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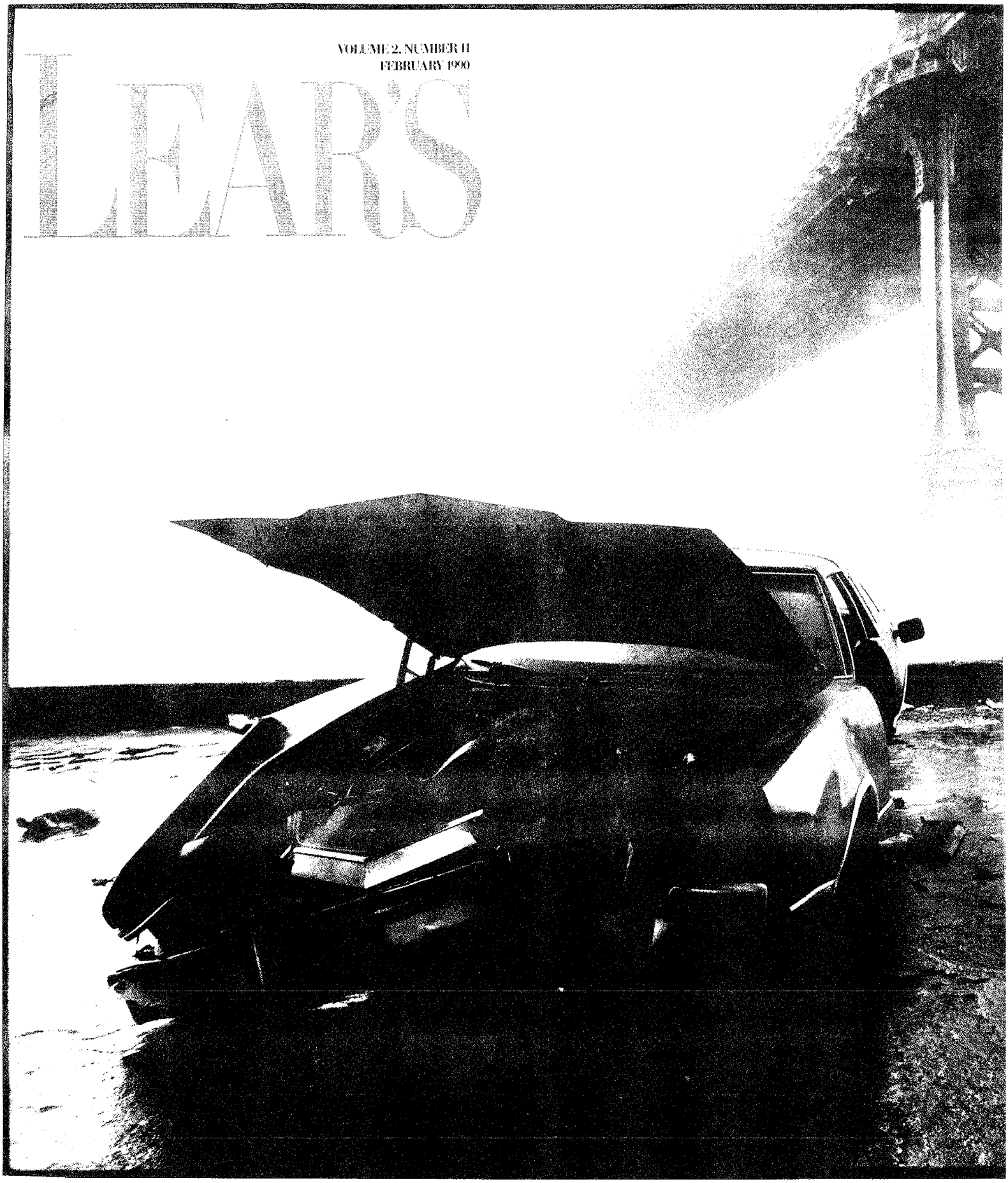
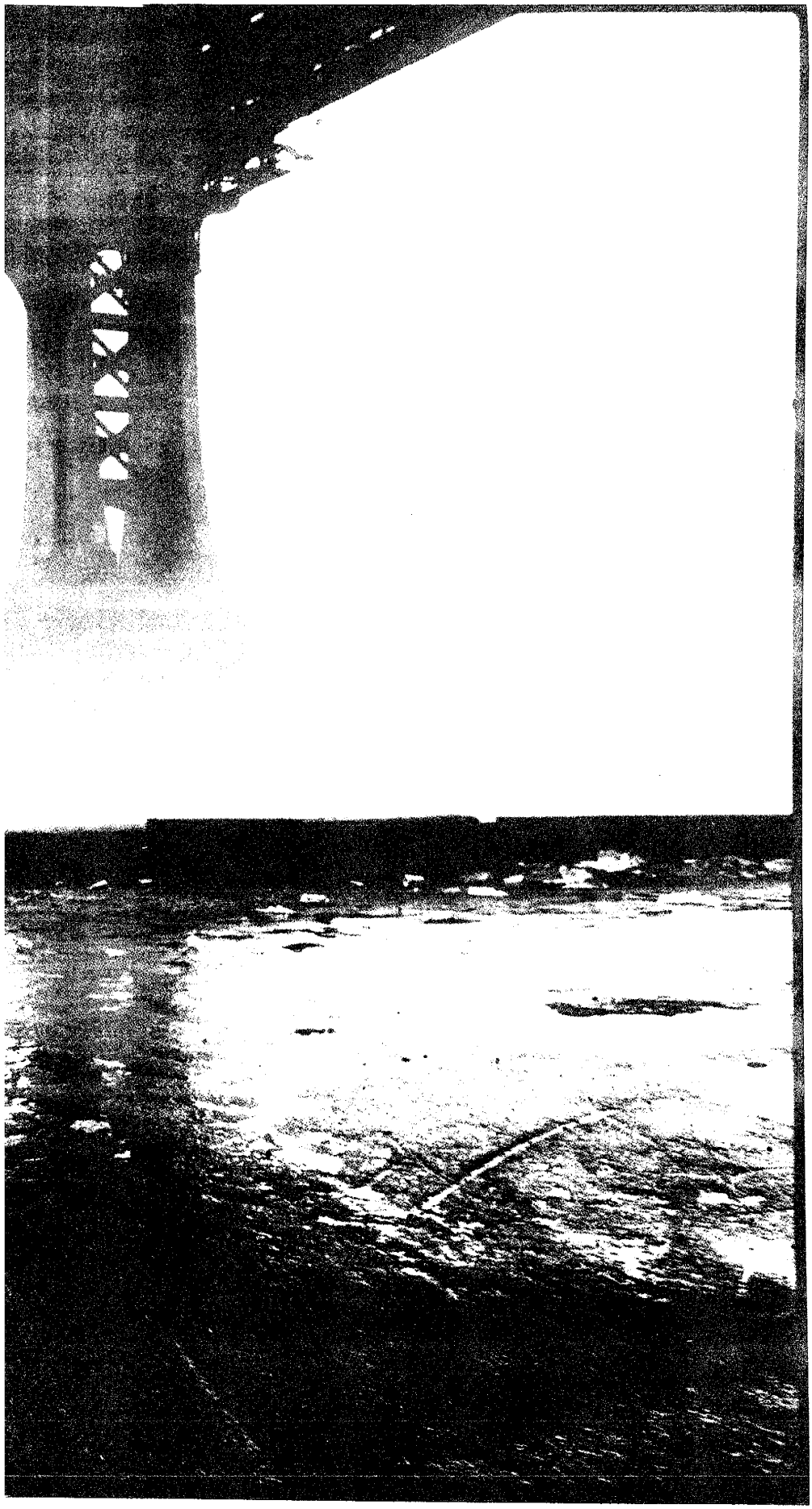
LEAR'S





Putting Out the BONFIRE

NEW YORK'S SAVING GRACES

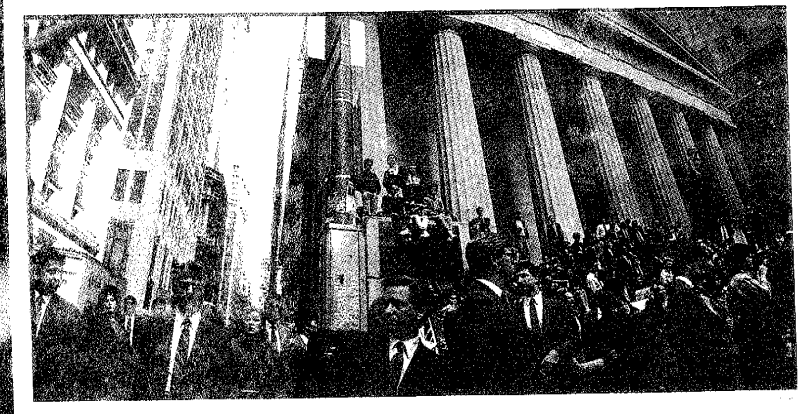
New York careens into the 1990s still the city America most loves to hate, its juxtapositions of wealth and squalor every bit as jarring as Tom Wolfe made them in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. At least it seems that way on the surface. Forty-five million square feet of new office space was constructed in New York during the financial-services boom of the 1980s. A tidal wave of immigrants from 90 countries inundated the city, 2 million of them or so, a deluge unprecedented in force and diversity since the 1920s. A cauldron of homeless, addicted, and AIDS-ridden humanity boiled over into the emergency rooms and shelters, prompting *The New York Times* to run a series of pieces on "The New Calcutta." ▷

By Jim Sleeper

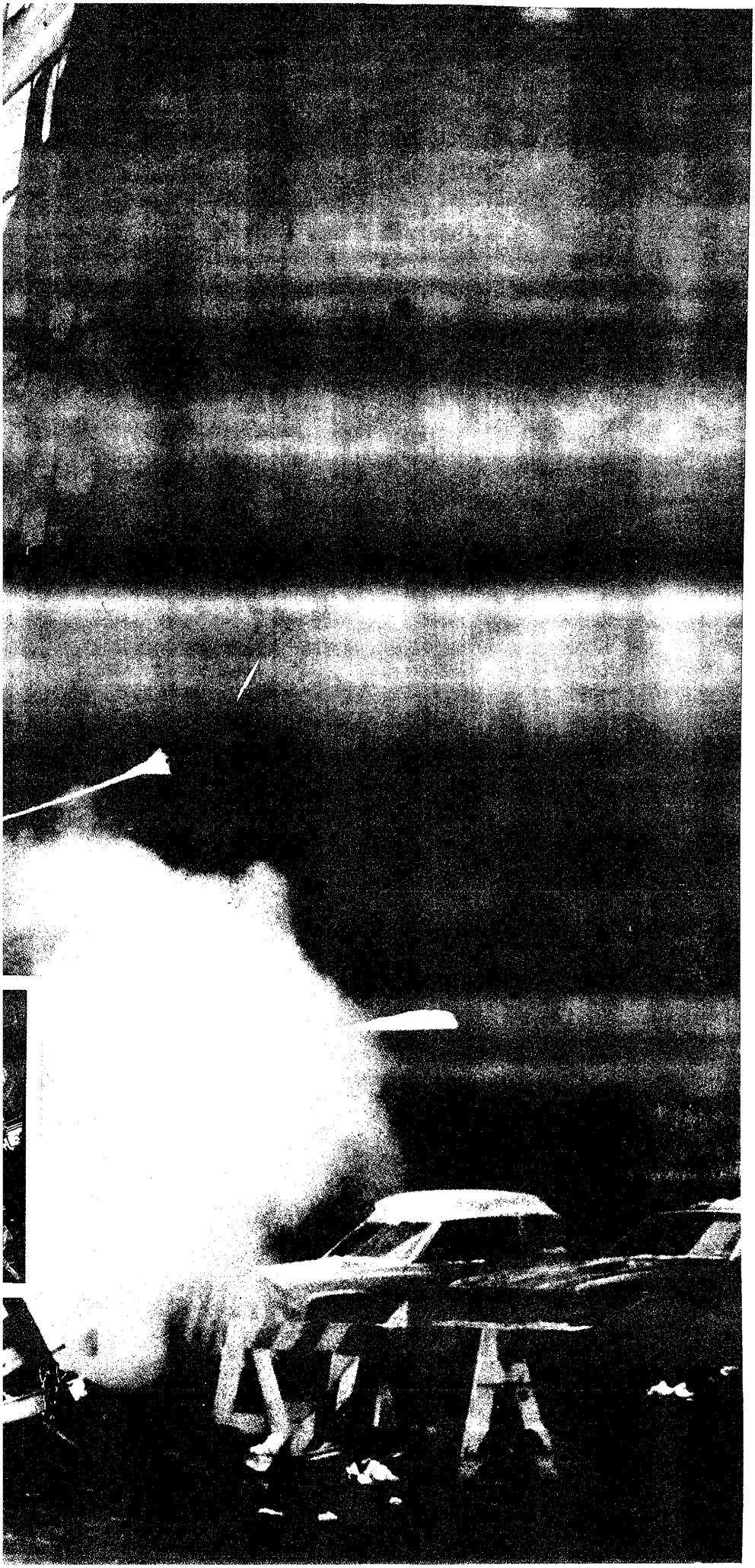
PHOTOGRAPHS FROM MAGNUM

Petty crime swaggered in the streets throughout the 1980s; innocents were slaughtered in the crossfire of warring gangs and drug dealers; emblematic racial murders—and rapes, imagined and real—wrenched political discourse this way and that. In the subway, that metaphor of New Yorkers' common yet separate journeys, whole cars and station passageways seemed to pass rhythmically in and out of civil authority, like provinces in a country gripped by a guerrilla war.

Infrastructure joined in the general rebellion: A water main exploded every couple of weeks last autumn, spewing lethal asbestos, snarling traffic. One Saturday afternoon in September, as I was strolling home down Third Avenue from my office at *New York Newsday*, I topped the gentle rise at 26th Street to find arrayed below me at least a hundred police cruisers, fire engines, and ambulances, their uniformed occupants yelling into walkie-talkies and gaping in awe at a vast geyser of steam roaring up a hundred feet into the air from 20th Street near Gramercy Park. I called my paper, from the only working pay phone I could find among a dozen in the vicinity, and asked whether anyone was on the story. "Yeah, you! Get moving!" was the response, so I ran around and found, by sheer chance, a teary, grimy young man who'd watched two workers for the Consolidated Edison company blown to kingdom come when the manhole cover they had been working on suddenly gave way.



The French have a saying: The situation is hopeless but not serious. Or as E. B. White observed some four decades ago, "It's a miracle that New York works at all. . . . By rights [the city] should have destroyed itself years ago, from panic or fear



or rioting or failure of some vital supply line in its circulatory system. . . .

"Mass hysteria is a terrible force," he continued, "yet New Yorkers seem always to escape it by some tiny margin; they sit in stalled subways without claustrophobia, they extricate themselves from panic situations by some lucky wisecrack, they meet confusion and congestion with patience and grit—a sort of perpetual muddling through. . . . The city makes up for its hazards and deficiencies by supplying its citizens with massive doses of a supplementary vitamin—the sense of belonging to something unique, cosmopolitan, mighty and unparalleled."

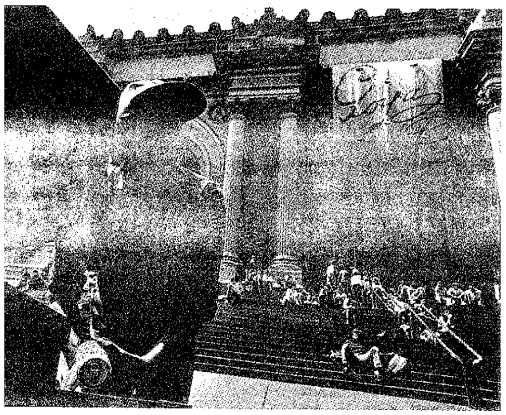
Well, maybe. Bernhard Goetz didn't extricate himself from a panic situation by some lucky wisecrack. And there was no escape for Yusuf Hawkins, a black teenager who was innocently walking through the Italian neighborhood of Bensonhurst one evening last August when he was gunned down by a white youth looking for trouble with a group of like-minded companions. Both cases ignited something close enough to mass hysteria, and it's unlikely that either Goetz or the Bensonhurst youths feel braced by massive doses of "something unique, cosmopolitan," etc. Nor are the city's "vitamins" potent enough to counter its terrifying plagues.

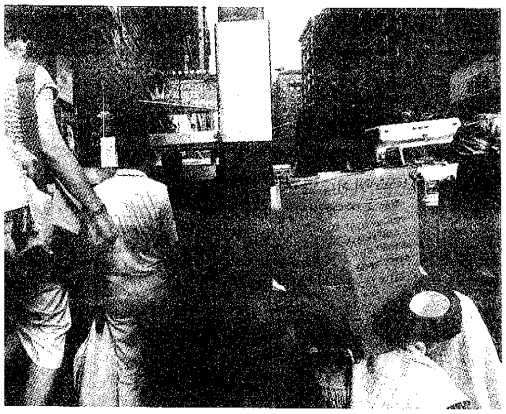
And yet, and yet. New immigrants' children in the city's public schools are copping the disproportionate share of national Westinghouse science prizes that have always come to New York. Churches are building new, low-cost housing in neighborhoods long thought drained of political and economic clout. Hundreds of new immigrant-owned businesses are transforming commercial districts in Queens.

There is the thundering, rolling democracy of the trains and the impersonal affection of the pedestrian crowds, gently bobbing, offering up serendipitous encounters, ever redeeming the standoffish and the sterile. To be out rubbing shoulders on a New York sidewalk, whether on upper Broadway or the Bronx's Grand Concourse or Kings Highway in Brooklyn, is to come into an unlikely serenity. There's nothing like turning a corner onto any broad avenue, looking down a few blocks and seeing in the sweep of an eye a hundred thousand people massed for no purpose more grand than to transact their daily

business. The very spectacle dispels fear, banishes paranoia, makes you think everything is manageable; if things are working out in this chaos, won't they anywhere?

Much about the city's life is aesthetically ugly, of course, so maybe it's a good thing that New York's most important vistas are not those of the eye but of dark nerve ends and the soul. To live here is to move always in a kind of polluted amniotic fluid, sensing more than seeing the minute fluctuations in temperature and viscosity. Let the fluid cool and thicken ever so slightly and the city's creative energies run down; let it heat up and thin out and those energies spin off into aimless violence or anomie. No one





who wants to escape such immersion should have to stay trapped in it, but it should be available to writers, artists, and adventurers worthy of their callings.

Lying awake in my third-floor apartment on East 14th Street some early mornings, when sirens and heavy trucks are stilled and even the voices of drunks on the sidewalk have grown soft, I hear, wafting up through the grate of the subway below, the squeal of brakes on trains arriving every 20 minutes from under the East River's murk and from out across Bushwick and East New York, neighborhoods tossing forlorn in the ravaged north Brooklyn night. I can hear, echoing from the catacomb below the pavement, the conductor's voice on the train's public-address system: "L train to Eighth Avenue. Union Square next." Then the cars rumble off, and I'm certain that even amid devastation civilization grinds on. After two, three trains have passed, I sleep, cosseted in the city's dense layerings of time and place.

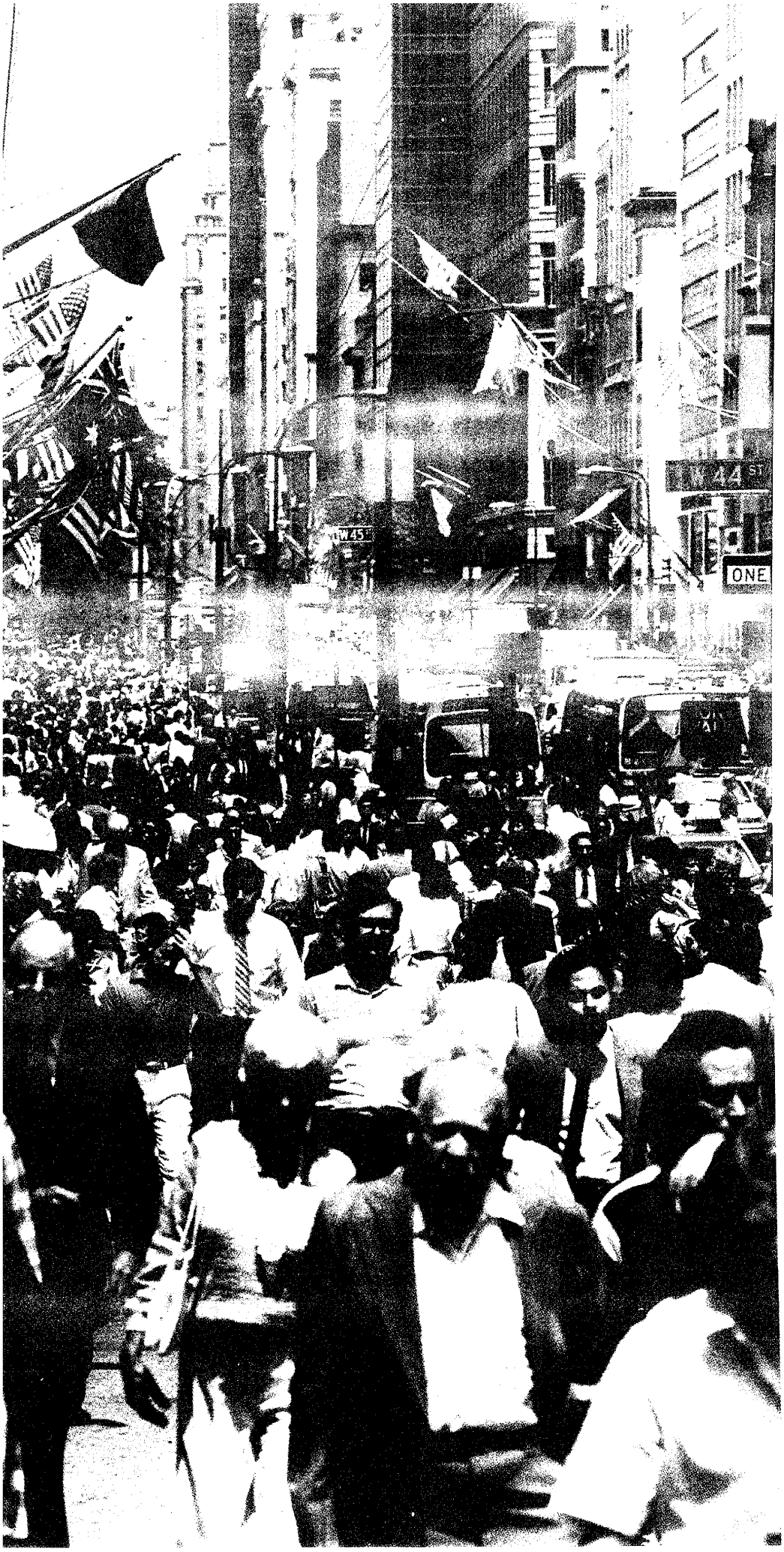
Some of this Wolfe sees, and some of it he doesn't. In a typically clamorous manifesto in last November's *Harper's* he urged fellow novelists—rightly, I think—to abandon their minimalist navel-gazing and give us instead the urban vitality of Balzac and Zola, as he thinks he's done in *Bonfire*. But he hasn't really done it. All across the boulevards and side streets of Wolfe's benighted Bronx are people working two and three jobs to pay mortgages on tiny row homes and small apartment buildings, sending their kids well scrubbed to school, attending community meetings, taking evening courses in the community colleges, and reading self-help books on the subways—the same subways Wolfe claims almost breathlessly to have ridden and lived to tell the tale.

Wolfe missed these New Yorkers. Completely. Where in *Bonfire* is there anyone like Velma Newton, a diminutive woman from Bedford-Stuyvesant who, crashing a traditional male preserve, superintends the 419 subway cars and quarter million riders on the IRT number 7? Where is Mary Antosiewicz, the school cook at Brooklyn's P.S. 282 who pays for condiments out of her own pocket to make her recipes "special" and arrives before dawn each morning, finishing early chores in time to keep an eye on the youngsters whose working parents must drop them off at school before anyone else is there?

Blindness to such people is a moral problem, I think, born of a 1960s-style disdain for all who are neither glitterati nor—if I may put it this way—"gutterati" but who are, instead, the city's glue. Editing a small weekly paper in north Brooklyn for a few years in the late 1970s, I lived among these New Yorkers—whose very normalcy bespeaks a heroism all its own—long enough to know that they are caricatured, when portrayed at all, in Wolfe's often brilliant but highly selective vignettes. More often they are demeaned by omission, not only in his tabloid novel but also in many other literary portraits of a city deliciously beyond redemption and supposedly the more stimulating for it—Tama Janowitz's *Slaves of New York* or Jay McInerney's lovely but insular first novel, which I keep wanting to call *Dim Lights, Small City* for its innocence of the real New York.

The fictional New Yorkers who show up in these novels are resigned to the failure of the liberal urban experiment. As Anatole Broyard put it in a *New York Times Book Review* essay, some of Wolfe's New Yorkers "enjoy the devastation almost sexually, as a form of sadomasochism . . ." and "have lost their belief in justice, perhaps even in order—and giving up these demanding beliefs has freed a lot of energy . . . like a cocaine rush." Writers slumming for thrills have developed what Broyard calls "a sophisticated attitude" toward New York's "utopian dream in tatters." Airily they summon up apocalypses—revolution or the abandonment of all pretense to justice, it scarcely matters which—while caring nothing for the feelings and struggles of people who live exposed and vulnerable to one another in neighborhoods where the upkeep of simple decencies is a matter of survival. "Insulate, insulate!" is the motto of Wolfe's New York; "Integrate, integrate!" is what these ordinary New Yorkers actually have to do every day in order to breathe.

The racial resonances of that old shibboleth are only the beginning of what it entails, but if it's true that the city's future can be read by those unafraid to look into dark, young faces, then let Wolfe acknowledge that he has peered only into the countenances of defendants at the Bronx Criminal Court and told us they remind him of little houses with all the lights out. For every defendant, there are, in real life, a hundred or more young aspirants to the city's promise. And there are leaders. The public schools' first black chancellor, the late Richard Green, a determined fellow who struggled up from reform school to succor frightened ghetto children, would have bored our scribblers. So would the white Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes, who has haunting tales to tell of his



encounters with "insulation" in Howard Beach. You won't find him in *Bonfire*.

All of which is curious, given Wolfe's exhortation in *Harper's:* "Within ten years political power in most major American cities will have passed to the nonwhite majorities. Does that render these cities incomprehensible, fragmented beyond the grasp of all logic, absurd, meaningless to gaze upon in a literary sense? Not in my opinion. It merely makes the task of the writer more difficult if he wants to know what truly presses upon the heart of the individual, white or nonwhite, living in the metropolis in the last decade of the twentieth century." Yet *Bonfire*'s opening vignette of the great, white mayor facing down a dark mob portends only the illogic and absurdity of barbarian conquest.

Mario Cuomo had the little people in mind when he said at his inauguration in 1982, "We are the sons and daughters of giants." And to understand what makes them so, you have to think of the city as a great human heart, drawing into itself a hundred immigrant bloodstreams, working its strange alchemy upon them, and then pumping them out across the nation and the world as athletes, engineers, teachers, political leaders—Americans. The city has done this uncomplainingly for so much of the country for so long that one in seven Americans can trace family ties to Brooklyn alone.

But since America doesn't know enough to lavish on this national treasure a tenth of what the French spend on Paris or the Italians on Rome, the perennial question is whether New York's great heart can keep beating. The city's economy is more mighty but also more vulnerable than it was in E. B. White's day—mighty because the volume of dollars and activity is unprecedented, vulnerable because, to a degree the "old money" crowd of White's time couldn't have imagined, all the volume is just passing through and isn't New York's money at all.

Whether a new immigrant and American-born minority middle class can emerge to reweave the city's economic fabric is unclear. Much depends on whether they can integrate, not insulate, and find a civic voice, as earlier generations did in Fiorello La Guardia and the Ed Koch of 1978. More often, it seems to me, New Yorkers

have been curiously shy about the ways they build their civic culture, reticent almost to the point of muteness about the intangible gifts they give one another across the generations and communities in the streets and schools and workplaces. Maybe their silence reflects something the writer Joe Klein mentioned not long ago: that the sons and daughters of "giants" carry a sense of hurt and shame about their immigrant upbringings and travails.

Then again, maybe these ordinary New Yorkers spoke well enough for themselves at the polls last fall. Refusing to be stampeded by the plagues of AIDS, crack, crime, corruption, and exploding water mains, they retired a played-out Koch and turned aside a prosecutor too wooden by half to elevate a natty, even-tempered gentleman who seems to have transmuted the subtle understandings of a Harlem Democratic Party lawyer into the strength of a peacemaker who radiates a quality—dare one call it cosmopolitanism?—that has always helped New Yorkers survive their multiple abrasions.

That may not be enough. The city faces bleak days and badly needs reform; whether David Dinkins can provide it remains to be seen. But New York embodies, willy-nilly, the notion that a complex, urban environment requires an ambitious, sophisticated public sector. Dinkins stands for that. Wolfe missed him, too.

Wolfe has provoked a legitimate debate about what the American novel should be, and I'm certainly not calling for a "proletarian" literature that would have harnessed his *Bonfire* to some political agenda. My point is more modest—that if ordinary New Yorkers' dreams are in trouble, too many writers who pretend to give us the city are complicit in its destruction. The city's deepening inequities, its private luxury and public destitution, contribute much to the decay of the civic traditions that are ordinary New Yorkers' greatest monument. But the failure of novelists to care enough about those traditions to place themselves at risk in them—that is one luxury urban America cannot afford. ■

Jim Sleeper is deputy editor of the Viewpoints section at New York Newsday. *He is completing a book for W. W. Norton & Co. on the politics of race and the liberal tradition in New York.*