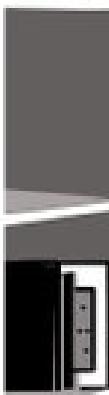


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# THE NEW YORKER



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## A Critic at Large

- [When “Foundation” Gets the Blockbuster Treatment, Isaac Asimov’s Vision Gets Lost](#)

The TV version of the classic sci-fi saga sidelines its source's most pressing questions about power and precarity.

By [Julian Lucas](#)

An innocent viewer of the new Apple TV+ series “Foundation”—a lavish production complete with clone emperors, a haunted starship, and a killer android who tears off her own face—might be surprised to learn that the novels it’s based on inspired Paul Krugman to become an economist. Isaac Asimov’s classic saga revolves around the dismal science of “psychohistory,” a hybrid of math and psychology that can predict the future. Its inventor, Hari Seldon, lives in a twelve-thousand-year-old galactic empire, which, his equations reveal, is about to collapse. “Interstellar wars will be endless,” he warns. “The storm-blast whistles through the branches of the Empire even now.”

His followers establish a Foundation on the frontier world of Terminus—a colony tasked with conserving all human knowledge—where they spend the next millennium fulfilling “Seldon’s plan” to reunite the galaxy. Left ignorant of its details (such knowledge would play havoc with prediction), each generation must solve its own crises. The Foundation confronts barbarian kingdoms, imperial revanchists, and shadowy telepaths who elude psychohistory’s grasp.

The novels conspicuously lack aliens, mysticism, and other space-opera standbys, not least battle scenes. (“I was so sorry afterward I had not counted the number of spaceships that had exploded,” Asimov wrote in a withering review of the 1978 movie “[Battlestar Galactica](#).”) Their appeal is subtler, relying on the tension between Seldon’s plan and the individuals caught in its weave. They are ordinary scholars, traders, politicians, and scientists: the tale spans light-years and millennia, but never forgets its human proportions.

This is no invitation to cinematic extravagance. Asimov’s saga has been enormously popular since the publication of its first trilogy—“[Foundation](#)” (1951), “[Foundation and Empire](#)” (1952), and “[Second Foundation](#)” (1953)—which sold millions of copies. (Asimov kept writing prequels and sequels until his death, in 1992.) Yet the series’ onscreen presence has been restricted to its influence on other science-fiction sagas, especially “[Star](#)

Wars.” Zealously noting these homages, Asimov fans have waited decades for their own epic.

Now David S. Goyer—who’s best known for co-writing “[The Dark Knight](#)” with Christopher Nolan—has not only adapted Asimov’s saga but overhauled it. Planned for eight seasons, and just renewed for a second, “Foundation” gathers the original’s far-flung strands into an action-packed morality play about agency and legacy, freedom and fate. The series attempts to rescue the novels from their atomic-age limitations but largely squanders its material on a clone of every other blockbuster fantasy quest. Though sprinkled with timely allusions, its hero-centered narrative obscures Asimov’s most pressing question for an era of political and ecological precarity: What does it mean to engage in a survival struggle that lasts far longer than any individual life?

The TV series has three arcs, each dramatizing an orientation toward the future. The first centers on Salvor Hardin (Leah Harvey), the Warden of Terminus, who defends its fledgling settlement from invasion. She’s agnostic about the plan (“Seldon’s gone. When are you all going to start thinking for yourselves?”). But her uncanny visions—linked to a portentous diamond-shaped “vault”—unwittingly advance its trajectory. A few decades earlier: Hari Seldon (Jared Harris) enlists Gaal Dornick (Lou Llobell), a math prodigy from a backwater world, to work on psychohistory, and then, by a cunning stratagem, arranges for their exile to Terminus. The gambit opens Asimov’s novel, but in the series it sparks a season-long argument. Gaal lambastes Seldon’s deterministic saviorism, shouting, “You didn’t care what we wanted, as long as your plan was safe!”

A third narrative unfolds at the imperial palace on the city-world of Trantor, a galactic capital where a “genetic dynasty” of clones has reigned for nearly four centuries. If Gaal, Hari, and Salvor enact an uneasy dance between progress and freedom, the emperors, all named Cleon, stand for unyielding continuity. They are a royal family of three, each at a different stage of life: Brother Dawn, a boy, who learns; Brother Day, an adult, who rules; and Brother Dusk, a retiree, who, naturally, paints, documenting the dynasty’s exploits by adding them to a vast mural. (Its grainy, ever-shifting surface exemplifies the show’s distinctively particulate aesthetic—an Ozymandias

of nanobots.) Even at the dinner table, the clones mirror one another, synchronizing their every gesture with neurotic precision.

Lee Pace, with a dulcet voice and a conspicuous chest, gives a mesmerizing performance as Brother Day, whose faltering serenity suggests a man beginning to lose his erection as he bestrides worlds. Day spends his time berating Dusk, molding Dawn in his image, and tyrannizing Eto Demerzel, his robot adviser-mother-wife-slave. Played with cunning and world-weariness by Laura Birn, Demerzel has tended Cleon egos for centuries. But her ministrations aren't quite enough to salve the imperial insecurities, as unrest threatens to unravel man and state.

Trantor suffers its 9/11 moment when terrorists attack the Star Bridge, a colossal spire that serves as its umbilical connection to the larger galaxy; its fall destroys a swath of the densely populated planet. Brother Day retaliates by publicly executing dignitaries from the suspects' home worlds; in a mashup of Caesar's thumbs-down in "Gladiator" and the Death Star's annihilation of Alderaan in "Star Wars," a crowd jeers at the blubbering emissaries as he nukes their planets with a two-finger flick of the wrist.

Asimov's saga has no such clone-emperor theatrics. The empire's death agonies are dispersed among more oblique episodes—a loss of contact with the inner worlds; a superstitious "tech-man" guarding an ancient nuclear plant—which gather momentum over chapters and centuries. Still, the Brothers Cleon are among Goyer's more effective innovations, giving the original theme of imperial inertia three all too human avatars. In what may be the season's most compelling episode, Brother Day endures a trial by ordeal to refute a charismatic priestess, Zephyr Halima (T'Nia Miller), who preaches that the emperors have no soul.

"Foundation" is much clumsier, alas, when it comes to the Foundation; Goyer dilutes psychohistory from a detective story about the future to a cottony utopian ideal. Jared Harris's Seldon is a bland thought leader who delivers speeches that wouldn't feel out of place at a political convention. In one scene, he shows up to praise starstruck laundry workers on the colony ship. "Your names will be memorialized," he says, as "believers who threw their lot in with an eccentric, that pinned the fate of the galaxy on the back of a theorem so abstract, well, it might as well have been a prayer." You can

almost see the yard signs on Terminus: “In this house, we believe that psychohistory is real.”

Gaal and Salvor, who are men in the Asimov saga, are both portrayed by Black women actors—a welcome revision of the original’s first installment, in which exclusively male principals smoke long cigars of “Vegan tobacco.” Yet Gaal, portrayed by Lou Llobell with precocious gravity, is burdened with a strangely racialized origin story: Synnax, her home world, seems to be populated by dark-skinned people who reject the empire and science with neo-primitivist ardor. (The planet’s Atlantean vistas combine a reference to our climate crisis with an opportunistic seasoning of off-brand Afrofuturism.) She defies tradition for psychohistory and Seldon, as if she were born to claim the mantle and correct the blind spots of a problematic white male genius. It’s a winking allusion to the show’s own self-consciously diverse update of Asimov—and exactly the kind of earthbound pigeonholing that limits Black actors in imaginary realms.

A more martial update is foisted on Salvor, played by Harvey with a striking flattop, a black jumpsuit, and an unremitting attitude of frowning concentration. She’s an anxious loner who emerges as a sort of gunslinging sheriff. In Asimov’s novel, by contrast, Salvor is a savvy mayor, who overthrows the Foundation’s pedantic director and forestalls an invasion through shrewd demagoguery. The original Salvor’s motto is that “violence is the last refuge of the incompetent”; the TV show gives the line to her father, and has Salvor march into the Terminus armory to “see what violence we can muster.” It’s a characteristic revision for the series, which strategically bundles amped-up diversity with amped-up action. But why not cast a Black woman in the original role of a crafty pol, instead of as another wide-eyed underdog who grows into an action figure?

The larger problem is that Goyer’s “Foundation” seems bored with its source material. The plot is carefully tailored to Joseph Campbell’s “The Hero’s Journey,” with many of its fantasy embellishments cribbed from better-known sagas. There are transhuman starship pilots à la “[Dune](#).” Math plays a feeble cousin of the Force; Jared Harris’s Seldon looks like Alec Guinness’s Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Gaal, the young outworlder evading her destiny, is an updated Luke Skywalker. Everyone seems to have a special ability, and, where Asimov’s protagonists drew urgency from the brevity of their lives,

Goyer's cheat their way across the centuries with clones, cryogenic capsules, and "uploaded consciousness." They are supersized heroes gallivanting through a diminished galaxy.

What's lost is Asimov's talent for conveying our fragility in the cosmos. His first novel, "[Pebble in the Sky](#)," takes place on a colonized, irradiated Earth, where imperial soldiers mock the local belief that the planet is humanity's world of origin. "[Nightfall](#)," his most celebrated story, is set on a world with multiple suns, where an eclipse makes the stars visible for the first time in millennia, and creates a planet-wide existential crisis. The "Foundation" saga achieves a yet larger sense of scale through its episodic structure: Trantor, a sprawling city-planet that dazzles Gaal in the opening volume, returns in the next as a world of farmers who sell scrap metal from the endless ruins.

The Apple TV+ series could have tried to craft a new template to encompass these constellations. Instead, it falls back on a sturdily familiar one: a ragtag band facing down a mighty empire, with the fate of the universe pivoting on the actions of a gifted few. It's an approach that would have appealed to Asimov's Lord Dorwin, a dilettantish dignitary obsessed with identifying humanity's original solar system. Rather than search for it himself, though, Dorwin relies on the findings of long-dead archeologists. When Salvador suggests that he do his own field work, Dorwin is incredulous: Why blunder about in far-flung solar systems when the old masters have covered the ground so much better than we could ever hope to? ♦

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# A Reporter at Large

- [The Migrant Workers Who Follow Climate Disasters](#)

[November 8, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Migrant Workers Who Follow Climate Disasters

A growing group of laborers is trailing hurricanes and wildfires the way farmworkers follow crops, contracting for big disaster-recovery firms, and facing exploitation, injury, and death.

By [Sarah Stillman](#)

November 1, 2021



## Content

Bellaliz Gonzalez had never heard of Midland, Michigan, before a white van dropped her off there in late May, 2020. The journey from her home in Miami, with twelve colleagues, had taken around twenty-two hours. She arrived to a region devastated by a recent flood: cracked roads, collapsed bridges. Gonzalez, a fifty-four-year-old asylum seeker from Venezuela, with neatly coiffed auburn hair, prided herself on remaining calm in dangerous situations. In Venezuela, she had worked as an environmental engineer and run several of the country's national parks. But for the past three years,

living in the U.S., she had turned to manual labor to make money. Earlier that week, she had been recruited to work with a franchise of a disaster-restoration company called Servpro, to help Midland recover. She carried her go bag, which contained steel-toed boots, thick jeans, and gold hoop earrings that helped her feel elegant while doing backbreaking work. At the job site, she received a neon-yellow vest that featured Servpro's name on the back, and the words "Safety Starts with You."

Gonzalez and her colleagues had rushed to Midland after a torrential downpour—the effects of Tropical Storm Arthur—had burst through two hydroelectric dams. Governor Gretchen Whitmer described the damage as "unlike anything we've seen in five hundred years." Eighteen inches of water flooded the local courthouse; vehicles from a nearby vintage-car museum escaped, belly-up, from the destroyed showroom. Whitmer declared that restoring the region would be a "herculean undertaking." Some twenty-five hundred buildings needed repairs. Particularly urgent, given the surging pandemic, were conditions at a hospital in the city, MidMichigan Medical Center—Midland, where one of the I.C.U.s had lost power.

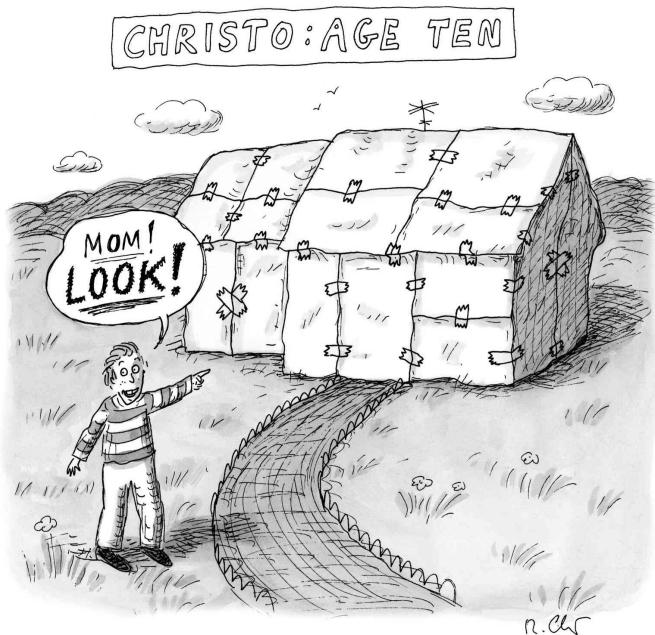
Gonzalez is part of a new transitory workforce, made up largely of immigrants, many undocumented, who follow climate disasters around the country the way agricultural workers follow crops, helping communities rebuild. She'd addressed damage inflicted by hurricanes, fires, floods, and tornadoes across seven states, scrubbing mildew blooms and clearing pools of toxic sludge from universities, factories, and airports. The work seemed meaningful and occasionally made her feel like a lucky tourist: she sometimes stayed in the shambles of beachside resorts she couldn't otherwise afford. But it felt risky, too. In 2019, in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida, after Hurricane Michael, she gutted the insulation of a home without proper protective gear and felt little pieces of fibreglass cutting her skin. The same year, in the aftermath of Hurricane Florence, she helped demolish a serpentarium in North Carolina; the former owner, an eccentric herpetologist, had been murdered by his wife in the adjoining apartment. On the walls of the exhibits, placards had warned visitors of the effects of snake venom: "The bitten extremity swells to massive proportions . . . and your eyes weep blood." Now the threat was the foul-smelling dust kicked up by the demolition, which left her coughing and wheezing.

Gonzalez and her seventeen-year-old daughter, Angelica, lived in Florida with Gonzalez's sister, Enilsa. For months, Enilsa had been begging her to quit chasing catastrophes, and, after the pandemic began, she got a job at a McDonald's. But the work was tedious, and paid poorly. Gonzalez and her daughter slept on twin couches in Enilsa's living room. Angelica, a senior in high school and an aspiring graphic designer, hoped to go to college, but Gonzalez wasn't sure she could afford it. In May, 2020, working an all-night shift, Gonzalez burned her forearm baking apple pies, and took it as a sign. Soon after, she saw a WhatsApp message from a group of Venezuelan storm workers noting a job offer from a small disaster-recovery labor broker called Back to New, based in Houston, that provided "on-demand workers, nationwide, 24/7." It had a contract with a Servpro franchise and put out an urgent call for workers. The opportunity, the company promised, was "*COVID-19* ready."

Back to New sent more than a hundred workers to Midland from Florida and Texas, most of them Venezuelans. Many were experienced disaster workers, but some had recently been pushed into the work by pandemic debts. Leyda Yanes, a former attorney from Caracas, had worked at a bakery in Miami until it closed during the lockdowns. She had seen an ad from Back to New, and persuaded her husband, Jesús Delgado, an Uber driver, and their extended family to go to Midland. Workers told me that they had not been tested for *covid* or made to wear a mask. Gonzalez wore one, and, in the van, a young woman scolded her: "Don't you know that you're breathing your own air in that thing? You'll cause permanent lung damage."

In Midland, the group found conditions that were far from "*COVID-19* ready." They were taken to a local hotel, where they learned that they'd be sleeping four to a room, two to a bed. Gonzalez and others would be cleaning floodwater and damaged goods out of the Midland hospital, including its morgue. Workers said that daily meetings were held indoors and were crowded, as was the group's work area; they were given inadequate protective gear that quickly ran out. (Back to New denied any wrongdoing during the project.) At the end of Gonzalez's shift, she and Yanes would scour the ground for discarded latex gloves to wash and reuse. Reinaldo Quintero, a broad-shouldered worker from Maracaibo, the city where Gonzalez grew up, belted *gaita* music, a regional genre, and recruited Delgado to sing along.

Still, Gonzalez couldn't let go of her worries. She asked a supervisor why they weren't having the temperature checks they'd been guaranteed. "The thermometer's broken," the woman replied, shrugging. One day, around 6 A.M., Gonzalez and other workers climbed into vans bound for the hospital. "Where's Reinaldo?" Delgado asked. Someone replied, "He's not feeling well." Gonzalez's bedmate was also ill. "Maybe it's just the changing weather?" Gonzalez suggested. She soon learned that Quintero had been tested for *COVID-19*. Later, she felt a pounding headache.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

On Saturday night, Gonzalez and several other workers decided to call Saket Soni, an organizer whom Gonzalez had met a few years earlier. Soni runs a nonprofit, called Resilience Force, that advocates for the fast-growing group of disaster-restoration laborers. As the workers follow storms, the organization follows them, trying to fight wage theft, avert injury, and generally prevent the kinds of disasters-within-disasters that pervade the industry. Soni is forty-three, with dark hair and owlish glasses, and an air of intense curiosity. That night, he was at his apartment in Washington, D.C., cooking an elaborate meal of octopus vindaloo. When he answered the phone, a group of workers clamored on the other end. Then Gonzalez came on the line. "Saket, it's bad," she said. "I think we're *contaminados*."

Apocalyptic weather has pushed many Americans into a belated recognition of the climate emergency. In the Pacific Northwest, temperatures surged past a hundred and ten degrees in June, killing more than two hundred people. In the Southwest, a “megadrought” dropped water levels to a once-in-a-millennium low. This past summer, Hurricane Ida sent Biblical rains through the roofs of homes across the Gulf Coast, then pushed north, killing at least eleven people in flooded basement apartments in New York City. But, even as awareness grows about what President Joe Biden calls our “code red” extreme-weather threat, most Americans know little about the labor crisis tucked within it.

The work of disaster recovery has always been gruelling. When the most lethal storm in U.S. history hit Galveston, Texas, in 1900, as Al Roker describes it in his book “The Storm of the Century,” “white soldiers forced Black men at gunpoint to the front lines of the most horrifying labor that any city could ever face,” which included loading hundreds of corpses onto a barge to be dumped at sea. After the Great Okeechobee Hurricane struck southern Florida, in 1928, three-fourths of those killed were migrant agricultural workers, most of them Black. Local officials conscripted the survivors to bury the dead in mass graves—pine coffins were primarily reserved for white victims—and, when some refused, they were denied food, or shot dead.

Today, the structure of the industry has radically transformed. For much of the twentieth century, many disaster-restoration businesses were mom-and-pop shops; they earned mostly modest revenues for repairing mostly modest problems (a house burned down by a stray cigarette, a chimney felled in a storm), and occasionally got windfalls when an outsized catastrophe struck. The work was done mainly by local laborers. In recent years, though, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, greenhouse-gas emissions from human activities have made extreme weather more common and more intense. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration noted a new U.S. record in 2020: a total of twenty-two “billion-dollar disasters.” Insurance companies paid out at least seventy-six billion dollars for repairs that year, and the government paid more than a hundred billion. “We’re going to spare no expense,” Biden told the Federal Emergency Management Agency this past May, announcing that he would double its funds to prepare for extreme weather.

As money poured in, companies consolidated, and began to chase extreme weather across the country, competing for insurance payouts and government contracts. Quality Awning & Construction was founded in 1946 in Dearborn, Michigan, to handle small fix-up jobs around town. By 1989, the firm had changed its name, and the brothers who ran it began sending caravans of workers to storms in other states. In 2001, the firm was sold for an estimated two hundred million dollars to Belfor USA Group, an emerging industry heavyweight then run by Mark Davis and Jeff Johnson. Today, the company does upward of two billion dollars in business annually. As *Forbes* put it, “Climate change is good for Belfor.” Servpro, similarly, was founded as a family-owned painting business in 1967, and now has nineteen hundred locations across the U.S. and Canada.

In the past five years, private-equity firms have acquired dozens of disaster-restoration companies. In 2019, Blackstone, one of the world’s largest private-equity firms, acquired a majority stake in Servpro Industries, reportedly for more than a billion dollars. The same year, American Securities, a Manhattan-based firm, acquired Belfor. If you run a local fix-’em-up firm, you can now attend a workshop in Las Vegas called “Why, How, and When to Sell Your Restoration Business,” which promises “the only sure bet in Vegas—you will come away a winner.”

Chasing disasters requires a labor force that is open to arduous work and is instantly mobile. Servpro promises to furnish workers to crisis sites within days, or even hours; one of its slogans is “Faster to any size disaster.” To marshal this force, many companies turn to an ill-regulated group of subcontractors and labor brokers, which, in turn, cultivate social networks of migrants and other people seeking economic opportunity. As demand has grown, many of these workers have come to travel a yearly catastrophe circuit.

Sergio Chávez, a sociologist at Rice University, has surveyed more than three hundred roofers from Mexico in the course of the past nine years. “At one point, they were all local roofers, stationed in Houston or Austin or San Antonio,” he told me. “Now they’re national storm chasers.” Some men see hurricane jobs as a life-transforming boon. “But the work is devastating on the body,” Chávez said. “The majority of these guys don’t have access to health insurance or paid leave.” When they’re hurt or sick, he continued,

“they have informal mechanisms to recover. They’ll pool their resources and give an injured colleague as much money as possible.” The life style is also isolating: “One of my guys, a storm chaser named Juanito, died of a heart attack in his mid-thirties, from substance abuse. He was without his wife, following storms, and he was so lonely.” Existing laws to protect these workers are widely under-enforced. “After a disaster, the contractors will owe thirty thousand dollars by the time the last paycheck is due,” Chávez said. “Instead of paying, they’ll call ICE or the police.”

In the past year, I followed Resilience Force through more than twenty disaster recoveries during one of the fiercest periods of extreme weather on record. I spoke with more than a hundred workers, storm survivors, advocates, and climate-change experts, and reviewed thousands of pages of Department of Labor records, death-and-injury reports, and documents emerging from worker-mistreatment litigation. All told, I found more than two thousand credible claims of harm to workers, including instances of fatal or injurious working conditions, stolen wages, assaults, and labor trafficking. I often thought of a worry that preoccupied Gonzalez in Midland: that news cameras descend when a storm or a fire arrives but move on before the work of recovery—often its own disaster—begins.

Saket Soni first encountered this nascent workforce in 2005, after Hurricane Katrina. He had grown up in New Delhi, and studied English literature and theatre at the University of Chicago. He graduated in 2000, on the eve of 9/11 and the subsequent creation of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. He bungled his immigration paperwork, an error that he thought would be “a minor thing, like an overdue library book.” Instead, he became undocumented, and was dropped from his job and evicted. “I lost my foothold on normal life,” he said. He assumed the alias Aram on official paperwork, a name he borrowed from a book of short stories that features migrant watermelon harvesters. Eventually, he got his visa issues resolved and found work as a community organizer. When Katrina hit, he moved to New Orleans and fought on behalf of Black residents who’d been displaced—many of them living in *FEMA* trailers—arguing for their right to return to their neighborhoods.

At the same time, Soni got to know the workers who were helping to rebuild the region. In City Park, hundreds of migrant laborers were sleeping in tents

beneath the oak trees. One of them, Mariano Alvarado, had been a shrimper back in Honduras, until droughts tied to climate change made his livelihood untenable; in New Orleans, he spent his days clearing spoiled food from a storm-ravaged elementary school and dealing with wage theft and verbal lashings from bosses. At a boutique hotel, Soni met Daniel Castellanos, a tall Peruvian, who had paid four thousand dollars to a labor broker on the promise of a well-paid post-Katrina construction job. When he arrived in the city, he was pressed into cleaning hotel toilets and floors for paltry wages, and sleeping on a cot alongside rats in the hotel's basement. "We mortgaged our homes, sold property, and plunged our families into debt to pay the fees," Castellanos said. "When I first got here, others told me, 'Welcome to the United Slaves of America.' And, for me, it was true."

Soni soon got a call from an Indian pipe fitter. The man said that he had been promised a lucrative gig for a company called Signal International: he would receive a green card and temporary housing in comfortable quarters while he worked to repair Gulf Coast oil rigs damaged by the storm. He'd paid a labor broker more than ten thousand dollars for the opportunity. When he arrived, he found himself with a guest-worker visa, living with twenty-three other men in a labor camp, a squalid space the size of a double-wide trailer, paying more than a thousand dollars a month for the privilege. Soni and other organizers soon discovered that recruiters had ensnared hundreds of Indian laborers in a similar scheme. If the men protested, they were threatened with deportation; three of the group's leaders were held under the watch of armed guards. Soni helped the workers travel to the White House and stage a hunger strike. Eventually, a broad coalition, including the American Civil Liberties Union and the Southern Poverty Law Center, sued, and secured one of the largest human-trafficking settlements in U.S. history: twenty million dollars, plus a formal apology from Signal International, which declared bankruptcy. "Signal was wrong in failing to ensure that the guest workers were treated with the respect and dignity they deserved," the company admitted.

Soni thought that, as the Gulf Coast recovered from Katrina, the calls might fade. Instead, panicked workers dialled his number after flooding in Baton Rouge, in 2016, and after Hurricane Harvey hit Texas, in 2017. He noticed that, following Katrina, many workers had begun to live on the road, making use of the skills they'd acquired while rebuilding New Orleans. "I realized a

new identity was forming among these workers, who regarded themselves not just as day laborers, but as people who repair after disasters,” Soni said. He started calling them “resilience workers,” and conducted a series of in-depth interviews for a document he titled “A Taxonomy of Jobs at the End of the World.”

Around the country, advocates were noticing new links between climate change and labor exploitation. Nadia Marin-Molina, who co-directs the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, told me, “After Katrina, we realized that we needed to reach out and support immigrant workers during disaster recovery, and also to create longer-term structures across the country, like local workers’ centers.” The workers lacked a shared shop floor or a consistent employer, but Soni, too, believed that they needed to be organized. He came to see their fates as entwined with those of the people disproportionately affected by disasters, including low-income survivors of hurricanes and wildfires. He started to advocate for those people as well. In the fall of 2017, Soni, Castellanos, and others formed Resilience Force.

Over the next few years, Soni and Castellanos hopscotched between disaster zones, slipping onto job sites to speak to workers and hand out flyers, bottled water, and beef jerky. (Often, Castellanos carried a Bible in his bag, so that, if challenged by management, he and Soni could pretend to be Seventh-day Adventists.) After Hurricane Irma hit the Florida Keys, in 2017, a tip led them to Gonzalez.



Gonzalez worked several disasters last year, including hurricanes, floods, and fires. Photograph by Rose Marie Cromwell for The New Yorker

In Venezuela, Gonzalez had balanced her job as a conservationist with life as a single mother. She often brought Angelica with her into open fields to plant mahogany trees—"the lungs of the earth," she called them. But in early 2017 she got into a series of clashes at work, including when she fought against the deforestation of a bird sanctuary. She faced threats of violence, and fled to Miami. A friend soon told her about a disaster-restoration opportunity at the Hyatt Residence Club Key West, Windward Pointe. "I've been an office worker my whole life," Gonzalez protested. But she signed on with a fly-by-night labor broker that supplied low-wage workers to Cotton Commercial USA, a behemoth disaster-restoration firm. The labor broker drove her to the country's southernmost tip, where a sign read:

*END OF THE RAINBOW  
UNLIMITED OPPORTUNITIES  
TROPICAL VACATIONLAND*

When Gonzalez arrived at the battered hotel, she was put to work stripping soggy carpets and carrying broken fans out of mold-ridden rooms. She was euphoric when she received her first check, but her second bounced, as did her third. She also wasn't paid for overtime, a considerable portion of her earnings. Other workers were being cheated, too; when colleagues texted to complain, they later alleged, their boss responded, "I am American," and "I

owe you nothing ok stop bothering [me] or immigration will come to your house.”

When Castellanos got in touch, Gonzalez thought, “The last thing I’d want is for immigration to come and put me in prison.” But her mother had always told her, “If a man treats you poorly, speak up.” That week, she began gathering evidence, turning over faulty checks and time stamps to Resilience Force. The team filed a class-action suit against Cotton and its subcontractors, and the workers received fifty thousand dollars plus legal fees in a settlement with Cotton. (A spokesperson for Cotton said that it conceded no wrongdoing and had paid the labor broker for the work, adding that the company “believes workers are entitled to just compensation and has a more than twenty-year history partnering with third-party labor providers.” The labor broker could not be reached for comment.) Gonzalez told me, “After that, I stopped being afraid that we didn’t have papers, and started realizing that we could organize together.”

Members of Resilience Force often noticed tensions between residents and the workers coming to rebuild their towns. In 2018, after Hurricane Michael hit the Florida Panhandle, undocumented workers fixed the homes of Donald Trump supporters who wished to see them deported; Confederate flags sometimes flew out front. “We wanted to build relationships between the workers and the beneficiaries of their labor,” Soni said. The team canvassed residents and found that many felt left behind by *FEMA*. A white father of three told Soni about being evicted from government housing for storm survivors and having to move his family into a tent outside a church, saying, “It feels like we went through a hurricane twice.”

Resilience Force began recruiting workers to rebuild the homes of local residents in need, without charge, after which they’d share a big dinner and talk. Soni recalled that, after one such meal, which Gonzalez attended, a white mortician who’d hung a sign reading “Strangers Will Be Shot” on his door quietly took it down. “It’s not inevitable that the traumatic experience of a disaster will lead to more solidarity between political adversaries,” Soni said. “But at the micro level it creates an opening.”

In the days after the storm, law enforcement had tacitly accepted the presence of undocumented workers. As the Panhandle regained its footing,

though, Soni saw a change. A task force, including the Bay County Sheriff's Office, staged a series of undercover sting operations: when workers came to fix houses with damaged roofs, and quoted a price, the "homeowners" arrested them for "contracting without a license"—a felony during a state of emergency—then, if they were undocumented, turned them over to *ICE* for deportation. (A spokesperson for the sheriff's office wrote to me, "It was *NEVER* about immigration. It was about non-licensed, substandard work on the homes of our residents already suffering the loss of their property." Unscrupulous contractors have, in some cases, preyed on storm survivors.) Workers, prepped by Resilience Force, testified at county-commission meetings against the crackdown and spoke with local officials to convince them that they were vital to the region's economic recovery.

The physical perils of resilience work became increasingly evident to Soni. A forty-three-year-old roofer stepped on a skylight and fell to his death; three utility workers were struck and killed by a pickup truck while repairing power lines. Resilience Force often encountered the same people doing dangerous tasks in storm after storm. One afternoon, a man named Gustavo, in a panic, told Soni about a co-worker with whom he had been fixing a nearby roof. Their boss had urged them to continue through a rainstorm without safety harnesses, and the colleague had slipped and fallen fifteen feet to the driveway beneath. "Blood was coming from his mouth like a faucet," Gustavo said. Looking at a picture, Soni instantly recognized the man: it was Mariano Alvarado, the Honduran shrimper he had met in New Orleans after Katrina. He and Castellanos rushed to the hospital, where they found Alvarado in a coma; when he finally woke up, two days later, he learned that he'd ruptured a disk in his back, lost thirty per cent of his vision, and developed blood clots in his brain. Doctors later removed the clots, an expensive procedure for which he had no insurance coverage. For days, he was unable to talk or walk. To Soni, it was "an instant, horrible vindication of why Resilience Force was on the right track."

In the years that followed, Soni and his colleagues met some five thousand disaster workers. They recruited many, including Gonzalez, to be informal member-advocates—what Soni called "our eyes and ears on the ground"—sharing screenshots of job advertisements, sending updates about their worksite conditions, and reminding co-workers of their rights. Soni bought a corkboard map of the United States for charting workers' journeys, and

devoted a red pushpin to Gonzalez. When the pandemic began, he learned that she and dozens of other Venezuelans were heading to Michigan, the site of one of the first major pandemic-era climate disasters, and worried about how the two crises might collide.

By the time Gonzalez called Resilience Force from her hotel room in Midland, she had a fever and a painful ache spreading up her spine. She and the other workers demanded *COVID* tests, but the county health department was closed during their off-hours, and workers told me that Back to New made it difficult for them to go during the workday. When some of the workers did manage to make the trip, twenty-two tested positive. One of Back to New's co-owners was asked to convey the Governor's order that they quarantine for fourteen days. Instead, workers said, he told many of them that they were fired. He was sending them back to Florida and Texas, workers said, cramming the sick together with the healthy for the journey.

Gonzalez had once helped Resilience Force to craft a comic-book-style manual that they handed out in disaster zones, teaching laborers how to document job-site abuses. ("Get the terms of your employment in writing." "Take pictures of license plates of your employers if you are able.") Now she tried to put this advice into practice. That Sunday morning, hardly able to move, she was thrown out of her hotel with her colleagues. Standing in the parking lot, she filmed a dispatch on her cell phone. "My name is Bellaliz Gonzalez, and I'm fifty-four years old," she said. "Here, they treated us like animals." She panned across a parking lot, filming her sick colleagues, who were being put into vans in defiance of the Governor's orders. (Some were taken to Indiana, to work another disaster for Back to New.) "They didn't care about our lives," she said.

Resilience Force forwarded Gonzalez's footage to authorities and the local press. The organization took up the job of contact tracing and rented Airbnbs so that workers could quarantine once they reached home. Gonzalez holed up alone and shook with fever, not telling Enilsa or Angelica; Cynthia Hernandez, a Resilience Force organizer who'd grown close to Gonzalez, brought her soup. She slowly recovered. Help reached Yanes and Delgado too late, and the couple soon fell ill, as did their grandchildren. Yanes recovered quickly, but Delgado had to be hospitalized. On oxygen in the emergency room, he hallucinated that he was stuck in a singing contest, just

as Quintero had encouraged him to perform at the Midland morgue. In order to stay alive, he had to prod himself and say, “Keep singing! Keep singing!” He eventually returned home and began driving an Uber again, with an oxygen tank in the passenger seat.

Soni and his team drafted a legal strategy. They documented accounts from dozens of workers and tallied a series of alleged legal violations by Servpro Industries, their franchisees, and Back to New. All told, they said, it amounted to “highly unsafe and life-threatening conditions during the course of disaster recovery work.” They alleged that in Indiana, as in Midland, a mass infection occurred and many workers were sent back to Florida. This past April, Resilience Force was dealt a blow. In a hearing, Servpro Industries’ lawyer argued that the company “did not employ any of these Plaintiffs,” because its franchisees and their subcontractors are independently owned and operated. A week later, the judge agreed, dismissing the claims against Servpro Industries and allowing only the claims against the smaller entities to continue. (A spokesperson for Servpro Industries said that the company was “not in any way involved in the provision of these services.”) The local franchisees could not be reached for comment. The co-owner of Back to New wrote, in a statement, “We deny the specific allegations of wrongdoing.”) Servpro continued to make millions during the pandemic; vans travelled around the country emblazoned with another of its corporate slogans, “Like It Never Even Happened.” More than ever, Soni felt that Resilience Force’s fight wouldn’t be won by suing one company at a time; a larger intervention was needed.

On a chilly Thursday in October, 2020, I met Soni in New Orleans, and we set out for Lake Charles, Louisiana. Hurricane Laura, a Category 4 storm, had just hit, damaging more than five hundred thousand houses and other properties. The region was full of oil refineries and chemical manufacturers, and, after the storm, black plumes of chlorine gas wafted over town. Right away, hundreds of resilience workers rushed in. (Gonzalez helped to clear debris from an airport before leaving to work in another part of the region.)



Soni's group, Resilience Force, follows workers as they follow storms, trying to prevent job-site abuses. Photograph by Annie Flanagan for The New Yorker

Soni was accompanied on the trip by Stephanie Teatro, an organizer with red-fringed bangs, and Osman, a roofer who moonlights as a preacher. Osman had been arrested in a sting operation in the Florida Panhandle, and was now awaiting deportation proceedings. Soni also introduced me to one of his newest hires, Mariano Alvarado, the Honduran man who had fallen from the roof in Florida. “He’s a Job-like figure,” Soni said. Alvarado still had nerve pain, poor balance, and post-traumatic stress, but his work with Resilience Force gave him a sense of purpose. “I think God made this happen,” he told me, “because people need to know our stories.”

When a storm descends on a town, many resilience workers converge on the parking lot of the nearest Home Depot—a spot they call the Corner—where some live out of their cars for weeks or months while hustling for jobs. (The Resilience Force crew often sleeps in the parking lot, too.) As we pulled into the Lake Charles Home Depot lot at dawn, Soni tallied at least fifty workers. Many had driven from Texas, Alabama, or Florida, and most spoke Spanish. Some had affixed hand-painted signs to their cars (“*HANDYMAN*”) or stencilled ads onto their vans (“Hot Patch / Holes in Walls / Give us a call, we do it all”). In the early-morning hours, prospective employers often arrived in flatbed trucks, shouting out job offers: did anyone want to gather bushels of shattered glass from a local business, for three hundred dollars a bucket? Food trucks follow workers to storm sites, serving traditional meals

from their home countries. A group of Mexican women sold hot tamales from plastic coolers; an Afro-Honduran woman ladled Garifuna stew into disposable bowls. Soni enthusiastically devoured a chicken foot, saying, “Duty calls!”

At least half a dozen people recognized Soni and Castellanos from previous storms. Some showed them fresh injuries they’d got on the job. An undocumented worker from Honduras had an oozing wound in his foot but hadn’t gone to the hospital, because he didn’t have insurance. Omar, an undocumented roofer, said, “Look at my hands”; they glowed red with friction burns from shovelling toxic silt out of a local home without proper gloves. Omar said, “I’m forty-five, and it’s too hard to keep sleeping in a car.”

Some workers lacked even a car to bed down in. Soni approached a man named George, a white worker with a scruffy beard, and asked, “Where are you sleeping?” The man pointed to a patch of pavement in front of a PetSmart. He had no tent, pillow, blanket, or tools. He’d recently got out of jail and hitched a ride to town, hearing that he might find work there even during the pandemic. Soni bought him two sausages from a food truck. “Here’s my cell-phone number,” he said, handing the man a card. “What you’re doing here is an important public service.”

Resilience Force was offering free laminated I.D.s for workers who lacked government identification. Castellanos carried a portable I.D.-maker in a canvas bag, taking names and personal information. Though the I.D.s offered no legal protection, cops sometimes left workers alone if they flashed their blue-and-yellow Resilience Force badge.

Just before sundown, the Resilience Force crew gathered in the parking lot for a worker meeting. Castellanos created a semicircle of folding chairs, and Soni used bales of hay to build a staircase to a stage: the back of a pickup truck flanked by bags of onions. As laborers took their seats, Alvarado polled the group’s storm “résumés”: “Who worked Hurricane Harvey?” Four of them had. Michael? Five. The Baton Rouge floods? Twelve. The early part of the event centered around identity building. “Your work is honorable!” Soni told the group. “If you don’t fix the homes and the schools and the banks, how will people in Lake Charles get back to living?”

Teatro described Resilience Force's political vision. Locally, it was lobbying community leaders to recognize the value of protecting rebuilders' rights. Nationally, it was pushing for a pathway to citizenship for undocumented resilience workers. A Honduran man called out, "It'll never happen." An older worker retorted, "I came here in the nineties, and I'm legal now. It takes time, but we have to dream big." Osman asked the audience to share their struggles. One said, "Yesterday, cops came here targeting people with our color skin, as if we were trash." Soni responded, "You won't be safe and secure on your own—the cops are organized, *ICE* is organized." He added, "If you want to enter a common fight, I ask you to stand." Almost everyone did. Osman closed the meeting by lifting his arms. "Let's pray," he said. "Protect us from accidents, protect us from police. Thank you, Jesus. Amen."

When getting an education in the lives of disaster-recovery workers, you encounter a diverse array of crises. Some of the most striking allegations I heard were of outright labor trafficking. David Gautreaux, a forty-four-year-old roofer, told me that, in 2017, he got excited about a job offer from a North Carolina company fixing roofs in the U.S. Virgin Islands after Hurricane Irma. He said that he was promised twenty-two hundred dollars a week. But, when he arrived, his employer put him in a remote hotel without access to potable water or transportation. He and some of his colleagues worked for nearly a month without pay, according to a lawsuit filed by eight workers last year. "Soon, I'd done gone through all the money I had," Gautreaux told me. "I'm ashamed to say it, but one day, sitting there with nothing to eat, I stole pork chops to cook."

Workers told me that one of Gautreaux's group got a splinter of sheet metal implanted in his eye and was told to walk to the hospital. When members of the group spoke up about their conditions, according to the legal complaint, their bosses "threatened Plaintiffs with death or serious bodily injury, and coerced Plaintiffs to continue working or else they would never be paid." Jeremy Santos, a foreman from Puerto Rico, told me, "Instead of sending the money back to our wives, our wives are the ones sending money to us, and we're having to tell them to pawn our tools back home to keep the lights on." He added, "This is a federal project of the U.S. government—this is *FEMA* money! And yet, they say no one is aware of this abuse?" (An

attorney for the companies in the case said that they deny the allegations, and the suit has been ordered into arbitration.)

Another widespread threat is assault—physical, verbal, and sexual. In Grand Isle, Louisiana, a white businessman struck two Black women on a hurricane repair crew while shouting racist epithets. (He later pleaded guilty to federal civil-rights violations.) Last summer, after hailstorms struck Loveland, Colorado, two men assessing damaged roofs were reportedly held at gunpoint by a man in fatigues, who described them to police as “antifa guys.” A worker who cleaned out incinerated hotels and office buildings after a recent fire in California told me that the bosses on the project had sexually harassed several women workers, called the men “wetbacks,” and failed to pay them as promised. “Many of the guys had already just lost their homes in the fire, and they were sleeping in their cars, just trying to survive,” he said. “And then, to be cheated?”

Work sites are full of preventable dangers. Consulting with Matt Nadel of the Yale Investigative Reporting Lab, I tallied more than forty resilience workers’ deaths over the past ten years. They died of heatstroke, flesh-eating bacteria, falls, electrocution. Many more deaths have likely never been acknowledged. “There’s a total undercounting of the true number of injuries from disaster cleanups,” Debbie Berkowitz, who during the Obama years worked at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration protecting disaster-recovery workers, told me. “It’s an industry with an incredibly vulnerable workforce made up of many workers of color and immigrant workers who have very high rates of underreporting when they get hurt.”

Wage theft may be the most pervasive problem faced by resilience workers—an economic crime that law enforcement rarely chooses to prosecute. In a study for the National Day Laborer Organizing Network and the Fe y Justicia Worker Center, Nik Theodore, a professor at the University of Illinois Chicago, found that more than three-quarters of day laborers in Houston had experienced wage theft, and more than a quarter had been victimized in the month after Hurricane Harvey. Soni dislikes the term “wage theft,” because he believes that it fails to capture the full harm. “In a disaster zone, wage theft isn’t really just wage theft—it’s an index of forced labor,” he told me. If your employer owes you money, you’re paradoxically more, not less, likely to keep showing up to the job, holding out hope of

being granted what you're owed. After a major storm or fire, your only access to safe drinking water and food may come through your employer. "The fear of retaliation is strong, and, if you sit down to strike, you'll be fired and lose all of your pay," he said. "In these disaster environments, housing is often provided by the employer, and if you're not paid you have nowhere else to go. You have no gas money, no car, no choice."

Biden has spoken often of the jobs that can be created by investing in climate resilience but has said little about how to safeguard this workforce from abuse, which pervades many *FEMA*-funded projects. The Trump Administration gutted *OSHA*, an already poorly funded agency, and it now has fewer compliance officers than at almost any point in its history. "There's no army of *OSHA* inspectors that can be deployed after a hurricane or other disaster to make sure that the workers involved in the cleanup are safe," Berkowitz told me. "If the federal government doesn't step in and think about how to keep cleanup workers protected, we'll see a whole lot of workers get really, really sick, and die, from all kinds of safety hazards." Undocumented laborers are often reluctant to bring claims forward. "The legal protections these workers have from retaliation are almost nil," Berkowitz said.

Soni and his team have enumerated more than a dozen changes that could help safeguard workers. As a starting point, he said, "We want the Administration to insure that worker housing is a right," noting that *FEMA* already provides shelter and food for some emergency-response personnel. The federal government, he argues, should also encourage raising labor standards by granting contracts to companies with better wages and working conditions. Marin-Molina, from the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, suggested that Biden offer deferred action for undocumented whistle-blowers: "What if workers who came forward to report exploitation at work—like being exposed to electrical and chemical hazards, or being forced to work on a roof without proper equipment—could get protection from deportation?" Resilience Force is also teaming up with members of Congress, including Pramila Jayapal and Joaquin Castro, to create an on-ramp to citizenship for resilience workers.



*"Do you ever feel like there's nothing left to curse?"*  
Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

Soni envisages a variety of farther-reaching efforts to make our approach to climate disasters more equitable. He has urged *FEMA* to revamp existing aid programs for storm survivors, which often give greater support to homeowners than to renters, compounding economic and racial inequalities. Some proposals are state-specific: in a report called “A People’s Framework for Disaster Response,” Resilience Force criticizes Florida’s governor, Ron DeSantis, for responding to disasters by “slashing benefits such as unemployment insurance and creating barriers to disaster food assistance, making it more difficult—not less—for people to recover.” Soni has also drafted a plan for a national public-jobs program that would train a skilled resilience workforce—a Resilience Corps, as he imagines it—modelled on the Works Progress Administration of the New Deal. Last year, Resilience Force launched a pilot program in New Orleans for workers such as barbers, bartenders, and massage therapists who had lost their jobs during the pandemic, retraining them as aid workers supporting storm evacuees.

A few minutes after the meeting in Lake Charles ended, the mood turned. Castellano’s phone was buzzing with texts warning of an altercation in a nearby Walmart parking lot. We drove over and found more than fifty workers scattered across the lot, distressed and outraged. About twenty had surrounded a car and were smacking the windshield as a young man—a

manager from Contractor Support Group, a Texas-based company that delivers thousands of workers to disaster-repair firms—cowered inside and tried to drive away.

“That bitch is gonna pay!” a young woman shouted at the vehicle.

“Give us what you owe us!” yelled another.

The people in the lot had been working on a project run by Signal Restoration Services, a Michigan-based company. (It has no relation to Signal International, the corporation that trafficked Indian workers after Katrina.) Signal had landed a large deal to repair the Isle of Capri casino, whose gambling barge had broken free during the storm and hit a bridge, and another to clean up more than a hundred buildings for the parish school district. Some of the workers had found the job through Facebook; when they arrived, they were given Signal safety vests. But, weeks into the work, many complained that they still hadn’t been paid their full salaries, if they’d been paid at all. For days, representatives from Contractor Support Group had told the workers to show up at various locations—an abandoned movie theatre, a parking lot, a school—with the promise of payments, which, workers said, largely failed to materialize. (A C.S.G. spokesperson claimed that some workers were misled about how much they would be paid by false information that someone posted on Facebook, and added that, when workers showed up, “we were very clear about what the wages were.”) The spokesperson also acknowledged that there were some “payment discrepancies,” and said that a process was eventually set up for “payment resolution.”

Signal represents the new model of American disaster restoration. The company had begun in 1972 as a sleepy residential-repair company, but, in 2012, it was bought by Mark Davis, the entrepreneur who had run Belfor USA Group, and his partner, Frank Torre. “Before, this business was volatile and had an unpredictable revenue line—the big storms weren’t happening that regularly,” Davis told me. “But, with the increase in frequency and severity of natural disasters, the big storms are now a safe bet.” Today, the company travels to all corners of the country with huge white trucks, carting an arsenal of specialized equipment (air scrubbers, moisture meters), and relies on subcontractors and manpower agencies to find general laborers.

In the parking lot, a man from Jeanerette, Louisiana, told me that he and his wife had been shovelling mud and other detritus out of a local elementary school for a month, and hadn't been paid. "We drive two and a half hours every day for this job—it's like we're practically paying them!" he said. Misty Zeledon, a chain-smoking woman with glittery eye shadow, told me that she had been keeping a journal documenting verbal abuse, improper protective equipment, a lack of promised food, and withheld paychecks. "Me? I don't work for free," she said. (The C.S.G. spokesperson claimed that protective gear and food were provided for the workers.) A twenty-three-year-old local named Brian Williams had escaped his mobile home when the hurricane descended, and was living in a hotel hours away with his fiancée and infant daughter. For a month, he had been cleaning out insulation, which gave him hives, and said he still hadn't been paid. "My baby is down to three cans of canned milk," he said. (The C.S.G. spokesperson said that the company had not received a medical complaint about Williams's hives.)

The manager in the car had contacted 911 for help, and local police rolled up. Williams helped defuse the situation, and the crowd agreed to disperse in accordance with a local curfew. Soni, impressed, took down Williams's number as a potential organizing ally.

The next night, the tension escalated at a Signal command center, just outside the Isle of Capri casino. Castellanos, Soni, and I ducked past security guards and into an area that looked like a military encampment. Large trailers had been converted into sleeping quarters where a largely white, mostly male managerial class bedded down each night. (Many laborers were commuting from hours away, sleeping in cars, or paying for rooms in distant hotels, some sharing beds.) About eighty workers rallied outside their bosses' trailers, demanding their pay. One manager addressed the crowd: "I've got five minutes before I call the police on people." When he spotted me taking notes, he told a colleague, "There's a journalist here. Call the police." Another boss said, between swigs of a bottle, "This is giving me erectile dysfunction." When I asked his name, he replied, "Right now, *no hablo* English." A third supervisor urged the protesters to go to the latest address that Contractor Support Group had issued, the parking lot of a second Walmart, for payment. "No more addresses!" someone shouted. "Give us our money!" I spoke to a dozen workers until Castellanos

approached. “You look surprised,” he said. “This happens everywhere we go. Always.”

Soni spent the next few months at home, gathering evidence against Signal. He tapped at a computer on his standing desk facing an enormous bookcase filled with labor and climate-change literature, a whole shelf devoted to John Steinbeck. Nearby, he had a black go bag, stuffed with audio devices, a coffeemaker, a wireless hot spot, some cash, and a small container of cumin, his “survival spice” for bland hotel food. Just before last Thanksgiving, Soni faxed Davis, the Signal C.E.O., a copy of Resilience Force’s lawsuits against Cotton and Servpro.

When Davis first heard Soni’s name, he was at his home in Florida, icing a groin injury he had sustained in Lake Charles while overseeing company work; a trusted manager had called to report unrest among the workers, telling Davis, “It’s a mob mentality—this could be a powder keg,” and attributing the protests to Resilience Force. Davis read up on the group feeling irked, thinking, These guys are all stick and no carrot. His frustration escalated a few weeks later, when he received a copy of a letter Soni had sent to the head of the school board in the parish where Signal was contracted, asking that it not be paid until the wage-theft allegations were resolved. Davis believed that his company was providing a vital service to a community in urgent need. Disaster work, he told me, is “very similar to a military operation, but without the budget the federal government brings to a war.” It requires ingenuity just to recruit sufficient labor. “You can’t predict where a storm will hit, or when, or on what scale, so how do you prepare?” he asked.

The two men agreed to meet on Zoom. On the call, Soni told Davis about a migrant worker named Veronica who’d driven seven hours from South Texas to seek her unpaid wages, a trip that had cost her seven hundred dollars in transportation and hotel costs; she’d been selling apples on the street to cover it. (Her supervisor on the job had allegedly told her that she was “pretty but dumb.”) Eight subcontracted workers from out of town, Davis learned, were lodged in the same hotel room at one of his sites, sharing beds. (“That is against our hotel policy,” the C.S.G. spokesperson said. “Company policy is two people per room.”)

To Davis, the scale of the problem looked clear. He had already heard of such issues, and told Soni that he had begun to address them. “When I was nine years old, working the milo fields, I expected to get paid,” he said. “Having someone do a job and not get paid for it? I can’t wrap my arms around it.” His company relied on subcontractors, which he saw as a necessity, but he conceded that it left him little visibility into workers’ conditions. “When the sub hires a sub, that’s when it gets out of control,” he said. He asked Soni, “Who’s doing this better?” Soni replied, “But that’s the point. There’s no one.” Soni told Davis that he’d like to partner with him to create a new set of industry-wide standards for disaster work that would build accountability into the field’s supply chain.

In early May, Davis invited the Resilience Force team to join him at the headquarters of his and Torre’s newest business acquisition, PuroClean, in Tamarac, Florida. The franchise specializes in fires and floods, and also cleans up meth labs, the homes of hoarders, and murder scenes, advertising a service for “deodorizing locations where traumatic events have occurred.” Davis showed Soni its Flood House, a fully furnished home that his colleagues routinely doused with tens of thousands of gallons of water to teach students the science of home restoration. Afterward, the teams sat down around a boardroom table and addressed four key issues affecting workers: wages, housing, safety, and food. At one point, Soni mentioned Gonzalez, who lived nearby. “She worked for eleven dollars an hour,” he said. “Do you think these workers are more valuable than that?”



*After a storm, many resilience workers converge on a local parking lot—a spot they call the Corner—where some live out of their cars for weeks or months while hustling for jobs. Photograph by Annie Flanagan for The New Yorker*

Davis's competitors, when confronted by Resilience Force, had dodged and deflected. But Davis came to see basic labor protections as both fair and feasible. "Quite frankly, the insurance industry allows for the minimum standards these workers deserve—the overtime, the travel pay, the food, the safety training," he said, "and there's no reason not to meet them." By June, the two sides had a deal. Davis agreed to a fifteen-dollar floor wage for all "general laborers." Crucially, Signal would pay dues into a labor-rights fund, which would include money for enforcement. In return, it would reap a range of benefits, including training sessions to build the skills of laborers for their projects. Seasoned worker-experts, like Gonzalez, could get certified to inspect Signal's sites and to lead the training.

This fall, as disaster season accelerated, Davis and Soni recruited other companies to adopt the standards. Right away, some of the industry's largest players agreed to talk. Soni hopes to cajole a dozen or more to sign on, leaning on the private-equity firms that own them. He doesn't see his work with disaster-restoration C.E.O.s like Davis as a contradiction. Large-scale rebuilding titans, he believes, aren't going away, and we've come to require their services. This summer, flash floods struck Soni's neighborhood in D.C., causing a leak in his building; a neighbor called Servpro, unaware that

Soni was fighting it in court. “All of us now depend on these companies to survive,” he said.

Recently, I visited Gonzalez in Miami. With her savings from disaster work, she had moved into her own apartment, a second-floor one-bedroom, where Angelica did her homework by the window, overlooking palm fronds. She had graduated from high school and is heading to a community college next year. When I arrived, Gonzalez was watching a church service on a flat-screen TV—one of three pieces of furniture in her living room, along with a couch and a special stool for displaying her Bible. She lit a small coconut candle and turned on the ring light that Angelica had purchased to improve her Instagram posts.

I’d last seen Gonzalez this past fall, in Pensacola, Florida, where she had been working twelve-hour days rebuilding a hotel hit by Hurricane Sally. Pensacola was her seventh disaster scene of the year, and she’d hardly been sleeping. Even her usual rituals—drinking chocolate Ensure, taking collagen, and applying goji-berry eye cream—weren’t bringing relief. Enilsa had told her that Angelica was trying to think of a fake emergency to trick her mother into coming home.

In Pensacola, Gonzalez had helped recruit more than twenty storm workers for an organizing dinner with Resilience Force. Many had survived the *COVID* outbreak in Midland. Reinaldo Quintero sang a ballad. Soni asked the group a leading question: “If you could have total stability, and guaranteed fair wages, would you make a career out of resilience work?” Most nodded, but Gonzalez said, “This work, it’s difficult—it means being far from my daughter. Honestly, if I could find some other way, I would.”

Two days later, another hurricane approached Pensacola, and, after my phone buzzed with an evacuation order, I left town at 6 A.M. Gonzalez stayed for a while (storm workers are exempt from mandatory evacuations), then went to Colorado to help rebuild a town after a wildfire. She’d been assigned to restore a home but sat down on the owner’s couch at lunch to eat a sandwich and was instantly fired and made to pay her own way back to Florida.

In Miami, we went out to eat at an Olive Garden. Angelica sat with us, scrolling through her phone and eavesdropping. She said, “O.K., Mom, I’m actually learning about your life.” She told me, “I’m not, like, ‘Save the trees’—that’s my mom’s thing.” But she was impressed that her mother had confronted anti-immigrant families in Florida. “Yes, in the Panhandle, the white people changed their opinion of us,” Gonzalez said. Still, she worried about the long-term toll of the job. Soni often argued that resilience workers were “like the early coal miners, the ones who got black lung disease—they knew they were breathing stuff that was bad for them, but they weren’t sure what it was, and Congress hadn’t yet acted to protect them.”

Gonzalez had become fixated on what she could do to make people pay attention to workers like her. One night, she drafted a proposal. “Let’s just think what would happen without the presence of immigrants in restoration work,” she wrote. “We risk our lives more, and yet, we are the ones who get the least well paid.” She had ideas about what workers deserve: access to hygienic bathrooms, nutritious food, better wages. The people at the top, making the most money, she thought, ought to be accountable for what happens down the supply chain. “They’re responsible,” she said. “I hope we can set a precedent to teach these companies about respect—like how to see us as more than just machines for our labor.”

Gonzalez also hoped more people would realize how lonely disaster work could be. She had begun writing poetry infused with hurricane metaphors. (In one, “Imaginary Winds,” she writes of how “the subtle breeze of a great love dissolves,” replaced by gusts of “pain deep within the heart.”)

As we spoke, Gonzalez’s phone pinged. “Are you going to this year’s hurricane season?” a friend she’d met in Pensacola texted. She paused. “Not this year,” she wrote back, then turned to me, conflicted. “My mother’s heart feels good,” she said, “but my adventurer’s heart aches.” Gonzalez has been talking to Soni about becoming a trainer for resilience workers. In the meantime, she’s found temporary work in the pharmaceutical industry, which allows her to live at home. I asked her whether she was sure that she’d never return to a storm job. “In Venezuela, there’s a saying,” she told me. “Don’t ever say, ‘I won’t drink that water.’ You never know how thirsty you’ll get.” ♦

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# **Art**

- [An Afrofuturist Seneca Village, at the Met](#)

[November 8, 2021 Issue](#)

# An Afrofuturist Seneca Village, at the Met

“Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room” imagines an alternate world in which the community of predominantly Black Americans that was destroyed to build Central Park, in 1857, still thrives.  
October 29, 2021



*Photograph by Gioncarlo Valentine for The New Yorker*

In 1857, Seneca Village, a community of predominantly Black Americans, was destroyed to build Central Park. Beginning Nov. 5, the Met imagines an alternate world, one in which the village still thrives, with “**Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room**,” combining historic and contemporary art and décor. Its visionary lead curator, Hannah Beachler—who won an Oscar for her production design on “Black Panther”—is pictured here, with wallpaper by the Nigerian American artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby.

# **Books**

- [Early Civilizations Had It All Figured Out](#)
- [Anne Carson's Obsession with Herakles](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)

A contrarian account of our prehistory argues that cities once flourished without rulers and rules—and still could.

By [Gideon Lewis-Kraus](#)

## Content

Moments of sociopolitical tumult have a way of generating all-encompassing explanatory histories. These chronicles either indulge a sense of decline or applaud our advances. The appetite for such stories seems indiscriminate—tales of deterioration and tales of improvement are frequently consumed by the same people. Two of Bill Gates's favorite soup-to-nuts books of the past decade, for example, are Steven Pinker's “[The Better Angels of Our Nature](#)” and [Yuval Noah Harari](#)'s “[Sapiens](#). ” The first asserts that everything has been on the upswing since the Enlightenment, when we learned that rational argument was preferable to religious superstition and wanton cudgelling. The second concludes that everything was more or less O.K. until about twelve thousand years ago, when we first beat our swords into plowshares; this innocent decision, which must have seemed a good idea at the time, heralded an era of administrative hierarchy, state-sanctioned violence, and the unchecked proliferation of carbohydrates. Perhaps what readers like Gates find valuable in these books has less to do with the purported shape and direction of history than with the broad assurance that history *has* a shape and a direction.

Both stories, after all, adhere to a model of history that's at once teleological (driven by specific forces to arrive at the foreordained present) and discontinuous (such magical things as farming and rationality emerged from the woodwork, unlocking successive stages of developmental maturity). They generally agree that the crucial rupture divided some original state of nature from the grand accession of civilization. Their arcs of irrevocable decline or compulsory progress are variations on themes that were given their most recognizable modern elaborations by Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Pinker takes up the Hobbesian notion that early human existence was a brutish war of all against all. Harari takes rather literally Rousseau's thought experiment that we were born free and rushed headlong into our chains. (“There is no way out of the imagined order,” Harari writes. “When we break down our prison walls and run towards freedom, we are in fact running into the more spacious exercise yard of a bigger prison.”) In

both accounts, guilelessness and egalitarianism are exchanged for knowledge and subordination; the only real difference lies in the cost-benefit assessments of that trade.

About a decade ago, the anthropologist and activist David Graeber, who died suddenly last year, at the age of fifty-nine, and the archeologist David Wengrow began to consider, in the wake of [Occupy Wall Street](#), how they might contribute to the burgeoning literature on inequality. Not inequality of income or wealth but inequality of power: why so many people obey the orders of so few. The two scholars came to see, however, that to inquire after the “origins” of inequality was to defer to one of two myths—roughly, Hobbes’s or Rousseau’s—based on a deeply ingrained and deeply misleading fantasy of the human career. The product of their extended collaboration, “[The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), is a profuse and antic account of how we came to take that old narrative for granted and why we might be better off if we let it go.

The consensus version of the story begins with the appearance of the first anatomically modern humans, about two hundred thousand years ago. For approximately a hundred and ninety thousand years, or about ninety-five per cent of our existence as a species, we lived in small bands of hunter-gatherers, following migratory herds and foraging for wild nuts and berries. These cohorts were small enough, and the demands of resource procurement and allocation were sufficiently minor, that decisions were face-to-face affairs among intimates. Despite the lurking menace of large cats, these early hunter-gatherers didn’t have to work particularly hard to fulfill their caloric needs, and they passed their ample leisure hours cavorting like primates. The order of the day was an easy egalitarianism, mostly for want of other options.

Twelve thousand years ago, give or take, the static pleasures of this long, undifferentiated epoch gave way to history proper. The hunter-gatherer bands lucky enough to find themselves on the flanks of the Zagros Mountains, or the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, began herding and farming. The rise of agriculture allowed for permanent settlements, which, growing dense, became cities. Urban commerce demanded division of labor, professional specialization, and bureaucratic oversight. Because wheat,

unlike wild berries or the hindquarters of an aurochs, was a storable, countable good that appeared on a routine schedule, the selfish administrators of inchoate kingdoms could easily collect taxes, or tributes. Writing, which first emerged in the service of accounting, abetted the sort of control and surveillance upon which primitive racketeers came to depend. Where hunter-gatherers had hunted and gathered only enough to meet the demands of the day, agricultural communities created history's first surpluses, and the extraction of tributes propped up rent-seeking élites and the managerial pyramids—not to mention standing armies—necessary to maintain their privilege. The rise of the arts, technology, and monumental architecture was the upside of the creation and immiseration of a peasant class.

From roughly the Enlightenment through the middle of the twentieth century, these developments—which came to be known as the Neolithic Revolution—were seen as generally good things. Societies were categorized by evolutionary stage on the basis of their mode of food production and economic organization, with full-fledged states taken to be the pinnacle of progress.

But it was also possible to think that the Neolithic Revolution was, all in all, a bad thing. In the late nineteen-sixties, ethnographers studying present-day hunter-gatherers in southern Africa argued that their “primitive” ways were not only freer and more egalitarian than the “later” stages of human development but also healthier and more fun. Agriculture required much longer and duller working hours; dense settlements and the proximity of livestock, as well as monotonous diets of cereal staples, encouraged malnutrition and disease. The poisoned fruit of grain cultivation had, in this telling, led to a cycle of population growth and more grain cultivation. Agriculture was a trap. Rousseau’s thought experiment, long written off by conservative critics as romantic nostalgia for the “noble savage,” was resuscitated, in modern, scientific form. It might have taken three or four decades for these insights to make their way to *TED* stages, but the paleo diet became a fundamental requirement of any self-respecting Silicon Valley founder.

For Graeber and Wengrow, this basic story, whether relayed in a triumphal or a defeatist register, is itself a trap. If we accept that the rise of agriculture

meant the rise of the state—of political élites and intricate structures of power—then all we can do is tinker around the edges. Even if we regard the Paleolithic era as a garden paradise, we know that our reëntry is forever barred. For one thing, the requirements of hunting and gathering could support only some trivial fraction of the earth’s current population. A life under government control now seems inescapable.



“The Dawn of Everything” is a lively, and often very funny, anarchist project that aspires to enlarge our political imagination by revitalizing the possibilities of the distant past. Superficially, it resembles other exhaustive, synoptic histories—it’s encyclopedic in scope, with sections introduced by comically baroque intertitles—but it disavows the intellectual trappings of a knowable arc, a linear structure, and internal necessity. As a stab at grandeur stripped of grandiosity, the book rejects the logic of technological or ecological determinism, structuring its narrative around our ancestors’ improvisatory responses to the challenges of happenstance. The result is an almost hallucinatory vision of the human epic as a series of idiosyncratic digressions. It is the story of how we made it up as we went along—of how things could have been different and, perhaps, still might be.

Drawing on new archeological findings, and revisiting old ones, Graeber and Wengrow argue that the granaries-to-overlords tale simply isn’t true. Rather,

it's a function of an extremely low-resolution approach to time. Viewed closely, the course of human history resists our favored schemata. Hunter-gatherer communities seem to have experimented with various forms of farming as side projects thousands of years before we have any evidence of cities. Even after urban centers developed, there was nothing like an ineluctable relationship between cities, technology, and domination.

The large town of Çatalhöyük, for example, on the Konya Plain in present-day Turkey, was settled around 7400 B.C. and seems to have been occupied for approximately fifteen hundred years—which, the authors note, is “roughly the same period of time that separates us from Amalafrida, Queen of the Vandals, who reached the height of her influence around AD 523.” The settlement was home to about five thousand people, but it had neither an obvious center nor any communal facilities. There weren’t even streets: households were densely packed together and accessed via roof ladders. The residents’ living areas were marked by a “distinctly macabre sense of interior design,” with narrow rooms outfitted with aurochs skulls and horns, along with raised platforms that encased the remains of up to sixty of the households’ dead ancestors. It was, as far as we know, one of the first large settlements to have practiced agriculture: the citizens derived most of their nutrition from cereals and beans they grew, as well as from domesticated sheep and goats. For a long time, all of this was taken together as a key example of the “agricultural revolution” in action, and the material remnants were interpreted to support the old story. Corpulent female figurines, assumed to be part of fertility rituals, were found in what were understood to be proto-religious shrines of some sort—the first indications of organized cultural systems.

In the past three decades, however, new archeological methods have disturbed many of these long-standing assumptions. The “shrines” were, Graeber and Wengrow tell us, just regular houses; the female figurines could be the discarded Barbie dolls of the Anatolian Neolithic, but they could also be a way of honoring female elders. The community seems to have supported itself for a thousand years with various forms of agriculture—floodplain farming and animal husbandry—without ever having committed itself to new forms of social or cultural organization. From what we can derive from wall murals and other expressive residues, Graeber and

Wengrow say, “the cultural life of the community remained stubbornly oriented around the worlds of hunting and foraging.”

So what was actually going on in Çatalhöyük? Graeber and Wengrow interpret the evidence to propose that the town’s inhabitants managed their affairs perfectly well without the sort of administrative structures, royal or priestly, that were supposedly part of the agricultural package. “Despite the considerable size and density of the built-up area, there is no evidence for central authority,” the authors maintain. “Each household appears more or less a world unto itself—a discrete locus of storage, production and consumption. Each also seems to have held a significant degree of control over its own rituals.” Some houses appear to have been more lavishly furnished with aurochs horns or prized obsidian (which was brought in from Cappadocia, more than a hundred miles away), but there is no sign of élite neighborhoods or marks of caste consolidation. Different forms of social organization likely prevailed at different times of year, with greater division of labor necessary for cultivation and hunting in the summer and fall, followed by something more equitable—and, perhaps, matriarchal—during the winter.

Çatalhöyük isn’t the only site that calls into question the presumption that the Neolithic era was patterned on a single civilizational kit. Graeber and Wengrow report that some cities thrived long before they showed signs of hierarchical systems—such as temples and palaces—and some never developed them at all. “In others, centralized power seems to appear and then disappear,” they write. “It would seem that the mere fact of urban life does not, necessarily, imply any form of political organization.”

If cities didn’t lead to states, what did? Not any singular arrow of history, according to Graeber and Wengrow, but, rather, the gradual and dismal coalescence of otherwise unrelated, parallel processes. In particular, they think it involved the extension of patriarchal domination from the home to society at large. Their account of how household structures were transformed into despotic regimes requires some unconvincing hand-waving, but throughout they emphasize that any given process can be historically contingent without being simply inexplicable. The guiding principle of “The Dawn of Everything” is that our remote ancestors—not to mention certain present-day Indigenous groups long dismissed as living

relics of superannuated barbarians—must be viewed as self-conscious political actors. Historical ruptures cannot be reduced to technological novelties or geographical constraints, even if those factors played crucial roles. They arose from our own choices and actions.

Graeber and Wengrow point to moments in the distant past in which they see instances of deliberate refusal: communities that weighed the advantages and disadvantages of one ostensibly evolutionary step or another (pastoralism, royal domination) and decided that they liked their current odds just fine. The communities that built Stonehenge had once adopted ways of cultivating cereal from Continental Europe, but recent research suggests that they returned to hazelnut collection around 3300 B.C. Various ecological theories have been floated to explain the sudden collapse, around 1350 A.D., of the brutal dynasty of Cahokia (in present-day Illinois), then the largest city in the Americas north of Mexico, but Graeber and Wengrow propose that the proto-empire's subjects—who lived under constant surveillance and the threat of mass executions—simply defected en masse. Land wasn't scarce, and they just walked away.

Where some groups adopted and abandoned different arrangements over time, others maintained a repertoire of assorted practices to suit fluctuating purposes. Modern ethnographic treatments of Indigenous communities describe an astonishing level of social plasticity (available to us, perhaps, in the highly etiolated form of Burning Man and other “temporary autonomous zones”). In a 1903 essay, the anthropologists Marcel Mauss and Henri Beuchat described the routine organizational reversals in Inuit communities. These groups spent their summers fishing and hunting in small cohorts under the possessive—and coercive—authority of a single male elder. Graeber and Wengrow describe how then, as the winter brought an influx of walruses and seals to the shore, “the Inuit gathered together to build great meeting houses of wood, whale rib and stone,” where “virtues of equality, altruism and collective life prevailed. Wealth was shared, and husbands and wives exchanged partners.” It’s impossible to say whether such practices were designed or preserved to diminish the threat of permanent domination, but that was one of their effects.

Such groups weren’t ignorant of whatever else was on offer; they were frequently in contact with other societies, took stock of their habits, and

sought to define themselves in contrarian ways, in a rather underexplored process that, following the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, Graeber and Wengrow call “schismogenesis.” In the Pacific Northwest, men of rank among the Kwakiutl held lavish, greasy potlatches and took war captives as slaves; their neighbors to the south of the Klamath River, the Yurok, prized restraint and self-denial, and committed themselves to modes of subsistence that rendered slavery, which they found morally repugnant, unnecessary.

When divergences in cultural values occurred within societies rather than between them, the result could take the form of revolutionary sentiment. Consider the city of Teotihuacan, which was founded around 100 B.C.—more than a thousand years before the rise of the Aztecs—and was almost certainly the largest city in the pre-colonial Americas. The metropolis was first constructed on a monumental scale, with the kind of pyramids and palaces that indicate social hierarchy. At a certain point, however, the people of Teotihuacan decided against investing in more fancy villas. Instead, Graeber and Wengrow write, “the citizens embarked on a remarkable project of urban renewal, supplying high-quality apartments for nearly all the city’s population, regardless of wealth or status.” They accomplished all of this without wheeled vehicles, sailing ships, animal-powered traction, or advanced metallurgy. Perhaps most important was that, although they were in contact with the monarchical Mayan societies nearby, the people of Teotihuacan flourished for some three centuries without submitting to the rule of anything like a king.

Except, we learn in passing, some archeologists believe that they did. (The scholarly debate on the matter turns in part on the interpretation of a few inscriptions in the Mayan city of Tikal.) Though Graeber and Wengrow have marshalled a vast amount of archeological evidence, they acknowledge that much of what anyone has to say about ancient societies is speculative. Their hope is that, even if some of their examples remain dubious, the accumulated weight of recent findings—and the more inventive assortment of political organization they imply—establishes the glib tendentiousness of Big History. As they put it, “We are at least trying to see what happens when we drop the teleological habit of thought.”

Big History, to be sure, has long been out of favor in academic circles. Although Graeber and Wengrow can be a little self-congratulatory, they do

point out that one of the first things you learn in an introductory course in anthropology or archeology is that pat appeals to cultural evolution are retrograde and silly. Critiques of grand narratives have been important to the modern self-image of these fields—in part as penance for having once been happy to serve the priorities of empire, peddling “civilization” as a gift to the “primitives.” One consequence, however, is that wholesale synthetic accounts of human history tend to be written in the extravagantly roughshod mode of Harari’s “Sapiens” or Jared Diamond’s “[Guns, Germs, and Steel](#).” (Graeber and Wengrow neglect to mention their strongest rivals: the science fictions of writers such as Kim Stanley Robinson.)

At the same time, Graeber and Wengrow know better than to limit “The Dawn of Everything” to a litany of counterexamples. In the late nineteen-sixties, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz worried that his discipline had gained a reputation for simple negation—a message encapsulated in the phrase “Not on Easter Island.” In other words, there were holes in every story: you could always puncture some “high-wrought” theory with a shard of anomalous data from the remote place where you did your fieldwork. Yet when anthropology was reduced to “spiteful ethnography,” Geertz argued, it put itself in the business of “disapproving of intellectual constructions but not of creating, or perhaps even of understanding, any.” Graeber and Wengrow seem to agree. It’s all well and good, they might think, to murmur “Not on Easter Island” when a popularizer gets too expansive or confident, but they worry that if people aren’t offered an alternative framework they will still default to some version of the pernicious cultural-evolution myth—and accept that the familiar hierarchies of governance are simply the price of sophistication.



Cartoon by Mike Twohy

Consider the widespread assumption, which Graeber long contested, that larger human societies can't resolve collective-action problems without top-down authority. In 2014, he and the tech investor Peter Thiel debated the issue onstage. Thiel argued that modern life is much too convoluted for truly democratic participation, which is why his model for innovation was the miniature suzerainty of the startup. As a quasi-libertarian, he admitted some sympathy for Graeber's political anarchism, but he didn't see how it could ever work: "Could you build the Manhattan Project, could you build Apollo, could you get someone to the moon in a radically decentralized chaotic system? Or do you need coördination and planning?"

Curiously, there are moments in "The Dawn of Everything" in which Graeber and Wengrow seem to yield to this way of thinking; they suggest, at one point, that we pay less attention to Egypt's heroic pyramid-building Old and Middle Kingdoms and more to its apparently helter-skelter "intermediate" periods, during which masterpieces might have gone unbuilt but people did not have to fear being summarily enslaved or buried alive as part of a funeral entourage. Still, it's by contending at length with the prejudices of scale—the expectation that there is some natural upper bound on the number of people who can live and work together without significant coördination from above—that the book signals its broader ambitions. "In the standard, textbook version of human history, scale is crucial," the authors

write. “The tiny bands of foragers in which humans were thought to have spent most of their evolutionary history could be relatively democratic and egalitarian precisely because they were small.” We therefore persuade ourselves that, given the problem of strangers, we need “such things as urban planners, social workers, tax auditors and police.”

Yet pre-agricultural people erected great testaments to their ways of life in the absence of those structural supports—at Göbekli Tepe, also in Turkey, as well as on the Ukrainian steppe and in the Mississippi Delta. And post-agricultural societies could maintain systematic achievements without administrators to run them. “It turns out that farmers are perfectly capable of co-ordinating very complicated irrigation systems all by themselves,” Graeber and Wengrow say. “Urban populations seem to have a remarkable capacity for self-governance in ways which, while usually not quite ‘egalitarian,’ were likely a good deal more participatory than almost any urban government today.” Ancient emperors mostly “saw little reason to interfere, as they simply didn’t care very much about how their subjects cleaned the streets or maintained their drainage ditches.” About eight thousand years ago, the villagers of Tell Sabi Abyad, in present-day Syria, saw to a variety of complex tasks—pasturing the flocks; sowing, harvesting, and threshing grain; weaving flax; making beads; and carving stones—that presumably required extensive inter-household coöperation, yet everyone lived in uniform dwellings. Though writing wasn’t invented for another three thousand years, a scheme of geometric tokens, stored and archived in a central if nondescript depot, had been put in place to monitor resource administration. The archeological remains of the village, remarkably preserved by a catastrophic fire that baked its structures of mud and clay, show no signs of caste division or a presiding authority.

Graeber and Wengrow hope that, once we grasp how ancient mega-sites (in Ukraine or in Jomon-era Japan) could grow large and manifold without a literate bureaucracy, or the way early literate societies (Uruk, in Mesopotamia) might have managed the trick of participatory self-governance, we might renew and expand our own cramped notions of what’s politically tenable. We could come to detach progress from obedience. As they put it, “Humans may not have begun their history in a state of primordial innocence, but they do appear to have begun it with a self-conscious aversion to being told what to do. If this is so, we can at least

refine our initial question: the real puzzle is not when chiefs, or even kings and queens, first appeared, but rather when it was no longer possible to simply laugh them out of court.”

Graeber and Wengrow’s dearest aspiration is to quicken that laughter once again. “Nowadays, most of us find it increasingly difficult even to picture what an alternative economic or social order would be like,” they write. “Our distant ancestors seem, by contrast, to have moved regularly back and forth between them. If something did go terribly wrong in human history—and given the current state of the world, it’s hard to deny something did—then perhaps it began to go wrong precisely when people started losing that freedom to imagine and enact other forms of social existence.”

This wasn’t a matter of sheer forgetfulness, they say. It was by design. At least some of the Indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, they tell us, were bewildered and appalled by the strange European custom of giving and taking orders. Their judgments were widely circulated in the Europe of the early Enlightenment, where Indigenous people were often featured in dialogues meant to criticize the status quo. At the time, they were typically dismissed as the rhetorical sock-puppetry of canny European heretics. For how could “Natives” credibly engage with political constitutions or deliberate over consequential decisions?

“The Dawn of Everything” makes a persuasive case that what was passed off as Indigenous criticism of European political thinking was, in fact, Indigenous criticism of European political thinking. These Indigenous objections could be safely deflected only if they were seen as European ventriloquism, not ideas from another adult community with alternative values. “Portraying history as a story of material progress, that framework recast indigenous critics as innocent children of nature, whose views on freedom were a mere side effect of their uncultivated way of life and could not possibly offer a serious challenge to contemporary social thought,” Graeber and Wengrow write.

The whole symbolic apparatus of cultural evolution aimed to make freedom—which they define as the freedom to move, the freedom to disobey orders, and the freedom to imagine less hierarchical ways of organizing ourselves—seem archaic and perilous. When we speak of the onset of social inequality,

we're accepting the idea that real freedom is the plaything of children. The species grew up, and grew out of it. Peter Thiel wonders why we don't yet live in the future of our dreams. Graeber and Wengrow think the first step forward is a reminder of the past we deserve. ♦

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## New Yorker Favorites

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In “H of H Playbook,” the poet considers war, guilt, and the mythological strongman.

By [Casey Cep](#)

## Content

No woman could get away with it. Murdering her children is all she would ever be known for—ask Medea. Yet Herakles, often called by his Roman name, Hercules, is known for everything else: slaying the man-eating birds of the Stymphalian marsh, the multiheaded Lernaean Hydra, and the Nemean lion, with its Kevlar-strength fur; capturing the wild Erymanthian boar, the golden-antlered deer of Artemis, and the Minotaur’s father; stealing the girdle of Hippolyta, the golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides, the flesh-eating mares of Diomedes, and the red cattle of the giant Geryon; mucking the Augean stables in a single day; and kidnapping the three-headed dog Cerberus from Hades.

Those dozen labors have inspired countless playwrights, poets, and philosophers throughout the centuries, not to mention Walt Disney Pictures. In the cartoon version of the tale, from 1997, Hercules’ hardscrabble climb from the lowly farms outside Thebes where he was raised to his rightful place atop Mt. Olympus beside Zeus—who, in the myth, fathered Herakles with a mortal, Alcmene, the wife of a Theban general, Amphitryon—seems like a mashup of “Survivor” and “American Idol.” “Person of the week in every Greek opinion poll,” Disney’s Motown-style muses sing, capturing the contemporary image of the mythical figure. Neither the children’s film nor any of the other pop-culture depictions of Herakles mentions what he was famous for among the ancient Greeks: murdering his wife, Megara, a Theban princess, and their sons.

Almost everyone believed that the gods made Herakles kill his family, but exactly when he did so was the subject of some disagreement. Many people thought that his labors were punishment for his crimes, feats of strength by which the fallen hero could propitiate the gods; others claimed the labors preceded the massacre, suggesting that violence always begets violence. That’s how Euripides told the story in “Herakles,” which was first performed some twenty-four hundred years ago and which has recently been reimagined by the poet Anne Carson, in “H of H Playbook.”

Like Herakles, Carson gets away with everything in this strange and surprisingly timely book. A cross between a dramaturge's dream journal and a madman's diary, it features Carson's transformed version of the Euripides play, rendered in handwritten lines and blocky paragraphs of pasted word-processor text, alongside original illustrations: marked-up maps, smears of blood-red paint, haunting sketches of human figures and tortured faces, pencil and eraser stains that resemble heaps of ash, plus the occasional glacier and lion. A facsimile of Carson's own personal playbook, "H of H" is a performance of thought, one that speaks not only to the heroic past but to the tragic present.

Only a few dozen of the Greek tragedies remain, among them works by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. These plays were the rock concerts of their era, staged not by candlelight inside small rooms but in grand theatres in the bright light of day before some ten thousand people. For a play like "Herakles," a large chorus would sing and dance in a circular orchestra space near the audience, at the edge of the stage. Meanwhile, on the stage itself, a troupe of three actors performed all the roles: the hero, his wife, his father, his friend, and the usurper of his throne.

Without playbills, the audience relied on dialogue to know who was who, and discerned the plot partly through conventions of staging and posture. Take the opening lines of "Herakles," which Carson first translated fifteen years ago, publishing it along with three other plays by Euripides in a volume called "Grief Lessons." The lines are spoken by a man sitting beside an altar, surrounded by a younger woman and her children: "Who does not know the man who shared his marriage bed / with Zeus?" Even if an audience member was too far away to catch every word of that question, the actor's low-to-the-stage position would convey his humble situation, and the next bit makes clear that it is the cuckold Amphitryon speaking: "son of Alkaios, / grandson of Perseus, / father of Herakles, / me!"

Amphitryon's sixty lines of woe are followed by another twenty-five or so from his daughter-in-law, Megara. Herakles has left them alone, vulnerable to the whims of the new king of Thebes, Lykos, who has sentenced the hero's family to death. They have taken refuge at the altar of Zeus, not because he is Herakles' father but because any mortal at the altar is to be spared harm, though Lykos announces that he is willing to burn the altar

down if that's what it takes to kill them. Herakles is off laboring; as best as anyone knows, he's still down in the underworld playing dogcatcher with Cerberus. And so these lines establish the play's first cliffhanger: Will he return in time to rescue his family?

But Euripides is interested not so much in heroic acts as in the origins and limits of heroism. Herakles soon arrives, reassuring his family that he will save them, and when Lykos comes to kill them Herakles kills Lykos instead. As always in Greek tragedy, the violence takes place offstage; the audience learns of the murder from the distant cries of the King, and from the celebratory song of the chorus: "The once great tyrant / turns his life toward death!" Then Iris, a messenger of the gods, and Lyssa, the goddess of madness, appear, supposedly at the behest of Hera, Zeus' wife, who is still sore at her husband over the affair that produced Herakles. Together, Iris and Lyssa drive Herakles mad, prompting him to kill the family he has just protected. Those murders take place offstage, too, in a confusion of violence that the chorus can hardly describe. (Carson calls it a "berserker furor.") When Amphitryon orders his son to look at the bodies, Herakles says, "I've become the murderer of my own beloveds." Then, setting up the play's second cliffhanger, he adds, "Shall I not be their avenger too?"

A family rescued only to be ruined, a hero resurrected only to threaten suicide: "Herakles" hinges on such reversals of fate. The rest of the play considers whether a man who sentences himself to death can be saved, and, if so, by whom. Ultimately, it is his friend Theseus, whom Herakles has recently rescued from Hades, who comes to his aid. Seeing "the ground covered in corpses" and learning, from Amphitryon, that Herakles is responsible, he concludes, "This agony comes from Hera." Like Herakles, Theseus has both divine and mortal parentage, and he argues that just as the gods transgress against one another, so, too, do they transgress against humanity—but just as the gods are allowed to live despite those transgressions, so should demigods and humans be allowed to live even if they sin.

But Theseus cannot convince his friend of this truth. "I don't believe gods commit adultery," says the agonized Herakles, as inconsolable as Job. "I don't believe gods throw gods in chains / or tyrannize one another. / Never

did believe it, never shall. / God must, if God is truly God, / *lack nothing*. / All the rest is miserable poets' lies."

Although this debate occurs near the end of the tragedy, it is in some ways where the play really begins: one demigod insists on a conventional theology of many gods who behave badly, while the other reasons his way to an existentialist view of life. Herakles maintains that if the gods are real they must be without sin; thus, having sinned, he cannot be a god. But the more troubling implication of his logic is that there are no gods at all—that the entire Olympic pantheon is merely an imaginary embodiment of all the awful and wonderful things humans can do. This is the radicalism of “Herakles” and, ultimately, why it is so fascinating to Carson: a play ostensibly about the gods is really about the causes and the consequences of our own deeply troubling behavior.

In “H of H,” Carson doesn’t merely translate Euripides; merely translating isn’t really her thing. She “translated” the work of the Greek poet Stesichoros into “Autobiography of Red,” a novel in verse in which the monster Geryon, of cattle-stealing fame, is a Heidegger-reading twink whose torturous love affair with Herakles takes him inside a Peruvian volcano. Her “translation” of Catullus became the Slinky-like “Nox,” an unusual text-in-a-box with pages that literally unfold one after another, linking an ancient elegy to Carson’s own elegy for her brother. The independent press New Directions published that beautiful volume and this new one; Knopf published “Float,” a collection of loose chapbooks drifting in an aquarium-like case.

It’s not an accident that Carson often produces work in forms that cannot quite be called books. Books are an anachronism in the imaginative realm she calls home, which lies somewhat closer to ancient Greece than to modern Canada, where she was born, or contemporary Michigan, where she lives. She is drawn to papyrus and codex, fragment and play. But books can seem like anachronisms to us, too, in the age of e-readers and smartphones, when information is immediate and ethereal and pleasure so often lacks a body of any kind. What Carson does again and again in her non-books is return us—jarringly, brazenly, delightfully—to that which predates the material culture of the book and which will persist if we ever move beyond it: the concentrated effort to externalize a mind and its thoughts. Whatever

“H of H” might mean—it isn’t clear—the book is really “H of C,” “Herakles of Carson,” a version that only this one bizarre and brilliant brain could produce.

That bizarre and brilliant brain is notably obsessed with Herakles. In addition to “Grief Lessons” and “H of H,” Carson has told his story on at least two other occasions, in “Autobiography of Red” and its sequel of sorts, “Red Doc>,” in which Herakles is known as Sad But Great, or Sad, for short. “H of H” opens on Amphitryon exiting an Airstream trailer, and the Theban general delivers a monologue that makes plain right away that we aren’t in Athens anymore: “By a thread hangs our fate. / H of H is late. / We are suppliants at an altar / being hounded by the totalitarian cracker / who’s seized power.” The rest of his lines spill across a few pages, tiny scraps of pasted text that seem to slow down, as if the words were pacing the way the actor might onstage. “What’s it like to wear an eternal Olympian overall” appears on the verso side; “held up by the burning straps of” on the recto side; then, on the next set of pages, a handwritten question—“mortal shortfall?” This appears opposite a drawing of a pair of denim overalls, charming in its rough simplicity and incongruous against the meta text beside it: “Dumb rhyme / for a complexity more sublime / than the self can ordinarily bear.”

The language sounds more Carsonian with every syllable, both in its wit and in the way it ignores eras as easily as genres, as if recognizing that the whole of history exists in our minds simultaneously with whatever happened yesterday and what we think might happen tomorrow. That is why Herakles wears overalls—OshKosh B’gods, basically. His divinity is draped over him protectively but not entirely, a provocation reminding us that the problem of Herakles is the same as the central problem of Christology: Is he fully man, fully divine, or fully both? But he also wears overalls because the present and the past intermingle freely here; the ancient hero steals a Corvette, misquotes Percy Bysshe Shelley, and uses a G.P.S. to navigate both the world and the underworld.

Too often, modernizations like these can seem gimmicky—reflexive attempts to make old plays relevant to new audiences. But Carson’s work never reads that way. This is partly because, unusually, the flow of time in her writing feels bidirectional; it is not clear if old heroes are being swept

into the present, if current readers are being swept into the past, or if all of us are simply aswirl in time together. But it is also because her work is unfailingly emotionally astute, the references, like those overalls, resonant rather than arbitrary. “I’m walking backward into my own myth,” the stumbling, P.T.S.D.-stricken hero of “H of H” says, struggling even before he murders his family. “I was trying to walk out.” He is bored with his reputation and annoyed at having to recount all twelve of his labors, breezing through most of them before jumping to the end: “Kind of an embarrassment now but oh, at the time they were grand. And they fitted into the way people lived, the things they believed, like a good war does.”

While Herakles contends with his inner war, his family faces the trials of the home front. Megara and her sons are starving, and neither Amphitryon nor the old men of the chorus can do anything to protect them. Harassed by border goons, they soon meet Lykos; in Carson’s drawing of him, the tyrannical King looks like a mix of Dr. Strangelove and Blofeld. Death arrives in many more forms in this version of the myth—not only fire and swords but also melting glaciers and nuclear catastrophes. Madness comes roller-skating into the plot, leaving behind “coal flowers” that fall from ears, and brain crystals that drop from Herakles’ head like crumbs from a mouth. Carson’s illustrations are indebted to the German artist Anselm Kiefer, whom she quotes as saying, “I think there is no such thing as an innocent landscape.”

When Theseus finally arrives, he sounds alternately like Harold Bloom and Andy Warhol, quoting Melville on the sperm whale and then trying to convince Herakles that his penance can take the form of a lion-print T-shirt: “You wear it, you shoot yourself, I sell it, say Sotheby’s, bullet hole and all.” No modern interpreter has better understood Herakles’ role in his culture, or has offered a more striking rendition of the enduring problem of fame. (To the creative minds at Disney, fame is less of a problem.) The play’s eloquent final dialogue comes fast and fragmentary, sometimes expressed as single words or solitary phrases taking over full-page spreads, as if they were text messages between demigods, more gay than grandiose. “Don’t go all tearful on me now,” Theseus jests, only to have Herakles reply, “Who saved your ass in hell? Who was tearful then?” Meanwhile, Theseus teases his filicidal friend by calling him Daddio.

Eventually, even existentialism gets a makeover. “I don’t call them gods,” Herakles says. “If god exists, god is a perfect thing, not some hooligan from bad daytime TV.” In “Grief Lessons,” Carson translates the speech following that confession like this:

So I, a man utterly wrecked and utterly shamed,  
shall follow Theseus  
like a little boat being towed along.  
Whoever values wealth or strength  
more than friends  
is mad.

In “H of H,” Herakles calls Theseus his “tugboat,” and this time their last exchange is both homoerotic and hopeful. “So we go,” Theseus tells H of H, who replies, “Go.” Theseus says, “Forward only,” and H of H assents by repeating the campy phrase: “Forward only.”

It’s a touching bit of conversation, gorgeously assembled on a single page, streaks of daylight breaking through a cloudy background, more plausible and more plaintive to modern ears and eyes than the original. To be mortal is to go only forward, and both demigods go that way together, walking out of mythology into mortality. Hope is not a solitary virtue, and the two of them head toward a new life as a pair, leaving the bodies of the dead behind for Amphitryon to bury, and leaving madness behind as well. Although in “H of H” Carson mostly abbreviates the words of Euripides, she slightly elaborates on the lines of the chorus that close the play. What is rendered in her earlier translation as “We go in pity, we go in tears. / For we have lost our greatest friend” becomes, on an otherwise blank page, as if the entire myth had vanished, “We go in grief. / We go in tears. / So many swift and dirty years. / We’ve lost a man of greatest merit, / truly a devil of spirit, / our greatest, our most legendary friend.”

In the preface to “Grief Lessons,” Carson writes, “There is a theory that watching unbearable stories about other people lost in grief and rage is good for you.” Plays like “Herakles” allow you to exercise rage without having to kill and to experience grief without losing those you love; such performances “may cleanse you of your darkness,” Carson argues. But, as she well knows, to read “Herakles” simply as a private tragedy is to miss its

political dimensions, which no audience member in ancient Greece would have done.

Euripides wrote “Herakles” in the middle of the Peloponnesian War. Actors might pantomime murder for our benefit, but soldiers actually commit murder on our behalf, and the playwright used the example of Herakles, who had inspired a widespread cult, to admonish his audience for so uncritically admiring the putative hero. Carson admonishes, too, revealing how villainous supposed men of virtue can be. “Heroism likes to go berserk,” she has the chorus sing of Herakles. “By the penultimate / Labour he’s raving. / Too bad if it leaves him / outsize and outside / the civilization he’s saving.”

In “H of H,” Herakles is not a superhero but a soldier, and Carson doesn’t have to set the action in Afghanistan to restore the play’s moral force. Our forever wars are always on her mind, here and elsewhere. In her poem “Clive Song,” the underworld that is Guantánamo Bay seems to have its own pitiless Hades and bureaucratic Cerberus. The old heroes killed monsters, but we use monsters to kill, like the drones in her prose poem “Fate, Federal Court, Moon,” which memorializes the murder of a Yemeni engineer’s family. That engineer, Faisal bin Ali Jaber, lost a nephew and a brother-in-law to a drone strike, and Carson unleashes an avalanche of grief and anger that suffocates any attempt at moral evasion. “The fate of the earth. The fate of me. The fate of you. The fate of Faisal,” she begins, burying us in sentence after sentence of avoidable suffering. “The fate of his family, the ones still alive, back in Yemen and the fate of the bridal couple, still alive, whose wedding was the target of the drone pilot (a mistake). The fate of the others, not still alive (a mistake).”

That repeated word, “fate,” is both an indictment and an ironic invocation. Carson understands that life still follows the patterns of the old myths. Families live or die depending on the whims of far-off figures who press buttons or pass laws or give refuge or don’t; our wars, however distant, follow us home, in the form of madness or redress or revenge. Those imposing forces, whether or not we call them gods, are what shape the action of our lives.

Yet we can act, too. That is why Herakles is unwilling to cede responsibility for his crimes to Iris or Lyssa or Hera. It is that ability to act, however constrained and imperfect our actions may be, which makes us interesting and unpredictable. Although “H of H” at times seems impossibly bleak, it is the story of a man who decides to live despite fearing that he deserves to die —a man, that is, who chooses to believe he will someday have an identity beyond that of the murderer of his own wife and children. Carson is writing not only about the persistence of violence but about the possibility of redemption, and in this respect “H of H” isn’t just a playbook for the past. It is also, in the other sense of the word, a playbook for the future. ♦

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## New Yorker Favorites

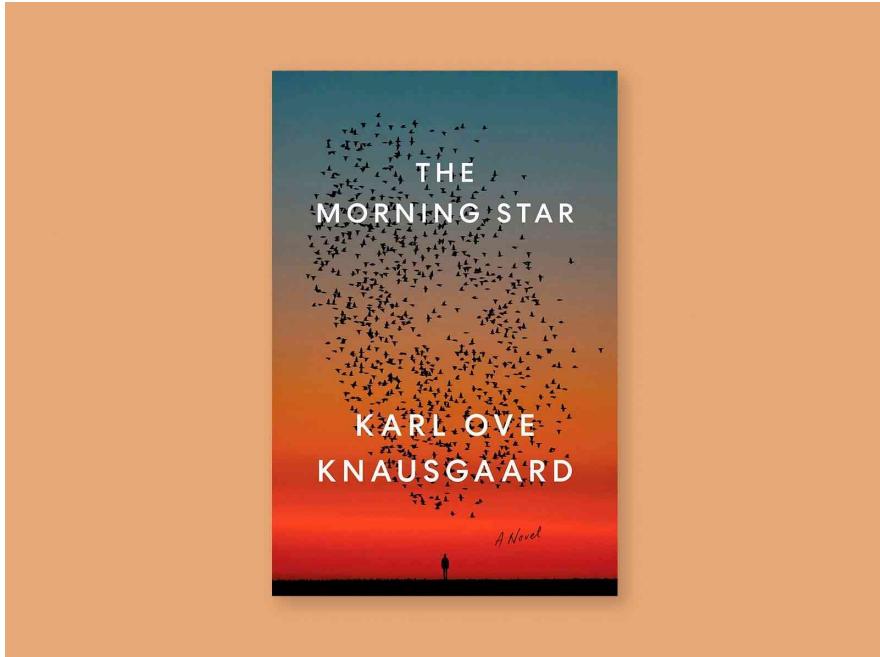
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[November 8, 2021 Issue](#)

## Briefly Noted

“The Morning Star,” “Imminence,” “Things I Have Withheld,” and “Orwell’s Roses.”

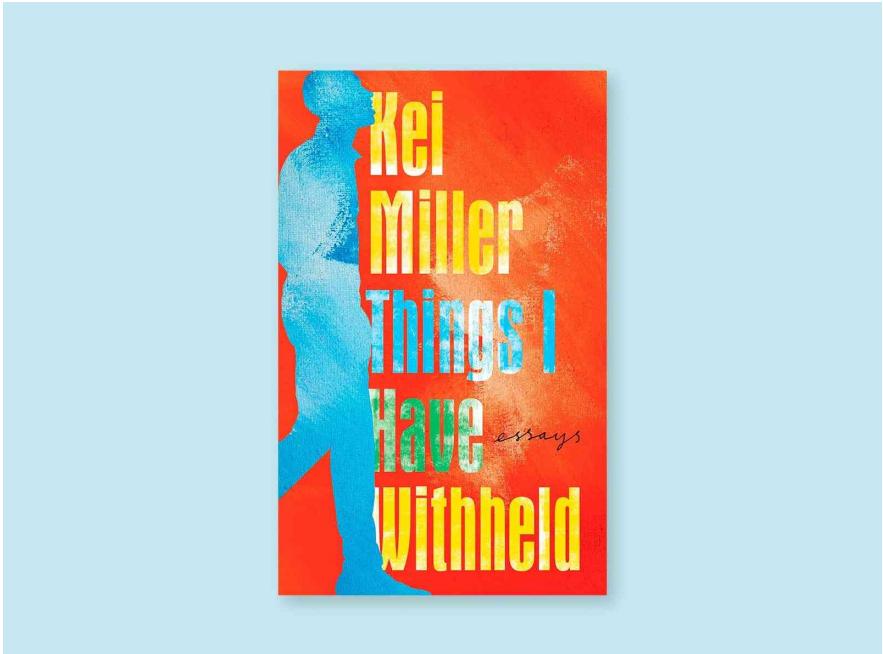
November 1, 2021



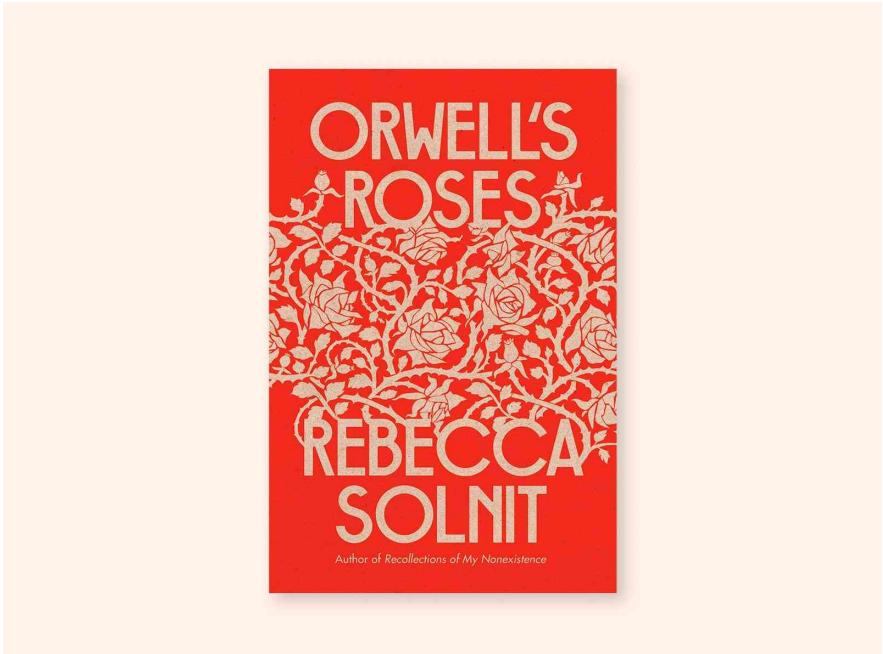
[The Morning Star](#), by Karl Ove Knausgaard, translated from the Norwegian by Martin Aitken (Penguin Press). In his first work of fiction since the six volumes of “My Struggle,” Knausgaard trades his bracingly autobiographical mode for a ravishing form of theologically infused fabulism. A mysterious celestial body appears in the late-August sky, accompanied by Biblical omens, hallucinations, and increasingly uncanny events in the natural world. Tracing the lives of nine interconnected characters, Knausgaard sets these enigmatic phenomena against the minutiae of everyday life. This combination of the universal and the intimate enables the novel to approach weighty subjects—death and dying, belief and despair—with both the thrust of a suspense narrative and the depth of a philosophical inquiry.



[\*\*Imminence\*\*](#), by Mariana Dimópolos, translated from the Spanish by Alice Whitmore (*Transit*). “I’m not a lady,” Irina, the protagonist of this unsettling novella, which unfolds during a single tense evening in Buenos Aires, tells a love interest. “I’m not a woman, either.” Irina’s sense of alienation—from family, friends, lovers, and the social expectations of womanhood—suffuses her stream-of-consciousness narration. After a life-threatening postpartum infection, she is haunted by memories: of a close friend who died tragically young; of a long-term boyfriend with whom things ended badly; of a sinister relative, the Cousin, who pursues her across time and space. Recurring themes and images from her relationships set up a morally ambiguous ending, tinged with violence, within the domestic sphere.



**Things I Have Withheld**, by Kei Miller (Grove Press). In fourteen dynamic essays, encompassing memoir, reportage, and open letters, the author, who is Jamaican, examines personal and professional moments in which silence revealed a truth about race and oppression. Miller parses stories “overheard when the aunts thought you were not listening,” white colleagues’ assumptions about his homeland, a painful debate with friends about the friction between #MeToo and racist carceral justice, his grandmother’s revelation of an explosive family secret. Miller admits to apprehension about voicing his private judgments but explains that “each of these essays is an act of faith, an attempt to put my trust in words again.”



[\*\*Orwell's Roses\*\*](#), by *Rebecca Solnit* (*Viking*). “In the spring of 1936, a writer planted roses,” Solnit writes, after a visit to George Orwell’s former garden in England, where she is astonished to find flowers that have long outlived the man who planted them. What follows is a far-reaching meditation on Orwell’s life and on the cultural significance of roses. In a particularly Orwellian episode, Solnit visits a rose “factory” in Bogotá, where working conditions are poor and the flowers appear “luridly unnatural.” Most affecting is the surprising hopefulness implicit in a political writer’s passion for nature: “Orwell did not believe in permanent happiness or the politics that tried to realize it, but he did believe devoutly in moments of delight, even rapture.”

## **Comment**

- [When Will January 6th Be Over?](#)

November 8, 2021 Issue

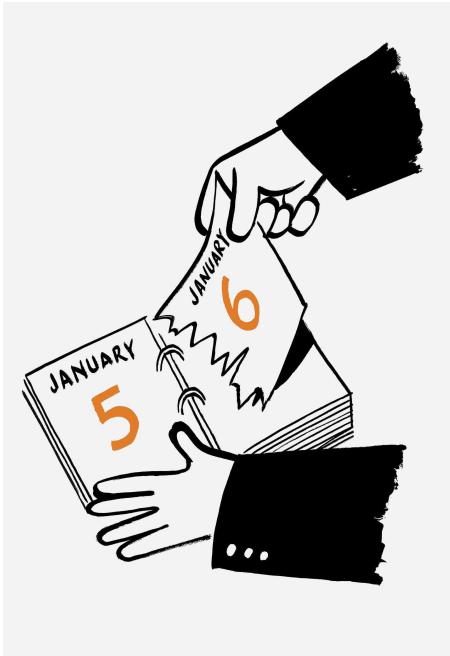
# When Will January 6th Be Over?

Donald Trump, in trying to obstruct the investigation into the Capitol riot, is fighting not only to impose his view of the past but to insure his political future.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

October 31, 2021

After [Donald Trump](#) lost the Presidential election last year, a law professor named John Eastman drafted, for Trump's use, a two-page manual for unlawfully throwing out the electoral votes of certain states as they were being tallied in Congress, on [January 6th](#). The name he mentions most often in the memo is that of Vice-President [Mike Pence](#). It appears in such statements as "Pence then gavels President Trump as re-elected" and, regarding disrupting the count, "The main thing here is that Pence should do this without asking for permission." Eastman also spoke at Trump's January 6th rally, where he said that what "we are demanding of Vice-President Pence" is that he intervene in the electoral count. Trump, speaking shortly afterward, cited Eastman's authority when he said, "If Mike Pence does the right thing, we win the election."



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Soon afterward, the assault on the Capitol began, and, once it became clear that the Vice-President was not going to do what Trump and his allies demanded, a group of insurrectionists chanted “Hang Mike Pence.” Members of the Pence family were also in the Capitol, and in danger. Eastman is expected to be subpoenaed in the coming days by the House select committee investigating the events surrounding January 6th. In addition to writing that memo, and a revised, more detailed one—in which he declares that letting the results stand would mean that Americans were no longer “a self-governing people”—he attended a meeting with Trump and Pence in the Oval Office on January 4th. (Eastman says that he ultimately advised Pence to delay the count, not to stage a coup.) An area of inquiry for the committee is how much pressure Trump put on Pence to help him overturn the election. (A lot, it seems.)

But one person who doesn’t appear eager to dwell on that question, at least not publicly, is Pence himself, who has been biding his time giving speeches and setting up an organization called Advancing American Freedom. Last month, in an interview with Sean Hannity, on Fox News, he said that the media is trying to use January 6th to distract from President Biden’s “failed agenda” and to “demean the character and intentions” of people who voted for Trump. He assured Hannity that he and Trump had “parted amicably” after leaving office, and had stayed in touch. On social media and in a

podcast he has launched, he steadily repeats the phrase “Trump-Pence Administration”—linking his name with that of a man who was ready to abandon him to a mob.

Pence’s position is intriguing on a human level, but it is significant in political terms, too, because it captures so much about the state of the G.O.P., where the 2024 Presidential race is headed, and how much the contest over the legacy of January 6th matters in setting that course. Trump seems to realize that as much as anybody. After Pence appeared on Fox News, Trump put out a statement saying that the interview “very much destroys and discredits the Unselect Committees Witch Hunt on the events of January 6th.” The interview does not do that, of course. But the Trump-Pence dance underscores how high the stakes are for the committee. Trump, in trying to obstruct the investigation into January 6th—with spurious claims of executive privilege, for example—is fighting not only to impose his view of the past but to insure his political future.

A simple explanation for Pence’s complacency is that he wants to run for President himself, and can’t afford to alienate Trump if he is to have any hope of making it through the primaries. According to a recent poll, Trump’s favorability rating among Republicans is eighty-six per cent. His Save America *PAC*, the new Make America Great Again, Again! super *PAC*, and ancillary political funds have raised more than a hundred million dollars. But Trump may not want to help anyone but Trump. In September, when asked by Fox News if he would run, he said, “It is getting to a point where we really have no choice.” It’s hard to know whom he means by “we.” In a [Morning Consult/Politico](#) poll that asked Republicans whom they would support out of more than fifteen potential candidates for 2024, forty-seven per cent chose Trump. Pence came next, with just thirteen per cent. Close behind Pence was Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida and a Trump ally, with twelve per cent. (Six per cent chose Donald Trump, Jr.—twice as many as picked Senators Ted Cruz or Marco Rubio.) When Trump was asked recently, in an interview with Yahoo Finance, what he thought of DeSantis’s Presidential prospects, he said, “If I faced him, I’d beat him like I would beat everyone else.” But Trump didn’t believe it would come to that. He said he thought that, if he ran, “most people would drop out, I think he would drop out.”

Trump may be right. Nikki Haley, the former governor of South Carolina, criticized him in straightforward terms after January 6th; in February, she told Politico that the Party had been wrong to follow him. A few weeks ago, she told the *Wall Street Journal*, “We need him in the Republican Party.” She also said that, if “there’s a place for me” in the 2024 race, “I would talk to him and see what his plans are. . . . We would work on it together.” Perhaps she was hinting at the Vice-Presidential spot; it’s extraordinary to think that there are people who would like to be the next Mike Pence. One wonders if candidates for the job would be given copies of Eastman’s memos and asked to check off the unconstitutional moves that they would be willing to make.

Far from being a witch hunt, the investigations into January 6th have continued to uncover unsettling material concerning Trump’s efforts to overturn the election. (The Senate Judiciary Committee reported last month on his attempts to enlist officials in the Department of Justice in that cause.) There’s no shortage of reminders that he hasn’t moved on. Last week, the *Wall Street Journal* published a lengthy letter to the editor from Trump, full of baseless claims that the vote count in Pennsylvania was wrong. “The election was rigged, which you, unfortunately, still haven’t figured out,” he informed the *Journal*. In a statement a week earlier, he spoke in even more strident terms: “The insurrection took place on November 3, Election Day. January 6 was the Protest!”

There can hardly be a better example of why a clear accounting of the events leading up to the assault on the Capitol is so crucial. According to Trump, the real insurrection was never put down. January 6th, in that sense, is a long way from over. ♦

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, November 1, 2021](#)

[November 8, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Crossword: Monday, November 1, 2021

A challenging puzzle.

By [Patrick Berry](#)

November 1, 2021

By [Caitlin Reid](#)

By [Natan Last](#)

# Dancing

- Ballet Is Back, but All Is Not as It Was

[November 8, 2021 Issue](#)

## Ballet Is Back, but All Is Not as It Was

Seeing New York City Ballet after the long pandemic hiatus highlights difficult truths about the company and its repertoire.

By [Jennifer Homans](#)

November 1, 2021



By the time New York City Ballet opened its fall season, a few weeks ago, at the Koch Theatre, at Lincoln Center, it had been more than eighteen months since the company performed there. I imagined the dancers pent up and ready to dance their hearts out. They had worked hard in preparation for the reentry, and the house was packed with a fully masked audience eager to welcome them home.

The program opened with “Serenade,” [George Balanchine](#)’s gloriously flowing dance to Tchaikovsky’s “Serenade for Strings,” a perfect choice for the post-pandemic start. Made in 1934, “Serenade” was Balanchine’s first American dance, and it was designed to teach his young dancers how to move—more, bigger, freer. It has since become a signature ballet for the company, and it seems to contain the full arc of life, from its simple opening

pose to its dances of fate, love, and death. Human frailty and improvisation are written into its very construction. (There's a moment in the middle where a woman falls to the floor—something that came from an accidental fall during rehearsals, back in 1934, which Balanchine wove into the dance.) But, instead of giving themselves over to the ballet's off-balance rush of movement, the current company delivered a spine-straight and strictly classical performance, as if they were living in the corseted world of the Russian Imperial ballet.

Maybe they were nervous, I thought, or adjusting to a live audience after too many lonely months. But things were much the same with the other major work on the program, "Symphony in C," to Bizet. This ballet is fiercely demanding, and it builds to a spectacular finale with some fifty dancers onstage. It is so technically difficult that it paradoxically requires abandon—think too much and you will falter. But, again, tentative precision held sway. Even the heart-stopping passage in the Adagio when the ballerina risks a dive into a deep arabesque was executed with academic caution.

As I watched the dancers trade vulnerability for perfection, I wondered if there wasn't a more crucial fact that the long absence was laying bare. Balanchine, it seems, has become orthodox: classical, beautiful, the radical edges zipped up and smoothed. This is not the dancers' fault, nor is it something anyone can undo. Balanchine made his dances around the personalities of the dancers he had—"these dancers, this music, here, now," as he liked to say—and today's dancers have different personalities and values. When they perform his work, they seem mainly interested in the mechanics of symmetry and physical virtuosity—in a kind of crystalline purity, no fragility or spontaneity in sight. They are living in an imagined and conservative past. But what about *their* now?

As if on cue, a week after this opening, the company premiered two new works by women, Sidra Bell's "Suspended Animation" and Andrea Miller's "Sky to Hold." Both were commissioned some two years ago, by [Wendy Whelan](#), the first woman to hold an artistic-leadership role at City Ballet, as part of an effort to promote female choreographers. Bell and Miller, who both run contemporary-dance troupes, brought influences far from the world of traditional ballet. Although neither work was a total triumph, both produced flashes of engaged dancing. We saw, if not a full solution to

N.Y.C.B.’s lack of strong contemporary choreography, at least a hint of a spirit and a range that these dancers are no longer finding for themselves in Balanchine. Miller came up with some truly arresting movement for the terrific dancer Taylor Stanley, which had him balancing on his hips, no hands, and then flipping like a fish, twisting across the floor, producing the bravura of an air jump without ever leaving the ground.

Bell’s piece was N.Y.C.B.’s first-ever commission from a Black woman. Bell has a history degree from Yale, and has trained widely in ballet (Dance Theatre of Harlem), modern dance ([Martha Graham](#), Alvin Ailey), and improvisational techniques. At City Ballet, she commissioned costumes from Christopher John Rogers, a Black, Louisiana-born wunderkind of the fashion world, still only twenty-seven, and set her dances to compositions by Nicholas Britell, Oliver Davis, and Dosia McKay.

Together, Bell and her colleagues managed to disarm these tense and technical dancers. The lyrical score, elaborate costumes, and slow, sinuous movement—no bravura—turned the cast into almost otherworldly creatures, defined by the ruffles and tulle, and by the electric blues, fluorescent greens, mauves, pinks, and sparkles that clothed them. There was even a touch of Baptist congregations in the cut and flow of a dress or a lampshade hat. The movement had striking moments of vulnerability—a dancer sank quietly into her hip as she walked, for example, body falling askew, gait not quite holding. There was a politics at play, but it was subtle: three Black dancers appeared briefly together and seemed to pause, as if to remind us that this is still a rare sight in a company whose ninety-six dancers include only eleven who identify as Black. But Bell’s primary interest is aesthetic, and, toward the end, a woman in bright green, sitting on the floor center stage, her back to the audience, gradually unfurled her spine, until she sat tall, a priestess of beauty with no face.

Across town, at the Park Avenue Armory, [Bill T. Jones](#), one of America’s most trenchant political artists, brought a very different experience. “Deep Blue Sea” is an extraordinary and maddening social-justice extravaganza, with a cast of a hundred, led by Jones himself, in his first stage appearance in fifteen years. Extraordinary because Jones is as charismatic and ambitious as ever, and because the production design was highly original. Maddening because Jones used the stage as his pulpit, complete with choir, and his

sermon was long and didactic. It ranged from postmodern word scramble (“ring freedom let”) to Jones’s childhood memories of school and reading “[Moby-Dick](#),” and then to his reflections on W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., Kendrick Lamar, and the history of race in America. The show was punctuated with unremarkable dances, by Jones and his colleague Janet Wong and the dancers, but what seemed to matter most was walking—just walking.

In the Armory’s cavernous space, made into an amphitheatre with bleachers around the edge, walking blurred life and art even before the performance began. Members of the audience walked across the stage to reach their seats, passing Jones and other cast members, who were walking and posing in their midst. We saw the post-lockdown slouches of ordinary people against the flexible ease of the dancers’ trained bodies. But it was Jones who stood out. As he talked, he walked—and walked and walked. He is nearly seventy now. His body is aging and his gait is deliberate, but his shoulders have not folded, as most people’s do, and he stands tall, with his rib cage a bit forward in space, as if he were always ahead of himself. His shoulders tip forward, seeming to hold his life’s burden, and his arms swing with studied rhythmic precision. It is the carriage of a man who has lived purposefully and with direction. Nothing is left to chance, not even his own step. It is a body without cracks, cared for and artfully designed—admirable, noble, but fortress-like. He doesn’t easily let us see inside.

Sometimes Jones walked in a darkened circle, as if his shadow had engulfed him, and then stepped out of it, leaving the darkness behind—one of several astonishing lighting effects in the “visual environment” designed by the architect Elizabeth Diller, her firm [Diller Scofidio + Renfro](#), and Peter Nigrini. At another moment, dancers made shiplike patterns at one end of the stage, which, through a kind of uncanny shadow play, appeared at the other end as a ghostly kaleidoscope of abstract forms. Later, out of nowhere, the stage suddenly cleared and a glorious sea—a figment made entirely of light—spread out before us, deep and blue, with gentle white waves. Some black monoliths rose from the depths and turned into ships floating in front of us, before collapsing and sinking into the surrounding walls. It was a fantastical vision, more striking than anything else that night.

The show pulled to a close, after nearly two hours, with testimony by eighty-nine “community participants,” who joined Jones and his dancers onstage. Each stood in a single spotlight—another memorable image. In turn, they walked to microphones placed center stage and proclaimed, “I know,” followed by something they know to be true—often about social justice. Conformity set in; this chorus even began to walk like Jones. Finally, they gathered at the far end of the space and charged forward, a revolutionary force that also splits into a police line, and a struggle ensued. No peace without justice, no justice without peace, we were reminded.

Everything that was said no doubt needs to be said over and over in politics, but, as I left the theatre, Jones’s words disappeared from my mind, and all I could think about was him walking, just walking, and the beauty of that unfathomable deep blue sea. ♦

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# **Dept. of Science**

- [Energy, and How to Get It](#)

All of us know people who have more energy than we do, but the science of the phenomenon is just coming into view.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

## Content

For months, during the main [pandemic](#) stretch, I'd get inexplicably tired in the afternoon, as though vital organs and muscles had turned to Styrofoam. Just sitting in front of a computer screen, in sweatpants and socks, left me drained. It seemed ridiculous to be grumbling about fatigue when so many people were suffering through so much more. But we feel how we feel.

Nuke a cup of cold coffee, take a walk around the block: the standard tactics usually did the trick. But one advantage, or disadvantage, of working from home is the proximity of a bed. Now and then, you surrender. These midafternoon doldrums weren't entirely unfamiliar. Even back in the office years, with editors on the prowl, I learned to sneak the occasional catnap under my desk, alert as a zebra to the telltale footfall of a consequential approach. At home, though, you could power all the way down.

Still, the ebb, lately, had become acute, and hard to account for. By the standards of my younger years, I was burning the candle at neither end. Could one attribute it to the wine the night before, the cookies, the fitful and abbreviated sleep, the boomerang effect of the morning's caffeine and carbs, a sedentary profession, middle age? That will be a yes. And yet the mind roamed: *Covid?* *Lyme?* *Diabetes?* *Cancer?* It's no *HIPAA* violation to reveal that, as various checkups determined, none of those pertained. So, embrace it. A recent headline in the *Guardian*: "Extravagant eye bags: How extreme exhaustion became this year's hottest look."

It was just a question of energy. The endurance athlete, running perilously low on fuel, is said to hit the wall, or bonk. Cyclists call this feeling "the man with the hammer." Applying the parlance to the [Sitzfleisch](#) life, I told myself that I was bonking. At hour five in the desk chair, the document onscreen looked like a winding road toward a mountain pass. The man in the sweatpants had met the man with the mattress.

All of us, except for the superheroes and the ultra-sloths, know people who have more energy than we do, and plenty who have less. We may admire or envy or even pity the tireless project jugglers, the ravenous multidisciplinarians, the serial circulators of rooms, the conference hoppers, the calendar maximizers, the predawn cross-trainers and kickboxers. *How does she do it?* On the flip side, there are the oversleepers, the homebodies, the spurners of invitations and opportunities, the dispensers of excuses. *Come on, man!* It's hard to measure success, if you want to avoid making it about money or power or credentials, but, as one stumbles through the landscape of careers and outputs and reputations, one sees, again and again, that the standouts tend to be the people who possess seemingly boundless reserves of mental and physical fuel. Entrepreneurs, athletes, artists, politicians: it can seem that energy, more than talent or luck, results in extraordinary outcomes. Why do some people have it and others not? What does one have to do to get more?

Energy is both biochemical and psychophysical, vaguely delineated, widely misunderstood, elusive as grace. You know it when you got it, and even more when you don't. This is the enthusiasm and vigor you feel inside yourself, the kind you might call chi, after the ancient Chinese life force or the pronouncements of the storefront acupuncturist. The kind you seek to instill by drinking Red Bull or Monster, plunging into an ice bath, or taking psychostimulants, like Ritalin or Adderall or Provigil. Nootropics. Smart pills. CDP-choline, L-theanine, creatine monohydrate, *Bacopa monnieri*, huperzine A, vinpocetine. Acetyl-CoA, lipoic acid, arginine, ashwagandha, B complex, carnitine, CoQ10, iodine, iron, magnesium, niacin, riboflavin, ribose, thiamin, Vitamins C, E, and K. Biohackers microdose psychedelics, stick ozone tubes up their butts, or pay fifteen hundred dollars for a seven-hundred-and-fifty-milligram dose of NAD IV. Energy is why we've made a virtual religion of 1, 3, 7-trimethylxanthine, otherwise known as caffeine.

"Society has progressively increased its demands on us, and with that, therefore, our expectations of what we can or should do," Maurizio Fava, the chief of the department of psychiatry at Mass General, told me. "This has led to a quest for greater 'energy.' 'How can I do more? Doctor, what can you give me?' "

“Energy,” though, is a misnomer, or at least an elision. What we commonly call energy is actually our perception of the body metabolizing carbohydrates or fat as energy. Energy isn’t energy. It’s our experience of burning energy, converting it to work. It’s a metabolic mood. As Richard Maurer, a doctor in Maine who specializes in metabolic recovery, and who encountered me one day last summer as I mumbled about a shortage of it, told me, “‘Energy’ is a useless term. It is not the perception of stimulation. It is just the capacity to generate work. I think of it as only relating to potential. If a patient says, ‘I want more energy,’ maybe the doctor should just write a scrip for methamphetamine. But that’s false chi.”

The precise workings of the metabolic system, its nuances and contingencies, are, in many respects, an enduring mystery. You’d think we’d have figured out by now how our cells go about their business, this being the most fundamental element of our existence, but they may as well be in deep space or the Mariana Trench.

One and a half billion years ago, the planet’s only life-forms were single-celled. Fermentation ruled the earth. Then an anaerobic bacterium engulfed an aerobic bacterium. In time, the ingested bacterium’s capacity for feeding on oxygen managed to increase, by an order of magnitude, the amount of energy available to its anaerobic host. This accidental collaboration made possible the proliferation of multicellular life-forms and, eventually, tool-wielding hominids who would come to complain that they feel tired all the time.

According to what is known as the endosymbiotic theory of biological complexity, this chocolate-meets-peanut-butter moment, this big mush, is the reason we exist. That aerobic bacterium evolved into what we call mitochondria, the organelles that fuel living creatures: the powerhouses of the cell, as every schoolkid learns. (It’s about all I retain from high-school bio, anyway, save for Mr. Burns’s relishing his coinage of the phrase “a smidgen of lipids.”) Each of us has hundreds—if not thousands—of trillions of mitochondria. They convert glucose and oxygen into adenosine triphosphate, or ATP, the primary cellular fuel. They also help produce the essential hormones—among them estrogen, testosterone, and cortisol—and regulate cellular proliferation and death.

It's not inconceivable that the rest of the body (brain, hands, heart, lungs, digestive tract) is merely an elaborate and sometimes clumsy apparatus for the nourishment of the mitochondria—that it is the mitochondria, and not *Homo sapiens*, who rule and foul the earth. Our cardiovascular system, that fantastic and vulnerable machine, is essentially a delivery system for the oxygen they require. The mitochondrion is the creature and we are merely its husk, its fleshy chrysalis. A newborn's first breath? That's the mitochondria, calling the shots.

"That, anyway, is the mitocentric perspective," Martin Picard said, on a recent afternoon in his office, in Washington Heights. Picard, a partisan of that perspective, is a professor of behavioral medicine at Columbia University Irving Medical Center, where he directs a lab of about a dozen researchers. His work straddles the departments of psychiatry and neurology. His specialty is mitochondrial psychobiology. "We try to understand the connection between the mind and mitochondria," he said. "We think about energy a lot."

A lean Montrealer, with a gentle yet poised intensity that one might classify as medium-energy, Picard came at the question of vim and vigor from a near-cosmic vantage. His office, high above the Heights, had a commanding view down the Hudson, a receding sun-blanced shorescape of skyscrapers and tidal swirl that lent his pronouncements an oracular air. In a mostly sincere attempt to convey how little we know about the workings of consciousness, he said, "We have yet to disprove that our brains aren't merely antennas, that all of our 'thoughts' and 'memories' don't just come from out there"—he pointed out the window—"and that we're not just 'streaming' everything." Glancing behind him at the river's eddying current, I half expected to catch a glitch in the matrix.

"The main distinguishing characteristic between a cadaver and a living, thinking, feeling individual is the flow of energy through the body," he said. "The cells are the same, but without the energy flow it's just an inert blob."

Mitochondria transform chemical energy into electrical energy, Picard explained. "Communication and energy go together," he said. "The organs and cells can't communicate without energy. Cells talk to each other. The mitochondria, which used to be bacteria, talk to the gut microbiome. They

are like cousins. Cells choose to do one thing or another, based on the energy available. Energy for cells is like emotions for a human. It causes them to make decisions that may not seem rational.”

Picard took me around the lab. He opened a cryo-storage tank—ice vapor wafting out—which contained cells of patients with mitochondrial disease, genetic defects that afflict at least one in five thousand humans. He pointed out other machines. Fluorometer, respirometer, real-time-PCR instrument, plate reader, Halo robot, a cellular-energy-consumption analyzer called a Seahorse. “This is our way to get to know the mitochondria, to challenge them and poke them,” he said. “It’s our way to ask them questions.”

A handful of doctoral candidates were at work. A research assistant was trying to determine whether women and men have different mitochondria. Mitochondrial DNA seems to be passed down from generation to generation exclusively by the mother; sperm contributes nothing. As a result, genealogists have been able to trace a matrilineal line from all living humans back to a woman in East Africa, our so-called Mitochondrial Eve, born an estimated two hundred thousand years ago. (Picard did his postdoctoral work, at the University of Pennsylvania, with Douglas Wallace, the evolutionary biologist who discovered that mitochondria are matrilineal and that mutations in mitochondrial DNA are a significant cause of disease. “He put mitochondria on the map,” Picard said.)

“The human body is a social network,” Picard said. He compared it to an ant colony, in which every ant has the same genome but serves a different purpose, much in the way the organs do for a human being. “My working hypothesis is that mitochondria do a lot of the sensing and perceiving and integrating of signals. That they are the cellular antenna, or little brains that receive, process, and integrate information.”

A student was filling plates with skin cells; each plate had ninety-six wells the size of apple seeds, and each of these contained twenty thousand cells. She was exposing healthy cells and compromised ones to stress, in the form of a synthetic version of cortisol. “A whole human life span, but in a dish,” Picard said. “Cells age faster if you expose them to stress. They burn energy faster. It’s as though cellular anxiety causes cells to breathe faster. They consume more oxygen. They’re wasting energy, and we don’t know why.”

People with mitochondrial disorders struggle to transform energy into ATP. “What they experience subjectively is constant tiredness and fatigue,” Picard said. “They don’t have the mojo. Fatigue is the No. 1 symptom—they feel tired all the time. And it’s a long diagnostic odyssey. So, yes, it seems people can sense when their intercellular energy state is low.” Another bit of circumstantial evidence: Amytal, or amobarbital, an active ingredient in truth serums developed in the United States in the thirties, essentially inhibits mitochondrial respiration, supposedly rendering subjects too worn out to lie. Amytal is also what Picard’s lab has used in some of its assays. “If you mess with the mitochondria, people feel shitty,” Picard said.

It can work the other way, too. A few years ago, Picard’s lab did a study in which ninety-one women reported their mood levels and submitted to mitochondrial tests for seven days. The study suggested that mood has a direct effect on mitochondrial health. *Chin up!*

By this point, I’d heard and read a lot about mitochondria—“the coolest independent contractors on the planet,” as Maurer called them. In “[The Energy Paradox: What to Do When Your Get-Up-and-Go Has Got Up and Gone](#),” Steven Gundry, the well-known California cardiologist, describes “mitochondrial gridlock,” the overwhelming of these organelles with too much to do—too much junk. Gundry enumerates seven “deadly” energy disrupters: antibiotics, glyphosate (the main active ingredient in the weed killer Roundup), other environmental chemicals, overused pharmaceuticals, fructose, bad light, and electromagnetic fields. Thinking about all the inputs, their ubiquity, and the myriad unmappable consequences of their interactions, one may just sigh and reach for the Red Bull. Fake chi until you make chi.

Picard’s purview was perhaps more descriptive than prescriptive. “Energetic constraints, energetic flow, and the forces that drive energetic flow—these questions aren’t taken into account as much as they should be,” he said. “The way of the future is understanding personalized energy flows. The last ten years of personalized medicine has been taken over by genomics. The premise is that if you can sequence it you’ll know whether you’ll get sick or stay healthy. That’s where all the money goes. It’s a lucrative hypothesis, but it’s doomed to yield incomplete answers. The genome is static. Health is so dynamic.”

“People are somewhat gorgeous collections of chemical fires, aren’t they?” [Harold Brodkey](#) wrote, in the story “Angel.” “We are towers of kinds of fires, down to the tiniest constituencies of ourselves, whatever those are.” Some years ago, without thinking, I introduced two friends of mine, B. and M., to each other, in a loose crew of people meeting up in a bar before a concert. B. and M. were both married. “I love your energy!” B. told M. Everyone laughed: such cheese. The next day, he called me and asked for her number. Such trouble. M. began referring to him, when discussing him with others, as “Energy”; she liked his, too. Their marriages didn’t survive the radiative flux, and B. and M. now live together, in a gravitational field of their own, otherwise known as Essex County, New Jersey. (When I told M. recently that I was writing about energy, the kind you feel, she said, “Talk about how annoying it is that everyone says they are tired. Tired is universal. We are exhausted until we die.”)

B. and M.’s energy is of a different, albeit related, category—the kind you project, or perceive in others. This one has something to do with vigor as well, but also charisma, aura, and temperament. It has a spiritual dimension, to those who perceive or credit such phenomena, and a social one. In some circumstances, good energy may just be a matter of radiance, of good skin, teeth, hair, posture, which are in many respects themselves functions of robust health. Or it may comprise kindness, attentiveness, optimism, humor—the ability to make other people feel good about themselves. There may be intangibles at play. Pheromones, assurance, electromagnetics, pixies.

To the extent that there is an overlap between the kind of energy you feel and the kind you project—a three-part Venn diagram of bio, mojo, and woo-woo—the concept has an array of ancient antecedents. In the Upanishads, *prana*, Sanskrit for “breath,” is the vital breath that animates body and soul, and all of existence, much like chi. Posidonius, the Stoic, proposed the existence of a life force that emanates from the sun. (Picard, the mitocentric, also cites the sun: it initiates a life cycle—photosynthesis, glucose, oxygen, ATP—that happens to have mitochondria as its lynchpin.)

Many of the variations on such ideas are pseudoscientific, the purview of quacks and crazies, or of spiritual adepts who may have been mistaken for them. Esotericism encompasses a variety of impossible-to-substantiate phenomena that persist best, in our quasi-scientific era, as metaphors or

abstractions. In the eighteenth century, Franz Mesmer introduced his concept of mesmerism, or animal magnetism, involving a universal vital fluid that passes in and out through our pores. Baron Carl von Reichenbach, some decades later, described an electromagnetic substance he named the Odic force, after the Norse god Odin, which sensitive souls could perceive emanating from others' foreheads. Early in the twentieth century, the French philosopher Henry Bergson identified an "élan vital," which impels consciousness and evolution. Schopenhauer had his "will to live," and, of course, for Freud, the source of the oomph within was the libido. Freud got some of his ideas from the work of the American neurologist George Miller Beard, who, in the years after the Civil War, had identified a condition called neurasthenia, arising out of the exhaustion of the nervous system. Headaches, fatigue, and impotence were the symptoms of what Beard called "American nervousness." The cause, he proposed, was the stress of modern civilization, the most salient manifestations being "steam-power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women."

And then there was orgone, discovered, or imagined, by Wilhelm Reich, the Austrian psychoanalyst and fallen Freudian. Reich—who fled Germany in 1933 and pursued his experiments in Norway and New York before settling in rural Maine, where he could keep an eye out for U.F.O.s—sought to find physiological proof of the libido. In the lab, he hooked his subjects up to an oscillograph (one of them was a young Willy Brandt, the future West German Chancellor) and, with a microscope, discerned pulsating particles he called "bions," which he claimed were the source of a mysterious life force called orgone. Orgone, he said, was blue, and was responsible for the color of the sky. Later, he invented a device called the orgone accumulator, an insulated shed the size of an outhouse, lined with metal panels. Among other things, it was said to enhance orgasms; the subject, preferably naked, would sit inside and accumulate orgone. It accumulated adherents, anyway—including Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, J. D. Salinger, and Sean Connery—despite there being no legitimate evidence of orgone's existence or benefits. Reich's machine inspired the Orgasmatron, in Woody Allen's "Sleeper," and Dr. Durand Durand's Excessive Machine, in "Barbarella." The federal government, suspicious of Reich's free-love evangelism and his associations with Communists, hounded him for years, and eventually jailed him for

shipping orgone accumulators across state lines. He died of a heart attack in 1957, at Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary.

A year ago, my wife gave me, as a gift, an Oura ring, my first so-called wearable. A hint, perhaps. I slipped it on next to the wedding ring, and it began feeding data about my exercise and sleep to an app on my phone. Yes, people have been using technology to track their steps and heart rates for a long time now—[Fitbit](#), Apple Watch—but I'd considered such devices dorky, and vaguely sinister. Self-improvement can grate; data tracking can infringe. But maybe I needed a shove, and I was curious to see some numbers behind the brownout afternoons.



*"The apes accepted you, but my sister's a whole other story."*  
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

The Oura motivated me to get out and move—steps, miles, calories. I took long, aimless walks that I imagined would add weeks to my life, like injury time in a soccer match. (It would take a lot of injury time to make up for the hot dogs, if, as a recent study suggested, each one shortens the life span by thirty-six minutes.) Harder work, not surprisingly, yielded higher scores. Jog, or bike, or run stairs, then excitedly check the app. The lure of better numbers, more carrot than stick, was energizing in itself, even if the ring's criteria seemed kind of arbitrary, maybe overgenerous. The instrument is blunt, but it will cut.

The ring also conditioned me to begin each morning with a Christmas-stocking jolt of anticipation. Oh boy, new data. “How’d you sleep?” my wife would ask, as one does.

“Don’t know yet.”

Most days, the numbers weren’t good: Santa leaves a lump of coal. My sleep patterns were lousy and seemed to augur an early demise. It turned out that what might feel like restorative slumber—after a keen night out, for example, or a bout of hard work—was instead my body struggling to process the poison I’d put into it. The time in bed was more work than rest.

The Oura emphasized the concept of “readiness”—a measure of recuperation. The relevant data point was heart-rate variability, or H.R.V. Your heart rate, like most of the body’s involuntary functions, is controlled by the autonomic nervous system, which has two components: the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic one. The former fires the fight-or-flight impulse; it activates when you experience stress, or excitement, or overindulgence. The latter is the restorative impulse: “rest and digest,” “feed and breed.” The sympathetic system stimulates adrenaline, which dilates your pupils, raises your pulse, opens your airways, and interferes with signals to your bladder. (This is why fear can cause people to piss themselves.) The parasympathetic does the opposite—it settles you down. Ideally, these two systems achieve balance. You rev up, you calm down. You push, you heal. H.R.V. supposedly measures this state of concord. Counterintuitively, higher variability is said to reflect greater balance, and better health. Low H.R.V. correlates to a range of diseases and to earlier mortality. My H.R.V., especially after I’d had a few, was very low.

“You can only manage what you measure,” Will Ahmed, the founder of Whoop, another tracking device, told me last month. By now, I had on three wearables: the Oura ring, a Whoop band on my left wrist, and a Levels glucose monitor behind my left triceps. I’d heard about Whoop from a doctor and journalist named Bob Arnot, a standup-paddleboard masters world champion and competitive ski-mountaineering racer, and the author of the recent book “Flip the Youth Switch.” Dr. Bob, who is seventy-three, is a high-energy guy—maybe a freak.

Clearly, despite our best efforts, energy is not evenly distributed, whether because of genetics or fate, nature or nurture. People blessed with it may ascribe it to their own virtue, perseverance, or self-discipline, and will sometimes wield the descriptor “low-energy” as a slight, as though Eeyores are contagious. The idea that you can train, will, or even medicate yourself into a permanent state of pep, charisma, and accomplishment lends an atmosphere of piety to the energy-assessment dance. It’s all a matter of attitude, they say, as though attitude were not itself determined by energy. *Think positive!* It takes energy to change habits and alter circumstances. One can adjust certain knobs, but it can feel like a chore to deduce which knobs do what.

“I fundamentally believe this is something you have control over,” Arnot said, when I called him. He credited his apparently prodigious mental energy to what he called “associative thinking.” Lately, he’d been composing a trumpet concerto and studying Python, calculus, machine learning, Arabic, and Swahili. “I don’t sleep much. I’ve always been a hopeless overachiever. Whatever I do is the opposite of what I call ruminating.” Whoop, he said, had helped him maximize his workouts and his downtime. His H.R.V. readings got better each month (H.R.V. typically worsens as you get older), and he reckoned that his biological age was much lower than his chronological one.

Arnot connected me with Ahmed, a former Harvard squash captain, who told me that it was in deep sleep that you generate ninety-five per cent of your growth hormones: “That’s when you’re repairing the muscles you break down in the gym.” The gym. Right. For cognitive repair, it was *REM* sleep, the dream state that cleanses the brain. “Chess players focus on *REM*,” Ahmed said. According to both Oura and Whoop, my *REM* and deep-sleep numbers weren’t great. I was killing it, though, on light sleep, and not sleeping. Search “Orgone accumulators near me.”

“Energy is a real thing, and your perception of your energy can affect your levels,” Ahmed said. Ahmed himself always eats early and avoids sugar and alcohol in the evening. He wears blue-light-blocking glasses when, as he must, he uses his phone late (the light wavelengths from our screens, as we are often warned, disrupt our circadian rhythms), takes a cold shower and does breathing exercises before bed (favorite prescriptions of

Wim Hof, the Dutch extreme athlete and life-style guru known as the Iceman), and uses blackout shades and an eye mask, aiming for more than five hours of *REM* and deep sleep a night. “I have never met someone who gets that much who isn’t leading a great life,” he said.

“Totally,” I said.

A Whoop representative had told me about Levels, which sent me a kit with a disk to stick in my arm for a couple of weeks. I began taking blood-sugar readings with my phone. Soon afterward, Casey Means, Levels’s co-founder and chief medical officer, checked in on me. Means, who is thirty-four, is a graduate of Stanford’s medical school and a self-proclaimed “recovering surgeon.” She cited a University of North Carolina study that found that eighty-eight per cent of Americans suffer from some metabolic malfunction. “That means that roughly one in ten of us is able to process energy the way our bodies are designed to,” she said. “It’s an epidemic. Our fundamental pathways have been hijacked by the Western diet and life style. Disordered blood sugar is a big driver of most inflammation and chronic disease. It’s not just diabetes.”

The Levels app revealed that even a banana or a piece of toast raised my blood sugar by an alarming amount. The flat line of the morning’s fast, once broken, would bend into the red. The app would post an exclamation point next to the spike on the graph and ask, “Did something happen?” Yeah, jerkface, I had breakfast. Then, two hours later, the numbers would begin to ebb. But it wasn’t as though I was feeling jacked on the way up and then whacked by the crash. It felt like not much. Until around 3:23 P.M.—the attack of the yawns. Following the instructions of Levels, I experimented, and soon discovered that fat and fibre—a slab of bacon, chia, some fucking kale—modified the surge, and the bonk. Egg good, juice bad? O.K., then.

“Glucose variability can correlate with a variability in your subjective experience of mood,” Means said, though not in the way you’d think. The traditional notion of the sugar high, sugar crash doesn’t always bear out, to go by the overlay of verve and blood sugar. Once you have high levels of glucose in your system, the more you add, the less energy you feel; your cognitive-processing speed declines. The advantage of the glucose monitor, she said, is that it can reduce the misattribution of our subjective experiences

—that habit we all have of telling ourselves, or especially other people, what might be causing certain symptoms or feelings. (“You’re just dehydrated.”) The wearables can help you tinker with the variables. It’s not so much the rush and the crash. It’s the roller coaster itself. Glucose excursions, or glycemic variability, which Means called “spikiness,” lead to oxidative stress (an imbalance between free radicals and antioxidants), which over time damages the mitochondria. (It’s the opposite of H.R.V., where spikiness is the goal, in a way.) And that, more than the sensation of the caffeine or the fructose wearing off, seems to be the true culprit, a leading cause of what Mark Hyman, the doctor and wellness celebrity, calls F.L.C. Syndrome—Feel Like Crap. “What’s happening in our cells is what’s happening in our bodies,” Means said.

By Means’s reckoning—and, admittedly, her perspective is not a rare one, in our desperate, fallen world—we are suffering from our own, twenty-first-century incarnation of George Miller Beard’s “American nervousness,” with less misogyny. We expect too much of ourselves, and then handicap our attempts to meet our expectations. There’s a contradiction: we need energy to do more, but to get it we need to do less, or at least less of the things we are doing. This particular energy crisis, to the extent that it is more metabolic than imagined, may be as apt an indicator of ill health, on a mass scale, as, say, addiction or disease.

“We like to think we have conscious control over our behavior, but the more we learn, the more we know that that’s not entirely true,” Kevin Hall, who runs a clinical-nutrition lab at the National Institutes of Health, in Bethesda, told me. “We’re less in control than we’d like.”

Hall has been trying to understand how different sources of energy in our diet affect metabolism—what happens, for example, when we restrict carbs or fat. “The body makes huge shifts to accommodate calories in different forms. You’re on a low-carb diet? The fat in your blood—triglycerides—stimulates the uptake and blocks the release of fat. Low-fat, high-starch? Insulin plays that role. The human body is like a vehicle that burns different fuels. It’s an incredible engineering challenge. The metabolism is a miraculous flex-fuel engine. Diesel, ethanol, doesn’t matter in the short term. It will adapt.”

A recent study published in the journal *Current Biology* determined that the body seems to adjust to higher burn rate by becoming more efficient, especially with exercise. This is called “energy compensation” and is not yet well understood. Generally, when your body burns through energy less efficiently, you are likely to die earlier and have a greater risk of disease. An inefficient metabolic system is like a car engine you rev too high: it wears out faster.

Richard Maurer comes from a family of long-distance runners. In college, he was obsessed with calories—what was and wasn’t working when he ran. The simple equation of calories in and out, the default presumption, didn’t actually seem to measure up. At the time, in the eighties, it was hard to find medical schools that taught nutrition (“Except the one in Loma Linda, and that was run by Seventh-day Adventists,” he said), so he wound up at the National College for Naturopathic Medicine, in Portland, Oregon. What was then fringe is now tacking sharply to mainstream.

“Every day we learn one thing less,” Maurer said. He cited a study of élite cyclists. They rode hard on a stationary bike and, when their muscles were spent, were given water on one occasion and a sweet drink like Gatorade on another, both of which they spit out without swallowing. The water spitters lagged behind, in terms of subsequent wattage produced. The taste of sugar had apparently tricked the brain into releasing energy that it had been hoarding for other functions. “In some ways, the bonk is a perception,” Maurer said.

In September, Sai Krupa Das, a scientist at the Jean Mayer U.S.D.A. Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging and a professor of nutrition at Tufts, sent me a Rand Corp. survey she and other clinicians use to get a sense of psychobiological energy. In one section, you are supposed to rate, on a scale of one to six, from “all of the time” to “none of the time,” your experience of the past four weeks:

Did you feel full of pep?

Have you been a very nervous person?

Have you felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up?

Have you felt calm and peaceful?

Did you have a lot of energy?

Have you felt downhearted and blue?  
Did you feel worn out?  
Have you been a happy person?  
Did you feel tired?

All of the above? Is variability of mood more like H.R.V. or like blood sugar? It was hard to imagine a more subjective exercise. Das also sent me a link to the Web site of something called the Human Performance Institute, at Johnson & Johnson, which offered a survey that was a kind of screening for the “corporate athlete.” Who doesn’t love a self-evaluation? I aimed to be honest. The J. & J. verdict was that I was “disengaged”: “This suggests that significant obstacles stand in the way of fully igniting your talent and skill. To become an extraordinary performer, you must build significantly stronger energy management skills.” The corporate Olympics would have to go on without me.

Das didn’t have a test for the other kind of energy, the kind that one projects. “This kind of energy does exist, and people who have it generally do have that aura about them,” she said. “But it is certainly hard to measure. This energy is in large part physiological, too. There’s a genetic component, and a biological underpinning for cellular health that reflects in tissue health.”

Each day, I fixated on the data from my wearables, even as my resistance to change rendered them moot. I was more interested in adding exercise than in giving up my morning toast or evening whiskey. I sought the Whoop’s approval, if not that of its other evangelists. “I’ll invite you to join our group and help coach you,” Arnot wrote. “What’s your Whoop name?” Not telling. The Whoop’s version of what the Oura called “readiness” was “recovery,” also H.R.V.-based. For exercise, it emphasized “strain,” a more robust version of the Oura’s “activity” category. It rewarded a high heartbeat and a hard workout, and basically turned up its nose at long walks. It preferred sweat to steps.

And yet. The other day, an old friend passed through town from the Bay Area. We’d grown up across the street from each other and, in our fifth-grade production of “Alice in Wonderland,” had played Tweedledum and Tweedledee. We met up in Central Park, walked and talked for an hour—no

secrets, at this age—and then said our fond farewells. I returned to the desk chair, energized.

That evening, I checked the data. The Oura ring, generous to a fault, gave me credit for burning two hundred and twenty-four calories. Ball don't lie. The Whoop, though, had captured something else entirely. The readout from our meander suggested that I'd undergone my most gruelling physical trial not only since I got the device but in many years, possibly decades. It had me at nearly fifty minutes with an average heart rate above a hundred and fifty, plus twelve minutes above one-sixty-seven, with a high of one-eighty-five. Basically, according to the Whoop, I'd won the Tour de France and was now dead. Or the Whoop, for once, was mistaken: a glitch not in the matrix but in the watch.

Then there was a third possibility. My friend and I had had an excellent rapport on our stroll—a surge of groovy vibes and hearty laughter. Could this energy, the kind that is projected, perceived, and exchanged, yet purportedly impossible to measure, have somehow spun the monitor's compass, like a poltergeist or a solar flare? Was my Whoop a spiritist? A line of Tweedledee's came to mind: "Contrariwise, if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be: but as it isn't, it ain't. That's logic." ♦

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## **Dept. of Symbols**

- [“Fearless Girl” Gets Taken to Court](#)

[November 8, 2021 Issue](#)

## “Fearless Girl” Gets Taken to Court

Kristen Visbal, the creator of the financial-district statue that has become a feminist icon, is fighting for her right to create and sell other versions of the art work to cities around the world.

By [Sheelagh Kolhatkar](#)

November 1, 2021

“The pose—there’s something really empowering about it,” the artist Kristen Visbal said. She was standing behind her most famous work, the “Fearless Girl” statue on Broad Street, in front of the New York Stock Exchange. Visbal planted her fists on her hips and jutted her chin forward, imitating the defiant stance of the child in the sculpture. “You cannot help but be strong if you assume that pose,” she said.



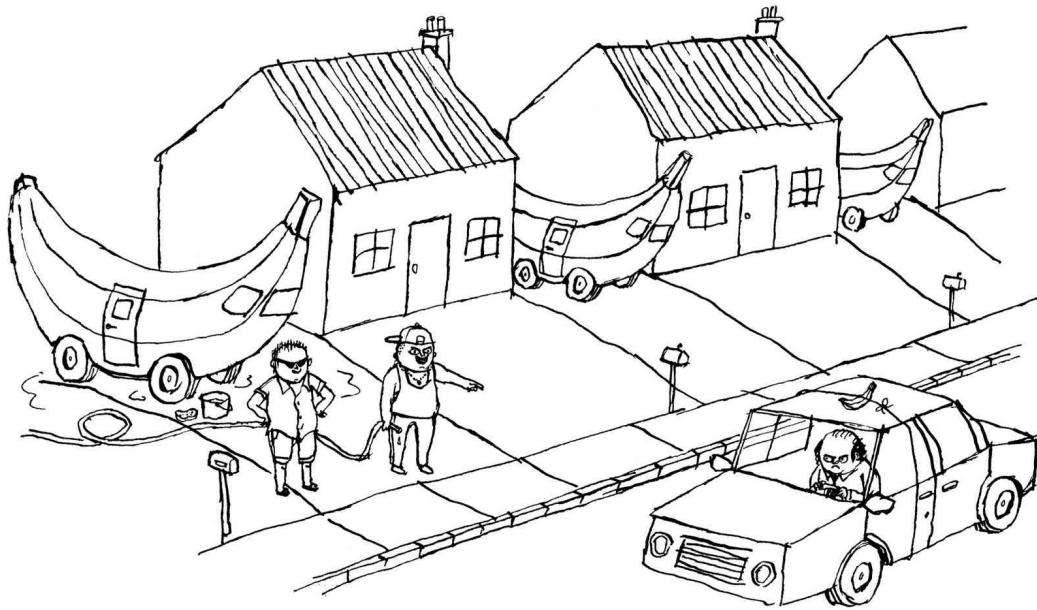
“Fearless Girl” was installed on March 7, 2017, the day before International Women’s Day, in front of the “Charging Bull” statue. It was commissioned by an ad agency for the asset-management firm State Street Global Advisors, intended as a critique of the lack of women in high corporate

positions, and as a marketing stunt to promote State Street's gender-diversity index fund. The statue was an instant sensation; tourists flocked to it to pose for pictures. Visbal said, "I do feel she is an unofficial symbol for the women's movement. We needed a symbol. That's why she took off."

Visbal wore a striped suit and high heels that occasionally wobbled on the street's seventeenth-century cobblestones. The statue, she said, had provoked "one media storm after another." An artist had placed a statue called "Pissing Pug" next to Fearless Girl's leg (the artist described "Fearless Girl" as "corporate nonsense"); and then the creator of the "Charging Bull" statue, Arturo Di Modica, complained publicly about "Fearless Girl," calling the piece "an advertising trick." In 2018, Fearless Girl was moved to her current position facing the stock exchange.

Visbal made twenty-five editions of "Fearless Girl" and two artist's proofs. She sold eight replicas, for up to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, including one to the law firm Maurice Blackburn, in Melbourne, Australia, and one to an investor in Oslo, who put the statue in front of the city's Grand Hotel, which he owns. Visbal also sold more than a hundred miniature versions for about six thousand dollars each, and took a resin copy to the Women's March in Los Angeles in January, 2019. A month later, State Street sued Visbal, accusing her of breach of contract, and of causing "substantial and irreparable harm" to Fearless Girl and to State Street by selling copies. Visbal filed a counterclaim, alleging that State Street was hampering her ability to spread Fearless Girl's message of gender equality.

"I have not sold a casting since the lawsuit was filed against me," Visbal said. "Which is so sad, because I want to see her in India, in China, in Japan—everywhere. I've had so many inquiries, but, with an open lawsuit, people are afraid." She plans to release a set of non-fungible tokens, or N.F.T.s, based on Fearless Girl next month, in part to raise money for her legal fees, which she says have exceeded three million dollars.



"You call that a banana-mobile?"  
Cartoon by Edward Steed

Visbal started out in hotel marketing; in 1995, she went to study lost-wax casting at the Johnson Atelier, in Mercerville, New Jersey. She now works out of a studio in the middle of a vineyard in Lewes, Delaware. She modelled Fearless Girl partly on a girl named Ellie, the daughter of a friend. "She had a lot of attitude," Visbal said. "I did seven different hair styles." (She settled on a ponytail.) A clay model was created, and then it was cast in bronze at a foundry in Baltimore. "When I walked away from the unveiling, I said, 'Well, people are either going to love her or they're going to hate her,'" Visbal recalled.

As she talked, a woman in a leopard-print top posed with her arm around the statue, followed by three men speaking Spanish. Then a gang of people in business suits surrounded the statue. It was a group of entrepreneurs from Atlanta visiting the stock exchange. "Prior to this, we indulged in some blow-dries for the women, and shaves for the men, and we walked out onto the floor, all in an effort to kind of motivate, and benchmark the dreams that we have for our own companies," David Aferiat, the group's co-leader, who wore oversized sunglasses, said.

Genevieve Bos, a tech entrepreneur who wore several crystal necklaces, gestured toward the statue. "It's about the fearlessness of the female spirit," she said. "Especially when you juxtapose it against this bastion of . . ." She

groped for words. “Um, male financial power. And, to me, it represents women starting to embrace that, you know?”

Visbal wants to write a children’s book and develop an educational program based on Fearless Girl, but, until the lawsuit is resolved, she is only working on her N.F.T. project. She stroked the statue’s head. “She needs a wash and a wax,” Visbal said. “She’s like my baby.” ♦

# Fiction

- [“The Haunting of Hajji Hotak”](#)

By [Jamil Jan Kochai](#)

## Content

*Audio:* Jamil Jan Kochai reads.

You don't know why, exactly, you've been assigned to this particular family, in this particular home, in West Sacramento, California. It's not your job to wonder why. Nonetheless, after a few days, you begin to speculate that the suspect at the heart of your assignment is the father, code-named Hajji, even though you have no reason to believe that he has ever actually completed the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. In fact, Hajji hardly leaves home at all. He spends hours at a time wandering around his house or his yard, searching for things to repair—rotted planks of wood, missing shingles, burned-out bulbs, broken mowers, shattered windows, unhinged doors—until his old injuries act up, and he is forced to lie down wherever he is working, and if he happens to be in the attic or the basement, or in some other secluded area of the house, away from his wife and his mother and his four children, sometimes he will allow himself to quietly mutter verses from the Quran, invocations to Allah, until his ache seems to ebb and he returns to work.

When Hajji has exhausted himself, he often retires to the living room, where he watches murder mysteries or foreign coverage of conflicts in Islamic countries. If his wife, code-named Habibi, is in the kitchen, and if she isn't already chatting with one of her many friends, most of whom you know Hajji despises, he will request a cup of tea and ask about his mother's health, which is never very good, but Hajji's wife doesn't tell him this, because his mother, code-named Bibi, is sitting just a few feet away, and though she doesn't acknowledge her son's presence, Bibi is always listening.

From early dawn, when she wakes to pray, until late at night, before she falls into a fitful sleep, Bibi nests in a corner of the living room, on the farthest edge of the second couch, and listens to the television at an incredibly low volume, listens to her son and his wife in the kitchen, to her grandchildren on their phones, to the Quran on an old radio that she smuggled out of Afghanistan forty years ago, to the flushing of the toilets in the house, to the wind in the trees that her son planted near her window, to the gentle burbling of her oxygen tank, and to the constant thrumming of the house, and she reports back all that she hears to her only living brother, in Afghanistan.

Thanks to Bibi's keen ear for even the most minute details, her calls are thorough and uncompromising. She knows when her grandchildren are constipated. She knows when her son and his wife are secretly fighting. She knows who is peeing too loudly or cheating on exams or missing prayers. Through Bibi's many reports to her brother, you begin to gather snippets of Hajji's history: his former life as a mujahid in Afghanistan; his trek from Logar to Peshawar to Karachi to California; his wedding; the births of each of his children; the children's gradual loss of Pashto; their gradual increase in insolence; the trucking accident that destroyed the nerves in Hajji's neck and shoulder; the court cases that led to nothing; the betrayal he felt when his second-eldest son, code-named Karl, decided to become a Marxist while studying at Berkeley; his depression; his total disillusionment with the American justice system; his anger; his rage; his softly bubbling fury.

### Jamil Jan Kochai on Americans' fear of Islam.

In another life, you think, Bibi might have been a spy.

Hajji's eldest son, Mo, gets home from his job at Zafar's butcher shop in the evening. He wears a blood-splattered smock, an Arabic *thobe*, and a heavy beard. Every night, Mo's mother scolds him for not having washed his smock, which smells like a massacre, and every night Hajji defends his son, who smells, he says, like a man. Mo begs his mother's forgiveness with a laugh and sits beside his father. In English, Mo asks Hajji about the current condition of the *ummah*, which translates roughly to "community," but which actually refers to a supranational collective of Islamic peoples.

"They hope to destroy our *ummah*," you record Hajji saying, in English, before he gives a recap of all the bombings, massacres, war crimes, protests, shootings, kidnappings, and assassinations that have occurred in the past twenty-four hours. Mo listens quietly, only occasionally asking a question or muttering a vengeful prayer.

The rest of Hajji's children arrive as dinner begins.

Lily, the youngest, sneaks into the kitchen and asks her mother which dishes have been prepared without meat.

Lily has recently, and secretly, become a vegetarian. Two weeks earlier, she came home weeping to her mother after having witnessed the vehicular maiming of a duck that was crossing the street with a line of her ducklings. Lily had cradled the duck in her death throes, surrounded by her little ducklings—which, Lily swore, were crying out for their mother. Together, Habibi and Lily wept for the little orphaned ducklings. Later that day, Lily informed her mother that she could not bring herself to eat the chicken korma she had prepared, and Habibi decided not to scold her (a decision she would come to regret). At first, it was only chicken, but then Lily confessed to her mother that she could no longer stomach beef or lamb, the rest of the culinary trinity of Hajji's household. Habibi made an effort to explain to her daughter that vegetarianism was a slippery slope toward feminism, Marxism, Communism, atheism, hedonism, and, eventually, cannibalism. “Animals are animals,” her mother explained, deftly, “and humans are humans, and when you begin mixing up the two you will find yourself kissing chickens and eating children.”

Lily swore that it was a matter not of ethics but of physical repulsion, and that with time, *Inshallah*, she would be able to eat all her favorite dishes again. Habibi relented, and for a few days the secret remained solely between mother and daughter, until Mary, Hajji's elder daughter, turned toward her sister one afternoon, in the room they had shared since Lily's infancy, and asked her how much weight she had lost.

“None,” she said, too quickly, laughing. “I'm as chunky as ever.”

But she *had* lost weight. Two pounds.

“Then why do you look so pale and self-righteous?” Mary asked, continuing her interrogation. Sharp, uncompromising, and with an excellent eye for weakness—a trait that, you assume, she inherited from her grandmother—Mary has many talents (deception, introspection, manipulation, a high pain threshold, and embroidering) that are wasted in Hajji's household, where the girls are allowed to go only to school or to the mosque and then must come straight home.

It's really a tragedy, you think. She could have been a fine spy.

In the end, Lily confessed her sin to Mary, who immediately mocked her. “Idiot,” she said. “You’re short enough as it is. How do you expect to get taller without protein?”

“I’ll eat beans.”

“Beans? How many beans? This room isn’t ventilated enough for you to be eating beans all day.”

“Please,” Lily said. “Don’t tell.”

Mary laughed and promised to snitch as soon as she could, which was a lie, of course, because Mary wasn’t the sort.

During dinner, Lily is always careful to serve herself a heaping portion of chicken or kebab or kofta, but while she eats her rice and fried vegetables, Mary, an avowed carnivore, nonchalantly clears away Lily’s meat. Hajji, fortunately, never notices. He eats with perfect focus. In total silence. And with his fingers.

Habibi, on the other hand, hardly eats. She is all questions and stories. She wants to know about Mo’s butchering, Mary’s studying, Lily’s friends, and even Marvin’s gaming. In response, the children tease her, which, at times, upsets Hajji, but Habibi always takes it in stride. She is—in your professional estimation—the beating heart of the household. Not only does she take on most of the chores; she also actively organizes the entire social life of the family—dinners and parties and showers and gatherings and even the occasional communal prayer. Seemingly at war with the hundred silences that fill her small house, she is almost always on the brink of shouting in Pashto or Farsi or English or sometimes Urdu. She chats so much on the phone, outside in the yard, inside in the kitchen, with her gloomy husband, her spiteful mother-in-law, her eclectic children, and her many, many friends, that you end up spending half your time at the office skimming through hours and hours of Habibi’s gossip, translated from your audio recordings by an officially sanctioned team of Afghan American interpreters, who are only ever provided with fragments of her statements, in the hope that they won’t figure out whom, exactly, they are interpreting. Habibi’s relentless chatter, however, is not completely useless. Every night,

before bed, she calls her family in Afghanistan, some of whom still live in a small village in Logar Province, which, according to your research, is currently under the control of the Taliban.

The word comes up sometimes amid Habibi's barrage of Pashto and Farsi. Her "*baleh*"s and "*bachem*"s and "*cheeka*"s and "*keer*"s.

"Taliban," she will whisper into her phone, as if she knows you are listening.

Just the sound of it makes your heart race.

After dinner, Marvin and the girls rush off to their rooms while Mo, his parents, and Bibi drink tea in the living room. Inevitably, the conversation turns to Mo's prospects for marriage. Habibi has a niece in Kabul, a midwife and a beauty, who speaks English, Pashto, Farsi, and Urdu. "She is almost too good for you," Habibi says, laughing. Hajji has a niece in Logar, only sixteen, wholesome, holy. She has memorized half the Quran, and her father is a respected mullah in the village. What Mo's parents don't know is that Mo is already in love with a girl at Sac State. They are constantly messaging, conversing, and Snapchatting. Mo writes her secret love poems on his laptop. Horrendous verses that he is rightfully embarrassed by. Sometimes, when he thinks he's alone, he recites his poems quietly.

His love, you hope, will save him.

At night, Hajji and his wife are the first to go to bed. The next morning, they will wake up at dawn—Hajji because of his pain, and Habibi because of Hajji's pain. Both Marvin and Mo pretend to fall asleep, but when Mo thinks Marvin has passed out he sneaks downstairs with his laptop, and, as soon as he does, Marvin climbs out of his own bed, performs *wudhu*, and begins to make up all the prayers he missed throughout the day. Though Marvin has earned a 3.8 G.P.A. in his first semester at U.C. Davis, though he works part time and donates money to Afghanistan, his parents often scold him for not praying, not reading the Quran, and Marvin never utters a word in self-defense. And yet here he is, in the middle of the night, praying in secrecy, away from the approving eyes of his mother and father and brother and grandmother, reciting verse after verse from the Quran, in a voice so soft and melodic that it almost brings tears to your eyes.

Downstairs, Mo descends into forums. Swaddled in his father's woollen shawl—the very same shawl that Hajji used to wear in the days of his long-ago jihad—Mo watches clips of American bombs falling on Iraqi cities, Afghans bearing witness to *isaf* executions, Muslim boys being burned alive in Gujarat. He watches these clips for hours, his head bobbing, his eyes bleary, until his beloved, mercifully, notices that he is online and commands him to go to sleep. Upstairs, Mary is reading Mo's messages. She has hacked into his Facebook account and watches his conversation play out in real time. She is a ghost on his profile, always careful to read only what he has already read and to leave everything else untouched. Such potential, you think, such a pity. Lily, in the bed next to Mary, is sketching pictures of ducks and ducklings and ponds and ducks crying into ponds and ponds expanding into oceans and ducks in flight and ducks walking and ducks dying, and she takes pictures of these charcoal portraits and posts them to a private Instagram account, which Mary can also, secretly, access. In the room adjacent to the girls, Hajji and his wife have a quiet argument about his wife's brothers. You recognize their names and suspect it has something to do with the fact that they were employed as interpreters for the U.S. military in Afghanistan. Hajji, you know, considers these men to be traitors. Eventually, Habibi turns away from her husband, mutters something under her breath, and cries herself softly to sleep. Hajji does nothing to comfort her. He sits up in bed, wheezing with pain or regret, and stares out the window at the dark street, where Mo is now shadowboxing beneath a street light. Tucked away in her corner of the house, Bibi sits up at the same moment, in the same manner, and stares out her window at the same street light. She, too, watches Mo strike at invisible enemies.



*"There's no way he'll notice, right? I mean, all turtles look the same."*  
Cartoon by David Ostow and Dan Salomon

When the family finally sleeps, you listen to them dream.

In the course of the next few weeks, you search for clues, signs, evidence of evil intentions. But to no avail. Life merely goes on.

Hajji repairs a window he broke while attempting to repaint his mother's room.

Cold floods the house.

Bibi moves into the boys' room, and the boys sleep in the living room. No longer able to sneak away from each other, they carry out long conversations before falling asleep. They discuss their family's finances, their suspicion that their father is hiding bills from them. They plan to confront him but never go through with it.

When they sleep, both of the boys snore, Marvin whistling and Mo sort of growling, and the girls, whose bedroom is closest to the living room, complain to each other all night. The timing of the boys' snoring is uncanny. There is a certain rhythm to it. When Mo murmurs, Marvin bursts, and, when Marvin quiets, Mo roars. The girls refer to it as "the symphony." Eventually, though, the girls fall asleep and you become the sole listener.

Mo notices blood in his stool but doesn't go to a doctor.

Mary earns a 4.3 G.P.A. for the semester, and Hajji buys doughnuts for the whole family. They all sit in the living room, eating doughnuts and drinking tea, and Bibi jokes that now they won't have to sell Mary for a pair of goats. The whole family laughs as though in a scene in a sitcom.

While Habibi's husband is out buying supplies from a hardware store, she receives a call from her parents, in Kabul, and discovers that her mother is seriously ill. She tells no one and leaves to visit her brothers across town. Soon afterward, Hajji returns home to find her missing. He goes from room to room, calling her name. For the first time in weeks, Bibi speaks to her son, informing him that his mother-in-law is sick.

Tech workers from the Bay Area have moved into the neighborhood. Property taxes are rising. Bills stack up. Hajji needs help but won't tell his sons, because he doesn't want them to take on more work. He borrows money and credit. He buries the bills at night like corpses.

Habibi receives another call from her parents. There will be an operation. It's the heart, of all things. Habibi tells only Hajji, but Bibi, of course, finds out.

In a moment of weakness, Lily eats a Slim Jim that she shoplifted from a gas station near her school. At home, she vomits the processed meat for several minutes. Though everyone assures Hajji that Lily will be fine, Hajji insists on taking her to the emergency room. "As long as we have Medi-Cal, why take the risk?" he argues. An hour later, Hajji and Lily return home from the hospital, and Hajji informs his wife that Lily has become a vegetarian. He asks her to keep it a secret. "For now," Hajji says, "she doesn't want anyone else to know." Habibi promises not to tell a soul.

One afternoon, while her father sleeps and her mother cooks, Mary shuffles through Hajji's mail and discovers past-due bills, three or four from the same creditor. She picks a few of the most urgent (electricity and Internet) and rushes upstairs. On Poshmark.com, she sells her own lightly used sweaters and jeans and T-shirts, which she has embroidered with characters

from popular animes—Sailor Moon and Totoro and Naruto—and, in the course of a week, pays her father’s bills online.

Habibi tells Marvin about his grandmother’s upcoming surgery. “Do you think she will forgive me for abandoning her in that city?” she asks him. Marvin pretends to pause his video game, even though he is playing online, in real time. He sets his controller aside and listens to his mother’s fears without responding. He is killed over and over again.

The stack of bills lightens, but Hajji hardly notices.

When her husband is out, Habibi calls Karl in Berkeley. They chat about his stomach, his rent, his studies, his protests, and his prayers until Habibi begs him, once again, to renounce Communism and come home. Karl argues that his father, more than anyone else, should be sympathetic to his cause. Habibi begins to weep and Karl mutters an excuse and hangs up. You wonder which of your colleagues is surveilling Karl.

While Hajji watches Al Jazeera—video footage of a young Afghan farmer being executed by an Australian soldier plays on the screen—Mary curls up next to him and picks at the flakes of dried skin in his beard as she did when she was four years old. According to Habibi, this was her special ritual before sleep. Now Mary has a bottle of olive oil in hand, a tiny dollop of which she pours into her palm and runs through her father’s beard. The execution is played again. After being mauled by a dog, the farmer, Dad Mohammad, lies on his back in the middle of a field. His knees are drawn up to his chest, and he is clutching red prayer beads. A soldier stands over him with a rifle. “You want me to drop this cunt?” he asks. There is the sound of a shot, and the footage cuts to black. When Mary is gone and the news segment is finished, Hajji sits alone in the living room with the TV turned off. He runs his fingers through the moistened strands of his beard and seems surprised by its softness.

On the night before Habibi’s mother’s surgery, one of Habibi’s brothers visits for the first time in months. Mary is the only one who doesn’t acknowledge him. In their shared room, Lily attempts to persuade her sister to forgive their uncle for his many insults, attacks, jokes, attacks disguised as jokes, and threats. But Mary refuses. “Mom will understand,” Mary says,

but you're not so sure. That night, Habibi and her brother sleep on a red *toshak* in the living room and quietly pray for their sick mother. In the morning, the news is good, and you cannot help sighing with relief.

Six months into your assignment, you begin to doubt your purpose. Hajji is falling apart. His doctor has advised him to undergo spinal surgery that may leave him paralyzed. In another era, in a different body, perhaps Hajji could have been dangerous. But here, now, debilitated by pain and trauma, the old man is no threat at all.

You should update your superiors. You should advise them to abort the operation. But you won't. Not now. Not when Mary is about to apply to colleges, not when Mo is planning to propose, not when Marvin is making new friends on campus, not when Habibi's parents are applying for a visa to the States, not when Hajji is deciding whether or not he will go through with the surgery, not when Bibi is losing touch with her brother, not when Lily is on the brink of an artistic breakthrough. There's too much left to learn.

But then, on a cold summer night, when the rest of the family has driven down to an aunt's house in Fremont, Hajji heads up to the attic to fix a pipe. You watch him prepare his tools and climb his ladder and enter his soaking attic, and, in a fine mist of leaking water, Hajji fidgets with the pipe until he mutters "Shit" in Pashto. He crawls back through the water, but on his way down he slips off the highest rung of the ladder and falls onto the hard tile beneath him. Though the fall must have been only ten feet or so, Hajji has landed awkwardly and broken his leg. He lies on the floor, on his back, staring up at the attic from which he fell. You know for a fact that Hajji has broken this leg once before, during the Soviet occupation, when a Kalashnikov round pierced his fibula and forced him off the battlefield for six months, during the heaviest period of fighting in Logar, and that this injury probably saved his life, and that his living—while his brother died, while his sister died, while his cousins and friends and neighbors all died—has haunted him his whole life.

A minute passes. Two. You know that Hajji always forgets his cell phone in the kitchen and that the kitchen is approximately twenty yards away from the spot where he lies on the floor, unmoving, and that he will have no other choice but to drag himself there and call for help. And yet he doesn't move.

You listen for his breath and hear him rasping. Water drips from the trapdoor to the attic, and Hajji lifts his hands and washes his face and his arms and his hair as if he were performing his ablutions. It's at this point that both you and Hajji notice the small puddle of blood forming under his head.

Hajji pleads to God, and you hear him, and you answer.

The ambulance arrives shortly afterward.

The next day, as soon as he returns home from the hospital, Hajji purchases a phone recorder on Amazon and, when it arrives, has Marvin hook it up to the landline. No one questions him. No one argues. He listens to hours and hours of recordings in his bedroom, alone or with Habibi, and during awkward moments of silence, pauses in conversations, he stops and rewinds and listens again. "Do you hear it?" he whispers to Habibi in Pashto. "The breathing?"

She waits and listens again and nods her head.

You know this is impossible. You know there is no way for them to hear you, and yet, when you are listening to a conversation, and there is a pause, a silence, you find yourself holding your breath.

Hajji becomes relentless.

He searches for you on the phone, in the streets, in unmarked white vans, in the faces of policemen, detectives in street clothes, military personnel, and his own neighbors. He searches for you at the hospital, at the bank, on his computer, his sons' laptops, in Webcams, phone cameras, and on the television. He searches for you in the curtains and in the drawers of the kitchen and in the trees in his back yard, in the electrical sockets, the locks of the door handles, and in the filaments of the light bulbs. And, even as his family protests, Hajji searches for you in shattered glass, in broken tile, in the strips of his wallpaper, the splinters of his doors, his tattered flesh, his warped nerves, and in his own beating heart, where, through it all, the voice whispering that he is loved is yours. ♦

## L.A. Postcard

- [Maurice Harris Knows What Roses Really Smell Like](#)

[November 8, 2021 Issue](#)

# Maurice Harris Knows What Roses Really Smell Like

The “Full Bloom” judge and florist for Beyoncé and Louis Vuitton talks flowers, tedium, and how fickle the trend of supporting Black businesses can be.

By [Sheila Yasmin Marikar](#)

November 1, 2021

Do what you love and you’ll never work a day in your life, or so Mark Twain and assorted influencers would have you believe. “That is fucking bullshit,” Maurice Harris, the L.A. florist, said the other day. “I do something I love, and I hate it, because it’s work anytime money gets exchanged. It takes away the purity.” Harris was seated at a table inside Bloom & Plume, his flower shop in Echo Park. His clients include Beyoncé, Louis Vuitton, and the Row, the fashion label owned by Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen.



*Maurice Harris* Illustration by João Fazenda

“They have a lot of rules,” he said of the Row, which displays his arrangements at its West Hollywood boutique. “White and green—they don’t like a lot of color,” he said.

An employee trimming alliums added, “Nothing too tropical.”

“They complain about things dropping on the floor,” Harris said.

“They like something that looks fragile, but that lasts,” the employee said.

“You’ve got to talk to God about that!”

Harris, who had on fuchsia loafers and a shirt printed with neon swirls, grew up in the San Joaquin Valley, with a grandmother who arranged artificial flowers and a mother who sewed. “I was always trying to negotiate a way to be creative but have a sustainable life,” he said. “I didn’t want to be poor.” An early notion: “Maybe I’ll just become the next Oprah.” Then: “Maybe I’ll work at the Gap.” He ended up studying fine art at Otis College of Art and Design, and then worked doing window displays for Barneys and Juicy Couture. Having discovered the downtown L.A. flower market, he became the go-to guy for office-party arrangements. “I was doing flowers for a co-worker’s baby shower, and I was just humming like the birds that dress Cinderella,” he recalled. “I had this out-of-body experience: ‘Oh, my God, you’re really enjoying yourself right now.’” He realized, “I want to do this more.”

In 2010, he opened Bloom & Plume on the east side of L.A. The Cinderella birds have since scattered. “People often romanticize what I do,” he said. “Flowers are gross. They stink. It’s a lot of hauling shit around. It’s a lot of logistics. Like, twenty per cent of it is pretty; the rest is just annoying.”

The same could be said of Hollywood. In 2019, Harris sold a TV series called “Centerpiece,” in which he interviews Black creative types (Rashida Jones, Maya Rudolph), to Quibi, Jeffrey Katzenberg’s short-form video service. “I told them, ‘Black people are dying at the hands of the police, and you’re putting up a black square that says nothing,’ ” Harris said. “‘Why don’t you put more money into this show about Black joy, this show that’s

not trauma porn?” ” Executives told him to make it shorter. Quibi folded in October; “Centerpiece” is now on Roku.

In 2019, Harris and his brother Moses, wanting to provide an aesthetically pleasing place for the people in their community to gather, opened a coffee shop next to the flower studio. “We wanted it to be a space for queer people, trans people, Black people,” Harris said. But retail was tough. Yelpers were unhappy. A staff exodus followed.

By 2020, the shop had found its feet. “We reopened right before George Floyd,” Harris said. “We went from thirty customers a day to three hundred.” The store’s success prevented it from qualifying for a second P.P.P. loan. “I found the support really strange,” Harris said. “It felt very performative. We had to reevaluate how we did everything to keep up with the volume,” which, after a few weeks, plummeted. “We got support when it was trendy to support Black businesses. We’re in a time when people think that a double tap, a share, and a visit solves the problem, when, No. It’s still pretty systemic.”

The shop now serves around seventy-five customers a day and is a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars in debt. Moses walked through the door, for a meeting about cost cutting.

“About our matcha,” Moses said, opening his laptop. “Our current provider, he’s a lunatic.” Moses had found a shop down the street that sourced matcha at three cents less a gram. “If you extrapolate that per gram per year, that’s two thousand dollars we’d be saving.”

“Margin Moses over here,” Harris said. “It’s like when you were trying to save on oat milk” and switched to a new brand, which Harris found watery. “It’s about taste,” he said.

Harris is more optimistic about MasterClass, for which he recently filmed a course on flower arranging (“I got compensated really, really well,” he said), and “Full Bloom,” a reality competition series shown on HBO Max.

“I would never *do* a flower competition,” he said. “Hell no.” But being a judge “is my favorite thing on the planet. I love judging people. It’s so

awful.” ♦

# Life and Letters

- [The Most Ambitious Diary in History](#)

Claude Fredericks, a Bennington classics professor, knew Anaïs Nin and James Merrill, and taught Donna Tartt. He kept a journal for eight decades, and persuaded many in his orbit that he was writing a titanic masterpiece. Did he?

By [Benjamin Anastas](#)

## Content

The most prophetic literary criticism that I've read in recent years is a twenty-four-page chapbook published by an obscure private foundation in Vermont. The author is Claude Fredericks, a printer, playwright, amateur poet, and classics professor, who died in 2013. He is largely unknown outside a small circle of former students and colleagues at Bennington College—unknown, at least, by his own name. But readers of Donna Tartt's 1992 novel, "[The Secret History](#)," will have a sense of Fredericks through his fictionalized alter ego, Julian Morrow, a magnetic classics professor whose tutelage in ancient Dionysiac rites so entralls his students that they commit—or are complicit in—two murders. I learned about the real Fredericks only after joining Bennington's faculty, in 2012. His chapbook is titled "How to Read a Journal," and the main text is adapted from a talk that he delivered on campus in 1988. By that time, he had taught at Bennington for twenty-seven years, and was the longest-standing member of its Literature and Languages faculty, which over the decades had included Bernard Malamud, Howard Nemerov, and Camille Paglia.

The talk was held in the communal living room of one of the white clapboard student houses built in 1932, when the college was founded. It was in such living rooms, which often had working fireplaces, that Fredericks liked to hold his classes: on Pindar and Aeschylus, on Japanese literature of the Heian period, on Augustine's "[Confessions](#)" and other religious texts. (The narrator of "The Secret History" notes Julian's belief that "pupils learned better in a pleasant, non-scholastic atmosphere.") In the lecture, Fredericks extolls the journal as a special form. Because its author can reflect solely on what's already happened, the narrative is perpetually in medias res—a "peculiar quality" in a literary work. Moreover, because the author doesn't know while writing how his dilemmas will be resolved, the resulting narrative captures better than a novel "how complex experience actually is." Fredericks goes on, "What I'd like to propose is that . . . we

now are no longer content with the conventions of fiction, that the whole idea of character and plot . . . no longer seems to be true.” Three decades before the rise of autofiction—novels that appear to hew to an author’s lived experience, largely dispensing with the artifices of fiction—Fredericks is calling for something similar.

Fredericks’s lecture, in fact, proposes dropping the illusions of fiction altogether. He makes a case for immersing readers in a subjective record of an individual’s experience, in “real time,” complete with all the errors, vagueness, lies, and mystifications that we engage in when we try to justify ourselves to ourselves. A journal is a “living thing,” he says; a novel is a “taxidermist’s replica.”

Fredericks, as he points out in his lecture, was uniquely qualified to explore the formal virtues of the journal. Beginning at the age of eight, in 1932, and lasting until a few weeks before his death, at eighty-nine, Fredericks was producing what he liked to call “one of the longest books about a single hero ever written.” All told, his journal stretches past sixty-five thousand pages. (This is an estimate made by the Claude Fredericks Foundation, a not-for-profit entity that Fredericks incorporated, in 1978, to preserve and eventually publish his journal in its entirety.) In 1990, when this epic narrative experiment was still under way, the Getty Research Institute acquired Fredericks’s papers, for an undisclosed sum. The purchase included the first part of the journal, documenting the years from 1932 to 1988.

Fredericks might seem an unlikely candidate to have his archive preserved at an institution as prominent as the Getty, which is best known for collecting the papers of such avant-garde artists as [Man Ray](#) and [Robert Mapplethorpe](#). Fredericks had published almost none of his writing when the Getty made its acquisition: six poems, in 1944; one play, in a “New American Plays” anthology from 1965; two pieces in the *Times Book Review*; a small excerpt of his notebooks in *Parenthèse*, a literary journal, in 1979. “Is there not achievement in remaining so completely unpublished?” he wrote, with a touch of self-loathing, as he was nearing forty. Small theatre companies in New York produced his plays—among them a pacifist political allegory called “The Idiot King”—but they received poor reviews and had brief runs. More significant is Fredericks’s work for the Banyan Press, a small letterpress publisher that he operated, with interruptions, from 1946 until the

late seventies. Banyan published writing by [Gertrude Stein](#), [André Gide](#), [Stephen Spender](#), [James Merrill](#), and others, in limited-run editions that were made with an almost spiritual sense of precision and care. Fredericks, who dropped out of Harvard in his sophomore year, wasn't a scholar in any professional sense; he published no academic papers on the Greek, Italian, and Japanese literature that he taught for thirty years. He dedicated himself instead to a life of self-directed study, and to a relentless pursuit of love and beauty—an ambition that he connected to ideas espoused in Plato's [Symposium](#), which, Fredericks wrote in the early eighties, was "the only holy book I truly know."

The Getty catalogue estimates that the portion of the journal ending in 1988 runs to fifty thousand pages. This manuscript and Fredericks's personal letters—some twenty thousand pages—fill twenty-seven archival boxes. The rest of the journal, covering 1989 to 2012, was acquired by the Getty in 2018, and has yet to be processed. On an inventory sheet, this section of the manuscript is described as being "many 1000s of pages." If and when Fredericks's journal is precisely catalogued, it may well prove to be the longest continuous record of an American life on paper—in any case, it's certainly among the longest. Other hypertrophied diaries exist, but those have generally gained renown as works of outsider art. Robert Shields, a minister, a high-school teacher, and a hobby poet in Dayton, Washington, documented his every activity, at five-minute intervals, for twenty-five years, leaving behind a diary estimated to contain some thirty-seven million words. Another Sunday poet, Arthur Crew Inman—a wealthy eccentric who lived as a shut-in in Boston's Back Bay, and hired working-class "talkers" to sit for interviews in his bedroom, so that he could subject them to analysis—compiled a diary of seventeen million words.

In the final years of Fredericks's life, he and a former student, Marc Harrington, began transcribing his journal and printing serial volumes of it. They made it only to 1943, using the print-on-demand platform Xlibris to self-publish the first four thousand pages in six uniform, blue-sleeved volumes. These begin with Claude's childhood, in Springfield, Missouri, where his doting mother nourishes his desire to see Tallulah Bankhead movies and listen on the Victrola to Toscanini conducting Brahms; Claude comes to loathe his father, a regional manager at an oil-and-gas company, calling him neglectful and a "vulgar drunk." When he is sixteen, his parents

separate. He muses, “It was Mother’s babying and . . . Daddy’s not being a father that made me a homosexual, je pense.” The volumes go on to chronicle his year and a half at Harvard, where he studies Greek, and end as he prepares to depart for wartime Manhattan—a new life of concerts, galleries, and cruising for sailors in Central Park.

In 1972, Fredericks writes, “I know that this journal is a work of permanent importance if anything in this world endures long enough to be called permanent or important.” During the past two years, I have been reading as much of the journal as I can manageably digest, from the original manuscript stored at the Getty Center, in Los Angeles, and from photocopies lent to me by the estate. At once more addictively engrossing and fatally tedious than anything else I have read, it is the strange chronicle of a “great” man whose genius is recognized almost exclusively by the chronicler himself. It is Nabokov’s [“Pale Fire”](#) but set in Vermont, with Fredericks playing the roles both of Charles Kinbote, the fawning critic on the edge of mania, and of John Shade, the eminent but mediocre poet. “I accept no authorities,” Fredericks writes, in the fifties. “And I . . . never met my equal, at least among my contemporaries.”

The journal is also a candid record of the homosexual underground in mid-century New York City, and the memoirs of a young gadfly’s encounters with such figures as [Marcel Duchamp](#), [Alice B. Toklas](#), and [Gore Vidal](#). (“False values, pomposities, vanities,” Fredericks spews after one encounter with Vidal.) It ripens into a portrait of a worldly man’s deepening solitude as he ages.

The journal sometimes overwhelms Fredericks with its outlandish scale: he expresses frustration with the responsibility of writing future entries, and he can seem demoralized by sitting down every day to confront the same life. At one point in 1982, Fredericks writes, “I’ve lost the thread again. This page, these pages, these volumes are a labyrinth I cannot find my way out of. I have wasted a life in writing them. They are without value. And yet they’ve helped keep me sane.”



"And remember, it's real silver—so you can never, ever get rid of it."  
Cartoon by Liana Finck

Langdon Hammer, a biographer and an English professor at Yale, told me, "I think Claude very honorably had an idea about the journal, related to his homosexuality and to his early reading of Freud. He wanted to privilege exactly what we edit out and compress and shape as writers—the self's own repetitiveness and falsifications." Toward the end of Fredericks's life, Hammer said, he came to know Fredericks well, and received a "guided tour" of the journal while conducting research for a 2015 biography of Merrill, who was a significant lover of Fredericks's. "Claude wanted to honor the original, imperfect form," Hammer said. "The text at its moment of creation." Fredericks, who resigned from Bennington in 1993, after a male student accused him of sexual harassment, wasn't concerned that there might be ugliness in his diary. According to his theory of the journal as a "total" work of literature, a diaristic account should be proudly unsanitized, including the prejudices and delusions that may reveal us to be monsters in our hearts. Indeed, when Fredericks gave his chapbook lecture, he told the audience that such an exposure is inevitable, "if we are honest."

The earliest published mention of Fredericks's journal that I've found is from 1948. Appropriately enough, the citation comes from one of the most famous journals of the twentieth century: the diaries of the Cuban-French-American writer [Anaïs Nin](#). She notes, of Fredericks, "He was a friend with

whom one could exchange confidences. He writes a diary. I read some pages of it. His descriptions of sexuality are very specific and he may not be able to publish it.”

Fredericks was drawn into Nin’s bohemian circle in New York in 1945, when he was in his early twenties and she was in her early forties. Nin had just published a collection of short stories, “[Under a Glass Bell](#),” and crossed paths with Fredericks when they were both pursuing Marshall Barer, an illustrator at *Esquire* who went on to become a success on Broadway. (He wrote the lyrics for “Once Upon a Mattress.”) Fredericks had a preternatural gift for placing himself alongside people destined for acclaim. When he was at Harvard, Fredericks had grown close to the poet May Sarton, whose father was on the faculty, and he joined the Cambridge literary set that orbited [Delmore Schwartz](#) (“very ugly but the most sensitive looking person I know”) and [John Berryman](#) (“so advanced and yet so retarded that I got a terrific despair for poetry”). Later, in New York, at a restaurant in Greenwich Village, Fredericks picked up a pretty young painter who was reading Lorca —her name was Frances Brando—and soon found himself at a party, deep in drunken conversation with her younger brother, a brooding, charismatic actor. Fredericks writes, “Marlin and I sat on the couch, and I was tempted to take advantage of his drunkenness, but did not.” When the two met again, months later, following the actor’s Broadway début, in “I Remember Mama,” Fredericks still referred to [Marlon Brando](#) as Marlin.

During this New York period, Fredericks portrays himself as a figure of fierce but thwarted ambition: “I thrive on praise, I thrive on solitude, I thrive on love; I have none now. I need love badly.” Living on an allowance from his mother—who had parlayed her ownership of a Missouri service station into a small-business empire—he was working on poetry, fiction, and plays, and trying without success to publish something. He was also living as much of an openly gay life as he could under the law. “No homosexual can be alive,” Fredericks observes during this period. “Half-alive in art—but more? In our culture, not more I think. If he is ‘himself’ he is destroyed.”

Nin, who had bought a letterpress machine and founded the Gemor Press with one of her lovers, Gonzalo More, advised Fredericks to learn the printing trade. He apprenticed with the couple for a few months before buying his own letterpress—he nicknamed it Dorothea, meaning “God’s

gift” in Greek—and starting the Banyan Press with Milton Saul, an aspiring fiction writer who had recently become his lover.

In Nin’s diary, Fredericks is introduced almost as an afterthought: “Claude Fredericks I never had time to describe. He was the born confidant, the shadowy friend, the evasive supporter. What you assert he does not deny. . . . He is the felt in the bedroom slipper, the storm strips on the wintry windows . . . the interlining in conversations, the shock absorber on the springs of cars, the lightning conductor. He is the invisible man.”

It’s difficult to imagine Fredericks being flattered by Nin’s portrayal of him, with its tinge of condescension about his sexuality—the felt in a bedroom slipper is a passive receiver of the foot, after all. And what artist wants to be the “shock absorber”? Nonetheless, they clearly shared a devotion to the diary form, and, like Fredericks, Nin was determined to chronicle her “reality and truth” with unflinching honesty. [Her diaries](#) documented not only her volatile affairs with Henry Miller and Antonin Artaud but also her incestuous relationship, as an adult, with her father.

Crucially, it was Nin who first suggested to Fredericks that the diary had a special literary status. She also made him aware of the perils of editing such texts. During the same period in which Fredericks makes his appearance in Nin’s diary as “the invisible man,” she recounts an episode from Paris in the thirties: the famed editor [Maxwell Perkins](#) suggested that she stitch selections from her diary into a manuscript, but when she did so Perkins was “disturbed” by the results, and declared that her diary “should be published in its entirety or not at all.” Nin concludes that, if her “novels are symbolic and composites, the diary must at least be intact.”

Nin helped Fredericks feel that his ritualistic approach to life-writing had great promise. His journal records an exchange they had in 1946, at a birthday party that she threw for him. He describes her turning to him suddenly and saying, “You will be a very great and famous writer, Claude. . . . You are the only one of all the group that I am absolutely sure of.” As a present, Nin tells him, she is chronicling her thoughts about some diary pages of *his*: a journal of reading his journal. The notion, he writes, “enchants me.” (If Nin did compose such a document, it appears not to have survived.)

In 1954, while the two writers were living in the Village, Nin reconsidered the idea of editing her journal. She proposed publishing selections from her and Fredericks's diaries in the same volume. Both would use pseudonyms, given that many of the entries would be considered scandalous. Her agent was on board, she reported. But Fredericks—not one to share the stage—resisted, and the idea languished. “I felt very defensive with her, and I did not want to see her again,” he writes, comparing her to a clinging vine.

Nin began publishing her diary, to acclaim and condemnation, in 1966. Not long after [the volume](#) with the description of Fredericks was published, in 1974, he extracted a small measure of revenge in his journal. He describes spending a rainy day in bed with a Bennington student; after making love, the student turns to him and jokes, “Anaïs didn’t know everything about you, did she?”

Fredericks makes a more extended appearance in James Merrill’s 1993 memoir, [“A Different Person.”](#) Merrill’s elegantly structured book uses a trip to Europe in 1950 to mark the beginning of his transformation from a novitiate author into a poet. That January, Merrill writes, he and Fredericks —by then an accomplished printer—had “caught sight of each other” at a book party for a mutual friend and felt a magnetic attraction. Fredericks, at the top of the first journal page describing their meeting, scrawled, “Here commences the *vita nuova* of C.F.” They made plans to meet in the South of France that summer; Merrill would sail for Europe first, and Fredericks would follow once he had extracted himself from his relationship with Milton Saul, and after he and Saul had finished printing the first edition of Gertrude Stein’s lesbian-themed novella [“Q.E.D.”](#), under the title “Things as They Are.”

“How had Claude learned to love?” Merrill asks in wonder. By this, he means loving another man so intensely and unapologetically. As he describes it, Fredericks’s emotional capacities were strengthened by a daily regimen of self-education—Plato, Augustine, St. Francis, Freud. Merrill then writes:

More to the point, Claude had learned how to live. He rose impatiently above boredom and unhappiness, the better to grasp what the world offered. . . . The journal he’d been keeping almost since mastering the

alphabet served him as both judge and guardian angel, for even the wasted day bore fruit, once confessed to at due analytical length. During seasons of solitude and introspection Claude thought nothing of leaving a party early or a concert at the intermission; by staying on he would merely have encountered more raw experience than his journal could process without fudging.

Fredericks's journal, in turn, marvels at Merrill's discipline as a poet: "He works, without stopping, for hours, writing hundreds of phrases in his notebook, reading the dictionary hour after hour, dragging each word out of his unconscious." Over time, their affair curdles, in part because Merrill makes Fredericks insecure. "You make me feel I am worthless," Fredericks writes to him.

When Fredericks made his initial sale to the Getty, in 1990, Merrill was still alive. (He died five years later.) From the start, access to Fredericks's journal has been highly restricted—a condition that he imposed and that extended to most of the archive until recently. Periods of limited access are standard practice with archival materials that likely contain sensitive information about living people. Select portions of [Susan Sontag's](#) journal, housed at U.C.L.A., were published a decade ago; the rest will be off limits to researchers until 2029, twenty-five years after her death. With Fredericks's journal, the restrictions are scheduled to be lifted in 2028. There is an obvious difference, though: Sontag is a venerated critic, novelist, philosopher, and cultural celebrity, and her journal has intrinsic value for scholars of her work. With Fredericks, the journal *is* the work, and the other materials at the Getty, including the Banyan Press archive, are the supporting documents.

Today, a visitor to the Getty can examine virtually all of Fredericks's unpublished poems and the drafts of his plays, along with thirty years' worth of his teaching notes and syllabi. This material—filling eighty-five boxes—includes everything from his juvenilia (Boxes 1 and 2) to the alternate versions of his "Complete Poems" (Boxes 10 and 11) and cassette recordings that he secretly made of his classes between 1981 and 1988. Fredericks took candid snapshots at elaborate dinners that he prepared at the Vermont farmhouse where he lived as a member of the Bennington faculty, and at drinking parties that he hosted for his students. All these images are

available for perusal. Fredericks's written evaluations of his students' work have also been housed at the Getty (Boxes 26 to 32). They are sealed until 2063, yet I wondered: Had he received permission from his students to place these evaluations in the archive? I felt a bit like Richard Papen, the narrator of "The Secret History," who, on accidentally seeing Julian Morrow grasping a student's hands, asks himself, "*What the hell is going on?*"

I had a similar reaction whenever I left the reading room of the Special Collections library after spending a day immersed in Fredericks's obsessively documented world. There was a journal inside that almost nobody had ever read or even seen, yet was being preserved, under ideal conditions of humidity and temperature, in the expectation that readers would one day come. And, like the map the size of an empire in [Jorge Luis Borges](#)'s paragraph-long story "On Exactitude in Science," Fredericks's archive seemed to contain an artifact—a printed program, a receipt, a collection notice—from virtually everything he had ever done. Hallmark cards from his mother, newspaper clippings on the health benefits of eating fibre: it was an archive nearly as long, and as excruciating, as a human life.

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas coined a phrase that captures Fredericks to the core: "the cultivated personality." It is introduced in Habermas's 1962 book, "[The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere](#)," which describes the advent of the European bourgeois, and the invention of modern subjectivity, in eighteenth-century Europe. During this period, the journal and the personal letter exploded in popularity, as individuals increasingly decided that their intimate thoughts were worth memorializing. "The first-person narrative became a conversation with one's self," Habermas wrote. As the spread of capitalism created wealth outside the aristocracy, and print culture made reading a common leisure activity, many middle-class homes held salons for discussing books, playing music, and displaying art. The family room "became a reception room in which private people gather to become a public."

By all accounts, Fredericks turned his farmhouse, in the village of Pawlet, into a dazzling reception room. He oversaw the slow transformation of the property from an unheated ruin without indoor plumbing into something out of a shelter magazine. The interior had the immaculate, minimalist aesthetic of a monk's retreat, albeit with modern conveniences like a Xerox machine,

for copying diary pages as soon as they emerged from his typewriter. Lavish multicourse dinners were regularly served, and Fredericks had a select library of fine editions. Merrill, in his memoir, praises the collection for its “breathtaking high-mindedness,” and he writes with equal admiration of the old letterpress, which was painted dark red and “stood five feet high, a presence challenging and inscrutable as any samurai in full armor.” But the house’s most dramatic element was Fredericks’s diary: he stored the original journal volumes in the basement, in an enormous Mosler bank safe.

Katharine Holabird, the author of the children’s-book series “[Angelina Ballerina](#)” and a student of Fredericks’s in the sixties, remembers being awestruck by the farmhouse: “I had never seen anything like it. Everything was arranged so sparely and intentionally. Each object in the house had meaning.” Fredericks had a garden where he grew a dizzying variety of vegetables; he nicknamed a towering pine tree on the property Zeus. For many of his students, Fredericks’s gatherings were not unlike the symposiums of Plato’s time: the farmhouse is where they first learned about gourmet cooking, the right wine to drink, which composers to worship. Todd O’Neal, a former student, told me that to be in Fredericks’s presence was “almost like Gestalt therapy,” adding, “It would shake something loose in your soul.”



Fredericks kept his diary in bank safes. His papers are now at the Getty, in L.A. Photograph by Grant Cornett for The New Yorker

I heard similar refrains from other former students who fell under Fredericks's spell. He was not an inherently charismatic man. Although Merrill portrays Fredericks as one of his main creative catalysts in "A Different Person," he gives only a vague physical description: "a round, fair-skinned face, by turns elfin and exalted, under thinning brown-gold hair." In the recorded lectures that I have heard, Fredericks's voice is archly theatrical; he sounds like an impish wizard who is equally fond of casting spells and telling dirty jokes. On campus, he dressed impeccably, in clothes from Brooks Brothers and J. Press. At home, he wore a fraying *yukata*, or unlined kimono, while doing daily meditation or playing the shakuhachi—a Japanese flute.

The diary was a central part of Fredericks's mystique. His student [Ann Goldstein](#), the translator of [Elena Ferrante](#), [Primo Levi](#), and other Italian writers, and a former head of the copy department at this magazine, told me, "We *all* knew about the journal." She studied Dante with Fredericks, taking the same class twice because the subject—and his emphasis on close reading—so appealed to her. For a while, she said, "Claude was my obsession." Goldstein kept a diary, too: "Claude talked about the diary as a work of literature, a form that gives the writer permission to take herself seriously."

Peter Golub, a composer who is the longtime director of the Sundance Institute's film-music program, and a lecturer at U.C.L.A., was a student of Fredericks's in the seventies, studying Greek for two years and poring over each line of [the Iliad](#) and [the Odyssey](#) with him. "Claude made the Greek world tangible," Golub told me, in a conversation at his studio, not far from the Getty. "It wasn't a distant theoretical thing when we read the *Odyssey* together. The characters were real to me."

Fredericks's journal contains many dilations on classical texts, but it is animated almost from the start by his search for love. Once he enters his fifties, he gives this quest a peculiar philosophical cast. He writes that he is trying to find "the solution of a problem—to that central problem, to how I can find my being always, how I can find eternal life." He increasingly surrounds himself with young men—many of whom, like Golub, are heterosexual. In the archive, I had come across a series of snapshots of Golub: he is standing outside Fredericks's farmhouse in a scarf and a winter coat, snowflakes collecting in his hair. I showed Golub these images on my

phone, and he swiped through them with a grin. “Claude was a dear friend,” he told me. “I was not one of his followers. There were students who adopted his manners and imitated his penmanship. They *became* Claude, in a way. But that wasn’t for me.”

Golub was one of the few male students of Fredericks’s who talked with me on the record. His warmth for Fredericks didn’t surprise me. In the early nineties, Golub returned to Bennington to teach, and he acted as Fredericks’s faculty advocate during a hearing about the sexual-harassment accusation. Fredericks denied any impropriety, but, according to the *Rutland Herald*, Bennington administrators informed him that, if he wanted to continue teaching and attain emeritus status, he had to move his office—which was in a secluded warren of the Commons building—closer to those of other faculty, and he could no longer lead private tutorials. Unwilling to accept such constraints, Fredericks resigned. “It devastated him,” Golub recalled. “I don’t think Claude ever got over it.”

When I informed Golub that Fredericks’s journal contains graphic depictions of his sexual relationships, including those with students, he was unsurprised. After all, during his own years as an undergraduate, male professors often slept with female students. “That was more accepted then,” he said, adding, “We were all supposed to be open-minded.” That is true, but, given the obvious power imbalances, Fredericks’s depictions can make for discomfiting reading today. (His accuser made his complaint anonymously, and I was not able to identify him.)

In his studio, Golub showed me a pair of bound scores—for Alban Berg’s operas, “Wozzeck” and “Lulu”—that Fredericks had bought and inscribed for him, in the mid-nineties. At a memorial service for Fredericks, in 2013, Golub told mourners that his former professor had a “deep spiritual and intellectual connection” to music, and recalled spending long hours with him in the farmhouse listening to the Bach cantatas. “Claude was truly an aesthete,” he added. Fredericks had “created himself, and his life, as an act of beauty.”

As an outsider to the Fredericks cult, I sometimes took a skeptical view of his strenuously constructed persona. Mastering Dante doesn’t require a bottle of wine and Palestrina on the stereo—and such atmospherics have too

often served as a way to seduce students. Yet, from the start, I took the diary project seriously. It wasn't just that eminent writers as various as Merrill and Nin had read passages from the diary and admired them: there was something thrilling about a document whose life span was longer than that of most humans. The very idea of the journal was a titanic act of imagination.

And so I committed myself to exploring its pages. I read most of the passages in the self-published volumes, which chronicle Fredericks's youth until 1943, and then continued with decades-old photocopies from Fredericks's estate, which included a set of bleaker entries from the early eighties. All told, I've read more than five thousand pages closely, and a few thousand more have passed under my eyes.

This experience generated a profound dissonance. For all the effort that Fredericks put into completing his journal project—and promoting it to others—an essential element is missing: he was not a good writer. He did not instinctively make judicious choices on the page, whether recounting a dramatic episode or offering a lengthy evocation of the pleasures of gardening in Vermont at the height of summer. His prose rarely displays the ingrained sense of control that true writers have even when jotting off a postcard. (I am not alone in feeling this way. In 1943, Fredericks laments, "Berryman said my poetry had no technique behind it.")

With Fredericks, it appears that the practice of keeping a journal was less about cataloguing acute observations, or about capturing a milieu, or about imposing a literary sensibility on quotidian moments, than it was about the fact of having written. For such a grand and self-serious project, it is curiously slapdash. Even though Fredericks came to view the journal as "unwittingly the masterpiece I've been longing . . . to write," a reader develops the sense that many of its pages came clattering out of his typewriter in a hurry.

In the Harvard years of the journal, the young Fredericks is confronting a profound dilemma: with America at war and the draft universal, he will face conscription if he proceeds with his plan to drop out and "escape from the tight chain of social obligation Cambridge is." In April of 1943—six days away from his induction appointment—he writes, "I am filled with real

terror right now.” But, in the frenetic tumble of events that follow, each of which is given equal weight, this terror is simply dropped. Instead, we get tedious descriptions of Fredericks’s dreams, and dreary recitations of meals he cooks with a lover.

Later in 1943, after he has left Harvard and is spending the summer in Maine, teaching himself Greek, writing poetry, and falling hard for the teenage son of his neighbors, he interrupts a breathless, scattered passage with an aside: “I can’t write English, I really don’t give a damn, do try to understand, I have to write this, I don’t care how—it must be gotten out, and quickly, and then I will do something else.” In another entry from that year, he resolves to streamline his effort on the journal: “I want to write each day in telegraphic fashion, 150 words say, and then amplify various points in paragraphs below until I am tired, thus eliminating daily detail.” At such moments, Fredericks’s theories about the narrative complexity of the journal run aground: if a diarist skims over the details of his life for the sake of efficiency, how can the resulting depiction be more truthful or meaningful than fiction?

Even stranger, as the years pass the journal increasingly adopts a tone of stiff indifference. After Fredericks spends time at a Buddhist monastery in Kyoto, Japan, in 1966, his exploration of Buddhism deepens, and his daily entries harden to the world, growing formalized and solipsistic. A passage from 1982: “I feel that perfect equilibrium that comes after sitting deeply. I will say here what I have to say, neither more nor less. There is all the time I need to say it. What remains unsaid poses no problem. It is simple.” More than once, the journal devolves into a pornography of isolation:

Last night it suddenly turned cool and cleared, and I felt today would be beautiful. It is. Just now I walked out into the day, looking at morning glories, at vegetables, at the beautiful Japanese gourds in delicate flower, at the ripening tomatoes, the crisp beans, the stiff onions . . . and walked softly back here to the house. Suddenly I was overcome and sank into a chair first and then onto the marble—yes, the marble slab—that lies on the coffee table there now. Opening my kimono I pleasured myself, melting into sun and day beyond thought—needing suddenly just that melting into being I had not known now in so long.

Langdon Hammer, the Yale professor, made significant use of the journal pages about the months that Fredericks and Merrill spent together in Europe for “[James Merrill: Life and Art](#).” He told me that he’d expected one kind of resource—“a diary that’s going to tell me what Merrill did on specific days”—and discovered something very different. “I got a *whole lot* of Claude,” he said. “More than I needed. There’s a prevalence of logorrheic, unfashioned writing. It was often confusing to wade through.” There are regular periods when Fredericks didn’t write entries every day, yet he still felt the need to account for the missing time: “Maybe he hasn’t written in the journal since Wednesday afternoon, and now it’s Sunday. So he skims through the calendar and mentions what’s important to him, summarizes events without any description. That’s not so convenient for the biographer.”

Or for the reader, I said.

To Hammer, it’s not just sloppiness that accounts for the journal’s unwieldy nature. “His grandiose ambition for the journal and his immediate need to produce its pages were related,” he said. “The journal was part of producing *himself*. ”

This performance was strong enough to bewitch some formidable minds, at least temporarily. In 1971, Fredericks delivered the first twenty-two volumes of his journal to Robert Giroux, the editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux, in a *panier*, a large French basket. “It is really amazing that anyone can have so fully documented a record of his life,” Giroux wrote to Fredericks that March. “It’s even physically interesting to read such a record—for example, the change of handwriting, all of a sudden, is phenomenal.” He compliments Fredericks on his “decidedly sophisticate” taste in classical music as a teenager. Giroux signs off by noting, “I can see that your journals will present a fantastic editing job, in sheer bulk alone.” A week later, he follows up with another letter, suggesting a date for lunch so that they can confer, and he can be given another batch of volumes:

There’s no question but that the diary gets better as your life gets more interesting. Yet I’m continually amazed at its catching such evanescent and changeable moods, things that would never have been caught on paper if you had not reached the status of veteran diarist in your early teens.



*"Mom's currently in a meeting—will she know what this is in reference to?"*  
Cartoon by Pat Achilles

Giroux didn't end up offering Fredericks a book deal. But they kept in touch. In 1973, Fredericks writes that he has proposed to Giroux a new publishing scheme: documenting a single year of his life, in three parts. The first would be a selection of the most interesting letters he had received that year; the second would be a selection of the letters he had written; the third would be "the most subjective part, the journal itself." Giroux is cool on the idea. "Tricks aren't necessary," he says.

In 1980, one of Fredericks's closest colleagues at Bennington, Bernard Malamud, offers to act as an intermediary with F.S.G., which publishes Malamud's novels. This time, Fredericks sends journals from 1966 and 1967, which chronicle his time at the Buddhist monastery in Kyoto and a failed relationship with a Japanese man who joins him back in Vermont. Months go by without word from Giroux. But in January of 1981 Fredericks visits New York, where he stays in an Upper East Side apartment belonging to Merrill. He has an appointment to meet Giroux for lunch at the Players club: "Monday a little after eleven, the 19th. It could be one of the more important days in my life. Certainly whatever I have been moving towards finds its happy fulfilment."

The "happy fulfilment" is not just about Giroux and the journal: Fredericks has met an attractive waiter at a French restaurant, and he has bought tickets

for them to attend a new production of “Un Ballo in Maschera,” at the Met. For once, the haste of a journal entry makes perfect dramatic sense.

When Fredericks sits down to write again the following day, his mood has changed drastically:

Whatever little order I had has swiftly crumbled, and a random paragraph or two here is all I can manage. I’m not really sure what happened yesterday. How can I? And how could I possibly have thought there would be any simple and clearcut gesture? I hardly expected to come home with a contract under either arm—and yet . . . what *did* happen?

The lunch with Giroux has been amiable enough, but his message about the journal and its prospects is confusing. “He began first by saying it really couldn’t be published until after I was dead,” Fredericks reports, because passages concerning “the lives and the intimacies of others” pose legal difficulties. There is also the problem of some anti-Semitic remarks—everyone has thoughts that other people would find offensive, Giroux explains, but you “simply can’t say those things in print and get away with it.” But these aren’t the only issues: “It was too long as it was. It repeated many things—even the obsessively constant concern with sexual adventure—too often. . . . There were too many names and incidents that everywhere needed . . . footnoting and the knowledge of other volumes of the journal.”

Most bewildering, Fredericks writes, is the fact that Giroux—even as he offers no compliments on the writing—speaks “as if it were inevitable” that the journal will eventually be published and admired, “as if he himself took its importance and value as something so obvious one did not even mention it.” Any book fashioned from the journal should be marketed as fiction, Giroux advises. Fredericks writes:

Puzzled by how specific he was and yet how entirely lacking in praise or enthusiasm, I asked—in saying I trusted his judgment more than anyone’s—Is it really worth doing, reducing these pages to a novel. Yes, he said quite briskly and then almost tenderly, of *course* it’s worth doing.

This is one of the few passages I have found in the archive where Fredericks actually fulfills his stated ideals about the journal as a “living thing.” We eagerly follow the protagonist into a series of dramatic events that he can’t foresee, and feel that we have been granted privileged access to a life as it unfolds. The author is both narrator and protagonist of a story so palpable—so “true,” to use one of Fredericks’s favored words—that it feels like we’re there. And we sympathize with him as both a literary figure and a human being.

At Christmastime, 1983, Donna Tartt was home from Bennington with her family, in Mississippi, working on her fiction and studying Latin and French. In one of several letters to Fredericks archived at the Getty, she describes a household “aflutter with telegrams and phone calls and parties and presents and flowers”—her sister is about to have her *débutante* ball, and seamstresses are going in and out. Tartt tells Fredericks that she has insulated herself from the excitement by moving into a playhouse in the back yard where she spent time as a little girl; it’s quite small, she writes, but so is she. Tartt finds it comforting to live “amidst all the tea sets and stuffed animals and rag rugs” she grew up with. Her family, however, is upset. Each night, her mother comes out to the playhouse, dressed elegantly for a party, and offers her extra blankets, begging her to come home. It’s a potent image: the young writer, marooned with her family for the holidays, taking refuge where she first learned to invent. It’s a boon to Tartt’s future biographers, especially as it brings to mind a line of Julian Morrow’s in “The Secret History” which was almost surely uttered first by Fredericks. When Richard Papen, the student narrator, makes the mistake of referring to classroom assignments in Greek as “work,” Julian issues a grandiloquent correction: “I should call it the most glorious kind of *play*.<sup>1</sup>”

In response to fact-checking inquiries, Tartt replied, “In public, and whenever I have been asked about it through my career, I have denied that the character of Julian Morrow is based on the Claude Fredericks I knew and loved—except in the most superficial respects. To me, this confusion is both tragic and unfair to the memory of Claude. As a student at Bennington, I was struck by how students and literature faculty alike loved to gossip and spin tales and embroider anecdotes and invent rumors about Claude that invariably cast him as a sinister, ridiculously wealthy, and larger-than-life personage that he was not, a tradition that unfortunately, and insidiously,

persists. It was these erroneous and larger-than-life fictions that caught my imagination as a young writer and went into the formation of the fictional character of Julian Morrow rather than the kind and generous person of Claude himself, and when the novel was published, in 1992, I was horrified when journalists in Europe and America presumed to state flatly that the character of Julian Morrow was Claude, treating their surmise as established truth, a problem that continues to this day. But unfortunately, now as then, people prefer to see fiction as fact.”

Tartt and Fredericks were close. In letters that she sent to him while still his student—she calls him *magister*, a Latin form of address to scholars—she clearly craves his respect and tries to meet him as an equal. But Tartt is already the superior writer. The letter about the playhouse shows a precocious gift for characterization, and she nimbly conveys her family’s bustle in a single atmospheric paragraph. (In fact, the Salingeresque glamour may be confected: a new podcast, “Once Upon a Time . . . at Bennington College,” suggests that Tartt’s family origins are humbler than she depicts.)

She exerts similar skill in transforming Fredericks into a fictional character: to heighten the sense that Julian is a figure of mysterious allure, Tartt initially gives the reader only tantalizing glimpses of him, as when he is seen peeking through a cracked door, “as if there were something wonderful in his office that needed guarding.” When one of the student characters has to complete an evaluation form about Julian’s teaching, he leaves the comments section blank, asking how he can “possibly make the Dean of Studies understand that there is a divinity in our midst?”

If Julian is a divinity in “The Secret History,” he is a deeply ambiguous one. By the end of the novel, his aestheticism and his “cheery, Socratic indifference to matters of life and death” have come to appear disquieting to Richard: “His voice chilled me to the bone. . . . The twinkle in Julian’s eye, as I looked at him now, was mechanical and dead. It was as if the charming theatrical curtain had dropped away and I saw him for the first time as he really was: not the benign old sage, the indulgent and protective good-parent of my dreams, but ambiguous, a moral neutral, whose beguiling trappings concealed a being watchful, capricious, and heartless.”

This dramatic reappraisal of Julian may have occurred entirely in the playhouse of Tartt's imagination. Or perhaps she just looked with a merciless eye at the professor who inspired her character—a man whose dark complexities served her pursuit of art.

In January of 1973, Fredericks writes, “I awoke this morning thinking perhaps that I had after all squandered my life—pursuing dreams that could not be realised, pursuing one infatuation after another. Others were famous or rich. Others had families. Had I not squandered all those extraordinary talents I had as a writer?” Self-recrimination is a familiar trope in Fredericks’s journal, but the sombre tone is new. He is middle-aged and beset by bills and debts; the seemingly effortless life of sensual indulgence that he has shared so freely with others has not come cheap. His closest friend, the wealthy and well-travelled Merrill, has been publishing steadily, with increasing recognition that he is a great poet. In earlier entries, Fredericks has remarked how strange it was to have his two closest friends, Merrill and Malamud, each win a National Book Award in 1967. He feels left behind, and a bit bored, and the journal reflects his enervation.

Meanwhile, Bennington, originally a school for women, has turned coed. Before long, almost half the students signed up for Fredericks’s Religious Experience class are male. His journal is reshaped by this change: the diaristic entries of past years start being replaced by copies of notes or letters written to students. It isn’t clear if the versions recorded in the journal are first drafts or later transcriptions. Sometimes he is pursuing four or five young men simultaneously, and for months at a stretch the letters supplant any other kind of entry. Reading the pages from this period, at the Getty, I began to wonder if they constituted a journal at all.

Robert Sternau was one of Fredericks’s students in the seventies, at the time when Peter Golub was an undergraduate at Bennington, and he has similar memories of tutorials at the Pawlet farmhouse—in his case, on Dante’s *Commedia*. Once a week, Fredericks would read a canto aloud in Dante’s Italian, and Sternau would read it aloud in English translation. “Then we would discuss it,” he recalled. “It was just an unbelievable opportunity to have someone who knew the material that well, and who devoted that kind of one-on-one time to me.” Sternau helped out in the yard and went for walks with Fredericks along the wooded edges of the property to post “no

*trespassing*" signs. They cooked with vegetables from the garden; Fredericks showed Sternau how the letterpress worked, and they collaborated on some printing projects. "He tutored me on shakuhachi flute," Sternau recalled. "Claude was quite adept. He did *everything* with perfection." Sternau sensed from the start that Fredericks was attracted to him, but, he said, "I think I was a bit naïve—at that point in his life, he told me, he was trying to be chaste."

The turn in their relationship came when they reached the end of the Dante tutorial, with a joint reading of Purgatorio. Sternau said, of Fredericks, "He was like my Virgil—he took me as far as Paradise. Claude could be quite dramatic." Sternau realized that Fredericks, despite his talk of chastity, had developed an abiding sexual interest in him. "He asked me if I would be the executor of his journal," Sternau recalled. "Being eighteen or nineteen at the time, it was somewhat frightening. I think it was his way of trying to commit to me. I'd been shown about thirty-five thousand pages of it, and I knew it was a massive opus. Not something that I wanted to commit to." Fredericks, he said, accepted his demurral. ("You assured me so stubbornly that it was my friendship and not my love you wanted," Fredericks complains to Sternau, in a letter preserved in the journal. "But when indeed I did just that, offering you friendship instead of love, you seemed somehow disappointed and distant.")

I spoke to another student of Fredericks's from this period, who didn't want to be identified. In the journal pages that I read, this person, whom I will call Will, is portrayed not as a student but as a resistant lover—at least, at the outset. Fredericks, in his first note to Will, informs him that, since his assigned counsellor—the equivalent of an academic adviser—has too many obligations, he will be taking over. "I'll be in my office at seven if you'd like to stop by," he writes. "We might then, if you'd like to see me regularly, find a time that suits us both."



*Victoria Roberts*

*"Eating out in a restaurant again is exciting enough—you don't have to order everything flambé."*  
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

Within a few months, the notes to Will become plaintive, lofty, and strikingly unguarded: "Must the cost of intimacy be distance? We'd never been so close to each other as we were on Sunday, nor, I think, so far from one another—and for no reason I can understand—as last night. Even distance, though, is a kind of intimacy, too, and has, having to do with you, something sweet about it as well as something bitter and painful."

At its height, the relationship sends Fredericks—who remains Will's adviser—into florid spirals:

Dearest, what rapturous moments those were, the macrocosm of any given moment with you, the microcosm of a lifetime, or of several, with you—separated & together & at the very last moment unexpectedly separated only to be united again, entering our destination—heaven, of course, in the allegorical reading, love, and a life together.

When I came to this passage, I had the eerie sense, and not for the first time, that Fredericks had entered uncharted literary terrain: a journal with a narrator who is unreliable, and quite possibly a fantasist. He is no longer confessing his experience "at due analytical length," as Merrill had observed in his memoir. Fredericks is writing sentimental fiction.

“Claude was very romantic,” Todd O’Neal, the former student, told me. “That’s why he always used to teach ‘[Madame Bovary](#).’ He *was* Emma.”

In these sections of the journal from the seventies, Fredericks, following the classical Greek tradition as described by Plato in the Symposium, places himself in the role of the Lover: a citizen of high birth who abases himself after becoming infatuated with a boy whose beauty is an earthly reflection of the divine. As the Lover woos the Beloved, he educates him in philosophy, in the law, in the arts, and in public speaking, thus preparing the student to further the ideals of the city-state. Fredericks, throughout the journal, celebrates the Symposium as a literary masterpiece, but by this stage his alliance with Plato has become fundamentalist. It’s a depressingly literal—and superficial—way to approach the ideas in Plato’s dialogue, akin to a college student who joins the Libertarian Club immediately after reading “[The Fountainhead](#).”

I asked Will for his version of these events. He said that when Fredericks took over as his adviser he initially felt flattered and fortunate: “I mean, this guy was why I was here. I wanted to learn about Japanese literature, about Buddhism, about meditation, and all the classics.” He’d heard rumors about Fredericks’s interest in male students, but he was overwhelmed by the intensity of their entanglement. He was soon taking all his classes with Fredericks except for one—a schedule similar to Richard Papen’s in “The Secret History.” Will recalled to me that he even began meditating in Fredericks’s office every morning. It was as if Fredericks were not just his professor but also his “spiritual adviser.” Finally, after months of fending off advances from Fredericks, Will slept with him. He was twenty-one. He felt liberated afterward, he told me, and ended the relationship, switching to another counsellor.

Years later, at a psychologist’s suggestion, Will contacted Fredericks and asked if he would join him in some therapy sessions, so that they could talk through their time together. “He kind of bowed out,” Will told me. “He really took no responsibility.” Will, who is now a professor himself, told Fredericks that he had come to view the older man’s behavior toward him as a form of abuse. Fredericks’s reply, he said, was eerily detached: “Don’t you do that to your own students?”

In the diaries documenting the period after Will breaks off the relationship, Fredericks stews in his loneliness, and for comfort he turns back to his “holy” books. The solipsism of these entries is astonishing. Will, he writes, “sought in a way no one ever ever dared to become me. That was his complaint on the phone. But that is the very thing he wished and I wished. We each wished . . . a true other—as Augustine calls his friend, as Montaigne calls his friend . . . and we wished true parentage & progeny.” He goes on, “Is it possible that all these years, in some deep biological need, I have indeed sought a son? I wanted to reproduce myself in something that lived even more than my books, than the pages of this journal, does, I wanted someone to live in my house and to use the things I have gathered about me but even more I wished someone to think the thoughts I think and live the life I’ve so slowly worked for. This is the true transmission of the lamp.”

In a rousing scene in “The Secret History,” the debauched students in Julian Morrow’s Greek class retreat to a country house and invite their teacher to dinner. A multicourse meal is prepared. There’s a fire in the fireplace, and, Tartt writes, “the whoosh of the flames was like a flock of birds, trapped and beating in a whirlwind near the ceiling.” Julian makes a toast: “Live forever.” The students repeat the phrase and clink their glasses across the table “like an army regiment crossing sabres.”

Claude Fredericks has achieved a startling measure of the immortality he sought for his journal—his mammoth manuscript will presumably be housed at the Getty in perpetuity. Yet it remains to be seen how many people will ever read any of it. As Fredericks asked, in an entry from 1951, “Who will ever wade through these million pages? How will the jewels (and there ARE jewels) be found? What pig will truffle my woods?” Yet even if no further volumes are published, by the estate or by another publisher, many readers will discover Fredericks—in reimagined form—as Julian Morrow, an indelible character in a novel that, three decades after its publication, continues to attract avid new readers.

For all the insights in Fredericks’s lecture “How to Read a Journal,” there is a troubling omission. Calling the journal a “private” form, he notes that his first diary had a lock, and that he carried the key with him. Even after his journal became a known part of his life—when he sometimes performed in

front of others the ritual of copying fresh pages and carrying the originals down the basement stairs to his bank safe—the entries themselves were full of private details: conversations with colleagues and students, phone calls with his mother, personal notes that he sent to friends and lovers, accounts of sexual encounters that he had with live-in partners and with relative strangers. In the lecture, he doesn’t acknowledge a diarist’s responsibility to the people he is writing about; in the journal, he almost always uses actual names. Nor does he address the ethics of writing about intimate experiences with other people and making it your “work”—and your claim on literary immortality.

James Merrill, despite his praise of Fredericks’s journal, had reservations about its contents. Fredericks, in a passage from July of 1975, recalls a night on an East Hampton beach more than twenty years earlier, when the two were still involved. Merrill had stripped off his clothing, and Fredericks, feeling “wild with desire,” dropped to his knees before Merrill in the sand. Merrill knew that a record of this moment would wind up in the journal, so he waited for Fredericks to write an account—and then he stole the pages. In 1975, Fredericks wonders ruefully, “Does he have them still—like some fading photograph an aging beauty keeps?”

As usual, Fredericks is flattering his older self by missing the point. It’s likely that Merrill stole the pages about the night on the beach to protect himself: it was the nineteen-fifties, and sex between men was then illegal. Merrill could have been blackmailed by an opportunist—his father was one of the founders of the investment firm Merrill Lynch—or even prosecuted. Fredericks understood this danger, too. He stored his manuscript in a bank safe in the basement, after all. And, as the Mosler filled up with journal pages, he installed another one.

Having spent so many frustrated hours with Fredericks’s journal, I sometimes wonder if it would have been better had the vaults never been opened. He is right that some stray “jewels” were hidden inside them, but in the main his millions of words are a monumental disappointment. Even so, I still find it captivating to think of the pages slowly piling up—a tomb of paper. It may be Fredericks’s most successful act of beauty. ♦

## **On Television**

- [Is “Succession” the Best Sitcom on Television?](#)

The HBO series, now in its third season, feels almost Seinfeldian in its efforts to capture a group of eccentric, petty characters as they try, again and again, to one-up one another.

By [Naomi Fry](#)

When the third season of “[Succession](#)” premiered, a couple of weeks ago, some viewers watching on HBO Max experienced a glitch: instead of being brought to the first episode of the new season, they found themselves rewatching the first episode of the entire series. The pilot opens with Kendall Roy (Jeremy Strong) rapping in a town car belonging to Waystar Royco, the right-wing media conglomerate run by his father, Logan (Brian Cox). It is Logan’s eightieth birthday, and Kendall is certain that his father is going to name him C.E.O. of the company. (“You’re the man, Mr. Roy!” Kendall’s driver tells him.) The scene is a far cry from the actual opening of Season 3, which begins where Season 2 left off, with Kendall collecting himself after a press conference in which he has effectively declared war against his father. And yet Kendall was able to get through several bars of the Beastie Boys’ “An Open Letter to NYC” before viewers realized the mistake.

The confusion was understandable. Despite all its minute twists and turns, “Succession” is surprisingly static. The series, a brilliant tragedy-satire of the corporate élite, created by the British comedy writer [Jesse Armstrong](#), is centered on the question of who will succeed Logan, a fearsome Rupert Murdoch-like mogul who closes roughly seventy per cent of his interactions with the epithet “Fuck off!” Although Kendall is initially presented as the heir apparent, it soon becomes clear that he is not cut out for the job, and that neither are his equally power-hungry siblings: Shiv (Sarah Snook), a shrewd political operator; Roman (Kieran Culkin), a squirrelly nihilist; and Connor (Alan Ruck), a nincompoop libertarian. There are other candidates, including Tom Wambsgans (Matthew Macfadyen), Shiv’s sycophantic, tortured husband, who also works at Waystar, and Gerri Kellman (J. Smith-Cameron), a general counsel with a naughty side. The underdog pick is Cousin Greg (Nicholas Braun), an ingenuous arriviste who, long-limbed and blunder-prone, provides much of the show’s comic relief. For two seasons, these characters circled the meaty morsel of the C.E.O. role like Cartier Tank-wearing vultures. But Logan held fast to his power, even after falling ill, and took a gladiatorial pleasure in keeping his children champing at the

bit, undercutting one another and exchanging inventively snippy verbal bitch slaps in their fight to be Daddy's No. 1. It was all very "Buddenbrooks," by way of "Veep."

The end of the second season seemed to signal a potential sea change. A congressional investigation into a coverup of sexual assaults at Waystar had necessitated a fall guy. "The Incans, in times of terrible crises, would sacrifice a child to the sun," Logan told Kendall, who agreed to assume culpability for the scandals in order to stabilize the company. But, when it came time to do so, Kendall ditched his prepared remarks and announced that his father was a "malignant presence," fully responsible for the ample wrongdoing at Waystar. It was time for heroic earnestness, clean hands, corporate oversight. Was the boy, at long last, becoming a man? Was Logan, as Shiv wonders to Roman, "toast"?

As if. Season 3 might not open with Kendall rapping, but, in many ways, we're right back at the beginning. His Judas moment made for a great cliffhanger, but he doesn't have a real plan for overthrowing Logan that wouldn't also result in the Roys losing the company altogether. The first few episodes take place in the days leading up to a shareholders' meeting, which will determine whether Waystar is to remain in family hands. (This mirrors Season 1, whose first half worked toward a board meeting foretelling a potential company upset.) The prospect of a D.O.J. investigation looms. Still, not an awful lot happens. Logan, who is holed up in Sarajevo in order to guard against extradition, continues to shuffle his underlings like cards, picking one and then another as potential successors and also as possible prison-bound scapegoats. The oft-whispered question "Is it me?" might refer to either role, and though the former is obviously better, the latter has its advantages. In one amazing moment, when Tom suggests to Shiv that he should offer himself as the fall guy, his wife calls the idea "punchy," saying that it will "bank gold" with Logan.

Kendall lands a couple of victories, including securing the star defense attorney Lisa Arthur (Sanaa Lathan), whom Logan is vying for, too. (Her choice is a bad omen for Logan: according to Shiv, Lisa "fucking loves winning, and she loves money.") But even as Lisa urges Kendall to focus on getting his story straight in order to avoid indictment, he is much more interested in politicking with his siblings, the only people, besides his father,

whose opinions he truly cares about. (It is as if all his ideas about staging a corporate takeover stem from having watched a TV show like “*Succession*.”) During a secret meeting, which, in a nice, infantilizing touch, takes place in Kendall’s tween daughter’s bedroom, he nearly persuades his siblings to team up with him against their father. They demur only when they realize that Kendall, just like Logan, won’t give up the prize of being C.E.O.

In the hands of less able custodians, this kind of narrative rehashing would become bland, but as I watched the new season it felt as if “*Succession*” were becoming more pleasurable itself with every episode, drilling down even deeper into its core as a study of the human thirst for domination. With its sweeping canvas and cinematic feel, the series has all the trappings of an HBO drama, and it is often compared to “[The Sopranos](#),” another show that documented seasons-long power struggles. The more apt comparison, however, might be a sitcom. There are times when the series feels almost Seinfeldian in its cyclical efforts to capture a group of eccentric, petty characters as they try, again and again, to one-up one another.

What makes any good sitcom work is an ability to repeat itself with small differences. Kendall is still a wimp who swings between self-satisfaction and an insatiable hunger for reassurance, and Strong is fantastic in his portrayal of this back-and-forth. But in Season 3 he fashions himself as a woke warrior, which opens up new satirical avenues for the show. “Fuck the patriarchy,” this patriarch manqué shouts at the press on his way into a charity gala. “Another life is possible, brother,” he tells Tom, urging him to leave Logan’s camp. (“Fuck you, plastic Jesus,” Shiv tells Kendall at one point, hitting the nail on the head.) He is also obsessed with tracking the public’s response to his newfound reputation as a whistle-blower, asking Greg to “slide the sociopolitical thermometer up the nation’s ass and take a reading.” The hapless sidekick checks Twitter and notes that Kendall is “the No. 1 trending topic, ahead of Tater Tots.”

Later, Shiv, whom Logan appoints as Waystar’s president, gives a speech at a company town hall to reassure employees that a new chapter of corporate responsibility has begun. “I’m here to tell you: we get it,” she says, as we watch a company flack in the audience mouth the words along with her. As Shiv goes on, her voice is drowned out by Nirvana’s “Rape Me,” emerging

from a speaker that Kendall has placed above the auditorium. The Gen X grunge anthem is intended as a righteous signal of alliance with the women who'd suffered at the hands of Waystar, but it comes off as a cheap gimmick, an act of solidarity that is just as canned as Shiv's largely decorative role. (As Kendall tells her, "Girls count double now, didn't you know? It's only your teats that give you any value.")

"Succession" doesn't offer any true liberal alternatives to the conservative monolith that is Waystar. All attempts to undermine Logan's empire are toothless, whether they take the form of rote jokes served on a late-night show called "The Disruption" (the host is played by the comedian [Ziwe](#)) or the vision of the company's future that Kendall outlines to his siblings. ("Detoxify our brand and we can go supersonic.") Even Shiv, who in previous seasons was portrayed as the progressive Roy, is easily enveloped in the company's embrace. In "Succession," ideological differences don't matter. Arguably the biggest threat to Logan's regime this season is a Noah Baumbach-vibes shareholder (Adrien Brody), who puts the C.E.O. to the test simply by taking him on an idyllic stroll. ♦

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# Poems

- “pencil & pen”
- “Can You Say It”

[November 8, 2021 Issue](#)

# pencil & pen

By [Eileen Myles](#)

November 1, 2021

## Content

*Audio:* Read by the author.

A minute is so  
long  
on my birthday  
snow feasts  
on the open  
air and she  
bought me flowers  
in my color  
which is  
orange  
*my color is orange*  
you don't know  
your color is  
orange. I do  
but it is such  
a gift  
Myra had snow  
I said  
I want that  
and now it  
has come  
71 is a birthday  
of tiny  
gifts  
crafts and tinkers  
just like  
this

[November 8, 2021 Issue](#)

# Can You Say It

By [David Baker](#)

November 1, 2021

## Content

*Audio: Read by the author.*

1.

There was a busyness. Yes, in the apple tree.

The first light. You could say it was a busyness—  
like a hive of movements, indistinct as haze

caught up in strings of light. Low sunlight, among webs.

And along the strands those slender brown fingerlings,  
the leaves, hovered, just there, in the breeze.

2.

What I meant to say is the morning was heavy.

Was it our sorrow. The tree was at the window.  
Before we could see the webs, the dew, the thousand

little apples, we saw the end of it only. The night, yes—

the end of it. There is always something else to say.  
No, I mean the first light. There's far too much to say.

3.

Low sunlight. Yes, in the apple tree, coming up.

Every day is the anniversary of a terror.  
But there you are. A sorrow. And something

caught there dazzling in the haze, just the same. Yes.

And of this moment closer to you than I can say.

There was busyness in the apple tree.

4.

First I thought it just a slim leaf, hanging  
to the screen. On the door. The night was settled.  
Darkness inside, darkness out. Then the wings

half-closed like hands, or a clasp. I mean, of a jewel.  
Dust of a moth, half a palm wide, and the crickets  
a busy tide at the seashore, when this was a sea.

5.

In the morning, the moth was gone. Or was it silence.  
Every day the image at the window—us, each other,  
wings on the door. Yes, can you say it now.

Before the webs we saw first light, a breath of haze—  
then leaves, floating there. In the window, yes. We saw  
ourselves. Then we saw ourselves with shadows.

## **Popular Chronicles**

- [Can Jake Paul Fight His Way Out of Trouble?](#)

A polarizing social-media star seeks an unlikely second act in boxing.

By [Kelefa Sanneh](#)

## Content

Like many executives, Jake Paul pays close attention to the fluctuating prospects of the business he runs, which in his case is the business of being Jake Paul. One hot afternoon in Sun Valley, California, he had some encouraging news to report. “I think the narrative is changing from ‘Fuck Jake Paul’ to ‘We love Jake Paul,’ ” he said. As evidence, he adduced some recent data collected from American sports arenas. In April, Paul had travelled to Jacksonville, Florida, for a night of fights sponsored by the U.F.C., the preëminent organization in [mixed martial arts](#). As he made his way to his seat, the attendees did, indeed, chant, “Fuck Jake Paul!” (Daniel Cormier, an M.M.A. champion turned commentator, also took note of Paul’s arrival, and explained his reaction to viewers at home: “I pointed at him and I said, ‘Don’t play with me,’ because I’ll smack him in the face.”) At a subsequent U.F.C. event, held in July in Las Vegas, the television producers did not put Paul on camera. But, Paul observed, the fans were not quite as unremittingly hostile. “It was actually a sophisticated crowd,” he said, by which he appeared to mean that it was a crowd sophisticated enough to tolerate his presence.

Paul is twenty-four and blond, with a confident smirk that is softened, slightly, by feathery eyelashes. He is a lifelong athlete, although until quite recently he seemed unlikely to become a professional one. Instead, since he was fifteen, he had been working alongside his big brother, Logan Paul, to earn the enmity of a significant chunk of the global population, as a prankster and instigator on Vine, the short-lived video-sharing network, and on YouTube, its long-lived rival. Connoisseurs can easily tell the brothers apart—Logan is taller, shaggier, and perhaps more in tune with the absurdity of the lives they have built for themselves. But everyone else tends to lump them together, conflating both their occasional triumphs and their frequent debacles, such as the time, in 2017, when Logan Paul visited a Japanese forest, reputed to be a place people went to commit suicide, and filmed his encounter with a corpse, sparking outrage that threatened to end his YouTube career. So when the brothers announced, a few months later, that they would be facing two of their fellow social-media stars in a boxing

match, it looked like merely their latest misadventure, bound to be supplanted by whatever came next.

And yet the Paul brothers ended up devoting far more time to boxing than anyone might have predicted. Logan Paul somehow wound up in the ring with [Floyd Mayweather, Jr.](#), and Jake Paul reeled off a string of victories, fighting increasingly credible opponents as he grew increasingly intent on training. Now Jake Paul was preparing to face Tyron Woodley, a muscular and rather solemn collegiate wrestler and former U.F.C. champion. Paul and Woodley had come to Sun Valley to produce a television ad for their fight—Woodley's first professional boxing match, and Paul's first match against a guy who could punch. They were filming their parts separately, to eliminate the possibility of unremunerated violence. The setting, a soundstage, was large enough to keep the two men well apart, but Paul was visited in his dressing room by Woodley's mother, Deborah, an expressive and charismatic woman widely known as Mama Woodley.

"We're out here doing business," Paul told her, almost apologetically. "Selling pay-per-views."

She beamed. "You and Tyron gon' get out there and beat each other's ass," she said.



*"Who's got excellent kidney function, according to this most recent round of tests? You do! Yes, you do!"*  
Cartoon by Zoe Si

She departed, and Paul was left alone with his entourage, which included at least two videographers and his girlfriend, Julia Rose, a social-media star with a similarly prankish sensibility. (During the 2019 World Series, Rose positioned herself near home plate and flashed the television camera; earlier this year, she claimed to have helped change the Hollywood sign to read, briefly, “*HOLLYBOOB.*”) Paul was explaining his plan to knock Woodley unconscious. “It’s a bit bittersweet now, with Tyron’s mom,” he said, his bravado fading for a moment. “I’m going to try and forget that we talked.”

Paul’s bad reputation is not hard to understand if you have seen the videos on his YouTube channel, which have drawn more than seven billion views; that figure, which approaches the population of this planet, does not account for the innumerable videos that summarize or criticize the ones that Paul has posted. His body of work is filled with dubious stunts, such as the time he covered half of his brother’s room in duct tape, and with mind-numbing repetition of the word “bro.” He has also faced some serious allegations. In May, 2020, during the disorder that followed the murder of [George Floyd](#), he filmed himself trespassing in an Arizona mall, alongside looters; at one point, he seemed to be holding a bottle of vodka. “These fuckin’ idiots teargassed me—I ain’t doing shit,” Paul explained on Instagram, gesturing to a row of officers. (The F.B.I. searched his home but has not pursued a federal case; he is facing misdemeanor charges of trespassing and unlawful assembly.) Earlier this year, he was accused of sexual assault by two women. One of them filmed a disturbing YouTube video, describing a night with Paul in 2019 during which he forced her to perform oral sex on him; she recently told the *Times* that she planned to file charges. The other told the *Times* that Paul had groped her during an encounter in 2017. Paul denied both accusations, and suggested that his accusers had fabricated them.

By the time the assault allegations were made public, this past April, Paul was so widely disliked that it seemed impossible for his reputation to get much worse. In any case, he had already embarked on his new career in professional boxing, a world in which good behavior tends not to be a job requirement. “One thing that is great about being a fighter is, like, you can’t get cancelled,” Paul told me. In fact, boxing can be a way to monetize a bad reputation: people who would never dream of buying a Jake Paul T-shirt might nevertheless pay to watch someone try to punch him in the face. Paul

is not a great boxer, and it is by no means obvious that he will ever become one. But he is already one of the top-grossing fighters in the world.

In general, the public tends to respect boxers for the same reason it tends not to respect social-media influencers: the boxers seem to be toiling and suffering, and the influencers do not. Paul's strange journey from one world to the other reflects his hunger for attention. It also reflects the hunger of the boxing industry, which has lately been invaded by celebrities and old-timers, who often get big checks for novelty fights that sometimes scarcely seem like fights at all; Mike Tyson, who fought a high-profile exhibition match last year at the age of fifty-four, remains vastly more popular than most of his successors. Boxing has spent decades trying, and generally failing, to transform its top athletes into big celebrities. Now comes a mediagenic villain with a quixotic plan: to achieve that transformation in reverse.

Jake and Logan Paul became boxers on a whim. In 2018, a British YouTuber and rapper named KSI challenged them to fight, and they agreed, without knowing quite what they were signing up for. The next day, they hired trainers, and soon they were running, jumping rope, and pounding away at a heavy bag. Jake Paul remembers thinking, "Bro, this is the hardest thing we've ever fuckin' done."

Logan Paul earned a draw in his fight against KSI, and then lost a rematch, but he kept talking about his boxing prowess. Eventually, Mayweather—a boxing virtuoso who had retired a few years earlier, but remained a shrewd analyst of risk and reward—agreed to an exhibition fight, which reportedly inspired something like a million people to pay fifty dollars to watch it. Jake Paul has taken a different path. He won his first fight, against KSI's younger brother, Deji, and then he kept winning.

As Jake Paul became more obsessed with boxing, he moved to Big Bear Lake, a town in the San Bernardino Mountains known as a high-altitude training destination, and then to Las Vegas, a city lousy with trainers and sparring partners, and finally to Puerto Rico—far away, he says, from the Los Angeles night life in which he was once immersed. One day in August, he was sitting on a low couch in a house in a lush gated community in Dorado, where the residents' golf carts are expected to obey signs that say, in English, "Keep it slow." Paul liked the fact that, except for himself and

his brother, who lives across the road, the area seemed to be free of social-media stars. “Everyone here, they’re all crypto people,” he said.

It was less than three weeks until the fight with Woodley, and Paul was gazing at a wall covered with exhortatory handwritten placards, one for each week of preparation. (The current week’s slogans included “*EXECUTE*,” “*KILL MODE*,” and “*THE MOST IMPORTANT 20 DAYS OF MY LIFE*.”) The “Moneyball” revolution has not yet come to boxing: the sport, largely untouched by advances in statistics and science, relies instead on folk wisdom. Hard work is valued almost for its own sake, and there is an abhorrence of anything deemed distracting. Paul claims to like the simplicity of a fighter’s life, especially compared with the chaos of social-media stardom. As he and some members of his team climbed into a jeep to head to a training session, he explained that one of his coaches had recently prevailed upon him to send his girlfriend back to the mainland—a traditional boxing tactic, although not one that has been substantiated by any double-blind studies. “He wants me to be mad,” Paul said.

The Paul brothers had leased a local warehouse, which they were converting into a gym and a production studio. On this day, it was still mainly empty, an expanse of concrete floor and corrugated roofing with a boxing ring set up on one side and televisions showing fight highlights along a wall. As Paul began a complicated stretching routine, a handful of boxing veterans assumed positions near the ring. There was B. J. Flores, Paul’s head coach, a soft-spoken scholar of the sport who, at forty-two, is only three years removed from his own fairly successful career as a cruiserweight. (Flores is well preserved, but he told me that he’ll never fight again. “I don’t even think about it anymore,” he said, as if he were trying not to recall a bad habit.) His advice to Paul tended to be simple and precise—for instance, he wanted Paul to fluster Woodley by jabbing twice instead of once. “He’s gonna block the first one, but the second one’s gonna hit him every time,” Flores said. “And it’ll make him think.”



*Cartoon by Mick Stevens*

Flores has been hanging around boxing gyms since he was four—his father was a trainer. Paul was a wrestler in high school, but he didn’t take up boxing until the age of twenty-one, which means he is trying to compress decades of experience into a few years. In the ring, he went two rounds with Denis Grachev, a Russian journeyman who has lost fourteen of his last twenty-two fights. Paul tried to jab enough to keep Grachev at a distance, and when Grachev pushed him against the ropes he ducked away, pivoting out of danger. He was thinking, which is better than not thinking, though not as good as not having to think.

Football fans don’t have to worry that a bunch of pranksters will put on pads, rent a stadium, and declare themselves Super Bowl contenders. But boxing is an entrepreneurial sport, governed, to the extent that it is governed at all, by an interlocking network of promoters, managers, broadcasters, local government officials, and so-called sanctioning bodies, which crown male and female champions in seventeen weight classes. Despite this proliferation of championship belts, the idea that Paul would win any of them seemed ludicrous back in 2018, when he spent five rounds staggering around a ring with Deji, who looked even less prepared for a prizefight than Paul was. But in his next fights he beat another YouTuber, and then an athlete: Nate Robinson, a former N.B.A. player who was known for his

toughness, until Paul sent him crashing to the canvas in the second round. It was time for Paul to face a real fighter—though not necessarily a real boxer.

Paul has been guided in his new career by Nakisa Bidarian, a former chief financial officer of the U.F.C. To a mixed-martial-arts fan, boxing might seem dull: an ancient sport in which two people merely stand and hit each other, following rules that haven't much changed since they were set down in nineteenth-century London. And to a boxing fan M.M.A. might seem inelegant: a mishmash that occasionally resembles a bar fight, with combatants trading haymakers and then collapsing onto the mat to roll around. In M.M.A., Paul and Bidarian found a supply of fighters who were not necessarily any more skilled at boxing than Paul was, combined with an army of fans who might be willing to pay for the opportunity to see their sport vindicated. Who says M.M.A. fighters can't punch?

Paul's first M.M.A. opponent, Ben Askren, was a laid-back wrestling specialist; he strolled to the ring and, less than two minutes later, found that he had been knocked out by a YouTuber. Dana White, the voluble president of the U.F.C., was one of many people who was surprised. Beforehand, he had said, of Paul, "I'll bet a million dollars that he loses this fuckin' fight"; afterward, he hastened to explain that he had made no such bet. (When Paul was booed at the U.F.C. event in Jacksonville, he was wearing a T-shirt that said "*WHERE IS MY MONEY DANA?*") The Askren knockout popularized the idea that Paul might be a natural: an Internet loudmouth who just happened to be blessed with professional-grade punching power. And so Paul and Bidarian chose to take a calculated risk by selecting Woodley as the next opponent.

Woodley was known as a much better striker than Askren, having won the U.F.C. welterweight championship by knockout in 2016. But his career had mysteriously collapsed when, beginning in 2019, he lost four fights in a row, sometimes looking rather listless. The Paul fight was a chance for him to earn a measure of redemption. It was also a chance for him to earn some money: according to disclosure documents, his pay was at least two million dollars.

The match had been set in motion by an encounter in Paul's locker room before the Askren fight; Woodley, who had trained with Askren for years,

was there to watch as Paul's hands were wrapped. (This is a venerable boxing tradition, meant to insure that no one sneaks a weapon into his glove, besides his fist.) Friendly trash talk escalated into something slightly less friendly. "I know he gon' win," Woodley said, referring to Askren.

"Let's make a bet," Paul replied. "We'll match whatever number you want to put up."

"I don't play games," Woodley said, looking down at Paul, who was sitting backward on a folding chair.

"Sounds like you playing right now," Paul said, and his lips began to curl mischievously. "You just said your boy's gonna win, but you won't bet on it."



*"Still, it's nice to just get away."*  
Cartoon by Christopher Weyant

The exchange sparked mockery online: many viewers noted the gulf between Woodley, who seems destined for the U.F.C. Hall of Fame, and Paul, whom one commenter compared to a young Justin Bieber. Then again, Paul's pop-star-like fan base is what makes him a force in boxing. And by challenging Woodley to a fight he was also proposing a limited partnership: for a few months, Woodley could join the lucrative Jake Paul business.

Woodley comes from Ferguson, Missouri, the eleventh of thirteen children, and recalls growing up as a gang member and a habitual scrapper: “fighting in the streets, fighting in the house for the remote control, fighting because my friends were fighting.” Wrestling helped him escape the neighborhood for the University of Missouri, where he earned a bachelor’s degree and a pair of All-American distinctions. When he was offered his first M.M.A. contract, in 2009, he nearly cried. “I was sleeping on my mom’s couch,” he told me. “I was thirty, forty thousand dollars in debt.” Within a decade, he was being flown around the country, accompanied by a gleaming U.F.C. championship belt. It is a familiar story, and a familiar defense of combat sports, which provide many athletes with a path out of poverty and away from violence—some forms of violence, anyhow.

Paul’s story is less inspiring and maybe more puzzling. He and his brother had rather normal boyhoods in a Cleveland suburb: their mother worked as a nurse, and their father was a real-estate agent and a commercial roofer. Late one night in Puerto Rico, Paul recalled that his father pushed him to win at whatever he did. With this encouragement, Paul turned out to be a pretty good wrestler and a very good content creator: in high school, he started posting skits to Vine, which imposed a six-second limit and therefore rewarded quick punch lines and goofy stunts. (In one video, a guy wearing a wig says, in a motherly voice, “Are you telling me if Jake jumped off a cliff you’d jump off, too?” Cut to the brothers jumping off a cliff, screaming.) On Vine, the Pauls often found themselves shirtless or dancing or both: they were essentially a non-singing boy band, attracting an audience that was evidently huge and seemingly hugely female. The brothers moved from Ohio to Los Angeles in their late teens, and Jake Paul was soon cast on a Disney Channel series called “Bizaardvark,” alongside the future pop star [Olivia Rodrigo](#), playing a good-natured, dim-witted showoff who would do anything on a dare.

Vine effectively shut down in 2016, which obliged Paul to focus his considerable energy on YouTube, where his videos were often twenty minutes long, with a new one posted every day. “Being an influencer was almost harder than being a boxer,” he says now. “You wake up in the morning and you’re, like, Damn, I have to create fifteen minutes of amazing content, and I have twelve hours of sunlight.” Needless to say, “amazing” is a subjective term, but Paul was fluent in the language of YouTube, where he

came across as a familiar type: the high-school jock, popular and gregarious, with a propensity for jokes that remind people of their place in the social hierarchy. (One day, he covered the floor with vegetable oil and then challenged his friends to a race, promising the winner a hundred dollars; footage of the resulting bumps and scrapes formed the basis of one of his more popular videos.) He provided running updates on various romances and rivalries, and a good look at his increasingly glamorous life, which seemed to revolve around swimming pools and expensive vehicles.

“I’m not a saint,” Paul told me one night. “I’m also not a bad guy, but I can very easily play the role.” In 2017, he released a charmless hip-hop track, “It’s Everyday Bro,” accompanied by a charmless video, which earned more than three million thumbs-up votes and more than five million thumbs-downs. But Paul told me that he paid less attention to likes and dislikes than to total view counts—in this case, about two hundred and eighty-seven million.

To leverage his popularity, he founded Team 10, a crew of young content creators who stayed together in a rented house. “It was a nightmare,” he says now. “I wanted to be cool and everyone’s friend, but I really was doing it to create a business.” If anything, Paul seems to underestimate just how bad an idea it was: some of the participants were minors, and the atmosphere evoked an out-of-control freshman dorm. (A report on “Inside Edition” described his neighbors’ anger at the chaos, and showed him roasting marshmallows over a burning mattress and driving a dirt bike into the swimming pool. Inevitably, the segment went viral on YouTube.) The group disbanded not long after, and a number of the members have described Paul as an immature bully, constantly pressuring them to perform dangerous or degrading stunts; Paul denies all of it.

The world of YouTubers thrives on endless reaction—a dizzying cascade of claims and counterclaims. But the accusations of sexual assault raise the possibility that Paul was not just a jerk but a predator. Earlier this year, a performer named Railey Lollie told the *Times* that she had begun working with Paul when she was seventeen, and that he often referred to her as “jailbait.” She also said that he had once groped her; in the paper’s account, “She forcefully told him to stop, and he ran out of the room.” Justine Paradise, a social-media personality, told a more detailed story in a video

posted to YouTube. She said that she was friendly with Paul and that one night he took her to his bedroom, where they danced and then began kissing. In her account, Paul “tried to put his hands places that I didn’t want,” and she moved them away, but Paul ignored this rejection. “He undid his pants and grabbed my face and started fucking my face,” she said. Afterward, he brusquely told her that he wanted to rejoin his friends elsewhere in the house.

Paul has called both of these allegations false. He told me he never would have called Lollie “jailbait” or groped her. And he said, of Paradise, “I didn’t even have any sort of a run-in with this girl.” More than once, he characterized the women’s accounts as “a cry for attention,” which might sound mean-spirited even to people who are inclined to believe his side of the story. He knows, though, that many people will not believe him, partly because plenty of other observers are on record saying that Paul could be boorish and cruel, especially in those days.



Inspirational slogans hang at Jake Paul's home in Puerto Rico. "I'm not a saint," Paul says. "I'm also not a bad guy, but I can very easily play the role."

Given his line of work, Paul doesn’t necessarily need people to believe him. The fact that he has been accused of sexual violence does not make him particularly unusual in the boxing world. Mike Tyson, after all, served three years in prison for rape, then resumed fighting, more or less as popular as ever. Mayweather, an ostentatious character who is probably the highest-

paid fighter of all time (he reportedly made something like two hundred million dollars for his 2015 match against Manny Pacquiao), has faced a number of accusations of violence against women; in 2012, he spent two months in jail after a vicious altercation with the mother of three of his children. But, as long as he was not incarcerated, Mayweather was allowed to fight, and indeed was well incentivized to do so.

One difference, of course, is Paul's background. While virtually all of the top American boxers are Black or Hispanic, Paul is a white guy from a middle-class neighborhood; for him, boxing was an escape not from poverty but from the seemingly luxurious world of social-media stardom. One of his training partners is J'Leon Love, a boxing veteran from Inkster, Michigan. As Love was rising to prominence, his older brother was shot and killed in Inkster, leaving behind a wife and children. Watching the workout in Puerto Rico, Love considered the unusual path that Paul had chosen. "He could be on a yacht, he could be on a jet, all kinds of women," he said, admiringly. "But he's here." And he offered Paul some measured but seemingly earnest praise: "Kid can fight."

When Paul talks about what he's up to, he often sounds, as many popular and polarizing people do, by turns self-pitying and self-aggrandizing. He has started a foundation, Boxing Bullies, on behalf of which he delivers frequent testimonials. "I've been a bully when I was a kid, and it was because I was insecure," he said one afternoon, adding that he shared Tupac Shakur's ambition to "spark the brain that will change the world." During the run-up to the fight, Woodley mocked Paul as a troll and a wannabe, a suburban kid who had watched too many "rap videos." Paul scoffed that Woodley was not passionate about boxing, and was fighting "mostly for a paycheck." Sometimes Paul tried to frame their encounter as a cosmic struggle for justice: he said that he was on a mission to reform boxing, advocating for higher pay and better medical care. Somehow Woodley, a hardworking athlete but a less flamboyant and marketable figure, was cast as the enemy of progress.

Late one night, Paul grew philosophical. "What I will do with this platform, this following, this attention is far more impactful than what Tyron Woodley would do if he would win," he told me, as rain-forest sounds burbled from his iPhone. (He had been sitting in an ice bath earlier, and hadn't bothered to

turn off the meditative music he likes to listen to.) “I think the higher powers, or God, or whatever you want to call it or whatever it is—maybe there’s nothing there, maybe it’s just, like, a placebo, and just thinking there’s something that is guiding me, which then gives me the ultimate confidence to go and win, so I don’t even question it—but I do think that the earth would rather me win than him.”

Every boxer with dreams of glory seems to cite the same two antecedents: [Muhammad Ali](#), the epitome of grace and courage, and Mike Tyson, the epitome of ferocity. This is a reflection of the extraordinary impression that these men made; it is also a reflection of the sport’s failure, in the post-Tyson years, to produce figures who made a similar claim on the public imagination. Paul names both as inspirations. (Tyson recently praised Paul as a “white boy with balls,” although he added that he could still knock him out.) But, to gauge Paul’s place in the sport, it may be helpful to consider a different precursor: Mark Gastineau, the former football player, who in 1991 began a new career in professional boxing—“fighting for respect,” as the *Los Angeles Times* put it. Like Paul, Gastineau was a famous white guy, strong but untutored, and, like Paul, he seemed sure that hard work and determination could make up for missed decades of training. His success, if he achieved it, would debunk the old-fashioned idea that champions are formed through years of patient gym work, but it would also affirm the idea that every boxing match is a test of wills, and that an unusually willful man might therefore triumph against the odds. He won his début bout, against a fighter named Derrick Dukes, by knockout.

Gastineau’s boxing story was complicated by the broadcast, in 1994, of a “60 Minutes” investigation in which Dukes revealed that the fight had been “totally fixed.” Dukes, a former pro wrestler, gave a demonstration: he asked Steve Kroft to throw an imaginary punch, and dropped at once to the ground, imaginarily knocked out. Gastineau denied cheating, but by then the fantasy that he was a boxing savant had already been dispelled, by a journeyman named Tim (Doc) Anderson, who beat him easily in a five-round decision. There was a rematch, which Gastineau won, although apparently not without some help: Anderson later said that the fight’s promoter, Rick (Elvis) Parker, offered him half a million dollars to throw the first fight and, on the night of the second fight, secretly poisoned him. Years

later, during a confrontation over the alleged poisoning, Anderson shot and killed Parker.

Boxing has always been a bit of a carnival, and sometimes a bit of a con, which explains why so many boxing fans and professionals have been disinclined to celebrate the arrival of the Paul brothers; in the sport's endless quest for legitimacy, the Pauls are unreliable allies. But in boxing, as on social media, the Pauls are part of a cultural shift. Just as YouTubers once encroached on boy bands' traditional turf, celebrity boxing matches have recently threatened to upstage championship fights; at least during the pandemic, viewers who typically ignore professional boxing have seemed to enjoy the novelty of watching famous people punch each other. When Tyson was lured back into the ring last year, he faced another legendary former boxer, Roy Jones, Jr., in a spirited but friendly eight-round exhibition that was one of the year's highest-profile fights. A series of matches have featured social-media stars—most of whom do not appear to have spent years (or in some cases even weeks) in training.

Logan Paul's fight against Mayweather, earlier this year, seemed at first like a fiasco. At a press conference, Jake Paul grabbed Mayweather's hat and was subsequently chased and roughed up by Mayweather and his team, an event that Paul commemorated by getting his leg tattooed with a picture of a hat and the phrase "gotcha hat." The fight itself, officially an exhibition, was less absurd: Logan Paul lasted eight unscored rounds, though many thought that Mayweather was taking it easy. Afterward, Paul celebrated with exaggerated bravado. On his podcast, "Impaulsive," he declared, "I'm the best boxer on the planet."

His co-host, Mike Majlak, roared with laughter, and reminded him that he had never actually beaten anyone. "Zero fuckin' wins!" he said.

Although Jake Paul takes boxing more seriously, that doesn't mean boxing is obliged to take him seriously. Lou DiBella is a promoter known for strong opinions and an inability to keep them to himself. Last year, when Paul was gearing up to fight Nate Robinson, DiBella told an interviewer, "The idea that I gotta watch Jake Paul or some of these other numbnuts fighting ex-professional football players and shit like that—who the fuck wants to see that?" This year, on Twitter, he was less dismissive. "There's a reason

@jakepaul has star power,” he wrote. “He’s smart and he’s a master button pusher. And when it comes to #boxing, he shows more respect for the sport (and its potential) than most others in it.” By then, DiBella and Paul were doing business together. One of DiBella’s boxers was fighting on the same card as Paul vs. Woodley: Amanda Serrano, a Puerto Rican champion who is widely viewed as one of the best boxers in the world, and who was hoping that an association with Paul might provide a mutually advantageous exchange of credibility and visibility.



*Jake and Logan Paul's provocations have earned them enemies throughout the social-media world. In boxing, though, good behavior tends not to be a job requirement.*

As a YouTube star, Paul earned between one and four dollars for every thousand times his videos were streamed. Those dollars added up, but only as long as YouTube didn’t find his content too objectionable to include in its advertising program. As a professional fighter, he aims to earn more money from fewer viewers: his fight against Woodley, which was distributed on pay-per-view by Showtime, was priced at sixty dollars. The venue was the Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse, in Cleveland, where the Cavaliers play, and the event was billed as a homecoming for Paul, who had grown up watching LeBron James there. He spent the week of the fight at his mother’s house in the suburbs, heading into the city for promotional appearances. By the weigh-in, he was growing notably more reserved. “Jake’s definitely way more serious, bro,” Logan Paul told me, backstage. “Before Floyd, bro, we

were, like, making TikToks and shit,” he said. “He’s not like that. He’s big on mental visualization.”

Jake Paul emerged from his dressing room, and the collection of friends and media members nearby suddenly hushed; a fighter preparing for battle, even this fighter, has a certain gravitas. He predicted a knockout in the second or third round. But he had also been spending some time in the woods behind his mother’s house, and he had some non-fight-related questions on his mind. “What do the mosquitoes do when there’s no humans?” he said. “Like, what do they suck blood out of?” He sounded a lot like a guy who once made his living by generating talky content on YouTube—which is to say, a guy who has learned how to convince viewers, often against their better judgment, that they want to see whatever will happen next.

Paul often frames his foray into boxing as a quest for respect, although he does not always act as if that is his top priority. The previous month, he had proposed that the loser get a tattoo saying “*I LOVE* [the winner],” a bet that Woodley had warily accepted. To create more of a spectacle, Paul had hired a tattoo artist to attend the fight, so that the bet could be settled immediately.

It was striking, on fight night, to see how many people would come out to watch Jake Paul fight, and how relatively few of them would root for him, even in his home town. Whenever his picture came onscreen, there seemed to be more boos than cheers. The arena was full of fans, including more teen-agers and preteens, and more women and girls, than typically attend boxing matches. One Ohio celebrity, Dave Chappelle, was a conspicuous presence near the ring, waving and hollering. Another Ohio celebrity, LeBron James, sent his regrets via Twitter: “*CLEVELAND IS JUMPING!!* Should have flew back to the crib.” Boxing crowds often ignore or skip the opening fights, but these fans seemed unaware of that convention, and they gave Amanda Serrano one of the biggest ovations of her career, as she spent ten rounds taking apart a Mexican champion named Yamileth Mercado. Serrano said later that she was “surprised” by the applause, and a few weeks after that she announced that she was leaving DiBella to work exclusively with Paul, who had launched a boxing-promotion company.

The most surreal part of Paul’s fight was his introduction. Jimmy Lennon, Jr., the announcer, called him “the popular media sensation, the acclaimed

content creator, and undefeated fighter known as the Problem Child,” which must make Paul the first fighter to have his boxing credentials listed third in his biography. He may also have become the first to compete while wearing trunks with embedded digital screens, which were flashing his name when the bell finally sounded. As he and Woodley stalked and pawed each other, the veteran boxing broadcaster Al Bernstein described Paul as “a pretty good combination puncher,” and then added a caveat: “You know, you temper that with the fact that he hasn’t yet fought a pro boxer.” Paul had won his previous fights while taking very little punishment, but the ability—and the willingness—to withstand punches is essential to boxing, to the sport’s mystique. It is harder to hate a person when you have watched him get hurt.

It happened near the end of the fourth round: Paul ducked his head, and Woodley hit him with an overhand right, sending him back with such force that he had to grab the ropes to stay on his feet. (A different referee might have ruled this an official knockdown.) The Ohio crowd was cheering for a Missouri guy, and Woodley waved his right fist triumphantly even as he kept pressing forward, hunting Paul. What followed was both anticlimactic and impressive: Paul refused to fade, and in fact looked somewhat revived in the later rounds, while Woodley let himself be outpunched. When the scores were read, Paul won a split decision, which most observers agreed he deserved; he had survived, and kept his undefeated record intact.

Before the fight, Paul had talked about his eagerness to return immediately to Puerto Rico and continue his training. But in the ring after the fight he took a more ambivalent tone. “I’ve barely got my hair cut in, like, two years, my teeth are all crooked, my nose is crooked, I’ve dedicated my past eighteen months to this,” he said. “I think I might need to chill out for a second, figure out who I am. I’m only twenty-four.”

Woodley was in no mood to talk about time off—he wanted a rematch. “Me and Jake need to run that back,” he said, and then he addressed Paul not as an opponent but as a business partner. “Nobody gon’ sell a pay-per-view like we did.” (Exact figures are kept secret, but reports indicate that about half a million people bought the fight.) Paul suggested that he would grant a rematch if Woodley got the tattoo he had agreed to, and a month later Woodley posted proof on Instagram: the words “i LOVE Jake Paul” inscribed, seemingly permanently, on the inside of his middle finger. By

then, Paul had moved on. “I’m leaving Tyron in the past,” he said—thinking, perhaps, of that perilous fourth round.

The Woodley fight made Paul seem less like a phenomenon or a fraud, and more like an ordinary boxer, albeit one with plenty of work to do on his footwork and punch mechanics. A Web site called BoxRec uses a mathematical formula to rank every active professional, and it recently listed Paul as the five-hundred-and-eighty-third-best cruiserweight in the world, out of nine hundred and twenty-eight. That doesn’t seem wrong. But boxing is entertainment, and so far Paul’s fights have entertained. Maybe some of the viewers were inspired to buy the recent heavyweight-championship fight between Tyson Fury and Deontay Wilder, who fought at the highest level, trading punches and knockdowns until Wilder collapsed onto the ropes and slumped to the canvas. It was a thrilling fight, and also a terrifying one—a historic encounter from which neither man may ever fully recover.

Paul says that he plans to keep boxing for three or four more years, working to build a new business and to shed, or partially shed, an old reputation. Having succeeded in the chaotic new world of social media, he seems happy, for now, to retreat into the chaotic old world of boxing, adopting a business model—pay-per-view—that was state of the art when Muhammad Ali fought Joe Frazier on HBO, in 1975. Paul will probably never give us anything like Fury-Wilder III, although he recently announced that in December he will fight Fury’s little brother, Tommy Fury, a nominally professional boxer who is still learning on the job. If Paul is defeated, he may suddenly become much less marketable, because his career is less suspenseful: the thing everyone is waiting for will have happened. In the meantime, he can keep doing what boxers are expected to do: risk his body and mind to thrill paying customers—including the many who are rooting against him. The appeal of boxing, for fans and fighters alike, is inseparable from the extraordinary toll it takes. Each fight is transformative. You don’t come out exactly the way you went in. ♦

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## **Strange Bedfellows Dept.**

- [When the Man in Black Met the Guys in Tie-Dye](#)

[November 8, 2021 Issue](#)

# When the Man in Black Met the Guys in Tie-Dye

Owsley Stanley, the legendary Grateful Dead soundman and LSD chemist, left behind thirteen hundred reels of live recordings from his sonic laboratory, including a newly released recording of the night Johnny Cash came to town.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

November 1, 2021

In the summer of 1990, Bill Semins, who goes by Hawk, was a wrestler who'd just finished his first year at Princeton. He was also a [Deadhead](#). One night, at a Grateful Dead concert in Raleigh, North Carolina, while dancing (sober) out in the concourse, he came across a table promoting the Rainforest Action Network and encountered a well put-together middle-aged man with an all-access backstage pass on a lanyard. Hawk grabbed the laminate and said, "You must be someone really important." The back of the pass read "Bear." Bear was Owsley—né Augustus Owsley Stanley III—the near-mythic soundman and LSD chemist. Bear and Hawk, discovering a shared obsession with fitness and diet (since the sixties, Bear had eaten nothing but rare meat), became Dead-tour weight-lifting pals, with matching membership cards to Gold's Gym. The following spring, at a concert in Albany, Bear introduced Hawk to his son, Starfinder Stanley, a wrestler, too, and a student at Cornell. Hawk and Starfinder became fast friends.



*Johnny Cash and Owsley Stanley* Illustration by João Fazenda

Starfinder was born on a solstice in 1970 (hence the name) while his father, who'd been busted for distributing LSD, was in prison (hence the bodybuilding). Starfinder's half sister Redbird was born three weeks later. "We're hippie twins," he said. "My dad had four kids with four moms and didn't raise any of us." Starfinder grew up in the Bronx and in Westchester County, but he and Redbird, as kids, attended a circus camp among the California redwoods. "I resisted [psychedelics](#) until I was in college," Starfinder said. "My father practically had to pry my jaws open and stuff it down my throat. I was wound a little tight." Now Starfinder is a veterinarian in Northern California.

Starting out with the Dead in 1966, Bear was a mad scientist of amplified music, pioneering sound systems and, later, recording techniques. For years, he made reel-to-reel tapes of virtually every show he engineered, no matter the artist, to assess the sound of the room and the effects of his unorthodox methods. He called these his Sonic Journals. Just before he died, in 2011, in a car accident in Australia, he instructed Starfinder and Redbird to preserve them.

Bear left behind thirteen hundred reels of live soundboard recordings, of eighty artists. Some quick math determined that it would take two engineers more than two years, working full time, to digitize them. This was more than

the Stanleys could afford, and so Starfinder and Hawk, along with a Princeton friend of Hawk's named Peter Bell and Bear's widow, Sheilah, launched the Owsley Stanley Foundation, to finance the transfer and eventual release of the material. "It was essential that we preserve this pivotal point in American musical history, where all this explosive creativity was happening," Hawk, now a lawyer in Pittsburgh, said.

They have since got through almost nine hundred reels and released eight performances, including rarities from [Doc](#) and Merle Watson (1974), Commander Cody (1970), Tim Buckley (1968), and [Ali Akbar Khan](#) (1970). On hearing the Watson, Jimmy Carter sent a note praising it as "a welcome addition to my collection." He added that he and Rosalynn "look forward to your Allman Brothers release." The foundation obliged: "Fillmore East 1970."

Last week, the foundation released a true jackalope, the "otoro of this tuna," as Bell put it: "Johnny Cash at the Carousel Ballroom, April 24, 1968." At that time, the Carousel, operated by the Dead, the Jefferson Airplane, and others, was a psychedelic dance hall and, effectively, Bear's sonic laboratory. Whoever passed through got journaled, and dosed.

[Cash](#) was in the early stages of a resurrection. The year before, he'd crawled into a cave near Chattanooga to die: drugs, drink, divorce. Now newly remarried, to June Carter Cash, off the pills, a few days from dropping his career-reviving live album from Folsom Prison, he showed up on a Wednesday night with his band, the Tennessee Three, and, before a scattering of bemused hippies and aficionados (capacity was three thousand; turnout, seven hundred), snapped through twenty-one songs. Among them were a couple of Dylan covers. June also sat in for a half-dozen numbers, including a rip-snorting rendition of "Tall Lover Man" that cuts out at the climax; Bear had been slow to change reels.

The release's opener is a number called "Cocaine Blues." Cash says, "Here's another song from a show we did at Folsom Prison. It's in the album that's out this week." No one had any idea that, in a little more than a year, Cash would have his own prime-time TV program, or that rock and country musicians would begin (again) to borrow and steal from one another, to the benefit (more or less) of both.

“Country music hadn’t yet captured the hippies’ imagination,” Hawk said. “Outlaw country was still five years away. And yet, by October of that year, Buck Owens was selling out the same hall.”

Did Bear, as was his wont, spike Cash’s Coke? “My dad used to pull tapes and tell stories,” Starfinder said. “The music set off his memories. Like the time he dosed with Jimi Hendrix, and so on. But I never did get the story of the time Johnny Cash came to town.” ♦

## Tables for Two

- [The Scent of Spices, and Vegan Pho, at Bánh](#)

[November 8, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Scent of Spices, and Vegan Pho, at Bánh

Nhu Ton, the chef of a Vietnamese restaurant on the Upper West Side, experimented for countless hours to make both her traditional and her vegan pho taste like the place where she grew up.

By [Jiayang Fan](#)

October 29, 2021



As a little girl growing up in Vietnam, Nhu Ton—the chef at Bánh, a Vietnamese restaurant that opened in January, on the Upper West Side—was surrounded by the scent of spices. Ton’s family worked and lived in a vast open-air market, and in the mornings her nose frequently awoke to adults shelving bags of cinnamon, coriander, and lemongrass. “When I think about my childhood, I smell it first,” Ton told me. The long aromatic tails that the spices left on her memory now make their mark on Bánh’s menu. “I wanted to create the flavors that I craved,” Ton said. “Things that taste like the particular place where I grew up.”



*The pho broth at Bánh is simmered for hours and makes use of star anise, cloves, and cardamom.*

One of those things is good Vietnamese coffee. Buôn Ma Thuột, Ton’s home town, is the capital of java in Vietnam, and the source of Bánh’s coffee beans. If you are wary of a bold brew, this is likely not the drink for you. But if you, like me, are a caffeine fiend with a taste for the rich and creamy, you will appreciate the buttery-sweet marriage of thick swirls of condensed milk to the dark, pungent roast.

On the varied menu, bún chả, a traditional barbecue-pork dish from Hanoi that features the meat prepared three ways, is a good place to start. A recent visit began with skewers of pork belly, steeped in a house marinade and smoked over charcoal. Then there were medallions of ground pork wrapped in betel leaf and submerged in a small bowl of fish sauce made faintly wine-like with rice vinegar and orange and lime juice. The most memorable of the three were the spring rolls; stuffed with pork, taro, and wood-ear mushrooms, the golden-brown parcels were encased in rice wrappers so diaphanous that their crispy crunch was like a wondrous sleight of hand: I heard the crackle, but my teeth didn’t sink into anything but pork.



The dry-style vegan pho arrives with a colorful platter of pumpkin, Brussels sprouts, tofu, and bok choy.

Ton remarked that, as a child, cooking didn't appeal to her because it seemed time-consuming: no matter how busy Ton's mother was with the shop, she cooked three times a day. Two decades on, Ton told me that she considers patience a necessary ingredient in most of her recipes. When I took my first spoonful of the pho at Bánh, I felt my senses come to attention; there was a vividness to the broth that could only have been coaxed into being through long hours of simmering and a timely deployment of star anise, cloves, and cardamom. "I need to get it to exactly the flavor I loved as a kid," Ton told me. "So it's always a process."



*Ton says that she considers patience a necessary ingredient in most of her recipes.*

For all her fidelity to the palate of her youth, Ton still rises to new challenges. When her mother adopted a vegan diet some years ago, Ton became determined to make a decent vegetable-only banh mi and pho. The solution to the vegan banh mi turned out to be basil pesto, peanut sauce for a silken texture, and smoked oyster mushrooms seasoned in soy sauce. Though a tad bland—one might wish for a squirt of hoisin sauce and a few jalapeños—the pleasingly charred mushrooms lend the sandwich a woody, umami edge.

Could pho ever be satisfyingly meat-free? With a vegan friend, I ordered the dry-style vegan pho with trepidation. The accompanying platter of pumpkin, Brussels sprouts, tofu, and bok choy was colorful, but we both knew it would come down to the side of broth. When it arrived, my companion took a single slurp, wrinkled his brow, and said, “Are you sure this is vegan? This tastes too good to be vegan.” When it was my turn to slurp, I understood his doubt immediately: instead of being watery and flat, this flavorful soup belonged to the same family as Bánh’s traditional pho—layered and complex in a way that makes you want to keep sipping on a cold autumn evening. How had Ton done it? She said that it probably had to do with the white pepper, the sesame oil, and the countless hours spent in the kitchen experimenting with a host of spices. Also, she knew not to stop working until her mother approved. (*Dishes \$10-\$17.*) ♦

# The Theatre

- Work, Motherhood, and Capitalism Onstage

The musicals “Caroline, or Change” and “The Mother” take on personal and political revolutions.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

You never quite know what you’re going to get with a revival of a lesser-seen work, one that had the mixed blessing to be considered ahead of its time. Have the moths got to it over the years? Does it now fit the way it was supposed to? When [Tony Kushner](#) and Jeanine Tesori’s musical, “[Caroline, or Change](#),” premiered on Broadway, in 2004, it received an uneven critical response, ran for less than four months, and hasn’t been staged here since. Now “Caroline” is back (in a Roundabout Theatre Company production, at Studio 54), with the English star Sharon D Clarke making her soul-shattering Broadway début in the title role. The musical hasn’t just stood the test of time; it has grown into the present—or maybe the present has grown to meet it. Either way, this production, directed by Michael Longhurst, should confirm it as a contemporary classic.

The show opens in November, 1963. We’re in the Lake Charles, Louisiana, home of the Gellmans, a Jewish family of sufficient, if stretched, means. Caroline Thibodeaux, the Gellmans’ Black maid (“Negro” is the term of the era, and the one Caroline herself prefers), toils in the basement, doing the laundry. For company, she has the washing machine (Arica Jackson) and the radio (Harper Miles, Nya, and Nasia Thomas), both of which are personified as fellow Black women, the former crowned in a halo of bubbles, the latter imagined as a Motown girl group with antennas sprouting from their heads. (Fly Davis did the superb costume design and set.) The appliances’ job is to make Caroline’s life easier, and they do their best, serenading her with ecstatic song. But they’re not above passing pointed judgment. “Thirty-nine and divorcée,” the radio sings. “How on earth she gonna thrive / when her life bury her alive?”

Caroline is angry: at life, which has trapped her in other people’s basements for twenty-two years while she struggles to keep a roof over the heads of her own four kids, and at herself, for failing to rise above her regrets. And she’s ashamed—of her illiteracy, of having lost a husband she loved in spite of his violence and drunkenness. Her bitterness explains her terse, forbidding manner, but lonely eight-year-old Noah Gellman (performed, on the night that I saw the show, by Jaden Myles Waldman) isn’t deterred. Caroline is the

center of his universe, the woman “who runs everything” and seems, to him, even “stronger than my dad.” It’s a special treat for him to light her daily cigarette. Noah’s mother used to smoke, too. Then cancer killed her, and his father (John Cariani), an emotionally distant clarinettist, got remarried, to Rose Stopnik (Caissie Levy), a New Yorker who feels painfully out of place in this sad family and this strange Southern town. Rose can’t seem to get anyone to warm to her. Caroline doesn’t want her leftover stuffed cabbage, and Noah won’t let her tuck him in at night. But Rose is a woman of action, and if she can’t inspire love she’ll settle for wielding authority. When Noah keeps leaving coins in his pockets like some careless rich kid, she devises a policy: Caroline can supplement her paltry salary with any change she finds in the laundry.

This is one form of change that the musical deals with, and it sets off a crisis. Caroline is humiliated by Rose’s good intentions, but she can’t afford to refuse, even if it means taking “pennies from a baby.” The other kind of change is no less fraught. The world is shifting beneath Caroline’s tired feet. Her friend Dotty (Tamika Lawrence), also a maid, has begun to attend night school in the hope of making a better life for herself; her fun-loving teen-age daughter, Emmie (the radiant Samantha Williams), is developing a political consciousness that Caroline fears will lead to disappointment, or worse. In Dallas, the President has just been shot dead. Then, there’s the statue of a Confederate soldier that stands downtown, and onstage, at the start of Act I. By the time the second act begins, only its legs are left. The rest has been dismantled under the cover of night and tossed into the bayou.

Kushner grew up the son of a clarinettist in nineteen-sixties Lake Charles; he dedicated “Caroline” to his family’s own maid, Maudie Lee Davis. So Noah is an avatar of sorts for Kushner’s boyhood self, but, in this work rooted in autobiography, Kushner does something rare: he invites his curiosity about others to dislodge his own point of view. Carried along by Tesori’s music, which mashes klezmer, spirituals, sixties pop, and half a dozen other genres to create one irrepressible American sound, we see the story simultaneously through a child’s hopeful eyes and through a grown woman’s jaded ones. Are their perspectives so different? Both kids and adults, in this play that grapples with the burdens of reality, are granted gorgeous flights of fantasy; both yearn for life to go back to the way it once was. Still, there’s an asymmetry: Caroline is a mainstay in Noah’s world, while Noah can only

dream of making a place for himself in Caroline's. He longs to stake the same claim to her imagination that she has to his. Isn't that what we all want —to figure in one another's stories?

That question is political, too. Kushner comically nails the sincere yet complacent side of so much American Jewish liberalism in his depiction of Noah's grandparents (Joy Hermalyn and Stuart Zagnit), who eulogize J.F.K. as being as much of a “friend to the colored” as he was a “friend to the Jew.” Nice thought, but not quite the truth. At the Gellmans’ Hanukkah party, Emmie, whom Caroline has brought with her to help serve the latkes, sparks a debate about the burgeoning civil-rights movement with Rose’s old-school socialist father (Chip Zien). Caroline is furious with her insubordinate daughter, and Emmie is incensed by Caroline’s meekness. When will her mother dare to stand up for herself—and for her people?

When Caroline finally does speak her mind, she sings it, in an explosive aria addressed to no one but God; Clarke, as powerful a performer as you’re likely to see, unleashes her character’s dissatisfaction and heartache, and brings down the house. Caroline isn’t who her daughter wishes her to be. She isn’t who she wanted to become. But she is singularly herself, and, as Clarke shows us, that’s enough.

Another musical about politics and motherhood under the strain of capitalism is in revival at the Wooster Group’s Performing Garage: [Bertolt Brecht’s “The Mother”](#) (directed by Elizabeth LeCompte). Brecht, who based this 1932 work on a Maxim Gorky novel, intended it to be a *Lehrstück*, or learning play. “About 15,000 Berlin working-class women saw the play, which was a demonstration of methods of illegal revolutionary struggle,” he later wrote. The Performing Garage holds about seventy-five people, who appeared, on the evening that I attended the show, to be members of New York’s literati. The Marxist revolution may yet be fomented on TikTok, but it seems safe to say that the downtown New York stage is not the insurrectionary platform for the masses that Brecht might have hoped for.

The mother in “The Mother” is Pelegea Vlasov (Kate Valk), an illiterate factory worker in pre-Revolutionary Russia. Once she is introduced to Communist politics by her son, Pavel (Gareth Hobbs), she devotes herself to

the cause, wrapping pickles in radical leaflets to distribute to workers and smuggling a printing press into her apartment. It is not hard to grasp Brecht's lessons: workers are exploited, factory owners are greedy, union reps will screw everyone, and common men and women must band together. And there's another, more curious message: that a parent can be converted to her child's beliefs through mere exposure. Inspired by a diverse array of sources, including Slavoj Žižek's YouTube videos, "Pee-wee's Playhouse," and Radiolab, the Wooster Group takes an explainer approach to Brecht's text, breaking up the action with amiable lectures on his theatrical methods; this cerebral production pleasurable tickles the intellect while leaving the emotions untouched. Brecht may have thought that one could function without the other, but no revolution has yet managed to sever the mind from the heart. ♦

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# **Underground News**

- [Putting \(Dopey\) Words in the Mouths of New York's Mayoral Candidates](#)

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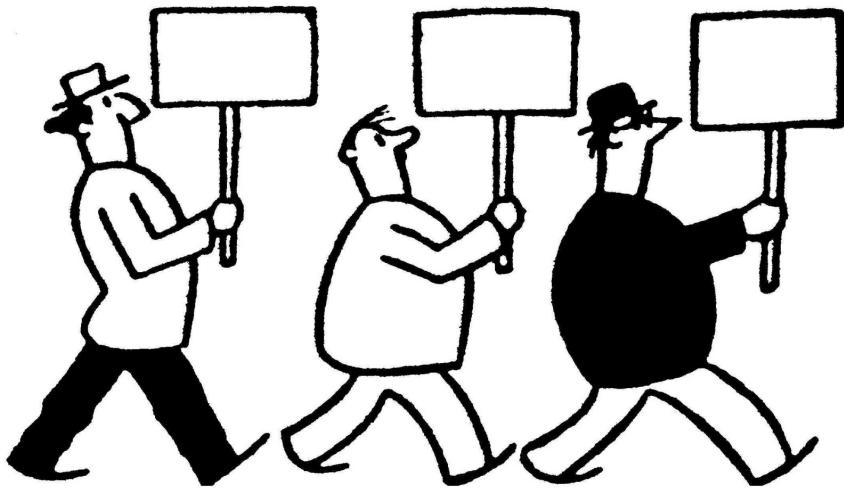
# Putting (Dopey) Words in the Mouths of New York's Mayoral Candidates

The satirist Dennard Dayle hopes to discomfit subway riders with his phony but sharp campaign posters.

By [Zach Helfand](#)

October 30, 2021

A few months ago, a series of mayoral campaign posters started appearing in New York subway cars and taped to lampposts. Something about the ads seemed off (one for Brooklyn Borough President [Eric Adams](#) promised: “I Was Beaten by Cops. Now You Can Be Too”), but, then, so has the campaign. The Republican candidate, the Guardian Angels founder [Curtis Sliwa](#), once evoked the image of himself as “a hemorrhoid in a red beret.” As for Adams, the Democratic nominee, no one is sure where he lives; he is said to pad around Borough Hall, where he keeps a mattress, in his socks. Fake news, real news—who can keep track? A paper in the Bronx pegged the strange posters as a Sliwa guerrilla operation. One of the ersatz Sliwa ads: “Marxist-Democrat voles want the light in your teeth. . . . Vote for me.” Maybe. Or possibly the work of Putin operatives? Dark-money disinformation?



“It’s more like, what if Banksy was a moron?” Dennard Dayle said the other day. Dayle is a writer from Bay Ridge—thirty, slightly nerdish—who sidelines in acts of civic disgruntlement. Recent pranks include fake posters for the M.T.A. (A-train-service-change notice: “Please let me die”); an M.F.T., or Marx Fungible Token, a digital painting of Karl Marx that sold for a hundred and ten dollars; and a made-up *Covid*-denier convention called SpreadCon, featuring chocolate-coated doorknobs and a sneezing contest. (Dayle recently quit his job writing ad copy after selling a book of satire called “[Everything Abridged](#).”) He has been published in this magazine as well.)

During the primary, he was inundated by candidate mailers. “I got one that said, ‘Beaten by cops, I became one,’ ” he said—from the Adams campaign. “I was, like, O.K., I can’t *not* do this.” After his Adams parody, he kept going:

Ray McGuire: “*Black? White? You’re Still Poor. Shut the Fuck Up.*”

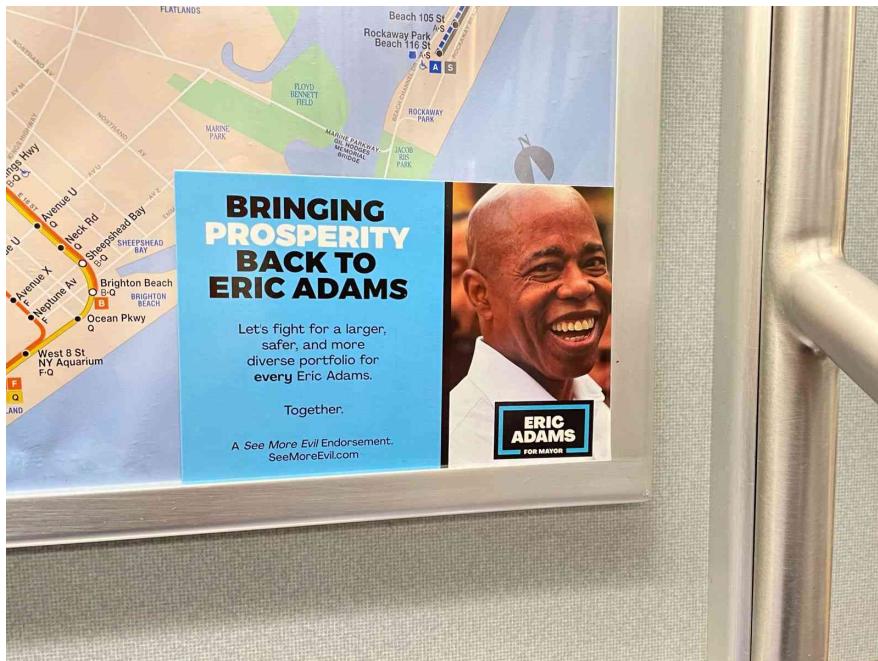
Dianne Morales: “*For Every Vote I Lose, an Intern Dies. Your Choice.*”

He printed thousands of copies and plastered them across the city. He noticed parallels between his work and the mayoral race—tall tales spun, personas manufactured. “I’m very interested in people that can pull off

large-scale hoaxes, and how that's sort of a creative thing unto itself," he said. A month ago, for instance, Sliwa orchestrated a photo op in which he crawled under a car and claimed, falsely, to have found a murder weapon. Adams blamed missing tax filings on an intermittently homeless accountant whom he charitably kept in his employ. "Creatively, you could say they come from a very similar place as me," Dayle said. "I would say that I'm better at it than Sliwa, and I'm very worried that Adams might be better than me."

One day last week, Dayle designed a fresh batch of posters and hit the subways. He wore all black and posted his work with practiced nonchalance.

Would riders know hoax from reality? Once, as a train left the station, a construction worker studied a fake Sliwa poster. Big letters read "*THE FALSE IDOL IS BROKEN.*" Under that: "The Weaver of Lies wove his lies, and I unwove them. . . . Now our city wears truth's beret." The man nodded vigorously. "I like the way he talks!" he said.



Photograph courtesy Dennard Dayle

On the L train, a rider approved of another fake Sliwa ad that read "*Don't give up. Don't let them win. ('Them' is the Blacks.)*" The rider said, cryptically, "*They want to confuse you.*" A woman skimmed an ad with the tagline "It's time to fight for a larger, safer, and more diverse portfolio for

every Eric Adams. Together.” “I like this,” she said. “It tells me he’s an everyman.” She leaned in closer, squinting: “Wait . . .”

Dayle exited for some air. In Union Square, he handed several posters to a stranger wearing a smiley-face tie. The man tore up the Adams ad and a de Blasio valedictory poster (“*I’m Free! Look at the sun, it’s beautiful*”). “I’ll keep that one,” he said, tenderly, of the Sliwa ad. Dayle thanked him for the feedback.

A few minutes later, the man flagged Dayle down. “Can I take this test again?” he said. “This is fucking genius!”

Dayle perked up. The man planned to vote for Sliwa, but the Sliwa parody (“‘Them’ is the Blacks”) was giving him pause. He wanted to hear what Dayle, who is Black, thought.

“My long-term impression: the Guardian Angels create these race-tinged crime stories,” Dayle said. “But I’m glad you liked the art.”

“I was a B.L.M. guy before they lost their fucking minds—I was walking around with a Kaepernick jersey,” the man replied. “My best friend’s a Black dude, and he’s very educational to me on race in America . . . but—how do I say this? I think we’ve won the race battle in New York. I think that in other parts of the country it’s a problem.” He went on, “In New York, *maybe* there’s still racism with the cops? But B.L.M. did such a number on the cops.”

The man offered a hug. Dayle suggested a fist bump. “That was nuts,” he said, when the man left. “That’s a demonstration of whatever power comedy does and does not have.” ♦

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