

# The New York Times Magazine

February 28, 2021

The Age of Ishiguro

With his new novel, he reaffirms himself as our most profound observer

of human fragility in a technological era. By Giles Harvey



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# The New York Times Magazine

February 28, 2021

7 **Screenland** Public Image *By Nicholas Kulish* / 11 **Talk** Amy Poehler *By David Marchese* / 14 **The Ethicist** Prioritized *By Kwame Anthony Appiah* / 16 **Studies Show** Tuning In, Tuning Up *By Kim Tingley* / 18 **Letter of Recommendation** Name Days *By Linda Kinstler*

## 20 **The Age of Ishiguro**

*By Giles Harvey* / With his new novel, Kazuo Ishiguro reaffirms himself as our most profound observer of human fragility in a technological era.

## 28 **Israel's Covid Wars**

*By Ronen Bergman* / How the pandemic brought tensions between secular and ultra-Orthodox communities to the boiling point.

## 40 **A Ruckus at the Table**

*By Hanif Abdurraqib* / The Black intimacy of spades.

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Ultra-Orthodox residents of Jerusalem protesting anti-Covid measures ordered as part of Israel's third pandemic lockdown in late January. Page 28.



Photograph by Ziv Koren for The New York Times

4 **Contributors** / 5 **The Thread** / 10 **Poem** / 14 **Judge John Hodgman** / 19 **Tip** / 46, 48, 50 **Puzzles** / 46 **Puzzle Answers**

**Behind the Cover** *Kathy Ryan, director of photography: "This week's cover story is a profile of Kazuo Ishiguro, the 2017 Nobel laureate whose newest book, 'Klara and the Sun,' is out next month. Ishiguro is a poetic writer who takes on deep humanistic issues through his characters, and we felt that we had the responsibility to do something equally poetic and interpretive for the cover. Ishiguro 'defamiliarizes the human condition,' and for his portrait, we sought to defamiliarize him through a cerebral and obscured photograph."*  
*Photograph by Jack Davison for The New York Times.*

**Contributors**

**Giles Harvey**

*“The Age of Ishiguro,”*  
Page 20

Giles Harvey is a contributing writer for the magazine. His work has also appeared in The New Yorker and The New York Review of Books. For this issue, he writes about Kazuo Ishiguro, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist who won the 1989 Booker Prize for “The Remains of the Day,” which tells the story of an English butler in a grand old country house before and after World War II. “Shortly after the novel was published, Ishiguro received a letter from an actual butler, one Arthur Inch, who had been in service around the same time as Ishiguro’s narrator and greatly admired the book,” Harvey says. “The two men corresponded for some time. In one letter, Inch proposed inviting a number of his former colleagues to a dinner, over which Ishiguro would preside. It never came to pass.”

**Hanif Abdurraqib**

*“A Ruckus at the Table,”*  
Page 40

Hanif Abdurraqib is a poet, an essayist and cultural critic from Columbus, Ohio. He last wrote about Gillian Welch and David Rawlings for the magazine.

**Ronen Bergman**

*“Israel’s Covid Wars,”*  
Page 28

Ronen Bergman is a staff writer for the magazine, based in Tel Aviv. His latest book is “Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel’s Targeted Assassinations.”

**Jack Davison**

*“The Age of Ishiguro,”*  
Page 20

Jack Davison is a British photographer known for his black-and-white portraiture. He last photographed the two remaining northern white rhinos in the world for the magazine.

**Jon Key**

*“A Ruckus at the Table,”*  
Page 40

Jon Key is a writer, designer and painter in Brooklyn whose work focuses on the South, Blackness, queerness and family.

**Ziv Koren**

*“Israel’s Covid Wars,”*  
Page 28

Ziv Koren is an Israeli photojournalist known for his documentation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He works for the daily Yedioth Ahronoth and is represented by Polaris Images.

**Nicholas Kulish**

*Screenland,*  
Page 7

Nicholas Kulish is a correspondent for The Times. His recent work has focused on philanthropy, immigration and the Saudi Arabian royal family.

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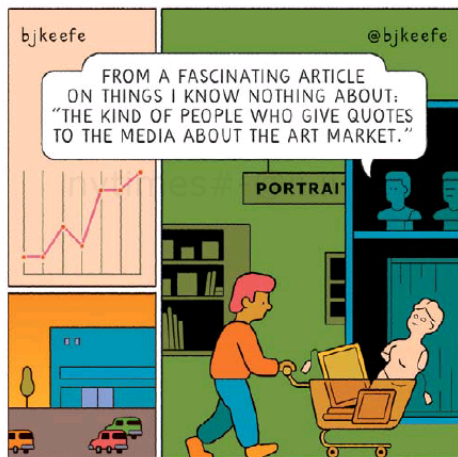
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Readers respond to the 2.14.2021 issue.

**RE: KAWS**

M. H. Miller profiled Brian Donnelly, who went from tagger to blue-chip artist.



One of the best articles I've read in The Times. Informative, thought-provoking and entertaining! Thank you, M. H. Miller.

I have nothing against Brian Donnelly/KAWS, or his work, but every time I read about anonymous billionaires "parking" obscene amounts of money in art they don't give a rip about emotionally or creatively, along with the ripple effect that has on creativity as a whole, I feel empty and sad. In the last three decades, the world of "fine" art has become yet another reflection of our increasingly vapid, acquisitive, self-absorbed, intellectually lazy culture — the kind that propelled the Kardashians to American icon status and ultimately led to the election of Donald Trump and the riot at the Capitol. It is all connected, and the word that comes to mind for all of it is "soulless."  
*Connie, Florida*

**RE: SEMICOLONS**

Lauren Oyler wrote about her lifelong love of the underrated punctuation mark.

This made my day! As an English teacher at Benjamin N. Cardozo High School from 1985 to 1991, I taught "The Mystery of the Semicolon." Before teaching, I was a writer and editor and understood that the semicolon had a role and rules to fit that role.

When I taught, it seemed that I was the only teacher teaching the semicolon, and I was often teased for it. Every year, students would take the English Regents

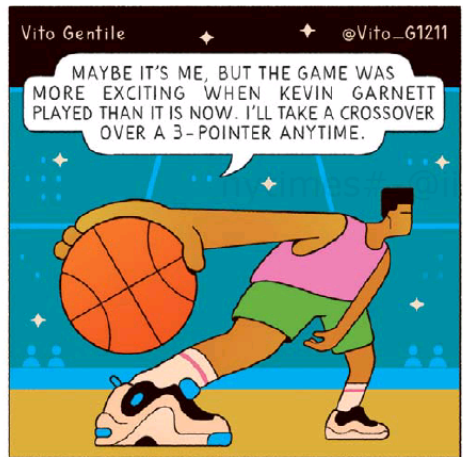
Examination, which included two essays. All English teachers graded those essays as a group, and sporadically a fellow teacher would say, "This student must be Izzo's; there are semicolons!" And yes, I was very proud of myself.

I became an English Ph.D. and persisted in teaching that mystery at the university level until I retired a few years ago. All I can say is: Amen!  
*David Izzo, Durham, N.C.*

Long live semicolons! As someone who has had a lifelong problem with too many commas, causing me to reread my writing to purge those extraneous ones, I recently discovered the semicolon. I have to say, it has become my favorite punctuation mark. Thank you for bringing attention to it!  
*Courtney Brooks, Silverdale, Wash.*

I'm all about the em dash, which I use all the time. It's my signature look. But today I've been given another gift — the semicolon! *Shoot. Should I have used it there?* Habits are hard to break; I must break my habits.  
*Tom Scott, San Francisco*

I teach my eighth graders that a semicolon should be used sparingly because it's special. Plus, it's like love, which is why I have them play a game I created, "The Semicolon Dating Game," near Valentine's Day.  
 Here is why a semicolon is like love (note use of colon to begin a list):  
 1. It can be used only between two independent clauses (no one wants someone who is dependent and clingy; you want them to stand on their own).  
 2. It can't be connected with a conjunction (that means it's already attached).



**THE STORY, ON TWITTER**  
 This deep dive into Rhode Island keeping the schools open is a must-read.  
 @ahazlett

3. The second half clarifies the first ("You complete me!").  
 The semicolon is the best punctuation mark ever!  
*Karin Edelson, Royal Oak, Mich.*

My wife says that when I first contacted her on Match.com, the main reason she agreed to correspond was because I knew how to use a semicolon properly.  
*GP, New York*

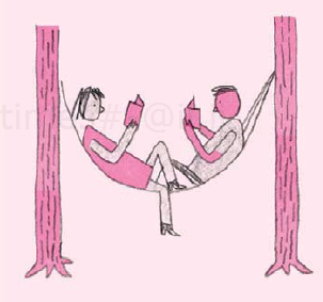
Thank you so much for this article! For one thing, my rhetoric and composition students are going to really find out what a nerd I am when I share this with them. More important, though, this article will help me guide them to a better understanding of how punctuation gives them all the rhetorical power they could stand to have!

I teach punctuation as a rhetorical tool for first-year writing students in college. Teaching them some simple basic maneuvers with commas and semicolons gives them the power to strategize with their writing, which engages them in meta-thinking about their own writing process. They learn that their ideas have value and are worth more than late-night, last-minute, one-draft specials for comp class! Thank you!  
*Sharla*



**CORRECTION**  
 An article on Feb. 7 about Dan-el Padilla Peralta, a professor of classics at Princeton University, included an erroneous reference to a T-shirt with an anti-Semitic acronym. The man wearing that T-shirt was at a rally in December; he was not at the rampage at the Capitol on Jan. 6.  
 Send your thoughts to [magazine@nytimes.com](mailto:magazine@nytimes.com).

**'Habits are hard to break; I must break my habits.'**

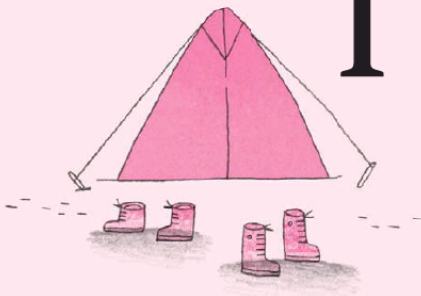


The joys.



The tribulations.

The twists.



## Modern Love

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# Public Image



*Everywhere you look, you see the ceaseless quest for content.* ● *By Nicholas Kulish* ● The Brooklyn Botanic Garden — with its roses, magnolia plaza and cherry esplanade — is an urban refuge, except for when the cherry blossoms burst from their buds. Then it becomes a hazardous place to stroll: Dozens of people dart across its paths, eyes trained on their phones, colliding while trying to frame perfect





shots among the brilliant pink petals. A few years ago, Los Angeles Magazine noted something similar about the Paul Smith store on Melrose, which it ranked as having the city's single most Instagrammed wall. Better known as the Pink Wall, it is neither more nor less than that description: a wall painted bright pink. But like the cherry blossoms, that is enough to make it a destination for a widely recognized type: the social media influencers, big-time and small-, amateur and pro, with whose tripods and ring lights we all must come to terms.

I am not an avid consumer of official-influencer content, but I know all about the Pink Wall. This is because I subscribe to an Instagram account called

Influencers in the Wild, which chronicles the behaviors of the would-be internet famous with the avidity of an old nature documentary. In one recent post we see a man lying prone in the middle of New York City's Fifth Avenue, finding the perfect angle, while a woman in a bright red coat cavorts through a crosswalk with what appears to be an impeccably groomed Afghan hound. The city bus idling feet away is merely the backdrop for their attempt to wring a frothy Darren Star aesthetic out of the city.

That video is shot from far down the sidewalk. Influencers in the Wild tends to observe people like this from a distance, like dangerous lions. The menagerie is managed by George Resch, a popular

**We see a crowd enjoying a National Park vista then spot the two people doing a TikTok workout.**

meme creator known as Tank Sinatra; he curates videos sent to him by his millions of followers and posts them on Instagram, TikTok and Twitter. The accounts' popularity, he once told a BuzzFeed reporter, most likely came from "the fact that everybody has done it at some point and thought: Man I feel ridiculous. I bet I look ridiculous."

They do. The scenes in these videos are almost normal, except that at least one person inside them is behaving, incongruously, as though he or she was modeling or acting. We see a snowstorm and then people posing in swimwear, risking frostbite for content. We see a crowd enjoying a National Park vista then spot the two people in its midst doing a synchronized

Above: Screen grabs from TikTok; Shutterstock. Opening page: Screen grab from TikTok.





TikTok workout. Mundane street scenes suddenly reveal a lone woman writhing in lingerie, as though a raunchy music video had erupted in precisely one spot. You are looking at the actual world, but some of the people in it seem to exist in an alternate dimension of slick online images.

Beaches are overrepresented in the feed; I never knew so many people cosplayed as mermaids. Many videos might be categorized as “spring-break behavior.” Others form a blooper reel: You see someone perch on something wobbly or pose on the edge of an infinity pool, and have a pretty good idea this will end with a splash or a splat. The second-most-popular video on the TikTok page is of a woman falling from a tree branch that

somehow catches on her bathing suit, suspending her in the air. The feed lets you see behind the scenes of Instagram’s grid: You learn that a particularly nice vantage is achieved by climbing on a dumpster or that flattering lighting may require coils and coils of extension cord, unspooled by a patient friend, parent or spouse.

The “in the wild” part of the account name is apt, but the “influencers” part might not be. Many of the videos’ subjects are just regular people, vamping and vogueing as regular people now do. Almost all of us participate in this; those people posing in the pumpkin patch could be anyone. (My wife and I took pictures in a pumpkin patch last fall. She posted them on Instagram.) In

Annual cost of maintaining the Pink Wall: About \$60,000

Rate at which it is repainted: Every three months

Rate at which it is cleaned by hand: Every morning

one clip, three kneeling women appear to hold up their food to the sunset, like supplicants making offerings to the gods, documenting their plates for posterity. They seem less like “influencers” and more like ordinary friends.

Even the people staging elaborate scenes could, in theory, be doing something like shooting merchandise for a clothing boutique; the woman shining a ring light on her dinner in a dark restaurant could be a food journalist. Or else they could just be getting Instagram shots. There is no longer any way to tell, because there is no longer so much difference between slick, professional media content and the way ordinary people document their lives — less and



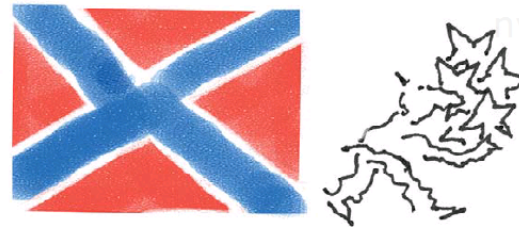
less distance between the photos you want of your night out and the photos you would see in an ad.

I reflect sometimes on an old video called Instagram Husband, which went viral several years ago. The premise, now strangely quaint, was that a few young women were the only ones obsessed with curating overly styled versions of their lives, one mug of artfully swirled cappuccino foam at a time; the video presented mockumentary-style interviews with their stoic husbands. The tide has turned against that latte-art aesthetic, just as it will one day turn against the pasteurized pop-and-lock dance moves of TikTok. But in 2021 it is obvious that just about everyone, of every age and gender, is either a content creator — and in their own way an influencer — or, like me, a passive consumer of that influence. More of us than would care to admit it end our days scrolling through photos of parties to which we weren't invited, vacations we couldn't afford and clothes we could neither pull off nor fit into.

The pandemic was supposed to lessen those feelings of jealousy by offering nothing to fear missing out on. That ended as soon as David Geffen posted a photo of his yacht and implored us all to stay safe. That picture sparked a brief online conflagration over inequality. But then it was recreated, on a more intimate scale, by the family you know with a house upstate, the friend who retreated to an island in Maine, the people who formed their little Boccaccio bubbles to live in idyllic communes, the people who filled time cooking parades of gorgeous dishes, the people whose kids are charming on video — it all reverted to the familiar deadening scroll through low-grade envy.

Over the past year, the more my world shrank, and the gap between the sunset cruisers and the hollow-eyed homebound grew, the more I needed Influencers in the Wild. It can be too much if consumed all at once, but it is remarkable in its natural habitat, tucked among the images in your feed, periodically reminding you that the perfect video looked ridiculous while it was taken. The couple squabbled as they squeezed into the frame together; the food got cold while they tinkered with the lighting; there were five belly flops for one swan dive. It is all just a show, and Influencers is a backstage pass. ♦

*I went to William Beanes Elementary, where I learned that Beanes was a medical doctor who was captured by the British during the War of 1812. Francis Scott Key went with John Skinner to secure Beanes's freedom. That trip ended with Key seeing the image of a flag that would become "The Star-Spangled Banner." In this poem, Nikky Finney is talking about what it means to stop flying some flags. Makes you wonder: How is it a flag can divide and unite a people? And if it does the former, why would we ever argue that it should remain?*



### A New Day Dawns

By Nikky Finney

On the occasion of the Confederate flag falling in South Carolina, July 10, 2015

It is pearl-blue peep of day.  
 All night the palmetto sky  
 Was seized with the aurora  
 And alchemy of the remarkable.  
 A blazing canopy of newly minted  
 Light fluttered in while we slept.  
 We are not free to go on as if  
 Nothing happened yesterday.  
 Not free to cheer as if all our  
 Prayers have finally been answered  
 Today. We are free only to search  
 The yonder of each other's faces,  
 As we pass by, tip our hat, hold a  
 Door ajar, asking silently,  
*Who are we now?* Blood spilled  
 In battle is two-headed: horror &  
 Sweet revelation. Let us put the  
 Cannons of our eyes away forever.  
 Our one and only Civil War is done.  
 Let us tilt, rotate, strut on. If we,

The living, do not give our future  
 The same honor as the sacred dead,  
 Of then and now — we lose everything.  
 The gardenia air feels lighter on this  
 New day, guided now by iridescent  
 Fireflies, those atomlike creatures  
 Of our hot summer nights, now begging  
 Us to team up and search with them  
 For that which brightens every  
 Darkness. Soon, it will be just us  
 Again, alone, beneath the swirling  
 Indigo sky of South Carolina. Alone &  
 Working on the answer to our great  
 Day's question: *Who are we now?*  
 What new human cosmos can be made  
 Of this tempest of tears, this upland  
 Of inconsolable jubilation? In all our  
 Lifetimes, finally, this towering  
 Undulating moment is here.

**Reginald Dwayne Betts** is a poet and lawyer. He created the Million Book Project, an initiative to curate microlibraries and install them in prisons across the country. His latest collection of poetry, "Felon," explores the post-incarceration experience. In 2019, he won a National Magazine Award in Essays and Criticism for his article in *The Times Magazine* about his journey from teenage carjacker to aspiring lawyer. **Nikky Finney** is the author of numerous collections including "Head Off & Split" and "Love Child's Hotbed of Occasional Poetry." In 2011, she won the National Book Award for Poetry, and in 2020 she earned the Wallace Stevens Award for outstanding artistic achievement. She is the John H. Bennett Jr. Endowed Professor of Creative Writing and Southern Letters at the University of South Carolina.



*Amy Poehler* is into what Gen Z is selling: ‘Like when someone says, “Hey, white women, stop centering yourself in a story,” I think that’s interesting.’





**No matter the** degree of mischievous glee or righteous anger, there's always something comforting about Amy Poehler's work, a sense that it comes from a place of empathy, of kindness. And even though its indignation runs pretty hot, her new Netflix movie, "Moxie," is suffused with the same underlying sense of goodness. (Poehler directed and co-stars in the film, based on Jennifer Mathieu's young-adult novel about high school students' turbulent feminist awakening, which premieres March 3.) Poehler's inclusive vibes are, undoubtedly, a big part of why so many viewers took last year's "Parks and Recreation" reunion special as a much-needed pandemic panacea. And I bet they're also part of why she and her friend and fellow "Saturday Night Live" alumna Tina Fey were asked to host this year's Golden Globes telecast, which airs Feb. 28. "I take pride in a process that feels supportive, collaborative, creative," Poehler says. "I think it comes from my early days improvising and doing sketch comedy — that ensemble feeling. I seek it out. I love it."

**What's most interesting to you about the idea of doing a remote Golden Globes?**

It's full-on weird. And we're hoping that the weirdness, which people are unfortunately used to at this point, will translate into something fun and interesting. It's hopefully something you would watch — for entertainment. [Laughs.] Look how bad I am at promoting this!

**Have you noticed any change in people's attitude toward award shows since you and Tina last hosted the Globes?<sup>1</sup> I feel that people used to take for granted that Golden Globe nominations and awards were faintly ridiculous and not actually a meaningful arbiter of quality. Now people get angry about "snubs." Is that giving the Globes too much power?** Both of those ideas can exist at the same time. When I was growing up and watching award shows, the people there were, *ahem*, decidedly drunk. There was this looseness — partly because nobody remembers who wins. However, not being included in the conversation over and over again can get frustrating. Award shows allow people to point at something and say, "Yet again, here's a substantial list" — whether or not you believe that award shows mean anything — "that we were left off of."

**People often write about you and your work — certainly over the last few years**

Below: Amy Poehler as Hillary Clinton and Tina Fey as Sarah Palin on "Saturday Night Live" in 2008, and Poehler with Nick Offerman in "Parks and Recreation" in 2012. Opposite page: Poehler with Hadley Robinson in the new Netflix movie "Moxie."

— **through the framework of feminism. Do you see what you do as an ideological project?** I do make it a point to try to investigate different ways to tell female stories. But it's not because I'm a great person. **No one suggested that.** [Laughs.] I want the reader to know that David definitely shook his head at that. But I look for those stories because I want to make stuff I want to see. It always comes back to that when I'm trying to decide what to work on and what to produce: Is this a show I would watch? I mean, it's hard in Covid times, because I would literally watch anything. I'm rewatching all the seasons of "ER" for the third time. I'm so obsessed with "ER." I did Seth Meyers's show, and I was telling him about a friend who knows Julianna Margulies,<sup>2</sup> and I texted that friend because I want to get dirt. Because Dr. Ross<sup>3</sup> might be charming, but he's a terrible doctor. Fight me on that. But anyway, yeah, I don't go, How can I do important work? That would be like if you said, "I

want to do an interview that changes people's minds." Good luck, buddy.

**As far as "Moxie," were there things you had to learn about the way teenagers today think about feminism in order to make the film?** Oh, yeah. It's like how in the movie I play a mom who considers herself a very active feminist, who felt she moved things forward, but then has to realize, maybe the movement I was in wasn't intersectional; we didn't have a sense of who we were leaving out and were coming at it from privilege. Part of that work is to not get defensive. Like when someone says, "Hey, white women, stop centering yourself in a story," I think that's interesting. I like it. I'm into all the young people who worked on "Moxie." I'm into what Gen Z is selling. There are a lot of cool conversations that feel inclusive. Whatever they're doing, they're doing it right. You know, I was saying to my friend the other day, "Am I too old to be on TikTok?" Because I'm obsessed with



**David Marchese**  
is the magazine's *Talk*  
columnist.



TikTok. I'm learning a lot and don't want to be excluded. TikTok was explaining the GameStop controversy to me! I thought, I'm having the stock market explained to me by teenagers — and I couldn't have asked for better teachers.

**I also kept reading explainers about GameStop, but every time I'd get to the end, I'd still be thinking, So what is short selling exactly?** Yeah, now that I think about it, it would be easy to con me, because if anyone said, "Here are the five things you need to know about 'blank'" related to finance, I would assume it's good advice.

**No. 1: Venmo all your money to Bob.** Send it straight to Bob. **No. 2:** Don't think about what you just did. **No. 3:** Go for a walk; self-care is important. **No. 4:** Listen to these beats I made.

**Getting back to "Moxie," when you make a film intended for younger audiences, what elements do you have to approach differently than you would on a film for adults?** One thing that's important is authenticity. Whether the film is a success is dependent on so many things, but if the intention is pure — young people feel that more sensitively. The other thing is you have to treat young people's experiences seriously. Everybody loves to be cool. Everybody loves to be cynical. But no young person trying to make a change in their high school is rolling their eyes at their own eagerness to make that change. I love leaning into earnestness because people hate it. The way it makes them squirm, I really dig. Because it's so hard to be like, "I care about this." It's so vulnerable.

**Is leaning into earnestness your way of rebelling against the cynicism that people associate with Gen X-ers?** You're totally right. Also, it's hilarious: Nobody gives a crap about Gen X. It's Gen Z, millennials, boomers. Everyone forgets Gen X — and Gen X is like: "Whatever, we don't care. We forgot you, too." But for whatever reason, I'm drawn to stories and to the process when people are open to being vulnerable. I take pride in creating a set where people feel supported. I'm not interested in torture for art. I was always struck by people who thought that the more chaotic, the more outwardly stressed they were, the better the thing was going to go.

**This is tangential, but I once interviewed the guy who directed "Hoosiers," and he said he had a horrible time with Gene Hackman because Hackman's thing was that he needed to create discomfort.<sup>4</sup>**

**1** In 2015. They also hosted in 2013 and 2014. In those years, though, they shared a stage. This year, because of the pandemic, Fey will host from New York and Poehler will be in Los Angeles.

**2** Who, of course, played the nurse Carol Hathaway on the NBC medical drama from 1994 to 2000.

**3** The troubled and dashing rebellious character played by George Clooney.

**4** The director David Anspaugh: "Gene, toward the end of the movie, after yelling at me for an hour, he said: 'I know I behave like a child sometimes. I want to make a good movie, but I just don't feel comfortable making movies where I feel comfortable.'"

**5** The actor Martin Sheen famously suffered one during the tumultuous filming of the 1979 movie.

**6** "Yes, Please," a memoir and self-help hybrid published in 2014. It was a best seller.

**7** Poehler and her ex-husband, Will Arnett, have two sons.



**Which sounds rough, but I guess it worked.** And I'm glad it did, because I love "Hoosiers." However, nobody is yelling at me. I'm not yelling at anybody. If I'm going to work with some actor whose "thing" is to yell at me, that's going to be a no for me, dawg. Over my career, I've had a couple of people who are yellers. People have different connections to yelling. I don't come from a family of yellers. So yelling makes me laugh, because I'm like: Are you — you're really screaming? Throwing things? Somebody needs to take a nap.

**Have you had a lot of heinous on-set experiences? I'm wondering if that's why you take such pride in avoiding that.** I take pride in it because oftentimes there's this glorification — and I don't want to gender it — that the harder the shoot, the more difficult the director, the more interesting the project. We romanticize struggle as being the way that something important gets done. I don't think it has to be that way.

**Right, like the idea that only an experience akin to making "Apocalypse Now" can result in a movie akin in quality to "Apocalypse Now."** "Apocalypse Now" — incredible movie. Might there be another choice than a process that involves me having a heart attack?<sup>5</sup> I'm going to look for that other choice. But that's just me.

**In your book,<sup>6</sup> you described the positive understandings you arrived at after turning 40. You're turning 50 this year. How's that looking?** Not going to lie: 50 feels older than 40. But I like being the age I am. I guess this is every moment of life. You start the story, and you go: I don't like this. I don't get this. Who are these characters? What is this story about? And

then in the middle, you're like: This is so good. I don't want it to end. Then it ends, and you think the next story is not going to be as good. That is what growing up is. It's the reluctance to start a new story.

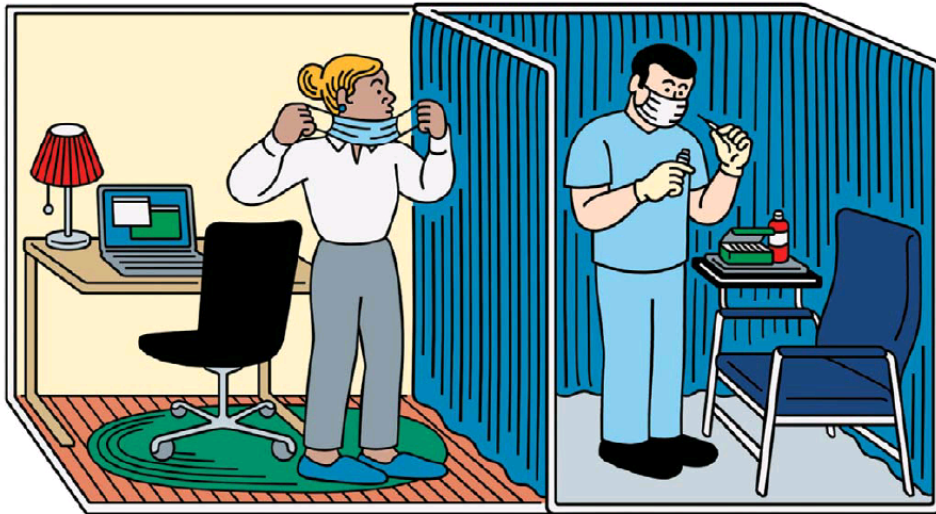
**What in particular is taking the most navigating?** Being a woman within the world. When you're up around 50, you're always a little out of breath from outrunning the voices, whether they be your own or society's — a certain feeling of your irrelevance. You have to outrun them or do some "Art of War" stuff and turn around and surrender to them. The most enlightened being can't avoid them. They're there, but so are more coping mechanisms. That's the cool thing about getting older. You've gone through bad times and survived them. You know, David, there's a quote Steve Harvey likes to say that I hear on TikTok all the time. It's, "Your track record for surviving your bad days is 100 percent." You've survived them, and you've learned coping skills. One other thing I'll say is that during the pandemic, every day is such an adult thing. I have to have this conversation with someone who is disappointing me; I have to talk to my children<sup>7</sup> about how it's important to be kind; I have to figure out when I should sell my GameStop stock. The easy decisions are gone. But if you're a person like me who has a healthy ego and a strong sense of competition, you can pretend you're superior. You're an adult, and you eat that frog. Or you can just go back to bed. ♦

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity from two conversations. A longer version is online at [nytimes.com/magazine](https://www.nytimes.com/magazine).*



# Should I Get a Covid-19 Vaccine When Others Need It More?

nytimes#-@ii.ii



*I have a question about receiving the Covid-19 vaccine. I work for a hospital, but in an administrative job. I do not interact with patients. I have worked from home since March. I am not at high risk for contracting Covid-19 based on my age, occupation and lack of health issues. I practice social distancing, I wear my mask in the limited situations in which I go out (to the grocery store, to the Post Office, to get takeout). I live alone and mostly keep to myself and stay home.*

*Because I work for a hospital, I am eligible to receive the vaccine as part of the second group in my state (after first responders, hospital personnel who interact with patients and people living or working in nursing homes) along with people who are 65 and older, medically vulnerable people and corrections officers. This means I would be vaccinated in the next week or two. If I worked for any other employer (I used to work at a bank), I wouldn't be eligible to receive the vaccine until the second-to-last or last group of the population, probably not for several months.*

*Is it ethical for me to get the vaccine now? Part of me feels as if I'm skipping the line, but part of me feels as if this isn't my decision and at a certain point it's about getting as many people vaccinated as quickly as possible. I believe in science. I believe in the efficacy of the vaccines currently available. I plan to get the vaccine at some point. I'm just very conflicted about the timing of it. Am I taking someone else's shot, someone who might need it more than I do?*

Name Withheld

**Whatever rules we** make for vaccination priority, there will be trade-offs. We want to minimize the total number of people who become severely or even fatally ill from the disease. We want to protect those whose necessary work puts them at risk of their exposure to the virus. And we want to be fair, treating similarly situated people alike. These desiderata don't all pull in the same direction. Health care workers who are in their 20s and don't have certain medical conditions aren't at

high risk if they contract Covid-19. Perhaps we could save more lives if we left them until later.

But there's another overall desideratum: The system has to be straightforward enough to be managed easily — to get large numbers of people vaccinated as swiftly as possible. We don't want to have to determine that people meet a dozen conditions before putting the vaccine into their arms: Doing so could slow down the rate of vaccination.

Any system that makes a reasonable attempt to be efficient and equitable in achieving the goal of reducing the harm done by the pandemic is acceptable, despite the questionable outcomes produced in particular cases. We've generally decided to treat employment in health care as a simple, useful proxy for a class of people who are part of our critical infrastructure — people to whom the community owes protection because they are helping us deal with the emergency. Some are more likely to face exposure to the virus than others, to be sure, even if it's not so easy to draw a sharp line between "direct care" personnel and others. (What to do about, say, the radiologist who has to walk through a patient ward to get to her office?)

I understand and respect your qualms. But you're benefiting from a system that was decided on after considerable deliberation among democratically elected leaders and scientific experts. Because the priority list, though inevitably imperfect, is a legitimate one, you are perfectly entitled, as an ethical matter, to receive your vaccination. In doing so, you are contributing not just to your own well-being but to the health of the community, given the growing evidence that a vaccinated person poses fewer risks to others, and, finally, to the resilience of our medical system. In a decently run hospital, people who do administrative work have a role to play, too.

*I was born and raised in Brooklyn, and my family and I have been eating at a particular restaurant nearby for nearly 20 years. We recently ordered takeout from there, and when I ran inside to pick up our order, I was dismayed to see literally dozens of people casually dining inside — zero distancing, zero partitions, zero masks (customers or staff). Indoor dining was prohibited in New York at*



## Bonus Advice From Judge John Hodgman

Nate writes: I buy croutons because otherwise my salads are boring. The other day, I found my partner shoving fistfuls of them in her mouth. I asked her not to. We bought some other snacks, but she was eating the croutons the next day. Is it fair for me to ask that they serve their purpose?

When my wife turned 4, her mother let her order whatever she wanted at the restaurant. Her choice was immediate: a bowl of black olives and croutons — because she is a genius, and croutons have zero purpose except to be delicious. And unique — no camouflage cloud of Chex Mix you throw in your partner's path will ever trick her. So long as you have enough for your boring salad, don't worry about your wife's habit. (P.S.: If you want to try the recipe, make sure the olives are from a can, as this was the '70s, and dry, so they don't moisten the croutons. I'll be serving this for my wife's birthday.)

To submit a query: Send an email to [ethicist@nytimes.com](mailto:ethicist@nytimes.com); or send mail to The Ethicist, The New York Times Magazine, 620 Eighth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10018. (Include a daytime phone number.)

Illustration by Louise Zergaeng Pomeroy



that time, though it has now resumed at 25 percent capacity indoors.

I am extremely torn about what to do. I don't want to call the authorities on my community, but I feel there needs to be some kind of accountability for the flagrant disregard of rules and profound disrespect of others, not to mention that this restaurant has created a potential virus vector. What would be an ethical analysis of this situation?

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Name Withheld

**You witnessed a** potential superspreader event, and if you leave things as they are, another one could appear every day at this restaurant for the foreseeable future. Diners there may end up causing sickness and death elsewhere through their indifference to the rules. In these circumstances, reporting what you've seen might save lives.

There can be reasons not to bring down the full weight of the law on people, especially those with whom you have a connection: Maybe the law is irrational or enforced with too heavy a hand. But here the rules are rational, and you offer no reason to think the enforcement will be inappropriate. Meanwhile, the restaurant can still serve its patrons with its take-out service. Current projections have us entering March with over half a million Covid-19 deaths. We need to take all reasonable measures to slow the spread.

*Like many single people during the pandemic, I and my sibling, both in our early 30s, have been living on and off with our two baby-boomer parents in the home we grew up in. All four of us are quite close, and our relationships are good: We talk frequently, go on walks, play games and have dinner together often. The only significant cause of tension is a disagreement about the obligation we adult children have to be "friendly" to our parents. Among other things, this includes making sure to tell them when we are leaving the house, though they grudgingly accept not being told where we are going. When I tell them that I would like to be able to leave without notifying them, or refuse on principle to report on my sibling's whereabouts, they become upset.*

*The house is much too small to afford any degree of privacy. I fully believe that as a guest, I have a duty to do whatever my parents ask of me; but on the other*

*hand, I wonder if my obligations might in some ways be more like those of a roommate. My parents insist that they want to make me as comfortable as possible. After discussing the matter, it seems as if I'm either going to act in a way that hurts their feelings or just give in and accept my own feeling that I'm under surveillance. Which should it be?*

Name Withheld

**Your parents, apparently,** say it's a matter of being "friendly"; you say it's a matter of being "under surveillance." Neither description strikes me as right. Your parents may enjoy having you around, but they're doing you a favor in letting you stay with them during the pandemic. They've agreed, even if reluctantly, that you needn't say where you're off to. (I agree that would be intrusive.) But is it really such a burden to tell someone whose house you're living in when you're

**Whatever rules we make for vaccination priority, there will be trade-offs.**

going out for a while? This isn't a matter of being friendly; it's a matter of acceding to a request they have a right to make of guests, even if those guests are their children.

I agree that it's not your job to report on your sibling's movements; hosts don't have the right to oblige guests to regulate the behavior of other guests. But because the house is small and everyone is presumably able to find out who's in and out, the information your parents are asking for is only something they'll most likely learn anyway. To say "I'm going out for a few hours" isn't the same as submitting to surveillance. Besides, I wonder whether this isn't more a matter of anxiety alleviation than control. Old habits die hard; parents can worry when their children disappear without notice. ♦

**Kwame Anthony Appiah** teaches philosophy at N.Y.U. His books include "Cosmopolitanism," "The Honor Code" and "The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity."



Trinity Porch (Iceberg), 2021, 24 x 36 inches, oil on linen, \$14,000.

## Mitchell Johnson

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# New research suggests that stimulating neurons in the brain can address psychological issues with surprising precision.

nytimes#-@ii.ii



**The brain is** an electrical organ. Everything that goes on in there is a result of millivolts zipping from one neuron to another in particular patterns. This raises the tantalizing possibility that, should we ever decode those patterns, we could electrically adjust them to treat neurological dysfunction — from Alzheimer's to schizophrenia — or even optimize desirable qualities like intelligence and resilience.

Of course, the brain is so complex, and so difficult to access, that this is much easier to imagine than to do. A pair of studies published in January in the journal *Nature Medicine*, however, demonstrate that electrical stimulation can address obsessive-compulsive urges and symptoms of depression with surprising speed and precision. Mapping participants' brain activity when they experienced certain sensations allowed researchers to personalize the stimulation and modify moods and habits far more directly than is possible through therapy or medication. The results also showed the degree to which symptoms that we tend to categorize as a single disorder — depression, for example — may involve electrical processes that are unique to each person.

In the first study, a team from the University of California, San Francisco, surgically implanted electrodes in the brain of a woman whose severe depression had proved resistant to other treatments. For 10 days, they delivered pulses through the electrodes to different areas of the brain at various frequencies and had the patient record her level of depression, anxiety and energy on an iPad. The impact of certain pulses was significant and nuanced. "Within a minute, she would say, 'I feel like I'm reading a good book,'" says Katherine W. Scangos, a psychiatrist and the study's lead author. The patient described the effect of another pulse as "less cobwebs and cotton."

The researchers also recorded what type of unmediated brain activity coincided with periods of low mood or energy. The aim was to use those responses to guide the placement of another set of electrodes that would deliver what is known as deep-brain stimulation — a technique that can restore lost function to neurons by zapping them with a consistent, high-frequency electrical pulse. To date, it has been employed most commonly to treat movement disorders, like



Parkinson's. It has also shown promise for depression. "But because depression presents differently in different people, it likely involves multiple neural circuits," Scangos says. She and her colleagues wondered if a "more personalized approach" might make the treatment more effective. Based on their mapping of the patient's brain activity, they programmed the electrodes to detect her depressed states and deliver stimulation in response, much the way a pacemaker acts on the heart. That experimental treatment will continue long term as the patient goes about her daily life.

Deep-brain stimulation is too invasive to use except in extreme circumstances. But in the second study, researchers used a noninvasive technique called transcranial alternating current stimulation to deliver electrical pulses through electrodes placed on participants' scalps. The goal was to try to curb obsessive-compulsive behaviors. Past studies have suggested that the orbital frontal cortex, an area in the brain's reward network, might play a role in reinforcing such behaviors, by regarding them as beneficial. So the researchers attached the electrodes to 64 volunteers and recorded the frequency in hertz at which their orbital frontal cortex fired when they won a monetary reward in a game.

Crucially, it was noted, the frequency varied slightly by individual. Using that personal frequency, the researchers next stimulated the same area in each participant for 30 minutes a day for five days in a row. Doing so, they found, reduced the number of obsessive-compulsive behaviors in the volunteers by an average of nearly 30 percent over the following three months. (None of the volunteers had an obsessive-compulsive disorder diagnosis. All of them, however, reported varying degrees of repetitive tendencies, and those whose symptoms were most intense got the most relief.) The researchers hypothesize that the stimulation helped the orbital frontal cortex maintain its optimal rhythm, thereby improving its coordination with other areas in the reward network.

The findings reinforced the idea that personalized brain stimulation requires determining not just the right area to target but also the right rhythm at which to do so. "The neural code — it's frequency-specific," says Robert M. G. Reinhart, one of the study's authors



and the director of the Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience Laboratory at Boston University. "The channel of information-processing in the brain is just like a channel you might tune in to on the radio." The study also illustrated that traits like compulsivity exist on a spectrum. Currently, a person for whom those traits are bothersome but not disabling might not seek treatment, particularly if it comes with side effects, as medications often do. Brain stimulation, though, could one day remedy all kinds of conditions we now target inexactly with drugs, Reinhart says. "If you want to get futuristic, you can imagine someone giving themselves a zap to get over a trans-Atlantic flight. What people use coffee for today."

**Psychiatrists won't be** prescribing brain stimulation to the masses anytime soon. But by identifying the neural circuits that give rise to particular symptoms, and by showing that alterations to the timing of their firing can change those symptoms, they offer new ways to think about what psychiatric disorders are. "There's still a lot of stigma around depression that a lot of patients feel," Scangos says. The subject of her study was no exception: "The fact that there was such an immediate response when we stimulated made her feel like, It's not something I'm doing wrong; it's something in my brain that can be addressed."

**Kim Tingley** is a contributing writer for the magazine.

Giving a collection of symptoms a diagnostic label like "depression" is useful because it helps doctors more efficiently find a successful treatment, currently a lengthy process of trial and error. "The million-dollar question is how to match the best treatment to the patient and how to avoid treatments that won't work," says Helen Mayberg, a neurologist and director of the Nash Family Center for Advanced Circuit Therapeutics at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai; she was co-author of a commentary on the two studies. As neuroscientists map the brain activity of more and more patients, they're getting closer to being able to offer a battery of tests that show, Scangos says, "you have this type of depression, you'll respond best to this medication."

Ultimately, if we could address those symptoms directly, we might be able to get rid of diagnostic categories altogether, says Alvaro Pascual-Leone, medical director of the Wolk Center for Memory Health at Hebrew SeniorLife and a professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School. Rather than applying a default label of depression or obsessive-compulsive disorder, Pascual-Leone says, doctors could instead ask, "What is the disabling symptom that this person presents?" And then treat it specifically.

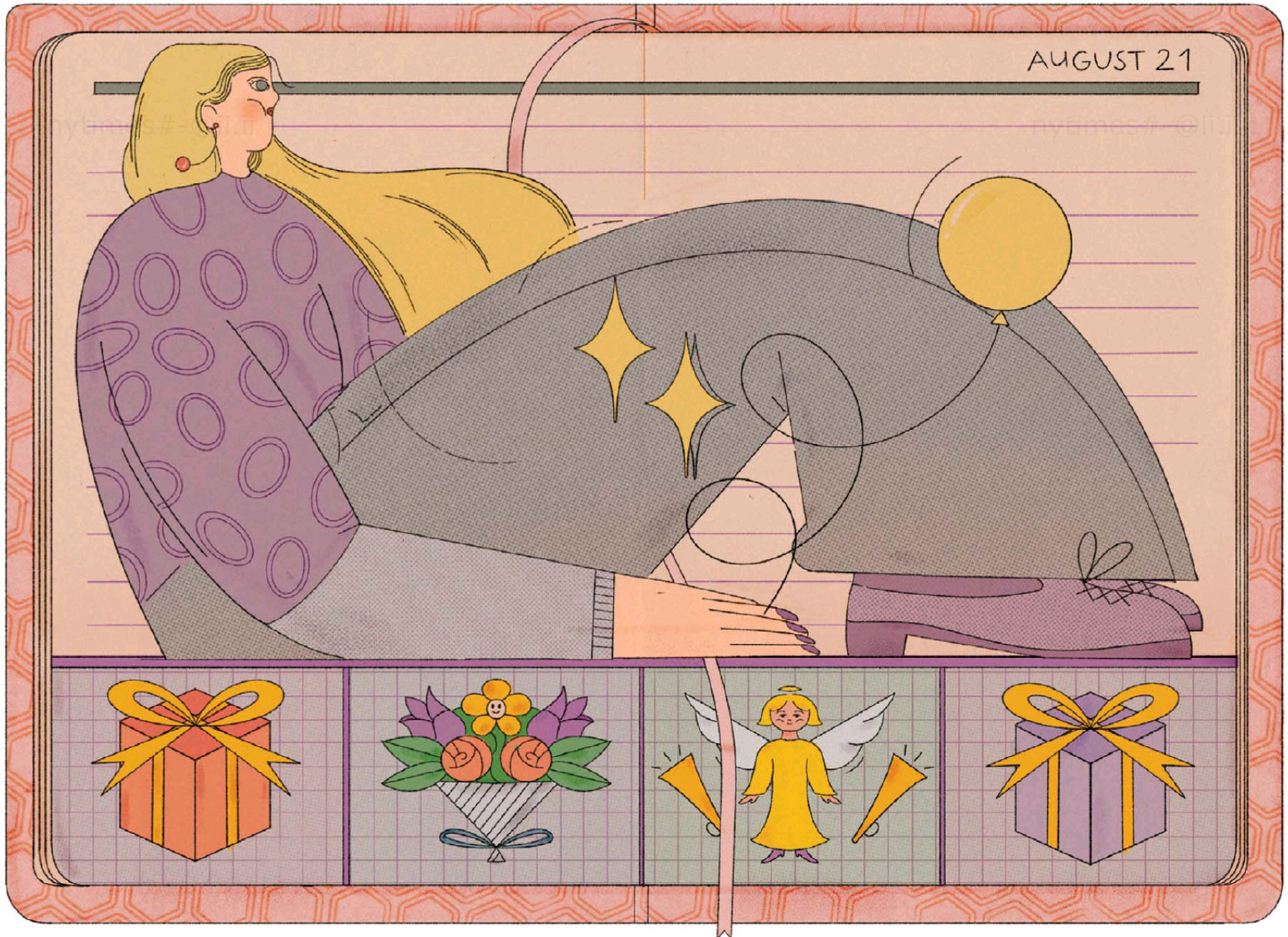
For now, what these studies offer everyone is additional evidence that "our brains are plastic," says Shrey Grover, a graduate student and a co-author of the Boston University study. "And we can rewire the brain in different ways." Those include psychotherapy and pharmacology. Our neural activity also changes as we learn; it changes as we age. This means we can improve how our minds work at any point in our lives, even without advanced technology.

But the brain's plasticity makes it all the more puzzling that certain psychological states can be so hard to dispel. Research into personalized brain stimulation also probes at the larger question of why moods or habits that are mild or circumstantial in some people — carefully rechecking a tax form, say, or feeling deep sadness at the death of a loved one — are chronic and debilitating in others. "There's nothing that gets right at the cause," Reinhart says. "It's like the water in the sink is running, and you can mop up the floor, but no one's turning off the faucet." ♦



# Name Days

By Linda Kinstler



**Every year on** my birthday, my mother reminds me that the day is really *her* holiday, not mine. There is nothing malign about it: She is simply stating a fact. After all, it was she who brought me to life and kept me in it; she who emigrated from Soviet Latvia; she who wanted an American baby; she who created one. I did nothing on my birthday except slip innocently into the world, oblivious to the unrelenting crush of time that the day would forever mark. She had every right to claim the day as her own

celebration. But I always wondered what was left for me.

The answer appeared one day in the mail, a greeting card from my grandmother in Riga, wishing me happiness and luck in honor of my name day.

My name day? I had never heard of such a thing. Nor did I think my name was something worth celebrating: My family had chosen “Linda” in part because it sounded incontrovertibly American to their Soviet ears, practically an idiom of assimilation unto itself. According to a

In many nations, they're like birthdays — but better.

2018 study, it is the “trendiest” name in U.S. history, having experienced a sharp rise and precipitous fall in popularity amid the postwar baby boom. By naming me Linda, my parents hoped they were conferring an easy American life upon me, a life free of mispronunciations and mistakes. For them, such a life would be forever out of reach. (Not that they haven't tried: My father's name is Olaf, but when he orders takeout he presents himself as Mike.)

In Latvia and many other European nations, name days are like birthdays,



but better. Whereas birthdays celebrate individuals, name days are collective holidays marked by national calendars, radio stations and news outlets, days when people are feted just for answering to particular appellations. In Finland, the University of Helsinki maintains a national almanac of name days for people, cats, dogs and horses. Though my name day varies from country to country, according to the Latvian calendar it falls on Aug. 21, a day it shares with “Janina.” On this day there are no candles to count, no years to tally. Instead, all the Lindas and Janinas receive flowers, chocolates and presents in honor of their belonging to a strange and ever-shifting collective defined not by race, religion, citizenship or age but by the simple fact of a shared name. There is no hiding your name day from public knowledge; it does not belong to you. By congratulating me on my name day, my grandmother had inducted me into this tradition and reminded me of my place in a long line of Lindas.

Name days are an ancient practice, a relic of a time when birthdays were indulgences reserved for the elite. The tradition began centuries ago as a way of venerating the Greek gods and Christian saints, and it has not always served inclusive ends: Name days have helped churches and state committees determine which names were acceptable and which were not, which individuals could join the collective and which ones had to be kept outside. In recent years, name days have experienced something of a renaissance. Largely divorced from their religious origins, they are now carnivals of cognomens, increasingly untethered from God, country and state committee. The concept has even gone digital. If you download the “Name-days” iPhone app, you can search through an index of 18,252 names from 17 countries, allowing you to claim your own day or congratulate someone on theirs.

Today we can think of name days as reminders that our lives need not be defined by mortal cycles of birth and death, invitations to dispense with aging as life’s defining attribute. Name days show us how our lives are defined by relation. Our names are not random markers. Whether given or chosen, they shape how we move through the world and how the world moves through us.

**Discovering my name day felt like a liberation. It is at once mine and not: It belongs to all the Lindas out there.**

**Linda Kinstler** is a writer based in Washington. Her work has appeared in *Wired*, *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian* and elsewhere.

They are small prophecies, their meanings borne out by their bearers. I often think of Zadie Smith’s observation that “the only thing that identifies people in their entirety is their name: I’m a Zadie.” Names tie us to those with whom we share them in almost mystical fashion. That is why names are lovingly passed down through families and why they are just as often cast away. They come to us used and outlive us all.

Discovering my name day felt like a liberation. It is at once mine and not: It belongs to all the Lindas out there. It is a day that seems to float above the march of time, dedicated to celebrating what it can mean to be a Linda. Most of the Lindas

I have encountered in my age group are also millennial daughters of immigrants; our name is a reminder of our parents’ aspirations and of the immense promise with which our name is laden. I have to admit that my name has grown on me lately — or maybe I’m the one growing into my name.

As I stare down the barrel of a second birthday spent in quarantine, I am grateful to my mother for claiming it as her own celebration. I do not want or need a day dedicated to my age; she can have it. I will happily wait until my name day comes around again: On Aug. 21, I will toast all the other Lindas out there, and hope they wear our name well. ♦

**Tip** By Malia Wollan

## How to Remove Graffiti



“Graffiti is not going away ever,” says Thomas Corrales, 53, who works for the Los Angeles Department of Public Works training and overseeing crews of graffiti cleaners. Some 175 cleaners fan out across the city every day; in the second half of last year, they removed 3.5 million square feet of graffiti. Corrales grew up in a neighborhood where spray-painted tags were so pervasive that he became almost blind to them. Then one day in 1993, the unemployment office got him a graffiti-abatement job. Now he can’t help spotting even the tiniest Sharpie tags.

Unauthorized paint on a wall can be many things — art, hate speech, social and political messaging, vandalism, the claiming of space. However it manifests, it often has a multiplier effect: Graffiti

begets more graffiti, and tags will be tagged over. On occasion, when Corrales paints over graffiti, someone shows up to tag it anew before he can even drive away. Remember that humans have been marking up walls for millennia; don’t get angry or take it personally. “We’re trained not to confront anyone,” Corrales says. If you ever feel unsafe, leave and come back later. Wear long pants and boots, preferably the steel-toed kind if you plan to use a water blaster (water sprayed at 3,500 pounds per square inch can take off skin).

As you traverse streets, carry the paint colors you’re most likely to need, including gray, beige, tan and white. If you don’t have the exact color, use a spectrophotometer to measure hue and make a match. For walls, paint with either a roller or a paint sprayer. For stop signs, murals and most metal surfaces, use a water-based chemical remover mostly known by its brand name, Krud Kutter. City-approved murals are sealed with a clear coat that makes them easier to wipe clean. For the multistory splatterings that people make by filling fire hoses with paint and shooting it out with a fire extinguisher, you’ll want cherry-picker trucks. Clean sidewalks with a high-pressure water and sand blaster.

Cityscapes are covered in layer after layer of paint, like an ever thickening skin. Never get attached to a clean, monochromatic surface. “You know that it’s going to be retagged,” Corrales says. “And you’re going to come back again, too.” ♦











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S A T U R D A Y

in late October 1983, the growing prospect of thermonuclear war between the world's two superpowers drew a quarter million people out into the streets of central London. Among them was a young writer named Kazuo Ishiguro, who'd recently published his first novel. Ishiguro's mother had narrowly survived the atomic bombing of Nagasaki in 1945, so his presence at the march that day felt like a matter of personal duty. Along with a group of like-minded friends, he chanted slogans demanding that the West renounce its nuclear arsenal — the hope being that the East would quickly follow suit. As they made their way past Big Ben to Hyde Park, holding signs and waving banners, a current of euphoria spread among the crowd. Synchronized protests were taking place all across Europe, and for a brief moment it seemed possible to believe that they would actually make a difference. There was just one problem, as Ishiguro saw it: He worried that the whole thing might be a terrible mistake.

In theory, unilateral disarmament was a nice idea; in practice, it could backfire catastrophically. Perhaps the Kremlin would respond to a nuclear-free Europe in the way the demonstrators foresaw, but it wasn't hard for Ishiguro to imagine a less harmonious outcome. Even as he recognized their good intentions, he feared the marchers were succumbing to the disorienting lure of mass emotion. His parents and grandparents had lived through the rise and fall of fascism, and he grew up listening to stories about the dangerous power of crowds. Britain in the 1980s was a far cry from Japan in the 1930s, and yet he recognized common denominators: tribalism, an impatience with nuance, the pressure placed on ordinary people to take political sides. Ishiguro, a mild, deliberative person, felt

this pressure intensely. He didn't want to wake up at the end of his life only to realize that he'd given himself to a misguided cause.

These anxieties found an outlet in the novel he was writing at the time, "An Artist of the Floating World." Masuji Ono, the book's narrator, is a man who waits too long to ask himself whether he might be backing a misguided cause. An aging painter in late-1940s Japan, Ono has been suffering from moral whiplash: His monumental artworks celebrating Japanese imperialism, at one time the source of honor and renown, have taken on a shameful meaning in the democratizing postwar era. Looking back over his life, he tries to come to terms with his decisions. Nietzsche once distilled the workings of psychological repression thus: "Memory says, 'I did that.' Pride replies, 'I could not have done that.' Eventually, memory yields." In Ishiguro's novel, the tug of war between pride and memory plays out behind a screen of glazed eloquence as Ono uncovers the things he has carefully hidden from himself.

At 66, Ishiguro is now approaching the age of the disgraced propagandist he imagined in his youth. To say that the life lived in error he once feared has not come to pass would be understating the matter — something Ishiguro, a virtuoso of restraint, has been doing for almost 40 years. In 2017, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature, the closest thing an author can get to outright existential validation. Announcing the award, the Swedish Academy described him as someone "who, in novels of great emotional force, has uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world." Ono, in "An Artist," or Stevens, the English butler who narrates "The Remains of the Day," which was awarded the 1989 Booker Prize, are men who have ever but slenderly known themselves. Only

late in life does Stevens recognize the mess he has made of things, freezing out the woman he loves and throwing away his best years — the period between the two world wars — in service to a Nazi-sympathizing master.

Ishiguro was laden with prizes long before the call from Stockholm came through, but acclaim has never stopped him from asking the questions that troubled him on the march in 1983: What if I'm wrong? What if I'm making a terrible mistake? On the evening of Dec. 7, 2017, he confessed to the audience who gathered to hear his Nobel lecture that he'd begun to wonder whether he'd built his house of fiction on sand. "I woke up recently to the realization I'd been living for some years in a bubble," he said from behind the gilt-inlaid lectern. "I realized that my world — a civilized, stimulating place filled with ironic, liberal-minded people — was in fact much smaller than I'd ever imagined." The raucous discontent that Brexit and the rise of Donald Trump were laying bare had forced him to acknowledge a disturbing reality. "The unstoppable advance of liberal-humanist values I'd taken for granted since childhood," he said, "may have been an illusion."

Ishiguro's new book, "Klara and the Sun," his first since the Nobel, picks up more or less where his acceptance speech left off. The novel is set in a near-future America, where the social divisions of the present have only widened and liberal-humanist values appear to be in terminal retreat. Appropriately enough, our window onto this world is not a human being but an animatronic robot powered by artificial intelligence. Its name is Klara — or should that be "her" name? On this choice of pronoun hinges the moral burden of Ishiguro's tale. The book addresses itself to an urgent but neglected set of questions arising from a paradigm shift in human self-conception. If it one day becomes possible to replicate consciousness in a machine, will it still make sense to speak of an irreducible self, or will our ideas about our own exceptionalism go the way of the transistor radio?

**Unlike his ill-at-ease** narrators, Ishiguro is a droll, self-deprecating presence, secure in his gift and the uses he has put it to. "If it wasn't for my screenplay, I think it would have been a pretty good film," he told me recently. He was speaking of "The White Countess" (2005), an all-around flop on which he joined forces with James Ivory and Ismail Merchant. (The duo had better luck with "The Remains of the Day," a nominee for Best Picture at the 1994 Academy Awards.) Perhaps modesty comes easier when everyone is telling you how remarkable you are — he seems to average around a prize a year — but there is something about Ishiguro, a sort of twinkling poise, that makes you feel that he



would be the way he is in any simulation of his life. “He’s very at peace with himself,” Robert McCrum, a longtime friend and former editor, said. “There’s no darkness in him. Or if there is, I haven’t seen it.”

As a man is, so he writes, and Ishiguro’s sentences have nothing to prove. In the hands of some of his contemporaries — Martin Amis, say, or Salman Rushdie — the novel can sometimes feel like a vehicle for talent; high-burnish prose comes at the reader in a blaze of virtuosity, but the aesthetic whole isn’t always equal to the sum of its parts. Ishiguro, a practitioner of self-effacing craft, takes a contrary approach. At first glance, his books can appear ordinary. “It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days” is the far from dazzling first sentence of “The Remains of the Day.” The real action happens between the lines, or behind them, as when Stevens justifies his taste for sentimental romance novels on the grounds that they provide “an extremely efficient way to maintain and develop one’s command of the English language.” That they might also provide a dose of wish-fulfillment to a disconsolate, middle-aged bachelor is something we are left to infer for ourselves. It is not for nothing that Ishiguro has named Charlotte Brontë as the novelist who has influenced him most. From “Jane Eyre,” he learned how to write first-person narrators who hide their feelings from themselves but are transparent to other people. Rereading the book a few years ago, he kept coming across episodes and thinking, Oh, my goodness, I just ripped that off!

Ishiguro’s latest novel continues this tradition of beneficent theft. Klara, an A.F., or Artificial Friend, is a sort of mechanical governess in search of a post. We first meet her (we’ll go with “her” for now) in a storefront window, where she is desperately hoping to catch the eye of a would-be owner. Meanwhile she has to content herself with the spectacle of street life, and one pleasure of the book’s opening section comes from watching Klara’s newly awakened synthetic consciousness expand in real time. First she gets to grips with things like physical space, color and light (A.F.’s run on solar power), but before long she is wrapping her head around more abstruse realities, like the rigid caste system that defines the society of which she is at once a product and a witness.

“It feels more fragile today than it ever has done in the time since I’ve been conscious,” Ishiguro said of liberal democracy. He was speaking to me over Zoom from his home in Golders Green in North London. From where I sat, in Los Angeles, liberal democracy didn’t look too sturdy either. It was mid-November, two weeks after the presidential election had

finally been called for Joe Biden, but Donald Trump and his supporters continued to resist this reality.

In his late teens and early 20s, when he was trying to make it as a singer-songwriter, Ishiguro had shoulder-length hair and a bandit-style mustache and went around in torn jeans and colorful shirts. These days the facial hair and flowing locks are gone, and he dresses exclusively in black. (“He hates shopping, but he wants to look cool, so at one point he just bought a thousand black T-shirts,” his daughter, Naomi, told me.) He didn’t look *uncool* this evening, hunched in front of the monitor in his sable shirt and rimless glasses. To his right was a bookshelf lined with Penguin Classics, to his left (as he obligingly revealed when I asked him for a brief tour), a spare bed crowded with stuffed animals.

Ishiguro likes to compare his generation, born at the start of the postwar era, to Buster Keaton’s character in “Steamboat Bill Jr.,” who, in

In “Klara,” the widespread adoption of artificial intelligence has created a permanently jobless class, which in turn has led to mass unrest and top-down repression. Most contemporary A.I. stories, even very good ones, like Alex Garland’s “Ex Machina” (2014) or Ian McEwan’s “Machines Like Me” (2019), play on the age-old fear that a slave class of robots will rise up and overthrow their human masters. Ishiguro’s vision is at once more pragmatic and more bleak. Klara and her kind don’t revolt; they simply allow governments and corporations to control people more efficiently. [nytimes#-@ii.ii](#)

On a philosophical plain, artificial intelligence is also putting pressure on traditional notions of human singularity. As one character in “Klara” phrases it, the idea that “there’s something unreachable inside each of us” that makes us who we are is an illusion: Human beings are simply the sum total of a series of biochemical processes. “One of the assumptions we have in liberal democracies is that human beings are intrinsically

‘ I W A N T T H E M  
T O R E A L I Z E :  
“ T H I S I S U S .  
T H I S I S  
M E . ” ’

the famous scene, is standing in front of a house when its facade collapses on top of him. He’s saved by an open upstairs window, which falls clean over his oblivious figure. “We don’t realize what a narrow miss we had,” Ishiguro said in his measured, unemphatic voice. “If we’d been born just a little bit earlier we would have gone through the war, the Holocaust — all that savagery.” Instead they inherited a world of unparalleled material comfort and reached maturity at the zenith of the sexual revolution. “For my daughter’s generation, I don’t feel things are so secure,” he said. “In the West, since the end of the Cold War, we’ve allowed massive inequalities to develop, which are leading substantial numbers of people to think, Well, maybe this isn’t for us.”

Another facet of the story, as Ishiguro sees it, is the rise of ever more sophisticated technology.

of value, that they have a value that is not conditional on what they can contribute to the larger society or to the economy or to some sort of common project,” Ishiguro said. “If it starts to look like we can be reduced to the point where we’re just a bunch of algorithms, I think that seriously erodes the idea that each person is unique and therefore worthy of respect and care regardless of what they can or can’t contribute to our joint enterprise.”

Of course, Ishiguro is a novelist, not a philosopher, and the power of his book derives from its ability to make palpable the human stakes of such abstract propositions. These stakes begin to emerge when Klara is picked out from among the other A.F.’s at the store by a young teenager named Josie, who is suffering from an obscure illness. At first, Josie’s family, rather like the reader, is unsure how to relate to Klara: She seems

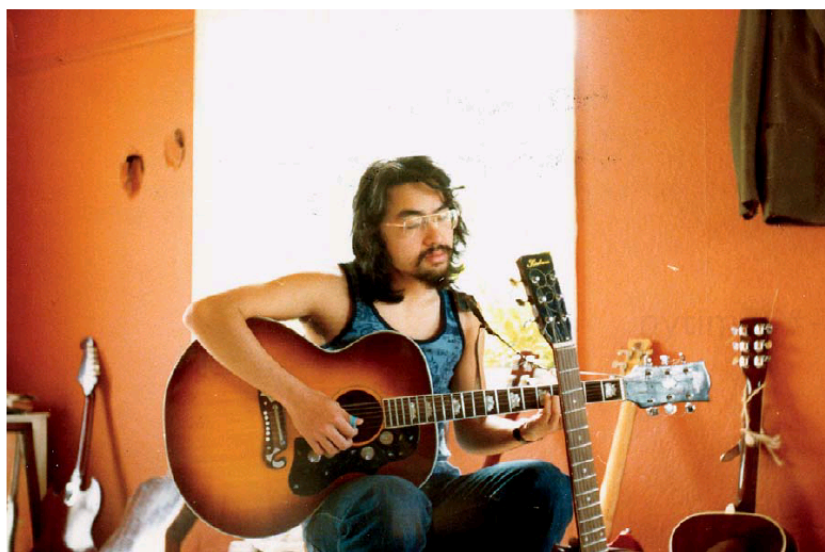


to them something in between an au pair and a household appliance. Ishiguro wrings plenty of pathos from these conflicting attitudes. One moment, much to Klara's delight, Josie is confiding in her A.F. as though she were a sibling; the next, she's brusquely ordering her to leave the room. For long stretches, Klara simply stands uncomplainingly in a corner, waiting until she can be of service.

Great stylists, like Amis, reinvigorate our perception of the physical world by defamiliarizing it, describing, for example, the steam that rises from the grates in New York City sidewalks as "meat-eating genies of subway breath." Ishiguro does both less and more: Using fairly simple sentences, he defamiliarizes the human condition. Time and again in his work, what looks like the face of an alien creature contorted with pain turns out to be a mirror. "Never Let Me Go" (2005), which the critic James Wood has described as "one of the central novels of our age," is narrated by a clone named Kathy H. As a young person, Kathy attended a prestigious English boarding school called Hailsham, where she and others like her were given a solid education in the liberal arts while also being gradually apprised of their true social role: to serve as organ donors for the noncloned population. This involuntary process begins shortly after graduation and ends only when the donors "complete" (i.e., die), which usually occurs sometime in their early 30s.

Kathy knows what's coming, and yet she tells her story, and seems to accept her fate, without self-pity or alarm. There is almost a quality of stoic good humor to the way she describes it all, as though state-sanctioned organ theft were just another one of life's minor irritations, like tax returns or parking tickets. "Why aren't they screaming?" the reader wonders of these death-camp inmates. Their situation seems nightmarish, a sadistically abbreviated travesty of life — until we realize it differs from our own only in the particulars. Sooner or later we are all going to the inevitable.

As a narrator, Klara functions in much the same way. Josie's growing emotional investment in her new A.F. mirrors that of the reader, and as the book wears on, the cleft between "it" and "she" begins to narrow. Whether it can, or ever should, be closed altogether is a question left provocatively open, and yet there is no mistaking the similarities between Klara's experience — that of someone performing onerous affective labor in an ever more precarious job market — and our own. "You can get the reader with their defenses down," Ishiguro said of his preference for seemingly outré narrators, "so that suddenly they realize this person they've been reading about isn't so alien. I want them to realize: 'This is us. This is me.'"



**Kazuo Ishiguro in Broad Oak, Kent, England, in the summer of 1977. Before turning to writing, he hoped to become a singer-songwriter.**

Like "Guernica" or "Chernobyl," the word "Nagasaki" has come to stand less for the name of an actual place than a totemic feat of human destruction. For the young Ishiguro, however, it was simply his hometown. By the time he was born there, in 1954, the city had been largely rebuilt, and no one talked about the war. He spent his early years in a three-generation home with tatami mats and shoji paper doors, the kind of place the director Yasujiro Ozu was already using in his films to symbolize a disappearing way of life. There was no washing machine and no TV. To watch his favorite program, "The Lone Ranger," Ishiguro had to go to his friend's house next door.

Ishiguro's father, Shizuo, was an oceanographer whose work on storm surges caught the interest of the British government. In 1960, he moved his young family to Guildford, a small market town an hour's drive from London, to take up a short-term research job. Like Nagasaki, Guildford was a place of long-established custom. The narrow winding lanes were often clogged with cows; milk was still delivered by horse and cart. When the Ishiguros arrived, at Eastertime, they were struck by the gruesome images they kept seeing around town: a man nailed to a cross with blood spilling from his sides. Everyone there was white, and even continental Europeans were a rarity, and yet the new arrivals were warmly received. Ishiguro picked up the language quickly, and at school he learned to turn his foreignness to his advantage, putting it about, for instance, that he was an expert in judo. He also started going to church, where he became the head choir boy. His family believed

it was important to respect local ways, however odd they might appear.

The move to England was only ever supposed to be temporary, and yet each year funding for Shizuo's research would be extended and the return to Japan postponed. Growing up between two cultures, Ishiguro, as everyone now called him, absorbed his immediate surroundings with an almost ethnographic detachment while simultaneously constructing a myth-laden image of the faraway homeland he left when he was 5. From his mother, Shizuko, a former schoolteacher, came haunting images of life during wartime: a man whose skin had been entirely burned off by the atomic blast being kept alive inside a tub of water; a cow's head, the rest of its body nowhere in sight, glimpsed from the window of a passing train. The parcels of comics and books that arrived regularly from his grandparents painted a more appealing picture of the country. To be Japanese was for Ishiguro a private source of confidence, but the more firmly rooted in England he grew, the harder it got to imagine going back. It came as a relief, when, in the late 1960s, his parents decided to stay for good.

Unlike many future novelists, Ishiguro didn't spend his teenage years inhaling the canon. He spent them listening to music and making music of his own. In 1968, he bought his first Bob Dylan album, "John Wesley Harding," and worked backward from there. He and his friends would sit around for hours nodding along to Dylan's obscure lyrics as though they understood every

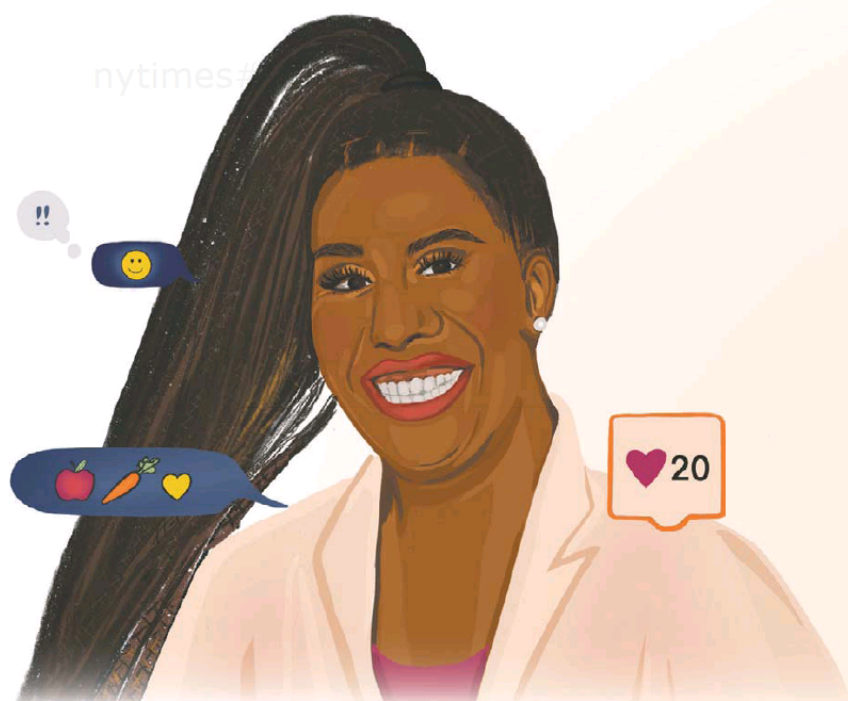






# When one person has a stroke, it can alter the

TOGETHER, WE CAN



“I went to work feeling beautiful.

But when I sat down at my desk, my face was paralyzed, and I was gasping for air. My co-worker screamed, and I woke up in the hospital. At first, I was misdiagnosed, but then found out I’d had a stroke. That’s when my life changed. Now I help spread the word on social media to women in underserved communities to be proactive in their heart health. I want to do everything I can to get the message out there.”

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SHANTAQUILETTE CARTER-WILLIAMS, 42

“Growing up, we ate what we could afford,

which didn’t include much healthy food. When I joined the military, I got fit. Still, my family history was working against me. My dad had a heart attack at age 49, so when I had symptoms at 34, he told me to call 911. The EMTs were shocked, because I was young and buff, but I’d had two heart attacks in one day. Now I talk to my adult children about their risk for cardiovascular disease and being vigilant about managing it. My family is my rock and my foundation. They are my legacy.”

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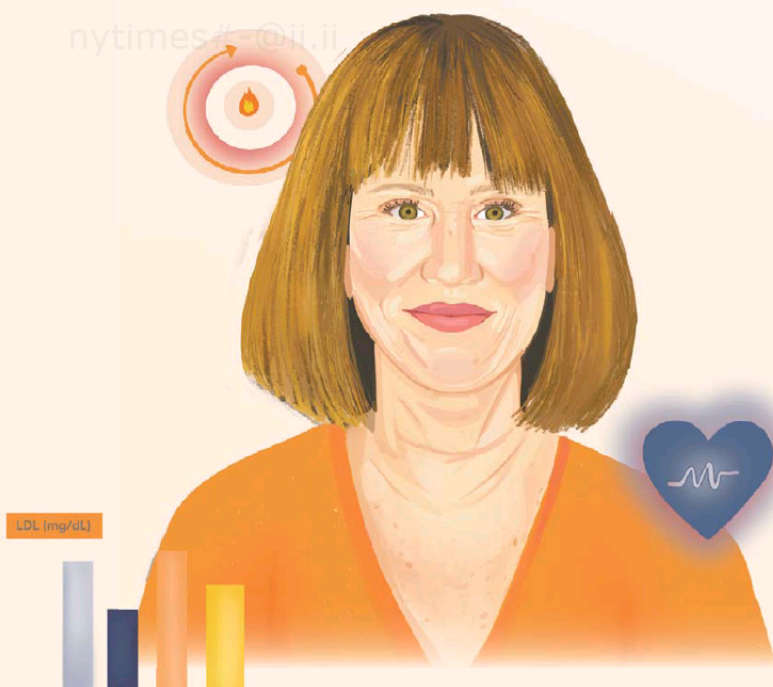
DAVID CLIFTON, 49





# as a heart attack or course of generations.

AN CHANGE THIS.



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“I thought everything was fine, but it wasn’t.”

One day, I felt more winded than usual walking up the stairs, so I got my heart checked. It turns out my bad cholesterol had been silently rising, and my arteries were blocked — even though I’d done my best to lead a healthy lifestyle. I had open-heart surgery two days later. I thought, ‘Thank goodness they found this.’ Everybody should prioritize their health and ask about their test results. I want my daughter and my grandchildren to do even better than I have. They’re what I’m living for.”

MAURA O’BRIEN, 67

Cardiovascular disease leads to one in four deaths and is on the rise — but it doesn’t have to be this way. ShantaQuilette, Maura and David took a pledge to lead a legacy for a healthier future.

Will you join them?



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## Take the Pledge

Helmed by Novartis, The Legacy We Lead is dedicated to halting the rise of cardiovascular disease-related deaths in the United States. To read more and take the pledge, scan the QR code or visit [legacywelead.com](https://legacywelead.com)





**Israel's**

**Covid**

**Wars**

**How  
the  
pandemic  
brought  
tensions  
between  
secular  
and  
ultra-  
Orthodox  
communities  
to  
the  
boiling  
point.**

**By  
Ronen  
Bergman**

**Photographs  
by  
Ziv  
Koren  
&  
Michal  
Chelbin**







# On Jan. 31, one month after

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Israel declared its third lockdown of the pandemic, Rabbi Meshulam Dovid Soloveitchik succumbed to the coronavirus at 99. Soloveitchik was the head of the Brisk Yeshiva in Jerusalem, an elite school for ultra-Orthodox Jews, and as news of his death spread, thousands of followers prepared to mourn him. A grand funeral was required, and according to tradition, it would need to take place as soon as possible.

Since the pandemic began, funerals have become a subject of intense, sometimes even violent controversy in Israel. The nation has kept its people in lockdown longer than nearly any other has, but it nevertheless has struggled with one of the highest rates of coronavirus infection. The main source of this seeming paradox is the ultra-Orthodox community, which has largely refused to wear masks or practice social distancing, arguing that the demands of lockdown prevent them from practicing their religion. By January, these Haredi communities, as the ultra-Orthodox are known in Hebrew, had three times as many cases per capita as the Israeli population at large.

Soloveitchik himself had apparently been infected at his yeshiva, where, in defiance of government mandates, classes continued as ever. Now thousands of black-hatted and black-clothed Haredim were gathering in Jerusalem for his funeral procession, unmasked and unpoliced, creating a stark visual record of what seemed certain to become a superspreader event.

As if to make these health implications even starker, another prominent ultra-Orthodox figure, Rabbi Yitzchok Scheiner, who was 98, succumbed to complications from the virus later that same day, even as Soloveitchik's followers were on the march. Scheiner's funeral, too, would take place immediately, and it too would be preceded by a mass procession through the streets of Jerusalem, attended by *his* many thousands of followers. Once again, the police refrained from acting. "I am not going to confront 20,000 people, because I do not have the capability of doing so," Shabtai Gerberchik, a spokesman for the Israeli Police, explained in a radio interview. "One does not make decisions between good and bad; one makes decisions between bad and worse."

As it has in so many other places, the pandemic in Israel has revealed and heightened long-existing tensions. The Haredim have selectively embraced the secular state, accepting its money, its health care system and, more recently, its vaccines. But whenever the state has tried to regulate the Haredi community in a manner that seems to threaten its leaders' authority, they have responded with the direst possible rhetoric. When the national government did try to enforce the lockdown a few times in January, the pushback was furious. Haredi leaders, drawing on the memories of the Holocaust, protested the mandate of new "ghettos." In videos, officers were filmed pulling out their side arms and firing into the air to ward off masses of ultra-Orthodox protesters. In one instance, Haredi teenagers blocked the road in front of a city bus in Bnei Brak, a largely Haredi city near Tel Aviv. After forcing the driver from the vehicle, they torched it, burning it to a charred metal shell.

One teenage boy was charged in that incident, but since the pandemic began, the authorities have largely pursued the same strategy of avoidance they used at the funerals. This hands-off treatment has stood in sharp contrast to its handling of the secular community, as was clear from a series of videotaped arrests that went viral in recent months. In one, a group of police officers, at least one armed with a military-style rifle, try to arrest a young man who has stopped to eat a sandwich at a bench in an otherwise-empty square. When the man attempts to run away, the officers grab him and force him brutally onto the ground, spilling his food all over the road. In another, recorded from Tel Aviv's deserted beachfront, two lone surfers are accosted by police officers on personal watercraft and in a helicopter in an attempt to remove them from the waves.

Though the Haredim make up only 12.6 percent of the population, they exert a powerful influence on Israeli politics and society. They have worked hard to preserve a way of life that long preceded the establishment of Israel in 1948, but in some ways, they represent the nation's future: Haredi women give birth to an average of 6.6 children each — the average among secular Israelis is 2.2, and it is even lower in most Western countries — and almost 60 percent of Haredim are under 20, compared with 30 percent of the total population of Israel.

The power of Haredi politicians is similarly disproportionate to their numbers. Both of the recently deceased rabbis belonged to Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah, the Council of Torah Sages, a group that includes most of the leaders of the ultra-Orthodox world. The council also leads Israel's United Torah Judaism party, which is a key part of the coalition of right-wing and religious parties, called simply the Bloc, that has long made up Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's conservative majority. United Torah Judaism's

leaders have already expressed a commitment to support Netanyahu after the coming legislative elections on March 23.

In return for this steadfast support, Netanyahu's Likud party, like many of Israel's previous ruling parties, has directed huge amounts of money — known as special funds — to subsidize yeshiva students and their families. Not only has Netanyahu refrained from censuring the ultra-Orthodox for the refusal to follow coronavirus restrictions; he has worked to minimize the fines for breaching them.

For the Haredim, their gatherings were not just a matter of defiance. A central tenet of the ultra-Orthodox worldview is that their adherence to Jewish law is literally necessary for the continued existence of the world. "On three things the world stands," according to the revered ancient rabbi Simeon the Just. "On Torah, on worship and on the bestowal of kindnesses." In other words, even more so than the work of doctors or soldiers or diplomats, it is the daily Torah studies in the yeshivas that preserve the Jewish people, the Jewish state and indeed the entire universe. Some of the most important stories of the Haredi community are of the heroism of the Jews who persisted in Torah study even in the ghettos and Nazi death camps. During the past year, that belief has come into direct conflict not only with the laws of Israel but also with the very prospect of the Haredim's continued survival.

The Haredi community was built on an unremitting faith in its leadership, made up of flesh-and-blood rabbis who, to their followers, speak the will of the living God. But the authority of the rabbis has for decades faced growing competition from the secular world — from the natural pressure in a small country to integrate, from the increasing presence of women in the workplace, from the leveling connectivity of the internet. A result has been a sharp rise in the number of Haredim leaving the community to join the secular Jewish population.

The pandemic has put all this into sharpest relief. For the first time, Haredi synagogues and yeshivas have been closed; for the first time, uncensored, "unkosher" smartphones and the internet have been allowed into many Haredi homes by families seeking a link with the outside world; for the first time, the community's leaders have openly declared their defiance of the secular government — and, for the first time, Israeli Army units have been deployed in Haredi towns and neighborhoods. Surviving the pandemic would mean confronting basic questions about the fate of the Haredim and the future of a Jewish state.

**Right: Haredim fighting with law enforcement this month while trying to accompany a rabbi's funeral procession in Bnei Brak despite coronavirus restrictions. Opening pages: An anti-government demonstration in Jerusalem on Dec. 7.**





For the Haredi leadership, that might mean ceding power to the wrong higher authority.

As it happened, Yaakov Litzman, Israel's health minister when the pandemic began, is himself a Hasidic Jew. He grew up in Borough Park, Brooklyn, and when he was 17 he emigrated to Israel, where he went on to become a powerful player within United Torah Judaism. When Netanyahu first ordered the shutdown of many public gathering places, including yeshivas and ritual bathhouses, it was Litzman, according to news reports, who made the argument directly to the prime minister that he should exempt the Haredim from the general lockdown. In a meeting, he argued that there was a higher law to consider.

"It cannot be that taking a dog for a walk will be allowed but the ritual baths will be shut," Litzman is said to have told Netanyahu.

The prime minister replied: "What can you do? The virus doesn't respect religion."

Litzman was unmoved. "So let *us* respect it," he said.

**One of the most** influential leaders of Israel's Haredi community is Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky. His thousands of followers, who sometimes call him Minister of the Torah, say the 93-year-old teacher has committed 5,000 Jewish holy books to memory; they tell of miracles he has performed, like the barren women who were able to conceive after he blessed them. Kanievsky lives in Bnei Brak, the city where the bus burning took place, which has a population of about 210,000.

On some days, a long line of the faithful can be seen waiting on the street outside his home, seeking an audience. David M. Friedman, the bankruptcy lawyer Donald Trump appointed as his ambassador to Israel, came to call during his tenure, and so have many secular Israeli cabinet ministers and lawmakers in the Knesset.

Those seeking an audience are usually met by Kanievsky's grandson Yaakov, more commonly called Yanki, whose role is to mediate between Kanievsky and the outside world. He often does so by way of his cellphone video camera, which he uses to record the wishes of visitors and then share them — the parts he considers important, at least — with the rabbi, explaining who the pilgrims are and what sort of blessings they require. Sometimes the rabbi responds, without even raising his eyes, by uttering the word *Booha* — a shorthand he devised for the Hebrew words *bracha v'hatzlacha*, meaning "blessing and success." The communications also work the other way, with Yanki recording messages for release on social media. (Most ultra-Orthodox sects ban access to the internet, requiring followers to use internet- and even SMS-free cellphones, attained via a special rabbinical council that declares a given phone number to be kosher. But some Haredi leaders and journalists can receive the videos, and they spread the word person to person or by way of posters pasted on walls.)

When the government first ordered schools to close last March, Kanievsky's message was clear: In video statements, he announced that

shutting down the yeshivas would be far more dangerous than keeping them open, and that if his followers voted for United Torah Judaism, they would be protected from Covid-19. To his followers, an instruction from Kanievsky is the closest thing there can be to a direct order from God. In the neighborhoods where the Haredim lived, life continued to bustle.

Kanievsky had a good record when it came to predicting catastrophe — or rather, its absence. He calmed the residents of Bnei Brak before the 1991 Persian Gulf war, assuring them that Saddam Hussein's missiles would not harm them, despite the Iraqi despot's threats to strike at metropolitan Tel Aviv. "That is what I heard from the Hazon Ish," Kanievsky said, referring to a Haredi leader who died in 1953 — implying that he was in touch with the hereafter. He turned out to be right. The missiles fell in neighboring secular Ramat Gan and other suburbs, but not in Bnei Brak. He continued to prophesy that Bnei Brak would always remain a safe and protected place because of the prayers and Torah study of its residents. He invited Haredim from other communities to come there in troubled times.

But as the weeks went by last spring, it quickly became clear that Bnei Brak enjoyed no divine protection from Covid-19. The crowded study halls in the yeshivas and the jam-packed Friday Sabbath-even dunks in the ritual public baths were turning Bnei Brak and other Haredi concentrations into hot zones. Haim Zicherman, the academic director for the ultra-Orthodox campus at













Ono Academic College and author of a forthcoming book about ultra-Orthodox culture, noted the particular challenges that ultra-Orthodox culture presented to efforts at social distancing. The thrice-daily synagogue prayers in particular were “one of the biggest incubators for corona,” he said. “From the kiss you give the Torah scroll, the kiss you give the mezuzah, the hugs and handshakes, the leaning over the prayer lectern while rocking your body, the sharing of the prayer shawls and *kippot* between congregants.”

By the end of the month, the number of reported cases in Bnei Brak was doubling almost every other day. On March 26, it was 176; on March 29, 410; on March 31, 596. “All of a sudden, you see the graph climbing steeply, higher and higher,” said Arik Adler, the city’s treasurer, who manages the local crisis center. “And Bnei Brak begins to exceed the average, and you say, ‘Good God, we have lost control.’”

The city’s population was relatively young, and no one had yet succumbed to the disease, but it was clear to all that it was only a matter of time before people began to die.

That was when Avraham Rubinstein, the mayor of Bnei Brak, requested help. Rubinstein, a United Torah Judaism politician, did not turn to the widely mistrusted central government. Instead, he sought help from a private team

of veterans of the Israel Defense Forces. “This was an event on a worldwide scale, something no one chose,” Rubinstein told me. “Netanyahu had never experienced such an event. Trump had never experienced such an event. And in all modesty, neither had Avraham Rubinstein experienced it. To fight it, the best people were needed, and those that we brought in are the best at coping with disasters like this.”

**On March 31**, Ronny Numa, a retired major general, arrived in Bnei Brak to see what could be done. Numa, who is 54, sturdy, with military-cut graying hair, had been a commander of the I.D.F.’s Duvdevan, the undercover counterterrorism unit that is the basis for the Netflix series “Fauda.” He thought he would stay just a few hours. But when he arrived at City Hall, the mayor himself was under quarantine — his wife had tested positive — along with the city manager and several other officials, and as he began to query the few senior officials who remained, it became clear that the situation had become perilously chaotic. That day’s report showed 596 residents of Bnei Brak with a Covid diagnosis. But the officials did not know how to get to all of them. “I asked them simple questions,” Numa recalled. “You have hundreds of sick folks — where are they?” The officials had no answers.

Soon, Numa brought in a small team of experts, most of them veterans of the I.D.F. But on April 2, as they were making plans, Litzman, Israel’s ultra-Orthodox health minister, received a Covid-19 diagnosis, along with his wife. It did not go unnoticed that one of the people nominally in charge of protecting Israel from the pandemic could not even protect himself or his own family. Now it was not just him going into isolation; all the people who had been in contact with him had to quarantine — including the prime minister and the chief of the Mossad.

Pressure was growing to do something. That same day, the I.D.F. placed a group of elite commando and infantry forces on alert. Never before had the military been sent in to take control of a Jewish city in Israel, but now a blockade of Bnei Brak appeared to be imminent.

“I thought it would be a very unwise thing to do,” Numa said. It was too soon. His first project had been to build trust, and now that trust was already being threatened. Numa spoke to the quarantined prime minister late that night and came away with assurances, he said, that he and his team would be looped in on any curfew efforts.

Early the next morning, though, the police and army units blocked the roads leading into Bnei Brak without warning. It was a Friday, “the



worst timing they could have picked,” said Ronen Manelis, a former I.D.F. intelligence officer who was part of Numa’s team. “The police and the army surrounded the city and sliced it up inside in such a way that a large number of Haredim couldn’t get to their supermarkets to buy food for the Sabbath. In their eyes, they’d just been placed under military rule.”

Tensions became even greater the next day after sundown, when Carmel Shama Hacohen, the mayor of the neighboring city of Ramat Gan — arguing that Haredim would be able to bypass the checkpoints on pedestrian side streets — began putting up a fence and posting guards along his border with Bnei Brak. Shama Hacohen had previously angered the ultra-Orthodox community by becoming the first mayor in Israel to introduce public transportation on Saturdays, prompting Rubinstein, the neighboring mayor, to call him a “pharaoh.”

Now protesters were out in the streets, chanting, “Don’t put us in a ghetto,” and hurling epithets like “Nazi” and “Gestapo” at the police officers and military guards stationed along the new fence and checkpoints. A pro-Haredi WhatsApp group told its members to file complaints of pedophilia against Shama Hacohen, in an attempt to get the mayor banned from the app, the most important form of communication among secular Israelis.

It was against this tense backdrop that Numa and his team began their work. They faced seemingly endless logistical challenges, some of them quite technical, some of them exceedingly mundane. The reported number of sick grew to 1,202 on April 5 and 1,460 on April 7, but at the same time, the number of tests taken in Bnei Brak was declining. A positive test, many Haredim feared, might cause them to be forcibly removed from their homes before the weeklong festival of Passover, which began on April 8. When the city did manage to identify the sick, it was often impossible to find and communicate with them, other than by knocking on doors. Most residents didn’t have smartphones, or at least known phone numbers, and social media would be of no use.

One of Numa’s team members, an ex-I.D.F. cyberdefense and electronic warfare expert named Avraham Cohen, used a software program to map the city in several layers — infrastructure, electrical systems, communications networks and more. They would do whatever they could do to get a better picture of the spread of the virus. Manelis, for his part, noted a historic turn: His team was deploying the kind of capabilities that they had once used to track and capture the enemies of Israel, “to achieve full control of what’s going on in the city.”

Some efforts were less drastic, though. The Haredi preparations for Passover include a thorough home cleaning, part of which involves bagging up any leftover bread, which is forbidden during the week of the festival, and burning it out

on the street. “This kind of thing leads to gatherings of people outside,” Numa said, “and right away you lose control over contagion.” Numa’s team sent out word: *Stay inside. We’ll bring you bags. Leave the bread near your doors. We’ll collect it.* Most Haredim were indeed persuaded to leave the bread, but a few were not.

And then there was the struggle to keep kosher in quarantine. As the government tried to isolate coronavirus patients, taking those who would agree by ambulance to designated hotels, it fell to Numa’s team to provide them with proper food. That proved challenging, Manelis said, because kosher-food law is complex, “and the residents of Bnei Brak refused to be evacuated before they saw written proof that the food would be kosher according to the standards of a rabbi they trusted.”

As the city descended into turmoil, Numa said, he began to fear a “loss of control,” not so much from the pandemic itself as from “the threat of a civil uprising by the Haredi community.” What would happen if so many people, many of them sick, went on the march? “How do you stop them? And how can you be sure that they would not come up against secular residents of the neighboring cities who would try to stop them? And God knows how all this would end.”

**The scenes of I.D.F.** service members taking over Haredi communities held a deeper meaning for both sides, because the Haredim are largely exempt from Israel’s mandatory military service — just one of the many ways they remain outside the mainstream of Israeli society. Indeed, nearly half of Haredi males choose not to work at all, relying on state funding and philanthropic aid to feed them and their families. About 42 percent of Haredim live under the poverty line, nearly four times as many as other Israelis.

The relationship between the Haredim and secular Israelis has been confrontational from the country’s beginnings. Zionism, which advocated building a Jewish national home in the Land of Israel, originated with secular Jews, mainly from Eastern Europe. The Haredim, by contrast, believed that only the Messiah could establish a Jewish state, that God alone would decide when to return the Jews to their ancestral homeland. Humans trying to expedite the process were committing a grave sin.

The Haredim worked doggedly, both inside and outside Palestine, to stymie the Zionists’ political efforts. The Zionists in Palestine responded with violence. In 1924, an assassin took the life of Jacob de Haan, a Dutch-Jewish author and activist who had become a Haredi as an adult, a day before he was to travel to London in hopes of persuading the British government to reconsider its promise to “view with favor” the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. After the Holocaust, it was the Zionist movement that became the leading Jewish political force; the

anti-Zionist movements were largely destroyed, apart from the Haredim, whose community survived, despite the huge numbers murdered by the Nazis. Many of the survivors migrated to the United States; most of the others moved to Israel.

Hoping to present a united front to the United Nations committee investigating the Jewish-Arab conflict in Palestine, David Ben-Gurion, the driving force behind the creation of a Jewish state, made a series of aggressive promises to ultra-Orthodox leaders. In the new state, he said, Saturdays would be made an official day of rest, kosher food would be served in all state kitchens and there would be no civil marriages. In addition, when it came to education, each of the three Jewish communities — secular, modern Orthodox and Haredim — would have autonomy, as long as core subjects like math, foreign languages and history were taught.

But even those concessions were insufficient to bring the Haredim into the national fold. On Oct. 20, 1952, the prime minister paid a visit to a small apartment not far from the site of today’s Bnei Brak City Hall. He went to see the pre-eminent Haredi leader of the time, Rabbi Abraham Yeschayah Karelitz, known as the Hazon Ish, the same figure Kanievsky cited in assuring his followers that Saddam Hussein’s missiles would not touch them. Ben-Gurion needed the Haredi parties to form a coalition, and they took their orders from the Hazon Ish.

As Yitzhak Navon, Ben-Gurion’s political secretary at the time and later Israel’s fifth president, told me in a 1990 interview, the rabbi welcomed Ben-Gurion graciously. The two men talked about Spinoza and other philosophical subjects, and then Ben-Gurion finally asked the question: “How can religious Jews and nonreligious Jews live together in this country without exploding from within?” The Hazon Ish replied with an allegory from the Talmud. “If two camels meet on a narrow path, and one camel is carrying a burden and the other is not, then the camel with no burden must give way,” he said. And it was the religious Jews who bore the greater burden by far. “We bear the yoke of very many commandments,” he continued, the clear implication being that secular Jews carried no yoke and lacked values.

Ben-Gurion hit his shoulder with his arm and asked angrily, “Do you think this camel is carrying nothing? And what about the mitzvah of settling the land, isn’t that a mitzvah? Isn’t that a burden? And what about the boys that you are so antagonistic toward — the I.D.F. soldiers who are sitting on the borders protecting you. Isn’t that

**Left: Afternoon prayers last April during Israel’s first lockdown, when Haredi leaders eventually relented and agreed to close synagogues. Previous pages: A funeral procession for Rabbi Chaim Meir Vosner, who died from Covid-19, in Bnei Brak this month.**



a mitzvah?” If it were not for those who guard and defend Jews, including the Haredim, “the enemies would have slaughtered you.”

But the Hazon Ish was not convinced. The mightiest soldiers in the world would be powerless if the world ceased to exist. “It is only thanks to the fact that we study Torah that they can do what they do,” he concluded.

And so it was that Ben-Gurion began what would become a series of concessions by him and his successors: not just exempting the Haredim from compulsory military service but also banning public transportation on the Sabbath, refusing to create an option for civil marriage, forbidding the sale of bread during Passover and so on.

For their part, the Haredim have been known to hold large protests, block intersections and even turn violent whenever they get wind of any possible retreat from the state’s longstanding deference to religious orthodoxy: the opening of a road near a Haredi neighborhood to Sabbath traffic, or a Supreme Court intervention against them on the draft, or the holding of a Gay Pride parade in Jerusalem, or an archaeological excavation of an ancient Jewish cemetery. In the 1980s, the “operations officer” of the extremist Jerusalem sect Eda Haredit, Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, led a gang that, among other violent acts, set fire to all Jerusalem bus stops that featured advertisements with images of women.

Hoping to loosen the Haredi check on civic life, many Israelis, right and left, have turned to voting for militantly secular politicians. On the liberal and center-left side, this has included figures like Yosef Lapid in the 2000s, who was then followed by his son, Yair Lapid, in the 2010s; on the right-wing side, this has raised the profile of the hawkish Avigdor Lieberman. But despite their relative successes, and the fact that they served in senior cabinet posts, these secularists have done little to diminish the Haredi influence within every ruling coalition.

As finance minister in Netanyahu’s government in 2014, for example, Yair Lapid managed to cut some spending that primarily benefited the Haredim, leading to a jump in the number of Haredi men taking jobs. But Netanyahu reversed these measures after he fired Lapid later that year; then he called an election and built his next coalition on Haredi support. Similarly, both Lapid and Lieberman tried to push for equality in the draft, and the I.D.F. established special units for the intake of Haredim without women and with special arrangements for keeping kosher. But the opposition the Haredim have for the state and the army triumphed, and soldiers who were drafted were cursed and pelted with eggs and stones when they came home on furloughs. As

a result, the I.D.F. was only ever able to attract a small number of Haredi recruits.

“The issue isn’t only military service or integration into the work force,” said Lapid, who today leads the opposition to Netanyahu. “It’s the Israeli social contract. I believe that everyone should have the same rights but also the same responsibilities. Ultra-Orthodox children should study mathematics and English so they can integrate into the work force and provide for their families, because the Israeli middle class can’t finance them forever. Ultra-Orthodox men need to serve in the army and do national service, just like every Israeli. This isn’t an argument between secular and religious. It’s not even really about Judaism. It’s a debate about which responsibilities every citizen has as part of the country. The political power that the ultra-Orthodox have and Netanyahu’s dependence on them gives them the sense that they have an exemption from the duties other citizens have. That’s wrong, and it comes back at them like a social boomerang.”

Many of the Haredim I spoke with believe that all attempts to force aspects of secular Israeli life on their community are doomed to failure. “It will increase divisiveness and hatred among the people,” said Hadassah Aisenstark, the first female Haredi to become a cadet in the Foreign Ministry’s training course for diplomats, who was recently accepted to the service. “The stark political truth is that over the decades, the Haredim’s confrontations with the secular Israeli establishment have been enormously successful, bringing them significant political power while allowing them to retain their autonomy.”

**Far from staying in** Bnei Brak just a few days, Numa and his volunteers wound up mired there for nine weeks. At first, the situation did seem to be reeling out of control, but in mid-April, something surprising happened. Photographs of the crowded funerals of members of the New York Hasidic community began to appear in the Haredi press, uncensored by the rabbinical media committee. Those shocking images, along with the soaring incidence of Covid cases in Haredi neighborhoods in Israel, led many to grasp that prayer and faith were not sufficient protection against the virus. The split that had divided the Haredim from secular Israel soon began instead to divide many within the Haredi community.

By late April, it was becoming clear even to Kanievsky that large gatherings were becoming too deadly. He and several other influential rabbis ordered their followers to begin observing Ministry of Health regulations. The change was almost instantaneous; some in the community now adhered to the regulations even more avidly than the secular population. But not every sect agreed. Followers of the radical “Jerusalem Faction” — who split from the main community

years ago, arguing that Kanievsky and his predecessors were too soft in their attitude toward the secular state — and other extreme splinter groups refused to obey the new orders. At Bnei Brak City Hall, Haredi government officials spoke with pride of the highly aggressive but “not entirely legal” measures taken to enforce the lockdown against the Jerusalem Faction.

“We shut down some ritual baths and cut off their water supply, those that had ignored the lockdown,” said a city official who dealt with enforcing the regulations. “In one place, we filled the pipes with lime and blocked them. Synagogues and schools, we welded the doors shut, like what we saw on TV that they did in China.”

Even as the ultra-Orthodox community was splitting, the lockdown and the stay-at-home orders made it necessary for the military to supply essential services to the Haredim. For the most part, the Haredi population welcomed the soldiers and were grateful. When members of some more intransigent sects pelted the soldiers with rocks and eggs, they were forcefully restrained by members of some of the more moderate sects. “They realized that to get out of the catastrophe, they *needed* the army,” Numa said. “They saw all of this power functioning on their behalf. They saw it, and they internalized it.” (Numa, for his part, later joined the Health Ministry to act as its coronavirus coordinator for the Haredi community.)

By late May, the percentage of coronavirus infections among the Haredim had declined to 22 percent, from 70 percent. It seemed like a victory for cooperation, and possibly a turning point in the fraught relations between the secular and ultra-Orthodox communities. But it was not to last.

As spring turned to summer and the pandemic seemed to be at its end, the Haredim reunited, bonded at first by impatience with public-health guidelines and then by a growing militance about the central government’s response. “Very soon,” said Gilad Malach, the director of the ultra-Orthodox program at the Israel Democracy Institute, “the Haredi leadership was talking as though the whole thing was a political matter, whose sole aim was persecution of the Haredi sector, both by the government and by the police.”

In June, Israel Eichler, the deputy speaker of the Knesset for United Torah Judaism, made a speech to the legislature that deployed the kind of Holocaust imagery that Haredi leaders typically reserve for their fiercest attacks on the secular state. The restrictions on Haredi neighborhoods — “as if they were ghettos” — proved “what we have suspected all along,” which was that the Israeli state was in fact anti-Semitic. Singling out the Hasidim, he argued, amounts to “a racist defamation, as if they are the disseminators of disease and contamination,” and it “engenders anti-Semitism among a population fearful of the virus all over the country.”

**Right: Members of the Israel Defense Forces delivering kosher food to Haredim during the first lockdown last May.**





In the Haredi Knesset faction, Eichler represents the Belz Hasidic sect, which was established in the early 19th century in the town of Belz in eastern Galicia, now Ukraine. Most of its members were murdered in the Holocaust, and the sect rebuilt itself when surviving members settled in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and New York. Its current leader, Rabbi Yissachar Dov Rokeach, was tapped to take power in 1957 at age 9 after the previous leader, his uncle, died without an heir.

Soon after Eichler's speech, the rabbi began to officiate at a series of prayer assemblies, ignoring the Health Ministry's call for everyone to wear face masks and maintain social distancing in public. To celebrate his grandson's wedding, the rabbi and the groom, accompanied by a crowd of followers, arrived at the Western Wall, showing the same disdain for the required precautions.

Then, on Aug. 5, came the huge wedding itself, in the vast hall of the Belz synagogue in Jerusalem. The entire community was invited; thousands turned up for the occasion. Guards at the door were there to make sure that the guests passed through metal detectors to ensure that no one was carrying a forbidden cellphone or a camera to record the proceedings, though they made no effort to push the guests to take precautions against the virus.

Nevertheless, footage emerged on TV showing the heaving crowd of men singing and dancing at close quarters, all wearing traditional *kapota* frock coats and *shtreimel* hats but no face masks. (Women were, of course, segregated.) The rabbi said through a spokesman that he believed that the risk of spiritual and mental damage to his followers if custom was discarded was greater than the risk to their health. No government intervention was needed. His followers could test themselves and remain in sufficient isolation without reporting to the authorities or disrupting the regular routine of religious and communal life. One prominent guest was Israel Eichler himself.

**By September, the Haredi** leaders had become widely and openly defiant. Kanievsky decreed that all Haredi study institutes must open as they do every year, immediately after the Sukkot holiday. When the pandemic shut down the yeshivas the previous semester, students who were living in the dormitories went home to their families, usually living in overcrowded apartments, and had nothing to keep them occupied. The universe had not collapsed, but the community was beginning to fray.

"Everything turned upside down for them," said Yair Hess, the director of Hillel, an organization that helps Haredim who want to leave

the community. Since the onset of the pandemic, there had been a 50 percent increase in those seeking his organization's assistance. No one would speak openly about the numbers, but it was clear that the alienation was real and growing. From this perspective, blatant defiance of school-closing orders, issued by the government's Education and Health Ministries as part of a second lockdown, was the only way to calm things.

Kanievsky's order was unprecedented. "For the first time in the history of the state of Israel," said Zicherman, the Ono Academic College official, "the Haredim simply said, clearly and unequivocally, 'We do not care what the law says; we are not going to obey.'" But that disobedience, Zicherman said, was itself simply collapsing the "island model" that had for decades characterized the standoff between the secular and ultra-Orthodox communities — "that the secular will be in certain areas, the Haredim in other areas and the two will not mix. That there's no friction. That Bnei Brak can be closed off on the Sabbath and that a Gay Pride parade can be held in Tel Aviv, and everything is fine. Now it is clear that there are no islands in Israel, and everyone is connected by a single thread — that in the shared public space, they affect one another, like different decks on one big ship."

Netanyahu called on the Haredi public to follow the rules of the lockdown. But when he



fell short of taking any real steps to enforce that call, members of Netanyahu's own cabinet harshly criticized him. "He can't stand up against the Haredi parties and fight in a determined manner against the spread of the virus in Haredi society," one unnamed minister told a reporter for Israel's Ynet. "If we don't stand up to this Haredi rebellion, we will be facing a third lockdown."

For many, though, rebellion was not the issue at hand. "It is not a matter of merely wanting to be contrary," said Eli Paley, the chairman of the Haredi Institute for Public Affairs, a Jerusalem-based research organization. "We are talking about a community with values, with a lot of love for mankind. But it does not think of itself as belonging to Israeli civil society."

Paley, who sometimes advises Haredi education officials on government matters, said he joined an effort with the Health Ministry to arrive at a partial reopening plan in October. The effort, which involved distancing and working in capsules, failed when the ministry determined that yeshivas could open only in parallel with secular schools, which were staying shut. The Haredim were not going to sacrifice their values to support what they saw as a highly politicized decision, Paley said. "If there is a clash between the government's orders and their values, there's no doubt what they'll choose."

That same month, as the government ordered a police operation in Bnei Brak to enforce the ban on gatherings, Eichler responded with another attack. "The state of Israel, to our great regret, is constantly and increasingly moving away from its definition as a Jewish state," he said. "In its place, a new essence has arisen, a Wild West state with violence, hedonism, having fun, enjoyment as the main goal."

On Jan. 5, as the infection rate in Haredi society soared to new heights again, Israel declared a third lockdown. The ultra-Orthodox community itself was now divided, sometimes bitterly. Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, the former Haredi "operations officer" and gang leader, has become more moderate in his views. He founded and heads ZAKA,

**Right: A protest last month in Jerusalem against the government's orders to close yeshivas and have the police enforce the country's third lockdown.**

an international search-and-rescue organization that helps repatriate the bodies of Israelis who have died abroad. He has repeatedly tried to warn the heads of the ultra-Orthodox community that disregard for Ministry of Health directives would lead to disaster. "My own parents are completely dependent on what the leadership tells them to do," Meshi-Zahav told me last year in what turned out to be a tragic personal prophecy. "They belong to such a segregated group that they do not let even Haredi newspapers into their home."

Early this year, Meshi-Zahav's mother and father both died of the virus. In an interview with The Times of Israel, he said the rabbis who resisted the lockdown "have blood on their hands."

**Israel's vaccination** campaign is beginning to show a very slow decline in the numbers of new and seriously ill patients, in both the general and the ultra-Orthodox populations, despite the efforts by some of the ultra-Orthodox sects to discourage it. About 22 percent of the population in Bnei Brak has received at least one dose of the vaccine, compared with 46 percent of the total population. It is a noticeable contrast, but both numbers are in fact fairly impressive. Just 12 percent of the U.S. population has received at least one dose.

As of early February, the number of ultra-Orthodox Covid-19 cases has dropped to 18 percent of the national total, down from 30 percent in January. But this could again be a function of testing. Israel's Ministry of Health reported just 49.8 tests per 10,000 in the ultra-Orthodox population in early February, compared with 73.6 for the general population. Among the ultra-Orthodox, the percentage of those testing positive is more than double that of the rest of the population. The true impact of the pandemic is expressed in the death toll: One in every 100 ultra-Orthodox people over the age of 60 has died from the disease, three and a half times as many as in the general population.

Netanyahu rejects the notion that he failed to sufficiently press the Haredi community on the coronavirus issue. "Though fashionable in some quarters, it is wrong to single out the Haredi community for criticism when there have been violations in many sectors," a spokesman for Netanyahu said. "The prime minister believes we will succeed in defeating Covid-19 not by playing one group against another but by being united."

Several Haredi leaders have announced that they will support Netanyahu's bid to remain prime minister in the election scheduled to take place on March 23, the fourth such election in two years. Their political calculation is likely to become more challenging in the months and years to come, though, because of what the pandemic has made obvious to their followers.

"What did they learn from the corona?" asked Zicherman, the Ono College official. "First of all, that the Zionist state is not always against them. Secondly, there was a very damaging blow to the core mechanism, the concept of *da'at Torah*" — knowledge of the Torah, which holds that learned rabbinical authorities should be consulted and obeyed on all matters. "Thirdly, it turns out that a Halakhic judgment is not entirely a matter of black and white. There are grays too, and you must not always go to extremes. Yes, it is permissible to have the internet in your home without a bolt of lightning



from hell coming to burn it all down, and you can do your Passover cleaning a little 'light' and the sky won't fall."

In some respects, the pandemic simply sped up a process of integration and opening that had long been in the works. During the pandemic, the Haredi community "had no choice but to enable women to work from home, including those employed by me here at the municipality," said Aliza Bloch, mayor of Beit Shemesh, a city between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv with a mixed Haredi-modern Orthodox-secular population. Bloch is the first woman to be mayor of Beit Shemesh; in 2018, she defeated an incumbent who had the support of Kanievsky. "The programmers in the city engineer's department are Haredi women who we need for the smooth





functioning of the municipality. But they had no computers or internet at home, so we installed them. And once they are in there, even if the reason for that is no longer relevant, the chances that they will be removed are slim.”

Ariel Fuss, who helps run several family-owned schools in Israel, including the Mercaz Chareidi Institute of Technology, told me that women now make up a majority of the students there. Often they simply need the money. “Many families simply do not have an alternative,” Fuss said, “and they have rebelled against the view that says a woman’s modesty requires her to stay at home.” Haredi women have been especially drawn to civil service, computing and accounting and are often employed at high-tech firms, which have been happy to

accommodate them by offering flexible work hours and a kosher workplace.

The increased exposure to the internet has been another potentially radical development. According to a survey by the Bezeq corporation, the provider of most of Israel’s telecommunications and internet infrastructure, more than 80 percent of the Haredim were surfing the web now, and they were surfing it far more often than they had before the pandemic. There has been a 30 percent increase in use in Haredi towns and neighborhoods and a fivefold growth in the number of applicants to connect to the network. In November, the first Haredi virtual school in Israel opened. Within a week, 150 students had registered, securing not just access to the classes but also access to the online world.

“Many Haredim now realize that they are no longer a small, weak minority that has to struggle, but today have representatives in the Knesset and the cabinet in leadership positions,” Bloch said. “They want to use that power not just to secure grants for yeshiva students, but also to address a host of issues that in previous years seemed to be the sole province of the secular world, from the environment to sexual harassment to special education.”

“On the other hand,” Bloch continued, “there is an extremist leadership that believes that the more it isolates its public from the Zionist state, the more chances they will have to accumulate political capital. They are doing it to preserve their role. When you strengthen the dependency of the members of your community on you, you are stronger.” ♦



**A Ruckus at the Table  
The Black intimacy of spades.  
By Hanif Abdurraqib  
Illustrations by Jon Key**





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# Somewhere on the road between Oxford, Miss., and Tuscaloosa, Ala.,

nytimes#-@ii.ii

my homie Jerriod looks at the cards fanned out in his hands. For anyone who has played enough games of spades and lost enough games of spades, it is known that you watch the moment directly after your opponent picks up their cards and assesses them. Some people sit stone-faced, staring at what they've got and nodding slowly, as if it could be anything. Some people make grand gestures about what it is they don't have and how bad the next few minutes of hand-playing are going to be. The more dramatic, the bigger the potential for a lie: The person who throws an arm over his eyes or pats away fake brow sweat while exclaiming something to his partner like "I don't know how we're going to make it out of this one. I'm going to need you to carry me."

We are among a group of 12 poets and peers, taking part in a weeklong fellowship that is requiring us to engage with the American South. Many of us have roots here, but the relationship is less tactile now, because a majority of us have scattered ourselves across the country in our adulthood. The days on the trip involve long, hot walks through paths lined with tree branches drooping under the weight of their own exhaustion. Sitting on porches of old homes and scowling at war monuments. The nights involve readings of our work for the communities we've landed in and engaging in panel discussions with one another. In between, we joke and swap stories and debate music and, of course, make threats about how dangerous we are with a handful of cards.

During this particular game of spades, we're in a white van speeding through various shades of barren Southern landscape, and I am partnered with Nate. Nate is from Chicago and probably better than I am at spades, though it isn't ever worth saying that out loud. And it certainly isn't worth

saying now, as we are careering toward a certain loss. Nate and I are vastly different spades players: him, often operating at the edge of risks that seem unlikely to pay off until they do at the very last moment. And me, calculating, taking every possible card into account and agonizing over the exact number of tricks to be taken before setting down safe bids. Because of this, Nate and I are usually foes in this game, two players on opposite teams during most get-togethers. But today, in a twist, we have ended up as teammates. In a van with no table, we make our own playing surface out of the van's leather seats. The cards jump around on the slick leather seats, and we lean haphazardly over the rows to throw down our offerings into the pile. We are hovering in each other's space — too close and not nearly close enough.

I see my friends best when I can see them during a game of spades. How, in their playing, they become the parts of their personalities that I most envy. Nate, with his devil-may-care instincts worn outside his body. Jerriod, with his quiet confidence. Danez, the fourth player in the game, tucked into the corner of a seat, shouting out the kind of quick-fire jokes we know will unfurl when inhibition is cast aside. The kind of jokes that send us tucking our cards into our chests and taking a break to laugh while Danez pushes the joke further.

The windows in this old van barely open, so the sweat begins to soak through our clothing. Nate dabs away the beads gathering at his forehead while I lean back to catch some of the stifling, humid air coming through the tiny sliver of open window. But the heat doesn't mean a thing when the company is this good. To open these windows and let the outside world blow away a layer of our sweaty, laugh-soaked, echoing glory would make us too generous and too foolish. Better to let it stay where we can savor it all ourselves. Where every portion of it overflows and rests at our feet, an embarrassment of riches. Let the high cotton we speed past stay unpicked, if it means those who might be tasked with picking it get to remain inside and look at a good hand they were dealt and pretend it is a bad one.

And what I meant to tell you, before you indulged the reckless swelling of my heart, was about the moment when Jerriod, beloved and largely silent, looked upon his hand. One of the last hands of the game, a game he spent not talking much and hiding behind his low hat and his always immaculate beard. In the few seconds after I skimmed my hand and realized that it was, once again, entirely worthless to the cause, I watched Jerriod spread his cards real wide, the smile across his face matching their width. And in the silence of the van, without speaking, Jerriod took out his cellphone, turned the camera on and snapped a photo of the cards before him. After a split second of confusion, he shrugged and mumbled, "This hand so good that if I didn't take a picture, wouldn't nobody believe it."

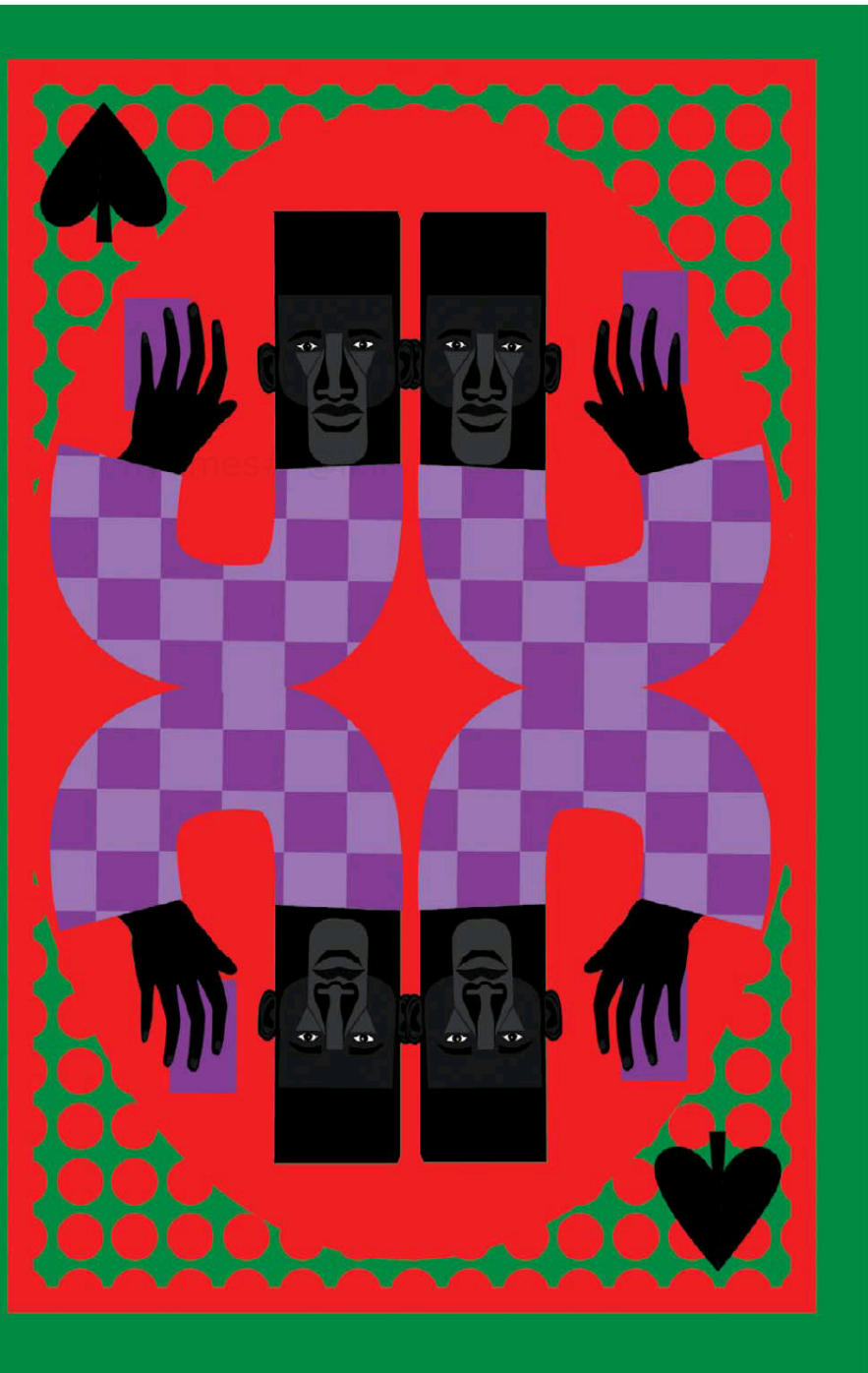
And there we go, set off to laughing again, and slapping the leather seats and covering our faces with our bad hands, full of bad cards, as the van speeds into the open arms of the Alabama border.

Oh, friends — I most love who you become when there are cards in your hands. How limitless our love for one another can be with our guards down. When the first bit of trash talk rattles the chest and then gives permission for more, and more, and more until the talking of trash, too, is a type of romance. Anyone worthy of being taken down is worthy of hearing all the ways they are being taken down. I meet my enemies with silence and my friends with a symphony of insults, or jokes that cut just deep enough for people to see them momentarily but not so deep as to leave a scar. Dearest siblings, even in an ass-whupping, there's no place else I'd rather be.

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*This essay is adapted from "A Little Devil in America: Notes in Praise of Black Performance," which will be published by Random House in March.*





“Joy” is such a flimsy feel-good word. I’m talking instead about what can be wrestled from otherwise-uncomfortable circumstances and be repurposed, anywhere a flat surface can be fashioned. I want a gift like this at every entry to every unfamiliar place.

**Like the history** of Black people in America, spades was born under one set of circumstances, but it came to life under another.

It is hard to say who first introduced the game to the world, but in my own mind’s invention, I’d like to think this person wore a low hat and chewed vigorously on something from the earth. There is no real history of the game but for loose ideas around time and place. The writer and card-game scholar George Coffin traced the origins of spades back to late 1930s Cincinnati. The game is shrouded in mystery. Searching the internet, I find that it may have burst up from the dorm rooms of college students, who came up on whist, a game that rose to prominence in the 19th century and relied on simple methods and ideas: a partnership with

another player, a hierarchy of cards and the ability to take tricks based on that hierarchy. These college students improved on some of the minor functions of whist in an attempt to keep the game moving, because they often had limited time to play it. The bidding system in spades is somewhat basic, though the stakes involved are high. The action is quick, and players must pay close attention. If you slip up, then you slip up, and there are penalties dished out for your slipping up.

First seen as a regional game played primarily by young people of the era, spades grabbed national and international hold during times of war. When some of those young spades players from Ohio became soldiers in World War II, the game evolved on battlefields and in barracks. Much of the general appeal of the game crossed over: It was fun and fast, rooted in the type of tactical strategy that might also serve a soldier during battle conditions. It was a game that could be interrupted and returned to at a moment’s notice. If something popped off, soldiers could lay the cards down and run toward whatever they were called to run toward, in hopes that they would all return later to complete the match.

In the version of spades that I grew up with, played with the 52 standard cards in a deck, the ace of spades is the most fortunate of cards. The one that promises at least one way out for you and your team. If you have the ace of spades and nothing else, you can be confident that you will bring at least one trick home. There will be some glory at the end of it all, no matter what other useless weeds may sprout out of a hand, how many red fours and sixes bloom from the interior. After a hand is dealt in a game of spades, there are few feelings like sifting through the bouquet of unspectacular pasteboards until the ace of spades appears.

It might bear mentioning, though, that depending on how you play spades, and where you’re from, that li’l ace of spades might not mean a thing. On the East Side of Columbus, Ohio, the ace might be the high card, but if you go a few blocks north, those folks might take the red twos out of the pack and get the jokers into the mix. Travel in some other direction, and someone might play joker-joker-deuce-ace, and then what are you going to do but pray you get dealt some card other than that ace of spades? But then someone might scrap the jokers altogether and play deuces high, when the two of spades is the high card, and then the two of diamonds, the two of clubs and the two of hearts all get run before you get to your ace, so you might as well just set it on fire if you get it.

Some would say there are as many ways to play spades as there are Black people playing it. I’m sure this is not true, but I still don’t sit down at a table I’ve never been to without asking about the house rules. In some cribs, a person might not care if you and your partner have full coded conversations across whatever kind of table has been set up. But in others, even the slightest hint of table talk means you’re falling into debt, two tricks or more, depending on how egregious the offense. In Atlanta in 2016, some older folks didn’t appreciate my slick attempts at feeding thinly veiled metaphors to my partner to tip her off to what was in my hand, and so they took two books the first time and then four the next, until my partner finally threw up her arms midgame and snapped, “Will you shut the hell up” — which cost us two more books.

There is no real consistency to house rules other than the fact that you don’t question someone else’s house rules. It feels, in effect, like questioning an ancestor or elder. Someone who most likely is not there in earthly form but who taught the game in a very particular way and demanded that it be played that way. The spades player must be versatile and willing to go with any rules laid down, even if they seem absurd or unfair or entirely whimsical. If the game is being played in mixed company



in some neutral location like a hotel room or a basement bar, the house rules defer to whoever is from the place where the game is being played, or whoever has some kin from somewhere closest to wherever the game is being played. There is no governing body that makes it like this, only a code of honor among the people playing. Once, in Virginia, someone I was playing with tried to trace family roots to Charlottesville just to place deuces high when no one else wanted to.

What strikes me as most in line with the American experience when it comes to spades, though, is the shifting value of a card's worth. How the red twos can be either dispensable or invaluable, depending on what city the game is being played in. How the ace of spades can be a symbol of ultimate power or a source of anxiety, depending on who is holding it and what borders the players are sitting within. I like a people to be nothing if not malleable. A people who can open their nearly bare cupboards and pantries and still find their way to a meal for a week, or a people who can choose not to code-switch and still get the job. Because of the transitory nature of the earliest days of spades, it makes sense that spades has so many different iterations, with nowhere to trace them to. Soldiers came back from war and taught the game to people who taught the game to people. Along the line, things were tweaked, new challenges were added and now there is a card game in which the worth of a card in your hand swings wildly depending on where you've taken a seat.

It might also bear mentioning that I have had more than enough money in my pockets in cities where I've still managed to be invisible. For example: in the middle of Texas, where the host at the restaurant nervously looked back toward some empty booths before looking at my road-wear attire of sweatpants and an old band T-shirt and said that there were just no tables for me at the moment. Everything was reserved, and I'd have to wait at least two hours, but potentially more. Or: In New Haven, Conn., where I had been living for well over a year, I returned from a run to meet my mailman at the door of my apartment as he was preparing to place my mail in the slot. When I told him I lived in the apartment and could take it, he looked at me skeptically and insisted that I pick it up after he locked the slot again. When I protested, he slammed the mail door shut and locked it. I am not particularly sad, or angry, about incidents like these, but I have been thinking about what it is for a person to shift in worth depending on who might be doing the looking and in what city they are doing the looking. And so of course I love a game in which a card's value can change depending on which ancestor whispered some rules to another one.

Spades isn't a game distant enough in history to pick up this many fluid iterations, and yet here we are. I most like to think that someone was dealt a losing hand one too many times, and then changed the rules to suit those bad hands. All of a sudden, a hand saddled with twos is a type of royalty. I play my game with the ace high because I just happen to be from a place where the people don't like to complicate a good thing as long as it stays good. Or, I'm from a place where if the people are lucky, they can live a life happily ignored without shaking anyone else's foundation. When people ask what I like so much about being from the Midwest, I get to tell them: I know the architecture of the wind. I know the violence it blows in and out. I like to keep my survival as simple as I can.

**The argument I** hear offered up from time to time is that spades, like poker, relies not entirely on what you have but on what you can trick people into believing you have. I nod gently at this revelation but also know the major difference is that in poker, there is a choice to opt out if what you have in your hand doesn't suit your comfort level. With this in mind, spades is a game that rests somewhere between skill and bravado — of hyping yourself up even if you know your kingdom will crumble with each hand playing out.

I am maybe not the best spades player in the world because I am the youngest of four, which (in my case) means that I cannot conceal the excitement that comes with having some small bit of power over an outcome. I cannot conceal the joy of anticipation that comes with wanting to open my palms, draw someone close and share something I believe to be miraculous.

I am trying to summon a specific type of feeling here. The one that can best be described by the summer I earned my driver's license and by the car that arrived the day after. I was the last of my four siblings to get either, having spent so many of my teenage years in cars with them, their own music blaring out of the speakers while I was forbidden to suggest or even hint at suggesting a song selection. I outfitted my car with a cheap stereo system within days of owning it and incessantly asked my older siblings, all of them home for their summer breaks, if I could be the one to drive them somewhere, no matter how short the trip. I'd sometimes park in the driveway behind their cars, so that if they had to leave, I could suggest that I just take them where they needed to go, because I'd have





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## What strikes me as most in line with the American experience when it comes to spades, though, is the shifting value of a card's worth.

to move my car anyway. All of these transparent attempts failed, of course. But it was the constant ache of wanting to invite my older and cooler siblings into my version of a world they'd already been living in on their own terms. I was bubbling over with excitement, wanting to turn up the volume in my own car with my own hands.

And this is why I throw that tricky ace of spades too early in every game. Or why, if I am dealt enough spades, I'll cut other cards early and often, sometimes throwing off a teammate's more sound strategy. I'm giving away all my secrets here, writing about a game in which everything is a secret and then nothing is. Spades is not always a game for those of us who had to grow up proving ourselves to the more hip or more apathetic people in our lives. Every good hand is an opportunity to gain some ground on a past moment of flying uncomfortably under the radar. To drown out the moments when your music rattled out of the open doors of a car, and no one came to join you.

So yes, the secret is out, and I am not great at spades. I am a fine player, probably the same as you or most of the people you know. I have rarely been the best player in the room, but I am always the player in the room most willing to play. I don't want to win as much as I want to draw a game out, long and loud. I want the rematches for losses I've endured, knowing another loss is around the corner. Bring me the people who can only kind of play and might lie to grab a seat at a table full of old friends. Those may be my people more than anyone else, the ones I'd try to lift with me to an unlikely victory while the jokes rain down at our expense.

There is a type of love in that — how I've been carried by someone who adored me too much to allow me to look foolish. How, even when the van ride through the South ended, I looked at Jerriod and Nate and Danez and made them promise that we'd have a rematch later, even after a long and hot day that was unfolding into a long and hot night. How I knew we'd all drag ourselves out of a bar or out of a bed that night for the sake of rebuilding the moment from a few hours past, before it grew too distant in our memories.

**The Black people** I know let some cultural things slide from our skinfolk, even if we sigh while doing it or throw a hand in the air and laugh loud enough for the laugh to catch on with the other people around a table. Yeah, your cousin can't cook worth a damn, but at least she can play the dozens. Yeah, your little nephew never quite grew into any dance moves, but the boy sure looks as if he might be able to hoop.

But for whatever reason, there is little scorn like the scorn of not being able to play spades, though I'm not exactly sure why. Perhaps because it is an easy skill to pick up — one that comes, largely, with watching and paying attention. Or having someone who loves you show you the ropes. Because it's a card game, and so many of the Black people I know learned card games at the feet of an elder, not to know your way around spades can seem like a reflection of your entire lineage. It is never that serious, of course. But the tells of the person who can't play spades but doesn't want to admit it are among my favorite subtleties of the game: the player who, upon receiving a first hand, sets the cards down on a table, looks around nervously and then opens a sentence with "OK, so just to clarify. ..."

Or the person who loudly announces how long it has been since he has played, before the game even starts. He hasn't played since high school, or college, and he has played only a few times, but he remembers the rules. Or at least most of the rules. He is certain he can recall a good portion of the rules. The important ones.

I've been the spades partner to these people many times, and I imagine that I get stuck with them because I'm forgiving and perhaps too kind as a partner in spades. When a partner makes a glaring mistake, I insist that we'll get it back, even after the score tally tips firmly out

of our favor. I think of this as a kind of foolish clemency, understanding that the wrong kind of mistake made at the wrong kind of table can lead to a spiral of ridicule that pushes a player into never wanting to play the game again or leads to a questioning of the stability of his or her own identity. I'm not saying that I have made myself a savior of sorts, taking loss after loss with a smile for the benefit of wayward souls who never knew the game all that well or at all. But I am saying that sometimes the game is just a conduit for something greater, or a window into a more vital community. And I suppose I can live with a less-than-stellar win-loss record if it means that I don't overturn the tables every time partners of mine make an error that might suggest they have no idea what they're doing but wanted to be close to where the laughter and the table slapping and the swift talk was coming from.

**I have intentionally** not dug my feet too deep in the explaining of the nuances of spades here, but to "renege" on something is an expression that has universal roots outside the game. In spades, to renege is a cardinal sin, but a sin that is easy to commit if you are the distracted type or the anxious type or the overzealous type. The thing with spades is that there is an order to things. You can't just throw down whatever card you want, whenever you want. The suits on the table must be strictly adhered to. If a player, say, throws down a spade when diamonds are in play — and he or she has a diamond resting in his hand — that is going to cost when the misdeed is figured out. Eventually. It could be the next rotation of diamonds being played, or it could be the end of the game. And what it might cost varies. Some people confiscate four tricks, some even more than that. It



Answers to puzzles of 2.21.21

KARAOKE BARS

A	P	P	E	A	L	T	H	E	D	O	W	E	T	C	E	T	C		
L	I	O	T	T	A	O	E	D	I	P	A	L	C	H	A	C	H	A	
F	L	U	T	E	S	F	L	Y	M	E	T	O	T	H	E	M	O	O	N
F	R	U	I	T	C	U	P	S	R	E	W	R	O	T	E				
H	E	S	T	E	A	C	A	R	L	A	I	O	W	A					
O	R	O	D	R	A	I	N	S	A	C	I	D	E	M	U				
L	E	M	M	A	S	I	N	G	I	N	I	N	T	H	E	R	A	I	N
I	D	E	A	L	S	R	K	O	A	N	D	S	O	A	R	C	H		
S	W	E	A	R	B	Y	S	P	A	P	A	M	E	L	A				
P	I	U	S	G	O	A	T	E	N	T	S	O	A	T	E	N			
A	N	G	J	A	I	L	H	O	U	S	E	R	O	C	K	H	A	D	
S	C	A	L	E	L	L	O	Y	D	E	R	R	H	E	R	S			
T	H	R	O	N	E	R	V	S	O	N	T	O	P	I	C				
I	W	O	N	M	O	U	S	E	P	O	D	W	I	T	H	I	T		
M	O	N	E	M	O	N	E	M	O	N	E	A	S	A	M	I			
E	R	M	T	A	L	C	E	V	A	D	E	D	M	A	N				
M	E	A	T	O	T	H	E	R	A	A	H	P	L	Y					
C	R	A	N	I	A	L	S	T	A	R	P	U	P	I	L				
D	A	N	C	I	N	G	O	N	M	Y	O	W	N	P	E	L	O	S	I
I	N	A	R	U	T	N	O	S	E	D	I	N	E	V	E	N	E	D	
T	A	T	A	M	I	I	T	S	A	G	O	R	O	A	S	T	S		

KENKEN

4	1	5	2	3
3	4	2	5	1
2	5	1	3	4
1	2	3	4	5
5	3	4	1	2

2	1	3	6	4	7	5
4	5	6	2	7	3	1
6	3	5	4	2	1	7
5	4	2	7	1	6	3
7	6	4	1	3	5	2
3	7	1	5	6	2	4
1	2	7	3	5	4	6

CRYPTIC CROSSWORD

S	O	D	A	B	L	A	R	W	I	T	C	H		
C	R	O	A	N	B	U	R	G	U	N	D	I	E	S
E	D	W	E	L	L	I	N	G	T	O	N	S		
P	O	S	E	U	O	R	B							
I	N	C	O	L	O	R	F	E	R	V	A	D	E	
N	K	E	H	E	C	H	I	G						
E	Y	E	H	O	L	E	C	H	A	N	T	I		
S	D	F	S	R	E	F	N							
A	T	I	O	R										
S	T	I	N	G	I	N	E	S	B	E	A	N		
H	R	H	I	O	S	G								
E	V	E	N	T	U	A	L	L	O	T	I	S		

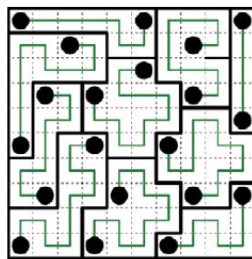
ACROSS: 1. rev. ados 3. homophone *blare* + *which* 9. r(O)an 10. burg + undies 11. W. + Ellington's 15. anag. *corn oil* 16. anag. *repaved* 17. homophone *l* + *whole* 19. hidden *Appalachian timber* 20. anag. *won trophies* 23. pun 24. Be(a)n 25. even + t(U)ally 26. hidden *hypnotism*

DOWN: 1. s(crew)piners 2. anag. *loaded deck* 4. lo(u)nger 5. anag. *pouring* 6. wind + sorties 7. homophone *tale* 8. ghost - g 12. homophone *l* love *white* 13. ra(info)rest 14. beg + innings 18. anag. *into sea* 19. anag. *coolers* 21. a + she 22. two meanings

TAILORED TO FIT

- Apples to oranges
- Beg to differ
- Bored to tears
- Dead to rights
- Fair to middling
- Hard to believe
- Heavens to Betsy
- Listen to reason
- Next to nothing
- Nine to five
- Open to debate
- Dressed to kill
- Built to last
- Spring to mind
- Taken to task

ROPE THREADING



Answers to puzzle on Page 48

SPPELLING BEE  
Achieve, archive (3 points each). Also: Achieve, arrive, oavice, carve, caver, caviar, cevice, chive, clvic, crave, crevice, heaver, raver, receive, recelver, reverse, revive, river, riviera, verve, vicar. If you found other legitimate dictionary words in the beehive, feel free to include them in your score.

is the kind of sin that can kick the legs out from under a pretty strong game. And it can happen so quickly, if one player briefly pulls his or her eyes to something beyond the game and looks back to the table after more than two cards have been played. In a life riddled with mistakes, it is the one I have avoided, just because of the sheer anxiety of what making it would mean.

Once, inside an old pal's mom's condo near the big suburban mall, making the mistake meant a spider web of glass stretching across a wide-screen television on a Friday night in '03, when most of us boys were too boring and too broke to do anything but try and call some girls and then break out the stack of cards when they didn't pick up. My pal's mom was out of town, but that didn't mean anything to us except for the fact that some of us could drink the beer stashed under the sink and play spades the way we sometimes saw the old heads play it: loud and drunk, cursing every movement of the game.

Another friend and I were partners, playing a tense game against two players, one of whom reneged. I could tell the exact moment he reneged, because he confidently threw a spade down to cut my ace of hearts, but then looked back at his hand with a sense of dread slowly washing over his face. The game was close, and he'd become far too excited about the prospect of stealing one precious trick away from us. By the time hearts came back around, the offending player, defeated, laid down an eight. My teammate, who had been helping himself to the warm beer from under the sink, leapt out of his seat, pointing furiously at the table and yelling: "Yo, nigga! Yo! You tried to slide like you ain't have hearts a few hands ago! Nah, nigga! Nah!" The offender could not protest what we all knew, the homies who were once bystanders now crowding around the table as the accuser took a handful of already-won tricks

from the losing team's pile while yelling: "We take six where I'm from! We taking six! Game over!"

I am not sure if it was the impending doom of loss, or the ambitions raised by the steadily cracking cans of cheap beer, or if it was the fact that none of the girls we knew answered our phone calls, but I remember the moment when the losing teammates wrestled each other to the ground while they threw lunging punches at each other, missing wildly each time. And there was my pal, the host, joining the fray to split up the brawl, which, by this point, resembled one of those cartoon tornadoes of arms and legs. Everything else was a blur until the exact moment when the cluster of boys collided with the entertainment center and the television resting atop it trembled a bit before beginning its long descent to the ground.

And in the months after we all pooled our money to pay my pal's mom, and even after we had to find a new spot to hang, I most remember the laughter that drowned the walls as we all sat, out of breath, on the floor next to the shattered television screen. I remember the deck of cards scattered on the ground, and I remember my teammate, composed as if none of this ever happened, picking up the cards slowly and shouting out, "Who got next?"

In that night from a long time ago, when my crew and I were too poor to do anything but stay inside with some cards and whatever was in the fridge, I do remember playing spades until the clouds brightened with the promise of a coming sun. I do remember someone I love falling asleep with his face on the table, among the pile of cards. And I do remember the moment when he woke, there was a single card stuck to the edge of his forehead. I never looked to see, but I told myself whatever card it was, it had to be the lucky one. House rules. ♦

KENKEN

Fill the grid with digits so as not to repeat a digit in any row or column, and so that the digits within each heavily outlined box will produce the target number shown, by using addition, subtraction, multiplication or division, as indicated in the box. A 5x5 grid will use the digits 1-5. A 7x7 grid will use 1-7.

1	1-		30*	2÷
1-	1-			
		4+		5
1-	20*	4-		2-
		2÷		

3-	2-	1-	24*	1-	1-
2-					
9+	2÷	1	11+	3-	
3÷	1-	1-		3-	
		6*		4-	3-
14+			5		
	7	1-	24*		



acclaim in 1982 when Ishiguro was still only 27. The following spring, *Granta* magazine named him on its list of Best Young British Novelists, along with Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis and Ian McEwan. The recognition from *Granta* made him bold; he decided to quit his job and devote himself full time to literature.

**Ishiguro is not** the kind of writer who takes dictation from his characters. He has never been able to sit down at his desk and improvise, to launch into a novel from a standing start. He is a planner, patient and meticulous. Before he begins the writing proper, he will spend years in a sort of open-ended conversation with himself, jotting down ideas about tone, setting, point of view, motivation, the ins and outs of the world he is trying to build. “Kathy’s self-deception isn’t about what happened in the past (like Ono, Stevens, etc.), it’s about what’s *going to happen*,” he wrote in one of his notebooks for “Never Let Me Go” in early 2001, clarifying for himself the psychological profile of his narrator. “Is it better not to have them in a prisonlike environment?” he wondered of the clones a couple days later. “Should they live in a wider community? Is there some other way in which they’re contained, tagged and made to fulfill their duties? Maybe not: a prison they don’t realize is a prison is the best.”

Only once he has drawn up detailed blueprints for the entire novel does he set about the business of composing actual sentences and paragraphs. In this, too, he follows a set of carefully honed procedures. First, writing very quickly and without pausing to make revisions, he’ll draft a chapter in longhand. He then reads it through, dividing the text into numbered sections. On a new sheet of paper he now produces a sort of map of what he has just written, summarizing in short bullet points each of the numbered sections from the draft. The idea is to understand what the different sections are doing, how they relate to one another and whether they require adjustment or elaboration. Working from this sheet, he then produces a flow chart, which in turn serves as the basis for a second, more painstaking and deliberate draft. When this is finished to his satisfaction he finally types it up. Then he moves on to the next chapter and the process starts again.

By his own account, Ishiguro’s relationship to work is decidedly nonobsessive. Some writers do and think of little else; he can go for years at a time without writing anything, and it doesn’t gnaw away at him. “Klara and the Sun” is only his eighth novel. For comparison, the figures for his near-contemporaries on the *Granta* list, Rushdie, Amis and McEwan, are 12, 15 and 16. When he’s between projects, he’s content to pass the days lunching with friends

or playing his guitar. (Since the mid-2000s he has been writing lyrics for the celebrated American jazz singer Stacey Kent.)

“You probably work harder at your job than I do,” Ishiguro said one evening in early December. He was sitting at a desk on the landing of his second home, a 17th-century limestone cottage in rural Gloucestershire, where he and MacDougall often spend weekends. During the pandemic, they had fallen into a postprandial routine. Sitting at the kitchen table, MacDougall would read aloud from an anthology of classic British crime stories, “Serpents in Eden,” while Ishiguro paced the dining area, as he put it, “like a caged cat.” “What distinguishes the detectives,” Ishiguro, who wore a black hoodie over a black T-shirt, said, “is that they have this weird, arcane knowledge of things like old English tapestries or Greek myths or something like that. And often that’s what allows them to crack the code.”

Speaking of his comparatively small output, Ishiguro said: “I don’t have any regrets about it. In some ways, I suppose, I’m just not that dedicated to my vocation. I expect it’s because writing wasn’t my first choice of profession. It’s almost something I fell back on because I couldn’t make it as a singer-songwriter. It’s not something I’ve wanted to do every minute of my life. It’s what I was permitted to do. So, you know, I do it when I really want to do it, but otherwise I don’t.”

When he does want to do it, he is capable of going flat out. He produced a first draft of “The Remains of the Day” in a four-week “crash,” during which he wrote from morning until night, stopping only for meals. The practice served him well at the time — he and MacDougall needed the money a new advance would bring — but Ishiguro’s crashing days are now firmly behind him. He has grown suspicious of the modern office and its imperative to be constantly on call. “The way our capitalist society is organized, it accommodates the workplace as a kind of alibi,” he said. “If you’re trying to avoid difficult areas in your emotional life, you can just say, ‘Sorry, I’ve got too much work on right now.’ We’re invited to disappear into our professional commitments.”

Ishiguro came of age as a writer in the early 1980s, when market fundamentalism was sweeping Britain and the West, a development that caught him entirely off guard. “I never wanted revolution,” he said of his younger self. “But I did believe we could progress towards a more socialist world, a more generous welfare state. I went a long way into my adult life believing that was the consensus. When I was 24 or 25, I realized that Britain had taken a very different turn with the coming of Margaret Thatcher.” Although his books never explicitly address Thatcher’s neoliberal project, they reflect its dismaying human consequences. For Ishiguro’s characters, not working is not an option, or even

a proclivity. Stevens is so devoted to his duty as a butler that he leaves his father’s deathbed in order to go wait on the guests downstairs. Klara, a sort of Stevens 2.0, doesn’t need to sleep or eat and lacks even the semblance of a private life.

When Ishiguro told the audience at his Nobel lecture that he’d always taken the unstoppable advance of humanist values for granted, he may have been exercising a certain degree of modesty. In fact, the defects of our current liberal order, and the selective blindness of its beneficiaries, come under scrutiny in his work. In “Never Let Me Go,” the clones hold up a mirror to the reader (like them, we are all dead in the long run), but so, too, do the noncloned characters, the ordinary human beings who accept with equanimity the wholesale slaughter of their fabricated counterparts. How could this be? At one time, we learn, there was a public outcry after news of the appalling conditions in which clones were reared got out, but because no one was willing to return to a world without an endless supply of organs — a world where cancer and heart disease remained incurable — discussions of systemic change came to nothing. Instead Hailsham, the progressive boarding school, was founded, an incremental half measure that allowed people to ventilate their guilt without substantially changing the status quo. Clones would still be bred for death, but a few of them were now given the chance to read poetry and make art in a pleasant rural setting before the time came to go under the knife.

**You don’t have** to be a Marxist revolutionary to see the parallels between Ishiguro’s novel and our own socio-economic dispensation. Over the past year, an army of underpaid workers in retail, health care and other industries, many of them living paycheck to paycheck, have faced a daily choice between putting food on the table and exposing themselves to a deadly virus. In “Never Let Me Go,” the clones are euphemistically referred to as “donors,” a word that obscures, to clones and humans alike, the involuntary nature of their situation. In the United States, the terms “essential worker” and “frontline hero” perform a similar function. The nation’s billionaires, meanwhile, have collectively grown \$1.1 trillion, or nearly 40 percent, richer than they were last March. Of course, the pandemic didn’t “reveal” the essential cruelty of the American system, as some have claimed: For anyone who chose to see it, the cruelty has been clear all along. Whether the high-visibility injustice of our current moment will be met with transformative change or the same old incremental half measures remains to be seen.

Perhaps the most chillingly resonant aspect of “Never Let Me Go” is the absence of solidarity among the clones. Despite the collective nature of their suffering, they can imagine only individual forms of resistance. They don’t strike, or revolt, or even try to run *(Continued on Page 49)*

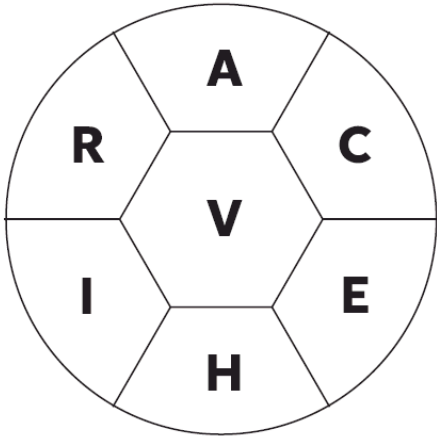


# SPELLING BEE

By Frank Longo

How many common words of 5 or more letters can you spell using the letters in the hive? Every answer must use the center letter at least once. Letters may be reused in a word. At least one word will use all 7 letters. Proper names and hyphenated words are not allowed. Score 1 point for each answer, and 3 points for a word that uses all 7 letters.

Rating: 9 = good; 18 = excellent; 27 = genius



Our list of words, worth 30 points, appears with last week's answers.

# FREEWHEELING

By Patrick Berry

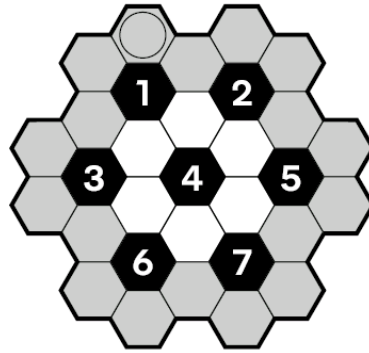
Wheel answers are six letters long and circle their correspondingly numbered hexagons, starting in one of the six adjoining spaces and reading clockwise or counterclockwise. Rim answers read clockwise around the grid's shaded perimeter, one after the other, starting in the circled space.

### WHEELS

1. Maker of hair dryers and curling irons
2. Flash (sci-fi hero)
3. Journalist's info supplier
4. Solve, as a secret message
5. Stormed, as a speakeasy
6. Overlooked
7. Made points in pinochle

### RIM

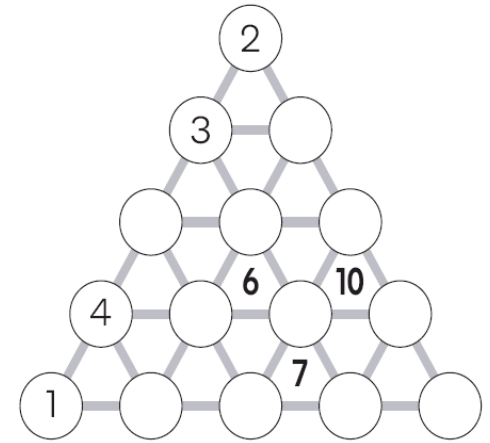
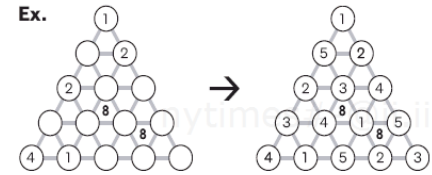
- Wool used for sweaters
- Not doing anything
- The Show Me State



# TRIANGULUM

By Wei-Hwa Huang

Enter the digits from 1 to 5 in the circles so that no digit is repeated along any line, and so that the bold numbers inside the grid equal the sum of the digits in the three adjacent circles. Some figures have been placed for you.



# ACROSTIC

By Emily Cox & Henry Rathvon

Guess the words defined below and write them over their numbered dashes. Then transfer each letter to the correspondingly numbered square in the pattern. Black squares indicate word endings. The filled pattern will contain a quotation reading from left to right. The first letters of the guessed words will form an acrostic giving the author's name and the title of the work.

1	K		2	L	3	V	4	B		5	E	6	Q		7	R	8	C	9	P	10	U		11	M	12	T		13	D	14	G		15	N	16	J	17	S	18	I	19	F	20	E	21	W			
22	U	23	B	24	R		25	V	26	Q	27	X		28	L	29	N	30	T	31	M	32	H	33	A	34	F	35	K	36	P	37	O		38	I	39	B	40	C	41	W	42	E		43	J	44	M	
45	U	46	G	47	N		48	D	49	P	50	L	51	S	52	V		53	K	54	Q	55	B	56	E	57	U	58	W	59	G	60	M	61	I		62	J	63	X	64	F	65	A	66	C	67	R	68	H
69	V	70	O	71	T	72	S		73	L	74	D	75	P	76	B	77	E	78	M	79	W	80	N	81	Q		82	J	83	X	84	C	85	O		86	L	87	K	88	R	89	B		90	E	91	P	
92	T		93	U	94	N	95	M	96	A		97	F	98	G	99	J	100	Q	101	O		102	X	103	V		104	S	105	D	106	U		107	P	108	H	109	T	110	I	111	F	112	O				
113	A	114	K	115	L	116	M	117	W	118	B		119	U	120	T	121	C	122	X	123	E		124	Q	125	S	126	R	127	O	128	J	129	N	130	F	131	V		132	G	133	W	134	A		135	M	
136	D	137	C	138	X	139	P	140	K	141	B	142	T		143	E	144	S		145	R	146	G	147	O		148	D	149	I	150	M	151	N	152	J	153	W		154	L	155	V		156	H	157	A		
158	G	159	F	160	S	161	U		162	G	163	T	164	D	165	N	166	C	167	R		168	K	169	M	170	A		171	Q	172	P	173	B	174	E	175	O	176	F	177	L	178	J	179	C	180	V	181	X

**A.** Rootless wanderer

134 170 157 113 65 96 33

**B.** Band for which Clapton, Beck and Page played, with "the"

89 39 23 4 55 76 141 173 118

**C.** Fred Mertz, to the Ricardos, on "I Love Lucy"

179 84 166 137 66 8 121 40

**D.** Man who observed the destruction of Sodom

74 148 164 48 105 136 13

**E.** Homesick blues?

5 42 123 20 56 77 90 174 143

**F.** Creative person of note?

34 64 97 176 111 130 159 19

**G.** 61, for example

59 98 46 146 162 132 14

**H.** Emotion strong enough to induce tears

156 108 68 32

**I.** "Ah, but I was so much \_\_\_ then" (1964 lyric)

149 110 61 18 38

**J.** What this quote's author became in 2016

128 152 62 16 99 178 43 82

**K.** One who is unfaithful?

1 87 168 35 53 140 114

**L.** Echoic term for M. (hyph.)

28 2 115 154 73 177 50 86

**M.** Literally, "moving from place to place"

78 169 135 44 31 116 150 11 95 60

**N.** Difficult to understand

165 47 29 151 129 15 94 80

**O.** Word preceding staff and key

101 127 147 37 70 85 175 112

**P.** Tramp, hobo, bindlestiff

139 36 107 172 49 91 9 75

**Q.** Administration taken to an extreme

26 158 54 171 124 6 81 100

**R.** Memorabilia of a sort

88 67 145 167 24 126 7

**S.** Brash newcomer on the scene

51 17 72 144 125 160 104

**T.** Poet with an instrument

30 120 12 142 92 71 163 109

**U.** Pouring out, as with words or ideas

106 119 93 57 161 22 45 10

**V.** Not performing; in private life

103 25 155 131 52 3 69 180

**W.** Like a rolling stone

133 21 153 79 117 41 58

**X.** What listeners must be in

122 138 27 181 83 63 102



away. They simply pin their hopes on a rumor that “deferrals” may be granted to a select few, namely couples who can demonstrate that they are truly in love. In a powerful essay on the book, the American philosopher Nancy Fraser credits Ishiguro with exposing the “double-edged sword” of individualism. Educated in the liberal arts, the Hailsham clones have come to think of themselves as unique and irreplaceable beings, which Fraser calls “the mark of personhood and intrinsic value.” Outside Hailsham, they are valued only as a source of spare body parts, a reality their schooling leaves them ill prepared to manage. Fraser sees the same process at work in our own society. “It is as ‘individuals’ that we are exhorted to assume responsibility over our own lives, encouraged to fulfill our deepest longings by purchasing and owning commodities, and steered away from collective action toward ‘personal solutions’ — invited to seek deferrals for our own precious, irreplaceable selves.”

“Klara and the Sun” isn’t Ishiguro’s finest novel (it has third-act problems, and Josie and her family are curiously underdrawn), but it provides a vision of where we are headed if we fail to move beyond this constraining view of freedom. What’s most unsettling about the future it imagines isn’t that machines like Klara are coming more and more to resemble human beings; it’s that human beings are coming more and more to resemble machines. As we slowly discover (and those wishing to avoid spoilers should now skip to the start of the next paragraph), the cause of Josie’s mysterious illness is a gene-editing surgery to enhance her intellectual faculties. The procedure carries high risks as well as potential high rewards — the main one being membership in a professional superelite. Those who forego or simply can’t afford it are essentially consigning themselves to economic serfdom.

The plasticity of human beings has been of pressing concern to novelists for hundreds of years. Ishiguro told me that he has always envied 19th-century writers like Dostoyevsky who were working at a time when age-old religious beliefs were being called into question by the rise of evolutionary theory. In that moment, he said, it seemed only natural to ask what in recent times may have come to sound like portentous questions: Does the human soul exist? And if it doesn’t, how does that affect our understanding of what human life is for?

“I grew up in an era when you didn’t really ask questions like that,” Ishiguro said, “but it seems to me that these huge breakthroughs in science and technology are forcing us to go back to them and to ask, ‘What exactly is an individual?’”

It’s a question Ishiguro has been asking, in his own way, ever since he first began to write.

To judge by the wretched and the meek who fill his books, it may seem as though he takes a dim view of humankind. “We’re modeled from *trash*,” Kathy’s friend Ruth says in “Never Let Me Go,” during an argument about “possibles,” the real people who may have served as models for the clones. “If you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in the rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that’s where you’ll find where we all came from.” Certainly that is where most of Ishiguro’s beings, human and otherwise, end up, once society has taken from them all that it can use.

It is curious, then, that we should come away from his books not with a sense of the cheapness and futility of life but something like the opposite. In “Never Let Me Go,” Kathy works as a “carer,” someone who looks after fellow clones once they’ve begun to donate. Her patients include her old school friends Ruth and Tommy, who used to be a couple. Kathy and Tommy have been drawn to each other ever since they were children, but circumstances have always kept them apart. Now, late in the novel, they finally get together and are briefly happy. Believing themselves to be eligible for a deferral, they track down one of their old teachers to ask for one, only to be told deferrals are a myth. Soon Tommy dies and Kathy gets word that the time has come for her to start her own donations.

Though she cherishes her memories of her old friends, Kathy says she doesn’t dwell on them. “The only indulgent thing I did, just once, was a couple of weeks after I heard Tommy had completed, when I drove up to Norfolk,” a place the three of them once visited. On a quiet country road, she notices a barbed-wire fence and a group of trees at the edge of a field. They are filled with trash. “It was like the debris you get on a sea-shore: the wind must have carried some of it for miles and miles before finally coming up against these trees and these two lines of wire.” The sight recalls Ruth’s words from earlier in the book (“We’re modeled from *trash*”), but Kathy’s thoughts on what she sees, a muted elegy for the overlooked and discarded, provide a defiant counterpoint:

That was the only time, as I stood there, looking at that strange rubbish, feeling the wind coming across those empty fields, that I started to imagine just a little fantasy thing. . . . I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I’d ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger

until I’d see it was Tommy, and he’d wave, maybe even call.

“I feel it’s an optimistic vision of human nature,” Ishiguro said of “Never Let Me Go” during a recent episode of BBC Radio 4’s “Bookclub” program. Love and friendship may not survive death, but they grow stronger and deeper right up until the end. As he saw it, this tenderness, and not the exploitation that the clones endure, is the moral center of the novel.

**What exactly is an individual?** For one thing, we are all works in progress, apt to make mistakes both large and small. Technology holds out the promise of human perfectibility, but, as far as Ishiguro is concerned, it is a promise we must resist. Our mistakes are the portals of discovery.

Ishiguro has known nothing but success almost from the moment he began writing. The last time I spoke to him, in mid-January, I wondered out loud what the major disappointments of his extraordinary career might have been.

“They’re like parallel lives,” he said, distinguishing between his public self, who gives interviews and wins awards, and the private one, who spends day after day in his study, trying to will imaginary worlds into being. “Most of the time, after I finish a book, I’m left with the feeling that I didn’t quite get down what I wanted to. And possibly that’s what’s kept me going. I always feel an urgency to get back to my desk. Because I don’t ever feel I’ve written the thing I wanted to write.”

As we discussed the subject of artistic failure and frustration, his train of thought led him to an old memory. In the summer after they graduated from high school, he and a group of musician friends spent several weeks at a chalet near Loch Fyne, on the west coast of Scotland. They’d brought their instruments and a portable cassette player and would pass the days and nights recording songs. Ishiguro had long had an idea for an arrangement of a song he always loved, “By the Time I Get to Phoenix,” written by Jimmy Webb and made famous by Glen Campbell. “I really cajoled my friends and made a complete pain of myself, telling them to do this and do that,” he recalled. “One of us, not me, happened to be a superb guitar player, and one of us was a very gifted singer, and it all sort of just happened.” The song turned out almost exactly as he’d envisaged it.

“This thing that I had in my head, in the abstract, had come to life, and it was there,” he continued, narrowing his gaze and lowering his voice. “It was very, very close to the way I had always wanted it to be. I remember being on a kind of weird high.” Ishiguro laughed softly to himself, emerging from his memory of the long-ago summer. “I thought at that point these kinds of moments would come often, but looking back, I haven’t had that feeling again.” ♦



# CROSSWORD BUFF

By Brad Wiegmann

Brad Wiegmann is a national security lawyer for the Department of Justice in Washington. About a year and a half ago, while solving some crosswords during a vacation, he wondered aloud if he could make one himself. It took several tries, but ... *voilà!* You'll want to put on your silly-puns hat before you begin. — W.S.

**ACROSS**

- 1 Man who had all the answers?
- 7 Some baggage
- 14 Fillet, say
- 20 William Howard Taft or William McKinley
- 21 "It's just me"
- 22 First-aid item for allergy sufferers
- 23 Shared with, for a while
- 24 Leadership style of the nudist-club president?
- 26 Like a senior year
- 27 Dates
- 29 Steamboat Springs alternative
- 30 Pint-size
- 31 Like Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick
- 35 Winter driving hazard
- 38 Ascribe to, as fault
- 41 When the nudist club was founded?
- 46 They hit the sauce a lot
- 47 "There's another good point"
- 49 "Hold on!"
- 50 Home to the world's three highest capital cities
- 51 Nicolas who directed "The Man Who Fell to Earth"
- 52 Puffs
- 54 Graduation wear for a University of Hawaii student
- 55 Place for a throne
- 56 New members of the nudist club?
- 59 Pans for potstickers
- 60 Time's Person of the Century
- 62 Lit into
- 63 Two are named after Douglas and Fraser
- 64 Big name in tennis balls
- 65 Weigh in
- 67 School with a 15th-century chapel
- 69 It comes straight from the horse's mouth
- 71 "Raspberry \_\_\_" (Prince hit)
- 73 Liquor with a double-headed eagle logo
- 77 Polo course?

- 78 What happens in the stand-up show at the nudist club?
- 81 Robert who played A.J. Soprano
- 82 Pro wrestler Flair
- 83 John for whom the Voting Rights Advancement Act was named
- 84 Slangy contraction
- 85 Rock genre
- 86 Soon
- 88 Taco Bell slogan
- 91 Its size may be measured in liters
- 92 Hours spent by the pool at the nudist club?
- 94 Popular hiding spots in hide-and-seek
- 95 Virtual currency
- 96 Sensitive subject
- 99 Mimic
- 100 "Cómo \_\_\_?"
- 103 Strong desire
- 104 Not a joke, say
- 108 How people returned from a week at the nudist club?
- 113 Mountaineer's tool
- 115 2006 World Cup champion, to native fans
- 116 Popping up
- 117 Follower of high or dry
- 118 Goal of some workouts
- 119 Break between workouts
- 120 Symbolic gestures

**DOWN**

- 1 Travel expense
- 2 Largest South American bird
- 3 A quarter of vier
- 4 Where the nudist-club orchestra plays its concerts?
- 5 Graze
- 6 Site of the Minotaur's Labyrinth
- 7 Feelings in the room, informally
- 8 Build up
- 9 Choreographer Lubovitch
- 10 Mont-Saint-Michel, e.g.
- 11 Not in debt
- 12 One-named Irish singer
- 13 Final Four game, e.g.
- 14 Thieves' hide-out

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118										119											120	

- 15 Cleanup grp.
- 16 Conference with five University of California schools
- 17 '60s TV kid
- 18 Child, in Chile
- 19 Part of the U.K.: Abbr.
- 25 "What's more ..."
- 28 Poetry night?
- 32 Humbugs?
- 33 A negative has a reverse one
- 34 Acid container
- 36 Joneses
- 37 Baseball Hall-of-Famer Slaughter
- 38 Element of Freddy Krueger's glove
- 39 Hawaiian house feature
- 40 Recipe direction
- 42 "Hey, man!"
- 43 Balrog's home in "The Lord of the Rings"
- 44 Techies and Trekkies, stereotypically
- 45 Elevator innovator
- 47 You might skip it if you're in trouble
- 48 Self starter?
- 51 L.G.B.T. symbol
- 53 Statistic in football or basketball

- 56 Kylo \_\_, "Star Wars" villain
- 57 Signed i.o.u.'s
- 58 Published
- 59 Victory in the annual nudist-club 1K?
- 61 Face card's value in blackjack
- 63 Supporting
- 65 Question that introduces doubt
- 66 Muscle above an ab
- 68 "\_\_\_ So Sweet to Trust in Jesus" (hymn)
- 69 Big name in windshield wipers
- 70 Need for a jailbreak
- 72 Nellie's love in "South Pacific"
- 73 Behaves badly
- 74 Many a goody, they say
- 75 Fighter's fake
- 76 Releases
- 77 The lake in "lake effect" snow
- 78 Whale constellation
- 79 Not as unruly
- 80 Small inlet
- 83 Vanderpump of Bravo's "Vanderpump Rules"

- 85 Privy to
- 87 Tenor Andrea
- 89 In relation to
- 90 Punk cousin
- 91 Supercilious sort
- 93 Syngman \_\_, first South Korean president
- 94 Sin's counterpart
- 97 First name on the Supreme Court
- 98 Like babies' legs, often
- 99 Thermostat setting
- 101 Permanent marker?
- 102 High-tailed it
- 105 Minimal effort
- 106 Neural transmitter
- 107 Common prescription item
- 108 In shape
- 109 Dark side
- 110 Criticize constantly, with "on"
- 111 Is, in ancient Rome
- 112 Divest
- 114 Many a golden-parachute recipient, in brief

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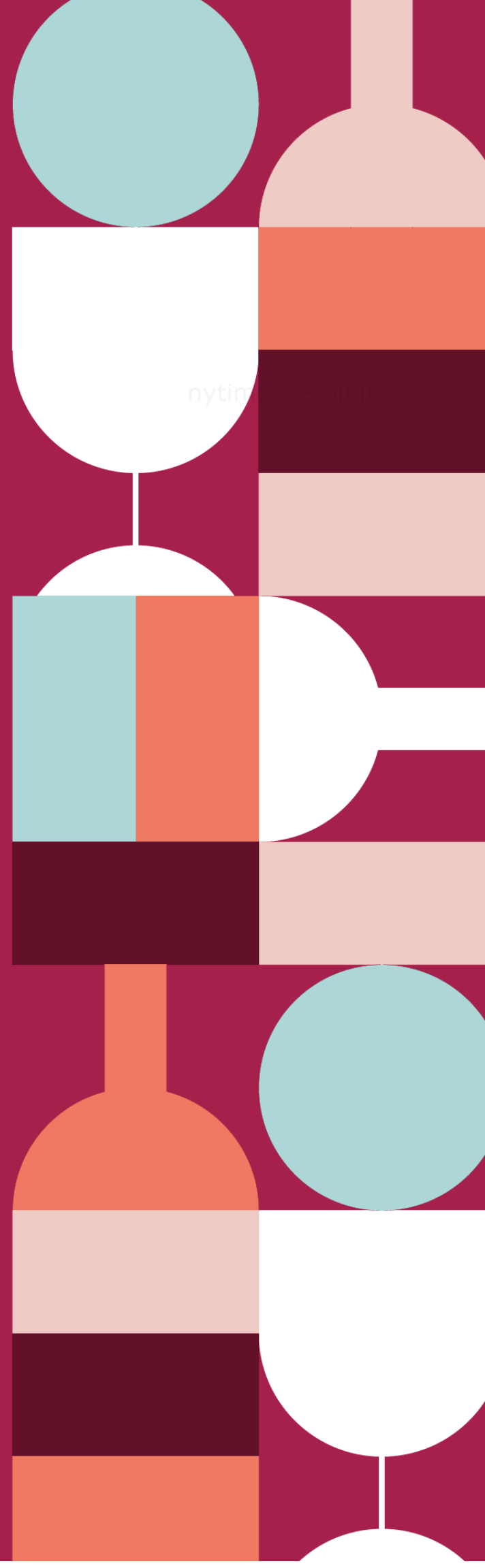
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