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THE NEW YORKER



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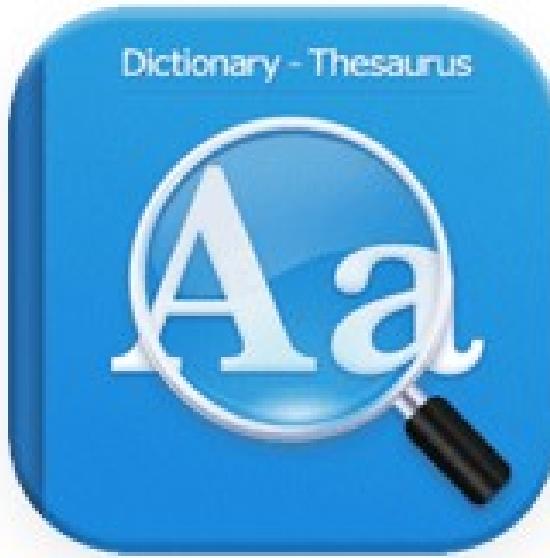


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Goings On

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Goings On

T-Pain's Redemption Arc

Also: Flamenco Vivo Carlota Santana, Carnegie Hall celebrates Juneteenth, the film “Naked Acts,” and more.

June 14, 2024



Sheldon Pearce

Pearce has covered music for Goings On since 2020.

To call T-Pain’s journey back to the center of pop culture a redemption arc might be underestimating his influence, even at his most marginalized, but in recent years the singer and rapper has become a case study in successful second impressions. Once the purveyor of a liquor-infused, Auto-Tuned R. & B. that pitch-corrected his voice to sound like a libidinous robot, he was soon deemed gimmicky and regressive, a blight on true artistry. A 2014 Tiny Desk concert went a long way toward dispelling the notion that he couldn’t actually sing; winning “The Masked Singer,” in 2019, beating out Donny Osmond and Gladys Knight, ratified his performance credentials. These days, he leans into his newfound brand as a soulful crooner, most recently with more role-playing, on his 2023 album, “On Top of the Covers,” which

takes on staples by Sam Cooke, Journey, and Black Sabbath. But T-Pain is still most captivating when he's navigating the tipsy world of strip joints and night clubs, even with a voice that's now sweet and unclouded.



T-Pain makes a stop in New York on his “Mansion in Wiscansin Party” tour, on June 23, capping a week of stirring performances at Central Park’s Rumsey Playfield, for **SummerStage**. First, on June 16, the English singer-songwriter **Corinne Bailey Rae** is joined by the Oscar- and Grammy-nominated singer and instrumentalist **Dixson**, a secret weapon for Beyoncé. For many years, Rae operated in a sunny pop R. & B. range, but with her 2023 album, “Black Rainbows,” she broke free, expanding into experimental jazz and rock for some of the best music of her career. On June 19, the saxophonist and singer **Masego** and the backup dancer turned R. & B. front man **Jordan Ward**—like-minded artists tinkering with jazz and blues—take turns running through songs that reimagine the classic forms they revere. Then on June 22 the accomplished jazz drummer **Yussef Dayes**, who made his solo début last year with “Black Classical Music,” synchs up with the bassist **Aneesa Strings** in a perfect convergence of knowledgeable and formidable players.



About Town

Theatre

In “**Home**,” Samm-Art Williams’s celebrated play from 1979, the blithe, tricksterish farmer Cephus (Tory Kittles) is in love with Pattie Mae (Brittany Inge), who goes off to college and decides not to return to their North Carolina home town, dashing Cephus’s hope to marry her. Cephus ducks the Vietnam draft and does time in prison, then reluctantly skips town and heads north, to the coldhearted streets of New York. Inge and Stori Ayers play a host of characters, giving Cephus’s journey shades of an epic allegory. But the director Kenny Leon creates a shallow stage plane, all bright, saturated color, more interested in horizontality than in depth, making Cephus and his tribulations look like a series of comic-book panels.—*Vinson Cunningham* ([*Reviewed in our issue of 6/17/24.*](#)) (Todd Haimes; through July 21.)

Classical

Although it took a while for the government to catch up, people have been observing Juneteenth, a commemoration of the end of slavery in the U.S., since the late eighteen-hundreds. For the sixth consecutive year, Carnegie Hall hosts a **Juneteenth Celebration**, in partnership with the Healing of the Nations Foundation. The evening features the frequent “Les Mis” Javert and acclaimed baritone Norm Lewis, the Grammy-winning and cap-donning jazz singer Gregory Porter, the orchestrator and pianist Joseph Joubert, and the esteemed Chicago-based contemporary-gospel group the Adrian Dunn Singers.—*Jane Bua (Carnegie Hall; June 19.)*

Art



If the late performer, artist, and conceptualist **Ray Johnson** (1927-95) was known to you primarily as a chief architect of Pop art, this show will come as a revelation—and a relief. Though in much of his work Johnson’s restless energy can be inspiring, one can feel fatigued by his desire to be heard, and noticed. But these exquisite paintings and collages are meditative: Johnson eschews words and symbols for shapes that are soulful and calm. And even as some of the incredible detail he gives to pieces like “Calm Center” (ca. 1949-55) is eye-boggling, you don’t get lost in Johnson’s bravura hand so much as you want to be close to the formal distance that haunts the work.

Beautifully lit and laid out, this show is like a well-ordered dream, filled with care and tenderness.—*Hilton Als* (*Craig F. Starr; through June 29.*)

Hip-Hop

In 2013, the indie-rap lifers billy woods and Elucid joined forces to become **Armand Hammer**, a clear-eyed, thrilling guerrilla duo with a penchant for cutting through nonsense. Taking the name of a man dubbed “Lenin's chosen capitalist,” they trade complementary snarky, razor-sharp bars. Elucid, a Queens-born skeptic, can't help but be blunt, wielding his bludgeoning voice like a hammer and sickle, and his raps press ever forward through the beats. Woods, who hides his face in photos, is more elusive; his elliptical verses are built like a labyrinth of postern doors all leading back to the center of the maze. Their music plays up the absurdity of the dystopia it evokes, and their most recent album, “We Buy Diabetic Test Strips” (2023), transmits shrugging revelations from inside the matrix.—*Sheldon Pearce* (*Union Pool; June 23.*)

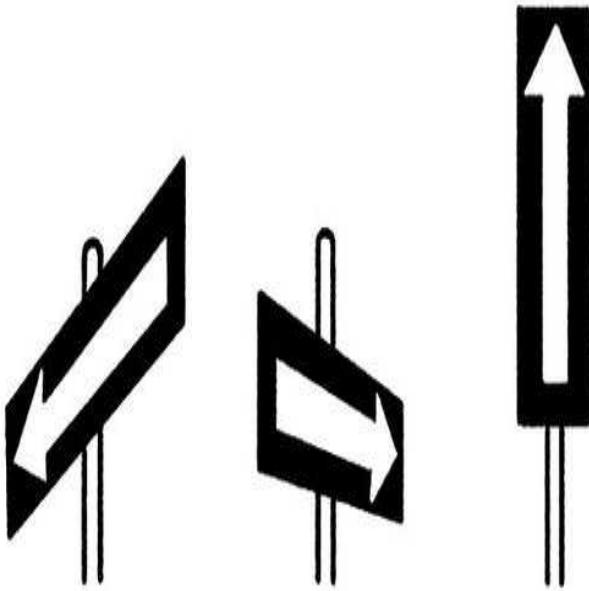
Dance



Flamenco Vivo Carlota Santana has been tending the flame of flamenco in New York for more than forty years, but its makeup and character change from one production to the next. In the company's latest show, "Equilibrio (Clásica/Tradición)," the gifted dancer-choreographer Emilio Ochando is joined by five other dancers and three musicians, including Daniel Jurado, who composed the score. The title marks a search for balance between the classical and the traditional elements of Spanish dance and flamenco, and between the individual and the group. Ochando, a castanet virtuoso, also plays the spoons.—*[Brian Seibert](#) (Joyce Theatre; June 18-23.)*

Movies

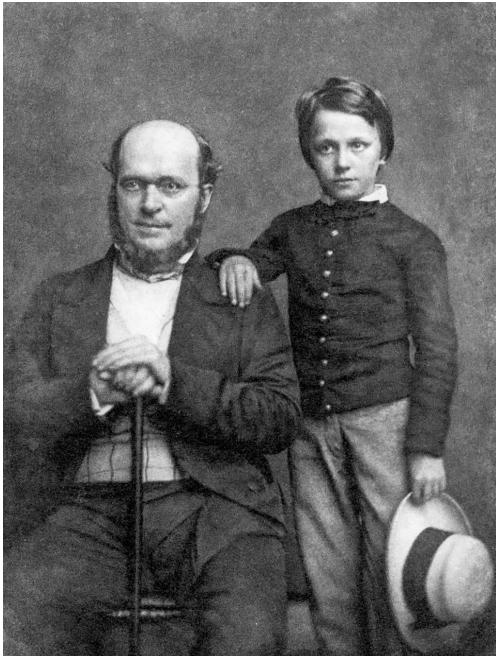
Under the guise of modest realism, the writer and director Bridgett M. Davis's 1996 feature, "**Naked Acts**"—which is only now being widely released—confronts grand archetypes and unexplored legacies of Black cinema. The twentysomething protagonist, Cicely (Jake-ann Jones), is the daughter of a former blaxploitation star (Patricia DeArcy) and the granddaughter of a theatre actress (Maranantha Quick). Cicely is making her own belated acting début in an independent film about a male artist and his female models, but she rejects the nudity the role requires. Davis presents a woman who, amid memories of neglect and abuse, struggles to find a creative space between being ignored and being exploited. Made when there were few Black female filmmakers, Davis's starkly symbolic drama exalts the hard-won breakthrough of self-depiction, of controlling the means of production; it opens pathways to a future cinema more radical than itself.—*[Richard Brody](#) (BAM Rose Cinemas.)*



Pick Three

The staff writer Vinson Cunningham shares current obsessions.

1. I was recently wowed, and weirdly moved, by a [video](#) of the Brazilian singer Seu Jorge performing “Tempo Perdido” (“Lost Time”), a heartrending song from 1986 by the Brazilian pop band **Legião Urbana**. I can’t speak Portuguese yet, but now I know that the song is about the sacredness of time, how each morning we wake up on the knife’s edge between the irretrievable and the unknowable. I’ve been poking around Legião Urbana’s smart, playful, trenchant œuvre, making much use of Google Translate as I listen.
2. I remain hopelessly addicted to sports talk—there’s something soothing about the fact that the pleasures of sports can be extended ad nauseam by endless attempts at interpretation. In “**First Things First**,” on Fox Sports 1, the hosts engage earnestly—rehashing, reframing, twisting their way into needless arguments—and also at a comic remove. They read fake fan mail, hire buglers and break-dancers to raid their set, feather themselves in fake snow. It’s like “Letterman” for sports junkies.



3. “[**A Chance Meeting: American Encounters**](#),” by Rachel Cohen, from 2004 and recently reissued by New York Review Books, is imaginative nonfiction with a deceptively simple structure: each chapter envisions what happened at a real meeting between two American luminaries—politicians, poets, artists, actors. It begins with a young Henry James and his father sitting for a daguerreotype portrait by Mathew Brady, the great Civil War-era photographer. I’ve been reading a chapter every few days, each a rare piece of rich fudge, reluctant to finish a book so obnoxiously up my alley.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [The Tally Ho sails again!](#)
- [Did David Sedaris originate the aversion to overhead lights?](#)
- [Watching a child age over dinner](#)

The Food Scene

A Pitch-Perfect Ode to Korean “Drivers’ Restaurants”

Kisa is a brand-new spot on the Lower East Side that does an astonishingly good job of seeming like it’s been there forever.

By Helen Rosner

June 09, 2024



A whiteboard affixed to the glass door of Kisa, a Korean restaurant that opened recently, on the corner of Allen and Houston Streets, lists approximate wait times for parties of varying sizes. On a recent evening, rolling up at the geriatric hour of 5:30 P.M., I learned that the wait for a party of two would be around forty-five minutes; by the time I finished my meal, the estimates had grown to an hour and a half for two people and nearly three hours for a group of five or six. (At especially busy times, the board simply reads “Waitlist is closed.”) Kisa does not take reservations, only walk-ins, an uncommon approach in this era of [cutthroat online machinations](#), though it makes perfect sense: Kisa is a diner, and a fairly bare-bones one. Operated by the duo behind the sceney NoHo restaurant C

as in Charlie, the Korean-born restaurateurs David JoonWoo Yun and Steve JaeWoo Choi, and a partner, Yong Min Kim, the restaurant is an homage to South Korea’s “drivers’ restaurants” (*kisa sikdang*), no-frills establishments whose limited menus, speedy service, and affordable prices are perfectly tuned to the needs of taxi drivers. Why would an exhausted cabbie want to play the Resy game just to grab dinner between fares?



Like the restaurants on which it's modelled, Kisa offers *baekban* (home-style, though it literally means “white rice”) set meals, featuring a centerpiece entrée—your choice of bulgogi, spicy pork, spicy squid, or a vegetarian option—rounded out with rice, soup, and an array of *banchan*. The emphasis, it seems, is on getting good food, and lots of it, out quickly, and cheaply: where C as in Charlie is sleek and stylish, the room and the food and the party-ready people in it all seemingly dying to be photographed and talked about, Kisa is utilitarian, almost austere. It has the unpretentious patina of a restaurant that's been there forever and has no time for the fripperies of social media or best-of lists or heatmaps. There are walls colored in landlord off-white; haphazardly positioned wall art and tchotchkies; an ancient cuboid CRT TV sitting on a high shelf in a corner of the dining room, permanently flickering. Even the restaurant's sign, a marquee running along the outside trim with messaging entirely in Korean —“Southeast Intersection Driver’s Restaurant,” facing Allen Street;

“Famous Driver’s Restaurant,” along Houston”—feels like a holdover from some earlier era, when the neighborhood was a locus of Korean-immigrant culture.



Except that it never was. The most marvellous thing about Kisa is the comprehensiveness of its artifice, its truly astonishing feat of sprezzatura: despite its worn-in feel, the entire restaurant is in fact brand new. The address’s previous tenant, a mediocre Cuban restaurant, was slick and snazzy; the Lower East Side, for all its global melting-pottery, has never been a Korean enclave. If you know what to look for, you’ll find that Kisa’s narrative immersion extends beyond the restaurant’s walls: stickers adhered to nearby power boxes and lampposts advertise (again, entirely in Korean) a “Driver’s Restaurant,” with Kisa’s phone number beneath.



This level of meticulous world-building is nothing new in restaurantland. Diners are used to being transported, via the meticulous construction of space and vibe, to the faraway, the unfamiliar, the nostalgically yearned-for. Normally, though, the atmosphere is designed to dazzle, telling a story of glamour and grandeur—the sultry greenery of the Caribbean, Positano in the fifties. What’s intriguing (and, to me, incredibly fun) about Kisa is that it applies the same aesthetic rigor in the opposite direction, away from the aspirational. Generally, when a buzzy restaurant’s food is of humble origin —like, say, the Indian roadside fare served at Jazba, a glossy, newish restaurant in the East Village, or the “street food” at the fancy new Tribeca steak house Beefbar—we tend to clumsily refer to it as “elevated,” a celebration of the everyday dressed up with a hip soundtrack, fancy tableware, pricey cocktails, and oligarchic ingredients. (Beefbar’s quesadilla, which includes Wagyu and truffle, is twenty-eight dollars.) Not so at Kisa. Call it a glow-down—an unphotogenic room, clashing and utilitarian signage, low-key food and service. The result is a slightly uncanny, tremendously compelling tension. The illusion is so straight-faced, so documentary, that an unknowing diner, wandering past, could sit down for a meal and have no idea that they were on a stage set and not in some off-radar, hole-in-the-wall discovery. I kept looking around for some kind of cool-kid tell: a secret list of high-end Champagnes, or a hidden door to a V.I.P.-only basement bar.

This conceit could easily have landed wrong, slipping perhaps into a distasteful sort of blue-collar cosplay. Kisa pulls it off, however, thanks in part to the obvious affection that the restaurateurs have for the diners to whom they pay homage. The old-school fan mounted to the wall, the printed-fabric cushions tied to the seats of the chairs with bows, the faded baby photos in frames—these details feel like they could only have come from a loving hand. Perhaps more important, the food is simply terrific. The prices, while not Seoul-cheap, are modest by the standards of the high-traffic Lower East Side—each thirty-two-dollar meal includes rice and soup (tofu and greens in a gently fiery broth) and seconds on the *banchan*. The kitchen, overseen by the chef Simon Lee, produces meals both excellent and abundant. When the food arrives, it presents a real-life geometry problem: how to position the bowl of rice, the bowl of soup, and the tremendous circular metal plate on which the rest of your dinner is arranged, your entrée of choice in the center, with little bowls of *banchan* arrayed around it like petals on a flower. On one visit, sensing the need for strategic dishware placement, I tried to be helpful and moved my water glass and chopsticks to make room. My server stopped me, with the soft forbearance of a person who's gone through this dance a thousand times before. "I know how to make it work," he said, and quickly Tetris'd everything into a staggered layout in which somehow, barely, every dish and cup and utensil fit on the slightly-too-small table.

Helen, Help Me!

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

I ate at Kisa two days in a row, and I would gladly have gone back for more. Lee's *jeyuk* (spicy pork) is sliced whisper-thin and grilled to a caramel sweetness; the *ojingeo bokkeum* (spicy squid) is charred and chewy, the heat of chilies given an edge of green thanks to fresh scallions. The vegetarian entrée, a bibimbap-style assemblage of pickled and steamed vegetables, is a bit bland, in both heat and flavor, but that mellowness is offset by joyous, colorful *banchan*—seven varieties, on my visits, including cabbage kimchi and sheets of roasted seaweed. There were slices of fluffy rolled omelette, wiggly strips of mung-bean jelly tossed in a seaweed purée, and sweet raw soy-sauce-cured shrimp, with mushrooms. The potato *jorim*, braised in sweet soy sauce, with tender hunks of beef, could serve as a meal on its

own; the *sotteok sotteok*—skewers of alternating chewy rice cakes and cocktail weenies, brushed with gochujang—are sticky and savory and perfectly silly. There's no dessert menu, but, after paying the bill at the end of the meal, you'll be handed a quarter for the vintage automatic coffee machine by the door, which dispenses your hot chocolate, black-bean latte, or milky coffee into a paper cup that holds just enough to last you a half block beyond Kisa's cabdriver fantasy—a little souvenir, hot and sweet, to bring back with you into the real world. ♦

The Talk of the Town

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Comment

After the European Elections, President Macron Makes a Gamble

The rise of the far right in Europe might help Americans deprovincialize their own crisis. The single wave has struck many coastlines.

By Adam Gopnik

June 16, 2024



In the classic days of the Republic of Venice, you could lodge a complaint against the government by slipping a paper into the *bocca di leone*, the lion's mouth, a kind of proto postal box. The lions' mouths were distributed around town and were often highly specified: this one to get hot over taxes, this one to complain about garbage in the canal. Their purpose was not just, as some imagine, secret denunciation but also open protest; the authorities would witness the disquiet, register the grievance, and then, possibly, do something about it.

The just-concluded elections for the European Parliament have some of the character of lion's-mouth communication on a continental scale. The

European Parliament is, like the Venetian Senate, mostly a pro-forma talking shop with limited power: actual political power still resides in the national governments, while the power to initiate and implement all those European rules and decrees with which “Brussels” supposedly encumbers its members—such as classifying bananas according to how bendy they are—remains largely in the hands of the bureaucrats and technocrats of the European Commission.

Yet the election results have meaning, and they have been cast, rather too narrowly but understandably, as another victory for the extreme right—a victory particularly noxious in France and Germany, where more or less openly neo-fascist parties won startlingly large shares of the vote. In France, the R.N., or Rassemblement National (formerly the Front National), won the most seats, under the guidance of Marine Le Pen, the daughter of the movement’s notorious antisemitic founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen. That outcome, though not entirely unanticipated, led President Emmanuel Macron to dissolve the National Assembly and call for new parliamentary elections, which will be held in two rounds, later this month and then in July.

The rise of the far right in Europe might help Americans deprovincialize their own crisis. The single wave has struck many coastlines. Whatever is happening is happening everywhere. *Why* what is happening is happening everywhere is still under scrutiny, with the same explanations offered in Europe that are already familiar to Americans. The popular notion, intended to rationalize the irrational—that what is happening is a revolt of those dispossessed by globalization against neoliberalism or the like—seems as empty there as it does here. Jean-Yves Dormagen, a leading French pollster, sliced and diced the results for the magazine *Le Point*, and noted that the R.N. electorate—like the Trumpite one in 2020—is largely old and rural and relatively rich, though also, as in the U.S., less educated. And, as in the U.S., the real divide is cultural: country against city, old against young, people with diplomas against people without them.

The nameable cause of this general revolt is a fear of what’s perceived to be uncontrolled immigration. This involves both the movement, over several generations, of new ethnicities and old faiths into Europe and also the more recent crisis cap of hundreds of thousands of refugees and asylum seekers arriving via the Greek islands and southern Italy. No country, including the

United States, has ever dealt happily with the panic, no matter how unfounded, prompted by mass migration, legal or clandestine, and the Europeans are doing no better. The rural foundation of the populist impulse also involves a revolt against European agricultural regulation associated with continent-wide efforts to address climate change. The rural protest in Europe is, ironically, anti-green.

The specificity of the R.N.'s rise in France is complicated, however, by an uncertainty about whether it is merely a grumble in the lion's mouth, as Macron's people suspect, or an actual ongoing rebellion. It is one thing to vote the far right into power in a relatively powerless institution, and another to endorse its governing of France. This is the gamble that Macron has made.

The result of this summer's election will depend on how effectively the parties of the far right and the far left can form coalitions with the old moderates. This is harder to do than it might seem. On the right, the few remaining old-style Gaullists are deeply divided about joining up with the once diabolized R.N. The leader of the Republicans, Éric Ciotti, proposed an alliance with the R.N. and was booted out of his party the next day. Le Pen's expected coalition with the still more extreme and openly anti-Islamic Reconquête! party, led by Éric Zemmour, stalled—to the point that the leader of the party's European list, Marion Maréchal, turned on Zemmour to back the R.N., an act that he referred to as "the world record for treason," but which he also desolately recognized as "familial." Maréchal is, among other things, Marine Le Pen's niece.

On the left, there was an instant agreement to call for a nineteen-thirties-style Popular Front, but this idea is already showing strain, given that neither the old-school nor the new-school social democrats, under the leadership of Raphaël Glucksmann, the son of the humanist philosopher André Glucksmann, will support for Prime Minister the fading demagogue Jean-Luc Mélenchon, of the populist left party La France Insoumise. So Macron believes that he can emerge if not victorious then at least in command of a still divided *hémicycle*, as the French call the National Assembly, presiding from the center over "two extremes."

Two general truths appear. First, as in the U.S., the rise of the far right can obscure the continuity of the center: the largest groupings in the European Parliament will still be of the rational right and the reasonable left—just as the truth, concealed by the antidemocratic Electoral College, is that Trump, even now, is unlikely ever to win a majority of the popular vote. (And as Anne Applebaum, a historian of the Gulag, has pointed out, none of Europe's far-right leaders are as far right as Trump is, or as recklessly contemptuous of the rule of law.) The second general truth is that the great divide of European and American politics is no longer between left and right—as it was first symbolized in the French *hémicycle* at the time of the Revolution—but between authoritarian, antidemocratic demagogues of both sides and those who represent, however uncertainly, the upholding of liberal democracy, pluralism, and tolerance.

The other animal mouth that Italians talk about is that of the wolf; to tell someone “Into the wolf’s mouth!” is the equivalent of saying “Break a leg!” The idea is that it is better to throw yourself directly into a crisis than to try to avoid it. (That’s what actors do.) Macron’s gamble is that to throw yourself at the wolf may be better than waiting for the wolf to come and get you. If he’s right, Americans might learn something from that thought, too. ♦

Apparel Dept.

Brad Pitt Likes It Softer

A holistic celebration of God's True Cashmere, Brad Pitt and Sat Hari's line of "quiet luxury" shirts with gemstone buttons. Gong bath, anyone?

By Sarah Larson

June 17, 2024



The other day, just before a gong-bath session co-hosted by Bergdorf Goodman in a sunlit loft in Chelsea, Sat Hari Khalsa, a Los Angeles-based holistic healer, greeted a small group of fashion-conscious New Yorkers seated on yoga mats. The room smelled pleasantly spa-like (cotton-poplin-scented candles); guests were offered macarons and cold-pressed vegetable juice. Sat Hari, who doesn't use her surname, is fifty-four, with long blond hair and a no-nonsense demeanor. She wore jeans, jewelry that she designed, and a blue shirt made by God's True Cashmere, a line of unisex "quiet luxury" button-down cashmere shirts that she founded with her good friend Brad Pitt. "I grew up in India, and at a very young age I was attracted to softness," Sat Hari told the group. "I was also attracted to gemstones and the healing properties of stones." She also had meaningful, sometimes prophetic dreams—What will be on the math test?—and still does, such as on a

Tuesday night in 2018, when she dreamed about Brad Pitt standing before her in an outfit made entirely of green cashmere.

“I looked at him and said, ‘What are you doing? Are you going golfing? You look like a leprechaun,’ ” she recalled. “And he said, ‘No, I just need more softness in my life.’ ” Two days later, while awake, she told Pitt about the dream. “And he said, ‘That’s strange, because on Tuesday I told my stylist, ‘I need more green cashmere in my life. I need more softness.’ ’ ” Sat Hari knew that this was important, and she had a green cashmere shirt made for him. It was a hit, and they started God’s True Cashmere. (“Sat Hari” means “God’s truth.”) The shirts, woven in Italy from the wool of well-treated goats, retail for about two thousand dollars apiece. Each shirt has seven buttons down the front representing the body’s seven chakras. “Brad and I design it all together,” Sat Hari said: color, weight, tartan, stone. “We pick the gemstone snap that we feel resonates with the shirt. It’s almost like the shirt asks for the snap that it needs.”

“Is this anybody’s first sound bath?” Sara Auster, a sound therapist in a wide-brimmed hat, asked. Several hands went up. Each yoga mat was equipped with a cashmere blanket and a cashmere bag of crystals. Sat Hari recommended holding a crystal (rose quartz, to activate love, say, or green amethyst, to release stress and “past traumas”) above the heart or the solar plexus. Auster had everyone lie down for a guided meditation. “Feel your breath as it gently moves in and out,” she said. “With each exhalation, allow yourself to soften even more into this moment.”

For the next half hour, the room thrummed. Auster played a set of crystal bowls with a cork-and-leather mallet, walked around gently shaking a string of bells, activated a droning sruti box, and struck tuning forks of various pitches. The vibes became expansive; the mind roamed; a snore rang out.

Sat Hari, who also has a line of jewelry with symbolic meanings, met Pitt several years ago through a sculptor friend. Born in Massachusetts, she was sent at age ten to a boarding school in India after her mother became a Sikh. “I had abandonment stuff, for sure,” she said. Part “incredible adventure” and “a little ‘Lord of the Flies,’ ” her India experience lasted through high school. She returned to the States, had an arranged marriage, had a daughter, studied, and began working as a healer, which led, in 2000, to touring with

the Red Hot Chili Peppers, when Flea brought her along to give him intravenous ozone therapy. “One of my main soul mates is Sat Hari,” the Chili Peppers’ Anthony Kiedis writes in his memoir; her presence made their tour bus “a cozy, moving cocoon of happiness.” She still works as a healer: “That’s what, honestly, pays my bills.”

The loft featured a rack of shirts—gray plaid, with moonstone snaps; “Brad’s tomato red,” with carnelian, for “healing, protection”; a tartan in muted greens. “Brad and I really went over these colors,” Sat Hari said, holding up a sleeve. “Acid green, but not too sour. Bring in the lemon, but not too lemony. No, that’s fridge butter, as opposed to counter butter. It’s all very, very important. He’s super particular about color.” Of a maroon plaid, she said, “This could be for everybody—vintage American, old school, not like a lumberjack but maybe a worker, the real people. A blue-collar shirt made into elevated cashmere.” She added that she hoped the shirts, even if unattainable for many, would have an effect that “ripples out to others” and reminds people to “soften inside of themselves.”

When the sound bath reached its apotheosis, Auster said, “Feel the texture of your stones, the softness of your blanket. . . . I see the softness in your faces.” Everybody sat up and looked around. “Have a little laugh!” Auster said. She had everyone think of the first word that came to mind and say it on the count of three; the result sounded like an aural scribble. “Amazing!” Auster said.

“Please take your crystals with you,” Sat Hari said. “And please try on a shirt!” ♦

Legacy Dept.

Deaccessioning the Delights of Robert Gottlieb

The eminent editor's wife and daughter sift through a lifetime's worth of collectibles: quirky plastic purses, a porcelain Miss Piggy, and many, many books.

By Zach Helfand

June 17, 2024



The Turtle Bay town house where the editor Robert Gottlieb spent much of his life backs onto a communal garden, shared by the entire block. “Sondheim lived on the end,” Gottlieb’s daughter, the filmmaker Lizzie Gottlieb, said recently, pointing out buildings. “That was Bob Dylan’s. E. B. White and Katharine White lived there. Janet Malcolm and Gardner Botsford were there—we used to go over to watch ‘Battlestar Galactica.’” Sometimes Gottlieb would edit the neighbors’ memoirs. “I was ten years old and someone knocked at the back door,” Lizzie said. “It was Katharine Hepburn.”

Lizzie and her mother, the actor Maria Tucci, were cleaning out the house. Gottlieb, who ran Simon & Schuster, Knopf, and *The New Yorker*, died last year, and Tucci decided to move out. “I always wanted to live on the Upper West Side,” she said. It’s closer to the theatres. They weren’t ready to sell, but they were offloading stuff. They’d engaged iGavel Auctions to deaccession some of his thousands of books, many inscribed. (The auction ends on June 26th.) Gottlieb was also a prodigious collector of kitschy knickknacks. Some of those (“Three Life Size Figures of Pugs”) are on sale, too.

Most of the sorting was happening on the parlor level. On a side table was a porcelain Miss Piggy, wearing a flowery Sunday hat. “He did Miss Piggy’s memoir at the same time he was doing Jacobo Timerman on torture,” Tucci said.

Tucci wore a black shirt dress. Lizzie was in jeans and a black T-shirt. She pushed on a bookcase, which swung open. “This is our secret bathroom,” she said. On the walls, Gottlieb had hung photos of people with their dogs. Above a door was a rendering of the Royal Family, circa 1955—floating head shots, looking at one another, in the style of “The Brady Bunch.” It faced the toilet. “Just because they’re so awful,” Tucci said.

Gottlieb’s most notorious collection was his mid-century plastic handbags—hideous and stunning specimens, entirely impractical. “There’s probably a thousand,” Tucci said. “He got bored with them after a while.” He moved on to macramé owls and something called TV lights, intricate fish-shaped lamps from France meant for decorating television sets. Lizzie and Tucci were trying to find everything a suitable home. A friend suggested a handbag museum, but it was all the way in Australia. (They put more than two hundred of the handbags in the auction.)

They moved to the living room. Piled-up furniture was everywhere. Lizzie performed some minor bouldering to reach a box. “Letters from camp,” she said. “He somehow got the *Times* delivered.” Gottlieb made one camp friend, Eddie—E. L. Doctorow, it turned out. They read together in the cabin and avoided the lake.

Lizzie chose some boxes at random and hauled them into the library. They were mostly author letters: Bill Clinton, Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison. (“Big problem: is this one book or three?” she wrote. “Your thoughts, puh-leez?”) The choreographer Paul Taylor was a frequent correspondent. (“Dear Bobsie—You’re right again! Aphids *are* insects—family aphididae, also disrespectfully known as ‘plant lice.’ Love ya—Paulsie.”) Doris Lessing wrote, “I had a dream of you the other night about my having two little girls, you being the father, we were separated, and I was finding it such hard work bringing them up without you, I said to you, ‘For the sake of the children . . .’ Well, what do you make of that?”



Many of the correspondents also visited. Baryshnikov, Julia Child—“I think I got ambitious and made a soufflé,” Tucci said.

She went on, “When Nora Ephron was breaking up with Carl Bernstein, she came here. Carl came to the door, and I had to stand there like a Sicilian vendetta queen.”

Before Tucci and Gottlieb moved in, the house had once belonged to the journalist Dorothy Thompson, who also entertained a colorful circle. Tucci’s father, the writer Niccolò Tucci, would attend. He hosted, too, in the family’s Washington Heights apartment—Camus, Prince Heinrich of Bavaria,

antifascists, White Russians. “Saul Steinberg sat me down in the corner and said to me, ‘You know, there are people who are like crystal balls, and there are people who are like goulash. You and I are goulash,’ ” Tucci recalled. Niccolò once took her to meet Albert Einstein. “His dog ate my doll,” she said. “I was so broken up about it that to cheer me up he played me a song on the violin.”

She and Lizzie weren’t sure how they would sift through everything. There was stuff everywhere: antique postcards, other people’s family photos, old ads for Maidenform bras. (“I dreamed I was a lady editor in my Maidenform bra.”) “Sometimes I get overwhelmed,” Lizzie said. “Will anyone want this?” She continued, “He used to say that editing is saving. He delighted in the fact that people had made strange, beautiful things. Some of them were beautiful because he saw the beauty in them.”

Tucci came down the stairs with more things. Lizzie went up, looking for a mechanical pet designed for dementia patients; Gottlieb had once requested it for Christmas. “We named it Leslie Silverpaws,” she explained.

Tucci said, “We may have to do another auction.” ♦

Dept. of Idols

Matthew Rhys Was Into Dylan Thomas Before It Was Cool (Again)

The actor, who starred in the play “Dear Mr. Thomas,” tours the poet’s old haunts with his partner, Keri Russell, and finds them disappointingly not crummy.

By H. C. Wilentz

June 17, 2024



In a suite at the Chelsea Hotel, a few flights up from the room where, in 1953, the poet Dylan Thomas spent his final conscious hours, the actor Matthew Rhys plucked a beer from the minibar and settled on the balcony. Rhys, like Thomas, grew up in South Wales, where he was steeped in the poet’s work. He recalled spending his first acting paycheck on a flight to New York, to visit his idol’s old haunts, and stopping at the hotel. “I remember loving how shitty it looked—just as I’d imagined it,” he said. “I was too scared to go in.”

Rhys, who is forty-nine, wore an old quilted jacket and Timberland boots. A few days earlier, at the 92nd Street Y, he had starred in “Dear Mr. Thomas: A New Play for Voices,” staged in the same auditorium where the poet’s first reading in the U.S. had commanded a crowd of almost a thousand. “There are elements of Thomas’s life that are very much magnified—his drinking being one of them,” Rhys said. “But I think there was a far more complex relationship to the life of excess—to the swagger of it all.” He went on, “In the play, I was wary of not turning him into this cartoon character, which he has been.” There were a few snags. Worried about selling tickets, Rhys got Penderyn, a Welsh distillery, to underwrite the evening: “And Chris Monger, the playwright, says, ‘Why the fuck did you get us a *whisky* sponsorship?’”

A world-class sponger, Thomas was constantly in debt, and was known for scooting around barrooms on all fours and for other rumored acts of indecorum, which included urinating on Charlie Chaplin’s porch. (Once, at a dinner party, he excused himself and returned wearing a full outfit of clothes pinched from his host’s closet.) In an age of compulsory wellness, the taste for living vicariously through incorrigibles past runs strong. “One of the reasons why I love Dylan is he could have long moments of great abandonment, where he just—he lived so in the moment,” Rhys said. “I have such envy. I feel the complete opposite of him.”

As the light faded, he hailed a cab downtown, past the hospital where Thomas died, at thirty-nine, after a doctor’s misguided morphine injection helped put him in a coma. (Frantic, his wife, Caitlin, smashed a crucifix and bit a nurse.) Rhys got out at Barrow Street and headed to St. Luke’s chapel, where hundreds of people, including E. E. Cummings, William Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams, had gathered for Thomas’s memorial service. The door was locked. “Isn’t the whole deal with churches that they have to remain open?” Rhys said.

He strolled north, past a pet-portrait gallery and a concept gym called Willspace, and arrived at the White Horse Tavern, Thomas’s favorite bar. Rhys was dismayed by a new outdoor patio decorated with garlands of fake flowers. A bouncer guarded the door. Malia Obama sat at a table with a group, looking bored. “It used to be grotty—that’s what I loved about it,” he said. “De Niro’s brother used to come in drinking—he looks a lot like him—

and when people would glance over at him the barman would scream, ‘It’s not him!’ ”

Rhys walked past the bar and into a space labelled the Dylan Thomas Room. On the walls were a few framed printouts of Thomas chestnuts and two flat-screen TVs tuned to hockey. Rhys settled gloomily into a back booth and ordered a double smashburger. Not long after, his partner, the actor Keri Russell, arrived. She’d biked in from Brooklyn Heights, where they live with their three kids. She got carded at the door. In “Dear Mr. Thomas,” she played Elizabeth Reitell, Thomas’s final lover. It was their second collaboration (after “Cocaine Bear”) since “The Americans,” in which they starred as married K.G.B. spies. When filming started, Russell was married to a Brooklyn contractor; by the airing of the second season, she was dating Rhys. Chewing a French fry, she recalled how, late one night when they were filming the pilot, Rhys had read her lines from Thomas’s “In My Craft or Sullen Art.” In the booth, Rhys began reciting: “I labour by singing light / not for ambition or bread.” Russell brought up the moment that her children heard Dylan Thomas name-checked in Taylor Swift’s new song “The Tortured Poets Department.” She’d texted her husband immediately, and he was thrilled. “I went, ‘I wonder if this leads to people Googling Dylan Thomas?’ ” Rhys said.

They mused on the enduring allure of the Dionysian life. Russell picked up her glass of white wine. “There’s no room for those people anymore—we’ve kind of gotten rid of them,” she said. “And it’s a bummer, because you’re missing the greatness of people. Like, I don’t need my poets or my rock stars to be able to run for Congress.”

Rhys got a text: a friend had invited him to a karaoke dive back in Brooklyn. His eyes flickered. Russell urged him to go. ♦

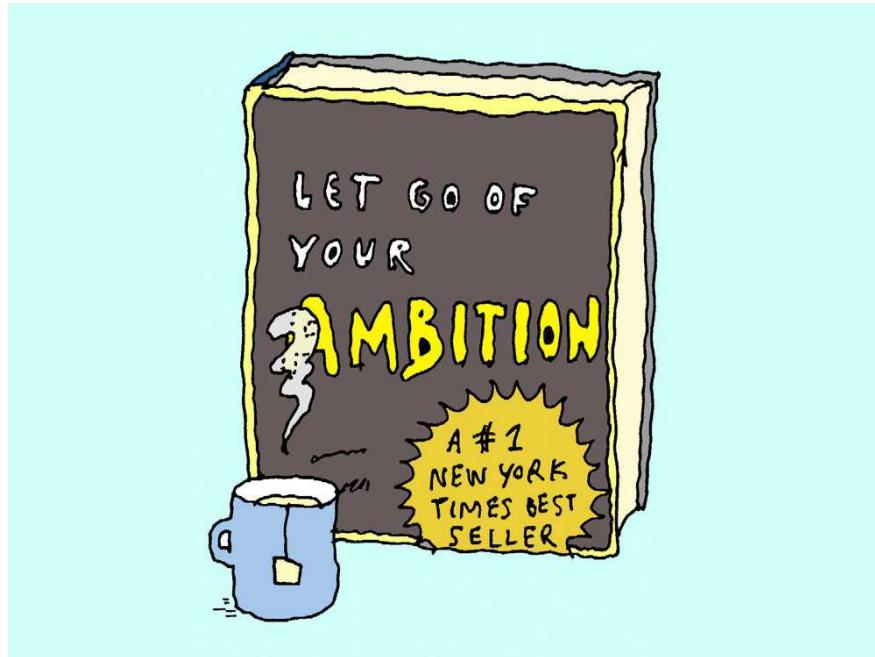
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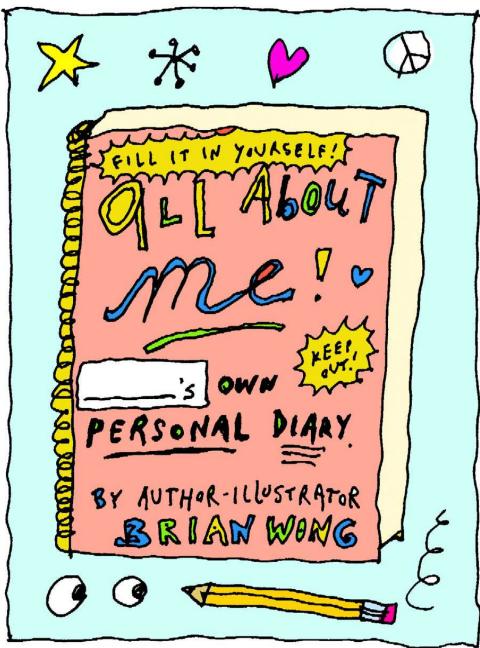
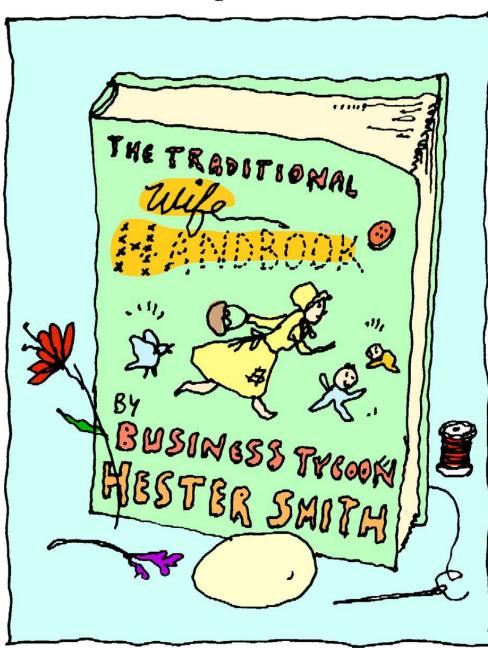
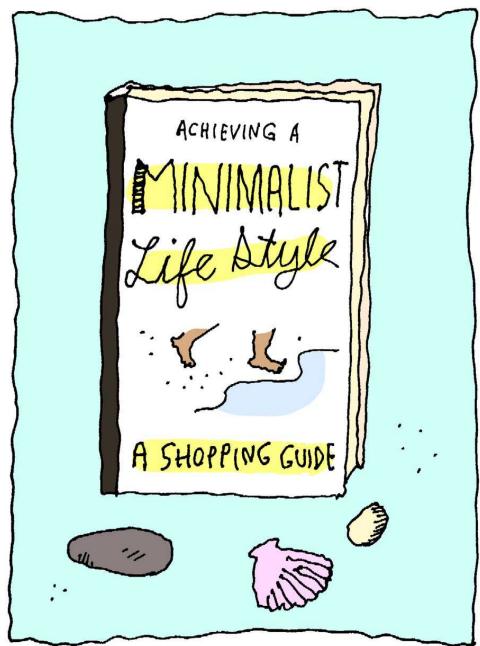
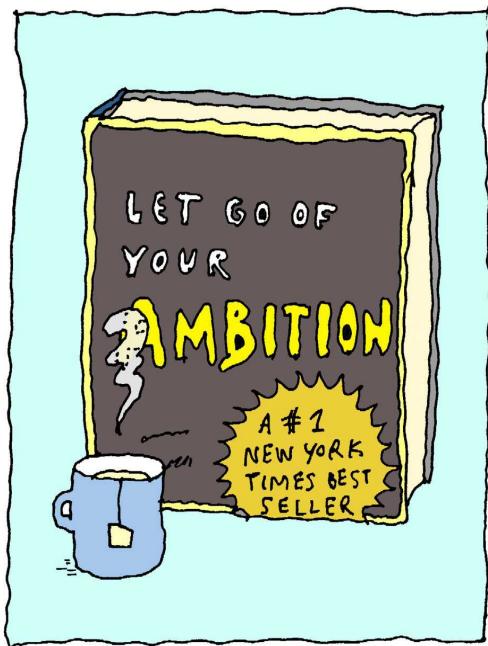
The Best Scammy Self-Help Books of the Summer!

“Let’s Save Our Trees” (hardback edition!), the minimalist shopping guide, and other best-sellers by hypocrites.

By Liana Finck

June 17, 2024







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The Strange Journey of John Lennon's Stolen Patek Philippe Watch

For decades, Yoko Ono thought that the birthday gift was in her Dakota apartment. But it had been removed and sold—and now awaits a court ruling in Geneva.

By Jay Fielden

June 17, 2024



For years, John Lennon's Patek Philippe 2499 has been the El Dorado of lost watches. Lennon was known for collecting expensive things: apartments in the Dakota (five); guitars (one apartment was mainly for musical equipment); country estates; jukeboxes (three); and Egyptian artifacts, including a gold-leafed sarcophagus containing a mummified princess, who Yoko Ono believed was a former self. But the Patek appears to have been his one and only wristwatch.

A gift from Ono, the watch is more than anyone would ever need to tell the time. A perpetual-calendar chronograph, it is, as Paul Boutros, the head of

watches at the American arm of Phillips auction house, says, a “mechanical microcomputer, the most sought after of all Pateks.” Between 1952 and around 1985, Patek produced just three hundred and forty-nine of them. The watch, which Ono bought at Tiffany on Fifth Avenue, records time in eight different ways; the dial houses three apertures (day, month, moon phase) and three subdials (seconds, elapsed minutes, date). If you never memorized the mnemonic “thirty days hath September,” no worries—the 2499 Patek hath. Its miraculous ganglia of tiny wheels and levers will adjust its readings to the quirky imperfections of the Gregorian calendar, including leap years. No other watchmaker was able to produce a perpetual-calendar-chronograph movement small enough to fit into a wristwatch until 1985.

What makes this 2499 even rarer—and perhaps the most valuable wristwatch in existence—is how little we know about it. Ono gave it to her husband for his fortieth birthday, on October 9, 1980, two months before he was fatally shot by a deranged man outside the Dakota. For the next three decades, the existence of the watch remained unknown except to a handful of family and close friends.

But, sometime around 2007, in the early days of social media, a new kind of watch obsessive materialized, equipped with native computer skills and an appreciation for the places where pop culture and the luxury market intersect. In those pre-Instagram years, fanboy wonks traded watch esoterica online: an image of Picasso wearing a lost Jaeger-LeCoultre; Castro with *two* trendy Rolexes strapped to one arm; Brando, on the set of “Apocalypse Now,” “flexing,” as watch geeks say, a Rolex GMT-Master without its timing bezel, a modification he made to better inhabit the role of Kurtz; and —the Google image-search find of them all—two frames of an uncredited snapshot of Lennon and his Patek.



Since its discovery, around 2011, the image has appeared online again and again, fuelling a speculative frenzy about what the watch—which cost around twenty-five thousand dollars at Tiffany in 1980—might bring at auction today, with estimates ranging from ten million to forty million dollars. (Bloomberg’s Subdial Watch Index tracks the value of a bundle of watches produced by Rolex, Patek, and Audemars Piguet, like an E.T.F.; the Boston Consulting Group reported that, between 2018 and 2023, a similar selection outperformed the S. & P. 500 by twelve per cent. In 2017, Paul Newman’s Rolex Daytona broke records by selling at auction for \$17.8 million.) But all the clickbait posts about the Lennon Patek, as it had come to be known, were regurgitations that contained few facts. There was never a mention of who took the photo, where it was taken, or even where the watch might be.

During the long, dull days of the pandemic, I decided to see what I could find out. Several years went by, as I traced the journey of the watch from where it was stowed after Lennon’s death—a locked room in his Dakota apartment—to when it was stolen, apparently in 2005. From there, it moved around Europe and the watch departments of two auction houses, before becoming the subject of an ongoing lawsuit, in Switzerland, to determine whether the watch’s rightful owner is Ono or an unnamed man a Swiss court

judgment refers to as Mr. A, who claims to have bought the watch legally in 2014.

Having reached its final appeal—Ono has so far prevailed—the case is now in the hands of the Tribunal Fédéral, Switzerland’s Supreme Court, which is expected to render a verdict later this year. Meanwhile, the watch continues to sit in an undisclosed location in Geneva, a city that specializes in the safe, secret storage of lost treasures.

Lennon holding up his birthday Patek in the fall of 1980 is one of the happiest moments captured on film in the final years of his life. That summer, he’d begun making music again, during a trip to Bermuda which he’d hoped would help repair the well-publicized strain in his marriage to Ono. Lennon’s “lost weekend”—more than a year spent living in Los Angeles with May Pang, a former assistant who became his lover—was not that far in the past, and Ono had fallen into an infatuation with an art-world socialite named Sam Green. (It was in Bermuda that Lennon wrote “I’m Losing You.”)

Lennon had spent the previous five years holed up in the Dakota as a self-proclaimed “househusband,” raising his son Sean so that Ono, whom Lennon called Mother, could take her turn at being the decision-maker of the music-business enterprise they’d named Lennono. While Ono dealt with Beatles headaches, controlled the purse strings, and invested in real estate, Lennon occupied himself by watching soap operas, eating bran biscuits and rice, smoking Gitanes, and listening to either classical music or Muzak. “If I heard anything bad,” he later explained, “I’d want to fix it, and if I heard anything good, I’d wonder why I hadn’t thought of it.”

In the photograph, Lennon, trim and fit from a macrobiotic diet, wears jeans and a loosely knotted striped knit tie adorned with a jewel-encrusted American-flag pin. The picture was taken in the Hit Factory, where he and Ono had been recording “Double Fantasy,” his first album in five years. The room is dim, but he has on sunglasses, celluloid horn-rims recently bought in Japan. Buckled on his left wrist is the Patek 2499.

In order to find out more about the photograph, I tracked down Jack Douglas, the noted record producer who oversaw “Double Fantasy,” and

sent him the picture by e-mail. He replied right away. “Bob Gruen took the photo,” he wrote, referring to the well-known documenter of the seventies and eighties rock scene.

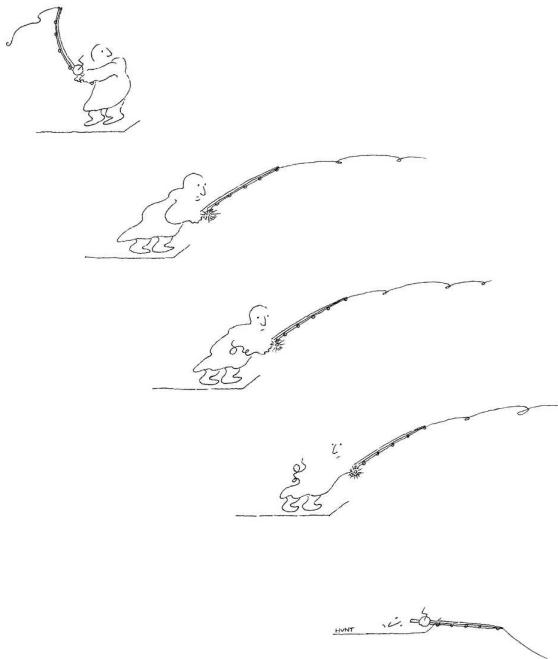
When I contacted Gruen, who is now seventy-eight and lives in New York City, he had no idea that his photograph had become the talk of the horological world or why he’d never been given credit for it; he’d published the image in a book, titled “John Lennon: The New York Years,” in 2005. But he remembered the night he took the photo—Lennon’s fortieth birthday. Since late that summer, Lennon and Ono had been spending a lot of time in a multiroom studio on the sixth floor of the Hit Factory building, then on West Forty-eighth Street. “I was one of the few people who had an open invitation,” Gruen told me. “They liked to work late.” Gruen, who said he was living on a “steak-and-Cognac diet” in those days, showed up after midnight, having attended the thirty-sixth-birthday party of the singer Nona Hendryx. “I thought I’d bring John a piece of her birthday cake,” he said.

When Gruen arrived, Lennon was enjoying his presents: the knit tie, which Ono had made herself (a copy of the one he wore at school in Liverpool); the flag pin; and the Patek, in yellow gold, which had a rare and highly coveted double-stamped dial, meaning that both the watchmaker’s and Tiffany’s logos were printed on it. Gruen remembered Lennon being abuzz over the tie and the pin, a nod to Lennon’s fourth anniversary as a green-card holder. He doesn’t recall talking about the watch. But Lennon nonetheless strapped the black lizard band onto his wrist when Gruen reached for his Olympus OM4.

A few other photographs that Gruen took that week have never been seen by the public. One shows Lennon at a mixing board with Douglas, who is wearing a recognizable watch himself, a Porsche Design Chronograph I—stainless steel and coated in black—which Porsche had presented to him and to the members of Aerosmith in 1976, after the band’s German tour for its album “Rocks.” Douglas told me that he and Lennon later wrist-checked each other. “Although I thought his watch was beautiful,” he wrote in an e-mail to me, “I told John it didn’t have the pizzazz of my black beauty, and we had a good laugh.”

After Lennon's death, Ono had a full inventory taken of her husband's possessions, a document that amounted to nearly a thousand pages. She then put the Patek in a locked room of her apartment. And there the watch remained for more than twenty years.

I found a clue as to what happened next by putting together shards of information from various members of the watch intelligentsia who had all "heard" that the Patek had been stolen. "I think the guy was Turkish," one said. Another remembered "something about a chauffeur." This led me to a 2006 article in the *Times* about a man named Koral Karsan (Turkish: check), who had served as Ono's chauffeur (check two) for the previous ten years. Karsan, a veteran member of Ono's oft-shuffled staff—trusted enough that he had full access to her apartment—had simply gone berserk in December of that year, threatening to release embarrassing photos and private conversations he'd been recording unless Ono paid him two million dollars; he allegedly said that if she refused he would have her and Sean killed.



A tall, square-jawed man with a thick burr of white hair, Karsan, then fifty, was arrested. In a series of preliminary hearings in a Manhattan courtroom, he defended himself against charges of extortion and attempted grand larceny by claiming, as the *Times* reported, that Ono had "humiliated and degraded him, wrecking his marriage and making him so nervous that he

ground eight of his teeth to the bone.” A letter he’d written to Ono describing himself as her “driver, bodyguard, assistant, butler, nurse, handyman and more so your lover and confidant” was also entered into the record. Ono disputed Karsan’s claims about a romance, but the prosecution allowed him to plead guilty to a lesser charge, and he was ordered to return to his native Turkey.

According to a story that Karsan would later tell, Ono—who was known to consult psychics—became worried one day in 2006 that a forecasted heavy-weather event might endanger some meaningful Lennon items, including two pairs of Lennon’s eyeglasses and several *New Yorker* desk diaries (which he used as journals during the last five years of his life); she asked Karsan to find a safer place to keep them. Unbeknownst to Ono, when Karsan was subsequently deported, these items, along with the Patek, followed him.

Ono, who is ninety-one and lives in seclusion in upstate New York, declined to comment. Of Karsan, Sean Lennon told me, “He took advantage of a widow at a vulnerable time. Of all the incidents of people stealing things from my parents, this one is the most painful.”

Karsan, back in Turkey, was in the market for a house. Around 2009, he showed Lennon’s watch to a Turkish friend visiting from Berlin named Erhan G (as he came to be known owing to German privacy laws). Karsan let Erhan G flip through the diaries, including one marked 1980, which includes Lennon’s final entry. Karsan threw out an idea: he’d give the Lennon Patek to Erhan G as collateral for a loan. Erhan G agreed.

One evening in 2013, in Berlin, Erhan G met an executive who worked for a new, much hyped digital auction platform called Auctionata. He couldn’t resist boasting about the Patek 2499 and the rest of the Lennon trove—some eighty items. In short order, a dinner was arranged with Oliver Hoffmann, Auctionata’s twenty-eight-year-old director of watches. “He told me the story of how he’d gotten the watch,” Hoffmann recalled, of his meeting with Erhan G. “It was strange, but it felt whole and true. It was credible because of the many details.” Erhan G, who said that he was the watch’s rightful owner, per an agreement with Karsan, didn’t strike Hoffmann as a man desperate for money. “He owned a successful business and lived in a large

apartment in a building close to Potsdamer Platz,” Hoffman said. (Erhan G could not be reached for comment.)

Auctionata, which live-streamed its auctions, was one of Germany’s dot-com darlings, lauded in the press for disrupting the old auction-house model, dominated by Christie’s and Sotheby’s, which had yet to develop a digital-first business. Investors including Groupe Arnault, Holtzbrinck Ventures, and Hearst Ventures had put up more than a hundred million dollars of venture capital for the company. Hoffmann says that the C.E.O., Alexander Zacke, recognized what a publicity boon selling John Lennon’s lost watch would be and pushed for a way to do it with or without notifying Ono. (Zacke did not respond to a request for comment.) Teams of lawyers studied the watch’s provenance and puzzled over how to offer it for sale without raising eyebrows. A document called an extract was obtained from Patek Philippe, which meant that the watch had not been registered as stolen, and Karsan himself travelled to Berlin, where he signed a document in front of a notary testifying that Ono had given him her husband’s Patek as a gift in 2005. As for the authenticity of the watch, there was no doubt: on the case back is an identifying inscription that has never been made public outside Germany.

In late 2013, in preparation for an auction, Auctionata had the watch professionally photographed. (In the photo, the watch floats in a vacuum, a carefully lit token of commerce, divorced from all human and emotional context.) But Erhan G got cold feet. Some years earlier, Ono had sued a former employee who had slipped out of the Dakota with Lennon memorabilia; Frederic Seaman, Lennon’s last personal assistant, confessed to having stolen diaries similar, if not identical, to those which Karsan and Erhan G had stashed away. (He later returned them.) Searching for a private buyer, Hoffmann approached Mr. A, a man he knew from the rare-watch circuit. A deal by “private treaty”—a sale undisclosed to the public—was reached, and in March, 2014, Mr. A agreed that he would consign a selection of Rolex and Patek watches from his own collection, whose sale proceeds would go toward payment for the Lennon 2499, which was priced at six hundred thousand euros (about eight hundred thousand dollars). “This, in some ways, was more helpful than auctioning the watch,” Hoffman told me, explaining that Auctionata’s watch department needed the inventory. The vintage watches Mr. A consigned, most of which Hoffman valued at

between twenty thousand and forty thousand euros apiece, were in total likely worth more than the 2499.

Mr. A told Hoffmann that he planned to keep Lennon's watch in his collection, which has included pieces owned by Eric Clapton. But, within months, he took the Lennon Patek to the Geneva office of Christie's. As part of the auction house's appraisal process, a Christie's representative reached out to Ono's lawyer, who promptly notified his client. Ono rushed to check the locked room, only to discover that the Patek wasn't there. She had no idea how long it had been gone.

In August of 2023, a reporter named Coline Emmel, who works for a small but enterprising Web site in Switzerland called Gotham City, found something interesting in a backlog of documents filed that summer by the Chambre Civile in the canton of Geneva—an appellate judgment in a civil case that had been going on for five years. European privacy laws, especially those in Switzerland, make legal documents unusually hard to decipher. The Swiss judiciary uses a system of letters and numbers to create pseudonyms for appellants, respondents, and anyone else involved, turning a case file into a cryptogram. Emmel knew enough about Beatles history to recognize that "C_____, widow of late F_____, of Japanese nationality and domiciled in [New York City]" was, in fact, Yoko Ono. Although the appeals court affirmed the lower court's decision that Ono was the "sole legitimate owner of the watch," Mr. A—"a watch collector and longtime professional in the sector, of Italian nationality"—was launching another appeal. Emmel posted a brief synopsis on Gotham City, along with the news that a final judgment was now being awaited from the Swiss Supreme Court.

"Mystery solved!" was the gist of the message that ricocheted around the watch world. But, to me, the mystery had only deepened. The basic itinerary of the Patek's odyssey and its current location had been discovered, but the human detail of how it had passed from wrist to wrist, hiding place to hiding place, still hadn't been reported. What's more, where had Ono ever got the idea of giving a guy like John Lennon—eater of carob-coated peanuts, singer of a song about imagining no possessions, peacenik—a watch that was a status symbol of lockjawed good taste? And what was its famously secret inscription?

I had already been in contact with Mr. A; three days before Emmel posted her scoop, he'd cancelled a planned meeting with me in Italy. Instead, we arranged to speak over Zoom. Seated in a panelled room, he told me that, when Ono had found the watch missing, her counsel demanded its return. It was a tricky legal situation, because Ono, having never realized that the watch was gone, hadn't reported it stolen, and because the case spans several national jurisdictions. Mr. A explained that he didn't return the watch because he didn't believe it to be stolen property. He mentioned the inventory that had been taken of Lennon's possessions after his death, which was referred to in the judgment; he claimed that only two watches were listed—a gold watch (presumably the Patek) and another that Mr. A said was a pocket watch Ono had auctioned through Sotheby's in 1984, two decades before Karsan swore she gave him the Patek.

Mr. A pointed to Ono's own version of the story. "Following the death of the late [John Lennon]," the Swiss court's judgment reads, in a summary of a deposition that Ono gave to investigators from Berlin at the German consulate in New York City, "[Ono] wanted to give something belonging to her to those who had worked very faithfully for her. So, she told [Karsan] to take a watch." Ono, however, added that she in no way meant the "watch she'd given the late [John Lennon]." What watch did she mean? Mr. A asked rhetorically. "There was only the Patek."

Christie's, informed that the watch had been stolen, kept the 2499 secured in its Geneva vault, where it sat for several years. The judgment states, "On December 17, 2015, the parties and [Christie's] SA entered into a consignment-escrow agreement under which the Watch would be consigned to [Mr. A's lawyer], until agreement or right is adjudicated on the property." (Christie's did not respond to a request for comment.) Mr. A told me that he eventually decided to go on the offensive. In 2018, he initiated a civil lawsuit against Ono to prove that he was the Patek's rightful owner.

What Mr. A never expected was that his fate would become intertwined with that of Auctionata, which went bankrupt in early 2017. A German court brought in a bankruptcy expert and lawyer named Christian Graf Brockdorff, who, in a review of the company's inventory, stumbled on the eighty-odd other Lennon items that Erhan G had consigned for a high-six-figure sum. "I doubted that everything that had happened in the past was legally correct,"

Brockdorff told me in an e-mail. He contacted the police; a criminal case was opened, and Erhan G was found guilty of knowingly dealing in stolen goods. He served a one-year suspended sentence, having admitted that the story that Karsan had told of how he got the Lennon items “did not correspond to reality.” (A Europol warrant was issued for Karsan, whose whereabouts are unknown; he could not be reached for comment.) That the case itself ever came to be is curious, but its verdict set a legal foundation that the Swiss judgment cited in declaring that Mr. A is not the watch’s rightful owner. According to Guido Urbach, a knowledgeable Swiss attorney, it is unlikely that the Supreme Court will decide any differently.



In a series of follow-up e-mails, I asked Mr. A about what John Lennon’s Patek meant to him. “I’m more of a Rolling Stones man,” he replied, mentioning that he has played bass in a local band for years. Still, “to own the JL watch is really a double good feeling,” he said, adding that he remained hopeful that he could “wear it as soon as possible.”

But, if the Supreme Court confirms the appellate court’s ruling, the watch will likely return to New York. “It’s important that we get it back because of all we’ve gone through over it,” Sean Lennon told me. He added, “I’m not a watch guy. I’d be terrified to wear anything of my dad’s. I never even played

one of his guitars.” He paused. “To me, if anything, the watch is just a symbol of how dangerous it is to trust.”

The watch never seems to have given anyone peace and happiness for long. When Lennon was in Bermuda, writing what he described as the best kind of songs—“the ones that come to you in the middle of the night”—Ono was spending time with Sam Green, whom the *Times* once described as “an unabashed poseur blessed with good looks.” Green had a way with rich and eccentric women. He’d had an affair with the Bakelite heiress, Barbara Baekeland, and by 1980 he was spending his time juggling Greta Garbo, Diana Vreeland, and Ono.

Looking through Green’s papers, which are at Yale’s Beinecke Library, I got an eerie feeling. I found a number of diary entries that corroborated his close relationship with Ono (“Yoko all day and night,” numerous notations read), and a handwritten tally for more than twenty-five thousand dollars—the cost of furniture that Green had sourced to appoint the Hit Factory studio. Whether Green was the one who suggested the Patek as a birthday present for Lennon is hard to confirm, but the cursed history of the watch invites speculation.

The secret engraving, which I found in the never-published Auctionata photo of the watch, is haunting in another way:

(JUST LIKE)
STARTING OVER
LOVE YOKO
10 • 9 • 1980
N. Y. C.

Was there a new start? By the time “Double Fantasy” was finished, Ono had lost interest in Green, and Lennon, who had just written and recorded no fewer than four love songs about her, appeared to be a happy man. The weeks they spent together at the Hit Factory that year had been charmed, which means that the Lennon Patek captures a measure of time that no other watch ever will—the little they had left together. ♦

Brave New World Dept.

Rise of the Nanomachines

Nanotechnology can already puncture cancer cells and drug-resistant bacteria. What will it do next?

By Dhruv Khullar

June 13, 2024



Ana Santos, a microbiologist at Rice University, grew up in Cantanhede, a small city in Portugal that is known as a biotechnology hub and a source of good wine. When she was a child, her grandfather, who bound books for a living, was an energetic man who often rode his bicycle around town. But by 2019, his health had deteriorated and he depended on a catheter. One day, he spiked a fever; doctors found that his urinary tract was infected with a highly drug-resistant form of *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, a bacteria that is commonly found in the gut. None of their antibiotics could treat it. A few days later, he died. “There was literally nothing they could do for him,” Santos told me recently, fury in her voice. “A simple bacterial infection kills him? I thought medicine had dealt with that.”

At the time, Santos was at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Paris, studying genes that allow some bacteria to live longer than others. But after her grandfather's death she decided to focus instead on new ways of killing pathogens. One problem with traditional antibiotics is that bacteria, which are always evolving, can develop resistance over time. To stay competitive in the arms race between bacteria and biotechnology, Santos reasoned, scientists might need entirely new weapons. She read in *Nature* that scientists at Rice, led by the chemist James Tour, had developed "molecular machines" that spun like microscopic drills and were roughly ten thousand times smaller than the width of a human hair—small enough to puncture and kill individual cells. Shortly thereafter, Santos moved to Houston to join Tour's lab.

Now in her late thirties, Santos is congenial but reserved, with straight brown hair, rectangular glasses, and lightly accented English. She seems like the kind of person who would be the first to finish her homework, and the first to help her peers with theirs. When I visited her at Rice, this past February, she led me past microscopes, fume hoods, and amber glass jugs; the chemicals in the lab gave off a faintly sweet smell, as though the walls were painted with banana-scented varnish. I could see an inflatable *T. rex* on top of a fridge, grinning, and a red-white-and-blue portrait of Charles Darwin, modelled on Barack Obama's 2008 campaign posters. "Very gradual change we can believe in," it read.

When we reached Santos's desk, she pulled up an image of kidney-bean-shaped bacteria on her computer. She explained that, in a petri dish, molecular machines are tiny enough to enter bacteria, affix themselves to the inside of bacterial cell walls, and tunnel through the tough outer membrane, rupturing it. The machines are activated by an intense blue light, which causes them to rotate millions of times per second—a hundred thousand times faster than a power drill. Santos showed me an image of the aftermath. The bacteria now resembled shrivelled lumps with angry blisters on their surface. She looked pleased.

"Let's see these things in action," Santos said, and led me to a small room on the other side of the lab. A neon-orange biohazard sticker was plastered outside.

“Dangerous pathogens in there?” I asked.

She paused longer than I would have liked. “Mostly mild stuff,” she said. “Just try not to touch anything.”

We donned lab coats, gloves, and safety goggles. From an overhead shelf, Santos retrieved two petri dishes that each contained five beige moth larvae. Before I’d arrived, she’d injected the larvae with *MRSA*, an antibiotic-resistant bacterium that can cause devastating infections. Now, using a tiny syringe, she injected the larvae in one dish with a solution containing molecular machines. She slid that dish under the glow of a blue light, and I imagined thousands of little drills sticking to each bacterium and then whirring to life.

After a minute or so, Santos moved the dishes to an incubator and took out two others, which had undergone the same procedure a few hours earlier. In the first dish, which had been infused with *MRSA* and molecular machines, the larvae wriggled happily. I watched as one climbed on top of another, like puppies at play. In the second, the larvae that had been injected with only *MRSA* were crusted black. Four of them lay flat against the dish, motionless. The fifth rolled meekly to one side and lifted its darkened head. Then it dropped down, stopped moving, and died.

A few days after Christmas, 1959, in a lecture at the California Institute of Technology, the physicist Richard Feynman considered a future in which molecular machines could “arrange the atoms the way we want,” creating a vast array of possibilities. Such machines might, for instance, allow us to “swallow the surgeon,” he said—we could ingest tiny machines that swim through our bodies to repair faulty heart valves or failing organs. Feynman’s talk established the conceptual foundations for manipulating matter at the nanoscale—the scale of atoms. (If you cut a grain of sand into half a million slices, each fragment would be about a nanometre wide.) For decades, however, scientists didn’t have the technology to test the idea.

A turning point came in the nineteen-eighties, when a pair of physicists invented the scanning tunnelling microscope, which was powerful enough to observe individual atoms. A few years later, K. Eric Drexler, then a research affiliate at M.I.T., published “[Engines of Creation: The Coming Era of](#)

[Nanotechnology](#),” a book in which he imagined “nano-assemblers” capable of reorganizing atoms. Drexler co-founded an organization to promote the development and use of nanotechnology, but, at the same time, he worried that without proper safeguards nanomachines could be built to replicate themselves. Drexler envisioned one apocalyptic scenario in which they fed on the materials of life and turned everything into “gray goo.” (Today’s nanomachines are not self-replicating, but A.I. pessimists have popularized a strikingly similar thought experiment, in which an out-of-control A.I. turns everything into paper clips.)

In the nineties, a Dutch chemist named Bernard Feringa made another breakthrough: he constructed a molecule that had the unusual property of spinning continuously in one direction when exposed to UV light. The molecule’s central element was a carbon axis, and it spun like a pinwheel, generating a small propulsive force. Feringa later described these tiny motors as a crucial step toward realizing Feynman’s vision. In 2016, he shared the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. “I feel a little bit like the Wright brothers,” he said, after winning the award. “People were saying, ‘Why do we need a flying machine?’ And now we have a Boeing 747 and an Airbus.”

In 2006, Tour, the chemist at Rice, built on Feringa’s work to create the world’s first motor-propelled “nanocar,” which was roughly the width of a single strand of DNA. He attached four round formations of carbon—called buckyballs—to an axle and chassis made of hydrogen and carbon. When researchers shone a UV laser on the molecule, the electrons in its central bond jumped to a higher energy state and then relaxed again, causing the motor to spin, the wheels to rotate, and the vehicle to speed forward. In 2017, a team led by Tour won the first international nanocar race, which pitted academic labs against one another in the South of France. (Scientists peered at their creations using a scanning tunnelling microscope and cheered them on; Tour’s achieved an average speed of ninety-five nanometres per hour.) That year, Tour published the paper that caught Santos’s attention. Molecular machines could do more than compete in nano-Daytona 500s. They could potentially help deliver drugs to specific points in the body. They could also home in on dangerous cells, drill holes into their membranes, and trigger a swift and violent death.

Tour, a fit man in his mid-sixties, is courteous but playful, with salt-and-pepper hair that gives him the air of a more professorial version of Mr. Rogers. In his office, he pulled out a tray of vials, each holding different molecules; behind them were sketches of their chemical structures. Tour had constructed the molecules in the two-thousands, as a way of demonstrating the precision with which nanoscale structures could be created. The drawings looked like stick figures, and each molecule had its own nickname and headgear. One appeared to be wearing a crown (NanoMonarch); another had on a graduation cap (NanoScholar). Between them was a molecule with a cowboy hat. This was NanoTexan.



We sat down at a long mahogany table. Above us hung a portrait of Tour, sketched in the world's thinnest known solid, graphene. Tour developed a novel production process for graphene, which he hopes could be implemented at scale; although the much-touted material was widely hyped, it has not yet entered widespread use. (He is also known for engaging in a rancorous online debate about the origins of life.)

Tour told me about two major developments in molecular machines since the twenty-tens, when he began exploring their use in medicine. The first involved the machines' energy source. To activate the molecules, his team

had initially used UV light, which can be toxic to our cells. (Wear sunscreen!) He walked to a bookshelf.

“See this?” he asked, holding up a brass-colored bullet as wide as his palm. It was hard not to. “It’s a .50-calibre bullet,” he said. “That’s UV light—it packs an enormous amount of energy.” By attaching nitrogen or oxygen groups to his microscopic drills, Tour’s team had engineered them to instead rotate under a concentrated form of visible blue light. Some newer machines, Tour told me, could be activated with an even weaker light, known as near-infrared. “Near-infrared is like a .22-calibre bullet,” he said. “A tiny little thing.”

The second development related to how, and how rapidly, the molecules moved. A researcher in Tour’s lab, Ciceron Ayala-Orozco, discovered that molecules in some medical dyes could be stimulated to oscillate trillions of times a second, making them more like jackhammers than like drills. Ayala-Orozco and his colleagues went on to inject mice with millions of melanoma cells and, a week later, billions of molecular jackhammers. About half the mice who were treated became cancer-free.

“Say you have a beautiful lawn in front of your home and the next morning you come out and there’s a big mound of dirt smack-dab in the middle,” Tour said. “That’s because ten thousand fire ants have been working all night. Go and disturb them and they’ll climb all over you.” His fingers scurried across the table toward me. “One fire ant can’t do much, but thousands? Millions? Now we’re talking.”

In 1989, J. Doyne Farmer, a physicist at Los Alamos National Laboratory, where Manhattan Project scientists had developed the atomic bomb, predicted that the twenty-first century might see the rise of artificial life, which had “potential to be either the ugliest terrestrial disaster, or the most beautiful creation of humanity.” He worried that artificial organisms could be designed to reproduce, or even to evolve new abilities, “thus creating self-modifying, autonomous tools.” A dozen years later, Michael Crichton published “Prey,” a novel about nanobots gone wild. In the book, scientists develop nanoparticles powered by solar energy to use in medical imaging, but ambition and greed lead them to ignore the technology’s risks. The particles, which are self-replicating and guided by artificial intelligence, start

to display emergent properties. They find that the most efficient path to reproduction is to feed on organic matter, including human flesh, and they start buzzing around in predatory swarms. (Spoiler: the book's protagonist ultimately infects the nanobots with a lethal virus, beating the biotech at its own game.)

Molecular machines could prove dangerous to humans for the same reason that they're powerful against pathogens: natural selection hasn't prepared us for them. "Biological systems are not evolved to recognize and interfere with (many) nanotechnological functions and capabilities," two defense experts [argued](#) in the journal *Health Security* in 2019. The experts were less worried about rogue science experiments than about bad actors who could design nanomachines to do harm. "This potential to create such new weaponry is not likely to escape the notice of adversaries," the authors wrote. It's not that our bodies have never encountered something as tiny as a nanomachine: volcanic ash, certain viruses, and the smallest fragments of pollen and mineral dust are all roughly on the same scale. "Humans actually evolved alongside any number of nanoparticles," Andrew Maynard, who leads the Risk Innovation Lab at Arizona State University and previously served on the U.S. National Nanotechnology Initiative, told me. "They're all around us and always have been." What's different about nanomachines, Maynard said, is that they can be engineered for specific purposes: "When you start talking about *active* nanomachines, you run the risk—even if it's a long-tail risk—of adversely disrupting complex biological systems."

For the molecular drills being developed by Tour's lab, using visible light as an energy source has both benefits and drawbacks. Visible light can penetrate only a few millimetres beneath the surface of human skin, which means that the machines are better suited to treating superficial conditions than to fixing problems deep inside the body. (The near-infrared light used to activate molecular jackhammers can penetrate a couple of inches; Tour's team plans to focus most of its future efforts on those.) But light usefully serves as a kind of on-off switch. Tour said that, because the machines require a high intensity for activation, they are unlikely to be triggered inadvertently. He also argued that they would not be any more dangerous than technologies that are already widespread. Theoretically, he said, you could "hold someone down and shine a very intense light on them to activate machines inside, but, at that point, you might as well just use a knife." Other

scientists are experimenting with nanomachines triggered by heat, acidity, magnets, or sound waves.

When I asked Tour if I could make some molecular machines, I imagined something like a microscopic video game in which I could direct tiny robots to assemble atoms into mini Model Ts. The actual process was closer to a high-school chemistry experiment.

A postdoc in the lab, Bowen Li, explained that the reaction required three powders: two salts, which he'd synthesized before I'd arrived, and a common chemical reagent, which he'd purchased online. (Their scientific names were benzoindole salts, which are found in some perfumes, and glutacondianil hydrochloride.) If we mixed the ingredients in a solution and heated them to nearly two hundred degrees Fahrenheit, the compounds would fuse together to create a hybrid molecule that reacts to near-infrared light.

Li poured precise amounts of each powder into a glass vial, then placed the vial over intense heat. He squirted in some ethanol and the concoction turned a deep purple. A few minutes later, he transferred the vial to an evaporator, the same kind of machine used to produce condensed milk. We were left with a forest-green goo.

I raised the vial into the air. The ceiling lights illuminated tiny splatters of slime, which looked almost like ants crawling up the sides of the glass. I marvelled at the simplicity with which the microscopic machines had been created, and at the complexity of the biology they were meant to influence.

“So that’s it?” I asked, turning to Li. The process had taken less than half an hour, and the ingredients had cost about a hundred dollars.

He looked at me and smiled. “That’s it.”

Sonia Contera, a physicist at Oxford University, studies how biological shapes influence function. Chlorophyll’s ring structure enables plants to convert sunlight into usable energy; the infinitesimally thin nerve fibres in our brains power cognition; the coronavirus’s crown helps it break into our cells. In 2019, Contera published a book titled “[Nano Comes to Life: How](#)

Nanotechnology is Transforming Medicine and the Future of Biology.”

She's interested in the possible use of nanotechnologies to develop sensors for pathogens, including, potentially, bioweapons.

Earlier this year, I called Contera to ask her about nanotechnology as a therapeutic tool. Learning to use molecular machines, she told me, unlocks a capacity to manipulate biology at its most fundamental level. “There is something very special about the nanoscale,” she said. “It is the scale that the universe chose to create life.” It is a kind of bridge between the quantum world of waves and particles and the biological world of DNA and proteins. Historically, medicine has acted through increasingly sophisticated forms of chemistry: aspirin blocks a pro-inflammatory enzyme; Lipitor inhibits the synthesis of cholesterol. Contera sees Tour and Santos’s molecular machines as part of a scientific movement to manipulate the building blocks of life mechanically, rather than chemically. “We’re now at a place where we can influence the physics of the cell,” she said.

In the human body, molecular machines could allow obsolete antibiotics to become effective again by, for example, disrupting the pumps that bacteria have evolved to expel them, or by penetrating thick bacterial membranes that keep drugs out. A group of researchers at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center recently showed that their nanoparticles could break down the molecular defenses around tumors; they could also drop off a gene-editing system, which would then rewrite a gene that the cancer uses to evade the immune system. Other scientists are trying to develop machines that might one day harvest rare metals from seawater, or extract carbon from the atmosphere. During my visit to Rice, I shuttled between buildings dedicated to engineering, cell biology, and clinical care—a sign that disparate scientific domains are converging in the development of nanotechnology.

In the best case, Santos said, the advent of molecular machines will be less like the invention of an individual tool and more like the creation of a new toolbox. “We have to decide which tool works best for each job,” she told me. Nanomachines bring to mind other innovations for which scientists have found new applications over time. After lasers were invented, in 1960, the military used them to improve guidance systems for smart bombs; now they are used for eye surgery, high-speed Internet, and tattoo removal. Of course,

for every technology like the laser, there are many others that never live up to their promise. Directing the right number of molecular machines to the right places, so that they do exactly what they're made for and nothing more, is much easier in a petri dish than a living body. Some machines could have untoward interactions with the immune system; others may be harmful to mammalian cells. It will probably be many years before the technologies are tested in humans. "There's a huge leap between showing something works in a lab and proving it works in people," Mihail Roco, a senior adviser at the National Science Foundation, who helped create the National Nanotechnology Initiative, told me. "These nanomachines could be a new treatment paradigm, but the human body is enormously complex. Many things we thought would work turned out to be ineffective or toxic." Still, he went on, "Even if you don't get exactly what you hoped for, you often learn something useful. You advance knowledge that, down the line, could benefit humanity."

After Santos wielded her power over the moth larvae, we walked together through a courtyard on campus. I had spent so much time in the laboratory that I savored the bright sun and the pastel-blue sky. A squirrel scurried up a tree; a bee buzzed by my ear. I thought of the sweep of evolution, which has shaped everything from the simplest cells to the humans who are doing these experiments. Power over nature is one of humanity's defining features, and one of its most destructive.

As we walked, I asked Santos about the prospect that her work might never reach patients like her grandfather. Most medical research fails, especially if it departs radically from established scientific practice. "I try to temper my expectations," Santos told me. "But I'm also confident that this is possible." In a way, she said, her work recapitulates the work of evolution. Molecular machines are all around us—in the flagella that can propel individual microorganisms, in the enzymes that unzip our DNA, in the proteins that ferry cargo across our cells. "We're not inventing anything new," she went on. "We're taking inspiration from what already happens in nature. But now we're getting more of a say in how the story plays out." ♦

Letter from Ecuador

Ecuador's Risky War on Narcos

Does President Daniel Noboa's campaign against drug gangs imperil the democracy he claims to defend?

By Jon Lee Anderson

June 17, 2024



[Listen to this article.](#)

After several hours of closed-door meetings with security officials, Daniel Noboa, the recently elected President of Ecuador, sat in a darkened office of the Presidential palace—an elegant eighteenth-century building, known as Carondelet, that overlooks the old center of Quito. When I arrived for our first meeting, Noboa was at a wide, empty desk, staring intently at his phone. Several minutes passed in silence before he looked up, mumbling an apology. We shook hands, and I asked how he was doing. “Surviving,” he said. He didn’t mean this in the ordinary, mildly ironic, getting-through-the-day way. A week earlier, he explained, a dozen hit men had been intercepted crossing the border from Colombia, apparently sent by drug traffickers to kill him. Four of the would-be assassins had been killed in a shoot-out with Ecuadorian security forces. The rest were in detention, but there were

presumably others out there. Now that he was President, he said with a rueful laugh, he would never be out of danger again.

Noboa's story about hit men might have seemed exaggerated, not to mention impolitic, but a foreign diplomat in Quito later confirmed it to me. The diplomat was taken aback that Noboa was discussing a highly confidential incident, but, he said, the new President had not yet mastered the art of discretion. I spent several weeks this spring with Noboa, travelling around Ecuador, and found that he spoke in an unfiltered way about most things, including his dangerous circumstances. Only a few months into his Presidency, he was overseeing an "internal armed conflict" against twenty-two criminal gangs that, taken together, constituted one of the most powerful forces in the country.

When Noboa took office, last November, his presentation was far sunnier. He is athletically built, clean-shaven, and boyishly handsome; at thirty-six, he is the world's youngest elected head of state. (Ibrahim Traoré, of Burkina Faso, is four months younger, but he seized power in a military coup.) He is the son of Álvaro Noboa, often said to be Ecuador's richest man, whose family banana business has grown into a conglomerate with interests in everything from fertilizer to container storage. Álvaro, who has estimated his fortune at more than a billion dollars, also launched five unsuccessful Presidential campaigns of his own.

Until 2021, when Daniel Noboa won a seat in the National Assembly, he was best known as an executive in his family's business, and as an occasional presence in gossip columns. His first marriage, to Gabriela Goldbaum, a designer of high-fashion straw hats, ended in a difficult divorce. (Goldbaum claimed that the relationship unravelled after Noboa said he was going to Miami to meet with tax lawyers, then snuck off to Tulum with a woman named Anastasia.) He is now married to Lavinia Valbonesi, a twenty-six-year-old social-media influencer with arctic-blond hair.



Even Noboa described his run for President as “an improbable political project.” The country was in crisis. For decades, Ecuador, a small nation of eighteen million people, was generally regarded as a peaceful, stable place, at least by regional standards. Tourists came to see the Andes and to retrace Darwin’s route through the Galápagos Islands. Thousands of Americans retired there, seeking an easygoing, inexpensive life.

But across the border in Colombia the cocaine trade was flourishing. Despite a fifteen-year anti-trafficking effort supported by the United States, by 2016 the country was producing more of the drug than ever, accounting for an estimated sixty per cent of the world’s supply. In the past few years, Ecuador—which has a dollarized economy, a modern road system, and major ports on the Pacific—has become a critical hub for the Colombian drug trade. Devastating violence and corruption followed. Particularly on the coast, where drug gangs dominated, killings became commonplace, and many Ecuadorians fled, heading to safer parts of the country or to the U.S.

Last spring, a snap election was called to replace President Guillermo Lasso, an unpopular conservative who was stepping down eighteen months early, under threat of impeachment for alleged embezzlement. Among the candidates was Fernando Villavicencio, a former journalist who spoke urgently about the need to constrain the drug gangs. Eleven days before the

election, as he left a campaign rally in Quito, a squad of Colombian gunmen shot him dead.

The election proceeded in a state of fearful tension, but the shock benefitted Noboa. Previously regarded as a well-prepared but unexciting speaker, he caused a sensation by arriving at a debate wearing a bulletproof vest. He promised to improve security, along with creating jobs and attracting foreign investment. Perhaps as important, he made a virtue of his youth. One TikTok video showed him squaring up with a rack of dumbbells at the gym, wearing a tank top in the same highlighter yellow as the national soccer team's jerseys. In another, which his campaign posted under the slogan "Noboa for everyone," Ecuadorians stopped their cars to grab life-size cutouts of him that his team had placed on city streets. One of his communications advisers, a twenty-five-year-old named Doménica Suárez, told me that Noboa had attracted intense support from young Ecuadorians—a crucial demographic in a country with an average age of twenty-eight and a voting age of sixteen.

The election was held in two rounds. In the initial round, Noboa came in second. In the runoff, he won fifty-two per cent of the vote. He took office projecting an image of himself as a commonsense leader, a businessman without much interest in ideology. What he promised, at least at the beginning, was not a war but a return to normalcy. "I'm not antiAnything," he said. "I am pro-everything."

When Noboa was sworn in, he seemed wary of radical solutions to the crisis in Ecuador; his main proposal was to build maximum-security prisons. For years, the country's overcrowded jails had been effectively run from within by the leaders of narco-trafficking gangs, who used them as headquarters to organize crimes. Villavicencio's assassination was reportedly commissioned by imprisoned leaders of a gang known as Los Lobos. After the U.S. posted a five-million-dollar reward for information on the attack, seven suspects were found dead in their cells—murdered, it was assumed, before they could talk. Such internecine violence was common. Turf warfare among gang members had led to gruesome prison massacres and hundreds of deaths.

In early January, six weeks into Noboa's Presidency, the news broke that the country's most dangerous prisoner had disappeared from his cell. Adolfo Macías, alias Fito, was the boss of the powerful gang Los Choneros; he was

serving thirty-four years for a series of crimes that included drug trafficking and murder. A photo of him being led into custody had been a public-relations victory for the government: the disgraced kingpin—long-haired, shirtless, and built like a former wrestler going soft—submitting helplessly to armed security officers. Now he had escaped. Perhaps most startling, it emerged that Fito had vanished just as Noboa was planning to transfer him to the country’s highest-security prison, known as La Roca, or the Rock. It seemed likely that someone in the government had facilitated his escape.

While campaigning, Noboa had often stopped short of endorsing a military solution to his country’s gang problem. Now he declared a sixty-day state of emergency and sent in the Army to take control of the prisons. Ecuador’s gangs fought back. Across the country, they set off car bombs, triggered prison riots, and attacked police stations; amid the chaos, a leader of Los Lobos also escaped from jail. At the height of the tumult, on January 9th, gunmen broke into the studios of TC Televisión, in the coastal city of Guayaquil. The station was in the middle of a news broadcast, and the cameras kept rolling as reporters and studio employees pleaded for their lives. The attackers, most wearing masks, put guns to their captives’ heads and ordered them to lie down. Before anyone could be killed, a police task force arrived and arrested the assailants. But Ecuadorians were shaken: a near-massacre had played out on live TV.

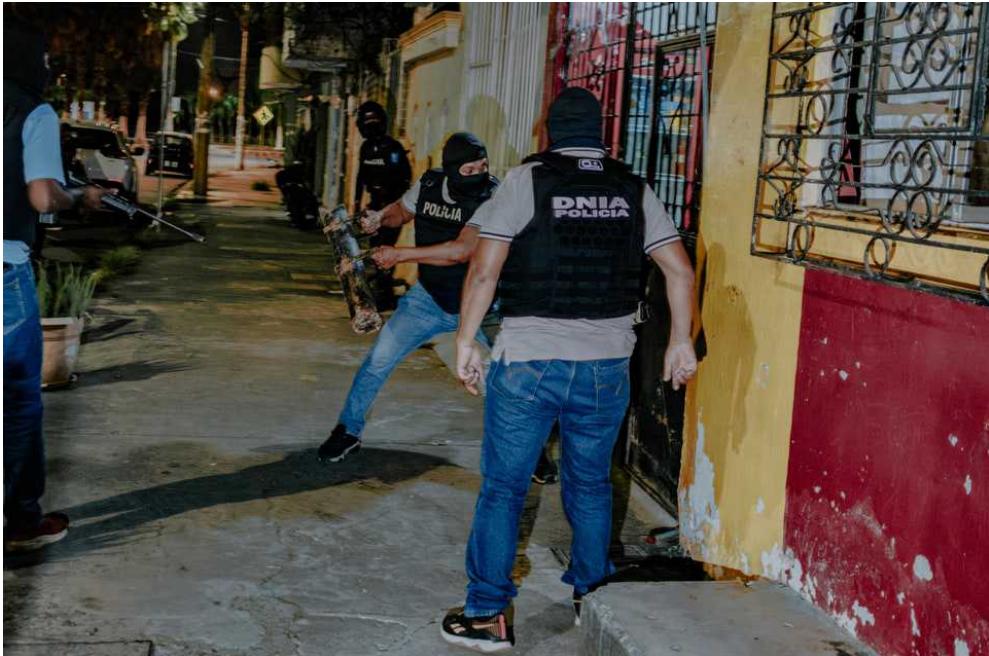
Noboa announced a state of internal armed conflict and instituted new rules: the drug gangs would henceforth be classified as “terrorists” and regarded as military targets. Across the country, soldiers carried out patrols and armed raids, particularly in poor neighborhoods. There were shoot-outs and arrests, followed quickly by reports of heavy-handed treatment of suspects and, in some cases, of torture.

The gangs did not seem deterred. A week after the TC Televisión attack, the prosecutor assigned to the case was assassinated. In one of our conversations, Noboa predicted that there would be many more such killings. Ecuador was corrupted from top to bottom, he said—infiltrated by the Colombian cartels, their Mexican counterparts, and Albanian gangs. Noboa is not an imposing figure, but since being elected he has seemed increasingly eager to demonstrate his *mano dura*, or strong hand. He told me he had seen intelligence showing that, when he launched his campaign, the

narcos predicted his government would collapse within a couple of weeks. “That was their plan,” he said. “They never expected me to have the balls to declare war on them.”

The next morning, a car picked me up before dawn and sped me to a V.I.P. airport, to accompany the President on one of the drug raids that his security forces had been carrying out. Noboa arrived soon afterward, in a convoy of black Suburbans. Travelling with him was like taking part in a small-scale military operation. He moved under close guard from his motorcade to the Presidential jet or a Presidential helicopter; when he got out of a vehicle, bodyguards unfurled bulletproof screens to protect him from potential snipers. At stops, dozens of security men formed tightly choreographed cordons, overseen by an élite military unit and private security guards, including a laconic Israeli named Rafi. (In a moment of indiscretion, Noboa disclosed that he received intelligence and security coöperation from the C.I.A. and Mossad.)

On flights, Noboa occupied a recliner-size leather seat, embossed with the Presidential seal. Aides filled the other rows, and flight attendants circulated with snacks. He usually dressed down, in slacks and sneakers, though sometimes he wore a flight jacket with the words “Daniel Noboa Presidente” embroidered in gold thread. Generally, he spent the time absorbed in his own thoughts, or scrolling through his phone, but he would respond to questions, and if a topic interested him he’d argue for his point of view in seemingly inexhaustible detail. (Several aides speculated to me that Noboa is on the autism spectrum.) On one flight, his intelligence chief mentioned that Alex Jones was tweeting about the container ship that crashed into Baltimore’s Key Bridge, suggesting that the controls had been hacked. Noboa, looking up from his phone, dismissed social media as largely vacuous: “Only ten per cent of what’s on there is valuable information. The rest is poison.” He added that his wife, Lavinia, was profoundly addicted. “If you hide her phone for two hours, she’ll collapse,” he said. (In fact, she joined us on a subsequent trip and hardly raised her eyes from her screen.)



The raid we were flying to was an hour away, in Guayaquil, the country's sprawling commercial hub. We landed at a military base, and travelled by convoy to a dusty neighborhood at the edge of town. Squads of military officers and policemen were there, keeping curious onlookers at bay. The raid, it turned out, had already taken place, and a haul of drugs and weapons had been laid out like an open-air exhibition; next to it, seventeen detained men were lined up on their knees, with a masked security officer standing behind each one. Most of the detainees looked meekly at the pavement, but a few stared sullenly at the members of the Presidential entourage. Noboa, wearing a helmet and a flak jacket, stood silently for a moment and contemplated the detainees. Then, trailed by photographers, he walked around the confiscated drugs and weapons, assessing them with a stern look.

In less than half an hour, we were back in the convoy, and then on the Presidential jet, heading back to Quito. Considering that more than a thousand policemen and military personnel had been deployed, the results of the operation seemed modest: fifty-two kilos of drugs, a few weapons, and a lineup of detainees. But Doménica Suárez and her team were drafting a press release that would make it a major news item. Within hours, Ecuadorian media were leading with reports of the government's "mega-operation"—a raid on an infamous Guayaquil housing project, controlled by a gang called Los Tiguerones (the Big Tigers), near which several

dismembered bodies of victims had recently been recovered. The stories ran alongside pictures of Noboa in his helmet, looking decisive amid the action.

On the plane, Noboa made it clear that the trip, like others he had planned, was all about politics. In a few weeks, a national referendum was scheduled on several of his proposed security measures, including the continued deployment of the military, tougher prison sentences for drug offenses, and the extradition of narco-trafficking suspects to the U.S. Noboa knew that the referendum would also serve as an index of how Ecuadorians saw his leadership. If he succeeded, he would likely win next year's Presidential election. If he lost, his political career was probably over. Noboa may have been prone to bluster, and the raids were obviously a kind of campaign event, but his presence there helped make him a visible enemy of the cartels. "Even if I'm in Geneva in twenty years, they could send a Russian hit man after me," he said. He shrugged and stretched out his hands, smiling. "It is what it is."

The next morning, staffers at Carondelet placed bouquets of fresh-cut flowers in the fountains of a central patio. Security men and attendants hustled around, while forty or so elderly men and women sat expectantly in a shaded arcade. The President, trying a new form of political outreach, was receiving the members of a local senior citizens' group. The guests, dressed for a formal occasion, called excited greetings to one another.

Everyone applauded as Noboa and Lavinia descended the stairs from the palace and took seats before the crowd. Noboa wore a stylish suède jacket, a pink shirt, and blue slacks, and Lavinia had on a loose brown jacket and burgundy pants.

The first guest to speak, the group's leader, stood and handed Noboa an effigy of the Virgin Mary, as if in offering. On the microphone, she addressed him affectionately as "one of the best Presidents in Latin America—and the youngest, too." She said that she had worked for his father. Referring to him reverently as "the engineer," she noted that she had participated in each of his five Presidential campaigns. A second guest also talked at length about Noboa's father: he had built companies for Ecuador, and now it was his son's turn to do something big.

As the audience chanted his family name, Noboa wore a slightly pained smile. Finally, he took the microphone and thanked the speakers for their kind words. Then he pivoted sharply to say, “I have to harden my heart, on behalf of eighteen million Ecuadorians.” He said that he wanted to restore “dignity” to his constituents’ lives, and suggested that experience had toughened him for the job. “I’ve spent all my life receiving attacks, directly or indirectly,” he said. “Maybe that’s why God put me here.” If any of the attendees detected a trace of messianism, they kept it to themselves as they clapped.



Noboa has a story that he likes to tell about his early travails. At eighteen, he started a company that staged concerts in Miami with popular Latin American musicians. But, he told me regretfully, he was inexperienced, and his business rivals were cutthroat. After a year, he went bankrupt, with more than a million dollars in debt, and asked his father for work. The family banana business, Bonita, had been steadily expanding, and Noboa was dispatched to Central America to hire farm managers. He travelled all over the region, including to the notoriously violent town of Tapachula, near Mexico’s border with Guatemala. Once, he recalled, he was caught in a gun battle between coyotes, and had to jump into a canal to avoid getting shot. Afterward, he said, his father had taken pleasure in joking that his son knew all the “worst places” in Latin America.

For the most part, the circumstances of Noboa's life had set him apart from his constituents. He was born in Miami and speaks English like a native. He says that he feels equally American and Ecuadorian, and when I asked him where he felt the most at home in the U.S. he immediately said, "New York." His father owned a home in the Hamptons, and he went there every summer growing up. The elder Noboa was a political combatant, fond of the epithet "Communist devil," but Daniel seemed groomed from the start to join the international élite. He earned a bachelor's degree at N.Y.U.'s Stern School of Business, followed by an M.B.A. from Northwestern, a master's in public administration from Harvard, and a master's in political communication and strategic governance from George Washington University.

He and Lavinia have two children, both toddlers; they came along on a flight we took to the coast, with a detachment of nannies to care for them. Noboa wanted to offer his children an education like the one he'd had. As a boy, he had gone to an élite private German school in Guayaquil, which he said was beneficially strict. He explained that the tuition hadn't been that expensive, three or four hundred dollars a month, so he had made friends not only with the children of bankers but also with those of bus drivers. (They would likely have been among a small number of scholarship students; in those years, four hundred dollars was more than the entire monthly earnings of a typical bus driver in Ecuador.)

Noboa seemed unconcerned, or perhaps unaware, that his wealth might inspire resentment. On a flight over the Andes, I had seen a patchwork section of jungle and asked about deforestation. He replied that it wasn't bad—the forest in that area regenerated quickly—and then immediately added, "For the record, I believe in climate change." He acknowledged that the glaciers were retreating in South America, and the snow was vanishing in Europe. "But it wasn't bad in Colorado last winter," he said. "The powder is still good there. I go every winter." He was an avid snowboarder, he said, and as a teen-ager had won a championship in New York State.

On the flight with Lavinia, as we approached the coastal city of Salinas, he pointed to a lake just inland from the beach. "I really want to build a home there one day," he said. "It's a dream of mine." Lavinia smiled but said

nothing. Their current beach house, in the resort town of Olón, was close enough to nearly be visible from the site he had in mind.



That night in Olón, we went to dinner at a rustic-chic restaurant. The security men took up stations outside, and the tables near us were kept empty, but the other diners waved and smiled from across the room. As servers brought us swordfish, Noboa spoke about a dry part of southern Ecuador where people go to ease health problems. Someday, he said, he wanted to retire to an almond farm there. “It’s a great area for that,” he said. “To be surrounded by all those white blossoms . . .”

Lavinia had dressed for dinner in a tunic with a vivid turquoise pattern. She is the daughter of an Italian adventurer, who arrived in the Galápagos Islands and opened a hotel there, and an Ecuadorian woman. Before becoming First Lady, she had been a social-media influencer, a model, and the owner of a health-food restaurant. When I asked how she had adjusted to politics, she smiled again and said that she never expected this life. Anyway, she added, she was just a mother, while “Daniel has all the hard work to do.” With an adoring look, she said, “I am just so proud of him. He’s saving our country.”

Later, Lavinia passed Noboa her phone, saying quietly, “Something’s up in a prison.” Noboa read a text message—it was his chief of staff, informing him

of rioting and a hostage situation in one of the Guayaquil prisons. Noboa fretted briefly, speculating that the riot was being staged as a distraction; the attorney general was about to present a key witness in an anti-corruption case. But dinner went on, and soon he got another message, saying that the rioting had ended. Before we left, guests from the other tables came to ask for selfies with the First Couple. Noboa and Lavinia rose from the table and posed with Instagram-ready smiles.

Noboa took office at a time of uncertain change in Latin America. As populism surges, the traditional split between left and right is eroding. There are ten governments in the region that could be described as left wing, but they range widely. There are those led by performative militants (Gustavo Petro, in Colombia, and the lame duck Andrés Manuel López Obrador, in Mexico) and by pragmatic social democrats (Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in Brazil, and Gabriel Boric, in Chile). At the extreme are the weary authoritarian regimes still proclaiming revolution in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua.

On the right, the most visible leaders are the most outrageous ones. In El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, a social-media-savvy millennial, has given himself dictatorial powers as he fights street gangs. In Argentina, the self-described “anarcho-capitalist” Javier Milei has declared war on the welfare state, advocating a market so free of constraints that, as he once suggested, people would ultimately be able to buy and sell children. Milei has been embraced by Viktor Orbán and by Donald Trump; Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg posed for photos with him when he visited the U.S. When Bukele recently staged a ceremony to celebrate his reëlection, the guests included Donald Trump, Jr., Tucker Carlson, and Matt Gaetz.

In this milieu, it is perhaps unsurprising that Noboa tries to resist political categorization. The diplomat in Quito told me that he espouses both center-right security policies and center-left social-welfare programs. In our conversations, though, Noboa seemed to be evolving a political philosophy on the fly. One afternoon, as we rode in his armored S.U.V. to the opening of a low-income housing project near the city of Riobamba, I asked which Latin American leader he felt most aligned with. He smiled and said, “Lula.” This was unexpected—in Brazil and abroad, Lula is a longtime emblem of the left. But Noboa said that he had met Lula fifteen years earlier, at a

“father-and-son business leaders’ summit” organized by the Mexican communications magnate Carlos Slim. Since then, Lula had impressed him with his political savvy and his ability to push through an agenda.



He seemed less impressed by other regional leaders. When I mentioned Chile’s Boric—a fellow-millennial, just a few years older—Noboa said that he “seems all right,” but was hamstrung by his far-left coalition partners. “It’s not a problem I have,” he added. He described Colombia’s President, the former Marxist guerrilla Petro, as a “leftist snob,” adding that he had a habit of delivering lectures rather than engaging in conversation. “He’s smart, but he’s not getting anything done,” Noboa said. Milei was worse, in his view: “I don’t know why he thinks he’s so great. He hasn’t achieved anything since he became President. He seems full of himself—which is very Argentine, actually.”

Among his peers in the region, Noboa is most often compared to Bukele, who has moved to end his country’s security problems by jailing more than eighty thousand purported gang members, some of them in a gigantic, purpose-built new prison. But a close aide of Noboa’s had warned me that his boss reacted badly to the comparison. When I mentioned Bukele’s name in the S.U.V., he wrinkled his nose and said, “The guy is arrogant and all about controlling power for himself and making his family rich.” There were

a handful of families who owned everything in El Salvador, he said, “and now there are the Bukeles.” I noted that Bukele had referred to himself as “the coolest dictator in the world.” Noboa smirked and said, “Yeah, in a country the size of Guayas”—a midsize province of Ecuador.

Noboa distinguished his security campaign from that of Bukele, who had imposed authoritarian measures by overriding his country’s institutions. “What I did was entirely democratic,” Noboa said. “I asked the legislature and the judiciary when I declared my war. I had the backing of the three powers to do it.”

In fact, Ecuador’s Constitutional Court found that Noboa had supplied insufficient evidence to justify his declaration. International observers raised concerns that his security forces had essentially discarded due process. Juanita Goebertus, the director of the Americas division of Human Rights Watch, pointed out that more than thirteen thousand people had been arrested in just the first two months of this year. There were reports of detainees being beaten or denied a hearing with a judge. “So far, Daniel Noboa still seems concerned about not being labelled an authoritarian,” Goebertus said. “What he has to do is take the appropriate measures so that he doesn’t become one.”

But Noboa seemed to suspect that many of his constituents wouldn’t mind an authoritarian leader, if he could rid the country of the cartels. Throughout the region, the fraying of democratic institutions and the rise of insecurity had encouraged support for strongmen. “If you took a poll right now,” he said, “the fact is most Latin Americans would take dictatorship over democracy.”

Despite Noboa’s security measures, his government seemed fragile. During my visit, there were constant reports of killings. In the past two years, the homicide rate had more than tripled, making it the highest in Latin America.

Noboa portrayed Ecuador as a country that had been hijacked with the compliance of its officials. Since taking office, he had fired the heads of the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force. The attorney general, Diana Salazar, had carried out an investigation called the Metástasis case, which uncovered

extensive evidence allegedly implicating scores of judges, prosecutors, and police and prison officials in collusion with narco-trafficking.

Perhaps as much as Noboa blamed the drug lords, he blamed his predecessor Rafael Correa. A protégé of the Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chávez, Correa was a charismatic, divisive leftist, who ran Ecuador from 2007 to 2017. His administration was widely seen as corrupt; his Vice-President was imprisoned for bribery, and Salazar, the attorney general, accused Correa as well. By then, he had fled to Belgium. In 2020, after being tried in absentia on corruption charges, he was sentenced to eight years in prison.

Still, he has a devoted following in Ecuador, and his party, Revolución Ciudadana, holds the largest share of seats in congress. Noboa's main rival in last year's election was a Correa loyalist, and it was generally understood that if she won she would facilitate his return to power. When the next election is held, in February, 2025, Noboa will surely have to face another candidate picked by Correa. To survive politically, he must weaken Correa's influence, and his strategy is clearly to blame him for the *narcopolítica* that has consumed Ecuador.

Noboa argued that Correa had set the problem in motion in 2009, by forcing a U.S. military base out of Manta, a port city in the coastal province of Manabí. The Americans had used the base to launch surveillance flights and block drug shipments, but Correa insisted that their presence violated Ecuadorian sovereignty. As Paulina Recalde, an Ecuadorian political pollster, pointed out, two of the more popular protest slogans in the Correa years were "Take the base out of Manta" and "No to the T.L.C."—a proposed free-trade agreement with the U.S.

Correa rejects the idea that removing the base encouraged trafficking. "That's like saying that it happened because the Spaniards were removed from Ecuador at independence!" he told me recently. "When I left office, nobody was saying Ecuador was a narco-state." But it is indisputable that, in the years that followed, Manabí became a stronghold for narcos, as well as the locus of vicious turf wars. Noboa told me that his administration had intelligence showing that some sixty per cent of the province's political class was involved with traffickers, who used public-works contracts to co-opt officials and to launder their profits. Anyone who opposed them was

murdered. Last July, the mayor of Manta, Agustín Intriago, was inspecting a sewage facility when hit men drove up and shot him to death; a woman talking with him was also killed. The day I arrived in Ecuador, the country's youngest mayor, Brigitte García, was shot to death in her home town of San Vicente. Her body was found in a car, alongside the corpse of her press officer. Noboa told me that, before García died, she had scheduled a meeting with him. He suggested that narco's had killed her because she was going to share compromising information about them.



During my visit, Noboa was planning a swing through Manabí. With the referendum coming, he wanted to be seen visiting cartel territory, and also hoped to promote his programs for a “new Ecuador,” which would provide employment, wean young people from the drug business, and ease insecurity in the region. As his aides worked out details of the trip, five people were kidnapped from a hotel in a beach town near Manta, and their bodies were later found on the side of a road. The victims seemed unconnected to trafficking, and Noboa and his advisers were baffled, until a theory emerged that it was a case of mistaken identity, in which a drug gang believed that the visitors belonged to a rival group.

Noboa managed a bluff response. When one of the suspected killers was captured, a few days later, he tweeted out a video of a masked policeman

forcing the suspect, a scruffy young man, into a patrol car. Beneath it, he wrote, “We won’t rest until we find the others.” But he seemed frustrated by the situation. After we arrived in Manta, he held a security briefing with his intelligence chief, his interior minister, his defense minister, and the governor of Manabí, along with the regional head of the police and a senior naval officer. In opening remarks, a police official said that Noboa’s administration had brought down homicides substantially. Yet everyone knew that the toll remained appalling: some two thousand deaths in the months since he had taken office. Noboa complained about the murdered tourists. “It gives the impression of a lack of control,” he said. “With the referendum coming up, it’s imperative to mount more aggressive police operations.”

The governor seemed eager to show aggression. He asked Noboa for “more firmness,” and for additional protections for police, “who fear that, down the road, they’ll be held to account for human rights for what they’re doing now.” (Attorney General Salazar had opened at least eight investigations into extrajudicial killings.) He also asked for a system that would offer rewards for the capture of the most wanted criminals, arguing that “the relatives of the criminals themselves will turn them in.” Noboa responded grimly, “We’ll post a list of military objectives, not ‘most wanted,’ and everyone can figure out for themselves what that means.”



Two prominent members of Los Choneros had been arrested recently, and the governor asked to have them transferred to La Roca. But the naval officer resisted the idea, warning that it was risky to mix “prisoners of war,” as he called gang leaders, with white-collar “political prisoners.” He also noted that he had intelligence indicating that the prospect of moving to the tightly controlled prison had caused rising tensions among the narcos.

Noboa’s interior minister, Mónica Palencia, bristled. She asked the naval officer curtly whether he was implying that the government should not move important prisoners to La Roca because they “felt tense.” Noboa broke in to settle the matter: “There are still vacant cells at La Roca, and it is the highest-security facility we have.”

The next morning, over breakfast at the luxurious beachfront hotel where Noboa was staying, I asked about the exchange. Noboa suggested that it wasn’t unusual to get pushback from security officers. “I’m sure they have agreements,” he said. (The naval officer denied links to drug trafficking.) “The big guys don’t want to go to La Roca because they have no control.” In other prisons, he said, the inmates were used to doing whatever they liked: “It’s like a night club.”

After our breakfast attendant left the room, he lowered his voice and said, “Manabí is one of the areas where the military has done the fewest crackdowns. If I didn’t come here, there was no chance they were going to move those guys to La Roca.” He speculated that the drop in murders in Manta—there had been two the previous day, he said, down from five earlier that week—was also due to his visit. “It would have been way too shameful for the military and the police to have an increase in violent deaths with me present.” Looking around the breakfast room, he said, “This place, Manta, it’s like Sinaloa.”

In Manta, Noboa held an event in a college auditorium with the Israeli Ambassador, to mark the announcement of a program of “circular immigration,” in which young Ecuadorians would be allowed to travel to Israel as agricultural workers. There would also be new scholarship programs in several countries, including Hungary, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Spain. “The youth are the most vulnerable to the narco-terrorists,

so they are my top priority,” Noboa said. “If we don’t look after our youth, we are destined to fail.”

Travelling through rural Manabí, Noboa made quick stops in a string of small towns. In each, he was greeted by politicians, local beauty queens, and applauding teen-agers. Wearing a T-shirt that read “Youth Employment—The New Ecuador,” he promised greater security and government support for projects in agriculture, fish processing, and mining.

The culminating event of our trip was supposed to have been a drug raid in a rural town, but our appearance there was called off at the last minute. Noboa told me that the suspects had been alerted by an intelligence leak, so the bust was too insignificant to bother with—he wasn’t about to show up for three guys caught with a couple of kilos and a donkey. Instead, we went to Guayaquil, where he took two days off to visit relatives, including his first child, who lives there with his ex-wife. While he was occupied, I obtained permission to visit La Roca.

Ecuador’s most secure prison sits next to a highway on the scrubby outskirts of the city, an area of car-repair shops, electrical pylons, and run-down buildings. The entry road was surrounded by chain-link fencing, overgrown with weeds, and festooned with trash. A new warden, Martha Macías, was appointed earlier this year, after one of her predecessors was accused of smuggling a weapon into the prison. Macías, a woman in her fifties who wore a billowy red shirt, a white baseball cap, and gold-framed sunglasses, arrived to escort me into the prison. We went through inspections, including an electronic body scan and a pat-down, in a series of rooms where police and penitentiary employees jostled for space with military officers. Macías explained that Noboa had brought in the Army to monitor the rest of the staff. The military had effectively no experience in running prisons, and the atmosphere was strained.



The interior of La Roca was a warren of concrete hallways with brown walls and harsh lighting. As Macías led me through, surrounded by guards, she described the strictures that had been imposed there since Noboa declared his internal war: prisoners were forbidden family visits and kept in lockdown for twenty-three and a half hours a day, with a half hour allotted for recreation in a concrete yard with a steel-mesh roof. In the yard, Macías showed spots in the wall where the prisoners had formerly hidden cell phones and weapons; they were now plugged with concrete. In a small infirmary, a prisoner was talking with a medic. Macías said that the room had been Fito's cell, before he had presumably used his influence to secure a transfer to a more comfortable prison—from which he then escaped.

In another room was a screen where prisoners could talk by Zoom with their lawyers. The room doubled as a library, and on a makeshift shelf I spotted a Deepak Chopra book and an English-language copy of Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States." Nearby was a tome on Ecuador's judicial system and another on agronomy. "Please try and get us some more books," Macías pleaded.

The main cellblock was a dark, cavernous two-story rectangle built around a concrete yard. It held about fifty of Ecuador's most dangerous prisoners, Macías explained, but also a former senior judicial official and the son of

Ecuador's Vice-President, who had been charged with influence-peddling. Noboa had had a falling out with the Vice-President, and some observers believed that he had orchestrated her son's arrest in an attempt to force her resignation. (A spokesman for Noboa said that judicial authorities had made the decision independently.)

As we approached, prisoners reached through the bars of their cells and pressed their faces close to look. Macías got permission from one inmate for me to see his cell. The inmate, a pale middle-aged man, was led out by a cordon of guards. In the cell, which Macías described wryly as a "suite," there were two concrete slabs, stacked like bunk beds; one held a soiled mattress. There was also a toilet and a sink. Macías explained that prisoners didn't leave their cells even for meals.

The cellblock was hot, and the air still and fetid. After a few minutes, prisoners began calling out from the floor above. One shouted, "Help us get back our family visits!" Another, complaining about the constant lockdown, screamed, "This isn't El Salvador!"

La Roca was evidently not the worst-case scenario. Ecuador's prisons are largely off limits to journalists, but Human Rights Watch says that observers have reported "restrictions in the provision of food, medicines and other basic services, cases of beatings, use of teargas, electric shocks, sexual violence and deaths at the hands of soldiers." Even at La Roca, there wasn't enough food for "*los P.P.L.*," Macías told me, referring to the Spanish for "persons deprived of liberty." As she drove me back out, she asked me to tell the President about the problems she faced. In Quito a couple of days later, I relayed her concerns to Noboa. He listened but looked unsympathetic. "The conditions could be a lot worse," he said.

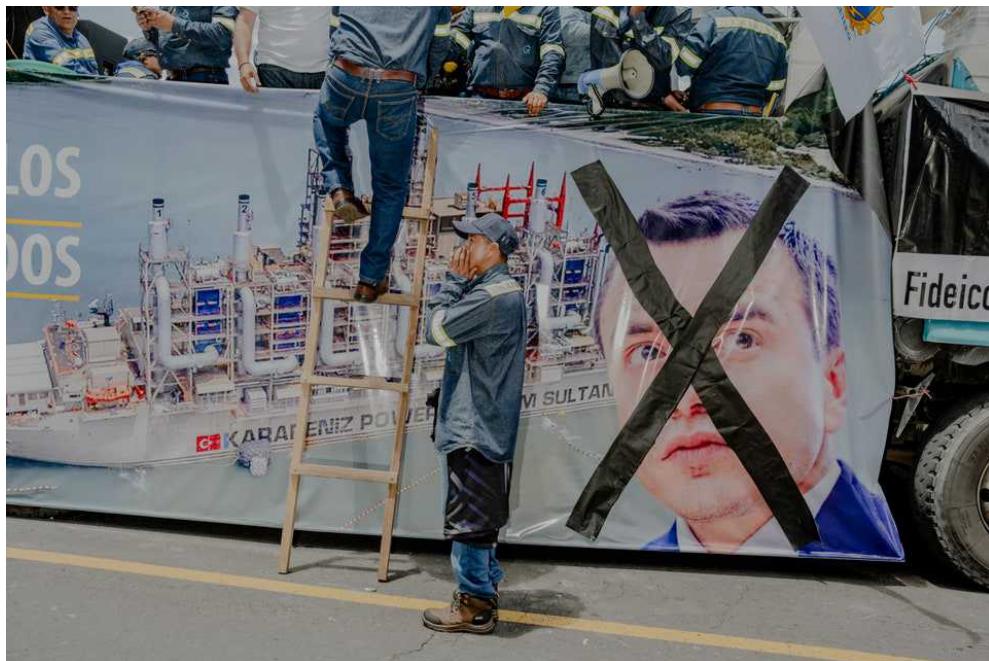
Durán, a sprawling town across the river from Guayaquil, is the most dangerous place in Ecuador. Gangs are fighting for control of its streets, and last year alone more than four hundred people were murdered there.

In May, 2023, a reformist new mayor named Luis Chonillo was ambushed as he drove to his inauguration, and three people were killed. Chonillo survived, but he has never sat in the mayor's office; he lives in secrecy, surrounded by armed guards. He governs by phone and Zoom, and often

sleeps in a different bed each night. Every few weeks, he visits his family, who have fled to a safer location.

I met Chonillo in the back room of a public building in Guayaquil. He entered accompanied by guards, wearing a flak jacket and a helmet. The violence in Durán had become gruesome, he said, with beheadings and bodies hung from overpasses. “I try to overcome my fear every day,” he told me.

Chonillo, who is thirty-nine, has degrees from the University of Miami and from Mexico’s élite Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education. He was in Mexico in 2006 when President Felipe Calderón declared his own war on the drug cartels. Since then, nearly two hundred and fifty thousand people are estimated to have died as a result of the conflict, and more than a hundred thousand have disappeared. “What is happening here now is something like that,” Chonillo said. “States of siege tend to work at the beginning. But without continuity these policies don’t work.” He suggested that law enforcement needed to be matched by programs to address the poverty and inequity that allow gangs to flourish. “It’s important to get resources to the affected towns and cities,” Chonillo said. “Otherwise, how will we ever recover the public spaces?”



As Mexicans grew disillusioned with the internal war, President López Obrador adopted a reformist policy known as *abrazos, no balazos* (“hugs, not bullets”). Noboa dismissed this milder philosophy, saying that it had done nothing to curb violence in Mexico. He pointed out that the powerful Sinaloa and Nueva Generación cartels had only increased their influence in Ecuador, with deadly results.

In his most combative and self-regarding moods, Noboa seemed to suggest that he was fighting the war with the narcos on his own. He showed me a video from social media in which masked thugs warned that they were going to rape his wife and kill him—one of many such threats, he said. With obvious pleasure, he told a story about how he’d sent word to a gang chief that, if he didn’t free a group of hostages he had taken, Noboa would go in with the special forces and personally “shoot him in the face.” During one of my visits, he was carrying around “Fouché,” Stefan Zweig’s biography of Napoleon’s crafty, amoral minister of police.

One day, flying back to Quito after a visit to a prison in Cuenca, where authorities had discovered a secret tunnel dug by inmates, Noboa wondered whether it was possible to build a prison in territory that Ecuador has legal access to in Antarctica. “We have a slice of it, so why not?” he said, with a sly smile. “A prison for just a hundred guys.” A senior aide, sitting across from us, coughed nervously. “Mr. President, it’s not a bad idea, but I think the Antarctic nations are bound by a treaty, and their presence there is limited to scientific research and the like,” he said. “But I will investigate.”

After a moment’s consideration, Noboa raised another possibility. If Antarctica turned out to be too complicated, could he protect prosecutors and judges who were facing threats by moving them to Ecuadorian embassies abroad? Could they legally try and sentence criminals from there? Looking doubtful, the aide promised to investigate that, too.

As the bloody skirmishes with the narcos dragged on, Noboa seemed increasingly conspiratorial. In conversation, he intimated that some of his political rivals had sex with minors. Publicly, he referred to a judge who challenged him over prisoners’ rights as “anti-patriotic” and suggested that his opposition in the legislature was trying to “destabilize the government.”

In April, there were frequent power outages, causing widespread frustration. In response, Noboa fired the energy minister, accusing her and twenty-one other officials of sabotage. An administration spokesman claimed that enemies had disabled a hydroelectric dam by opening the floodgates; the dam turned out not to have floodgates. Soon afterward, a luxury development that Noboa's wife was planning on land owned by his family was halted by environmentalists, who pointed out that it encroached on a nature conservancy. An investigation was opened, but Noboa claimed that his family was abandoning the project only to avoid empowering his political opponents.



On the evening of April 5th, Noboa made an extraordinarily provocative move: he ordered police commandos to breach the gates of the Mexican Embassy in Quito. Inside, they arrested Jorge Glas, who had served as Ecuador's Vice-President under Rafael Correa. Glas is a controversial figure who, in 2017 and 2020, was convicted of bribery and corruption and sentenced to a total of fourteen years in prison—though a judge allowed him early release, ruling that his well-being was at risk. He was under investigation in a separate case when he fled to the Embassy and secured political asylum.

A standoff ensued, as Noboa refused to honor the asylum. Finally, he told the police to move in. Within minutes, videos circulated online that showed the former Vice-President being driven from the compound, and the Mexican official in charge of the Embassy shouting in outrage as he was jostled by police and then pushed to the ground. Officials around the world expressed indignation over a breach of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. The Mexican government broke off relations with Ecuador, and Nicaragua soon followed, condemning the “neo-fascist political barbarism” of Noboa’s government.

Observers within Ecuador were furious, too. Verónica Potes, a prominent lawyer and activist, told me, “To go into the Mexican Embassy like that was a signal that he is ready to violate any norm. I don’t think he has any scruples about breaking any laws.” She said that Noboa appeared determined to consolidate power, with the referendum and his reëlection in mind. Leonidas Iza, the leader of Ecuador’s largest Indigenous alliance, *Conaie*, presented me with a litany of Noboa’s worrisome behaviors—which included accusing rights groups like his of conspiring with narcos. “It’s clear that Noboa is trying to create a state like Bukele’s,” Iza said. “It goes beyond authoritarianism. He has a dictatorial attitude.”

Thirty-six hours after the Embassy raid, I met Noboa at Carondelet, where I was shown into an expansive living area with elaborate sofas, gilded mirrors, and a grand piano topped with silver-framed photographs of his family. Through the windows, I could see the ranks of terra-cotta roofs that make up the colonial heart of old Quito, and beyond them the tin-roofed slums on the adjacent hills.

Noboa came in wearing a red-and-white athletic shirt bearing the logo for Pilsener, a ubiquitous Ecuadorian beer. Chuckling, he said, “It’s been a crazy few days.” He explained his decision to arrest Glas. “The option of entering the Embassy was always in my head over the last couple of months,” he said. He told me that Attorney General Salazar had heard from witnesses in the Metástasis case that Glas was leading operations aimed at undermining his government. “He’s a very dark figure,” Noboa said.

As Vice-President, Glas had overseen the ministries in charge of ports, highways, electrical plants, and petroleum. “If you were a cartel, you needed

to talk to two guys,” Noboa said. “Glas and another guy, José Serrano, who was the minister of the interior.” Serrano was living comfortably in Florida; Noboa had asked American officials to arrest him, but they had thus far declined. (Serrano denied any wrongdoing and called the accusations “baseless.” Glas’s lawyer said that his client hadn’t been charged with committing anti-government acts or having connections with drug groups.) Glas, meanwhile, had taken the fall for the Correa team, evidently without informing on anyone. “If he gets out of jail, he’s got power,” Noboa said. “The day he talks, the whole structure collapses.”



Noboa told me that the U.S., Canada, and China had not said anything about the Embassy raid. “They seem O.K. with it,” he said. A few days later, the U.S. national-security adviser, Jake Sullivan, denounced the incursion, saying that it “jeopardizes the foundation of basic diplomatic norms.” But the responses from Canada and China were milder, and slower to arrive.

Along with Mexico and Nicaragua, Venezuela and Colombia also forcefully condemned the raid. Noboa saw a plot: Correa and his allies were trying to position him as a right-wing extremist. “They need to show me as a neo-Nazi, because I’ve been taking away their more moderate voters,” he said. “They want to put me in that box because it’s hard to fight me when I am in the center.” Laughing, he added, “It’s like an M.M.A. fight—I would beat

them all, because I have ground game, and I can kick and punch them. But if they put me in a boxing match I'd probably lose, because it's the only thing they know how to do."

Regardless of the controversy, his polling numbers remained high. Noboa considered the raid a victory: "If Glas had escaped, we'd have lost the referendum, because it would have made us look weak."

When the referendum was held, on April 21st, Noboa won it handily, as some two-thirds of voters approved nine of his security measures. His economic plans were far less popular; two proposals to loosen business regulations, which his opposition had described as gifts to the neoliberal élite, were soundly rejected. But, over all, Noboa was delighted by the outcome. Even before the votes were entirely counted, he proclaimed victory on social media, writing, "I apologize for jumping the gun on a triumph that I cannot help but celebrate." That evening, he gathered with his wife and several close aides on the rooftop of Carondelet, with the lights of the city beneath them.

A week later, when I saw him in his office, he was still in an upbeat mood. He was wearing a tailored gray suit with a yellow-and-blue silk tie; an emissary of the Pope was waiting in a nearby room to see him. Since our last meeting, however, there had been an uptick in violence in several provinces. Two mayors had been murdered, and the warden of a prison in Manabí had been killed. Noboa said that he had mounted a response: "Like they've done in Donetsk and Luhansk, we're moving the whole Army to those five provinces." He laughed at the ungainly comparison to the war in Ukraine, but he was serious about further militarizing the conflict. He had extended the state of emergency, and it seemed possible that it would go on for the foreseeable future.

Huge numbers of Ecuadorians were still fleeing the violence, making their way north through the lawless Darién jungle, which links Panama and Colombia. On the way, many were preyed on by criminals, suffering robberies, rapes, and sometimes murder. Ecuador was also being used as a transit point for U.S.-bound migrants from other countries. Noboa said that sixty thousand Chinese people—mostly young men—had flown into Quito

in the first three months of the year, and only half had flown out. The rest were presumably heading north.

Outside Latin America, Noboa has retained the support of key allies, including the United States. “The sense is, he has warts, but who doesn’t?” the diplomat in Quito said. But Noboa expressed frustration at the extent of that support. He complained that the U.S. had recently sent ninety billion dollars to help Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan, while giving him just ten million for his fight against the cartels. “Ten *million* dollars,” he exclaimed. “We’re in a war, and we represent twenty per cent of the migration crisis.” He went on, “Yesterday, I had a meeting with the C.I.A., and I said, ‘Please, help. Focus all your efforts on the border between Ecuador and Colombia. If you don’t want to help us with anything else, it’s enough to do that.’ ”

I wondered whether Noboa’s idea for an Antarctic prison was still on the table. He said that his aide had looked into it: “Initially, they said you could only have scientific-research stations.” But there might be a way around the restriction, if the facility was run by the military. He could already picture it —the country’s enemies removed to a military prison, in a frigid waste thousands of miles from Quito. “Yes!” he said. “It’s a great possibility.” ♦

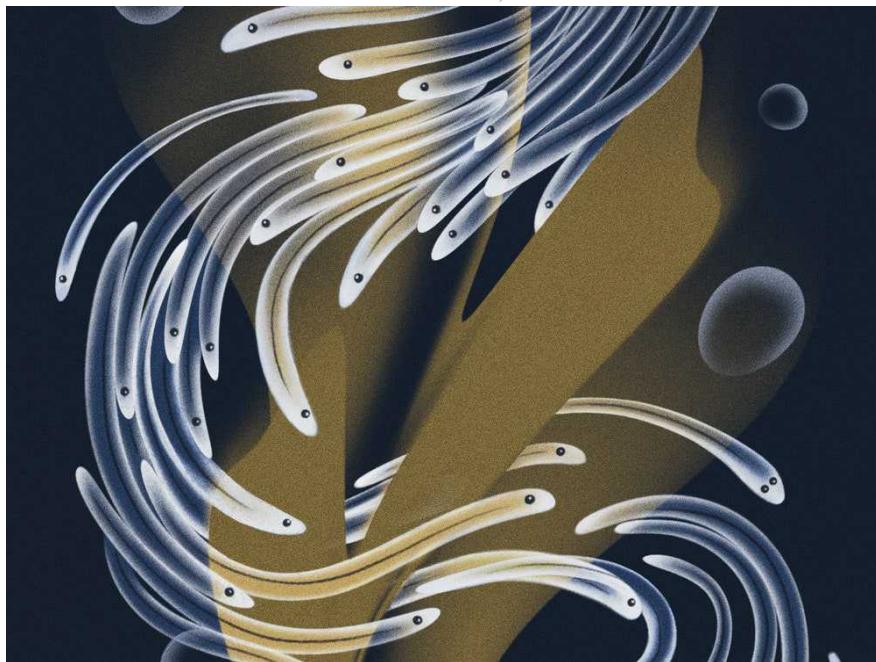
U.S. Journal

Inside the Slimy, Smelly, Secretive World of Glass-Eel Fishing

Each spring, hundreds of millions of baby eels swarm the waterways of coastal Maine. Soaring global demand incited an era of jackpot payouts and international poaching.

By Paige Williams

June 17, 2024



The Sargasso Sea, a warm, calm expanse of the North Atlantic Ocean, is bordered not by land but by four strong currents—a gyre. Vast mats of prickly brown seaweed float so thickly on the windless surface that Christopher Columbus worried about his ships getting stuck. The biodiverse sanctuary within and beneath the sargassum produces *Anguilla rostrata*, the American eel. Each female lays some eight million eggs. The eggs hatch as ribbonlike larvae that drift to the Gulf Stream, which carries them to the continental shelf. By the time they reach Maine, the larvae have transformed into swimmers about the length of an index finger, with the circumference of a bean sprout and the translucence of a jellyfish. Hence their nickname, glass

eels, also known as elvers. The glass eel is barely visible, but for a dark stripe—its developing backbone—and a couple of chia seeds for eyes. “Ghosts on the water,” a Maine fisherman once called them. Travelling almost as one, like a swarm or a murmuration, glass eels enter tidal rivers and push upstream, pursuing the scent of freshwater until, ideally, they reach a pond and commence a long, tranquil life of bottom-feeding. Elvers mature into adults two to three feet in length, with the girth and the coloring of a slimy bicycle tire. Then, one distant autumn, on some unknown cue, they return to the Sargasso, where they spawn and die.

Maine has thirty-five hundred miles of coastline, including coves, inlets, and bays, plus hundreds of tidal rivers, thousands of streams, and what has been described as “an ungodly amount of brooks.” Hundreds of millions of glass eels arrive each spring, as the waters warm. Four hundred and twenty-five licensed elvermen are allowed to harvest slightly more than seven thousand five hundred pounds of them during a strictly regulated fishing season, which runs from late March to early June. Four Native American tribes may legally fish another two thousand or so pounds, with more than half of that amount designated for the Passamaquoddy, who have lived in Maine and eastern Canada for some twelve thousand years. Maine is the only state with a major elver fishery. South Carolina has a small one (ten licensed elvermen), but everywhere else, in an effort to preserve the species, elver fishing is a federal crime.

The elvermen sell their catch to state-licensed buyers, who in turn sell to customers in Asia. The baby eels are shipped live, mostly to Hong Kong, in clear plastic bags of water and pure oxygen, like a sophisticated twist on pet-store goldfish. They live in carefully tended tanks and ponds at aquaculture farms until they are big enough to be eaten. Japan alone annually consumes at least a hundred thousand tons of freshwater eel, *unagi*, which is widely enjoyed *kabayaki* style—butterflied, marinated, and grilled.

The American eel became a valuable commodity as overfishing, poaching, and other forms of human interference led to the decline of similar species in Japan (*Anguilla japonica*) and Europe (*Anguilla anguilla*). Those species are now red-listed as, respectively, endangered and critically endangered. The U.S. has not declared the American eel endangered, and fishermen want to keep it that way.

In March, 2011, just before elver season started in Maine, a tsunami in Japan decimated aquaculture ponds, driving the price of American glass eels from about two hundred dollars per pound to nearly nine hundred by the season's closing day. The next year, the price reached one thousand eight hundred and sixty-nine dollars per pound, and soon topped two thousand. *National Fisherman* calls glass eels "likely the most valuable fish in the United States on a per-pound basis." A recent issue of *Marine Policy* cited "unprecedented demand" for American eel. Only lobster outranks it in Maine.

During a favorable market and a hard elver run, a Mainer may earn a hundred thousand dollars in a single haul. Each license holder is assigned a quota, ranging from four pounds to more than a hundred, based partly on seniority. Even the lowest quota insures a payout of six thousand dollars if the price per pound breaches fifteen hundred, which happens with some regularity. Maine is the only place in the country where a kid can become eligible for an elver license at fifteen and win a shot at making more money overnight, swinging a net, than slinging years' worth of burgers. Elvermen have sent their children to college on eels, and have used the income to improve their homes, their businesses, their boobs. This year, more than forty-five hundred Mainers applied for sixteen available licenses.

One frosty evening in April, an elverman named Sam Glass turned onto a dead-end road in the state's northernmost coastal region, Down East, and parked beside a stream. The water was about thirty feet wide, with boulders across it and trees on the other side. The stream feeds West Bay, which leads to the Atlantic, whose tide swells and then shrinks the river's volume every twelve hours. Glass, a tall, reserved fifty-year-old with dark, curly hair and a trim beard, pulled five hand-chopped maple poles from the bed of his pickup truck and carried them down the riverbank. Next, he fetched a plastic bucket, nylon cord, coils of rope, two boat anchors, and a fyke net. Unfurled, the net, made of pale, fine-gauge mesh, resembled a Chinese lantern trailed by two oversized streamers, or a mutant sea creature with a barrel-shaped head.



Glass, wearing waders, sloshed into the water and fastened a rope around a boulder, securing the barrel, called the tail bag, at the foot of a gentle rapids. Back on land, he hooked a streamer to one of the maple poles, which he'd stabbed into the earth as a stanchion. The streamer now resembled a wing, hemmed at the top with tubular buoys and weighted at the bottom with chains and one of the boat anchors. To pull the wing taut, Glass roped it to a spruce, then went to work on the other streamer. The net took shape as an ocean-facing funnel, hugging the shore.

The high-tide line showed on the riverbank like a shadow on a wall. In about six hours, the water would rise again, submerging the tail bag and the bottom half of the wings. Glass was working to beat the setting sun and to harness the pull of the moon. If he had set a good net, baby eels would swim right into his trap.

Elvers avoid strong currents by keeping to the sides of rivers, the way mice follow baseboards. Glass long ago learned to look for "pinch points," where the eels are likely to pass within two feet of shore. For the better part of two hours, he cut cord, tied clove hitches, positioned the anchors, tweaked the lean of the stanchions. Hawks and bald eagles were circling, and watching from tree branches. He finished after sundown, his exhalations visible in the beam of his headlamp. "That's about it," he said, and walked back up the

riverbank, through the bulrush and thorn. A block of dislodged snow slipped downstream, pinballing through the boulders and passing beneath a bridge, beyond which other elvermen had just finished setting their nets. Glass went home to wait for high water.

Glass grew up in a cedar-shingled house on ten acres near Dyer Bay, and still lives there today. He keeps fyke nets strung up near his apple trees and piled in a greenhouse, where he's been restoring his late father's lobster boat. He got burned out on lobstering a while ago and fantasizes about piloting the boat to the Bahamas. He prefers eeling to lobstering, and travelling to almost anything.

A couple of years ago, Glass and another elverman, Ryan Loughran, went into business together as licensed elver buyers. They partnered with a Korean businessman who wanted to stake a local broker and guarantee a shippable supply. Loughran and Glass augmented their own fishing by taking a commission on each transaction. When I asked why not sell directly to Hong Kong, bypassing the middlemen, another fisherman who overheard the question said, "It isn't done."

Glass has other entrepreneurial interests, including turning a cottage that he built when he was twenty into an Airbnb property. Aside from a shipyard pension, eeling constitutes Loughran's entire livelihood. He is a gregarious father of three in his forties who always wears a baseball cap and, because of a nerve disorder, walks with a cane. When he was a boy, his father, an eeler, advised him to get a fishing license in case glass eels ever became valuable, never expecting a disaster on the other side of the world to produce Florida-condo money, comfortable-retirement money. In the early boom days of eeling, armed buyers roamed the coast with aerated tanks and a tantalizing amount of bundled cash, paying for elvers straight out of the water.

The Maine Department of Marine Resources now required fishermen to sell their catch at a fixed address. Glass's home wasn't particularly conducive to handling customers, so he reached out to the patriarch of a respected fishing family who lived in a more convenient location, with a wide gravel driveway and a stand-alone garage. Glass had known the patriarch's wife since grade school. The patriarch captained a range of vessels and wore jackets embroidered with the name of his forty-two-foot Duffy. "I scallop, I

lobster, I eel,” he told me one night. I wondered what happens when two competing boats show up at the same fishing grounds—who wins? The patriarch said, “Whoever’s got the biggest balls and the biggest red knife.” A lobsterman standing next to him nodded solemnly.

The patriarch agreed to rent Glass and Loughran his garage as a buying station. (His name isn’t mentioned here because he wouldn’t allow it, but he tolerated my hanging around.) This year, in late March, they brought in tanks, aerators, nets, buckets, folding tables, and a portable scale. In one corner, near a “*TRUMP 2020*” banner, they installed a chest-high tank, which resembled a one-person hot tub. Someone chalked “\$900” on a blackboard.

Demand in Asia drives the price, but the floor is set locally by a small group of buyers whose names are known and whose conversations, I was told, are private. Nine hundred dollars per pound was the lowest opening price in years. (Loughran had heard that there was a “bottleneck” in Hong Kong.) As the season progresses, the price climbs in twenty-five- or fifty-dollar increments. Each change is posted in Elverholics, a popular fishing forum on Facebook. Some fishermen sell early and low, just to get money in hand. Those who won’t even consider taking less than fifteen hundred dollars a pound respond with yawn emojis and exhortations to “HOOOLLLDDDD!!!!” as they wait for the price-setters to turn on one another.

In early spring, there’s little for fishermen in Maine to do other than catch bait herring and prepare boats and drags. The clam flats are still thawing. Eeling, theoretically, bridges the gap between seasons. Glass eels hate turbulence, and cold water stupefies them. They seem to run hardest under a full or new moon, in warmer weather, which may not come until May or June, by which time the season is nearly over. This year, rain and snow had left the rivers frothy and high. Eelers were pulling their nets to avoid losing them to the blow. Leaving baby eels trapped in churn was “like puttin’ ‘em through a washing machine,” the patriarch told me.

Loughran set up a makeshift bar in the garage. One night, he invited a bunch of people over. I walked in to find about a dozen fishermen, drinks in hand. Loughran was sitting behind his scale, his laptop open. School had been

cancelled for the next day, because of another incoming snowstorm. Bottles of Bacardi Limón and Skrewball peanut-butter whiskey were being drained.

In the corner, Glass was running an aquarium net through the holding tank, cleaning out dead eels and searching for killers. The elver's mortal enemies include trout and raccoons, but eelers most despise sea lice, fingertip-size crustaceans that look as lovely as their name. The lice bite the eels; the eels die. The patriarch fished a brown louse from a garbage barrel, where it had been clinging to the side of an empty Miller Lite box, and showed it to me: "Even that *one* will cause mass destruction."

The patriarch often eats scallops out of the shell on his boat. He plucked a baby eel from the tank and swallowed it alive. Glass, who is known for his ability to stomach anything, did the same, and said, "Not much taste to 'em." This was an old trick sometimes performed for nosy outsiders. Eleven years ago, an elverman downed a live eel in front of a BuzzFeed reporter and claimed that it tried to crawl back up his throat.

In the human palm, a living mass of glass eels feels like a cold pile of squirm. In captivity, they resemble restless black threads, or pepper that has learned how to move. Eels enjoy density, and often cuddle up in piles. With each scoop of the net, elvers wriggled onto Glass's wrist before appearing to leap back into the water. Glass said, joking a little, "This was the funnest business in the world, but the government doesn't want to see you have fun or make money. We used to be able to go at it unlimited."

"A free-for-all," the patriarch said.

Licensed fishermen could once set as many fykes and catch as many glass eels as they wanted, using a net of any size or type. The patriarch showed me a cell-phone video of someone dumping a funky gumbo of overage back into a river, to comply with the state's limits. The price at the time was twenty-two hundred dollars per pound. The eels would have fetched more than ninety grand.

Like lobster, eel was popular for its affordability and protein before it became an expensive delicacy. In the U.K., elvers are scrambled with eggs. In the Basque country, elvers *a la bilbaina* are fried in olive oil with chili

peppers and garlic. The Scandinavians smoke eels. The Maori roast them in leaves. *The Economist* once noted that the cooking encyclopedia “Larousse Gastronomique,” published in 1938, contains forty-five different recipes for eel. (“To kill an eel, seize it with a cloth and bang its head violently against a hard surface.”) Cocktail garnishes are typically inanimate (and non-sentient), but I recently saw a Facebook video of glass eels wriggling around in, supposedly, a cup of sake.

Years ago, John Wyatt Greenlee was working on a doctorate in medieval history when he became intrigued by seventeenth-century maps of London, which showed images of “eel ships” anchored in the Thames. The Dutch had been selling salted eel to England since at least the fourteenth century, and now delivered them live. Calling himself “Surprised Eel Historian, PhD,” Greenlee took his findings to Twitter, attracting tens of thousands of followers with trivia (early Britons could pay their rent in eels), cheek (“Eel on Twitter > Elon Twitter”), and activism (“Eels are also a super-important part of stream ecologies”). Greenlee told me, “It’s not a panda, or something big and majestic, and it’s not a cute otter. Eels are slimy, weird, snakelike things. But they’re an umbrella species. Saving them means saving broad swaths of habitat from the ocean all the way up to the headwaters.”

Previous eel obsessives have included Aristotle, Pliny the Elder, Linnaeus, and Freud, who published one of his first papers, in 1877, on eels. (He dissected hundreds of them in a futile search for clues to how they reproduce.) Contemporary biologists know more about the eel’s reproductive system than Freud did, but the sex life of eels is still a secret that plays out within the pressurized depths of the Sargasso. Despite numerous attempts, no one has ever seen them mate in the wild, or managed to document the hatching of eggs outside of captivity.

The freshwater eel “has a complex life history, parts of which are still shrouded in mystery,” Jonna Tomkiewicz, a senior researcher at the National Institute of Aquatic Resources, in Denmark, explained in one of many papers she’s written on the subject. Do the larvae live on gelatinous plankton? Marine snow? Where in the water column do they feed? Without this kind of knowledge, researchers are “often operating in the dark.” In “Under the Sea-Wind,” Rachel Carson observed that when the American eel returned to its sargassum patch to die it “passed from human sight and

almost from human knowledge.” In his book “Eels,” James Prosek, whom the *Times* has dubbed “a kind of underwater Audubon,” calls this final swim “among the greatest unseen migrations of any creature on the planet.”



For adult eels, the trip often involves surviving the turbine blades of hydroelectric dams. A Maine elverman named Randy Bushey once reported finding migrating eels “chopped up in perfect, one-foot chunks.” Brian Altvater, Sr., a member of the Passamaquoddy Tribe who is working to restore healthy fish runs to the Schoodic River, on the Canadian border, has pushed for the removal of dams by arguing that “they generate very little electricity compared to the damage that they do to the entire ecosystem.”

Elvers are the key to eel aquaculture farming, given the difficulty, as yet, of captive breeding and scalable hatcheries. Japan, which now imports two-thirds of its eel stock, was eying the American eel as early as 1970. The following spring, William Sheldon, a young employee of the Maine Department of Marine Resources with a new degree in wildlife management, embarked on a study to see if the state’s elver numbers could support a fishery. He found more than enough, and in a report that is still referenced today, he detailed his observations along with one of his fishing inventions, the “Sheldon trap.” (A net with a mesh size “somewhat smaller than ordinary window screening” appeared to work best.) Sheldon also

described how to harvest, hold, and transport elvers without killing them. The document was foundational to the fishery that exists today.

When Maine's elver season starts, every March 22nd, eelers pray for warm weather. Some toss a coin in their chosen river, for luck. A couple of days before the opening in 2012, the year after the tsunami in Japan boosted prices, the temperature reached the low eighties, far above average. Julie Keene, a veteran eeler from Lubec, at the northeastern tip of the contiguous United States, got a sunburn and fourteen glass eels. That time of year, the typical number was zero, because the rivers were usually still full of ice. Within a couple of days, she had caught about forty-five thousand—eighteen pounds, a personal best. On the Union River, in Ellsworth, the capital of Down East eeling, fishermen were said to have caught more than a million dollars' worth of glass eels in a single night.

The next year, the fishing was still so good that one elverman tattooed his forearm with an eel, dollar signs, and “2013,” memorializing a record season that afforded him, among other things, a new four-wheeler. Rural Mainers could work their entire lives and never see big money, especially all at once, especially Down East, where the median household income was about thirty-six thousand dollars.

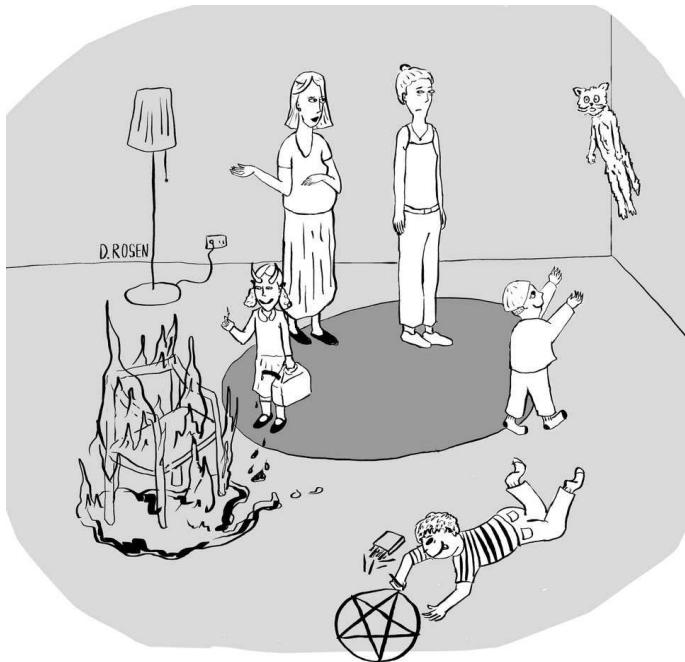
Jackpot payouts, in cash, fomented a wild period of interstate elver poaching. Saboteurs sliced their competitors' nets. Untended buckets got taken. Thieves would detach entire tail bags and run off with them. Loughran's father used to have him camp beside their “honey hole” around the clock. A splash in the night, or “hootin' and hollerin',” as one eeler put it, was the sound of fishermen throwing one another into the drink. “There were just *hundreds* of people poaching,” Darrell Young, a prominent elverman, told a filmmaker. Another, Rick Sibley, said that eeling “didn't bring the community together—it tore people apart.”

By 2014, the state had imposed its quota, capped the number of elver licenses, limited eelers to two nets, banned cash transactions (buyers must pay with checks), and implemented a swipe-card system to monitor eelers' individual hauls in real time. The regulations were devised in collaboration with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, a long-standing interstate body that works with federal agencies to maintain a sustainable

industry. Poaching quieted down. Fishermen who had let their license expire kicked themselves when, in 2018, the price of elvers peaked at twenty-eight hundred dollars a pound. Now it was possible to get back in only through a state lottery.

A fourth-generation sardine packer, Keene started fishing glass eels decades ago, when it paid barely twenty dollars a pound. After the price spiked, she and her longtime boyfriend were able to buy two new trucks, plant an orchard, and build a barn and a garage. “It’s changed our life,” she said, in an interview for an oral-history project in 2014. “And then let’s look at how it’s contributing to the rest of the state. We paid sixty thousand dollars in taxes last year. That’s enough money to support five families on welfare.”

Keene, who considered herself a good steward of Maine’s natural resources, told the historian that she had watched “a complete gold rush” nearly destroy sea urchins in the late eighties and early nineties, and that she didn’t want to see the same thing happen to eels or any other species. “I believe in having a future,” she said. That future already seemed compromised by factors unrelated to conservation. Keene described pervasive drug abuse and a “lot of alcoholism” Down East, where, as in many rural areas, it can be hard to get help. (A record seven hundred and twenty-three Mainers died of overdoses in 2022.) Keene said, “How does a local community hold on just by their fingernails, you know?”



Responsible fishermen don't disapprove of rules; they simply want more of a say in making them. Regulators were worried about the American eel's decline, but fishermen were seeing elvers in what Keene called "Biblical" numbers. Eelers wondered if the regulators were perhaps looking in the wrong place, or conducting their census on nights when eels didn't "go." Keene said, "Just because they didn't go doesn't mean they're not there." No one seemed to know exactly how many elvers there were, or whether any decrease in population was caused by overfishing or more properly attributable to the turbine gantlet and other hazards. Jason Bartlett, a Maine Department of Marine Resources biologist who specializes in eels, told me that he is increasingly worried about a swim-bladder parasite that messes with an eel's buoyancy: "If they can't get off the bottom, they're going to die before they get back to the Sargasso." The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in its most recent significant assessment of *A. rostrata*, acknowledged a decline but indicated that "the American eel population is not subject to threats that would imperil its continued existence."

The A.S.M.F.C. has never increased Maine's over-all quota. Individual quotas are not made public, and fishermen reveal their number about as quickly as they give up their favorite fishing spot. Some of those who remember the unregulated days bristle at any limit ("Fishermen always grumble," one elverman told me), but they were especially infuriated when

the lottery was introduced, in 2013, and their quotas stagnated while the state admitted newcomers. Keene said, at the time, “How is that rewarding someone that’s been in this fishery, that breathes that fishery? That makes their own gear, that is dependent on it, that understands it, that respects it? I still have a license because I obey the law. How is that rewarding good faith?”

Glass eels are an ideal target for subterfuge, because they run at night and because once they’re out of the water it is impossible to prove where they came from. The risk-reward ratio makes them irresistible. Eel smuggling, reportedly a four-billion-dollar-a-year trade spanning at least three continents, has been called the world’s least known but most profitable wildlife crime. (The G-7’s Financial Action Task Force, a watchdog federation of thirty-nine countries, has identified wildlife trafficking as a “major transnational” racket, on par with arms dealing and drug running.) Glass eels are among the most bootlegged protected species in Europe. In 2021, an investigation into the assassination of the Haitian President Jovenel Moïse revealed that his government had been bearing down on traffickers of narcotics, weapons—and eels. Moïse believed that the eel trade should be regulated and taxed, the *Times* reported, noting, “Many of the eels go to China, but the Haitian police are investigating the industry as a way to launder illicit profits.”

Glass eels have been found in passengers’ luggage at airports in Amsterdam and Brussels. In 2017, British border agents checked cargo bound for Hong Kong and discovered, hidden beneath a batch of iced fish, four hundred and forty pounds of illicitly harvested elvers. Half were dead. The smuggler had allegedly spent two years trafficking more than five million eels, with a market value of nearly seventy million dollars. He used a warehouse in Gloucestershire as a way station, and the eels had been sourced in Spain. Smugglers there have operated in Algeciras and Tarifa, at the southern tip of the continent, just across the Strait of Gibraltar from Morocco, which has restricted elver fishing since 2011.

Although *A. anguilla* tends to be the most trafficked eel species, in 2022, Hong Kong alone imported almost twenty-eight thousand pounds of *rostrata* from the United States, according to Hiromi Shiraishi, a researcher at Chuo University. The amount far exceeded the quotas in Maine and South

Carolina combined. When I asked Maine's fishing commissioner, Patrick Keliher, to explain the discrepancy, he told me, through a spokesperson, "Elvers from Maine are being tracked very closely, and it's our belief that if there are additional elvers entering the supply chain, it's because of the illegal activity that has been so prevalent in Canada the last two years."

In Canada, glass eels are the most valuable seafood by weight. Last year, a woman who lived near Hubbards Cove, in Nova Scotia, was alarmed to wake at three in the morning to see men outside, in balaclavas, taking glass eels from a stream. In another incident, a dispute over eels ended with one man reportedly assaulting another with a pipe. Canada's minister of fisheries and oceans temporarily shut down the country's fishery, saying, "It was simply too dangerous to let this continue."

Elver fishing in Canada was cancelled again this year, but eelers went on eeling. (By late April, the authorities had charged ninety-five people with doing so, including five Mainers.) First Nation members argued that treaty rights exempted them from federal regulations. In a Facebook video, a First Nation fisherman named Cory Francis announced plans to set fykes on the Annis River in Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia, a hundred and twenty-two miles across the Gulf of Maine, and declared Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans a "criminal element" and a "rogue group." Accusing the agency of "racially profiling Indigenous people," he said, "You can go fuck off."

Not long after conducting his seminal elver study, Sheldon, the Maine Department of Marine Resources employee, left government service to become a lobsterman. His boat sank, and he turned to eeling. He both fished and operated as a buyer, once explaining to a TV news station, "The small man can get into it." The license plate on his truck read "*EEL WAGN*." A sign in his headquarters, in Ellsworth, said "Smoking is permitted here in the shop. Lying is to be expected. Everyone welcome here."

Sheldon often talked to the media. He was the one who swallowed a live eel in front of the BuzzFeed reporter. In that reporter's profile, published in 2013, we find Sheldon in his sixties, with both a flare gun and a 40-calibre Glock, serving bucket-bearing customers at a temporary headquarters set up in a cheap motel room. He's on the phone with "Chinese guys who wired

him \$600,000 on handshake deals.” The year before, Sheldon had “paid his fishermen \$12 million for elvers (about a third of the estimated \$40 million paid out in Maine over the season).”

What few knew then was that federal agents had launched an interstate poaching investigation, called Operation Broken Glass. Baby eels were being harvested up and down the East Coast in places that banned elver fishing, and passed off as having come from Maine. Dealers were knowingly buying and selling illicit elvers, learning only too late that they’d been talking to undercover officers. Twenty-one men were ultimately charged with trafficking more than five million dollars’ worth of glass eels.

Sheldon was one of them. By the time federal agents raided his business, he was considered the grandfather of the industry in Maine. Sheldon had “cornered the market, basically,” a fellow-elverman later said. In federal court, a prosecutor noted, “By his own pronouncement and by the consensus of the community, he knows more about elver fishing than anyone.”

In October, 2017, Sheldon pleaded guilty to trafficking two hundred and sixty-eight pounds of glass eels from states where elver fishing is illegal. “Bill Sheldon not only facilitated a black market in illegal elvers—he encouraged it,” the federal prosecutor said, at sentencing. “He didn’t just buy illegal elvers—he provided poachers with advice and equipment. He didn’t just dodge the law himself—he told other people what to say if they got caught.” The prosecutor told the judge, “This was just greed.”

In court, Sheldon minimized, as defendants do. He claimed to have made, at most, thirty thousand dollars on his crime, and expressed shame and regret for “poor judgment.” His lawyer requested home confinement instead of incarceration, arguing that Sheldon was a good, stable person: married for nearly fifty years, a father of two, a grandfather of four, no prior felonies. Hardships were enumerated: a sick father, the sunk boat. Worst of all, Sheldon’s daughter Deb had killed herself as his case unfolded. Sheldon told the judge, “I will forever feel like I was responsible.”

Sheldon was sentenced to six months in prison and three years of probation —a fitting punishment, the judge said, for “significant deception” and for helping to create and clandestinely support a black market. His probation

ended a few years ago. He gave up his dealer license but was allowed to keep fishing, and went to work for a Maine-based company co-owned by Mitchell Feigenbaum, a former Philadelphia lawyer who moved to Canada decades ago to become an eel exporter. Feigenbaum had testified on Sheldon's behalf at sentencing, and tried to differentiate him from the "rough, tough, mean, nasty, hard individuals" typical of their industry. He told the judge, "Our product is all going to one place. It's the Chinese government. State-owned industries are pretty much our sole consumer for this product. They want it as cheap as possible. They will engage in predatory practices that would make your head spin, including a lot of the poaching."

Although Sheldon remains an influential figure in eeling, he no longer takes questions. (He did not respond to mine.) He and his supporters blamed "the media" for the death of his daughter—a mother of two, a registered nurse, a Steelers fan who refused to shit-talk the Patriots, a smoker who was trying to quit, an alcoholic who already had. "The various stories about Bill and the stress it brought to the family had a negative impact," one of his defense documents said.

The Sheldon case left a lot of fishermen even more wary than usual. Loughran told me, "It's a fragile industry, and bad publicity could be very detrimental to it." Last year, when I initially expressed interest in writing about glass eels, someone posted on Facebook, "I smell Fed." One person liked the comment: Sheldon.

On a recent night, the patriarch and his son drove to a back-road bridge north of Acadia National Park and parked downslope on a concrete boat ramp. The headlamps of their truck illuminated little more than a wedge of flotsam. The only other light was the sickly twinkle off a scattering of stars. As I crossed the bridge on foot, it was so dark that I could have walked into an elephant.

The men were wearing waders, hoodies, and yellow rubber gloves up to their elbows. One of them flicked on a powerful flashlight. From the bridge, I watched them traverse an inhospitable stretch of beach and climb the jagged riprap, moving toward the bridge piling where their fyke net was tethered. The outgoing tide churned between the pilings with the noisy

velocity of floodwaters. Grasping one of the tethers, the patriarch waded into the buffeting rush. He untied one end of the tail bag and emptied it into a plastic bait bucket that his son was holding. Then he re-tied the bag and secured the tether, and the two of them returned to the truck.

Back home, they found Loughran waiting at the garage. It was one-thirty in the morning. Eelers on the Presumpscot River, another elver stronghold, further south, were “*slaughtering*,” Loughran reported. That meant having a good night.



The patriarch’s son set an aquarium net over the top of an empty bucket and strained the first of their sludge. The pour revealed sea lice, krill, a needlefish, and a bunch of twitchy sticklebacks, as silver as store-bought fishing lures—bycatch, all of which gets returned to the river. Cupping the net from the bottom, the patriarch teased the few glass eels into view and plucked them out, the way you’d pick lint off a sweater. He said, “We have to work harder for ours than they do down in southern Maine. They don’t get out of bed for this little bit.” I understood what he meant when I later saw a video in which two eelers struggled to lift a tail bag so full that they might as well have been trying to move a body. “Holy mackerel,” one said. The other said, “Oh, my word.”

The second pour of the patriarch's bucket writhed with eels—a pound and a half's worth, all told. They moved the elvers into their holding tank and prepared to wait out the price the way an investor sits on a promising stock. The blackboard now said "\$950." It was hard to know what kind of payout they could ultimately expect, given the caginess surrounding pricing and quotas. (Buyers sometimes pay more than the publicized rate.) I'd once asked Loughran why all the secrecy, and he'd said, "If you're pullin' a hundred pounds a night, you ain't showing *nobody* that." Rivals would "set nets around every fucking inch of you." Elvermen don't like others watching their weigh-ins, either. Nobody wants the world to know that he just banked fifty grand.

Several days later, Loughran and Glass brought kimchi (a gift from their business partner) and fresh crabmeat over to Glass's house. They were making crab rolls when I arrived. Glass stoked a fire in a woodstove and handed me a Heineken in a jelly jar. We ate some dried haddock as he prepared the rolls, which he served on square porcelain plates at the dining table, whose centerpiece was a chessboard. Afterward, Glass walked me out to the greenhouse and showed me his dad's lobster boat, the Don't Know. He was thinking of renaming it the Andromeda. In the distance we could hear the ocean. He said, "When it's *real* rough, it sounds like a lion's den."

When we got back to the house, the patriarch and his wife were there, sitting with Loughran in Glass's living room. Loughran told a story about killing twenty-seven rats in one night in his father's barn and lining them up as evidence of an infestation; the corpses were gone by morning, having presumably been carried off and eaten by other rats. This led to talk of wharf rats, New York City rats, black widows, brown recluses, and the redback spiders of Australia, but, as inevitably happens with elvermen, the conversation returned to eels.

Like hunters, elvermen study and admire the animals that provide their livelihood. Glass and Loughran had recently asked Alexa about the lifespan of the American eel, marvelling that the answer was as many as forty-four years, the same age as Loughran. Because eels absorb oxygen through their skin, they can skirt a strong current by leaving the water briefly to climb rocks or scale a concrete dam. They may rest in a river's calm pockets,

waiting for the rising tide to help push them past white water before the next lunar cycle drags them back.

Loughran told me, “In China and Japan, there’s whole families that rely on this seed fish for *their* livelihoods as well.” (Aquaculture farming has existed in Asia since antiquity.) On Glass’s television, he cued up a YouTube video of an eel-farming operation in Taiwan. A doughy mass oozed out of a machine and hit the concrete floor like a dense blob of poo. Glass eels eat nothing—they don’t even have a mouth—but in the next stage of development, when they start to resemble garter snakes, they can be taught to expect “eel chow,” often some amalgam of fish proteins, oils, and blood. (This garter-snake stage is when glass eels technically become elvers, though fishermen almost always refer to the two interchangeably.) We watched a farmer quarter the blob and drop one of the chunks into a pond. It floated. Hundreds of mature eels attacked it from all sides. They were large and ropy, and you could hear them smacking. It was hard to believe that the baby eels in the patriarch’s garage would grow up eating the stuff in this video. “Yep,” the patriarch said, “and then we’re gonna eat them.” The U.S. imports eleven million pounds of eel annually, mostly from China. The elvers that get shipped to the other side of the world may wind up right back in Maine.

In the United States, according to a census conducted in 2018, there are seven eel farms—two fewer than there are frog farms. The only land-based eel aquaculture operation, American Unagi, is in Midcoast Maine. Sara Rademaker, an Indiana native who studied aquaculture at Auburn University, started the company ten years ago by test-raising elvers in her basement. She had been looking for a fish to farm when she realized how ludicrous it was that the only state with a major elver fishery had no one growing, processing, and selling its own valuable catch. Establishing such an enterprise would theoretically keep jobs and money Stateside, shrink the trade’s environmental footprint, and, if done right, provide accountability. (Rademaker told me that American Unagi uses no antibiotics or chemicals.)

Aquaculture farming, the fastest-growing sector of food production, is a global industry valued at more than three hundred billion dollars. It already provides half the world’s food and is projected to account for more as the planet’s human population hurtles toward ten billion in the next couple of

decades. Twenty million people work in the aquaculture trade, many of them in developing nations. When someone recently asked Loughran why Maine elvermen don't try to get a piece of the farming, he replied, "You'd need several million dollars just to gear up."

A successful eel farm requires the careful balance of environmental factors: warmth, diet, oxygen, pH levels. In Maine, the right conditions must be simulated. An indoor operation such as Rademaker's requires, to start, square footage, tanks, feeders, pumps, temperature control, filtration, and clean water flow. As the eels mature, workers continually separate the stock by size, so that they'll feed correctly—and not on one another.

The Maine Department of Marine Resources assigned American Unagi a quota of two hundred pounds. Rademaker also buys elvers from local harvesters. She told me that black-market fishing is no longer a concern locally because of the state's strict regulations and enforcement, and that eelers police themselves: "They'll turn people in at the drop of a hat."

American Unagi is headquartered in a new ten-million-dollar facility at an industrial park in the small town of Waldoboro. The company has twelve employees, one of whom, Liam Fisher, is trying to turn eel innards into a marketable condiment. On the day that I met him, he was carrying a tiny fish-shaped bottle of prototype behind one ear. He produced it like a magic nickel and squeezed an oily drop onto my finger. It tasted like liquid fish. Co-workers were preparing to run dead eels through a butterfly machine. The company, which sells fillets and smoked eel to restaurants and grocery stores, expects to hit a production record of half a million pounds next year.

Rademaker led me through a laboratory, where she and her staff monitor the health of their eels by microscope. "We look at their gills, we look at their skin, we look at their fins," she said. The company spends two years growing each new class of elvers into processable adults. We stopped in the doorway of a room the size of an airplane hangar, where nearly two million eels were living in dozens of gurgling, futuristic tanks. Another half a million glass eels were quarantined. Rademaker explained, "We keep things super biosecure, because we have one time of year to get them."

When an elver permit is not renewed, or the licensee dies, a newcomer gets the slot via the state's lottery. "The lottery's good," a fisherman named Randy insisted one night in the patriarch's garage. Loughran countered, "You have families that have been doing this for fucking generations, and instead of being able to pass on their fucking livelihood they have to put it up for a lottery, for anyone and their brother to take a piece of it."

"So, yes, then *you* end up like the Rockefellers," Randy, who was getting red in the face, replied.

"He's disgusted because he wants a piece of this," Loughran said.

"I'm fuckin' *pissed*," Randy said. A lot of Mainers want badly to win the lottery. "It's an industry, not a fucking cult."

"Randy, chill."

"It's like lobstering," Randy said. Down East, a commercial lobster license is one of the few paths to a middle-class income. ("It's not like there's a lot of accounting jobs around here," one elverman told me.) Certain lobster permits can be legally transferred, and they often sell for tens of thousands of dollars. Feigenbaum, the exporter who co-owns the company that Sheldon went to work for after prison, and who once served on the A.S.M.F.C., has pushed for transferrable quotas for glass eels. He pitches eelers by asking, Wouldn't you like to be able to leave something to your grandchildren?

In Canada, quotas are distributed basically evenly among nine companies. Feigenbaum runs one of them; it controls about twenty-six hundred pounds of quota, according to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. Some Mainers worry that transfers could lead to a few entities dominating the industry in the U.S., too, and force formerly independent elvermen to work for someone else, for an hourly wage. "If you could buy up quotas in Maine, you'd be sitting back like any other corporation, where only a few people make all the money," an elverman told me. "It would be horrible for the fishery." (Feigenbaum told me that such fears are "unwarranted," and that elver quotas should be transferrable only under certain conditions, mostly related to aquaculture.)

This year's elver season closed at just over fifteen hundred dollars per pound. The elvermen pulled their nets. The alewives were running now, and the lobster boats were going out, though lobstering, for some, had started to feel like more trouble than it was worth. The warming oceans are pushing lobsters north, and the industry has already collapsed in southern Maine. Last year, the statewide catch fell to ninety-four million pounds, the lowest level since 2009. Fishermen's prospects are further hampered by efforts to erect windmill farms and to save the planet's last three hundred and sixty or so North Atlantic right whales, which can get tangled in fishing ropes. In the patriarch's garage, a sternman named Tristan told me, "Kids growing up now, I'd tell them *not* to try working on the water." Mainers whose families have been fishing for generations are pushing their children toward contracting, or trucking—toward land.

Several days ago, I called Keene, the fisherwoman from Lubec. Her family has lived in Maine since it was Massachusetts. An ancestor, Richard Warren, came over on the Mayflower, she told me. ("I have my certificate!") His progeny supposedly also includes Ulysses S. Grant, Sarah Palin, and Taylor Swift. In addition to packing fish, Keene's forebears founded community newspapers and served in the Coast Guard. Both her grandfather and her father were keepers of the West Quoddy Head Lighthouse, a peppermint-striped tower with a fog bell and a beam visible eighteen miles away, across the Quoddy Narrows.

Keene's college degree involved computers, but she prefers being outdoors. She has dug clams for a living and picks periwinkles on winter beaches, making sure to leave the smallest ones alone, giving them the "chance to grow up." She has urged people not to overharvest rockweed, a marine algae that farmers add to their soil. Cherry and apple trees that she planted after the elver windfall haven't borne much fruit, but that was all right. "We have a nice little garden, and some chickens and stuff," she told me.

This fall, not long after she picks the last of her cucumbers, Keene will turn sixty-six. It pains her to know that state law prevents her from bequeathing her elver license to her children or grandchildren. It will, in a sense, die with her.

When I first rang Keene, she answered with a bark worthy of Olive Kitteridge: “What do you want?” Like most everyone else Down East, she had zero interest in talking to another reporter about elvers. “You get hit over the head every time you do,” she said. The articles always seemed to dwell on venality and crime. Keene much preferred talking about the sight of a baby seal, or that night when she was out clamming alone and sat on a bucket to smoke a cigarette, and a fox strolled by. She told me, “It’s not just about how much money you can make. It’s about seeing the alewives trying to get upriver, and an eagle fishing for them. And hearing the river at night. When you see millions and millions and millions of elvers, it’s mind-blowing. You see full moons. You see rings around the moon. You see fog. If you see garbage, you pick it up. You want passage for all the things that are trying to get into the lakes to spawn. You want it to be—*not ruined*.”

One night when Keene was about fifteen, she begged to go out on the water with her grandfather, a lifelong fisherman with one eye. They put on warm clothes and crossed Johnson Bay in a skiff, to see how the herring were running in a certain cove. Volume was measured by the hogshead, a cask or a barrel that holds sixty-three gallons.

Keene’s grandfather cut the outboard motor and put a finger to his lips. Using a cloth-wrapped oar, he rowed quietly into the cove. Keene watched, mystified, as he lowered a long piano wire into the water, and waited. “What was *that*?” she recalled asking him on the way home. “He said, ‘I could tell how many hogshead of herring there were by how hard they were hitting the wire.’ I knew I wanted to be a fisherman after that.” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

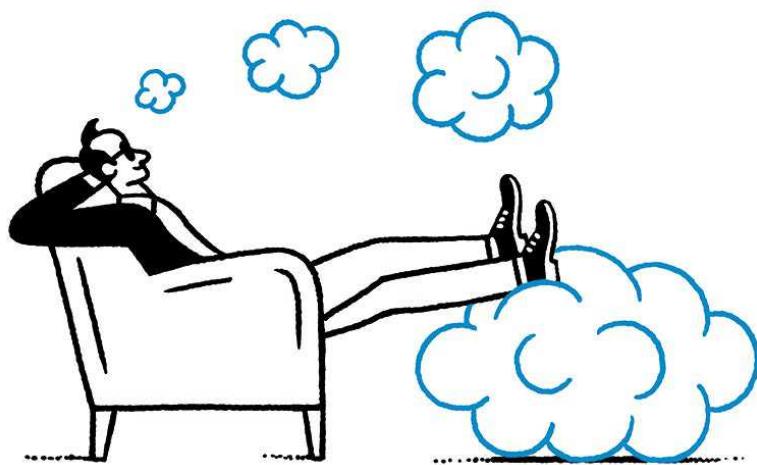
- [Middle-Age Fantasies](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

Middle-Age Fantasies

By Yoni Brenner

June 17, 2024



Sexy Nurse

You are seated on the examination table when the nurse enters. She's tall and raven-haired, with enormous blue eyes and candy-red lips. She says hello with a husky Eastern European accent, which reminds you of a recent episode of "The Daily" about Polish elections. As she takes your blood pressure, you casually ask her whether the new centrist government will be able to sustain broad support among an increasingly populist electorate. Her eyes flash with delight, and you spend the next three minutes chatting knowledgeably—but not obnoxiously—about the challenges facing emerging European democracies in the shadow of Russian aggression. When it's time to summon the doctor, she lingers in the doorway for a moment, nibbling her lip seductively, and says, "You are quite well informed." And it's true. You are.

Forbidden Layover

You are standing at the United Airlines counter at O’Hare, having just learned that your flight is delayed three hours. The agent taps on his keyboard. He’s six-three and distractingly handsome—green-eyed, olive-skinned, and bearing an uncanny resemblance to that bad-boy tennis player, Nick something. You explain why you need to get home today: it’s your night to pick up your daughter from gymnastics, and your dog has some weird diarrhea thing but your wife can’t take him to the vet because she has back-to-back Zooms with clients in Malaysia. The agent nods with genuine sympathy and says that although he can’t rebook you, perhaps a pass to the first-class lounge might make up for the inconvenience?

Two hours later, you are in a leather armchair sipping small-batch mezcal beside a heap of olive pits while bingeing Season 8 of “Top Chef” on your iPad. The P.A. crackles to life, announcing that your flight has been delayed an additional four hours. A wave of euphoria washes through your body, and you wonder if this is what heroin feels like.

Bad Babysitter

When you arrive home, you are dismayed to discover that not only are the kids still up but the sink is filled with dishes and the dog has shredded the new throw pillows. You discover the babysitter—an auburn-haired coed from a nearby liberal-arts college—sitting on the floor of your home office. When you ask her what happened, she crumples, tears streaming down her freckled cheeks. She confesses that while looking for your son’s stuffie she stumbled on the manuscript of your unpublished novel, and once she started reading she found herself so transported by the finely wrought characters and dreamlike prose that the world seemed to melt away.

“I feel like I’m babysitting for Tolstoy,” she whispers.

You gently deflect her praise, saying that nowadays no one would give Tolstoy the time of day until he amassed twenty thousand followers on #BookTok.

“Is that all?” she replies, surprised. “Because I’ve got half a million.”

Naughty Therapist

You are grabbing lunch at a Mexican fast-food chain when you spot your therapist deep in conversation with a colleague. You start toward her to say hello, but freeze when you realize that she is talking about you.

“I know we’re not supposed to have favorites,” you hear her say, “but in ten years I’ve never encountered someone who combines such oceanic depths of emotion with raw intellectual horsepower. Plus, he’s hilarious!”

Her paean continues for five minutes, as she extolls every cranny of your psyche. “I don’t think he knows that I’m only charging him one-third my rate. To be honest,” she continues, “I feel guilty charging him at all. Just his company is payment enough.”

Sitting in her office the next week, you casually mention that you would be open to a pro-bono situation. She looks up, nibbling her lip seductively.

“I’d like that,” she says. “I’d like that very much.”

A Star Is Born

Back at the airport, you are in the boarding line when you feel a tap on your shoulder. You turn around and are astonished to see the acclaimed actor-director Bradley Cooper, a sheepish expression on his face. “I swear I never do this,” he says, then asks if you aren’t the author of that unpublished novel everyone is talking about. And, if you are, would you consider selling him the movie rights for several million dollars?

You hesitate, lost in his Arctic-blue eyes, then tell him that, while you are flattered by his interest, your Art isn’t for sale, and that a massive international audience would betray the sacred compact between author and reader. He nods, clearly disappointed but also sort of awed.

Two months later, you and Bradley Cooper are riding motorcycles together in Jalisco when he asks, almost as an afterthought, whether you might partner with him on a line of small-batch mezcal.

“I’d like that,” you say. “I’d like that very much.” ♦

Fiction

- The Buggy.

Fiction

The Buggy

By Roddy Doyle

June 16, 2024



[Roddy Doyle reads.](#)

There were people at the far end of the beach. Some adults, a lot of children. An extended family, maybe—he didn't know. He tried to see if one of the adults was carrying a baby or if there was a toddler—a padded lump—plonked on the sand.

He didn't want to walk over, down from the path, across the sand and stones, to the buggy. It was facing the sea. If the people up the beach had been nearer to it, he'd have known that it was theirs. He'd have known that they'd parked the buggy there at the edge of the sea so the baby would drink in the air—the ozone, whatever it was—and sleep, and stay asleep for a while. But it stood out, alone. There wasn't an adult or a sibling, a towel or a bucket, anywhere near it. It made no sense.

It was more than likely empty. That didn't make much sense, either, a buggy abandoned on the beach like that. But he remembered abandoning a buggy

himself, years ago—it would have been more than thirty years—when the frame had buckled as he was pushing it up the hill in that place in France they'd gone to on their way to the ferry in Le Havre. Mont-Saint-Michel. A spectacular place, dripping with history and religion, but all he remembered about it was the ache in his arms, and the heat, as he pushed the buggy and the toddler in it up the incline, and the metallic screech as the frame—the sides—surrendered and the toddler seemed to disappear, as if she had been eaten by the buggy. The toddler, Gráinne, was fine—she had a toddler of her own these days—but the buggy wasn't savable. No amount of bending or hammering would have coaxed it back into shape. They'd left it beside a bin and passed three more buggies, buckled and discarded, on their way back down to the car park.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Roddy Doyle read "The Buggy."](#)

Maybe that was what had happened here. The frame had given up as the buggy was pushed—shoved, forced—across the sand. But he was looking at it and he knew: there was nothing wrong with this one. It was a solid-looking thing; calling it a vehicle wouldn't have been ridiculous. A small adult could have squeezed into it. A hen or a stag party—he could picture the other eejits pushing a little bride or groom from one pub to the next in the buggy he was looking at.

It wasn't buckled, but it might have been abandoned, and he wanted nothing to do with it.

Was the tide coming in or on its way out? He didn't know. He hadn't paid much attention to the tides and their times since he was a kid. He remembered how much he'd loved looking them up in the back of his father's *Independent*, after his father had shown him how to read the charts.

The sea—the wave he was looking at now—stopped a yard, a metre, from the buggy's front wheels, and receded. He waited for the next wave. Exactly the same—from where he stood. It got no closer to the wheels. He looked again, from left to right, to see if anyone was going to claim the buggy before the sea took it.

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

He should have kept driving. Of course, he should have. He'd been on his way to meet his brother, who'd moved down to Arklow. He'd left the house early—hours early—before he'd wanted to. He'd just been anxious—anxious about finding his brother's place, anxious about the traffic, anxious about leaving the house, anxious about meeting his brother. He'd seen the sign for the beach and he'd turned left, off the motorway. And here he was, about to witness a drowning, an abandonment. Something bad. Something dreadful. An accusation, a misunderstanding, a night in a Garda station, a slot on the news. Or just an empty buggy on a cold Irish beach. A mystery. A story he didn't want to make up, or even think about.

He should have kept driving. He shouldn't have left home in the first place.

He didn't want to do it—he really didn't. He'd go over now to the buggy; he'd look in, he'd bend down. Even here, on the path above the beach, he could feel it. The magic, the curse—the man he'd been thirty years ago. The man who would have known what to do. The man who wouldn't have hesitated. But he was so far away from being that man, he'd have to turn into an entirely different man—a man who wasn't in him.

He could remember being a kid. He remembered being very small. He could remember looking up at the handle of the fridge, in the kitchen. He could remember standing beside his father, resting his arm on his father's knee as his father ate his dinner. He could remember the smell of his father's tobacco. He could remember the paint on his father's trousers. He could remember his father telling his mother that he'd change his trousers after he'd finished his dinner; he was starving and the grub wouldn't taste any better in clean trousers, the trousers weren't the ones eating it. He remembered his mother laughing and calling his father an eejit. He remembered looking up at them—their words and laughter—over his head. That was how far back he could go. But not just that—the little lad was still in him. He was the much, much older version of that child. And the older boys, the other layers of his life—they were in him, too. Not just the memories—it wasn't that they were vivid. They were living things, events—he could live them now. He could scratch at the blue paint on his father's cord trousers. He could hear his mother's laughter—now he could. He could

feel his foot hitting a wet leather football. He could hear the chalk on a primary-school blackboard. He could taste the first girl's tongue—he could feel her sweat on his cheek as they kissed, both of them afraid to stop, like they were both cycling bikes for the first time and would fall off if they slowed down or stopped.

But the man—the competent young man he'd been, the father—he couldn't feel him at all.

He could see him. He could see him take Gráinne from the buggy, making a joke of its collapse, making her brothers laugh—*The poor ol' buggy; your bum was too big for it, Gráinne*—and carrying her back down the hill. But he couldn't feel her weight on his arm, or the confidence—the knowledge—that he'd make it all the way without changing arms or putting her down and trying to persuade her to walk.

He could remember another buggy. He was standing on the platform as the train—the *DART*—came slowly into Killester station, with the boys on either side of him. A double buggy this time—before Gráinne was born. He had one boy's hand in his own left hand—the younger lad, Colm—and he held the buggy, folded, in his right hand. The older boy, Seán, held on to the buggy. The train stopped. There was no one getting off, no one there to press the button to open the train door. He forgot that Seán loved pressing the button, that it was his job, the thing that made him more important than his little brother. He let go of Colm's hand for a second, to give the button a jab—and Colm was gone. He had tried to step onto the train; his stride fell short of the gap, and he dropped between the train and the platform, under the train. Someone had seen what had happened and was shouting up the platform to the driver, as he got down on his knees, gently grabbed Colm's outstretched hand—*Good lad, up you come*—and pulled him up to the platform, gave him a hug, Colm smiling, not a bother on him, then got himself, the boys, and the buggy onto the train, and dealt with Seán's tears.

If the train had been moving, if Colm had slid further beneath it, if the guy on the platform hadn't been there to shout the warning to the driver—all of these possibilities rattled away inside him as the train left the station and the boys sat so they could both look out the window and get ready to be surprised by any trains dashing past in the other direction. *Ambush!*

But, really, he'd been fine, even happy. He'd known that he'd just have had to reach down, his arm in the gap between the train's green side and the rain-drenched cement of the station platform, and hold Colm's hand—not even grab it—just hold it and lift the boy effortlessly to safety. He'd have managed it. He remembered examining the soaked knees of his jeans and brushing the grit off them with his open hand. Mission accomplished.

He looked at the hand now, his right hand. It wasn't the same one—it wasn't the hand that had saved Colm. It wasn't the age, or the liver spots. It wasn't even the hand. The hand, his arm, shook sometimes—just slightly—when he had to reach out to grab something, and sometimes he was happier holding a mug or a glass in both hands till he became used to the weight. But it wasn't his hands or his arms or aging or anything. It was him. Just him. That phrase from the pandemic, "essential worker"—he'd been an essential father. He could remember rescuing Colm, but he couldn't imagine it—he couldn't feel it. He couldn't believe he'd done it. He *didn't* believe he'd done it. Or any of the other things he'd done when he was a father. Not just observed or witnessed, stored away for later. Done. Picked up, set down, pushed, pulled, fed, tickled, comforted. His physical life beyond children, too. Ran, gasped, laughed, cried, came. The verbs—the action words. He had the words, but the actions? He could walk and drive and eat and sleep. He could go through the motions. He could get through the day.

But he didn't live.

The tide was coming in—the sea was closer to the buggy. Another minute and the waves would be digging under a front wheel.

There was another buggy story. He'd pushed the buggy, empty—he couldn't remember which buggy; they'd gone through five or six—down to the shops, with Seán walking beside him. Seán was grand walking anywhere, it didn't really matter how far. But, coming back, he often went on strike. Setting out, he'd object to the buggy—*Buggy's for babies!*—but on the way home he'd sit on the ground, plonk himself down, in puddles, or right in front of shopping trolleys and pit bulls and pensioners, and refuse to walk. Even then he objected to the buggy. He wouldn't climb into it or let his father pick him up and fasten him in. This particular time, Seán—the adorable little bastard—shoved the buggy out onto the road, right in front of

an oncoming car. The driver braked, but the car hit the buggy side-on—he'd never forget the noise, the thump. The buggy went into the air and landed clean, all four wheels at once, facing the car, and the driver, a woman with a carful of her own babies, stared out at the empty buggy and screamed and screamed and fell out of the car and looked under it and on the roof for the missing baby—*Oh, Jesus, oh, Jesus, oh, Jesus, oh, Jesus*—while the missing baby, Seán, pointed at her and laughed. *Funneee!*

He could remember it like a scene from a film. It was a very good film. But he wasn't in it.

What happened?

Where had his life gone? Not the years—the blood. Where was the life?

The buggy was listing—it was going to topple. The next wave or the one after, it was going to be on its side and the baby—if there was one—would be strapped in and helpless.

If there was one.

He'd forgotten how hard moving across soft sand was; his ankles were already aching. He nearly fell—the sole of his shoe slid on a stone. He watched a wave wallop the wheel—he saw the buggy pushed back. He didn't seem to be getting any closer—he'd left it too late. His shoes were full of sand—there was a stone digging into his heel. But the ground was more solid; there was a layer of stones, a thick band that stretched along the beach. He got over the stones quickly enough, and he was nearly at the buggy—he could feel the handle, *all* the handles, in his grip—when a wave slid up over his shoes and he was lifting his feet, moving like a mad thing, his feet smacking the water, and he caught the buggy, he grabbed one of the handles and pulled it back with him, up to the bank of stones, and he knew before he looked. He had the buggy by both handles now, and he parked it, still facing the sea, and looked—no baby. He was relieved—and disappointed—and angry. His feet were freezing—his legs, up to his knees and past them—fuckin' freezing. And he laughed. He was angry, and delighted to be angry. He was soaking and didn't know what he'd do, and he didn't care.

—Oh, God. Thank you!

It was a woman, a young woman running at him, sliding over the stones.

He checked again—the buggy was empty. He wondered why she was thanking him.

—I forgot all about it, she said.

She looked the part, the young mother, exhausted and lovely. But she didn't have a baby, on her hip or in her arms.

He held on to the buggy.

—You're drenched, she said. I'm so sorry.

He shrugged. He wasn't sure if it was a proper shrug. He was gripping the handles and leaning over the buggy, protecting the baby that wasn't in it.

She was a bit uncertain—he could see that. She'd expected him to roll the buggy across the stones to her, or to turn it around and offer her the handles. It probably looked like he needed the buggy to hold himself up. He looked down. He was wet past his trousers, halfway up his jumper.

—I left my phone in the car, she said. Are you all right?

Jesus Christ, she wanted to phone for an ambulance—for him.

He stood up straight. He let go of the buggy.



—I'm grand, he said.

—You must be frozen, she said.

His job now was to get her to stop talking to him like he was an old man. An old man who'd fallen into the water, or who'd wet himself.

—I'm grand, he said again.

He patted a buggy handle.

—Where's the owner of the vehicle? he asked.

She smiled.

—He's in the car, she said. In the car park.

—If he hasn't driven away, he said. I'm only joking.

She looked behind her, toward the car park that they couldn't see from where they stood.

—I wouldn't put it past him, she said.

He moved first. He walked off the sand, pulling the buggy with him.

—He wanted to go to the toilet like a big boy, she told him. In the dunes.

—Fair enough, he said. What's his name? I feel like I should know.

He pulled at a wet trouser leg where it was stuck to his thigh.

—Seán, she said.

—I've a Seán as well, he told her.

—Really? she said. That's amazing.

They were on the tarmac, off the sand. He let go of the buggy. She took hold of it and pointed it at the car park.

—Tell Seán I said hello, he said.

She laughed. She smiled.

—I will, she said. Bye. Thanks again.

—Seeyeh.

She hadn't asked him if he was O.K. or if he knew where he was going, or if there was someone he could phone to come and collect him. She'd seen a man who was fine, and she'd walked away. He was freezing, and stiff. He'd drive to Arklow now and change into one of his brother's tracksuits.

He took his phone from his trousers pocket and rubbed the screen dry on the shoulder of his jumper. He went to Favourites and tapped "Seán."

—Dad?

—Howyeh, son. Are you busy—can you talk?

—What's up? Are you all right?

He told his son about how he'd been on his way to Arklow, about how he'd been early so he'd stopped at the beach. About how he'd gone for a walk. How he'd seen the buggy facing the sea. How he'd seen the tide coming in, how he'd dashed down to the sea to rescue the buggy.

He didn't hesitate.

—There was a baby in it, Seán.

—Ah, Jesus—a baby? Are you serious?

—I couldn't believe it, he said. Fast asleep.

—No!

—Yeah.

There—in the car park beside the Irish Sea—he'd never felt happier. He watched the mother drive slowly to the gate, stop, then turn left, out, onto the road. He waved at the back of the car. A Volvo, he thought it was. Black, or very dark blue.

—Was the baby O.K.?

—Ah, yeah, he said. Not a bother on him. And come here—guess what his name was. ♦

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Books

Anthony Fauci's Side of the Story

The former *NIAID* director has been both lauded and demonized for his work during the *COVID* pandemic, but his autobiography insists that his career needs to be seen whole to be understood.

By Jerome Groopman

June 17, 2024



Some fifty pages into his autobiography, “On Call: A Doctor’s Journey in Public Service” (Viking), Anthony Fauci, the former head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (*NIAID*), describes a moment of horror when he and his colleagues realize that the scale of the epidemic they are dealing with is far greater than previously supposed: “Thousands and thousands of people had been getting infected before we knew that the disease existed, and they were passing the infections on to others long before they showed symptoms of the disease itself.” Later, as the government response—of which he is the “public face”—comes under fire, Fauci will be called a murderer.

The year is 1985, and a blood test for H.I.V. has recently become available. By the end of the year, it will be evident that, for each of the nearly sixteen thousand people in the United States suffering from *AIDS*, more than seven others are infected but asymptomatic.

Even if the *COVID-19* pandemic had not occurred, Fauci's career would still have been one of the most consequential and most prominent in American medicine in the past fifty years. But it was the pandemic that made him, as he writes, "a political lightning rod—a figure who represents hope to so many and evil to some." Long renowned as a clinician, a researcher, and a public servant—George W. Bush awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2008—he became demonized as a liar who hid evidence about the *SARS-CoV-2* virus, funded dangerous laboratory studies, misled Congress, and was responsible for countless unnecessary deaths. So it is telling that his memoir is less dominated by recent events than one might expect. Although most readers will surely first turn to the part that relates Fauci's dealings with the Trump Administration, the forty-fifth President is only one of six whom we meet in person, and *AIDS* gets more pages than *COVID*.

The book thus presents an implicit demand for us to see Fauci's career whole, from medical training to retirement. When, at the start of this month, he was questioned by the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, the Republican firebrand Marjorie Taylor Greene insisted upon addressing him as Mr. Fauci, rather than Dr. Fauci. "Because you're not 'Doctor,' you're 'Mister' Fauci," she said. "That man does not deserve to have a license. As a matter of fact, it should be revoked, and he belongs in prison." Against this absurd charge, "*On Call*" maintains that Anthony Fauci is a doctor first and foremost.

The book is also something of a diptych. The resonances between the two greatest public-health crises of Fauci's tenure at *NIAID* are impossible to ignore. Both cases involve asymptomatic infection, a scramble for tests and treatments, public-information campaigns, and the search for a vaccine—miraculously fast for *COVID-19*, still unfulfilled for H.I.V. And, each time, he is vilified—first by militant *AIDS* activists, later by anti-vaxxers and anti-maskers, populist Republicans and libertarians, and a panoply of conspiracy

theorists. But the differences are as revealing as the similarities, in ways that, by the end of the book, test even Fauci's resistance to pessimism.

The title "On Call" suggests that medicine is not merely a job but a calling, and Fauci traces the roots of this sensibility back to his childhood in Brooklyn. His parents were first-generation Italian Americans, both college-educated. His father worked as a pharmacist, and the Faucis—a close-knit family, proud of their heritage—lived above his pharmacy. Dedication to caring for others was exemplified by Fauci's father. "Dad was generous to a fault when it came to accommodating customers who could not afford to pay their pharmacy bills," he writes. "He kept a running account for them, much to the frustration of the whole family."

Fauci was educated in Catholic schools, initially by Dominican nuns who demanded achievement and graded students down to a tenth of a point. At Regis, an élite Jesuit high school in Manhattan, he immersed himself in Greek and Latin. Regis's motto is "Men for Others," making personal gain secondary to public service, and Fauci notes the school's spirit as a "natural extension" of that of his upbringing. He went on to a Jesuit college, Holy Cross, in Worcester, Massachusetts, and then to medical school at Cornell, where he graduated first in his class.

Fauci joined the National Institutes of Health in 1968, rising through its ranks as an infectious-disease specialist and immunologist. He cared for patients with rare autoimmune disorders, and discovered that low doses of chemotherapy and steroids could be life-saving, because they blunted these patients' aberrant inflammatory responses. It was serendipitously perfect preparation for studying H.I.V.—so much so that Fauci describes feeling "the illusion of fate" when the disease's first victims, mostly young gay men, began arriving at the N.I.H. Clinical Center. "I was trained for years as an immunologist *and* an infectious disease specialist," he writes. "Here was a disease that certainly was infectious. It also was destroying the immune system and rendering the patients highly susceptible to opportunistic infections."

Fauci redirected his efforts from inflammatory diseases to H.I.V. At first, there was no medication to block the virus, and half the admitted patients died of infections or cancer within nine to ten months. During the early years

of the epidemic, I crossed paths with Fauci at various scientific conferences; at my hospital, at Harvard, I had been enlisted as an oncologist to care for *AIDS* patients with malignancies, specifically Kaposi's sarcoma and lymphoma. Fauci became a frequent target of gay activists, who saw that the government was failing them. Larry Kramer, in the San Francisco *Examiner*, wrote a piece headed "*i call you murderers*: An open letter to an incompetent idiot, Dr. Anthony Fauci." He accused Fauci of facilitating the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands, of people with H.I.V. "His rationale for the attack was that I had not demanded enough money for *AIDS*," Fauci writes. "He ignored the fact that I had requested from Congress and the president the largest increase in resources given to an NIH institute since the famous 'war on cancer' in the 1970s."

The first major advance in the treatment of *aids* was AZT, a drug that had originally been tested as a chemotherapy agent. Although AZT was not effective against tumors, laboratory results showed it to be a potent inhibitor of H.I.V. I was among several physicians who participated in the pivotal clinical trial of AZT for the treatment of *AIDS* patients. Fauci presents these results succinctly: "Over a twenty-four-week period in 1986, 145 individuals with HIV received AZT, and 137 received the placebo. At the end of the study, 19 patients who received the placebo had died compared with only 1 death in the group that received AZT. Opportunistic infections, such as *Pneumocystis pneumonia*, developed in 45 subjects receiving the placebo, compared with 24 subjects receiving AZT."

The drug was clearly a turning point, and not long after the publication of these results, in a *New England Journal of Medicine* article that I co-authored, I joined colleagues on a panel presenting the results of the clinical trial to physicians, nurses, and other caregivers. During the discussion, a group from *ACT UP* barged into the meeting room. I vividly recall how they yelled that AZT was poison and handed out Kool-Aid to the attendees, a reference to the deaths of Jim Jones's cult followers. They turned to the physicians on the panel, calling us Nazis. This stung; many members of my mother's extended family were murdered in Auschwitz. Having worked to care for people with *AIDS*, and having participated in a clinical trial that proved for the first time that a drug could combat the virus, I was indignant at the group's slander.

But this is where one distinctive facet of Fauci's mentality reveals itself. Although he writes that he was hurt to be called a murderer by Kramer, he goes on to say, "Yet, in a strange way, I still did not blame Larry. If I had been in his position, I would have been just as angry." When activists protested at the N.I.H., demanding the development of better drugs than AZT, Fauci made a key decision, bringing a handful of the demonstrators inside to meet with him. "They were shocked," he recalls. "This was the first time in anyone's memory that a government official had invited them to sit down and talk on equal terms and on government turf." Fauci was able to clarify what drug development involved, while the activists, as he writes, "played an increasingly important role in shaping my thinking and policy in these areas." This culminated in an innovative "parallel track" of drug testing that expanded the availability of experimental treatments for *AIDS* beyond the rigid confines of clinical trials.

Ultimately, Fauci's vision of convincing activists of a shared goal was realized, and even Larry Kramer forged a bond with him. Shortly before Kramer died, in May, 2020, he had one last phone conversation with Fauci, which ended with Kramer saying, "I love you, Tony." Fauci writes, "I tearfully responded, 'I love you too, Larry.' A complex relationship, indeed."

Fauci's commitment to his work on *AIDS* was such that when, in 1984, he was offered the directorship of *NIAID*, a purely administrative role, he insisted on being allowed to continue doing research and treating patients. He writes of a piece of advice a mentor gave him as his influence increased: "It's a good rule when you are walking into the West Wing of the White House to advise the president, vice president, or the White House staff to remind yourself that this might be the last time you will walk through that door." In other words, sooner or later there would likely be a choice between sugarcoating unwelcome news and losing influence, so one should mentally prepare to do the right thing.

Fauci was neither naïve nor cynical about the ways of Washington. He understood that politicians were obliged to grandstand for the press and the public, and that even allies could occasionally make trouble. During a hearing in 1988, Senator Ted Kennedy selectively quoted him in a way that implied that a dinner invitation from Vice-President George H. W. Bush had

made him soft-pedal his demands for more *AIDS* funding. Fauci writes, “At the end of the hearing Senator Kennedy called me over, put his arm around my shoulder, and said warmly, ‘Sorry I had to do that, Tony, it was nothing personal, but I just have to keep the pressure on. Anyway, keep up your great work.’”

Fauci was known for being apolitical and having friends on both sides of the aisle. This, along with his reputation for integrity, bore fruit in both Republican and Democratic Administrations. He writes with affection about Bush, Sr., who offered him the N.I.H. directorship—a position he turned down, as it would have required him to give up hands-on medical care. He worked with Bill Clinton on creating a center devoted in part to H.I.V.-vaccine research, with George W. Bush on providing life-saving medication to people with the disease in the developing world, and with Barack Obama on combatting outbreaks of Zika and Ebola.

And so to Donald Trump. Seeing Fauci’s expressionless face during the President’s pandemic press conferences, I often wondered what he was thinking. Once, while listening to Trump, Fauci moved his hand to his forehead in disbelief. That seemed to answer my question.

Fauci mentions this incident in his memoir, and his handling of it is characteristic. Trump, he writes, “was being especially flippant” and made a joke that gave him “a moment of despair mixed with amusement.” Catching the eye of a journalist who shot him “one of those ‘What the . . . ?’ looks,” Fauci recalls, “I put my hand to my forehead to hide my expression.” He was dismayed when a photograph of this gesture was seized upon by his critics as proof that he was “a naysaying bureaucrat who deliberately, even maliciously, was undermining President Trump.” Fauci, then, does not deny that he was aghast at what Trump was saying, but he is adamant that he had no intention of communicating disrespect—a line he maintains consistently—and that, indeed, the notorious gesture was an attempt to conceal his reaction. The word “flippant” is notable, too. As criticisms of Trump go, it’s decidedly mild, and it does capture something about his character; namely, his love of playing to an audience.

The chapter about working with Trump is called “He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not.” At first, Fauci found Trump “far more personable than I had

expected.” But, early on in the pandemic, Fauci encountered “the first, but not the last, whiplash effect that I would experience in dealing with this complex man.” On a nighttime phone call in February, 2020, Trump listened as Fauci advised him against underplaying the severity of the situation —“That almost always comes back to bite you, Mr. President”—and suggested that honesty would win the country’s respect. The next day, at a rally in Charleston, South Carolina, Trump called *COVID* the Democrats’ “new hoax.”

Similarly, Fauci was impressed that, despite the economic consequences, Trump agreed to shut down the country for fifteen days in March, in an attempt to “flatten the curve.” The difficulty came when fifteen days turned into longer and longer still. “I think Donald Trump thought that *COVID* would be temporary: a little time goes by, the outbreak is over, everyone goes back to work, and the election cycle can begin,” Fauci writes. But, “with the ghastly reality setting in that *COVID* was not going to go away, Trump began to grab for an elixir that would cure this disease.” When the President started touting the benefits of hydroxychloroquine, Fauci realized that “sooner or later I would have to refute him publicly.” Knowing that the press would seize on divisions between Trump and his *COVID* team, he evidently tried to make these corrections as measured as possible, and he writes of being struck that Trump did not seem to hold them against him.

Nothing that Fauci says will change the minds of those who believe he was trying to undermine the President, but Democrats may be surprised that he enjoyed cordial relations with much of the Administration. He finds Mike Pence, Marc Short, and Hope Hicks to be supportive and sees “positive attributes” in Jared Kushner. Even Trump often seems guilty more of wishful thinking than of something darker, pleading with Fauci to find some sort of silver lining. The villains in the account are the White House chief of staff Mark Meadows and the press secretary Kayleigh McEnany, who Fauci feels try to silence him, and Peter Navarro, an economic adviser, who berates him about hydroxychloroquine. Fauci shows quiet scorn for Scott Atlas, a doctor who becomes Trump’s special assistant on *COVID*. Atlas is against lockdowns, putting his faith in herd immunity, and acquires influence by “telling the president what he wanted to hear.”

The relationship with Trump certainly soured, something Fauci attributes in part to the people who had the President's ear, and there is an alarming account of Trump at his most furious. In June, 2020, after Fauci said that the duration of immunity from the vaccines then in development might be such that booster shots would be needed, he got a call:

The president was irate, saying that I could not keep doing this to him. He said he loved me, but the country was in trouble, and I was making it worse. He added that the stock market went up only six hundred points in response to the positive phase 1 vaccine news and it should have gone up a thousand points and so I cost the country “one trillion fucking dollars.”

Fauci himself evinces anger only when he tells of death threats to him and his family, which required him to have a security detail at home. In the *AIDS* era, he recalls, he got maybe a couple of abusive letters a month. Things were very different this time: “Now my family and I were barraged by emails, texts, and phone calls.” He is particularly outraged at the harassment of his daughters, writing that he “wanted to lash out at the people who were terrifying these innocent young women.”

Fauci’s troubles did not end with Trump’s departure. Once Joe Biden was President, the abuse got worse, he writes, because attacking him became a badge of loyalty for extremist Republicans and a way to wage war on Biden and the Democrats—“as well as established principles of public health.” In 2022, Fauci decided to retire, but the polarization that he laments is as virulent as ever, as the rhetoric at the recent congressional hearing shows.

Parts of the book were obviously written with an eye to the ongoing scrutiny of the government’s handling of the pandemic. He is open, if a little general, about things that went wrong. “If we knew in the first months what we know now, many things would have been done differently,” he writes. “We learned, for example, that aerosol transmission of infection was important, and asymptomatic spread of virus played a much greater role in transmission than originally appreciated. This knowledge clearly would have influenced earlier recommendations for mask wearing, social distancing, and ventilation.” He also thinks that mask mandates could have been relaxed

earlier but explains that although he privately made this recommendation to the C.D.C., he was hesitant to criticize the agency openly.

More broadly, he emphasizes that “people associate science with absolutes that are immutable, when in fact science is a process that continually uncovers new information.” People look to medical science for definitive answers, but the advice during the pandemic had to change as the understanding of the virus developed. This idea governs Fauci’s stated attitude toward the debate that still rages about whether the pandemic started with the virus naturally jumping species to humans, perhaps in the Wuhan wet market, or whether a leak from a laboratory in Wuhan working on coronaviruses could have been to blame. (The latter possibility is made more politically fraught by the fact that the Wuhan lab indirectly received funding for some coronavirus research from the N.I.H.) Fauci states that there is no proof either way, but that “keeping an open mind about both possibilities does not mean that one cannot have an opinion.” In the book, as in the recent hearing, he continues to argue that a natural spillover from another species is more probable. He notes that this is the prevailing opinion among evolutionary virologists and the majority opinion among U.S. intelligence agencies; he also asserts that seventy-five per cent of all new infectious diseases originate in this manner.

While somewhat open-minded about the origin of the virus, he is vociferous about the way that the lab-leak theory has been used to erode confidence in public-health provisions. He relays in detail his rebuttal, in May, 2021, of Senator Rand Paul’s claim that N.I.H. money directly funded the creation of the virus in Wuhan.

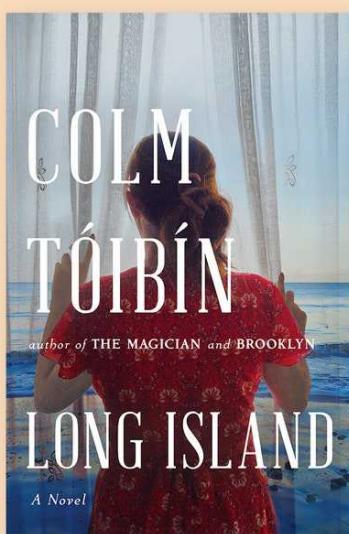
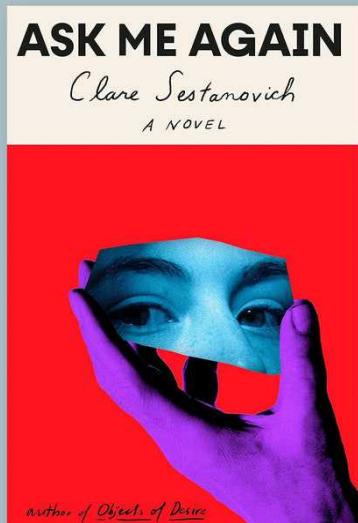
“At times, I am deeply disturbed about the state of our society,” Fauci writes near the end of his book. “We have seen complete fabrications become some people’s accepted reality.” If this “crisis of truth” persists, the effects of future pandemics will be much worse. Such is the grim lesson of Fauci’s career in public service. In the nineteen-eighties, by listening to his critics, he managed to turn them into allies. Larry Kramer, famously combative, went from calling him a murderer to saying he loved him. Which of Fauci’s current adversaries would be capable of such a transformation? ♦

Books

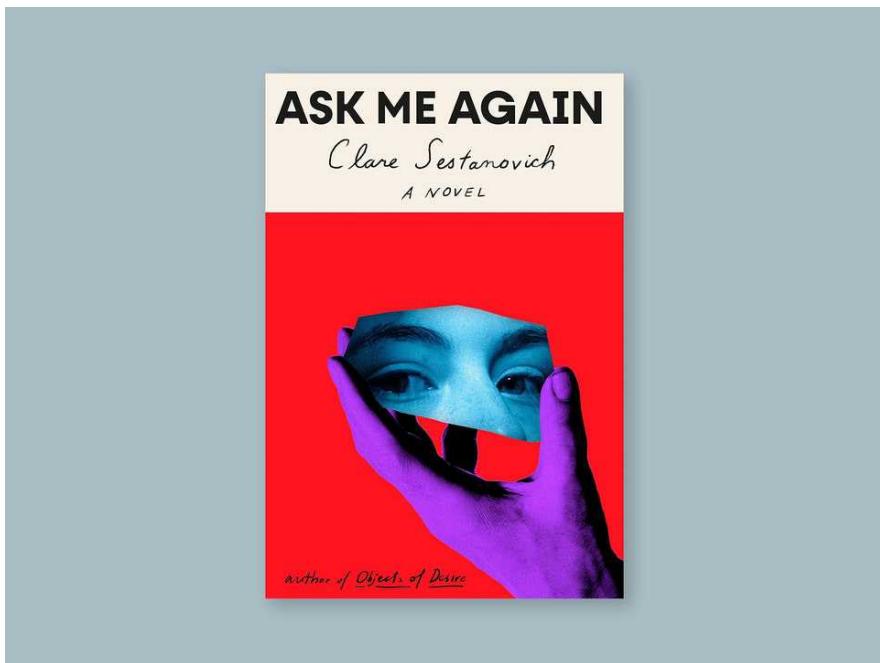
Briefly Noted

“Long Island,” “Ask Me Again,” “Orwell’s Ghosts,” and “Vows.”

June 17, 2024

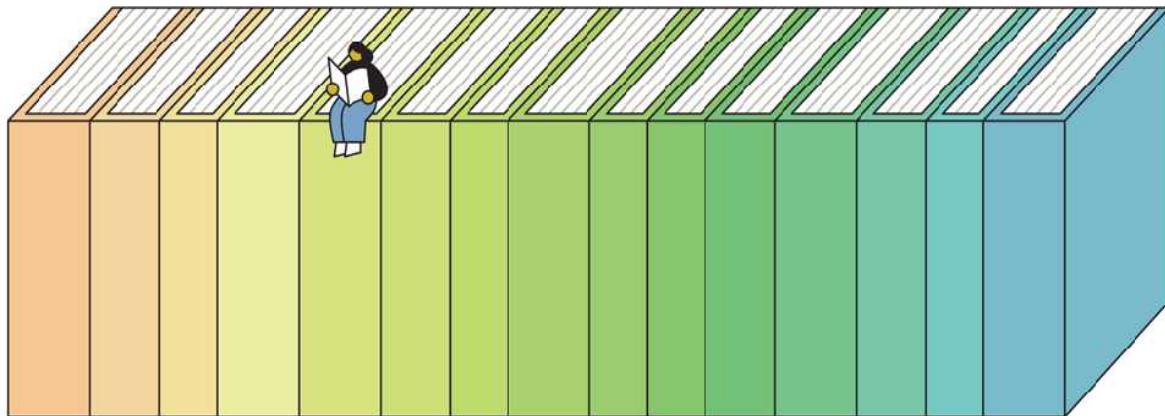


Long Island, by Colm Tóibín (Scribner). Eilis Lacey, an Irish immigrant in New York whom Tóibín introduced in his novel “Brooklyn,” returns in this deeply felt but resolutely unsentimental sequel. The book, which takes place in the nineteen-seventies, two decades after the events of the earlier installment, opens with Eilis—now a mother of two living on Long Island—learning that her Italian American husband has impregnated another woman. The news sparks Eilis’s return to her home town, Enniscorthy, where she has not been for some twenty years, and where she reconnects with a man with whom she had a dalliance early on in her marriage. Tóibín uses masterly restraint to dramatize how lives can be destabilized by desire.

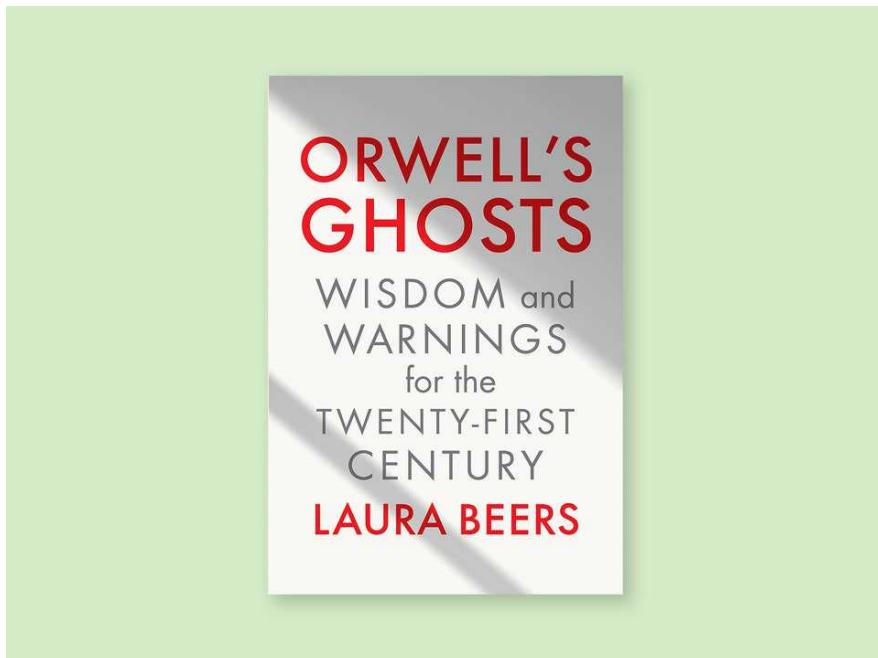


Ask Me Again, by Clare Sestanovich (Knopf). This début novel, by a noted writer of short stories, begins as Eva, the self-conscious teen-age daughter of middle-class parents, befriends a boy named Jamie, an intellectual with a contrarian streak who comes from a wealthy family. In the next few years, Eva graduates from a prestigious college and gets a job at a newspaper while contending with romances, ambitions, a nascent political consciousness, and a changing relationship with her parents. Meanwhile, Jamie drops out to join a thinly veiled Occupy Wall Street. Throughout, the novel considers how a life’s trajectory takes shape, and how much it is influenced by other people: “Eva herself thought about impressions all the time. She liked picturing it literally: the mark that you left on someone or that someone left on you.”

What We're Reading

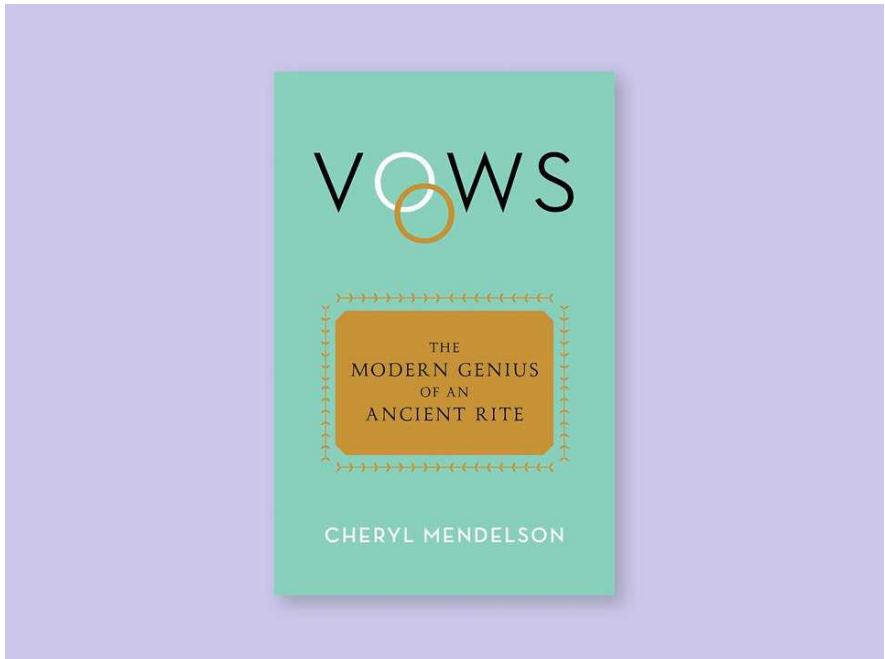


Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Orwell's Ghosts, by *Laura Beers* (Norton). In the nearly seventy-five years since George Orwell's death, his writing has been appropriated for various

ideological ends. In this lucid, engaging study, Beers teases out its intricacies, considering, for instance, Orwell's dual commitment to socialist revolution and "traditional" English society; his apparent dismissal of feminism; his belief in individual liberty; and why he ultimately valued truth above freedom of speech. The complexity (and sheer volume) of Orwell's work means that he has frequently been misunderstood. Beers reaches a satisfying synthesis, writing that Orwell illuminates how "to resist the temptations of totalitarianism in favor of a more open and democratic socialism."



Vows, by Cheryl Mendelson (Simon & Schuster). This timely, if uneven, blend of social science, history, literary criticism, and anecdote mounts a defense of monogamous marriage as the "world's best blueprint for happiness." Mendelson is on firm footing as she traces the evolution of standard marriage vows from their feudal roots, and she makes compelling points regarding the interconnectedness of love, desire, and commitment. But other sections, including an underbaked one positing a causal relationship between a monogamy-based society and a strong G.D.P., are less persuasive. She critiques defenders of consensual non-monogamy, but she and they are speaking different languages; this is a book on the institution of marriage in which the word "patriarchal" never appears.

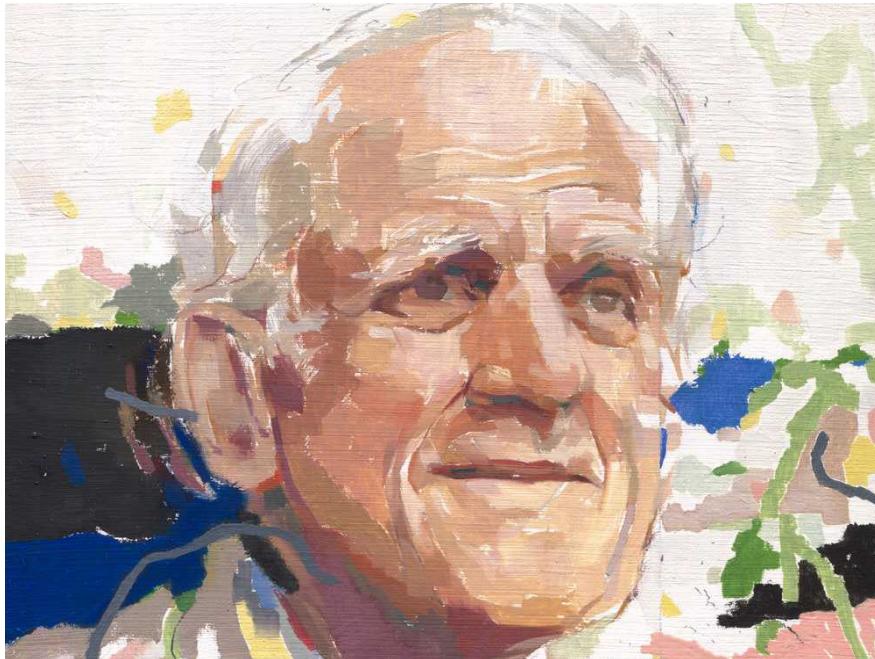
Books

How the Philosopher Charles Taylor Would Heal the Ills of Modernity

Enlightenment liberalism fragmented the world by neglecting the social nature of the self, Taylor contends, but the Romantics can tell us how to restore a shared sense of meaning and purpose.

By Adam Gopnik

June 17, 2024



Lyric poets and mathematicians, by general agreement, do their best work young, while composers and conductors are evergreen, doing *their* best work, or more work of the same kind, as they age. Philosophers seem to be a more mixed bag: some shine early and some, like [Wittgenstein](#), have distinct chapters of youth and middle age; Bertrand Russell went on tirelessly until he was almost a hundred. Yet surely few will surpass the record of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who is back, at ninety-two, with what may be the most ambitious work ever written by a major thinker at such an advanced age. The new book, “[Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment](#)” (Belknap), though ostensibly a study of Romantic poetry

and music, is about nothing less than modern life and its discontents, and how we might transcend them.

A hard thinker to pigeonhole, Taylor has long been a mainstay of Canada's social-democratic left; he helped found the New Democratic Party, running for office several times in Quebec, though losing, inevitably, to the Liberal Party and the charismatic Pierre Trudeau. He's also a Catholic and a singularly eloquent critic of individualism and secularism, those two pillars of modern liberalism. He worries about the modern conception of the self—what he has called “the punctual self”—which he takes to be rooted in Enlightenment thought, and about the primacy it accords to autonomy, reason, and individual rights. By wresting our identities away from a sense of community and common purpose, the new “atomist-instrumental” model was, he thinks, bound to produce our familiar modern alienation. We became estranged from a sense of belonging and meaning. We experienced the attenuation of the citizen-participation politics we need. We wanted to be alone, and now we are. With this analysis, critical of the foundations of liberalism without betraying liberal values, Taylor manages to be at once precise and prophetic. He may be the most well-regarded philosopher in the English-speaking world, having snatched most of the big prizes, including the million-dollar Berggruen Prize, in 2016. There are now books about his books, study guides and Web sites dedicated to indexing his œuvre.

When I was a kid, growing up in Montreal around McGill University, where Taylor taught for more than three decades, he was a significant if troubling presence: not personally troubling—quite the opposite, he was an amiable faculty friend—but troubling because, in my own science-worshipping (what the other side would have called “positivist”) faculty family, Taylor's rehabilitation of Hegel seemed almost sinister. Of such matters are quarrels made in Barchester.

Nonetheless, at some point I began to read Taylor, first with the fascination of the forbidden and then with ever-increasing pleasure. Though Taylor was defending a German idealist tradition that a more empirical-minded tradition had denounced as mere verbiage and wind, he had spent a formative period in the precincts of ordinary-language philosophy at Oxford, where he was mentored by Isaiah Berlin; he spoke the plainer dialects of Anglo-American philosophy. (The phone calls were coming from inside the house.) Indeed,

he felt that Berlin had abandoned philosophy for the history of ideas because the moral philosophy of his day was too parched to capture the complexities Berlin cared about.

As a social and political theorist, Taylor emphasized the primacy of shared experience—the idea that identity resides within communities rather than inside brains—without succumbing to nostalgia for some lost organic society. What matters most in life to actual people, he has argued, is not the standard liberal question “Who am I?” but the richer humanist question “Where am I going?” In expansive volumes such as “[Sources of the Self](#)” and “[A Secular Age](#),” he has stalked, like a soft-footed cat, a “naturalist” view of humanity which assimilates our minds and morals to a purely materialist and empirical program of study. We are not atoms in a mindless universe, he argues, but agents in a metaphysically alert one, embodied and embedded in meanings we jointly create. Art is not an accessory to pleasure but the means of our connection to the cosmos.

Taylor’s new book is formidably chewy, with page after page featuring passages of Hölderlin, Novalis, and Rilke, offered both in the original German and in translation. Long analyses of [T. S. Eliot](#) and [Milosz](#) arrive, too. But, though Taylor’s subjects are often severely abstract, his sentences are lucid, even charmingly direct, and his purpose is plain. We once lived in an “enchanted” universe of agreed-upon meaning and common purpose, where we looked at the night sky and felt that each object was shaped with significance by a God-given order. Now we live in the modern world the Enlightenment produced—one of fragmented belief and broken purposes, where no God superintends the cosmos, common agreement on meaning is no longer possible, and all you can do with the moon is measure it. “I admire the moon as a moon, just a moon,” Lorenz Hart sighed, with memorable modernity, adding, significantly, “Nobody’s heart belongs to me today.” Enlightened, we are alone.

Romantic poetry—the poetry of Shelley and Keats, in English, of Novalis and Hölderlin, in German—first diagnosed this fracture (the argument goes) and offered a way to heal it. Where neoclassical poets like Alexander Pope appealed to an ordered world, with clear meanings and a hierarchy of kinds, the Romantics recognized that this was no longer credible. The enchanted world had been replaced by the modern world. We could hardly go back

toward ignorance—[Goethe](#), one of Taylor’s heroes, participated in the modern world as a scientist—but we had to find a way to reenchant it. The best way to heal the wound is through poetry and music, of the sort that doesn’t offer propositions but casts spells and enacts rituals. The arts are not subsidiary places of secondary sensations but the primary place where we go to recall feelings of wholeness, of harmony not just with “Nature”—the craggy peaks the Romantics loved and the Italian lakes they lingered by—but with existence itself. Poetry and music do this by escaping the constraints of intellect, by going at things atmospherically rather than argumentatively. They convey a sublime atmosphere of sound, ineffable intimations of immortality, and so the apprehension of a “cosmic connection.”

Taylor reproduces lines from Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” (“And the round ocean and the living air, / And the blue sky, and in the mind of man; / A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of thought”) and tells us, “To let oneself be carried by this passage is to experience a strong sense of connection, far from clearly defined . . . but deeply felt; a connection not static, but which flows through us and our world.” Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” is similarly effervescent in diction, similarly ethereal in effect. The lines “O for a beaker full of the warm South, / Full of the true, the bluish Hippocrate, / With beaded bubbles winking at the brim, / And purple-stained mouth” cast a spell as much as they describe a feeling. Taylor writes, “The rhythmic flow between the features as recounted in the poem somehow encounters, meets, connects up with the flow between the features as we live it.” Classical art, he argues, moves us by convincing us; Romantic art convinces us by moving us.

Taylor is challenging the belief that science provides objective truth, and art mere subjective feeling—that art produces sensations, and what you make of the sensations is all up to you. He insists that there is intrinsic, grounded human value in the experience of art. At one point, he constructs a table in which he contrasts things toward which our attitudes are subjective with things that have hard, biological significance: I may prefer vanilla ice cream to strawberry, but I *must* have air to breathe. Is listening to [Beethoven](#), he asks, more like preferring vanilla ice cream or more like needing to breathe? Or does it, as Taylor is convinced, belong to the realm of ethical elevation? Perhaps hearing late Beethoven is more like seeing that viral video of a

small Chinese boy meticulously cooking a meal of egg fried rice for his still smaller sibling than it is like the experience of eating the egg fried rice. “Strong ethical insights are grounded in what I called ‘felt intuitions,’ ” Taylor writes. “Someone couldn’t be said to have a moral conviction about universal human rights, for instance, if she wasn’t prone on the appropriate occasions to experience them, to feel them as inspiring (hearing the choral movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony), and their flagrant violation as appalling.” We are convinced because we are moved. The reasoning may seem circular—I know it’s inspiring because it feels inspiring—but his point is that what great modern poetry does is to encircle us with inspiring feelings.

Art isn’t absolute, but it isn’t at all arbitrary. Taylor escapes from the divide between subjectivity and objectivity through a concept he calls the “interspace”—not the inner space where I perceive and enjoy but some resonant atmosphere that exists between me and the world. The sound of the cello in a Schubert trio isn’t entirely in the cello, where the sound begins, or entirely between my listening ears, where the experience of structured sound as music happens, but somewhere between the two, where the creation of meaning takes place. The interspace is the phenomenal field of the arts. When we listen to sublime music, then, our experience is not of pleasure but of an overwhelming feeling of encountering and exploring some truth. The music sculpts us, we sculpt the music, and to reduce this to mood misses the cosmic connection that the experience proposes and, quite often, provides.

Every Hot Sauce



Babbitz

All of this is attractive, directed at some unnamed but quite easily imagined contemporary Gradgrind who thinks that poetry is mere décor and music mere entertainment (in a footnote, Taylor cites Steven Pinker’s provocation that music is “auditory cheesecake”), and who scoffs at the conviction of aesthetes and humanists that music and art contain a kind of knowledge. Most readers will respond to Taylor’s contagious excitement in the presence of Wordsworth and Rilke and Beethoven. His are ideas that one assents to enthusiastically even while realizing that it would be hard to defend them to someone less inclined to assent. Indeed, one recalls the spiral of puzzled questions that apostles of the arts regularly encounter from the science-minded, who insist that when we invoke the ethical allure of music we’re just saying we really like those fuzzy feelings. If Taylor’s experiential enthusiasms sometimes do not seem too far away from the lyrics to “Misty” (“Walk my way and a thousand violins begin to play”), well, being misty about something is a precondition of transcendence, even if it’s only that old black magic called love. And so the interspace between Taylor and the art-infatuated reader is likely to be one of enthusiastic assent: Yes, it does feel like that! Yes, it is a big experience. Yes, I feel the cosmos. When I browse through Spotify, passing from [Ray Charles](#) to the obscurer singers of the Stax/Volt catalogue, each stop along the way offers some experience of common space which is not just diverting but deeply reassuring. Yes, there is meaning in the mess; yes, the space says yes.

The last fifty pages of “Cosmic Connections” pivot decisively from the intricacies of poetic imagination to the specifics of contemporary American and Canadian (and, secondarily, European) politics—toward the social interspace, so to speak. A long section turns to questions of white supremacy, civil rights, national identity, the rise of Trumpist populism, and so on. A successful self-governing republic, Taylor believes, requires a community of shared purpose and a common space of deliberation. Antagonistic groups must go beyond the narrow aspiration of winning a contest against adversaries and come to one another with a sense of mutual recognition and regard. And the people best able to make this case, in Taylor’s view, “are people who are deeply rooted in their spiritual sources, often religious.” These are people who, at least culturally, have retained a sense of the sacred. Overcoming discrimination becomes not just an abstract advance in justice or an instrumental strategy for minimizing conflict but a “source of deep fulfillment.”

Taylor is a believer in the importance of place; one does not provincialize his work by situating it within the province it comes from. Born in Montreal, Taylor was shaped by the peculiar social fabric of Quebec. The communal connection among Québécois remains unusually strong. It’s reinforced by linguistic isolation, which outside Montreal often produces an inward-turning monolingual culture, and in Montreal an outward-turning bilingual one. The Catholic Church has collapsed as a living force, but it provides a cultural scaffolding in which much else still takes place. (The holiday celebrating the now secularized cause of Quebec nationalism is a religious one: June 24th, Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day.) Quebec is openly cosmopolitan in affect and narrowly communal in arrangement, and, for the most part, the two forces contest peaceably.

Taylor is inclined by his experience to think that the communal and the cosmopolitan can coexist. You can belong to a tribe and still belong to the people. The “politics of recognition” that Taylor has recommended gives weight, accordingly, to the demands that communities—ethnic, religious, or otherwise—make on the state. Given Taylor’s emphasis on the embodied dimensions of social meaning, it seems significant that he was reared in a bicultural household; his mother was a Francophone Catholic, and his father an Anglophone Protestant. McGill is a great English-speaking university in the midst of a French-speaking city, and though its autonomy and financing

is threatened from time to time by the provincial government, it has survived through even the most extreme independence-minded administrations. Montreal is a very good place to nourish the belief that communities can supply meaning without fomenting mayhem.

The link Taylor wants to make between his readings of poetry and his civics lessons has affinities to the proposals made by a number of writers—many of them Catholic, significantly—throughout the modern period: the meticulous remaking of ritual (which you find in Chesterton and Tolkien alike), the love of the local, the revaluing of ceremony and communal spirit as things essential in themselves rather than leftovers from a barbaric past. The wrong kind of politics, Taylor implies, arises from the loss of a cosmic connection which the Romantics first sensed, and which now is part of the unhappy inheritance of our civilization. Alienated and disconnected, the Trump voter, the Brexiteer, the Le Pen supporter turns to theatricalized reassurances of fascist-style unity, predicated on the demonization of the nearby other. Taylor celebrates Pope Francis's encyclicals on extended families, with their sense of the common good, and those Native religions which get their sense of the sacred from a specific place of dwelling. He turns again to the interspace, now lofted to become not only the theatre of reception and communication between artist and audience but also the implicit space of political community.

The turn from poetry to politics is certainly seductive, but is it persuasive? Certain objections rise even in the mind of the reader stirred by these kinds of accounts. First, and simplest: Should we be so enchanted by “enchantment”? Taylor treats the change from the enchanted world to the post-Enlightenment naturalistic world as a change from one climate of opinion to another, rather than as any kind of progress. But “progress” does seem to be the right word for it: life in the “enchanted” world was poorer, briefer, uglier, and more brutal. The opposition of the enchanted and the disenchanted—one world lacking in technological power but rich in communal spirit, the other rich in machines but poor in soul—is tilted toward the past. To put it plainly, the “disenchanted” universe is one where, increasingly, human suffering is resolved by vaccination and effective drugs, not by bleeding and cupping.

Taylor's response would be to point out that, if we have to look past leprosy and death in childbirth in chronicling the enchanted, we also have to look past Treblinka, the killing fields, Wounded Knee, and more in chronicling the disenchanted. Yet such a rejoinder is corrosive of the neat division between the two worlds he makes. Though he never says it directly, the atmospherics of Taylor's book suggest that great music is an agent of moral growth. So you can wonder what it would be like if we had a civilization where Romantic music was the soundtrack of the people, and where even military victories and defeats were celebrated through the allure of symphonic sound. In fact, such a society existed—in the Third Reich of the nineteen-forties. Loving Schubert and Beethoven, it seems, gets you nowhere at all ethically.

And then the question arises of whether the alteration between the enchanted and the enlightened is really the historical one proposed by Taylor's Hegelian model, with its emphasis on an unfolding one-way plot, or, rather, a permanent tension in all literate times. Shakespeare's language, as Taylor hints at various moments, is structured by a pull between inherited magic and Renaissance cynicism. Ted Hughes made the point that Shakespeare stood balanced on a knife's edge between myth and measurement, between an old, fairy-tale world and a new, empirical one. There's visionary language in the sonnets that seems to say almost more than we can understand ("the prophetic soul / Of the wide world dreaming on things to come") and acerbic worldliness right next door ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"). Enchanted and enlightened sensibilities rise throughout history and seem two points in the cycle of human possibility more than two moments in fixed historical sequence.

A third point relates to Taylor's particular appetite for poetry. He likes the sides of Keats and Wordsworth that are ineffable, symbolic, atmospheric, and mystically resonant. But this taste can lead him, so to speak, to miss the ice cubes in the tumbler while seeking the iceberg in the ocean. Romantic poetry gets some of its meaning by overwhelming us, but it also gets meaning by making a disputable case. There's a lot of atmosphere in Romantic poetry, but also a lot of argument. Shelley was obsessed with the scientific findings of his day, and they showed up in his verse. Keats's claim that "beauty is truth, truth beauty" is contestable on its own terms, and the subsequent claim that this is *all* we need to know puts one in mind of the

philosopher's favorite T-shirt: "Surely not *everybody* was kung-fu fighting." One hates to pit one great Polish poet against another, but Taylor's book might have benefitted by having a little more Szymborska and a little less Milosz, since she gets an effect quite as Romantic as her counterpart's simply by inventorying the actual world of peeled onions and doctors' offices. Humanistic inquiry may not be susceptible to strict empirical measurement or evolutionary explanation. But it remains rational, forcing us to argue out our tastes and values. To treat art as a question of personal taste is, as Taylor thinks, reductive, but it's also impractical. It is to forget that almost all we ever do is argue about taste—and the good arguments often ask how art corresponds to our experience or shines light on our values.

Taylor extolls the communities of meaning that are drawn together by the interspace of enchantment. Yet, as he would be the first to acknowledge, such communities are, first of all, communities of practice. We learn to listen, just as we learn to read. Learning to love Beethoven's music is first to love the sound, then to find it achingly long-winded, then to sustain concentration, then to find the concentration rewarded by new understanding —only to return to the pleasure of the sound.

The interspace is an arena of shared education as much as of solitary epiphany. Ritual without reason has led modernity in many wrong directions. Practical communities are as valuable as poetic communities. The experiences Taylor evokes of being overwhelmed by aesthetic responses scarcely distinguishable from ethical elevation are ones we encounter daily —exploring a stranger's playlist of [Chuck Berry](#) and his precursors, reading a newly sent poem, or seeing an Instagram Story of children in a distant land sharing a meal. The interspace is enchanted mainly in its normalcy. Perhaps connecting with the cosmos is not as hard as philosophers sometimes imagine. It's where we live. ♦

On and Off the Menu

The Era of the Line Cook

In a dinner series called the Line Up, line cooks, sous-chefs, and chefs de cuisine from buzzy New York restaurants get to be executive chefs for a night.

By Hannah Goldfield

June 17, 2024



In “Kitchen Confidential,” the book that launched Anthony Bourdain’s writing career, he explained that his subject was “street-level cooking and its practitioners.” Line cooks—the people actually making your food—“were the heroes,” he wrote. It was clear what kind of heroism he meant: obscured and nearly undetectable; all drudgery, no glory; the hustle its own reward. In the preface to an updated paperback edition, Bourdain said that the book had been wrongly perceived as an exposé of the restaurant business, when all he was trying to do was write something that his fellow-cooks found “entertaining and true.” “I was not—and am not—an advocate for change in the restaurant business,” he wrote. “I like the business just the way it is.”

Whether he meant to or not, Bourdain did change the business, in part by stoking the public's interest in its inner workings. His vivid portrait of life in the kitchen helped turn the line cook into an ascendant figure; a quarter of a century later, people without any particular connection to the industry are familiar with the image of a cook drinking ice water out of a plastic quart container; with the term "back of house"; with the ritual of "family meal." The TV show "The Bear" has proffered an insider's view of the quotidian dramas of opening a restaurant, giving focus not only to Carmy, the head chef and owner, but also to Sydney, a sous-chef learning her worth in macho environs, and to Lionel, a quietly ambitious pastry chef.

The restaurant world still harbors affection for the idea of cooks paying their dues, but the fetish for rigidly hierarchical and abusive workplaces seems to have abated in recent years. In his memoir "Notes from a Young Black Chef," Kwame Onwuachi recounts being emotionally abused in some of New York's most prestigious kitchens. At his own restaurant, Tatiana, he is a firm but gentle leader, presiding over an ongoing "Top Chef"-style knockout tournament, in which cooks both compete and serve as judges, whipping up dishes during lulls in service. It's lighthearted—an impromptu round I saw involved shooting a balled-up piece of tinfoil into a trash can—but high-stakes, ending with a big-ticket prize of the winner's choice. (One person won a trip to Jamaica, at Onwuachi's expense.) Eric Ripert, the chef and co-owner of Le Bernardin, recently hired a "staff meal chef," whose sole job is to prepare excellent food for his co-workers.

If the era of the line cook had been hovering pre-pandemic, the course of 2020 certainly hastened it. That year, as restaurant workers scrambled for gigs and sweated in the trenches of "essential work," the chef Eli Sussman, who began his career as a prep cook, started posting memes that united denizens of the industry over the daily struggles of kitchen labor: dropping a paring knife behind a lowboy, forgetting to close the roll gate at the end of your shift, barely livable hourly wages. (To a pair of photos of Tom Hanks—a clean-cut Forrest Gump on the left, a bedraggled castaway on the right—he added the text "Day 1: Hi Chef! Looking forward to being part of the team! Day 366: Who the fuck stole my fucking sharpie!!!") At the latest Baldor Bite, a biannual food expo hosted by one of the biggest restaurant suppliers on the East Coast, Sussman hawked delightfully niche

merchandise for the back-of-house crowd, including T-shirts printed with the script for Baldor's automated phone menu.

One recent Monday afternoon, I stopped by gertrude's, a restaurant Sussman co-owns, in Prospect Heights, and made my way down a precariously steep set of stairs to the dark, cramped basement prep kitchen. Every Monday, Sussman runs a burger special, usually conceived by someone—a line cook, a dishwasher—who works one of the restaurant's less glamorous jobs. That day, it was in the hands of João Soares Vieira, the production manager, who oversees all kitchen prep and who now stood at an induction burner, stirring a pot of garlic simmering in olive oil, to which he'd soon add walnuts and diced cremini, to make mushroom duxelles.

This was Soares Vieira's second go at burger night; his first had been "vaguely controversial," he said, because the patties were served without a bun, after *bife à café*, a classic of Lisbon, his home town. This time, he was showcasing his classical French training, pairing the duxelles with yellow mustard, Roquefort, and a handful of parsley, all to be sandwiched with the beef patty on a buttered challah bun. Other cooks had done riffs on the banh mi and the chopped cheese; a porter named Keith had smothered his in smoked cheddar, crispy onions, and a house-made A1 sauce. "It's definitely not common to have line cooks actually put something on a menu," Soares Vieira said. Cooking is his second career; before culinary school, he worked for ten years as an interior architect. He confessed to spending "too much time" at gertrude's—"to the point that Eli sends me home sometimes."

During the restaurant's lineup meeting, after Sussman updated the front-of-house staff on changes to service—the chopped salad was eighty-sixed; it would be great to sell more of the Montauk sea bass—Soares Vieira emerged from the kitchen with two finished burgers, which he sliced into tiny wedges so everyone could have a taste. "How would you describe Roquefort to someone who's never had it before?" a server asked. "Very nutty," Soares Vieira said. "Don't say 'moldy,' but it's full-on moldy—it's a full blue cheese, which has mold in it. If they don't know what Roquefort is, they probably won't like it." But Soares Vieira and Sussman agreed: no "mods," or modifications.

Chefs see these opportunities as a way to develop the skills of newer cooks, and to retain their talent. Jason Vincent, the chef and co-owner of Giant, in Chicago, prints the initials of line cooks who conceive of new dishes on the restaurant's menu. (When I went recently, a pasta with lentil ragù and a grilled swordfish Tom Kha were attributed to "l.k." and "l.d.," respectively.) Younger cooks, he's observed, have different expectations for their careers than he did when he started. "With Instagram and everything, everyone's got the potential to be noticed," Vincent said.

"I was a cook not so long ago; I know how monotonous it can be," Onwuachi told me. "And I think by having the tournament, by bringing the staff into the dining room, by playing the music loud so they can hear it, it feels more like they're a part of the culture that we're trying to convey to the diners." But also, he said, "everybody has a voice now, especially with social media. So I think a lot of people are more cognizant of how they're treating their staff—because there is someone watching."

This spring, I went to a dinner in a series called the Line Up, for which line cooks, sous-chefs, and chefs de cuisine from buzzy New York restaurants get to be executive chefs for a night. It's the brainchild of Elena Besser, who is in her thirties and makes a living as a private chef, a caterer, and a culinary contributor to the "Today" show. She has worked the line herself, at Lilia, in Williamsburg. "I felt really frustrated that it takes years and years, and many other factors, to get the opportunity to be in the spotlight," she told me. "Often, individuals leave the industry because they put in all of this time and effort, and are never the ones calling the shots."

For the series, Besser and her co-founders find participants by asking chefs to nominate someone in their kitchen, and choose three per "season" to each come up with a one-night restaurant concept, which Besser and her team fully fund and help to execute. On the marquee when I went was Noah Ponjuan, the Baton Rouge-born sous-chef at the Musket Room, a Michelin-starred restaurant in Nolita. At the offices of Food 52, on a high floor in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, guests milled around a bar, drinking a cocktail called Clear Skies—a riff on a Hurricane, with coconut milk and lime—and eating cornmeal-battered fried oysters before being seated at several large tables.

Ponjuan, who is twenty-seven and slight, with a ruffled mop of fine curls, a goatee, and round spectacles that give him the look of a young, Brooklynite Colonel Sanders, seemed nervous and excited; it was clear that he wasn't taking the experience lightly. A detailed menu began with a poem about his mother and explained the inspiration behind each dish: the boiled-peanut vinaigrette on a plate of white asparagus reminded him of eating boiled peanuts by the side of the road on the way to baseball games in Louisiana; a course of duck à l'orange was made with satsumas like the ones that grew on a tree behind his grandparents' house. A dish of crab "rice and gravy" came with a tiny plastic squeeze bottle of Nasty Noah's Hot Sauce, labelled with an illustration of Ponjuan's face.

Besser said that when she was first putting together the Line Up, five years ago, "it felt like walking on eggshells"—some chefs she approached "felt threatened and nervous about their cook being distracted, or wanting to leave and go do their own thing." But recently, she told me, chefs have been eager to showcase their employees' talents. At dinner, I sat next to Camari Mick, the Musket Room's executive pastry chef and one of Ponjuan's bosses and mentors, who cheered loudly—"Yeah, Nasty Noah!"—when he stood up to speak.

Ponjuan considered the night a success, though afterward he couldn't resist thinking about what he might have done differently. (The plating on the crab rice, and on the dessert, could have been cleaner, he told me.) If he had relished his moment in the spotlight, it didn't seem to be what motivated him. "It's hard," he said of his work, "but there's something that I just enjoy about the endurance of it. The life that comes with it." ♦

Pop Music

Lizzy McAlpine Wants to Go Offline

The artist, who got famous by going viral, discusses refusing to play the TikTok game with her new record, turning to a life of slowness and privacy, and maybe auditioning for a musical.

By Amanda Petrusich

June 17, 2024



In 2022, the singer and songwriter Lizzy McAlpine released her second studio album, “Five Seconds Flat,” a collection of winsome bedroom-pop songs about feeling heartsick and alienated. McAlpine, who was then twenty-two, seemed to fit neatly between Phoebe Bridgers and Olivia Rodrigo, two other visionary young songwriters who became enormously famous during the pandemic. McAlpine’s work was funny and forthright, but also vaguely elegiac. She has a velvety, agile voice that trembles in the right moments. She is also unusually adept at writing the sorts of tender, yearning hooks that move legions of aspiring warblers to pull out their iPhone tripods. McAlpine had collaborated with Jacob Collier and Finneas on the record, and would soon work with Noah Kahan and Niall Horan. She felt like a singer of her time and place.

Almost a year after “Five Seconds Flat” was released, the single “Ceilings” went viral on TikTok. McAlpine, who was brought up in a suburb of Philadelphia, wrote the song while she was in London, working on an EP and muddling through a breakup. It tells the story of a relationship’s heady and intoxicating early days, when everything feels possible but the ground is still unsteady. The song’s narrator bites her tongue rather than confessing devotion too soon: “I don’t wanna ruin the moment / Lovely to sit between comfort and chaos.” Much of McAlpine’s writing wobbles between those two poles. Like Bridgers and Rodrigo, she is prone to contemplating the distance between what feels safe and what feels thrilling.

Yet the final verse of “Ceilings” suggests that it was all an elaborate fantasy. “But it’s not real / And you don’t exist / And I can’t recall the last time I was kissed,” she sings. Plenty of songs feature extended daydreams about getting subsumed by a new romance, but far fewer include invented thoughts of love-related angst. “Ceilings” feels particularly modern in this way, and in conversation, somehow, with the loneliness of quarantine. McAlpine’s longing for love is also a longing for confusion, for nervousness, for weird feelings. She wants the whole imperfect and exhilarating package: comfort, chaos.

It was the verse containing the plot twist—it was all just a dream!—that started whipping across TikTok. The audio was typically sped up (users will sometimes increase a song’s b.p.m. so that they can cram more lyrical content into a very brief clip—yes, this is nuts) and played over footage of girls in long dresses twirling around outside, sometimes during a rainstorm, with beatific expressions on their faces. For several years now, the music industry has been hyperfocussed on TikTok as a kind of magic portal to huge, near-instantaneous success. Although the platform can be confounding—the particulars of its algorithm are famously kept secret—it’s a cheap and efficient marketing tool, and omnipresent in the lives of its billion-plus users. It works to create a certain kind of outsized, often momentary fame. “Ceilings” has now been streamed more than five hundred and thirty million times on Spotify.

When we first spoke, McAlpine, who has long brown hair and an air of seriousness, was seated on her bed at her house in Los Angeles, an open, high-ceilinged space with heavy wooden beams and white walls. I asked

how long she'd been living there. She paused, then laughed. "Time is weird," she said. "Two-ish years?" She found the city isolating at first, but has slowly settled into a domestic rhythm. She told me that she has come to understand virality as something of a curse. "I play 'Ceilings' toward the end of the set," she said. "The song I play after 'Ceilings' is about my father, who passed away. Hundreds of people just get up and walk out. Like, you really paid that much money to come see my show, and only wanted to hear 'Ceilings'? It's mind-boggling."

Of course, griping about the inanity of TikTok can make a person feel dusty and oblivious. For a while, I was so resistant to resisting it that I found myself engaging in all sorts of mental and spiritual gymnastics to justify its galloping pace, its endless expanse of fun-sized content, the way it reduces even the most dynamic and emotionally complicated songs to neutral blips. But the more a person mulls over the mechanics of virality the more odious the experience seems. Building a career the old-fashioned way—slow and steady—is not glamorous, but being launched into the stratosphere seemingly at random, with no personal or professional infrastructure in place to support sudden fame, tends to leave musicians stricken, if not traumatized. This is partly because virality is understood as a gift, the whole point of being relentlessly online. It can be irksome when artists don't express endless gratitude for their luck. As we spoke, McAlpine was careful not to complain too much about this kind of notoriety. "It's kind of disheartening, a little bit, sometimes," she said cautiously. "But for the most part it's fine. I'm just going to move 'Ceilings' to the encore. If they really want to see 'Ceilings,' they can wait."

In April, McAlpine released her third album, "Older," an eerie, sparse, and gorgeous folk-rock record that deliberately eschews the melodramatic swooning of "Five Seconds Flat." She is in the middle of a world tour, and will perform two shows this month at Radio City Music Hall. "Older" is a slower and more mature album, focussed on grief, culpability, and the tumult of change. The songs were inspired by a romantic relationship McAlpine had while she was an undergraduate at the Berklee College of Music. "We dated for a month and a half, and then the next four years were on and off, basically," she said. "I was just going back to him over and over again because I knew he would be there." Now she's trying to hold herself

accountable: “I only hear songs about ‘You hurt me and you left and you suck!’ That’s not my experience.”

The melodies on “Older” are rich but subtle. On the title track, McAlpine details her regrets over mournful piano lines:

Over and over
Watch it all pass
Mom’s getting older
I’m wanting it back
Where no one is dying
And no one is hurt
And I have been good to you
Instead of making it worse.

It is impossible, the song suggests, to understand or control our lives as we’re living them. “I wish I knew what the end is,” she repeats in the final verse, her voice splintering. I told McAlpine that I found the album to be a poignant meditation on self-loathing and the time we lose to pain. “I’ve seen so many people just be, like, ‘It’s really boring,’ ” McAlpine told me, of the record. “It’s not ‘Five Seconds Flat,’ but ‘Five Seconds Flat’ was so not me.” She went on, “I’m kind of losing the people who don’t actually care about my art, which is hard, but also good, probably, in the long run, because this album sounds the most like me that I’ve ever sounded. If people don’t fuck with it, ‘Five Seconds Flat’ is still there for them.”

McAlpine also said that she has been turning away from social media. “I used to put myself out there a lot more, in the early days, when I was building my career. But recently, I just . . . I don’t like it,” she said. “I don’t want to have people know my every move and every thought. With this record specifically, I was, like, I’m not doing that. I don’t care if my music goes nowhere. I’m not going to be lip-synching the songs on TikTok every day to get them to go viral. That’s not who I am.”

Instead, McAlpine has spent much of the last two years reestablishing herself both creatively and personally. She initially recorded a different version of the album, but the results left her cold. “As we kept going, it just started to feel less and less right,” she said. “We were doing it like my other

records. I listen back to my first two albums, and I can just hear the perfection. We would Melodyne every vocal. It was perfectly in time. I felt like this music deserved something more messy than that, more human.” She ended up reworking most of that material, and ultimately helped produce the record herself. “I found a band,” she said. “Finally being in a room with people who are real, and in the same room, and we’re recording things in one take, playing off of each other—it just felt so good. It was exactly what the music was missing.”

She recalled her previous tour, in support of “Five Seconds Flat,” as harrowing, anxious. She wrote “All Falls Down,” one of the more beguiling tracks on “Older,” while in the midst of it. “I was trying to put on a show that I saw other people doing—the pop thing,” she said. “But it just didn’t sit right with me. This tour is completely different. It’s like night and day.” On “All Falls Down,” McAlpine sings about being miserable over jaunty, AM-radio horns. The track is playful but intensely grim, in the mold of Harry Nilsson or Randy Newman. “Twenty-two / Was a panic attack,” she sings, her voice soft. “I can’t stop the time from moving / And I can never get it back.”

Lately, McAlpine has been reevaluating her aspirations. “I didn’t play gigs growing up—all I really did was do theatre,” she said. “I wanted to be on Broadway. I liked writing songs because it helps me process things, and for a long time the songs were just for me.” I asked if she could imagine a future in which she stopped touring and concentrated on a different kind of performance, maybe auditioning for a musical. “That’s all I’ve been thinking about, honestly,” she said. “This album took so long to make, and it took a lot of the joy out of making music for me.” Now she’s considering a life centered on selflessness, slowness, privacy, quiet. “After this tour, I’m fully going to pivot to something else,” she said. “I want to work on other people’s words. I want to be a part of someone else’s ideas. I need to live a little before I can write more.” ♦

The Theatre

Sandra Oh and a Cast of Downtown All-Stars Illuminate a Period Thriller

The British playwright Lucy Kirkwood's "The Welkin" exorcises the jury-room drama.

By Helen Shaw

June 13, 2024



Early in "The Welkin," the British playwright Lucy Kirkwood's period thriller, now at the Linda Gross Theatre, a dozen women appear in something like an eighteenth-century diorama: they are arranged in bas-relief against a black curtain, each obsessively performing a single task. *Whump, whump, whump* goes a carpet beater; *scrape, scrape, scrape* grinds a brush against the floor. It's a cliché, of course, that "women's work" is backbreaking and soul-crushing, but Kirkwood, who also wrote the Tony-nominated play "The Children"—in which retired nuclear scientists consider sacrificing themselves to shut down a damaged reactor—is interested in what follows the cliché. If work can crush a soul, who's to blame for the monstrous thing that takes that poor soul's place?

In Kirkwood's play, directed for the Atlantic Theatre Company by Sarah Benson, a court has already condemned a young married woman, Sally Poppy (Haley Wong), to hang, for helping her lover murder a little girl. We're pretty sure she did it: the play starts with a candlelit prologue, in which Sally visits her abandoned husband raving and covered in the child's blood. But Sally has sworn to the judge that she's pregnant, and, under English common law in 1759, "pleading the belly" could commute the sentence. The judge presses twelve women—a "jury of matrons"—into service to evaluate Sally, sequestering them "without meat, drink, fire and candle," to hasten their examination along.

For much of its first half, "The Welkin" is Kirkwood's gender-swapped version of "Twelve Angry Men." Here, Sandra Oh takes on what the playwright has referred to as the Henry Fonda position in the jury room, playing Lizzy, a midwife who empathizes with the unstable, fierce, forsaken Sally. Lizzy brings obstetric expertise and a brutal class consciousness to the deliberations. She spares no pity for the victim, the rich eleven-year-old Alice Wax, who was beaten to death with a hammer. "They found the little girl in pieces in two sacks stuffed up the fireplace," the bailiff, Mr. Coombes (Glenn Fitzgerald), tells Lizzy. "Expect that is the closest a Wax child ever got to sweeping a chimney," she tuts, banging away at her butter churn. Kirkwood uses the second half to take wilder stylistic swings. Music and apparitions move through the space; the women channel absurd interventions from other centuries. I found these moments bewildering at first, and then, as the superb cast invests them with manic energy, exhilarating.

In 1759, Halley's Comet was a recent fascination, and Kirkwood threads its presence through the play, hinting at the way that future years (maybe 1835, certainly 1986) will drift into the play's weird gravity. Other things—angels, demons, even the idea of airplanes—also hover above the action. In fact, "welkin" is an old English word for sky, or, really, the firmament, the high vault over us. Georgian and East Anglian idiom is usually introduced carefully and with enough repetition that I can now confidently insult any sloppy mawther as a slamkin who keeps a dirty house. "Welkin," though, is said only once. I wonder if Kirkwood wants you to reach for a dictionary after you leave the theatre, and then, as you realize that you just spent two and a half hours at a play named for Heaven, she wants you to look up.

Two trends seem to be converging in “The Welkin”: the urge to revisit plays like “The Crucible” with our modern feminist sensibilities—in just a few years, we’ve had Kimberly Belflower’s “John Proctor Is the Villain,” Talene Monahon’s “The Good John Proctor,” and Sarah Ruhl’s “Becky Nurse of Salem”—and a long-building fear of authority and its instruments, including the justice system, the medical establishment, and even civic society itself. In Arthur Miller’s classic, girls—historically, *little* girls, Ruhl’s “Becky” taught us—are treated like sociopathic maniacs. Kirkwood’s tragic plot shows us a girl who is certainly violent, but we also gather that Sally’s fall into madness came after a short lifetime of abuse, unstinting work, and marital assault. As for that long-building fear, the women on the jury hear from a doctor (Danny Wolohan) who treats Lizzy with grave respect—while also reminding her, “The life of a woman is a history of disease.” This phrase is cribbed, I believe, from the nineteenth-century physician George Darwin, who recommended that women cleanse their vaginas with borax. (Kirkwood has a gift for chilling details, but even her horrors can’t rival the actual history.)

Kirkwood is also following in the great Caryl Churchill’s footsteps; there are elements here that recall the time-travelling “Top Girls,” the vignettes of rural English labor in “Fen,” and the acidic defense of cunning women in “Vinegar Tom.” When Kirkwood’s at her best—the often hilarious group exchanges, the adventurous aesthetics—she does Churchill proud. Kirkwood can write with a gunslinger’s ease: she introduces the jury in a clever impanelling scene, in which each woman responds to a disembodied judge’s voice with a saucy little summation of herself. (“Mary Middleton. Wife to Amos Middleton. I do not know what else to tell you except we have five children and there is a tankard in our house that is haunted.”) As the twelve women—plus Sally—argue and reveal themselves in the court’s upper room, Kirkwood orchestrates the many voices into a believably undulating, sometimes chaotic conversation. Kirkwood’s text, though, walks a tricky line between period-appropriate earthy banter and less graceful, more laborious speechifying. Lizzy at her most righteous observes, “It is a poor apparatus for justice. But it is what we have. This room. The sky outside that window and our own dignity beneath it.” For a long while, I found Lizzy’s didactic speeches wearing, though I did come to believe that Kirkwood wants the seams to show.

Benson's directorial touch is extravagantly precise: we never see her move her ensemble into a tableau, but suddenly we'll be looking at a stage image as delicately composed as a Hogarth print. Unfortunately, Benson, like Kirkwood, exhibits less deftness with the central pair, whose performances are big but sometimes flat. Oh, who has a gift for majesty, thunders like a lawyer during summation, and when she's thwarted she gets even louder. And Wong, as the complex Sally, leans into playing her as if she's a sulky teen. Kirkwood has given Wong an almost impossible task, and Sally's costume doesn't help. The designer Kaye Voyce puts the rest of the cast in clothes that suit 1759 from a distance but turn out to be inventive, anachronistic patchworks of hoodies, knitwear, and gathered skirts, yet she strips Sally down: by the end, she's in just a corset over a slinky, soiled shift. (Did Forever 21 open an outlet in the eighteenth century?) Wong therefore spends a long time in her underwear, and that makes her character's late-arriving fear of physical exposure difficult to sell.

Lizzy and Sally may be the core duo, but Kirkwood offers her secondary characters the best material. Susannah Perkins is wonderful as Mary, one of several comic-relief characters, notable for her dim-witted sweetness (she "does not know which glove belongs on which hand," Lizzy says); Ann Harada shines as a lusty, menopausal mischief-maker, who takes great joy in humiliating the humorless bailiff. Sarah (Hannah Cabell) is a mute jury member who forces herself to speak after years of silence; her hoarse confession that she has seen a cloven-hoofed woman, spitting on blackberries to make them sour, is the dense, dark heart of "The Welkin." Sarah has, until her outburst, seemed affable and sane, and when she tells the others not only that she met a devil-woman but that the demon delivered Sarah's baby, the women all accept her testimony as though it makes perfect sense. It's like the moment in a village-gone-bad thriller, say, "Midsommar" or "The Wicker Man," when you realize that everybody's in on it. A sweet face is no guarantee that the mind behind it isn't wriggling like a bag of snakes. ♦

An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of Sandra Oh's character in "The Welkin."

The Current Cinema

Annie Baker's "Janet Planet" Is an Exquisitely Moving Film Début

Julianne Nicholson and Zoe Ziegler play a mother and her eleven-year-old daughter in a story that quietly sidesteps coming-of-age drama conventions.

By Justin Chang

June 14, 2024



The first time we meet Janet in "Janet Planet," a wondrous début feature from the celebrated playwright Annie Baker, she is standing on a rural road a little way from the camera. The distance is subtle, but crucial. Glimpsed from afar, surrounded by grass and sunshine, Janet (Julianne Nicholson) is a vision of loveliness—serene, earthy, and a little remote. We're seeing her through the eyes of her eleven-year-old daughter, Lacy (Zoe Ziegler), an owlish misfit with whom she shares a close bond, though we can already guess that things are about to change. Janet has come to fetch her daughter from summer camp, yet summer is far from over; Lacy called the night before, demanding liberation or death. "I'm gonna kill myself if you don't

“come get me,” she announced, before calmly replacing the receiver. (Yes, the receiver; the movie takes place in 1991.)

If Janet was at all disturbed by Lacy’s threat, she doesn’t show it now. Instead, she fixes Lacy with a smile, devoid of reproach or alarm, and pulls her into a warm, reassuring hug. She knows her daughter’s anxieties too well to be taken aback by them, and loves her too deeply to hold them against her. Lacy loves her mother, too, yet the quality and intensity of that love will fluctuate over the remaining summer months. You could call “Janet Planet” a coming-of-age story, but that would risk lumping it together with countless movies it doesn’t much resemble. It’s more a story about a child at the stage where one moves beyond the intense, almost romantic, idolization of a parent—a process that, as Baker is aware, is gradual, full of hesitations and stumbles. To capture a process of disillusionment requires uncommon patience, plus keen powers of observation. Hers are up to the challenge.

It will surprise none of Baker’s admirers to hear that, onscreen as well as onstage, she is attuned to the quotidian, allergic to melodrama, and borderline monkish in her appreciation for silence. Back home in woodsy western Massachusetts, Janet, an acupuncturist, meets clients at her in-house studio, leaving Lacy to her own devices. Janet has a boyfriend on the premises, too: a terse, tetchy older fellow named Wayne (Will Patton), who mostly keeps to himself. And so we watch, for unhurried stretches, as Lacy busies herself practicing piano on an electronic keyboard and directing a makeshift puppet theatre peopled with a collection of tiny figurines. She is alone, but not exactly lonely. The house is awash with sunlight, streaming in through enormous windows, bouncing off high, vaulted ceilings, encasing her like a wood-panelled womb—a rustic extension of her mother’s embrace.

At night, though, as darkness descends and the chirping of crickets intensifies, Lacy grows restless and covetous of Janet’s attention. She insists that her mother sleep beside her; when Janet tries to slip out, Lacy forces her to leave behind a piece of herself, a strand of her hair. (Hair figures frequently, and evocatively, into this micro-layered story: watch how Lacy’s red-brown locks billow in the breeze during a car ride, or how her curiosity leads her, mid-shower, to sample a visitor’s unfamiliar-looking shampoo.) If there’s a reason Lacy clings to her mother so fiercely, it’s to thwart Wayne,

who is obviously put out by the girl’s premature return from camp. You can’t entirely blame him; Lacy can be blunt and overly inquisitive, and Ziegler, a remarkable discovery, doesn’t soften any rough edges. But you also can’t entirely blame Lacy, and her presence merely hastens the inevitable end of Janet’s relationship—the latest, we sense, of many.

“I think you have to break up with him,” Lacy says, when Janet asks her advice. Does their exchange reveal heartening depths of parental trust, or is it a warning sign of mother-daughter codependency? The camera, spying on Janet and Lacy as they walk and talk on a dirt road, betrays nothing. (The cinematographer is Maria von Hausswolff, who brought her eye for natural splendor to the magnificent Icelandic drama “*Godland*,” from 2022.) And Nicholson, in an exquisite performance of pinpoint subtlety, doesn’t try to sway judgment in either direction. When Lacy later asks how her mother would feel if she were to someday date a girl, Janet’s response is an uncommonly thoughtful one, evincing a kind of honesty that I suspect not every parent would sanction. It’s not just an answer; it’s a declaration of faith in the person Lacy is becoming, and who she already is.

“Janet Planet” consists of three loosely plotted chapters, the first of which ends with Wayne’s departure. The following two each center on a new house guest. One of these is Janet’s longtime friend Regina (Sophie Okonedo), who belongs to a theatrical-agricultural hippie commune, and whom we first see at an outdoor performance, monologuing in full force. (“I wouldn’t go so far as to call it a cult,” Janet says to Lacy. “What’s a cult?” her daughter asks.) Regina is warm, chatty, and free-spirited; she is also hypercritical, entitled, and blind to her hypocrisies. Up next in the guest rotation, through mysterious yet oddly logical circumstances, is Regina’s charismatic ex-partner Avi (Elias Koteas), who happens to be the leader of the not-really-a-cult. He immerses Janet in liberation-speak and reads to her from Rainer Maria Rilke’s “*Duino Elegies*.” And then he, too, is gone, as shifty and unreliable as his words.

It’s here that at least one of the title’s meanings drifts into focus. Janet Planet is the name of Janet’s acupuncture studio; it’s also an allusion—oblique and unacknowledged—to the nickname that Van Morrison gave the songwriter Janet Rigsbee, who, during their five-year marriage, inspired some of his most well-known songs. (Although don’t expect “Crazy Love” on the

soundtrack, which consists mainly of the classical pieces that Lacy is practicing—those, and the crickets.) But the title is best understood as a lesson in social astronomy: Janet is the planet who, with subdued but undeniable magnetism, pulls various human satellites into her orbit. But Lacy can see, more clearly than most, that Janet’s celestial radiance has begun to dwindle, eclipsed by the disappointments of middle age and the frustrations of an unmet longing.

Baker’s most prominent work remains “The Flick,” which won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for drama, and which follows the travails of three employees at a small Massachusetts art-house cinema. The action, such as it is, unfolds inside the theatre, during post-screening cleaning sessions; emotional truth emerges as reluctantly as it does in real life, one stale popcorn kernel at a time. Like many of Baker’s plays, including “Circle Mirror Transformation” (2009) and “The Antipodes” (2017), “The Flick” pushes against the trappings of what we ordinarily think of as theatrical realism or naturalism—two concepts that feel especially reductive when applied to Baker’s leisurely pacing, her precise use of silences and pauses, and the persuasively humdrum quality of her dialogue. But the play is also an expression of profound movie love, replete with wide-ranging cinematic references and even a full-throated defense of old-school film projection—a manifesto against an era of ever more aggressive digital encroachment.

If “The Flick” was Baker’s theatre-based tribute to movies, “Janet Planet” is her cinematic ode to the theatre. There is Lacy’s figurine company, which, apart from the wry inclusion of a bright-haired troll doll (a very nineties obsession), feels like a tip of the hat to Ingmar Bergman’s “Fanny and Alexander” (1982). There is also the alfresco performance that introduces us to Regina: a beguiling Dionysian spectacle, with actors in flowing white costumes and horned animal masks, which Baker records with an almost anthropological wonderment, plus the faintest whisper of satire. Even as we register, and maybe share, Lacy’s bewilderment, we also feel the filmmaker’s rigorous fascination with what she’s showing us.

We are not, in other words, locked inside Lacy’s head at all times. Indeed, if there’s a reason “Janet Planet” never succumbs to the rosy, banalizing glow of nineties nostalgia, it’s Baker’s ability to juxtapose multiple perspectives in the same static frame—a gift that feels closely rooted in her theatre work.

Meanwhile, it's a pleasure to watch her avail herself, for the first time, of a filmmaker's tools. Now that she can cut swiftly from one setup to the next, her scenes are shorter and tighter, less dependent on a sense of prolonged duration. And there's a startling sequence whose effects would be difficult to reproduce through stagecraft alone: Janet and Lacy attend a local dance, which Baker has the inspiration to film as a kind of human constellation, a roundelay of fast-moving, not quite heavenly bodies. By the end, nothing obvious has changed, and yet mother and daughter—one grinning on the dance floor, the other watching quietly from the sidelines—seem strangely, and perhaps permanently, out of alignment. It's a gifted filmmaker who can draw blood with a single cut, and turn the distance between two souls into a chasm. ♦

Poems

- [Moonlight](#)
- [Suite for Voices](#)

Poems

Moonlight

By Peter Balakian

June 17, 2024



[Read by the author.](#)

I was walking through the muddy pastures of Woodstock.
Even now, what do I know?

My days on the football field were numbered.
And—then—what did I know?

I pumped iron, ran down-and-outs—followed a pulling
guard. It was 1969 and men had just landed

on the moon; we watched it on TV two miles
from where a car went off a bridge at Chappaquiddick.

And so—Chappa-quid-dick floated
in the air; what matters more, the bridge or the moon?

Then—I thought I understood the moonlight
on the water snakes in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

I knew that three women broke down the door at McSorley’s
that summer. Liberty was not just for men on the moon.

I walked out of McSorley’s with Coleridge’s poem
in my pocket, uplifted by their breakthrough.

I didn’t know Coleridge was high on dope.
I thought I knew his poem was an ode to love.

When I entered the pasture of love Canned Heat
needled my head. The sky was acid blue.

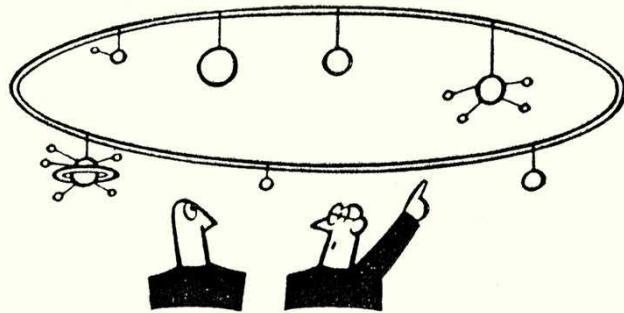
Whatever I knew—I didn’t know. The moon
stared over the groaning planet and that pasture.

Poems

Suite for Voices

By Joyce Carol Oates

June 17, 2024



SOLITARY

If there is no one to hear
the cry is there a
cry that there is
no one?

POEM FOR THE POET'S BIRTHDAY

(Bill Heyen)

After Novocain, pain
returns in small surges
you might mistake for the life
it has replaced.

Bill, you've always known
the composing of a poem
is removing tooth from bone
deep-rooted in the bloody jaw
no matter with what mercy,
and precision.

A YEAR OF TEARS

A year of tears
& tears in the sky
we called the road
to nowhere.
& now, the road
to the bright shore
we hate for
rousing hope
where there should
be none.

Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Tuesday, June 11, 2024](#)

Crossword

The Crossword: Tuesday, June 11, 2024

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By Erik Agard

June 11, 2024



The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Idrees Kahloon's piece about economic growth, Kathryn Schulz's essay about suspense, and Justin Chang's review of "Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga."

June 17, 2024

Growth and Emissions

Idrees Kahloon's review of the economist Daniel Susskind's new book, "Growth," succinctly summarizes the debate about whether we can avert climate catastrophe while also pursuing economic growth (Books, June 3rd). However, Kahloon's assertion that, in the U.S., "growth and carbon emissions have decoupled" is misleading. Although it's true that the economies of the U.S. and many other developed nations have become more and more digital- and service-oriented, these nations and their residents still rely heavily on emissions-intensive, environment-degrading resource extraction and industry. Those activities just occur, increasingly, in the developing world (where they often drive economic growth).

Ted Lamm

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Inciting Incident

I really enjoyed Kathryn Schulz's witty and insightful essay about suspense ("Wait for It," May 27th). I've been trying to trace the origins of the modern page-turner myself, and I think I can take us back a little further. Railway fiction comes from penny dreadfuls and sensation novels, which in turn owe a lot to "Frankenstein." Mary Shelley wrote that book during a series of difficult pregnancies, so that's a bit more evidence for pregnancy as the original suspense story. (Also, the year that she started writing it, 1816, the

sun had been mysteriously blotted out from the sky, owing to a faraway volcanic eruption, and nobody knew when it would come back, a circumstance that must've set a worldwide record for suspense.)

Shelley, in turn, borrowed suspense techniques from her father, William Godwin. He wrote what I think is the first modern page-turner, “The Adventures of Caleb Williams,” which, along with Godwin’s preface to a later edition explaining how he’d written the book, was also a model for Poe and Dickens.

The only writings that Godwin cites by name are nonfiction. (They include a memoir by a fugitive Huguenot.) He gives the impression that he didn’t have a previous structural model in fiction, so this may be as far back as we can go.

*Aaron Zinger
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More “Mad Max”

I was intrigued by Justin Chang’s discussion of the influences that have shaped the “Mad Max” films, in his review of “Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga” (The Current Cinema, June 3rd). I wonder if one of them might be the literary theorist Northrop Frye’s idea of the “drama of the green world.” For Frye, the green world—especially in Shakespeare’s romantic comedies—represents “the triumph of life and love over the waste land.” In “Furiosa,” the eponymous protagonist begins in an Edenic landscape. She is soon taken to a barren wasteland, where the story unfolds. And, throughout, she is haunted by the hope of being able to return to the green world.

*Allan Irving
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As a fan of the first two “Mad Max” movies, I was happy to read Chang’s extended take on the series. However, I was surprised that his list of George Miller’s other notable projects did not include “Babe,” a movie about a pig that wants to be a sheepdog. (Miller may not have directed it, but he co-wrote and co-produced it.) This is a movie that is both heartwarming and

technically amazing. Yes, “Happy Feet” was sweet, but it was more of a one-use item than “Babe.” I don’t understand the omission.

*Elmera Goldberg
New York City*

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