were willing to battle each other’s ideas. She thought I would end up here.”

First, he and Cynthia had to complete residencies. They wanted to be in the same town, a problem many professional couples face, but additionally complicated in their case because Cynthia is Black. She suggested Nashville: he could apply to Vanderbilt School of Medicine and she to Meharry Medical College, a historically Black institution. Tennessee had only recently repealed a ban on interracial marriage.

Driving back to Kansas from Maryland on Christmas Eve, Graham stopped in at Vanderbilt. To his surprise, the director of the residency program, Thomas Brittingham, was in his office and willing to meet with him immediately. When the interview was over, Graham told Brittingham, “I know this is the South. I’m going to marry a Black woman, and if that makes a difference I can’t come here.” Brittingham said, “Close the door.” He welcomed Graham on the spot. Cynthia was accepted at Meharry, and so they moved to Nashville.

By 1982, Graham had become the chief resident at Nashville General Hos-

pital. That year, he saw a patient suffering from five simultaneous infections, including cryptococcal meningitis and herpes simplex. It was a mystery: most infections are solitary events. The medical staff was terrified. Graham realized that he was treating Tennessee’s first AIDS patient. “We kept him alive for three weeks,” he said.

Millions of lives would be changed, and so many ended, by this remorseless, elusive disease. Immunology, then a fledgling field, was transformed by the battle. “It took us a couple years just to figure out that H.I.V. was a virus,” Graham said. He started running vaccine trials. “It was not till the mid-nineties that we had decent treatments. There were some really hard years. Almost everyone died.”

In 2000, the N.I.H. recruited Graham to create a vaccine-evaluation clinic. He insisted on keeping a research lab. With space for two dozen scientists, his lab focusses on vaccines for three categories of respiratory viruses: influenza, coronaviruses, and a highly contagious virus called respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), which ended up playing a key role in the development of a COVID vaccine.

RSV causes wheezing pneumonia in children, and sends more kids under five years old to the hospital than any other disease. One of the last child-

hood infectious diseases without a vaccine, RSV also kills about as many of the elderly as seasonal influenza. It’s wildly infectious. In order to stop its spread in a hospital pediatric ward, staff must wear gloves, masks, and goggles; if any of these items is omitted, RSV will surge. Like COVID, it is dispersed through particle droplets and contaminated surfaces. In the nineteen-sixties, a clinical trial of a potential RSV vaccine made children sicker and led to two deaths—a syndrome called vaccine-enhanced disease. Graham spent much of two decades trying to solve the riddle of what causes RSV, but the technology he needed was still being developed.

In 2008, he had a stroke of luck. Jason McLellan, a postdoc studying H.I.V., had been squeezed out of a structural-biology lab upstairs. H.I.V. has proved invulnerable to a vaccine solution, despite extraordinary technological advances and elegant new theories for designing one. “I thought, Let’s try things out on a more tractable virus,” McLellan recalled. “Barney thought RSV would be perfect for a structure-based vaccine.”

A vaccine trains the immune system to recognize a virus in order to counter it. Using imaging technology, structural biologists can intuit the contours of a virus and its proteins,
then reproduce those structures to make more effective vaccines. McLellan said of his field, “From the structure, we can determine function—it’s similar to how seeing a car, with four wheels and doors, implies something about its function to transport people.”

The surface of an RSV particle features a protein, designated F. On the top of the protein, a spot called an epitope serves as a landing pad for antibodies, allowing the virus to be neutralized. But something extraordinary happens when the virus invades a cell. The F protein swells like an erection, burying the epitope and effectively hiding it from antibodies. Somehow, McLellan had to keep the F protein from getting an erection.

Until recently, one of the main imaging tools used by vaccinologists, the cryogenic electron microscope, wasn’t powerful enough to visualize viral proteins, which are incredibly tiny. “The whole field was referred to as blobology,” McLellan said. As a work-around, he developed expertise in X-ray crystallography. With this method, a virus, or even just a protein on a virus, is crystallized, then hit with an X-ray beam that creates a scatter pattern, like a shotgun blast; the structure of the crystallized object can be determined from the distribution of electrons. McLellan showed me an “atomistic interpretation” of the F protein on the RSV virus—the visualization looked like a pile of Cheetos. It required a leap of imagination, but inside that murky world Graham and McLellan and their team manipulated the F protein, essentially by cloning it and inserting mutations that kept it strapped down. McLellan said, “There’s a lot of art to it.”

In 2013, Graham and McLellan published “Structure-Based Design of a Fusion Glycoprotein Vaccine for Respiratory Syncytial Virus,” in *Science*, demonstrating how they had stabilized the F protein in order to use it as an antigen—the part of a vaccine that sparks an immune response. Antibodies could now attack the F protein, vanquishing the virus. Graham and McLellan calculated that their vaccine could be given to a pregnant woman and provide enough antibodies to her baby to last for its first six months—the critical period. The paper opened a new front in the war against infectious disease. In a subsequent paper in *Science*, the team declared that it had established “clinical proof of concept for structure-based vaccine design,” portending “an era of precision vaccinology.” The RSV vaccine is now in Phase III human trials.

In 2012, the MERS coronavirus emerged in Saudi Arabia. It was extremely dangerous to work with: a third of infected people died. Ominously, it was the second novel coronavirus in ten years. Coronaviruses have been infecting humans for as long as eight centuries, but before SARS and MERS they caused only the common cold. It’s possible that, in the distant past, cold viruses were as deadly as covid, and that humans developed resistance over time. Like RSV, coronaviruses have a protein that elongates when invading a cell. “It looks like a spike, so we just call it Spike,” Graham said. Spike was large, flexible, and encased in sugars, which made it difficult to crystallize, so X-ray crystallography wasn’t an option. Fortunately, around 2013, what McLellan calls a “resolution revolution” in cryogenic electron microscopy allowed scientists to visualize microbes down to one ten-billionth of a metre. Finally, vaccinologists could truly see what they were doing.

Using these high-powered lenses, Graham and McLellan modified the MERS spike protein, creating a vaccine. It worked well in mice. They were on the way to making a version for hu-
mans, but, after MERS had killed hundreds of people, it petered out as an immediate threat to humans—and the research funding petered out, too. Graham was dismayed, realizing that such a reaction was shortsighted, but he knew that his energies hadn’t been wasted. About two dozen virus families are known to infect humans, and the weapon that Graham’s lab had developed to conquer RSV and MERS might be transferrable to many of them.

What was the best way to deliver a modified protein? Graham knew that Moderna, a biotech startup in Cambridge, Massachusetts, had encoded a modified protein on strips of genetic material known as messenger RNA. The company had never brought a vaccine to market, concentrating instead on providing treatments for rare disorders that aren’t profitable enough to interest Big Pharma. But Moderna’s messenger-RNA platform was potent.

In mice, Graham had proved the effectiveness of a structure-based vaccine for MERS and also for Nipah, a particularly fatal virus. In 2017, Graham arranged a demonstration project for pandemic preparedness, with MERS and Nipah serving as prototypes for a human vaccine using Moderna’s messenger-RNA platform. Almost three years later, as he was preparing to begin human trials for the Nipah vaccine, he heard the news from Wuhan.

Graham called McLellan, who happened to be in Park City, Utah, getting snowboard boots heat-molded to his feet. McLellan had become a star in structural biology, and was recruited to the University of Texas at Austin, where he had access to cryogenic electron microscopes. It took someone who knew Graham well to detect the urgency in his voice. He suspected that China’s cases of atypical pneumonia were caused by a new coronavirus, and he was trying to obtain the genomic sequence. It was a chance to test their concept in a real-world situation. Would McLellan and his team like to get “back in the saddle” and help him create a vaccine?

“Of course,” McLellan said. “We got the sequences Friday night, the tenth of January,” Graham told me. They had been posted online by the Chinese. “We woke up on the eleventh and started designing proteins.”

Nine days later, the coronavirus officially arrived in America.

Within a day after Graham and McLellan downloaded the sequence for SARS-CoV-2, they had designed the modified proteins. The key accelerating factor was that they already knew how to alter the spike proteins of other coronaviruses. On January 13th, they turned their scheme over to Moderna, for manufacturing. Six weeks later, Moderna began shipping vials of vaccine for clinical trials. The development process was “an all-time record,” Graham told me. Typically, it takes years, if not decades, to go from formulating a vaccine to making a product ready to be tested: the process privileges safety and cost over speed.

Graham had to make several crucial decisions while designing the vaccine, including where to start encoding the spike-protein sequence on the messenger RNA. Making bad choices could render the vaccine less effective—or worthless. He solicited advice from colleagues. Everyone said that the final decisions were up to him—nobody had more experience in designing vaccines. He made his choices. Then, after Moderna had already begun the manufacturing process, the company sent back some preliminary data that made him fear he’d botched the job.

Graham panicked. Given his usual composure, Cynthia, his wife, was alarmed. “It was a crisis of confidence that I just never see in him,” she said. So much depended on the prompt development of a safe and effective vaccine. Graham’s lab was off to a fast start. If his vaccine worked, millions of lives might be spared. If it failed or was delayed, it would be Graham’s fault.

After the vaccine was tested in animals, it became clear that Graham’s design choices had been sound. The first human trial began on March 16th. A week later, Moderna began scaling up production to a million doses per month.

4. “IT’S MORE LIKE 1918”

Since 2016, Dr. Rick Bright has run the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority. A division of H.H.S., the authority is responsible for medical countermeasures in the event of bioterrorism or a pandemic. According to a whistle-blower complaint, on January 22nd Bright received an e-mail from Mike Bowen, an executive at the Texas-based firm Prestige Ameritech, the country’s largest maker of surgical masks. Bowen wrote that he had four “like new” N95 manufacturing lines, which weren’t in use. He added, “Reactivating these machines would be very difficult and very expensive but could be achieved in a dire situation and with government help.” In another message, Bowen wrote, “We are the last major domestic mask company. . . . My phones are ringing now, so I don’t need government business. I’m just letting you know that I can help you preserve our infrastructure if things ever get really bad. I’m a patriot first, businessman second.”

Bright had already been worried about the likely shortage of personal protective equipment in the Strategic National Stockpile. He also felt that not enough was being done to develop diagnostics for the virus from Wuhan. On January 23rd, at an H.H.S. leadership meeting with Secretary Alex Azar, he warned that the “virus might already be here—we just don’t have the tests to know.” Many Trump Administration officials seemed determined to ignore scientists who shared bad news.

On January 25th, Bowen wrote Bright again, saying that his company was getting “lots of requests from China and Hong Kong” for masks—a stunning piece of intelligence. About half the masks used in the U.S. come from China; if that supply stopped, Bowen said, American hospitals would run out. Bright continued pushing for immediate action on masks, but he found H.H.S. to be unresponsive. On January 27th, Bowen wrote, “I think we’re in deep shit. The world.”

The same day, at the White House, Matt Pottinger convened an interagency meeting of Cabinet officers and deputies. Attendees fell into four camps. There was the public-health establishment—Redfield, Fauci, Azar—data-driven people who, at the moment, had no data. Another group—the acting White House chief of staff, Mick Mulvaney, along with officials from the
Office of Management and Budget and the Transportation Department—was preoccupied with the economic damage that would result if drastic steps were taken. A State Department faction was concerned mainly with logistical issues, such as extracting Americans from Wuhan. Finally, there was Pottinger, who saw the virus not just as a medical and economic challenge but also as a national-security threat. He wanted dramatic action now.

For three weeks, the U.S. had been trying unsuccessfully to send medical experts to China. The public-health contingent didn’t want to make decisions about quarantines or travel bans without definitive intelligence, but the Chinese wouldn’t supply it. When Pottinger presented a proposal to curtail travel from China, the economic advisers derided it as overkill. Travel bans upended trade—a serious consideration with China, which, in addition to P.P.E., manufactured much of the vital medicine that the U.S. relied on. Predictably, the public-health representatives were resistant, too: travel bans slowed down emergency assistance, and viruses found ways to propagate no matter what. Moreover, at least fourteen thousand passengers from China were arriving in the U.S. every day: there was no way to quarantine them all. These arguments would join other public-health verities that were eventually overturned by the pandemic. Countries that imposed travel bans with strict quarantines, such as Vietnam and New Zealand, kept the contagion at a manageable level.

The State Department’s evacuation of Americans, particularly diplomatic staff in Wuhan, outraged the Chinese; Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the W.H.O., said that the U.S. was overreacting. In part to placate the Chinese, the 747s that were sent to collect Americans were filled with eighteen tons of P.P.E., including masks, gowns, and gauze. It was a decision that many came to regret—especially when inferior substitutes were later sold back to the U.S., at colossal markups.

The morning after the meeting, Pottinger spoke to a doctor in China who was treating patients. People were getting infected and there was no way to know how and where it happened—a stage of contagion called community spread.

Pottinger asked, “Is this going to be as bad as sars?”

“Don’t think 2003—it’s more like 1918,” the doctor said. That flu lasted two years, and killed between forty and a hundred million people.

On January 28th, the national-security adviser, Robert O’Brien, brought Pottinger into the Oval Office, where the President was getting his daily intelligence briefing. According to contemporaneous notes from someone present at this meeting, the briefer mentioned the virus, but didn’t present it as the top threat. O’Brien warned the President, “This will be the biggest national-security threat you will face.” Trump asked if the outbreak posed as big a danger as sars, and the briefer responded that it wasn’t clear yet.

Pottinger leaped to his feet and recounted what he’d heard from his sources—most shockingly, that more than half the disease’s spread was attributed to asymptomatic carriers. Yet, every day, thousands of people were flying from China to the U.S.

“Should we shut down travel?” Trump asked.

“Yes,” Pottinger advised.

Pottinger left the Oval Office and walked to the Situation Room, where a newly formed Coronavirus Task Force was meeting. People were annoyed with him. “It would be unusual for an asymptomatic person to drive the epidemic in a respiratory disorder,” Fauci said. That certainly had been true of SARS. He still wanted U.S. scientists to report from China, in order to get more data. Redfield, of the C.D.C., considered it too early for disruptive actions. He said that there were only a handful of cases outside China, and that in the U.S. the pathogen wasn’t moving that fast. The public-health contingent was united. “Let the data guide us,” they advised.

Pottinger pointed out that the Chinese continued to block such efforts: “We’re not getting data that’s dependable!”

The economic advisers, meanwhile, were frantic—a travel ban would kill the airline industry and shut down the global supply chain. Larry Kudlow, the President’s chief economic adviser, had been questioning the seriousness of the situation. He couldn’t square the apocalyptic forecasts with the stock market. “Is all the money dumb?” he wondered. “Everyone’s asleep at the switch? I just have a hard time believing that.” (Kudlow doesn’t recall making this statement.)

Pottinger, sensing that he’d need backup, had brought along Peter Navarro, an abrasive economic adviser who had been part of the trade negotiations with China. Many White House officials considered Navarro to be a crackpot, but he was known to be one of the President’s favorites because he advocated tariff wars and other nationalist measures. Navarro warned the group, “We have got to seal the borders now. This is a black-swan event, and you’re rolling the dice with your gradualist approach.”

Within minutes, Navarro was at odds with everyone in the room. He pointed out that the new virus was spreading faster than the seasonal flu or SARS. The possible economic costs and loss of life were staggering. Azar argued that a travel ban would be an overreaction. No progress was made in that meeting, but Navarro was so strident that Mulvaney barred him from future sessions.

Then data surfaced that shifted the argument. In mid-January, a Chicago woman returned from a trip to China. Within a week, she was hospitalized with COVID. On January 30th, her husband, who hadn’t been to China, tested positive. Fauci, Redfield, and others in the public-health contingent changed their minds: human-to-human transmission was clearly happening in America.

Trump was told the news. The timing couldn’t have been worse for him. The bitter trade war he had initiated with China had reached a tentative pause. Since then, he had been praising Xi Jinping’s handling of the contagion, despite evidence of a coverup. A travel ban would reopen wounds. Nevertheless, Trump agreed to announce one the next day.

It was a bold gesture, but incomplete. The Administration blocked non-Americans coming from China, but U.S. citizens, residents, and their family members were free to enter. A two-week quarantine was imposed on trav-
ellers coming from the Wuhan region, but, unlike Taiwan, Australia, Hong Kong, and New Zealand, which rigidly enforced quarantines, the U.S. did little to enforce its rules, and the leaks soon became apparent.

5. FLATTENING THE CURVE

In 1989, Dr. Howard Markel was in graduate school at Johns Hopkins, specializing in both pediatrics and the history of medicine. He had just lost his wife to cancer, a month after their first anniversary. Markel began volunteering at a local AIDS clinic. He found that helping men his own age who were facing their mortality, or their partner’s, was immensely consoling—“the most spiritually uplifting work I did in my entire clinical career.”

Markel’s patients often asked him, “Doc, do you think I’ll be quarantined because I have H.I.V.?” He’d reply that it wasn’t appropriate for the disease. But, realizing that these men feared being shut away, like victims of leprosy, he began studying “the uses and misuses of quarantine.” His first book was about two epidemics in New York City in 1892, one of typhus and one of cholera, in which Jewish immigrants were blamed for the outbreak and many were sent to quarantine islands.

In the early two-thousands, Markel studied “escape” communities that had essentially closed their doors during the 1918 flu pandemic—among them Gunnison, Colorado, and a school for the blind in Pittsburgh. All had survived the contagion virtually unscathed. In 2006, Markel continued his work on the 1918 flu with Martin Cetron, who now directs the Division of Global Migration and Quarantine, at the C.D.C. For an initiative undertaken by the George W. Bush Administration, Centron and Markel were asked to help identify the best way to manage the early waves of a pandemic that had no vaccine or treatments. They considered school closures, public-gathering bans, business shutdowns—traditional tools of public health. Markel assembled a dozen researchers—“the Manhattan Project for historians,” he jokes—who combed through more than a hundred archives.

In 1918, Americans faced the same confounding choices as today. Twenty-five cities closed their schools once; fourteen did so twice, and Kansas City three times. More than half the cities were “double-humped”—suffering two waves of the flu. “They raised the bar too early because the natives got restless,” Markel, who is now a professor at the University of Michigan, told me. “They each acted as their own control group. When the measures were on, the cases went down. When the measures were off, the cases went up.” After Philadelphia permitted a Liberty Loans parade, there was a huge uptick in cases. St. Louis, by contrast, cancelled all parades, and local officials broadcast a unified message. The city’s health commissioner published an op-ed alerting citizens to the threat, immediately closing entertainment venues and banning public gatherings. St. Louis’s death rate was half of Philadelphia’s. By quickly imposing several nonpharmaceutical interventions, a city could dramatically lower the peak of infection—on a graph, it would look more like a rainbow than like a skyscraper. Markel compared each intervention to a slice of Swiss cheese; one layer by itself was too riddled with holes to be effective, but multiple layers made a profound difference. “Early, layered, and long” was the formula. JAMA published the study in 2007. The authors declared, “We found no example of a city that had a second peak of influenza while the first set of nonpharmaceutical interventions were still in effect.”

In the century since 1918, technology has transformed so much, but the tools for curbing a novel pandemic haven’t changed. Masks, social distancing, and frequent hand washing remain the only reliable ways to limit contagion until treatments or vaccines emerge.

One night, Markel and Cetron were in Atlanta, talking over their study, and they ordered Thai food. When their dinner arrived, Markel opened his Styrofoam container: instead of a fluffy mound of noodles, he gazed on a level, gelatinous mass. “Look,” Markel said. “They’ve flattened the curve, just like we’re trying to do.” A slogan was born.

6. THE LOST FEBRUARY

By January 20th, ten days after the Chinese posted the genetic sequence of SARS-CoV-2, the C.D.C. had created...
a diagnostic test for it. Secretary Azar reportedly boasted to Trump that it was “the fastest we’ve ever created a test” and promised to have more than a million tests ready within weeks. (Azar denies this.) But the F.D.A. couldn’t authorize it until February 4th. And then everything really went to pieces.

The testing fiasco marked the second failed opportunity America had to control the contagion. The C.D.C. decided to manufacture test kits and distribute them to public-health labs, under the Food and Drug Administration’s Emergency Use Authorization provision. According to Redfield, the C.D.C. published the blueprint for its test, and encouraged the labs to ask the F.D.A. for permission to create their own tests. But Scott Becker, the C.E.O. of the Association of Public Health Laboratories, told me that the labs weren’t made aware of any change in protocol. They kept waiting for the C.D.C. to supply tests, as it had done previously.

At a Coronavirus Task Force meeting, Redfield announced that the C.D.C. would send a limited number of test kits to five “sentinel cities.” Pottinger was stunned: why not send them everywhere? He learned that the C.D.C. makes tests, but not at scale. For that, you have to go to a company like Roche or Abbott—molecular-testing powerhouses that have the experience and the capacity to manufacture millions of tests a month. The C.D.C., Pottinger realized, was “like a microbrewery—they’re not Anheuser-Busch.”

At the time, Azar, a former top executive at the pharmaceutical firm Eli Lilly, led the Coronavirus Task Force. He agreed with Pottinger that test kits needed to be broadly distributed, yet nothing changed. Everyone on the task force understood the magnitude of the crisis; they attended meetings every weekday, with conference calls on weekends. North Korea and Iran didn’t receive such concentrated attention. Yet the Administration was simply not accomplishing tasks crucial to limiting the pandemic. There was a telling disparity between what Azar said in private, or in the task-force meetings, and what he told the President. He was hammering Redfield and the C.D.C. on testing delays while assuring Trump that the crisis was under control.

A bottleneck of constraints imposed by the C.D.C. meant that testing was initially limited to symptomatic patients who had come from China or had been in close contact with an infected person. Even health-care workers who’d developed COVID-like symptoms while treating patients had trouble getting tests, because the C.D.C.’s capacity was so limited.

Pottinger kept in frequent touch with his brother, Paul, the infectious-disease doctor in Seattle.

“You getting enough test kits?” Matt asked him.

“We use none of the C.D.C. kits,” Paul responded. “They have been way too slow in coming.” They also hadn’t been approved for screening asymptomatic patients. Seattle doctors had instead devised a “homemade” diagnostic platform, but their testing capacity was “way less than demand.” Paul was frantically setting up triage procedures—guessing which cases were covid, and trying to sequester those patients, in order to prevent them from infecting everyone at the hospital.

But there was an even bigger problem. Microbiologists are acutely aware of the danger of contamination. Viral DNA can linger for hours or days on surfaces, adulterating testing materials. C.D.C. scientists wipe down their instruments every day. Chin-Yih Ou, a Taiwanese microbiologist who retired from the C.D.C. in 2014, told me that while he was creating a test for H.I.V. in infants he refused to let janitors into his lab, mopping the floor himself. In some labs, the last person to leave at night turns on ultraviolet lamps, to kill DNA that might be on the floor or a lab bench. A new pathogen is like an improvised bomb: one wrong decision can be fatal.

The development of the C.D.C.’s test kits was overseen by Stephen Lindstrom, a microbiologist from Saskatchewan, who was known for his ability to function under pressure. C.D.C. scientists began working sixteen-hour days. The C.D.C.’s Biotechnology Core Facility is in charge of producing the components used to detect such pathogens as flu, H.I.V., and SARS. To save time, Lindstrom asked the Core Facility to produce both the components and a template of a coronavirus fragment, which would be used to generate the positive control for the C.D.C. test. But, just as the kits were being boxed up to be mailed, a last-minute quality-control procedure found a problem that could cause the tests to fail thirty-three per cent of the time.

A decision was made—perhaps by Lindstrom, perhaps by his superiors—to send the kits anyway. According to ProPublica, Lindstrom told colleagues, “This is either going to make me or break me.” (The C.D.C. did not make Lindstrom available for comment.) Almost immediately, public-health labs realized that something was wrong with the kits. The labs are required to do a negative control on the test—for instance, using sterile water—and the tests kept showing false positives.

The C.D.C. test kit had three sets of primers and probes, which are tiny bits of nucleic acid that find a segment of RNA in the virus and replicate it until it gets to a detectable level. Two were aimed at SARS-CoV-2 and a third would detect any coronavirus, in case the virus mutated. The third component failed. Public-health labs figured this out quickly. On their behalf, Scott Becker communicated with the C.D.C. on February 9th, seeking permission to use the test without the third component. “I got radio silence,” he told me. Later, he learned that an internal C.D.C. review showed that it hadn’t passed the quality-control check before the test kit was sent out. “That was a gut punch,” Becker said.

In 2009, Matt Pottinger was in Kabul, in his final deployment as a marine. While walking through a tunnel connected to the U.S. Embassy, he passed a young woman, and then suddenly wheeled around. Her name was Yen Duong. She was working with the Afghan government on improving its H.I.V. testing. “It was, like, seven o’clock at night,” Yen remembers. “He came up to me and asked if I knew where so-and-so’s office was. I was thinking that I’m pretty sure so-and-so’s office is closed right now. It
was just a ploy to talk.” Matt and Yen married in 2014.

They have lived very different American lives. He grew up in Massachusetts. His parents divorced when he was young, and he lived mostly with his mother and stepfather. His father, J. Stanley Pottinger, was a lawyer in the Nixon Administration. Matt had an ear for languages, and majored in Mandarin and Japanese at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and that is how he found his way to China as a reporter.

Yen was six months old when her family left Vietnam, in 1979, in a boat that her father had secretly built in his sugar factory. At sea, the Duong family—sixty-eight in all—were shot at. A storm nearly capsized the vessel. Pirates robbed them. Finally, the family reached a refugee camp in Indonesia. Six months later, the Duongs were sponsored by four American churches on Long Island, and ended up living in the Hamptons. Yen’s mother cleaned houses and took in sewing, and then found a job in a bakery. Her father painted houses and worked in construction. Eventually, they saved enough money to send Yen to boarding school.

Yen, drawn to science, fell in love with studying viruses. She got a doctorate in pharmacology at the University of California, Davis. In 2007, she became a virologist at the C.D.C., where she developed the global-standard test to measure H.I.V. incidence. None of this would have happened if the family had stayed in Vietnam, if the boat had sunk in the storm, if the pirates had murdered them, or if they hadn’t been taken in by Americans who wanted to help them achieve the opportunities that freedom allowed.

Yen Pottinger, who is now a senior laboratory adviser at Columbia University, told her husband what she thought had gone awry with the test kits. Once the Chinese had posted online the genetic sequence for the virus, Yen explained to Matt, primers would have been easy to design. “It’s a pretty standard task,” she told him.

But SARS-CoV-2 is an RNA virus, which is "sticky"—tending to cling to any surface. Contamination was the only plausible explanation for the test kit’s failure. Perhaps a trace amount of the virus template had found its way into the primers and probes. “Contamination has felled many a great scientist,” she said, which is why a pristine lab environment is essential.

On February 10th, the F.D.A. learned that ten labs working with C.D.C. test kits were reporting failures. The C.D.C. assured the F.D.A. that it could quickly fix the problem with the third component. The Trump Administration—in particular, Azar—insisted on continuing with the C.D.C. test kits. Although F.D.A. rules generally require that any procedure granted an Emergency Use Authorization be used exactly as designed, the agency could have allowed public-health labs to use the C.D.C. test kits without the third component, as they were pleading for. The test kits largely
worked, even without it, but the F.D.A. says that it didn’t have the data from the C.D.C. to justify that simple solution. The C.D.C. wanted to stick with its original design. Moreover, university scientists, hospital researchers, and commercial labs were eager to develop their own tests, but they were hampered by the bureaucratic challenge of obtaining an Emergency Use Authorization.

On February 12th, the C.D.C. estimated that it would take a week to re-manufacture the third component. Six days later, Redfield informed Azar that doing so might take until mid-March. By February 21st, only seven labs in the country could verify that the test worked. Redfield admitted that he had no idea when new test kits might be ready.

On Saturday, February 22nd, the F.D.A. sent Dr. Timothy Stenzel, the director of the Office of In Vitro Diagnostics and Radiological Health, to the C.D.C. to investigate what had gone wrong with the test. When he arrived, there was no one there to receive him, and he was turned away. The next day, he was allowed in the building but forbidden to enter any labs. It was still the weekend. Stenzel made some calls. After he was finally permitted to visit the labs where the test kits were manufactured, he spotted a problem: in one lab, researchers were analyzing patient samples in the same room where testing ingredients were assembled. The tests are so sensitive that even a person walking into the room without changing her lab coat might carry viral material on her clothing that would confound the test. According to the Wall Street Journal, an F.D.A. official described the C.D.C. lab as “filthy.” It was the lowest point in the history of a proud institution.

According to an internal F.D.A. account, C.D.C. staff “indicated to Dr. Stenzel that Dr. Stephen Lindstrom—who oversaw a different lab in the manufacturing process—directed them to allow positive and negative control materials to occupy the same physical space of the lab, even though this is a violation of their written protocols.” The clear remedy was to hand over part of the test’s manufacture to two outside contractors. Within a week, tens of thousands of tests were available. But America never made up for the lost February.

I recently asked Redfield, a round-faced man with a white Amish-style beard, how the contamination had occurred and if anyone had been held accountable for the corrupted kits. He replied, vaguely, “One of the newer individuals hadn’t followed protocol.” It also could have been a design flaw that mangled results. Both mistakes might have happened, he conceded. “I wasn’t happy when we did our own internal review,” he said, and acknowledged that the C.D.C. shouldn’t have mass-produced the test kits: “We’re not a manufacturing facility.” He insisted, “At no moment in time was a COVID test not available to public-health labs. You just had to send it to C.D.C.” But the C.D.C. couldn’t process tens of thousands of tests.

The C.D.C. wasn’t entirely responsible for the delay. The F.D.A. might have authorized a version of the test kit without the problematic third component, and loosened the reins on tests developed by other labs. Not until February 26th did the F.D.A. permit public-health labs to use the C.D.C. test kit without the third component. Only on February 29th could other labs proceed with their own tests.

Secretary Azar held the F.D.A. responsible for the absence of alternative tests. A senior Administration official told me, “Instead of being more flexible, the F.D.A. became more regulatory. The F.D.A. effectively outlawed every other COVID test in America.” Stephen Hahn, the F.D.A.’s commissioner, says, “That’s just not correct,” and notes that more than three hundred tests are currently authorized. But there was only one other test by the end of February. Whether the delay was caused mainly by the C.D.C. or the F.D.A., Azar oversaw both agencies.

Without the test kits, contact tracing was stymied; without contact tracing, there was no obstacle in the contagion’s path. America never once had enough reliable tests distributed across the nation, with results available within two days. By contrast, South Korea, thanks to universal public insurance and lessons learned from a 2015 outbreak of MERS, provided free, rapid testing and invested heavily in contact tracing, which was instrumental in shutting down chains of infection. The country has recorded some fifty thou-
sand cases of COVID. The U.S. now reports more than four times that number per day.

7. “THIS IS COMING TO YOU”

“One day, it’s like a miracle, it will disappear,” the President told the American people on February 27th. At the time, there were only fifteen known cases of COVID in the U.S., and nearly all involved travellers or people close to them.

As Trump made his promise, a hundred and seventy-five employees of the biotech firm Biogen were heading home from a conference held at a Marriott in Boston. The attendees, many of whom had travelled from other states or foreign countries, had gathered for two days in banquet rooms, shared crowded elevators, and worked out in the gym. Soon, many fell ill.

Researchers affiliated with Massachusetts General Hospital and the Broad Institute of M.I.T. and Harvard believe that SARS-CoV-2 was probably introduced to the conference by a single individual. About a hundred people associated with the conference eventually tested positive. The viral strain that they contracted had unusual mutations, allowing researchers to track its spread. In a recent study published in Science, the researchers reported that the Biogen outbreak may have been responsible for three hundred thousand cases in the U.S. alone.

During the study’s initial stages, in February and March, the researchers were discomfited by the implications of their data. “The rapidity and degree of spread suggested it wasn’t a series of one-to-one transmissometers,” Dr. Jacob Lemieux, a lead author, told me. Rather, it was “one-to-many transmission events.” That raised the question of airborne transmission. “At the time, the idea was heretical,” Lemieux said. “We were afraid to consider it, because it implied a whole different approach to infection control”—one in which masks played a central role, especially indoors. But the W.H.O. had repeatedly proclaimed that large respiratory droplets—as from a sneeze or a cough—drove the spread. This wasn’t based on data about the new virus, Lemieux said: “It was received wisdom based on how previous respiratory viruses had behaved. The global public-health infrastructure has egg on its face. There’s a component of human nature that, until you get burned, you don’t know how hot the fire is.”

Vaccines were in development around the world, but Pottinger was hearing that they wouldn’t be available for eighteen months at the earliest. Even that would be a record. A vaccine must be subjected to three trials of increasing size, to determine safety, effectiveness, and proper dosage. Pharmaceutical companies then invest in production, ramping up from thousands of doses to millions.

Pottinger and Navarro, the China-trade adviser, advocated for a way to radically shorten the time frame: companies would be paid to manufacture vaccine candidates that were still in trials and might never be used. If any ended up being successful, Americans could be inoculated in less than a year.

At the end of February, Navarro wrote a memo proposing a three-billion-dollar supplemental budget appropriation to cover the cost of an accelerated vaccine process, P.P.E. for frontline workers, and effective therapeutics. Azar recognized the need for a major budget supplement, but after he met with Mulvaney, Trump’s acting chief of staff, he declared that eight hundred million dollars was enough for now.

Pottinger was apoplectic. The Administration was in denial. There were now more cases outside China than within. Italy and Iran were exploding. And yet Mulvaney and the Office of Management and Budget insisted on viewing the contagion as a kind of nasty influenza that could only be endured. At home, Pottinger fumed to Yen that eight hundred million dollars was half the sum needed just to support vaccine development through Phase III trials.

“Call Debi,” Yen suggested.

Debi was Deborah Birx, the U.S. global AIDS coördinator. In the mid-eighties, as an Army doctor, Birx studied immunology and AIDS at Fauci’s clinic. They walked the hallways together, watching their patients die. Birx then moved to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where she worked on an H.I.V./AIDs vaccine. At Walter Reed, Birx worked with Redfield. From 2005 to 2014, she led the C.D.C.’s Division of Global H.I.V./AIDs (making her Yen Pottinger’s boss). Birx was known to be effective and data-driven, but also autocratic. Yen described her as “super dedicated,” adding, “She has stamina and she’s demanding, and that pisses people off.” That’s exactly the person Pottinger was looking for.

Birx was in Johannesburg when Pottinger called and asked her to join the Coronavirus Task Force, as its coördinator. She was ambivalent. When she had started her job at the C.D.C., some African countries had H.I.V.-infection rates as high as forty per cent. Through the steady application of public-health measures and the committed collaboration of African governments, the virus’s spread had been vastly reduced. What if she turned her attention and the numbers skyrocketed? Then again, COVID would likely run rampant through the same immune-compromised population she was devoted to protecting. She went to Washington.

As March approached, Secretary Azar had to defend his supplemental budget request before a Senate appropriations subcommittee. Earlier, the senators had been briefed that a grave coronavirus outbreak in the U.S. was likely. Patty Murray, the Democrat from Washington State, was on the committee. “You’ve had a month now to prepare,” she said. “Is our country ready?”

“Our country is preparing every day,” Azar responded.

“You sent over a supplemental that wasn’t clear to me at all,” Murray said. She listed actions that Azar had said were necessary. None were listed in the budget on the table. “Did you stockpile any of these critical supplies that we are told we need—masks, protective suits, ventilators, anything?”

“We do have in the Strategic National...
Stockpile ventilators, we have masks, we have—"
"Enough?"
"Of course not, or we wouldn’t be asking for a supplemental," Azar said.
"I didn’t see any numbers in your request," Murray said.
Azar said that the details were being worked out. Murray persisted: "I’m very concerned about this Administration’s attitude. We’re not stockpiling those things right now that we know we might possibly need." She concluded, "We are way behind the eight ball."

On February 27th, the C.D.C. began allowing tests for people who hadn’t been to China or in close contact with someone known to be infected. The next day, doctors in Washington State tested two people from a nursing home, in the Seattle suburb of Kirkland, that was overrun with pneumonia. Both tested positive. America’s blindfold was finally coming off.

Trump, however, continued offering false assurances. "We’re testing everybody that we need to test," he proclaimed. "We’re finding very little problem."

On February 29th, Washington’s governor, Jay Inslee, reported that someone in his state had died of covid. It was the first official death from the disease in the U.S., although it was later established that two Californians had died from it weeks earlier. Many others may have as well.

Inslee declared a state of emergency. One of Senator Murray’s relatives had been in the Kirkland facility a few years earlier. "I knew how many people came in and out of it, visitors and staff," she told me. She said to herself, "Wow, this contagious virus, it can’t have just stayed in a nursing home." Soon, friends of Murray’s got sick. She urged them to get tested, but they said, "I’ve asked my doctor, I’ve asked the public-health people in the county, I’ve called the state health people—nobody has these tests."

Her state was in turmoil. In Senate hearings and briefings, though, she sensed a lack of coordination and urgency.

The Democratic caucus went on a retreat in Baltimore. Murray received a text from her daughter, whose children attended school near the nursing home. "They closed the schools," her daughter said. She added, "Kids are sick, teachers are sick. This is really frightening."

Murray told her colleagues, "My daughter’s school closed. This is coming to you."

8. "JUST STAY CALM"

While this was happening, I was in Houston, in rehearsals for a play I’d written about the 1978 Camp David summit. Oskar Eustis, of New York’s Public Theatre, was directing. I have a memory of the preview performances which later came back to me, charged with significance. The actors were performing in the round, and slanted light-
ing illuminated their faces against the shadowy figures of audience members across the way. When one actor expostulated, bursts of saliva flew from his mouth. Some droplets arced and tumbled, but evanescent particles lingered, forming a dim cloud. At the time, I found this dramatic, adding to the forcefulness of the character. Later, I thought, This is what a superspreader looks like.

I have no idea how Eustis got sick. But when he abruptly flew back to New York and missed opening night, on February 20th, I knew that something was wrong. Texas was thought to be outside the danger zone that month, but retrospective modelling suggested that the virus likely had been infecting at least ten people a day since the middle of the month. The same was true for New York, California, Washington, Illinois, and Florida. By the end of February, there was probable local transmission in thirty-eight states.

The virus continued hitchhiking with passengers coming from other hot spots. Between December and March, there were thirty-two hundred direct flights from China to the U.S., many of them landing in New York. More consequentially, sixty per cent of flights from Italy to the U.S. landed in the New York area. Some of these passengers carried a more contagious mutation of SARS-CoV-2. On March 10th, Italy entered lockdown, and the next day the W.H.O. finally declared a pandemic. By that time, there were more than a hundred thousand cases in a hundred and fourteen countries.

“Just stay calm,” Trump remarked. “It will go away.”

Weeks had passed from the point when containment was possible. On February 25th, Nancy Messonnier, a senior director at the C.D.C., warned, “We will see community spread in this country. It’s not so much a question of if this will happen anymore but rather more a question of exactly when.” Without vaccines or treatments, communities needed to rely on such measures as school closures, social distancing, teleworking, and delaying elective surgeries. People should expect missed work and loss of income. Parents needed a childcare plan. “I understand this whole situation may seem overwhelming,” she said. “But these are things that people need to start thinking about now.”

A steep drop in the stock market followed Messonnier’s blunt assessment. The President, who had encouraged Americans to judge his performance by market indicators, was enraged. The next time Messonnier spoke in public, she was quick to praise Trump, saying that the country had acted “incredibly quickly.”

Amy Klobuchar dropped out of the Presidential race on March 2nd and flew to Dallas to endorse Joe Biden. The stage was filled with supporters. As the crowd cried, “Let’s go, Joe!” she

wisdom, just the roomlessness of this your suddenly—suddenly everything, suddenly there is no more of what there was, suddenly you do not die of fear you just fear, suddenly there is no such thing as right or wrong yr hand is a claw full of hair there is no purification anywhere as the shower keeps streaming looking for hollows, more hollows, this thread of the only water cycle dragged down into here to run all over you, to rake yr skinny neck & down inside of you where you look up, open yr mouth—to scream to sing to say the one right word—as now the next soft handful comes, it is such a surprise, as you raise up yr hand, high, full, to the ledge, to pile it on there—and what will you do now, shooting your gaze into those filaments, your years of having & not knowing, still wet, in clumps, through which the daylight now is pouring itself, though it is not pouring anything at all or into anything at all because it’s just the planet turning again and again into and out of the dark which is not itself actually dark at all.

—Jorie Graham
embraced Biden. But as she did so she said to herself, “Joe Biden shouldn’t get COVID.” She warned his advisers to begin taking greater precautions.

On the first Friday in March, she attended a Biden rally in Detroit. That night, employees in the Wayne County sheriff’s office gathered for an annual party at Bert’s, a soul-food and jazz venue. Most of the officers were Black; some had retired. At the time, there were no known cases of COVID in Michigan. Three weeks later, seven of the attendees had COVID, and dozens more in the sheriff’s office were ill. By the end of March, three law-enforcement officials had died.

At the rally, Klobuchar noticed that people had become more careful. “I put on gloves,” she said. “We didn’t know about masks at the time.”

Democratic rallies soon came to a halt.

Bellevue Hospital, on First Avenue in Manhattan, is “the grande dame of America’s public hospitals,” the historian David Oshinsky told me. Since it opened, as an almshouse, in the eighteenth century, nobody has been turned away, whether the patient can afford treatment or not. Bellevue has endured epidemics of cholera and yellow fever, diseases that sent untold thousands to their graves in the potter’s fields that are now Washington Square and Bryant Park. In the nineteen-eighties, Bellevue treated more AIDS patients than any other American hospital.

In 1983, Nate Link began an internship at Bellevue, and almost immediately pricked himself, by accident, with a contaminated needle. He thought it was a death sentence, but he escaped infection. The work was both harrowing and thrilling. “I felt like I was in the epicenter of the universe,” he told me. He is now Bellevue’s chief medical officer.

During the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Africa, Link and his colleagues knew that, if Ebola spread to New York, the patients would end up at Bellevue. The hospital built an Ebola unit and a dedicated laboratory, training hundreds of staff and storing additional personal protective equipment. The instant they finished their preparations, a patient appeared. He survived. Bellevue then sent emissaries across the country to help hospitals prepare special facilities, develop protocols, and train their staffs for novel infections. Had it not been for the foresight of Link and his colleagues, America would be far less prepared for the COVID onslaught.

Once the coronavirus emerged, Bellevue’s special-pathogens team began preparing a protocol. “We thought we’d get one or two cases, just like Ebola,” Link recalled. But by early March the hospital was admitting a stream of patients with fever and unexplained respiratory problems. They were labelled P.U.I.: patients under investigation. Tests weren’t available. “We had this sense that there was this invisible force out there,” Link recalled. He believes that the city already had tens of thousands of cases, but, “without testing, there was just no way to know—it was a sneak attack.” When the city reported its first positive case, on March 1st, only thirty-two tests had been conducted. Asymptomatic carriers and people with mild symptoms slipped through the nets. The testing guidelines almost seemed designed to undercount the spread.

On March 10th, Eustis, the theatre director, walked half a mile from his home, in Brooklyn, to an emergency clinic on Amity Street. His muscles ached. Twice he had to stop and catch his breath, sitting for a while on a fire hydrant. He was too exhausted to be afraid.

His vital signs showed dangerously low potassium levels, and his heart kept skipping beats. An ambulance ferried him to a Brooklyn hospital. An antibody test eventually showed that he had the coronavirus. Despite his condition, there was no room for Eustis. He was placed on a gurney with an I.V. potassium drip and left in a corridor overnight. He soiled himself, but nobody came to change him. He was given no food for thirty-six hours. The COVID surge had begun.

On March 11th, Dr. Barron Lerner was at his office in Bellevue. The hospital had begun implementing triage at the front desk for patients with respiratory problems. That morning, at a staff conference, doctors were told, “If you’re talking to a patient you think might have COVID, you excuse yourself from the room. You say, ‘O.K., I need to leave now. A nurse is going to come in and give you a mask.’”

Lerner met with a regular patient, an Asian immigrant who didn’t speak English. Bellevue maintains a staff of a hundred translators, and one of them connected to a dual telephone system. “About ten days ago, she had a fever,” the translator told Lerner. “Then she was coughing, and she’s been really short of breath since then.”

“I thought, I can’t believe this just happened,” Lerner recalled. “I was probably the first staff member to be exposed.” He was sent home and told to monitor his temperature. He and his wife began sleeping in separate bedrooms. Five days later, the fever struck.

Meanwhile, Eustis was released after four days, still shaky. Upon returning home, he immediately went to bed. He turned out to have “long haul” COVID. “It comes in waves,” he told me. “I’m struggling with extreme fatigue and continued muscle pain.” Working wasn’t an option in any case: every theatre in New York had gone dark.

9. THE DOOM LOOP

Vice-President Mike Pence was now in charge of the task force, but Azar remained a member. Meetings were often full of acrimony. Olivia Troye, a former homeland-security adviser to Pence, told me, “I can’t even begin to describe all these insane factions in the White House. I often thought, If these people could focus more on doing what’s right for the country rather than trying to take each other down, we’d be in a much different place.” Fauci, she recalled, was considered too “outspoken and blunt” with the media, which led such Trump Administration officials as Jared Kushner and Peter Na-
varro to complain that he was “out of control.” Troye summed up the Administration’s prevailing view of Birx crisply: “They hate her.” At task-force briefings, Birx typically presented a slide deck, and Troye once caught White House staff members rolling their eyes. Marc Short, Pence’s chief of staff, remarked, “How long is she going to instill fear in America?”

On March 11th, members of the Coronavirus Task Force crowded into the Oval Office, where they were joined by Kushner, Ivanka Trump, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and a dozen others. According to the official who kept contemporaneous notes, Birx and Fauci pushed for shutting down European travel. “Every seed case you prevent is a cluster of cases you prevent,” Birx explained. Redfield and Azar had swung around to the idea that cutting off European travel might buy time, but Steven Mnuchin, the Treasury Secretary, heatedly insisted that doing so would cripple the U.S. economy and trigger a global depression. The markets would crater. “Forget about ballgames!” he said, pointedly adding, “Forget about campaign rallies!”

After an hour, the President had another obligation, and he asked Pence to keep the discussion going. The group adjourned to the Cabinet Room. Mnuchin argued that there must be ways to curb viral spread without banning travel. The elderly were at high risk—why not sequester the most vulnerable?

“It’s twenty-five per cent of the population!” Robert O’Brien, the national-security adviser, observed. “You’re not going to be able to stick them all in hotels.”

Fauci had recently warned the group that the outbreak was going to get far worse, saying, “There’s no place in America where it’s business as usual. By the time you mitigate today, we’re three weeks late.” Colleges were sending students home, further contributing to the spread.

Another member of the task force noted that, in a bad flu season, sixty thousand Americans might die. What was the difference?

“This is twenty times that,” Pottinger argued. “This is two per cent dead, where the flu is .1 per cent.”

“If we just let this thing ride, there could be two million dead,” Birx said. “If we take action, we can keep the death toll at a hundred and fifty to two hundred and fifty thousand.” It was surreal hearing such numbers laid out so nakedly.

Mnuchin demanded data. He felt that the U.S. just had to live with the virus. It wasn’t worth sacrificing the airlines, the cruise ships, the hotels. “This is going to bankrupt everyone,” he said. “Boeing won’t sell a single jet.”

“You keep asking me for my data,” Birx said, sharply. “What data do you have? Does it take into account hundreds of thousands of dead Americans?” In the end, her side won.

That evening, in an unusually formal speech from the White House, the President announced that he was suspending travel from Europe for the next month. “We are marshalling the full power of the federal government and the private sector to protect the American people,” he promised. He had also signed a bill providing $8.3 billion to help the C.D.C. and other government agencies fight the virus. He highlighted the danger the elderly faced and urged nursing homes to suspend unnecessary visits. He advised social distancing and not shaking hands—practices that he hadn’t yet adopted himself.

Trump’s speech included his usual distortions. He claimed that insurance companies had agreed to “waive all co-payments for coronavirus treatments,” though they’d agreed only to waive fees for tests. But, for perhaps the first time, he was presenting himself as a unifier—as a take-charge Consoler-in-Chief. If he had continued playing that role, America would have had a different experience with the contagion.

Glenn Hubbard is a conservative economist who served as the chairman of President George W. Bush’s Council of Economic Advisers. Soon after the pandemic began, he became involved in discussions in Washington about how to handle the financial impact. Hubbard told me, “I and other economists had been worried about a doom loop”—a cycle of negative economic feedback. When the pandemic hit, the world suffered a supply shock: trade was disrupted, factories and stores closed. If workers didn’t start earning again soon, the supply shock could turn into a demand
shock, and that would further weaken supply, which would increase unemployment and further diminish demand. A doom loop.

In mid-March, Hubbard spoke with the Republican senators Marco Rubio, of Florida; Susan Collins, of Maine; and Roy Blunt, of Missouri. The N.B.A. had just suspended its season. Economic forecasts were terrifying. The senators were getting panicked reports from business owners back home.

Only Collins had been in office during the 2008 financial crisis, when Congress had passed a seven-hundred-billion-dollar bill to bail out troubled assets—the outer limit of what these conservatives had ever imagined spending. Now they were talking about trillions. Enlarging the deficit and expanding the federal government’s reach were anathema to the Republican caucus; to some members, it smacked of socialism. Rubio indicated that he would never support such spending in normal times. “You need to do something,” Hubbard warned. “We’ve been having a debate for decades now about the size of government. The more interesting debate is the scope of government.” He spoke of the first Republican President, Abraham Lincoln: “He decided to do the Homestead Act, land-grant colleges, and to lay the foundation for the transcontinental railroad. If Lincoln, in the middle of the Civil War, had the idea of using government as a battering ram for opportunity, why can’t we do that today? Instead of focussing on how big government is, think about what you want it to do.”

Rubio, who is the chairman of the Small Business Committee, thought about the restaurants, the travel companies, the hair salons—all of them service businesses “with the least ability to survive.” The action that Congress was contemplating was heresy from a fiscal-conservative perspective, but the alternative—failing businesses, deepening poverty, boundless unemployment—was worse.

Action was necessary, the senators agreed. As it turned out, there was a surprising logistical problem: the Treasury Department had previously bailed out corporations and given checks to individuals, but it wasn’t clear how to give assistance to small businesses. Collins was working on a loan-forgiveness program, and Rubio was trying to figure out how to create a new loan program through the Small Business Administration’s existing network of lenders. “That’s when the Paycheck Protection Program arose as an idea,” Rubio told me. Loans taken out to keep people on the payroll could be forgiven, offering employees assurance that their jobs would still be there when the clouds cleared.

The Democrats were fully on board, and Congress soon approved three hundred and fifty billion dollars’ worth of forgivable loans to small businesses. The over-all relief package was even larger. Chris Coons, a Democratic senator from Delaware, told me, “We went from ‘We don’t know what to do’ to nine hundred pages and $2.2 trillion in about ten days. I’ve never seen anything like it.”
Hubbard said, “Nothing like a big shock to help people become more bipartisan.”

10. REINFORCEMENTS ARRIVE

On March 12th, Amy Klobuchar was back in Minnesota. Her husband, John Bessler, who teaches law at the University of Baltimore, remained in Washington. He awoke that morning feeling ill. “He was going to take my place at my constituent breakfast in D.C.,” Klobuchar recalled. “It was when he would have been most contagious, as we now know. There would have been around fifty people, in a small room. And then he was going to a faculty meeting—about sixty people, in a small room. Then he was going to get on an airplane and fly to Minnesota, with a bunch of people packed in. I was having some minor surgery at Mayo, and he was going to come there! He really would have had quite a day of infecting people.” They had no idea how he’d caught the virus. He was fifty-two and, until then, in excellent health.

Bessler stayed home, and steadily grew worse. For more than a week, Klobuchar kept calling, anxiously asking what his temperature was. Their only thermometer was in centigrade, so Klobuchar had to Google the conversion. Each time, it exceeded a hundred degrees. Hearing that he was short of breath, she urged him to see a doctor, worrying that “it was one of those cases where people are underestimating how sick they are, and then they die the next day.” After Bessler coughed up blood, he went to the hospital to get tested. He had severe pneumonia. Doctors kept telling Klobuchar, “The oxygen is getting worse.” She couldn’t visit him, making the ordeal even more frightening.

Bessler spent five days in the hospital. He recuperated, and was back in the couple’s D.C. apartment when his test finally came back positive.

Dr. Lerner’s COVID case was mild. He returned to work at Bellevue after twelve days, on March 23rd. The city had become weirdly quiet: First Avenue resembled an abandoned set on a studio back lot. During his absence, a tent had been erected in the courtyard, for screening patients. Everyone now wore a mask.

Non-COVID in intensive care were shuttled to the postoperative surgical unit, which was available because all surgeries had been cancelled. This freed up fifty-six I.C.U. beds. Workers installed HEPA filters in each room, creating negative pressure that prevented infected air from escaping. Offices were turned into more patient units; as soon as carpenters walked out of a converted room, a patient was wheeled in. Twenty-five more spaces for ventilator patients were added in the E.R. When all the beds filled, the I.C.U. cubicles were doubled up. Lerner, still recovering, tended to his patients through televisits, taking hour-long naps as Bellevue whirled around him.

In mid-March, Bellevue had its first COVID death: a middle-aged patient with no pre-existing conditions, who had been hospitalized for two weeks. Dr. Amit Uppal, the director of critical care, recalled, “Among our staff, we just looked at each other and said, ‘O.K., here we go.’ And from there it just exponentially ramped up.”

Uppal, the son of Indian immigrants, grew up in Northern California and did his medical training at Ohio State. He was drawn to Bellevue because he wanted to serve the disadvantaged, but also because of the staff—“people that could work anywhere in the country and chose to defend this population.” Uppal wanted to specialize in critical care so that he could handle the most extreme diseases. He was prepared to face the knotty ethical dilemmas at the limits of medical knowledge.

Part of the mission at Bellevue is helping patients die well. “It provides you a rare perspective on your own life,” Uppal said. “Many laypeople who don’t do medicine, and aren’t exposed to end-of-life issues, may not have the opportunity to reflect on what’s really important to them until the end of their own life.” But COVID seemed cruelly designed to frustrate the rituals of death.

Just as Bellevue’s first patients began dying, the hospital was flooded with new admissions. The I.C.U.’s typical mortality rate was far lower than COVID’s, so even critical-care staff like Uppal were unsettled. Such doctors knew how to click into emergency mode. Before COVID, that might last thirty or forty minutes—say, with a heart-attack patient. After a bus wreck or a mass-casualty event, emergency mode could last a full day. With COVID, it lasted weeks on end.

During rounds, Uppal passed each of the I.C.U.’s fifty-six cubicles. The patients were all on ventilators, the distinctive gasping sound unvaried. I.V. lines extended outside each cubicle, so attendants didn’t have to enter to administer medication. In the antiseptic gloom, the patients appeared identical. It was too easy to overlook their humanity. Uppal forced himself to examine their charts. He needed to recapitulate “what made them unique.”

Overwhelmed hospitals in New York’s outer boroughs transferred more than six hundred patients to Bellevue, knowing that nobody would be turned away. The E.R. became a hot zone where many people coming off the street required immediate intubation. Before COVID, the E.R. was always jammed, and nobody wore P.P.E. Nate Link told me, “When COVID hit, we made a promise to ourselves that we would not let the emergency rooms back up, and that we would keep them pristine.” Staffers had to remain swathed in P.P.E., Link said, adding, “In the end, only fifteen per cent of the staff in the emergency department tested positive. That’s lower than the hospital in general. It’s even a bit less than the city average. The message is that P.P.E. works.”

Some doctors needed new roles to play. Orthopedic surgeons began devoting their shifts to turning patients—“proning”—to facilitate breathing. Ophthalmologists helped in the I.C.U.; general surgeons treated non-COVID patients. “Everybody found a niche,” Link said. “We were a completely different hospital for three months.”

More than twenty thousand New Yorkers died from COVID in the spring. As the numbers mounted, Link noticed that employees were practicing “psychological distancing.” He said, “Our staff had never seen so much death. Normally, a patient dying would be such a big deal, but, when you start
having a dozen patients die in a day, you have to get numb to that, or you can’t really cope.” This emotional remove was shattered when the first staff member died: a popular nurse, Ernesto (Audie) De Leon, who’d worked at Bellevue for thirty–three years. Link said, “His death was followed by a COVID–style ‘wake,’ as many of his colleagues approached his I.C.U. cubicle in full P.P.E., put their hands on the glass door, and read Scripture, prayed, and wept. Because of the infection–control restrictions, staff consoled each other without touching or hugging. It was very unnatural.”

When Bellevue’s doctors were at their lowest ebb, reinforcements arrived: hospital workers from other states flooded into New York to help. According to Governor Andrew Cuomo, thirty thousand people responded to the city’s call for aid. It was a rare glimpse of national unity. “Half the people in the I.C.U. had Southern accents,” Link told me. “That’s what saved us.”

II. THE NO–PLAN PLAN

In mid–March, America began shutting down. The Coronavirus Task Force urged Americans to work from home. Education would be virtual. Travel and shopping would stop. Restaurants and bars would close. The goal was to break the transmission of the virus for fifteen days and “flatten the curve.” Trump’s impatience flared. At a press briefing, he said of the virus, “It’s something we have tremendous control over.” Fauci corrected him, observing that the worst was ahead, and noting, “It is how we respond to that challenge that’s going to determine what the ultimate end point is.”

Trump held a conference call with governors. “We’re backing you a hundred per cent,” he said. Then he said, “Also, though, respirators, ventilators, all the equipment—try getting it yourselves.”

Most governors had assumed that, as in the event of a hurricane or a forest fire, the federal government would rush to help. Storehouses of emergency equipment would be opened. The governors, faced with perilous shortages of ventilators, N95 masks, and nasal swabs, expected Trump to invoke the Defense Production Act, forcing private industry to produce whatever was needed. Surely, there was a national plan.

Governor Inslee, of Washington, was flabbergasted when he realized that Trump didn’t intend to mobilize the federal government. Inslee told him, “That would be equivalent to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, on December 8, 1941, saying, ‘Good luck, Connecticut, you go build the battleships.’”

Trump responded, “We’re just the backup.”

“I don’t want you to be the backup quarterback,” Inslee said. “We need you to be Tom Brady here.”

Larry Hogan, the Republican governor of Maryland, was incensed. “You’re actively setting us up!” he told Trump.

Matt Pottinger’s brother, Paul, kept sending desperate e-mails from Seattle. He had heard about medical workers fashioning P.P.E. out of materials from the Home Depot. Industrial tape and marine–grade vinyl were being turned into face shields. Garbage bags were serving as surgical gowns. A local health official wrote him, “We are currently drafting up guidelines for how to make homemade masks from cloth and I’ve asked other innovators in the community to see if they can figure out if we can do ANYTHING that would be better than nothing.” Matt wrote to Paul, “Help is on the way, but it probably won’t be in time—so start tearing up bed sheets and turning them into lab coats, raid the Salvation Army for garments, wrap bras around your faces in place of face masks if you have to.”

The Strategic National Stockpile existed for such emergencies, but Secretary Azar had recently testified to the Senate that it had only twelve million N95 masks—a fraction of what was needed. The storehouse had once held more than a hundred million masks, but many were used during the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic, and the supply wasn’t replenished.

After Trump made clear that the states were on their own, Ned Lamont, the gregarious governor of Connecticut, called other governors in his region: Phil Murphy, of New Jersey; Charlie Baker, of Massachusetts; Gina Raimondo, of Rhode Island; and Cuomo. The states needed to act together, Lamont said. “If I close down bars and Andrew keeps them open, that doesn’t solve any problems,” he said. “Everybody’s going to go down there to drink, and bring back the infection.”

The governors were daunted by the task facing them. Lamont imagined furious constituents: “You’re going to close down the schools? My God!” Acting in concert provided political cover and a sense of solidarity.

The governors closed gyms, restaurants, and bars at the same time. Lamont, Murphy, and Cuomo prohibited gatherings exceeding fifty people. Baker and Raimondo limited them to twenty–five. Cuomo announced, “If you were hoping to have a graduation party, you can’t do it in the state of New York, you can’t go do it in the state of New Jersey, and you can’t do it in the state of Connecticut.”

Governors discovered that the Trump Administration was sabotaging their efforts to protect citizens. Charlie Baker arranged to buy three million N95 masks from China, but federal authorities seized them at the Port of New York, paying the supplier a premium. In another group call with Trump, Baker, a Republican, complained, “We took seriously the push you made not to rely on the stockpile. I got to tell you, we lost to the Feds. . . . I’ve got a feeling that, if somebody has to sell to you or me, I’m going to lose every one of those.”

“Price is always a component,” Trump replied coldly.

Baker quietly secured a cache of 1.2 million masks from China, and enlisted the help of Robert Kraft, the owner of the New England Patriots, who used the team plane to fly the shipment to Logan Airport, where it was received by the Massachusetts National Guard and spirited away.

At a briefing, Cuomo fumed, “You have fifty states competing to buy the same item. We all wind up bidding up each other.” He threw up his hands. “What sense does this make? The federal government—FEMA—should have been the purchasing agent.”

Gina Raimondo pressed FEMA, saying, “Can we tap into our national stockpile?” After days of giving her the run–around, the agency promised that a truckful of P.P.E. was on its way. At 9 P.M.,
she got a text saying that the truck had arrived. Raimondo told Politico, “I called my director of health. ‘Great news, the truck is finally here!’ She says, ‘Governor, it’s an empty truck.’ They sent an empty truck.”

Inslee told me, “Only eleven per cent of the P.P.E. we’ve obtained has come from the federal government.”

Governors who got more had to show obeisance to Trump. Gavin Newsom, of California, praised the President fulsomely after being promised a shipment of swabs. Around this time, a reporter asked Trump, “You’ve suggested that some of these governors are not doing everything they need to do. What more, in this time of a national emergency, should these governors be doing?”

“Simple,” Trump said. “I want them to be appreciative.”

In the spring, Trump pressed the F.D.A. to fast-track authorization of a malaria treatment, hydroxychloroquine, for COVID patients. Fox News touted the drug as a “game changer.” Tucker Carlson and Laura Ingraham aired breathless interviews with Gregory Rigano, who had co-written a “paper”—a self-published Google Doc—calling the drug an effective treatment. Rigano, a lawyer, had recently started blockchain funds that aimed to “cheat death” and “end Alzheimer’s.” Between March 23rd and April 6th, hydroxychloroquine was mentioned on Fox News nearly three hundred times. White House officials, including Peter Navarro, heavily promoted it.

At a task-force briefing, Fauci was asked if hydroxychloroquine curbed the coronavirus. “The answer is no,” he said.

The President glowered and stepped toward the mike. “I’m a big fan,” he said.

Three months later, the F.D.A. withdrew its authorization. The drug was ineffective and caused “serious cardiac adverse events” and other side effects, including kidney disorders and death. When hydroxychloroquine was paired with azithromycin—a combination that Trump had publicly championed—patients were twice as likely to suffer cardiac arrest as those who took neither drug.

Fox News stopped hyping hydroxychloroquine, but Trump still wanted a quick fix. While cases in New York were doubling every three days, and doctors were treating patients in tents in Central Park, he declared that he wanted America “raring to go” by Easter.

Over all, the case fatality rate for COVID is two per cent. But for people over seventy-five the risk of death is hundreds of times greater than it is for those under thirty. The devaluation of elderly lives was evident in the low standard of care in many nursing homes, where forty per cent of U.S. deaths have occurred, despite accounting for only eight per cent of cases. In March, two hundred and thirty-five military veterans were living at the Soldiers’ Home in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Some had served in the Second World War. Now they were captives to a system that was failing to protect them.

According to an independent investigation commissioned by the state, family members and workers had long complained about understaffing, in part because of a 2015 hiring freeze ordered by Governor Baker. On March 17th, a veteran who had been showing symptoms for weeks was tested for COVID. He lived in one of two dementia units; he wasn’t isolated, not even after his test came back positive, four days later. Contagion took hold, and overburdened employees made the fateful decision to combine the two units, with beds placed in tight rows. Many disoriented veterans climbed into the wrong beds, accelerating the spread. A recreational therapist said that she felt as if she were leading her patients “to their death.”

On Friday, March 20th, Michael Miller, who is retired from the Army National Guard, got a call from his two sisters, Linda McKee and Susan Perez. “They’re not thinking Dad’s gonna make it through the night,” they said. Their father, James L. Miller, was ninety-six, and had been at the Soldiers’ Home since 2015. The siblings drove to the facility. Only one family member could enter at a time. Mike went in while his sisters waited in the car. His father “looked like a corpse,” he recalled. “He had been in that state of decay for a week, and nobody called us.”

Jim Miller had landed at Normandy Beach on D Day. He had helped liberate a concentration camp near Nordhausen, Germany. After mustering out, he became a postal worker and a firefighter. He was a taciturn man who had

“Maybe make this one a little less true to life.”
rarely discussed his military service with his children.

Now this quiet old veteran was dying in the midst of bedlam. “Men were just wandering around,” Mike said. “They were in various states of dress. There was a curtain drawn for my dad—other veterans would open the curtain and stand there. And these gentlemen I knew. They meant no disrespect.” A man on a nearby bed was “just moaning—he couldn’t breathe. He ended up passing away that night.”

Staffers couldn’t offer the dying residents anything but “comfort measures”—morphine under the tongue. Jim was so dehydrated that he couldn’t swallow. “Give him an I.V.!” Mike pleaded. But staffers weren’t authorized to do this; nor could they transport him to a hospital. Mike moistened his dad’s mouth with a foam swab. Nurses broke down, Mike recalled: “They loved my dad. But they couldn’t do anything.” He never saw any administrators.

Mike returned each day as his sisters kept vigil in the parking lot. On Saturday, they witnessed the arrival of a refrigerated truck that had been sent to store bodies. On Monday, Jim Miller passed away. Before it was all over, at least seventy-five other veterans had died.

**12. LITTLE AFRICA**

In the COVID world, everyone is in disguise. When Dr. Ebony Hilton enters a room, patients see wide-set, lively eyes above her surgical mask. Her hair and body are hidden by a bonnet and a gown. Her accent marks her as a Southerner. She calls herself a “country girl,” which is at odds with her assured manner. When the call comes to intubate a COVID patient, “it’s already a situation where somebody is dying,” she told me. “The only reason I’m placing this breathing tube is because your body is shutting down, so if I don’t touch you you’re dead.” She added, “If I do touch you, I could die.”

Hilton, who is thirty-eight, is a professor and an anesthesiologist at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, in Charlottesville. U.Va.’s hospital has some six hundred beds, but at night Hilton often works alone: “I’m literally the only anesthesiologist attending for the entire hospital. At that moment, I can’t shut down, I can’t go to my room and let fear stop me.” She continued, “I don’t think any of us have slowed down to think that this could be the one that gets me sick. You don’t have time to consider options A, B, C, and D. You’ve got to gown up and go.”

One day in early March, Hilton got a page. A patient was septic, meaning that an infection had entered her bloodstream and was raging through her body. Her kidneys were starting to fail. Ordinarily, doctors would suspect bacteria as the cause, but the infection’s spread had been alarmingly rapid, and the symptoms matched what doctors were reporting about COVID patients in China and Italy. Many health-care workers had noted the speed with which the infection killed when it made its move.

Hilton entered the room, wearing an N95 mask. The patient had no blood pressure; without intervention, her oxygen-starved brain would start dying within seconds. The procedure for intubation requires a pillow to be placed under the patient’s shoulder blades, so that the head is tilted back in the “sniffing position.” Hilton made sure that the patient was oxygenated and given a sedative and a muscle relaxant; then she pried her mouth open, pushed her tongue aside, and inserted a laryngoscope—a curved blade attached to a handle, which looks like the head of a walking cane. The de-
vice lifts the epiglottis, exposing the vocal cords. If the vocal cords don’t readily appear, pressure on the larynx can bring them into view. Hilton slowly inserted a plastic tube through the narrow portal between the vocal cords, down into the trachea. Once the tube was secured, the patient was connected to a ventilator.

That was probably Hilton’s first COVID patient, but there was no way to know. Virginia had barely any tests in early March.

Hilton comes from a community near Spartanburg, South Carolina, called Little Africa. After the Civil War, Simpson Foster, a formerly enslaved man, and a Cherokee named Emanuel Waddell founded the community as an agrarian refuge. “It’s tiny,” Hilton said. “We don’t have a red light. We only have my great uncle Hobbs’s store—he keeps snacks and stuff for us.”

Little Africa is in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. “When you’re sitting on the porch, you can see the skyline of the peaks,” Ebony’s mother, Mary Hilton, told me. “We have doctors, lawyers, judges—we have so many professions coming out of the Little Africa community, because we put so much emphasis on education, taking care of each other,” she said. “Eb is coming from a very powerful place.”

When Ebony was eight, her little sister asked Mary if they could have a brother. Mary was caught by surprise but answered honestly: her first child had been a boy. “I was seventeen,” she recalled. “I had never heard of an obstetrician-gynecologist. ‘One night, when I was on my OB rotation, there was a lady having a seizure—she actually had eclampsia—and this guy ran into the room and started shouting orders, like, ‘I’m going to do the A-line,’ ‘You start a magnesium.’ I leaned over and asked, ‘Who is that guy?’ One of the OBs said, ‘Oh, that’s the anesthesia resident.’” Hilton told herself, “I want to be the person that, when there’s utter chaos, you know what to do.”

In 2013, she became the first Black female anesthesiologist to be hired by the Medical University of South Carolina, which opened in 1824. U.Va. hired her in 2018. “Growing up in medicine, what I’ve come to realize is that, should I have a child, it would actually be at more risk of dying than my mom’s child was,” she said. She cited a Duke University study that correlated race and education levels: “If you look at white women with my same level of degrees, my child is five to seven times more likely to die before his first birthday than theirs. It’s been that way historically for Black women. Our numbers haven’t really changed, as far as health outcomes, since slavery times.”

Many minorities suffer from co-morbidities. “That’s where the social determinants of health kick in,” Hilton said. Asthma and chronic respiratory disease can be the result of air pollution—say, from an industrial plant in a low-income neighborhood. “If you’re in a gated community, you don’t see smoke billowing out of these industries, because you have the money and power to influence the policymakers to say, ‘You can’t put that here.’”

“Heart failure, obesity, and diabetes are tied to whether or not there are nearby restaurants and grocery stores with healthy options. She pointed out that, in South Carolina, one in every five counties doesn’t have a hospital; eleven counties don’t have any ob-gyns.

The moment the first American COVID death was announced, in February, Hilton said, she “started doing a tweetstorm to C.D.C. and W.H.O., saying, ‘We know racial health disparities exist, and they existed before COVID—and we know where this will end up.’” She demanded, “Tell us who you’re testing and who you’re not.” The C.D.C. didn’t release comprehensive data until July, after the Times sued for it. The country, it turned out, was experiencing wildly different pandemics. For every ten thousand Americans, there were thirty-eight coronavirus cases. But, for whites, the number was twenty-three; for Blacks, it was sixty-two; for Hispanics, it was seventy-three. At Hilton’s hospital, seven of the first ten COVID fatalities were people of color.

Hilton and her colleagues went to minority communities in and around Charlottesville to provide testing at churches and shopping centers. “Minorities are less likely to be tested, which means they might go back home, where they have the capability to infect their entire community,” she said. People of color are more likely to be exposed because so many are essential workers.

“Only one in five African-Americans can work remotely,” she said. “Only one in six Hispanics can.”

Staffers at U.Va.’s hospital prepared their wills. Hilton realized that she would be spending long hours away from her dog, Barkley, so she bought a puppy—a dog for my dog—that she named Bentley. “They barely get along,” she admitted. Hilton’s neighbor, a nurse in the COVID unit, has two children, and feared exposing them. The woman began living in her basement.

One of the hardest moments at Hilton’s hospital came when Lorna Breen, a forty-nine-year-old doctor, was admitted to the psych unit. Her father, Philip Breen, is a retired trauma surgeon; her mother, Rosemary Breen, had been a nurse on the ward where Lorna was admitted. Lorna had been living in Manhattan, overseeing the E.R. at NewYork-Presbyterian Allen Hospital. When COVID inundated New York, she worked twelve-hour shifts that often blurred into eighteen. She barely slept. Within a week, Breen caught COVID herself. She sweated it out in her apartment while managing her department.
remotely. After her fever broke, she returned to work, on April 1st.

Breen was defined by her vitality. She was a salsa dancer and a cellist in an amateur orchestra. She ran marathons; she drove a Porsche convertible; in her spare time, she was pursuing an M.B.A. “She never left the party,” her sister, Jennifer Feist, told me.

Breen told Feist that a trauma nurse was walking through the E.R. triaging patients based on how blue their faces were. So many doctors in New York fell ill that, at one point, Breen supervised the E.R.s in two hospitals simultaneously. It became too much. As her father put it later, Breen was “like a horse that had pulled too heavy a load and couldn’t go a step further and just went down.”

Breen called her sister one morning and said that she couldn’t get out of a chair. “She was catatonic,” Feist told me. “COVID broke her brain.”

Feist and her husband, Corey, decided that Breen needed to come home to Virginia. A friend in Connecticut drove Lorna to Philadelphia; another friend took her to Baltimore. Feist was waiting on the side of the road to drive her to Charlottesville.

During the eleven days that Breen spent in U.Va.’s hospital, she was terrified that her career was over. Licensing boards, she knew, might flag evidence of mental illness. Before COVID, Breen had never had a trace of instability. Feist and her husband, both attorneys, assured her that she wouldn’t lose her license. Breen seemed to improve: she even tried to do her M.B.A. homework on her phone. Feist took Breen home with her on the last Saturday in April. The next day, Breen killed herself.

The pandemic has added immeasurable stress to a public-health workforce already suffering from burnout. Feist told me, “She got crushed because she was trying to help other people. She got crushed by a nation that was not ready for this. We should have been prepared for this. We should have had some sort of plan.”

13. THE MISSION OF WALL STREET

Goldman Sachs is a controversial name in high finance. Its influence pervades American economic policy. Three of the twelve presidents of the Federal Reserve have worked there. Steven Mnuchin, the Treasury Secretary, is a Goldman alum. The company’s many critics see it as the pinnacle of avarice. They hold it responsible for contributing to the vast income disparities in America and see its alumni as manipulating government policy to further enrich the wealthy. But, in the upper chambers of power, Goldman’s culture of success is revered.

In the first quarter of 2020, the Goldman view of the economy was exuberant. Jan Hatzius, its chief economist, told me, “We had come fully out of the deep downturn post-2008.” Unemployment was near historically low levels; wages were creeping up. Sure, median incomes hadn’t risen substantially since the seventies; the gap between the rich and the poor appeared unbridgeable. But those weren’t Goldman problems. The company exists to make wealthy clients wealthier.

When the Wuhan outbreak began, the economic risk to America seemed low. Previous pandemics, such as H1N1 and SARS, had negligible economic impact on the U.S. On February 12th, with COVID already rooted in this country, the Dow Jones closed at 29,551—a record high at the time. Three weeks later, Hatzius said, “we began the deepest contraction in the global economy on record.”

Hatzius compiled data for quarterly Goldman G.D.P. forecasts. Normally, he said, “you estimate the ups and downs of a business cycle by, say, relating people’s propensity to spend on consumer goods to their labor income or tax changes, or the effect of interest-rate changes on the willingness or ability to buy homes.” This situation was different. “It wasn’t the case that people didn’t have the money to go to restaurants—they couldn’t go to restaurants.” Airlines stopped flying. Car production ceased. Entire sectors had to be subtracted from the economy: “It was more arithmetic than econometrics.”

On March 27th, the Times ran an apocalyptic headline: “JOB LOSSES SOAR; U.S. VIRUS CASES TOP WORLD.” Curiously, by that time, the Dow had reversed its plunge and begun a long climb that was strikingly at odds with the actual economy. In November, it once again reached record highs.

Steve Strongin is a senior adviser at Goldman. Sixty-two, he wears rimless glasses that lend him the aspect of a nineteenth-century European intellectual. Ibsen without the sideburns. “Markets very often get talked about as though they’re some kind of giant casino,” he told me. “But they actually have a deep economic function, which is to move capital, both equity and debt, from businesses that no longer serve a purpose to businesses we need today.”

The market’s initial reaction, Strongin said, was “Somehow we are going to freeze in place, the virus will pass, and then we’ll unfreeze.” During that phase, Wall Street’s function was to provide liquidity as clients turned to preservation strategies—raising cash, drawing on lines of credit—while waiting out the contagion. But the pandemic settled in like a dinner guest who wouldn’t leave and was eating everything in the pantry.

“The moment when everybody was forced to reassess the severity and longevity of the crisis is when people realized that asymptomatic carriers were important,” Strongin said. “That meant that all the prior controls were going to fail.” Thousands of businesses would close. Nobody alive had seen a catastrophe of such scale. The rules had to change. The pandemic was a historic disruptor, forcing a shift from short-term to long-term thinking. Strongin, who once wrote a paper called “The Survivor’s Guide to Disruption,” said, “Once that realization came into place, you saw the rush to opportunity.”

Investors pivoted to a consolidation phase: going with the winners. The market recovery was led by five stocks—Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Amazon—accounting for more than twenty per cent of the S. & P. However, “the Darwinian reality of capitalism is not about this brilliant insight into the five winners,” Strongin said. “It’s about taking money away from the fifty thousand losers. It’s the core of the economic system—we don’t prop up failures.”

The most useful thing the government can do, he said, is help people start new small businesses: “The current split between the stock market and the employment numbers is a flash-
warning that the economy and the people are not the same. If we don’t spend real money, the pain will be very real, and the political consequences dangerous at best.”

14. **The Man Without a Mask**

The third and final chance to contain the infection—masks—was the easiest, the cheapest, and perhaps the most effective. But the Administration, and the country, failed to meet the challenge.

On March 4th, as Matt Pottinger was driving to the White House, he was on the phone with a doctor in China. Taking notes on the back of an envelope while navigating traffic, he was hearing valuable new information about how the virus was being contained in China. The doctor mentioned the antiviral drug remdesivir—which was just emerging as a possible therapy in the U.S.—and emphasized that masks were extremely effective with COVID, more so than with influenza. “It’s great to carry around your own hand sanitizer,” the doctor said. “But masks are going to win the day.”

Still on the phone when he parked his stick-shift Audi, on West Executive Avenue, next to the West Wing, Pottinger forgot to put on the parking brake. As he rushed toward his office, the car rolled backward, narrowly missing the Vice-President’s limo, before coming to rest against a tree.

While the Secret Service examined the errant Audi, Pottinger kept thinking about masks. America’s pandemic response had already been handicapped by China’s withholding of information about human-to-human and asymptomatic transmission. The testing imbroglio would set the country back for months. But masks offered a ready solution.

Deborah Birx had told Pottinger that, whereas mask wearing is part of Asian culture, Americans couldn’t be counted on to comply. Pottinger began to see America’s public-health establishment as an impediment. The Surgeon General, Jerome Adams, had tweeted, “STOP BUYING MASKS! They are NOT effective in preventing general public from catching #Coronavirus.” Such messages were partly aimed at preventing the hoarding of hospital-grade masks, but they dissuaded people from adopting all forms of face covering. In those early days, the U.S. medical establishment looked at SARS-CoV-2 and flatly applied the algorithm for SARS: sick people should wear masks, but for others they weren’t necessary. Redfield, of the C.D.C., told me, “We didn’t understand until mid-March that many people with COVID weren’t symptomatic but were highly infectious.”

Pottinger, however, thought it was evident that, wherever a large majority of people wore masks, contagion was stopped “dead in its tracks.” Hong Kong was one of the world’s densest cities, but there was no community spread of the virus there, because nearly everyone wore masks. Taiwan, which was manufacturing ten million masks per day for a population of twenty-three million, was almost untouched. Both places neighbored China, the epicenter. Pottinger’s views stirred up surprisingly rigid responses from the public-health contingent. In Pottinger’s opinion, when Redfield, Fauci, Birx, and Hahn spoke, it could sound like groupthink, echoing the way that their public messaging was strictly coördinated.

Nobody in the White House wore a mask until Pottinger donned one, in mid-March. Entering the West Wing, he felt as if he were wearing a clown nose. People gawked. Trump asked if he was ill. Pottinger replied, “I just don’t want to be a footnote in history—the guy who knocked off a President with COVID.”

Many N.S.C. staffers work in the Situation Room, monitoring news and global developments. They are crammed together like workers in a call center. Pottinger asked the staff virologist to teach everyone how to mask up. Some people were annoyed. Masks had become a political litmus test, with many conservatives condemning mask mandates as infringements on liberty, and
to wear one in Trump’s White House seemed borderline treasonous. Pottinger was shocked to learn that, in any case, the White House had no ready supply of masks.

He called an official in Taiwan and asked for guidance about controlling the virus. Masks, he was told again. Soon after that call, Taiwan’s President donated half a million masks to the U.S., via diplomatic pouch. Pottinger took thirty-six hundred, for the N.S.C. staff and the White House medical unit, and sent the rest to the national stockpile.

In early April, new studies showed substantial reductions in transmission when masks were worn. Pottinger put copies of the studies into binders for key task-force members. A Chinese study reported on an infected traveller who took two long bus rides. He began coughing on the first ride, then bought a face mask before boarding a minibus. Five passengers on the first ride were infected, and no one on the second. Another study failed to detect any viral particles in aerosol or droplets from subjects wearing surgical masks.

On April 3rd, the C.D.C. finally proclaimed that masks were vital weapons. It was the last opportunity to do something meaningful to curb the pandemic.

The C.D.C.’s sudden reversal, Redfield admitted to me, was awkward: “When you have to change the message, the second message doesn’t always stick.” Worse, when the President announced the new mask advisory, he stressed, “This is voluntary,” adding, “I don’t think I’m going to be doing it.”

Trump is a notorious germophobe. He hates shaking hands and recoils when anyone near him sneezes. He once chastised Mick Mulvaney, on camera in the Oval Office, “If you’re going to cough, please leave the room.” Years before COVID, Trump told Howard Stern that he had a hand-washing obsession, “could be a psychological problem.” It’s one of the only frailties he acknowledges. He seems fascinated by his horror of contamination.

How could such a man refuse to wear a mask in a pandemic? It wasn’t just Trump, of course; the people around him followed his example. Pence visited the Mayo Clinic without a mask, violating hospital policy. Many Republican legislators shunned masks even after members of their caucus became infected. It wasn’t just Republicans, but Democrats were twice as likely to say that masks should always be worn. It wasn’t just men, but women were more in favor of masks. It wasn’t just white people, but they were much more averse to mask wearing than Blacks and Latinos were. If you name each of the groups least likely to wear a mask, the result roughly correlates with the average Trump voter.

Some anti-maskers called the coronavirus a hoax; others believed that it wasn’t all that dangerous. But the image of the maskless President spoke to people, especially his base. He appeared defiant, masculine, invulnerable. He knew that the virus was dangerous—“more deadly than even your strenuous flus,” as he told Bob Woodward, in a February interview that surfaced months later. Yet he dared the virus to touch him, like Lear raging against the storm.

Tens of millions of Americans emulated the President’s bravado, and the unchecked virus prolonged unemployment, upended efforts to reopen the economy, and caused many more fatalities. “I’m not buying a fucking mask,” Richard Rose, a thirty-seven-year-old Army veteran from Ohio, posted on Facebook. “I’ve made it this far by not buying into that damn hype.” He tested positive on July 1st and died three days later. There are many similar stories.

It’s dispiriting to think that, had such a simple precaution been broadly implemented from the start, America could have avoided so much suffering, death, impoverishment, and grief. The starkest example occurred in Kansas, when the governor issued an executive order to wear masks in public but allowed counties to opt out. It was as if Kansas
were performing a clinical trial on itself. Within two months, infections in mask-wearing counties had fallen by six per cent; elsewhere, infections rose a hundred per cent.

Of course, wearing a mask was a much smaller burden than self-isolating. Although CNN repeatedly ran alarming footage of people who refused to stop going to bars or malls, a far greater number of Americans had listened to the experts, sequestering themselves for months, at tremendous financial and emotional cost. My wife and I live in Austin, and, as the quarantine dragged on, we forced ourselves to take an occasional drive, partly to keep our car battery alive. We’d snake through vacant streets downtown, grimly taking note of which businesses had boarded up since the previous drive.

One April afternoon, I went for a jog on a school track near my home. A group of young women were running time trials in the hundred-metre dash. They were the fastest people I had ever seen. Occasionally, as I came around a curve, I’d pull even with one of the women just as she was taking off. It was like Wile E. Coyote eating the Road Runner’s dust.

“What school do you guys run for?” I asked one of them, who was cooling off.

“Oh, it’s not a school,” she said. “We’re Olympians.”

Instead of competing in Tokyo, here they were, on a middle-school track in Austin, isolating together and trying to maintain peak condition as they waited for the rescheduled Games. So many dreams have been deferred or abandoned.

15. “I CAN’T BREATHE”

The corpse on the autopsy bench was a middle-aged Black man with COVID-19. Six feet four and two hundred and twenty-three pounds, he had suffered from many of the co-morbidities that Ebony Hilton had described to me. The medical examiner identified signs of heart disease and hypertension. The autopsy noted the presence of fentanyl and methamphetamine, which could be considered co-morbidities, although they didn’t really factor into this case. The cause of death was a police officer’s knee on the neck. The victim was George Floyd.

On a video seen worldwide, four Minneapolis policemen killed Floyd as he was handcuffed and lying face down in the street. It was Memorial Day. One cop stood watch as two knelt on Floyd’s back and held his legs while the fourth, Derek Michael Chauvin, pressed his knee into Floyd’s neck for more than nine minutes.

At a time when health officials were begging people to stay home and avoid groups, protests arose in Minneapolis, then spread across America. They called to mind the Liberty Loans parades in 1918—the ones that had served as potent vectors for the killer flu. Nevertheless, thirteen hundred public-health officials signed a letter supporting the demonstrations.

Hilton joined a protest in Charlotteville on June 7th. Hundreds of people marched to the rotunda at the University of Virginia, carrying Black Lives Matter signs and placards saying “Let My People Breathe.” I asked Hilton if she was worried about the mass gatherings. She said that she expected a rise in infections. Then she added, “For Black men, one in every thousand is at risk of dying in his lifetime from an encounter with a police officer. If you think about that number, that’s what leads Black people to say it’s worth me dying and going out to this protest and saying enough is enough. Police brutality is almost like a pandemic, a generational pandemic. It’s a feeling—I’m going to die anyway, so I might as well risk this virus that I can’t see, to speak about the virus of systemic racism that I can see.”

Surprisingly, the marches did not stop appearing to be significant drivers of transmission. “We tested thousands of people,” Michael Osterholm, the director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, at the University of Minnesota, said. “We saw no appreciable impact.” One study found lower rates of infection among marchers than in their surrounding communities. Epidemiologists concluded that mask wearing and being outdoors protected the protesters. Moreover, demonstrators were on the move. Osterholm said that people in stationary crowds are more likely to become infected. In other words, joining a protest march is inherently less dangerous than attending a political rally.

16. THELMA AND LOUISE

The President hadn’t gathered with supporters since March, and was eager to dive back into the pool of adulation. An event was scheduled for June 20th. “It’s going to be a hell of a night,” he promised. He tweeted, “Almost One Million people request tickets for the Saturday Night Rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma!”

Only sixty-two hundred showed up. Trump was enraged by the dismal turnout but delivered his usual blustery speech. Because Oklahoma had just seen a record increase in COVID cases, attendees were required to release the Trump campaign from responsibility for any exposure. Just before Trump went onstage, two Secret Service officers and six campaign staffers tested positive.

In the audience was Herman Cain, the former C.E.O. of Godfather’s Pizza and an erstwhile Presidential candidate, who had become one of Trump’s most prominent Black supporters. Like nearly everyone else, he was unmasked. He flew home to Atlanta the next day, feeling exhausted—“from his travels,” his daughter, Melanie Cain Gallo, believed. It was Father’s Day, and she stopped by to give him a gift. They embraced. She had seen a photograph of him at the rally and wondered why he hadn’t worn a mask. Cain had preached the virtue of social distancing and hand washing on “The Herman Cain Show,” a Web series that he hosted, and he had usually worn a mask in public. He told her that everyone entering the Tulsa auditorium had passed a fever check—an insufficient gauge.

Gallo worked with her dad all week on his show. By Friday, they were both feeling ill, but Cain filmed another
episode. Flanked by the American flag and a painting of Ronald Reagan, he looked wan, his eyes rheumy. He quoted a newspaper headline: “U.S. DEATH RATE FALLS FOR THIRD DAY IN A ROW.” Other newscasts had hyped rising case counts, he complained, adding, “They never get to the death rate is falling.”

On Monday, both were sick enough to go to a clinic for a test. Cain was feeling weak, so he waited by the car while Gallo stood in a long line. Suddenly, he passed out. An E.M.S. truck took him to the E.R. “They checked him out and said he was fine,” Gallo recalled. They returned to the testing clinic. Both were positive.

Her case was mild. On July 1st, Cain was hospitalized. That day, he tweeted an article about a forthcoming Trump rally at Mt. Rushmore. “Masks will not be mandatory,” Cain tweeted, adding approvingly, “PEOPLE ARE FED UP!” It was a defiant nod to Trump’s base. Cain died on July 30th. He was seventy-four.

For some public-health officials, Deborah Birx had become an object of scorn. “She’s been a disaster,” a former head of the C.D.C. told me. The Yale epidemiologist Gregg Gonsalves tweeted, “Dr. Birx, what the hell are you doing? What happened to you? Your HIV colleagues are ashamed.” Birx was accused of enabling an incompetent and mendacious President. The mortified look on her face at the press briefing when he suggested injecting disinfectant or using powerful light—“inside the body, which you can do either through the skin or in some other way”—became a meme, underscoring how much Trump had compromised scientists. The public didn’t know what she was saying in private.

Birx confided to colleagues that she’d lost confidence in the C.D.C. She disparaged the agency’s hospital reports on covid, which relied on models, not hard data. A C.D.C. staffer told Science that compiling precise totals daily in a pandemic was impossible. But hospitals quickly complied after Birx said that supplies of remdesivir could be portioned out only to hospitals that provided inpatient COVID data.

In August, Dr. Scott Atlas, a neuro-radiologist, a fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, and a Fox News regular, joined the task force. He was adamant that children should return to school—as was the American Academy of Pediatrics, which urged a “safe return” to schools in the fall, warning of learning deficits, physical or sexual abuse at home, and depression. That was a debate worth having, but most of Atlas’s views on covid seemed reckless. He insisted that masks did little to stop the spread, and he advocated creating “herd immunity” by allowing the virus to be passed freely among people at lower risk. Herd immunity is gained when roughly seventy per cent of a population has effective antibodies to the disease, through either infection or vaccination.

Once Atlas got to the White House, Trump stopped speaking to other health advisers. Herd immunity could be achieved by doing nothing at all, which became the President’s unspoken policy. Atlas encouraged Trump and others to believe that the pandemic was waning. “His voice is really very welcome combatting some of the nonsense that comes out of Fauci,” Stephen Moore, a White House economic adviser, reportedly said. (The White House denies that “the President, the White House, or anyone in the Administration has pursued or advocated for a strategy of achieving herd immunity.”)

Birx and Atlas had it out in the Oval Office, in front of Trump. Birx accused Atlas of costing American lives with his unfounded theories. Atlas cursed her. Birx, who spent twenty-eight years in the Army, gave it right back. Atlas said that young, asymptomatic people shouldn’t be tested, adding, “She just wants to lock them down and not let them live their lives.” They kept shouting at each other, but Trump was undisturbed and didn’t take either side. “It’s all reality TV to him,” one of Birx’s colleagues said.

After the confrontation, Birx demanded that Pence remove Atlas, but Pence declined. The task force began to dissolve after Atlas took a seat.

When Birx was working in Africa, she and her chief epidemiologist, Irum Zaidi, had met with Presidents and village elders across the continent, learning the value of personal diplomacy. The two scientists decided to take an American road trip together. The contagion had moved from the coasts to the heartland. In June, when the virus suddenly gripped Texas, Birx and Zaidi travelled to Dallas to meet with Governor Greg Abbott. Abbott’s dithering response to the pandemic
had led to attacks by Democrats—who noted that the death rate soared when he lifted restrictions too soon—and by Republicans, who called him a tyrant for imposing any restrictions at all. At a press conference, Birx urged Texans to mask up, especially young people. “If they’re interacting with their parents and grandparents, they should wear a mask,” she said. “No one wants to pass the virus to others.” She praised Abbott for closing bars, knowing that he was being pressured to fully open the economy. Abbott soon issued a mask mandate.

Zaidi grew up in Atlanta, and her father was a C.D.C. statistician. On vacations, they took long car trips, a passion passed along to Zaidi. She loves to drive—fast. As they were leaving Dallas, a state trooper pulled her over. She’d been doing a hundred and ten.

“Little lady, what’s the hurry?” he asked.

Zaidi explained that they’d just met Governor Abbott, and New Mexico’s governor was next. “Surely you recognize Dr. Birx,” she said.

The trooper let them off.

Soon after their visit to New Mexico, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham announced a hundred-dollar fine for going maskless in public. Birx and Zaidi proceeded to Arizona and met with Governor Doug Ducey. Birx explained that even a small increase in the percentage of positivity—going from 3.5 to five per cent—could spark an unmanageable crisis. Ducey soon declared, “If you want to participate in any good or service in Arizona, you’re going to wear a mask.”

Birx and Zaidi racked up twenty-five thousand miles as they crossed the country eight times, visiting forty-three states, many more than once. They saw the rural areas and the cities, red America and blue America. They drove past cotton farms and soybean fields, but they also saw derelict oil rigs and abandoned factories, remnants of a vanishing industrial age. There were gleaming cities, bold and glassy, with construction cranes crowning the skyline, and broken towns, tumbling in decay, with all the promise bled out of them.

The women, who got regular covid tests, established their own protocols. They cleaned rental cars and motel rooms with Clorox Wipes. In the morning, early, they’d pick up coffee and pastries at Starbucks. Lunch was often peanut butter spread on bread with a plastic knife. Dinner was served at a drive-through window. Baristas and gas-station attendants were useful informants of community outbreaks and served as indicators of local mask compliance. Birx and Zaidi met mayors and community organizers; they visited hospitals and nursing homes; they turned H.I.V. activists into covid activists. In Atlanta, they urged officials to test migrants working on chicken farms. They visited more than thirty universities. Those which conducted mandatory weekly testing of students had positivity rates below one per cent; at schools where only symptomatic people were tested, positivity rates were twelve to fifteen per cent. Republican and Democratic governors made the same complaint: many people wouldn’t listen as long as Trump refused to set an example.

One of the most effective governors Birx and Zaidi encountered was Jim Justice, of West Virginia. He issued a mask mandate, and in press briefings he read out the names of West Virginians who had died of covid. He urged residents to “be great, loving neighbors.” The state developed a plan to safely reopen schools by constantly assessing the level of risk in every county and presenting these data on a color-coded map. “It’s something that every county and every state can do,” Birx said. “West Virginia represents exactly what we want to see across the country—a commonsense approach based on the data.”

A pandemic lays bare a society’s frailties. Birx and Zaidi saw a nation that was suffering from ill health even before covid attacked, where forty per cent of adults are obese, nearly half have cardiovascular disease, and one in thirteen has asthma. They visited reservations and met with Native Americans, who have been particularly ravaged by covid. The Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, in Arizona, gave Birx a mask inscribed with the Salt River tribe’s shield. When North Dakota recorded the nation’s highest rate of infection, Birx met with the governor, Doug Burgum, and with local, state, and tribal officials. Birx scolded them: “This is the least use of masks that we have seen in retail establishments of any place we have been.” She added, “It starts with the community, and the community deciding that it’s important for their children to be in school, the community deciding that it’s important not to infect the nursing-home staff who are caring for their residents.” Burgum eventually agreed to a mask mandate. In South Dakota, Governor Kristi Noem couldn’t find the time to meet with Birx.

For nearly six months, Birx corralled politicians, hospital executives, and public-health officials, often bringing such leaders together for the first time. She took charts and slides from state to state, promoting a simple, consistent message about masks, social distancing, transparency, and responsible leadership. She was the only federal official doing so.

One day in October, Birx and Zaidi were eating lunch at a roadside stop in Utah, beside the Bonneville Salt Flats, where land speed records are often set. The salt stretched out like a frozen sea.

They’d rented a blue Jeep Wrangler. “We have to go off-road, for just a minute,” Zaidi said. Birx gazed at the great white emptiness. “As long as you don’t hit anybody,” she said.

17. Dark Shadows

I asked Dr. Fauci about the global-preparedness study calling America the nation best prepared for a pandemic. What happened? He emitted a despairing laugh and said, “We never got back to baseline”—the point when the contagion had been reduced enough to allow contact tracing to minimize spread. “It could be the fact that we didn’t have a uniform strategy,” he went on. “It could be our own culture right now, of people not wanting to be told what to do. The guidelines say ‘Don’t go to bars. Wear a mask.’ And you look at the pictures in the newspaper and on TV and you see large crowds of mostly young people, not wearing masks.”

Fauci, who has led NIAID through six Administrations, has never seen this level of distrust and anger in the country. “Political divisiveness doesn’t lend
itself to having a coördinated, coöperative, collaborative response against a common enemy,” he said. “There is also this pushback in society against anything authoritative, and scientists are perceived as being authority, so that’s the reason I believe we have an anti-science trend, which leads to an anti-vaccine trend.” Even with an effective vaccine—or several of them—social resistance could delay the longed-for herd immunity.

I asked Fauci if he’d been threatened. “Oh, my goodness,” he said. “Harassing my wife and my children. It’s really despicable. It’s this dark-Web group of people who are ultra-ultra-ultra-far-right crazies. They somehow got the phone numbers of my children, they’ve tracked them where they work, they’ve harassed them with texts, some threatening, some obscene. We have gotten multiple death threats, my wife and I.” He sighed and said, “It is what it is.”

Buoy ammunition, ladies and gentlemen, because it’s going to be hard to get,” Michael Caputo warned, in a rambling Facebook Live event on September 13th. Caputo is an Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services, and focusses on public affairs. He controls the flow of information from America’s public-health establishment: the C.D.C., the F.D.A., and the N.I.H. Trump appointed Caputo to the post in April, when COVID was out of control; competence and transparency were needed to restore public trust. Caputo had no public-health expertise, and he claimed that his best friend was the notorious political operative Roger Stone.

Evidently, all the President wanted Caputo to do was reinforce his message that the virus wasn’t as dangerous as scientists claimed, and that the crisis was under control. Caputo presided over interventions by H.H.S. that meddled with the C.D.C.’s guidelines—apparently, to get case numbers down and stanch the flow of bad news. Trump asked Caputo to lead a campaign to “defeat despair,” which encouraged celebrities to endorse the Administration’s laissez-faire approach. To fund the campaign, Caputo snatched three hundred million dollars from the C.D.C.’s budget.

Meanwhile, his science adviser, Paul Alexander, a part-time professor at a Canadian university, pushed an alternative plan: herd immunity. “It only comes about allowing the non-high-risk groups to expose themselves to the virus,” Alexander wrote to Caputo, in an e-mail obtained by Politico. “We want them infected.”

Caputo’s efforts met with resistance from Fauci and others, and he felt under siege. In the Facebook video, he was unshaven, sitting outside his house in Buffalo. “There are scientists working for this government who do not want America to get better,” he said. “It must be all bad news from now until the election.” He stared into space. “This is war. Joe Biden is not going to concede.” The Antifa attacks, the murders that have happened, the rallies that have turned into violence—this is all practice.

Such embattled thoughts were shared by Adam Fox. A powerfully built man with a trim brown beard and a square face, he helped lead a militia called the Michigan Three Percenters—a reference to their belief that only three per cent of American colonists took up arms against Britain in the Revolutionary War.

In a strip mall in Grand Rapids, a shop called the Vac Shack sells and services vacuum cleaners. Fox, a former employee, had been kicked out of his girlfriend’s house and was homeless. The shop’s owner let Fox sleep in the basement. That’s where he allegedly began plotting to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer, Michigan’s governor, who had enforced tough lockdown measures.

In June, at a gun-rights rally in Lansing, Fox met with members of a militia, the Wolverine Watchmen, who planned to kill police officers. They were infuriated by Whitmer’s COVID restrictions, but, even before the pandemic, they’d been prone to anger. “I’m sick of being robbed and enslaved by the state,” one of the conspirators complained, after receiving a ticket for driving without a license.

Fox allegedly told the Watchmen that he was recruiting for an operation targeting the state capitol. He needed two hundred men to storm the building and abduct politicians, including Whitmer, whom Fox called a “tyrant bitch.” Although the plotters were mostly unemployed or in low-paying jobs, they spent thousands of dollars on a Taser and night-vision goggles, and were planning to spend thousands more on explosives. They were plainly inspired by Trump’s disparaging of Whitmer for shutting down her state. “Liberate Michigan!” the President had once tweeted.

The F.B.I. learned of the scheme, and arrested the conspirators in October. In a statement, Whitmer singled out Trump, who, in a recent debate with Biden, had refused to explicitly condemn right-wing, white-supremacist violence. “Words matter,” she said. “When our leaders meet with and encourage domestic terrorists, they legitimize their actions and they are complicit.”

Trump tweeted that “My Justice Department and Federal Law Enforcement” had foiled the plot, adding, “Rather than say thank you, she calls me a White Supremacist.” He commanded Whitmer, “Open up your state.”

On Michael Caputo’s Facebook video, he sighed deeply. “I don’t like being alone in Washington,” he said. “The shadows on the ceiling in my apartment, there alone, those shadows are so long.”

Soon afterward, he went on medical leave.

18. THE ROSE GARDEN CLUSTER

On September 26th, eight days after the death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Trump nominated her successor, Amy Coney Barrett, in a White House ceremony. The Reverend John Jenkins, the president of the University of Notre Dame, where Barrett had taught law, recalled, “We were required to wear a mask at entry and, after going through security, were immediately taken to a room and administered a nasal swab for a COVID test.” Once a negative result came back, guests could remove their masks. “I assumed that we could trust the White House health protocols,” Jenkins said. He regretted his decision: “I unwittingly allowed myself to be swept up very publicly into the image of a White House that sometimes seemed to dis-
regard scientific evidence and minimize the threat of the pandemic.”

Guests were ushered to the Rose Garden, where there were two hundred assigned seats. Barrett spoke briefly. “Movement conservatives were very happy,” Mike Lee, the Republican senator from Utah, recalled. Friends who hadn’t seen one another for months reunited, he said, which “added to the jovial atmosphere.” Afterward, dozens gathered in the Diplomatic Reception Room to meet the Barrett family.

That day, seven hundred and sixty-nine American deaths from COVID were recorded—down from the spring peak, on April 15th, of twenty-seven hundred and fifty-two. Despite the absence of miracle drugs, the death rate for hospitalized patients had fallen significantly. In part, this was because the average age of patients was lower, but the improved chances of survival were also the result of flattening the curve, which gave doctors and scientists the time to devise more effective treatments, such as proning. The infection rate, however, was harder to slow. The number of cases per day, which had topped seventy-five thousand in mid-July, had faded a bit in the late summer, but it was again rounding upward. After months of being more careful, Americans had apparently let down their guard.

The White House refused to say when the President had last been tested before the Rose Garden event. He had just made multiple campaign stops, in Florida, Georgia, and Virginia. More than a dozen guests—including Reverend Jenkins, Senator Lee, the former New Jersey governor Chris Christie, and the former Presidential adviser Kellyanne Conway—soon tested positive. Without knowing Trump’s testing history, no one can say when he contracted the disease or how many people he might have infected. The full extent of the Rose Garden cluster will never be known. Fauci labelled it a superspreader event.

Despite his germophobia, Trump is proud of his immune system, boasting on multiple occasions that he never gets the flu. But COVID hit him hard. According to New York, he told a confidant, “I could be one of the diers.” A friend from the real-estate world, Stanley Chera, had died from it. “He went to the hospital, he calls me up,” Trump recounted after Chera’s death. “He goes, ‘I tested positive.’ I said, ‘Well, what are you going to do?’ He said, ‘I’m going to the hospital. I’ll call you tomorrow.’ He didn’t call.” Vanity Fair reported that Trump developed heart palpitations. He asked aides, “Am I going out like Stan Chera?”

Hospitals are often portals to the graveyard, and that has been especially true during the pandemic. But Trump, who received a series of cutting-edge therapies, including monoclonal antibodies, was ready to return to the White House after three days. According to the Times, he considered hobbling out of the hospital and then yanking open his shirt to reveal a Superman logo. In the event, he saved his drama for the moment he stood again on the
Truman Balcony and ripped off his surgical mask.

"Don’t be afraid of COVID," he tweeted afterward. "Don’t let it dominate your life."

19. SURVIVORS

After Amy Klobuchar dropped out of the Presidential race, she was on Biden’s shortlist for his running mate. George Floyd’s death put an end to that. She had begun her career twenty years earlier as the district attorney in Minneapolis, earning a reputation for being tough on crime but light on police misconduct. On June 18th, she asked Biden to take her name off his list and urged him to select a woman of color as his running mate.

That day, she learned that her ninety-two-year-old father, Jim Klobuchar, had COVID. He was a retired newspaper columnist, and known to everyone in Minneapolis, especially cops and bartenders. Full of adventure, he was also often full of alcohol. When Amy was a young lawyer, her father was arrested for drunk driving. In a closed hearing, she encouraged him to take responsibility and plead guilty. He did so, and finally got sober. Now this vigorous old man, so troubled and so beloved, had COVID—and Alzheimer’s. When Klobuchar visited him, at an assisted-living facility, they were separated by a window, and she believed that it would be her final glimpse of him alive. He recognized her, but couldn’t understand why they had to remain separated. He sang to her: "Happy Days Are Here Again." He has since recovered.

Among the many awful legacies that COVID will leave, one blessing is that our understanding of coronaviruses, and the tools to counter them, has been transformed. Much of that progress will be because of Barney Graham, Jason McLellan, and other scientists who have spent their careers building to this moment.

There has never been such an enormous, worldwide scientific effort so intently focussed on a single disease. More than two hundred vaccines are in various stages of development. On December 11th, the F.D.A. granted its first Emergency Use Authorization for a COVID vaccine. Created by Pfizer, in partnership with the German firm BioNTech, it uses the modified protein that Graham and McLellan designed. In its third and final human trial, it was deemed ninety-five per cent effective. Giant quantities of the vaccine had been prepared in advance of F.D.A. approval.

“Our goal is more than a billion doses by the end of 2021," Philip Dormitzer, Pfizer’s chief scientific officer for viral vaccines, told me. The first employee at U.Va.’s hospital to get the Pfizer inoculation was Ebony Hilton.

Operation Warp Speed, the government initiative to accelerate vaccine development, may prove to be the Administration’s most notable success in the pandemic.

Modern’s vaccine secured approval next. Its formulation proved to be 94.1 per cent effective in preventing infection and, so far, it has been a hundred per cent effective in preventing serious disease. Graham is happy that he chose to work with Moderna. In 2016, his lab developed a vaccine for Zika, a new virus that caused birth defects. His department did everything itself: “We developed the construct, we made the DNA, we did Phase I clinical trials, and then we developed the regulatory apparatus to take it into Central and South America and the Caribbean, to test it for efficacy.” The effort nearly broke the staff: Moderna was an ideal partner for the COVID project, Graham told me. Its messenger-RNA vector was far more potent than the DNA vaccine that Graham’s lab had been using.

In another major development, Eli Lilly recently received an Emergency Use Authorization for a monoclonal antibody that is also based on the spike protein that Graham and McLellan designed. It is similar to the treatment that President Trump received when he contracted COVID.

Graham had been in his home office, in Rockville, Maryland, when he got a call telling him that the Pfizer vaccine was breathtakingly effective—far better than could have been hoped for. “It was just hard to imagine,” he told me. He walked into the kitchen to share the news with his wife. Their son and grandchildren were visiting. “I told Cynthia, ‘It’s working.’ I could barely get the words out. Then I just had to go back into my study, because I had this major relief. All that had been built up over those ten months just came out.” He sat at his desk and wept. His family gathered around him. He hadn’t cried that hard since his father died.

Graham and his colleagues will not become rich from their creation: intellectual-property royalties will go to the federal government. Yet he feels amply rewarded. “Almost every aspect of my life has come together in this outbreak,” he told me. “The work on enhanced disease, the work on RSV structure, the work on coronavirus and pandemic preparedness, along with all the things I learned and experienced about racial issues in this country. It feels like some kind of destiny.”

More than a thousand health-care workers have died while taking care of COVID patients. Nurses are the most likely to perish, as they spend the most time with patients. On June 29th, Bellevue held a ceremony to memorialize lost comrades. Staff members gathered in a garden facing First Avenue to plant seven cherry trees in their honor.

As the coronavirus withdrew from Bellevue, it left perplexity behind. Why did death rates decline? Had face masks diminished the viral loads transmitted to infected people? Nate Link thinks that therapeutic treatments such as remdesivir have been helpful. Remdesivir cuts mortality by seventy per cent in patients on low levels of oxygen, though it has no impact on people on ventilators. Amit Uppal told me that the hospital has improved at managing COVID. “We now understand the potential courses of the disease,” he said. Doctors have become more skilled at assessing who requires a ventilator, who might be stabilized with oxygen, who needs blood-thinning medication. Then again, the main factor behind superior outcomes may be that patients now tend to be younger.

When a patient is discharged, the event offers a rare moment for the staff
Eating in front of the computer is bad for you.

The death toll kept mounting, surpassing three hundred thousand at year's end. Some victims were famous. The playwright Terrence McNally was one of the first. The virus also killed Charley Pride, the first Black singer in the Country Music Hall of Fame, and Tom Seaver, one of the greatest pitchers in baseball history. Eighty per cent of fatalities have been in people aged sixty-five or older, and most victims are male. It's been strange to find myself in the vulnerable population. I'm a year younger than Trump, so his adventure with COVID was of considerable interest to me. If I get ill, I'm not likely to receive the kind of treatment the President did, but I'm in better physical condition, despite a bout of cancer. My wife, though, has compromised lungs. Even before the coronavirus put a target on our age group, mortality was much on my mind. Sometimes I'm dumbstruck by how long I've lived; when I'm filling out a form on the
Internet, and I come to a drop-down menu for year of birth, the years fly by, past the loss of parents and friends, past wars and assassinations, past Presidential Administrations.

On September 9th, our grandchild Gioia was born. She is the dearest creature. We stare into each other’s eyes in wonder. Even in this intimate moment, though, the menace of contagion is present: we are more likely to infect the people we love than anyone else. Deborah Birx has recalled that, in 1918, her grandmother, aged eleven, brought the flu home from school to her mother, who died of it. “I can tell you, my grandmother lived with that for eighty-eight years,” she said.

Even before the election, Matt and Yen Pottinger had decided that they were tired of Washington. He was burned out on the task force, which had drifted into irrelevance as the Administration embraced magical thinking. They drove west, looking for a new place to live, and settled on a ski town in Utah. Matt will join Yen there once he wraps up his job in Washington.

Pottinger’s White House experience has made him acutely aware of what he calls “the fading art of leadership.” It’s not a failure of one party or another; it’s more of a generational decline of good judgment. “The elites think it’s all about expertise,” he said. It’s important to have experts, but they aren’t always right: they can be “hampered by their own orthodoxies, their own egos, their own narrow approach to the world.” Pottinger went on, “You need broad-minded leaders who know how to hold people accountable, who know how to delegate, who know a good chain of command, and know how to make hard judgments.”

At the end of October, before returning to D.C., Pottinger went on a trail ride in the Wasatch Range. As it happened, Birx was in Salt Lake City. Utah had just hit a record number of new cases. On the ride, an alarm sounded on Pottinger’s cell phone in the saddlebag. It was an alert: “Almost every single county is a high transmission area. Hospitals are nearly overwhelmed. By public health order, masks are required in high transmission areas.”

Pottinger said to himself, “Debi must have met with the governor.”

Covid has been hard on Little Africa. “Some of our church members have passed, and quite a few of our friends,” Mary Hilton, Ebony’s mother, told me recently. “We just buried one yesterday. They’re dropping everywhere. It’s so scary.” A cousin is in the hospital.

“One out of eight hundred Black Americans who were alive in January is now dead,” Hilton told me. “There would be another twenty thousand alive if they died at the same rate as Caucasians.” She added, “If I can just get my immediate family through this year alive, we will have succeeded.” She and two colleagues have written a letter to the Congressional Black Caucus proposing the creation of a federal Department of Equity, to address the practices that have led to such disparate health outcomes.

Infected people keep showing up at U.Va.’s hospital at a dismaying pace. Hilton recently attended the hospital’s first lung transplant for a covid patient. He survived. Lately, more young people, including children, have populated the covid wards. Hospitals and clinics all over the country have been struggling financially, and many health-care workers, including Hilton, have taken pay cuts.

Thanksgiving in Little Africa is usually a giant family reunion. Everyone comes home. There’s one street where practically every house belongs to someone in Hilton’s family; people eat turkey in one house and dessert in another. Hilton hasn’t seen her family for ten months. She spent Thanksgiving alone in Charlottesville, with her dogs.

Thanksgiving was Deborah Birx’s first day off in months. She and her husband have a house in Washington, D.C., and her daughter’s family lives in nearby Potomac, Maryland. During the pandemic, they have been a pod. Recently, Birx bought another house, in Delaware, and after Thanksgiving she, her husband, and her daughter’s family spent the weekend there.
Her access to the President had been cut off since the summer and, with that, her ability to influence policy. She had become a lightning rod for the Administration’s policies. Then, in December, a news report revealed that she had travelled over the Thanksgiving weekend, counter to the C.D.C.’s recommendation. She was plunged into a cold bath of Schadenfreude. Old photographs resurfaced online, making it look as if she were currently attending Christmas parties.

Birx indicated that she might soon leave government service.

20. SURRENDER

Austin bills itself as the “Live Music Capital of the World,” but the bars and dance halls are largely closed. Threadgill’s, the roadhouse where Janis Joplin got her start, is being torn down. The clubs on Sixth Street, Austin’s answer to Bourbon Street, haven’t been open for months. A band I play in has performed in many of them, but for the past several years we had a regular gig at the Skylark Lounge, a shack tucked behind an auto-body shop. Johnny LaTouf runs the place with his ex-wife, Mary. It’s been shut since March 15th.

“All small businesses have been affected, but music venues around the country were already in a struggle,” Johnny told me. He’s had to let go his ten employees—including three family members. That’s only part of the damage. “When the musicians get laid off and the bands disperse and go their separate ways, then you’ve actually broken up their business.” He added, “COVID killed off more than people with preexisting conditions. Lots of businesses have preexisting conditions.”

Lavelle White, born in 1929, was still singing the blues at Skylark until the doors closed. “Some of our greatest musicians are older, because it takes a lifetime to master the craft,” Johnny said. Skylark was a mixing bowl where younger musicians learned from their elders. “Now that pathway is broken.”

When Congress passed the CARES Act, which included money to support small businesses, local bars were not a priority. “There’s no money,” Johnny said Wells Fargo told him. He helps several older musicians with groceries, but he doesn’t know how many in that crowd will ever return. Some have died from COVID.

Two qualities determine success or failure in dealing with the COVID contagion. One is experience. Some places that had been scarred by past diseases applied those lessons to the current pandemic. Vietnam, Taiwan, and Hong Kong had been touched by SARS. Saudi Arabia has done better than many countries, perhaps because of its history with MERS (and the fact that many women routinely wear facial coverings). Africa has a surprisingly low infection rate. The continent’s younger demographic has helped, but it is also likely that South Africa’s experience with H.I.V./AIDS, and the struggle of other African countries with Ebola, have schooled the continent in the mortal danger of ignoring medical advice.

The other quality is leadership. Nations and states that have done relatively well during this crisis have been led by strong, compassionate, decisive leaders who speak candidly with their constituents. In Vermont, Governor Phil Scott, a Republican, closed the state early, and reopened cautiously, keeping the number of cases and the death toll low. “This should be the model for the country,” Fauci told state leaders, in September. If the national fatality rate were the same as Vermont’s, some two hundred and fifty thousand Americans would still be alive. Granted, Vermont has fewer than a million people, but so does South Dakota, which was toppling a thousand cases a day in November. Scott ordered a statewide shutdown in March, which caused an immediate economic contraction. Governor Noem opposed mandates of any sort, betting that South Dakotans would act in their best interests while keeping the economy afloat. Vermont’s economy has recovered, with an unemployment rate of 3.2 per cent—nearly the same as South Dakota’s. But South Dakota has seen twelve times as many deaths.

In Michigan, the state’s chief medical officer, Joneigh Khaldun, is a Black emergency-room doctor. “She was one of the first to look at the demographics of COVID and highlight that we have a real racial disparity here,” Governor Whitmer told me. “Fourteen per cent of our population is Black, as were forty per cent of the early deaths.” The state launched an aggressive outreach to Black communities. By August, the rates of both cases and fatalities for Blacks were the same as—or lower than—those for whites. The vast differences in outcomes among the states underscore the absence of a national plan. The U.S. accounts for a fifth of the world’s COVID deaths, despite having only four per cent of the population.

In August, the Pew Research Center surveyed people from fourteen advanced countries to see how they viewed the world during the pandemic. Ninety-five per cent of Danish respondents said that their country had handled the crisis capably. In Australia, the figure was ninety-four per cent. The U.S. and the U.K. were the only countries where a majority believed otherwise. In Denmark, seventy-two per cent said that the country has become more unified since the contagion emerged. Eighteen per cent of Americans felt this way.

On March 16th, Trump issued nationwide guidelines for closing schools, shutting down bars and restaurants, and limiting unnecessary travel and social gatherings. But that day marked a turning point. In his conversation with governors, he abandoned any effort to coalesce a national plan, and his Administration began undercutting governors’ attempts to acquire P.P.E. Then, on April 3rd, Trump undermined the C.D.C.’s guidance on wearing masks: “You don’t have to do it. I’m choosing not to do it. But some people may want to do it.”

Trump, by his words and his example, became not a leader but a saboteur. He subverted his health agencies by installing political operatives who meddled with the science and suppressed the truth. His crowded, unmasked political rallies were reckless acts of effrontery. In his Tulsa speech, he said that he’d asked his health officials to “slow the testing down”—impeding data collection just to make his
Administration look better. When the inevitable happened, and he contracted the disease, he almost certainly spread it. Every guest at the Barrett reception tested negative for the virus before entering. Trump may well have been the superspreader at the Rose Garden event.

The President could have tried to bring the country together. In the press conference where he said that he wouldn’t wear a mask, he praised the efforts of the Democratic governors of New York and New Jersey; he expressed sympathy for Michiganders, who were “getting hit very, very hard.” He announced federal efforts to aid New York City. “America is engaged in a historic battle to safeguard the lives of our citizens,” he said. “Our greatest weapon is the discipline and determination of every citizen to stay at home and stay healthy.” The man who said those words might have been the President the country needed. But he was not that man.

He campaigned against Biden, but mainly he campaigned against the disease. “When the year started, he appeared unbeatable,” Senator Lee told me. “My Democratic colleagues were discouraged about their chances. By the end of the impeachment trial, when we began hearing about the virus, we were not sure it would be a big deal. But it put an end to the President the country needed. But he was not that man.

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Five days before the election, Biden spoke at a drive-in rally in Tampa. “So much suffering, so much loss,” he said. “Donald Trump has waved the white flag, abandoned our families, and surrendered to the virus.” Honking cars punctuated his remarks. That day, new confirmed cases topped ninety thousand.

The next day, Fauci said, “All the stars are aligned in the wrong place as you go into the fall and winter season, with people congregating at home indoors. You could not possibly be positioned more poorly.”

Halloween night in Austin was beautiful, graced with a blue moon. My wife and I set out a bowl of chocolate bars and Dum Dums, but there were scarcely any trick-or-treaters. As dusk settled over the city, when our neighborhood would normally be filled with fairies and vampires, a deer galloped down the street.

21. “GET HERE NOW”

America is full of strivers whose dreams seem just out of reach. Iris Meda was one of them. She had a big smile but sad eyes. She grew up in Harlem, the oldest of six children. Her mother was a domestic who was home only one day a week; her stepfather was a longshoreman. Meda’s first bed was an ironing board.

For most of her childhood, she was the family caretaker, walking her siblings to school before she went herself. Like many of her high-school friends, she dropped out after a bout of depression. She married and had two daughters. Meda eventually got a G.E.D. and surprised herself by graduating at the top of her class from Bronx Community College. In 1984, she earned a nursing degree from City College. Medicine fascinated her. She would go home and talk about watching a surgeon massage a patient’s heart. She was drawn to those who were wounded or hurting—people who felt that the world wasn’t big enough for them. For years, she was a nurse at the Rikers Island jail. She cared about the prisoners, and they knew it. When her husband was transferred to Dallas, she gave notice, and on her last day the inmates clapped her out. “She was all—those big rallies.” When Trump finally

resumed them, defying medical advice, his fury was volcanic. “People are tired of hearing Fauci and all these idiots,” he grumbled on October 19th, when the number of new cases exceeded sixty-five thousand. “COVID, COVID, COVID, COVID, COVID!” he said at a rally in North Carolina, five days later. “We’re doing great. Our numbers are incredible.” That day, nearly eighty thousand new cases were reported, overshadowing the highest levels of the summer. In Omaha, on October 27th, he said of COVID, “It’s here, right? . . . I had it.” Hospitalizations were up forty-six per cent that month. He ignored the fever sweeping through the Mountain West and the Great Plains—Trump country. His slogan was both cynical and fatuous: “If I can get better, anybody can get better.”

Infections often rose in counties where Trump held a rally. The surge in infections and deaths mocked his assertions that we were “rounding the turn.” The disease stalked him; it encircled him. On October 25th, Trump’s chief of staff, Mark Meadows, declared, “We are not going to control the pandemic.” The Administration had given up.

COVID couldn’t kill Donald Trump, but it could defeat him.

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ends, and when she turned seventy she decided that she’d had enough. She and Selene had big plans. Meda wanted to travel; she wanted to ride in a convertible for the first time; she talked about writing a book. “In March, it all came to a screeching halt,” Selene told me. Her mother was still a proud New Yorker, so she spent a lot of time in front of the TV watching Dr. Fauci and Governor Cuomo. “Her knowledge of science kept her ahead of the news reports,” Selene said. Meda, having worked in nursing homes, hospitals, and jails, knew that COVID would be devastating for people who were confined, and for those who took care of them.

Meda couldn’t stand being idle during the crisis. “She wanted to teach,” Selene said. “She wanted to encourage younger nurses to continue their education. She wanted them to reach their full potential in a way she almost didn’t.” Meda successfully applied for a job at Collin College, in Allen, Texas. At the time, courses were being offered virtually, and Meda imagined that she would be teaching online in the fall. When the semester began, she learned that many classes were in-person. According to the local NPR station, the college’s president, H. Neil Matkin, had made his views of the virus known in an e-mail to trustees: “The effects of this pandemic have been blown utterly out of proportion across our nation.”

Meda hoped to be in a large classroom where students could be widely spaced, but she was assigned to teach a lab for a nurse’s-aid course. There was no social distancing. On October 2nd, a student was coughing and sneezing, complaining of allergies. That day, Trump announced that he had COVID. Meda was repulsed when he insisted on taking a car ride to wave at his supporters outside the hospital, with Secret Service agents in the car with him. Meda texted Selene, “He’s putting all those people at risk just for a photo.”

On October 7th, Meda learned that the student had tested positive. The college chose to continue in-person classes even after one student died. By this time, Trump was out of the hospital, saying he felt “better than twenty years ago.”

Meda became feverish on October 12th. Two days later, she tested positive and went to the E.R., but her oxygen level was not low enough for her to be admitted. On October 17th, Selene took her mom back to the hospital. Meda was seriously ill, but the staff, worried about COVID, kept her waiting outside, slumped over on a bench in the E.R. drive-through. When the triage nurse finally waved Meda in, Selene wasn’t permitted to join her, because she had been exposed. Meda’s oxygen level was now so low that she couldn’t speak. Selene didn’t see her again for thirty days.

During that period, Meda was able to speak only once on the phone. Most days, she texted with Selene. One day, she asked Selene to call a nurse who she thought was doing an excellent job. “She’s having a hard day,” Meda texted. Selene worried about her students and wondered if anyone else had caught the virus. (None showed symptoms.)

The disease progressed inexorably. Selene could tell that doctors were doing everything they could, but her mother’s lungs wouldn’t rebound. Selene wondered if things would be turning out differently had her mother received treatment earlier.

On November 14th, Selene got a call advising that her mother’s blood pressure was plummeting. “Based on how she’s declining, how long do we have?” Selene asked, thinking that she would pick up her father, so that he could say goodbye. “A couple hours,” the doctor said. Ten minutes later, a nurse called and said, “Get here now.”

“They put me in a helmet,” Selene recalled. “There was a plastic flap that closed around my neck. Inside the helmet there was a fan at the top that blew air down, so that any air that got in would be flushed away. And they put a gown on me, and double gloves, and they let me go in and say goodbye to her. That was the biggest shock, to see her, and to see how she looked. She was twice her size, because she was swollen from steroids. Her tongue was swollen and hanging out the side of her mouth because she was on the ventilator—she’d been intubated. They had to brace her head to keep it straight on the pillow, and they had tape around her mouth to keep the tube in. I’ll never forget it. But I think the thing that will haunt me is the smell. It’s like the smell of decay, like she had already started to die.

“The thing that made it so hard to see that was to juxtapose it against President Trump out there, saying he felt like he was twenty-eight years old again and he never felt better. So how could the same thing that did this to her, how could someone ever take it for granted that this was nothing, you have nothing to be afraid of?”

Selene gathered her mother in her arms as the machines went silent.

My wife and I voted early, in a drop-off location in Travis County, where ninety-seven per cent of eligible voters were registered. It was a new way of voting—swift, efficient, and rather exhilarating. And yet the vote came amid a crescendo of bad news. The week before November 3rd, the country added half a million new COVID cases, reaching record highs in half the states. The stock market had its worst week since the swan dive in March. Eight million Americans had fallen into poverty since the summer. At least five members of Vice-President Pence’s staff had been infected with COVID, as the virus continued to roam the White House.

In Texas, as in many Republican states, there were naked attempts to suppress the vote. Governor Abbott restricted the number of drop-off sites to one per county, including in Harris County, which has more than four million people. The attorney general, Ken Paxton, went to court to block the enforcement of a mask requirement at the polls, endangering voters as well as poll workers, who tend to be older. For the election, Abbott readied a thousand National Guard troops in major Texas cities, in anticipation of violence. Store owners in Dallas boarded up their windows, like beach communities awaiting a hurricane.

But there was no violence in Texas on Election Day. Voting is a simple act, and an act of faith. It is a pledge of allegiance to the future of the country. Across America, people waited in long lines to vote—despite the disease, despite attempts to discredit or invalidate their vote, despite postal delays, despite Russian or Iranian meddling, despite warnings from the White House that the President would not go quietly if he lost. They voted as if their country depended on it.
THE RIVALS

Andrea Lee
When Floristella catches sight of Pianon on the Red House veranda—the side that overlooks Madame Rose Rakotomalala’s jackfruit tree—he gives a martial bel ow, charges down the garden path, and attacks his neighbor with a walking stick. And though the two old Italian men, both well over seventy, are ludicrous combatants—Floristella, a diabetic, is ponderously fat, while tall Pianon is skeletal from annual bouts of malaria, so that their skirmish suggests a clash between Falstaff and Ichabod Crane—their energy and passion run high, and no one who witnesses the incident feels inclined to laugh.

The owners of the Red House, Senna and his wife, Shay, have left Madagascar and are back home in Italy at the time, but there are plenty of witnesses to give them, later, a detailed report of the fight between their resident accountant and their old friend and next-door neighbor. There is Madame Rose, their neighbor on the opposite side and their chief informant. There are the gardeners and maids from the Red House, including the formidable head housekeeper, Ber tine la Grande. There are several Antan droy market women heading up the beach bearing baskets of vegetables on their heads. There is a boy driving a herd of zebu up the side path from their morning bath in the sea. There is an oyster vender in a straw pillbox hat.

The maids and gardeners rush to separate the struggling old vazzaba while other people stop and stare, but with a notable lack of astonishment. Everybody up and down Finoa Beach knows the history of the trouble and the name of the woman behind it.

Not long ago, the combatants were close friends. Pianon and Floristella: both Italians who have been in Madagascar since the early years of independence, both men of dignity and substance, as much as they can be in that libertine island atmosphere where foreigners’ souls can rot as quickly as a bunch of soft skinned bananas. Both speak fluent Malagasy, highland and coastal dialects. They’ve been on Naratrany long enough for the islanders to have christened them with fondly mocking nicknames. Pianon is Valilha, the word for a tall thin twanging bamboo musical instrument, and Floristella is Sakaw, meaning, simply, “food.”

Pianon is a notary from Verona, a widower who dresses in elegant shirts and trousers tailored, colonial-style, from linen of an archaic thickness. He has cropped white hair, a hatchet nose, and the intense yet ascetic air of erudition that is the unmistakable sign of a Jesuit education. A passionate amateur ethnologist, he spends his free time interviewing missionaries and village headmen for a monograph he is writing on the Sakalava royal family. His job as the live-in bookkeeper and rental manager at the Red House is undeniably beneath him, yet he has grown attached to the space and the beauty of the big villa, which he often has to himself outside of peak vacation season, and where he has built a library. Like everyone else, he is fond of his boss, the boisterous and decidedly nonintellectual Senna; Shay he admires for her degree of learning, which he was surprised to find in an American woman, and he sometimes invites her along on his research expeditions.

No one could differ more from Pianon than Floristella, a Sicilian baron of fallen fortunes who carries his huge belly with the complacent ease of a pasha. In his adventurous youth, he was a famous yachtsman and deep-sea diver, whose prowess and seductive charm ensnared the hearts of beauties from Capri to Zanzibar. Although riches, youth, and health have vanished, leaving him of fallen fortunes who carries his huge belly with the complacent ease of a pasha. In his adventurous youth, he was a famous yachtsman and deep-sea diver, whose prowess and seductive charm ensnared the hearts of beauties from Capri to Zanzibar. Although riches, youth, and health have vanished, leaving him to a frugal pensioner’s existence on Nara trany, he still has a grand manner, which has made him an island personage. His aquiline profile—noble despite his two chins—and his silver crest of brilliantly tined hair are a landmark on Finoa Beach, where he holds court daily from the porch of his tiny bungalow, which adjoins the grounds of the Red House.

There, ensconced in a sagging director’s chair, surrounded by a motley array of cats and dogs and even a three-legged pet tortoise, he contemplates the tides and the changing skies over the Mozambique Channel. He exchanges greetings with passersby, from village children to hotel owners, while perusing documents or eating heaping plates of pasta prepared by his faithful housekeeper, Marianne. He naps, smokes endless cigarettes, reads thrillers, and doles out wages to the Sakalava workmen who, in starts and stops linked to the fluctuating state of his finances, have for years been at work on a grandiose extension to his bungalow, which he secretly hopes will outshine the Red House.

When Pianon first came to work for the Sennas, the two neighbors established a habit of meeting up on Floristella’s porch in the cool of the early morning to drink powerful Sicilian coffee from Floristella’s battered pot. For a pleasant hour, as the sun rose and the fishermen set out in their pirogues and Floristella’s thin gray kitten purred on Pianon’s bony, linen-covered knee, they traded island gossip. Shay, who liked to take fins and a mask and swim the length of Finoa Bay before breakfast, often paused far out in the water to observe the two old men on the porch of the little bungalow beside her own big house. They had a look of casual harmony that was in keeping with the early-morning hush, the long shadows of palms and casuarinas that lay along the immaculate curve of beach. When Shay came, dripping, out of the water, they’d call out greetings and offer her coffee, but she never wanted to disrupt their modest but perfect intimacy.

The woman who did break up the idyll was Noelline. For years, she was Floristella’s secretary and mistress, filling the gap left by his wife, who long before had grown weary of the tedium of Madagascar and returned to Trapani, where she awaited her husband’s twice-yearly visits. Noelline, twenty-six and childless, was no longer young by island standards and, in a land where lovely women were as abundant as grains of sand, had never been considered a beauty, though she had an almost preposterously voluptuous body, a product of her mixed Sakalava and Antankarana background. The daughter of a seamstress and a ferryman, she had a demure wide face, its teak surface roughened by out breaks of tiny pimples, a high forehead, and a ferryman, she had a demure wide face, its teak surface roughened by outbreaks of tiny pimples, a high forehead, and bright, shallow-set eyes that missed nothing. She kept her hair short and stylish, sometimes enhancing it with a waist-length tail of beaded Chinese braids, and her enviable wardrobe consisted of tight imported jeans and dresses, purchased by Floristella.

Unlike most of the village women who became embroiled with foreign men, Noelline was educated—she had completed two years at the lycée run by the
sugar refinery at Ankazobe. She could type and use a computer, and spoke French and Italian. Beyond her intelligence, her undeniable energy, and a reputed genius for sex, her greatest talents were ones she shared with most resourceful wives and mistresses: an inconsiderate but relentless persistence, the ability to hide her time, to cling without being obvious, and never to show offense.

Eventually, Floristella entrusted her with the keys to his bungalow, the secrets of his defunct business exporting medical jungle herbs, the erratic construction work on his property, and the care and the pleasures of his swollen, diabetic body. Noelline didn’t move in with him but lived a mile away in a rented two-room cinder-block house—luxurious by village standards, and paid for, of course, by Floristella—set among palms and thornbushes in one of the warren-like settlements that sprawled messily off the only paved road in Finoana.

Each morning, she buzzed up to Floristella’s bungalow on a battered motorbike, offering a cordial but slightly condescending greeting to Marianne, who pounded laundry and cleaned fish in the small trodden-sand yard by the sea. In the course of the day, Noelline wrote Floristella’s letters, gave him his insulin injections, climbed nimbly astride his big belly during the siesta hour, and sometimes lingered after sunset on his lamplit porch, patiently listening to his fantastically plans for rebuilding his forlorn residence. She was wearing a two-piece bathing suit, the kind that tourists wear, a bikini that left little about her large breasts and her broad thighs to the imagination. And she was frolicking contentedly with her husband back in Trapani, who vowed not to show offense.

In the course of the day, Noelline wrote Floristella’s letters, gave him his insulin injections, climbed nimbly astride his big belly during the siesta hour, and sometimes lingered after sunset on his lamplit porch, patiently listening to his fantastical plans for rebuilding his fortune. She never spent the night.

To Floristella’s many friends, and especially to Pianon, she was quietly respectful. She absorbed Italian idioms with solicitude, and sometimes, in the tone of a schoolmistress, translated for him an obscure term in Sakalava dialect, or explained some custom, like why it was fady for certain young girls to eat chicken.

The villagers knew that Noelline had her own giambillys, or lovers on the side, notably a handsome cabdriver from Saint Grimaud, a métis who was said to be his penniless French mother. However, the young woman jealously guarded her position with the Sicilian. In the village, she acquired the title of Madame Floristella, much to the annoyance of his wife back in Trapani, who vowed never to show offense.

T he rivalry of Floristella and Pianon began when Floristella suffered a heart attack, as was inevitable, one hot January night. Alerted by the night watchmen, Pianon called Dr. Pau and, with the help of the doctor and Madame Rose, had the Sicilian transferred by helicopter to the hospital on Reunion Island. His wife and sons rushed there from Trapani, and later carried him back home.

Noelline, Marianne, and the groundskeepers were left in charge of Floristella’s Madagascar affairs: his bungalow, his motley array of pets, his keys and documents, and the weedy construction site out back. As he recovered, Floristella—forgetting the lessons of history, and his own extensive knowledge of women—asked his friend Pianon to keep an eye on things, including Noelline. As Senna would say, any fool could have anticipated what would happen, with Floristella absent for so many months. His convalescence was astutely extended by his wife, who was pleased to have her elderly husband out of the infectious atmosphere of whores and decayed colonial dreams that hung like a fever mist over the island of Naratrany.

From Madagascar, Pianon called to ask whether Floristella would mind if Noelline helped him with some complicated paperwork at the Red House. Bertine la Grande later described to Shay a scene that made it clear how things were progressing. It was circumcision season, and all over the island groups of four- or five-year-old boys had undergone the ceremonial procedure. Three days after the operation, Noelline brought a band of little Finoana village boys, her cousins and nephews, down to the beach in front of the Red House, to wash in the sea. They were lured into the water, as tradition prescribes, with singing and splashing games. The naked boys winced and squealed as the salt water stung their wounds, and Noelline led them in playing.

She was wearing a two-piece bathing suit, the kind that tourists wear, a bikini that left little about her large breasts and her broad thighs to the imagination. And she was frolicking con-
I feel I need to take a break from academia.”

spicuously, as proper village girls never do—decorous girls who enter the water modestly dressed to wash themselves or to fish with a piece of sheeting. “On dirait quelle dansait!” Bertine said sourly. She meant dancing like the whores at the bars near the port, who could move their asses like turbines while balancing beer bottles on their heads.

Bertine saw that Noelline was aiming her movements in a specific direction, and then saw Pianon’s tall, bony linen-clad figure emerge from the garden of the Red House onto the beach. Pianon, who rarely went onto the sand and never swam, approached with his crane’s gait to call out to them, perhaps to make some scholarly inquiry into the chants and songs used in the games. But Bertine saw how his eyes latched on to the nearly naked young woman in the circle of splashing children. As if he were standing hungry in front of a market stall without a coin to his name.

Pianon and Noelline. Both lonely people who, in a different situation, in a place less strung about with caste, could have been openly together from the start. Pianon had lost a wife to cancer and his only daughter to a drug overdose, and was not inclined to go back to Verona to rejoin the small accounting firm he had once run with his brother. Alone among the foreign adventurers and losers washed up on the shores of Naratrany, he had never annexed an ambitious teen-age beauty as a mistress.

Noelline had been cut off from clan and tribe by her curious unpopularity and by her attachment to Floristella, who had devoured her freshest youth without ever offering to live with her, have a child, or buy her a house of her own. Floristella, whose noble forebears were said to have hunted peasants for sport on the slopes of Mt. Etna, had—besides his bungalow and useless construction site—only a crumbling seaside family palace in Trapani, a tenacious wife, and a mountain of debt from frivolous investments both in Africa and in Europe. But Pianon was unattached and had an Italian pension, in addition to his position at the Red House.

So, while Floristella recuperated back in Sicily, Noelline began to spend afternoons working on the computer in Pianon’s office at the Red House, and appeared at Pianon’s side in the pickup truck when he made his trips to the Banque Commerciale de Madagascar, to the customs office, or to the Commune Urbaine.

Noelline, coming and going on her motorbike, had always had a certain camaraderie with the small army of maids and laundresses who maintained the Red House for Senna’s family and the paying guests. Some were girls she had grown up with, and, like Bertine la Grande, they knew exactly what was going on. Noelline and her seamstress mother were even seen several times in the Red House kitchen. Everyone understood that, in the time-honored manner, Noelline was using magic to entice Pianon, but whether it was simply an aphrodisiac or a love philtre that she was adding to his food remained unclear.

By June, when the cold season began and the village infants bound to their mothers’ backs wore snug crocheted caps, Floristella had been snug away from the island for five months. Pianon’s once clear and ironical blue eyes had acquired a submissive, almost doglike expression, and in matters of dress he had become unattractively casual, abandoning his impeccable linens for the tracksuits and safari shorts worn by most of the old rum-soused foreigners on the island.

When the Sennas arrived from Milan to spend their summer vacation at the Red House, Shay was angered to catch sight of Noelline slipping out of Pianon’s bedroom early one morning, the young woman’s usually neat hair standing on end in a way that suggested unbridled rutting. After a decade of sojourns in Madagascar, Shay had developed an iron-clad poise and had learned to be astonished at nothing, but she was disappointed with Pianon, whom she’d thought might be the one old man on the island who would not embarrass himself.

“I’ll have to say something to him,” she said severely to Bertine la Grande, when the housekeeper reported that the two had been sleeping together for weeks. “This house is not a bordello!”

“I think it is useless to speak to him,” the housekeeper said. “Speak to her—la fille.”

But when Shay did take Noelline aside and, in her firmest tone, as if she were dealing with a misbehaving student, told her that certain behavior would not be tolerated, she found herself confronted with an enigma. The prow-like bosom and tiny waist, the round face...
under the Eartha Kitt hairdo, the coffee-bean eyes, the dulcet voice that immediately agreed—“Oui, oui, madame, c’est honteux, je suis désolé”—all barely masked the blaze of mocking hostility that Shay had sensed before. For a second, the American woman with all her privilege quailed before the Malagasy woman who had nothing but her wits.

All July and August, Shay observed the progress of the affair. Though no more nights were spent in the Red House, Noelline cleaved to Pianon’s side, even showing up in the sweaty, raucous crowd at the weekly Sunday mourning boxing match held in the dusty arena at Betsaka Beach. (Pianon attended this popular entertainment to take notes on the ritual insults exchanged by Sakalava and Antandroy opponents.)

One afternoon, Shay returned unexpectedly from an excursion into Saint Grimaud and caught Noelline, her demure mask laid aside, leading the younger maids—it was Bertine’s day off—in loud teasing of her elderly lover. Just outside the kitchen, the girls had surrounded Pianon in a giggling, clapping, shouting ring as they demanded that he throw them a party to celebrate Italy’s World Cup win.

When Shay, carrying a basket filled with lengths of Comorean cloth, came into view, the maids scattered in all directions like ants, and Noelline darted into the office, leaving Pianon struggling to reassume his dignity. “They are young . . . high-spirited,” he mumbled to Shay, who was trying not to laugh.

“Really, Gianfilippo, you shouldn’t let them run wild like that!” she said, keeping a straight face as he stood there in his ugly warmup pants, a dull flush suffusing his cheeks.

On the one hand, the scene was hilarious: the house manager bullied by his staff, the priestly Pianon helplessly aroused by the loud, ribald female crowd around him. Shay had always amused herself by envisioning him as the arid scholar Casaubon, from “Middlemarch,” transplanted to the tropics and engrossed not in the “Key to All Mythologies” but in an endless history of the Sakalava kings. But now she thought of his quiet kindness to her children, his unswerving courtesy to her and to Senna, and felt saddened at his mislaid decorum.

“Are you sure this is all worth it?” she asked him quietly, just as her son and daughter came running up from the beach.

Pianon gave her an austere look, and replied, “Le cœur a ses raisons.”

That night in their bedroom, she said to Senna, “I think we may need to look for a new house manager soon.”

“Che cazzo!” Senna exclaimed in annoyance, slapping aside the mosquito net and collapsing on the bed. “I was hoping he would just start chasing hookers like everyone else.”

When Floristella returned to Madagascar, in late September, it seemed as if Pianon and Noelline’s affair might die the natural death of countless illicit romances on Naratrany Island: everything buried under layers of silence, nothing remaining but a sudden opacity in the eyes of the people who knew. But the very evening of Floristella’s arrival Pianon went directly to his old friend and confessed everything.

Yielding to the frailty of the flesh and sleeping with an absent neighbor’s mistress was a forgivable lapse by the lax standards of island morality. Running off with a friend’s woman was also something that Naratrany had seen before. But confessing such an offense without any particular plan of action except declaring oneself the woman’s defender, in a vague chivalric manner, was just foolish, and this was what Pianon did. He did not declare that it was

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**FINAL POEM FOR MY FATHER**

**MISNAMED IN MY MOUTH**

Sunlight still holds you and gives your shapelessness to every room.

By noon, the kitchen catches your hands, misshapen sun rays. The windows have your eyes. Taken from me, your body. I reorder my life with absence. You are everywhere now where once I could not find you even in your own body. Death means everything has become possible. I’ve been told I have your ways, your laughter haunts my mother from my mouth. Everything is possible. Fatherlight washes over the kitchen floor.

I try to hold a bit of kindness for the dead and make of memory a sponge to wash your corpse. Your name is not *addict* or *sir*. This is not a dream; you died and were buried three times. Once, after my birth. Again, against your hellos shedding into closing doors, your face a mask I placed over my face. The final time, you beneath my feet. Was I buried with you then? I will not call what you had left anything other than *gone* and *sweet perhaps*. I am not your junior, but I survived. I fell in love with being your son. Now what? Possibility was a bird I once knew. It had one wing.

—Phillip B. Williams
destiny, and that in Noelline he had found his dream of love (which might have been an acceptable excuse to an emotional Sicilian); instead, he took an unfortunate middle route, announcing pompously that he and Noelline had made no plans, but that in their new-found intimacy he had come to respect her even more, and did not wish for her to live a life of misery.

The foolishness of this! As Senna remarked to Shay—husband and wife were both avidly soaking up the gossip, long-distance from Milan—it left Floristella not only cuckolded but egregiously insulted, with rage and revenge his only options.

The situation was rendered more volatile by the fact that Noelline began to act erratically. She abruptly stopped her part-time work with Pianon, so as not to go anywhere near her official employer, Floristella. With him, she would have no contact, not even to tie up the loose ends of her secretarial duties.

Worse than this was that, after being the soul of discretion, she suddenly started issuing melodramatic pronouncements all over the island, telling anybody who would listen that for years she had been the Sicilian’s overworked body who would listen that for years and now she wished to be free. For the idlers at the Fleur des Îles café, who were following the situation like a soap opera, Noelline was overdoining her big moment.

Everyone knew that she had long ago offered herself to old Floristella, fighting off other girls, and that she and her mother had since then been living contentedly in the greatest luxury the impecunious Sicilian could afford. For years, he had paid the rent of the cin-der-block house. He put down the money for her diploma from the lycée, for those business courses. How else could she have got the motorbike, the satellite dish, all those shoes, and the third-rate sapphire she wore around her neck? Even now, Floristella had done the paperwork properly, and she was receiving severance pay.

Yet here she was, going on about her suffering in a manner that the gossips opined was suitable only for crazy white women. And the way she bragged about her powers of fascination over old vazaha, as if every pretty island girl didn’t have the same power between her legs! She even invented a third suitor, a rich German, who, she claimed, wanted to take her to Munich. No one believed this except the two rivals, Floristella and Pianon.

Long vanished were the days of con-tempulating the sunrise together over caffè ristretto. Morning and evening, Floristella sat in monumental solitude on his porch overlooking the beach, glaring at the waves while nursing his Achillean rage.

Meanwhile, Pianon was sleeping away from the sea, well back in the bosky garden, made discreet evening visits to Noel-line in her cinder-block house, and twice took her on weekend excursions to Mahajanga. He was filled with bittersweet tenderness at her predictable appetite for fake designer purses, nine-carat-gold bangles, and the hair extensions that hung temptingly in the Indian shops of Saint Grimaud. He even bought her a twenty-four-piece dinner set painted with violets, which had been gathering dust for years on a shelf of Au Bonheur de la Maison.

In between her demands for gifts and her melodramatic complaints about Floristella, Noelline made love to Pianon with an explosive intensity that he had never experienced, even as a young man. In all his years in Madagas-car, he had stayed away from affairs with Malagasy women, but, in Noelline’s plaintive voice, in the touch of her cool, slightly rough skin, even in her greed, he encountered something simple, ancient, and essential that made his research into history and custom seem as unreal as a stage set. He was oddly touched by the fact that she did not even pretend to be in love with him.

Meanwhile, Floristella was overcome with jealousy. He set up a network of spies led by Marianne, and began calling Noelline on the cell phone he had bought for her in happier times. He abandoned pride and begged her to return. Even if just for an hour a day. He swore that she would never again have to give him insulin injections or toil at his haggard lessons. She would not have to listen to his rambling theories on politics and genetics. She would not have to work at all: she could just sit and keep him company.

He called a dozen times a day. Fin-ally, when, with her new outspokenness, she threatened to file a complaint with the police, he subsided into an ominous Sicilian calm. Madame Rose reported in frequent agitated phone calls that Floristella had “gone quiet, like all maniacs.” According to Madame Rose, he had been overheard musing aloud that the beach in front of his bungalow would be a perfect spot for a public flog-ging post, or even a gallows.

Naratrany Island was, in fact, a convenient place to commit a crime of passion. A year before, the captain of a South African schooner docked at the yacht basin had vanished after killing his first mate with a machete. A Belgian diving instructor who beat his Sakalava girlfriend had been waylaid while rid-ing his motorcycle and had his skull bashed in with a rock. During fishing expeditions to the Îles Glorieuses, unwanted tourist wives disappeared over-board, untraceable. The forces of law were more interested in capturing sapphire smugglers than murderers. Poison was rifle, as easy to sneak into food as aphrodisiacs.

It was absolutely true that Floristella had told Hassan, the owner of the Total-Kianja gas station, that he had considered the simple expedient of flinging a lighted book of matches onto the thatched roof of the Red House while Pianon was sleeping.

“But that,” the old Sicilian said to the horrified Hassan, “would be burning down a friend’s house to exterminate a rat!”

Things come to a head on that memorable November morning when Floristella storms into the Red House garden. He is brandishing an antique brass-bound walking stick that one of his progenitors acquired in Scotland, a blackened thorn meant for trampling across Hebridean gorse moors. With startling swiftness, considering his bulk, he dashes up the veranda steps and hurtles toward Pianon, who stands frozen on the wide gleaming floor before his office, wearing his own unlikely European accessory: an elegant pair of fur-lined Venetian slippers.
“Tell Mom the detergent war has gone into a new cycle.”
is not jealous or vindictive, that it is a matter of principle, a question of right and wrong. "What is written is written," he pronounces in a sepulchral tone, as Shay looks at him with compassion. "And those who steal from others will pay."

Shay embraces him, then walks back up the garden path to the Red House, breathing in the scent of jasmine and ylang-ylang. Approaching the l amphit veranda, she catches sight of Pianon sitting primly upright on a rattan chair, exactly where the notorious scuffle took place. He is discussing with Senna and Madame Rose the cost of installing a château d'eau to replace the up-country stream that supplies the beach houses with water. Pianon's eyes are sunken, and he is, if possible, even thinner these days, like a dry stalk that the next marital tremor will break. Yet he holds himself with dignity. To Shay, there is something impressive about the way he refuses to speak of his woe, just as there is a certain maj grandeur to Floristella's noisy perorations. In some odd manner, the two men seem closer as antagonists than they were as friends. Near the end of their lives, this melodrama has bestowed on them a kind of strength, a purpose, as if they were a pair of p ilots battling in the night sky.

Then Shay considers Noelline. At this hour, the resourceful young woman is probably at home in the cinder-block house she now owns, its shutters barred against insects, thieves, blowing refuse. Perhaps she and her mother are squatting around a dish of rice with their novice maid. Or maybe she is fucking her new man, or hemming one of her Chinese dresses, or getting her scalp greased as she absorbs visions from an otherworld on her satellite television. Or perhaps she is studying accounting or reading Pascal. Whatever she is doing, she is swiftly losing the bloom of youth that has been her main currency, growing thick-waisted and iron of countenance, as happens too early to even the prettiest island girls.

You have to respect her, Shay thinks. She's gone far with the hand she was dealt.

But what has it meant? Was it just the usual game, with real estate and costly hair extensions as the prize, or were there subtler satisfactions? Did Noelline find glory in being, for a short while, the talk of Naratrany, the damsel hotly contested by two doleful knights?

Not much more than a year later, life—or its loyal servant, death—puts a definitive end to the triangle. And which of the rivals triumphs? According to the chattering classes of Naratrany island, it all depends on one's point of view.

In the rainy season, Floristella, who has been having dizzy spells, is carried off to Sicily once again. There, an examination reveals that, in addition to the diabetes and the failing heart, a tumor has infiltrated a lung and spawned offspring around the huge, overtaxed body, even crowding one side of Floristella's stubborn, fantastical brain. His family does not tell him that he will never return to Madagascar, and so he settles into a sunny, crumbling wing of his palace in Trapani to begin what he thinks of as a convalescence but which is really a short season of dying.

At the same time, political troubles begin in the capital of Madagascar, as supporters of a popular young usurper battle the President's followers in the highland streets, torching stores and government buildings, causing unrest even on the far island of Naratrany. And the tourists take off like a flock of startled gulls.

What do politics have to do with the two old men? Well, the hotel where Noelline works closes down—and she, prudent woman that she is, renews her love affair with Pianon.

Dressed in a modest blue lamba, she arranges a chance encounter with the Italian on a village road, near the market stall of the artist Pinceau Magique. It's almost pitiful how simple it is to get him back. Soon she is once more riding beside Pianon in Senna's Toyota pickup, performing wifely actions like buying Sunday mille-feuilles at the Pâtisserie Trois Étoiles.

And, when the cool weather arrives in May, Pianon surprises everyone by moving out of the Red House and going off to live openly with Noelline. Not in her cinder-block house, where she leaves her mother, but in a new construction in a mixed settlement of Chinese, middle-class Malagasy, Indians, and French, on a hillside above the Muslim cemetery.

The new house is small, but with stucco walls and European proportions. They install the young maid, Pianon's books, a generator, and a double bed from the Chinese merchant on the airport road. They also play host to Noelline's father and an array of half brothers and uncles who suddenly materialize from the Grande Terre and spend their days squatting on the veranda, chewing khat with a businesslike air.

Noelline is judged a successful adventuress, but Pianon is thought a double fool for having taken her back. He's gained weight and looks idiotic with happiness. Still working at the Red House, he has, in addition, taken on a number of new projects, funded by foreign developers who are leveraging the political chaos and buying up land for a song. Pianon has always enjoyed a spotless professional reputation, but now rumors begin to circulate that he is forging documents and bribing village headmen for terrain they have no right to sell. He is seen in the decrepit offices of the Suerie, signing papers alongside a ruthless Mauritian developer whose nickname is the Crocodile.

Back in Milan, Senna scratches his head and curses over shortfalls in the Red House accounting. Still, Pianon looks unworried; he is always at work, Noelline at his side. Then, one hot morning in January, as he stands by a window in his house that looks down the sun-scorched hill to the incorruptible blue of Finoana Bay, he turns to say something to Noelline, who is sitting at the computer.

The men on the veranda and the little maid in the side yard hear Pianon give a loud cry. It is followed by a crash and a crescendo of shrieks from Noelline. When they rush in and turn over his lanky body, he is already dead from a stroke.

Noelline, to her credit, seems genuinely grief-stricken, and has two zebras killed for the ceremony. And, to the islanders' credit, dozens come for the feasting and mourning, even those, like the
village headmen and the Crocodile, who had lately led Pianon astray. Because of the political situation, most Europeans are absent from Naratrany.

The Sennas have to use their connections to the Italian consul to cut through the tangle of red tape and get what remains of Pianon shipped back to his family tomb, in the hills above Verona. Intermittently iced, his body has lain for six days in the Saint Grimaud morgue, a cement storeroom behind the police station, and is, as the consulate delicately puts it, in a deteriorated condition.

It turns out that Pianon’s new house, along with the cinder-block residence and some prime road-front land, now belongs in some mysterious but indisputable way to Noelline. She receives an instant boost in status when it becomes clear that she is a woman of means, the owner of two houses, and she quickly distances herself from the dishonor that turns out to be Pianon’s other legacy. Just before his death, it appears, the Commissaire had drawn up a warrant for his arrest on charges of forgery and the illegal sale of government terrain. Had he remained alive, Pianon would have been locked up to the bitter end, and that would have been the end of his new house, a deconsecrated chapel of his palace, reduced to a single bare, big swelled hand as he lies amid threadbare pillows on a huge-wheeled wicker chaise longue on a terrace of the ramshackle palace, looking out toward distant Tunisia. But, for a minute, before he falls back into the morphine haze, his black eyes hold a gleam of savage glee.

The rest of his life is brief. In the afternoons, lizards run up and down the crumbling plaster behind his head, and, when awake, he stares off across a cracked balustrade toward the container ships, the hangars, the teeming chaos of the port and the open Mediterranean, almost as pure a blue as the Mozambique Channel.

Night and day, they tell him lies—his daughters and sons, his grandchildren, his straight-backed wife with her rough, aristocratic voice—they all say, over and over, that Floristella will go back to Madagascar. To sit enthroned as usual on the porch of his Naratrany bungalow, gazing out over the strait at the bellying sails of the fishing pirogues and the bateau hauling timber from the Grande Terre.

Through the drugs he listens, and envisions a scene on Finoana Beach, years ago, when he dragged ashore a pair of hammerhead sharks: he, Floristella, young, bearded, and muscular; his children, blond and small, shrieking with glee as his knife bites through the tough sharkskin and the cold dark blood soaks into the sand. Behind him hovers the face of a girl, a young Sakalava woman with a high forehead, who stares at him with a sly edge of affection in her shallow-set eyes. Then a blink of brown and blue, a sound of wailing that might come from his family or from some cyclonic turn of the weather over the Indian Ocean. Then nothing.

Just four months after Pianon is placed in the tomb in the hills above Verona, the body of Floristella lies in an extra-large open casket in the old deconsecrated chapel of his palace, re-done in the seventies with ugly murals of fishing apostles, as a crowd of family and friends—aristocrats mingling with sailors, mechanics, market vendors, and the odd mafioso—spill out the doorway onto the seawall. He has been dressed in one of the open-necked shirts he always wore on Naratrany, with his big black-nailed feet bare as they almost always were in life.

Present are Senna, choking with sobs, and Shay, who stands thinking about how much she will miss Floristella, how long it will take for his giant presence to dissipate into memory, and thinking also of his less grand qualities: how he’d kill palm rats with a slingshot and treat his children’s coral scratches with rum.

After the cremation, his wife and children scatter his ashes in the sea. Floristella at the very end insisted on this, declaring that with the currents he would find his own way back to Madagascar.

S

o who is the winner? the idlers at the Fleur des Îles café ask. Is it Pianon, who got the girl but died of it, and was sent home putrescent with a stench of crime? Or is it Floristella, cuckolded and robbed of his revenge, but who outlived his enemy and passed away in peace, in a garland of family and friends?

No one consults the person who many think is the real winner. Noelline is an island personage these days, and after her months of mourning—her mother and uncles carefully guarding her two houses—she allows herself to grow distinctly stout, adopts a pair of nephews, and blossoms into a commanding, wealthy Malagasy matriarch.

After a few years, she opens a big dry-goods store in Renirano village, in partnership with a recent arrival on the island, a sheep-faced young man from Bologna, who may or may not be her lover. (Her other lovers are said to include a powerful senator and the king of the Sakalava.) There Noelline sits, magisterial behind the register in the prosperous gloom, with the hubbub and squalor of the Renirano market right outside her door, totting up shopping lists for Australian yachtmen or rich Europeans and Indians, barking out orders to her nephews, who haul cases of imported gin, soft drinks, frozen chickens, and cartons of laundry soap. Her thick gold chains are laid out for all to see on her handsome jutting bosom, her eyebrows penciled in superb arches, and her ever-changing hair extensions are the best that money can buy.

Pianon’s beloved library remains at the Red House until Shay decides to donate it to the scholarly priest Père Jobeny; she and Bertine la Grande spend a melancholy hour cleaning rot and insects out of the yellowing old volumes. At one point, flipping through Pianon’s copy of “Transes, Rites et Talismans dans le Sud-Est Malgache,” she thinks of Noelline and observes to Bertine that the woman has at least shown character in making a success out of an unpromising fate.

But Bertine’s response is predictable: a single terse shake of her head, which is crowned with impeccably twisted knots. “Pas bien!” she says in a dismissive tone, before picking up another book.
A crossword toast to auld lang syne.

BY CAITLIN REID AND ROBYN WEINTRAUB

**ACROSS**

1. Changes course
2. Animal Crossing, in 2020
3. Group that watches TV?
4. “Terrible” Russian leader
5. Ballpark figures, briefly
6. Islam alternative
7. Seehorn of “Better Call Saul”
8. Title fish of film
9. 1521: Martin Luther responds to charges of heresy before the ___; accelerating the Protestant Reformation
10. Ballpark figures, briefly
11. Short hairdo
12. Advertising-industry awards
13. Tropical fruits
14. 1621: Plymouth colonists celebrate the ___ with the Wampanoag (though it wouldn’t be called that until the eighteen-forties)
15. “The ___ Song” (Adam Sandler holiday hit)
16. Classic beginning or ending?
17. Members of a controversial “college”
18. Ad-___ committee
19. Reusable shopping bag
20. Form field
21. See 54-Across
22. Bonfire, e.g.
23. Green spumoni flavor
24. Former footballer Manning
25. With 44-Across, Middle Eastern body of water
26. Wall St. debut
27. 1721: ___ presents his Brandenburg Concertos, a partial recording of which would one day be launched into space on the Voyager Golden Record
28. Cousin of an omelette
29. Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo
30. Blow off, as a class
31. Sample from the dentist
32. Lifesaving procedure, briefly
33. One who blows off class
34. “Holy moly!”
35. “Push It” group
36. Salt-N-___
37. Back talk
38. Comforting support
39. Roused from sleep
40. Period just before dark
41. “Oh, all right!”
42. Click the floppy-disk icon
43. French wine-label word
44. Insta post
46. Sign of late spring
47. Comedian Margaret
48. Word after island or bunny
49. Sporting-goods retailer
50. ___ Tomé and Príncipe
51. Nobel-winning Mother
52. “The King of Staten Island” director Judd
53. Classic fruity-soda brand
54. Caramel-custard dessert
55. Stuff found in a trap
56. Itty-bitty
57. Alerts from police HQ
58. Trench, e.g.
59. Assembles
60. Beef stew
61. steak-house order, for short
62. “___ created a monster!”
63. Coup d’___
64. Beat the buzzer?
65. Went “nom nom nom”
66. Drive the getaway car, say
67. Sweetie, in slang
68. Ending with Mao or Tao
69. Cupfuls at a diner
70. “La Bohème,” e.g.
71. An infinite supply (of)
72. ___ Ego (“Ratatouille” food critic)
73. Table game in Vegas
74. “Start playing!”
75. Twenty per cent, perhaps
76. A square one won’t fit perhaps
77. Twenty per cent, perhaps
78. A square one won’t fit perhaps
79. Alert from police HQ
80. Caterer’s vehicle
81. Sunscreen element
82. Declare
83. What an athlete might put on
84. Strand at a Swiss chalet, say
85. Time periods
86. The “N” of Hollywood’s N.P.H.
87. Misanthropes, slangily
88. Online auction house
89. Green, melon-flavored liqueur
90. Fancy party
91. ___ lily (Utah state flower)
92. Gray kid-lit character who’s typically blue?
93. Genre for Judas Priest
94. ___ Jackson, a.k.a. Ice Cube
95. Lowest quality
96. Lymph locations
97. Jared of “Dallas Buyers Club”
98. Needs to pay back
100. General ___ tofu
101. Lil ___ X (“Holiday” rapper)
102. Stimpy’s cartoon pal
103. Fast-food chain that’s a Christmas tradition in Japan
104. Before, to a bard
105. Waged a campaign
106. Ruler units: Abbr.
107. “I ___ framed!”

**DOWN**

1. Sunscreen element
2. Declare
3. What an athlete might put on
4. Strand at a Swiss chalet, say
5. Island” director Judd
6. Caramel-custard dessert
7. Stuff found in a trap
8. Itty-bitty
9. Alerts from police HQ
10. Trench, e.g.
11. Assembles
12. Beef stew
14. Sign of late spring
15. Comedian Margaret
16. Word after island or bunny
17. Sporting-goods retailer
18. ___ Tomé and Príncipe
19. Nobel-winning Mother
20. “The King of Staten Island” director Judd
21. Classic fruity-soda brand
22. Beef stew
23. Alert from police HQ
24. Caterer’s vehicle
25. Sunscreen element
26. Declare
27. What an athlete might put on
28. Strand at a Swiss chalet, say
29. Beef stew
30. Alert from police HQ
31. Caterer’s vehicle

Find more crosswords and the solution to this puzzle at newyorker.com/crossword
Haley Nahman was having a weird time. She had spent most of the pandemic inside, shuttling around the one-bedroom apartment she shares with her partner, Avi. “Not to paint too bleak a picture, but I’ve started sitting down in the shower,” she wrote, in September, in an e-mail. “I’ve noticed that when you hug your knees to your chest and watch the water pitter-patter against your toes, drips sliding down your nose and into your mouth, it feels almost like getting caught in a warm rainstorm.” She recommended reading Ross Gay’s poem “A Small Needful Fact,” a Jacobin essay about socialism, and a profile of Miranda July in New York magazine. In October, she reflected on the long-term consequences of “collective, inexhaustible despair”; in November, she clarified that, despite sounding depressed, she was doing fine, before segueing into a two-thousand-word meditation on anxiety, which she illustrated with a photograph of her cat, Bug, a sleepy Persian. Three weeks later, she took a small dose of psychedelic mushrooms and walked around a lake. “I then proceeded to make the most colorful stoner drawing of my life, which I’m convinced healed something inside of me,” she reported, attaching a photo of herself bundled up in winter clothes, looking peaceful.

Nahman, who is thirty-one and lives in Brooklyn, sends out missives like illustrated with a photograph of her cat, Bug, a sleepy Persian. Three weeks later, she took a small dose of psychedelic mushrooms and walked around a lake. “I then proceeded to make the most colorful stoner drawing of my life, which I’m convinced healed something inside of me,” she reported, attaching a photo of herself bundled up in winter clothes, looking peaceful.

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Substack is a natural fit for the influencer, the pundit, the personality, and the political contrarian.
new consumer products, and so there is a glut of newsletters written by venture capitalists and entrepreneurs, about venture capital and entrepreneurship. There are also newsletters dedicated to sexism in sports, witchcraft, design, cricket, bread baking, Bob Dylan concerts throughout history, “The Hudsucker Proxy,” and human-animal relationships. “David” is a bracing series on family, literature, and sexuality, ostensibly structured around historic Davids: Bowie, Foster Wallace, Hyde Pierce, Lynch, Wojnarowicz (five dollars per month). “Beauty IRL” contains essays and reporting on beauty, politics, and pop culture (seven dollars per month); “I Know a Spot” offers pithy commentary on unusual and dreamy properties listed on Zillow (free); “Foreign Bodies” focuses on immigrant and refugee communities, and the destigmatization of mental illness (five dollars per month); “Unsnackable” wanders between reviews of idiosyncratic snacks and diaristic reflections (free); “Deep Voices” is a regular, hour-long playlist accompanied by digital liner notes (free); and “Books on Cities” reviews books on cities (five dollars per month).

In its variety, the Substack corpus resembles the blogosphere. It is produced by a mix of career journalists, bloggers, specialists, novelists, hobbyists, dabblers, and white-collar professionals looking to plump up their personal brands. The company has tried to recruit high-profile writers, offering (to a select few) healthcare stipends, design help, and money to hire freelance editors. In certain instances, Substack has also paid advances, often in the generous six figures, incentivizing writers to produce work without employing them. Substack writers can apply for access to a legal-defense fund, which covers up to a million dollars in legal fees on a case-by-case basis. Casey Newton, a tech journalist who has written about Silicon Valley for a decade, left the Verge in September to launch the Substack newsletter “Platformer,” a solo venture, where he analyzes news about social networks and democracy (ten dollars per month). Newton, who is a friend of mine, declined an advance but took a health-care stipend; he joked to me that his life has now been twice disrupted by the Internet—first when he was a newspaper journalist, “and the Web came along and devoured print,” and then a decade later, when “social networks came along and devoured the Web.” Substack has also recruited the former Buzz Feed culture writer Anne Helen Petersen and the Vox co-founder Matthew Yglesias, who left his staff job to write a newsletter; both were given substantial advances. Other well-known writers have started Substack newsletters without brokering deals with the company, including the rock critic Robert Christgau, whose “And It Don’t Stop” is a trove of winding essays on music, television, and science fiction (five dollars per month). After going on leave from the Times this spring, the food writer Alison Roman started “A Newsletter,” which contains recipes and breezy, bossy, self-deprecating anecdotes (five dollars per month).

When Substack launched, in 2017, the founders posted a mission statement of sorts to “Substack Blog” (free). After beginning with an anecdote about how, in 1883, the New York Sun incorporated advertisements, the post went on to detail the current state of journalism:

The great journalistic totems of the last century are dying. News organizations—and other entities that masquerade as them—are turning to increasingly desperate measures for survival. And so we have content farms, click-bait, listsicles, inane but viral debates over optical illusions, and a “fake news” epidemic. Just as damaging is that, in the eyes of consumers, journalistic content has lost much of its perceived value—especially as measured in dollars.

It’s easy to feel discouraged by these dire developments, but in every crisis there is opportunity. We believe that journalistic content has intrinsic value and that it doesn’t have to be given away for free. We believe that what you read matters. And we believe that there has never been a better time to bolster and protect those ideals.

The subscription-based news industry, the founders speculated, could someday “be much larger than the newspaper business ever was, much like the ride-hailing industry in San Francisco is bigger than the taxi industry was before Lyft and Uber.” These days, Substack’s founders, investors, and marketing materials all have different ways of describing the startup’s mission. Depending on which source you consult, Substack might be “reinventing publishing,” “pioneering a new business model for culture,” or “attempting to build an alternative media economy that gives journalists autonomy.” It is “writers firing their old business model” or “a better future for news.” Substack’s C.E.O., Chris Best, has said that the company’s intention is “to make it so that you could type into this box, and if the things you type are good, you’re going to get rich.”

Hamish McKenzie, one of Substack’s co-founders, told me that he sees the company as an alternative to social-media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. “We started Substack because we were fed up about the effects of the social-media diet,” McKenzie said. Substack’s home page now reads, “Take back your mind.”

Substack, like Facebook, insists that it is not a media company; it is, instead, “a platform that enables writers and read-

“Don’t worry, everything is going to be O.K.”
ers.” But other newsletter platforms, such as Revue, Lede, or TinyLetter (a service owned by Mailchimp, the e-mail-marketing company), have never offered incentives to attract writers. By piloting programs, like the legal-defense fund, that “re-create some of the value provided by newsrooms,” as McKenzie put it, Substack has made itself difficult to categorize: it’s a software company with the trappings of a digital-media concern. The company, which currently has twenty employees, has a lightweight content-moderation policy, which prohibits harassment, threats, spam, pornography, and calls for violence; moderation decisions are made by the founders, and, McKenzie told me, the company does not comment on them. Best has suggested that Substack contains a built-in moderation mechanism in the form of the Unsubscribe button.

It’s an interesting time for such a hands-off, free-market approach. The Internet is flooded with disinformation and conspiracy theories. Amazon’s self-publishing arm has become a haven for extremist content. The flattening effect of digital platforms has led to confusion among readers about what is reporting and what is opinion. Newsrooms at the Times and the Wall Street Journal have taken pains to distinguish their work from that found in the op-ed sections. Substack has advertised itself as a friendly home for journalism, but few of its newsletters publish original reporting; the majority offer personal writing, opinion pieces, research, and analysis.

A Substack newsletter is both a product and a portfolio: a way to make money, but also a venue for displaying personality, intelligence, and taste. Read enough of them and certain patterns begin to emerge. Newsletters in the business and tech categories tend to adopt a Substack tone, a semi-professional quality suited to mass e-mail. Some newsletters convey intimacy, in the language of psychotherapy and self-help, but their style is more polished and structured than that of the looser, rangier blogs of the early two-thousands. “Maybe Baby,” for all its vulnerability, is also aware of itself as a commodity, dialled in to its audience. Still, it’s nice, from time to time, to receive a chatty, engaging, personable e-mail from someone who doesn’t expect a response.

Newsletters have existed since time immemorial. As Silicon Valley came into being, newsletters were among the earliest trade publications. In 1983, Esther Dyson, a former business reporter and Wall Street securities analyst in her thirties, purchased a nine-year-old newsletter about semiconductors and personal computing, the “Rosen Electronics Letter,” from her boss, Ben Rosen, who was selling it to focus on his work at a venture-capital firm. Dyson, who wrote for the newsletter and had a reputation as a confident, quotable technology expert, renamed the publication “Release 1.0.” The design was unadorned, formatted in a single column, and printed on white paper; an early issue, published that November, offered twenty-nine pages of her research and opinions on hot topics of the day, from end-user training to newly public tech companies. “Normally we don’t like to be nasty: we’d rather simply be silent,” she wrote, in a section on vaporware. “But the current rash of purported revolutions, breakthroughs and new generations requires some comment.”

The subscriber base included two thousand people, most of whom paid three hundred and ninety-five dollars a year to receive the newsletter monthly, through the mail. This readership was modest by mass-media standards, but it included an enviable A-list of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and executives, bolstering Dyson’s nascent image as one of the most powerful women in computing.

In 1985, Aldus, a small startup in Seattle, began working on a software program called PageMaker, to design and organize newspaper layouts. (Paul Brainerd, an Aldus co-founder, who coined the term “desktop publishing,” had previously worked as a journalist.) The company caught the attention of Steve Jobs, who encouraged the founders to adapt the software for a broader business environment. That year, Apple released its first mass-market laser printer, the LaserWriter—a seven-thousand-dollar beige machine that produced professional-grade text and images—and promoted it alongside PageMaker, an early desktop-publishing program for Macintosh. A corporate office or a carpeted den could now become a bespoke printshop. PageMaker’s layout elements mimicked those of a newspaper. The software, with its suggestive columns, seemed to say: Circulate!

Almost immediately, newsletters—on personal finance, high-end travel, UFOs, carnivorous plants, surfing, bluegrass, numismatics, farming, and, of course, computing—proliferated. Independent publications had long circulated in the finance and technology sectors, offering data and analysis not easily found elsewhere. (Charles Schwab, the financial-services company, began as “Investment Indicator,” a newsletter first published in 1963.) But, for the most part, newsletters had been the province of civic groups, religious congregations, cultural and educational institutions, and corporations—as well as some restaurant enthusiasts, including Tim and Nina Zagat, who began printing “The Zagat Survey,” a collection of crowdsourced restaurant reviews, in 1979. “Desktop Publishing,” a guidebook released in 1986, included a chapter on newsletters’ “golden opportunity,” and emphasized the value of a unique, voice-driven editorial style. A small galaxy of adjacent companies, such as digital-font foundries and clip-art production outfits, emerged to satisfy the desire for customization. “One of the unfortunate side effects of the desktop publishing craze is that we are being flooded with publications that look as if they had been created by a drunken committee under a full moon,” a 1987 Times article read. “The ease of cutting, pasting and assembling a publication in no way guarantees the merit of the end product in either content or visual appeal.”

In the nineties, as desktop computers and printers became more affordable, some subscription newsletters began serving groups whose needs were unmet by larger media outlets, in a sort of professionalized parallel to zine culture. “Out & About,” a newsletter founded...
in 1992, rated hotel chains and travel agencies on their “gay-friendliness,” and recommended companies such as Eco-Explorations, a lesbian-owned scuba-and-sea-kayak concern, and Gay'n'Gray Partners in Travel, for men over forty. “Bully Pulpit,” launched in 1998 by the Welfare Reform Network, published rebuttals to misinformation in the media about poverty and government assistance. Newsletters also provided a forum for fringe political views: the medium was popular among violent anti-abortion activists and members of militias. At the height of the nineties culture wars, figures like Rush Limbaugh (“The Limbaugh Letter”) and Paul Weyrich (“The Weyrich Report”) also found an additional revenue stream in newsletters.

The rise of the commercial Internet upended newsletters, along with everything else. Publications offering restaurant listings or information about frequent-flier databases. Communities found blogs, and bloggers found new sources of income in advertisements, sponsors, and affiliate links. Some newsletters went digital, or folded; others morphed into more traditional enterprises. “The Hideaway Report,” a luxury-vacation newsletter launched in 1979, became a boutique travel agency; “Dr. Andrew Weil’s Self Healing Newsletter,” first published in 1995, spawned a small empire. (The newsletter was later purchased, together in 1995, spawned a small empire. (The newsletter was later purchased, together with Body & Soul Magazine, by Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, for six million dollars.) “In many ways, I see the example of how I work as representative of the way things are going for creators,” Dyson told the Times in 1996, in an article about PC Forum, a conference held for “Release 1.0” subscribers, which brought in $1.5 million a year. “The money-making part of my business is really an offshoot of the content production. Also, I do other things: consulting, speeches, which come to me because of my writing. In other words, I get paid for my activity rather than my products.”

Dyson was once again prescient: today’s “creators” often split their activity across a range of platforms. They use multiple social-media accounts to craft and maintain their personal brands; to monetize them, they offer exclusive content or privileges. In recent years, companies like Patreon and OnlyFans have made it easier for people to support, via subscriptions and micropayments, writers, artists, podcasters, comedians, fitness instructors, photographers, musicians, singers, sex workers, gamers, dancers, educators, and influencers. Substack allows writers to collect subscription income without leaving the Web site, through an integration with the payment processor Stripe. (Stripe takes about three per cent of every subscription charge, as well as thirty cents per transaction; this comes out of the writer’s revenue share.)

In 2018, Substack raised fifteen million dollars in funding, primarily from the venture-capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, whose portfolio companies also include Lyft, Caviar, and Instacart. Substack operates in what Andreessen Horowitz has taken to calling the “creator economy” or the “passion economy.” In 2019, in a blog post titled “The Passion Economy and the Future of Work,” Li Jin, a partner at the time, discussed the opportunity for monetizing individuality. Drawing on the example of the gig-work economy, Jin suggested that everyone could be an independent contractor. She pointed to Outschool—a Web site where teachers and coaches offer instruction on topics like playwriting, mindfulness, and English as a second language—and to Cameo, the surreal online marketplace where celebrities can be hired to record customized video messages. “Gig work isn’t going anywhere—but there are now more ways to capitalize on creativity,” she wrote. “This has huge implications for entrepreneurship and what we’ll think of as a ‘job’ in the future.” When I spoke to Dyson recently, she told me that she was intrigued by applications like OnlyFans, in which she saw a new business model for celebrities and influencers, one that did not depend on advertising: “People who receive attention, kind of for free, then give attention back to people and charge for it—the attention they’ve garnered has become a genuine commodity that they can sell.

Nahman’s income from “Maybe Baby” well exceeds the full-time salary she made at Man Repeller; Yglesias’s newsletter, “Slow Boring,” has a readership that includes more than six thousand paid subscribers, and he is making twenty-seven thousand dollars a month. (Yglesias opted to receive a two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar advance from Substack, which, in return, will take eighty-five per cent of the subscription revenue from his first year. In his second year, Substack’s commission will revert to ten per cent.) But Substack’s founders have acknowledged that, for the majority of writers, a newsletter will be a side hustle. In most cases, subscription fees will generate not a salary but something closer to tips. In a recent blog post on Medium, Hunter Walk, a venture capitalist, compared a newsletter to a stock-keeping unit, or SKU, a term of art in inventory management. “The biggest impact of someone like Casey [Newton] unbinding himself” from the Verge, Walk wrote, “is that he is now an entrepreneur with a product called Casey. His beachhead may very well be a paid newsletter . . . but the newsletter is just one SKU. . . . There could be a podcast SKU. A speaking fee SKU. A book deal SKU. A consulting SKU. A guest columnist SKU. And so on.” Lisa Gitelman, a media historian and professor at New York University, said, of Substack, “They obviously want to call it a democratizing gesture, which I find a little bit specious. It’s the democracy of neoliberal self-empowerment. The message to users is that you can empower yourself by creating.”

The “passion economy” thesis assumes that an audience will want everything a creator brings to market, the way viewers of the “Rachael Ray” show will often buy Rachael Ray cookbooks and cookbook. But starting a newsletter does not immediately lead to speaking engagements, and not all writers can generate multiple distinct products. Yglesias told me that he considered Twitter to be an “incredible acquisition funnel for customers,” but said that “the interplay between Twitter, which is obviously free, and the newsletter, which is mostly paid, is the trickiest thing to get right in the business.”

Substack has some social features, like comments sections and discussion threads, but the newsletter ecosystem seems to lack the camaraderie that animated blogging communities. Unlike
blogs, which link to other blogs almost as an ontological condition, most newsletters are impossible to find without an external referral or recommendation. Non-subscribers can read free newsletters online, but there isn’t much of a discovery mechanism—just the leaderboards. Reggie James, the founder of Eternal, a social network in development, and the author of “Product Lost,” a newsletter that takes an artistic, humanist approach to technology (free), was skeptical of the idea that Substack was an antidote to social media; about half his readers come through social networks. As long as writers were beholden to the logic of social-media algorithms, he said, Substack was still “playing the game of the platforms.”

Readers of magazines, newspapers, and many Web sites, which publish established writers alongside emerging ones, automatically encounter new voices; on Substack, the most successful newsletters are almost always written by people who have already cultivated an audience at traditional publications or built up a following elsewhere. (I learned about “Maybe Baby” via the Instagram Explore algorithm.) Many of these writers, like Yglesias, consolidated their reputations in the previous two decades, as bloggers, before leveraging that work into book deals or columns at traditional outlets; now, having built large followings, they are working as free agents. Substack is a natural fit for the influencer, the pundit, the person-free agents. Substack is a natural fit for subscription newsletters rival magazines and newspapers is a world that people want. A robust press is essential to a functioning democracy, and a cultural turn toward journalistic individualism might

**BRIEFLY NOTED**

**The Kidnapping Club**, by Jonathan Daniel Wells (Bold Type Books). This history of eighteen-thirties New York probes the city’s entanglement with the slave economy, which made it “the most potent proslavery and pro-South city north of the Mason-Dixon Line.” Despite the state’s emancipation law of 1817, police marshals and bounty hunters began terrorizing Black communities, abducting several hundred people and selling them into bondage. Alliances between Southern plantation owners and New York bankers, judges, and politicians fostered a system “constructed to cheapen Black lives.” Wells details how the funding of the cotton trade fueled a nascent Wall Street and admiringly portrays David Ruggles, a Black abolitionist who gave the Kidnapping Club its name and organized to resist it.

**Dark, Salt, Clear**, by Lamorna Ash (Bloomsbury). This seafaring memoir recounts a stay in Newlyn, a Cornish village with five pubs, an active fishing port, and a low average income. Ash, a recent university graduate from London, ships out with the crew of a trawler called the Filadelfia. She notes the dearth of job opportunities for the town’s younger inhabitants and the impact of corporate takeovers on its fishing industry. Her book is most memorable for its visceral descriptions of the boat, the nets, the men, the gulls, the fish, and their innards. Fish go “shaking and fizzing” over the deck; gulls “churn the air up into a rage.”

**Ordesa**, by Manuel Vilas, translated from the Spanish by Andrea Rosenberg (Riverhead). The narrator of this sober yet elegant autobiographical novel is a middle-aged man reckoning with his past and with his encroaching mortality. Painfully observant and poetically inclined, he reflects on his impoverished childhood in northern Spain, his job as a teacher, his battle with alcoholism, his divorce and his experience of fatherhood, and, above all, his relationship with his deceased parents. He ruminates on how inequalities in postwar Spain shaped his family, and on the ways that death leaves an imprint on the actions of the living. Constantly looming in his imagination is the image of Ordesa, “a place full of mountains” which he visited as a child with his father. This landscape, where “for the first time I was conscious that time was beginning,” symbolizes the narrator’s belief that memory can be tangible—a state of mind that is a place.

**The Sun Collective**, by Charles Baxter (Pantheon). The collective of this novel’s title is an anticapitalist cell in Minneapolis. Members include a bank worker partial to a drug that makes her “both particle and wave,” who is recruited at a yoga class by a more militant member, and a retired man whose son is missing and who spends his mornings pacing around a mall, convinced that “the love of accumulation is killing us.” As the group’s plans, at first focussed on a community garden, take a more radical and violent turn, its members are forced underground and tensions among them escalate. Baxter infuses his tale of class warfare in the social-media era with a hint of the supernatural.
not be in the collective interest. It is expensive and laborious to hold powerful people and institutions to account, and, at many media organizations, any given article is the result of collaboration between writers, editors, copy editors, fact checkers, and producers. McKenzie, the Substack co-founder, assured me that the platform should be considered only “one of the models alongside others,” pointing to the potential for worker-owned cooperatives, nonprofit newsrooms, and state-funded media. (There are also other models for newsletters; one Substack competitor, Ghost, is a nonprofit, and its technology is open-source.) McKenzie went on, “The more ‘generalized newspaper’ world has been diminishing anyway, a trend that started before Substack, and I don’t think there’s any turning back on that. The genie is out of the bottle.”

In the past year, Substack’s political newsletters have gained traction. The most popular is “The Dispatch,” a conservative publication run by former writers and editors of The Weekly Standard and National Review. (“The Dispatch” costs ten dollars a month, and, like a more traditional media startup, it has also raised six million dollars from investors.) In July, the former New York columnist Andrew Sullivan, expressing a desire for editorial freedom after readers and colleagues criticized his politics as retrograde and noxious, launched “The Weekly Dish” (five dollars per month); the newsletter ranks fifth on the Politics leaderboard. Moving to Substack; she has claimed that the “deplatforms conservatives.” Her newsletter, “Chapter and Verse” (free), which offers link roundups and brief commentary on other people’s tweets—primarily to reiterate right-wing talking points—quickly rose to the Culture leaderboard’s top five. Substack has, intentionally or not, become a player in the culture wars. Reggie James suggested that the next QAnon could easily find a home there. “When you don’t do editorial but you do power the individual identity—and that individual identity has the engine of a viral mechanism like Twitter—you can get into some really interesting and weird corners,” he said. In November, an anonymous Substack account published a newsletter titled “vote_pattern_analysis,” with a single, elaborate post claiming election fraud. On Twitter, the link was tagged with a fact-check label. For a time in December, the newsletter became one of the top free publications on Substack.

Substack recently launched a feature called Substack Reader, which gathers readers’ newsletter and podcast subscriptions in one place, on the company’s Web site. The product is the digital equivalent of a three-ring binder: a way to manage newsletter overload. Reader also has an option for integrating outside RSS feeds. It seems to have taken its cue from Google Reader, an aggregator that, until it shut down, in 2013, had an ardent user base. It also resembles Tumblr’s dashboard, Twitter’s timeline, and Facebook’s News Feed, and looks less like a reaction against social media than like its evolution. Substack, like these social networks, allows readers to create an information ecosystem populated by individuals of their choosing.

For many readers and writers, the personal, intimate quality of newsletters is their appeal. “You assume certain levels of familiarity,” Yglesias told me, explaining that, vying for attention on the “algorithm-driven Internet,” he’d never quite known for whom he was writing. He was working on a story about train-station design on the Green Line Extension in Boston, and, although he didn’t expect it to go viral, he knew that his readers would appreciate it. “I think people who have been following me for years have developed an ongoing interest in mass-transit construction in the United States,” he said. “They know why I’m writing about this kind of weird thing.”

In November, Nahman sent her paid subscribers a new edition of her advice column, “Dear Baby.” A reader had inquired about Nahman’s life as a freelance writer, and whether it had matched up with her expectations. Nahman wrote that her first day as a freelancer had also been the first day many New Yorkers went into quarantine. Her vision of pitching editors, working in cafés, and meeting with other writers had been replaced by a new reality. The newsletter, she wrote, was never meant to be the thing she spent most of her time on. This surprised me: the newsletter seemed so deliberate. I hit Reply and wrote back.

She responded immediately. “Maybe Baby,” she told me, had initially been an experiment. After the launch announcement on Instagram, ten thousand people signed up. Nahman soon decided to go all in. Writing the newsletter had been a welcome change of pace. After four years of writing and editing multiple posts a day, each with a search-engine-optimized headline, and working hours she described as “insane and untenable,” she was taking pleasure in spending several days on each installment. The newsletter had made her reflect on how she measured success. “For a while, I had a fear that this wasn’t real writing and that I wasn’t going to gain respect by putting out a newsletter,” she said. She had been “un-learning those ideas.” She went on, “I’m working less, and I get to write whatever I want. Isn’t that kind of the dream?”

But the business model had novel challenges. One week in October, she was feeling low and like she had “absolutely nothing to say.” She wrote a newsletter in which she described fifteen things she had thought of writing but which she “could not manage to cohere into a single worthwhile idea.” The post had not been her most popular, and she was haunted by it. “If business is down, or people are unsubscribing, it’s definitely a very direct referendum on me,” she said. “Or it feels like it.”

Readers regularly replied to her e-mails, and she had begun setting aside a day each week to respond to them. She had managed to shake her Man Repeller voice—“spunky, making jokes that aren’t really that funny” —and was settling into running her own small media business. In addition to the newsletter, she hoped to try her hand at screenwriting. She had recently signed with a literary agent, and was thinking about her first book, an essay collection about “self-mythology and how that guides decisions.” She imagined it as being similar to “Maybe Baby”—“cultural commentary, maybe a little philosophical,” she said. “But, well, hopefully more professional.”
In the early months of 1803, perhaps the most consequential period of Thomas Jefferson’s Presidency—if not, for him, the busiest—American envoys were in France, Jefferson’s old ambassadorial stomping ground, negotiating the terms of what would later be called the Louisiana Purchase. Jefferson, meanwhile, was mulling a book project. He imagined it as a work of comparative moral philosophy, which would include a survey of “the most remarkable of the ancient philosophers,” then swiftly address the “repulsive” ethics of the Jews, before demonstrating that the “system of morality” offered by Jesus was “the most benevolent & sublime probably that has been ever taught.” This sublimity, however, would need to be rescued from the Gospels, which were—as Jefferson put it in a letter to the English chemist, philosopher, and minister Joseph Priestley—written by “the most unlettered of men, by memory, long after they had heard them from him.” Jefferson pushed Priestley to write the treatise, and, by the following January, seemed to think that he would. But Priestley died in February, and Jefferson decided to do the salvage work, at least. He got a copy of the Bible, cut out some choice passages, glued them onto blank pages, and called the volume “The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth: extracted from the account of his life and doctrines as given by Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John. Being an abridgement of the New Testament for the use of the Indians unembarrassed with matters of fact or faith beyond the level of their comprehensions.”

One of Jefferson’s aims seems to have been to demonstrate—to himself, if to no one else—that, contrary to the claims of his political adversaries, he was not anti-Christian. As Peter Manseau, a curator at the National Museum of American History, points out in “The Jefferson Bible: A Biography” (Princeton), the puzzling reference to “Indians” in the subtitle may be a joke about the Federalists, and their apparent inability to grasp Jefferson’s true beliefs. His opponents often labelled him a “freethinker,” or an outright atheist; milder observers came closer to the mark, pegging him as a deist who largely thought of God as a noninterventionist. But Jefferson did not openly claim the deist label. “I am a Christian,” he insisted in a letter to the educator and politician Benjamin Rush, “in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence, & believing he never claimed any other.” In order to establish that this was the actual limit of Jesus’ claims, one had to carefully extricate him from the texts that contain nearly all we know about his life and thought. That might sound like impossible surgery, but, to Jefferson, the fissures were obvious. What was genuinely Christ’s was “as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill,” he wrote in a letter to John Adams. Jesus, in the Gospel of John, says, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” Jefferson was no lamb, and no follower, but he considered himself a good hearer.

Manseau opens his study with an anecdote from earlier in Jefferson’s life, which Jefferson recounts in “Notes on the State of Virginia.” As a young man, he went digging through one of the “barrows”—huge mounds of earth, covered in grass—that mysteriously dotted the Virginia landscape. “That they were repositories of the dead has been obvious to all: but on what particular occasion constructed, was matter of doubt,” Jefferson wrote. The solution, for Jefferson, was to get a shovel. He travelled to what had once

Even when young, Jefferson bridled at the metaphysical claims of Christianity.
been a Native American community and got to work on a mound, quickly finding “collections of human bones.” There were arm bones and loose jaws, vertebrae and several skulls. Manseau writes:

It was the skulls that most drew Jefferson’s interest. Some were “so tender,” he noted, that they fell apart at the touch, leaving him with a handful of teeth that were considerably smaller than others. At least one section of the mound seemed to include children—a suspicion reinforced by the discoveries that followed: “a rib and a fragment of the under jaw of a person about half grown; another rib of an infant, and part of the jaw of a child, which had not yet cut its teeth.”

Manseau adds, “Today the image of Jefferson rummaging through the bones of Native Americans would likely be regarded by many as an obvious desecration, while in his own day it would have been praised as a purely scientific inquiry.” Manseau uses this unsettling anecdote to illustrate the desacralizing impulse in Jefferson—the impulse that would lead to his cut-and-paste Bible. Jefferson had seen Monacans go in groups to visit the mounds, but the knowledge of their reverence and the ardency of their devotion didn’t satisfy him. He was deeply impatient with myth, ritual, and mystery. He had to see it so that the locals could understand.

Another youthful influence on Jefferson was the English parliamentarian Henry St.John, Viscount Bolingbroke, who wrote wittingly of the God of the Scriptures, in both the Old and the New Testaments. Bolingbroke argued that, at most, “short sentences” culled from the Bible might add up to a plausible but not especially coherent system of ethics and morals. For Jefferson—who, in his journals, copied long passages of Bolingbroke’s religious criticism—the only God worth serving was one whose powers accorded precisely with the powers on display in the visible world. Later, in the Declaration, Jefferson insisted that all people were “created” equal, but he also made sure to invoke “the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God,” a favorite phrase of the deists of his day. The urge to independence hadn’t come down from a mountain, etched on tablets, but was, instead, the logical end point of a long process of looking, and of thought. God was sovereign only so far as you could track his moves, like an animal leaving footprints in snow.

“The Philosophy of Jesus” did not survive; the only evidence we have for it is in Jefferson’s correspondence. But, in the eighteen-tens, after he had left the White House and had withdrawn almost totally from public life, Jefferson began working on what was, essentially, a new edition, incorporating not only the English of the King James Version but also columns of translation. This version bears a slightly shorter title: “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French & English.” He had tried, once again, as he put it in a letter to a young acolyte, to separate “the gold from the dross.” Jefferson’s Jesus is born in a manger, but there are no angels, and no wise men; at age twelve, he speaks to the doctors in the temple, and everyone is impressed, but he doesn’t say that he is “about my Father’s business.” When Jefferson’s Jesus suddenly has disciples, it is not clear why they have decided to follow him. Jefferson includes Jesus’ encounter with a man with a “withered” hand, and his argument about whether it is “lawful to heal on the sabbath days”—the gold in this story, apparently, is the idea that...
The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. The dross is the part where Jesus turns to address the poor man directly, like a real person instead of a prop for conjectural argument, and heals his hand.

Even at this late date, some who knew Jefferson believed that publishing such a text would tarnish his name. The Virginia minister Charles Clay, upon hearing about the idea, warned him that “it may effect your future character & Reputation on the page of history as a Patriot, legislator & sound Philosopher.” Jefferson finished “The Life and Morals” in 1820, and, according to acquaintances, he read from it often before going to sleep. But, when he died, six years later, only a few of his friends were aware that it existed. Nearly a century passed before the “wee-little friends were aware that it existed. Nearly he died, six years later, only a few of his friends were aware that it existed. Nearly a century passed before the “wee-little book,” as Jefferson once called it, came fully into public view.

Manseau’s story skips ahead to that discovery—a thrilling mixture of accident, fine timing, and diligent public–museum curation—but it’s worth pausing, for a moment, at the time in between. There’s something appropriate about the fact that the book sat in obscurity, all but forgotten among library acquisitions, throughout the nineteenth century. Those resonant years were as consequential for the country’s many versions of Christianity as they were for its politics; Americans warred as much over the meaning of God as over the particulars of freedom. To the extent that America has a recognizable civic religion, it would be permanently shaped by what took place while Jefferson’s Jesus sat waiting to be retrieved from his tomb.

The interim’s most Jeffersonian voice, at least when it came to Christ, may have been Ralph Waldo Emerson, who began his controversial address to Harvard’s Divinity School, in 1838, not with a recitation of Scripture but with an invocation of nature. Emerson goes on, at length, about the “refulgent summer” that year in Cambridge—“the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers”—as though engaging in high-flown small talk, breaking the ice by chatting about the weather. But there is a subtle assertion in it: whatever you want to know about God, you can best find by way of nature and your own good sense. “The word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster,” Emerson said. When he relays a little juxtapositional parable, of a preacher speaking feebly as a snowstorm rages outside, full of the real force of nature, you can picture Jefferson nodding in agreement. “Once leave your own knowledge of God, your own sentiment, and take secondary knowledge, as St. Paul’s,” Emerson said, “and you get wide from God with every year this secondary form lasts.”

Emerson’s neighbor Nathaniel Hawthorne saw a darker god in the American landscape—in the forests and uncharted lands that had been the constant horror of the early Pilgrims and Puritans, and whose mysteries their descendants tried to tame by endless expansion and by a campaign of elimination against Native peoples. Not everybody, Hawthorne’s novels and stories suggest, could so easily do away with mystery, or with Christ as a figure who might inspire not just admiration but holy terror. Hawthorne’s friend Herman Melville likewise seemed to have little interest in a dispassionate, cerebral Jesus. In “Benito Cereno,” a novella published in 1855, Melville staged the true story of the meeting of two ships, one American and sunnily Protestant and the other from Catholic Spain and ostentatiously Gothic and baroque. There’s a mystery on board the Spanish ship, a slave vessel, and the American captain, who has a personality like a Labrador retriever—all happy certainty, all reliance on the senses—can’t quite figure it out. The transatlantic trade in human beings, Melville seems to say, couldn’t be understood, or justified, or, in the end, re-buked by way of simple common sense. Something of the spirit, a demon or an avenging angel, had to come to bear. The Old World, and the old pre-Reformation religion, might still have a lesson to teach.

In the years before emancipation, the best arguments against slavery were also arguments about God. Throughout “The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,” Douglass emphasizes the vulgarity and seeming godlessness of the overseers, slave breakers, and masters of the South. He shows them cursing and drinking, which, he knew, would horrify the largely temperate, highly religious abolitionists of the North. “I love the pure, peaceful, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land,” Douglass wrote. “In fact, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.” But Douglass’s Jesus is not Socrates; he is, as Douglass wrote in “My Bondage and My Freedom,” the “Re-deemer, Friend, and Savior of those who diligently seek Him.” Douglass did not wish to remove Christ from the Gospels, or to separate the New Testament from the Old, finding truth in Jeremiah and Isaiah as he did in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. One of the few lines from Jefferson that Douglass quoted in his speeches was a famous but arguably atypical remark from “Notes on the State of Virginia.” Jefferson, after meditating on the institution of slavery, wrote, “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever.” Douglass added, “Such is the warning voice of Thomas Jefferson. Every day’s experience since its utterance until now, confirms its wisdom, and commends its truth.”

Abraham Lincoln once wrote that Jefferson “was, is, and perhaps will continue to be, the most distinguished politician in our history.” But, in some ways, Lincoln treated Jefferson as Jefferson had treated Christ. In arguing for the end of slavery, Lincoln exalted Jefferson’s Declaration, and praised Jefferson as “the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.” He gilded past the particulars of Jefferson’s own relationship to the practice of slavery. In centering the Declaration as the cornerstone of “the new birth of freedom”
represented by the Civil War, Lincoln had cut the contradictory dross out of Jefferson's life and emphasized what had value for a new age.

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address clarifies his differences with Jefferson on the matter of God—and set the stage for many religious clashes to come, suggesting how they might, in time, be settled. Both sides of the Civil War "read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other," Lincoln wrote; in the end, neither interpretive system could fully win the day. "The Almighty has His own purposes," Lincoln added—purposes that, presumably, aren't entirely knowable, even by the most capable reader. We see only so far as "God gives us to see the right." This was the dawning of a new and fragile postbellum pluralism, grounded not in pure reason but in mutual détente. Jefferson's Declaration, as reimagined by Lincoln, was less a fleshed-out American Gospel than a pathway to tenuous agreement—not a statement of natural fact but a meta-physical horizon toward which the country, fractured though it was, could travel together.

"The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth" was brought to public attention in 1895, by Cyrus Adler, an observant Jew from Arkansas, who was a librarian and a curator of religious items at the Smithsonian. Nearly a decade earlier, as a doctoral student searching the private library of a wealthy family, Adler had happened upon a set of Bibles that Jefferson had owned, with key passages of the Gospels snipped from their pages. Now, charged with mounting an exhibition on American religion and still mulling over that discovery, Adler finally figured out where the missing passages had gone: into Jefferson's little book, which was hidden away in the library of Carolina Ramsey Randolph, Jefferson's great-granddaughter. Adler bought the book from Randolph for four hundred dollars and promptly put it on display in the Capitol, where, in Jefferson's time, it would almost certainly have been a scandal. Now it was met mostly with affectionate enthusiasm, as another example of Jefferson's wide-ranging brilliance. In 1904, the Government Printing Office made the first official set of reproductions, one of which was to be given to each U.S. congressperson. "By the 1920s, there were five editions in circulation, both as cheap pocket-sized books and as collectors' items," Manseau notes.

America's national ambitions were going global. After the Spanish-American War, the country had seized possession of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. If Jefferson needed a Jesus who could fit the imperatives of republicanism and westward expansion, Teddy Roosevelt—later to become Jefferson's neighbor on Mt. Rushmore—needed to christen a budding empire. The new attitude was evident even in the nation's architecture: the National Mall, for which Jefferson, in 1791, had sketched a plan of "public walks," was reimagined as a site of Romanesque splendor. Eventually, the Jefferson Memorial was laid on the bank of the Tidal Basin, just across from the Mall, and among the documents placed under the cornerstone were the Declaration and "The Life and Morals."

There's a photograph of that monument taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson, in 1957, during the heat of the Black struggle for civil rights. Two Black boys, facing in opposite directions, dawdle just across the Tidal Basin from the memorial. A gentle row of trees and the dome dedicated to Jefferson loom just above their heads. The photograph is a reminder that, science and reason notwithstanding, Jefferson's Iaconic Jesus, full of wisdom and bereft of spiritual power, never persuaded him to forfeit the slaves he owned. The boys in the photograph could be Jefferson's kids; as Americans, they sort of were.

Since 2011, a monument to Martin Luther King, Jr., has sat across the water from the Jefferson Memorial, almost engaging in a staring contest. The result is a rich spatial symbolism: two ways of seeing Christ duking it out. King saw Jesus in much the way that Douglass did: as a savior, a redeemer, and a liberator sorely degraded by those who offended him name most loudly. During the Montgomery bus boycott, King reportedly carried a copy of "Jesus and the Disinherited," a short, beautiful book by the minister and writer Howard Thurman. Thurman had travelled to India, where he made sure to meet Gandhi, whose doctrine of nonviolence he admired; he took what he learned from him back to America, planting an important intellectual seed that would blossom during the civil-rights movement. In his preaching and writings, Thurman reoriented what he called "the religion of Jesus," pointing out what it might mean for those who had lived for so long under the thumb of the likes of Jefferson. Jefferson's Jesus is an admirable sage, fit bedtime reading for seekers of wisdom. But those who were weak, or suffering, or in urgent trouble, would have to look elsewhere. "The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall," Thurman wrote. "What does our religion say to them?"

Thurman's Jesus was a genius of love—a love so complete and intimate that it suggested a nearby God, who had grown up in a forgotten town and was now renting the run-down house across the street. That same humble deity, in the course of putting on humanity, had obtained a glimpse of the conditions on earth—poverty, needless estrangement, a stubborn pattern of rich ruling over poor—and decided to incite a revolution that would harrow Hell. "The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed," Thurman wrote. This is a Jesus that Jefferson could never understand.

In a world as compromised as ours, a soul so exalted was always destined for the Cross. Jefferson's Bible ends before the Resurrection, with Jesus crucified by the Roman occupiers, as the Gospels tell us he was. Jefferson's austere editing turns the killing almost into an afterthought—a desiccated reiteration of Socrates' final encounter with hemlock, the simple consequence of having offended the wrong people. For Thurman, the Crucifixion was an emphatic lesson in creative weakness: by sticking out his neck and accepting the full implications of his own vulnerability, Christ had radically identified himself with the worst off. Those societal castoffs who could never get a break now had a savior, and a champion, and a model. This, for Thurman, is as great a teaching as anything that Jesus merely said. Where death, for Jefferson's Jesus, is an ending, for Thurman's it is a necessary precondition—just a start.
In 1973, shortly after his last novel, like the others before it, was rejected by publishers, the Italian writer Guido Morselli shot himself in the head and died. He left several rejection letters on his desk, and a short note that read, "I bear no grudges." It was the kind of gesture one of his protagonists might have performed—a show of ironic detachment that belied a deep and obvious pain. Morselli was sixty years old. Before returning to his family's home in Varese and ending his life, he had been living in near-isolation for two decades, on a small property in Lombardy, near the Swiss-Italian border. There he tended to the land, made wine, and wrote books that faced diminishing odds of publication. The last one that he finished tells the story of an apocalyptic event in which all of humanity suddenly vanishes, leaving a single man as the world's only witness.

That book, "Dissipatio H.G." (NYRB Classics), has now been published in English, in a translation by Frederika Randall, a journalist who turned to translating Italian after experiencing health problems caused by a fall. The plot begins with a botched suicide attempt: the unnamed narrator, a loner living in a retreat surrounded by meadows and glaciers, walks to a cave, on the eve of his fortieth birthday, intent on throwing himself down a well that leads to an underground lake. "Because the negative outweighed the positive," he explains. "On my scales. By seventy percent. Was that a banal motive? I'm not sure."

Sitting on the edge of the well, he doesn't so much lose heart as get distracted. The mood is all wrong; he feels calm, lucid, too upbeat to go through with it. He is carrying a flashlight, which he flicks on and off. "Feet dangling in the dark," he takes a sip of the brandy he has brought with him and considers how the Spanish variety is better than the French and why this is so widely unappreciated. Before leaving the cave, he bumps his head on a rock, and hears a peal of thunder: it's the season's first storm. Back home, lying in bed and still dressed, annoyed at the last-minute change of plans, he picks up a gun, considering an easier solution. He brings the "black-eyed girl" to his mouth and pulls the trigger, twice. The gun doesn't work. He falls asleep.

The next morning, from his kitchen window he sees an overturned car in the distance. He goes to help, thinking that he might start over, in a way—"return to the living," as he puts it. But it is raining heavily, and when he reaches a flooded creek he returns home rather than try to cross it. After changing clothes and drinking coffee, he walks to the closest village to tell the police about the accident. But the station is empty. Garages and hotels are, too. What first looks like evidence of a national holiday takes on a more disturbing cast: the narrator roams one village and then another without encountering a single person. He finds several cars still running, and drives one to the nearest city, called Chrysopolis, in the hope of finding an explanation for the collective vanishing. But this city, too, is empty, its sleek façades shuttered.

Morselli was born in 1912, in Bologna, and grew up in a well-to-do family in Milan. His father was a pharmaceutical executive and a member of Mussolini's National Fascist Party. When Morselli was ten, his
mother was hospitalized for a long time with the Spanish flu, and she died two years later. He spent his adolescence and early adulthood reluctantly placating and then frustrating his father’s hopes for his professional life, studying law and, after a stint in the Army, taking a job, for a short period, at a chemical company. After the death of a sister, Morselli began receiving an allowance from his father, and decided to dedicate himself to writing. He published two books, a long essay and a philosophical dialogue, but all of his attempts at fiction were rejected. In 1974, shortly after his suicide, one of Italy’s most prestigious publishers, Adelphi, brought out his novel “Rome Without the Pope.” Written around 1966, it’s a Surrealistic tale about a fictitious Pope who leaves the Vatican to live on the outskirts of Rome, where he plays tennis and ingests hallucinogens. The reviews were enthusiastic. More novels were published throughout the seventies and eighties, posthumously establishing Morselli as one of the country’s most prominent post-war writers.

He hopped from genre to genre before ending with post-apocalyptic fiction; the results are thrilling but uneven. “Divertimento 1889,” which was published in English in the eighties, and was admired by Shirley Hazzard, is a Belle Époque farce that revolves around an attempt by Umberto I—the King of Italy from 1878 to 1900, when he was assassinated by an anarchist—to take a holiday, incognito, in the Swiss Alps. It is occasionally funny, but often glib, as though the author were trying to mimic the shallowness of his subject. Morselli’s best novel is “The Communist,” published by NYRB Classics in 2017, in another translation by Randall. It is the story of Walter Ferranini, an Italian Communist who fights Franco in Spain and lives for a time in the United States before returning to Italy and joining Parliament. As Ferranini’s political work grows distant from the grassroots labors that radicalized him, he comes unmoored; political and personal crises coalesce and accrue. Although Morselli’s father served in Parliament, his own engagement with politics seems to have been limited—and yet the book is one of the least condescending portraits of a mid-ranking politician you could imagine, illustrating the intersection of our public and private lives, and mixing the novel of ideas with social realism. The tone of the book is melancholic, reminiscent of Morselli’s great contemporary Cesare Pavese, who killed himself with an overdose of sleeping pills at the age of forty-one.

“Dissipatio H.G.,” despite its fanciful premise, may be Morselli’s most autobiographical book: the erudite and neurotically self-aware narrator, a former newspaperman who has left the world behind to write in solitude, is essentially an alter ego. The novel’s title comes from a phrase that the narrator claims to have recovered from an ancient text by the Syrian philosopher Iamblichus, a Neoplatonist. It refers to the possibility that everyone might simply evaporate into thin air. (Iamblichus was “less catastrophic than other prophets,” the narrator explains.) Walking the streets of Chrysopolis, the narrator watches a hen strutting around and a horde of cats mating on the steps of a bank. “The world has never been so alive as it is since a certain breed of bipeds disappeared,” he thinks. He never liked the city. In the village near his retreat, alone on a bench, he is hyperattentive to the sounds lacing the general silence—a dripping drainpipe, the flick of a traffic light.

There are hints that something fantastical has occurred, perhaps connected with the storm that began while the narrator was in the cave. But his investigations into what actually took place are quickly dropped in favor of descriptions of the landscape and reflections on Durkheim, Pascal, and Hegel, among others. He sets out to search for miners, on the theory that being in a cave might have shielded him from what he calls the Event, but one senses that he is looking more for diversion than for enlightenment. Whatever has caused humankind’s disappearance remains obscure to him:

I possess none of the wishful thinking of science, and none, to my credit, of science fiction either. I don’t fall back on genocide by death rays, or epidemics spread around Earth by tiny, evil Venuses, or clouds of nuclear fallout from distant H-bombs. I sensed right off that the Event cannot be gauged by the usual measures.

Typically, stories about the near-extinction of humanity dramatize the process of decay, with lessons on the fragility of civilization, and how easily a sense of community is shattered when people become desperate. Mary Shelley’s “The Last Man,” published in 1826, one of the earliest modern apocalyptic novels, chronicles humanity’s failure to face up to a global plague, resulting in a kind of Hobbesian conflict survived only by the title character. That narrative trajectory now feels familiar. But Morselli forgoes the drama of depopulation, reducing the genre’s basic premise to its essence and its aftermath. His protagonist is not someone who cherishes social relations but a loner who has long since social–distanced, and flirted with self-annihilation. Given the narrator’s—and Morselli’s—views on contemporary society and its endless efforts to eliminate all kinds of earthly friction, one may even read this end of the world as a kind of collective wish fulfillment. One of the questions Morselli seems to have had on his mind is: How alive was everyone in the first place?

With nothing to do but walk around and observe, the narrator finds himself surprisingly impressed by some of the things people have left behind, or at least by their stubborn persistence in the absence of humans. A self-defined “Anthropophobe,” he begins to feel an unexpected sympathy for his fellowman. “I waited for it to arrive and strike me,” he says of whatever has disappeared everyone else:

Finish me off, seeing that my turn was coming soon. I was condemned; beyond my walls, everything was submerged in a death fluid and I was immersed in it, a diving bell at the bot-
tom of the sea. By osmosis, that fluid would creep through the walls. My anxiety was conscious and focused, not frenetic, and I was present to myself.

But this burst of attentiveness eventually gives way to sloughishness and despondency. The narrator lets himself go, shaving less often, leaving the kitchen sink clogged and the bed sheets unchanged. He develops a sweet tooth, feasting on chocolates and pastries. He abandons a journal that he has barely started.

A sudden, invisible phenomenon that has emptied the streets of cities and villages, without fanfare or farewells, leaving our protagonist in a state of existential limbo: the echoes one finds in “Dissipatio H.G.” of life during the coronavirus pandemic are, at times, so glaring that some passages read like thinly fictionalized versions of the present. Apocalyptic fiction is often disinterred amid catastrophes, either for their prescience or because they are paradoxically reassuring. Each phase of the quarantine seems represented in this slim novel, from the short-lived pleasure at nature’s reclaiming of old ground to the vague impulse to take notes and the growing pointlessness of grooming. Morselli is drawn to anticlimaxes, resisting drama at every turn, and it is this instinct that makes his final book so resonant with certain experiences of the past year. The tone of its post-apocalyptic world is not unceasing despair but melancholic inconsistency. Desire is transient; states of mind are fleeting and untrustworthy. “What for anyone else would be an ocean of negativity, an utter horror, is something I’m able to float on in a paper boat,” the narrator reflects. “A boat made of a few, mediocre, at times ironic, general ideas.”

In matching a world-weary protagonist to a depopulated planet, Morselli seems less interested in dissecting social shocks than in probing the porous border between blissful solitude and extreme loneliness. As the novel progresses, the narrator’s account of his environment becomes increasingly unhinged. The world, which at first looked “like an apartment whose owners are on vacation,” becomes a “tomb, wide open and empty.” The narrator briefly hallucinates the voice of a long-dead psychiatrist named Karpinsky, who once treated him for a nervous condition. He goes in search of this man, clinging to what is perhaps the one affectionate memory he has of another human being. At times, his fear is all-encompassing, “a gelid black substance in which I’m miserably, foolishly stuck, like a fly frozen in ice. ‘Where can I go?’ I wonder, ‘Where can I hide?’ And I understand that I cannot go anywhere, the fear is all around, and identical.”

Randall, who died in May, in Rome, shortly after finishing her translation, manages to get across, in English, the bleakness of Morselli’s restraint. At one point, the narrator returns to his retreat and, upon entering his storeroom, finds a cow munching on copies of one of his books. The sight of his words being digested fills him with tenderness. “I’d get them back tomorrow, supposing I succeeded in milking her, my ideas finally remunerative,” he thinks. The ironic tone is characteristic of Morselli’s books, but there is a nervous edge to the joke. Only someone well versed in loneliness—artistic, physical, emotional—could produce such a ruthlessly realistic account of an isolating catastrophe, tending to its false starts and its interruptions, its strange mixture of anxiety and tedium. In the end, that experience had a price. ♦

From the Medford (Mass.) Transcript.

Their bagel place will offer eight or nine regular bagels, around 15 toppings, tea, coffee, chocolate chip cookies and four to five types of sandwiches. The types of bagels will be: plain, sesame, salt, rosemary salt, which is the most popular option, everything, poppy, garlic and cinnamon sugar, and they will also have a gluten-free option.

Perfect for those on low-fat diets.
ON TELEVISION

HOT MESSES


BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX

How on earth does the title character of “The Flight Attendant,” the best new miniseries on HBO Max, manage to hold down her job? Cassie Bowden (Kaley Cuoco) lives with her feet off the ground, both metaphorically and literally. She is the embodiment of all those lightly sexist tabloid monikers: party girl, train wreck, hot mess. In order to get a colleague in the first-class cabin to slide her some liquor, Cassie needn’t do more than pout and blow on her blond curtain bangs. “The Flight Attendant” is superficially a caper, and, with Cassie, it dutifully references the Hitchcock heroine. But the blue of her uniform put me in mind of another pop-culture touchstone: Britney Spears’s flight-attendant themed music video for “Toxic,” in which the singer spills champagne on her passengers and makes out with one of them in the bathroom. This woman is steering, but she is not in control.

In the pilot, Cassie swoons over the guy in 3C: Alex Sokolov (Michiel Huisman), who might be described, in noir parlance, as tall, dark, and handsome. And literate! (The two bond over Russian novels.) On landing in Bangkok, they engage in excess: too much food, too much alcohol, and too much sex. The morning after, Cassie wakes up to find Alex dead, his throat slit, the sheets bloodied. She is unable to recall the events of the night before. The killer’s identity will remain a mystery for the next seven episodes, but one antagonist has already revealed itself: memory, with its ability to not only augment the truth but to supplant it.

“The Flight Attendant” is an adaptation, from Steve Yockey, of Chris Bohjalian’s novel of the same name. (Cuoco is an executive producer.) The series is like a clever pop song; the thrill is in its juxtaposition of a rowdy rhythm with a lyrical portrait of tragedy and grief. Cassie tidies the murder scene, then flees the hotel. Back at work, she is eyed by her co-workers, the wonderfully fey Shane (Griffin Matthews) and the middle-aged worrier Megan (the terrific Rosie Perez). But no one is too concerned about her erratic behavior. Everyone is used to tolerating her chaos.

On the flight back home to New York City, Shane’s phone buzzes with the news of Alex’s murder. Cassie is interviewed by the F.B.I.; she pleads, rather unconvincingly, that Alex was alive the last time she saw him. All the while, blurred memories of their date night come rushing back. These moments intensify as the series goes on, extending back past Cassie’s time in Bangkok to unearth repressed memories from her childhood. She also sees visions of Alex, who, from beyond the grave, becomes her spirit guide.

The series does not waste time pointing the finger at Cassie. When she blurts out, “I’m not that kind of drunk—I’m public-nudity, yelling-in-the-subway kind of drunk,” we believe her. She just doesn’t seem like she’s capable enough to commit a murder; in fact, much of the fun of “The Flight Attendant” lies in watching her stumble into capability, as she becomes an amateur sleuth in an attempt to clear her name. We get a villain turned friend in Miranda, played by Michelle Gomez, with her gorgeously craggy face. We get a wacky laundering scheme, replete with sinisterly named organizations like Lionfish, that is uncovered by Cassie and her lawyer best friend, Annie (the flinty Zosia Mamet). We go, distractingly, from Thailand to New York to Rome and back.

All that movement—geographic, psychological, physical—can cause “The Flight Attendant” to get jerky. (Cassie herself is in constant motion—always flying somewhere or running from something—in flashy split-screen sequences that reflect her fractured state of mind.) But the mystery rights itself before it crashes; we finish the eight episodes because of the show’s aesthetic ambition—
clear from its boldly designed title cards, which evoke Saul Bass—and because of Cuoco’s remarkable performance, a breakthrough for the career sitcom actor.

Cassie’s lies calcify into a tower of avoidance and pain. I loved the gradual darkening of the party scenes: our stewardess goes from gyrating at European clubs to stealing a kiddie ride from a bodega. In Cassie, “The Flight Attendant” manages a character study that feels intriguingly quiet, especially given the commotion of its thriller conceit. This may be at the expense of the secondary characters, who were not given much room to grow. (A couple of welcome twists in the finale bode well for future seasons, however.) I was particularly interested in Perez’s Megan, a homely wife from Oyster Bay, who is helplessly drawn to the dirty glamour of her younger, whiter colleague. She calls her constantly, fawning that could be pseudo-maternal, sexual, or both. But, rather than explore this, the show opts to silo Megan into a convoluted subplot that culminates in her gaining “agency” by becoming a sleuth herself.

“The Flight Attendant” works hard to earn its place among its contemporary influences, which might include “Russian Doll,” “I May Destroy You,” and “BoJack Horseman.” But the show’s high jinks sent me back to Bugs Bunny. Cassie moves through the world like a flesh-and-blood cartoon, careening from drunkenness to lucidity. Cuoco gives this physical recklessness some meaning, thereby humanizing a trope. When she visits Alex’s workplace, in search of more clues, she is chased by security guards—whom she is able to evade, but not be. Her pursuit of a bad parent. When Simon’s father was on his deathbed, Simon vowed that he would never have children, in order to end the Hastings line. But, as is expected, Daphne and Simon end up falling for each other, and their union permits “Bridgerton” to mature past the cuties and into the adult. Fans of the novels will watch the series out of curiosity as to how it will reveal the identity of Lady Whistledown—and also for the feverish sex.

Shonda Rhimes, who is almost a genre unto herself, produced the series, which was created by Chris Van Dusen, and it is the first to début under a new deal that Rhimes has with Netflix. My empty, end-of-the-year brain was well served by the burlesque of selfish viscounts, conniving ladies of the house, and enterprising mot- distes. Less pleasurable were certain at- tendants at serious events. Van Dusen’s version of nineteenth-century England is race-blind, and Simon’s refusal to propagate his seed has something to do with his father’s race shame. The grafting of contemporary politics onto the period piece feels extraneous and vague. Maybe this interracial-love fetish would have jelled better in the Obama era. “Love, your grace, conquers all,” Simon’s de-facto mother, Lady Danbury, tells him. “Love changes nothing,” he responds. :©2020 KENDAL
THE CURRENT CINEMA

MOTHER COURAGE

“Dear Comrades!”

BY ANTHONY LANE

The career of the Russian director Andrei Konchalovsky is a zigzag affair. There can’t be many people who have made a faithful adaptation of Turgenev’s “A Nest of Gentlefolk” and a buddy-cop thriller with Kurt Russell and Sylvester Stallone—“Tango & Cash” (1989). That was one of the films resulting from Konchalovsky’s move from the Soviet Union to the United States, in 1980. The least gentle of them was “Runaway Train” (1985), which was like Dostoyevsky’s “House of the Dead” pumped up into an action ride, and which ended with an escaped murderer standing atop a locomotive as it sped toward a snowy and certain destruction. Other Konchalovsky projects include a long Soviet epic called “Siberiade”; a heroically cheesy version of Homer’s Odyssey, for NBC; “The Nutcracker,” in 3-D; a bio-pic of Michelangelo; and a wild tale set in a psychiatric ward during the First Chechen War, and featuring Bryan Adams. Of course.

Now Konchalovsky has confounded us yet again, damn him, by coming up with his masterpiece. It’s called “Dear Comrades!,” and the artistry is calm, controlled, persuasively detailed, and utterly Stallone-free. The only excessive thing about it is the exclamation mark in the title. Like “Paradise,” Konchalovsky’s Holocaust drama of 2017, the new work is in black-and-white, and stars his wife, Julia Vysotskaya, in the leading role. “Dear Comrades!” however, has a moral doubleness serves her well in “Dear Comrades!,” where she barely has the line in the Second World War, and who still reveres the memory of Stalin, lives with her elderly father (Sergei Erlish) and her eighteen-year-old daughter, Svetka (Yulia Burova). As the story begins, in the summer of 1962, we find Lyuda in bed with her boss, the unlovely Loginov (Vladislav Komarov). They speak not of sweet nothings but of unobtainable somethings; food prices have been raised, meat and milk are scarce, and there are rumors of unrest. Logino

Your initial reaction is: “Nobody talks like that.” But Loginov does, as does Lyuda (she dismisses the shortages as “temporary hardship”), and you soon realize that both of them are true believers. In reciting the necessary rhetoric, like a rosary, they are not so much describing a situation as willing the reality to match up to their creed. What interests Konchalovsky is the sundering of words from facts, and the speed with which that split becomes a gulf. Thus, during a committee meeting, a siren goes off, indicating that the unthinkable has happened: factory workers, offered lower pay and less to eat, have gone on strike. “This is a crime,” Lyuda says. “People are ignorant.” Yet she is the one who might leak out and foment further disorders.

Your initial reaction is: “Nobody talks like that.” But Loginov does, as does Lyuda (she dismisses the shortages as “temporary hardship”), and you soon realize that both of them are true believers. In reciting the necessary rhetoric, like a rosary, they are not so much describing a situation as willing the reality to match up to their creed. What interests Konchalovsky is the sundering of words from facts, and the speed with which that split becomes a gulf. Thus, during a committee meeting, a siren goes off, indicating that the unthinkable has happened: factory workers, offered lower pay and less to eat, have gone on strike. “This is a crime,” Lyuda says. “People are ignorant.” Yet she is the one who doesn’t want to know.

A regional superior named Basov (Dmitry Kostyaev) arrives from out of town to handle the crisis. Fat chance. Portly and perspiring, he steps onto a balcony to address the crowd below. “Comrades, we live in a wonderful time,” he declares. A rock is thrown in reply. As the tension mounts, and as we follow the chain of command, we sense the rising fear, with apparatchiks hurrying to offload blame. Even a general, heralded as “a beast,” looks nervous in the presence of two brooding honchos from the Central Committee, dispatched on Khrushchev’s orders. Their fear is that information might leak out and foment further dis

Julia Vysotskaya stars in Andrei Konchalovsky’s film.

heads the production sector on the City Committee of Novocheerkassk—a solid industrial base in southern Russia, cradled in a wide loop of the Don River, and housing an electric-locomotive plant. Lyuda, who was a nurse on the front line, is to be sealed off. Boldly, if unwisely, Lyuda stands up...
and recommends an “extreme penalty” for those who incited the trouble. She will have her wish.

More than twenty-five people died in the demonstrations of June 2, 1962, in Novocherkassk, and more than eighty-five were wounded. And yet, for a long while, what happened there was expunged from the records. It unhappened. Then, in 1975, in the final volume of “The Gulag Archipelago,” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn published reports of an uprising in the town—a cry from the soul of a people who could no longer live as they had lived—and of an ensuing massacre, every trace of which had been “licked clean and hidden.” Not until 1992, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, did the Chief Military Prosecutor undertake a review of the fatal events in Novocherkassk. Two years later, the bodies of the murdered, finally exhumed, were accorded a proper burial, though some have never been found.

“Dear Comrades!” is not the place to go if you want a clear and exhaustive grasp of the historical incident. Indeed, one of the film’s assets—a very Tolstoyan virtue—is that it shows how unclear such an episode feels to those caught up in the chaos. Lyuda, for example, is hustled from a government building, along with her colleagues; they sit idly on benches, in the sunshine. Leaves stir in the breeze. Shots are heard, and Lyuda hastens back to the square where the protesters have gathered, because she knows that Svetka, her daughter, may be among them. We see people lurch and fall, under gunfire, but where it’s coming from is hard to gauge. Lyuda helps one woman, who has been shot in the leg, to the haven of a hairdressing salon; a bullet then zips through the window, with a tinkling click, and hits the woman in the throat. Her blood looks black. We stay inside, witnessing the slaughter through the glass, while a radio plays an entertaining song.

For some viewers, all this will seem too composed. The camera scarcely moves, surveying the tumult but never joining in; of handheld reelings and shakes, there is no trace. Yet you cannot mistake the movie’s onward force. This is partly a matter of editing—the meticulous energy with which we are propelled from one image to the next. (Is there an echo of Eisenstein’s “Strike,” a model of classical montage, from 1925? And, if so, how much irony resounds in that echo, since the strikers, back then, were heroes rather than enemies of the state?) But something else is driving “Dear Comrades!” It quickens into a quest, as Lyuda hunts in vain for her law-breaking child. Ideology smacks head on into love.

Vysotskaya’s performance is equal to the impact. Watch Lyuda having to ask the doctor at the local morgue (one of the movie’s few good guys, who has nipped outside for a smoke) if he has come across the corpse of a girl. More awful still is her unblinking horror when she’s told that she must write down her earlier demands—that is, retrospectively propose the very measures that may have killed her own daughter. Then, there’s the scene in which a K.G.B. agent, Viktor (Andrei Gusev), looking for Svetka, knocks on Lyuda’s door with a search warrant; instead of complaining, she slumps listlessly onto a chair. Despair can wring us dry.

Viktor is an odd case. He’s handsome, taciturn, and inclined, for some reason, to assist Lyuda rather than harass her. On the other hand, how can she trust him, since it’s the K.G.B. that—according to “Dear Comrades!”—was responsible for opening fire? (In other accounts, the Army was the guilty party, although one general, who refused to attack civilians, was stripped of his rank and dismissed.) Nevertheless, against regulations, Lyuda and Viktor team up and make their way out of town, on Svetka’s trail. Given that both adults are compliant cogs in the Communist machine, and that there’s not a flicker of romance between them, you wonder why they should risk their livelihoods, and maybe their necks, in pursuit of such a course.

One answer would be this: once you start to suspect that your entire world may be founded on a quicksand of deceit, then nothing seems more urgent or more weighted with meaning than the need to do one true thing. The shade of Antigone would gaze upon Lyuda in approval. If Konchalovsky’s heroine had been one of the factory workers, underfed and underpaid, her passion and indignation would have come as no surprise; it’s precisely because Lyuda is an enabler of the system, who, thanks to her status, receives ample supplies of sausage, fish, and candies, that her private crusade is so moving to observe. By the end, it becomes a kind of madness, and all she can do is stutter questions. “Why? How is it? Why?” she asks. “How am I supposed to forget this?” Beautiful and damning, “Dear Comrades!” is also an act of remembrance.

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week’s cartoon, by Carolita Johnson, must be received by Sunday, January 10th. The finalists in the December 14th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week’s contest, in the January 25th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK’S CONTEST

“Keep climbing—you’ve only reached middle management.”
Sarah McGarry, Chevy Chase, Md.

“Growth has exceeded our projections.”
Judy Nigro, Wheaton, Ill.

“I thought you said the cloud was secure.”
Jack R. Thompson, Denver, Colo.

THE WINNING CAPTION

“I can keep it together during the ceremony. The reception is where I fall to pieces.”
Peter Sergison, Durham, N.C.
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Mitchell Johnson of Menlo Park, California—an American Academy in Rome Visiting Artist (2015) and a Josef and Anni Albers Foundation Artist in Residence (2007)—is the subject of the monograph, *Color as Content*. Johnson’s color- and shape-driven paintings are known for their very personal approach to color and have been exhibited in Milan, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Johnson divides his time between his favorite painting locations in Europe, New England, New York City, Asia, and California. His paintings are in the collections of 28 museums and over 600 private collections. The most recent museum acquisitions were by Museo Morandi in Bologna, Tucson Museum of Art, Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Johnson moved to the Bay Area in 1990 after finishing his MFA at Parsons in New York.