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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN
Amy Davidson Sorkin on the 2020 race for the Senate; ahoy there, Greta Thunberg; Mark Ronson's feelings; Airbnb but for swimming; rosy outlook at the drugstore.

THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Dan Piepenbring
The Beautiful One
Writing with Prince, in the final months of his life.

PERSONAL HISTORY
Calvin Trillin
Class Notes

SHOUTS & MURMURS
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“Sweeping Into Fall”
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Dan Piepenbring ("The Beautiful One," p. 28) is a writer in Brooklyn. He collaborated with Prince on "The Beautiful Ones," a memoir, which will be published in October.

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Hua Hsu (Books, p. 70), a staff writer, co-curated "The Moon Represents My Heart," an exhibition at the Museum of Chinese in America. It runs through September.

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

Paul Muldoon (Poem, p. 50), a former poetry editor of The New Yorker, teaches at Princeton. His collection "Frolic and Detour" comes out this fall.

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Kaye Blegvad (Sketchpad, p. 27) is an artist, illustrator, and designer based in New York.

Sharon Olds (Poem, p. 38) will publish a new poetry collection, "Arias," in October.

Bruce Handy (The Talk of the Town, p. 26) is a contributing editor at Vanity Fair and the author of "Wild Things: The Joy of Reading Children's Literature as an Adult."

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Amy Davidson Sorkin (Comment, p. 23), a staff writer, is a regular contributor to Comment. She also writes a column for newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

PAGE-TURNER
The idea that novelists are solitary creators is deeply ingrained. What happens if you write fiction as a group?

THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW
Michael Schulman speaks with Linda Ronstadt about her politics, her career in music, and her life with Parkinson's.

PERSONAL HISTORY
Mike Mariani on a town that has become an unlikely mecca for people with chronic-fatigue syndrome.

Download the New Yorker Today app for the latest news, commentary, criticism, and humor, plus this week’s magazine and all issues back to 2008.
PROTECTING THE ABUSED

Larissa MacFarquhar, in her piece about Transition House, which serves domestic-violence survivors, portrays the organization as one in conflict with its past, by focussing on the dismantling of its early radical feminist agenda and relying, in part, on oddly juxtaposed and exaggerated comments to heighten the appearance of controversy (“A House of Their Own,” August 19th). As a result, the Transition House that MacFarquhar describes does not accurately reflect the one that I led, from 2008 to 2018.

In one particularly misleading quotation, a former volunteer claims that, when I was the executive director, I would “trot” out the shelter’s residents during “parties.” MacFarquhar acknowledges that, once everyday technology made data mining and geotracking a ubiquitous part of life, it became impossible to conceal the addresses of domestic-violence shelters. Transition House’s board of directors and I thus decided to invite donors and stakeholders to the shelter for annual fund-raising events to celebrate the organization’s legacy and to share new approaches to the agency’s work. We took careful precautions to protect the privacy of the shelter’s residents and to include them in the planning of the events.

MacFarquhar drew from Ann Fleck-Henderson’s book “Transition House 1976-2017: The Movement and the Mainstream” (for which MacFarquhar was interviewed, as was I) but offers less clarity about the shelter’s recent years. Today, with one in four women and one in seven men in abusive relationships, Transition House and organizations like it remain necessary and relevant. The work to fight systemic oppression and to support survivors of violence continues at a time when the possibilities and constraints are very different than they were when that work started. Shelters are no longer considered the primary form of intervention. Strategies to combat domestic violence have broadened, but public perception of the issue has not.

Risa Mednick
Cambridge, Mass.

As the former executive director of a domestic-violence shelter and of a homeless shelter, I am intimately familiar with the issues that MacFarquhar traces in her piece. She skillfully captures the complex nature of domestic violence and the imbalance of power between those giving help and those seeking it. MacFarquhar also shows how difficult it is to run an organization efficiently, compassionately, and empathetically. It seems that Transition House has ultimately been able to strike the right balance, despite the difficulties it has faced in the past.

Antonia Atlas Dosik
Yellow Springs, Ohio

DISTORTED FACTS

I was moved and enlightened by Ian Frazier’s article on the debate between W.E.B. Du Bois and Lothrop Stoddard (“Old Hatreds,” August 26th). However, Frazier’s rejection of Stoddard’s writings about the “germ-plasm” is scientifically dubious. Stoddard was certainly a buffoon, and his belief that he was racially superior to the erudite Du Bois, by virtue of his germ-plasm, is absurd and repulsive. But, although it sounds silly, the excerpt of Stoddard’s work that Frazier includes remains, for the most part, substantiated today.

The theory of germ-plasm, as described by Stoddard, was put forth by August Weismann, in 1892. Germ-plasm is composed of our germ cells, which are involved in sexual reproduction and contain the genes that are passed down from previous generations. “Body-plasm” is composed of our somatic cells, or, as Stoddard puts it, “the ever-multiplying cells which differentiate into the organs of the body.” The distinction between the two helps explain why, if I got lung cancer, my child would be unlikely to develop the disease: he or she would inherit the germ line, rather than the somatic line.

I do not take issue with Frazier’s message, nor do I support Stoddard’s racist rhetoric. But, in an era of unsound scientific thinking, it’s important to understand the difference between false science and false interpretation. Stoddard cited Weismann’s theory, which was profound and ahead of its time, and used it to advance the perverse and unfounded idea of the superiority of Nordic germ-plasm. Rather than faulting the science, we should be on the lookout for scam artists using it as a justification to advance their systemically racist beliefs.

Nikhil Chari
Berkeley, Calif.

A NOVEL GENRE

However unusual the thousand-plus-page length of Edoardo Albinati’s novel “The Catholic School” might be, Paul Elie is not entirely right to say that Italy has produced “no Cervantes, no Richardson or Fielding, no Dumas or Hugo” (Books, August 26th). Ippolito Nievo’s “Confessions of an Italian” (1867) is a nine-hundred-page doorstop. Federico De Roberto’s saga “The Viceroy’s” (1894) is more than six hundred pages. Most important, “The Betrothed,” by Alessandro Manzoni (1840)—which has a similarly substantial page tally—is widely considered the foundational novel of Italian literature. There’s a lot of lengthy yet engaging Italian fiction to be enjoyed—and, fortunately, more of it is being translated into English.

Andrea Malagutti
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Letters should be sent with the writer’s name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.
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For the first time since the Met opened its Beaux-Arts building on Fifth Avenue, in 1902, works of art will grace the niches of its exterior. On Sept. 9, the museum inaugurates its Façade Commission with a quartet of seven-foot-high bronzes by the Kenyan-born artist Wangeci Mutu (pictured), who divides her time between Nairobi and New York City. The female figures are reminiscent of caryatids, seen in both ancient Greek temples and in the centuries-old carvings of the Luba people from Central Africa.
CLASSICAL MUSIC

Du Yun
The Stone at the New School
At first glance, the one predictable thing about Du Yun, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer, performer, and multimedia artist, is her unpredictability. Dig deeper, though, and you can sense the conjoined strands of curiosity and compassion that run through everything she makes. On the first two nights of her Stone residency, her art-pop band, OK Miss, ventures through breathy Chinese pop, seductive trip-hop, and metallic skronk. The group returns on the final night to relay impressions from the composer’s recent trek to Tibet; in between, two intimate evenings of electro-acoustic experimentation provide fodder for future innovations.—Steve Smith (Sept. 3-7 at 8:30.)

Steinway D Arrival Marathon
Spectrum, a cozy, ambitious performing-arts space near the Brooklyn Navy Yard, has just installed a gorgeous grand piano. To put the new instrument through its paces, the pianist and composer Gabriel Zucker has mustered an imposing lineup of fellow-keyboardists—Melody Fader, Ethan Iverson, and Eric Wubbelss among them—that represents a broad range of stylistic inclinations, from classical elegance and high-modernist rigor to freewheeling improvisation.—S.S. (Sept. 6 at 7.)

Sirius Quartet
Governors Island
Timeliness and topicality can be tricky for a classical ensemble to pull off convincingly. But the Sirius Quartet—a group that emphasizes new music, including works composed by its members—hits the target on its latest recording, “New World,” a collection of songs reflecting on immigration, discrimination, and the quest for hope. Here, the quartet shares music from that project, in the final concerts of this year’s free Rite of Summer Music Festival.—S.S. (Sept. 7 at 1 and 3.)

“Collecting Performers”
Bruno Walter Auditorium
The International Contemporary Ensemble starts its fourth year of association with the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, where the group routinely presents free programs for packed houses. The newest ICE series, “Collecting Performers,” showcases members of the ensemble and its associates in works of personal meaning. The first installment features the percussionist Ross Karre, the flutist and soprano Alice Teysier, and the composer and endes Martenot player Suzanne Farrin. The line for free admission forms an hour before the concert begins, and attendees are limited to a single ticket apiece.—S.S. (Sept. 7 at 2:30.)

NEW OPERA

New York City Opera
Bryant Park
In its heyday, New York City Opera supported a core ensemble of singers and gave new operas, especially American ones, a berth in the city. The company honors that legacy in a seventy-fifth-anniversary concert in Bryant Park, where the conductors Carolyn Kuan, James Meena, Gil Rose, and James Lowe take turns leading a thirty-piece orchestra, a chorus, and a team of soloists. The program includes excerpts from “The Crucible,” “The Ballad of Baby Doe,” “Susannah,” and “Emmeline” by a cast of U.S.-based ensembles. The first program, “Genuine Fakes,” includes new creations by Bird, Einbond, Hall, and Jessie Marino; the second, “space initiative,” offers a hefty premiere by the violinist Julia Robert and a sampling of contemporary French sounds.—S.S. (Sept. 7-8 at 6.)

Stephen Gosling
Miller Theatre
Stephen Gosling, a pianist of abundant strength, sensitivity, and imagination, has, in recent years, become a leading interpreter of John Zorn’s concert music; on Zorn’s new album, “Encomia,” Gosling persuasively plays three of the composer’s recent scores. To inaugurate the season of Miller Theatre’s casual, free pop-up concerts, Gosling presents the world premiere of a substantial Zorn creation, “18 Studies from the Later Sketchbooks of JMW Turner” (1841–1845).—S.S. (Sept. 10 at 6.)

Paul Jacobs
Juilliard School
The Grammy Award winner Paul Jacobs devised a three-part series honoring the French organ tradition before the fire at Notre-Dame de Paris, but his concerts—full of magnificent, transporting, and enduring music—take on new resonance in light of the cathedral’s near-total ruin. (Its organ survived.) Pieces by Franck,
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INDIE ROCK

When the singer-songwriter Mitski, riding high on the acclaim of her latest album, “Be the Cowboy,” announced her plans for an indefinite hiatus, it seemed as though she was shielding herself from bursting under the pressure. Ever since the success of her 2014 record, “Bury Me at Makeout Creek,” she’s been heaped with praise. And it’s all deserved. Her way with words—how she bottles anguish and turns it into jet fuel—is arresting, and audience demand for emotional purging has kept her on the road for nearly five years straight. A pair of shows at SummerStage, Sept. 7-8, marks the end of that chapter. Though she will be absent from the spotlight, she is not leaving music but, rather, returning to herself; in her own words, “It’s time to be a human again.”—Briana Younger

Dupré, Saint-Saëns, and Guilman promise a mesmerizing start to the series at Juilliard’s Paul Dupré, St. Mary the Virgin (Sept. 17) and St. Ignatius Loyola Church (Sept. 24) include works by such masters as Olivier Messiaen (“Messe de la Pentecôte”) and Louis Vierné (Symphony No. 6, Op. 59).—O.Z. (Sept. 10 at 7:30.)

NIGHT LIFE

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

Liebman, Copland, Alessi Quintet

Birdland

In the early seventies, the saxophonist Dave Liebman cut recordings with Miles Davis and Evin Jones that today’s musicians still scrutinize for inspiration. In the decades since, Liebman has cemented his role as both a profoundly improviser and a trusted mentor. Here, he joins forces with a cadre of exceptional players, all thoroughly conversant with post-bop procedures—the pianist Marc Copland, the trumpeter Ralph Alessi, the bassist Drew Gress, and the drummer Joey Baron—to form a unit that radiates promise. —Steve Futterman (Sept. 3-7.)

Tash Sultana

SummerStage

The live artist Tash Sultana, who uses they/them pronouns, is even-keeled until they pick up a guitar, unleashing a sudden torrent of energy: eyes closed, they hop up and down on one foot and swerve side to side as if possessed by their own music, which they create using their looper pedals. The spectacle is expressive and intense, and Sultana’s gripping commitment to their performance helps explain their trajectory from a kid busking in Melbourne to a jolting stage act.—Jullyssa Lopez (Sept. 4.)

Maria Usbeck / Jackie Mendoza

The Sultan Room

Maria Usbeck and Jackie Mendoza seem like neighbors on a strange, ethereal planet. They’re both interested in art that has an otherworldly quality, and their respective releases find them each twisting electronic sounds into abstract, bilingual portraits of memories and places. Usbeck, who was previously the front woman of the band Selebrities, has a taste for gauzy, glistening melodies, whereas Mendoza likes her creations to lurk in a little bit of darkness. They share a bill at the Sultan Room, where Usbeck is celebrating her new album, “Envejeciendo.”—J.L. (Sept. 4.)

James Ferraro

Issue Project Room

The Brooklyn electronic composer James Ferraro works with a palette of the cheesiest processed sounds available—the Apple startup chime, for one. That suspiciously blank instrumental affect has led to comparisons with Jeff Koons, but Ferraro’s goofy, billowing synthesizers turn out to be a cunning delivery device for the heavier themes of his recent work: his album “Requiem for Recycled Earth,” from May, sounds giddier than its doomslad title would suggest. The veteran Texas-bred electronic minimalist J. D. Emmanuel headlines.—Michaelangelo Matos (Sept. 5.)

Jimmy Cobb Quartet

Smoke

The ninety-year-old veteran drummer Jimmy Cobb—the last surviving member of the ensemble that recorded “Kind of Blue”—can still rouse memories of his tenures with the likes of Miles Davis and Wynton Kelly with his crisp, no-nonsense playing. He celebrates the release of his buoyant new album, “This I Dig of You,” at the helm of a quartet that features the same personnel as the recording: the bassist John Webber, the guitarist Peter Bernstein, and the pianist Harold Mabern.—S.F. (Sept. 5-8.)

Abdu Ali

Elsewhere

During the Harlem Renaissance, some of the movement’s greatest literary minds put together a magazine called Fire!!!, which eschewed the respectability politics of the time in favor of a more comprehensive depiction of the black experience. The Baltimore-based experimental musician Abdu Ali, who uses they/them pronouns, reanimated that spirit with their début album, “Fiya!!!”, a shape-shifting set of songs that inhaled such influences as Baltimore club music, free jazz, hip-hop, and vogue and exhaled them as a prismatic sonic cloud. In one breath, Ali creates a portrait of oneself, their city, and black music’s radiant legacy.—Briana Younger (Sept. 6.)

Vampire Weekend

Madison Square Garden

Incubated in New York before decamping to Los Angeles, Vampire Weekend honors both locales with songs reflecting the bookishness of the first city and the ebullience of the next. At Madison Square Garden, the band tests how music that approximates the lightness of a Miró will fare in an arena that knows only concrete. It shares a bill with Angélique Kidjo, a kinetic performer who, like the headliner, has a knack for recognizing—and then duly ignoring—musical borders.—Jay Rutenberg (Sept. 6.)

Afterlife New York

Avant Gardner

Back-to-school season tends to mean a spate of big dance-music blowouts, and this one is particularly enticing: a two-room techno all-nighter with a stellar lineup, modeled on the weekly summer club nights hosted by the Italian d.j. duo Tale of Us in Ibiza. The pair headlines the Brooklyn Mirage, but the lineup in the Great Hall is the real draw: the German d.j.s Ben Klock and Chris Liebing are techno veterans whose sets still surprise, and Copenhagen’s Courtesy proffers a speedy, highly melodic style.—M.M. (Sept. 7.)

Joanna Newsom

Museo del Barrio

Joanna Newsom has spent the past few years absent from the stage, on maternity leave. If indie rock maintained an H.R. department, it would have faced quite a dilemma: how to replace a crackerjack harpist with a voice torn from a fairy tale and byzantine songs given to high-flew wordplay. The musician returns in style with a weeklong residency in the East Harlem museum’s...
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Raphael Saadiq
Music Hall of Williamsburg
The R. & B. savant Raphael Saadiq’s bag of tricks is seemingly bottomless; he’s equally at ease producing assorted heavyweights and basking in a front man’s spotlight as he showcases his own cool Motown throwbacks and sleek modern balladry. On “Jimmy Lee,” his first solo album in nearly a decade, Saadiq pulls off yet another stunt with a set of atypically personal tracks. In mining long-age family heartache (addiction, death), the singer produces a novelistic song cycle that seems at once intensely private, broadly political, and undeniably funky.—J.R. (Sept. 10.)

Hercules Delacorte
Public Works, the Public Theatre’s ambitious community-based initiative, is staging a free limited run of “Hercules,” based on the 1997 animated film, with a few new songs by Alan Menken and David Zippel (who collaborated on the movie) and a new book by Kristoffer Diaz. There are some familiar Broadway names in the cast—James Monroe Iglehart, Roger Bart, Krysta Rodriguez—but they’ll be far outnumbered by an ensemble of some two hundred nonprofessional New Yorkers. Under Lear deBessonet’s direction, the program aims to break down the boundaries between performers and patrons and recontextualize theatre as an open-door jamboree.—Michael Schulman (Through Sept. 8.)

Little Gem Irish Repertory
This funny, touching one-act, by Elaine Murphy, was a sensation at the 2008 Dublin Fringe Festival and is getting an altogether winning revival here. Three women from a section of Dublin known as North Inner City—Andrea (Lauren O’Leary); her mother, Lorraine (Brenda Meaney); and her grandmother Kay (Marsha Mason)—tell their stories and explore their relationships with one another in a series of rotating monologues. The writing is wonderful, full of incident, comedy, drama, and emotion, and of loss and displacement work well—but the glut of it all, where one or two mediums too many, alongside drive-by nods to variations on the theme (migration and borders, class and homelessness), muddy the waters.—Maya Phillips (Through Sept. 8.)

Make Believe
Second Stage
The four Conlee kids have an attic playroom that serves as both an escape and a refuge in this quietly unsettling play by Bess Wohl. As in her acclaimed “Small Mouth Sounds,” Wohl creates fleshed-out characters from seemingly little—an impressive feat, considering that the characters are preteens (played by child actors) in the show’s first half. “We are not even going to remember most of this stuff when we grow up,” the boisterous Chris (Ryan Foust) soothingly tells his siblings in a time of crisis. “Make Believe” explores trauma and its legacy, brought into the open when the Conlee’s adult selves turn up. At eighty minutes, this is the rate
In 1874, tennis arrived in the United States via a New York socialite’s suitcase, following her alluring island adventure in Bermuda.

Bermuda, the archipelago known for its pink-sand beaches, turquoise waters, and year-round warm weather, has been announced as the Official Sponsor of the U.S. Open. It’s a fitting collaboration, given the island’s reputation as a destination for travellers in search of idyllic adventures—just a ninety-minute flight from N.Y.C. Lesser known, however, is that the long history of American tennis was introduced by this enchanting Atlantic island.

In only a few years, Mary’s unexpected souvenir from her Bermuda sojourn helped set in motion a national tradition: today, nearly eighteen million people in the U.S. play the sport, from the public-tennis-court games in many cities to the annual U.S. Open, in N.Y.C. Mary’s role in bringing tennis from Bermuda to America has earned her a place in the International Tennis Hall of Fame. In fact, when you visit the museum, in Newport, Rhode Island, a paper cutout of her likeness greets you at the door.

It only serves to enhance the sport’s allure to learn that every swing of a racket in the U.S. can be traced back to Bermuda, where island adventures still await all travellers—tennis lovers included. You’re welcome!

Plan your Bermuda trip today at GoToBermuda.com.
AT THE GALLERIES

After completing his epic project “American Power,” about the presence of the energy industry in the landscapes of twenty-five states, the photographer Mitch Epstein spent a year at home, in New York City, taking pictures of trees. He was looking, he wrote, for a subject “to honor, rather than mourn.” The twelve magnificent images in his new series “Property Rights,” at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. (through Oct. 5), do both as they reflect pressing issues ranging from immigration to our threatened environment. Epstein commemorates activists protecting their land during a snowy vigil on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, in North Dakota, and reveals the spartan conditions in a refugee halfway house in El Paso, Texas. Last year, he photographed the high-school student and Sunrise Movement leader Ashton Clatterbuck (above) in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, secured to a tree with a homemade tool of resistance.—Andrea K. Scott

show that feels too short, and Michael Greif’s production, for Second Stage, has moments that are a little too big, a little too emphatic. Still, Wohl has a voice all her own, especially when suggesting the unsaid.—Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through Sept. 22.)

Moïn Rouge! The Musical
Hirschfeld
Baz Luhrmann’s pop-fuelled film fantasia is now a musical, directed by Alex Timbers, and the new form fits like a cancan dancer’s glove. In 1899, Christian (Aaron Tveit), an American romantic in Paris, falls in with an amiable group of Montmartre artists, who recruit Satine (the wonderful Karen Olivo), the premier courtesan of the Moulin Rouge, to star in their new play. It’s love at first sight for Christian, but the club’s impresario, Harold Zidler (Danny Burstein), has promised Satine to the evil Duke of Monroth (Tam Mutu), whose lucre Zidler needs in order to keep the lights on and the absinthe flowing.

Tveit’s Christian is adorable, the Duke louche and sly, but we are here for the music—hits from Elton John to Beyoncé and Lady Gaga that roll through the audience in wave after wave of dopamine—and for the glorious glitz: arrive early to see the actors begin to appear in their corsets and codpieces on Derek McLane’s appropriately maximalist set.—Alexandra Schwartz (Reviewed in our issue of 8/5 & 12/19.) (Open run.)

Sea Wall/A Life
Hudson
The monologues that make up this show, directed by Carrie Cracknell, are not so much acted as presented by Tom Sturridge and Jake Gyllenhaal. In “Sea Wall,” by Simon Stephens, a youngish photographer named Alex (Sturridge) talks adoringly about his family—a wife too good to be deserved, a beautiful little girl, and a father-in-law, Arthur, with whom he has gently antagonistic conversations about the existence of God. Stephens braids these talks with Alex’s meditations on the nature and power of water; we see the heavy ending coming from a nautical mile away. In “A Life,” by Nick Payne, Gyllenhaal plays a man grieving for his father as he expects his first child. Payne flits between the two cataclysms, first with slow precision, and then, as the cruxes approach, back and forth cinematically, the borders showing some slippage. The scene is nicely done, but it doesn’t lead to much of a revelation. You might just shrug if the anvil of these plays’ shared desire weren’t so obvious: Cry. Feel.—V.C. (8/19/19) (Through Sept. 29.)

ART

“Basquiat’s ‘Defacement’: The Untold Story”
Guggenheim Museum
This small but timely and often surprising powerhouse of a historical show is pegged to a not very good scrap of painting by a stardusted name. The exhibition includes photographs, documents, and art works relating to the death, on September 28, 1983, of Michael Stewart, a twenty-five-year-old art student in New York City, from injuries incurred while in police custody after his arrest, allegedly for writing graffiti. At some point later that year, Jean-Michel Basquiat used marker and acrylics to dash off a sketch on a graffiti-crowded plasterboard wall in the artist Keith Haring’s studio: two fistic bumps beating a leg, a leg, a face, rendered in black silhouette. Unrelated tags of graffitists (Daze and Zephyr are legible) and random froths of spray paint share the surface. The piece, known as “Defacement,” is anomalous. Things are almost never shown happening within this great painter’s characteristic pictorial space, which is usually canny organized and aggressively frontal. Three other Basquiat paintings of police figures, all from 1981, along with strong works by him on unrelated themes, also appear in the show. The curator Châdria LaBouvier asserts their kinship, as protest art, with “Defacement.” But Basquiat’s message wasn’t a fight for freedom. It was that he was free.—Peter Schjeldahl (Through Nov. 6.)

“Camp: Notes on Fashion”
Metropolitan Museum
It’s perhaps best not to overthink the conceptually slippery theme of this year’s Costume Institute show, inspired by Susan Sontag’s famous essay. Instead, let its lessons in aristocratic queer history edify you and its croquembouche flamboyance carry you away. Among the pre-Sontagian artifacts are portraits of cross-dressing nobles from the seventeenth century onward, installed alongside designs they inspired, such as a black silk-taffeta ensemble—half lady’s gown, half dandy’s suit—by Jean Paul Gaultier, from 1998. The show initially exercises restraint, but an appropriately more-is-more ethos ultimately reigns, evoking the chaos of luxury retail as much as it conveys the gender satire and social critique of drag excess. Nevertheless, beauty abounds: double-decker cubicles in rainbow hues display sartorial provocations, including enormous gowns (such as Tomo Koizumi’s joyfully monstrous polychrome organza creation, from his 2019 collection), garish appliqués of
You could call “Dance Now” the unofficial kickoff of the fall dance season. This lively festival, m.c.’d with dry, goofy humor by Deborah Lohse, unfolds over four days, Sept. 4-7, on the tiny stage at Joe’s Pub. The pieces range from fully conceived solos to excerpts of larger works in progress, and each dance is only five minutes long. (One of the participants will receive a stipend to expand his or her piece into something more substantial.) The lineup is consistently varied. This year’s includes work by Alice Sheppard, a pioneering choreographer who conjures up and performs rapturous dances in her wheelchair; the Bang Group, which specializes in rhythmically driven, often humorous dances; Caleb Teicher, a rising tap innovator; and Kate Weare, whose focus on the art of partnering often leads her into fraught and dangerous territory.—Marina Harss

T. C. Cannon
National Museum of the American Indian

When Cannon died, in an accident while driving alone near his home in Santa Fe, in 1978, the world lost more than a talented young artist. Just thirty-one at the time, he might soon have made an improving difference in America’s artistic and even political culture. He may yet do so, if we take to heart this exciting retrospective (The artist’s long obscurity was largely a consequence of problems with his estate, which have been resolved.) An Oklahoman son of poor Native American farmers, Cannon caught fire as a painter while still a teenager, gravitating to Pop art with mordant irony and decorative éclat. He rendered Native subjects—figures and scenes from past and present, both observed and imagined—in sophisticated styles, absorbing influences that ranged from Vincent van Gogh and Henri Matisse to Robert Rauschenberg and Larry Rivers. One of his last paintings, “Two Guns Arikara” (1978), blazes with special promise: a stern man wearing a mixture of traditional and contemporary garb sits holding a pair of long-barreled pistols. The picture’s uniformly intense hues—purple, red-orange, burnt orange, lilac, terre verte, sienna, cerulean, golden yellow, violet, black, and white—generate a visual cadenza, violently serene.—P.S. (Through Sept. 8.)

Edmund de Waal
Frick Collection

The British artist’s porcelain and alabaster vessels are displayed in steel-and-gilt cases throughout the museum, a Gilded Age mansion originally built for the industrialist Henry Clay Frick. De Waal’s poetic sculptures were created in dialogue with the antiques and Old Master paintings that surround them. Viewers who consider the historical context—Frick was a notorious union buster, for one thing—may find their thoughts turning to the relationship between oligarchy and aesthetics. In de Waal’s piece “On an Archaic Torso of Apollo,” delicate white dishes are stacked in a gilded terrarium in the museum’s room of Fragonard murals; resting on an ornate cabinet, the tableau all but disappears into its opulent backdrop. In
Opposites attract. In 2005, the cinematic diarist Jonas Mekas, wielding a handheld camera like a pencil and sketchbook, captured illuminating views of the industrial-grade inspiration of Martin Scorsese on location in Boston and New York during the shoot of “The Departed.” The resulting film, “Notes on an American Film Director at Work,” screening Sept. 4 at Anthology Film Archives (of which Mekas, who died in January, was a founder), also traces the friendship, dating back to the nineteen-sixties, on which the documentary is built. Mekas (along with his son, Sebastian, who also operates a camera) is welcomed onto the set by Scorsese, who comes by to reminisce and talk movies between takes. Above all, Mekas displays the many layers of activity during the shoot to probe Scorsese’s art of composition: as members of the cast, including Leonardo DiCaprio, Vera Farmiga, and Ray Winstone, perform apparently simple and straightforward actions, Scorsese—seated behind a video monitor—seems to conduct them telepathically while creating images that reveal their exaltation. —Richard Brody
Promise at Dawn

The autobiography of Romain Gary, published in 1961, is so crammed with incident that it cries out, all too loudly, to be brought to the screen. The call was first answered by Jules Dassin, whose 1970 adaptation starred Melina Mercouri—a suitably fiery figure—as the author’s irrepressible mother. The role now passes to Charlotte Gainsbourg (too wistful, perhaps, for endless rages and pleadings), in Éric Barbier’s film, which divides its time between the hero’s childhood in Poland, his adolescence in the South of France, and his exploits as a pilot in the Second World War; the hero is played by a succession of actors, with Pierre Niney as the adult Gary. The movie is steady and respectful, though whether the memoir deserves such respect, given Gary’s fantastical embroideries of the truth, is another matter. What would Truffaut, say, have made from this rich material? In French, Polish, and Russian.—A.L. (In limited release.)

Ready or Not

Matching motifs of “Midsummer”—a feckless young man and a sadistic cult—this horror comedy muffs both the humor and the drama. Samara Weaving stars as Grace, who marries the fabulously wealthy Alex (Mark O’Brien) at his family’s estate and learns, on her wedding night, that she must play a deadly game of hide-and-seek in which she is her in-laws’ prey, a condition of an age-old curse. The plotters’ brazen evil leads to several gleefully macabre deaths early on, but, as the chase intensifies and Grace fights to survive, the gags and stunts turn clumsy and expose the story’s rote contrivance. The directors, Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett, guide the able cast (including Andie MacDowell and Henry Czerny, as Alex’s parents, and Nicky Guadagni, as his aunt from Hell) into broad clichés. An opening scene of Grace preparing for the ceremony has more heart and wit than anything that follows. As for the giddy concluding twist, it skirts disturbing implications regarding who gets punished for what; it’s a cop-out.—R.B. (In wide release.)

Tigers Are Not Afraid

Issa López’s new film is composed of different strains. It’s a bleak depiction of a Mexican town that has been devastated by drug cartels; El Chino (Tenoch Huerta Mejía), a hoodlum with political ambitions, kills anyone who gets in his way. But the movie is also an account of lost childhood, as a motherless girl named Estrella (Paola Lara) joins other scavengers in building a makeshift life for themselves among the ruins. From time to time, López shifts into fantasy—not as a flight from the kids’ ordeal but as proof that even their imaginations are chained to their surroundings. The dead, for instance, return, wrapped in plastic, to haunt the living. There’s a curious plot device, about a cell phone, that barely makes sense; yet the action is sustained by the fierce performances of the children, especially that of Juan Ramón López as the orphan-in-chief. In Spanish.—A.L. (9/2/19) (In limited release.)

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Our members return each year as faithfully as the tides.
In northern China, *hutongs* are thin, narrow alleyways lined with cramped single-story houses in which families live communally, sometimes for generations. Depending on your point of view, to enter Hutong, the palatial Chinese restaurant that occupies the ground floor of the Bloomberg Tower, where the legendary Le Cirque once resided, is to feel either the triumph of Chinese haute cuisine as it conquers one of the world’s preeminent food capitals or disorientation at its newfound accessibility to the masses; the restaurant’s prices would cause a stroke for most real-life occupants of its humble namesake.

At Hutong, opulence is an atmospheric condition, apparent as soon as you step into its blue-and-silver dining room: with its soaring vaulted ceiling, white mausoleum marble, and chandeliers resembling alien deities, the space evokes an Art Deco cathedral paying homage to the Holy Father of capitalism. Hutong is part of David Yeo’s restaurant group, which includes more than twenty operations across three continents and whose unifying theme might be characterized as polished, unapologetic decadence. To eat here is to be reminded that you are the sort of person who willingly pays eleven dollars for a dîner cup’s worth of lukewarm soup.

On a recent Monday night, a young manager with a posh English accent assured a table of new arrivals that, “even with everyone in the Hamptons now,” business was going strong. At a nearby wraparound banquette sat a member of the *Forbes* 400 list. A waiter casually dropped that Henry Kissinger had stopped by a few weeks prior. Later, so many women showed up in floor-length evening gowns and stacked Louboutins that one patron wondered aloud if that was the suggested dress code.

Hutong bills its offerings as “northern Chinese,” but a preponderance of the dishes—from the mapo tofu to the dan-dan noodles and the mala-chili prawns—are Szechuanese classics. Skip the hot-and-sour pork *xiao long bao*—it seems like an interesting idea in theory but arrives neon orange and tastes almost no different from regular *xiao long bao*. Instead, go for the dim-sum platter, which has four kinds of dumplings; they arrive in the form of eight translucent sculptures with fillings—lobster and squid ink, rosé-champagne shrimp—sumptuous enough to satisfy Empress Cixi.

To impress your companions, order the Red Lantern, a signature special that features halved and seasoned soft-shell crabs buried in a basket of dried chilies so large you’ll worry that the entree will go untouched. You will be wrong, of course. There are six pieces of crab; finding all of them will feel exciting at first, but then like a tiresome fishing expedition. A recurring theme, as you move from one course to another, is aesthetically pleasing presentation that yields so few mouthfuls that communal dining becomes almost anxiety-provoking; playing chopsticks hockey for that last morsel is inevitable.

The Red Star Noodles, another Hutong original, delivers tender fillets of halibut, theatrically revealed from under petal-like pieces of red pepper, on a bed of soupy noodles and shiitake mushrooms. It’s tasty enough, but one wishes for more interesting cuts of the fish—say, the head or the tail or a few bits of skin—to complicate and deepen the flavor. The crowd-pleaser was the Peking duck, carved tableside and made from a centuries-old recipe that takes at least twenty-four hours to prepare and leaves the meat so supple that it all but melts in your mouth. Pro tip: order early, because the birds tend to disappear after 9 P.M.

One recent evening, a thirtysomething Beijing native and his date wondered whether food necessarily tastes better when there’s less of it. They had eaten their entrees, but a feeling of fullness felt far on the horizon. His companion contemplated the last grain of rice on her chopstick, paid the check, and then quietly asked, “Where to for second dinner?” (*Entrées* $25–$78.)

—*Jiayang Fan*
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COMMENT

ANOTHER RACE TO RUN

This summer, a Dallas Morning News poll asked Texas Democrats to pick their favorite from a list of declared candidates for the 2020 U.S. Senate race. The winner was: “Someone else.” This shadowy figure, who garnered nineteen per cent of the vote—almost twice that of the next nearest contender—was easily recognizable: he has the tall, lanky profile of former congressman Beto O’Rourke, of El Paso. About half of those polled said that O’Rourke should drop his Presidential bid and take on the Republican senator John Cornyn, whose approval rating is in the thirties. (Even Ted Cruz, whom O’Rourke almost defeated last year, does better than that.) “Beto, if you’re listening: Come home,” the Houston Chronicle said in an editorial after the poll was released. “Texas needs you.” He heard, but said that he would not run for the Senate “in any scenario.”

For many Democrats, that was a disappointing reply. Even if Donald Trump is defeated, the Democrats will need to pick up three Senate seats in order to gain control of the chamber and have a reasonable chance of turning their ambitious plans into legislative reality. If Trump wins, the crucial net gain will be four. (The Vice-President gets to break any tie; there would be an added complication should either Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders beat Trump—the Republican governor of the winner’s state would name an interim senator until a special election could be held.)

The urgency cannot be overstated. Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer are both in their eighties; whether Trump has an unimpeded choice to replace one or both of them, potentially remaking the Court in his Constitution-defying image, could come down to a couple of seats. It’s not going to be so easy to get them. Republicans have to defend twenty-three of the thirty-five Senate seats on the ballot next year, but most of them are in deep-red states.

There are openings for the Democrats. One has already been taken: two weeks ago, in Colorado, the former governor John Hickenlooper abandoned his Presidential campaign, and he will now run against Senator Cory Gardner, instantly turning what had been a likely Republican win into a possible Democratic one. In Georgia, an increasingly purple state, there are now two Republican seats up for grabs. David Perdue, who is a cousin of Sonny Perdue, Trump’s Secretary of Agriculture, is running for reelection, and Johnny Isakson announced last week that he would step down at the end of this year for health reasons. There is a Democrat who could be a formidable contender for either seat: Stacey Abrams, the former minority leader of the Georgia House of Representatives, who narrowly lost a highly contested governor’s race last year. Abrams has said that she is not interested, even though, as in Texas, no other candidate commands the field. She intends to stay focused on her voting-rights work, but she did say that she would “be honored” to be considered as the Democrats’ Vice-Presidential candidate.

In Arizona, Mark Kelly, a former Navy combat pilot and astronaut, is running against Senator Martha McSally, who lost last year to the Democrat Kyrsten Sinema but was appointed by the Republican governor to fill John McCain’s seat after his death. Kelly is the husband of the former congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, who was seriously wounded eight years ago in a mass shooting at an event with her constituents in Tucson, which left six people dead. Since then, Giffords and Kelly have become tireless advocates for gun control. He is a well-known figure with a strong message in a state that seems ready to hear it.

But the Democrats have their own vulnerabilities. Doug Jones won in a special election in Alabama last year
against Judge Roy Moore, a far-right extremist who was accused of sexual misconduct with teen-age girls. (Moore has denied the allegations.) Jones must now defend that seat in a state where Trump's approval rating is above sixty per cent. Unless Moore gets the Republican nomination again—and he's trying—Jones may have a short Senate career. In Michigan, the junior Democratic senator, Gary Peters, is facing a strong challenger in John James, an Iraq War veteran and a businessman, who, if elected, would be one of only two African-American Republicans in the Senate. In these states—and in others that may be in play, such as Iowa, Maine, and North Carolina—the essential message is the same: the candidates matter.

There is no imperative, at this point, for every low-polling Presidential contender to drop out of the race. Andrew Yang, for example, is using his candidacy to spur a conversation about universal basic income. And he is from New York, which has no Senate race next year. But, if there's a chance to take a seat, why not try? Governor Steve Bullock, of Montana, has been asked that question many times, because he could have a Hickenlooper-like effect on the Senate race in his home state. His answers boil down to this: the Senate is a miserable place, ill-suited for anyone who wants to "get things done." The chamber has done much to earn that reputation, particularly under Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. Yet the present morass only underscores how important it is to elect better senators. (The Senate is also a place where Montana, with a population of one million, has the same representation as California, with forty million—something that might at least inspire Bullock.)

Even O'Rourke, for whom, just last year, being a senator was something of a dream job, said that running for the same office now "would not be good enough for El Paso and it would not be good enough for this country." He made that comment soon after a mass shooting in El Paso, in which the gunman targeted what he called a "Hispanic invasion." On a human level, it's understandable that O'Rourke would want to directly take on Trump and his bigotry; on a political level, though, the logic is less clear. When Senator Kirsten Gillibrand left the Presidential race, last week, she said, "It's important to know when it's not your time, and to know how you can best serve your community and country."

There are many fronts on which the battle against Trumpism can be fought. More broadly, too much is lost if legislative politics, as practiced in Washington, is simply scorned. The Senate can be a safety net for our democracy, and, at the moment, it needs saving. Someone has to do it.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

DEPT. OF TEEN SPIRIT
ARRIVAL

In "Moby-Dick," Ishmael says that "whenever it is a damp, drizzly November of the soul," when the impulse to knock people's hats off for no reason gets too strong, it is time to take to the sea. Melville described men "posted like silent sentinels" at the edges of Manhattan, "fixed in ocean reveries." Last Wednesday, in drizzly August, a crowd of two hundred or so waited at the North Cove Marina, in lower Manhattan, for the arrival of Greta Thunberg, the sixteen-year-old climate activist from Sweden.

There were reasons to "start growing grim about the mouth," as Melville put it: the Amazon rain forest was on fire; glaciers were calving into the sea; Tropical Storm Dorian was gathering strength in the Caribbean; scientists were trying to artificially inseminate the last two northern white rhinos on earth; there was lead in the water in Newark. The Endangered Species Act had been gutted, and the E.P.A. had announced new protections not for air or water but for marine diesel engines.

Last year, Thunberg began striking by skipping school every Friday to protest government inaction on climate change, inspiring kids around the world to do the same. On August 14th, she departed from Plymouth, England, on the Malizia II, an emission-free sailboat, to attend a climate summit at the United Nations on September 23rd. (She avoids airplanes, which are among the worst sources of carbon emissions.) During the two-week journey, she had posted several dispatches on Twitter. Early Wednesday morning, she documented her first sighting of the dim lights of New York. "Land!!" she wrote. After clearing customs and immigration while anchored off Coney Island, she waited on the boat for the incoming tide. With no engine, the Malizia had to rely on natural forces to propel it to its landing place.

By 1:30 P.M., a crowd of supporters and international media had assembled at the Malizia's berth, alongside a gleaming mega-yacht called the Gran Finale. "We're here to give her a warm welcome to our city," Spencer Berg, a freckled sixteen-year-old, said. He wore a pin that read "There is no planet B." Berg, who has organized strikes at his school, credited Thunberg with changing his outlook: he used to be "really mad and depressed about climate change"; now he was "mad and active about climate change."

On the dock, people turned to the mouth of the Hudson, waiting for the Malizia's dark sails to materialize out of the gloom. "You can see the Statue of Liberty now, the haze is clearing," a silver-haired woman said. She wore a pin that read "Granny Peace Brigade." "I love the life I've had, and I love all the creatures," she said. "It's our responsibility to be part of this amazing world." A fourteen-year-old named Alexandria Villaseñor, who has been striking at the U.N. every Friday, had come to greet the boat. She had been exchanging messages with Thunberg, who advised her to bring a sleeping bag and a thermos to each strike when it's cold. At school, she has arranged to get the assignments she misses from her teacher. "My generation will be so affected to the point where school won't matter anymore, because we're running from the next disaster," she said.

At two-thirty, Thunberg posted a photograph of herself with the New York skyline behind her. A shriek of delight went up. A little girl with a flower crown worthy of a pagan ritual waved a "Welcome Greta!" sign. A woman gave
out posters of the U.N.’s Sustainable Development Goals. “I’ve got industry, peace and justice, decent work,” she said.

“Do you have gender equality?” a demonstrator asked.

“I have reduced inequality,” the woman offered.

Finally, the thin black line of a sail, tacking slowly back and forth toward the Statue of Liberty, was visible. “Hey, everyone, we see Greta’s boat!” an activist could be heard live-streaming. The youngsters sang a song: “We’re going to strike because the waters are rising. We’re going to strike because the people are dying.”

The boat took more than an hour to make its way to port, in what felt like a very nineteenth-century setting for a very twenty-first-century problem. The Malizia was escorted by a candy-colored flotilla of seventeen small boats whose sails listed each of the U.N.’s goals. Jet Skis and ferry boats made oblivious circles around the little fleet. “Listen to the proof, you owe it to the youth,” the crowd chanted. The boat passed Ellis Island, and soon the words “Unite Behind the Science” could be seen on one sail. A small silhouette on the prow lifted its arm and waved. The crowd cheered and waved back.

As the Malizia drifted in to dock, Thunberg could be observed watching the approach. She wore Crocs and a black waterproof sailing outfit, which had “Greta” printed on the back and “G. Thunberg” on the front. Her hair was in a single braid. She had brought her hand-painted school strike sign all the way from Sweden. It seemed like an occasion where the Mayor should be present, or a brass band, or dignitaries bearing a fruit basket, but no official delegation welcomed Thunberg. She stepped off the boat and onto a floating dock, then ascended a ramp to a stage, where she faced rows of news cameras and handheld phones beaming her arrival around the world. She stood with a placid expression, her hands folded in front of her. The boat’s captain summarized the journey in a clipped German accent, using nautical terminology. “We are extremely relieved that this has all worked out exactly as planned,” he said.

When it was her turn, Thunberg spoke in the precise and measured language for which she has become known.

“It is insane that a sixteen-year-old had to cross the Atlantic Ocean to make a stand,” she observed. She reported that not once had she been seasick. She gave words of encouragement to her fellow-activists. She said that after participating in the U.N. strikes she will travel by “trains, buses, and probably even sailing” to Chile, for another U.N. climate conference. A reporter asked what she would miss about being on the water.

“To not have contact with anyone, and to just not have anything you have to do, and to just literally sit for hours and stare at the ocean, not doing anything,” she said. “To be in this wilderness, the ocean, and see the beauty of it—that I am also going to miss.” Then she returned to the boat to get her things.

—Emily Witt

**WEST SIDER**

**HOMECOMING**

The music producer and d.j. Mark Ronson was hunched over a bowl of matzo-ball soup at the Fine & Schapiro kosher deli, on the Upper West Side. The establishment’s fluorescent lights and imitation-wood panelling, which was hung with photographs of intricately arranged cold cuts, made for the kind of half-dowdy, half-gritty aesthetic seen nowadays less in real life and more on streaming-platform dramas set in the seventies. Ronson—a lanky man made at least an inch lankier by a towering, dawn-of-rock-and-roll pompadour—is a platinum-selling producer (most famously, of the Bruno Mars collaboration “Uptown Funk”) and a recent Academy Award winner (for “Shallow,” from “A Star Is Born”). When he was a child, living in London, his grandmother used to make him matzo-ball soup. After his family decamped to New York, Fine & Schapiro picked up the slack.

“No offense to my mum’s cooking, but, when we lived in the neighborhood, ordering from here was a treat,” Ronson said, in a soft mid-Atlantic accent. As if reconsidering, he examined the bright-yellow liquid in his spoon. “Does this soup have a slightly Springfield Power Plant color to it?” he asked. Born into a Jewish family of real-estate developers, Ronson moved to Manhattan when he was eight, after his mother, Ann, married Mick Jones, of the rock band Foreigner. The family lived in the San Remo, on Central Park West, and Ronson attended the all-boys Collegiate School. He interned at Rolling Stone, where he
spent the dead hours of one long summer in a cubicle, headphones on, practicing for his bar mitzvah. (“Some of the notes were probably a little . . . challenging,” he said.)

In his teens, Ronson became a d.j., spinning early hip-hop and funk. Then he began producing music, releasing four albums of his own material before heading to Los Angeles and sequestering himself in the studio. “I’ve always felt like I have to work really fucking hard to achieve anything,” he said. “I guess I have pretty low self-esteem.”

Existential and physical ennui, as well as a divorce, from the French model and actress Joséphine de La Baume, led him to record his new album, “Late Night Feelings.” A minor-key, tears-on-the-dance-floor synth-and-soul anthology, it features a bevy of female vocalists, among them Miley Cyrus and Lykke Li. It’s the kind of record you could dance to at a club but also listen to at home while wearing woolly socks and sipping a glass of Sancerre. Ronson’s midlife crisis also spurred a move back to the Upper West Side, where he is buying an apartment. “I was ready for a change, and I don’t have FOMO about not living downtown anymore,” he said. “I’m forty-three years old.” He picked up a plastic-encased menu. “Now I’m going to act my age and order the stuffed cabbage.”

After forgoing the cabbage for half a tuna sandwich and a crisp, saucer-size latke, Ronson left the deli. He put on a pair of sunglasses—looking not unlike Johnny Cash, if he were run through an Ashkenazi filter—and strolled east on Seventy-second Street, toward the Park. “Over there”—he pointed—“was the Virgin Megastore. I would get so excited in high school, because you could listen to any CD you wanted, and they’d have to open the box for you. Even at fifteen, I knew that was a terrible business model.”

Onward, toward the Dakota, the one-time home of his childhood friend Sean Lennon. “When I’d come to visit Sean there, when I was eleven or twelve, I had more of a British accent,” he said. “I would go, to the doorman, ‘Can you please tell Sean that Mark is downstairs?’, and he would go, ‘Maug?’, and I’d be, like, ‘Mark.’ And he’d be, like, ‘Maug?’” He laughed. “So after a while I gave up and said, ‘Can you tell Sean Maug is here?’ It was easier.”

As he crossed the street to the Park, his steps quickened. “I love the expanse you get here, where you stand on Central Park West and there are no buildings,” he said. He was looking forward to walking his two rescue dogs, Pablo and Maisie, in the Park and heading down to the Film Society of Lincoln Center. (“Fassbinder’s ‘Fox and His Friends’ is also the basis for the news show, right?”)

“Three weeks ago, I was about to make an offer on this apartment, and I was, like, I need to do due diligence—see if I really like it here,” he said. “So I came up here and lay down on that patch of grass.” He gestured toward a stretch of lawn. “And it felt right.”

—Naomi Fry

THE SHARING ECONOMY

THE SWIMMER

Imagine a last-gasp heat wave. You want to cool off. Hmm, let’s see. How about going for a swim in a random stranger’s back-yard pool—but without getting arrested or shot at or developing a weird skin disease? Sound enticing? If so, there’s now an app for that, a sort of Airbnb for pools. It’s called Swimply. The name might strike you as awkward—maybe appropriately so, given the potential ick factor of diving into waters that could be half toddler urine—but “it captures what we do,” Bunim Laskin, the company’s twenty-two-year-old C.E.O., said. “It’s swimming. It’s simple.” The name was originally even simpler: Swimple. “But people said it sounded like ‘pimple,’ so we added the ‘y.’”

Laskin was explaining this on a muggy morning while sitting poolside—that was another contender for the app’s name, he said—in a Long Island backyard belonging to his business partner, Asher Weinberger. Spindly, balding, and animated, Weinberger is Swimply’s chief marketing officer and something of a contrast to Laskin, who is shorter, hisure, and less animated. Both are passionate about developing the shared-swimming economy. To that end, Weinberger’s own pool is available on Swimply, for fifty dollars an hour, under the rubric “Local Paradise.”

“The first day, I made a thousand dollars in bookings,” Weinberger said. He now claims to host paying strangers in his pool four times a week, on average. Over all, the company has signed up pools in thirty-six states in a little more than a year. Hosts set their own prices; Swimply takes a commission, plus a “service charge” from swimmers. As for the ick factor? The company partners with local pool-maintenance firms to make sure that pools are up to snuff and proper pH levels before they’re listed.

Weinberger and Laskin met last year, at a networking event that Weinberger, an entrepreneur and “chill” Orthodox Jew, had set up for other religious Jews interested in startups. Laskin, an Israeli-American whose family moved to Lake-wood, New Jersey, when he was fourteen, had launched Swimply as a lark the previous summer, while he was home from college. His family had been paying a neighbor to use the pool she had built for her mostly absent, presumably ungrateful grandchildren, and he realized that he might have found a scalable business.

“I went on Google Earth and searched eighty pools nearby,” Laskin recalled. “I knocked on eighty doors. I got seventy-six slammed doors. And we started with our first four pools.” He added, “They all had to be within walking distance, because I didn’t have a car.” He used his bar-mitzvah money to build “a really dumbed-down Web site” and launched it under the name Pool For U. At that stage, the site was just a listing service: a potential swimmer would call Laskin about a pool; he would then call the host, make ar-
rangements, and get back to the swimmer. For marketing, he placed an ad in a local paper. Within two weeks, he said, “the four pools became thirty-two. And two weeks later MSNBC mentioned us, and the Web site crashed. That was the end of my summer and the beginning of Swimply.”

By December, Laskin had dropped out of college to pursue the concept full time. Weinberger helped him raise funding to build a proper Web site and app. To their surprise, among the early adopters were observant Muslim and Jewish families, who are often reluctant to swim in public. “There are all kinds of niche communities,” Weinberger said. “We’ve had people with body issues—amputees, things like that—where they’re uncomfortable going to a public pool. Nudists find this to be a great way to express themselves. We get a lot of e-mails saying, ‘Hey, are you nude-friendly?’”

“We had a mermaid thing that I just didn’t get,” Laskin said. Weinberger thought it might have been a meet-up for a group “that identifies as half human, half fish,” which he’d read about in a magazine.

It was time for a test drive. Swimply’s Web site is easy to navigate, and without much effort an hour was booked at a pool in the Marine Park neighborhood of Brooklyn. The house turned out to be a mansion on a block of more modest residences. An inviting pool was found beyond an iron fence, but privacy hadn’t been prioritized. Swimply hosts typically give swimmers a wide berth, and this host, like most, had promised that window shades would be drawn; but the shades were up and a woman’s forehead was visible in a window. Moreover, the pool was within sight of three other houses. This was not a nude-friendly situation. It must also be said that the pool deck was a bit grubby. Scattered around were plastic beer cups, an empty corn-chip bag, a cigarette butt, a wire coat hanger, and a rusted metal tube that had broken off a deck chair. Floating in the water was a half-inflated raft decorated with characters from Pixar’s “Cars.” But the pool itself looked clean and a quick dip proved refreshing. The water was cool, not overheated, and stinging eyes indicated a reassuring level of chlorine. At press time, no rashes were reported.

—Bruce Handy

SKETCHPAD: A SURVEY OF PINK IN A DRUGSTORE AISLE

In an effort to understand the history and the cultural significance of the color pink, the artist Kaye Blegvad scoured gardens, Barbie DreamHouses, zoos, and crystal shops—as well as a Family Dollar on Gates Avenue, in Brooklyn.

Diapers for children aged one to three, by which time the gendered enthusiasm for pink has kicked in.

Automobile air freshener in “Cherry Blossom Honey” scent.

The “sensitive” version of a toothpaste.

Enormous cans of hair spray.

A toilet cleaner with a sticker inviting you to “scratch and sniff”—a peculiar instruction on such a product.

Diaper packages for pregnancy tests.

A body puff (this item was available only in pink).
On January 29, 2016, Prince summoned me to his home, Paisley Park, to tell me about a book he wanted to write. He was looking for a collaborator. Paisley Park is in Chanhassen, Minnesota, about forty minutes southwest of Minneapolis. Prince treasured the privacy it afforded him. He once said, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, that Minnesota is “so cold it keeps the bad people out.” Sure enough, when I landed, there was an entrenched layer of snow on the ground, and hardly anyone in sight.

Prince’s driver, Kim Pratt, picked me up at the airport in a black Cadillac Escalade. She was wearing a plastic diamond the size of a Ring Pop on her finger. “Sometimes you gotta femme it up,” she said. She dropped me off at the Country Inn & Suites, an unremarkable chain hotel in Chanhassen that served as a de-facto substation for Paisley. I was “on call” until further notice. A member of Prince’s team later told me that, over the years, Prince had paid for enough rooms there to have bought the place four times over.

My agent had put me up for the job but hadn’t refrained from telling me the obvious: at twenty-nine, I was extremely unlikely to get it. In my hotel room, I turned the television on. I turned the television off. I had a mint tea. I felt that I was joining a long and august line of people who’d been made to wait by Prince, people who had sat in rooms in this same hotel, maybe in this very room, quietly freaking out just as I was quietly freaking out.

A few weeks earlier, Prince had hosted editors from three publishing houses at Paisley, and declared his intention to write a memoir called “The Beautiful Ones,” after one of the most naked, aching songs in his catalogue. For as far back as he could remember, he told the group, he’d written music to imagine—and reimagine—himself. Being an artist was a constant evolution. Early on, he’d recognized the inherent mystery of this process. “Mystery is a word for a reason,” he’d said. “It has a purpose.” The right book would add new layers to his mystery even as it stripped others away. He offered only one formal guideline: it had to be the biggest music book of all time.

On January 19th, Prince chose an editor—Chris Jackson, of Spiegel & Grau, an imprint of Penguin Random House—and started the search for a co-writer. A few days later, he put on his first-ever show without a band, “Piano & a Microphone,” at a soundstage at Paisley. He’d pared down his songs to their essential components and reinvented them on the fly. He’d been practicing there into the night, playing alone for hours on end, his piano filling the vast darkness until he found something that he described, to Alexis Petridis, of the Guardian, as “transcendence.” In a recording of the concert, which I watched a year later, Prince shared some of his earliest musical memories with the audience. His mother, Mattie Della Shaw Baker, was a jazz singer; his father, John Lewis Nelson, who went by Prince Rogers, was a musician and a songwriter. “I thought I would never be able to play like my dad, and he never missed an opportunity to remind me of that,” Prince said. “But we got along good. He was my best friend.”

I later learned from an aide that Prince was in the habit of reading the reviews of his shows that fans tweeted or posted on their blogs. These were the people he felt deserved the collaborator job, not the high-profile candidates floated by the publisher. He’d inspired them to write, he said, and they might inspire him, too. He wanted an improvisation partner, someone he could open up to and with whom he could arrange his story the way he would a song or an album. Of course, publishers would balk at the idea of hiring someone entirely untested. In a spirit of compromise, he accepted two names from a list of candidates that Jackson and the literary agency I.C.M. had provided for him, mine being one of them. The other writer

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and I were the only ones who’d never published a book. Prince’s team sent us an assignment: we were to submit personal statements to Prince about our relationship to his music and why we thought we could do the job. I submitted mine at eight-thirty that same night. To call it heavy on flattery would be an understatement, and I regretted it almost immediately. But the response from Prince’s camp came at two-thirty—the next morning, and within a day I was on a plane to Minneapolis.

Around 6 P.M., Pratt texted to say that she was picking me up from the hotel. P, as many people in the Paisleyosphere called him, was ready to see me. The sun had set, and Paisley—a vast network of squat buildings, including three recording studios, panelled in white aluminum like an office park—was illuminated by purple sconces. “He’s really sweet. You’ll see,” Pratt said. “Actually, looks like you’ll see now—that’s him.” Prince was standing alone at the front door.

“Dan. Nice to meet you,” he said, as I approached. “I’m Prince.” His voice was calm, and lower than I’d expected.

In the foyer, the lights were dim, and the silence was broken only by cooing doves—live ones, in a cage on the second floor. Scented candles flickered from the corners. Prince was wearing a loose-fitting top in a heathered siena, with matching pants, a green vest, and a pair of beaded necklaces. His Afro was concealed beneath an olive-green knit hat. His sneakers, white platforms with light-up Lucite soles, flashed red as he led me up a flight of stairs and across a small skyway to a conference room.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“No, I’m O.K.,” I said, though I hadn’t eaten since morning.


In the conference room, his trademark glyph was etched into a long glass table. Toward the back, a fern sat beside two small sofas arranged in the shape of a heart. On the vaulted ceiling, a mural depicted a purple nebula bordered by piano keys. Prince took a place at the head of the table. “Sit here,” he said, gesturing to the chair next to him. He seemed accustomed to choreographing the space around him.

Prince asked whether I had brought a copy of my statement; he wanted to go over it together. I hadn’t, I said, but I could read it from my e-mail. I fumbled for my phone in my pocket, fearing that I was already in over my head. I cleared my throat and began, “When I listen to Prince, I feel like I’m breaking the law.”

“Now, let me stop you right there,” Prince said. “Why did you write that?” It occurred to me that he might have flown me in from New York just to tell me that I knew nothing of his work.

“The music I make isn’t breaking the law, to me,” he said. “I write in harmony. I’ve always lived in harmony—like this.” He gestured at the room.

“The candles.” He asked if I’d heard of the Devil’s interval, the tritone: a combination of notes that create a brooding, menacing dissonance. He associated it with Led Zeppelin. Their kind of rock music, bluesy and harsh, broke the rules of harmony. Robert Plant’s keening voice—that sounded lawbreaking to him as a child, not the music that he and his friends made.

Behind his sphinxlike features, I could sense, there was an air of skepticism. I tried to calm my nerves by making as much eye contact as possible. Though his face was unlined and his skin glowing, there was a fleeting gnawing in his eyes. We spoke about dictation. “Certain words don’t describe me,” he said. White critics banded about terms that demonstrated a lack of awareness of who he was. “Alchemy” was one. When writers ascribed alchemical qualities to his music, they were ignoring the literal meaning of the word, the dark art of turning base metal into gold. He would never do something like that. He reserved a special disdain for the word “magical.” I’d used some version of it in my statement. “Funk is the opposite of magic,” he said. “Funk is about rules.”

To my relief, much of my statement sat better with him than the first lines had. He said he liked “some of the stuff” I wrote: about his origins in North Minneapolis, his pioneering use of drum machines, his nest of influences. Our conversation loosened up a bit. He said he was finished with making music, making records. “I’m sick of playing the guitar, at least for now. I like the piano, but I hate the thought of picking up the guitar.” What he really wanted to do was write. In fact, he had so many ideas for his first book that he didn’t know where to begin. Maybe he wanted to focus on scenes from his early life, juxtaposed against moments set in the present day. Or maybe he wanted to do a whole book about the inner workings of the music industry. Or perhaps he should write about his mother—he’d been wanting to articulate her role in his life. He wondered what writing a book had in common with writing an album. He wanted to know the rules, so he could know when to flout them.

The book would have to surprise people—provoke them, motivate them. It would become a form of cultural currency. “I want something that’s passed around from friend to friend, like—you know ‘Waking Life’?” he said, referring to Richard Linklater’s surreal 2001 movie. I said that I did. “You don’t show that to all your friends, just the ones who can hang.” Books like Miles Davis’s autobiography or John Howard Griffin’s “Black Like Me” were natural touchstones, he thought.

The book would allow him to seize the narrative of his own life. Once, he said, he’d seen one of his former employees on TV saying she thought it was her God–given duty to preserve and protect the unreleased material in his vault. “Now, that sounds like someone I should call the police on,” he told me. “How is that not racist?” People were always casting him—and all black artists—in a helpless role, he said, as if he were incapable of managing himself. “I still have to brush my own teeth,” he said.

He noticed my phone still sitting on the conference-room table, and seemed to falter for a moment. “That thing’s not on, is it?”

“No,” I said—it wasn’t. He had never explicitly said not to record him, but I didn’t even try to take notes. (As soon as I got back to my hotel room, I retracted as much of our conversation as possible. I’ve used quotation marks only when I’m confident that I’ve captured his remarks verbatim.)

In 1993, Prince had publicly broken with his longtime record label, Warner Bros. At the time, his contract had promised the label six more albums for a hundred million dollars, but it limited his prolific output to one new album a year and gave the label ownership of his
master recordings. Hoping to break the contract, Prince changed his name to an unpronounceable symbol and appeared in public with the word “slave” painted on his face. With the help of his manager, Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins, he’d gained control of his master recordings in 2014. Every artist should own his masters, he told me, especially black artists. He saw this as a way to fight racism. Black communities would restore wealth by safeguarding their musicians’ master recordings and all their intellectual property, and they would protect that wealth, hiring their own police, founding their own schools, and making covenants on their own terms.

The music industry had siloed black music from the start, he reminded me. It had promoted black artists to the “black base”; only when they captured that base would those artists “cross over.” Billboard had developed totally unnecessary charts to measure and quantify this division, which continued to this day. “Why didn’t Warner Bros. ever think I could be president of the label?” he asked. “I want to say in a meeting with big record executives, ‘O.K., you’re racist.’ How would you feel if I said that to you?” His eyes settled on mine with a blazing intensity. “Can we write a book that solves racism?” he asked. Before I could answer, he had another question: “What do you think racism means?”

After sputtering for a few seconds, I offered something like the dictionary definition. Prince only nodded slightly. He recalled some of his earliest memories of racism in Minneapolis. His best friend growing up was Jewish. “He looked a lot like you,” he said. One day, someone threw a stone at the boy. North Minneapolis was a black community, so it wasn’t until Prince started fourth grade, in 1967, when he and others in his neighborhood were bused to a predominantly white elementary school, that he experienced racism firsthand. In retrospect, he believed that Minnesota at that time was no more enlightened than segregationist Alabama had been; he’d sung scathingly about busing in the 1992 song “The Sacrifice of Victor.”

“I went to school with the rich kids who didn’t like having me there,” he said. When one of them called him the N-word, Prince threw a punch. “I felt I had to. Luckily, the guy ran away, crying. But if there was a fight—who would it end? Where should it end? How do you know when to fight?”

Those questions became more complex as racism took on insidious guises, he said. “I mean, ‘All lives matter’—you understand the irony in that,” he said, referring to a far-right slogan that was gaining some traction at the time.

A little later, Prince said, “I’ll be honest, I don’t think you could write the book.” He thought I needed to know more about racism—to have felt it. He talked about hip-hop, the way it transformed words, taking white language—“your language”—and turning it into something that white people couldn’t understand. Miles Davis, he told me, believed in only two categories of thinking: the truth and white bullshit.

And yet, a little later, when we were discussing the music industry’s many forms of dominion over artists, I said something that seemed to galvanize him. I wondered what his interest in publishing a book was, given that the music business had modelled itself on book publishing. Contracts, advances, royalties, revenue splits, copyrights: the approach to intellectual property that he abhorred in record labels had its origins in the publishing industry. His face lit up. “I can see myself typing that,” he said, pantomimic typing at a keyboard. “You may be wondering why I’m working with . . .”

We’d been speaking for well over an hour when he paused. “Do you know what time it is?” he asked. The singer Judith Hill was playing on the soundstage that evening. He disappeared for a moment to call his driver, hoping she would take me back to the hotel. Apparently, she was already engaged.

“It’s O.K.,” he said, when he came back. “I’ll take you myself.”

I followed him out of the conference room and into an elevator. Bouncing on the balls of his feet, he punched the button for the bottom floor. “You got me hopping up on this industry talk,” he said. “But I’m still thinking about writing on my mother.”

The elevator opened into a dimly lit basement, and Prince led me out to the garage, walking briskly toward a black Lincoln MKT. Climbing into the passenger seat, I noticed a fistful of twenty-dollar bills in the cup holder. Prince activated the garage door, and we pulled out into Paisley’s main lot, now noticeably fuller than when I’d arrived. “Looks like people are starting to show up,” Prince said, sounding excited.

Turning out of the complex, his posture straight, he picked up speed and resumed our discussion on chains of distribution: who controls a piece of intellectual property, and who makes money on it. “Tell Esther”—Newberg, his agent at I.C.M.—“and Random House that I want to own my book,” he said. “That you and I would co-own it, take it to all the distribution channels.” He added, “I like your style. Just look at a word and see if it’s one I would use. Because ‘magic’ isn’t one I’d use. ‘Magic’ is Michael’s word”—meaning Michael Jackson. “That’s what his music was about.”

In the portico of the Country Inn, he put the car in park. “I’ve never seen race, in a certain way—I’ve tried to be nice to everyone,” he said. He seemed to think that too few of his white contemporaries had the same open-mindedness, even as they fêted him for it. When it came time to sell and promote the book, Prince wanted to deal only with people who accepted that he had his own business practices. “There’s a lot of people who say you gotta learn to walk before you learn to run,” he said. “That’s slave talk to me. That’s something slaves would say.” He offered me a firm handshake and left me at the hotel’s automatic doors.

Around four o’clock the next afternoon, I was returning to the Country Inn from lunch when I saw Prince, at the wheel of his Lincoln MKT, pulling out of the hotel lot, his Afro looming large in the driver’s-side window. I watched him idle at a traffic light in front of a bank, beside a dirty snowdrift. For some reason, sighting him in the wild felt even stranger than riding with him. What was he doing? Interviewing another writer? Running errands?

When I got back to my room, I saw that one of Prince’s aides had e-mailed a link from him: a short video on Facebook about the continuing relevance of the doll test, the famous experiment, first conducted in the nineteen-forties, in which black children associated a white doll with goodness, kindness, and beauty, and a black doll with badness, cruelty, and ugliness.

I’d reconciled myself to a Saturday
night alone in Chanhassen when Prince’s assistant, Meron Bekure, texted. There was to be a dance party for Prince’s employees at Paisley, followed by a movie screening. She would pick me up. In a high-ceiled room adjacent to the soundstage, Jakissa Taylor Semple, who goes by DJ Kiss, was spinning records on a plinth surrounded by couches and candles. Six of Prince’s aides and bandmates swayed to the music next to a tray of vegan desserts. A mural of black jazz musicians from Prince’s “Rainbow Children” era was on the wall; a large silver rendering of Prince’s glyph was suspended from the ceiling. After a while, Bekure left and returned holding a bundle of coats. Prince regularly arranged for private after-hours screenings at the nearby Chanhassen Cinema. We were going to see “Kung Fu Panda 3.” We headed over in two cars and found a lone attendant in the empty parking lot ready to unlock the door. Prince arrived just after the movie began, slipping into the back row.

“Is there popcorn?” he asked Bekure. She went out to fetch some. We watched as the animated panda ate dumplings and relegated evildoers to the Spirit Realm. I heard Prince laugh a few times. As the credits rolled, he rose without a word, skipping down the stairs and out of the theatre, his sneakers shining laser red in the darkness.

Many Prince associates have a similar story: they were never officially hired. Prince simply told them to show up again, and they did. A week after I returned from Minneapolis, Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins wrote to Prince’s agent at I.C.M. He was taking “Piano & a Microphone” on tour in Australia. The show, Prince told the Sydney Morning Herald, would be “like watching me give birth to a new galaxy every night.” He wanted me to join him for the first leg, in Melbourne.

I arrived on Tuesday, February 16th, the day of his first show, at the State Theatre. His bodyguard, Kirk Johnson, was staying in the room next to mine at the Crown Towers hotel. Johnson told me I could expect a call from Peter Bravestrong—Prince’s preferred pseudonym for travelling. I liked how obviously, almost defiantly, fictitious the name sounded. Its comic-book gaudiness was in keeping with some of his past alter egos: Jamie Starr, Alexander Nevermind, Joey Coco. Around twelve-thirty, the phone on my bedside table lit up. Peter Bravestrong was calling. Sounding crestfallen, Prince said he’d just received some sad news. I couldn’t draw him out on it. “I’m just going to get ready to play the show tonight, and I’ll see you tomorrow?” He brightened a bit. “I have a lot of stuff to show you.”

I Googled “Prince.” News outlets were reporting that Denise Matthews, better known as Vanity, was dead at fifty-seven—Prince’s age. In the early eighties, Prince and Matthews had fallen in love, and Prince had tapped her to front the group Vanity 6. She was slated to appear in his 1984 film, “Purple Rain,” when their relationship fell apart, and her role went to Apollonia Kotero instead.

The stage set already had a touch of the séance to it. Long tiers of candles burned around the piano, light poured in a velvety haze from the ceiling, and fractals pulred and oozed on a screen at the back of the stage. Prince came out and sat down at the piano, and as the cheers faded he said, “I just found out someone dear to us has passed away.”

There was something wintry about the concert that reminded me of people huddling for warmth against the cold. In 1984, Prince had excised the bass line from “When Doves Cry,” preferring its more skeletal form. The same force seemed to be moving him during this performance. “I’m new to this playing alone,” he said toward the end of the show. “I thank you all for being patient. I’m trying to stay focussed. It’s a little heavy for me tonight.” He paused before beginning the next song, “The Beautiful Ones.” “She knows about this one,” he said.

The next day, I followed Johnson up to Peter Bravestrong’s suite, where Prince had secreted himself away in the bedroom. Johnson conferred in private with him, and then pointed me toward a desk in the main room. A legal pad had been filled with about thirty pages of pencilled script, with many erasures and rewrites. Johnson said that Prince wanted me to read what he’d written, and then he’d talk to me about it.

Prince’s handwriting was beautiful, with a fluidity that suggested it poured out of him almost involuntarily. It also verged on illegible. Even in longhand, he wrote in his signature style, an idiosyncratic precursor of textspeak that he’d perfected back in the eighties: “Eye” for “I,” “U” for “you,” “R” for “are.” The pages were warm, funny, well observed, eloquent, and surprisingly focussed. This was Prince the raconteur, in a storytelling mode reminiscent of his more narrative songs, such as “The Ballad of Dorothy Parker” or “Raspberry Beret.”

He’d written about his childhood and adolescence in Minneapolis, starting with his first memory, his mother winking at him. “U know how U can
tell when someone is smiling just by looking in their eyes,” he wrote. “That was my mother’s eyes. Sometimes she would squint them like she was about 2 tell U a secret. Eye found out later my mother had a lot of secrets.” He recalled his favorite of his father’s shirts, the way his parents oustdid each other sartorially. He summoned up his first kiss, playing house with a girl in his neighborhood. He described the epilepsy he suffered as a child.

Prince had become a Jehovah’s Witness around 2001, and had stopped playing his raciest hits. I’d worried that he would shy away from describing his sexual life, but, in these pages, he conjured the first time he felt a girl up; his first R-rated movie; a girlfriend slamming his locker shut, “like in a John Hughes film,” just to hold mistletoe over his head and kiss him. These memories were interspersed with his philosophy about music: “A good ballad should always put U in the mood 4 making love.”

He wrote about the sometimes physical fights between his parents, and about their separation, when he was seven. After his mother remarried, in 1967 or 1968, Prince went to live with his father, a day he described as the happiest of his life. He recalled persuading his father to take him to see the 1970 documentary “Woodstock” after church one Sunday:

Eye remember already standing by the car waiting 4 him, crazy with anticipation. Calling back 2 mind the whole experience reminds me 2 do the best Eye possibly can every chance Eye get 2 b onstage because somebody out there is c-ing U 4 the 1st time. Artists have the ability 2 change lives with a single performance. My father & Eye had R lives changed that night. The bond we cemented that very night let me know that there would always b someone in my corner when it came 2 my passion. My father understood that night what music really meant 2 me. From that moment on he never talked down 2 me.

After I finished reading, Johnson took me to my room and told me to call Peter Bravestrong.

“So what’d you think?” Prince asked when he picked up. I told him, truthfully, that what he’d written was excellent. We touched on a few spots where I had been confused or wanted more detail. “I can feel myself getting amped up about this,” he said. We hung up. Had I spent twenty-three hours in the air to talk to Prince over the phone?

Fortunately, following the show that night, he invited me to join him at an after-party in a waterfront lounge swathed in purple light and chintzed out with faux-crystal chandeliers. He strutted in through the back entrance—he was holding a cane, which enhanced his royal aspect—and invited me across the velvet rope into the V.I.P. area. We sat on a plush couch with a marble tray of chocolate-covered strawberries in front of us.

“Threw in a different mood tonight,” Prince said when I asked him about the show. He’d been happier, less aware of himself. I told him that I was glad to hear “Purple Music,” an unreleased track from 1982 in perennial circulation among bootleggers. “That was the first time I’ve played that song live,” he said. “Someone said they recorded it. I might just release it.”

He sat forward and gripped his cane with both hands. He was wearing black leather gloves with a symbol on them. “Have you talked to Random House?” he asked. “You have power now,” he said. “Learn to wield it. It’s you, it’s me, and it’s them. Convince them that they need to put everything behind me.” He locked eyes with me. “I trust you. Tell them I trust you.”

He told me that he’d look at my notes on his pages and would address them. “Get a stenographer,” he said. “I’d prefer it to be a woman. Or—you can just type it yourself.”

We left the club through the kitchen. An Audi S.U.V. was waiting in the service garage. Prince and I sat in the back in silence. I found I had nothing to say that was worth breaking it. Prince gazed out the window at Melbourne’s shuttered shops and empty streets. “We should do a golden-ticket promotion,” he said, after a few minutes. “Put the book together with some other prize—maybe we play a concert for the winner. Make the winner tell their own story.” He sounded exhausted, as if he couldn’t turn his mind off.

The car pulled into Crown Towers through a special entrance that snaked below the hotel to a bank of underground elevators. I told Prince that I liked the quiet of hotels at this hour. There was something weirdly appealing about wandering their long carpeted corridors late at night. Prince gave a sly smile. “I’ve done it many times,” he said.

On Friday, Johnson led me back to Peter Bravestrong’s suite so that I could pick up some papers. What I thought would be a simple handoff became a two-hour conversation. Prince, wearing a rainbow-colored top with his face on it, sat down at the desk where I’d read his pages. There were a few packs of hairnets off to the side. “Sit here,” he said again, bringing over a pen and paper. “Music is healing,” he said. “Write that down first.” This was to be our guiding principle. “Music holds things together.”

Since we’d spoken at Paisley, his ambitions for the book had been amplified. “The book should be a handbook for the brilliant community—wrapped in autobiography, wrapped in biography,” he said. “It should teach that what you create is yours.” It was incumbent on us to help people, especially young black artists, realize the power and agency they had.

I liked the idea of framing the memoir as a kind of handbook. It was a way to expand its remit, giving another layer of meaning to the title, “The Beautiful Ones,” which could denote an entire community of creators. “Keep what you make,” Prince told me more than once. “I stayed in Minneapolis because Minneapolis made me. You have to give back. My dad came to Minneapolis from Cotton Valley, Louisiana. He learned in the harshest conditions what it means to control wealth.”

Prince wanted to teach readers about Black Wall Street in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a wellspring of black entrepreneurship that flourished in the early twentieth century. After the Civil War, freed blacks flocked to the booming city and bought land. Segregation forced them to the Greenwood neighborhood, where their proprietorship and ingenuity created a thriving community. Soon, Greenwood boasted more than a hundred black-owned businesses, as well as nearly two dozen churches, several schools, and a public library. Prince loved reading about that amassing of wealth. Then came Tulsa’s 1921 race massacre, when thousands of armed whites, their hatred
fanned by accusations that a black boy had attempted to rape a white girl, doused Greenwood in kerosene and burned it down block by block, looting and plundering as they went. Hundreds died; about ten thousand lost their homes. Black Wall Street was decimated.

“The Fountainehead,” Prince said. “Did you read that? What’d you think of it?” I said I didn’t like it—that I had no patience for objectivism, or for Ayn Rand’s present-day acolytes, with their devotion to the free market and unfettered individualism. Prince agreed, though he saw that the philosophy could be seductive. “We need a book that talks to the aristocrats, not just the fans. We have to dismantle ‘The Fountainehead’ brick by brick. It’s like the aristocrats’ bible. It’s a compound of problems. They basically want to eliminate paradise,” he said. “We should attack the whole notion of supremacy.”

But a radical call for collective ownership, for black creativity, couldn’t be made alone, he said. “When I say, ‘I own ‘Purple Rain,’” I sound . . . like Kanye.” He paused. “Who I consider a friend.” Statements of ownership too often read as self-aggrandizing, he believed. It was more powerful to hear them from other people. He wanted to find some formal devices that would make the book a symbiosis of his words and mine. “It would be dope if, toward the end, our voices started to blend,” he said. “In the beginning, they’re distinct, but by the end we’re both writing.”

He’d recently had a new passport photo taken, which he’d tweeted. It had gone viral. Of course it had: his lips in a gentle pout, his eyeliner immaculate, every hair in his mustache trimmed to perfection, he seemed to be daring the customs officials of the world to give him a kiss instead of a stamp. He said, “Maybe we should have that on the cover, with all my info and stuff. We need this to get weird.” We were both laughing, exhilarated. “Brother to brother, it’s good to be controversial,” he said. “We were brought together to do this. There was a process of elimination. To do this, it takes a personality not fighting against what I’m trying to do. You know a lot more words than I do. Write this thing like you want to win the Pulitzer and then—” He raised his arms, hoisting an invisible statuette, and pretended to smash it against the desk.

He stood and we walked to the door of his suite. “This was helpful to me,” he said. “I have a clearer understanding of what we have to do.” He gave me a hug goodbye. Suddenly, my nose was in his hair. I spent the rest of the day catching whiffs of his perfume. It was summer in Melbourne, and I walked along the Yarra River with his words in my head, listening to the Ohio Players’ “Skin Tight” at a deafening volume.

“The bass & drums on this record would make Stephen Hawking dance,” Prince had written in the pages he showed me. “No disrespect—it’s just that funky.”

In New York, Prince’s book contract was deviating far from the boilerplate. At one point, he called Chris Jackson, his editor, at home, and asked if they could just publish the book without contracts or lawyers. Jackson later recalled, “I said I’d love to, but the company can’t cut a check without a contract in place. He paused and said, ‘I’ll call you back.’ And he did—with some fine points for the contract.”

Prince wanted to reserve the right to pull the book from shelves, permanently, at any time in the future, should he ever feel that it no longer reflected who he was. The question was how much he’d have to pay Random House to do so. On a Friday, after a three- or four-day volley of offers and counter-offers, they settled on a figure, and Prince hopped on a plane. At 7:40 P.M., he tweeted, “Y IS PRINCE IN NEW YORK RIGHT NOW?!”

By eight that evening, a hundred and fifty people had convened to hear the answer at Avenue, a narrow, dusty club on Tenth Avenue, in Chelsea. Prince, in effulgent gold and purple stripes, announced his memoir as he leaned on a Plexiglas barrier on a stairway high above the crowd. Later, he performed what Prince enthusiasts had
come to call “the sampler set,” in which he cued up the backing tracks to a medley of his greatest hits and sang live over them. “We want to thank Random House,” he interjected at one point. “Ain’t nothing random about this funk!”

The next day, as news of the memoir caromed around the Internet, Johnson invited me to join him, Bekure, and Prince at the Groove, a night club in the West Village, at around midnight. Li’nard’s Many Moods, fronted by a prodigious bassist named Li’nard Jackson, was playing. Prince’s security detail had reserved a high-backed banquette toward the rear, facing the stage but hidden from the dance floor. Prince had me scoot in beside him and cupped my ear. “Did you get paid yet?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Me, either.” I was confused—the contract hadn’t even been signed. But questions of money, usually considered crass, had an air of scrappy anti-corporate camaraderie in Prince’s world, and became a kind of comforting refrain. The artist should always be paid; the company should always be paying.

Michael Jackson’s “Bad” came on the speaker system. Prince said it reminded him of a story of the one time they were supposed to work together. “I’ll have to tell you about that later,” he said. “There are gonna be some bombshells in this thing.”

Prince’s d.j., Pam Warren, known as Purple Pam, joined us, and he gave her a few words of advice. First, it was always a good idea to close a set with “September,” by Earth, Wind & Fire. Second, no profanity. “These d.j.s play songs with cussing and then they wonder why fights break out in the clubs,” he said. “You set the soundtrack for it!”

A while later, he nodded to Johnson that it was time to go. “So what we’ll do is—you free in about a week? We’ll get together wherever we’re playing and really start to work on this thing,” he said. He shook my hand, gave me a quick side hug, and hustled out, holding his jacket over his head.

A

week went by, and then another, with no word. In early April, Johnson asked me if I could resend the typed pages with my notes. I did, and heard nothing. The silence began to worry me, especially after I read that Prince had postponed a show in Atlanta. A week later, TMZ reported that his plane had made an emergency landing after departing the city, and he was hospitalized in Moline, Illinois, supposedly to treat a resilient case of the flu.

Within hours, Prince tweeted from Paisley Park, saying that he was listening to his song “Controversy”—whose lyrics begin, “I just can’t believe all the things people say.” Subtext: he was fine. On the evening of Sunday, April 17th, he called me. “I wanted to say that I’m all right, despite what the press would have you believe,” he said. “They have to exaggerate everything, you know.” I told him that I had been worried, and was sorry to hear that he’d had the flu. “I had flu-like symptoms,” he said. “And my voice was raspy.” It still sounded that way to me, as if he were recovering from a bad cold.

But he didn’t want to linger on the subject. He’d called to talk about the book. “I wanted to ask: Do you believe in cellular memory?” he said. He meant the idea that our bodies can store memories, and that experience can therefore be hereditary. “I was thinking about it because of reading the Bible,” he explained. “The sins of the father. How is that possible without cellular memory?” The concept resonated in his own life, too. “My father had two families,” he said. “I was his second, and he wanted to do better with me than with his first son. So he was very orderly, but my mother didn’t like that. She liked spontaneity and excitement.”

The conflict of his parents lived within him. In their discord, he heard a strange harmony that inspired him to create. “One of my life’s dilemmas has been looking at this,” he told me. “I like order, finality, and truth. But if I’m out at a fancy dinner party or something, and the d.j. puts on something funky…”

“You’ll have to dance,” I said.

“Right.”

He paused for a moment. “We need to find a word for what funk is,” he said. Funk music, which fused impulse to structure, was the living contradiction he embodied: his mother and his father in one. It was all something to consider for “when we really start working on it.” He’d often used phrases like that, usually adding that in a week or two he’d clear his schedule and we could get down to business. “I just wanted to call and let you know that that’s what I’ve been thinking about,” he said. “And I’m O.K.”

Late in the morning on April 21st, I was on a Metro-North train to Connecticut when the text messages began to come in. TMZ was reporting a fatality at Paisley Park. I kept refreshing the news sites. Soon, the headlines increased their point size. Prince was dead. Outside, spring had come, and through the train window I watched the landscape scroll by at a stately pace, acres of brown earth now mottled with green.

The following days brought news of addiction, first in the exclamations of tabloids and later in more sober reporting. He’d died of an accidental overdose, having taken counterfeit Vicodin pills laced with fentanyl. The source of the pills remains unknown. One of the people closest to Prince told detectives that, after Prince’s first show in Atlanta, he’d said that he “enjoyed sleeping more these days,” and that maybe it meant he’d done all he was supposed to do on Earth; waking life was “incredibly boring.” I found those words wrenching when I read them, a disavowal of everything we’d talked about. Then I remembered that he’d said something similar at the first “Piano & a Microphone” show. “I like dreaming now more than I used to,” he’d told the audience. “Some of my friends have passed away, and I see them in my dreams. It’s like they are here, and the dreams are just like waking sometimes.”

As I read more about his last months, it was hard to reconcile the sunny, puckish, solicitous man I met with the one described in news stories and police reports, who could be unyielding, furtive, and willfully opaque. Prince had always embodied dualities. Here was one more: he had told me that he was O.K., and he was not O.K. There was nothing false in the way he spoke to me, and nothing false in the way he spoke during his darkest moments. I can’t think less of him for hiding his pain. He was living on his own terms. To expect anything more of him would have been to expect magic. ♦
SHOUTS & MURMURS

BY CALVIN TRILLIN

There’s beaucoup news this month about the Class of 1993, topped by the happy tidings that Jack Beckston, known to most of us as the Beckster, has finally been transferred from the United States Penitentiary in Atlanta to the less rigid Federal Correctional Institution near Marianna, Florida, which he describes as more comfortable than his freshman dorm. The new digs are an easy drive from the Gulf Coast, and the Beckster invites any ’93ers travelling in that area to drop by. (Visitor regulations and hours are available at fedcorrection.gov.)

Ever the joker—he has always maintained that what he refers to as “the so-called Ponzi scheme” was a prank—Jack added a P.S. to his letter which reads, “No hacksaws, please.”

An e-mail from Kimberly Connelly carries the disappointing news that her latest door-to-door beauty product, a cream for fighting cellulite, called Cell-No-More, attracted the attention of the Food and Drug Administration, “and not in a pleasant way.” When all was said and done, Kimberly had to file for bankruptcy—her fourth. She plans to start again with a different cellulite-fighting formula but with the same motto: “Keep those dimples on your face where they belong.” Investors welcome, as usual.

Ralph Hawkins reports on a sort of mini-reunion of ’93ers in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, attended by himself, Rich Adams, Sam Miller, Frank Milledge, Ralph Burnside, Mike Clark, and Paul Smith. “The alma mater was sung,” Ralph writes, “although we might have been a bit fuzzy on the second verse, when we were almost drowned out by the sirens.” The lawsuit concerning the damage to two motel rooms may be heading for arbitration, Ralph writes, and it’s hoped that the judgment will not be large enough to affect alumni donations. Happily, no criminal charges were filed.

Fred Carson has fled the country.

More good news from one of the legal beagles of the class: Clem Howard writes from Oregon that, upon appeal, his disbarment has been reduced to what he describes as “a strong censure with conditions,” which will allow his law practice to continue. The principal condition is that when he meets with a female client a third party must be in the room. Clem writes, “I can certainly live with that condition, particularly if the third party is a chick of considerable hotness.”

We have what may be a first this month—the first example of one ’93er firing another. Tom Weber, who worked as an assistant sales manager for Gilbert & Parsons One-Coat Paint, was axed by Gilbert & Parsons C.E.O. Pam Hawkinson, who writes that she should have known better than to hire the man who, at the “Not the Class Day” high jinks on the evening before our actual Class Day, was given the award for graduating with the most pages of assigned reading left unread. (“He has the get-up-and-go of a tree stump.”) Tom, who is considering a wrongful-termination suit under the Civil Rights Act (“She has an unreasoned hatred of Dekes”), writes that the working conditions at Gilbert & Parsons “compared unfavorably with those of the Gulag” and included the mandatory singing each morning of the Gilbert & Parsons song (“More than just a single coat is what we ain’t/Cause we’re Gilbert & Parsons One-Coat Paint)—a requirement that he calls “demeaning, not to mention consistently off-key.”

From Stephanie Green, we’ve received an update from Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on the Class of 1993 club that was formed there last year once the aforementioned Clem Howard ascertained that there is no extradition treaty between Burkina Faso and the United States. There are now eight ’93ers in Ouagadougou, and all of them show up on the third Tuesday of every month for a Class of 1993 lunch of riz gras, the national dish of Burkina Faso. The club extends a welcome to any ’93er who happens to be travelling in that area, particularly on a third Tuesday.

From Alabama, Jack McPherson writes that he has now been divorced five times. We’re calling that a Class record until we hear otherwise.

Speaking of Class meals, we remind you that the annual Class dinner will be held on September 28th, back on campus. The charge is seventy-five dollars per person, and that includes the meal and an open bar. Only cash or certified checks will be accepted. Dean Augustus Gillis will be speaking after dinner on the topic “A College Degree as the First Step Toward Leading a Successful Life.”
The Gay Genealogist

An epic play draws on E. M. Forster, Tony Kushner, and Donald Trump.

BY REBECCA MEAD

One may as well begin with Matthew Lopez, sitting in the Sheep Meadow, in Central Park, and rereading “Howards End.” It is 2008, and Lopez, recently turned thirty, has kept returning to E. M. Forster’s novel of Edwardian England ever since he was introduced to it, in 1993, in the form of the Merchant Ivory film adaptation. Lopez, then a slight, isolated sixteen-year-old, begged his mother, an elementary-school teacher, to take him to see the film during its brief run in his home town of Panama City, in the Florida Panhandle. There was a vast disparity between his circumstances and those of Forster’s calm, earnest heroine, Margaret Schlegel—who lives in London, on income from an inheritance, with her tempestuous sister Helen, and whose celebrated inward injunction, “Only connect,” provides the novel’s moral core. Nonetheless, Lopez had the uncanny sense that Forster, writing almost a century earlier, had intended the book just for him.

Now Lopez thinks about a strain of repression underlying the narrative. He’s recently learned that Forster was a closeted gay man, who found the impossibility of writing truthfully about his desires so crippling that he stopped publishing novels in his forties, suppressing his one explicitly gay-themed book, “Maurice,” until after his death, in 1970, at the age of ninety-one. Lopez, too, is gay, a fact that he resisted reckoning with in his teens. By 2008, he has been a New Yorker for eight years, wholly partaking in the city’s gay culture: drinking vodka-tonics at Splash, in Chelsea, and at Wonder Bar, in the East Village; clubbing at the Limelight; hooking up, sometimes recklessly. His stated ambition for moving to the city—to become an actor—has languished. Various stints as an executive assistant, initially intended merely to support his audition-going, have led to what he has to admit is a real job. He has started writing plays, but feels that he has little to show for his three decades. Amid the bright animation of his social life, he wrestles with loneliness and self-loathing.

In Central Park, an idea for a drama stirs. What if Forster’s plot were transposed to contemporary New York, with gay men from different generations standing in for Forster’s straight people from different classes?

“Not bad, Lopez thinks. He isn’t ready to write it yet. Only after several more years—during which he will hone his playwriting craft, and nearly be undone by alcoholism—will he be able to pick up a notebook and write on its cover the title of his putative adaptation: “The Inheritance.”

“The Inheritance” is a two-part, seven-hour epic centered on a group of gay New Yorkers, two decades after the height of the AIDS epidemic. The play begins previews at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, on West Forty-seventh Street, on September 27th. It arrives on Broadway after a sold-out run in London, where it originated at the Young Vic.

“The Inheritance,” which is directed by Stephen Daldry, played to rapturous audiences in the U.K.; the Telegraph called it “perhaps the most important American play of the century.” It won four Olivier Awards, including Best New Play and Best Director. The Best Actor award went to Kyle Soller, who is onstage for nearly all of “The Inheritance,” in the role of Eric Glass. At the play’s outset, Eric is a thirty-three-year-old facing the imminent loss of a rent-controlled apartment, on the Upper West Side, that he has inherited from his grandmother, a Ger-

Matthew Lopez, whose drama “The Inheritance” is coming to Broadway.
man refugee and a Holocaust survivor. Eric Glass is Lopez’s stand-in for Margaret Schlegel, Forster’s socially progressive and sometimes naïve heroine, whose dispossession from her family residence is key to “Howards End,” and whose encounters with disparate Londoners—from Leonard Bast, a struggling clerk, to Henry Wilcox, an affluent industrialist—shape her understanding of her obligations to others. Like Margaret, Eric provides a center of gravity for the characters swirling around him. Among them are Eric’s boyfriend, a charismatic but tormented writer named Toby Darling, who is Lopez’s version of Helen Schlegel; Adam McDowell, a seductive social climber, and Leo, a homeless sex worker, who together approximate Leonard Bast; and Henry Wilcox, a billionaire real-estate developer, who brings Eric into conflict with his moral convictions, just as Forster’s Henry Wilcox does with Margaret.

Through a chorus of minor characters—such as Jason 1 and Jason 2, who are giddily expecting a baby, with the help of a surrogate mother—“The Inheritance” creates a lovingly wry panorama of gay life in New York that echoes Forster’s depiction of the comfortably bohemian, intellectual London society of the Schlegels. Lopez conjures a familiarly urban world in which men attend lavishly prepared brunches, are oppressed by their season tickets to BAM, and feel the necessity of having an opinion on German Expressionism. The play offers the pleasure of eavesdropping on a clique constantly engaged in competitive, virtuoso conversation.

For all its verbal ebullience, “The Inheritance” also explores serious questions about sexual identity, and measures what the gay community has lost, and gained, in recent decades. Lopez captures an era in which marriage equality has been secured while gay signifiers have been blandly absorbed by the mainstream. In one scene, Tristan, an African-American doctor, rails against his teen-age niece for claiming that the phrase “Yas, kween” comes from “Broad City.” “They have appropriated a phrase from drag culture,” he thundered. “And they’ve built a brand off it!” Eric mournfully notes, “I miss the feeling that being gay was like being a member of a secret club. . . . In order to fully join, you needed people to help bring you in.” (“You’ve just described Soho House,” Jason 2 shoots back.) Through Eric, Lopez asks how, in the age of Grindr, a young man can find not just sex but community—a connection with something that helps him understand himself.

“The Inheritance” also raises alarms about the potential reversal of the legal advances that have been made in L.G.B.T.Q. rights. Audience members of any age or sexual orientation may feel a nightmare being replayed when, in Part 1, the friends gather to watch the 2016 election returns. (“Nate Silver still has her at eighty-six per cent,” Jason 1 remarks. Then: “Sixty-seven per cent.” Then: “Fuck you, Nate Silver!”) In a bravura aria in Part 2, Tristan, who is H.I.V.-positive, characterizes President Trump’s effect on the American body politic, declaring, “You could say that he is H.I.V., and that he’s attached himself to American democracy and is now destroying the American immune system. . . . He’s replicating his genetic material from tweet to tweet, from person to person.” In London, the tirade elicited applause; on Broadway, it should bring the house down.

“Howards End” provides many underpinnings for Lopez’s drama: the passing of a beloved home from one person to another; the thorny difficulties of social privilege. In one particularly deft transposition, Lopez reimagine the wife of Henry Wilcox, a spiritual mentor to Margaret Schlegel, as Walter Poole, Henry Wilcox’s partner. Walter illuminates gay history for Eric (and for members of the audience too young to remember Pride Marches without corporate sponsors). Through Walter’s memories, “The Inheritance” summons a not too distant past when gay men were not just marginalized but reviled, because of AIDS. Part 1 culminates in a coup de théâtre that represents the generational loss wrought by the epidemic. Even in buttoned-up Britain, it reduced theatregoers to sobs.

Though Lopez preserves Forster’s moral seriousness, his play breaks free from its literary scaffold. One bold liberty Lopez takes is to make E. M. Forster himself a character. Referred to, with warm familiarity, as Morgan—Forster’s middle name—he appears as a kind of empathetic counsellor, guiding the chorus of young men through the recounting of their stories. Thanks to Lopez’s artful structuring, only in the final scenes does the audience realize that “The Inheritance” is not just a play about gay life, or AIDS, or politics, or the imparting of heritage; it is also a work of art about the making of a work of art—about the degree of growth, and the depth of loss, that an artist may have to go through before he can create something truthful.

Matthew Lopez and his husband, Brandon Clarke, a private-school administrator, live in a spectacular penthouse residence atop a new luxury building in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. The apartment, which they have rented since 2018, has lofty ceilings and a vertiginous terrace, towering above farm-to-table restaurants and picturesque brownstones. It is the kind of place a Hollywood location scout might select to signify the apex of metropolitan sophistication.

For Lopez, the view is more personal. From his windows, he can see both the Fort Greene housing projects, where his father, who is Puerto Rican, lived as a child, and Greenpoint, where his mother, who is of Polish-Russian descent, grew up. Lopez’s parents initially lived in New York, but his father, an elementary-school teacher, had been stationed in Florida after serving in Vietnam, and he proposed moving to Panama City, which he thought would be a good place to raise children. “I feel like what was taken from me without my consent—before I was born—was my birthright, which was being a New Yorker,” Lopez told me, when I visited his apartment this spring. Lithe and compact, he curled up in an armchair across from an open kitchen, which Clarke had decorated with a vase of quince branches. In the course of two days, Lopez spoke for hours at a stretch, with clarity and unguardedness; having spent years in psychoanalysis, he is practiced in poring over his experiences. “There was a period where I felt a lot of resentment for having been robbed of who I could’ve been if I’d been raised here,” he said. “My time in the South was basically an eighteen-year-long hostage crisis.”

Lopez, the older of two brothers, felt like a misfit from his earliest years. Panama City was religious—Lopez’s family attended an Episcopal church—and socially conservative. His high school
banned the teaching of "The Catcher in the Rye," because of its profanity; when Lopez asked to study ballet, it proved impossible to find a teacher who coun-
tenanced having boys in class. The city was also racially bifurcated between black and white, which left no place for some-
one of Latino descent. "There was no-
obody like us around," he said. "I went
through a very shameful period where I
didn't like my last name." Lopez was
soon labelled in another way: "People
would say, 'O.K., we don't know where
you belong on a racial spectrum, but we
can identify the fact that you are one
queer little kid.'"

When Lopez was four, and on a fam-
ily visit to New York, he saw Sandy Dun-
can perform in "Peter Pan." Lopez's
family had a connection to the theatre
through his father's sister, Priscilla Lopez,
who originated the role of Diana Mo-
rales in "A Chorus Line." (In 1961, as
children, Priscilla and her brother suc-
cessfully auditioned to play extras in the
film of "West Side Story"; in an early
dance sequence, Lopez's father can be
seen standing, self-consciously, in a door-
way.) A few days after seeing "Peter Pan,
" Lopez saw his aunt play Harpo Marx in
"A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the
Ukraine." Lopez told me, "We visited
her dressing room, and I remember hear-
ing people warm up, and I watched her
put on her makeup and wig. It was this
amazing thing of 'We're going to strip
away all of the magic of theatre, and
show you how it's made.'" His life's course
was set, he said: "It was like being given
really high-class drugs for your first time,
instead of really cheap pot."

Lopez started performing in com-

munity theatre, playing, among other
roles, Michael Darling, in "Peter Pan." In
school, however, he shrank from the
limelight, because bullies targeted him.
"In class, I would position myself so that
I wasn't in their line of sight," he said.
"I would literally hide behind another
kid, and move with their movements, to
become invisible." (In a draft of "The
Inheritance," Lopez gave Toby Dar-
ling—a New York native who is trans-
planted to the South as a child—some
of his own experiences, including hav-
ing sunflower seeds spat at him on the
school bus. Lopez writes, "No one knew
what to do with... this sensitive, effem-
inate, sing-songy, twinkle-toed, wide-
eyed, smiling, brokenhearted naïf who
actually believed that people had his best
interests at heart.") To cope with the
stress, Lopez began drinking, and by his
junior year in high school he was going
home at lunchtime for a few glasses of
wine. "I'd drive back to school and float,
in a moderately intoxicated state, through
the rest of the day," he said.

Lopez was attracted to men, but tried
to push this knowledge away. "I already
had enough going on that marked me as
an outsider," he recalled. The dawning
of his sexuality coincided with the AIDS ep-
demic. "There was a lot of learned trauma
in my generation—though we did not
live through the epidemic, we saw it hap-
pening as kids, as teen-agers, when we
were learning that we were gay, and know-
ning that our sex lives could kill us," he
said. In Panama City, many people said
that AIDS was God's retribution for sin.
"The headline was 'Don't go there. And
if you do go there, keep it a secret,'" he
said. While still underage, he started fre-
quenting the only local gay bar, hanging
out with drag artists who performed there.
(He later drew on that experience to write
"The Legend of Georgia McBride," a
comedy about a straight man who, be-
cause of economic hardship, begins to
perform in drag; the play was produced
in 2015, at the MCC Theatre, in Man-
hattan.) Lopez attended college at the
University of South Florida, in Tampa,
where he majored in theatre. He didn't
come out until he was twenty-one. "My
mother, for weeks afterward, looked as if
there had been a death in the family," he
said. (He now has a good relationship
with his parents.)

Lopez has a heightened conscious-
ness of belonging to a generation of gay
men that has lived through a sea change:
his cohort is old enough to remember
the experience of being homosexual as
a secret, and perhaps a shameful, iden-
tity, yet young enough to have escaped

I CANNOT SAY I DID NOT

I cannot say I did not ask
to be born. I asked with my mother's beauty,
and her money. I asked with my father's desire
for his orgasms and for my mother's money.
I asked with the cradle my sister had grown out of.
I asked with my mother's longing for a son,
I asked with patriarchy. I asked
with the milk that would well in her breasts, needing to be
drained by a little, living pump.
I asked with my sister's hand-me-downs, lying
folded. I asked with geometry, with
origami, with swimming, with sewing, with
what my mind would thirst to learn.
Before I existed, I asked, with the love of my
children, to exist, and with the love of their children.
Did I ask with my tiny flat lungs
for a long portion of breaths? Did I ask
with the space in the ground, like a portion of breath,
where my body will rest, when it is motionless,
when its elements move back into the earth?
I asked, with everything I did not
have, to be born. And nowhere in any
of it was there meaning, there was only the asking
for being, and then the being, the turn
taken. I want to say that love
is the meaning, but I think that love may be
the means, what we ask with.

—Sharon Olds
a lifetime in the closet. “In my generation, a staple of conversation was ‘How did you come out?’” he said. “What I’ve discovered, over time, is that the younger generation doesn’t have coming-out stories. Or, if they do, it seems as commonplace as making dinner plans.” He and Clarke were married in upstate New York, at Blue Hill at Stone Barns, in June, 2015, five days before the Supreme Court effectively legalized same-sex marriage across America. “We were sort of the last pioneers,” Lopez said. Clarke told me that he shares a nostalgia for “that liminal period when gay culture hadn’t completely been co-opted”; not long ago, he wanted to take an out-of-town friend to gay bars, and had to research which of his and Lopez’s former haunts remained open. (Not many.) In part, “The Inheritance” is a celebration of the sense of community often found in a marginalized population. The play also offers validation of the different forms that love between men can take. One draft included a long ode to rimming: “Adam found himself irresistibly drawn to Kip’s ass, to his muscular cheeks splayed before him like an unwrapped gift. . . . To Adam’s surprise and utter enchantment, it smelled almost sweet, like cookies cooling on a rack.” The passage was cut, for length, but “it’s still the ethos of the play,” Lopez said, adding, “Maybe I’ll publish it, as an appendix.”

Gay men have found that watching “The Inheritance” in a theatre filled with both older and younger generations is a charged experience. Terrence McNally, whose 1994 play, “Love! Valour! Compassion!,” reckoned with the AIDS crisis while it was ongoing, saw “The Inheritance” at the Young Vic. (His husband, Tom Kirdahy, is one of the show’s producers.) McNally told me that he has never had such a strong response to a play: “As an eighty-year-old survivor, observer, and participant of the many years covered in the play, it was as if someone were telling the story for the first time—so hot are its passions—and for the last time, with the compassion and wisdom we seek from our artists.” He added, “Matthew’s play is not about the AIDS experience—it is about the human experience. Only a stunted soul would not rise, soar, and expand to it.” Paul Hilton, who plays Walter Poole and Morgan, said, “I’ve never felt that sense of a communal connection with an audience—it’s the closest that I’ve ever felt to church in a theatre.”

Lopez says that, because of AIDS, embracing his sexuality entailed accepting an inheritance of grief. But this mourning felt abstract. He said, “It is so unimaginable for people of my generation, and certainly subsequent generations—how do you contemplate loss on that level?” Eric Glass, as the grandson of Holocaust survivors, has a personal connection to generational catastrophe, and is therefore better primed to comprehend the history of the gay community’s devastation. In one sequence, Walter tries to convey to Eric the scale of the tragedy by naming all his friends, a recitation that rises to a litany delivered by the chorus of men: “Daniel is dead. Stephen is infected. Brian’s partner has peripheral neuropathy. He screams in pain at the slightest touch. Scott is in Paris, hoping to get HPA-23. Javier went home to die in his mother’s house. Jonathan’s family won’t take him back. Brandon is dead. Matthew is dead.”

Lopez told me, “For my generation, it is as if a sibling had died before we were born—you are never quite sure why Mom and Dad are so sad. That person isn’t real to you—they are only real as a fragment and a spectre. You only know the negative space. You don’t know what once filled it.”

In May, a work session for “The Inheritance” was held at a rehearsal studio in the Flatiron district of Manhattan. The intention was to tweak the show for the Broadway production, and, in particular, to clarify the narrative of Toby Darling, Eric’s boyfriend, who is played by Andrew Burnap. One of Lopez’s first inspirations in adapting “Howards End” was to turn the Schlegel sisters, Margaret and Helen, into boyfriends. Like Helen, who acts on sentiment, Toby is impetuous and often inconsiderate. In the play’s first scene, he recounts a party that he’s just attended in the Hamptons, where he got drunk and projectile-vomited on Meryl Streep: “You’ve seen ‘Sophie’s Choice’—I am so humiliated.”

Much of the body language that Burnap uses to convey Toby’s character—the way that, in greeting, he saunters over with a raised arm, anticipating an embrace—echoes Lopez’s own mannerisms. “Every time I see him, that is what happens, unless he is mad at me,” Burnap told me. Burnap plays Toby with a manic, exhilarating energy: he dances, stripped to a Speedo, at a rave in the Pines; he caustically challenges Morgan for hiding his sexuality. (“The great E. M. Forster, beloved by all the world. And secretly the gayest daisy in the field.”) While Eric Glass provides the play’s steady, slowly evolving center, Toby Darling’s orbit becomes increasingly erratic.

At the work session, Lopez and Stephen Daldry honed scenes in which Toby’s backstory is revealed through encounters with other characters. Toby, who initially appears to be a man of effortless confidence, has in fact strenuously constructed that identity. Lopez once told an interviewer, “Charm I can write in my sleep—honesty takes more effort.” This line could easily be delivered by Toby. Lopez told me, “We are trying to carve out Toby’s journey very clearly through the play—deepening Toby’s internal crisis before it becomes an external crisis.” He was sitting at a table next to Daldry, with sheaves of typescript in front of him. The actors were gathered at tables arranged in a horseshoe shape. The principal cast of the London production is being imported to Broadway virtually intact, and there was an atmosphere of fraternal reunion, as well as a sense of excitement that the play was finally coming to New York, where it belonged.

On a makeshift stage, Burnap and Samuel H. Levine, who plays Adam McDowell, Toby’s calculating protégé, ran through an early scene in which Toby, in order to escape a rainstorm, goes home with Adam, and discovers that Adam lives with his wealthy parents in a glamorous apartment near Lincoln Center. (After Toby spots a photograph of the McDowells with Barack Obama, Adam explains, “My mom went to law school with him. It broke her heart when I went to Yale.”) Toby replies, “Yes, I’m
Adam, who aspires to be a famous actor, has read Toby's seemingly autobiographical novel, “Loved Boy,” about Elan, a rich, sarcastic seventeen-year-old living on the Upper West Side. Daldry explained to the actors that Toby's book is mediocre: “It's a Y.A. novel—you could possibly read it in two minutes on the toilet.” The novel is to be adapted into a play, and, as Lopez put it, “Adam has his eyes on the part of Elan.” Lopez and Daldry wanted the scene to lay the groundwork for an eventual twist: Toby's youth was drastically different from Elan's charmed life.

“There was a line—we did it in the West End for a couple of performances, but then we cut it, because we thought we were belaboring the point,” Lopez said. “But maybe we need to belabor the point.” Using a laptop to flick through an earlier draft, he supplied the lines to the actors:

**ADAM:** Your book is fairly autobiographical, isn't it?
**TOBY:** Well, what isn't?

Lopez said, “The trick is to keep hammering in that Toby's world is about as far away from Adam's as possible.”

Lopez is an unusually active presence in the rehearsal room. David Lan, who was the Young Vic's artistic director when “The Inheritance” had its première, told me, “During rehearsals, he was rewriting all the time. Every night, he would go back to his room and come in the next morning with new pages.” For the New York work session, Lopez had written a new scene to experiment with, for the beginning of Part 2. Leo, the indigent sex worker (also played by Levine), whom Toby once summoned by app and then forgot about, is fleeing the Strand after being caught shoplifting, and collides with Toby on the sidewalk. Later that day, Leo shows up at Toby's apartment, ostensibly looking for a notebook that he dropped outside the bookstore. Toby, though, assumes that Leo wants to offer himself sexually:

**TOBY:** Do you want to fuck?
**LEO:** I'm not actually—

Lopez listened as the actors ran confidently through the swift, almost Sorkinesque dialogue. (In 2013, Lopez was a staff writer on “The Newsroom,” Aaron Sorkin’s HBO series; working in TV, Lopez said, taught him the importance of getting drafts down quickly, and not to be precious about his ideas.) As Burnap and Levine performed, Lopez interrupted them to trim lines. “We’re trying to streamline, which is important with a seven-hour play—the audience needs to know that someone's flying the plane,” he said. “I always say, I don’t care if you miss your train. I do care if you’re worrying about missing your train.”

When, in 2012, Lopez proposed an adaptation of “Howards End” to Darko Trenjan, at the time the artistic director of the Hartford Stage, he imagined that it would be straightforward. “My goal was so simple—all I wanted to do was to take my favorite novel and dive into it,” Lopez told me. But it soon became clear that Lopez’s exploration of Forster’s ideas, and his own, demanded a capacious form. “The Inheritance” reaches back to the beginning of the twentieth century, and looks ahead to the end of the twenty-first. The writing adopts multiple registers, from snappy dialogue to sprawling monologues. At one point, Walter Poole recounts his and his lover's pasts, almost without interruption, for eighteen hundred words. It’s more like a section of a novel than like a speech in a play: “Henry was born in Ohio, in the late 1950s. He was a star of track and field. First in his class and president of the student body association. As American as an Aaron Copland symphony. He married Patricia Fitzgerald while still in college. Two sons arrived soon after and Henry was on his way to a life of success and diligence and robust Episcopalanism. And if stripping, ascendant young men with bright futures and beautiful families have secret desires and shameful urges, they hid them from the world, from themselves.”

In 2015, Lopez sent a draft of Part 1 to Elizabeth Williamson, Hartford's associate artistic director. “I reached the end in tears—it was incredibly long, and very compelling,” she told me. The play seemed too ambitious to be presented in Hartford on its first outing—and it needed an accomplished director. Lopez's agent, Olivier Sultan, sent the script to Daldry, who has directed everything from “An Inspector Calls,” on Broadway, to “The Crown,” on Netflix. Daldry told me, “It is very rare that you get an unsolicited script and you go, ‘This is something I would like to do.’ It happens just a few times in your life. This was one.”

Lopez finished a full draft of “The Inheritance” before Trump became President. Daldry suggested that he incorporate the election into the plot: addressing contemporary politics offered opportunities for exploring how the activism of the past might inform the present. “People had come to accept the idea that rights were rights,” Daldry told me. “And what we understand now is that they can be taken away from you really easily. ’Act up, fight back’ is not a slogan from the eighties and nineties—it’s an active slogan that we need now.”

Because of its structure, ambition, and themes, “The Inheritance” invites comparison to “Angels in America,” Tony Kushner’s two-part epic of gay life in New York. “The Inheritance” was staged at a nonprofit theatre in London before moving to New York, as “Angels” had been; the choice gave Daldry and Lopez the chance to experiment without Broadway’s commercial pressures, in front of audiences less judgmentally familiar with the milieu depicted onstage. Although Lopez insists that he didn’t name Walter Poole for Prior Walter, the H.I.V.-infected protagonist of “Angels,” and that he wouldn’t have dared to emulate Kushner’s play, the debt is clear. The play’s final words—an injunction, “You live”—echo the blessing that Prior Walter bestows at the end of “Angels in America”: “More Life.”

“The Inheritance” is less intellectually demanding than “Angels,” Kushner having endowed his masterwork with a complex cosmology drawing on Jewish mysticism and leftist political theory. Lopez’s play strikes an upper-middle-
brow tone, with knowing remarks about "Jules et Jim" and Constantine Cavafy, the Greek poet, who was a friend of Forster’s. (“Ooh, which translation?” “Mendelsohn.” “The best.”) One book that isn’t mentioned, but might have been, is “A Little Life,” Hananya Yanagihara’s recent gay–trauma novel, with which “The Inheritance” shares a compulsive and, at times, lurid urgency—“The Inheritance” has a lot of sex and drugs, in addition to brunch and books. But Lopez is also unafraid to be stirring: of the Upper West Side home of Eric’s grandmother, he writes, “She watched John Kennedy’s death, Richard Nixon’s resignation, and Barack Obama’s election from the living room of this apartment. It was in this apartment that Miriam Glass became an American.” Theatre-goers may sometimes feel that their emotions are being manipulated a touch too sure-handedly, but the play earns its cathartic amplitude.

Lopez says that the biggest theatrical influence on “The Inheritance” is “Gatz,” the two-part, eight-hour adaptation of “The Great Gatsby,” by Elevator Repair Service, in which the entire novel is read aloud and enacted by an antic cast. Lopez saw it in 2010, and calls it “the greatest thing I’ve ever seen onstage.” “Gatz” helped inspire the use of what Lopez calls “self-narration” in “The Inheritance.” He said, “‘Reporting’ is a terrible word in drama—reported action is the most uninteresting thing. But characters can also report on what they’re feeling, and in ways that they wouldn’t share with another character. Eric and Leo do it a lot. Toby doesn’t—he almost always reports on action, not feeling, because it is too dangerous for him to do it.”

At the work session, Burnap and Levine continued reading aloud the new scene between Toby and Leo. In one of Lopez’s signature pivots, the arch banner transitions to something darkly moving: what Leo wants is not to turn a trick but to take a shower and do laundry. The chorus of actors narrates Toby’s seesawing interior thoughts: “Toby likes to be wanted but he hates to be needed”; “But Toby, drawn to both beauty and to danger, was helpless to resist”; “Toby knows how easily he could have shared this boy’s fate if Eric hadn’t rescued him all those years ago.” Finally, Toby shuts down this self-examination, saying aloud, “Toby pushes all thoughts of Eric to the back of his mind.”

When Lopez came home from his desk at the Brooklyn Writers Space, after a day working on “The Inheritance,” his husband could tell by his mood which character he’d focused on. “Brandon would say, ‘It was a Toby day today, wasn’t it?’” Lopez told me. “On Toby days, I was a lot of fun to be around—a little much, but great dinner conversation.” Still, Toby was an unnerving creation: the very first scene of “The Inheritance” that Lopez wrote concerned Toby’s capacity for self-sabotage, his ability to wreck whatever stability he has achieved in his relationships. “I could write Toby because Toby’s me,” Lopez said. “I could get into his skin.”

Lopez moved to New York City on January 5, 2000. He’d written plays at the University of South Florida but was intimidated by graduates of the elite drama schools: Yale, Juilliard, N.Y.U. “Writing was this exalted thing, done by classy people,” he said. “I didn’t think I was smart enough to be a writer, and certainly not well enough educated.” But Lopez was a committed reader, and one of his first conversations with Clarke, which took place online, was about books they’d recently finished. “I may have said something about Anne Carson, whose ‘Autobiography of Red I had just read,’” Clarke told me. “Matthew talked about Larry McMurtry.” Several characters in “The Inheritance” share an aspirational yearning for a cultural education in literature, classical music, and art—knowledge necessary to enter a certain kind of gay intellectual conversation. (At the New York work session, Lopez asked the actors to make sure they’d read Alan Hollinghurst’s notoriously explicit 1988 novel, “The Swimming Pool Library,” so that they’d appreciate the play’s sly reference to it.) In Part 2 of “The Inheritance,” Toby buys an entire library of books for Leo, their authors listed by the chorus of men: “Jane Austen, James Baldwin, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Italo Calvino, Joan Didion, Charles Dickens, Ralph Ellison, F. Scott Fitzgerald, E. M. Forster….” Leo opened ‘Howards End’ and from the first sentence, his life forever changed.”

Lopez lived in Jersey City at first. He
landed a few small acting jobs, but mostly he partied. “I loved being here—it was like an extended vacation,” he said. “I was of legal drinking age, and I had sort of figured out sex.” His preferred drug was alcohol, but he soon found a way to stay as alert as his friends who preferred cocaine: “When Red Bull came out, that was very exciting. I would be, like, ‘Just put Red Bull in it!’ My twenties were a bit of a blur.”

Lopez began writing in his spare time, and his début play, “The Whipping Man,” was staged in Montclair, New Jersey, in 2006, when he was twenty-nine. Set in Richmond, Virginia, at the end of the Civil War, it concerns a Confederate soldier, Caleb, who returns home, wounded, and encounters two of his family’s former slaves, Simon and John, who have converted to the family’s faith, Judaism. The play was staged at a number of regional theatres, and was produced Off Broadway in 2011. When the Times asked Lopez why he’d chosen to write about Jewish culture in the nineteenth century, he replied, “I don’t know if you need to belong to a certain group to tell a story. If you did, I would only write about gay Puerto Rican guys who live in Park Slope and have an obsession with stinky cheese.” In fact, he told me, the play has plenty of himself in it, for anyone who cares to look: “John is me. He’s angry, he’s rebellious, he’s certainly not where he wants to be. He has thwarted ambitions. He’s an alcoholic.”

After “The Whipping Man,” Lopez quit his day job and began writing full time. “Somewhere” (2011) is set in Hell’s Kitchen around 1960, during the demolitions that permitted the building of Lincoln Center, and draws on his family’s experience with the filming of “West Side Story.” He said of Leonard Bernstein’s musical, “I don’t know if that creative team could get away with writing that show today—there would be a hue and cry all over social media. But I don’t know a single Puerto Rican who doesn’t hold ‘West Side Story’ dear. It’s our story, and I don’t care that it was written by a bunch of white guys.” Lopez worked in a more contemporary vein with “Reverberation,” a drama about the relationship between two New Yorkers, Jonathan, a bereaved gay man, and Claire, a heterosexual woman. That play premiered at the Hartford Stage, in 2015.

“I’m proud of the plays I wrote before ‘The Inheritance,’ and some of them are good, and there’s a lot of me in them,” he told me. “But it’s perhaps more storytelling, and less revealing.”

Making the transition from office worker to writer was not altogether easy for Lopez. Clarke, whom Lopez met in 2004, told me, “One of the things that he discovered is that writing is an intensely lonely career—you spend a lot of time with your own thoughts, sometimes in a dark room—and drinking became a more obvious outlet for some of his frustrations.”

Lopez soon spun out of control. Once, on the subway home after a binge, he was so out of it that a stranger helped him up to the street, hailed him a cab, and gave the driver twenty dollars for the fare. “I could just about remember my address,” Lopez said. “Dangerous stuff like that. There was a lot of wakening up and not knowing what I did the night before.” He was living a dual existence: “On the one hand, I was finally getting to do all the things I’d been denied the chance to do—be a New Yorker, be unapologetically out, have fun, live with reckless abandon. But, on the other, I was dealing with the trauma of what I had left behind.” Lopez uses the word “trauma” advisedly, insisting that he didn’t have a terrible childhood. “But there was trauma, and, in the end, it almost exclusively had to do with my sexuality, and my feelings of otherness.”

Lopez alienated friends by becoming belligerent while drunk, and his alcohol abuse also strained his relationship with Clarke: he’d promise to cut back, make a short-lived effort to do so, then backslide. “I couldn’t be compassionate—to myself, or to other people,” Lopez told me. “It was a spiritual bankruptcy.” He felt that he had no identity outside of drinking. “I just hated myself. I liked living, but I hated my life.” One night in 2010, Lopez told me, he stumbled home at four in the morning: “I was maybe eighteen or twenty drinks in, and Brandon said, ‘That’s it—I’m done. One of us is moving out of this apartment.’” Lopez started calling friends, desperate to talk to someone, and eventually reached his younger brother, in Florida. “Later, he told me he thought Brandon had died, I was sobbing so much,” Lopez recalled. “My brother was the first person to whom I said the words ‘I’m an alcoholic.’ I was sitting on the kitchen floor, spilling Johnnie Walker Blue Label all over myself—going out in style.” Lopez didn’t enter rehab. Instead, he shakily embarked on a life of sobriety; he hasn’t had a drink in nearly nine years. “There was no going back after that scene,” he said. “Once you’ve played Lady Macbeth, you can never play Juliet again.”

During the London rehearsals for “The Inheritance,” Lopez spoke frankly about the ways in which his life informed his characters’ paths. John Benjamin Hickey, who plays Henry Wilcox, told me, “The play is about addiction, and how some people can recover and some cannot. In the same way, during the epidemic, there were a lot of people who died, and so many of the people left behind asked themselves, ‘Why not me? What did I do, or not do?’ I think Matthew’s way into the generational themes of the play are through the very specific lens of somebody who has suffered his own calamity and has come out the other side.” David Lan, of the Young Vic, says, “Matthew has invented himself in the writing of this play.”

Lopez told me, “I needed to write, for the first time ever, really, what it means to me to be a gay man. I wanted to write about that specific question, and that question only.” For critics who have noted that “The Inheritance” lacks any explicitly Latino characters, Lopez has a snappy answer: “If you want a play about what it means to be Puerto Rican and deal with housing in New York City, I invite you to explore my play ‘Somewhere.’”

In his view, “The Inheritance” is informed by his experience as a Latino. “My Puerto Rican-ness distanced me from other people,” he said. “So ‘The Inheritance’ is a search, a desire, for a place in the world, and for identity.” But he finds the expectation that he will incorporate explicitly Latino themes demeaning. “They
don’t just let Sonia Sotomayor only decide the Puerto Rican cases,” he said. “She decides all the cases.” As for taking inspiration from E. M. Forster, he said, “I don’t get to just do Lorca—I have as much right to access the canon as any white writer does.”

Not long ago, Lopez visited King’s College, Cambridge, where Forster spent most of his post-fiction-writing years, and whose Fellow Librarian, Peter Jones, administers Forster’s copyright. Jones told me, “I was pretty convinced on reading the play that this was something that Forster would have been very interested in. It presents Forster as he would have liked to see himself—as a guru to the young, and an adviser on their affairs.” Lopez was permitted to examine the manuscript of “Howards End.” He recalled, “It was one of the most moving experiences of my life to see his words, in his own hand.” In a coincidence so apt as to seem contrived, when Lopez turned to a random page his eyes fell on the words “Only connect.” “I broke down in tears,” Lopez said. “I pushed the manuscript away—I didn’t want to leave my physical mark on it.”

Lopez also looked at Forster’s so-called “locked diary,” in which the author inscribed his inner thoughts, and elliptically catalogued his sexual experiences, for sixty-odd years. “In 1967, he writes about how angry he is at society for causing him to be false—the obfuscation that he has to live through,” Lopez told me. Immersing himself in the text of “Howards End” felt strangely like reading a family history, Lopez said; claiming it for his own purposes, and reordering and restructuring it, felt like a kind of restitution. “We’re so far apart, and yet when I read his diaries—that’s me,” he said. “That’s me, a hundred years ago, as a closeted white man in England.”

Earlier this year, Lopez flew to London for the final West End performance of “The Inheritance.” Having developed a migraine, he was unable to watch most of Part 1, but by late afternoon he felt better. As the audience took a two-hour dinner break, he was in the Royal Room, a silk-lined suite off the mezzanine, chatting with friends who had also flown across the Atlantic for the occasion, and laughing about the fact that the box office had sold his seat. “I have such a good producer—Look, we’re a hundred and twenty pounds closer to recoupment!” he said. “Lopez isn’t in? Great, sell that ticket. You have to admire it.”

In the manner of a Victorian triple-decker novel, “The Inheritance” has multiple endings and codas, and imagines one character in 2079—two hundred years after Forster’s birth. As the seven-hour mark drew near, Lopez sat with Stephen Daldry on a staircase at the rear of the orchestra, sobbing. After the curtain fell, Lopez and the cast and crew gathered in an upper lobby to raise a glass—Lopez stuck to club soda. In a speech, he said, “This whole year has been amazing, but what I cherish most of all is those first two months in the rehearsal studio, wrestling with this play, with you all.” He explained how he was coping with the aftermath. “The show has never ended,” he said. “The show is ongoing. The show is not the thing that is being torn apart on the stage. The show is the work that we did. The show is the year that we spent together. The show is the friendships that we have made, and the things we have learned.”

By the play’s end, Eric’s relationships with the other characters have reached a satisfying, novelistic resolution, and Eric has grieved and matured. “If Toby is who I was, then Eric Glass is who I am working to become,” Lopez told me, when we spoke in Brooklyn. “The Inheritance” concludes on a hopeful note, with a suggestion that, despite the current political darkness, a future exists in which gay men will still be free to be themselves. “I am not an idealist, but I am hopeful,” Lopez said, as we neared the end of our two-part marathon conversation. “I can’t not be, because if I’m not hopeful, then what’s the point? Think of the epidemic. It must have been impossible for those living through those years to think that things would ever be good again. How do you put the world back together after that calamity?”

This had been the central question of all his work, he observed: “How, after the calamity of slavery and the Civil War, do you put a nation back together? In ‘Somewhere,’ after their home is destroyed, how does the family survive as a family when part of how they identify themselves is gone? How, in the midst of calamity, can you even perceive the future? That is something that has always interested me as a writer.” At the conclusion of “The Inheritance,” Lopez hopes to leave the audience in a state of grace. “We’re very proud of how we end the play, even though we know we do something that might be seen as indulgent,” he said. “There’s a lot of endings in this play. But there are a lot of endings in life.”

“Not only have my eyes glazed over—they have turned completely into cinnamon rolls.”
“Fuck being an artist,” Sterling Ruby, the artist turned designer, thought, after his first venture into fashion, a collaboration with
Vernon, California, is a small city near Los Angeles with a population of a hundred and twelve. Every day, fifty thousand people commute to work there, in its eighteen hundred factories, warehouses, and small businesses. Light fixtures, Farmer John hot dogs, industrial chemicals, Tabasco hot sauce, and stuffed toys are made in Vernon. One of the many industrial employers on Soto Street is the artist Sterling Ruby, whose large-scale paintings, collages, multimedia sculptures, blistered ceramics, and other mammoth works are created in a former truck factory with the assistance of a fifteen-person staff. Since 2008, when Ruby had his first major show, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (MOCA), his works have entered the permanent collections of the Guggenheim, the Whitney, the Museum of Modern Art, the Pompidou, and Tate, and private collections from Miami to Beijing.

In 2017, American Apparel went bankrupt and shut down its factory near Vernon. Ruby dispatched an assistant to tack a notice to its bulletin board: “Seamstresses Wanted.” He was looking for experienced sewers to help with an unannounced project. I visited Ruby at his vast complex around the same time, and I noticed a large shed toward the back of the property. When I asked Ruby what it was, he referred cryptically to a secret undertaking, and said only that it involved textiles. He held open the door of the shed just long enough for me to catch a glimpse of several hanging racks of fringed acid-washed denim pants and oversized work shirts. “I’ve been thinking about starting a company,” he said, and closed the door.

Ruby is forty-seven. He is sturdily built and walks with a slight hunch. He has blue eyes that are often hidden behind long, stringy, blondish-brown hair. He tends to dress in baggy jeans and bulky sweatshirts or work shirts that he has distressed, bleached, and dyed, and buff-colored leather work boots or huge sneakers. He often speaks in a library voice, just above a whisper, so that people are forced to lean in to hear him.

Plenty of fashion designers have made moves into the art world: Helmut Lang gave up his label to be a sculptor; Miuccia Prada opened a foundation outside Milan to showcase young artists. And artists have collaborated with fashion designers: Takashi Murakami decorated handbags for Louis Vuitton, and Alex Israel created suitcases for Rimowa. But no major visual artist has produced a fashion line. “It’s one of the reasons I’m doing it—because I don’t think an artist has ever done it,” Ruby said one day, as we walked past a burned-out passenger van that he had discovered in a nearby parking lot and had hauled to his studio, figuring that it could be useful somehow. He views making clothes as just another part of his multipronged art practice.

For Ruby, fashion doesn’t seem like such a stretch, considering that one of the spaces in his studio complex is a supermarket-size room devoted to creating what he calls “soft sculptures”—huge Dr. Seuss–ish stuffed creatures, quilted and appliquéd and sewn from fabrics that Ruby designs. He also uses fabric scraps in his collage paintings, and his work requires so much yarn that, until his staff got him certified as a wholesale distributor for a yarn company, he would regularly buy out entire
inventories at several local Jo-Ann Fabrics and Crafts stores.

Ruby learned to sew on his mother’s old Singer, as a boy in Pennsylvania. “I kept breaking the needle and bending the bobbins,” he said. “I was trying to cram through too much fabric.” His mother bought him his own used sewing machine when he was thirteen. Recently, when his toddler daughter, Rosemary, wanted a cape, Ruby sorted through a bin in his studio for the right size scrap and sewed her one on the spot. He and his wife, the fine-art photographer Melanie Schiff, have two other young children, a son and a daughter. (Ruby also has another daughter, who is fifteen.)

The studio compound occupies four acres and is divided according to major bodies of Ruby’s work. There is a chamber where six dumpster-size kilns produce molten-looking ceramic vessels, some as big as hot tubs. Several huge rooms contain monumental paintings and collages; other areas house metal, resin, and urethane sculptures. A thirty-thousand-square-foot hangar that Ruby calls a “viewing room” stands ready as a test gallery, where he can assess finished pieces and mock up the configuration of art shows that will take place elsewhere.

Since word got out that Ruby was planning to design a line of clothing, an unlikely assortment of visitors started showing up at the studio, including Rei Kawakubo, the groundbreaking designer of Comme des Garçons; an array of fashion and marketing consultants; and Michael Ovitz, the co-founder of Creative Artists Agency and a longtime art collector. Ovitz first encountered Ruby’s work at the 2008 MOCA exhibition and invited the artist to mount a show at his private home gallery, in Beverly Hills. Ovitz bought every piece in the show except several coffins, which Ruby said were a play on Minimalism and confinement. “I didn’t need the coffins,” Ovitz told me.

Another visitor was the Belgian fashion designer Raf Simons, a friend of Ruby’s who helped plant the seed for his foray into making clothes. Simons, who designed for Jil Sander and Dior, and then worked as the creative director at Calvin Klein, is known for an aesthetic of precision and minimalist restraint, the opposite of Ruby’s rugged style of willfully messy profusion. In 2008, Simons asked Ruby to design a boutique in Tokyo for his label and liked the result—white walls defaced with blue paint splatters—so much that he commissioned set designs from Ruby as backdrops for two runway shows for Calvin Klein. For another Calvin show, models walked through ankle-deep drifts of popcorn under looming barn façades, from whose rafters hung cheerleaders’ pom-poms, created, by Ruby, out of blood-red yarn. In 2014, Simons asked Ruby to collaborate on some menswear.

Ruby’s galleryists discouraged the collaboration. Since the beginning of his career, he has rejected the traditional financial arrangements between artists and dealers. Instead of being yoked to one gallery, which would take half the purchase price of his pieces, Ruby works with several galleries simultaneously, and he negotiates the terms of each contract separately. “I never trusted the gallery model of fifty-fifty,” he told me. Unlike many other artists who produce on his scale, he funds his own work, and galleries pay him a specified percentage of the sale price. Some people in the art world have branded him a careerist gallery-hopper, without loyalty, but he doesn’t care.

So when his dealers looked askance at his work with Simons, he ignored them. “The dealers were so mad at me,” he said, laughing. But he found the result exhilarating. After the Simons runway show, he told a reporter, “Everybody was standing up, cheering. At that moment, I thought, Fuck being an artist—this is wonderful.”

The collaboration with Simons felt organic to him. As an adolescent, using his mother’s sewing machine, he had made skate clothes, and as an adult he’d been making work clothes to wear in the studio, using bits of fabric or canvas that he’d experimented with for art pieces—spattering or burning them with bleach, or painting them. His work has always had a handmade, D.I.Y. aesthetic, which he associates with his blue-collar roots; the objects that he creates resemble jumbo versions of things turned out in a high-school shop class. They are not ironic in any way.

The next time I visited Soto Street, last December, Ruby had expanded the staff of his fashion project to include a general manager, a head of production, two sample-makers, and several consultants to advise on the design and the merchandising of a clothing line. The project had not been formally announced, but Ruby had been producing sample garments—the distressed denim I’d already seen, plus graphic T-shirts, baggy trousers he called “raver” pants, and big coats with fringed edges. His line now had a logo and a heavily punctuated name: S.R. Studio. L.A. CA.

Although Ruby had tried to keep the project quiet, he had been invited to show his first collection at Pitti Uomo, an important men’s-fashion week that takes place twice a year in Florence. (Past special guests at the Pitti shows have included Hedi Slimane, Rodarte’s Kate and Laura Mulleavy, Raf Simons, and Martin Margiela.) For the location of the show, to take place in June, 2019, Ruby selected Le Pagliere, an old hay barn near the Boboli Gardens. Back in L.A., he was busy preparing for simultaneous art showings in Dallas and in Los Angeles; he had also agreed to create a sculpture for the exhibition Desert X, in Coachella Valley. (The result was a fluorescent-orange block the size of a shipping container, called “SPECTER,” which became a sensation on Instagram.) On that day in December, however, he and his new fashion team were focussed on the Pitti deadline. In addition to men’s and women’s clothes, he would be showing shoes and handbags. The group began by discussing the line’s labels, and whether they should be printed or woven.

“The printed ones seem to me a little gimmicky,” Ruby, who had on a Death Angel T-shirt and paint-splattered sneakers, said.

Michele Sodi, a former Helmut Lang executive whom Ruby had brought in as a consultant, asked, “Should the care label say ‘Dry-clean only’ for everything?” “For us, that’s the safest,” a brisk young woman who was hired to oversee production said.

The group sat around an oval table, drinking coffee and picking at gluten-free pastries. They decided that the collection should have pricing tiers, ranging from three-hundred-and-fifty-dollar logo T-shirts to one-of-a-kind items hand—finished in the Vernon studio. These designations were based on the way that artists commonly define editions. Someone suggested calling the items produced in limited runs, which
could sell for several thousand dollars apiece, “S.R. Studio L.A. CA. Limited.”
Ruby winced at the word “limited.” “It sounds like the Eddie Bauer version,” he said.

Emily Maturo, the new general manager, who had previously worked for Thom Browne, proposed calling the high-end line “Soto.”

“I think a Mr. Soto was a founding father of Vernon?” Ruby said. Then he frowned. “But was he corrupt?”

Everyone at the table Googled “Soto” on their phones.

“I like ‘Soto,’” Ruby said. “A lot.”
“Don’t ask me,” Sodi said with a shrug. “I cut all the labels out of my clothes.”

Ruby left the meeting early to head home for his daughter Rosemary’s birthday party. The talk of dry cleaning and pricing tiers had subdued him. He’d told me that one of the reasons he wanted to branch out from art is that he views that world as becoming too commodified. He hoped that producing clothing would be a way of democratizing his work, making it available to a wider audience. He agreed with Simons that most artist-fashion mashups were somewhat cynical, what Simons has called “a package to sell.” He seemed to think that the buyers of four-hundred-dollar T-shirts would be a different order of consumer from the buyers of million-dollar paintings.

Tyler Britt, Ruby’s studio director, had told me that Ruby started the fashion company because, after collaborating with Simons, he wanted to do his own line but didn’t know how he’d sell it. “He couldn’t sell it through his art galleries, unless the clothes were priced like art,” Britt said. The day before, I’d asked Ruby what he hoped to accomplish with his fashion line. He was tongue-tied. “I want it to have the same integrity as the art has,” he finally said. He added, “I don’t want to fix the fashion industry. I want to reset the rules of what it means to be an artist.”

Ruby designed his first piece of apparel as an adult around ten years ago: a light-green denim shirt with two square pockets on the chest. When the first large-format iPhone came out, he bought one, then he went to his studio and sewed a new shirt with a larger pocket on the left side, for the phone. Friends began to notice Ruby’s homemade work clothes and requested pieces for themselves. He started to research pattern-making, and his conversations with Simons turned technical. Ruby likes rough edges, but Simons, a true couturier, recommended more refinement in a garment’s finishing. To Ruby, nothing can top a bulky Christmas sweater that his grandmother knitted for him, in the eighties, out of red, green, and white acrylic yarn. When Simons saw it, he shrieked, “Oh! It’s poor, poor, poor!”

Ruby was born in Germany. His father was in the military and had been stationed in Bitburg, where he met and married a Dutch woman. The family moved to rural Pennsylvania when Ruby was eight. In high school, he started decorating his clothes with patches representing his favorite bands (Bad Brains, Foetus, Swans, and Slayer), and he made tops by splicing together pieces of different shirts. These getups made some of the kids at school think he was gay, and they bullied him. “I just liked to fuck with people,” he said. Ruby thought his do-it-yourself approach was in line with the stripped-down punk aesthetic and

Before Ruby, no major visual artist had ever produced a fashion line. “It’s one of the reasons I’m doing it,” he said.
skateboarding culture of the time. (The Amish and Mennonite teen-agers in his town, having learned carpentry at a young age, built the best skateboard ramps.) He also made zines, and as a teen-ager he interviewed the hardcore band Circle Jerks. His parents let him go to punk clubs in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., as long as he got to school on time in the morning. “Where I grew up, there was no fashion,” he told me. “When hunting season came, people switched from flannel to orange.”

Ruby attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where, in his free time, he worked as a bicycle mechanic and a video archivist. After graduating, in 2002, he moved to Los Angeles, to pursue a master’s in fine art at the Art College of Design. He ended up leaving the Art College without a degree, and with more than two hundred and fifty thousand dollars of student debt. He finally paid it off in 2008, after his landmark show at MOCA.

With the Pitti show less than six months away, a sense of urgency spurred a retail plan. An avant-garde e-commerce site called Ssense wanted to make some of Ruby’s pieces available for sale immediately after the show; Rei Kawakubo and her husband, Adrian Joffe, offered to sell the line in their Dover Street Market stores all over the world. Word came from Paris that an influential boutique in the Marais called the Broken Arm wanted to turn the top floor of its store over to S.R. Studio, L.A. CA. the following September.

Lining up retailers required a pricing strategy. “We started with traditional retail-wholesale markups,” Britt told me. A former photography student of Melanie Schiff’s, he started out pouring urethane and sweeping floors in the studio. He now runs the place, managing construction, negotiating employment contracts, and, these days, figuring out how to price articles of clothing. Britt had learned that apparel is generally sold for between two and a half and three and a half times its wholesale cost. But art is not priced according to a cost-plus model. A Sterling Ruby fabric sculpture goes for as much as a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. “How do you put a value on the pieces of clothing being hand-worked by Sterling?” Britt wondered. Maturo, the general manager, proposed eight thousand dollars as a potential price for a one-of-a-kind bleached-denim poncho, around the same cost as a Chanel jacket. Ruby reminded them that he wanted young people to be able to afford S.R. Studio; he insisted on offering some “entry-level” items. He suggested that one of his jeans designs should sell for four hundred and ninety-five dollars.

No one at the meeting questioned the democratic bona fides of five-hundred-dollar dungarees. Britt pointed out that, unlike an art work, which is the property of one person or institution, “clothing is about accessibility.” He added, “It would be a failure if it weren’t.”

The merchandising discussion was picked up at another meeting, on a rainy day in January. The downpour had left wide ponds across the studio’s asphalt back lot, and Ruby, who was bundled against the cold in track pants, a fleece hoodie of his own design, and a knit cap, frowned as he looked over a list of what Ssense had ordered to sell online—mainly logo T-shirts and sweatshirts. “Let’s not go everyone else’s route and just offer a bunch of fucking T-shirts on our Web site,” he said. “I worry about a site like Ssense. If you front-load a bunch of T-shirts, it’s just another T-shirt brand.”

He had recently decided to add silk column dresses printed with high-resolution photographs shot by Schiff. “Will silk dresses sell for fall?” he asked the group.


Ruby also said that he’d prefer his Web site to be ungendered—what used to be called unisex—although Maturo and Britt tried to talk him out of it. They pointed out that having the clothing identified as male or female is important for helping shoppers with sizing and fit.

Leaving his studio that day, Ruby conceded that he had qualms about whether the fashion line would have a negative effect on his career. “People just think that fashion is lower than art,” he said. But he saw clothes as just another thing to make, like sculpture or film or ceramics. “Being an artist, to do something like manufacturing apparel, it’s tricky,” he said. “I love my life as an artist, and I don’t want to give it up. As an artist, I get to do anything I want to do.”

In February, Ruby’s two worlds bumped up against each other at the opening of his latest show, called “Damnation,” at the Sprüth Magers gallery in L.A. Ruby and Schiff showed up wearing
identical pairs of black leather boots with metal tips on the toes, designed by Simons. One portion of the show featured a series of loopy dinosaur-like heads. Ruby had hired a Hollywood prop designer to help him create gigan-
tic skulls out of resin, with sharp teeth and bulbous eyeballs and tongues. Ruby topped the fierce-looking skulls, each the size of an armchair, with mops of colorful, acrylic-yarn hair that made them look more Muppets than Jurassic Park. They were priced at two hundred and fifty thousand dollars each.

The centerpiece of the show was a half-hour-long film called “STATE.” Ruby had hired a helicopter to fly over California state prisons, from which a videographer shot footage of the brutalist architectural shapes and also the surrounding countryside. The soundtrack was Ruby playing the drums and synths. Three copies of “STATE” were being offered for sale, at two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. There have been inquiries from a few museums, but Ruby told me that he is in a mood to break with art-world traditions. He is hoping to offer “STATE” to a streaming service like Netflix or HBO.

At dinner afterward, guests discussed Ruby’s fashion venture. “Why, as an artist, wouldn’t you want to engage in the mode of production?” HamZA Walker, who runs the experimental art space LAXART, said. He has known Ruby since his student days in Chicago. Standing at the bar, Walker acknowledged that some art dealers were suspicious of Ruby’s fashion project. “That’s a nervoussness that’s endemic to the nature of art,” he said. Walker compared Ruby to Robert Rauschenberg. “Everything was open to Rauschenberg!” he said. “Would he have said yes to fashion? Absolutely!” A London art dealer named James Lindon, standing nearby, used the phrase “high-level criticality” to describe Ruby’s clothes venture. “It’s much more subversive than a buffed bunny,” he said.

Raf Simons was at the opening, wearing a fitted denim jacket over a collared shirt. He had recently left Calvin Klein, after a tumultuous tenure. Although he continues to design his own menswear line, from Belgium, he told me that he was having second thoughts about fashion altogether. Rather than produce seasonal collections, he is contemplating showing his designs along with the work of other artists and designers, inspired by the Bauhaus model. “I’m thinking about an environment,” he said, adding cryptically that he had talked to Belgian politicians about the idea, suggesting that Ruby would be part of it.

“What I experienced with Sterling was so natural,” Simons told me. Most artists, he said, were afraid of fashion. He added that for years he had been thinking of becoming an artist. I asked what was holding him back. “Fear, of course!” he replied.

A few weeks after the “Damnation” show, Pitti Uomo issued a formal announcement of Ruby’s fashion show. Gagosian, a network of art galleries founded by Larry Gagosian, which represents Ruby, Instagrammed the announcement. But Ruby was distressed. “I didn’t get a call from Larry,” he said. The Instagram post did not use the word “fashion,” and it garnered only about fifteen hundred likes—low for a Gagosian post. One commenter wrote, “This is truly awful. What’s wrong with you?”

Ruby was becoming concerned that his fashion project could depress the prices of his art. “I’m worried about it being received as cynical, ironic, and somehow less than what I do as an artist,” he said. “I know that there are people who have paid millions of dollars for my work who might find this banal.”

A recent visit from his patron Michael Ovitz, who wanted to see Ruby’s apparel, had left him unsettled as well. He’d shown Ovitz his acid-washed denims, the T-shirts, and the silk dresses. Ovitz, as he left, had said, “I need time to process this.”

Ovitz later told me that he hadn’t been surprised at Ruby’s move into fashion, given the scope of his other work. He said that it reminded him of what the entertainment business was like when he started C.A.A., in 1974. Back then, he said, television was considered less important than movies, and movies were considered a lower art form than sculpture. “There’s a lot of effete thinking,” he said. “I come from the school of creativity is creativity, whether it’s films or TV or art. I put Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg right up there with Jasper Johns and Cy Twombly. I think there are fashion designers up there, too. I have never subscribed to a hierarchy of creativity.”

Ovitz conceded that he looks at fashion differently since he started dating Tamara Mellon, a shoe designer (she co-founded Jimmy Choo and now has her own brand), about ten years ago. “I liked Tom Ford clothes, but I didn’t know why until she told me,” he said.

As the Pitti show got closer, Ruby was spending more and more money on his fashion line. He and Schiff had gone out to dinner with two designers, Matthieu Blazy, who has worked
POSITIVE PAPER

The sentence should have been, “I don’t see any reason why it wouldn’t be Russia.” Sort of a double negative. So you can put that in, and I think that probably clarifies things pretty good.

—Donald J. Trump.

One rotten apple keeps the doctor away.
When the doctor’s away the cat will get the cream.
The law is an ass that loves to hear itself bray.
The path of least resistance leads to Rome.

Like father, like two peas in a pod.
It’s in the country of the blind
we find ourselves kissing the auld sod.
A society is great when men plant

One of the couple was startled to hear their friend’s take on the finances of the fashion business. Mulier, giggling with Blazy, had said, “We’d never use our own money.”

“That made me feel weird,” Ruby told me. “I don’t want this to bankrupt me.” He had recently spent almost three million dollars on another warehouse to use, in part, as a headquarters for his label. The costs for the Pitti show would likely reach half a million dollars (Pitti was paying half of this), not including the costs of designing and manufacturing, and of paying Ruby’s growing fashion staff. He had hired a new production manager, Ramona Jones, from the Row, the well-regarded luxury label designed by Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen. He was having nurse-style sneakers produced in Italy, and he had clunky hand-bags, modelled on cardboard boxes, cast from aluminum. More sculpture than purse, the bags hung from industrial-grade chains.

He had struggled to find factories in the United States and Italy that were willing to make only between five and fifty of each garment. Studio staff members were bleaching cotton duck and knit fabrics on the asphalt in the sun, preparing a few yards at a time to send to the factories. But manufacturers are accustomed to working with enormous rolls of fabric that they can cut with saws, hundreds at a time. A consultant had located a woman in Tarzana who had agreed to knit thirteen oversized, blobby sweaters, according to Ruby’s specifications. (Simons prevailed on this front: the sweaters were made of merino wool.)

One afternoon in April, Ruby decided to make a drastic change to some of the dresses he was working on. He elongated the sleeves and made the necklines higher, giving them the chaste look of prairie dresses, a style that Simons had explored at Calvin Klein a few years ago, and that other designers had been popularizing. “It hit me like a brick,” he told me. “This is about the Amish and Mennonite girls I grew up with.” As a punk teen-ager, he had rejected their ethos, but now he appreciated the work ethic and the self-sufficiency of those communities. The collection was soon full of smocks, aprons, and long skirts layered over wide-legged pants.

Meghan Roche, a designer who has worked at the fashion label Christopher Kane, had recently joined Ruby’s studio. “I’m looking for something bigger than clothing,” she told me. “Here it’s, like, clothing as a medium, like ceramics.” While many fashion designers
In Rome, every cloud 
is born with a silver spoon in its mouth
and, on its tongue, an ox.
Step on a crack, my dearies, step on a crack
and teach your granny to suck eggs
from her one basket. Beware of Greeks
bearing a gift horse
on which beggars might ride.
Little acorns do indeed have the biggest ears.
If wishes were fishes we’d all rot
from the head down forencest a stable door.
Waste not, nothing gained.
The poor workman blames a ha’porth of tar.
There’s many a slip to every coin.

The plot is thicker than water off a duck’s back.
From your lips is enough.
All nose-to-the-grindstone makes Jack
a dishwater-dull knife.

Where there’s muck we become as sounding brass.
Put your money in the company you keep.
It takes all sorts to make a silk purse
but birds of a feather flock in your cap.

Don’t even think of crossing the bridge
till it takes you to the fair.

barely touch fabric, Ruby, she said,
couldn’t stay out of the fashion shed:
“He’s in here every hour.”

Ruby and Schiff live in the Mount Washington area of Los Angeles.
After a number of years in the rural San Fernando Valley town of Tujunga, they
bought a house at the top of the mountain and enlarged it. Ruby has landscaped
the front yard with grasses and native plants, according to the ideas of the
Dutch landscape designer Piet Oudolf, the leader of the New Perennial
movement and the force behind New York’s High Line. Ruby and Schiff bought the
house next door, too, and put in a pool
and a family art studio with kilns, where Ruby makes ceramics with the kids.

I visited on Easter weekend, and
the family had just had an egg hunt. Schiff
rocked Rosemary on her hip as Ruby
talked about the photographs of Schiff’s,
including a series on candles, that would
be printed on the silk-crêpe dresses he
was making. Schiff was busy shooting
photographs for the S.R. Studio. L.A.
CA, promotional campaign. Ruby looked
at her and remarked, “You said, ‘We’re
not paying someone to shoot the cam-
paign. I’m shooting it.’” Schiff nodded.

As the Pitti show got nearer, Ruby
seemed to be getting more cheerful. He
often suffers from post-show depres-
sion, but this was pre-show optimism.

In mid-May, Matthieu Blazy flew to
L.A. from Antwerp to help edit the se-
lection of looks that would appear on
the Pitti runway. He and Ruby sat before
three boards, looking at sketches and
photos of models in potential outfits.
Every once in a while, one of them would
move a photo, or drop it on the floor.

“These five,” Ruby said, pointing to
a series of robes inspired by the ones
that Emilie Flöge made for Gustav
Klimt, familiar from Klimt’s paintings.
“Is it too much?” He moved a photo to
another group. Blazy moved a fringed
denim suit and two bulky sweaters a
few inches to the left, then counted
what was left. Seventy-four looks. They
needed to eliminate thirty more.

“After seeing so many fashion shows,
I get bored after fifty looks,” Ruby said.
He had been watching footage of run-
way shows online. “I looked at that last
Balenciaga show,” he said. “It went on
forever.” They decided to eliminate se-
veral cardigans that seemed repetitive.
Blazy bent down and picked up a pic-
ture of an acid-green barn coat from
the pile of discs.

“It’s a very important piece,” he in-
sisted, re-pinning it to the board. “It
represents work wear.”

Head shots of the models Ruby hoped
to cast were pinned on another board.
They were young and skinny, and only

—Paul Muldoon
a few could be considered pretty. “They all look like they live life,” Ruby said, describing the aesthetic he was after. “Like they haven’t had it easy.”

In early June, Ruby’s team shipped most of the collection to Florence and packed some more of it in their suitcases. They arrived six days before the show and settled into a temporary headquarters, a series of chambers underneath the show venue, on the Viale Machiavelli. By the day before the début, Ruby’s mood had turned focussed and a bit dark. He had the half-doomed look of a man about to jump off a very high diving board. “I’m restless about art,” he told me, during a final model-casting session. “I’m not excited about what art has become, as an industry. I think it’s become very investment-heavy, with people looking at artists like racehorses. I don’t think it’s making artists do better work.”

He paused for a moment, then said, “I think this”—he swept his arm at the roomful of garment racks—“is more transgressive. I still love painting. I love sculpture. I just feel a little blah.” He likes the artisanal part of fashion, like the knitter in Tarzana. (He had asked her to sign the labels of her pieces.) And yet he said he has no interest in churning out collections every three to six months, as other designers do. He wants to make clothes on his own timetable.

That evening, Givenchy threw a party to celebrate the first menswear collection of Clare Waight Keller, the British designer known for making Meghan Markle’s wedding dress. It was held at a palatial estate on the outskirts of town, and guests were talking about Ruby’s show, which was scheduled for the next day. One fashion insider said that she had warned Ruby against this project more than a year before. She made a square in the air with her hands and said she had told him, “You can sell one little painting for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Why would you do fashion?”

On the morning of the show, Serena Cattaneo Adorno, the head of Gagossian’s Paris office, flew with a handful of clients from Art Basel to Florence to see Ruby’s show. “There are a group of curators and collectors who are certainly against this,” she said, of Ruby’s cross-over into fashion. The fact that Art Basel and Pitti Uomo are both more or less trade shows didn’t seem to register.

Later, at Le Palgiere, Ruby, wearing his prototype green nurse shoes, watched a rehearsal of his show, set to a soundtrack of his own drumming. Then he headed backstage for what is known as “first looks.” There were forty-five models, including a few of Ruby’s friends, like Pieter Mulier and the actress Mackenzie Davis, lined up in the order of the show. Several wore huge, semi-rigid, one-of-a-kind ponchos, one of them ripped in the back, that looked as grotty and unfinished as any of Ruby’s ceramics. The ethereal silk dresses printed with Schiff’s photographs of candles and grasses were paired with lug-soled boots. Making when they feel like making it.”

Ruby’s amplified drumming signalled that the show was starting. The first outfits on the runway were the bleached-and-dyed denim—jeans and overalls with matching shirts or jackets. A cast-aluminum hammer glistening in the pocket of a pair of overalls. One model, wearing a splattered collared shirt—with two big-iphone-size pockets—stomped down the runway in combat boots, holding a shiny hoe, as if part of a mob confronting Frankenstein’s monster. Another model wore a long dress fringed with red and green acrylic yarn—the same kind of yarn that bewigged the dinosaur skulls in Ruby’s L.A. show—accessorized with a bib in back that looked like a hunk of quilt. Some wore

Models in Ruby’s show wore bleached-and-dyed denim and carried cast-aluminum farm implements down the runway.

Ruby walked down the line, as if inspecting an honor guard, and used a blue microfibre cloth to polish the accessories—cast-aluminum handbags, decorative hatchets, crowbars, hammers, hoes, metal baskets (stuffed with red yarn), and other accoutrements of the laboring class.

Out in the audience, Simons took his seat in the front row. He wore a tuxedo shirt over his own line’s track pants and athletic slides. Suzy Menkes, the veteran British fashion critic, peered around the room. The designer Virgil Abloh, who had flown in from Art Basel, sidled past the art dealer Vito Schnabel. “In the past, the art world has been tough on people who do more than they’re supposed to,” Schnabel said. “But I think people should be able to make what they feel like
Backstage, Ruby looked elated. Right after their shows, designers often resemble brides: dazed, surrounded by gushing well-wishers. Ruby, tears in his eyes, hugged his colleagues from Vernon and the people from Art Basel. He said that it was exciting to think of his work going out and moving around in the world for people to see, rather than hanging in a museum. Within hours, the fashion reviewers had weighed in. Guy Trebay, in the Times, called the show a “stellar” debut. Vogue reported that, backstage, Menkes had said that it was “the best new-person collection I have ever seen.” Menkes’s own review described “the roar of joy” that greeted the collection, calling it “one of those fashion ‘moments,’” a tribal approval of a collection that expressed a current yearning for craft, for originality and also for wearable but artistic clothes.

That evening, the Gagosian gallery hosted a dinner for Ruby at a restaurant outside Florence. (Gagosian tweeted the Vogue piece, but Larry didn’t call.) Buses were provided to ferry guests, and on board word spread that items from the collection were already available on Ssense. Samuel Rubell, the eighteen-year-old son of the art collector Jason Rubell, pulled out his phone. His parents and grandparents have been buying Ruby’s work since 2005. Samuel clicked and bought a black shirt with the S.R. Studio logo printed upside down, for four hundred dollars. His sixteen-year-old sister, Ella, bought, for seven hundred and ninety-five dollars, a pair of pink-and-black mineral-washed jeans. “They look like tie-dye,” she said. Olivia, their fourteen-year-old sister, chose a pair of six-hundred-and-ninety-five-dollar leggings that, she said, “look like space.”

Their father asked, “Why are young people so into fashion these days?”

“Because people will make fun of you if you wear the wrong thing,” Olivia said.

Rubell’s face wore the proud look of a parent whose kids were happily choosing books at Barnes & Noble. He seemed pleased that his children were into Ruby’s clothes. “It means the art crossed over and translated to a new audience,” he said. As someone with a stake in Ruby, he had wondered whether this enterprise would devalue his investment, but, after the show, he concluded that the broody clothes fit in with Ruby’s vision. “There’s his darkness in them,” Rubell said. “It didn’t feel like a sellout to me. It could have been.”

The following morning, the S.R. Studio, L.A. CA. showroom, under the Le Pagliere venue, hosted eight retailers that had been granted the right to buy the collection for their stores. (Earlier inquiries from Barneys had been rebuffed.) Ruby had left to go on vacation with his family before setting to work on his next sculpture show, at Gagosian in London, in October. In fashion, scarcity supports high prices, and Ruby had, in the end, decided to embrace the luxury tier. Men’s shirts of mottled silk were seventeen hundred dollars. Maturo, the general manager, said that she had originally suggested pricing the one-of-a-kind pieces, like the ponchos, at twenty thousand dollars, but Ruby had doubled the figure, to forty thousand dollars each. (The same amount could buy a Chanel couture gown or a Picasso lithograph.)

Ruby’s team began to think that they had underestimated demand. They had received inquiries for nearly every one of the eight unique pieces. The clothes were being snapped up online, too. Thirty per cent of the inventory was gone in two days, with the most expensive items selling the fastest. So much for democracy.

Ruby spent four weeks in Europe with his family. While waiting for a train in Antwerp, he felt a tap on his shoulder. “Are you Sterling?” a man asked. It was the designer Dries Van Noten, who complimented him, saying he had watched Ruby’s show online over and over again. Ruby had also got a text from the rapper ASAP Rocky, who wanted to buy a pair of pants. (By the time Ruby was ready to respond, ASAP had been jailed in Sweden on an assault charge.) Elle magazine asked for some Ruby T-shirts for a cover shoot with the singer Billie Eilish. Virgil Abloh, whose designs for Off-White and for Louis Vuitton menswear have a cult following, sent him a pair of robin’s-egg-blue Nikes, on whose midsoles he had scribbled the artist’s name, in the Off-White signature style, to create “Air Rubys.” They arrived in a big Vuitton shopping bag with the L.V. logo crossed out and “S.R. Studio” written in marker. They were the wrong size, but Ruby plans to keep them for his archive.

The art world also made requests. A curator from the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, which is organizing a Ruby retrospective, asked to include garments. The Spruth Magers gallery asked him to incorporate his clothes in a show. He declined both requests but was cheered. Several museums inquired about buying the one-of-a-kind items for forty-five thousand dollars. “And we got letters from artists,” Ruby told me. “Urs Fischer texted and said, ‘It’s awesome you did it.’”

In August, the art dealer Jeffrey Deitch offered his verdict: “I think his clothes are fantastic. He’s better than Raf.” He told me, “The new audience is ahead of the gatekeepers. A lot of collectors will want Sterling even more because of what he’s doing in fashion. Because it’s fresh.”

Still, the collection’s initial sales figures were perplexing. Ruby’s advisers had predicted that the cheaper T-shirts and sweatshirts would be the best-sellers. Instead, they went largely unsold. The expensive Soto line sold briskly. The jewelry designer Gaia Repossi bought a pink bleached-denim outfit and wore it to Paris haute-couture week.

Ruby had his art deadlines, but he hired more staff for the label, including a “trims” coordinator, to oversee fabrics and materials, and he brought on contractors to handle e-commerce, since he’d made it clear that he didn’t want to be part of fashion’s runway-show cycle. The huge soft-sculpture studio has been taken over by the label. Britt, the studio director, now spends half his time on the fashion company.

Ruby has started working on new pieces—a blotchy-yellow jersey prairie dress, a tailored men’s suit (oversized jacket and slim pants) in fluorescent green-and-black plaid—to be sold online. I asked several times when he thought he might be ready for the next runway show, but he kept hedging.

“I still don’t know,” he said. “But I know we’re going to do it. What we’re thinking about is where.” A familiar, painted look crossed his face. “I think the next show should be Paris,” he said. “I really do.”
Alex Prager was born in the bedroom of her grandmother’s house, in the Los Feliz neighborhood of Los Angeles, in 1979. She had an upbringing with few rules and little structure. At fourteen, she spent a summer on her own in Switzerland, where she worked at a knife store. She dropped out of school at sixteen, returning to Switzerland for longer periods, and earned her G.E.D. At twenty-one, while living in L.A., she went to see a show of William Eggleston’s photographs at the Getty Museum. “I felt like I was struck blind by a vision and that was the path I was going to take for the rest of my life,” she said recently. A few days later, she bought a Nikon N90s and began her career. She avoided formal education, and taught herself what she needed to execute her ideas.

In her early series, including “Polyester” and “The Big Valley,” from the mid-two-thousands, Prager established a particular California aesthetic, photographing friends wearing polyester minidresses and suits, with teased hair and melting lipstick. The images feature Big Gulp sodas and blazing sun, and are underpinned by disaster. Cars sink into water and houses combust. A
woman's body is folded over the lattice of an electricity pylon. In 2013, Prager turned to crowds, constructing intricate gatherings of moviegoers, travelers, and sunbathers in garish dress.

Prager does for photography what James Ellroy did for crime fiction, inventing a neo-noir L.A. vernacular that creates a feeling of the past without the limitations of historical accuracy. Her studio, in Silver Lake, is a storehouse for a vast collection of vintage clothing, newspapers, textiles, and objects whose obsolescence might otherwise have gone unnoticed—waxed-paper Coca-Cola cups, beach chairs with plastic webbing, suitcases without wheels, particular typefaces and patterns. Prager has immersed herself in the history of illusion in cinema and photography, and deploys in-camera effects, painted backdrops, stuntmen, set builders, and digital editing techniques, with often surreal results. A car that appears life-size might be a miniature, crafted by a special-effects artist, a profession that has itself been made antique by technology.

Last year, Prager published “Silver Lake Drive,” her first monograph, and had her first solo retrospective, which included her first forays into film. She married her partner, the creative director Simon Dargan, and gave birth to a son. She thought about how Los Angeles had become glasier and less familiar to her, and experienced a nostalgia that she mistrusted even as it made itself known.

Prager’s uneasy contemplation of her past inspired a new series, comprising a film and photographs, which will be shown this month at the Lehmann Maupin gallery, in New York. The film, “Play the Wind,” follows a man as he drives across L.A., passing crowds of people in states of amusement and hysteria and a car upended vertically after an apparent crash on the highway. (“Driving through Los Angeles, you see all kinds of things out your window, and they go by so quickly,” Prager explained.) The film’s point of view switches when the driver encounters a mysterious woman from his past. Their eyes meet, and then she is suddenly falling, whipped through the air, clothes and detritus flying past her.

The photographs in the series are complementary to the film, meant to give the spectator a chance to linger on the details and the stories contained in each frame. She seeded the images with gestures to her former self. A woman lies on a bedspread that Prager used in an early photograph. Friends, family members, and actors whom she has portrayed for years reappear, the passage of time evident in their faces and bodies. Prager’s memories of Los Angeles pervade the work: a character dressed as a Muscle Beach bodybuilder like the ones she would see on Venice Beach as a child; a “You Are the Star” mural, dating to a seedier era of Hollywood Boulevard, that she passed growing up in the eighties; a key chain in the shape of a pair of red lips which Prager borrowed from her aunt Eydie; fancy packs and cigarette packets of a certain vintage. Her crowd scenes have evolved, too, into manic tableaux of movement and satire. The agitation is contemporary, sometimes reflecting what she describes as a feeling of knowing something has gone wrong without being certain of the cause.

Prager shot the series during several hot, sunny days in early May. A staging area had been set up at a Japanese Methodist church in the south L.A. County city of Torrance, where production trailers and catering tents occupied the parking lot. Inside the church, dozens of extras were transformed into well-thought-out characters, with mannequins, makeup, and hair styling or wigs. I took a production shuttle to a two-story brick building in nearby Gardena, chosen by Prager because of an elaborate old neon sign advertising a dance studio on the second floor. On the ground floor, Prager and her assistants had remade a shop’s windows into those of an electronics store called Eddie’s, complete with nineties-era cassette boom boxes and clock radios.

Prager bounded her beatific year-old son, Francis, on one hip while gaffers and grips arranged the lighting for the next shot. She wore a green baseball cap over her blond bob, white New Balance sneakers, a black button-down cotton shirt tucked into green khakis, and a touch of winged eyeliner. She was shooting the moment in which the man, driving by the store, sees the woman from his past. The actor, Dimitri Chamblas, sat at the wheel of a powder-blue Cutlass Ciera. A pack of Marlboro Reds was on the dashboard; a yellow pine-tree air freshener hung from the rearview mirror.

“Is it her?” Prager instructed Chamblas to wonder, as the woman, who was played by the actor Riley Keough, stood at a bus stop. “Is this a dream?” From the car window, Chamblas gazed with intensity.

“Now you’re deciding: Never again. This is over. We have a new life,” Prager said. She watched, satisfied, as the camera rolled.

Later that morning, I travelled with Prager to the parking lot of Teds Liquor, a nearby mini-mart, where extras sat in folding chairs in the shade of a pop-up tent. The assortment recalled the characters of “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” or perhaps a carnival in a Fellini film. There was a woman in a clown suit with hearts painted on her cheeks, a Burt Reynolds type with faux-snakeskin pants and a shag rug’s worth of chest hair, and a man with a prosthetic Pinocchio nose. Prager’s sister, the painter Vanessa Prager, who was pregnant, wore a candy-striped sheath dress and a beehive wig.

The extras stood in a line. Prager went from person to person, examining each costume. “She needs more sunburn makeup,” she said of a woman wearing a hibiscus-patterned one-piece swimsuit and Keds. A man in a Hawaiian shirt needed his hair slicked down; a woman in workout clothes needed tan lines; someone was given a plaster cast to wear on one arm.

“I’m not into this,” she said, pausing
before a woman in a chartreuse pants suit. “Put her in a different costume.”

Props were distributed: a tabloid newspaper, a pair of crutches, a popcorn bucket, goldfish in a plastic bag. Francis, stripped down to his diaper, was in the shoot, being held by Prager’s cousin Miquelle McCarthy, who was wearing a crop top and short shorts that showed off the tattoos on her legs. “Keep that Popsicle,” Prager said to a man eating a lime Popsicle that he had bought at the mini-mart. He looked down at it, and pulled the wrapper back on.

Prager lay down on the hot asphalt of the parking lot and aimed her Contax camera up toward the sky. A half-dozen extras loomed over her, blotting out the sun. She set about creating the small dramas that give her images their unique narrative quality.

“You’re angry. You’re having a great day,” she said to a man dressed in a buttercup-yellow polyester suit and a woman in blue sequins, respectively. “Oh, there’s gum on your shoe,” she said to another man. He affected an expression of dismay.

Later, Prager strapped herself into a safety harness and was lifted above the cast in a cherry picker. She held a wireless microphone, into which she issued instructions that were broadcast to the crowd. On the roof of the mini-mart, a cowboy and his girlfriend were sharing an illicit kiss. Down below, the clown wandered sadly. The woman in the swimsuit sunbathed in a folding chair. The extras milled around, smoking cigarettes and drinking Budweiser. One took Polaroid photos. The parking lot could have been anywhere, but the people and the glaring midday sun nowhere else.

—Emily Witt
"Western Frontier," 2019.
THE STONE

Louise Erdrich
Her family drove north every summer to stay at the end of an island in cold Lake Superior, and it was there that she found the stone. It wasn’t on the beach, where stones are usually found, but in the woods. She was wandering in the brush behind the cabin, uncurling ferns, kicking up leaves, snapping the heads off mushrooms. She sat down beside a birch clump, and after a few moments her neck pricked. She had the distinct feeling that someone was staring at her. Looking around, she saw the stone. It was black and rounded, nestled in the crotch of the birch clump. Water had scoured two symmetrical hollows into the stone, giving it an owlish look, or a blind look, or, anyway, some quality that was oddly attractive. At first, she was startled and a little spooked, but then she ran her hand over the stone and it felt like a normal stone. It was about half the size of a human skull and very smooth. The girl’s mother called to her, and she got up, holding the stone, and carried it into the cabin. At first, she put it beside her pallet in the bedroom she shared with her siblings. But then, thinking that her brothers or her sister might take the stone, she tucked it right at the bottom of her sleeping bag. That night, her feet rested on the cool curve of the stone, and she brushed the smooth eye sockets with her toes.

After a month, the family got ready to return to the city, and the girl put the stone in her backpack, which she kept at her feet for the whole long drive. She did not let anyone else handle her pack, and when she got home she went straight to her room, took the stone out, and set it on her nightstand, where there was also a digital clock and a pile of books. She was old enough now to say good night to her mother and father before entering her room. They did not sit by her bed to read to her anymore. She took her own laundry downstairs as well. Her mother was not the type to go through her children’s rooms often, or to clean for them, so school had started by the time her mother noticed the stone.

She mentioned it at dinner. “That rock by your bed looks like it came from the island. Did you find it there?”

The girl nodded, but her mother’s remark gave her an uneasy feeling, and that night she put the stone at the bottom of her least used drawer. As she fell asleep, she could picture it, nestled among her summer T-shirts and shorts, which would not be disturbed all winter. She was happy just knowing that it was there, and for months the drawer seemed the best place for it. She might have kept it in the drawer indefinitely, if it weren’t for something that occurred at school.

There was a boy named Vic, who often acted up in order to get attention. One day, during art class, the girl felt a little tug at the end of her ponytail, and looked around to see that Vic had used his art scissors to snip off a piece of her dark hair. He dangled the lock from his fingers and grinned at her. But she said nothing. She was frozen, staring at her hair. He made a move to hide the hair, but she found her voice and told him to drop it. She snatched the lock as it left his fingers and balled it up in her fist. At this point, the teacher noticed that something was going on and asked the girl what was in her hand. When the teacher saw the hair, she said that cutting your own hair was the sort of behavior most children had outgrown long ago, and she would have to write a note to her parents.

Her mother was mystified. “Why did you do that?”

Her father lectured her about the beauty of hair.

That night, she put the little clump of severed hair into one of the empty hollows in the face of the stone. As soon as she’d done this, she was flooded with a sense of peace and relief. The entire incident ceased to matter, though she had been terribly upset by it before. She breathed out and laughed as she closed the drawer. It was nothing at all.

After that, whenever something happened to upset her, the girl would go to the stone. She would sit on the bed with the stone in her lap, stroking it, until her agitation subsided. As she got older, in the most difficult of times, to calm herself, she would take the stone into the bathroom with her and set it on the edge of the tub while she soaked. One night, as she lay in the hot water, she became acutely aware of the stone. The smooth, empty scoops in its face seemed profoundly interested in her. A gentle, thrilling ripple spread through her body. After a while, she took the stone into the water with her and held it on her chest, then slid it down her body until it rested, heavily, between her legs. There was the weight and the pressure of the stone and the heat of the water. She put her hand on the stone and pushed against it. Then she put the stone back on the edge of the tub and closed her eyes.

The boy, Vic, made the varsity basketball team; in fact, he was a starter, and the most popular girls followed him home. One night, however, he called the girl and asked her to go out with him. She did. They went to a movie, and in the darkness he took her hand. His palm sweat unpleasantly, but she did not move her hand, although she wanted to. Later, he drove her home in his family car, which had a child’s car seat in the back and smelled of peanuts and other food eaten while driving. He parked the car outside her house and bent toward her. His breath was hot and he panted like a dog, she thought, but she put up with the kissing. He took a strand of her hair between his fingers and whispered something in her ear. He said that she was different from all the other girls, more loyal, because she’d never told on him for cutting her hair with his art scissors. She, too, had never forgotten the incident. Gently, she tugged her hair from his fingers.

She got out of the car, walked into the house, and called out to her parents that she was home. She was the oldest of four children, and the others were asleep. Her parents slept downstairs. The house was quiet. Something rustled in the drawer where she kept the stone. She opened the drawer quickly, but there was only the stone, its eye sockets calm. Everything was understood. She slept that night with the stone beside her, and every night after that, too.

Before she went to college, the girl would hide the stone immediately upon rising so that nobody in her family would notice it. But in college there was no need. She had a single room. And anyone who noticed the stone on her pillow considered it an interesting,
even artistic, sort of sleeping companion. Much better, for instance, than the childish stuffed animals that so many girls affected, or the giant stuffed footballs or beer kegs that could be bought at the college bookstore.

But one girl saw the stone and thought it a pretentious thing to do. Sleeping with a stone—how artsy-fartsy. There was some envy, perhaps, of a girl so self-sufficient (though pleasant, smart, musical, organized, sociable) that all she needed to sleep with was a smooth, black rock.

Basalt, the girl corrected, whenever her stone was mentioned, which the other girl—Mariah was her name—found so infuriating that one night she picked up the stone and carried it off. Just stole it. She put the stone on her highest bookshelf, above her bed, and waited to see what would happen. That night, the stone fell off the shelf and struck the bone around her eye, causing an orbital fracture and maybe a concussion, as she forgot where she was and could not speak for several hours. During the chaos of the incident, the girl picked up her stone, tucked it under her blouse, and carried it back to her room. Again she had to hide it. She kept the stone hidden for a long time as she continued her education, perfecting her musical skills.

She became so proficient at the piano that she gave concerts and was hired by an orchestra in a large city. Now she carried the stone to every rehearsal in a leather bag and set it beside the piano. She carried it to every concert as well. She became known for this eccentricity, for sweeping onstage in an elegant low-necked black velvet gown with a black leather bag, which she deposited beside the piano before she played. And then, one evening years later, the black bag was not with her. She was such a remote and yet vulnerable person that nobody wanted to question her, but there was certainly some curiosity. The bag did not return, and it was guessed that the orchestra director had at last forbidden it. People forgot. The woman had no other peculiar habits. Her playing was the same as always, perhaps a bit improved.

What had happened was that the stone and she had quarreled. Or perhaps that is not exactly the right word. It began in the bathtub one night, right after she lifted the stone, as usual, to the edge of the tub and closed her eyes. Her hand was perhaps too relaxed. She dropped the stone on her knee. Tears sprang to her eyes, not so much from hurt as from betrayal, and she lifted the stone out of the water roughly and shook it. Then, rising from the bath, she smashed the stone down on the bathroom floor. Basalt is hard, but so is ceramic tile. It all depends on the angle of impact. The bathroom floor was only chipped, but a piece the size of a baby’s fist sheared off the stone, destroying its strange symmetry. The spell was broken. It was like falling out of love. As she had before, the woman put the stone, now in two pieces, into a drawer she rarely used. Then she dialled the number of a man who had been hounding her for months.

They married. She tried to pretend that she was not a virgin, but he could easily tell and was inexpressibly moved. Her piano playing was now filled with such emotion, in addition to her precision and clarity, that she was invited to tour Europe. She took her husband, and left her stone behind.

A stone is, in its own way, a living thing, not a biological being but one with a history far beyond our capacity to understand or even imagine. Basalt is a volcanic rock composed of augite and sometimes plagioclase and magnetite, which says nothing. The wave-worn piece of basalt that the
woman had slept with for more than a decade was thrown from a rift in the earth 1.1 billion years ago, which still says nothing. Before she broke it and dumped it at the bottom of a drawer, the stone had been broken time and again. It had been rolled smooth by water and the action of sand. Because of its strange shape, it had been picked up by several human beings in the course of the past ten thousand years. It had been buried with one until a tree had devoured the bones and pulled the stone back out of the ground. It had been kept by a woman who revered it as a household spirit and filled its eyes with sweetgrass. It had been shoved off a dock, lifted back up with a shovel, deposited in a heap. It had surfaced in a girl’s left hand. A stone is a thought that the earth develops in human time. It is a living thing to some cultures and a dead thing to others. This one had been called ni-mishooms, or “my grandfather,” and other names, too. The woman had not named the stone. She had thought that naming the stone would be an insult to its ineffable gravity. And yet once she had broken it she set it casually in a drawer with old belts, unmatched socks, pilled sweaters, and stretched-out bras. She had left it there and gone off with a man named Ferdinand, who’d always hated his name and went by Ted.

Ted could feel her pulling away from him, gradually and so gently that it was a long time before he understood that, while he’d been adjusting to each tiny, incremental motion, she’d been shifting entirely. By the time he saw things clearly, she had turned her back on him. It wasn’t on purpose. She didn’t know that she was doing it. He couldn’t point to any evidence in their day-to-day life. She was never unkind. She was always attentive, thoughtful, even loving. But there was a glassy distraction. He could feel it, though he could not describe it in a way that made sense.

By this time, her concerts were few and far between, and she taught at a local institute for music. She and Ted had moved back to the city and inhabited the same apartment, now a condominium, half of an old house in a bucolic part of town. There was a large yard, with plenty of birds, a nearby park. What should have been a pleasant life, however, became painful because of this invisible distance. It took a few more years, but eventually Ted understood that he didn’t want to live with a simulacrum of intimacy. He left, and the woman wept over him, until at last, to restore her balance, she decided to clean the house and opened the drawer where she’d put the two pieces of the stone.

There are glues that can join stone to stone so well that the seam can hardly be detected, and the woman used such a glue to fit the stone back together. This was one thing that had not happened to the stone before. Now only the thinnest line told the story. The woman placed the stone on a sunny kitchen sill, and felt so well that she began to cook a nourishing dinner for herself. She chopped fresh basil and garlic (as much as she wanted) and dripped olive oil into a saucepan. Then she put the stone in the sink and poured olive oil over it as well. The pores of the stone soaked up the oil. Whenever the stone looked dry, from then on, she oiled it. When the stone looked bored, she carried it to the window, so that it could watch what was happening at the bird feeder. At night, when she settled in the golden light of her reading lamp, she placed the stone beside her on an antique piece of embroidered linen. She became very old in this comforting life, and in the last few years divested herself of many possessions so that her niece and nephew, of whom she was fond, would not have much to go through after she was dead. She was lucky enough to die—when an aneurysm ruptured in her sleep—with the stone beside her. As the blood seeped into her brain, she dreamed that she had entered a new episode of time, in which she and the stone would become the same through the endless repetition and decay of all things in the universe. Molecules that had existed in her body would be joined with the stone’s molecules, over and over in age after age. Flesh would become stone and stone become flesh, and someday they would meet in the mouth of a bird.

NEWYORKER.COM
Louise Erdrich on the power of stones.
In April, 2011, the anthropologist Caitlin Zaloom was sitting in her office at New York University when one of her most promising students appeared at her door, crying. Kimberly had dreamed of life in New York City since she was eight years old. Growing up in a middle-class family just outside Philadelphia, she was regaled with stories about her mother’s short, glamorous-sounding stint waitressing in Times Square. Kimberly’s version of the big-city fantasy was also shaped by reruns of “Felicity,” a late-nineties drama set at a lightly fictionalized version of N.Y.U. Her dream school did not disappoint. Kimberly was an intrepid, committed student, studying the effects of globalization on urban space; she worked with street vendors and saw their struggles to make ends meet. College opened up a new world to her. But her family had sacrificed to help finance her education, and she had taken out considerable loans. She had looked forward to putting her degree to good use, while chipping away at the debt behind it. But the job she was offered involved outsourcing labor to foreign contractors—exacerbating the inequalities she hoped a future career might help rectify.

Zaloom felt that there was something representative about Kimberly’s story, as more students find themselves struggling with the consequences of college debt. She wanted to learn about the trajectory that had brought Kimberly to her office that day. She visited her at home and listened as her mother, June, talked about how she, too, had fantasized about a life in New York. But June’s family had needed her back home, in Pennsylvania, where she met Kimberly’s father. They eventually divorced, but they stayed in the same town, raising Kimberly together. June had wanted her daughter to have the experiences she had missed out on. When Kimberly was accepted at N.Y.U., her father urged her to attend a more affordable school in state. June implored him to change his mind, and he eventually agreed. The decision stretched their finances, but June told her daughter, “You’ve got to go.”

It’s easy to dismiss quandaries like Kimberly’s as the stuff of youth, when every question seems freighted with filmic significance. There’s a luxury to putting off practical concerns. But her story gave Zaloom insight into the evolving role of college debt in contemporary American life. Kimberly’s predicament was put in motion when she first set her sights on attending a college where, today, the annual tuition is more than fifty thousand dollars, in one of the most expensive cities in the world. That her parents risked their financial stability to nurture this dream seemed meaningful. Previous generations might have pushed a college-bound child to fend for herself; Kimberly’s parents prized notions of “potential” and “promise.” Shielding her from the consequences of debt was an expression of love, and of their own forward-looking class identity.

Since 2012, Zaloom has spent a lot of time with families like Kimberly’s. They all fall into America’s middle class—an amorphous category, defined more by sensibility or aspirational identity than by a strict income threshold. (Households with an annual income of anywhere from forty thousand dollars to a quarter of a million dollars view themselves as middle class.) In “Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost” (Princeton), Zaloom considers how the challenge of paying for college has become one of the organizing forces of middle-class family life. She and her team conducted interviews with a hundred and sixty families across the country, all of whom make too much to qualify for Pell Grants (reserved for households that earn below fifty thousand dollars) but too little to pay for tuition outright. These families are committed to providing their children with an “open future,” in which passions can be pursued. They have done all the things you’re supposed to, like investing and saving, and not racking up too much debt. Some parents are almost neurotically responsible, passing down a sense of penny-pinching thrift as though it were an heirloom; others prize idealism, encouraging their children to follow their dreams. What actually unites them, from a military family in Florida to a dual-Ph.D. household in Michigan, is that the children are part of a generation where debt—the financial and psychological state of being indebted—will shadow them for much of their adult lives.

A great deal has changed since Kimberly’s parents attended college. From the
The challenge of paying for college binds parents and children together in a saga of ever-growing sacrifice.
late nineteen-eighties to the present, college tuition has increased at a rate four times that of inflation, and eight times that of household income. It has been estimated that forty-five million people in the United States hold educational debt totalling roughly $1.5 trillion—more than what Americans owe on their credit cards and auto loans combined. Some fear that the student-debt “bubble” will be the next to burst. Wide-scale student-debt forgiveness no longer seems radical. Meanwhile, skeptics question the very purpose of college and its degree system. Maybe what pundits dismiss as the impulsive rage of young college students is actually an expression of powerlessness, as they anticipate a future defined by indebtedness.

Middle-class families might not seem like the most sympathetic characters when we’re discussing the college-finance conundrum. Poor students, working-class students, and students of color face more pronounced disadvantages, from the difficulty of navigating financial-aid applications and loan packages to the lack of a safety net. But part of Zaloom’s fascination with middle-class families is the larger cultural assumption that they ought to be able to afford higher education. A study conducted in the late nineteen-eighties by Elizabeth Warren, Teresa Sullivan, and Jay Westbrook illuminated the precarity of middle-class life. They found that the Americans filing for bankruptcy rarely lacked education or spent recklessly. Rather, they were often college-educated couples who were unable to recover from random crises along the way, like emergency medical bills.

These days, paying for college poses another potential for crisis. The families in “Indebted” are thoughtful and restrained, like the generically respectable characters conjured during a Presidential debate. Zaloom follows them as they contemplate savings plans, apply for financial aid, and then strategize about how to cover the difference. Parents and children alike talk about how educational debt hangs over their futures, impinging on both daily choices and long-term ambitions. In the eighties, more than half of American twentysomethings were financially independent. In the past decade, nearly seventy percent of young adults in their twenties have received money from their parents. The risk is collective, and the consequences are shared across generations. At times, “Indebted” reads like an ethnography of a dwindling way of life, an elegy for families who still abide by the fantasy that thrift and hard work will be enough to secure the American Dream.

If you are a so-called responsible parent, you might begin stashing away money for college as soon as your child is born. You may want to take advantage of a 529 education-savings plan, a government-administered investment tool that provides tax relief to people who set money aside for a child’s educational expenses. Some states even provide a 529 option to prepay college tuition at today’s rates. Zaloom writes of Patricia, a schoolteacher in Florida who managed to cover in-state fees for both of her children after five years of working and saving. Patricia resented the fact that preparing for her children’s future left her with so little time and energy to be with them in the present. Her daughter, Maya, was academically gifted and excelled in college. Then, when Patricia’s son, Zachary, was a high-school senior, her husband walked out on the family, leaving them four hundred thousand dollars in debt. Patricia spent her retirement savings to keep them afloat. Zachary had difficulty coping, and he had never shown a strong inclination toward college, but the money was already earmarked. Zaloom writes, “Her investment in his tuition was an expression of faith in him.” He struggled in college and never graduated. “If I’d had a crystal ball,” Patricia says, “I wouldn’t have gotten in the program for Zachary.” In Zaloom’s view, Patricia’s decisions all point to a core faith that college is fundamental to middle-class identity.

Throughout “Indebted,” parents and children lament the feeling of burdening one another. Parents fear that their financial decisions might limit their children’s potential, even when those children are still in diapers. It’s a fear, Zaloom argues, that loan companies often exploit. “You couldn’t not hear about it,” Patricia recalled of the commercials for Florida’s college-savings account.

The existence of 529 plans suggests that paying for college is just a matter of saving a bit of each monthly paycheck. And yet Patricia is an outlier. Only three percent of Americans invest in a 529 account or the equivalent, and they have family assets that are, on average, twenty-five times those of the
median household. Zaloom disputes the premise that “planning leads to financial stability.” Student debt didn’t become a problem because families refused to save. “In truth, it’s the other way around,” she writes. “Planning requires stability in a family’s fortunes, a stability in both family life and their finances that is uncommon for middle-class families today.”

As an anthropologist, Zaloom is particularly attuned to how institutions teach us to see ourselves. The Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) form, required of all students seeking assistance, consists of a hundred or so questions detailing the financial history of the applicant’s family. Zaloom hears about the difficulty of collecting this information, especially when parents are estranged, or unwilling to help. And the form presumes a lot about how the “family unit” works. One informational graphic poses the question “Who’s my parent when I fill out the FAFSA?”

Our failure to adhere to these official scripts becomes a sign of personal inadequacy. Zaloom argues that the financial-aid process encourages families to “maintain silence about the challenges they face in sending their children to college.” Sometimes, during her interviews, parents would ask Zaloom not to disclose the details of their finances to their children. (Elizabeth Warren has spoken about how she learned that her family was “poor” when she was filling out her financial-aid forms.) At times, the families sounded as though they were in denial. One mother wanted to shield her daughter from reckoning with the family’s tenuous financial health as they put her through college: “It’s not really part of a conversation that [my daughter] needs to be in.” That conversation can’t always be avoided, though. As Kimberly’s parents hashed out her prospects, there was, she recalled, “this weird moment of them feeling like my potential was going to be limited by their financial decisions and choices.”

A few generations ago, going to college didn’t involve so many forms, and seldom led to existential questions about the nature of familial ties. If you were a white male of means, it wasn’t all that difficult to attend the college of your choice. If you were not, then college probably wasn’t in your future. In the early years of the twentieth century, college graduates were rare: only about two to three per cent of adults earned a degree. Things changed with the G.I. Bill, which was designed to preempt the veterans’ rights marches that came after the First World War. The college population grew by nearly half a million, and campuses quickly expanded their facilities and faculties to keep pace. Still more Americans were able to go to college in the sixties, thanks to the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which offered financial assistance to students pursuing studies that could benefit the national interest, and the Higher Education Act of 1965, which provided federal support to poor and working-class students, regardless of what they wanted to study. Female enrollment levels soared, too. But the specific ways in which the federal government helped make college affordable changed—from tuition subsidies and grants to an increasingly complicated network of federal and private loans. Starting in the sixties, Americans became more comfortable with the idea of taking on personal debt, owing in part to the rise of personal credit. Besides, for a long time, a college degree was a sound investment. Paying for it was just a transitional nuisance on the way to middle-class adulthood. In 1972, President Nixon created Sallie Mae, a partnership between the government and private lenders designed to help students. There was broad federal support to deliver more students to college.

When Ronald Reagan took office, in 1981, some people feared that his faith in free markets would mean the end of federal assistance programs and research support. But colleges continued to expand, partly as a result of growing applicant pools. New loan programs targeted middle-class families. The advent of the U.S. News & World Report college rankings, in 1983, and the rise of the test-prep industry helped create a new culture of competitive credentialism. Tuition had come to increase at nearly twice the rate of inflation.

In 1979, the sociologist Randall Collins published “The Credential Society,” which was recently reissued by Columbia. College had, in Collins’s view, become little more than an expensive and inefficient system of accreditation. The problem was that those with power were the ones determining how much credentialing was sufficient, making young people feel that they needed a degree, no matter the cost. Collins’s insights are especially prescient, as the scholar Tressie McMillan Cottom notes in the new edition’s foreword, when considering how for-profit colleges have essentially preyed on the insecurities—and leached off the loans and subsidies—of poor and working-class students. This “credential inflation” wasn’t driven by innovation or technical need. It was a product of social pressures. A college degree, once a guarantor of economic mobility, had become what a high-school degree symbolized to previous generations, “the prerequisite of mere respectability.”

For Zaloom’s families, the spectre of debt impedes the children’s transition toward self-sufficiency. One of her subjects is Clarice, an N.Y.U. undergraduate who grew up near Buffalo. Clarice’s mother, a social worker, and her stepfather, a retired military man, had to take on substantial debt to cover the thirty-six thousand dollars they owed for her first year, despite her large merit scholarship. For the remaining three years, Clarice took out loans in her own name totaling around sixty thousand dollars. Her mother recalled a conversation they had when deciding on colleges. “You’re making decisions today, Clarice, that are going to affect your whole life,” she told her daughter. “You might not be able to buy a home. You might not be able to own a car. You have to make choices.”

Clarice’s family was one of the few in the book to look at the college-finance process in such sober terms. Yet they embarked on it anyway. “Enmeshed autonomy” is what Zaloom calls a situation in which parents and children face a future of intertwined finances, even as they hope for future independence. Critics who describe the student-loan industry as predatory or exploitative are often told that the problem is one of individual irresponsibility. But Zaloom’s families illustrate
how difficult it is to negotiate the snares set out by lenders and colleges. The system “monetizes the power of those bonds” between parents and children, she says, promoting the “morality of fiscal restraint to families even as it banks on their risk taking.” Zalooom offers a range of explanations for rising tuitions, from plush facilities and fancy meal plans to the expansion of administration and student services. Perhaps the reality is that college is expensive because it can be—especially when the destiny of one’s child seems to be at stake.

“Indebted” ends up being a story about modern families—about how we understand our responsibilities toward one another in a time of diminishing prospects. Sacrifice is nothing new, and guilt has mediated family relations for eons. But there’s a distinctly modern paradox in Zalooom’s version of middle-class life, with parents preparing their children for adulthood while also protecting them from it. One mother provides her son with spreadsheets every semester that show “how much tuition is per hour, how many credit hours he’s taken, how much his room and board is, how much every book costs.” It seems both infantilizing and like an attempt to accelerate a child’s acceptance of real-world responsibilities.

Other parents incur enormous credit-card debt or put off retirement in order to provide their children with luxuries and opportunities that they were never able to enjoy. The stories in “Indebted” end right around the time that the students are entering the complex world of loan repayment. Graduation is fresh in their minds; debt is just an abstraction, and the future can still feel open.

As graduates become employees, they start to feel the future closing in. In the late nineteen-nineties, Alan Collinge was beginning work as a research scientist, hopeful that he would be able to pay back about thirty-eight thousand dollars in loans he had taken on to study at the University of Southern California. But he fell behind, and a series of ill-timed career turns, most of which were undertaken to speed up his payments, left him deeper in debt. In “The Student Loan Scam,” published in 2009, Collinge writes with an anguished intensity about years spent with no days off—a “penance” for falling so far behind. He was constantly hassled by collection agencies, many of which he had never heard of. At the end of this hellish period, he realized that his tally had climbed to six figures. He didn’t understand whom he owed, and he could find no authority to which he could appeal; he felt trapped in a purgatory of call centers.

In 2004, Sallie Mae went private, meaning that the nation’s largest lender—and also one of its largest debt collectors—was no longer directly accountable to the government. Around the time that Collinge was struggling to make ends meet, Albert Lord, Sallie Mae’s C.E.O., received fifty million dollars in compensation over a five-year period. The company continued to thrive despite investigations into its seemingly predatory practices. Collinge’s response was to phone Lord at odd times to tell him how much he hated him.

In “The Student Loan Scam,” Collinge admits that he was “obsessed” with his debts. He launched a popular Web site and eventually became an activist. In 2011, Occupy Wall Street brought similar conversations around student debt into the public consciousness. Where debt caused the middle-class families in Zalooom’s study to feel shame and insecurity, young people nowadays talk about it freely, with righteous indignation. It’s become so commonplace that the Presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg—a gay veteran, a son of a Gramsci scholar, a Norwegian speaker—is relatable because of the six figures of student debt that he and his husband owe.

The idea of free college, once Bernie Sanders’s fringe dream, is now seriously debated in the political mainstream. As the economist David Deming recently argued, it’s not as though the money isn’t there. In 2016, the federal government spent ninety-one billion dollars subsidizing college attendance; for as little as seventy-nine billion dollars, tuition could be eliminated at all public colleges.

At the same time, there is mounting skepticism about the usefulness of the college experience. Earlier this year, Tim Cook, the C.E.O. of Apple, talked about the “mismatch” between the skills that people were acquiring in college and the ones demanded by modern businesses. He maintained that about half Apple’s new hires last year didn’t hold four-year degrees. The economist Bryan Caplan has provocatively argued that we would be better off if college were “less affordable.” In his 2018 book, “The Case Against Education,” he argues that a college education is largely useful as a means of “signalling,” of advertising one’s potential to a future employer: “It is precisely because education is so affordable”—thanks to loans and government subsidies—that the labor market expects us to possess so much.” There are cheaper ways to do this, and, in Caplan’s cynically droll view, they don’t require us to spend years studying subjects we will never use.

Zalooom’s scholarship descends from a line of economic anthropologists who are particularly interested in the social bonds that result from exchange, not least ones that occur outside the market. (Zalooom’s previous book was “Out of the Pits,” an ethnography of traders and brokers in Chicago and London.) The French sociologist Marcel Mauss described one such configuration in his 1925 book, “The Gift.” We give gifts voluntarily, and though we expect reciprocity, we don’t know when that might happen. As a result, people feel in debt to one another in a way that, not being contractual, strengthens the bonds among them.

This was the spirit that first animated the Rolling Jubilee, an offshoot of Occupy Wall Street. The group raises money from donations and then buys student debt from banks for pennies on the dollar. Rather than holding on to the debt, the group forgives it, freeing debtors from their obligations. To date, it has spent about seven hundred thousand dollars to abolish nearly thirty-two million dollars of debt. Last summer, TruTV began airing “Paid Off with Michael Torpey,” a game show where contestants compete to get their student debt erased. Torpey claims that the show is satire. “I want you to be pissed off that the show has to exist and that we’re leaving students out in the cold,” he explained in an interview.

This May, the billionaire Robert F. Smith announced, in a commencement address at Morehouse College, a historically black institution, that he was going to take care of the entire graduating class’s student debts. Smith was hailed for his gesture, but it only dramatized the plight of today’s twentysomethings. (One’s heart goes out to the student who took an extra
Economists imagined the research findings that this "natural experiment" would produce years from now. How would the gift—amounting to an estimated forty million dollars—change the students’ paths in life? A recent study by the Center for American Progress suggests that the disproportionate effect of student debt on black and Latinx graduates may explain the lack of teacher diversity in America. Without debt hanging over their heads, how many Morehouse grads will become teachers, or artists, or bankers?

Zaloom’s book takes much of what we have come to accept and renders it alien and a bit absurd. “For me, money is ineffable at the same time that it’s also very concrete,” one down-on-her-luck mother tells Zaloom. Other parents joke that their backup plan is to win the lottery. Scrutinizing the mazy FAFSA form, or a savings account you can open before your newborn has left the hospital, one is reminded of how strange it is that so much time and energy, across multiple generations, goes toward an experience that often feels like a four-year blur.

The rise of higher education in the twentieth century was an American success story. But access is not a birthright. One of the success stories of “Indebted” involves the Bakers, a black family with roots in the military whose daughter, Karen, desperately wants to attend Princeton. Her practical-minded parents nudge her toward cheaper, in-state alternatives, but she insists that Princeton will provide opportunities that Florida State and the University of Florida will not. Her parents get behind her, cutting back on cell-phone use and post-church brunches, forgoing air-conditioning despite the state’s sweltering summers. At Princeton, Karen experiences the weird dislocations of life on one of the Ivy League’s most elite campuses. She finds herself navigating wealthy classmates and social clubs, though she remains true to her frugal roots. “I mean I obviously wasn’t shopping at J. Crew,” she says. Karen flourishes; her professional successes will take her far away from where she grew up, and from the family that raised her. She’s entering into “rarefied” spaces that none of them will ever comprehend. She’s not leaving them behind, but she is “breaking free.” This, too, is the American Dream.

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**BRIEFLY NOTED**

**The Memory Police**, by Yoko Ogawa, translated from the Japanese by Stephen Snyder (Pantheon). The narrator of this unsettling novel is a writer living on an island where things have been disappearing mysteriously for years—initially incidental items, such as emeralds, perfume, and hats, then more important ones. When things vanish, most of the island’s inhabitants lose all recollection of them, and those who don’t disappear themselves, at the hands of a shadowy “memory police.” As the community withers, the narrator, living alone in her childhood house, struggles to record the losses in stories. Ogawa depicts a world in which forgetting is the key to survival, but it is a survival that comes at the price of the erosion of self.

**Exposed**, by Jean-Philippe Blondel, translated from the French by Alison Anderson (New Vessel). A striking variation on the theme of the muse, this novel probes overlapping varieties of attraction. Louis, a secondary-school teacher, rekindles his relationship with a former student, Alexandre, who has since become a famous painter and asks him to sit for a nude portrait. Louis barely remembers Alexandre, but, nearing retirement, divorced and in a slump, he is revivified by the attention, and spurred to reconsider his past life. As the pair’s relationship, built around the work in progress, intensifies, it veers toward the erotic, quickening the painter’s search for the model’s soul—“a term that disintegrates the moment you try to define it.”

**VC**, by Tom Nicholas (Harvard). This incisive history of the venture-capital industry frames it as a distinctly American innovation, and identifies its earliest precursor as nineteenth-century whaling in New England. This unpredictable and hazardous trade was financed by investors who backed many voyages, most of which were expected to fail, in the hope that a small subset would yield outsized returns. Today, a similarly skewed distribution of payoffs defines speculation in Silicon Valley, which is propelled by “the allure of the long tail.” The American appetite for risk fuelled the rise of venture capital, along with such factors as access to highly skilled immigrants and the central role of the federal government, beginning with the commercialization of military innovations after the Second World War.

**Palaces of Pleasure**, by Lee Jackson (Yale). When the first gin palaces began to appear in London, in the eighteen-twenties, the public was dazzled by the Corinthian columns, mahogany counters, and gas lighting. But, as Jackson shows in this engaging history, not everyone was pleased. Unlike the homely pub, these places lent drinking a veneer of refinement and blurred social boundaries, offering the working classes access to a kind of space and experience previously reserved for the wealthy. This fascinating history shows how the new venues flourished, along with music halls and seaside resorts, thanks to a growing middle class, favorable legislation, and shifting morals. Wildly popular (albeit to the chagrin of Victorian moralists), these temples of “commercialised leisure,” Jackson writes, ushered in the era of modern mass entertainment.
the mortality rate of Shipman’s patients should have aroused suspicion earlier. Then a biostatistician at Cambridge, Spiegelhalter found that Shipman’s excess mortality—the number of his older patients who had died in the course of his career over the number that would be expected of an average doctor’s—was a hundred and seventy-four women and forty-nine men at the time of his arrest. The total closely matched the number of victims confirmed by the inquiry.

One person’s actions, written only in numbers, tell a profound story. They gesture toward the unimaginable grief caused by one man. But at what point do many deaths become too many deaths? How do you distinguish a suspicious anomaly from a run of bad luck? For that matter, how can we know in advance the number of people we expect to die? Each death is preceded by individual circumstances, private stories, and myriad reasons; what does it mean to wrap up all that uncertainty into a single number?

In 1825, the French Ministry of Justice ordered the creation of a national collection of crime records. It seems to have been the first of its kind anywhere in the world—the statistics of every arrest and conviction in the country, broken down by region, assembled and ready for analysis. It’s the kind of data set we take for granted now, but at the time it was extraordinarily novel. This was an early instance of Big Data—the first time that mathematical analysis had been applied in earnest to the messy and unpredictable realm of human behavior.

Or maybe not so unpredictable. In the early eighteen-thirties, a Belgian astronomer and mathematician named Adolphe Quetelet analyzed the numbers and discovered a remarkable pattern. The crime records were startlingly consistent. Year after year, irrespective of the actions of courts and prisons, the number of murders, rapes, and robberies reached almost exactly the same total. There is a “terrifying exactitude with which crimes reproduce themselves,” Quetelet said. “We know in advance how many individuals will dirty their hands with the blood of others. How many will be forgers, how many poisoners.”

To Quetelet, the evidence suggested that there was something deeper to discover. He developed the idea of a “So-
Bill Bryson recounts in his new book, “The Body,” the woman was Jeanne Calment, who went on to become the oldest person on record. She survived for thirty-two years after their deal was signed, outliving Raffray, who died at seventy-seven. By then, he had paid more than twice the market value for an apartment he would never live in.

Raffray learned the hard way that people are not well represented by the average. As the mathematician Ian Stewart points out in “Do Dice Play God?” (Basic), the average person has one breast and one testicle. In large groups, the natural variability among human beings cancels out, the random zig being countered by the random zag; but that variability means that we can’t speak with certainty about the individual—a fact with wide-ranging consequences.

Every day, millions of people, David Spiegelhalter included, swallow a small white statin pill to reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke. If you are one of those people, and go on to live a long and happy life without ever suffering a heart attack, you have no way of knowing whether your daily statin was responsible or whether you were never going to have a heart attack in the first place. Of a thousand people who take statins for five years, the drugs will help only eighteen to avoid a major heart attack or stroke. And if you do find yourself having a heart attack you’ll never know whether it was delayed by taking the statin. “All I can ever know,” Spiegelhalter writes, “is that on average it benefits a large group of people like me.”

That’s the rule with preventive drugs: for most individuals, most of those drugs won’t do anything. The fact that they produce a collective benefit makes them worth taking. But it’s a pharmaceutical form of Pascal’s wager: you may as well act as though God were real (and believe that the drugs will work for you), because the consequences otherwise outweigh the inconvenience.

There is so much that, on an individual level, we don’t know: why some people can smoke and avoid lung cancer; why one identical twin will remain healthy while the other develops a disease like A.L.S.; why some otherwise similar children flourish at school while others flounder. Despite the grand promises of Big Data, uncertainty remains so abundant that specific human lives remain boundlessly unpredictable. Perhaps the most successful prediction engine of the Big Data era, at least in financial terms, is the Amazon recommendation algorithm. It’s a gigantic statistical machine worth a huge sum to the company. Also, it’s wrong most of the time.

“There is nothing of chance or doubt in the course before my son,” Dickens’s Mr. Dombey says, already imagining the business career that young Paul will enjoy. “His way in life was clear and prepared, and marked out before he existed.” Paul, alas, dies at age six.

And yet, amid the oceans of unpredictability, we’ve somehow managed not to drown. Statisticians have navigated a route to maximum certainty in an uncertain world. We might not be able to address insular quandaries, like “How long will I live?,” but questions like “How many patient deaths are too many?” can be tackled. In the process, a powerful idea has arisen to form the basis of modern scientific research.

A stranger hands you a coin. You have your suspicions that it’s been weighted somehow, perhaps to make heads come up more often. But for now you’ll happily go along with the assumption that the coin is fair.

You toss the coin twice, and get two heads in a row. Nothing to get excited about just yet. A perfectly fair coin will throw two heads in a row twenty-five per cent of the time—a probability known as the p-value. You keep tossing and get another head. Then another. Things are starting to look fishy, but even if you threw the coin a thousand times, or a million, you could never be absolutely sure it was rigged. The chances might be minuscule, but in theory a fair coin could still produce any combination of heads.

Scientists have picked a path through all this uncertainty by setting an arbitrary threshold, and agreeing that anything beyond that point gives you grounds for suspicion. Since 1925, when the British statistician Ronald Fisher first suggested the convention, that threshold has typically been set at five per cent. You’re seeing a suspicious number of heads, and once the chance of a fair coin turning up at least as many heads as you’ve seen dips below five per cent, you can abandon your stance of innocent until proved guilty. In
Many people would have survived if everyone, but it was unlikely that so many people would have survived if the drug did nothing. The numbers passed the threshold; the team concluded that the aspirin was working.

Such statistical methods have become the currency of modern research. They've helped us to make great strides forward, to find signals in noisy data. But, unless you are extraordinarily careful, trying to erase uncertainty comes with downsides. Peto's team submitted the results of their experiment to an illustrious medical journal, which came back with a request from a referee: could Peto and his colleagues break the results down into groups? The referee wanted to know how many women had been saved by the aspirin, how many men, how many with diabetes, how many in this or that age bracket, and so on.

Peto objected. By subdividing the big picture, he argued, you introduce all kinds of uncertainty into the results. For one thing, the smaller the size of the groups considered, the greater the chance of a fluke. It would be "scientifically stupid," he observed, to draw conclusions on anything other than the big picture. The journal was insistent, so Peto relented. He resubmitted the paper with all the subgroups the referee had asked for, but with a sly addition. He also subdivided the results by astrological sign. It wasn't that astrology was going to influence the impact of aspirin; it was that, just by chance, the number of people for whom aspirin works will be greater in some groups than in others. Sure enough, in the study, it appeared as though aspirin didn't work for Libras and Geminis but halved your risk of death if you happened to be a Capricorn.

Using sufficiently large groups might help to insure against flukes, but there's another trap that befalls unsuspecting scientists. It's one that Peto's experiment also serves to underline, and one that has led to nothing less than a statistical crisis at the heart of science.

The easiest way to understand the issue is by returning to the conundrum of the biased coin. (Coins are the statistician's pet example for a reason.) Suppose that you're particularly keen not to draw a false conclusion, and decide to hang on to your hypothesis that the coin is fair unless you get twenty heads in a row. A fair coin would do this only about one in a million times, so it's an extraordinarily high level of proof to demand—far beyond the threshold of five per cent used by much of science.

Now, imagine I gave out fair coins to every person in the United States and asked everyone to complete the same test. Here's the issue: even with a threshold of one in a million—even with everything perfectly fair and aboveboard—we would still expect around three hundred of these people to throw twenty heads in a row. If they were following Fisher's method, they'd have no choice but to conclude that they'd been given a trick coin. The fact is that, wherever you decide to set the threshold, if you repeat your experiment enough times, extremely unlikely outcomes are bound to arise eventually.

Apple learned this shortly after the iPod Shuffle was launched. The device would play songs from a users' library at random, but Apple found itself inundated with complaints from users who were convinced that their Shuffle was playing songs in a pattern. Patterns are much more likely to occur than we think, but even if several songs by the same artist, or consecutive songs from an album, had only a tiny probability of appearing next to one another in the playlist, so many people were listening to their iPods that it was inevitable such seemingly strange coincidences would occur.

In science, the situation is starker, and the stakes are higher. With a threshold of only five per cent, one in twenty studies will inadvertently find evidence for nonexistent phenomena in its data. That's another reason that Peto resisted the proposal that he look at various subpopulations: the greater the number of groups you look at, the greater your
chances of seeing spurious effects. And this is far from being only a theoretical concern. In medicine, a study of forty-nine of the most cited medical publications from 1990 to 2003 found that the conclusions of sixteen per cent were contradicted by subsequent studies. Psychology fares worse still in these surveys (possibly because its studies are cheaper to reproduce). A 2015 study found that attempts to reproduce a hundred psychological experiments yielded significant results in only thirty-six per cent of them, even though ninety-seven per cent of the initial studies reported a p-value under the five-per-cent threshold. And scientists fear that, as with the iPod Shuffle, the fluke results tend to get an outsized share of attention.

Many high-profile studies are now widely believed to have been founded on such flukes. You may have come across the research on power posing, which suggests that adopting a dominant stance helps to reduce stress hormones in the body. The study has a thousand citations, and an accompanying TED talk has amassed more than fifty million views, but the findings have failed to be replicated and are now regarded as a notable example of the flaws in Fisher’s methods.

It’s not that scientific fraud is common; it’s that too many researchers have failed to handle uncertainty with sufficient care. This issue has only been exacerbated in the era of Big Data. The more data that are collected, cross-referenced, and searched for correlations, the easier it becomes to reach false conclusions. Illustrating this point, Spiegelhalter includes a 2009 study in which researchers put a subject into an fMRI scanner and analyzed the response in 8,064 brain sites while showing photographs of different human expressions. The scientists wanted to see what regions of the brain were lighting up in response to the photographs and used a threshold of a tenth of one per cent for their experiment. “The twist was that the ‘subject’ was a 4-lb Atlantic Salmon which ‘was not alive at the time of scanning,’” Spiegelhalter notes.

But, even at that threshold, run enough tests and you’re bound to cross it eventually. Of the more than eight thousand sites in the dead fish’s brain the researchers inspected, sixteen duly showed a statistically significant response. And the fear is that equally unfounded conclusions, albeit less apparently so, will routinely be drawn, with the false assurance of “statistical significance.” Science still stands up to scrutiny, precisely because it invites scrutiny. But the p-value crisis suggests that our current procedures could be improved upon.

Scientists now say that researchers should declare their hypothesis in advance of a study, in order to make finding for significant results much more difficult. Most agree that the incentives of science need to be changed, too—that studies designed to replicate the work of others should be valued more highly. There are also suggestions for an alternative way to present experimental findings. Many people have called for the focus of science to be on the size of the effect—how many lives are saved by a drug, for instance—rather than on whether the data for some effect cross some arbitrary threshold. How impressed should we be by very strong evidence for a very weak effect? Let’s go back to aspirin. A gigantic study—it tracked twenty-two thousand individuals over five years—demonstrated that taking small daily doses of the drug would reduce the risk of a heart attack. The p-value, the probability of this happening by chance, was tiny: 0.001 per cent. But so, too, was the effect size. A hundred and thirty otherwise healthy individuals would have to take the drug to prevent a single heart attack, and all the while each person would be increasing his or her risk of adverse side effects. It’s a risk that is now deemed to outweigh the benefits for most people, and the advice for older adults to take a baby aspirin a day has recently been recanted.

But perhaps the real problem is how difficult we find it to embrace uncertainty. Earlier this year, eight hundred and fifty prominent academics, including David Spiegelhalter, signed a letter to Nature arguing that the issue can’t be solved with a technical work-around. P-values aren’t the problem; the problem is our obsession with setting a threshold.

Drawing an arbitrary line in the sand creates an illusion that we can divide the true from the false. But the results of a complicated experiment cannot be reduced to a yes-or-no answer. Back when Spiegelhalter was asked to determine whether Dr. Harold Shipman’s mortality rate should have aroused suspicion earlier, he swiftly decided that the standard test of statistical significance would be a “grossly inappropriate” way to monitor doctors. The medical profession would effectively be pointing the finger of suspicion at one in every twenty innocent doctors—thousands of clinicians in the U.K. Doctors would be penalized for treating higher-risk patients.

Instead, Spiegelhalter and his colleagues proposed an alternative test, which took account of patient deaths as they occurred, contrasting the accumulating deaths with the expected number. Year on year, it sequentially compares the likelihood that a doctor’s high mortality rates are a run of bad luck with something more suspicious, and raises an alarm once the evidence starts to build. But even this highly sophisticated method will, owing to the capricious whims of chance, eventually cast suspicion on the innocent. Indeed, as soon as a monitoring system for general practitioners was piloted, it “immediately identified a G.P. with even higher mortality rates than Shipman,” Spiegelhalter writes. This was an unlucky doctor who worked in a coastal town with an elderly population. The result highlights how careful you need to be even with the best statistical methods. In Spiegelhalter’s words, while statistics can find the outliers, it “cannot offer reasons why these might have occurred, so they need careful implementation in order to avoid false accusations.”

Statistics, for all its limitations, has a profound role to play in the social realm. The Shipman inquiry concluded that, if such a monitoring system had been in place, it would have raised the alarm as early as 1984. Around a hundred and seventy-five lives could have been saved. A mathematical analysis of what it is to be human can take us only so far, and, in a world of uncertainty, statistics will never eradicate doubt. But one thing is for sure: it’s a very good place to start.
Anybody wanna make a band?“ he fourteen-year-old Texan, sent up a flare. KTT, in 2010, that Kevin Abstract, about celebrity friendships. It was on KTT, in 2010, that Kevin Abstract, a fourteen-year-old Texan, sent up a flare. “Anybody wanna make a band?” he posted, under the username Harry Styles. Abstract started making music with some friends from high school, and, through KTT, he recruited like-minded members for a group that eventually called itself Brockhampton—the name of the street that Abstract grew up on in Corpus Christi.

Brockhampton’s members initially described the group as a boy band. The designation was partly a joke, under-scoring how different Brockhampton was from the prefabricated all-male pop groups of the early two-thousands. Its members were of different races and sexual orientations, and they were proficient in a variety of musical styles. They wanted to reimagine the term “boy band” and give it an air of inclusivity. (As an act of resistance, this was not exactly urgent—in America, the conventional boy band had not been a dominant cultural force for a decade or so.) The boy bands of yore were incubated in sterile, controlled corporate environments. Brockhampton was formed in abject chaos: a Viceland show called “American Boyband” documented the group’s beginnings, trailing the members as they struggled to pay the rent in a shared house, argued with one another, and played tiny shows plagued by technical difficulties.

Initially, Brockhampton mostly performed as capital—“R” rappers, writing straightforward singles on which they took turns rapping over dark, thudding, homemade beats. Their songs gently mimicked what was happening on the radio. But Brockhampton is part of a digital-native, Gen Z cohort for whom genre signposts are often avoided, and the band began incorporating other styles, experimenting with psychedelic R. & B., breezy guitar, and muted electro-pop. Creativity was not a means to an end; it was the whole point. The group was not concerned with stylistic heritage, only the here and now.

And yet Brockhampton did have ancestors, namely Odd Future, the boisterous California hip-hop collective that formed when Abstract was a preteen. Tyler, the Creator and Frank Ocean—Odd Future’s yin-and-yang leaders—were the pioneers of a certain type of genre-agnostic, free-associative music, and Brockhampton is one of its beneficiaries. Whereas Tyler, the Creator and Frank Ocean once made sly and indirect references to their sexualities, Abstract presents his orientation as a matter of fact. “I love my mom, I hate my boyfriend,” he chants exasperatedly on “Empty,” a peppy single from his 2016 solo album, “American Boyfriend.”

Popular music has never been so fragmented, or welcoming, and the values and aesthetics of the underground and the mainstream have become indistinguishable. In 2017, buoyed by a passionate online fan base, Brockhampton signed a fifteen-million-dollar deal with a major label. As a group and as individual acts, the collective’s members developed a strong touring presence, and their sold-out shows had the air of
religious gatherings. But their route to superstardom was interrupted, last year, when Ameer Vann, one of Brockhampton’s strongest lyricists and most charismatic members, was accused of sexual misconduct. (Vann has denied these allegations.) The revelation seemed to clash with the group’s ethos of social progressivism, and, shortly after the allegations surfaced, Brockhampton announced that Vann would leave the band. They scrapped their forthcoming debut album and spent just ten days, at Abbey Road Studios, recording new material.

The result of these frenzied sessions, “Iridescence,” from 2018, is a primal scream of an album. Abstract, Brockhampton’s figurehead and its most versatile vocalist, embraced his self-doubt. “I been feeling defeated, like I’m the worst in the boy band,” he raps in the opening verse of “Weight,” which starts with a soft orchestral intro before jolting into a drum-and-bass beat and then drifting into ambient sound. But the intensity of emotion largely clouds the album rather than clarifying it. “Iridescence”—which landed at No. 1 on the Billboard album chart—is dense and disorienting, with hyperaggressive bursts and abrupt tonal shifts. At times, Brockhampton’s m.c.s packed several songs into one track, summoning the raw pugnaciously of Eminem before downshifting to folksy pop. They were full of ideas, not all of them worth pursuing. They relied too much on short-term inspiration and not enough on execution, making freedom sound draining instead of galvanizing.

The band’s new album, “Ginger,” is a testament to the forces of professionalization. Plenty has changed in the past year: the members have graduated from their Peter Pan clubhouse phase and have moved into their own homes. Previously a proudly D.I.Y. act, Brockhampton teamed up with the producer Rick Rubin, who excels at stripping unnecessary elements from songs. On paper, these developments seem like concessions, but the album that resulted is clear and concise. The musicians barreled blindly through “Iridescence;” on “Ginger,” they slink on Pink Panther tiptoes over jittery beats and trippy refrains.

Brockhampton’s lyrics are intensely personal, but the band’s members have always been drawn to production effects that obscure their voices, pitching them high, to an absurdist squeal, or low, to a gloomy bellow. On past albums, this was an aesthetic choice that created an emotional barrier, and it helped conceal vocal weaknesses. It also had a destabilizing effect on the listener, making Brockhampton sound like a much larger group than it was. (Currently, there are thirteen members.) On “Ginger,” the musicians use these effects sparingly—perhaps at the behest of Rubin—and their messages come through more clearly, revealing that they’re more skilled rappers than they might have wanted anyone to know. Nowhere is their rapping more effective than on the album’s closer, “Victor Roberts,” named for the song’s vocalist. Roberts met the longtime Brockhampton member Dom McLennon while gaming on Xbox Live, one of the many online platforms teeming with the band’s acolytes. Over an acoustic piano, he raps steadfastly in his gravelly voice, describing the havoc of his childhood.

In interviews and on social media, the members of Brockhampton have alluded to the uncertainty of the group’s future as a collective—some, like Abstract and Matt Champion, have solo careers to focus on, and others may turn away from music altogether, out of boredom or burnout or maturity. These concerns run through “Ginger.” “Where’s my stamina in this life?” Champion asks, on “Dearly Departed,” a woozy hallucination of a song that builds to a psych–rock guitar wall. On the album’s title track, Abstract asserts his companions’ independence: “I know you got your own, I know you got your own.” And yet, despite the despondency evident in this transitional phase, the record has plenty of optimism about the future. Roberts’s presence suggests that the collective is not a fixed entity but a fluid organization that will regenerate over time. Brockhampton’s fans dissect its members’ lives across many social-media platforms and online forums, infusing the group with new life. On one recent Reddit thread, a user waxed nostalgic about Abstract’s original casting call on the KTT message board. “Seeing this kind of shit is what made me wanna buy a guitar and begin to learn how to produce,” one user chimed in. “Message me,” another replied. “Would like to hear ur stuff.”

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**The New Yorker Crossword Puzzle**

1. Plot device sometimes used in thrillers.
2. Bad stuff to microwave.
3. N.Y.C. club said to have catalyzed the punk movement.
4. Apt to snoop.

Find a new puzzle every Monday and Friday at newyorker.com/crossword
ON TELEVISION

CASTAWAYS

“BH90210,” a sweet meta-reboot.

BY EMILY NUSSEBAUM

Since the turn of the century, three paths have emerged for washed-up stars, displacing hoariest options like “Hollywood Squares.” First, there was the glitzy image rehab of reality TV: invite the cameras into your bedroom, try your hand at ballroom dancing, or tell your secrets to Dr. Phil. Alternatively—or often simultaneously—you could flack for a line of life-style products. But another option was available, too. On a scripted comedy such as “Entourage,” you could agree to “play yourself,” in both senses of the phrase. Satirizing your reputation let you look like a good sport—and, if it clicked, might remind people of why they liked you in the first place. Could Liza Minnelli really be so crazy if she was capable of pulling off such a daring, funny, literally unstable slapstick satire of her own unstable person, on “Arrested Development”?

The members of the cast of the hit nineties teen soap opera “Beverly Hills, 90210” have chosen door No. 3, stepping into just these kinds of career-rejuvenating air quotes—but, savvily, they’ve chosen to do so as a team, effectively seizing the means of celebrity production. If you’ve seen ads for the new Fox show “BH90210,” you might have assumed, as I did, that the actors—Tori Spelling, Jason Priestley, Jennie Garth, Shannen Doherty, Gabrielle Carteris, Brian Austin Green, and Ian Ziering—would be playing grownup versions of the rich Hollywood teens they played when they were in their twenties. Not so. Instead, the premise of “BH90210” is that the washed-up, middle-aged cast flies to Vegas for a reunion and gets in trouble with the cops. Then Tori Spelling—who, like the real-life Spelling, is running low on reality franchises, and has multiple kids to support—sees dollar signs in the drama. She recruits her former cast members to play versions of themselves in a scripted series, in which the grownup cast of “BH90210” go to a reunion in Vegas, get in trouble, and then decide to film themselves in a scripted Fox series. At least, I think that’s what “BH90210” is about—considering the number of wacky dream sequences, often set at the Peach Pit diner, it all gets a little confusing.

But it’s also a surprising amount of fun. “BH90210” is the TV equivalent of one of those cereal boxes on which a kangaroo is holding a cereal box with a picture of a kangaroo holding a cereal box, etc. The series shares some thematic elements with other hall-of-mirrors meta-shows, like HBO’s brilliant “The Comeback,” in which the former “Friends” star Lisa Kudrow played an aging sitcom actress—except that “The Comeback,” beneath its jokes, was a serious project, a lacerating satire of Hollywood narcissism and misogyny. “BH90210” touches on these themes (Garth keeps yelling at Priestly about double standards, when the two of them are not making out), but it isn’t trying to lacerate anything. Instead, the show bubbles over with goofy in-jokes about product placement, bad money management, and the highly specific Hollywood danger of getting sucked by one’s scheming influencer spouse. The fact that the stars are behind their own warped self-portraits becomes part of the joke. The result is just smart enough to feel clever, just silly enough to feel relaxing, a guilty pleasure by design.

“BH90210” is also a flattering stage for its cast members, who largely come off well—and, in some cases, as better actors than you might think. Spelling is campily over the top in the show’s pilot, in which she drunkenly steals a dress from a fan, but, once she calms down,
she’s disarming as a needy Hollywood princess struggling to be a producer, just like her father, Aaron Spelling, the “jiggle TV” king, who created the original “90210.” Priestley and Garth have lasting chemistry as, respectively, Jason Priestley, a TV director with a cheating wife and an anger-management problem, and Jennie Garth, a gorgeous, multiply divorced former teen star who’s too narcissistic to live a normal life. Ziering gamely takes the biggest hit, playing a self-promoting blowhard who walks around whining about the post-MeToo culture. Meanwhile, Shannen Doherty—on “Beverly Hills, 90210,” she transformed the Midwestern-ingenue role of Brenda Walsh into a morally ambiguous spitfire by applying bitch face to every line—drifts into view as a globe-trotting do-gooder who is nearly impossible to sign to the show, maybe because, like her offscreen version, she is unwilling to be cast as the villain that she was portrayed as during her tabloid days. In one of the funnier scenes, Spelling hunts Doherty down in the Andes, to Donovan’s “There Is a Mountain,” a sequence so weirdly filmed that half the enjoyment is trying to figure out whether the actresses are even in the same shot.

Surprisingly, it’s Gabrielle Carteris who is the breakout, in the oddly affecting role of Gabrielle Carteris, the actress who played Andrea Zuckerman, the student-journalist “nerd,” on “90210.” Andrea was a crush object for female viewers craving lesbian representation, back when Xena was the best option available—mainly because, in nineteen-nineties terms, having glasses and short hair was enough to qualify, even without any same-sex plots. On “BH90210,” Carteris plays a version of herself, questioning her sexuality after a kiss from a female fan in Vegas. The plot unspools as if Carteris had jumped into her character’s fan fiction, right down to her flirtation with another actress on the show, Christine Elise, who played the punk troublemaker Emily Valentine on “90210,” and now plays herself as an executive at Fox. “As a queer woman, I’m very interested in your story,” Elise purrs. “You mean Andrea’s story,” Carteris says, open to doing some research.

As with Andrea’s story, the strongest plots blend absurdism with streaks of emotional realism, in the style of “Jane the Virgin.” Rather than make the marriages “Dynasty”-level cartoonish, the show creates relatable marital problems for characters such as Brian Austin Green, who played the relatable David, on “90210,” and who is now married to the talented sex-bomb actress Megan Fox. On the show, he is married to a talented sex-bomb pop singer, who is played by the MTV v.j./reality-show host/actress La La Anthony; as he tries to reboot his career after years at home with the kids, damn me if I didn’t actually care a little bit. “BH90210” treads delicately, as well, with mentions of Luke Perry, who played the bad boy Dylan McKay and who died, earlier this year, of a stroke.

At the same time, the show has the wisdom to keep things zany, with regular injections of the surreal and the self-conscious. “Somebody had to do something about that guy’s dialogue,” Ziering says, after he punches the show-within-a-show’s writer in the nose, for cheating with Priestley’s wife. When the gang, unnerved by a stalker who has been sending them mutilated “90210” dolls, attend group therapy, their shrink is Carol Potter, who played the Walsh twins’ mother on the original show. She explains, plausibly: “Those years on ‘90210’ were a great training ground for observing a whole gamut of psychopathology.”

Now and then, Spelling and Garth simply hang out in Spelling’s kitchen and debate the risks of revisiting their fame. “What is the thing that that guy said? ‘You can’t go home again,’ ” Garth asks. “What guy?” Spelling asks.

Garth shrugs, and grins: “I dunno, some guy. I only went to fake high school.”

This year has been at a fever pitch for reboots, maybe because the eighties and nineties feel stable and sane compared with today, or maybe because streaming has so radically expanded the viewing demographic of older shows. (One of the more perverse side effects of Netflix is the sight of Gen Z furiously debating the sexual politics of “Friends.”) Still, there’s something winningly small scale about “BH90210,” which, for all its pastel Los Angeles outlandishness, amounts to a niche satire of a lost era, wistful and knowing, humble at heart. Maybe, as that guy once said, you can’t go home again. But you can sublet for a short vacation.
A la in De lon p la y s R o b e rt K le in, an
im med i ate sense of a wi de r world
gone wrong. The woman’s lack of protest tells
us that she is far from alone in being
manhandled, and that her ordeal con-
forms to an established routine. These
anxious hints are a trademark of the
movie’s director, Joseph Losey, who lived
from 1909 to 1984. He was a master of
interiors and a connoisseur of dread.

“Mr. Klein” had its première in 1976,
at Cannes, and came out in America the
following year. Since then, it has proved
hard to catch on the big screen. Now
it is back, restored to its clammy glory,
and showing for two weeks at Film
Forum. For hunters of rarities and stu-
dents of wartime oppression, the emer-
gence of “Mr. Klein” will be an event to
match that of another fierce appraisal
of Occupied France, Jean-Pierre Mel-
vil le’s “Army of Shadows,” which finally
arrived on American screens in 2006,
thirty-seven years after it was made. All
good films come to those who wait.

Alain De lon stars in Joseph Losey’s neglected classic from 1976, now newly restored.
Robert Klein: a welcome relief for our hero, for what is more easily resolved than a case of mistaken identity? The trouble is that he is now a figure of interest to the authorities. His very attempt at clarification has trapped him in the machinery of state, the workings of which the film invites us to watch—the long black Citroëns sliding out of police headquarters, in convoy, or the wall-size map of Paris on which the corolling of undesirables can be plotted, district by district, when the hour of reckoning descends.

Like Orson Welles, Losey was a Wisconsin boy who spent much of his adult life in exile. What drove him abroad, in 1951, was the House Un-American Activities Committee, and the accusation—quite correct, not that he or anyone else deserved to be blacklisted, let alone hounded out—that he had Communist sympathies. (In 1935, he went to Russia, and attended a parade in Red Square. “The old boy up there was Uncle Joe,” he recalled. “It was impossible to think of him as other than warm, lovely.”) In common with many of those who profess a revolutionary faith in the betterment of mankind, Losey could be mean and difficult toward individual souls, and his rancor was compounded by ill health. On his birthday, during the shooting of “Mr. Klein,” his asthma was so bad that Delon had to blow out the candles on the cake.

The miracle of the film is that Losey had the imaginative guts to probe his own fears and failings. To have one’s mail opened by the F.B.I., as he did in America, is to be schooled in paranoia—ideal training for the creation of Klein. The governing theme of the tale, Losey claimed, was indifference, “the inhumanity of the French towards sections of their own people.” Hence the vital presence of Delon, one of the most pitiless of stars. Because he is a natural hunter, notably as the assassin in Melville’s “Le Samouraï” (1967), it’s deeply discomfiting to see him dwindle and pale, for once, into the hunted. So caustic, in fact, is the atmosphere of “Mr. Klein” that his beauty seems to peel away, a loss unthinkable to the audiences who swooned over him in “The Leopard” (1963). Klein has no eyes for anyone but himself and his alter ego, and those eyes are the color of a winter sea.

He is hardly the first person, it must be said, to fall victim to a predatory glitch. “Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.” So runs the first line of “The Trial,” lit by Kafka’s terrible clarity. Hitchcock, of course, preferred the comedy of errors, and the bellboy at the Plaza, in “North by Northwest” (1959)—who calls out for “George Kaplan” and gets Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) instead, thus unleashed the rest of the story—foreshadows the page, in Losey’s film, who stalks among the diners at La Coupole, in Paris, exclaiming “Robert Klein!” But which Klein is being summoned to the telephone? Could both be at the restaurant? It’s no surprise when our Klein, like Thornhill, decides to turn detective, and to pursue his other self.

Sleuthing takes him to a number of destinations. One is a seedy refuge in Pigalle, with rat droppings on the floor and a lone bullet, left in a drawer; another is a château in the countryside, with snow on the ground and a high-born family in residence. The lady of the house (Jeanne Moreau), we gather, is the lover of the second Klein, though she confuses the issue by visiting the bedroom of the first. Our man also travels to Strasbourg to see his aging father (Louis Seigl), whose outrage at the suggestion of Jewish blood in the family’s veins is all too revealing. “We’ve been French and Catholic since Louis XIV!” he cries out. (Losey offered the part of the father to Fellini. No luck.) Strewn across the film are a handful of clues, which lead us to suspect that the other Klein is a member of the Resistance—that he is as brave and as principled as Delon’s Klein is slippery, suave, and hollow. In one haunting sequence, the two of them speak on the phone. Yet I continue to wonder, viewing the movie again, if the gallant Klein truly exists, or if the art-loving, morally compromised Klein merely needs him to exist. Maybe we all dream of a better half, who could somehow atone for our sins.

So do we actually see the double, face to face? Never. The closest we get is a glimpse of a hand, supposedly his, raised aloft and waving, like that of a drowning man, in a crowd that is swept along at a Paris velodrome. By now, it matters not a jot, in the bureaucracy of terror, which Klein is which, for the roundup of Jews is under way, and the trains are waiting. One of the final images, in Losey’s icy labyrinth of a film, is of children being forcibly torn from their parents by officers of the law. How blessed we are to live in a decent and democratic age where such things could not possibly occur. ♦

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 Paul Karasik, must be received by Sunday, September 8th. The finalists in the August 26th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the September 23rd 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

“Let’s let him keep your ball.”
Beth Lawler, Montclair, N.J.

“Kinda puts going to the vet in perspective, doesn’t it?”
Gary Kriewald, Madison, Wis.

“You could at least bark.”
Jim Cobbe, Tallahassee, Fla.

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t prescribe anything I haven’t tested on myself.”
Doug Higbee, Matthews, N.C.

THE FINALISTS

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