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June 21, 2024

Helen Shaw

Staff writer

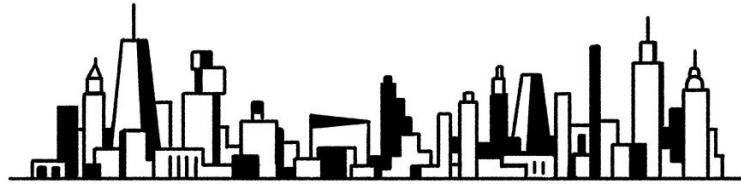
*You’re reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we’re watching, listening to, and doing this week. **Sign up to receive it in your in-box.***

Walking to St. Ann’s Warehouse—a pretty brick industrial warehouse conversion in the Dumbo neighborhood—can show you Brooklyn at its most romantic: first, you’ll see sunshine slanting onto cobblestone streets, then Brooklyn Bridge Park’s soft paths, then the East River, with Lower Manhattan shimmering beyond. Inside the theatre, though, you’ll find the country at her blood-soaked worst. A shock of the awful is the key to the horror-movie-style excitement of “**Dark Noon**,” a brutally clownish retelling of European settlers’ push into the American West which St. Ann’s artistic director, Susan Feldman, first saw at the Edinburgh Fringe. A troupe of seven South African actors, many wearing slapped-on whiteface and yellow mop wigs, exhort the audience via live video and carnival-barker shouting—don’t sit in front unless you want to be hustled into service—as the decades (Slavery! Civil War! Gold rush!) zoom past.



Photograph by Teddy Wolff

It's not all history, though, and the supposedly American aspect also shifts, at times, into South African self-portraiture. "Dark Noon" is the work of the Danish writer-director Tue Biering, in collaboration with both the South African cast and the co-director, Nhlanhla Mahlangu. Mahlangu has said that the show's town—a take on Western movie sets, built, as we watch, with folding frames and a working railway—also recalls the apartheid-era squatter camps of home. The two countries rhyme, of course, in other ways, too. At one point, each actor addresses a camera, confessional style, to talk about the impact of U.S. Westerns on South African youth: "Many people in my township died by the gun," the performer Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck says, noting how the films exported a gamified violence. A human being plays a rolling tumbleweed; members of the audience play a terrorized boomtown congregation as gunfire explodes in the street; eventually, almost everybody plays dead. *Pow pow pow* goes a pistol, and a Native warrior falls down. But it isn't enough to kill the Indigenous defender once—oh, no. The shooter takes aim, and kills him over and over and over again.



About Town

Classical

Amid method-dressed press appearances for the upcoming “Wicked” movie, Cynthia Erivo is gracing us with a little Sondheim. The venerated singer and actress, who is one “O” shy of an *EGOT*, will join other distinguished performers, including the mezzo-soprano Susan Graham and the seasoned Frankenstein’s monster Shuler Hensley, to mount “**A Little Night Music**” in concert, at Lincoln Center. An expanded Orchestra of St. Luke’s accompanies, conducted by Sondheim’s longtime orchestrator of choice, the full *EGOT* Jonathan Tunick, in a run that is sure to be glamorous.—*Jane Bua (David Geffen Hall; June 27-29.)*

Rock

In the late twenty-tens, the singer-songwriter David Bazan started to take **Pedro the Lion**, the indie-rock band he founded in Seattle, in 1995, on a spiritual tour of cities that had shaped his creative output. The band cohered in the two-thousands around thematic albums that put the inner lives of both callous and guilt-stricken capitalists into striking relief, but its members split in 2006. Bazan now jump-starts Pedro the Lion once more, exploring echoes of his childhood homes across a planned five-album series. Following “Phoenix” (2019) and “Havasu” (2022) is the recently released “Santa Cruz,” a nostalgic record that reflects on the transition into young adulthood. The music is at once clear-eyed and eye-opening.—*Sheldon Pearce (Music Hall of Williamsburg; July 1.)*

Art



“leaning over blue,” 2023.

Photograph by Laura Letinsky / Courtesy Yancey Richardson

The Chicago-based photographer **Laura Letinsky** continues a career-spanning investigation of the tabletop still-life, a genre as old as photography itself (and centuries older in painting) but long out of fashion. No matter. Letinsky nods to its conventions—allegorical domesticity, elegant disarray—by undermining them. Working mostly in la Maison Dora Maar in the South of France, she lets the light of Provence bleach her prints to abstraction. What remains are after-dinner jumbles of dirty plates, crumpled napkins, and wilted flowers, with the tabletops teetering and all but dissolved in a white-on-white aura that never strains to be painterly. The party’s over, yet Letinsky sees not chaos but promise—and a

genuine sense of renewal among the ruins.—*Vince Aletti* (*Yancey Richardson; through July 3.*)

Dance

Under the leadership of Michael Novak, the **Paul Taylor Dance Company** is trying new things, including shows at the intimate Joyce. Two alternating programs create wildly contradictory impressions of Taylor. On one end lies the cheerful classicism of “Airs,” set to Handel, and on the other the cynicism and savagery of “Big Bertha,” a theatrical miniature in which a seemingly happy family turns out to be rotten at the core. But other facets of the dancemaker also reveal themselves, in the avant-garde irresolution of “Post Meridian,” with color-block costumes by Alex Katz, and in the ritualistic drama of “Runes,” which evokes Taylor’s time as a dancer for Martha Graham.—*Marina Harss* (*Joyce Theatre; June 25-30.*)

Movies



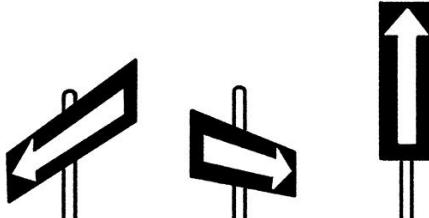
Photograph by Kyle Kaplan / Courtesy Focus Features

Jeff Nichols's film **“The Bikeriders”** is based on the photographer Danny Lyon's book of the same title, from 1968, which documents

Lyon's four years of involvement with a Chicago motorcycle club. In the movie, Mike Faist plays Danny, whose personal ties are downplayed in favor of his observations—mainly of the camaraderie and the divisions that the club fosters. Its president, Johnny (Tom Hardy), keeps order with Machiavellian ferocity, but its coolest member, Benny (Austin Butler), whom everyone wants to follow, has no desire to lead. The film is structured around Danny's interviews with a young woman named Kathy (Jodie Comer), who marries Benny; she offers a keen perspective on the physical and emotional toll of the club's ambient violence and its ultimate devolution into a criminal gang. Nichols's view of the characters is sometimes swoony, but his dramatic sense is sharp.—*[Richard Brody](#)* (*In wide release.*)

Theatre

Everything is fluid in “**Pre-Existing Condition**,” Marin Ireland’s gossamer-fragile aftermath play, directed by Maria Dizzia, about a woman, named A, shattered by an instance of intimate-partner violence. The carpeted non-setting cross-fades between apartment and therapist’s office; identities elide, too, so a lawyer refusing A’s case suddenly becomes her mom on the phone. Even the actors change. (I saw Tatiana Maslany as A; later, Dizzia and others will take her place.) People keep asking A what she wants—Someone to hit the guy back? Monetary damages?—but she doesn’t know. The play encourages unsettled, twilight thinking: we’re suspended between answers, as is A, so full of sorrow and bafflement, unable to chart her way past injustice.—*[Helen Shaw](#)* (*Connelly Theatre Upstairs; through Aug. 3.*)



Pick Three

The staff writer [Alexandra Schwartz](#) on her top hit-man movies.

1. The Cool Cat: Stoic, cunning, and inscrutable, Jef Costello (Alain Delon), the hunted hit man at the heart of Jean-Pierre Melville's 1967 neo-noir classic, "**Le Samouraï**," remains the unshakable archetype of the cinematic killer-for-hire. The film's action is set in motion by a hit on a Parisian night-club owner which goes awry; as Costello is tracked through the city's drizzly streets by both the police and the gangsters who paid him for the job, we root for this amoral killer to give them all the slip.

2. The Dumb Lug: Kinney, the hit man who roams through Elaine May's pitch-black comic tragedy "**Mickey and Nicky**" (1976)—he's out to get Nicky (John Cassavetes), a small-time Philadelphia mobster who's stolen money from the boss—is the antithesis of French savoir-faire. Played by Ned Beatty, he's constantly running two steps behind his target, foiled by, among other things, the city's dearth of parking. "I look like a schmuck," he complains to Nicky's friend Mickey (Peter Falk), who's been tipping him off. He's not wrong.

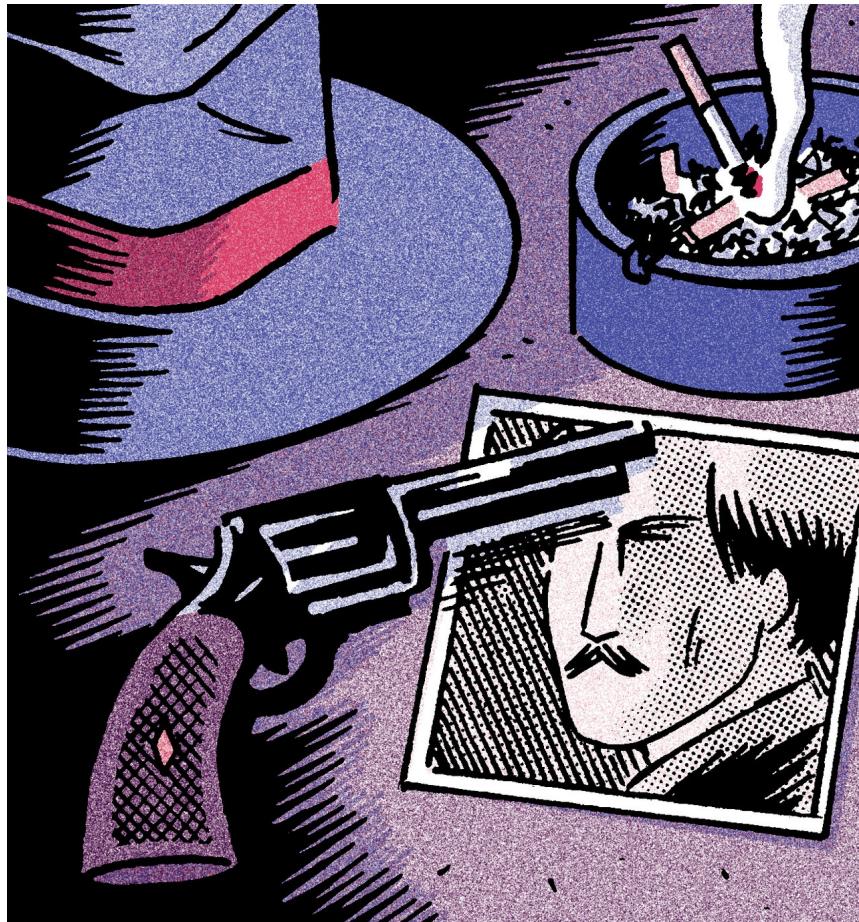


Illustration by Lucas Harari

3. The Betrayer: Frank Sheeran (Robert De Niro), the eponymous protagonist of “**The Irishman,**” Martin Scorsese’s epic from 2019, works as a hit man for the Bufalino crime family and as a bodyguard for the Teamsters leader Jimmy Hoffa (Al Pacino). When Hoffa finds himself on the wrong side of the Mob, Sheeran is given the order to pull the trigger. Early in the film, Scorsese coats Sheeran’s violence with a comic, even glamorous veneer, but the brutal, blunt scene in which he murders his friend conveys the horror of the whole business.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- “Recess Therapy” is therapy for all
 - “Pilgrim at Tinder Creek”
 - It’s boring-girl summer
-

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[The Food Scene](#)

One Weird Night at Frog Club

If a self-consciously clubby restaurant suddenly becomes easy to get into, what's the point of going at all?

By [Helen Rosner](#)

June 16, 2024



In certain New York City circles, the only thing better than a spectacle is a secret. At least for a short time, Frog Club managed to be both at once.

Illustration by Simon Bailly

You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. [Sign up to receive it in your in-box.](#)

Even if I wanted to go back to Frog Club, I might not be allowed to. The mysterious restaurant, which opened a few months ago behind an unmarked door in the West Village, maintains a somewhat tongue-in-cheek code of conduct, codified by a ten-item list of ways to get “eighty-sixed,” restaurant parlance for “kicked out.” Some rules are easy enough to follow: don’t be rude, don’t steal or vandalize, don’t kiss the chef without her consent. Other forbidden activities are more surprising. No. 2: “Taking photos inside, this includes bathroom selfies.” When you arrive outside the restaurant, a doorman in a beret and amphibian-green ascot will check your name against his iPad and then, with disarming charm, ask you to present your phone for stickering: one over the device’s

front-facing camera, one over the back. No. 5: “Touching the memorabilia, thinking about touching the memorabilia.” The restaurant’s ceilings are crisscrossed, somewhat medievally, with metal chains, to which are wired hundreds of ceramic plates bearing the Frog Club logo, and the occasional frog. One such specimen, suspended near the bar, looks to be sculpturally constructed from pieces of scrap metal. He seems like he would feel cool and heavy against your fingers, smooth and matte, a little sharp at the welded seams. Clearly, I’ve thought a lot about touching him. Now you have, too.

Frog Club is the creation of the thirty-three-year-old chef Liz Johnson. Nearly a decade ago, in New York, she knocked everyone’s socks off with indulgent French fare at MIMI. More recently, in Los Angeles, she and her then husband, Will Aghajanian (also a chef; he and Johnson met while working together at Noma), operated Horses, a restaurant so scintillatingly cool that not even the tabloidy dissolution of their marriage—complete with stomach-churning allegations regarding Aghajanian’s treatment of their cats—could stem demand for its tables. (Aghajanian [denied any wrongdoing](#).) Johnson seems to have a flair for cultivating desirability: Frog Club is inscrutable, inaccessible, a knowing architect of its own absurdity. Instead of sharing glossy P.R. photos showing off the food and interiors, the restaurant distributes things like a twelve-minute lo-fi clip show, edited to mimic the nineteen-nineties PBS show “Great Chefs” (“Liz Johnson’s interest in preparing green food began at a young age, when she was introduced to Heinz green ketchup”), or an Instagram clip of Johnson giving a deadpan sidewalk interview to a faux reporter, in the manner of an ESPN postgame debrief. The scant photographs of food that have appeared seem almost hostile in their ugliness. The only way in was to plead for a table via e-mail; I sent inquiries under various names (including my real one), each time receiving a polite rejection, and an encouraging note to try again later.

In certain medium-insufferable New York City circles, the only thing better than a spectacle is a secret; Frog Club, with exquisite narrative finesse, has managed to be both at once. Firsthand accounts, all the more alluring for being photo-free, came trickling out over the restaurant’s début weeks, delicious tales of a glittering celebrity clientele marvelling at the windowless dining room’s over-the-top frog-themed décor, and picking at what was, by many accounts, oddly mediocre food, given Johnson’s track record. A well-connected friend who made it in warned me away from the spinach soufflé (“a sad frittata”); another advised against the buffalo-style wings, which he described as O.K., but freakishly small. Still, he said, the burger was worth suffering nearly any indignity.

Frog Club is situated in what was, for more than a century, the home of [Chumley’s](#), an infamous West Village literary haunt and speakeasy whose address—86 Bedford Street—provides the origin story for “eighty-six” as a synonym for “scram.” (One legend goes that, during Prohibition, paid-off cops would conduct raids via the side entrance on Pamela Court, allowing patrons to flee through the Bedford door.) With its wood panelling, gilt-edged portraits, and library-like display of books alleged to have been written in its Cognac-leather booths, Chumley’s offered a space of patrician gravitas. As Frog Club, the layout remains the same—a trim front room anchored by a working fireplace, a large bar and a handful of tables in the back—but Johnson has overseen a dramatic aesthetic transformation. There are those ceiling chains and their knickknacks, plush burgundy carpeting, and most of all the walls: now painted blood red, they bear enormous murals of Prohibition-era frogs gambling and fighting and quaffing bathtub gin. A froggy madam glares out from a painting over the bar, an insouciant flapper frog just behind her, hair bobbed modishly, anatomically improbable tits out.

There aren't that many seats at Frog Club—half a dozen tables in the front room and three in the back, plus room for a handful of people at the bar—and, on my visit, at least two chairs were occupied by huge green plush frogs, seated alongside guests seemingly without explanation. The frogs wear white deerstalker hats, like baseball caps with brims facing both ways, tied under their bulbous chins and embroidered with Frog Club's name and address. (The hats are available to purchase for, if I recall correctly, without the aide-mémoire of a phone camera, either forty-five or sixty-five dollars.) At other tables, I noticed that certain diners were wearing paper chef's toques. "I think you get them if you order the soufflé," a bartender said, when I asked. I pointed out that we'd been told the soufflé wasn't available that evening. He returned a moment later with a revised answer: "You get them if it's your birthday." Don't even think about it: No. 6 on the list of ways to get kicked out of Frog Club forever is "Lying about it being your birthday."

The burger, it turns out, actually is pretty great. Inspired by the one served at Chumley's, it involves a tender, juicy patty nearly an inch thick, placed with geometric precision atop the bottom half of a similarly lofty English muffin of precisely the same diameter. Before popping on the top of the crumpet, you'll be advised to liberally slather its face with salty cultured butter, which comes on the side in a ramekin, and to shake on a few lashes of Frog Sauce, a piquant, brick-red, celery-seed-y substance—quite delicious—that is essentially a very tart steak sauce. The effect is mostly butter, with a hint of beef and a zingy edge of vinegar.

The menu's other offerings are, like the restaurant itself, by turns self-consciously classic and self-awarely bizarre. An appetizer of lobster pierogi was impressively briny, even without the hundred-and-eleven-dollar supplement of what a server described as "a big smear of caviar on top"; a lovely piece of crisp-skinned Montauk fluke dusted with black pepper and paprika rested atop a terrifically

rich plop of sweet, soft-cooked spaghetti squash. Johnson, who is in the kitchen most nights, tends toward comfort food and New England nostalgia—oyster shooters, a cheesy pasta bake, an oxtail pot pie—but little is explained, on the menu or by servers. This admittedly contributes to that seductively clubby vibe, but it can, at times, leave behind a sour taste of having been suckered. Some menu items seem like jokes we diners are intended to be in on, like the Dirty Kermit, a green-tomato cocktail so popular that, by the time I asked for one, the bar had run out, or all the obvious photo-bait flourishes in the no-photo zone: dinner napkins folded onto forks like long-stemmed roses, a trompe-l’oeil “spaghetti sundae” of extruded orange sherbet doused in marinara-red sauce made from strawberries and guava. But others seem like jokes made at the diners’ expense, like those microscopic chicken wings (a friend hypothesizes that they might actually be from Cornish hens); or the curlicue “sidewinder fries” that come with the burger, which seem straight from the Sysco truck; or the frankly horrible walnut-and-green-pepper dip, which was bitter and grainy. It was served with store-bought baby carrots and golden saltines briefly crisped in the deep fryer, plus chunks of raw sunchoke—a vegetable that, when eaten uncooked, is notorious for causing uncontrollable flatulence.

Helen, Help Me!

[E-mail your questions](#) about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

I wish I could tell you that I finally got into Frog Club by disguising myself as a porter and slipping in the kitchen door between shifts, or that I befriended an A-lister and sweet-talked them into inviting me to dinner, or that I finally received the healing validation of an affirmative reply to my e-mails. The truth is more anticlimactic: I noticed, by chance, that Frog Club is on Resy now, and that there were a lot of openings. I clicked, I booked. I will not lie: such ease of access makes the whole Frog Club proposition—already somewhat tenuous—fall almost

completely to pieces. The appeal was never the silliness of the animal theme, nor the weird rules, nor, certainly, the food. It was the draw of the locked door, the inherent value of the unattainable. The men at the bar next to me were complaining about mid-level media salaries; the guests at a table near the front door were animatedly discussing market volatility. We got our celebrity sighting—a famous artist, eating green salad and what looked like escargot casserole in the company of a human friend and one of those behatted stuffed frogs—but he seemed a little indifferent, a little bored. What made Frog Club great is what made it awful is what made it irresistibly fascinating: its exclusivity, its gleeful snobbishness, its ostentatious secrecy. What's the point of bragging about your impassable moat if you always keep the drawbridge down? I thought about rule No. 2, and the stickers over my phone cameras. The hell with it. I took a selfie in the bathroom. I sent it to everyone I know. ♦



Helen Rosner is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of the weekly column *The Food Scene*.

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The Talk of the Town

- **[What Can We Expect from the Biden-Trump Debate?](#)**

By Evan Osnos | Until recently, it wasn't clear that the two men would ever share a stage again. Now there's a potential for even greater stakes and strangeness than four years ago.

- **[Troye Sivan Wants to Sell You a Bottomless Bowl](#)**

By André Wheeler | The Grammy-nominated Australian singer surveyed the Nolita pop-up store where, for three days, fans snapped up his oil burners, candles, and dreidels.

- **[An Around-the-World Eco-Voyage Makes a Pit Stop Near Wall Street](#)**

By Adam Iscoe | Energy Observer, a ship equipped with solar panels and a hydrogen fuel cell, has spent the past seven years circumnavigating the globe, powered by sun, water, and salads.

- **[The Sun Ra Arkestra's Maestro Hits One Hundred](#)**

By Robert Sullivan | Marshall Allen, the musical collective's sax-playing leader, is celebrating with a deep-spacey video installation at the Venice Biennale.

- **[The Dominican Election That Took Over Upper Manhattan](#)**

By Nicolas Niarchos | A newly elected representative of the Dominican Republic's overseas population gives advice to the U.S. on orderly elections and muses on the Yankees star Juan Soto.

[Comment](#)

What Can We Expect from the Biden-Trump Debate?

Until recently, it wasn't clear that the two men would ever share a stage again. Now there's a potential for even greater stakes and strangeness than four years ago.

By [Evan Osnos](#)

June 23, 2024

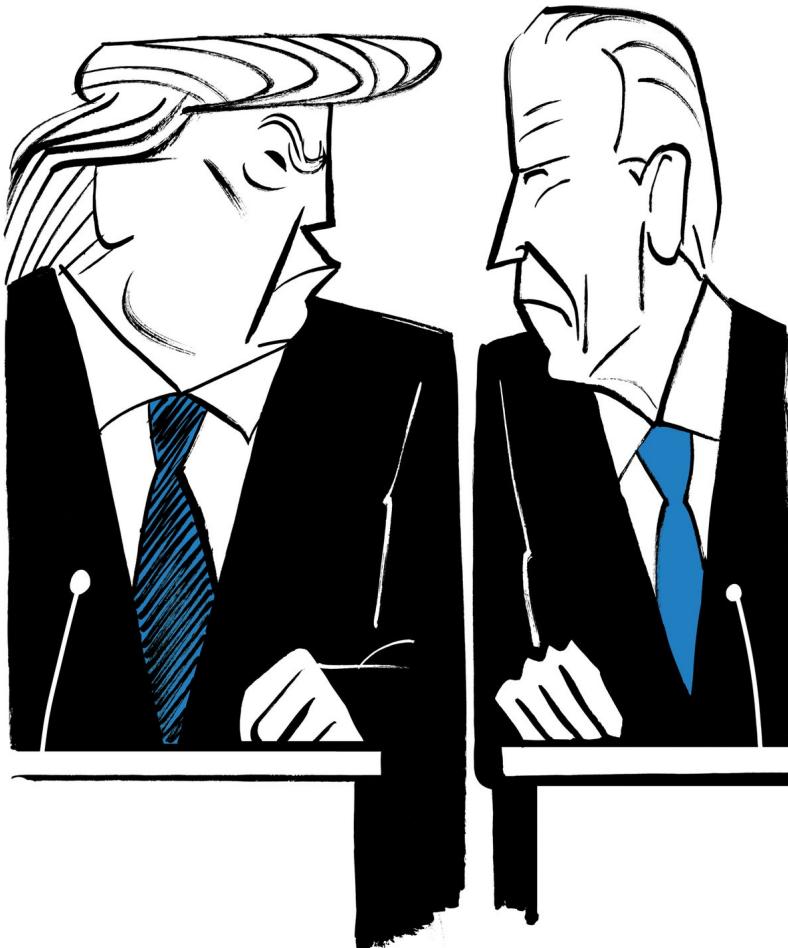


Illustration by João Fazenda

If you wonder how much a Presidential debate really matters, it's worth recalling the first time one aired on television. In September, 1960, Vice-President Richard Nixon, the Republican nominee, faced John F. Kennedy. Before the debate, Nixon held a narrow lead in the polls and was thought to have the edge in know-how and experience. But, within minutes of the broadcast's start, it became clear that he had misjudged the moment and the medium. Having waved off a makeup artist, he looked spent and haggard. He often glanced at a clock on the studio wall, which made him look shifty and awkward beside the crisp young senator from Massachusetts.

Kennedy's calm command of the facts was partly an illusion; he had spent days preparing with advisers, memorizing statistics from index cards—about steel production, Soviet scientists, and obstacles facing Black Americans in the job market—to make his case for a more equitable, ambitious society. Onstage, Nixon's perceived advantage “vanished before the first debate was over,” the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin writes in her latest book, “An Unfinished Love Story: A Personal History of the 1960s.” Kennedy went on to prevail in one of the closest elections in American history, winning the popular vote by less than .02 per cent.

Nobody is expecting youthful vigor on June 27th, when Donald Trump, who recently turned seventy-eight, and Joe Biden, eighty-one, meet on the debate stage in Atlanta for their first encounter since the 2020 election. But it is unlikely to be sedate. After their first debate in 2020, Chris Wallace, who moderated, described it as a “mess,” and noted that Trump interrupted more than a hundred times. At one point, Biden muttered, “Will you shut up, man?” Days later, Trump was hospitalized with *Covid*, and withdrew from the next debate. When they met for the final time, the production staff managed to achieve some decorum by muting each candidate's microphone whenever his opponent was answering a question.

Until recently, it wasn't clear that Trump and Biden would ever share a stage again. But last month their campaigns announced plans for two debates, which have the potential for even greater stakes and strangeness than four years ago. Since they are meeting nearly three months earlier than usual in a Presidential election, there would, in theory, be enough time for either party to find a replacement, in the event of a catastrophic performance. More likely, however, the spectacle of Biden and Trump side by side, and effectively tied in the polls, could jolt the electorate, swaying some of the disaffected voters who have preferred to ignore the choice before them. That would be a vivid test of Biden's adage about elections: "Don't compare me to the Almighty. Compare me to the alternative."

To create what the host network, CNN, has called, in a hopeful phrase, a "civilized discussion," mikes will be muted except during direct questions. Moreover, there will be no studio audience for the first time since 1960, a condition that will deprive Trump of the chance to bring in guests intended to intimidate his opponent. (Facing Hillary Clinton in 2016, Trump brought three women who had accused her husband of sexual misconduct.) Efforts to civilize the discussion will be tested. In the weeks since Trump was convicted on thirty-four felony counts of falsifying business records, to cover up the payment of hush money to a porn star, he has been in frenetic overdrive, raising money—donations have surged—and escalating his incendiary rhetoric in e-mails to supporters with messages such as "*HAUL OUT THE GUILLOTINE!*" Steve Bannon, Trump's former chief strategist in the White House, recently told an audience of young conservatives in Detroit that the election is a matter of "victory or death."

It is a measure of this curious rematch that some of Trump's opponents are eager to boost his visibility. Because Trump posts almost exclusively on his own social-media site, and most broadcasters do not air his rallies, Rachel Maddow, the MSNBC

host, said last week that she suspects voters have not absorbed how “pornographically violent” his rhetoric has become. As George Conway, the former Republican strategist, put it recently, “The more you see of him, the more you say, ‘What is wrong with him?’ ”

Biden, for his part, enters the debate without the lead he had at this stage in 2020, and he’s still acclimating to a forceful new posture of attack. For months, while Democrats pushed him to slash at Trump for his criminal trials, the President held back, wary that doing so could be portrayed as interfering in the prosecution. But, since the Trump verdict was delivered, on May 30th, a raft of polls have shown a small but consistent shift away from him, and the President has seized on that signal. At a fund-raiser, he labelled Trump a “convicted felon” who “snapped,” and his campaign has released a wave of television ads in swing states, showing Trump’s mug shot and images of him in court, and calling him a “convicted criminal who’s only out for himself.”

It’s tempting to wonder, given that the candidates are so well known, what impact another appearance together could really have. Mitchell McKinney, of the University of Akron, who for decades has measured voters’ attitudes before and after debates, said that a decisive performance could move crucial votes on the margins: “We always find a slice—no more than five per cent—who say, ‘I wasn’t sure, but now I am.’ That can make a difference in a razor-thin election, and we’ve got one of those right now.”

Predicting what might make the difference is more difficult. Will Trump confirm his vow to pardon followers jailed for violence on January 6th? Or his aim to gut the Justice Department? Will Biden defend abortion rights boldly enough to inspire young voters who recoil from his handling of the U.S. response to the war in the Middle East? Can he defuse criticisms about inflation and immigration? The most searing moment, for two candidates dogged by questions about age and acuity, could be something unsaid. In a

1984 debate, Ronald Reagan stirred concern when he lost his way and abandoned a story about the Pacific Coast Highway; in 2011, Rick Perry’s primary bid all but ended when he blanked on the name of a government agency he intended to eliminate. (“Oops,” he said.) At times, a turn in history is obvious even as it is happening. While watching the 1960 debate, Nixon’s running mate, Henry Cabot Lodge, reportedly told those around him, “That son of a bitch just lost us the election.” ♦



Evan Osnos is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. His most recent book is “*Wildland: The Making of America’s Fury*.”

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Troye Sivan Wants to Sell You a Bottomless Bowl

The Grammy-nominated Australian singer surveyed the Nolita pop-up store where, for three days, fans snapped up his oil burners, candles, and dreidels.

By [André Wheeler](#)

June 24, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

Troye Sivan, the Grammy-nominated Australian singer, recently opened a pop-up shop for Tsu Lange Yor, his fledgling life-style

brand, on the corner of Broome and Mott Streets, in Nolita. For three days, shoppers could purchase a variety of objets, including a dreidel made of recycled aluminum (\$1,178), a molar-shaped oil burner (\$247), and recycled-brass bowls with no bottoms (not ideal for soup!) that ranged from \$167 to \$610.

Sivan, who is twenty-nine, with short dyed-blond hair and saucer eyes, might come off as a club rat (last summer, he released a tongue-in-cheek dance ode to poppers), but he's really more of a homebody. Just before his shop opened, he took a final walk through the space, wearing loose cargo pants and a black sweater. "It really doesn't feel that different from making music or a music video," he said of designing housewares. Sivan lives in a mid-century-modern house in Melbourne, and he says that running it is a full-time job. "I'm, like, 'You know what? Today I'm going to go get flowers,'" he said. "And then, 'Oh! I need to get a Magic Eraser because I scuffed the wall upstairs.'" The place is inhabited by a rotating roster of friends, friends of friends, and family members. So he figured that it made sense to create a life-style line. "It's, like, lots and lots of micro decisions you make that completely change the way that something can feel," he said. He fiddled with a clear bottle of the brand's fragrance TLY 5755 (\$196).

When he launched the line, last year, it was available only in Australia and online. Sivan comes to New York about five times a year and compares the city's energy to the feeling of skydiving. "When I think about sort of, like, the epitome of taste, I think about New York," he said. For the pop-up, he wanted a "not too stuffy vibe," which translated into burgundy leather furniture and tabletops strewn with misshapen heirloom tomatoes. The walls were hung with work by Australian artists. People had been asking him about a painting of a slender, shirtless lad. "Everyone thinks it's me!" he said, laughing. "But it's not."

Among the members of the brand's team buzzing around the store was his older brother, Steele, who quit his job as a lawyer to co-found Tsu Lange Yor. He had on a fuzzy sweater and a cap. "There were years where Troye never left his room," Steele said. "He was just making stuff in there."

Sivan is a natural at giving QVC-ish spiels. He is especially good at suggesting practical uses for his bottomless bowls. "Honestly, this is maybe one of my favorite things that we've made," he said. Sivan recommends using the large version, eleven inches across, to hold produce or decorative groceries. "If you're a person who doesn't keep eggs in the fridge, it's such a chic way to do it." He pointed to a smaller bowl, a version of which he keeps on his own bedside table. He reached down and placed his wallet inside. "As soon as I walk in the door, it's, like, chewing gum, lip balm, you know, my wallet, AirPods, keys—they go in there." He continued, "That's a nice little interior hack—creating designated space on a tabletop makes things look really neat and tidy."

The bottomless bowl was conceived during a remote brainstorming session that Sivan had with Joel Adler, an Australian designer. Adler was demonstrating a bowl prototype and, when its bottom dipped out of the frame, had what Sivan called "an 'Aha!' moment." "It was fully his idea," Sivan said.

Sivan has dreams of expanding Tsu Lange Yor: "Fashion or lighting or a really beautiful blanket or something like that." Coming up on his schedule was a summer tour in Europe. "I will wake up in the morning and do a few hours of Tsu Lange Yor stuff and then switch brains," he said.

Outside, with two hours to go before opening, a few fans waited in line. Sheen Dudwadkar, a twenty-seven-year-old software engineer, and Tamzid Rahman, a twenty-three-year-old nursing student, were bristling with excitement.

“Oh, my God, I’ve been a fan since Troye was a baby vlogger, in the YouTube days,” Dudwadkar said. “I got through my most difficult breakup by listening to his music.”

Once they got inside, Rahman picked up a candle labelled “Sassafras” (\$51) and sniffed. “Ooh, I like the *oud* scents,” he said.

Would they consider a bottomless bowl? Dudwadkar was skeptical. “If I’m buying a bowl, I should at least be able to move it around without moving everything in it,” she said. But it was going on her wish list anyway. “When I’m older and richer I’ll have one,” she said. “Because they are giving ‘I have too much money.’ ” The large version sold out the next day. ♦

André Wheeler is the author of the forthcoming young-adult novel “Second Coming.”

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[Here To There Dept.](#)

An Around-the-World Eco-Voyage Makes a Pit Stop Near Wall Street

Energy Observer, a ship equipped with solar panels and a hydrogen fuel cell, has spent the past seven years circumnavigating the globe, powered by sun, water, and salads.

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

June 24, 2024

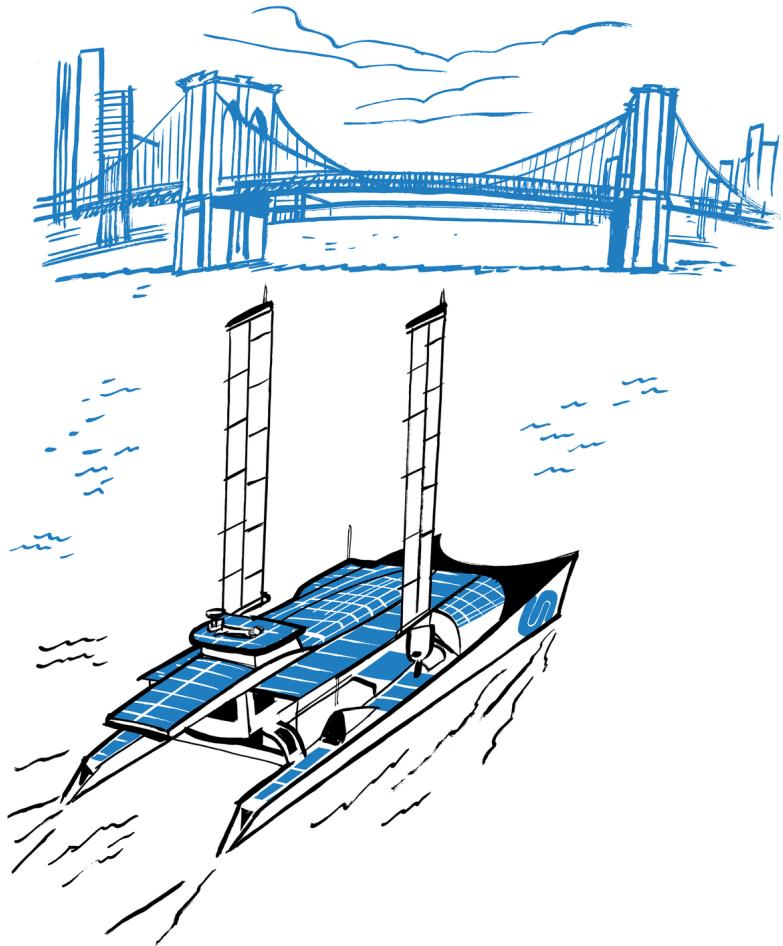


Illustration by João Fazenda

One phrase that describes New York's waterways is “diesel-powered”: supersized container ships, megayachts, oil tankers, garbage barges. But not every ship that comes to town is on a Greenpeace watch list; there are also schooners, plus the odd outrigger canoe. And recently a hundred-foot-long former racing catamaran from France, which had been retrofitted with solar panels and a hydrogen fuel cell, docked near Wall Street. The vessel, known as Energy Observer, resembled a sperm whale that had been wrapped in roughly ten thousand photovoltaic cells. She made a two-week pit stop during a seven-year, around-the-world voyage, gathering some fresh vegetables, before setting sail again, at dawn.

“We’re having a little issue with the batteries this morning,” Beatrice Cordiano, an Italian scientist aboard the craft, said on the day of departure. Energy Observer was to travel up the East River, through Long Island Sound toward Massachusetts, and across the Atlantic, in the direction of the French coast; her more than sixty-two-thousand-mile journey would return to where it began, in 2017, in Saint-Malo. “It’s a problem that we usually do not have,” Cordiano said of the batteries. Just about everything on the vessel —two electric engines, a washing machine, the Starlink satellite hookup, a seawater desalinator, two refrigerators, several MacBooks, a G.P.S. navigation system, lights—is powered by four lithium-ion batteries, which are recharged by a couple of thousand square feet of solar panels, and a hundred and thirty-seven pounds of hydrogen gas. The gas, which is produced using seawater, is stored in eight pressurized tanks.

Here’s how it works: In the hulls, seawater is desalinated and purified, before an electrolyzer splits H₂O into hydrogen and oxygen. After that, the hydrogen gas is converted into electricity, via a custom-built Toyota fuel cell—a version of the technology inside the company’s hydrogen-powered sedan, which emits water vapor instead of exhaust.

Cordiano, who wore a blue beanie and a retroreflective sailing jacket, and had the chapped lips of a woman who had been at sea for some two years, went on, “If there’s no sun, no wind, no nothing, we can do continuous sailing for one week with the hydrogen that we have.” But setting sail was practically impossible without working batteries. Luc Bourserie, one of the ship’s engineers, grabbed some pliers and shouted, “This is high-voltage work,” before disappearing into a hull.

After further shouting (and swearing), Energy Observer’s electric motors puttered to life, and the vessel departed the marina. Marin Jarry, a merchant marine turned eco-evangelist, sat on the bridge, sipping espresso from a mug that read *“The Captain’s Word Is Law”* and smoking Marlboro Golds. As Jarry lifted two sails—or “ocean wings,” as they’re known on board—with the push of a button, he glanced at the nearby Statue of Liberty and said, “A French present.” Downstairs, another crew member muttered, “It’s underwhelming, if you ask me.”

Energy Observer passed under the Brooklyn Bridge and continued north, past a wastewater-treatment plant on Randall’s Island, an oil-and-gas facility in Astoria, and a recently decommissioned prison barge in the Bronx. On deck, George Conty, a boatswain (“I’m the Swiss Army knife,” he said), reminisced about some highlights during his four years at sea—huge storms in the Pacific, icebergs near Svalbard. Before joining the crew, he was in the French special forces, fighting *isis*. “People are used to just pressing a button without realizing the impact, because it’s easy,” he said. “We live in a comfortable world. But that’s not the case everywhere. When there’s a string of cloudy days and there’s no wind, it’s a shitty situation. You have to choose between comfort and speed.” In such cases, the crew puts up with strict water rationing and eats salads. “If we want to change the world, I think the first thing is *sobriété*—being reasonable, turning off the lights.”

The wind picked up, and Conty smiled. “I love this shit,” he said. ♦2

Adam Iscoe is a writer based in New York City.

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Deep-Space Music

The Sun Ra Arkestra's Maestro Hits One Hundred

Marshall Allen, the musical collective's sax-playing leader, is celebrating with a deep-spacey video installation during the Venice Biennale.

By [Robert Sullivan](#)

June 24, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

The Sun Ra Arkestra, the musical collective founded in Chicago in the mid-fifties, moved out of the Lower East Side in 1968, and wound up in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia, on a very green side street along the edge of a hill that feels a million miles from anywhere. An old row house became the Sun Ra Arkestral Institute, a place to practice at all hours, in order to be ready. “One day it will happen,” Sun Ra said at the time. “It could be happening now—that a voice from another dimension will speak to earth. You might as well practice and be prepared for it.” The Arkestra practiced and eventually toured the world, the row house filling with gig posters, its plaster walls soaking up decades of music from a band that, under Sun Ra’s leadership, had set out on a course of inter-dimensional travel, using chords and time signatures and equations rather than rocket fuel. Sun Ra died in 1993, and his saxophone players replaced him as director—first John Gilmore, and then Marshall Allen, who last month turned a hundred.

Allen bounded down the stairs to greet a visitor the other day, in between birthday celebrations near and far—near being Philadelphia, where a public performance of the Arkestra was followed by a party for family and friends at a club called Solar Myth, named for a Sun Ra-ism. Across the Atlantic Ocean, during the Venice Biennale, a celebration occurred in the form of a site-specific video installation in an abandoned sixteenth-century church and hospital; it is directed by Ari Benjamin Meyers, a Berlin-based composer, who met Allen in person in 2022, in Philadelphia, and was, like a lot of people, “blown away.”

“Let’s sit here,” Allen said, finding a chair in the Arkestral Institute’s kitchen. A second seat was borrowed from the rehearsal room, where a bust of a pharaoh watched an old drum kit and an upright piano. Allen is lithe and sinewy and, in a Sun Ra T-shirt and cap, didn’t seem much changed from the guy on sax in the seventies or eighties, blowing and chanting and dancing. He reminisced about growing up in Louisville, Kentucky, where, in the

nineteen-thirties, at a state institution for Black children, he was given an oboe. “I wanted the clarinet, but they’d run out,” he said.

During the Second World War, he served in the Army’s 92nd Infantry Division, known as the Buffalo Soldiers, and he remembered playing sax in a victory parade in Reims, France, after which, on a general’s recommendation, he studied music at a Paris conservatory. “I saw everybody in Paris,” he said. “Eartha Kitt, James Moody, Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Parker.” Other Arkestra members were knocking around the row house as he talked, and Knoel Scott came into the kitchen. Scott, who has played sax and sung and danced with the Arkestra since 1979, nodded toward Allen when he mentioned Parker. “He played drums for Charlie Parker,” Scott said.

Allen started hanging around Sun Ra after the war, in Chicago, while working at a camera shop. “Sun Ra was a master musician,” Allen said, and by way of explanation he sang a few bars from “Shadow World,” a composition that shifts between time signatures. After Allen expressed interest in his music, Sun Ra asked him to play, a pattern that has continued for the band up through recent members, like Tara Middleton, who started playing violin with the Arkestra in 2012 and is now its singer. Players visited from the neighborhood, too, like Rufus Harley, the jazz bagpiper. Allen went on, “I mean, we’ve been all over the world, all these years, but what’s great about Germantown, see, is it’s nice and quiet, so you can study, and you can play your horn.”

“Marshall Allen, 99, Astronaut,” the film in Venice, shows Allen doing just that, in the row house, working out a tune on his sax, then in the Franklin Institute’s Fels Planetarium. In the planetarium, Allen plays his trademark electronic valve instrument, or E.V.I., a kind of synthesized sax that sounds like communications from deep space. A digital time stamp counts back in time through moon, star, and sun positions, starting a century ago, at May 25, 1924, as Allen, in a sequinned vest, floats through the planetarium’s galaxies. “His

energy seems to be a renewable resource,” Mark Christman, the director of Philadelphia’s Ars Nova Workshop, which programs music at Solar Myth, said.

As far as living a century goes, Allen believes that music charted his route, and that it continues to do so, as do Sun Ra’s equations. “Create a better music and you create a better world,” Allen said. “And people hear that. They do. We were talking about the twenty-first century in the twentieth, and people were saying, ‘The twenty-first century? Man, that’s about forty, fifty years from now!’ But now we’re here.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the venue of the Venice video installation.

Robert Sullivan is the author of, most recently, “*Double Exposure*.”

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[Election Season](#)

The Dominican Election That Took Over Upper Manhattan

A newly elected representative of the Dominican Republic's overseas population gives advice to the U.S. on orderly elections and muses on the Yankees star Juan Soto.

By [Nicolas Niarchos](#)

June 24, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

A few months ago, political posters began proliferating on the lampposts of upper Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens, and parts of Brooklyn. They could be flummoxing: these candidates weren't

running as Republicans or Democrats. Who was Leidy Laura, resplendent in an acid-green jacket? Or Cirilo Moronta, smiling in a business suit and tinted horn-rimmed spectacles? Some consulting of a Spanish dictionary confirmed that they were candidates in the election of the Dominican Republic. They were running to be *diputado* or *diputada de ultramar*, one of seven congressmen or congresswomen who represent the sizable Dominican population overseas.

“More than forty years in service of the community,” read the poster for Moronta, a businessman and longtime community organizer. “Contributing here and there!” But *where* exactly was Moronta? His face was everywhere, but there was no detailed public schedule of his appearances. He occasionally posted videos online—waving the flag of the incumbent Modern Revolutionary Party from the sunroof of a Range Rover; singing the Party’s anthem; being endorsed by Julián Tavárez, a journeyman Major League Baseball player. At Broadway and 136th Street, a semi-official Moronta campaign office had opened up, with a loudspeaker blasting *bachata* music. But Moronta wasn’t there, and volunteers were keeping mum about his whereabouts.

Dominicans overseas have been able to vote in general elections since 2004, and for their own representatives since 2012. There are about eleven million people in the country and about 2.8 million Dominicans abroad—nine hundred and thirty-five thousand of whom live in New York, making it a key battleground state in any election. (“There’s almost as many Dominicans in New York as in the capital, Santo Domingo,” Carolina Beltré, another candidate, pointed out.)

The day before the election, rumors circulated suggesting that Moronta was at a restaurant he owns, 809 Bar & Grill, on Dyckman Street. A man at a table outside was handing out flyers for Luis Abinader, the Dominican Republic’s President, who was running for reëlection. Abinader is also the leader of Moronta’s

party. Was Moronta inside? No, Moronta wasn't there; no further comment at this time.

The polls would open early the next day: maybe Moronta would be found voting nearby, on Sherman Avenue? The next morning, outside the Washington Heights Academy polling station, a group of Dominican gentlemen were arguing about the candidates.

"Luis Abinader is the best for the Dominican Republic!" one man shouted. He didn't know where Moronta was.

"He's the best President in the *Americas*," another man added. He didn't know where Moronta was, either.



"Don't let him get to you. I'm sure there are lots of people you didn't invite."

Cartoon by P. C. Vey

A man dressed in a turquoise-and-white patterned shirt and Y2K-style sunglasses was less impressed with Abinader. "He took forty thousand million dollars in four years," the man said, referring to murky claims about the administration's accrual of foreign debt. "Nobody knows where that money is." (Abinader, a former hotelier, maintains that all funds have been accounted for.)

A few hours after the polls closed, the votes started trickling in. Leidy Laura Núñez was making an unexpectedly strong showing. Maybe Moronta could be found at his restaurant now? The door security was lighter, perhaps because bottles of sweet Luscious Vines wine were being cracked open in the hope of a victory. The room was crowded. At the back: Moronta.

The candidate, illuminated by a halo of purple neon light, sat on a chair, watching the results on his phone. He had swapped out his business suit for a white guayabera and Hugo Boss sneakers. People sipped wine and resisted the temptation to bother him. The results came in at around 11 p.m. Moronta had bested the competition. The room erupted with cheers. Moronta waved his hand: he had won, and it was time for interviews. “I see my community going in the right direction,” he said. “We’ve had representation for twelve years, but none of the congressmen ever opened an office. I’m going to have to go back and forth every time there’s a session.” He smiled. “I have to go to Congress, man.”

Moronta’s campaign promises included establishing a community office for expat Dominicans and education programs for the diaspora.

The election had come off without a hitch. Could the U.S. learn from the orderly vote? “We Dominicans do enjoy it,” Moronta said with a laugh. “We know how to behave.” Who did he like for the U.S. election in the fall? “I don’t know, it’s kinda tough right now,” he said. “But here in New York everybody’s going for Democrats.”

What were Moronta’s thoughts on Juan Soto, the Dominican Yankees star who will become a free agent after the season? “We Dominicans, we *are* baseball,” he said. “Every time you see a young kid sign for over a hundred million, two hundred million, it makes you feel proud.” He went on, “We already earned our place. Sometimes you feel like the Dominican Republic is a state of the United States.” ♦

Nicolas Niarchos has contributed to the magazine since 2014 and received a 2023 Edward R. Murrow Award for his work on the New Yorker Radio Hour.

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The Doctor Tom Brady and Leonardo DiCaprio Call When They Get Hurt

Neal ElAttrache, the surgeon to the stars of sport and screen, can fix anything.

By [Zach Helfand](#)

June 24, 2024



He can be “a bit of a self-promoter,” a friend said. “But he’s also, like, an artist.”

Photograph by Michael Friberg for The New Yorker

If you spend enough time in certain circles in Los Angeles, you might get the impression that the most popular person in town is Neal ElAttrache. Officially, ElAttrache is an orthopedic surgeon at

the Cedars-Sinai Kerlan-Jobe Institute for sports medicine. Unofficially, there are people who regard him as a village miracle man. One of his patients, for instance, is Vasiliy Lomachenko, one of the best boxers in the world. After his wins, he likes to credit God. In a bout in 2018, he threw a combination of punches that yanked his right shoulder out of its socket. It hurt so badly that he bit through his mouth guard. “For a long time, I wondered if I could box again at the same level,” Lomachenko told me. He went to ElAttrache. The doctor operated on the shoulder, then undertook the more delicate work of helping Lomachenko rebuild trust in his arm. ElAttrache would take him out for lunch and counsel him on what punches to throw and when. Lomachenko won his second match back by knockout, a right hook to the skull. Afterward, he didn’t thank God. He thanked ElAttrache.

ElAttrache sees patients in a multi-story office building near LAX. After business hours, by phone, a stream of athletes and the otherwise famous or wealthy seek ElAttrache’s advice for free. He treats shoulders, elbows, knees, Achilles tendons, and the big muscles. Most surgeons are known for one specialty operation; ElAttrache’s fellow-surgeons consider him among the best in the world at many. “There’s very few of the upper-level-athlete injuries that we’re not going to be somehow involved in,” ElAttrache told me. “Over time, it’s gotten to be, just, a lot.” One week this spring, his off-the-books consultations included an N.B.A. star in the playoffs, a future W.N.B.A. Hall of Famer, an ace pitcher and an All-Star infielder, a star quarterback and a receiver, a Grand Slam-winning tennis player, a World Cup-winning women’s-soccer player, a prominent actor, at least one billionaire, several fringe-level athletes, and a high-ranking member of a Middle Eastern royal family. This was a fairly slow week. The Jets quarterback Aaron Rodgers, a close friend, was texting ElAttrache videos of exercises that he was doing for his left Achilles, which ElAttrache had repaired in September. Rodgers had just had dinner at ElAttrache’s house with Sean McVay, the coach of the Rams, who

considers ElAttrache a father figure. ElAttrache is the team physician for the Rams and the Dodgers, but one of his nurses said, “Lately, we’ve been joking that he’s the team doctor for all the teams.” (Only patients who consented to the presence of a reporter have been named.)

Athletes seeing ElAttrache often find themselves, quite suddenly, at a low point in their careers, maybe their lives. Many have described their bond with ElAttrache as a singular relationship. “It was the first time I ever felt, in the football business, someone being completely honest with me,” the receiver Odell Beckham, Jr., told me. ElAttrache often becomes a fixture in his patients’ lives. He did Tom Brady’s knee surgery in 2008, then regularly flew to Boston during the rehab. Brady now considers him a best friend.

ElAttrache was one of Kobe Bryant’s few confidants. Rob Pelinka, Bryant’s longtime agent, told me, “When those types of individuals meet one another, they just know. That was his guy.” Surgery is perhaps the only time a superstar must relinquish control completely to someone else. Bryant once spent the night before a shoulder surgery shooting around at the private basketball court of Patrick Soon-Shiong, the owner of the Los Angeles Times. “My wife was screaming at him, saying, ‘Kobe, what are you doing?’” Soon-Shiong once recalled. “He says, ‘It’s broken. Neal’s going to fix it tomorrow anyway.’”

ElAttrache likes to host patients and friends at his house near Benedict Canyon, above Beverly Hills, for Cuban cigars and Pappy Van Winkle bourbon. “My practice, it’s almost like a continuum,” he told me. “There’s no beginning to the day, there’s no end of the day. I guess it’s very personal.” Sensitive conversations happen within the confines of doctor-patient confidentiality. A friend who spends time with ElAttrache, Brady, and Stephen Curry said, “They share, you might even say, their soul with him.” Walker Buehler, a pitcher for the Dodgers who often dines at ElAttrache’s house, sometimes with other eminences, told me, “The funny part about

that whole thing is, everyone who's there wants to talk to Dr. ElAttrache more than anything."

In ElAttrache's office, his staff keeps a whiteboard listing patients and examination rooms. Sometimes a person will point to it and say something like "This is Ryan Seacrest's friend." Scores of framed autographed photos and notes from patients line the walls: Alex Morgan ("Thinking back to the World Cup, I was only able to get through it playing every game because of you"), Leonardo DiCaprio ("Can't thank you enough for my new knee"). Charlize Theron told me, "I run into people all the time on my movie sets: 'Oh, Neal did this for me!'"

In his younger years, ElAttrache could have passed for a star on "General Hospital." He has intense green eyes, a prominent chin, and an imposing chest. As a freshman at Notre Dame, he won the school's light-heavyweight boxing championship. Now sixty-four, he effuses a certain Dos Equis-man masculinity. Ringo Starr told me that he consulted ElAttrache in 2002. "He was there with the intake form, doing it himself," Starr said. "Name? Age? I just burst out laughing, because it looked like Elvis was doing the name check." Starr's shoulders were in bad shape. "I was going to some homeopathic people in England," he said. "One guy even injected O₃ into me. Woo-ooh. Anyway, none of it worked." A family member suggested ElAttrache, who found bone spurs that no one else had seen, and operated successfully. Starr had been distressed that he couldn't lift his arms to flash peace signs onstage. "And now!" he said, demonstrating for me triumphantly. After the surgery, ElAttrache stayed with Starr and his wife, Barbara, at their house in Surrey. Starr and ElAttrache have attended each other's birthday parties. Last year, Barbara got hurt in a riding accident, and ElAttrache treated her as well. "She's doing good!" Starr said.

One day recently, the whiteboard said "Patiño, Room 11." This was Luis Patiño, a friendly twenty-four-year-old Colombian pitcher for the San Diego Padres, who'd complained of arm pain. "I felt a

tingly feeling in my elbow every time I threw,” he told me. Patiño wore ripped jeans and shiny Jordans. He sat on an examination bench, eyes wide, swinging his legs off the edge.

ElAttrache walked in wearing a white coat over a blue blazer. He has a regal nose, which can make him appear imperious when he looks down, though he rarely does. “If I’m delivering bad news, I’m at their level or lower,” he told me of his patients. He sat next to Patiño on the bench and patted his knee. (“It immediately makes someone feel like they’re being protected.”) He pulled up MRI scans on a computer and talked Patiño through the images.

ElAttrache saw damage at the top of the ulnar collateral ligament, or U.C.L., a two-inch band that holds the upper and lower arm together. ElAttrache prefers to avoid surgery. They discussed Patiño’s pitching repertoire. Then Patiño removed his shirt so that ElAttrache could test his range of motion. Below his right shoulder, Patiño had a tattoo that said “*TRUST NO ONE*.” ElAttrache later told me, “His tattoo may say that, but I promise you, by the time I operate on him, I could tell him I’m going to do whatever crazy thing I’d want to do and he’ll let me do it.”

Thirty minutes had gone by. A team trainer, who occasionally helped translate, said, “He’s asking if he’s gonna get surgery.”

ElAttrache was facing Patiño from a stool, which he’d positioned down low. “I think he needs it,” he said. “Do you think you need it?”

Patiño laughed. “If you have a knife now, I’m ready,” he said.

Very few things exist that haven’t, at some point, injured a baseball player. Players have got hurt putting on shirts, putting on pants, taking off shirts, taking off pants, washing dishes, and eating a doughnut. At least nine players since 1985 have missed games after a painful sneeze. For decades, sports medicine was little help. Not that long ago, pitchers had teeth pulled to treat their arms. Players

played until their bodies broke. Years of pitching mangled Sandy Koufax's arm so severely that his tailor had to shorten his left sleeve. He retired at thirty. Mickey Mantle, as a parlor trick, would twist his bum kneecap around, "as if opening a pickle jar," his [biographer](#) Jane Leavy wrote. The strongest and fastest athletes tended to destroy their own bodies; the survivors remained small and slow. There was a time when many N.F.L. linemen were, on average, built like Jimmy Kimmel.

In 1974, Tommy John, of the Dodgers, threw a pitch and, as he has recounted, "felt as if I had left my arm someplace else." He'd shredded his U.C.L. Frank Jobe, the Dodgers' team physician, performed an experimental operation. He drilled holes in two bones at the elbow and transplanted a tendon from John's wrist, looping it in a figure eight through the eyelets as if hitching a boat to a mooring—a MacGyvered ligament. An earlier generation of doctors, operating on knees, had achieved moderate results, but Jobe's procedure was a breakthrough. John, whose career had seemed over, returned better than before. The operation, now common, is known as Tommy John surgery.

About a decade later, ElAttrache entered medical residency at the University of Pittsburgh. Many of the big-shot surgeons were in the cardiothoracic department. ElAttrache was talented and ambitious, and was drawn to the department. He assisted on one of the first pediatric heart-and-lung transplants. There was a monthlong span when he slept at home just once. An older surgeon pulled him aside, hoping to give him some perspective. "We went through the I.C.U. that night," ElAttrache said. "His message to me was 'You know, six or seven of these kids are not getting out of here. Starting tomorrow, you're going to come with me and talk to the families.' " ElAttrache went on, "My ego was so strong on one hand but fragile on the other. All I could see was fucking misery. And then I see that my orthopedic surgical colleagues are dealing with people that

break, and you fix them, and they get back to being healthy and happy.”



“Once upon a midnight dreary, while I waited weak and weary, Over many a package of goods galore—While I nodded nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping, As if Amazon gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door—But it’s a stupid bird and nothing more.”

Cartoon by Brooke Bourgeois

ElAttrache took a fellowship with Jobe and his clinic partner, Robert Kerlan, in Los Angeles. Jobe was a surgical artist. “It was a waltz, everything moved in a certain way,” James Bradley, the Steelers’ team physician, who worked with ElAttrache at Pittsburgh and at Kerlan-Jobe, told me. “Neal had that early on.” Kerlan, meanwhile, suffered from a debilitating form of arthritis, which eventually prevented him from performing surgery, but patients trusted nobody more. He was a creature of Los Angeles. He liked to bet the horses at Hollywood Park with his friends Fred Astaire and Burt Bacharach. “I remember one day Kerlan called up to the fellows’ room yelling and screaming,” ElAttrache said. “And so, of course, I come running down to his office. And Clint Eastwood and Bob Newhart are there, and Kerlan said, ‘I told you he was fast!’ ”

As sports doctors were becoming more effective, athletes were becoming more dependent. There were few high-level players in the nineties and two-thousands who didn't visit James Andrews, an orthopedist then based in Birmingham, Alabama, who was one of ElAttrache's mentors. Andrews treated Michael Jordan, Albert Pujols, Jack Nicklaus, and most of the Yankees' cornerstones: Roger Clemens, Andy Pettitte, Bernie Williams, Jorge Posada, Mariano Rivera. Andrews flew in a Falcon 10 jet and had a yacht that competed for a spot in the America's Cup. He told me that he would perform about a thousand surgeries per year.

No players have come to rely on surgery as much as pitchers. In the past twenty years, the average major-league fastball has become five miles an hour faster. For the U.C.L., speed destroys. ElAttrache has operated on elbows whose tissue resembled spaghetti. Today, more than a third of pitchers on major-league rosters have undergone Tommy John surgery. At the beginning of this season, more star pitchers were on the injured list than not. "Here's the problem," Andrews told me. "We've made it too good an operation. They're not scared about blowing their ligament out, because they think it's easily fixed."

Each year, more and more athletes show up in ElAttrache's office, a parade of cartoonishly strapping young men and women. When I visited, I'd sit next to them at the clinic, feeling like a Schwinn in an F1 lineup. The delts. The quads. It's typical now for the football patients to arrive with knees looking like explosion sites, with multiple structures blown out. The limbs' owners tended to understand what it meant—a hundred million dollars at stake in a couple of inches of stretchy tissue. As Andrew Friedman, who runs the Dodgers' baseball operations, put it, "They're fearing their mortality." He meant the end of their careers, not their lives. But an injury could also prompt wonder at the miracle and the precariousness of sinew and bone.

The most connected players and agents are in touch with ElAttrache regularly. “In a way, he helps them map out their career,” one person who knows him said. Four of the last five major-league-baseball M.V.P.s are ElAttrache patients. Brady won more Super Bowls after his knee surgery than before it. “If it didn’t go well, I mean, it’s pretty self-explanatory,” Brady told me. (Several Patriots fans called ElAttrache’s office and threatened revenge if the surgery went poorly.)

Last September, ElAttrache performed a second elbow surgery on [Shohei Ohtani](#), the Japanese superstar. (After his first surgery, his fastball got faster; he threw one pitch 103.5 miles an hour.) Until recently, surgical “revisions” meant the end of a pitcher’s career. A few months after Ohtani’s second surgery, the Dodgers signed him for seven hundred million dollars. Later, they signed another Japanese pitcher, Yoshinobu Yamamoto, to a contract worth more than three hundred million. ElAttrache reviewed both men’s physicals. Sam Reeves, a friend of his, told me, “The Dodgers are betting a billion dollars that he’s right.”

For some in Hollywood, having an in with ElAttrache is a status symbol akin to a membership at Riviera country club (where ElAttrache himself is a member, with a ten handicap). ElAttrache’s earliest patients included more actors than athletes. In the nineties, he treated Helen Hunt and Paul Reiser while they were starring in “Mad About You.” He was invited to sit at their table at the Golden Globes. A few years ago, Reiser pulled his biceps while moving a couch and saw ElAttrache again. Afterward, he wrote a standup bit about a friend referring him to an orthopedist: “He said, ‘I got you my guy. My guy is the best, don’t even look around, I got the guy.’ ” He continues, “That can’t be! They can’t all be the best.” When I asked Reiser about this recently, he said, of ElAttrache, “The thing is, he *is* the best!”

ElAttrache’s office has a separate entrance for celebrities that bypasses the waiting room. They wait, instead, in his personal

office. “He does not rush,” Teri Gonzalez, his executive assistant of thirty-one years, told me. “Patients are waiting and they’re upset. We offer them coffee, water, snacks. But once he walks into that room and starts talking, everybody calms down.”

ElAttrache has been known to answer patient calls at all hours of the night. He did Kobe Bryant’s Achilles surgery early on a Saturday morning, with a few hours’ notice. (Directly beforehand, he had inserted a metal plate to fix the broken collarbone of the Dodgers pitcher Zack Greinke.) The baseball agent Scott Boras keeps tabs on ElAttrache’s vacation plans. Lon Rosen, an executive for the Dodgers, told me that a few years ago his wife, Laurie, got hurt playing pickleball on Memorial Day weekend: “I call Neal. He’s in the South of France. He goes, ‘I’ll get her an MRI.’ So on Memorial Day Saturday she gets an MRI. Ten minutes later, my phone rings. It’s Neal. ‘She’s got a torn Achilles tendon.’ I go, ‘Neal, you’re in the South of France. Laurie is still in the tube!’ And then he got back and did the surgery.”

A few years ago, ElAttrache stopped accepting workers’-compensation claims, and began charging higher rates; he has a contract with teams outlining his unique prices. (He said that workers’ compensation was not meant for professional athletes, whose cases are time-intensive, and that the new model allows him to be more involved.) “We thought maybe it would cut his schedule, but nope, no, it did not,” Gonzalez said. Professional and college athletes make up roughly three-quarters of his practice, but he also sees high schoolers and non-V.I.P. non-athletes. Players, agents, and the well connected can get an appointment by texting his staffer Sidney Jones or ElAttrache directly. (He used a BlackBerry until a few years ago, when it stopped working, and was forced to switch to an iPhone.) Others have to try their luck calling cold, or be willing to wait for months.

For decades, [Pat Kingsley](#) was the most powerful publicist in Hollywood. Friends referred her to ElAttrache after an injury

twenty years ago. “I had hurt my knee in Taipei when I was with Richard Gere, because some thugs from the mainland were trying to get after him, and I fell on some stairs,” she told me. (“He’s banned in China, because of Tibet,” she said of Gere.) Several directors and producers called ElAttrache on her behalf. “Finally, they gave up and they gave me an appointment,” she said. “God, was he good-looking. He had these great green eyes.”

Friends call ElAttrache “Doc Hollywood.” “He has a reputation as a bit of a self-promoter,” one told me. “But he’s also, like, an artist.” Some of his famous patients were inherited from Kerlan and Jobe. Rodney Dangerfield was one. “I’d visit him in Centinela Hospital,” ElAttrache said. “He never went a day in his adult life without smoking dope. He’d take wet towels and put them under the door.” Others—Keanu Reeves, Travis Scott, Finneas—came later. In his office is a statue of a Black fist. “That’s the Black Excellence Award,” he told me. “Sean Combs gave it to me.” ElAttrache once flew to Spain, where “Moulin Rouge!” was being filmed, to treat Nicole Kidman’s knee. “He milks it,” Kingsley, who represented Kidman, said.

Of course, other doctors are capable of treating sprained ankles and balky shoulders. “I don’t know that I *need* the best,” Reiser told me. “I was never looking to be Tom Brady good. My standard was if I could eat soup without spilling.” ElAttrache said, “If you’re taking care of somebody that can go anywhere and they go to you, it’s some sort of weird affirmation.” He hastened to add that what he finds most rewarding is successfully treating an athlete on the fringe of viability. “If his life takes one of two very, very different trajectories and it’s because of something I did, it’s fucking unbelievable,” he said. “It’s almost so good it’s selfish.”

One day, when I was at the clinic, the whiteboard read “Apatow, Room 11” (Judd, shoulder), “Beckham, Room 7” (Odell, knee checkup), and “Ruscha, Room 5.” ElAttrache treats the artist Ed Ruscha’s entire family. In between examinations, he told me that he

has purchased some Ruscha works. “One of them is hanging in LACMA right now,” he said.

Ruscha told me, “I was on a yacht in Sardinia and I was windsurfing, and I slipped off the board into water about ten inches deep, and I heard this crunch.” Another friend who was on the yacht, which was owned by the billionaire real-estate developer Donald Bren, sent him to ElAttrache. He diagnosed a torn A.C.L., and performed the surgery. Years later, he did both rotator cuffs so that Ruscha could keep painting. “He’s just been a real friend ever since,” Ruscha said. Ruscha has brought him to his studio. ElAttrache has acquired two of the artist’s pieces, titled “Muscles in Motion” and “Bones in Motion.”

Patiño, the Padres pitcher, arrived at ElAttrache’s office for surgery, followed by his girlfriend and his mini goldendoodle, Rayo. ElAttrache greeted him in blue scrubs, with bootees and a hair cap. An anesthesiologist put Patiño under. ElAttrache sits in a swivel chair while he operates. Above him is a canopy of bright lights. Everyone else stands around him. There are usually five other people in the room: an anesthesiologist, an assistant surgeon, a nurse, and two scrub techs. ElAttrache likes to play music; he lets the patients choose. He conducts the room: he opens a hand, a technician places an instrument. The space is called the operating theatre, but it can also be thought of as a stadium. The pressure, the ego, the man calling out instructions as his colleagues scurry about him—I am not the first to be reminded of a quarterback.

ElAttrache made an incision in Patiño’s elbow. He removed a calcified piece of bone that had embedded in the ligament. The tissue wasn’t shredded beyond salvaging—a beleaguered rigatoni, maybe, but not spaghetti. ElAttrache repaired the ligament by crisscrossing sutures into the tear, as if lacing a shoe. Then he did his typical Tommy John procedure—the snipping of the wrist tendon, the weaving through the elbow. He laid the new graft into the shoelaces, and then tied it all tight. Patiño’s new ligament was

now double reinforced—"belt and suspenders," as ElAttrache put it. A hand surgeon, Steven Shin, did the delicate work of relocating the ulnar nerve, the cause of Patiño's tingling, by tucking it into a fatty pouch. ElAttrache sewed the elbow shut. The whole thing took about ninety minutes.

Patiño woke up in a recovery room, groggy and babbling about his favorite Colombian soccer team. ElAttrache debriefed Patiño's agency representatives and a Padres trainer. He sat in a chair, with an arm slung over the back. He appeared deeply relaxed, almost blissful. It would not have looked off if he had been smoking a cigarette. "I've been playing around with a couple different ways that I like to do it, and this turned out the best of all," ElAttrache said. "He had a beautiful tendon on his wrist and forearm. Very satisfying."

The success of the surgery depends on the shoelace suture. It has to be tight enough to hold but flexible enough to give the pitcher his accustomed range of motion. Improvisation is sometimes required. Lon Rosen, the Dodgers executive, once needed elbow surgery and insisted on staying awake, against ElAttrache's advice. "All of a sudden, he goes, 'Get another pillow,'" Rosen recalled. "I said, 'That doesn't sound like a surgery thing.' He says, 'That's why I wanted to put you to sleep.'" ElAttrache practices on cadavers to refine his touch with suturing. "It's very unforgiving," he said. "It's a fine-tuning of millimetres."

As surgeons have scrambled to keep up with increasingly catastrophic injuries, ElAttrache has invented many of their tools himself. In 1999, he devised a socket-and-screw system that could fasten a tendon or a ligament to bone. He took his idea to Reinhold Schmieding, who owns the medical-device company Arthrex. "He nicknamed that first patent 'orthopedic duct tape,'" ElAttrache said. It's used in feet, ankles, knees, elbows, thumbs, shoulders, and spines. Arthrex pays him about seven million dollars a year to license his creations.

Last year, Aaron Rodgers tore his Achilles on his third play of the season. Rodgers remembered going into an emotional spiral. “The tailspin is: I’m thirty-nine years old, my career is over,” he said. Half of all quarterbacks with the injury are forced to retire. He was carted off to the locker room. As he lay on the trainers’ table, he took out his phone. “I typed in ‘Kobe Bryant Achilles,’ ” he said. “I had forgotten that Neal did his surgery. I literally got off of Google and texted Neal.” A couple of years earlier, ElAttrache, building on the work of a Scottish surgeon named Gordon Mackay, came up with a new remedy for a torn Achilles, by stringing a cable of sutures down through the tendon, affixed to Arthrex anchors below, like a suspension bridge. It allowed the native tendon to heal naturally while bearing enough weight for rehab to begin almost immediately.

The first player to have the procedure was Cam Akers, a running back for the Rams, who got hurt in July, 2021. The injury usually required at least nine months of recovery time. “I thought he was for sure out for the year,” McVay, the Rams coach, told me. ElAttrache had him ready within four months. They waited another month just to be safe. Akers returned for the Rams’ Super Bowl run and was the team’s primary rusher.

Rodgers wondered if an even faster recovery was possible. “I basically said, ‘Neal, What’s the craziest timeline that you could come up with?’ ” he told me. They decided to find out. Rodgers read up on anatomy. ElAttrache monitored his rehab daily. By mid-December, the Jets were playing Miami, trying to keep their playoff hopes alive. Rodgers was hoping to return the following week. It would’ve been three months since he underwent surgery. “I had cleared him to play,” ElAttrache said.

Last month, ElAttrache had a spot at a table for “The Roast of Tom Brady,” the live comedy show on Netflix, but he preferred to watch from home. He lives in a big Spanish-style house in the hills, at the end of a long gated drive, that he bought in 2017, for more than

fifteen million dollars. Justin Bieber and Dwayne Johnson have houses nearby. ElAttrache's brother-in-law Sylvester Stallone used to live in the area, too, but he recently moved to Florida. (The Stallones sold the house to Adele, for fifty-eight million dollars.) The ElAttraches' daughters—they have three—and two of the Stallones' had just returned from the Stagecoach music festival, where they'd stayed in Tom Brady's house in the desert. ElAttrache smoked a cigar and watched the show in front of the biggest home television I have ever seen. He winced at the first of many divorce jokes. "Some of this stuff was supposed to be off limits, because of the kids," he said.

He propped open a door to a balcony. A pleasant breeze blew in, and light glinted off the hills. Personal chefs downstairs were making tacos. ElAttrache had his feet up. Brady's giant face, on the giant TV, seemed to be devoid of any fat. His skin looked almost like a teen-ager's. One of his roasters was Drew Bledsoe, the quarterback whom Brady replaced after a brutal hit put him in the hospital.

ElAttrache moved to the kitchen for dinner with his wife, Tricia, a former O.R. nurse. The two met on ElAttrache's first day at Kerlan-Jobe; both were engaged to other people. Four years later, they married. ElAttrache's practice is a kind of family business. Charlize Theron told me, "My mom broke a bone in her foot playing tennis. It happened at five, I called him at seven or eight, and he just said, 'Come by the house.' Trish and the girls were there, and I was, like, 'Sorry!' He was looking at her foot in the living room. I think they were about to go to dinner."



“The city never fails to excite after two hours of traffic.”

Cartoon by Amy Hwang

He sometimes puts up patients at his house after surgery—the Dodgers pitcher Clayton Kershaw, the Rams receiver Cooper Kupp, the Cowboys defensive lineman Mazi Smith. “I don’t like somebody to come in and just go to a hotel,” ElAttrache told me. “I’m not going to stick them in an Uber and wait for the concierge at a hotel to tuck them in.”

Tricia usually looks after the guests. “Laura Ingraham from Fox stayed over,” she said as we ate. (While I was at the clinic, ElAttrache brought in the book “Government Gangsters: The Deep State, the Truth, and the Battle for Our Democracy,” by the former Donald Trump adviser Kash Patel, as a gag gift for a liberal-leaning staffer.) Ingraham blew out her knee last year while skiing in Aspen. She’d met ElAttrache through a mutual friend; in June of 2020, he hosted a dinner for her birthday, and invited a group of friends who included Mel Gibson. “Recovery was actually fun, if that’s possible,” Ingraham said. “I did my podcast from there with ice bags around my legs.”

Andrews, ElAttrache’s early mentor, told me, “A lot of professors would tell you that you shouldn’t become friends with your

patients, because it may make you make the wrong decision. Personally, I think that's wrong." ElAttrache mused to me, "Where does the familiarity with a patient begin and end? I don't know anymore. It seems it goes to the depth it needs to go to."

The intimacy is useful during rehab, which can have as much to do with psychology as with physiology. "It has to be complete trust," ElAttrache said. He likes his patients to recuperate locally. Recently, I visited his preferred physical therapist, Heather Milligan, who has an office outside Santa Monica. Roughly half the space is used by professional athletes and V.I.P.s, who run on antigravity treadmills and do weight training on blood-flow-restriction machines, and the other half is for the rest of the population, who'd lately been showing up with a lot of Achilles injuries. "Pickleball," Milligan said. ElAttrache visits the rehab clinic on Fridays and Saturdays, and likes to be heavily involved. "He is at your house checking in, he is at your first physical-therapy appointments," Arnold Schwarzenegger, who had his shoulder done by ElAttrache, told me. [Schwarzenegger](#) chose ElAttrache on the recommendation of Stallone, who happened to have a shoulder surgery of his own scheduled the same day; they were both preparing to film the action movie "Escape Plan." "They wanted to hang out together in the recovery room," ElAttrache said. "Literally, one gurney ran into the other." At the first rehab appointment, ElAttrache introduced Schwarzenegger to Milligan. "He told me he wouldn't hand me over to just any physical therapist," Schwarzenegger said. He and Milligan started dating shortly after his therapy ended.

In 2021, ElAttrache worked intensively with the golfer Brooks Koepka, who had shattered his knee so badly that it hung sideways. ElAttrache did a procedure similar to the one he'd later do for Rodgers. At that point, he hadn't tried it on a knee. The closest he had come was a surgery he did for the rapper Travis Scott, who'd injured himself during a concert. Koepka had one request: he

wanted to play at the Masters, less than four weeks later. Rehab began immediately. Milligan took Koepka to the driving range at Riviera, nearby, so she and ElAttrache could make sure that his knee was sound, and that he trusted it. He made it back for Augusta.

Almost all of ElAttrache's friends believe that his philosophy on the doctor-patient dynamic comes from his family. ElAttrache grew up in Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania, a small town outside Pittsburgh nicknamed Helltown, in part because of the glow from its coke furnaces. ElAttrache's mother, Vera, was a nurse. "She looked just like Grace Kelly," Bradley, the Steelers doctor, told me. ElAttrache's father, Selim, was born in Syria. The extent of ElAttrache's knowledge of the al-Atrash clan, as they were known, is that they were a prominent Druze family. In fact, one patriarch, Sultan, led the Great Syrian Revolt against the French, in the nineteen-twenties. Sultan was striking, with penetrating eyes. As a Druze, he considered hospitality sacrosanct. Hostilities with the French began in earnest when a man en route to Sultan's villa was arrested as a suspected insurrectionist. Sultan considered the man his guest and begged for his release. Rebuffed, Sultan ambushed a French convoy. He eventually routed an entire French column so decisively that the commander of the colonial forces killed himself on the spot.

Selim was sent to study at a Jesuit boarding school outside Beirut. (ElAttrache was raised Lutheran.) Years later, he began an orthopedic practice in Mount Pleasant. He was known for drawing strikingly detailed skeletal diagrams on his patients' casts. He harbored hopes that ElAttrache, his eldest child, would one day practice with him. When Kerlan was recruiting ElAttrache to Los Angeles, he visited Selim to ask for his blessing, "like he was asking to marry him," Tricia said. Selim and Vera also put up patients at their home. Many were members of the United Mine Workers. Some couldn't afford to pay. Selim worked on the barter

system. One family owned a hardware-and-clothing store and paid in boots. Others gave food. After ElAttrache got married, one patient paid Selim with a llama that he'd named Tricia. ElAttrache told me, "You'd watch how my dad and my mother were involved with people that were peripheral acquaintances, but the depth of intimacy that they instantly had—it struck me that there's no profession where you had the privilege of having that kind of experience with another human being."

Walker Buehler and his wife, McKenzie, are over at ElAttrache's house enough that Buehler's friends joke that he is part of the doctor's family. "Everyone at the field calls him my uncle Neal," Buehler told me. He was twenty-one when ElAttrache performed Tommy John surgery on him, in 2015. He recovered and became one of the best pitchers in the league, but over time the repeated trauma of pitching had partially calcified the flexor tendon and the U.C.L. at the elbow. Two years ago, he felt some strange sensations in his arm. "I made three throws," Buehler said. "I felt a popping, I felt like something went into my ligament, and I felt like something was cutting my ligament." (ElAttrache explained that the sensations were the result of a tear widening.) He needed Tommy John surgery again.

ElAttrache opened his clinic on a Saturday to examine him. "Me, my wife, and him were sitting in his office," Buehler said. "No one else was there." He went on, "Getting an answer quickly is really the only thing that can keep you from spiralling mentally—the panic of it." Buehler will be a free agent after this year. His health could mean a difference of a hundred million dollars or so. "You're thinking of the worst case over and over and over," he continued. "If I'm hurt, maybe I'm not the same again."

Two years later, in May, Buehler was scheduled to make his return to the major leagues. ElAttrache went to Dodger Stadium to see it. Beforehand, at his office, he passed by an autographed photo on the wall, from Buehler after his first surgery: "Thank you for wrapping

this elbow really tight.” ElAttrache considered it. “Maybe not tight enough!”

A patient’s return to the field is like a graduation day. ElAttrache recalled José Fernández, a dazzling young pitcher from Cuba, who played for the Miami Marlins before he [died](#) in a boating accident, in 2016. “Oh, I loved him,” ElAttrache said. He had come to ElAttrache for Tommy John surgery. Before the procedure, the ballplayer’s mother, with whom he’d made a near-fatal [escape](#) from Cuba, had accompanied him to the clinic for an appointment. “She had these big green eyes, looking at me,” ElAttrache said. “She said something in Spanish: Take care of my love, my *ojitos*—her eyes, her most loved thing.” When Fernández returned to playing, ElAttrache got a text in the middle of a game. “He said, ‘Boss, we did it,’ ” ElAttrache recalled. “I didn’t know what he was talking about.” Then Fernández sent him a screenshot, showing a pitch and a radar reading. “It was the first time he’d hit one hundred after Tommy John.”

At the stadium, ElAttrache went to his seats behind home plate and greeted some friends. Buehler had said that he didn’t want to see him in the clubhouse before the game. As Buehler took the field, ElAttrache peered out at the mound. “I have chills,” he said. He zipped up to a private suite, where McKenzie was hosting a watch party.

A slightly nervous celebration was under way. Tricia was already there, as was a large contingent of Buehler’s family and friends from Kentucky, his home state, including the horse trainer Bob Baffert. McKenzie was holding their three-month-old daughter. “Thanks for being here,” she told ElAttrache. In a more private moment, she turned to him and asked, “He’s still a big deal, right?”

“He’s still a big deal,” ElAttrache said.

The umpire called “Play ball,” and everyone in the suite got quiet. ElAttrache looked out at the field, with his hand covering his mouth. Buehler took a deep breath, reared back, and threw. ♦

Zach Helfand is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff.

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Onward and Upward with the Sciences

Would You Clone Your Dog?

We love our dogs for their individual characters—and yet cloning implies that we also believe their unique, unreproducible selves can, in fact, be reproduced.

By [Alexandra Horowitz](#)

June 24, 2024



*Since 2005, more than two thousand dogs have been cloned.
Photographs by Rose Marie Cromwell for The New Yorker*

Listen to this article.

A few miles off the highway in Hempstead, Long Island, on a gently curving street of tidy two-story homes and raked lawns, there is a sprawling ranch house with a back yard, a pool, and a large, netted enclosure, like an aviary, built to house seventeen cats. But when I drove there, on a bright, chilly fall day, I had not come to see the cats. I pulled in to the driveway, a screen door opened, and two small white dogs emerged, attached by harnesses and long leashes to John Mendola, a retired police officer in his fifties with a mild manner and a broad, kind face. (The house is his mother's; he lives in a smaller place nearby.) He introduced me to the dogs, Princess Ariel and Princess Jasmine. They were named for a deceased, much mourned dog named Princess—part Shih Tzu, part Lhasa Apso—whom they strongly resemble. As they should: they are Princess's clones.

Mendola took me inside and sat on a sofa, a new Princess on each side, while he told me about their forebear, a stray who was brought into the police precinct when he was on duty one day in 2006. "We had animals my whole life," he said. "I never had one that was so affectionate. She'd look at me and give me that soulful eye." He gave a sigh of satisfaction. "It was a special bond." As he spoke, he reached out and stroked Princess Jasmine reflexively.

In 2016, the original Princess was given a diagnosis of cancer, and Mendola was devastated. He had seen a television program about pet cloning, and, looking online, he found a company in Texas called ViaGen Pets & Equine. ViaGen could cryogenically preserve a pet's cells indefinitely and generate a new pet from the old cells, for a fee of fifty thousand dollars. Mendola sent off for one of ViaGen's biopsy kits, and, when Princess had surgery to remove a cancerous mass, he asked the vet to take a tissue sample, which he sent to the company.

Princess died in March, 2017, but Mendola spent months grieving before he made up his mind to go ahead with cloning her. Once he had made the decision, after ViaGen advertised a twenty-per-cent

discount, he travelled to a suburb of Austin to visit ViaGen's genetic-preservation site. "I saw the facility," he said. "I have a picture of it, and a little video of where the liquid nitrogen is." Standing outside the building where Princess's cells were cryopreserved, he said to himself, "They're in there. Your little ones are in there."

Mendola placed his order with ViaGen on the first anniversary of Princess's death. Eight months later, he went to LaGuardia Airport to meet the two resultant puppies. In a video taken of their meeting, Mendola starts tearing up as he grabs hold of them. "Are you my little Princesses?" he coos. Two months old, they squirm in his grip.

The little Princesses, now five, fussed as Mendola stroked them and tried to hold them in place. As they moved, they were indistinguishable: small bundles of soft fur, trimmed close. When they sat still for a treat, I could see that they had similar, though not identical, golden markings on their bodies. And, like the original Princess, each has one misaligned eye—a different eye in each clone, so that they look like mirror images of each other.



KOREN

Cartoon by Edward Koren

It has now been nearly thirty years since cloning mammals became possible. The technology has mainly been used to produce cattle, sheep, and pigs. The F.D.A. has signed off on the use of cloned farm animals as meat, although most agricultural clones are used for breeding. Meanwhile, since 2005, more than two thousand dogs have been successfully cloned. Biologically, their genesis is not very different from that of cloned cows or sheep, but in other respects the cloning of pets is far more uncanny.

The domestic dog, *Canis familiaris*, is seen by most owners as a species of individuals, with distinct personalities and quirks. I am a scientist who studies dog behavior and cognition, and the pet dogs who participate in my studies all bring their own idiosyncrasies

with them. Early in the domestication of the species, dogs were presumably kept for functional roles—guard, hunter, herder—but in contemporary society they are kept for companionship. As a result, we have projected our ideas of selfhood onto them, giving them biographies, preferences, fears, plans, and moods.

But, if it is dogs' individuality that we value, what should we make of the idea that their unique and unreproducible selves can, in fact, be reproduced? Cloning is the ultimate expression of genetic determinism—chromosomes as character. ViaGen's Web site declares that a cloned dog "is simply a genetic twin of your dog, born at a later date." The assertion is not untrue, as far as it goes, but it's a sales pitch that dodges a host of complicated ethical and identity issues. There are issues of exploitation—both of the bereaved owners whose desire to somehow cheat death is being monetized and, more viscerally, of the unseen animals whose bodies are used in making a clone. There's the issue of supply: the production of bespoke dogs in a society when so many good, naturally born ones in shelters are in need of adoption. Finally, there's an existential issue: who, exactly, is produced when a dog is cloned?

The business of cloning is an outgrowth of the discovery of genomic equivalence, the fact that the DNA sequence is identical in all the cell types of our body. Evidence for genomic equivalence began to accumulate in the mid-twentieth century, and, in 1962, the British biologist John Gurdon succeeded in growing adult African clawed frogs from the intestinal cells of tadpoles, work for which he later won the Nobel Prize in Medicine. In 1996, a sheep called Dolly became the first mammal clone to be born. Dolly was euthanized in 2003, at the age of six, after veterinarians found tumors in her lungs, but she was preserved in taxidermied form at the National Museum of Scotland and also had offspring of her own, fathered the old-fashioned way, by a ram named David.

In 2005, researchers at Seoul National University, in South Korea, took an ear-skin sample from an Afghan hound named Tai and made two dogs: Snuppy (a portmanteau of “Seoul National University” and “puppy”) and another, unnamed twin, who died after twenty-two days. Snuppy lived for ten years, all of them in a laboratory. At the age of five, he was himself cloned: four re-Snuppys were born, of whom three survived. Since Snuppy’s birth, dog cloning has joined the cloning of livestock as a retail business. All told, more than a dozen mammalian species have been cloned, including macaques, red deer, cats, and water buffalo. Hwang Woo-suk, who led the team that cloned Snuppy, now clones camels raised for racing and for *mazayna* (a kind of camelid Westminster Dog Show) in Abu Dhabi.

Like Dolly and Snuppy, all clones are conceived through somatic-cell nuclear transfer: the nucleus of a skin cell from one animal is extracted and implanted into an egg whose nucleus has been removed. The transplanted nucleus contains all the instructions needed to make the new organism. At ViaGen’s genetic-preservation site, the building near Austin that Mendola had stood expectantly outside, I met with the company’s cell-culture manager, Sanaz Arenivas, who told me that she recommends that people send a sample of skin cells around the size of half a pencil eraser, but sometimes people just send in a whole ear from their dead dog. “Time is of the essence in a post-mortem situation,” ViaGen’s Web site warns grieving (or pre-grieving) owners.

Often, the samples arrive at ViaGen accompanied by photographs and stories about the dogs from whom they came. Arenivas showed me the lab where she isolates the cells from the samples, after which she puts the cells in a petri dish with a growth medium until there are about a million of them. With a cryopreservant added, each of these cell lines is then kept chilled, by liquid nitrogen, at minus a hundred and fifty degrees Fahrenheit, in large silver tanks. Arenivas put on insulated gloves and safety glasses and opened the

top of one of the tanks for me. Clouds of vapor escaped as she reached in and pulled out a rack of vials, like a core sample from a sulfurous spring. The tanks house up to fifty thousand vials of cells. Each sample has a unique identifying number—"like V100-Buddy," she told me. "We have a lot of Buddys."

When it comes to actual cloning, each attempt requires making use of two other dogs. The first of these, the donor, provides developing eggs, known as oocytes. A dog in estrus is operated on to extract these oocytes. Then, under a microscope, the nucleus of an oocyte is sucked out with a tiny pipette and replaced with the nucleus from a skin cell of the dog who's being cloned. Electricity is used to stimulate cell division, and, when this embryo is still just a bundle of cells on the scale of micrometres, a second dog, also in estrus, is operated on to become a surrogate mother. Her ovaries are pulled outside her body, and a catheter full of embryos is plunged into her oviduct. Typically, the surrogate receives multiple embryos from several different cell lines. Many of these embryos will die; those that survive live in her uterus for the usual canine gestation period, around sixty days, after which, with any luck, a pup is born.

ViaGen is the only business in the U.S. that clones dogs, and its cloning process is patented. A few months ago, I drove to visit its president, Blake Russell, who lives on a hundred-acre ranch ninety minutes north of Dallas. As the buildings lining the interstate got smaller and the scrubby forest grew denser, I noticed a dead armadillo on its back, legs splayed. I wondered if this unfortunate creature might be a nine-banded armadillo, a local species that gives birth to four genetically identical young—almost like clones of one another.

A tall man wearing a blue Baja hoodie and a day's worth of stubble, Russell had to crouch to see me in my compact rental car, but he was talking even before I rolled down my window. "That's Beatrice," he explained, as a long trailer pulled by a pickup slowly

rolled by, emitting a series of whinnies. Beatrice was a surrogate horse, and she was with her foal, a two-month-old clone.

Russell joined ViaGen in 2005. At the time, the company cloned many farm animals, but the agricultural business, which produces cattle, sheep, and pigs, is now separate from the pet-cloning side, which produces dogs, horses, and cats. Oddly, for the head of a company that has cloned hundreds of dogs, Russell said that he is “not a dog person.” As a child, he was mauled by a German shepherd and needed a large number of stitches in his face. Still, he owns two ranch dogs, including Lucy, a large hound mix. Before he adopted her, she was the surrogate mother to a litter of wolf-dog hybrid clones.

Russell—a third-generation horseman, as he told me several times—is much more hands-on when it comes to cloning horses. The ranch is home to a couple of hundred mares—many pregnant—and a few dozen foals. Most of these are the company’s, not Russell’s, but he has gene-banked his father’s favorite horse, Chief Comanche, and plans to revive him for his presumed future grandkids. He led me to a heated stall with two newborn foals: a day-old quarter horse, his head fuzzy and tail short, and another, born prematurely without a suckle reflex, who had a tube inserted from his nose to his stomach. Later, Russell escorted me to the horse-cloning facility, a two-room office in a tiny cluster of low-rise buildings a short drive from his ranch. The site’s embryologist led me past a small fridge labelled “oocytes,” then gestured toward a cluster of large boxes where the embryos were developing. “These are our incubators,” she told me, unwittingly quoting a line from “Brave New World” nearly word for word.

As Russell showed me around the ranch, he pointed out a “really famous horse”—he meant a clone of a really famous horse—from England, who, at four months old, was all legs, and a chestnut foal destined to be a polo horse. The client had ordered five clones each from five different polo-horse antecedents. Russell is keen on the

idea that cloning could be used for conservation—ViaGen has helped clone endangered species, such as the Przewalski's horse and the black-footed ferret—or even to bring back the woolly mammoth. “One day, my pastures are going to be filled with baby rhinos in draft mares,” he said. “Would that not be the coolest thing ever?”

Dogs were comparatively late to the cloning game. One set of reasons for this is biological. Canine eggs are very dark, almost black, because of an unusually high lipid content, and as a result it is hard to see the nucleus that is to be removed. Dogs ovulate only once or twice a year and mature their eggs in the oviduct for a relatively long time. This makes it difficult to determine the timing for extraction, and the maturation process has proved challenging to re-create in the lab. And the failure rate of dog clones is higher than that of many other mammals; for some reason, many dog embryos in petri dishes don't survive past about eight cells.

The other big reason for dogs' late start is societal. There are plenty of mammals that contemporary society treats purely instrumentally; we are prepared to risk harming horses in races, to kill livestock for food, to shoot deer for sport or for pest control. Our attitude toward dogs is that they are members of our families. They share our sofas and beds; we throw them birthday parties and dress them in sweaters. But, for each special, beloved dog that is cloned, two non-special, nameless dogs must be operated on, giving up their eggs or womb. For many potential customers, this creates an uneasiness that the Harvard veterinarian and bioethicist Lisa Moses calls the “ick factor.”

I asked Moses if she would find cloning more ethically palatable if, say, an embryo could be grown in an artificial womb. She paused. “In some ways,” she said, “that's actually even more distasteful to me. Because that means, from the beginning until birth, that individual animal's life is completely divorced from—I don't like to use the word ‘natural’—but from the way that animals are

created normally.” Another bioethicist, Jessica Pierce, was even more emphatic, telling me that although, in her line of work, she mostly navigates the gray areas between right and wrong, that wasn’t the case here. “Cloning to me is black-and-white,” she said. “I just don’t see any countervailing benefit. It seems frivolous and wasteful and ethically obnoxious.” Even if the cost were not so exorbitant, and even if it could be done without using other animals, it would still highlight our objectification of dogs, she added—“viewing them as products or toys or somehow not quite animate beings with feelings and thoughts and life projects of their own, but as our *stuff*.” As heartbroken as we are when a beloved family member dies, it doesn’t occur to us to bring a dead child or parent back as a clone.

In serving to both replace and recapitulate a past dog, the business of cloning becomes a kind of scientific magic trick, dealing in the language of cell cultures, cryopreservation, embryo transfers—opaque words for an opaque process. It’s a black box, into which cell and electricity are deposited, producing, after a suspenseful pause, a copy of the original. ViaGen works hard to keep all ickiness inside the black box. Its social media and its waiting-room walls show images of happy clones, with no hint that any other dogs are involved. “We chose many years ago to just go trade secret on everything we do,” Russell said. The dog side of the business is managed by ViaGen’s attending veterinarian, Kerry Peacock, who performs the surgeries required to extract the eggs from the donor dogs and implant the embryos in a surrogate. Speaking to me over Zoom from a ViaGen location someplace near Rochester, New York, she cited “biosecurity” concerns as the reason for keeping the dog-cloning process under wraps.

ViaGen doesn’t own the dogs that supply the eggs and the wombs; instead, they’re rented from what the company calls “production partners.” “People often ask if we’re using shelter animals as surrogates, and, unfortunately, we can’t do that,” Peacock said.

“There’s just too many germs out there.” But she wouldn’t divulge who the owners were, or anything about the dogs’ living conditions or postoperative fates. Peacock described these dogs as “purpose bred” but cited the confidentiality of the breeders as the reason that ViaGen could not allow me to meet the dogs, see photographs of them, hear about their personalities, or learn their names. She did tell me that “they come in all different kinds of shapes, sizes, and colors,” and that working with a variety of dogs “makes it fun” for her team. Russell told me that he has production partners all over the country, including in Texas, South Carolina, Hawaii, and upstate New York.

Peacock said that ViaGen does its best to have ex-surrogates adopted, but, since they are owned by the company’s production partners, “some of them are utilized for other projects.” People I spoke to who cloned their dogs had expressed an interest in adopting the surrogate and were told that they couldn’t. The dogs used for their eggs are even more invisible. Hwang, in scientific papers about his cloning work, describes donors that are mixed-breed dogs, between one and seven years old, housed in indoor kennels, and fed once a day. ViaGen would not confirm whether its donors live in similar conditions, but U.S.D.A. guidelines specify that dogs kept for such use must be provided a minimum amount of floor space, calculated as the square of the sum of the dog’s length plus six inches. Thus a beagle (the typical lab dog) who is twenty-four inches long might be housed in a cage three feet long and two feet wide.



“She’d look at me and give me that soulful eye,” John Mendola said, of his dog Princess, who was cloned after she died, in 2017.

After a clone is born, Peacock oversees the process of exposing it to stimuli—noises and smells, new objects—which is important in the first weeks of a puppy’s life. Some clients send photographs, or voice recordings for Peacock to play for the puppy. Sometimes, as with Mendola’s two Princesses, there will be more than one puppy from a given cell line; any extras are thrown in for free. The puppies are sent to their new homes at around ten weeks of age. Clients who ask to pick up their puppies in person are turned down; instead, they meet the reincarnations of their beloved dogs at a distant, neutral site, such as a parking lot or a hotel lobby.

Of course, these are the clones that make it—most cloned embryos do not. Others may wind up deformed: researchers working under

Hwang have reported on defects that have appeared in cloned dogs, such as puppies born excessively large or with a hypertrophied tongue, a cleft palate, a very small eye, a fatal overdevelopment of musculature, or genital abnormalities. These problems are likely due to epigenetics—broadly, the effect of non-DNA matter, like proteins in the cell, on gene expression. The exact source of such mutations is not yet clear, but they do not come as a surprise to biologists. In cloning, the nucleus of the epithelial cell needs to essentially erase its memory and be reprogrammed. If the reprogramming is incomplete, the subsequent development will be affected. The egg cell, too, may have components from the donor dog, such as mitochondria, that influence how the cloned dog's DNA is expressed.

Peacock told me that she had not seen any of the abnormalities I mentioned. "Not to say that we've never seen anything abnormal," she said. "Just like in any breeding system, we do occasionally see some congenital abnormalities"—birth defects or embryo deaths—"and things like that." Like many ViaGen employees, she herself owns a clone, Pippa, who was cloned from her Cavalier King Charles spaniel Piper. Pippa is tricolor, with long ears, a distant gaze, and an underbite that, Peacock mentioned, Piper didn't have. She recalled that one of Piper's littermates did have an underbite, but I immediately thought about a research paper that noted the incidence of underbites in cloned dogs, which might be traceable to epigenetic effects of cloning.

The United States is home to some eighty million owned dogs, and the most popular type is the so-called purebred. Unlike with a mutt, the purebred's parentage is assured, recorded by such national dog organizations as the American Kennel Club. Physically and genetically distinct breeds have been developed through intensive inbreeding. A registered, purebred German shepherd results from a mating of two other registered dogs, often closely related. And each can trace its ancestry back to one Horand von Grafrath, a dog from

Thuringia who, in 1899, was chosen as an ideal specimen to form a newly named breed. Dog breeding began in order to segregate what were seen as the best exemplars of the species from the canid hoi polloi.

It's possible to see dog cloning as merely an extension of what is already a bizarre and highly unnatural process. In Fort Worth, Texas, I met a clone of a dog called Eudoris. The clone's owner, Jeff, who didn't want his last name used, was on the phone as I approached, but Eudoris 2—or E2, as he's known—turned to look at me. His body was shaped like a German shepherd's, but he lacked the swayed back of the kennel-club German-shepherd lines, whose hind legs buckle in a way that people liken to frog legs. E2's face was more vulpine, too. I made a sound of greeting to him, and he folded his ears back. Within half a minute, he had turned his rump toward me beseechingly, the universal dog body language for requesting a scratch above the tail.

The original Eudoris was a mix of a Belgian Malinois and a Dutch shepherd, and had been bred by Joshua Morton, a trainer of tactical working dogs, who felt that Eudoris was the ideal specimen. He had ViaGen clone him, and not just once. Thirty-five clones have been made from Eudoris so far. Jeff got E2 as a protection dog for his wife, who travels frequently to compete in rodeos. E2 was their second Eudoris clone. The first, E4, drowned in an irrigation ditch four months after they got him. Jeff and Morton felt that E4 was so special that they sent some of his tissue to ViaGen. Since then, Morton has used E4's cells to clone yet another line of dogs, which he dubs the Red Squadron Myrmidons, called M1, M2, and so on. "The DNA of M1 is the same as the DNA of E1 through E-whatever," Jeff said. "And the same as Eudoris Actual, the biological Eudoris." Hearing his name, E2 began wagging his tail.

Though E2 is highly trained to distinguish friend from foe, the primary impression he gave, like all the clones I met in person or over Zoom, was of a very normal dog. The dogs all did *dog things*

—barked at noises, rolled onto their backs for belly rubs, chewed on bones, nose-bumped their owners for attention.

With every dog clone I encountered, I went through two stages. I'd start out looking for resemblances to the original—a characteristic marking, the fold of an ear, distinctive behaviors. But soon I'd find myself looking for differences. They were numerous. Although the genome is for the most part identical in cloned and clone, from the moment that the host cells begin dividing the clone inexorably diverges from its parent. Each experience of the surrogate's that affects her health—an uptick of stress or a dip in nutrition—affects the growing embryo. After birth, the number of individuals, canid and hominid, who interact with and shape the clone skyrockets; the possible environments go from finite to indescribably many. There can be no cloning of the world that shaped the original, no repetition of the scenes and smells they encountered. Life leaves its mark.

Few people who clone their dogs believe that they are truly buying the same individual that they once cherished. Zehra Peynircioglu, a psychology professor at American University, teaches a graduate seminar on cognition and memory. She opens one class with a provocative question: "Without your memories, are you 'you'? If you had a head injury and lost all your memories, would that still be you?" Her interrogation of the subject is especially interesting given her decision to clone her handsome white husky-poodle mix, JonJon. But she went into the process with open eyes. "I knew I was not going to get another JonJon," she told me, of her clone, named Joniki. "But I knew I was gonna get an *essence* of JonJon."

Most of the cloning clients that I spoke to struggled to say exactly what it was about the original animal that they had wanted to reproduce, especially in contrast to other dogs they had loved but hadn't felt like cloning. Many spoke of the original as simply "special"—but the specific nature of that specialness seemed to be ineffable. This dog was sociable, that one was empathetic; this one

loved to swim, that one had curly hair; this one was moody, or grouchy, or affectionate. I began to wonder if the desire was less about re-creating the dog qua dog than about restoring the distinctive relationship that had been forged with the animal. In several cases, the cloned dog's appeal appeared to lie partly in physical problems or a difficult start in life: the dog found as a mangy stray or rescued from a kill shelter or a bad breeder; the needy dog or the purebred with a non-ideal characteristic.

Lara Gale, a Seattle-based photographer who cloned her Ibizan hound Georgia and now lives with Georgia's clone, Kismet, told me over Zoom that Georgia's physical problems were so severe that vets recommended euthanizing her as a puppy. Georgia was born with dwarfism and hyperflexion—Gale held out her fists and bent them down, as though revving a motorcycle—so her legs were angled backward, leaving her unable to walk. After that was treated, Georgia developed luxating patellas, a condition where her kneecaps shifted out of place. Before her second birthday, Georgia blew out one of her knees and wound up having two surgeries on it. Gale assiduously massaged Georgia's hamstring and took her to many rounds of rehab. As we talked, Kismet bobbed her head in and out of view of the computer camera. She has none of her predecessor's maladies. Scratching Kismet's neck playfully, Gale acknowledged that Georgia could be grumpy, no doubt because of those ailments. "You know, I spent a lot of time worrying about her," Gale said. "Just having to stay away from everybody" when Georgia was recovering, she added, "kind of made us a little more attached to one another."



“Listen, I know you’re both worried that I haven’t made any friends, but it will really pay off in twenty to twenty-five years, when I’ll be spared from having to attend a wedding every weekend.”

Cartoon by Natalya Lobanova

The intensity of the experience of caring for “damaged” dogs may be part of what some people are trying, unconsciously, to recapture. Nurturing, like parenting, is neurologically rewarding for humans. James Serpell, an emeritus professor of ethics and animal welfare at the University of Pennsylvania’s veterinary school, has suggested that humans’ drive to nurture has, in fact, led us to breed pets with health and behavior problems. The brachycephalic (small-skulled) dogs, including pugs and French bulldogs, who are bred to have ever-flatter faces, usually have severe difficulty breathing, requiring a dependence on owners that, research has found, the owners actually enjoy. Some studies indicate that owners of dogs with extreme phenotypes caused by inbreeding are more attached to their dogs than those with healthier or more “normal” dogs; similarly, owners of dogs with behavioral problems because of challenging early-life events still rate their relationships with their dogs as decidedly positive. Barbra Streisand famously cloned

Samantha, her small white-coated Coton de Tulear, after the dog's death. Streisand has written that she chose cloning because she "couldn't find another curly-haired Coton": the breed's coat is usually straight or wavy, whereas tightly curled hair is considered a fault, according to the breed standard. Of the four pups produced by the cloning, one died within a few weeks of being born, one was given away by Streisand, and two were kept. Accompanying an article she wrote in 2018 to explain her decision to clone is a photograph that captures the two clones sitting in a stroller in a garden, gazing toward Samantha's headstone. Having insinuated themselves into human society, dogs are now the objects of both our salutary and our pernicious impulses.

When Finnegan, my family's charismatic black mutt, was in the final weeks of his life, in 2022, I felt myself prematurely grieving his loss. Age had robbed him of voluntary control of his rear quarters, foreclosing the possibility of him performing any Finnegan-characteristic behaviors, like racing through puddles or wagging his tail. What wouldn't I have given to have him rejuvenated, brought back to an earlier stage of life in which he could run and gallivant? More specifically, *would* I have given a small skin sample and fifty thousand dollars? And, had I done this, would the result be the same Finn? Certainly not. For some people, though, even just the *possibility* of a future Finnegan is enough to leaven the grief of losing the current one. The great majority of the samples at ViaGen will remain in their cryopreserved state in a vat of liquid nitrogen. Their owners never clone them—for want of money or nerve, or because cloning is less straightforward and morally messier than they'd realized, or simply because time steps in and reveals that grief, unimaginably, does fade.

When Dolly, the cloned sheep, was born, there was a lot of speculation and concern about the possibility that people might soon be cloned, too. President Bill Clinton tasked the National Bioethics Advisory Commission with making recommendations on

human cloning; the commission came out resolutely against it, calling it “morally unacceptable,” and citing the risk of harm to the fetus, child, donors, and surrogates, as well as ethical concerns around individuality, objectification, and the slide toward eugenics. Writing in *The New Republic*, the physician Leon Kass argued that cloning a person would be “inherently despotic,” because creating a copy undermines the intangible otherness of a new life, the unknown child whom parents should accept for whomever that child becomes. The cloned person, he wrote, “will not be fully a surprise to the world.”

But a lack of surprise turns out to be just the thing that people seem to want, at least when it comes to their dogs. When I visited John Mendola, in Long Island, he scrolled through his social-media feed for me, lingering on the posts that showed the Princesses sitting, begging, panting in tandem. “Look at this one,” he said. “Look at this.” The Princesses peered up at him, momentarily still. Then, as if on command, they shook off, pivoted, and turned away. I watched as they both began to drink from the same water bowl, lapping in perfect synchrony. ♦

Alexandra Horowitz, a former member of the editorial staff, is a professor at Barnard. Her books include “[The Year of the Puppy: How Dogs Become Themselves](#).”

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[The Political Scene](#)

John Fetterman's War

Is the Pennsylvania senator trolling the left or offering a way forward for Democrats?

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)

June 24, 2024



“We are in a mad season of the Democratic Party,” Fetterman said. “We are turning against ourselves instead of realizing that we don’t have the luxury of fucking around.”

Photographs by Rebecca Kiger for The New Yorker

On a cool, sunny evening in April, John Fetterman, the junior senator from Pennsylvania, relaxed into the passenger seat of his robin’s-egg-blue Ford Bronco, which was parked just outside the U.S. Capitol. He was headed to his parents’ house, in York, Pennsylvania, where he grew up, and did not seem unhappy to be leaving Washington. A few hours earlier, in an elevator off the Senate chamber, he had closed his eyes and let his head slump against the control panel—whether from exhaustion or annoyance, it was hard to tell. Now, as an aide inched the Bronco through traffic, Fetterman mentioned that his Republican opponent in 2022, the TV doctor Mehmet Oz, had spent twenty-seven million dollars of his own fortune on the campaign. “And I’m, like, for what?”

Fetterman said. “The glamour? I live in a tiny, very expensive apartment. It’s basically a couch and a bed. I go home and I order Grubhub.”

A certain geographic specificity has been essential to Fetterman’s rise—if Donald Trump represented a Republican version of what the politics of industrial decline might look like, then Fetterman, a left-of-center populist from western Pennsylvania, could embody the Democratic one. He is six feet eight and thickly built, a onetime college offensive tackle with a shaved head, a prominent brow, and a laconic, watchful demeanor. No matter how formal the setting, he dresses in a hoodie and athletic shorts, a costume that inspired the passage of a bipartisan bill—the Show Our Respect to the Senate (*SHORTS*) Act—requiring business attire of every senator in the chamber. Fetterman’s wardrobe reinforces his populist politics, but it also has physical advantages. One of his former aides told me, “I’ve been in big-and-tall stores with him. It is impossible to find a suit that looks decent when you are that big.”

Fetterman, who is fifty-four, was elected to the Senate a few months after suffering a major stroke, which still obviously affects him. By the time he was sworn in, last January, he was experiencing a bout of depression so debilitating that, on the advice of the Senate doctor, he was admitted to the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for psychiatric care. When he returned to work, in April of 2023, he showed little interest in the upper chamber’s lawmaking machinery and rarely attended the Democratic Party’s weekly caucus lunch. Instead, he distinguished himself by eagerly antagonizing the opposition. Igor Bobic, a senior politics reporter for HuffPost, told me that Fetterman first caught his eye that fall, during then Speaker Kevin McCarthy’s ill-fated effort to impeach President Joe Biden. “The words he was pulling out were just totally words that you wouldn’t normally hear in the Senate,” Bobic said. “You know, like ‘jagoff’ and ‘circle jerk,’ and calling Republicans ‘dicks.’ ”

Fetterman was also happy to speak out against members of his own party. In September, he was the first Democratic senator to call for the resignation of Robert Menendez, his colleague from New Jersey, who was indicted for allegedly accepting bribes and using his influence to benefit the governments of Egypt and Qatar. Those nations are complex actors in a sensitive region—“It’s not like it was Australia,” Fetterman said—and Menendez was the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. Memorably, federal investigators had found a stash of gold bars in a locked closet in Menendez’s home (he has pleaded not guilty to all charges). In the hallways of the Senate building, Bobic said, “every time Fetterman saw Menendez, he would just shout out, ‘Gold Bar Bob!’” According to Rebecca Katz, a longtime adviser of Fetterman’s, “He is the guy who says the emperor has no clothes.”

Since the Hamas attack on October 7th, Fetterman has also become the most outspoken pro-Israel Democrat in the Senate. A wall in the reception area of his office in Washington is covered with posters of missing Israeli hostages, and Fetterman’s staff assiduously updates it with news of every release or declared death. In May, when the Biden Administration threatened to suspend military aid to Israel if the country carried out a ground assault on Rafah, a city in southern Gaza, Fetterman was the rare Democrat to oppose the White House. (“Hard disagree,” Fetterman said at the time. “Deeply disappointing.”) When I asked him whether he had any concerns about the way in which Israel’s right-wing Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, was conducting the war, he answered with a shrug. “I’ve never rendered judgment on him, because he is the leader, he is the democratically elected leader,” Fetterman said. “And my support, my support follows Israel.”

The left wing of the Democratic Party, which has coalesced around its opposition to the invasion of Gaza and which, previously, had been a major part of Fetterman’s base, has struggled to understand the senator’s unrelenting commitment to Israel. Alissa Wise, a rabbi

from Philadelphia who founded the group Rabbis for Ceasefire, voted for Fetterman in 2022. She was moved by one element of his politics in particular: when he was the mayor of Braddock, Pennsylvania, an economically besieged steel town just outside of Pittsburgh, Fetterman marked each time a resident was killed by having the date tattooed on his forearm. (He now has nine of them.) Wise said, “I just cannot understand how someone capable of such empathy for the victims of violence in Braddock has none for the tens of thousands of Palestinian children who are also victims of violence.”

In 2019, artists in Philadelphia constructed a ten-foot-high Fetterman puppet as part of a campaign to pressure elected officials in Pennsylvania to close an immigrant-detention center; this year, it has been repurposed at pro-Palestinian marches to criticize his stance on the war. “We have a destructive fringe that’s unhelpful,” Fetterman said of his party. “And I’m living that now with Israel.” But his frustrations with the left, he went on, preceded the war. “Years ago, I became more and more appalled at the progressive—whether it’s ‘Abolish ICE’ or ‘Defund the police’—all these kinds of bizarre, boutique views. Like, here’s another toy for Republicans to play with!” Now Trump was competitive in the polls and the left’s invective was directed at Fetterman. “We are in a mad season of the Democratic Party,” he said. “We are turning against ourselves instead of realizing that we don’t have the luxury of fucking around.”

From the back seat of the Bronco, I could not see Fetterman’s face, but he seemed to be enjoying himself. His steady stream of commentary washed over me like sports talk radio. Reflecting on the Presidential race, he said it had been inevitable that Trump would be the G.O.P. nominee: “DeSantis was like a Scott Walker in four-inch lifts,” whereas Trump “broadcasts on a very specific frequency that brings out people who don’t give a shit or know who is mayor or supervisor.” In the most recent elections in

Pennsylvania, he went on, Oz and the Republican candidate for governor, Doug Mastriano, had both tried to replicate Trump's approach, only to lose badly on Election Day. "There's only one Pennywise," Fetterman said, referring to the murderous entity in Stephen King's novel "It." "And everyone else who tries to pretend that—they just look like a clown at a birthday party."

Since his stroke, Fetterman has relied on transcription software to communicate, which, in subtle but important ways, shapes his interactions. We rarely made eye contact, since, by necessity, he was usually looking at the tablet he carries with him. In the car, if I asked a question that was too long, with too many caveats, or whose syntax the machine could not make sense of, Fetterman would shake his head in frustration; the aide who was driving would speak more concisely into the mike, giving a version of the question that sometimes lacked the original's context or subtlety. Fetterman likes to compare his use of the transcription app to the way that people use eyeglasses. I often felt that I was talking with an extremely intelligent person through a nuance-deletion machine. A lobbyist who recently met with Fetterman and received a simple, black-and-white response to a question on a complex issue was left wondering, "How much of this is the stroke?"



“Captain, the shields are down and also the air-conditioning.”
Cartoon by Eddie Ward

Fetterman also thought that the stroke had changed him, though in a different way. Part of the reason he was going to York was to check in on his father, who suffered a heart attack last summer, not long after Fetterman’s release from Walter Reed. “It’s undeniable that neither myself nor my father should be alive,” Fetterman said. “We had two situations where, if we were asleep when it happened, we would have been dead.” It was near the end of our ride. Fetterman described his ordeal as a kind of reset—he had come back unrestrained. He compared himself to the Joker. “It’s like in ‘Batman’—the original one, with Jack Nicholson,” he said. “I’ve already been dead once. It’s very liberating.”

Since October 7th, the news from Israel and Palestine has been unremittingly grim. For lawmakers in Washington, it has also been vexing, since they are being held responsible for a situation over which they have little direct control. Among Democrats, a faction on the left, opposing the White House, has called for a ceasefire and opposed sending any additional military aid to Israel. These politicians are committed, but their numbers are small: in April, when the Senate passed a ninety-five-billion-dollar military-aid

package, including fifteen billion dollars for Israel, only three members of the Democratic coalition voted against it, all progressives—Jeff Merkley, of Oregon, and Peter Welch and Bernie Sanders, of Vermont.

But even Democrats who broadly support Israel have advocated for the Biden Administration to impose conditions on U.S. aid. Chris Van Hollen, a Maryland senator, has proposed withholding support for Israel unless humanitarian-aid corridors to Gaza are expanded; Mark Warner, of Virginia, has pushed for scrutiny of any financing for Israeli militias in West Bank settlements. Chuck Schumer, the Majority Leader, gave a long speech calling on Netanyahu to resign, though that, like the rest of these proposals, has so far been futile. Fetterman is distinct in that he is not looking for contingencies at all. “I’ve always been no conditions,” he told me. In January, forty-nine senators from his party backed an anodyne resolution sponsored by Hawaii’s Brian Schatz affirming Congress’s commitment to a two-state solution; Fetterman refused to sign on. Last month, when the *Wall Street Journal* asked him if there was anything that would cause him to break with Israel, he said, “It would be some kind of an absurd situation that’s unlikely ever going to happen.”

People who worked for Fetterman told me that, when they returned from recess, in September, the senator’s operation was riding high. Their boss had helped save the Senate for Democrats, in a race that he had won from a hospital bed. They had stuck with him through his depression and were eager to see his political ingenuity at work in Washington. “Where’s the puck going?” he would ask his staffers, seeking their input on political developments. Fetterman was almost instantly battling with Republicans over his shorts and with Menendez over his gold bars. (He was also an early supporter of Menendez’s progressive opponent, Andy Kim.) “It felt like, O.K., he’s back, this is the guy we fought for,” a former senior aide

to Fetterman told me. Another close adviser recalled, “It was just fun.”

On October 6th, Fetterman agreed to sign a letter that was circulating in the Senate expressing concern about Netanyahu’s plan to weaken the Israeli judiciary, a constitutional trespass that had sparked mass protests in Tel Aviv. The following day, when news of the terrorist attack arrived, one of Fetterman’s first texts was to a subordinate, saying he wanted to get his name off that letter. Even in less troubling times, Fetterman’s staff knew, he was not a politician who dealt in gray areas. One of his “political superpowers,” as one staffer put it, is his “radical empathy,” a characteristic that was easily activated by the violence Israelis suffered on October 7th. “Who says, ‘I’m going to go and kill and rape and torture and kill innocent children and women—well, I can’t forget my GoPro,’ ” Fetterman said to me. “And they put that on their helmet like they were going to go skateboarding.”

During the following weeks, staffers noticed that Fetterman tended to turn conversations about policy toward the horrifying details of the Hamas murders themselves. He also would gripe about the attention given to left-wing activists and lawmakers, including members of the so-called Squad, whose support for Palestinians often seemed, to Fetterman, flatly pro-Hamas. On October 18th, he tweeted, “Now is not the time to talk about a ceasefire.” Within the office, some staffers sought to rationalize the position, telling themselves that, if he eventually criticized Israel, he would have more standing to do it.

On October 31st, the Israel Defense Forces struck Jabalia, the largest refugee camp in Palestinian territory. A spokesperson for the I.D.F., in confirming the strike, reported that a senior Hamas commander had been killed and several tunnels destroyed. The Gaza Health Ministry, which is affiliated with Hamas, said that more than fifty civilians were killed and another hundred and fifty were injured. That week, Fetterman was asked about the Israeli

attack by congressional reporters. “They are not targeting civilians,” Fetterman said. “They never have. They never will.”

Afterward, the former aide told Fetterman that he sounded unsophisticated and naïve. Perhaps, the aide suggested, Fetterman could say that Israel didn’t intentionally target civilians. Fetterman shrugged him off. “He’s a stubborn son of a bitch,” the aide said. “We got more and more into the world view that you’re either with Israel or you’re with the Squad, and there’s nothing in between.”

Fetterman is not Jewish, had never visited the Middle East, and had served on no foreign-policy committees. If he was going to be talking so much about Israel, his staffers thought, it made sense to keep him briefed. On November 6th, Fetterman met in his offices with a retired Israeli security official who had been brought in by a group advocating for a more measured approach to the conflict. The meeting quickly went off the rails. The Israeli official referred to Hamas’s attack as “impressive.” The official meant in a technical sense, but Fetterman took offense. Later that day, according to former staffers, he was still angry that such a word could be used to describe an attack like October 7th. What was impressive, Fetterman said, was Israel’s restraint.

During this time, Fetterman met with the father of a tank commander who had been taken hostage by Hamas. “And he was talking about it with such restraint, such dignity,” Fetterman said. “I was thinking, What if it’s my own son? And are they alive or, especially for a soldier, I can’t imagine how terrible the conditions would be. And I was blown away. I couldn’t process that.”

The following day, Fetterman posted to social media a short video of the wall in his reception area covered with posters of the hostages. Activists had been caught on film tearing down similar posters in New York and Los Angeles. “Here’s a place where they’re not going to be vandalized or torn down,” Fetterman said.

The video got eleven million views, a fact that Fetterman still likes to cite. “It must really resonate with people,” he told me.

It was slowly dawning on members of Fetterman’s staff that his early support of Israel wasn’t likely to be a temporary position. The situation grew tense enough that, when there were pro-Palestinian protesters in the Senate buildings, which happened often, his employees did everything they could to avoid telling him, because, as one put it, “We were worried he might do something insane.” On November 14th, pro-Israel groups staged a rally in Washington that drew an estimated two hundred and ninety thousand people.

Fetterman joined the march, wearing the Israeli flag wrapped around his shoulders. At the time, he was developing a deeper relationship with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC. A Fetterman adviser texted a photograph of the senator at the rally to one of the group’s board members. “I was, like, Wow!” the board member told me.

Shortly before Thanksgiving, Israel and Hamas negotiated a weeklong ceasefire, during which Hamas returned a hundred and five hostages and Israel released two hundred and forty Palestinian prisoners. Several aides brainstormed a statement, recognizing the agreement as a good start. Fetterman, the former aide said, thought that the deal was too weak to praise. The aide told me, “I was, like, ‘What, you know more than Mossad? You know more than the negotiators in Qatar?’ ”

Braddock, Pennsylvania, population seventeen hundred, is a tiny sliver of the Pittsburgh metropolitan area—a single run-down commercial street along the Monongahela River, and a few hundred houses on the hillside behind. The town was largely built around the Edgar Thomson Steel Works, opened in 1875 and still operational, whose original owner was Andrew Carnegie.

Fetterman grew up on the other side of the state, in Reading and York, the son of a Republican insurance-company executive. For a time, he seemed to be following his father’s career path, graduating

with a business degree from Albright College and earning an M.B.A. from the University of Connecticut. The story Fetterman came to tell on the campaign trail is that these plans were disrupted just before he graduated from business school, when a close friend who was driving to pick him up was killed in a car crash. “That could have very easily been me,” Fetterman said at a 2022 rally. “I thought, What have you done with your life?”

By 2001, after receiving a degree in public policy from Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, Fetterman was working in Braddock, helping young parents get their G.E.D.s. Four years later, he ran for mayor and won by a single vote, 149–148. The job, which paid a hundred and fifty dollars a month, was largely ceremonial. A council runs most of the municipal business. George Dougherty, a professor of public administration at the University of Pittsburgh, who served as the borough’s state-appointed financial coördinator, said that he met Fetterman only three times in five years. Most of the Democrats who made names for themselves as mayors of declining cities in this period—Pete Buttigieg, in South Bend, Indiana; Martin O’Malley, in Baltimore—billed themselves as turnaround artists, but Fetterman left a different impression: more than trying to fix Braddock, he represented it. Tattooing your arm in commemoration of people who have died suggests a much less technical idea of what the mayor of a poor place can do than saying you will halve the murder rate. It is also more realistic.

Fetterman had been drawn to Braddock, he told a reporter for *ReadyMade* magazine in 2007, by its “malignant beauty.” He bought an old church for fifty thousand dollars, lived in its unheated basement for eight months, and eventually remade it as a communal arts space. He was also buying and refurbishing houses. (“If I’m not getting dirty, I’m not doing my job,” Fetterman said at the time.) He met his wife, Gisele, in 2007, after she read about him in a magazine and wrote him a letter; they now have three kids. Their projects together grew more idealistic and ambitious.

Gisele opened Free Store 15104, which makes donated goods available to residents, and the couple provided space to a restaurant called Superior Motors, which drew national notice. Fetterman was soon appearing in Levi's ad campaigns and speaking at the Aspen Ideas Festival.

Still, Braddock remained rough. In 2011, Fetterman was profiled in the *Times Magazine*, which treated his gentrification efforts skeptically, noting that he had got only ten households to move to the town. Two years later, Fetterman pulled a shotgun on a twenty-eight-year-old Black man named Christopher Miyares, who was jogging near the Fettermans' home in a mask and goggles.

Fetterman was unapologetic, saying that he'd heard gunfire. (He also said that he did not know Miyares was Black.) Years later, a progressive opponent accused him of seeking "vigilante justice," but the incident barely registered at the time. The general tone of the coverage of Fetterman—a Bunyan-esque progressive emerging from Trump country—suggested a bigger future. "Democrats yearned for a folk hero," ran the headline in a 2018 Washington Post article. "But will they vote for one?"

They would, eventually. By 2015, Fetterman was campaigning virtually full time for statewide office, beginning with a long-shot run for the U.S. Senate on a Sanders-style populist platform: Medicare for all, marijuana legalization, a fifteen-dollar-per-hour minimum wage. Outside the Democratic power bases of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, he barnstormed relentlessly, drawing crowds in places where his party had often struggled. Neil Makhija, who is now a Montgomery County commissioner, recalled meeting Fetterman a decade ago in Makhija's coal-country home town of Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania. "John came to a meeting in the basement of the Jim Thorpe Inn—there must have been twenty people there—and he was talking about how geography doesn't have to be destiny," Makhija said. "He's just genuinely interesting."

Fetterman finished third in the Senate primary. Two years later, he won the primary for lieutenant governor and was easily elected on the ticket of the popular gubernatorial incumbent Tom Wolf.

During the campaign, Fetterman became close to his Republican opponent, Jeff Bartos. It was admittedly an unexpected friendship, Bartos told me, but it also made sense. “There’s a lot of stuff—dealing with donors, just how draining it is on the road—that no one else cares about,” Bartos said. “You can’t talk to your staff about it, because it’s demoralizing. So it helps to find someone going through the same thing. Otherwise, it’s very lonely.”

Ten days before the election, Bartos was attending a parents’ weekend at Franklin & Marshall College, where his daughter was a freshman, when he received a call from Fetterman. That morning, an extremist had killed eleven people and wounded six at the Tree of Life synagogue in the Squirrel Hill section of Pittsburgh. Bartos, who is Jewish, recalled Fetterman telling him, “You were the first person I thought of. I’m so sorry for what happened. I’m so sorry that this is happening in our world.” Fetterman attended vigils for the victims and has since stayed in touch with Tree of Life’s rabbi. Bartos believes that the experience helped attune Fetterman to the existence of violent antisemitism and provided some of the background for his pro-Israel stance. “I’m just incredibly inspired and proud of the way he’s going about his work,” Bartos said.

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, like most state capitals, is a town of insiders. A leading Pennsylvania Democrat told me that Fetterman arrived with “no political coalition behind him.” But he soon demonstrated a talent for generating attention. His lieutenant governor’s office came with a balcony, where he hung a trans-equality flag, infuriating Republicans. One of the lieutenant governor’s duties is overseeing the state’s pardons board. Fetterman toured Pennsylvania’s prisons, encouraging inmates to appeal. “If you’re cynical about the commutation process, you have good reason to be,” Fetterman told a group of lifers at the state

correctional institution in Dallas, Pennsylvania. “But we have the best opportunity in forty years to get people out.” During Wolf’s second term as governor, he commuted forty-nine life sentences, compared with five in the previous term, when Fetterman’s predecessor ran the board.

Criminal-justice reformers in Pennsylvania still speak warmly of Fetterman. His work on the pardons board also solidified a progressive political identity. Josh Shapiro, then the state’s Democratic attorney general and now its governor, was a member as well and tended to be more cautious about commuting sentences. At one point, according to the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, Fetterman threatened to run against Shapiro for governor if he kept voting against pardons. (Shapiro denied that this happened.) A senior Democratic aide in Harrisburg at the time told me, “I think the press coverage of the pardons board was the first time that Josh realized he was going to be seen only as a moderate, and it was also the first time that John realized that he was going to be seen only as a progressive, and I think that made them both uncomfortable.”

Four days before the Democratic Senate primary in May, 2022, Fetterman and Gisele pulled into a Sheetz gas station near Lancaster to make a pit stop, en route to a big campaign event in Millersville. When Fetterman emerged from the bathroom, Gisele noticed that his words were slurred and his face was drooping. He spent the weekend in a Lancaster hospital, first having surgery to remove the blood clot that had caused the stroke, then having a pacemaker and a defibrillator implanted to prevent another one. The story Fetterman has told is that he woke up from surgery on the night of the primary, learned that he had won, and fell back asleep.

He soon returned to Braddock to begin both a long recovery and a general-election campaign. For months, he had major struggles with what his campaign called “auditory processing”—understanding what he heard and getting his words out cleanly. “At

first, we communicated with whiteboards,” Gisele said. “Then we switched to iPads.” When I met the Fettermans recently at their home in Braddock, a big, open loft inside a former automobile showroom, I asked whether they had given any thought to dropping out. Not really, Gisele said. The doctors believed he would recover. It was a matter of the timeline.

Gisele was sitting on a brown leather couch, wearing a summery, rainbow-colored dress. Pittsburgh Pride was beginning, an event that Fetterman had regularly attended in the past and once described on Twitter as “Best. Time. Ever.” This year, because it would likely be the site of pro-Palestinian protests, the Fettermans had decided not to go. Fetterman’s political turn has put Gisele, who works in local nonprofits, in an interesting position. Her presence once helped confirm her husband’s progressive bona fides: Fetterman long grounded his support for undocumented immigrants in her story of having come to the U.S. from Brazil without papers as a child, a fact he featured in campaign ads. More recently, when he talks about immigration, it is usually about the need for order along the Rio Grande. “Honestly, it’s astonishing,” Fetterman said last December, about the number of undocumented migrants arriving in the U.S. each month. “You essentially have Pittsburgh showing up there at the border.”

When I watched old interviews of Gisele, she was funny, occasionally impertinent, slightly hippie coded. Now she seemed more measured and poised, something a bit closer to the archetypal senator’s wife. She was very proud, she said, of how many people contact Fetterman about their own experience of stroke and mental illness. (“There was one I talked to just this morning,” Fetterman said.) It was also Gisele who noticed the symptoms of Fetterman’s depression after he won the 2022 election—that he was not eating and didn’t seem like himself. “You know, for the kids, I didn’t want them to see their dad struggling,” she said. “I didn’t want them to

have to think about, ‘Is he going to harm himself,’ which I was worried about.”

For a time, Fetterman’s depression intruded on his political life, too. In the weeks after he won the election, two ex-staffers told me, Fetterman often came away from public events feeling as if he’d screwed up. One of the former staffers recalled a Martin Luther King, Jr., Day celebration in Philadelphia, in January of 2023, at which Fetterman gave a brief, innocuous speech as part of a long lineup of politicos. Afterward, Fetterman beckoned the ex-staffer over to his car, rolled down a window, and said, “What’s the damage?” The speech had been fine; there was no damage. A few days later, the senator was admitted to Walter Reed.

It is hard to imagine Fetterman acting so self-consciously now. He’d sat down next to me, in an armchair by a window, but as Gisele talked he stood up and restlessly roamed the apartment, intermittently shouting at their two dogs, both rescues, to pipe down. When I asked about his early days in Braddock, he stiffened and said, “I thought this was going to be about more contemporary stuff.” In an interview with CBS News shortly after his discharge from Walter Reed, he had mentioned that he’d experienced episodes of “self-loathing” throughout his life. When I asked him about it, he said, “It’s not like I had this low-running depression all along.” I got the sense that Fetterman was sick of being the stroke guy, or the depression guy, in the same way that he was sick of being the progressive.

On the evening of January 26th, with the Senate out of session, about two hundred and fifty pro-Palestinian protesters staged a demonstration at Fetterman’s house. The event had been well publicized, and, in the recollection of an organizer named Stephanie Pavlick, about eight police cars were present. The plan was to have volunteers read tributes written by family members and friends of Palestinians killed during the war. About ten minutes before the event was supposed to start, Fetterman appeared on the

roof. He spread his arms, unfurling an Israeli flag. The crowd chanted, “Fetterman, Fetterman, you can’t hide, you’re supporting genocide.” Fetterman, as Pavlick recalled, said nothing, which itself made for a dramatic image. “He’s huge, but at the same time he was far away,” she said. “He’s all the way up there, three stories up, and we were just down here on the sidewalk.”

When I asked Gisele about the protest, she said that she’d always understood politicians’ homes to be off limits: “Essentially, what those two peace groups did was they doxxed my children, and that’s a federal crime.” Fetterman was more emphatic. Homes, he said, “are not part of the deal.” He added, “You can protest at a public office or anything, but they chose to come out here. And I was on the roof listening to it. And then they started to get ugly and started yelling about genocide, and my ten-year-old was there. So I just showed the Israeli flag.”

Fetterman’s offices in Washington are on the first floor of the Russell Senate Office Building. On the day I visited, the only light in his inner chamber came from two Edison-bulb lamps, one on either side of a couch, so that otherwise brisk policy meetings took place in a slightly sombre atmosphere. That afternoon, I watched Fetterman lean over a speakerphone as Senator Debbie Stabenow, of Michigan, gently lobbied him about an agricultural aid bill. Fetterman made it clear that his main interest was in preserving SNAP food benefits for poor people. For a moment, he seemed exactly like what his voting record suggests he is—a very normal sort of Democrat.

But the ways in which Fetterman is an ordinary politician have never been as useful to his Party or himself as his genius for finding the center of political attention. There is both art and labor to this. Igor Bobic said that Fetterman has a useful cynicism about the processes of power. “In a gaggle with twenty of us reporters,” Bobic said, “he is able to very quickly distill the absurdity of what is going on.” Tom Wolf, the former Pennsylvania governor, told me

that Fetterman is willing to try things that no one else thinks to try. “He marches to the beat of a different drummer,” Wolf said. “But he can be very effective when he takes something seriously.”

During my first day with Fetterman, I joined him for a long, slow walk through the Senate tunnels. Three aides surrounded him with the anxious efficiency of tugboats trying to coax a barge into port. There was a subway car for the use of senators to our right.

Fetterman said that, when he discovered that Bernie Sanders, who is eighty-two, always walked instead of riding, he decided that he would, too. Not a minute later, Sanders himself, head down, zoomed past on our left, without acknowledging Fetterman—the Vermont senator is a foot shorter and thirty years older than the Pennsylvanian, but he was somehow moving three times as fast.

Fetterman was on his way to cast a vote on judicial nominees. Because of the *SHORTS* Act, he is not allowed on the floor of the Senate in his usual garb, and so he delivers his votes by signalling a clerk from the doorway. But the real action came beforehand. The news of the day concerned the pro-Palestinian encampments and protests on college campuses, which were still raging, and a group of reporters quickly formed. After waiting patiently for Fetterman to open his transcription app, one of them asked what he thought of the protesters. “It’s the pup-tent intifada,” Fetterman said. “You can break down the protesters—it’s the pro-Hamas, and then it’s the really pro-Hamas, at this point.” He noted the antisemitism that had surfaced among the demonstrators; another reporter asked if schools should lose federal funding if such behavior continued. “Well, I think there has to be consequences,” Fetterman said. “Like, right now, there is no consequence. You can blow up a bridge, or block a road, or those kinds of things.”

This was an exercise in blunt hyperbole, in that Fetterman had drawn attention to the darkest aspects of the protests—that Jewish students were sometimes stopped on campuses and asked whether

they were Zionists—by inventing an even darker one: no protester has blown up any bridges, let alone done so with impunity.

This past winter, one by one, Fetterman’s staffers began to leave his office. The communications director, his deputy, and a communications aide all departed. In April, Adam Jentleson, who had been Fetterman’s chief of staff, took a less involved role as an adviser. Fetterman’s current staff argues that this is not an abnormal rate of turnover for a Senate office, that the reasons people left were complex, and that some of them still work with the senator in smaller roles. That is all true, though differences over Israel are a common thread among the departures. “I’ve carried out things for Fetterman previously, or for other electeds I’ve worked for, that I don’t one hundred per cent agree with,” one aide who left told me. “If you’re in this business, you’re never going to agree with the principal all the time.” But Fetterman’s advocacy on Israel, the aide said, was “so in your face, troll-y, and kind of reductive in a way. Like, people are dying. This isn’t a troll.”

In a sense, the Fetterman aides who disagreed with his stance on Israel were experiencing a form of generational reckoning. Many of them had come out of the Bernie Sanders movement, in which it was broadly assumed that the future of the Democratic Party lay on the left—in the expansive, outsider politics that drew so many millions of young people to the Sanders campaign. But that particular fusion of populism and progressivism has been hard for others to replicate. Elizabeth Warren and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are progressives, but they aren’t really anti-establishment populists. Fetterman is that kind of populist, but, as his aides were discovering, he wasn’t really a progressive. Maybe Sanders, like Trump, was Pennywise, too.

By the spring, some of the staffers who had left noticed a pattern in Fetterman’s political moves in which a broad anti-left positioning was detectable, if also woefully underbaked. At the end of March, Fetterman commemorated Vietnam War Veterans Day by thanking

the soldiers who “defended our freedoms in Vietnam,” a Cold War framing that most Democrats had long ago left behind. In May, he inveighed against lab-grown meat, a cause that few other than Ron DeSantis have embraced. A week later, a young climate activist from Pennsylvania approached Fetterman in the hallways of the Senate, introduced herself, and asked about a pipeline project that he had once opposed and now supports. In response, Fetterman took out his phone and started both recording and ridiculing her. “I didn’t expect this!” he said, sarcastically. “Oh, my gosh!”



“Yeah, I’ll be a minute. ‘Landslide’ just started playing at Home Depot and now I’m crying in lamps and light bulbs.”

Cartoon by Corey Pandolph and Craig Baldo

Jentleson offered an intricate theory of what Fetterman is up to. In the last few elections, Democrats have increasingly struggled to win the support of working-class voters of all races, leaving the Party heavily dependent on suburban moderates, many of whom typically vote Republican but despise Trump. The Party’s future depends on re-ingratiating itself with less educated voters who might be economically populist and might dislike the G.O.P.’s turn toward the religious right, but who, as Jentleson sees it, “don’t want to feel super judged all the time.” Fetterman’s instinct is for what Jentleson called “vice signalling”—a countermeasure to the

performative do-gooderism of the left. The cumulative effect of Fetterman's clothes, his cursing and snark, his blunt anti-élitism, and his push for legal weed was to try to displace some of the Yale Law School atmosphere that occasionally threatens to fog in the Democrats.

Since 2020, one of the most significant patterns to emerge in U.S. politics has been a backlash against the left, powered by the perception that it has gone too far—on *COVID* restrictions, on the increased codification of political correctness following the murder of George Floyd, on containing radical speech on the Internet. The demonstrations on college campuses against the Israeli war in Gaza have provoked a similar response. These pent-up frustrations have focussed the energies of right-wing media, led to successful efforts to oust university presidents at Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, and fuelled the third-party campaign of Robert Kennedy, Jr., who is perhaps best known for his anti-vaccine advocacy. The backlash is also playing an increasingly large role in the comeback candidacy of Donald Trump.

Fetterman has picked his way through this landscape with care. He remains steadfast on many of the liberal positions that he has long espoused: most of all, on L.G.B.T.Q.+ rights and racial and criminal justice. He plainly disdains Trump and the Republicans. But he has also courted pro-Israel and centrist voters in his stylized rebukes of progressive activists. This spring, Fetterman met the *New York Post*'s political correspondent, who had previously mocked him as a “slob,” for a convivial dinner at a fancy New York restaurant, and declared, “I’m not woke.” This new posture has won him fervent support, not just on Fox News, where he appears regularly, but among centrist members of his own party. In a May interview with the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*, the New Jersey senator Cory Booker called Fetterman “one of the most exciting Senators that’s come through the Senate in the ten years I’ve been here.”

Jentleson said, of Fetterman, “He sees the Party being defined by the extremes in the public image, and he is pushing back against that, in a very strong way.” Keeping the White House out of Trump’s hands, and helping the Democrats stay viable in places like Pennsylvania, might hinge on the Party’s ability to distance itself from the activist left. “Most voters do not form their political views through the lens of Israel,” Jentleson told me. “What they formulate is more intangible and is a sense that the Democratic Party is being led around by the far left.” But in order to get inattentive voters to associate the Democratic Party with centrism rather than progressive activism, he added, “you might have to be theatrical.”

The 2024 commencement ceremony for Yeshiva University, a private Jewish institution in New York’s Washington Heights, was held not in an auditorium but at the Louis Armstrong tennis stadium, in Queens. It was the Wednesday after Memorial Day. Fetterman had accepted an invitation to receive an award at the ceremony and give a short speech. Backstage, where rabbis and donors kibitzed expectantly, I chatted with Yeshiva’s president, Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman, who, a few weeks earlier, had flown to Jerusalem to meet with Netanyahu. “Many of the members of our community are just one degree of separation from someone who was a victim of October 7th, or a hostage, or a soldier,” he told me. When Fetterman arrived, the most eager to meet him was Janet Hod, a Yeshiva board member who is originally from Pennsylvania. “I’m a huge Trump person—huge,” Hod said. “But he”—she indicated Fetterman—“is right up there with Trump.”

Outside, the ceremony was at once deeply moving and fervently pro-Israel. The students were largely segregated by sex: the graduates on the left side of the aisle were all men, and those on the right were overwhelmingly women. A dean asked the assembled to pray for “our soldiers” in the I.D.F. There were stirring recorded testimonials about members of the Yeshiva family who had died on

October 7th and in the subsequent war, and video presentations about the lobbying and community service that Yeshiva students had done after the attacks. Rabbi Berman told the graduates that they were now “charged with the mission of supporting Israel and the Jewish people.” When the singer Mordechai Shapiro performed a rousing rendition of “Hatikvah,” Israel’s national anthem, the crowd waved Israeli flags.

Eventually, it was time for the senator to speak. “Honestly, I was truly humbled and blown away when I was invited,” he said. “And then I did some research and I discovered that last year’s speaker had invented the Iron Dome. And I don’t belong in that company, I truly don’t. I’m just a senator with a big mouth, that happens to be committed to standing with Israel.” Fetterman was wearing a black robe with a crimson hood, which commemorated his degree from the Kennedy School of Government. He said that he had been reflecting on his last graduation. “And that was literally a quarter century ago, twenty-five years ago, and I was graduating from Harvard University.” At the mention of Harvard, there was a smattering of boos. Fetterman waited for them to abate and then said, “But today I have been profoundly disappointed” by Harvard’s “inability to stand up for its Jewish students after October 7th. And for me, personally, I do not fundamentally feel it’s right for me to wear this today.” He took off the crimson hood and, delicately, laid it down next to him on the stage. When the speech ended, and Fetterman passed through the crowd, he was encircled by a group of Yeshiva graduates, who danced with him.

That Friday, I was with Fetterman in Braddock. He seemed to want to make it clear to me that he had not blindly plunged into the politics of Israel. He had anticipated that his position “would become more and more unpopular, and members of my party would move more and more away from the Israeli side.” He might eventually, he added, “be the last man standing.”

The issue of Israel and Palestine is famously knotty. I asked what Fetterman had been reading about Israel, meaning books—the work of theorists, historians, or policy types that had influenced him—but he understood me to be asking about which news outlets he read. (In a recent *Times* story, an ex-aide had attributed his political turn to an increasing diet of conservative news media.) He opened his phone and showed me his Apple News feed, pointing out that it included mainstream, conservative, and progressive outlets—“The *Guardian*, oh, my God,” he said.

From the leather couch opposite us, his communications director, Carrie Adams, seeing that we were talking past each other, prompted him. “And meetings with experts, not just news outlets,” she said. Fetterman couldn’t hear her at first—the captioning on his transcription device had not worked. She repeated herself, more loudly, “And meetings with experts, not just news outlets.”

“Well, sure, yeah,” Fetterman said. “But I’m, like, ‘There are no Middle East experts.’ Because if there are experts, well, have things gotten any better?” He went on, “I’ve had meetings with these experts, and they’re not able to answer all of these questions.”

The line that Fetterman often gives in response to left-wing disillusionment with him is that the Democrats have adopted many of the progressive positions that he once advocated for—legal weed, a fifteen-dollar-an-hour minimum wage—and so he now seems more moderate by comparison. Another way to put it might be that his identification with Israel and his antipathy toward activists have always been part of his political makeup, too. But what has changed is that he now operates largely alone, without a deep network of political allies and policy experts and without many of the staffers who had been with him the longest and whom he trusted the most. (Katz, Fetterman’s strategist since 2015, also recently departed.) It seemed to me that, if the stroke and the depression had had an effect, it was to deepen his isolation and self-reliance, at a time when he was developing a different view

from other Democrats about how politics is changing—about where the puck is headed. This has made him not only a more singular and provocative figure but also a more extreme one.

At one point, I asked Fetterman what end he saw for the war—would it be Hamas’s dismantling, or something else? “I do think that it’s a fact that when you have that kind of an evil, or that kind of a movement that came out of a society, whether it was Nazi Germany or imperial Japan or the Confederacy, right here in the South, that kind of movement has to be destroyed into submission,” Fetterman said. He had reframed the question. It wasn’t just Hamas’s political movement that needed to end, but the underlying support for it: “That kind of society that gave birth to it now has to reach a point where it has to turn its back to those kinds of uses and pursuits.” Fetterman seemed to seize upon the Civil War analogy. After a moment, he added, “And that’s why Atlanta had to burn.” ♦



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[Letter from Arizona](#)

How a Homegrown Teen Gang Punctured the Image of an Upscale Community

The authorities didn't seem to pay attention to the Gilbert Goons until one boy was dead and seven others were charged with murder.

By [Rachel Monroe](#)

June 21, 2024



After the killing of Preston Lord, what had been hidden was now open: a group of mostly wealthy white teens was terrorizing Phoenix's East Valley.

Illustration by Max Guther

The Awards & Recognitions section of the Web site of Gilbert, Arizona, lists some of the area's accolades: #1 Best City for Early Retirement, #2 Safest City for Trick-or-Treating, #6 Best City to Raise a Family in the West. Gilbert recently surpassed Scottsdale as the Arizona city with the highest median income, and, according to F.B.I. statistics, only one American community of its size had a lower crime rate in 2022. Although Gilbert has more residents than Boise or Salt Lake City, its official documents avoid the word "city"; the municipal government has opted to preserve Gilbert's status as a town, one of the largest in the United States. Driving down Gilbert's wide, smooth roads, past vast developments enclosed by white fences, you get the impression of a place that, like an adolescent, hasn't yet adjusted to its proportions.

On a Saturday evening late last October, teen-agers in Gilbert circulated aimlessly, looking for a good time. One party was disappointing, full of "Mormon kids that were, like, pretty sober," a teen-ager later said. (Arizona's East Valley, which includes Gilbert, has one of the largest populations of Latter-day Saints outside Utah.) But a flyer had been posted on Snapchat for a party at a house in an upscale neighborhood in Queen Creek, adjacent to Gilbert. The flyer read "*HALLOWERN COSTUME RAGER* Open Invite ss ALC provided first come first serve." People started showing up around nine—kids in lifted trucks, in their parents' BMW, in a black Camaro, in a friend's Camry. The girls were dressed like cowgirls and white-swan ballerinas and giant cans of Twisted Tea; the boys were dressed as soldiers and mobsters and prisoners in orange jumpsuits. They drank Blue Raspberry Lemonade Smirnoff vodka, played beer pong, and smoked joints in the yard.

Preston Lord, a slight, gangly sophomore known for his school spirit, was there with friends from the basketball team. The party was wilder than they were used to. They "spent most of the time being 'wall huggers,'" hanging out in the garage, one of them later

said. Some older girls confronted them teasingly—were the boys sure they were old enough to be at a party like this? (This account of the party is drawn from an eleven-hundred-page report made by the Queen Creek police; many interviewees were minors, and their names were redacted.)

Sometime before ten, Lord and his friends watched as a teen-ager they knew, a Latino boy in a baseball cap, filmed two partygoers arguing. Treston Billey, a stocky eighteen-year-old wearing a white pin-striped suit, told him to delete the video. The air had a pre-fight crackle to it; people stood around waiting to see how the tension would break. Lord and his friends, together with the Latino boy, left the party and walked down the street. A group of older guys followed them. Because they were “tall and strong-looking,” one of Lord’s friends said, he thought they might be football players. Many of them were dressed as gangsters, in fedoras and suits with pocket squares. They taunted the younger kids as they left, singing “Na, na, na, hey, hey, hey, goodbye.” One witness described them as “skipping.”

The Latino boy in the baseball cap was dressed as a “cholo,” wearing a saint pendant on a long fake-gold chain. When the pursuers caught up to the younger group, one of them snatched the chain and tossed it to his friends. At some point, Lord and his friends began to run. One jumped over a fence and into a neighbor’s yard; another hid in a bush. But the older kids caught up with Lord and knocked him down. When he was on the ground, a group of guys began “kicking on him,” “standing right above and beating down,” “getting on him and going at it,” witnesses told police. The beating was over in seconds. “He’s out,” someone said. A neighbor’s surveillance-camera footage showed ten boys running away, some of them laughing.

A handful of partygoers, including several lifeguards, pulled Lord off the street and attempted CPR. Lord wheezed, then fell silent. There was blood on his face and coming out of his nose. He never

regained consciousness. Two days later, he died; the coroner ruled the death a homicide.

A boy named Taylor Sherman took a video of Lord's body and sent it to a group chat. "Slumped the fuck out haha," he wrote. Later that night, Sherman's friend Talan Renner told him, "I might have hospitalized that kid. I hit him pretty hard." Other people who had been at the party, and who had witnessed, heard about, or participated in the attack on Lord, talked about it in D.M.s and group chats:

actually think that kid is actually dead, their was a blanket over him I heard

Clay told me it's an investigation now

Hes on life support rn, I feel bad for the kid ngl, kinda sad

Talen hit him once, and he was like dead

that kid was just a freshman and talyn is 17 like that kid had his whole life ahead of him

I'm js thankful I wasn't involved, even tho I am

Any pictures or post of me delete them please.

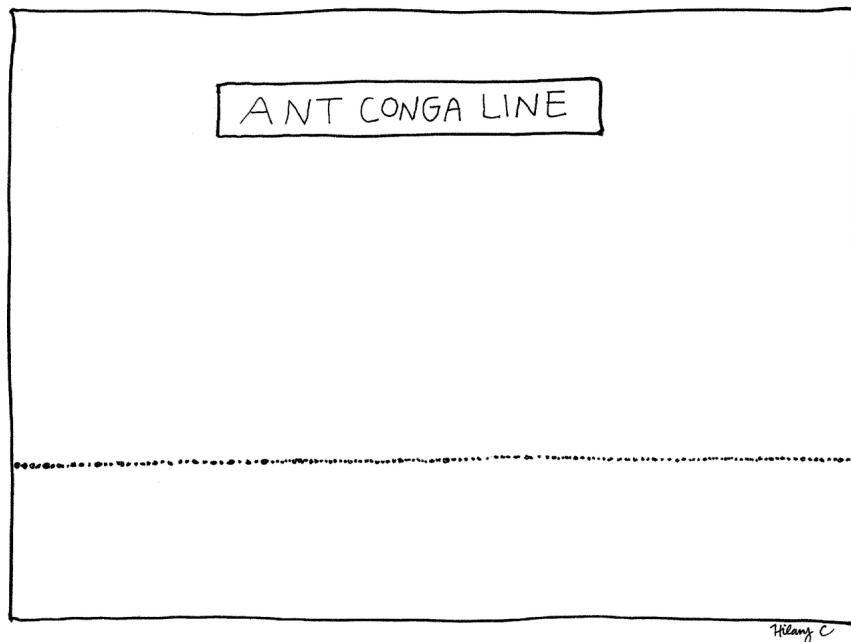
idk everything is just bs rn.

Queen Creek, which sprawls east of Gilbert, is a new enough town that its police department was formed in 2022; Lord's death was its first homicide case. Gilbert itself had only about five thousand inhabitants in 1980. But, in the nineties, as Phoenix boomed, proliferating suburban developments made Gilbert, the former "Hay Capital of the World," the fastest-growing municipality in the country. "You used to drive down the road and see sheep crossing," a school official said at the time. "Things are changing." These

days, the city, some twenty-five miles east of Phoenix, is closing in on a population of three hundred thousand. But the area's tendency toward sprawl must contend with the reality of scarce resources.

"Gilbert's not far from being full," Grady Gammage, Jr., a land-use attorney who writes about development in Phoenix, told me. Owing in part to Arizona's dwindling groundwater, the state has temporarily halted some new construction in Queen Creek, where Preston Lord's family lives and the Halloween party took place. When I visited, in January, housing developments sat among bare fields that were awaiting the resumption of building.

Rumors about who was responsible for Lord's death spread quickly among teen-agers, and then among adults. On Facebook, a pseudonymous account under the name Lily Waterfield served as a gathering place for outraged parents. Weeks passed; in the absence of arrests, rumors metastasized online. In late November, the women behind the Lily Waterfield account tagged Wendi Meisner, whose son, Jake, was alleged to have participated in the beating. "Your son was involved in the murder of Preston Lord. Do what's best for the community. Turn in your son," they wrote. "Your son won't get away with this murder. The community is demanding justice!!!!!!" (Meisner said that her son had "no involvement" and threatened legal action.)



In December, the *Arizona Republic* reported that Lord's death was not an aberration but the culmination of an alarming trend: a group of largely upper-middle-class teen-agers had been wreaking havoc in Gilbert and the surrounding East Valley communities for more than a year, with few consequences. The paper reported that the group called itself the Gilbert Goons, a name that apparently originated in a Snapchat group. High-school students knew about them—one victim later described them to law enforcement as “a group of kids just harassing Arizona”—but the Gilbert police seemingly did not. “We do not have documented incidents associated with that group name,” officials told the *Republic*. The newspaper detailed seven violent attacks by members of the group, many of them captured on video. Others soon surfaced. The Goons seemed to be a loose association of some two dozen kids, mostly but not entirely white and wealthy, who attended high schools in the Gilbert area. (The *Republic* would eventually identify ninety-five Goon-related assaults, stemming from eighteen incidents. Michael Soelberg, chief of the Gilbert police, called that number “exaggerated.” He added, “Any teen-violence case, they’re lumping them all together as a Goon-related assault, and that’s not accurate.”) The videos were shaky, chaotic, difficult to follow; the person filming would sometimes gasp, “Oh, my God,” sounding shocked or thrilled or some giddy mixture of the two. Some of the clips seemed to show drunk teens posturing and throwing wild punches at one another. “You’re talking all crazy on Instagram,” a girl yells in one, before shoving another girl against a car and hitting her repeatedly. Others depicted unprovoked blitz attacks: a group of kids swarming someone, knocking him to the ground, and kicking him over and over.

In January, Jaimie Weinberger, a mother of three with a thick fringe of eyelashes, gave me a tour of Gilbert in her white Yukon S.U.V. We passed large houses hidden behind long, pale walls, medians tastefully landscaped with desert plants, and a disorienting number

of shopping centers. Three-quarters of Gilbert residents are white, and, even as Arizona has become a swing state, the city remains solidly conservative—Donald Trump won the area by fifteen points in 2020, and most of the East Valley is represented by Andy Biggs, a former chair of the House Freedom Caucus.

“One thing to know about Gilbert is that there’s a shopping center on literally every corner. All of this, in the past couple of years, has been built up,” Weinberger said as we passed a Five Guys, a Shake Shack, and a Torchy’s Tacos. “I mean, there is literally every restaurant you can imagine here. Which I feel like is part of the draw to Gilbert. Because there is everything.”

“We can get to three different Targets within five minutes of our house,” her husband, Cody, who was driving, added.

Like many other Gilbert parents, Weinberger had become preoccupied with Lord’s death and was a regular on the Facebook groups and Reddit forums in which the case was discussed in obsessive detail, and in occasionally conspiratorial tones. “My husband’s, like, ‘You are just so engulfed in all of this,’ ” she told me later. “But my kids are growing up here.”

About a week after Lord’s death, Queen Creek police executed search warrants at four houses in a wealthy subdivision called Whitewing. The community is gated, but Weinberger had the security code. We drove through the snaking streets, past sprawling homes that Weinberger regarded with an appraising eye. In Gilbert, minute gradations of wealth are particularly visible in real estate: Is the neighborhood gated or not? Is the house custom-built or tract? “So all these are custom builds, and these lots are probably half acres, so that’s premium. Land is a hard thing to come by in Arizona, especially in Gilbert,” Weinberger said. “I would say every house in here is at least a million and a half, current market. I mean, there’s a really outdated, crappy house for one point eight five.”

Weinberger directed her husband down a short street, past a lamppost encircled with an orange ribbon. “Now this area is just covered in orange,” Weinberger said. People in Gilbert were painting rocks orange and tying orange ribbons around tree trunks as a sign of support for Lord’s family. (Orange was reportedly Lord’s favorite color.) In Whitewing, the orange decorations had become fodder for a proxy war. The week before my visit, someone had tied large orange bows to the community’s front gate. The Whitewing homeowners’ association had ordered a landscaper to remove them. After an uproar online, the bows were restored. Farther down the street, a spacious ranch house had thick ribbons tied around nearly every available surface: the mailbox, planters, wrought-iron lanterns. The orange décor appeared to be aimed at the family who lived across the street, the Renners. Talan, a seventeen-year-old football player with a blunt chin and wavy brown hair, had been linked to Lord’s death; his nineteen-year-old brother, Kyler, had recently been arrested on drug and assault charges. Both brothers had been identified as Goons. (Kyler’s attorney, a public defender, has said that the state has not alleged that he is a member of a gang.) “Did you see Kyler’s mug shot? He looks . . . not well,” Weinberger said, pulling up a picture of a young man with thin lips, bad skin, and a piercing, anxious gaze.

In the year leading up to Lord’s death, some of the young men implicated in his beating, and also other alleged Goons, had engaged in an escalating series of transgressions. At a houseparty in December, 2022, two Goons commanded a sixteen-year-old to get on his knees. When he refused, a group encircled him, shoving, then punching him until he fell to the ground; according to his mother, Lori Nitzen, he was beaten unconscious. Thirteen days later, a sixteen-year-old named Connor Jarnagan was attacked with brass knuckles in the parking lot of an In-N-Out Burger—the fourth beating with brass knuckles in five weeks. One mother was so alarmed by her daughter’s friends that she created a fake Snapchat account to keep tabs on their posts, which depicted violent beatings

and “more guns than anything I’ve ever seen in my whole life,” as she told the *Republic*.

I spoke to a couple whose daughter, whom I’ll call Alyssa, had been friends with several boys later identified as Goons. Like other parents I spoke with, they seemed bewildered by their child’s actions in the past few years, as if, since the pandemic, teen-age bad behavior had sparked into something unrecognizable and extreme. (Violent crime rose nationwide in 2020. It has since returned to pre-pandemic levels, over all, but rates of youth violence remain elevated in many places.) During the lockdowns, Alyssa was in middle school, and she began hiding in the closet, seized with panic attacks, her father, Brad, told me. She had always been “spicy,” her stepmother, Cheryl, added, but by the spring of her sophomore year she was exhibiting “a darker energy I couldn’t put my finger on.” (Brad and Cheryl are pseudonyms.) That year, she began dating Kyler Renner. Kyler was reserved around adults. He drove a turbocharged Camaro with a custom paint job, and was surprisingly well dressed for a seventeen-year-old: Gucci belt, Louis Vuitton backpack, Burberry boxer shorts. Kyler and Talan’s parents divorced in 2020, and Kyler lived with his father in a house south of Whitewing that was ostentatious even by Gilbert standards; it had an indoor golf gym, a basketball court, and a lazy river snaking through the expansive back yard.

One evening, while browsing through Alyssa’s prom pictures, Cheryl found what she believed to be Kyler’s second Instagram account. (It was linked in his main account’s profile, and featured selfies and pictures of his car.) Some of the posts were glamour shots of Kyler’s Camaro; others showed someone casually handling a silenced submachine gun as the person drove down a dark street, the camera zooming in on the odometer as it approached a hundred and twenty miles per hour, or a hand flipping through fat stacks of rubber-banded cash. “I was just scrolling through, shaking,” Cheryl said. When Alyssa went back to school

after summer vacation, her behavior deteriorated. (She eventually moved in with her mother full time, and is currently estranged from Brad and Cheryl.) One of Alyssa’s friends tested positive for cocaine use and said that Alyssa had provided the drugs, so Cheryl and Brad requested a meeting with school administrators and Alyssa. “I thought the minute we sit her down with an authority, that’s going to scare her,” Cheryl said. “And it didn’t.” Even the school resource officer seemed intimidated by the teen-agers he was supposed to be protecting. “I remember being, like, ‘There’s a vaping issue, they’re doing drugs, this is scary,’ ” Cheryl said. “And he was, like, ‘Well, there’s two thousand of them and there’s four of us. What do you want us to do?’ ”

Arizona’s strong libertarian tradition has led the state to embrace a consumer-oriented approach to its educational system. “I don’t think people understand what it’s like here,” one parent told me. Since the mid-nineties, Arizona has had open enrollment, meaning that students can attend any public school within a given district. “There are eleven different schools with over two thousand kids, some with three thousand kids, all within seven miles of me,” the parent went on. “The troublemakers can switch schools really easily. Or kids switch schools because of bullying, or because they just don’t like the kids there.”

Several parents told me that open enrollment contributes to a sense of unrootedness in the East Valley. That feeling was compounded when, in 2022, Arizona became the first state to implement a universal school-voucher program. Students can now have their pick of strip-mall schools, online religious homeschooling programs, or “traditional academies”—charter schools that emphasize discipline and often boast Roman columns out front. The voucher program was designed to help poor children leave failing schools, but a large majority of the money has gone to wealthy families whose children were already enrolled in private education. (The program has also led to a funding crisis for the

state, which currently faces a budget shortfall of more than eight hundred million dollars.) “It’s really eroded the sense of community and destabilized what was already a pretty destabilized system,” Beth Lewis, the director of Save Our Schools Arizona, a public-schools advocacy group, said. “Parents will get frustrated with something going on, rightly or wrongly, and they just say, ‘Forget it, I’m going down the street.’” Weinberger, a former elementary-school principal, told me, “Schools have to uphold this image to maintain their enrollment. And, because there’s so much competition, principals are encouraged to minimize issues to keep enrollment numbers up.”

Lord’s death shocked many parents in the community. Others were less surprised. “I have received over 50 text messages from worried parents, furious parents, heartbroken parents asking what we can do. Asking how can this happen HERE? I hate to break it to you all but it has been happening here for a long time,” a former educator turned “childhood advocate” named Katey McPherson wrote in a widely shared Facebook post soon after Lord’s death.

I met McPherson for breakfast at a popular spot in Gilbert’s self-consciously quaint downtown. “Welcome to Goonville!” she said brightly when I sat down. “Every morning, it’s something new and fucked up.” McPherson has an appealingly frank and dishy manner. She is the mother of four high-school-age daughters, who are, apparently, trouble-free, and she spoke about the Goons raptly but as if from a slight distance, as though they were unruly neighbors who couldn’t keep their mess out of the front yard. After two decades as a guidance counsellor in East Valley schools, McPherson became a consultant, lecturing around the country on topics like the plight of America’s boys: “Why they’re always in trouble, why they’re addicted to video games, everything.” The Goon drama aligned with her professional interests; it also seemed to have awakened a latent detective instinct. “I have a little informant that sends me all of their assault videos, because they’re

tired of knowing they've hurt people. And then I send them to the police," she told me. "I have, like, this whole Goon board," she said. (The Goon board mapped the connections among various floppy-haired boys.) The state police's gang-intelligence task force was looking into the Goons, and regularly consulted her for assistance. "We talk *very* frequently. They'll e-mail me, 'What do you know about this kid? Is he connected to So-and-So?'"

McPherson said. She'd become impressively well versed in the social world of Gilbert's troubled teens. "I don't even have to look at my Goon board anymore," she told me. McPherson often shared information with me before it was publicly known. "Arrests are happening this week!" she texted me in early March, three days before Queen Creek police made their initial moves in the Lord case.

Before Lord's death, police had treated the beatings as isolated incidents. Many people assumed that the boys' wealth had insulated them from consequences. "The cops know who these kids are," Lori Nitzen, the woman whose son was beaten unconscious in December, 2022, said. "It's crazy. The law isn't doing anything." Parents of victims told me they felt that Gilbert police hadn't taken the Goons' crimes seriously. Stephanie Jarnagan, whose son, Connor, was hit with brass knuckles, said that officers initially told her they were having trouble investigating her son's attack because they couldn't find witnesses. It was only when Connor tracked down screenshots of one of his assailants bragging about the beating that the case moved forward. At the time of the attack, ten months before the assault on Lord, Connor's father told police in an e-mail that it was "well known" that "these guys go around jumping people but no [one] wants to talk about it because they are scared." When police searched a suspect's phone, they found a group chat in which someone had written, "as soon as they find out we r the ones who got into all the fights We're gettin charged w 30+ assaults." (One of Connor's assailants, a seventeen-year-old, eventually pleaded guilty to one count of aggravated robbery.) "It's

really hard for me to say, because we are supportive of law enforcement, but I don't know how all these things have fallen through the cracks," Stephanie told me. A teen-ager being questioned for a Goon-related attack told police after Lord's death, "All summer long, there was fights happening at In-N-Out non-stop, and cops never did anything about it." He added, "But now a kid dies and everybody wants to do something about it."

Chief Soelberg said that the police had done their best with limited information provided by the public. "None of our cases, none of the suspects, none of the witnesses, none of the information ever mentioned the term 'Gibert Goons,'" he told me. "What's important to note is that the information we know now is much different than the information we had prior to Preston Lord being killed." After Lord's death, stories and videos of fights began circulating online, as parents scrutinized social media and victims of previously unreported assaults came forward. The material appeared to reveal a hidden world of rampant teen-age violence and crime. (It could get confusing: Goon investigations would ultimately ensnare multiple Masons, a Kyler, a Tyler, a Taylor, a Talan, and a Talyn.) The "truck kids" lived in north Gilbert, McPherson said. "Everyone would consider them, like, the hick Goons. They drive big lifted F-150s, they might have those big exhaust pipes off the back and a big American flag. They drive fifteen, twenty miles out into the desert and have bonfires. They have these little tiny motorcycles, and they jump over the bonfires with them." In south Gilbert, the Goons looked like J. Crew models. "Some of them are pulling a 3.8 and have a job and play a sport, and they're just beating people up on the weekend," she went on. The high-school Goons ran around with some older guys: recent grads, dropouts, older brothers.

The Goons had expensive vehicles and no curfews and longish hair that hung in their eyes. They liked car surfing—riding on the outsides of moving vehicles—and hanging out in the parking lot

between the In-N-Out and the Walmart, where the boys got in fights and the girls stood around, watching them fight. They shared videos of their exploits in a group chat labelled Social Studies. Online, they affected street language: “I’m on my trap phone,” one of the Whitewing boys messaged an antagonist not long after Lord’s death. “i got a revolver and a 12 gauge shotty i dont trust myself enough to go around yo crib.” (His correspondent didn’t seem impressed: “talking this crazy when you inna mansion?” the person replied.)

Much of the community’s condemnation had been aimed at Travis and Becky Renner, the parents of Kyler and Talan. “They’re super known in the community,” McPherson told me. “They own a lot of businesses.” The pair were college athletes—he ran track at Kansas State; she was a gymnast at Arizona State. In Gilbert, they owned a number of fitness-adjacent businesses, including Orangetheory franchises, smoothie shops, and a martial-arts studio. A decade ago, the *Republic* wrote about a mission trip that the couple took to Uganda, where they helped to fund the construction of a well to supply clean drinking water to a village. In the accompanying photographs, Becky and Travis grinned amid a crowd of Ugandan children wearing Orangetheory T-shirts. The Renners seemed to embody a Gilbert ideal: athletic, entrepreneurial, spiritual. But, below the surface, the family was struggling. Kyler went to rehab when he was in high school, and Talan spent time at Diamond Ranch Academy, a Utah residential treatment center and boarding school for adolescents with behavioral issues. (Diamond Ranch lost its license and closed last July after a state investigation into the deaths of several children in its care.) In 2018, Becky filed a restraining order against her husband, accusing him of physical abuse, though she dropped the order after they got divorced.



"I'm just wondering why you only say 'no bad ideas' after my suggestions, Janice!"
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

In the wider Phoenix area, the story of the Gilbert Goons was met with a mixture of shock and Schadenfreude: moneyed, manicured Gilbert had an underbelly after all. “I’m guessing my reaction was fairly typical. Holy crap, this is happening in Gilbert? *Gilbert?* Inconceivable!” Gammage, the author, told me. “Because, you know, it’s this upper-middle-class paradise, it’s these pretty, big, fancy houses. That’s certainly the image.”

As McPherson saw it, the Goons’ transgressions were a symptom of parental neglect and decadence. “Our home *tripled* in value in ten years,” she said. “So, as part of that, there’s this fast-money, fast-life-style thing, where people that didn’t have money gained equity in their homes and bought a boat, bought a Jet Ski. The parent community became very, well, I call it California—they were trying to be like the reality shows. I’ve even seen my own friends morph, where they’re swinging and having Adderall parties.” Another parent admitted to me that her child had been friends with members of the group. “Look, I wasn’t perfect. I did my best, and stuff still happened,” she said. Trying to rein in her

misbehaving kid had been deeply isolating. She believed that parents in the East Valley were too concerned with maintaining their public images to admit that their children were out of control. “No one talks, like, ‘My kid is being a complete shithead, I’m struggling, I don’t know what to do,’ ” she said.

Despite Gilbert’s reputation as a safe city, the community has a history of troubling teen violence. Decades before the Goons, Gilbert was menaced by a group of “clean cut high school boys with nice cars, fat allowances, and a mean streak,” as the *Republic* described them in 2000. The group went by a few different names, but by the late nineties they were calling themselves the Devil Dogs. The Devil Dogs were into steroids and the Ultimate Fighting Championship. They wore white laces in their Doc Martens, to signal that they were white supremacists. One Devil Dog later told police that the group sought out fights “pretty much every weekend.” They favored choke holds and head stomps and yelling “White power,” even when their victims were white. They hung out in a Taco Bell parking lot, where, on a spring evening in 1999, nine drunk Devil Dogs accosted two young men, barking at them and calling them “homos” and “pussies,” and then beat them. Another time, also at the Taco Bell, a group attacked a teen-ager, kicking him in the head and fracturing his skull; his injuries were so serious that he was taken to the hospital in a helicopter and rushed into surgery.

As with the Goon attacks, few of the altercations resulted in prosecutions. Police said that witnesses wouldn’t coöperate, or that victims declined to press charges. Sometimes, when things got out of hand at the Taco Bell, employees called leaders from the Mormon Church instead of the police. According to Mike Sanchez, a former Gilbert police detective who investigated the Devil Dogs, the Church’s involvement gave the young men an “aura of invincibility.”

On Memorial Day weekend in 1999, an eighteen-year-old named Jordan Jarvis was attacked by a group of Devil Dogs. Jarvis's face was so disfigured from the beating that he needed multiple reconstructive surgeries. Even months afterward, his speech was garbled. "He doesn't like to talk because he is hard to understand," his mother told a reporter. Jarvis agreed to press charges, and the family's answering machine filled up with messages consisting of nothing but loud barking.

Sanchez was surprised when his investigation into the teen gang intersected with a much larger case. It turned out that one of the Devil Dogs' older brothers was selling Ecstasy for Sammy (the Bull) Gravano, the Mafia hit man turned informant, who had moved to the area as part of the witness-protection program before renouncing his anonymity, which he found too confining. The Devil Dogs had apparently served as a kind of intimidation squad. Gravano ultimately pleaded guilty to federal and state drug charges, for which he served nearly eighteen years. "In my criminal life," he told the judge, "this is a minor thing."

A Gilbert city councilman, Mike Evans, said at the time that he was urged to keep quiet about the Devil Dogs, because if he spoke out "it would hurt economic development." Ultimately, a half-dozen young men were prosecuted for the assault on Jarvis. But teachers, coaches, and local officials wrote letters urging the courts to be lenient. "We have some thugs, and they need to get their noses bloodied. But they don't need to go to jail on assault charges with hate-crimes tags on them. They acted like jocks are supposed to act, obnoxious and aggressive," a former Gilbert mayor, James Farley, wrote to the judge. (All six young men pleaded guilty; five of them received sentences of six months in prison, and one was sentenced to two years.)

There are some obvious resemblances between the Devil Dogs and the Goons. Both scandals involved high-school athletes from privileged families who liked to beat up strangers, and who filmed

their fights—on videocassettes, in the case of the Devil Dogs. But Sanchez saw other parallels as well: police who regarded certain teen-agers with a boys-will-be-boys tolerance; parents in willful denial of their children’s crimes; a community that prioritized a reputation for safety over actual safety. “Gilbert has always been worried about a black eye,” he told me. “Image is everything. It’s that nineteen-fifties sitcom where everyone’s great, then you close the door and the dad beats the wife, the kid’s an alcoholic, the daughter just had a pregnancy.”

In the nineties, leaders in Gilbert had attempted to sweep the Devil Dogs story under the rug, Sanchez said. But, in the age of social media, doing so was now impossible. Facebook groups and Reddit forums dedicated to the area’s teen violence swelled to thousands of members. City-council meetings drew overflow crowds; every month, parents gathered to march in Lord’s memory, and to make demands. They called for the mayor’s resignation, a new police chief, a task force to address the violence. After a mayoral candidate’s son was spotted in a video alongside several Goons, his father dropped out of the race. Parents organized a boycott of the Renners’ businesses; when I visited, a gym that Becky Renner used to run sported a large banner proclaiming that it was under new ownership. The address of the family’s old house was shared online. “You’ve got kids out in front of the house, and people are driving by and yelling at them and cursing at them and accusing them of being murderers,” Soelberg, the police chief, told me. At Becky Renner’s new house, the attention grew so fervid that the family moved out; several people told me that it was for rent, for ten thousand dollars a month.

By the spring, the public pressure was having an effect. Law enforcement had officially named the Goons a criminal street gang. In March, SWAT teams assembled to make arrests. “It sounded like a war zone,” someone who lived nearby told me: police shouting through bullhorns, helicopters circling overhead. Queen Creek

police had recommended charging three young men—Talan Renner, Treston Billey, and Jake Meisner—with second-degree murder, and two others with lesser charges. Instead, the district attorney’s office charged seven—including Taylor Sherman, who appears not to have participated in Lord’s assault, although he filmed its aftermath—with first-degree murder. Some faced additional charges for aggravated robbery, stemming from the theft of the necklace, or for kidnapping, because Lord was allegedly prevented from escaping. All are being charged as adults and, if convicted, could face life in prison. (The D.A. has said that she won’t pursue the death penalty.) In their mug shots, some of the young men look stunned, as if the reality of their situation were only now registering.

When police asked teen-agers—Goons and their friends and ex-friends and girlfriends and ex-girlfriends—about the group, they struggled to explain it. It was a nickname from back in middle school, when Talan and Kyler and Jake were known as the Goonies. It was “a large friend group that [hung] out.” It was a group chat that turned “into this big thing.” The Gilbert Goons was just a name that other people called them, a teen associated with the group said. A name “which none of them liked.” ♦



Rachel Monroe is a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*, where she covers Texas and the Southwest. She is the author of “*Savage Appetites: True Stories of Women, Crime, and Obsession*.”

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Shouts & Murmurs

• [Parents in a Chain](#)

By Jay Martel | The great zucchini-bread disaster of 2024 and other mishaps, on a group text of moms and dads after the library bake sale.

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

Parents in a Chain

By [Jay Martel](#)

June 24, 2024



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

MURIEL: Thanks to all parents who participated in this year's Books Not Phones bake sale. We reached our goal and had great fuck.

MURIEL: *Fun* *great fun* Grrr autocorrect.

DIANE: Thank you for organizing, Mur! Library will get much needed \$.

CONNOR: Chicken zit winterscroll?

MURIEL: ???

CONNOR: Sari. *Isn't it wonderful?*

DIANE: Are you driving, Con? Asked you not to text and drive.

CONNOR: Gnat droving, runting 2 meetgang.

WINONA: Wanted to apologize for zucchini date bread fiasco. 
Was so popular last year. Not sure what happened.

HANNAH: Zucchini date bread was my favorite! No apology necessary!

WINONA: Took home almost all loaves. Even sample plate was full. 

MEREDITH: Was worried that I priced my fudge too high but worked out fine.

HANNAH: Fudge was a best-seller! [Tina Turner “Simply the Best” GIF.]

MURIEL: 

DIANE: 

CONNOR: Fuddle was sew grate! Eye 8 weigh 2 mini!

MEREDITH: Sold out by noon.

WINONA: Fudge always sells, right? Basically candy.

MEREDITH: ?

WINONA: Point of zucchini date bread is to have some kind of nutrition w/sweet. [Link to *Times* article on childhood obesity.] Not for this crowd tho!

MURIEL: In any case, the library stuffed is v. tankful. *staff*
thankful

WINONA: Wanted bread to sell well for library but also for Ava. She helped me make it this year.

HANNAH: Was so great to see Ava there! Such a sweetie!

WINONA: Wish she hadn't come. Then I could've lied and said it was popular ha ha. 😞

MURIEL: Because we made our goal, library can use bookmobile to reach kids who might not otherwise have access to boobs.

books

HANNAH: Such a great cause! Kids SO distracted by phones these days!

MURIEL: . . .

MURIEL: . . .

MURIEL: . . .

MURIEL: Sorry, just on phone with Dan. He wanted to congratulate all but is going into surgery.

MEREDITH: Thanks, Dan!

HANNAH: Dan's great!

MURIEL: I'm a lucky girl. 😊

WINONA: I saw Dan spit out sample.

MURIEL: ???

WINONA: Went behind your booth and spat out my zucchini bread sample.

MURIEL: . . .

MURIEL: Don't think he realized what it had in it. He has allergies to squish. *squash*

WINONA: Knew there had to be a reason. 🤔

DIANE: Skylar told me that zucchini date bread was her favorite.

WINONA: Interesting because I don't remember Skylar coming to booth at all. 🙄 Ava said they had some sort of falling out. Been happening a lot since divorce.

CONNOR: Kin eye bi sum moor fuddle brainies?

mEREDITH: Sold out, Connor!

DIANE: Read up the chain, Con.

MURIEL: And please consider not using voice to text.

WINONA: Everyone loves fudge, right? Sugar and chocolate basically. Just like who doesn't love new romance? Sweet and fun but big crash after rush. Empty calories.

MEREDITH: . . .

WINONA: Not yours Meredith of course. I loved yours! Afraid I made big pig of myself! 🐷🐷🐷

MURIEL: Hope everyone is on board for next year's fake sale.
bake sale

WINONA: Not sure given current custody arrangements and coordinating with Ava's new tutors and therapists. 😊 Might need some new recipes ha ha.

HANNAH: We're all here for you, Winona!

WINONA: TY. Know I can count on all of you. 🙏

DAN: Don't have any of these numbers in my contacts. What's this about?

MURIEL: Dan, it's me. Us. Bake sale chat?

DAN: See now. [Hide alerts for this chat.]

CONNOR: Sari, meetgang starching. 3 fuddle brainies 4 me.

TTYL! ♦

Jay Martel is the author of the novel “[The Present](#).” A film adaptation, which he also wrote, was released in May, 2024.

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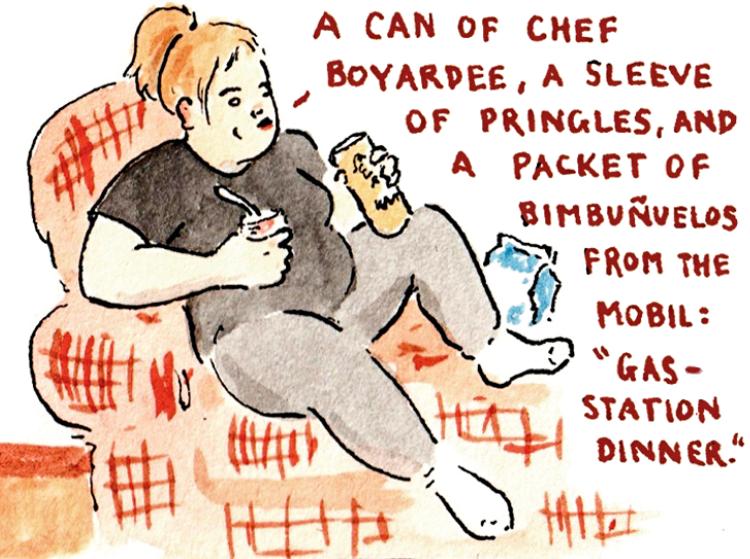
My TV Boyfriend

By [Emily Flake](#)

June 24, 2024



I HAD A LOT OF GRIMLY CUTE NAMES FOR MY QUESTIONABLE LIFE-STYLE CHOICES.



A CAN OF CHEF BOYARDEE, A SLEEVE OF PRINGLES, AND A PACKET OF BIMBUÑUELOS FROM THE MOBIL: "GAS-STATION DINNER."

BUT NONE SO EMBLEMATIC OF THE SITUATION AS "TV BOYFRIEND."



NOT AS MUCH FUN AS IT SOUNDS!

"TV BOYFRIEND" WAS A WOOD-PANELLED CATHODE-RAY TELEVISION SET THAT LIVED ON MY BED.

ON HIS SIDE, SO I
CAN WATCH HIM
LYING DOWN.



DID THAT BED HAVE A FRAME?
DID THAT BED HAVE SHEETS?

I THINK YOU
KNOW THE
ANSWERS
HERE.



MY NIGHTLY ROUTINE WAS TO
WATCH THE PRIME-TIME
SHOWS, THEN RERUNS, THEN
"ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT."



IF I WAS STILL AWAKE BY
THE TIME "THIS OLD HOUSE" CAME
ON, I KNEW I WAS IN FOR A
LONG, DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL.



OBVIOUSLY, MY PROSPECTS FOR
A HUMAN BOYFRIEND WERE
NOT IDEAL AT THIS TIME.



I'M KIND OF
THE DOLLAR
STORE OF
SEXUAL
CONQUESTS.

I HAD A SENSE OF DROWNING IN
MY OWN DIPSHIT INERTIA AND A
MORBID CURIOSITY TO SEE HOW
FAR I COULD FALL BEFORE I
HIT BOTTOM AND BOUNCED BACK UP-



MAYBE IF I
JUST HIT IT
HARD
ENOUGH...

OR JUST CRASHED THERE,
FINALLY AND BLESSEDLY DONE.

IN RETROSPECT, I SUPPOSE
YOU'D CALL THIS "DEPRESSION"?



EVENTUALLY, I HAD TO MOVE, AND
I COULDN'T TAKE HIM WITH ME.

I'M SORRY, HONEY-
IT'S NOT YOU,
IT'S ME.



WHICH WAS JUST AS WELL -
HE WOULD HAVE ONLY MADE
THE AIR MATTRESS I WOUND
UP ON DEFLATE FASTER.

WHEN MY BUTT
HITS THE FLOOR,
THAT WILL BE
BOTTOM.



Emily Flake, a New Yorker cartoonist, has published books including “[Joke in a Box: How to Write and Draw Jokes](#).”

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Vincent's Party

By [Tessa Hadley](#)

June 23, 2024



Illustration by Isabella Cotier

Listen to this story

Tessa Hadley reads.

The party was in full swing. Evelyn could hear the sexy blare of the trad jazz almost as soon as she got off the bus at St. Mary Redcliffe and began walking over to the Steam Packet, the pub that Vincent

—who was a friend of Evelyn’s older sister, Moira—had commandeered for the evening. He’d decided that they all needed a party to cheer them up, because the winter had been so bitter, and because now, in February, the incessant rain had turned the snow to slush. It was raining again this evening; the bus’s wiper had beat its numb rhythm all the way into town, the pavements were dark, and the gutters ran with water. Frozen filthy formless lumps, the remainders of the snow, persisted at the street corners and in the deep recesses between buildings, loomed sinisterly in the gaping bomb sites. Crossing the road, Evelyn had to put up her umbrella—actually, her mother’s worn old green umbrella with the broken rib and the duck’s-head handle, which she’d borrowed without asking on her way out, because she’d lost her own somewhere. Probably she’d get in trouble for this tomorrow, but she didn’t care; she was too full of agitated happiness. Anything could happen between now and tomorrow.

Evelyn couldn’t believe her luck, that she was going to an actual party—and not just any dull, ordinary party but this wild one with her sister’s friends, in a half-derelict old pub with a terrible reputation, hanging over the black water in the city docks. If her parents had known where the party was, they’d never have let her out, but she’d lied to them fluently and easily, saying that Moira had promised to look after her, and that they were meeting in the Victoria Rooms. She was proud of herself. Who knew that you could be a Sunday-school teacher one minute, asking the children to crayon in pictures of Jesus with a lost lamb tucked under his arm, and then lie to your parents with such perfectly calibrated, innocent sweetness?

The rain didn’t matter; Evelyn was impervious to it. Picking her way between the streams of water rippling across the roads, not wanting to spoil her fashionable, unsuitable black ballet flats, she enjoyed the contrast between this desolate outer universe and the heat of the life burning inside her. When she’d had to change buses

at the Centre, she'd gone into a cubicle in the Ladies' to take off her Wellington boots, and also the decent wool dress she'd put on over her party clothes, so that her parents couldn't see what she was wearing: skintight black slacks zipped up along the inside of her calves, black polo-neck jumper, wide red leather belt with a black buckle. Evelyn was very thin, with a long neck—a swan neck, she thought—a flat stomach, and jutting hip bones. She hoped that she looked spectacular, her hair scraped back from her face like a dancer's and breasts thrust upward in a new brassiere; she longed for and feared the moment when she would shed her thick winter coat and reveal herself. To tell the truth, she feared everything; part of her wanted to get right back on the 28 bus and go home. Peering at her reflection in the square of tin that served as a mirror above the sink in the Ladies' toilet, she had clipped huge false pearls to her ears—those were her mother's, too—and painted her mouth stickily with red lipstick. The boots and the dress were bundled now into a shopping bag, which she'd have to jettison somewhere, along with her coat and the umbrella, for collection later.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Tessa Hadley read “Vincent’s Party.”](#)

The Steam Packet's austere silhouette, three stories tall, was stark against the gaps that bombs had left in the skyline: the rows of windows on the upper floors were dark or boarded up, but a yellowish light shone enticingly from the ground floor. A clamor of raised voices drew Evelyn toward it, her body beginning to move already to the music. Moira hadn't promised to look after her—in fact, Moira didn't even know that she was coming to the party, and probably wouldn't want her there, but Evelyn was desperate to be part of her sister's crowd. The girls were born two years apart; Moira had always complained about her kid sister tagging along after her friends. Evelyn had usually tagged along anyway, when they were turned out of the house to fend for themselves for the

day, Moira jolting their baby brother along in the pram and intent on some mission with her gang, rolling up leaves in cigarette papers to smoke them, or climbing onto the roof of the glasshouse in the park, or spying on their neighbor who'd lost his mind and walked around nude in the garden.

It was Vincent who'd invited Evelyn to the party, last week when she'd bumped into him in Queens Road on her way to a lecture; he told her he'd persuaded the landlord of the Packet to let him take the place over for an evening. Vincent knew everyone: not just the arty people, although he was an art student like Moira, but also taxi-drivers and bookies and chip-shop owners, pub landlords and veteran soldiers who'd lost limbs in the first war; he talked to these characters for hours and learned their stories, catching them in clever charcoal drawings in his sketchbook. He paid court to a toothless old woman who ran a secondhand clothes shop, where garments were heaped in a rotting dark mulch against the window; you could see the moths and the fleas jumping out, Moira said, from between the layers of clothes. This old woman would save certain items for Vincent, so that he came to classes dressed in an airman's leather jacket or an evening cloak lined in red satin; Moira refused to sit near him then, because of the fleas and because the old clothes stank of naphthalene from the mothballs. Vincent was tall, with eager, moist brown eyes, a booming voice, and a lot of curly chestnut-brown hair. He wore a wide-brimmed soft black felt hat like Augustus John and played in a jug band.

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

“Vincent’s very good-looking,” Evelyn had said experimentally to Moira once, as Moira was cutting out a skirt pinned with a paper pattern on the dining-room table, crunching her scissors confidently through the fabric, which parted cleanly in their wake. She was studying fashion at college and could do tailoring like a professional.

“Ye-es.”

“What do you mean, ‘ye-es’?”

“Shush, Evelyn, let me concentrate. I don’t know. He’s got all the ingredients but somehow he isn’t attractive. Not to me, at any rate.”

Moira’s discriminations were subtle and absolute.

Evelyn dropped her voice, so that their mother couldn’t hear from the kitchen. “Is he queer?”

“God, no. Don’t be an idiot.”

“Well, *I* don’t know. I’ve never known anyone who *was* queer.”

“You’ve known loads of them, only you never noticed it. Half of the awful old spinsters who taught at our school, for instance. But not Vince. Vince tries to get off with everyone. He’ll probably try with you. You’d better watch out. Unless you do find him attractive, of course.”

“No, I don’t think I do,” Evelyn said. How could she find him attractive, after Moira had said he wasn’t? “I know what you mean. He’s sort of woolly, somehow.”

Moira laughed, in spite of herself. “*Woolly?*”

“Yes, like a fuzzy old favorite toy or something. A Teddy bear with big glassy eyes.”

“Well, he’s not *my* favorite toy.”

“Nor mine, either,” Evelyn said.

The Steam Packet was already full, with the band squeezed into a corner, blasting out music, and everyone shouting to be heard over

it. The place was dimly lit by bare electric bulbs, dangling from loops of wire festooned along the old beams of the ceiling. Vincent explained delightedly that the pub hadn't been connected to mains electricity since the war; it was just piggybacking off someone else's supply. A few couples were dancing already, in a tight space where the tables had been pushed back; there was sawdust on the stone-flagged floor, the rough-hewn benches and tables and three-legged stools were scarred and gouged, and the plaster walls—stained a dark mahogany by tobacco smoke—were crowded with advertising for brands of beer and rum and pipe tobacco which hadn't existed for decades, alongside paintings of ships set on choppy blue seas. A chunk of tree smoldered sulkily to ash in a dirty open hearth at the far end of the room. The young people by this time were generating their own heat.

Vincent was officiating behind the bar, where a few sticky bottles were assembled in front of the ornate mirror glass; he was ladling out cider from an open tin bucket, and the pub landlord—wizened and tiny as a jockey, with blue eyes like clear chips of ice—was sitting on a barstool in front of it, overseeing things skeptically. He didn't drink the cider himself, apparently; he preferred neat gin—Hollands, he called it. Vincent said that he was pickled in it. Some of the rough-looking men standing at the bar were most likely his regular customers: it was a dockers' pub, Vincent had said, where prostitutes came looking for customers. Evelyn had never seen prostitutes, but she'd read about them in novels. It was a big thing among the art students to want to mingle across the boundaries of class that their parents were so intent upon policing: their mothers putting doilies on cake plates, objecting to milk or ketchup bottles on the table, ironing handkerchiefs and socks and dusters as if respectability depended upon it. Many of the students hadn't come far from the working class themselves; Vincent's dad was a plumber in Ashley Down. Moira and Evelyn's maternal grandfather had been a coal miner—and yet their father was petitioning to join the Masons. After the war, he'd got a job with the Port of Bristol

Authority, and they'd moved down to Avonmouth from the northeast of England, leaving their history behind, along with a whole tribe of aunts and uncles and cousins on their mother's side.

“Oh, it’s you,” Moira remarked without enthusiasm when Evelyn had stowed her coat, and the bag with her boots and dress and umbrella, under a table in a corner, which was a makeshift cloakroom. Moira absorbed her sister’s outfit in one scouring, appraising glance. “Looks nice,” she said, grudging but fair. Evelyn thought now, however, that her Left Bank-themed black clothes had perhaps been the wrong choice for the Packet. Moira was wearing her striped full skirt and a cream blouse; someone had told her once that you should aim to make the other women in the room look overdressed. That was the difference between Moira and her, Evelyn thought. She would go for something striking and zany, which might work and might not, while Moira would never be so foolish as to take that risk. Evelyn veered between two extremes; either she spent hours dressing herself up extravagantly, or she slopped around at home in her oldest skirt and cardigan and slippers. Her scruffy self was her reading self. To give herself properly to a book she had to be crumpled and snug, oblivious of her appearance, scrunched up in an armchair with her shoes off and her legs tucked under her. When she was really reading, she forgot who she was. Yet when she went out to lectures or classes—she was in her first year at the university, studying French—she worked anxiously in front of the mirror to make herself look more like a student and an intellectual: beret tilted to one side, silk scarf fastened insouciantly around her throat. *“Insouciant,”* she murmured with a French accent, gazing adoringly at herself, finishing off her outfit with a couple of books under her arm.

The two sisters weren’t completely unlike in their appearance. There was a family stamp on both of them, and on their younger brother: they were all strong-featured, full-lipped, dark-browed, with a long doleful nose the girls hated, although it actually made

their faces more interesting. The nose came from their father, who was handsome and stern: it was all right on a man, a war hero, first lieutenant on an aircraft carrier that had escorted merchant convoys across the Atlantic. Both sisters were good-looking, although Moira insisted that she wasn't, that she just knew how to make the best of herself.

"I look more like *him*," Moira said. "You're the lucky one."

Their mother had pretty, soft Irish looks, although she'd let herself go and grown shapeless, because she was unhappy in the south and in her marriage. Moira was always telling her off for slouching, or eating too much starch. Moira was critical of her own defects, too, staring them down, calculating and resigned. "I hate these lumps of fat under my arms, for instance. These I do have from Mam."



And, on the seventh day, God rested. His eyes.
Just for a second. He didn't nap. That would
be so unprofessional. He wouldn't do that
while on the clock. Please don't fire Him.

Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

Whenever she and Evelyn went out together, though, it was Moira the men were drawn to, with her self-possession and sophisticated allure; beside her, Evelyn felt girlish and gauche, no matter how hard she tried. "You shouldn't talk too much," Moira advised unhelpfully. "Don't talk right in their faces."

At Vincent's party, Moira had the dreamily smiling, assured look she wore in public, her attention only brushing gauzily against the present moment. And she'd managed to get a table in just the right position—not so near the band that conversation was difficult but commanding a good view. She was sitting with Josephine LaPalma and two men Evelyn had never seen before. Josephine modelled at the art college and was one of Vincent's characters, glamorous and dangerous, with a broad Bristol accent. It was a coup for him that he'd persuaded her to come. She was said to have gypsy blood, and her black hair reached down to her waist when she undid it; it was in a thick plait tonight, wound around her head. Everything about Josephine fitted in with the students' romantic idea of a bohemian life. She was even having an affair with a married man, a talented painter who taught at the college.

The two men looked keenly at Evelyn as she joined the table, and stood up to be introduced, as if they belonged somewhere more formal; the older one bent over the hand she held out, to kiss it. They fussed about getting her a chair until she said she could just squeeze onto the bench with Moira—"Oho! Slumming it!" they cried. Their names were Paul and something she didn't quite catch, like Sandy or Simon, and they weren't quite right for Vincent's party: too conventional, something artificial and sneering barely concealed under the sugary surface. They behaved with that mixture of assurance and awkwardness which was a sign of being privileged and posh. Even Evelyn could see that their clothes were good—expensive, made with fine cloth—and the one who'd kissed her hand smelled of some subtle cologne. In the crowd jostling around them, the women wore peasant skirts and striped sailors' tops, and none of the men, apart from these two, were wearing ties. Evelyn couldn't help sneaking glances at the younger one, Paul, who didn't talk as much as his friend, and looked as if he might be quite drunk already. His movements and his speech were slow and syrupy, and he smiled privately, communing with himself, brilliantined treacle-colored hair flopping across his forehead,

blinking eyes and dimpled chin making him seem sleepy and childlike. His perfect features were like an angel's in a picture: upper lip very full, the curve of his cheek like a peach. He might be corrupt, Evelyn thought, remembering some of the poetry she knew.

Paul insisted on buying Evelyn a drink and she said she'd have a gin-and-orange. She hadn't really learned to like the taste of alcohol yet; she only liked its effects. The men thought she was very wise. "The cider's undrinkable. We think that creatures have drowned in it."

"Oh, they *encourage* creatures to drown in it," Moira assured them solemnly. "Everything adds to the flavor."

She and Josephine were drinking the cider laced with black currant, to make it palatable—most of the students did that.

"Well, Evelyn," the older man asked, "are you an art student, too?"

She told them that she wasn't, that she was studying French.

"French? *La belle dame sans merci!* Gosh, what brainy girls you all are. I'm perfectly terrified."

Josephine reassured him languorously that he needn't worry; she was an absolute idiot. "You don't look like an idiot to me," he said. "I expect you know which side your bread's buttered on."

"She isn't an idiot," Evelyn said. "The artists all want to paint her."

"I'll bet they do. I suppose they pay you to model, do they?" he asked Josephine.

"Nobody works for free."

"Clothes on or off?"

He wasn't looking at Josephine as he asked this, but grinning at Paul.

Josephine was indifferent. "Mostly off."

"I wouldn't let any daughter of mine earn money that way."

She laughed at him. "Your daughter might be too ugly. Maybe they wouldn't want to paint her."

This man had springy pale hair and rubbery, froggy features; his manicured hands—gathering the empty glasses or reaching to light their cigarettes, a gold signet ring on one stubby finger—made Evelyn think of that trick where you move colored pots around so fast that no one can guess where the bean is hidden. Under cover of his attention to her and Moira, Evelyn saw, he was more fascinated by Josephine. He spoke to her differently—jeering and presumptuous and yet afraid of her. He said that he and Paul didn't know anyone at the party. They'd never met Vincent before; they'd bumped into him on the street outside and he'd persuaded them to come in. "So you have to take pity on us and look after us," he said, in a tone of wheedling, teasing flirtation.

Evelyn decided that these two men didn't care about art or literature, and she wished that Vincent hadn't invited them; yet Moira was energized and spiky, as if she were enjoying their sparring. Mostly she was talking to the older one, but, of course, her attention was really on the beautiful boy, Paul, who rested his chin on his fist and stared into his drink. The older man's name was Sinden, it turned out, which was his surname. He didn't like his Christian name, he explained, and wouldn't tell them what it was, however much they begged him. "I can't believe the things women get interested in," he protested. "Now, you see, a man wouldn't care less about my Christian name, once I said I wasn't using it. What does it matter, something my mother chose at a time when I

didn't have any say in it? I wouldn't trust her to name a dog of mine."

"But imagine if there weren't any women in the world," Evelyn said.

Sinden pretended he was anguished by that idea, grabbing her hand and pressing it against his shirtfront to make her feel his heart beating fast; the material of his white shirt was clammy from his body heat, slippery against the vest he wore underneath. He groaned suggestively. "No women! Alas, alack! What would we do without them? But I'll let you in on a little secret, Evelyn: it isn't your curiosity we adore you for."

"But, no, seriously, imagine it," Evelyn persisted, trying to have a proper conversation. "No one would find anything out if there were no women asking questions. All the secrets would just rot away unnoticed. There would just be a sort of empty framework left. Like one of those wire things they build up plaster on. An armature."

"I love a bit of gossip," Josephine said. "Keeps the world going round."

Sinden winked at her. "It isn't gossip keeps it going round."

"You think it's money, then? Or sex?"

"That's a poser for you, Sinden," Paul said, lifting his head from his drink. "Money or sex, old chap?"

"Depends what time of day," Sinden said. "Depends how many drinks I've had."

"You need the money first," Paul said. "To buy the drinks that make you think that you don't care about the money."

Sinden beckoned them closer, speaking in a hoarse whisper; Evelyn moved her knees away from his under the table. “My friend here has got plenty of it, too,” he said. “Money coming out of Paul’s ears, doesn’t need to do a day’s work in his life. Let’s just say that once upon a time his family were in the tobacco industry, and, when they sold, they invested the proceeds wisely.”

Listening to this description of his wealth, Paul looked bashful and complacent, almost coy. Sinden told them that Paul had been giving him a tour of the war damage in Bristol; he’d never visited before. “Little did we know we were going to bump into you girls! So Paul’s been showing me around and I’m convinced there are opportunities here. For the right sort of people. A fresh start for the city. Building for the future.”

“Do you know about building, then?” Moira asked. “Is that what you do?”

“I’m not a builder.” He laughed. “Do I look like a builder? But I do have very good contacts, with the right sort of men who have the right sort of friends. Contacts are the important thing.”

“Sounds like profiteering to me,” Josephine said. “I hate profiteering.”

“And what’s wrong with making a nice clean profit, out of something everybody wants? That way we win all round.”

“They should just cut out the middleman. Then everything in this city would be a damn sight cheaper. Building by the people, for the people.”

“She’s a Red!” Sinden exclaimed delightedly, staring at her with his goggle eyes. “I’ve never met a real live Red before! Seen a few dead ones.”

“Take a good look,” Josephine said. “Looking is free.”

She settled herself as if she were posing, presenting her head in its dramatic profile, magnificent as a ship’s figurehead. Sinden couldn’t believe, he said, staring at her, why three such lovely girls hadn’t been snapped up. How come they weren’t wearing engagement rings? Weren’t there any red-blooded men around here?

“Moira is engaged,” Evelyn blurted out, as if she were defending their honor, or Moira’s at least. “Sort of engaged. Her boyfriend’s gone as a policeman to Malaya.”

“Cass isn’t my boyfriend.”

“Christ, the poor sap,” Sinden said.

Evelyn protested, astonished. “Why a poor sap?”

“I doubt if you’ll see him again.”

“But we will see him!”

“Don’t suppose he speaks a word of Chinese. I know that game. Put him in charge of a squad of men he can’t talk to, armed with weapons he doesn’t know how to use, in a terrain he doesn’t understand. They’ll supply him with some soft-skinned Austin or Land Rover. Done for at the first road ambush, driving between the plantations he’s supposed to be protecting.”

“But how do you know all that?”

He tapped the side of his nose. “I know what I know.”

“And why are you gloating? It sounds as if you’re glad that he might die.”

Sinden's horrible knowingness was hard and irrefutable as a rock, Evelyn thought. You couldn't push back against it unless you understood about guns and vehicles and politics, all those brutally real things. Moira stared at him dry-eyed, challenging him to find the least sign that she cared. "Cass wasn't my boyfriend. I told him not to go. I knew it was stupid. We never were engaged. He kept on about this cash bonus they were offering, at the end of one year."

"Good luck with that," he scoffed. "Getting through to the end of a year."

"Risking his neck," Paul said, stirring to wakefulness and slurring his words, "when he could have been spending the evening here with you."

"You see? Paul likes you," Sinden said triumphantly. "I knew that he'd like you. He's pretty choosy, our friend Paul, but he likes you, Moira. Now, why don't you two lovebirds get dancing, while I buy us more drinks?"

Josephine said then that she was leaving, going on to another party. Evelyn didn't want anything; she hadn't finished her first gin-and-orange. The band was playing a bluesy number, and as Paul stood up from the table he pretended to be parping along on an imaginary slide trombone, as if the music were a comedy laid on for his benefit; Sinden joined in on an imaginary snare drum, screwing up his face to feel the beat. Evelyn was buffeted by a gust of rage at their obliviousness. Didn't they know that this music was serious, it came out of human suffering, it wasn't a game? The student crowd were all jazz enthusiasts, worshipping Louis Armstrong and Buddy Bolden and King Oliver, whose lives and art set a high-water mark for everything tragic and joyous. The musicians in the band were all just white Bristolians, but seemed to borrow something of that glamour.



"First the good news, Mr. Edmonds: you're going to get closure."
Cartoon by Peter Steiner

Evelyn thought that Moira might refuse to dance, if she was upset by how Sinden had spoken about Cass. But she moved suavely enough into Paul's arms, with a remote, vague look as if she hardly saw him. Paul wasn't tall, but he wasn't slight like a boy: he was muscled and substantial, more authoritative now that he was on his feet. When they'd squeezed their way among the couples on the dance floor, he let his head droop onto Moira's shoulder and his body rested heavily against hers, as if he really were drunk. He danced well, though, responding to the music's sluggish melancholy. Evelyn had the surprising thought that bodies were sometimes wiser than the people inside them. She'd have liked to impress somebody with this idea, but couldn't explain it to Sinden, who would misunderstand her deliberately. When she saw Paul rouse and lift his head to say something in Moira's ear, pulling her closer with his slow smile and sleepy eyes, Evelyn was stricken with envious desire, in spite of everything. Whatever he said ignited some response in Moira, so that she smiled back

secretively, pretending to reproach him, pushing him off a little, not giving anything away. Evelyn had a horror then of Sinden asking her to dance out of sheer obligation, taking second best. She didn't want to dance with him anyway; she didn't like him. So when he got up to go to the bar she made her escape with Josephine, said she was popping outside for a bit of air.

"Don't fall in the water," Sinden said. "It's dark out there."

Emerging so abruptly from the noise and heat of the pub into the night's blackness and wetness and quiet, Evelyn wondered for a moment if she was drunk, but that didn't seem likely after one gin. "Don't men just like to talk?" Josephine said. "They love the sound of their own voices." Then she hurried away, her big coat flapping, her head down in her gypsy scarf, heels clacking on the pavement, as she weaved her way among the shadowy, slouching men, not afraid of walking by herself through the docklands. It wasn't quite dark: there were street lamps on the road and lights on some of the wharves and in the timber yards. Light seeped from the pub windows onto its forecourt, where the cobbles gleamed wetly although it had stopped raining; beyond this forecourt a wall dropped abruptly to the water, ten feet below, in a narrow channel that cut through from the Floating Harbor into the Basin. On summer nights, couples would sit on the wall, swinging their legs, drinking the lethal Kingston Black cider, but in winter the idea of that enclosed invisible water was furtive and chilly. When something splashed in the blackness, Evelyn thought of rats. A call from one of the ships in the Basin, in no language she recognized, bounced eerily along the surface of the water.

Probably there wasn't really any other party, she thought; probably Josephine was hurrying to meet her lover, the married artist. Then she felt sick with loneliness. She longed for a lover of her own and was ashamed of her inexperience, her poor judgment. Things had been hopeless when she was still a schoolgirl, but she'd thought that something would happen now that she'd started at the

university—where surely she would thrive, because she was clever. She'd imagined herself surrounded by admirers, and had even been afraid that she'd settle too easily, for someone who wasn't good enough. Evelyn could have loved Moira's Cass, for instance, Robert Cassidy, although she didn't know him well; she'd met him only a few times, when Moira had allowed her to come to the pub with her crowd. Moira kept her emotional life strictly apart from her family, and their parents weren't to be told that she and Cass were engaged—and, anyhow, now apparently they weren't. Yet he'd seemed entralling to Evelyn: bullish, talented, popular, a burly, freckled, red-headed rugby player, his blue eyes watchful and wary. He was a joker and a tease, with a gift for drawing caricatures of his friends. Since Cass had gone off to Malaya, Evelyn had loyally taken a great interest in the Emergency, looking out for snippets about it in the newspapers. It was called an Emergency, their father said, because if they called it a war then the plantation owners wouldn't be covered by their insurance.

It was too cold outside without her coat; Evelyn had only come out, anyway, to get away from where she was stuck in that corner with Moira and Sinden and Paul. She needed another drink to give her the courage to throw herself back into the party, where she barely knew anyone, and no one was interested in her. A character in a novel, in her situation, would break in on conversations and introduce herself, then turn out to be charming and brilliant; people would be amazed by her ideas and her sex appeal, her stylish gamine haircut. Just as Evelyn was imagining this, she heard someone come out from the pub entrance behind her and say hello. It was Donald, from her French class at the university. When Vincent invited her to the party, Evelyn had been on her way to meet Donald in Carwardines for coffee—they were going to go over some ideas about Racine's "Phèdre." She'd passed the invitation on, wanting to impress Donald with her bold sociability, mingling with the rough life in the docks, but hadn't imagined that

he'd dare to come. He was wearing the same unsuitable striped blazer that he wore to classes.

"Are you having a good time?" he said.

"Isn't this just an amazing place? Very 'Fleurs du Mal.' "

"Is that the name of the cider?"

"Oh, dear, did you drink it? I should have warned you—you need to put black currant in, to take the taste away. Was it very awful?"

"Definitely the worst thing I've ever drunk. You look stunning, by the way. I'd drink the cider bucket dry, it goes without saying, for the chance of spending an evening with you. The sort of ordeal knights undergo in the old stories."

"I never heard of one drinking a bucket of cider."

"They always give girls the expurgated version."

Evelyn liked Donald, but—it was just her luck—he wouldn't do for a boyfriend. He looked about sixteen, to start with: overeager and stumbling and pallid, with sticking-out ears and a tense, lumpy jaw. He'd been a boarder at Queen Elizabeth's Hospital, where the boys' uniform hadn't changed in centuries—a sort of long dress buttoning up the front, with yellow stockings and black shoes. Evelyn had seen these boys tormented in the street by children from the local schools, and, once she knew that Donald had worn the yellow stockings, couldn't help imagining him in them. When Moira first met him, she'd said that he was really sweet, pity he was so N.P.A., which meant Non-Physically Attractive. Donald took off his blazer when Evelyn shivered and put it around her shoulders. "You should come here in the summer," she said, encouragingly. "In the summer you can sit out on the dock."

“I should think people fall in, though. After a pint or two of *Fleurs du Mal*.”

“Are you drunk, Don? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you when you’re drunk. I wonder what you’re like.”

“I’m adorable, apparently.”

“Do you feel drunk now?”

He frowned, as if testing himself inwardly. “Drunk enough to fall in the water, not drunk enough to risk going anywhere near it. It’s an odd kind of drunkenness, different to beer, lighter and more extreme, as if someone had just sliced off the top of my mind, like taking the top off an egg. Yet ask me to supply the past historic first-person plural of the verb *saisir*, and I bet I could still do it.”

“*Nous saisîmes*, of course, you oaf.”

He sighed and complained that she was too quick for him.

Evelyn shuddered inside the blazer’s warmth and Donald put an arm tentatively around her shoulders. “Don, if we went back inside,” she said, “would you buy me a drink? Because I need a boost. I’m not really enjoying myself much at this party. I’m not talking to anybody, or not anybody I actually like—I mean, apart from you, of course. I’m always disappointed at parties. I long to be, you know, a *succès fou*, but I never am.”

“You’re a *succès fou* with me,” he said.

“Yes,” she said with a flare of irritation. “But that’s not enough, is it?”

“I suppose not.”

Donald bought Evelyn a gin-and-orange with double gin in it, and after that the party went much better. She wasn't exactly a *succès fou*, but she submerged herself effectively in the flamboyant, quarrelsome, ecstatic, flirting mass, drifting between different groups as if she were always on her way somewhere else. More drinks were bought for her from time to time, by one man or another; she danced with a couple of these men. In lieu of a lover, she decided to be in love with the glorious, sinuous, shameless music, and with the whole jazz band collectively, from the droopy-faced ironic pianist wreathed in his cigar smoke to the grinning drummer perched so tautly and eagerly upright on his stool; she even included the brooding trumpet player, whip-thin, the quiff of his thick black hair oiled like a pelt, who glared at her when she said something loudly, by mistake, over his solo in "West End Blues." She danced with Donald only once: predictably, he was a hopeless dancer, with no sense of rhythm. "Are you actually *counting?*" she asked, accusingly.

"I thought that was what you were supposed to do."

"Only when you're learning. Afterward, you've got to just feel it, in your limbs."

"I apologize for my unfeeling limbs," he said.

"And the counting's supposed to relate to the beat of the music. It's not just something random ticking over inside your own head."

"Sorry."

Evelyn didn't lose sight of her sister, in her circulation around the party. Moira hadn't stuck with those two men, thank goodness; she'd shaken them off and danced with different people. She'd been at the heart of the knots of fun and laughter that Evelyn had most wanted to break into. Had someone replaced Robert Cassidy in Moira's affections? Evelyn kept a lookout, but couldn't see

anything obvious. Toward the end of the evening, when Evelyn was thinking she needed to leave, to catch the last bus home to Avonmouth, she made her way to where Moira was standing, talking again, as it happened, to Sinden and Paul, who had their coats on and their hats in their hands. Evelyn didn't know whether Moira was coming home with her or not; often she stayed over in town with friends.

"We're making efforts to abduct you and your sister," Sinden said jocularly to Evelyn. "Paul wants to give you girls a lift somewhere, anywhere. The night outside is not only dismal—it's also young. I know a little place we can get a drink after hours, something that doesn't taste of dead animals. Surely nobody wants to go to bed yet?"

"No matter how dog-tired I am, I can't sleep," Paul volunteered unexpectedly with a drunk's solipsism, more or less talking to himself. "Soon as the old head hits the pillow, *bang!* Whole caboodle starts up again, the merry-go-round."

Evelyn said she didn't want a lift, though it was very kind. She'd rather get the bus.

"No monkeying around," Sinden assured her. "Evelyn, I swear. If you want to go straight home, we'll take you straight home. But there's a business proposition I'd like to discuss with your sister."

She looked at Moira anxiously. "What kind of business proposition?"

"A good friend of mine is in lingerie," Sinden said. "Very exclusive and expensive. He has a salon and a small workshop in London, and I'm aware he's wanting to expand into dress design. All I'm saying is that I'd like to take a look at Moira's portfolio—not tonight, of course, but some other time. If I thought her work was

good, then I could introduce her to my friend. At least let me give you my card, Moira, with my telephone number.”

Moira said it was an interesting idea and she would think about it; she took the card and put it in her purse. Sinden insisted again that in the meantime they should come for a spin in the Bentley. “I’m happy to take the wheel, if you’re afraid Paul’s had a few too many.”

Evelyn was about to repeat that she’d rather not, when Moira seized her by the arm and jerked her away. “Wait for us here,” she said to Sinden. “We’ll get our coats, then we need to pop upstairs and powder our noses.”

“But I don’t *want* to, Moira,” Evelyn protested sotto voce, as her sister pulled her toward the bar. “I hate those men.”

“Just follow me,” Moira hissed, not letting go of her grip. They found their coats and Evelyn’s bag; when Evelyn saw Donald watching her, solitary, across the room, she was smitten with compunction. Perhaps before she left she’d dance with him once more, even though he was hopeless. The sisters hesitated, coats over their arms, at the foot of a dark staircase; they’d seen girls disappearing up here in the course of the evening, presumably in search of the toilet—impossible to tell, when those girls came down again, if they’d been successful. The men just went to pee whenever they needed, in the harbor outside. “Is there a Ladies’ upstairs?” they asked Vincent, who looked doubtful and said that not many ladies drank in the Packet as a rule.

Evelyn was hesitant. “We could wait until we get home.”

“I can’t wait.”

Now that they’d imagined relieving themselves, they were both desperate to go. It was very dark on the stairs. Evelyn discovered a

light switch and tried it, but nothing came on; they felt their way, hanging on to a greasy handrail. Moira found a book of matches in her bag and by their wavering feeble light—they were only little paper ones, the kind they give you in hotels—she and Evelyn climbed the winding wood-panelled staircase and peered into rooms, one after another, of an extraordinary ancientness and awfulness. Some had their windows boarded up; in others, they could make out, by a dim light creeping through filthy windowpanes, looming forms that might have been rolled-up drugget, broken chairs, crates full of bottles, coiled rope, heaps of white china crockery, a birdcage, a painted sign lying on its side. The staves of a barrel, whose hoops had burst, fanned in a toothy grin. Each time a match went out, the dank smell of the place—tarry and rotten—settled on them like the whole foul weight of the past. “I suppose this would be Vincent’s idea of heaven,” Moira said disparagingly. The top floor was emptier, but still none of these rooms was any kind of bathroom or toilet; in one of them, where iron bedsprings were propped against one wall and the torn old wallpaper was printed with flower baskets, Moira exclaimed, “Oh, I’m just going to go right here.”

Evelyn squealed. “You can’t! Moira!”

“I can! No one will ever know. The place stinks anyway. Hold my coat, will you, and strike another match for me? I don’t want to get pee on my dress.”

They were probably both drunker than they realized. Moira hoicked up her skirt and petticoat, pulled down her knickers, spread her legs, and peed against the wall with a satisfying splashing. “God, that’s good,” she said, laughing. And when she finished she struck the last match for Evelyn, who had more difficulty, tugging her tight slacks down.

“What if anyone comes? What about rats?”

“Well, hurry up, then.”

Evelyn screamed while she peed, imagining the rats. When the match went out, as she struggled to pull up her slacks, Moira told her that Cass was dead.

“What?”

“His mother wrote to me last week, at the art college. He was ambushed. I suppose he was shot, just like the man said. It was all my fault. Which is what his mother more or less thinks, too.”

Evelyn stood frozen with her slacks halfway up her thighs. “Oh, Moira. Oh, no.”

UNSUNG HEROES



JOHNNY O'MALLEY, WHO DECIDED IN 1837 THAT YOU SHOULD GIVE SCISSORS BACK TO PEOPLE WITH THE POINTY END IN YOUR HAND, NOT AIMED AT THEM. (ESTIMATED LIVES SAVED: 37 MILLION.)

Cartoon by Brian Frazer and Sam Frazer

“I feel so awful. He said he’d sign up if I wouldn’t go with him to Paris.”

“That doesn’t make it your fault.”

“I told him that I didn’t love him. That I loved someone else.”

Moira sobbed just once, or at least Evelyn thought it was a sob: an ugly barking noise, roughly torn out of her, almost like exasperation. When Evelyn tried to console her, Moira pushed her away, wiping her eyes brusquely with the back of her hand. Evelyn sobbed, too, in sympathy with her sister; she couldn’t truly grieve for Robert Cassidy, she realized, because she’d hardly known him. His death was too improbable—he had seemed so solidly alive, with his loud laugh, the explosion of his freckles. As the girls grew used to the dark, each could make out the other’s shape; the darkness anyhow seemed thinner up here at the top of the building. There must have been a broken windowpane, because the wind whistled and a draft blew around their shoulders.

“So who is the someone else?”

“I can’t tell you. Because it isn’t really anything. Not yet.”

“Who, though? You have to tell!”

Moira couldn’t suppress her shudder of voluptuousness. “The trumpet player.”

Evelyn felt like a fool. Of course it was: with his forbidding frown and his high notes. She saw, in a flash of revelation, that Moira had been performing that entire evening, dancing and flirting with Paul and all those other men, for the eyes of the trumpet player only. “And does he know? I mean, what you feel about him?”

“He sort of knows. He knows, yes. Though he’s still with someone else right now.”

In her sister's expression—vivid even in the dimness, and so familiar from their childhood—Evelyn saw recklessness, fear, concealment, power. Moira had made such efforts to transform herself, when they moved down to Bristol, into this controlled, poised young woman. Yet some essence of the fierce, bold child persisted in her, and had been diverted into new channels, sexual and personal.

"And now," Moira declared, "we have to get away from those hideous men."

"I thought you liked them!"

"I hate them. I could kill them."

At one end of the landing on this upper floor, light came weakly through a half-glassed metal-framed door, which led onto a fire escape. Moira tried the door handle, tugging it abruptly so that the door opened and boisterous wet night rushed in. "I thought so," she exclaimed in triumph, her voice whipping away from her in the blast.

"No, Moy, I can't. I'm not going down there. Not in a thousand years."

"You can!"

"Why don't we just go downstairs normally and insist on getting the bus home?"

"Because you can never get away from that kind of man. They'll inveigle us into something or other and then it'll be too late."

Evelyn was sure that she could have got away from them. But Moira had buttoned up her coat already and stepped out onto the rickety, rusty platform. Evelyn screamed again: was the fire escape

swaying away from the stuccoed side of the building? “It’s fine,” Moira reassured her. “Just a little bit shaky. I’ll go first.”

This was more or less what she’d said all those years ago, when they’d walked on the metal struts across the glasshouse roof in the park, up in the north. That hadn’t ended well: Moira had put her foot through the glass and needed twelve stitches—they’d got into serious trouble. At least this fire escape was a proper stairway, with a bannister to hold on to, and not just one of those ladders attached to a wall. Moira ran down swiftly and lightly, with a jangle of her heels on the iron, to the bottom, which was still about six feet off the ground, in an open yard at the side of the pub. Then she jumped like a cat, landing gracefully in a crouch on all fours, pale coat billowing around her in the wet.

“See! It’s easy.”

Evelyn stood on the narrow platform at the top, sick and dizzy and exalted, while the wind flew at her and threw rain at her. Lights on the ships in the Basin and on the wharves were reflected in the black water; beyond the harbor she could make out the great masses of the city against the night sky, its ghostly terraces climbing the hills. How could she take in that Cass was dead, while she was still alive and young? All the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them, were in that giddy moment spread beneath her. Evelyn made her way down the fire escape more cautiously than Moira, then hesitated at the bottom.

“Throw me your bag,” Moira said. “What’s in it?”

“A dress I wore so that they couldn’t see me. And Mam’s umbrella.”

“She’ll be annoyed. It’s her whist drive tonight.”

“Oh, Moira, are you full of grief?”

“Just jump,” Moira said impatiently. “Trust me.”

And Evelyn jumped and she was all right. She was jubilant, landing in a crunch of gravel beside her sister, though the jolt shocked all thought out of her body for a moment, and her palms stung from the sharpness of the stones, down there in that filthy salty bitter underworld of dark. ♦

This is drawn from “The Party.”

Tessa Hadley has contributed short stories to *The New Yorker* since 2002. Her books include “*After the Funeral* and *Other Stories*.”

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How to Start a War Over Taiwan

“The Work of Art,” “The Other Olympians,” “The Coast Road,” and “Housemates.”

By [Ian Buruma](#)

June 24, 2024



The question of Taiwan is fraught with bad history, which muddles our understanding of what is at stake in East Asia.

Illustration by Álvaro Bernis

Catastrophic wars can start in peripheral places: Sarajevo, for the First World War; Gleiwitz, on the German-Polish border, for the Second. The contributors to “[The Boiling Moat](#)” (Hoover Institution), a short book edited by Matt Pottinger, believe that [Taiwan](#), the democratically governed island situated off the coast of southeast China between Japan and the Philippines, could spark a major war, possibly even a nuclear one, pitting the U.S. and its Asian allies against China. According to their estimates, more than ten thousand Americans could be killed in action in just three weeks of combat. The cost in Chinese and Taiwanese lives, both civilians and soldiers, would presumably be much higher. And that is assuming that a local war doesn’t spread to the rest of the world. Pottinger was the Asia director on the National Security Council under [Donald Trump](#), and so his opinions are worth paying attention to.

This isn’t to say that Pottinger’s hawkish views on the need for U.S. intervention in East Asia would earn him a place in a second Trump Administration. *MAGA* isolationism has always been in tension with the former President’s tough-on-China rhetoric, which, in turn, is in tension with his penchant for making deals with dictators. The contributors to “[The Boiling Moat](#)” are not *MAGA* types, either; they’re a mixture of military mavens, including a Japanese admiral and a former contractor for U.S. Special Operations Command, and hawks for democracy, such as Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the former *NATO* secretary-general.

There are indeed good reasons to be worried about an East Asian conflict. Unlike previous Chinese leaders, who were, on the whole, content to let the Taiwan question rest until some kind of peaceful resolution could be found, [Xi Jinping](#) has avowed that “unification of the motherland” is the “essence” of his campaign to “rejuvenate the Chinese nation,” and has indicated that he is prepared to use military force to bring that about. After Lai Ching-te, the newly elected Taiwanese President, declared in his inaugural speech that

the Republic of China (the official name for Taiwan) and the People’s Republic of China “are not subordinate to each other,” the P.R.C.’s foreign minister, Wang Yi, accused Lai and his supporters of betraying China and their “ancestors.” The Chinese defense minister, Dong Jun, used even more pugnacious words. Anyone who aspired to Taiwanese independence, he said, would be “crushed to pieces.”

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If a Chinese attempt to take Taiwan by force were to succeed, the consequences could be dire. East Asian countries, panicked by China’s control over their supply routes in the East China Sea and by America’s unwillingness or incapacity to protect them, might embark on a nuclear-arms race. Taiwan’s semiconductor industry, which provides the world with more than half of its chips, would fall into Chinese hands. And, because Taiwan is also the only functioning liberal democracy in the Chinese-speaking world (Singapore is an illiberal democracy), crushing Taiwan’s system of government would be a huge blow to democrats, greater even than [the crackdown in Hong Kong](#).

Pottinger and his contributors think that the only way to stop China from launching an attack on Taiwan, and possibly starting a devastating war, is to build such a formidable system of military deterrence that China wouldn’t dare. Their book is a kind of PowerPoint briefing on how to turn the Taiwan Strait into a “boiling moat” filled with *JASSMs* (joint air-to-surface standoff missiles), *LRASMs* (long-range anti-ship missiles), *HIMARS* (high-

mobility artillery rocket systems), P.J.D.A.M.s (powered joint direct attack munitions), uncrewed sea drones, and much other military hardware and software. Readers will need a taste for dense military prose to scale such sentences as “If tactical-level operators have organic I.S.R. [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance] fires, and engagement authority, they can identify and attrit at close-range enemy forces that meet certain predetermined profiles (e.g., landing forces).”

Missiles, drones, and bombers are, however, insufficient to deter China, according to the book’s authors. Taiwan and Japan must be given a “new military culture.” Grant Newsham, an ex-marine who served as the Marine Corps attaché in Tokyo, thinks that the Japanese people must be prepared “physically and psychologically” for a war over Taiwan. He mentions movies that might “increase morale (the *Top Gun* effect).” Pottinger holds up the Israelis as a model: “Since the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, the benefits of Israel’s warrior ethos have been on display again as Israelis have unified, despite bitter domestic political differences, to wage a war to destroy Hamas.” (This might not be the most happily chosen example.) And to tell the Japanese to become a nation of warriors again would be to push for complete reversal of the irenic nature of postwar Japan, and of the pacifist constitution written by Americans in 1947.

One can agree that Taiwan deserves to be defended against military aggression, but what’s missing in all this talk of missiles, drones, and the fighting spirit is any sense of politics or history. References to the past in “The Boiling Moat” are only of the crudest kind: Xi Jinping is compared to Hitler; the People’s Liberation Army is called “China’s Wehrmacht”; and the inevitable example of Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler, in 1938, is invoked as a warning against complacency.

Politics, too, is reduced to sloganeering about defending democracy in “counter-authoritarian partnerships.” In the concluding chapter,

the book's two European contributors write, "You cannot declare yourself neutral when it comes to the front line of freedom—in Donbass or in the Taiwan strait." These are fine fighting words, echoing a statement by the former Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen: "The rallying cry for all democracies must be one for all, and all for one."

She can be heard uttering these words in "Invisible Nation," a documentary by Vanessa Hope, which presents an uncomplicated case for defending Taiwan's democracy. The film offers a short history, pitting the admirable Taiwanese (and Americans) against the menacing Chinese. This take isn't exactly wrong, but "Invisible Nation" has the air of a campaign movie for the independence-minded Democratic Progressive Party, now in power in Taiwan.

History, of course, is never uncomplicated. A concern for democracy and freedom was not always the reason for defending Taiwan. President Eisenhower went to the brink of nuclear war with China in 1954, after [Mao](#) attacked Quemoy (Kinmen) and Matsu, two minuscule islands off the mainland which formally belonged to the Republic of China, when it was under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's brutal military dictatorship.

The question of Taiwan is, in fact, fraught with bad history, which muddles our understanding of what is at stake in East Asia. As Sulmaan Wasif Khan observes in his rich and thoughtful book "[The Struggle for Taiwan](#)" (Basic), a "historian watching the situation from afar could not help being struck by the odd mix of mendacity, amnesia, and half-truths on display." Start with China's claim that Taiwan was always part of China, a cornerstone of Xi's nationalism. In fact, for most of its history, Taiwan, or Formosa, as it was once called, was no more a part of the Chinese nation than, say, Gibraltar was a part of Britain. Until the seventeenth century, when the Dutch ruled the island as a colony, hardly any Chinese people lived there. The original inhabitants, whose descendants now make up a small minority in Taiwan, were Austronesian tribes

who ruled themselves in a number of chiefdoms. Then the Dutch brought in tens of thousands of people from China to till the land. In 1662, the Dutch were ousted by a half-Japanese, half-Chinese swashbuckler named Zheng Chenggong, also known as Koxinga, whose exploits are still celebrated in a famous Kabuki play.

Koxinga was a loyalist to the deposed Ming dynasty. He hoped to stage a rebellion from Taiwan against the Qing rulers, who were not Chinese but Manchus. Koxinga briefly established an independent kingdom on the island, but it was overthrown by the Manchus in 1683. Taiwan then became part of the Qing Empire.

After the Qing lost a war with Japan, in 1895, Taiwan became a Japanese colony. To demonstrate to the Western nations that Japan could also be a great imperial power, the Japanese presented Taiwan as a model colony: more modern, more industrialized, more technologically advanced than any part of the Qing Empire. Some of the grand Belle Époque architecture of the Japanese colonial period—government buildings, law courts, universities, museums—can still be seen in Taipei and other cities.

When Japan’s Asian empire was dissolved, in 1945, the fate of Taiwan remained open. President Roosevelt, at the Cairo Conference of 1943, had promised to hand over Taiwan to Chiang Kai-shek, who ruled parts of China that weren’t occupied by the Japanese. Still, Roosevelt could have made a different choice. As late as July, 1949, just months before the defeat of Chiang’s Nationalists (ChiNats) in the civil war with Mao Zedong’s Communists (ChiComs), George Kennan advocated “the establishment of a provisional international or U.S. regime which would invoke the principle of self-determination for the islanders.” This prospect, if it ever really existed, ended when the Generalissimo (“the Gimo,” to the Americans) retreated to Taiwan after the Communist victory, with more than a million of his troops and loyalists. When I first travelled to Taiwan, in the nineteen-eighties, many taxi-drivers in Taipei had once been soldiers in

Chiang's army. There were statues of the Gimo in front of schools and public buildings; maps of China illustrated the official goal of reconquering the mainland.

Mao did not pay much attention to Taiwan until Chiang turned it into a fortified base for his dream of ruling China once again. Meanwhile, the six million original inhabitants of Taiwan, most of whom had never been to China, did not take kindly to being subjected to Chiang's harsh military junta. A rebellion in February, 1947, resulted in roughly twenty-five thousand Taiwanese dead and years of repression, known as the "white terror," which led to the imprisonment of tens of thousands of people and the deaths of thousands of others.

President Eisenhower's decision to come to Chiang's rescue in the nineteen-fifties, when Mao started shelling Matsu and Quemoy, had nothing to do with defending democracy (even though the Republic of China was still known as Free China) and everything to do with getting tough on Communism. This was more an attitude than a well-thought-out policy, and Chiang, like many other anti-Communist strongmen around the world, knew how to exploit it in order to get what he wanted from the Americans.

Tensions between the "native Taiwanese," or *benshengren*, most of whom were of Chinese origin, and Chiang's mainlanders, or *waishengren*, who lorded over them, continued to simmer for decades. Political rebels and dissidents were almost always *benshengren*. At the same time, Chiang's dream of toppling the "Communist bandits" in China never faded. I recall seeing old men in wheelchairs being pushed through the corridors of the parliament building in Taipei, acting as the official representatives of Chinese provinces they would never see again.

Chiang was still alive when, in 1972, [Richard Nixon](#) and Henry Kissinger had meetings with the Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai, and then signed a communiqué in Shanghai stating that there was only

one China and that Taiwan was a part of it. This in itself would not have bothered Chiang (who died three years later); he agreed that there was only one China. There would be no more talk of ChiNats and ChiComs; they were all Chinese now. The people who disagreed were *benshengren* dissidents who longed for independence. This aspiration did not sit well with Zhou, with Chiang, or, indeed, with Kissinger. As Khan writes, “Taiwan’s fate was irrelevant to Kissinger. This was about a rapprochement with China. The suppression of the Taiwan independence movement, Zhou agreed, could be left to Chiang Kai-shek. The much maligned generalissimo would be helping the PRC by making sure that Taiwanese independence did not make headway.”

In the course of the nineteen-eighties—a modus vivendi with China having been reached, and Deng Xiaoping opening the country for business—getting tough on Communism receded as a priority for Washington. Once useful anti-Communist strongmen became dispensable. In 1986, Ferdinand Marcos was driven into exile in Hawaii. The South Korean junta was pressed to accept democratic elections in 1987. And President Chiang Ching-kuo, the Generalissimo’s son, ended martial law in the same year. He even allowed a new opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party, to take part in elections.

The first democratically elected President of Taiwan, Lee Teng-hui, was a member not of the D.P.P. but of Chiang’s Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang (the K.M.T.). He was, however, native-born, and spoke Taiwanese (Hokkien Chinese), the language that most of his compatriots spoke, and he was more comfortable with Japanese, a legacy of his colonial education, than with Mandarin. Lee gave the official goal of unification a new twist: Taiwan would join China, yes, but only once China became a democracy. He also saw himself as a unifying figure in Taiwan, the leader who would overcome the tensions between the natives and the mainland interlopers.

One might have assumed that the United States, having promoted itself as a champion of freedom and democracy, would have been delighted with this turn of events. In fact, it complicated U.S. policy toward China. Now that the Taiwanese could freely express their views and vote, it became clear that few people outside conservative factions of the K.M.T. had any desire to be part of mainland China. Taiwanese democracy promoted a Taiwanese national identity that was separate from mainland China. (I attended rallies for Tsai Ing-wen's D.P.P. during the elections in 2020, when huge crowds chanted, "We are Taiwanese! We are Taiwanese!")

This identity was cultural and historical as well as political. The Taiwanese language was now taught at schools, as was Taiwanese history. Taiwanese writers and artists, a bit like Catalan nationalists in Spain, emphasized the unique values of their native arts and culture, sometimes to a tiresome degree. There was a boom in movies about Taiwanese history and the peculiarities of Taiwanese life. More and more, citizens began to identify as Taiwanese, rather than as Chinese. D.P.P. politicians ran for office vaunting their native-Taiwanese credentials. And even the younger politicians in the K.M.T., which never officially let go of its identification with China, are comfortable speaking Taiwanese. By the time Chen Shui-bian was elected as the first D.P.P. President of Taiwan, in 2000, the busts of Chiang Kai-shek and the maps of China had begun to disappear. Meanwhile, China was becoming Taiwan's largest trading partner, confusing their relations even further.

From Washington's perspective, Taiwanese democracy became something of an irritant. Chiang Kai-shek, though headstrong and manipulative, had been easier to deal with than were democratically elected politicians whose flirtation with the idea of independence provoked belligerent Chinese reactions and complicated U.S.-China relations. Washington felt that it had both to defend democratic Taiwan and to reassure Beijing that

Taiwanese independence would continue to be resisted. This “drove America crazy,” Khan writes. Washington “would affirm the ‘one China’ principle, then twist itself into knots explaining how its tilt toward Taiwan was consistent with that affirmation.” A frustrated President Clinton once exclaimed, “I hate our China policy! I wish I was running against our China policy.” As Khan observes, “In a way, he and every president since Nixon had been doing just that.”

Trying to keep Beijing onside by asserting that Taiwan is part of China while also defending a democratically elected government that believes otherwise doesn’t make for a coherent policy. Nor would the U.S. have any treaty obligation to defend Taiwan if China actually invaded. The official position is still to leave the Chinese guessing about the U.S. response. Yet [President Biden](#) stated, in a 2021 television interview with George Stephanopoulos, that the U.S. would indeed come to Taiwan’s rescue in a war, in the same way it would if Japan or a *NATO* member were under attack.

Biden probably wouldn’t have said this if China itself had not changed radically in the past decade. Under China’s relatively pragmatic leaders in the nineteen-nineties, the chances of a military conflict over Taiwan were slight. But Xi’s hostile nationalism, aimed at a complete restoration of the borders of the Qing Empire, by force if need be, is a greater threat to the status quo than Mao’s shelling of Matsu and Quemoy was. Whereas Taiwan could still be treated as an annoyance by Kissinger and Nixon, or even by Clinton, the United States now feels compelled to show it can be tough on China and risk war to defend Taiwan. This is, of course, no more a carefully considered position than “anti-Communism” was. When prominent U.S. politicians provoke Beijing with well-publicized visits to Taiwan, their only purpose is to show the American public that they can be tough on China.

Once again, Taiwan has become a pawn in a clash between Great Powers. The stakes are higher than ever. But to keep East Asia safe

from a terrible war is not just a military problem. Khan is surely right to question how getting tough will alter Chinese conduct. A show of force is supposed to deter China from aggression. “But what if deterrence failed?” Khan writes. “Being deterred, after all, was a choice; China could choose not to be. What if the show of force backed China into a corner from which it felt it had no option but to lash out?”

Avoiding a violent conflict will take a great deal of diplomatic finesse, guided by a profound knowledge of local history and politics. This makes one wonder whom Pottinger is trying to convince. Is his main intended audience Taiwanese, Japanese, or American? He mentions, as a hindrance to deterrence, the “1930s-style isolationism that has infected pockets of the political discourse in America and Europe.” One can only assume that this is aimed at his former White House boss.

The Japanese press now talks a great deal about the question of *moshitora*—*moshi* means “if,” and *tora* is short for *Torampu* (Trump). What if Trump came back? The ex-President’s attitudes toward China are even less coherent than those of his predecessors. He has delighted in insulting China (“Chinese virus,” “Kung Flu”); he also started a trade war with China and has promised to slap sixty-per-cent tariffs on all Chinese imports. But his withdrawal, in 2017, from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which sets the rules for trade in the Pacific Rim, has weakened America’s influence in the region, and strengthened China’s.

If America’s old Taiwan policies were often muddled, Trump’s attitudes are so fickle that one can’t predict what he will do. “Depending on his mood,” as Khan writes, “he might have been as willing to provide Taiwan with nuclear weapons as to sell it to China for a trade deal.” With a President like that in charge, no amount of *JASSMs* and *HIMARs* is likely to keep East Asia, or, indeed, the rest of the world, safe. ♦

Ian Buruma, a professor at Bard College, is the author of books including “[Spinoza: Freedom’s Messiah](#).”

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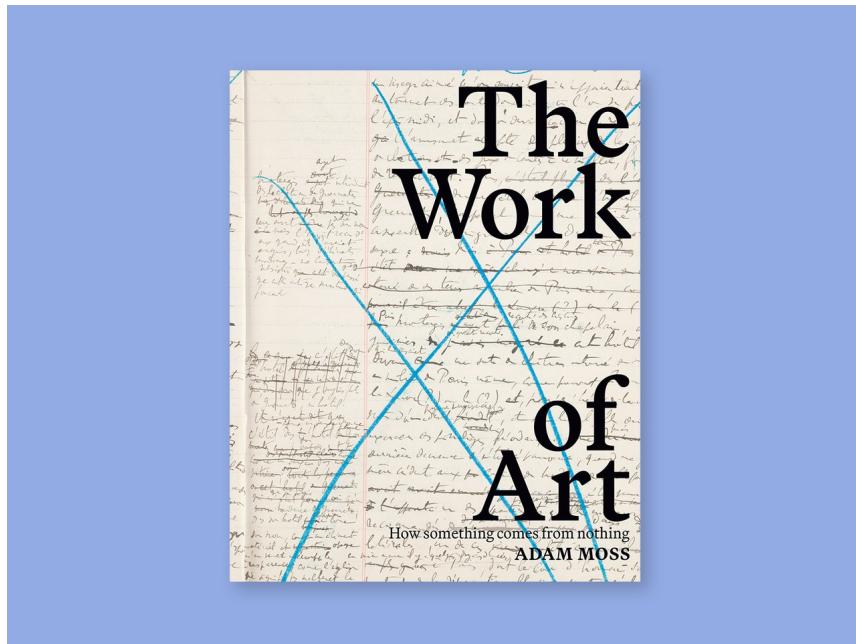
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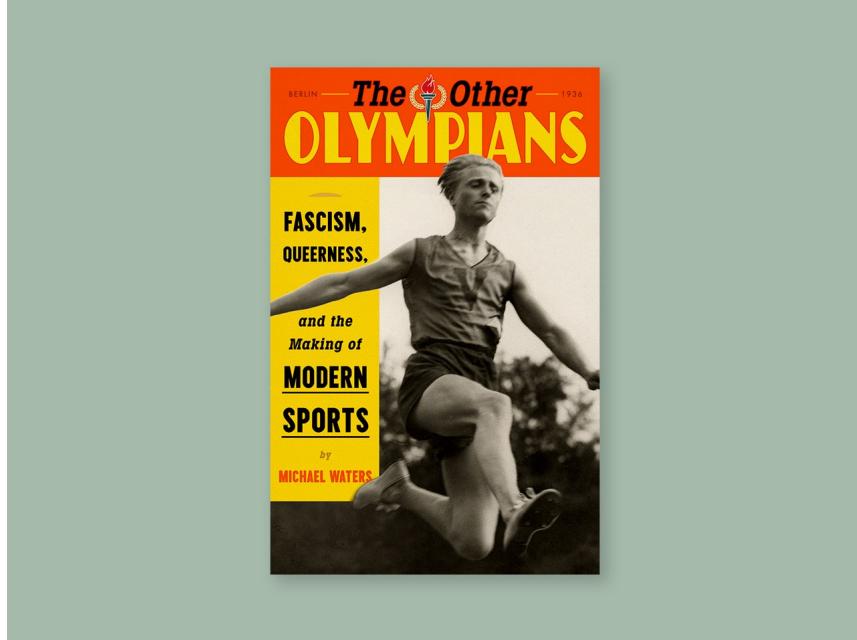
Briefly Noted

“*The Work of Art*,” “*The Other Olympians*,” “*The Coast Road*,” and “*Housemates*. ”

June 24, 2024



The Work of Art, by Adam Moss (*Penguin Press*). This collection of interviews, by a former editor of *New York*, aims to illuminate artists’ processes through conversation. The novelist Michael Cunningham describes writing first thing in the morning to avoid getting “lost in the realness of the real world”; the visual artist Kara Walker recounts beginning one project by drawing with her feet (“I can’t trust this hand not to make something very obvious”). Moss’s footnotes flag common themes, including tenacious work ethics, mentorship, and iterative revisions. His subjects’ accounts are enriched by color images of works in progress: the outline of a concerto (Nico Muhly), a line of poetry scribbled in a faculty meeting (Louise Glück).



The Other Olympians, by Michael Waters (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). In the nineteen-thirties, one of the most famous trans people in the world was Zdeněk Koubek, a Czech running champion who transitioned to live as a man. This book, which examines the Fascist response to Koubek and other early trans athletes, focusses on a time when cross-dressing was a criminal offense, Olympians drank brandy before their races, and athletes like Koubek were largely regarded as marvels rather than threats. (In 1936, crowds eager to see a scientific miracle flocked to a cabaret show to watch Koubek run on a treadmill.) Waters is interested less in competition than in the deals that made Germany the host of the 1936 Olympics, and led Hitler's sympathizers to begin the sporting industry's ongoing project of defining womanhood.

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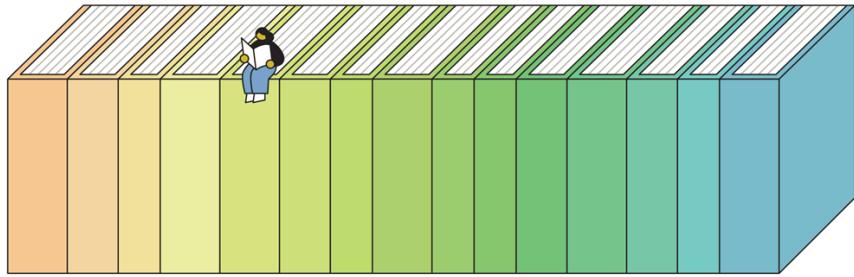
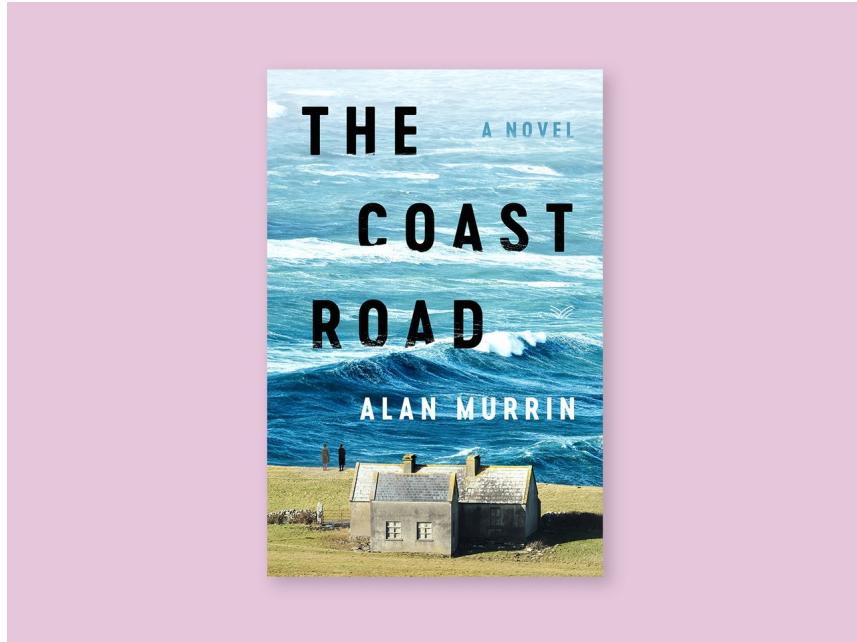
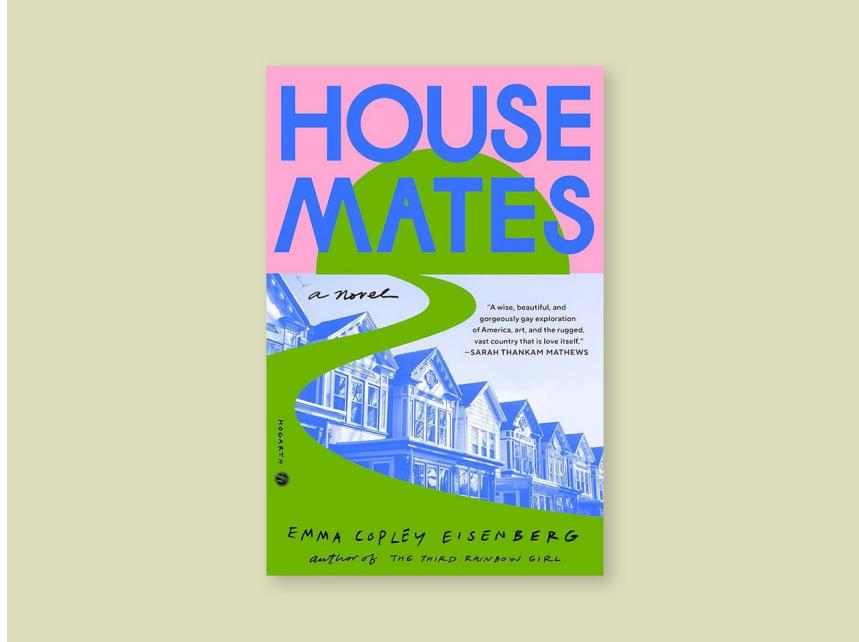


Illustration by Rose Wong

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The Coast Road, by Alan Murrin (HarperVia). Set in a small town in northwestern Ireland in 1994, this finely wrought début novel depicts the limited options that were available to unhappily married women in that country prior to the referendum that legalized divorce there, the following year. It centers on the friendship between a poet who has returned to town as a pariah after a scandalous affair in Dublin and the discontented wife of a local politician. Murrin powerfully renders the ways that women's freedom, individuality, and self-expression are stifled by religion, custom, and gossip, and, as one character reflects, how "bitterness could poison a life, could make you lousy with exhaustion."



Housemates, by *Emma Copley Eisenberg* (Hogarth). The events of this novel are set off by the death of a brilliant but disgraced photography professor, who leaves his negatives, his cameras, and an immovable installation to a former student. The student, Bernie, and her friend Leah, who live in a queer collective in Philadelphia, embark on a road trip together to collect the inheritance. During the journey, the two take photographs and write, respectively, eventually assembling the results in a project titled “Changing Pennsylvania.” (The characters are loosely inspired by the modernist artists Berenice Abbott and Elizabeth McCausland, who, more than eighty years earlier, planned a similar work, “Changing New York.”) Throughout, Copley Eisenberg meditates on art-making, community-building, and how the two are entwined.

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[Books](#)

The Radical Faith of Harriet Tubman

A new book conveys in dramatic detail what America's Moses did to help abolish slavery. Another addresses the love of God and country that helped her do so.

By [Casey Cep](#)

June 24, 2024



“God set the North Star in the heavens,” Tubman said. “He gave me the strength in my limbs; He meant I should be free.”

Photograph by Benjamin F. Powelson / Courtesy National Museum of African American History and Culture / Library of Congress

Just how far down did Moses go? The spiritual does not say, but one of the prophet’s namesakes—the woman who sang “Go Down, Moses” along the rivers and roads of the Eastern Shore of Maryland as she helped some seventy people escape slavery via the Underground Railroad—went as far south as she could. Harriet Tubman returned not only to the border state from which she herself had escaped; defiantly courageous, she ventured deeper into the land of bondage to liberate hundreds of others during the Civil War.

Her greatest feat may also be among her least known—a raid of Confederate rice plantations on the Combahee River, in the Lowcountry of South Carolina, which liberated more than seven hundred enslaved Americans. She did not lead the raid, as some recent histories suggest, but she was integral to its success. For more than a year, Tubman gathered intelligence from formerly enslaved men and women fleeing the Confederacy, and she recruited troops, scouts, and pilots from around Port Royal, South Carolina, to help the Union Army fight its way through enemy territory.

On the night of June 1, 1863, five months after the Emancipation Proclamation and a few weeks before the Battle of Gettysburg, Tubman accompanied Colonel James Montgomery and the newly freed men of the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers as they boarded three steamboats off the coast of Beaufort. Their paddle wheels turned quietly in the dark as the vessels advanced toward St. Helena Sound. From the pilot house of the lead steamer, Tubman watched a full moon rise, its light a welcome guide for the raiders as they avoided pluff mud and mines, following a serpentine, twenty-five-mile route up the river. By the next morning, Montgomery’s men had landed and driven off the few remaining

Confederate pickets, most enemy soldiers having fled the so-called sickly season, when malaria and yellow fever ravaged the coast. Thanks to Tubman's intelligence, the Union troops faced almost no resistance besides a few skirmishes; after destroying a pontoon bridge they marched on seven plantations, burning whatever they could not confiscate. Millions of dollars in property was left smoldering as soldiers made away with rice, cotton, corn, chickens, pigs, and horses, but the soldiers were soon overwhelmed by a different kind of "contraband."

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Tubman later remembered how enslaved people of all ages emerged like "startled deer" from the fields and the forests along the shoreline, running for the boats like "the children of Israel, coming out of Egypt." It was as if a "mysterious telegraphic communication" had gone from one rice field to the next, with laborers sharing the news that "Lincoln's gun-boats come to set them free," she said. Hundreds of refugees began rushing the rowboats; once those were filled, the oarsmen, worried about capsizing and afraid of being stranded, began beating people back. Seeing the chaos, Montgomery called out to Tubman for help: "Moses, you'll have to give 'em a song."

Above the screaming, the splashing, and the gunfire, Tubman's voice rang out. "Of all the whole creation in the east or in the west, / The glorious Yankee nation is the greatest and the best," she sang. "Come along! Come along! Don't be alarmed, / Uncle Sam is rich enough to give you all a farm." After every verse of the abolitionist

anthem, the clamoring crowds let go of the boats, raised their hands, and shouted, “Glory!” The rowboats returned to the steamers, and the three steamships returned to Beaufort, with more than seven hundred newly freed people.

That dramatic scene, with all its danger, grace, and tragedy, is wonderfully staged in Edda L. Fields-Black’s new history, “Combee: Harriet Tubman, the Combahee River Raid, and Black Freedom During the Civil War” (Oxford). Where some have seen the raid primarily as Tubman’s story, isolating her from the broader network of Black liberation, Fields-Black powerfully situates the abolitionist among her contemporaries—controversial military geniuses who advanced the war effort through espionage, river raids, and guerrilla tactics, and fellow freedom seekers who, like Tubman, chose not to flee but to go back down to pharaoh’s land and fight.

“Combee” is one of two notable books out this year to wrestle with less familiar aspects of Tubman’s legacy. The other is “Night Flyer: Harriet Tubman and the Faith Dreams of a Free People” (Penguin Press), by Tiya Miles. Fields-Black conveys, in elaborate detail, what America’s Moses did to help abolish slavery; Miles addresses the far more elusive question of why she did it.

Neither “Combee” nor “Night Flyer” is a cradle-to-grave biography, though both Fields-Black and Miles are drawn to the cradle that Tubman’s father made for her, from the trunk of a sweet-gum tree. Born Araminta Ross, to Harriet Green and Benjamin Ross, around 1822, Tubman was first known as Minty. There were tender moments—she recalled being rocked in that hand-carved cradle—but her early years in Tidewater Maryland were filled mostly with physical torture and emotional terror.

Tubman was the fifth of nine children. Three of her sisters were sold and sent to the Deep South. Her parents were owned by two different families who separated them not long after her birth.

While still a young girl, Tubman was taken away from her mother and forced to work as a maid, a nanny, a trapper, and a field hand. She was whipped constantly and regularly deprived of food and clothing. Short and frail, she was often debilitated by beatings and was once struck so hard with a two-pound iron weight that she suffered seizures for the rest of her life. What was never beaten out of her was an innate sense of liberty—the knowledge, self-evident to her, that God intended for her to be liberated from bondage, spiritually as well as literally. “God set the North Star in the heavens,” she said later. “He gave me the strength in my limbs; He meant I should be free.”

Tubman’s concept of freedom was not only hoped for, like faith; it was something she observed in the world around her. Like Frederick Douglass, born just a few towns away, Tubman saw the reality of liberation early, interacting with formerly enslaved people who had worked to buy their freedom or been manumitted by their owners. In Tubman’s lifetime, the Black population in Maryland was almost evenly divided between enslaved and free; the year before the Civil War started, the state had more free Black people than any other in the country. She married one of those free men, John Tubman, and after taking his name she took her mother’s, too.

But marriage did not make Harriet Tubman free. Owing to the perverse absurdities of antebellum slave laws, she remained enslaved, and any of her children would be as well—born the property of the man who owned her. In 1844, when her wedding is thought to have taken place, that man was Edward Brodess, whose mother had owned Tubman’s mother. Tubman’s father had been manumitted by his owner, but Brodess had inherited Tubman, hiring her and her siblings out to neighbors for seasonal work, whether trapping muskrats or clearing land. Then, struggling with debt, Brodess decided that selling his inheritance would earn him more money than hiring them out.

Fearful that she would be separated from her family, Tubman turned to God. “I groaned and prayed for old master,” she told an early biographer. “Oh Lord, convert master! Oh Lord, change that man’s heart!” Brodess, evidently having as hardened a heart as the one Moses confronted in Exodus, did not relent. Tubman, on hearing that she and her brothers were to be sold into the Deep South, altered her petition. “If you ain’t never going to change that man’s heart,” she remembered pleading, “kill him, Lord, and take him out of the way.” Brodess died within the week.

Brodess’s wife, though, still planned to proceed with the sale, and on the night of September 17, 1849, Tubman, who had spent her entire life hearing God’s voice and having visions of God’s mercy, decided to act on her faith, and she fled into the darkness with two of her brothers. The brothers grew frightened and soon persuaded her to turn back, but she set off again later, on her own. “I’m bound for the promised land / On the other side of Jordan,” she sang while leaving, hoping that her friends and family would understand where she was headed.

That promised land was both geographical, the American North, and theological, God’s Kingdom on Earth. Many readers today will find such a concept confounding; some of Tubman’s contemporaries did, too. But resurrecting her spiritual life is the unusual project of Miles’s “Night Flyer.” Noting that Tubman “oriented to the world from a place of immersive religious belief,” Miles argues that we might never understand her if we don’t try to occupy that same “experiential space of integration between what she knew and what she felt, between rational thought, intuition, spiritual sensation, and landscape awareness.”

Abolition was a legal and social movement, but it was also a religious one, populated and promulgated by men and women of faith, who operated out of sincere and sweeping spiritual convictions. Tubman carried a pistol, but when questioned about her safe passage she once declared, “I just asked Jesus to take care

of me.” And although she has rightfully been compared to intellectuals such as Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, Miles suggests that Tubman should also be considered alongside Black evangelists of the era, including Jarena Lee, the first female preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church; Zilpha Elaw, a mystic and a minister; Old Elizabeth, a spiritual memoirist; and Julia A. J. Foote, a leader in the Wesleyan-Holiness movement.



Cartoon by Dahlia Gallin Ramirez

“Night Flyer” is a welcome corrective to the sorts of biographical portraits that reduce religious faith to psychoanalytic case studies or medical mysteries. It takes seriously the spiritual life of a people who, despite their enormous suffering, emerged with a robust and restorative religious tradition all their own. Rather than suggesting that Tubman’s prophetic visions and potent prayers were merely the product of temporal-lobe epilepsy or narcolepsy, Miles explores Tubman’s own explanation for their origin—the Lord God Almighty. Tubman and these other pioneering Black women “came to view themselves as ‘sanctified’ or ‘holy,’ after an emotionally wrought process of spiritual transformation,” Miles writes, and they shared a profound theology of universalism, inspired by St.

Peter's declaration in Acts that "God is no respecter of persons" and St. Paul's assertion in Galatians that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

The little we know about Tubman's motivations comes robed in Scripture and prayer—blinding garments for modern eyes, but Miles helps us see. Raised in the Baptist Church, Miles, a professor of history at Harvard, studied womanist theology in her early academic career and has lately focussed her scholarship on the environmental humanities, connecting ecology with spirituality in careful, creative studies of nineteenth-century America. One of those studies won the National Book Award, in 2021: "All That She Carried," a beautiful, braided story of a single South Carolina family, told through a cotton sack passed from one generation to the next.

That book, Miles wrote, "leans toward evocation rather than argumentation and is rather more meditation than monograph." The same approach serves her well in "Night Flyer," which portrays Tubman as the living embodiment of an extraordinary faith that helped her escape the estuarine ecology of the Eastern Shore of Maryland and master the salt marshes of the South Carolina Lowcountry. "Among the best preserved of Tubman's speech acts are her prayers," Miles notes. She has collected many of them in "Night Flyer," along with modern poems and contemporary liturgies that give the book a spiritual texture not often encountered in narrative nonfiction. The result, like "All That She Carried," is not an academic study of nineteenth-century Black history but a moving account of Tubman's intellectual life—"her belief in God, heaven, and unseen powers" and "her belief in the integrity and import of relationships among all natural beings."

A flock of Christian witnesses surrounds Tubman in "Night Flyer," while a different cast of characters joins her in "Combee." Some readers may balk at the equal attention that Fields-Black gives to

Tubman's many compatriots in the Combahee River Raid and the many South Carolinians liberated by their efforts, but the book's more than seven hundred pages rescue neglected lives and, in the process, reconstitute an entire society.

For Fields-Black, those people are not just historical figures but family. Like Diane McWhorter's "Carry Me Home" or Margot Lee Shetterly's "Hidden Figures," "Combee" derives some of its power from the author's personal connection to the national history she recovers. In McWhorter's magisterial account of the Birmingham campaign of the civil-rights movement, she teased out her own family's complicity with the Ku Klux Klan. As a child, Shetterly, whose father worked with the "human computers" at NASA's Langley Research Center, was surrounded by the pioneering Black engineers, mathematicians, and scientists who later filled her book. Fields-Black, for her part, grew up visiting relatives around the Lowcountry, touring the region with her Gullah Geechee-speaking grandparents. She is a great-great-great-granddaughter of Hector Fields, one of hundreds of men who liberated themselves from the Confederacy and then fought to liberate others in the Combahee River Raid.

Aided by the Center for Family History at the International African American Museum, in Charleston, Fields-Black found military records and plantation archives that helped her plot Hector's journey from enslavement in Beaufort to enlistment in the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers. He was denied a federal pension, but his brother Jonas had a two-hundred-and-fifty-five-page Army pension file that allowed Fields-Black to recover the story of the ancestors whose headstones she still visits at her family cemetery in Green Pond. Hector's story is as important to Fields-Black as Tubman's not only because of their family ties but because she understands that without men like him the Combahee River Raid would never have succeeded. As singular as Tubman was, her efforts depended on other freedom fighters.

Already famous for her furtive work as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, Tubman arrived in Beaufort in the spring of 1862, a few weeks after the Union general David Hunter declared martial law and ordered the emancipation of the local enslaved population. Tubman had the endorsement of Hunter's friend John Andrew, who was the governor of Massachusetts—and a member of both the Boston Vigilance Committee, which provided assistance to fugitive slaves, and the Free Soil Party, which fought slavery in the Western territories. President Lincoln reversed Hunter's emancipation order and rebuked him publicly, but Hunter began recruiting Black soldiers anyway.

Like Tubman, these soldiers were anomalous even among abolitionists, risking their freedom and safety by remaining in Confederate states. Thousands of them enlisted all around the country, forming regiments like the 1st South Carolina Colored Volunteers, the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry, and the 1st Louisiana Native Guard. They soon swelled the ranks of the Bureau of Colored Troops, joined by dozens of Northern regiments. By the end of the war, more than two hundred thousand Black men had volunteered for the Army or the Navy; nearly twenty per cent of them died fighting for the Union.

“Combee” studies the pension files of these veterans to reconstruct their lives before and after the Civil War, paying close attention to the Gullah Geechee people of the Carolina Lowcountry. We meet Old Heads, Prime Hands, and Pikins—what the Gullah Geechee called elders, enslaved laborers, and children—whose work, harvesting billions of dollars of Sea Island cotton and Carolina Gold rice, made the Combahee River one of the most profitable agricultural regions in the country. Some had already escaped to Port Royal in the first year of the war, after the Union Army captured the city and surrounding islands, joining the ten thousand refugees left behind after Confederate forces fled.

It was the Port Royal Experiment, an early attempt at Reconstruction, that drew Tubman to the Deep South, where she worked as a nurse and a cook, then established a kitchen and laundry where refugees could earn a living baking gingerbread and pies, making root beer, and washing clothes. At the same time, she interviewed all the “contrabands” she could, gathering information about the land they’d left behind, recruiting people who could navigate local byways and waterways, and encouraging able-bodied men to enlist. She became one of the Union’s most valuable spies, equipped with “secret service money” for paying informants and official travel papers that read “Pass the Bearer, Harriet Tubman, to Beaufort and back to this place, and wherever she wishes to go, and give her free passage at all times on Government transports.”

General Hunter had issued Tubman that pass, and he was eventually joined in the Department of the South by other white officers with abolitionist sympathies, eager to expand the use of Black troops. “Combee” celebrates two of these officers in particular, allies of Tubman who offered her opportunities to serve. Both were ministers who left their pulpits to fight for abolition, leading two of the first Black regiments at a time when the Army would not commission Black officers. Thomas Wentworth Higginson hailed from Massachusetts; after studying theology at Harvard Divinity School, he was called to a Unitarian church in Newburyport, then found a more radically abolitionist congregation in Worcester. Although remembered by some today as an early reader and mentor of Emily Dickinson, he was one of the Secret Six, who sent arms to Kansas and funded John Brown’s attack on Harper’s Ferry.

Higginson regarded Tubman as the seventh member of Brown’s Secret Six. He’d met her in Boston, before the war, and in a letter to his mother he described her as “the greatest heroine of the age.” “Her tales of adventure are beyond anything in fiction,” he wrote,

“and her ingenuity and generalship are extraordinary.” Higginson commanded the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, and he often led actions with James Montgomery, who commanded the 2nd South Carolina. Montgomery had been raised a Congregationalist, in Ohio, but after moving to the slave state of Kentucky he found himself drawn to a more evangelical faith, the filings of his soul aligned magnetically by the spiritual fervor and social revolution of the Second Great Awakening. He became a Campbellite preacher and moved his family west, to Kansas, where he developed a reputation as one of the most zealous Jayhawkers, attacking pro-slavery households and retaliating against border ruffians. Although Tubman had known Higginson for longer, some sources say she told Hunter that she would accompany troops on the Combahee River Raid only if the fervid Montgomery was in charge.

What Tubman accomplished a hundred and sixty-one years ago deserves to be celebrated in the annals of military history, and Fields-Black argues that it should be celebrated as a revolutionary act in the history of Black liberation, too—as notable as the Stono Rebellion, in South Carolina, or Nat Turner’s revolt, in Virginia. Her characterization of the Combahee River Raid as “the largest and most successful slave revolt in U.S. history” is debatable, given the decisive assistance of the Union Army; other revolutionaries could presumably have succeeded at a similar scale if backed by its might. But it is true, as Fields-Black suggests, that those involved were crucial links in a long chain of brave individuals connecting this country to its most honorable ideals of freedom and equality. And she does not shy away from how often and how cruelly the United States has failed to uphold those ideals, including after the Civil War, when Tubman and countless other Black veterans were denied their pensions outright or had to spend decades fighting for the compensation that they deserved.

Tubman died famous but in near-penury. She received some money as the widow of a war veteran, her second husband—and,

belatedly, through congressional appropriation, only a portion of the money she was owed for her service as a scout, a nurse, and a spy. Yet she never lost her faith, in her country or in her Creator. The beauty of “Combee” and “Night Flyer” is that, taken together, they remind us of the redemptive possibilities of patriotism and religious belief, ideologies that today are too often associated with the reactionary rather than the radical. On her deathbed, Tubman invoked the Gospel of John, paraphrasing the promise that Jesus made to his disciples of their place in Heaven, and also echoing her own promise to bring about that Heaven on earth: “I go away to prepare a place for you, and where I am you also may be.” ♦



Casey Cep is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of “[Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud, and the Last Trial of Harper Lee](#).”

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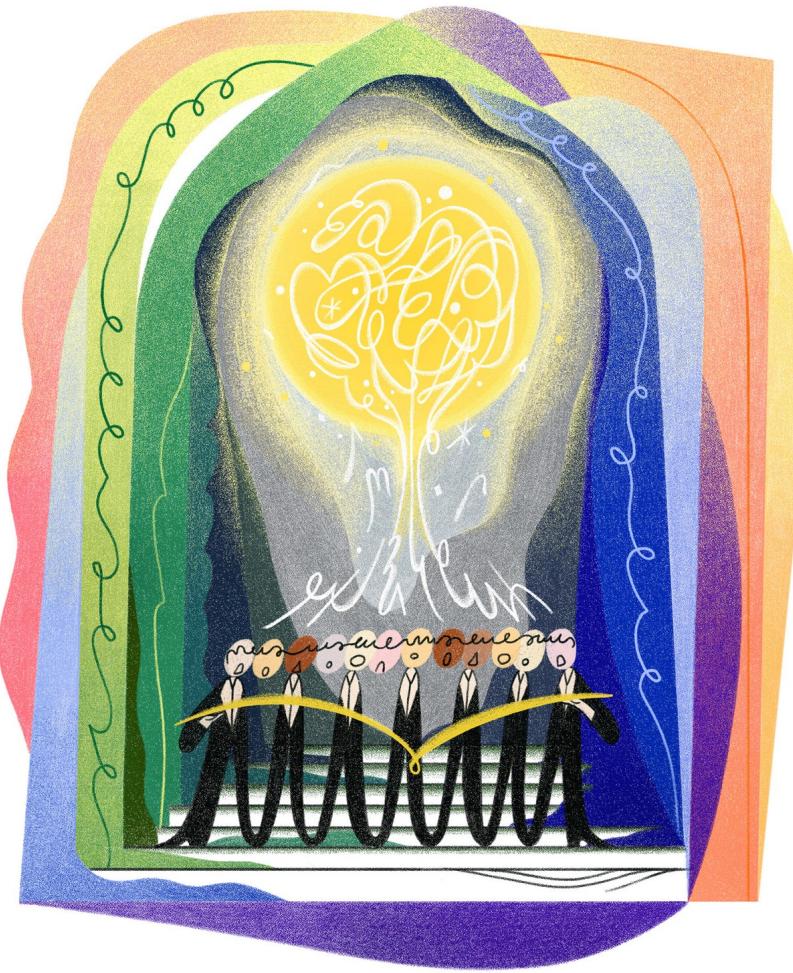
[Musical Events](#)

Guillaume de Machaut's Medieval Love Songs

The fourteenth-century composer's expressions of longing can still leave an audience spellbound.

By [Alex Ross](#)

June 24, 2024



The dulcet vocal ensemble Chanticleer gave Machaut's disquisitions on courtly love an uncanny immediacy.

Illustration by Gizem Vural

Guillaume de Machaut, the master poet-composer of fourteenth-century France, served for many years as the canon of the great Gothic cathedral at Reims, where the kings of the realm were

crowned. Machaut's most famous creation, the *Messe de Nostre Dame*, has a singular place in musical history, because it is an early attempt at creating a comparably sublime edifice in sound—a six-movement work in four-part polyphony, lasting well over half an hour, in which austere, granitic harmony is set against delicate contrapuntal play and spiky rhythmic motion. This Mass is, in fact, the oldest extant piece of its type to have been attributed to a single composer. When, the other day, the San Francisco-based vocal ensemble Chanticleer sang it at Grace Cathedral, on Nob Hill, a suitable atmosphere of awe accumulated.

Yet the Mass is ultimately not Machaut's most striking achievement. Superbly constructed as the score is, it does not mark a leap beyond other, anonymous masses of the period. Chanticleer augmented the movements of the Mass with a generous selection of Machaut's works in secular forms, for which he wrote both texts and music: ballades, rondeaux, lais, virelays, and motets. In these, we are confronted with something more modern—and more elusive—than a monumental meditation on liturgical ritual. Machaut's subtle, self-aware disquisitions on courtly love rely on the codes of a long-vanished society. Their music adheres to austere formulas. At the same time, they convey enough sensuous truth that, in the right hands, they speak with uncanny immediacy.

The text for Machaut's rondeau “Rose, liz, printemps,” which four Chanticleer singers performed at Grace, praises a woman in florid terms: “Rose, lily, spring, verdure / Flower, balm, and most sweet fragrance / *Belle*, you surpass them in sweetness.” The music adds a rapturous complexity, as the intertwining parts seem to waver between 3/4 time and 6/8 time, and syncopations enliven the texture. In Chanticleer’s dulcet rendition, voices brushed against one another like roses swaying in a breeze. Across some six and a half centuries, a composer held an audience spellbound.

Machaut’s lasting fame resulted from a lucky conjunction of talent and power. Early on, he belonged to the court of John of

Luxembourg, the King of Bohemia; in later years, he enjoyed connections to many members of the French royal family. He was thus in a position not only to write for high-ranking patrons but also to arrange for the preservation of his manuscripts. The Bibliothèque Nationale de France possesses an enormous volume, of more than five hundred folios, containing almost all of Machaut's output. Like many composers over the centuries, Machaut did not lack confidence. In a prologue to that tome, he portrays himself in dialogue with Nature, who tells him, “Your works will find more renown than others, / For there will be nothing in them to fault, / And thus they will be loved by all.”

Yet the ubiquitous “I” in Machaut’s writing should be treated with caution. This is one message of Elizabeth Eva Leach’s 2011 book, “Guillaume de Machaut: Secretary, Poet, Musician,” a revelatory study of the music and the poetry in tandem. No less than future singer-songwriters such as Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell, Machaut deploys a rotating array of ersatz selves. Although some of his scenarios have a happy vibe—“Rose, liz” shivers with gentle ecstasy—he is very often trapped in perpetual longing for a woman out of reach. What’s more, that pining is deemed essential to the creative act. Poetry and music, Leach writes, become “the ultimate surrogate for erotic desire and means of achieving a serene life.”

Machaut’s aesthetic of sublimation is on display in his ballade “Riches d’amour,” a highlight of the Chanticleer program:

Rich in love and begging for a lover,
Poor in hope and graced with desire,
Full of misery and deprived of aid,
Far from mercy, famished for favor,
Devoid of all that could let me rejoice,
For the sake of love I am in fear of death,
Because my lady hates me and I adore her.

This tortuous series of rhetorical oppositions is filtered through classic gestures of lament: long melismas unfurl in circuitous stepwise patterns, generally tending downward. A second voice, called the tenor (the name for the grounding part in medieval polyphony), fills out the harmony with pinpoint precision. At Grace, Tim Keeler, Chanticleer's music director, sang the upper part with ethereal wistfulness, and the tenor Matthew Mazzola provided resonant support. The dynamics grew softer as the piece went along, expressing self-abnegation in the face of failure.

At times, the intricacy of Machaut's constructions becomes dizzying. Mazzola and the baritone Matthew Knickman joined the countertenors Gerrod Pagenkopf and Logan Shields to give a bracing account of the motet "De Bon Espoir," which, in a structure typical of the period, incorporates three distinct layers. The top voice speedily runs through a twenty-seven-line poem that juggles allegorical concepts such as Hope, Memory, Desire, and Loyalty. The middle voice moves at a more deliberate pace through a contrastingly disconsolate fifteen-line text. Finally, the tenor intones fragments of a Gregorian chant, derived from Psalm 13 ("I have trusted in thy mercy"). As Jacques Boogaart observes in his edition of the Machaut motets, the use of the single Latin word *Speravi* ("I have hoped/trusted") is ambiguous in isolation: it can also signify "I hoped (but do no longer)." The upper parts flesh out that alternation between hope and despair. One can see why Leach puts Machaut in the league of Dante, Petrarch, and Chaucer—none of whom were composers.

There is no clear consensus on how Machaut's music should be sung. The discography is dominated by British groups that favor a pristine a-cappella approach: the Taverner Consort recorded the Mass in 1984, the Hilliard Ensemble surveyed the motets in 2004, and next year the recently retired Orlando Consort will issue the final installment of an eleven-volume Machaut edition, on the Hyperion label. In 1996, though, the Ensemble Organum staged a

healthy disruption with a recording of the Mass that showed the influence of Eastern Orthodox chant—a raspier, freely ornamented sound. The renegade Flemish ensemble Graindelavoix renders the Mass almost as folk music from the steppes. Some groups sing with instruments, some without.

Chanticleer mediates among these various styles. For a time, this venerable ensemble, which began life in the bohemian San Francisco of the nineteen-seventies, settled into an overly polished professionalism. Under Keeler, who took over in 2020, it is reinforcing its early-music bona fides. In a program note, he cited scholarly guidelines for medieval performance, which allow for considerable freedom of ornamentation and improvisation. As a result, Chanticleer’s individual personalities showed through, whether in Andy Berry’s swaggering take on “Le Lay de Bonne Esperance” or in Vineel Garisa Mahal’s hints of classical Indian vocalism in the Mass. As a collective, the singers were sometimes choirboy-pure, sometimes huskier in tone. I also saw them perform at First Church in Berkeley, where they were joined by the instrumental ensemble Alkemie. Despite the characterful playing of the latter, I preferred the intimacy of the a-cappella outing.

As celebrated as Machaut was in his day, we don’t know when or where he was born or even precisely when he died. Yet his passing elicited the first significant memorial tribute from one composer to another. One F. Andrieu set “La mort” and “Machaut” as two-note sobbing gestures, bracketed by silence. In that moment, music transcends its point of origin and becomes an open-ended conversation across time. ♦



Alex Ross has been the magazine's music critic since 1996. His latest book is “*Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*.”

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[On Television](#)

Searching for the Star of the N.B.A. Finals

This year's series, between the Boston Celtics and the Dallas Mavericks, featured many wonderful players but no obvious main character.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

June 21, 2024



Boston presented an ideal of basketball in action—hoops as jazz, or as democracy.
Illustration by Sam Bosma

The N.B.A. makes for good television because basketball's a sport that bends around stars. The players wear no face-obstructing gear—no helmets, no long-brimmed hats casting shadows—and the presence of a single great performer can guarantee a degree of success for his team. Satisfaction after a made shot, befuddlement after a miss, irritation at a teammate who keeps rushing to the wrong spot: it's all clear as day, written on the body as much as on

the face. Few things are more thrilling than the sudden onrush of protagonism that clings to a player who's hit a few shots in a row and is about to make the story of the game about himself. The Finals, especially, are a factory for new stars.

Television cameras—in the most immediate case, the ABC cameras that captured the recently concluded Finals confrontation, between the Boston Celtics and the Dallas Mavericks—participate in this effect. They find the right figures and follow them around the court, tracking their moods. Back in the nineties, NBC helped to usher in the era of Michael Jordan; when he wasn't on camera, making magic, broadcasters such as Bob Costas were busy eloquently showering him with stardust. Jordan became not just a player in a game but a character in a story.

The narrative and its chief protagonist were harder to find in the series between the Celtics and the Mavs. Boston won in just five games, and the anticlimactic occasion was notable for its lack of true star assertion. Not that there was a lack of wonderful players. The Mavericks had made it this far in the playoffs because of the heroics of [Luka Dončić](#), a Slovenian prodigy with the feet of a dancer and a torso like a bag of wet cement—a one-man visual anomaly whose entire life seems aimed at scoring buckets. He shoots offhanded step-back three-pointers and, after driving to the rim, throws off-kilter sidearm passes to his teammates on the perimeter. He never appears to be moving quickly and yet he always finds, or creates, an opening for a decent shot. He is usually deadly in the clutch, and one of the great shames of his first Finals performance was that his team was almost never close enough to victory to give him the chance to show off this flair for late-game dramatics. In the tightest contest, Game Three, Dončić's penchant for sloppy defense got him booted, after a sixth foul, with more than four minutes still to play.

Dončić's second-in-command is Kyrie Irving, [famous outside of basketball circles](#) for his resolute aversion, two seasons ago, to

getting the *COVID* vaccine—and for sharing on social media, not long afterward, an antisemitic documentary. (Irving later apologized and said that he was not antisemitic.) He dribbles like a wizard and makes layups that twist him into yogic positions, but the past few years of his career have been a tutorial in self-sabotage. For a brief and initially bright period he played for the Celtics, a stint that ended badly; in his first game back in Boston after leaving the team, he burned a small bundle of sage and ostentatiously walked the perimeter of the court, to “cleanse the energy,” as he put it. (Irving, who is an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, said it was “not anything that I don’t do at home.”) Now, perhaps grounded and recentered by the Southern hospitality in Dallas, he has cast himself as a fount of good-hearted wisdom, smiling at press conferences and still killing on the court. As the Mavericks marched through the Western Conference playoffs, he frequently looked all but unstoppable, filling in when Dončić’s conditioning flagged, raining down jumpers and finishing from both sides of the hoop.

But against the stout defense of the Celtics, both Texas stars dimmed. One of the devilish features of Boston’s roster is how many strong, agile players the team can put in front of offensive geniuses like Dončić and Irving. Dončić still managed to fill the stat sheet, but the effort it took to evade the endless tide of defenders rendered him even more feckless than usual when it was his turn to play D. To watch him during the Finals was to observe a man getting red-faced and petulant, paying more attention to the refs than to the action on the court—and to notice how many times, on defense, he let his man whiz by him and find a cozy home in the paint.

Irving was even more thwarted. His game, all style and dexterity, is as telegenic as it gets. But when there’s a bigger defender on him—in this case, it was often the incessantly present Jaylen Brown—his dazzle can get swallowed up. He had a brief unburdening in Games

Three and Four, dropping thirty-five and twenty-one points, respectively, and helping Dallas to its one win, in the latter game. But otherwise he fizzled, unable to show much flash against his former team.

You'd think, with the Mavs muted, that the Celtics would have filled the starry gap. They won, after all, and became deserving champions; shouldn't we have some new hero to laud as the true cause of victory? That's how N.B.A. history-making works, for better or worse. We clock a lead character within seconds of his team's triumph, and parse legacy-creating criteria, none more important than the determination of *whose* team it really was—and who it is that we will see on our screens more often from here on. First, during the summer, a spray of product-endorsing commercials; then, next season, in-game cameras closely attending to the freshly anointed star.

But the answer, when it comes to the Celtics and traditional star power, is still, confoundingly: We'll see. Their most obvious candidate for canonization is Jayson Tatum, a wide-shouldered forward who is typically considered to be among the five or ten best players in the league, thanks to his generally sturdy jumper, his strong forays to the hoop and, perhaps especially, his enthusiasm for defense. But there's something retiring about Tatum, both on the court and off. He speaks in bromides that are the birthright of the former Duke star that he is. He is never objectionable or ill-tempered or funny. He does not play with particularly obvious emotion: sometimes he grins, gamely, and sometimes he rolls his eyes at himself, genially irritated, like a guy in accounting who put a crucial number into the wrong cell of a spreadsheet. He is hardworking and hard to seriously dislike. He rarely lets his team down. He also rarely explodes.

Since 2017, when he was drafted, Tatum has been paired with Brown, an athletic marvel. Perhaps the most purely beautiful play of the series was in Game Three, when Brown slipped into the

paint and launched himself not too far from the free-throw line, assuming the pose of a heron just sprung from the water, and then dunking with a mixture of force and grace that spelled the end—spiritual if not formal—of the game under way. He shone in these Finals. Tatum shot poorly, at times seeming stiffened by nerves; Brown, consistently effortful, sporadically dynamic, came to the rescue. He received the Finals M.V.P. award, which usually serves as a stamp for the records kept by fans and pundits of the game’s great legends. Here, though, the individual honor seemed almost inconvenient: the team had won, but it had to credit *somebody*.

The Celtics were the best team in the league all season. In addition to Tatum and Brown, they employ two starting guards, Jrue Holiday and Derrick White, who are amazingly astute defenders, and who approach their trade with scientific accuracy and a cage fighter’s cruelty. All four of those players—plus Boston’s two principal centers, Kristaps Porzingis and Al Horford—shoot threes competently and take turns bringing the ball to the rack. Nobody’s too precious to end up on the floor. In some ways, they present an ideal of basketball in action—hoops as jazz, or as democracy. Everybody gets his turn.

Maybe this is the new N.B.A. There are more talented players than ever, and this fact could blunt, just slightly, the power of the overweening stars. Instead of looking for a hero, then, we should be looking for the right ensemble. The cameras may have to widen the frame just a bit—at least until someone comes along demanding a closeup. ♦



Vinson Cunningham is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His début novel, “[Great Expectations](#),” came out in March, 2024.

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[The Current Cinema](#)

The Monotonous Miseries of “Kinds of Kindness”

Yorgos Lanthimos’s new film casts the same set of actors in a trio of stories, all of them cruel.

By [Justin Chang](#)

June 21, 2024



Jesse Plemons, Emma Stone, and Willem Dafoe star in Yorgos Lanthimos’s film.
Illustration by Lorenzo D’Alessandro

Should you arrive late for Yorgos Lanthimos’s “Kinds of Kindness,” you will miss its single most rousing moment: an opening blast of that delectably sour 1983 earworm “Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This).” The song needs no justification; it could kick off every movie from now until kingdom come. Even so, you may wonder what put Lanthimos, the Greek-born director of such acrid downers as “[The Lobster](#)” (2015) and “[The Killing of a Sacred Deer](#)” (2017), in a specifically Eurythmics mood. Perhaps, after concocting the mad Victorian brew of “[Poor Things](#)” (2023), he wanted to signal a shift back to a more contemporary style of weird. Or perhaps he recognized, in the song’s coolly cynical lyrics, a corrosion of spirit to match his own. “Some of them want to abuse you / Some of them want to be abused”: there are worse

ways to sum up the cruel spectacles of subjugation that Lanthimos has made such a perverse specialty of.

From the start, he has been chillingly consistent. So many of Lanthimos's movies play like arch behavioral experiments, conducted in a laboratory filled with slow-acting nerve gas. His characters drain all feeling from their faces and speak in flat, disaffected tones, as if they had been treated with emotion-numbing anesthetic. And yet, in that numbness, a kind of subversion persists; the abused do not succumb mindlessly to their abusers. In the Greek chamber drama "[Dogtooth](#)" (2009), three children gradually push back against the lifelong house arrest they've been subjected to by their parents. "[The Favourite](#)" (2018), a rare Lanthimos foray into eighteenth-century English history, presents a royal love triangle in which the balance of political and psychological power is forever in flux. Along the way, Lanthimos has driven home his lessons with often bludgeoning force: the absurdity of sex, the inevitability of violence, the innocence of animals, the beastliness of humans, the rottenness of it all. Another lesson: bad things come in threes.

To wit: "Kinds of Kindness," which runs nearly three hours and unfurls three dark fables about control, abjection, and the delusion of free will. The stories, written by Lanthimos and his regular collaborator Efthimis Filippou, are self-enclosed narratives, up to a point. The same performers—chiefly Jesse Plemons and [Emma Stone](#), but also [Willem Dafoe](#), Margaret Qualley, Hong Chau, Mamoudou Athie, and Joe Alwyn—appear in all three tales, each time playing different characters. Sometimes the variations are mainly sartorial; Dafoe starts off in a suit and winds up in a Speedo. He's essentially playing the harsh authoritarian three ways, and in knowingly stark contrast to the more benevolent father figure he gave us in "Poor Things." That man was called Godwin, or God, for short; this time, Dafoe dances with the devil.

Lanthimos, you may have realized, has more than a passing interest in theology, even if his primary impulse is a desire to ridicule it. The first story he tells is like a corporate-world riff on the Book of Isaiah, with bits of the Parable of the Prodigal Son thrown in for bad measure. Plemons plays an unimaginative drone named Robert, who lives wholly under the thumb of his wealthy boss, Raymond (Dafoe). Their business is unspecified, and of no consequence. Everything Robert has—an attractive home, a shiny gray S.U.V., and a lovely wife, Sarah (Chau)—was given to him, or arranged for him, by Raymond. Every day, Robert receives instructions from Raymond on what to eat, what to wear, and even whether to have sex with Sarah. Every night, again following orders, Robert reads a bit of “Anna Karenina,” perhaps as a reminder of how tragically futile any attempt to liberate himself would be.

Nonetheless, he achieves a liberation of sorts, if only temporarily. Early on, Raymond commands Robert to ram his S.U.V. into a car driven by a man known as R.M.F. (Yorgos Stefanakos), whom Raymond wants dead. But Robert botches the collision, and, when Raymond orders him to try again (“if you truly love me”), Robert refuses, and Raymond cuts him off completely. Plemons has long been a virtuoso of sad-sackery, and he locates the pathos in Robert’s newfound helplessness. Deprived of directives from his boss, he can’t even order a drink without getting flustered.

Speaking of indecision, it isn’t particularly clear what Lanthimos is skewering here: Corporate tyranny? Religious dogma? General American banality? (The movie was shot in New Orleans, but the setting is an unidentified Anytown of suburban manses, run-down motels, and sleek office buildings.) The problem isn’t that Lanthimos withholds an answer. It’s more that he seems unengaged by the question. He’s fascinated, instead, by patterns of repetition, and by the gamesmanship of words. It can’t be a coincidence that the most significant characters in the first story all have names that

begin with the letter “R,” and I haven’t even mentioned Rita (Stone), whom Raymond effectively hires to take Robert’s place. In Lanthimos’s view, we are all interchangeable, which is to say replaceable.

Much of what we see in the first section will recur, at some point, in later ones: a closeup of a woman’s bare heels, an abortion disguised as a miscarriage, and, yes, a grisly vehicular death. The music, composed by Jerskin Fendrix, proves similarly repetitive, an unvaried string of ominously plinking piano notes. Across its three stories, “Kinds of Kindness” occasionally traffics in surface ambiguities, but, from start to finish to start to finish to start to finish, it maintains a persistent through line of self-assured, self-admiring nastiness. By the time we see someone driving a car in circles, it’s Lanthimos who seems to be spinning his wheels.

In the triptych’s second panel, Plemons plays Daniel, who, in keeping with the Biblical tenor, soon finds himself in a den of lying. Daniel is a police officer, and he hasn’t been the same since his wife, Liz (Stone), a marine biologist, went missing. There to comfort him are his partner, Neil (Athie), and Neil’s wife, Martha (Qually), whose presence supplies the movie’s best, randiest gag. Eventually, Liz is miraculously found alive and returns home, but her newfound taste for chocolate—something she previously abhorred—is one of many clues that lead Daniel to suspect that his real wife has been body-snatched, and he becomes determined to force the truth into the open.

Some Grand Guignol spectacle follows, impish yet weightless, though it does pack some nicely ironic symmetry: if Liz’s palate has changed, it only makes sense that Daniel’s should, too. But the best part of the tale is something else entirely—a hallucinatory sequence, filmed in black-and-white, in which Liz tells her father (Dafoe) about a dream she had, in which the island she was stranded on was ruled by canines. “I must admit, Dad, the dogs treated us pretty well,” she murmurs, and it’s a measure of how

reliably Lanthimos's deadpan-absurdist tone takes hold that you'll find yourself nodding rather than laughing. Compared with human overlords, the dogs *would* treat us pretty well.

No surprise, then, that the most sympathetic character in the third story is a veterinarian, Ruth (Quolley), who takes the time to gently bandage a dog's injury. The wound is inflicted, with icy premeditation, by a woman named Emily (Stone), for reasons too viciously convoluted to get into here. Suffice to say that Emily's motives stem from her high-ranking position within a bizarre sex cult, led by Omi (Dafoe) and Aka (Chau), who insist on a stringent doctrine of bodily purity. Everything hinted at in the two prior stories—an anti-religious subtext, an emphasis on dietary restrictions—is rendered thuddingly explicit, as if the movie's ideas were suddenly metastasizing in the final stretch.

In keeping with the rampant doubling, Ruth has an identical-twin sister, bringing Quolley's total number of roles to four. Still, this particular yarn belongs to Stone, who tears into the part of the devoted cultist with fearless determination. It would be unfair, though, to compare her work here—unerringly focussed, if joylessly constrained—with her dazzling, Oscar-winning star turn in “Poor Things.” That picture, polarizing as it was, struck me as a breakthrough for all involved. Despite the mock-Frankensteinian disjointedness, Lanthimos gave us a unified vision, bristling with energy and purpose, and fronted by a heroine for the ages. Having made a film in which everything came so beautifully together, did his unrepentant inner trickster yearn to break everything apart again?

Who knows. The one performer to make a proper meal of “Kinds of Kindness” is Plemons. An actor of understated inventiveness, he succeeds, within the confines of the script, in giving us three different characters, each with a distinct emotional coloration. That's true even when he flattens himself out, in the third yarn, to play a character almost unrecognizable in his dead-eyed

impassivity. It's telling that, in a picture that exudes more than a whiff of artistic fatigue, the newcomer to Lanthimos's company supplies the freshest impact. And so, as it slogs toward the finish, does "Kinds of Kindness" manage to cough up its last and perhaps most useful lesson: when life gives you Plemons, make Plemons aid. ♦



Justin Chang is a film critic at *The New Yorker*.

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Poems

- **From “Adam”**

By Gboyega Odubanjo | Weaving together the Genesis myth, Yoruba culture, and contemporary Black British culture, a young poet explores the haunting reverberations of an unsolved killing with an unidentified victim.

- **“Hernia”**

By Sandra Cisneros | “A worry bead. / A rosary woe.”

[Poems](#)

From “Adam”

By [Gboyega Odubanjo](#)

June 24, 2024



Illustrations by JR Dunnweller

Sometimes we think of archives as pertaining only to the past, but I often find that they speak just as profoundly to our current moment. This is all the more true with Black archives, which can remain elusive today—a lost recipe, an erased neighborhood, a forgotten name. We need the jazz of the archives, speaking to life’s improvisations and otherwise lost moments—not to mention the archives’ blues, taking pain and transforming it, if not into pleasure then into a song of suffering in order to inch beyond it. Like such rich music, archives evoke the ever-present.

The poems of the British-Nigerian poet and editor Gboyega Odubanjo offer an archive of loss and, unfortunately, echo his own. Odubanjo's work came to my attention only after his untimely death, in August, 2023—when he disappeared from a cultural festival that he was to perform at and was found dead several days later. He was twenty-seven. Almost a year after this tragedy that no words can repair, Faber & Faber is bringing out Odubanjo's début full-length collection, "Adam," which, like his three prior chapbooks (or pamphlets, as they are typically called in the U.K.), draws on a fount of stories and soundscapes to create a unique, indelible idiom. His friend and fellow-poet Raymond Antrobus—who first alerted me that there was work yet unpublished—wrote, after Odubanjo's death, "So many of us loved you & knew your brilliance, we were waiting for the rest of the world to catch up."

The excerpts from "Adam" that follow evince the vibrancy of Odubanjo's poetry, his generational gravitas. As the author's prefatory note indicates, the book centers on the discovery, in 2001, of an unidentified Black boy's remains in the River Thames. The poems are remarkable for their weaving together Genesis, Yoruba culture, newscasts, "[The Waste Land](#)," Black Britishisms, and apocalyptic weather in lyric tension and testimony. Writing of this child's "death by water," Odubanjo conjures past and present horrors facing the young, the Black, the vulnerable in our midst. Yet he also pays tribute to the perseverance—even amid a hostile or indifferent world—of community, ritual, and the creative spirit.

"What comes next cannot without a story of water and offering.
The sun shines and we gather because the river allows it."
Odubanjo's extraordinary words shine on, their incantations reaching for the divine.

—[Kevin Young](#)

On 21 September 2001, the torso of a black boy was discovered in the River Thames, near Tower Bridge in central London, clothed only in an orange pair of girls' shorts. Given the name "Adam" by police officers, the unidentified boy was between four and eight years old. What comes next cannot without a story of water and offering. The sun shines and we gather because the river allows it. Na from clap dem dey enter dance. We enter with, and as, Adam.

Genesis

then god said let me make man in my image
man in my likeness man like me
man like light and man like dark
let man nyam and chop whatever be good
god said give man arm to skank leg to shake
tongue and chest to speak with
give man cash to spray put man's face on it
said give man sea and sky and trees
and zones one to six on the oyster so man can see it
now man said rah swear down
man said show me



A Potted History of East

in the beginning.
it was a gush of us and we came from all over.
life was a bottle of nuts. one room and it was decent.

kept the cardamom in the cupboard above the bagels.
sixpence i'd make on an alright day. then independence came.
then war. then war. took me and my brothers.
the women built an estate for our ghosts. we manufactured fords
and drove them to the city gates demanding to be let in.
back then it was simple. sure we weren't squeaky clean
but we were easy. always punch up we said. no point
nicking some bloke's ped when the factory owner's balling
in his four-door. but then a sweet one makes you settle down a bit.
landlord gets the hump so you find another room.
store the polenta next to the cassava flour. get the jobs
where you can. someone's left their lamb leg in the pub again.
is this where eden is. where the sun rises.
developers calling it barcelona on thames now. council say
dagenham leo is alive and well. it's cold as chips
but the ice cream van is still going off and we're laughing.

we never unpacked.

so far east it's west to another man. no bells here.

still we move. almost back where we left now.



Rewilding

it was the rainy season so it rained. the old man snored. these times the river like a boy was either missing or was everywhere you looked. in the east it was everywhere because they had convinced themselves it didn't exist. newbuilds and roundabouts existed. the river was just a story they thought. so they planned their journeys to the minute not knowing where they had come from. but it rained so there was rain and because the people had forgotten the river had to retell its story. it said before anything there was water and there was water. on one side you. on the other side you. the people mistook this for a riddle. each claiming a side for themselves. the river welcoming the people in their entirety. taking in them the clothes on their backs all that they clung to.



Breaking

looks like it'll be a rainy week ahead thank you now the body
of an unidentified boy aged between four and seven
was in the river for up to ten days before a passer by
noticed african boy's stomach included extracts
of calabar bean and flecks of gold expert at kew gardens
says headless limbless boy likely to be nigerian
growing number have spread throughout the world coming up
goat arrested for armed robbery prime minister's response breaking
male torso boy five or six said to be somebody's
son boy assigned most appropriate acceptable name
after long deliberation thought to have been in river ten
days
appeal made to family of girls' shorts boy's body

walking man who spotted adam to be offered counselling
suspicious thames river boy behavior should be reported
to authorities in other news



Àbíkú Adam

we called him the beginning. we begged that he stay but
he didn't hear word. instead he came and went for the first
and repeated time and when he returned he was two halves
of a gourd longing to flesh. each time the cuts were the surgical
same.

there are some who claim they saw him walk on water some
who swear he floated. sometime after the war he arrived
one by one into the homes of the victors playing on a
thumb piano singing his miserable life how lonely it was
until one day in the market he saw one miserable as he
and followed him into a silk tree where were gathered

children—for he too was a child—all with his exact scars
and foibles besides themselves trading deaths like marbles.

Adam's Law

from the twenty-first day of september two thousand and one
every person born within the ague shall be a citizen
any person who was a subject or alien
if he is of excellent character

has sufficient knowledge of one or two idiolects shall
become a happy man

state brigadish shall have no responsibility thereof
for this world go start subject to the provisions
the underground wahala

every person born within this geographical expression
infrastructural el dorado

we all sing together freely and sardonically and
lugubriously reh teh teh

we all sing
the teacher schoolgirl schoolboy
let's get down in the cankerous tribalism who be teacher in the
malodorous saga cum gargantuan gaga

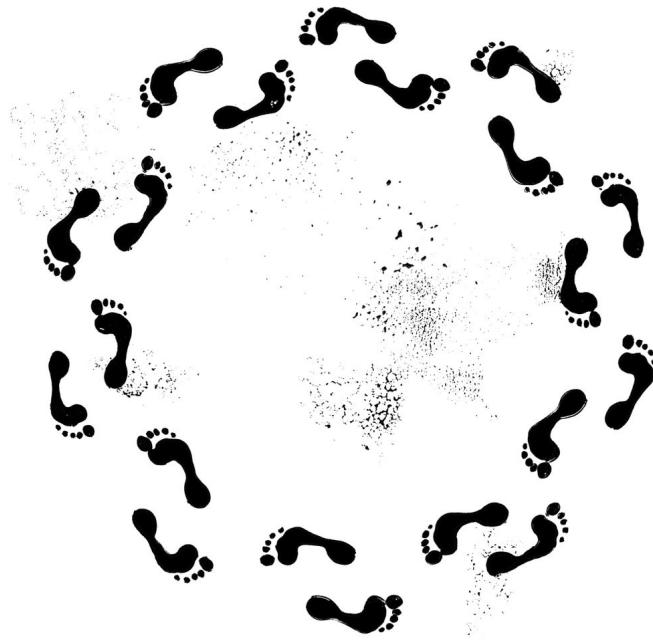
we all mishmash
me and you no need dey for same category
the qualifications of citizenship therefore are

it is to be obtained by means of fraud
we to be compos mentis reh teh teh
political hallelujah boys

and let us think say for the reference therein to the
veritable bugaboo

the english language must be pooh pooh-ed quod erat
demonstrandum reh teh teh
let's wallow in the bluest dye conceal all material fact
every person recognized in this interpose this democracy this

demonstration of craze this economic
quagmire this cataleptic shall on this date



Should You Return

just be sending the money and the land will be here waiting for you
the price the builder gave you is not a serious price unless you
don't want joy

if you don't like the way the sun shines in the morning we can
bring you a new one

the local guys will say you should pay tax but we can sort that one
out

you want everything included school hospital transport we can
build

there's nothing like government policeman no dey for center
everything we can do

if anyone should try to rob you believe me the smoke will clear
before you hear sound

if you want the house to be a cure a meal an ocean we can manage
there is space for you your children their children their concubines
their ghosts

when you are coming let us know the diesel will be in the generator

the guinness will be cooking the family you don't know they will
come and eat
and only when they are full will they remember that the rain has
finished

This is drawn from “Adam.”

Gboyega Odubanjo, who died in 2023, was an award-winning poet. His début full-length collection is “Adam.”

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[Poems](#)

Hernia

By [Sandra Cisneros](#)

June 24, 2024

Read by the author.

A worry bead.
A rosary woe.
A raja's pearl.
An ear-to-ear
Jack grin, seam
undoing
torso to limb.
Mean trick to
remind me
I am not young.

Hard knuckle under
flesh. A sailor's knot.
A not knowing when,
or how. A warning
sent to send me
convalescing. Lest
I grow cocky in my age
and think myself
forever young.

Young is never
raging at the body,
that shell found on the

shore. More or
less the days
left. And more
and more complaints
to threaten
complacency.
Please.

Who will hold my hand
when I count
backward to ten?
The sun
a lamp above my head.

I, who avoided
surgery till now.
Am I only now
old?

Is old fear, and, if fear,
now is the time to deal with
here. So far
from any hands
to hold.

Sandra Cisneros received a 2022 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize. Her books include “*Woman Without Shame*.”

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Crossword

The Crossword: Wednesday, June 19, 2024

A *beginner-friendly puzzle.*



By [Robyn Weintraub](#)

June 19, 2024



[Robyn Weintraub](#) has been constructing crossword puzzles since 2010. Her puzzles have appeared in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament.

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